


The critical reception of Spanish contemporary art. 1974-1982

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Abstract. This paper examines the international critical reception of Spanish contemporary art, specifically in the english-speaking world, between 1974 and 1982. It examines how the lasting impact of Franco's cultural diplomacy efforts in the 1950s and 1960s, which promoted in particular the Spanish abstract and Informalist artists, connecting them to a specific conception of Spanishness and the artists of the Spanish golden age, left english-speaking publics with certain preconceptions about Spanish art. This, combined with a lack of understanding of the Spanish socio-political context during the transition to democracy, negatively affected the reception of later artistic movements. The paper is based on a close reading of contemporaneous primary sources – principally exhibition reviews in newspapers and specialist art magazines – and is centred around four case studies, including the 1976 Venice Biennale and major touring exhibitions in the United Kingdom and the United States.

Keywords. Cultural diplomacy; Spanish contemporary art; art criticism; critical reception

ESP La recepción crítica internacional del arte contemporáneo español. 1974-1982

Resumen. Este artículo examina la recepción crítica internacional del arte contemporáneo español, específicamente en el mundo anglosajón, entre 1974 y 1982. Examina cómo el impacto duradero de los esfuerzos de la diplomacia cultural franquista en las décadas de 1950 y 1960, que promocionó en particular a los artistas abstractos e informelistas españoles, vinculándolos a una concepción específica de la españolidad y a los artistas de la edad de oro española, dejó al público angloparlante con ciertas ideas preconcebidas sobre el arte español. Esto, combinado con una falta de comprensión del contexto sociopolítico español durante la transición a la democracia, afectó negativamente a la recepción de los movimientos artísticos posteriores. El trabajo se basa en una lectura atenta de fuentes primarias contemporáneas –principalmente reseñas de exposiciones en periódicos y revistas de arte especializadas– y se centra en cuatro estudios de caso, que incluyen la Bienal de Venecia de 1976 y grandes exposiciones itinerantes en el Reino Unido y Estados Unidos.

Palabras clave. Diplomacia cultural; arte contemporáneo español; crítica de arte; recepción crítica

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1. Introduction

The knowledge of Spanish artists in the period after Picasso and his generation in the ^{ENG}lish-speaking world is remarkably low. While the promotion of Spanish art abroad in the 1950s and 1960s during the Franco regime has been widely discussed in recent research in Spain (Marzo and Mayayo 2015; Barreiro López 2017; Díaz Sanchez, 2013), particularly its successes in promoting the careers of Spanish abstract and 'informalist'

artists such as Eduardo Chillida and Antoni Tàpies, less attention has been given to the period towards the end of the regime and the beginning of the democratic transition period.

This paper examines the efforts to promote Spanish art to an international audience, around the end of the Franco regime and the early transition period, focusing on its reception in the ^{ENGLISH}-speaking world. It argues that the failures and missed opportunities of this period, as well as the legacy of Franco's cultural policies, have had a lasting impact on the visibility and understanding of Spanish contemporary art abroad.

With a focus on contemporaneous reviews in specialist art magazines and newspapers in the US and the UK, four case studies from 1974 to 1982 are examined. The paper demonstrates how the presentation of art through the lens of a certain conception of Spanish identity led to expectations of what Spanish art should be, which, combined with a lack of knowledge about the Spanish socio-political context, negatively affected the critical reception of new forms of artistic expression during the transition period that were neither aligned with international trends nor these preconceptions of Spanish art.

2. 1974-1976: 'Outdated' and 'Confused'

This section considers perceptions of Spanish art in the ^{ENGLISH}-speaking world towards the end of the Franco regime and before the full democratic transition. Two case studies – one before and one after the death of Franco in 1975 – are examined in detail: the exhibition *Spanish Contemporary Art*, in London in 1974 and the Spanish exhibition at the 1976 Venice Biennale. Other exhibitions that contribute to the understanding of in the UK and US that contribute to the understanding of this period are also referenced.

The efforts of the Franco regime from during the 1950s to use international art events such as the Venice Biennale and exhibitions in the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and the Guggenheim Museum in New York (1960), and the Tate Gallery in London (1962) as a form of cultural diplomacy is well documented. This notably benefited the informalist artists of the El Paso group (Antonio Saura, Manolo Millares, etc), the Dau al Set (Antoni Tàpies, Modest Cuixart, etc) and Eduardo Chillida, and several of these artists became well known on the international stage, winning awards at Biennales and obtaining gallery representation abroad. By the end of the decade, however, figures such as Tàpies were boycotting these official promotions. This collaboration had always been uneasy and it is clear that the promotion abroad of these artists was designed to suit international tastes of abstract expressionism of the time for political advantage, rather than representing a sincere interest to support these artists on the part of the regime.

