



# Theodoulos: "the artist who thinks like an architect and feels like a poet"

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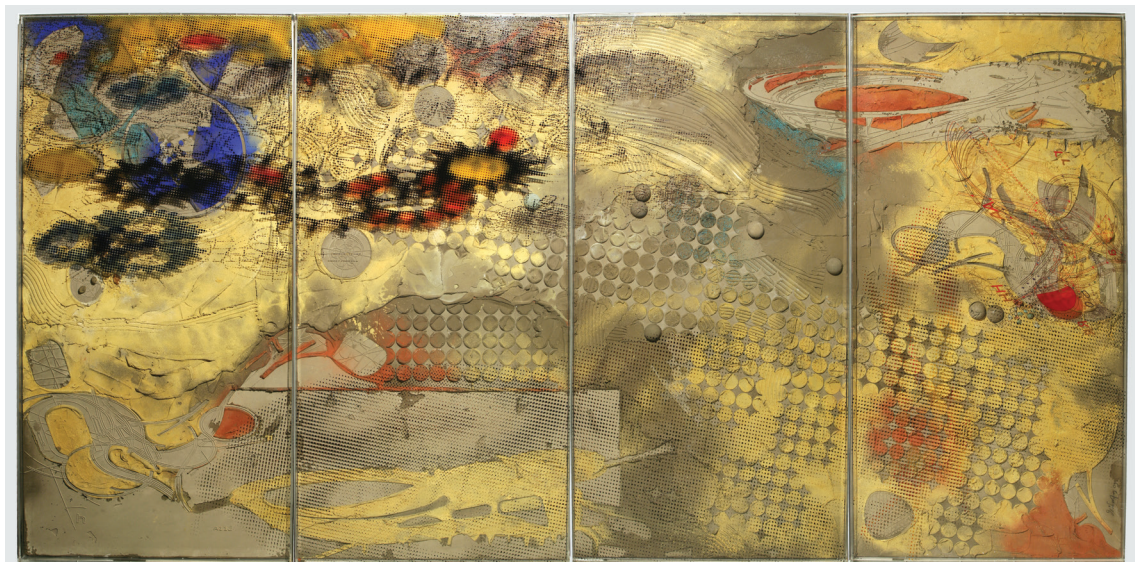
## THEODOULOS :

### “THE ARTIST WHO THINKS LIKE AN ARCHITECT AND FEELS LIKE A POET”

*Androula Michael*

“Cells” is the title Theodoulos has chosen for his work made for the Louvre, as it exactly defines the heart of the matter, which rules his entire work. The cell, working as a symbol in his mind, crystallizes and underlies his work and justifying it calls for a new way of understanding Aristotles’ Physics where by : “matter carries in itself the origin of movement and of change, but takes

shape and builds up as a picture through the mind”. In his “video sculptures” and his “expanded paintings”, Theodoulos conjugates diachronic, archetypal forms, such as spheres, cones, cubes, in various cellular combinations on which projected pictures come to life by slides and video pictures that, by definition, pertain to the world of immateriality, which for him is equivalent to the immateriality of



