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**Equipo Crónica: A Case Study on the Art Work  
as an 'Object of Criticism'**

by

**Clara Gonzalez de Miranda Gabriel**

**A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree  
of Master of Arts**

**Department of Art History  
McGill University  
Montréal, Canada**

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**For my parents, brother, family, and friends**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper will look back on the work of Equipo Crónica, who worked between 1964-1980, to reveal a production of art that centered on issues of originality and value that were grounded in attempts at social activism and a redefinition of the role of art vis-a-vis society. To achieve their goals, I will argue and describe how the two man team of artists used serialism, objectivity, hybridity, appropriation of mass media iconography and techniques, and parody to produce something that was neither an art object nor an ordinary object, but an object of criticism. The historical relevancy of such an art lies in its claims of participating in a political critique of the culture industry controlled by the oppressive Franco regime, and its wary outlook on the rapid modernization of Spain into the neo-capitalist state it is today within the multinational world order.

The relevance of such an examination lies in how their intentions to create a new relationship between art and society is still pertinent today in modern Spain. Since the death of Franco in 1975 there has been a feeling in Spain that the eyes of the world have been on its new democracy, leading to a campaign, led until recently by the Socialist government, to prove Spain is a modern state that has recuperated from 40 years of isolation. It has tried to demonstrate that it is progressive, not only economically and technologically, but culturally. Over the last twenty years a veritable culture industry has boomed in Spain which has been generously backed by its federal and regional governments. As Spain zealously and rapidly finds its place in the globalized multinational world order, I will demonstrate that the issues of identity pertinent to Equipo Crónica, and the tactics they used to address it, can still contribute a critical position to present-day discussions.



## RESUMÉ

Ce mémoire revisite l'oeuvre de Equipo Crónica, (1964 à 1980) pour révéler une production artistique centrée sur des questions d'originalité et de valeur elles-mêmes fondées sur un démarche d'activisme social et de redéfinition du rôle de l'art dans la société. Pour atteindre cet objectif, j'argumenterai et décrirai comment cette équipe de deux artistes a utilisé le sérialisme, l'objectivité, l'hybridité, l'appropriation de l'iconographie et de la technique des mass-medias ainsi que la parodie pour produire quelque chose qui n'était ni un objet d'art ni un objet ordinaire, mais un objet critique. La pertinence historique d'une telle forme d'art se situe au niveau de sa participation à une critique politique de l'industrie de la culture contrôlée par le régime répressif de Franco, et de son regard méfiant sur la modernisation rapide de l'Espagne en un état néo-capitaliste au sein d'un ordre mondial multinational.

L'examen des intentions d'Equipo Crónica de créer une nouvelle relation entre l'art et la société est encore pertinent dans l'Espagne moderne d'aujourd'hui. Depuis la mort de Franco en 1975, il existe un sentiment en Espagne que les yeux du monde se sont braqués sur sa nouvelle démocratie, aboutissant à une campagne, menée jusqu'à récemment par le gouvernement socialiste, visant à prouver que l'Espagne est un état moderne qui a rattrapé un retard dû à 40 ans d'isolation. Elle a tenté de démontrer qu'elle est progressive, non seulement économiquement et technologiquement, mais également culturellement. Ces vingt dernières années, une véritable industrie de la culture a fleuri en Espagne, avec l'appui généreux des gouvernements régionaux et fédéraux. Alors que l'Espagne trouve sa place rapidement et avec beaucoup de zèle dans un nouvel ordre mondial globalisé, je démontrerai que les questions d'identité soulevées par Equipo Crónica, et les tactiques qu'ils ont élaborées pour adresser ces questions, peuvent encore contribuer de façon critique aux discussions politiques et culturelles qui occupent l'Espagne aujourd'hui.

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## PREFACE

The major programme of the Franco regime, beginning with the end of the Civil war, to create the impression of a unified Spain imposed an attempted homogeneity through education, censorship, and repression of regional and ideological opposition. Popular culture was also controlled and promoted to meet the goals of the Francoist programme, demonstrating what can be understood as their knowledge of the importance of seeing culture as a site of text. The role censorship played in this control of popular culture, however, proved to be counterproductive because it encouraged the Spanish public to read the political into everything, making them adept at the art of resignification and able to turn everyday life into politically charged instruments of resistance. This makes Spain an interesting case study for a Postmodernist context, because culture was given an importance beyond that assigned to it in most democratic societies.

Despite this, the rise in interest over cultural studies has, to a large extent, overlooked the case of Spain due to several factors including: departmental compartmentalization, especially in Spain; few Spanish specialists in academic departments; the fact that Spain is of minor interest to other countries, as seen in anthologies of European history and art history that often treat Spain, if at all, as an aside to European tendencies; and the lack of availability of texts (secondary and primary) in translation. This oversight within post-colonial and cultural studies neglects the relevancy of looking at Spain which has been both colonizer and colonized. The present-day globalization acts as a colonizing force throughout the world compromising identities, but the case of Spain also offers the possibility of observing a self-colonizing project that with Franco meant the suppression of regional identities to the idea of one centralized country.

Postmodern and post-colonial theories have demonstrated that in order to fully understand cultural processes and forms, one needs to understand the issues of legitimation at stake, why they should have acquired urgency at that particular moment, and who are the people involved in the struggle to impose certain meanings at the expense of others. While modernity can be accused of excluding, Postmodernism may now merely disguise persisting exclusions. Furthermore, the pastiche that characterizes the Postmodern may have lost its

original criticality by no longer being used to ask questions about what is legitimized through particular cultural representations, because its pluralist approach cloaks the increasing concentration of economic power with the multinational which produces and reproduces the cultural industry. History may have become a picturebook of useable images that serve as commodities, thus robbed of its dialectical power. To oppose this we need to disclose cultural, social, and political alternatives which competed in the past to counter the Postmodern writing of history which with its claims to expose homogenous readings bars solidarity and collective action.

Recently, the omission of Spain in dialogues around cultural studies, Postmodernist debates, and post-colonial studies, has begun to be corrected in new attempts to bring to light Spanish modern and contemporary art. As Francisco Calvo Serraller laments, a thorough study of Spanish modern art is still at an inventory stage, and much work remains to be done in analyzing it. His *Del futuro al pasado. Vanguardia y tradición en el arte español contemporáneo* (1988); Valeriano Bozal's *Arte del Siglo XX en España* (1995); Simón Marchán Fiz's *Del arte de objetual al arte de concepto: 1960-1974. Epílogo sobre la sensibilidad "Postmoderna". Antología de escritos y manifiestos* (1994); and William Dyckes' *Contemporary Spanish Art Now* (1966) and *Contemporary Spanish Art* (1975) are but a few examples of the kinds of recent publications that attempt to bring to light what has been for so long overlooked in Spain: an examination of its art through its social concerns.

The commercial packaging of the past, as in retrospective exhibitions and historical publications, is evident in Postmodern cultures generally, but in Spain it also reflects a specific need to salvage a history previously suppressed or neglected. The historical urgency in Spain of looking at its past during the years of transition (the 1970s) gives it an affinity with Postmodernism, and offers a valuable example to cultural studies, because at a time when Postmodern theory dominates across disciplines, including cultural studies and art history, the case of Spain provides an interesting territory of cultural analysis that, as already mentioned, has until recently not been explored.

This thesis has benefited from the recent inventorying of Spanish contemporary art, and suggests possible new avenues for further research and analysis by broadly borrowing considerations raised through cultural studies and debates around Postmodernism.

## INTRODUCTION

The first chapter will briefly outline the issues around Modernism and the Spanish debates on figuration, and relate them to the reception of Pop Art and the Realist, two of the leading tendencies in Spanish art during the late 1960s and early 1970s, in order to contextualize the art production of Equipo Crónica. It will be demonstrated that they were neither Pop artists nor Social Realists, but produced an art that reflected the strategies of both.

The second chapter will examine some of the works produced by Equipo Crónica to illustrate how they translated their political intentions into their production, and I will question the success or failure of their strategies, arguing that an examination of their art production has relevancy today.

This third, and last, chapter will provide a brief review of issues around Modernism and Spanish debates on the re-introduction of the figure into art after the long monopoly of abstraction in Spanish modern art to illustrate that the social and political situation of Spain differed from the countries where these debates originated. Debates centered on avant-garde intentionality, with its blurring of the divisions between high and low art, will be outlined in order to demonstrate the urgency in Spanish art of the late 1960s early 1970s of creating an art practice that could participate in social change.

A particular focus on the years of transition to democracy is offered throughout this thesis to show how the work of Equipo Crónica was situated in a very specific time in Spanish contemporary history. Debates centered around issues of the avant-garde marked by a particular socio-political urgency in Spain, where many oriented themselves in opposition to the Franco regime, have contributions to make to present-day discussions on cultural criticism. Even though the Franco government-sponsored construction of a Spanish identity has ended, contemporary issues around the identity of Spain, and indeed any nation, within the new world order of concentrated multinational capital presents a similar control over cultural production that requires opposition. To expose the structures of power that are created in a controlling system cloaked in the rhetoric of pluralism, we must explore the alternatives that may lead to routes of solidarity and collective action. It will be argued the Equipo Crónica participated in such a programme.

Publications on Spanish contemporary art and culture are scarce, especially in translation, due to decades of isolation, but over the last twenty years there has been a concerted effort to recuperate its history, however it can be said that writings on its modern art are still often at an inventorying stage. The methodology of this thesis has been to review such writings which in some cases have been difficult to find outside of Spain. This situation is exacerbated by the fact that many primary sources on the subject of Equipo Crónica are not to be found in Spanish library collections since the subversive nature and origins of these publications (Valencian and Catalan) has meant their falling through the cracks in their own states. However, mention should be made of the excellent services and resources provided by the New York Reference Library within whose walls are safeguarded some of these sources. This thesis suggests possible new avenues for further research and analysis on Spanish art by broadly borrowing considerations raised in cultural studies and Postmodernist theories.

The 'inventory'-type sources for this thesis include exhibition catalogues, articles on Spanish contemporary art found in foreign publications, new anthologies of Spanish modern and contemporary art production, and articles written by art critics, mostly Spanish, who wrote on the art production of Equipo Crónica. For the discussions on Modernism, censorship, the subversivity of avant-garde strategies, and the reception of Pop Art and Figuration as critical art in Spain, the sources include art historical publications on Pop Art, Modernism, and the twentieth century avant-garde. To contextualize these discussions within the social, political, and economic situation of Spain I have referred to sources that offer a general overview of its history and culture.

### **Brief history of the second half of the twentieth century in Spain**

After the Civil War, the Franco regime practiced various forms of political, social, and cultural repression in order to strengthen its stranglehold on the country. The years directly following the Civil War were marked by a paralyzed postwar art market, anti-avant-garde sentiments that boasted the crossing out of pre-war Spanish avant-garde art, confused art criticism that threatened painting to regression, and a state patronage that produced nothing significant. It should be noted here that when the term avant-garde is used, the notion of it as an art practice that strives to be socially engaged and critical is what is meant. Avant-garde has

become a loaded term with far-reaching implications (ie. historical avant-garde, neo-avant-garde, etc), but in order to simplify matters, I have chosen to use it as faithfully as possible to the denotations it had for Spanish writers on contemporary Spanish art, which meant the definition I provided above. On these years, Vicente Aguilera Cerni, wrote:

The end of the Spanish civil war in 1939 gave birth to a new period characterized by famine, ravages, and the most brutal repression one can imagine, particularly in the different sectors of culture. An envenomed isolation made any current which wanted to integrate itself into outside culture suspect of being a social menace.<sup>1</sup>

These were years of an eclipse of modernity in Spain, which was left a ruined and closed-in world where fascism ruled for decades. The generation of this time lived through international isolation, economic dislocation, shortages, rationing and censorship, and as a result wanted to overcome the divisions within the country. Mass migration also marked this period and subsequent decades.<sup>2</sup> Spain was modernizing itself, moving away from being an agriculture economy towards an industrial.<sup>3</sup> Between 1945-51 some attempts of the self-interested regime were made to reclaim some of the 'safer' cultural currents and intellectual figures of liberal Spain (many of which had left the country for fear of persecution and for cleaner air abroad) with the aim of hastening the incorporation of Spain into the Western bloc which was inevitable given the logic of the Cold War.

Between 1951-56 a minimal cultural thaw in Spain allowed for the growth and strengthening of grass-roots opposition culture. This was a decade when the Spanish youth who had not lived the Civil War were better informed about world affairs, accompanied by the

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<sup>1</sup> Vicente Aguilera Cerni, "Spanish Art Between 1945 and 1970. Informative note". *Cimaise* (Dec. 1983): 3.

<sup>2</sup> A statistical summary of the developments between 1955 and 1975, includes the fact that six million people (20% of the population) moved province in Spain. Two million migrated to Madrid; 1 800 000 to Barcelona; 1500 000 to Europe for work. The number of cities in Spain with populations of over 100 000 rose from twenty to forty in 1975. These social phenomena put a strain on education and the medical systems, and brought on the emergence of a new urban bourgeoisie and urban middle class made up of professionals and technicians with university qualifications. They also determined a new working class, of young and mostly rural origin with few professional qualifications who worked in the new industries or the service sector. Borja de Riquer I Permanyer, "Social and Economic Change in a Climate of Political Immobilism", in Jo Labanyi and Helen Graham, eds, *Spanish Cultural Studies. An Introduction. The Struggle for Modernity* (London: Oxford University Press, 1995): 263.

<sup>3</sup> In 1950, 48% of the working population was engaged in agriculture, while in 1990 the number fell to 12%. 84% of Spaniards live in cities today. Rosa Montero, "Political Transition and Cultural Democracy: Coping with the Speed of Change". in Labanyi and Graham, eds.: 315.



start of decline of traditional religious values which was to continue in the following decades.<sup>4</sup> Television, cinema, the press, and tourism, despite rigid state control, helped end the news isolation imposed on Spain since 1939, and democracy was beginning to no longer be equated with civil war and communism.

The years between 1956-61 saw the intensification of this confrontation between representatives of a liberal and pluralist opposition and the Franco regime. It also marked the start of the tremendously rapid rate of Spain in becoming a culture of commodity which was very different than in Europe. It was disseminated through television, popular music, and film, and in a very short period Spain had passed from being a country with high levels of functional illiteracy to becoming a society of television saturation without having undergone intermediate stages of cultural development. Despite the rigid control over information sources, television became a window onto the world, that indirectly helped:

...to break the stranglehold of the cultural and informational 'autarky' enforced by the regime. Similarly, the youth culture of the 1960s had a startling impact on the rigid social world of Franco's Spain, where enthusiasm for the Beatles or Bob Dylan, or emerging Spanish protest singers, represented a more overt political statement than in democratic societies.<sup>5</sup>

1962-69 saw rapid economic growth accompanied by a weakening political sector, creating a high social cost of the economic boom disproportionately paid for by the poorest, and a lack of freedom which seriously impaired the quality of life. During the 1960s, Spain was quickly developing into a consumer society.<sup>6</sup> Despite rigid political control, television and music became a genuine opening onto the world outside Spain, indirectly participating in the breaking of the control of the regime over cultural and informational sources. Foreign music, and Spanish protest singers represented a more overt political statement than in democratic societies. Books and films were even more in conflict with the regime which revealed the regime's programme of *aperturismo* (liberalization) as a sham.

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<sup>4</sup> In 1970, 87% of the population were practicing Catholics, while in 1991 this number had fallen to 4 %. Rosa Montero: 316.

<sup>5</sup> de Riquer: 265.

<sup>6</sup> By 1974 70% of homes had a television, 85% had a washing-machine and fridge. Car ownership rose from 500,000 (one for 55 people) in 1960 to over 3,300,000 (one for every nine) in 1974. de Riquer: 265.

1969-75 saw the regime collapsing under its own contradictions, triggered by an economic crisis both nationally and internationally. Under threat, the regime reverted to hard-line repression, but could not reverse the progress made by opposition towards political and cultural freedom that had already begun in the course of the 1960s.

Franco's repression was starting to be revealed and challenged as the states of emergency of January 1969, and December 1970 prove. Other examples of the general unrest in the country include the serious simmering political and cultural unrest in the Basque country and Catalonia born of nationalist grievances, the violent police action against the emergent labour movement, and the student movement in 1966-7 with its subsequent ideological radicalization in the wake of May 1968. These all indicate an opposition to the regime which had progressively begun losing its previous prestige and domination in the eyes of the children of the post-war bourgeoisie. This generation contributed greatly to the changes Spain was to go through in the following decades, but at times, it can be argued that they tended to exaggerate the possibility of reform, and their vision of the end of Francoism, an illusion that paralleled the beliefs of 1931 in relation to the monarchy that the masses could provoke the dictatorship's collapse. Their weakness lay in internal divisions brought about by the anti-communism of the moderate sectors and the absence of a shared alternative programme.<sup>7</sup>

The 1970s were also marked by the ad hoc and dependent character of its economic growth which rendered the effects of the world economic crisis of 1974 particularly severe in Spain.<sup>8</sup> Foreign investment fell and emigrants returned once they were laid off abroad, while damage to the environment sharply rose and the deficit grew.

The superficial and accelerated cultural integration of much of the population at this time was marked by a profound ignorance of Spaniards regarding the origins of the country's cultural and linguistic diversity, an absence of a genuine democratic tradition of citizenship, and a reliance on an overly strong state.

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<sup>7</sup> As Borja de Riquer I Permanyer pointed out in "Social and Economic Change in a Climate of Political Immobilism". 268: "As these conflicts grew and spread further afield, Francoism seemed to the dominant social sectors to be losing its most characteristic and convincing features: its capacity to guarantee social order and general political control. On the contrary, there was a growing sense that it was the dictatorial nature of the Franco regime itself, its total immobilism, which deepened the social conflicts and politicized them further by denying them a legal outlet".

<sup>8</sup> Inflation reached 22% in 1977, unemployment was the highest in Europe at 21% in 1982. de Riquer: 270.

To understand the change in Spain during the 1970s, the years of transition from Franco to democracy, we must understand the slow painstaking conquest of democratic space over the long years of dictatorship. The long search for a space in which individual freedom could be reclaimed, beyond the regime's reach was a kind of ethical necessity by the 1970s for all those whose critical consciousness distanced them from the ruling order.<sup>9</sup> As Elias Diaz put it: "Francoism, precisely because of its stultifying cultural and political dogmatism, sharpened the critical edge of new, emergent currents of thought and generated significant cultural and political forms of resistance among writers, poets, philosophers, and scientists."<sup>10</sup>

The 1970s were marked by a politicization, not only in Spain, but in the rest of the world. Politicization also appeared in the arts, and in Spain it culminated in the 1977 Venice Biennale's central pavilion being entirely dedicated to Spain. It was called *Spain. Artistic Avant-garde and Social Reality*, and was curated by Valeriano Bozal, a theorist for the Equipo Crónica and member of the Communist party. The artists represented there clearly demonstrated that Spanish art of the 1970s was fighting new political battles that differed from those of 1936. What was generally apparent at this exhibition was a suppression of former claims for a social or political compromise of art founded on Social Realism, as practiced by *Estampa Popular* whose work will be discussed in chapter one. Their political motivation was comparable to that of the newer artists represented at the Venice Biennale, but their artistic programme was generally felt to be too limited. *Estampa Popular*'s topical themes of class struggle often associated with Social Realism were now being replaced by other thematic elements. However, the general bias of Social Realism against Abstraction and Modernism was maintained by the new artists. What was emphasized was an interest in linguistic arguments and sociological limitations. The circulation of signs in society, the rise in publicity images, mass

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<sup>9</sup> As Helen Graham and Jo Labanyi put it in "Developmentalism, Mass Culture, and Consumerism 1960-75". 275: "The fundamental shift in collective identities that took place during this period represents a kind of 'normalization', in that the national once more becomes inseparable from the international. It represents a 'normalization' also in the sense that the period sees the emergence of a new civil society; but it must be remembered that this was still operating under the 'abnormal' circumstances of enforced clandestinity, with periods of return - particularly in the regime's last years - to hard-line repression. The rapid economic changes at this time also produced massive enforced social dislocation in the name of a 'normalizing' modernization - particularly in the internal and overseas migration underpinning the economic 'miracle' for which the rural and urban proletariat paid so heavily. This dislocation would in it turn, however, contribute to Spain's cultural *apertura* or liberalization".

media, and consumption, were the new focus of artists to the point that as Carlos Jiménez commented: "An old guard Marxist-Leninist could have accused them of supplanting the formalism implicit in abstract art for a linguistic formalism."<sup>11</sup> This paper will argue that it is precisely this 'linguistic formalism' that made it possible to approach avant-garde intentions. The re-introduction of the figure into art, the choice of themes made available to artists, and the criticality that can arise from juxtaposing symbolically charged images appropriated from mass culture, offered artists a way to achieve critical positions vis-a-vis their role as artists and society. The 'linguistic formalism' was not aiming to continue the Modernist distancing of high art from low, but rather to blur the distinctions between the two socially constructed spheres, in such a way challenging the traditional positioning of art and artists within capitalist society. Such artistic intentions, which I will argue are avant-garde, are relevant to Spanish artists today, as the following discussion of the 1980s will demonstrate.

The term *desencanto*, or disenchantment, has been used repeatedly to describe the 1980s in Spain. It is linked to notions that the long-awaited for end to Franco and the introduction of democracy to Spain would dramatically change the country. But the disillusionment of such a possibility became all too apparent despite the fact that the foreign view was that Spain without Franco had entered into a new Renaissance, an optimism that was not shared by many Spanish cultural critics who questioned the positive interchange between cultural life and political changes. Some argued that new problems existed with the introduction of democracy like what can be seen as the nepotism of the previous Socialist-led government, the extreme artistic ignorance of the public powers that stress quantity over quality, the deceiving anxiety of freedom, and the popularization controlled by politicians to further their chances of winning in the next elections, etc.

Ironically, views on Spain's culture was one of Franco's areas of state control, whereby art was used in international shows to parade abroad a liberalization that was never happening for real in Spain. The presence and success of such artists like Antoni Tàpies - the most internationally recognized - attests to this. Now, it can be argued, that government roles in the promotion of the culture industry is similar. The newer promotion of Spanish art as a vehicle to

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<sup>10</sup> Elias Diaz, "The Left and the Legacy of Francoism: Political Culture in Opposition and Transition", in Graham and Labanyi, eds.: 285.

demonstrate the modernity of Spain in the 1980s focused on the younger generation of artists, thus underlining the dynamism of Spain (both cultural and economic) which overstated the isolation of the Franco era, leaving older artists feeling like they were being described as ignorant, backward, and unsophisticated. It produced the effect that the success of artists is measured by their international recognition, and the government policy to negotiate between regional and internationalist culture is the policy of cultural export which returns the image of Spain to the Spaniards themselves.

The case of Spain offers an excellent example of issues of cultural exportation, especially when centered around an administration that may lead to a suppression of regional cultures. These include the following factors that at times may overlap: issues of difference, similitude, internationalism, homogeneity, and novelty. Since the second half of this century Spanish artists have enjoyed success abroad with the encouragement of Spanish governmental departments, highlighting the issues surrounding culture, especially since the 1970s. The rhetorics of the avant-garde, regionalism and internationalism acted as the medium of such translations between the national and international, and they governed what was possible to say about culture while smoothing the passage from one culture to another. The way contemporary art is spoken of is a crucial factor in what a country becomes for a foreign audience. In cultural export, the translation is done for the benefit of the foreign audience, but also it returns to the country of origin, and is offered to the domestic audience as its own self-image. The artists success is thus measured by his or her recognition abroad. A comment made by Mercedes Lazo in 1981 on *Equipo Crónica* offers a sense of how Spanish art is validated through international recognition. She wrote:

Equipo Crónica figura con sus obras en los más importantes museos del mundo. Y con ellas pervivirá. El arte siempre vence a la muerte... Con sus obras que han suscitado polémicas y atraído el interés de relevantes críticos y especialistas de rango internacional, el Equipo Crónica está en primera línea de la plástica española.<sup>12</sup>

The problem with difference that arises with a government programme of cultural exportation, is evident when one considers that Spain has been and is still often characterized as

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<sup>11</sup> Carlos Jiménez, "The Dream of an 'Inverted Conceptualism'". *Lapiz*, no. 79 (Summer 1991): 35.

<sup>12</sup> Mercedes Lazo. "La ultima cronica del equipo". *Cambio 16*, no. 52 (Nov. 1983): 163.

radically different from the rest of European culture. Geographical, historical, and psychological clichés are used to prove that Spain is exotic, mysterious, and mystical. This rhetoric defines both the audience and the object of their attention. Thus, if Spain is anti-rational, non-Spaniards are rational; if Spain is sensual, others are restrained; if Spain is vibrant, then non-Spain is staid, etc. Art that is exhibited abroad is often tied to these generalizations of Spanish national character and frequently rooted historically through references to Spain's history and geography. Contemporary artists are repeatedly linked to Goya, Velázquez and El Greco, and spoken in terms highly reminiscent of Romanticism which also viewed Spain as a tempestuous sensual 'other', and thus the return to the "sheer pleasure of painting" revived in the Neo-Expressionism of the 1980s is not surprising. Within this construct of difference, Spain is repeatedly defined according to the foreign audience's own needs, and even though the Spanish criticize the image of their country as a nation of matadors, flamenco dancers, and gypsies, they to this day often have it returned to them as a sign of their international success.

The problem with similitude also arises with cultural exportation, because the difference cloaking Spain's art must not become radically threatening. A cultural universalism smoothes over difference and is more appealing to the foreigner because it is more comfortable to have a self image based on a version of the audience's own, effectively a variant of a parent culture. For example, an American critic wrote on Spanish expressionist art of the 1980s: "It is odd, yet pleasing how much of the heritage of the New York School is now coming back to our shores digested, changed and made into something different by the Spanish boom."<sup>13</sup> The hegemony of the world order is preserved as Spain is described favourably by its parent culture.

Internationalism whereby the international parent culture becomes the defining signifier is another problem with cultural exportation. The end of Franco, ironically, means that Spain is seen as regaining its identity by reneging it in favour of an internationalism laced with exotic difference that is promoted by the demands of art dealers. In an increasingly globalized world contemporary Spanish painters, like others, have little choice but to become itinerant painters, setting up shop in whatever city their next exhibition is scheduled for.

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<sup>13</sup> Chris McAuliffe, "Translation or Gloss? The Case of Contemporary Art From Spain". *Art Text*, no. 36 (May 1990): 98.

The rhetoric around internationalism is accompanied by that of homogeneity. The continued projection of one Spain fails to display the internal divisions within the country, and loses its indigenous context thereby maintaining the best of both worlds.

Notions of novelty, vitality, youth, which results in the concentration on certain generations, media and styles, like expressionistic figures and brush, the emphasis on lyrical abstraction, a style which appeals to a notion of tradition (figurative legacy of Spanish Naturalism), regional temperament (the Mediterranean colour and hedonism), the role of art as a visual pleasure (a reaction to boredom of minimal and conceptual). Such a rhetoric builds on the depoliticization of art post-Franco in a way that appeals to international tastes and fits into the order of globalization.

All of these factors participate in Spain's broadcast of itself to the world which is then returned as its self-image. It is a combination of slanted readings of historical circumstances, government policy, institutional change, and rhetorical formulas. The case of Spain's culture industry, offers an example of how we need to look at the rhetorical devices that propel translations of art across cultures, the ways in which both international and domestic requirements colour the translation, and how all of these rebound on the source culture.

These factors in the formation of national and international identity involved in cultural exportation also played a part in art history and Spain's inclusion in it. Lamentably, the general and frequent bias within the discipline has meant Spain is often seen as producing derivative and outdated versions of European, and more recently American, movements. The discipline has traditionally criticized Spanish art for being anti-classicist, thus relegating it to the exotic other of Europe. This exoticization goes back to the Romantic fascination with Spanish paradoxes of the grotesque and sublime, reality and fantasy, naturalism and idealism, piety and satire, all the while overlooking the fact that Spain's political and cultural situation progressed differently than the rest of Europe.

