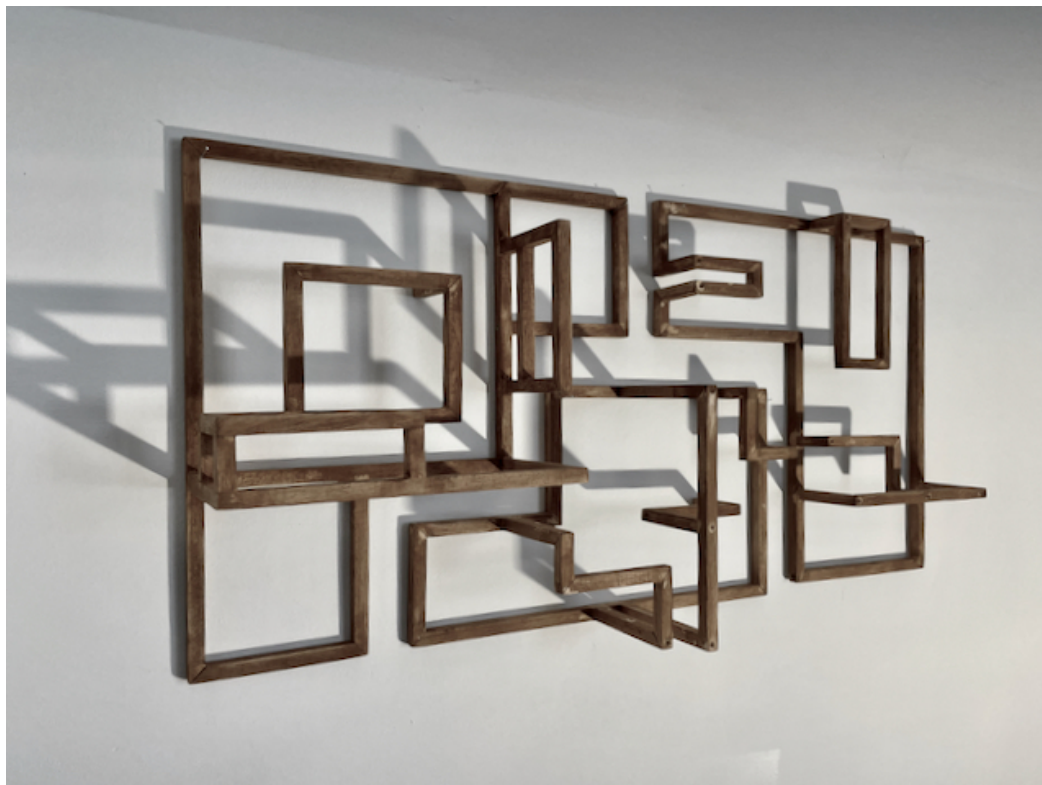


# Algebra of revolt

*Recent artwork from Michel Tombroff*



Algebra of revolt (2021)  
Wood structure  
63 x 30 x 10 cm

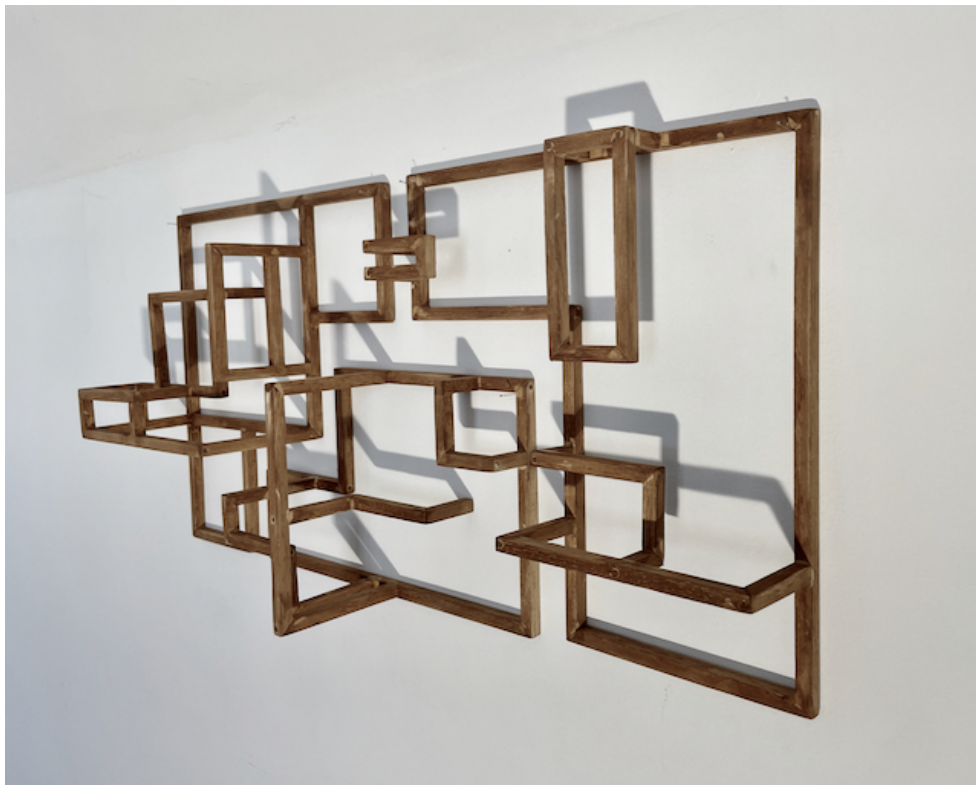
“Marxism is the discourse that sustains the proletariat as a subject.”  
« Le marxisme est le discours dont se soutient le prolétariat comme sujet. »  
Alain Badiou – *Théorie du sujet* (1982)

What do lovers, poets, scientists and rebels have in common, besides their origin in the spark of a rare and improbable event and their militant loyalty to it? Alain Badiou answered this question by linking the category of subject to those of being, event and truth. To do this, he took a path that goes back to the dawn of thought, to the enigma of being as posed by Parmenides and Plato, then forgotten for more than two millennia until it was partially resuscitated by Martin Heidegger and his recourse to the poem. In 1988 Badiou presented his theory of the subject in *L'être et l'événement* (*Being and Event* [1]), a fascinating construction built on the majestic foundations of mathematicians and logicians Georg Cantor, Kurt Gödel and Paul Cohen.

My recent works *In Praise of Love* and *Encounter* [2] explored the mathematical complexities of love, while *The Cohen Event* [3] attempted to capture the subjective power that *forces* truths. Remember that what Badiou calls truths are neither revelations, true judgments or knowledge, but instead exceptional creations of love, art, politics or science. After these artworks on love and science I have to confront the poet and the revolutionary. *Algebra of Revolt* looks at the latter.

