

FRANCISCO TROPA
«THE RM ENIGMA»

Francisco Tropa, «The RM Enigma»

We like to create a certain vertigo in our projects.

This exhibition is part of a significant series of projects involving the Galerie Jocelyn Wolff and the Cahn Gallery, with each project exploring the complex relationship between contemporary art and archaeology.

The aim of these confrontations and dialogues is to refresh our gaze; for audiences who have followed the history of art over the past few decades, the mysterious aura of archaeological objects enables striking re-readings and mises en abyme; the same is true for the enlightened archaeology enthusiast, who will see in contemporary creations objects that are difficult to apprehend, in their involuntary esotericism.

To continue the 2022 exercise, with a fascinating contribution by Katinka Bock, itself a continuation of an earlier reflection (Laura Lamiel, in collaboration with the Galerie Marcelle Alix), we asked Francisco Tropa to come and exhibit his most recent work at the Cahn Kunstraum.

Since Francisco Tropa's work emerges from the dialectical respiration between the traditional materials of sculpture (bronze, stone, etc.) and the classical devices of Western art (trompe-l'oeil, composition) on the one hand, and on the other, contributions from conceptual art or the use of techniques that blur the status of the object in the field of sculpture – the direct projection of objects, for example, transforms them into images rather than shadows – it is possible that here we reach the paroxysm in this dialogue between archaeology and contemporary art.

But it is also possible that having passed the tipping point, this confrontation reverts here to a natural simplicity, a harmonious, more literary relationship, with the emergence of new metaphors.

Jocelyn Wolff

L'Énigme de R.M., or alternatively

For many years, without cynicism, but with a certain amusement, Francisco Tropa has been highlighting the innumerable misunderstandings suffered by the work of Marcel Duchamp, and more particularly his ready-mades. The term was invented by Duchamp to refer to the manufactured items he borrowed to exhibit – the *Bicycle Wheel* on a stool (1913), the *Bottle Rack* (1914) or the snow shovel from *In advance of the broken arm* (1915). The term “ready-made” is more than a century old and has become one of the most recurring critical annotations in the history of the avant-gardes. Amongst them is the iconic *Fountain* (1917); “a porcelain urinal as a sculpture,” which has become a real model of Dada. In 1965, Duchamp nevertheless deplored its misguided interpretations and corrupted appropriations, especially those of the neo-Dadaists of the New Realism, Pop-Art or Assemblage: “I threw the bottle rack and the urinal into their faces as a challenge,” he said, “and now they admire them for their aesthetic beauty.”¹ Profaning the principle of visual indifference dear to Duchamp, who also spoke of “complete anaesthesia,”² some of these followers reconnected with a fetishisation of the object, in complete contradiction with the artist who inspired them.

The starting point of this large installation by Francisco Tropa entitled *L'Énigme de R.M.*, the initials of “ready-made,” is an approximation made by a friend on the subject of *Fountain*. Before changing his mind, he first imagined that Duchamp rotated his urinal 180° from its usual vertical position, whereas the artist only tilted it 90° in order to lay it flat. This temporary confusion was added to the sum of doubts that intersperse the history of *Fountain*, whose attribution problem is only one example amongst others. Although the artist’s authorship has sometimes been questioned, with some critics suspecting Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven of having been the initiator, it was Duchamp who listed the potential meanings of the pseudonym that appears on the urinal: “R. Mutt,” for Richard Mutt, could be an echo of the J.L. Mott Iron Works where the object came from, but also an allusion to *Armut*, “poverty” in German, which is opposed by Richard or “rich art”; or alternatively, “R. Mutt” might evoke *Mutter*, “mother” in German; or alternatively, derive from the comic character Mutt & Jeff; or alternatively... simply be an allusion to the initials of “ready-made”?

