

Free Ride: The Art (and Science) of Skateboarding



Raphaël Zarka is a French artist, born in 1977. Although he states that he is mainly a sculptor, he produces works of art in a wide range of media. He first started crafting objects when he attended the Beaux-Arts Academy in Paris before turning to photography, with the intention of documenting them. He then returned to sculpture through the photographic medium. While doing so, he also undertook some amateur research into certain concepts in the history of science—and skateboarding. Soon after, he began writing on these subjects.



For Performa 11, Raphaël Zarka presented a three-part project: a sculptural installation, an essay, and a lecture, each a different component of the same project. Zarka's principal innovation for that exhibit lay in his prose work, *Free Ride*, which was partly translated into English for the occasion. In this text, he unveiled his unusual idea that "the skateboard is the involuntary and intuitive continuation of Tony Smith's road experience, transformed into sculpture by Robert Morris, Carl Andre or Richard Serra." To this interesting interpretation of minimal art, he added the idea that Galilean theories and astrological observations like those of Yantra Mandir in Jaipur were unintentional

skateboarding ramps, and similarly that these skateboarding ramps were in fact unconscious or unwitting tools for measuring gravity. This thesis—at first, only a hunch—made Raphaël Zarka embark on some exhaustive research. From there, he published two books on the history and sociology of skateboarding, while trying in his formal practice to merge his interests in this sport with studies in minimal art and the mechanical sciences. He found many pregnant connections between these three very different domains, and then rendered these links through his use of sculpture “in the expanded field”, as well as in a lecture that he further developed. He then recently transcribed his lecture into his essay “Free Ride”. It was thus even more intriguing to attend his Performa lecture, which was in a way a *mise en abyme*: a conference on a conference-based prose work.



The third part of Zarka’s New York project consisted of filling the Performa Hub with a plywood skateboarding ramp. However, it was neither an ordinary ramp nor a proper work of art. The artist presented it as an application to skateboarding of a Galilean theory, which states that acceleration is higher on the cycloid curve than on the arc of a circle. Indeed, even though some theorists have known that a cycloid might be more efficient for rolling over surfaces, they never actually tried to build one for skateboarding. Raphaël Zarka therefore took upon himself the task of doing so, thus revealing his love for both experimentation and concretization. This is only one instance of how this French artist imparts three-dimensional life to objects that once existed only in theory. He even invented a typology to define his different replicas, and named these specific achievements “reconstructions.” For instance, he produced *Studiolo*, a sculptural model of the study painted in Antonello da Messina’s famous *Saint Jerome in His Study*. With these reconstructions—as well as some other re-creations—Raphaël Zarka seeks to develop the second point of Lawrence Weiner’s “Declaration of Intent”: “The piece may be fabricated.” In the young artist’s hands, it seems that this rule transforms into “anything previously built or thought of can be materialized or readapted, if the artist has a proper justification.” Indeed, Raphaël Zarka creates this justification by writing, which is a medium that allows him to produce concrete works, often based on replicas. In the context of Performa 11, his ramp was a concrete embodiment of the dramatic meeting points he developed in *Free Ride*, while his essay provided the rationale for constructing the ramp.



Raphaël Zarka, *Free Ride* (Installation Views). 2011. Mixed media. A Performa 11 Project. Photos courtesy of Performa.

Even though his works of art usually look like abstract sculptures or scientific tools, it would be unfair to label both their aesthetic and their meanings as dry. Indeed, Raphaël Zarka is aware of the awkwardness of his associations, and it is not without humor that he usually displays them. His work is also about the beauty of experimentation—that is, the beauty of testing concepts again and again. The ramp that the artist placed in the Performa hub was, in fact, a way to allow skateboarders to experiment with the efficiency of the cycloid curve. However, it was also a way to embody a poetical fact: the cycloid is proof that the shortest way to go from one point to another is not a straight line. Raphaël Zarka, by making this point, thus gives insight into his methodology of thinking by taking detours, and of working in a spirit of playfulness. “It is better to play with existing things than to believe we can invent new ones,” he likes to say. What better way to assert this concept than by poetically and playfully comparing a skateboarder riding a public sculpture to Duchamp’s *Bicycle Wheel*, or to “an Egyptian obelisk on the back of a stone elephant”?





Like other European “research-based artists,” Raphaël Zarka thus uses knowledge as his main material, and works like a scholar, without forgetting the possibilities allowed by his amateur status. In fact, his sculpture *Studiolo* could be seen as a metaphor of contemporary artistic production: a mental space in a post-studio era. His oeuvre therefore seems more concerned with storytelling, connections, and knowledge than activism and political statements. But even though his practice appears harmless at first, what could be more politically engaging than championing erudition and books in a world ruled by short-term profits and high efficiency? What could be more anarchical than introducing skateboarders—better known for damaging public art rather than for seeking to preserve it—into a New York City art hub?

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All photos courtesy of Free Ride by Raphael Zarka unless otherwise noted.