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Tradition and Collaboration between the Avant-Garde and Francoism (1940 to 1960)

Jorge Luis Marzo

Translated by Isabel Adey

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Abstract

The 1950s saw an intense collaboration process take place in Spain between the totalitarian government of General Franco and a significant part of the avant-garde artistic scene. Although there are a number of causes for this complex process, it is worth highlighting the role given to a supposed “anti-modern” myth of Spanish culture—symbolized in the Baroque and spiritual transcendence—which was seen as the glue that would bind and unify artistic and political action to benefit all those involved.

KEYWORDS: Francoism, collaboration, avant-garde, abstract art, cultural policy, Baroque

Tradition and Collaboration between the Avant-Garde and Francoism (1940 to 1960)

In 1950, the Spanish curator of the Venice Biennale, Enrique Pérez Comendador, refused to exhibit some of the works of abstract art sent to him by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In response to the demands of the ministry's general director, the curator wrote a vexed letter asking the question: "Why doesn't art have to follow the same admirable policy line as Spain?"¹

Pérez Comendador's words open up an infinite realm of studies into both the role of the rebirth of the avant-garde in post-Civil War Spain and the circumstances surrounding the resurgence of the movement. Which style was deemed fitting for this "admirable policy line"? Why did the Franco regime opt for a different approach? Why was abstract art not to be admired? What was so threatening about it? And finally, how should we interpret such a radical change in the nation's artistic discourse in light of the curator's consternation at the sudden shift in his superiors' policies?

We know that Pérez Comendador was not alone in his concerns: indeed, a huge number of Francoist academics and intellectuals were also asking themselves the same questions. The journals and newspapers were awash with articles mocking the flaws and shortcomings of Abstract Art, openly criticizing the artists for being anti-Spanish and contrary to the more basic sensibility. In 1942, the distinguished Spanish historian and art critic José Camón Aznar warned against the dangers of abstraction.² Then in 1952, fellow critic María Tomás said that it was easy to tell which paintings were anti-Spanish: those that were "absurd and extravagant."³ Likewise, the writer José María Pemán was notoriously opposed to the idea of modern art receiving any kind of public attention, particularly the prospect of such artworks making their way into churches. In 1952, the writer's express condemnation of the use of industrial techniques to depict Jesus Christ was published on the first inner page of the Spanish daily newspaper ABC: "My Lord: I came before your image to ask you many questions. But I cannot. I do not think you can hear me [...] No: All the things I wanted to ask you remain inside my soul. Something very industrial and economical stands between my prayer and You"⁴ Likewise, the Spanish writer and art critic José Francés shared a peculiar vision of the history of art in 1956: "Painters have always been the chroniclers of History. Painting must be figurative. We could ill afford to study a period without figures in the paintings [...]" His conclusion: "Abstract painting is an inharmonious series of colours with an epileptic imbalance of lines."⁵ And in 1951, Fernando Álvarez

de Sotomayor, who was in charge of the Prado Museum at the time, wrote the following in a well-publicised letter to the President of the Department of Psychiatry at the College of Physicians in Madrid:

To the astonishment of the public, who have eyes to see and a normal sensibility, an artistic battle is evolving, one with the most regrettable consequences for youth. On the one hand, there are those of us who uphold the tradition of fine arts along with the most basic cannons of beauty and the noble professions of painting and sculpting based on objective and subjective realities; on the other hand, there are those who are trying to rapidly settle the past and create a new form of art (which, incidentally has been forty years in the making), an art form with room for all the great absurdities and ugliness, the most unprecedented aberrations [...], which they refer to under the banner of Surrealist, Abstract or Indalian art, and all manner of other names [...]. So who are the mad ones? If we are [the mad ones], we promise not to concern ourselves with the fine arts again, and instead we will dedicate our energy to agriculture or business [...].⁶

Unfortunately, individuals like Comendador and Sotomayor were involved with the fine arts, and for a long time too. But it is also true that they had to endure more than the occasional unpleasantness, often from the upper echelons of power, which were increasingly being controlled by ambitious young Falangist existentialists, particularly from the 1950s, and they did not approve of the kind of art produced at the Spanish Academy in Rome. Within just a few years, the influence that such figures exerted over the state's cultural policies was to diminish significantly.

These outpourings suggest that a tug of war was being played out at the heart of the Francoist regime; a difference in opinions as to what public support for the arts ought to involve and the role that the arts should play in the various political strategies that were helping to sustain Francoism. It is not hard to explain why the cultural authorities supported abstraction under the dictatorship, even though doing so went against their own sensibilities: it was because there was no other option available.⁷ We would do well to remember that cultural policy under Franco's regime was always scant, precarious and haphazard. Still, this does not mean that there is no sense to be made of it. The more complicated task at hand involves analysing the mechanisms that were employed to justify, legitimise and assimilate this process in a country whose official creative repertoire was completely devoid of intellectual sophistication.

As Spain left behind the brutal decade of the 1940s, the country adjusted with remarkable speed to the new diplomatic and economic panorama that opened up with the Korean War and as the USA moved ever closer to its new anti-communist ally. The new international political

Figure 1

Pedro Muguruza and Diego Méndez (architects), *Basílica del Valle de los Caídos*, 1940–1958, photograph by Jorge Luis Marzo, San Lorenzo del Escorial, Sierra de Guadarrama © Jorge Luis Marzo.



situation had hindered the aesthetic approach that was employed by the regime during the decade that was drawing to a close. Following the downfall of the German and Italian allies in the Second World War, the para-fascist aesthetic backed by Falange was discarded and the regime found itself ‘orphaned’, so to speak, i.e. lacking any comparable stylistic approaches it could use for state purposes. A prime example of this ‘orphanhood’ is the Valley of the Fallen near Madrid. The monument was officially inaugurated in 1959, nineteen years after work on the site began in 1940. It was initially motivated by dreams of the great Christian cross, the tomb, and (doubtless) God’s forgiveness, but eventually these dreams disappeared and gave way to a stylistic absurdity of an immense scale after the new American ally came onto the scene (Figure 1).

Hans Magnus Enzensberger perfectly summed up the Francoist aesthetic of the 1940s after visiting the monument in 1987:

As if the pharaohs had employed Walt Disney; as if Stalin had become religious; as if the mafia had decided to build a necropolis for honourable society; as if Albert Speer had produced a Vatican without a pope; as if Paul Getty had commissioned a gang of forgers to build him a Renaissance nuclear bunker.⁸

The Valley of the Fallen represented precisely *the horror vacui* that had come to typify the visual style of Francoism, the fear of empty space that had paralysed Comendador, Sotomayor and so many others. For a nation so obsessed with securing diplomatic connections, this void proved to be extremely inconvenient.

Around this time, a new perspective was brewing; one that would come to dominate official artistic thinking and policy for the best part of two decades in the 1950s and the 1960s, particularly within the diplomatic circles and among some of the “liberal” members of Falangism and Francoist Catholicism. Manuel Fraga, Alfredo Sánchez Bella, Joaquín Ruiz Giménez, Leopoldo Panero, Eugenio d’Ors, Dionisio Ridruejo, Pedro Laín Entralgo, Luis Felipe Vivanco and Manuel Sánchez Camargo, to name but a few, had visions of a liberal situation of cultural normality, all the while generally failing to appreciate the complete abnormality of the system in which they were operating. Perhaps this explains why more than just a few compliments were paid in order to remedy such a blatant paradox.

At the same time, a large number of young artists and art critics—Francoists and non-Francoists alike—supported the system by dancing to its tune and using it to secure an artistic and social status that would put them in an uncompromisable position vis-à-vis the dictatorship. Clearly this fact alone would produce some almost insurmountable paradoxes. This disconnect between the artist and the social function of art would in turn magnify, to an even greater extent, the utter peculiarity of a dictatorial political system that was formed in the slurry of 1930s fascism and managed to survive by adopting a depoliticised form of modernity concerned with prosperity, not freedom.

The modern art produced in Spain was to play a major symbolic role in this survival dynamic, albeit it not completely of its own accord. Rather than trying to usher Spain into modernity, which would have been unthinkable in view of the traits of Francoism, the aim was to promote the modernisation of the country, or to at least give the impression that the country was moving with the times. A process of modernisation devoid of any debate as to what modernity meant was inevitably going to bring about an understanding of the image’s value in terms of he who dictates it. Francoism wanted a modern image; most fascists, however, were part of the military, priests, landowners and those with right-wing views, so they were clearly anti-modernists.

The flattery that was exchanged with a view to finding precedents to legitimise the debate concerning the role of art from the 1950s is the focus of this paper. At a certain point in time, a bridge was crossed by many individuals who were seeking a common ground based on mutual benefits: for some, this ‘bridge’ served as a way to keep their composure in the context of the deep-rooted historicist discourse of Francoism,⁹ while for others it served as a means of securing official endorsements. This was particularly the case for Informel critics, painters, sculptors and writers hoping to propel their careers while situating their work in a global artistic context by invoking certain traditions. Let’s just say it: the “great Spanish tradition” was this bridge. I use the term ‘Baroque’ to denote what was regarded as Spain’s great national heritage: a distinctly Hispanic style or constant, which was independent of history and

flaunted as an alternative to the odious instrumental modernity of the north; or rather, the idea of Spanish culture as being anti-modern.

