

Las exposiciones de arquitectura y la arquitectura de las exposiciones

La arquitectura española
y las exposiciones internacionales (1929-1975)

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SPAIN: ARTISTIC AVANT-GARDE AND SOCIAL REALITY, 1936-76. EXPOSING THE TRANSITION, OR SPAIN AS THE THEME OF VENICE BIENNALE

Joaquim Moreno

Venice, July 18th 1976. That year's Biennale opens to the public, following the opening of its Historical Archive for Contemporary Art (ASAC) the day before. For those paying attention to Spain's transitional political process, this was a symbolic date: the 40th anniversary of the beginning of the Civil War. An informed audience would compound this symbolic date with a strange paradox when entering Biennale's Gardens: Spain's pavilion was closed. The guide map pictured the Spanish pavilion as an empty contour, left blank without an index number. Literally, there was no representation of the Spanish nation. But a sign hanging in the façade of Biennale's central pavilion read: *Spain: Artistic Avant-garde and Social Reality, 1936-1976*. Spain, more precisely the complex relations between avant-garde art, politics and society during the Civil War and Franco's regime, was the theme of the Biennale, its central exhibition. There was no Spanish representation, yet the memory of Civil War was made present in Biennale's calendar, and the complex history of its avant-gardes was the theme of the central exhibition. Such intricacies make this process a rich rendition of the historical complexities of Spain's democratic transition, at the convergence of different movements: a renewed Venice Biennale playing politics, the crisis of state representation that signaled Spain's transitional political process and a renewed attention to history as a critical instrument to reassess the avant-gardes and their politics. Its historical analysis is easier in several parts: the historical transformations of the Biennale; the reception, public debate and censorship attempts that surrounded this exhibition in Spain, and its very content and historical perspective.

This Venice Biennale perceived itself as a political actor intended on renovation and self-criticism, after its tumultuous closure in the early 1970s. The old institution was literally reestablished as a new public entity by the law number 438 of July 26 1973. This new institutional framework implied a new directive structure: a president, an executive board and an advisory council. Its members included representatives from local, regional and national scales of government. Its mandate and cultural planning worked in 4 years cycles. Various permanent committees organized planning conventions to construct the activities, expected to become a continuum with a broad spectrum: less competitive saloon and more research institution, less beaux-arts and more engagement with society and politics. This biennale was interested in new publics and new ways of being public, a need fulfilled with the new space for its institutional memory, the Historical Archive for Contemporary Art (ASAC). It was equally intent on keeping a published record of its activities, on publicizing them. This required year-books; regular catalogues did not suffice. And for four years this biennale published roughly 1000 pages long volumes documenting its works.

The first cycle of activities intended to ‘establish a new relation with society,’ in the early fall of 1974, was called *for a democratic and anti-fascist culture*. The general aim of bearing witness against a resurgence of fascism was made evident in a series of ‘testimonials against fascism.’ This commitment to become a political agent instead of an echo chamber of different national cultural diplomacies coalesced under the general cry *Freedom for Chile*, in solidarity with the Chilean people in the aftermath of Pinochet’s coup. Music, cinema, theatre, photography, literature, posters, mural paintings, debates... every front was important for this cry for help. And *Freedom for Chile* was also the name of a weekly newspaper that kept a record of all this activity as well as Chile’s ongoing repression. Five poster size issues were published and pasted in the walls between October and November 1974.

Several details connect these events of 1974 and the Spanish paradoxes of 1976. Spain was in the news: a column in issue 3 denounced political repression, and the opening of issue 4 gave notice of Eduardo Arroyo’s arrest. The Spanish Artist was arrested and interrogated while in Spain at the service of the Biennale, which had charged him with the mission of preparing an exhibition of Spanish Anti-Fascist art. Another part of this anti-fascist testimonial was the very closure of Spain’s national pavilion. The new statute gave the Biennale the prerogative of bypassing national commissaries and inviting international artist directly, what explains both the closure of the pavilion and the direct address to Spanish artists.

Closing the door on Franco’s was one side of this new political engagement. Symmetrically, it also meant an increased interest in the cultural work against Franco’s regime, and in a critical re-evaluation of the role of avant-garde art, both during the war and under Francoism. For the Biennale itself, a critical history of the avant-gardes was also an opportunity for self-reflection, an opportunity for a real departure from earlier saloon like curatorial strategies. These factors converged, in the preparations for 1976, in the planning of an exhibition on Propaganda and Spanish Avant-garde Art and Architecture. And historical change concurred with a new perspective in history. Franco’s death in November 1975 reversed the historical conditions of this planning. A special issue of *Freedom to Chile* was published later in 1976 with a new perspective: change had already occurred in Spain, giving hope for a similar transformation in Chile. The writing of History crossed paths with History on the making, and these real-time convulsions and the Biennale playing politics resulted in *Spain, Artistic Avant-garde and Social Reality: 1936-1976*; a Spanish presence, not a representation.

