



Photograph: Steve White

Frieze June July August 2008



'Cellar Door (Once is Always Twice)'  
2008  
Mixed media  
Installation view at  
Institute of Contemporary  
Art, London

# Doors of Perception

The multi-faceted exhibitions of French artist **Loris Gréaud** reward leaps of faith with wild flights of the imagination  
*by Vivian Rehberg*

Loris Gréaud's much lauded exhibition 'Silence Goes More Quickly When Played Backwards', held at Le Plateau/Frac Ile-de France, Paris, in 2005, secured the French artist's reputation as something of an art/science/technology wunderkind, as fluent in the languages of conceptualism as he is at navigating the complexity and plurality of 'the post-medium condition'.<sup>1</sup> Those who were present at the opening still wax rhapsodic about the three-hour drum set played by artist/musician Gael Angelis (also known as Man-Eater Orchestra), the energy of which was converted into electricity to partially light the show. Gréaud is not one to be outdone, even by himself, so when Marc-Olivier Wahler, the director of the Palais de Tokyo, invited him to mount his second major solo show in Paris in just three years, he approached the invitation as an experiment. He scheduled an appointment with a neurologist for an electroencephalogram (EEG) and, once attached to the electrodes, got to thinking about his proposal, 'Cellar Door'. It turns out there was a lot to mull over.

'Cellar Door', words J.R.R. Tolkien singled out for their inherent beauty in his 1955 text 'English and Welsh', would encompass the following: a television commercial/internet teaser for Celador, flavourless button-shaped gummy sweets sold in striped cellophane bags, whose clever marketing slogan is 'A Taste of Illusion'; a libretto entitled *Cellar Door: An Opera in Almost One Act*, written by Raimundas Malašauskas and Aaron Schuster; and said opera, for which the music was composed and conducted by Thomas Roussel and performed by soprano Marie Devellereau and the Radio France Philharmonic Orchestra at the Palais de Tokyo (a further performance

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is planned for a Paris theatre). It would also entail the conceptualization and creation of works intimately related to the libretto for two briefly overlapping exhibitions, 'Cellar Door', at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris and 'Cellar Door (Once is Always Twice)' at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London.

Whereas the libretto, opera and exhibitions would provide the skeletal framework for the whole enterprise, its crux is the actual design and construction of Gréaud's studio out of modular prefab components, which is just getting underway outside Paris. As the off-stage protagonist of the opera, whose shadow is literally figured in both exhibitions, this future studio's omnipresence begs the question of its utility. Does Gréaud's emphasis on the studio as site of production – with all the symbolic and historical baggage that involves – amount to a retreat to an outdated notion of studio-based artistic creativity or a latent critique of post-studio art practice? Or does positing the studio as the spatially and temporally displaced origin of his work in fact enable him to relieve some of the pressures of an economy in which the exhibition over-determines an artist's mode of production and reception?

Unresolved questions, mysteries and apocryphal stories proliferate around Gréaud's art. He has tested viewers' capacities to suspend their disbelief by manufacturing the hypothetical scent of Mars (*Spirit*, 2005), making radiophonic attempts at teleportation (*Haunted Quantum #5*, 2005), fabricating walls out of air currents (*The Residents (2)*, 2005) and nano-sculptures invisible to the naked eye (*Why is a Raven Like a Writing Desk?*, 2006). The unverifiable nature of these works can nag at those who need assurances about the ontological status of art objects, but I rather appreciate the way they poke at the issue of lack situated at the heart of desire. *Frequency of an Image (M46 EDIT)* (2007), one of several works produced from the results of his EEG, arguably continues in this vein. This low-tech suspension lamp/sculpture consists of two bulbs in trim sockets hanging from cords attached to a vintage-style teardrop counterweight. The bulbs flicker like fireflies captured in glass jars to the frequency of Gréaud's brainwaves, supposedly translated from the printed recording of his EEG. If the most common illustration of a bright idea is a light bulb switching on, Gréaud's practice persistently stresses the fragile, evanescent nature of individual creative thinking, particularly through his customary collaborative and co-authorial working method, central to the production of all of the works mentioned above, by which he occupies the position of transceiver, tossing out ideas and letting others run with them and recuperating those that suit his purpose.

