

The File Room ANTONIO MUNTADAS



For more than twenty years, Spanish artist Antonio Muntadas has orchestrated remarkably complex installations whose content – the analysis of the institutions of cultural and political power – changes with each situation in which the work is presented. This nomadic character is a hallmark of the work and the career; but in a structural pattern characteristic of the artist, the work instantly contradicts its own mutable quality and is housed or recontextualized in the very form of the institution being examined. Projects earmarked for museum visitors, such as *Between the Frames* (1983-1993) and work for public spaces, are planned according to the anticipated audiences. The permanent appearance of the installations, whose architectural refinement is evident and often elegant, belies the evolving mass of information they contain. Other levels of meaning are revealed in the design of these architectural pieces, for they are conceptualized to function semiotically, not merely to frame the situations they criticize.

Muntadas's latest project is *The File Room*, which examines the massive history of censorship. He began his research on censorship five years ago and imagined a space suggesting bureaucratic enclosures, dimly lit chambers claiming forbidden materials. I am

persuaded that Muntadas's work derives from a postmodern impulse to salvage and recuperate rather than a utopian urge to rescue and affirm. The overbearing walls of black file drawers and low-hanging light fixtures in The File Room give material presence to the sinister arena of censorship. Viewers participate, as did the artist, in a conscious political performance as they search at computer terminals for examples of censorship or, if they choose, enter their own cases into the archive.

For its introduction in Chicago, on the first floor of the Cultural Center, an enclosure constructed from 138 black metal filing cabinets, holds 552 cabinet drawers. The project's interactive component consists of seven color computer monitors (linked to a central server) installed in filing cabinets around the room. With a click of a mouse at any one of these terminals, viewers can access case histories of censorship by geographical location, date, grounds for censorship or medium. At the center of the room is a desk with another computer at which visitors can enter their own examples. In May 1994, the project opened with more than 400 entries on censorship from antiquity to the present. Under theater, for example, The File Room lists multiple occasions from the fifth century B.C. to 1967 in Athens, when Aristophanes' classic plays were banned for reasons of obscenity and anti-war themes. Another literary example is Salman Rushdie's 'Satanic Verses', while entries from popular culture recently added include television host Ed Sullivan's request to Jim Morrison of The Doors to alter a line in his song, "Light My Fire", the banning of Steven Spielberg's film, 'Schindler's List' in Jordan and from personal experience, the Chicago Public School's attempt to confiscate materials handed out to high school students by the Coalition for Positive Sexuality. Entries can also be logged in through Internet and new archives of texts and images running on other Internet sites worldwide are added to The File Room through hypertext links. Hundreds of individuals from around the world log on as users daily. What originally had been private becomes public, audiences become archivists and consumers of an expanding collection of source material.

Archives are begun when groups of individuals – families, cities – accumulate material that documents a particular activity or series of events. More systematic than the diaristic activities of those who keep journals, archival methods of saving are nevertheless inspired by the profound desire to mark events or to record something for posterity. Whether personal or political, archives have roots in antiquity and are prompted by a consciousness that what occurs is noteworthy, deserving of future consideration. Record keeping provides evidence: source material for future historians collected in the present serves as factual evidence of the past. The opposite of the archival institution, censorship has an equally long history, but represents erasure, withdrawal from memory. On both personal and public levels with subjective and objective justification, the need to control what is spoken, written or acted has often occurred as an adjunct activity of authoritarian regimes and religious movements.

The File Room's material condition, however, is rooted and objective. Before it was designated and transformed into a municipal exhibition facility, the Chicago Cultural Center housed the main branch of the city's public library. Indeed, the landmark building was constructed in 1897 as a library by the architectural firm Shipley, Rutan and Coolidge. Muntadas chose the Chicago situation because the Cultural Center functions somewhere between the public space of a street and the specialized space of a museum. Since the organizing principle of The File Room is that of an archive, its place in Chicago becomes doubly resonant. Architecturally its rationale and history coincide with the subject matter of Muntadas's project to reintroduce censored material into the library. Furthermore, its civic constituency, the fact that it is physically open and accessible to the public, underscores the openness and fluid character of the archival process, always growing, never complete. A

similar lack of boundaries and psychological uncertainty marks censorship and self-censorship, since what can be stated and what cannot is always debatable, open to redefinition and potentially infinite.

