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Sharon G. Feldman

It’s not a social phenomenon, it’s not a group, it’s not a political collective, it’s not a circle of allied friends, it’s not an association established for a cause. . . . It produces theatre through the constant interference between intuition and investigation. It’s experienced live. Each action represents a practical exercise, an aggressive performance against the passivity of the spectator, an intervention of impact designed to alter the relationship between him/her and the spectacle.

—La Fura dels Baus, “El manifest canalla”

Explosion at Sitges

In October 1983, just south of Barcelona at the annual Sitges Theatre Festival, beneath the railroad tracks in the claustrophobic space of a subterranean pedestrian passageway, La Fura dels Baus erupted into public view with an embryonic version of their first major spectacle, entitled Accions (“Actions”). The performance was conceived along the same aesthetic lines that continue to shape even the most recent work of this Catalan company. Accions consisted of a series of transgressive and, at times, startling exercisí pràctícs (“practical exercises”) intended to elicit an impulsive, visceral response from audience members. In their program notes, La Fura defined the performance as “a game without norms, a ball kicked right in the face, a noisy racket, a release of light and pyrotechnics; the best way of destroying a car, a sharp thud, a

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1 Partial funding for this essay was provided by grants from the Institut d’Estudis Catalans (Departament de Cultura, Generalitat de Catalunya), the General Research Fund of the University of Kansas, and the Hall Center for the Humanities. I wish to express my appreciation to Pablo Ley, Ricard Salvat, and La Fura dels Baus (especially “Miki” Espuma) for sharing with me their thoughts on the company’s creative endeavors.


brutal succession of hammer blows, a sonorous execution, a chain of limit-situations, a plastic transformation in an unusual area." Accions possessed a kind of organic, rough-cut, seams-showing quality reminiscent of the work of Catalan artist Antoni Tàpies. Like Tàpies’s “matter paintings,” which resemble walls made of earth and stone, La Fura’s Accions appeared to be in a constant state of construction or undoing. They reflected a desire to return to a primal, prelinguistic, “authentic” reality, beyond the constraints of representation and signification. La Fura began with an empty, undifferentiated space, uninhabited by theatrical ghostings, and there they endeavored to chisel, carve out, and constitute a scenic architecture through the use of organic and residual materials and their own physical, live presence. A hypnotic brand of avant-garde music played as nude male bodies seemed to emanate from out of nowhere, smeared with raw egg and flour, or covered with sand and mud. They hurled themselves into the crowd of spectators, frightening some and enthralling others. In one of the most visually impressive exercises, nude “chrysalid men” covered in plastic placentae were suspended from ropes and propelled toward a huge white canvas covered with bags of colored gelatinous paint. The pigments spewed across the canvas in an ironic recollection of the work of Jackson Pollock and Yves Klein. La Fura’s spectacle stressed the process (that is, the performance) over the final product; it presented theatre in the very act of becoming and in the act of fading away—what Catalan art critic Pere Salabert refers to in his own metaphysical discourse as “Self-destruction, disappearance. Ejaculatory discharge of that which is there—the world—in the pure making-spectacular of things.” When, near the end of Accions, a high-pressure hose was used to spray the canvas clean, La Fura’s body painting appeared to vanish in an instant, thereby evading commodification as a fixed and permanent work of art.

In another defining moment of the performance—one that roused a great deal of commentary from the press—members of the group, dressed in dark urban formal wear, demolished an entire automobile (a scrap of postindustrial refuse) with their
bare hands and an ax. At the end of Accions, the auto was ignited and enveloped in flames in a negative gesture of destruction which paralleled the disappearance of the painting. La Fura dels Baus, with their seemingly gratuitous and aleatory "actions" left a only a fugacious imprint on the empty space. The performers then disappeared into the undifferentiated chaos from where they were born. Like footprints on the beach immediately washed away by the tide, signs were rendered visible, and then they vanished, and with their vanishing and self-consumption, so too disappeared the possibility of reference. Each ritualized gesture was drained of meaning, for it was the spectacularity of the gesture itself that mattered.

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La Fura dels Baus emerged as a collective in 1979, during the period of political paradox, cultural renaissance, and frenetic activity that characterized Spain's post-Franco democratic transition. Since that time, they have evolved into one of Catalonia's most revered, provocative, and successful performance groups, having achieved an impressive range of international visibility and critical attention. La Fura's main body of work is composed of two trilogies: Accions (1983)–Suz/o/Suz (1985)–Tier Mon (1988) and Noun (1990)–M.T.M. (1994)–Manes (1996). These are ambitious, predominantly nonverbal, spectacles in which this so-called "urban tribe" employs a multimedia aesthetic of collage in presenting its delirious obsessions. The plastic arts, dance, mime, elaborate sadistic-looking machinery, nude bodies performing impressive feats of athleticism, live music, video, mobile sculptures, recycled materials, slide and laser projections, and pyrotechnics are just some of the elements embraced by La Fura's radically-extended concept of mise en scène.

If there is one obsession that flows through all La Fura's work, it is a fascination with the rapport between the human being and his or her postindustrial surroundings. In a process that begins with Accions and culminates with M.T.M., those who attend La Fura's spectacles are implicitly asked to contemplate their roles in a visually-oriented culture in which the intervention of technology leads to a problematic search for authenticity. Within the context of theatrical performance, this search is played out as a desire for unmediated experience, an echo of Antonin Artaud's influential struggle

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9 Accions was seen by approximately 76,000 spectators and was performed a total of 143 times (an equal number of automobiles were smashed). See Gozalo Pérez de Olaguer, "Nuevo espectáculo de los autores de M.T.M.,” El Periódico de Catalunya, 1 December 1996, espectáculos, Internet edition.

10 Many television spectators still recall La Fura’s presentation of Mar Mediterrania ("Mediterranean Sea") at the opening ceremony of the 1992 Olympic Games in Barcelona. The performance, featuring music by Japanese composer Ryuichi Sakamoto, presented an allegorical battle in which a giant phantasmagoric hydra engaged in a struggle against progress and civilization (Saumell, "Performance Groups in Catalonia," 122–23). La Fura’s participation in June 1996 in the annual Granada Festival of Music and Dance marked the beginning of their experiments with opera. In front of Granada’s baroque cathedral, they staged a contemporary interpretation of Manuel de Falla’s seldom-performed operatic poem Atlántida (1927). More than two hundred performers, singers, and musicians intervened in this production which used computerized projections and video images intended to conjure for the audience the sensation of being immersed in the sea among the lost civilization of Atlantis. La Fura presented its second operatic production, Claude Debussy and Gabriel d’Annunzio’s Martyrdom of St. Sebastian, in 1997 with Spanish pop singer Miguel Bosé in one of the lead roles. The company is scheduled to premiere its version of Hector Berlioz’s The Damnation of Faust at the Salzburg Festival in 1999 with the collaboration of Catalan sculptor Jaume Plensa.
against logocentrism, textual authority and the notions of repetition and representation that are embodied in this struggle.\textsuperscript{11} The presence in \textit{Accions} of the live nude body, stripped of theatrical attire and makeup, is perhaps the most vivid expression of this thirst for authenticity, for the real, for immediacy. Nothing is hidden. The performer does not conceal himself behind the mask of a dramatic personage; rather, everything is plainly visible, uncovered beneath the spectator’s gaze.\textsuperscript{12} Salabert aptly equates La Fura’s overexposure with the Baudrillardean concept of obscenity, calling it “brutal,” even “hair-raising.”\textsuperscript{13} In describing the nonreferential landscape of simulation, Jean Baudrillard tells us that “obscenity begins precisely when . . . all becomes transparence and immediate visibility” and that, “the obscene puts an end to every representation.”\textsuperscript{14} To violate the binary logic of theatrical representation is, for La Fura, to return to primordial origins, to a prediscursive space of silence that can only exist here and now. If, as La Fura dels Baus seem to suggest, we can locate a place where representation is completely denied, then we will have uncovered the real: pure presence in its most untainted state and a place where theatre truly does equal life.

