

Conceptualism – Intersectional Readings, International Framings

**Situating 'Black Artists
& Modernism' in Europe**

VAN
ABBE
MUSEUM
EINDHOVEN

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Repositioning Spanish Conceptualisms: New Institutionalism, Coloniality and the Contemporary¹

Juan Albarrán

Since December 2011, the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid's third and last part of its collection, 'From Revolt to Postmodernity (1962–1982)', has been available for public viewing. The display, curated by Jesús Carrillo, Rosario Peiró and the museum's director Manuel Borja-Villel, showcases additions to the collection that were meant to build a continuity between a modern art collection structured around Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) with the contemporary.

Upon arriving at the Reina Sofía in 2008, Borja-Villel and his team started a deep reorganisation of the collection in order to update and expand the discourse of the museum.² At the same time, they have been thinking about how the new conceptualisation of the collection could transform the institution itself: its relation to history, capacity to establish a dialogue with social movements and main goals in a society suffering an economical and institutional crisis.

In this presentation, the team puts forward a political perspective strongly related to Spanish conceptualism, which has been traditionally ignored by the previous museum directors and Spanish histories of art (Carrillo 2008). The works are arranged throughout several titled rooms: for example, 'Art and Politics at the End of Franco's dictatorship' with works by Francesc Abad, Colita, Alberto Corazón, artist and intellectual collective Grup de Treball, Concha Jerez, Pere Portabella, Redor Gallery, and the collective Video-Nou, most of whom



are key authors of Spanish conceptualism – the so-called *nuevos comportamientos artísticos* (new artistic behaviours). Unlike the other rooms with works from the collection, this one has barely been modified since the opening. ‘Art Activism in Latin America’ has experienced many changes; at the time of writing in January 2018, the display includes works by Colectivo Acciones de Arte (C.A.D.A.), Felipe Ehrenberg, Pedro Lemebel, Carlos Leppe, Juan Carlos Romero and Sergio Zevallos.



Juan Carlos Romero, *Violencia*, 1973–7, installation view, in ‘From Revolt to Postmodernity’, Museo Reina Sofía, 2017. Photograph by Juan Albarrán.

It is significant that the term ‘conceptualism’ does not appear in the rooms’ titles, nor in their captions, nor in the museum’s brochures; the museum distances itself from the conventional art labels that articulate Western art history. Nevertheless, we can affirm that the referred artists can be inscribed within a set of conceptualist practices that – in dictatorial contexts – furthered a politics of resistance and shed light on state repression. The abovementioned rooms establish a clear physical,

visual and discursive connection between Spanish and Latin-American conceptualisms. The collection proposes a narrative in which both sets of practices represent alternative and decentred ‘points of origin’ regarding the northern genealogies of contemporary art. In this essay, I examine the contiguities between Spain and Latin America as a strategy used by the museum to insert Spanish conceptual – and contemporary – art in the global (South) art, but also to reconsider the political objectives of the museum in our society through the incorporation of (post)colonial issues in its agenda. I study how Spanish conceptualism has been resituated in art history and, by extension, in the narrations of the contemporary, by focusing on the relationship between Spain and Latin America, the political dimension of their conceptual practices and the strategies subjacent to institutional recuperation, specifically in the case of the Reina Sofía.

IDEOLOGICAL (SOUTHERN) CONCEPTUALISMS

While the bond between Spanish and Latin-American conceptualisms has a long history, a brief survey of artistic transfers between the regions can help us understand its political connotations. The first contact between agents working on both sides of the Atlantic took place in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In those years, Spanish theorist Simón Marchán Fiz, in close dialogue with Argentinean curator Jorge Glusberg, coined the expression ‘*conceptualismo ideológico*’ (ideological conceptualism) to characterise Spanish and Argentinean politicised and dematerialised practices.³ This category appeared in the second edition of Marchán Fiz’s seminal book *Del arte objetual al arte de concepto* (From Object Art to Concept Art) first published in 1972. For him, ideological conceptualism was an inversion of the tautological conceptual art: ‘[ideological conceptualism] is not a pure productive force, but a social one. Self-reflection is not satisfied

by tautology, it goes into its own specific production conditions, into its consequences in the process of appropriation and the world's active transformative configuration from its specific field of activity' (Marchán Fiz 2012, p. 405). In his view, northern conceptual art was mainly cold, rational and linguistic, while southern conceptualism tended to be warm, poor, poetical, less analytical and usually more politicised. He notes this 'inverted' version was valid for both Spain and Argentina (p. 404).