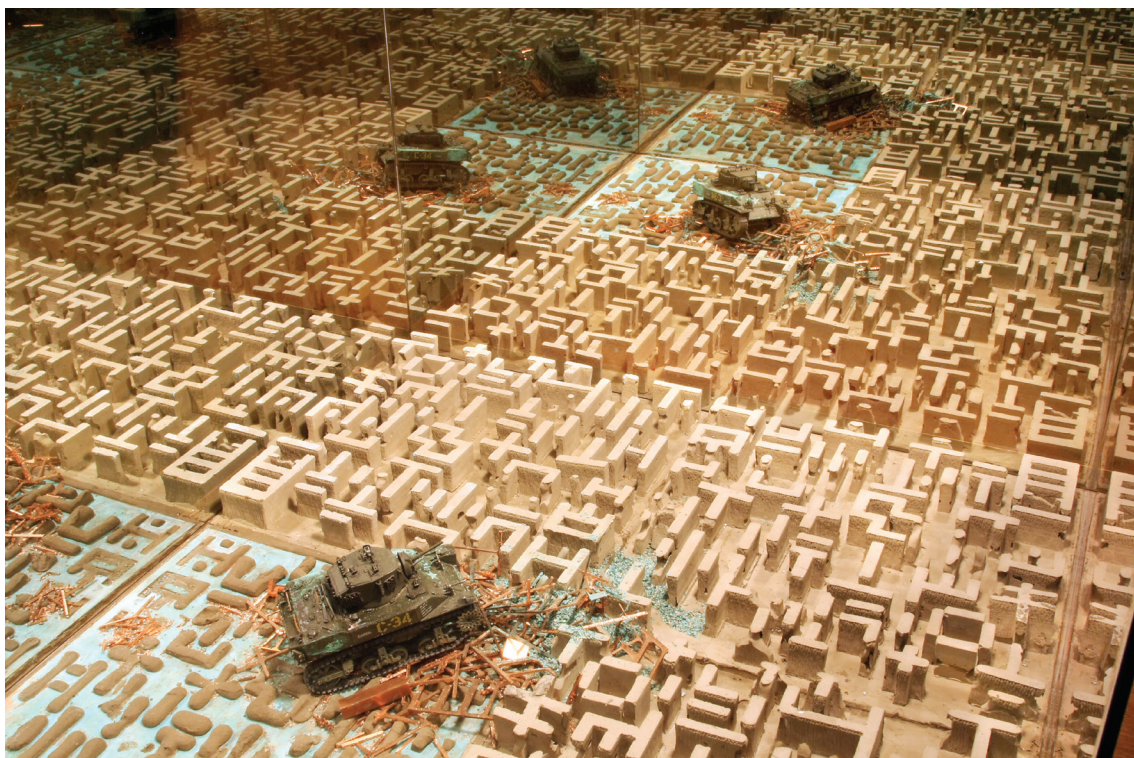
“CELLS - Choirokitia “ 2009 / 444x222x12 cm. / cement, minerals / Patrimonial collection UNESCO Paris - Photo: Ch. Panayides

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the thought. This kind of work finds its achievement in the installations he created for the Biennale of Venice in 1990 (Aperto) and in 1997. The video incorporated into the spheres made of metal or of cement, transform the materiality of the sculpture that becomes a hybrid form which, oscillating between matter and non-matter. His works make forms and temporalities echo among themselves in his quest for balance while tending to reconcile contraries. He also toys with the difference produced among various materials, as in: the cement cubes and the waves of the sea or waves of fire, the cone of cement in the earth,

which emits luminous signals. As a creator, Theodoulos tests the efficiency of his hybrid blends. His entire work can be viewed as under the sign of transformation, as the passage of one state to another, as the result of magical power that charges the chosen material with a poetical aura. Yiannis Toumazis used the term of alchemy to speak of the work made on the archetypal raw materials (fire, air, earth) and their association to more contemporary ways pertaining to mental activities, which mediate in the process of transformation of matter<sup>(1)</sup>.

This alchemy also interferes in speech,



Solo exhibition Musée du Louvre Paris 2008-9 “CELLS II - Engomi” Photo: Ch. Panayides



in language. The appearance of Cypriote proto-syllabic scripture signs, inscribed on a terra cotta small plate in Engomi, on his earlier works, rendered by luminous signs, and made by the use of cathod screens, progressively takes the shape of “a free electronic analysis”, to be transformed yet into a picture. Naturally, Theodoulos makes no use of a strictly scientific method but rather uses an empirical and intuitive approach. The picture obtained gets amazingly closer to the structural rhythm of the creation of the ancient city, as it can be observed on an aerial photograph of Engomi. Ten thousand years after Khirokitia, the cell

becomes, once more, the basic module in the creation but it exists as well, as an electronic field, which, in turn, translates visible reality by means of a simple code. The metamorphosis of the cellular unit moving from the structure of the inscribed alphabet to the urban topography and electronic language, come to form “temporality strata” which the artist uses freely in his works “Cells I” and “Cells II”. Transforming / transcribing this electronic language – picture of the contemporary world – testifies to his will: having ancient heritage, remote in time, made into terms and vocabulary of our time and attempts to find the sim-



