

The Muntadas-Method Existential Corporeality in a New Aesthetic Paradigm

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"The important thing here is not only the confrontation with a new material of expression, but the constitution of complexes of subjectivation: multiple exchanges between individual-group-machine. These complexes actually offer people diverse possibilities for recomposing their existential corporeality, to get out of their respective impasses and, in a certain way, to resingularise themselves. Grafts of transference operate in this way, not issuing from ready-made dimensions of subjectivity crystallised into structural complexes, but from a creation which itself indicates a kind of aesthetic paradigm." (Félix Guattari, *Chaosmose*)

Muntadas' *corpus d'oeuvre* is almost impossible to grasp as a whole, not just for the overwhelming extension of his activities across more than four decades, but mainly because his work is so radically process-oriented and site/time-specific that the invention of *ad hoc* methodologies for each project is required each time. But there are, among many others, two transversal lines we would like to draw, from which certain procedures can be deduced. Procedures that might not be considered as formalized, pre-fixed methodologies, but as a series of protocols that seem to be starting points for Muntadas' usual critical readings of cultural artefacts – no matter whether these artefacts are an architectural typology, a "work of art" or the proper name of an artist.

The first line refers to the need to always pay attention to the context of reading or (re)presentation. The context is the humus from which singularities emerge, and at the same time the situation that frames these singularities, that overdetermines their meaning and conditions, the different ways in which they can be made readable. The second line refers to the need to consider the format, the mould, the meta-form that pre-codifies discourses. With Muntadas one learns that the form always intrinsically carries a content, and that the "content of the form" is never neutral, and in no way objective. If it is perceived in such a way, neutral, objective, it is because it is a naturalised cultural form; of course, naturalised – which does not mean "stabilised" once and for all, nor always equal to itself – through the dominant equilibrium in a given set of power relations. For the sake of our argument, the "Muntadas-method" is what we will call this ensemble of transversal lines – along the context and the content of form – and the working procedures associated with them.

According to this "Muntadas-method", neither the overdetermination that is exercised on contexts in a way that is not always evident, nor the discursive prefiguration that is imposed by codified cultural forms should be pre-conceived simply as a dark side of power systems understood as stable entelechies or materialities, homogeneous and external to the processes of subjectivation. Rather these two lines force us to adopt a series of protocols. We could call them preventive protocols: to be attentive to not accept the overdetermining frames or the pre-established forms of classification, categorisation or narration as natural, objective or transparent systems. The problem is much more, as it appears very frequently in the Muntadas-method, how to thematise the context, the frame or the institutionalised cultural forms *in the work itself*, how to make them become the theme or the actual topic of the work that is about to be expressed within them. The work is situated within a context, perceived in

the interior of a frame, and materialised following certain formal patterns, making them all become the "theme": the work constitutes itself as a comment about, an intervention in the very conditions out of which it emerges. Sometimes, this intervention is explicitly critical. Sometimes, it is "simply" revealing, it displays the structures, the procedures and the mechanisms that are proper to certain power relations, to an institutional system – the museum, television or the university, for instance – whose naturalisation precisely makes them "invisible", or better: imperceptible in a first instance.

According to this, we would like to argue for the need to short-circuit the type of separation that is implicit in many critical overviews of Muntadas' work, since the Muntadas-method we are dealing with serves for a less rigid focus when it comes to the divisions between private and public, object and subject, power and subjectivities. For this matter, this essay will propose a transversal reading of a few titles within Muntadas' corpus of work. In fact, one cannot avoid recognising that the way that his work is sometimes formalized favours the point of view that establishes a binary organisation of thinking and social materiality, since it adopted from very early on a tendency to organise its materials confronting two of three elements. We could think for instance about the early contrast that the multimedia installation precisely called *Confrontations* proposed in 1974 – the Watergate era – between the urban landscape of Manhattan and the *media-landscape* (an expression often used in Muntadas' work). We can find the same archetype behind another important project in 1981, *Personal/Public*, where the seated spectator could observe a TV program in a monitor on his/her right, while the monitor on the left displayed her/his image as a TV spectator through a closed-circuit television system. Muntadas has stated that in this way the spectator is offered the possibility to wander in "the space between two extremes". Our hypothesis of reading proposes that, in spite of the appearances, some aspects in the Muntadas-method allow us to confront such dichotomies, if we adopt an approach different from the common phenomenological or structuralist exegesis of Muntadas' work.

