# RAPHAËL ZARKA INTERVIEW BY ELISABETH WETTERWALD

July – October 2008

Elisabeth Wetterwald:
You've written two books on skateboarding: *Une journée sans vague. Chronologie lacunaire du skateboard. 1779-2005* (*A Day with no Waves: An Incomplete Chronology of Skateboarding. 1779-*2005) and *La conjonction interdite. Notes sur le skateboard* (*The Forbidden Conjunction: Notes on Skateboarding*). In the preface to *La conjonction interdite*, you write: "For those who skate, skateboarding warps the way you look at things." As it's something you've spent a lot of time doing, skateboarding has certainly shaped the way you look at things, as well as your approach to sculpture, but we'll come back to that in a moment. Skateboarding doesn't feature in your work as a "fun activity" undertaken by a "fan". On the contrary, it seems to me that it operates as a tool, a filter and a method; not, at any rate, as a subject, and certainly not an object. I'd like it if you could describe in detail the role that skateboarding plays in your work …

Raphaël Zarka:
Oddly enough, I'd say that skateboarding enabled me to internalize my passion for certain works of art. I was given my first skateboard when I was seven years old. Like all skaters, I'd seek out smooth surfaces, new tarmac, concrete precincts (which weren't very common in the village I grew up in: there was only one concrete pavement, with two small steps; I knew it by heart). When I was a teenager, skateboarding was my all-

consuming, and pretty much my sole passion. Then, when I went to art school, I consciously set skateboarding to one side.

It was then that I discovered minimalism and conceptual art: I began to familiarize myself with the artists and movements that have had a lasting influence on my work: Arte Povera, with Giuseppe Penone, Giovanni Anselmo and Alighiero e Boetti, British Land Art by Hamish Fulton and Richard Long (or works by David Tremlett and Roger Ackling), as well as Supports / Surfaces (some of Tony Gand's and Daniel Dezeuze's works). When I got to the Ecole des beaux arts in Paris, I was lucky to attend a year-long class devoted Harald Szeemann's exhibition, *When Attitudes become Form*, which was taught by Dider Semin. That moment in art history, which made me completely forget about skateboarding, later helped me to reevaluate my experience as a skater. Because of skateboarding, I was unconsciously aware of some of the forms, materials and logics that had been specific to some of the artists of that generation. So to me my relationship to that period is more of a personal than a historical one.

EW: Could you give precise examples of the kinds of links you've been able to make?

RZ: There's a work by Nancy Holt called *Sun Tunnels* that she made in the Utah desert in 1976. The photographs of that work look very much like photographs of skaters skating giant pipes in the middle of the desert. I'm thinking of the images that Warren Bolster started taking in 1977 in particular (Bolster was a famous surf and skate photographer). Those giant

pipes were to be found in Arizona, especially around Phoenix. In 1973, as part of the Central Arizona Project, Ameron started building concrete pipes in the middle of the desert that sometimes measured up to 7 meters across – part of a project to construct a 500 km long canal. The same pipelines serviced the cooling system of nuclear plants in other parts of the United States. It's likely that Nancy Holt saw them before she conceived of *Sun Tunnels*. In fact, I think that Nancy Holt's fascination for that type of space is of the same order as a skater's; it's just that the artist and the skater use the space in different ways.

I've also always associated Richard Serra's famous *Verb List* (1967-1968) – where the artist lists all the processes one could use to make a work of art (to fold, to throw, to tear, etc…) – with the ways that skaters use their skateboards to test out the materials of a city. Most skateboarding moves get their names from the part of the skateboard that's in contact with a given obstacle and the specific type of friction that causes. So a *nose slide* means making the front part of the skateboard slide along or down a small wall, bench or railing; *nose wheeling* means skating on the front two wheels; a *nose grind* means grinding the front truck. The processes of skateboarding are very like those of so-called process art.