The famous speech given by Joaquín Ruiz Giménez in 1951 as Spain's Minister of National Education provides the perfect introduction to this problematic situation. Addressing official representatives of the art world and Franco himself, Ruiz Giménez declared:

Cultivating an aesthetic sense is one of the most important tasks of the great educational powers, the Church and the State. [...] As far as the production of artistic work is concerned, the State must avoid two pitfalls: agnostic indifferentism and totalitarian interference. The first inhibits itself in the face of Truth and also in the face of Beauty; the second enslaves them, turning works of intelligence and art into servile instruments of a particular policy. Between these two dangers, the attitude to be adopted must be rooted in a lively, immediate understanding of the nature of Art. As the free expression of the individual, Art has a legitimate sphere of autonomy in which the State cannot interfere in its own interest. The authentic is always impolitic; the inauthentic of art—that is, what is not rooted in creative autonomy—ultimately leads, whatever the protectionist measures employed and the apparent successes, to impoverishment and impairment of political work itself. Only by helping artists to be authentic, by keeping them apart from so many strange insinuations which might divert them from their true selves, can a true artistic policy be conceived. In our specific situation, it seems that this support for authenticity should follow two routes: on the one hand, it should stimulate a historical connection, that is, situating the artist in the present epoch, avoiding all misleading formalist traditionalism; on the other hand, it should strengthen the national connection, avoiding any false sense of universalism, any provincial admiration for anything that happens outside of the country, which certainly does not mean—far from it—diverting artists from the international trends in art, but instead trying to be attentive to their own values [...] This opening up of the spirit, which is proposed as a fundamental artistic policy, is an essential weapon in the struggle against materialism, 'the great heresy of our time'. As the communist states increasingly go to lengths to put art at their own service, creating a gross caricature and mystification of true art, our task is becoming more serious and urgent. If art can be made to serve its true master, the spirit, in this way alone it will become an essential ally of all political Christian endeavours. [...] The artist must be instilled with a longing for service and transcendence; but these desires should not be imposed from the outside, by force, which would damage the very root of art; rather they should become the water that nourishes and sustains it.¹⁰

Figure 2

Jorge Oteiza, *Apostles of the facade of the Basílica de Aránzazu*, early 1960s, granite, Basílica de Aránzazu, Oñati, Spain. Photograph by Ricardo Ugarte of the abandoned sculptures lying in the ditch along the road to the sanctuary following censorship by the ecclesiastical authorities. Jorge Oteiza © Pilar Oteiza, A + V Agencia de Creadores Visuales, 2020.



Transcendence, authenticity, “Spanishness,” internationalism and creative freedom: the education minister was asking himself how it was possible for these terms to be reconciled. Various points raised by Ruiz Giménez allow us to understand why the approach of appealing to certain traditions would ultimately form the basis for an unlikely union, serving as a kind of glue for seemingly incompatible ideas. Three of these concepts were already integral to the regime: transcendence, authenticity and Spanishness. The other two concepts, i.e. internationalism and creative freedom, were somewhat circumstantial and reflected latent tensions in the history of Spanish art.

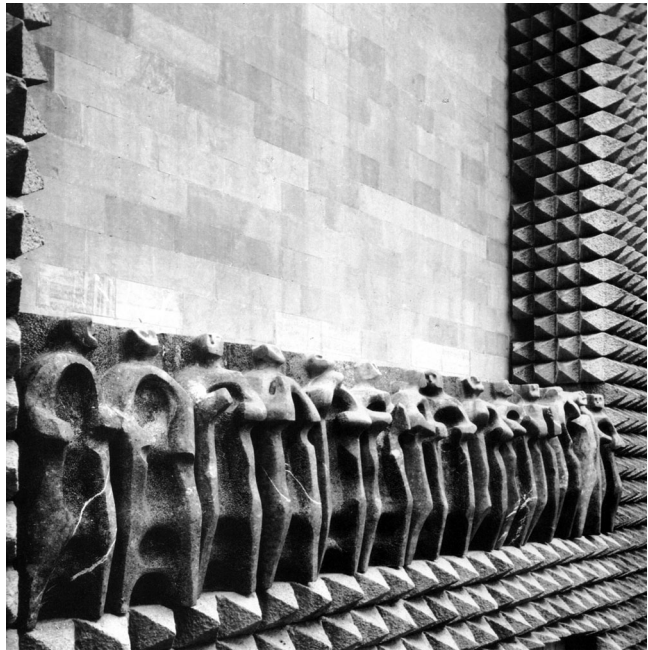
Ruiz Giménez belonged to the Catholic line of the regime. This fact is significant in view of the role that the Church played in the cultural and educational framework of the dictatorship, which gave it exceptional influence in terms of legitimising certain cultural products, such as Abstraction.

In 1955, inspired by Pius XII’s papal encyclicals against modern art, the San Sebastián Diocesan Committee of Sacred Art banned the murals and sculpture projects created by Jorge Oteiza, Eduardo Chillida, Lúcio Muñoz and Néstor Basterretxea had for the Basílica of Our Lady of Aránzazu in Guipúzcoa¹¹ (Figures 2 and 3). The committee justified the move as follows: “This Pontifical Committee, which is responsible for ensuring the decorum of Sacred Art in accordance with the instructions of the Holy See, regrets that it is unable to approve the proposed projects. Though the artists’ good intentions are not disputed, it would appear that they have been misdirected by modernist trends, which fail to observe some of the precepts of the Holy Church in the matter of Sacred Art.”¹²

The committee did not go into detail about these precepts or what they were, but we can imagine that they had to do with the representation of figures in the images. In keeping with the famed matter of “decorum,” an argument that appeared in the sixteenth century during the Counter Reformation, we can only assume that the committee was trying to ensure that the paintings were appropriate to the proposed setting and subject matter. Specifically, religious doctrine dictated that biblical or historical

Figure 3

Jorge Oteiza, *Frieze of the Apostles*, 1968, granite, Basílica de Aránzazu, Oñati, Spain. Jorge Oteiza © Pilar Oteiza, A + V Agencia de Creadores Visuales, 2020.



fragments should only be depicted if the means used pertained to the elements handed down through the tradition that was governed by the Church. The problem with abstraction was that it threatened to do away with the fiercely guarded tradition of Catholic iconography, as well as verging on the great heresy of all time: protestant iconoclasm.

This turn of events occurred at a period in time when the clergy was beginning to adopt a more open stance to Abstract Art. In 1953, the Menéndez Pelayo International University organised the First Conference of Abstract Art in Santander. This project was financed and coordinated by Manuel Fraga Iribarne, who was the general secretary of one of the fundamental institutions in the state-led support for the avant-garde around this time, the Institute of Hispanic Culture (Instituto de Cultura Hispánica, ICH) (Figure 4). The event represented one of the regime's first attempts to find an appropriate means of channelling some of the energy of the Abstract artists. The program included a lecture by Muñoz Hidalgo on the subject of "Religious Art and Abstract Art," in which the priest relayed a Dominican acquaintance's personal experience of a work of Abstract Art. His testimony is worth citing here in full:

I attended the modern art exhibition and found myself standing in front of the painting by Manessier entitled *Salve Regina*. I told the organiser that I did not understand the painting. 'You do not need to understand it; you must allow yourself to be drawn in by it,' he responded. And off he went ... I sat down in front of the painting. I spent a long time looking at it, intrigued, inquisitive, forcing myself

Figure 4

Photograph taken in a room at the Instituto de Cultura Hispánica following Salvador Dalí's lecture at the María Guerrero Theater. From right to left: the poet Leopoldo Panero (seen from behind), Gonzalo Serraclara (lawyer), Manuel Fraga (General Secretary of the Instituto de Cultura Hispánica), Salvador Dalí, Antonio Gallego Burín (General Director of Fine Arts), and the art critic Rafael Santos-Torroella, 11 November 1951, Madrid. © Archivo Rafael Santos-Torroella.



to try and relate to it, but to no avail. Well, I thought to myself, when I look at this work of art I am incapable of feeling violence, rage, war-hungry fervour, envy, eroticism, unbound pleasure... I thus began discarding all the feelings this painting failed to provoke in me, and little by little, the objectivity of the painting became blurred as I stood there contemplating it. Eventually a positive thought stuck me: might all this coloured space be in harmony with prayer? At least, I see no reason why not. Anyway, Manessier does not speak to me of prayer; he says, 'Salve Regina', hail Holy Queen. And this supplication puts me in the presence of the Virgin, whom I seek from this valley of tears... These colours would not be right for the Sacred Heart, for instance... And why do these blues chime with my memory of the Virgin? Any other spectrum of colour would not remind me of the Virgin... Then, like a choir of monks singing, in the blues I see the clergy of La Trapa singing to our Lady of the Clouds... I remember that one afternoon, when I heard the monks chanting the 'Salve [Regina]'... That's it! My inner world has tuned in to the artist... Well, if not exactly, then at least [the artist] has helped me find that sacred feeling. Now I find myself dreaming of a church where all the windows are covered in this abstract art, in blues like these (if they are dedicated to the Virgin) ... That the members of the public unwittingly find themselves in a setting of piety... Without words, without images to distract them, this [state] will lead them to prayer.¹³

"Without images to distract them...": this is one of the main reasons why the Church was so afraid of abstraction. If figuration was no longer the main element that would lead people to prayer, the implication was a kind of religiosity in which "decorum" no longer made sense, which meant the Church would no longer be able to rely on this concept to be sure of its own position. Now the worshipper was to have a

direct line to God, one without a need for pedagogical intermediation. To quickly clear up any potential misunderstandings as to what he was implying, Muñoz Hidalgo made the following point at his lecture in Santander:

Is abstract art Christian? In the sense of being an embodiment of God, no; since Christ is God in flesh and bones, not symbolised or abstracted, but tangible, bleeding and loving. Generally speaking, all Christian iconography and art tends to embody our faith. Thus anything that blurs lines may cause confusion for simple spirits, [whereas] anything that respectfully symbolises or represents the truths of Faith and so on, elevates and helps [...] In the mystical sense of the union with God and love for all things in Christ, the abstract comes closer to Christianity if it succeeds in conveying the high anxieties of mystic life and loves of the transverberated soul. Or rather, as an expression of [human] struggle and dissatisfaction, of the ‘absence of eternal life’, as Oteiza would say, compelling the material to cry out to the spirit which is entrapped in the senses.¹⁴

In other words, abstraction may not be the right way to represent Christ, but it is a perfectly suitable way to convey the Christian and humanist ideal. These ideas proved troublesome when it came to framing an avant-garde movement that would tally with some of the guiding principles of the Francoist regime, which—as we have seen from the words of the education minister—was flaunting Christian transcendence as both a fundamental element of its political endeavour and as a weapon in the fight against communism. But at the same time, notions like these would help to cushion many artists and critics, allowing their proposals to be met with a positive response in the relevant government offices. It should be noted that many of these individuals were fervent Catholics who submitted their work to every and any religious-based exhibition they came across.¹⁵ Hence intellectuals such as José Luis López Aranguren, José María Valverde and Luis Trabazo¹⁶ negotiated a union between the avant-garde and Catholicism in some of their writing, emphasising the “innate” spiritual character of the Spanish artist. In the same way, many critics interpreted the avant-garde works as being a direct result of this tradition: “Tàpies’ message is too profound, it goes beyond the mere plasticity of the subject or the object. Tàpies’ message is [one of] death [through a] modern substitution of religious sentiment”¹⁷ (Figure 5). Likewise, in 1956, the prominent art historian Juan Antonio Gaya Nuño declared, somewhat smugly: “Today, in the middle of the twentieth century, abstract painting is the only religious painting [there is].”¹⁸ Then in 1958—despite the minor scandal that the Falangist architect and poet Luis Felipe Vivanco caused when he organised a university exhibition in homage to the deceased French painter

Figure 5

Photograph of Antoni Tàpies, 1962
 © Archivo de Antoni Tàpies.



Georges Roualt, displaying the results of a competition to provide a modern sanctuary for a chapel¹⁹—the Archbishop of Zaragoza, Casimiro Morcillo gave his official blessing for modern art to be used in the church:

Can Modern Art enter the temple and sing with the believers? There are many artists think so and are making this happen. There are many priests and worshippers who want this [to happen]. If the Sacred Art of today is able to teach [God's] revealed truth [...] then it is most welcome!²⁰

Far from being exclusive to the curia, the matter of transcendence was an integral component of modern Spanish thought. Indeed, the idea of a transcendent history punctuated by permanent marks had been a central to Menéndez Pelayo to Américo Castro, and from Unamuno to Ortega y Gasset. Of course, the same applied to the history of art, particularly given that a great deal of Spanish historiography and the intellectual class had employed art in the discussion and explanation of national identity. In Unamuno's words: "If we wish to see into the soul of Spain, we should turn to its painters, since [the] Spanish see much better than [they] think."²¹ Likewise, Sánchez Camargo declared the following a few months after the war ended: "Art is that which best

captures the grandeur of our nation.”²² But he was not just referring to any old art; he was talking about a certain history of Spanish art, i.e. the seventeenth century and its legacy. In other words, the only history of Spanish art, if we are to follow the words of Enrique Lafuente Ferrari in 1948:

Neither the great masters of French, English or German Romanticism, nor the French Realism of 1848, nor Impressionism, nor [any of] the subsequent movements in French painting, nor the International School of Paris from the first three decades of this century, nor the German art of the nineteenth century, nor the British Pre-Raphaelite paintings, nor the European avant-garde of the twentieth century—none of these [artists or movements] have left a [lasting] impression on any Spanish museum.²³

The idea of a transcendent culture, i.e. one with a distinct purpose, is not a notion that belongs within Spanish Imperial or Baroque thought. In fact, it was triggered in the nineteenth century in view of the processes of industrialisation that were occurring within this inward-looking nation. The modern threat posed by the competition in the markets brought about a kind of hyperinflation of culture among many intellectuals. Prominent thinkers were increasingly employing the concept of culture as a trademark of national identity, in a romanticised environment where people and institutions tended to dream of nations in their glory days. Specifically in Spain, the growing affront that the USA posed to Hispanic thought—culminating in the loss of the last remaining colonies in 1898—contributed all the more to a hugely inflated climate of culturalism and exceptionalism. Before long, artists like el Greco and Velázquez, Golden Age painting in general, and (above all) Goya, began to be extolled for their links to the modern age, and all on the strength of foreign interest. And the reason for this was always their transcendent nature.

It is important to pay close attention to what Spanish intellectuals understood by “artistic transcendence” during the first half of the twentieth century. Rather than referring exclusively to an artistic practice guided by revelatory myths, the notion of transcendence above all defined the essential, homogeneous vigour of Spanish expression, above and beyond the vicissitudes of history. As Chueca Goitia remarked in 1947:

From the fourteenth to the seventeenth century we belonged to ourselves, and if we imported anything from abroad—less so than one might at first expect, unless it reinforced the intensely nationalist resolve of this post-war art—our own creative capacity, without [the need for] expansive force, tipped the balance of our artistic trade with other countries in our favour... But in the

eighteenth century, the Spanish corps was so weak that we were unable to resist the foreign influx, hence the rupture with the past eventually ensued. Still, we had been through five centuries, the greatest in our History, and not once did our creative faculty falter in artistic matters [...] The foundation is Spanishness; it is the styles that stumble and fall.²⁴

These words perfectly illustrate the sentiment that had gripped the Spanish intellectual class: the idea that transcendence resided in the national, in a capacity to manifest an identity that goes beyond styles. But clearly this ‘foundation’ had its own style, one that was independent of history—or to put it even more precisely, anti-historical—, making it transcendent.

Without a doubt, Eugenio d’Ors y Rovira was one who brought all these issues up to date, placing these ideas in a European context that allowed them to be grasped to their full extent. D’Ors famously addressed the Baroque issue in 1922,²⁵ but rather than treating the Baroque as a matter of historical style, he viewed it as an analytical tool and presented it as an alternative to the safe, rigid constraints of a brand of “overly self-assured” modernity. D’Ors called for the Baroque to be perceived as a system, which he believed was *supertemporal*—existing beyond time—and referred to it by the Greek term *eon*. He claimed that this system was organised by means of “metaphysical categories whose evolution is etched in time, and which have a way of making history [...] whereby the secret of a certain human constant is revealed.” In keeping with Alois Riegl’s concept of *Kunstwollen*, d’Ors views the Baroque as a moral duty, but one that is not experienced consciously. For d’Ors, the Baroque is simply experienced, its outcome being a shared, adocrinal expression that is as permeable as it is capable of permeating.

D’Ors’ comments gave rise to a number syllogisms that became platitudes in stylistic thought about what constitutes the “national.” One fundamental syllogism is that of *fortuitousness* and *authenticity*: “The Baroque spirit, to put it bluntly once and for all, *doesn't know what it wants* [...] It laughs at the requirements of the principle of contradiction.”²⁶ Then there is the ethical responsibility, *transcendence*: “The Baroque is not only the cult of the forms that fly, but also of forms that sink.”²⁷ Successfully consolidating many of the concepts from Northern Europe that attempted to define national forms and apply them to the Southern European context in the first third of the twentieth century, the Catalan thinker skilfully mapped out these concepts, reconstructing and presenting them as an alternative modernity without stripping them of their legacy or distinctly Mediterranean origins, all the while still stressing their Hispanicist universalism. This meant that the Baroque and Romanticism could be proposed as potential solutions for this problem of a “dehumanising modernity”: as one modern historian has put it,

“some [are] anti-classical by tradition [while] others [are] anti-classical by vocation. For some it is the weight of the past, for others it the [weight of the] future; here we have an unusual union in the face of a circumstantial common enemy.”²⁸

By proposing German Romanticism as a magnificent “historical episode of the Baroque constant” and borrowing certain ideas from Nietzsche and Spengler, D’Ors paved the way for numerous Spanish intellectuals to legitimise the prospect of a modern take on the Baroque. D’Ors—and others such as Curtius—saw the Baroque spirit as a sort of noble refuge away from the seemingly monotonous and decrepit ways of Western modernity. As a kind of “imaginative escape” from reality, the Baroque presented itself as a break from contemplating the experience of the Western world, rather than being posed as an out-and-out alternative to modernity itself. This narrative proved extremely instrumental in the discourse that was gradually opening up, as the Baroque became synonymous with attempts to overcome the apparent pitfalls of modernity. According to this line of thought, Hispanic man was challenging Protestant materialism with culture. Before long, this intellectual flight from the modern came to be identified with the situation in Franco’s regime and its political legitimisation after the Spanish Civil War. A flurry of studies set out to defend the Baroque as the ultimate expression of the Spanish national identity: a-temporal and eternally victorious. These studies were also the result of a number of policies designed to help restore the country’s religious heritage, which was in ruins at the time, and these policies were used to finance various traditional Baroque-inspired sculpture programs.²⁹

