

In Real Time

Rafael Tous Collection of Conceptual Art

Level 0

Blow, Trace, Observe and Other Rituals

Blow, trace, observe, run... Action was one of the most broadly employed artistic expressions of the 1970s. As it was materially ephemeral and set apart from all traditional artistic disciplines, action united everything the new generation of artists sought to put into circulation. Amongst the variety of forms that were adopted, there was a kind of action art associated with nature that awakened a great deal of interest amongst artists, whether exploring body movement in space and the perception of physical phenomena, interacting directly with the landscape or registering tensions and documenting similitudes. Some artists developed complex, theatrical actions, frequently putting themselves into situations of risk.

Art and Nature, Alchemy of the Elements

The artists who had a relationship to landscape and nature included them as frameworks of action, or else converted them into experimental working tools. Water, earth, air and fire were no longer just artistic supports, but also became art's primary materials and explorative fields. This alchemical art approached the natural environment and its transformations, processes and energies, giving rise to a plural variety of practices. Amongst the various proposals of the time, what stands out was work exploring closeness with all living things, the rejection of all forms of animal abuse and commitment to the notion of healing.

The Emergence of Consumption and New Social Behaviour

In the 1970s, the mass media became a new domain of artistic exploration. Its eruption into the collective imagination, along with rising consumerism and the popularisation of the world of the image, were factors favouring its interest. This resulted in an art that was critical and denunciative; it was often sociological in nature, visibilising multiple forms of manipulation in advanced capitalism. Many artists were interested in the mass media and its images, which they altered and intervened in to deploy personal mythologies or reveal the newfound commodification of the gaze. Using resources such as literalness, irony, play and subversion, they decried the deficits and errors of ascendant consumer society.

Necessary Denouncement

Stalingrad, Guernica, Dresden, Auschwitz.... The political, denunciative gaze, set in opposition to the many forms of 20th century totalitarianism, has an ongoing presence in the art of the 1970s. The first generation of Catalan conceptual artists was distinguished by its powerful opposition to the Franco regime, which also played out in other parts of Spain. The weakness of the regime made it possible for determined inroads to be made by the revolutionary spirit of France's May '68, Marxist theory and a way of understanding art as a tool for social transformation. In this context, extremely radical political propositions were set forth, along with others that critiqued social malaise. Discrimination against women, the first elections, the televised treatment of Franco's death, along with the memory of fascism and excess militarisation centred many of the artistic propositions of the time.

Semiotics and Semantics: The Life of Words

The emergence of concept art in Catalonia occurred in parallel to the experimentation with language that was seen in other areas of the avant-garde. In the 1970s, the visual poetry that had been developed in pioneering fashion in the European post-war became more broadly known, along with the philosophy of language and semiotic theory. The theses of theoreticians like Ludwig Wittgenstein, Ferdinand de Saussure and Marshall McLuhan opened up a new paradigm, which was also explored by art. Interest in all things related to the word, the equivocal relationship between language and things, the semantic dimension of the object, the idea of play associated with phonetics, as well as patterns of repetition—these were just some of the areas that would be developed.

Poetics and Practices of the Object

The life of objects and the proliferation of consumer goods centred the attention of experimental practices of the time, which explored their many facets on formal, poetic and discursive levels. Everyday objects and those of an extremely humble nature, decontextualised and intervened on in a multitude of ways, took the place of the work of art. When referring to Catalan artists working this way, we find unique propositions such as the *enfangades* [muddying], the inclusion of reliquaries and impossible objects, a taste for kitsch and an accentuated aesthetic of poverty.

Level 1

The 1980s and 1990s in the Rafael Tous Collection

The legacy of experimental artistic practices begun in the 1960s and 1970s was sustained throughout the 1980s and 1990s. During the euphoric years of the new democracy, and in parallel to a return to painting, concept art entered into large cultural institutions and the new museums created during those years. The artists revised the very notion of art and returned to the “poor” object, transforming it into a vehicle for aesthetic and metaphysical reflection: the idea of the double, reflection, time and the components of artistic presentation.

For a Critical Art

In the 1980s and 1990s, social and political engagement continued to be present in many artistic practices. The denouncement of all forms of violence, war and the collapse of dialogue, as well as forms of social abuse carried out worldwide, centred the interest of many artists whose careers were already consolidated. In this mode of working, Francesc Torres used media images and objects from the consumption society to deactivate ideological codes that are not always explicit. Working from an artistic position, the artist encouraged collective thought of an effectively critical character, evidencing irrefutable parallelisms, as in his *Siegesallee o Avinguda de la Victòria* [Siegesallee, or Victory Avenue], or when intervening in the pages of well-known magazines like the historical *Newsweek*.

Sala Metrònom

Sala Metrònom, a space dedicated to contemporary art founded by the collector and businessman Rafael Tous, was operational in Barcelona between 1980 and 2006. Until 1983, it was located on Carrer Berlinès, in the Sant Gervasi neighbourhood, and later moved to Carrer Fusina, adjacent to El Born market. Tous surrounded himself with successive teams of reliable collaborators and opened his doors to several generations of creators, not only in the visual arts, but also in the fields of the performing arts, music and còmics. Its programme went far beyond local art and soon became an open window to the world. The experimental profile of most projects, outside the institutional and commercial circuits, made Metrònom a meeting point for the unexpected and transgressive.

Metrònom organised over a thousand exhibitions and activities that had a decisive impact on the evolution of the culture of those decades. In time, photography came to be included, especially concerning the human condition, establishing a link with the New York. It also embraced the art linked to the contemporary technological evolution, from complex sound installations to the emergence of digital art. From the late 1980s, Metrònom also became a platform for the resurgence of performance. Contemporary music also featured in its programme, especially the cycles organised by the flautist and sound artist Barbara Held.

Metrònom was a forerunner in the creation of an archive, not only of its own activity, but also of some key documents for the understanding of the recent history of art, in dialogue with an extensive bibliographic and videographic collection that includes thousands of titles.

Europe, Rescue Architecture 1989

Along with one's own body as material for experimentation, interaction with nature is another of the components articulating the projects of Francesc Abad. His is a broadly understood notion of nature, related to ideas of culture, civilization, barbarism and the past and present of Europe.

Presented in Metrònom in 1989, *Europa arqueologia de rescat* is an installation that calls on all these considerations. As with other projects by the artist, the fragility of memory, the presence of the document and art understood as a form of collective knowledge are present at the heart of the proposal. In this case, the work sets off from Abad's discovery of a forest cave in the Serra de l'Obac mountains near Terrassa, his hometown. The cave, which had been inhabited by humans, leads the artist to invent a possible alphabet of signs that refers to the origin of writing, along with vertical stones which evoke the earliest indications of solstices and other measurements of time, apart from their clearly sexual referents. A journey to a primeval era linking alphabets, calendars, magic ritual and sexuality.

Carlos Pazos

No hay replay

No hay replay is an installation that was presented for the first time in 1989 at Sala Metrònom, Barcelona. It features various recurring components of the artist's imaginary realm – the passing of time, memory and its fetishes, loss, randomness – which on this occasion are shrouded in darkness. The decontextualised objects introduce the spectator to a dreamlike space, striking visually while referencing staging as the sole form of representation. Here, the frozen image of a leap into the void, with the intimate journey, inner experience and risk that come along with it, gives rise to a degree of anxiety. Irony, parody and theatricality are the veritably subversive features at play. There is no turning back.