The Kaleidoscopic Career of Marcel·lì Antúnez Roca

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In February 2014, the Arts Santa Mònica Museum in Barcelona celebrated Marcel·lì Antúnez Roca's artistic career with a large exhibition called *Sistematurgia*. The whole second floor of the museum was arranged to contain almost all the videos, sculptures, physical interfaces and interactive installations produced over more than twenty years of investigation into the field of interactive art. Should we wonder why a theatre artist and performer finds himself at ease in a gallery of contemporary art, rather than in a theatre? Do we have to regard him as a theatre director or as an installation artist? Is he a set designer? Needless to say, these questions do not apply to his activity, and here we will explain why.

It was in 1994 when, with the performance *Epizoo*, Marcel·lì reached a worldwide reputation as a sheer pioneer in the so-called techno performance. At that time, he was already a prominent figure in experimental theatre, as the former founder and member of the Catalan company, Fura dels Baus. However, in the nineties, he daringly shifted his career toward the analysis of the relation between the body and interactive media, and elected performance as the perfect test-bed. Never fully acknowledged by critics, this shift reveals the true complexity of Marcel·lì Antúnez Roca as artist.

He first touched international fame in the late eighties with the famous La Fura dels Baus's trilogy (*Accions, 1984, Suz/o/Suz, 1985, Tier Mon, 1988*). The Fura's first stages were Barcelona's the Ramblas or the villages of their native region, Catalonia. The activity of this group of young visionaries from different backgrounds started a few years before, with the *pasacalles* ('street parades'), some kind of free and eccentric events. The late seventies were times of liberation (Spain was at last freed from dictatorship). For the group's members – above all, for Marcel·lì as a young student in the Fine Arts Academy – this meant to refuse the theatrical models from the past, to reject the dominance of the text as literary product, to discard the actor as a tool of mimesis, and to set the performance in every venue except the traditional theatre. In the same years when Almodóvar was producing his first feature films, the components of Fura dels Baus began to discover their own manner. Nevertheless, that sort of hippie style of the *pasacalles* soon turned into a post-industrial and anarchic aesthetic, in which the relationship between the performer's body and the relics of technology was the arena of a physical confrontation with the audience. Marcel·lì recalls that the kind of actions performed, and the new context in which they took place, provoked a sort of "negative interaction", that is an interaction that was mainly an immediate reaction of the audience to the performance provocations[1].

When, in 1990, Marcel·lì Antúnez Roca decided to pursue his individual career, he remained faithful to some deep motifs, such as the centrality of the body, the collective and anti-hierarchical creation, and the political and anti-ideological stance. In other words, he joined a reformed idea of mimesis: from the representation of reality to the investigation of the human world. The nineties also fostered the spreading of digital multimedia, thus he twigged that the human-machine interaction was the domain of a new humanism; moreover, he understood that the personal computer opened a whole new frontier for performance. He wasn't alone. For a decade, the Medialab in Boston had promoted the "digital revolution", Stelarc had presented his robotic *third hand*, and, finally, museums and galleries had gradually integrated interactive art in their exhibitions[2].

First, in 1992, he started a new project focused on the creation of the robot, *JoAn, l'home de carn*, an interactive installation for public space consisting of an anthropomorphic figure lined with pigskin, sitting inside a glass case. Via a microphone, the robot reacted with small movements (head, elbow, etc.) to the sound emitted by the public passing by. The basic idea subverted, almost paradoxically, the vivid events

[1] Marcel·lì Antúnez Roca, *Materia sistematurgica*, in Tatiana Mazali, Federica Mazzocchi, Antonio Pizzo (eds.), *Marcel·lì Antúnez Roca e la performatività digitale*. Bonanno, Roma, 2011, p. 18. The English translations are mine, if not otherwise specified.
[2] Cf. Marquard Smith, Julie Clarke, *Stelarc: The Monograph*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2005; Christiane Paul. *Digital Art*. New York: Thames & Hudson, 2003. For the specific history of digital performance cf. the seminal work by Steve Dixon, *Digital Performance: a History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007.

experienced with La Fura: the highly active performers' bodies of the trilogy was here turned into a sort of mummified corpse, and the audience once shocked by the performers' provocations, was here controlling the agency of the event. Marcel·lì recalls: 'the several public presentations of *JoAn* demonstrated that, contrary to the "negative interaction" that we offered with La Fura, an active participation was possible, and that this participation was an essential part of the work, because without interaction the robot would stay still'[3].

