

## HELSINKI

### Tomás Saraceno

#### Taidehalli (Kunsthalle)

A walk through Tomás Saraceno's recent large-scale museum exhibition conveys the impression that we are witnessing the work of a man obsessed. Much like a researcher or inventor engaged in the development of some all-important proof or machine, Saraceno focuses on the claim that we can comprehend the structure of the universe through the spider's web. Rather than hone in on a particular salient feature, however, his project tackles the subject from

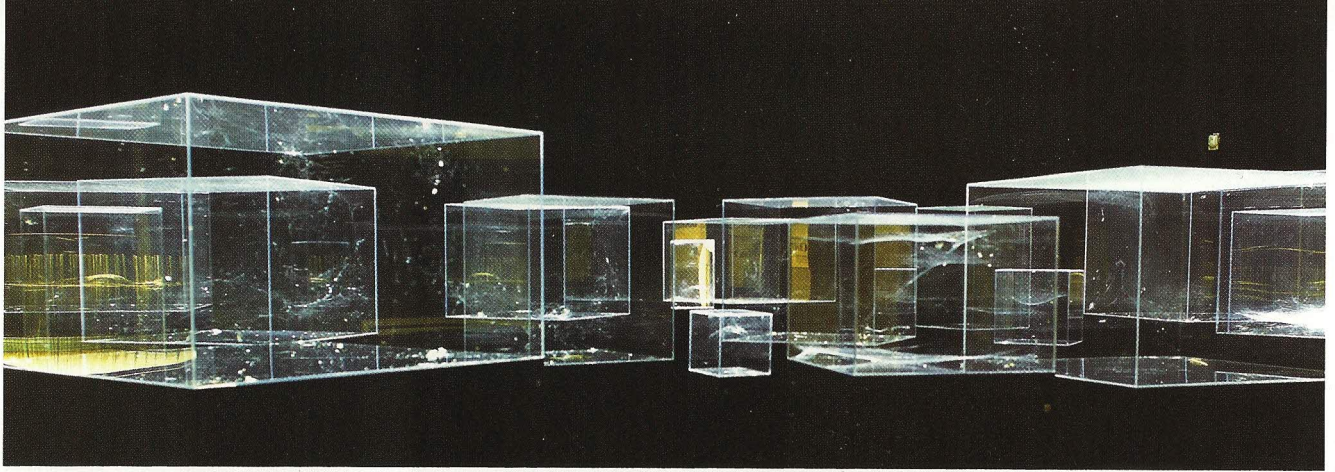
the broadest possible perspective. He develops life science experiments and employs model-making strategies, state-of-the-art scientific analysis, video, and performance in the production of work that effectively stands as a marriage of architecture, science, and art. Saraceno's investigations include the use of computer tomography, research into spider habitats, and an involvement with the international art project Museo Aero Solar. A significant quantity of background information about the centerpiece of all this effort—an immensely oversized replica of a

black widow's web called *14 Billions (Working Title)*—is also available to viewers. The inclusion of an application to the European Science Foundation supplements this information, detailing the rationale for an experiment that proposes to compare the structure of earthly spider habitats with webs built in the weightless environment of the International Space Station.

