

Horizons and Folds: Elizabeth Presa

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When I look at Elizabeth Presa's extraordinary new sculptures of this wedding dress, these kimonos, these fans of two memories immediately possess me. The first is of my parents' house in the east end of London where my mother worked as a seamstress. She specialized in wedding dresses: they would hang in various stages of completion from the picture rail of our lounge room. Before I left for school, and well into the night after I got home, my mother would be bent over her Singer making white dresses that seemed to fizz or that quietly declared, in long gestures of trains and veils, that there are moments in life when seriousness and celebration fuse completely. Some evenings the



house would be alive with a bride, down from Romford or Barking for her fitting, along with several bridesmaids who would giggle, undress, and slip into their chilly satin gowns. Those evenings opened for me a feminine space of dress and undress, of intimacy and gossip.

The second memory is of reading Jacques Derrida. It crosses many years, and contains many images. Rather than condense them, though, I wish simply to quote a sentence from "Economimesis" which yields a glimpse of that reading and what it means. Derrida speaks of the challenge of reading Kant's aesthetics, and of finding there an entire politics of art that goes back to Plato and Aristotle. 'Folded into a new system, the long sequences are displaced', he tells us, 'their sense and their function change'. It is the metaphor of the fold that interests me.

When Kant folds motifs from Greek philosophy into his reflections on art, they work differently than in their first homes. Sometimes the disparity is hardly apparent, sometimes it is distinctly noticeable. Either way, the borders separating Plato and Aristotle from Kant are not erased but revealed to be divided and equivocal. This does not prevent us from asking about ‘the precise limits framing a corpus’, but it guides us to answer by way of how motifs participate in a text rather than belong to it.

My first response to Elizabeth Presa’s sculptures, then, is personal and singular. It precedes the act of criticism, but it is doubtful that any commentary I would be able to make would have any interest without this initial response. For me, these works fold together memories of my mother’s work as a seamstress along with my memories of Derrida’s writing; and since both have been so important to me, I see an image of my life there. Elizabeth Presa could not have known this when making these sculptures, nor could I have anticipated my response before seeing them. My initial reaction testifies to a gap in the horizon of expectation that surrounds these works, and it makes me think a little more about the title by which she gathers them together, ‘The Four Horizons of the Page’, along with the very idea of an artwork’s horizon.

The title directs to us think about a page, and not just any page. Elizabeth Presa has taken an icon of Jacques Derrida’s typescript of *Le toucher*, Jean-Luc Nancy, opened it on her computer, printed it many times, then folded those pages endlessly in order to make a wedding dress, two kimonos, and several fans. Now Derrida wrote part of *Le toucher* while visiting Monash University in August 1999, and it appeared earlier this year with Galilée. If the east-west axis is one of Elizabeth Presa’s four horizons, as is suggested by the wedding dress straight from Diego Velasquez and the kimonos from Japan, then certainly the line passing through Melbourne and Paris is another. Why choose Derrida? No author, not even Gilles Deleuze, has written so beautifully about folds, let alone fans, guiding threads, and the knots that form on textual strings. Why this book of Derrida’s? No sculptor could fail to be intrigued by a study of touch, for touch is what a sculptor knows intimately when making a work and what a philosopher usually declares to be out of order if one is to talk about art, not the material of art. And why the typescript of his book and not the book itself? Because it contains traces of Derrida’s touch that are silently erased in Galilée’s handsome production. Here a finger lingers for a moment too long on a key, producing an additional ‘s’ on a word, while just there one notices two



words run together in a moment of excited typing. So something of Derrida is folded in these sculptures: his pages become the material for a work with a quite different sense and function than his own. In a strange way, this exhibition holds together the touch of Derrida's hands and the touch of Elizabeth Presa's hands.

