

ON TRANSLATION. Antoni Muntadas and the Politics of Translation in Visual Arts (1995 - 2015)

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Abstract

*The essay starts with a reflection on the interpretative authority of curators and audience, sketching the progressive shift in visual arts from canonic criticism to context-sensitive and community-sensitive mediation and translation processes. From the 19th century, the nature of translation has gradually adopted a philosophical category and entered into the analysis of how we 'understand' a discourse, also providing a synapse for work in psychology, anthropology, sociology and in intermediary fields such as ethnolinguistics and sociolinguistics. In the visual arts field, the most extensive project developed so far on the topic is *On Translation*, that artist Antoni Muntadas initiated in 1995. *On Translation* consists of about 35 subprojects realised over more than 20 years, in which Muntadas engages with translation as an autonomous medium which occurs when a piece of information (either textual, visual or under other forms) shifts from context to context.*

*Muntadas is universally regarded as a pioneer media artist for the extensive usage of and reflection about technology potentiality and limits. He uses the notion of Media Landscape as the aggregate of communication media that transmits information. Their role in this transmission - or translation - is fundamental and has, according to Muntadas, a strength equal to human verbal translation in its capability to convey or transform a message. *On Translation* also highlights the audience's responsibility in critically understanding the processes behind translation and committing to participate in the formation of meaning. One of the recurrent symbols of the project is, in fact, a red, bright sign stating *Warning: Perception requires involvement*. Muntadas's warning points particularly to the easy manipulation of communication media by political and economic powers to create different narratives, attractive myths, and points of tension.*

Keywords: media landscape, media artist, visual communication, contemporary art, translation.

I.

The passage from Modernity to Postmodern has at its core the downfall of the Enlightenment philosophies based on the belief of history as a natural progress of the white-man project (Lyotard, 1984). Modernism was exclusivist, constantly seeking to reduce the plurality of culture into one single view. Postmodern society, instead, moves towards a polymorphic, pluralistic knowledge where legitimations are no longer universal and frozen, but fluid, local and temporary (Jencks, 1989). In Postmodernism, therefore, "there is no point of view external to all tradition from which one can offer a universal judgment" (Mouffe, 1988); fragmentarity replaces unity; mass media help to dissolve a central view; and the centers from which information and opinions propagate, vertiginously multiply.

This invites the opportunity for a wide range of cultures to be recognised, for many subcultures and peripheral visions to emerge, and for movements such as feminist and queer movements to flourish.

However, Postmodern comes also with less auspicious by-products. First of all, the complexity of contemporaneity can be intimidating. We live in an off-centered system of multiple contextualised values, all of which precarious, and subject to the idea that any interpretation is valid. Jean Baudrillard observed how Postmodernism also led to the trap of hyperreality, in which we are unable to distinguish reality from its simulation (Baudrillard, 1981), or, as rephrased by Zygmunt Bauman "no reality claims to be more real than its representation" (Bauman, 1992). When our

lives become so saturated with the constructs of society, all meaning is rendered meaningless and we are in a regime of total equivalency.

Another of Bauman's concerns is the possibility that the facade of political fairness towards multiculturalism and alternatives of any forms, might conceal a gap of critical effort. Instead of having a flourishing of new perspectives, the result might thus become that opinions plateau out (Bauman, 1992). Especially with regard to new media, the risk is that of passive absorption and the lack of critical engagement on the part of the audience that gives up on the possibility to negotiate and actively disagree with the message. Among the main consequences resulting from it, the line between what is needed for human life and what is instrumental to the market can more easily become blurred, and the language increasingly becomes caught up in the production of power relations between social groups (Baudrillard, 1981).

The double-sided nature of Postmodern philosophical theory has its correspondent in visual arts. Famously, Arthur C. Danto named his book on Postmodern culture: *After the End of Art* (1997). The era of art was determined - according to Danto and, before him, Hans Belting (1987) - by two discontinuous narratives, that is to say two shifts in the way we interpret the world. The first narrative, marking the beginning of the era of art, comes in the Renaissance with the new investiture of the figure of the artist as superior to the craftsman. The second narrative, *the end of art*, is not - as the wording might suggest - a total exhaustion of art, but the rejection of previously assumed set of practices and readings. Danto suggests that the new *after-art era* is characterized by an indefinable style, a chaos of information, and a condition of absolute aesthetic entropy:

