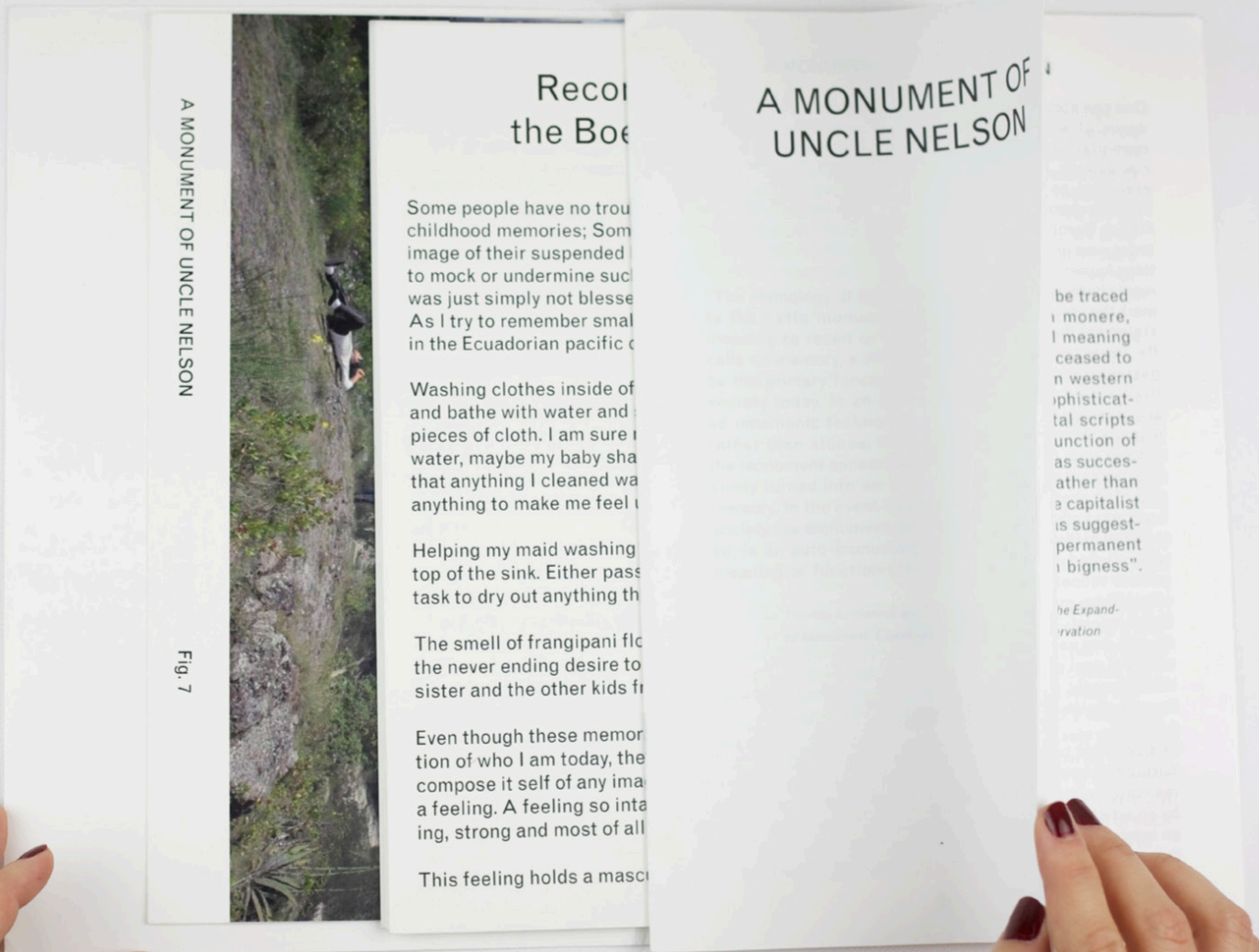


A monument of uncle Nelson

Maria Gracia Ogliastri Larrea



A MONUMENT OF UNCLE NELSON

Fig. 7

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A MONUMENT OF UNCLE NELSON

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“The etymology of the word *monument* can be traced to the Latin *monumentum*, derived from *monere*, meaning to recall or to warn. This original meaning calls on memory, a direct function that has ceased to be the primary function of the monument in western society today. In an era of increasingly sophisticated mnemonic technologies based on digital scripts rather than stones, the commemorative function of the monument appears superfluous and it has successively turned into an issue of aesthetics rather than memory. In the event-based economy of late capitalist society the monument, as Rem Koolhaas has suggested, is an auto-monument emptied of any permanent meaning or function other than of its own bigness”.

Thordis Arrhenius and Jorge Otero-Pailos

The Expanded Monument: Contemporary Theory of Conservation.