If we are thinking of problematising dichotomic divisions like the one between the private and the public, we have to go back to the broader political and social context from which Muntadas' work emerged in the beginning of the 1970s. There is, of course, a long legacy of pointing to the fact that, at least in capitalist times, privacy never existed, except for the rich. In the context of second-wave feminism, however, in the early 1970s feminist theorists and artists shifted this discourse in a very specific way: by promoting the slogan "the personal is political", they called attention to the way that the dualism of public – private (as well as another dualism linked to it: production – reproduction) has always followed a twofold Western patriarchal binary logic. Insisting on the personal, the private, the subjective as political indicated this double logic of exclusion and at the same time sought to promote an emancipatory component in the blurring of private and public.

Now without wanting to inscribe Muntadas into a feminist genealogy we want to propose the historical political context of the early 1970s as an unavoidable starting point for discussing the only seemingly non-political, private, subjective character of the *Subsensorial Actions/Experiences*. By this, we want to investigate how some aspects of the Muntadas-method serve to understand – and to envision a way of operating within – power, which allows us to conceive it in a way that is diametrically opposed to its conventional objectified representation; i.e. power as a "sphere", a "system" in which individuals circulate and are simply manipulated, moulded or influenced; a critical subjectivity (be it that of an intellectual, an artist, or an anonymous individual) would therefore confront that system as something external –

that is, in fact, the classic figure of a "critical intellectual" —, as an antagonistic critical subject not moulded or influenced by that power-system.

The *Subsensorial Actions/Experiences* achieved a first documental systematisation in a modest catalogue published by Galería Vandrés in Madrid in 1974. They started to be realized in 1971, and they were the first form the Muntadas-method adopted right after coming out of the initial pictorial period of Muntadas' biography. Those who have analysed Muntadas' corpus of work have very rarely described in detail the micro-physics of these actions, in the way that Christopher Phillips did in his text "Architectures of Information" (1996). Multiple ways of perception, always in the mode of a certain "blindness", are realized within this series: the exploration of how different materials rubbed onto a naked body do or do not leave traces in the skin; the tactical recognition of a naked body by a group of individuals; the pluri-sensitive exploration of a diversity of spaces in hazardous trajectories. Two aspects have to be emphasised here. First, that the *Subsensorial Actions* constitute a prototype designed to stimulate the vibratory character of the body. Suely Rolnik explains how the external borders of the body constitute a membrane that can be activated, if properly encouraged, so that inter-subjective relations and the relations of each subjectivity with its surroundings can lead through certain complexes of subjectivation, thus radically questioning the Cartesian rational differentiation between the world and the self. The second aspect seems obvious, or even trivial, but it is important since Muntadas himself stressed it in an early reflection about this series of actions: from the moment in which they are registered in super8 or video, they stop to be "private" exercises and enter the "public" domain.

In this sense, *Subsensorial Actions* seems to be a paradoxical project: blinding performers to empower the hypersensitivity of other secondary human senses is the method that activates the vibratory condition that is latent in the body; but the formalised result of these experiences, its *visual* documentation, is offered to the spectator, privileging again just the sense of vision. Yet, we have to consider that the actions thus documented do not constitute the closing of an "artwork", but rather formalise a prototype (Muntadas has stated insistently that he prefers to conceive his work as a process that leads to producing *artefacts*). A methodology is thus put into circulation that desires to be reproduced – or better: translated, adapted, modulated – in other situations and contexts, to be able to multiply precisely the deactivation of the rigidity that rationalism and social disciplining impose onto bodies, opening up the body to new complexes of subjectivation that consist in the *embodiment* of the context and of the other, through a sensibility which is related to thinking in a non-hierarchical and non-dissociated mode.

When Félix Guattari — in his last book *Chaosmose*, published in French in 1992 — writes about the "multiple exchanges between individual-group-machine" (what else has Muntadas' work been, in his use of a diversity of technologies and, at the same time, in his multiple ways of promoting the work as a collaborative exercise following different diagrams of relations?), this threefold concept hints at his conceptualisation of "ecosophy" as three ecologies or three components of ecology. Mental, social, and environmental ecology are the three planes which form 1. *subjectivation*, 2. the creation of *new social assemblages*, and 3. *context*. All of these components are interlinked and actually form diverse possibilities for recomposing what Guattari calls "existential corporeality". So the vibratory body is neither meant to be a prison of the mind or the place where thinking is lodged, nor a clearly defined other of the outside world. On the contrary: the body is transversally pervaded by social ecology and environmental ecology, producing together with them sociality and context;

reciprocally, the body is being produced by them. This is what existential corporeality means: a strong link between the vibratory bodies, the social machines, and the environment. This link is in turn very close to the one that lies in a formulation frequently adopted in Muntadas' work during a long period of his analysis of the *media-landscape*: "media-ecology" (remember, for example, the video *Media Ecology Ads*, 1982), an expression that referred to the interrelations between subjectivation, communication technologies, and social context.

