

A Short Century: MACBA Collection

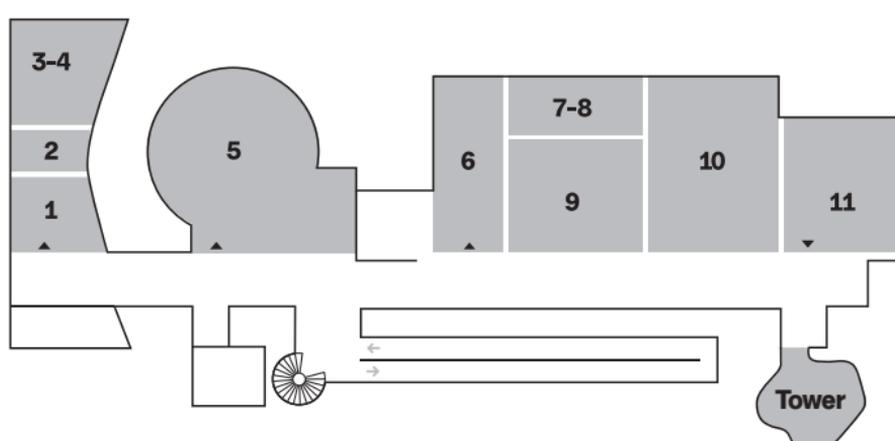


Guerrilla Girls, *Do Women Have to Be Naked to Get into the Met. Museum?* [detail], undated. MACBA Collection. MACBA Consortium. © 1985-2018 Guerrilla Girls. Photo: Tony Coll

This display offers a chronological path through the MACBA Collection from 1929 to the present. It includes many key works in a series of rooms devoted to emblematic moments or decades. Coordinated by the MACBA curatorial team, special attention is given to the changing presentations and experiences of art through these nine decades or 'short century'.

Recommended itinerary

Meier Building



Room 1

THE FIRST DECADES of the twentieth century saw a rupture with established art forms and a profound transformation in the field of aesthetic reflection. The idea of there being an artistic avant-garde (advance guard), which adhered to values like the new and the original, led to a radical experimentation with materials and forms. Among the main trends of this vanguard were those that sought to construct artistic languages of the universal and utopian from an analytical approach to form.

The International Exposition of 1929 took place in Barcelona in the context of this tension between tradition and radicalism. It was an event that marked an important urban transformation in the city, responding to the desire to connect with new technical developments, as well as the introduction of the most advanced architectural and artistic languages of the international avant-garde. In addition to showing the world the degree of Catalan industrial development, the Exposition would strengthen Barcelona as a capital of tourism.

Room 2

THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR (1936–39) was also a war of images in which artists and filmmakers were involved in the diffusion of the different political ideologies at stake through their corresponding aesthetic means. In the territory loyal to the Government of the Republic, poster design underwent a special development in which the advanced visual and typographic languages of the international avant-garde were used to communicate messages clearly to a mass audience.

In cinema, the contribution made by the anarchist movement through the Unified Trade Union of Public Entertainment of the CNT (a confederation of anarchist labour unions), with the production of films addressing subjects including the collectivising revolution in agriculture as well as the role of the militias, was fundamental to the anti-Fascist resistance. The involvement of artists in the Pavilion of the Spanish Republic at the 1937 Paris International Exposition reveals the use of art for the internationalisation of the conflict and to generate support.

Room 3 and 4

IN THE YEARS after the Civil War and following the end of the Second World War, artists explored divergent forms of abstraction. While this has been articulated as a tension between abstract geometric and concrete art on the one hand, and an abstraction that explored matter and an *informel* aesthetic on the other, these two principal tendencies also had degrees of proximity. Even though later forms of concrete art continued in the tradition of earlier utopian abstraction advanced by an international avant-garde, nevertheless elements of organicism, biomorphism and gesture began to be used. Similarly instances of geometric form can be detected in the more material abstraction.

While associated with a resurgent bourgeoisie, as well as a counter to it, both tendencies were a means to deal with the creation of art in the aftermath of so much war and violence. They can be seen not necessarily as a way to avoid the consequences of conflict, but instead as techniques to examine, even if indirectly, the nature of humanity.

Room 5

DURING THE SIXTIES, art became imbued with images from advertising and the media. Artists experimented with these new visual languages, often using them to address urgent political issues of the time, and as effective ways through which to claim freedom of speech.

The May 1968 revolts in various parts of the world, the process of decolonisation, as well as the Civil Rights, feminist and anti-war movements coincided and contributed to an era of turbulent change and counter-cultural struggle, transforming society and confronting its contradictions.

In the case of the Spanish state, the social and political reality was defined by the Franco dictatorship (1939–75) and a conservative society strongly determined by Catholicism. This 'grey' context (named after the colour of police uniforms as well as the feeling of living under a dictatorship) provoked artistic practices from denunciation to irony – a tool for avoiding censorship. Through their work artists configured a critical iconography, sometimes referring to the aesthetics of comics, which coexisted with the alternative spaces of psychedelia.