These volatile interpretations and shifts in meaning echo the instability of the short text that Francisco Tropa has written as a preamble to his installation *L'Énigme de R.M.*, which appears in the cartridges of the screen-printed posters illustrated with false marbles. Describing his friend’s spatial misunderstanding, this note, accompanied by a diagram, is available in eight languages. Generated by a translation company, these versions have intentionally been left uncorrected by the artist or by a competent third party, and therefore retain their typos, faults and mistranslations. For Tropa, these er-

rors are significant: they reflect the phenomenon of distorted interpretation that skews our understanding of Duchamp, whose love of puns has also fuelled a deviant hermeneutics. And at heart, these semantic shifts operate in the same way as the ready-mades, which are foremost displaced objects. Having left its place of origin, the store, *Fountain* first appeared in the form of an image photographed by Alfred Stieglitz for the magazine *The Blindman*: presented flat on a pedestal, with the signature and date visible, dramatically lit and in front of a painting by Marsden Hartley. Through this staging, the “transmutation” becomes effective: the object becomes a work, a sculpture on a pedestal, a figure on a background. As early as 1917, critics succumbed to a kind of interpretative mania, boasting of its false airs of a “Buddha of the Bathroom,” its Madonna-like silhouette – projections which were not refuted by Duchamp.

On the basis of these Duchampian excesses, the installation *L'Énigme de R.M.* questions the capacity of exhibition arrangements to create works of art for our minds, which are eager for meaning. Introduced by the eight screen prints forming a credit roll, the installation is a maze of eight narrow, self-supporting picture rails, both sides of which are visible, featuring “paintings” and “sculptures” in the centre. Front sides: paintings of false marbles which act as neutral backgrounds, simulacra that escape both figuration and abstraction. Back sides: silkscreen prints of the reverse of a famous canvas, exhibiting the chassis and the label. The picture rails are equipped with shelves and loaded with various instruments (porticos, cranks, weights, mechanisms, frames, pipes, etc.) which serve to accentuate the objects presented by the artist. With their great diversity, the latter form a kind of “Tropa museum” in which some of his earlier works reappear, combined with new objects. A broken piece of porcelain, a glass of water, an oil lamp, the bronze cast of the Venus of Lespugue... Driven by a “paranoid-critical” spirit in the manner of Dalí, the visitor of *L'Énigme de R.M.* stubbornly seeks a logic to this ensemble. Although Tropa has created pairs of objects in this puzzle, they move and contrast according to a shifting composition that the artist has borrowed from the repetitive music of Steve Reich. *Clapping Music* (1972) follows a very simple score, but the motif shifts as it repeats, creating effects of canons and syncopations. The meaning of this half-Dada, half-Surrealist decor remains undetermined. The micro-exhibitions that Tropa orchestrates on each of the walls are like small machines whose inner workings are exposed, but whose rebus of objects forms an enigma which is left unresolved.

Hélène Meisel

1—Marcel Duchamp, Lettre du 10 novembre 1962, in Hans Richter, *Dada - art et anti-art*, Bruxelles, Éditions de la Connaissance, 1965, p. 196.

2—Marcel Duchamp, « À propos des ready-mades » (1961), in Marcel Duchamp, *Duchamp du signe suivi de Notes*, Paris, Flammarion, 2008, p. 182.

When I look at a work by Francisco, I come to realise that appearances are deceptive. They move in multiple directions. Everything is present at the same time and with no chronology. There is no visual hierarchy. This disconcerting arrangement of objects creates the illusion that one has nothing to do with the other. An object that we know to be soft and fleshly, appears in bronze. Heavy matter floats in the air, hanging from a thread. These assemblages are positioned in a pluralistic system that forces the spectator to look. The gaze on the object is key.

Francisco invites us to look at the faces of the past, which themselves are gazing at indefinite space. The light beam of the installation projects their silhouettes on the wall, framed by crystals. An allusion to Plato's cave. Is it a gaze towards the afterlife or towards the absolute? A gaze across time? The moment of looking interrupts eternity. We are open to any interpretation. Thus, by referring to the imagination, the moment becomes immaterial. Francisco plays with the immaterial projection of light on a stone object, itself material, to create an illusion by means of the gaze.

The gaze has a "numinous" power. Here, it is the face of Dionysus, the god of the afterlife and the unconscious, that looks at us. We recall that the gaze is his attribute. His eyes adorned the Greek ships that parted the seas on the Attic cups, a red sea like wine that makes one sway and in which one can drown. Those eyes look at us when we drink. A herm of Dionysus, an object that served as a protective monument marking the border of his sanctuary, was chosen for the installation in the basement. It refers to the experience of the cave, of mystery, of the enigmatic.

