

La Fura dels Baus: Scenes for the Twenty-First Century

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The journey began in Mojà, a traditional village and one of the birthplaces of Catalanism, making street theatre with a donkey and cart.¹ They followed in the footsteps of the old travelling players, exercising a festive and participative style but with subversive undertones. Nearly thirty years on and significant players in the international festival market, La Fura dels Baus propose a techno-landscape full of reproducible and interchangeable images easily identified within our mass media environment. They have pioneered the introduction of *on-line* spaces and actions fashioned in the distance. In this way, live actors and virtual performers share a scenic environment; the screens overflow and so do the images of the actors moving within them, avatars of themselves, until their interpretation and virtuality become conflated. La Fura dels Baus is made-up of six of its founding or early members: Miki Espuma, Pep Gatell, Jürgen Müller, Alex Ollé, Carlos Padrissa y Pere Tantiñà.² Along the way, Marcel.li

Antúnez, Jordi Arús and ‘Hansel’ Cereza decided to pursue different ventures.³ La Fura dels Baus: vitality, risk, astuteness, professionalism, daring,

Catalan rock movement towards the end of the 1970s. Espuma habitually takes primary responsibility for the group’s musical work.

Pep Gatell (b. Barcelona, 1959) comes from street theatre and the musical scene (he plays the saxophone). He joined the company in 1981.

Jürgen Müller (b. Weiterdingen, East Germany, 1955) trained extensively in physical theatre. Müller studied with Dimitri in Switzerland, with Philippe Gaulier in France and undertook training in Mime and Pantomime at Barcelona’s Institut del Teatre. He takes responsibility for the company’s physical work.

Alex Ollé (b. Barcelona, 1960) studied Puppetry and Object Theatre at Barcelona’s Institut del Teatre. He was part of several Catalan theatrical collectives before joining La Fura dels Baus in 1981. Together with Padrissa, he has, since 1992, specialized in the company’s large-scale work and operatic productions.

Carlos Padrissa (b. Mojà, 1958) studied saxophone, piano and harmony at the Conservatorio del Liceo in Barcelona.

Pere Tantiñà (b. Mojà, 1960) studied trombone and graphic design.

3. Marcel.li Antúnez (b. Mojà, 1959) studied Fine Arts and Music (specializing in the trumpet); he left La Fura dels Baus in 1990. He became a member of the performance collective Los Rinos and then developed a solo career as an installation artist. His installations include *La vida sin amor no tiene sentido* (*Life Without Love Has No Meaning*, 1993) and *Joan, l’home de carn* (*Joan, Flesh and Blood*, 1992), centring on a hi-tech robot covered in pigskin. In 1994, he started a career as a technological performer with *Epizoo*, where the audience participated in manipulating various parts of his body through computerized terminals: opening his nasal orifices; smacking his buttocks; hardening his nipples; opening his lips, etc. In *Afàsia* (1997), Antúnez reconstructed Homer’s Odyssean universe as a technological buffoon: through an exoskeleton he controlled the sound on stage and also the

1. The company’s origins are referenced in the production *Naumón* (2004). *Naumón* is also the name given to a boat which is used as a piece of itinerant scenery by the company; it is a nomadic performance space and tours with the assistance of a full professional sailing team. When on tour, the *Naumón* offers several shows simultaneously. On deck, a donkey walks around the boat both symbolizing the company’s origins and Catalonia’s tradition of labouring on which the economy was built in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is also the group’s mascot and an image of the long journey carried out by La Fura dels Baus since their formation in 1979.
2. Miquel Badosa ‘Miki Espuma’ (b. Barcelona, 1959), a musician and singer/songwriter, emerged from the so-called

teamwork, and laboratory theatre. These might be seen as the key terms that define their long trajectory.

Given La Fura dels Baus's numerous productions and bearing in mind that their first period between 1979 and 1992 has been subject to considerable critical attention,⁴ this article will focus on the recent history of the collective. The discussion nevertheless considers earlier stages in the company's development. The 1970s were the years of street theatre and of the euphoria provoked by the end of Francoism and the emergence of democracy in Spain. The 1980s revolved around the desolate feeling of doom evoked by the iconography of the urban metropolis. In this sense, La Fura dels Baus parodied the inherited optimism of street festive performance (Comediants, The Footsbarn Travelling Company, Odin Teatre), transforming it into a chaotic and brutal aesthetic dominated by an aggressive physicality, arrogant youthfulness and a vitality appropriated from rock music. The emblematic 1980s image of the company remains that of the all-male cast dressed in business suits embroiled in a rhythmic spiral of destruction relentlessly smashing a car with a sledgehammer. This sequence from *Accions* (*Ac-*

virtual images – animated holography and videos performed by several actors. The use of technology at the service of narrative was further developed in productions such as *Pol* (2002), *Mondo Antúnez* (2004) and *Transpèrnia* (2006). Antúnez's work is judged to have points of contact with that of Stelarc whose work is far better known in the English-speaking world. On Antúnez, see Paul Julian Smith, 'Marcel.li Antúnez Roca: Biology, Technology, Visuality', in *Antes y después del Quijote: en el cincuentenario de la Asociación de Hispanistas de Gran Bretaña e Irlanda* (Valencia: Generalitat Valenciana/Biblioteca Valenciana, 2005), pp. 393–397; Steve Dixon, 'Metal Performance: Humanizing Robots, Returning to Nature, and Camping About', *TDR: The Drama Review*, 48:4 (T184) (Winter 2004), 15–46 (pp. 33–38).