Furthermore, the prominent role of the censors during Spain's modernization needs to be taken into account when examining its art. In Spain, censorship involved the manipulation of collective memory, and the generation of the 1950's had to deal with it most.<sup>14</sup> The end of the

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<sup>14</sup> Helen Graham and Jo Labanyi described this situation in the following: "Writers and artists responded to cultural massification by incorporating mass cultural forms into their work, in many cases opting simultaneously

Franco regime has meant that those who defined themselves as anti-establishment no longer knew what to define themselves against. They were then obliged to operate in freedom and not in the comfort of anti-regime positions, and cultural independence has allowed some writers to create new literary sensibilities.

The regime had absolute control over news and information agencies, maintaining a tight stranglehold over state press, radio networks, on public knowledge and perceptions of national and international reality. It manipulated historical truth by choosing what was to be excluded, and how it treated what was to be included. One constant theme of its international coverage was anti-communism which was used to remind audiences who they had to thank for the peace and tranquillity in which they lived while foreign contemporaries allegedly suffered all manner of deprivations (like the wars in Korea and Vietnam, or starvation in China). The control of the censors was so far reaching in manipulating the public conscious that in times of crisis, Franco would not be shown to enhance the association between Franco and prosperity in the popular mind.

The censors also interfered in the trivia of everyday life to the point of absurdity. For instance, in the 1940s 'Russian salad' was renamed 'imperial' or 'national salad' on restaurant menus, and Fosforera General Española was fined for a design that appeared on their matchboxes in 1972, which upside down could be read as a woman masturbating.<sup>15</sup> These are but two examples that show the regime saw all forms of social communication as a text. The need for control over everything even extended into language which manifested itself in examples like the renaming of hotels, and an insistence that tombstones with inscriptions in Basque had to be replaced by the deceased family. The compulsory dubbing of foreign films facilitated censorship through mistranslation, while Spanish film scripts had to be submitted for approval.

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for a language of cultural allusion accessible only to an educated minority. Nevertheless, this language of allusion constructed the public as an agent actively engaged in the production of meaning, encouraging the development of independent, critical thinking. The role of opposition culture in this period was vital for paving the way to the transition to democracy, by encouraging pluralism and debate, and by connecting the present not only with the memory of previous progressive intellectual and artistic traditions but also with their contemporary, transformative potential. Culture - in this form of collective memory, at both popular and intellectual levels - was thus central to the construction of the future." Graham and Labanyi, eds.: 258.

<sup>15</sup> Jo Labanyi, "Censorship of the Fear of Mass Culture", in Graham and Labanyi, eds.: 207.



Censorship was not limited to protecting the state, but also sought to curtail offenses to Catholic dogma, morality, the Church, the regime and its associates. This was particularly manifested in film, which by 1941 had created a backlog of 6,000 films.<sup>16</sup> Sometimes, books and films were authorized for export only, and from the late 1950s double versions were produced for home and overseas.<sup>17</sup>

The chief target of the censors was the press, and all reports had to be approved in advance. Lists of banned topics were distributed, and sports coverage without exacerbating regional passions was encouraged. Illustrators were employed for touch ups, like filling in cleavages or to lower hem-lines. All 'decadent' or so-called black music, like jazz was banned, though Afro-Cuban dance and song was allowed on the grounds that it formed part of the Hispanic imperial tradition. Books and comics were banned in minority languages unless they had religious overtones. Children's literature was censored by a special office under Church control; in the late 1940s Little Red Riding Hood became Little Blue Riding Hood. Books in unusual foreign languages were un-translated because no censor could read them.

In the 1960s, intellectuals petitioned the government to relax censorship, and the Minister of Information and Tourism (MIT) in 1962 began a cautious liberalization contracting the US ad agency McCann Erickson to improve Spain's image. Marxist texts were authorized in expensive editions if they did not mention Spain, the Cuban Revolution, or May 1968. Translations into minority languages were also increasingly allowed. Anything could be published, but it had to be deposited with the MIT, which could then order confiscation or prosecution.

In regards to the relationship between art and censorship, Vittoria Combalia described the current situation as not much different from 1939. Forty years of censorship even if no longer controlled by the state remains in the system of acceptance established in galleries, museums, critics, etc. She claims it is a kind of self imposed censorship that is current in almost all cultural activities in Spain. Nowadays, the official culture has taken on the task of showing certain artists who can give an image of modernity that parallels the international scene. It attempts to offer an image of economic strength that has raised Spain to the level of a society of

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 209.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 209.

consumption. Isolationism had many facets, including very little exchange with foreign artists, inaccessibility of Spanish and foreign specialized magazines, and insufficient resources for the study, practice, and enjoyment of art. There was a general lack of official institutions that advanced capitalist countries had to support the arts, presupposing an inclusion of the avant-garde into the commercial system, while ensuring democracy.

William Dyckes maintains that the impact of the censors on art was negligible as long as art remained abstract.<sup>18</sup> With the return to figuration in the 1960s, the censors became active once more by closing certain exhibitions and causing legal troubles for artists, especially those that angered the army. In cases where the offense was too vague, right-wing groups responded by vandalizing galleries and bookstores, while the police offered little resistance. Such actions by the censors demonstrate that there is a critical aspect in the art object because it has the power to provoke a response in the social. On top of the obvious result of provoking the censors, Jo Labanyi describes the case of censorship in Spain as having been counter-productive to the goals of the State that had implemented it. She writes:

Writers and film-makers resorted to realism to replace a shackled press, but censorship also encouraged indirect statement (irony, symbolism visual metaphor, the use of actors known for their roles in officially approved movies). Censorship was counter-productive in that it produced a hyper-politicization of culture, with censors, artists, and public keen to read the political into everything; but the recourse to techniques of allusion restricted appeal to a minority public. It is easy to dismiss the censors as stupid, but their tolerance of high art-forms suggests they knew what they were doing. It was not till the 1960s that intellectuals started to realize what the censors had always known: that elite culture is, sadly, not a political threat. If the censors distrusted mass culture, it was because they appreciated its importance.<sup>19</sup>

The none-threatening sphere of art in Spain opened a space for criticality when it appropriated elements of mass culture, and it will be demonstrated in chapter two how Equipo Crónica approached such criticality by exploring notions around avant-garde especially in its attempt to disrupt the inert role of art vis-a-vis society produced within a capitalist system.

On the direct impact of censorship on the production and activity of the Equipo Crónica, Gérald Gassiot-Talabot describes how they worked clandestinely and were shown

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<sup>18</sup> William Dyckes, *Contemporary Spanish Art* (New York: The Art Digest, Inc., 1975): 6.

<sup>19</sup> Jo Labanyi, "Censorship or the Fear of Mass Culture": 214.

more abroad. Nationally they often showed their works where the censors would not find them like in schools or non-art related places, confirming the primacy and scandalous power of their images. Furthermore, they often worked in a small format which allowed for easy and quick transport to avoid the persecution of the censors. Hence, even though Equipo Crónica's main priority was not to simply provoke the censors, but rather critique the state and the relationship of art to an increasingly capitalist society, they like many others were also at times affected by the weight of censorship. Gassiot-Talabot explains the problems they had with *El Novio de la Muerte* as an example of this, and wrote:

Cette toile, d'ailleurs, a eu un destin subversif évident puisqu'elle a permis à Crónica d'occuper quelques heures les locaux d'une section régionale de la Phalange jusqu'à ce que les autorités s'aperçoivent de l'énormité de ce qu'elles exposaient et chassent les peintres.<sup>20</sup>

Llorens also mentions how the censors affected the art production of Equipo Crónica. For them it often meant exhibiting in clandestine spaces like brave galleries, universities, private associations, and regional salons. Also, their choice of smaller scale works allowing for quick transport, differentiated them from American Pop Art which tended to produce works created for site specific environments.<sup>21</sup>

Francisco Calvo Serraller is one of the recent art historians who is writing the history of Spanish contemporary art. He summarized the history of twentieth century Spanish art in light of the fact that it has been a paradox that no one has discussed the lack of writing on identity in Spanish art when so many artists have contributed to the international art scene, especially at a time when historical identities were an important theme or content of art. He argues that we can speak of a nationalist sentiment in Spanish art despite the difficulty of tracking the constant transformations in Spain. However, he also acknowledges that we need to be careful to avoid creating a sense of a singular Spanish artistic identity. Such a position on the existence of national characteristics for art risks submitting art to a predetermined and simplistic formula. Nevertheless, he argues, one constant of Spanish artists this century has been the fact that they have moved between a unified and regionalized concept of Spain. The desire to experiment in

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<sup>20</sup> Gerald Gassiot-Talabot, "Le pouvoir de l'image: Saul, Genoves, Groupe Cronica". *Opus International*, no. 15 (Dec. 1969): 33.

art from within the country, and not Paris, was seen (with groups like *El Paso*, *Dau al Set*, the *Altamira* artists, etc. in the 1950s), but these manifestations have not yet been fully explored due to a general lack of information, and the isolation Spain has been submitted to for most of this century.<sup>22</sup>

The position that Spain, as a subject of its art, has been a common theme in the production of its contemporary art. Beginning with the Generación de 1898 artists, an intellectual programme centered on the destiny of Spain and its political regeneration via culture has been constant. With the de-isolation of Spain that began in the 1950s, came a new desire to recuperate this memory and spirit of the Spanish avant-garde. The idea of Spanishness already existed in the nineteenth century and was cloaked in notions of its love of realism mixed with an unrestrained Christian idealism. In the twentieth century, the most dynamic Spanish cultural production operated in the margins because of its frequent opposition to Franco. Beginning in the 1950s, artists joined international trends, and it is still important to connect them to their specific historical situations. For instance, the Informalists were widely recognized abroad for being more cosmopolitan, an image the Franco regime encouraged in order to improve the international view of its actions, but these artists still maintained concerns pertinent to Spain. In his autobiography, Antoni Tàpies, the leading figure of the Informalists who worked in the 1950s, described how the time of *apertura* was a time of great stimulation for artists because of the new contact with foreign tendencies, but it was also an opportunity for Spanish artists to explore the issues of memory and national identity reflected in the intentions of their art production. Now that the *apertura* of Spain is complete, and it partakes in the increasingly globalized multinational world order, the issues of memory and national identity are still relevant today. But, more importantly, looking back at the production of art at a time of political urgency for art in the late 1960s and early 1970s, particularly that produced by Equipo Crónica, with their focused attention on issues of the avant-garde intentions to critique and participate in social change, can contribute to contemporary debates on the same issues of

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<sup>21</sup> Tomás Llorens, "Equipo Crónica. La distanciation de la distanciation: une démarche sémiotique". *Opus International*, no. 50 (May 1974): 80.

<sup>22</sup> Francisco Calvo Serraller, *Del futuro al pasado. Vanguardia y tradición en el arte español contemporáneo* (Madrid: Alianza Editoria, 1988).

identity. The question of identity today continues to move between the local and the global, and the urgency of addressing it is no less.

Spain is presently in a veritable state of frenzy of recuperation, and contemporary art studies are still at an inventorying stage, but for the first time work can be done without restrictions. The question, however, remains: can Spain be anything other than an irreducible 'other' created by those who distinguish themselves against it with horror or complacency? If changes are to be made in the art industry of Spain, they have to come from within the country, and it would need to be something new. It cannot replicate the agenda of Eugenio D'Ors, a Minister of Culture under the Franco regime who made attempts at modernizing the Academy. Often these attempts to normalize relations with the foreign world signified obtaining information that was systematically taken by the censors in Spain. Nevertheless, Spanish artists achieved spectacular successes in international biennales and exhibitions but the fact that they existed within channels of the Franco regime created uncomfortable paradoxes. Artists during the 1950s asked themselves whether or not they should go into exile, and if so then who would be producing critical art in Spain? Historically, the Spanish avant-garde left Spain, like Picasso, Dalí, Miró, Juan Gris to name but a few of the most recognized. The later generation to be recognized internationally (where they were often applauded for representing the oppressed Spain) worked in Spain. During these years it was often the Franco regime that became embarrassed, because it was forced to borrow the image of the avant-garde of the 1950s. The greatest accomplishment of these artist was that they were the first examples since the Civil War of an artistic synthesis between national identity and the cosmopolitan and international forms of expression.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Of this, Bozal and Llorens wrote in the introduction to the catalogue for the exhibition entitled: *España. Vanguardia artística y realidad social: 1936-1976*: "Hacia el final de la década apareció una tendencia consistente que enmarcó la labor y la investigación artística en el contexto de grupos formados a propósito, alrededor de filosofías o posturas artísticas y culturales comunes. El Paso es el mas conocido de estos grupos. Según una vision meramente estilista, es citado a menudo como el mejor ejemplo de la 'introduction' del 'informalismo' - en España, excluida, claro esta, Cataluña-. A la luz de la especificidad del contexto español, esta vision se muestra bastante propicia a la confusion. La labor realizada por Millares y Saura durante este periodo, por ejemplo, nunca podría ser comprendida sin hacer referencia a las amplias discusiones, habidas en los medios intelectuales españoles de este momento alrededor de dos temas principales: a) el llamado 'problema de España', que empezo a ser objeto de atención a principio del decenio de 1950 como resultado de una revision y una reinterpretacion polemica de la Generacion del 98, y b) el problema filosofica de las raices eticas de la libertad individual (tema que debe ser relacionado tambien por la lectura de los existencialistas). Todo ello

The term Informalism is a blanket term given to Spanish abstract expressionism that dominated the 1950s and received significant international recognition. Its representatives include such groups as *Dau al Set* in Barcelona, *El Paso* in Madrid, and other artists associated with the School of Altamira. In many ways they had to overcome similar problems which included laws that prohibited the formation of organizations thus making it difficult for them to exhibit under a collective name and distribute pamphlets as a way of promotion. It was a time of general public fear and prejudice that equated their avant-garde attempts at exploring the materials of art thus challenging notions of high art in Spain, with Communism. Such an equation with Communism was also experienced in the United States, but in Spain it was more pronounced. Despite these obstacles, or perhaps even because of them, Spanish Informalist artists received international acclaim that led to what William Dyckes called a "Spanish boom" from 1959-1962.<sup>24</sup> This entailed popular exhibitions in Paris, London, Tokyo, New York (at the MOMA and the Guggenheim), and in nearly every major city in Europe and South America. Prizes were also awarded in recognition of these Spanish artists, most notably: Jorge de Oteiza won Grand Prize for sculpture at the São Paulo Biennale in 1957, the same prize went to Eduardo Chillida in the Venice Biennale in 1958, and in the same year Antoni Tàpies won both the UNESCO and David Bright Foundation awards.<sup>25</sup> Because these artists were late comers to international abstract expressionism they were often seen as second or third generation artists of the style representing an exotic and derivative regional movement, thus having their contributions overlooked or misinterpreted.

The art production and career of Antoni Tàpies best exemplifies the kind Informalism that would be rejected by Spanish artists seeking a new critical art in the 1960s. He abandoned law school in 1946 to devote himself to his art and cofounded the group *Dau al Set* the same year. In 1950 he studied in Paris with a French government grant and traveled to Belgium and the Netherlands the following year.<sup>26</sup> His early works involved an interest in heavy impasto and incorporation of all sorts of materials like marble powder added to oil pigments and later

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comprendido y experimentado desde el seña del contexto social procurado por la dictadura." Quoted in Serraller: 113-114.

<sup>24</sup> Dyckes: 6.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 11.

powdered pigments to latex. In general, his works exhibited simplicity, monumentality and a focus on the nature of materials and textures. The tactility and relief-like quality of his canvases were described by Roland Penrose as "paintings for the blind"<sup>27</sup> that contributed to the anti-aesthetic spirit of his works. Of his artistic intentions Tàpies wrote:

My aim is to remind men of what they really are, to give them a topic for meditation, to provoke a shock that will help them to get away from false values, to rediscover themselves and to reacquire consciousness of their own value. In order to attain this goal I try to overcome our material and spiritual dependence on technology. In my work I try to overcome this state of alienation, using everyday objects that should bring him into contact with deep problems of our existence - I try to be as suggestive as possible in order to obtain this contact. Instead of preaching humility, I would much rather demonstrate it. For instance, if I speak of loneliness I would take grains of sand and let them discuss Man's loneliness.<sup>28</sup>

By the 1960s, such a personalized artistic programme was no longer deemed useful in light of unchanging social conditions controlling the relationship of art to society, especially in the context of Spain where the sense of political urgency to artists was so prevalent. The original avant-garde intentions of Spanish artists of Tàpies' generation were seen to have failed in impacting the political or social situation of the country.

Democracy in Spain has been accompanied by a revitalization of cultural activity that has developed at a different pace than the rest of Europe. The drawbacks of isolation have been experienced, and to counter the negativity of such a situation, the Ministry of Culture (created in 1977), particularly after the Socialists came to power in 1982, promoted the arts both through state support and by encouraging private sponsorship for art-related areas that were encouraged through significant tax incentives. This embracing of the arts led to the creation in 1982 by the Ministry of Culture the ARCO (Arte Contemporáneo) project which is a government-sponsored annual art fair in Madrid and the Fundación ARCO. The intention of such a project was to build up a collection of world-wide contemporary art, and to organize educational events and offer consultation on prospective purchases. The sponsorship of the banks to the arts, like *la Caixa* in Catalonia accompanied this development of a culture industry that gave support to public installations, the fine arts, theatre, music, museums, and

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 12.

architecture. This programme received much international press and led to the organization of several large exhibitions on Spanish art.

The autonomous regions also participated in this boom in the arts and the result was the opening of new or impressively refurbished art centres, by local architects like Centro Reina Sofia, in Madrid, the Instituto Valenciano de Arte Moderno (IVAM) in Valencia, the Cuartel de Carment contemporary art museum in a medieval Arab building in Sevilla, the Atlantic Centre of Modern Art in a converted colonial mansion in the Canary Islands, and the Tàpies Foundation and the Centro de Arte de Santa Mónica in Barcelona. The reality of these new cultural institutions is that they have been appearing across Spain, and have spent fortunes on construction, but now find themselves priced out of the art market in which contemporary Spanish art fetches extravagantly high prices. The result is that there is not enough available art to fill them.

The prices of Spanish art have gone up considerably, and the gallery scene in Spain is marked by an increase in foreign dealers, like the Marlborough Gallery in Salamanca, who are looking to take advantage of the expanding market. Also, Spanish artists are well represented abroad: Galeria Joan Prats, a Barcelona gallery which also has a space in Manhattan, and Galerie Lelong in Paris and in Zurich which focus on Spanish art. The national tourist office has also participated in the promotion of Spanish contemporary art by sponsoring foreign journalists to report on the new Spain.

Between 1982-1986, cultural spending increased by 68%. 78% more funding was given to museums and acquisitions, and more formal bodies were established within the ministries of culture and foreign affairs to encourage and facilitate cultural imports and exports. Centralized government administrations organize exhibitions and exhibition spaces, publish catalogues, arrange junkets for international writers and curators, underwrite shipping costs, etc.

This excitement over the newly de-isolated and liberated Spain in the foreign view is also evident when one considers the number of exhibitions that have been devoted to new Spanish artists, and the special issues on Spanish art of several art publications, including: *Art Press* in 1982, *Cimaise* in 1983, *Flash Art* in 1988. Many articles on the art being produced in

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.



the 'new' Spain are also abundant, and bear such titles as "Spain. Learning to Absorb the Shock of the New". "L'Espagne à la reconquête d'elle-même". "The '80s: a Tumultuous Decade". "Spanish Art: Malnourished but making waves". "New Mirrors for a New Society: Seven Artists in Post-Franco Spain". and "Post-Franco Cultural Offensive Puts Spanish Art on the Map". Often, the Spanish and its regional governments have encouraged such outlooks by sponsoring writers, journalists, and curators.

This led to an incredible rise in the consumption of art with no increase in the analysis, research, cataloguing, archival work and various other academic pursuits. The general lack of a critical forum under Franco is partly to blame, but the treatment of the Ministry of Culture of art like a natural resource or product meant to be promoted as an example of how Spain has modernized and shed its years of isolation has also contributed to this weak sense of criticism. The promotion and sponsorship of culture has been used by the democratic government of Spain to prove to the world that it has recovered economically and politically after forty years of isolation, and its "official coming out party", as Emma Dent Coad put it, 1992 was the year when Spain hosted the Olympics in Barcelona, the Expo in Sevilla, and Madrid was designated the "cultural capital" for that year.

Such a promotion and sponsorship of the arts has meant that fringe artists and movements have been thrust directly into the mainstream, creating an unbalanced progression from avant-garde marginalization to mainstream popularization making it difficult to know where the avant-garde was. The avant-garde as rebellion against the establishment has now been put to the task of political propaganda that fosters an image of youth, energy, and diversification of a new democratic Spain. As Mar Villapesa wrote in 1989: "this collaboration is the golden dream of any dictatorship."<sup>29</sup>

Juan Gracian shares a similar view in regards to the autonomous government support of the arts. In 1989 he wrote in an article on the growth of art galleries in Andalusia:

...it is quite clear that the main concern is to imprint a political stamp on a building. No thought is given to creating an intelligent space in Seville or Granada where artistic events can flourish. What matters is to appear intelligent

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<sup>29</sup> Emma Dent Coad, "Artistic Patronage and Enterprise Culture". in Graham and Labanyi, eds.: 375.

by creating a centre that provides monumental evidence of the way political developments are flourishing.<sup>30</sup>

Despite the increased exposure of Spanish art both in and outside its borders, the problem remains that art is still seen as an item of consumption and an elitist activity that focuses on short-term gain in investment on high-profile art, while little has been invested in lower profile cultural activities or in long-term research and education. Furthermore, the tremendous cultural bombardment of films, television, literature, music, and art into Spain, has oriented many Spanish artists towards producing media-oriented work. Prior to democracy, many artists positioned themselves in opposition to Franco and his regime that defined them as avant-garde. Now that mercantile ideology invades everything including art, the only logical place for the avant-garde to appear is in opposition to this.

Similarly to the Franco era, the democratic state and local governments have been used to facilitate cultural production in Spain. The cost has been the institutionalization of cultural experiment, including what is found in the fringe.

Perhaps what is most pertinent to contemporary Spain, is the sentiment of *desencanto*, or disenchantment, disappointment. It is a widely used term that denotes a general sense of disappointment with the reality of the liberal democratic system in action. The high expectations put on democracy, as the solution to all national problems that so many waited so long for, resulted in social disenfranchisement and long-term unemployment. Of course, this is not particular to Spain, but as Helen Graham and Jo Labanyi states: "the impact of this democratic deficit is potentially even more damaging in a country where the social and cultural rooting of democratic practice is itself relatively recent."<sup>31</sup> The cultural anxieties that have been exacerbated by the erosion of collective values and the development of market economics are potentially more damaging in Spain with its newer and more vulnerable civic culture.

Dan Cameron, a frequent writer on Spanish art wrote in 1989:

...it is even more surprising to learn that a quarter century after its formation, Equipo Crónica has yet to receive any official recognition beyond Europe. In fact, the entire saga of Equipo Crónica's career may eventually be seen as a

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Graham and Labanyi, "Developmentalism, Mass Culture, and Consumerism 1960-75": 275.

case study of how one country may have gone too far in cleaning up its culture for the sake of international consumption.<sup>32</sup>

The new tendencies towards a critical realism in the 1960s which concurred with the reception of Pop Art in Spain, followed the glory days of Informalism and Abstraction of the previous decade which was generally felt to have reached a moment of crisis. Equipo Crónica was grouped with an expressive realism that was rising in Valencia, and given the broad term of *Crónica de la Realidad* (Chroniclers of Reality), by Aguiler Cerni, a contemporary art critic. Such a term may be confusing because of the different approaches by different artists to achieve the same goals, which were: to use figuration and elements of the language of the mass media to objectively focus on social phenomena thus ethically engaging the artist in the signification of these phenomena.

The art production of Juan Genovés is an example of this kind of socially and ethically engaged art. He stated that "the principal end of Art is to give testimony of the epoch in which the artist lives."<sup>33</sup> To produce this, his sources were journalistic photographs of situations of social unrest, like persecuted crowds or fighting figures, but it is impossible to situate the events depicted and yet the desire to depict social injustice and persecution is undeniable. His objectivity was further attained by using the tintype of photography, maintaining its monochromatic quality, which as a non-modern source suggests a distance in time as a way of achieving objectivity. Furthermore, he often created a series of the same image repeated over and over with a zooming in on a particular element of the composition, like a fallen figure in the crowd.

The intentions of Equipo Crónica to produce a commentary on their time and place is similar to Juan Genovés, though they achieved this in a different way. However, they shared the urgency of producing an ethically engaged art. A publicity poster signed by Rafael Solbes, Manuel Valdés, and Joan A. Toledo (a member of the original group who left shortly after its inception), outlined their artistic intentions as:

Para nosotros 'Crónica de la realidad' significa objetivación y realismo de los datos utilizados, así como tipificación y serialización de los conjuntos. Es decir: realismo en lo particular, dando carácter interpretativo a las series. La serie es,

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<sup>32</sup> Dan Cameron, "Contents Under Pressure. Equipo Crónica". *Artforum*, 73, no.3, Feb. 1985, 125.

<sup>33</sup> Dyckes, 68.

para nosotros, un modo idóneo de unir lo particular con el desarrollo dinámico y dialéctico de lo general.<sup>34</sup>

From this it is clear that the artistic recourses they chose to pursue included objectivity, realism, and the series. Their use of these concepts, and the results they were able to achieve by using them, will be explored more fully in chapter two.

The late 1960s was a time when it was being asked how can art influence public conscience? For some the answer involved the rejection of the conventional notion of the signifying structure of an art object. The idea that its message is transmitted by the artist through the work that is given an emotive charge that then passes to the spectator, was no longer an acceptable logic for art given the social and political circumstances that demanded an ethical engagement in the change and participation of art vis-a-vis society. Instead, it was proposed that the work of art should be a signifier that exists independently of the subjective identity of its creator. In this way, the position of the spectator and his or her social origin is what gives art the ability to signify. Artists needed to limit their function, remove and distance themselves from the Romantic notion of them as producers of objects that construct culturally significant objects. This defined the work of artists as different from other forms of production, and the time had come to dismiss the classic division between art and society that glorifies the status of the artist. In order to successfully carry out the task of ethical cultururation of society the characteristic of the art object as signifier needed to change, and to do this the spectator's role in participating in the creation of such a signifier is required. In this way, the art object will serve as a model for the experience of reality, and in this way it keeps the characteristic of being a repetition of such an experience. If presented artificially (representing the already represented), as mass media does, the art object can be an effective signifier of the spectators experiences of their social reality. Such a view implies that the artistic category is historic, and thus variable and not locked into one sole role or function within society. With the aim of destroying the traditional art object and the role art had in society *Crónica de la Realidad*, a group Equipo Crónica was affiliated with in its early years, had avant-garde intentions, because it was affiliated with a sense of historicity that distinguished its production from the

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<sup>34</sup> Valeriano Bozal, "Planteamiento sociológico de la nueva pintura española", *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos*, no. 235 (July 1969): 61.

conventionally restrictive designation of art as optical experimentation that previous avant-gardes had been locked into. Of course, such a belief in the possibility of a critical art to disrupt the traditional role of art within society requires a different system of diffusion of the art object within society, one that entails a change of the channels in which art operates (art market, galleries, museums, etc.) - a difficult goal to achieve.