"There is nothing that does not fit. But that in fact is the mark of the visual arts since the end of modernism, that as a period it is defined by the lack of stylistic unity, or at least the kind of stylistic unity which can be elevated into a criterion and used as a basis for developing a recognitional capacity, and there is, in consequence, no possibility of a narrative direction." (Danto 1997)

In Danto's work, contradiction and ambiguity are regarded as highly positive because they oppose the previously defined as

objectively good. As a consequence, art theory shifts away from "judgment grounded in a presumed authority" and moves towards "a post-judgment model based in the practice of the translation and researched interpretation of cultural differences in a plural global field, wherein no one has the last word" (Demos, 2009). While modern intellectuals were acting as 'legislators' legitimated by a higher level of knowledge to issue judgments and establish an orderly system of universal certainties, with the later collapse of such certainties, the contemporary intellectual has now to face a change of role. The fact of the lost authority in critique, make us sail towards diverse lands.

Amongst the most crucial changes, cultural institutions do increasingly encourage an engagement of the audience, a relationship of proximity with the work and a certain freedom of interpretation. The aim is to make the audience feel represented and included, and as a consequence the traditional value of authority falls down, substituted with mediation. Pre-existing frames of reference are broken. Museums shift from being collection-driven institutions to visitor-centred organisations. Increasing room is given to pedagogical and participative activities. In countries like the UK, Belgium, France and Spain, fundamental is also the process of decolonisation, not only trying to offer alternative narratives about the objects of the past, but mainly presenting the institutions as aggregation points of the various ethnicities co-existing in the territory and former colonies.

However, there are at least three critical observations to take into account. The first is that in many cases the veracity of these transformation might be contested as instrumental to political agenda or driven by the phenomenon of 'experience economy' (Bishop, 2012; Foster, 2015; Lio, 2017). The second is that the result of this effort - even when sincere - might lead to an ambiguous result. For example, studying the institutional landscape of London, Mounira Mirza observed how inclusivity measures may even embitter social divisions. In fact, programmes aimed specifically to ethnic minority backgrounds insist on the fact that "race, ethnicity and cultural background are vital elements in defining identity" nourishing a sense of difference and separation (Mirza, 2012). The third point is that eroding the concept of expertise and authority in cultural institution might, in the long term, result in a banalisation of culture. Acting as if every content and opinion

has the same exact value of all the rest, entails losing the capacity to prioritise, recognise and accredit, impoverishing our society of knowledge and value.

The role that curators have been covering in recent years is, thus, not easy. It requires a continuous balance of different knowledge systems, cultures, experiences and expectations, with the dormant risk of making the effort counterproductive. The widening and diversification of the role is also clear in the split of the curatorial role among different figures of the team: curator of exhibitions, curator of public programme, community engagement curator, among others. To embrace the plurality of today's cultural policies, specialisation in various components of an institutional programme is though not enough. Each member of a curatorial staff needs to apply the principles of equality and diversity in any part of the work, endlessly translating the whole institutional frame to the public. The curator-as-translator indeed translates principles and facilitates communication between distinct communities. For him/her, no criteria of validation are correct out of a specific context, and no universal standards are any longer admissible. Instead, the main preoccupation is to secure communication between cultures without proposing hierarchical structures between them. The tools with which he/she operates consist not only of verbal communication, but also of a broad spectrum of media, technologies, and methods of getting together.

The curator who has most notoriously embodied 'translation' discourse is Okwui Enwezor (1963 - 2019). Nigerian curator, art critic and poet, Enwezor was a traveling curator who had always mediated between cultures, creating exhibition projects about ethnography and post-colonialism. Enwezor had a close gaze to politics of representation and the politics of translation (Kuhn, 2017) as clearly shown in *All The World Futures*, 56th Venice Biennale (2015), and - even more so - in *Intense Proximity*, 3rd Paris Triennale (2012) which focussed on biopower, spatial or geographical proximities and distances, on visual connections and clashes between cultures:

"The off-center allows the emergence of multiplicity, the breakdown of cultural or locational hierarchies, the absence of a singular locus. In a sense, off-centered zones of production, distribution and

reception of contemporary art articulate a dispersal of the universal, a refusal of the monolithic, a rebellion against the monocultural." (Kuhn, 2017)

In one of the most complex works in the exhibition, the 35mm film *Coupé/Décalé* (2011), Camille Henrot, places herself in the controversial position of the anthropological observer/tourist fascinated by a stereotypical exoticism (Illustration 1, see List of illustrations). Shot on Pentecost Island, the video shows young men jumping from a tall wooden platform. This traditional rite of passage into adulthood is said to have inspired bungee jumping and is now still performed on the island mainly for the benefit of tourists. The film is split into two sides playing at a different tempo, a fracture that, according to Henrot, addresses the "deconstruction of the original tradition and its reconstruction in the contemporary staging" (Henrot, 2011).

