

Solitary Place: Scenodynamic Architecture and The Avant Garde

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The clarity and transparency of Roussel's works, exclude the existence of other worlds behind things and yet we discover that we can't get out of this world. Everything is at a standstill, everything is always happening all over again.

In 1914, Raymond Roussel (1877-1933), one of the ancestors of experimental writing and forerunners of avant-garde art practices, commissioned Pierre Frondaie a popular pulp fiction writer, to turn his novel *Locus Solus* ('Solitary or Unique Place') into a play. The production, however, was a complete failure. Roussel and his strangely titled work became the butt of jokes overnight, and everyone waited with impatient malice for the next play. The paper examines the three modular stages (and spaces/stages-locations/loci) of a three year project based on Roussel's *Locus Solus* so as to discuss a wide range of possibilities of re-visioning and re-making the context in which *Locus Solus* was framed, misread, misunderstood and mis-fitted during the epoch it was written.

The paper presents theoretical and artistic perspectives that reflect on the boundary between theatrical and visual practices, and on the contemporary focus that accompanies the relation between personhood and objecthood, in the theatre, by providing an overview of the ways in which the collaborating artists draw on 'scenodynamic architecture' and on scientific and technological developments to explore public interfaces between art and science, between public and private (solitary) space, new forms of creative expression and to unfold the wide range of disciplines, genres, theoretical, and artistic positions that comprise the relationships between spectator, artist, architect/scientist and director/curator.

The three different stages/spaces of the performance based installation project *Locus Solus I, II, III by Out of the Box Intermedia* (2008-2010) reconsidered the work of the proto-surrealist writer and Surrealism's historical context, along with its literary and pictorial culture, so as to engage with the ways in which a 'classic' text like *Locus Solus* can comment on the notion of the 'total work of art' and on the implications of new technologies and practices that challenge received notions about the theatrical event and about the art object and its representation.

Processes of boundary dissolution internal to the arts, instances of hybridization or 'cross-over,' mutual processes of importation between the arts and the extra-artistic sphere and cross-disciplinary approaches are some

of the most significant aspects of recent aesthetics and cultural production. Contemporary art contextualizes the radical shift in art's boundaries that began in the last century and the art world has increasingly assimilated artists' experiments with new mediums and new contexts. Longstanding sites of production, consumption and display of art - such as the theatre, the museum and the gallery - are being challenged by new media. Crucial to this process has been the redefinition of the relationship between works of art and their surrounding space, the concept of the work of art and the spectator's mode of reception.

Accordingly, the concept of installation art (that developed into a genre of its own right until the 1960s) incorporates all kinds of media and techniques by combining them in many different ways. As a genre, installation art is associated with the structuring of various objects and materials to create a complex spatial environment within the exhibition space and does not entail unique formal and technical qualities believed to be intrinsic to this particular type of work. The site of meaning in these works shifts from an inner, formal structure to the shared presence of work and beholder. Installation art is also associated with the creation of an almost 'architectural' construction that the viewer must enter in order to experience its spatiality from within. The artwork's 'lived physical perspective' describes its spatial orientation to the viewer's body.

The scenographic approach in *Locus Solus* examines points of intersection between theatre and installation art, in a structure that is interpreted as a version of 'scenodynamic architecture,' namely, an 'architectural' construction, that attempts to embody the ways in which the 'total artwork' is expressed through a synthetic relationship between sound, color, form and movement. A 'responsive environment' based on a more external plastic and dimensional paradigm, as a kind of flexible performance environment that accommodates the project's vision.

Contemporary technologically responsive environments have been entangled with performance across a wide range of disciplines, hence, the production's scenographic and architectural practices concentrate on the experiential, three-dimensionality of performance space rather than the representational aspects of its visual image.

Parallel to this, the project addresses a general strategy in collaborative practice that engages participants in the work, by shifting the meaning of the art object, to the experience that is made with and through this work. The focus on individual artistic practice, the experience of the artistic process and the attitude of the creative act are some of the guiding principles that inform the expanded and unbounded relationship between space, subjecthood and artwork.

