

I FIGLI DEI COMUNISTI
Daniela Ortiz
Opening 8 April 2023
With a text by Danilo Siragusa

Laveronica Arte Contemporanea is proud to present the first solo gallery exhibition of Peruvian artist Daniela Ortiz (Cuzco, 1986). The theme concerns one of the undisputed protagonists of what historian Eric J. Hobsbawm called 'the short century': the international communist movement. With *I figli dei comunisti* (*The Children of the Communists*, 2023), the artist chooses to recount a little-known page of twentieth-century revolutionary history: the organisation of initiatives and protection networks in support of children, implemented by governments, parties and militants belonging to the Marxist galaxy. Stories that differ in context and latitude, telling of militants' children being rescued, the search for missing grandchildren and the welcoming of refugees fleeing civil war or nuclear disaster, but with a common denominator: the defence and protection of children in the name of internationalist solidarity.

Over recent years, Ortiz has tackled the theme of childhood several times, starting with a critique of the discriminating symbolic systems of artistic heritage. We might think here of Ana Maria de Jesus Ribeiro, better known as Anita Garibaldi, in whose equestrian monument on the Janiculum Hill, Mussolini ordered the image of a swaddled baby to be included: an ideological rather than iconographic distortion, with which to bring the figure of the revolutionary woman back into the more reassuring sphere of the mother/hearthside angel, so dear to fascism. Likewise, with the performance *I figli non sono della lupa* (*The Children Are Not of Wolf*), the puppet show produced in Rome in 2021 as part of *Hidden Histories* and reproposed especially for the opening of the exhibition, the artist raises the issue of the institutional racism of social services, viewed as an instrument of repression and social violence, and of the state's interference in the lives of migrant families.

The Italian word *storia*, just like the Spanish word *historia*, has a double meaning, which the Latin-speaking world instead broke down into *res gestae* (what happened, the event) and *historia rerum gestarum* (the telling of the event). Exploring this lexical ambiguity, Ortiz has repeatedly deconstructed and reinterpreted colonial and racialised historical narratives. In her work *El ABC de la Europa racista* (*An ABC of Racist Europe*, 2017), an illustrated primer created through a participatory journey with single mothers seeking asylum in the United Kingdom, she highlighted the role of children's literature in the construction of a Eurocentric collective imaginary, poised between paternalism and the criminalisation of *others*. A reflection on the relationship between history and memory does not only pass through the symbolic level: the creative process is deployed as a recovery and revival of the direct actions of activism.

Daniela Ortiz has accustomed her audience to expect the use of a range of media. For *I figli dei comunisti*, the artist once more deals with a popular artefact such as toys, opting here for a cultural object with transnational origins that in the twentieth century became one of the key symbols of the homeland of authentic socialism: the matryoshka. Heir to the more ancient Japanese *kokeshi*, despite its deliberately antiquated iconography, the famous wooden doll, depicting a female figure in traditional dress, was only created at the end of the nineteenth century as part of the 'Children's Educational Workshops', founded in the Abramtsevo circle with the aim of promoting popular art: displayed at the Universal Exhibition in Paris in 1900, the *matryoshka* doll would soon become one of the most iconic elements of Russian folklore. Ortiz's artistic action stems from a reflection on the cultural object/artefact as a product of a given political and economic system, on which she intervenes by means of inserts and variations, blending cultural levels and sources of various origins: a *détournement* that, by triggering a shift in meaning, alters the original perspective. While abandoning the doll's genealogical structure of the *mise en abyme* narrative, her matryoshka ends up taking on the connotations of a narrative told through images, the episodes of which form a sequence that, as they gradually unravel, illustrates characters and events step by step. Daniela Ortiz's matryoshka shows how, behind a story apparently linked to a single figure, a single protagonist, there is actually a complex event of collective political relevance, in which the process of iconographic construction evokes the craft dimension of research and historical narration.