When 'Cellar Door' finally materialized at the Palais de Tokyo and the ICA, it seemed inconceivable that an object as modest as its precursor, *Frequency of an Image ...*, could ever be a gauge of the project's impressive scale and ambition. Gréaud mobilized the aforementioned contributors and the expertise of DGZ Research, the production company he runs with architects Marc Dölger and Damien Ziakovic, as well as a substantial number of other specialists and interlocutors. Granted the entire 43,000 square feet of the Palais de Tokyo's ground floor, he transformed the stripped interior of the 1937 building by organizing the space into chiaroscuro areas called 'bubbles', which either constituted works or contained them.

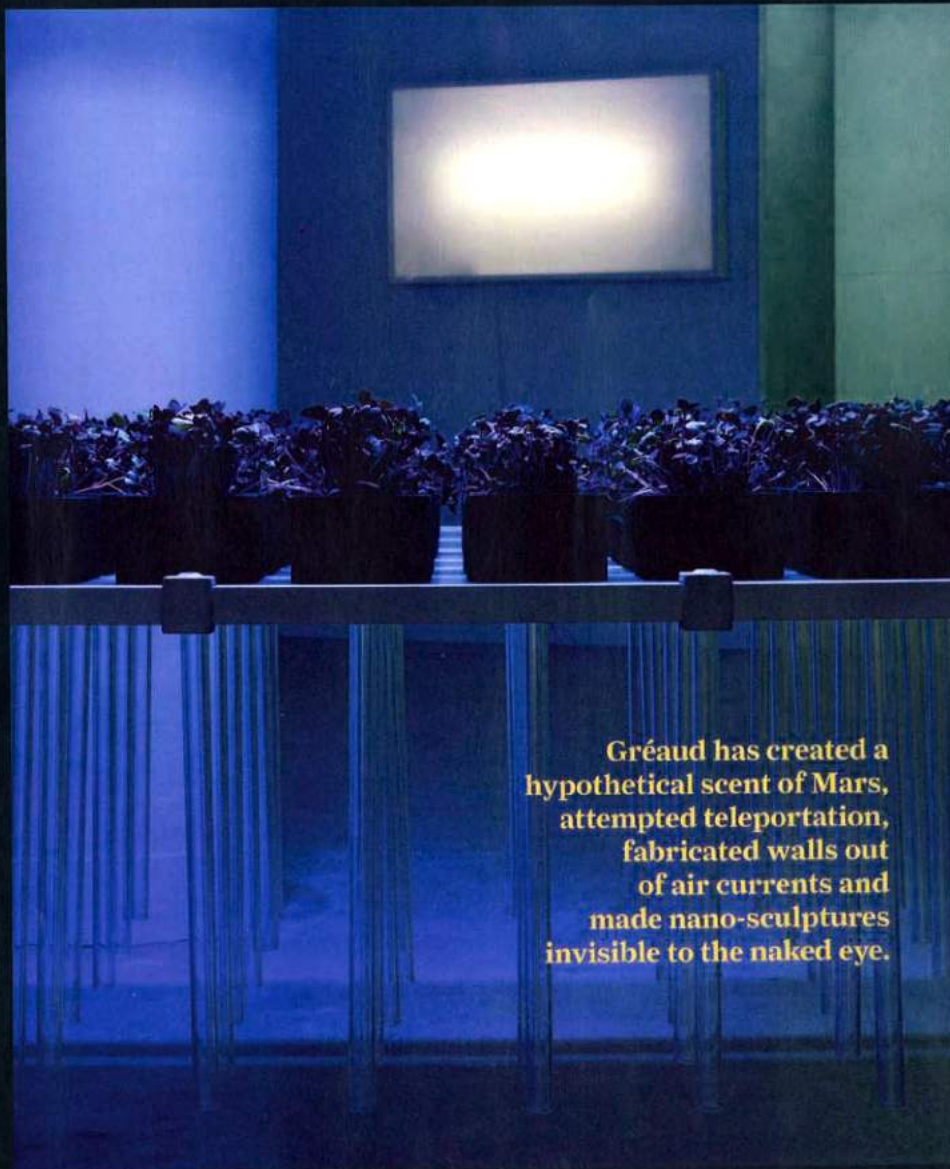
The conceptual *raison d'être* for these space bubbles is a vital episode in the *Cellar Door* libretto: 'Scene 4', in which black champagne bubbles fizz and pop while two main characters, Bucky Wonka (after Buckminster Fuller and Willy Wonka) and the Singer debate the philosophical implications of possibility and impossibility, while the 'music of multiplying rooms' plays all around.<sup>2</sup> Sound obscure? It somehow makes beautiful sense when you see the passage spatialized as a *mise-en-abyme* in the three quasi-identical black and white rooms Gréaud installed at the ICA, but perhaps only if you have read the libretto. There, behind successive high-speed automatic doors made out of black vinyl panels, the opera emits from low-hanging bulbous *Spore Speakers* (2008) that pulsate light and ooze tarry black resinous goo onto a geometric patterned carpet (*Nothing is True Everything is Permitted*, 2007). A sleek, glossy black elevation drawing of the future studio, rendered in 1:1 scale, emerges from the matte black wall, and neighbours a mirrored horizontal wall piece that reads *When people tell me I don't know how this story is going to end up I usually tell them: wait till the end and you will see yourself ...* (2008). I felt happy to oblige while sipping black champagne (another of Gréaud's inventions) served by male triplets at planned intervals during the opening reception.

