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CONTRIBUTORS: MARC SANJAUME, AURORA MADAULA, ENRIC CANELA,
VÍCTOR TERRADELLAS, FRANCESC DE DALMASES, MARC GAFAROT, RICARD PLANAS,
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THE LANDSCAPES OF CULTURE AND ART: FROM A CATALAN ETHOS TO A EUROPEAN

by Ricard Planas*

Ut ridentibus arrident, ita flentibus adflent humani vultus

According to Horace, 'human countenances, as they smile on those who smile, so they weep with those that weep'. It appears to be highly relevant to how the central government in Madrid approaches its (cultural) policies. In charge of an obsolete state which is rapidly falling apart while it is sheltered from the woes of the economic crisis. A government (rather than the public itself, who are generally more worthy than their leaders), which has systematically neglected the entirely understandable and rational tears of a centuries old Catalan culture, whether from a lack of understanding, neglect or a simple lack of clarity. Catalan culture is facing the twentieth century with a firm commitment to a Europe, which is reinvented with each new crisis. Hopefully Europe will change itself for the better, in order to broaden the framework of understanding and diversity that has always led to more wealth and that has always been exemplified by Catalonia.

Nevertheless, the bitter tears stopped flowing some time ago, dried up like the cycle of drought that is ceaselessly plaguing the planet on a global scale. Now is not the time to protest a lack of understanding, it is the time for decisive leadership, for action, for the desire to rewrite the rules. The economic crisis is an opportunity to wipe the slate clean and rethink certain overgrown, unsustainable societies, which are as often as not against their own people. Santi Vila, the former mayor of Figueres and the current Minister

of Territory and Sustainability for the *Generalitat* of Catalonia said, 'we don't want our own state so that we can be against anyone, or out of a sense of idealism. We want our own state because we love our people and their welfare' and reaffirmed 'Catalonia is a welcoming country; it is our reason for being. Catalonia is European and pro-European and needs a state of its own in order to grow as a society, with culture as one of its foundations'. Culture, within this ecosystem full of confusion that fleeting postmodernism has left as



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a legacy, becomes a key, substantial element of cohesion. A poultice of peace, reflection and critical analysis. Culture becomes widespread, to such an extent that some years ago a French Culture Minister stated that, in an ideal state, a Ministry or Department of Culture ought not to exist since 'Culture is everything. Everything is Culture'. It is a way of thinking which is also corroborated and defended by one of the great creators of the twentieth century, the German conceptual artist Joseph Beuys.

Culture, cross-culturalism and identity: the ethos

L'Observatori del Paisatge de Catalunya (The Landscape Observatory of Catalonia) is a fundamental instrument which helps promote the cultural aspect, support the cross-cultural aspect as part of its arguments while emphasising that, 'Contemporary Catalan nationalism, in contrast to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, has been unable to incorporate the landscape in the process of nation building. Nevertheless, it continues to

Interior of the *Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona*



form a part of the national identity. The great diversity and wealth of Catalonia's landscape forms a part of our collective heritage and is an expression of our history and a reflection of our identity, while also continuing to generate a strong sense of belonging among the population'. The landscape, the territory, these words are both elusive and key. They are an essential frame of reference. Art and Culture adapt to these geographical paradigms in order to find their place. This is in spite of the fact that thanks to a form of modernity now known as 'liquid' (or 'late') artistic practices have involved the annihilation or exclusion of a local (which is not to say parochial) contribution, in favour of de-localised and globalised proposals which involve an inherent degree of depersonalisation. Now is the time to

seek references from hyper-proximity while they still exist, as many of them have long since collapsed or have fallen out of fashion, alas! Fashion (and its instruments of diffusion) and its quirks that appeal to that humanity which is so *homo* and so little *sapiens*.

While we are sheltered by a Europe which hopefully wants to be more European (by adding such cultural landscapes as Catalonia), the economic crisis has exposed the weaknesses to such an extent that it has caused our points of agreement to be reborn, phoenix-like, from the ashes. Perhaps we should ask beforehand what cultural ethos should inform the new Catalonia we are building. In other words, what is the cultural ethos that we want for the new Europe we are building apace? Or, to put it another way, while peace reigned when



Europe's founding ethos was being established (and by extension that of Catalonia), how are we now to build an identity that ranges from the Mediterranean, the birthplace of all civilizations, to a quasi-Siberian northern Europe?