The international debate regarding the “Spanishness” of the Baroque reared its head again in 1920s. In 1924, the British historian Sacheverell Sitwell posed a provocative question: what if in fact Spain was really the predestined Baroque country? Didn’t the true Baroque already exist in the *plateresco* style that covered the simple Renaissance façades imported from Italy, with their typically Spanish ornamentation and arabesques?³⁰ Unsurprisingly, Spain was quick to chime in, with José Ortega y Gasset being the first to support Sitwell’s thesis. According to Ortega, not only was the Baroque preformed in the Spanish peninsula, but it also reached its high point when the country managed to rid itself of the late Renaissance-Chiaroscuro (and pagan) influences and return to the spirit of historical utopia that prevailed in the Medieval (and Catholic) era. In the same year, the German art historian Hugo Kehr declared: “indeed, if the metaphysical is the core of the Baroque, all the more Spain must be its homeland, because in no other place does the transcendental have such a central position as in Spain.”³¹

Although deterministic arguments like these would soon be disputed,³² the idea of the Baroque as being a fundamentally Spanish phenomenon was beginning to catch on. In 1927, the philosopher Carl Gebhardt argued that “freedom from limited forms, true substantiality,

and a boundless potentiality” were integral to the spirit of the Baroque. Gebhart saw these elements in the work of the famous Dutch figures of Rembrandt and Spinoza, and he believed that this influence was due to Spain’s enduring influence in the Netherlands, with the mystics and the Jesuits being the ones responsible for handing down these values.³³ Five years later, in his *History of Italian Baroque Painting*, Nikolaus Pevsner declared that the “Baroque in Italy shows itself fertile only there, where Spanish influence is traceable.”³⁴ He claimed that the Italians would not have been capable of abandoning the harmony of Renaissance life “in favour of a desire for the [great] beyond and a disembodied aesthetic ideal,”³⁵ and that they lacked the sensitivity to allow the “true feelings of the nation” to be expressed. Spain, on the other hand, was different. Hatzfeld also regarded the Renaissance as an “intrusion” of the Mozarabic spirit (mestizo in its nature) and the Hispanic Baroque, drawing links between these two periods in history.

In 1941, Werner Wiesbach spoke of Spain’s “eternal Baroque,” which—when washed down with the country’s Arabic heritage—was capable of overtaking the Italian Renaissance and giving rise to the “historical Baroque.”³⁶ One year later, Enrique Lafuente Ferrari picked up where Wiesbach left off, declaring that if the Baroque was the expression of religious sentiments, then Spain was above all its quintessence. Ultimately, the Baroque would also serve as a means of uniting that which the Renaissance had broken—the Christian transcendence that existed in the Middle Ages—through a general reconquest of the Renaissance nation whereby religious ideology was taken as the only possible form of culture. A response to the “civic” ideal of the new Machiavellian prince, which supported the theocracy of Philip II with its elements of a new *Weltanschauung*³⁷ and its anti-utilitarian argument.

In fact, one of the ideas that fuels this argument is Spain’s supposedly anti-Renaissance streak, one of the core myths of the country’s historiography from the 1920s. In the previous decade, Ortega y Gasset—like Worringer before him—wanted to see the Renaissance being supplanted by the inevitable force of the “Gothic spirit.” If Spain and everything about it was anti-modern, it was because the country managed to overcome Renaissance reasoning based on the connection between the Middle Ages and the Baroque.³⁸ This debate was not exclusively Spanish, or perhaps it wasn’t Spanish at all, but still its echoes were particularly audible in Spain. The debate was triggered by the threat of “dehumanisation” posed by the avant-gardists and, consequently, the entire modern endeavour. Hence in 1937, right in the midst of the Civil War, the existentialist Falangist philosopher José Luis López Aranguren noted: “It would be an unforgivable sin of the spirit to allow the rationalist perspective, superseded by contemporary philosophy, to take hold of us now [...] What if the metaphysical Spain were essentially baroque?”³⁹ Whereas the Baroque had traditionally been synonymous with a negative attitude toward enlightened modernity, progress and

Figure 6

Photograph of Antoni Tàpies and Eugeni d'Ors © Archivo de Antoni Tàpies.



rationality, it was now being interpreted in a positive sense: at one time, Spain had been attacked for its reluctance to adapt to modernity, but now this bastion-like resolve was being flaunted as a cultural advantage. Almost in a state of ecstasy, people were praising this staunchly pre-modern stance, claiming that this refusal to subscribe to modernity made the country a particularly suitable candidate for being post-modern or even counter modern. In 1934, an ecstatic Ramiro de Maeztu declared: "The panorama has changed so much in the past fifteen years that [...] people abroad are now extolling the aspect of Spain that they previously fought the most, [and they now] understand our Baroque art, perhaps better than we do."⁴⁰

These arguments were posed to the same end but in a different format in the criticism of avant-garde art in the late 1940s. Eugeni d'Ors, a true champion of the cause, was quite clear on the matter: Informel, which by now was in its infancy, was responding once more to those constraints: the criterion of austerity over ornamentation, of transcendence over the coincidental. This criterion was instrumental for Antoni Tàpies, the artist who ended the chapter of trivial and superficial stagnation that had pervaded artistic production throughout the nineteenth century and part of the twentieth century (Figure 6). The international trends (French material abstraction/Informel and North American Abstract Expressionism) were interesting travel companions, but Spanish Baroque transcendence was a guaranteed national trademark, and this was what was going to be recognised abroad from now on. The same thing happened with Goya; the same thing had happened time and again: "The Barbarians [became] Visigoths: the Spanish Renaissance movement refused to be dominated by Italy by dispensing with rationalism and paganism. Goya takes the French [plant] cutting and turns it into a Spanish trunk."⁴¹

Alexandre Cirici, one of Spain's most prominent critics from the late 1940s, welcomed the appearance of the *Dau al Set* magazine and movement in 1948, praising its "conservative values, contrary to modernity" because "they fight the systematic destruction of the spirit that has plagued Western Europe throughout the centuries of Renaissance pedantry, scientific progressivism, Caesarism and utilitarianism."⁴² In 1957, fellow art critic Joan Teixidor shared his own take on French Informel *art autre*:

Returning to Europe, it would be impossible to dispense with the most theatrical and plentiful aspects of the Baroque, its most dramatic and passionate side, when it tears and contorts the serene surfaces of the Renaissance to open up this fissure of anguish and doubt, which 'art autre' is now trying reproduce as a [kind of] warning to man.⁴³

So from this perspective, Informel rejected much of the avant-garde that came before it, identifying these artworks with renaissance, serenity, order and scholasticism. Associated with the Baroque tradition, Informel represented a departure from the safe modern model, appealing instead to anguish and dramatic expression, both of which just so happen to be undeniable traditions within the history of Spanish art.

This posed something of a dialectic conundrum: how could an avant-garde movement that was professedly anti-avant-garde—one that had ties with anti-modern traditions and whose sources were so overused that they had more or less dried up—be put forward in contemporary terms? What arguments could be used to promote this brand of avant-garde? Should we interpret the conservatist leaning of the movement as a mere knee-jerk reaction to the dictatorial setting in which it came about? Or was it like this because the groundswell of Spanish aesthetic thought was so unambiguously conservative in its essence, above and beyond the political regime that formed its backdrop? What exactly was the painter Rafael Canogar asking in 1959, when he claimed that abstract painting had a very specific function: to "find, once more, the true essences of Spanish painting of all time"?⁴⁴

In our attempt to tackle these questions, we will use three guiding principles that were instrumental in the process through which different parties came to share the same terms and perhaps even the same objectives: (1) the criticism of Spanish pre-war *isms*; (2) the notion that Spanish artists were defined by an immanent gaze: i.e. that of the realist and the expressionist; (3) the influence of existentialism in helping to bring Spanish Baroque thought up to date.

The Spanish tradition, as it had been characterised up until that point, was linked to art that refused to be polluted by foreign cultural legacies (comparable though they may be) or political allegiances that could serve to distract the artist from his huge responsibility as "demiurge" of the nation. Consequently, the avant-garde *isms*, these

“dehumanised adventures” that were causing such an uproar—even though many of the individuals complaining had been involved in these projects before the war—were not deemed suitable references for the epoch. According to the Francoist intellectual Luis Felipe Vivanco, who was one of the regime’s biggest supporters of post-war abstraction, having lived through avant-garde experiences himself during the 1930s:

Having rejected the *isms* and discarded the art of the nineteenth century, the reference for our century will undoubtedly be seventeenth-century painting, whose greatness lies in the fact that the artist maintains an attitude ‘of service’ to the subjects suggested by the spirit.⁴⁵

The freedom of the *isms* did not tally with the obligation of individual responsibility toward Spain’s national community and history. Furthermore, the collective nature of the *isms* was a particular shortcoming that ran completely counter to the Spanish individualist tradition. In fact, Vivanco explicitly rejected the violence of the collective experience of freedom preached by Breton, preferring instead the exaltation of the individualist spirit he noted in Kandinsky’s work.⁴⁶ The critic Figuerola-Ferretti also expressed his satisfaction at the fact that, while in Paris, Modigliani had not lost his Renaissance instincts “to the point of losing them in the anonymity of the prevailing *isms*.”⁴⁷ Ricardo Guyón, one of the founding critics of the Altamira School in 1948, was glad that the School had not adhered to the tenets of surrealism.⁴⁸ The deep-rooted anti-Christian element of surrealism⁴⁹ and, generally speaking, of all the European pre-war *isms* was often considered the greatest obstacle to their acceptance.