Jordi Arús (b. Sabadell, 1960), a mechanic by profession, later trained in mime and pantomime. He left La Fura dels Baus in 1992 to direct the Pavilion of Discovery at Seville's Expo 92. He now works freelance as a technical director for large-scale international events.

'Hansel' Francisco Javier Cereza (b. Barcelona, 1962) was a medical student when he joined La Fura dels Baus in 1981. He left the company in 2004 to direct, together with scenographer Alfons Flores, the opening ceremony of Barcelona's Fórum 2004. He is currently part of the artistic team of Cirque du Soleil in Las Vegas.

4. On this period of La Fura dels Baus, see *La Fura dels Baus 3 Cuadernos Monográficos El Público*, 34 (June 1988); Alex Ollé (ed.), *La Fura dels Baus, 1979–2004* (Barcelona: Editorial Electa, 2004); Mercè Saumell, 'Performance Groups in Catalonia', in David George and John London (eds), *Contemporary Catalan Theatre: An Introduction*, The Anglo-Catalan Society Occasional Publications, 9 (Sheffield: The Anglo-Catalan Society, 1996), pp. 103–128; Mercè Saumell, 'Performance Groups in Contemporary Spanish Theatre', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 7:4 (1998), 1–30.

tions, 1983) changed the point of reference for contemporary Catalan theatre, since it presented a provocative approach to performance within the context of a nation redefining its sense of self. The sequence challenged established understandings of theatrical space and actor's presence, and instead of traditionally constructing meaning onstage it embodied destruction and deconstruction.

POPULAR AND AVANT-GARDE THEATRE

Established in 1979, La Fura dels Baus represents a popular form of theatrical language that converges with the non-Aristotelian tradition through street theatre, through the great machinery and theatrical trickery representative of the grand guignol's truculence at the end of the nineteenth century, and through the visual surprises of optic theatre and scenic dioramas.

The discourses of the 1960s, engaging with the terminology of pleasure, emotion and eroticism, were more rooted in the popular than the academic. In theoretical terms, the aesthetics of cruelty proposed by Antonin Artaud revealed themselves as invigorating and liberating factors in freeing theatre from slavish addictions to the literary. The increasing attention paid to oral traditions as manifestations of popular culture working alongside the irresistible rise of images and telecommunications again eroded the privileges of the text.

Classified as urban or wild theatre La Fura dels Baus work in open spaces with large machinery and sophisticated technology. Siblings of collectives like the Dutch Dogtroep (1975), the French Royal de Luxe (1980), the Welsh Brith Gof (1981), or the Californian Survival Research Laboratories (1978), they similarly share an overtly masculine ethos, the execution of violence as a spectacle in itself, a fascination with the machine and the ingenuity of reinventing everyday items.

Esta superposición de lo maquinal y lo primitivo conecta indudablemente la propuesta de Survival Research y La Fura. Para ambos colectivos, la máquina ya no es meramente, como para los modernistas, un enemigo del ser humano, éste ya no reacciona angustiado ante la deshumanización provocada por el progreso industrial, sino que asume, con una mezcla de resignación, perplejidad e ironía, las consecuencias de la interpenetración de lo industrial y lo natural. Las máquinas aparecen

entonces como víctimas del mismo sistema que las ha generado, exactamente igual que los seres humanos: de ambos se descubren formas mutantes, resultantes de la combinación de lo mecánico, lo animal y lo humano. Y ello da lugar a una extraña complicidad entre el actor y la máquina.⁵

(This overlapping of the mechanical and the primitive undoubtedly connects Survival Research and La Fura's projects. In both collectives, the machine is no longer merely humanity's enemy, as it was with the Modernists; humans don't react in anguish any more when faced with the dehumanization brought about by industrial progress, but rather assume with some resignation, perplexity and irony, the consequences of intermeshing the industrial and the natural. Machines, then, appear as victims of the same system that created them, just like human beings: from both mutant forms emerge resulting from a combination of the mechanical, the animal and the human. And this gives rise to a strange complicity between actor and machine.)

La Fura dels Baus's international standing also responds, as already mentioned at the beginning of the article, to a very specific historical situation: that of Spain after the death of Francisco Franco in 1975 and the momentum towards democratic freedom that followed. Censorship in theatre lasted for two further years after Franco's death. It was in 1977 that the Congress of Catalan Culture took place in Barcelona, signalling the culmination of all claims, passions and broken dreams that had been fermenting since the Actors and Directors Assembly (1976), at which the majority of delegates agreed that theatre should be for the whole community and should thus be publicly protected. Many of those young professionals came from groups of the so-called *teatro independiente*, markedly anti-Francoist through their trajectories in the 1960s (like Els Joglars) and 1970s (as with Comediants). The latter conquered the streets with pleasurable Dionysian spectacles, occupying public spaces that had been forbidden during the years of the dictatorship. La Fura dels Baus, like many other companies of this period, followed in the footsteps of Comediants by forging their aesthetic in street theatre.

5. José Antonio Sánchez, 'La estética de la catástrofe', in José Antonio Sánchez (ed.), *Artes de la escena y de la acción en España: 1978-2002* (Cuenca: Ediciones de la Universidad de Castilla La Mancha, 2006), pp. 135-182 (p. 156).

