

The Furor of the Festival / *Los Encuentros de Pamplona* (1972)

José Díaz Cuyás

Los Encuentros de Pamplona, or Pamplona Meeting, in 1972, was the most significant and best-attended international avant-garde festival of any held in Spain after the civil war. In the form of the work of 350 artists, it brought together, in a country still under the sway of a military dictatorship, the latest trends of the national and international avant-garde. In particular, it included those trends that in the latter half of the 1960s chose to blur the boundaries between media, which tend to be classified loosely as conceptual. Shortly before the festival of Sanfermines, from June 26 to July 3, the public space of Pamplona, then a provincial town, was literally occupied by a full program of events and artistic interventions intended to celebrate the most radical trends of art that challenged its very limits and argued with an iconoclastic vehemence to dissolve the boundaries between art and life. The patriarchal presence of John Cage, with his influence on the anti-art trends of the previous decade, “whose spirit,” the catalogue tells us, “is so present in many of the manifestations of these Encuentros,” came to be seen as the symbol of that general propensity towards the act or event, towards the ephemeral, transitory poetics of art seen as mere happening.

Held in the early summer of 1972, the Encuentros marked the beginning of a cultural artistic tour that added the capital of Navarre to the route that included the Spoleto Festival, Documenta 5 in Kassel and the XXXVI Venice Biennale. It played a major role from the outset, as was only to be expected in a country where cultural tourism and the leisure industry were determinant factors in both the economic development policy of the previous decade and the correlative phenomenon of political opening-up.¹ Rather than a distinctive local feature, however, it was an element of international normalization at a time when, thanks to the development of communications, for the first time it was possible to speak of an intercontinental artistic debate.² This globalization of the art scene coincided, significantly, with the final phase of the avant-garde myth, characterized by the maximum radicalization of its postulates—due

1 “Tourism was our Marshall Plan [...] the great support that the Spanish economy received from developed countries [...] the most evident super factor in the development of the Spanish economy.” Interview with Manuel Fraga Iribarne, Minister of Information and Tourism from 1962 to 1969, conducted in Santiago de Compostela on May 15, 2000, cited in Esther M. Sánchez Sánchez, “Turismo, desarrollo e integración internacional de la España franquista”, *EBHA Annual Conference, Barcelona, September 16–18, 2004*, p. 1. The press of the time reported its value for tourism: see “Los ‘Encuentros 72 de Pamplona’”, *Diario de Navarra*, April 29, 1972, or Louis Dandrel’s chronicle for *Le Monde* on July 9, 1972, in which he wrote: “Last week, the capital of Navarre left behind its traditions and welcomed its tourists with strange manifestations: the ‘Encuentros’.” For an introduction to action arts and Spanish experimental art in regard to tourism, see my articles “Popular el paraíso: la AAO en El Cabrito”, *Desacuerdos* 5, 2009, p. 115–128, http://www.macba.cat/PDFs/desacuerdos5_jose_cuyas_cas.pdf, and “La rarefacta fragancia del arte experimental español”, *De la revuelta a la posmodernidad (1962–1982)*. MNCARS, Madrid 2011, p. 127–141.

to the objection to any limit, to the extent of totally negating art and culture—and its immediate depletion and consequent disempowerment.



Proposals, experimental artistic practices and installations in the Pneumatic Domes. Los Encuentros de Pamplona, 1972, photo by Pío Guerediáin. Courtesy of the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía

What principally set it apart from other similar events were the peculiarities of its organizational structure, and the importance of the dialogue between art and music, and between the avant-garde and popular tradition. In terms of funding, it was almost entirely privately financed (Grupo Huarte) and managed by artists (Grupo Alea), more specifically a small team directed by the composer Luis de Pablo and the artist José Luis Alexanco. The peculiarities of its gestation, in that historic context, are indicative of its underlying paradoxical nature: firstly, under the dictatorship, only private initiatives could undertake an event of this kind; and secondly, it was precisely this disinterested, open-handed financing that marked it out as a public service, as a gift to the city that exploited the public nature of these tendencies, offered to the city-people as an instructive, free, festive event.³ The fact that it was a private initiative also gave the team of directors the freedom to make their decisions without the mediation of what they referred to rather contemptuously as “cultural intermediaries,” turning their back proudly on the market and the art institution.⁴