Found in Translation, curated by Nat Trotman and held at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 2011, is a further example of an exhibition dealing with cultural translation. The show originated from the thought that translation is a discursive field "in which the terms of identity - class, race, religion, sexuality - are negotiated, and meaning is generated" (Trotman, 2011). For instance, Omer Fast's video-project *Godville* included interviews with three eighteenth-century actors from the "living history museum" in Colonial Williamsburg, in Virginia (Ill. 2). Fast had his subjects speak about the stories of their fictional characters (a female plantation owner, a male slave, and a white militiaman) as well as their own lives. Then, he manipulated the material cutting and stitching each character's two identities together in a way in which real and fictional, past and present, result seamlessly interwoven, especially comments about religion, race, class, gender, and war. The fact that the manipulation is not concealed in any way make the work a strong statement against mediation and instrumentalization of the translation between cultures and times.

II.

From the 19th century, the nature of translation adopted a philosophical category and entered into the analysis of how we understand a discourse. In the last decades, translation has indeed provided a synapse for

work in psychology, anthropology, sociology and in intermediary fields such as ethno-linguistics and sociolinguistics (Steiner, 1975), getting to the theorisation of all communication as translation (Bell, 1987).

No artist has been engaged in the problem of translation as an autonomous critical medium more consistently than Antoni Muntadas (b. Barcelona, 1942). His project *On Translation*, started in 1995, consists of about 35 subprojects realised over more than 20 years and focusing on contemporary culture defined as translation and interpretation.

Inspirational to *On Translation* was a previous project, *CEE* (1988), in which a 4x6 m carpet with the image of the European flag was placed in twelve public spaces, and perceived differently by the public according to the context in which it is inserted. So, for example, in a museum, the audience walked around it without trampling it, as if it were a work on display, while in the library it was quietly trampled along with the other carpets.¹ A second input came in 1994 in San Sebastián. In a workshop about urban interventions took part 25 artists, activists, writers, art historians, anthropologists and sociologists speaking three languages: French, English and Spanish. Many of the participants could not understand some of the three languages and, consequently, listened to simultaneous translation, which, Muntadas realized, gave rise to some misunderstandings. For instance, some people were smiling at unsuitable times, evidently because of the interpretation provided by the translators.

Reflecting on these and other episodes, Muntadas started the series of *On Translation* in 1995, with *The Pavilion* featuring the glass kiosk used by translators on occasion of the C.S.C.E summit held in Helsinki in 1975.² By displaying the glass structure in a street of Helsinki, Muntadas put in the foreground the roles behold by the translators, who were committed to conveying what the politicians wished to say to one another, as well as to the audience following the event in their home countries. The implicit question is about the difference between what

was said and how was interpreted and translated - such as gaps, different shades, surplus in meaning - and how this affected the lives of the countries and citizens involved.

However, Muntadas's main intention wasn't to explore the risk of an imperfect translation, but to highlight the natural elasticity of communication, its being open and multi-layered to the point that the net of interpretations are as important as the original meaning. As a consequence, also translators are as important as speakers. For instance, in *The Interview* (2002), Muntadas interviews Pablo Poliaschenko, a Russian-American translator who worked through Perestroika and Glasnost, making evident his pivotal character in history-making as much as the diplomats involved.

The Transmission (1996), had as a subject Muntadas himself enacting, from Atlanta, a remote video conference with Claudia Giannetti, in Madrid. Various types of translation and intermediation were superimposed: the time zone (for Muntadas 2 pm and for Giannetti 8 pm), the use of different languages (Spanish, English, German and Portuguese), the role of simultaneous translation, the use of technology that made the event possible, various textual codes and the differences in the public attending in the two cities. The intersection between these different levels made the communication unsteady and hard to follow, exploring limits and flaws of the technologies that we trust to mediate for us. Muntadas is universally regarded as a pioneer media artist for the extensive usage of and reflection about technology potentiality and limits. He coined the notion of 'Media Landscape' as the aggregate of communication media that transmits information and believes that the influence machines have on communication is at the same level of human translation.

