



Manuel Saiz
A Colossal Blog

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I have never managed to love the Coliseum – nor to hate it as I perhaps should. It is the first monument I ever remember recognizing when I first went to Rome, on a bus from the airport. Of course, the thing looks much better from the outside. And I always thought it was best when truly in the middle of a fume-infested traffic island. The more the Roman authorities try to clear bits of traffic away, the more of a dinosaur it becomes.

I like it when aggressively and squalidly urban; not when it is a bit of Roman “heritage”. And I like it when I don’t have to think about entering it. Because inside it is a true disappointment. That’s partly because there is not much left to see. It would have been great when it was covered with flowers and rare plants – a wild botanical garden. But the bare, reconstructed bones of Mussolini’s building don’t do much for me. And I can’t stand the parties of school children of every nationality you meet inside, each group being told exactly the same thing. “What did the Romans do here?” “They had people fight to the death for their own pleasure.” “Would we do that now?” “No Miss”.

Europe’s school children are, in other words, bound together by the self-serving self-satisfaction that we are better than those old Romans were. If only that were so simply true.

Now I think of the Coliseum and death in a different way. My collaboration with Keith Hopkins in writing our book was nastily post mortem. I had commissioned a book on the monument from Keith – interrupted by his cancer. On his death-bed in the hospice we agreed that I would take his notes and finish it. In his last days, he struggled to remember what he wanted to say, and I struggled to pretend to write it down. Death to death.

Now I try to have a Coliseum-free visit when I go to Rome. Like Manuel in a way.

Rome without the Colosseum?

A project by Manuel Saiz Carla Subrizi

A monument tells us about the history of an age. Characters, styles and ideas which are widely accepted and recognised as unique to that age come together and take shape in a building or in a sculpture. In time, this will establish its specific place in the make-up of the city. In the centre of a square (or in any case in a strategic position for the city's architecture), the monument stands out and captures the attention of many generations. In time, the monument will remain unaffected while the city changes, evolves, constructs and deconstructs its own schemes in response to new social, economic and cultural factors. In this way, when we approach the monument, we think that we are seeing the manifestation of a history that we have left far behind, something that does not have too many consequences for the present day.

We accept for example that the Colosseum tells us many things about the history of Rome: about Rome between 72 and 80 AD, about the Empire, two emperors (Vespasian and Titus), about the architectural styles of a Rome that was already very strong and which had taken many things from local cultures, but also from the characters, styles and ideas of faraway cultures. So this ancient monument becomes in time the cultural witness to a historical period, a testament to the transformations of Roman art and architecture. It becomes an icon. The monument (in this case, the Colosseum) is embedded in a precisely defined historical framework; in time its architectural form will

be read and understood as a consequence of past styles and as a sign of Roman culture in the 1st century AD; through an analysis of every single detail, from the order of the columns to the types of arches used in the structure, to its elliptical shape, the Colosseum will seem to be understandable through a series of pieces of information and specific artistic and architectural characteristics.

Each guide that talks about its history will try to explain its importance in relation to the imposing nature of the architecture and history produced during that century of the Roman empire. In this way the monument takes with itself into the future its own history and the history of its age.

However, we shouldn't believe that the only things we can learn about a monument are held within the history of its style and architectural language. We need to change our focus from the form to the context, from the object to the concept that engendered it, from the observation of it to the culture which underlies it, and understand how each element or aspect of a visual history is also the history of communications strategies which are related to factors of economic, political and power. In this way the monument crystallises meanings, symbolisms and ideologies in time. Its presence is far from inoffensive and neutral. On the contrary, it interacts with the different realities which it encounters in time. It becomes a message. What kind of message in particular? In the case of the Colosseum, a message

to do with political power, domination (for example that of the Empire over the peoples and cultures that it had conquered), persecution and extermination strategies (the arena in which spectacular fights were held between gladiators and between wild animals), the structures of power and strength layered and cemented within its physical structure.

Here, the ideology of Imperial Rome invented and enacted one of its most effective representations; in an enormous building, placed in a strategic location, near the markets and the most dynamic areas of city life. It is precisely this image of power and strength that is consolidated with time. While the real history (that of the 1st Century) shrinks away and becomes insignificant, the history of the image and of the efficiency of its message are reinforced. So the idea of a monument is not only in what we see. History of art has often stopped to read the forms that seem timeless, forgetting that each form is a cultural representation of a particular social, political and ideological context.

The twentieth century was not in fact an age (as often suggested) of innovation taken to the extreme of transgression and provocation. It was a transitional age between the last consequences of modernity and the beginning of a new phase which has in fact analysed and rethought the premises and the consequences of modernity. In the twentieth century there is a rethinking of the cultural premises that for centuries have

reiterated the entirely Western concept of a linear history of progress and centrality, ignoring any form of marginality.

This rethinking begins by breaking up language and traditional reference points, throwing the idea of reality onto disorder, by making differences interact and bringing together the marginal and banal aspects of everyday life.

Objects are deconstructed, ideas are dismantled, not in a mere spirit of innovation which is an end in itself. The destruction of a monument is not only an artistic gesture, but a singularly revolutionary one. Let's consider the statue of the last Russian Tsar, torn down during the October Revolution: it was a very effective sign of the end of an age, of the end of a certain power and ideology. Until then, what had that statue represented? The tearing down of a statue, a monument, symbolically removed the past from the consciences of the people, marking a point of rupture and no return. More recently, Sybille Bergemann, halfway through the Eighties, through a photo-montage, this time artistic, shows the statue of Engels (part of the monument of Marx and Engels in Berlin, made after the Second World War), hanging in the air in a horizontal position, while in another work, she symbolically cuts off half of the bodies of the two characters, depriving the two figures of their identities. It is not an attack on Marx and Engels but a work (made only a few years before the fall of the Berlin wall) about the loss of political identity, expressed using a shift in position and a clear cut in half.

So a decision such as that adopted by Manuel Saiz – that of staying in Rome for eight months without once seeing the Colosseum – is full of meaning. Let's try to analyse it. If the monument has been the focus of a long artistic history as well a architectural one (a symbolically central position in the cityscape, impressive height and size, an imposing structure), then recent art has put that central position into question. An important building is always born in the centre of a city, never on the outskirts. However, during the twentieth century, the concept of centrality has been challenged in all its manifestations: geographical, political, cultural. The anti-monument was a concept rather than a different type of monument: the artists involved in the movement demolished buildings, left city centres to live and work on their fringes, and constructed ephemeral environments destined to disappear.

Saiz decides to work on something which has disappeared, so with his project, turns centuries of history (and reinforcement of a message) upside down. He tries to remove a monument such as the Colosseum from his own stay in Rome and in doing so, contemplates a Rome not simply without the Colosseum but without the message that it has conveyed for millennia. His Rome lacks not only this building, but its history, the tourists it attracts, the crowds that fill it, because it is now taken for granted that a visit to Rome is incomplete without seeing the Colosseum. Saiz takes a stab at the ancient, the past, the history of art and of architecture. By refusing to see the Colosseum, he metaphorically challenges the cultural canon which this

building represents, the cultural stereotypes rooted within it and which it continues to diffuse.

His work does not constitute an anti-monument, but conceptually, it totally cancels out the presence of a monument. In reality he does not have to demolish anything physically concrete: the Colosseum is where it has always been and will be for a long time to come. The thing which disappears or is put into question is the image or the icon, its true meaning, i.e. the immaterial but very effective presence of this old monument. What is Rome without the Colosseum? Can Rome really exist without this monument, which has become the main icon of the city, as all the tourist maps show?

With this project, Saiz uses art as an exercise in vision: so that we can decide to see or not to see, to concentrate on something beyond the purely visual and reach those things which mere appearances stop us from really seeing. This project was not a game, but a piece of work about history and the history of art, about cultural representations and the history of the image, factors which are always reflected (more or less explicitly) in anything that we observe.

Colossal Blog

Harry Eyres

Deciding to spend eight months in Rome without seeing the Coliseum is rather like deciding to spend eight months in the USA without eating a hamburger or eight months in Brazil without watching a football match, or eight months in Norway without visiting a fjord (the list could go on).

You could say Manuel Saiz was being perverse, or at least the opposite of a model tourist. Model tourists visit all tourist destinations in the same cheerful but somewhat bland spirit, which means that all tourist destinations become more or less the same.

The moment Saiz decides he must not set eyes on the Coliseum, it becomes a threat, a danger, a source of constant tension, as well as humour and horror. Deciding not to see it is not the same as deciding not to think about it – quite the reverse. He has hit on the only way of giving back to this tamed old heap of stone or eviscerated circus lion its original living, steaming, bloodshot entrails.

As an artist – a performance artist, a blogger, a photographer - Saiz has come up with an immensely fertile strategy. Everything can hang on the original apparently arbitrary decision. Instead of wandering round Rome in the time-honoured desultory way, admiring the sights, he has become an anti-tourist, a sight-avoider: he must plot every journey with the greatest attention to detail; just an inadvertent glimpse, a careless taxi ride, lingering too long at a dinner party spells

death (to the project if not to him). On the other hand he can approach the Coliseum blindfolded, touch it, even taste it; he can visit alternative Coliseums (the arena in Verona) or inverted ones (the Circus in Bath). He can think about the way representations which were at the same time real (involved real deaths) relate to other events such as our contemporary wars masquerading as media events (or vice versa).

Death looms large in these pages. Hardly a surprise: the Coliseum, like any Spanish or Mexican bullring, is a place with death at its heart. Deciding not to see the bloody arena (a decision not open to those, the *morituri*, who perished there) is a way of postponing death, but also a way of making death haunt every moment. And the Coliseum is a bit like death in the sense that you cannot really get away from it; among other things, Saiz's Colossal blog charts and analyses the way the Coliseum has invaded our collective visual imagination and especially the worlds of film and advertising. What other building has obsessed Seneca (who liked to avoid it) and Hitler, Goethe and S. Shankar, maker of the Bollywood film *Jeans* (1998)?

Saiz's Colossal Blog culminates in the ceremonial sighting which puts an end to his project. Friends gather to celebrate a dawn breakfast in which, like an Oedipus in reverse, he is given back his eyes. It is touching and funny and thought-provoking, a fitting conclusion to an eight-month psycho-Odyssey which has succeeded in making the familiar most strange.

I am not going to
see the Coliseum
in the 8 months
of my stay.

1 - Coliseum

05 November 2008, 19:08:18

I was preparing my residency in the Real Academia de España en Roma.

I was planning to do a number of art projects there which would keep me pretty busy in the studio.

Then I had this idea of interacting differently with the city and the people around:



First I checked if the Coliseum was near the station Roma Termini where I was arriving.

Then I wrote to the Academy to see if it was visible from the studio (it is not), as this would have been so distracting that I do not know if I would have been able to carry on.

As it seemed possible I was very excited about it during the first days.

2 - Starting Whys

05 November 2008, 20:36:27

As always with ideas I feel the excitement just because I think it is a **brilliant idea**. Many times it turns not to be brilliant at all a few minutes later. But never know at first why I feel that the idea is interesting. It needs some time to get “reinforced”.

I guess that I just thought it was good because it will make me different and will pervert all my relationships with the people and the city. Very “arty”, isn't it? Artists are extravagant, I heard.

Who has been in Rome for few months, even for a week, and has not seen the Coliseum? I came up with these people:

- Blind people
- Convicts in transfer from one prison to another
- Sick people coming to the hospital
- Nero. I mean, everybody between the foundation of Rome and the construction of the building.

(Now this question comes to my mind: “Who has been in New York and has not seen the Twin Towers?” Must have been triggered by the image of a future destruction of the Coliseum and the inspiration from Nero).

I know there are more reasons for me to do the project and I am keeping this blog to write about all the annoying nuances and implications of carrying on with this task.

3 - While travelling further reasons

06 November 2008, 09:46:30

I came to Rome by train yesterday.

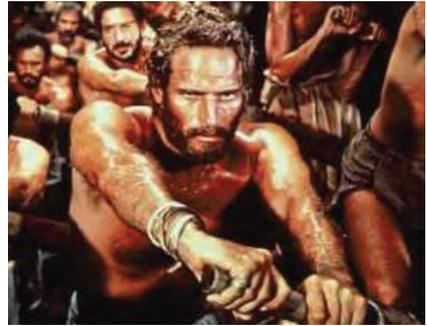
I got the Eurostar from London to Paris, I slept one night in Paris and next morning I got a train to Rome with a change in Milan. I wanted to feel the space in between, see the landscape and people

changing progressively. In these times of Ryanair I do not want to get there so quickly that the minimum inconvenience flies me back to London.

“I leave the 21st century with no regrets. But one more thing - if anybody’s listening, that is. Nothing scientific. It’s purely personal. But seen from out here everything seems different. Time bends. Space is boundless. It squashes a man’s ego. I feel... lonely.”



to



In the train I was able to think a little further about my reasons for this project:

- It will help me to think about Rome. As for example in relation to the tourists
- It will help me to think about my work, in terms of discipline and control

4 - The Arrival

06 November 2008, 15:03:10

I took a cab at the station. There was a football match and the traffic was quite bad. I asked the taxi driver not to pass near the Coliseum. He said that it was in a different part of the city. I was afraid that the traffic might make him take a different route.

But as the taxi was getting closer to the hill on which the Academy is located, I started seeing the roofs of the buildings and the myriad illuminated monuments spread in the landscape. I was terrified. Not so much

of seeing it accidentally, but more of not being able to turn my gaze elsewhere. It was a moment of tension. I do not know if you can see it from the side of the hill, but until I know it is a safe area I cannot look down on the city.

I am going to take a picture of the panorama without looking through the viewfinder, and I will post it later.

A few hours later:



outbound picture



return picture

It has been confirmed: the view descending from the Academy to the Trastevere is safe.

5 - In the morning

07 November 2008, 10:39:28

At breakfast with my colleagues I received all sorts of opinions. For some it is almost impossible not to see it. For others it is very simple. Some have to pass through it every day.

Some questions arose: Can I see it in pictures? What happens if I see it accidentally? etc.

If I see it accidentally everything will be over and my life will have no purpose anymore. I might leave the Academy and retire from the world to Amsterdam.

I can see it in pictures. This is the map in the welcome pack I got at the Academy.



6 - Architecture of mass murder

07 November 2008, 11:23:00

When I talked about this project at my gallery, Clara told me about her cousin and aunt. They were visiting Rome for a few days and the aunt, an elderly and religious person, did not want to pass near the Coliseum. She cannot understand how people want to visit a place where so many Christians were tortured and murdered.

I got a similar impression when I visited the concentration camp Sachsenhausen near Berlin a couple of months ago.

I felt awkward seeing visitors adopting the same attitude you can see in the Grand Canyon or (let's say) Eurodisney. In the tourism phenomenon everything gets crushed into a compact form.

Curiously enough most of the visitors the day I went were German, Spanish, Italian and Japanese, the evil axis nations in the 40s. I did not see English or American people. I did not recognise Slavic faces.

Maybe to be interested in visiting the Coliseum you must have a lot of Roman blood in your veins, and I might not have it.

From Wikipedia: "The Colosseum today is now a major tourist attraction in Rome with thousands of tourists each year paying to view the interior arena, though entrance for EU citizens is partially subsidised, and under-18 and over-65 EU citizens' entrances are free."

Sachsenhausen is a panopticum and a very efficient structure for the purpose for which it was created. The main door is also a watch tower from which all the corridors and barracks can be seen.



Sachsenhausen 5/22/45



Also the Coliseum was an efficient device. A sophisticated structure managed the flow of the many elements that joined in the arena: gladiators, animals, V.I.Ps, general public, cleaning services, props... Apparently there were re-enactments of naval battles, with floodable areas where models of the ships could float.

In this shape you can say that the gladiators and the doomed enjoyed a perfect panopticum too, able to watch from one point (the arena) all the 80,000 spectators.

All this interest in architecture and death (architecture and coercion) comes from a project I did recently Buffer in Matadero Madrid, which was the slaughterhouse of Madrid for many years and is now a cultural institution.



Another day I will deviate towards hospitals; architecturally, technically and conceptually they share a lot of characteristics with the previous examples.

7 - Safe and exclusion zones

08 November 2008, 15:25:15

The day before yesterday I went to visit 1:1 projects and had to take a long walk circumnavigating anything that could be a bit dangerous coliseumwise.

A map showing the safe zones that I have already explored could be useful to enable me to move more freely.

I will update the map with the areas that I have visited. At certain moments I might have a “blind person’s guide” (lazarillo) who can help me to tour around the streets near the Coliseum and draw a precise map of the “Exclusion Zone”.

*View “Exclusion Zone”
map on folding cover*

8 - Vietato

08 November 2008, 16:41:27

I've had good comments from people I've told about this project. It is kind of inspiring and provoking for me and for the ones who hear about it.

Especially my comrades at the Academy, who seem to be interested in the development. As many of them are discovering the city like me, this absurd restriction creates a certain kind of attraction. Some told me that they thought about me when they passed nearby on public transport.

Different levels of access to things create tension. I am thinking about the right to cross borders depending on passports, for example. This tension was well portrayed by Santiago Sierra in "his" pavilion at the Venice Biennale.

Like Sierra's, the fact that it is just an almost random decision (not so random in the end) makes it more appealing.

Prohibition enhances desire. The key word for this project is "perversion", a kind of fetishism that looks for "everything around the thing but the thing itself". The restriction makes me desire to see the Coliseum more than I ever expected I was going to.

9 - Some tourists

09 November 2008, 20:33:43

My friend Jonathan sent me this nice picture from his documentary about the history of marble.



He came for a visit in May 1938 with Mussolini.

Meng long guo jiang



He came for a visit in 1972 with Chuck Norris.

Roman Holiday



He came for a visit in 1953 with Audrey Hepburn.

10- The Deadline

09 November 2008, 21:08:13

I have been in Rome a few days and I have been through a lot of the Coliseumism already. I hope to take it easier soon, because at the moment I spend almost the whole day thinking about it. 8 months is a lot of time.

I am thinking what will happen once the term of the residency is finished. Will it make any sense to go and visit it? Should I continue my project forever...

FOREVER!

No. It is better to see it right at the end of the residency. I do not want the Coliseum to be the centre of my world once I leave Rome. I do not want to have this black hole, this blind spot in my back, to which every place I arrive in the future can be related. I need to cancel it. The Coliseum is a place of power over me just because I decide so and I will decide the end of it as well.

I will take a look at it on the 30th of July.

I have this project, "If Alive", that consists in preparing my 65th birthday party. The day of the party I will have spent 24 years preparing the party. I can imagine the feeling the day after as of "emptiness". The visit to the Coliseum could be an experiment to foresee how I will feel on the 11th of January 2026.

11- Social Interaction

10 November 2008, 10:55:19

I ordered 300 of these from a factory in Torino to be distributed through the city. It will help me and German tourists to walk cheerfully in many city spots.



DIN 1451 Engschrift™ Package Font (Deutsches Institut für Normung)

12 - Networks management

11 November 2008, 16:07:25

Although subjective, the main similarity by far between the Coliseum and contemporary hospitals for me is that I do not want see any of them in the next 8 months.

However there are other (minor) resemblances about which I am going to speculate in the table below.

The Coliseum and the hospital are devices that allow controlled interactions on all these elements in a complex structure.

Directive class	
Director, specialist surgeons, visiting doctors	Emperor, nobility and guests
Operating staff and specialized workers	
Doctors	Gladiators
Compulsory users	
Patients	Christians, doomed and general victims
Voluntary users	
Visitors, and relatives of the patients	Public, plebeian
Other staff	
Secretaries, assistants...	Servants of the nobles
Nurses,	Couches of the gladiators, sparrings
Nurse assistants	The servants of victims (to feed and beat them up)
Porters	Handlers of animals and slaves
Security guards	Soldiers and praetorians guards
Cafeteria personnel, newspaper shop clerk	Bread and other emperor's gratuities distributors
School of nursery personnel	School of gladiators personnel
Cleaning services for all	Cleaning services for all
Body parts disposal personnel	Body parts disposal personnel
Salesmen of medical material	Salesmen for animals and slaves
Pharmacist, medical equipment maintenance unit	Props and theatrical machinery technicians
Chaplain	Augurs
Administration	Administration
Services	
Lighting (electricity)	Lighting (torches)
Water	Water
Medical supplies	Weapons
General waste disposal	General waste disposal
Medical waste disposal	Body parts disposal
Crematorium	Crematorium
Radioactive material disposal	?

- Both have a dedicated building that has to be designed specifically for the function
- All the people involved can be at one point eventually patients/victims
- It is a big economic effort for the regional administration
- It shows the wealth of the state and its people
- Users get angry when quality of the service drops
- All participants are going to die (some with no time to salute)

(end of metaphoric delirium)

The main objective similarity is that both combine in the same place cutting edge technology and a sophisticated management of people and supplies with the most extreme and primitive emotions.



San Pietro Rioja Salud amphitheatre, La Rioja (Spain).

13- The first expedition

12 November 2008, 22:14:02

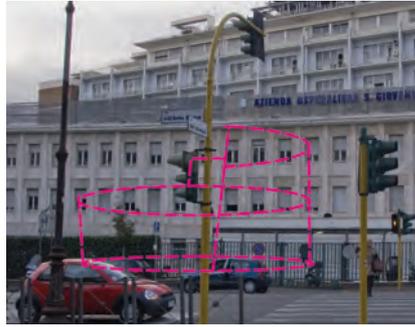
Today I have been closer to the Coliseum than ever in my life, which is 582.57 metres away.

