

GALERIE CRÈVECOEUR
4 RUE JOUYE-ROUVE
75020 PARIS

Florian and Michael Quistrebert / Interview with Dave Harper and Martha Kirszenbaum, curators of *NineteenEightyfour* at Austrian Cultural Forum, New York

Your mural *Illuminati* seems to refer to a ubiquitous eye spreading around the gallery. The drawing *Congruent Triangles* also depicts nine eyes framed in triangles.

What's the function of the mystical symbol of the eye in your work? What references does it imply within a show like *NineteenEightyFour*?

Our interest in this specific symbol emerged while we were doing a research on occultism and secret societies, starting with one of the most famous, and yet still very mysterious, the Freemasons. Also, at that time, our work was undergoing serious reconsideration. We were including more and more geometric and nonfigurative shapes in our compositions and leaving behind narrative landscape paintings. We found out that the eye framed by a triangle is symbolically known as the all seeing eye of God, under which nothing can be hidden. Although Freemasons never refer to any embodied divinity capable of mercy or anger, the eye in the triangle, through Masonic perspective, represents a neutral superior entity that watches and organizes the world (the eye) as well as it is a symbol of supreme knowledge (the triangle). So this Eye really symbolizes an absolute state of mind, the ultimate stage of consciousness that masons thrive for and they actually call the eye The Great Architect of the Universe.

For us, this kind of mystical symbol encloses both visual and conceptual qualities as a way to approach abstraction in our work. We used the all seeing eye for its formal simplicity, its rigorous geometrical structure to which we applied a negative dimension. Black and white, upwards and downwards, fractalized or merging; these simple visual tricks create a reversal effect, a bit like a mirror which reflection opens to deeper perspectives.

While the Eye of Providence (on the American \$1 note) is the most famous cliché of Masonic conspiracy, we see it more as a potential for questioning basic kind of ontological, or even mystical, issues like the helplessness and fear of human consciousness when confronted to the unknown. Therefore, the work made perfectly sense to us within the context of *NineteenEightyFour*. There are several connections with the book: the omniscient eye of Big Brother through the telescreen, the concept of double-think, paranoia, etc. We never intended to do an illustration of Orwell's novel, since *Congruent Triangles* and *Illuminati* were made independently from this show, but these pieces happen to really match the themes.

You seem to refer to architecture, in particular in your videos, which feature many shapes clearly inspired by art-deco. Where does this fascination with Utopian architecture come from? Is it somehow linked to your residency in New York in 2009?

One full year in New York City was a source of many discoveries in our work. The interest in the occult and Art Deco, among other curiosities, began there. New York City is a place for an artist to experience a huge potential in terms of inspiration and creation. The city's early modern architecture looks strikingly daring. For example, one can find a gothic structure with art-deco ornaments in the Chrysler, the Rockefeller or the Empire State buildings. But the fact is that these skyscrapers were originally all private commissions, often named after their owners, and this suggests that these buildings were not conceived with utopian concerns but rather to bring the newest ornamental inventions from Europe to reinvigorate a 19th century style. We also think this enabled New York to expand so greatly in the 1920-30's, which continues through today. Through the will of the most overzealous commissioner who would want to stand next to the most accomplished building in terms of style, technology and, of course, height – a bit like pharaohs fighting for the biggest pyramid.

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[The video] Ex Futuro, in some ways, depicts the relationship between European avantgarde and its formal echoes in western countries, and in other ways the decline of a utopian ideal and the ‘ism’ artistic movements of that era. It’s rather astonishing when you think that at the time New York was getting big with Art-Deco, constructivism or futurism in Europe were already falling into the hands of political leading parties as instruments of power. The spiritual core that originated with the early modern movements was undermined and the formal aspects remained to serve egocentric ambitions, which in the end is comparable to the function of art-deco in Gotham’s architecture.

The video Ex-Futuro appears as very low-tech piece of work, where you used filmed images of shadows, smoke, or reflections. Can this be seen as an act of aggression towards the prevalence of technology in today’s world and is there something specific about this aesthetic that helps to define you work?

Absolutely, this work is clearly low-tech, but even if we’re not interested in utilizing the newest technology, fully rejecting it is not our aim either. We basically shot that video with the tools available at that time (that is to say, a cheap digital camera, an over-head projector, cut paper, etc) and we usually work like that because it’s not nearly as expensive.

Further than that, the raw quality look of the video also comes as a formal decision in our “declinist” approach to the modernist enlightenment. This piece evokes avant-garde cinema in its visual aspects, but also questions utopia and more generally progressivism, and the fact that the geometrical shapes in the video mainly come from shadow projections (and a light is kind of grey) which attempts to drive modernism into the dark. For us, Ex-Futuro marks the point where modernism and occultism intersect.