Surrealism had been very exposed to political influence over the years. The movement, which officially appeared in 1924 with the publication of André Breton’s Manifesto, enjoyed a resurgence when Breton released his second manifesto declaring the group’s support for the Marxist revolution. Later, in 1948, the more politicised strand of Surrealism joined forces with the French Communist Party, the same year in which Camus, Aragon, Abad Pierre and Merleau-Ponty, among others, signed a manifesto entitled “Contre la répression en Catalogne.” With all these ups and downs, the movement was met with great disdain from among the intellectual ranks of the Franco regime, particularly when Surrealism was seen as the “exclusive province of Paris,”⁵⁰ which led to the advent of Informel being lauded as a “typically and distinctly” Spanish avant-garde movement. For these intellectuals, Surrealism was a prime example of the calamitous results that are produced when art and politics go hand in hand. Nothing could run quite so counter to the tradition of “authentic” art, one which is “unequivocally” associated with the solemn figure of the isolated genius, centred around the intense relationship that develops when the artist observes reality in order to

extract the essence of the illusion. This essence, however, was to be manifested as an “existential quest”; not as part of political discourse.

Furthermore, the movement had reached its climax in Spain during the republican era in the 1930s.⁵¹ Significantly, many Spanish avant-garde critics were going to great lengths to redirect the traces of Surrealism that were apparent in the work of many of the country’s emerging artists, trying to bring them in line with the national image and identity. With great utopianism, José María Moreno Galván recognised Tàpies’ work as the ultimate embodiment of Surrealism, one “which not only represented modernity and progress, but also political and social revolution,” also declaring that “Tàpies’ art came onto the scene at an opportune moment in time.”⁵² Then there were critics such as Gasch, who had signed the *Manifest Groc*⁵³ (the Catalan Surrealist Manifesto) in 1928 and insisted on condemning the absence of moral preoccupations among the Surrealists, who had been reduced to mere “slaves to their instincts, freed from any of the obstacles posed by reason.”⁵⁴ This disapproval of Surrealism’s automatist aspect from critics like Gasch echoed the attempt in more recent criticism to form a humanist, Christian basis for Informalism; foundations that would reflect Spain’s artistic tradition and simultaneously edge the new trends closer to a context of Spanish cultural references, such as realism of matter and transcendence.

As things moved in this direction, much of the new criticism coincided with views expressed by the great promoter of French Informel, Michel Tapié, who defended stances contrary to Bretonian Surrealism, which he accused of being nothing more than “political education for the masses.”⁵⁵ However, many of the avant-garde artists around this time—from the Catalan Informel artists to the El Paso group—accepted their debt with Joan Miró, Max Ernst and Paul Klee, which is something we must not overlook here (Figure 7). Indeed, Tàpies, Cuixart, Ponç, Brossa and Cirlot are very clear on this matter in the first issue of *Dau al Set* magazine in 1948 (Figure 8). In plain sight, Surrealism became the ethical-political foundation for artists of this generation, albeit more in an ethical sense than in political terms. But around this time, many artists were also campaigning for the “demilitarisation” of Surrealism for different poetic aims, echoing the sentiment of the official and informal criticism. In 1950, Antonio Saura wrote:

We believe that Surrealism is not dead and that its seed, which today is scattered around the world with so many [different] names and meanings, has opened up countless roads and will continue to guide new art down increasingly promising paths [...] We are completely convinced that the new Surrealism, resurging with all its poetic force above the chaos of existentialism, must resume its prominent place as the most potent of [all the] artistic and literary schools⁵⁶ (Figure 9).

Figure 7

Members of the *El Paso* group. From left to right: Manolo Millares, José Ayllón, Rafael Canogar, Antonio Saura, Manuel Rivera, Manuel Viola, Luis Feito and Martín Chirino. Note that the only woman of the group, the artist Juana Francés, is not in the photograph, although a picture of a woman can be seen on the door. Madrid, 1958. © Archivo de Martín Chirino.

**Figure 8**

Joan Bonet Ponç, *Ictiol*, 1948, mixed media on reinforced paper, 45 × 66 cm, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid. © Associació Joan Ponç and DACS 2020.



The various Surrealist stances were fashioned to support a reading that accommodated a dual perspective. On the one hand, this involved responding appropriately to the individualist, apolitical, transcendent vision of the artist, something the German critic Friedrich Bayl recognised in Tàpies' work when he noted: "it leans in the direction of Surrealism, which appeals [to him] with its wandering sensations but which he then

Figure 9

Antonio Saura, *Rona*, 1956, oil on canvas, 162 × 130 cm © Succession Antonio Saura/www.antoniosaura.org/A+V Agencia de Creadores Visuales 2020.



rejects because of the unpleasant nature of the encounter.”⁵⁷ On the other hand, it meant reclaiming the “necessary” elements of the movement in order to warrant the internationality of the artistic proposals at a time when, in the words of Saura, the movement had spread through the world (or rather, the USA) “with so many [different] names and meanings.”

By addressing the subject of Surrealism, and indeed the pre-war isms in general, the intention was to make these movements more palatable in the context of the Spanish humanist traditions that were being brandished by intellectual class around this time. Likewise, the references to a supposed ‘constant’ for the Spanish artist, i.e. his inherent expressionistic realism as being directly linked to his existentialist nature, were just as embellished. The simple religious transcendence invoked by the more Catholic elements of Spanish thought began to adopt a distinctly existentialist hue toward the end of the 1940s. This was partly due to foreign influences, i.e. the political inclinations of Heidegger and, to a lesser extent, Sartre, as well as to the direct influence of Unamuno and Ortega at home in Spain.

The subject of anxiety, of a human existence marked by the pressures of a world in a constant state of crisis, became a particular area of interest for Spanish art and criticism (Millares, Tàpies, Feito, Saura), both in relation to matters of a personal nature and for socio-political reasons,

but also on the grounds of the debt burden regarding human “insecurity” and “failure” (*naufragio*) that was handed down through the Baroque tradition. But this issue had also surfaced in the realm of European (specifically, French) and American literature. The elevated status of anguish in the work of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, both of whom played a highly significant role in the appearance of French Informel (Fautrier, Dubuffet, Tapié and Matthieu), tied in extremely well with the existentialist tradition of Spain’s own Miguel de Unamuno.

For Menéndez Pidal, Ortega and Unamuno, the very nature of the Spanish artist means that he possesses a great expressionist realism. He has no abstract thoughts and is obsessed with reality—just as long as it is interpreted in a subjective way, since he does not believe in objectivities. According to Menéndez Pidal, the Spanish genius: “crushes [the workings of the] imagination under the weight of reality, measuring all artistic problems by the human aspect according to a model established by his own carnal nature.”⁵⁸ The existentialist issue had formed a focal point for Ortega in 1911, serving as a powerful acceptance of Spanish counter-modernity:

Spanish man is characterised by his antipathy toward all that is transcendent; he is an extreme materialist. Things, related things, in their raw material state, in their individuality, in their misery and sordidness, not distilled and translated and stylised, not as symbols of supreme values.⁵⁹

The echoes of these arguments would be heard for decades to come. The republican Américo Castro also addressed these ideas in exile in 1940:

The Iberian mind can never detach itself (*despegar*) from the vital basis on which it rests [...] The Spanish [artist] cannot isolate himself in abstraction. The Spanish [artist] feels more isolated in the realm of concepts than Robinson Crusoe on his island [...] For his joy and misfortune, Hispanic man has always relied on his integral *ego*, with all its security and its ups and downs.

The Spanish artist always depicts “artistic creation, life and thought: a complete representation of his very existence. Hence the vital importance attached to expression and attitude.”⁶⁰

These interpretations were directly imported with the dawn of the 1950s, when philosophical arguments legitimising pictorial abstraction were being put forward in the tone of the Realist and Expressionist tradition. This is exactly the sentiment that art critic Salvador López de la Torre expressed in the following statement from 1954, on the subject of Abstract Painting:

Our [country's] racial obsession with realism is the most persistent subject in the ever-varied realm of art, leaving a bitter taste of remorse in the memory of the very few deserters, who are full of regrets ...⁶¹

The critic José María Moreno Galván underscored “existential expressiveness” as the constant feature of Spanish painting. By this, he was referring to the

...substitution in Spanish art of all ideal conditions by existential conditions, the reduction of all ideality to more tangible human plane [...] All Spanish art, even the most compliant harmonious forms, even that more pressurized by an ordered hierarchy is determined by this ultimate existential conscience.⁶²

Expressiveness and realism ultimately established themselves as powerful arguments for stressing the distinctly Spanish aspect of Informel, something that had always been appreciated in Goya. Supporting this idea, the historian Victor Nieto claimed that Goya served the Informel artists because he was the “archetype of an uncontrollable internal revulsion that surfaces spontaneously and aggressively.”⁶³

Spanish expressionist realism speaks out in favour of one distinct notion of the Baroque as opposed to other possible interpretations. These are not idealised, colourful images with exuberant forms. Quite the opposite, in fact: the Spanish artistic tradition—including the likes of El Greco, Velázquez, Ribera, Zurbarán and Goya, as well as various new interpretations of the tradition, which appeared at the start of the twentieth century along with artists such as Benjamín Palencia, Zuloaga, and José Caballero⁶⁴—is governed by its restraints: here, the artist is capable of taming the intrinsic violence of the beast, employing a potent brand of minimalism that manages to convey these transcendent moments with realist precision. Cirici i Pellicer admired Tàpies’ realism, which was opposed to any form of Baroque idealization⁶⁵ and therefore allowed him to speak with extreme precision (Figure 10). José Camón Aznar made a similar point in his discussion of some of the more modern work on display at the First Biennial Hispano-American Art Exhibition (*I Bienal Hispanoamericana*).

