

Soundings and Repercussions: The Creative Stratagems of RENSEIWZAFRANSKA:PERFORM(a).

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INTRODUCTION

With almost a decade of various works behind them, the Estonian performance duo *RENSEIWZAFRANSKA:PERFORM[a]*, have acquired a diminutive, but cult like following and a growing reputation for their astute acts in a wide range of sparse architectural spaces. Central to their experiments is an apparent obsessive-compulsive urge to re-enact their first meeting, and to distill this experience into a combination of particularized, abstracted story guide-lines, and generic translations of *coup de foudre* conditions. All of their works to date are entitled (*st*)*illness*, and accordingly numbered in a seemingly coherent chronological inventory.

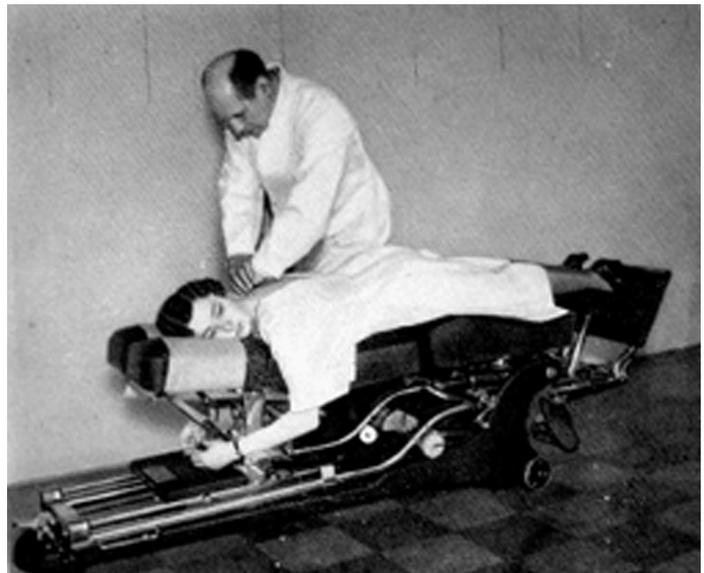
Although the works possess inherent, partially overlapping reoccurring elements, each piece seems to interact distinctively and genuinely with the selected spaces. As none of the performances are encompassed in conventional theatrical settings, the importance of the spaces is thus exponentially enhanced, and gives rise to a certain amount of focusing as to the actual nature of these interactions. One of the most compelling conditions in the work seems to be the attention devoted to the presence of a *void*, as central hub for all proceeding activities.

The inclusion of fragmented and distorted bits of flamenco dance in the works is amalgamated with hazy, partial body fixations originating from Japanese bondage rituals and further combined with mumbling utterances, either spoken or hastily written on ad-hoc walls. This remarkable blend is usually varied according to the chosen spatial context, but remains a definite and unmistakable trademark of *RZ:P[a]*.

I: A simple meeting with consequences

The beginning is always an open, tense, curve.

As such, the memorable meeting in 1992 between Sam Renseiw and Neená Zafranska had a somewhat ordinary setting.¹ Both of Estonian origin, they encountered in an understaffed district Polyclinic in Tallinn, where Sam had been relegated to, due what local authorities deemed to be excessive, eccentric bourgeois tendencies. With a fine, successful reputation in the field of post-polio treatment, this apparently was the beginning of the end of his career. Neená, morose, on the verge of a deep depression, was recovering from a mild polio attack; the prospects of not being able to dance any longer — she was celebrated as upcoming solo dancer in Poland — seemed devastating.