Alongside foreign avant-garde movements and interacting with them, this was, then, a stage for the most experimental and therefore most minority trends of Spanish art. It showcased the latest manifestations of visual, sound and action poetry, coordinated by Ignacio Gómez de Liaño (featuring works by

² The Encuentros were marked by particular attention to media projection, and their impact was considerable in both the national and the international media. The press office was coordinated by Juan Manuel Bonet and Carlos Alcolea, and relations with the foreign press were conducted by Josephine Markovitz. Although the NODO, the official news service, ignored the Encuentros, two special chapters about the event made by the *Galería* television program have recently been recovered. The mediatic and touristic aspects of the event, which informed its entire nature, are indicative of a new age in festivals and art biennales.

³ “Everything was free. Everywhere, people were rushing around, open, enthusiastic, spontaneous; students, of course, but then in the evenings there were lots of workers. For the first time in my life, a

Julien Blaine, Jean-François Bory, Augusto de Campos, Eugen Gomringer, Jiří Kolář, Décio Pignatari, Franz Mon, Paul de Vree, Herminio Molero, Pau Bertran, etc.) and public poetry by Liaño's own group, Alain Arias Misson and Carlos Ginzburg, as well as Lily Greenham's phonetic poetry performances .

truly 'popular' public." Jack Gousseland, "Entre la fête et la crise: un succès inattendu," *Combat: Le journal de Paris*, July, 1972.



Public poem by Gómez de Liaño, *Los Encuentros de Pamplona*, 1972. Courtesy of Muntadas

It offered conceptual art and what was referred to as proposals, creations and plastic montages, with works by Art & Language, Christian Boltanski, Victor Burgin, Christo, Walter De Maria, Al Hansen, Joseph Kosuth, Carl Andre, Artist Placement Group, Robert Smithson, Ben Vautier, Lawrence Weiner, etc.), with the presence of Bernar Venet, Leandro Katz and Ludwik Flaszen, a close collaborator of Jerzy Grotowski at the Laboratory Theatre, texts by Catherine Millet and Guy Debord, the exhibition of Systems Art, "Towards a Profile of Latin American Art," by the CAYC in Buenos Aires, the creation of a collective parangolé by Hélio Oiticica created for the occasion; and the participation of foremost Spanish figures such as Nacho Criado, Valcárcel Medina, Lugán, Julio Plaza, Equipo Crónica, José Miguel de Prada Poole, Alberto Corazón, Paz Muro, Gardy Artigas, Luis Muro, Robert Llimós, Jordi Benito, El Grupo de Gracia, Antoni Muntadas and Francesc Torres.

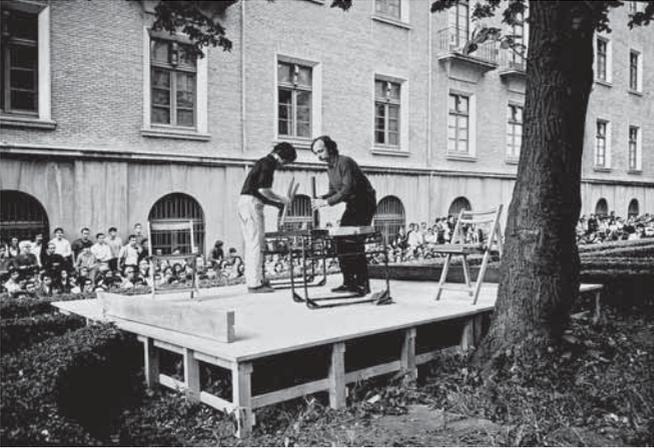
There was video art as well, marked by the attendance of Dennis Oppenheim and the cycle "This Is Your Roof," specially produced for Pamplona by Willoughby Sharp (with works, among others, by Vito Acconci, Mel Bochner, Nancy Holt and Gordon Matta-Clark); computer, plastic and musical art, with

