

Communication + Exchange + Participation = Miralda

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Throughout his long artistic career, Antoni Miralda has developed numerous projects with highly significant themes. Hence, the displacement of the frontiers between the public, the common and the individual and the perspective of communication as an exploration of exchanges and ways of understanding the world or the use of languages, such as ritual ceremony, parade and banquet, are the fundamental bases of Miralda's works. Thus, the artist creates new ways of producing heritage and participation that reject the traditional and strict exhibition spaces to become spaces without walls that question numerous cultural archetypes. Notable among Miralda's most emblematic proposals in this respect are *Honeymoon Project*, the imaginary marriage of the monuments of Columbus and the Statue of Liberty, and *FoodCulturaMuseum*, which explores social practices through food.

Most misconceptions about Miralda's work also paradoxically reflect the imprecision with which many of the artistic practices that operate from the diffuse territory of popular culture are interpreted. Thus, one of these main archetypes, that of the misnamed Ambient Art during the 1970s, with worse connotations as folkloricism during the 1980s and definitively diluted in the 1990s under the imprecise label of "relational aesthetics", that is, work with disarticulated social forms, as well as the study of intangible memory and the displacement of frontiers between the public, the common and the individual are, precisely, the most significant themes within Miralda's career.

It is true that in proposals such as *Ceremonials* (1969-1975) it was possible to see the reconsideration of the aesthetic, symbolic and sensualist value of the collective ritual, or that *Miami Projects* (1981) and *Tastes and*

Tongues (1997-2007), among others, offer the inhabitants of different cities the possibility of immediately interacting with these works, contributing customs very rooted in popular heritage. However, in the aforementioned projects, and in others we will analyse next, communication is an aspect of great importance, a kind of structure or mould that makes it possible to establish tentacular lines of work, explorations towards themes, accounts and identities that are not easily accessible.

Moreover, it should be noted that in Miralda's proposals the communicative seems to recover its etymological essence; in other words, it becomes not so much an informative exchange between an emitter who is the owner of the discourse and a static receiver, but a true circulation of the "common". This circulation reclaims, on behalf of all those involved in each work – the artist, collaborators, audience, par-

ticipants and museum or public institutions –, a distinct contribution, “an exchange of experiences, knowledge and feelings,” in Miralda’s own words.

Communicating would thus mean offering and receiving something in common, creating the conditions for the knowledge of individuals or a small “community” to spread, teach us and be protected from its definitive disappearance. Communicating would also mean exploring the symbolic mixings and exchanges, the immemorial dialogue between diverse ways of understanding the world produced within cultural imaginaries of great richness, such as the Mediterranean (*Flute and Trampoline* [1981], *The Mediterranean Necklace* [1991] or *Aquatic Monument* [1992], among others). Communicating would be, finally, the objective of most projects but also their channel of expression, their form of development.

It is not surprising, therefore, that many of Miralda’s works go beyond the strict ambit of the exhibition hall and are directly developed in a territory as unregulated as the street. Not the public space, that category that has already become a subgenre of art, but the public street, from the great American avenues, as happens in *Wheat & Steak* (1981), to the minuscule cobbled alley, as in *Dolçura d’en-saïm-ada* (2009); from Kassel’s majestic avenues, in *Feast for Leda* (1977), to the B roads that link Barcelona with Girona, in *Gambas on Wheels* (2007).

We talked before about communication and its places, but we should also have asked about language: which linguistic codes are used to create these projects? In this respect, we could point out three possible languages through which Miralda’s works “speak”.

The first would be ritual ceremony, an invitation open to symbolic exchange, articulated through thematic coordinates (food, colours, myths or customs, among others). Within this section, we would find proposals such as *Ritual in Four Colours* (1971), with Dorothée

Selz and Jaume Xifra, where four characters dressed in white offer those present different coloured foods and wines, together with white masks. In this way, as the banquet goes on, a chromatic collage is scattered on the tables and all over the space. Moreover, we have *Situation Colour* (1976), a ritual procession, created with Jaume Xifra, which served as the inauguration of Josep Suñol’s house. The different floors of the dwelling were identified with a colour and on each one a performance was carried out that symbolised their respective functions.

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Another of these languages we are referring to could be the parade, the travelling procession that covers the city interrupting its quotidian dynamic, calling for the participation of spectators or their simple curiosity, integrating them into the celebration itself and making them its real protagonists. These are very complex projects from the point of view of production, which involve diverse agents and incite reflection on the memory of the urban space, its uses and origins, as well as the capacity of transformation that art possesses beyond the closed museum venues.

In this direction we find interventions as emblematic as *Movable Feast* (1974), presented as the opening of the 1st Ninth Avenue International Festival. The performance showed the cavalcade of a float-banquet on three levels pulled by horses and decorated with food donated by the residents and traders of the modest West Side district, who organised the event in response to the threat of a municipal redevelopment project. The aforementioned *Wheat & Steak* (1981) was also important, and led to three different interventions. First, a monumental parade through the centre of Kansas



Aquatic Monument by Antoni Miralda.