Ana, one of my fellow “inmates”, was kind enough to walk with me around the area. We were trying reach a theatre in the via Capo d’Africa, where in few days

there is a show I would like to attend. It is very close to the Coliseum, and the task seemed not to be very easy.

We planned the expedition carefully, like a military operation. Map, satellite printouts, GPS...

From Metro San Giovanni we went west to avoid the streets that point directly to "It" like Via Labicana. We tried to get to the north from the side. The area is quite enclosed, with a big hospital, military facilities, private colleges and villas. The blocks are very wide, so it is not easy to find shortcuts. Everything pushes you to the main streets that give a direct view of it.



It is behind this hospital but both side streets run straight into it

This is the closest we got. From where my guide is, she can see the building around the corner on the right. If I walked on a few metres and entered the church in front, perhaps it could be possible to get to the gardens behind and then to the group of blocks we were aiming for. But at that moment I thought it was not fair just to close my eyes without thinking for a while about other possibilities. Perhaps on a future visit.

I dreamt of being like Edmund Hillary and Tenzing, but we could not reach the objective.

*Latest news:
The other artists of the Academy were, at the same time, visiting the Coliseum. Fernando, the photography fellowship holder, took a picture of them inspired by those of this blog*



14 - Dinner parties are risky

15 November 2008, 11:51:17

I see my time in Rome is going to be very productive. Parallel to this project of not visiting the Coliseum I am doing another one of not visiting the Taj Mahal during these 8 months.

I haven't been in India. I am not in India. It is very unlikely I will be in India in the next 8 months.

It would be very easy and futile for the Coliseum thing to stay the whole day working at the studio, never going out visiting people or places, not taking public transport at all... It would have been a very efficient way to carry out this project to stay in London the whole duration of the residency. One of the principles of art projects is that all the rules are operative, that there is nothing to hold on to, everything is capricious. The excitement is to place limits and then test them. As in one of Blake's programmatic Proverbs of Hell, *you never know what is enough unless you know what is more than enough.*

So yesterday I went to a dinner party a friend was organizing in the south east of the city. A careless route from the Academy to there would probably pass directly by the Coliseum. Therefore I operated the usual 2-rides-squared-route diversion tactics. After a nice dinner, good food and conversation, and warm encounters with old friends and promising new ones, I started feeling the Londoner's last train syndrome. I discovered that this urgency I was experiencing is as alien to Rome as the Stendhal syndrome would be to Birmingham.

To walk a couple of hours in the night, with some glasses of wine in my body, in a city I do not know, with the "restrictions" I have (that make taxis and night buses complicated) was not very appealing so, regardless the animation of the conversation, I started making moves to leave. As everyone knows in Italy it takes a very long to say goodbye and the conversation must continue standing, with the door of the flat open for at least 15 more minutes.



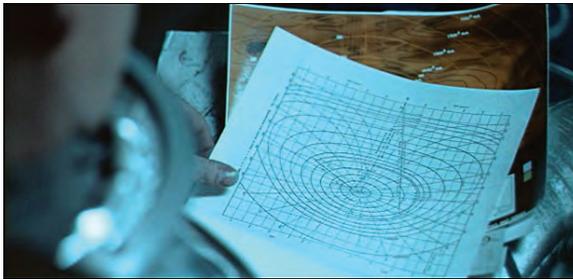
I benefited from the charm of Italian night life because I did not need to take public transport nor to walk because my friend Anna was kind enough to give me a ride in her Fiat 500.

Sarra, an American filmmaker who knows the city well, came with us and took on the leadership role. She was aware of my “condition” and planned the trip to avoid the monument. But as I recognized the San Giovanni district, I started to feel a bit anxious. This is the area I explored a few days ago. Approaching a corner I knew as dangerous, before we got the diversion turn that threw us back into hyperspace, I felt like jumping out of the window (if only that had been allowed for back seat passengers by the design of the car). It was only few moments of stress and then the danger passed.

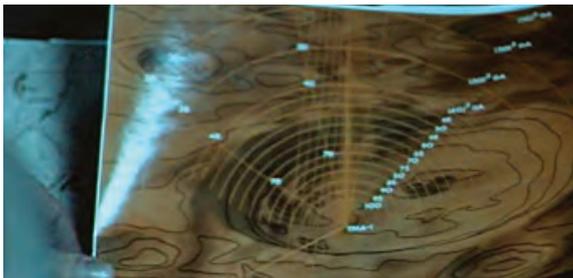


This feels like a very Roman experience.

Once you go to a party, have drinks, sit in a car you are not driving, in a city that it is not yours, you are in danger. **Once you start on this downward trip you never know where you'll land. There is many a man who can date his ruin from some dinner party that he thought little of at the time.**



2001: A Space Odyssey (1968)



Magnetic power lines around Clavius Coliseum

15- Roman Blinds

19 November 2008, 14:21:34



Yesterday I got a new studio in the Academy, which is much nicer, bigger and high up. It has two huge beautiful windows.

One looks north, and you can see San Pietro's dome among many other things.

The other looks east: those who can would be able to see the Coliseum from here.

Marco wrote from London with a quote by Roland Barthes on *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies*: "Maupassant was but one of a fair number of 19th-century Parisians

who did not care for the Eiffel tower; indeed, he often ate lunch in the restaurant at its base, not out of any preference for the food, but because it was only there that he could avoid seeing its otherwise unavoidable profile".

The connection is the ability of both buildings to organise the city in your mind around them. Like the contextual menu in Google maps it says: "center the map here". In few days I am going to Paris and I will try to eat lunch at the Eiffel tower to feel companionship.

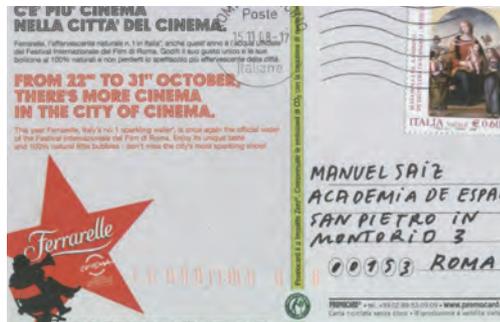
16- Postcard

19 November 2008, 14:32:08

Yesterday also, I received a post card in the mail.



It is a normal picture of the Coliseum from a point of view in which it looks like a default backdrop monument.



It has arrived from an unknown sender.

At first I thought it was a very nice thought of somebody's, but during the day I started to wonder if I should call the Forensic Police. Like in Robert Altman's *The Player* it is becoming kind of threatening. If an anonymously delivered dead fish for the Italian mafia means "you are going to sleep with the fishes" this postcard could be telling me: one day you will bump into it unwillingly.

Senders please identify.



The Player
(1992)

17- Spread

25 November 2008, 20:07:10

It might well be that I have seen the Coliseum already many times. Perhaps I see it every morning when I wake up and look out of the permitted window.

My marble expert friend also sends me this quote:

"The Colosseum was leased as a quarry by the Popes: picking up one receipt in the Vatican archive we see a payment of 205 ducats for the removal of 2,522 tons of stone between September 1451 and May 1452.....The lime-burning which Pius II and Raphael decried was the most banal, yet most destructive, aspect of the recycling. In mixing mortar the best aggregate is powdered lime, and the easiest way to obtain powdered lime is to burn marble." Woodward, C. In Ruins, Chatto and Windus. 2001.

As the actual basilica of San Pietro started to be built in 1506, it is not unlikely that some of those very stones are from the Coliseum. In a very postmodern Baudrillardian style, the Coliseum has spread to be part of every monument of the city. While we inhale non-stop part of the last Nero's breath.

It reminds me something that the director of the Reina Sofia Art Centre in Madrid said a few days ago about a 30-ton Richard Serra sculpture that disappeared some years ago (before he started in the post): half of Spaniards might be shaving with parts of Serra's work.

Is this the Coliseum?



18- To gather

26 November 2008, 00:19:10

San Pietro, Rome



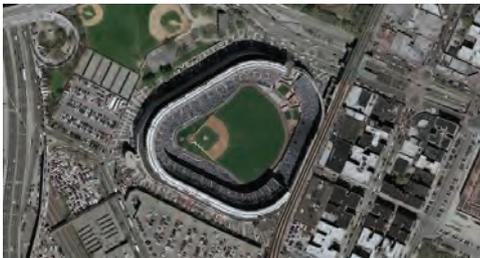
Coliseum, Rome



Plaza de toros de Las Ventas, Madrid



Yankee Stadium, NY, NY



19- The second expedition

27 November 2008, 00:00:56

Today I requested the help of my guide again to come back to the spot we visited the other day.



In the streetview service of Google I couldn't see the Coliseum from this point, so I wanted to check it up again.



I thought that perhaps she saw a different building and mistook it due to the excitement and responsibility.

Or that the Coliseum had the same confusion-inducing power as Solaris' swirling ocean-like surface.

But that was not the case. Actually I just "went" too far in the google street. If I go back couple of clicks, the picture matches the one Ana took today.



After establishing that no further approach was possible by this path, we went east to try to make the encircling ring smaller. I have updated the map: "the exclusion zone map".

Today was not as exciting as before, being one step nearer to the end of the project. It is incredible how something can become routine in just two tries.



20- Coffee Faith

28 November 2008, 17:51:47

I cannot say that the fact of not seeing the Coliseum has clearly changed my life, as it has always been my custom not to see it at all. However the proximity of it, and the constant invitation to break this rule, is something new that creates many disturbances in my thinking and daily life.



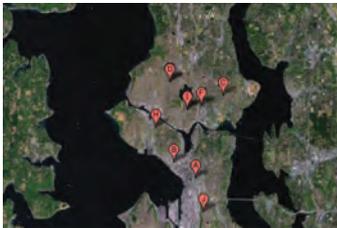
*Catholic Church Headquarters
(Vatican City)*



*Starbucks Coffee Co. Headquarters
(Seattle)*



Starbucks stores in Rome



Catholic churches in Seattle

There is another clear disturbance of my daily life when compared to London: I used to see at least one branch of Starbucks every day and I have not see any since I arrived here. However there is no temptation or possibility of doing it.

I read Internet forums in which Starbucks lovers complain about the lack of stores in Rome. They wonder why the company has not made inroads here, speculating about sociology and economics. My own speculation: all the good premises are already taken by the Catholic Church. They were earlier in looking for the best spots. Even McDonald's cannot afford any premises here except little scruffy shacks.

Starbucks followers in Rome.



21- A Liberated City

06 December 2008, 11:07:55

I went to Paris for a couple of days, but I did not get lunch at the tour Eiffel. When I arrived I learned that the Maupassant syndrome is so widespread, so many people hate the tower, that it is almost impossible to get a reservation for lunch at the restaurant.

It was interesting to experience how different the city feels when you get lost and can walk for 20 minutes along streets you do not know with the certainty that there is not going to be a Coliseum around the next corner. It makes you careless, the whole city becomes flat.

But I might have been in danger. When I checked my email at the Centre Pompidou cafe (very comfortable) I read a message from my friend warning me: from the top of the tower, on a very clear day, you might catch sight of the Coliseum if you looked in the direction of Rome. I laughed. Thanks.

22- Hyperspace

06 December 2008, 13:40:04

The object of my map and the need of a guide through the city is not that I will become marble if I am exposed to the light that has been projected by the Coliseum, but rather to establish an area in which I can walk by myself safely.

When I went to the airport for my flight to Paris I had to cross the city very early in the morning to get to Termini train station. I took the H bus, which has known compatibility issues with Coliseum avoiders. I knew that in Piazza Venezia, for around 40 metres, the bus passes a zone from which you can see it. So as we arrived at the spot, I closed my eyes and very soon the danger was over.

But two days later I was coming back late in the night, after a long day with meetings in Paris, trains, buses, plane, etc., and things were not that easy.

I took the same bus and the route was the same. I arrived near the Piazza and I closed my eyes. I opened them and it was over. Good. But then, the bus took a different street I never went down before, turning around the monument of Vittorio Emanuele. I got in a panic and I started closing and opening my eyes, turning my head in a kind of hysteria. Then, at one awful moment, I opened the eyes to see this:



What the f is this?



I couldn't believe it.
It should be very far away.

It is like in Asteroids or Defender when, in danger of being it by a rock or enemy bullet you press the hyperspace button, only to appear in a lethal spot.



Asteroids



Defender

It was a very stressful moment. The tide of emotion which overwhelmed me flowed so deep that it was scarcely to be distinguished from religious doom.

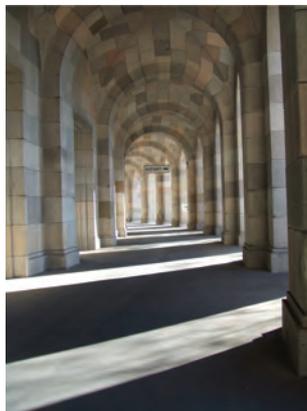
This morning I went there again just to verify that it is the Teatro Marcello.

This is the same street in the opposite direction.



The Coliseum is actually on the other side of the monument to Vittorio Emanuele. Really far.

I might have been also as far as Nuremberg, where Hitler ordered this Congress Hall to be built after his visit to Rome, next to the grounds for his spectacular rallies.



Taken from <http://cyan.mx.ca/rally.shtml> with thanks

23- Stairs

07 December 2008, 17:31:14

Just another quick comment on the architectural connection of Rome with Nazi Germany.

These are the Spanish Steps at the Piazza di Spagna by Alessandro Specchi.



Fassbinder shot the beginning of *Martha* here with cinematographer Michael Bauhaus (both in the picture). In this scene the father of the leading character dies of a heart attack while on the stairs.

Martha (1974)



These are also known as Spanish stairs.



They are in Mauthausen and were mainly built by Spanish Republican soldiers who escaped from Franco after the defeat in the civil war only to fall into German hands in France. Many of them died during the construction.

They were called “Stairs of Death”.
This picture is with a Russian soldier after the liberation of the camp.



24- Viddy Well

08 December 2008, 11:55:16

Jaime sends me these images from Antonioni's *Leclisse*, as he promised in his comment some posts ago.



This is what Monica Vitti is looking at:



He thought this was the Coliseum, but actually it is the Verona Arena, an amphitheatre from AD 30.



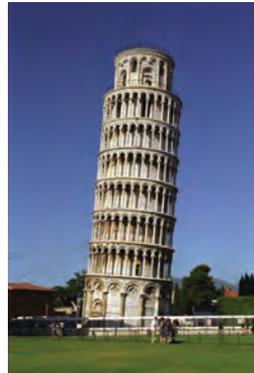
It has a similar history to the Coliseum but only held 30,000 people (instead of 80,000) and was pink (due to the limestone of Valpolicella). Like the Coliseum it suffered an earthquake and a lot of stone was stripped away when it was used as a quarry. But this one looks more complete, like the digitally reconstructed image for Gladiator.



Here are a couple more of them:



Nîmes Amphitheatre (France)



The tall, elongated, arenaless, leaning coliseum of Pisa



*Viddy well, my little brother.
Viddy well*

25- Shot/reverse shot

10 December 2008, 13:16:48

This morning one of my mates at the Academy asked me during breakfast if my Coliseum project has to do with “desire”.

- Yes. By refraining from visiting it I increase my desire, I accumulate desire.
- With renunciation?
- Of course. It is a training for renouncing other things and appreciating what you have.
- With control?
- It is all about control...

The fact is that this project uses a technique to work and think I just discovered. By giving an extreme importance to something in time or space (better if by default it has no importance at all) you can relate everything to it. Either because it is similar or because it is dissimilar. As all cylinder-like objects can be related to the Coliseum by similarity, all the ones that are not can be also related by their lack of cylindricality. All themes that usually are wandering around my head can be inserted in a Coliseum pod bay. If it doesn't work in the straight form, I try it in reverse.

I used the same technique (I know now) in *If Alive*, the project about my 65th birthday party I talked about before. By giving this high importance to a banal event like a birthday party in the future, one more among many others, everything can be related to it. Actually the main purpose was to have some certainties in life: since I started the *If Alive* project my death only can happen at two moments: I can die either before or after the party. It is quite a reduction.

A friend sends me this drawing. It has to do with my next project after Rome, a circular train that is so precise that it gives the time (keep tuned if you want to know more).



This train depicted here has been discovered apparently as the very first train in history for passangers. It was an English attraction called Catch Me Who Can. But also people know it as “steam circus”.

26- Limited Liability

12 December 2008, 15:10:25

Apparently this winter is especially rainy in Rome. I did not expect this: even the sunniest days you have to put your umbrella in the bag just in case.

Yesterday I went out for a walk and it was raining for a while at an intensity very much playing with the limit at which opening the umbrella is justified. I admit that this limit could be quite soaking for a Londoner. There are other cities much more umbrella-release-button-happy than London like for example Tokyo. But here also people quickly open their umbrellas as soon as the first drops come, if for no better reason than to avoid the annoying offerings of a myriad of umbrella street sellers.

Getting wet with my umbrella kept warm and dry in my cozy bag I recalled the joke that Baudrillard tells in *L'illusion de la fin*:

There is a man walking under the rain with a closed umbrella under his arm.

When somebody asks him why he doesn't open it he replies:

“I do not like to feel at the limit of my possibilities”.

I reserve the Coliseum because I do not want Rome to live at the limit of its possibilities. Perhaps I am afraid of Rome not being at some point of my stay good, entertaining, exciting, spectacular, beautiful or scary enough. If so, then I will be able to say: “well, I still have the Coliseum to try”.

“What's this story of reaching your own limit?”

Baudrillard says, “it is a fantasy of death, that doesn’t allow any other alternative than downfall and decay”. (Sorry, translated into Spanish by somebody else and then into English now).

27- Rhizome

17 December 2008, 11:23:30

I went to London on a quick trip to present a film. My friends there have followed my Coliseum fortunes: “What did the driver say when you took the cab at London Bridge and asked him not to pass near the Coliseum?” asked one of them.

The Coliseum theme spread beyond the Roman limits and appears in all the terminations of my net extensions. Everywhere I go, in the header of every conversation, there is a little Coliseum info exchange.

In London, because I know where I am all the time, the navigating experience is different than in Rome, where the Coliseum can be around the corner. It is also different from Paris where although I do not know what is around the corner, I know there is not a Coliseum threat. A classification of expectations.

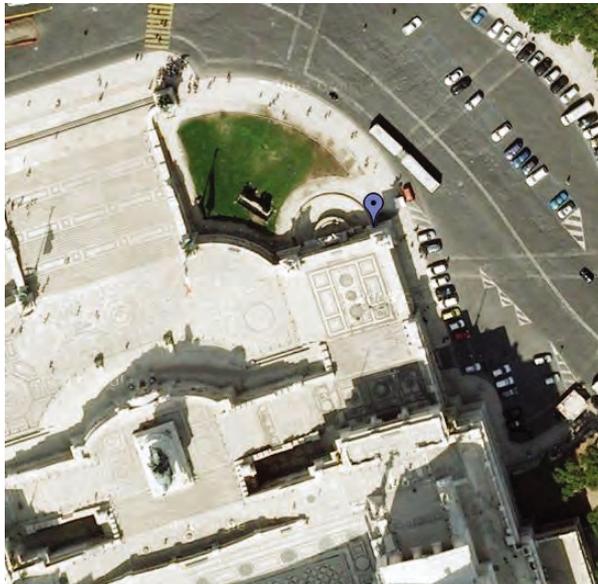
28- The third expedition

21 December 2008, 15:10:02

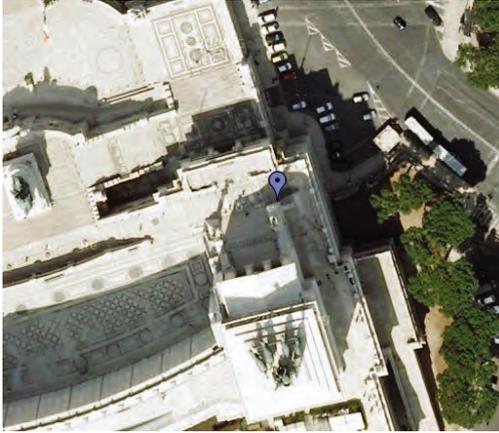
(I guess this post is going to be very descriptive, so please skip it if you are not into the practicalities of avoiding the Coliseum).



The motto of yesterday's expedition was "The circle should be closed". Starting at the monument of Vittorio Emanuele and moving anti-clockwise we wanted to do a very systematic drawing of the exclusion zone.



We began in this corner (1), the furthest you can go east. Then we started the turn towards the west, always trying to explore any new possibility to go east. The first was to climb the stairs up to the building.



Here, (2 in previous picture), my guide could finally take a beautiful picture of both of us together (C. and I). I dragged myself along the wall until my guide said “stop” to me. Head U-turn not allowed.



It is not possible to get to the very top of the building, because the panoramic elevators are on the Coliseum side of the building (3). We asked for the staircase but the guards were not very cooperative.



I am planning to come back and ask again adding claustrophobia to see if there is a more merciful guard.