It is likely that the foregoing description of La Fura’s work may elicit certain pangs of theatrical déjà vu, for, as Roger Copeland reminds us, the concern with authenticity and “living presence” is certainly not a new or revolutionary concept; it is a notion that “has always been sacred to the theatre—and never more so than during the 1960s,” when it evolved into a kind of vanguardist obsession.\textsuperscript{15} This preoccupation with the “metaphysics of presence,” as Marvin Carlson would have it,\textsuperscript{16} underpinned by a longing for unmediated experience, has evolved into a widely disputed issue. Poststructuralist theory—particularly Jacques Derrida’s deconstructive readings of Artaud, as well as the work of Herbert Blau and Baudrillard—has already cast several layers of doubt upon the idealistic claims to theatrical immediacy that emerged in Europe during the first half of the twentieth century (futurism, Dada, surrealism, Bauhaus) and persisted on both sides of the Atlantic throughout the 1960s and 1970s in the work of performance groups such as The Living Theatre and the Théâtre du Soleil. As Blau observes, the quest for unmediated experience will forever remain unfulfilled: “there is something in the very nature of performance which, like the repeated spool of the \textit{fort-da} (Krapp’s extrapolated spool), implies \textit{no first time}, no origin, but only recurrence and reproduction, whether improvised or ritualized, rehearsed or aleatoric.”\textsuperscript{17}

Each performance, he maintains, exists in a “space of amortization”; that is, “\textit{on borrowed time},” imbedded within a cultural or institutional frame that has been

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\textsuperscript{12} Referring to the basic features of any Happening, Michael Kirby employs the term “nonmatrixed performing” to describe performances where the “actor” does not create or project “an artificial context of personality.” See “Happenings: An Introduction,” in \textit{Happenings and Other Acts}, ed. Mariellen R. Sanford (New York: Routledge, 1955), 7.

\textsuperscript{13} “Epifanías,” 5–8.


\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Theories of the Theatre} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 514.

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{The Eye of Prey: Subversions of the Postmodern} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 171.
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established a priori.18 Attacking the problem from a phenomenological standpoint, Stanton Garner conceives theatrical presence as an oscillating play of perceptual levels, whereby "actuality" alternates with, and even "infiltrates," illusion, but does not replace it: "the theatrical mode of this presence, or givenness, is oriented in terms of an experiential actuality that transgresses (while never fully erasing) the boundaries between 'is' and 'as if.'"19 La Fura's performances repeatedly attempt to rupture and confound this alternation between the actual and the virtual.

When considering La Fura dels Baus, one might, therefore, be understandably inclined to view their less than subtle aesthetic allusions to the polemical notion of theatrical presence as a rather belated, or even epigonic, manifestation of the type of experimentation that characterized the 1960s' and 1970s' avant-gardes (Happenings, "environmental" theatre, "immediate" theatre, "radical" theatre). So, how does one begin to account for the presence in contemporary Catalonia (and, by extension, contemporary Spain) of this seemingly belated aesthetic? And, moreover, what are the cultural and political implications of its existence? In order to address these questions, it is necessary to backtrack several decades, to the Catalan and Spanish cultural contexts that set the stage for La Fura's work. On the one hand, La Fura's appearance during the period of Spain's democratic transition can be perceived as a response to the release of political and cultural oppression following the demise of the Franco dictatorship in 1975. The company is, in effect, a key player in a new generation of grups, troupes, and col-lectius that has been able to blossom in Catalonia with the freedom and opportunities garnered during the democratic period. However, it is also essential to bear in mind that these groups did not spring forth from a cultural void, but that they represent the culmination of a long-standing trajectory of experimental theatre in Catalonia. In the pages that follow, I shall offer a descriptive account of the cultural and historical circumstances that gave rise to La Fura's emergence in post-Franco Spain, highlighting their historic-aesthetic connections with the independent theatre movement, artist/poet/playwright Joan Brossa, the culture of the movida, and the European avant-gardes of the first half of the twentieth century. I shall then turn my attention to La Fura's artistic trajectory subsequent to Accions in order to demonstrate how the company's preoccupation with authenticity is symptomatic of a desire to return to essential origins as well as a contemporary anxiety concerning the aestheticization and spectacularization of reality. La Fura's performances are situated in a space of temporal flux: between a past that reveals itself through primitive ritual (an allusion to the company's Catalan-Mediterranean origins), and a future that is portrayed through mediated visions of a high-tech globally-oriented Europe. Their spectacles thus paint an emblematic portrait of Spain during a time in which unstable identities are in constant motion, competing in an ongoing struggle for legitimacy.

La Fura: Heir Apparent to the Independent Theatre Movement

Although the stifling censorship practices of the Franco regime undoubtedly left a lasting imprint upon the development of theatre and performance in contemporary Spain, theatre practitioners during the post–Civil War period did not find themselves

18 Ibid., 170.
thoroughly deprived of opportunities for experimentation. It is a fact rarely underscored by Spanish and European theatre historians, but totalitarian Spain did experience its own theatrical avant-garde, which paralleled and was strongly influenced by the activities of internationally acclaimed groups such as the Living Theatre, the San Francisco Mime Troupe, and Bread and Puppet. Beginning in the 1950s, the Spanish theatrical landscape witnessed the genesis of a variety of communitarian performance troupes conceived as nonofficial and nonprofessional alternatives to government-subsidized theatre. These so-called “independent” theatre groups—Els Joglars and Comedians in Catalonia, Tábano and Los Goliatos in Madrid, Akelarre in the Basque Region, and La Cuadra of Seville are some well-known examples—engaged in their own explorations of the implications of collective creation.20 Linguistic censorship appeared to encourage the independent theatre’s prevailing interest in nontextual, gestural, pantomimic forms of performance. For discerning spectators who were able to read between the lines, silence became just as powerful a strategy of political protest and social commitment as the spoken word.

In Catalonia, where the Catalan language was, and still is, a driving cultural force, the issue of freedom of expression inevitably intertwined with the question of affirming a Catalan cultural identity. The Franco regime’s privileging of theatre in Castilian Spanish significantly mitigated the activities of the professional Catalan stage—so much so that by the 1950s, according to Enric Gallen, Barcelona’s professional theatre scene was in a lamentable state, aesthetically antiquated and exceedingly dull.21 The performance of translations was largely prohibited, and plays could be presented in Catalan only at a few locales. The most progressive members of the Catalan theatre scene, consequently, were propelled toward either self-imposed exile or nonprofessional alternative environments in which they could explore experimental modes of performance. While there were limitations to the number of times a play could be performed in public, this was a rule that at least carried the positive effect of encouraging an array of productions. It also stimulated the proliferation of itinerant theatre companies.22

In 1956, director Ricard Salvat, Miquel Porter, and Elena Estellés created an experimental group known as the Teatre Viu (“Living Theatre”). Much of the work of the Teatre Viu was developed within an improvisational environment in which participants drew upon the methods of pantomime and gesture of Jean-Louis Barrault. Eventually, the Teatre Viu established ties with the Agrupació Dramàtica de Barcelona (ADB), whose central aim was “to revive artistic and social interest so as to enable Catalan theatre to relate once more to the dominant currents of contemporary foreign theatre.”23 Additionally, the ADB took on the task of promoting and publishing plays by several avant-garde Catalan authors who were unable to integrate themselves into

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20 One of the most comprehensive sources of information documenting Spain’s independent theatre movement is Alberto Fernández Torres, ed., Documentos sobre el teatro independiente español (Madrid: Ministerio de Cultura/Centro Nacional de Nuevas Tendencias Escénicas, 1987).
22 See Eugene van Erven for a discussion of the Ministry of Information and Tourism’s law regulating non-commercial theatre activities, Radical People’s Theatre (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 146–47.
the paradigm of the commercial mainstream. One of these marginalized authors was Joan Brossa, a highly innovative and prolific visual artist, poet, and playwright, who has left a decisive mark on the evolution of the Catalan vanguard during the second half of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{24} It was not until after Franco’s death that Brossa’s works were staged with any sort of normalcy, and even today, they are rarely staged at Barcelona’s most “grandiloquent” venues.

