

Marcel·lí Antúnez Roca - Texts

EN TIERRA DE NADIE

Author: David Armengol
Written: Barcelona
Date: January 2009
Topic: Metamembrana Catalog
Category: INSTALLATIONS
Work: Metamembrana

Prologue: the artist on the edge (I)

One of the main virtues of Marcel·lí Antúnez's work is that quite consciously, wilfully and in a way that is distinctly uncomfortable, he has always walked the tightrope between the boundaries of the self-contained disciplines of cultural production. For this reason, since his first performances with the Fura dels Baus in the late seventies to the present day, his discourse has always been difficult to classify within contemporary artistic practice, and therefore situate or acknowledge. Aside from the challenges that this radical frontier stance has posed in interpreting his ideas effectively, this fact alone converts his work in a significant and representative rarity within contemporary art. In other words, by virtue of its extreme singularity, and regardless of any mythologizing interpretations, his work and his extensive career constitute an almost unique case study.

Looking at the body and ritual work of the Fura dels Baus which the artist championed for over ten years, Los Rinos and their transgressions, and the subsequent evolution of his artistic interests through the incorporation of new technologies (from Epizoo, JoAn?, l'home de carn and Afasia, to the current trilogy of the Membranas), the label "rarity" which has accompanied him since the beginning refers mainly to his intention to remain coherent within a frenetic dialogue of opposites. This situates his work in a sort of no man's land articulated by constant questioning of the artistic fact. Antagonistic input binomials which are inseparably interconnected, namely; scientific and biological knowledge as opposed to artistic considerations, scenic arts in contrast with visual arts, the tradition of ritual as opposed to high technology, body and organic art in contrast with artificial and electronic art. All these form a personal and polysemic imagery arising from the analysis of multiple references and experiences (from Antonin Artaud and Tadeusz Kantor to Viennese Actionism, from the medieval bestiary to the underground comic, from baroque painting to virtual reality, from Catalanian auca to epic fables...) and resulting in the articulation of a truly personal, emotional and subjective cosmogony.

Seen as a whole, his work involves the exploration – and exploitation – of the subversive and destabilising capacity of art when interacting with a reality that is excessively conservative and immovable. It is a way of using art as the driving force of change and as a device to interpret reality unconventionally. Using the dialectic of multiple formats of presentation (performance, installation, drawing, video, film...), Marcel·lí Antúnez's work uses parody and excess to offer a critical interpretation of ourselves which is engaged, ironic, grotesque, obscene, violent and at the same time, naïve. It is an uncomfortable attitude which still maintains the level of faith and energy necessary to confront our surroundings using the supposed freedom that he still seems to retain in his artistic work.

A current interpretation of Marcel·lí Antúnez's work

"In the film *El Dibuxant* I stated that in recent years I had adopted new positions regarding my work which I had never been so clearly aware of as I am now, and which I summarised as follows: the will to build a career, the materialisation of a universe and the search for ways to narrate it..."

Analysing the artist's current production is a complex task, even when his extended career over the last 30 years work is not taken into account. Despite remaining faithful to certain discursive and formal premises, in other words the hypothesis that identifies and situates his work in an ambiguous and decentralised place within the current artistic panorama, his work, nevertheless, has undergone certain shifts in focus. These changes, over and beyond their performance, interactive and relational nature, have led him to substantiate his overarching intentions regarding the artistic fact: the progressive construction of a personal cosmogony.

In this non-linear evolution, *El Dibuxant* (2005) plays a noteworthy role. As the artist himself points out, this documentary was an exercise in retrospection, a sort of testament to all his projects to date. It was a point of no-return, of fleeing towards the future, which led to the development of the Membrana project and its tripartite structure: *Protomembrana* (2006), *Hipermembrana* (2007) and *Metamembrana* (2009).

The proliferation and scope of Marcel·lí Antúnez's work has meant that he has always worked under tight time parameters, giving rise to the frenetic and constant production of large-scale projects. After leaving the Fura dels Baus, he intensified his artistic production and created many works (JoAn, l'home de carn, Epizoo, Afasia, Agar, Réquiem, Pol and Transpèrnia, among others) which consolidated the use of performance and interactive devices as the two cornerstones of his work. From this point onwards, his work became linked to the dialogue between art and action, and between scenic art and the application of new technology.

