THE AMERICAN MAKING OF MIRALDA, THE PARTICIPATORY ARTIST

Josep M. Martí Font

> "The experiment of working in a team is like a game. You give and you take. Sometimes it ends in drama, but that isn't bad. There's nothing wrong with drama."
>
> Miralda

Miralda arrives in the United States for the first time in 1971. He's thirty years old. He exhibits in the Richard Gray gallery in Chicago. He's built a career in the Paris of the *nouveaux réalistes* and is one of the "Paris Catalans" (together with Jaume Xifra, Dorothée Selz, Benet Rossell and Joan Rabascall) who are adored by such powerful critics as Pierre Restany. He travels round the country and in 1972 he ends up in New York, where he runs into another Catalan, Antoni Muntadas, with whom he shares a loft at 228 West Broadway in south Manhattan. It's a big bright space accessed directly from the freight elevator. There are large desks and permanently switched on TVs showing distorted images that are impossible to identify as the channels are deliberately not tuned in correctly and the color, a technology at that time still in its infancy, bled its way into greens and oranges. There is something psychedelic about it. Nowadays everyone knows what a loft is and that the ones in that area, between SoHo and Tribeca, cost enormous sums of money. Then, they were simple warehouses taken over by artists. Miralda finds it through an advertisement on the noticeboard at Pearl Paint, the indispensable art-supply store on Canal Street. On the floor above lived Meredith Monk, artist, musician, and composer, who played all the keys, from performance to free jazz and who could be heard rehearsing at the most unexpected times.

The United States at that time is a country in upheaval, still engulfed in the Vietnam War, where all kinds of movements and political, social, and cultural rebellion defy the system. New York is a cauldron of ideas, a social laboratory where the last part of the twentieth century is cooked. The city bubbles with initiatives, breathes freedom, and lives with the sensation that anything is possible and that there are no red lines that cannot be crossed. It is a collective sensation. At midnight on Saturday nights, long lines form outside The Elgin Theater, on 19th Street in the Chelsea neighborhood, to see the iconoclastic *El Topo*, by the Chilean Alejandro Jodorowsky, later replaced by David Lynch's masterpiece *Eraserhead*. A young Bob Wilson stages the monumental opera *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin*, which runs for more than twelve hours, at the Brooklyn Academy of Music; an oneiric experience for the audience, signaling the scenographic path for future decades. It is one of those times where everything seems to need to be done and the circumstances are right for it to happen. Washington is in the hands of Richard Nixon, a crooked president who will see himself forced to resign from office because of the Watergate scandal, overwhelmed by his own lies and pressurized by an emboldened society that openly challenges the traditional establishment. The pictures of Nixon boarding the helicopter and leaving the White House are one of those moments that taste of glory, when we believe that the world is ours. In Europe, the aftershocks of May 1968 are experienced and intellectual demobilization wreaks havoc. In Spain, General Franco continues in power.

Miralda and Muntadas, or Muntadas and Miralda, form a strange and somewhat symbiotic pair. One is color, the other monochrome. One is the sociologist's apprentice, with the conceptualist sobriety of the video art pioneers; the other is the anthropologist's apprentice, the baroque artist diving into popular culture. There is a very powerful exchange between the two of them. The space they share defines them. There, they cook 250 kilos of rice and color it in such a way that a taste corresponds to each part of the spectrum; from pink to blue and green going by way of yellow and the most garish red. The action is called *Sangría 228 West B Way*, in honor of two large receptacles full of sangría. The following morning they attack the street, occupying the asphalt on which they spread out the remains of the banquet in such a way that the colors and texture continually change as the traffic passes over. The piece also follows its path through the stomachs and digestive tracts of the artists and participants in a glorious scatological race, so that the final deposits also reflect the metamorphosis of color.