With an affinity for satire and a fascination with Catalan culture, Brossa has appropriated and integrated a variety of popular and paratheatrical forms of entertainment into his interdisciplinary theatre pieces. The \textit{commedia dell’arte}, the music hall, strip tease, circus, magic shows, mime, vaudeville, and carnival regularly cross paths in his spectacles, which are often purely visual, brief, and minimalist. Since the late 1940s, he has experimented with hybrid artistic configurations, such as collages, installations, and performance art, and has even invented his own lexicon to describe his work in these genres, which in many ways anticipates La Fura’s performance style: \textit{poesia visual (“visual poetry”), accions espectacle (“spectacle actions”), posttheatre (“post-theatre”), accions musicales (“musical actions”), fregolismes (monologues whose name pays homage to the famous Italian transformist Leopoldo Fregoli), and poesia escènica (“scenic poetry”).} David George and John London categorize much of this work as “quasi-happenings \textit{avant la lettre},” which rely strongly on the physical intervention of the audience.\textsuperscript{25} In Barcelona, in 1963, a government decree dissolved the ADB following a performance of Brecht’s \textit{Three Penny Opera}. However, in 1960, Salvat and Maria Aurelia Capmany had already created the Escola d’Art Dramàtic Adrià Gual (EADAG), a school that would serve as a cradle for the most innovative Catalan theatrical activity. By the time the EADAG closed its doors in 1976, this school had played a substantial role in training the most outstanding members of Catalonia’s independent theatre movement.

Concurrent with the evolution of the Teatre Viu, the ADB, and the EADAG was a growing interest among Catalan performers in mime and pantomime—especially the work of Italo Riccardi of Chile and Jacques Lecoq of France. For these artists, nonverbal communication, in effect, became an implicit affirmation of Catalan cultural identity in that it signified a refusal to yield to the omnipotent authority of the Castilian Spanish language. If they could not speak their own language, better not to speak at all. Thus, in their quest for freedom of expression, the early participants in the Catalan independent theatre movement not only found it necessary to turn their backs on Barcelona’s lethargic professional stage, but also felt obliged to look away from Madrid, away from the symbolic center of the dominant Castilian culture and the Franco regime. Instead, they would look outward, toward Europe, in a gesture that Catalan artists and writers had been known to perform for centuries. It is possible, therefore, to distinguish a direct rapport between the suppression of the Catalan language and culture and the growth and vitality of Barcelona’s independent theatre.

With Franco’s death in 1975 and the subsequent transition to democracy in Spain, the majority of the independent theatre troupes were forced to examine their \textit{raison

\textsuperscript{24} David George and John London offer detailed descriptions of Brossa’s works in “Avant-Garde Drama,” in \textit{Contemporary Catalan Theatre: An Introduction}, 73–83.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 81.
when their main cause for rebellion had suddenly ceased to exist. While this crisis occasioned the demise of many troupes, the legacy of the Spanish independent theatre movement continues to be felt in the 1990s, especially in Catalonia, where economic potency and political authority accumulated during post-Franco democratic times have served to reinforce a strong sense of cultural identity. A crucial cluster of Catalan companies—Els Joglars, Comediantes, Dagoll Dagom, El Teatre Lliure—that originated in the margins of Francoist oppression and censorship—continues to thrive today, having achieved commercial success in post-dictatorial times. These groups essentially paved the way for the appearance of the new generation of Catalan companies that includes La Fura dels Baus. Established during the late 1970s and 1980s, La Cubana, Sèmola, El Tricicle, VolRas, and Zotal are some of the other groups whose names, like that of La Fura, have begun to resonate far beyond the borders of Catalonia and Spain in places such as Edinburgh, New York, and Buenos Aires. La Fura dels Baus is thus a product of the creative momentum that continues to emanate from a tradition of Catalan performance and collective creation spanning more than three decades. It is a tradition that corroborates the historical significance of the independent theatre movement as a source of innovation and renovation, not only within the context of Catalonia, but also within the broader sphere of Spain and the contemporary European stage.

After decades of fascist suppression, the Catalan culture and language are today as energetic as ever, and, ironically, the economic stability and vitality that many of the above-cited companies now enjoy is, in part, attributable to the fact that they no longer subsist outside the boundaries of institutional support. Most of them, including La Fura dels Baus, now receive subsidies on an annual basis from Spain’s central government, as well as the Autonomous Government of Catalonia (the Generalitat). Hence, while Franco’s death eventually occasioned the end of official censorship, it did not bring an end to the strong ties existing between politics and theatre in Spain.

The Partido Socialista Obrero Español (“Spanish Socialist Workers Party,” or PSOE), which dominated the central government from 1982 to 1996 (led by then-President Felipe González), authorized a significant increase in the amount of public subsidies for the theatre and the arts in general. However, as María-José Ragué-Arias pessimistically asserts, “the State has been converted into the principal theatre impresario, and the control of public subventions appears to have replaced Francoist censorship.”

As early as 1979, the year of La Fura’s establishment, the Barcelona theatre scene was already immersed in a series of polemical debates surrounding the institutionalization of Catalan art and culture, the distribution of public funding for the arts, and

27 In 1977, the prohibition of El Joglars’s spectacle La torna led to the incarceration of several company members, converting them into heroic emblems of the battle for freedom of expression during the democratic transition.
28 El teatro de fin de milenio (Barcelona: Ariel, 1996), 114.
the hazy boundaries separating the public and private theatre sectors. The conception and creation of the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya (TNC) became a particularly contentious site of debate. The sixty-million-dollar postmodern edifice, designed by Ricardo Bofill and funded by the right-centrist Generalitat, was officially inaugurated in September 1997; however, controversies surrounding this theatre’s political, fiscal, and cultural agendas still have not abated. In April 1998, La Fura dels Baus were invited to premiere their most recent work, F@ust versió 3.0, at the TNC. The production was backed not only by public institutions (such as Spain’s central government, the Generalitat, and the CDN) but also private corporations (such as Mercedes-Benz, Iberia, and Freixenet). The setting and situation surrounding this production were certainly a far cry from La Fura’s early days at Sitges, and perhaps a sign that in present-day Barcelona, there is a growing phenomenon of crossover between the alternative theatre scene and the mainstream.

La Fura and la Movida

“Rapid,” “abrupt,” “frantic,” and “vertiginous” are just some of the adjectives used to describe the accelerated pace of cultural, political, social, and economic change occurring in Spain following Franco’s death. As Rosa Montero, a highly regarded journalist and fiction writer, has observed, contemporary Spain is “a country of extremes,” of absurd juxtapositions that result from the coexistence of “a very old society and a very young democracy.” If the prevailing sentiment was, in effect, that things had changed overnight, there was also a lingering feeling in the air that they could just as easily change once again. Both the fragility and strength of this young democracy were all the more apparent on 23 February 1981, when Lieutenant Coronal Antonio Tejero Molina, with the support of two hundred Civil Guards, burst into a meeting of the Spanish congress in an attempted coup that was captured by television cameras and broadcast throughout Spain. King Juan Carlos I shrewdly and expeditiously intervened in favor of democracy in a gesture that, for the moment, seemed to dispel further suspicions of governmental instability. During these later years of the democratic transition (1979–1982), the period in which La Fura dels Baus made their debut, many members of the political left, who in dictatorial times had ideologically engaged in anti-Francoist activism, found themselves increasingly disillusioned with the realities of the democratic system. If some appeared to undergo a crisis of political identity as they searched for a new cause célèbre, their attitude of desencanto—or “disenchantment,” as it is widely known—was also a concrete reaction to heavy unemployment, frivolous government expenditures, increasing accumulation of state and personal debt, and escalating corruption and scandals.

29 1979 was the year actor/director Josep Maria Flotats first approached the President of the Generalitat de Catalunya, Jordi Pujol, and his then Minister of Culture, Max Cahner, and proposed the idea of creating a National Theatre of Catalonia. See Josep Maria Flotats, Un projecte per al teatre nacional (Barcelona: Edicions de la Revista de Catalunya, 1989).


