

Marcel·lí Antúnez Roca - Texts

EL ARTISTA COMO INTERFAZ Y MARCEL·LÍ ANTÚNEZ COMO MEMBRANA

Author: Roberta Bosco & Stefano Caldana
Written: Barcelona
Date: January 2009
Topic: Metamembrana Catalog
Category: INSTALLATIONS
Work: Metamembrana

If the public has learnt anything about Marcel·lí Antúnez during the last decade, and also before that – think of the buckets of paint and axes in the first performances of the Fura del Baus – it is that if there is a sensor on stage then someone has to use it.

A master of stage production and creative dramaturgy, Antúnez has never lost sight of the key element of all narratives: metonymy or the literary *deus ex machina* that Anton Chekhov so skilfully conjured up with the pistol in the story of Uncle Vanya. In other words, an object which, at the beginning of the story, goes almost unnoticed but which, as the action unfolds, begins to take on more significance until it becomes even more important than the actors on stage. As Chekhov himself claimed, “No one shows a loaded gun on stage unless somebody is going to fire it.” The story and the emotions which give rise to a state of expectation in the mind of the audience do not happen by themselves since in drama logic, morality and meaning do not exist independently, but rather arise and grow out of a causal relationship.

And it is in this context that the work of Antúnez must be approached as, since the beginning of his solo career, he has never lost sight of the importance of the key elements which make up the dynamic core and driving force of the action on stage. In the panorama of contemporary plastic arts his works defy the standard labels: they cannot be regarded either as performances or as installations, since they are hybrid works which combine installation with theatrical and audiovisual elements but without being static or contemplative.

Throughout his career, the body (almost always his body) has been the stage and the physical space of his performances, while the theatre or exhibition centre were merely pretexts to gather the audience around the artist. It is also worth noting that his performances do not use traditional stage design. The context and the dramatic narrative also arise from the direct experience generated by the interaction of the public with the artist by means of creations which combine autobiographical elements with classical myth, moral fable, popular wisdom and a broad conceptual and ideological background.

The use of technology makes an early appearance in Antúnez's creative process and in the nineties, works such as the Epizoo performance and the Alfabeto installation became key elements of an artistic career open to dialogue with the public. In 1994 Antúnez put himself in the hands of the audience and became the stoic victim whose face and various appendages – such as ears, nose, buttocks and nipples – were connected electronically to machinery. The action of Epizoo is totally directed by the public who control by means of a remote not only the pneumatic exoskeleton which deforms the artist's features, but also elements of the staging such as lighting, images and sound. Different factors come together in this work - social, moral, playful and technological – combined with the novel use of tools which, thanks to the development of home computing, are beginning to be understood by the general public. Epizoo is not only entertainment, a sadistic experiment or a futile anatomical exercise in which the participants give free rein to their fantasies, but also a stage where emotional reactions and subliminal states of mind are caused directly by the facial expressions of the artist as he is subjected to all sorts of mistreatment. In this way, the artist not only grants an unusual prominence to the spectator but at the same time he also gradually reveals a hidden interior universe, made up of impulse, emotion, attraction and repulsion, which bring into question the nature and boundaries of the spectator's active role. Epizoo marks the beginning of the artist's transformation into an interface, into a type of membrane between the work and its audience, a role or state which Antúnez will continue to develop in almost all of his subsequent works and through which he will become the undisputed demiurge of his universe. If Epizoo can be considered the genesis, Alfabeto, an interactive installation with sound (1999), represents the Rosetta Stone, essential in understanding the world of interactive artefacts with which the artist will continue to surround himself in the following years. Alfabeto, as its very name implies, lays the foundations for understanding a universe of interactive tools which dissociate the audience from its passive attitude, and impose their rules. Interaction is no longer a simple sensory resource, but rather a body action and gestures which force the user to shed her/his inhibitions and interact with the work. Under the austere guise of a static column of wood, emotions are expressed through sound effects when the public embraces it. This is because the surface is equipped with sensors which, when activated, emit moans associated with different emotional states, such as anguish, pleasure, happiness and pain.