Malašauskas and Schuster's imaginative and entertaining libretto, seemingly inspired by science fiction, children's tales, nonsense, surrealism, philosophy and hints of autobiography, is essential to understanding Gréaud's project. It recounts the artist's fantasy of a studio as a site of creative potential, metaphorized by the studio's quest for a door: "This is the story of the Studio, a vast workshop distended in space and time [...] It is not so much a "Dream Factory" as a "Dreaming Factory", a production plant more stratospheric than Jack's beanstalk and more distorting than Alice's mirror, a place where cables climb the clouds and nanocircuits line the event horizon."<sup>3</sup> In Paris, this dreaming factory could be accessed through a single black

All images courtesy: Avon Lambert; Paris and New York, and the artist • Cellar Door photograph: Pierre Dumont

vinyl automatic door that whooshes up to uncover *La Bulle Studio* (The Studio Bubble, 2007–8), a glassed-in control room from which a technician was running the show, switching between an 'on' mode, during which all the works function, and a 'standby' mode, when only the opera drifts like Muzak through the dimly lit space via the same *Spore Speakers* found at the ICA. The identity of each bubble is indicated by a luminescent Perspex music stand that contains the corresponding passages of text from the libretto and sheet music from the score. After passing beneath *La Bulle Underworks* (The Underworks Bubble, 2007–8), a ceiling made from the cast of the earth after an underground fireworks explosion, one encounters *La Bulle Néon* (The Neon Bubble, 2008) a dazzling white neon sculpture of criss-crossing tubes representing the scrunched perspective lines of the Palais de Tokyo architecture, which is crammed into a room that emphasizes its monumentality. A bit further along, an inconspicuous rectangle cut into the wall reveals rows of empty red movie-theatre seats and a nebulous film Gréaud had shot (unbeknownst to his hired cameramen) on expired Super 16mm film stock he found in the basement of the Palais de Tokyo, once home to the Paris Cinéma-thèque and prestigious Fémis film school.