One can state that a monument is a structure of lasting evidence, of reminder. Either it being a building, a statue or a memorial stone, they are all based on the principle of remembrance. This identifying mark varies in culture and in execution, as an example of someone or something notable, a specific character or an event. Historical events such as the French Revolution, a period of radical social and political disorder, was immortalized by one of the most touristic attractions known today: the Eiffel Tower. Though seen as one of the most characteristic structures of Paris, its real meaning is to mark the important historical period and stand erected as a statement that the revolution is never to be forgotten. The Eiffel Tower represents the ideal example of the argument suggested by Rem Koolhaas mentioned earlier: the commemorative function of the monument appears superfluous and it has successively turned into an issue of aesthetics rather than memory. When dealing with the remembrance of someone notable such as the actor, philosopher and celebrity Bruce Lee, the concept of recollection translucence as oppose to that of an abstract monument built to represent an event. The body mass and the facial complexion are identical to the one time full of life personality. The one character whose moves were studied daily by many can be again viewed in a static pose to validate his life and mark the trajectory of his existence. Time, presents itself as the monuments invalidation, due to society's constant desire for reinvention. With such remark, one can suggest that modern practices destroy any sense of past glory. Reflecting on the argument of Koolhaas -Can one still, through the bases of memory, build a monument in the Western Society of the 21st Century?

A monument both as: a place or a structure build without the purpose of being a monument but later became one due to its memorial references or a monument as an object executed by an artist as a meditated statement of remembrance, target an intended weight and symbolism. They physically present themselves with a variety of renditions where society, age and personal experiences dictate the different meanings. At the same time, collective memory plays an important role once the viewer is confronted with a physical statement. The Berlin wall is an example of such monumental capacities as history presents itself constantly as a collective memory to the German society. One can say that the memories, the experiences and the consequences of such division, are present in the collective memory of the past, present and future generations. Seeing the wall as a concrete object does not just imply a physical separation, but a strong division of ideals within the same community. Therefore one can state that the strong impact of such opposition is imprinted onto prefabricated concrete slabs. People who do not have any connection to Germany, but visit the ruins of the wall, understand the idea of separation, as a wall's main function is to divide, but the intention of remembrance of the specific event is impossible due to the lack of personal connection and experience. The monument then becomes an attraction of historical importance that has a direct connection to a specific group of people. The idea of a monument holding a strong link to a certain audience magnifies its exclusivity. Hence it not only presents itself as a memory encapsulated by form, but it manifests as an immortal homage to that specific event, idea or person.

Once I dig into my collective memory, more specifically my family's history, there is one specific event that marks a very important before and after. This familiar connection is linked to the biggest aerial accident in the history of Ecuador. My father's brother, Nelson, was on board of the Boeing 737-200 that collided with a mountain seconds before landing in

Cuenca, killing all passengers on board (precisely one hundred and nineteen passengers and crew members). Out of this accident came nothing more than the birth of my brother, four days after the crash, on the 15th of July of 1983. Without thinking of future consequences, such as the weight of such a tragic end or the possible psychological traumas due to carrying someone else's life expectations and indirectly becoming the "replacement", my parents decided to name my brother after our uncle Nelson. Five years and four months later my Mother gave birth to her last child; that would be me, and consequently, the only Nelson Ogliastrì I ever met was my brother.

Throughout my entire life the name Nelson possessed a prohibition which only years later I would come to understand. The name, the idea and the memory became the strongest taboo in my family; stronger than sex and drugs within a conservative Christian south-American household. As an attempt to exercise my research and creative writing skills I began to dig into my memory and collect a series of short and unfinished events where the presence of my uncle was undeniable. After that, a strong sense of further connection and of unveiling historical facts pushed me into interviewing my father. This was the first time any of his three children, including a thirty-four year old psychologist, ever seriously asked him about his brother. With this previous statement I cannot stress more what of an unspoken prohibition this was for all of us. The interview consisted of an emotional journey where my father guided me through that specific day. The road to hell, as he himself named it after a dream he had the night before the accident. The dream consisted of an epic journey where my father had to climb a mountain and on its peak fight with the devil to get his brother's body back. The next morning he awoke to find out he had to travel two hours and a half from the Pacific coast South-East up to the mountain where his brother's body laid dead. He was in charge of recognizing the body and bringing him home.

Born from an Ecuadorian mother and a Colombian father, and having lived in six countries by the age of twenty-four, my life has been that of a gypsy. I guess I would have to thank the American franchises that employed my father for giving us the opportunity to grow as world citizens. As a consequence our lives were always separated not only from our father but as well from our entire family. Even though I won't go into detail about the psychological effect this had in my life, I believe it is important to mention that this desire to reconnect and to discover and learn about my family drove me to dig in deeper into the death of my uncle Nelson. As a consequence of almost one year of research, that being visual and written, I reached a point where I felt the need to produce. I guess it has to do with my responsibility as an artist. This topic of the "artists responsibility" can be deeper analyzed, but I will rather just leave it superficial, as to the idea that as an artist one possesses the power to communicate, to reinvent, to recreate and to question. This power of recreating, reinventing and most importantly immortalizing, provoked me to remember uncle Nelson and to create that of a physical structure of lasting evidence, a monument which in a profound scale will serve as an homage to his life.

