PEDAGOGY, ART AND PUBLIC SPACE

Silvia Bottinelli in conversation with
Antoni Muntadas and Gediminas Urbonas

INTRODUCTION

Pieces from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s (MIT) public art collection punctuate the university’s campus. Beyond being the site of renowned permanent installations, MIT plays host to temporary experiences that aim at re-evaluating the definition of public space.

Select symposia, lectures, exhibitions and courses address public art and dialogue with multiple audiences; particular consideration is awarded to the community of MIT students and professors, whose technological research will contribute to broadly reshaping our future access to, and interactions within, public space.

The Maki building is the epicenter of such research. This environment houses the Media Lab and the Program in Art, Culture, and Technology (ACT), in addition to the List Center, the Okawa Center and the Comparative Media Studies Program. Given the fact that it is home to diverse programs, the building itself becomes a theater for interdisciplinary exchange, where artists and scientists can compare perspectives and try to find some common ground.

In addition, the space is used for experiments in the display of art and intelligent architecture. For example, sensors scattered on walls and ceilings process information about the users’ bodies and their movements.

“You Are Being Listened To,” Gediminas Urbonas informs me of the sensors while I comment on the exhibition on view in the Maki building’s hall.\(^1\) The space is occupied by monumental billboards bearing the huge words, “Who? What? Why? How? Where? When? For whom? How much?” The billboards are key components of the show Public Space? Lost and Found, curated by Urbonas in Spring 2014 (Figures 1 and 2). The display also includes archival materials related to courses taught by artist Antoni Muntadas. In fact, together with a symposium and a forthcoming volume,\(^2\) the exhibition honors Muntadas, who was a member of the MIT community between 1977 and 2014, first as a research fellow at the Center for Advanced Visual Studies (CAVS) and then as a Professor of the Practice with ACT (Figure 3).
The billboards showcase questions that function as prompts for the development of a project. Muntadas asks that his students consider each question as they create work inspired by their experiences of public space in Cambridge and elsewhere. As clarified in an interview with Anne Bénichou, Muntadas values the concept of the project over that of the actual exhibition, as it does not impose specific time constraints but rather “institutes a way of working in the long term and generates a set-up that is ready when it is ready.” In Muntadas’ vocabulary, a project is a work-in-progress centered around a specific research topic; research is conducted through the study of secondary and primary sources, as well as through direct experience and the collection of oral sources via interviews; the results of research are shared through displays, events and activities that are publicly interactive.

Figure 1. *Public Space? Lost and Found*. Installation view. Maki Building, MIT; Cambridge, Massachusetts. April–August 2014. Courtesy Gediminas Urbonas.

Figure 2. *Public Space? Lost and Found*. Aerial view. Maki Building, MIT; Cambridge, Massachusetts. April–August 2014. Courtesy Gediminas Urbonas.
Public Space? Lost and Found is organized so that viewers can engage with documents produced during Muntadas’ classes. Visitors can simply wander around the Maki building and view the billboards from a distance or stop at each and view the course materials on display.

Each billboard also represents specific destinations from around the world, places that Muntadas and his students visited as part of his course Dialogues in Public Space (offered at MIT and other international institutions). The projects created by the students over the years are extremely varied. Examples include a tennis match in which the court resembles the field of a video game circuit board (Jennifer Allora); a song loop that seeks to highlight the endless perception of time from the perspective of immigrants awaiting their documents’ approval: the song, “South of the Border” describes a romantic image of Mexico in contrast with current media representations (Clementine Cummer and Nicole Vlado); didactic workshops with Chinatown school children at the Berkeley Street Community Gardens in Boston (Marrikka Trotter); and a series of portable pedestals that transform into bases for impromptu live monuments (Souyan).

Documentation of courses at MIT and elsewhere is on display in shelves and cases attached to the billboard structures of Public Space? Lost and Found. DIY and “retro” looking, the billboards obstruct the viewer’s perspective in such a way that it is impossible to see all the way through the Maki building, the architecture of which is intentionally airy and transparent. The Tokyo-based architectural firm Maki and Associates who authored the design intended a sense of openness, with external walls of glass that offer the impression of total accessibility. Entering the space, though, the visitors’ bodies are tracked: temperature measured and voices recorded, as Urbonas mentioned. In some ways, Public Space? Lost and Found mirrors the contrast between the supposed openness of public space and the actual inability to participate in contemporary public discourse without being
monitored; in fact, participation often relies on the Internet and social media, which also allow for individual contributions to be tracked.

It was during my visit to this exhibition in June 2014 that I started my ongoing conversation with Urbonas and Muntadas.

