

On Graciela Sacco

‘Waiting for the Barbarians’ exhibition 2022

Gallery talk: 2 September 2022 Ubicua Gallery, Charlotte Street, London

Graciela passed away, too early, in 2017. She was one of the artists I had written about in my book *The Art of Post-Dictatorship*, and through my research, we had developed a friendship. I visited her at her home in Rosario and in Spain, she visited me at mine in London, we met in Europe with our families, and we kept in touch across distances. So of course, when her daughter Clara asked me to speak today I was more than happy to honour my friend and to speak about her work.

Among her works, Sacco made delicate installations employing the technique of heliography, using light sensitive paint to imprint sepia images onto materials and objects. In her piece ‘The Things They Took With Them’ (1998), a collection of leather suitcases are covered with images of hands. These are not imprints left behind by all the hands that might touch a suitcase on a journey – they are not the grubby fingerprints of those carrying and transporting belongings – since each case has an image of just one pair of hands, clasped together in an enclosing gesture. Indeed, these hands are not engaged in the physical work of carrying. Too entwined to be weight-bearing, but too deliberate to be idle, the hands seem anxious, ill-at-ease, tense. They are traces of something other than the journeys of luggage through space, suggesting a carrying that is not of things but of worries about the decision to leave, maybe, a ‘holding’ that is not of contents but of hopes for the future. Dreams and concerns are ‘taken’ by those who leave, just as much as are the suitcases in their hands. In the gallery space, however, the suitcases are stationary. Their journey has not yet begun – or has perhaps already been completed – and their owners are not here to tell us their plans and intentions, leaving us – the spectators - to move around the cases, wondering about the stories and sentiments they provoke. Artworks are able to do this: to set us on a train of thought that is an adventure of thinking, a usually pleasurable, intellectually stimulating response to an intervention that arranges attentions and atmospheres in ways that may not otherwise have occurred, prompting thoughts and imaginings that may not otherwise have been entertained. In her heliographic works, as well as in many of her other pieces, Sacco’s interventions prompts such rumination without directing its course. She sought I believe to create

atmospheric works that connect to each other as well as to reflect on processes of art-making itself, of art's role and reception. When we say an artwork is impressive, what is it that has impressed itself upon us? What, in other words, do we 'take away' from an exhibition? How will we allow the art we have seen to continue its work within us, so to speak, how will we carry the artwork with us?

If Graciela's artwork reflects on the relationship between art and the spectator in this way, it was also frequently, to my mind at least, about intervals, about spaces: spaces between us, between us as living, breathing beings and inanimate things, as well as between things. Also, more profoundly, it was about the spaces between us and our oftentimes *imagined* 'outsides', our desires, curiosities, fears, as is the case in her series 'Waiting for the Barbarians' as well as in earlier works.

The worn shoes, for example, that line the gallery in 'An Essay on Waiting' (2005) have a relationship to each other as each shoe 'needs' its pair, is balanced on this surface, as we are on this earth, across a 'gap'. Yet little do we notice the gap, the precarity of our balance, of our relationship to surfaces, to gravity, to the material things that support us. Like our attention, the shoes here seem to fade away into their background as the heliographic technique blends them onto the supporting surfaces. Unlike the determined steps of the arriving travellers at the airport of a European city, whose footsteps Sacco captured from below – from the shadows – in the piece M2:T4 (2008), these forlorn shoes are patiently waiting to be lifted from their fate. But they are already moulded to another's feet, and, neatly arranged as they are, they do not seem (yet) abandoned; they are not waiting for us, then, and it would be distasteful – not to say uncomfortable - to assume that we could simply step into these shoes. They, and we, must continue waiting.

The idea that objects wait, that they are capable of desire and patience, that they might even 'see', runs through several of Graciela's pieces. In her memorable piece 'El Incendio y las Vísperas (The Fire and the Days before)' (1996) a series of wooden slates, like a makeshift fence, have imprinted on them an image of what appears to be a riot of some kind. A man throws something towards 'us', a stone perhaps. Graciela told me that these were found images, and she wanted the particular event to remain unspecified, since it is the mood of the piece that was most important. The piece

suggests that an event creates a lasting impression in its wake, not only for the people involved but also in the very materials that surrounded it and were chosen to become part of it. The subtle sepia image suggests that the trace – the impression – the memory of the event is imprinted on the surroundings. These impressions are often left un-captured by human accounts of an event. The slats emphasise that when we assemble an account, we piece it together by gathering, piecemeal, the evidence that remains. The spaces between the slats dramatise the sense in which a narrative or analysis always contains leaps, linking pieces of evidence together in order to create a coherence across all those things lost, unseen or unavailable.

In 2011, an installation by Graciela was shown at the temporary exhibition space (PAyS, Presentes Ahora y Siempre) at El Parque de la Memoria in Buenos Aires. It repeated the use of rough wooden slats, this time across the gallery space, cordoning off an area from floor to ceiling. One could be forgiven for thinking there were works going on in the gallery, as there were also sounds emanating from behind the fence that sounded, at first, like sand being shovelled. (In fact Graciela told me that her mother-in-law had thought precisely this, and having arrived to see Graciela's artwork turned tail and head home thinking she had made a mistake!) These sounds were also like muffled shots. When I visited I was the sole visitor in the gallery space, and it was only after some self-conscious indecision that I approached the fence to peer through the gaps. 'Most people,' Graciela told me once, 'were in the middle [during the violence before and during the dictatorship period]. I remember', she continued, 'the feeling, the panic, of being in a shop or in a university class and hearing something going on outside, shouts and shots, and not knowing what was going on or what was about to happen' (personal communication, February 2012). To take oneself over to see what was going on was a potentially dangerous curiosity.

