

## NATIONAL NARRATIVES AND CULTURAL DIPLOMACY. THE SPANISH PAVILION AT THE VENICE BIENNALE DURING THE FRANCO DICTATORSHIP'S *APERTURA* IN THE FIFTIES

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### Abstract

This article proposes an approach to the Spanish presence at the Venice Biennale from the perspectives of Art History and International Relations. The article examines the image conveyed by Spanish participation in the Biennale, always via the Spanish Pavilion and in the political context of the Franco dictatorship's *aperturismo* [openness] in the fifties, to prove how the dictatorship favoured the attainment of political interests through a carefully planned soft power cultural diplomatic strategy. The text introduces the distinctive features of the Venice Biennale and examines its unique layout in national pavilions, which makes it an appropriate case study for addressing the connection between artistic production and national identity, on the one hand, and for analysing the role played by art and culture in international relations, on the other. What role did the Spanish Pavilion play at the Venice Biennale in the construction of national narratives during the Franco regime? How did the dictatorship use cultural diplomacy to construct its image on the international stage?

**Keywords:** art; International Relations; Historical Memory; Francoism; Venice Biennale.

### Resumen

En este artículo se propone una aproximación a la presencia española en la Bienal de Venecia desde la perspectiva de la Historia del arte y de las Relaciones Internacionales. Se examina la imagen que transmite la participación española en la Bienal, a través del Pabellón de España y en el contexto político del *aperturismo* del régimen franquista en los años cincuenta, para demostrar cómo la dictadura favoreció la consecución de intereses políticos a través de una estrategia de poder blando y de diplomacia cultural cuidadosamente diseñada. El texto estudia algunos rasgos distintivos de la Bienal de Venecia y examina su singular distribución en pabellones nacionales, lo que la convierte en un caso de estudio apropiado para abordar la relación entre la producción artística y la identidad nacional, por un lado, y para analizar el papel que juegan el arte y la cultura en las relaciones internacionales, por otro. ¿Qué papel jugó el Pabellón de España en la Bienal de Venecia en la construcción de narrativas nacionales durante el franquismo? ¿Cómo utilizó la dictadura la diplomacia cultural para construir su imagen en el escenario internacional?

**Palabras clave:** arte; Relaciones Internacionales; Memoria Histórica; franquismo; Bienal de Venecia.



## THE POLITICS OF ART AT THE VENICE BIENNALE. THE NATIONAL PAVILIONS

The Venice Art Biennale is a classic example that enables us to study the connections between art and diplomacy at such international events, in which art and culture play a key role in defining and legitimating the narratives and shaping the imaginary map of the contemporary world. Launched in 1895 in the hope of restoring the cultural importance that Venice had enjoyed in the past, for over a century and throughout fifty-nine shows the Venice Biennale has gradually become a reflection of the political transformations that have shaken Europe and the rest of the world. Two of the singularities of the Venice Biennale are its permanence over more than a century and its spatial organisation. Thanks to its longevity, the Venice Biennale has become a place in which to study the political changes produced over the last century, while its spatial organisation in the form of national pavilions enables us to analyse how representativeness produces a national meaning in keeping with the political regimes of each country and at each specific moment in time. Furthermore, the peculiar spatial configuration of the Biennale plays an important role in the study of international diplomatic relations through culture, and in the construction of national imaginaries.

The notion of imagined community<sup>1</sup>, developed by Benedict Anderson in 1983 serves us here to compare the mechanisms of construction of national communities with the mechanisms used by governments to build a national imaginary in spaces of representation such as the Biennale. But the debate will extend to its interpretation as a space where international relations between states are also established and developed, and issues related to geopolitics or diplomacy are brought into play.

The special configuration of the Venice Biennale in national pavilions allows us to explore in greater detail the connections between the exhibition format, the articulation of the imaginary that surrounds the nation state, and the development of a cultural policy based on diplomacy. Such a framework of analysis is particularly productive for surveying the narratives of art history that in recent years have begun to see the exhibition format as a critical tool for rewriting history and studying the links between exhibitions, the production of knowledge and, consequently, power. Two spheres – that of knowledge and that of power – which are always interrelated, as proved by Michel Foucault. (Foucault 1995).

The Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte della Città di Venezia was born in an enclave with strong symbolic connotations. The Giardini di Castello, Venice's public gardens, were officially opened in 1807 by Napoleon Bonaparte after conquering northern Italy and proclaiming himself king of Italy, a fact that aroused strong nationalist sentiments among Italians. Over the course of the century, the public gardens became a place for socialisation for the Venetian bourgeoisie, and in 1887, eight decades after its creation, the area was chosen as the venue for the National Art Exhibition, the immediate precedent of the Biennale. Twenty years had passed since the Veneto had been annexed to the Kingdom of Italy in 1866, and slightly less since the country was definitely unified thanks to the incorporation of Rome in 1870.

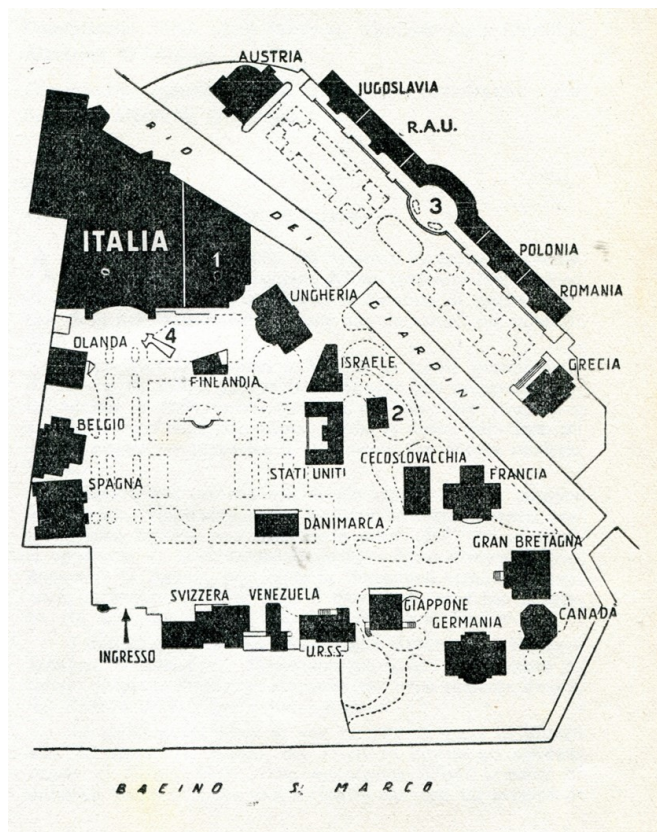
In the late nineteenth century, the debates on the idea of nation that began to emerge in the political arena were also present in the art field, and the effectiveness of exhibitions in the construction of cultural identities made them patriotic instruments. Indeed, exhibitions and fairs enabled many Italian cities to exalt the nationalist sentiment produced by the birth of Italy as a nation state. So, bearing in mind the precedent of the Venetian National Exhibition devoted exclusively to art – unlike the Industrial Exposition in Turin, or the Milan Triennale – the site founded by Napoleon was chosen to inaugurate the International Art Exhibition on 30 April 1895.

Promoted by Venetian mayor Riccardo Selvatico, the Biennale also became "one of the many locuses for debates about Italian nationhood and regionalism in the post-Unification period" (West 1995, 404). In his public announcement of the celebration of the exhibition held in 1894<sup>2</sup>, the mayor openly expressed the patriotic vocation of the show, "Venice has assumed this initiative with the double intention of asserting its faith in the moral energies of the Nation and of bringing the most noble activities of the modern spirit, without distinctions between countries, around a great concept of art" (Torrent 1997, 22). As educational and civilizing agencies, national expositions and great universal fairs – new forms of spectacle usually considered to be the forerunners of the Biennale – played a decisive role in the formation of the modern state, and since the late nineteenth century their formulation and financing had been priority issues for nation states, aware of their influence and importance in transmitting narratives.

