

Conceptual Art Historiography in Spain

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This paper addresses the question of how to come to terms with the legacy of conceptualism in Spain today. In order to do this I propose a retrospective tour through or national art historical narratives to check their topoi and to identify the cul de sac nature of such approaches. Non objectual and conceptualist trends were explicitly excluded from the construction of the contemporary art memory of Spanish democracy; but since the late eighties have been episodically claimed both by the Catalan and by discontents with the mediocre art scene. Today, I think we have different and **I think better** reasons to do it, not any more as a matter of national pride or as a last resort to escape our mediocre present.

An interview with Simón Marchán, the main theorist of the conceptualism, a member of the Grup de Treball, and today an acclaimed and influential scholar, included in the first volume of *Desacuerdos*, ended with a series of somber reflections on the entropic dynamic observed by the conceptualist avant-garde in the final moments of the Franco regime. Firstly, Marchán underlined the "blindness and sectarianism we were all suffering; antifranquism produced such a distortion of reality that we were unable to distinguish between a dictatorial regime and conservative liberalism". Secondly, he noted the loss of ground for such practices: "alternative spaces existing, even precariously, during Franco period, did not have room in a democratic society that, at least in theory, did not exclude you [...] such is the tragedy." This was a tragedy, particularly for Marchán, who had been intimately committed to the theorization and dissemination of what he had

baptized as "new artistic behaviours" in his pioneering "From objectual art to conceptual art" published in 1972.

In this retrospective view Simón Marchán provides us with some keys to interpret the complex juncture in which the master lines of the dominant master discourse of contemporary art in Spain were decided, as well as the meaning of the art system in democratic Spain. According to a superficial reading of Marchán's diagnosis we interpret that the avant-gardes of the seventies collapsed due to their own rigid position which misinterpreted any artistic experimentalism as antifranquism. Such a fixation emerged from an aim at hegemony as orthodox and exclusive as it was detached from any realistic realisation in an open cultural sphere. Such a position was made clear in 1972 when, as Marchán reminds us, many members of this avant-garde, especially those from Cataluña, rejected the opportunity to participate in the *Encuentros de Pamplona*, a unique event in which the international avant-garde and the precarious local art scene crossed their paths, sponsored by provincial entrepreneurial capital. According to this interpretation the party discipline - PCE and PSUC- biased the artistic debate to such an extent that, once those conditions disappeared, this art practice would also lose its grounds.

A second reading, however, may lead us to interpret the emphasis on "blindness" and "distortion" in the view that the artist had of their own historical circumstance as the result of a new and no less hegemonic pattern of historical representation coming forth, that of the new democratic regime, which compelled to explain the extinction of such movements as a consequence of their structural maladjustment to the new conditions. We can already find such hegemonic interpretation twenty years before *Desacuerdos*, in 1983, in the catalogue of the "posthumous" exhibition of Spanish conceptualism *Fuera de formato*, including texts by Simón Marchán and Antoni Mercader amongst others in the catalogue. Placed in a transavantgardist and postmodern context, such an exhibition

was, as Marchan, the epitaph of some aesthetic attitudes which had been completely forgotten, perhaps due to their well known arrogance."

This historical representation is strikingly different from the one constructed in Catalunya. Alexandre Cirici, who died in 1983, still had time to see the quick marginalization and the oblivion of the highly politicized artistic practices of the early seventies and the return of painting, as well as the replacement of the avangardist debate with the old notion of decoration. However, the differential dynamics of Catalunya and the fierce defence of such a difference - excited by its exclusion from the art policies of the first democratic governments for which only "Spain is different" - made possible an early recovery of the conceptual avant-garde for the dominant narrative of Catalan art. Making emphasis on the ideological binary of modernity and Catalan identity, democratic Catalunya made of the conceptual movement one of the main foundations -together with the heritage of Antoni Tapies - on which to build its modern artistic identity. Such interpretation got a formal status in the exhibition *Idees i actituds. En torn de l'art conceptual a Catalunya, 1964-1980*, curated by Pilar Parcerisas held in Barcelona in 1992. This may be understood within a wider project by which, together with the Olympic Games, Barcelona was creating its image as a modern cultural city.

In spite of the encyclopaedic vocation and deep research displayed in the exhibition and catalogue, the conflicts and contradictions within the avant-garde groups were silenced, together with any comment on the compromises made during the period of democratic normalization. The idea of an autochthonous avant-garde, plenty of youthful creativity and utopism, as rescued by the new democratic Catalunya was to good an image to be problematized.

The only echo of such old disagreements was the angry discussion held between the curator, defender of the political - catalanist - identity of the conceptual movement, and Victoria Combalia, an art critique and active

participant in the period which denounced the political manipulation of art both in the early seventies as well as, again in 1992. The interpretation of the roll played by the Grup de Treball was central in this debate.

