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DIALOGUES #1

Marcelo Pombo by Martín Legón
Buenos Aires, August 2015

ML: Well, as I was saying, I was looking forward to interviewing you, particularly as the gallery is conducive to talk...

MP: What do you want to talk about? Barro?

ML: I wanted to ask you a few things, seeing as you had two exhibitions on at the same time.

MP: Fine. Fire away!

ML: I don't know whether you heard comments from artists about the exhibition that ended a few days ago at the Colección Fortabat. Many saw it as a change of paradigm. It was an important moment for all of us who visited to be able to see your retrospective. So above all else I wanted to know how you feel seeing your work in perspective.

MP: Fine. I think that exhibition changed my life in the sense that people in the art world were able to see the work I've done over thirty years, and the feedback I've received is very gratifying. And the work with Inés Katzenstein was a stroke of luck, not only for everything she brought to it but also because I accepted each and every one of her decisions. It wasn't in my plans to do a retrospective exhibition almost as the same time as an exhibition of my recent works in a gallery. They overlapped completely by chance. In the Colección Fortabat I'm free to choose the curator and propose Inés if she wants. And as I said, I totally abide by her wishes and preferences.

ML: That's clear.

MP: And it's what I suffered most early on... because in the mid-90s I was doing many pieces of work with a unique character, not series. Series weren't of any interest to me. I preferred experimenting with techniques, modest experiments, little

formats, pictures that were sellable, but I was always seeking to experiment. I wanted them to be unique. And during the 90s people didn't think much of that. Galleries or institutions wanted series, the exploration of things that were similar to each other, and I was doing things that were really exceptional in comparison with each other. I experienced it as someone who wanted to entertain, as if they were magic tricks by a bad magician. So a retrospective like this one was a chance for me to show all my tricks and games...

ML: I remember when you were interviewed by Inés, who was a legend at the time. At one point you speak about a work that I can't find anywhere. It's a work with packets of rice, some shelves with bags of rice. If I'm not mistaken it was for an exhibition at Recoleta...

MP: Yes, at the Centro Cultural Recoleta, in 1992 for the fifth centenary of the discovery of America...

ML: And how do you remember that piece? To a certain extent it's a very mental piece, and as I never saw it, I tried to include it in your work in some way. I only understand it conceptually so I wanted to ask you about it...

MP: That piece was an exception. It was a more conceptual and market-oriented operation. I asked the owners of Arroz Bárbara for money in exchange for doing a publicity stand...

ML: Did it ever occur to you to include it in the exhibition?

MP: I don't think so...

ML: A friend of mine went to the Colección Fortabat with a foreign curator. And when he saw your work *Michel y yo* the first thing he said was: Jeff Koons. On seeing the dates, the curator wondered whether you were aware of what was going on outside... That's another of my questions: what kind of relationship did you all have with what was going on around the world? Because that piece, which has a central place in the retrospective, would seem to create a very direct link with Koons.

MP: Yes, I met Jeff Koons, I'm not sure if it was in 1989 but I met him... I reckon I got to know him at the beginning of the 90s. The only work of his on Michael that I remember is *Michael and Bubbles*, which was after 89 I think...

ML: I reckon it was 88...

MP: Ah, that's interesting. I didn't know that piece until the early 90s.

ML: I don't think much information got to Argentina.

MP: There wasn't much. But I wasn't obsessed about being informed about what was going on, because I knew that it was a hopeless race, at least it was at that time. Of course, Internet has completely changed the paradigm. At that time I felt completely at ease conversing with international, but out-of-date art.

ML: There's a touch of our time, of today, where a margin to ignore what's going on would seem not to exist. It's taken for granted that everything is interconnected, isn't it? It happened to Adrián Villar Rojas with the whale, for example. That logic in which there were three whales swimming around at the same time.

MP: And an exhibition held in a central country is going to be seen as the first. If it's done in a peripheral country it'll probably not be relevant. But of course where it was held first is not relevant either.

ML: In the 60s that happened quite often with Latin American art...