He soon realized that the new interaction paradigm could be brought to a more complex level, and that the spectator could be provided with an updated graphic interface. Furthermore, he imagined that the relationship could be set between the agency of the spectator and the agency of the performer.

This led the artist back to the realm of live performance and to the creation of *Epizoo*, in 1994. There, he exploited the recently born notion of human-computer interface to subvert the relationship between audience and performer, as developed with La Fura. While in the trilogy's public events, such as *Accions*, the vibrating and almost violent performer's actions forced an analogous intense reaction in the spectator while in *Epizoo* the latter took charge by means of a mouse and a monitor, and the audience gained control over the body of Marcel·lì. In fact, the people attending the performance could sit in front of a computer, where, one by one, they could freely command the movements of a metal exoskeleton mounted on the artist's naked body, while the latter was standing on a small platform in front of a distorted graphic projection of his body, accompanied by music and sounds. Certainly, the show belongs to the field of performance art as defined by the works of Marina Abramovich, yet it aims to confront the methodological and theoretical implications introduced by digital interactivity. In the framework of cyborg theatre, that performance 'inevitably raises ethical and political questions reminding the viewer that ultimately they are responsible not only for the interpretation but also for the actualization of the work of art […]'[4]. Furthermore, this performance was also an interactive installation that exposes the political implications at stake in the apparently playful notion of interaction, and the artist ceased to be the agent of the actions and exposed himself as a piece of art manoeuvred by the public. He abdicated the agency – the core quality of the performer - in favour of the audience.

This show consolidated the collaboration with the computer artist Sergi Jordà, who also played an important role in the next ambitious project. *Afasia* hit the stage in 1998 as the first great mechatronic interactive performance, and, moreover, established a personal style that Marcel·lì Antúnez Roca would retain throughout the following years of activity. Here, the former exoskeleton used in *Epizoo*, took a different form and turned into a physical interface. The change didn't happen all at once. First, in a series of theatre workshops for the project *Satel.lits Obscens*, it was transformed into a mechanical doubling of the performer. Then, for the production of *Afasia*, it turned into the dreskeleton: the word was coined by the artist to indicate an exoskeleton that was also a costume (dress). In fact, the earlier machine converted to a new wearable mechanical interface that granted full control over the props, lights, and projections on stage. The artist's body with this sort of "armour" turned out to be the definitive and iconic image of Marcel·lì's theatre[5]. Once focused on the interaction amidst audience and the piece of live art, Marcel·lì's distinct investigation hinged on the relationship between new digital language and interactive storytelling. In *Afasia*, the artist's body propagated along the stage, and remotely controlled a number of purpose-built musical robots (the "soundbots"), yielding sounds, directing videos and lights. The interactive installation became the space for telling stories, an ingenious setting where the performer could re-enact the myth of Ulysses, sequencing, in real time, a definite number of small narrative units. The human, yet mechanical, marionette of *Epizoo* gave way to a "technological clown"[6], a storyteller by means of digital media and human flesh. Nevertheless, this kind of playground retained always something disturbing. As Giannachi pointed out: 'the omniscient narrator of *Afasia* has complete and final control over his world. Yet his narration is diseased, aphasic: words cannot be articulated or fully comprehended, judgment cannot be passed, the true nature of things cannot be represented'[7].

