

HORS-SÉRIE

LE JOURNAL

NUMBER 2

DU MUSÉE D'ART CONTEMPORAIN DE MONTRÉAL



On Translation: The Audience
View of the project in progress
Rotterdam, 1998-1999

Muntadas

ON TRANSLATION : LE PUBLIC

OCTOBER 12, 2000 TO JANUARY 7, 2001

A NATIVE OF BARCELONA, ANTONI MUNTADAS LIVES AND WORKS MAINLY IN NEW YORK. HIS ART HAS BEEN THE SUBJECT OF NUMEROUS EXHIBITIONS AROUND THE WORLD (VENICE, SÃO PAULO AND PARIS BIENNALES, KASSEL DOCUMENTA, ETC.). THE MONTRÉAL PRESENTATION OF THIS EXHIBITION IS A CO-PRODUCTION OF WITTE DE WIT, CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY ART (ROTTERDAM) AND THE MUSÉE D'ART CONTEMPORAIN DE MONTRÉAL. IT IS COMPLETED BY A VIDEO PROGRAM FEATURING WORKS PRODUCED BY MUNTADAS SINCE THE LATE SEVENTIES. AFTER MONTRÉAL, THE EXHIBITION WILL TRAVEL TO THE UNIVERSITY ART MUSEUM (BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA), IN EARLY 2001.

Since the seventies, Muntadas has cast a critical eye, through his art, at the way meaning is developed and transformed by means of different systems of representation. In a world marked by the increasing hold of the media and the communications sector, his works endeavour to reveal the mechanisms underlying the transmission of information and the conditioning of the public. In an often metaphorical tone, and employing a number of techniques (video, photography, sound, Internet, printed material, architectural installations... generally in combination), Muntadas explores the space between the source of a piece of information (which is often the source of some power) and its perception by the public, a space where various manipulations take place.

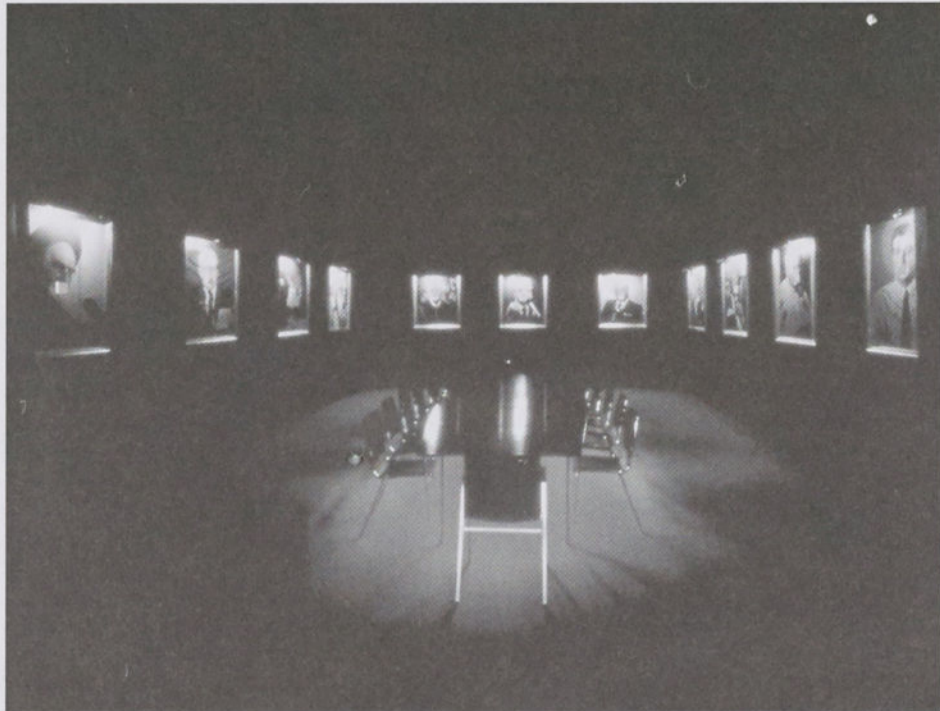
The exhibition *On Translation : Le Public*¹ is made up of three major installations produced by Muntadas over the last two decades: *The Board Room*; *Between the Frames: The Forum*; and *On Translation: The Audience*. Apart from illustrating the artist's chief concerns, the purpose of bringing them together is to shed light on three different approaches to setting up an exhibition: "reconstruction": the installation of *The Board Room* follows precise instructions, repeated from one exhibition to the next; "reinterpretation": like a musical score, the installation *Between the Frames: The Forum* receives a fresh interpretation with each presentation of the work; and "recontextualization": originally revolving around Rotterdam's network of cultural institutions, the work *On Translation: The Audience* undergoes an expansion in the number of its components and its range of references with each new exhibition site.