There, where Spanish is to be heard, man summons from his imagination creatures bound by the same blood... Perhaps an excessively severe, solid impression... A profound solemnity seems to govern this collection, in which we find so few declamatory excesses.⁶⁶

As the government’s commissioner for exhibitions, Luis González Robles was an extremely important figure in the implementation of

Figure 10

Antoni Tàpies, *Pintura*, 1955, mixed media on canvas © Foundation Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona/VEGAP, Madrid and DACS, London 2020.

**Figure 11**

Photograph of Luis González Robles, chief curator of modern art for the Spanish Government from 1950 to 1965, accompanying General Franco and his wife, Carmen Polo, at the opening of the exhibition *Arte de América y de España* [Art of the Americas and Spain], Madrid, 1963.



artistic policy during Franco's regime (Figures 11 and 12). He identified the essential characteristics of Spanishness in Tàpies's work:

an ethical attitude to life and a mystical view of the world, the aridity and austerity of the Spanish lands and realism, the textures of the earth, the dark colours, and the subdued hues of the Spanish artistic tradition.⁶⁷

Figure 12

Manolo Millares, *Caricature of Luis González Robles*, pencil on paper © DACS, 2020.



He would say the same thing, more or less, about Feito, Guinovart, Canogar and Amadeo Gabino, who, in his opinion, “despite their disjointed modernity” were “linked to the time-old Spanish artistic tradition.”⁶⁸ Even Moreno Galván acknowledged that “in order to be regarded as one more manifestation of European art, the Hispanic essentiality of Spanish art must first be recognised.”⁶⁹

Tàpies undoubtedly represented the ultimate confluence of all these streams of thought regarding the innate nature of Spain’s national expression. In 1960, a number of leading contemporary writers⁷⁰ featured in a special edition of *Papeles de Son Armadans*,⁷¹ the literary journal that was initiated in 1956 by Camilo José Cela in Palma de Mallorca and rapidly became one of the guiding intellectual lights of the era. The issue, a monograph devoted to Tàpies and his work, represented to most organised attempt to position the artist as the heir of a long tradition in the Spanish arts, with Cela determined to connect the world of Tàpies with (take note!) Menéndez Pidal, Azorín and Picasso. The art critic Alexandre Cirici situated Tàpies within the great Spanish Baroque tradition, but also within the Catalan Gothic tradition, as well

as Romanticism and Existentialism, very much in line with d'Ors' historical assumptions with regard to the Baroque. Aguilera Cerni, Kultermann, Bayl and Gaya Nuño also placed Tàpies within the trajectory of seventeenth-century art. Gaya Nuño even argued that the Baroque element to this artist was so strong that his style of painting could not be referred to by any other name:

Three hundred years ago, pessimism clothed itself in skulls and decay. Now it uses parietal surfaces, also in a state of decay. So you see, there is very little reason to speak of *art autre* to refer to the paintings of Tàpies.

Kultermann, on the other hand, believed his work was “necessary in order to counteract the vigour and sweeping force with which American painting was attempting to penetrate Europe”; or in other words, Tàpies offered the appropriate means (solemnity, economy and transcendence) to ward off the superficiality and anecdotal nature of American Abstract Expressionism.

In 1955, the godfather of French Informel, Michel Tapié, also claimed that the Baroque was the inexorable font of Tàpies' work, along with Phoenician influences, the *sardana* (folk dance), the proto-Roman and Ramon Llull.⁷² These kinds of comments from abroad were more than welcomed by many of the official supporters of the artists whose theoretical findings were to meet with international acclaim as a result. In 1960 Frank O'Hara, the curator of the most important exhibition of Spanish abstraction at the MOMA, declared—prompted by the Spanish government—that the quintessential roots of Spanish Informel painting were to be found in its direct links with the artistic tradition of the Baroque.⁷³ One can imagine that certain offices and editorial departments must have been brimming with pride at this remark. And in 1958, when the critic Vicente Aguilera Cerni, who could hardly be taxed with Francoist militancy, reviewed Spain's participation in the Venice Biennale in 1958, in which Tàpies and Chillida won the prizes for painting and sculpture, he said: “Spain has intervened in the controversy of the Biennale in the best way possible: forcing people to recognise (as critics from all over the world have already done) the power and tremendous Spanishness of its young, non-conformist voices.”⁷⁴ Likewise, in a review of the Tàpies exhibit at the ICA in London in 1965, the British critic Paul Grinke referred to the artist's preoccupation with decay, a tendency he considered to be “essentially Spanish.” He associated motifs used by Tàpies, such as the sackcloth and ashes, with the Spanish Inquisition, also identifying “the completed canvas, with its scuff marks, grooves and dark sand” with “the arena of an especially bloodthirsty bull fight.”⁷⁵ The New York Times critic John Canaday's interpretation of Manolo Millares' work was also inspired by the image of bull fights: “[Millares' sackcloths are] ceremonial vestiges, particularly

of the bull ring - elegance of the torero's garments, the torn padding of the horses under the bull's attack."⁷⁶ The British critic Francis Hoyland, in his discussion of a Tàpies exhibit, said:

... it is as characteristically Spanish as the bed covers are American, but it is hard to say why... Perhaps the light of Spain and the dignity and restraint of the Spanish character have given his painting their specific 'local' quality [...] It was of Velázquez that Tàpies reminded me. Both artists create a tranquil mood out of clear, telling proportions and a decent respect for their materials.⁷⁷

The historian Paula Barreiro recently noted: "Informel made it possible to resort to historical references from the history of Spanish art and the most clichéd notions of the Spanish nation: violence, drama, the tragic principle, individualism, the wild streak, Spanish passion."⁷⁸ The use of such stereotypes should not only be understood in terms of the Spanish aesthetic tradition and its nationalist background; rather, clichés like these must be considered in the context of the diplomatic and promotional policies of a nation that was in need of legitimisation and fated with discovering how much money was to be earned from the Spanish tourism brand. The exceptional political nature of the Francoist regime played a major role in promoting values of exceptionality, but ones which were sublimated into art and culture, making them easy to assimilate in exotic terms. At the same time, the similarly exceptional situation within this dramatically strained avant-garde movement was to bring about a peculiar confluence of common interests that would define Spanish art in the 1950s.

As we come close to the end of this investigation, I would like to revisit the words of Pérez Comendador from 1950: "Why doesn't art have to follow the same admirable policy line as Spain?" The Spanish art commissioner firmly believed that there was a red line which was not to be crossed in art: i.e. some styles were appropriate for Spain and others simply were not. And he was asking his superiors for answers. Just one year later, the cinema critic Eduardo Ducay published an article entitled "Antipintura y arte anti-español" (Anti-painting and Anti-Spanish Art), in which he addressed the controversy generated by the more "conservative" response to the "modern" exhibits at the First Biennial Exhibition of Hispano-American Art. In it, he asked:

Can art, for example, represent a danger to the national character? Can it attack the integrity of that particular collective and human condition? I find it difficult to believe that enemy cannons of the aesthetic variety might be turned against a country in order to annihilate it and destroy its characteristic mode of self-expression [...] A way of painting cannot be directed against anyone [...] The qualification "anti-Spanish" cannot be awarded

simply because a painter creates in his own way [...] The epithet is even more inappropriate when applied to artists who, in all their works, have shown themselves to be Spanish to the bone, as great rebels, great inventors, great creators.⁷⁹

It is tempting to construe Ducay's words as the kind of reply Pérez Comendador may have received from his superiors in response to his complaints. Ducay's statement clearly embodies one of the key ideas that could be used to address the issue of the role of art in Francoism and modern Spanish thought. Based on this concept, art should not adopt an exploratory role in social life or in political life, and any kind of explorative work in the arts should be restricted to the study of forms. Likewise, art does not impinge on the normal order of social existence: it is an isolated, alienated domain, and it is this very alienation that provides the basis for transcendence, protecting art from anything unrelated while also sheltering the surrounding world from the naturally rebellious nature of the artist. Here, art is authentically Spanish: the artistic domain is where the upheavals of political life are transformed into something beneficial, where the status of pain is elevated by the mysticism of the dramatic, suffering, expressive, free artist.

This side note gives us a deeper insight into the role of the Baroque tradition among the different cultural and artistic actors who interpreted the post-war avant-garde movement in Spain. As far as the regime was concerned, the Baroque not only represented not only the art of the nation, an art form that had been inspired and safeguarded by the state since the Habsburg era; it was also the trademark of Spain's national identity. Art had been a willing and conscious reflection of the state's artistic policy. It was not merely a by-product of its context; it was an unbreakable link between the artists and the nation. Spain's artists had been fully capable of assuming responsibility for this convergence of interests. In other words, the Baroque was not so much a style as a moral obligation. By calling upon the Baroque, Spain's artistic practices would be deinstitutionalised and free from ideology, as well as coinciding with the formalist and individualist proposals presented by French Matter Painting and American Abstract Expressionism.

