

Antoni Muntadas: I want my audience to “play tennis” with me

Original LinLin 圣菱艺术 2019-09-03 Translate by Lou Yilun

“I love to play tennis.”77-year-old Antoni Muntadas said. He loves tennis, because it is a sport with response. Not like squash, only one-way output. It might be a metaphor he sent out. He is always good at it. Along with his creation career, his main goal is to break the barriers and walls, build the conversation and communication.

Through his outstanding sentiment, logic and creation ability, lifeless files become lively pictures, composing sets of artwork project with metaphors, humor and a sense of ridiculous.

These over 30 years file records are not historical archives, because they are Muntadas’s notebook with his personal perspective. Yes, he pays attention to the social issues, but he never gives moral persuasion from above, expresses excitedly or takes a side. For him, art is the freedom of thinking and creation——under the presumption of his understandable range rather than mass education.



Antoni Muntadas's project: *The File Room* (1994)

Nowadays, if we talk about the interactive exhibition, what will come to our mind first? It is probably the emerging multimedia interactive exhibition or immersion exhibition, coming with lots of interesting and nova elements. If I say you will see some “antiquated” files (image or text), will you still participate actively?

This is the problem. What kind of exhibition does we really need today? In further, do we need exhibitions or need art itself in the end? Do we still hope

that we can learn something and open up our mind by visiting an exhibition? Do we have enough curiosity and logic to analyse those seems complicated but interesting clues, leading to the unknown?

If your answer is yes, you shall favour Antoni Muntadas. Of course, for those who are not familiar with him, they need to do some homework in order to understand his work. He also stated that he has a pre-requisite for the audience—“the artists have their responsibilities, so do the audience”. However, please don’t get me wrong. Muntadas’s works are not overwhelming or mysterious, also are not only suitable for technology savvies or theories lovers. He is not interested in all those titles and superficial skills. The pre-requisite for the audience is not knowing intensive theories or reading lots of books, but—in Muntadas’s words—you need to have enough curiosity. Just that simple.

It is because of this curiosity, he moved out from hometown thirty years ago; it is because of this curiosity, he consistently built up this splendid document archive in thirty years. He organizes those archives periodically and thinks during the process. If he discovers new idea, he will activate part of the archive, generate a new project and present it in a straight way eventually.



Palabras, palabras (2017)

Antoni Muntadas was born in 1942 in Barcelona. Since 1971, he has been living in New York. Among contemporary artists, it is rare to find artists like him having such deep reflection on the connection between individual sentiment and technology, also strongly criticizing social media and working on further research. Within it, there also includes topics like social norms, mass media,

political power and so on. Therefore, his works are constantly having spirits of challenging and questioning. His alienation, independent thinking, and outsider perspective are the soul of his works. Meanwhile, he also hopes audience can share his work and comes out their thinking, questioning and challenging.



On Translation- warning, digital printing, 70 x 100cm, 2013

From the context and background of the 70s in the last century, media communication promoted the development of mainstream culture. The communicability and seductiveness of TV and videos encourage the emergence and development of video art. He was positioned on the turning point of mass communication. His practice can be perceived as meaningful and visionary. His works are considered as one of the important driving factors for video art to receive recognition and independent position under the contemporary art context.



The same title with exhibition name *Look See Perceive*, art installation (desk lamp, lettering and white shelf) 2009



The Spanish version of the same work, 2009

Therefore, Muntadas's works are using the methods of videos, photos and slogan type text (using the local language in terms of the exhibition location), so from the communication perspective it is easy to share. However, he is not interested in superficial interaction on the surface but is more interested in the things hidden behind. Consequently, those videos, photos and text are becoming alienated, strange and awkward, alike his "warning". However, when

you are absorbed into it, you will find those are all our daily life, ridiculous and real. For Muntadas, every work has an independent story, or more like a file rather than work. He said he was looking forward for the audience to activate those archives and have a “tennis-like” conversation with them.