Paradoxically, this period of disenchantment was also a time of innovative artistic undertakings. As an authoritarian/Catholic Spain of the past continued to hover in the background, a new cultural vanguard, composed primarily of artists born in the 1950s and 1960s, moved away from the fringe and into the foreground. They were members of a young “democratic” generation, armed with newly acquired political and cultural freedoms and a hedonistic desire to live in the European present. This ebullient eruption of creativity, which some even refer to as a cultural “movement” and others brand as a distinctly Spanish strain of postmodernism, was aptly designated la movida (the term was borrowed from the drug culture, which used it to refer to the acquisition of hashish—as in, “irse de movida”).32 Since its original epicenter was located in Madrid, the term movida madrileña began to ring in people’s ears. Although the atmosphere of indulgence and permissiveness that characterized this period was also strongly prone to a decadent underside, with increased drug abuse and the spread of AIDS, the movida is often remembered in rather idealistic terms as a celebration of freedom of expression—artistic, sexual, linguistic— which at times resembled the countercultural movements of the 1960s. (Political apathy, rather than turbulence, however, was most often the trend.) A euphoric, sybaritic kind of energy quickly infiltrated Spain’s urban cultural life, especially that of Madrid and Barcelona, leaving its imprint on literature, theatre, performance, music, film, fashion, art, and design.33

During the fall of 1984 and summer of 1985, La Fura dels Baus traveled to Madrid with financial support from this city’s municipal government (ironically, they had yet to receive support from the Generalitat). The company was enthusiastically embraced by the movida madrileña. The youth culture of Madrid was excited and mesmerized by La Fura’s “actions,” which were perceived as a welcome, avant-garde alternative to the more traditional bourgeois-commercial offerings that had dominated the Spanish stage for decades. In effect, La Fura dels Baus seemed to speak, and epitomize, the countercultural language of the movida. There were even some spectators who perceived in the group’s ritualistic vandalism of the automobile a cathartic sacrificial spectacle designed to banish corruption, bourgeois consumerism, and conspicuous consumption from Spain’s contemporary society.34

“What’s in a name?”

If many critics and spectators have found themselves perplexed by La Fura’s work—the group’s enigmatic relationship with the press is bound to have contributed to the confusion—it is only natural that one would first look to the company’s name for salient clues. It is a name that has been twisted and tortured by many a theatre critic. “La Fura” literally means “ferret” in Catalan, while the Baus is a reference to a

32 See Emma Dent Coad, “Designer Culture in the 1980s: The Price of Success” in Spanish Cultural Studies: An Introduction, 376–80. According to Dent Coad, the term movida was an invention of “one of the hundreds of foreign ‘style’ journalists” (377).
33 Some central cultural icons associated with the movida style include filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar and his coterie of actors; fashion designers Adolfo Domínguez, Sybilla, and Agatha Ruiz de la Prada; musical groups La Unión, Radio Futura, and Alaska y los Pegamoides; painter Guillermo Pérez Villalta; playwrights Fermín Cabal and Jose Luis Alonso de Santos; and Barcelona architects/designers Fernando Amat and Javier Mariscal.
34 On La Fura’s experience in Madrid, see Albert de la Torre, La Fura dels Baus (Barcelona: Alter Piene, 1992), 55–56.
ravine, now dry, that once ran through the provincial town of Moià, the birthplace of the company's three founding members. (A British theatre critic once rendered his English version of the name as "Vermin of the Sewers."35) However, as Albert de la Torre points out, the name holds more significance in terms of its poetic and onomatopoeic value than its literal meaning—a fact that is substantiated by an offhand remark made by an anonymous member of the troupe: "I don't know; we like it. It sounds good, doesn't it? And besides, for someone 'in the know,' it should suggest something along the lines of 'Bauhaus' or 'Pina Bausch.'"36 It may have been an offhand comment, but the allusion to Bauhaus and Bausch is not just a reflection of La Fura's slick cosmopolitanism and international "consciousness"; more significantly, the commentary is evocative of the company's theoretical ties with the European avant-garde modes of performance historically rooted in first half of the twentieth century—concretely, the experimental work of the Bauhaus, Artaud, Dada, the futurists, and the surrealists. The futuristic theatre projects of the Bauhaus school of design of the 1920s anticipated and even paved the way for La Fura's conception of spectacle as an organic synthesis of a rich variety of artistic and audiovisual modes of expression. In their experimental formulations of a "total theatre," members of the Bauhaus advocated the creation of multidisciplinary fusions of color, light, space, surface, movement, sound, and the body. They conceived global spectacles that attempted to portray the hallucinatory transformations of the human experience occurring within the context of a modern, mechanized, urban, industrial landscape. In a parallel manner, the Catalan term that La Fura regularly employs to describe their eclectic language is espectacle integral.

The function of the audience in La Fura's spectacles is intensely participatory, and the spectator often has the sensation of being plunged into a barrage of activity. Coinciding with Richard Schechner's concept of an "environmental theatre," La Fura's performances tend to appropriate alternative, "found" spaces, uncontaminated by theatrical connotations, so that the spectacle itself is able to enter into a dialog with its respective surroundings. Accordingly, La Fura dels Baus have chosen to perform in venues such as the KGB nightclub in Barcelona, the historic Barcelona shipyards (les Drassanes), a fish market and a funeral home in Madrid, and a basketball arena in the working-class Barcelona fringe town of L'Hospitalet de Llobregat.37 Recalling Dadaist performance experiments of the early part of this century, as well as Happenings of the 1960s, audience members find themselves compelled to negotiate not only the appearance of meaning, but also the environment in which they find themselves immersed. La Fura's spectacles appear to materialize gradually as part of a never-ending and never-beginning organic process. They are conceived as organic entities that gush forth from an indeterminate chaos, their timing and rhythm being improvisationally determined by the spontaneous perception and reception of the audience. The spectators are manipulated throughout the performance space, obliged to mingle with the performers and set design, and to evolve with them. In Manes, for example,

36 La Fura dels Baus, 27–28.
37 La Fura's recent operatic productions, as well as their re-creation of Goethe's dramatic poem which they title F@ust versio 3.0 [reviewed in this issue of Theatre Journal, ed.], represent the company's only experiments with a proscenium-arch stage design.
burning torches and water are used to move the crowd of spectators toward strategic locations and condition their responses.

La Fura’s works, in effect, are underpinned by a search for a mystical alliance between performer and spectator, such as that envisioned by Artaud, whereby the audience has the impression of being immersed in a total, secondary reality. The ritualistic violence of the theatre event would, as Artaud reminds us, dissolve all boundaries of distinction between text and representation, actor and spectator, thereby thrusting the audience into a jarring, transformative experience. As La Fura’s musical director “Miki” Espuma affirms, the group’s aesthetic intentions, of Artaudian inspiration, are designed to stir up a visceral rather than cerebral reaction. Music, which has a central function in each spectacle, is, according to Espuma, endowed with the capacity to incite a wide range of bodily/physical responses. La Fura’s Artaudian approach leaves the spectator no room for critical distance, no time to ponder fully the implications of what one is seeing. Rather than emerge during the course of the performance, meaning often slips away, only to be awakened retrospectively in the hours or days that follow the performance. Francesc Cerezo points out in his analysis of Accions that this experience of deferred meaning is equally applicable to La Fura’s creative process. Even for the performers themselves, Cerezo observes, “the rationalization-intellectualization of the spectacle appeared at a point in time that was significantly posterior to the realization.”

The Bauhaus conception of total theatre, the cubist/futurist/surrealist collage aesthetic, and Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty were among the many reflections of the vanguard’s disavowal of a rationally determined relationship between sign and referent, of an objective representation of reality, and of the historical and collective consciousness attached to that reality. Collage was one way of creating what Eduardo Subirats calls a “secondary” reality, which could displace and even “liquidate” the real, a surrogate spectacular world composed of decontextualized and recontextualized images. In the spirit of the avant-garde concepts of total art and collage, La Fura’s aesthetic embraces a historically familiar, symbolic language of the Mediterranean spectacle, of the popular pagan rituals of Catalonia that were revived during the democratic transition as part of an open assertion of cultural identity and even nationalism. La Fura’s appropriations of this Mediterranean language, in effect, can be traced to the company’s origins in rural Catalonia (in the aforementioned town of Moià), where founding members Marcel-li Antúnez, Carlos Padrissa, and Pere Tantiñá embarked upon their artistic trajectory in the late 1970s. These three childhood friends (Antúnez, with training in the plastic arts; Padrissa, in musical composition; and Tantiñá, in carpentry) began as harlequinesque street performers, taking part in traditional town processions known as cercaviles or pasacalles. These processions and

