

Frieze

Waiting for Nothing

The sculptures of Juan Muñoz

By Adrian Searle (August 20, 1991)



A book among books

In my hand is a small book, an anthropological study of a singular rite which takes place each year in a village somewhere in the Peruvian highlands. In his preface the author pays a debt to the late archaeologist who came across the village where the annual event occurs, and on the basis of whose notes this slim volume has been prepared. Although published (according to the flyleaf) in 1990, it is apparent that the ceremonies surrounding the construction, location and ritual burning of the Posa at Zurite were recorded by Friedmann - the archaeologist - years earlier, and the study based on his notes was also written at some time before the advent of structuralist anthropology, or ignorance of it. Although the text itself is undated, the ethnologists, archaeologists and anthropologists cited by the author belong to an earlier epoch, but it is impossible to gauge either from the style or substance of the text the exact decade of this century in which the book was originally written. Friedmann's tragic death in a helicopter accident in the late '70s, at the age of 83, doesn't help us either, as he left over a half-century's worth of undated and disordered notes. His travels in the South American continent took place over a period of 40 years and were not always documented, and when it was done, haphazardly. Much has been said of Friedmann's life, yet no biography has yet been written. His papers have been dispersed, and no library or institution possesses a significant archive holding.

Friedmann was at one time close to Julian Huxley, according to H.G. Wells, who introduced the two in Paris in the '30s, and it was at Huxley's suggestion that Friedmann wrote his only book to be published in English - a standard reference for students, in use until the late '40s. Friedmann, now long unfashionable in academic circles, did however exercise a strange power over those close to him. His forceful and difficult personality is evident even in the recently published study of the extraordinary ritual of the Posa, a study which by even pre-war standards lacks any real academic rigour, yet makes up for that lack with a wealth of recorded evidence from the

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inhabitants of Zurite, the participants in the ritual itself, the origins of which cannot be ascertained. It has been said that Friedmann often allowed himself to get too close to his subject, and his subjectivism has long been a matter of controversy, yet the paradox of his approach was that he made up for his methodological deficiencies with intuitive, almost poetic insight. Many apocryphal anecdotes abound - the arguments with Popper and Merleau-Ponty, the infamous impromptu speech to the Royal Institution, his black-balling by the Traveller's Club. Sadly, the archaeologist remains today little more than the sum of rumour and a footnote to the work of more esteemed writers, notably Bataille (who planned a Festschrift which was banned under the Occupation.) The rest is long out of print or the chatter of a fading ancient regime, whom I have no desire to offend by dragging up old controversies. The world, nevertheless, has moved on.

'For years', writes the author of Segment2, in his dedicatory preface, 'we shared identical balconies on opposite sides of the same street.' Yet the two never met. A meeting would have been quite impossible. Friedmann did not exist.

And the ritual of the Posa - the annual construction of a small wooden dwelling on the edge of a muddy square in a small Peruvian town, a dwelling place for no one, never inhabited, only used in a desultory fashion, a place to enter and then to leave again, the kind of place you'd think twice before using even as a temporary shelter from a shower of rain? A building which is destined to be rased to the ground even as it is being constructed? It is almost entirely fictitious, though something like it does exist, or has existed, once, somewhere.

The only real evidence is a photograph found by the Spanish sculptor Juan Muñoz, in an old encyclopaedia, which he used to concoct the whole story, in a room with a balcony, on his own side of the street. Muñoz's book, Segment might easily pass as one of those sub-academic curios which nobody wants and which fill the shelves of second-hand bookstores and the stalls that line the Paris quays. Although odd, it has what Muñoz calls 'the disguise of normality,' it is only 'a book among books.' The narrative, replete with spurious quotations, is the medium through which Muñoz reflects on his own work: his sculpture lies half buried in the text, like Shelley's Ozymandias. The Posa is a space to be inhabited only by the imagination of the artist and the mind of the reader. It is a house in which the mind dwells, 'where time does not run backwards and where the floor is swept mercilessly... this place accommodates the tension between the suspension of the human presence and its possible appearance. Between its leaving and its possible return.' It is an 'absolute enigma.' Its purely literary existence defies time. The Posa 'holds only the certainty that in it, no one will shatter a long silence.'

A dark room

We met in the cloakroom of the British Museum. Tourists came and went, steel and brass casements whirred and clicked. The dry mechanical sounds of time passing, leavened by the brighter chimes of bells, announcing the hours and quarter hours. Each clock runs according to a private rhythm, a different heartbeat. Springs quietly coil and uncoil with the steady reflex of life on a coral reef. So many clocks that the sound rises and falls in waves, with a curious synchronicity which Muñoz claimed had a 'beautiful futility'. Pendulums sweep the air. Being

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here is like being awake in a dormitory, surrounded by slumbering bodies, each one sleeping to its own regulated pulse, each dying at a singular pace. 'My work,' Muñoz once said, 'is about a man in a dark room, waiting for nothing.' This is why I bought him here to this room within rooms, somewhere between 'Assyrian' and 'English Silver', in the depths of the British Museum.