The 'ideological conceptualism' Marchán Fiz discusses in his 1972 book could be considered a re-elaboration of Glusberg's ideas in the show he curated that same year 'Hacia un perfil del arte latinoamericano' (Towards a Latin-American Profile of Art), at Centro de Arte y Comunicación (CAyC) in Buenos Aires, of which he wrote: 'the art as idea represented in this exhibition is indicative of a revolutionary opacity, opposed to the dishonest consciousness of ideologies' (Glusberg 1972).⁴ Glusberg conceived an opaque conceptual art that tried to denounce the transparency of the dominant ideology. In this sense, Argentinean conceptualism was not accurately ideological, but counter-ideological, since it was opposed to the dominant ideology reproduced by the media. Glusberg developed this theory to bring together the work of artists who he named *Grupo de los Trece* (Group of the thirteen) – including Carlos Ginzburg, Víctor Grippo, Luis Pazos, Juan Carlos Romero and Horacio Zabala – not all of whom were comfortable with his leadership.

The 'ideological conceptualism' proposed by Glusberg under the Argentinean dictatorship and by Marchán Fiz in late Francoism met with unforeseen critical success in the 1990s. This was thanks to Puerto Rican curator Mari Carmen Ramírez, who quoted it in the catalogue for the exhibition 'Latin-American Artists of the Twentieth Century' at the Plaza de Armas, Seville in 1992 (Ramírez 1993). Ramírez recuperated it in

order to establish a direct connection between Latin-American conceptualism and political projects that fought dictatorships. In doing so, she contributed to widening the gap between northern conceptual art (linguistic, hegemonic) and southern (ideological, peripheral). A few years later in 1999, Ramírez, assisting an extensive international team, curated the Latin-American section of 'Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s' at Queens Museum of Art (now Queens Museum), curated by Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farver and Rachel Weiss. In her long essay for the catalogue, she expanded on the hypothesis of her 1992 text, outlining three elements that differentiated Latin-American conceptualism – not only Argentinean practices – from the Anglo-Saxon: its ethical and ideological profile, the critical recovery of the object and research in the field of communication (Ramírez 1999).

TOWARDS A NEW INSTITUTIONALISM

It is precisely this political dimension of Southern conceptualism that the Reina Sofía's display promotes to build a reviewed narrative of Spanish contemporary art, and, with some nuance, to shape a new institutional programme for the museum. But before arriving at its discussion, let's look at how 'Global Conceptualism' reconnected with the Spanish context. By 1999, an early revision of Spanish conceptualism was ready to be presented among practices that could be part of the pluri-centric discourse proposed in 'Global Conceptualism'. *Recorreguts* (Routes) (1973) by Grup de Treball – the most well-known and politicised collective of the Catalan transition context – was included in the 'Western Europe' section curated by Claude Gintz, who considered it 'probably a unique example in the history of Western European conceptualism of overtly political commitment' (1999, p. 38).⁵ It seems clear that this was an exaggerated statement, but it helped to resituate Catalan conceptualism in connection with



the Latin-American context more than with the European framework. The work's inclusion could also be due to the friendship between Camnitzer and Grup member Antoni Muntadas since the 1970s, when Muntadas moved to New York. Camnitzer admitted that by the late 1990s he did not know Spanish conceptualism (Hontoria 2010), while Gintz learned about it from Grup member Antonio Mercader. The Grup worked on several issues with different strategies related to the artists' labour problems and the economic dimension of the art object, or the social role of art in late Francoism. Their piece in 'Global Conceptualism' is the one that is most directly linked with the political repression of the Catalan society: different measuring systems for the route covered by the 113 detained members of the main anti-Francoist Catalan organisation – *Assemblea de Catalunya* – to the police station. Formally, its materialisation is typically 'conceptual', based on performance, photo-documentation, metrics and slide projections. However, what is important to note is, with 'Global Conceptualism', Grup was admitted into the new proposed genealogy. It was therefore internationally recognised thanks to its political dimension.