Many people go to the West Broadway studio that day. The practice of "open studios" is habitual; the majority of the members of the artistic community open the doors to their places of work, which are also their homes, to share and present their work. Daily life in a loft, in a space without any walls or divisions, is a stimulating experience. One meeting place is the Canal Street Post Office, where the line is shared with the neighborhood artists, people such as the father of video art, Nam June Paik, Willoughby Sharp – founder and editor of *Avalanche* magazine – and other members of the Fluxus group like Geoffrey Hendricks and the cellist and artist Charlotte Moorman, founder of, and the driving force behind, the Annual New York Avant Garde Festival.

Paco de Lucía and Peter Downsbrough tasting the rice at *Sangría 228 West B'Way*, 1972.

Toilet at 228 West Broadway, 1972.

The festival, a key event on the New York scene, was born to present pieces of experimental music and happenings by the Fluxus movement and went on to open up to all practices, from electronic music, dance, and performance to video art. During its existence from 1963 to 1980 it was held in places such as Central Park, Shea Stadium, and the World Trade Center, and in others as improbable as the Staten Island ferry and a train traveling from Buffalo to Grand Central Station. Moorman had the ability to involve people in her projects and get them to give of their best. She handed out vitamin tablets to keep her assistants awake, Miralda recalls. Everything was organized from her studio with the help of friends lost in a mass of papers and dossiers which reminded Miralda of Joan Brossa's Barcelona studio. He himself collaborated in the organization of the 1973 edition that took place in Penn Station and in which 282 artists took part, using the platforms and a train's coaches. Miralda's piece was called *Hot & Cold* and consisted of two big tables with rice salads and colored breads, one illuminated by infrared light and the other, the cold one, with normal light.

In the first few years of the seventies, Miralda comes and goes between Europe and America, between Paris and New York, two hubs of culture that are evolving in different directions. The American poison, however, is taking effect. After producing *Edible Landscape*, an installation where 200 guests eat a Christmas country scene at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts in New York, the event that will change the course of the Miraldian packet boat arrives. In early 1974 he receives an unexpected commission. Paul Smith, director of the museum, puts him in contact with the storekeepers' association of Ninth Avenue in Manhattan, a working-class West Side neighborhood known as Hell's Kitchen, with a mix of Italians, Greeks, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and Chinese… the epitome of a melting pot. They aim to stop a large-scale real estate operation which would wipe out the essence of the place if it were to take place and because of this they want to organize the First International Ninth Avenue Festival and get the city's attention. They propose that Miralda, who doesn't even know Ninth Avenue exists, work in the streets, with regular people, totally away from art circles.

He accepts. He goes around the area and talks to the residents, the storekeepers, and discovers a place imbued with fusion: the Virgen de la Regla, the Meat Market, Manganaro's restaurant – whose origins date back to 1893 – the old New York communities that keep their identity and urban legends. He also discovers that the space is free and available to anyone who wants to occupy it. The first meeting takes place in a modest backroom. They tell him they are thinking of setting up stalls on the street with each store's products. Instead of having them immobile on the sidewalk,

The Hilton Hotel allowed the use of their kitchens in collaboration in the *Movable Feast* project, 1974.

Miralda suggests it might be better to set them on a platform so it's clear that everyone is joining in. And then, once they're on a platform, all you have to do is add wheels and take it all up and down the avenue. The idea is accepted and then the negotiation begins. The artist will have to accept that some things will not be possible and others will have to be brought in; that he will have to set up a team, get the residents and storekeepers on board, manage his desires and ability to fulfill…

Movable Feast, as it was baptized, was basically a great horse-drawn three-tier carriage full of food, wrapped up in a parade. Everyone joins in. His great ally is Louis Manganaro, heir to the inventive dynasty of the famous hero sandwich, a true New York classic. The Hilton Hotel lets him use their kitchens to make the colored bread. It is the first time he has ever been in a big hotel's kitchen and he will not forget it. The local Boy Scout association offer to hand out the colored bread slices during the parade. It is a founding moment for Miralda's activity in public space. Everything he will go on to do is already present on Ninth Avenue. The production of the event becomes the learning that will mark his way of working. He is on the street, without the

Boy Scouts waiting for the gloves to hand out the slices of colored bread to the crowd during the parade at *Movable Feast*, 1974.

conceptual safety nets the art world provides, and with no references to help deal with all the different practical problems that occur during the process. He has to find out how North American society works at people level. He runs up against the unyielding rigidity of the public authorities. The city assign to him three municipal employees, but no one warns them they are working with an artist. They see his wishes as whims, stick strictly to the rulebook, and cause confrontation and conflict. The budget is gradually cut or not stretched enough. Miralda, however, despite his still incipient mastery of English, gets round the difficulties with the help of the people who believe in his project. Everything seems to develop in a constant dice with catastrophe, but in the end the aim is achieved: the mayor of New York, Abraham Beame, comes to the parade and the city turns its eyes to Ninth Avenue.

