An exhibition about Raymond Roussel seems at first glance a controversial venture. A man who kept his private life secret and who put his limitless imagination under methodical “constraints,” Roussel was an author poised between two worlds and resolved to make one up completely his own.

At the origin of the Rousselian universe is the lost paradise of childhood’s “perfect joy.” When attending the Nice carnival as a child, he first discovered the power of words to double themselves and to generate infinite images.

Pursuing his own glory, Roussel worshipped such “literary geniuses” as Victor Hugo and Victorien Sardou. He transformed the classical culture of his time into a cabinet of curiosities, a maze of references, tributes, and travesty, where a quote always leads to an invention.

“I who have traveled so widely, have never written about my travels,” Roussel remarked. He journeyed to Tahiti on the trail of his idol Pierre Loti, and to many other exotic locations. However, it was his imaginary Africa that impressed Michel Leiris, who linked his own ethnographic journey there to Roussel’s poetical exploration.
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For Roussel, theater was the highest form of art—a magical extravaganza where words materialize and reality is suspended. With the staging of his novels and plays, both luxurious and bizarre, he gained notoriety and ignited scandal, while arousing support from the young Surrealists

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Described with a photographer’s eye, the numerous machines in Roussel’s writings reveal his familiarity with the advanced technology of his time, as well as his fascination with the novelist Jules Verne and the astronomer Camille Flammarion. The morphological mechanisms in Impressions d’Afrique “showed the way” to the artist Marcel Duchamp in his conception of his Large Glass and other Bachelor Machines

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To André Breton, Roussel was a “Surrealist as a storyteller.” A major resource for the Surrealist idea that reality is nothing but an extension of the self, Roussel’s writings were exemplary of a “fundamental crisis of the object” that Salvador Dalí translated into double images in his “paranoiac-critical” paintings

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The posthumous discovery of his “highly special writing procedure” gave rise to numerous attempts to visualize Roussel’s world of language. The first “Machine for Reading Roussel” was conceived under the umbrella of the College of 'Pataphysics, while Roussel became, for sometimes contradictory reasons, a key exponent of modern literature for many artists and writers.

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