Next area was the Piazza Campidoglio (4) with the Marcus Aurelius statue. Beautiful square designed by Michelangelo for the Pope to impress Charles V. It has two dangerous spots. (The camera icon is at the panoramic elevators of the Monument to Vittorio Emanuele).





Continuing turning to the east we descended the monte Tarpeo as far as via della Consolazione. There somebody who wanted to help has put up a sign to tell me that I cannot continue to the Foro Romano.

A few streets later, at the via di San Teodore, an ambush was prepared. The Coliseum is at the other side of this wall.



Walking carelessly along the wall, this was waiting for me at the window in the middle:



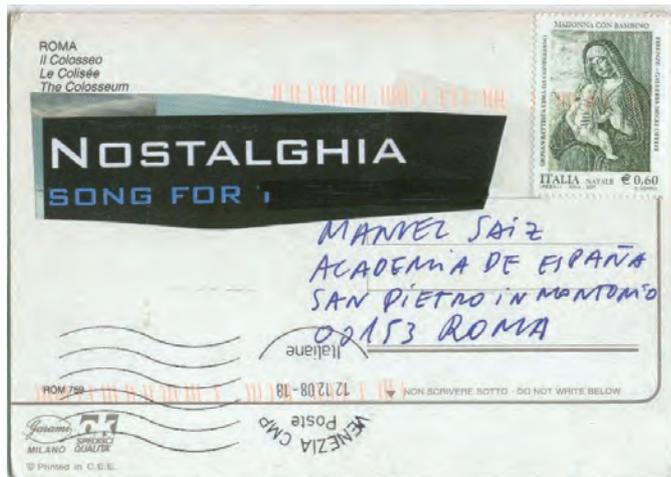
Fortunately my guide was alert and my virginity was saved.

In the whole day we drew nearly 60 degrees of an exhaustive research circle around the Coliseum. The exclusion zone.

29- CSI

21 December 2008, 15:58:48

A few days ago another anonymous postcard arrived.



It is the same handwriting as the previous one. This one is stamped in Venice. I got a graphologist, dna analysis, fingerprints expert, and all the information checked against the list of producers and sellers of this type of postcard. The circle is getting smaller.

30- Palimpsesto

23 December 2008, 18:13:22

Past



Future



Retrofuture



La Decima vittima (1965)

31- Wrap up

23 December 2008, 18:33:26

Read in David Mamet's *Bambi vs. Godzilla*: The dramatic experience is essentially *the enjoyment of the postponement of the enjoyment*.

To delay the moment of visiting the Coliseum has a dramatic effect. It is an open situation that creates tension: of seeing it accidentally, of compulsorily controlling each movement, of being different to normal people, of being vulnerable to, for example, a taxi driver, of being impaired or demanding violation. This is an area fruitful for suspense.

The touristic experience, as Baudrillard would say, is that of the pornographic realm. Everything is allowed, open, illuminated, there are no barriers. What is going to happen is arranged and known. The tourist is always stimulated for primary, secondary, tertiary targets. As the experience doesn't progress, the same stimulation is repeated, there is no place for fulfilment: there is always a new target to cover, however minor, always a possibility left for repeating the experience.

The Colossal Blog, as a work of art, will have a closing event, an apotheosis where all the elements of the project get tied up.

At the moment the best choice for me is to spend the last night of the residency at the best suite of the hotel Gladiatori and have breakfast on the terrace.



This can give me a kind of fulfilment, I think.

The Hotel Gladiatori Palazzo Manfredi enjoys an exceptional location in the heart of ancient Rome, with rooms and a rooftop terrace directly overlooking the Coliseum.

32- Psychogeography

28 December 2008, 20:43:50

I seems that if I have to give a quick description of what this project is about I should only say that it is a “Psychogeographic case study”.

Psychogeography was defined in 1955 by Guy Debord as the “the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals”. Another definition is “a whole toy box full of playful, inventive strategies for exploring cities... just about anything that takes pedestrians off their predictable paths and jolts them into a new awareness of the urban landscape”.

From Wikipedia

33- Methadone

03 January 2009, 12:27:25



This is a New Year picture. And no, I haven't been guided to the Coliseum blindfolded and posed for the picture here without seeing the building at my back.

This is the Verona arena, much colder and more Swiss than the Coliseum (notice the snow).

For New Year I wanted a physical Coliseum experience, so I went to Verona to see the thing most similar to it that exists in the surroundings.

The welcome at the Verona Porta Nuova station was very promising.



Coliseum imagery and a circular train like the one in post 25.

Then at the hotel:



The next day it was snowing. The building feels small, compared with my mental picture of the Roman one. It is well built and perfectly round in shape. There are also remains of larger previous glories.



Daniel, my travel mate, suggested that considering how neat and perfectly rebuilt the arena is, the mayor should remove this annoying piece of ruin. Instead of that, I think they are planning to make it look like the rest of the building. At the moment this is its aspect.



The interior is functional and renovated. It seems that at some point most of the stones in the rows have been replaced.



It is used for concerts and opera. The entrance to the building was 6 euros, without any bonus, not even gladiators dying in the arena. It is interesting to point out that the steps were extremely slippery, very dangerous. The management hasn't spread salt to avoid ice, nor even swept the snow, and I can imagine that the day would have finished with several tourists on the floor. This safety and health level would cause major heart functioning anomalies to any British surveyor.

Some other nice details of the visit. Here there is a link to some of the other posts:



There are two representational levels in this picture for me, as they are pointing to other buildings by different means.

From the top, the tip of the Eiffel tower also links with the Veronese Lamberti tower, one of the landmarks of the city. The Lamberti tower is not here on behalf of any other building.

In front of the arena there is another later building with a Coliseum look, which reminds me of the one in Nuremberg.



Finally, here is a beautiful view of the type that visits my most nightmarish nights (if seen in Rome).

All in all, my experience of visiting the Verona arena is rather like a shot of methadone for a morphine addict.

Or even better. Considering:



- the make up (the rows pretty well restored)
- that it is a place that can be visited without restrictions (it is always solicitous)
- that you have to pay a fee to enter (Coliseum is free for the fellows of the Spanish Academy)
- the horrible Christmas star decoration that comes out of it
- the physical danger
- and the dissatisfaction when I left the building,

It was more like visiting a professional when you cannot spend time with the loved one.

34- Show business and periphéria

03 January 2009, 15:10:36

Verona's Arena is certainly a lower key Coliseum: fewer spectators, less tonnage of precious marble, fewer important celebrities on the VIP seats... I guess also the shows must be lower quality, for provincial people, etc.

I read somewhere (perhaps in Claudio Magris' *L'anello di Clarisse*) that during the Austro-Hungarian empire all the theatres within the limits of the empire kept in every show the best seats empty, just in case the Emperor, suddenly, being in the area decided to attend the play. I can imagine that sometimes Roman Emperors liked to watch a combat when passing through Verona on their way to some import-export market expansion ventures in Germania. So the quality of the VIPs could be sometimes of the highest.

But it is difficult for me to imagine gladiators on an empire tour, doing gigs in a small circus far from



Rome. The life of a well trained, spectacularly built gladiator cannot be sacrificed in a corner of the empire for the amusement of second class citizens. In this sense I find the criteria must be similar to bull fighting, in which the best bulls are always sent to main arenas, advertised as such, while the lower class animals are sacrificed at provincial festivals. This doesn't mean that the good animals are always better: by the very reason of their perfect breed, they could be more predictable and less interesting show business-wise than the ones whose training has not been closely monitored (you can read "artists" here too, in the place of "animals").

Only a short speculation: the Christians to murder were local, the gladiators were coming from abroad to kill them in low risk shows, as the toreadores travel from festival to festival killing bulls.

Boxing champions only fight in the main arenas. A theatre play can be sometimes performed better out of Broadway, if for unforeseen reasons the actors are more inspired that night, or are feeling less pressure than in a principal venue. An art biennial in a small remote town can be more independent of market and the gallery lobbies than the Venice one. An experience in a second line tourist attraction can be stronger due to the reduced number of fellow tourists present. Movies are essentially projected in the same conditions in every corner of the Hollywood empire.

35- Models and scale

03 January 2009, 15:57:01

Verona's arena is a model of the Coliseum made by downscaling all its features.



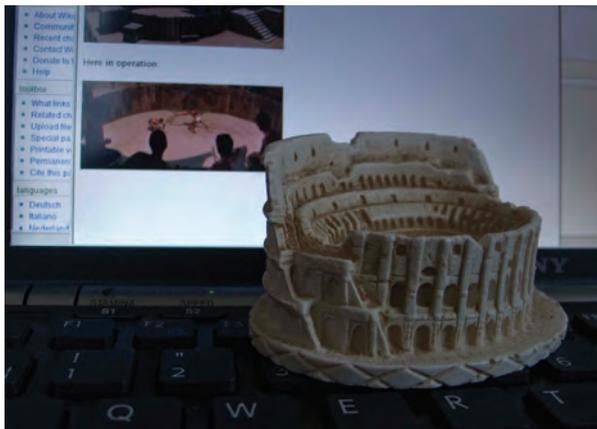
The training facilities at the school of gladiators of Lentulus Batiatus, as portrayed in Kubrick's *Spartacus*, are a model of the Coliseum made by reducing it strictly to its functionality.



Here in operation:



This is a model of the Coliseum reduced to its souvenir and fetishist functions:



A sign model of Verona's arena.



And of the Coliseum (as photographed by Fernando, a fellow grantee).



36 - Location awareness

03 January 2009, 19:40:50

A good way to feel back on the Roman track after celebrations and travelling is to watch Peter Greenaway's *The Belly of an Architect*. The film is beautifully shot and portrays in a very interesting manner the relationship between the monumental architecture of the city and an individual person's (artist/architect) contemporary troubles.

As the film goes on many buildings and piazzas of Rome are described, shown and documented. The Coliseum only appears for half a second, but for me is present all the time. I can map it perfectly out of the frame in shots in which other buildings are protagonists. I never before had such an awareness of a film location just by watching the film. In each shot I reconstruct the relationship of the buildings with the Coliseum and the space between.

Actually a big part of the story happens in the monument to Vittorio Emanuele, explored for post number 28.

This is the hottest scene in the film:



“Over there you can see the Coliseum...”



“There, Michelangelo’s Dome of San Pietro...”



Actually I am quite doubtful of the direction in which the actor is pointing when he talks about the Coliseum. In the case of San Pietro I think he is more accurate. But the picture is nicer if he is in profile when pointing.

This is a minor detail if you compare it with this scene from John Frankenheimer's *Year of the Gun*. This is a pre-*Basic Instinct* Sharon Stone movie, not exactly first grade. It is about terrorism in Italy in the 70's. The main character, the journalist David Raybourne, played by Andrew McCarthy, runs away from a house in one of the streets that lead to the Coliseum.



The poor guy cannot contain himself and looks at it. But he is actually turning because some policemen are chasing him.

It is not very clear why the next shot is this one:



Next shot

and finally.

How have the policemen got here, much closer to the Coliseum than before? Also it is interesting to point out the particular pan-and-scan decision, that takes out most of the action to favour the Coliseum.

Definitely Frankenheimer is as big a fan of the Coliseum as I am, ready to present it at its best in his film even if spoiling the continuity.

37- Operative centres

04 January 2009, 21:47:06



1- Coliseum

3- Monument to Vittorio Emanuele

2- San Pietro

4- Spanish Academy

In *The Belly of an Architect* the character confronts the Coliseum with the dome of San Pietro, looking at them from the monument to Vittorio Emanuele.

From the two windows of my studio at the academy it is possible to see the two buildings almost at the same distance. It could be said that the orientation of the building of the academy has been decided considering the relationship with them.

I have been asked many times why I have chosen the Coliseum and not San Pietro for this project.



There are many reasons. One important one is practical: it would be very difficult to avoid the view of the dome. It is so enormously arrogant that it would have been a very difficult task to maintain such tension for 8 months.

But I think the main reason is that it refers too directly to the idea of “centre”. San Pietro would not have been an axis for my circumnavigations decided by me in any aspect. God, power, church, money, pilgrimage... everything is pertaining to a very established existing reference point.

Years ago I had a residency at Delphi in Greece. This town was the centre of the world for a long time. The Delphic oracle was located in a temple on the side of Mount Parnassus there.

For the 2,300 inhabitants of the town Delphi is still the centre. My address there was: Hotel Delphi, Delphi, Greece. When I asked if there was anything else, a post code, region, something... the man at the post office was proud to say that there was no way to miss it as “everybody knows Delphi”.

At the museum it is possible to see the Omphalos, the navel of the world, through which is possible to communicate with the gods.

At that time (1994) I was thinking about the importance of the centre, its dispersion, the concept of “rhizome”. I was reading Lyotard and Baudrillard and working on these ideas. I made a show called *Metaphysics of Training*. These two mobile centres belong to it:



Omphalos



The idea of “absolute centre” is as obsolete as the idea of god. The importance of the Coliseum is more contemporary, related to entertainment and virtual politics. The Coliseum is a dynamic operative operational centre.

38- Denaro legittimo

04 January 2009, 22:19:20

Today I realised that I had several coliseini on my pocket.



I checked: Verona’s arena is NOT on the 2 cents nor on the 1 cent coins.

39- Armchair Specialist

06 January 2009, 12:23:57

Apart from the Arena and Giulietta e Romeo (see the explicit iconography in front of the arena), the other highlight of Verona is Emilio Salgari (1862-1911). He wrote many adventure novels, set in the most remote exotic places, without leaving Italy, an armchair adventurer. However he took great care in making the





public think that his novels were somehow the result of personal experiences. Here he is in a mock Indian location, probably set a few metres away from the Verona arena.

By the end of the residency I am going to be a Coliseum specialist who has written many articles about it and never seen the actual building.

40- Moneda Unica

06 January 2009, 12:37:30

Like royalty portrayed on coins, getting older with the new mintings, the Coliseum was also young once. There were the times of the previous European single currency, the sestertius.



At that time the protocol for how to treat Eurosepticus was different than now.

41- Inside Out

09 January 2009, 21:21:48



I found this beautiful pot for tips in one of my usual coffee suppliers.

The regulars are too generous and do not keep the conceptual elegance of just dropping five cent coins (and too stingy to drop sestertii).

I thought that bringing this into the Coliseum would start creating some Matryoshka doll implications.

42- Parallel Rome

12 January 2009, 17:02:29

Last Saturday, on the occasion of my birthday, I went on a tour to the EUR, in the south of Rome. The EUR is an urban area planned and half built at the beginning of the 1940's by the fascist government. EUR stands for Esposizione Universale Roma.

At first I was expecting to find good locations for other projects. I thought it was not going to be a very *Colossal blog* related day though, except for one of the buildings in the complex.

But it started differently as, in order to get there, my train had to stop at the Coliseum tube station. This is, absolutely, the closest I have ever been to the building. It is, also absolutely, a station exactly like the others in the Roman subway network. But, why does your heart pound when you know somebody you love is calling, if the ring of the handset is the same as when it is the "Direct Kitchens Special Winter Offer" sales agent?

The building I wanted to visit is right at the exit of the EUR station. It is the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana.



It is known as the “Colosseo Quadrato” (square Coliseum).

But luckily now these days this can be easily changed with Photoshop.



There are other interesting buildings, like the Palazzo dei Congressi, where many films have been shot, such as Fellini's *8 e mezzo*, or the fungus tower, portrayed in Antonioni's *L'eclisse*.

But there is also the Museo della Civiltà Romana that, apart from big spaces, empty of tourists, specialists or any public at all, and beautiful backdrops for video artworks, features:



one



two



three

and four Coliseums.

It is there, in the middle of this big model of the city during the times of the Roman Empire.

Julie Taymor's *Titus* (1999) is a movie based on Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* filmed both in classical and fascist era locations and mixing them very nicely. There is a special link between these two architectures. The Colosseo Quadrato plays a big role in the film but, perhaps for production reasons, the rounded one is not featured in the film.



I do not know where they shot these classical scenes. Let's say that the EUR is a parallel Rome, a "square Rome".



43- Apocalypses

19 January 2009, 16:11:10



The Core (2003)

Oops, some collateral damage

One of the strategies to deal with something that you cannot acquire, possess or control is to destroy it.

I could identify the idea of destruction in a few angles of *The Colossal Blog* experience. It works for some people who, after learning of my project, threaten to compel me to view the Coliseum by force, even by the use of chloroform. Everything that is pure should be soiled, as could be inferred from a casual reading of the second law of thermodynamics.

But mine would be an even more miserable, jealous approach: "if I cannot see it, nobody should see it". Reversing the power of the magnetic forces around Claudius described in post 14 which my desire has created I can start achieving some results here.

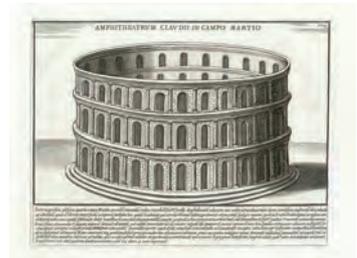
As long as the Coliseum stands, Rome will stand as well; when the Coliseum falls, Rome will fall and when Rome falls, the end of the world will follow... said Beda in the 7th Century (thanks Daniel).

44- Burning Rome

21 January 2009, 15:43:11

The destruction of Rome depicted in *The Core* is set in a near future. The plot of the film is quite dubious, as the catastrophe is caused by the magnetic fields created by the sudden shut-down of the magmatic inner core of the Earth. But the heroes go down there, set in train a sequence of nuclear explosions, the core starts moving again and the apocalypse is postponed. All in 135 minutes and colour.

However the Coliseum would have been destroyed forever. In the parallel fictional history that the movie rejects, the authorities might reconstruct it. It would be interesting to see how they might decide which point in history to take as the model for the reconstruction. At the end it might be like the Verona Arena, perfectly shaped for opera and events. In a parallel fiction world.



If this is the limit of the Coliseum in the future, there is a limit also in the past, when the city of Rome was burnt. After some researching I learnt that it is not clear that Nero gave orders to start the fire, as popular culture affirms. Here is Nero contemplating the spectacle in *Quo Vadis*.

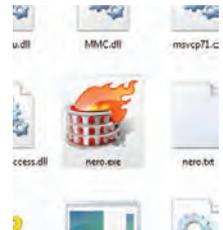


The space left empty by the fire was supposed to be used for big architectural developments of the city Nero had planned, many of them part of a palace and a lake for his own use.

On this land was built the Coliseum, many years later, after Nero had died. So there is a historical inconsistency in Nero Burning Rome logo.

Also in the fact of Nero attending the killing of Christians in a questionable Coliseum-like building in *Quo Vadis*.

It could be the Circus Maximus, but looks a bit too rounded, the tribune too near to the round part of the stadium. I think the Art Director of the film had fun mixing popular ideas of how this Christian-killing took place.



Quo Vadis (1951)



45- Witness

21 January 2009, 15:54:27



The Christians being eaten by lions in the Coliseum sequence of *Quo Vadis* might be another inconsistency. A very good book about the Coliseum written by Keith Hopkins and Mary Beard affirms that there are no records anywhere of Christians being killed in the Coliseum. Many authors say that this is part of the Catholic Church's hijacking of the building, which included the installation of a big cross in the centre of the arena that stayed there many years, and the creation of chapels in the arches...

From the point of view of the Church to deny the killing of the Christians in the arena is the same as holocaust denial, from a Jewish perspective. Lyotard says: "Even as the deniers' work is an effort to continue the Final Solution by silencing all testimony about it from survivors, they have a point when they claim that there are no witnesses to the gas chambers since every true witness was exterminated in the process". For Lyotard the task of thinkers, writers and artists becomes not to represent Auschwitz, which is impossible, but to bear witness to this impossibility.

Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend*

Hooligans having a good time



46- Proof of Unsubstantiality

21 January 2009, 16:32:28

People coming to my studio and seeing the papers I have covering the window looking towards the Coliseum or simply hearing for the first time about my project are suspicious about my strict observance of the essential rule of *The Colossal blog*, I haven't seen it, I swear. The tension is maintained because it is not possible to prove effectively that I haven't seen it. On the contrary it is possible easily to produce evidence of the very moment I see it, so seeing it will release all the pressure. Even more: once I see it nobody has a reason to claim evidence of it.

Also in Lyotard's *The Differend* we can read about the tension created in the Nazi scenario: only the Germans are suspected of being Jews, and the tension is maintained while it is necessary to prove it to keep a certain status. For the ones who have been already proclaimed Jews there is no tension anymore. Horrible future but no tension about their condition of doom. To prove that somebody was a Jew was much easier than proving Arian ancestry.

And in Bataille: the power of the lord over the slave is to keep him alive, not to kill him, to maintain this tension of survival and surrender. If the slave is killed, all the fun is gone.

47- The fourth expedition

24 January 2009, 12:20:17

Yesterday the map of the exclusion zone was closed. At the moment I have a clear knowledge of which streets I can walk by myself. If you would like to avoid the Coliseum, keep it handy: The exclusion zone map.

Please note that the accuracy of the map depends on variables of several types. I have identified these:

Quasi-Permanent When the Coliseum is hidden behind buildings that are kind of unlikely to be torn down, of a monumental type. The "quasi" is because

it is necessary to contemplate earthquakes and other natural disasters, war, terrorism... that can remove some buildings, making the Coliseum visible from some areas that now are allowed. On the other hand, these accidents may also remove parts of the Coliseum, increasing the Coliseum-view-free area.