The project focuses on art practice that engages with the use of new media, sound and performance, including work that is process-driven, participatory and interactive. The terms 'relational' and 'participatory' have become increasingly important, for the visual and performance arts, in describing both

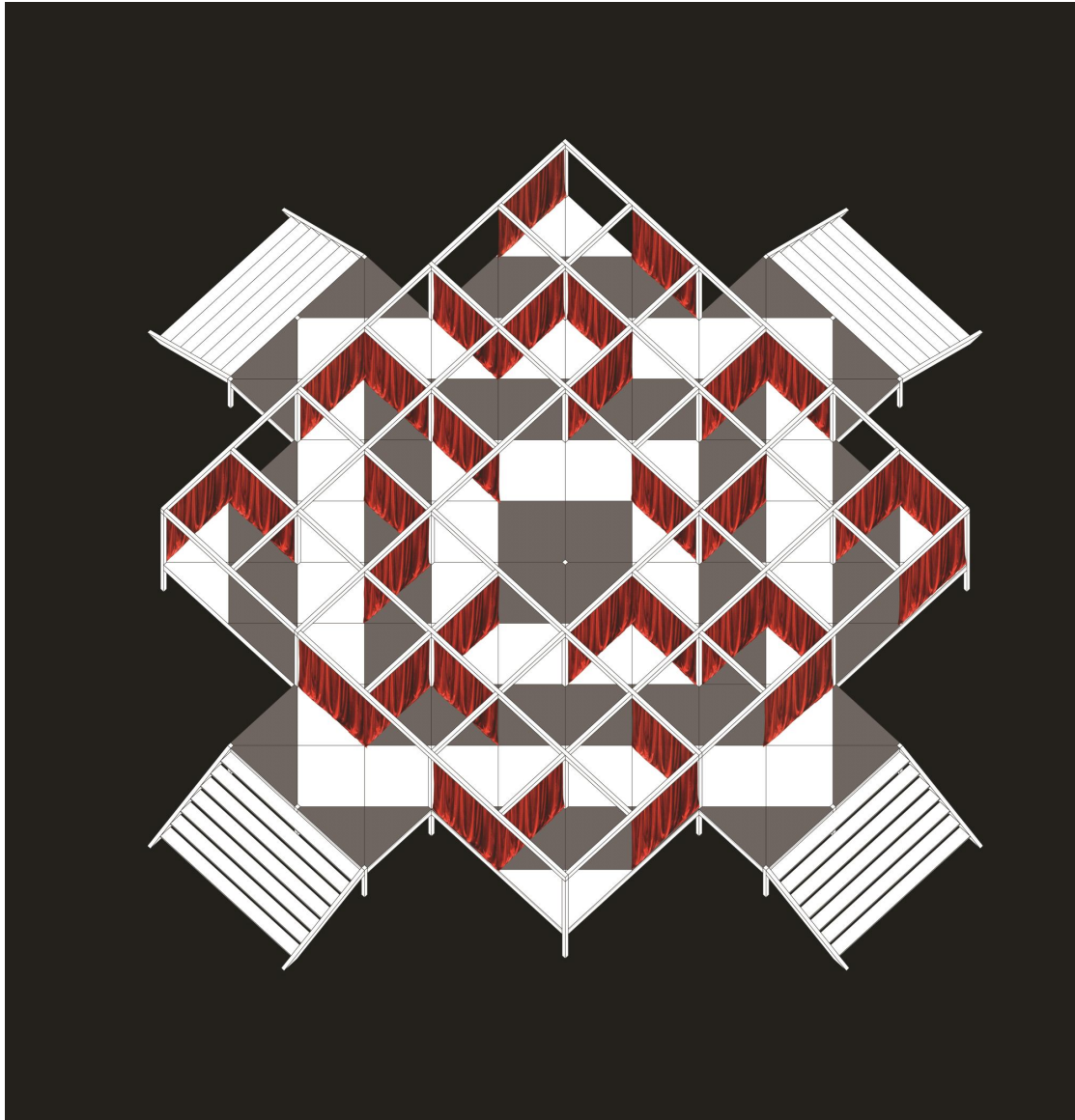
an aesthetic of making and an ethics of spectatorship. The artworks and performances involve a variety of time-based media, hybrid, intermedia forms and expanded modes of display beyond the museum or the theatre. Roussel's early fascination with human machine entanglements, fantastic hybrids of nature and technology, bodies and machines; machines which produce living beings and living things; organic matter integrated in machines and the construction of hyperreal landscapes, is identified with practices that involve intermedia and hybrid forms of art production.

Intermediality is examined as a radical force that operates in-between realities and that involves new modes of representation and collaboration, new dramaturgical strategies, new ways of creating temporal and spatial interrelations, both in artistic venues and public spaces. Intermedia art practice involves a combinatory structure of syntactical elements that come from more than one medium but are combined into one and are thereby transformed into a new entity. The reference frame of the entire system of art forms that mediates the intermedial correlation is itself included in the processes of transformation. This approach highlights the dialectic between the media that is not reliant only on technology, as it is often believed, however, technology often provides more possibilities for exploring the potentials and limits of every art medium.