38 The Theatre of Cruelty, as Artaud described, “proposes to resort to a mass spectacle; to seek in the agitation of tremendous masses, convulsed and hurled against each other, a little of that poetry of festivals and crowds when, all too rarely nowadays, the people pour out into the streets,” The Theater and its Double (New York: Grove, 1958), 85.
39 “Miki” Espuma, personal interview, 6 July 1995. Espuma acknowledged that he and several other members of La Fura have been avid readers of Artaud.
40 “Accions i La Fura dels Baus,” 62.
41 Linterna mágica: Vanguardia, media y cultura tardomoderna (Madrid: Siruela, 1997), 189.
festivities, which in some cases have become intertwined with the traditions and iconography of Spanish Catholicism, typically incorporate symbolic elements (fire, water, earth, blood, sea, and sand), as well as fire-breathing dragons and other mythic beasts, devils, performers on stilts, and *gigants* (giant figures made of papier-mâché and/or fiberglass). They carry powerful carnivalesque connotations of anarchy and inversion, as well as sacred connotations of sacrifice and renewal that are deeply entrenched in the cultural fabric of this part of Spain. The *correfoc*, for example, is a ceremonial rite of purification often performed around the time of the summer solstice, in which fire-breathing dragons and devils are paraded through village streets, their final destination being a large bonfire in the town square.

Inspired by these Mediterranean/Catalan traditions, as well as the itinerant tradition of the commedia dell’arte, La Fura dels Baus left Moià and took their show on the road with a horse and pull-cart. Like their predecessors Els Joglars and Comediants, the original members of La Fura were determined to avoid the pitfalls of provincialism and superficial folklorism. Accordingly, their journey eventually landed them in metropolitan Barcelona, where they were able to seek the contributions of urban artists whose backgrounds and training were extremely varied and multidisciplinary. The company is presently composed of seven principal creators: Padrissa, Tantitñá, “Miki” Espuma, Pep Gatell, “Hansel” Cereza, Jürgen Muller, and Àlex Ollé. (Antúnez has since left the group, but continues to work as a performance artist.) Today, additional performers (male and female), musicians, and technicians from Spain and other parts of Europe regularly collaborate in La Fura’s productions, making this the most transnational of Catalan companies: they now have multiple touring groups that simultaneously circle the globe and feature a multinational roster of artists from France, Belgium, Germany, Morocco, Italy, and Portugal, as well as Spain.\(^{42}\) The company has also begun to experiment with the possibility of performance via Internet.

**After Accions or A Return to Essential Origins**

Baudrillard and others have repeatedly described contemporary culture as a delirious, hallucinatory experience that places us in contact with a virtual reality: an aestheticized, theatricalized representation of the world. This spectacularization of the real has only intensified during the latter half of this century with the augmentation of electronic mass media and the technological saturation of information. Subirats, correspondingly, speaks of the curious blend of fascination and fear, anguish and enthusiasm, surrounding the contemporary creation of “new electronically defined social and cultural frontiers.”\(^{43}\) Reality is not just conceived as spectacle, but is displaced, even “liquidated,” in favor of illusion.

Forced to confront an overabundance of new communicative media, many avant-garde artists, from the postwar period on, have felt a need to search for a type of art

\(^{42}\) La Fura enjoys an especially large following in Germany, Italy, France, Holland, Austria, Argentina, and Brazil and has performed in these countries often. Their visits to the United States, in contrast, have been much less frequent, in part because of the difficulties in adapting their performance strategies to building codes and safety protocols. In June 1991, the company presented *Suz/o/Suz* in Astoria, Queens, and in July 1998 it presented *F@ust versio 3.0* at the Lincoln Center Festival.

\(^{43}\) *Linterna mágica*, 123.
that would liberate them from the tainted, adulterated, and embellished versions of reality that characterized their contemporary experience. A certain nostalgia for the archaic, a return to myths and to a primitive iconography, a recovery of essential truths uncontaminated by civilization are aesthetic practices that represent a move away from rationalization, (post)industrialization, and spectacularization. In the work of Antoni Tàpies, it is possible to perceive a pictorial rendition that anticipates and coincides with the aesthetic practices of La Fura dels Baus. In addition, Tàpies’s personal observations are equally illuminating when viewed alongside La Fura’s creative endeavors. Referring to a series of works he created between 1946 and 1947, Tàpies describes the “air of primitivism” with which he struggled to imbue his paintings: “I did a series of collages using soiled papers, cardboard marked with crosses, pasted-down thread, the scrapings and peelings of ordinary materials, of burned wood, etc. . . I was truly repulsed by anything that might seem derived, as Cassanyes put it from *homo faber*, the human being who was industrious, vulgar and materialistic in the worst sense of the word.”44 Later, in his study of “progressive” and “modern” art, Tàpies comments: “If today we are touched by certain prehistoric drawings, by the shapes of some African masks, by certain carvings in Polynesian ritual objects, by some particular pre-Columbian images . . . and also by the ‘mystery’ exuded by many naive paintings, by the art of madmen . . . or by a great deal of street graffiti, this is essential with the cosmic order, within nature’s cycles.”45 His paintings portray a desire to strip away the surface layers of the reality he perceives and submerge his artistic gaze in a realm of primordial impulses.

If *Accions*, in its search for authenticity, was aesthetically evocative of Tàpies’s matter paintings, La Fura’s subsequent works, *Suz/o/Suz*, *Tier Mon*, *Noun*, and *M.T.M.*, intensified this nostalgia for the primitive, converting it into a kind of anthropological journey into the past (or, as in the case of *Noun*, a newly configured future), a search for a pristine underlay that would be uncontaminated by humanity’s materialism and industrialism. Paradoxically, along with this search for essential origins, La Fura’s successive productions also appeared to be propelled in a contrary direction, becoming increasingly more elaborate, stylized, and technologically sophisticated. In these spectacles, La Fura recontextualized the Mediterranean/Catalan rhetoric of their origins within a contemporary technological environment. Poetic primitive ritual of the past intermingles with urban iconography of the present; audacious pyrotechnics clash with futuristic machinery; circus-like acrobatics overlap with recycled industrial rubbish. The image of the human being is continually juxtaposed with the presence of the machine. Original live music takes on a crucial connotative function by underscoring and punctuating this juxtaposition—the most exemplary instance being the performance of *Noun*, in which the hypnotic rhythms and passionate moans of flamenco singer Ginesa Ortega clashed with the icy electronic sounds of heavy metal.46 In a collective interview with Francesc Burguet Ardiaca, La Fura were asked about this characteristic marriage between “modernity” and their Catalan provincial “roots” and gave the following response regarding this ever-present motif: “It’s what Miró already said, and Raimon, too—that he who loses his origins, loses his identity. And, in fact, in order to arrive at a universal language, it is important to begin with

44 *Memòria personal* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1983), 211.
45 *Per un art modern i progressista* (Barcelona: Empuries, 1985), 41–44.
46 The soundtrack for *Noun* has been released on compact disk.
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your own roots."47 The ritualistic gestures inherent in La Fura’s performances are superimposed upon a series of contemporary environments that hold historical connotations of their own, thereby creating a dialectic that vacillates between a primordial Catalan past and a postindustrial present.

Suz/o/Suz, perhaps the company’s most successful work to date, premiered in Madrid in 1985 at Madrid’s Antigua Funeraria de Callejero, an old abandoned funeral home. It is a work that spotlights La Fura’s continued fascination with ritual—so much so that prior to its premiere, the company fabricated and issued an absurd story to the press in which they attributed their artistic inspirations to a three-month anthropological journey through Sudan. According to the press release, several members of the troupe had been living with the Nuba tribe. They even had themselves photographed in tribal garb. The Barcelona premiere of Suz/o/Suz at the Mercat de les Flors, in January 1986, was heralded by an "action," derived from the production, in which furero Jordi Arus was suspended, naked, from a crane, forty-five meters high, between the two "Venetian" towers located on the Plaça d’Espanya. Arus was covered in grease in order to protect himself from the cold, and after approximately thirty minutes, he was lowered into a tank of water. It was a stirring image that was captured by and displayed throughout the media in what turned out to be a very effective publicity stunt. La Fura have since been known to go to great lengths to document and commodify their performances through the production of press dossiers, compact disk recordings of their music, CD ROMs, manifestos published in daily newspapers, and t-shirts.

