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Muntadas: Piscine Obliviousness/ Amphibious Editions

Oriol Fontdevila
GALERIA JOAN PRATS

Text done for the Antoni Muntada's publication *Editions II*, launched in relation the exhibition with the same name that took place in Barcelona, April, 2018
The text is a short version of another that remain umpublished, which examines the publications of Muntadas in relation to the concepts of *media landscape*, *media art*, and the notion of the project the artist himself has forged.

I.

"Imagine a deep-sea fish at the bottom of the ocean. It is surrounded by water; it lives in water; it breathes water. Now, what is the last thing that fish would discover? I am inclined to believe the last thing the fish would be aware of would be water" (1)

The so-called piscine obliviousness (2) is a recurrent issue of phenomenology. Aristotle, in his treatise *De anima*, in 350 BC, already questioned the possibility that maritime animals recognised humidity in their abrasion with subaquatic surfaces. Oliver Lodge, the spiritualist, physicist, and pioneer in the emission of radio waves, pronounced the words above in 1920, in the Shubert Theater of New York, deducing in this way that the whole universe is full of ether – without any need to present any scientific formula to demonstrate it.

Marshall McLuhan popularised the oblivion of the fish in the second half of the 20th century, making it a pivotal issue in his theory of the media. In what has been considered his best seller, The Medium Is the Massage (1967), McLuhan proposed that "One thing about which fish know exactly nothing is water since they have no anti environment which would enable them to perceive the element they live in". The thinker understands in this way that in themselves, "the media are invisible" (While the possibility of gaining awareness can only arise from the condition of being able to inhabit an alternative medium, even if it is only momentarily (3).

Alexandre Cirici, one of the greatest defenders of contemporary art in Catalonia during the second half of the 20th century, echoed this theory in 1979 in one of his texts in *Serra d'Or* "L'environament vinvisible d'Antoni Muntadas" (4).

II.

The first time Muntadas talked to me about the exhibition *Edicions II* at the Galería Joan Prats, he referred to it as an "exhibition of deltas". I asked him to elaborate: "my projects are one, they are units. But these units diversify into huge quantities of postcards, there could be up to 100.000 postcards, and could even include 17 metal plaques distributed throughout the city in the form of signage, or a web page. So, the project finally appears as the sum of three collections of remains; that is of deltas" (5).

For Muntadas, deltas come into being as the result of accumulated sedimentations –the 100.000 postcards, the 17 metal plaques, the web page, etcetera–, are generated under the shelter of some projects which, in correspondence with the metaphor of the delta, will also have to take on attributes of an aquiferous formation, probably a river.

In any case, it is by no means insignificant that the artist identifies his publications with deltas. Amongst landscape formations, deltas probably stand out as the most amphibious, in that they are half way between two differentiated forms of medium, the aquatic and the terrestrial.

III.

Editions allowed Muntadas to achieve a more porous and plural circulation by its multiplication and intervention capacities across diverse media and in different time frames. While his projects usually consist in one video, one installation, or one urban intervention, his publications are rarely made up of a single unique element.

Projects unfold through different editions, not only in a plethora of media but also in the way editions determine the artist's research on how to multiply each project's intervention capacity throughout different media. Editions tend to divide Muntadas' projects in two:

On the one hand, editions are specifically developed to intervene in the media landscape, the landscape of the media that Muntadas has impacted upon in his projects since the beginning of the 70s. As the artist declared: "I use the media to talk about the media (6). In the works where I use video I normally deal with television, similarly when I have used photography it has been to address advertising" (7).

But, conversely, on the other hand and unlike the rest of the media that Muntadas works with, the editions that are publications seem to show a desire to contravene the very landscape of media art, breaking conventions that have become natural under the project culture and ended up being imposed in the practice of art.

A primordial project in which this intervention is revealed in a crystalclear way is the first version of *Media Sites / Media Monuments* that Muntadas made in Washington in 1982. Muntadas produced a series of postcards with photomontages of different monuments in the city in relation to major episodes in the media that used the same monuments as a scenario. The sense of intervention of this series of postcards was intensified once they were distributed to tourists who visited the city daily. The postcards transformed *Media Sites / Media Monuments* into an intervention at the heart of the city's media landscape.

On the other hand, Muntadas applied to the magazine *Sites*, specialised in architecture and literature, to have his work published, as well as to complement it with a conversation the artist had with Ronald Christ. In different occasions the artist

has articulated his publications as platforms for dialogue, allowing theorists in different areas of thought to converge in discussion around his projects. Just as Muntadas intervened in Washington with the postcards project, with the magazine *Sites*, he in turn decided to invite a theorist in literature and art to intervene on Muntadas. Although this exercise appears as a constant within Muntadas' strategy, the results have rarely been considered as pieces of art or artist's books.

Finally, on the same note, the publication *Híbridos* (1998), although conceived with an extremely experimental narrative, because it referred to the exhibition bearing the same title at the Museo Nacional Reina Sofía and included theoretical texts, was not considered as a hybrid of an artist's book and catalogue (8). However, it could actually be a hybrid twice over, or rather an amphibian, as discussed earlier, a formation that maintains the equilibrium between two forms of medium.

IV.