Their convention on Sam's first prototype of the *psychosomatic relaxation-stretcher* was somewhat benign. It nonetheless changed the path of their life dramatically: acknowledging their mutual passion for ritualized Japanese bondage, flamenco dance, the existential spatial esthetics of mathematical topology and sanitary plumbing, their relationship set off. An initial wildly sensuous and erotically loaded bondage experimenting period consequentially produced their first photo digest: *Bound*.² Produced in only two handmade facsimiles, published as a primitive *zamizat* underground opus, *Bound* had an immediate, tremendous impact in the then minute Soviet/Estonian art avant-garde scene of the transition period. Thus, giving them the prospect to initiate their radical performances. When RZP started their performances, no defined environment or infrastructure existed for this sort of activities. Even in the case of available sympathetic theater or gallery space, *RZ:P[a]*'s endeavor was from the outset deliberately situated outside any established, functionally denominated spaces. (Though one particular performance of *(st)illness* was staged in a temporary art gallery space in Tallinn).

The first performances of *(st)illness* occurred in friend's apartments and in derelict, deserted industrial spaces. As these early activities carried shortcomings of up to two years of imprisonment, the advertising methods and *modus operandi* were adequately discrete and covert. Partly due to the involved circumstances, very little documentation of the first five years of work are existing; Very early on, *RZ:P[a]* issued a general request for the total refrain of any photographic documentation of their activities. Most of the compiled knowledge of their activities thus relies closely on mouth-to-ear testimonies by audience present at the various performances.

II: The shell and the tortoise

The reconstruction of a strange, mutating, animal: a morphic field?

As *RZ:P[a]* apparently do not keep an official, chronological log of their works, the following reconstructions are mainly based on two sources: a partial compilation by a group of Scandinavian aficionados³ and collected witness records.⁴ The reconstructions are thus at best, attempts to circumscribe and charter external circumstances and inherent matter of a body of work with basic twofold characteristics. On one hand, the insistent inclusion of space(s) as basic reference point, on the other, of the actions, movements and rituals performed therein. From this fundamental formula, a certain pattern of structuralized categorizations has been set

up for the purpose of this paper, and accordingly classified:

Shell1: Internal, private and semi-private settings; *Shell2*: internal, abandoned or functionally transformed, larger spatial settings; *Shell3*: external or public settings with short-circuited functionality. Within these categorizations, the actions performed, although drawing from the same sources, would invariably have strikingly different variations and connotations. In the intersection of actions and space, certain unconventionalities appear, distorting and blurring functional, programmatic and narrative readings. Instead of deconstruction, conditions of simultaneity and to a certain definite extent, synchronicity, appear.

Most of the early performances were framed within the *Shell1* settings: friend's apartments and the like. Of these works, very little material and testimonies unfortunately survives. Neither Néena nor Sam seems to be able (or wish) to convey detailed recollections that could shed more precise light on this phase of their work.⁵ It was first with the transfer into semi-private spaces, that the performances attained a more notorious exposure. From one the testimonies, the surfacing photographic material exhibits a simple, hotel room interior. According to the same source,⁶ these performances of *(st)illness* had an average audience of 6-14 persons, and displayed more distorted flamenco moves than actual bondage fixations which were more prominent elements, in the early, more concealed, performance settings.

These early performances that could be, somewhat unjustly, classified as "private peep-shows", where nonetheless already gaining reputation for uncanny incidences in the audience, due to the strange *shifts* in space and time awareness.

Shell2 performances, staged in abandoned factories and large storage houses, had more spectacular effects, owed to the poor lighting conditions available. The hefty presence of darkness seemed to emphasize the massive void, and amplify or muffle the acoustic traits within the space. Thus the focus seemed to shift from a more radical experience of the audio-visual characteristics, towards a vast intimacy shared by the audience and the performers. A mutual understanding, where the utterances of seemingly banal sentences and sequences of numbers blended with the (now more subtle) body fixations and flamenco *palmas* examinations. Most accounts of "desert translocations" and "arctic indefinites" seem to stem from these settings, in conjunction with the first precise accounts of synaesthetic experiences. In the subsequent, more *sophisticated* set-ups in

