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# The Hurtle of the Universe:

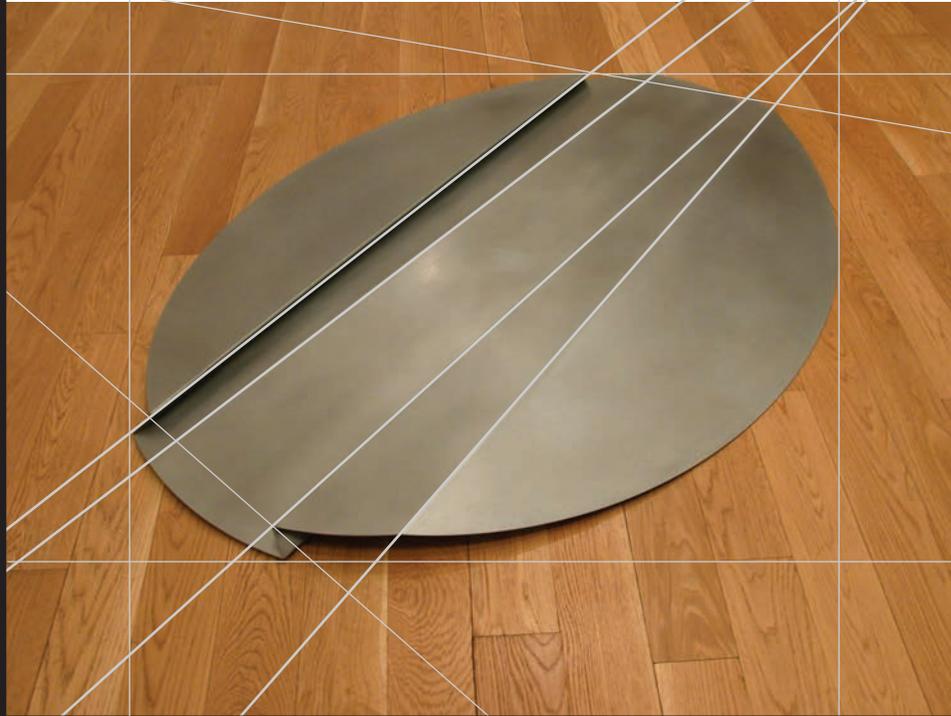
The Critique of Pure Sculpture of David Rabinowitch

by Mark Daniel Cohen

David Rabinowitch: Phantom Group

*Hyperion*, Volume II, issue 3, October 2007

**HYPERION:  
ON THE FUTURE OF AESTHETICS**



# The Hurtle of the Universe

**The Critique of Pure Sculpture**

**of David Rabinowitch**

**David Rabinowitch: Phantom Group**

**Peter Blum Gallery, New York**

**November 16, 2006 – January 20, 2007**

**by Mark Daniel Cohen**



Our love goes out to him and embraces him, because he did not need it. We solicitously and apologetically caress and celebrate him, because he held on his way and scorned our disapprobation. The gods love him because men hated him. “To the persevering mortal,” said Zoroaster, “the blessed Immortals are swift.”

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance”



And take upon 's the mystery of things

—*King Lear*, Act V, scene iii, 16



. . . light is the limiting condition for the mass.

—David Rabinowitch

## I

Those who peer the deepest are opaque. Those whose gazes seek into the bottomness of things, whose fingers scratch beyond the tissues of the ordinariness, beyond the protoplasmic pleasures, past the trite despondencies, take upon themselves the dim obscurity they probe. The blackness dabs their souls; they miss the sun. They distance themselves with distances and bring us secrets that evade our sense, that knot our wits, beguile our will to emphases. Their thoughts are like the runes.

They are *sui generis*: each a model of his making; each a fashioning of his own hand. For each, there is a field of intervention that finds analogy but in the quality of uniqueness found in comparable travail. Among these few, their opacity is the only thing they share. And if they are not opaque to each other, it is through no fault of proximity, for they travel distinct trajectories and are farther from each other than is any from the horde. They move out from the norm by different vectors; like radii stemming from a center, like radiation from the leaden dullness of the core, like sparks shot out by dying embers—scintillae from the closing eye—the farther they traverse, the farther from each other they acquire.

They are, observed, in silhouette. They dwell in isolation. We do not see the world they see, we do not see the world as they. The shortcoming is ours—for they are those who peer the deepest. The shortcoming's our own.

Their blankness is no masking, their opacity no obfuscation. It is a false objection, a bristle of evasion, and it cannot be made with cogency, for obfuscation is a measure of the gap between expression and its meaning, and there is meaning here no one has yet encountered. There is no knowledge of where it lies, and how distant from the testimony it is found.