MP: Yes, and more brutally in the 60s. Now the revision of history is changing all that. I'm sure I hadn't seen that work by Koons in the 80s. I was a devoted Michael Jackson fan, from the days he was with the Jackson 5, and I was mad about the album produced for him by Quincy Jones, *Off the Wall*, and then *Thriller*. I used to try and imitate his dance steps, and I loved the gradual whitening of his skin, I liked everything about him...

ML: When Koons was asked about his piece he said he thought Michael Jackson was a spiritual authority who could make people feel secure, regardless of their culture, whatever that culture was...

MP: And it's true...

ML: But Koons is being cynical, isn't he?

MP: Yes, of course...

ML: And so how do you regard the cynicism in your work?

MP: Yes, I'd like to talk about that... Although there's no cynicism in most of my work, there is to a certain extent in others. All in all, the worst cynicism is in he who sees it, in what it reveals. I'd say it's a minimal part of my intentions. For example in this little piece, *Michael y yo*, there must be 0.9 per cent of cynicism.

ML: That's interesting...

MP: Nought point nine, eh?

ML: Yes, I asked because we were talking about the rice piece, a piece which, as you describe it, seems to be sarcastic, and I was thinking about the exhibition at Barro, the idea that starts with the title *Nuevas obras en Barro* using mud (*barro* in Spanish) as a material, etc... So, what percentage of cynicism is there in your exhibition at Barro?

MP: In the exhibition at Barro, around 2 per cent... (laughter)

ML: 2 per cent per work?

MP: No, no, in the whole exhibition... In the pieces where there is more cynicism, the title obviously gives them away, like the three that are called *Vulgaridad es lujo*: Vulgaridad is luxury (blue), Vulgaridad is luxury (red), Vulgaridad is luxury (green). I

would say there's about 90 per cent of cynicism there. In fact, I regret having injected so much cynicism in the title of the work. They were the first ones I did. Generally, when I begin a production for an exhibition my first works have something more conceptual, sometimes happier, sometimes less so in terms of the result. Then I start becoming more relaxed, more innocent. Or more thoughtless...

ML: You start enjoying the process a bit more...

MP: I start enjoying and feeling what I've always thought of as a motto of work: that the experience should go ahead of the ideas. And logically I begin with the ideas, far ahead of the actions, so that afterwards the actions become something that moves forward.

ML: In that respect, the exhibition would seem to have a beginning and an end. Is it like showing a process? Does what you're exhibiting include what could have been discarded too?

MP: Look, most exhibitions, and the Barro one is no exception, I complete 2 or 3 months before the opening in case I have to discard a piece and create something new. But in this exhibition at Barro I didn't think it necessary. I began with the three *Vulgaridad es lujo* pieces, which are a dig at the Los Redonditos de Ricota, a band I never liked ...

ML: All 'neighbourhood' rock?

MP: All macho 'neighbourhood' rock, meaningful lyrics with a message. Let's call its alignment anti-establishment. I find the world of *rocambole* (the bizarre) horrendous...

ML: And what's your relationship with tango?

MP: Absolutely classical. Time passes and I love it more and more. It's the story of the old tango singer who tells the young man, who doesn't like tango, not to worry because tango will wait. I love *lunfardo* tango, tango with descriptions of local characters, Griseta, Muñeca Brava...

ML: All the same Los Redondos have something of tango they make good use of, not in such a loud-mouthed way, but there's another part that's insufferable... But hang on, getting back to cynicism, it always seems to get you in the end, it can bring you trouble and doesn't age well... and we don't know how it'll be read in hindsight. I've just seen the retrospective (if that's what it is) by Prior in Recoleta, and I was surprised at the decadent way in which he's aging. When you read about him in the book published by Mansalva, for instance, he comes across as an artist who retains a certain freshness and a command over what he understands by system that's no longer reflected in his work. I don't really know what happened there...

MP: And why do you think that cynicism doesn't pay? I get the impression it doesn't pay Argentinian artists; who are we to play the cynic? Let's say, a Koons or a Warhol... when you deal with a culture of a central country you probably have more tools for cynicism to work. But when you're an artist from a peripheral country like

Argentina, working in visual arts, which in themselves occupy a fairly peripheral place compared with the pre-eminence of literature, for example, it's hard... Similarly, and despite Borges, cynicism doesn't pay in literature either...