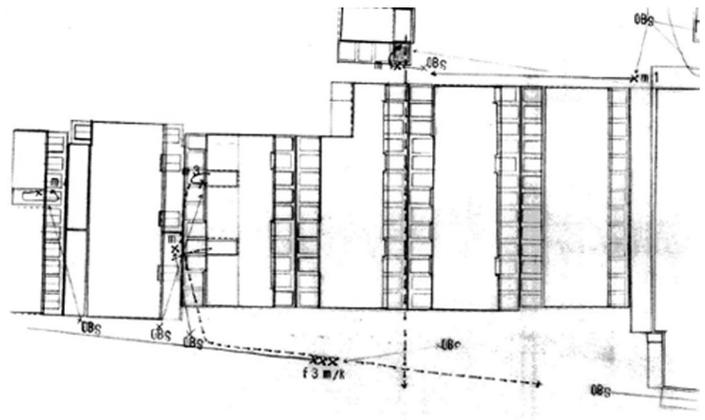
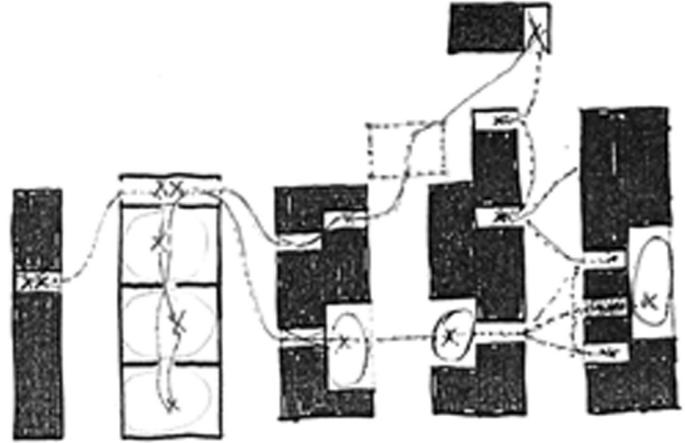


northern Scandinavia, the equivalent *performative conditions* seem to have had as striking repercussions as in the early staging, but with a distinct difference: the western audiences seemed to be astoundingly unaccustomed to the relatively primitive performance paraphernalia, an actuality probably owed to an excessively high level of theatrical audio-visual expectance and tolerance.

Of the *Shell3* typology, one of the most memorable staging of *(st)illness* seems to be one recent performance in Dessau, Germany; its notoriousness is partly due to the diligent recordings by a young German architect with dance credentials.⁷ In this particular performance of *(st)illness*, the actual space, a cluster of small garages in an industrial suburb of Dessau, is a dispersed territory.

In parallel maneuvers, the stage-set appears to become a kind of procession, a stylized physical excavation with loopholes. The performative conjuration of a possible *4.th dimensionality* is, in this work, still in a scattered state.

Nonetheless, it is from this work that accounts of incidences of synchronicity most obviously seem to converge into a coherent set of testimonies. The notions of delineable space and of void are of a more miscellaneous nature, disparate as they are, even though all garage spaces apparently, according to the mappings, seem to be of the same modularity.⁸



Within the spatial settings of *Shell3*, photographic testimony enables the partial reconstructions of two performances of *(st)illness*, in radically different public environments, each with distinct functionalities. One was operated for an invited audience in the eastern locker room in Tallinn's older soccer stadium, where the

performance happened simultaneously with the staging of a large traditional national folk-gymnastic festival.⁹



The other performance, also ostensibly subversive, was apparently situated in one of the newly reconstructed gorilla cages in Tallinn's zoo.¹⁰ Both performances evidently had a stronger emphasis on social observation than previous, and could be labeled as crossover pieces, with a more obscure translation of void, ritual, and genuine manifestation of committed presence.