Grup de Treball, *Recorreguts*, 1973, installation view, in 'From Revolt to Postmodernity', Museo Reina Sofía, 2017. Photograph by Juan Albarrán.

The Reina Sofía's current director Borja-Villel was previously director of Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA). In 1999, a few months after his arrival at the Catalan museum, he opened the exhibition 'Grup de Treball' curated by Antoni Mercader and Glòria Picazo. Since then, the collective has been a cornerstone in the MACBA's collection display and in the redefinition of its institutional identity. Catalan art history had been traditionally linked to surrealist traces and the painting of Antoni Tàpies and his group *Dau al Set*; Borja-Villel's choice to feature Grup de Treball and its politicised conceptualism served as an entrance point to contemporaneity. The Grup and some of its former members – especially Muntadas and Portabella – were important figures in the successive presentations of the MACBA's collection where the connection between Spanish and Latin-American conceptualisms was also highlighted.

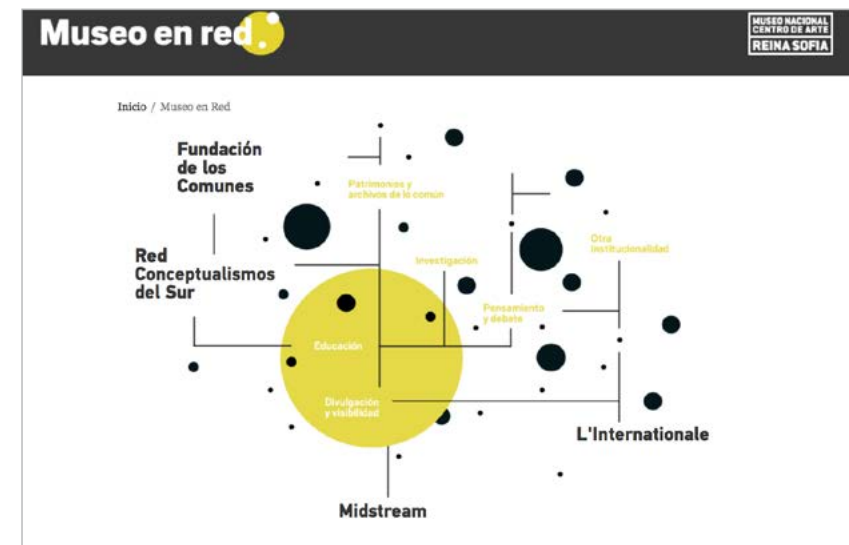
The repositioning of Spanish conceptualism not only served to build a new genealogy, but also to project a politicised approach to the museum's role in society. At the MACBA, Borja-Villel participated actively in the construction of a 'new institutionalism' or 'new institutionality', as the museum preferred to call it (Ribalta 2009), an undertaking that involved several European contemporary art institutions in the early twenty-first century (Kolb & Flückiger 2013). In this framework, the MACBA tried to rethink its goals in dialogue with social agents, especially in connection with the at that time rising anti-globalisation movement. This strategy was developed through an intense public programme that complemented the exhibitions and collection presentations. The will to open the museum to the society and commitment to protest movements and activists needed some key historical references as pillars for the new narrative. The Grup was one of them.

The Grup's work is closely related to the fight against dictatorship, working-class solidarity, the construction

of democracy, and institutional critique. But the collective, which dissolved in 1975, also represents the defeat of the leftist utopia by neoliberalism in the late 1970s and early 1980s. This utopia could be recovered in the 1990s by agents that pursued the radicalisation of democracy in and around the institution. According to Borja-Villel, ‘art history is a space where a political battle takes place. (...) The historiographical narratives, although based on realities, act like fictions. The narratives that you construct as a historian, mediated by the institution, are utterances with effects on the present reality, and also modify the collective perception of the past’ (Expósito 2015, pp. 103–4). From this perspective, the recuperation of the Grup served to put into circulation a political legacy that could be reclaimed by activists collaborating with the museum and who needed a genealogy in which they could place their practice.⁶ This politicised history was widely explored and expanded in the research project ‘Desacuerdos’ (Disagreements) (Roma 2013), led by the MACBA in collaboration with other Spanish institutions, pretending a political revision of the narratives of local contemporary art.