Muñoz's ballerinas, (last seen in England at the ICA in 'Possible Worlds') who instead of dancing can only rock and turn, wait for an impossible flight across a stage. Someone said to him 'I find the ballerinas quite playful,' 'Personally I find them quite painful' he replied. Each is sunk up to her waist in a heavy, rounded bowl. If you touch her, the little bells she has instead of hands grate against her base as she tilts. Rather than bells, one has useless shears for hands. 'This image of selflessly going nowhere, endlessly rotating figure, incapable of going forwards or backwards - incapable of motion yet describing motion - I don't find it so funny...' More recent figures, men in voluminous coats who lean together and apart as though in conversation, their hands hidden beneath broad draping sleeves, stand on massive domed bases. Yet the possibility of some kind of movement is retained in their frozen postures, their turned and angled heads - and by their apparent, arrested instability. Each is like a stopped watch.

An object among objects

These figures and objects stand at a tangent to the present. Entirely lacking the fresh sheen of new objects, or the bright, beguiling confidence of new art, each has an air of being interminably stranded, always belated. Their stillness and estrangement is not to be compared to the watchfulness of sentinels, or the idleness of a passenger on a long journey. Instead, they are self-absorbed in their own present, their own waiting. They are by turns sad, pathetic, ridiculous, funny and touching, and sometimes dark and threatening, like the characters in the limericks of Edward Lear, of whom Muñoz is a great fan.

The figures are strangely evocative of an earlier phase of modern art; their entire deportment speaks of a particular, classical reticence, an unwillingness to express themselves, to divulge a personality or a cast of mind, a refusal of the Expressionist tendency to tell the viewer what to think or feel. The dwarves wear workaday clothes so anonymously cut as to be utterly nondescript. Their modelled expressions tell you nothing, do not try to win you with a returning gaze. His little dragons and lizards look half-remembered from a museum, of a photo once glanced at in a saleroom catalogue. The works have what he calls 'the disguise of normality'; they look like 'perfectly normal artworks', inoffensive and decorous, to be admired for their craft, perhaps, or to be responded to with a supplicatory half-nod as you check the gallery label and quickly pass on. These abnegated objects, 'objects amongst a multiplicity of objects,' are biding their time.

Meanwhile they seem consumed by hauntedness, and are haunting. Their bathos is mostly intended. That Muñoz's lonely dwarves, ventriloquist's dummies, prompters, ballerinas, watchmen and hunters are in front of us when we walk into the spaces they occupy, there is no doubt. There they perch, or stand, or lie - on tables, between columns, on little low walls, on the floor or on plinths. They are obdurately present, here - resisting the light, casting their shadows. Light falls across their surfaces; the light that falls just as it always has, and is falling now, in this

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room, on this figure, through this stillness. The wooden handrail Muñoz has made and secured to the wall meets your hand with a reassuring, implacable resistance, just like the banister you momentarily gripped on your climb to the gallery. Your fingers remember that touch. The vacant balcony, high up on the wall, rides through the long afternoon, in the unfaltering brightness of the tungsten-lit gallery day.

'Maybe only one in ten works succeed in making the spectator aware of the condition of presence, of being in one particular time, one particular place, of being here and now, if only for a split second ... I'm talking about the present,' Muñoz said, 'but the present is filled up with the past.. the present you can never really grasp - it is happening to you; instead you use your past to give shape to the present' And, 'If I make a figure which looks too actual, too "of the moment", I'm only postponing his death for a little while.' In other words, it will only look old later - so why wait? The figures also evoke memories one never possessed for oneself. 'My work,' he said, 'is not about nostalgia; it is more to do with the unbearable.'

He has said that he makes his work in order to discover what it is that troubles him. Brave words, from a man who seems intent on tracing the dimensions of a particular emptiness, the proportions of an empty stage. It is as if he is describing stage-fright or his own particular blankness. This may be a truism of all artists: what Muñoz declines to take part in is that red activist, squeaky-clean, obfuscating, parasitical, pompous, arsecrawling, anaemic, high-minded, sanctimonious, often parsimonious pursuit which turns a life into a career.

Later that day we walked to Sir John Soane's Museum - not far from the old Central School of Arts and Crafts where Muñoz had been a student in the '70s. Soame's is an incredible labyrinth, an 18th century lumber room, a repository of learning, fond passion, collector's mania, masonic dabbings, astute connoisseurship and wily archaeological pillage. Piranesi wash-drawings jostle salvaged pew-ends and gargoyles, Egyptian sarcophagi and Roman statuary, Soane's own unbuilt plans for the Houses of Parliament and Hogarth's Rake's Progress and The Election. Here was a man who filled his life with his house, his amateur enthusiasms and his professional schemes, shoring himself up against his own mortality. Muñoz says he'd like to be an amateur - a dilettante in the old sense.

