

Marcel-Í Antúnez Roca - Texts

MEMBRANA. GÉNESIS, SATÉLITES Y EPISODIOS

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Written: Barcelona
Date: January 2009
Topic: Metamembrana Catalog
Category: INSTALLATIONS
Work: Metamembrana

In April 2003, my team and I carried out twenty-five parabolas in two flights aboard an Ilyushin, the plane used as a flying laboratory by the GCTC (Yuri Gagarin Russian State Scientific-Research? Cosmonaut Training Center) at Star City in the Russian Federation. By following an arc-shaped flight path, parabolic flights provide 30 seconds of 2g (double gravity) on the ascent; zero gravity at the top of the arc for half a minute and another 30 seconds at 2g descending. We conducted this experiment, which I called Dédalo, with some of my prototypes: Réquiem robot, dreskeleton, a projection system, a soft robot and other devices which we installed on the plane. However all our artistic expectations were surpassed by the radical body experience of microgravity.

On returning from Russia, with the bittersweet memory of that experience, I began an intense process of reflection that led me to review concepts and devices in the work I had produced in the period between the robot Joan, l'home de Carn (1992) and the POL performance (2002). This reflection enabled me to examine the concepts I had been working with more deeply, and to give names to the methods and prototypes I had invented and was already using. In this way I added newly invented terms to my vocabulary, such as Systematurgia, the name I give to my methodology, and the terms I use to label the different functions of the exoskeletons: for example parazitebots control the body, and dreskeletons are body interfaces that expand the actor's possibilities. Following on from these deliberations, the idea of producing a show arose, that would be a hybrid conference and performance. This work was prepared between mid 2003 and early 2004: the first part presents videos of the Dédalo experience and the second part prototypes for a utopia called Transpermia, as the show was finally called. The animations that illustrated this utopia are based on India ink drawings that I had made.

During the first half of 2005, I focussed on producing the film El Dibuxant, a documentary that reviews my artistic biography. The film organises my repertory in different thematic modules throughout which my drawings provide a common thread. These drawings include an animated auca illustrating my childhood (in the same style as the Indian ink drawings of Transpermia), short animations using black and white drawings, that serve as links between the modules, and a final scene featuring a series of large-scale murals that I paint and erase. Drawings shape the film and explicitly illustrate my talent as a draughtsman, hence the title.

I see my creation as a chain of events leading from one to the next. In this way my reflections in Transpermia, the need to rethink and restructure my career for the making of El Dibuxant, and the emergence of drawing as a means of representation, prepared the ground for the creation of Membrana.

Membrana now comprises three episodes: Protomembrana, Hipermembrana and Metamembrana, in addition to a number of satellite works. The staging of Membrana is not so spectacular as the performances between 1994 and 2002 in which robots and exoskeletons were prominent. By contrast, Membrana proposes elements that focus on interaction, both in the interface/spectator relationship and also in the narrative possibilities. This project proposes an open, creative and horizontal methodology, and it reveals contents, in the form of drawings, that articulate a personal cosmivision.

From the outset, I was clear that the first episode, Protomembrana, following in the wake of Transpermia, would be a hybrid performance and conference dealing with Systematurgia, that is to say, interfaces, categories of gestures, computational management and the medium of representation. But I did not know exactly how to achieve this. I thought it might be a good idea to use a gradual production system which, through public showings, would enable feedback from the spectators' impressions to nurture my ideas. I quickly realised that the technical aspects of Sistematurgia were of little interest while, by contrast, a micro-story structure related through drawings fascinated the public. For over 5 months, Protomembrana became an open text, correcting what did not work and feeding on new elements. In September 2006 this procedure came to an end and the open text was closed. Nevertheless, I felt uneasy. Although the show included spectator participation in aspects such as choosing how the story developed or capturing photographs of spectators' faces so they became characters in the performance, I still felt that something was missing. In October, I decided to build Fembrana which was a suit with range, position and touch sensors. Unlike the dreskeleton that has sensors mounted on a metal exoskeleton, the Fembrana sensors were encased in grotesque latex prostheses. In the third and last part of the show, the audience is represented on the stage by a volunteer spectator wearing Fembrana. A sort of cross between a human interface and a monstrous puppet, this device provided the ending for Protomembrana in December 2006, a year after it had started.