ML: Yes, all the same there's something that can save cynicism over here, and perhaps it's the moral dimension one has when working with it. As I see it, Jeff Koons, to continue with that example, has lost it, don't you think? A certain moral conscience ends up rescuing you from cynicism and puts you in an intermediate place between both things, which is sarcasm. And I think that's where all of us who want to say something similar can possibly meet. The problem comes when you lose that moral dimension... But are morals an issue...? For instance, your work can be read from a very cynical point of view if you lack specific references...

MP: Do you think this exhibition can encourage people to see the work cynically?

ML: Which of the two?

MP: The retrospective at the Colección Fortabat.

ML: Not at all. But in the one at Barro yes, from the title, the materials... there's a percentage of the exhibition that is quite specific. And that percentage interests me, which is why I was asking about the rice piece, because it reflects a degree of cynicism that can't be seen in the retrospective. It's something I found a bit unsettling and it reappears in the exhibition at the gallery, but it doesn't appear explicitly in the retrospective, it doesn't come through there... And as both exhibitions happen at the same time it's interesting to see... I realise it's sometimes hard to know why we did what we did... right?

MP: That on the one hand. And on the other, perhaps not all things have the same value, the same quality. Also when you do a retrospective, you choose better quality work. Most of the central artists we've admired and consumed for two centuries in this country are curated, and edited in their best expressions. And even so, if there's something that you notice all the time when you see artists from the past in Argentina, it's that there is no posterity that can edit them or curate them; look after them say. There are very few people who can reveal how you can establish what a lesser work by Puente is like while another is fantastic. I say Puente but it could be anyone. This kind of purification or curating in countries with a strong tradition is constantly operating; from the market, museums, art researchers. They do the purifying. We don't know the works by Matisse or Mike Kelley that were not so fortunate. And at the same time there are many works we don't know, that are better than the big hits. But we also consume from a distance. Anyway, if the Barro exhibition had occurred last year, surely some of those works would have been included in the little room of the Fortabat dedicated to my relationship with Argentine art. And there you can see a greater percentage of cynicism for the first time. I don't know if it's because of the subject or my age: I'm 55... I mean the room with the 70-minute video on Piccoli we made with Santiago Villanueva, the corncocks I used to decorate an exhibition on heritage in Santa Fe, and where I gave free rein to my cynicism and to my cruelty, at

the Museo de Arte Argentino Regional. There I brought together things I loved very innocently with others in which I acted consciously and treacherously...

ML: So do you believe that the scatological comes into your work?

MP: The scatological?

ML: That's right. I was talking with some friends and when we saw your drippings on the Winco or the stool, or the mud at Barro, they seemed more like bodily secretions than a technique. I was also thinking about your corncobs and the ending of *El Matadero* by Echeverría, where one of the interpretations is that the unitarian is raped with a corncob... And I saw something scatological in such elements, like a resignifying, that starts on the international scene, Pollock, etc., to end in a process of mud and corncobs.

MP: On the corncob painted with lovely, golden colours, I put little stones like jewels, and in the middle there's a work I included in the exhibition *Mi primera exposición en galería Witcomb*, at Castagnino Roldán, a work on the book *El Matadero* by Esteban Echeverría together with a purse in animal print covered in little bows. Hermetically it reflected a sort of unease with a certain genealogy of Argentine literature in connection with massacre, rape, that begins with Echeverría and Ascasubi, and continues with Osvaldo Lamborghini, of course, etc.... and that little animal print purse was a declaration. More than the denouncer of a massacre I prefer to think of myself as a prostitute who aspires to something pretty and modest.

ML: What was your relationship with the *Cerdos & Peces* magazine? I heard that Gumier illustrated several issues...