In our opinion, works such as Epizoo and Alfabeto are absolutely vital in interpreting the evolution of Antúnez's artistic quest. The exoskeleton, which in Epizoo played with the morbid curiosity and complicity of the public, five years later becomes the cold steel armour of Réquiem, an interactive robotic installation (1999) controlled by means of sensors distributed throughout the exhibition space. The work, which is a reflection on the theme of death, consists of an exoskeletal robot which, on the one hand can revive a lifeless body, while on the other is capable of caging a person, forcing him/her to eternally repeat sequences of simple gestures and movements such as walking and waving, or more complex ones, such as dance choreographies.

Afasia (1998) is a mechatronic performance featuring a dreskeleton, in which concepts present in several previous works by Antúnez come together on stage for the first time. The objective is to stage the artist's personal interpretation of Homer's Odyssey. A large-scale projection screen and four sound robots accompany the deeds of a phantasmagorical and hypertechnological Ulysses whose movements control everything that happens around him. The whole work is controlled by the dreskeleton, a basic element in Antúnez's career, which becomes an active stage component connected to a computer and original software created by the artist with the aim of controlling the dynamics and interactions between the different stage elements.

From Afasia onwards the dreskeleton becomes a totally original key element, a product of Antúnez's fantasy, whose aim is to broaden the scenic interactive possibilities by turning the artist's body into a highly advanced technological instrument. On stage in Afasia, surrounded by his creatures, Antúnez re-enacts a journey which at the same time can be considered a metaphor for his own life. A journey which will henceforth lead him towards a highly characteristic and original robot performance format. This format will evolve in subsequent works such as Pol (2002) and Hypermembrana (2007) by integrating on the one hand

more complex and sophisticated technological resources and, on the other, new practices and interpretations of traditional disciplines, particularly drawing, which will become increasingly more prominent.

The content of Antúñez's works is wide and varied: life and death, illness, sexuality, orgies, bureaucracy and loneliness. However, apart from the subjects dealt with, all of his works convey a feeling of surprise and of the unexpected which prevents monotony and repetitiveness. In his work context always plays with the dichotomy of cause and effect; the process of becoming is essential and opposites attract. Life and death are always present simultaneously. Flesh and the depiction of the naked body with its flaws and limitations, revealing its vulnerability, are some of the more recurrent themes. They have appeared since 1992 when he created *JoAn?*, *l'home de carn*, a naked human figure made of pigskin and cowhide and built to almost lifelike scale, capable of reacting to sounds made by the spectators by moving various parts of its body. In an apparently atypical turnabout, after having been a pioneer in the hybridisation of technological resources with *JoAn?*, Antúñez pays homage to the power of the rhythms of nature in *Metzina* (2004). Twelve years after *JoAn?*, Antúñez created another body of pigskin and cowhide and enclosed it in a metacrylate coffin so that it gradually rotted and decomposed literally under the incredulous eyes of the spectators, finally revealing in its interior a metal framework formed by the words of a poem by J. V. Foix. It is a way of bowing to the inevitable, something which he had already tried to overcome – or perhaps only temper – with Réquiem's exoskeleton. The almost repulsive rawness of his flesh sculptures is the façade behind which a reflection on the meaning of life and its driving force lurks, proffering a broad, articulated vision which conceives the human being's life parabola as a combination of past and present micro and macro events. Nature never stops: the body is only a temporary reorganisation of matter. Antúñez's flesh sculptures evolve into another state, just as the gigantic test tubes of the biological installation *Agar* (1999) enable us to admire the growth of bacteria. At first sight the bacteria resemble beautiful magma, colourful and stable, but their unceasing internal activity keeps them in a constant state of flux, reacting to chemical and environmental variations which turn them into an ecosystem which is interactive in its own way.

In our opinion, installations for Antúñez form part of a process of adapting and metabolising specific technologies before applying them to a performance. This is the case of *Tàntal* (2004), which allows the spectator/user to take part in an interactive film by means of an interface which uses her/his face, once captured, as a dramatic medium, by turning it into the protagonist of the story. Antúñez plays with his audience and most probably observes people, analysing both their reactions and the functioning of the interface before introducing it into future actions. In this way the protocols of capturing the face appear in the form of a guncam in performances such as *Protomembrana* (2006) or evolve and broaden their potential, for example including not only visual but also sound functions, as in the scream machine in *Hipermembrana* (2007). If *Epizoo* and *Alfabeto* laid the foundations for the creation of *Afasia*, more recent works such as *Tàntal* and *Transperma* constitute the starting point leading to the three *Membranas*: *Protomembrana*, *Hipermembrana* and *Metamembrana*.