Solo exhibition Musée du Louvre Paris 2008-9 “CELLS I - Chirokitia” (cellules I) détail, cement vidéo minerals, Photo: Ch. Panayides



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ilarities or rather to seek the link which ties the past to the present.

The archaeological sites - of cellular structure of Khirokitia, of the Neolithic period, with its circular plan to the site of Engomi, of the late Chalcolithic period, of orthogonal plan - seem to fascinate him as they answer, by their organization, to the archetypal forms he has developed in works such as “Cells”. The extremely reduced means by which he renders everything serving an infinite number of possibilities is indeed the core of the matter in Theodoulos’ creative activity where he uses minimal forms in his sculptures associated with natural materials, such as : earth, ochre, iron or copper oxides which he always finds near a copper mine where he spent his childhood. This copper mine in activity since the Antiquity marked him significantly. Such an image obviously was not that much indifferent to the artist

who, still unaware, experimented what is known now as land art, of a colossal and natural earthwork. To his eyes, this was not really art but had to do with new artistic fields, which he experimented later on. When asked: what his relation to land art is –as one may see in it a certain similarity with land art works like in Michel Heizer in his “Double Negative” of which he speaks with respect and appreciation– to add immediately though that what counted for him was the traces of his own life experience of the landscape left upon his unconscious. He adds that he believes there is a clear and major difference between the information one receives and the experience directly felt in life.

When he heard of land art, as an artist, he was confronted with his own intuitions, which this art enabled him to verify, but his very own route lay elsewhere as he does not share the same problematic and experiments land art artists have. He then talks about the enormous hole in the earth, the copper mine with its depth, its color continuously changing and its inscription in the landscape, “his land art”, as he likes putting it, which follows him as a strong image in all his work. He evokes the marvel but also the fear facing this natural sight, the feeling of time awareness and the way it is printed in this sculptural land-



“Système Global” 1996 video inst. Photo: Ch. Panayides

scape. This is how Theodoulos gains concrete experience of time continuity from a specific place. He stood facing this copper mine, standing in front of something which oscillated, to and fro between what was natural and what was artificial, between landscape and human interference. This explains the big size of his works, works dug into the earth, all work effected on the volume in negative, in void. With Cupola-matrix made in Nicosia in 1983 (fig. 1), he plunges back to “the maternal cavity of the earth”. Efi Strouza the commissioner of this project, which she has support-

ed with eagerness, stresses the “natural” and “structural” character of these works in direct relation to the earth and the mine in Mitsero. “The walls of this cavity are erected according to the traditional structure of the dwelling made of stones, but at a certain point of the wall the structure reacts and gives way to the inscription of some organic element like a human figure emerging from the Earth breaking its stone structure and spreading itself on the ground”(2). The inversed cone in the earth made in Delphi in 1992, is also part of his works directly linked to the strong experience



“Système Global” 1996 video installation, Venice Biennale 1997 / NIMAC 1996, Photo by Ch. Panayides



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yielded from this site. The source of his work the void, volume in negative, is this place and it provides him with the materials he has always used: earth, stones, iron and copper oxide...

Environment, which is the mark of the place printed on the unconscious, according to Theodoulos, affects our way of thinking and this emerges spontaneously during creation. “Landscape, unconsciously, evokes a rhythm in us”, says the artist. Cupola and spheres evoke this undulating rhythm, no doubt, of the land-

scape which stretched under his eyes and which he recorded, having to reproduce it later impulsively. Theodoulos is obviously very sensitive to real space, which he sees as metaphor of our own inner landscapes, but he is also very concerned about space in which his works are set. He does not consider space as an empty frame but sees it as a dynamic element interacting with the work in order to create environment. Theodoulos behaves with space and with elements as a commander of shapes; always adopting an “architectural behavior”, organizing space and shapes, toying with the site he sets forward.

