

ISSUE 01

# ART DESK

CONTEMPORARY ARTS, PERFORMANCE, AND THOUGHT



# A R T D E S K

FROM THE ART DESK 02

*Art of Our Time*

PORTFOLIO 04

*In Full Bloom*

THE NECESSITIES 11

EXHIBITION 20

*The Quantified Self*

BRIDGE 32

*Marfa Man*

PROFILE 38

*Other Dimensions*

PHOTOGRAPHY 48

*Edward Burtynsky*

STUDIO 56

*Valerie McDonald*

*with Larry Keigwin*

RETROSPECTIVE 62

*Jim Hodges*

AN OUTLIER 66

*Rescue Dogs*

RECENTLY 68

COLOPHON 70

AT WORK 72

*Ed Ruscha*

MANIFESTO BC

# *OTHER DIMENSIONS*

by CAROL KINO

Artist Tomás Saraceno  
Lets His Inner Architect  
Out to Play

TOMÁS SARACENO, *In Orbit* ▶  
at K21 Ständehaus, Düsseldorf (2013)

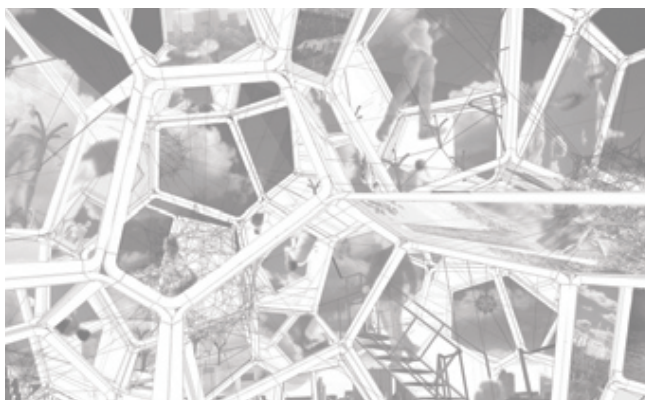








▲  
Bubble: *On Space Time Foam*  
at Hangar Bicocca, Milan (2012)



## SARACENO

FOR THREE WEEKS LAST SUMMER, anyone who visited Green Mountain Falls in Colorado got to see something surprising: a fantastical cluster of steel and acrylic pods, hovering like a giant space ship in the foothills of Pikes Peak. Measuring fifty-four feet across and soaring twenty-eight feet into the surrounding trees, the structure could be seen from every part of town, its mirrored surfaces reflecting the sky, the mountains, and the drifting clouds. Those who climbed inside found themselves disoriented by upside-down and sideways reflections, as if they'd entered a funhouse built by nature and light.

Part of the Green Box Arts Festival, the piece was *Cloud City*, a 2012 construction by Argentinian artist Tomás Saraceno, whose work has been shown in

museums, galleries, and biennials around the world. The forty-year-old is known for creating spectacular installations, including room-size plastic bubbles that welcome people to climb around in, or latticeworks of black elastic thread that suggest the macrocosm of the galaxies or the microcosm of a spider web. Saraceno's projects are inspired by visionary architects such as Buckminster Fuller; social theorists such as the French philosopher Bruno Latour; and scientific studies of natural phenomena. Increasingly, they also require a huge amount of smart engineering to pull off.

*Cloud City*, for instance, is comprised of sixteen separate, interlocking, twelve- and fourteen-sided polyhedrons made from transparent acrylic and polished stainless steel. Weighing twenty tons,

▲  
On the Roof: *Cloud City* (rendering and detail)  
at Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (2012)



it was carted to the site by a convoy of eight semi-trailer trucks, making *Cloud City* the largest and most complex installation Green Box has mounted since it began presenting artists' projects in 2008. It was also the most popular, drawing hundreds of visitors, according to Julie Maguire, the art advisor who helps select work for the program each year. Part of the appeal was that people in Green Mountain Falls are "all about outdoor living and doing things outside," Maguire says. "It's a really wonderful thing to have brought that here."

*Cloud City* proved an equally complex undertaking for the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, where it debuted in May 2012 as part of the Met's annual roof garden series. There it presented a completely different experience, reflecting the urban cityscape while offering panoramic views of Central Park. It also required more than two years of help and input from dozens of lawyers, engineering consultants, architects, and city agencies to complete.

"We always viewed it as a sculpture," says Anne L. Strauss, the associate curator in the Met's modern and contemporary art department who oversaw the project. "But ultimately we were building a building."

Yet for Saraceno, *Cloud City* is but a tiny step on the road to "Air-Port-City," the grand utopian project that has occupied his imagination since he began his career. It involves creating "platforms or habitable cells made up of cities that float in the air," the artist explained in a 2005 interview in *Domus* magazine. "These change form and join together like clouds."

Ultimately, he aims to find a way for people to live in self-sustaining modules in space, travelling freely without regard for national borders.

"Up in the sky there will be this cloud, a habitable platform that floats in the air," he says, "changing form and merging with other platforms just as clouds do...a huge kinetic structure that works towards a real economic transformation."

In the Mountains: *Cloud City*  
Green Mountain Falls, Colorado (2013) ▶  
photograph by DAVID LAUER









And Saraceno is totally serious about it. “He’s a very passionate visionary artist,” says Strauss, noting that Saraceno’s original plans called for the *Cloud City* modules to be launched over Central Park from the roof of the Metropolitan Museum. He had also hoped to realize “a model for futuristic urban planning,” Strauss says, by outfitting the flying modules with solar cookers and bromeliads, tropical plants that can survive on the moisture in the air. He also agitated for a utopian cleaning regime, which would have involved swiping the entire surface of the piece with a feather duster each day. Apparently Saraceno was dismayed when Strauss informed him that many of these things could not be achieved—at least not on the Met’s rooftop.

