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CREUX  
DE  
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FER

centre d'art  
contemporain

**OUTDOOR EXHIBITION  
LE CREUX DE L'ENFER  
AT CPACC - LA CROIX DE FER, VALLEY OF FACTORIES, THIERS**

**Che Vuoi ?**

Francisco Tropa

“What do you want?” Beelzebub asks Alvaro, the hero of Jacques Cazotte’s fiction, when Alvaro summons him out of a thirst for knowledge. The devil, taking the guise of a camel, a spaniel and then a woman called Biondetta, uses all the ruses he can think of to trick Alvaro and dominate him. This fable, in the guise of a libertine tale, reveals that underlying the devil’s innocent question is the hero’s desire for pleasure. The expression used here by Francisco Tropa for the title of his exhibition, presented by Le Creux de l’Enfer on the premises of the Croix de Fer factory, suggests a mischievous approach to his new installation. Through the image of the devil – which echoes the many tales associated with Le Creux de l’Enfer’s history – the artist is referring to one of the major figures in psychoanalysis: Jacques Lacan, who in the 1960s saw the diabolical figure in Jacques Cazotte’s novel as an embodiment of the “dialectic of desire”. Indeed, Lacan links man’s desire to the desire of the other, affirming that “it is qua Other that man desires”. If he does it in the right way, the psychoanalyst can address this question. This will be put to the analysand as “what does he want from me?” Amusing himself with a new change of role, the artist seems this time to question the visitor himself, in a double relationship with the work: “what do you see?” and “what do you want, standing in front of this work?”

After crossing the Durolle river’s torrents and entering the grounds of the Croix de Fer factory, still deafened by the continuous noise of the surging water, we make our way through the darkness towards two strange technical objects, slender and luminous. These are two projection systems from which emerges a fascinating phenomenon of revelation : one is transporting us inside a crack in an agate geode’s cavity, and the other above a drop of water seen through a thin glass plate. The drop gradually swells until it forms a magnifying glass of water in the light beam. At the precise moment when the drop becomes too heavy to resist gravity, we are captivated and suspended in this moment of timelessness. When it breaks away and disappears, it releases us from its grip. This phenomenon, projected onto the dimensions of space, is moving in its simplicity.

The new lanterns designed by Francisco Tropa are part of a family of objects that he has been making and perfecting in his workshop for ten years. Composed of mechanical and luminous devices, these lanterns allow us to witness the birth of an image. Hybrid objects, between sculptures and optical instruments, these lanterns are above all mechanical systems of such precision and technical beauty that they seem to come from another era, echoing the first photographic and cinematographic experiments of the 19th century. They consist of an optical device and a lamp, between which the artist places an object that he describes as “elements that jumped straight from nature to the

<sup>1</sup> *Les machines au mouvement perpétuel*. Francisco Tropa in conversation with Nuno Crespo, in Arenario, Porto, Universidade Católica Portuguesa, School of Arts Citar, Sistema Solar (Chancela Documenta), 2021, p190.

inside of the sculptures. (...) For example, a drop of water, a cobweb... These elements have not been modified and project a larger version of themselves without any intervention.”<sup>1</sup> The object, often gravitational, is then transformed into a magnified, inverted image superimposed on its own shadow “as though inside a camera obscura into which the viewer is plunged.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, one of the key features of Tropa’s lanterns is the change of scale they bring about, through projection, from the micro to the macrocosm. Projected into this dimension, the drop of water, whose oscillating surface we perceive, becomes a visual event as powerful as the waterfall of Hell.

Francisco Tropa enjoys pursuing the technical evolution of his lanterns together with the craftsmen who guide him towards new experiments. Insatiably curious about the trades and know-how to which he pays such crucial attention in his work, his exhibition in Thiers was an opportunity to develop the formal structure of his lanterns with the high-tech mechanical engineering company Eprose, which specialises in the production of perforation tools. This collaboration made it possible to refine the structure of the projection device and give it a new dimension, as well as to work on new surface treatments.

Inside the installation, composed of lanterns and screens positioned facing each other, the artist creates the conditions for new symbolic interactions with the visitor by placing two elements in tension and equilibrium on a platform at the intersection of the light beams. A bucket filled with coal suspended by a rope, which passes through a pulley and connects to a door ajar in its frame: this group of elements sets the scene for the impending disaster. A recurring pictorial figure that Tropa likes to use in many of his works, the door refers to the Magrittian surrealist theme of the passage from one state to another. While we are exposed in the cones of light in which everything manifests itself, this scene of equilibrium remains suspended in an inverted temporality: “What we see is not what has happened, but what has always been. It is a time outside of time. It is a moment that is neither in the past, present or future. It is an eternal moment of becoming, a pure possibility in which the laws of physics no longer seem to apply, and in which all knowledge seems to disappear,” writes Federico Ferrari about the installation composed of a set of lanterns that the artist created in 2011 for the Venice Biennale.

Returning to the initial figure of desire, the exhibition *Che vuoi?* invites other artistic readings connected with the image of this partially opened door. To mention but one, we could recall *The Gates of Hell*, a great masterpiece (opposed in every way to the purified version with which we are presented here) for which Auguste Rodin created more than 250 sculptural groups that were the foundation of his work. *The Gates of Hell* reflects, not so much the punishment of sins in Dante’s Hell, as the spirit of Baudelaire’s *Flowers of Evil*, exploring human passions and, in particular, the tortures that desire breeds in all of us.

### **Sophie Auger-Grappin**

Director of Le Creux de l’Enfer

Contemporary Art Centre of National Interest

<sup>2</sup> *Francisco Tropa*, by François Piron, in *Arenario*, Porto, Universidade Católica Portuguesa, School of Arts Citar, Sistema Solar (Chancela Documenta), 2021, p150.



Francisco Tropa, *Mur-Mur*, 2019, exhibition at Berardo Museum, Lisbon.  
Photo : Teresa Santos



Francisco Tropa, *Mur-Mur*, 2019, exhibition at Berardo Museum, Lisbon.  
Photo : Teresa Santos

## **Francisco Tropa**

Born in Lisbon, Portugal in 1968

Lives and works in Lisbon, Portugal

Portuguese artist, Francisco Tropa (his country's representative at the 2011 Venice Biennale) is the author of a complex body of work, freely combining a broad range of techniques, from the most basic skills to virtuoso tours de force. Mixing art and technical ingenuity, Tropa's creative vision embraces prototypes and machines, but also paintings, screen prints, photography and performance. The result is a 'world' very much his own, nourished by diverse sources including a rigorously antihierarchical array of references, figures from the ancient and modern worlds, science and magic. (Text : Guillaume Désanges)

# Che Vuoi ?

Francisco Tropa

Exhibition  
18 june - 25 september 2022  
Wednesday-Sunday / 2:00 - 6:00 p.m  
Free entrance

Opening  
Friday 17 june 2022 at 7:00 p.m

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Le Creux de l'enfer est un centre d'art contemporain d'intérêt national  
membre d'AC//RA Art contemporain en Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes,  
du réseau d'art contemporain Adele et  
de d.c.a. / Association française de développement des centres d'art.