Going beyond the triangle of performance, theatre and technology, the making of *El Dibuxant* marked a hiatus which enabled the artist to detect other basic concepts in his work which, although present, had not played a leading role until that point. And this is where the value of his drawing should be situated, a procedure which until then had lacked autonomy. It combined the pleasure of fragmented narration with the building of his discourse based on the sum of micro-stories.

The Membrana project implied a paradigm shift in Marcel·lí Antúnez's work. It comprises three basic stages; the *Protomembrana* mechatronic lesson, the *Hipermembrana* performance, and the multimedia installation *Metamembrana*, in addition to multiple satellite projects such as the interactive video *DMD Europa* (2007), mural paintings at the *Interattività Furiosa* exhibition in the GAM in Gallarate (2007), and the *Outras Peles* exhibition at the ZDB in Lisbon (2008). It reveals a way of understanding artistic practice based on the action-technology binomial but articulated through the lens of his personal cosmogony, and this leads to other formats of presentation such as mural installations and audiovisual story-telling which complement the ephemeral experience defining his work.

Arising from many meetings, conversations and working sessions with the artist, this text aims to organise and systemize the main ideas that currently define his work. To this end, the essay is structured in a series of fragmented, independent and interconnected sections, enabling the guiding threads that weave through his work to be drawn out.

Membrane as a live structure

"Memory, that is to say, the way that organisms replicate from RNA and DNA, and the membrane, are the two elements necessary for an organism to exist. The membrane interests me because it is an open container, permeable and capable of communication".

In microbiology, the membrane is a flexible and frontier element that serves as a protector and transmits information. Let us look at, for example, the plasma membrane that surrounds cells. This membrane represents the frontier between the extracellular medium and the intracellular pool, that is to say, it provides protection and at the same time it is a means of communication and contact. If we take into account that Marcel·lí Antúnez has always been interested in the relationship between science and biology, it is not surprising that the membrane as a living organism should be so attractive and seductive for the artist.

In Agar (1999), the work that can be most directly linked to biology, we can understand, visually and explicitly, his interest in these ideas. Agar represents the construction of an autonomous ecosystem that exhibits the metabolic processes of microorganisms that grow, reproduce and die during the timeframe of the exhibition. In other words, an open life cycle – in this case of a scientific nature and structured in layers, spheres and levels of interdependence – that the artist extrapolates to the artistic terrain in order to bring us closer to the artistic experience as something inextricably linked to life.

Intuitively, membrane was the starting point in 2005 that led Marcel·lí to construct his cosmovision. Owing to its permeability and porosity, and in particular its open nature, the membrane was the unifying element which was to become the basic model for the creation of his personal universe.

Sistematurgia as a method

"I created this new term that fuses the words system and dramaturgy, to denote the shift in the methodological paradigm entailed by implanting computation onto artistic and scenic practices."

As we mentioned previously, Membrana is divided into three central projects, and it is accompanied by a series of parallel experiences, different projects that are closely related, through which Marcel·lí's artistic practice has incorporated a number of innovations in its formal presentation. Without rejecting the time-bound and transitory format of the performance, this strategy has gone beyond it to establish rhythms of perception adapted to the exhibition room. Despite these changes, one aspect that has remained unaltered in his approach to practising art is precisely his procedural methodology which is a model applied by the artist in all his work and which he himself defines as sistematurgia.

Protomembrana (2006) is a performance with a pedagogical intention that is presented as a scenic and interactive show. It has been adapted to the central figure of the orator or narrator of stories, and inspired by fables and epics. In this performance, the artist presents the guiding principles of sistematurgia: the term was invented by him as an exercise in translating computational systems into the basic scheme of dramaturgy. In this way, all the elements that take part on the stage can be controlled by different interfaces and interactive devices that enable the storyline to advance openly and in a dehierarchized manner. Thus, sistematurgia applies new forms of group production and execution to staging. The artist establishes a diagram based on the notion of interface (interactive objects and elements that interpret the user's gestures), computation (the system of managing said interfaces using computer systems) and the medium (methods of translation based on images and sounds that make up the scenic narrative).