Before long, Marcel·lì Antúnez Roca became internationally acclaimed as the "performer with the exoskeleton", the iconic character that combined human flesh with technology, and relied on the vivid image of the augmented body by means of a wearable metal apparatus. Yet he was intrigued by his own image and therefore pushed further the idea of the augmented body, and revealed the hidden burden (or even a

[3] Marcel·lì Antúnez Roca, *Materia sistematurgica*, cit., p. 21.
[4] Gabriella Giannachi, *Virtual theatres: an introduction*. London: Routledge, 2004, p. 43.
[5] Federica Mazzocchi, *Gli attori:'recitare' per Marcel·lì*, in Tatiana Mazali, Federica Mazzocchi, and Antonio Pizzo (eds). *Marcel·lì Antúnez Roca e la performatività digitale,* cit., p. 59.
[6] Antonio Pizzo, *Attori e personaggi artificiali*, in «Acting Archives Review», Acting Archives, no. 1, 2011, p. 113-114.
[7] Gabriella Giannachi, *Virtual theatres…,* cit., p. 67.

dystopian prophesy) of that piece of equipment. With the installation *Requiem*, in 1999, he built a pneumatic suspended exoskeleton with automatic movements triggered by the people passing by[8]. Here the body disappeared or became a corpse, nothing more that an inert ornament while the real life generator was the machine[9]. It is a provocative yet romantic piece of art where the spectator casually interferes with the technological apparatus and is induced to staring at the void of a moving lifeless body.

As we see, once more, Marcel·lì Antúnez Roca went back to installation art. Was it to go back home where he really belonged? Was it a detour from his career? Again, we cannot employ a timeworn category, such as theatre or fine art, to describe his endeavours. Throughout the year, the moving across different fields of art was his trademark. A closer look at his working method gives the impression that there is a continuous flow of inventions: drawings, devices, software, tales, characters; all seamlessly arise from the artist's imaginative world. A figure drawn on a sketchbook can be found one year later in a video clip, a specific device made for a performance may find a more mature form in the following creation. Yet this flow of elements obeys some inner and deeper stream of creativity. The clip recorded for a workshop becomes the media content of a performance even if the latter wasn't planned. Almost all the pieces that were shown at Art Santa Monica were created prior to and extrinsic to the production of a specific performance; nevertheless all of them (there are only few exceptions) became an integral part of a live theatre show. Indeed, performances provide the conditions in which to verify the narrative power of the interactive installations; the latter are the laboratory for the creation of a new language of the narration: the one cannot live without the other.

In his influential work, Zarilli maintains that every time an actor or actress performs, he or she "enacts a theory of acting"[10]. Similarly, we can say that, every time Marcel·lí Antúnez Roca performs, he is voluntarily enacting a theory on the digital performance. Over time, this theory has become more accurate and has finally been given the name of Systematurgy[11]. The word merges two notions (system and dramaturgy), thus encompasses the principles that govern the design of an interactive digital performance. It is also a technique that the artist has developed and that uses and improves on in every show, thanks to dedicated software that was originally written for the performance *Pol* in 2002. The software (that took the name of the performance) allowed the artist to control all the media and all the physical interfaces via a number of midi interfaces. This innovation also had the effect of freeing him from the cumbersome technological apparatus that was used in the previous shows. The software was the hub where all the input from the dreskeleton could be processed and became instructions for the projections, the light, the sound, and also for the robots on stage. From that moment onward, Marcel·lì Antúnez Roca was free to experiment with the notion of interface and to invent a number of devices to be used on stage by the performer or by the spectator. Besides the soundbots in *Afasia* and the taxidermic robots in *Pol*, he soon added other inventions: exaggerated synthetic replicas of human body parts that were a sort of three-dimensional version of Marce·lì's imaginative drawings. They were double interfaces because they yielded twofold results: on the one hand, they function as technical devices that let the performer or the audience control the media content of the show, on the other hand, they function as a scenography that introduces the spectator to the imaginative world of the artist. A new awareness was at hand; the kaleidoscopic malleability of the new interactive stage was similar to the freedom of the sketchbooks that the artist had been filling with drawings since his early years. Increasingly, the theatre stage wasn't something to be built: it was something to be drawn.