These reflections allow us to finally enter into *The Board Room* (1987), frequently mentioned as one of the most characteristic installations of the way in which Muntadas conducts his analysis of power structures. Following the description by Muntadas himself and Eugeni Bonet, "the display and the components of the installation recreate the institutional and corporative typology of a board room: a space of power where decisions are taken, a mysterious atmosphere, ritual and secret." The meeting table, around which thirteen chairs were placed as a symbolic "Last Supper", was surrounded by thirteen luxuriously framed portraits of individuals who represented contemporary articulations of political, economic, and religious power. In his monographic essay "Born-Again Architecture" (1988) Brian Wallis exactly analysed this threefold molar articulation of power as it was configured during the 1980s. In another relevant text from the same year, "L'art de la démonstration", Raymond Bellour proposed a less familiar description of Muntadas' installations: "A luxurious and calm atmosphere assails the visitor ... The huge oval table, illuminated from below with an invisible red light, seems to be floating ... Without doubt the board room acquires the characteristic sensuality of (Brechtian) pedagogy." If Wallis' focus stressed the macropolitical dimension that undoubtedly fits the board room, Bellour underlined the strongly sensuous character of the experience of visiting that installation.

Just as it happens with the different singular site-specific materialisations in the series *Stadium* — always in the form of strong sensorial environments adapted to different architectures and socio-political, cultural, and historical contexts (realised from the same original mould, whose first prototype was produced in 1989) — there is an articulation between two planes (that we consider "two" only for the sake of descriptive language). We have on the one hand the installation as a "model" that comes out of the way in which the Muntadas-method usually incisively reduces complex systems of power relations to their material archetypes. Those material archetypes, often architectonic, didactically demonstrate how a specific system of power relations governs its subjects. On the other hand, the system manifests itself not only in its physical constitution, but also in its relational, affective, and non-discursive dimensions. The archetypal synthesis that the Muntadas-method implements allows the spectator to analyse the macropolitical dimension of a social structure or institution. Yet, at the same time, the micro-physics of the installation promotes a type of knowledge which is acquired not just through rationality, but also through a sensuous experience. Think for instance of the site-specific installation produced for the Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in 1988: *Situación*, which focussed on the historical changes exercised in the building's function, the relationship between its architecture and social control, and political power as it was exercised through that specific cultural institution. The way the spectator could perceive that analytical complex was mostly *sensorial*, since Muntadas turned off the technical systems that serve to stabilize the interior climate and left the windows open: the actual experience of being inside the installation was made uncomfortable by the coldness and noise from the street.

In this second aspect it becomes clear that what actually matters is not so much the phenomenological outside from which the "spheres or systems of power" could be confronted. Rather, it is the "synergy of two processes" — as Guattari writes in *Chaosmose* — that can only be perceived if we abandon "structuralist reductionism" to "reconstitute the problematic of subjectivity". It is only when we pay attention to how the molarity of macro-politics and the molecularity of micro-physics are related to each other, that we can begin to conceive of a critique of the systems of power and a simultaneous resistance to them from within.

What is our provisional conclusion, where does our hypothesis of reading point to? We believe that certain moments of Muntadas' corpus of work allow existential corporeality to experience the ambivalent quality of social assemblages: there is on the one side the social subjection by a molar power system, in the framework of which different modes of critique can be realised. Yet it is also possible to experience how machinic enslavement operates by inducing the subjects to the self-government of conduits. In response of this, critique as opposition to the system is not sufficient: we are in need of microphysical, molecular lines of flight. Molecular resistances are not supposed to be created in an outside realm, since they are immanent to power systems. They are possible not simply as an external criticality, but mainly in the here and now of subjectivation, production of social assemblages and environment as context. They consist of practical creations, echoing what Guattari called "a new aesthetic paradigm". This term does not designate just the aesthetic experience of isolated individuals, nor any type of aesthetic novelty enclosed within the art system. Nor does it propose to deterritorialise art outside the art institution in order to reterritorialise or objectify it within a biopolitical domain. Existential corporeality creates a constantly moving concatenation of aesthetics and ethics, aesthetics and politics, aesthetics and existence; always and necessarily by means of the invention of a new aesthetic paradigm...