Conceived on the same occasion as *The Transmission* - the Olympics in Atlanta - *The Games* (1996) featured a transparent pavilion and video interviews with eight translator-interpreters shown at work (Ill. 3). The audio of the interviews was though not directly accessible, but translated into Vietnamese (the least represented language at the Games) and then re-translated into English in an audio track available to the audience only through headphones.

Besides reflecting on the limits of translation and technology, the project featured

¹The carpet/flag has been placed on the floor of twelve public spaces in the EU, including a design museum in Ghent, an opera house in Thessaloniki, a library in Copenhagen, a city hall in Calais, a school in Frankfurt.

²Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe held in Finlandia Hall of Helsinki in Summer 1975. Thirty-five countries, including the U.S., Canada and all European countries except Albania and Andorra participated and signed the Helsinki Accords, a declaration of collaboration between the countries including also steps to reduce the tension of the Cold War.

an inversion of centre and periphery, highlighting how uncommon is for English speakers not to be addressed in their own language and be in a position of linguistic disadvantage. Moreover, the contexts of the Olympic competition added to the project a further political layer. The Games are indeed plentiful of anthems, flags, medals and other symbols that define the identity of a country and its diplomatic relations. The competition between nations in the sport mimics political tension, and in the Olympics it's possible to draw parallels with economic hierarchies.

On Translation projects not only point to the political meaning implicit in communication and the active role of translating, but also warn against the risk for the audience of falling into passive absorption of contents. For instance, *El Aplauso* (1999) is a triptych of screens with the images and sounds of the applause of an anonymous audience to an unspecified event. At regular intervals of a few seconds each, the central screen changes to show black-and-white images of utter violence coming from various countries - especially Colombia. The work is a metaphor for the translation of violence into spectacle, and the applause in itself identifies the audience's apathy, passive acceptance, complicity and even satisfaction in their monotonous clapping.

A paramount example is the conspicuous work that Muntadas undertook around the issue of borders: *Fear/Miedo* (2005), about the border between Tijuana and San Diego; and *Miedo/Jauf* (2007), about the border at the Strait of Gibraltar between Tangier and Tarifa (Ill. 4). In both titles, the word "fear" appears translated in the language spoken in the two countries along the border, introducing a bilingual perspective of the same feeling. In the two projects Muntadas documents the daily fear of people from either side of the border and proves, by interlacing interviews with locals, television footage, newspaper excerpts and miscellaneous material, how this tension is systematically built by a network of communication and symbols.

On the Mexico/United States border the struggle is represented between the economic mirage of the US for Mexican workers and the distrust that Americans feel towards immigrants with a different culture and language. In the Spain/Morocco confrontation, a mutual attraction between the European and the Arabic myths is counterbalanced by cultural - especially

religious - divergences. They seem different dynamics, but in both cases Muntadas brings them back to "the construction of fear", a strategy enacted by political and economic interests through mass media in order to create different narratives, attractive myths and points of tensions with the systematic scope of re-directing work, capital, and resources towards where results more convenient.

Muntadas directly addresses the audience with the most recurrent symbol in the whole *On Translation* series through the years: a red, bright sign stating:

**WARNING: PERCEPTION REQUIRES
INVOLVEMENT**

The sign appeared for the first time in 1998, distributed in the form of sticker on the occasion of *The Audience*, in which a large wheeled panel travelled to various spots of Rotterdam for one year.³ The panel reproduced three side-by-side images that changed for any location maintaining a fixed structure: the first image was always inherent to culture (e.g. books, films); the second image represented the public (e.g. clapping hands); while the third image, positioned in the middle of the panel, was a filtering situation acting as a translator between the two concepts (e.g. mass media, museums). Curator Bartomeu Marí points out how the reception of the panel was quite different in each location, ranging from indifference to surprise, and being fully experienced as artworks only at the end of the journey, when the presentation at the Witte de With Art Center in Rotterdam "conferred a quite different status on it, although the materials were the same" (Marí, 2002). The intention of the project was precisely to investigate how the setting influences viewers, and how some messages might go unnoticed if we maintain just a passive level of perception.