Nevertheless, governmental bodies wanted 'official' theatre based on a French model that prioritized the text. Catalan text-based theatre was overvalued, a political tool in the linguistic process of normalization. Theatre in Catalonia has traditionally been one of the strongest and most popular forms of artistic expression. Critics and institutions treated performance groups, especially those associated with street theatre, with a certain condescendence or even as part of local folklore. Hence it was considered a bridge, an interim process, a kind of post-Francoist juvenile fever that should not overwhelm the desired return to the written word and the expected resurrection of the Catalan author, a new Àngel Guimerà.⁶ Therefore, and with the exception of Hermann Bonnín's⁷ period as director of the Centre Dramàtic de la Generalitat, in the course of 'institutionalizing' theatre, a marginalization occurred that had significant implications for the performance groups who had forged their aesthetic through non-textual dramaturgies. These groups constitute a lengthy list: Els Joglars, Comediants, Companyia Albert Vidal, La Claca, Sèmola, La Fura dels Baus, El Tricicle, Vol.Ras, La Cubana, Carles Santos. They share a theatrical language emerging from improvised rehearsals, the specificity of the space, and the actor's body as the main focus of communication with an audience that often share the performance arena. The focus on live music, miming, clowning, object and puppet handling contrast with the habitual realism of institutional and commercial stagings. Theirs is a theatre embedded in a bold visual aesthetic that brings together interdisciplinary forms in playful and provocative ways.

These groups filled the stage with a new vitality, fuelled by the pleasure of the imagination, by transgressing and by conceiving theatre as a game, drawn from what is immediate or current. Furthermore, these collectives questioned achievement in theatre as an individual phenomenon. Creation was linked to the plurality of the group's input and experiences and its stability has only been

6. Writing in Catalan, playwright Àngel Guimerà (1845-1924) produced historical tragedies in verse and modern dramas in prose. His most significant work is *Terra baixa* (*Martha of the Lowlands*, 1896), considered the foundational text of Catalan drama. It is regularly restaged, most recently in 2002 at the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya (TNC).

7. Hermann Bonnín created a season entitled Teatre Obert where adventurous productions were programmed outside the Centre Dramàtic de la Generalitat's base, the Teatre Romea. In this way *Accions* (1983) was staged on a building site close to Barcelona's port. Early performances by La Cubana were also programmed in the city under this scheme.

questioned by professional changes of direction or unexpected developments that have seen members leave. The idea of the group remains the constant as La Fura dels Baus have shifted from a theatrical collective to a business enterprise in the late 1980s. That change coincides with moving from a physically provocative basis in the early 1980s towards a more formal and intellectual provocation by adopting an end-stage form of theatre from 1992 onwards.

Consequently, the first stage in the trajectory of La Fura dels Baus, which evolves between the harsh aesthetic of urban theatre and neo-ritual, comprises their first trilogy: *Accions* (1983), *Suz/o/Suz* (1985) and *Tier Mon* (1989), which launched them on the international scene (see Image 1). Those early performances had no physical barriers between actors and spectators, provoking intensely vivid experiences by submerging the public into neo-primitive environments – fire, screams, fights – enhanced by the most sophisticated technology available at the time (MIDI systems or high pressure lighting, for instance). Music substituted text in the show's dramaturgical construction. The music was performed with live instrumentation (saxophone, keyboards, trumpets), electronic accompaniment (samplers and synthesizers) and equally by using objects for percussive effect (barrels, iron sheets, gas cylinders). In the second trilogy, consisting of *Noun* (1991), *M.T.M.* (1994) and *Manes* (1996), there was a greater interest in the technological, including virtual images, projections on giant screens and multimedia spaces as well as a more substantial textual script, allowing for the fictional element to gain ground. With the introduction of end-on staging, the so-called 'matrices literarias' (literary matrices) were born.⁸

After the second trilogy, La Fura dels Baus developed a new interest in text, taking works from the traditional repertoire to make new dramaturgical adaptations, which would include a large visual component and nearly always developed in collaboration with an external source. This was the case with Goethe's *Faust*, transformed into *F@ust 3.0* (1998), with the collaboration of Pablo Ley; *F@ust 5.0* (2001), a feature film with a script by Fernando León de Aranoa; *XXX* (2002), adapted by Mercedes Abad from *Philosophy in the Bedroom* by the Marquis de Sade, and Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (2005), a contemporary



Image 1 *Tier Mon* (1989): an urban theatre of harsh aesthetics. Photo: Gol, courtesy of La Fura dels Baus

take on the modern classic by Argentine playwright Javier Daulte.

RITUALS AND CEREMONIES

La Fura dels Baus embodies the intersection between a ceremonial ritual and theatrical performance. Eccentricity, the realities of working on the edge of the performance genre (theatre, performance, installation, concert, opera), has been a constant throughout their work. It is precisely this eccentricity or the fringe nature of their work, which has allowed them to tackle varied formats of live performance: theatre, theatrical concerts, publicity events,⁹ rave parties.