The carriage and its escorts are now marching down the avenue and the Boy Scouts are handing out the slices of colored bread to the crowd. Suddenly everything comes to a halt: an official orders them to stop because health regulations do not allow food to be touched with bare hands. Desolation spreads. Everyone goes silent. The kids stare at the ground disconsolately. Miralda immediately gets hold of dozens

of pairs of colored gloves from a neighborhood haberdashery store and the parade recommences. The Boy Scouts, including their veteran leader, start handing out the colored bread again.

The negotiation with the people in the neighborhood, with the storekeepers, shows him the way; the importance of being able to fully explain the project so as to generate enthusiasm and the necessary collaboration for it to go ahead. It will be the central element in his artistic activity: the project's communication is part of its very origin. Miralda does it with both words and drawings, which will be his best argument. A set of arguments which will transport instructions, suggest ways of interpretation, transmit ideas and delight those who receive it by means of an amazing machine: the fax, a sublime device which the analogue world gave birth to before it disappeared and to which Miralda declares himself for ever in debt. The compilation of these facsimiles remains a task for the future.

Louis Manganaro with the hero sandwich, 1974.

Another essential element in Miralda's work: food, which turns a decisive corner on Ninth Avenue. In the process of putting together the carriage with the various foodstuffs, Miralda discovers the incredible range of products each culture provides. He visits La Marqueta – the market in Spanish Harlem – near El Museo del Barrio and comes across the *botánicas*, the stores around 130th Street where all kinds of religious products are to be found. They sell the herbs in the drugstore, but in the backyards are the roosters and hens required for the rituals. On this journey, he is accompanied by the French artist Arman and an unusual New York collector, Jack Kaplan, a famous Fifth Avenue fur dealer and friend of artists with whom he exchanges artworks for fur and for whom Miralda designs a store window display in exchange for a bearskin coat.

He discovers the true meaning of the North American melting pot: that the layers of different cultures create a whole with which everyone can identify, a place where – he says – "you can be more authentic than in your own country, because the city grants you space and respect, whereas in Europe I didn't know what respect for what people say and do was." The esthete with exquisite taste who dazzles in Paris and Milan, the artist who builds affected imaginary cenotaphs or dresses the Winged Victory of Samothrace in a cloak of little plastic soldiers, the scenographer who produces fascinating rituals of color, gets dirty when he turns American. In a society that

practices the immediacy of the ephemeral and with the permanent ability to dare to try what is on offer just to see if it works – something very improbable at the time in Europe – Miralda is transformed into a creator who goes beyond artistic practice.

After Ninth Avenue, he prepares a banquet for the premiere of the film *Ladies & Gentlemen: The Rolling Stones* at the Ziegfeld Theater that was called off on public order grounds, although the colored food ends up being handed out in a Salvation Army center for the destitute. He returns to Europe and brings together his *Cénotaphes* at the Galerie Noire in Paris; he prepares a portfolio with his sketches and collages for the *Cendriers-tombeaux* and, among other things, has his first solo exhibition in Barcelona, at Galería G, on the poster for which appear for the first time the languages that years later will become an omnipresent symbol in many of his projects. In 1977 he is invited to take part in Documenta 6 in Kassel, due to take place at the beginning of the summer. He has an interview with the artistic director, Manfred Schneckenburger, and explains to him that in order to carry out his project, *Fest für Leda*, he needs to use the Versailles inspired Karlsaue gardens. In this way, he wants to integrate Documenta into Kassel's everyday life. An elaborate festive procession leaves from the shopping area in the city center and ends at the Temple on the Island of Swans at Karlsaue. "So you're a participatory artist!" Schneckenburger tells him after listening to the proposal. At the following Documenta, Rebecca Horn will also use the Karlsaue gardens.

