



Mircea Cantor Razor's Edge

The concept of artifice looms large in Mircea Cantor's work. It is constructed around an array of constantly renewed universal symbols—fire, the tree of life, the number seven and the rope—that give rise to a tension between the powers of the material and symbolic, a coexistence of contrary signs into which uncertainty insinuates itself. The winner of the 2011 Marcel Duchamp prize, his exhibition *Don't Judge. Filter. Shot.* will be presented at the Pompidou Center's Espace 315 from October 2, 2012 to January 7, 2013.

A footprint fossilized in a cement floor (*The Second Step*, 2005) or left in the sand before being methodically swept away (*Tracking Happiness*, 2009), a digital fingerprint on a wall (*Chaplet*, 2007) or a sheet of glass (*Rainbow*, 2011): Mircea Cantor's work is filled with shapes left by a body pressing on a surface. *Chaplet* is about both a simple hand motion and

sophisticated biometric identification technology. Dipping his fingers in black ink, he left a series of fingerprints like a string of beads across the walls of an exhibition space, reconstituting the figure of barbed wire. His fingerprints become the raw materials for a representation that in turn evokes yet another figure, the double helix of DNA. An underlying violence results from the collusion of these representations (the motifs of barbed wire and DNA), the bringing together of allusions to security technologies meant to guard territory and track people. In the photo triptych *Protection* (2010) a string of barbed wire whose points are frozen in ice (thus rendered inoperative) bring to mind the seductive ornamentality of a garland as well as the violence of oppression.

TECHNOLOGICAL THROWBACKS

Like the rope, the trap and the knife, "which have hardly ever needed a structural change to perfect them," (1) a fingerprint can be defined as "a technological throwback or cliché." (2) As Georges Didi-Huberman points out, "two wrong ideas about technology—first, that it points only to the future; second, that it can exist independently of beliefs and symbols—were

laid to rest long ago by Marcel Mauss." (3) But old-fashioned technologies fascinate this artist exactly because they imply durability and are not independent of beliefs and symbols. Consequently, he can re-insert and transpose them into a different economic system. Cantor has made many pieces in partnership with craftsmen, such as *Arch of Triumph* (2008), produced in Maramures in Romania, a region where the oak doors of homes that were not destroyed during the communist era are now being taken down to reuse the wood. Here he draws a parallel between a pre-Christian symbol, the tree of life, which often decorates these doors, and the representation of a strand of DNA. He had a variation on this theme made of gilded oak. *Arch of Triumph* evokes the victory of economic productivity over memory and legacy—unless the sculpture is decked out with the finery of a monument to memory. Also signaling the durability of a motif, it also represents a threshold, a passageway from the physical world to the metaphysical world. (4) In contrast to the monumental and ornamental temptation of *Arch of Triumph*, linked to the context of its production, there is the fragility and preciousness of *Epic-Fountain* (2012), a piece recently shown at the





À gauche et ci-dessus/left and above:

« Sic Transit Gloria Mundi ». 2012

HD film, son/with sound. 4 min 6 s

(Court. de l'artiste, galerie Yvon Lambert, Paris et Dvir Gallery, Tel Aviv)

MACRO in Rome and slated to show at the Pompidou. This sculpture is a new variation on the DNA strand, this time made of gold safety pins, each seven centimeters wide and almost nine meters high. Once also known as the diaper pin, this object symbolizes both safety and practicality. DNA is fascinating because it can be used to duplicate human beings, but it is also associated with the madness of eugenics. Man Ray's *Safety Pin* (1936) floats over a peaceful landscape like a sword of Damocles.

There is often something threatening in Cantor's work. In his *Double Head Matches* (2002–03), the multiple is shown with a documentary video of a match factory

where he augmented the assembly line with more artisanal manual labor to produce 20,000 two-headed matches, a hybrid object that definitely gives off a whiff of danger.

This sense of danger is also present in the very recent video *Sic Transit Gloria Mundi* (2012). A ritual takes place in an atmosphere as antiseptic and clinical as his piece *Tracking Happiness* (2009), where seven women circle in a vortex of immaculate whiteness. The title of the 2012 video is a reference to the coronation of the pope. It shows mendicants kneeling down and bowing their heads as they prepare to receive a strange form of alms from a woman who, like one of the Fates, unspools a thread that she places in the palm of their hand. Here the traditional ceremonial flax is replaced by a dynamite fuse burning furiously to the beat of a semantron, a percussion instrument used by Orthodox monks to call the faithful to

prayer (Cantor recorded the sound in a monastery in Putna). There is a great deal of suspense in this video as the flame alternates between a will-o'-the-wisp and a sacred fire. It also brings to mind the practice of mendicancy, meant to remind men of the lowliness of the human condition and implying a relationship of negotiation, hierarchy and power. The ritual gives us a visual and intellectual shock.

In *Vertical Attempt* (2009), a little boy sitting on the edge of a sink tries, for several seconds, to cut the trickle of water with a scissors. There is a disjunct between the sound and the image: the sound is like a jolt of electricity but no electrical appliance appears. Whether produced by a sensory illusion or artifice, the feeling of danger also evokes the trilogy of predation (bait, predator and prey) implicit in Cantor's work. A hook hangs under the fuselage of the miniature airplanes caught in a fishing net in *Fishing Flies* (2011). Yet a fishing net also allows filtering to take place and suggests that the fisher use analysis and discernment.

By weaving together a fabric of symbols inspired by sacred and profane references, Cantor creates his own cosmogony in which the signs are reversible. Like a strand of DNA, symbols are repeated and replicated and undergo formal transformations. Thus with great economy Cantor goes over from simple acts to long-term collaborations. Like a puppeteer, he need only pull the springs of a single symbol to change the situation. ■

Translation, L-S Torgoff

(1) Georges Didi-Huberman, *La Ressemblance par contact*, Paris: Éditions de Minuit.

(2) *Ibid.*, p.30.

(3) *Ibid.*, p.29.

(4) As Mircea Eliade notes, "The threshold is the limit, the boundary, the frontier that distinguishes and opposes two worlds—and at the same time, the paradoxical place where these worlds communicate, where passage from the profane to the sacred world becomes possible. A similar ritual function falls to the threshold of the human habitation, and it is for this reason that the threshold is an object of great importance." *The Sacred and the Profane*, 1959, Harcourt Inc.

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Mircea Cantor

Né en / born 1977 en Roumanie

Vit et travaille à / lives in Paris

Expositions personnelles / Recent shows:

2011 Credac, Ivry-sur-Seine ; Kunstverein, Salzburg

2012 Centre Pompidou, Paris ; International Film

Festival, Cluj, Roumanie ; Museum of Moving Image,

New York ; MACRO Museo di Arte Contemporanea,

Rome ; *Voices of Images*, Palazzo Grassi, Venise ;

TRACK, S.M.A.K. Gand