

On Claudia Fontes' 'Reconstrucción del retrato de Pablo Míguez'

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On exiting the exhibition space there is now a little viewing platform that juts out beyond the shoreline. From here, as well as sensing the vastness of this estuary, one can view the sculpture by Claudia Fontes (Argentina, 1964), entitled '*Reconstrucción del retrato de Pablo Míguez*', its slightly awkward title reflecting the artist's commitment to preserving the fact that her sculpture is 'one possible portrait' that had to be reconstructed from incomplete information about its subject<sup>1</sup>. Pablo Míguez was a young boy of fourteen years when he was kidnapped at 3am on 12<sup>th</sup> May 1977.<sup>2</sup> Adopting a lyrical approach that contrasts with the epic approach of the Monument which guides one to it, it is a sculpture of silver stainless steel that stands some distance from the shore, supported in the water by a tethered platform that offers him, as Fontes put it, only a 'tenuous balance' and allows the water to reach the boy's feet, lapping around him. The polished surface reflects the muddy colours and constant

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<sup>1</sup> Claudia Fontes wanted to make a sculpture of a specific individual. She worked hard to find Pablo's father, who was still alive but had moved house, and he became closely involved in key decisions around the making of the sculpture. Further issues arose because there were few photographs available of him, many having been stolen when he was kidnapped. His father had only the ID photograph, but a few more emerged in the files of the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (*Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense*, EAAF) having been given to them by Pablo's sister. Since these were not enough Fontes also studied photographs of his sister at his age, as well as the postures of school children of his age to enable her to capture the stance, and involved a computer graphic designer to help her reconstruct his face. For all reasons, Fontes prefers to think of this as just one possible portrait, the outcome of a long collaborative process (interview with artist, 4/3/2013).

<sup>2</sup> Pablo Míguez was kidnapped along with his mother who was active in the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP) ('People's Revolutionary Army'). He was taken first to El Vesubio, a clandestine centre in La Tablada, Greater Buenos Aires, then to the ESMA, where survivor Lila Pastoriza spent a month with him. Pastoriza wrote an account of her time with him in *Página/12* in 1998 (available at <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/1998/98-03/98-03-24/pag03.htm>) a piece that Claudia read (interview with artist, 4/3/2013).

rippling movement of the *Río de la Plata* (Figure 5.9). The sculpture has been much anticipated, its little maquette that was on display in the exhibition space at the park a year or more before its eventual installation, unable to convey the full impact of its eventual position. Fontes wished that the sculpture be a realistic human size and she chose to depict him standing casually, gazing steadfastly out upon the far horizon across the estuary. His contemplative posture contrasts with Breughel's Icarus, then, since he has not fallen, even if it is impossible to look at him and not think of those who did, who were drowned here. Nor is he looking back or calling to us for help or action; he is not in distress or a victim.

It is intriguing that the sculpture is, in Fontes' own words 'specific, figurative, descriptive, personalized and ... anchored to a time and place' (2005:34) precisely because she wanted to avoid the abstractions of both History and euphemism. Her own interest in Pablo was initially based on a mode of identification insofar as she explains that had he lived, he would have been the same age as her. Yet she responded to the date of his kidnap with a sense of how lives are radically separated by these horrific events, since dates that for some become heartbreakingly significant hold no special import for those whose lives continue regardless: 'I am participating in this project because ... I cannot remember what I was doing on 12<sup>th</sup> May 1977' she wrote in her submission to the sculpture competition, 'when Pablo's future was taken from him' (2005:71). Fontes is explicit that her decision to chose one specific portrait for her contribution to the park reflects her belief that 'history should be made out of personal links of solidarity and commitment.'<sup>3</sup>

The specificity of the boy-sculpture, then, seems at first to be in stark contrast with the Monument for the Victims, singular, embodied and isolated as opposed to the gathered, abstracted multitude. But insofar as the sculpture is a response to his story by one for whom he could so easily have had *no* significance, it is explicitly and intriguingly intended for those who do *not* remember him, who struggle for his name and 'his' date to have significant meaning for their lives. This makes the

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<sup>3</sup> She continues 'and not by ominous decisions from willful psychopaths secure in their illegitimate power' (2005:71). Yet her approach is not based on identification, as I will discuss further. She works with a notion closer to Kaja Silverman's (1996) celebrated notion of heteropathic identification, whereby simultaneously with the understanding that one could have been the other, one retains and just as strongly, the clear understanding that one is not.

interpellations of Fontes' sculpture paradoxically *less* personal than the Monument, where we search for those we knew or know about, posing as such an arguably broader challenge to consider the processes by which, and against the erosion of time, we might make him relevant, important, personal. His disinterest in us, and the land on which he turns his back, may seem disdainful of the attitude of histories that aggregate and speak of 'the disappeared' without looking into their eyes as it were, without the stories of specific lives. But Fontes meant for the sculpture to catch the light of the sun every so often so that it becomes, metaphorically, a lighthouse, awaiting any sea-traveler who decides to disembark at this place. And when it does catch the light every now and again, glinting in the distance, it *is* a way of touching us as if he were attending, catching or responding to our attentions. His face is turned away, his eyes fixed on the horizon, but the sculpture is clearly there 'before' us, and is therefore *for* us, protecting and leading.

