

## IT WOULD HAVE BEEN SO MUCH EASIER TO START FROM THE BEGINNING

by cecilia canziani and raphaël zarka

A premise: I find the interview to be a most difficult form of critical writing and too often treated with careless *non-chalance*. It sometimes appears an escapism from an authorial text or, on the contrary, a direct way leading informally to the core of the artist's work, but most often reading interviews of living artists, I am left with a sense of distance, as if I was the spectator of an intimate conversation where I was ultimately not invited to take part, since interviewer and interviewee were sharing a private code that I could not access. They had fun, or so it seemed, but I did not. I am not sure if Raphaël Zarka feels the same, since I know he likes the dialogue as a genre,

but I know that he also wasn't too keen on using the interview format. However, I like to work within given limits – and I feel I can speak for us both here – and wanted to see how I could unfold the structure to better fit our purpose. Raphaël was interested in having my take on his work. I was interested in reading his work *vis à vis* the idea of the monument. What I proposed was that he sent me a selection of images of his works to which I would respond. Saved the interview format, it would be his work that would interrogate me, which is indeed the basis upon which all art criticism operates. Questioning is also the very basis of the interview.

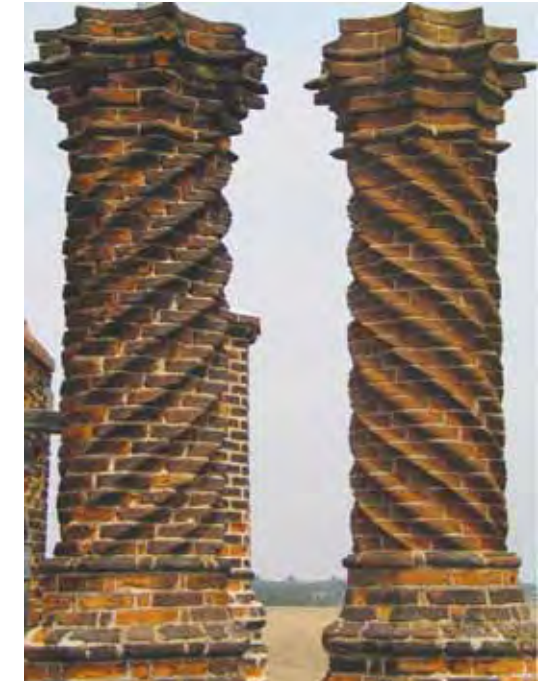


(1)

(1) Raphaël Zarka, *Le Cénotaphe d'Archimède*, 2011, terracotta bricks, 236 x 134 x 72 cm Collection Frac Basse Normandie  
Courtesy: Galerie Michel Rein, Paris © Marc Domage, opposite page: (2) Views of the chimneys at Layer Marney Tower, Essex, England.



(2)



(1 - 2) “It would have been easy to start from the start,” you said in your email, instead you first sent me the image of one of the last works you have made and which you recently showed at Le Grand Café in Saint-Nazaire. The work is titled *Le Cénotaphe d'Archimède* (2011), and features in an exhibition called *Le Tombeau d'Archimède*. The Greek mathematician's presumed tomb is in Siracusa, in the area of the ancient Sicilian necropolis. Cicero in a famous passage claims to have restored it from oblivion by recognising it upon discovering a sphere and a cylinder that marked the site. The burial is inscribed in the landscape, it is a chamber tomb within a system of burial places, with an entrance surmounted by a tympanum. It is of course empty and the title of the work you sent me, cenotaph, literally describes a tomb without a body. A cenotaph is a monument dedicated to the memory of someone buried somewhere else, it is a dislocated memorial, so to say.

In this work there is a direct and literal reference to the notion of the monument which uncovers two more elements that to me are inextricably connected to it: the notion of the landscape, and the allusion to the body that sometimes acts as a measure, sometimes as a vector tracing a topography.

The landscape is here alluded to, not represented, twice: in the title of the show, as memory of a place, and in the title of the

work, as a lack. The body is called into question when we know that this work was developed not only as a reproduction of a Tudor Chimney from Layer Marney Tower in Essex, England, “built in the 16th century by Italian craftsmen who most probably know Luca Pacioli's *De Divina Proportione*” (to steal your words), but also under the influence of the bell tower of architect Borromini's Sant'Andrea delle Fratte, which you walked past every day during your stay in Rome.