For a system like the Franco regime, i.e. Spanish baroque politics in its purest form, baroque thought entailed rebuilding an invisible, porous wall that protected the system from any kind of unnecessary contamination while also allowing certain outside elements to pass through. Hence the popularity of this approach among the artists and intellectuals themselves, individuals who had been politically distanced from the regime, at least in a theoretical sense. All these artists endorsed certain traditions because doing so ensured a status quo and created an environment that was conducive to coexistence. They all accepted that art had nothing to do with reality, that it could not affect life. When all this became clear, the Spanish post-war avant-garde movement finally

Figure 13

According to Tàpies, this photograph captures the moment when Franco and the rest of the authorities joked about the supposed revolutionary nature of Abstract art at the first Hispano-American Art Biennial held in Madrid in 1951. See Antoni Tàpies, *Memoria personal. Fragmento para una autobiografía* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1983), 376–377. © Archivo de Antoni Tàpies.



triumphed. And when the agreement was broken one decade later, this was because the tradition was called into question at a time when all those involved had already taken ample payoffs from the relationship.

There was nothing exploratory about Spanish abstract art in the 1950s: after all, the general tacit agreement between all those involved was that the main priority should be to avoid conflict. The only exploration was formal: an artistic exploration of forms exposed to the shadows of implied meanings, created in the illusion of solitude and celebrated in generously supported ceremonies with Spanish flags. The artists would not question the regime, and the regime would not question its artists.⁸⁰ An anecdote from Antoni Tàpies at the inauguration of the First Biennial Exhibition of Hispano-American art in 1951 sums this situation up perfectly: “Someone, I think it was Alberto del Castillo, said to Franco: ‘Your Excellence, this is the revolutionaries’ room’. And apparently the dictator said: ‘So long as this is how they carry out their revolution’”⁸¹ (Figure 13). This is how the Spanish artistic tradition itself was interpreted, in keeping with the famous Orsian maxim “that which does not come from tradition is plagiarism.”⁸² The Franco regime, ontologically connected to essentialist traditions, naturally adopted the Baroque because it represented a kind of continuum, a narrative that could also be updated in line with contemporary narratives. Efforts like this, to approach and appeal to the modern art circuits, were extremely desirable from a diplomatic and economic perspective.

For many intellectuals and artists, this reference to the Spanish Baroque tradition and its notorious anti-utilitarianist aspect may have provided a possibility to question the obscene manifestations of rationality and liberalism by the Francoist elite in the wake of mass slaughter in a country completely devoid of civil rights. The Baroque certainly nudged the Informel sensibility in the direction of a humanist and Expressionist style that would contradict the acts for which modernity was responsible in

Europe and the rest of the world during the 1930s and 1940s. And in reality, it could be said that the Spanish post-war avant-garde movement was rather unlucky to come about in the midst of a traditionalist dictatorship, rather than finding itself in a liberal democracy like in France, Germany and the USA, where similar work was being produced and where the artists were also appealing to existing traditions. As the most authentic model available and the closest thing to hand, the dictatorship snapped up the Baroque concept. And with support from so many wiseacre devotees who were willing to write about it, the Baroque was employed to make sure that art played a purely nationalist, decorative role and was concerned first and foremost with identity and image.

But most significantly of all, this whole process was deliberately cultivated in order to reinforce a trope that had been simmering away in Spanish thought for a long time. It is a preconception that still persists today: the notion that Spanish culture is the expression of a kind of national meeting place where conflicts are settled, agreements are reached, and differences of opinion are ironed out. Given the disastrous social, political and collective situation, and faced with the impossibility of understanding one another, culture became a symbol of its own national transcendence, the backbone of a common national image. Francoism and some of the members of the Spanish avant-garde fully collaborated with each other for many years, because both parties—if we may allow ourselves to generalise in this rather dramatic way for a moment—shared the same idea of a culture whose only function is palliative, to serve as a substitute, just like the very Spanish artistic tradition itself in its assumptions. The result is hypocrisy of the worst kind, branding culture as a kind of national adhesive and, in the process, eliminating its potential for social transformation.

Notes

1. Cited in Antonio Morales Moya, “Los primeros destellos,” *España, años 50. Una década de creación*, exhibition catalogue, SEACEX, Málaga, Budapest and Prague (2004): 29.
2. José Camón Aznar, *ABC* newspaper, July 9, 1942.
3. María Tomás, *Madrid* newspaper, July 16, 1952.
4. José María Pemán, “Oración ante una imagen industrial,” *ABC* newspaper, Madrid, July 30, 1952, 3.
5. *La Estafeta Literaria*, Madrid, October 13, 1956; cited in Gabriel Ureña, *Las vanguardias artísticas en la posguerra española. 1940-1959* (Madrid: Istmo, 1982), 99.
6. Mercedes Rozas, “Sotomayor: el eco gallego de Velázquez,” *La Voz de Galicia*, January 21, 2005; also see Ureña, *Las vanguardias artísticas*, 340.
7. Alfredo Sánchez Bella, one of the official promoters of the avant-garde at the Institute Hispanic Culture, declared that “Abstract art

- is art which lends itself most to falseness [...] Ninety-five per cent of it is a hoax.” In the *Madrid* newspaper, January 2, 1954.
8. Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *¡Europa, Europa!* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 1989), 98.
 9. See María Isabel Cabrera García, *Tradición y vanguardia en el pensamiento artístico español (1939-1959)*, 9 (Granada: Universidad de Granada, 1998), 119: “Spanish fascism is much more historically inclined than the other European totalitarian regimes. The statements made on this matter are quite clear, and the subject of tradition, which appears in almost of the arguments, is regarded as the eternal lifeblood of Spanish art and the only thing that is capable of sustaining the mechanisms that the prompt the emergence of a new theoretical system that can be applied to the present”. Cf. José Luis de la Nuez Santana, “Arte y política en la crítica española (1939-1976): el debate historiográfico,” in *Arte y política en la crítica española (1939-2000)*, ed. J. L. de la Nuez Santana, *Revista de Historiografía*, no. 13, VII, Madrid (2010): 15–29.
 10. Joaquín Ruiz Giménez, “Arte y política; relaciones entre arte y estado,” *El correo literario*, II, no. 34–35, Madrid, November 1, 1951, 1.
 11. See Encyclical Letter “On The Sacred Liturgy” (November 20, 1947), Rome: “We cannot but deplore reprove those images and forms recently introduced by some, which seem to be deformations and debasements of sane art, and which at times are even in open contradiction to Christian grace, modesty and piety, and miserably offend true religious sentiment; these indeed are to be totally excluded and expelled from our churches.” Also see: *Ilustración del Santo Oficio sobre Arte Sagrado*, Rome, June 30, 1952.
 12. *Dictamen sobre las obras de artes decorativas propuestas para la nueva Basílica de Aránzazu*, Comisión Diocesana de Arte Sacro, Obispado de San Sebastián, July 6, 1955.
 13. Muñoz Hidalgo, lecture on “Arte Religioso y Arte Abstracto”; cited in Ureña, *Las vanguardias artísticas*, 144–145.
 14. Ureña, *Las vanguardias artísticas*, 144
 15. Among these artists were Gasch, Cirlot, Santos Torroella, Cirici i Pellicer, Gullón, Oteiza, Chillida, and several artists from the El Paso group. One example worth noting here is the exhibition of religious art held at the Caralt Gallery in Barcelona in 1952. The exhibition was organised in conjunction with the ultra-conservative XXXV International Eucharist Congress, and the works on display included pieces by Subirachs, Ponç, Ràfols-Casamada, Guinovart, Tharrats and Planasdurà, de Solà. See the accompanying exhibition catalogue for more details: *Exposición sobre arte religioso*, Galería Caralt, Barcelona, 1952.
 16. José Luis López de Aranguren, “Sobre arte y religión,” *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos*, no. 26 (February 1952): 184–190; José María

- Valverde, *Informaciones*, October 31, 1946; Luis Trabazo, "Orden y caos en el arte contemporáneo," *Arbor*, no. 175–176, Madrid, July 1960: 19–30.
17. Juan Perucho, "Antonio Tàpies o el hervor de lo inerte," *El arte en las artes* (Barcelona: Nauta, 1965), 11.
 18. Ricardo Gullón, *El arte abstracto y sus problemas* (Madrid: Instituto de Cultura Hispánica, 1956).
 19. Ureña, *Las vanguardias artísticas*, 152–3.
 20. Casimiro Morcillo, "Continuidad del Arte Sacro," 1958; cited in Ureña, *Las vanguardias artísticas*, 153–4.
 21. In Javier Tusell, *Arte, historia y política en España (1890-1939)* (Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva, 1999), 98.
 22. Manuel Sánchez Camargo, "La pintura de ayer, de hoy y de mañana," *El Alcázar*, Madrid, November 16, 1939, 1.
 23. Enrique Lafuente Ferrari, "Las Exposiciones Nacionales y la vida artística en España," *Arbor* X, Madrid (1948): 353.
 24. Fernando Chueca Goitia, *Invariantes castizos de la arquitectura española* (Madrid: Dossat, 1947), 121.
 25. Eugenio d'Ors, *Lo barroco* (Madrid: Tecnos&Alianza, 2002/1922).
 26. *Ibid.*, 37.
 27. *Ibid.*, 11.
 28. Francisco Calvo Serraller, *Del futuro al pasado. Vanguardia y tradición en el arte español contemporáneo* (Madrid: Alianza, 1990), 27.
 29. See the interviews with Juan Luis Ravel, Pedro Respaldiza and J. L. Romero de Torres for the exhibition entitled *El d_efecto barroco. Políticas de la imagen hispana*, Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona (2010), and Centro de Arte Contemporáneo de Quito, Ecuador (2011).
 30. Helmut Hatzfeld, *Estudios sobre el barroco* (Madrid: Gredos, 1966), 18–19.
 31. *Ibid.*
 32. Like Wilhelm Hausenstein, who challenged the idea that art of a particularly spiritual nature that uses tangible media to express itself was exclusive to Spain. See Wilhelm Hausenstein, *Vom geist des barock*, (Berlin: R. Piper & Co., 1921).
 33. *Ibid.*, 21.
 34. See Helmut Hatzfeld, "A Critical Survey of the Recent Baroque Studies," *Boletín del Instituto Caro y Cuervo*, 4, no. 3 (1948): 471.
 35. Nikolaus Pevsner, *Barockmalerei in den Romanischen Ländern* (Wildpark Potsdam: A. V. Athenaiion, 1928), part I: Die italienische Malerei vom Ende der Renaissance bis zum ausgehenden Rokoko, 3. 5, 107: "Die Aufgabe eines auf das Diesseits, auf die Harmonie des Lebens und die organische Schönheit der Form gerichteten Ideals zugunsten der Sehnsucht nach dem Jenseits und eines Ideals entkörperlichter Schönheit."