As detailed earlier, the foundation of a monument relies purely in memory. With this incentive as a strong starting point I began to question myself about what I wanted exactly to remember or what I wanted to reproduce. The stories told by my father, a few other family members and a local Newspaper, are strongly depicted in my mind, but the visual construction is lacking. The idea of physically being present in the scene of the events was the point that called out my attention the most. Looking back into the material I have gathered, there is one specific moment that stands out: The road to hell. Almost as the Greek myth of Orpheus my father performs a journey to hell to reclaim his loved one. Such epic journey represents a strong experience in my father's life, he whom I wish to further connect. Being

aware of this, the possibility of performing the same physical journey acquires the characteristics of a pilgrimage.

A journey in the search of moral or spiritual significance, normally directed to a specific location of importance being the place of birth, death or of awakening of a specific entity. Such areas are mostly commemorated by several means of monumental executions, being temples, shrines, statues or performances. Followers are encouraged to visit these locations and participate in the praise and the pleading for salvation, as well to have questions answered or achieve any other spiritual benefits. My interpretation of a pilgrimage in this case consists of a physical and psychological journey to the place where one of the most important members of my family past away. In this pilgrimage I intend to symbolize camaraderie between my father and I by literally performing the same road to hell just thirty years later.. Once I find myself in front of such imposing landmark my task would be that of concluding the pilgrimage with a deeper desire of sanctifying such an esteemed location. In this moment memory performs its principal task, as to direct any sense of monumental operation.

It is important to remark that time plays an important character in the negation of memorial attempts. The modern society's desire to rapidly evolve and reinvent has a strong impact in everlasting memory. Superficially speaking, in today's society likes and dislikes are constantly changing and what is once a necessity becomes quickly disposable. Adaptation, as a result of time, challenges the action of noticing and hence the act of recognition. In 2009, Italian artist Lara Favaretto constructed an installation called "Momentary Monument", placing thousands of sandbags surrounding the statue of Dante Alighieri in Trento, built in 1896 as a symbol of Italian culture. The artist therefore brings attention to the monument and its purpose of recollection. Re-enactment as an act of reconstruction represents a monumental

execution in the work of English artist Jeremy Deller : The Battle of Orgreave. Seventeen years later Deller re-enacts the controversial 1984 miners' strike that led to a violent altercation between miners and police forces. The artist provokes on collective memory and highlights its contemporary cultural relevance. As a conclusion, both artistic executions depend on the recall of a specific event and the production of a temporary venerable stimulus.

My homage to uncle Nelson was based on these two monumental principals: provocation and momentary executions. The use of memorial references such as his idolism to Bruce Lee and his fanaticism with Abba were depicted with a statue of the celebrity and a thirty-seven minute-thirty-nine second presentation of his Abba vinyl record. The Ecuadorian tradition of paper mache statues was chosen as the ideal construction for Bruce Lee, later erected on the mountain as a momentary performance complementing the pilgrimage. The vinyl record was amplified by the use of a large speaker that was brought to the peak of the mountain; the music played loudly and echoed through the valleys confronting the mundane. Both executions targeted the recollection and re-enactment of Nelson's life, and momentarily brought attention to a forgotten topic in a forgotten place. The attention and energy is then placed in an encapsulated moment where the remembrance serves as homage to a specific entity. One can further propose that the modern monument consists of an act of provocation being visual or spoken, calling upon memory, in my case exhibiting Nelson.

Going back to the initial point presented by Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas: monuments in the western society of the 21st century have lost its foundations as instead of representing a memorial long lasting evidence it is outshined by its superficial popularity and its own bigness. The memorial aspect of the monuments is then impermanent. As I explore the possibility of performing a memorial through my own work I believe that the idea of

provoking the remembrance creates on its own a long lasting monumental operation. For the visual production, working with the idea of an impermanent performance just as the Italian artist Lara Favaretto or the re-enactment exhibited in Jerry Deller's work, both bring a momentary yet powerful attention to the event that is being targeted. In other words, the choice of a given time frame magnifies the exclusivity of the monument and sets a specific moment of commemoration and honoring; to the contrary of the presented problem that lies in the monument itself where time plays the role of an increasing loss of memory and therefore the complete loss of the monuments main function. Hence, I believe that through the choice of a documented memorial provocation and a momentary physical execution, the responsibility of the monument, which is that of remembrance, remains effective.