So what about the curiosity that she creates in this work? In the gallery space of El Parque de la Memoria, one certainly felt exposed in one's curiosity, peering through the fence, mildly embarrassed at one's interested self. The piece was effective, then, in enforcing a participation, its pointing to one's own subjectivity as a spectator as one looks – prys, even – trying to get a view on just what was lurking behind the makeshift barrier. You have to admit your attractions, in danger as one is of getting a splinter on one's nose. The notion that our own desire and curiosity is as interesting as

what we see is something Graciela spoke about in our conversations, making the humorous – she was very funny! – analogy with attraction between humans. Speaking about her exhibition ‘Nothing is Where You Believe it to Be’ she said ‘[it’s like] when you meet a man and you think ‘he’s handsome!’ but when he comes close he is not handsome at all, but then - he is more interesting than you thought! All the time your perception is deceived. It happens all the time! Things are beautiful but [then] it is horrible. It seems nice but then I don’t want it close!’(conversation, London, 2015).

The other side of the fence was dimly lit, and it was difficult to see through the gaps with two eyes. What you could see was a looped video playing on a screen positioned between the rafters that support the fence. The soundtrack, which had appeared aggressive, as it turns out, was of paint being fired or splashed until the whole screen is obliterated, turning from white to black, and then repeated in reverse from black to white. There are art historical references here, and one could also relate the installation – as I did at the time, and as the context of the park primes one to do, to the practice of kidnapping and hiding the kidnapped in the eaves of the *la capucha*, the attic space of the casino building at the now-notorious detention centre the ESMA. The woody smell, the dim light, and especially the awkwardness of being a viewer, encouraged that association. But each is only one of the ways in which we could understand this piece. I want to suggest that the more nuanced point is to bring an awareness of the very fact of our reaching for narratives to understand what we are seeing. In creating a situation in which one is made conscious – to the extent that can ever be – of one’s own projections, associations and ‘resolutions’, and by making our view of what is going on always partial, Sacco did not intend to berate us for always being subjective, partial, but to accentuate the problematics at stake whenever we attempt - and delude ourselves about - the possibility of a clear and uninterrupted view of what is ‘behind’ or beyond the veil of our own anticipations.

Another of Sacco’s works also shown at the park also used the theme of the slats with gaps, this time with a photograph of rippling, not to say choppy, and rather

brown water printed onto planks of wood and each leant up against the wall of the gallery. [This piece was called 'Cualquier salida puede ser un Encierro (Any Exit could be an Imprisonment)' – from the series Tensión Admisible.] What we confront here is a seeming choice either to gaze into the illusory depth of the water and through the magic of photography believe we see the river – the Río de la Plata – or to see the gaps between the slats and the wall behind so that we 'stay' in the gallery. Or to alternate between both, and to be in both elements, mimicking the swimmer who exists in two elements, as I know Clara often did, courageously, in that very water. Again, as I have argued before, since it is in this space, one is forgiven for reading this piece – for over-reading it – as about the bodies that were thrown into that water, that this park commemorates. The point is that this is not wrong, but that we are simultaneously asked – by the gaps, the spaces between the rectangular slats (and the lack of any detail to guide such a reading) – to *interrupt* that narrative, to consider how it has been *put together* by us and together with the artwork itself. In order to see the river in the piece, one has to forget so many things – to not see the gaps, to not see the white wall behind, to not sense that we are on land, in a gallery and so on. The point is that we are asked to both see the river and to *notice* ourselves seeing it.

This 'double' noticing might serve to connect this piece with other works too. While we are busy stepping closer to the table to see where the fork is stabbing into the world map in Bocanada (1994), we come to notice how we are stepping upon the open mouths scattered on the ground. It is not a shock of recognising our own complicities that Sacco's work seeks to deliver, so much as a series of reflections on the omissions and distortions that are enfolded into our images of ourselves and others.

On the wall of the installation 'An Essay on Waiting' (2005) there were images of people from many different countries projected as shadows through plexiglass, placing the viewer amidst their images in many different urban scenes, waiting with them. We are amongst them, we could be them. And when Graciela showed some images in an exhibition in Rome, the light passed through an anamorphic image on the plexiglass before it appeared on the walls. This distortion is not

'seen', unless one cares to look up into the light to notice it. What allows us to see is simultaneously then, what we do not see. In Rome, Graciela told me, the visitors ran their hands along the walls where the images were projected to see if the figures were 'really there'. It is precisely this doubting, this caution that her work prompts. From where do we stand when we consider these other human figures and our shared humanity? Which shadows do *we* cast as we stand precariously balanced here on earth? Which projections and which fictions do we create, which to we perpetuate even in those moments when we seek to give others due attention? And if a further of the questions is also 'while we are watching others, who or what is watching us?' this is not a paranoid stance, but a deconstructive one. It serves to give us pause and to suggest that our need for human reassurance and recognition – that which has us reaching out through an ephemeral image to run our finger tips along a wall - is what offers us a chance to understand our own precarious positions, our interdependencies and our shared desires.