Making the prototype swan for the set of 22 swans for the *Fest für Leda* procession, 1977.

Back in the United States, he jumps to Texas, the apparent antipodes to Schneckenburger's Kassel. The Contemporary Arts Museum of Houston – a fleeting *ville miracle* – is directed by James Harithas, one of the most radical characters on the art scene at the time with an intense relationship with the people in Fluxus and who has gathered round him guys like Paul Schimmel, David Ross, and Rita Gardner. Fascinated by Texan culture, the mix of the "Western" and ultramodernity, Miralda produces the *Breadline* performance, which consists of a sixty-meter-long wall of colored bread combined with the installation *Texas TV Dinner*; a reflection on popular North American culture where television is already playing a dominant role, something which is still to happen in Europe. *TV Dinner* is a complete menu served on a tray with individual compartments for each dish, heated in the oven with the single objective of

Portraits in the New York subway, c. 1984.
Pierre Restany and Jos de Cock returning from a *botánica* in the neighborhood of Spanish Harlem.
Dale Eldred, James Harithas and Fernando Vijande.

being able to eat while watching television. They are a series of monitor-trays which symbolize daily habits: the screen as object.

The icing on top is the Kilgore College Rangerettes – a Texan version of Majorettes – the cheerleaders of a local football team who, dressed in denim miniskirts and cowboy attire do their routines on the night of the performance with the result that all the people present, the cream of Houston high society, launch themselves crazily at the colored bread wall and rip out crusts to throw over their heads, thus generating a real pitched battle with colored bread that spills over into the streets surrounding the museum in what ends up being known as the Night of the Food Fight.

By that time, Miralda had expanded his spectrum of works to other fields, the majority being related to rituals and foodstuffs. In 1979 he looks south and travels to the Port-au-Prince carnival in Haiti, to All Souls' Day at Lake Pátzcuaro in Mexico, to the Festival of Dates in Morrocco, and the Celebration of the Full Moon in Sri Lanka. At the Bronx Zoo he produces *Thanksgiving: The Animals' Banquet* with Karin Bacon. With the assistance of twelve chefs, he offers the animals a meal as they are shown a video of humans eating the traditional Thanksgiving Day turkey.

The qualitative leap to turn into the participatory artist foreseen by Schneckenburger in Kassel takes place in Kansas City, capital of corrals, destination for great herds of livestock, a Homeric space of epic legends of the West, the mythical place where the cowboys went to spend their pay after crossing the prairies. In addition, Charlie Parker's city, the cradle of bebop, in which jazz became denser and darker. You can't find anything more American.

In November every year, Kansas City holds the American Royal, an event with all sorts of agricultural competitions with prizes for the best cattle, sheep, and pigs, and at the same time big business is done on the grain market, the Kansas City Board of Trade (KCBT). Dale Eldred, a professor at the Art Institute of Kansas City who had seen Miralda's *Breadline* in Houston, searches him out to do a presentation at his school. The KCBT and the Nelson Art Gallery get involved in the idea of Miralda organizing a very special edition of the American Royal, so special that it would take three years of work and the participation of 500 people.