The staging of part of the opening ceremony of the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games gave the company massive media coverage. *Mar Mediterrània* (*The Mediterranean Sea*) was a huge challenge for La Fura dels Baus in terms of scale and audience coverage. Conceived as a macro-show lasting twenty minutes, television would broadcast it to a considerable population of the planet.¹⁰ There-

9. Some publicity events, like *Pepsicole* (1996), undertaken in Barcelona for the brand Pepsi, involved an enormous open air spectacle, near the cathedral, attracting an audience of more than 10,000.

10. The study by Miquel Moragas Spà and Nancy Rivenburgh, 'Television and Olympic Ceremonies', presented and published for the I Simposium Internacional de Ceremonias Olímpicas (Barcelona–Lausanne, 13–18 November 1995), reproduces the extensive list of television stations from across the globe that aired the entire opening ceremony for the Olympic Games in Barcelona. These included Channel 7 (Australia), TV Globo (Brazil), CRTV (Cameroon), CTV (Canada), TVA (Canada, French Language), Canal A

8. La Fura label 'literary matrix' any production whose starting point is a literary text.

fore, a simple and easily comprehensible narrative was sought, based on choreographing mass and objects.

The epic *Mar Mediterrània* enacted the combat between good and evil, between Hercules, a synonym for civilization and founder of mythical Barcelona, and the forces of ignorance, of disease and malevolence, personified by hydras, harpies and monstrous crabs. The generic format used was that of a *Naumaquia*, the Roman spectacle that filled amphitheatres with water to reproduce naval combats. In this instance, water was substituted by a texture of cloth weaving through the amphitheatre of the Olympic stadium. Hundreds of dancers wearing different shades of blue constructed a Gaudi-style mosaic representing the sea. Their synchronized movements (to the sound of Ryuichi Sakamoto's musical score) simulated waves. A giant mobile Hercules – founder of the city of Barcelona – carried by twenty actors, entered the Montjuïc Olympic stadium. This was an image of nature shaped by civilization (see Image 2). The performance also showed Hercules's fight against disease, ignorance and other malign forces which were embodied through different scenic machinery. A world away from the rhythmical gymnastics of Moscow (1980) or Seoul (1988) or the saccharine Disneyesque spectacle of Los Angeles (1984), La Fura dels Baus's project gave rise to a new referential aesthetic concept for the future by adding a fictional component to this type of ceremony.

L'Home del Mil·lenni (*Millennium Man*, 2000) was a public celebration in Barcelona's central square, Plaça Catalunya, designed to welcome the twenty-first century. This was a project for a techno-mythological celebration whose centrepiece was a giant built as a metallic case in the form of a human being. The engorging of the interior of the giant with a huge quantity of *castellers* built human towers up to nine levels high, based uniquely on the equilibrium of their individual components. Once inside the giant, the body of the *castellers* in traditional white costume became at the same time a surface, a living screen, where thousands of virtual beings were used to project images created by web surfers through the 'Active Worlds' programme and SMS messages sent through mobile phones. Connecting to La Fura dels Baus's webcam, it was possible to view the



Image 2 *Mar Mediterrània* (1992). The opening ceremony of Barcelona's 1992 Olympic Games. Photo: Andreu Adrover. Courtesy of La Fura dels Baus

ways in which email and other modes of telecommunication were shaping the development of the venture. From street theatre and the physical presence of the spectator, La Fura dels Baus moved to occupy a virtual realm where spectatorship came through tele-presence.

RETURNING TO 1992: A YEAR OF CHANGE

The great moment of expansion for the contemporary scene in Catalonia and Spain culminated in 1992 (Barcelona's Olympics, Seville's Expo 92 and Madrid's status as European Capital of Culture). With these events over, however, the contemporary creative scene was largely ignored by public institutions who favoured text-based products. The commercial initiatives of emerging businesses such as Focus and Anexa in Barcelona and Pentación in Madrid again served to prioritize directors and companies working within literary parameters. José Antonio Sánchez comments on some of the consequences emerging from this period. Many companies that had enjoyed strong institutional support in previous years either disappeared or experienced a substantial crisis: Albert Vidal went into voluntary exile to Mongolia and La Fura dels Baus changed direction after Marcel·li Antúnez left, adapting to the new theatrical climate.¹¹

(Colombia), Tele-R (Cuba), CCTV (China), ERTU2 (Egypt), TFI (France), ARD (Germany), RAI1 (Italy), NHK (Japan), MBC (Korea), Canal 13 (México), OS 1 (Russia), SABC (South Africa), TV2 (Spain), Canal Olímpic (Catalonia), BBC (UK).

11. José Antonio Sánchez, 'Génesis y contexto de la creación escénica contemporánea en España', in *Artes de la escena y de la acción en España: 1978–2002*, pp. 15–33 (p. 25).

Financial support from the Catalan parliament, the Generalitat, was certainly more generous than in other parts of Spain, and this allowed many creative artists with longstanding careers to continue working in medium- and large-scale venues. Els Joglars, through a growing public acceptance, gradually moved into the commercial sector at the same time as Comediants. For their part, La Fura dels Baus prioritized spectacle over ideology. Their research centred on the interdisciplinary and, from this perspective, their move into the world of opera served as an invigorating shot in the arm.

OPERA

The musical world of opera with its heightened vocal register implies a departure from naturalism. The rigid structures of Western music notation necessitate the translation of the imagined scene in the score (with a fixed *tempo*) into a spatial scenic performance. The Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art) solved it to an extent by pointing out that operatic staging means the development of a musical action that is visible. In this way, a sensual and autonomous world emerged onstage.

