

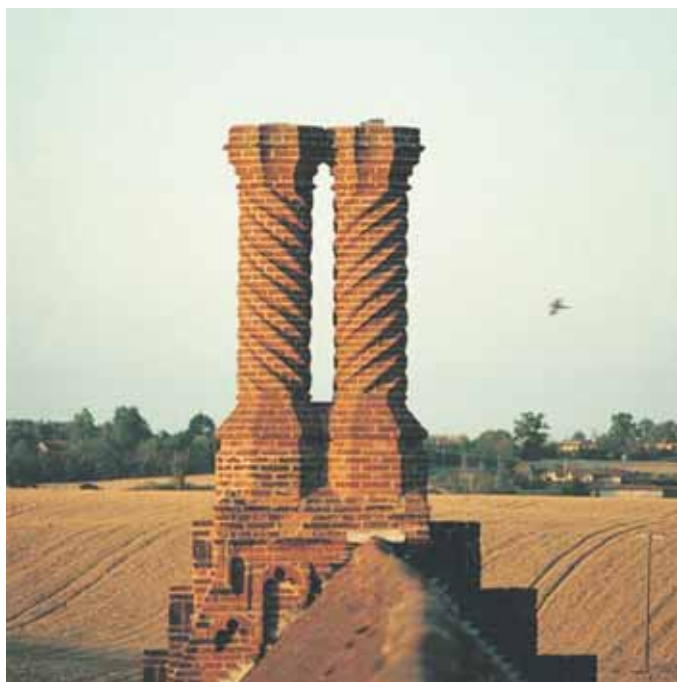
IT WOULD HAVE BEEN SO MUCH EASIER TO START FROM THE BEGINNING

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 *nonchalance*. 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.





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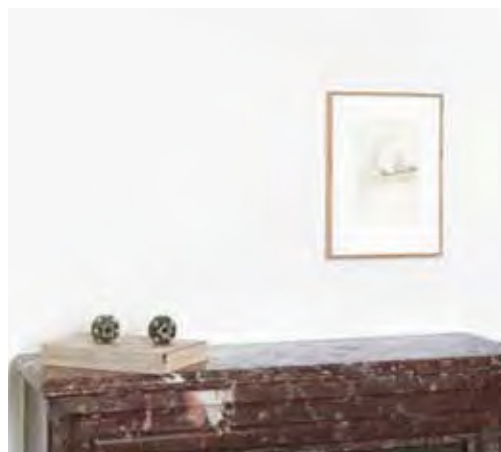
(1 - 2) “It would have been easy to start from the start,” you said in your email, instead you first sent me the image of one of the last works you have made and which you recently showed at Le Grand Café in Saint-Nazaire. The work is titled *Le Cénotaphe d’Archimède* (2011), and features in an exhibition 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.

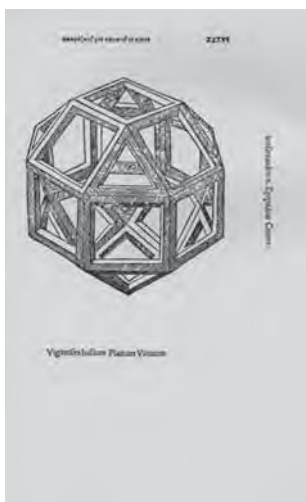
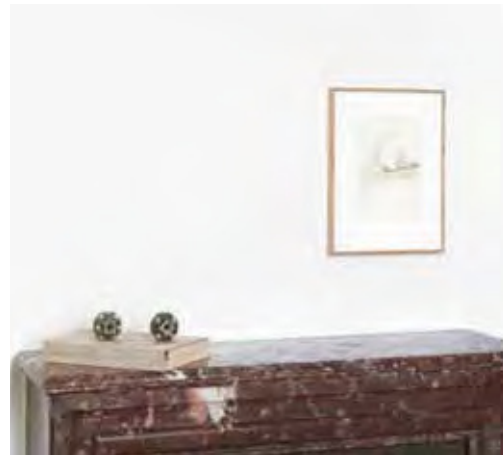
If you had started from the beginning, I would have looked at the work from the same angles: *Les Formes du repos n°1 (rhombi)* (2001) is the photograph which you consider to be the beginning of your work as an artist. The image frames and isolates a wave breaker on the French coast, in as much as here *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.



(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.



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(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 Damage.

(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.



(5)



(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.



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(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.