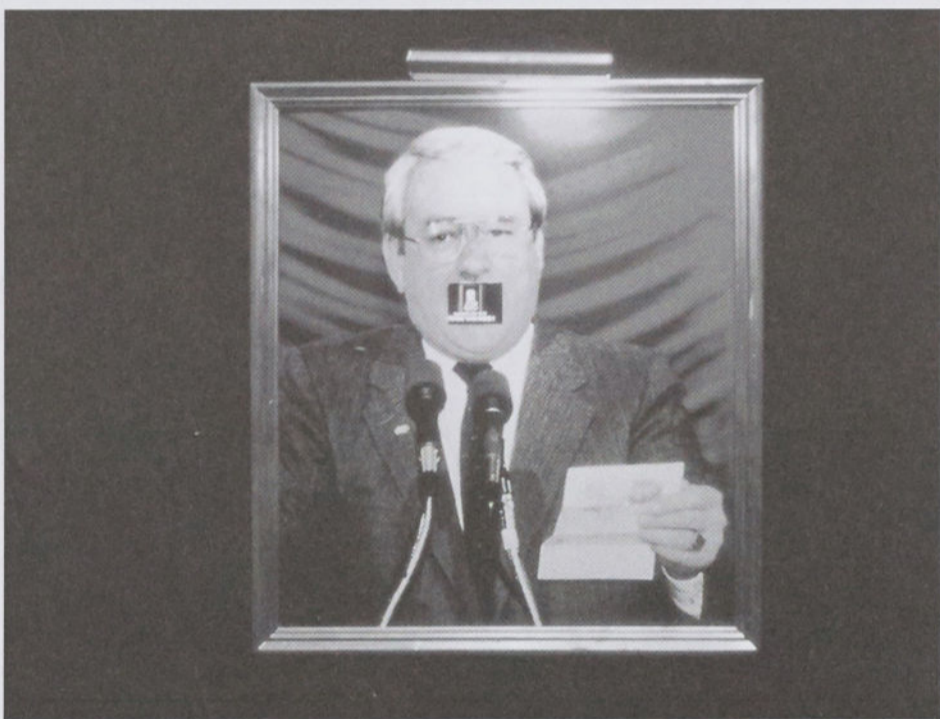
MUSÉE D'ART CONTEMPORAIN DE MONTRÉAL

Québec

1. For the Montréal presentation, the title has been adapted from the original, *On Translation: The Audience*.



The Board Room, 1987
Installation (partial view)
Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa
Gift of Walter A. Moos, Toronto