Yet where the regime can be said to have been very successful, at least initially, was in presenting a more-or-less coherent image of Spanish contemporary art abroad, which seemed to represent an expression of modernity and artistic freedom. While not a government initiative, the opening of the Museo de Arte Abstracto Español in Cuenca in 1966, an initiative of the artist Fernando Zóbel, fitted neatly into this view, and was covered enthusiastically by the international press, such as *TIME* magazine (1966), with MoMA Director Alfred Barr, who visited it in 1967, famously calling it "the most beautiful small museum in the world." (Fundación Juan March, Exhibitions section)

As Barreiro López (2017) – one of the few scholars to have written extensively in ^{ENGLISH} on this topic – puts it:

Even if the avant-garde was not openly accepted and promoted inside Spain, it was apparent to some civil servants that contemporary Spanish art could be an effective foreign policy tool (...). The objective remained, however, to locate and recover an essential Spanish heritage, *Spanishness*, in the Catholic roots of the Golden Age (p. 63).

This perceived "Spanishness" can be characterised as using a limited palate of blacks, red and earthy colours, references to Spanish masters such as Goya and Velázquez, gestural brushstrokes and the occasional reference to Catholic symbols such as crucifixes, as exemplified particularly by Saura and Tàpies. These connections to the Golden Age seem to have given not only the regime a way to accept this new art, but also an element for foreign audiences to grasp and understand.

It is not the purpose of this paper to discuss the policies of the 1950s and 1960s in detail, but rather to show where this form of state sponsorship had left international perceptions of Spanish art by the end of tail-end of the regime.

2.1. *Arte '73/Spanish Contemporary Art*

The itinerant exhibition *Arte '73*, organised by the Juan March Foundation, is one of the last of the high-profile group exhibitions promoted by the regime. It toured several Spanish cities in 1973, before going abroad in 1974. It was first shown as *Spanish Contemporary Art* at Marlborough Fine Art, London in March 1974, and then in Paris, Rome and Zurich, before returning to complete the tour in Spain, culminating in the inaugural exhibition of the Juan March Foundation's new building in Madrid in October 1974.

There are several contemporaneous sources that can help us understand both how the exhibition was presented and how it was critically received. The first is the multi-lingual ^{ENGLISH}, French, German and Spanish catalogue that was produced for the various iterations of the exhibition, which provides a short, anonymous introduction and a few lines written by each of the participating artists about their work.

While acknowledging that the exhibition does not include "other artists with indubitable and well known merits," the catalogue introduction claims that the exhibition offers "a representative panoramic view of the present moment of Spanish art" (*Arte '73*, 1973, p.8). There are a total of 40 artists – informalist, geometric abstractionist, realist, expressionist and figurative painters and sculptors – and, far from being incomplete

as the catalogue suggests, the exhibition would seem to be if anything too large and lacking in coherence, with each artist being allocated two works. The exhibition seems to have left a remarkably small footprint in London – only two reviews have been located, both in specialist art publications, while the only trace of the exhibition in the archives of the major newspapers are paid advertisements.

Max Wykes-Joyce (1974), for *Arts Review*, puts the eclecticism of the exhibition into historical context: “The whole matter of Spanish Art in the 20th century is a most complicated one” (p.132). Explaining the different artistic movements that emerged because of the civil war, the exile of many artists, and Spain’s post-war isolation, he writes:

In consequence, there grew up in Spain several generations of artists and teachers forced back into their own artistic and cultural history for exemplars. This could have had a stultifying and parochial effect: in fact, it had just the opposite, it generated a marvellous freshness of approach, of ideas, even of techniques and media, wholly uninfluenced by the whimsies of dealer/collector international fashion (p.132).

This generous interpretation is not, however, shared by Tony Rethon (1974) in *Studio International*, who is quite scathing in his view of the Spanish art world. He believes that the artists have been formally influenced by their European and American counterparts, becoming successful at home due to the country’s isolation, but that now in London their work feels outdated. He concludes:

The sadness of the exhibition, however, is not in the degree to which the exhibits look dated, but in the degree to which a formal identification of art and a formal appreciation of art is made to look wholly bankrupt in the face of an ideological struggle brought about by the existence of Spanish Academies (p. 262).

Rethon, himself an artist, benefited from a British Council Scholarship to study at the San Fernando Fine Art Academy in Madrid in 1973-74, and so his opinion is naturally coloured by this experience, as is evident in his review, where he writes that at the Academy, “a particular approach to drawing and painting isn’t encouraged; it’s enforced (...) Velazquez is to be revered, one is wary of El Greco; Goya is to be emulated.” (Rethon, p. 262).

But perhaps the most negative criticism of the Marlborough show comes from one of its own participants: Fernando Zóbel. He spent two weeks in London in March 1974, during which time he wrote a handwritten diary (in ^{ENGLISH}), reflecting on various aspects of his life and art career. As a fluent ^{ENGLISH} speaker and the founder of the Cuenca Museum, Zóbel was asked by the Spanish embassy to give a talk about the exhibition in London. On the exhibition, he writes:

A mediocre show. Less would have been more. A great expense – money. Torner’s time. To no useful purpose. Lecture this afternoon. The ambassador’s idea. How they all use us, and how badly. I probably won’t even get thanked. The last of this sort of thing if I can help it. I have gone along, thinking that it was worth doing – a kind of teaching etc. Well; it isn’t worth doing. (...) (in this show the pictures don’t speak for themselves) (Zóbel, 1974, p. 6).