'Believing in Europe requires a rational understanding of the joint project, as well as sharing a common destiny and desires. It is almost an act of faith on behalf of both believers and non-believers', according to the former president of Spain and Europhile Felipe González. The former president of the *Generalitat* of Catalonia, Jordi Pujol constantly reminds us of this fact. Such a view sees a Europe that is both a museum and a laboratory, perhaps still more the former than the latter. A Europe with a unique Catalonia ahead of its time asking if it can go it alone.

It is aware of the global mega-regions, with Barcelona-Lyon being one of the 12 most important, according to Richard Florida. Catalonia has a key role to play in the Mediterranean railway corridor, which also has a cultural dimension. To speak of mega-regions is also to speak of city-states, smart cities and cultural centres belonging to cities. Barcelona, with public centres such as the *Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona* (which is currently in a precarious economic situation thanks to the Spanish state defaulting on its debts), the *Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya* and the *Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona*, the *Fundació Miró*, *Fundació Tàpies* and private organisations such as *La Pedrera*, *Caixaforum*, *Fundació Vila Casas*, *Fundació Gòdia* and *Fundació Sunyol*, *Fundació Dalí* in Figueres,

Museu Can Framis,
property of the
Fundació Vila Casas,
Barcelona

the soon to be inaugurated Bulli Foundation in Roses, and many other successful, examples in Tarragona, Lleida, Girona and throughout Catalonia. In a free Catalonia, these centres would all be eligible for infinitely greater direct resources. In some instances, such as the *Teatre-Museu Dalí*, the shared management by numerous governing bodies cause obvious tensions regarding the work's continued existence in Catalonia. Mega-regions also interact with concepts such as Eurasia and define first class, multifaceted cultural alphabets, weaving the new language we should embrace at the local level, rather than dislocating us.

THE SPANISH STATE EMPLOYS INTRUSIVE MECHANISMS THAT GENERATE USELESS, DUPLICATED MINISTRIES

Moving towards a degree of cohesion or coherence is difficult when we have nothing but monetary union. This is when Culture can play a major part. Nevertheless, in the Europe of diversity, of a thousand faces, the cohesive elements often come from Anglo-Saxon culture on both sides of the Atlantic. Sometimes these are so deeply embedded that European ties are made through the absorption of prevailing American paradigms. Likewise, it should be noted that America is simultaneously a mirror and an explosive jumble of European cultures. Appealing once again to the European ethos, we ought once more to reference territory, geography and linguistic diversity as cornerstones in the construction of this new reality we call Europe. These physical, material landscapes, full of references to the intimate and the personal have to live with the virtual landscapes which are universal yet increasingly individual, of a place, an origin.

Free Catalonia, cultural Catalonia, economic Catalonia

a) Everyone is entitled to equal access to culture and the development of their creative skills, whether individual or collective. b) Everyone has the duty to respect and preserve cultural heritage. c) The authorities of Catalonia shall promote research and quality scientific investigation, artistic creativity and the preservation and promotion of Catalonia's cultural heritage. d) The authorities of Catalonia shall take the necessary measures to enable all individuals to have access to culture, goods and cultural services and Catalonia's cultural, archaeological, historical, industrial and artistic heritage.

These are the four fundamental principles relating to the world of culture which appear in the Statute passed by the parliament of Catalonia. What would have happened if the Statute, agreed upon by a sovereign, democratically elected parliament, hadn't been castrated by a virtually unconstitutional court? What if they had been able to put it into practice with all the strength the government and the people of Catalonia desired? Aside from the fact that the Spanish state employs intrusive mechanisms that generate useless, duplicated ministries. In terms of culture, central government spending on Catalonia has fallen by 63.87% since 2010. Is this a coincidence or a deliberate attempt to put a stop to a European people's desire for independence? Let me quote some figures: Spain's average annual deficit with Catalonia is 16,000 million euros, the cost of recovering from a tsunami every year. If the Catalan Ministry of Culture's budget is 1% of the Generalitat's total, it would represent 160 million euros more for Catalan culture (approximately 60% more than its current budget). Another example is growing unrest surrounding the comparative cultural capital of Bar-



celona and Madrid: though Barcelona received 9.5 million in 2011, so far this year it has received absolutely nothing.