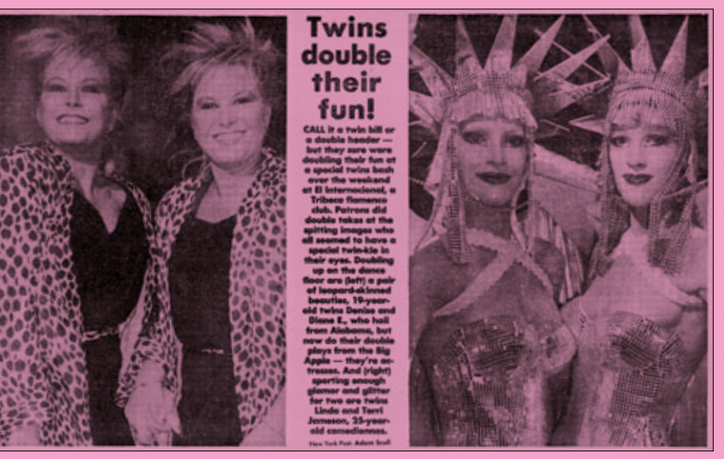
Miralda arrives in Kansas City in time for the Future Farmers of America convention, where they explain to him where the corrals the livestock are taken to are, how the grain market works, and they initiate him into the traditions of livestock and crop farming. To his surprise, the meetings with the farmers, although complicated, always have moving the project along as their main aim. "They are open to what might come and see immediately how to take advantage of things, how to make projects their own," he remembers. "*La vie d'artiste rencontre la vie de l'Amérique profonde* [The life of an artist meets the life of the heart of America]," the critic Pierre Restany said at the time.

He designs an enormous *Royal Crown* made of pig lard, out of which sprout a steer's head, a sheep's, and a pig's butt. He also uses large cows of different breeds, to be drawn by ostentatious Cadillac convertibles. The signature piece of the event is made up of a steer, a pig, and a sheep, all placed on top of each other, marked with their cuts, and made into unicorns, which undertakes a 100-kilometer journey by road from where it is put together to Kansas City. He convinces the Marching Cobras drum and percussion band to parade, carrying cut-outs in the shape of knives, forks, sickles, and steaks, farmers and citizens to wrap themselves in sheaves of wheat and join in the procession, and dresses the huge combine harvesters in scarecrows. Not content with occupying the city, he manages to get them to allow him to use the large grain-trading space at the KCBT and he covers a wall with 6,000 gold, blue, and pink loaves which

The *Wheat & Steak* team modeling out of lard the sheep's head at the heart of the *Royal Crown*, Kansas City, 1981.

act as a projection screen. On the traders' desks, he places the ingredients for *Gold Taste*: blue bread and gold leaves. *Wheat & Steak*, as the Kansas City work came to be known, is a tour de force. It means a very long gestation period and is extremely complex, as it brings together a very wide range of elements of a whole city, involves major economic sectors, and is staged simultaneously in different public spaces. Miralda emerges from this experience in the heart of America, in the essence of the Midwest, with the capability to embark on any project, however impossible or amazing it might seem.

At the start of the eighties, the United States has left behind the turmoil of the Vietnam War and the depression which followed it, and even the exotic peanut-growing president Jimmy Carter. The country is led by a Hollywood actor, the conservative Ronald Reagan, who incarnates the wild optimism of the neoliberal project and especially the chance of getting rich. The world of culture and the arts becomes frivolous in line with these Hollywood parameters. The 228 West Broadway loft neighborhood is now known as Tribeca, and the SoHo boundary is now Canal Street. Miralda meets and


Twins double their fun!
CALL it a twin bill or a double header — but they sure were doubling their fun at a special twins bash over the weekend at El Internacional, a Tribeca flamenco club. Patrons did double takes at the spitting images who all seemed to have a special twinkle in their eyes. Doubling up on the dance floor are (left) a pair of leopard-skinned beauties, 19-year-old twins Danika and Diana E., who hail from Alabama, but now do their double plays from the Big Apple — they're actresses. And (right) sporting enough glamor and glitter for two are twins Linda and Terri Jamesson, 33-year-old comedienne.
New York Post: Adam Scull

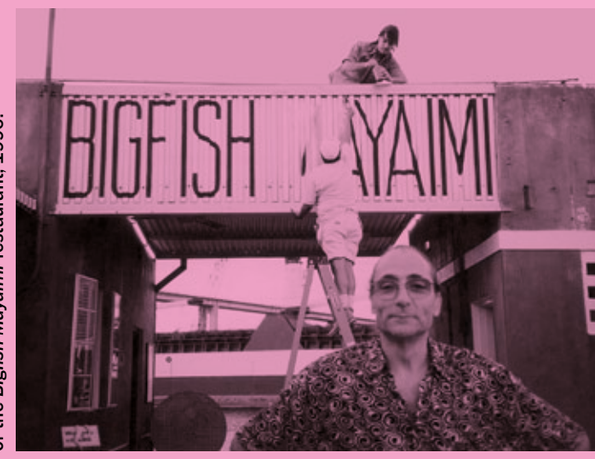
Article published in the *New York Post* (February 17, 1986) about the *Face to Face* dinner at *El Internacional* on the night of Valentine's Day.