Two recorded shows of *(st)illness* can be seen as the exemptions to the *Shell* classification: One of the early performances in Tallinn seemingly happened twice in an art gallery space, and was witnessed by an Estonian architect, now based in Glasgow.¹¹ His account is one of the most clear-cut testimonies to this date, possibly due to his professional awareness of spatial issues. The startling issue in this set of circumstances is the substantial architectural imagery formed after the leg bondage fixations. Real or imaginary, the account's center of attention orbits around as unrelated translocation shifts, as the space between the inner and outer skins of the dome of St Paul's Cathedral in London, parts of Le Corbusier's La Tourette's inner crypt, and the exterior of Aalto's studio in Helsinki, between the garden fence and the side wall to the neighboring house.

The gallery's peculiar staircase seemed to have been the other mentioned, original trigger mechanism.¹²

No testimonies of synaesthisiac experiences of any kind are conveyed in the account, ascertaining the fact that the witness does not possess these faculties.

III: The strange phenomena of synaesthesia

A short-circuiting of the senses

As a relatively large amount of the testimonies from audiences present at *RZ:P[a]* mention incidents that



could be allocated to synaesthetic experiences, a short descriptive resume in this regard seems appropriate. *Synaesthesia* is a general term covering the condition of a confusion of the senses whereby stimulation in one sense triggers stimulation of a different sense. A synaesthete might claim to be able to hear color, taste shapes, describe the color, shape and flavor of somebody's voice, or music, the sound of which looks like "shards of glass". Throughout history many notable artists have claimed to have synaesthesia, including Rimbaud, Kandinsky, Scriabin and the Russian filmmaker Eisenstein. Recent scientific research has moved the condition from the domain of mainstream neurology to mainstream neuroscience, though explanations for the conditions cause remain controversial.¹³ According to the French existentialist philosopher Merleau-Ponty, "synaesthetic perception is the rule, and we are unaware of it only because scientific knowledge shifts the center of gravity of experience, so that we unlearn how to see, hear, and generally speaking, feel."¹⁴

It might thus be speculated that one of the basic shared experiences at *RZ:P[a]*'s performances is of a synaesthetic nature, and that the main appeal in their performative presence actually is "correctly" perceived and grasped by sympathetic synaesthaetes in the audience. A certain amount of clues might seem to confirm this thesis: Néena's short and melodious intonations of sentences or singular words, Sam's number mumbling and the scribbling on the walls or the floor during the performances. How and if the bondage fixations actually might fit this pattern is still an open question, but these actions seemingly produce forceful color fields in some of the audiences. All testimonies concord on the strong presence of colorful elements during the performances, even though no stage props or other colorful paraphernalia is ever mentioned.

The Russian film director Sergei Eisenstein had a strong conviction that sound and vision were intimately related and might have been further encouraged by his exposure to the highly stylized Japanese *kabuki* theatre form. Amongst his essays on film theory Eisenstein writes about this by ways of explanation for his adoption of what he called "color-sound montage". Eisenstein explains that: "in experiencing kabuki one involuntary recalls an American novel about a man in whom are transposed the hearing and seeing nerves, so that he perceives light vibrations as sounds and hears tremors of air as colors, he hears *light* and sees sound. This is also what happens in *kabuki*."¹⁵ One can thus speculate about a possible linkage to some of the employed bondage fixation forms by RZ:P[a] with *kabuki*, even though any traces of supplementary narrative other than the original meeting seems missing in their work .

IV: The acknowledgment of the void, incidences of synchronicity

The parallels to MA and acausal connecting principles.

As one of the peculiar aspects of RZ:P[a]'s use of space seems to be the strong biased emphasis on the acknowledgment of the presence of a void, this phenomenology could be explained with a clear focus on the various characteristic movements in this idiosyncratic territory. Another possible meaningful translation could be the oblique juxtaposition of the restrained or fixed moves within the bondage elements and their affiliations according to traditional Japanese concepts of void.