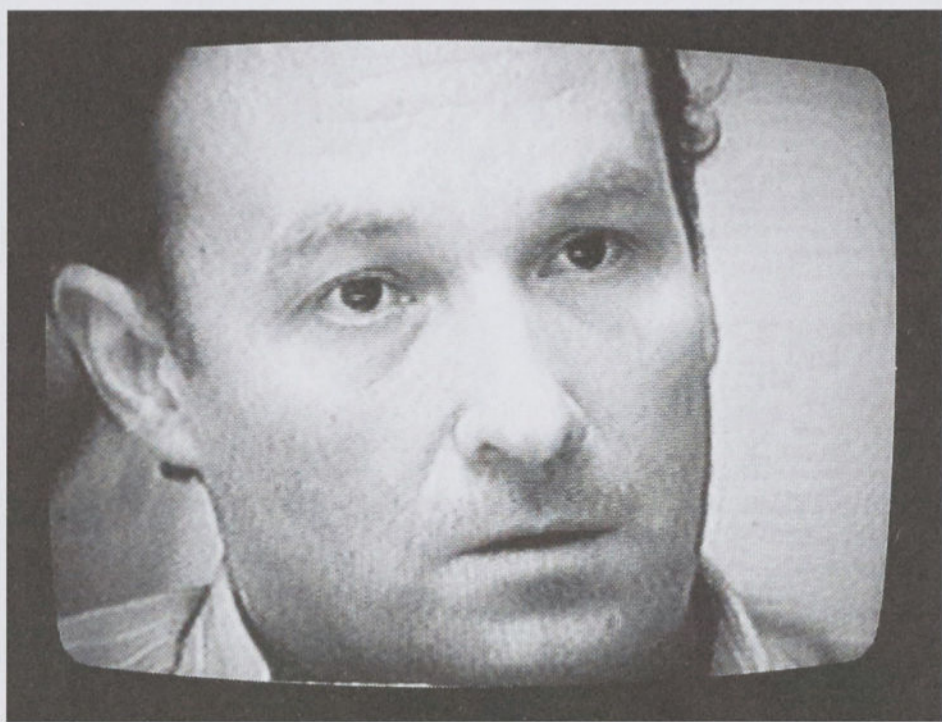
The Board Room (detail), 1987

The Board Room

The very title of *The Board Room* evokes its form. A long, rectangular table surrounded by thirteen chairs stands in the middle of a space whose walls are dotted with thirteen portraits using both photography and video. The lighting, which comes from small lamps above the portraits and coloured neon lights set under the table, gives the work a dramatic effect that is further emphasized by the formal frames and the red of the carpet. The religious reference, established implicitly by the number of chairs and portraits (suggesting the Last Supper), is made explicit by the content of those portraits: television evangelists, heads of sects or spiritual leaders of international stature, the individuals portrayed all belong to the world of religion. In all cases, they are also media figures, as evidenced by the origin of the photographs used to produce the portraits and the presentation of excerpts from television talks given by these leaders. Although they emanate from different churches or denominations, these talks are oddly similar in the tone adopted—a tone that attests to a proselytical desire to persuade.

In its configuration and its elements borrowed from media representation, *The Board Room* draws a parallel between the theoretically separate realms of religion and economic power. Both enjoy the spinoff effects of media coverage, and both make use of archetypal rituals and forms that are, in addition, often similar. Here, the space created by the work features a decorum and a contemplative atmosphere that are characteristic of sites of decision making as well as places of worship—and even certain places with a cultural mission. Indeed, while *The Board Room* initially seems independent of its exhibition context, in some ways the work actually relates to the art venues in which it is displayed. In spite of the illusion created, visitors cannot disregard the fact that they are looking at a boardroom set up inside an exhibition gallery. Some connections may therefore be established, notably concerning the importance of the presentation (or museography) in the process of transmitting a message or emotion.

Between the Frames: The Forum



Between the Frames
Detail (chapters 1 and 3 – The Dealers, The Galleries)

Produced mainly in the eighties, *Between the Frames* constitutes a "portrait" of the contemporary art world of that decade. Made up of excerpts from video interviews conducted in different countries with players in the art world, the work is laid out in eight chapters spread over seven videotapes. These chapters cover: dealers, galleries, collectors, museums, docents, critics and the media. In the eighth chapter, or epilogue, the artists are heard. *Between the Frames* was first presented as a work in progress, in the form of a video program containing the chapters then finished. Since its completion, it has been exhibited (as is the case here) as an installation entitled *Between the Frames: The Forum*.

At first glance, the work could resemble a sociological investigation²—an impression qualified, however, by the overall form it is given. For example, the people interviewed are not identified: their names appear only in a list at the end of each chapter. Similarly, no translation of the interviews is provided on screen, despite the fact that the people interviewed express themselves in different languages (variously in English, French, Catalan, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish).³ Moreover, the interviews are interspersed with images of a metaphorical nature, inserted during the editing and showing environments outside the art world. Finally, in addition to the video's different formal traits, the work is set up in the space as an installation. This use of space, which varies from one exhibition to the next, was entrusted, in accordance with the artist's wishes, to a player on the Montréal scene—specifically, Guy Bellavance, a sociologist of art and professor at the Institut national de la recherche scientifique (INRS – Culture et société).

By offering multiple possibilities for reading and considering the work, *Between the Frames: The Forum* goes beyond the quest for objectivity typical of strictly sociological research. Its openness induces active participation by the viewer, yet does not allow any hasty conclusions. The work thus brings out the complexity of the network of ideas and relationships which, in the contemporary art world as elsewhere, lies behind the conveying and assigning of values.

2. Each tape begins with a short text shown on the screen and specifying the following: "Art, as part of our time, culture and society, shares and is affected by rules, structures and ties like other economic, political and social systems in our society. *Between the Frames* is a series of eight chapters about people and institutions located between the artist and the audience."