Some artists wanted their art objects to be informative and thus needed to include elements of the language of imagery in order to link the art object to the reality they are referring to. Mass media offered the iconography that was encouraged to meet the ends of revalorizing the syntactic relations with a logical character. Associating two or more signs from mass culture in the sphere of art could disrupt the aura of art imbued with the notion of authenticity, two concepts that will be elaborated on later, by mixing forms of expression. The appropriation of components of the popular and mass media, like comic strips, magazines, cinema, television, etc., would assist in the artists endeavour to explore new modes of diffusion.

The critical potential of realism in the 1960s with its avant-garde intentions lay in its capacity to form symbolic signs in connotative semiotics and to animate the initially static character of the image. By 1962 the term New Realism was being used in the United States and France where it was called *Nouveau Realisme* as a name for Pop Art. In time it came to signify a new breed of realism. Traditionally, the term realism linked content with illusionist representation of observed reality and the rejection of the flattened pictorial space derived from Abstraction. But, New Realism as a radical departure from the Abstract Expressionism that dominated in the 1950s incorporated the flattened space, large scale, and simplified colour of Modernist painting. In Spain, many abstract artists began to switch from Abstraction to representational painting, like Antoni Tàpies, Manuel Millares, and Antonio Saura. It is important to clarify here what is meant by the terms critical realism, and New Realism. New Realism is too broad a term to have much meaning except as a shorthand for the figurative alternative to Abstraction that began appearing in the late 1950s in Europe and the United States, and which took on many forms including Pop Art, Hyper Realism, and the expressive Figuration like that produced by Francis Bacon and Dubuffet, etc.

The art production of Equipo Crónica is most comparable to the kind of critical realism being elaborated in the 1960s, which includes Pop Art. However, they differed from the kind of

Pop Art being produced in the United States by infusing their art with politically charged intentions comparable to the kind of Social Realism being practiced by their compatriots the *Estampa Popular*. Interestingly, a critical realism was no longer confined to underdeveloped countries, but began to also appear in the industrialized world. In such a way the possibility of simultaneously problematizing the iconic representation and the designated reality is made possible. In its insistence on representing and participating in connotative semiotics, art becomes linked to historical situations, thus distancing itself from the initial neo-figurative intentions though logically having developed from its original premises. Their *Folklore*, of 1966 (see illustration 1) attests to this. It represents the attempt of Equipo Crónica to expose the manipulation of the Spanish mass media controlled by the Franco regime in formulating a sense of national unity that ensured the regime's position of power. By appropriating a theme so commonly disseminated through mass media and using the techniques of objectivity in this representation conventionally excluded from the sphere of high art, Equipo Crónica disrupted the logic of the flamenco dancer as a sign for Spanishness that the regime promoted in its tourist campaigns beginning in the 1950s. This is an example of linguistic recourses to art that rejected the unity of a formal style, allowing for a variety of points of impact that are justified by semantic and pragmatic reasons of communicative efficacy, and appropriating mass media techniques inverts its linguistic functionality in a non-affirmative, critical sense. Thus, the new attempts of critical realism did not conceive of the artist as a passive being, but as a militant who made claims to approaching a social avant-garde by challenging the notion of quality in art, and feeding a progressive spirit in exploring the limits of language and its contents. It was felt at the time that by focusing on language, a new critical realist art would also distinguish itself from what had become a negative view of Social Realism, as practiced by *Estampa Popular*, that was being criticized for a certain dogmatism and reactionism. It was argued that it had become merely a testimonial art centered on electing subjects that fell into a kind of formalism that could not meet the demands of a social environment that was in perpetual transformation. To avoid this from happening, the new realists had to use and participate in the language of visual imagery that was found in reality: mass culture. This would create the potential for criticality through appropriation and decontextualization; two linguistic recourses that serve as a dialectic of the contradictions in contemporary social reality at a local and

international level by underlining the historical character of the artist trying to transform or contribute to his or her changing society and its relations. In such a way, artists who used figuration and mass media imagery could represent the contradictions of people and their relations demonstrating the conditions under which they live.

Several tendencies towards creating such an actively engaged art existed during the late 1960s because the historical condition of Spain demanded it. Some restricted themselves in Social Realism, while others used mass media more like Pop Art did. I should stress the need to understand the pluralism of styles at the time to point out the impossibility of a purely formal or stylistic reading of the tendencies at the time, because the appropriation of diverse techniques traditionally outside the realm of art now gave it a referential function that sought to strengthen communicative efficiency. This discontinuity annihilated a univocal apprehension of the art object and opened up the possibility of viewing art and its role in society differently. The new art that favoured oppositions and symbolism, direct or indirect influences on the spatial frames, montages, sequences and syntagmatic considerations were translated into a temporal-spatial division favouring the narrative and intensifying the semantic space.

This, in effect, changed the traditional notion of the art object, not by making it an ordinary object, but an object of criticism. This explains the appropriation of comics and stylistic conventions particular to mass media in order to extend the communicative ends of art and attack notions of high and low art. These are not a mere transcription of mass culture, but a recourse for art production that sought criticality. This estrangement from the conventional view of art took place at the level of language, and at the level of codified contents and symbols, or in other words, the social order of communication. It is precisely this inversion that characterized the new kind of critical Realism that was happening in Spain. Art that appropriates images from mass media decontextualizes the image to unmask the underlying ideologies of the developing late capitalist Spanish society and critically unveils the normative functions, social norms, and complex causalities of the images that act as signs. Furthermore, by incorporating the techniques of mass media art separates these techniques from their institutional relations and their usual contexts within mass culture, and enters them into the dimension of semantics producing a more pragmatic and critical art. This decontextualization takes advantage of the united symbolic themes that exist socially and takes them out of their

conventional spaces and roles asserting the affirmative character, and avant-garde tendencies of a new realism in art evolving in the 1960s, by creating causalities with the social and the historical, and exposing the contradictions of contemporary social reality. By integrating the historical with the social (without being a cynic nor an opportunist) they could be engaged in transforming or contributing to change in society. Thus, the newfound interest of inverting the popular mass media image, inverting their linguistic function to a non-affirmative and critical function, is not a mere eclecticism or opportunism, but rather an opportunity to take advantage of communication facilities. For many artists, like the Equipo Crónica, Pop Art took this furthest by making images that were intelligible through realism, but critical because of the relation of the art object as sign and art as signifier. It problematized the realism of art by drawing attention to its own structure as art with its power to represent reality. But the reality represented by Pop Art is one that is already represented, and by representing the already represented in mass media Pop Art not only interrupts denotations and connotations of the signs selected, but it also reinforces the reference to itself as art by way of being able to represent. In such a way, the artist is not a passive resigned figure, but a participant and disrupter in the formation of language and content. The decisive criteria to use these themes is not simply the recourse to strong codes, but rather the concrete historical connotations that are used. The use of too universal connotations can debilitate the critical compromise, making the art object an object of evasion of reality. The effect of decontextualizing is thus, a dialectic reflection on the concrete contradictions of a particular society. A discussion of Equipo Crónica in chapter two will show that their artistic recourse to the abundance of determined connotations does not depend on a codification of the art medium, but on the tolerance or repression in Spain of the social context in which art operates.

It is most important and possible to consider the production of Equipo Crónica, from a historic perspective. By the mid-seventies Equipo Crónica represented Spain in 1976 with the artist Eduardo Arroyo at the Venice Biennale. This was a transitional moment in Spain's history and their positioning then can be considered somewhat of a paradox. On the one hand, their opposition to the Franco regime and its manipulation of culture to create the impression of a unified state made it clear where they positioned themselves vis-a-vis art and modernity. On the other hand, the programme of the democratic state to prove its modernity after forty years of



isolation that followed the end of the Franco regime meant the Equipo Crónica did not fit in with the attempt to re-create Spain into as new a culture as possible. This required a purging of the previously tarnished role of the spontaneous imagination of Spanish painting, and the death of Rafael Solbes, a member of the team, in 1981 meant that Equipo Crónica could no longer produce paintings to enter into that dialogue. But now that Spanish artists prepare themselves to be seen as both Spanish and international at the same time, the case of Equipo Crónica has something to offer. As Dan Cameron, asserts: "Seen from today's vantage point, Equipo Crónica's work prefigures a profound examination of the issues of originality and value that have come to the forefront of art-making in our moment."<sup>35</sup>

As their period is becoming no longer ours, it may be useful to see them as having achieved a balance between the global and the local, something which may appeal to the present generation of artists struggling with the search to find a position vis-a-vis globalization. At a time when Spain has institutionally and officially admitted its plurality, it is no longer possible to make clear-cut distinctions between what is and is not Spanish. The loss of distinctions in the multinational economy, the product of world-wide access to media, is accompanied by a recognition of internal differences. It should be remembered that the Postmodern deconstruction of identity does not call for an abandonment of attempting definition. It makes possible the recognition that "Spanishness" is a shifting concept with plurality and contradiction, and reminds us that identities are strategic constructions that can be negotiated.

Equipo Crónica were part of the Spanish debates over Figuration versus Abstraction that flourished in the 1960s both in and out of Spain, and which were linked to notions of the role of artists in society. Many at the time thought that the reintroduction of the figure into art could introduce Realism's potential for criticality, which parallels the inception of Pop art. The 'New figuratists' argued that the figurative could make more critical statements against modernity because of the tension created between a familiarity with its iconographic sources. The principal issue in these debates was how to be involved in criticizing the impact of modernity. These debates involved social concepts that demanded art be committed to the struggle to oppose modernity. The role of artists as servants of an emancipating social

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<sup>35</sup> Cameron, "Contents Under Pressure. Equipo Crónica": 130.\*

movement put them in the sphere of the political. A characteristic inflection of this modernist impulse, making a thing of itself, ironically meant art remained a signifier fixed on the materiality and opacity of the medium through which the world is represented. When the means of art remain unchanged in a changing world, art remains archaic, and the debates in the late 1960s in Spain centered around how to make art dynamic. The perception that how one achieves representation stands logically prior to what it represents implies that the means of art require transformation in ways that parallel the changes modernization itself had wrought upon the world at large. The continued referentiality to art and its preoccupation with the autonomous picture surface creates a wedge, a gulf, between a concern for art's Realism in respect to wider social forms, and its own reality as a signifying practice. The purpose of art to decode the modern world and participate in changing it is a response to the modern condition which has led some artists to conclude art must transform itself. This was seen as the agenda of the new avant-garde, an avant-garde with which Equipo Crónica identified itself.

In chapter two I will discuss Equipo Crónica's thoughts on avant-garde intentions, the strategies they incorporated in order to achieve their avant-garde notions including elements of American Pop Art which they recontextualized to meet their own objectives in using art against the Franco-regime in a new consumerist society. The chapter will also reflect on their roles and limits as artists, and examine a few of their works in relation to their theories.

Rafael Solbes, Manuel Valdés, and Joan A. Toledo (a member who was shortly to leave what was to become the Equipo Crónica) met and worked together in 1964 at several collective exhibitions. They developed a friendship that connected them to each other based at the time on their shared ideological and cultural crisis. Together they entered a dialogue on their avant-garde intentions for producing an art that would oppose the Franco regime in Spain, and question the traditional bourgeois notion of high and low art, thus re-examining the position of art in relation to society. Several others participated in this dialogue, including Tomàs Llorens, Valeriano Bozal, Aguilera Cerni, and Alexandre Cirici. The participation of Equipo Crónica in the *Ateneo mercantil de Valencia* in 1964 was the first exhibition wherein the concerns prevalent to contemporary artists in Valencia were clearly linked to the social problems that were most significant to Spanish society at the moment - the issues of tourism and emigration, two phenomena that were the product of Spain's development into a modern

capitalist state. The interchange between this group of artists was essentially based on their need to directly implicate themselves in a political fight by problematizing the role of art.

Shortly afterwards, they jointly signed an independently published manifesto in 1965 wherein they stated their objectives. These included: a declaration of their working as a group to ensure collaboration and experimentation that would be centered on a critical realism that is demanded by their historical circumstances, and a need to disrupt the myth of individualism and expressive subjectivity that has been associated with Modernist artistic activity. They planned to apply collective methods to the practice of painting to reach ends that surpass individualist projects. They describe *Crónica de la realidad* as the end of Social Realism but acknowledge their plans to use systems of images that are pertinent to daily experiences of modern society making it coincide with an intentionality in the art product and its dialectic function that is free from the formation of social groups. *Crónica de la realidad* means objectification and realism of the images as well as typification and serialization of the combinations. In other words, a realism of the particular with an interpretive character of series. The series for them, is finally a way of uniting the particular with the development of a dynamic dialect of the general. They ended their declaration by stating:

Métodos colectivos, fines sobrindividuales y presencia de la realidad y de la dialéctica histórica, implican un arte comprometido, un arte al servicio de los valores humanos. El 'Equipo Crónica' propugna la 'Crónica de la realidad' como vehículo intencional para dar a la pintura una finalidad elevada, una razón de ser en nuestra sociedad y en el marco histórico de los valores positivos contemporáneos.<sup>36</sup>

In the exhibition catalogue published by the Reina Sofia in Madrid in 1989, the Equipo Crónica stated their model for working as a group were the *Dau al Set* group of Barcelona, and *El Paso* of Madrid.<sup>37</sup> They point out, however, that these two groups had lost their sense of coherency and effectivity as groups, because the members had dispersed and their theoretical foundations and activities had disintegrated further and further away from the aesthetic and ideological principals that had united them. They ceased responding to the reality of the

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<sup>36</sup> Valeriano Bozal, *Arte del siglo XX en España. Pintura y Escultura 1939-1990* (Madrid: Editorial Espasa Calpe, 1991): 472.

moment of Spanish artistic culture and society. *Equipo 57* is another group of artists that worked in Spain, but Equipo Crónica felt that their neo-rationalist and experimental approach to art had become too utopic and scientific, thus not addressing sufficiently the problems of representation. Then there was the group of Gilles Aillaud, Eduardo Arroyo, and Antonio Recalcati in Paris who worked together on some projects that included a series of pictures on a narration of Flaubert. They also worked together on *Vivre et laisser mourir* which was intentionally scandalous, and intentionally depersonalized presupposing a clear confrontation vis-a-vis the official neo-avant-gardes that had triumphed in the United States, and had started to creep into Europe where Marcel Duchamp was recognized as the grand master of contemporary art. Their collective exhibitions (like the *Salons des Realités Nouvelles* in which Equipo Crónica first participated in 1965, and the exhibitions of *Le Monde en Question* in 1967, and *Kunst und Politik* in 1969) were marked by a strong polemical spirit which stayed with Equipo Crónica throughout their career.

The benefit of having been exposed to the productions of the Aillaud, Arroyo, and Recalcati group lay in how the Paris group established a criticality that was rooted in the subversion of art. The influence of Pop Art on the Equipo Crónica and its coinciding with the decline of its post-Informalist alternative often called New Figuration (of which Dubuffet, and Francis Bacon were the main figures), also appealed to the inclinations of Equipo Crónica. However, the reception of Pop Art into Spain was imbued with a wary feeling of invasion of a colonial character that was heavily felt in those days of rapid development towards becoming a neo-capitalist society, and was thus interpreted by Spanish artists in ways that suited their own needs.

The appeal of Pop Art to Equipo Crónica lay in its criteria of pertinancy through which the 'common' and the artificial of society, or the already represented in mass media, is converted into an object of artistic creation with a notion of destruction and renovation of the subject. This is comparable to the Duchampian technique of the random which allows the art object to constitute itself as a analogon of the experience of contemporary society. Art thus replicates the distractions and destructions that are subjected to the individual in society

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<sup>37</sup> Equipo Crónica, "Datos Sobre la Formación del Equipo Crónica", in *Equipo Crónica. 1965-1981*, (Madrid: Ministerio de Cultura. Dirección General de Bellas Artes y Archivos. Centro Nacional de Exposiciones, 1989):

through the artificial medium of mass media that has come to hide and finally disrupt the unity of the traditional sense of society. By doing this, art that appropriates its imagery creates a tension between the biographic and the artificial playing a role equal to the mediation of the consciousness. Pop Art had to be different in Spain based on the fact that the saturation of mass media in Spain compared to other industrialized countries that generated Pop Art was notably less despite the rapid change in the Spanish industry of mass communication at the time.

It would be wrong to simplify the production of Equipo Crónica as political art, though this is partly what motivated them. Their proposition of inverting the concepts of form and content that had come down to them through traditional art doctrines, was based on a linguistic recourse to explore the ideological intentions of the creator which is what gave their painting a political pertinence. For them, to speak of and act on the world and the social environment, meant to speak of and act on painting and the art practice itself. This pictoric practice is a discourse that exhibits the intentions of avant-garde art. As Llorens writes:

El sujeto artista en la medida en que es construido por su propia actividad, no puede analizarla, entenderla ni juzgarla desde fuera de ella misma; prisionero del mito colectivo, el único espacio de libertad (también política) que tiene a su disposición es el que le puede abrir la exploración del terreno en que se mueve: la disciplina de la pintura.<sup>38</sup>

From this it is clear that Equipo Crónica's intention was to produce a critical art that requires a self-reflection which cannot be undertaken anywhere else but at the level of the social practice of art. They practiced a self-reflecting, self-referential art on the act of painting itself, and on the practice of painting on a professional level. They criticized art and painting while at the same time working within them. They even practiced it in conventional ways as evidenced in their maintaining the use of paint as a medium, circulating in commercial gallery spaces, and pricing their works in relation to the art market. Admittedly, they could have tried to have been more outrageous, for example, by taking up actions over painting, limiting themselves to non-commercial galleries, or seeking alternate forms of sponsorship other than from private patrons. But, Llorens asks, would this have changed the relations between the production of art and the servitude of art in capitalist society? Their aura instead was to produce an historically and

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<sup>38</sup> Tomás Llorens, "Equipo Crónica: La amistad y la palabra", in *Equipo Crónica. 1965-1981*: 65.

nationally relevant art wherein the spectator's involvement in the creation of meaning through art would prove to be the space wherein the avant-garde could operate allowing for the potential of collective action.

## Chapter I

This chapter will examine views of Spanish and non-Spanish authors on Pop Art in regards to the role of the artist in society and the status of the art object. Issues that will be dealt with include an examination of Spanish views of the critical potential for figuration, particularly those tendencies that leaned towards a Social Realism and Pop Art will be provided to demonstrate that the art production of Equipo Crónica was situated by Spanish authors somewhere between the two. This discussion will provide the necessary framework from which to read the works of Equipo Crónica that will be proposed in chapter two.

The appeal of Pop Art to Spanish artists was on their interest to position themselves against capitalist society and the Franco regime. Pop Art's repetition of the objects such a society has created was thought by some Spanish artists, to have produced an art of critical objects that successfully revealed the objectification of humans and their relations. It should be remembered, however, that the case of capitalist growth in Spain has also been characterized by a continued problem with the developed and underdeveloped sectors of its society, distinguishing it from many other neo-capitalist contexts. The stage of development Spain had reached in the late 1960s felt to many more like a moment of social transition that had stopped progressing, creating tensions of all kinds. Because of the diversity of tensions existing in Spain at the time, including in its art, it was often argued that a Social Realist art (as expounded by *Estampa Popular*), with its focus on the labourer, failed to address other major manifestations of the alienating capitalist society developing in Spain. The 1960s produced artists who wanted to be ethically engaged in the social concerns of Spain, like its rapid modernization and the problems of inequality and political control that arose as a result, but they needed to move beyond what was traditionally offered as strategies to artists. Artists in the 1960s tried to understand their acts as part of the social and they questioned their place in the totality of this reality. They could not be indifferent to real events, and many put themselves in direct relation with life and history.

The art production of Equipo Crónica needs to be considered in relation to the reception of Pop Art in Spain, along with the debates over the critical potential for figuration. It will be argued that an examination of the influences of Pop Art in Spain, as seen through

Equipo Crónica, particularly its critical potential, could offer an example of how it was taken in new directions or perhaps even further in the specific context of Spain where the redefinition of art vis-a-vis society had a more political urgency as the efforts of *Estampa Popular* will reveal.

### **Pop Art and the avant-garde**

Pop Art participated in the debates of the late 1960s over the relationship between art and life, image and reality. Some of its supporters saw it as having liberated art from the high tower bourgeois society had relegated art to rendering it ineffective vis-a-vis the social praxis. Almost out of necessity, the new path artists chose led to the bridging of the traditional gap between high and low art. By eliminating the historical separation between aesthetic and the non-aesthetic, Pop Art proclaimed it would join and reconcile art and reality.

Nicole Dubrueil-Blondin makes reference to Mike Dufrenne who in his *Art et Politique* of 1974 described the elements that are required to make a critical art.<sup>39</sup> These include that it be reflexive, critical, and revolutionary. A combination of the second and third elements allows art to avoid propagating ideology because such a combination makes art reflect on itself as art giving it the revolutionary attitude of an avant-garde art that reflected on and attacked the traditional techniques and content of art, as well as its position in society. The premise is that an art that contests its proper domain will accomplish a veritable move towards social transformation. Such an art aims to be a non-art and a non-consumer product in order to disrupt the role of art in a capitalist society that imbued art with notions of authenticity and the genius of the creator. Ironically, the references to art that Pop Art makes, moves it back into the sphere of art instead of proceeding towards what Modernism considered the vulgar conventionally excluded from high art. The stance of early Pop Art at the beginning of the 1960s is centered around the rejection of the concept of art for art's sake that was the credo of the dominant tendency of Abstract Expressionism of the previous decade. Such an art, it was felt by the new figurationists, would become an art for the artist or for groups of artists, because it operated from an intellectual realm as a system of relations between social relations

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<sup>39</sup> Nicole Dubrueil-Blondin, *La fonction critique dans le Pop Art américain*, (Montréal: Les Presses de l'université de Montréal, 1980): 10.



associated with the individual. Such positions would define how art and artists define their function within society.

However, Clement Greenberg did not see their project as appropriately addressing social concerns. His complaint was that it did not contribute innovations on form, the only avenue available to the modernist avant-garde, but merely prolonged the tradition of Cubism and Abstract Expressionism. But, it can be argued that what Pop Art did was create a hybrid product between objects of the world of art and mass culture. Instead of seeing Pop Art as carrying a certain ideology of the avant-garde which since the nineteenth century tends to see art as an autonomous, which is illusory, because of capitalist society's tendency to legitimate avant-garde art, we can instead view the Pop object as neither an ordinary object nor an art object. Its function is a critical one in denouncing illusionism because it practices both *in* art and *in* society. It is thus more an object of criticism rather than an object of art. The Pop artist divulges the artificiality and fabrication of the painted object and demystifies its status by making it an object of criticism that is no longer neither an art object nor mere object.

Pop art uses what art despises, the mass culture that is unworthy of aesthetic consideration as often seen with Modernism. Unlike modernist art, Pop Art accepts being an imagery, a collection of reflections, constituted by the banal of legitimate society. Unlike high art it is an art of the copy, ironically only to have the status of art rejoin it through the social systems of legitimation around around art. Furthermore, as Stephen Bann described it, to say that Pop Art reflects on the everyday is to imply two propositions. The first is that it takes everyday life as its material insofar as it is already condensed in an amalgam of idioms and visual practices which are recognizably 'contemporary'. Second, it transforms this amalgam in the very process of interpreting it. Seeing an image from the mass media in art is therefore immediately followed by the realization that it is not the same image any more.<sup>40</sup>

The most significant contribution of Pop was the way in which it referred to mass media. It produced an art where culture no longer constituted the being, but merely the reference. It is an art of citation, to reproduce the reproduced. This creates a tension because on the one hand the mass culture of the period is present and part of the revolutionary force that contests art, and on the other hand, art is present which returns it in the economy of society. It provides an

image of the character and contradictions of late capitalism, while at the same time participating in its assimilation both by the art industry and the reproductive mass media. Some, particularly those who saw art as a nobler and less commercial endeavour, had regarded Pop Art as an example of the decadence of art due to market or political ideologies.<sup>41</sup> They were appalled by its focus on consumer goods, mass culture, advertising, and mechanical reproductions. But since then, Pop has become more integrated with new art historical formulations and is getting legitimated through the art industry. The original notions of it as being subversive and capable of criticality, thus paralleling the tradition of the history of the avant-garde to the extent that it prompts a critical reflexivity regarding the institutional framework of art, is today perhaps less conceivable. However, the critical potential of the strategies of Pop are precisely where its possibilities lie, and the relevance today of these possibilities is seen in the contemporary postmodern reluctance to invent new forms and a willingness instead to recycle the past. Strategies of Pop Art, that clearly demonstrate its need to approach the goals of the avant-garde include appropriation, objectivity, parody, serialism and repetition, the embrace of mechanical reproduction, colour, and a focus on the signs of visual language.

Appropriation, or *detournement* as Guy Debord prefers to call it, has always been a strategy of the avant-garde. It is the borrowing of an already existing image into a new context whereby the original image loses its importance and may even lose its original sense completely, while at the same time the organization of another meaningful ensemble is conferred on it, and each detourned component is given, a new scope and effect. For example, Jim Dine's brightly coloured images of a familiar variety of everyday objects like pencils, shoes, tools, etc. are given heightened nearly religious meanings by appearing in the sphere of art, while the high status of art is challenged with the inclusion of such mundane objects. Similarly, Claes Oldenburg's soft sculptures that give gigantic proportions to ordinary objects like fast-food items produces visual paradoxes in the gravity of representing the mundane, and the kitsch of representing them in art. In Pop Art there is a double meaning which proves to be the strength of its strategies of appropriation. It creates an enrichment of most terms by the coexistence within them of their old sense and their new, creating an inexhaustible potential for reuse. It is a

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<sup>40</sup> Stephen Bann, "Pop Art and Genre". *New Literary History*, vol 24, no. 1 (Winter 1993): 116.

<sup>41</sup> Like Clement Greenberg, Theodor Adorno, and Michael Fried.

process of devaluation of the cultural past by negating the value of the previous organization of expression, and at the same time offers the detournable as material for other ensembles as expressed in the search for a vaster construction, a new genre of creation at a higher level.<sup>42</sup>

Objectivity is also an approach to question the legitimization of art within society. In keeping with Roland Barthes' concept of the 'death of the author', the artist in order to challenge the legitimization of art had to eliminate all interpretation, expressivity, sentimentality, morals, and subjectivity, which had been heralded by most modernist art but failed to affect social reality. It was also recommended that the content of the art object be reduced into objects like consumer society does with every facet of life. These goals could be attained by using conventional non-artistic styles and mediums as are found in publicity, comics, graphic arts, etc. The same effect could be achieved through deformations of the cited object or figure, which should not respond to particular interpretations or manipulations of the artist. Rather, the Pop artist impersonally distorted, elongated, widened, deformed the image following laws of optics and objectivity. This demystifies the historical and contemporary mythic realities around the objects or figures cited. The prestige or heroism of the cited image is effaced and is shown for what it really is, and its social realities are shown for what they are. Furthermore, Pop Art's use of techniques from mass media, conventionally considered not worthy of high art further problematizes notions of high and low art. Roy Lichtenstein's painting the graphic technique of Ben Day dots used in comic books adds to the disruption of high and low art notions that his choice of mundane and melodramatic themes already produce.

This may seem that all forms of expression are losing all grip on reality and being reduced to self-parody, but this is not a negative feature. As Guy Debord put it:

It is necessary, to conceive of a parodic-serious stage where the accumulation of detourned elements, far from aiming at arousing indignation or laughter by alluding to some original work, will express our indifference toward a meaningless and forgotten original, and concern itself with rendering a certain sublimity. This 'parodic-serious' expresses the contradictions of an era in which we find ourselves confronted with both the urgent necessity and the near

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<sup>42</sup> Guy Debord, "Détournement as Negation and Prelude", in Paul Taylor, ed., *Post-Pop Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989): p. 7.

impossibility of bringing together and carrying out a totally innovative collective action<sup>43</sup>

This is an era of the ambiguous interplay of art and its negation. With many viewers the humor of parody in art like Pop provokes a laughter which is moral and obscene, because the classical view of art describes it so. But is the smile it provokes one of derision in judging the objects painted, or in the painting itself? By not knowing how to take it the spectator may be left with a shameful desolation, making art like Pop full of humor and humorless. Jean Baudrillard sees the logic of this humor as having nothing to do with subversive or aggressive humor. It is not concerned with short-circuiting the objects in their function, as in Surrealism, but rather in juxtaposing them in order to analyze their relations as in a semantic analysis. It is not an act of terrorism (a reading spectators may bring with them out of a critical nostalgia), but is rather derived from cultural isolation like a false wink for a 'certain smile' is one of the obligatory signs of consumption. Such false distance is everywhere, in films, and in modern advertising.

