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John Francis: Rubu(m)(s) opus

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Galerie Samuel Lallouz, Montréal

June 16 - July 14, 1990

Université de Sherbrooke, Sherbrooke

September 11 - October 7, 1990

Galerie d'art du Collège Édouard Montpetit,

Longueuil

October 12 - November 4, 1990

Haut 3e Imperial, Granby

October 7 - November 7, 1990

Eschewing any value judgement, it might be fairly stated that much contemporary sculpture is timeless. Timeless, that is, inasmuch as it has been disenfranchised the rigid constraints of modernism's pre-eminent, ontological agenda and from the immanence of autonomous objecthood, to enter into an "other" interval of exploration, charted, in large measure, on the shopworn calendar of historicism, neognostic knowledge or ancient myth, and on the clock of scientific prospectus.

Consider, for example, the most recent series of works by John Francis. Not only is the artist self-questioning, sometimes self-parodying, in his abundant manipulation, reorganization and juxtaposition of preferred materials (steel, copper, rubber, aluminum, and neon), and components (ramps, walkways, loops, wheels and cruciforms), but it's clear that a sort of auto-historicism is in play that reschedules a myriad of early sources and concerns in the current program of investigation.

Allan Pringle: John, sitting here in your Magog studio adjacent to your raspberry fields, I am compelled to liken your work, produced over the course of the past three years, to a trellis. I see a consistent upward mobility, a central thrust, a growth aimed at coming to terms with new forms and materials; and, at the same time, there is a complex latticework of returns, a persistent circling back in order to re-embrace various earlier creative concerns or to reinforce the weave of your long-standing preoccupations. It is a trelliswork that must bear considerable weight. I know of few sculptors as prolific as you ... four solo shows in as many months... Tell me about your field of vision, your abundant harvest.

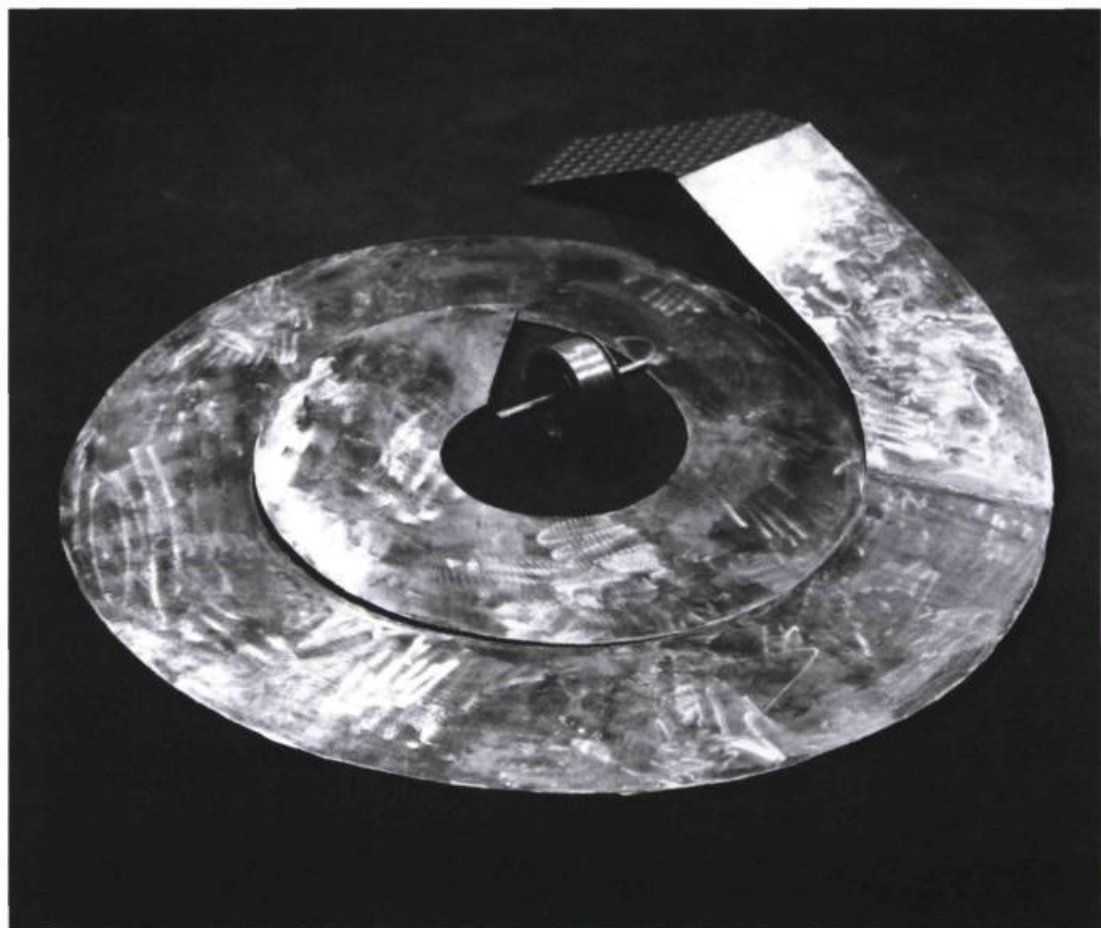
John Francis: Your trellis analogy is rather unexpected, but, at the same time, somewhat appropriate. While my pieces do consistently possess strong formal qualities and demonstrate an evolution of sorts, a passage to greater consciousness if you