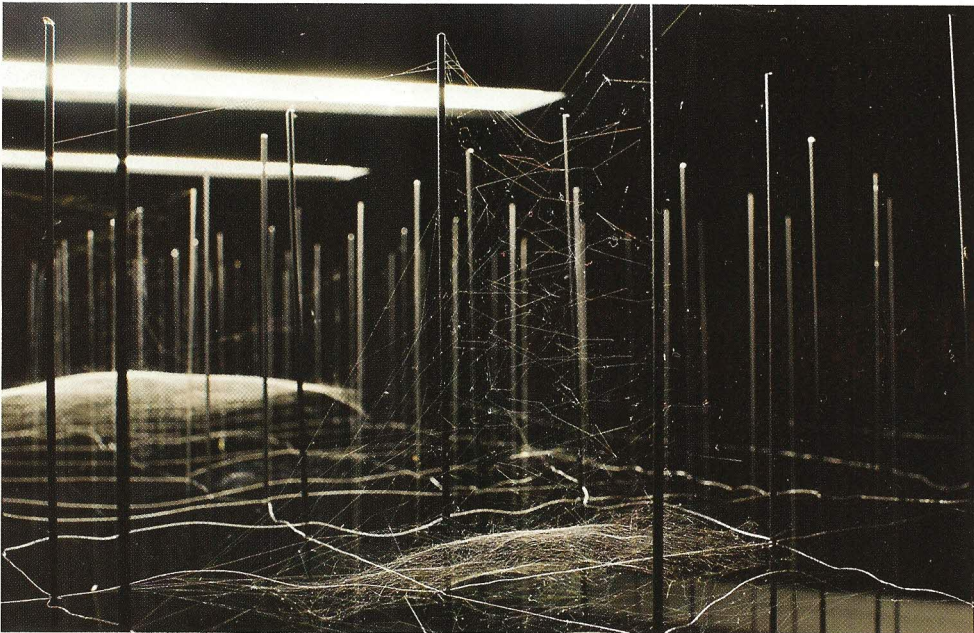
Technically, the structure fascinates. The network of knotted black polyester filament bears cloud-like properties. It consists of dense clusters of tightly packed elements that

Tomás Saraceno, *14 Billions (Working Title)* (detail), 2010/12. Approx. 3000 meters of polyester filament, 1500 screwhooks, and tube lights in purpose-built, 7-x-8-x-5-meter room.

grow out of a corner and dissipate as the strands reach out across the room. Surveying its progression reveals a constantly shifting array of geometrical forms, the shapes and interrelationships of which continue to change as one moves through the cube. The experience is enlightening because it alters our understanding of space. For some, it induces a reck-



Above: Tomás Saraceno, *untitled* (detail), 2012. 17 vitrines with spiders and their webs, fitted with interior lighting, dimensions variable. Left: Tomás Saraceno, *untitled* (detail), 2012. 1 of 2 open terrariums with mdf, spring steel-wire, fishing line, rubber mat, water, and tube lights, dimensions variable.



less sense of playfulness. Visitors familiar with playground climbing structures made of rope can envision themselves hanging from the fibers or scrambling through the mesh. But instructions posted at the points of entry clearly state, "Do not touch." The work was not built for participative purposes, and it fails to capture interest in other ways, too.

Saraceno's model exhibits a sense of stasis and immutability that sharply contradicts the delicate, versatile, and provisional qualities of real spider webs, while its inherent complexity prevents it from being adapted to other kinds of spaces. The requirement that the structure be brightly lit and displayed in a featureless white cube conveys an irksome clinical quality to the presentation. The box felt out of place in Taidehalli's darkened monumental sculp-

ture hall, the cloaking strategy failing to obliterate enough of the 1920s, classically styled building. The darkness surrounding the sterile cube also enveloped the rest of the presentation. Traipsing from one blackened room to another, the loss of traditional points of reference induced a degree of disorientation and limited movement and perception. The experience vaguely intimated a space-like environment. Though the lack of light served practical purposes, it also conferred a displeasing theatricality that increased the potential for awe.

Within the dark galleries, viewers encountered a disparate range of materials and work. Here, we could peruse *Liverpool/Flying Garden/Air-Port-City*, a wall-filling image in which the city's buildings huddle beneath huge billowing clouds of netting punctuated by various dia-

grams. The 2009 video *Space Elevator* reveals the artist enjoying a brief journey into the sky, nestled in a puppet pulled upward by a pair of translucent hot air balloons. *Ladies and Gentlemen, we are floating in space...*, the oldest work on view, consists of a plain white work table and a short length of red string tautly stretched between a large stapler and the shade of a work lamp. The arrangement exemplifies Saraceno's project in the simplest of forms. Two new and untitled sets of spider habitats rounded out the presentation. One set consists of 17 Plexiglas boxes, the general structure of which mirrors the vessel that holds Saraceno's large model. The webs they contain, though, have been built by anywhere from one to four spiders. The other set features a pair of large open terrariums. The spiders in these

domains have space to build bigger webs, spread out to occupy different zones, and adapt their webs to support rods. According to Saraceno, spiders in this context will even take advantage of the breeze caused by passing viewers to fly their threads to higher locations. Structurally diverse clusters of gossamer threads shimmered in the darkness and revealed a host of visually impressive three-dimensional networks.