Ironically, the year before *Arte’73* reached London, the Marlborough was showing an exhibition of nine realist Spanish painters and sculptors, which seems to have been more positively received: “Contemporary Spanish Realists” according to the *Daily Telegraph* review, “comes as a surprise” and “confirms that in recent years a notable resurgence has taken place in the arts in Spain” (Mullaly, 1973, p.15). Max Wykes-Joyce (1973) in calls it an “extremely good show” (p. 661). Although some of the same artists (Amalia Avia, Julio Hernandez, Carmen Laffon, Antonio López) would also feature in *Arte’73*, this seems to have been an overall more coherent exhibition with a more limited selection of artists presenting a more unified artistic concept – an important lesson in presenting work to a wholly new and foreign audience.

Another important exhibition in London in 1974, just a few months after the Marlborough show, was a solo retrospective exhibition of Tàpies at the Hayward Gallery. Although positive overall, critic Michael Shephard (1974) also hints that the artist’s work seems a little outdated:

Those who remember the first impact of Antoni Tàpies on the London art scene about 15 years ago, will welcome this retrospective as one of the most serious and balanced of ‘matter’ artists; though the speed with which art-history moves may make his work, especially the recent assemblages, seem rather déjà-vu to students, when shown in 1974 (p. 429).

To the extent that it is possible to summarise these varied responses to these three exhibitions it would appear that by the end of the Franco regime there was a certain feeling that for Spanish contemporary art to solicit interest abroad and convey meaning, it was not enough to present artists in exhibitions without a greater thought for coherence and curation. When abstraction and informalism were being promoted as the main artistic voice of Spain, there was at least a plausible narrative for foreign publics to try to understand (however incomplete that narrative may have been). All this would suggest that after Franco’s death in 1975, there was a genuine opportunity to “correct” history and present an alternative, more nuanced, vision of Spanish contemporary art.

2.2. The 1976 Venice Biennale

The 1976 Venice Biennale marked the rebirth of the event under new leadership, following a crisis in the mid-60s amid accusations of lobbying and favouritism among prize-giving, and a two-year hiatus. Two key themes

were selected: politics and art, and art and the environment. The first theme was presented through two large exhibitions: *Spain. Artistic Avant-Garde and Social Reality 1936-76*, and *Rationalism and Architecture in Italy During the Fascist Regime*. This Biennale was especially significant for Spain as it was its first participation since the death of Franco. However, it had already been decided by the Biennale's new Director, Carlo Ripo de Meana before Franco's death that the undemocratic Spain should not be officially invited and therefore it did not yet mark a return to the national pavilion; instead a non-official contribution, side-stepping the state, had been planned. With the death of Franco, this contribution was given more prominence to emphasise on the new reality of the political transition (Torrent, 2004, p. 65). A committee of Spanish artists and theorists was invited to put together the exhibition, which was allocated a large space in central building of the Giardini della Biennale.

The Spanish exhibition was aimed at correcting what was seen as an erroneous conception of Spanish avant-garde art due to it being co-opted by the Franco regime. In his introduction to the catalogue, Tomás Llorens, one of the key figures of the organizing committee of the Spanish show, writes:

Its central idea was to consider the evolving context provided by the development and reinforcement of capitalist structures within the political framework of a long lasting dictatorship, and to trace the history of avant-garde art as a results of and a response to such a context (Bozal and Llorens, 1976, p. 176).

This was an ambitious project, especially since it involved presenting many of the same artists promoted under Franco, but aiming to recontextualise their work. It was also highly controversial within Spain itself, largely because of how the committee was selected and which artists were represented, and given the fact that it was attempting to provide a new narrative of recent Spain's artistic history without a wider consensus on what that narrative should be. At a certain point, two rival groups were working on different exhibition propositions (Torrent, 2004, p. 70) and divisions continued right up until the exhibition was inaugurated. Reflecting the country's political fractures, this included the refusal of leading Basque artists such as Eduardo Chillida and Jorge Oteiza to participate, who instead called for a separate Basque pavilion (Torrent, 2004, p. 80).

The Spanish exhibition's position as one of the main shows of the Biennale meant that it attracted a lot of media attention. Eleven reviews have been identified, in *TIME* and *The New York Times* in the US; in *Arts Review*, *The Burlington Magazine*, *The Architectural Review*, *The Times* (two reviews), *The Sunday Telegraph*, *The Observer* and *The Guardian* in the UK; and *Art International* in Switzerland. While the views of individual critics may not always be representative, taken collectively, it is possible to extract shared perceptions.

Some of these reviews seem to miss the point, with no attempt made to engage with the proposition being put forward of a new narrative of Spanish art and society, and the superficial description rests on previous assumptions or understanding about the Spanish avant-garde – focusing, as so often, on Picasso and Miro. Into this category can be placed the reviews in *Arts Review* (Shepherd, 1976) and *The Times* (Robinson, 1976). Meanwhile, *The Guardian* review does not go beyond seeing a link between the fact Venice has a communist mayor to the way the Spanish exhibition is conceived (Tisdall, 1976). Among the reviews which engage with the proposition of the exhibition, most are negative about it, for differing reasons.