Semi-Permanent Buildings of no special value can be torn down to make better views of the monumental area, as Mussolini did with the buildings in the Via dei Fori Imperiali. Or can be torn down to build new ones, so the accuracy of the map will temporarily change between construction works.

Seasonal Especially referring to trees. Before and after pruning, or leaf-fall.



It is behind those trees

Accidental I tend not to include these. They are temporary structures like booths for fairs, advertising or building sites. Perhaps a truck strategically parked.

Ad Hoc These are not taken into account but, of course, can make the map completely invalid. They are blindfolds, scuba equipment, motorcycle helmets used with the face part back, etc.

Yesterday a new record in overground proximity was established, so the walk was very exciting again. In couple of places I almost felt the gravitational attraction of the stone mass.



I have been as close as this.
Here is a picture from 1 taken by
my guide.



And from 2.



If you look carefully in the top
left side of the picture there is a
palm tree.



So this is from another point of
the tour.

Finally, here I am at the Via Labicana.



The furthest building before the Coliseum is the Hotel Gladiatori, where I plan to spend the last night of my residency.



48- More Tension

26 January 2009, 14:27:56

Six years ago I conceived my project *If Alive*, in which I started preparing my 65th birthday party 23 years in advance, contemplating the possibility of being a bunch of bones by then. Since then all other projects which span more than a few days share a bit of the tension that *If Alive* brought to my life.

What if **I NEVER** see the Coliseum?

In a way the tension increases when the new project is shorter, as the possibility of not being on my feet on the 30th of June is of the “not-thought type”.

In the same macabre path, I am considering the possibility of just dying precisely on the very same day, victim of a sudden attack or accident... to die in the arena. It would be a similar Roman experience to Stourley Kracklite’s in *The Belly of an Architect*. A tourist visit sine missione.

The last recorded gladiatorial fights happened in 435. How many people have died since then in the arena? For a while it was a castle and perhaps some fighting took place, then some killings by robbers in the 19th century perhaps, acts of revenge might have occurred after the fall of fascism, heart attacks for tourists coming up too many stairs... was there a car that crashed against the monument with fatal consequences? This requires further research.

And then, when I was writing this post offline I was struck by the possibility of not being EVER able to upload it.



49- Spares Supply Co-ordination

30 January 2009, 19:29:34

Gladiatorial fights were only the most glamorous shows in the Coliseum, but apparently not the most common. I read about the prisoner executions by fire or beasts, re-enactments of classical mythological stories and beasts fighting and hunting. These last seem to be very present in the venue. Beasts were brought to Rome from the most remote and exotic places in big quantities. Tigers, lions, elephants, ostriches, alligators, bears, bulls... were hunted in the arena or made to fight amongst each other in a type of event called venatio.

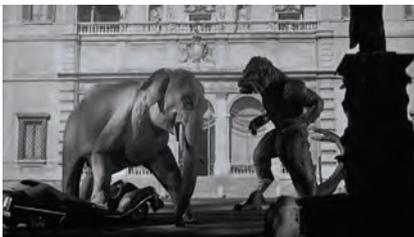
Huge resources were used in keeping the Coliseum well provided with animals as it is said as many as 5.000 could have been killed in the arena in the course of some single festivals. From all corners of the empire,

under the supervision of local authorities, with the help of Roman legions, captured and kept alive for specialists, the animals were collected, fed and transported in all kind of vehicles toward the centre of the world. Special facilities existed in the middle stations and in Rome itself to keep them until their big time arrived.

This one, in the 1957 film *20 Million Miles to Earth*, has been brought as far as from the planet Venus.



He (she) is bound to die in the Coliseum.



But before that he (she?) has performed as expected, fighting with an elephant in front of the Galleria Borghese en Villa Borghese.



This shot is in front of the Giardino Zoologico.



That looks like this in Google street nowadays.



He (she?) deserves some kind of punishment because he/she has destroyed part of the touristic assets of the city.



Well. These people do not look like perfect thoughtful archaeologists either.

From the 19th century and until now, the most exotic artists have been collected from remote corners of the art empire. They have been carefully selected by the local authorities, fed and put in Ryanair type cages by specialists and sent to Rome. We, Spaniards, Germans, Americans, Austrians, French, Venusian... populate the academies, special dedicated installations to keep us alive as part of the city entertainment. Perhaps at the moment this is the result of an inertia rather than urgency.

50- Crosscurrent

30 January 2009, 20:31:53

I read in Roland Auguet's *The Roman Games* that during the most important gladiatorial games, the city of Rome remained empty, because everybody was inside the Coliseum attending the show. The kind of feeling you have in Spain when there is an important (?) football match on TV.

Ettore Scola describes a similar situation in 1977 *Una giornata particolare*. It tells the story of two people in a deserted Rome at the end of the 30's while everybody is at Piazza Venezia and Via dei Fori Imperiali attending Mussolini's military parade to honour the visit of Adolf Hitler.





Auguet also says that Seneca sometimes did not go to the games. He liked a quiet Rome, to take a walk around the city and think in the way philosophers do. I do understand his reasons if I picture myself working in London over the past years during Christmas and Boxing Day.

Una giornata particolare (1977)



Actually this Coliseum thing is not completely new, as I have quite a long record of not doing things that one is supposed to do. *The Colossal Blog* is just an implementation in terms of my art practice of what I have done often in my daily life. Never been to a football match, never watched one on tv even. Living for many years in Madrid as an artist and never going to the Prado, at first out of rebelliousness, and then by habitual inertia. Also I remember the familiarity I had in my twenties with all the loonies of my home town. Only artists and mad people do not work during the day in provincial towns, and we used to meet in the same cafes.

I find it very fruitful for an artist to have this approach to all kind of experiences. It has many cons, though. I am more aware of how I have been using and profiting by them since I decided to avoid the Coliseum.

51- Anticipation

30 January 2009, 21:12:04

But despite what one might think reading the previous post, I do not feel very special recently. In the beginning of the project, when I started the blog, I was bragging about the uniqueness of coming to Rome and not visiting the Coliseum, for the sake of my artistic extravaganza. Now, after learning something about the history of the building, I feel like one more in a huge group of people, waiting in a state of high excitement, joy or fear, for the very moment in which to step into the building. Many are expecting to see the display of blood and death, many tormented by the vision of their death in the area, everyone hoping to leave the premises in the best of health.

The term “death panic” is used by one of the SS Leaders at Treblinka in Lanzmann’s 1985 documentary *Shoah*. He refers to the state of the prisoners about to get into the gas chamber:

“Death panic” makes people let go. They empty themselves, from the front or the rear. So often, where the women stood, there were five or six rows of excrement.

Next to the gates to get into the Coliseum arena, in Roman imperial times, “death panic” and piles of excrement might have been a frequent issue.

52- Personal Logic

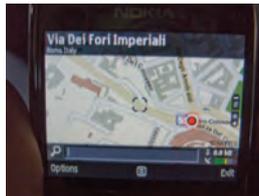
03 February 2009, 19:57:30

Today, encouraged by the fact that the exclusion zone map was completed, I did not bother to ask the taxi driver on my way to the airport to avoid the Coliseum.

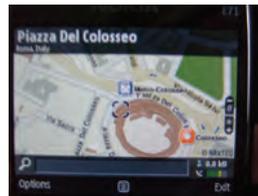
When I saw the car heading clearly towards the Piazza Venezia and the Via dei Fori Imperiali I knew we were going to pass very near. I looked down, ready to endure the experience.

The GPS of my phone helped me to know my position, to calm my anxiety and therefore to avoid the contemplation.

As I was looking at the mobile I felt we entered in the area of its shadow and perceived the light inside the car decreasing.



I am the red dot



Going around

Already left. The red square here is the icon for the underground station.

A few days ago I watched Jean Cocteau’s 1950 film *Orphée*. In this story Eurydice, Orpheus’s wife, dies but he is allowed to go with a guide to the Kingdom of the Dead and bring her back. The only condition is that he cannot look at her ever again.

In this scene he protects himself with his hand, as I did this morning.



Here are Eurydice, Orpheus and the guide.



In this scene, Orpheus finds the image of his wife in a magazine.



Terrified, he covers the image with his hand and shakes his head violently.



But the guide is there to reassure him:

“Your wife’s picture is not your wife”.



In the logic of Cocteau's *Orphée*, the forbidden object cannot be looked at directly but one is allowed to see pictures of it. However one is not allowed to see it in the mirror, and that's how Orpheus loses her again, when he sees her in the rear view mirror of the car. Is your wife your wife's image in the mirror?

Where should the limits to my Colossal Blog project be set?

- 1- Not allowed to see it
- 2- Not allowed to see it in the mirror
- 3- Not allowed to see moving images of it
- 4- Not allowed to see photographs of it
- 5- Not allowed drawings, icons, symbolic images
- 6- Not allowed to talk about it
- 7- Not allowed to say the word "Coliseum"
- 8- Not allowed to think about it
- 9- Not allowed ever to remember anything about it

53- The British Concave Job

11 February 2009, 16:44:43

I was in Manchester for few days for a show, quite far from any Coliseum concern. However, on the way back to Rome I spent a couple of days in London and I went from Manchester to London via Bath Spa, following a tip that my friend Charo gave me.

Apparently it was a common joke in the 18th century to say that "if the Coliseum were portable, the English would carry it away". As they couldn't carry it, they built something similar in Bath. John Wood Senior and Junior did. It is called The Circus.





As I was getting there from the station I felt the proximity. (This is an unrelated local pub but recently Lions thrill me).

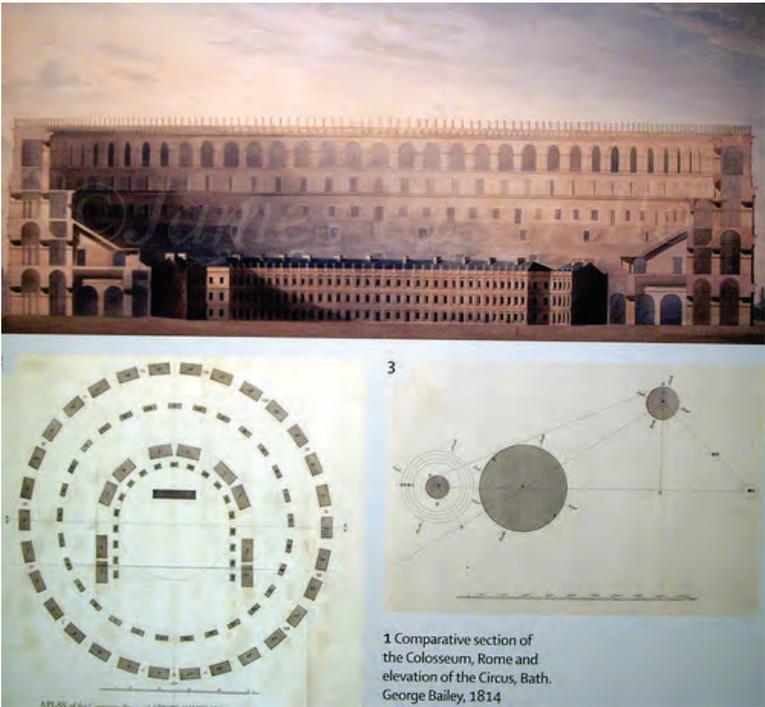
Here I am again in front of another Coliseum, photographed by one of the numerous visitors.



This is an “inverted Coliseum” in which the concept of the inside and outside becomes quite confusing.



Here compare the proportions with the original.



The way the orders, Doric, Ionic, Corinthian, are stacked was inspired by the original.

Third Floor

Second Floor

First Floor



That was all, for “the inverted Coliseum”, to be inside and outside at the same time.

In London I passed briefly by the “London Coliseum”, the home of the English National Opera.



It is next to a Caffe Nero, “the Italian Coffee Company.”



And this was the last sighting I got in London.

54- Inverted Coliseum no.2

13 February 2009, 19:55:51

I came across this other British inverted Coliseum:

This is Brooklands, in Surrey, one of the first purpose built race tracks in the world.



It is an inverted Coliseum because the spectators are in the middle and the performers are running around.

Built in 1907;
closed in 1939;
used as an airfield
during WWII.



Here, in *Life of Brian* (1979) the car race principle is applied to gladiatorial fights in an amphitheatre in Judea.



The winner



Also the Jewish/British audience having fun.

55- Representation

14 February 2009, 15:30:15

A friend in London asked me what was the most interesting thing I found out about the Coliseum. There are many aspects of it at various levels that are turning out to be revealing. When I come across some information that matches other things I have registered, about my life or my work, an idea comes to life. I write a post about it and the subject is done until new details and ideas on the same theme are found. I think the most surprising and inspiring for me at the moment is the one that continues opening up with new connections and references. This post, therefore, might be long, confused, perhaps boring.

One of the possibilities I am considering for the final project's closing event is a kind of re-enactment of something that happened in the Coliseum. So many things have happened there! It is not defined yet, just a possibility to get hanging around my thoughts in the hope it matches something interesting.

For example, the following are the type of shows that were put in the Coliseum:

- 1- Gladiatorial combats
- 2- Beast hunting
- 3- Beasts fighting each other.
- 4- Executions of criminals (including Christians) by throwing them to the beasts
- 5- Other colourful executions of criminals by hunting, burning, disassembling them.
- 6- Re-enactments of nautical battles and the very exciting
- 7- Re-enactments of mythical and heroic stories.

The very special feature of the last one is that criminals were performing small theatre pieces in which they played the role of somebody who died in the story, to finally actually die in the performance.

Let's say that we want to re-enact the death of Laureolus, a famous bandit punished by the Romans: you just get another bandit, re-enact his capture and trial (or similar), finally nail him to a cross and leave him in the company of a Scottish bear. The historians point out the Promethean reference, with the guts of the hero eaten once and again by animals. Other plays in the repertory: the story of Attis (who castrated himself) or Hercules (burned alive).

Of course in my final event I cannot compete even at a far remove with the intensity of such reenactments, but just the thought of it triggers a lot of speculations of the nature of art and representation. I am going to point out some in a very (for now) disordered way.

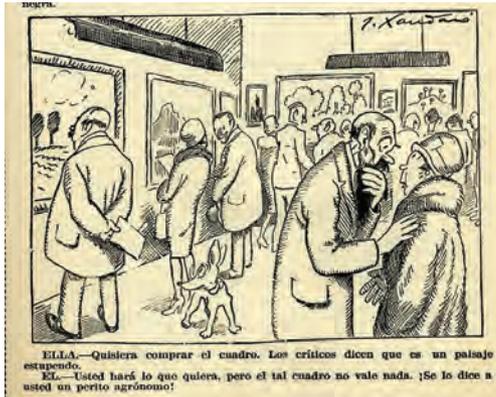
"Pornography". A little narrative, very weak, is used just to go directly to the very explicit interest of the audience. There are not film ellipses or suggestions: it is important to see immediately and in reality what the audience wants to see.

"Snuff". Why use this narrative? If in pornography the story is just a cover up, in the Coliseum it can be an aesthetic element, because before and after this little theatre play you have strict, no frills, bloody killing. At the Coliseum there was even a perverted reverse (perverse) version of Orpheus's ability to charm the animals: the animals did not know the script and despite their role they used to tear apart the actor playing Orpheus.

How important was it that the killing was real? In snuff movies the "illusion" of reality (the connection with the reference) has to be beyond any doubt. This character of reality in the killing was faked successfully for a while in the popular 1980's *Cannibal Holocaust*, which worked just fine in some circles. Just as a suggestion: what's the representational relationship of these Coliseum representations, porno movies and snuff movies with the story told in the trial and killing of Ceausescu and his wife?

Does the reality of the killing, the contact with the horror, make the experience more artistic? More intense perhaps? It reminds me of the joke in which a doctor is at a show looking at a yellowish face in a Fauvist portrait and when the gallery person asks: “what do you think?” the doctor replies: “I would say it is malaria”.

Or in this 30's Xaudaro's comic strip.



The lady: I would like to buy this landscape. The critics say it is excellent. The gentleman: It is up to you, but the painting is worthless. I'm telling you as an agronomist.

In the Coliseum the reality was shown as fiction while the doctor and the agronomist see in the fiction only the referent.

A few years ago I visited Venus Fort, a shopping mall in Odaiba, Tokyo, in which galleries and shop fronts mock Italian streets.





At the end of one of the galleries there is a piazza della Chiesa and some of the galleries which run across are called “della Fontana”. Japanese employees do small representations dressed as Roman soldiers or Italian traditional music bands. I wondered at that time if, in order to enhance the Italian experience of the visitors, it might be an idea to include some other Japanese employees disguised as Neapolitan street robbers and pickpockets, who could operate on shoppers. The wallets could be collected later in a desk at the exit or, for the sake of the real experience, lost for ever. Normally you leave the shopping mall with less money than you entered, anyway.

Three last things:

The fact of people being killed in the representations makes the idea of real and fake very confusing. It seems that every representation is a presentation, as the level of reality and accuracy doesn't really matter, when what is being presented is a new event. Or on the other hand, however many elements of reality you put into it, it never leaves the realm of the representation.

The plays were a repetition of any inaugural moment, artistic or religious. But then, why can the body and blood of Christ be just substituted with wine and bread?

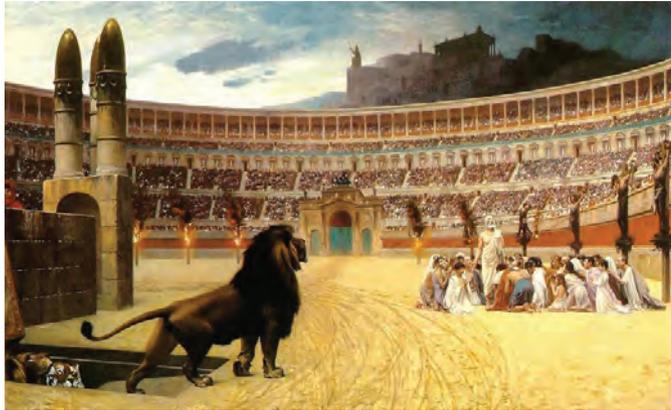
This post does imply that I might have seen the Coliseum but that doesn't matter, because conceptually it can be the same experience. It could be for the readers, but not for me (for the audience, not for the one-performance-stand actors). I haven't seen it, anyway.

56- More on Representation and Death

19 February 2009, 16:28:10

The tales of Christian martyrdom I read always refer to the death of Jesus. The killing of a Christian in the arena doesn't have the same redemptive effect that the passion of Christ had, but his/her sufferings are described in many stories in relation to how they differ from the model. Any assassination of a Christian re-enacts in certain measure the inaugural moment of the faith. This might be one of the reasons why the persecution was a failure: the re-enactments (not simple torture and killing) were a powerful promotion agent.

To read the tale of 17th century Japanese Christian martyrdoms in Shusaku Endo's *Silence*, so similar to the ones in the Roman Empire, brings me to a strange similarity.



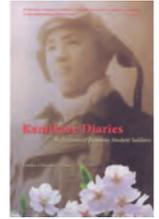
In many places it is possible to find stories of Christians who go towards the torture singing, without struggling, accepting their fate with joy (for example in *Quo Vadis*, where this attitude very much annoys Nero).

The legend of the martyrs "happily" walking to the lions or the cross has an interesting parallelism with the image of the "exalted" kamikazes in WWII

crashing straight into the enemy vessels. All Western literature during and after the war took good care to depict these Japanese pilots as fanatics ready to give their lives for the emperor and a place in the Yasukuni Shrine.

A book called *Kamikaze Diaries: Reflections of Japanese Student Soldiers* by E Ohnuki Tierney selects, reviews and comments on the diaries of some university student pilots, about to perform suicide missions. They were not exactly keen on taking part in the attacks but rather antiwar. To fail to obey orders would have put themselves and their families in an impossible social, economic and emotional situation. Like the Christians, they accepted their fate with resignation and it was outsiders (those not part of the Christian faith or kamikaze cult) who created an image of the sacrifice that could be used instrumentally.

I read a few days ago that Martin Scorsese is about to start the production of a film based on *Silence*. There is one from 1971 by Masahiro Shinoda.



57- Object Trouvé, Ready-Made

20 February 2009, 16:52:13



Saiz, Manuel

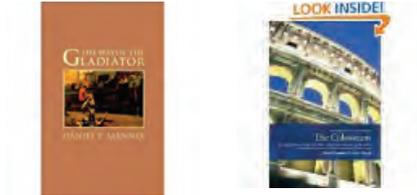
Coliseum, 2009, Mixed media, 188 x 156 x 48.5 mts

Courtesy of the artist

58- History show business

26 February 2009, 12:49:20

I read this book about the Roman games, *The Way of the Gladiator* by Daniel F. Mannix. Which is to this one I read before, *The Colosseum* by Keith Hopkins and Mary Beard,



like this film, Ridley Scott's 2000 *Gladiator* to this one, Akira Kurosawa's 1980 *Kagemusha*.