Taken to an absurdist point, The File Room in this scenario can never be complete. It holds out the promise of rendering invisible images visible, censored texts legible. Indeed there are archives of on-line books that can be accessed from within The File Room case record. A direct hypertext link will bring up complete texts of Machiavelli's 'The Prince', Hawthorne's 'The Scarlet Letter' and Whitman's 'Leaves of Grass', as well as other literary works which have been marked by censorship at one time or another. For the most part, Muntadas's oppositional critique is lodged against and in relation to an institution or ideology. While The File Room, like many of his social sculptures, was initiated on a metaphorical level as an archetypal space with a set-up that evokes the claustrophobic spaces of Kafka, the artist has pushed beyond its perceptual boundaries into a fourth dimension - the space and time of the Internet, the so-called information superhighway. Dialectically poised between reference to past function and present high-tech usage, The File Room exists in an uncertain temporal situation and in an equally unresolved conceptual terrain, the puzzle of censorship—who wields the power, what are its targets, who does it aim to protect?

Rejecting the comfort of extreme positions left or right, Muntadas locates his work in the gray zones between the poles of populism and authoritarianism, censorship and self-censorship. Intentionality becomes a problem, as his artistic negotiations are more complex, less conclusive and self-critical of his own position as the single authority who collects the cases. These material and intellectual shifts, which in retrospect seem almost preordained, also displace Muntadas's artistic authority. His role is more like that of an editor of an anthology as he leads a collaborative team of programmers and researchers who worked together to design the Mosaic program and to undertake research for the archive. Indeed, there is the uncomfortable sense that the project is too open-ended, too haphazard and subjective with few, if any, criteria for selection but every case for itself. In an essay by Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Muntadas locates some insights into the problem of censorship sprawl:

"Structural censorship does not operate with absolute perfection, in a 100/100 way. Usually it works following the rules of the calculus of probability. Messages are mitigated, altered or brutally eliminated depending upon their degree of incompatibility. ... While censorship oriented toward production cleans up the core of the cultural industry (publishing, television, cinema), policing censorship — since it is complementary to the first kind of censorship — leans the periphery (fanzines, small presses). The first kind of censorship is unobserved, so much of the second is noisy. And this second one likes to give spectacle, having people talking about it; its actions are meant to be demonstrative."¹

The paradox of The File Room is the fact that, like its content, it cannot be controlled or concluded; potentially it could include all cultural and political production from anytime, any place. The File Room changes according to its user's willingness to contribute, to engage in a dialogue and debate the contradictions of censorship without reaching a resolution. It is striking that Muntadas has veered away from his own agenda of deconstructing spectacle and mass media to expose its internal mechanisms in order to provide a global frame of reference for this massive collection. It is perhaps inevitable that certain subscribers to America Online have already submitted an entry about the infringement of their public speech by forum hosts on Internet. According to one subscriber, members of a bulletin board are having their "posts pulled" by this commercial service provider for violating the vague admonition against vulgar or insulting language and explicit talk about sex. In fact, even euphemisms are being pulled

for content, although America Online denies its adherence to any specific code of electronic proprieties. Ultimately, The File Room is subject to the same constraints of its own cultural logic; it can only be concluded if someone pulls the plug or censors the file.

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1 From "Lo dico, non lo dico, no, lo dico ..." Hans Magnus Enzensberger translated by Catarina Borelli from an article reprinted this year in the Italian newspaper, L'Espresso, copyright 1977 by Pardon and L'Espresso.

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