Paul Overy (July 21, 1976) of *The Times*, reviewed the Biennale called the show “quite extraordinarily confusing, a worthy idea which seems to have misfired” (p. 9). The same critic also wrote a more detailed review in the *New York Times*, this time criticising both the show and the catalogue:

[It] is a curiously muddled exhibition which reflects the confusion which ensues when politically motivated exhibitions grow too large and unspecific. The idea was to correct the view of Spanish art as projected during the France era through the Spanish Pavilion at the Biennale, which this year is closed with no official Spanish contribution. But the end result is to give no clear picture of the relationship between art and culture in a closed society, while the catalogue introduction by Valeriano Bozal and Thomas Llorens imposes a simplistic Marxist interpretation which is equally unconvincing (Overy, July 25, 1976, p. 68).

Joseph Rykwert (1976) in *The Architectural Review* is more positive, emphasising that the Spanish exhibition contained many very strong pieces, but concluding that it was “modest in exhibition technique” (p. 315). Simon Wilson (1973) of *The Burlington Magazine* similarly criticises the curation of the exhibition:

The main exhibition is an immensely ambitious and laudable project and it is sad that on the whole both the choice and the arrangement of works tends to present a picture of a much less vital development of avant-garde art since 1937, especially in the 1950's and the early 1960's, than was in fact the case (p. 723).

Wilson is the only critic in the reviews identified that points to what was a concern among Spanish critics of the time – that there were important artists missing, and that this selection did not represent enough of a break from what the Franco regime itself offered in the preceding years.

While praising some of the individual contributions, William Feaver (1976) in *The Observer* again feels that the exhibition does not achieve its aims:

The [Spanish exhibition] is an elaborate attempt to show how artists expressed themselves under Franco conditions. Somewhere along the explanatory corridors of the exhibition this aim goes missing. A few happy-go-lucky late Picassos, some of those rather dapper spiky wrought-iron works by Julio Gonzalez and fleeing crowd scenes by Genoves do little to illuminate the subject compared with the

posters, re-workings (or datings) of 'Guernica' by Eduardo Arroya and others and a brilliant series of photo-collages by Josep Renau (p. 20).

Perhaps the most positive review is from Robert Hughes (1976) writing in *TIME*, who makes a link between what the different exhibitions in the Biennale are attempting to do, engaging in the complex relationship between politics and art:

The purpose of the festival...is to inspect and debate the mythic purity of modern art, to see how it really has worked in society and not just how it hoped to work. (...) we suppose that the 'advanced' movements in Spanish art during the past 40 years must have threatened Franco's commissars. But a historical show entitled 'Spain, Artistic Avant-Garde and Social Reality 1936-76,' suggests that it was otherwise, that after the moment of heroic protest symbolized by Picasso's Guernica, the regime itself started to exploit, for its own benefit, the success of the Spanish avant garde (para. 2).

It is clear from the analysis of these reviews that the critical reception was not in the main what Llorens and others had been aiming for. I put forward two explanations for this disconnect. The first is that, as Wilson suggested above, the exhibition did not fully reflect the extent of what was happening in the Spanish art scene during the forty years from 1936 to 1937. Women artists, as well as the many experimental artists and underground movements active during this time are notably absent (for a broad outline of the many different artists of this time, see Marzo and Mayayo, 2015, chapter 3). The second reason is that it is simply a misconception to think that the international world had misunderstood Spanish art to the extent suggested, and that Franco's 'soft power' success has been exaggerated.

To illustrate the latter reason, there are several exhibitions worth considering. The 1960 exhibition in MoMA in New York *New Spanish Painting and Sculpture*, which followed the 1958 Venice Biennale where Chillida and Tàpies won awards, among general critical acclaim for the Spanish pavilion, is frequently mentioned as a diplomatic coup for the Franco regime, and it followed intense diplomatic discussions between the two countries (see for example, Díaz Sanchez, 2013, pp. 202-214). But what many writers do not take sufficient account of is the extent to which this was also an exercise in American soft power. It is not so much that the Americans were hoodwinked about the true nature of the regime – it is rather that, with their shared opposition to communism – there was more to be gained by *detente* than opposition. MoMA curator and poet Frank O'Hara's text (1960) about the exhibition is a model of diplomacy – carefully avoiding references to the political context of the work, and setting Spanish informalism (at times by stretching credulity) in the context of Spanish art history and traditions, a reading that very much suited the Spanish regime.

The selection of Joan Genovés to represent Spain in the Biennale in 1966 (where he received an honourable mention) at a time when artists such as Tàpies and Saura were already refusing to engage with projects promoted by the regime, is surprising in many ways given Genovés' more explicitly political work. In a review in *TIME* (1967) about his first show in London in the Marlborough Gallery the following year, which featured work such as *La Protesta* showing figures fleeing and being felled at a protest, the unnamed critic writes:

(...) he does not consider his work a critique of the Franco regime. 'I want to be a universal painter,' he says. 'What I am trying to show is that a multitude is not an anonymous mass, but a collection of individuals who would, in an ideal world, each be authentically free.' (p. 75).