collaborates for the first time with Montse Guillén, cook and artist, at the New World Festival of the Arts in Miami, where he presents the edible sculptures *Mermaid Table*. Out of his collaboration with Guillén, who was then running a famous restaurant in Barcelona, the idea of setting one up in New York emerged, something very different to anything previously known.

A twist of fate leads them to the discovery of premises right opposite the 228 West Broadway loft: a sign saying "For Rent" is hanging at the door to the old Teddy's, an Italian restaurant with a long history and a great many legends, such as one that Edgar Allan Poe used to live on the site. In the twenties it was a popular restaurant serving German food and in 1945 passed into the hands of Sal Cucinotta who turned it into a luxurious and iconic Italian restaurant where film stars and all kinds of famous people, as well as important Mafia figures, came to eat. Miralda and Guillén go to see old Cucinotta and find that his bathroom is entirely covered in photographs from the fifties and that the premises' old decoration and furniture, even the candelabras, are almost completely intact. It is as if it had been waiting for them. In the space of three months, and with a relatively modest budget, recycling everything they found there, they open *El Internacional*. They keep the façade, where it's possible to still make out the old name, but on the roof terrace they place a life-size replica of the Statue of Liberty's crown.

On the culinary side, *El Internacional* was the first restaurant to present tapas in the United States. As for the esthetics, it was the quintessence of Miralda's world. Socially, it was where all the lines in mid-eigthies Manhattan crossed. The succession of actions and events was non-stop. Just one example: on Valentine's Day he brought

Sabores y Lenguas: Buenos Aires, Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires, 2007.



Miralda finalizing details before the opening of the *Bigfish Mayaimi* restaurant, 1996.

together 53 pairs of identical twins with dishes that looked identical but had different flavors. The whole Who's Who of New York was there: from Andy Warhol to Sara Montiel; from Jean-Michel Basquiat to Pina Bausch and Robert de Niro; David Lynch to Frank Zappa by way of David Byrne, Michael Douglas, Grace Jones, Diane Keaton, and Keith Haring, as well as such illustrious and unlikely visitors such as Umberto Eco and John F. Kennedy Jr. The restaurant is only to last two years, but the image of the Statue of Liberty's crown on the roof of *El Internacional* is now a New York icon and appears in the credits of NBC's *Saturday Night Live* show.

They give it up in 1986. Miralda the American participatory artist has reached mastery and he prepares for his most ambitious work: marrying the Statue of Liberty to Barcelona's Christopher Columbus monument; this is the *Honeymoon Project* in which the American Miralda embraces the European Miralda to reflect on discovery and disagreement. It is true, as it must be, that the gods have to plot together to make it into a reality. Two decisive political elements come together: Pasqual Maragall is mayor of Barcelona and Ed Koch that of New York. Both are interested. *Honeymoon Project* is not a classic single project with a start and an end but an open process that develops on its own and goes where it is wanted and where the winds blow it, only with the expiration date of the *annus mirabilis* of 1992. It combines settings and cities and involves totally disparate actors. In the making of the trousseau and the couple's presents, each has its own dynamic. It is a world in itself. It is like an infection; there is something organic about it.

This story ends in 1992. It is incomplete as it misses out dozens of Miralda's actions. It is restricted to the "American" ones. I have deliberately used the terms "American" and "America" to refer to the United States, as people there do, taking a part as the whole. But it is precisely through this "Americanization" that Miralda, the participatory artist, will become truly American when he transfers his center of operations to Miami and embarks on projects, such as *Tastes & Tongues*, throughout the continent. But that's another story.