**Silvia Bottinelli (SB):** Gediminas, if the exhibition itself is a codified language\(^5\) — that is, if the exhibition is a way to communicate by constructing an experience in which every installation element functions as a signifier—what is the meaning behind the installation choices?

**Gediminas Urbonas (GU):** As Beatriz Colomina poetically and provocatively suggested in her contribution to the symposium, public life and public space have been inverted so that the ultimate public space today is . . . our bedroom, where most of our business and public affairs are conducted with the help of communication technologies. So, in a nutshell, so much of our time is spent dealing with others through devices in our bedroom. Hence, as Colomina concluded, the architecture of public and private has been inverted. *Public Space? Lost and Found* reflects this situation, this inversion, as it brings inside the institution—the heart of MIT—the apparatuses, the elements and fixtures of construction sites (Figure 4). Utilizing the materiality of the basic and democratic character of everyday life—mundane materials like plywood, sand and vinyl (a typical billboard material that points to infrastructures marking a mediatized public landscape)—the exhibition design constructs structures for pedagogical engagement, if you will. What you described as “retro” perhaps could be rephrased as a triangulating conversation about materiality that brings the constructivist take on the reading rooms—I am thinking of Rodchenko’s *Workers’ Club* or El Lissitzky’s *Abstract Cabinet* for Alexander Dorner’s *Living Museum* vis-à-vis with Aldo van Eyck’s *Playgrounds*. The constructivist logic of our exhibit comes into play when it ends and the installation gets dismantled, lending the large vinyl billboards to be cut in pieces and tailored for a collection of specially designed tote bags. Each bag bears a fragment of the key image representing the

![Figure 4. Gediminas Urbonas at the opening of Public Space? Lost and Found. MIT; Cambridge, Massachusetts. April 18, 2014. Courtesy Gediminas Urbonas.](image-url)
destination of the class research. For example, destination Boston features Occupy Boston (Boston Commons, Fall 2011), metaphorically distributing that image to other random destinations, intervening and disrupting those spaces, whether urban spaces and social media.

**SB:** Muntadas, from your point of view what was the genesis of *Public Space? Lost and Found*?

**Antoni Muntadas (AM):** The idea was sparked in conversation with Ute Meta Bauer when she was the director of ACT. It was a kind of farewell event, as I was also leaving MIT after many years of involvement. Gediminas was very generous to develop the idea and put together a symposium and exhibition with those I had connections with, and I knew all of them; I was and am an indirect participant. However, I have comments about the building: in the architecture of the university we have two kinds of spaces; one is the British monastery type, like Harvard, Princeton and Columbia, the other is the transparent architecture of glass typical of MIT or NYU. This is more invisible in terms of the architecture itself. The Maki building is a typical example of the latter, and of course the site influences pedagogy as well: it’s not the same to teach in a room where you are totally isolated—without windows and little relationship to the outside—than in a place where one has contact with the outside. I talked a bit about this in my project *About Academia,*⁶ a collection of interviews with academics with a long history of teaching experience (Figure 5). I ask all of them similar questions to unearth the links between education and power on a global scale. The second phase of the same project, *About Academia II,*⁷ mirrors *About Academia*’s structure, but, students—rather than professors—from private and public colleges were interviewed.

**SB:** The interview is often part of your practice. As noted by Néstor García Canclini,⁸ you expose the viewers to a range of perspectives and enable them to form their own opinion. What sparks your own interest in specific subjects?

![Figure 5. Antoni Muntadas, Interview with Noam Chomsky. *About Academia.* Harvard Carpenter Center. 2011. Courtesy Antoni Muntadas Archive.](image)
**AM:** Through the 1980s, I made a project called *Between the Frames*, which was about the system of art. I was interested in all the people between the artist and the audience. Later, Harvard asked me to work on a project with MIT; I saw it as an opportunity to engage with smart people, or people with experience. Projects usually start from a curiosity to learn. *About Academia* began with Harvard's request and took three years to complete. Results were presented at Harvard and other universities across the US and Canada, with the presentation always contextualized within the university.

**SB:** Do you believe that the artist affects change in the university from within? How so?

**AM:** One of the interesting points of *About Academia*, as well as *About Academia II*, is to behold the academy’s evolution from institution to corporation. The institutional component of academia is absorbed by a corporate management structure: business as usual. The economy influences a lot of decisions, from how students pay to the gentrification of the neighborhoods where the university is located. The role of academia is migrating in ways that we had not anticipated before. From the European perspective it is very difficult to see, because the university is still part of the public trust. But when the university is part of the private sector, you see this increase. How do you locate pedagogy in a machine that has other agendas besides teaching, learning and research?