The use of steady and non-temporal shapes, melt into cement, along with organic materials, stones, minerals and earth, presented in several piles, totally fleeing away from form, might give us the impression of an archaeological excavation in process and might lead us to ponder on the topic of ruins... Philippe Dagen, in his brief report he made, of an exhibition very important to the artist, an exhibition organised by Alain Mousseign in Toulouse(3), rightfully, spoke of “Greek contemporary ruins”. There is indeed such a dimension to be found in the artist’s work. It is about rewinding time, not with the nostalgic intention to live it again as a past and bygone ideal, but with the ambition of “re-inventing” and re-linking it to the

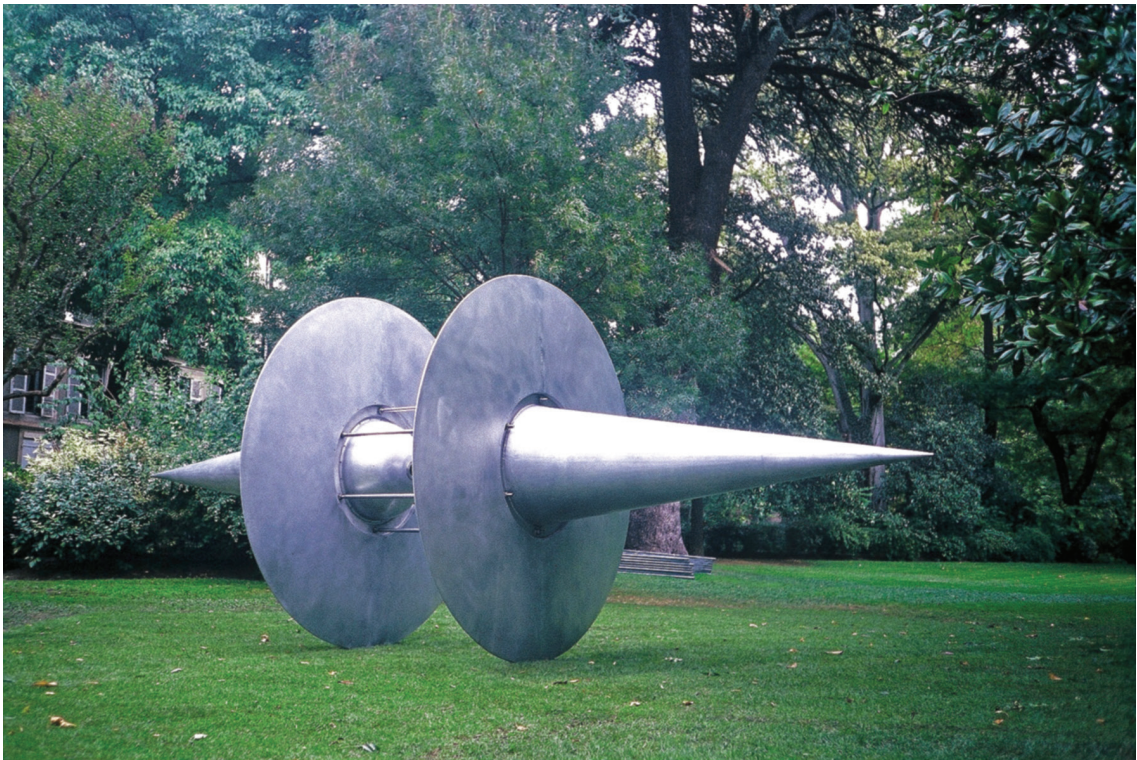


“Between Earth and Sky” 2010  
Larnaca International Airport Sculpture (h 16.65 cm / metal)

present, revealing thus the perennial form in shapes through time and space. Theodoulos goes well beyond the formal resemblance as his dialogue with the past is engaged at a higher level.