3. French and English transcriptions of the interviews have been published, however: by CAPC – Musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux, and by the Wexner Center for the Arts (Columbus, Ohio) in collaboration with the List Visual Arts Center (Cambridge, Massachusetts).

TEXT BY GUY BELLAVANCE, INRS – CULTURE ET SOCIÉTÉ, GIVING HIS “REINTERPRETATION” OF THE WORK *BETWEEN THE FRAMES*, BY MUNTADAS

Temple, City, Labyrinth

There is art. And then there is the art world, which underlies or accompanies it, like a murmur, rumour or noise. The echo is especially “audible” in contemporary art, the art that is being made now. More than traditional art, whose values are already well established, contemporary art seems to remain much more closely attached to the personalities and interpretations of the many different players in the art world. For indeed, time generally acts in favour of the works themselves, muffling the echo of the worlds that produced them. In letting us consider works out of context, removed from their particular circle or world, time thus magnifies their “aura,” their reach. But what happens when we subject the art world to the same process, by putting it on exhibition, as is the case here? Does this lead, for example, to a “demystification” of art or the art system, to the removal of the sacred aura surrounding it? Or, on the contrary, does it result in a new mythology, a (re)sanctification giving it back an aura similar to that emanating from the works?

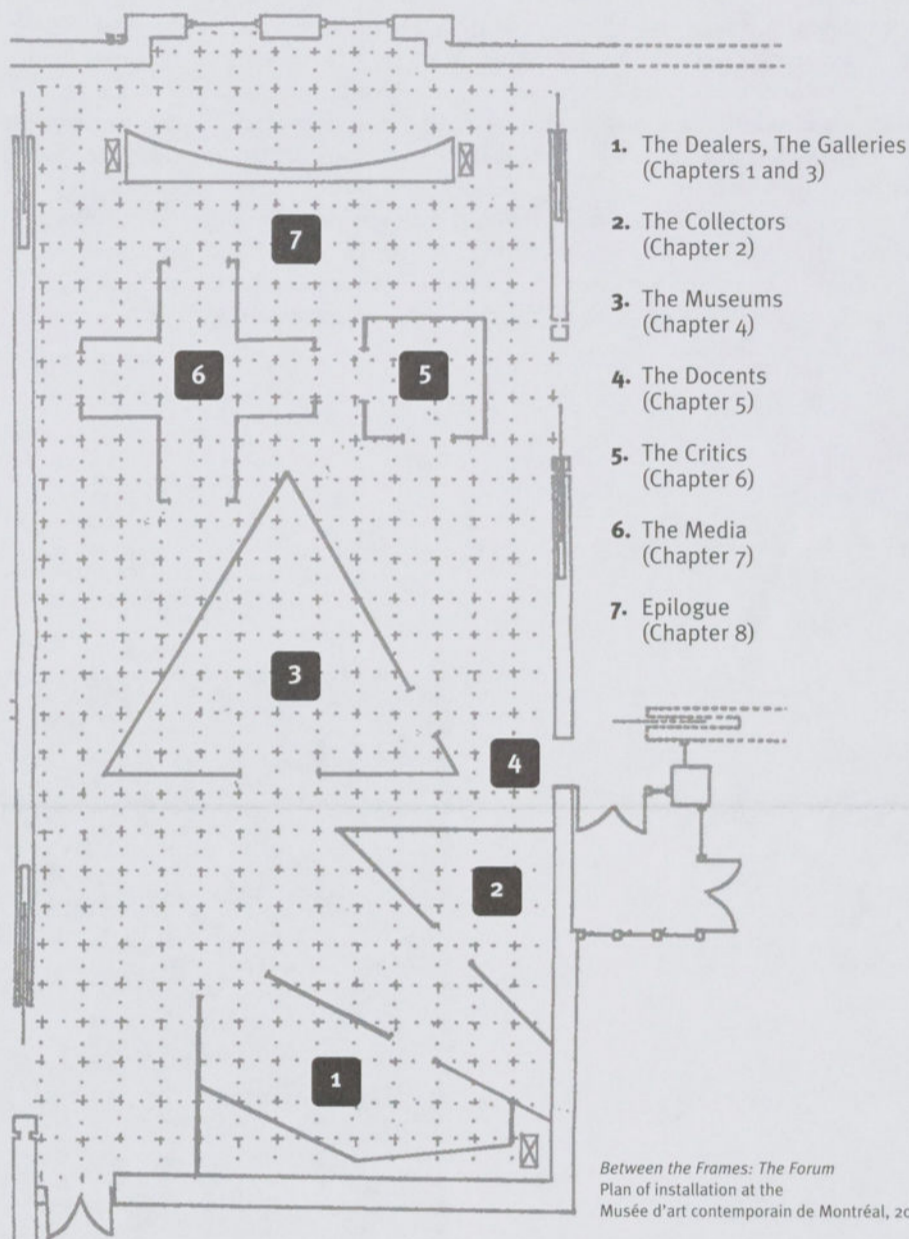
Here we have, it seems to me, the main thrust of the question put to me by Antoni Muntadas when he invited me to devise this presentation of his work *Between the Frames*. This series of eight chapters (spread over seven videotapes) is composed of excerpts from video interviews conducted during the eighties with all those “illustrious unknowns” who constituted his contemporary art world at the time—as well as our own, to a certain extent—and who largely constitute it today. In this way, Muntadas also raised the ante by reversing the roles played. After assuming the sociologist’s position himself, he placed a scientist like me in an unaccustomed, off-centre position.

