

: ON VIEW

CAUGHT ON TAPE

Zilvinas Kempinas's exploration of videotape as a sculptural medium has won him many admirers, and as he prepares to show a monumental work in Venice, *ArtReview* caught up with him to find out why he can't simply leave his tape in the videocassettes like everybody else



above: *Parallels*, 2007
(installation view,
Contemporary Art Centre,
Vilnius), magnetic tape,
plywood, dimensions variable

facing page: *Tube*, 2008
(installation view, Atelier
Calder, Saché), magnetic tape,
plywood, dimensions variable

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"WHEN I WAS A KID in school, I used to entertain myself by seeing how quickly I could run down the stairs", Zilvinas Kempinas recalls. "But then I became curious about which leg went first. And so the next time I decided to pay attention to this particular 'problem'. I almost broke my neck."

Kempinas is trying to explain the impulse that led him to create *Tube*, a 26-metre horizontal walk-through cylinder made primarily of parallel strips of videotape stretched lengthways across the space, for his exhibition in the Lithuanian Pavilion at this summer's Venice Biennale. And the story of his near-fatal childhood accident is designed to illustrate the fact that he learned an important lesson: to trust his instincts. "I realised that sometimes analytical process can affect your speed and can even be harmful. It's good to turn off your knowledgeable reasoning sometimes in order to become more open to things that lie beyond the reach of our intelligence."

Magnetic tape is a frequent component of Kempinas's work (in fact, it might be described as his signature material), and he is best known for creating sculptures such as *Flying Tape* (2004-7), in which floating loops of tape are kept swooping and spinning by fans – a display you might almost describe as a sort of lyrical minimalism. The effect is part science, part voodoo: the dark, shimmering loops of tape hover in a ghostly way, and it is impossible while watching them not to feel somewhat anxious that, in the context of the fragile ecosystems the artist creates, they're just about to flutter down to the floor. Incremental changes on such minimal work create dramatic effects; the simple doubling of *Double O* (2008), for example, in which two touching tape loops are held together by two facing fans, immediately brings to mind the fragility of relationships, while in *Lemniscate* (2008) two fans support a length of tape looped into the mathematical symbol for infinity.

Kempinas employs tape to a variety of ends: creating shimmering columns recalling Fred Sandback, or hanging hundreds of lengths of tape in front of lightboxes so that they fizz like television's white noise, or even pulled taught, in mathematically precise stripes, like glossy,

sculptural Bridget Riley paintings.

Kempinas developed *Tube* during a recent residency at Atelier Calder, the house and studios of Alexander Calder in rural Saché, France, a period that he describes as a "dream exile" (although he admits that it was "extremely difficult to stay in the French meadows for six months after living in Manhattan for a decade"). He was eager to use the enormous space provided by Calder's studio, and the assistance provided by the residency, to



its full potential, creating *Tube* and some other large-scale works that could not have been made otherwise, including *Tripods* (2008), an outdoor installation of crisscrossing aluminium rods that was installed in a field next to the Atelier, set off by the intertwining clumps of trees nearby.

For Venice the work will be transported to the Scuola Grande della Misericordia in Cannaregio. Begun in the sixteenth century by a young Jacopo Sansovino, the building was never finished, due to a lack of funds, which creates a suitably limbo-like atmosphere for Kempinas's immersive sculpture. "Videotape is an old-fashioned data carrier which is about to become obsolete", the artist points out. "Ironically it was designed to preserve moments of time, but it's doomed to vanish itself as a media, overtaken by new technologies." The medium itself, then, is a crumbling, unfinished palace of technological dreams.

waterfall. The shimmery surface of tape, blowing in light breezes and breaths, constantly rippling, reflects light in a similar way to water, another feature of the material that might be seen to make it particularly appropriate to Venice. "Water and light are two elements we always associate with Venice", says Kempinas. "I am hoping to use natural light coming through the windows. The sun moves around, and the light is always different. I would like to save this natural passage of daytime, since it would change the space and my piece along with it; every time you come here, it would be a slightly different atmosphere inside."

Kempinas tells me that one of the most common questions people ask him concerns what is recorded on the tape he uses. "Sometimes I say that it has everything you could possibly imagine on it. But then later I say it's blank, and people do not seem to be disappointed either", he says, before

words LAURA MCLEAN-FERRIS

While *Tube*, and many of Kempinas's other sculptures, contain mathematically precise elements – here circles, squares and lines – the shimmering, otherworldly effects of light on dark tape is intrinsic to the experience of the work. In a recent sculpture shown in Bolzano as part of last year's Manifesta 7, lengths of tape were hung high from a factory roof around a skylight, both blocking the passage of light from the ceiling and activating it, creating the impression of a cascading black

adding, "I guess it doesn't really matter after all." Perhaps the best answer to that oft-posed question would be to say that what plays on the tape is the imagination. Like the television, which the title of the sculpture brings to mind, it might be that this tube of tape plays images to the eye.

Zilvinas Kempinas, Tube, is on show at the Lithuanian Pavilion at the 53rd International Art Exhibition, Venice Biennale, 7 June – 22 November