In Japanese, the concepts of space and time have been simultaneously expressed by the word MA. MA is characterized as *the natural distance between two or more things existing in a continuity* or as *the natural pause or interval between two or more phenomena occurring continuously*. Thus, both time and space have been measured in terms of intervals. (This concept is strangely contemporary, as it coincides with present day theories that equate space and time). For the ancient Japanese, the perception of space arose from an effort to visualize and formalize the divinities *kami*, that where thought to permeate cosmos. *Kami's* method of occupation was postulated, and sanctified sites, usually empty spaces, where marked by four posts or by the bondage of a single rope. Here *kami* was expected to descent. Space was believed to be fundamentally void. Even solids objects where thought to contain voids capable of receiving the *kami* that descents at certain moments to fill such spaces with the spiritual force *ki*. Thus space was perceived as identical with the events or

phenomena occurring in it: that is, space was recognized only in its relation to time-flow.¹⁶

As there seems to be no smoking-gun to justify this hypothetical conceptual juxtaposition in RZ:P[a]'s work, the present line of thought appears as one of the many somewhat plausible approaches to assess and translate the many testimonies from witnesses at some of the performances. These testimonies, although diverse and at times contradictory, all clearly emphasize, that at certain definite moments in RZ:P[a]'s performances, an elated transcendation occurred. Time-flow seemed to slow, and ecstatic spiritual moments of bliss and tranquility ensued. Although these moments seemed to have been of extreme short duration, all accounts coincide in mentioning the following phenomena: increased, acute awareness of the space present, while simultaneously, a sudden surge of short-circuited, virtual imagery transports the *afflicted* into various other, known or new locations or landscapes. These happenings or instant translocations seem to be accompanied by another crux, often in conjuration with some of Néena's uttering's or Sam's sentence or number tagging on some of the spaces walls, all ongoing in understated inconspicuousness. The common denominator for this phenomenon seems to be the concurrence of a shared *sensation* of touching simplicity. This particular incidence can clearly be labeled as of synchronistic nature. The testimonies seem to concord on the observable incidences, but vary as to the specific contents.

The concept of *Synchronicity*, a term coined by CG Jung, designates a meaningful coincidence of two or more events, where something other than the probability of chance is involved. Chance is a statistical concept, which "explains" deviations within certain patterns of probability. Synchronicity elucidates meaningful arrangements and coincidence, which somehow go beyond the calculations of probability. While Jung had advanced the synchronicity hypothesis as early as the 1920s, he gave a full statement only in 1951 in a lecture.¹⁷ The following year, Jung published a monograph in a volume on synchronicity with a related study by the renowned quantum physicist and Nobel Prize laureate Wolfgang Pauli.¹⁸ In this book, Jung sought to reveal these coincidences as phenomena that involve mind and matter, science and spirit, thus providing some rational explanations for events like precognition, intuition inspiration and creativity. In another variation of synchronistic examinations, Fritjof Capra's bestseller *The Tao of Physics* circumscribes in detail and with authority the various connections between Eastern mysticism and modern quantum physics.¹⁹ In recent years, further publications have shed more substantial light on this ethereal subject.²⁰

V: Neighbouring realities v/s Many worlds

Partial visions of different realities.

The parallels of synchronicity and recent investigations in quantum physics, seem to indicate that some physicists are increasingly accepting the idea that there exist an infinity of realities stacked together.²¹ The most preposterous theory reconciling the difference between the microscopic world of atoms and the macroscopic everyday world was proposed in 1957 by Hugh Everett III. His *Many Worlds interpretation*, is an approach to quantum mechanics according to which, in addition to the world we are aware of directly, there are many other similar worlds, which exist in parallel at the same space and time. The existence of the other worlds makes it possible to remove randomness and action at a distance from quantum theory and thus from all physics.²² The Physicist Max Tegmark even imagines a *multiverse* in which the individual universes dance to the tune of different laws of physics.²³

As incredibly mind-boggling as it seems, some of these interpretations undoubtedly would, for the scope of this paper, certainly transgress the usual architectural interpretations of space and place. The search for possible explanations to occurring phenomena in parts of the work of *RZ:P[a]* lead the author of this paper into many surprising paths, opening vistas into vast and challenging territories of oblique approaches as to the possible (re)assessment of the nature of space and architecture. Some of the proposed links, despite their seemingly incongruous nature are more than exceptional potentialities.