Contemporary art is, to a much greater degree than traditional or established art, something that results from the not always concerted action of the many players in the art world: first and foremost, the artists who create the works, of course, but also the dealers who sell them, the collectors who buy them, the museum and exhibition curators who confer value on them, the docents who explain them to us, the critics who argue about them, and the journalists who publicize them or base their columns on them. It is this world, or at least the most strategic points in this world, that the artist has recorded over the years. And then, last but not least, there is also you, us, the “public,” invited today to bring the work to completion, or to edit it, by participating in a kind of Forum. Chosen from any number of people to “reinterpret” the work, I now must explain my reasoning. So let’s see.

There are at least two hypotheses about this art world. Either it is a wholly secondary, superficial aspect—at best, a detail, at worst, an annoyance—which is of no direct concern to either the artists or the public, who are there for the works. Or, quite the opposite, artists and public alike are party to, full-fledged players in, this world or system. The latter hypothesis seems, if not more plausible, at least more interesting to me. At one end the artists, at the other, the public, all equally enmeshed in the art world and, by the same token, in the system of the art work, with a certain lag for the public, which is always a little behind, and with keen anticipation by the artists, who are always a little ahead. And then, there are all these “intermediaries,” who represent a kind of centre of gravity. Around them, artists and public, their principal *raison d’être*, are set in orbit, so to speak.

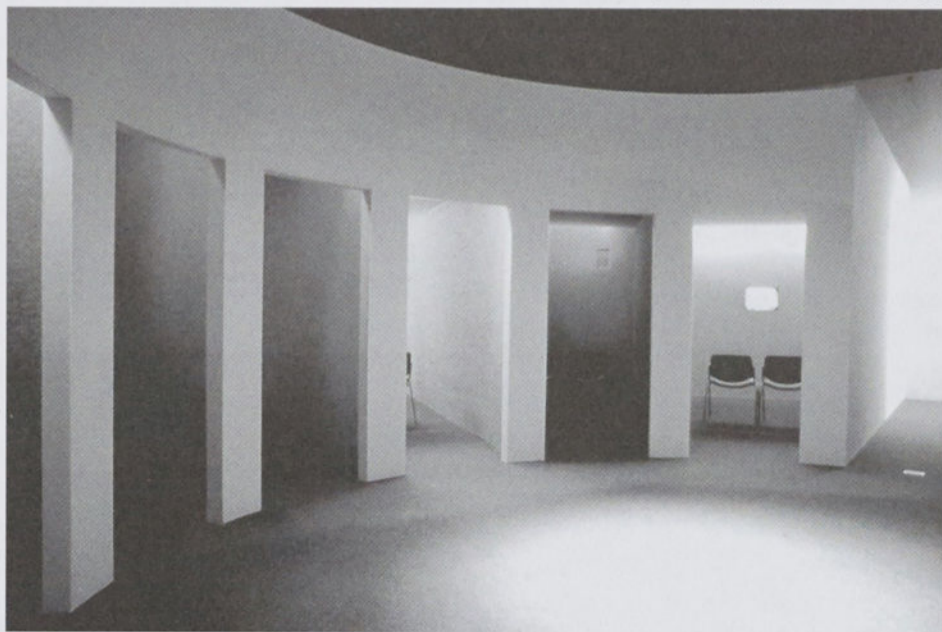
In my view, there is no position from which we can see or grasp the entire art system or world—not even through thought. While we may have previously envisioned it as a sort of Temple, a receptacle for sacred, age-old values, the edifice seems to have been greatly dismantled today. It is no longer a clearly visible institution, organized in a perfect hierarchy and centred around a single issue. It is a complex system, with tangled, multipolar hierarchies (of values and powers), which reveals itself between the lines, or between the frames, through experience. Sacred or sanctified values, and the powers of consecration that underlie them, circulate in a changing system of ideological action and performative discourse.

