

# The Time Traveler

## Interview with Daniel Arsham

by Catherine Somzé

*Pixel Cloud (New York), 2010*  
Plastic, paint  
135 x 200 x 170 cm  
Courtesy of Galerie Perrotin  
Credit Guillaume Ziccarelli





*Ash Eroded Jet Fighter Helmets, 2015*  
 Volcanic ash, steel fragments, pulverized glass,  
 sand, crushed marble, hydrostone, metal  
 30 cm x 30 cm x 25 cm  
 Courtesy of Galerie Perrotin  
 Credit Guillaume Zicarelli

The life and career of Daniel Arsham reads like a fairy tale for creative hopefuls. The New York based artist was barely twenty-four when modern dance legend Merce Cunningham came across his work and asked him to collaborate. Cunningham had become famous for an approach to dance that brought together stage design, music, and dance, only on the very day of the premiere. Arsham was given total freedom, a *carte blanche* to make any work he'd like. By the same token, he was set on equal footing with Cunningham's former collaborators, including avant-garde luminaries, such as Bruce Nauman and John Cage.

Arsham grabbed his chance and let other disciplines inform his practice. He had started out as a painter, but soon became a sculptor, architect, and filmmaker as well. All aspects of this output were increasingly integrated into ever-complex scenarios that referred back to one another. Drawings inspired his stage design, and sculptures came back as props in his films.

Static structures, such as walls and furniture, were made to behave as if they were alive; sculptures became narrative and "cinematic." A total approach to art that reminds one of the composition of symphonies and operas.

Musicians also liked his work. Arsham exploited vintage memory technology, using 16mm film cameras and cassette recorders in unusual materials, from volcanic ash to crystal.

The monochrome sculptures resembled archaeological finds in a post-apocalyptic future. They endowed mass culture with a sense of longing. Pharrell Williams commissioned Arsham to cast an ash copy of his own early keyboard, and the two started collaborating on musical productions.

But Arsham is not done yet. Despite being a celebrity himself now, he is still as curious as ever. Exploring new technologies and materials, he tweets "I'm working on something that will be designed to last 1 billion years." Working in his studio in Manhattan, he talks with *ZOO* about the importance of collaboration, uncanny objects and the difficulty of making images of the future.



“All of the works are final in themselves but they are also part of larger projects. All of what I do is ongoing, continuous. It comes from a sense of play.”

**Catherine Somzé:** You’re a visual artist working with a major gallery, you run an architecture studio, you design stage sets, you collaborate with celebrities, you also make movies, and you’re only thirty-six years old. Do you ever sleep?

Daniel Arsham: Yeah, I sleep plenty! And I also have two children!

**CS:** Congratulations on your second, by the way, wonderful!

DA: Thank you.

**CS:** How do you manage with all this work?

DA: I work heavily in collaboration with other people, though many of these collaborative opportunities have kind of fallen into my lap, really. I worked as a set designer for Merce Cunningham for many years.

**CS:** But with Merce, you could pretty much make whatever you wanted, right?

DA: Yeah, but I've also worked with other choreographers and theater makers, such as Jonah Bokaer and Robert Wilson, and that's very different from my studio practice, which is often work that is created independently. Stage design obviously involves the performers, the choreographer or director, light designers, and many more people. And then my architecture practice is a studio, Snarkitecture, which I formed in 2007 with Alex Mustonen. It was bringing many of the ideas that were present in my practice as a visual artist into an architectural scale. It's not the same as working in your studio alone. There are certain things that you have to take into account when you work in public space, for instance. So I formed a practice with a partner who is an architect and that practice has grown into its own language, and life, outside of my artistic practice.

**CS:** And you’ve worked with film as well...

DA: Yeah! I mean, I've always been interested in film, and that's something that has always influenced my work. But I find it to be really one of the most difficult things that I've done. The amount of time required to make a film is huge. It's an art form where every single aspect is considered. And that's one of the things that I appreciate most about it! So, you know, I'm continuing with it, I'm still working on my *Future Relic* project and first doing some larger projects.

**CS:** With virtual reality this time?

DA: Yeah, I'm working on a project now, that will be like a VR experience and it's something that I'm certainly interested in. VR has a lot of promise. I haven't seen many things done with it narratively that I thought were very interesting.

**CS:** VR is often used as a gimmick.

DA: Exactly, I've seen a couple of things that I thought were really strong but they were documentary-based, bringing you to a place that you couldn't go or living impossible scenarios. I'm trying to combine those things.