EW: In *Chronologie lacunaire du skateboard*, you mention how Californian skateboarders discovered new terrains. They started off on the pavements, then moved on to the sloping sides of their school playgrounds, which were built into the hills, then empty swimming pools, then giant water pipes; then public spaces, like

the Embarcadero in San Francisco, built at the beginning of the 1970s and containing a fountain made out of intersecting concrete structures…

The discovery and testing out of new spaces is one of the fascinating aspects of skateboarding of that period. And you're right in that it's very close to what some of the artists more or less closely associated with Land Art were doing at the time. A whole dimension of your work seems to be "inhabited" by the memory of Land Art. I'm thinking of your photographs in particular….

RZ: Alongside skateboarding, the other major experience of my teenage years was archeology. A friend of the family owned the grounds of a Château in a small town. I would go there to do amateur digs, and spent a great many weekends digging up catapult balls or uncovering underground pools. As an experience it had a profound effect on me. (In the same way as the time I spent looking for pre-historic tools in a small cave in the Lot region while on a residency at the Ateliers des Arques this year has marked me). And, in fact, the way I came at art was not from the perspective of the imagination or of making, but from that of discovery. I chose to study art with the eventual aim of studying archeology. I've deviated from that path, but something about that relationship to forms has stayed with me. The presence of Land Art in my photographs or videos is not unrelated to the question of archeology. Heizer, Morris, De Maria and Smithson were all interested in the art of the Paleolithic and pre-Columbian civilizations. What I really like about their work is their historicized approach to the formal vocabulary of minimal art.

EW: You often use works by other artists as the basis for your own work. You've come up with your own typology for this way of working: you do “cover versions” and “replicas.” What's the difference?

RZ: My detour via photography got me thinking about how I produce objects as a form of documentary sculpture. Formally, my sculptures are close to the branch of abstraction that leads from constructivism to minimal art. Yet they're not based in a conception of form as an autonomous language. None of the sculptures I've made so far are abstract. But, rather than “figurative”, I prefer to think of them as “documentary”. They deal in objects in particular, they're never just copies. I'm just as interested in the history of the objects they refer to as I am in their form.

Not all the objects we're surrounded by have the same status. Among other characteristics, some of those objects are works of art. This is the kind of distinction that the typology you mention makes. I decided to call works by artists that I've made again “cover versions.” I've actually only made two so far: a wheel made out of breeze-blocks and five circles etched into tarmac: *Reprise nº1 (Iran do Espírito Santo) (Repeat nº1 (Iran do Espírito Santo))*, 2001 and *Reprise nº2 (Michael Heizer) (Repeat nº2 (Michael Heizer)),* 2006. The “replicas” are reconstructions too, but the difference is that they start out from an artisanal object (Galileo's mechanical instruments) or one that's been industrially produced (the breakwaters in *Formes de repos*). I recently added a further category: “reconstructions” in the strict sense, which applies to the production of objects that exist only virtually…

EW: Which is to say…?

RZ: For example, I made *Studiolo* (2008), a wooden model of the cabinet that features in Antonello da Messina's famous painting of Saint Jerome (*San Gerolamo nello studio*, 1475). And I'm working on a piece at the moment that's a reconstruction of the glass rhombicuboctahedron[1] half-filled with water in the portrait of Luca Pacioli by Jacopo de Barbari (*Ritratto di Fra' Luca Pacioli*, 1495). You could say that the *Billes de Sharp* (*Sharp's Beams*) (2008) series belongs to this category too. In that piece, I had a network of straight lines pyro-graved into oak beams. The sculptures repeat the perspective drawings, illustrating a method for the construction of semi-regular polyhedrons invented by the English astronomer Abraham Sharp in 1718, line by line; a method that, as far as I know, has never actually been used.

To complete that typology, there are also "deductions." *Forme à clef* (2006), a piece I showed as part of the exhibition entitled "XS" (2007) at the Fondation Ricard, is a small geometrical sculpture, a wooden polyhedron deduced from thirty six wedges, used in painting stretchers. This type of deduction is linked to the use of a modular system. It's something that I'm really interested in, especially in other people's work. In another genre, there's *Sculpture déduite* (2007), a circular layering of wood and marble that is the exact counter-form of the replica I did of one of Galileo's objects, which he devised to study the movement of pendulums (*Tautochrone,* 2007).