The complexities of the Spanish reception of the exhibition are better told in flashback, from the moment in which censorship confiscated its catalogue. “Due to allegedly illegal propaganda, the catalog of the Spanish participation in the Venice Biennial: *Spain, Artistic Avant-Garde and Social Reality*, was withdrawn from commerce,” stated a brief notice in the society section of the young *El País* of December 14th 1976. The paper further informed that despite the withdrawal of the catalogue, the exhibition would open the coming Saturday in Miró’s Foundation in Barcelona. Another small notice in *La Vanguardia* evidenced this split between the censorship of the book, sequestered in judicial proceedings, and the opening of the exhibition it documented. These two small notices about the sequestering of a book already made public; about the break-

ing of its propagation; offer a glimpse on the convoluted paths of the transition. Spain's path to democracy was a period in which old inertias and bursts of change –the past and the future– collided and reorganized each other. This catalogue, its exhibition and the events and reactions surrounding it, are an ideal terrain to observe these many overlaps. It is an opportunity to look at a historical juncture whose unresolved conflicts are still conditioning Spain's relation with the past and the present.

And what is the story leading to this flashback? Little time after Spain's exclusion, the newly appointed director of the Architecture and Visual Arts section of the Biennale: Vittorio Gregotti, visited Barcelona and outlined his prospects for the event to his longtime friends of *Arquitecturas Bis*: a new cultural policy that would attempt to overcome the topical and eventful character of the Biennale and transform it in a modulated continuum, supported by what is now the Historic Archive for Contemporary Art. The lines of inquiry that could be inferred from Gregotti's description were articulated around three issues: the pedagogic effort of the modern movement (understood as an experimental and dialectic moment in the activities of the avant-garde), current solutions and debates about the housing problem, and finally a great exhibition on the theme of Propaganda, proposed as a way to deal with the obvious problem of architecture exhibitions: the absence of its object, and as a way of connecting architecture with the other arts. Gregotti's words appear rather prescient, announcing one of the central motifs of *Spain, Artistic Avant-Garde and Social Reality: 1936-1976*: the Republican pavilion for 1937 International Exhibition in Paris. This apparent fulfillment of Gregotti's ambition was the product of a process of radical transformation of the historical conditions that witnessed his words. The inclusion of materials on the 1937 pavilion; the recovery of the voices defeated in the Civil War, was a real-time addition only possible with Franco's disappearance.

Arquitecturas Bis' group and Gregotti's Biennale had joined efforts in July 1975, in the *Convegno Internazionale Progettuale* (the Planning Convention) assembled in Venice to produce guidelines for the Biennale's activities. Tomas Llorens, in the introduction to the catalogue, outlined the two main lines of inquiry produced by the convention: a) New proposals regarding the "decentralization" and the democratization of culture; b) A critical analysis of the relations between culture and imperialism in capitalist society, with a special focus on the mission of the artistic avant-garde¹.

The exhibition, proposed in the second line of research, was immediately accepted and included in the final declaration published in Biennale's 1976 yearbook. It is important to notice that this initial proposal was a very critical perspective of the development and consolidation of capitalist structures under a long dictatorship and its interactions with the artistic avant-garde. Venice was a safe haven to debate de avant-gardes under Franco's regime, but the debate was nonetheless immersed in its historical cycle. The disappearance of Franco after a long agony brought Propaganda into the picture. The democratic transition made possible the historical recovery of a moment of convergence between architecture and democracy, and of radical participation in the war effort: Sert and Lacasa's pavilion of 1937. Biennale's political changed, from a witness to an active participant. The Biennale was actively contributing to Spain's path to democracy. The Biennale that had closed the door to the old regime was giving its central place to the effort of inventing a new democratic one. The initial

1. LLORENS, Tomas, "Introducción", A.A.V.V. in *España. Vanguardia artística y realidad social: 1936-1976*, Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, 1976, p. XI.

Francoist historical cycle: 1939-1975, was being encased in real-time in a new one: 1936-1976 –from the beginning of the civil war to the transition.