Transperma is a mechatronic performance (2003) based on the artist's personal experiences and his experiences with zero-gravity flights at Star City in the Russian Federation. Featuring these flights in which he wore the *dreskeleton*, Antúñez weaves a new performance which is staged in the form of a didactic conference on *transperma*, as its title indicates. Contrary to *pansperma*, the scientific theory according to which life began exogenously, owing to comets crashing on the surface of the Earth and supposedly introducing organic material such as protobacteria, *Transperma* postulates a hypothesis according to which life could have arisen on Earth, spreading out across the cosmos by means of modern space travel. In this way the actions of humankind and its scientific and cultural development provide a new genesis, space contamination whereby life returns to whence it came, emphasising once again movement in the artist's vision of the universe, where nothing is static and everything is continually evolving. It is in this context, halfway between a conference and performance, that a new facet, characteristic of Antúñez, is introduced, that of the artist narrator who will become the conduit for the future *Membrana* project.

Transperma marks the beginning of a new cosmogony. The *dreskeleton* and computers start to control a world which the artist triggers with his movements and which is increasingly represented by drawings. The latter come to life to represent the traditional subjects of Antúñez's poetics, such as life, death, the body, sex and desire, and also new spheres of reflection such as social and interpersonal relationships and the creator's link with the art system in the age of information technology and savage and decadent post-capitalism. In Antúñez's fiction, machines and new devices for perceiving reality and intervening in it - robots and sensorial drugs to induce transitory personality states - transfer life to the age of a *transperman* utopia, a metaphor for contemporary daily living. Antúñez thus adopts a new role as the Homer of the 21st century, transforming himself into a narrator who - while it may sound redundant - explains the world from his world.

Re-evaluating the concepts of myth and cosmogenesis – subjects which in an era dominated by science appear to have lost their meaning – the three works that make up the *Membrana* project are structured around a narrative thread based on the cosmogonic performance by Antúñez. *Protomembrana* is the direct evolution of *Transperma* and consolidates the mechatronic conference format. *Hipermembrana* illustrates a kind of initiatory landscape and reasserts its most authentic performance format. *Metamembrana* analyses the subject of changes in the internal and external landscape using the innovative format of five identical and simultaneous installations situated in five cities (Lleida, Olot, Reus, Granollers and Barcelona), which share part of their content via internet.

Protomembrana features a *dreskeleton*, sensors, computers and a screen. The public is no longer in control, but their faces become part of Antúñez's universe through the use of a guncam, a gun which captures them and integrates them into the scene. The *Fembrana*, a latex suit with grotesquely exaggerated female attributes, allows the audience to become another character in the play. The hypersized sexual organs on the suit transform the spectator who volunteers to wear it into a new instrument, a new visual and sound interface in the service of the artist and his narrative economy. The story of *Protomembrana*, which arises from the *mise-en-scène* itself, is constructed in four chapters which – thanks also to a good dose of irony – takes the form of a parallel universe, a metaphor for contemporary society, inhabited by creatures endowed with unlikely technological tools which provide them with an extraordinary range of communicative and sensory resources, belonging to an as yet inexistent world. These beings, examples of a hypothetical future *Homo sapiens digitalis*, appear more specialised but at the same time more limited and probably more isolated and alone, and increasingly uncertain and confused about their desires and how best to achieve and enjoy them.

Protomembrana, as the first episode of the *Membrana* trilogy, enables us to predict the universe which Antúñez will reveal successively in *Hipermembrana* (2007) and *Metamembrana* (2009). The methodological process underlying the narrative process of these works has been defined by the author himself as *sistematurgia*, a neologism arising from the contraction of the terms *system* and *dramaturgy*, which literally means the *dramaturgy* of computational systems.