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1 In geometry, the rhombicuboctahedron, is an Archimedean solid with eight triangular and eighteen square faces.

Last, there's the found object, the readymade in the surrealist sense of an object that's been promoted to the status of artwork. This is quite a new method for me. The first piece of I made in this category was a ready-made still life, *Les Ptolemaïques (The Ptolemaics*) (2008): a collection of four objects, used in a particular kind of cup and ball game, arranged on a small copper-plated wooden shelf. I recently made a piece in the same genre: *Préfiguration de la collection des rhombis* (*Prefiguring a collection of rhombis*). While he was putting up his *Le Jardin de Cyrus* (2007) at the Galerie Edouard Manet in Gennevilliers, Yoan Gourmel found some small metal rhombicuboctahedrons in a cupboard. The rhombicuboctahedrons were pierced and grooved on every side. I simply placed two of those small objects on a copy of Luca Pacioli's *Divine Proportion*[2], and bookmarked one or two pages.

EW: How are these "methods" different from citation or appropriation?

RZ: Once you've made the decision that you're going to work in a documentary manner, and you want to give a physical account of a particular object, there aren't many means at your disposal other than imitation, duplication or just presenting the object itself. If I've made use of these operatory modes, it's not to treat them as subjects. They constitute a method that's entirely bound up with the project I've set myself: to establish a collection of objects that's at the same time a collection of sculptures. For a "documentary practice"

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[2] Luca Pacioli, *On the Divine Proportion*, treatise first published in Venice in 1509 with illustrations by Leonardo da Vinci.

to be more than just a “collection of various documents”, one *mnemosyne*[3] among others, it has to engage in modes of production / restitution such as the copy, the replica, the reconstruction, or the readymade.

EW: Your way of working is quite close to the artists of the Renaissance (the model of the artist-engineer) who drew on their scientific investigations when working out their paintings or represented that link between art and science in paint. We get the sense that that world, the imagination of the Renaissance, is at least one that you're familiar with…

RZ: What really interests me in the Renaissance is the porosity between different fields of knowledge and techniques. Perspective, that incredible effort of rationalization with a view to representing the world, was as important to mathematicians, doctors, botanists as it was to painters, sculptors, architects....
The spaces built using the stricter rules of perspectives prevalent during the Quattrocentro suit my taste for geometrical abstraction. Often, when I look at Giotto, Piero della Francesca, Uccello or Mantegna, I mentally remove all the human figures until I'm left with constructions that look like “ideal cities”: perspectives on deserted cities that historians also sometimes qualify as “urbinate”. These radical constructions (that can be found in an even more abstract form in the geometrical panels in the *Studiolo* from Gubbio or Urbino[4]) in some

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[3] *Mnemosyne* was in the Greek mythology the personification of memory. Zarka refers here to the project of Warburg (not to Mnemosyne as a myth).

[4] The *studiolo* were private chambers used for the purpose of study and meditation. The most famous are those from Gubbio (in

sense prefigure the geometrical sculpture of the twentieth century, and in particular the works that could at one time have been associated with minimal art (from Tony Smith to Robert Morris). It seems to me that that kind of geometrical sculpture is more likely to have come out of painting than the history of sculpture: the paintings of *mazzocchi*[5], for example, or octagonal wells. In fact, judging by the number of times it has been replicated in contemporary art, Dürer's rhombohedron in *Mélancolie* (1514) is probably the most famous minimal sculpture of the sixteenth century (if not the whole of art history).

I'm aware that I share this interest in the Renaissance with a number of artists. I'm thinking of Isabelle Comaro, for example, of her series of *Black Maria* drawings (2008)[6] that she showed this year at the Ferme du Buisson, and the ones showed more recently at the Galerie Xippas. In her work, there's a clear sense that this recourse to classical perspective serves an alternative to geometrical abstraction. I'd even be tempted to say, reversing the direction of the history of

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Guidobaldo I da Montefeltro's ducal palace, now conserved at the Metropolitan Museum in New York) and Urbino (in Frédéric III da Montefeltro's ducal palace), for their trompe-d'œil panels. They contain representations of polyhedra very similar to the ones by Leonardo da Vinci that figure in Pacioli's treatise.