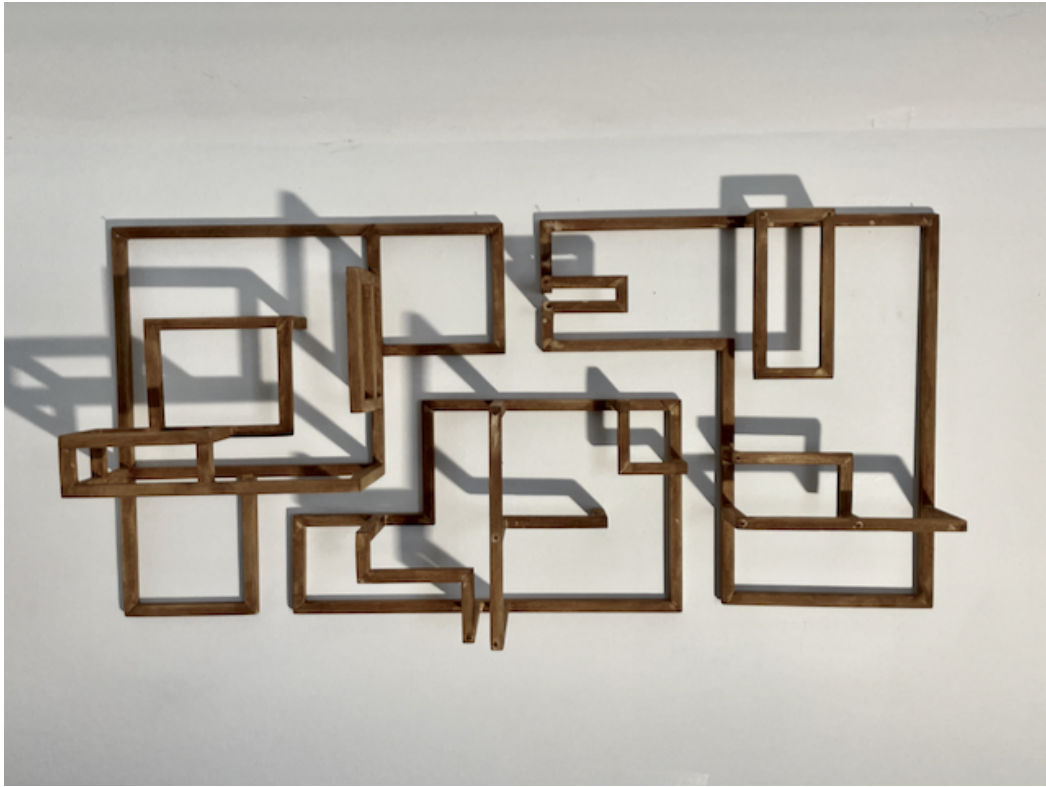
This subject gave me more trouble than the previous ones. It was indeed necessary to avoid the temptation of naive mathematical representation, or of falling into what Graham Harman identifies as the anti-formalist trap of so many contemporary artworks which "simply denounce capital or the surveillance state for perhaps the billionth time." [4] It is true that if a revolution were to take place today, it would be directed against these evils. But is it worth mobilizing art in that struggle?

I therefore decided to go back to Badiou's first major text, his *Théorie du sujet* (1982) (*Theory of the Subject* [5]), of which he later admitted "having limited the speculative scene by purely and simply presupposing that 'there was' subjectivation." A strange admission by the author of a book which deals precisely with subjectivation. It was this confession presented in the form of a teaser that made me decide to return to this text.



The artwork is inspired by the chapter entitled *Algebra and Topology* [6], where Badiou establishes a link between algebra and topology, the opposite slopes of the mathematical range, in the valley of which he locates the subject. This dialectic remained very obscure to me for a long time, and I was unable to connect it to the set theory principles of *Being and Event*. Until I read Peter Hallward's synthesis, *Badiou - a Subject to Truth* [7], which brilliantly sheds light on the metamorphosis undergone by the working-class *object* which is transformed into the proletarian *subject* when it frees itself from static and inert algebra of the *place* to unlock the topology of the *force*. What a magnificent image!

*Algebra of Revolt* illustrates the tension that precedes this stage of subjectivation, this moment when the object (the working class) is about to become a subject (the proletariat). We are still in algebra, in the logic of belonging where "strength is missing". [8] This moment when "All the revolutionary movements in history, from Spartacus to Münzer to Saint-Just, joined what Badiou calls the 'communist invariants'". [9] But the algebraic stage is only the first stage of revolutionary subjectivation, the revolt stage: in a future work I will try to represent the next stage, that of the revolution itself. It will therefore be necessary to understand the topology of revolution.



In *Art + Objects*, Harman suggests that “rather than exporting messages from artworks into the political sphere, it is probably more fruitful for art to devour chunks of politics and give it an aesthetic life that might even be able to ‘redistribute the sensible,’ in Rancière’s phrase.” [9] I don’t know if Harman is right, but I decided to take his advice.

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[1] A. Badiou. *Being and Event*. Continuum, 2007.

[2] M. Tombroff. *In Praise of Love and Encounter*.

[3] M. Tombroff. *The Cohen Event*.

[4] G. Harman. *Art + Objects*. Polity Press, Medford, MA, USA. 2019, p. 177.

[5] A. Badiou. *Ibid.*

[6] A. Badiou. *Theory of the Subject*. Translation Bruno Bosteels. Bloomsbury Academics, 2013.

[7] P. Hallward. *Badiou – a Subject to Truth*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis/London, 2003.

[8] A. Badiou. *Ibid.*

[9] P. Hallward. *Ibid.* p. 36.

[10] G. Harman. *Ibid.* p. 177.