In Suz/o/Suz, the human figure is often subjected to violent aggressions: dangled like a puppet from sadistic-looking pulley systems; stripped naked and exposed; placed in bondage; carried around on what looks like a rack used for dried cod; immersed in paint, blood, and water. Images that may seem shocking, at the same time, acquire an extraordinary aesthetic value that many spectators have found to be tremendously inspiring and uplifting.48 In the hands of La Fura dels Baus, the human subject, the body, is converted into a piece of living sculpture, dehumanized at times, and yet bordering on the sublime or the profoundly beautiful (fig. 1). In one stunning ritual, nude male performers in fetal positions, breathing through oxygen hoses used by scuba divers, are immersed for several minutes in transparent cube-shaped human aquariums. Noting the "ritualistic resonances" of this tableau sequence, Mercè Saumell calls it "a beautiful birth of initiation."49 At other moments, a group of performers appears nude from the waist down, dressed only in white shirts and black ties; hence, their urban apparel assumes a symbolic role: the body of the partially (un)clothed performer is depicted in a state of undoing, a paring down to minimalist origins.

At times, the allusions to this "air of primitivism," as Tàpies would have it, seem self-consciously parodic, as in the body paint worn by the naked musician-warriors who play a contemporary rendition of tribal music, or when the performers fervently devour large pieces of raw meat. In Saumell’s words, “Rousseau’s noble savage is

47 "El nom i la cosa: Declaracions recollides en una entrevista de Franscisc Burdjiac," in De La Torre, La Fura dels Baus, 100.
48 Espuma recounts the story of male and female spectators so inspired by a performance of Suz/o/Suz in Argentina, they began to engage in sexual intercourse (Personal interview, 6 July 1995).
49 “Performance Groups,” 120.
Figure 1. Image from *Suz/o/Suz*. Reproduced with permission of La Fura dels Baus.
perversely converted into the component of an urban tribe within a 1980s mytholog-
yogy."50 Suz/o/Suz, correspondingly, contains several references to the decadence of
contemporary consumer society: a television set that is wheeled around in a supermar-
ket-style shopping cart is quickly replaced by a human being.

Tier Mon, the production that followed Suz/o/Suz, invoked a more cynical, forebod-
ing, atmosphere in which La Fura confronted the issue of power through the creation
of violent images of war, death, imprisonment, entrapment, and execution. Gone was
the ebullient optimism of their previous work, only to be replaced with a notable
degree of disenchantment. The Barcelona premiere at the Mercat de les Flors in 1988
was preceded by a press conference at Montjuïc in which the performers, in a
decidedly Beckettian gesture, were buried up to their necks in sand, creating an
extremely unsettling situation for all those involved. The performance space encom-
passed several catwalks, large stadium-style spotlights, high-pressure hoses, sirens
and alarms, all of which propelled the spectator into a disturbing, chilling landscape of
Orwellian overtones, which was also evocative of the experience of a concentration
camp. The immediate historical references to Spain’s not-so-distant authoritarian past
were evident. The search for essential origins was portrayed in Tier Mon in terms of an
aesthetic of debasement that brings to mind Francisco de Goya’s “black” paintings. In
one of the key sequences, six performers were “housed” in a “cell-block” of wooden
crates. A grotesque metamorphosis converted them into swine-like animals who were
fed scraps and refuse. Motivated exclusively by primal urges, their existence was
reduced to the most prosaic and natural of bodily activities: eating, masticating,
spitting. The scaffolding situated above the boxes was eventually ignited, creating a
potent image of destruction. With Tier Mon, La Fura had reached the end of their first
trilogy.

Beginning in 1990, with the production of Noun, the incorporation of female
performers into the company was one change that would orient La Fura in new
directions. Also, with Noun, their work began to question outwardly the illusory,
mythic, and idealistic assumptions surrounding their quest for authenticity. The title,
an appropriation of an ancient Egyptian term, refers to the primordial waters that gave
way to the origin of the universe and the river Nile, the fundamental amorphous state
of chaos that existed prior to the construction of systems of representation and
signification.51 “Noun” is the initial magma, pure presentation without any added
layers of meaning, without duplicity; just pristine water that is evocative of a desire to
uncover an authentic state of being.

The set design for Noun included an enormous square of scaffolding, suspended
high above the heads of the spectators, who remained below and moved about freely.
The primordial state of disorder was conceived according to a cybernetic logic,
embodied in the image of a giant machine (recycled materials, scaffolding, video
screens). The spectators witnessed the birth of male and female performers who
emerged from giant placentae that hovered above and spewed the audience with
water and foam. They were depicted as having been born into a futuristic domain that
was so intellectually and technologically sophisticated that the process of genesis, in

50 Ibid.
51 Program notes, Noun, 1990.
the biblical sense, appeared to have come full circle—or, perhaps, to have been inverted. La Fura dels Baus created a fictional, but seemingly plausible, realm where human beings did not invent technology; rather, machines were endowed with the ability to conceive human life. As the performance evolved, Noun became a giant life-giving and breathing machine, a sacred deity to whom sacrifices were made beneath the divine electronic eyes of video screens (fig. 2). Technology was depicted as a symbiotic interface that mediates between life and death, between being and non-being. Whereas in Accions, the human subject corporealized the process of creation, in Noun, that process was embodied in the machine. In the latter piece, the subject’s rapport with the world was shown to be inconceivable without the intervention of technology. By manipulating conventionally accepted ideas of genesis and creation, La Fura dels Baus submerged the notion of authenticity within layers of machinery, where the destinies of technology and the human being seemed inescapably entangled.

**M.T.M.**

With La Fura’s fifth grand-scale production, bearing the infinitely polysemous title *M.T.M.*, the search for essential origins reaches a point of culmination as they attempt to expose the politics behind the aesthetics of representation. La Fura’s critical view is intricately tied to the same desire for immediacy and authenticity expressed in earlier works; yet this spectacle also seems to deliver a message that deconstructs the “mythology of presence.”\(^{52}\) La Fura dels Baus uses its own aspiration for the authentic

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in order to dispel the myths that surround this very notion, thereby showing us that the real is an impossibility, forever condemned to existence as a mere illusion. While Noun advocated a symbiotic relationship between man, woman, and the technological landscape, M.T.M. expresses a lack of faith in the credibility of all mediated and mediatized forms of communication.

In taking up this issue of authenticity, La Fura confront the spectator with the "game" of representation, manipulation and deception that is often attributed to the culture of the mass media. The group's earlier mockeries of the press are thus taken one step further, in that the theme of the media is self-consciously incorporated within the performance, occupying the role of both form and content. In M.T.M., La Fura dels Baus attempts to capture the sensation of living in a postmodern "schizophrenic" world as it forces the audience to navigate an infinitely alterable theatrical space, where reality is converted through technological mediation into a perpetual "flow" and substitution of images. M.T.M. thereby engages the spectator in an exploration of the ontological and aesthetic consequences posed by our existence within a technological culture, in which postmodern fascination with the plainly visible significantly alters our rapport with reality.

M.T.M. premiered in Lisbon in 1994. In July of that year, it was staged just outside of Barcelona at the Poliesportiu Municipal de Bãsquet de L'Hospitalet de Llobregat (a municipal sports center), and it is there that I was able to see—or, more aptly put, participate in—La Fura's spectacle. In shaping the original premise of M.T.M., La Fura dels Baus enlisted the collaboration of venerated Spanish playwright and critic Alfonso Sastre. (Sastre is known for his polemical and politically committed theatre of protest and social agitation, which served as a vehicle for his critiques of the Franco regime.) La Fura provided him with a précis and asked him to write a series of corresponding dialogues, which in the end, because of stylistic dilemmas, were only briefly integrated into the final product.