Formerly known as the fierce performer in La Fura, then famous as cyber artist, more recently Marcel·lì Antúnez Roca has described himself as the draughtsman *(El Dibuixant*, 2005). Once more, he shifted position, refused the label given, and started a new course of activity with renewed faith in his artistic mission. He turned from a nomadic Ulysses to a knowledgeable Virgil who guides the audience in the fantastic world of interactive performance *(Protomembrana*, in 2006)[12]. The immersion of the audience is furthermore augmented via a newly born device called a guncam: a cam, arranged like a gun, that records the face of a member of the audience and inserts it in a pre-recorded list of slapstick video clips.

Contained within this framework is the exhibition *Interattività Furiosa* produced by the Civica Galleria d'Arte Moderna at Gallarate (Lombardy, Italy) where, among all other works, he created the *DMD Europa*

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[8] Recently, Marcel·lì Antúnez Roca has defined the kind of exoskeleton used in *Epizoo* and *Requiem* as muskeleton (muscle + exoskeleton), to stress that the device substitutes the agency of the body, thus acting as prosthetic muscles.

[9]
  -   , 1999, p. 97.

[10] Cf. Phillip B. Zarrilli, *Acting (re)considered: a Theoretical and Practical Guide*, London: Routledge, 2002.

[11] Cf. Marcel·lì Antúnez Roca, *Sistematurgia,* 2005 04, <http://www.marceliantunez.com/texts/sistematurgia/sistematurgia.pdf> (accessed January 20, 2015).

[12] An insight of this process is provided by the author in Marcel·lì Antúnez Roca, *Protomembrana, de lo Colectivo a la Sistematurgia*, <http://marceliantunez.com/texts/protomembrana-de-lo-colectivo-la-sistematurgia/> (accessed February 23, 2015).

(2007), a dynamic mural and interactive installation. It is a 1/1 scale interactive video projection of a dynamic mural that synthesizes a week's work. Thanks to sensors on the floor, the spectator could select among three videos that run simultaneously[13]. *DMD Europa* could be included in the field on interactive cinema, because the narration (the creation of an artwork) could be controlled by the user. Nevertheless it was also the re-interpretation of the relationship between audience and performer in *Epizoo*: the user was free to control the action of the performer within a given installation framework.

In 2008, this new strand was summoned up in the performance *Hipermembrana*. Here, Marcel·lì Antúnez Roca applied the paradigm of systematurgy at a show in which three actors conveyed the myth of Minotaur, from different perspectives, on stage and on video. The scenography was simply a large screen for rear projection; nevertheless the form of the interactive installation took a firmer narrative hint. The story's fragments were enacted in turns on stage and on screen; the dramatic actions often were the outcome of a collaboration between the dramatis personae live in front of the audience and the video running on the backdrop. Marcel·lì and his fellow partners were not only activators of the media content, but also characters engaged in the plot. Therefore, the screen was only a part of the complex set design that included a number of physical interfaces handled by the performers, such as costumes, mats, and the newly born *scream machine*, a musical instrument made of three projectors that shows the faces of different characters screaming on three mini screens.

Hipermembrana, made clear that the artistic yet provocative actions performed with La Fura dels Baus, or even the sexually charged situations of *Satel.lits Obscens*, were going to lose their centrality and become part of a wider fictional world of the artist. Painted bodies, screaming actors and violent actions were now staged on video and often framed by Marcel·lì's colourful illustrations. Those actions were incorporated into the artist's palette, together with the memories of his childhood, beside the characters of his imagination.

In fact, the sketchbook and drawing became more and more central in his production. A black and white figure sketched on a notepad could be easily transformed into a colour animated cartoon by means of digital image processing software. Drawing became the test of his fertile imagination as in the exhibition *Hibridum Bestiarium* in 2008, in which the theme is anthropomorphic animals presented as genetic errors or monstrous beings[14].

Digital performance is a wide and complex field in which a number of different approaches are often placed one beside the other. For example, in his comprehensive work, Steve Dixon included markedly different artists such as Orlan, Lepage, and Builders Association in the same agenda. And he enlisted Marcel·lì's work within the cyborg trend, together with Eduardo Kac and Stelark[15].