Lost in the maze

A ventriloquist's dummy with his head hidden under a box (titled Thanks). A figure on his back, legs in the air, in front of a window. A dwarf standing between fluted columns. If the single figures began to look too alienated, too heroic even - despite their self-deprecatory disguise as artworks - more recent pieces, at Marian Goodman and in the Carnegie International, imply a narrative, or at least some network of relationships between the grouped figures. A man pressing his ear to a wall, listening intently, another smiling, another crying, another laughing, another gazing nowhere in particular - a tableau vivant. Back in the studio, Muñoz has a collection of architectural props balustrades, shutters, the inevitable balcony which he uses to construct scenes and situations. Dramatising space, with figures and with objects, he raises our expectations and yet excludes us. No longer mere spectators, we become agents in the drama; we are implicated. We blunder in, full of hopes, wishes, frustrations, lack. Like priests on the

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way to a funeral, we pause to sing a song. Like Thanatos dragging a corpse, we haul our stories with us.

Juan Muñoz has written of a lecture given by Octavio Paz, in which the Mexican poet described the discovery of a stone statue, in 1790, during building works in Mexico City². The statue of the Aztec goddess Coatlique is removed to the Royal University, and after much debate, is buried again. Time passes. Disinterred and reburied several times over the years, each time to be the focus of a different argument, she is finally brought to the surface for good, and placed in the showroom for Aztec art in the National Museum of Anthropology. Her history, for the last few hundred years, has been surrounded by animated argument, between the Catholic church, academics and politicians. She has been lost in 'the maze of aesthetic discourse' since the 18th Century. By now, she has many presences, is so symbolically laden than you would imagine that she would be invisible. And yet, Muñoz writes, the statue manages still to encapsulate 'the enigma of the arousal of feelings... Because, behind all these additions and subtractions we are left with a unique understanding: we have come together only to try to grasp its presences.'

Radio

BBC shipping forecasts broadcast vital information to ships at sea but are heard everywhere. Listeners on land find themselves listening to details of the height of waves, wind speeds, visibility, the conditions at sea in distant places, delivered calmly and emphatically, in a kind of code: 'Rockall, 10 miles, falling... Portland, rain imminent.. Finistere, five knots, increasing to seven... Iceland... fog... calm... squalls expected later.. rising.'

Currently Muñoz is making a series of works for radio with composer Gavin Bryars. For the BBC he intends to make a series of programmes in which a voice exposes the activities and argot of card-players, conmen and sharks. Yet what we hear may well itself be a sleight-of-hand, a radio legerdemain. Muñoz imagines someone driving, perhaps at night, absently tuning the car radio, only to enter a world of enigma and illusion.

A Monument

Every year, on the second Sunday in November, a sombre wreath-laying ceremony takes place at the Cenotaph, in Whitehall. At eleven in the morning, as the strikes of Big Ben die away, a symbolic, two minute silence commences. This unbroken silence is broadcast live, on TV and radio, throughout Britain and the Commonwealth. It is the longest on-air silence the BBC transmits, a silence which falls in Bombay and Vancouver, in Wellington and Harare, simultaneously. A global, local stillness. There is, of course, some ambient sound - the distant hum of traffic, a cough from somewhere in the crowd, the shrieks of gulls on the river - all carried on the wind and picked up by the microphones. Originally commemorating the formal end of fighting in the First World War (on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month of 1918) it now encompasses the remembrance of the dead from subsequent wars. The cameras can't bear the stillness, and slowly pan and dissolve across the ceremony, always returning to Lutyens's monument. The Cenotaph, completed in 1920, is a stepped and canted

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obelisk with minimal ornamentation, whose largest angled planes, if projected vertically, would meet at a single point exactly one mile above the base.

Muñoz says of the Cenotaph 'It is one of the most outstanding pieces of modern geometry I can think of. It hasn't been damaged by the passage of time.' On the opposite side of the Thames, between the South Bank arts complex and County Hall, he plans to build a sculpture³, 4.5 metres high, of granite slabs, with three bronze flagpoles and three bronze flags (the Lutyens has real flags, sheeted-in to prevent any unseemly flapping). His sketches show a loosely rendered, unadorned version of the Cenotaph, and three flags shrouding their poles. In the drawings the flags look a little like Giacometti figures standing in a row against their stone backdrop. According to Muñoz's notes the sculpture will be 'disguised as a monument; a monument to nothing. How great it would be, he said, if someone mistook this sculpture for a memorial of some kind, and placed a wreath beneath it.

1 Segment is published by the Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneve and the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago. The details of Friedmann's life and career am, I am afraid, entirely my own elaboration on Juan Muñoz's fictional invention.

2 First printed in the catalogue to the exhibition 'Transmission', The Rooseum Center for Contemporary Art, Malmo, Sweden, and to be reprinted in the catalogue to the exhibition below.

3 As part of the forthcoming exhibition 'Doubletake: Collective Memory and Current Art,' 20th February - 19 April 1992, in and around the Hayward Gallery, London.