Hence, conceived as an educator and initiator of a new, modern culture for *la giovane Italia*, the Venice Biennale was set up as an exhibition of official, nineteenth-century academic art displayed, in its first years of existence, in the central pavilion of the Giardini di Castello, where Italian and foreign artists were presented together and their works were arranged according to aesthetic parameters. In spite of having emerged as an International Exposition recommended by a committee of artists and intellectuals who, from the beginning of the negotiations, had insisted on transcending the national character of the preceding art exhibition, the first biennials were chiefly national shows of works by artists concerned with Italian reality. Not until the end of World War Two, after having undergone an unstoppable process of Fascist extremism during the Mussolini government, did the Biennale truly become international. The show was created as a powerful instrument for the transmission of Italian nationalism.

The increasing presence of Italian artists left little room for foreign participation, triggering the need to enlarge the space to promote its internationalisation. Twelve years after its creation, in 1907, the structure of the Venice Biennale began to change. Several different governments were invited to erect pavilions to house the works of their artists in the area of the Giardini. Besides helping to solve the problem of the lack of space, the decision heralded new relationships between the organisers of the Biennale and the participating countries (fig. 1). This decision marked the beginning of a new relationship between the organizers of the Biennale and the participating countries, as the national exhibition halls began to operate as independent spaces in which the various different countries could freely decide to present their displays: "[O]nce the pavilion was agreed upon, it would become the property and responsibility of the foreign country involved, as would all maintenance and furnishing costs" (Martini 2005, 219).

Fig. 1. Site map of the Venice Biennale Giardini with the national pavilions in 1958



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In 1907, the first national pavilion built in the gardens of the Biennale was that of Belgium; in 1909, Germany, Hungary and Great Britain followed suit, as did France and Switzerland in 1912 and Russia in 1914, whose pavilion was inaugurated barely three months before the outbreak of World War One. The Russian Pavilion, which in 1924 would change its name and the Tsarian symbols on its façade to the USSR acronym and the red flag with the hammer and sickle, is a clear example of how the Biennale architecture has, over time, reflected political changes. Similar changes in symbols would subsequently affect the German and Spanish pavilions. In 1932, 1934 and 1936 the colours of the Republican flag adorned the façade of Spanish Pavilion, erected in 1922 under the reign of Alfonso XIII, a time of conflicts and great political and social turmoil. The building's first neo-Baroque façade was modified during the Spanish Civil War, when Mussolini decided that the pavilion should fall under military rule. Hence in 1938, when the war was at its height, Spain opened its Venetian display organised by the Falangists. Following the defeat of the Republicans, in 1940 the Spanish Pavilion depended directly on the Franco-led government and its Fascist symbols remained on the façade until 1952, when architect Joaquín Vaquero Palacios designed a new and neutral façade. The neutrality formed a part of a progressive strategy set up in the fifties by the Franco regime: after having been condemned by the United Nations in 1946, Spain was beginning to be admitted to other international bodies such as the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in 1950 and the United Nations Educational and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1952. In 1955, Spain became a member of the United Nations (UN) and decided it needed to



improve its exterior image. The Spanish Pavilion was therefore altered whenever there was a change in Spanish power.

The presence – and absence – of national pavilions on the biennale premises reveals, on the one hand, the cultural diplomacy behind the participation of the different countries and, on the other, the Eurocentric nature of the exhibition. The Biennale was born as a reflection of this new European order of a national character that in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries organised the world into nations, and both the architecture of the pavilions and the content of the displays proved the position of power occupied by each country in world geopolitics. A study of the Venice Biennale enables us to establish the global hegemony of the participating countries: the first countries to build their artistic embassies had either been or were still colonial powers, and the more or less significant presence of countries on the map of the Venice Biennale depended on the diplomatic relations between them<sup>3</sup>. As summed up by artist Jonas Staal, the Biennale "can be considered a key battleground where the war for cultural hegemony is waged on all fronts" (Staal 2013). From the beginning, it had been a place where international relations and national galleries had forged close ties. While countries like Belgium, Germany and the United Kingdom (great colonial powers when the exhibition was founded) enjoyed prominent positions in the Giardini, the countries that were burdened with a colonial past only began to install their pavilions in the area in the mid-fifties, with the exception of the United States pavilion, erected in 1930, when the country was already considered a hegemonic world power after its victory, and that of the Triple Agreement, in World War One. Consequently, the organization of the pavilions obeys political strategic reasons; the exhibition spaces will operate over time as places of national representation in the service of governmental interests.