MP: Only through Gumier. At that time I was keen to show my drawings. They were the only thing I had as I was just beginning to make records, but I had many drawings, the ones done in São Paulo in 1982 that I've included in the retrospective. The exhibition includes the originals that had never been seen before, because in the 90s I simply showed photocopies. I wasn't interested in originals. It was only when I entered the market at Ruth Benzacar that I understood that clients wanted to own an original, so we'd give it to them in an envelope, and we'd also give them the photocopy on a polystyrene sheet, with little balls around it as decoration. Only one version of those photocopies was exhibited, the one that belongs to Mauro Herlitzka, at the side there...

ML: I don't remember it right now...

MP: I'll show it to you in the catalogue...

ML: Ah, well... And that's how you exhibited it?

MP: It's displayed in a glass case now. But in the 90s it was on the wall, and was there in the room with the little balls stuck to the frame... Where were we going with this...?

ML: I wanted to ask you about *Cerdos & Peces*, whether you had collaborated, and what your relationship was with the magazine...

MP: I didn't like *Cerdos & Peces*...

ML: I guessed as much...

MP: For me they were Los Redonditos de Ricota. From a current perspective I would say they managed a naivité and a gigantic innocence. An aura of doom, transgression, and the cult made of it. Gumier was earning his living as a designer and he invited me to do two illustrations, one for a note called "A coger que se acaba el mundo" (laughter)... At the time *Cerdos & Peces* was known, just like a large part of the post-dictatorship Buenos Aires underground, for its worship and exaltation of sex and the possibilities of liberation through sex. I wasn't particularly interested in all that. But I made a vignette on the subject for the article, and I handed over a fairly innocent drawing, with nothing offensive about it. Later on, for another article I was invited to do, Gumier chose a xylograph of mine called "En nombre del hijo," a blind Mickey Mouse surrounded by intestines... and that illustration was used for the invitation to the protest march against the visit of Pope John Paul II, a rally that was repressed by the police. The magazine received threats and that's why Gumier erased the names of all the participants except the author's before it was published...

ML: ...the author of the article...

MP: No no... of the illustration. That is, he erased all the names except mine. Purely causality! My name only appears in that issue (laughter). I got paranoid; something stupid like that got you paranoid at the time. Those were my two interventions in *Cerdos & Peces*. Then I appeared in *Fin de Siglo* where Jorge (Gumier) was also working; Daniel Molina had an important position there and incorporated him and María Moreno with some other people. In 1987, when I did my first exhibition in the youth area of the Centro Cultural Recoleta, where the records and recordings I'm telling you about appear, it's all a bit gay, Jorge wrote a review and added drawings. But well, I was about 26 or 27 and was eager for publicity... of course I didn't think much of the magazines. The same thing happened to me with *Fierro* and *Humor*, I took along my drawings although I hardly agreed with them on anything...

ML: And were they published?

MP: No, they weren't published. I didn't like those magazines. Both *Humor* and the review *Fierro*, and even *Cerdos & Peces* represented that macho post-dictatorship transgressive thing. I was looking to go down other avenues, and later on with Gumier and other people we were lucky enough to reveal what is pejoratively called *light art*: making us happier, more innocent, poorer but more carefree without the need to denounce or provoke.

ML: I once read a phrase that said that only gays, fans of the Ramones and Trotskyists are allowed to be adolescents all their lives...

MP: At that time I was half Trotskyist, I liked the Ramones and felt very gay...

ML: Do you still feel a bit of a teenager?

MP: In certain things I do... yes.

ML: Great. Did you ever come across Perlongher? Did you meet him in Rio?

MP: I met him in Buenos Aires. I once went to his house, but before that he'd come to a birthday party of mine but we didn't meet. That was in 1986 when I was 26.

ML: But were you both activists or did you meet by chance?

MP: There were three main activists in the group I was in, the GAG: Jorge Gumier Maier, Carlos Luis and Oscar Gómez. Oscar Gómez was from the FDH, the gay liberation front of 1972 and from one of the more radical groups in that front of Trotskyist, Lacanian leanings. It was called Eros, I think. Perlongher belonged to that group. So Oscar knew him, Gumier Maier was also in touch, and that's why he participated in the two magazines we published...

ML: Which were they?