While he claims to be not criticising the regime, just as that is the assumption put forward by the critic, his explanation nonetheless does nothing to negate the impression that he is talking about his own country's situation, as much as universal lessons can also be drawn from it. Similarly, a BBC radio broadcast from 1962 marking three exhibitions of Spanish art, including at the Tate Gallery – another so-called success for Franco's 'soft power' – claimed "we have the almost unheard-of spectacle of a thoroughly rebellious and non-conformist artistic movement being smiled upon by a thoroughly reactionary and autocratic regime" (Wheeler, p. 92). Such attempts at cultural diplomacy do not necessarily signify the successful whitewashing of oppressive regimes; whether other countries chose to take action against such regimes is another question altogether.

Bozal and Llorens (1976) are not wrong that the context of a dictatorship necessarily affected the way artists could live their lives and produce their work, and that the selection for international exhibitions was an instrument of repression of the regime (p. 176). This is a subtle argument that requires in-depth understanding of the complex relationships and structures within Spain, that ultimately seem to have been more effectively conveyed in their writing than in the exhibition itself.

Despite its laudable aims, it cannot be concluded based on the critical response that the 1976 Spanish exhibition in the Biennale succeeded in providing a coherent alternative narrative of Spanish contemporary art to the outside world. At the same time, the notion of artistic freedom flourishing under Franco may also not have been as ingrained a perception abroad as has been assumed within Spain. Meanwhile, the reviews of the exhibition in the Spanish media continued to focus on the aforementioned internal controversies over its organization, seemingly unaware of or uninterested in the rather negative perceptions of it in the foreign press (see for example, *ABC*, 1976, p.74; Pereda, 1976). While the ferocity of the debate around the exhibition's organization provoked at home makes this unsurprising, it would appear that the very purpose of the exhibition – to communicate an alternative narrative to the outside world – was largely forgotten amid the domestic discussions.

3. 1980-1982: 'Vulgarity' and 'Immaturity'

By the time of the arrival of democracy to Spain, it would seem that the major legacy in of Franco in relation to art was to reinforce the idea of Spanishness to the extent that it became both a method for reading Spanish contemporary art and an expectation of it. The new generation of Spanish artists that emerged during the early years of the transition to democracy, who were untainted by the controversies of the Franco era, made little lasting impact on the international scene despite various attempts at their promotion.

To better understand their relative absence in the ^{ENG}lish-speaking scene, this section will examine the critical reception of two international exhibitions, both supported financially by the Spanish cultural agencies: the exhibition *New Images from Spain* that was shown in the Guggenheim Museum in New York from 21 March to 11 May 1980, in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art from 5 October to 30 November of the same year, and also – as is less well known – in Tuscon (Arizona) and Albuquerque (New Mexico) in 1981; and the 1982 exhibition *New Spanish Figuration* that toured the UK, first at Kettle's Yard in Cambridge from 1 July to 19 August, the Institution of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London; Cartwright Hall in Bradford from 9 October to 15 November, and finally in the Third Eye Centre, Glasgow from 27 November to 19 December.

An obvious difference between the two exhibitions is that *New Images from Spain* included a very diverse group of artists, representing different styles (Sergi Aguilar, Carmen Calvo, Teresa Gancedo, Muntadas/Serrán Pagán, Miquel Navarro, Guillermo Pérez Villalta, Jorge Teixidor, Darío Villalba and Zush) while *New Spanish Figuration*, as the title suggests, presented a group of four painters working in a similar style: Chema Cobo, Costus, Luis Gordillo and Guillermo Pérez Villalta.

Both exhibitions had catalogues with texts that aimed to put the work in context of the recent history of Spanish art and political context, and both received a reasonable amount of reviews in the press of the two countries. This section is based on an analysis of these sources, as well as an interview conducted by the author with Guillermo Pérez Villalta as the only artist who participated in both exhibitions.

3.1. *New Images from Spain*

New Images from Spain was organized by Margit Rowell, curator at the Guggenheim Museum, and received support from the Spanish government as well as private US foundations. As the then Director Thomas M. Messer states in the catalogue's Preface (Rowell, 1980, p. 8), one of the goals of this type of exhibition was not only to provide information, but to be a potential source of acquisitions. This exhibition led to the acquisition of eight works for the Guggenheim collection, although interestingly these were primarily the result of Spanish rather than American donations, and it would not be overly cynical to see a vested interest from those individuals in having these artists in the prestigious Guggenheim collection.

In her catalogue text, Rowell (1980) attempts to explain the context in which Spanish art operated under Franco, and her text includes extensive discussion of the El Paso Group, Dau al Set, Equipo Crónica, Estampa Popular, the realist painters, and others artists of these generations, alongside many reproductions of their work. We know she was informed by conversations with Spanish critics and friends, whom she credits in the catalogue, and it is perhaps for this reason that her analysis at times feels confused (reminiscent of the confused narratives of the 1976 Venice Biennale). For example, when discussing the participation of Spanish artists in exhibitions and biennales abroad during the Franco regime, she writes:

The presence of these painters and sculptors [Oteiza, Chillida, Tàpies, Feito] at such exhibitions gave rise to the idea that Spain was a liberal democracy where artists could create freely, and where their work was not only accepted but promoted by the government agencies controlling the selections to be sent abroad (p.11).