This is the case of the matryoshka dedicated to the *Madres* (and the *Abuelas*) *de Plaza de Mayo*: the movement of the mothers of the *desaparecidos*, the political dissidents killed during the military dictatorship in Argentina between 1976 and 1983. The first image portrays one of the founders, Norita Cortiñas, showing the face of her son Gustavo, a militant of the Partido Justicialista and the Montoneros guerrilla organisation. The second has the likeness of an infant in swaddling clothes and represents the children of the *desaparecidos*, some of whom were born in captivity, taken from their murdered parents – whose portraits adorn the infant’s swaddling clothes – and given up for adoption to other couples, sometimes the families of their torturers themselves. Only as we proceed along the path of discovery do we come across 131 figurines, the number of *hijos* that the ***Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo*** have so far tracked down over the course of their research, and to whom they have revealed their history as children of *desaparecidos*. At the heart of the symbolic unveiling is thus a tale of genuine and painful awareness with which the spectator is forced to come to terms. Other collective stories also find space within the project, such as that of the ***niños de Morelia***; or that of the longest humanitarian programme in history, undertaken in Cuba in 1990 in the wake of the Chernobyl disaster, and which – thanks to the voluntary work of thousands of Cubans – over twenty-one years made it possible to welcome and treat more than 26,000 children from Russia, Belarus and Ukraine.

Daniela Ortiz’s study emphasises the importance of political organisations in protecting and securing the children of communist militants: the role of governments, committees and pressure groups is read by the artist as a form of anti-fascist resistance against the planned annihilation of women, men and ideas. This is the case of Patrice Lumumba, the first black president of the independent Congo, killed in 1960 in a coup financed and supported by the CIA and the Belgian government. It was the Egypt of Gamal Abdel Nasser, one of the leaders of the non-aligned countries engaged in the process of decolonising Africa, that gave asylum to the wife and children of the Congolese statesman, in the name of third-world solidarity.

The assassination attempt on Benito Mussolini, which took place in Bologna on 31 October 1926 at the hands of **Anteo Zamboni**, constituted a turning point in the history of Italy: on the strength of the fury aroused by the incident, the government proceeded to promulgate the Laws for the Defence of the State, with which the end of the old liberal-democratic order was decreed and a decisive step was taken towards the definitive establishment of the fascist regime.

At the same time, this particular day may be told as a story of allegories and images. The entire city was decked out for Fascist Revolution Day, the most important military ceremony of the year. An enormous tricolour banner surmounted the façade of the station. Mussolini on horseback inaugurated the Littoriale stadium. A mammoth deployment of forces was prepared in defence of the *Duce*, who had escaped three assassination attempts over the previous year: in the streets, a group of fascists in uniform dragged a gloomy carnival float depicting a dummy hanging from the gallows, invoking the death penalty for his attackers. When Mussolini’s car pulls into the Canton dei Fiori, a shot is heard. The bullet reaches the *Duce*, piercing the lapel of his militia uniform (a symbol of fascism) and the sash of the Mauritian Order (a symbol of the Savoy monarchy), yet leaving him unscathed. The crowd then attack fifteen-year-old Anteo Zamboni, who would be kicked, punched, bitten and stabbed multiple times by militia members and Mussolini supporters alike.

What is striking in this iconographic reconstruction is the absence of Anteo’s face. Denied in the body, on which the fascist violence continued to rage even after his death, to the point that the father could hardly make out the features of his son on that disfigured corpse. And denied even in effigy: by order of the then Minister of the Interior, Luigi Federzoni, no photograph of the assailant – whose adolescent face would have risked seriously embarrassing the regime – was to appear in the newspapers.

Daniela Ortiz pays tribute to the young anti-fascist, an expression of the revolt of the youngest against the fascistisation of society of which children were the key target. By shattering this twofold *damnatio memoriae*, the artist restores Anteo’s serene face to the onlooker, the trace of a smile, his gaze good-natured and intense. A gaze that cannot but make us reflect – today even more than then – on the value of the sacrifice made by the young revolutionary.

Danielo Siragusa