They are misunderstood, for the species has the reflex to digest, and if they are understood by each other, it is through no fault of proximity. Taken as innovators of phrasing and linguists of the imagination rather than breakthroughs of insight, as phantoms of the dive, they are accused through parochial result: their transcriptions are relayed to comprehensions in the common pool, to thoughts already thought, to common knowledge common minds demand to be confirmed, and the measures marked between what they have said and what we have to make of it. Their system of expression is their own; their uniqueness of reference refers to unique references; their cartography *Ultima Thule*. By implication, by reaction, we condemn their failure to say what we know. They are unreasonable, they do not compromise or weight received opinion. Yet they reason, they are rigorously rational, for what they wield is uncorrupted, uncontaminated potency of mind, and with thought heated to this degree, all alloys fuse—all thought is of a piece.

Their work is what we have taken to be art—the privacy of realization, the privation of common bonds. It has been art, until recently, until the turning point some decades back. We are now deep into the time of finding art not in the impulse but in the receipt, which is to say, art as a profession—art without the sense of mission internal not to its place in the social fabric as a life plan but to its intrinsic and necessitated conduct as a life commitment: art as an industry. Art has become what its recipients find it to be, and so it has become a professional classification, a field of economic endeavor—a thing responsive to marketplace demand—and has taken its place among the investments of entertainment, which is to say that it has become a sideshow for the general population as well as a financial instrument (which inevitably go together—consider how films are financed).

What art had been, what art is, and more than art, for the work of those who have made themselves opaque has not been suspended—they do not lose their nerve, they work by the resilience of insistence, without the need of approbation and beyond the discountenance of the reprove—is, at minimum, the approach of genius. It is the attack of adamant curiosity, the assault on the unknown without curtail. It is the call of personal conscience, the call demonstrably to search for truth, the truth of some matter caught by silent urge, by inkling, by the soft demand that cannot be denied. It is a vapored pressure of the self that drives the mind and acknowledges no computations of reception or renown. Its principle of operation is investigation, discovery, for when art is art, it is not invention. It sets its value, and tells us what we

do not know, but *should*. And they remain among us, inevitable as thought, discounted in the history we write, occupied otherwise, for they have courted no one.



Great works of art have no more affecting lesson for us than this. They teach us to abide by our spontaneous impression with good-humored inflexibility then most when the whole cry of voices is on the other side. Else, to-morrow a stranger will say with masterly good sense precisely what we have thought and felt all the time, and we shall be forced to take with shame our own opinion from another.

(Emerson “Self-Reliance”)

Their thought is of necessity opaque because it does not go down easily the nearly all-consuming maw of popular taste, all consuming but for this. Art when it is art sticks in the throat of the imperturbable amorphous and thus humiliates those with access to an audience and who would think of no better occupation than to feed the beast of masses and of madness who can relish nothing but the bland and to protect their careers—as if in a world in which all will die, in which love is a lie, an infantile dream, in which everything touched turns to dissipating vapors, all of life a waking from a dream, in which life makes promises, and cheats, and everything is war, they had something to lose; as if there were anything left to obtain, as if anything left to betray, and the integrity of our minds were not the only object of true significance.

Art when it is art is significant, it is indispensable, for the beast of madness is constituted when people let themselves be led like cattle, be made the reliable audience requisite for investment strategies, becoming by their authority of judgment over art the tool of an industrial machine, for any power over what one does not create is a dependency, it is a slavery, and there will be inevitably “a brute part of him to kill so capital a calf.” Art when it is art leads nothing, when like a rock it splits the flow of masses, the current of the herd instinct, and breaks the savage back. It is driven toward a polestar no one knows, and inviolable intent, the soul of independence, relentless delves like sanctity the insoluble mystery of things.

Which is to say that art is one of the natural functions of clarity of mind, one of the autonomic resorts of those who will not be forestalled and do not ask appreciation, those who seek to hear the most profound hintings of their own thoughts, who work to hear the most distant of the inner voices. It is one of the fields to which the genius within us naturally flocks. And so what we find in art is not so much aesthetics—not in the sense of a program of thought at

its essential level unique to its field of endeavor and found in no other—as the spontaneous expressive outcomes of purpose in life. It is shown to us that clarity of mind brings a superior form of existence, an elite dispensation available, as are all forms of elitism, by definition, to all those who choose to pursue it with sufficient, and that is lifelong and tireless, commitment—those who seek it above all other things. It is diagnosed as, for it is composed of, formal integrity with a purpose of functionality—thought turned through inestimable effort to accomplishment and realization in place of recognition.