In spite of these handicaps, the Catalan cultural cluster occupies 5th place in Europe. Obviously, things would change with an injection of new money into an independent state, thus restoring its fiscal balance. Nonethe-

less, the *Generalitat's* current contribution to culture is not in line with the European average, which stands some two to three points higher than ours. Nor is it understandable why Catalan culture and art contribute more towards GDP than investments made in it, yet art and culture almost always tend to be considered an expense rather

Close-up of the rooftop terrace of the *Casa Milà*, popularly known as *La Pedrera*, by the architect Antoni Gaudí

than an investment. It is for these reasons that those involved in culture have repeatedly spoken out against the increase in VAT to 21%, thanks to its disastrous effects on culture. Meanwhile, successive Spanish finance ministers have been unable to create a 'patronage law' to compensate for the shortfall. If we had a Catalan state I would like to think that these changes would be quickly implemented.

CATALONIA HAS A KEY ROLE TO PLAY IN THE MEDITERRANEAN RAILWAY CORRIDOR, WHICH ALSO HAS A CULTURAL DIMENSION

Against such a backdrop, certain actions are taking place in Catalonia, with variable results, but which nevertheless indicate a way forward. The creation of the Council for Cultural Arts' Strategic Plan for Culture 2021, for example, which organises meetings between people from the world of culture at the local and national level. Then there is the National Cultural Agreement, which lists 100 agreements and commitments on different aspects such as language, identity, social cohesion, installations, finance, science and research and internationalisation. Omnibus Laws: in the cultural milieu these have principally determined the creation of the OSIC (Office for the Support for Cultural Initiatives), to provide more flexibility in processing and resolving grant applications, and the creation of the Heritage Agency. One of its priorities is contributing to Cultural Heritage and the PNL (Na-

tional Reading Plan) with the aim of unifying the efforts of different sectors and levels of society to encourage the public to read more, thereby increasing Catalonia's knowledge and cultural capital. The PNL has created the 'Active Bookstore Plan' in order to promote said sector.

Creators and contexts

To conclude, how are Catalonia and its creators represented in this, our Europe, named after the Greek goddess who managed to seduce us all? The answer is: to different degrees. Names like Antoni Gaudí, Joan Miró, Salvador Dalí, Antoni Tàpies, Jaume Plensa and Miquel Barceló have all become internationally renowned. So too have greats such as Antoni Clavé, Joan Brossa, Joan Fontcuberta, Perejaume, Antoni Muntades, Arranz-Bravo, Xavier Corberó, Albert Serra, Isaki Lacuesta, Carles Pazos, Antoni Miralda and Cesc Gay among many others. Nevertheless, as the historian Xavier Barral noted, sometimes it is not easy to live like a Catalan, with a degree of independence when Spain wants to assimilate us. Spain does not want us to be either European or Catalan but exclusively Spanish. The lack of perspective which is present in such an attitude, among other variables, has fragmented Spanish cohesion.

Finally, as Winston Churchill said rather eloquently (although 'British' and 'Europhilia' are hardly synonymous concepts, especially of late), and which I should like to apply to the current situation in Catalonia, 'A kite flies against the wind, not with it.'



*RICARD PLANAS

FOUNDER AND DIRECTOR OF *Bonart Cultural* AND ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF *Fundació Lluís Coromina*

SUBTLE DEPENDENCIES AND DECLARED OUTBURSTS

by Arnau Puig*

The official icons of dictatorships often appear brutal and unbending, but in the day to day existence they have at their disposal subtle ways of transmitting their will which make them appear normal, proper and appropriate to every circumstance (friendship, rigour, timeliness, understanding). This was the case in the university sector during the decades in which Franco made his ideological presence felt through simple obedience and acceptance of the transcendent meaning of life for the subjects under his guidance. This consisted of recognizing and respecting his powerful presence and wise decisions, as a reflection of his splendour and spiritual clarity. His cultural servants were thus assigned the role of disseminating this content.

One was not allowed to think for oneself or ask questions that couldn't be induced from the answer. It was a parody of the rules of rhetoric, one might say that the questions were included in the answers and who was asking them: if you don't know what to ask, you'd best just keep quiet. This exercise in good rhetoric, if people are really interested in progressing in terms of thought, meant the questioner was really kept on their toes. It was only interrupted when the wary censor realised that the questions had gone off-topic, that they had escaped the established context.

During the Franco era, the university sector was a constant game of who is doing the indoctrinating and who is asking the questions. Apart from this insidious dig, or other concerns that were unrelated to a strictly educational relationship, reality flowed relatively quietly for those who thought of nothing besides learning what was taught. After all, this was the best way to keep abreast of the established social order. Remember the Franco regime lasted forty years and since things function coherently within the doctrine on which they are based, in spite of the impertinent (and some unrepentant) naysayers, the system, or at least the structure, could have lasted for an eternity. The so-called 'good' students continually adapted themselves in response to external circumstances, in order that the system worked smoothly. An observation which is

unrelated to the context but which is a consequence of it: we find ourselves in exactly the same position as forty years ago: no progress has been made towards what the classics called ethics: *joie de vivre*, though virtually all the mechanisms are in pace which should allow us to live comfortably. Dominion requires the mental sterility of those who are dominated.