Locus Solus attempts to integrate different mediums into an intermedial correlation that encounters the entangled relationship between live performance and installation art and between performers and art works. The stage is designed as a machine that utilizes the technologies of time and space and media in creating an affective responsive experience for the audience. *Locus Solus* is staged as a labyrinthine installation, an entity with many discrete parts, of stages within stages, and of events within events, that generates critical 'points of view,' concerning scenographic, visual and theatrical practice. The project deploys a scenographic and a dramaturgical model based on an analogy between the central character's laboratories and a museum (a cabinet of curiosities). The laboratories with the ingenious inventions represent gallery rooms, where visual artists exhibit their work.



Locus Solus | Out Of The Box Intermedia | Costas Alivizatos A-mazing Villa | Benaki Museum | September-October 2010



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The project investigates the ways in which visual artists are attracted to the expressive possibilities of the theatre and of theatricality as a property of the quotidian, yet repelled by its seemingly mimetic drive, while it works with recent trends in performance and installation art which pose interesting challenges to the legacy of theatricality by altering common perceptions about representation, performance space, scenery, costume, lighting, sound and video.

In Rousell's *Locus Solus*, a prominent scientist and inventor, Martial Canterel, invites a group of colleagues to visit the park of his secluded country estate, *Locus Solus*. As the group tours the estate, Canterel shows them inventions of ever-increasing complexity and strangeness. Rousell presents a new world of machine technology, which he links integrally to a fresh exploration of language. He specializes in detailed descriptions of peculiar artifacts linked to the concept of the machine and to the advent of

new technology, while he intentionally orchestrates an episodic structure of a single afternoon's exposition. The objects on the guided tour in the garden are enshrined and cared for with an unabashed fetishism, the scenic space is occupied with pseudoscientific mechanisms, marvels and inanimate bodies. A mysterious underground passageway leads into *Locus Solus*.

The marvels include: four dancers who embody eight figures within eight *tableaux vivants* inside an enormous glass cage, a road-mender's tool which when activated by the weather creates a mosaic of a hoard of teeth in a range of color, a huge glass diamond filled with water in which float a dancing girl, Danton's preserved head, a small dirigible called the 'demoiselle' with several delicate instruments attached, African mud sculptures, a hairless cat and a vast aquarium in which human beings can breathe. The inventor Canterel provides a thorough history of each exhibit, while he invents *resurrectine*, a fluid that revitalizes inanimate bodies. The subject, as Roussel suggested:

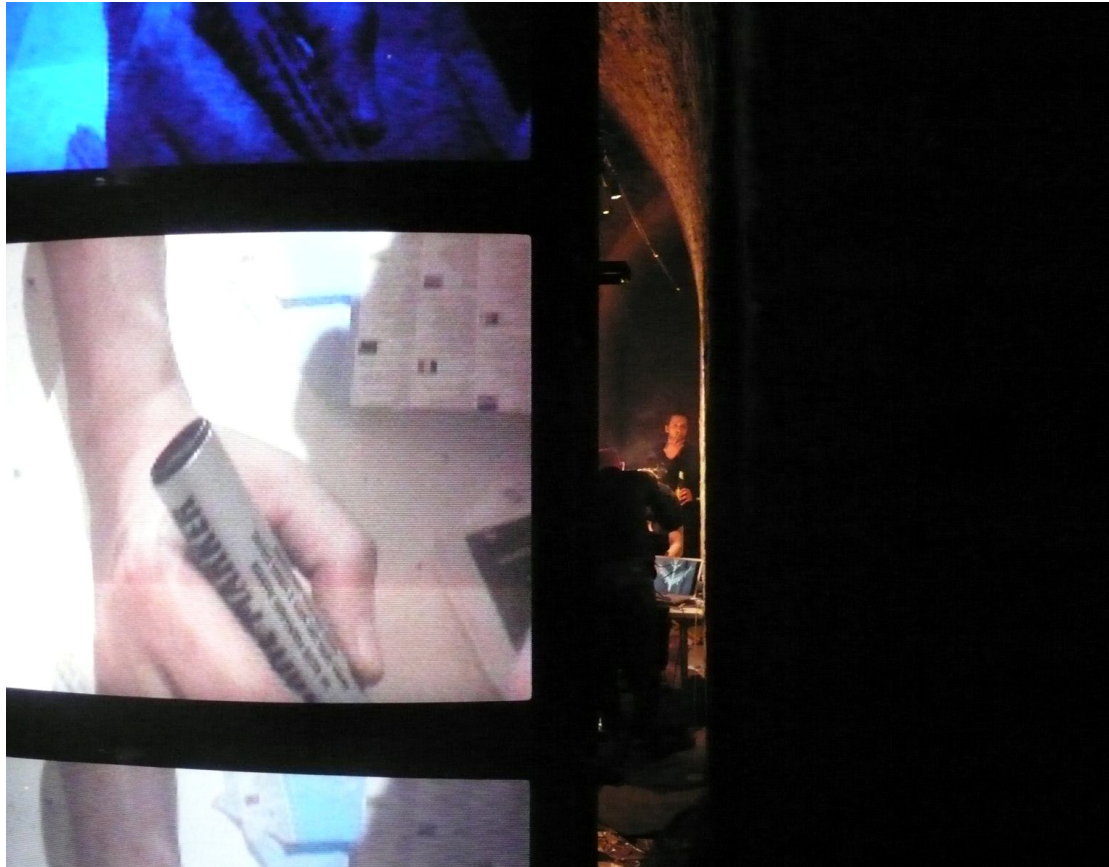
Would at once reproduce, with strict exactitude, every slightest action performed by him during certain outstanding minutes of his life; then without any break, he would indefinitely repeat the same unvarying series of deeds and gestures which he had chosen once and for all. The illusion of life was absolute: mobility of expression, the continual working of the lungs, speech, various action, walking-nothing was missing.