For ideas are imaginative constructs of the mind. We know what things are by the principles upon which they are built, and ideas are built by the mind. It is the integrity of the idea, the coherence of its accomplishment, that requests the integrity of the manufacturing mind, and only the mind alone, the single mind left to its own resources, reliant solely upon its distinctive methods, principles of pursuit, and trust of realization, is integral. When minds are integrated in the attempt to formulate ideas, when people try to think in chorus, the result is nothing but muddle. The germinative mind is an opacity to others.

So, the mind that has become opaque possesses a protocol that is enigmatic—its points of focus, its questionings, its speculations are self-engendering. It is a species of one. Its investigations are not out of the established questions but are the inspirations of new inquiries born of new initiations, new examinations that proceed from taking nothing for granted, from going back to zero in some area of inquest, from beginning again. This is why the artist's work, the thinker's work, does not survive editing or interference, which is to say, why editors and meddlers don't survive it.

The artist, when an artist, tolerates no impositions, accepts no forced assumptions. All of civilization is his to dispose; he takes no grants of culture. He is the agar of his own, and he goes back to zero. The artist when an artist starts again.

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Every profound spirit needs a mask: even more, around every profound spirit a mask is growing continually, owing to the constantly false, namely *shallow*, interpretation of every word, every step, every sign of life he gives.

(Nietzsche)

“

Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind.

(Emerson “Self-Reliance”)

## II

David Rabinowitch is a sculptor who is, by evidence of his work, a member of this breed of separate breeds, this family of the self-created, or, to be more precise and avoid the inevitable, intrinsic arrogance of *ad hominem* assertion, his work is a participant in their capability of discovery. His work is demanding, not merely in the sense of being advanced sculpture, of being works of art that press against the tissues of conventional practice of the art, of being formally innovative, but in the sense of being exercises in advanced thinking, of being challenging instigations to the inquisitive mind. This is to say that Rabinowitch as an artist is a thinker, a thinker in sculpture, and thus he is, by any sensible definition of the term and despite his own denials that he has “studied” philosophy, a philosopher as a sculptor: an inquirer into essential issues of existence who uses sculpture as his vehicle of inquiry and discovery.

To our misfortune, Rabinowitch is a sculptor too little known in the United States, strangely unknown. Born in Toronto, he moved to New York in 1972 and has been living and working here since. Even so, he has exhibited relatively little in this country—the majority of his exhibitions, and evidently the larger part of his reputation, has been in Europe and Canada. A contemporary of such sculptors as Judd and Serra, it is odd that his work has not been more available to us.

The last two exhibitions of Rabinowitch’s work to occur in New York, and evidently in the United States, were mounted at the Peter Blum Gallery in 2003 and 1998-99 and were exhibitions of the artist’s drawings and, in 2003, monotypes with several early sculptures. The recent exhibition, under consideration here, presented works from one of Rabinowitch’s major sculptural series and is an opportunity, for the first time in New York for some time, to observe and estimate Rabinowitch’s achievement in full force.

On display here were works of Rabinowitch’s *Phantom Group*, a series of 14 sculptures and 16 drawings done in 1967. The drawings, of course, are in support of the sculpture—plans for the articulations of those works. They are all executed on paper, using either charcoal or a variety of combinations of pencil, colored pencil, oil crayon, crayon, gouache, and gesso, and all bear the same “title”: *Untitled (Drawing for the Phantom Group)*, 1967. They range from what appear to be visual notes, the first thoughts for a structure laid out in loose assortments of a few lines, to technically accomplished, highly polished renderings of intended sculptural works.

Throughout the range of their finesse, even as recordings of compositional intentions, the drawings are striking as works in their own right. Some are so refined, they could stand as demonstrations of the methods and the value of drawing as an art in itself. They show a wide variety of the ways of combining, gravitating together, and apparently overlaying simple geometric



David Rabinowitch, *Untitled (Drawing for Phantom Group)*, 1967  
Oil crayon on paper, 21 x 14 1/2 inches

forms to achieve a harmonic balance—a variety so broad, they constitute a short encyclopedia of the strategies to achieve compositional resolution. Even at their simplest, they are compelling to witness, as if the sheer achievement of formal resolution, without further drapery of depiction to excuse the raw formal exercise, were enough to create a kind of serpent's eye: they seem, through their manner of inherent and palpable completeness, to be staring back at you, and to, thereby, transfix your gaze and hold you in astonishment, as if the promise of abstraction were finally achieved here. They are like pages from a geometrician's notebook, and they reveal why mathematicians feel that pure mathematics is an entry into and an exercise in pure beauty.