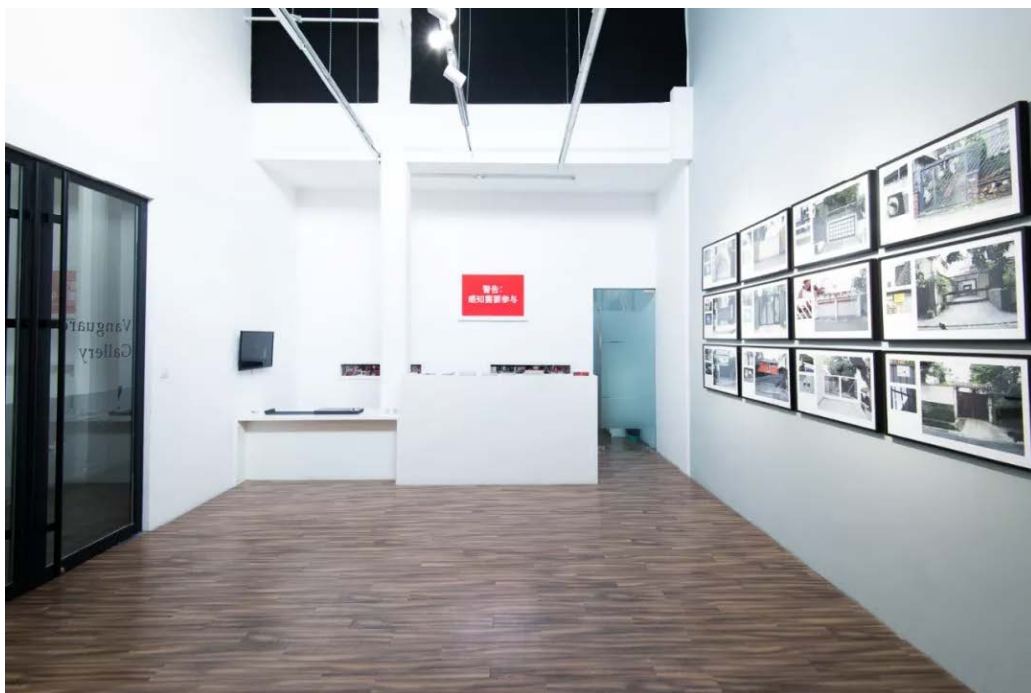


Muntadas Shanghai solo exhibition poster

This time his first solo exhibition *Look See Perceive* (starting from August 23rd 2019) in China will be held at Vanguard Gallery in Shanghai M50. The English version of the exhibition title *Look See Perceive* presents Muntadas's art concept well—Firstly, you look and observe; then you grasp the situation and understand the whole picture; finally, you need to go further to experience and sentimentalize.



Muntadas solo exhibition photos at Vanguard gallery



Muntadas solo exhibition photos at Vanguard gallery

Take the advantage of Muntadas Shanghai solo exhibition opportunity, I had a face-to-face communication with him. I asked questions about my previous thought and confusion, or maybe my subjective bias. Right, we were like playing tennis slowly (also thanks to the translation support from Eline Wang). This sports game seems haven't ended. During the time, he came out with lots of interesting opinions. I perceived those as understanding at the current stage; if I retrieve back in the future, I may have a new interpretation? Yes, it must be.