In order to generate the structure of his plots, surreal prose style and texts, Roussel had adopted an overall principle or formula derived from several different complex linguistic devices to produce the foundations of a new writing rationale. The format of the narrative is shaped by Roussel's method of composition— the 'procédé.' The 'procédé' is an elaborate word game that exploited the homonymic nature of French words and that determined the content of Roussel's texts. Through complicated intricate word games and phonetic distortions he would exploit the homonymic nature and complex relation of words; and by selecting a random phrase, and distorting it, he would create incredible imagery. For example, he changed the phrase *Demoiselle à prétendant* into *demoiselle* (pavement-laying device) *à reître en dents* (soldier of fortune in teeth). From this, he derived, for *Locus Solus*, a balloon-powered paving apparatus that makes a mosaic (depicting a scene from the tale of Aag, a German soldier) out of extracted teeth.

Roussel's special method is outlined in *Comment j'ai écrit certain de mes livres* (*How I Wrote Certain of my Books*, published posthumously in 1935) and his basic paradigm is an image or idea generating supplemental material, which, though seemingly infinite in scope, will always resolve itself with the original subject. The notion of a containment of an entity within another identical entity, that is to say, the 'mise en abyme' is also related to the method of the 'procédé' and can be used as a scenographic material. In the visual arts, an image placed into itself repetitively (the image of an image) creates the effect of 'mise en abyme,' which literally means 'to put something into infinity.' The same is applicable to narrative, when a story is told within a

story.

The three different stages of this modular project attempted to map out the experimental textual method of the 'procédé' and of the 'mise-en-abyme,' in terms of its spatial and temporal ramifications, by introducing a chain of shifting players, places, and temporalities. The first stage of the project *Locus Solus I*, was presented at the art venue, *Shunt Vaults* in London Bridge (London, April, 2009 <http://vimeo.com/5459210>), as well as at public spaces in Elephant & Castle, London (<http://vimeo.com/5459260>) and Manhattan, New York.



Locus Solus | The Erasers | Out Of The Box Intermedia | Shunt Vaults | London Bridge | May 2009

The production at the Shunt Vaults was concerned with the permeable surfaces that delimit internal life from the external world of public encounter, thus, it dealt with space, in terms of its physical transformation, through the movement of both the spectators and the performers. The 'live' exhibition involved interfaces between technology and live performance. The collaborating group researched on an audio-visual language by integrating various seemingly diverse elements such as: live cinema/ improvised music/ performance_actions/ and installation techniques. The sound and visual installations remained 'in situ,' and were only transformed during the interaction with the performers at the actual performance.

The two public interventions (Elephant & Castle and Manhattan) investigated

points of intersection (connections, linkages, overlaps) between Roussel's *Locus Solus* and the public realm of the city, by exploring the imbricated realms of the 'private/solitary' and the public sphere. These spatial shifts were used as a critical scenographic practice that addressed what might be called the site-specificity of everyday life and a variety of other action typologies.



