

## Ship of Fools

"*Tout est dangereux ici-bas, et tout est nécessaire*"  
Voltaire

The work of Paula Anguita focuses on --that is to say, it de-naturalizes- vision. More precisely it materializes it, manifesting its dependency from that third dimension, the space, which the traditional perspective, by simulating it, left aside. In fact, for Paula Anguita's work to constitute itself, it is necessary that the observer not only should stand in front of the image and exercise interpretation as a pure and disinterested observer, but also that she should move, involving her body in this displacement. With this minimum gesture, the exposed images lose their comfortable unity: the quiet cruise, sailing on a calm sea breaks in two, sinks; it suddenly becomes the *Stulifera Navis*, The Ship of the Fools, which perhaps it always was<sup>1</sup>.

Madness and travelling are recurrent themes in the work of Paula Anguita. In this way, and I have in mind works such as the one the exhibition is named after, or *Der Verruckte* (The Mad), an old topic reappears. Life in the mainland, under the kind glance of Zeus, represents rational behaviour; the sea instead, under the power of Poseidon, the God who shakes the Earth, represents the unexpected; anarchy, disorientation, wreck and craziness.

Hans Blumenberg, German XXth century philosopher, gave special attention to metaphors through which we organize our lives. He wrote a short essay dedicated to the figure of the wreck (*Shipwreck with Spectator*). He registers in it the atavistic mistrust aroused by men who entrusts their fragile existence to such a capricious element. Reading Hesiod (or the *Apocalypses* of John, who announces a Messianic Kingdom in which "there will no longer be a sea") Blumenberg concludes: "The powers and gods responsible for [the sea] stubbornly withdraw from the sphere of determinable forces. Out of the ocean that lies all around the edge of the habitable world come mythical monsters, which are at the farthest remove from the familiar visage of nature and seem to have no knowledge of the sea as cosmos".

As a matter of fact, we inhabit a cosmos. In other words, a world furnished with familiar objects, which seem to exist *per se*. Nevertheless, there are instants when this comfortable familiarity is dissolved: instants in which we are allowed to suspect that solidity is merely illusory and that what we consider as hard and substantial facts, is nothing but the result of the slow, very slow sedimentation of the habits that our inevitable trade with the world imposes. This sedimentation takes place in

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<sup>1</sup> In 1494, humanist Sebastian Brant published *Das Narrenschiff*, or *The Ship of Fools*, a long, moralistic poem written in the German language. Born in Strasbourg, Germany circa 1457, Brant earned degrees in philosophy and law at the University of Basel, then continued there as a lecturer. He wrote a law textbook and several poems prior to *Das Narrenschiff*, as well as editing books and broadsides for local printers. Brant was a loyalist to the Holy Roman Empire, and when Basel joined the Swiss Confederation in 1499, Brant returned to imperial Strasbourg. There he worked for the city in various administrative capacities until his death in 1521. In *Das Narrenschiff*, Brant describes 110 assorted follies and vices, each undertaken by a different fool, devoting chapters to such offenses as Arrogance Toward God, Marrying for Money, and Noise in Church. Some of the chapters are united by the common theme of a ship which will bear the assembled fools to Narragonia, the island of fools. *Das Narrenschiff* proved so popular that it went through multiple editions, and was translated into Latin, French, English, Dutch, and Low German.  
(<http://info.lib.uh.edu/sca/digital/ship/introduction.html>)

our senses; finally, it crystallizes in concepts and words: truths whose profane history we have forgotten. Truths: "this is a dog"; "this is a tree"; "this is a woman". Nevertheless, Nietzsche states, "truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins." ("On Truth and Lie in a Extra-Moral Sense", <http://www.geocities.com/thenietzschechannel/tls.htm>).

Certainly, for us in the XXI century, the transmutation of one image into another, while we comfortably sit in the cinema, seems to be nothing special. Nevertheless, 24 times per second the image turns black; by chance of our physiology, we perceive that outrageous blink as if it were pure continuity. In the cinema, also in TV, and even more in the contemporary digital arts, this technique shows its kinship with magic, with illusionism; certain high-tech venues, such as the MIT's Media Lab of, or the ZKM in Karlsruhe, carry with them a whiff of the fun fair.

But, in her *The Ship of the Fools*, Paula Anguita makes an option for a deliberately archaic technique: in this way, the spectator is faced to what sophisticated technologies, with their user-friendly interphases, vainly attempt to hide. In fact, passing by the works that we now present, there is a moment (the failure, the glitch<sup>2</sup>) in which the images disquietingly lose their definition: we then attend, though only once (and once is all there is!) to the unfamiliar view of an image at the moment of its liquefaction (or should I say passing-out?).

Borges writes: "We (the undivided divinity that operates in us) have dreamt the world. We have dreamt it as resistant, mysterious, visible, ubiquitous in space, strong in time; but we have allowed tenuous and eternal interstices of unreason in its architecture to know that it is false". ("Avatares de la Tortuga")

"Eternal interstices of unreason". Paula Anguita's *Ship of Fools*, with its cargo of monsters, might be one of them.

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<sup>2</sup> Common term in the computing slang, it is used to design unpredictable failures. Its etymology is suggestive: from the German *glitschig*, which means slippery (as the skin of a monster).