The exhibition devoted to Spain by the Venice Biennale of 1976, titled "Avant-garde and social reality" has been traditionally considered by Spanish historians as the swan song of a notion of art - as socially useful, as class art - necessarily condemned to disappear in the new democratic era. Interestingly enough, the curators of such an event, which embodied the identification between art and political resistance, were to be the same agents responsible of the actual metamorphosis observed by the notion of art in the first decade of Spanish democracy. Behind their political notion of the Spanish avant-garde a clear effort to monopolize the symbolic value of art since the Republic can be easily perceived. The texts included in the book produced for the occasion, especially the one by Valeriano Bozal, pass through the different episodes of the politically committed avant-garde noting their subjection to the specific historical juncture and describing the reasons of their fatal obsolescence. The populist naivete of some and the contradictory autonomy claims of others, conceptualist practices in particular. We should remember that *Champs d'attraction* by Grup de Treball was part of the exhibition. The interest of these texts is not derived from their proposals for an art in a new social reality, but in the feeling of obsolescence and closure they provoke with regard to previous avant-garde movements. Seven years later, in 1983, in the already mentioned essay, Simón Marchán asserted that "Artistic avant-garde and social reality, was not only a rereading of Spanish art from the civil war, but it was also a keystone in our history: the exhaustion of a period in which the conceptual movement was included".

The meaning of "democratic normalization" in the art world was quickly determined during the intense period between 1976, the year of the Venice Biennale, and 1982 when the

Socialist Party takes the power. During that period, the energies of politically committed art were spent in the efforts of some to have a place in the new order, and the disenchantment of many others who felt betrayed by the compromising attitude of their comrades and the direction taken by the historical process. This resulted in a depolitization of the art system, as exemplified by the blossoming of transavant-garde art, and, above all, by the installation of a new ideological framework which defined the function of art in a democratic society, a framework within which the dynamics of the avant-garde of the late Franco period did not have a place.

In the meanwhile, in the eighties, a new variety of modernist historiography got strength side by side with the former Marxist and now Kantian participants in the Venice biennale who never relinquished their authority. This new modernist trend, formalist and erudite, and self-identified as non political, soon became loosely postmodernist, even if with a strong attachment to the canon. In spite their original differences both trends will show an identical interest in the "museification" of Spanish avant-garde and the construction, on such museal foundations, of an art system adjusted to the new democratic system. The creation of the Reina Sofia as national museum with the active intervention of some of these scholars, was represented as the fulfilment of the so ofte frustrated ideals of modernity and progress in Spanish history. The Reina Sofia is probably the last big modernist museum in the Western world, being the Guernica the link between the discourse of modernism and Spanish history. This centralising and modernist model did and does not yet have space for the critical and non objectual practices of the late Franco period we are dealing with here.

We could thus conclude that the description of the complex avant-garde scene of the seventies as an isolated phenomenon paralysed by its own dogmatism, may be a necessary ideological projection of the new art system rather than the description of a fatal and irreversible

process. Only after three decades of democracy, an art historian, Alberto López Cuenca, has approached the transformation of avant-garde art avoiding the typical either self-celebratory or self-pitying perspectives as part of the general social, economic and ideological changes taking place in Spain in the period. According to López Cuenca, democratic governments not only encouraged the commodification of the art world, following an international trend in the eighties, but they also identified such a process with the modernisation and europeisation of the country, using the symbolic capital attached to art as a tool to define the identity of the new Spain as a capitalist democracy.

As we approach the end of the eighties, the mediocre and sterile nature of a dependent and artificially nourished art system, became more and more evident. By then, the art world was unable to break by its own means with such a dynamic, and most often it passively witnessed the increasing discredit of cultural policies and the effects of a financial crisis that was patent after the 1992 celebrations. As a reaction a few artists and critics of the new generation tried to recover the fading notion of artistic autonomy. In a famous article published in 1989, the Andalusian art critic Mar Villaespesa, claimed that "art should not just be the decorative frame of power". After a summary retrospective description of the state of the art during in the eighties, she proposed a definitive emancipation of Spanish art from both the acritical mimicry of foreign models and the close supervision of the state.

However, the several declarations of independence taking place at the end of the eighties and early nineties rarely go beyond a melancholic evocation, as if autonomy was the utopia of a time irremediably lost. A mix of melancholy and the anxiety to find a way out can be found in a curatorial project by the art critic José Luis Brea, "Before and after the enthusiasm, 1972-1992" held at the KunstRai de Amsterdam in 1989. It an attempt to bridge the vacuum of the Spanish art of the eighties by bringing attention to

the forgotten conceptualist practices of the previous decade. Both the exhibition and the book published on that occasion display a dialogue between a personal choice of members of the "conceptual" generation: Isidoro Valcárcel Medina, Juan Hidalgo and Ferrán García-Sevilla with a group of young artists linked to the gallery *La máquina española*, in Seville. The late-modernist discourse of the former is approached from a non-political and mainly tautological perspective, stressing the linguistic features which could be read by the latter from a neo-banjaminian and postmodern notion of history. José Luis Brea identifies a trans-historical tendency of Spanish art to explore the complexities of language, translating the conceptualist heritage into the terms of Baroque language games.