Mannix's book (as the introduction points out, in a somewhat promotional manner, his name sounds like a gladiator's):

- uses a literary licence that allows him to put names of individuals to the different types of gladiators, their stories made up from a very few historical details combined with a lot of invention. This incites identification of the reader with the characters.
- through writing in a narrative fictional form makes the reader feel that the cruel and bloody events, though terrible, have nothing to do with our desires and death. This, in the opposite way to what you would expect, gives distance to the events.
- puts at the front the most shocking details, regardless of historical accuracy.
- has a lot of comparisons and terms belonging to the contemporary entertainment scene and business, to lead people into situations they can recognise...
- has a heroic tone all through.

I would say that it is a Hollywood book, disguised as friendly historical research. I read it because I found on a website a reference to extreme sexual shows in the Coliseum this book was commenting on.

On the other hand, the Hopkins and Beard book puts in question every traditional received piece of information, confronts it with original sources and through facts uses a delicate craft to expand all the range of narrative techniques. It mixes rigorous historical research and experiences of the human condition, and creates speculations and some casual humorous comments. Just like *Kagemusha*. I think also of Andrei Tarkovski's 1966 *Andrey Rublyov* or Bergman's 1982 *Fanny och Alexander*.

One of the ideas that repeatedly and strongly exercises Mannix is that the games were noble at the beginning, but the desire for blood and shocking spectacle from the audience make them become simply massacres. I think his book also has become a victim of the audience's desire and is contributing to the massacre of History. Just like *Gladiator*.

59- Hist-Fi

01 March 2009, 18:02:07

The idea people had during the Middle Ages about why the Coliseum was built was very different from the one we have today. Hopkins and Beard: "The standard medieval view was that the Colosseum was a Temple of the Sun, originally roofed with a gilded dome, and the home of all kind of demons; and one of the favourite medieval etymologies of 'Coliseum' derived the title conveniently from the Latin word for 'to worship' (colo, colere)". In the middle there was supposed to have been a huge statue of Jupiter or Apollo symbolising Roman power. Other speculations about its original use include that it was a palace for Vespasian and Titus.

However, through analysis of ancient literary texts, use of scientific instruments and scrupulous

excavations in the following centuries, we “know” now what its original purpose was.

Actually I have neither the means nor the time to study the sources, to learn the necessary skills to interpret them, compare and contrast them, and therefore have my own personal take on them. I have to believe what so-called specialists, books and media state about it. If they now decide that originally it was a Temple of the Sun, what can we do but trust them, as we do now when they talk about gladiatorial combats.

I am naturally sceptical and, inspired by the reading of Juan Benet’s *La construcción de la torre de Babel*, I have decided that my official explanation of the origin of the Coliseum for the next couple of days is going to be that the stones of the building are the actual remains of the Tower of Babel. From now on and in the meanwhile, there is no doubt for me that future research will provide evidence for the accuracy of this hypothesis.



Virtual CGI recreation

Its construction was started by the Catholic Church, driven by a new way of understanding faith in the 6th century, and wanting to prove the power of the Pope to get higher than God. It is called 'Coliseum' because, although it never was finished, it reached almost 7 levels.

The legend of the failure of the project being caused by the diversification of languages came about because of the determination of Benedict I to give orders to the contractors in Latin, a language they refused to learn. The construction was in fact abandoned because of the lack of slaves, the only workers who can be managed by whip commands. After the 'fiasco', Latin itself was also abandoned.

The name "Tower of Babel" has little to do with Babylon, except for the fact that Luther on his return to Germany after a visit to Rome, called the city "The new Babylon", horrified by the new buildings projected by the Church. The dome of San Pietro and the Coliseum tower were the two that annoyed him the most. The tower of Babel and the Coliseum are, indeed, the same building.

In 14th century the popes, ashamed by the failure and trying to keep the Church out of it, made it look like a Roman building and invented all kind of cruel and bloody stories to discredit pagan deities.

60- Buildings and art works

02 March 2009, 15:35:13

Reading Benet's book has been very rewarding in relation to my theme: art projects + buildings.

The Coliseum doesn't look so much like the tower of Babel (have two days already passed? Time flies) but there are interesting details that connect *The Colossal Blog* with Brueghel's *The Tower of Babel*, the main reference of Juan Benet's book.



Brueghel's is the first European painting dedicated to a building. Not only is it central in the scene, like many others in the Renaissance, but also is the main if not the only motif. The attention of the artist to the building is focused in the same way in the painting and in my project, the relationship is kept although the art and the artists have changed.

Brueghel analyses the details of the construction in order to understand, in a real practical way, all the technicalities. It is not only a representation of the myth, but a speculation about the way it would have been built. I clearly sympathise with this engineering obsession.

A fascinating point that Benet makes is that this building doesn't shelter the myth, but embodies it. I think *The Colossal Blog* also depicts this relationship with the building, but I am wondering what is the correspondence with the painting: the painting in Brueghel's work appears in mine as: the blog?, the electronic content?, the text?, my experience? the building itself? I am not sure what is the carrier in this work of mine.

One VERY different element in the two works is that Brueghel's is somehow a homage to failure, while my project, fingers crossed, is a monument and an incarnation of success (of the negation).

Another version, this time helicoidal.



This version is not by Brueghel.

61- Shape Embezzlement

03 March 2009, 10:09:18

Here is a building which features a combination of shapes and structures that seem to have been created to celebrate my speculations of yesterday.



It is the Library of Vancouver, sent by a friend after reading the blog this morning. Architect Moshe Safdie. Built in 1993.

Other views that link mentally with familiar buildings.



And since I am on that continent, I am including this image of a building in Phoenix, Arizona, I visited in 1995. It seems to be made with the same brand of children's construction blocks.

Tempe campus music building. Wesley Peters, Frank Lloyd Wright's son-in-law, designed the building, which is a neighbour to Lloyd Wright's Gammage Auditorium.

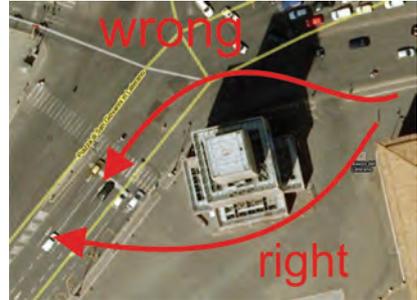


62- Resilience

12 March 2009, 18:42:23

Yesterday there was a new visit to the site, a very turning-pointed one.

The walk started at San Giovanni underground station, with the intention of visiting a 3D virtual Coliseum existing at a venue next to the real one. I was going to walk through a couple of dangerous passages; my guide was going to lead.



We were talking in lively fashion about one of my previous projects when we crossed Piazza di San Giovanni Laterano. At the time we passed near the obelisk, as I realised a few seconds after, we went round it on the wrong side.

I raised my eyes and I saw the top corner of a building, and by the time I felt a clear matrix match, I was already away. I saw for a fraction of a second the top corner of the Coliseum. I had calculated that the duration was proportional to two PAL video frames, which is like a $1/12$ of a second. *Ein Augenblick. Ja, ein Augenblick.**

Suddenly I recognised the side of the obelisk, the precise place I was. Indecision, hesitation. Was it the Coliseum? Yes, it was it. Is it a valid hit? Yes, it should be. What a disheartening feeling!

Two frames in a life can cause you to leave paradise and throw you wandering into exile. It is like a click that provokes a nuclear reaction, the instant that bound you to the car accident, the single wrong mouse click that deletes the hard drive.

I needed to sit down, because the impression was too strong. It has happened because everything was becoming too normal, not exciting enough. And suddenly it is again at its highest emotional point.

But it was important not to throw the towel in immediately because, actually, I did not know yet what had happened. I remember the examination

for my motorcycle licence many years ago, suddenly stalling the engine in the middle of the test. I alighted from the motorbike, more or less throwing in the towel, when the examiner said: “oh, it is just a stall. Please turn the engine on again and continue.” And I got the licence. So let’s not do anything but think about the implications.

For a filmmaker this problem is completely irrelevant. Fiction doesn’t require any connection with the reality of the things. And the show must go on.

For a philosopher, it is doubtful what is “the reality of the things”.

For a conceptual artist of the 70’s it will be the worst of tragedies. He might abandon the project or lie. I think I am a cynic and an engineer. I like to tell the whole truth about the event and try to get as much out of it as possible: I took this glimpse as a warning the Coliseum has thrown to me. I have been certainly touched and, as if the arrow was impregnated in curare, I have been poisoned. But fortunately I am still alive and I might be like arsenic eaters in Styria, Austria, who used to eat arsenic in small portions as a stimulant: I got my stimulation and might develop an immunity to it in the future. Art projects are characterised by their resilience, their capability of taking errors on board. They are done in order to get the experience and errors increase the knowledge. As John Cage said, if you do not believe in the cause/effect relationship, the error doesn’t exist.

Only one fear. It could be a mad scientist thing: something goes wrong in the experiment and he is exposed briefly to radiation. Everything seems normal, but one’s hair can start falling out in the next few days.

We continue the visit as planned, as if nothing has happened. Everything is the same and different at the same time, more dramatic, in a new level of the experience.

Today I still feel a certain degree of disquietude. It reminds me the days after being burgled in London (it happened twice): an uncomfortable sensation of insecurity and loss. It passed in a few days.

“Eternal means eternal, it means eternal, you must see that; and yet again it’s not eternal, it’s an instant, a single instant”. Wozzeck.

63- Testing

14 March 2009, 13:02:20

A few days ago my friend Pedro suggested that at the end of the project I may pass the polygraph or lie detector test, to prove to sceptics that I have not seen the Coliseum. I am very interested in passing it now. Just to **know** if I have seen it or not.

In the time of the Roman Empire, at the games, there were very effective tools to prove if people lied. As for example, after a match in the arena, a gentleman used to go around touching all the bodies lying in the floor with a red hot iron to determine with 100% accuracy if they were dead, and not just pretending.

64- Virtual Reality

14 March 2009, 13:57:07

During the American trip in 1995 I already mentioned, I visited the Grand Canyon. I was driving from Phoenix and arrived too late in the evening to see the landscape, as it was already dark. I had booked a hotel in a commercial complex a few kilometres from the edge, which included restaurants, shops and a brand new IMAX cinema. Of course the film showing was a 3D glasses 70 mm documentary film about the Canyon, featuring spectacular shots from a plane flying deep inside the gorge. I had this special, unique experience the day before I saw the real canyon.



I thought (already I was into “it”) how extravagant it would have been to watch the film and leave the area without visiting the “real thing”. At that time I was on an American government programme called “International Visitor” invited to travel all around the country to visit things of interest to me as an artist. The theme of the trip for me was “Virtual Reality and computer generated immersive environments”, so it came naturally.

The object of the trip to the Coliseum a couple of days ago was to visit Rewind, a “museum” showing a 3D film reconstruction of the times in which the Coliseum was at its best. The venue is 80 metres away from the real building. You pay, you get your audio guide and follow a member of the staff who leads you through a passage of provincial town fair attractions, simulating an archaeological site. The technology at this point consists just of flickering lights and terror-film-like sounds. But it seems that the weapons and utensils found in this mock excavation are taken from a real one. At the end of the passage is the film theatre. To watch the programme it is necessary to wear special glasses. The film is very well made, everything CGI, and gives a clear view of how the urban landscape and the swing of the games might have been. However, the way of telling the story, the characters that lead it, the editing, etc, is so inspired by Walt Disney aesthetics that it spoils all the fun for intellectual Coliseum avoiders. It must be this way though, because it is the only way of having enough visitors to pay the enormous cost of the installation and production of the film.

After the shocking “reality experience” I had in a way to rewind: having set the limit in one direction, it was good to set one on the other side, of the fake and artificial 80 metres away from the Coliseum.

65- Wild Cards

18 March 2009, 14:46:08

The Coliseum has, actually, a lot to do with the Grand Canyon, although the most important element of similarity is that both are in the folder named “Popular Destinations”. All popular destinations are interchangeable.

Here is the landscape in *Jeans*, a 1998 Bollywood film by S. Shankar. As a result of a very confusing (at same time as simple) script, the main characters, a couple in love, travel first from LA to the Grand Canyon.

How they get there is one of the magical secrets of Bollywood genre: a song starts and they are suddenly dancing in a different place.



A little later in the film, two or three songs that do not involve teletransportation, they are in the Coliseum.

Then they appear successively in other popular destinations.



The same locations are selected for the 2008 film *Jumper*, directed by Doug Liman. The script is certainly less Bollywood style, but it shares the same level of confusion and simplicity as *Jeans*.

Here are the main characters (they are in love).



She is so happy at being stared at! Lucky girl.



And here is the bad guy.



They have also other locations in common as for example:

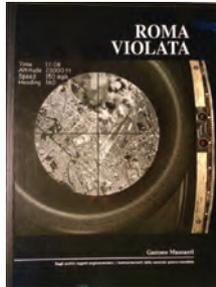


66- Collateral Damage

19 March 2009, 10:33:51

I found this book by Gastone Mazzanti called *Roma Violata* that tells the story of the bombings of Rome during WWII, mainly from the point of view of the bombers, as the book is full of aerial views of the city before, during and after the falling of the bombs.

Here there is a nice view of Rome while some bombs are being dropped. The Coliseum is seen in the upper right corner of the picture.



During the war the allies demarcated a large area of Rome to be preserved from aerial raids. The plan included all the main historical monuments including, of course, the Coliseum.

Some of the American soldiers arriving on liberation day at the site are convinced at this moment that the preservation plan has failed.



The site was saved for future filming.
This location of *Jeans*, by contrast, is not available anymore.



67- Double Jumping

19 March 2009, 12:19:14

The Coliseum has an important role in the film *Jumper*. One of the most important scenes happens there and there are very beautiful shots of it during the film. I cannot resist posting some of them.



The plot of the film is based on the condition of the main character that allows him to “jump” from one place in the world to a different one just by thinking about it. How he acquired this wonderful ability is not explained in detail but the fact is that the character is now in Rome and an instant later in Tokyo, then three seconds later has jumped to the States. The spectator who follows the story is also jumping mentally from one place to the other. The main Coliseum scene is quite long with some sightseeing, love and a big chunk of fighting. The “jumping” is what we can call “only local”: the guy (and now his mate too) jumps only distances of a few metres. They never leave the Coliseum.

However, by watching the extras of the DVD, I learned that a big part of the Coliseum interior was remade on a studio in Toronto, Canada. During this scene the shooting jumps seamlessly from Rome to Toronto and back many times.

The parts are cut in styrofoam,



arranged as the original



and put onto a blue screen set.



This explains the damage the characters are allowed to cause to the stones.

The writer says in the “making of” that he wrote the scene for the Pantheon, but it was not possible and they were very lucky to have the Coliseum instead. He says it enthusiastically, but I think he has a hidden hint of complaint. Ah! unfaithful!

68- Intimate Crowds

22 March 2009, 13:13:25

Today is the Maratona di Roma, which starts and finishes at the Coliseum.



March, 22nd 2009
The most participated sporting event in Italy

One of the important elements of public spectacles is the amount of people attending: if the crowd is big, the event is more exciting. I think this is clear in this “most participated sporting event” as it was in the times



of the Gladiatorial games. More people make it more special, the crowd becoming one person reacting at once to the same stimulus. The record of the runner or the death of the gladiator are glorified to the maximum level by the mass.

There is a touristic engineering anecdote that plays nicely with this “crowding effect”: the power station located near Niagara Falls that produces energy from the fall of water is allowed to control of the volume of water diverted from the Falls to the turbine. I heard that the criterion they use to decide how much water they can withdraw from the Falls is the occupancy level of the hotels in the area: the more tourists, more splendidly the water falls. It is as if the Coliseum grows and shrinks with the tourists.

The “crowding effect” happened also, I guess, in the concert Paul McCartney gave in the Coliseum on 11th May 2003 when he performed in front of 500.000 people.



But the day before there was also a frisson, for 400 people only, from the opposite feeling, the one of exclusivity. 400 fans payed almost £1000 each to attend the concert McCartney gave inside the building.

There were also “exclusive” killings in relation to the games, not as glamorous as the ones in the arena, but more intimate. I learned that, in order to make lions and other wild animals keen to hunt and devour running humans, they were fed living slaves during the days the beasts were training as executioners. They were not very enthusiastic about human flesh to start with but, as when a small amount of free heroin is given to kids, they quickly became addicts, making the slave investment worthwhile.

69- Bonus Crowds

26 March 2009, 12:38:02

The number of people playing the role of audience in gladiatorial movies also makes a difference in terms of the scene's intensity. This audience can be seen as "servo-mechanisms" or "signal repeaters" that amplify the effect of the arena for the bigger audience of movie theaters. Or they could be like the paying audience in theatres, always prepared to clap at a signal from the director (In Spanish is called "cla". I think it comes from "a-cla-mation"). These people, the hired clappers, are part of the play as much as these actors playing the audience.

The quality and capacity of the amplifiers in movies is directly connected with budget.



Gladiator (2000)



Quo Vadis (1951)





Maciste, Gladiatore di Sparta (1964)



Androcles and the Lion (1952)



The Last Days of Pompeii (1935)



Life of Brian (1979)

70- Senses

28 March 2009, 16:30:09

The closest to the Coliseum I had been until yesterday was when using the tube.



The proximity of the tunnel to the building is surprising. However, the sensory experience of the Coliseum in the underground is non-existent.

Yesterday I got a quasi-complete sensory experience of the Coliseum (and I guess a few extra-sensory ones too).



I touched



listened to



smelled



and tasted the Coliseum.

Everything except the thing.

Here is a short review:

1- It is cold, especially in the shaded part, rugous, and impossible to hold in your arms.

2- It smells moist, like after rain.

3- The sound of the tourists shouting and the cars did not allow me to get much of sound of the building itself but something of the atmosphere surrounding it. I was naively expecting to be able to hear some harmonics of the remains of the vibrations the steps of elephants made in 80 AD.

4- It is definitely savoury, kind of salty.

I wonder how many people have licked the Coliseum since the building has been there. Apart from the arena itself, where I guess many gave it a try. Perhaps since the coming of jet culture there have been some Japanese visitors, who so much like Italy and the taste of Italian things (Oishii desu ne). Maybe a model made out of pizza.

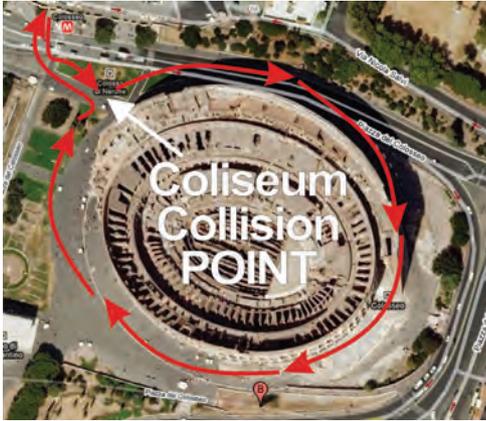
Anyway. The expedition started at the Colosseo underground station. Even from the inside of the station, before leaving by the gates, you can already see it. I had to put on my eye patches right there.



This time I had two people to help me, due to the complicated logistics of the operation.

Ana (from the door of the station) and Daniel.





The assignment was to make me circle as closely as possible around the Coliseum, touching the exterior all around the perimeter. The secondary tasks were three: keep my physical integrity intact, document photographically the adventure and keep track of the timing of the operation. We went clockwise.

Here are some pictures of the way.



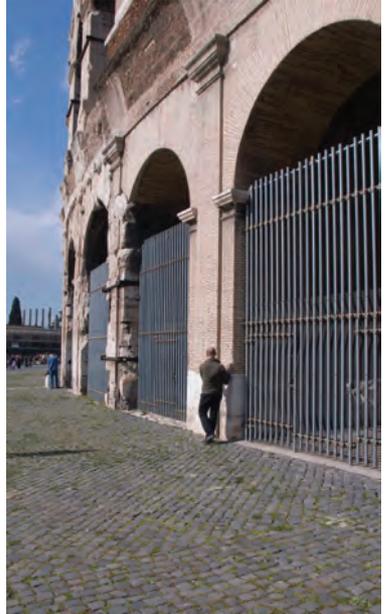
Useless attempts to measure the height of the building





There were some difficult spots in which I was helped.

I passed close to police agents of different eras



People looked at me, apparently as if they thought I was injured



Since I touched in and I touched out 44 minutes 12 seconds have passed. Most of the time I had my eyes open behind the patch. I did not realise until very late that perhaps closing my eyes would have helped me to concentrate. I am not sure what made me more confident.

Even the performance aspect of the visit I felt was really the approach of a sculptor. The actions were very much related to volume, size and material. I think ideas about what happened in the course of this visit will come to me in the next days.

71- El mundo al revés (up side down world)

29 March 2009, 12:27:00

To encircle the Coliseum blindfolded made me think again about the inverted Coliseum in Bath, which I already visited couple of months ago.

If I had been blindfolded in that occasion too, the differences would have been:



- If I had circled clockwise as I did the other day, I would have had the wall on my left.

- The walk would have taken less time, because the Bath one is smaller and because the perimeter is encircled from the inside, reducing the distance.

- Although the angle of my walk would have been the same there would have been an issue concerning the concepts of “concave” and “convex” that I cannot quite define in my mind.

