

THE SHAMANIC TRYST

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As with anything esoteric the beginnings of Maschi Fontana are clouded in mystery. Turned into mythology like any good story, the encounter with a deer, frantically caught in a fence, struggling for life and bleeding on the snow, offers a vivid representation of a life changing moment. This, by all account is the event which led to the formation of Maschi Fontana.

For Tom Müller and Jean Thomas Vannotti this encounter with a desperate animal offered an insight into their own physicality, changing the paths of their concurrent artistic lives. It was not the first time Müller and Vannotti had shared life changing creative moments - previously involved in a street art practice their lives had run up against similarly intense encounters before. But in its material nature, in its vestiges of flesh, fur and blood, the deer encounter rings true; these things can hit a physical mark. I have had a similar run in with a deer on the moors in Scotland and the imprint it makes on the physical memory is significant. Maschi Fontana takes the deer as the point of departure for their collaboration and as a material signifier it is important to elaborate further on this. But before this let me discuss the name.

Maschi and Fontana are the surnames of the artists' grandmothers and this may seem incidental, if not nice, but it runs a little deeper than this. These women were artists in their own right but apart from honouring this history the name Maschi Fontana acts like a tattoo of sorts. It's a pledge, a tryst, a meeting of personal histories and an acknowledgement of the essence of collaboration. Collaboration is personal, it is a relationship and it invariably dips into private histories. Collaborative success is based on what you bring to it, how open you are and how you identify, early on, the place or nexus at where the partnership meets. In this case the name Maschi Fontana recognizes history, culture and conjoined memories. It takes the flesh and blood of family and melds it with the flesh and blood of nature; life is encountered, death is honoured; magic happens.

In *Rising Lotus* Maschi Fontana bring to the Fremantle Arts Centre (FAC) the art of collaboration and the invariable chemistry this brings. Undertaking a residency at FAC, Maschi Fontana spent one month working through various ideas, probing and pushing possible configurations and outcomes. This may sound generalized as an art process but this particular collaboration has a specific focus. Maschi Fontana acknowledges the energy and the potential involved in dialogue; talking about things adds meaning to the present, but this is not mindless chatter - rather, like any good collaboration, there is a locus here - or perhaps more so (in the plural) a loci. *Rising Lotus* can be read as the site of conjunction of several, yet specific activities; the crossroads if you like of several refined narratives. One is the potential of collaboration, one is material transformation, one is reduction and another might be the place of esoteric knowledge in the arts and the role this might play in future world designs. The symbol, as a site of transitional meaning is also an underlying current in Maschi Fontana's work – by this I



Stanserhorn Luzern
Poster by Ernst Hodel, 1923

mean symbolic power (or the power inherent in symbols) rests in the fluent movement of meaning across these symbols and their power to engage across events, cultures and most importantly time. Icons are more culturally specific and in this sense Maschi Fontana's use of a high point geographical marker (known as a *signal* in French)¹ found across the Swiss Alps, becomes the remaking of a Swiss icon but for those not privy to the personal or specific cultural significance the sculpture offers a symbolic artwork. Capable of becoming a pyramid of mental energy, a futuristic beacon of hope or inter-planetary dialogue, the *signal* becomes a multifaceted site of potential meaning. This is the power of translation in the space between icon and symbol and Maschi Fontana use it well.

¹ This is modeled on one situated on top of the Mont-Racine peak (1438m), located in the canton of Neuchâtel in the Western French speaking part of Switzerland. Maschi Fontana has been operating a studio at the base of the mountain for many years

Maschi Fontana engages the shamanistic history of art, in particular the duo connect with a post-Beuys shamanistic tide of esoteric artists like Almagul Menlibayeva and Marcus Coates who engage in a variety of ritualistic, channeling art processes. Maschi Fontana's work taps into the performative aspects of shamanism and the idea of material transference and for mine these are inherently intertwined. Historically the tribe's engagement with the shaman was based on transference and transcendence and in terms of performing this, or presenting the transformation to the tribal group, the shaman utilized "character channeling" symbolized through transforming materials; the shaman became the animal and their blood his. We see this in the Eucharist in the Christian mass and wine made blood and bread made flesh is not symbolic in the spiritual mind - it is real and this becomes essential to belief. The extension of this belief into the arts is also essential and indeed can be read as a cornerstone of contemporary art – what is the artist asking of us as an audience but belief - in this case



Pine root system, Val-de-Ruz
Switzerland, 2010
Photo: the artists

the transformation of material into art and the transcendence of the artist from the uninitiated into someone with powerful insights. Maschi Fontana don't just understand this idea of the artist as transcender and transformer but have incorporated it into their process, openly acknowledging its importance but also divining its potential.

This can be seen in the pivotal relationship between performance and sculpture in Maschi Fontana's *Rising Lotus*. The courtyard opening performance of experimental music outfit Masonik playing underneath the pyramid sculpture conjures the metaphysical. Playing ambient music designed to probe higher consciousness; this is theatre that implores a particular type of audience interaction, one based on flow and harmony. In *Rising Lotus* the sculptural work becomes imbued with harmonic energy, displacing the solidity of the object, reminding us in a dramatic, yet simple fashion, that objects, beyond their symbolic reading are beyond the ownership of language and in fact belong (in the realm of physics at least) in the world of atomic vibration.

The inter-hemisphere collaboration of Maschi Fontana may stem from an adolescent friendship, it may come from a specific encounter on the edge of life and death and it may have its roots in the transformation of materials but it also looks forward. *Rising Lotus* questions the possibility of a high tech, low impact lifestyle in which life becomes reduced in its material usage as society. It posits the possibility, particularly through its minimal, soft and tonal aesthetic of us becoming more acknowledging of a material's inert wealth and as such developing a better understanding of the energetic powers around us - tapping into these as a resource. Sounds esoteric yes but, as we enter a new age of bio-technology and increasingly see the aesthetic design capability in micro technologies it's a discussion we need to have.