Yet in the very next paragraph, she seemingly contradicts this supposed perception of Spain by writing that "even more significantly, to an outsider's eyes, this Spanish art seemed a revolutionary art; it was interpreted as a protest against the current political regime, albeit in abstract and somewhat elliptical terms" (p. 11). There is little evidence, however, that anyone outside of Spain really did interpret these artworks as a reflection of liberal democracy (this seems more like a projection coming from within Spain) but rather there was an acknowledgement of the political convenience in these artistic exchanges that cloaked the deeper understanding of them as a form of protest art.

Importantly, Rowell notes that while more overtly political Spanish artists such as Canogar and Genovés, influenced by pop, are "are already relatively obscure in the United States (...) the American stereotype of 'Spanish' art remains that established by the previous generation: dramatically expressionist, richly textured, chromatically sober" (p. 13). The generation of artists presented in the exhibition therefore will be seen against this backdrop of what is expected of "Spanish art". She goes on to describe the persisting relative cultural isolation of Spain and its eclectic styles of current art, concluding:

If there is one common denominator in the more interesting and original art in Spain today, it is the ostensible lack of politicization. And so we conclude that this is the image of the new Spain; this is the definition of post-Franco art: an art-as-art expression (p. 12).

Recognising that this exhibition represents something different to contemporary international tastes, she argues that this in fact makes these artists avant-garde in the original sense of the term (p. 36). That was the proposition of this exhibition. A total of ten reviews across the US have been identified from newspaper archives, which reveal a mixed critical reception.

On the show's New York iteration, Hilton Kramer (1980) in the *New York Times* writes, a little patronisingly,

(...) if 'New Images From Spain' does not succeed in introducing us to any commanding new talents – and it doesn't – it at least has the virtue of re-establishing contact for us with a community of talent we can expect to hear more from in the future (para. 6).

On the other hand, Norman Nadel (1980) writing in *The News Tribune* sees the show as proof that while the repression of the Franco regime hid creative talents from the outside world, they were nonetheless able to flourish and concludes that "an ancient nation with a rich artistic past is expressing itself in art vigorously in the present" (p.10).

Meanwhile, Barbara Rose (1980) for *Vogue* finds that there is little in common with other European or American avant-garde movements but instead sees connections with Spanish surrealism, medieval manuscripts, irrationality, and morbid themes from a new generation that is "bursting with vitality and wit" (p. 140).

Victoria Combalia (1980) wrote a contemporaneous article in the Spanish journal *Batik*, analysing the critical reception in New York. The reviews, she admits, were few, which she attributes to the fact it is hard to stand out among the vast number of exhibitions in the city, as well as the difficulty American critics had in understanding Spanish art given they have had very little exposure to Spanish art since Tàpies and the El Paso group. Hers is a rare voice in Spain in recognising that having an exhibition in a prestigious venue abroad is not a sufficient condition to ensure genuine understanding and appreciation of Spanish contemporary art. Promotion, including contextual information and cross-cultural communication as well as personal contacts with members of the wider art community, are also important.

On the West Coast the picture is equally mixed. According to Al Moreh (1980) in the *San Francisco Examiner*, the show "is like stepping back into time" with Spain's latest art "several decades behind the current U.S. art scene" (p.54). Pérez Villalta's canvases are "superb" but "old hat", Zush is "boring" The artists "have talent. But they have to catch up with the mainstream" (p. 54). Charles Shere (1980) in the *The Oakland Tribune* finds the otherwise distinct artists all have in common "the degree to which most of the nine apparently prefer the adoption of prevalent tendencies of contemporary art to the search for individual discoveries and the statement of personal values". He finds Pérez Villalta's "native brand of Surrealism looks like much of the artless fool-the-eye symbolism you see in slick magazine pharmaceutical ads." The sculptors go down better with him, with Navarro's work "hallucinatory" and "metaphysical", Carmen Calvo "hovers convincingly between painting and installation", while Teresa Gancedo's work "has an enigmatic personal quality" with "the suggestion that her concerns are those of the viewer as well." Zush, far from being boring is "astoundingly sassy" with work that is "controversial (...) but worth looking at – and considering" (p. 130).

In the *Sacramento Bee*, there is a preoccupation of whether or not the works are "Spanish". None are "provincial or aggressively Spanish" although Zush and Dario Villalba "work in ways that seem peculiarly Spanish", and for the reviewer they are the stand-out artists of the show. Villalba seemingly finding a contemporary way to reflect "the uniquely Spanish tradition of the *memento mori*", while Zush "also presents a uniquely Spanish yet strongly individualistic vision," that includes "surreal beasts" and a "Moorish influence in the speedy, hooking movement of Zush's graphology." She concludes: "I've never seen any works like Zush's and I certainly want to see more" (Dalkey, 1980, p. 93).