This inversion of the Coliseum can imply metaphorically that the whole world is just this small circle with only one tree (the Amazonian rain forest of the square) in the middle. Or it implies that the whole world beyond the walls of the square is a Coliseum, a violent spectacle. Like *The Great Theatre of the World*.



*Base of the World,
Magic Base No. 3 by
Piero Manzoni 1961
Homage to Galileo*

In 1961 Piero Manzoni created this work that has the same conceptual mechanism. By creating this pedestal he claims that the whole Earth is his sculpture.



*Socle du monde (Base of the World), 1961
iron, bronze, 82x100x100cm
Herning Kunstmuseum, Denmark*

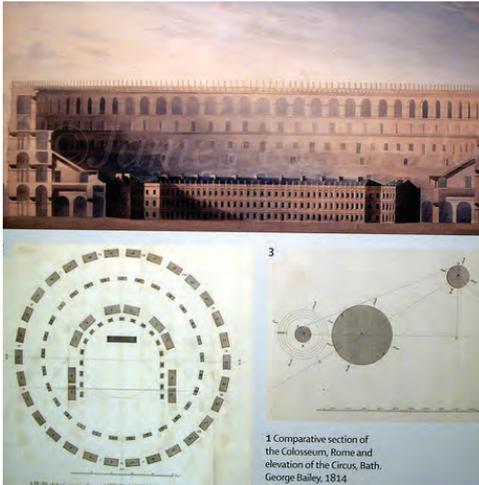
By crosschecking the available information on the Internet about this work and Manzoni's life I have determined that probably the work was conceived and realised in January 1961. This happens to be the month of my birthday. I wonder if the Earth became a sculpture the same day that became "something exterior in relation to me". Before "everybody is an artist" comes "everybody is a pedestal" ("Jeder Mensch Ein Podest").

72- Frames

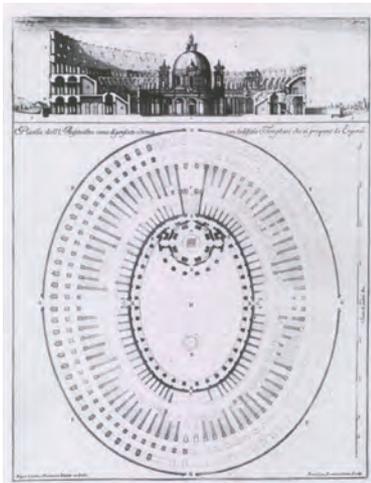
30 March 2009, 22:17:09

I would like to insert again this image, that appears in post 53, to confront it with another similar one.

It is the display of the proportion of the Coliseum in relation to the Circus in Bath, made by drawing one into the other at the same scale.



This illustration, created perhaps by John Wood the architect of the Circus, shows the humbleness of this new architectural milestone in relationship with the greatness of the Flavian Amphitheatre. At the same time it suggests that the Circus is such a beautiful building that the 50,000 spectators of the Coliseum might watch it indefinitely.



Here is the other image. The visionary architect in this case is Carlo Fontana. He made plans in 1703 for a church to be built filling completely the arena. Church, and ultimately religion, has become here a spectacle to look at.

During the Roman Games the Coliseum worked as a frame, creating limits and distance for the violence, which remained in the arena isolated from the rest of the urban civilised life of Rome. It is very different from the other kinds of violence and death, those of the war and the accidents happening in the process of the construction of the Empire.

Death in the arena is somehow virtual, second generation drama, even if real people suffered and died there. As in action movies, the most explicit violence is separated from the public by the formal frame. Inside the projected church within the Coliseum the passion of the Christ is also virtual, blood and flesh made with wine and bread.

I would like to see the Coliseum in this post as if it was a frame for an art work, decorated with leaves, fruits, and signs carved all around.



The violence of the art work is restrained by the frame. The gallery works as a frame for the show. It creates the floodgate that allows the simultaneous existence of art and life, destruction and production.

I think it is still there (I did not go to check if it was okay). But anyway, today we got the same swing.

In Japan I have experienced several quakes stronger than this one, some in huge concrete buildings, some in wooden houses. I have even attended an earthquake survival course at a training/entertainment facility at the firemen's headquarters in Ikebukuro, north of Tokyo. Japanese are well prepared operationally and psychologically for such an eventuality. I have this dreamy idea of London or Paris being hit by a powerful earthquake and, on account of the French or British citizens and emergency workers being completely confused, the rescue tasks having to be undertaken by Japanese tourists, extremely calm and organised.

74- The Way of the Cross

10 April 2009, 10:34:31

Today, as it is Good Friday, the Coliseum becomes the stage for The Stations of the Cross, a seasonal Catholic performance put on by the Church. It has been on show since 1749, when Pope Benedict XIV put the cross in the middle. A well established re-enactment play.



Yesterday, when I was coming back home, I saw the glow of the building, specially illuminated for the occasion.



The light is coming from the back of the Palatine Hill, which I discovered yesterday is what allows me to come home without being blindfolded everyday.

The rays made think of the picture of the bombing of Rome and the Nuremberg parades.

75- Roman Typeface

23 April 2009, 20:30:44



TRAJAN PRO TYPE FACE

Trajan® Pro

The inscription on the base of Trajan's column in Rome is an example of classic Roman letterforms, which reached their peak of refinement in the first century A.D. It is believed that the letters were first written with a brush, then carved into the stone. These forms provided the basis for this Adobe Originals typeface designed by Carol Twombly in 1989. Trajan is an elegant typeface well-suited for display work in books, magazines, posters, and billboards.

76- Dissemination

27 April 2009, 12:38:37

I arrived in Osnabrueck for European Media Art Festival and the first thing I saw in the street was this babelian billboard.



Images of the Coliseum are spread all over the world. They belong to a “meta-nation” of icons. I wonder how many times in my life up until now I have seen images of the Coliseum.

I had a lead I am going to follow about a Pope who thought it would be an interesting idea to get pilgrims to take home some debris from the Coliseum, so in a certain number of years the building would have disappeared into the world in homage to the martyrs who suffered there. The building would have been reduced to ground zero standards and the land would have been ready for the construction of a new church. I do not know why it did not happen.

I have imagined all the time the pilgrims with their little plastic bags full of debris but there was no plastic at that time.

77- Space Travelling

08 May 2009, 15:30:42

I got this picture from Casilda, a guest at the Academy, who went to the Coliseum during her four days stay and told me about her visit.



Apparently these tourists like to bring their two dogs to all the places they visit. They can see the sights from their travelling pod.

I recall Shimabuku's video *Then, I decided to give a tour of Tokyo to the Octopus from Akashi* (2000), a documentary account of his experience of capturing an octopus in Akashi in the south of Japan, giving him a ride to Tokyo in the shinkansen and bringing him back in the evening to Akashi again and releasing him alive. Along the way he shows him Mount Fuji, and Tsukiji, the Tokyo fish market. Never before had an octopus left the premises of Tsukiji alive.

For the artist, as he said, this was his own Apollo project.



Shimabuku and octopus

78- Unscrambled Eggs

10 May 2009, 11:34:16

I have received a clipping from La Repubblica from Enrique, the director of our Academy.



Two American tourists have sent back anonymously to Rome some fragments of the Coliseum they took on a holiday trip 25 years ago. They have been suffering remorse all these years until they finally took the decision to repair the mess.

Also Tom Ripley, played here by Matt Damon, is about to take the mattock out of his bag.



Those citizens are following a very trendy, responsible, politically correct, movement. The next step should be to return all other souvenirs they collected in their trips, including pottery from France, and a Scotland Yard plastic hat they got in Heathrow before they left the Kingdom.

But other tourists who have collected stones should also give them back. Going a bit further, it would be interesting to dismantle San Pietro to give all the stones belonging to the Coliseum back to the building, and all other palaces, bridges, staircases... until the building would return to its original splendiferous shape (Empty the British Museum too!).

The fair response of the Comune di Roma should be to send the stones back to the quarries, dismantle the whole Coliseum and then, finally, make peace with Nature restored. No more remorse.

Kurt Vonnegut writes something similar in *Slaughterhouse 5* when he narrates backwards the bombing and destruction of Europe during WWII, as if the bombs were sucked by the planes and taken back to America to be dismantled and their components dispersed in Nature.

But you know, Manuel, that this is hollow idealism, something impossible to achieve, if only because of the law of thermodynamics. As an artist would say, if we cannot get back to paradise, the only way out is to go as far as possible into disorder. I think I must steal some stones from the Parthenon in Athens and send them to Rome, with a contrite note saying that I took them from the Coliseum some years ago.

This city is full of fragments. Please send integral experiences only.

79- Reparations Agreement

10 May 2009, 13:02:05

The travertine used in the construction of the Coliseum was brought from the Tiber quarries, about seventeen miles from Rome. A road was specially built for this purpose, along which, according to tradition, 30,000 Jewish prisoners assigned to the task formed an uninterrupted double line. These prisoners were taken to Rome by Titus, who won the Jewish/Roman war (66-73). Also it seems the main budget for the construction of the building came from the looting of Jerusalem by Titus.

Once built, the Coliseum also used Jews for feeding the shows (and the animals featured in them).

It is easy to imagine that money looted by Nazis from Jewish families before WWII was used to build the Congress Hall and Documentation Centre in Nuremberg.



And also the Berlin Olympic Stadium by Werner March (1936).



The **Reparations Agreement between Israel and West Germany** was signed on September 10, 1952, and entered in force on March 27, 1953. According to the Agreement, West Germany was to pay Israel for the slave labor and persecution of Jews during the Holocaust, and to compensate for Jewish property that was stolen by the Nazis. (Wikipedia)

As far as I know, no reparations agreement was ever signed between the Roman Empire and any of the countries looted and destroyed (rebuilt in a Roman way).

Because, apart from the sanitation, the medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, a fresh water system, and public health, what have the Romans ever done for us?

80- Negative Land

16 May 2009, 18:00:49

Here is a self-portrait of Alighiero Boetti from 1968 that is like an illustration of the idea I was suggesting in post number 71.

Following the logic of my post, if Manzoni's work makes the whole world his work, and the inverted Coliseum in Bath makes the whole world an arena,





this could be an example of both:

- either the whole world outside the stone is Alighiero Boetti,
- or the whole world is compressed inside the stone, like in a kind of a universe before expansion.

81- Reversal of Fortune

21 May 2009, 12:17:15

I am preparing the end of my Coliseum project. I am going to see the building on the 1st of July, exact conditions still to be arranged.

But the evening before, already “in costume”, I will give a talk at the Academy about my experience. The title of the talk is:



I was designing the card and this came to my mind:

I HAVE SPENT EIGHT MONTHS IN THE COLISEUM
AND I HAVE NOT SEEN ROME. TOMORROW I WILL.

Unfortunately it is too late for this most radical project. Perhaps one of my next projects will be to spend 8 months inside the Taj Mahal before seeing India.

Even though it sounds radical I know other projects similar to this new one other people have done, like “I have been ten years in Alcatraz and I have not seen San Francisco” or “I have been all my life in the Forbidden City and I have not seen China”. In a way I have been all these months inside the Coliseum: the Coliseum inside my head.

82- Routines

24 May 2009, 12:09:20

There are some repeat procedures in this project that are a bit annoying after seven months of practice. I am kind of tired, for example, of interrupting conversations when passing through the Piazza Venezia in the H bus because I have to be alert not to look to the right.

An important nuisance I endure is to try to sleep or dive into my book when taking off from Ciampino airport. I always look for an aisle seat which makes it easier. But the other day taking off there was a moment of turbulence and instinctively I looked through the window at the fields below. I was far from seeing it, but I felt a sudden unexpected emotion.

It is clear that I am not the target of this Lufthansa campaign.



83- Roman Games

28 May 2009, 11:57:08

I have a couple of images a friend took for me during the winter of a kind of South American football league that has been taking place outside the Coliseum. Inside and outside games.



Yesterday there was an “important” football match happening in Rome. The Olympic Stadium, in the northern part of the city, can hold 72,698 spectators and I guess yesterday it was full. This is roughly the amount of people who were able to attend a show at the Coliseum in the golden times of the Roman Empire.

A big part of the audience came from abroad, mainly Catalonia and Manchester; there were not as many Romans watching as in the times of the gladiatorial games. What was going to happen in the Olympic Stadium was felt in the whole city. Attendants were not so bloodthirsty, but just in case, beer was not allowed to be sold over a period of several hours.



“Bevanda magica” was not allowed, but profusely advertised throughout the city for a long time, curiously enough, in Coliseum-themed billboards and installations.



Advertising has made intensive use of the “historical dimension” of the event, the same in the world of beer as in this one of shoes.

There is too much barbarity in sports for me to cope with. I prefer not to see anything related to it.



84- Embassy of Uncertainty States. Pay-per-View

31 May 2009, 12:57:58

Art projects are fragile. I cannot recall an art project I like that can be qualified as (accused of being) “solid”. “Solid Art” sounds to me oxymoronic. If I have to say something about an art work with good reasons to exist I rather would say that is “a coherent project”, a vaporous coherent one.

The fragility of art projects (even the very coherent ones) becomes evident when the project comes in contact with non-art environments and structures. I prefer not to approach people with interests alien to those of the art, because this relationship is regularly disappointing and changes my character (and we want a 100% full artistic personality, don't we?). Only people, artists or not, who understand what is the peculiar specific value of your work and appreciate it are worth working with. The rest are an open door to future humiliations.

Through a slight misunderstanding I went to the hotel Gladiatori to propose a possibility for the ending of my Coliseum project with the wrong idea that the owner was an art collector. There is another hotel nearby owned by a collector but not this one. I only found out about the mistake once I was in the taxi on my way to the meeting.

The facilitator of the encounter helped me arrive at the hotel and get upstairs where the manager would meet us. We entered the cafeteria on the top, next to the terrace, and I had to walk with my eyes closed to get a seat, because the Coliseum invades this room by every orifice. I sat and waited. When the manager came an awkward situation developed because I needed to walk backwards to shake his hand, as to turn to receive him would have involved getting a perfect view of the building. At that point I already felt embarrassed and perceived, beyond the manager's polite professionalism, a hint of what-a-loony-I-am-talking-to attitude. I was there, explaining my project and the value of my work, like an Ambassador of Another Mind Frame who tries to get into commercial relationships with a country that does not have any interests in the exchange. I recalled the image of European ambassadors in the courts of the Japanese Shoguns, trying to emphasise the importance of industrialization and the advances already made in their countries.

My intention was to get there and have breakfast at the terrace with 30 people on the 1st of July, at 4.30 am, and wait with them until the daylight unveiled

the building. I explained as best I could and we left with promises of following emails. The key phrase of the meeting, profously repeated, was “we can do that”.

It has been one month of unanswered messages and vaguely promising calls (one way only). A few days ago I got the deterrent estimate for this 90 minute event: 3.000 euros.

I am now looking for a new location or possibility. More news to come.



Privileged terrace of the Gladiatori Hotel. The picture was taken with the Coliseum at my back. Between the hotel and the Coliseum lie the remains of the Ludus Magnus, where the gladiators trained.

My refusal to deal with people who are not in the know is in tune (although on another theme) with this statement P. Ruiz P. made in 1935: “Toutes choses que je fais en relation avec l’art me donnent une grande joie. Néanmoins je ne vois pas pourquoi tout le monde s’occupe d’art, lui demande des comptes, et à son sujet laisse libre cours à sa propre sottise. Les Musées sont autant de mensonges, les gens qui s’occupent d’art sont pour la plupart des imposteurs”.

85- Scouting

03 June 2009, 10:45:44

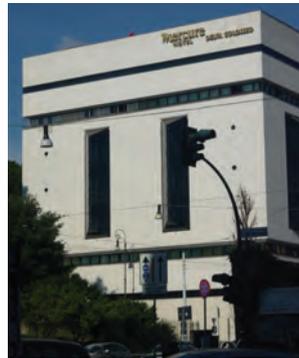
Due to the fact that the place I thought was the best for the end of my project is not available, I have to look for a new solution that can give me, at least, the same results.

As I am clearly showing in this Colossal Blog project, the more annoyances a project provides, the more useful the experience turns out. I am confident that the extra time and energy I am going to invest in looking for a new location for the project is going to bear fruit that the Gladiatori was not ready to offer.

So I am scouting for a new place from which to look for the first time at the Coliseum. I went to the site to tour around the building, once again, blindfolded and with a guide. I walked 20 or 30 steps and stopped with the building at my back to look at the landscape to search for new spots and possibilities. I am like a filmmaker looking for the perfect shot and who can look at everything except the shot. These are my notes:

First I check hotel availability in the zone. There is a Mercure hotel a bit further in via Labicana, the Delta Colosseo.

I could be the person on the top, looking at the Coliseum from the pool, or the one in the window at the right, watching from his room.



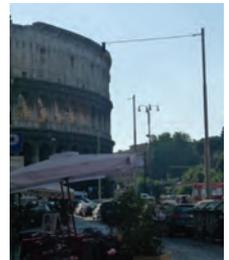
The view from the pool is good, but a bit far. Actually the building of the Gladiatori covers a part of the Coliseum. My friendly guide went to the terrace and took this picture from there.



Next to the Gladiatori Hotel is this salmon pink building, which belongs to a savings bank. The offices of the bank are on the ground floor. The rest looks pretty empty, but the logo of the bank is in the window panes.

I thought of the possibility of breaking into the bank one night, staying there until dawn, looking at the building, and then leaving in the morning. An adventure in the style of *Sette volte sette* or *The Hot Rock*. These are two movies in which they commit one crime in order to commit a completely different one, not connected at all. For me to see the Coliseum is not exactly a crime.

Here there is a lower terrace, on a bar. It needs more research.



This building in front, up on the hill, must have a wonderful view. It has two cafes downstairs.

To ask for the terrace it is necessary start ringing all these bells.



Let's see how it goes.

86- Unfolded Reflections

08 June 2009, 11:24:47

My friend Manuela tells me about her aunt in Quito (Ecuador), who did not see the sea until she was 17 years old. She knew so much about the sea, she had an idea so precise (even if probably not accurate) about how it was before she saw it, that after the moment she encountered it she had experienced two different seas, the imagined one, still vivid and pretty sharp in her imagination, and the real one she saw on that occasion. There were actually three seas (almost like Kosuth chairs): the imagined one, the real one, and the result of the combination of both when there were confronted.

Ruins are inspiring because when you look at them you fill in the spaces between the stones, you are forced to supply the missing pieces. To experience

something without seeing it also invites you to create features for the details not known. What I am now speculating about is how once I see a building's remains I would be able to speculate about how it was.



87- Drunkenness in Company

08 June 2009, 11:45:20

Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, artist Manuel Saiz was to remember that distant dawn when his friends took him to discover the Coliseum.

What I am expecting for the final event of the project is just to be positioned in a good spot overlooking the building when the light of the dawn is hitting it.

The key element of looking at the building for the first time will be to share the experience with friends and colleagues. It is important to watch, but equally, working in synergy, it is important to see other people watching, being watched watching, to see yourself watching.

This conjunction of visual relationships was, apparently, of extreme importance during the Roman gladiatorial games. They could get the feedback of their own inebriation when watching the blood, from the emotion of others watching them inebriated

by blood. “The gladiatorial combats damage the capacity of rational thought” says the literature and so does the art, if we trust Stendhal’s Italian experiences: *I felt myself grown incapable of rational thought, but rather surrendered to the sweet turbulence of fancy, as in the presence of some beloved object... The tide of emotion which overwhelmed me flowed so deep that it scarce was to be distinguished from religious awe.*

St Augustine writes memorably in his Confessions of one Alypius, who was eventually to become a Christian bishop, going unwillingly to some shows with his friends. Though determined to keep his eyes shut, as soon as he peeped he was hooked. The spectacle had done its work: “when he saw the blood, it was as though he had drunk deeply on savage passion” (The Coliseum by Keith Hopkins and Mary Beard).

Ana suggested I should give my talk there in the cafe, at 4.30 in the morning, while watching the building for the first time, but I think my capacity for rational thought, normally limited, will be at a minimum at that point, especially before coffee is served.

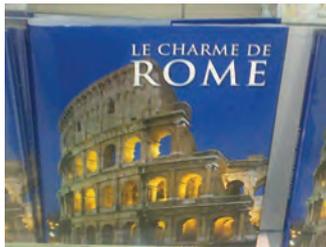
Still some meetings to hold but it seems that my first viewing is going to be something like this:



88- Delegation

08 June 2009, 12:00:27

The fascination of Rome has been decanted drop by drop into the Coliseum. I have been immune to it because every possibility of being fascinated has been delegated to the contemplation of the building. This will contribute to the intensity of that moment.



89- Light Effects

10 June 2009, 11:23:30

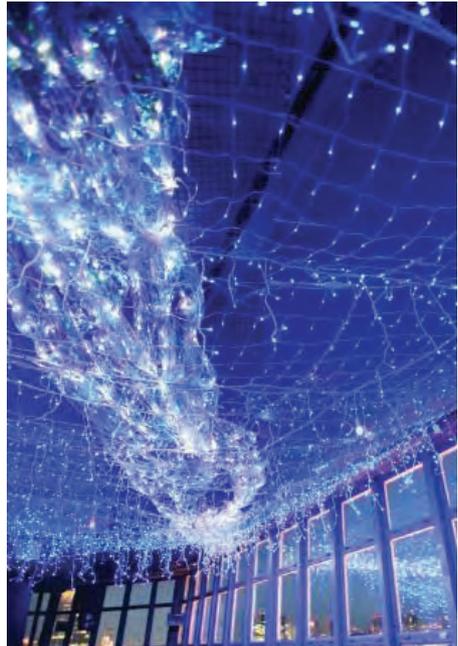
Tokyo Tower is especially creative in light effects. The structure has to compete with many other buildings and light emitters through the city.