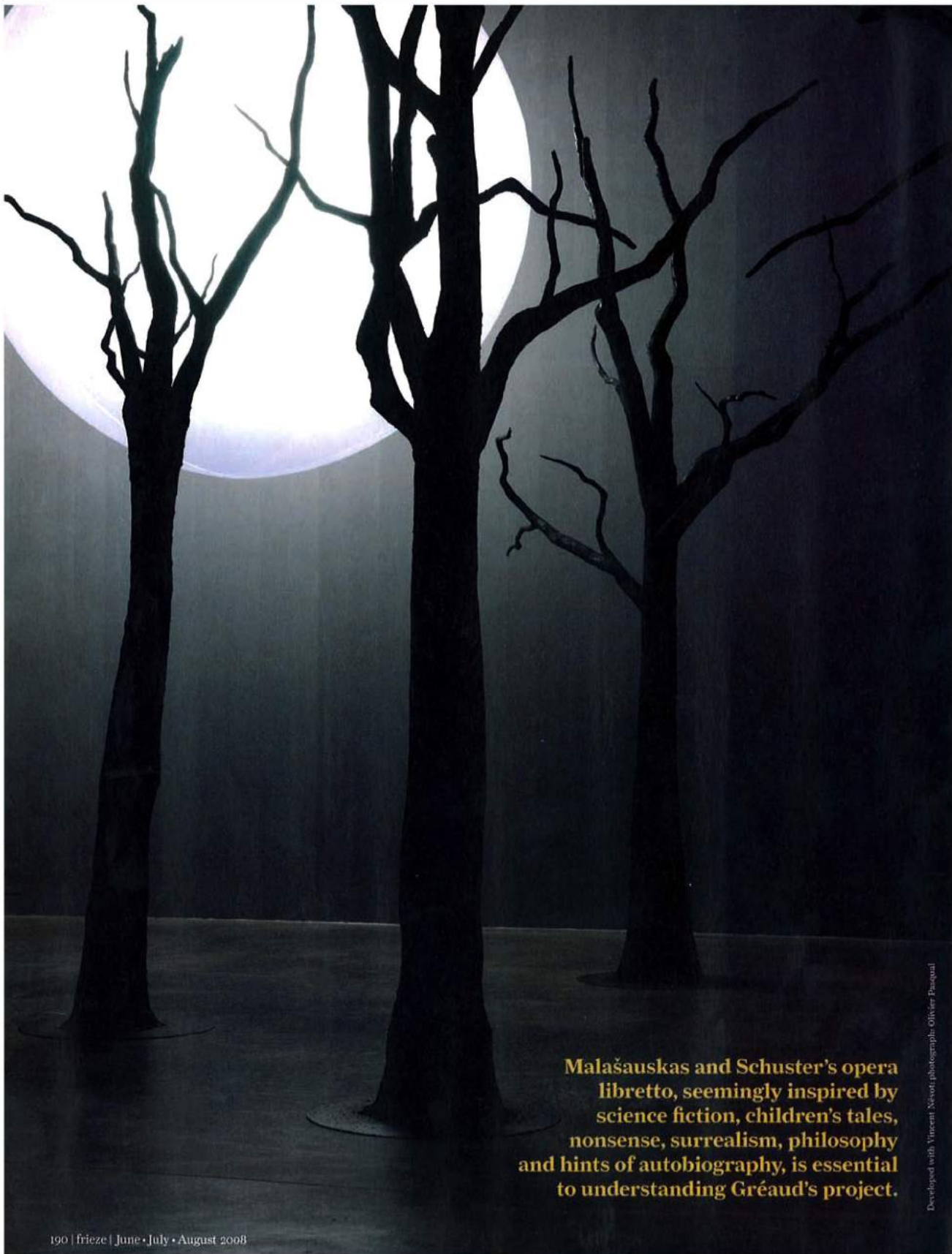
*La Bulle Néon* and *La Bulle Film Expiré* (The Expired Film Bubble, 2007–8) can be read as vestiges unearthed by Gréaud's conceptual and material archaeology of the exhibition site, without any obvious accompanying institutional critique, though the Palais de Tokyo floor plans crumpled into a massive neon ball may harbour some secrets. Similarly, it is tempting to read *La Bulle Plateau* (The Plateau Bubble, 2008) as an archaeology of the self, or at least of self-representation. In this series of rooms, which occupy roughly one-third of the space, Gréaud reinstalled his entire 2005 Plateau show backwards (does that make silence go more slowly?), and included its original brochures. The only new additions are hyperrealist paintings he commissioned of the destroyed photographs of the initial installation. It would be easy to let one's mind aimlessly wander through these different pockets of space-time, were it not for the harsh rat-a-tat-tat that signals the onset of a paintball war taking place in *La Bulle Merzball* (The Merzball Bubble, 2007–8), as players clad in militaristic gear take to this faeceted, screened-in playing field modelled on Kurt Schwitters' *Merzbau*, or 'Cathedral of Erotic Misery' (1919–33), their guns loaded with pellets of international Klein Blue. On the opposite wall, facing this 'space of conflict and negotiation'<sup>4</sup>, the elevation drawing of