If you had started from the beginning, I would have looked at the work from the same angles: *Les Formes du repos n°1 (rhombi)* (2001) is the photograph which you consider to be the beginning of your work as an artist. The image frames and isolates a wave breaker on the French coast, in as much as here *Le Cénotaphe d'Archimède* gains another use and reference by losing its function. There, the wave breaker, a functional object, once isolated by the gaze and given a specific space, becomes a modernist monument, a sculpture in the public space that reminded me, when I first saw it in your studio, Robert Smithson's *Monuments of Passaic* from 1967. Both, along with the interplay between the status of ruin and that resurrection as aesthetic objects, call into question the idea of the walk – the crossing of a landscape – as inherent to the making of the work, or to its experience.



(3)

(3) The tomb of Archimedes is again present here, in this series of A5 offset prints that you titled *Cards* (2011) and which were originally conceived as starting in 2008 as a collection of invitation cards for solo exhibitions. Some refer to figures of scientists and mathematicians: Abraham Sharp, Max Bruckner, Wentzel Jamnitzer, Jean-François Niceron. Others reproduce the burial of the Greek mathematician and a sculpture dedicated to *Fortuna* designed by Goethe and erected in his garden in Weimar as a gift to a friend. Are they equivalent to the others? And what is the role of these *Cards* in the logic of your work? If we imagine their use, they would be anticipations of the show. Each refers to aspects of an ongoing research that has to deal with form, approach, methodology, references. Or they would be a piece of the show directly delivered to our home. They are coded messages to the viewer, or so you intended them. However, they became a work in itself that features in this last show because they could never be used for their original purpose: they were never used as invitation cards, ultimately.

The order of the prints catches my attention: opening with a site, that is also a tomb, that is also a cenotaph in some sense, and closing the series with a sculpture.

These two, in that position, seem to disclose the possibility of a continuous shift between the notion of the monument in public space and that of the sculpture in the studio, that in your work I see as a constant. Strictly, the monument as a place of collective remembrance does not pertain to your work. However it often triggers – or stems from – a narrative construction of the relation between space and time, which is a central point for the agency of the monument. These images disclose another node of your practice – that of the document – which might help me in focus on this passage that slips away as I try to grasp it.

In your email you refer to a conversation we had in your studio in Villa Medici and define your sculptures documentary: “The way I mean it” – you say – “refers to pieces linked to a certain type of investigation that come from a pre-existing form or site. These artworks look abstract to start with, but actually are pretty close to the original. Mine are highly figurative (I re-build objects) but others could relate to that shape/site by contact.”

To explain indexicality as one of these strategies of translation, you refer to the sculptures that Rossella Biscotti realised as part of her work *Il processo* (2010-2011). This is interesting, for what your work and hers have in common is exactly the intuition that performativity can give to sculpture when it refers on one side to the category of memory, and on the other to reappropriation (be it collective and referring to history, in her case, or individual in yours). I have in mind *La Sculpture verte de Montreuil* (2008) mainly, but this applies also to works such as *La Draisine de l'Aérotraine* (2009), or in the way skaters activate inert urban material. The index is the basis for both, and at the same time it offers itself through art as both document – trace – and material that can be newly re-articulated into a spoken language, which is the way to undisclose the object so that it becomes public and stands as a monument (the word monument is rooted in *mnema*, memory, however memory is not given once for ever, but must be constantly reactivated. Alois Riegl at the beginning of the last century referred to monuments as something that is felt as such by the collective ‘in the time of its experience.’)



(4)

(4) Such translation from one phase to another is well laid out here, in this sequence of works where the same form occurs in *Les Formes du repos n°1 (rhombi)*, in a small sculpture resting on a plinth, *Préfiguration de la Collection des Rhombis* (2008), consisting of a facsimile of the *De Divina Proportione* by Pacioli and two

found objects, at the bottom of a portrait of Luca Pacioli by Jacopo de' Barbari. How does this take form as sculpture though, is very much part of the way in which the camera works: by isolating the object of ones' gaze from time and space and reframing it into a new, autonomous configuration.



(5)

(5) Raphaël Zarka, Rhombus Sectus, 2009, Super 16 film transferred on HD, 12', location shots Courtesy: Galerie Michel Rein, Paris; Bischoff/Weiss, London.

previous pages:

(3) p.138 Raphaël Zarka, Cards, 2011, series of six invitation cards. (selection of 3) offset print, 31 x 34 cm each, from top: Portrait of Jean-François Nicéron; The tomb of Archimedes; Portrait of Wentzel Jamnitzer Courtesy: Galerie Michel Rein, Paris © Marc Domage.