Considering Marcel·lì Antúnez Roca's work, we would be less keen to associate his works with the Kac's fluorescent rabbit or with Stelarc's third ear. The Catalan artist is mainly a storyteller who decided to tell his stories using a personal vocabulary and syntax. The wish to tell a story binds him to the theatre stage, where he can transform a tale into a live dramatic event. Although he uses the codes that belong to performance art, he enacts a personal fictional world and engages the audience in an interactive narrative[16]. Instead of words, he uses sounds, videos, drawings, sculptures, robots; he replaces the natural language with the paradigm of interactive media; the performative environment turns out to be his specific blank page. He is a visual artist with a vision to communicate in a dynamic space.

The visitors of his exhibition at Art Santa Monica, were welcomed by a site-specific wall painting called *SADDI* (Sistematurgia/Accions/Dispositius/Dibuixos in process, Systematurgy, Actions, Devices, Drawings in process). The large mural depicts an ouroboros (a serpent eating its own tail). The figure was deployed along the six flights of stairs leading to the second floor, and worked as an introduction to the artist's universe. Overall, the painting, composed of a series of connected scenes in the manner of a medieval fresco, represents and organizes the materials and the creative universe that surround the artist[17]. It starts from listing the interface devices that he uses (mats, dreskeleton, guncam, etc.), then it illustrates all the phases involved: interface behaviour, how he creates content, which channels deliver the inputs, the activity related to the software management, the representational medium that will be used in the performance. Up to now, this painting could probably be seen as the most complete description of Marce·lì's approach to live art and

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[13] Cf. the description provided at <http://marceliantunez.com/texts/dmd-europa-ita> (accessed, February 25, 2015).

[14] *Hibridum Bestiarium*, exhibition, Galería Rojo Artspace, Barcelona, from 4 June to 4 July 2008.

[15] Cf. Steve Dixon, *Digital Performance*, cit., in particular pp. 303 – 332.

[16] Cf. the interview with Marcel·lì Antúnez Roca, *Sistematurgia: la quarta perete e lo schermo*, «Mimesis Journal», vol. 1, n. 2, 2012.

[17] Cf. < http://marceliantunez.com/work/expo-sistematurgia> (accessed, February 25, 2015).

interactive digital media. It is his major attempt to leave a legacy for the artists to come, and it is made with the very same language to which the artist resorts when he is creating his works: drawings.

Any attempt to confine his activity in a specific purposely made branch of experimental performance would be like judging his artistic career. Indeed, he is a pioneer in using interactive technology and augmented reality on stage; nevertheless it is undisputable that technology isn't the focus of his research. At the core of his research there are seminal notions such as the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators, the generation of materiality by means of a digital performance; the emergence of a meaning in the kaleidoscopic world of multimedia. Those are not only computer related problems, but overall they are all foundational concepts of the performance[18]. So, his research glares at the limits of the theatre as a place where we can represent the world with its contemporary protocols of communication. He doesn't conceive digital interaction and multimedia as technical gimmickry to 'spice up' the stage; in his hands, they become a powerful metaphor of the complexity of reality, as we perceive it in the contemporary world. He invites us to challenge the categories we use to interpret our social and political environment and, therefore, he attempts to break the boundaries of our experience.

For Marcel·lì Antúnez Roca, the performance is not the delivery of a specific form of entertainment, but is a strategy to achieve these goals: thus his art is intrinsically interdisciplinary. Indeed, along with the great artists of contemporary theatre, he has contributed to the reform of set design, taking it to a new level where the scenography not only participates in the event: it is the language of the performance. Hence it is little wonder why his career has been celebrated in a gallery of contemporary art. He wholly joins the long line of artists (from Svoboda to Bob Wilson) who have had a strong vision of the world and thus reformed the idea of theatre by means of their powerful visual imagination.

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[18] Here I purposely use the concepts listed by Erika Fischer-Lichte in her seminal work *The transformative power of performance: a new aesthetics*. New York: Routledge, 2008.