**Gréaud has created a hypothetical scent of Mars, attempted teleportation, fabricated walls out of air currents and made nano-sculptures invisible to the naked eye.**

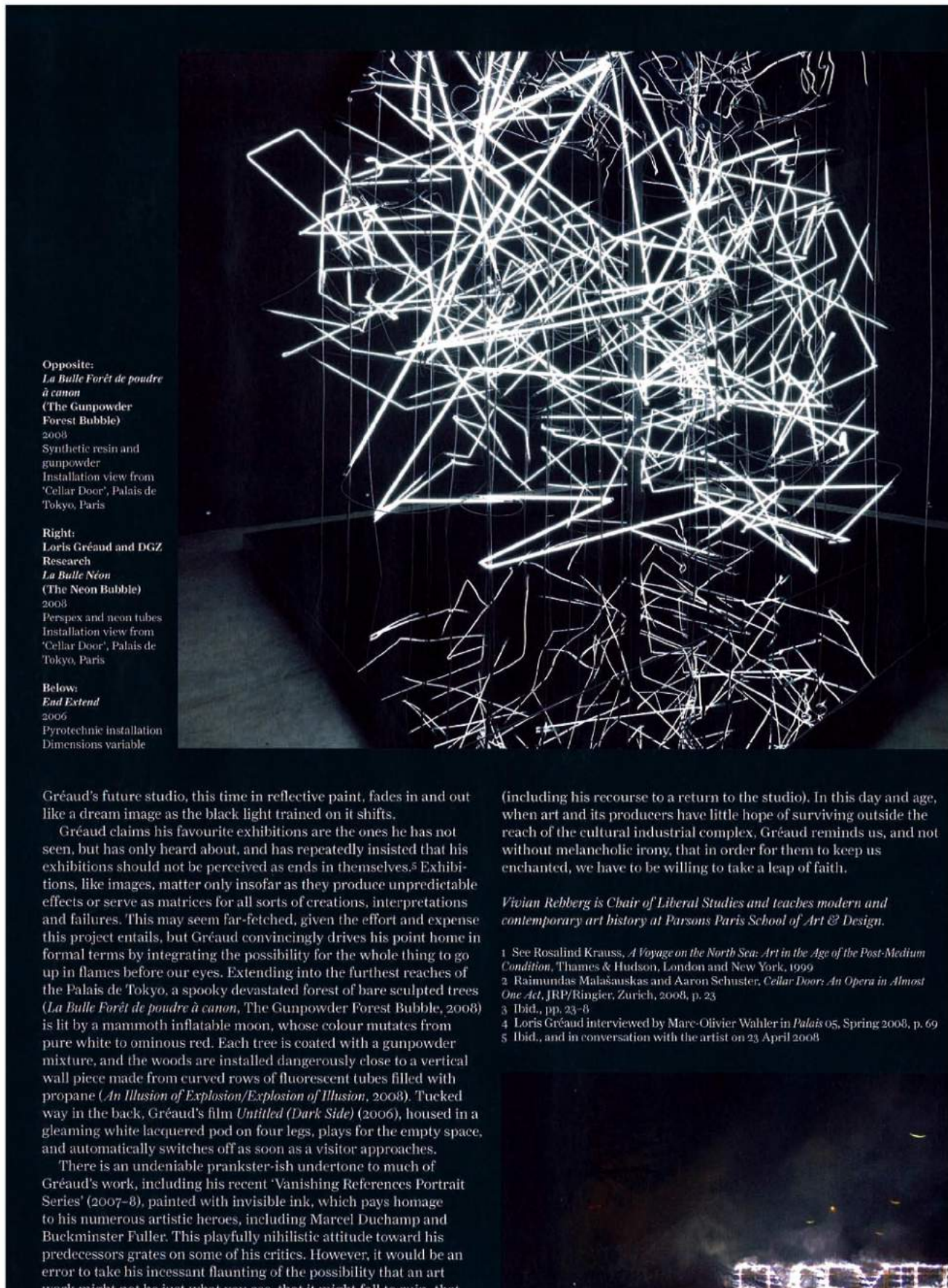
Opposite:  
Loïc Gréaud and DGZ  
Research  
*La Bulle Merzball*  
(The Merzball Bubble)  
2008  
Steel, synthetic fabric  
netting  
Installation view from  
'Cellar Door', Palais de  
Tokyo, Paris