In 2007, a new platform came to add more elements to this genealogy and to reinforce the relationship with Latin America. In May of that year, the MACBA hosted the seminar ‘Thinking About Global Conceptualism’. The event was part of the independent research project ‘Vivid [Radical] Memory. Radical conceptual art revisited: a social and political perspective from the East and the South’, whose main objective was to discuss the historical recovery of those conceptualisms produced under repressive conditions.⁷ ‘Vivid [Radical] Memory’ was led by Antoni Mercader, lecturer at University of Barcelona and co-curator of the 1999 show on the Grup. The seminar was a founding moment for the Red de Conceptualismos del Sur (Southern Conceptualisms Network), taking into account that some of the most active members of the network attended. Created in

October 2007, the Red Conceptualismos describes itself as ‘an international platform for collective undertakings, thinking and political positioning’ and intends to act as a political lobby – not only a research project – aiming to reactivate ‘the memory of conceptual practices which was developed in Latin-America in the 1960s and 1970s’ (Red Conceptualismos del Sur 2007). In the years following the Red de Conceptualismos were important interlocutors in the construction of the institutional project led by Borja-Villel at the MACBA and the Reina Sofía.



Museos en red, Museo Reina Sofía: <http://www.museoreinasofia.es/museo-en-red>.

CONCEPTUALISMS, THE CONTEMPORARY... AND THE AVANT-GARDE

This project for a new institutionality, first developed in the MACBA, travelled to the Reina Sofía in 2008, when Borja-Villel was elected to direct the museum. The objectives and strategies defined during his directorship in Barcelona were adapted to a bigger institution, and quickly won prominence in the media

and scholarship as the new contemporary museum paradigm: the Reina Sofía was a case study in Claire Bishop's well-known book *Radical Museology: Or What's Contemporary in Museums of Contemporary Art?* (2014) in which she analyses three institutions as new experimental and politicised models, also including the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven and +MSUM | Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova, Ljubljana. In these museums, 'the contemporary is understood as a dialectical method and a politicized project with a more radical understanding of temporality' (Bishop 2014, p. 6). This dialectical contemporaneity would be tested in their collections, designed to 'suggest a provocative rethinking of contemporary art in terms of a specific relationship to history, driven by a sense of present-day social and political urgencies, and marked by particular national traumas: colonial guilt and the Franco era (Madrid), Islamophobia and the failure of social democracy (Eindhoven), the Balkan Wars and the end of socialism (Ljubljana)' (p. 27). In the case of the Reina Sofía, Bishop draws attention to the importance of critical pedagogies in its programme, and the revalorisation of non-Eurocentric modernities that invited thinking in a more complex contemporaneity. These alternative narratives, constructed in the Spanish case in collaboration with Red Conceptualismos, became an important chapter in Latin-American conceptualism.

There has certainly been an intense dialogue between the Red and the museum, wherein Latin American scholars and curators received support in a discursive space where they might test their research in seminars and exhibitions such as 'Losing the Human Form: A Seismic Image of the 1980s in Latin-America' (2012-13). In exchange, the Reina Sofía could incorporate Red's content and methodologies into its discourse. These included their critical approach to the archive – based on a commitment to its reactivation – the referred political weight of conceptualisms and even some

traces of blackness in the reflection on the 1804 Haiti revolution recovered in a public activity around the 2010 *bicentenarios*, the independence anniversary celebrations of some Latin American states (Red Conceptualismos del Sur 2010). These elements helped to redefine the imaginary role that the museum played in the international scene.