In any case, the application of sistematurgia is not new in his work, as it was already in the making during his Fura dels Baus period, and also in a methodology defined by him as the "theory of fields" (teoría de los ámbitos). In an attempt to decentralise scenic narrative– thereby relating to Artaud and his confrontation of the notion of author - , "the theory of fields" proposes a new form of group creation with an open, permeable narrative based on independent scenes which, without being predefined, are built on the basis of active participation systems. Once conceived, the scenes are interlinked to give shape to a changeable and pluralistic story. Marcel·lí Antúnez uses this approach to blur the predetermined and compartmentalised boundaries between author, actor and receiver.

Hipermembrana (2007), the following instalment of Membrana, follows the premises of sistematurgia, but applies them differently. While the role of the artist as a narrator set the pace in Protomembrana, the narrative rhythm in Hipermembrana, using video and screams as the basic structure, was more flexible and anarchic. The interfaces, prostheses, and interactive elements – the dreskeleton worn by the artist and the scream machine created for the event – built up an expansive story centering on another of the recurring themes in Marcel·lí Antúnez's work: myths.

Drawing as the root

"I have always drawn"

Drawing has always been present in Marcel·lí's work, but in a more intimate, procedural and methodological way. This is an aspect that, throughout his career, has been used as an alternative form of writing to the written text. This can be clearly seen in his workbooks, the storyboards for the film Frontón, El hombre navarro va a la Luna (1992), preparatory sketches for Epizoo (1994), Epifanía (1999) and Pol (2001), performance notebooks for Afasia (1998), and even specific graphic projects such as the series of books Artcagarro which Antúnez worked on between 1985 and 1992.

On analysing his immediate, organic and intuitive way of drawing, all sorts of references arise that lead to comparisons with the underground comic and the aesthetic of the fanzine which he devoured when he was younger. Given the high degree of fantasy in his work and his transgressive attitude, connections can be established with automatic writing, surrealist and dream painting and certain trends within Dadaism and punk. However, one of the clearest references in Marcel·lí Antúnez's drawings, perhaps because of the darkness and mysticism evident in his work, can be found in medieval imagery, such as illuminated manuscripts and Romanesque murals, and this links to his idea of drawing as a system of writing. His drawings forego the use of perspective and instead offer flexible perception solutions capable of generating symbolic and allegorical interpretations (always ironic in tone) about our surroundings, using a style that is coarse, direct and even rough. The concepts of saturation and excess used in his compositions also relate, although rather indirectly, to the idea of horror vacui and the excessively dramatic quality of the Baroque style.

It was not until the mechatronic conference *Transpermia* (2003), and the sequence of black and white murals painted, erased and painted over again in the final part of the film *El Dibuxant* (2005), that the artist analysed the core role of drawing in his work. This means of expression would become even more prominent and appear as the main element in his work. Drawing is also, together with video images, the raw material of his complex and varied animation systems. And this use of drawing has, going beyond traditional animation interpolation, led him to incorporate new digital techniques that enhance the dynamic quality of pictures and their conversion into interactive material.

Moreover, in recent years, Marcel·lí has incorporated the use of large-scale murals into his work. This can be clearly seen in his specific site paintings at the GAM in Gallerate for the *Interattività Furiosa* exhibition (2007), the mural *43 El somni de la raó* (2007) painted in the new building of the History of Art Department at the University of Barcelona, and his wall paintings for the exhibition *Outras Peles* (2008) – such as, for example, the *Arbre Sistemàurgic*, a schematic tree likened to a phantasmagoric presence symbolically summing up part of his career.

Cosmovision as a goal

“My work comprises a broad cosmvision, formed of elements that present a private universe, a way of relating them and specific methods to do this.”

This cosmogony can be understood as the set of narratives and stories that try to find answers to the creation of the world. In this sense, humankind's concern to know its origins – and to try and explain and justify its existence – has been expressed throughout history in a multitude of hypotheses and speculations, whether scientific, mythological, religious or philosophical. When we transfer the cosmogonic structure to Marcel·lí Antúnez's artistic imagery, we can see that his artistic interests and concerns converge precisely on the attempt to build and articulate his personal universe. A subjective and expansive microcosm created on the basis of drawings, performance, animation, technology and interactive experience.

