

Frieze

Vanishing point

The late Juan Muñoz

By Adrian Searle (November 11, 2001)



I had a grandfather who worked as a stage illusionist in the 1920s, but never quit his job with the gas company. Who, I have often wondered, did my grandfather think he was: the gas man pretending to be a music hall artiste, or an illusionist, cleverly hidden in his anonymous day job? Either way, his life was a disappearing act, a life between trapdoors. It seems to me strange that it was not a novelist or a shrink who showed me something about this grandfather I never knew, but a sculptor.

It was in the quiet, dark days between Christmas and New Year in December 1986 that I walked into Marga Paz's gallery in Madrid and saw for the first time a work by Juan Muñoz, called *The Wasteland* (1986). There, sitting on a waist-high white wall that had been built across the gallery, sat a small figure looking out across an optical patterned floor, a geometric indoor sea heaving towards the far wall. The figure looked across this floor, blankly, as if mesmerized. His gaze was directed at the inexplicable.

The figure on the wall sat in my head, surveying an imaginary emptiness and waiting to speak, until the time came, a few years later, when I finally met the artist. How acquaintance slid into friendship I don't recall, though both of us liked the idea that our paths had crossed before, in the very early 1980s, when he was in a student group show in a basement in Covent Garden and I was working upstairs in the same building, fumbling with index cards for Artscribe magazine. I think Muñoz liked the idea that London was indeed Borges' labyrinth, where paths taken and not taken exist simultaneously, and where certain meetings are inevitable. This is the city where he first saw Cristina Iglesias, the love of his life, carrying a mirror on Southfields station. And the city where he sat, alone at a big table in Swiss Cottage, working on a battle plan for *Double*

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Bind (2001), his great final work at Tate Modern. With his Moorish turn of mind, Muñoz was always looking for patterns, knots, subtleties and synchronicities. He always wanted to change the rules of the game and recognized too that his life and his work were an endless return.

So it is that the personal collides with critical disinterest, and the experience of looking at someone's art becomes tangled with friendship. Friendship is hard to talk about, and rarely is talked about unless it's broken or lost. Nor is friendship always easy between an artist and a critic. It entails complications; it has implications. With the gift of friendship and its collusions and scams came responsibilities: the unexpected responsibility of love being the best gift of all. Sometimes for him the words 'friendship' and 'family' became interchangeable. So it is for me, and there's no undoing it.

I can no longer tell if my inability to perform those elisions which keep art and life apart is the fault of the art or of the man. I can't look up at a balcony without thinking of Muñoz. Much less stand on one, hands on the rail, looking out, without feeling as though I am inhabiting one of his situations or rather, that one of his situations is inhabiting me.

In 1850 Eugène Delacroix wrote in a letter, 'I never cross the Place Vendôme without looking up at the little window which is still the same; but how many things, or rather how many men have changed, not to speak of all that has vanished!' Whoever sits on the other side of that little window might not notice the man making his way across the plaza, turning for a second and glancing up. This, it seems to me, is a very 'Muñozian' image, of someone stilled in the swirl of the crowd, stranded and belated, like so many of his figures.

Muñoz sometimes described himself as an illusionist. In his work there are card games, disappearing acts, confidence tricks. The trick of being an artist is the best con of all: it is the grandest illusion.

Ten years ago Muñoz and I did a half-hour unscripted radio conversation together for the BBC, one of those long interrogations that sound like high-brow fireside chat. Of course no one talks like that in real life, except when it's late, except when they're drunk, except when there's no one else around to stop them. Half-way through the live recording Muñoz, trying to explain 'the condition of presence' in sculpture, and the paradox of trying to do this through the singularly dematerialized medium of radio, announced to the audience that his work was exactly like the illusory situation we were presenting on air: although it sounded as though he and I were in the same room, he was in fact alone in a recording booth in Rome, while I was in an identical sound-studio in London. Beyond the soundproofed glass wall, I saw the programme's producer drop her head in her hands. Muñoz felt, he said, like a figure in one of his own works. Nor, he observed, did either of us know where our listeners were, or even if there were any; we were all taking part in an illusion, while unseen rooms multiplied around us, a labyrinth of solitaires, each constructing a world through the voices on the radio.

Later, Muñoz claimed that this programme was in fact a 'work', and designated it as a 'sound piece' on his last CV, for his American travelling retrospective. When he performed this bit of archival legerdemain, which I hope will confuse future scholars, I realized I had been implicated

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all along, tricked into becoming part of that work which is known as his life. Or rather, taking part in that inner, creative life that is also known as his work.

Inevitably, I cannot think of him without the voice, an idiomatic English learned as a Spanish waiter in Italian restaurants in Soho, an English that owed as much to Robert de Niro and *The Godfather* as to the language of the writers he loved. 'Hey man, finish your deadline, they're gonna kill you anyway. There is something very important we must do today!' and next we'd be in the back of a lurching taxi and he'd be showing me some intricate joke-shop trick. He also had a fantasy that the place where he bought it was the same Bloomsbury store where T. S. Eliot, magisterial author of *The Wasteland*, bought whoopee cushions and farting powder to play practical jokes on his colleagues at Faber and Faber.

Muñoz rang me ten times one Christmas Eve, when I was in Barcelona and he was in a car somewhere between San Sebastián and Madrid, insisting absolutely insisting that we join the extended Muñoz family in Marrakesh in two days time. Leaning on a lamppost on Passeig de Gracia, my arms full of shopping for a Catalan family Christmas, I finally wilted under the onslaught. His urgency was utterly compelling. From whence sprang a story I used as an essay for a show of his the following year in Denmark. The ever more frantic phone calls led to the Djafna al Fna, to rooftops and minarets and a walk by the Baltic on a windy autumn night. Without his calls and cajolings, without his art and encouragement, my life would have been lesser. And the illusion, and the tragedy of it, would be that I wouldn't even know it.

There is a trick Muñoz once showed me, though where he got it I don't know. He slips it in at the end of a series of real and imaginary overlapping dialogues that he had transcribed as a script, to accompany a show he had in Valencia:

'You know what it's like when you're in a room with the light on, and suddenly the light goes out?'

'What?'

'I'll show you. It's like this.'