Acting politically, Carlo Ripa de Meana (Biennale's President) headed a delegation that consulted with Democratic Coordination (opposition), Filipe Gonzales (the socialist leader), or Santiago Carrillo, the exiled head of the Spanish Communist Party. Reciprocally, opposition representatives were granted political status and received solemnly by Venice's mayor in Palazzo Ducale. According to the recollection published in the yearbook of 1978, opposition leaders saw this as "a proof of international solidarity because it demonstrates to a wide public that an old and highly prestigious Italian public institution, regulated by National Law, recognizes in the oppositional intellectuals and workers the face, the problems, the hopes and the works of the authentic Spain, and not in the declining power of the regime or the king"². Biennales' *Homage to the Democratic Spain* also included: *Spain 1936-1939. War Photography and Information*, *Spain 40 Years After: Autobiography of a Civil War*, a symposium titled *Ideological Cinema of an Ideological War*, representations of Spanish Theater that culminated with the symposium: *Theater and Society in Today's Spain*, the symposium: *40 years of poetry in Spain: between realism and avant-garde*, Spanish Music: *Singing Freedom*, a concert in La Fenice theatre celebrating Spanish resistance, Spanish cinema and a special section dedicated to the Basque Country. In short, the Venice Biennale was directing all its cultural thrust to support Spain's democratic change. Yet the Spanish pavilion remained close. If before the Biennale refused representation to a fascist state, it now refused representation to the transitional regime. Before, Spain was a country without freedom; now, it was one expecting elections and a new constitution, it had no representatives. The Biennale was acting its politics and preserving its cultural policy.

And if in Venice the opposition appeared to be with the Biennale, in Spain, contested it loudly, accusing it of being orchestrated by a non-democratically chosen committee, of compromising the purity of the revolution dealing with an institution as the Venice Biennale, or of not being representative of anti-fascist art. The transitional regime was denied representation, some emerging forces did not feel represented, and others preferred an all-inclusive pilgrimage devoid of any historical project. These polemics constitute a real crisis of representation, maybe another definition of a transitional process.

The polemic was so acrid that even another format of the printed media made its appearance in this populated story, which already included yearbooks, weekly and daily newspapers, or censored catalogues: the documental dossier inserted in a magazine. The shortcomings the Biennale saw in its general catalogues were likely perceived equally for this particular one: these volumes lacked a documentary anthology capable of justifying its protagonists; of inscribing their work in the public sphere. Issue 31-32 of *Comunicación XXI*, a generalist magazine on media, published such dossier. It ranged from precise descriptions of the curatorial and historic strategies, through graphic documentation of the exhibition ensemble, to the publication of the epistolary exchange between the committee, the Biennale, invited artists and the proponents of alternative Spanish representations and other perspectives on anti-fascist art. Late in 1976, the public record this polemic – with all its significance of an emergency of a public sphere for government control – lived side by side with the decapitated automaton of censorship, still afraid of the propagation of

2. La Biennale, *Annuario 1978, Eventi del 1976-77*, p. 150.

subversive books. It is now possible to picture the transition as an explosion of narratives: contradictory, overlapping, misaligned, delirious or obsolete, colliding and rearranging each other in those times of expectation.

The beginning and the end of the historical narrative of Spain, Artistic Avant-Garde and Social Reality was the rotunda of the Italian pavilion. It contained remains and remainders from the Republican pavilion of 1937: Calder's fountain of mercury, a table set for the absent: artist, poets, intellectuals, disappeared in the war, and a circular wall of Civil War propaganda. Avant-garde and propaganda were clearly the themes of the exhibition. But there was no victimization or sociological determinism in the historical presentation of these objects. Tomas Llorens was careful about this point right from the beginning, when stated in the initial *convegno* that:

"The new biennale should emphasize the analysis of the constraining, the manipulation in propagandistic terms acted upon artistic production by a fascist regime, but it should equally avoid the temptation of presenting art as a victim of repression, along a framework that perceives creativity and an active and productive artistic expression only under abnormal conditions".

Architecture was a protagonist of these events, not a victim or a reflex of social conditions³. The recuperation of Sert and Lacasa's pavilion was not a physical replica; it was a reunion, as far as possible, of its original contents, and an opportunity for a careful historic analysis of its process. This reconstruction or staging was bringing back the most singular moment of convergence of the arts in the Republican cause. Its most famous piece, Picasso's *Guernica*, at the time in New York, did not travel to this reunion, but Alexander Calder's *Fountain of Mercury* was brought from its resting place in Miró's foundation, with the original inscription: "Voici ce que convoient les armées envahissantes" (Here's what invading armies covet) hanging over it. The catalogue was the opportunity for a historical reflection on this dramatic real-time chronicle of the beginning of World War II; the place to reflect on the pavilion as a media; literally a vehicle for propagation, denunciation and cry for help. The collective text in the catalogue, by Victor Pérez Escolano, Vicente Lleó Cañal, António González Cerdón and Fernando Martín Martín details the diplomatic developments of the process that mediated from the initial French invitation to participate in the International Exhibition, in 1934, through the changes produced by Civil War, up to a letter in which the Republican Ambassador in Paris, Luis Araquistain, outlined the importance of the pavilion in the politics of war:

"It is desirable that we prepare Spain's participation in the Exhibition as soon as possible, and in the case that is not possible, that we communicate it immediately to the French Commission, to avoid giving the impression of lack of punctuality or seriousness.