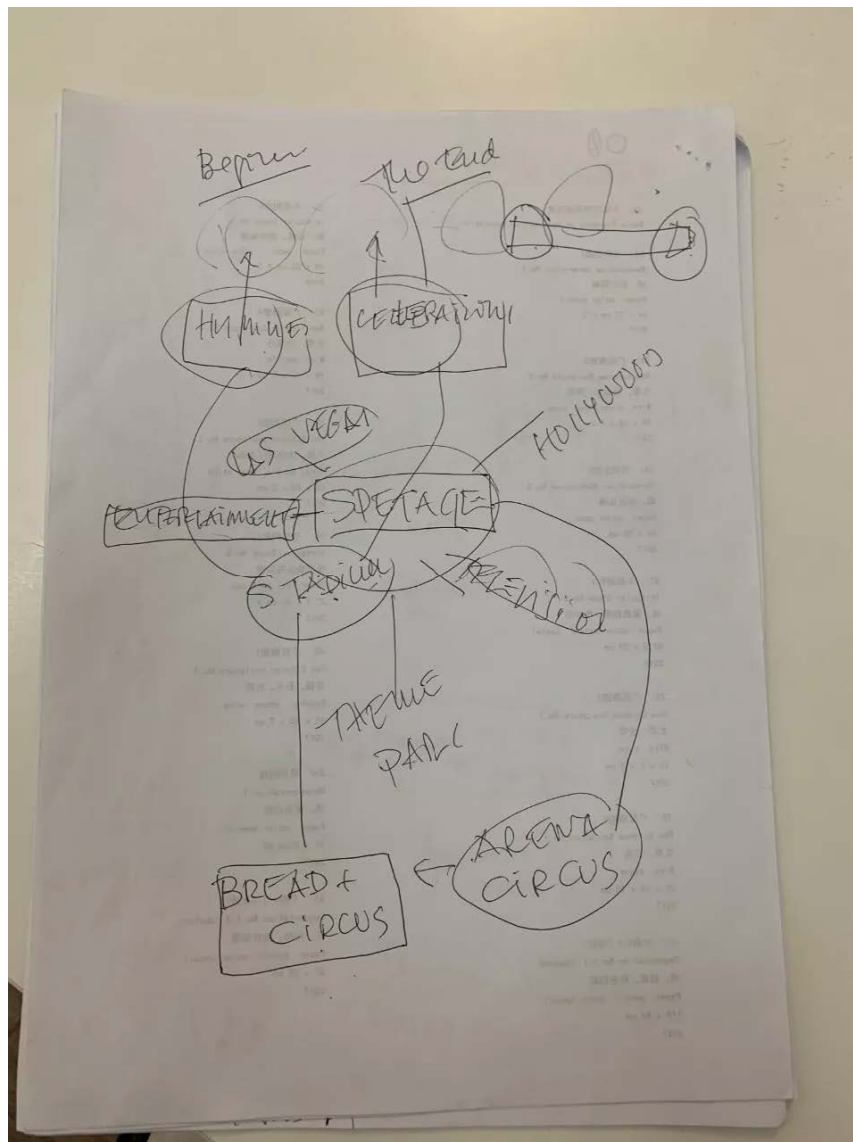


Antoni Muntadas in Vanguard Gallery

Methodology: files structure metaphor, files activate space

In the beginning, I asked him that: for the audience, is there some difficulties to understand him, just like “reading archives”? Because it is obviously having a requirement for audience’s understanding abilities and knowledge level. Muntadas honestly admitted it, as we mentioned before: “artists have their responsibilities, so do the audience”. Muntadas never does compulsory aesthetic education. He talks about the content he knows and doesn’t give opinions on things he doesn’t know. He said: everyone got Google. Just search on it, you will find the answer. There is a metaphor in my question—the requirement towards audience can be perceived as establishing a wall in some way. He uses the examples of playing tennis and squash and expresses in a

straight way: if there is a “wall”, you need to jump over it, or dig a hole to pass it. Be prepared with a challenging soul at any time.



Hand-written draft of Muntadas, written down while he was having this interview.

For Muntadas, files are the material of his work. The file itself is independent, but a project needs a structure. It comes to the issue of how to construct and how to present. From his point of view, those materials can be responsible for different metaphors. They can tell the stories by themselves when put in a certain space and encountering the field there (for instance, space, time, and audience). However, space is not as important as time, because for the development of human being, the most important element is time. Along the timeline, Muntadas is constantly challenging things. Moreover, some sharp things won't lose its sharpness due to the passage of time.



Series of eleven serigraphs. Photographic images are taken from various media

Asian Protocols: the third person perspective? Objective viewpoint?

Muntadas seems not to agree with the demonstration of imagination from Benedict Anderson, who came up of Imagined Communities theory. He said he won't image anything. His art practice is based on reality. Imagination? That's too romantic——It's like a scene: open the window, take a look at outside, drink coffee and suddenly inspiration comes. On the contrary, the reality is: close the window, sit in front of a desk, brainstorm, keep observing and discussing, finally inspiration comes (or maybe not).