José Luis Brea was not the only one who, in the early nineties, looked back to conceptualism both as a last resort in the shipbreak of Spanish art, whose mediocre and provincial nature was becoming increasingly patent "after the enthusiasm" and as a way to catch up with the new trends of international neoconceptualism. Two young colleagues of José Luis Brea, Juan Vicente Aliaga and José Miguel Cortés, published in 1990 *Conceptual art revisited*. This book is a symptom of both the new interest in conceptualism and the oblivion it had undergone as a local phenomenon. The only trace of Spanish conceptualism among the textual material compiled in the book is an interview, again, with Simón Marchán, in which he gave a detached view of those controversial years, but, nevertheless, advocated for a recovery of their memory as a source of inspiration for the new more reflective conceptualism of the young artists of the nineties.

The recovery of the 70s in the nineties came together, specially in Cataluña, with an increasing awareness of the need of a historical analysis of the recent past. Such journals as *Papers d'Art* from Girona or such series of publications as *Impasse* from Lleida, both related to local art foundations, provided a space to reflect simultaneously about the past and present of art practice. But this urge

to rewrite the narratives of recent contemporary art in Spain was not, and has not been felt yet in academic art history and university departments, still under the hegemony of either canonical modernism or despicable provincialism. The main narrative of contemporary art history as established around 1976 remains unquestioned, and the second generation of scholars has been unable to "kill the father" and to articulate an alternative view, just filling the gaps - the names and works - of a predetermined historical narrative.

If, as Marcelo Exposito pointed out, the "nineties wanted to be political", politics were not embraced in a systematic manner till the second half of the decade, being the conservative party in power, when new forms of political resistance were taking shape. By the late nineties, many young artists were immune to the seduction of the art world and felt attracted to the ethics and aesthetics of autonomy, the setting of alternative communication networks and collective action, which were becoming the terms of the new political discourse.

The new interest in the creative and experimental practices of the seventies observed in the last ten years should be understood in this specific context. Such an interest does not have anything to do with the reconstruction of a glorious modernity, nor with the attempt to find local precedents to the neo-conceptualist trends, as it happened in the early nineties. Two main features define the new approach to conceptualism: First, the attempt to find links between art practice and the radical experimentation with the languages, media and technologies of society as a whole. Second, the recognition of a precarious, but never completely interrupted lineage of art as a counter-hegemonic space of contestation.

In this path the new generations have met the steps of some of the historical members of art activism in the seventies, moved by a sudden new energy. We should mention, for instance, Narcis Selles *Art, política i societat en la derogació del franquismo. La Assemblea Democràtica*

d'Artistes de Girona, his exhibition on the group Tint-2, together with Jordi Font, or Carles Ameller work on *Video Nou*. Their memory is stimulated by the new interest of the younger artists and researchers Marcelo Expósito, Valentín Roma, Fernando Golvano, and Pedro G. Romero, among others.

This new look at the seventies, as produced by old and new militants, is characterized by a rejection of the interpretation of conceptualism as an "ism", and the emphasis on the transversal processes and the specific junctures which are usually ignored by the typical linear narrative of canonical art history. This new turn intends to recover the continuities between past and present beyond the strict limits of the historicist line of museum discourse.

Valentin Roma's project to read Barcelona's cultural context of the seventies, from a perspective which links art, design and pedagogy, breaks the narration of Catalan conceptualism as a politicized local version of an international art movement, repeated by Simón Marchán, with Pilar Parcerisas and Victoria Combalia variant versions. The label "conceptualism", as a trade mark of art history and art criticism, gets blurred in the complex melee of economic, political and personal relations described in the Catalan society of the period.

The journal *Brumaria*, whose first issue was launched in 2002 by members of two different generations, Darío Corbeira and Marcelo Expósito, is the best known attempt to bridge the apparent gap between the avant-gards of the seventies and contemporary critical art practices.

These fruitful encounters between old and new art activism, which initially happened mainly on the margins, found however an unexpected ally in the Museum, an institution which at the turn of the century was trying to update its hegemonic position as a cultural institution. The Museum of Contemporary Art of Barcelona (Macba) is particularly relevant in this process since, on the one hand, is the repository of the "national legacy" of Catalan

conceptualism and, on the other hand, stands as an alternative model of museum against the historicist-modernist tradition embodied by the Reina Sofia: a museum *mise en abîme* which underlines the permeability between avant-garde experimentation and contemporary social dynamics. The dense exhibition and catalogue devoted in 1999 to the *Grup de Treball* was leading its steps in such direction. The exhibition and workshop *Direct action as one of the Beaux Art* in 2000 and the following *Agencias* project were training camps to a strategic alliance (or tactic, if we position ourselves on the side of activist) between this new Museum model and artistic activism.