If I had to begin by telling you how these sculptures make me remember two people who meet only in me, my mother and a friend, it was not in order to promote a subjective style of interpretation. Not at all: interpretation always begins from the objective pole of our experience of art. I began as I did in order to remind us that art often touches us in ways neither the artist nor the viewer can expect. 'No horizon, then, for the event or encounter', Derrida tells us, 'but only verticality and the unforeseeable'. Even if one prepares thoroughly for viewing these works, by reminding oneself of Elizabeth Presa's earlier harliquins and book-sculptures, not to mention her interest in the poetics of the book, it remains impossible to circumscribe an encounter with them. To stand before this infant Spanish wedding dress, to walk around these fans, is to enter an intimate,



feminine space that they project, one that calls forth memories, desires, and, since the dress is for someone so very small, fears. To be sure, you will be moved in another way than I have been; yet, like me, you will be moved at different times, and in different ways, in your acquaintance with these works. In their quiet and gentle ways, these sculptures divide the lines between themselves and you.

The title of Derrida's most recent publication, *Le toucher*, Jean-Luc Nancy, points in several directions. First of all, it seeks to present Jean-Luc Nancy as a formidable thinker of touch, the greatest since Aristotle. Second, it attempts to touch him: to be a salutation that will move the man Jean-Luc Nancy who has been Derrida's friend for many years. And perhaps third, it suggests that making any contact with this

corpus will inevitably contain moments of violence. 'On a touche au vers!' exclaimed Stéphane Mallarmé while lecturing in Oxford. He was speaking in horror, or mock-horror, of those younger French poets who had started to compose *vers libre*. To write on Nancy, in admiration of him, though in the knowledge that even praise can tamper a little with the order of his thought, requires considerable tact. And, inevitably, tact, deriving, as it does, from the Latin *tactus*, touch, becomes a theme and a way of proceeding for Derrida. The second part of *Le toucher* is a series of tangents, lines which touch Nancy at just one point.

Tact is also a theme and a way of proceeding in these exquisite sculptures. In its

discreet way, ‘The Four Horizons of the Page’ is a tactful homage to Derrida, to all that Elizabeth Presa has learned from his pages over the years. Let there be no mistake. This exhibition neither construes Derrida as a cultural monument nor ironizes the process of monumentalizing. It has little in common with Mark Tansey’s amusing images of Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man, for instance. Yet the exhibition raises the question of how someone who is a sculptor, not a philosopher, can pay tactful homage as a sculptor to someone who is a philosopher and not a sculptor. What Derrida and Presa both know, each in their own way, is that touch is both an inevitable horizon for sculpture, and what cannot be given as a theoretical horizon for talking about it. There is no sculpture that does not bear the traces of an artist’s touch—a blowtorch, chisel, gouge, hammer, knife, needle—and that does not invite the viewer to touch it. (In these works we want to caress their crisp folds, to run fingertips lightly over the crumpled paper, to slip the knotted thread around one’s thumb while trying to read a line or two of the script.)

Yet philosophers tell us time and again that touch can never render a sculpture intelligible as art. Hegel puts this more forthrightly than most: ‘the sensuous aspect of art is related only to the two theoretical senses of sight and hearing, while smell, taste, and touch remain excluded from the enjoyment of art’. On this understanding, we describe, discuss and evaluate Michelangelo, Auguste Rodin or Alberto Giacometti by appeals to the eye, not to the feel of the metal, stone or wood that they use. Yet careful attention to a sculpture will show that the horizon of sight can be punctured by a materiality that can best be experienced by touch. Perhaps one only understands Henry Moore’s ‘Reclining Figure’ or ‘Relief No. 1’ when one lets one’s hands wander around it for a while. That is, touch helps one to understand the work as a sculpture. It can also testify to the singularity of the artwork. Derrida knows this, and so does Presa. It is by virtue of this shared knowledge that the artist can respond tactfully to the philosopher’s work. These sculptures show us how she touches his writing just as it approaches her, not engaging in any tactic that would commodify or glorify those texts. She touches them delicately yet firmly, now at this point and now at another, so that they are sent in a direction that Derrida could never have anticipated, eventually arriving here, in this Gallery, where we are now and where we are perpetually delighted by what we see and touch.



'The Four Horizons of the Page' was first exhibited at the Linden Gallery, Melbourne 28 July–12 August 2000. The installation was also on exhibition until 30 January at Sculpture Square, Singapore, as part of 'Oblique Shadows: Asian Influences in Australian Sculpture'.

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