[5] Frequently painted by Uccello, the *mazzocchio* was originally an article of male clothing that was fashionable during the Quattrocento.

[6] *Black Maria* is a sort of cinematographic study combining eleven drawings on tracing paper with eleven black and white photographs. Abstract images made following a mathematical system from the Renaissance are set alongside photographs that gradually zoom in on a character.

art, that classical perspective is an *extension* of geometrical abstraction.

EW: A number of artists of your generation, with whom you often show your work, work as "connectors". Your work doesn't partake in the great big postmodern mix-up, nor do you appropriate, quote or remake. Yours is more like a methodological postmodernism. You borrow, you manipulate, you make links, you create networks of knowledge and information, you pick out analogies….

RZ: Yes, that's true in the case of artists such as Julien Prévieux, Aurélien Froment, Jochen Dehn, Gyan Panchal, Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc, Benoit Maire, and Isabelle Cornaro, among others. There's no desire to break with the past. But as a spectator it's impossible not to see that there are some very obvious differences between the exhibition organized by Saâdane Afif and Valérie Chartrain at the last Lyon Biennale[7] and the one by Pierre Joseph that we spoke about earlier – if only on a formal level; or indeed between the two most recent Prix Ricard shows, the one Mathieu Mercier curated in 2007[8] and Nicolas Bourriaud's this year...

If I had to speculate on the relative specificity of these artists, I'd say it has to do with an open and profound

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[7] "Promenade au zoo" an account of the Zoo Galerie (Nantes) and the journal *Zéro-deux*, (both under the direction Patrice Joly), via works by forty-five artists.

[8] "Dérive", 12 October- 17 November 2007, with the artists Wilfrid Almendra, Vincent Beaurin, Christophe Berdaguer & Marie Péjus, Julien Bouillon, Stéphane Calais, Sammy Engramer, Marc Étienne, Daniel Firman, Regine Kolle, Hugues Reip and Virginie Yassef.

connection with history. The fact that Aby Warburg was omnipresent in the intellectual context of our time at art school is probably not just a coincidence. I know how important the book by Philippe-Alain Michaud[9] is to Aurélien Froment, and some of Didi-Huberman's texts to Mathieu K. Abonnenc. But ultimately what mattered was less the topics that Warburg discussed than the methodological implications of his work: the way he expands fields of knowledge, is constantly telescoping different moments from the history of form and gesture; to repeat something that Giorgio Agamben says, he basically "goes beyond the limits of art history itself."[10]

As a form of investigation and the way different references can intersect, the activity of the art historian, like that of the essayist, is very important to us. And if Warburg's *Mnémosyne* atlas approaches an artwork, it's not surprising that some artists are starting to approach or claim to be engaging in the work of the essayist. This is probably one of the main reasons why Robert Smithson is so widely admired nowadays. Given his fondness for geometry, materials, the landscape, his research carried in books or out in the world, I'm not at all surprised that Smithson gets cited more frequently than Marcel Duchamp. As far as my work is concerned, I find I'm often compelled to talk about the influence of Roger Caillois: his concept of a generalized poetics based on the idea of there being a unity and continuity

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[9] Philippe-Alain Michaud, *Aby Warburg et l'image en mouvement* (Paris: Macula, 1998).

[10] Giorgio Agamben, "Aby Warburg et la science sans nom", *Image et Mémoire* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, coll. Art & esthétique, 2004), p.11.

between the physical, intellectual and imaginary worlds.[11]

*This interview was first published in the magazine 20/27, nº3, January 2009, éditions M19, Paris. This is a shortened version of the interview.*

[11] See in particular "Le Champ des signes" and the chapter entitled "Sciences diagonales" in Roger Caillois, *Œuvres* (Paris: Gallimard, coll. Quarto, 2008).