Although the audiovisual content of Protomembrana introduced a number of extreme elements, their interpretation is tempered by the show's graphic representation which is based on different animation techniques using my drawings as the root. Although I like the formal result of these animations and I find them useful for this performance, it was clear to me that the spectator perceives images produced graphically in a very different way to photographs. While graphic animation is always filtered through a degree of unreality, photography and its extension in film and video are a guarantee of reality.

In late 2006, I was invited to show my drawings, some of my installations and the videos of my performances at GAM (Galleria d'Arte Moderna) in Gallarate, Italy. While the exhibition was being conceived, I decided it was necessary to produce a piece that would serve as a bridge between the drawings and the interactive installations. This led to the creation of one of the Membrana satellite works, the interactive video-installation DMD (Dynamic Mural Drawing) Europa. This work shows the process of constructing 5 large-scale panel drawings and also painting actions against a wall 2.25m high by 3m wide. To achieve the effect that the drawing was happening by itself, I came into the shot and left it again after each brush stroke, so that in the video editing process my presence was erased. After three days of filming, and fed up with painting stroke by stroke, I felt the need to literally saturate myself in the wall. The body/paint actions in the last part of the video recover strategies that I had already developed in my first Fura dels Baus period and which the making of El Dibuxant had brought back to my memory. DMD tries to manifest what, in my opinion, is the cultural life on our continent today: individualism, bureaucracy, conservatism, censure..., and that is why I added the word Europa to the title. In early March, I presented DMD Europa as part of the exhibition Interattività Furiosa at the GAM.

The year spent producing Protomembrana had helped me to consolidate a technical team made up of skilled specialists. Thanks to them I could now use new tools that, among other things, enabled effective interactive control of the video. This same team also allowed me to work faster and with a greater degree of flexibility. Therefore, I now had a solid working base for producing a large-scale performance using an interactive strategy based on work-laboratories open to artists and technicians, and incorporating the use of interactive video as a technique. From this point on, I began the second episode of Membrana: Hipermembrana.

The first laboratory for Hipermembrana took place in May, with a small group of artists and technicians. It was held in Arte Ladines, an art centre located in the Redes National Park in Asturias, directed by the artist Cuco Suárez. As a working base, I proposed the Minotaur myth. This story has elements that I find stimulating such as the mechanical beast, zoophilia, the monster and cannibalism. I felt that these elements could provide the incentive to protest at the frightened and conservative society that I denounced in DMD Europa. The results were overwhelming.

In mid-June the second laboratory took place and this time the group was larger, including some of the participants from Ladines and new people. It was held in L'Animal a l'Esquena, a production centre in Celrà, in the province of Girona, another rural setting. I added a new element to the story of the Minotaur, the Dantesque topography of the Inferno. The workshop was intense. The sequences from Celrà were added to the Asturian videos - raw, brutal and graphic actions that surpassed the final results in DMD Europa.

The third laboratory took place in Turin, Italy, during the first fortnight in July. This time I worked with a team of over forty people under the auspices of Mala festival, in the Politecnico di Torino, and MULTIDAMS. The previous laboratories had served to develop the rawest part of the story, and now it was time to cook with the other techniques. Thus, wild painting gave way to drawing. The ink on paper animations in Protomembrana, that had changed format to the wall in DMD Europa, now spread to objects, panels and the participants' bodies. The sum of the results of the three laboratories became the basis of the first public showing of Hipermembrana in Turin. It was the moment for weaving micro-stories in space and time, using the results of Protomembrana in an interpretation of Dantesque topography and the Minotaur myth. The public presentation introduced new control interfaces used on stage: in these shows sensor mats were placed on the floor, in addition to prostheses such as Fembrana and microphones that enabled the active participation of up to eleven performers. These new sensors broadened the range of body gestures that had previously been made possible by the dreskeleton, to a new framework that included the entire scenic space.

Version 1.0 of Hipermembrana was revised, extended and completed during the final period of production in my Barcelona studio. In October version 2.0 opened, first in Girona and later in Barcelona. This version included three performers, two projection screens, a scream machine or onomatopoeyon, the dreskeleton, a body prosthesis, several sensor mats and three micro-cameras.