City, with sheaves of wheat two metres high that symbolised the end of the harvest, mobile combine harvesters simulating scarecrows, a float in the form of a crown pulled by tractors, groups of majorettes with gigantic cutlery and adorned with polystyrene steaks, as well as the glass fibre *Tri-Uni-Corn* float, formed by an ox, a pig and a lamb arranged in pyramidal order, all presided over by the queen of the American Royal Fair. Second, the project conceived an exhibition in the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, with the floats used, sketches of the whole project, documentary videos on the parade and an aromatic installation made with corn seeds. Last, the project led to an interactive ceremony in the Corn Exchange in Kansas City, one of the biggest cereal markets in the world, which opened its doors to the public for the first time with this work.

Finally, as a third possible language through which Miralda's projects "communicate" with their spectators, we find the banquet, which in addition to exploring the cultural and culinary connections through food, also constructs spaces of socialisation, places where the categories of identity, consumption and exchange experience unexpected displacements. Notable among these is *Food Situation for a Patriotic Banquet* (1972-1973), an installation with three "time-spaces" whose main element was a big table with eight trays of rice that reproduced the flags of the greatest powers of the time, which gradually decomposed during the course of the exhibition in which they were shown; *Thanksgiving: The Animals' Banquet* (1981), which offered the chance to get to know the eating habits of different species in the Bronx zoo, in New York, and *Holy Meal* (1984-1989), a set of

altars displaying foods linked to offerings to the seven best known divinities of the *Orishas*.

Other important projects include *The International* (1984-1986), developed with the restorer Montse Guillén, which consisted of the remodelling of the famous New York restaurant Teddy's, from the 1950s, where there were artistic interventions, events of a very different nature and even the publication of a newspaper. Another outstanding project is *Bigfish Mayaimi* (1996-1997), a real meeting place located in an industrial zone on the southern bank of the river Miami, where it was possible to taste the culinary specialities developed by Montse Guillén and, at the same time, participate in Miralda's creative performances.

Finally, within this kind of *promenade* through the work of Miralda and the communicative aspects he explores, we must mention two projects – *Honeymoon Project* (1986-1992) and *FoodCulturaMuseum* (1996-...) – that, given their scope and complexity, condense and amplify many of the issues we have set out until now.

Honeymoon Project was conceived and carried out over a period of six years, as a series of ceremonial performances around the imaginary marriage between two monuments – Columbus and the Statue of Liberty – seen on the two sides of the Atlantic, both located on the same parallel, with the same age, one hundred years, and which also personify the exchange of products, ideas and traditions that have linked the Old and New World since 1492. Their symbolic union marked the start of a set of “celebrations” that came from the event and the performance, which involved the participants in interactive rituals based on themes such as marriage and gifts.

The aim of this project was to demythologise and liberate the two monuments from their saturated symbolism, opening a dialogue between them and humans, thereby widening their respective “families”. The symbolic value

of the monument to Columbus and the Statue of Liberty, as well as the tricky circumstances of the event of the 500th Anniversary of the Discovery of America, in 1992, acted as a backdrop which lent great density to the proposal but, at the same time, generated more than a few controversies, which revealed the existence of crossed interests and tactical, economic and, of course, political motivations.

In contrast, *FoodCulturaMuseum* was conceived as a structure for the presentation of the concept of food culture developed by Miralda. Strictly speaking, this is not a museum but a set of mechanisms to shake up the museum archetypes – opaque, impenetrable and hierarchical. Thus other forms of producing heritage, classification and participation are created in accordance with the very nature of the materials compiled for nearly forty years, which make up a vast archive on how culinary cultures throughout the world are developed.

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Despite having food or nutrition as the main lines of interest, the concept of food culture actually explores questions of a broader scope, which have to do with the modes used to express human identities, their universal rituals, relation with native memory, processes of mixing, preservation and cohesion strategies, vehicles to transmit or subvert traditions or contemporary social practices.

This is, therefore, research open to any new change of paradigm, alert to any new focus of interest. In this respect, food is, perhaps, the first and most essential element of community cohesion, as it reflects the collective social, economic and ideological conditionings but, at the same time, re-signifies them, situating them

in a scenario devoid of political infractions or media exaggerations.

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Logically, this accumulative exploration in a permanent state of change could be developed within the strict perimeter of a traditional museum, but in the absence of

any physical coordinate, expanded through the most diverse places, absorbed by the distinct cultures, presented in the most different formats, as suggested by *Tastes and Tongues* (1997-2007) and *Power Food* (2010), among others.

A market and a stomach, an archive and a mouth, a centre of exchange and a brain, a laboratory and a language; all these concepts are useful to define the *FoodCulturaMuseum*, a space without walls dedicated to communication, research and the global history of food, customs, cultural experiences and art.