Through the 1980s operatic productions promoted electronic images that provoke novel and fascinating illusions. Robert Wilson, Laurie Anderson, Peter Greenaway, Julie Taymor, Carles Santos, all of them creators coming from performance art, architecture or cinema, have conceived opera as a quasi-scientific lab. Sophisticated technology allows for the projection of huge images and stereoscopic holograms on expansive revolving stages. Sophisticated lighting designs provide emotional atmospheres and extraordinary chromatic ranges, whilst the clarity of the scene on the stage gets closer to the world of the cinema. Within the challenge of balancing a solid dramaturgy and distinctive images with the musical discourse, La Fura dels Baus has discovered their own operatic style.

Alex Ollé and Carlos Padrissa's direction of La Fura dels Baus's work with opera has involved a productive collaboration with sculptor Jaume Plensa.¹² Their first project, *L'Atlàntida* (1996), an opera on the mythical continent sunk under

water, can also be read as a symbol for Republican Spain, destroyed by the Civil War. Indeed, the three artistic creators (score by Manuel de Falla, libretto in Catalan by Jacint Verdaguer and design sketches by the architect Josep Maria Sert) never saw the work completed.¹³

In *L'Atlàntida*, we find some stylistic details the group would return to in later productions: a single set in constant mutation; a symbolic chromatic range where whites predominate; vertical scenery (structured as a pictorial frontispiece); the inclusion, at a dramaturgical level, of a concrete architectural referent. For *L'Atlàntida* it was the façade of Granada's cathedral – Granada was Falla's home from 1921 until he went into self-imposed exile in 1939. For *D.Q.* (2000) the site was the popular Ramblas avenue in central Barcelona.

Debussy's *The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian* (1997) was first performed in Rome as an overt and richly allusive struggle between mysticism and carnality. Working with Plensa, filmmaker Manuel Huerga and video artist Frank Aleu, who established an extraordinary performance space projected on giant screens, replete with texts, arrows, bodies, flames, and viscous reptiles, the result was an intensely suggestive visual discourse, in line with the symbolist character of the score.

The immense space at the *Felsenreitschule* Festival in Salzburg was the setting for Berlioz's *The Damnation of Faust* in 1999. Faust was already an old friend for Ollé and Padrissa after *F@usto 3.0* and the combination of live on-stage action and internet participation of *Faust Shadow*, produced in Austria during the solar eclipse of August 1999. Faust is shown across all the pieces to be a totally contemporary character, permanently dissatisfied and disaffected. For *The Damnation of Faust* the company established a close link between the three main characters: Faust, Mephistopheles and Margarita, presenting them as three aspects of one single personality (see Image 3).

On the stage, the audience relived the solar eclipse, the moment of greatest 'faustic' anxiety,

He has been collaborating regularly with La Fura dels Baus since the early 1990s.

12. Living between Barcelona and Paris, Jaume Plensa (b. Barcelona, 1955) is well known for his large-scale works, for the use of industrial materials, like iron, and for a technological sophistication. He has exhibited in Salzburg, Brussels, Paris and London. Emblematic pieces include The Crown Fountain in Chicago's Millennium Park and The Sculpture of Light in the BBC building in central London.

13. The opera, written between 1930 and 1936, the year when the Spanish Civil War broke out, was plagued by disasters. Jacint Verdaguer (1845–1902), poet and priest as well as father of the contemporary Catalan language, was excommunicated whilst he was writing his epic poem *L'Atlàntida*. The composer Manuel de Falla (1876–1946) died in exile in Argentina without finishing the opera that was finally completed by his pupil Ernesto Halffter. The muralist Josep Maria Sert (1876–1945) saw his paintings at the Cathedral in Vic, his native town, destroyed in 1936.



Image 3 *The Damnation of Faust* (1999). The huge cylinder designed by Jaume Plensa dominated the expansive Salzburg stage. Photo: Ruth Walz, courtesy of La Fura dels Baus

linked from the start to the alchemical mystery and the passing of time. The aesthetic design closely evoked a nuclear power station; onstage a large cylinder was both a prop and a screen for projecting stereoscopic images. On the other hand, for this staging, La Fura dels Baus fully developed their concept of artistic chorale; hence, the choir, composed of more than a hundred members of the Orfeón Donostiarra, did not appear as a static mass or a last minute rehearsal idea, but as a dynamic element in the development of the performance.

D.Q. Don Quijote en Barcelona (2000) opened at Barcelona's Gran Teatro del Liceu. Here the challenge involved staging a new work with a score by José Luis Turina and libretto by Justo Navarro. For Carlos Padrissa the need to renovate opera's repertoire is fundamental to La Fura's understanding of performance:

Está muy bien que se modernicen y revisen, escénica y musicalmente, las óperas antiguas creadas por los grandes compositores clásicos. Pero hacen falta nuevas óperas. El arte evoluciona con las nuevas técnicas y con las nuevas realidades sociales. Con nuevas técnicas, nuevos instrumentos, nuevos sonidos. Con nuevas realidades sociales, nuevos estilos, nuevas maneras de interpretar con los viejos instrumentos, nuevas palabras, nuevas acciones y nuevas plásticas para expresar viejos sentimientos. Si

el Barroco tenía un tipo de ópera y de estilo que lo definía, ¿por qué no ahora? La nueva ópera requiere nuevos timbres, nuevos temas literarios, nuevos críticos y nuevos espectadores. ¿Qué pasa hoy en día? Ha nacido otro estatuto de creador: el ordenador, que puede componer, puede grabar, puede escribir, animar, editar fotografías, etc. Es un nuevo artista renacentista, multidisciplinar, que puede trabajar solo o en colectivo con otros artistas gracias a la red de Internet.¹⁴