VI: A SECOND GLANCE AT SOME PINNACLES OF ARCHITECTURE

THE OWLS ARE NOT WHAT THEY SEEM TO BE...

In coincidence with the research for the topic of this paper, the reference by some of the witnesses to prominent architectural works triggered a line of thought about the many other possible dispositions of these works. Although significantly substantial writing is extant in regard to the foremost architectural works by i.e. Kahn, Le Corbusier, Mies or Aalto, certain crucial dimensions always seemed missing, or at least very clearly understated. Spiritual, metaphysical or intuitive descriptions of these works are virtually nonexistent, or tentative. What then, would another more oblique scrutinizing examination of Kahn's Dacca parliament, Mies's Barcelona Pavilion or the Esther and Lange Houses, Corbu's Rompamp or La Tourette and Aalto's Villa Mairea, produce? Could it be possible that some of the seemingly unfathomable qualities powerfully inher-

ent in these design, could be described and explained within a readjusted framework of synaesthetic and/or synchronistic properties? As the main focus until date is set upon tangible and explanatory chronologies, theoretically grounded on philosophy or history, what would a Many World approach produce? A interesting recent work in this regard, is Sarah Menin and Flora Samuel's book *Nature and Space: Aalto and Le Corbusier*,²⁴ while Juhani Pallasmaa's *The Eye of the Skin* provides a vital and open-minded key to the necessary inclusion of conscious awareness of haptic dimensions in the experience of architecture.²⁵

Within the context of this paper, essential parts of one particular architectural object would certainly deserve a more circuitous mentioning: Alvar Aalto's Villa Mairea. In this sublime work, the multitudes of layered, intricate and obviously mystifying details have yet to be appropriately assessed, given the exceptionally powerful, surreal emanations of synchronicity in: The hazy African nature of main entrance canopy's supporting, erratic, slender pillars; The Japanese atavistically bonded timber constructions by the sauna; The nautical trans-Atlantic liner balustrade on the roof terrace amalgamated with a Japanese dry-garden; The kaleidoscopic, sensuous nature of the large variety of the villa's door handles; The bamboo-thread bondage of the living room columns; And, amongst the many, many other prominent inclusions, the captivatingly oneiric, sensuous, erotically loaded molding on the side of the fireplace. There might be more to all these elements than the present interpretation of hazy inspirations from Japan or the analog recall of forests and other poetic traits from (Finnish) nature. It might just be a wildly intuitively staged holographic world, carrying within it synaesthetic clues and synchronistic trigger-devices in lush, highly erotic stanzas of fleeting or stolen times. The spaces as vibrant haptic, mnemonic devices, transcending time, camouflaged into apparent functionalities, waiting for the thus staged actors to perform their daily choreographic duties accordingly. At least one of the clients might have carried the key. What James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* is to literature, Villa Mairea might be to domestic architecture: An unparalleled synchronistic space-time conglomerate, gently turbo charged, still waiting to be deciphered with the heart.

VII: Meanwhile, a persistent performative presence

Conclusions are often just another beginning

In a world where the uncritical production and consumption of imagery, spatial clichés, analogies of all kinds and complicated deconstructions have reached unprece-

dented polluting heights, the work of *RZ:P[a]* might appear like a muffled, desolate drop of water in an all to arid and expanding desert. In fact, some of their recent performances went almost unnoticed.²⁶



As to the actual nature of their work's *élan vital* no intentions of programmatic manifestations seem visible or are anywhere stated. It apparently remains a semi-private vivacious arena, a dynamic, shelter-like 'pata-physical laboratory for simple investigations and, first and foremost, an understated outpost for the quest for a potential essence in yet uncharted phenomena.