(4) p.139 From top to bottom and left to right  
Raphaël Zarka, Les formes du repos n°1 (rhombi), 2001, lambda print, 70 x 100 cm Courtesy: Galerie Michel Rein, Paris.

Raphaël Zarka, Préfiguration de la collection des Rhombis, 2008, facsimile of the book by Luca Pacioli, De Divina Proportione, two aluminium rhombicuboctahedrons, bookmark, 10 x 29 x 20.5 cm  
Courtesy: Galerie Michel Rein, Paris.

Raphaël Zarka, Ratiocination, Galerie Michel Rein, Paris, 2010, from the series Cartons d'invitation 2007-2010, impression offset, 31 x 34 cm  
Courtesy: Galerie Michel Rein, Paris; Bischoff/Weiss, London.

Page from Luca Pacioli's De Divina Proportione, 1509.

Jacopo de' Barbari, Ritratto di Luca Pacioli, 1495.



(6)

(5-6) For Siegfried Kracauer, mere photographic documentation is not capable of conveying the *continuum* of space and time. It does not offer us a testimony, but on the contrary it risks burying its meaning. Instead it is through *montage*, i.e. the breaking down of a film sequence and its reconstruction, that the filmmaker is able to impart truth. This does not tell the whole story, but rescues fragments of it that would otherwise be destined for oblivion. In a similar way, Walter Benjamin with *Das Passagen-Werk* and with his *Theses on the Philosophy in History*, performs his understanding of history and of the role of the critic, whose task is to rescue forgotten files of the archive in order to reconfigure them into a narrative that, ra-

ther than accounting for the past, offers a reading of the present. In both Kracauer and Benjamin we can indicate the archive as a performative dispositive that while preserving the past, reactivates it. The films *Rhombus Sectus* (2009) and *Gibellina Vecchia* (2010) do not make use of the archive, but constitute themselves an archive for further uses. *Rhombus Sectus* was shot in Minsk, Belarus, and captures life scenes of the futuristic National Library. Conceived in the 1980s, built in the years 2000, and opened in 2006 this building seems to speak more of the past than projecting the skyline of Minsk in the future: it is an anticipation of a memorial to an unlocatable time, a paradoxical object of commemoration.



(7)



(8)

(7-8) “When I shot the film in 2010, there was a hole on one of the concrete platforms. That’s what I could see there: the door from one of the village houses. What could I say?” This passage through the concrete surface of one of the blocks composing the Cretto here is not just the sign of the negligence of which the monument suffered for years. You give it a new significance by interpreting it as a door to one of the houses, and to me this reconnects to the idea of the cenotaph that is inherent to your work. I am again in front of a sarcophagus without body, that looks so much like Archimede’s tomb. This image commented by your words brings to my memory the Aetruscan necropolis of Cerveteri near Rome. The fascination with the Cretto is a long standing obsession of yours: you have filmed in Gibellina several times, and many works directly or indirectly refer to it. The Cretto is a memorial to the victims of the earthquake that destroyed the whole Valley of Belice in Sicily in 1968, and is also a grand public sculpture by Alberto Burri that can be practiced. By walking through it, the visitor retraces the alleys of the old village. You also filmed the village of Poggio Reale, left as it was at the time of the earthquake, as a monument in the form of a ruin. For me there is something

in common with your collection of photographs of skaters performing on public sculptures, of which you buy the rights of reproduction as well as the image, and those fixed views of the Cretto. In both there is tension between performance and fixity, sculpture and action, memory and the present. And the archive stands as the possibility – as in the case of the exhibition *Riding Modern Art*, a photographic collection around a replica of Katarzyna Kobro’s *Spatial Composition 3 (1928)* (2007), or in the case of the configuration of the architectural detail of a Renaissance painting into a sculpture in *Le Tombeau d’Archimède*, to re-signify the material into a new object, through a new display, and a new *montage* that makes a translated document from the past newly spoken, again present.

By request of the author: Original conversation and text in English

(6-7) Raphaël Zarka, *Gibellina Vecchia*, 2010, Super 16 film transferred on HD, 10’30’’. Location and set photographs Courtesy: Galerie Michel Rein, Paris; Bischoff/Weiss, London.

(8) Raphaël Zarka, *Riding Modern Art*, a photographic collection around a replica of Katarzyna Kobro’s *Spatial Composition 3 (1928)*, 2007. Collection Frac Alsace. Courtesy: Galerie Michel Rein, Paris. Photo: Bertrand Trichet.