

# encounters

## RAPHAËL ZARKA

### Guide

#### RAPHAËL ZARKA GEOMETRY IMPROVED

Raphaël Zarka is one of a new generation of artists for whom existing cultural forms constitute the raw material for their work. The point of departure for Zarka's art, which encompasses photography, video and the written essay, is fundamentally sculptural in the expanded sense of twenty-first century art making. The perpetuation of forms, from Plato through Modernism to post-Minimalism, characterise his explorations, which he presents as precise compositions evoking interconnecting narratives across time and space.

*Geometry Improved* is an installation comprising six colour photographs from Zarka's ongoing series *Les Formes du Repos* (Forms of Rest) (2001–), images taken by the artist of large-scale structures isolated in the landscape, and *Les Billes de Sharp* (Sharp's Beams) (2008–09), eight solid oak beams scored with geometric patterns and presented in vertical and horizontal positions. The dense lattice of intersecting lines that cut into the wood's surface are taken from drawings made by the English astronomer Abraham Sharp, who described how to cut complex polyhedra (multi-sided forms) from a solid block of wood in his 17<sup>th</sup> century treatise 'Geometry Improved', from which the exhibition takes its name. A portrait of Sharp, borrowed from the collection of the University of Oxford's Science

Museum forms part of the display as does the cut-out relief, *Déduction de Sharp* (2008), a literal translation of the outlines of Sharp's drawings.

Zarka has described *Les Formes du Repos* as involuntary sculptures. Existing in the world, they are transformed both by the artist's gaze and by the process of photographic registration. Shot for the most part in different areas of rural France, their subjects are remnants of abandoned structures which Zarka encountered, often by chance, in the landscape: a stretch of unfinished monorail, the foundations for a concrete breakwater, a half-section of a water-pipe. Standing in isolated formation or partially submerged by a forest floor, Zarka has captured them as mysterious monuments, bringing to mind, alternately, images of archeological campaigns of past civilisations, science fiction movies and 1970s Land art. Seemingly frozen in time, these uncanny forms, many of which replicate shapes first described in Antiquity, also suggest movement, in the arcs, slopes and vectors of their constituent parts.

*Les Billes de Sharp* are 'documentary sculptures'. Like *Les Formes du Repos*, they are found structures onto which Zarka has directly transposed a second set of found elements, taken from Sharp's treatise. As with the image-sculptures, they too seem held in suspense, caught between their seemingly immovable presence and the dynamic implied by the traces across the wood's surface. This interest in the relationship between form and function and the moving and static

body finds further expression in Zarka's video works, notably *Riding Modern Art* and *Topographie Anecdotee du Skateboard* (An Anecdotal Topography of Skateboarding), a chronicle of the history of skateboarding and its marginalised status in public spaces.

True to Zarka's interest in the essay form, *Geometry Improved* consists of a literal as well as speculative narrative of formal enquiry. Replication, collage – the juxtaposition of visual information from different sources – and the principle of the ready-made, by which existing objects, images or structures are transformed into a work of art by the artist's reframing of them, underpin Zarka's approach. He describes himself as a collector, rather than a maker of objects, of the view that there are enough objects in the world to need to invent new ones. Rather, the artist sees his work more akin to the cabinet of curiosities, an activity of subjective classification, in which objects are freed from the weight of history and combined in such a way as to suggest new interpretations.

The framed portrait of the astronomer Sharp in the exhibition attests to Zarka's sense of theatre. 'Theatrical machines' that invite comparisons and analogy, the constituent elements of his installation are part of a growing lexicon of narrative and conceptual possibility. In previous work, Zarka has brought together found images of skateboarders riding public sculptures with a 1920s modernist sculpture. In others, he has paired scaled-up replicas of instruments to test physical laws

of motion with Renaissance objects borrowed from the collections of science museums. The scholar Kate Briggs suggests a comparison between Zarka's approach and that of the editor or, perhaps more aptly, the writer who uses the idea of the found manuscript as a ruse for introducing his own story.<sup>1</sup>

For many years a skateboarder and the author of several books on its history,<sup>2</sup> Zarka's idea of skateboarding as a kind of re-wiring of spaces destined for a particular use rhymes with his approach to making art: 'Skateboarding is a pleasure that ultimately consists of testing and making use of the resistance of materials. Depending on the figures, the skateboarder slides or scrapes wood, plastic or metal on wooden, stone or metal supports. He tries to master a variety of different functions.'<sup>3</sup>

Similar to the abandoned structures built for past moments of aspiration and endeavour, and the recurrence of forms put to new uses, Zarka's reflections on skateboarding signal an ecology of art making of critical and contemporary relevance. For Zarka, it's not a question of an absolute reality but rather, what it is, has been or might be depending on the position from which you view it.

Suzanne Cotter

<sup>1</sup> See Kate Briggs, 'An Idea A Day: Presentation of A Daily Writing Programme', in Raphaël Zarka, *En Milieu Continu*, Nantes School of Art, 2007, pp.75–87

<sup>2</sup> *La Conjonction Interdite: Notes sur le Skateboard* (The Forbidden Union: Notes on Skateboarding), éditions fsept, Paris, 2006, and *Chronologie Lacunaire du Skateboard 1779–2005: Une Journée Sans Vague* (An Incomplete Chronology of Skateboarding 1779–2005: A Day without a Wave), éditions fsept, Paris, 2007

<sup>3</sup> 'La Conjonction Interdite' in *La Conjonction Interdite*, p.16





## RAPHAËL ZARKA INTERVIEWED

### Which way of working do you prefer (photography, film-making or sculpture)?

Each way gives me a particular sense of time. What I mean is that I love to work on very different time scales. With the photograph of an object, there is an element of chance, the work takes 1/125<sup>th</sup> of a second to make. When I work with sculpture, it is more elaborated; you have drawings, sometimes maquettes, that come first. I also work with crafts people whose movements are more precise than mine. It can take from a couple of days to a couple of weeks to produce a sculpture. The process of film-making is even longer, I usually make several trips on location to have a clear idea of what I want to do with the specific site I am interested in. Then there is the crew, at least 3 people, a couple of days for the shooting, then some weeks in the edit room with a professional. The medium is really important to me, even though it is never central. I always choose it according to the project I have in mind.