Ultimately, in this 'cool' smile, you can no longer distinguish between the smile of humor and that of commercial complicity. This is what also happens in Pop Art - after all, its smile epitomizes its whole ambiguity: it is not the smile of critical distance, it is the smile of collusion.<sup>44</sup>

This 'collusion' that arises with the spectator's participation in the production of meaning is where the critical capacity in Pop Art lies. The spectator, by being presented art's re-representation of the representations that are circulated in mass media for social legitimation, leaves with a sense of how his or her complicity functions social experience. The fact that this complicity is ambiguous or non-fixed in meaning or intentions, especially when it appears in art, the conventional sphere that holds truth, serves as a way of disrupting the dynamic of social complicity because the spectator leaves with an awareness that opens the way of critically questioning what is legitimized.

Serialism and repetition is another feature of Pop Art that takes away the notion of truth in an art image, because various facets on one theme are jointly presented. It also contributes in impeding the belief of the exceptionality of an image or the exceptionality of the

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 9.

<sup>44</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "Pop - An Art of Consumption", in Paul Taylor, ed.: 44.

corresponding situation represented by it. By representing Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley, or Jackie Kennedy, over and over again in a series with only slight variations, Warhol reinforced the cultural realities of an era and disrupted their logic ironically but not moralistically. What he did in these series is took the cliché of the star and reorganized their image, exposing the emptiness of the identity of the star through the banal repetition of their representations in mass media. Warhol's human subjects, stars, are themselves commodified and transformed in their own images. They become identical copies of originals that never existed. Barthes described how serialism introduced the element of time into painting. Pop as a challenge to the historicist process, a challenge to the idea of the natural supercession of styles in art, questioned the concept of the new in history. Repetition is a feature of culture and Pop repeats it spectacularly, which means the end of art, but also entails another new conception of the human subject because it offers access to a different temporality. The death of the subject, produced for example in Warhol's series on popular cultural icons, is rid of time because of the feeling that something has disappeared and become transformed into something different which does not resemble the first. It is important in Pop that a sense of the organization of a destiny not be created. Repetition is also disturbing because it multiplies the same image creating a double which is not threatening. The double is a copy, not beside nor behind the original but merely a flat insignificant hence meaningless double. Barthes suggests that such a state of non-fixity created by repetition makes it seem as though the object trembles before the gaze seeking its essence through the spectator. The trembling of things acts as the affirmation of the trembling individual spectator's essence.<sup>45</sup>

The use of the mechanical processes of reproduction freezes the image, leaving it soulless with nothing but a strictly imaginary status since the start of its being is the icon already presented in mass media. In Pop Art, the object we personalize in our everyday life is no longer anything but the residue of a subtraction: what is left over after we have mentally amputated all its possible themes and possible uses. Thus Warhol's Monroe, Presley, and Kennedy are cultural icons from the experience of a particular culture at a particular time through their saturation in mass media that has nothing to do with the identity of the person the icon is based on. Their identity as icons in mass media is moved further away from the original in Warhol's

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<sup>45</sup> Roland Barthes, "That Old Thing Art...", in Paul Taylor, ed.: 29.

appropriation and then repetition of their image, because as icons of mass media they are out of place in the sphere of art, and their tentative identity is exposed by focusing on the banal repetition of their image as stars. It is an awareness of the fundamental expression of a person is style. But today, when individuality is a threatened idea under the pressures that animate mass culture, the personality of art is fading. It depersonalizes but does not make anonymous because of the immediate and exhaustively identifiable quality revealing that the identity is not the person, the artist, the art object, or what it represents. Baudrillard commented on how it is a great affectation for artists to think they can be a machine, but on the other hand he does not fault them.<sup>46</sup> He sees their exacting logic as colliding with a certain sociological and cultural status of art about which they are powerless, and their ideology conveys this powerlessness. Whenever art, as witnessed in the attempts of the historical avant-garde have attempted to desacralize their practice, society has come to sacralize them all the more. And reciprocally, the more they have attempted to secularize art, its themes and practices, the more the manifestation of the sacred in art is exalted. Baudrillard reminds us that the author's content or intentions are not enough in preventing the art object from becoming another sign in society, a unique object, a signature, an object of luxury consumption. A change in the structures of culture would be required in order to prevent this assimilation of art into luxury commodity from happening.

Colour, the kind used in Pop, reflects a sense of enjoyment of play with its focus on the daily environment and its implied critique of this same environment, thereby ridiculing the serious art of abstract expressionism. Ironically, if the Pop object is to become a factitious object to demonstrate the destruction of art, then its colour must remain indeterminate, but in Pop colour is intentional almost a subject to a style. It is openly chemical, and not of nature, and its colour gives the Pop Art object a meaning and consequently makes it an art.

The issues around the language of the visual in the signifying process explored by the structuralists, is also a theme of Pop Art. There was a consciousness that the art object can be an instrument with the objective of communication, perhaps even with a didactic intention, and a predominantly descriptive intention was chosen by Pop artists and the figurationists. This awareness is what links Pop to Realism, but the equation is not that simplistic. Baudrillard explains that there is no order of reality in Pop Art, but levels of signification and thus there is

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<sup>46</sup> Baudrillard, p. 40.

no real space. The only space is that of the canvas where the juxtaposition of different elements and signs are put forward with their relations. As we know, Barthes also argued that there is no real time; only the time of the reading of the differential perception of the object and its image, and its repetition.<sup>47</sup> It is simply the time necessary for a mental correction or accommodation to the image, the relation of the art object to its real object. It is not an articulation of coherence, but of a successive order. It is a 'cool' art requiring a kind of abstract involvement or instrumental curiosity that brings into play intellectual reflexes of decoding and deciphering. The inclusion of mundane objects, or the vulgar as defined by high art, by Jim Dine, Claus Oldenburg, Roy Lichtenstein, and Andy Warhol demands from the viewer a questioning of why such misplaced objects across the spheres of high and low art have been presented to them, leading them to question what such notions mean in the first place. By producing such an effect Pop Art is not a popular art since traditionally this implies an unambiguous realism with a linear narration, not a repetition or deformation of levels. Allegory prevails in Pop with a participation linked to the uncertainties of the social praxis. Thus, only on a rudimentary level can Pop Art be seen as a figurative art. To be a Realist art it would ask itself how can social reality be signified by way of visual elements? But the society of neocapitalism has already started answering this question. The extra-artistic instruments of social communication, especially those that show intentionality and content of social behaviours, in essence the mass media, has increasingly undertaken more visual images as elements of its language or mode of communication. The advantage that Pop took of such a language is in how it appropriated these elements of language into the field of art to offer a self-reflexive analysis of it.<sup>48</sup> It used the syntactic structure predilected on commercial publicity, gaining its efficiency in provoking in the spectator an immediate consciousness or unconscious association between the perceived image as the total signifier. The advantage is double. On the one hand, linguistic signs designate a reality which people are already familiar with. On the other, these signs usually offer an emotional or affective designation that reveal its intentions of promoting certain behaviors when faced with a designated reality. The artist uses this language doubly by first constructing a

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 42.

<sup>48</sup> Llorens, "Problemes i tendencies de la pintura valenciana actual", *Suma y Sigue* (March 1966): 31.

model of experience, the art object, then profits from its mechanisms in the promotion of behaviours. As David Deitcher put it:

Once the pictorial signifier cannot be counted on to fuse with its intended signified, it achieves parity only with other signifiers as one side of a now irretrievably fractured relationship to the signified. In this sense all images had acquired an equivalence with one another in their capacity to yield 'non-meaning'.<sup>49</sup>

The dislocation of style from its former congruence with the concept of authenticity problematized the matter of locating the voice of the author as was never possible under the old and once durable order of metaphor. The pop object is neither metaphoric nor metonymic; stripped of any symbolic function, it has no depth. As Barthes said, no artist can be found 'behind' this obdurate object. Confronted by it the artist is moved to recall a 'true revolution of language.'<sup>50</sup> Metaphor has been replaced by allegory, and as Benjamin argued, the allegorist appropriates images in a seemingly arbitrary fashion thus severing them from their original function and meaning. It recontextualizes the image situating it in another network of signifying relations. By isolating the original signified, the signifier is now able to simultaneously produce a new meaning that is potentially antithetical the old, and this is the structural logic of allegory. In this way, the Pop artist could salvage the Utopian modernist tradition of opposing the effects of industrialized life within the elaborately sanctioned and imaginary spaces of discrete works of art.

Roland Barthes also contributed to the concepts of visual language. For him, art has traditionally set itself apart from reality in order to render the truth of the thing, and Pop Art intended to desymbolize the object and give it the character of a fact. But, to say that the object is without symbolic value is to deny that it possesses a profound or proximate space through which its appearance can create vibrations of meaning. The true revolution in language that Pop Art introduces is that its object is neither metaphoric nor metonymic. It presents itself cut off from its source and its surroundings. The Pop artist is also left with no depth as he becomes the surface of his pictures: no signified, no intention. What appears as fact in mass culture is no more than the stereotype and the image, and Warhol's Monroe is proof of that. By being an

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<sup>49</sup> David Deitcher, "The Handmade Readymade". in Paul Taylor, ed.: 147.

<sup>50</sup> *Idem*.



image, it is stripped of any symbol. Monroe is no longer the fact that is transformed into an image (metaphor), but it is her image which becomes a fact. But, despite being facts, as Roland Barthes reminds us, they begin to signify again: they signify that they signify nothing.<sup>51</sup> In its attempt to destroy art, Pop Art is rejoined by art because the attempt to abolish the signified and thereby the sign, fails because the signifier subsists. The signifier, the thing that is now perceived is augmented by a certain thought. This supplement in Pop Art exists as it does in all art. It changes the level of perception and once this is started art appears.

Baudrillard also contributed to the discussion of the language possibilities of Pop Art. For him, the object loses its objective finality and function to become a term in a much wider combination of groups of objects where value is one of the relations. It thus loses its symbolic meaning and tends to dissipate in a discourse of connotations which are relative to one another within the framework of a totalitarian cultural system which is able to integrate significations from anywhere. The modernist art object, no longer tied to moral or psychological values, began to assume an extraordinary importance as an autonomous element in an analysis of space. Similarly, Pop Art may be seen as the contemporary art form of that logic of signs and their consumption, or is it only an effect of fashion and thus purely an object of consumption? According to Baudrillard, these are not necessarily contradictory notions. He says: "One can grant that Pop Art transposes an object-world quite accepting that it also results (according to its own logic) in objects pure and simple. Advertising shares the same ambiguity."<sup>52</sup> Consumption eliminates that traditional sublime status of artistic production, but in Pop Art there is no privileging of the art object over the image in essence of signification and neither one is the truth, but both coexist. Warhol's Brillo boxes by circulating in the sphere of art are no longer merely the consumer items found on any grocery store shelf. Neither are they art in the traditional sense because they are so mundane, but they participate in Pop Art's claims to be homogenous with what previous art had set itself apart from. But, does this make it a non-sacred art? If consumer society is caught up in its own mythology, if it has no critical perspective on itself, and if this is precisely its definition, then no contemporary art can exist which, in its very existence and practice, is not compromised by, and part of this opaque

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<sup>51</sup> Barthes: 26.

<sup>52</sup> Baudrillard: 34.

obviousness of things. Pop artists paint according to real appearances because they function mythologically. It is not a game, nor a realism, but a recognition of the obvious fact of consumer society that the truth of objects and products is their mark. Through its predilection for such marked objects and material consumables with commercial success, as Baudrillard maintains, Pop Art is the first to explore the status of its own art-object as 'signed' and 'consumed'. It does not contravene on the traditional moral aesthetic because it is coupled with an ideology into which it is not apart from but akin to. Pop Art represents the surrounding world for what it is, primarily an artificial field of manipulable signs, a total cultural artifact where what comes into play is not sensation of vision, but a differential perception and a tactile game of significations. By presenting it as revealed nature, and essence, Pop Art has a double connotation: first, as the ideology of an integrated society (contemporary society is nature is ideal society), and second it reinstates the whole sacred process of art which destroys its basic objective. By wanting to be the art of the commonplace (the modern version of the sublime), Pop Art creates the moment that it signifies and thus ceases to be commonplace and returns to art. Like the contemporary object which is no longer useful for something, yet signifies, the art object is no longer to be manipulated as an instrument, but as a sign. The success of Pop Art is in how it shows this to us. The impasse is that art can no more be absorbed in the everyday than it can grasp the everyday. Because there is no essence of the everyday there is no art of the everyday.

### **Spanish views the critical potential of Figuration**

The evolution of an industrial society of consumption in Spain occurred later than in Europe or the United States and in a distorted and unequal way with a different rhythm. Therefore, the industrialization which permits the rise of mass culture, a popular culture that is not limited to survival, did not share a similar politic in Spain. There, politics were anchored in institutions of the Civil War and repression, and thus were part of the artistic life of the country. Bozal wrote extensively of this different process of modernization that took place in Spain. As he explains, Spain in the late 1960s was rapidly becoming a Western society of mass consumption though it had not fully evolved into such at the time. Though the average Spaniard had advanced economically, they were still behind other Western countries, because

problems of subsistence were still very real in comparison to societies of abundance. While the middle and upper classes were approaching the levels of the industrialized countries, the conditions of Spain's rural and urban poor resembled those of the Third World. What this meant for the Spanish artist turning towards realism is:

...no es algo que se limita a estar ahí, sino el medio en que debe comprometerse, cuyo sentido ha de cristalizar, expresar, etc. Es importante, porque, en su condición realista... su interés fundamental se centra en torno a las clases bajas, subdesarrolladas, pero su destino, por la naturaleza de la comercialización artística en Occidente, son los sectores del desarrollo. La diferencia de medios es suficientemente evidente como para que se produzca el desgarramiento. Como ya habíamos sugerido, pero ahora por otras razones, el artista adscrito al realismo vive en una contradicción dramática.<sup>53</sup>

The Spanish realist artist is in a position of contradiction by being concerned with the conditions of the underdeveloped sectors of society while being relegated to the developed sector of Western societies through the commercialization of art. In speaking of the two worlds that made up Spain at this time, the developed and underdeveloped, Bozal points out that the interest of the bourgeoisie for the lower classes was linked to an exoticism, the interest in spectacle, and not in a real comprehension of their reality. Along with the alienation of the producer and the labourer, neo-capitalism produces the alienation of the consumer comes with the development of neo-capitalism. The rise of a consumer society did not only create economic consequences, but it also altered existence and experience. Changes in principles, criteria of value, and customs have transformed the experience and way to formulating an identity of the individual which was more recently marked by advertising and the manipulative power of mass media. The individual has been reduced to an object, one amongst many, able to be measured, calibrated, and dehumanized. For Bozal, the solution then is not to return to a Utopian personalism, as evidenced in the modernist art of the Informalists, but rather to reveal the economic structures that produce this state. Of this, he wrote:

La solución, naturalmente, no consiste en volver a un personalismo más o menos idealista, sino en desmontar la estructura económica que ha producido semejante estado de cosas. Pues en esta consideración objetiva del hombre, por debajo de su alienación negativa, hay un aspecto positivo: la eliminación de los prejuicios retóricos que ocultaban la verdadera faz humana como si fueran una

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<sup>53</sup> Bozal, "Planteamiento sociológico de la nueva pintura española": 52.

pantallo mitificadora. No es solución, por consiguiente, volver atrás, desandar lo andado en este camino de la alienación del consumo, sino asumirla, partir de ella para destruirla, situarla a un nivel en que se disuelve. No es ese el momento presente. Ahora la alienación del consumo es una realidad en los sectores elevados de nuestra sociedad, y una esperanza en los restantes, o en buena parte de los restantes.<sup>54</sup>

For him, the solution is to assume the structures of myth-making in modern society in order to destroy the they circulate and are legitimated.

The debates in Spain over mass culture and intellectual conditions were going on at the same time that debates over the sociology of culture and theory of semiotics. Translations of foreign authors were being made thus introducing new contributions to the debates around art and mass culture. Though these debates included theoretical discussions, the culture, society, and politics of Spain were never absent. What arose was an awareness that the image acts as a sign in a signifying sequence. The desire to explore the possibilities of disrupting their logic explains the appeal of Pop Art to the Spanish artist of the time who sought artistic recourses to participate in the context of their country.

What was most attractive about the options available with figuration, with which Pop was grouped, was its potential for criticality. Bozal wrote that it offered: "opciones que pueden originarse a partir de la no aceptación del actual destinatario público del arte, y la no aceptación de la comercialización capitalista de los productos artísticos."<sup>55</sup> He, like many of his contemporaries, felt that the use of the figurative could make a more critical statement through the tension created between the art object and its referent in society. Furthermore, the embrace of figuration was made with a militant zeal. The appeal of such an approach to art is not surprising when one considers the tremendous scale of economic and social change that Spain was undergoing which included the drastic reduction of the agricultural labourer, the augmentation of services and industry, and the inability of the country to absorb the population of intense mass migration.

For this generation of Spanish figurationists, a modernist detachment was not a viable option. Their intense commitment to altering the relations of art production and the social praxis came from the same social and political frustrations that had motivated the Informalists

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid. 53.

of the previous decade, but by reintroducing content into art they exposed themselves to the threat of censorship. Their accusations were generalized, but there is no question of where their sympathies lay.

The potential for criticality with figuration, or realism, is implicitly based on the need to select themes that are pertinently a part of the society the artist wished to address. As Bozal wrote:

Realismo en los temas quiere decir selección de aquellos que encontramos en nuestro medio cotidiano, no temas supuestos o cuya existencia cabe esperar en otras situaciones, otros sectores sociales u otros contextos sociopolíticos.<sup>55</sup>

He called for a direct address of the immediate reality of Spain.

*Estampa Popular*, a group of artists which originated in Madrid, is an example the type of militant realism that pervaded Spanish art in the early 1960s. Several manifestations of Social Realism were seen in Spain and they often involved a strong desire to intervene socially, to renunciate ambiguous syntactics and offer more concrete connotations. At its core was a reaction to the banalization of the triumphant bourgeois reaction to art. At this point it was as though the process that tended to counterpose art and the social praxis had finally come to a head, and in order to continue its position against this capitalist structure, Spanish artists chose to invert the terms of this counter-position and think of artistic activity as a tool for social activism.

*Estampa Popular* worked actively and exhibited across the country spurring the same type of groups in several major cities, including Valencia in 1964. Characteristically, they exhibited mostly in places that were not integrated in the commercial circuits of art thus accentuating their ideological compromise and the combative attitude of their realism as well as its marginal character. This is also partly explained by their search for a new art audience that traditionally had been in the minority and at an economic disadvantage. They produced prints for inexpensive and mass dissemination to meet their goals, the crude quality of which helped keep them out of the art industry which was not interested in promoting their work. The

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid. 54.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. 62.

precarious state of, and general lack of, alternative art spaces in Spain at the time also kept other marginal tendencies from exhibiting.

*Estampa Popular* tried to lower art from its sacred station in society which was used to maintain the position of the elite. They also meant to create a descriptive technique to reflect their surrounding social reality; include artistic activity in the framework of other sectors of society that were not traditionally associated with art; and attempted to use clichés and modes of expression of popular art, particularly the labourer resembling Bolshevik art. Unfortunately, the audiences that they were able to draw tended to not differ from those who frequented the established commercial spaces, these being members of liberal professions, students, and intellectuals.<sup>57</sup> Another example of their failure in reaching a different art audience is evidenced in the quick public disinterest in the labourer as a theme in their art. They tended to substitute attributes of the class struggle into stereotypical symbolic emblems imbued more with a sentimental exaltation than with actual information. They had to ask themselves if their artistic programme was appropriately adjusting itself to the social realities around them which entailed so many economic and social changes rendering the image of the archetype labourer unsuitable. As Marchán Fiz put it:

El criterio decisivo para enjuiciar estas temáticas no es simplemente el recurso a los códigos fuertes sino las connotaciones históricas concretadas utilizadas. El recurso a connotaciones universales puede debilitar el compromiso crítico y devenir síntoma de evasión.<sup>58</sup>

It was generally felt that they failed to offer a critical art that would use figuration because the symbolic leanings of the themes they used tended to universalize and thus move away from reality by not focusing on the historical specificity of the reality they centered their work on. The labourer was no longer a suitable theme because it failed to treat other sectors of Spanish society that were appearing during the country's modernization.

However, despite their short-lived existence, their enthusiasm for what they saw as the possibilities of realism exemplifies the sense of urgency and hope that many contemporary Spanish artists of the time placed on the role of art in society through the use of figuration.

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<sup>57</sup> Valeriano Bozal, "Cuatro notas para el análisis de las imágenes del Equipo Crónica", in *Equipo Crónica. 1965-1981*: 34.

## Spanish views on the critical potential of Pop Art

The reception of Pop Art in Spain offered another exit from Informalism, and an alternative use of figuration. But, there were limits to what American Pop could contribute to the Spanish situation. For many, it exercised an insufficient amount of criticism, which was more attentive to effects and results than social phenomena. In general, Spanish artists were disinterested with the new representational tendencies in vogue that did not aim at problematizing representation particular to their situations. Rather, these wary artists sought to problematize reality, thus linking their intentions to a desire to recuperate the linguistic tension inherent in the spirit of the historical avant-garde. The difference from American Pop has been described, by Simón Marchán Fiz for example, as an attempt to invert the ideological neutrality attributed to it, with the goal of giving it a signifying charge, a definite criticism of the social and political that would be repeated over and over. Marchán Fiz also wrote on the Spanish use of Pop Art strategies that meant something different in the context of Spain. In fact, several Spanish authors mention this difference. For Marchán Fiz, the need to select signs that are recognizable to the audience the artist is relating to means that the signs will be different across cultural contexts. He says: "La heterogenidad del propio referente subyace, pues, a cualquier intento de asimilación, filtración, o mera contaminación".<sup>58</sup> In Spain, Pop Art was not a derivative movement.

In Spain, Pop Art offered a way out of the crisis of Informalism. By the 1960s, artists sought an art that would appeal to the collective and social testimony of reality. There was a veritable obsession with converting art into an active project creating an examination of the interventionism of the European avant-garde of the 1920s. This is not surprising when one considers the political urgency of such a project in Spain at the time.

Already in 1962, the debate about the end of and the fatigue over Informalism had begun. It was admitted that its greatest contribution to Spanish art was that it helped get the country out of the cultural isolation it had undergone during the first half of the century, creating a bridge with the international avant-garde. For Marchán Fiz this meant that: "lo

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<sup>58</sup> Simón Marchán Fiz, *Del arte objetual al arte de concepto. 1960-1974. Epílogo sobre la sensibilidad "Postmoderna"* (Madrid: Ediciones Akal, S.A., 1994): 73.

<sup>59</sup> Simón Marchán Fiz, "La penetración del Pop en el arte español". *Goya*, no. 174 (May-June 1983): 361.

convierte en la primera víctima de una dinámica artística que empieza girar en la órbita de las dependencias.”<sup>60</sup> The hegemony of Informalism did not only connect it to the stereotypical conception of the Spanish taste for the dramatic, expressive, black, sober, and mystical, but also to the conception of a pictoric creation imbued with the inspiration of the genius artist who produces a limited and authentic act that is expressive of the truth of things and the truth of the I. It was felt that it continued notions of high culture, what Modernism was criticized for, with notions of the well painted, of quality, and to images that circulate in the realm of good taste. The Spanish version of Pop Art reacted to these conceptions and introduced the duality of the rural and urban society, the notion of high and low art. It opposed the tradition of the Spanish taste for the dramatic, sober, and expressive as well as the creative action manifested in such a gesture. It made cold what Informalism made hot.

Furthermore, it also explored the development of the economy which was rapidly moving Spain towards developing into a neo-capitalist consumer state, and the ways the Franco regime used and manipulated images for legitimation. Spanish Pop artists rejected the tradition of good painting but not painting, and they chose to link themselves to the language of popular art, of the masses, but as it was linked to the industrial society. In this way it differed from other realist tendencies in Spain, like *Estampa Popular*, that had returned to figuration and which leaned more towards a Social Realist idiom.

The subversive potential of Pop Art was discussed by Marchán Fiz who cautiously welcomed the innovation it introduced to art, and the way it participated in the questioning of realism and art as an effective form of communication. The appeal lay in its communicative function that displaced the expressive which Informalism had chosen. This communicative function was tightly linked to a desire to put at the fore the ethical, political, and social over the aesthetic. The subversion of Pop Art for Marchán Fiz lay in the fact that it brought attention to the phenomena of mass culture, anticipating the industry of culture that clearly came to play an integral part in transitional Spain of the 1970s.

Llorens also discussed the potential of Pop Art in a Spanish context. He linked Pop Art to the consideration of the art object as a perceiving signifying structure that denotes social behaviours, which can and should bring about ethical values and effectivity through an

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<sup>60</sup> Idem.



objectivity of the behaviour of man.<sup>61</sup> It affirms the inevitability of ideology which can be alienating, but its lack can also be alienating because the indifference its lack would produce avoids confronting historical reality. The strongest affiliation between Equipo Crónica and Pop Art lies in the shared desire to depersonalize their production to their situation and time, and in their conviction of the dependence of painting in regards to the object or the painted. Herein is derived the linguistic aspect of their production that through an antisubjective approach to representation calls to attention the common text. The point was to understand the common, or the 'world', not as something given to perception in a natural way, but rather as something artificial, constructed by systems of social communication which Equipo Crónica intended to disrupt and expose. These technical recourses led to and strengthened the mediation of consciousness thanks to a kind of reconstruction, that was deliberately artificial of the subject-artist.

The relation of Spain to Pop Art is clearly differentiated in their syntactic relations. For example, the structure of the series or repetition with or without small variations of the same image, or of several linked to the same theme, so frequently used by Pop artists, like Warhol in his series of flowers or cultural icons like Marilyn Monroe, is a syntactic structure predilected on commercial publicity. Its efficiency depends on provoking in the spectator an immediate and unconscious association, between the perceived image and a total signifier; the series is an instrument of totalizing the isolated experience. The series tends to refer to immediate ethical issues in the same way that the immediate elements of experience tend to refer to a totalizing mediating object in mass media. The formal relations constituting the work are established at this level of intentionality. In reality, many of these syntactic relations are susceptible to the transcription of typical logical relations like counter-position, comparison, and paradox, but more importantly they also participate in disrupting it.