While in *Protomembrana* graphic animation was the main player, in *Hipermembrana* video and image become more prominent. *Hipermembrana* takes place on a stage equipped with different sensors and body interfaces similar to *Fembrana* in *Protomembrana*. Antúñez directs the performance using the *dreskeleton*, accompanied by two performers whose faces and sounds are picked up by the scream machine. In this performance Antúñez returns to the theme of the myth and portrays it using creatures such as the Minotaur, a metaphor for the conflict between rationality and our animal nature. Suddenly the spectator is catapulted into a sort of hell in the guise of an "end of the world" iconography, evoking the middle ages and Dantesque in form. The artist moves through this landscape like a contemporary Daedalus on a rites of passage journey of discovery between impulse and reason, desire and necessity. Aware that political correctness creates

harmful and perverse forms of self-censorship, Antúñez plays with sexuality, ritual, exhibitionism and lust in chapters which mix orgies with bacchanal. The relaxed tone of Protomembrana, in which the narrative is almost always structured as a monologue, gives way in Hipermembrana to the scream as the main narrative thread and favoured form of expression of the performers. It should not be forgotten that the scream, the characteristic element of an unbridled orgy, is a noun which comes from the Latin term bacchius, which in the Greek form, bákchos, means to scream or make noise. From a visual perspective, the use of video instead of graphic animation – as in the previous works – makes the mise-en-scène much more impressive. The artist becomes an alchemist of life and the eucaryotic cell – a basic element of higher life-forms, an essential working part in the matrix of life – becomes the arbiter and starting point of a different way of seeing the development of reality, beyond the play of life and death.

Audiovisual techniques and graphic elements present in the previous episodes of the Membrana trilogy come together in the multiple installation Metamembrana. The changing landscape is the central theme of a work which combines, through a system of projections, visual elements captured in the world outside and in panoramas inspired by the paintings of the Flemish masters Bosch and Pieter Brueghel. Like those vivid teeming paintings, Antúñez's landscapes are also too vast to take in as a whole; it is the spectator who must decide which fragment to look at and when to look at it, thus determining the narrative structure. There are also contributions from the users, who can take part through interactive interfaces, and although external dialogue continues to be part of the discourse, it is no longer so prominent.

In the entire Membrana trilogy, drawing acquires a major role, alone or mixed with real images and the actual faces of the spectators. Basic drawings, in which black and white or bright colours may predominate, are reasserted in their historic role as a means of communication; from the most ancient forms of cave painting, our ancestors' first indication of their determination to communicate, to the wireless electronic communication of today. Drawing and acting have always been present in the history of humankind, even before written language, and they have always had a basic informative and educational role, for example totemic representation. In Antúñez's universe drawing occupies the same narrative role as in ancient times and is close to the iconography of cave paintings, the landscapes of the literary tradition of Ovid and Dante and the worlds of Bosch. And, as in some of the latter's works, Antúñez's drawing is peopled with dream beings, represented with exaggerated features which recall the fantastic creatures reproduced by the explorers of the voyages of the Age of Discovery.

Finally, drawing as a means of expression has been growing in importance in the work of an artist who has always enjoyed drawing but who only from a certain point in his career understood how to reassess it and grant it an increasingly central role. The striking totemic figure of the artist in the autobiographical documentary *El Dibujant* (2005), which reviews the different periods of his life, is proof of how drawing has broadened the potential of his work and its narrative capabilities. The story, which unfolds as his career develops, is told in the first person by the naked artist who, with great skill and ease, paints black lines on his body, underscoring once more his view of himself as the central figure in his own universe.

At this historic moment in which social, technological and economic changes provoke discussions about the art world and the very role of the artist, it is logical that the work should become a witness to and proof of the situation and that it should also force us to reflect. The western public of the 21st century is a "2.0 public" which lives surrounded by technology and is used to using it. So it is no longer a question of trying to surprise, but rather of talking to the audience in a language which they are clearly at ease with. The challenge for the 21st century artist is to connect with this "2.0 public". For this reason the artist has to be an interface. And for this reason Antúñez has chosen membrane as a metaphor, the biological symbol of the basic interface of life and the beginning of the evolutionary process, which out of a chaotic world gave rise to the simplest cell and its unstoppable evolution. The key is in the artist as membrane and interface, a role which Antúñez actively fulfills by taking the form of a permeable surface between his works and the public.

Translated by Kay Welsh

Revised by Fionnuala Ní Eigearthaigh