

Mircea Cantor
Artist meets con artist;
travel and tourism; matches
lit at both ends
by Christy Lange

Top left:
All the Directions
2000
Photograph
137×180 cm

Bottom left:
Double Heads Matches
2002-3
DVD still

Right:
Anxious Utility Vehicles
(detail)
2001
80 billboard images
Dimensions variable



Although only 28, Mircea Cantor has already propagated his own creation myth. Born in Romania, he left home in 1999, hitch-hiking his way through Europe and eventually settling in France. In his work *All the Directions* (2000) he documents himself holding a blank sign by the side of the road – a message to drivers that he would accept a lift anywhere. Yet for someone so itinerant, Cantor's practice stays surprisingly tied to his Romanian roots. He is the co-founder and co-editor of a cultural review called *Version*, based in Cluj and Paris, and although many of his video works focus on travel and tourism, the best of them examine the processes of production and exchange in his own country. These deadpan documents reflect his ambivalent position as refugee, traveller and Romanian native – as both observer and participant in an economy that accommodates and relies on unconventional forms of labour. Are the exchanges entered into by the scrounger, the protester, the cheat or the artist a means of survival, legitimate business practices or just dead labour?

The protagonist in *Smen* (2002) is a Romanian youth who explains how he cheats tourists out of their Euros by surreptitiously replacing them with Romanian Lei. The camera focuses on his hands deftly handling his Velcro wallet as he rehearses the trick, narrating each step as if it were a standard business transaction. Although the thief describes the deal as one with a clear winner and loser, Cantor remains equivocal. As a young Romanian artist making a film about a

young Romanian con artist, Cantor undermines our expectations of solidarity between the two; he could be exposing the thief to potential tourists, but he may also be justifying the scheme to the sympathetic viewer, who can see that this vocation is somehow inevitable; the exchange, though illegal, seems almost fair. Whether the artist identifies more with the struggling local cheat or the unlucky tourist remains uncertain.

Like the magician letting you in on the tricks of his trade in *Smen*, Cantor spotlights his surroundings and then demystifies them. For *Anxious Utility Vehicles* (2001) he covered parked cars on the streets with home-made covers, then posted pictures of them on hoardings across Paris. The images may look like some guerrilla advertising campaign for a new vehicle, yet the cars look utterly uniform under their grey covers. In a similar kind of intervention, he orchestrated a street demonstration in Albania in which protesters held mirrors rather than conventional placards, reflecting the city's buildings (*The Landscape is Changing*, 2004). Cantor draws attention to aspects of the landscape that might otherwise disappear, but once our curiosity has been aroused, reality sets in again – there is actually nothing magical to be unveiled. Like the scheme in *Smen*, this sleight of hand is just a set of straightforward operations reflecting reality rather than a more enticing illusion.

Double Heads Matches (2002-3) appears to document a rarely seen match production process in a Romanian factory. The footage is captivating, even beautiful: the cavernous, light-flooded factory is full of massive pieces of machinery, each with its own specific purpose: shredding logs into matchstick-size bits, for example, or sorting the millions

of sticks into vertical rows. Occasionally one of the workers unbuttons his shirt or flexes his muscles as he rakes up the rejected matches littering the floor. This is the only time we are aware there is a filmmaker present. At the end of the process the footage unexpectedly shifts to a setting more like an artist's studio, in which women with manicured fingernails gently dip the matches into a red phosphorus mixture. This last step is surprisingly home-made and deliberate, but there is another twist – the women dip both ends of the matches into the phosphorus. Our attention focuses on this final functionless product, which begins to look like an art work, implying something both dangerous and absurd. My first thoughts flickered between imagining someone striking the match at one end until burning his fingers on the other, and the thrifty consumer who might try to get full value for his money by using each match twice. In employing the match factory to produce his edition of double-headed matches, Cantor not only convinced the workers to exchange their machine labour for craft labour; he also manufactured a product that has no exchange value, other than as a work of art. Like someone throwing an unwieldy spanner into the works, Cantor momentarily short-circuits the system he and his subjects are bound to uphold. Like any good magician, he gracefully inverts the narrative he has so patiently unfolded and emerges from behind the curtain, hands free.