Asian Protocols project in Muntadas sole exhibition at Vanguard Gallery: *On Translation Abroad*, art installation, 75x48cmx12

In his recent creation project *Asian Protocols*, Muntadas observed and analysed China, Japan and Korea, reflecting about the fragility of East Asian geopolitics. In this solo exhibition at Vanguard Gallery, *On Translation-Pille* (2006-2014) and *On Translation Abroad* (2016) both are from *Asian Protocols* project. When processing this project, Muntadas called himself “an outsider”. When I asked him how he deals with “the third-person perspective” as a foreigner (especially as a western person) while doing the researches for project *Asian Protocols*. He corrected me that it is more appropriate to use the phrase “outsider” —it can refer to the proverb “lookers-on see most of the game”. Keep in distance and have different distances with three observation objects (Why in different distances? It can be viewed as a hint while visiting the exhibition, and everyone can have his/her own understanding).



On Translation-Pille (2006-2014), installation (43 glass bottles and pills) 2006-2014



On Translation-Pille (2006-2014), installation (43 glass bottles and pills) 2006-2014

Sometimes it is not always “being out of the game”. For example, he is so familiar with Barcelona and New York. Seemingly “cold-blooded” file archive is actually involving with a sense of community belonging and national identity in most of the time. For instance, his earlier work *Barcelona Distrito Uno* is created in 1979, which is after the death of Franco and the start of Spain transition period.

Muntadas played a video in a popular bar and grocery store located in Barcelona Palau people's liberation army district. This video projection was pre-discussed with local residences and being well-organized, so there was a sense of community connection, pushing forward the establishment of a group. From this aspect, the value of “community” exists but lacking self-awareness. As for Muntadas, although every work is independent, but it is complicated essentially, combining multiple, strange and emotional elements. Even though the file itself is pure, but human nature is certainly complicated and impossible to be “cold”.



On Translation: Clapping, video art

Metaphor of Scenery

Aldous Huxley's *Brand New World* is a pessimistic utopian fable. Muntadas doesn't write novels or myths, also never advocates the importance of imagination. He only talks about what he sees in person and what he thinks. Although the video is the main creation method for him, Muntadas uses lifetime to analyse and reveals the hidden things. He always thinks: how does this image being constructed? It results in the *stadium* project. In this project, the stadium is not important, bread and circus instead (i.e. performance items such as gladiators in ancient Rome). Why there are bread and circus? If so, people won't think about other things (for instance, pride, freedom, glory and so on). Attention towards the heavy reality in the distance is distracted by the joy in front of us——this metaphor is still mind-blowing in current society. However, this kind of shock is silent. For sure, silent but powerful.



The Nap, Video installation, chairs and white cloth, Dimensions variable, 1995

Besides, although Muntadas is an artist communicating through images and videos, he thinks text let images more clear and powerful. Text is not explaining the images, but giving out background information. Here is an extremely clear metaphor for the audience: what you see is not complete; you think you know everything, is it real? You should read words, more words; but those words are not the answer, so what is the answer? The part you believe. Maybe we should stop here. After all, everything here is metaphors.



Muntadas sole exhibition photos

Artist is not a romantic character in the novel

In today's Internet information era, looking back the decades of efforts which Muntadas has invested consistently in "building up archives" and the creation method of sociology researches, they are all visionary: the effort to against record/video art becoming spectacles. But sometimes art is too powerless to influence social reality, isn't it? Muntadas didn't give a clear answer. He did not think that art have any divine power to change the society and human hearts, and art is certainly not dispensable as well; nevertheless, art is realistic. (When I asked this question, Muntadas might feel very confused and think "do you have some misunderstanding towards artists?")



Dérive Veneziane, Video, 30 original frames from the film, 38min, 2015

Therefore, what kind of role do you think artists are playing? Do artists have to save desperate aesthetic? Does art have to broaden the width of life? Does art need to bring storms to life? Muntadas said, stop it. It is too romantic. Don't expect everyone can be Picasso and Van Gogh, because not everyone is genius. Artist is not genius but a job. He/she doesn't always need to be in the paradise or in the hell? He/she is ordinary, as a member of exhibition halls and galleries. He/she needs to sustain his/her working conditions. We are all working. Where is the difference?

So, please work hard and live well. Art and love are afterall too personal.