**SB:** Yes, this is a crucial question. What is the role of the teacher in this mechanism? How do you locate yourself within the machine of the university?

**AM:** Well, you need to keep doing what you think is your work and your responsibility. The practice of disseminating knowledge and questioning information needs to be continued, even if you are in a situation that is not ideal, especially in some places where there is a connection to the corporate and military worlds, which is not easy to relate to.

**SB:** Your practice is informed by an interest in pedagogical aesthetics; in other words, you have been experimenting with teaching as a form of artistic project. Why did you choose to work within academia, as opposed to other educational situations that are completely detached from the institutional realm?

**AM:** It is important to refer to project methodology. Teaching and practice are complementary—the one informs the other. When I am teaching, the class is about the project and I use the terms of the methodology of the project, based on my own practice. It's important to work with a structure: mine is a methodology, not the methodology. Students choose their own methodology and follow steps and accomplish something. People learn by doing. If you work only on a theoretical basis, something is missed. Through the project, you unify these approaches. You research first, then put things into practice.

**SB:** Gediminas, what drew you to academia as a form of activism and public art? Is this something that happened as organically as for Muntadas, or was it planned?
GU: Well, Muntadas has been involved with MIT since 1977, as a researcher (an artist hired with an appointment from György Kepes and Otto Piene), and then as a professor. I came to MIT in 2009 after working for four years at the Norwegian University for Science and Technology. I was interested in short-term collaborations with academic institutions in order to produce work within the format of the workshop. Looking back at works that Nomeda and I developed in collaboration with institutions since the beginning of the 1990s, I can say that these workshops were a type of laboratory, or temporary institutions and temporal organizational forms. We attempted to look into the aesthetics of organization; I have in mind types of forms of collective belonging, creating a type of context in a small group, flirting with forms of utopian organizations. These utopias have an activist flavor and orientation. That said, it is somewhat of a paradox that we are now so entrenched in an academic institute! But this paradox can be explained. There is a trend in the art world: the pedagogical turn and perhaps also the research turn. This process requires certain conditions. One of them is longevity. None of the art world institutions offer the same opportunity to develop a consistent, long-term research program or agenda that academia affords.

SB: It is true that teaching at higher education institutions can afford the opportunity to organize multi-year projects, especially if the instructor holds a tenured position. However, not all faculty can count on long-term appointments, and there is hierarchy among the faculty. In the classroom, other kinds of vertical social structures can affect the way in which the students learn. How do you both feel about the power dynamic between students and professors?

AM: I think it’s important to be clear the first day of class: what is going to happen, who is teaching, who is visiting, why they are there. Then there is no need to exercise power, because the rest is clear. The TA is also very important: s/he functions as a complementary element that connects the students and the teacher, s/he eliminates the generational gap, the distance between established roles: you discuss the decisions, you share them. There is a structure and flexibility. We also need to remind the students of a specific vocabulary. They must choose among diverse typologies of action: temporary interventions, collaborations with artists and architects, community involvement...there are different ways to act and react in diverse situations.

GU: As producers of knowledge, professors and students equally are subjects of the “apparatus” of the educational factory. Foucault and later Agamben elaborate on the apparatus—a system that encompasses various institutional aspects, including physical, administrative and discursive, all of which participate in modeling, controlling and safeguarding our behavior, thinking and discourse. In that sense, my students and I are part of the same apparatus: a systematic entanglement of power that is characteristic of cognitive capitalism. I am always interested to engage with students in “extra-disciplinary investigations” that lead to a productive take on institutional critique, shifting traditional inquiry into the power relations within the (art) system toward radical forms of pedagogy and practice that build and reinforce relations between artistic, theoretical and activist efforts and networked commonalities.
SB: Muntadas and Gediminas, you both intend to construct courses in which both the students and the teachers find learning opportunities. You also organize your classes as a process analogous to how Muntadas might design a project. I am curious, what is the role of failure in your pedagogy? How is that accounted for in *Public Space? Lost and Found*?

AM: Well, some students are so proud of themselves that they don’t take the risk to fail. They feel more comfortable doing research, but feel intimidated by risking on the practical aspects. I’m sorry, but inside the classroom you need to experiment, to explore and risk. This happens when you learn. In the first part of the semester you need to confront yourself with research: conversation, interviews, readings, field trips—all come before you define the project. At a certain moment, the research becomes materialized in the project. Time is clearly divided in sections. It’s a pedagogy of practice, or practice as a pedagogy. When you go outside the classroom, you want to be more edited and finalized. The presentation of the projects does not need to translate the failure. It is meant for a public of outsiders that needs to understand the logic of the project, it must be more finished.