MP: *La Sodoma I* and *La Sodoma II*, from 1983 and 84 if I remember rightly. Perlongher wasn't actually one of the idols of my youth either. In some way by the end of the 80s I was fairly clear about a wish of mine, a programme of work that included making something else out of gayness. Something not transgressive or provocative, not mud and blood... but something more infantile... more in tune with what was going on in the world...

ML: You were aware of that...

MP: It was what I wanted... For example, I always found Perlongher's Peronism unpleasant. I never liked all that macho Peronist culture of commotion; ever since I was young I knew full well I didn't like it. I preferred more indeterminate things and of course more adaptive, even arriviste things.

ML: But generally you had leftist political leanings. How do you adapt that to today's world, how do you interpret these times?

MP: What I see as positive about the left isn't of course the ultimate utopia of revolution but the need for groups of activists to try and put a halt to the voracity and greed of capitalism...

ML: And in relation to this last decade and the rights that have been won?

MP: The rights that have been won have not been easy but were the result of a great struggle. The sentencing and reparation of state terrorism crimes and the right to gender identity together with same-sex marriage are issues where there was an historical struggle. Post-dictatorship human rights organisations here were leaders in the world in the way they fought. Argentina was the first country in Latin America to have gay activism... In other words, in relation to the rights of gays, lesbians and transvestites, just to mention those three...

ML: Of course, you see it as a logical consequence...

MP: It's more than that. I remember during Menem's time how the CHA, which isn't very relevant any more, pressurised Menem; it sort of set an agenda for him... Journalists asked why Jáuregui and other guys allied themselves... After all, the repeal of the police edicts, which was so important because for decades the police had the right to detain a gay or a transvestite just because they were acting in a suspicious manner, were achieved thanks to the pressure exerted by the CHA and other organisations on Menem's government. I mean, things were won after a fight.

ML: I asked you that because of what you were saying about Peronism in relation to Perlongher...

MP: I think it's bloody absurd that people should be grateful to their leaders. And when I told you about my early Trotskyism, which of course became watered down giving way to something closer to anarchism, say, when I said that, I was thinking of it in relation to the fact that part of the state is still an enemy, to put it in literary and exaggerated terms. I'd go so far as to say that as an artist I feel neoliberal, but how could a stallholder in La Salada feel the same way. I like the fact that the art world has its own wild and transparent rules... I always expected things to be hard but was never very optimistic. But I like that; in fact I adapted to this microclimate that has as many disadvantages as the insecurity of the fleeting, where everything is born well and ends badly, but has the advantages also of great autonomy, great freedom. I feel like a little animal that has adapted to the ecosystem...

(The phone rings... Marcelo apologises. He answers it and says that coincidentally they're ringing from the gallery. When he returns I tell him I'm going to ask him two simple questions that I reckon would provide a good conclusion to the conversation, to which he generously replies that he has no problem in me asking him more incisive, even cruel, questions. I say we usually hate reading ourselves after an interview. He says he knows that he's not going to like what he reads, whether I edit it or transcribe it word for word, but says it's not important, and confesses to generally disbelieving words. He asks to break for a smoke. I don't say anything but he doesn't appear to be a regular smoker, but rather gives the impression it's something he allows himself outside his daily routine. Among other things we speak about the *off the record* as a concept. After a while the conversation gets back on track).

ML: Well, to end with, I was saying that a couple of artist friends of mine agree with me that your retrospective leaves the sensation that there's been a change of paradigm. For some reason a certain form of reading future Argentine art has changed in our heads... it occurred to me that the young generations that had seen that exhibition have to read the history of Argentine art from another standpoint. Similarly, a large part of my generation read in Kuitca an inevitable reference, consolidating something of that with his retrospective at the Malba, appearing as the figurative path to follow. Your exhibition at the Fortabat would seem to come to change the horizon of reading. And I was left thinking about something in connection with teaching work as a foundational myth. Teaching work as myth generated by Kuitca concerning his famous clinics, and you in some way also draw a myth around your teaching work,

teaching in schools for children with different capacities in Greater Buenos Aires. Of course I'm speaking of myth not in pejorative terms but in terms of constructing identity in the imaginary. And that's where I saw a confrontation in connection with teaching as an activity. As if each of you had built from such different standpoints, one offering a postgraduate scholarship for artists graduating from the Pueyrredón, with a background of very great containment, and you at the exact opposite end, in the antipodes, with kids who don't even have social containment, teaching at that level. What is remarkable is that it was at the same time. Yours was at the end of the 80s and the Kuitca Scholarship started in 1990, if I remember rightly...