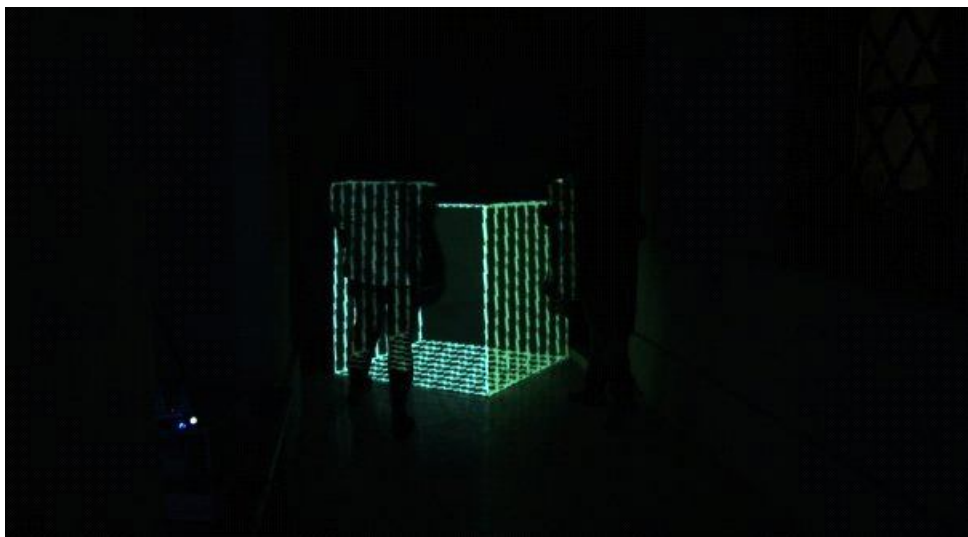
Conversations Curatives | Locus Solus | Public Space Elephant & Castle | May, London 2009

During the second stage of the project *Locus Solus II*, Martial Canterel's

Estate and his luxurious laboratories were simulated with the former Mansion of the Duchess of Placentia that is now transformed into the Byzantine Museum in Athens. Site-specific installations encircled the Estate at different and hidden locations (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CKCvEraFdwY>). The artworks engaged in a dialogue between art and the emerging forms of technology (augmented reality, hybrid interfaces, interactive art).



Locus Solus | Out of The Box Intermedia | Byzantine Museum | Athens 2010



Locus Solus | Dimitra Stamatou Augmented Reality | Byzantine Museum | Athens 2010



Locus Solus | Artemis Papageorgiou Fabrique | Byzantine Museum | Athens 2010.

The directorial approach and architectural design of the final stage of the project, *Locus Solus III*, at the Benaki Museum was inspired by Michel Foucault's analysis of Roussel's work in the book *Death and the Labyrinth: The World of Raymond Roussel* (<http://vimeo.com/16502937>). The architectural installation is a labyrinth, inspired by the Palladian villa, based on symmetry and perspective. The walls of the thirty-six rooms (laboratories) in the labyrinth are replaced by proscenium-arch curtains, that shape thirty-six stages. The curtain frames the viewer's presence in the installation. The art pieces and exhibits confront each other over the notion of theatricality – the construction of scenic space, the stage and the duration of the experience. The 'Cabinet of Curiosities' becomes a theatrical exhibition where the audience is both a spectator and a performer walking inside the cabinets/stages. The role of the spectator is transformed into a structural element of the work.



Locus Solus | Dimitra Stamatiou – Augmented Reality | Benaki Museum
2010



Alexandra Waierstall *Hourglass Entity* | Lina Dima-*Platonic Solids Unfolded* | Benaki Museum Athens 2010



Balint Bolygo - Danton's Head | Alexandra Waierstall - Hourglass Entity |
Benaki Museum Athens 2010



James P Graham –
The Golden Brain | Eleni Spiridaki – Pyramid | Benaki Museum 2010 | photo
credits Maria Boucaouri.



Mario Simitis | Dear Deer | Locus Solus | Benaki Museum 2010 | photo credits Maria Boucaouri



Alastair Mackie | Amorphous Organic | Benaki Museum 2010 | photo credits Maria Boucaouri



Simon Tegala | A Matter Of Life and Death | Locus Solus | Benaki Museum Athens 2010

Roussel's 'language machines' and his animistic relationship to language require a peculiar deciphering. Similar decrypting processes are to be used in understanding the synthesis of art forms and the coexistence of mediums

during the three stages of the modular *Locus Solus Project*, as well as the points of architectural intersection between the theatrical space and the museum. Nevertheless, the certitude remains that the encounter between two mediums doesn't take place when one begins to reflect on the other, but when one discipline realizes that it has to resolve, for itself and by its own means, a problem similar to one confronted by the other and that all work is inserted in a system of relays where the different art mediums coexist in an integrative and interactive process.

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