Muntadas has also been interested in the process of mediation and interpretation by curators. When, in 2002, he was invited to exhibit the corpus of *On Translation* at the museum MACBA in Barcelona, he proposed to give up on the idea of just showing a group of his works and challenges the curators to study them and exhibit the results of their interpretation, rather than the works in themselves. The challenge

³ *The Audience* was successively presented also at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal (2000-01) and the Berkeley Art Museum (2001).

drew attention to the mechanism according to which artists supposedly give curators the freedom to translate their work in the exhibition format, a task that curators are in general thought of undertaking quite automatically. Instead, the museum curators felt the invitation presented by Muntadas to be an ethical dilemma that also pointed toward the impossibility of an objective curating.

On Translation's institutional critique continued when Muntadas represented Spain in the 51st Venice Biennale, in 2005. *I Giardini* analysed the transformation over time of the Giardini di Castello, the main venue of the Venice Biennale since 1897. The work included, among other elements, a kiosk with old photos from the national pavilions located in the Giardini and a list of the countries who don't participate in the Biennale, making evident the transformation of the place through time - in particular during and after Fascism - and the obsolete representation of national power that the institution still perpetuates.

III.

The Postmodern relativism of the institutions, and their being constantly in translation, gives to communication with the public an in-flux property that can be liberating. Or instrumentalist.

In the field of contemporary art, the new figure of curator-as-translator is mediating between different communities, interests and cultural perspectives with two possible outcomes: effectively decolonising the museum, or furtherly exacerbating divisions. On many occasions, the attempt to disrupt previous narratives within museums has indeed led to question the real agenda behind these new curatorial methodologies. Reflecting from within Tate, Cinta Esmel Pamies summarises the issue as follows:

It is key to understand that audience research in museums is not neutral. The questions asked, the information determined to be useful, the means used to gather data and the way the information is organised and presented all depends on the social views of those who orchestrate it. (...) Visitor research activities are designed, carried out and assessed in the light of a specific 'belief-system' supported by the status quo. (Esmel Pamies, 2010)

As a matter of fact, all kinds of translation and mediation are an active tool that originates from a pre-existing view of the world. Reflecting on this, translator and theoretician Lawrence Venuti talks of "domesticating translation" and "ethnocentric violence" when translation assimilates the others in the dominant culture's view, "reducing if not simply excluding the very differences that translation is called on to convey" (Venuti, 1995). As demonstrated also by Muntadas's art projects, the way media build narratives and the contexts in which we absorb (or ignore) a message, are an active influence also on matters of global importance as security and world peace. For example, media supported political and financial powers in the construction of fear about the border between Mexico and the United States.

Muntadas's slogan, used several times through the years - **WARNING: PERCEPTION REQUIRES INVOLVEMENT** - aims to prevent the passive absorption of information without a critical engagement (Ill. 5). Still today, a big part of the audience erroneously takes for granted that the message received through the media or through big institutions is unmanipulated and objective. If left unchallenged, the risks of Postmodern theory could outweigh - and subvert - its pluralism.

List of illustrations

1. Camille Henrot, *Coupé/Décalé*, 2011, still from video, 35mm film transferred on Betanum, 5'20", courtesy of the artist and Kamel Mennour, Paris
<https://www.carolinialio.info/ontranslation?lightbox=dataitem-k4x67luk>
2. Omer Fast, *Godville*, 2005, video installation, courtesy of INIVA, London
<https://www.carolinialio.info/ontranslation?lightbox=dataitem-k4x78zfw>
3. Muntadas, *On Translation: The Games*, 1996, installation view at Atlanta College of Art Gallery, courtesy of the artist and Galleria Michela Rizzo, Venice

- <https://www.carolinalio.info/ontranslation?lightbox=dataitem-k4x6ojej>
4. Muntadas, *On Translation: Miedo/Jauf*, 2007, stills from video, 53'54", courtesy of the artist and Galleria Michela Rizzo, Venice
<https://www.carolinalio.info/ontranslation?lightbox=dataitem-k4x7eaph>
5. Muntadas's recurrent slogan in the On Translation projects, courtesy of the artist
<https://www.carolinalio.info/ontranslation?lightbox=dataitem-k4x74woq>
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