Bozal also credited the importance of Pop Art in Spain by elaborating on the use of the series. For him, the series searches for associations which are considered independent or completely different from each other, but that through association propose a reading that approaches the 'truth' behind the appropriated image which can be hidden in its original context. Decontextualization disrupts the reading of the image by taking it out of its original

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<sup>61</sup> Llorens, "Problemes i tendències de la pintura valenciana actual": 30

context, and Bozal writes: "En este terreno, dado el grado de mitificación de nuestra historia, el campo de posibilidades es sumamente alto".<sup>62</sup> Thus the potential for demystification proposed by Pop Art is what appeals to Bozal who encourages this process within a Spanish context where mass culture served the purposes of the State in creating a homogenous view of the country that supported the position of the Franco regime. Furthermore, Bozal described the critical potential of Pop Art with its objectivity and selection of themes from mass media as producing the desired effect of irritating the spectator who is offered something other than an art object. He writes:

...elimina las características personales, con lo que desaparece la interpretación subjetiva y la humanización a que suelen someterse los objetos y las figuras mediante el estilo y los matices personales, tiene un efecto sarcástico sobre la eterna preocupación por el estilo, las normas y los cánones tradicionales, el buen gusto artístico, etc., produce una profunda irritación en el espectador, que cree haber sido engañado, negándose a dar a estas obras el calificativo de arte y rechazándolas, etc. Naturalmente, el punto principal, del que dependen todos los demás, es el primero. Si el primero no ha sido logrado, ninguno de los restantes se producen.<sup>63</sup>

Bozal also points out that it would seem that in Pop Art the subject that all pictorial imagery evokes has disappeared as though being limited to retaking and reuniting, because in this world of objects, a world of images and the things they represent, there is no subject that projects the interests, intentions, or ideology which is fundamentally of its presence. Understanding this, the Equipo Crónica produced collages of paintings, that once pieced together would be read differently by each spectator. Such a procedure acts as a mirror which reflects the alienated environment of the spectator drawing attention to a creative morality which is above all centered on the production of images. In the same way that the cultural heritage of Spain had been diffused by the Franco regime, the Equipo Crónica disrupts its structure by appropriating its imagery, illustrating the diffusion of art history, and the avant-garde, but now producing an anonymous work which does not try to manifest the opinions of the artists, but rather to expose the articulation of what there is to view: the Equipo Crónica disappears behind their productions. This anonymity also marks the distance, described by

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<sup>62</sup> Bozal, "Planteamiento sociológico de la nueva pintura española": 64.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* 62.

Llorens, that the artists need to maintain while pointing to the imagery referred to. The artists are those who had the idea or thought of making the connections and associations in the art objects. The question, however, is: are objectivity and anonymity achievable if the associations made by the artists are recognizable, almost as a style? The choice of themes and the humorous associations produced by the artists are identifiably a product of the Equipo Crónica, no matter how much they strive for objectivity and anonymity.

Originally, Spanish critics to Pop art thought it was incapable of forming a cohesive perception and as a consequence would lose all efficacy that was not surprise and stupour. Others argued that Pop Art was limited merely to providing neutral information of what surrounds the spectator, and is thus devoid of any intentional signification. The reception of Pop Art into Spain came through critics who were the products of decades of isolation who formulated arguments that made it difficult to understand why it was being denigrated in the first place.<sup>64</sup> It was a movement understood through word of mouth rather than personal contemplation. Many critics did not like it and described it as ridiculous or of poor quality. Comparative material rejecting such claims are scarce and second hand with almost always black and white reproductions. Magazines were rarely to be found and were usually Italian or of foreign origin, like *Art International*. Travel offered another way for exposure to it, with Italy and France being the main foreign contact. Bozal saw this scarce contact with Pop Art as a good fortune for the Spanish Pop artist who: "sin descuidar que nuestra crítica mas abierta y progresista se hallaba atrapada en los litigios locales y bajo el influjo de los demonios familiares, propios de nuestra coyuntura artística y, mucho más, de la situación social y política general."<sup>65</sup> The subversion of Pop Art in Spain lay in the fact that it did not renounce the intentions of the avant-garde to confer intentionality of the social and the political in art practices. But, in this inversion linguistic recourses are not enough to provoke a formal decontextualization of found materials. Rather a pragmatic or dialectic reflection of the social media in question is required. This need for social engagement is what artists practicing figuration in Spain, be it through Pop Art influences, a Social Realist vein, or an expressive figuration, had in common.

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<sup>64</sup> Marchán Fiz, "La penetración Pop en el arte español": 363.

<sup>65</sup> Bozal, "Planteamiento sociológico de la nueva pintura española". 54.

## Equipo Crónica as Pop artists and Social Realists

The Valencian version of *Estampa Popular* first exhibited in November 1964, and again at the Medical Faculty of the University of Valencia in December of the same year. It is in these two early exhibitions that the seeds of what was to become Equipo Crónica's aim were first formulated. Their strategies, however, were infused in a more theoretical tradition that would be developed later, a tradition that opposed the more speculative traditional realism that was until then hegemonic. Tomás Llorens outlined their principle aims as being, first to produce an affirmation of objectivity and the satirical as propositions for the ethical contents of art in opposition to its lyrical tradition. Second, to use a content that avoids excessively generic symbolism that incorporates mass media of the Spanish industrial society. Such principles were published later in *Aulas*:

Las tensiones internas de la sociedad española exigen que el artista hoy, si quiere interesar y afectar profundamente a un público amplio (lo que debe ser su vocación y su oficio), se interese por la realidad exterior, por las aspiraciones y las necesidades muy concretas que pesan sobre la vida cotidiana de este público. No basta esa simple actitud individual de protesta en general, de rebelión puramente psicológica, que es la actitud de la mayoría de los artistas españoles más conocidos, hacen falta referencias precisas. Y para introducirlas hay que cambiar la estructura significativa de la obra de arte. Hay que poner el acento sobre la información, en lugar de hacerlo sobre la expresión (...). Utilizando las imágenes de los medios de comunicación de masas, los artistas de Estampa Popular entienden hacer, sobre el plano de la conciencia ética, lo que el Pop-Art trata de hacer sobre el plano sentimental de lo inconsciente.<sup>66</sup>

From this description of what artists are required to do in order to produce a critical art, it is clear that the proposed programme was neither a realist approach with concerns on social issues, nor a derivative assimilation of what it was felt American Pop Art proposed. Instead, what was called for was a veritable melding of the two.

The Equipo Crónica came on the art scene in Valencia at the time that Llorens' demands of art were made. They exhibited in Valencia with the Valencian branch of *Estampa Popular*, the principle theories of which were defined by Llorens, and which reveal the differences already being made from the original principles of *Estampa Popular* and similar early realist groups. No longer was realism to be about distinguishing itself from expressionism,

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid. 37.

nor between abstraction and figuration, but now it was about language and how the signifying structure of the art object, its meaning, needed to use the images produced by the mass media because of the ethical consciousness of the artist. The generally excessively expressive iconography of Social Realism needs to be substituted for an iconography of reality that approximates the images that inform the spectator of his or her experiences.

This call for a decontextualization of the images found in mass media is not simply a formal change in art, but a dialectic reflection of the contradictions of a particular society: no longer a realism explicitly about class struggle as traditionally associated with Social Realism, but now about typical aspects, relevant in different contexts, related both to universal and specific phenomena. This produces an abundance of possible connotations that are more or less determined not on reasons of codification of the medium, but rather on a criticism of the tolerance or repression of the social context in which it is presented or operates. Criticality arises in the intention to expose the underlying ideologies of capitalist societies by undoing their functions and revealing their causalities. The development of causal complexities is not realized only through the explicit contents that are united thematically, but in the proper organization of the meanings or of the levels of decontextualization - the syntactic and the signified. This depends on two critical components - to know the selection within a repertory of linguistic mediums, in thematic unities, and concrete connotations; and the combination of the selected repertories.

Many Spanish writers on Equipo Crónica have situated them between Pop Art and the new politically charged realism seen in Spain during the 1960s which differed from previous types of realism by being more concerned with the problems of alienation of consumerism, and more conscious of the need to address issues historically. Marchán Fiz described the interest of Equipo Crónica in American Pop as an attraction to its vitality, that: "de ese desparpajo y desinbicionismo envidiables que caracterizan al arte americano, lo más opuesto en los sesenta a nuestra cultura puritana de derechas e izquierdas, a las represiones ambientales, a las inhibiciones seculares, que apenas permitían probar las mieles de la década prodigiosa".<sup>67</sup> In this quote he reveals the appeal of the uninhibited fun represented by American Pop Art in 1970s Spain. Spain, in contrast to the United States, was a country full of institutionally and socially

imposed inhibitions that were fostered by leftist and rightist ideologies, and the persisting morality of the Church. The distinction between the political contexts of the United States and Spain demonstrates the sense of urgency that the artistic programme of Equipo Crónica, and as the next chapter will explain, their appropriation of images from Spanish art in particular, enabled them to approach more deeply their concerns and objectives with how art could approach impacting life, particularly Spanish life. Such a sentiment is already a displacement of Pop Art which is often seen in art history from an American perspective, thus neglecting other uses and examples of its strategies in non-American contexts. Equipo Crónica themselves were conscious of their differences to Pop Art, and as Valdés, one of the two members of Equipo Crónica put it:

Nos interesaba el realismo, pero entendíamos que en aquellos momentos pedía al espectador una adhesión sentimental, no racional. Tratamos de distanciarnos creando imágenes mas frías, asumidas desde el pop, pero dotándolas de contenido.<sup>67</sup>

It is clear from this that Equipo Crónica saw themselves as more ethically engaged than their foreign counterparts.

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<sup>67</sup> Marchán Fiz, "La penetración del Pop en el arte español". 361.

<sup>68</sup> Eva Larrauri, "Una exposición reconstruye en Bilbao la andadura artística subversiva del Equipo Crónica". *El País* (11 July 1988): 34.

## Chapter II

As discussed in chapter one, Equipo Crónica borrowed some strategies from Pop Art but interpreted them to meet their own goals which had more in common with the spirit of Social Realism that developed in Spain in the late 1960s, but from which they also differed. What they consistently insisted on exploring were the problems inherent to reality and its appearance, the arbitrary and fabricated transcription of reality as evidenced in mass media, pictorial fictions, the limits of representation, and the painting within the painting. Their art production was a contestation of the descriptive function of the canvas, with an irony of the very act of painting which approached mass media and the iconography diffused by it, but with them it was ironically contemplated and always addressed politically. The role of the Franco regime in the formation and diffusion of popular culture gave Equipo Crónica's appropriation of mass media images a particularly political motivation. Their strategies included working as a group, objectivity, appropriation, serialism, and parody always imbued with an attempt for criticality.

The shift away from works of art that were believed to contain an inherent message moved towards the message arising from the relationship between the spectator and the work. The spectator's social origin would then be the site of reading the message in art.

The work of Equipo Crónica reveals their consideration of the world as always a world of images, an interpreted world that is not natural, without referring to the natural or any notion of essence. They play with diverse interpretations and images, and manipulate them to bring to light the fact that their activity is not like conventional painting. They entered into the terrain of the game of decontextualization not on the canvas, but in the imagination of the spectator where the previous and new readings of the image they present are to be found, where both the visual memory and the recognition as the discovery of the older meaning is understood. At some point with Equipo Crónica, the spectator forgets that he or she is presented with a game that invites one to play by participating in the creation of meaning. By playing it becomes clear to the spectator that the game approaches a truth because there is no non-interrupted reality inherent in the art object. Rather, the truth, or approximation to it, comes from the reading the spectator formulates and walks away with once having viewed the non-fixity of meaning in the

art object. The point of view of the artist who traditionally discovered the essence of things underneath appearances has been substituted with Equipo Crónica by a procedure that relates to semantics. Like language, the sign is derived from the relation of the unity between the signifier and the signified. This produces a tension when the spectators forgets they are in a game, but the game is never hidden. Herein lies Equipo Crónica's aspiration for attaining an avant-garde intentionality.

They used the media of mass culture with its decomposition of images, objectification, decontextualization, metamorphosis, repetition, and deformation with the intention not to merely distort reality through a personal impression of it, but to call attention to the results obtained with the revealing approximations created through decontextualization. The distorting play with perspective, uninterrupted repetition, and appropriation are techniques that when applied to the realm of art disrupt the logic of both mass culture and modernist art which often differentiated itself from the former. By situating their art production between mass culture and high art, Equipo Crónica managed to produce neither art objects nor simple objects, but rather objects of criticism that met their need to implicate art in social reality.

Originally, the Equipo Crónica consisted of three members: Rafael Solbes, Manuel Valdés, and Joan A. Toledo. The latter left the group shortly after its inception, and the remaining two members continued to work together until the death of Solbes in 1981. By working as a group they were able to attain political strength, artistic camaraderie, and achieve the desired anonymity called for by Pop Art.

Their intention as a group was to establish a position in the panorama of daily art via a system of affinities in creating a painting that is thematically political in which the central theme consists of a judgment on the situation of the artist vis-a-vis the history of modern art and society. With this as a goal, it seemed more appropriate to form a group to ensure the objectivity adopted from Pop Art with its authorless strategy, because a simple proposition on a particular aspect of a situation could be better made by including several perspectives on the same theme.

On a more practical level, working as a group facilitated circumventing the censors which had plagued Spanish artists throughout Franco's regime resulting in many artists



working in exile and developing clever strategies to cloak their meanings. Generally, artists and groups were less closely scrutinized by the censors.

In regards to the camaraderie established between Solbes and Valdés, Carla Stellweg described their working methods in the following:

They share everything including schedule "...from 9:30 am to 2pm and from 4pm to 7 pm. The first half hour they spend having breakfast together, but each goes to his own home to have lunch from 2pm until 4 pm. Preparatory work is done in the outside world - together in cafés, bars and hotels. They have an assistant who takes care of all the administration and telephone conversations, finds the documentation they need and tends to correspondence. After work they do not meet socially except for interviews. Both are married and have no children. They travel extensively and use these experiences for their work."<sup>69</sup>

The objectivity they wanted to achieve had earlier precedents. For instance in the 1957 manifesto of *Equipo 57*, they called for the rejection of psychoanalysis, Surrealism and in general any emotive, individualistic, or literary content. They wrote: "en una epoca como la nuestra no determinado por el individualismo, sino por la colectividad, cualquier solución que tienda a lo particular pierde toda posibilidad de contemporaneidad".<sup>70</sup> The required collectivity to achieve contemporaneity in art, wherein the intentions of the avant-garde lies, was a concept that was also put forward by *Equipo Crónica*.

The colour of Pop Art, and indeed in the work of *Equipo Crónica*, lacks adornment with no play on light or exploration of the problems of representing light, thus giving it no traditional sense of technical artistic value or semblance of artistic quality. This puts it in direct opposition to Abstract Expressionism and Informalism which were often praised for the artist's mastery and handling of his or medium. As they themselves put it, they chose what they called "Walt Disney" colours to add kitsch to their art production in order to challenge notions of high art.<sup>71</sup> Bozal claimed that the use of the aggressive colouring of advertising meant that *Equipo Crónica*: "hacen de éste un arte popular de la nueva sociedad industrial, en la que el artesano y el valor artesanal han perdido su sentido."<sup>72</sup> He argues that *Equipo Crónica* were able to

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<sup>69</sup> Carla Stellweg, "New Mirrors for a New Society: Seven Artists in Post-Franco Spain". *Artnews*, vol. 79, no. 3 (March 1980): 63.

<sup>70</sup> Marchán Fiz, "La penetración del Pop en el arte español": 119.

<sup>71</sup> *Equipo Crónica*, "Cronología por series" in *Equipo Crónica. 1965-1981*: 22.

<sup>72</sup> Bozal, "Planteamiento sociológico de la nueva pintura española": 62.

dismiss notions of artistic mastery by introducing the new techniques particular to mass media. For Bozal, Equipo Crónica produced a popular art belonging to a new industrial society. This completes the process of the 'death of the author', the life of whom was so cherished in modernism, and attacks the traditional role of art vis-a-vis society. Furthermore, Equipo Crónica used colours (of advertising and comic books) and techniques to subvert the source of their production - mass media.

Their *Latin Lover* of 1966 (see illustration 2) illustrates their strategy of appropriating the techniques and images found in mass media and advertising. It challenged the notion of a unified Spain being created during the tourist campaigns of the 1950s and 1960s, and its vibrant colouring in large flat planes mimics the techniques of advertising. It is almost as though their painting could be used to replace a travel poster, if not for the fact that it is far too stereotypical to be taken seriously. They redid the stereotype, ironically, to reveal the artificiality of its ability to represent, as Warhol did in his series of cultural icons. This disrupted the circulation of a sense of a Spanish identity put forward by Franco and disseminated through mass media during the tourist campaigns. These campaigns fed into the stereotypical international, and now national, view of Spain as exotic 'other', with notions of it as a country of passionately tempestuous lovers, as embodied in the likes of Rudolph Valentino or Carlos Gardel, who just could not help it because of the balmy climate and gorgeous scenery. Such constructions of a national identity, also contributed to the idea of one Spain within Spain itself. By appropriating the types of images used in this construction of a false national identity, Equipo Crónica commented on how the country can interpret and manipulate its own self-depiction. Their use of the image of the latin lover is based on quoting recognizable images disseminated through mass media, to create different effects. To use already existing images which have been circulated by cinema, comics, photography, and other forms of mass media, gives new significations for daily lived reality. To repaint them is to create an inversion of the logic of the sign. Thus *Latin Lover* serves to expose the structures involved in the creation of it as a sign that represents Spanishness. The stereotype of the latin lover is a recognizable image that is a prefabricated element of everyday life distributed through mass media. Its appropriation into the sphere of art produces a critique of its historical myth by suggesting the falsity of its ability to

represent the real, leaving the spectator with a sense of the tensions inherent in representation. Art cannot represent the essence of things, because no such essence exists.

Equipo Crónica also used serialism to reach the same goals. For them, the series presents variations on the same theme like the new industrial society of Spain, militarism, folkloric traditions, and elements of Spanish art history appropriated for political motives of Franco. They also selected images that were already perceived serially in newspapers, news, etc. They used these previous images that pretended to speak of the world and manipulated them to explore the concept of speaking of the world, revealing the real condition of this world of representation. Their *Folklore* of 1966 (see illustration 1) borrows Pop Art's use of the series and repetition in order to expose the blatant overuse in the mass media of using folklore elements of Spanish societies in the false construction of a unified national identity. Recalling the tourist campaigns mentioned earlier, the choice of the Flamenco dancer, a form of dance particular to only some parts of the country especially Andalusia, imposes a sense of unity on the country over regions that do not share the same folklore. The progressive distortions of these dancers, repeated over and over again throughout the canvas contributes to the understanding of the distorting capacity of the mass media to manipulate reality, thus creating an alternative artificial one through its representation. The flamenco dancer as a sign of Spanishness, especially as fostered by the Franco regime, is with Equipo Crónica exposed for being nothing real. She is merely a construction used to signify Spain, and the falsity of such a sign is exposed by Equipo Crónica. Furthermore, they employ the objectivity of mass media to reveal the reduction of figures to objects done in consumer society. *Folklore*, thus, does not represent a flamenco dancer, but the distorting practice of mass media in producing images that make claims to represent personal experience. *Folklore* literally replicates such a procedure of representation in mass media. Equipo Crónica's use of the serial techniques of mass media in art also entails a critique on notions of what techniques belong to the realm of art, thus undermining both bourgeois notions of technology as progress and art as natural, autonomous, and organic. The result is not the representation of some abstract 'human condition' but rather a critique of the invasion of capitalism's technology and instrumentality into the fabric of everyday life and the human body.

It should be recalled that the series stresses an indifference that we reach in the bombardment of mass media and acts as an obstructive function in this system. The spectator approaches what he or she thinks should be the art object only to be confronted with something else. Gone is the 'aura' of the 'genius' artist and 'authentic' art work which has been replaced by a coldly painted image that replicates what mass media bombards us with. The commonly circulated image is re-circulated only now in a realm that is called art, but that does not act like art in the modernist sense with its 'apartness' from life nor in a realist sense that mirrors ordinary real objects. Instead, what is reflected onto the spectator is a dialogue of signs that disrupt each other creating a satiric and schizophrenic edge within and of the language of signs.

By creating a series of works on a subject many more facets are exposed that one picture alone cannot show. It also avoids the notion of exceptionality of the art object, or its situation, and rejects the sacredness of the unique work thus permitting a reflexive reconstruction of what art does and is within society. The series establishes a distance that permits a reflexive reconstruction while avoiding an empathy and outlines a new type of narrative. It orients the spectator to variations in sequentiality whereby truth is no longer seen as having an essence, but is a result of an historic experience and artistic elaboration.

Equipo Crónica also made references to cultural artifacts, especially Spanish art, which were not directed to a small group of cultural connoisseurs to make allusions only such people would get. Instead, the recognizable images they selected for satiric and critical ends were so well known that they were part of the popular culture of Spain. These included Velázquez's *meninas* and dwarves, Goya's grotesque characters and royal portraits, El Greco's elegant *señores*, and Zurbarán's, Murillo's, and Ribera's saints in mystical ecstasy to name just a few. Sometimes Equipo Crónica's use of these images may seem to pay homage, at other times to lay the past to rest, and occasionally it is more ambivalent leaving the spectator with an understanding of the tensions involved with any attraction to previous art. Equipo Crónica do not criticize Velázquez, Goya, El Greco, or any of the artists they cite that form the canon of Spanish art, but instead manipulate the aura they carry with them as specific cultural, social and political signs. This serves to demystify and satirize aspects of contemporary society. Equipo Crónica combine images of mass culture that constituted the visual heritage through their social consecration and ideological canonization.

Several of their series appropriated images from the history of painting, especially that of Spain, in order to consciously reconstruct the process of reconstruction they had already gone through under the regime and through the systems of legitimation in Western society. Spanish painting of its Golden Age had been used by the regime to create a collective myth of a culturally unified contemporary Spain by fabricating a sense of cultural inheritance that had been presented as a collective imagery.<sup>73</sup> Equipo Crónica, by selecting images that had already gone through a process of selection with the regime, were able to demystify their meaning offering a representation of the immediate social experience of the original works. Implicit to this endeavour is the sense of a violent and confrontational position being taken because appropriating images from the State controlled mass media of Spain in order to be critical of it, meant being critical of the State. They were criticized at the time for presenting nothing more than a purely satirical intention in their appropriation of Golden Age images, a criticism they flatly denied, because the ambiguity that arises is not mere satire, but lies in the presentation and rejection of the contaminating power of myth, combined with a fascination for that same power as pure pictoric potential. In this case, the memorability of the image is what most fascinated them. Their borrowing of images from Spanish art evokes images of both greatness and corruption, or glorious extravagances and economic collapse, of pure spirituality and of the grossest forms of servitude and exploitation. Also, their depiction of physically degenerate monarchs and their attendants and dwarfs both attract and repel, but their legacy in Spanish culture is undeniable.

Their procedure of appropriating such cherished images was to be intentionally disrespectful, and one of their earlier planned projects involved making balloons out of some of the figures of Spanish Baroque art to make their sacrilege public. This was never carried out, but they did do cardboard images of figures from Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, and members of the royal family depicted by Goya, which clearly demonstrate their recourse to parody of images found in popular culture and the public consciousness.

The yearly week-long celebration of *las fallas* in Valencia is marked by several community events which include the erection of cardboard and papier-maché satiric representations of local and foreign celebrities from politics, the entertainment industry, sports,

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<sup>73</sup> Llorens, "Equipo Crónica: La amistad y la palabra": 64.

etc. These sculptures are exhibited in practically every square around the city, and attract crowds of spectators who circulate through the streets to view them while they are being constructed, and then watch them burn on the last day of the holiday. Equipo Crónica's use of the satire involved in this popular culture tradition in art, creates a kind of sacrilege that establishes the artistic in a different orbit that is neither low nor high art. It introduces a new space where a new dimension of criticality on and from art may arise by demystifying its culturally sacred images. This caused great hostility on the part of Spanish art critics who upheld a criteria for art based on the idea that to create is an activity associated with notions of authenticity and quality. For Equipo Crónica their art practice had to problematize this notion, and the responsibility of the artist lay in examining the mechanisms and techniques of the painter to introduce criticality on the role of art in society.

The satiric humor of Equipo Crónica's art production, was particularly relevant to the time in which they worked, because their choice to use it can be understood as having contributed to their desired opposition to the previous sobriety of Informalism. Of this, William Dyckes wrote:

It has become too popular to emphasize the tragic in Spanish art and to draw gory, convenient comparisons with bullfighting and war. The truth is that only a small percentage of the artists in Spain maintain a very serious tone, and the passionate Spanish temper is as much an exaggeration as the señorita with the rose in her teeth. The light, the lyrical and particularly the humorous are strong elements of Spanish art that go virtually ignored when shows are prepared or general criticisms written.<sup>74</sup>

The Equipo Crónica explored appropriating elements from the history of art, maintaining the form of the recognizably famous work, but altering it in a new cultural and historical context. This produces a symptom of the historical process that invalidates the normal authenticity of the original work, and parody as a linguistic recourse to obtain such an indirect opposition. It accepts a historical, cultural article of elitist or mass consumption and confers on it a different meaning through its decontextualization.

In the context of Spain, Helen Graham describes the parody used in popular culture as a means of self-protection and a form of cultural resistance which helped people get by during

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<sup>74</sup> William Dyckes, *Spanish Art Now* (Madrid: Gráficas Brasil, 1966): 2.

the 1940s. She refers to such a strategy as an "affirmative cynicism in desperate times which so much human reciprocity had been reduced to having an exchange value of the market".<sup>75</sup> It can be argued that the irony that circulated in Spain's popular culture of the 1940s continued in subsequent decades, including in *las fallas*. Equipo Crónica mediated between such irony and combined it with a new iconography that was particularly Spanish, especially when they appropriated images from its art history and collective imagination. In this way they produced a violent position that led to an understanding of references that were demystified as a clarification of applied consciousness and more immediate social experiences. The paradox lies in the arbitrariness and subjectivity that is implicit in taking a position and the violence done to the cited iconography, introducing an element of ambiguity.

It can be argued that in making an ambiguous presentation their intention was to reject the contaminating power of myth. The subject-artist as constructed by the art activity cannot analyze or judge his position from outside the activity, therefore the only space of freedom left is to open the terrain in which he or she moves - painting. Equipo Crónica was left with no other choice but to offer a markedly ironic critical reflection on the system of painting in its iconographic repertory, to take images out of their previous contexts and insert them in the new space of the painting they produced. The transcription of the satire and irony so prevalent in Spanish popular art into high art meant an appropriation of non-artistic techniques and themes disseminated through mass media. This offered several advantages to Equipo Crónica's intentions. First, it eliminates characteristics of the personal which avoids the subjective and humanizing interpretation often put on objects and figures which was so crucial to their distancing themselves from modernist tendencies which they felt had failed to integrate art into the social praxis. Second, it creates a sarcastic commentary on the preoccupation with style, norms and traditional canons of good artistic taste. And third, but not least, it creates a profound irritation in the spectator who feels cheated when the art object is negated the character of art which leads to the potential rejection of the traditional status of high art. The spectator is confronted with neither an art object nor an ordinary object, but an object of criticism.

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<sup>75</sup> Helen Graham, "Popular Culture in the 'Years of Hunger'", in Graham and Labanyi, eds.: 241.