It is therefore more a city/labyrinth that presents itself to our gaze, an initiatory journey through a City of ever unstable and uncertain, contradictory values, qualities and criteria, in which all seem to do whatever they please, defending their own aims, beliefs and values, but which, with time, also lends itself to a playful, tourist-like experience. This type of gaze is the privilege of the public, and of its delay, its lag. In this City that is still just a big village, we thus find, one after the other: 1) the avenue of shops, dealers and galleries; 2) the collector’s chamber or vault; 3) the museum temple, church or chapel; 4) the docents’ hallway or corridor; 5) the critics’ arena or tower; 6) the crossroads of the media and public space (or opinion); and 7), by way of a conclusion, an epilogue, the artists’ anteroom or café. And there you, we, the public will be, passing through the former temple now become city/system, following a course that is not fully signposted, paying attention—or not—to the confidences, justifications and beliefs of this particular world.



Between the Frames: The Forum
Plan of installation at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, 2000

Between the Frames: The Forum
Partial view of installation at the List Visual Arts Center (MIT, Cambridge, Massachusetts), 1995



Between the Frames: The Forum
Partial view of installation at Witte de With, Center for Contemporary Art (Rotterdam), 1999



On Translation: The Audience

The work *On Translation: The Audience*, which gives this exhibition its name, is part of the *On Translation* series begun in the mid-nineties. The notion of translation, generally understood in its linguistic sense (turning from one language into another), takes on a broader meaning in this series, one that also encompasses the many types of transcription or transcoding inherent in all forms of communication.

On Translation: The Audience first took the shape of a “project in progress” started in Rotterdam in October 1998. For eleven months, eleven different photographic triptychs were presented, one a month, in the circulation spaces of various cultural institutions around the city. Through its three photographs, each triptych suggested some sort of mediation. The presentation of these triptychs in “intermediate” spaces consequently echoed their content, prompting viewers faced with a “visual artifact” of ambiguous status to question the “filtering” role played by the institution, as it conditions interpretation and assigns a value. Subsequently, the eleven triptychs were exhibited at Witte de With, Center for Contemporary Art (Rotterdam), accompanied by promotional material on the eleven participating institutions and a twelfth triptych displayed at the entrance to this exhibition space. In Montréal, a thirteenth triptych, produced for this occasion and added to the previous ones, is presented in one of the Musée’s circulation spaces (a process that will be repeated with each new exhibition of this work).



On translation: The Audience
Partial view of installation at Witte de With, Center
for Contemporary Art (Rotterdam), 1999



On Translation: The Audience
View of the project in progress
Rotterdam, 1998-1999

Muntadas’s practice, centring on certain key notions (translation, perception, interpretation...), has evolved through shadings, reformulations and variations—based mainly on the time and context of exhibition. Time plays a primary role in his work: “I like to work with time, to take the time for things to ripen, not to stay on the level of impulses but to think, to work out a synthesis, an intellectual process that is often accompanied by work on reformulating the relations between places, language and people.”⁴ In this way, Muntadas leads viewers to see things differently and to read “between the lines,” as is underscored by the title of one of his videos from the late seventies,⁵ and so to play an active part, as is recalled by another recent exhibition title: *Warning: Perception Requires Involvement*.⁶ ■ PIERRE LANDRY

4. “Antoni Muntadas—The Paradoxes of Translation,” interview with Claire Stoullig, in *Art Press*, No. 256 (April 2000), p. 23-29.

5. *Between the Lines*, 1979 video on how television newscasts process information.

6. The exhibition *Warning: Perception Requires Involvement* was presented in Geneva from January 30 to March 19, 2000.