(It is good that the old operas created by the great classical composers get modernized and revised both scenically and musically. But we need new operas. Art evolves with new techniques and with new social realities. New techniques bring new instruments, new sounds. New social realities bring new styles, new ways of playing with the old instruments, new words, new actions and new artistic mediums to express old sentiments. If the Baroque enjoyed one type of opera and style that defined it, why don't we? New opera requires new timbres, new literary themes, new critics and new spectators. What happens today? Another blueprint for the creator has been born: the computer that can compose, record, write, animate, photo edit, etc. It is the new Renaissance artist, multidisciplinary, working alone or as part of a collective with other artists thanks to the internet.)

In fact, the dissolution of the role of the individual creator took place in this opera. Many web surfers intervened in the musical composition through free FMOL software, writing short musical contributions lasting about twenty seconds. Turina selected about fifty from over three thousand that were received, which were included in the soundtrack and copyrighted by the SGAE (General Society of Spanish Authors). For this occasion, the group collaborated with the architects Enric Miralles and Benedetta Tagliabue on the set design, which was presided over by an enormous Zeppelin. They also worked with other regular collaborators such as robotic engineer Roland Olbeter, lighting designer Albert Faura and video artist Emmanuel Carlier. Many of the team, including Jaume Plensa, came together for Mozart's *The Magic Flute* (2005), which opened at Paris's Bastille opera house. The Fura-Plensa team also joined forces for the presentation of a double bill composed of a

14. Carlos Padrissa, 'Creación operística de La Fura dels Baus', in *Seminari d'escriptura dramàtica i dramaturgia escènica I/II* (Lleida: Edicions de la Universitat de Lleida, 2005), pp. 61–74 (p. 66).

cycle of orchestrated songs, *Diary of One Who Disappeared*, by Janáček, and the short opera *Bluebeard's Castle*, by Bartók, at the Opera Garnier in Paris (2007). Rather than see them as separate works, the staging offered an innovative fusion organized conceptually around gender politics.

It is unclear if the arrival of La Fura dels Baus in the opera world involved an increase in the number of spectators, with loyal audiences following the company to hallowed opera venues; or whether there was a shift in their audience base from the 'alternative' to the 'bourgeois'. Alex Ollé argues that:

Our theatre audience is not an opera audience, we're basically talking about two different collectives. Few people have carried out a complete study of our development. We don't think about it ourselves; our work with opera evolved almost organically, through our visual proposals, with artefacts, built in huge proportions. What did change was the issue of the noise produced by machines and inventions, even though in *The Damnation of Faust* music shared the stage with scenic noise produced by the large-scale artefacts sliding across the stage. In general terms, the opera audience continues to be pretty conservative and inflexible, although also very passionate.¹⁵

THE BODY AS IMAGE

The theatre of La Fura dels Baus is written through bodies rather than words. From its earliest days it has been distinguished by a sense of immediacy: impacting physical actions performed in a single space shared by actors and spectators. Both sets of bodies intersecting in the space provided a corporeal energy far removed from the frontiers established in traditional theatre. This was an aesthetic closer to the popular culture of *fiestas* and it thrived on the proximity of physical human contact.

The concept of intersubjectivity is central to La Fura dels Baus's ethos. It is not simply a question of responding to the aesthetic stimuli of the performance, but rather an opening up of the body to the energy of the collective. Their projects take the spectator very seriously, turning him/her into a co-participant. The festive, neo-ritualistic early productions were grounded in awarding the spectator the role of playful conspirator, alert and standing,

moving through the proposed actions. While spectators now sit through the productions in their comfortable stall seats, participation is still pervasive through SMS, texting and other technological gameplay. These resources/interactions either enhance or distort the discourse, as was the case at the start of *XXX* (2000).

The physical image of the Fura actors diversifies after *Noun* (1991), with the introduction of female performers, more explicit erotic iconography and technological inventions across the human body. In *Noun*, the group proposed a more voyeuristic attitude for the spectator that allowed him/her, in turn, to watch how the actors worked with numerous prostheses. In this way, the manipulation of various artefacts (such as the unwieldy sex machine handled by Jürgen Müller, the last founder-member of La Fura dels Baus to abandon performing with the company for an entirely 'backstage' role) made physical gesturing the centre of this show. The human clashed with the mechanical in ways that would be revived in *M.T.M.* (1994) or in *OBS* (2000).

For La Fura dels Baus, fantasy feeds more on science-fiction cinema, comic books, or the cybernetic world than on past theatrical traditions, and it presupposes the theatrical elevation of the inorganically permeable post-modern body, a hybrid between the human being and the machine. The figure of the *cyber* becomes popular in the 1990s through the Swiss illustrator H. R. Giger or performers such as Stelarc or ex-Fura member Marcel.li Antúnez. We should remember that the idea of body metamorphosis, frequently monster-like, is central to urbane cyber-culture, existing between the technophile and the technophobe. It is perhaps not surprising to observe here that one of the company's most recent shows is a version of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (2005).