Marcel·lí Antúnez's cosmvisión is built on the basis of a specific attitude towards life's experiences and artistic practice. His attitude is disobedient and politically incorrect and its maximum expression is the use of parody, and more specifically, self-parody, a fundamental concept in how he understands art.

If we look at the Greek root for “parody”, we will see it was considered a sort of “disrespectful poem”, and this definition accurately describes the way Marcel·lí works. From the start, spurred on by the cultural revolt that took place after the Franco years, Marcel·lí Antúnez used parody and excess as discursive elements. This was evident in the subversive actions of the *Fura dels Baus'* early works and in the everyday aggressive actions by *Los Rinos*. Throughout his career, Antúnez has maintained a will to provoke which voluntarily alienates itself from the limits of what is permissible and morally acceptable. His parodic and satiric interpretation of real life, from a critical distance, feeds obsessively on the world of fantasy and imagination as the basis for his body of work. It is not surprising, therefore, that everything related to the building of parallel worlds - such as fantasy literature, mythology, legends, fables and even science-fiction - forms an active part of the artist's personal cosmogony.

We can say that his whole creative universe is consciously filtered through parody, which is perhaps one of the concepts that most misleads when it comes to classifying his work, but which serves as a pretext for the artist to articulate the overarching interests of his work: the multidisciplinary and cross-cutting exploration of the emotional, passionate and cathartic capacities of the individual in response to life's experiences. This ambitious goal, drawing to a certain extent on Wagner's concept of total art, functions as a distinctive and distinguishing element in all his work, whether performances or exhibitions.

In this way, parody becomes a fundamental element in his cosmvision. The presence of parody, as in the use of ridicule, sarcasm and in particular grotesque images, can be detected in all areas of the artist's work through the use of systematurgia, the scientific and biological nexus, the use of animation and robotics, body work and imagery rooted in the contemporary revision of ritual and ceremony. A balance between visual and scenic art, (that no man's land we are trying to define), endeavouring to find a specific way to interpret the functionality of culture and art in our era. And, going beyond artistic concerns, to include moral, aesthetic, philosophical and even political interpretations of the everyday reality which upholds and defines us. This framework is a given, whether we like it or not, and the artist seems to constantly reject it under the utopian premise of deconstruction and parodic reactivation.

Metamembrana as totality

“Metamembrana summarises the discoveries of the previous episodes of Membrana. It stresses the idea of cosmvision and the use of drawing acquires a central role. Metamembrana calls for an open methodology involving different agents and participation strategies (...), and it does so by using a creative space in which, thanks to technology, scenic and visual art become one single territory.”

Metamembrana is the third and latest instalment to date of the Membrana project. Having reached this point, analysing the key aspects that define Metamembrana enables us to synthesize the postulates that define Marcel·lí Antúnez's position on art. By contrast with the previous instalments, in which pace and the time-bound nature of the performance predominated, Metamembrana is an interactive installation that takes as its starting point a large multiple landscape (drawn previously and then filmed) that links the five cities involved in the project: Olot, Reus, Granollers, Lleida and Barcelona.

Marcel·lí Antúnez's work is deeply rooted in the land, understood as the influence that a particular place exercises on its inhabitants, and present in Marcel·lí's imagery in different ways, for example his family's cattle breeding background and the scatology characteristic of Catalanian culture. His work incorporates the ultralocal tradition of these geographic areas in a sort of cross-referenced interpretation of different rituals and popular tales.

In this way, and thanks again to the use of high technology, Metamembrana features a large-scale interactive and audiovisual picture landscape, that is directly inspired in 15th and 16th century Flemish painters, (who pioneered the creating of fragmented micro stories on the unifying surface of the canvas), with the aim of presenting an open and hypertextual narrative structure. As in the landscapes of painters such as Bosch (1450-1516) and Pieter Brueghel the Elder (1525-1569), this technique also explores the notion of expanded cinema or exhibition cinema (defined by the decentralisation of the story line, pre-eminence of images and the multiplication of projection screens) in search of new formulas of interaction arising from the frictions and tensions between painting, film and theatre.