When artworks are set in a space that has the ideological connotations of a national pavilion, they fulfil the function of diplomatic representativeness and help shape public perception of the identity and politics of nations. This symbolic function is an example of the advertising role played by art in international displays, i.e., ideological instruments that act as diplomatic channels for the political regimes they represent and that, in turn, reveal the relations between art, politics and diplomacy on a global scale.

## **THE SPANISH PAVILION IN THE FIFTIES. A TOOL OF PUBLIC DIPLOMACY**

Spain's presence in Venice has been one of the most constant in the history of the Biennale. The country was first represented in 1895, year of the official inauguration. Although Spain's own pavilion wasn't erected until 1922, during the first two decades Spanish artists regularly took part in the show held in the central exhibition area. The most important structural change in the Biennale, the one that made it a unique event and therefore a case study for diplomatic relations between states, came when the countries represented were allowed to build their own pavilions within the Giardini area. This meant that they were able to organise their displays inside their own pavilions freely, acting as cultural embassies of sorts within a specific sphere: a small international community inside a city. As mentioned, the change was brought about by the construction of the Belgian Pavilion in 1907.

Exhibitions are products and agents of social and political changes. During the years of the Second World War, the 1942 Venice Biennale was the last to be held until 1948, although Spain did not take part that year on account of the country's isolation following the defeat of Germany and Italy and the international blockade that the UN had decreed against Franco in 1946. Circumstances had changed, and the victory of the Allied Forces led to Spain's international isolation, altering the foreign policy of the dictatorship. As soon as the world war

was over, Franco removed the Falange from his government as its collaboration with the Axis powers had made it an awkward partner, naming instead an administration linked to the Catholic Church, that stood for the anti-Communist values of the United States.

Shortly after the end of World War Two, the world found itself immersed in the Cold War, an ideological battle that played a key role in the evolution of the Franco regime and would also be reflected in the Spanish Pavilion in Venice. In the forties, during the first phase of the regime's presence at the Venetian venue, Spain was represented by the ambassadors of the new order. Art was used with propaganda aims, but in a different strategy to that of cultural diplomacy followed in the fifties. As opposed to the one-directional nature of propaganda, in the fifties culture was a tool of public diplomacy designed not only to convince but to listen and understand external audiences with whom it could build long-lasting relationships. Hence, in the aftermath of World War Two, cultural assimilation gave way to cultural exchange and cooperation.

The consequences of the political changes taking place around the world led to the abandonment of the policies of autarchy and to the gradual openness of the regime. The campaign to abandon the Fascist image that had prevailed during the first years of the dictatorship began in the fifties, giving way to a diplomatic strategy that also implied the arts, was now oriented to project an idea of neutrality. This phase was characterised by a new cultural approach to Europe and the United States, continents that would play a vital geopolitical role in Spain's integration in the international community. Besides the country's strategic geographic situation, Spain had the strength of being overtly anti-Communist, and although the Harry Truman administration had expressed its qualms about supporting the dictatorship, Eisenhower's election victory in 1953 paved the way for establishing relations with Franco, who was considered a moral ally. In 1950, the UN General Assembly revoked the recommendation that prevented Spain from becoming a member of international organisations and approved initiating diplomatic relations. This event is considered to have marked the beginning of the end of Spain's isolationism during the post-war years.