By reclaiming the portrait of the clubfooted dwarf by Ribera's *Le Pied Bot* (1642, Louvre), in their *The Insistent* (see illustration 3) Equipo Crónica reveals the fact that the original painting does not bear something inherently Spanish as the mass media would like one to believe. Robbed of his original context, and made contemporary with the inclusion of Miró-like amorphous creatures, Ribera's familiar dwarf grins out addressing the viewer directly. But now his involvement with the viewer has nothing to do with the naturalism that characterizes Ribera's figures. Instead, it is as though he shares in complicit glee his new position produced by Equipo Crónica's decontextualization. As a member of the cultural heritage of Spain that has been constructed by the Franco regime through its control over mass media, the dwarf has been relegated to the realm of high art, and imbued with the aura appropriate to such an art. Equipo Crónica's appropriation of an image that carried such an aura serves to decontextualize it doubly. The dwarf's representation through reproductions of the mass media already removed it from its original context in order to use it as a sign in a new signifying structure. Equipo Crónica, by doing the same, critically exposes the use of it as a sign and thus disrupts the structure that had produced its meaning. Miró and Ribera's representations, and indeed those of several other Spanish artists, have already been re-represented through reproductive techniques of the mass media controlled by the Franco regime both to create an image of unity based on a strong cultural heritage, and as false examples of the regime's modernity. Now again the examples of Miró and Ribera are reused by Equipo Crónica in such a way that the aura of authentic Spanish art, as fabricated and controlled by the regime, is disrupted making way for a potentially critical art that may continue to make such disruptions in the formation of signs. Both Ribera's dwarf, and Miró's amorphous creatures now inhabit a new space that is not familiar to them in the sense that it is not their original environment, but it is familiar to them in that they still dwell in art, just another kind from another time with another intention. No longer are these misplaced and oddly associated appropriations signifying what they used to: in the case of Ribera the remarkable naturalism infused with a humanism that had been usurped by the Franco regime to construct a national identity based on a strong cultural heritage, and in the case of Miró creatures that exist in the imagination of the artist beyond the banality of reality. They are now used by Equipo Crónica to challenge notions of what they came to mean through the legitimation of the Franco regime and neo-capitalism, because their power to signify that



they signify nothing has been exposed. The spectator is the one who participates in the formation of meaning around the art object. The meaning is not inherent to the art object nor is it a truth to be revealed by the artist, but it is a changing and never fixed meaning that is altered across time and coloured by the reading of the individual spectator.

Equipo Crónica's use of humor in this attempt to change the role of art vis-a-vis society is also evidenced in *The Meal* of 1973 (see illustration 4). A ghastly toothless creature out of Goya's disturbing oil on canvas paintings at the Quinta del Sordo sups on a modern meal consisting of a modernist fish while an apple and cabbage (elements from Sánchez Cotán *bodegon* or seventeenth century still-life painting), dangle nearby. Within arm's reach is a cubist bottle of seltzer and glass. The juxtaposition of these elements from Spain's cultural heritage, that include its Golden Age era of art in the still life, the Romantic heritage in the figure of the old woman, and its more modern cubist and perhaps Surrealist exploration in the food she eats, strike the spectator as odd and he or she is left uncertain as to what the message is. They sarcastically transcribed the satire and irony of popular art into high art, and vice versa in appropriating from art history. Does this invite abandonment and passivity in the surcharge of information, or on the contrary, does it invite participation in the sensorial bombardment or even critical distance by referring to conditions of perception? Does its aggressivity on the spectator really redefine the relationship with the spectator, or is the aura of art maintained by the contexts of the works? These questions are difficult to answer but it can be agreed that they are the results of the strategy of appropriation of other media outside what is normally considered worthy of high art. Such a disruption of the traditional role and definition of art reformulates the role of vision in art. The perturbing role of the art object that solicits from the spectator an intense encroachment that is de-routed and makes the spectator conscious of conditions around signification, especially artistic signification. The effect is inseparable from the aggressive iconography, but is accompanied by a deconstruction of the space of the picture and procedures of traditional illusionism. There is no message within the painting itself, but the viewer now needs to participate in the creation of meaning that may arise. The spectator is presented with a collage of the history of painting in Spain, a history of its classic greatest hits. This serves to draw attention to Equipo Crónica's own production as complicit in the formation of signs through representation, and is stressed by the references they make to their

own practice as artists. They focus on the question of the power of signification of painting and its limits which are situated in the polarity between high culture and mass culture, or low culture. The function of high culture, including the avant-garde which has historically been trapped in the system it challenged, is to assure differentiation, to employ a real entity in contrast to mass culture that keeps in place the position of art in a capitalist society.

Their desire to change the traditional role of art is further evidenced in their immersion of figures from Spain's Golden Age into a contemporary environment filled with objects that represent the first forms of consumption in Spain, like the pressure cooker, computers, etc., which is what their series entitled *La Recuperación* of 1968-69 did. As already mentioned the images from Spanish art that they appropriated make up the visual, political, social, and cultural history of Spain, and have been used by the regime as signs of identity of a historical present. Appropriating them satirically disrupts their logic within the Spanish system of arts legitimation. The sense of history that is reclaimed by representing the governors and defenders of the Spanish Bourbon or Habsburg monarchies serve to create a repertory of the signs of identity of a historical present. Their recontextualization makes evident the similar reclamation these images went through as a consequence of a political process, and not a quality natural to or inherent in the images. They produce a synchronicity of time, place, and function. For example, in their *Antechamber* of 1968 (see illustration 5), is there a difference between El Greco's *Man with Glove* seated behind a modern veneer-finish desk with his hand on his chest and the similar contemporary figure of an office manager or politician seated in his office? It would seem Equipo Crónica is implying there may not be. Furthermore, the man has a nasty weapon at his disposal, and the question put forward to the spectator is whose weapon is it? Does the man have it because he belongs to the social structures that trap art in its 'apartness' from life to maintain privileged positions? Or, does he have the weapon to represent art, because he is after all a recognizable figure from Spanish art, which through its position in society tries to create spaces and dialogue that disrupt the powers that make art inert? The ambiguity present in the formation of such questions contributes to negating the spectator the ability to read it the way that is conventionally thought to be the character of art. This disrupts and rejects such a notion of the art object that is imbued with meaning or the artists personality, and serves to redefine the relationship between Equipo Crónica, their art object, and the spectator. Their reference to

art was intended to be critical of art and society by appropriating the images such a society controls through mass media to create signs. El Greco's portrait as canonical example of Spanish cultural heritage, is put by Equipo Crónica within his contemporary reality as a sign within a politically motivated mass media control over the cultural heritage of contemporary Spain. The gentleman has been recontextualized into the real modern world of Equipo Crónica and the space of contemporary experience which brings in Pop Art's idea of intervention. It creates neither an ordinary object, nor an art object. Instead, El Greco's gentleman becomes an object of criticism by being exposed as a sign. This serves to comment on the power of myth as a stabilizing element of fascist power, and on the ability, or lack thereof, of art to impact experience by disrupting the stabilizing impact of signs in representation.

Equipo Crónica contributed to the debates around art with avant-garde intentions by focusing on their own practice as artists, and examining art tendencies of their time to take their agendas to task. Their series *Policia y Cultura* of 1971, (see illustrations 6 and 7), explored their interest in contemporary movements most fully by painting teams of uniformed oppressors juxtaposed with elements borrowed from modern and contemporary art. While their reasons for quoting images from the realm of art has already been, and will continue to be explored in this thesis, the figures of the aggressors represent abstractions of police and military interventions occurring contemporaneously with their art production. It is clear that by including figures that point directly to political and social realities around them, (like the Vietnam war, the student movements of May '68, and the Civil Rights Movement) Equipo Crónica was trying to infuse their art practice into the social practice. They used a large format (2 x 2 metres) with a highly complex system of visual references to decontextualize and recontextualize the images taken from mass media along with images of twentieth century avant-garde painting and newer tendencies with avant-garde intentions. They described their intentions in this series as:

No consideramos la actividad artística como una actividad autónoma, pero ello no quiere decir que pensamos que el conocimiento de dicho fenómeno pueda explicarse exclusivamente en función del entorno en que se produce. Estos paralelos son tan mecanistas como frecuentes. La actividad artística posee leyes que le son propias, y para nosotros, sólo del conocimiento de estos mecanismos del lenguaje en cada caso concreto, así como del análisis del medio donde se

producen, lugar y tiempo también concretos, se pueden extraer respuestas productivas.<sup>76</sup>

In questioning the complex inter-relationship between art and society, they did not consider art as autonomous, which does not mean that it can be understood by what surrounds it. For Equipo Crónica, artistic activity has its own laws, and knowing the mechanisms of the language, as well as being able to analyze the way it is produced, offers the possibility for productive answers because it admits that no neutrality exists or is possible around such an artistic activity. They wanted to reveal the discipline of art not in a systematic way but as something that in each historic situation is concrete with its own internal contradictions and doubts. The space created by painting can be one of liberty.

This series was made between the fall of 1970 and the spring of 1971 for an exhibition in Barcelona at the School of Architects, and was their most ambitious project to date. It consists of eight canvases of equal size (200 x 200 cms), and was inspired by a specific historical situations in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the European student movements of 1968 which in Spain were politically different than those in France. The series suggests a narrative but not in the traditional sense because there is no order of sequence, not even within an individual scene. The fact is, it deals with one singular theme: the power of art faced with social realities. The possibility of a reading is not evident here because there is no linearity. Instead, an ambiguity is created through the unexpected association of images creating what Equipo Crónica called their "barroquismo compositivo".<sup>77</sup> It includes iconographic appropriations that run the gamut of diverse avant-garde tendencies of the twentieth century, but it is most significant that American Pop, which was fundamental to their initial formation, appears here appropriated in the same way that Expressionism, Dadaism, Surrealism, etc. A discussion of *This One Won't Get Away* (see illustration 6) and *Pim-Pam-Pop* (see illustration 7) will describe why.

The critical capacity of art is questioned and perhaps even negated in *This One Won't Get Away*. The question "who is *this one*?" is immediately made, but the answers are not so clear. Are *they* the Figurationists (Dubuffet, Bacon) elements of whose imagery appear here?

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<sup>76</sup> Equipo Crónica, "Cronología por series", Catalogue, p. 22.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. 23.

And if so, what does the question mean? Is it a statement by Equipo Crónica to suggest they do not think such art can be critical? If so, are they criticizing Figurationists who do not enter the discursive potentials available in appropriating the images and techniques of mass media? Or are they referring to the broader category of art practice in general when confronted with real physical force? Throughout the series, storm-trooper types stomp through environments consisting of elements from several modern and contemporary art movements. There is a certain ambiguity in each scene, but what is clear is Equipo Crónica's probing issues of criticality in art vis-a-vis society by taking up the stylistic repertoires available to the twentieth century national and international avant-garde. This painting has an emphasis on the simultaneity and juxtaposition of contrasting compositional hierarchies that create a pictorial scenario that is purely artificial and constructed, and not representative of anything in particular, except for issues concerning the avant-garde. This type of complex and artificial fragmented pictorial space opens a space for allegory and ambivalence where it is not the gaze of the spectator but his or her visual and ideological memory that is fundamental. It is not about Equipo Crónica's impression of the events, but their re-representation creating a strong visual impact with its ambivalence towards its original social context and mass media representation. Equipo Crónica understand the stylistic repertoire of the avant-garde as constituting a system which is closed contextually with a bourgeois origin in how it is legitimized in capitalist society. Pop Art's blatant introduction of mass culture into the realm of art seemed to have opened up the system, because by appropriating and isolating images from mass culture, their meaning changes by being infused with 'articity' in their inclusion in another system. Thus, for example, to read Lichtenstein, the spectator approaches it with an understanding of it as art, which is different from how the same spectator would approach a comic book. Llorens describes this effect as wearing different glasses, and writes:

la décontextualisation mutuelle des images (...) en proposant des lunettes pour lire des lunettes, ce qu'ils proposent aux fidèles c'est de retourner le chemin qu'ils ont jusqu'alors fait: de retourner le chemin vers la constitution d'une conscience sociale différentielle. Ne serait-ce pas, peut-être, le seul niveau où l'art de nos jours peut espérer atteindre la conscience sociale?<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Llorens, "Equipo Crónica. La distanciation de la distanciation: une démarche sémiotique": 89.

The avant-garde goal of Equipo Crónica is to propose a different way of approaching the art object so that the spectator can leave with a different awareness of his or her experience. The artist merely proposes ways of looking at the ways of looking in the formation of meaning in representation, and the structures that operate in society to control representation. It is left up to the spectator to choose how to define art and society, and where to be positioned between art and collective action. As Llorens asks, is this involvement of the spectator's experience not the only way for art of our times to have an impact on the social praxis?

*Pim-Pam-Pop* (see illustration 7) is another painting from the *Policia y Cultura* series that made encyclopedic references to contemporary art. They linked such appropriations to a theme of victim (art) and victimizer (political vehicles of control) which act as deliberate barbs against modernist artists who they thought irresponsible because of their emphasis on expressions of the individual psyche which avoided direct political engagement. What underlines this series is the point that all artistic freedom is granted to the artist by the state under conditions that are mutually understood. Art can be manipulated and devalued no matter how revolutionary it tries to be. The artist never succeeds in defeating what it opposes, and as such becomes an instrument of repression. As Dan Cameron wrote: "Part of the underlying sense of this series, perhaps, is that all styles are equally impotent against the state, and therefore equally complicit in its crimes".<sup>79</sup> The wit in Equipo Crónica lies in making this modern art what a totalitarian state would deem socially undesirable: an attack on its way of being in and maintaining power. This makes them political artists. But art is here shown as helpless when confronted with reality. The environment in *Pim, Pam, Pop* is a purely contemporaneous one. A Lichtenstein industrial setting dominates the background, while police devastate the field of Warhol flowers by marching through it. A Jim Dine shoe floats to the right of the canvas, but at first sight resembles a pistol hanging from the policeman's belt. Also floating around the foreground are a Warhol soup can, a Lichtenstein comic book-like rendering of a brushstroke, a Morris geometric shape, and a Rauschenberg nude. The irrelevancy of these contemporary artistic elements to real actions taking place give a sense of the inevitable failure of art in participating in redefining its role in society. Equipo Crónica are here asking themselves and the viewer what it means to be avant-garde, and if it can be

achieved at all when faced with physical realities. Ultimately, it would seem that avant-garde art is bound to fail in its attempt to have art participate in changing the social praxis by transforming the position of art vis-a-vis society, but even with this assumption, the Equipo Crónica continued to work and explore the possibilities available to them through appropriation, serialism, and objectivity. As Llorens described it earlier, the only potential for success of the avant-garde lies in art's participation in the formation of a different social consciousness in the spectator by presenting a disruption in the formation and circulation of signs.

This exploration of issues around the avant-garde were further explored in Equipo Crónica's *Seria Negra* of 1972. This series also recontextualized images of mass culture and the avant-garde, but added the concept of genre in order to challenge the division between high and low art. Genre is a mode of expression that has been expulsed from high art, and Equipo Crónica chose to focus this series on the gangster film genre that was so prevalent in Spain during the 1950s which had contributed to its initial period of *apertura*, appropriating its violence. Their *Painting is like Punching* (see illustration 8) humorously dramatizes the image of themselves as militants operating for social change. The painted tubes of paint juxtaposed over a painting of what looks like it could be a scene from a gangster movie exaggerates the difference between the two media. Equipo Crónica's inclusion of the reproductive technique of film points to previous calls for art's inclusion of reproductive techniques, but Equipo Crónica painted the technique, creating an ironic positioning of themselves between notions of high and low. To critique the notion of high art, they appropriated the imagery of low art, only to return it to high again through the act of painting it. Herein lies the paradox of the avant-garde in its precarious position created through society's definition of art in a capitalist system.

Their series *Autopsia de un oficio* (Autopsy of a profession) of 1970, elaborates on this non-fixed position of the avant-garde and has as its central theme the activity of painting. The series illustrates their attempt to analyze their own production within a wider examination of the practice of painting. Their *The Dog* (see illustration 9) portrays them within their own practice of painting by standing in the royal chambers where Velázquez's *Las Meninas* was painted. They have literally immersed themselves in the sphere of art, in order to understand its

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<sup>79</sup> Cameron: 129.

mechanisms, and way of signifying. The scantily-clad duo stand inside the system of art they challenge, interrupted in their painting of the dog that has in their representation taken on gigantic proportions. This painting depicting their unfinished painting draws our attention to the fact that they await from us the spectator, an indication of where their project will lead. Theirs is a never-ending undertaking, because the avant-garde intentions they strive for can only come from our and society's redefinition of their position as artists.

Their series entitled *Guernica* of 1969 is probably the best example with which to illustrate the artistic intentions of the Equipo Crónica, (see illustrations 10, 11, 12). The history behind Picasso's *Guernica*, of 1937, is a loaded one, and not simply for Spanish contemporary artists. The many publications on this work in particular, and on Picasso generally, attest to its importance as an example of avant-garde twentieth century art. It was painted for the Spanish pavilion in the 1937 World's Fair in Paris, which was devoted to the struggles and suffering of the Spanish during the Civil War. In 1968 Franco began making attempts to have it sent to Spain in order to demonstrate that his regime was abandoning its original hostility toward the work and possibly towards Picasso. The significance of this lies in his attempt to generate an image of Spain as modern, combined with the prestige of possessing a world famous painting. It was generally hoped that it would help improve the stance of the Franco regime toward foreign culture, and even modern art. Picasso responded to the Spanish government's request with a resounding no, though he did state that he did want it in Spain "when the Republic shall be restored."<sup>80</sup> In 1970 he changed this to: "when public liberties will be reestablished in Spain".<sup>81</sup> Exactly how to determine the appropriate time for its return was the subject of debate during the late 1970's, until finally in 1977 it was secretly transferred from New York's Museum of Modern Art to the *Casa del Buen Retiro* in Madrid. Many headlines at the time revealed the political significance of its return to a new democratic Spain. However, the coup d'état in February 1981, brought into question the actual opportune time to bring it to Spain, and it remained locked until its protective case was ready for installation. The official viewing of it occurred October 23, 1981, and was widely held as a testimony of national reconciliation.

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<sup>80</sup> Herschell B. Chipp. *Picasso's Guernica: History, transformations, meanings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988):171.

<sup>81</sup> Picasso quoted in Chipp: 171.



The historical significance of Picasso's *Guernica* is widely varied. At the Paris World's Fair, it served as propaganda for the Republican cause, and then was viewed as a symbol of the atrocities of the war as evidenced in Spain, and was made into a symbol of campaigns opposing war and promoting peace and liberty. In the 1970s in Spain, it became a symbol for a new Spain and became a significant force in both the reconciliation of old hatreds and in the final healing of wounds from the war. More recently, the ceremonial removal of its protective case has been used as an exemplar of the permanency of democracy in Spain. Its place in art history is equally varied. It generally became a subject of controversy between abstract and more representational artists with a social consciousness. As Herschel B. Chipp wrote: "*Guernica* became recognized not only as one of the great monuments of modern art but also as a unique example of the role a powerful work of art could play in forming our view of the condition of the modern world and even in shaping political history itself".<sup>82</sup> It became a painting charged with political and artistic symbolic value.

The questioning Equipo Crónica went through on their own practice as artists, and their choice of Picasso's *Guernica* as a starting point on this issue seems appropriate because as Bozal put it: "Porque Picasso se ha convertido en sí en el símbolo de la difícil democracia española".<sup>83</sup> He also said that: "Si antes fue... emblema de la resistencia, hasta convertir Guernica en una 'estampa' que aportaba suficientes señas de identidad sobre su poseedor, ahora empieza a ser el emblema de la transición y de su presunta consolidación".<sup>84</sup> Art can always be used to serve specific interests in social constructions, regardless of the original intentions of the artist, but it is precisely this power of art to represent that opens up the possibility for avant-garde strategies, especially when it is the intention of the artist to put into question the system of representation in society and art.

This series represented an opportunity for Equipo Crónica to reflect on the transformative process of an image and its signification by looking at one particular painting from the canon of Spanish art history, thus limiting the meanings around it, and selecting a contemporary art piece that was heavily charged with signification and imbued with a certain value as cliché of the symbolic. But, more importantly, it allowed them to explore issues around

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid. 159.

<sup>83</sup> Mercedes Lazo: 163.

being political painters, with avant-garde intentions. By appropriating *Guernica* and its aura they were suggesting that the struggles Picasso contended with in 1937 were still present in 1969. Furthermore, by playing the role of political painters they made clear, as Dan Cameron suggested, that “once the artist has embraced his or her medium, there can be no escape from the museum as prison, even mausoleum, the ultimate repository of all his or her energy, labor, and ambivalence”.<sup>85</sup> The ultimate fate of the avant-garde is to be rendered inert in its assimilation into the social construction of art that it critiques.

*The Intrusion* (see illustration 10) is a humorous illustration of the avant-garde incorporation of mass culture to the realm of art. Here, a Spanish comic book figure, (resembling a figure from the days of *El Cid*, a Spanish hero in the wars of expulsion against the Moors), is shown wreaking havoc within Picasso’s already tumultuous setting of the *Guernica*. High art meets low art here in a literal representation of the avant-garde intention of redefining art within society, in order to allow art participate in the social praxis.

*The Banquet* (see illustration 11) is taken from Zurbarán’s *St. Hughes at the Cartusians Refectory* (Seville Musuem), and the diners are a group made up of recognizable religious figures, contemporary figures whose representation seem to have been taken from contemporary newspapers (perhaps they are recognizable public figures in Spain at the time), and a comic book soldier from the days of the Spanish Reconquest. They are being served by a humble servant on loan to them from the heritage of Spanish painting, as they prepare to dine on violated figures from Picasso’s already violated *Guernica*. A mysterious figure, strangely resembling Franco outside of army uniform, overlooks the scene in the room lit by the light in Picasso’s *Guernica*. The criticality of the avant-garde seems to be seriously compromised here when faced with politics, the paralyzing institution of art, and the Christian zeal of the institutions in Spain.

The third painting in the series *Guernica* is entitled *The Visit* (see illustration 12). The fate of the Spanish avant-garde, indeed every avant-garde, is being imprisoned into the very system it intended to attack - art. Here, the figures of Picasso’s *Guernica* are about to be caught as they try to escape the space they have been confined to in society - the museum, or as

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<sup>84</sup> Bozal quoted in Lazo: 163.

<sup>85</sup> Cameron: 128.

Dan Cameron described it, the prison (as hinted at in the barred skylight) and mausoleum. Official dignitaries are about to enter the chamber that houses the *Guernica*, and we are left wondering what will happen next. Will there be enough time for the figures to escape their situation, which is highly unlikely? Will they try to return to their spaces within the painting to hide the fact that they refuse to be confined to the space created for them, where they will wait until the next opportune moment? Or will there be a moment of clash between the two opposed groups?

Yet again, the Equipo Crónica gives the spectator ambiguity which is meant to irritate. We only know that that is their artistic intention. This series calls upon the viewer to read all the possible themes at once in their radical and random difference. This requires the reader to follow the mutation in the logic of representation in making demands on his or her capacity for understanding aesthetic representation, and to somehow rise to a level where the perception of such difference becomes the new mode of grasping reality. This proves to be the success of their art because by affording the spectator glimpses into the power or authenticity of representation, a new space emerges allowing for a critical distanciation. Equipo Crónica needs to be seen as having entered a zone that had been forbidden to art in Spain in the pre-figurative days due to censorship and the general cultural repression of the Franco-regime, while acknowledging the ideological constraints which define art and the avant-garde as a system. This understanding produces an ironic homage to the attempts of Picasso, an allegory for the helplessness of art when up against real power, for what Picasso's career meant to the younger generation of Spanish artists, and an undermining of clichés about Spanish art in general. The art production of the Equipo Crónica is about avant-garde painting as a product and prisoner of high culture, exposing the limitations and renouncing any illusion of transcending them. But without abandoning painting, they continued to participate in the meaning of the avant-garde.

### **Chapter III**

Until now, a discussion focusing on issues of artistic ethical engagement, and debates over the role of the artist and art vis-a-vis society have been elaborated in order to place the production of Equipo Crónica into context. It has entailed a coverage of issues that demonstrate a focus on visual meaning and signification in general, and an urgency in addressing socioeconomic configurations

To contextualize the work of Equipo Crónica within its time and country this chapter will look at some issues surrounding art in relation to the legacy of Modernism, issues and strategies of the avant-garde, Spanish views on these two, and contemporary interpretations of the successes or failures of the strategies elaborated within these debates in order to situate the critical potential of art within neo-capitalism which still has relevancy in contemporary Spain.

#### **International Legacy of modernism**

Modernism and avant-garde identity are always based on two cultural phenomena, traditional bourgeois high culture and the vernacular culture as it is increasingly transformed into modern commercial mass culture.

High modernism in art has defined its relation to mass culture with an insistence on the autonomy of art production, hostility to mass culture, a radical separation of cultural and everyday life, and a programmatic distance from political, economic, and social concerns. Modernism begins in the forced marginalization of the artistic vocation. An examination of how art aligns itself to the pressing demands of public life where individuality could only be expressed in private acts of self-estrangement, in distancing and blocking out the gray realities of administration and production in favour of the lighter world of urban leisure and spectacle wherein the subjective expression of freedom becomes a function of a supplied identity detached from social mechanisms. In this way, Modernism connotes an autonomous, inward, self-referential and self-critical artistic practice.

Clement Greenberg is one proponent of Modernism who insisted on such a categorical separation of high art and mass culture, with a political impulse behind saving the dignity and autonomy of the art work from the totalitarian pressures of Fascist mass spectacles, Socialist

Realism, and an ever more degraded commercial mass culture in the West. In his "Avant-garde and Kitsch", published in 1939, he starts out with the flat rejection of a limited frame of formal aesthetics. The crisis in art that resulted from the economic pressure of industry devoted to the simulation of art in the form of reproducible cultural commodities or mass culture was the basis for his argument. Modernism for him is what art is left with after it is stripped of its marketable qualities. In "Towards a Newer Laocöon", of 1940, he wrote that art was isolated in its medium to restore an identity of an art, whereby the opacity of the medium must be emphasized. Mass culture determined the form high culture must assume. It is prior and determining, Modernism is its effect, therefore admitting an interdependence all about repulsion and no attraction. Kitsch for Greenberg, exists to fill a vacuum which compensates the surrender of personal autonomy to the discipline of the workplace in the intense development of time left over; lost control over one's life is rediscovered in the symbolic and affective experiences now defined as specific leisure. A contradiction between oppositional art and the public with an appetite for no other kind of opposition led to an autonomous practice, that saw the commodification of culture as a negation of the real thing, or the rich and coherent symbolic dimension of collective life of earlier times. Modernist art for Greenberg was an art that acted as a critical response to the perverse laws of capital underneath the apparent variety and allure of modern urban spectacle.

Theodor Adorno shared a similar view of Modernism. For him, the exchange value in society reduced everything into quantitative equivalences reflecting the bourgeois need to subjugate everything to the same principle. Art had become an endangered medium resisiting this general tendency, but it lacked the social influence derived from having a communicable content. To resist conforming to society, art must be related to the social totality, resist it and not attempt to communicate with it, thus creating an absolute negation. Modernism was a mistrust for the word as bearer of meaning, directing its entire energy towards the negation of an ossified language of thought forms that art had become. His was a sociopolitical pessimism. Serious art could only negate the negativity of reality, thus maintaining the separation of art and reality. Only through negation does the work maintain its independence, autonomy, its claim to truth. For him, it was necessary to maintain this distinction because in the modern, rationally organized capitalistic state, even culture loses its independence and is deprived of its critical

substance. The praxis of this culture industry subordinates all spiritual and intellectual creation to the profit motive. In a radio lecture in 1963, he said:

Culture industry is the purposeful integration of its consumers from above. It also forces a reconciliation of high and low art, which have been separated for thousands of years, a reconciliation which damages both. High art is deprived of its seriousness because its effect is programmed; low art is put in chains and deprived of the unruly resistance inherent in it when social control was not yet total.<sup>86</sup>

Peter Bürger offered arguments in favour of the avant-garde strategies of the twentieth century and their attack to alter the institutional commerce with art which had pushed artists to the margins of society.<sup>87</sup> He felt their success lay in the skepticism in an artistic language as a means for discussing the norms and values. The newfound Modernist strategies led to art's dissociation of language from traditional forms of narration, described as a transformation of form into content which was now about the apartness from the praxis of life that had always constituted to the institutional status of art in bourgeois society. It created an intensification of art's separateness from life, and artists reached an increased consciousness of their techniques (ie. how material is applied and its potential for effect). Their strategies were logical but also negative in the sense that they led to semantic atrophy. By turning onto itself, aesthetics had severed itself from all social relevance, and avant-garde artists were forced to recognize the social inconsequentiality of autonomous art, consequently leading them back into the social praxis. Therefore, for Bürger, it had nothing to do with the consciousness of language, but a continuation of tendencies already present in Aestheticism. In the 1920s the first art movements to turn against the institution of 'art' and its autonomy was different from previous nineteenth century attempts at avant-garde strategies which were determined by an acceptance of this autonomy. The avant-garde of the 1920s attempted to transform 'l'art pour l'art' isolation from reality into an active rebellion that would make art productive for social change, through criticism and self criticism. This presupposes the failure of bourgeois society and since it will not change the avant-garde's attempt to integrate art and life, it had to fail because of the false sublations of the art/life dichotomy in fascism with its aestheticization of political Western mass

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<sup>86</sup> Adorno quoted by Andreas Huyssen, "The Cultural Politics of Pop". in Paul Taylor, ed.: 51.