But it is the sculptures that are the point at issue. They are all low to the ground—or in the cases of the smaller works, to the platform surface—worked sheets of metal, steel and copper, and in some instances cardboard models. The sheets are cut to be flat conic sections—in essence, ovals—and in some cases, just

portions of ovals, with some of the extremities excised. The sheets have not been left flat—they have been “broken”: bent along a line to raise part of the sheet above ground level, sometimes in several steps, fold upon fold.

Occasionally, one can see the relation between specific drawings and specific sculptures—one can see some of the record of working towards the completed sculptural realization. But in all cases, the sculptures have the air of being the fruition of the line of thought, the manner of thinking, that is deposited in the drawings—like starting speculations that ultimately coalesced into tangible realities, like a promise kept. The compelling, transfixing aspect of the drawings is as heightened in the sculpture. They have the feel of essential forms, each one a single form in spite of its compositional complexity—they seem somehow realer than you, as if we were fleeting presences dancing through time, and these were that which knows nothing of the passing of ages, as if these and their like are what is left after time has eaten away all that can be deteriorated, as if the dust of mortality, of that which passes, had been blown away by the winds that turn the pages of the calendar and that billow the bane of Ozymandias, and this is what has been revealed—this is what remains. And in their purely geometric faces, in the complex, strangely right compounding of simple forms that is their form, there is something alien, something unlike us, but even so, something strangely familiar. There is a secret held within—something we were about to realize for ourselves, but have not, not yet.

But the secret is tightly held. There is an opacity of intention in these works that is impossible to miss—they carry an undeniable sense of weight and import, one has an instinctual response that there is something here, something of significance that one risks missing, and yet they are self-evidently but sheets of folded metal and board and, in the sheerly



physical sense of them, nothing more. They are the threat of abstraction fully achieved—there are no clues of meaning through depiction, no hints for the literary mind, no story; there are no literal faces, no figures, no human forms. There are just forms, with no translation grid against which to measure their implication, no concrete values to fill in the variables. And simple geometric forms are, by their nature, as deadpan as anything can be. With nothing of voiced thought appended to it, an oval is an oval.

We are told in the statement that was available in the gallery that Rabinowitch intended each work to represent a material plane of infinite extension—the conic section is to be taken as an observed portion of an endless plane, a foundation level that is not set against a background but is the background. The vertical breaking, the folding upwards of portions of these planes, is the “interior articulation” of this represented background extension—the crimp in the field.



But self-evidently, in deadpan fashion, this helps us little. To gain a better sense of the significance of these works, one needs a guideline—one needs a sense of Rabinowitch’s concerns, a sense of the field of inspiration for his art. Rabinowitch has spoken of his “overriding concern” early in his career

David Rabinowitch, *Phantom Group: Conic Plane, Elliptical, 2 Non-Parallel Double System, 2 Non-Parallel Single Systems*, 1967  
Steel with ground zinc, 2 x 7 1/2 x 50 1/2 inches (5.1 x 181.6 x 128.23 cm)

as a sculptor: “to discover a unique basis from which a fundamental critique of sculpture would follow naturally. The conscious aim was to generate works that would exemplify this critique.” The focus of his critique was the “anthropomorphic, totemic (Romantic) and painterly tendency” and the Bauhaus-tinged tendency of contemporary sculpture to be conceived “in terms of pre-planned, usually closed, factory-produced (and architecturally modelled) volumes.”

However, Rabinowitch’s critique has proved to be much more thorough than that, his artistic concerns much broader. They are philosophical and scientific. Rabinowitch has been an extensive reader of Hume and Spinoza, in particular, as well as Kant, Descartes, Leibniz, Frege, and other philosophers. He also has studied and drawn ideas from scientists, among them Einstein, Galileo, Kepler, Darwin, and more.

“

In the mid-1950s, my physicist uncle gave me Einstein’s beautiful book on the special theory of relativity and the theory of gravity written for laymen. I’ve never studied anything that affected me more deeply . . . . My engagement with this book was an important factor in my giving up painting and has had a determining role in all the sculptures I’ve made.

(Rabinowitch)

Evident in Rabinowitch’s published remarks on philosophy and on science, and suggested, once the clues have been taken up, by the sculptures themselves through a clear and deliberate, deliberating focus on the most essential of formal exercises—through the care and intricacy with which so foundational a set of manipulations have been carried out, giving the works an intricacy their apparently basic means of execution belie—is the artist’s orientation on philosophical examination. These sculptures are means of investigating the questions with which philosophy is occupied. More precisely, Rabinowitch is examining the conditions of reification, the intrinsic conditions of reality, of something’s being extant.