Room 6

THE PHRASE 'The medium is the message' (1964) by Marshall McLuhan highlights both the interest generated by the mass media and how these condition our perception of reality and the information that reaches us. Using decontextualised mass media images, *On Subjectivity* (1978) focuses on the nature of information and on its interpretation and ideological construction. In other words, it points to the fact that the meaning attributed to an image is the result of the influences, knowledge and personality of each individual.

The installation consists of the book *On Subjectivity (Fifty photographs from The Best of Life)* and the video *On Subjectivity (About TV)*. Muntadas selected 50 photographs of 'The Best of Life' – a publication that included hundreds of photos from *Life* magazine –, made five copies of each and sent each copy to five different people, asking for a comment on the images. The result was the book *On Subjectivity*, which, in addition to the photographs, includes the 250 contributions. The video is structured as a collage that alternates images of a television set emitting different programmes with those of people who deliver opinions about them.

Room 7 and 8

THE LATE SIXTIES and seventies witnessed the emergence of a new era of radical feminism and feminist activism, within a broader counter-cultural or anti-establishment context, which took different forms around the world. This feminist struggle was at the basis of the work of a number of women artists, or even within a given social context. Many used the objectification of women in traditional forms of art and in the mass media, the creation of highly commercialised female stereotypes that emerged from advertising and publicity, as a means to denounce the subordinate role of women in society.

Similarly, the body (through sexuality, motherhood and physical attractiveness), space (such as the domestic sphere), language, objects or attributes and colours associated with femininity or gendered as feminine were employed in ways that, with deliberate irony, embraced their formerly pejorative connotations in order to deconstruct and undermine such associations. Some artists widened their critique to counter a broader gender stereotyping.

Room 9

ART AND ACTIVISM gained a new proximity in the eighties, and artists created work with strong ties to the domain of the street or elsewhere beyond the studio, bearing a relation to forms such as graffiti, comics or unauthorised fly-posters. Developing with the ongoing emergence of feminism, anti-racism, gay rights and identity politics were forms of art and activism that addressed specific issues such as the AIDS crisis. A burgeoning context of neoliberalism, free market economic policies and neo-colonial interventions were also targets for activist art.

Popular culture and the cult of celebrity also exerted a continuing fascination for artists, who were impacted by the creation of new forms such as the music video and MTV, as well as fanzines produced as informal means of expression for subcultures, which provided a means to bypass establishment culture. Art, as well as fashion and graphic design, became dominated by intense new synthetic, heightened and fluorescent colours.

Room 10

WHILE IDENTITY POLITICS continued to influence artists into the nineties, and they were still negotiating the legacies of Minimal art and its tendency to eschew the personal, they began to work with large-scale installation art and scenography in ways that, even while often referencing Minimal art, addressed intensely personal or political subject matter. Allusions to the body were frequently made through its absence, or through props, prosthetics or proxies in the form of aids for and augmentations of the body, or else via furniture or other objects that stood in for the body or body parts.

Underlying these practices was a new consciousness of history at the fin de siècle and the end of the millennium. It was marked particularly by an awareness of the violence dominating twentieth-century history, a reflection made more intense in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and thus in an era of post-Communism, and likewise, at a time marked by debates around post-colonialism.

Room 11

RECENT ART has focused on the critique of economic relations governed by neoliberalism, globalisation and simultaneously has examined the human relations that are dominated by geo-politics and unequal distributions of power. In our transnational economy the open sea is an economic space for the mobility of material goods, but it is also a contested space fraught with social and political debate. While commodities travel aboard container ships with ease, the mobility of people is curtailed despite circumstances of persecution and violence. A stark linguistic and conceptual contrast is drawn between those who are designated economic migrants or refugees.

Artists have variously focused on the maritime economy through the transport of natural gas; the precariousness of the sea through the material remains of the migration crisis, reshaped into a parquet floor; or the interplay of capitalism, labour and politics through captions from news photographs that attest resistance movements worldwide against unjust economic policies, abuse of power and political repression.

Tower (from 8 of May)

IN HIS WORK, Colombian artist Marcos Ávila Forero investigates contemporary neo-imperialism. For the video *Un pechiche para Benkos*, he commissioned a handmade *pechiche*, a drum with which slave communities sent encrypted messages, and asked Congolese musicologist Émile Biayenda to tell a story, which concerns the journey of two migrants, using these ancient codes. The sound of the percussive drum creates a hypnotic effect that combines the experiences of the two men: one a historical figure and the other a modern migrant. They are identified as Camara Mwa Abdallaye, who tries to cross the contemporary Mediterranean hidden in a 'cayuco', and Benkos Biohó, a slave and leader of the first movement of Colombian emancipation, who died in 1622. Although they correspond to two different historical moments, the parallels show that the current migration phenomenon repeats and reproduces the experiences of past centuries. For both characters, hidden in the hull of the ship, the sound of the waves turns the boat into a resonant box.

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MACBA Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona

Plaça dels Àngels, 1
08001 Barcelona
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