Unlike Rowell, the *Albuquerque Journal's* Joseph Traugott (1981) finds many of the works in the show extremely political. He writes "they speak to the kinds of personal isolation and alienation bred during the nearly 40 years of Franco's dictatorship. The works by Teresa Gancedo, Guillermo Pérez Villalta, and Dario Villalba seem to be charged with political implications." (Traugott, p. 42). While Traugott finds some elements of "Spanishness" in some of the works, he criticises Rowell's essay for trying to pigeonhole each artist into a previous strand of recent Spanish artistic tradition, and actually finds that much of the work has a "New York" look.

In a review laden with references to older Spanish art, Chad Hardin (1981) writing in *The Albuquerque Tribune* finds that while "five years since Franco's demise are not enough time for masters to be born" there is nevertheless "[m]ore than promise: passion, energy and guts" (p. 17). He singles out Pérez Villalta, Gancedo and Villalba for particular praise. David Horne (1981) in the *Arizona Daily Star* agrees that Villalba is one of the show's stars, along with other "critical realists" Muntadas and Pagán, who "seem best to accept the challenge that must be met for art's survival: to be analytical, experimental, responsive and – perhaps above all – to communicate to the public" (p.83).

With such a diverse group of artists it is not surprising that there should be such a variety of conclusions drawn about the show: the artworks are political and they are non-political, they are uniquely Spanish and they "could have been done by any contemporary artists in any country" (Dalkey, 1980, p. 93), they are fresh and vigorous and they are like a step back in time, they are something never seen before and they are set firmly in the Spanish tradition. Even more significant than the lack of a universal acclaim for the longer-term impact was that these artists didn't in general establish links with US galleries (perhaps a limitation of state-sponsored initiatives as well as language barriers) meaning that despite the renown of the venues, there was limited follow-up. It must be a strong possibility that the purchased artworks have remained hidden for the last 42 years in the Guggenheim's warehouses.

3.2. New Spanish Figuration

Two years later, a smaller and less stylistically diverse show toured the UK. *New Spanish Figuration* was shown at four venues, and was reviewed fairly widely in its different iterations, both by the art magazines *Arts Review* and *Art Monthly*, and by prominent critics in national newspapers.

The exhibition catalogue features a foreword by Kettle's Yard curator Jeremy Lewison (1982), which notes that since the 1962 Tate Gallery exhibition, "[a]part from the work of Tàpies exhibited at the Hayward Gallery in 1974, very little Spanish art has been seen here [in Great Britain] since" (Foreword, para. 1). He explains that while the Spanish government has given financial support, the selection of the works was based solely on his choice, following five trips to Spain over the past two years – an important point to emphasis given the different circumstances of the 1962 exhibition. In addition to artists' statements, the catalogue also includes an essay by Francisco Calvo Serraller (1982) in which he explains the historical background to why Spain has until then been considered apart and how now there is an opportunity for Spain to forge a new path, away from the isolation of the past. His essay gives an in-depth account of Spanish art under Franco, highlighting not just the informalists, but also many other artists and movements. Calvo Serraller's essay is thorough and comprehensive, but perhaps in citing so many Spanish artists and groups that we can assume were unfamiliar to a British audience, his account fails to hit its mark (at least in Rowell's text she accompanied her references to previous generations with ample reproductions of their work). A crucial lesson for curators about the need to know your audience can be drawn here.

The most positive of the seven reviews identified are by Michael Shepherd (he writes almost identical reviews for both *Art Monthly* and *The Sunday Telegraph*). He clearly understands something of the context of the *movida madrileña* – the countercultural movement that emerged in Madrid during the transition – making references to the rock musicians, writers and artists in the orbit of Guillermo Pérez Villalta, and writing that Costus is "a collaboration of artists who include from time to time a whole famous rock group – the very centre of this new spirit in Spanish culture and art, yet fitting with relevance, natural affinity and fluent confidence into a contemporary international language of expression which they actually know little of nothing about" (Shepherd, July 25, 1982, p. 17). He concludes that the exhibition is not easy to quickly evaluate and cautions against applying international comparisons without due regard to context but that it is definitely worth looking at.

Also positive in his assessment, although stronger in his language, is Terrance Mullaly (1982), writing in the *Daily Telegraph*, who calls the exhibition a "shock", saying it "challenges ideas about art at the moment: the impression created is of crudity, violence, and a disdain for accepted values" (p.11). Guillermo Pérez Villalta's work is "full of allusions both blasphemous and vulgar", Costus's work is "crude", Chema Cobo "carries the element of the absurd in much of Picasso to an extreme, and is at the same time gross" (p. 11). While overall he concludes are obvious weaknesses, he calls the exhibition proof that in 1982 Madrid is the most exciting centre for the visual arts. He points out that the "calculated crudity" of these artists is not the whole story of Spanish contemporary art, making reference to the Guggenheim exhibition two years earlier and particularly the poignant images of Genovés and Quintero.