The metaphor of water, and more specifically of liquefaction, is a classic of contemporary thought. At least since *Liquid Modernity* by Zygmunt Bauman (1999), liquidity has become an indispensable attribute for the understanding of the flux of information, the network society, the ebb and flow of post-Fordism and neoliberal economics, as well as the very culture of the project.

A truly genuine notion of project has also emerged throughout Muntadas' career. The artist tackles the project, on the one hand, as the logic behind a series of procedures, based on the repetition of processes and strategies and on the other, the project defines has allowed him to depart from a type of intuitive and immediate practice while helping him to structure flexible environments, open to unpredictability, developing platforms to work in the long run. Among the strategies that provide Muntadas with a certain porosity,joining together teams that work in several intervention locations is a major one. These teams are usually made up of local agents who come from different fields of knowledge. In this way, if Muntadas has consolidated, over the last few decades, a dimension of work on a transnational scale, developed through the deployment of simultaneous processes across different sites, the artist also ends up confronting the possibility of standardisation via a reduced collection of formulae, from the moment he encourages the creation of a series of filters that, finally, oblige him to translate in relation to the specificities of each of the media in which he intervenes. Hence, for example, the collection of metaphors about cultural translation generated by Muntadas in the series *On Translation* (initiated in Helsinki in 1996) have been seen, in turn, translated by the interlocutors and collaborators who the artist unites in each locality.

With regard once again to publications, our hypothesis is that they have played a fundamental role in consolidating the methodology for the project work of Muntadas. We even think that in part they anticipate it. So, from at least the mid seventies onwards, with cases such as *Cadaqués – Canal Local* (1974), we see the proliferation of different publications around the same piece, publications with which the project unfolds, seeking an ad hoc articulation with the different media coming into play- such as, in this case, the local population, tourism, or even the art scene. While Cadaqués – Canal Local led to a television broadcast, in relation to publications, it resulted in at least three elements: a poster, a diary, and a catalogue.

The network of relations articulated by the publication *On Subjectivity*, in 1978, can also be seen as the precedent for one of the most radical translation methodologies that Muntadas ended up experimenting with around his work. In this sense, just as in 1978 Muntadas had elaborated a network of agents to achieve the most varied possible set of interpretations of images from Life magazine, publishing them in an artist's book in the form of captions, in the early nineties, he exposed his Between the Frames (1983-1994) to a similar methodology, where Muntadas has left since then the mode of public presentation of the project in the hands of those responsible for the institution and the curators chosen within the framework of his exhibitions. The aim being that they could freely alter the project according to their interpretation.

One particularly successful case, along these lines, was the retrospective exhibition of the series *On Translation* that took place in 2002 at MACBA. Muntadas challenged the museum and its curatorial team to realise "not a recreation", nor "a documentation" of his projects, so much as "an interpretation", to take the very idea of translation inherent in the project to its final consequences (9). According to what José Lebrero Stals, the curator of the exhibition, stated, Muntadas' invitation, called for "a fresh formulation of the way of working and, therefore of producing and mediating", in such a way that this translation of *On Translation* highlighted (10) and induced a rethinking of the ways of working, that remain anchored within the medium of museums.

The editorial work and the publications is where Muntadas has experimented more precociously and with more intensity than in any other medium the collaborative methods that have ended up impregnating the whole of his work. Here is where one finds the deployment of strategies that catalyse translation no longer, as just a metaphor, so much as in particular a process of bidirectional exchange.

The publications are, therefore, what has triggered the amphibious evolution of Muntadas. More than in any other medium, in the publications, Muntadas has shown a greater disposition for contortionism, leaping, not just from medium to medium (understood as tools of communication) but doing so within different media (as such environments) (11) . Even though this has supposed, in exchange, that a large part of the editions of Muntadas blurs the gap between art and not-art.

Notes:

1. “Lodge Pays Tribute to Einstein Theory”, in: The New York Times. February 9th, 1920.
2. Phrase used John Durham Peters in a: *The Marvelous Clouds. Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media.* Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015, p. 55.
3. Included in Durham Peters (2015): Op. Cit., p. 55.
4. NT. The invisible environment of Antoni Muntadas. Cirici, A. (1979): “L’environament invisible d’Antoni Muntadas”, in: Serra d’Or, n. 241, October, pp. 657-659
5. Private conversation with Muntadas. Barcelona, August 2017
6. NT. The Catalan version of the statement, “utilitzo els mitjans per parlar del medi”, retains the duality of the meaning of “medium” with which Muntadas plays here; when he says mitjans (media) he refers to the media, as such, to the tools, while when he says medi (medium) he refers to the medium as the environment.
7. Private conversation with Muntadas. Barcelona, August 2017
8. Conversation between Muntadas and Anna Pahissa in the bookshopMúltiplos. Barcelona, June 2015.
9. Declarations of Muntadas collected in Staniszewsky, M.A. (2002): “An Interpretation/Translation of Muntadas’ Projects” in: Muntadas: On Translation. Barcelona: ACTAR and Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA). Exhibition catalogue.
10. Lebrero Stals, J. (2002): “From the Museum to Museums”, a: *Muntadas: On Translation*. (catalogue). Barcelona: ACTAR and Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA). Exhibition catalogue.
11. NT: In relation to the translation into English about the duality established in Catalan around mitjà/ medi, see note n. 7.