Very close to Macba's positions, but without the patrimonialising obligations of a museum, we find the exhibition programme of the Tapies Foundation, also in Barcelona. The Foundation has explored alternative ways to tell artistic and cultural processes beyond the mere exhibition of objects and has rehearsed non canonical manners to explain the spatiality and temporality of art. On the one hand, it makes emphasis on the city, as the place where things happen, and, on the other, on different formulas to bring the events and facts of the world to the gallery space: such as the archive, the documentary display, etc...Perhaps, historical reasons - the famous polemic between Tapies and the Grup de Treball - have prevented so far an approach to conceptual art in Catalunya, but the Fundación has a long list experience with the display of conceptualism from within and without Spain. One of the most notorious cases may be the exhibition "Ir y venir" on the Spanish conceptual artist based in Madrid, Isidoro Valcárcel Medina, curated by José Díaz Cuyás, which run through his whole career as an artist without showing a single piece.

In 2003, Macba, together with two other institutions sharing the same interests: the Universidad Internacional de Andalucía and the Arteleku Art Centre of San Sebastian, in the Basque country, agreeded to articulate all the disperse attempts to rewrite the recent history of Spanish

art from a political perspective, which were by then emerging, in a collective research project titled *Desacuerdos - Disagreements-* as an homage to Jacques Ranciere. The context of a highly conservative government in Madrid, made seem possible the cooperation between activists, scholars and art institutions.

A key element in the initial definition of the project and its later development was Marcelo Expósito, video-artist, theorist and art activist, who had been working for some time in a project of collective research on the precarious legacy of critical art in Spain since the late Franco period. After a few failed attempts, this project, whose final name was *1969-... Some hypothesis of rupture for a political history of art in the Spanish State*, became the core of the bigger plan of *Desacuerdos*. Its main guidelines can be found in the texts included in the first two publications derived from the project. According to them, *1969-...* did not intend to be a history of political art in Spain, but it wanted to promote, through the cooperation of a network of researchers, the creation of an archive and the plotting of new stories which activated the relationship between art and politics, without reconstructing, by the same token, a new dominant narrative.

In spite of such an explicit counter-hegemonic will, there was a clear idea of what its main object of research was, an object which fitted very much with the conceptual art practices of the seventies. However, their traditional historical outline was going to be transgressed from two different sides. Firstly, from the transversal point of view applied by Valentin Roma, who was a member of the *1969-...* research network. Apart from design, edition and pedagogy, this transversal look associated art practice to militant cinema, so far divorced in historiography - except for the case of Pere Portabella -; and to the feminist movement, traditionally silenced in both art history and the political memory of democratic Spain. Secondly, *1969-...*intended to transgress the chronological insularity of

conceptualism, as exclusively related to the late Franco period, finding links, continuities and echoes underneath the democratic normality of the eighties and nineties and the present. The creation of alternative communication networks, the search for new modes of collective action and cultural production were aspects that contemporary practice recognized as common of art practices whose memory had been erased.

As a result, both in *1969-...* and in *Desacuerdos* as a whole the profile of conceptualism as an "ism", as well as artistic practice in general as a separate field within cultural dynamics.

The explosion of the collective research network which was the basis of the project, caused by congenital deficiencies in our democratic culture, as well as the stubborn decision of the institutions to go ahead with their exhibition and editorial project, should, at least, make us reflect on the difficulties, contradictions, and disagreements which may face the collective construction of a radical memory, as it intends this project.

Our reflections should not be paralyzing, though. The proliferation of "reifying" and "trivialising" programmes devised by the art history institutions, such as the recent *Art happens*. The origins of conceptual practices in Spain, held in the Reina Sofia Museum, remind us of the urgency and relevance of our project. The only historical text included in the catalogue, signed by Victoria Combalia, "Spanish conceptual art in the international context" insists again in the topos of relating the local "ism" to the international art scene, locating the interpretation of conceptual practices in the limbo of canonical - even if provincial - art history.

There are many lines of research open. Some of them have been already mentioned, regarding the projects of Valentín Roma and *1969-...* I can still think of another line of research, one that may locate the experience of conceptual art out of the national art heritage debate and describe it

side by side the other cultural dynamics taking place in Barcelona and Madrid beyond the world of art, giving a leading role to the life in the city and the intermingling of collective experiences in a period of intense transformations. The melancholy which usually comes together with the narratives of the antifranquist heroic past could be thus finally exorcised.

This text correspond to the presentation that took place at the Stuttgart Workshop in October, 2007.

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