This numinous power awakens the moment we look at it. It is the moment in which the past and the present become one, simultaneous. Time stops. With his installations, Francisco creates a "nature morte" which, in German, is precisely not "dead." The "Stilleben," translated as "stilled" life, evokes the frozen instant. For me, it was an unexpected experience to awaken these objects for a brief moment.

Jean-David Cahn

Francisco Tropa, *Agate*

At first glance, the large luminous projections that appear on the wall seem to be abstract. Translucent and concentric rings or crowns, by turns crystalline and milky, are organised around a rounded central opening. Francisco Tropa has substituted the slide's transparent film for a thin slice of stone cut out of an agate geode, replacing the photographic image with a real piece of nature. Far from being abstract, these large projections are actually very concrete, more akin to presentation than representation. In 2011, Tropa had already projected real objects using lanterns – a tree leaf, a fly, a flow of water – for his large installation *Scenario*, which was presented at the Venice Biennale.

The projected agate sections give a glimpse of their varied materials, colours and densities, creating blurred or chiselled effects on the wall which recall the photographic lens. They appeared in Francisco Tropa's earlier lantern projections, *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* (2013), and more recently in the large installation *Che Vuoi?* and the slide projector of *Agate* (2022). These hollow agates are reminiscent of a cave: cosmic, matrix-like and primitive. Often initiatory, the cave symbolises the world from which we emancipate ourselves from by means of the quest for light, as is the case in the famous allegory of the cave described by Plato in Book VII of his *Republic*: men chained at the bottom of a cave mistake the shadows of objects – images – for reality, and must free themselves from the world of illusions in order to access the world of ideas. The Platonic cave, a recurring motif in the artist's work, is also that of the Hells in Dante's *Divine Comedy* or that of the depths of the unconscious.

Hélène Meisel

A brief conversation between Francisco Tropa and Ana Luiza Teixeira de Freitas, about the exhibition “The R.M. Enigma” at Cahn Kunstraum, Basel

Ana Luiza Teixeira de Freitas : The idea for this project predates the invitation to exhibit at the Cahn Kunstraum in Basel. The original body of work, already complex and multi-referential, has now been augmented by a new set of elements that emerged from this collaborative venture. Would you like to speak about the project’s evolution?

Francisco Tropa : Yes, I wanted to show this new work and was looking for the right time and the right place. In the meantime, a conversation with Jocelyn Wolff and Jean-David Cahn about establishing a dialogue with objects in the Cahn Gallery’s collection led to the invitation to exhibit here. I accepted with enthusiasm. I already knew Jean-David Cahn, his collection, and the space, whose industrial nature was well-suited to the project and allowed for a balanced relationship between my work and the archaeological artifacts. However, an element of chance came into play. I had set up the project in my studio to visualize and test the works together and, at the same time, installed a new series of projections in development. In the to and fro of tasks at the studio, I noticed that the coexistence of the projected images and sculptures was visually intriguing and did not interfere with their interpretation. In fact, the combination formed a landscape that reminded me of the fresco murals on the walls of Roman houses, which always fascinated me. This reflection prompted the choice of three objects from the Cahn collection to accompany the project.

During our conversations, I noticed that you use the term “*cimaises*” to refer to the series of eight sculptures that constitute the centerpiece of the exhibition. I’m curious about why you chose this word, which as far as I know, is primarily used to describe an architectural feature.

I have always liked this word and had been considering doing something with it for some time. I particularly like the fact that it names, with considerable precision, an architectural detail as well as a device used to hang pictures in an exhibition. In the eight works that bear this title, this versatile structure plays a crucial role in defining the space, positioning, and identity of each object. The *cimaise* was the first element that I designed, and it immediately became a key structural component of the works. With a front and back and a shelf on each side, this device allows sculptures to take on different “personalities,” just as a tailor’s mannequin can be dressed in different clothes.