In December 2007 I began working on a mural that took almost a month to complete in the new building of the History of Art department in the University of Barcelona. When I was commissioned to do the mural 43 Somni de la raó I realised that the black and white strategy I had used in DMD Europa and Hipermembrana made no sense in this work, and thus this gigantic painting naturally led me to broaden the colour scheme. The development of murals, another of the Membrana satellites, continued at the large-scale exhibition devoted to my work, Outras Peles, in the ZDB gallery in Lisbon in March 2008. My graphic investigation took shape in new and ephemeral murals drawn on the walls of the gallery, some of them polychrome, such as the Arbore Sistematurgia.

From the outset of Membrana, I knew that one of the episodes was going to be an interactive installation. The technological platform that I use to construct my interactive works can be used to produce both performances and installations. Narration in the shape of micro-stories is versatile and can be adapted both to the sequential context of the performance and the hyperstory of an installation. Transferring the experience of interfaces to the domain of the spectator, who through using them becomes an inter-actor in the work, does not differ much from the way the expert performer manages an interactive performance. I believe that this transfer is interesting for the spectator. As I see it, the interactive aspect of a work increases its identification potential. Videogames are proof of this concept: if the spectator participates in managing the work, s/he will easily identify with its content and will experience it differently.

The third episode of Metamembrana began early 2008, after the project was accepted by the Anella Cultural network. The intervention of this institution and the five Catalan cities that took part - Olot, Reus, Granollers, Lleida and Barcelona - meant that the installation was replicated in each city. In this way, the initial project that was planned for one space, became more voluminous and acquired fresh nuances, such as the network. In June we began to establish contact with representatives in each city and we established the strategies to be followed in producing the content.

In September, Metamembrana continued using the creative methods established in the previous episodes, while extending them to people, bodies and associations in each city participating in the production of the project. Metamembrana broadened the idea of the Hipermembrana laboratories by transferring them to the art schools in Granollers and Olot, the L'Aula de Teatre de Lleida and the group Diables de Reus, just to name a few of the participating groups. In all, over a hundred and twenty people shared the experience of creating Metamembrana. This exchange deeply influenced the content of the show, by fulfilling the expectations outlined at the beginning of the project namely; to construct, as in the paintings of Bosch and Brueghel, a landscape full of situations enabling the spectator to choose which route to follow and to construct her/his own story. The fact that many of the subjects developed in the installation were suggested by the participants gives Metamembrana a strange richness and an ancestral sense. The titles of these micro-stories - the triumph of death, the fable of Porcoboc, the paradise tree, and the battle of Blancs vs Blaus, are clear evidence of this idea.

But the complicity of Metamembrana does not end with the production of the lengthy panoramic videos created in each city, but also includes its interactive nature. The installation sums up the findings of previous episodes in the area of interfaces and offers them to the spectator, who becomes the inter-actor in the work. To step on the mats or shout in the microphone that leads to the panoramic pictures, or to activate the face-capture device that personalises the Guiñol, or to grope the nose joystick - a sort of Fembrana object that sounds an instrument shared by all the cities -, are interactions that reveal the complexity of the work to the spectator and invite participation.

The graphic work in Metamembrana arises from a chain of evolution that began with the animations in Protomembrana, extended to the black and white videos in DMD Europa and Hipermembrana and continued with the polychrome murals 43 Somni de la raó and Arbore Sistematurgia. Metamembrana installs polychrome drawings at the centre of a real stage and the pictures take over. The recordings on stage give rise to interactive images that blend the unreal aesthetic of graphic animation with the forceful reality of video. It is very likely that these panoramic videos are actually the most elaborate expression of the Metamembrana cosmovision.

Metamembrana opens simultaneously in all the participating cities in January 2009. And although it may not be the last episode, it culminates the Membrana

project for the moment.

Technology may change body status to the extreme of experimenting microgravity but today technology is no longer something extraneous in our lives.

My formal narrative comprises the traditions of modernity linked to visual arts – individualism, objectuality and discursive uniformity, and scenic arts – collectivity, polysemy and temporality. Both are compatible for me, and in fact they are the same thing. The technological procedures I use dilute the frontiers between the arts and justify this position. However, the powerful and spectacular technology that I worked with in the nineties has today been “hidden” in the Membrana episodes. Over a surface that conceals great complexity, simple resources such as drawing have been developed. The Membrana project is a product of the 21st century that does not shirk from reinterpreting mythical and ancestral forms, updating them with stories that are sometimes critical, other times emotional, but almost always ironic. My attitude has always been the same: art is a way of understanding the world and therefore, a space of freedom.

Translated by Fionnuala Ní Eigearthaigh