The fight, being reckless, to challenge the status quo from outside, is the only force that can change reality. I had such an experience when I was president of the Catalan Association of Art Critics (ACCA). Due to the lack of effectiveness of the Spanish association I suggested that we become entirely independent from it, with no structural affiliation. Initially the international body, the IACA, was reluctant to accept us, but eventually surrendered thanks to the effectiveness of our management, leaving behind the Spanish organisation's 'non-management' and their verbose, and empty proposals and promises.

In short: the Franco period was a tragic episode, a harsh regime prolonged and enforced through words and absurd, useless and empty slogans. Those who did not accept this state of affairs were annihilated and rendered ineffective. Universities were only able to defend themselves with a game of words, while on the street, the effectiveness of every individual depended on the extent of their personal commitment.



TORRES MONSÓ

We can see Torres Monsó is a sculptor who is engaged in a struggle with matter, while simultaneously appreciating his ability to transport us to the work of a poet. There is something of a writer in his vigorous sculpture. Just as the iconographer is seen as a writer of images, Torres could be said to be a calligrapher who intervenes in the substance of the earth in order to liberate suggestive, metaphysically decisive shapes. As a result, one could speak of a metaphysical breath, thanks to the fact the artist has been able to confront major questions surrounding the human condition. This capacity to move from the more intimate to the more universal, allows us to see the work of Torres Monsó as one of those most audacious and creative adventures in contemporary sculpture.

In my opinion, this makes him one of the decisive interlocutors in European art in the second half of the twentieth century. The Basque Country has Chillida and Oteiza who represent, in their own inimitable way,

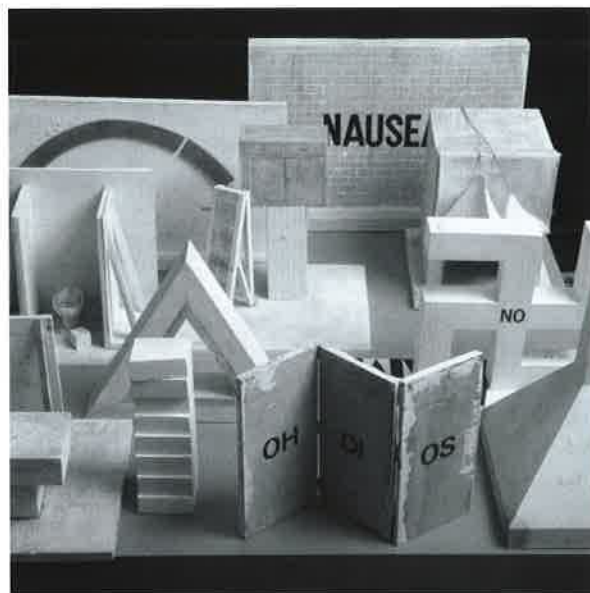
a means to capture concrete existence that is removed from its territorial and temporal frame. Paco Torres Monsó performs a similar operation. His capturing of existence, rich in shades, is always directed at the expression of the essence; his observation of everyday life is tied up in a transcendental spirit and a spirituality that goes beyond rigid religious reference points. In conclusion, Torres Monsó is a good example of Baudelaire's definition of the modern artist: on one hand he must be a careful observer of the reality of his age, attentive to any metamorphoses which occur, while on the other he has to be a man capable of going beyond what is fragmentary and imminent in order to confront what is eternal.

(Extract from *L'escultor com a poeta* [The Sculptor as Poet] by Rafael Argullol, for the catalogue accompanying Torres Monsó's exhibition *Anar fent i prou* [Carrying on and no More])

Picapedrer
 (Stonemason)
 1956
 Bronze
 90x80x48 cm
 Private collection



Cover Art:
Escala
 (Stairway)
 1984-85
 Formica
 185x60x60 cm



Maquetes varies
 (Various models)
 Mixed media
 Various sizes

Torres Monsó

Anar fent i proud

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Museu Can Mario

Plaça Can Mario, 7. 17200 Palafrugell (Girona)

» Tel. +(34) 972 306 246

» Fax. +(34) 972 306 247

» canmario@fundaciovilacasas.com