M.T.M. was a bridge in its referencing of the technological treatment of the body, of the symbiosis between human and machine (see Image 4). One of the production's innovations is what may be termed multiple perspective narrative: the inclusion of instantaneous information, both casual and embarrassing, through cameras picking up fragments of the very performance in question. These images fused with others (coming from the other side of the wall that split the performance space), and with prerecorded images that the spectator witnessed happening around him/her. The end result intermingled real, simulated and virtual images. In *M.T.M.* La Fura dels Baus show an apotheosis in the fragmentation of the human body. Thus, deformed faces wearing dentistry

15. The interview with Àlex Ollé was carried out on 30 December 2006.



Image 4 *M.T.M.* (1994). The human body and the machine experience a symbiotic relationship. Photo: Gol, courtesy of La Fura dels Baus

apparatus, sinister objects of a pseudo-surgical nature resembling torture weaponry, appeared. In *M.T.M.* a teratogenic world begins to emerge. While grotesque, it is fully human, and it develops further in later shows such as *OBS* or *XXX*.

It is in *M.T.M.* where audiences witness screens flooded by hundred of anonymous bodies, bodies built into pyramids, humiliated bodies, pulsating, naked, partially profiled bodies, undulating profiles, animal-like bodies like worms, covered in mud or in oil. That fearful aerial image (filmed straight down) has been turned into one of the collective's most emblematic symbols, used across several shows, events and operas. This image of slithering, virtual bodies evoked the magic of the ephemeral. These are bodies that are created, modified and disappear amongst their companions, bodies strongly tied to our collective imagery. We also encounter a variant of these in Carlos Saura's film *Goya en Burdeos* (*Goya in Bordeaux*, 1999). Saura asked the company to collaborate on the film in staging the Aragonese painter's 'black' paintings.

Lately, La Fura dels Baus have presented another corporeal group image, this time live in *La Divina Comedia* (2002), with a single perfor-



Image 5 *La Divina Comedia* (2002). A net made of human bodies. Photo: Tilde de Tullio, courtesy of La Fura dels Baus

mance in the Plaza Pitti in Florence, in their show *Naumón* (2004), or re-enacted in the opening ceremony of the Mediterranean Games in Almería (2005). Here, we are dealing with a web of bodies, this time in frontal view, fully dressed in white, linked by hands and feet, of the same average height and hanging in the air: a truly human screen that takes us back to a more rational and acrobatic image of global humanity (see Image 5).

POST-PORNOGRAPHIC THEATRE

A ludic and narcissistic eroticism made its appearance in *Suz/o/Suz*, linked to the act of consumption (both material and emotional) and to ritual rivalry between men. José María Cortés discusses the importance of the mouth in primitive eroticism. The mouth is the facial orifice that best embodies orality and takes us back to the first estate of cannibal impulses, when ingesting food and erotic

desire become conflated.¹⁶ In the devouring of raw meat and the consumption of food across the bodies of the actors, there was a balance between gameplay and fight. The poetic scenery further reinforces this sense of an erotic 'phallocracy'.¹⁷

Without a doubt, one of the keys to the contemporary relevance of La Fura dels Baus has been its carnality, its scenic non-Platonic bodies. Contrasted with the civilized, unpolluted, clean and aseptic bodies of our information-technology saturated society, the group has opted for the sweat, saliva, mucus, skin, and blood of human existence. Theirs has been the aesthetic call of abjection, to appropriate Julia Kristeva's term.¹⁸ However, this eminently carnal vision, from *Noun* (1991) onwards, has alternated with and been complemented by the presence of the machine. Once again, we encounter that explosive combination between the atavistic and the technological. The machine appears in the group as an object that interacts with the human, that answers, executes and satisfies his/her desires. The machine is figuratively sodomized into complying with human orders.

But in *Noun*, where there is a certain amount of fetishism appearing between objects and bodies, we also discover a process of eroticism linked to technological pleasure, and thus responding to the most varied sexual fantasies. As Don Idhe points out: techno-fantasy bases itself in the intersection between technology and human desire, as much in a corporeal as in a social sense.¹⁹

For this reason, the appearance of digital technologies has given rise to new habits that have, as one of their most distinctive components, the eroticising effect of the gaze through voyeuristic practices. XXX could be defined as post-pornographic theatre; it exploits this voyeurism by making visual pleasure sophisticated and more diversified. The erotic scenes projected on the screens – some of a documentary nature and others

more stylized – were accompanied by dizzying amounts of theatrical prosthesis and onstage artefacts. The theatrical end-stage enhances the visual climax with different consumer formats. If in postmodernism the body is transformed into consumerist, controversial and conflictive territory, this is because it is frequently believed that the exterior (appearance) of the body is the being as such, both its business card and ID.²⁰ The characters of XXX rescue myths and images linked to western sexuality's masculine and heterosexual history (for example Sade, the expert teacher, the young debutante). The production flaunts the criteria of simulation as characteristic of the erotic (against the real act flaunted by pornographic works).

INTERACTIVE DRAMATURGY

La Fura dels Baus is one of the international theatre collectives that best exemplifies the move from the improvisational idea (also as a working methodology), so closely associated with the 1970s, to the concept of interactivity that became established in the 1990s. We must remember that the group emerged in 1979 through what is termed the independent theatre movement, associated with a rejection of hierarchy and a celebration of the collective.