“I think he’s allergic to boundaries,” Strauss says. “And to the word *no*.”

Those who are close to Saraceno say his disdain for boundaries—national, financial, and otherwise—stems from his childhood. Born in San Miguel de Tucumán, Argentina, in 1973, during a military dictatorship, he was exiled to Italy with his family when he was a toddler, returning in the 1980s after the danger had passed.

“Tomás doesn’t really talk very much about that,” says Luca Cerizza, a Berlin-based curator and critic who organized Saraceno’s first major solo show at Genoa’s Pinksummer gallery in 2004. “But this issue of borders, and the idea of finding and creating a community, it’s related very much probably to this condition as a child, when he was expatriated.”

Saraceno now lives in Berlin.

Although he made his career in art, Saraceno’s first love was architecture, which he initially studied at the University of Buenos Aires. In 2001, he moved to Frankfurt to attend the prestigious Städelschule School of Art, drawn by the chance to study with Peter Cook, a member of the 1968–74 British avant-garde collaborative Archigram, whose projects, which re-envisioned architecture as entertainment, were widely published but never built.

At first, recalls Daniel Birnbaum, then dean of the Städelschule, Saraceno’s ambitions seemed headed in the same direction. “There was this joke in the architecture class that he was the worst student ever,” says Birnbaum, now director of the Moderna Museet in Stockholm. “He’d be there drawing balloons

or flying eagles, and he left the school doing the same thing.” Yet Saraceno also had a strong interest in science and engineering, and soon found an outlet for both interests in art. During school, he went to work as a studio assistant for German pop artist Thomas Bayrle. Through connections made there, he met the artist Olafur Eliasson and, after graduation, became his assistant. But even as a student, Saraceno managed to be “always very visible everywhere,” Birnbaum recalls. “He was always linked to interesting things.”

In 2003, right after graduation, Saraceno participated in the Venice Biennale as one of the youngest participants in “Utopia Station,” a project for which 160 artists were asked to create posters. Saraceno’s, a rambling, stream-of-consciousness manifesto, talks about the electron microscope, “the project of the flying city,” and “humanity’s new frontier.” His first solo show in Italy, *On-Air*, at Pinksummer gallery in Genoa, came the following year. Although Cerizza, the curator, had originally intended to mount a group exhibition, he changed his mind after one meeting with Saraceno.

“He talked about this vision he had of a flying city, erasing national borders and moving in the stratosphere,” Cerizza recalls. “His vision was so strong and so convincing that I thought, ‘Let’s do it!’”

Saraceno’s proposal involved creating a giant PVC balloon that would fill the gallery, then located in the thirty-foot-high ballroom of a sixteenth century palazzo, and inviting visitors to clamber around inside and on top of it. The piece would also function as a social experiment: although the balloon was kept inflated by an air compressor, both groups of visitors had to cooperate in order to maintain equilibrium.

Saraceno had never realized a project like this before, says Cerizza, and until the last minute, “we really didn’t know if this thing would work, or would smash to the ground in a few minutes.” Luckily, it turned out to function perfectly—after some minor adjustments to air pressure when a visitor slipped over the side of the balloon at the vernissage. Opening the same day as another big show at nearby Palazzo Ducale, Saraceno’s installation attracted scores of international visitors, and an art career was born.

One person who saw it was the director of the Curve Gallery at the Barbican, which gave Saraceno his first show in London in 2006. He presented a

panoramic video made in Salar de Uyuni in Bolivia, the world's largest salt flat. Shot with a ring of thirty-two cameras, it was projected against the curved walls of the space, creating the illusion that visitors were floating in the clouds. This led directly to Saraceno's first solo show in New York at Tanya Bonakdar Gallery in Chelsea, which continues to represent him in America today.

But the real turning point came in 2009, when Birnbaum, the curator of that year's Venice Biennale, gave him the gallery at the center of the International Pavilion. Saraceno filled the space with ethereal orbs and lattices woven from black elastic. Titled *Galaxy Forming Along Filaments, Like Droplets Along the Strand of a Spider's Web*, the installation suggested spider webs, dividing cells, exploding galaxies, even a fanciful map of the Internet. Since that moment, Saraceno's career has exploded, with bigger showing opportunities and more frequent scientific collaborations—a combination that has allowed him to realize increasingly monumental and ambitious work.

In 2009, he participated in an international space-studies program at NASA's Ames Research Center in Mountain View, California, where he explored the idea of sending his spider web models into space. The next year, working with a team of arachnologists, computer programmers, and other scientists, he created *14 Billions*, said to be the first three-dimensional model of a spider's web, for a show at the Bonniers Konsthall in Stockholm. And at Hangar Bicocca in Milan last October, for a show called *On Space Time Foam*, he built a three-level, seventy-nine-foot-high version of the giant balloon he showed at Pinksummer. This project became the focus of Saraceno's fall 2012 residency at MIT, where he was the Inaugural Visiting Artist at the university's new Center for Art, Science & Technology.

The Venice Biennale was also the place where Anne Strauss, the Metropolitan's curator, saw Saraceno's work and realized it might be perfect for the museum's rooftop. "I just thought he exhibited this astonishing, unfettered imagination and inventiveness," she concludes. "In his world, the sky is truly the limit." ✕