⁴ The Huartes were Navarrese builders who had connections with the regime, but they also featured strongly in the most ambitious and systematic project of modernization and cultural patronage under Francoism. As Luis de Pablo recalls, after the death of Félix Huarte Goñi, Vice President of the Diputación Foral regional council from 1963 until his death in 1971, his eldest son Jesús Huarte wanted to give the city a gift: "He wanted Pamplona to receive a very big gift." Interview with Luis de Pablo, February 23, 2004. With the exception of major funding for infrastructures and the contribution of engineers on the part of Pamplona Council, Grupo Huarte must have met all the expenses, managed production and applied for administrative permits, as well as undertaking responsibility for public order and security.

a large show coordinated by Mario Fernández Barberá in association with the Computer Centre of Madrid University (with artists such as Manuel Barbadillo, Iannis Xenakis, Soledad Sevilla, José María Yturralde, Robert Baker, Otto Beckmann, Gregorio Dujovny, etc.), including performances and talks given by the pioneer of computer music, Lejaren Hiller.

Then there was electronic, minimalist and action music, with concerts by, among others, John Cage and David Tudor; Steve Reich with Laura Dean's dance company; Zaj; Eduardo Polonio and Horacio Vaggione; Luis de Pablo in collaboration with José Luis Alexanco; Tomas Marco with Juan Giralt and Fernández Muro; Luc Ferrari and Jean-Serge Breton; Sylvano Bussotti, and pieces by Mauricio Kagel, Cruz de Castro, José Luis Isasa and Mestres Quadreny.

It also included experimental and historic avant-garde film, in collaboration with Henri Langlois, from Dziga Vertov to Stan Vanderbeek, Ian Breakwell, John Latham and Philippe Garrel, with showings produced personally by Martial Raysse, Shusaku Arakawa and Madeline Gins, Javier Aguirre, Rafael Ruiz Balerdi, Gonzalo Suárez and José Antonio Sistiaga.



Performance by the Artze brothers on the *txalaparta* (Basque wooden percussion instrument) in the Museo de Bellas Artes at Pamplona. Los Encuentros de Pamplona, 1972, photo by José Luis Alexanco. Courtesy of the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía

In addition to all of the aforementioned was the controversial “Contemporary Basque Art Show” curated by Santiago Amón, which, despite its general incongruence with the dominant poetics of the Encuentros, offered a comprehensive artistic panorama of recent decades in the Basque Country and Navarre. Completing the program was “Music of Other

Cultures,” including concerts by Vietnamese Trần van Khê, Kathakali dance drama from Kerala, Basque *txalaparta* music by the Artze brothers, the flamenco of Diego del Gastor with the Morón gypsy group, and the Iranian trio of Hossein Malek.

This short list serves as an outline of the ambition and scope of the festival and how representative it was of the most active trends of the time. In an interview given in November 2009, Dennis Oppenheim remembered these Encuentros as one of the first occasions that brought together European and American artists who practiced a new kind of art: “I have to say,” he commented in relation to the difficult reception of the final avant-garde manifestations, “that the people didn’t understand a great deal of what we were doing at the time; only the artists themselves really understood that work.” A state of uncertainty which also made it especially exciting for him, and which in the case of Pamplona contributed to the curiosity and excitement with which he received his invitation: “You can imagine the artists, we were all relatively young, being in an international exhibition, in a country that had a completely different political climate to our own and being considered important.”⁵ These declarations are quite indicative of the contradictions and conflicts, even the grotesque or carnival-like elements that came to dominate this festival, held in a political “climate” that was, in itself, exceptional and untimely.

It would seem that this art, which “only the artists themselves really understood,” was characterized by the general desire to show reality quite literally; by the iconoclastic rejection of any figurative or metaphorical conception of the truth, and the desire—never satisfied—to *present* reality, to invoke it in the here and now.⁶ What is both fascinating and terrible about that artistic situation could then be summed up as the “meeting”—or the collision—of the passionately snatched art of the *real* with Spanish social *reality* at its most critical moment. Hence the multiple outbursts that took place among the scheduled artistic proposals and the other events, festive or violent: two bombs and the manifestos against the festival by ETA; the semi-clandestine meetings and the press releases by a sector of artists in the orbit of the PCE (the Spanish Communist Party, the principal underground political organization, was opposed to the festival since, according to its viewpoint at the time, it offered other countries a distorted image of the