As Bishop notes in her book, the pedagogical and political aspects and the Southern perspective are standpoints from which to give a differentiated identity to the Reina Sofía's museological programme. However, some problems and contradictions underlie the museum's discourse, especially in relation to non-Eurocentric modernities. I would like to suggest two voids related to Spain's recent history that conditioned the position of the Spanish conceptualism in the Reina Sofía's collection. Bringing into play these 'other' modernities as seeds for a different contemporaneity necessarily implies a re-evaluation of the Spanish modernity – if such a thing exists – and, specifically, the role of the local avant-garde in art history. We cannot forget that some Spaniards – Picasso, Dalí, Miró, Gris – were central authors in the Paris avant-garde, heroes of modern art. But in the Spanish territory an avant-garde scene with a constellation of magazines and exhibitions comparable to European contexts did not exist. In addition, the very few avant-garde experiences developed in the 1930s were persecuted and dismantled during early Francoism. In different ways, *Guernica*, the highlight of the Reina Sofía collection, embodies all these issues. At the same time, it is important to note that the concept of avant-garde (*vanguardia*) lay at the heart of 1960s and 1970s Spanish artistic debates during the rise of conceptualisms. Art historian Paula Barreiro demonstrates how the concept of avant-garde was crucial in the theories of some militant critics in late Francoism and the transition to democracy in connection with the European redefinition of Marxism (Barreiro López 2016). The

notion of avant-garde allowed them to evaluate the relationship between art and politics from their specific context, conditioned by the weakness of local first avant-gardes and the historical trauma engendered by dictatorship. These contextual aspects – the relationship to the Spanish avant-garde of the 1920s and 1930s and the evolution of the concept of avant-garde in the 1970s – could be productive in understanding modernity, conceptualism and the contemporary in Spain.⁹ In my opinion, this has not been addressed by the Reina Sofía in the recuperation of Spanish conceptualisms.



La Familia Lavapiés, *Solidarity with the fight of the Sahara people*, 1976. Courtesy Darío Corbeira.

A second blind spot in the presentation of conceptualist works in this collection relates to the Spanish colonial past. The colonial exploitation of the Americas was revisited in the exhibition ‘Principio Potosí’ in 2010 – curated by Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, Max Hinderer, Alice Creischer and Andreas Siekmann – but it does not have a presence in the collection. While the colonial relationship with America ended a long time ago, colonial dominance in Guinea and Western Sahara remained until 1968 and 1975. There are key conceptualist works criticising the Spanish colonial policy, specifically in Western Sahara: Madrid collective La Familia Lavapiés’s *Solidarity with the fight of the Sahara people* (1976) and the Asamblea Democràtica d’Artistes de Girona (Girona Democratic Artists’ Assembly) project *El Aaiun: Construction of a Spanish City in Western Sahara* (1976).¹⁰ These works dealing with the (de)colonisation of Northern Africa have not been considered by the Reina Sofía, although *The Battle of Algiers* (Gillo Pontecorvo, 1966) – a film about the decolonisation of French Algeria – opens the final section of its collection. This could be owing to the museum’s preference to read Spanish conceptualism in relation to Latin America and the shared experience under dictatorship, forgetting recent Spanish colonialism in Africa. Additionally, we need to keep in mind that the Spanish government that funds the museum would probably not assume the museum directly critique this colonial past. This past is still very present if we consider that Guinea has a cruel dictatorship and the Sahara territory is still occupied by Morocco after a failed decolonisation process. At the same time, an important part of the Spanish society is still not really sensitive with its colonial history. Colonial problems are not on the political agenda, and I am afraid certain public institutions would face serious problems if they tried forcing a debate on this topic.

Mexican scholar and curator Cuauhtémoc Medina explains that, although contemporary artistic practices imply a break from modern practices and their political



utopias, 'for those who come from the so-called periphery (the South and the former socialist world), the contemporary still has a certain utopian ring. For indeed, notwithstanding the cunning imbalances of power that prevail in the art world, the mere fact of intervening in the matrix of contemporary culture constitutes a major political and historical conquest' (Medina 2010). From this perspective, the recognition of Latin American – and on a lower level, Spanish – conceptualism after 'Global Conceptualism', if problematic, contributed to the deconstruction of the restrictive dimension of Western modernity and created a new point of entry into the contemporary for artistic contexts detached from the Western modern canon. This shift towards the South deeply affects the point of view from which the Reina Sofía tries to produce a decentred history (Borja-Villel 2008).