<sup>87</sup> Jochen Schulte-Sasse. "Foreward: Theory of Modernism versus Theory of the Avant-Garde", in Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984): xi.

culture with its fictionalization of reality, and in Social Realism with its claims of reality status for its fictions.

For Bürger, the avant-garde's intention of reintegrating art into the life praxis cannot occur in bourgeois society, except in the form of a false sublation or overcoming of autonomous art. For him, worked-through experience can only be the consequence of an adequate total understanding of the social. Avant-garde linked to bourgeois society is neither positive nor negative but we need to shift the focus away from the question of evaluation and toward the break the avant-garde made with art as institution. The institution of art and bourgeois society makes this investigation mandatory. The avant-garde questioning of its mechanics makes possible an examination of the exclusion of certain works as low art.

Art can be both protest against and protection for the status-quo because of its ambivalent position in bourgeois society. Art that protests the alienation in society and insists on participation in the ideals of the future fulfills the classical-romantic notion of art in modern society. But, because it is detached and autonomous from society, this art can become a mere compensation for lack in society, serving to affirm social conditions it does not protest.<sup>88</sup> On the level of artistic content, art dissociated itself from its communicative function in society in Modernism and radically set itself against society in this way. Modernist artists were not just reacting to society with feelings of ennui, angst, etc... nor merely reacting to the social with last-ditch efforts at breaking up and dislodging prevailing styles. Instead they had created an emphasis on the pathos and not praxis for art. The modernist avant-garde actively attacked the institution of art, not to isolate themselves, but to reintegrate themselves and their art into life - this intention is evidenced in several manifestos of the avant-garde, in Surrealism and Russian Constructivism for example. This design to destroy the institution of art, permitted its existence and significance to become visible and perceivable. Modernist art could only give body to social criticism through the stylistic weapons like Abstraction that made it autonomous with its art for art's sake attitude and individual transcendence over the alienation of bourgeois society. In such a way it tried to undermine the homogenous ideology of bourgeois society. This left the historical avant-garde of the 1920s with the opportunity to attack the institution of art once aesthetic or modernist art radically separated itself from society.

The institution of art has been bound to the social, and critics saw work in the sphere of art as a privileged domain apart from society. Thus, the institution of art mediates art with bourgeois society, and the autonomy of art is derived from its social function as art in modern society. Art offered a better world to the bourgeoisie that was precariously balanced between the negative and the affirmative, and the avant-garde social praxis aimed at intervening and disrupting in this social reality. It understood that the bourgeois institution of art which supported the autonomy of art left it impotent to intervene in social life and therefore the avant-garde developed different concepts of the work of art. If artists could create unclosed, individual segments of art that open themselves to supplementary responses, then the aesthetic fragment and organic whole of Romantic artworks would be different, for it would challenge its spectators to make it an integrated part of his or her reality and to relate it to their material experience.

Only by setting the avant-garde within the broad context of cultural politics and the consciousness industry, can the avant-garde be understood. The concept of experience in art must change depending on whether society is identified with language or not. Experience must emerge from the ruptures within the system and exposed by the avant-garde. The merely particular remains just that: it materializes momentarily and is never tied to anything general in society. For this reason, the use of the series by artists seeking criticality, offered a space for the sensuous-material experience to be made possible. The language of modernist Abstraction prevailing in late capitalism, is an art that could be construed as never being linked to society, the result for the alienated subject creating a search for affirmative forms of expression.

New possibilities are presented with Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht. Benjamin was influenced by Brecht and like him he tried to develop the revolutionary tendencies of art out of the production relations of capitalism.<sup>89</sup> He used the Marxist conviction that capitalism generates productive forces that make the abolition of capitalism both possible and necessary. The productive forces are the artists and the artistic technique, especially when they use the reproduction techniques of film and photography. By using new means of artistic production, as for example Dada had done with montage, the avant-garde proved that the criterion of

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid. xxv.

<sup>89</sup> Huyssen: 64



bourgeois aesthetics which involved notions of authenticity, aura, and originality, had become obsolete. For Benjamin what the avant-garde intended and, to a certain extent, achieved was a relentless destruction of the aura of art which they branded as reproductions through the very means of production, thereby destroying the bourgeois concept of an autonomous and eternal art. But, ultimately they failed because out of negation alone, neither a new art nor a new society can be developed. In order for it to be critical, and thus approach avant-garde intentions in 'trying' to have an impact on reality or social practices, then it needs to establish a theoretical critique of art based on an understanding of historical processes and an understanding of the historical process which is formed by the critical experience of art. This reciprocal project will serve in approaching an understanding of how art can reach a certain level of success, despite its apparent failure by being extracted from its marginal, and thus critical capacity in neo-capitalism.

Benjamin demanded two things which were the application and use of modern artistic techniques, and the partisanship and active participation of the artist in the class struggle. The key question for him was the position of the work of art within the productive relations of its time and not vis-a-vis it. He was interested in transforming the forms and instruments of production by a progressive intelligentsia interested in liberating the means of production and hence active in the class struggle. He differed from Adorno and Greenberg in that he held a positive view of modern reproduction techniques as they were applied in art, due to his different views on capitalism. But, neither the thesis of the total manipulation of culture nor the belief in the revolutionizing effects of modern reproduction techniques has withstood the test of time. Reproduction techniques in the early part of the century challenged the bourgeois cultural tradition but today they confirm the myth of technological progress. However, modern reproductive techniques have a progressive potential today in the unlimited distribution of art works and the destruction of the aura of work of art, a prerequisite for arts autonomy and authenticity and concept against which the avant-garde has historically defined itself. By combining notions of art's need to critique prevailing capitalist developments in society and appropriating mass media the avant-garde seeks to develop a theory and praxis leading eventually to the integration of art into the material life process, because its mixing of class signifiers acted as a subculture response to generate new meanings. The glamor or marginality

ends in the domestication of every modernist movement, because mass consumers appropriate its pose, but make it a shallow and detached version leaving nothing of the original. The transition from margin to centre evacuates the form of the original vividness, but does something persist? The expansion of culture economies continually creates new marginal areas and young subcultures will create themselves to begin the process anew. Herein lies the relevancy of looking at Equipo Crónica in a Spanish context.

### **The twentieth century avant-garde**

With modernism the notion of the gestural notation appearing as a natural and liberated moment of individual life is where its oppositional claims were founded, because of the bourgeois assumption that it can transcend the culture of commodity. Its deliberate evasiveness and opacity to insist on the material surface is where modern Abstraction was articulated. The museum is where art is sealed off confirming its autonomy as an expression outside history. In relation to this, mass culture can be understood as doing the same in its denial of the commodity by using the objects at their disposal and creating a double marginalization when it is brought into art. The avant-garde return to mass culture reflects the efforts to revive and repeat the modernist attempt to transcend the culture of commodity, each time from a more marginal position. The attraction to mass culture is based on its marginality. In this way, it collapses the distinction between high and low by transforming the totalizing creative practice of traditional painting into a fragmented consumption of already existing manufactured images and it disrupts the false harmonies of oil painting by reproducing the disposability of the late-capitalist commodity. Modernism was successful when it figured in detail the manufactured culture it opposed and put it on display by shifting the boundaries between high and low art and altering the received messages through representation.

The formal autonomy of early modern painting can then be seen as not a withdrawal into self-sufficiency, but a mediated synthesis of possibilities derived from both the failures of existing artistic technique and a repertoire of potentially oppositional practices discovered in the world outside. It represented itself as a position in contradiction to the social position. It neither affirmed nor negated it, but acted out the possibility of critical consciousness in general, and the

provocative inclusion of materials from outside validated high culture was joined with a new rigor of formal organization, an articulate consistency of attention within the material fact of the picture surface.

The avant-garde depends on elite patronage which serves the interests of actual consumers that goes beyond an attraction to quality or glamour of the forbidden. The break between the high and the low was necessary in order for the avant-garde to refine what it finds in the fringe of mass culture. It searches out areas of social practice that are not yet completely available to efficient manipulation and makes them discrete and visible.

The failure of avant-garde lies in two things: One is the way it can exhaust itself in negation as some modernist artists may be accused of doing, of what it is not, that is self-contained and apart from the social praxis. The second is in how even during periods that produced an avant-garde, bourgeois culture was able to co-opt any kind of attack made on it. Artistic inventions and the use of technology by the avant-garde were absorbed, co-opted, and legitimated by Western mass mediated culture in all its manifestations. The irony being that technology initiated the avant-garde and its radical break with tradition, but then deprived it of its necessary living space in everyday life. The culture industry's capability for manipulation seems complete. But can we find an alternative character of high art? Can an art that critiques notions of high art with its aura of authenticity which reveals it as nothing but a means of domination that deprives art of its utopian and anticipatory need to transcend market exchange? It can be argued that by having established its apartness from society and commercialism, modernist art created the space for avant-garde strategies to situate themselves.

### **Avant-garde and subversivity**

Whether seen from a left, or right wing, perspective views on the avant-garde of the twentieth century usually define it as a reaction to capitalism that generally rejected the cultural commercialization of art. In many cases this view simply reinforced the divide between high and low culture that itself had been manufactured by capitalism. But, it should be remarked, the avant-garde strategy of incorporating popular and mass cultural discourse to redefine the role of art in a capitalist system by rejecting its high art status was particularly marked in the case of the Spanish avant-garde.

Spanish artists chose to appropriate the mediums and imagery distributed in mass culture in order to produce an art that would have a greater chance of participating in or prompting change in society. The homogenization of difference produced by the state controlled mass media in Spain, which had begun blocking individual interpretation of material experiences through a dominating system of spectacles, images, and representations, was particularly the target of such artists. Their concern for political and social issues, and their insistence on being ethically engaged artists, led them to ask that if material or unarticulated experiences exist behind the homogeneity imposed by mass media, and if a psychic tension or contradiction of some kind exists between the two, then the different degrees of verbal approximation and conscious understanding are possible. It is on this possibly successful potential for change, that the new Spanish Realists focused their efforts. The creation of such a tension is dependent on the access people have to a public sphere of production, even though the actual sign is difficult to make coincide with what it signifies, the experience. Consciousness is the historically concrete production of meaning that approximates an accurate articulation of material experiences, and linguistic recourses to critique this depends on both the selection from a repertory of already existing images and themes that carry their own meaning, and combining the repertories that have been selected by the artist. The pragmatic of such an endeavour of disruption lies in the intercession of the art object in the totality of society's reality which is never free of contradictions. The selection and combination of elements from high and low art were recommended to tend to definite contexts of place and time in order to reach a higher degree of indeterminacy and ambiguity that can produce a critical disruption, while avoiding notions of universality which Spanish artists in the 1960s wanted to distance themselves from as the concept of universality was often associated with the art production of the Informalists whose programme was no longer deemed acceptable by many looking for a more socially engaged art programme. The discourse produced by decontextualizing both mass culture and high art would allow artists to enter the public domain of the system of creating affinities, thus accepting the game of a shared creation of meaning between the work of art and the spectator, an unthinkable sacrifice for the modern artist who would be forced to give up precious give subjectivity.

In a 1988 exhibition review Eva Larrauri wrote that *Equipo Crónica*:

Analizaron sin utopía las relaciones de la cultura y de la clase dominante, e hicieron indisociable la historia del arte y los acontecimientos sociales. El Equipo Crónica desafió todas las normas vigentes hasta entonces, los símbolos y los mitos, desviándolos por medio del humor.<sup>90</sup>

It is through humorous juxtapositions and decontextualization that the Equipo Crónica were able to demystify images from art history and mass media to expose the intricate relationship between culture, art, and the bourgeoisie.

She also said they created allegories producing: "una obra que combina pensamiento y experiencia visual. No crearón, sino que manipularon mitos y símbolos".<sup>91</sup> These two quotes illustrate the subversive character of the Equipo Crónica, because they manipulated signs circulated in society in the same way as the mass media controlled by the Franco regime. Equipo Crónica exposed the contradictions inherent to the state-controlled mass media by appropriating its techniques and themes in such a way that they were able to denounce the cultural myths fabricated by the Franco regime to maintain its position of power which reveals the political positioning of their programme. The themes of Equipo Crónica hide a nihilism or tactical strategy which is at times opportunistic, but more often than not reflect a realism of isolation and alienation produced in a capitalist system.

Llorens points out that the appropriation of images from the Spanish Golden Age by Equipo Crónica acted as a linguistic inversion of the signs that had already been translated into the context of mass media and education controlled by the regime. The regime had used examples of Spanish art history as symbols with ideological values pertaining to their position of power, thus making them signs within a contemporary context of cultural control. Llorens wrote:

Et, tout en utilisant ces images, on s'est aperçu que la peinture historique, sacralisée, douée d'une valeur spéciale, abstraite, par le Musée, s'était prêtée particulièrement bien à... la re-sémantisation idéologique franquiste.<sup>92</sup>

While democratic Spain is currently being affected like other nations by globalization, the problems posed for culture are different as they are within other nations. The globalization of media has meant both an awareness of the cultural diversity in Spain, and an erosion of that

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<sup>90</sup> Larrauri: 34.

<sup>91</sup> Idem.

diversity through imitations and pastiche. However, it does present a freedom that had not been licensed before democracy. But, on the other hand, there are risks involved in the loss of identity caused by an excessive influx of imported cultural goods which are signs of a global capitalist culture that poses a threat to any culture with its possibility for heterogeneity. An art production that uses the strategies of appropriation, the series, objectivity, and parody approaches the possibility of producing a reflexive and critical position between art and society under capitalism.

For Spain, a positive response to such a threat could not be found in taking refuge in the promotion of a folkloric localism or *casticista* pride, for that would merely create cultural stagnation. (The term *casticista* was widely used in the late nineteenth century in a time of growing nationalism and was popularized by the 1898 Generation to describe a sense of Spanish essence. The term was abused in Francoist ideology, and had become associated with a belief in the need for a strongly centralized nation-state that in practice has meant the Castilian). Though the recovery in democratic Spain of cultural, linguistic, and political differences, have to a large degree been positive, the new plurality in the regional autonomy movements has its own dangers. The Franco regime has been characterized by its attempt to unify the nation by projecting difference outside its borders, or confining it to internal exclusion zones, in the form of otherness which was equated with anti-Spain and the product of foreign influence. Its recent disappearance should not be so quickly forgotten in order to truly understand the impact of newer cultural developments involved in the formation of regional and autonomous identities in Spain.

The recent rise of cultural studies and its emphasis on a shift from concepts of national identity to cultural hybridity offers a way of understanding the positioning of identity within this growing globalization. Notions of acculturation or the impositions of the foreign are now being replaced by transculturation or notions of how indigenous cultures respond to hegemonic imported cultural models by creating new hybrid forms that are *both* local and foreign. Looking at the case of Spain will reveal the development of modernity without a corresponding development of an economic and social infrastructure. Its recent history is an example of how very rapidly the public has been exposed to the whole backlog of previously banned works by

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<sup>92</sup> Llorens, "Equipo Crónica. La distanciation de la distanciation: une démarche sémiotique": 87.

foreign and Spanish exile writers and film-makers as a result of Franco's isolationist policies. Sectors of the population have passed directly from a preliterate culture to one dominated by the visual and oral mass media. As Jo Labanyi commented:

It is precisely this rapidity, alongside an increasing heterogeneity, that gives Spanish society its vertigo-inducing Postmodernist identity. It is a world where the archaic and the modern coexist.<sup>93</sup>

This experience of history as synchronicity produced art and literature that were a pastiche of mass cultural forms and world culture that blurred the distinctions of high and low culture. They can be described as a Postmodern art in that many of the artists produced works incorporate fragmentation, hybridity, appropriation, etc. This has produced an emphasis, especially in Spain, on the importance of representing the real, the natural, which has become the representation of the world through its reproduction and representation. Sometimes it has resulted in a cynical rejection of history, and at others produced a critical deconstruction of the ways in which reality is packaged for our consumption and even propaganda the blurred distinction between representation and reality, between the sign and what it refers to were issues that were starting to be addressed by Spanish artists in the 1960s. The advantageous results of Postmodern theory includes the deconstruction of the concept of unity thus exposing political designs to suppress difference. But, people like Frederic Jameson, criticized Postmodernism for reducing history to representation and points out that the effects of history are all too real. He argued that even though Postmodernism emerged as a gesture of revolt against the canonization of Modernism and the consequent evisceration of its oppositional potential. He defines it as an age when people have forgotten how to think historically and he finds nothing more evident than the disappearance of the historical referent. Can art survive as a morally independent cultural practice without this historicity? It will be argued later on that the answer is no.

### **Brief history of the avant-garde in Spain**

By tracing the history of avant-garde tendencies in twentieth century Spain, one can argue that though times have changed, we would be better served to remember the history of

avant-garde intentions in Spain. The boom in the culture industry of Spain over the last few decades can sometimes be seen as a desire for prestige by politicians searching for re-election, cloaked behind an image of impartiality but that may actually be about a situation of selection without any criteria which has created a present-day dependency of artists on a mercantile system where the choices are between Abstraction (lyrical, geometric, and minimalist) or figuration (traditional, new realism and new surrealism).

The first moves towards a 'normalisation' of avant-garde artistic activity occurred in the 1950s with *Dau al Set* (made up of Tàpies, Tharrats, Cuixart, Brossa, and Puig) which introduced a ferocious critique of the dominant culture by exploring the grotesque and magic. This decade saw many new tendencies that were consolidated under Abstraction with Tàpies being the most internationally recognized Spanish artist. During the 1960s, many different movements that paralleled international tendencies that were worked out in Spain appeared, including Op Art, Pop Art, happenings, and geometric abstraction. By the end of the decade a modernisation in schools of design led to a new generation of artists with the common intention of refusing the traditional canvas, connecting it to Italy, Germany, the United States, and Arte Povera, and Conceptual Art which was evidenced especially in Catalonia.<sup>94</sup> Two strands in the 1970s included the speculative and linguistic explorations of art and art geared to questioning the social conditions of the avant-garde and its development within a more vast milieu rather than for an elite public. They generally received little support from galleries which saw them as young rebels without formal values.

The eclipse of modernity in Spain between 1939-45 meant it was a ruined and closed-in country where nazi-fascist type principles ruled. Censorship produced savage constraints in every domain and the officially backed culture had a monopoly over the arts that was characterized by its banality, conformity, and obsolete Academicism. Eugenio D'Ors along with Ernesto Giménez Caballero, were two figures who founded the cultural bases of the Franco regime, and outlined the first signs of a political opening in the founding of *La Academia Breve de Critica de Art* (the Brief Academy of Art Criticism) in the early 1950s. Their first proclamation asserted that it was imperative to correct the shame of the Spanish public in being

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<sup>93</sup> Helen Graham and Antonio Sánchez, "The Politics of 1992", in Labanyi and Graham, eds.: 410.

<sup>94</sup> Victoria Combalia, "Les avant-gardes en Espagne" *Art Press*, no. 22 (January-February 1976): 26.



deprived of any knowledge of universal contemporary art.<sup>95</sup> Despite his association with the Franco regime as a contributor to its cultural programme, he did furnish the cultural foundations for the experimentation of modern Spanish art. His yearly *Salones de los Once* (Salon of the Eleven - active between 1943-55) created an opening for certain aspects of modernity into the country.

1948 proved to be a significant year in the development of art in Spain that was not imprisoned in the traditionality of the regime-sponsored art. This entailed the formation of *Dau al Set* in Catalonia with its links to pre-war avant-garde ideologies and the poetics of Paul Klee. The products of their collaboration made many allusions to Ortega y Gasset the author of *La Deshumanización del Arte*, (*The Dehumanization of Art*) the most influential theoretical work in Spain before the Second World War.<sup>96</sup> Their influences can also be traced back to 1920 in Barcelona, particularly to the Dalmau Gallery and Francis Picabia. Another significant event in 1948 was the creation of the Altamira School, which demonstrated a clear attempt to recapture the pre-war attainments in favour of a modern culture. The October Salon in Barcelona and several art galleries sponsoring important exhibitions were significant in presenting the works of Joan Miró, Pablo Picasso, etc. These painters who had for the most part worked in Paris were now being seen in Spain, where they were often met with hostile aggressivity by official art critics. Basically, 1948 was a year wherein Spanish art began breaking away from the Eugenio D'Ors monopoly and official state-sponsored art.<sup>97</sup>

The different degrees of hostility of the government towards these innovating movements implied a progressive opening which contributed to the tearing down of the more and more shaky foundations of isolationism, which future generations of artists were to continue participating in. This coincided with a newfound contact with the Spanish artistic circle in Paris, an enclave favorable to political emigration, combined with a recognition of Spanish pre-war art and the growing international acclaim of several other groups like the *Parpalló* group (founded in 1957 in Valencia), *El Paso* (in Madrid), a group that contributed in a decisive manner through publications and exhibitions, to the international recognition of Spanish art, and *Equipo 57* (which opposed the position taken of *El Paso* in proposing a

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<sup>95</sup> Serraller: 89.

<sup>96</sup> Serraller: 80.

systematic art researching the interactivity of plastic space over the more poetic Informalist style).

### **Spanish views of Modernism and avant-garde**

For Llorens, the successions or simultaneities of tendencies of art in the twentieth century is a succession or simultaneity of failures. He felt that the avant-garde had often arrived at a level that created an isolated whole identity with the needs of expression of their times, but were unable to give expression of the new industrialized societies. The academicism of art contributed to its inability to participate in the social praxis because, by trivializing through assimilation its original radical questioning of the doctrinal development of the new societies. The avant-garde implicitly opposes new forms of dependence that construct art as a mercantile product that is used to maintain the power of the elite, and incites criticism of bourgeois culture while accepting its limitations and prior failed attempts.

Llorens offers two other reasons why the avant-garde failed. The first, argues that taking on an active part in the process of enculturation should imply an ethical engagement which is not prone to support the imposed limits of professional specializations. One cannot seriously attempt to change structures of belief, knowledge, or sentiments which are reflected in structures of behaviour if one does not implicate in the change a rethinking of the relations between social groups that create the beliefs, knowledges, and sentiments. The attempt to critique culture without including real sociological conditions of production and distribution of economic goods, for Llorens, is hopeless.

In short, the avant-gardes by not concerning themselves with the relations of production of economic goods, accept the reduction of their own activity to produce goods for the consumption of a powered elite. In effect, for Llorens, their artistic production has been absorbed, through the culture industry (galleries, markets, collectors, museums). The trivialization of the avant-garde occurred, reducing it to being in fashion in such a way that the limits of art's relation to society were left undisrupted. The trivialization and sterilization of the cultural critique of the avant-garde before it could impact the structures of art has generally

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<sup>97</sup> Serraller: 94.

been the typical fate of the avant-garde, and was manifested completely in Spain with Informalism that had developed after World War II, a time that saw the fastest rise of an elite segment of the population, and the most accelerated concentration of economic power.

The first reception of modern art in Spain in the 1950s was seen as an attack on the trivialization, hedonism, and conformity of its bourgeois art consumer. It was also accompanied by formulations that sought to radically renovate Spanish art with a conscious aim at making an impact on material life. The 1950s saw the formation of several avant-garde Modernist tendencies and their ethical engagement was accompanied by failure. Some of these artists found their audience outside of Spain, and in such a way entered into a new dialogue of art that moved between the international and their original Spanish audience.

For Llorens, Informalism was the most typical of avant-garde failures in a Spanish context, but he gave it credit on the following counts.<sup>98</sup> First, each attempt at the intentional transcendence of art, or as Tàpies described as previously mentioned in the introduction, his aim was to: "...to provoke a shock that will help [the viewer] to get away from false values, to rediscover themselves and to reacquire consciousness of their own value". Llorens argues that such had become progressively more coherently formulated, in Spain with implications of ethical engagement. The generation of Spanish avant-gardes in the 1950s in wanting to incite a process of cultural action, put the accent on the perception of the physical world, thus focusing on the tactility of their medium. The foundation of the principles of Informalism was a modernist ethical existentialism or an absolute value put on the spontaneous creation of the liberty of man.

Second, according to Llorens, the ethical engagement of Spanish artists in the 1950s was based on a general attempt to speak against the political situation of the country but through a universalizing approach. The Informalists generally directed their activity to man in the abstract or to the man of his times, thus, consequently creating a structure whereby the art work is imbued with an inherent and not extrinsic value like merchandise. In such a way art was meant to transcend the banal system in which it operates, establishing itself in its apartness thus criticizing the capitalist system. It seems that the more experimentation in art is successful and proceeds to diminish the aura and autonomy of art (for instance with the Informalist exploration

of new techniques and media), the more aura and autonomy is returned to art through systems of legitimization in society like the museum, curators, and art galleries. Because the art work is ultimately given a market value it returns to the system it has set itself against.

Third, the latest avant-garde attempts, like Informalism, have been consumed even more rapidly by the capitalist system it opposes than their predecessors. The quicker consumption of art and the subsequent assimilation of avant-garde art since the second World War, is tied to the prestige around art which is tied to notions of authenticity, a phenomenon that is created by society, and that ultimately needs to change in order to rethink art's relationship to society.

Fourth, understanding the required change in society that is needed for the avant-garde to avoid being assimilated, and thus resulting in its failure to alter the situation of art vis-a-vis the social praxis, Llorens parallels the advance and less illusory aspects of the recent avant-garde in Spain imbued with ethical engagement, to the progress of a public that in a capitalist or neo-capitalist society is preparing for a new society. When Llorens described these conditions, he presented an almost naively hopeful scenario of things to come. He believed that the circumstances that had negatively conditioned artistic production were evolving. He saw indications of the birth of a new collective consciousness that can reach the majority because the spectator was becoming the content of art. The historic needs of this population were based on a new humanism through a critique of the dehumanization of Modernism. This is the product of a society based on a system of privileges of a centralist organization of a society that is poli-cultural. These are the areas where it can be produced coherently, making contact with a real public, and the intentionality of ethical engagement attempted by the avant-garde of Spain is made possible. He admitted, however, that this was still a tendency, and not reality. Also, he saw that there had been an evolution of appropriate institutions that could make this diffuse public become an immediate public, a direct consumer and not just a supporter of Spanish avant-garde art. But, it can be that art need not simply be a passive reflection of the social conditions of the time, but rather it can and should contribute to configuring this desired future.

In Spain, the interest in realism was first seen in the rupture after the Civil War in literature that took on a more social character during the 1950s. Writings on the visual arts

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<sup>98</sup> Llorens, "Problemes i tendències de la pintura valenciana actual": 23.

centered on general arguments and contributed little that was new. It was not until the late 1950s, early 1960s, that a more interesting dialogue was established centered around the debate of Informalism, the expressionist avant-garde, and a more rationalist return to avant-garde realism. The debates were often more political and ideological rather than theoretical, probably due to the sense of urgency felt at a time of rapid change in the country. The 1960s was a time of crisis for Informalism in Spain which saw the introduction of American and English Pop Art along with other European new figuration movements. Several aspects of figuration began being discussed including those which dealt with the traditional problems elaborated by George Lukács, Marx and Engels with issues like typicity and reflection, accompanied Sartre's existential issues of compromise.