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The motive for such reading was always and completely bound up with my desire to engage in a program of construction that was fundamental, that would expose and work directly with reality.

(Rabinowitch)

Rabinowitch's means is to work with essential components that, philosophically, straddle the divide between reality and perception, that are the preconditions—it is argued both ways—for existence *per se* and for observation, for presence in the world, ontologically, and for presence within the range of our awareness, objectively, presence as phenomena. The primary components of his artistic ruminations—the primary conditions of existence in one sense or the other—are, he has told us, gravity and perspective. Perspective is the lateral extension, the run along the floor of the steel plate, that which is to be considered a portion of what is infinite, and thus foundational. Gravity is the lift—or vice versa—the vertical structure engaged by the folding of the plate. And it should be noticed that these two terms, terms of Rabinowitch's choosing, strike to the two fields of category. Gravity is, presumably, a property of that which is, not a perceptual condition but a condition of the world as it is, as it is even when we're not looking. Perspective is a property of observation, things appear to recede to a vanishing point specified only by a specific point of view, when in fact, presumably, they do not.



Ever since I made the *Box Trough Assemblages* I've considered the field of gravity and the perspectival plane as two all-embracing, counterpart modalities essential to the construction of sculpture. That is, they are the two conditions in terms of which a sculpture must be realized if it is to provide a foundation for perception to become self-sustaining.  
(Rabinowitch)

This form of work makes Rabinowitch's sculpture, as he has acknowledged, an exercise in Constructivism—one of the movements of geometric abstraction—a practice or movement in Modernist art that dates from the early part of the twentieth century. Practiced roughly as much in sculpture as in painting (which is not the case for most modalities of abstraction, which have been largely a painter's ambition), it can be said Constructivism is to be found in the art of (working under a variety of movement titles and including predecessors as well as direct movement practitioners, and much of this is Rabinowitch's own list) such artists as Cézanne, Matisse, Picasso, Léger, Miro, Mondrian, Malevich, Tatlin, Rodchenko, Duchamp, Brancusi, and Giacometti, as well as Naum Gabo and Antoine Pevsner.

The overt purpose of Constructivism, on the part of those artists on Rabinowitch's list who practiced it knowingly, was to seek the reality of the world, to peer behind the veneer of appearances and give at least some indication of the nature of the world beyond the limits of our senses. It is one

of two principal motivations to abstract art, the other being direct emotional expressiveness, which very likely should be isolated for the most part to Action Painting—and it should be observed that the two objectives are far from mutually exclusive, Jackson Pollock being a case in point. It is broadly recognized that the invention of photography, and particularly the refinement of photography late in the nineteenth century to the point at which it started to become a hobby, the practice of it no longer limited to professionals, made the reproduction of appearances in visual art seem pointless.

Linda Dalrymple Henderson in her exceptional books *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art* (which is unfortunately out of print at this time) and *Duchamp in Context: Science and Technology in the Large Glass and Related Works* has argued convincingly that the motivating factors were much more numerous. In the decades before World War I, a number of scientific discoveries and mathematical explorations initiated among the general public a rage of interest in the invisible reality behind apparent nature: X-rays, radioactivity, luminiferous ether, and the formulations of non-Euclidean geometry and four-dimensional geometry, particularly in the work of Henri Poincaré, which had been taken up by a number of popularizing authors, including E.A. Abbott and Charles Howard Hinton, and were common currency among a thinking lay public. Such ideas and discoveries spurred interest in the search for the invisible world and made the reproduction of appearances in art seem naïve and provincial. As Henderson has put it in an abstract for one of her papers, works as indispensable as her books, “X-ray’s proof of the inadequacy of the human eye as a perceiving instrument played a vital role in supporting artistic speculation on the possible existence of a suprasensible fourth dimension of space, to be revealed by the visionary artist.” (Her word “suprasensible” is intriguingly near Kantian terminology. And it should be added that Henderson has argued with equal conviction that the established idea of a relation between the development of abstraction and Einstein’s theories of relativity is largely fallacious—the dates simply don’t work.)

Thus, Rabinowitch’s sculptural practice fits within the tradition of Constructivism, both in its methods and its appearance, which resembles in particular Malevich and the Russian Constructivists, and in the ambition of revealing the nature of reality beyond the conditions and distortions of observation. What distinguishes Rabinowitch’s work is the weight of intellectual importing, the degree of direct influence of the specifications of established thinking, of actual ideas and focused questions. There is a literateness that can be found to the same degree in likely no other artist working today. To locate the role these ideas play in his work, one needs to turn again to the artist’s statements to receive a sense of his immediate concerns.