Regardless, the unlikely alliance between these contrasting generations from Spain's contemporary theatre scene proved to be a rather fruitful endeavor, in that it was Sastre who inspired La Fura to create a playbill for M.T.M. that would take the form of a press dossier and would provide the audience with a (counterfeit) journalistic view of the spectacle that they had witnessed. The final version of this playbill/press dossier resembles a newspaper and contains material written by troupe-members, as well as a series of unrecognizable and recognizable names: obscure authorities from the international scientific community (such as Catalan biologist Ramon Guardans), theatre critics (such as Eduardo Haro Tecglen of the Madrid daily El País), and playwrights (such as Sastre himself). In my copy of the dossier, which I purchased for 1000 pesetas (approximately nine dollars), I am able to count no less than thirty-four articles appearing in at least seven languages. Since it would be virtually impossible to read through this entire magnum opus prior to the commencement of the performance, the dossier itself can be viewed as a work of art, masquerading as the truth, which takes on a life of its own, an artifact of the culture of the mass media that can be assimilated and consumed by the spectator both prior to and after having attended the

spectacle. The dossier thus serves an ironic function: on the one hand, in keeping with most theatre playbills, it explains and elucidates some of the major themes present in M.T.M. Yet, ironically, after having attended La Fura’s performance, the audience will already know that they cannot trust what is on the printed page. The implicit intention is that they will have been jarred into a position of skepticism with regard to any information that is transmitted through a mediated or mediated form of communication, such as a newspaper. In elaborating its critique, therefore, the dossier appropriates in a typically postmodern fashion, as does the spectacle itself, the very same medium that it is critiquing. It disturbs the distinction between what is actual circumstance and what is an illusory work of art.

M.T.M. contains no narrative plot in the conventional sense, but the playbill does delineate the nine major sections that comprise the spectacle. First, there is a prelude, titled “Initial Magma,” which parodies the situation of a discothèque. The prelude is followed by three main jocs (“acts”) which introduce a series of archetypal figures—a scientist, a mother, two twins, an empress, an artist, a rich man—that, are curiously reminiscent of Pedro Calderón de la Barca’s seventeenth-century auto sacramental (mystery play) titled El gran teatro del mundo (“The Great Theatre of the World”). Each of the three acts allegorizes the construction of a sacred institution, totem, or hegemonic power (symbolized, for example, by the pyramid-altar that is constructed and demolished during the second act). Between acts, the spectator is forced into negotiating four cataclysmic sequences—chaos, an earthquake, a plague, and a war—each of which invokes a kind of leveling and apocalyptic destruction of the previously established power structure. Finally, an epilogue, titled “Memory,” returns to the discothèque format and offers a video reprisal of what are supposedly the “most important scenes” in the performance. During this epilogue, a final cry in Catalan (“an explosion of collective consciousness”) is flashed onto the video screen, which says: “No em llanceu més merda a sobre” (literally, “Don’t throw any more shit on me”). I will return to this point later.

Despite the nine-part format, the precise temporal and spatial limits of M.T.M. are never clearly delineated for the audience. During the opening prelude/discothèque sequence, a highly rhythmic, gut-wrenching music plays as the spectators file into the pavilion and mill about randomly in the darkness. Gradually they are able to familiarize themselves with the architecture of the performance space, which is neutral and infinitely modifiable. At one end of the room, there is a huge video screen. At the opposite end of the space, there is a large platform containing an impressive assortment of lighting equipment, projectors, sound systems, synthesizers, video cameras. Lining the walls are 150 generic cardboard boxes, 80 cubic centimeters each.

The disco sequence continues for a seemingly endless length of time, and during this period, the spectators are able to move about freely with the rhythm of the music as they contemplate a series of kaleidoscopic images that unfold across the video screen. The members of La Fura dels Baus have not yet made themselves visible, so up until this point, the only performers in M.T.M. are the spectators themselves. In this manner, the conventional hierarchy of theatrical representation appears at first glance to be radically problematized. The traditional spatiotemporal gap that is regularly established between actor, spectator, and theatre event has been erased. The spectators’ live bodies, it would seem, constitute the theatre event; their immediate presence is the theatre event, and the actions of these spectator-performers appear to be free,
unscripted, and unauthorized—conditions that situate them beyond the authoritative limits of theatrical representation. Gradually, this initial situation, which ostensibly denies repetition, is revealed to be an illusion, and even a ruse. It is, in fact, a preordained scripted performance that is part of a larger game of deception, and the spectators are merely pawns in this game. For although they appear to be moving about freely and arbitrarily, they are in effect representing—even if they may not be the least bit conscious of this fact. Their performance in the discothèque creates an allegorical rendering of the world in its primordial amorphous state, prior to the fabrication of sociocultural order. Like the primitive waters of Noun, the discothèque of M.T.M. is evocative of a desire to uncover a “non-excremental,” authentic state of being. An anonymous editorial published in La Fura’s playbill/press dossier further delineates the metaphoric function of this so-called *discoteca infinita*:

Suppose the mass of humanity were an effervescent humus evolving in all directions in an amebic motion, from where individual stories and histories emerge as if unshelled, the instantaneous flashes of unique, but already old, dramas: they are the stories belonging to the indistinct mass that, through mere concrete presentation, becomes strange and alien. In the beginning, then, it is an indefinite space in which the never-ending process of change gives way to an accumulation of layers and layers of humanity.  

After several minutes of “disco-play,” the “rules of the game” are projected onto the video screen: 1) move forward to make way for the others who have yet to enter the space, 2) dance, and most importantly, 3) do not touch the boxes. For the spectator-performers, these seemingly benign rules represent the beginning of an unnerving game of deception that will set out to manipulate their expectations in an infinite variety of ways—visually, acoustically, physically, mentally, and spiritually. Moments later, in an unanticipated cataclysmic sequence, the cardboard boxes begin to tumble, shake, and stir. Emerging out of the darkness, several performers dressed in workman’s jumpsuits hurl themselves and the boxes into the audience, disrupting and erupting upon what was once a placid, undifferentiated space. Delirious cries are heard, evocative of collective hysteria. The spectators are pushed and shoved (even trampled upon) in a chaotic mayhem as the boxes are propelled in a variety of directions. No differentiation is made between box and spectator; both are manipulated at the same level.

As a member of the audience, one has the sensation that one’s entire world is caving in. For the audience, the spectacle is converted into an intensely “real,” undeniably “present” experience, whose heightened level of immediacy can be compared to the type of “frenetic gratuitousness” that Artaud associates with both the theatre and the plague.  

This collective drama is also symptomatic of a technique of manipulation commonly employed by La Fura dels Baus, which De La Torre describes as an *efecte ascensor* (“elevator effect”). It is a supposed “syndrome” that plunges the audience into an awkward situation comparable to the relationship between a group of strangers who are trapped together in an elevator, a situation that implies a breach of one’s intimacy and bodily space, as well as an unexpected relationship of mandatory complicity. De La Torre comments: “The audience, upon feeling that its space has been invaded by the actors, backs away and, in backing away, enters into physical contact.

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55 See *The Theater and its Double*, 15–32.
with strangers. Confronted with this surprise, the spectator seeks refuge in the embrace of a familiar friend or escort but, because of the movement of the group, is compelled toward the embrace of a stranger, and even to trespass upon the personal space of someone he or she has never met."  

In *M.T.M.*, this elevator effect is primarily achieved through the movement of the boxes during the four cataclysmic episodes. These building blocks of creation are used to construct a series of monolithic formations—such as walls, fortresses and pyramids—which in turn serve as emblems of political, religious, and economic order. The spectators are manipulated around the space in order to make way for these monuments. Thus, with the elevator effect, La Fura dels Baus is able to use the spectators to underscore the way in which authoritative institutions regularly draw their strength from the manipulation of the so-called "masses."

Yet, before long, these fragile images of authority—as well as all forms of communication, theatrical and otherwise—fall beneath a subjective and illusory light. As the spectators contemplate the cyclical rise and fall of power that is taking place around them, La Fura dels Baus bombards them with a visually exhausting whirlwind of video images. In general these images fall into two major categories: ready-made images that are conceived *a priori* and images that are conceived during the actual performance. The problem that is thus posed for the spectator is that of deciphering which images fall into which category. All sense of space, time, and objective reality is altered through the use of the video camera and video projections. Video creates a deceitful system of irony, which places into question the audience's power of exegesis—not only with regard to the events that they are witnessing visually; but also those they are experiencing physically through their own bodily presence as spectators who have taken on the role of performers.