⁵ <http://www.museoreinasofia.es/archivo/vid-eos/2009/encuentros-pamplona/dennis-oppenheim.html>

⁶ See “Literalismo y carnavalización en la última vanguardia”, José Díaz Cuyás (ed.), *Encuentros de Pamplona 1972: Fin de fiesta del arte experimental*, MNCARS, Madrid 2010.

country); the various confrontations between the Basque artists that marked the end of the project that was the Basque School; the threats and pamphlets of extreme right-wing groups; the constant rumors of a shutdown and the ongoing police presence encouraged by a regime that regarded this public manifestation with suspicion; the anti-festival stances of the Basque Church and a sector of Catalan artists organized around Pere Portabella and Antoni Tàpies; and finally, the vandalism and the spontaneous outbursts of collective jubilation among much of the public. Many things, seemingly disparate, were happening at once, though all motivated by that artistic event.

The dysfunctionality between politics and society in the Spain of the time had reached an almost unsustainable level of tension. After the tragic travesty of the Burgos Trial, held the previous year, the regime had started to show evident signs of weakness, though it was another three long, hard years before the dictator's interminable televised death.⁷ The general perception was that this was the end of an era, run through in equal measure by hope and uncertainty, most of all for a new generation that had grown up with development policies and been sustained by the trends of the new left and the counterculture of the late 1960s. There was a new but still precarious critical mass that identified with neither the overblown rhetoric of the regime nor the strict dogmatic style of the old culture of resistance offered by the "fellow travelers" of the PCE. Accordingly, calls for public action that partook of art-life trends, with their formal disobedience and their implicit content of bodily and ideological "liberation" found the ultimate sounding board in Pamplona. An individual artistic proposal could find itself over- come, contaminated or disguised, and at the Encuentros there were many examples, on the side of *life*. This was the case, for example, of Oiticica's parangolé, the piece embodying the most explicit carnivalesque substance featured in Pamplona. Its fabrics were "decarnalized" and turned into festive or protest banners. Then there were the dummies of Equipo Crónica that imitated the "secret police" and were distributed among the audience at the concert given by Ferrari and Breton, ending in the "glorious orgiastic ritual"⁸ of being tossed and destroyed, and which, in a comic twist, were saved from the mob thanks to the protection of the very police force they parodied. The same was true of the enthusiasm with which the audience danced

⁷ In early 1971, the Executive Committee of the PCE had issued what it intended as a definitive declaration: "After the Burgos Trial, the dictatorship of General Franco is potentially at an end." Gregorio Morán: *Miseria y grandeza del Partido Comunista de España 1939–1985*, Planeta, Barcelona 1986, p. 463.

⁸ Fernando Huici & Javier Ruiz, *La comedia del arte*, Editora Nacional, Madrid 1974, p. 160.

to and cheered Steve Reich's severe, mental minimalist piece, *Drumming*.⁹ And also of the sarcastic misunderstanding of the artistic packets imitating bombs that Luis Muro planned to place in the streets and that had to be removed after ETA's first bomb, real in this case, went off at the monument to General Sanjurjo.

Amid the anxiety and uncertainty in the streets and at the various events, a contagious vandalistic joy reigned. Due to the way the public phenomenon took over that program of *public* works, the outcome was more like a boisterous, explosive carnival masquerade. Like a furious game of collective dressing-up in which any gesture, any thing, be it of an artistic or a political nature, could invert its meaning and end up "out of place". Like a multitudinous masquerade in which art, so eager for *life*, found itself, in a country already immersed in a grotesque reality, outdone by the contradictions and impulses of that *life* to which it so desperately aspired.

Translated from the Spanish by Elaine Fradley.

⁹ "Years later, Steve Reich himself told me that no public had danced to his music like the public in Pamplona." Llorenç Barber: "Música española de los años setenta," Mariano Navarro (ed.), *Los setenta: Una década multicolor*, Fundación Marcelino Botín, Santander 2001, p. 197.