

TEMPORARY EXHIBITION

The democratic skylight: an illuminating exhibition

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“It ends up being an exhibition where you don’t really know if it is about history, art history or aesthetics. It does not come from any of these disciplines and it comes from all of them at the same time”. This is how Núria Ricart, a professor of Fine Arts at the University of Barcelona, described the exhibition *El tragaluz democrático. Políticas de vida y muerte en el Estado español (1868-1976)* (“The democratic skylight: policies of life and death in Spain (1868-1976)”). This multidisciplinary vision is one of the great milestones of this original exhibition that could be seen in the new hall of La Arquería Art Centre in Madrid from March to July 2023. But beyond this quality, it is perhaps its daring approach that has drawn the most attention of its visitors. As its curator, Germán Labrador, explained: “What the exhibition seeks is a radical estrangement of our own history and a deconstruction of the myths that have articulated it on a national level, putting in the foreground struggles for life, for dignity, the demands of subjects and groups that had been denied in a modernity implemented according to the needs of the capitalist market and the nation-state”.

A large amount of paintings, sculptures, posters, photographs, videos, archival documents, publications and objects of various kinds (from a garrot, or a whip made of wood, leather and wires, to folkloric elements such as a big head or a giant) populated an intense tour through two floors of the impressive La Arquería. Walter Benjamin’s theories underlay this constellation of fragments of a collective past that glimpsed constant tension



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1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7. Art pieces and objects displayed in the exhibition (EUROM)



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8 | 9. Fernando Sánchez Castillo explaining his artistic piece and a group of students visiting the exhibition (EUROM)

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between popular struggles to expand their rights and freedoms on the one hand and the repression imposed through the modern state on the other. It was *El Tragaluz* (The Skylight”), the powerful device created by Antonio Buero Vallejo in his science fiction story—a machine that allowed people in the 25th century to see post-war Spain—the allegorical door that introduced visitors to the exhibition, where they would see pieces of their past projected onto their present.

The ability to connect all these pieces to create a complex and powerful story only lies within few people’s reach, and to listen to Germán Labrador explain his construction process is to behold a cascade of subtle ideas and images that speak to each other, complement each other, intertwine and confront each other throughout the exhibition. In June, EUROM wanted to interview Labrador, who is also a professor at Princeton University and director of public activities at the Queen Sofía National Museum Art Centre (MNCARS). He recently gave us the opportunity to film a report that can be seen in the different videos found on our website and our YouTube channel.

The exhibition was divided into four major sections. The first started with the civic struggles of 1868 and the Sexenio Democrático until 1936; the second focused on the years of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939); the third was primarily about Franco’s dictatorship; and the fourth and final section was

dedicated to the origins of the democratic transition. There was a firm and determined commitment to begin chronologically with one of the various democratising moments that the country underwent as far back as the 19th century, when several of the demands that form the basis of current freedoms originated: the abolition of the death penalty, the end of slavery, demands for women’s rights, secularism and religious freedom, freedom of the press, rights of association and many, many more. The construction of the modern state and all its repressive machinery, which it would develop in the colonies and in the Iberian peninsula itself, assembled under a powerful nationalism with a Catholic legacy, leaves a deep mark throughout the exhibition. In fact, one of its strengths is how it weaves colonial violence in Cuba, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, the Rif and Guinea into the Spanish historical narrative. In one of our interviews, CSIC anthropologist Francisco Ferrándiz, an advisor to the State Secretariat for Democratic Memory (SEMD) and the promoter of the exhibition, told us how this portrait of colonial violence had been rejected by certain parts of current public opinion. The exhibition hit the nail on the head because it explained “that in some way we are educated with this idea of the civilisational empire, etcetera, etcetera. And if you question it or take the point of view of the victims of colonisation, there are people who find that... unsettling”. It was foreseeable that this exhibition would collide head-on with the conservative and far-right wave that is currently



sweeping Spain (and Europe) and that seeks to restore the old myths of an anachronistic history of heroes and battles, empires and national feats.

The portrait of modernised and industrialised violence during the Spanish Civil War (what better example than the aerial bombardments, also heirs of colonial practices and a testing ground for the world war that would come later?) was contested by forms of resistance and solidarity in the fight against fascism. And although the systemic repression and the necrophilic death cult of General Franco's dictatorship was reflected in the "immense prison" that the country became, with its "martyrs" and "fallen", parades, canopies and banners, exhumations, tombs and monuments, the exhibition leaves an important matter very clear: "the forms of dignity of the anti-fascist struggles did not simply disappear in April 1939: they endure in memory, in language, in the imagination, as the capital of utopias. They are an incorruptible school".

The final touch to the exhibition were the different artistic pieces, including "Seis jóvenes" ("Six Young Men") by Juan Genovés, and the reproduction of the destroyed car carrying Admiral Carrero Blanco, General Franco's right-hand man, a work by the ever-provocative and brilliant Fernando Sánchez Castillo. Although it was initially planned for the chronology of the exhibition to reach the present day, it is a total shame that this last section was not carried out, leaving the transition as the



ending point. Let us hope that the publication of the promising catalogue can compensate for this encroaching feeling of wanting more. Above all, let us hope that the State Secretariat for Democratic Memory continues to support these types of exhibitions, which are so necessary in the Spanish "memory" scene, exhibitions that add complexity to the past and challenge our present, with original approaches and unusual compositions, daring and capable of making us rethink the cultural heritage of the struggles for democratic freedoms that have brought us here (and the potential of their legacy).

Exhibition: *El tragaluz democrático. Políticas de vida y muerte en el Estado español (1868-1976)*. Curator: Germán

Labrador Méndez. Production: Ministry of the Presidency, Relations with the Cortes and Democratic Memory; State Secretariat for Democratic Memory (SEMD); Ministry of Transport, Mobility and Urban Agenda – Fundación ENAIRE; Acción Cultural Española. Location: Centro de Arte la Arquería. Nuevos Ministerios (Madrid, España). Dates: 24 March 2023 – 23 July 2023