

Marcel·lí Antúnez Roca - Texts

MARCEL·LÍ. ODISSEY

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ARTISTS FOR THE 21st CENTURY. Since striking out on a solo career his fame has burgeoned and spread internationally. He has enriched his performances with a number of components, including computer graphics, video and music. His latest work is "Afasia", a show without words, his most ambitious project in global artistic language: marked by a baroque sensitivity akin to the tradition of Goya, Valle and Buñuel.

MARCEL·LI ANTUNEZ

Odyssey

Marcel·lí Antúnez Roca was born in Moià, province of Barcelona, in 1959. Born and raised, as he recalls, "in a tough rural environment where you worked enormously hard: a butcher shop, two herds of sheep, pigsties, woods..." Before taking his degree in Fine Arts at Barcelona in 1982, he had already been, in 1979, one of the founding members of La Fura dels Baus, troupe that he left in October 1989. At the same time, Antúnez worked as well with the groups Error Genético (1981-1983) - where he situates the origins of La Fura's passage from hippiedom to another, "harder, more aggressive, more punk" lifestyle - and from 1985 with Los Rinos, who performed in the streets and wore the bull's-eye as a mark of identity.

Striking out on his solo career - which he doesn't see as working in isolation, but rather as a job of coordination or team management - his stage show Epizoo, opened in 1994 and performed over 100 times, brought him widespread international fame. Since then he has progressively enriched his performances, integrating a range of new components, including computer graphics, video and music, and probing deeper into interactivity.

Like Odysseus at the end of the journey. After disposing of the suitors and before consummating his marriage to Penelope. When he recognises that he must set off again. The journey never ends. The plot is circular. The end is the beginning.

It is no accident that Homer's epic poem The Odyssey should serve as an inspiration for Marcel·lí Antúnez in Afasia, his hour-long one-man show without words, which is his most ambitious project to date in global artistic language. One of the foundational texts of western cultural tradition turned metaphor for "the relentless transformation of the textual to the audiovisual".

In his work Antúnez draws an arc spanning from the latest horizon of our technological - digital - culture to the most remote and archaic - ceremonial - depths of the human being, thus demonstrating the profound intercommunication between the two planes. It could be said that, in broad terms, his creative sphere is located in the terrain of performance or action, which he has profoundly renovated, giving it new impetus. But the use of very diverse technological supports affords his works a hybrid character: theatrical, plastic, musical and poetic, all at the same time.

Tragic tradition

Marked by a baroque sensitivity, to the extent that baroque means a transgression of genres and disciplines, Antúnez feels akin to the Iberian tradition of tragedy and sacrifice found in Goya, Valle-Inclán and Buñuel. The roots of his work are in the theatre. And his central reference in the body, his own body, which he puts in touch with other living forms or with the audience, using the mediation of technology. As a whole, his pieces can be interpreted as a global metaphor of the interpenetration of the bodily and the technological in our world. We are all, to a greater or lesser degree, cyborgs, hybrids of flesh and machine. In Joan, l'home de carn (1992-1993), a piece constructed in collaboration with Sergi Jordà, Antúnez presented a robot, an inner machinery, covered with a skin of real meat, cuts of pork sewn together. Installed inside a transparent cooler to keep the meat from going off, the figure moved randomly to noises from the audience. "My initial idea," says Antúnez, "was that it should be eaten," underscoring the importance of the use of meat: "an icon of my childhood".

Meat was used again, in an equally disturbing and intensely allusive manner, in the exhibition La vida sense amor no té sentit (1993). The three installations it comprised - Poemes d'amor, Màquines de plaer and Caps arrancats - included a total of 15 sculptures, the raw materials of which were pigskin and pork, submerged in a preservative solution and placed on internally-lit shelves. It would be a mistake not to delve underneath the surface, that convulsive impact these pieces cause. Antúnez has pointed out, to set the record straight, that while this sort of sensationalist attention has indeed been habitual in media approaches, "in essence, almost all my work plays with simulation and reality". Not to mention a certain festive and vitalist humour that captivates the spectator.

All these facets reveal to us some of the keys to this truly exemplary artistic project. Meat, a metonymy for the body, speaks to us of our proximity to animals, the animal inside all of us, as Nietzsche said. But something so intimate is presented, in its miscegenation with technology, as alien, aloof: natural and artificial at the same time. The image of the golem, the artificial anthropomorphic figure of Jewish legend, emerges as a recurrent reference throughout Marcel·lí Antúnez's repertoire. His figures, his characters, his actions, turn always on the image of the double, of which the golem is a variant: where we perceive the human and the inhuman, what we project of ourselves and that with which we identify ourselves, and that which coming from the exterior stirs in us at the same wonder and repulsion.

Theatre aesthetics

This experience and representation of the double is even more patent in the interactive performances Epizoo (1994) and Afasia (1998), the lab-workshop Satèlites obscenos (1996-1997), and the installation Réquiem (1999). The pneumatic mechanisms of the first piece, the exoskeleton of plastic and metal of the second and the pneumatic exoskeleton of the last are in all cases prostheses that adjust to the body, establishing interactive communication with the exterior, with the spectator. The idea of audience participation, which became a predominant cliché in the theatre aesthetics of the 60s, with digital technology has now become a means for active interaction. Dissatisfied with the limitations of the habitual interfaces, Antúnez invests all his interest in "the achievement of systems that foster

new possibilities for interaction and expand them to include more human forms”.

The prostheses of his actions make up “a cycle of corporal orthopaedics” that inform “different themes: the idea of pleasure/pain, the appropriation of another body, and the expansion of corporal possibilities”. Before Réquiem these were inevitably prostheses designed for animate bodies. This latest work goes a step beyond, attaining a point “at which the organism, having been transformed into cadaver, becomes an ornament, and the machine is the only generator of life”. The circle closes. The ultimate frontier of the human journey - state-of-the-art technology - leads to the most basic dimension: the ceremony, the rite. As in The Odyssey, man’s journey has no end. To go is always to return. The circle and the return are the symbols of human life. And thus art, in its most profound essence, at the new thresholds of technology, resolves itself in sacrifice, in surrender of the body. An open ceremony. Marcel.Í Antúnez: the end is the beginning.