This presentation of Saraceno's work to date offered a well-produced and thought-provoking selection of work that, with the supplementary data, deluges viewers with captivating visuals and facts relating to the means of production and the contributions made by teams of specialists. The press release notes that Saraceno's art is best considered as an intertwining process. His work has also been described as an immense, ongoing project. Such comments suggest that his thinking may still be in its formative stages and help to disguise any shortcomings. Conversely, one can accept the complexity of his project. With time, his parallel investigations may gradually converge into some potent synthesis, one that will also resonate with the imaginative potential

of *Ladies and Gentlemen, we are floating in space...*, which, in this outing, stood as his most evocative work.

—John Gayer

## LOS ANGELES

### “Made in L.A.”

#### Hammer Museum

“Made in L.A.,” the first biennial survey of Los Angeles-based artists, featured three artists making interesting sculpture—Liz Glynn, Caroline Thomas, and David Snyder. A sufficient amount of their work was on view to reveal their conceptual trajectories.

Glynn’s collection of objects was dominated by two large wooden structures made primarily from recycled pallets. In the two-part *Anonymous Needs and Desires (Gaza/Giza)* (2012), a high wall doubles as a wide cabinet with colorful plywood drawers containing cast lead objects that can be removed and handled, while a plywood closet contains a dress and a tree branch. *Passage (Giza/Gaza)* (2012), a tall, tapering, hollow rhomboid, intersects a windowed, Sheet-rock partition. Minus titles and wall text, this abstract, poetic aggregation offers no clue that it is “about” the 2011 Egyptian revolution. The lead objects are meant to represent items smuggled into Gaza; the rhomboidal form refers to a tunnel in Khufu’s pyramid.

*Me TV* (2012), Snyder’s installation, consists of a rickety enclosure of five or six connected house fronts. The interior is dominated by loud radio and video programs, all produced and performed by Snyder. This beautifully crafted space exposes what props up the façades—a claustrophobic disorder of monitors, dribbled glue, shelves, two-by-fours, and sheets of plywood. There’s a clear connection between the façades and the sets used for TV programs. The wall text states the obvious: *Me TV* (2012) represents the deadening marriage of media and domestic space.



Above: Installation view of works by Liz Glynn, from “Made in L.A.,” 2012. Right, top and bottom: David Snyder, *Me TV*, 2012. 2 views of installation, from “Made in L.A.,” 2012.

Thomas uses plaster, clay, and mixed media to cast, hand-build, and alter functional objects. Her selection of works was prefaced by the video *Interlude* (2012), a lyrical close-up of plaster being mixed and pigmented. It provides an insight into Thomas’s relationship to her materials, an element not evident in the work itself. The pieces on display included a suspended, powder-coated motorcycle engine (*Decoy*, 2010), a cast ceramic pillow on top of a Plexiglas box (*Generator*, 2012), and a tall, black ceramic object (*Untitled [2x4, Pourhole, Block]*, 2012). A kind of severe Pop Art for intellectuals, Thomas’s work is concerned with the crossbreeding of function and aesthetics.

The work of these three artists mirrors the current aesthetic trend in which craftsiness in the form of obsessive attention to fabrication gives appearance precedence over concept. Their ideas are memes shared with thousands of other artists, while their work focuses on the spectacular and relies too heavily on the use of wall text. Interest in the mediation of domestic life is limited to the obvious and recycles Pop Art and pop-psych tropes. “Made in L.A.” was funda-



mentally an assembly of over-exposed conceptual hits—nothing in it upped the ante. The way in which the work was put together

was more compelling than anything else the exhibition was trying to do.  
—Kathleen Whitney