Recently there has been an special attraction for the visitors to the upper deck of the tower consisting of 5.000 electric bulbs organised in the shape of the Milky Way.

Also the Coliseum is very creative in terms of the light arrangements. There is a special set for the days that a death penalty has been commuted anywhere in the world.

BBC in January 2007: Rome has lit up the arches of the Colosseum to highlight Italy's support for a global ban on the death penalty. Italy launched its campaign in the wake



of former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein's execution, which sparked widespread protest among Italians. Rome's mayor said the Colosseum, once a place of gladiatorial combat, was now a "symbol of peace and reconciliation".

To maximize the effect of seeing the Coliseum delicately fading into my view, I am asking the city of Rome to turn off the lights of the building for few hours. The director of the Spanish Academy in Rome has been so kind as to write to the three institutions in charge of the lights of the building. If everything goes well the lights of the building will be off from 4.30 am to 6 am on the 1st of July. Without this light pollution it will be a bit easier to see the Milky Way.



Governor of New Mexico, Bill Richardson and Archbishop of Santa Fe, Michael Sheehan, attending a special ceremony at the Coliseum on 15th April 2009, when New Mexico abolished the death penalty.

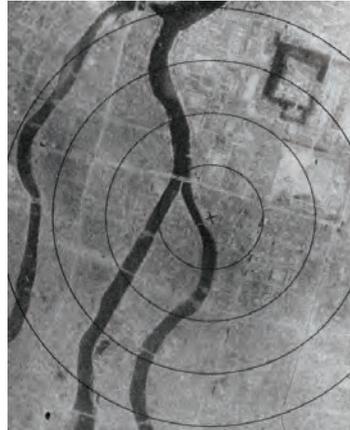
90- Ground Zero

10 June 2009, 12:09:46



I like to repeat this picture from the book *Roma Violata*

to compare it with these two that are almost contemporary with that one.



This is Hiroshima before and after the bomb. The Roman one is like a frame you can put in between in the sequence.

The square in the top right corner, almost in the same place that the Colosseum occupies in the picture of Rome, is the location of the Castle of Hiroshima:

Hiroshima Castle, sometimes called Carp Castle, is a castle in Hiroshima, Japan which was the home of the daimyō (feudal lord) of the Hiroshima han (fief).



Originally constructed in the 1590s, the castle was destroyed in the atomic bombing in 1945. It was rebuilt in 1958, a replica of the original which now serves as a museum of Hiroshima's history prior to World War II (from Wikipedia).



*Hiroshima today
by Google maps*

91- Blindest Date

18 June 2009, 20:27:18

Since I arrived in Rome I have been looking forward (notice the expression) to taking this picture.



I am playing the role of Oedipus, a man who willingly removed his capacity of sight. The look is inspired by Pasolini's (1967) *Edipo Re*.



I have been always fascinated by this story, sometimes because of the idea of “fate”, sometimes because the “fear and disgust of knowledge”, now because of the theme of blindness. Tiresias, the blind, is the wisest man in town.

At least temporarily you remove your capacity of seeing when attending the Unsight Restaurant. A friend writes to me about her experience of having dinner in the Berlin branch. After you order you go into a pitch dark room where you have a full dinner assisted by blind staff, who take care of you. Then you receive the dishes and a very simple transaction with your survival needs becomes a strong experience. Manners and senses change their meaning.

Many of the things she said about how you feel in the restaurant reminded me of my visits to the Coliseum blindfolded.

On the first of July hopefully my blindness will be revoked.

It is what happens with artists: as Perich said “the worst blind person is the one who doesn’t want to hear”.

92 - Forecasting Misery

19 June 2009, 13:09:26

The road to preparing a first view of the Coliseum is full of obstacles. It is so frustrating that it invites you to think that there is a spell to make my insignificant project look insignificant. As my friend says “you are dealing with the clerical-conservative bureaucratic system of Rome”. I start to feel like leaving without seeing it.

I dealt with the hotel, a couple of cafes, private terraces, catering services, and for the moment everything resists being closed (the deal closed, the business open). I think this is a project that doesn't inspire the local business owners with confidence.

I do not know how it is going to be but at least certain facts are clear:

Latitude +41.89 (41°53'24"N)

Longitude +12.5 (12°30'00"E)

Dawn 05.06

Sunrise 05.40

The phase of the moon will be something like this:



So, even if the lights of the building are off, it will be softly illuminated by the moon.

In the eighteenth century it was a must for British visitors doing the Grand Tour to contemplate the building at full moon.



Edible “Moons or Rome” and “For the city and for the world” biscuits.

I wonder from which direction Titus saw the building for the first time once it was officially finished.

I hope to have more facts in a few days, at least the weather forecast.

93- Fornes

20 June 2009, 10:30:17

One possibility of making the act of viewing the Coliseum for the first time special might be to contemplate it right after make love under its arches. The word “fornication” comes from the habits of Roman prostitutes commonly solicited under the arches of the Coliseum and other significantly dark Roman buildings. Like many others during the history of the building, under the moonlight, *The Colossal Blog* Project group, hiring the services of prostitutes of both sexes to celebrate the occasion. Well, I don’t know... perhaps it is too “Santiago Sierra” for my liking.

Also, this would look pretty much like the Bacchanalia, and these used to be held in a grove near the Aventine Hill.

fornication c.1300, from O.Fr. fornication, from L.L. fornicationem (nom. fornicatio), from fornicari “fornicate,” from L. fornix (gen. fornicis) “brothel,” originally “arch, vaulted chamber”, from fornus “oven of arched or domed shape.” Strictly, “voluntary sex between an unmarried man and an unmarried woman;”.

I haven’t found
any appropriate picture
to illustrate this post.

94- Seppuku

21 June 2009, 13:15:15

These days of inconveniences and threatening omens about my first visit to the Coliseum, in which sometimes the darkest thoughts come to my mind (for example, leaving the country without finishing the project) I am assaulted also by the sudden vertigo of the possibility of taking a taxi and going right away to the building to “finish with everything”.

It feels quite like a suicidal desire. Let's say that the impulse is somewhat the same. (I remember many years ago that I associated that urgency with the desire to shave your head, as a substitute of chopping it off. There was no "shaved head" trend at the time and it was something only for lunatics).

Taking the similarity of the emotion and bringing it forward, I will say that this blog would be my suicide note. I read in Wikipedia that it is estimated that 12-20% of suicides are accompanied by a note. Does this statistic also apply to art projects? Are 20% of art projects accompanied by a text explaining the way it is going to end?

Also in Wikipedia: According to Dr. Lenora Olson, the most common reasons that people contemplating suicide choose to write a suicide note include one or more of the following:

- To ease the pain of those known to the victim by attempting to dissipate guilt.
- To increase the pain of survivors by attempting to create guilt.
- To set out the reason(s) for suicide.
- To give instructions as to disposal of remains.
- Occasionally, those who have committed murder or some other offense will confess their crimes in a note.

I am not sure which of those would apply to this Colossal Blog.

Masaki Kobayashi's *Seppuku* (1962), tells a story about ritual suicide in the feudal Japan of the clans. At that time, when the wars between lords have finished and a new stable order exists, there are not enough resources to maintain as many retainers as there used to be. Many samurais without lords wander through the country in total poverty. It is so humiliating for them (their honor does not allow them to beg) that some decide to commit honorable ritual suicide. To give official status to it, they ask the favour of a Lord, to provide them with the space and resources

that the protocol requires. In the film, one lord who agreed to help a samurai in this final act, feels compassion for him and hires him to take him out of poverty, removing therefore the reason to commit suicide. Great.

But then many other samurais ask for the same thing, and an increasing number of them are betting with their life just to provoke the situation of being hired, with no real intentions of finishing their lives honourably. Unfortunately the only way to show your full commitment is just to finish your life.



Seppuku

I think that I might be thinking about going to the Coliseum just to provoke this post, without the real desire of finishing the project. The true honorable ritual suicide will happen on the 1st of July and this situation now is just result of weakness. To leave the country without seeing it would be also to cover myself with the most horrible ignominy.

95- Onirical Timeline

23 June 2009, 12:36:34

People who follow this blog would not be surprised to know that I dream of the Coliseum. I have some daily life dreams of Him and, on bad nights, I have also some anxiety dreams in which, try to guess..., I see Him unintentionally.

I have a very clear memory of when I thought about this project for the first time: I was in a London bus, coming back home after looking at many guides to Rome in Borders. However I have no recollection whatsoever about the first time I dreamt in relation to it. It would be interesting to have a history of dreams, that collects the first occasions in which particular things were dreamt. When somebody dreamt for the first time, for example, that something that happened in the dream could be undone by pressing Ctrl+ Z?

Anyway, to be a resident in Rome and dream about the Coliseum you do not need to be doing an artistic project about it. It is enough to be leading your daily life.



Badge



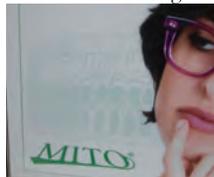
Ice Cream fridge



Sugar 1



Sugar 3



Advertisement for a pair of glasses



Lollipop



Sugar 2



Chocolate



Rental car logo



Advertisement for the city Christmas campaign



Advertising poster for an exhibition



Advertisement for Mozzarella



Advertisement for I-don't-know-what



Logo of a bank



Logo of electrical company



Logo of a cafe (notice the grains in the arches)



Logo of a funerary business



Van of an ironmonger

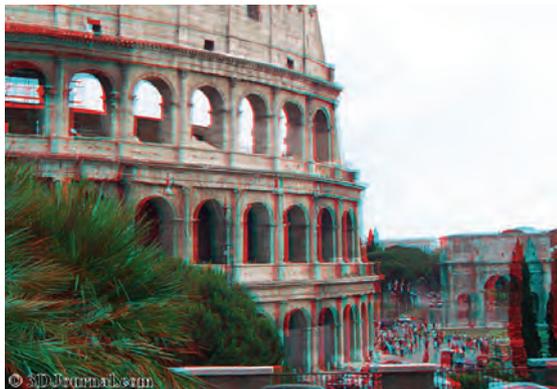
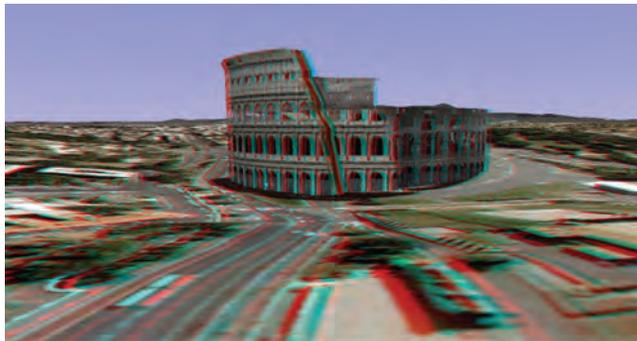
96- Stereovision

27 June 2009, 14:30:28

It seems that the event in which I see the Coliseum for the first time is going to be low profile. Some friends are going to gather to see the building with me, on the 1st of July, at 4.30 am. We will eat some tiramisu and drink iced coffee while the sun rises. It will be nice and cozy.

I discussed with some friends what to do until 4.30, whether it is better to go to sleep for a few hours or to stay awake the whole night. One of my friends recommended going to have some drinks before the event, but another very wisely replied that after not seeing the Coliseum for 8 months it will be interesting if I do not see it double the first time.

Kwong sent me some time ago these double images of the Coliseum, to see in 3D.



97- The Man and the Building

27 June 2009, 23:23:11

Every time I am preparing a visit to the Coliseum, for location scouting, dealing with the owners of the business or for pure danger lust, it feels like an operation in a state of emergency. It is necessary to plan the way to approach the place, the people who are coming, the tasks to accomplish, the material to bring...

A friend tells me about her problems when she goes to her country where, because of political problems, she has to be protected every time she leaves her home. Bodyguards must to be arranged, routes have to be checked before she starts the trip and somebody has to go before her to every shop or cafeteria, to see if everything is okay. She says that this sensation of being dependent on somebody makes her think about me going to the Coliseum.

The other day I went again to the place to be photographed in front of the building blindfolded by Fie Tanderup, a Danish artist who is doing a collection of works in which she portrays people in places they have a special relationship with.



The pictures she took are on film, so I have to wait some time to see it. I will publish it here, probably, after the end of the project.

The man and the building.



98- Refresh Rate

28 June 2009, 18:20:28

I have been exposed to the light of the Coliseum so many times already, I have turned my gaze away from it, so many blind walks, that many times I am completely accustomed to it. You just close your eyes, ask the person coming with you to guide you, walk backwards for a while, make enormous turns around to avoid streets, etc. Very normal stuff.

The other day, while walking to the meeting with Fie, I decided to take a shortcut I'd never used before, because just 100 metres exposed to the Coliseum could save me 10 minutes walk. And while I was looking in the opposite direction, marching "in profile", a thought clearly came to my mind: "what a stupid thing I am doing, all this Coliseum business!". I felt completely ridiculous.

After the first shock and uncertainty it was great. I felt again the artistic power of the project: "I am an artist. I do not believe in it. I am not a lunatic. I do this because it makes me feel things and experience emotions such as, for example, the one of being ridiculous".

I need a periodic refreshing of this feeling, to get enthusiasm for the project. I think is good to have it quite often.

I have the same approach as regards the people coming to my first view of the Coliseum. Sometimes I think that it is stupid to invite people to come at 4.30 in the morning to see something so banal as me opening my eyes in front of the monument. On other occasions I feel how special and friendly the event could be. Let's see in a few days.

99- The Perfect Shot

28 June 2009, 18:54:04

After many scouting visits I finally decided what should be the first image of the building I am going to see.



Instead of being the one sitting there, I will be in the place from which the picture has been taken.

The idea is to gather with some friends at 4.30 am in this little piazza.



In this place we will set the table, the glasses, etc. I will sit and slowly I will open my eyes. Hopefully the lights of the building will be off. I will wait for the sun. Then we will toast the end of the project.

Like when shooting a movie, you have to write the script carefully beforehand, think about all the possibilities of framing, look after catering, etc. You can rent the camera and equipment only once. It is all about anticipation. I can see the building for the first time only once.

100- More on Anticipation: The Day After

29 June 2009, 12:20:50

I know that on the 1st everything will be thrilling, to wait for the sun and then for the opening of the building. I will use the free access I am entitled to as a Fellow of the Spanish Academy, a right that I haven't used in the whole stay. Then, at 11.00 I can go to the Mercure Hotel, where I have booked a room, and go to the swimming pool overlooking the Coliseum while having a bathe.



I will probably then walk by the Fori Imperiali sometimes turning my gaze to see the building while heading to the Academy, to get a deserved siesta. I will open the curtains of my studio, closed during all the 8 months.

And then I will be a **NORMAL PERSON!**

I often recall the image of Reagan the day after he left the White House I saw in 1989 in El Pais. He was at the porch of his home in California, in dressing gown, home slippers, picking up the newspaper, like any anonymous citizen. I could not find the picture in the Internet. This one is of the moment he left the White House on 20th January 1989.



1990 was the year of the premiere of Scorsese's *Goodfellas*. In this movie there is a very similar shot, inspired perhaps by the one of Reagan. Henry Hill, played by Ray Liotta, after a life of crime, power, excitement, luxury and arrogance gets into the Witnesses Protection Program after getting all his crime mates into jail. Next day he is in an anonymous suburb of an unknown town picking up the newspaper, living on a salary. Here is a frame of when he and his wife are about to accept the deal.



(Just one anecdote: Michael Ballhaus, the cinematographer of this film was also the one of Fassbinder's *Martha* shot in Roma's Spanish Steps, quoted in the post 23).

I have been thinking of these two images since 1990 when I heard about terrorists giving up and getting reintegrated into society. It must be enormously sad to experience such a downgrade of your emotional life.

Am I going to feel something of the kind? I will know soon.

101- *Bonjour Tristesse*

29 June 2009, 13:02:23

I read the book recommended by Jaime at the beginning of the blog. It is this one.

It is a log of the trip that Carol Dunlop and Julio Cortázar did through the Paris Marseille motorway trying to cover the distance in one month, extremely slowly, stopping in all the break areas. There are many similarities with this Colossal Blog. They take very seriously something which is kind of ridiculous and they use the system in the opposite way that it is intended to be used, as in my projects.

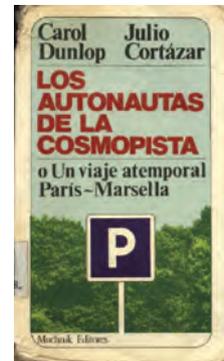
In the log they tell stories related to the motorway, little anecdotes of daily life in the road, quotes of books and films.

The lack of Internet at that time makes their narration much drier.

There is a moment in which they play with the idea that the whole log is a fiction, that they never left Paris, as I did in my blog, suggesting that I have seen the building many times.

I was interested especially in how they leave the motorway, how they trick the payment agents at the end, but they are very unspecific about this. They only say that at the gates they pretend the ticket was lost. And about the feeling, that it was somehow “sad”.

This is the last line of the summary in Wikipedia of the 1954 Françoise Sagan novel *Bonjour Tristesse*: Cécile and her father return to the empty, desultory life they were living before Anne interrupted their summer.



102- Anticipated Memory

29 June 2009, 13:06:42

We came to the Colosseum at twilight. Once one has seen it, everything else seems small. It is so huge that the mind cannot retain its image; one remembers it as smaller than it is, so that every time one returns to it, one is astounded by its size. 11 November 1786 (J. W. Goethe's *Italienische Reise* (Italian Journey)).

I thought I would publish this quote and get it out of the way so then I can get my own impression.

103- A New Era for Coliseum Prevention

02 July 2009, 11:27:01



It has happened and things will be not the same again (even if perhaps not very different).

The Colossal Project sped up the last few days until yesterday's final event.

I do not know still clearly what has changed but I am elaborating new posts to show once again my doubts and confusion, this time about the fact (and from the point of view) of having seen it already.

104- Coliseum Unveiled

03 July 2009, 10:56:54

The day before I arrived late at the Mercure Hotel in Via Labicana, near the building. I went by myself, to concentrate like a matador the day before the bullfight. I took a taxi and looked away when we passed next to the building. I left the taxi and crossed the street, relying on hearing, as I was not able to look back to see if cars were coming. I waited for silence and crossed the street without looking.

The 1st of July started at 4.00 am. I waited for few minutes at the hotel. It was good to sleep in a different environment, close to the location, and have some time to think.



Here I am in the front lobby. Very peculiar moment of excitement.

Alessandro was the first to arrive. He was going to record the event on video. Many of the images are going to be captured frames from his recording.

And a few minutes after him, two cars with my pals from the Academy who also were bringing the stuff for the breakfast.



I got into the car and we passed next to the Coliseum on the way towards the location.



Here I am getting out of the car.

And then waiting for the people to arrive and for the breakfast to be ready.



Things are getting ready in the background. The guests are gathering around me. I am going to give a speech.





Right before opening my eyes.



The very moment.



Fascination.



It's done. The day, though,
went on very much longer.

105- Transcript of the Speech

03 July 2009, 11:01:19

I just want to thank everybody for being here. Especially people who have come from abroad, of course, friends from London. My colleagues at the Academy, Fernando, the secretary, and friends from Rome who are here tonight. I want especially to thank Ana, who has helped me so much, all these months, being my eyes when walking around the building.

And I think it is something I want to be especially grateful to all of you for because it is so ridiculous to come here just for me to open my eyes. To wake up so early, including people who have come from far away, and such an expectation for something so insignificant, so simple, as me opening my eyes, I am very touched.

I think there is something unimportant and ridiculous in this event but I know that the person I am now and the person I am going to be in a few minutes will be different people. I do not know exactly why, I do not know what is going to happen. Nothing physical is going to happen, maybe nothing psychological or emotional, but I am going to be completely different. And I think the people who have come, all of you, have come because you know something different is happening, and it is in the realm of signs and language and the meaning of things, so this is an event for artists and people who work with language and with the significance of things.

I think I have accumulated a lot of energy, symbolic energy, these months, walking covering my eyes, or in the bus or maybe just walking backwards sometimes, odd things... and all this energy I put it in this event, is going now to pay back. And all these moments are going to vanish, the energy is going to dissipate, and that's why we are all here. So thanks very much and let's see what happens.

106- Get this Coliseum Out of My Mind!

05 July 2009, 23:16:54

In the very moment I opened my eyes everything changed. A few days have already passed and I am still evaluating my feelings about it, what I am experiencing as a result of the release of the pressure I put on myself during the the 8 months. I am writing about it and my notes will come soon, but the very first thing to feel after I opened my eyes is that I have projected the Coliseum out of my mind.

Some months ago I wrote the post 37- Operative Centres in which I remembered when I was troubled about metaphysics and the idea of the disappearance of the absolute centre and the need of operative centres, that you can take with you everywhere, that you can create your own spaces in relation with them.