GU: I see each course as a laboratory for pedagogy (to borrow from Varela), a portable lab where experiments in pedagogy and artistic research take place. Only by taking risks is it possible to know the value of experimentation: crisis, urgency and failure are the pillars of invention in such a space. Failure is critical in times so driven by the pressure of success as it provokes dialectical thinking. No crisis, no critique. Whenever we intervene or put on hold the “distribution of the sensible” we are balancing on the verge of paradox, on the edge where failure and success are suspended yet available simultaneously. Perhaps the choice for the display materials of *Public Space? Lost and Found* was capitalizing on such suspense. In a space driven by the future and where the most ambitious plans to achieve that future rely on high-technological means, it was simply too mundane to offer an aesthetic typical of construction sites or Home Depot. But the game was intentional as it suggested the dialectics with the apparatuses overseeing our gesturing toward a somewhat less-than-Media-Lab-worthy future.

SB: The display of *Public Space? Lost and Found* is dominated by the big billboards that Gediminas just discussed. Behind each billboard, one could read the questions: “Who? What? Why? How? Where? When? For whom? How much?” These are also the questions that shape the research process in Muntadas’ classes. Is the role of the artist that of asking questions, instead of giving answers? If so, what are the effects of this approach?

AM: This is a way to make the audience become sensitized and intrigued in order to create an intellectual dialogue. This is the hope, although it’s difficult to know if this actually happens; the level of engagement varies from individual to individual. I would like to talk about a paradox, too. There was an exhibition titled *Big Data* on view in Barcelona in June 2014. It was an interesting pedagogical show, but with a lack of criticism: the critical aspect, created through questions, needs to be reinforced. We are at an advantage in receiving large quantities of data through the Internet, but there is also an aspect of surveillance that we should not underestimate. There is a loss of public space that comes from the introduction of systems
of control. Information data, which is the terrain of the Media Lab, requires critical scrutiny. We must test technological innovations and question their value beyond the reception by corporations.

**SB**: Muntadas, you have critically incorporated new technologies in your work for decades, for example *TVE: Primer Intento* (1989), a documentary about the origin of the only Spanish television channel available during your childhood; and *The File Room* (1994) (Figure 6), a notorious piece about censorship that was accessible simultaneously at the Chicago Cultural Center and on the Internet. A territory you explore with equal attention is travel, through which you have tackled issues of cultural translation since the early 1970s. For example, in your series *Markets, Streets and Stations* (1973) (Figure 7) you recorded people in public places in countries such as Mexico, Morocco, Portugal and the United States. More recently, the various incarnations of *On Translation* (1995–ongoing) reveal how the same signifier can have different meanings depending on context. The documentation shows the diverse values and social codes attached to the public environment within different cultures. Travel is also a fundamental pedagogical tool for you, and for Urboñas too. What is achieved through travel that wouldn’t be possible otherwise?

**AM**: A course requires a series of elements beyond the teacher and the students: reading books, attending lectures, visiting exhibitions, experiencing public spaces, being aware of new media. Travel is relevant because we talk a lot about context. Seeing another context, beyond one’s own, provides a quality of comparison that allows for an understanding of the local by contrast. The cities where we travel are starkly different from the Boston area, where MIT is located; these places open up to sharing, to a collective dynamic. Travel makes the relationship among all the participants more connected; power structures dissolve during trips. I usually travel to places that I know, or where I have been before, so I can better activate the visit.
GU: The studio seminar in public art/public sphere that is developed each spring term at ACT explores the contexts and ideas that situate “the public sphere” and what is called “public art.” Those ideas constantly shift from one context to another; to grapple with them, one needs to conduct the actual public interventions experimenting with perception, expression and action. We also operate in hybrid space that merges the physical environment and the transmitted one. The artists of CAVS, the precursor of ACT, launched the first wave of environmentally conscious projects situating the discourse of public space within the expanded context of ecosystems. Today, as we all know, we are dealing with the legacy of environmental and ecological damage on a global scale. The overarching aim of class travel is to engage the world through eco-systematic relationships. Correlating MIT, Boston and other destinations defined as ecological frontiers, we seek to confront the human-generated forces that are transforming the biosphere; we can only engage through a relational, hybrid and widely sharable framework—and simultaneously on a global scale—from one country or continent to another. Through travel the class not only maps shifting notions of the public sphere, but also engages aesthetic regimes navigating perceptual and expressive techniques that grapple with the spatial relations of today’s interconnected world. The travel-based research element of the course facilitates the correlation of the diversity of articulations of these notions and regimes in flux, opening up possibilities to engage with public space on today’s most urgent scale—the scale of the Anthropocene.