Another recurring element in your work, which is also present here, is the use of “shadow.” “Shadow” is rich with connotations and references; it presupposes an obstacle and, at the same time, as in psychology, it can be the opposite side of the conscious ego... the theme is very broad...

When we talk about a projected image, we are inevitably talking about something whose origin is in the ancestral cave. Sometimes, I think we have too quickly forgotten the childlike magic of this kind of place, where phenomena appeared when the light was eclipsed. The movie theater still retains aspects of that feeling, and as I work on my lanterns and light projections, I strive to capture something that has remained unchanged since the dawn of time. To emphasize this connection, I simply placed the sculptures under a beam of light. Curiously, the two things come to us from the same place. The opaque shadow of the ancient sculpture combines with the translucent image of the agate geode. Both appear without the intermediary of the medium to which we are accustomed: photography. In both cases, the image is projected onto the wall by light passing through the fine mineral placed inside the light cone. Ultimately, the image also deals with that absence.

Could you talk more specifically about the choice of these three ancient sculptures, which come from a much larger collection. What was the process? How did you arrive at these objects?

My selection process was closely guided by Jean-David Cahn, who has an in-depth knowledge of the collection. During our conversations, he shared the stories behind each piece and offered valuable advice. We shortlisted ten objects, all heads. I chose to focus on just one typology so as not to overburden the project which is already ambitious in terms of its reading. We ultimately decided on three pieces for the exhibition. Two heads will punctuate the ends of a spacious room on the main floor. Downstairs, in a darker space, will be the head of a Greek god, an effigy of menacing beauty.

You also talk about the relationship between background and object, an idea that comes from painting. In *The R.M. Enigma* (Cimaïses), I notice that there are painted surfaces and objects placed in front of them. Is this relationship to painting intentional?

Yes. This is clear in the trompe l’oeil image of the back of Van Gogh’s famous painting on the panels, as well as in the painted images that form the backgrounds for the objects on the shelves. But my intention was not, is not, to “paint.” What I’m looking for is a certain ambiguity in the element that acts as the background and allows me to place objects in front of it in this precise way.

It is interesting to speak of absence in an exhibition that is loaded with objects and references. I speak of absence, and I might add ephemeral as well, would you agree?

Indeed, in some of the compositions on the shelves are elements that refer to the notion of still life. And we know that this type of representation is a reference to the ephemeral. It is possible to establish a strong relationship with that genre, which is quite old, but, curiously, what is shown on the panels is not there. It is elsewhere... it just so happens that it is manifesting there in this way.

Your work, and this is nothing new, draws inspiration from mythological references, but these are usually intrinsic to your construction process, and, in the end, they are not blatantly visible. In this exhibition, there is a direct dialogue with the archaeological findings, which are themselves historically charged. Does this facilitate or hinder the reading of the project? Is there a natural syntony?

I certainly hope so. At least the aim was to create a structure that would allow me to place elements from such disparate sources side by side. What I feel is that the projected images create a short pause, a respite in the reading of the remaining elements, which are deliberately louder. You'll notice that the heads which I added to the projection do not create any noise. The feeling I experience is one of extreme nakedness. Everything happens at eye level.

But all these elements, objects, painted backgrounds, trompe-l'oeil, follow an order and thought process that, I suspect, is quite structured. You make it seem like there is an element of chance, but nothing is random, is it?

No, no it is not. Certain themes come together in each sculpture. I built a polarized structure that is used to position, match, and assemble all the elements on the shelves which, in turn, are organized in pairs. I used a binary system which was then applied alternately to the panels, making the meaning of the overall reading of the project almost invisible, yet still leaving a trace that I really like. Viewers feel there is a connection, they can recognize and relate the different images, but can only grasp the reading in small, disjointed fragments. One could say that there are several lines of meaning occurring at the same time, various simultaneous "compositions" which the viewer can access in real time to create a "polyphony" of meanings.

There is a wonderful analogy here with musical composition. Thinking of it, this is a characteristic of several of your projects, this flirtation with music...

It is an old platonic love affair... Music has a malleable structure which is useful to understand because it helps to find solutions for work. It is deeply linked to the work, the practice in the studio, to the hands, to the manipulation of things.