will, the key to the work — what you describe as my "returns" — lies in the interpretation of alchemical procedures and shamanic myth and ritual, which, for me, merge with certain artistic ends and strongly influence the implied functions of the works, the configuration of components, as well as my choice of material... And there are specific references to writers, thinkers and events in art history...

My interest in alchemy dates back to 1976 and is twofold in nature. I discovered Jung and his interpretation of alchemy — his concept of projections of psychic content into inanimate objects and material — in essence, the idea of archetypal image or imagery. In addition, I became fascinated with the notion of transmutation in its various stages; that is, prima materia (lead, black muck, the psyche) transmuted into a mercurial Dionysian form that would have to be "fixed" (made solid, made material), resulting in the production of gold, the philosopher's stone, knowledge... Just before that final stage, however, an event called the peacock's tail occurs — a bright rainbow flash of color out of the spout of the alchemical vessel — gold is achieved, but is only momentarily maintained, and the alchemist begins again. I perceive my works as alchemically tuned, and my process of working as an endless, experiential Dionysian flight, a manipulation of physical properties hopefully causing a metaphysical reaction... Humanity is, after all, posited somewhere between pure matter and pure spirituality and is separated from the other animals by consciousness, or more precisely self-consciousness. Through my work, I seek to evoke what Jung described as man's "collective spiritual existence hidden behind alchemy, myth, science and reason".

A.P.: On the subject of myth, there is, I believe, in your work, a tandem play with shamanism — a parallel between the alchemist and the shaman?

J.F.: Yes. I was amazed to note very similar activities simultaneously taking place in rural Siberia and in the major cultural hubs of medieval Europe. Chemical operation by chemical operation, mythic image by mythic image, the alchemist and the shaman engaged in analogous activities, the only significant difference being that the alchemist had a sense of the subject-object relationship whereas the shaman did not. In other words, the alchemist worked on a physical "object" which was, in essence, his reflection, a mirror of the self, a metaphoric substitute for the human body. The shaman, on the other hand, worked directly on or with his own



John Francis, *Diagrammatical Spiral Ramp*, 1990. Steel; 152 cm in Diameter. Photo: Roger Lafontaine

corporeal being. One of the strongest images for me was that of the Marind shaman that sat inside his yurt dressed as a bird, then ignited into fire and ejected himself ablaze through the chimney.

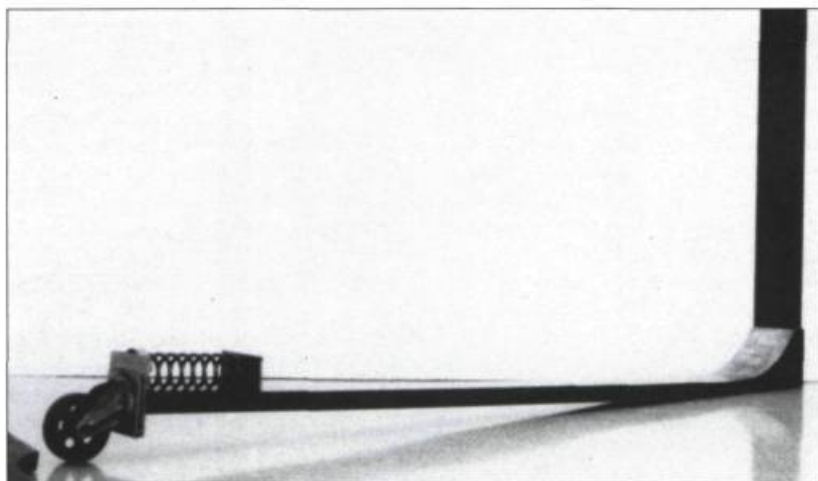
A.P.: *This reference to fire and the shaman reminds me of what you called your "Alchemical Animal" — those part-beast, part-neon creations shown at C.I.A.C.'s Lumières in 1986. What ever became of the figurative side of your work? It's not at all apparent in your recent series.*

