

DIRECTIONS

Juan Muñoz

March 6–June 15, 1997



Plaza (Madrid), 1996, resin and pigment; dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

When I first saw in writing that I had described myself as being a storyteller, I might have crossed some bridge....

SINCE THE EARLY 1980s, JUAN Muñoz (Spanish, born 1953) has devoted himself to a highly personal form of sculptural expression and to the telling of stories. One measure of the originality and meaning of his work is that he has done so with the utmost restraint. Muñoz's narratives give voice to an elaborate and unsettling silence: his sculptures and the spaces they inhabit are filled with anticipation and boredom, recollection and indifference, communication and anonymity. Resolution, however, is absent.

For the Hirshhorn exhibition, Muñoz worked in his studio outside Madrid during the winter months of 1996–97 to create an installation



Double Figure, 1996, resin and wood; dimensions variable. Marugame Hirai Museum, Japan. (Preliminary installation at Dia Center for the Arts, New York.)

featuring pairs of cast-resin figurative sculptures. The pieces engage in a range of physical and psychological interactions. In this way, they possess an extensive heritage in the artist's work. Muñoz matured as an artist in the early 1980s, when progressive artists were torn between imageless, language-based Conceptual work and outsized neo-Expressionist paintings featuring romantic content. As a young student, first in Madrid, then from 1979 to 1982 in London and New York, Muñoz sought a middle ground between those positions, which he considered quite limiting. Although Muñoz dismissed the muteness of Minimalism, he nonetheless embraced reticence; similarly, while he rejected the overstatement of neo-Expressionism, he too sought to engage the audience in a complex, psychological way.

Muñoz's initial work of the early 1980s centered on architectural objects that implied a transitory human presence. Balconies, fabricated banisters, staircases, and patterned floors suggested the silent passage of men and women, yet their unorthodox materials, unusual scale, and awkward placement haunted them with a feeling of absence. A small, roughly welded metal balcony mounted high on a wall lacks a floor; a simple banister nearly conceals an open switchblade knife; a staircase ascends directly and ominously into the ceiling; and a richly patterned floor discourages human passage. Despite their implication of interaction or dialog, Muñoz's nonfigural sculptures of the early 1980s were props lacking actors, situated in indeterminate and isolated places, suspended in time and tense with silence.

Almost immediately, however, Muñoz began to conceive small figures. In developing his figurative sculptures,

Muñoz could not rely on contemporary work, since progressive artists, particularly in Europe, had virtually outlawed the figure as a subject for art. Casting forms in papier-mâché, resin, and occasionally bronze, Muñoz depersonalized his figures, limiting their size to less than human scale and withholding details of anatomy and dress in favor of an utter sameness of size, color, and facial expression—an approach that yielded a figure that was, he says, a “nonentity.”

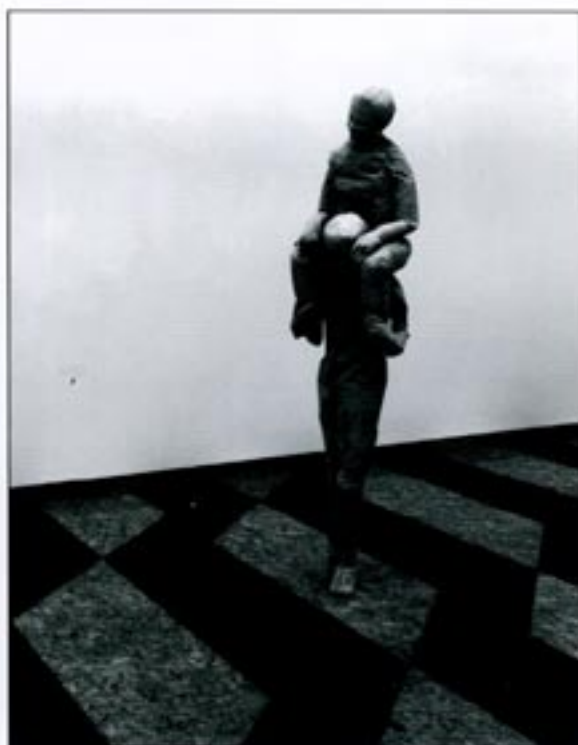
If the artist's works began to share some of the enigmatic character of the sculptures of Alberto Giacometti and Medardo Rosso, the manner in which Muñoz integrated them with architectural objects was distinctive. Although their conjunction in a sculptural tableau implied a specific setting and a clear narrative, those elements remained absent. By limiting the expressive potential of each figure to minimal gestures and equivocal interaction with the surrounding objects and space, Muñoz disengaged the sculptures from the audience and forced them inward psychologically. In many cases the balconies, patterned floors, and other forms actually isolated the sculptures in time and space, effectively charging the environment with expectation as well as discomfort. Among Muñoz's most evocative works is *Winterreise* (Winter Journey), 1994, in which he placed two figures, one atop the shoulders of the other, on a patterned floor, creating a theatrical setting that simultaneously engages and separates the viewer from the stilled narrative of the figures. As the artist describes it, he was seeking figures who look inwards, “and that automatically excludes the receiver, the person in front.... The more realistic they are meant to be, the less interior life they have.”