Right:  
*La Bulle Plateau*  
(The Plateau Bubble)  
(detail)  
2008  
Mixed media  
Installation view from  
'Cellar Door', Palais de  
Tokyo, Paris



**Malašauskas and Schuster's opera libretto, seemingly inspired by science fiction, children's tales, nonsense, surrealism, philosophy and hints of autobiography, is essential to understanding Gréaud's project.**

Developed with Vincent Névolet, photograph: Olivier Pasqual



**Opposite:**  
*La Bulle Forêt de poudre à canon*  
(The Gunpowder Forest Bubble)  
2008  
Synthetic resin and gunpowder  
Installation view from 'Cellar Door', Palais de Tokyo, Paris

**Right:**  
Loris Gréaud and DGZ Research  
*La Bulle Néon*  
(The Neon Bubble)  
2008  
Perspex and neon tubes  
Installation view from 'Cellar Door', Palais de Tokyo, Paris

**Below:**  
*End Extend*  
2006  
Pyrotechnic installation  
Dimensions variable

Gréaud's future studio, this time in reflective paint, fades in and out like a dream image as the black light trained on it shifts.

Gréaud claims his favourite exhibitions are the ones he has not seen, but has only heard about, and has repeatedly insisted that his exhibitions should not be perceived as ends in themselves.<sup>5</sup> Exhibitions, like images, matter only insofar as they produce unpredictable effects or serve as matrices for all sorts of creations, interpretations and failures. This may seem far-fetched, given the effort and expense this project entails, but Gréaud convincingly drives his point home in formal terms by integrating the possibility for the whole thing to go up in flames before our eyes. Extending into the furthest reaches of the Palais de Tokyo, a spooky devastated forest of bare sculpted trees (*La Bulle Forêt de poudre à canon*, The Gunpowder Forest Bubble, 2008) is lit by a mammoth inflatable moon, whose colour mutates from pure white to ominous red. Each tree is coated with a gunpowder mixture, and the woods are installed dangerously close to a vertical wall piece made from curved rows of fluorescent tubes filled with propane (*An Illusion of Explosion/Explosion of Illusion*, 2008). Tucked away in the back, Gréaud's film *Untitled (Dark Side)* (2006), housed in a gleaming white lacquered pod on four legs, plays for the empty space, and automatically switches off as soon as a visitor approaches.

There is an undeniable prankster-ish undertone to much of Gréaud's work, including his recent 'Vanishing References Portrait Series' (2007-8), painted with invisible ink, which pays homage to his numerous artistic heroes, including Marcel Duchamp and Buckminster Fuller. This playfully nihilistic attitude toward his predecessors grates on some of his critics. However, it would be an error to take his incessant flaunting of the possibility that an art work might not be just what you see, that it might fall to ruin, that

(including his recourse to a return to the studio). In this day and age, when art and its producers have little hope of surviving outside the reach of the cultural industrial complex, Gréaud reminds us, and not without melancholic irony, that in order for them to keep us enchanted, we have to be willing to take a leap of faith.

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1 See Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, Thames & Hudson, London and New York, 1999

2 Raimundas Malašauskas and Aaron Schuster, *Cellar Door: An Opera in Almost One Act*, JRP/Ringier, Zurich, 2008, p. 23

3 *Ibid.*, pp. 23-8

4 Loris Gréaud interviewed by Marc-Olivier Wahler in *Palais 05*, Spring 2008, p. 69

5 *Ibid.*, and in conversation with the artist on 23 April 2008