During their early years, La Fura dels Baus worked on gathering materials around which they would improvise scenes according to an alternating method of rejection or acceptance. This was a democratic method that required a great deal of time for the development of each production. That is to say, the company members performed alternately as actors and spectators in a process of attuning the shows. This could last until well after their opening performances, with the fine-tuning taking place in response to audience reactions. This is the period they refer to as *lenguaje furero* (*fura* language). Later, La Fura dels Baus has moved towards a greater specialization of its members, although they still maintain teamwork as one of their organizing principles.

But if improvisation as methodology has almost disappeared, interactivity was developing as a working concept at the beginning of the 1990s. Interactivity is consolidated in their Manifesto for

16. José María Cortés, *Orden y caos. Un estudio cultural sobre lo monstruoso en el arte* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 1997), p. 69.

17. 'Our collective imagination is from the phallus and its accessory values of money, domination, exclusion and systematic violence.' Sadie Plant, *Zeros and Ones – Digital women + The New Technoculture* (London: Fourth State, 1997), p. 33.

18. For Julia Kristeva the abject comes to define that which is found in the physiological frontiers of the body and which provokes repulsion or disgust. The iconography of the abject conforms to liquids and substances shed by the body: blood, urine, semen, sweat. It is a desolate vision of the human condition through its corporeal degradation. See *Les Pouvoirs de l'horreur: un essai sur l'abjection* (Paris: Seuil, 1980).

19. Don Idhe, *Els cossos en la tecnologia* (Barcelona: Editorial UOC, 2004), p. 49.

20. See Leandre Duch and Joan Carles Mèlich, *Escenaris de la corporeïtat* (Barcelona: Publicacions de l'Abadia de Montserrat, 2003), p. 96.

Digital Theatre,²¹ marking the evolution and complementing earlier *fura* language. Digital theatre is, for La Fura dels Baus, a flexible equation between actors and the virtual realities of the technologies offered by the net. After 2001, the genetic concept of the stage (from the moment of conception of an idea to giving birth to it on the stage) has given way to an ordering of interactive and intercultural experiences. Digital theatre makes reference to a binary language relating the organic with the inorganic, the material with the virtual, the physical actor with the avatar, the live spectator with the web surfer. The binary theatre of La Fura dels Baus aims to break down the skin barrier, the classical distinction between actor and spectator, via technology, in the same way that in its *fura* stage it broke the barrier between stage and stalls.

On the other hand, La Fura dels Baus carried out an interactive experiment in *WIP2* towards the end of 1997. It consisted of performing a series of actions simultaneously in four European cities (Brussels, Freiberg, Girona and Tàrraga) through videoconferencing. Through this experiment, four possible types of spectator could be located: the one actively following the performance in his/her own city; the *fura* fan that accompanied the group in its venture; the probable virtual spectator present through videoconferencing; and, lastly, the web surfer that accessed the project through an interactive web page.

With regard to the websites, besides the company's official website (www.lafura.com), created in 1994, La Fura dels Baus have carried out several scenic experiences online. Perhaps, one of the most representative was the *Faust Shadow* (www.lafura.com/faust-shadow), coinciding with a solar eclipse that plunged several European and Asian cities into shadows on the 11 August 1999. After registering, the user who wished to become an actor/actress in this online performance chose an icon to symbolize him/her. Once on the website, several services could be chosen: informa-

tion about the very eclipse; about the various scenarios La Fura dels Baus were carrying out at that moment in Salzburg and Munich; or participation in a chatline where all the participant's icons were displayed.

The fact is that in cyberspace we are all authors, with the result that the basic distinction between author and spectator tends to get blurred. Time and space do not constitute any kind of restriction in cyberspace for the interchanging of information. Time and space are the basic stuff of theatre. It is not surprising, therefore, that analogies between theatre and cybernetics are often established.

Los ordenadores son un teatro. La tecnología interactiva, igual que el drama, nos proporciona una plataforma en la que podemos representar realidades coherentes [...] Hemos dedicado doscientos años de teoría y práctica teatral a fines muy parecidos a los de esa reciente disciplina del diseño de la interacción entre hombre y ordenador. Esa finalidad es la de la creación de realidades artificiales en las que el potencial de acción está cognitiva, emocional y estéticamente resaltado.²²

(A computer is a theatre. Interactive technology, like Drama, provides a platform on which we can perform coherent realities [...] We have dedicated two hundred years of theatrical theory and practice to achieve very similar results to those of the recent discipline of designing the interaction between man and computer. That final end is the creation of artificial realities in which the potential for action is cognitive, emotional and aesthetically enhanced.)

Furthermore, if we define theatre as a complex aesthetic machine, dedicated to the representation of the imaginary through action, the similarities increase further. La Fura dels Baus's journey demonstrates the possibilities of re-envisaging the stage's languages in a technological era where participation is always subject to redefinition.

21. Carlos Padrissa and Mercè Saumell, 'Teatro Digital', in the *D.Q. Don Quijote en Barcelona* programme of the Gran Teatre del Liceu, Barcelona, 2000–2001 season, pp. 151–152.

22. Brenda Laurel, quoted in Benjamín Woolley, *El universo virtual* (Madrid: Acento Editorial, 1994), p. 221.

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