The spectators contemplate the rise and fall of power that is taking place around them, a situation whose existence is dependent upon their immediate physical presence and participation. At the same time, "Hansel," one of the performers, roams about the space with a video camera in hand, leading the audience to believe that he is simultaneously transmitting to the video screen the very same events that they are witnessing. As a spectator, one is even apt to search for an image of oneself on the screen. Hansel's ubiquitous presence creates, in this manner, a scenario whereby the spectator is offered multiple perspectives of a single event—conditions that are not unlike our everyday experience with the culture of the mass media. However, Hansel's video version of the events does not always coincide with the spectator's point of view, planting doubts in the minds of audience members. The spectators are simultaneously offered both presentation and representation, the actual and the virtual, pure presence and mediatized presence; but their experience in the performance space is such that they are unable to distinguish between the two, unable to confirm the authenticity of anything that they are seeing or experiencing live.

A dramatic example of this problematic occurs during the second act, in which the audience witnesses the birth of female twins who, in a manner reminiscent of the placentae of *Noun*, emerge from a set of cardboard boxes that dangle above the space. One twin hangs in an inverted position, while the other is right-side-up (fig. 3). It is a

56 La Fura dels Baus, 58.
tableau that allegorizes the duplicitous relationship between the audience and what they are seeing. Truth/fantasy, the real/the mediated—the metaphoric correspondences are infinite. Because the twins are identical, it is unclear whether or not the truth will prevail in this double-sided system. The audience witnesses, in the present, the “actual” death of one twin, who is mutilated by the other. Hansel appears with his video camera, and his gestures indicate that he is simultaneously transmitting a live, close-up version of the twin’s death. On the screen, the spectator sees what is supposedly Hansel’s version of the event: a disturbing bloody image of the dead twin’s mutilated mouth. However, this version does not quite coincide with the audience’s perspective of the events that are taking place, events that they may have empirically understood to be reality. There is no blood, except on the screen in the “close-up” mediatized version. The spectator, consequently, is plunged into an imagistic labyrinth offering a parade of images that pretend to be real—or that pretend to be more real than reality itself.

An additional example of this situation occurs during the third act, in which La Fura dels Baus creates an ironic parody of the way in which the media transmit news and information, and of the aesthetic process of invention whereby a nation can fabricate an image of itself and project it to the rest of the world. A giant wall of boxes is swiftly erected, completely dividing the space (the world) and the mass of spectators into two separate crowds. The screens and video cameras are positioned so as to create a kind of aesthetic dilemma whereby the spectators are led to believe that the images projected on “their” screen—that is, on their own side of the wall—are faithful representations of what is occurring on the other side. Images of death and destruction

Figure 3. Image from M.T.M. Reproduced with permission of La Fura dels Baus.
correspond to one side, while it appears that on the other side, a joyful Brazilian carnival is taking place. The tableau carries special resonance within the context of modern Spain, where, in 1962, the propagandistics aims of the Franco regime motivated Manuel Fraga Iribarne, former Minister of Information and Tourism, to enlist the help of a North American advertising agency in an attempt to improve his nation’s image.

In the performance of M.T.M., La Fura dels Baus create an aestheticized version of reality by appropriating the baroque conception of teatrum mundi, such as that which Calderón created in his auto sacramental. The allegorical entities that correspond to Calderón’s auto (a king, a pauper, a rich man, a child) and those of M.T.M. (a scientist, a mother, a rich man, an empress) appear to emerge out of the space occupied by the audience, from the undifferentiated primordial “mass of humanity” or “effervescent humus.” As Subirats indicates, this teatrum mundi format, which portrays human existence as a type of spectacle, transforms the relationship between reality and illusion: the theatralized rendition of the world is taken to be ontologically superior to the real; it simulates and replaces the real.57 The autos, as a result, were easily adapted to the propagandistic intentions of the Spanish crown and the Catholic Counterreformation. They superimposed upon the theatre audience the same characteristics of collective identity that are associated with a religious mass.

In a parallel sense, the electronic media in M.T.M. posit a new type of invisible, intangible, faceless audience whose existence is only insinuated by the presence of this technology. The audience is besieged and surrounded; it exists only in a virtual time and space, historically neutralized, decontextualized, and divorced from reality. Passive collectivity replaces individual identity since the gaze the spectator directs toward the screen is neither acknowledged nor answered. When confronted with M.T.M.’s fragmented collage aesthetic of decontextualized and recycled images, the spectator’s faculties of cognition and perception are dramatically transformed. Rather than facilitate communication, the effect of this technological bombardment is a collapse of meaning.

The audience’s rapport with this spectacular world becomes a purely aesthetic experience, pointing to a potential destruction of historical memory and the creation of what Subirats calls a “mediactic totalitarianism.”58 Baudrillard reminds us, too, that “it is now impossible to isolate the process of the real, or to prove the real.”59 M.T.M. appears to echo this concern when it examines this problematic within the context of the mass media. In the particular case of Spain, in the realm of film and media culture (as in the realm of theatre), a large degree of disenchantment with the dominant system has persisted since the time of Franco’s death. If it is true that the censorship codes of the dictatorship no longer exist, state and regional governments still have managed to maintain a surprisingly large measure of control over what Spanish citizens see and hear on the radio, television, stage, and screen. Spaniards typically approach these media with extreme skepticism. As Montero recounts:

57 Linterna mágica, 212–16.
58 Ibid., 123, 136.
In the media, the change from dictatorship to democracy is less of a success story. Television remained a state monopoly, as it had under Franco, until the early 1990s when private channels were franchised. The two continuing public sector channels, despite the fact that all political tendencies are represented on their governing body, in practice are still too dependent on the government; while the new private television companies have led to a shocking lowering of standards.60

Spanish film, theatre, and television producers are frequently forced to depend upon the availability of public subsidies, for lack of private sponsorship. Imbedded in M.T.M. is an ironic critique of governing bodies, at the level of the Spanish state and at the regional level, that are inevitably positioned to use their political power as a way of authorizing their own propagandistic versions of the "truth." As Montero points out, Spain, not unlike the United States and other parts of the world, has also witnessed the creation of giant media conglomerates that are perilously close to monopolizing the diffusion of information via radio, television, and the press.

The concepts of "official/national culture" and "official history" may be remnants of Spain's Franco era, but they have yet to be thoroughly negotiated and contested. The so-called tejerazo of 23 February 1981, in which a very real historical battle between fascism and democracy was aesthetically captured on television screens and projected around the world, was neither the beginning nor the end of what is also an allegorical battle between authenticity and illusion. In post-Franco, democratic Spain, state and regional governments, the media, and the arts continually exploit the postmodern capacity for the reproduction and recycling of images in their treatment of issues of national and cultural identity. Their contrived, aestheticized versions of reality create an overabundant flow of images that are continually projected, accepted, rejected, and/or subverted.

In M.T.M., the relationship between what is live and what reproduced is completely jeopardized, and La Fura dels Baus's "great theatre of the world" is revealed to be not an allegorical space of essential archetypes; but rather, a place that can only create a hallucination of the truth. The production of pure presence is shown to be no more authentic and pristine than the mediated, mediatized, and theatricalized versions of the truth that we are offered. It is, perhaps, here that one can look for meaning in the final cry that La Fura dels Baus lances into this dark labyrinth of deceit. In a once-empty space, which, unlike that of Accions, is now steeped in layers of excremental versions of the truth, the phrase "No em llancue més merda a sobre" is an evocation of exhaustion and a cry for authenticity.

In this postmodern Spanish landscape, as in other parts of the world, collective consciousness and historical memory can indeed be conceived as, or confused with, aesthetic performance. This crisis of distinctions, combined with an ever-present fear of monopolization and manipulation of information, are what motivates La Fura's search for authenticity. Consequently, M.T.M. is a work whose confrontation with the mass media marks not only the culmination; but also failure, of this implicit aspiration. As Blau attests, the aspiration to the authentic is an impossibility, a mythical notion, for "[t]here is nothing more illusory in performance than the illusion

60 "Political Transition and Cultural Democracy," 318.
of the unmediated."61 It is an observation that is equally applicable to the "spectacular" contemporary world. The more the real becomes displaced, the more we want to recover a semblance of its presence. During a period in Spain's history in which indeterminacy and cynicism are the norm, and the truth and the real reveal themselves only during fleeting moments, La Fura's cry for authenticity is perhaps more timely than ever.