In her wonderful work *Flesh of My Flesh*, Kaja Silverman (2009) considers precisely the act or gesture of turning through a series of readings of its place within artistic endeavours. Her thesis answers Pollack's ethical concerns that I mentioned briefly above, ie. the concern that the gesture of turning our gaze to the past 'kills again'. Silverman re-reads the Orpheus myth in its different versions, emphasizing the cultural pervasiveness of the key notion in the myth, ie. that a figure who turns to look back, a look that Silverman underscores as the desire to re-establish connection, will suffer as a result. It is a foundational notion of gender difference, ie. that masculinity entails a turning away from women, that strength and survival are constituted through isolation and a lack of bonds with others. Orpheus turned back as he emerged from Hades, thereby losing Eurydice once again. Yet Silverman suggests there have been many artists – she discusses Leonardo da Vinci and Rilke in particular in this regard, but also Proust, Barthes, Sebald – who stand as a tradition opposed to this negation of connections. This tradition is key, Silverman contends, because they understand that to make connections the necessary requirement is *receptivity*, in the sense of a form of passive openness to relationality.

In a way that resonates with Fontes' concern with Pablo Míguez, Silverman writes in her discussion of Rilke, but quoting Sebald's *Austerlitz*, that

'Because art privileges similarity above all other relationships, it is able to reveal these connections to us. Not every work of art exercises this capacity;

some offer us only fleeting and partial glimpses of the resemblances that connect us to our fellow beings, and others elide them altogether. However, there are songs, poems, paintings, and buildings that help us to see that we have “appointments to keep in the past, in what has gone before and is for the most part extinguished” and that we “must go in search of places and people who have some connection with us on the far side of time.”(2009:65).

Fontes has ‘an appointment with the past’, because she missed that date that was significant to one of her - maybe only *therefore* unknown - cohort. So while the sculpture is figurative and specific, it resonates with this profoundly ethical problematic of missing appointments one only later understands as significant. ‘Analogies that are not of our making really do connect our lives to many others – to lives that are over, and to lives that have not yet begun, as well as those proximate to us in time and space ... [O]ur history is only one chapter in an enormous and ever expanding book’ she writes ‘[and] this volume is written from the inside, through the analogies we acknowledge and those we refuse’ (2009:65).

Moreover, the analogy that Fontes sees between her younger self and this child who she might, but for the course of history, have known, is one that extends beyond the two named identities. This is so not only because, as Fontes put it, ‘everyone has someone is ‘missing’ even if they do not belong to “the disappeared”’(interview, 4/3/2013), so that the sculpture prompts, as does memory, all of those other connections and misconnections.<sup>4</sup> It is also because the analogy extends and resonates beyond that of Fontes and Pablo Míguez, insisting that the viewer him or herself enter into relation with it and become part of the central problematic of relationality.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Like the tea-infused madeleine in Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*, that brings not only Aunt Leonie’s cake but also ‘all the flowers ... the water-lilies and the good folk of the village and their little dwellings and the parish church and the whole of Combray and its surroundings’ (quoted in Silverman, 2009:65), analogies are potentially limitless like memories returning, ie. with a potentially unlimited amount of additional attached impressions, sensations and affects.

<sup>5</sup> Its central problematic of relationality is clear from the first point of the title, discussed above, which refuses the simple relation between the sculpture and the boy whose name it bears. For Silverman, to receive the analogy is to receive the world and to be open to ‘gifts from elsewhere’, to the relationality and resemblance that connects us to others and to other things in ways that are ‘ontologically equalising’ (2010:181).

When we look out on his swaying sculpture, with the breeze full in our faces, but obliged to remain 'behind' him like Eurydice, 'Pablo' may seem to almost disappear. On sunny days, the movements of its endlessly flowing water on his polished surface make it difficult to distinguish his form, to extract it from all else that surrounds him. With an intermittent dazzle of the reflected sun, or, as often happens, with the additional of a bird that has chosen to rest awhile on his platform or even on his head, the sculpture changes, merges and becomes indistinguishable from its landscape, its waterscape, making this most overtly figurative contribution to the park, move beyond the figurative, merging with its natural history. Becoming-landscape, in Deleuze's sense, the sculpture enters a zone beyond art as representation. Here then the 'gifts from elsewhere' of which Silverman speaks (2010) are received not through identification but through the participation with all these different elements - the breeze, the dazzle of the sun, the sound of the water rushing back and forth - that are at play and which, while seemingly indifferent to mere human history, bespeak the gathering of a set of concerns at this point on the earth. In contrast to Young's notion of the need to provoke the landscape, therefore, the sculpture has enlisted the *participation* of elements around it, becoming a perch for the birds, allowing its surface to reflect the sun, or by contrast to dull as it reacts with the elements in its environment<sup>6</sup>. By the same token, it requests, but with the gentlest of beckonings, our participation, our concern.

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<sup>6</sup> The sculpture does need to be maintained, as the surface reacts with the water of the *Río de Plata*, and in this sense, its dulling reflects the need for human intervention.