Muñoz has recently come to depend less and less on the objects of which his work initially consisted. As his reliance on the architectural setting has gradually decreased, so the complexity of psychological communication has become his primary focus. When figures appear singly or in pairs, most often they seem aloof, as if frozen in time. In certain works, the artist has created a tender if unresolved relationship, with paired figures seated together on a bench, for example, or a parent bending down to speak to a child. When organized in larger groups, the expression shifts, and a group dynamic and heightened psychological tension surface. Often composed under the title “Conversation Piece,” groups of figures first appeared in the early 1990s and became a principal subject in his work. These sculptures, most possessing bulbous bases rather than legs, were conceived according to the available indoor or outdoor space. In several instances, such as the Hirshhorn's *Conversation Piece*, 1994–95, the composition suggests a violent exchange, as gestures assume a threatening tenor. More recently, Muñoz has completed *Plaza* (Madrid), 1996, an enormous and remarkable installation of thirty-one figures, many standing in a circle as if participating in animated conversation and even laughter. Muñoz's growth as an artist—particularly his ability to include peripheral and apparently indifferent figures in his orchestration of the psychology of the whole—is readily apparent in both of these recent multi-figure compositions.

At times, Muñoz's work has been criticized as being too literary and theatrical. Yet for the artist, the freedom to explore other disciplines for guidance has been liberating. Muñoz is fond of reminding us that modernism

has always been more than a simple exercise in formal exploration. An avid reader and inventive writer, Muñoz continually searches far afield for parallel work in other areas—including the history of art, architecture, literature, music, and theater—for examples of artists who have found original ways to respond to their times. Thus, while critics have repeatedly inferred the artist's admitted respect for the work of Giacometti, Rosso, Édouard Manet, and Diego Velázquez, less obvious references are perhaps of greater consequence. The Baroque architect Francesco Borromini, the dramatist Luigi Pirandello, and the writers T. S. Eliot, Octavio Paz, and Jorge Luis Borges play perhaps a more active and vital role. In the work of each, Muñoz has glimpsed artists who have sought freedom from the prevailing artistic methods of their time and embraced what Muñoz calls the "unresolved complexities" of their age. The dualities that define Muñoz's work—tradition and innovation, narration and restraint, tension and the void—are those that he cannot seem to avoid. He cannot "escape," he says, "this sense of dislocation while crossing through the forest of my time, the late twentieth century."

Neal Benezra
Assistant Director for Art and Public Programs



Winterreise, 1994 (detail), silicone, resin, electric motor, and wood; dimensions variable. Collection Carré d'Art, Nîmes, France.

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The works in the exhibition were in progress when this publication went to press. All quotations are drawn from the artist's statements in James Lingwood, *Juan Muñoz: Monologues and Dialogues* (Madrid: Palacio de Velázquez, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 1996). The curator would like to thank Tania Duvergne, a volunteer researcher who diligently compiled much of the bibliographic material published here.



Five Figures Seated, 1996, resin, pigment, and mirror; dimensions variable. Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

BIOGRAPHY

Born in Madrid, Spain, June 17, 1953. Attended Central School of Art and Design, London, 1976-77; Croydon College of Design and Technology, London, 1979-80; Pratt Graphic Center, New York, 1982. Lives and works in Madrid.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1984 Galería Fernando Vijande, Madrid. Exhibition catalog.
- 1987 CAPC Musée d'art contemporain, Bordeaux. Exhibition catalog. Lisson Gallery, London.
- 1990 The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago. Exhibition catalog.
- 1991 Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, The Netherlands. Museum Haus Lange, Krefeld, Germany. Exhibition catalog. Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.
- 1992 IVAM Centre del Carme, Valencia, Spain. Exhibition catalog.
- 1994 Carré d'Art, Musée d'art contemporain, Nîmes, France. Exhibition catalog. The Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin. Collection of writings, titled *Silence Please*, accompanied the exhibition. See Selected Bibliography.
- 1995 Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston. Exhibition catalog. Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea, Santiago de Compostela, Spain.
- 1996 Dia Center for the Arts, New York; Palacio de Velázquez, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid. Exhibition catalog.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1986 "Aperto 86," XLII Biennale di Venezia, Venice. Exhibition catalog. "Chambres d'Amis," Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst, Ghent, Belgium. Exhibition catalog.
- 1987 "Lili Dujourie/Juan Muñoz," Abbaye Royale de Fontevraud: Fonds régional d'art contemporain des pays de la Loire. Exhibition catalog.
- 1989 "Magiciens de la terre," Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris. Exhibition catalog.
- 1990 "Objectives: The New Sculpture," Newport Harbor Art Museum, Newport Beach, California. Exhibition catalog. "Possible Worlds: Sculpture from

Europe," Institute of Contemporary Arts, London. Exhibition catalog.

- 1991 "Carnegie International 1991," The Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh. Exhibition catalog. "Metropolis," Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin. Exhibition catalog.
- 1992 "Documenta IX," Museum Fridericianum, Kassel. "Doubletake: Collective Memory and Current Art," Hayward Gallery, London. Exhibition catalog.
- 1993 "Sonsbeek 93," Arnhem, The Netherlands. Exhibition catalog. "New Sculptures," Open Air Museum of Sculpture, Middleheim, Belgium. Exhibition catalog.

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SELECTED WRITINGS BY JUAN MUÑOZ

- "The Best Sculpture Is a Toy Horse," *Domus* 659 (March 1985).
- "Un hombre subido a una farola." In *Entre el Objeto y la Imagen: Escultura británica contemporánea*. Madrid: Palacio de Velázquez, 1986.
- "La Imagen Prohibida." In *Julião Sarmiento*. Porto: Fundação de Serralves, 1992.
- "La Posa." In *Segment*. Chicago: Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, 1990.
- "Los primeros/Los últimos." In *La Imagen del Animal*. Madrid: Palacio de las Alhajas, 1983.
- "The Prompter," "Dusk," "The Face of Pirandello," "On a Square." In James Lingwood, *Juan Muñoz: Monologues and Dialogues*. Madrid: Palacio de Velázquez, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 1996.

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