Waldemar Januszczak (1982) in *The Guardian* is scathing: "When they see *New Spanish Figuration*, those who might have been wondering what Spanish art has been up to since the golden age of Picasso, Miró, Dalí, will probably wish they hadn't asked" (p. 9). He continues that the exhibition "resorts to decadence every time it can't think of the right answer. The results are sickening". But perhaps his most brutal assessment is that these are nothing new – he sees Picasso's faces in the work of Costus and Dalí in that of Pérez Villalta, leaving us with the idea that this is just a rehash of something older and better.

Titled simply *Vulgar*, Richard Cork's (1982) review in *The Standard* is similarly damning, describing the exhibition as "callow, brash and cheekily vulgar" and with a "rampant gaudiness", suggesting that Spanish art may need a few more years more to develop (p. 23).

Frank Whitford (1982) in *Art Monthly* says Pérez Villalta's work while technically strong deals with "inflated allegory whose meaning is either too simple or too obscure" while Costus' works "glorify in vulgarity, employing the kind of migraine-inducing colours, *supermercado* subjects and hamfisted technique familiar to anyone who has glimpsed murals in bars and restaurants on the Costa del Sol" (p.10). Chema Cobo is at least "appealingly decorative (...) and he plays winningly with pictorial conventions". There is also some faint praise for Gordillo who "refrains from introducing intimations of allegory as a crutch for a lame idea" (p. 10). While appreciating the opportunity to see art from a country whose contemporary artists rarely exhibit abroad, the review concludes with a longing for the days of El Greco, Goya and Velázquez – a familiar but surely unfair comparison, as if other nationalities of painters were constantly held up to their Old Master compatriots.

The final showing of the exhibition in Glasgow fares little better. Clare Henry (1982) quotes the curator Lewison admitting the artists lack artistic maturity and have a lot of catching up to do. Her own view is that Chema Cobo has a "resourceful" use of colour and Costus' "vulgar castanet clicking females elicited the memorable comment from my companion, 'I quite like them, they're so hideous'. Gordillo is "forgettable" while Pérez Villalta "combines allegory and autobiography with some success" (paras. 4-6).

It is not that these reviewers are wrong to note the vibrant (or brash, depending on your point of view) colours of these paintings and their overall tone and subject matter. But there does seem to be something in their judgement that includes an expectation of what should be coming out of Spain, and a lack of understanding of the how they reflect what was happening in Spain at the time that somehow makes them less legitimate in their eyes.

One such work, Pérez Villalta's *Scene. Figures Leaving a Rock Concert*, now in the collection of the Reina Sofía Museum, is typical in capturing the essence of the *movida*, inspired by a scene outside a concert of the emblematic punk group Kaka de Luxe. A wider awareness of the *movida* and its cultural impact first came to wider attention in the US and the UK with the films of Pedro Almodóvar. However, while *Pepi, Luci, Bom and Other Girls Like Mom*, his first commercial film, was released in Spain in 1980, Almodóvar's films didn't get an English-language release until *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* in 1988, by which time brashness

and vulgarity was recognised as a form of expression in itself and something to be celebrated. "Films Reflect a Brash New Spain", proclaims the *New York Times* headline in a glowing review of *Women on the Verge*: "The brashness and vitality of La Movida, evident in everything from life styles to pop music, has transformed Madrid into something akin to the San Francisco of the 1960" (Pitt, 1988, Section 2, p. 1).

The artists of the *New Spanish Figuration* don't appear to have exhibited again in the UK after this exhibition and their works are not in any major British collection. One can't help wondering that had this exhibition coincided with the arrival of Almodóvar on British screens, and a better understanding of the new Spain, things might have been rather different.

4. Conclusions

The story of Spanish art for many in the ^{ENG}lish-speaking world seems to stop with the death of Picasso in 1973. Despite the popularity of Spain as a tourist destination, particularly among the British, understanding of Spain's 20th century history is still very weak. This has contributed to a lack of understanding of the socio-political context of Spanish art in all its diversity. While within Spain there are substantial ongoing efforts to rediscover and recontextualise work from the last century, such efforts have to date had little diffusion to ^{ENG}lish-speaking audiences.

Several of the exhibitions that have been analysed in this study continue to be celebrated in Spain: *Arte '73* was considered as an important moment for the Juan March Foundation in carrying out its mission to promote art, and works from the exhibition are still displayed in its permanent collections today; in 2018 the Valencian Institute of Modern Art (IVAM) produced an exhibition celebrating the 1976 Venice Biennale, with its representatives calling it still the most important Spain has ever brought to Venice (Jorges, 2018); in 2019, the Madrid-based José de la Mano Gallery organised a tribute exhibition to *New Images from Spain*, alongside a catalogue and text by the critic Alfonso de la Torre. An article in *El País' ICON* magazine presents the original exhibition as a golden moment of Spanish culture when Spanish contemporary art swept New York (López, 2019). These instances serve a reminder of the disconnect between how these exhibitions are still perceived today within Spain and how they were actually received abroad. At the same time, it is hoped that this paper provides some insights for curators, gallerists and museums when promoting contemporary Spanish art in the Anglo-Saxon world, as well as highlighting the knowledge gaps that can be filled by art historians, academics and researchers.

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