[...] It appears convenient to participate in the Exhibition and take immediately the necessary steps for it, to give an impression of dependability and pass the idea the government still works on this type of things.

[...] In the worst case scenario, in which it is impossible to enroll private participants, merchants, industrialists, etc., it would be always possible to make a cheap yet decorous pavilion, and exhibit art works, propaganda, etc."⁴.

From its inception, the pavilion was intended as built diplomacy. Real-time diplomacy demanded convergence yet independence of contents and architecture. When the five sections of the exhibition were distributed in the project, the first stone had been already laid, in February 27th of 1937. The development of the Civil War was intruding in the contents of the pavilion. The most famous intrusion was Picasso's masterpiece, painted for the pavilion in the aftermath

3. La Biennale, Anuario 1976, Eventi del 1975, p. 234.
4. ESCOLANO, Víctor Pérez, CAÑAL, Vicente Lleó, CORDÓN, Antonio González, MARTÍN, Fernando Martín, "El Pabellón de la República Española en la Exposición Internacional de París, 1937", AA.VV. in *España. Vanguardia artística y realidad social: 1936-1976*, p. 28.

of the bombings of Guernica, in April 26th 1937. This urgency to address the facts of war is a fundamental principle of the historical analysis. The project is interpreted as an Agit-Prop enterprise, a convergence between Lacasa's realism and Sert's rationalism. The urgency of the situation merged these two apparent antagonistic positions:

“When Lacasa allows Sert to make the decisions about what code to employ, is the moment of most intense mutual understanding between the hypothetical antagonists. Sert is proficient in the use the rationalist code, and assumes the preliminary programmatic decision. Lacasa accepts «the functionality of the code as a mediatizing element, and as a guarantor of communication», what is, in an Agit-Prop lineage, what really matters”⁵.

Rationalism represents thus an economy of material as well as an economy of means of communication. The need for an expressive efficacy is what compressed realism and avant-garde, propagandists and formalists. Josep Renau, then the *Director General de Bellas Artes*, remained in Paris producing the photomontages that reflected in the walls of the pavilion the developments of war. This essential operator of this propaganda architecture accompanied the return of the pavilion he helped activate, visiting Venice and assembling a sizeable group of his graphic work. This component of the exhibition, War Propaganda, was historically contextualized by Imma Julián in: “The poster and graphic arts in the Civil War”⁶. This text outlines the Republican propagandistic machine, from its collectivized actors, like the Union of Professional Draftsmen, to its ideologues and innovators, like Renau himself (an early adopter of photomontage), to its territorial deployment. These images, printed large to make the walls of the rearguard cry, were also printed small, postcard size, and sent in the opposite direction, as a means of connecting the rear and front. One size spoke to the collective, another was address to a single loved one that fought in the variable geography of the front lines. Historical reflection on Republican Propaganda was giving voice to the defeated, bringing the absent back to the table. The well laid expectant table at the center of the exhibition.

In Spain, the past and the future, history and memory, change and continuity, were battling and reorganizing each other in real-time. In Venice the Biennale was providing a real time opportunity to bring new light on recent history, giving voice to silenced histories. This exhibition was thus a media, was a strange journal of the transformations occurring in Spain, a process mirrored in Spain through heavy debates in media like *El País* or *Comunicación* or the censorial process of its catalog. The central piece of this media exhibition was a ‘reconstruction’ of the most extreme instance of Republican propaganda during the civil war: Sert and Lacasa's pavilion for Paris. This is the most fascinating *mise en abyme* of this story: one exhibition as presence, not representation, was the opportunity for a historical recovery of the most dramatic moment of convergence between art, architecture, diplomacy and propaganda of the Republican side of the Civil War, or in other terms, the tragic moment in which architecture was really asked to be a media.

Marcel Duchamp's door with two frames, exhibited in the Ambient Art show two rooms away from *Spain, Artistic Avant-garde and Social Reality*, is a good metaphor for the intense debate that surrounded this exhibition. A door impossible to close, a banal domestic item rendered absurd, a threshold with multiple options; in parallel with a Biennale experimenting with institutional self-criticism and a real time archive, in a country in transition, the past and the future were clashing in multifarious ways that no door could close.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 45.