**CS:** What do you mean?

DA: As opposed to traditional film, there are no rules yet about how we interpret VR. When you think about the language of film — a fade, a dissolve, a crosscut for instance — if you'd showed these things from today's cinema to an early film viewer they would be confused. There are all these things that are kind of ingrained in us, and because we've watched films for so long, there are things that we understand without a problem, such as continuity breaks, breaks in time, you can go from one place to another. All of that is kind of a learned thing. But in VR, you are not able to direct the viewpoint because the viewer is in an environment, and that changes everything.

**CS:** So it’s not possible to tell stories with VR?

DA: There are no established conventions about VR yet, so what I'm doing with it is more conceptual, unlike what I've done with my films, which could have come straight from Hollywood. So I'm treating VR much like I'm treating an exhibition in a gallery or a museum.

**CS:** You’ve worked with a broad range of materials such as crystal, cast volcanic ash, and many more unusual materials. Did you acquire all these skills by yourself?

DA: Yeah, many of them I had to sort of learn by trial and error. Obviously, I had a foundation from art school regarding casting procedures and things like that, so that's the basis. But there is no given technique to cast ash or crystal, for example ,so they were done in the studio just by trial and error. For some of the works, I collaborated with specialists to make the materials act in the way that I wanted them



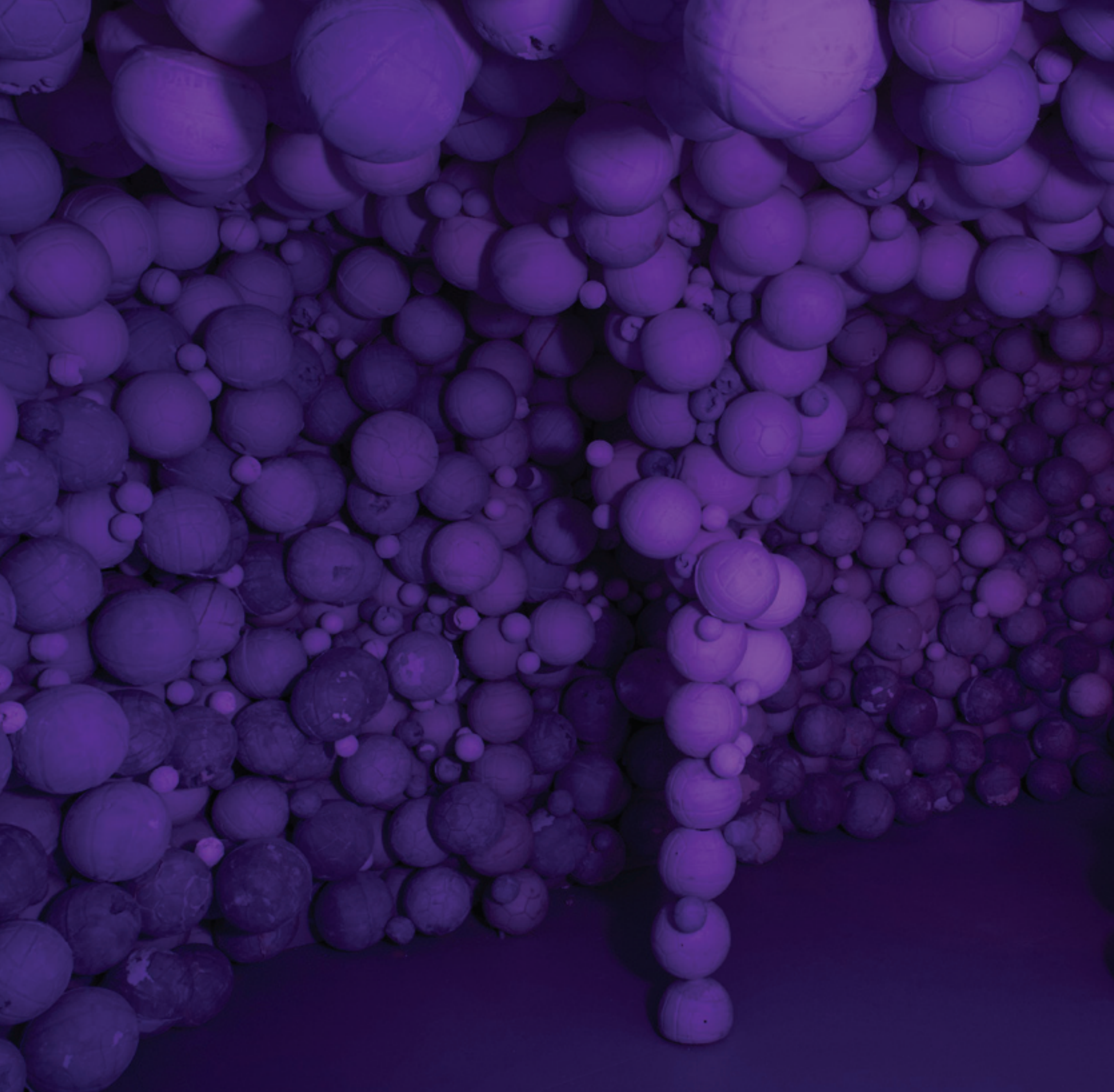
*Seated Figure*, 2015  
Clear glass fragments, resin  
90 x 56 x 114,3 cm  
Courtesy of Galerie Perrotin  
Credit Guillaume Ziccarelli





*Rules of the Game*, 2016  
Photo Credit: Sharen Bradford





to. But in many ways, there is a bit of alchemy happening when working with materials, kind of transforming them from one thing to another and changing people’s understanding of them.