J.F.: While those "Animals" shared the mythic implications of my core vision, they were contaminated by the influx of the renewed popularity of figurative art and by the imposition of pictorial space on sculpture — that is, games with false

perspective and other allusions. While as an observer I found what was happening very interesting as an artist I found it difficult to continue to participate. I lost interest in producing figures and instead chose to make objects that might function as vessels to hold the figure — vehicles really.

A.P.: *Vehicles? Hence your penchant for recycling scrap metal, especially automobile parts, in your subsequent Torker, Floor Leach, and Torsion Cone series from 1987 through 1989. This led to the introduction of wheels, ramps, industrial tread, runners, and loops of cable that we see in your most recent work ... all metaphors for travel or passage.*

J.F.: Teilhard de Chardin described all matter as on an evolutionary voyage to pure spirit, pure



John Francis, *Accelerator Ramp*, Steel, aluminum, rubber; 200 x 36 x 700 cm

consciousness. Yes, my newest work is intended as a metaphor for that passage. Generally speaking the new pieces deal with the notion of passage between physiological and psychological states, between sculptural and pictorial space — they are manifestations of the mind-body problem. Incidentally, I have switched to the use of almost all new material...

A.P.: *Material plays an important role in your passage or dialogue. Elsewhere, I have likened your "examination" of obdurate materiality with Mendeleyev's Periodic Chart of the Elements. Where that scientist arranged elements according to their atomic mass, you tend to arrange materials (and component parts) in accordance with their aesthetic, or more importantly, their metaphoric, weight.*

J.F.: Well, ... light, of course, is a metaphor for consciousness. I do use polished or bare steel, aluminum, brass and copper for their reflective qualities. And reflection is an extension of the abstract... Steel has a natural rust patina — a powerful reference to the passage of time. Neon ... light ... is alchemy in a tube... The blackness of rubber is physio-illogical, it at once implies a dense presence and the void of a hole or a portal.

A.P.: *I believe that copper-colour is sometimes referred to as the alchemist's hue and the fired or heat-treated ends of your copper-cable works exhibit a rainbow effect — a flash of color that returns us to your reference to the peacock's tail. But instead of pursuing that "return" further, I would like to extrapolate briefly into the realm of science.*

You gave acknowledged a "peripheral reference", most especially in your latest Accelerator

Ramps and in your looped-cable pieces, to the awesome particle colliders of astro-nuclear physics — Stanford's Linear Collider and the circular, sub-atomic race-track known as the Tevatron, in particular.

J.F.: These "machines" are time-matter accelerators like the shaman's drum or the alchemist's formula. They collide electrons and positrons, recreating the original "Big Bang" on a microscopic scale. The ramps, runners, loops, ladders, and "T" junctions in my work suggest route or destination as do those machines. Some of my pieces might be read as diagramming the passage of perennial internal pursuits en route to a flash of heightened consciousness. I enjoy the extended metaphor, from alchemy and shamanism, into contemporary science...

A.P.: *John, I think I have noticed a fox in your fields.*

J.F.: Yes, perhaps. A fox is symbolically a Dionysian agent. Just as the struggle between Dionysus and Apollo was necessary to keep the ancient mythical world in balance, so too is the fox a necessary disruptive factor in its environment. I would like nothing better than if viewers saw my work as vehicles of flux, as vital components charged with keeping the psyche alive. Consciousness should be ... must be, by choice ... dynamic.

[Excerpts from a studio visit and correspondence with Allan Pringle]

Allan Pringle