There was also a focus on the polemics in structuralism that entailed a reflection on Brecht's concept of distantiation as opposed to sentimental identification that had traditionally constituted an expressive realism. These theoretic developments, influenced by structuralism, semiotics, and contemporary Marxist approaches (like Galvano della Volpe) entailed a reading of the art object as a sign. Issues brought up within this debate included the eventual determination of the economic and social role of the art object inscribed in the process of the historical class struggle, its capacity for transformation, the role of the intellectual and the artist in contemporary society, the class conditions of artistic production, rationalism or irrationalism as a necessary criteria of the art object, and the possibility for progressivism, individual creation and collective or group work, the role of the market in the reception of the art object and determination of its significance, etc.

Bozal summed up these debates around figuration in the following statement:

el realismo no era la captación y representación del mundo de las apariencias, sino, en el de aquellos elementos que tipificaban una situación y estructura sociales, inscribiéndose entonces en el proceso histórico, ya fuera para animarlo o para detenerlo: como ese proceso histórico se insertaba, a su vez, en la lucha de clases, las diversas producciones artísticas presentaban una condición de clase; su hipotética efectividad, su funcionalidad social e ideológica pasaba por la concienciación clasista del espectador, que actuaría a tenor de lo visto; en ese proceso el medio de recepción tiene gran importancia, pues el mercado podía 'absorber' y eliminar (banalizando, estetizando...) los rasgos más lúcidos y radicales de tal concienciación; frente a la 'queja' subjetiva, individualista e irracional propia de la vanguardia tradicional, y sobre todo de la vanguardia

expresionista-informal, el realismo proponía un análisis plástico racional - en el sentido de la 'racionalidad histórica' - y alentaba la crítica del individualismo.<sup>99</sup>

For Bozal, realism was not about representing appearances, but rather the elements that typify social situations and structures in order to be inscribed in a dialectical antagonism. The role of the spectator would play an important role in the production of meaning around the object presented by the realist artist who intended to disrupt the ways art would normally be absorbed and made banal by society and the relationship such a society produced with art. No longer would the individualist art exemplified by modernist artists such as Tàpies suffice in offering a merely transcendental critical space to art vis-a-vis society. The new project of Spanish realist artists centered on being engaged with the historical situation of the times to offer a more rational criticality implicitly involving the interpretation of the spectator. Such an objective was thought to break with modernism's individualist tradition of the artist in the formulation of critical meaning only through negation and not direct contact with the social praxis.

Bozal goes on to describe the concept of typicality, a concept borrowed from Lukács, that permitted an understanding of the relation between the initial singularity of images and the generality of artistic representation that was inscribed in a historical moment that could be described as 'objectifying' in the alienation produced by capitalism. The conventional struggle between committed art and aestheticism and the consideration of the moral function of art were issues that were inherited from the previous decade and two new attempts to resolve these included an insistence on the importance of the dynamic components in the historic and artistic construction of the typical thereby reducing the value of a notion that was fundamental to Marxist dialectic that saw the need for changes to the economic spheres before changes to the superstructures of society could start, and an analysis of linguistic potentials. This new predilection for the condition of the text and signs permitted the posing of questions for a Marxist dialectic that saw the need for changes to the economic sphere before changes to the superstructure in which art is included could be made. It also addressed alienation in the context of the economy of consumption and the development of the urban and industrial transformations that Spain was undergoing. An art focused on language that is made possible

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<sup>99</sup> Valeriano Bozal, "Planteamiento sociológico de la nueva pintura española": 39.

through figuration would be able to create images that act as signs that can be read and deciphered through 'distantiation' (a term borrowed from Brecht and used frequently by Llorens). This was required because the modernist concept of authenticity which imbued the work of art with inherent meaning, were excessively limiting when considering the new realist art objects being produced in the 1960s. The hope for realism lay in that fact that its capacity to form symbolic signs within the visual semiotics of mass media could dynamize what had become the static and inert character of art in a capitalist society. It could simultaneously problematize the iconic representation and the designated reality. Appropriating the techniques and images of the mass media creates an inversion of their linguistic functions to a new non-affirmative way that required a critical reading. In this way, the artist operates in trying to unite the social avant-garde, with its potential for collective action, to the practice of art, and participate in the exploration of language and content in art in order to disrupt the position of art vis-a-vis society that the historical avant-garde contested.

Traditional realism could no longer act as a mere testimony of social realities in a time when information was being manipulated and false consciousness produced. The debate turned towards a search for new languages that would be linked to a progressive consciousness that sought to disrupt representation in mass media.

Tomàs Llorens went furthest in describing the Spanish interest in Brecht's discussion of distantiation. In his "Equipo Crónica. La distantiation de la distantiation: une démarche sémiotique" he described distantiation as the only recourse to counter the type of realism that the official state had appropriated as a long-standing tradition so inherent to Spain. In 1920s Germany, Brecht had developed a theory of distantiation that operated between expressionism and realism that differed from the natural realism supported by the bourgeoisie. He stressed that this new realism had to be capable of situating itself historically, that it had to transcend appearances to break through the surface of a stagnant present in search of retrieving the historical dialectic. Like two parts of an equation, a balance had to be struck between the creative and 'authentic' side of the artist on the one side, and on the other, historical transcendence. The conception of the artist and spectator had an intentionally revolutionary artistic focus so long as it could understand the socio-cultural mediations imposed by systems of communication. Typically the twentieth century avant-gardes fell into the system of art in

which they refused to participate, and became imprisoned within the structure of culture that had been created in their past. Without a present day vocabulary, cut off from the reality of the day within this system, the artist could not speak of the past and thus failed to achieve historical relevancy.

Brecht was for Equipo Crónica an exit from Sartre's problem with engagement, by concentrating on a semiotic reflection on the objectives and constitution of ideologies. Equipo Crónica used the language of the day, but were conditioned by their conception of artistic communication. The Brechtian doctrine of distanciation from the work of art implicated a conception of the function of art as a function of mobilization of the experience of the spectator, a confidence in the rationalism of the spectator, and a confidence in the semiotic efficiency of the ready-made system of visual communication that pre-existed in mass culture. In such a way, distanciation, the operation within forms of communication and representation, put into question the transfer of revolutionary content from the interior subjectivity of the artist to the interior of the spectators.

In 1966 in an exhibition catalogue of Equipo Crónica in Sevilla, Llorens wrote:

la signification de l'art se trouve médiatisée par la culture. Les signes constituant une oeuvre d'art signifient par le moyen de la fonction qu'on leur attribue dans un système sémiotique. Un système, un procès social, objectif, et non pas subjectif (...) L'oeuvre d'art appartient à la catégorie des objets culturels (comme les institutions sociales, les instruments et les matériaux de travail); elle exerce, en tant que telle, une fonction médiatrice entre l'individu et son expérience. En tant qu'objet sémiotique, elle exerce cette fonction médiatrice en rationalisant et en complétant l'expérience immédiate de l'individu par l'expérience globale de son groupe social.<sup>100</sup>

Along these same lines, Equipo Crónica later wrote in 1966:

[La signification des valeurs éthiques doit s'accomplir] d'une façon concrète, non pas par référence à des formations sémiotiques dénotant directement une norme, mais en dénotant l'expérience historique du spectateur de manière à évoquer en lui un procès critique, permettant la déduction d'une norme. Voici la voie, plus ou moins entrevue par Brecht, et c'est la voie qui semble la plus cohérente avec nos aspirations lorsque nous proclamons la nécessité du réalisme.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Tomás Llorens, "Equipo Crónica. La distanciation de la distanciation: une démarche sémiotique": 80.

<sup>101</sup> Idem.



Their aim to reconcile the avant-garde with historical engagement, to potentialize the specificity of the visual medium is clear from this quote. In the spirit of researching the specificity of visual culture through models of the verbal and discovering that the syntax of art can work the same, they stated in 1967 the following in what Llorens called their manifesto:

Dans une oeuvre d'art cette élaboration rationnelle doit dériver de relations syntactiques susceptibles d'être paraphrasées en des termes logiques. Les relations syntactiques qu'on trouve le plus souvent dans l'Equipo Crónica permettent des paraphrases exprimables par des schémas verbaux tels que 'répétition exemplaire', 'incongruité apparente' (qui devient congruence seulement dans le contexte rationalisé d'une expérience totalisée), 'contradiction apparente' (qui devient conséquence dans les mêmes conditions), etc.<sup>102</sup>

The concept of the paraphrase appealed to Equipo Crónica, with their interest in political and ethical engagement, and they chose to practice avant-garde strategies of critical self-referentiality while at the same time explore what was forbidden: to speak on politics. They saw themselves as inverting the path of the avant-garde, and on this Llorens wrote in 1972:

La peinture de l'Equipo c'est, sans doute, de la peinture d'avant-garde, un produit de la high culture (...); elle se meut dans ces limites, et elle renonce à l'illusion de les transcender. Sans en sortir, quand même, elle tente de renverser le sens des avant-gardes. Héritiers d'une petite bourgeoisie déplacée lors de l'évolution sociale du capitalisme, les intellectuels qui ont constitué les avant-gardes artistiques du XXe siècle se sont appuyés, dans leurs illusions de transférer aux masses les patterns éthiques procédant de la révolution bourgeoise. La liberté comme négation des contraintes sociales; la dichotomie praxis/théorie — la pratique se présente comme résultant de la spécialisation et par acceptation forcée des contraintes imposées par l'organisation de la production; la théorie (et l'Art) comme évasion de ces contraintes (...), etc.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.* 89.

## CONCLUSION

Franco's particular programme of national modernization, by attempting to construct and impose a rigid model of national identity, entailed a demonization of sectors of society composed of a defeated working class and all examples of pluralist cultural and political alternatives to the established norm as an internal 'other', thereby consolidating the national identity that was projected by the regime. This same manipulation was also evident in its international isolation which reinforced the notion of Spain's as 'other' than European liberal democratic decadence. Later in the 1960s the tourist slogan was 'Spain is different' which while intended to appeal to a desire for the exotic 'other', also referred back ambivalently to the idea of a national identity threatened by outside forces. The slogan ignored the way the regime was seeking to impose an artificial unity of the different fragments of Spain.

The Franco regime's understanding of the power of popular culture in identity formation presented one avenue in the construction of the idea of a unified Spain. It also gave the avant-garde appropriation of popular culture (as disseminated by the regime through mass media) a particular political charge not seen in other Western countries. When Spanish artists used elements of mass media in their works they not only disrupted the division between high and low art established through capitalism, but made direct political statements, the urgency of which can be compared to the intentions of Social Realism. Yet, they were able to go beyond the universalism of such an art, with its focus on the symbolic value of the labourer, by introducing the element of language, giving it a relevant historicity.

The art production of Equipo Crónica exemplifies this kind of art, and as has been demonstrated, they can be situated within a very specific time in Spain that is important to understand because of their relevancy to the production of art and the culture industry in Spain today.

The first chapter focused on the reception of Pop Art and figuration in Spain as avenues available to the avant-garde intentions of the late 1960s and early 1970s. This examination explored the two leading tendencies in Spanish art at the time, in order to contextualize the art production of Equipo Crónica between Pop Art and a kind of Social Realism.

The second chapter looked at some of their works to illustrate how the theories of Equipo Crónica and their contemporaries came forward in their art production. They made the following statement in a 1967 exhibition catalogue entitled "Monde en Question":

Si l'art d'avant-garde doit jouer un rôle réel dans l'évolution (historique)... nous pensons qu'on doit poser sa fonction spécifique dans la contestation des 'formalisations' éthiques qui conditionnent l'expérience affective. Nous entendons le faire avec la construction de modèles, composés avec des éléments extraits de l'expérience culturelle quotidienne, structurés de telle façon que le spectateur puisse:

- reconnaître dans l'expérience artistique des traits de son expérience sociale;
- dégager les 'formalisations' éthiques (voire, parfois, des structures politiques) qui conditionnent celle-ci et leur rôle réel dans les rapports des groupes sociaux;
- adopter une attitude 'affective' de contestation des 'formalisations' éthiques déjà faites et opposées au progrès historique.<sup>104</sup>

This reveals the important role of the spectator in the critical realism Equipo Crónica produced. The realism they strove to attain was meant to be derived from the shock of the spectator in grasping the confinement of his or her experience and seeing the political and social systems of control over their experience so that the spectator can formulate new resistance and criticality with such an understanding that involves a new way of seeing. This new way of seeing will mean the spectator becomes aware of a new historical situation that understands how history remains forever out of reach by way of our images. Equipo Crónica's statement outlines their artistic intentions to be avant-garde in the sense that they strove to connect art to social reality. This they thought they could do by recognizing in art its potential to expose for the spectator the conditions of social experience, analyze the political constructions that control and identify these conditions, and adopt ethical considerations of the past that have historical resonance, all the while recognizing that in order for art to play a real role in historical evolution it had to contest the social and political constructions that condition identity and experience. This they thought they could do by borrowing previous avant-garde strategies of incorporating

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<sup>104</sup> Juan Manuel Bonet, "De la narration de combat à l'ironie sur l'art. Equipo Crónica". *Chroniques de l'art vivant*, no. 17 (Feb. 1971): 4.

into art, elements extracted from the environment of the spectator, and restructuring them in such a way that the spectator could be given the opportunity to see the ruptures in the repressive structures in their environment that shapes their experiences. Herein lies the avant-garde subversive potential of the art practice. In the case of Equipo Crónica its attack on the cultural myths of Spain and the avant-garde in general was the starting point of their artistic production.

A brief description of Spain's social history has been provided in chapter three in order to establish the setting for an examination of the reception of modernism, postmodernism, and concepts of the avant-garde, the critical potential of Pop Art and figuration into Spain. The first chapter briefly outlined arguments around modernism and how they were interpreted in Spain where the social and political situation differed greatly from the countries where they originated. Debates around avant-garde intentionality with its blurring of the divisions between high and low art were outlined in order to demonstrate the urgency in Spanish art of creating an art that could participate in social change.

The success or failure of their strategies is debatable. It has been demonstrated how the situation of Spain led the Equipo Crónica to position themselves against the cultural production of the regime, while the contemporary threats of neo-capitalism to Spanish artists today require the same sense of urgency in challenging the destiny of their art production. Equipo Crónica's art production is thus relevant to the study of avant-garde issues today. For instance, was the specificity of their connotations restricting their audience? Were they being opportunistic in their satirical commentaries on art and its role in society, thus practicing in nothing more than a nihilism and negation of the subversive potential of art? Or did their themes reflect acts, images, and phenomena of the collective alienation and impact of technology? It can be argued that sometimes the unity of their themes unfold through syntactic oppositions thus exposing signifying contradictions of groups or social acts, and it is precisely the lack of apparent conscious relations that constitutes the fundamental historical and critical aspect of their art. If the predominance of exchange value over value of use of the artistic object has a determined destiny in capitalist societies, this situation summarizes more than any other the factor of contradictions in Equipo Crónica's, and it reflects the drama of critical realism with the problems of the distribution and consumption of art objects. Equipo Crónica worked fully

aware of the limitations and contradictions in their painting practice, like the problem of assimilation into the established system that they set out to attack through multiple social mechanisms around culture, and the problems involved in art's attempt to disrupt the artifice that undeniably returns to their production. Being aware of these limitations and contradictions contributed to their position on implicating their practice with their actual historical situation and the specificity of linguistic and social contexts. By outlining and pointing out these contradictions, Equipo Crónica were able to destabilize the position of art within society as being imbued with a message or truth, and instead put the reading of the art object, or more precisely the object of criticism, onto the spectator.

The loss of potency of the avant-garde in the West coincided with the rise of Western culture industry, making it obsolete. Or has it? In our reality of late capitalism the avant-garde has become a tool of legitimation, having lost its cultural and political explosiveness, because the commodity fetish reigns supreme and the marginal has become the mainstream. But now we must take up the historical avant-garde's insistence on the cultural transformation of everyday life and from there develop strategies for today's postmodern cultural and political contexts. The provocative stance of postmodernism no longer scandalizes anyone and is in fact legitimated through cultural institutions. Art today is therefore forced to ask itself if truth can be achieved in exposing the falsehood of neo-capitalist culture. Artists today need to ask how can a critical distance be established in art that is disarmed and reabsorbed by a system from which it cannot distance itself? Such has been the question of the historical avant-garde and taken up again by the Equipo Crónica.

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Illustration 1



Illustration 2

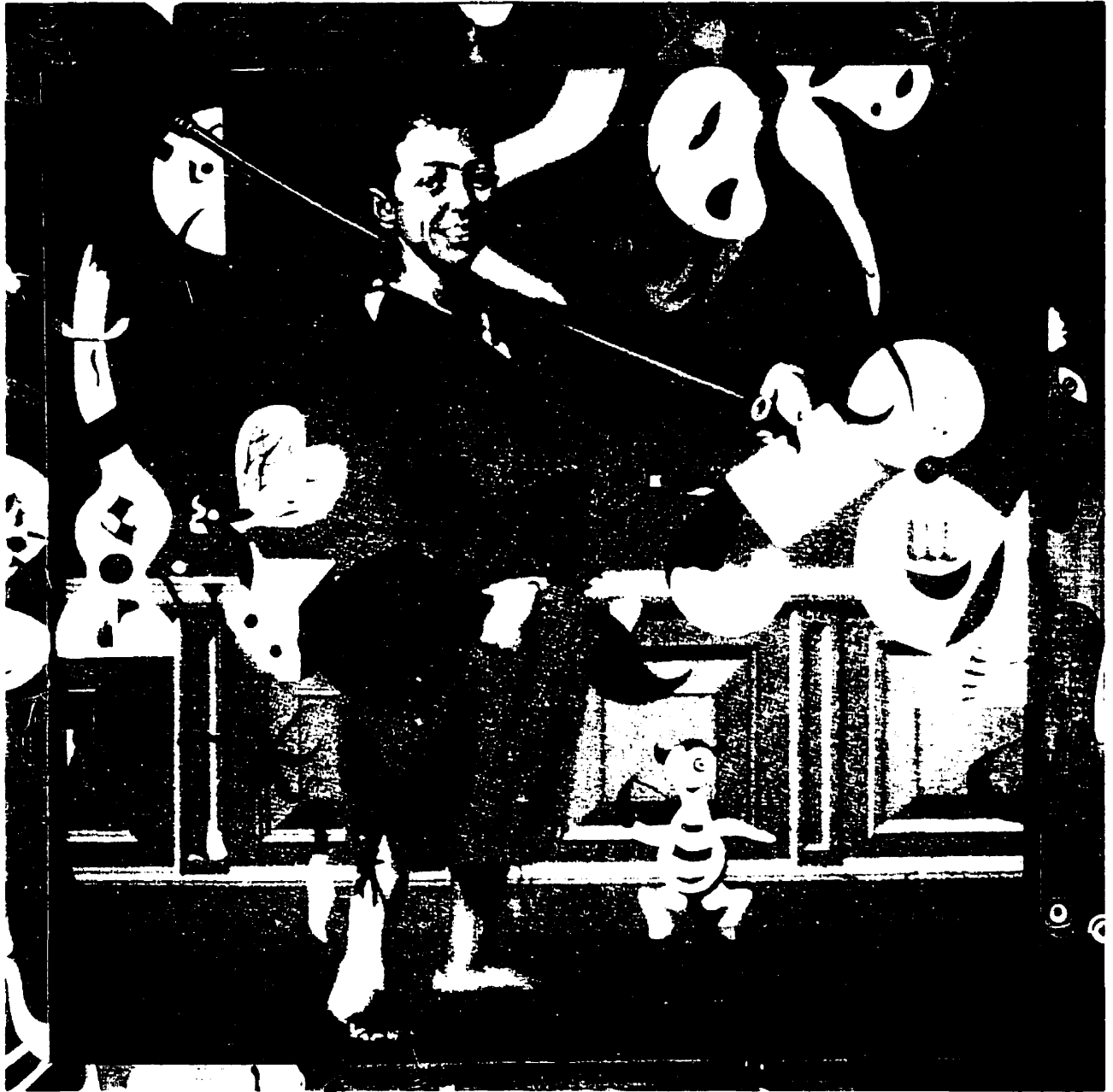


Illustration 3



Illustration 4



Illustration 5



Illustration 6





Illustration 7



Illustration 8

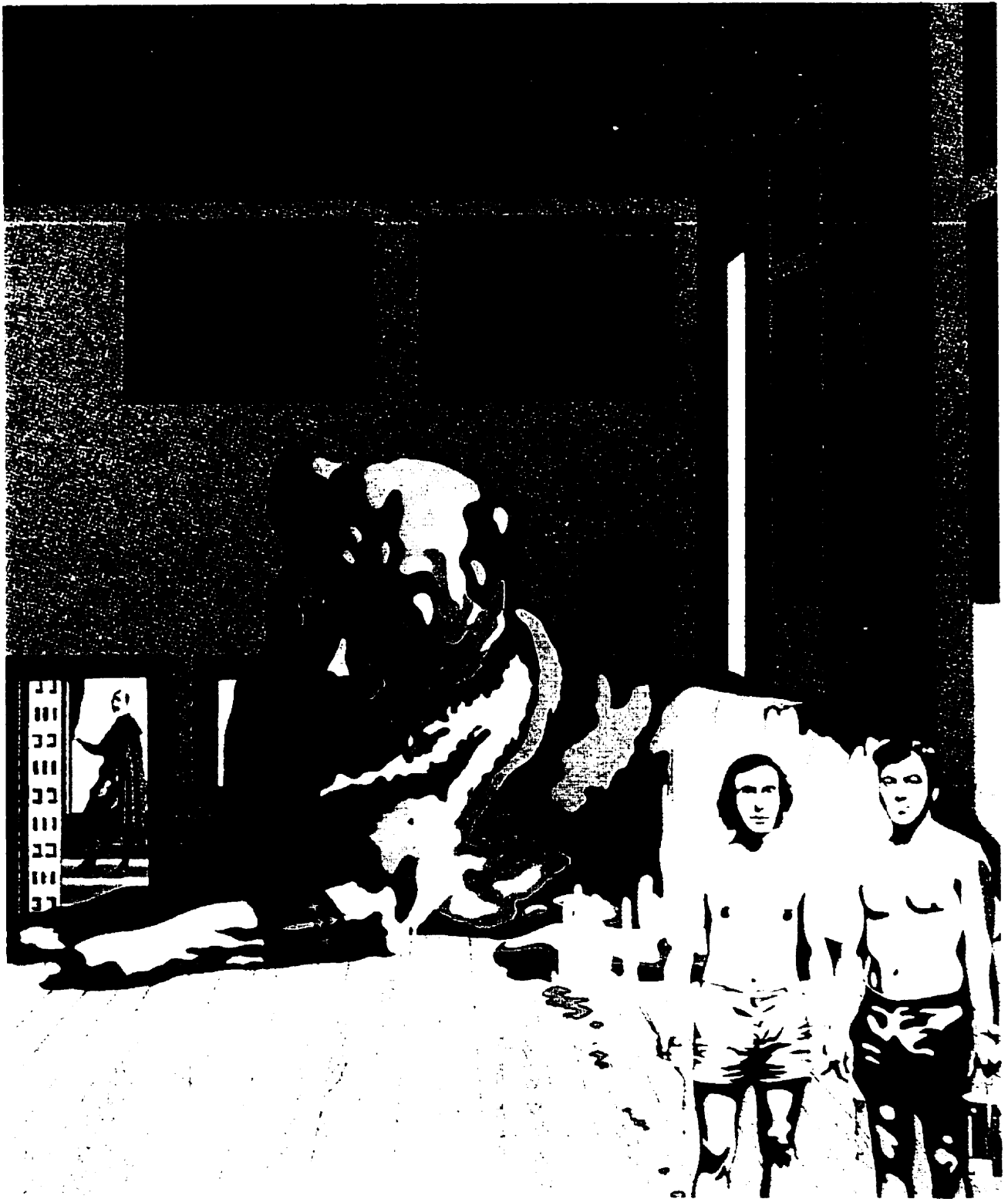


Illustration 9



Illustration 10



Illustration 11

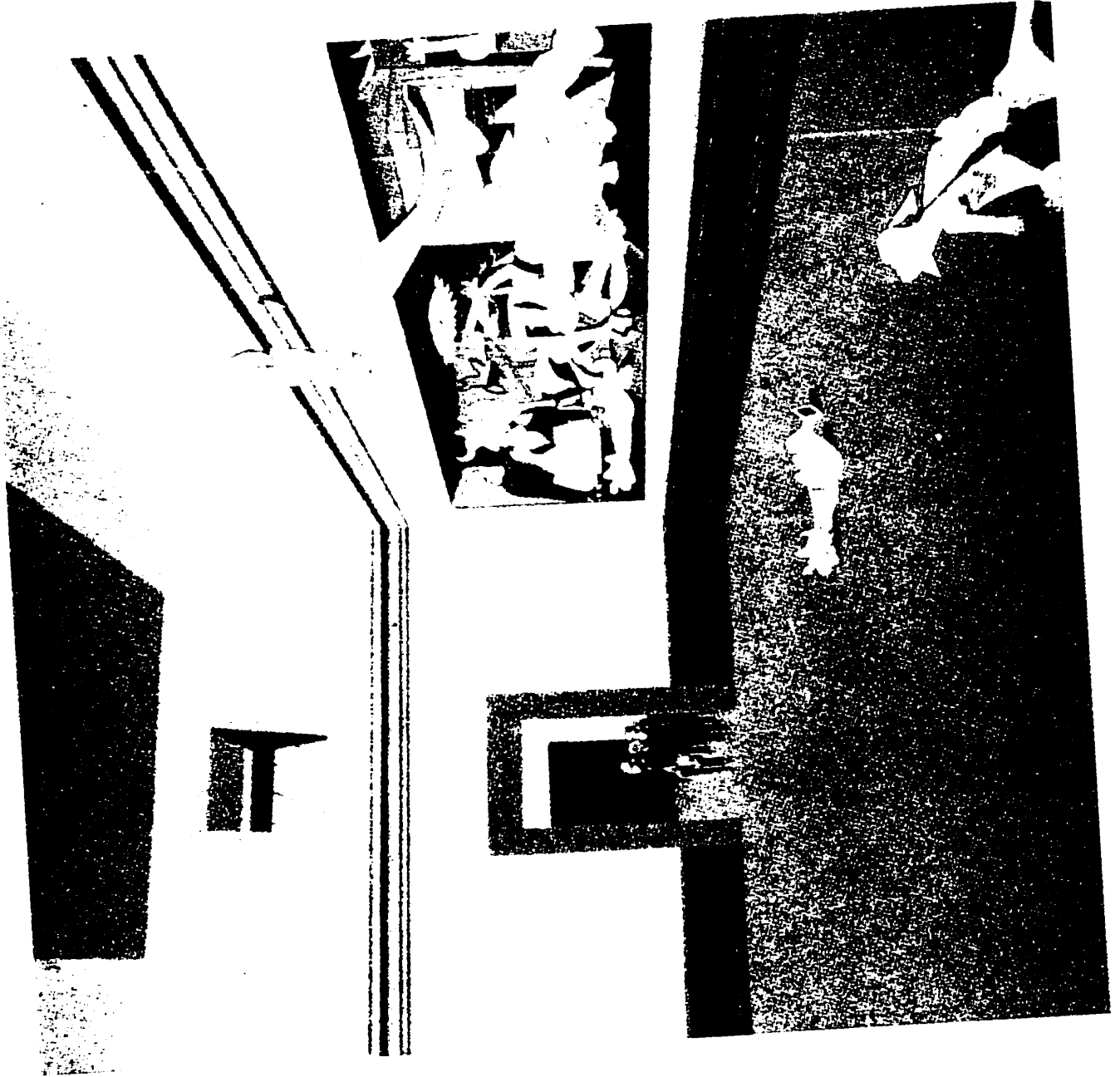


Illustration 12