Opening of 'Pity and Terror. Picasso's Path to Guernica', Museo Reina Sofía, April 2017. From left to right, TJ Clark, Anne Wagner and Manuel Borja-Villel. In the centre, King Juan Carlos and Queen Sofía.

Maybe, thanks to this strategic alliance with the Southern conceptualisms, Spanish conceptual – contemporary – art could take part in Global South art. Nevertheless, this operation clashes with the role of the museum in the consolidation of a 'democratic' cultural infrastructure. After Francoism, Spain came into the international arena from a kind of southern periphery. So, during the first years of the democracy, the state invested significant budget in the construction of a cultural system that tried to homologise Spanish art within Western art, without thinking of their own historic peculiarities and embracing a depoliticised contemporaneity. In the '90s, the Reina Sofía was an important part of this establishment. Its institutional position could help us understand its structural limitations in managing political issues, such as, for example, 'colonial guilt'. The current project for a Southern museum has to deal with its location in a state where the government – and their voters – be it conservative or progressive, tries to be part of a normative North.

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NOTES

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- 2 In May 2009, the museum opened 'Collection 1: The Irruption of the 20th Century: Utopias and Conflicts (1900-1945)' where *Guernica* is framed and in November 2010, 'Collection 2: Is the War Over? Art in a Divided World (1945-1968)'.
- 3 Glusberg established contact with Marchán Fiz by 1967, and they met during the series of artistic meetings held under the title 'Los Encuentros de Pamplona' (The Pamplona Meetings) in 1972. Part of their correspondence is preserved in Marchán Fiz/Quevedo archive at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía.
- 4 The show travelled from the III Bienal Coltejer de Medellín in 1972 to several venues around the world including Los Encuentros de Pamplona in 1972 and gallery Amadis in Madrid the following year.
- 5 Camnitzer explained he asked Gintz to participate in 'Global Conceptualism' so she could 'correct the mistakes' – the formalist approach – of the exhibition she curated in 1989, 'L'art conceptuel. Une perspective', Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (Davis 2008).
- 6 These collaborations with activists had an important moment in the workshop 'Of Direct Action Considered as One of the Fine Arts', MACBA, October 2000.
- 7 This project was the point of departure for the exhibition 'Subversive Practices: Art Under Conditions of Political Repression: 60s-80s South America / Europe' (Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart, May-August 2009), curated by an international team of researchers coordinated by Iris Dressler and Hans D. Christ.
- 8 In 2010, in collaboration with Red Conceptualismos del Sur the museum organised the seminar 'Disruptive Memories' around the *bicentenarios*. Red launched a call for a re-appropriation of the Haiti proclamation 'we're all Blacks now'.
- 9 From a different point of view, Olga Fernández López has stressed the need to think about the avant-garde category when theorising on Latin American conceptualism (Fernández López 2009).
- 10 The exhibition 'Provincia 53. Art, Territory and Decolonization of Western Sahara' curated by Juan Guardiola at MUSAC, Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Castilla y León, 2017-18 addressed the Spanish policies in the Sahara and the uncompleted decolonisation of the territory.



COLOPHON

This e-book offers the findings of the conference 'Conceptualism – Intersectional Readings, International Framings: Situating "Black Artists & Modernism" in Europe After 1968' at the Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven, 7–9 December 2017, presented by Black Artists & Modernism in collaboration with the Van Abbemuseum.

TEXTS

Nick Aikens, Juan Albarrán, Lotte Arndt, Eva Bentcheva, Sonia Boyce, Jennifer Burris, Valerie Cassel Oliver, Laura Castagnini, Alice Correia, Sandra Delacourt, David Dibosa, Fabienne Dumont, Iris Dressler, E. C. Feiss, Annie Fletcher, Alexandra Kokoli, Charl Landvreugd, Elisabeth Lebovici, Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes, susan pui san lok, Sophie Orlando, Sumesh Sharma, Sarah Wilson, Wei Yu

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