### Is it mainly man-made structures which inspire you, or are you equally interested in naturally occurring forms?

I would like to say it does not matter, that like in the *Wunderkammer*, or cabinet of curiosities, the distinction between man-made and natural does not exist. But I have to admit I work

more often from man-made structures. That might be because I am deeply interested in geometric forms. It might be a matter of convergence. Geometry is not absent from nature; it might just be that I haven't found the right way to really work with it yet.

### What material do you find most interesting? Concrete? Wood?

Concrete is much easier to photograph than to actually work with! But if I had the right idea, I wouldn't mind using it in my work. Recently I have been producing wooden sculptures but there are a lot of other materials I plan on using in the future, including glass, brass or copper.

### Is there a particular way in which you catalogue your different projects or findings?

I do hope that with time all the different projects will intersect. I suppose one could find some connections, for instance in my research on polyhedrons on the one hand and my interest in skateboarding on the other. But to me that would be reducing the work too much. It is always hard to define what is the subject matter of someone's work, but I think the closest to the truth would be to say that I am interested in the migration of forms and shapes in time and the history of their re-use.

### Do you think of your work as an ongoing project, or separate projects?

As an ongoing project, definitely. To me working is like progressively mapping a mental territory. It might also be seen as a kind of jigsaw puzzle that is assembled slowly but that also is continuously expanding. You might have heard of that quote by Blaise Pascal that states: 'Nature is an infinite sphere whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere'. Until I find a better one, I do not mind adding my name to the list of artists who use this to describe the process of their work.

### What is the art world like in France?

That's a terribly hard question to answer. It's always strange to see how England and France remain disconnected. I did a BA in Winchester, so I have some experience of this. I am not sure about specificities, but what I am sure of is that a lot of very good British artists never had a show in Paris and unfortunately it works the same the other way round. Now in France, I feel there are artists I can really relate to. That was not so much the case a couple of years ago. These artists seem to share a more cultural approach to art, by which I mean that history is a material to them not only a subject. They also share a great sense of materials, in the physical sense of the word.

### Are there any artists that particularly inspired you?

There are many artists but some of the key ones would be Kurt Schwitters, Marcel Duchamp, Robert Smithson, Robert Morris and, more recently Gabriel Orozco. To these artists I should add writers such as Jorge Luis Borges, Italo Calvino, Roger Caillois, Witold Gombrowicz or Robert Walser and some philosophers or scientists like Lucretius, Archimedes or Galileo. The list could go on and on and some of these names have been mentioned so many times that I think it reveals a certain family among the ways of thinking and producing shapes and meaning.

### How fast can the pentacycle go? \*

I would say faster than someone walking, but definitely not as fast as someone running.

Interview carried out by BTEC students from Oxford School. With thanks to Orla Crean, Head of Art.

\*In 2002 Zarka collaborated with Vincent Lamouroux on *Pentacycle*. The film documents Vincent Lamouroux riding a pentacycle on twenty kilometers of concrete, test rail built by Bertin Aérotrain in the countryside near Orléans in France. The structure was not demolished after the project failed and remains standing to this day.

## TOURS AND SCREENINGS

### Lunchtime tours

Every Tuesday and Thursday  
Led by one of the Modern Art Oxford team  
1pm *FREE* just turn up

### Exhibition tours

Saturday 21 February  
Emily Smith, Exhibition Organiser  
3pm *FREE* just turn up

Saturday 21 March  
Christophe Gallois, curator  
3pm *FREE* just turn up

Sat 28 March  
Dr. Stephen Johnston, Assistant Keeper, Museum of the History of Science, Oxford  
3pm *FREE* just turn up

### Screening Evenings

Tuesday 17 February  
Raphaël Zarka: *Topographie Anecdote du Skateboard*  
6pm *FREE* just turn up

Thursday 12 March  
Short video works selected by Raphaël Zarka:  
Julien Previoux, *Roulades*, 1998  
Julien Previoux, *Crash test*, 1998  
Raphaël Zarka, *Pentacycle*, 2002  
Raphaël Zarka, *Rooler Gab*, 2004  
Virginie Yassef, *Wow*, 2005  
Virginie Yassef, *Parachute*, 2003  
Virginie Yassef, *Projectile*, 2003  
Mathieu K. Abonnenc, *Le bord du monde*, 2004  
6pm *FREE* just turn up

If you have a question about Raphaël Zarka's work please ask a Visitor Assistant or consult the books on our reading table.

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### RAPHAËL ZARKA

31 January – 29 March 2009

Curated by Suzanne Cotter  
Assisted by Allia Ali

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Encounters is a programme of exhibitions in our Lower Gallery, displays at our partner schools and in the community, and special projects.

Raphaël Zarka lives in Paris. Born in 1977 in Montpellier. He graduated from Winchester School of Art in 1999 and the École Nationale des Beaux Arts, Paris in 2002. He was awarded the Prix Ricard in 2008.

Photography by Aurélien Mole

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