*"It moves / It moves not / It is far, and it is near / It is within all this / And It is outside of all this"*²⁷

NOTES:

¹ Sam Renseiw, Andrej Lubimov, Gregory Antonov, "Soma-related Problem Complexes in the Treatment of Polio afflicted Patients: Use and Misuse of Psychosomatic Relaxation Stretcher," *SMAP*, 27, (1992): 36 - 51. The picture of Sam with Néena on the stretcher was originally published in the paper above mentioned.

² *Bound* subsist only on the corner of an interior photograph taken by Néena Zafranska.

³ A photocopy of a small pamphlet can be required at: <www.vaterpas.dk>

⁴ French/Danish documentarist Zoe Tati has produced a video of various testimonies. *Attestations Intitulées/Untitled testimonials*, Copenhagen: Productions du Nactus, 2002. (can also be required at: www.vaterpas.dk)

⁵ Interview conducted with Néena Zafranska, in Oslo, Feb.2002

⁶ Zoe Tati, *Snublefoto*, 1994.

⁷ Julianne Brandes: *SpleLRaum: 12 Räume in Dessau*. Architecture diploma thesis, UdK, Berlin, December 2002. Probably (st)illness # 25

⁸ *Ibid.*, Various plans from the thesis project. ajb04@web.de

⁹ Zoe Tati, 1998; Probably (st)illness #20.

¹⁰ Photographic evidence and testimony from Danish architecture student Thomas Koch. Probably (st)illness # 23.

¹¹ Interview with Divat Ritrup, at The Mackintosh School of Architecture in Glasgow, June 2002. During the conversation, Ritrup mentioned a new Finnish book he was reading at the time of his experience with *RZ:P[a]*. An incredible fiction of the sudden disappearance of the French capital, and the subsequent, international efforts to dispatch numerous search expeditions to solve this urgent puzzle. It contains many strange allusions to possible synchronistic events. To my knowledge, the book has only been translated into Swedish. > Markus Nummi, *Det Förlorade Paris*. Stockholm: Albert Bonniers Förlag, 1997.

¹² The photographic evidence depicts an apparently narrow staircase space. The columns convey, indeed, faint reminiscences of Aalto's Helsinki studio garden space.

¹³ Harrison, John. E, *Synaesthesia: The Strangest Thing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*,19.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*,133.

¹⁶ Arata Isozaki, "Space-Time in Japan-MA", Exhibition catalogue, 1981.

¹⁷ Jung's first formal presentation of the theory, and his last public lecture at the Eranos Conference of 1951 in Ascona, Switzerland

¹⁸ CG Jung, *Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973.

¹⁹ Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics: An Exploration of the Parallels between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism*. London: Fontana Paperbacks, 1988.

²⁰ Allan Comb & Mark Holland, *Synchronicity: Through the Eyes of Science, Myth and the Trickster*. New York: Marlowe &Company, 2001.

²¹ Marcus Chow, *The Universe Next Door: Twelve Mind-blowing Ideas from the Cutting Edge of Science*. London: Review, 2003

²² Vaidman, Lev, "Many-Worlds Interpretation of Quantum Mechanics", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2002 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2002/entries/qm-manyworlds/>>.

²³ Max Tegmark & John Archibald Wheeler, "100 Years of the Quantum" *Scientific American*, (Feb. 2001): 68-75.

²⁴ Sarah Menin & Flora Samuel, *Nature and Space: Aalto and Le Corbusier*. London: Routledge, 2003.

²⁵ Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eye of the Skin*. London: Academy Editions, 1996.

²⁶ (st)illness #26 was performed in the large workshop space at the new School of Architecture in Oslo, in February 2002. Lacking any prior announcements, Sam and Néena performed without interruption for 27 hours. As the space used was still under reconstruction, almost devoid of proper lighting fixtures, and the school still in the process of moving into its new premises, only few people seemed to have noticed.

²⁷ *Isa-Upanishad*, 5.