At that time I requested a collaboration with Fátima de Burnay, a hat designer from Madrid, to see if we could create a hat that could be a Coliseum I can take with me, on the top of my head, so I do not need to stay around the original, either physically or mentally.

Apart from my two “Metaphysics of Training”, I sent 3 Chiricos as inspirational images:



It is very elegant and discreet. It shows the Coliseum in a subtle way.



The other night, after I saw the building for the first time, I saw also saw for the first time the hat she designed, which arrived that day from Madrid.



Once I have seen the Coliseum I can take it out of my head. I can bring it wherever I like because I have full control over it.

107- Verification

05 July 2009, 23:42:56

The sunrise in front of the building was very special. Everything was very quiet, there were no cars, no people coming from parties or going to work. The activity started very slowly after 7 am when some of the people attending also had to leave.

Here are the people who stayed



The light was softly orange and started hitting the building from the left and invaded the whole old façade. Once the process finished, around 7 am, we started a tour around the building, as I had done

blindfolded a couple of times in the preceding days.



This is a picture taken in the place in which Fie took my portrait few days ago.

Then we went to a café to wait until 8.30, the time the Coliseum opens to public.

At 8.15 there was already a little queue. I was able to get my ticket for free.

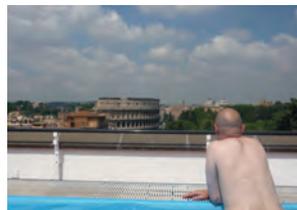


I found the exterior more impressive than the interior. We walked all round the interior corridor but the tiredness, the sun already hitting strongly and the geometrical increase of tourists made us cut our visit short. This ruin has a bit of the feel of a big dead animal and walking in the interior is rather like staying in a mess of broken organs.



An all areas pass for the Paul McCartney concert.

The event of the day was finished and all that was left was to have the promised bathe.



The first hours were about comparing my mental image and the real one. There were several mismatches I will write about, but I need some more time to reflect on it.

I appreciate very much that Jaume, Ingrid, Ana, Fernando, Sarra, Manuela, Marko, Alessandro, Leonora, Eugenia, Bárbara, Wolfgang and Gregor came at this hour and shared the moment with me.

“It is no fiction, but plain, sober, honest Truth to say: so suggestive and distinct is it at this hour: that, for a moment -actually in passing in- they who will, may have the whole great pile before them, as it used to be, with thousands of eager faces staring down into the arena, and such a whirl of strife, and blood, and dust, going on there, as no language can describe. Its solitude, its awful beauty, and its utter desolation, strike upon the stranger the next moment, like a softer sorrow; and never in his life, perhaps, will he be so moved and overcome by any sight not immediately connected with his own affections and afflictions”.
DICKENS, C., *Pictures from Italy*, 1877.

108- No Second Chance for First Impressions

06 July 2009, 09:34:06

A few hours before the event, a friend sent me a message with the title of this post that, however threatening it might look, I find very encouraging.

The main feature of this event was, certainly, the calibration of the change that it was going to effect in me, and the friends who attended, at the moment I opened my eyes, a moment that cannot be rewound.

As minimal and imperceptible as the change in the factual world was, so strong and relevant it became in the realm of signs and significance. As for a person before and after receiving a cancer diagnosis, nothing has changed but everything is different.

In *Ringu* the characters of the film are doomed when they watch a mysterious video tape that is passed secretly from hand to hand. Once you have seen it,



Ringu

sooner or later, you will die (I do not want to be a party pooper, but anyway this is something that, until further developments in medical science, happens with absolutely EVERY videotape and viewer in the world).

It is the act of viewing something that kills you, something that you cannot erase from your retina, not even by pulling your eyeballs out, as Oedipus did.

The act of seeing the Coliseum for the first time is irreversible, so it contains death within it. It is something that it is going to be broken and will never be fixed again. This happens with all the inaugural moments. Art is experienced in one's life like a necklace in which each pearl is a inaugural moment. Now these days, after so much frantic consumption of experiences, after an already long artistic life,

inaugural moments are really scarce, so it is convenient to delay the few we can achieve and give them space and time to grow in importance. Towards an economy of inaugural experiences.

There was one moment in History in which somebody saw the Coliseum for the first time, and he couldn't be accompanied by people who had seen it (as I did) because NOBODY had seen it before. It is not easy to determine which was this moment in which the building became "the" building" (more because of conceptual fuzziness than historiographical difficulties) but for sure that moment existed.

In this event everybody had seen it before they came but, as some of the attendees told me, they felt also as if they were seeing it for the first time.



It might have been the time of the day, the excitement I communicated, the collection of pointers towards the building I set up... Some people saw the building through my eyes and experienced in one art event a condensation of the emotions that I had during the eight months. An art object that reflects an intense art experience of the artist is for me the perfect art object.

109- Inaugural Closure, Closing Inauguration

06 July 2009, 09:58:02

On that day, at 13.00, I came back home and opened the curtains that have been closed for 8 months.

It felt very much as if something was starting, like when politicians draw the curtains in a hospital, school, monument or other public building, but actually this was the “inaugural moment of the end”.



I was excited to see if the Coliseum was visible from the window, as there were different opinions about it. I couldn't check until this final day. And yes, it is visible.



The window of the Academy that has the best view over the city has been closed for a reason: it has not been a complete waste, just a relative one.

110- Notes on Changes in Perception

06 July 2009, 11:11:52



On the first day I was very tired and many of the things I felt about the building were provoked or enhanced by my weariness. Some of them came back during the three following days, my three last days in Rome, and also I had some new feelings and ideas.

- First, the volume. As Goethe said, the building does not fit in one's mind. You are all the time thinking in one size that actually is smaller than the one you perceive when looking at it again so,

in a way, each gaze is a source of confusion. George Simmel writes about the volume and incomprehensible mass of the Alps as the key elements which make the experience of them so similar to the artistic experience. He analyses how different these two experiences are, however, especially for the reason that the Alps are not a human construction intended to arouse aesthetic experiences. Unlike the Alps, the Coliseum is a human construction, but it is a ruin and, as Simmel says “the charm of a ruin consists in the fact of a human deed perceived as if it was the result of nature”.

- The space of the city around the Coliseum has changed for me: The monument to Vittorio Emanuele is smaller now. The attraction of the void that wants to be filled in that has marked my knowledge of the city during this time, has been substituted now by the attraction of a gravitational mass. In my perception now the Coliseum is the kernel that keeps all the pieces together.



- The first day, when I saw it from via Labicana, I thought that the Coliseum had been photoshopped there, just cut and pasted. My tiredness contributed to the feeling, but I have experienced it again the days after and I think this perception is due to:

a. It is like a Gulliver, out of proportion. There is no later building in the area that can compete with it. Perhaps if San Giovanni Laterano or the Vatican were closed, this feeling would not be so strong.

b. The materials are very diverse and new around it. I would say that the Coliseum is remarkably homogeneous object in the way it looks. Of course the cars and traffic lights do not contribute very much to its integration in the landscape.

c. As a result of the problems of determining the scale at first sight, you tend to feel it is closer than actually is. The amount of air (mist) you have to look through is different with Him than with other buildings that seem to be in the same range (even if they are closer). This makes it look as if it belongs to a different picture.



- But apart from these matters of size what confuses me more is what, after a couple of days of suffering it, I discovered and named as “Two speed tourist syndrome (TSTS)”. I think this is something very few people, perhaps nobody, has experienced before in relation to the Coliseum. The syndrome consists in the shock produced by the encounter in your mind of two sensations that it is not possible to hold together:

a. The one that I am a resident of Rome, who knows the name of the streets, the shops, restaurants and gelaterie, who has several routines that make me feel settled here, who knows the structure and the history of the city pretty well

b. The other of the tourist who just arrived, and is seeing the main monument for the first time, who has to hurry up to see the tourist attraction in three days,



before he leaves the city to go back home.

The collision of these two ideas makes me think alternatively:

1- that it is not possible that I have been so long in Rome and I haven't seen the Coliseum and

2- that I am not actually seeing it, as if "I cannot trust my eyes".



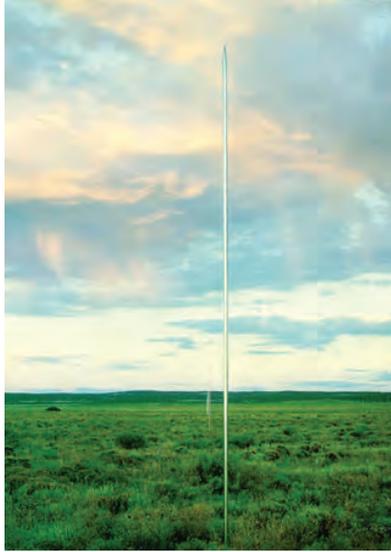
My first picture of the Coliseum, now that I am a tourist.

111- Delayed Gratification

06 July 2009, 13:34:37

On the 1995 trip around USA I already talked about, I visited Walter de Maria's *Lightning Field*. On that occasion I learned something that has been with me for long time and that has been applied fully in the making of *The Colossal Blog*.

"Lightning Fields" by Walter de Maria



Lightning Field is in a remote area of the desert in New Mexico, a place where the rate of electric storms is the highest in the United States. To visit it you have to book a place to stay in a cabin located in front of the work, by calling a New York phone number, in the DIA Art Foundation. Only 6 people can stay in the cabin each night, and you can

only see the work if you stay at least one night, so the trip was planned around the dates there were rooms available. I was with an escort who helped me with all the arrangements.

We flew to Phoenix, Arizona, and we rented a car to get to Quemado, a very small village far away from main roads. The instructions were to find a two-storey building next to the gas station and wait there at midday. We did not know what was going to happen, so the scene was similar to that in North by Northwest in which Cary Grant is at a crossroads in the desert and looks at each car approaching as the possible contact for his mission.

Many cars came, including one driven by two people in the same circumstances as us, looking forward

to seeing the Fields. We gave them an interrogatory look. After a sufficiently long time a four wheel drive vehicle came and a young lady asked us if we were there for the art work.

We got into her car and left ours there. She drove us for 30 minutes along smaller and smaller roads until we reached a very rough path of stones. She was smoking, chewing gum and drinking Cocacola at the same time, while explaining interesting safety things about the possibility of being bitten by a snake or having a power cut and being isolated in the desert. Then we saw the cabin and the work and remained there overnight.

The work consists of 100 poles, lightning conductors, situated geometrically in a vast prairie surrounded by mountains. The installation is at its most dramatic when lightning hits one of the poles.

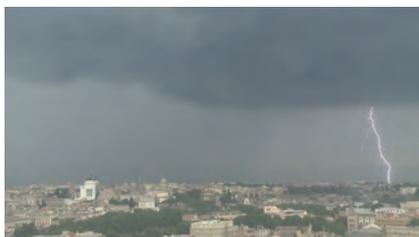
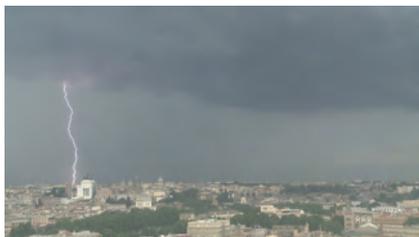
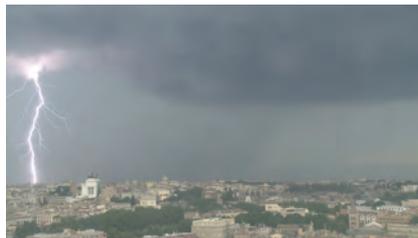
I stayed the whole night waiting for lightning and, I want to believe, it came at dawn. There was a beautiful moment when the sun rose and the rays hit the pointy top of the poles and the field was spread with 100 sparks. It was a very magical experience and I will never forget being there, waiting, feeling the desert and the art.

But then, how it could be any other way? After so much expectation, so much time and energy employed, everything was set to be ready for magic. I stayed up the whole night because I was wound up to do it. I gave a lot of credit to de Maria, whether it could be justified or not. He put real pressure on the visitors, of the "take it or leave it" type. My trust was paid back, if not by de Maria's work, by my own enthusiasm. It was the investment in the work which made the work special.

The moral of the story in relation to *The Colossal Blog* is clear. It was an important moment for me, and also for the people who attended, especially for the energy accumulated in it and the trust we put in the project.

By a nice chance, on the 1st of July, when I came back home after seeing the Coliseum and I drew the curtains, a big storm was getting ready to break. I never saw so much lightning in my life. I think it is

lightning credit I got during that visit to New Mexico, which reaped benefits on that day. Some of the lightning pointed at the Coliseum in the landscape of my recuperated window.



This one is a perfect hit
on the Coliseum:



*Frames from HD video.
No photoshop amendments.*

112- Memory Materials

06 July 2009, 13:59:03

This project has taken a lot out of me and I am not going to get rid of it so easily.

For instance one month ago, when I went to Venice for the Biennale, I was visiting the Irish Pavilion, which was on a third floor. When I was climbing the stairs the alarm automatically activated and I started feeling the need to avoid windows, until I realised that there is no building in Venice, however tall, from which you can see the Coliseum.

It is as if some functions of my body atrophied, after not being used for so long. Or even better: now the project is finished and I am still affected by it, I am like those people who have had a leg amputated and still feel it.

When I did *If Alive*, a FX make-up artist made me look like 65 by applying latex to my face. I got my wrinkles for a day to make some portraits in costume. At the end of the day I removed the latex and went to sleep. Next morning, I STILL HAD the wrinkles!! I might not have looked 65, but perhaps something like 55 or so. Apparently the skin has little memory and it took some time for it to remember how its shape was before the pressure. The day after I was back to normal, and I looked only 2 days older than the day before the shooting.



These days after the event, I still felt in an emergency state when I was approaching an area that used to be dangerous, or I unconsciously avoided looking in the direction of the Coliseum while on the terrace of the Academy. I guess I still will have some dreams in which I am depressed because I have seen it unexpectedly.

To develop such an obsession with the Coliseum is not surprising. As I said, the building is everywhere in the city. Here are some more examples that appeared in recent days in Rome.



poster in the street

milk packaging. The two cans are the type of coffee we served chilled in the event.



logo for a cab company.

I do not know how long it will take for my mind to get back to its normal state, the state before these behaviourist techniques were used on me - if this ever happens, if the damage has not been permanent.

113- Burning Rome (reprise)

13 July 2009, 09:32:42

The previous posts were written on the ferry from Rome to Barcelona. While I was writing the concluding post of *The Colossal Blog* I saw in the news that an spectacular fire had started in Rome. It happened in a tyre store, a specially smoky venue for a blaze.

Gregor passed by Piazza Venezia yesterday and took this picture



The smoke column is coming from the back of the Coliseum, from Via Appia, but it looks as if the building is burning. Or perhaps as if the whole arena is being used as the fireplace of an enormous summer barbecue.

It gives me a slight “scorched earth” thrill, as if just as Rome has been erased from my mind, it has also physically disappeared.

114- The Closure of the Ellipse

02 August 2009, 09:03:18

One month after leaving Rome I am now closing down my project. It finishes in London, the place where it started.

For the occasion I decided to write this last post while having dinner at the Colosseo restaurant in Victoria Street, enjoying some fettuccine. Apart from Coliseum-Absence there are other things I miss from Rome.



Once there I thought it was better to go for the Colosseo Pizza.

MORETTI	2.55
PERONI	2.85
COLOSSEO/ROMAGNOLA	8.95
	7.15
SUBTOTAL	21.50

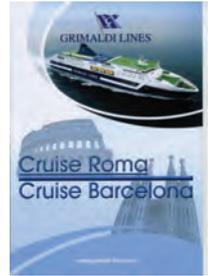
It was not an oval pizza as expected, but it was okay. It contains a lot of parma ham, something I found interesting as a Spaniard. I wonder if the pizzaiolo got inspiration for the ingredients of the pizza considering

the similarity the map of the building has with the shape of the pizza.

At the end of the residency I decided to leave Rome using a snail transportation system, as I did to get there. I got the ferry from Civitavecchia to Barcelona. This brochure was a good welcome present by the crew of the ship.

How could it be more suggestive? I did not visit the Sagrada Familia in Barcelona though, and I did not avoid visiting it. At this point if I am not visiting a landmark in a city it looks as if I have secret creative reasons for it. No, just lack of time and interest.

As the Coliseum retreated further and further away I could see more clearly what had happened in the last days. I wrote a lot on the ferry; most of it can be read in the previous posts.



But what it has meant in my perception of art, my work and myself, is going to take more time to work out. A good epigraph for the project for me would be this one:

All reduction of the artistic to cultural reality is a denial of desire, says Jean François Lyotard. Applying reverse logic I would say that denial of cultural reality to art is a celebration of desire.

Desire for knowledge about the building and the city
 Desire for knowledge about my self
 Desire for new emotions
 Desire to test new limits
 Desire for new ways of experiencing the idea of death
 Desire to reconsider my conceptions about art
 Desire of desiring and
 Desire to control my desire.



This is my 8 months collection of Coliseum paraphernalia



This project has been the right tool to achieve what I proposed when I went to Rome: to survive the city as a contemporary artist. My desire has been fulfilled and I finished my stay victorious.

It is going to be hard to find another Coliseum. Since I saw it *crying and sleepless I roam, cruelly pricked by the thorn, Neither the warmth of the daylight nor the cool darkness of night helps.*



This is the last piece of the puzzle.



Films

Featuring the Coliseum

20 Million Miles to Earth (1957) Directed by Nathan Juran
Gladiator (2000) Directed by Ridley Scott
Il sorpasso (The Easy Life) (1962) Directed by Dino Risi
Jeans (1998) Directed by S. Shankar
Jumper (2008) Directed by Doug Liman
La decima vittima (The 10th Victim) (1965) Directed by Elio Petri
Meng long guo jian (Fury of the Dragon) (1972) Directed by Bruce Lee
Roman Holiday (1953) Directed by William Wyler
The Belly of an Architect (1987) Directed by Peter Greenaway
The Core (2003) Directed by Joel Amiel
The Talented Mr Ripley (1999) Directed by Anthony Minghella
Un americano a Roma (1954) Directed by Steno
Year of the Gun (1991) Directed by John Frankenheimer

Referred to in the blog

2001, A Space Odyssey (1968) Directed by Stanley Kubrick
8 ½ (1963) Directed by Federico Fellini
Andrey Rublyov (1966) Directed by Andrei Tarkovski
Androcles and the Lion (1952) Directed by Chester Erskine
Ben-hur (1959) Directed by William Wyler
Cannibal Holocaust (1980) Directed by Ruggero Deodato
Chinmoku (Silence) (1971) Directed by Masahiro Shinoda
Edipo Re (1967) Directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini
Una giornata particolare (A Special Day) (1977)
Directed by Ettore Scola
Fanny och Alexander (1982) Directed by Ingmar Bergman
Goodfellas (1990) Directed by Martin Scorsese
Kagemusha (1980) Directed by Akira Kurosawa
Leclisse (Eclipse) (1962) Directed by Michelangelo Antonioni
Life of Brian (1979) Directed by Terry Jones
Maciste, gladiatore di Sparta (1964) Directed by Mario Caiano
Martha (1974) Directed by Rainer Werner Fassbinder
Orphée (Orpheus) (1950) Directed by Jean Cocteau
Planet of the Apes (1968) Directed by Franklin J. Schaffner
Quo Vadis (1951) Directed by Mervyn LeRoy
Ringu (Ring) (1998) Directed by Hideo Nakata
Seppuku (1962) Directed by Masaki Kobayashi
Sette volte sette (Seven Times Seven) (1968) Directed by Michele Lupo
Shoah (1985) Directed by Claude Lanzmann

Spartacus (1960) Directed by Stanley Kubrick
The Hot Rock (1972) Directed by Peter Yates
The Last Days of Pompeii (1935) Directed by Ernest B. Schoedsack
The Player (1992) Directed by Robert Altman
Titus (1999) Directed by Julie Taymor

Books

About the Coliseum or the Roman Games

In Ruins by Christopher Woodward
The Colosseum (Wonders of the World) by Keith Hopkins and Mary Beard
The Roman Games by Roland Auguet
The Way of the Gladiator by Daniel F. Mannix
Roma Violata by Gastone Mazzanti
Naples and Florence: A Journey from Milan to Reggio by Stendhal

Referred in the blog

Bambi vs Godzilla by David Mamet
Bonjour Tristesse by Françoise Sagan
Confessions by St Augustine
Italianische Reise by Goethe, J. W.
L'anello di Clarisse by Claudio Magris
La construcción de la torre de Babel by Juan Benet
Los astronautas de la cosmopista by Julio Cortázar and Carol Dunlop
Menons Klagen um Diotima by Friedrich Hölderlin
Pictures from Italy by Charles Dickens
Slaughterhouse 5 by Kurt Vonnegut
The Alps by George Simmel
The Eiffel Tower and other Mythologies by Roland Barthes
L'illusion de la fin by Jean Baudrillard
Silence by Shusaku Endo
Kamikaze Diaries: Reflections of Japanese Student Soldiers
by E Ohnuki Tierney
Le Différend by Jean François Lyotard
The Great Theatre of the World by Pedro Calderón de la Barca

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