SB: Being nomadic yourselves, living across continents and countries, you have certainly developed an in-depth understanding of the so-called global art world. Is there homogeneity in the way in which young artists interpret the public space in different places?

GU: If one wants to communicate for oneself, one has to learn one of the global languages. Too bad nobody cares about Esperanto anymore! Or perhaps that’s a good thing. In any case, the dream of a universal language notwithstanding, it is necessary to “speak” several languages, as this enables one to grapple with disciplinary and cultural proximities. In these proximities there is a space and time for poetics, paradoxes and politics, and for the discovery of unexpected truths. Living across continents (or disciplinary islands) means constant re-translation of oneself from one context into another, and one needs to be equipped to engage with these proximities. As humans are mimetic beings, the communication technologies spread the homogeneity around the globe much faster, nevertheless I believe the task of the humanities (and post-humanities) is to secure biodiversity; that is, to be equipped to produce local meaning to engage in a given space and time on a different scales—from body to city.

AM: I agree. In my courses the trips are to places where there is not necessarily a strong art system, but where the public space is intended in ways different from Boston. Concerning the globality of art, I am critical. All these biennales are not essential to me. Sometimes I prefer to avoid them. Of course, we live between local and global. However, when we do a project, all the places are local. We need to go
in depth and absorb as much as possible. We want to go beyond the similarities, to understand the specificities.

**CONCLUSION**

Talking about local specificities, MIT clearly has a history of engagement with public space and public art. This attention takes the form of collections, architectural installations and didactic offerings. Muntadas’ seminars in Public Art, and current courses in Public Art offered by Urbonas at ACT, contribute to shaping public art discourses by fostering the design of projects that reflect on existing power structures within and outside the institution. The courses put emphasis on the development of critical tools that address contrasting aspects such as the relationship of public and private, participation and surveillance, techno-optimism and the everyday, locality and globalization. The exhibition, symposium and upcoming book *Public Space? Lost and Found* provide a visual archive of the courses’ experiences and ignite a new dialogue about the role of public space in contemporary society.

**NOTES**

1. See “ACT Dialogues in Public Space,” 2016. http://goo.gl/iQ3i0p (accessed 15 Aug. 2016). *Public Space? Lost and Found* was on view between 18 Apr. and 20 Aug. 2014. Since then, Muntadas, Urbonas and I have developed a dialogue revolving around some core points of the show. The pages published here represent the most recent phase of an ongoing process, which will inevitably continue to evolve as both academia and public art find ever-changing incarnations. I am grateful to both Muntadas and Urbonas for sharing their perspectives.


7. *About Academia II* was presented at the Center for Art, Design and Visual Culture—University of Maryland Baltimore from 2 Feb.–17 Mar.


**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


**BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES**

Silvia Bottinelli teaches in the Visual and Critical Studies Department, School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts University. She received her PhD from the University of Pisa in 2008. Dr. Bottinelli is the author of two monographs about post-WWII Italian art in the public sphere. She is the present travel fellow of the Center for Italian Modern Art and received a research grant from the American Philosophical Society to work on her current book project. Dr. Bottinelli’s articles have appeared in numerous edited volumes and journals, such as, among others, *Art Journal, Modernism/modernity, Food Studies, Art Papers* and *Sculpture Magazine*.

Antoni Muntadas is a Catalan artist. His work has been exhibited at major international museums (New York MoMA, Berkeley Art Museum, Musée Contemporain de Montreal, Reina Sofía, Museo de Arte Moderno in Buenos Aires, Museu de Arte Moderna in Rio de Janeiro and MACBA, among others). Also, Muntadas presented his projects at Documenta (1977, 1997), the Whitney Biennial (1991), the 51st Venice Biennial (2005) and the Biennales of São Paulo, Lyon, Taipei, Gwangju and Havana.

Artist Gediminas Urbonas is an Associate Professor and the Director of the ACT program at MIT. Together with Nomeda Urbonas, he is the co-founder of US: Urbonas Studio. Their projects have been shown internationally, including in the São Paulo, Venice, Berlin, Moscow, Lyon and Gwangju Biennales; as well as in Manifesta and Documenta. Urbonas Studio also represented Lithuania at the Venice Biennale in 2007, and was featured in a solo show at the MACBA museum in Barcelona in 2008.