MP: Yes, I stopped teaching and working exclusively as a special needs teacher in state schools in 1992 and think the Kuitca Scholarship began in 1990...

ML: They overlap with each other. The thing is that Kuitca responded to a generation of the 80s in which you were barely active... But I believe you're the same age, aren't you?

MP: Yes, with a few months' difference... He was born in 1960, February I reckon, and I was born in December 59. There must be 3 months between us, but I'm not too sure. I didn't much like the artists of the 80s. There was a class thing there, and I was from another social class, and very resentful. I felt more at home with the small Rojas group which took its inspiration from the low, the poor, in doing attractive things, etc. And I felt that in the first year of the Rojas something interesting was taking shape, being born. What was interesting about it was that influences without hierarchies between us, one to one, began to be important, there was parity in those influences; Gumier was making Scottish patterns and I really took to that, while I perhaps was doing with a Mondrian something that looked like fabric, and Schirilo was using beads and sheens, and I was using glitter... Two years on and Laren appeared with silver foil and lights (without the slightest trace of cynicism)... So coming from the mouth of a resentful, ambitious 30-year-old, I didn't think much of the Kuitca Scholarship. In fact, Sonia Becce, who I later forged an excellent relationship with, offered Miguel Harte and me the chance to take part in the first edition of the Kuitca Scholarship...

ML: Incredible.

MP: We were nobody, eh? We were at the Rojas...

ML: Yes, but you would have radically changed your paths...

MP: Yes, we were lucky enough to refuse. We spoke about it together, as we were very close at the time, and went ahead.

ML: Do you remember why?

MP: Because we thought we had something important here, something that had nothing to do with what I supposed was going to happen with the Kuitca Scholarship. I didn't think it would work, that it was placing my hopes in something I didn't believe in, and we could see there wasn't much in it... I'd like to make this difference,

something I've never said before, except when speaking with Inés: on the one hand, at that time I identified very closely with Gumier, Schirilo, Londaibere, and even Fernanda Laguna later on. That's where I feel my soul is. But at the same time because I was very ambitious and had everything to win, I joined forces with Pablo Suárez and Miguel Harte. It was all the same for them two, a mixture of passionate friendship but also a question of getting a foot in the door, a sort of shortcut. Suárez helped us find legitimacy. In fact, he was the one who introduced us to Laura Buccellato, so in 1991 Miguel and I could be the first from the Rojas to exhibit at the ICI she directed as the great legitimiser at the time. And that must have been influential in us becoming the first from the Rojas to exhibit at Ruth Benzacar. And after that came the myth of the road to Rojas-ICI-Benzacar success. I think the same thing happened to Miguel, it was a sort of strategic grouping for rapid access to certain places. I knew that if I alone jumped on the Gumier bandwagon it would take longer, or I would end up in a zen monastery... But never speculating with my work. I wasn't very aware of my work in fact; but speculating on who were the right people, because I really had many class constraints. I couldn't join forces with Adriana Rosenberg, who I also appreciated a great deal, for example, although she was the one who took my works to a gallery for the first time, her gallery. But that was a new world to me. I didn't understand certain codes much at the time.

ML: I can't imagine the scene 20 years ago.

MP: Young art didn't exist in Buenos Aires before. You were valued for not looking young. Art was viewed as something precarious, cheap, vital, without ideas, it didn't exist... I think that's about it, don't you?

ML: Yes, I was just about to say... Thank you, Marcelo... and now the crucial moment...

MP: Ah yes, turning off the recorder...

ML: I know of a journalist who interviewed Marcelo Cohen and when he came to turn off the recorder he erased the whole interview...

MP: Ah... well... good luck.