36. Ibid., 30.
37. See Sergio Bertelli, *Rebeldes, libertinos y ortodoxos en el Barroco* (Barcelona: Península, 1984/1973), 11.
38. Wilhelm Worringer, *La esencia del estilo gótico* (Buenos Aires: Nueva Visión, 1967/1911), 138; José Ortega y Gasset, "Arte de este mundo y el otro," *El Imparcial* newspaper, Madrid, July 1911.
39. José Luis López Aranguren, "El arte de la España nueva," *Vértice*, Madrid, no. 5, September 1937.
40. Ramiro de Maeztu, *Defensa de la Hispanidad*, Madrid, 1934.
41. Juan de Contreras y López de Ayala, *Características del arte español*, Universidad Internacional Menéndez Pelayo, Santander, 1971; cited in Julián Díaz Sánchez, *La "oficialización" de la vanguardia artística en la posguerra española (el Informalismo en la crítica de arte y los grandes relatos)* (doctoral thesis, Universidad de Castilla la Mancha, Cuenca, 1998), 14.
42. Alexandre Cirici Pellicer, "Dau al Set," *Vint-i-dos [Ariel]*, (February 1951): 60, cited in Narcís Selles Rigat, *Alexandre Cirici Pellicer* (Barcelona: Afers, 2007), 75.
43. Joan Teixidor, "Arte otro en Barcelona," *Destino*, February 16, 1957.
44. Rafael Canogar, "Tener los pies en la tierra," *Papeles de Son Armadans*, no. 37 (1959), 70; cited in Julián Díaz Sánchez and Angel Llorente, *La crítica de arte en España (1939–1976)* (Madrid: Istmo, 2004), 83.
45. Díaz Sánchez, *La "oficialización" de la vanguardia*, 56.
46. See Ureña, *Las vanguardias artísticas*, 143.
47. Luis Figuerola-Ferretti, "Arte. Modigliani, Campigli, los abstractos y la escultura italiana contemporánea," *Arriba*, Madrid, July 6, 1955, 13, cited in Díaz Sánchez, *La crítica de arte*, 155.
48. Ricardo Guyón, "Proyecto para la Escuela de Altamira," in *De Goya al arte abstracto* (Madrid, 1952), 187–188.
49. Díaz Sánchez, *La "oficialización" de la vanguardia*, 147.
50. Manuel J. Borja-Villel, "Los cambios de gusto. Tàpies y la crítica," *Tàpies. Els anys 80*, exhibition catalogue (Barcelona: Ajuntament de Barcelona, 1988), 63–68.
51. Most of the survivors of Spain's historic avant-garde movements had been surrealists: Miró, Dalí, Foix, Ferrant, Caballero, Westerdahl, Gasch, Eudald Serra, Juan Ismael and Tomas Seral.
52. Borja-Villel, "Los cambios de gusto," 63.
53. *Manifest Groc* (Yellow Manifesto) was a surrealist manifesto that was presented in 1928 by Salvador Dalí, Sebastià Gasch and Lluís Montanyà and railed against the Noucentista movement.
54. Juan Manuel Bonet, "De una vanguardia bajo el franquismo," in *Arte del Franquismo*, ed. Antonio Bonet Correa (Madrid: Cátedra, 1981).

55. Serge Guilbaut, "Materias de reflexión: los muros de Antoni Tàpies," *Tàpies. Comunicació sobre el mur*, exhibition catalogue (Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 1992), 273.
56. Bonet, "De una vanguardia bajo el franquismo".
57. Friedrich Bayl, "Tàpies o el silencio," *Papeles de Son Armadans*, monograph on Antoni Tàpies, Madrid-Palma de Mallorca, no. LVII (1960): 242.
58. Cited in Salvador López de la Torre, "Humilde mirada española sobre la pintura abstracta," *Juventud* journal, Madrid, February 18–24, 1954.
59. José Ortega y Gasset, "Arte de este mundo y el otro," *El Imparcial* newspaper, Madrid, July 1911.
60. Américo Castro, *España en su historia. Ensayos sobre historia y literatura* (Madrid: Trotta, 2004/1940), 17–20.
61. López de la Torre, "Humilde mirada española".
62. Cited in Calvo Serraller, *Del future al pasado*, 171. English translation originally published in: Jeremy Lewison, *New Spanish figuration: paintings by Chema Cobo, Costus, Luis Gordillo, Guillermo Pérez Villalta: An exhibition* (Cambridge: The Gallery, 1982), 1952.
63. Cited in Cabrera García, *Tradición y vanguardia*, 574.
64. See, for example, Ricardo Gullón's statements from 1952, when he linked some of the artists from the first half of the century to Velázquez: "The teachings of Velázquez are to be found elsewhere: in the glistening landscapes of Benjamín Palencia, in the solemn *impastos* of José Caballero, [and] in the brave and daring efforts of the young [Spanish] painters." In Ricardo Gullón, "Semejanzas y diferencias en la Bienal," *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos*, no. 26, Madrid, 1952.
65. In Selles, *Alexandre Cirici Pellicer*, 198.
66. José Camón Aznar, "Panorama de la Bienal," *ABC*, Madrid, October 14, 1951, 15–23.
67. Borja-Villel, "Los cambios de gusto," 203.
68. Genoveva Tusell García, "La proyección exterior del arte abstracto español en tiempos del grupo El Paso," *En el tiempo de El Paso*, exhibition catalogue (Madrid: Centro Cultural de la Villa, 2002), 13.
69. José María Moreno Galván, "La realidad de España y la realidad de un informalismo español"; cited in De la Nuez Santana, 21.
70. Cela, Gaya Nuño, Aguilera Cerni, Cirici, Udo Kultermann, Carlo Argan, Westerdahl, Arnau Puig, Friedrich Bayl, Joan Brossa, Celso Emilio Ferreiro, Santos Torroella, Blai Bonet, Michel Tapié, Cirlot, Jacques Dupin, Fernando Chueca, Pierre Restany, and Herbert Read.
71. *Papeles de Son Armadans*, special edition on Antoni Tàpies, Madrid – Palma de Mallorca (2002): 13.
72. In Michel Tapié, *Antoni Tàpies et l'œuvre complète*, Paris, 1955.

73. Frank O'Hara, *New Spanish Painting and Sculpture*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1960).
74. Vicente Aguilera Cerni, "La Bienal entre dos fuegos," *Revista*, no. 337, Barcelona, September 27 to October 3, 1958: 14.
75. Paul Grinke, "Writing in the Sand," *Financial Times*, London, June 25, 1965, 24.
76. John Canaday "Art: More from Spain. Modern Museum Show Follows Guggenheim's," *The New York Times*, July 20, 1960. Cited in Genoveva Tusell, "La proyección exterior del arte abstracto español en tiempos del grupo El Paso," *En el tiempo de El Paso*, exhibition catalogue (Madrid: Centro Cultural de la Villa, 2002), 87–117.
77. Francis Hoyland, "Tranquil Sand," *The Listener*, London, June 17, 1965, 904.
78. Paula Barreiro, "La 'invención' de la vanguardia en la España franquista: estrategias políticas y realidades aparentes," in *¿Verdades cansadas? Imágenes y estereotipos acerca del mundo hispánico en Europa*, ed. Víctor Bergasa, Miguel Cabañas, Manuel Lucena Giraldo and Idoia Murga (Madrid: CSIC, 2009), 355.
79. Eduardo Ducay, "Antipintura y arte anti-español," *Índice de Artes y Letras*, Madrid, no. 54–55, September 15, 1952. https://www.soymenos.net/gzlez_robles_eng.pdf
80. On this note, it is worth remembering the words of Luis González Robles regarding the political and personal attitudes of the artists around this time: "I wasn't interested in whether they were reds, homosexual or whatever [...] I have a rule which says: 'Don't interfere with other peoples' lives; and they won't interfere with yours'. See: "Entrevista a Luis González Robles," in *¿Puedo hablarle con libertad, excelencia?*, ed. J. L. Marzo, 141–160. Download from: https://www.soymenos.net/gzlez_robles_eng.pdf
81. Antoni Tàpies, *Memoria personal. Fragmento para una autobiografía* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1983/1977), 376–7.
82. Eugenio d'Ors, *La tradición* (Buenos Aires: Editoriales reunidas, 1939), 20.