If we take by way of example the landscapes teeming with small-scale figures and life by Bosch and Breughel, whether it's the phantasmagoric landscapes of the former or the detailed depiction of customs and manners of the latter, we find the same taste for dehierarchised fragments that defines Metamembrana. This approach to reality dispenses with nuclear elements to become a hypertext, thus granting the user greater freedom to act, participate and interpret.

Metamembrana functions as a large-scale simultaneous projection in the five locations mentioned above. Based on drawings, it generates different interrelated fantasy visions: a volcanic forest (Olot), a multicultural musical stage (Barcelona, represented by images from the Raval barrio), a fantastic graveyard (Reus), a battle field (Granollers) and a paradise tree laden with fruit (Lleida). The imagery is telluric, organised according to layers of meaning and activated by a series of interfaces that trigger some of the resources already used by the artist making them available to the receiver. A mat with movement sensors (DMD Europa, 2007), a device that captures the user's face and inserts it into a story (Tàntal, 2004), a joystick used as a body prosthesis (Protomembrana, 2006, and Epidermia, 2008) and a microphone for applying sound effects.

On the basis of this structure (landscape and interfaces), Metamembrana encourages a live, dynamic and polysemic story, with multiple video and sound resources much like a videogame, a hypertextual navigation system or a virtual reality device, offering different possibilities of narration and immersive interaction. Summing up, we can say that Metamembrana synthesizes the work system currently used by Marcel·lí Antúnez and in the future could lead to a possible evolution focussing on film production.

Epilogue: the artist on the edge (II)

Returning to the idea of uncomfortableness that has accompanied Marcel·lí Antúnez throughout his career, we can see that his work as a whole entails a constant subversion of what is regulated and accepted. It is a controversial discourse which, through art in action, has always sought the transgression of established limits using resources such as excess, jokes, irony, the absurd and even the ridiculous. In this sense, and as has been highlighted throughout this essay, one of the main strengths of his work lies precisely in the use of self-parody as a strategy for interpreting the immediate surroundings. Combined with the mocking and provoking nature of the jester, this converts Marcel·lí Antúnez into someone who, despite the supposed impracticality of art, is capable of changing the established rhythms that maintain the balance and well-being of our social and personal structures.

A process of positively mocking reality has always led him to present his discourse with unconventional intentions such as the fact that it is incorrect and uncomfortable to explore, honestly and bluntly, the wide range of extreme emotions, sensations and passions that life's experiences awaken in us. For this reason, his work feeds on complex components such as drama, tragedy, euphoria, ritual and trauma which are difficult to set bounds to and measure, in which, without being able to control them, instinctive and pre-rational confrontations arise, not contemplated within our daily conduct.

For this reason, and aware of the difficulty posed by analysing extreme experience, the artist has developed two basic strategies: on the one hand self-parody which had led to constant experimentation on his own person and body and, on the other, emotive complicity with the user. In this way, the extreme experience proposed by the artist, whether it's a performance, video or multimedia installation, always has resources that ease the tension of the situation and enable channels of interaction and effective and fruitful dialogue to be established. Proof of these strategies for creating complicity are the workshops that the artist has carried out complementing his projects (such as for example Satèl·lits Obscens, 1996-1997), and the performances dynamised and led by himself, moving subtly between the roles of Master of Ceremonies and guinea pig, a resource he has used since the first performance of Epizoo right up to the current "trilogy of the membranes".

Finally, and regardless of the complexity in Marcel·lí Antúnez's work, both because of his multidisciplinary discourse and his non-conformist attitude towards the artistic fact, we can say that his current work still has a critical, revolting and uncomfortable effect on the secrets of our present reality, which is too rigid and conservative to allow these mysteries to seep out but which the Antunez extracts from our daily routine. An even if Marcel·lí Antúnez continues to operate in no man's land, clinging to the frontiers that define it like a survivor on the fringes of the official discourse on contemporary art, his work draws solid lines of continuity with new generations of artists who use different manifestations but share the same provocative and mocking attitude in practising art.

Translated by Fionnuala Ní Eigearthaigh