**CS: To achieve a sense of surprise?**  
DA: I don’t think any of my work has any specific purpose or meaning. It’s more of an invitation and I think that a lot of it has to do with my own thinking and the way I want to sort of bring that out. When you’re looking at the work, there are things that I find interesting or think about, but it’s always also part of a process. All of the works are final in themselves, but they are also part of larger projects. All of what I do is ongoing, continuous. It comes from a sense of play.

**CS: I often experience cognitive dissonance when looking at your work: a wall rippling like water, or wrapping a figure as if the wall were a blanket...**  
DA: My work is about slight manipulations of the everyday. When I’m working in these kinds of in situ built-in works, when there’s a clock that’s melting down or a figure that is emerging from a wall, you could walk into a room and you might not notice these pieces at first. They are meant to be subtle. They are integrated into something that we are familiar with already. So we know that a wall should not act like that, that a wall is solid, but there is a sort of break with that idea, because we are seeing it acting differently. And it is a physical thing as well, it’s not painted, it’s not an imaginary thing, it’s real. I am interested in provoking these sorts of uncanny breaks with reality.

**CS: Where does this fascination come from?**  
DA: I don’t know... I guess if I’d be able to answer that I wouldn’t need to make any more work.

**CS: In an interview with Pharrell Williams you mention a hurricane that took place in Miami when you were a boy. That must have been quite a shock. Did you fear for your life?**  
DA: I mean, there were certainly moments like that, but my overall sense of it was not that. It was much more...I mean...certainly *during* the hurricane it was like that, but after, seeing houses destroyed, cars flipped over, and pieces of people’s lives scattered all over the streets, for me, that was more interesting, that was amazing actually... You see, for a child it seems less traumatic and more wonderful in some crazy way. It’s so unusual. It’s certainly something I’ve not experienced again in my life and certainly something most people will not be likely to ever experience either.

**CS: Like being on a post-apocalyptic movie set. Many of your works feel like that...**  
DA: Perhaps, but I sort of stray away from that sort of doom thinking, because I feel it’s kind of negative. The work does not entirely embody that, it’s more hopeful. There are a lot of pieces that I’ve made that are in a state of decay, but they are made of materials that grow as well, such as crystal. It is as if the pieces were falling apart, but then also growing back together. They are in between demolition and construction. This is something that comes back in my stage design as well. We just did a new work together with Pharrell Williams and choreographer Jonah

Bokaer, who was a dancer with Merce. It includes a film, and in it, there are all these objects that are shattering and being destroyed but then also reforming and getting back together. This kind of time experience, that is not linear but rather cyclical, is perhaps linked to the storm, that kind of destruction.

**CS: Things falling apart and coming back together, a sense of loss and yearning at the same time...**  
DA: Yeah. I mean that, for me, is exactly right, and the objects that I select are kind of iconic, right? If you live in any kind of advanced culture right now, then you’ve seen these objects, you know them, they might even mean something specific to you. So imagine looking back at these objects of your own life as if you could see them in a thousand years, decaying but, at the same, time in this state of entropic growth. It’s like being able to step out of this moment in time. There’s something quite profound and disturbing about it. Similar things have been done in literature and in film, but to encapsulate that within an object and to provoke an experience out of it, that is really challenging.

**CS: Is that why you also use vintage memory technology such as cassette players and recorders?**  
DA: Sure! I mean, some of the objects are, but there are also things like the basketballs that I’ve used lately, that are more fluid in time. They haven’t changed for the last century, and they will probably not change for the next half a century.

**CS: You’d like to travel to the future then.**  
DA: I’m fascinated by the future. The present we certainly know, and the past we also know, but the future... The future is invisible, and it seems unfair. I’m trying to look at it, to pretend, in a way, that I can look at it, at least. And there are certain things that we do know about the future. We can certainly know that many objects today will become obsolete. I create scenarios around them. I’ve done that with film, and with objects as well. I project a certain image of the future.

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*Amethyst Sports Ball Cavern*, 2016  
Amethyst crystal, quartz, hydrostone  
Dimensions variable with space  
Courtesy of Galerie Perrotin  
Credit Guillaume Ziccarelli