His works created for the Louvre evoke this dialogue in a compact way and it is also recalled in the very adaptation of the project to the specific space of the museum and more particularly to the hall where the works are exhibited. The artist, taking into account the reality of the given space and the archaeological objects exhibited, goes as far as to include the existing showcases display-

ing antiques in his own works. These are made of a pedestal, a surface of cement made of various forms, as well as a cube of transparent mirror. The latter, might give the impression of being used as a showcase, but it is only a “shell”, or sheath that is part of the work itself. The pure geometric form of transparent mirror has the capacity of multiplying the image from the inside to the infinite. This spatial infinite is not without functioning as temporal infinite, which would go far back in time to rally the time of the antiques with which Theodoulos seems to have started a dialogue. He made a dream he had for a very long time come



Parc Royal, Toulouse (metal sculpture) 2001



true: it was to help rallying two temporalities, one as remote as Antiquity and the other, today our present time, in the same unifying place.

Multiplying the image to the infinite is already experimented by the artist in one of his significant works, *A Roof for Homo sapiens*: an enormous transparent cube and inside a “floor” made of minerals on which flares a projected video image in movement – the one of a naked swimmer, “his poet”, as he calls him, who is revolving around himself. Space is locked yet, multiplied to the infinite. The image in movement brings life to this otherwise inanimate space which combines once more the perfect archetypal shape, say the shape of the cube and the shapeless space it is enclosed by. Here, one might reflect on some words his professor, in the *Ecole des Beaux-Arts*, said about him more than twenty-five years ago: “He thinks like an architect and feels like a poet”. His work, under the appearance of pure minimalism, might keep a secret content. The architectural dimension, the almost monumental dimension of this cube is not without concealing the poetic fragility of the swimmer confined in its interior. It is free movement indeed yet also confinement, it is purity of the line yet disorder on the ground. Is it not a metaphor of this non-defined magma that each of us carries within the heart of hearts? In

this sense, Theodoulos’s cube, despite of the minimalist feature of its shape, will never qualify as a minimal work, just like Tony Smith’s *Die*, for instance. Whereas the shape carried in minimalism is cool, in Theodoulos’ work, it is always clad in a more spiritual dimension, this psychological content Minimalists endeavored to remove from their works. Unfortunately, the Cells of the Museum of the Louvre are deprived of image in movement, the immaterial projections, companions to almost all his works from *Autophoto-Etrophoto* up to *Système Global* and *Système Urbain*. Theodoulos compensates this constraint, linked to the specific space of his installation, and he creates, through the multiplication of the image, the movement which conscience sets in motion... These works betray the “architectural behavior” Theodoulos maintains with things and places. His simplified architectural structures have the sober and denuded character these ancient cities like Khirokitia and Engomi display. In this experimental work Theodoulos tries to link the past to the present in a vivid manner; attempting to relate the trace or the print of the human thought in relation to everyday life.

- 1) Yiannis Toumazis, exhibition catalogue, Theodoulos, The Nicosia Municipal Arts Centre, 1996.
- 2) Efi Strouza, «Introduction au parcours de Théodoulos», exhibition catalogue, Théodoulos

Grégoriou, *Système Global*, 26 June – 13 September 1992, Midi-Pyrénées Centre of Contemporary Art, p. 55.

3) Philippe Dagen, «L'Été festival Labège Ruines grecques modernes Béton, terre et téléviseurs: étrange alchimie Gregoriou Théodoulos à Labège-Innopole», in the newspaper *Le Monde*, 28 July 1992.

\*Text of the catalog by Dr. Androula Michael  
Art Historian, University of Picardie Jules Verne  
(Co-Curator of Theodoulos exhibition in Louvre Museum – Paris,  
December 2008- September 2009)



“Autophota-Heterophota” 1992 CRAC Midi - Pyrénées, Toulouse (cement, 2 TV monitors, inox, color)