And so, in 1950, Spain returned to the Venice Biennale. In the transition from the forties to the fifties, the role the arts should play in the new political strategy of openness and how public support of art should be organised were object of heated debate. Jorge Luis Marzo and Patricia Mayayo speak of a twofold treatment of culture by the dictatorship, "While it was brandished as an end in itself thank to the identification between national destiny and cultural destiny, it was also used as an instrument in the service of state interests, as a conveyor belt between the regime's political and diplomatic objectives" (Marzo and Mayayo 2015, 158). In the forties, Falangist circles had tried to impose their aesthetic criteria in the ideological framework of Francoism, but once the Falange had been dislodged from power and the regime began to apply new foreign policies, new forms of expression would soon emerge. While the previous pro-government art had prevailed in Venice during most of the decade, works by artists like Antoni Tàpies or Joan Miró began to make a timid appearance at the 1952 and 1954 biennales. Avant-garde art wasn't openly displayed until 1956, and finally took centre stage in the 1958 Biennale. Despite the mistrust of certain sectors of the dictatorship, that didn't understand the sense of utilitarianism, this movement from essentialism to modernism in the new cultural policies of the fifties generated a discourse that linked the avant-garde to national tradition. This policy, that could be understood as an operation in cultural diplomacy, was chiefly implemented outside of Spain, given that the state's support of the avant-garde focused above all on biennials, exhibitions in large museums and cultural events that accompanied Spanish diplomacy.

Cultural diplomacy is a term akin to others such as public diplomacy or nation branding, all of which imply the setting up of actions designed to improve the image of a country abroad and have an impact on the construction of specific national identities, although these objectives are attained through the articulation of cultural and artistic expressions. Despite the lack of consensus as regards the designation of the term, we have chosen the open definition by Milton Cummings as one of the most suited to our analysis, for he understands cultural diplomacy as "the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding" (Cummings 2003). If we understand that the key objective of cultural diplomacy is to support, through the arts, a State's foreign policy and project a positive image abroad in order to secure a favourable public opinion that will enable the achievement of more specific political objectives, we may place the use of the visual arts during Franco's dictatorship in the context of a strategy of cultural diplomacy implemented in the fifties in the framework of the regime's openness process after the initial period of autarchy characterising the regime. A report drawn up in 1959 by the General Board of Cultural Relations of the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs proves this intention: "Foreign cultural policy consists in drawing on the spiritual and cultural values of a people accumulated over centuries by the pedagogical action of the State and by individual initiative, and disseminating them in order to support favourable causes in other States. So, it is not a question of creating culture but of using existing culture as a linchpin abroad to mobilise aid and alliances"<sup>4</sup>.

The political dimension of cultural actions can also be interpreted in the framework of what Joseph S. Nye describes as "soft power," a concept that emerged in 1990 and is defined as the ability to obtain one's desires through seduction rather than through coercion or payment<sup>5</sup>. Soft power is thus opposed to hard power, which Nye defines as the ability to make others obey our wishes using economic and military forces, the coercive ability used by traditional diplomacy (Nye 2003). When it's a question of bringing soft power as an analytical instrument into relation with art and museums, Christine Sylvester declares that "these popular institutions of civil society traffic in soft power" (Sylvester 2009, 172) and their objectives are met in the field of negotiation.

In fact, the political and diplomatic meaning that the first display of Spanish art organised by the General Board of Cultural Relations of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the 1950 Biennale was opposed by some of the members of the organisation committee, who criticised "the development of ways of painting and sculpting that may be valid abroad, though we recognise their falseness and their intention to destroy the foundations of our society"<sup>6</sup>. This critical report was drawn up by the curator of the 1950 Spanish participation in the Biennale, who refused to display some of the abstract works sent by the Ministry. His vision, rooted in the assumptions that had until then dominated Francoism, diverged from the new cultural policy designed by the progressive strategies of openness.

The reply to this letter by the General Board of Cultural Relations revealed the intentions of the shapers of foreign cultural policy to adapt the contents of the Spanish Pavilion at the Biennale to what was displayed in the general context of the Venetian event, "to avoid missing the boat of the Western bloc" (Quaggio 2013, 36). For Spain, the commitment to abstraction implied taking the opposite stance to Communism and supporting Western liberal democracies. The debates between realism and abstraction had continued during the Cold War and had politicised the styles that represented both blocs: Abstract Expressionism in the West and Socialist Realism in the East. Abstract art, with its different expressions in each country, was a common language, apparently and paradoxically devoid of social and political connotations.

This marked the beginning of the new artistic foreign policy, which since the Hispano-American Biennale of 1951 had included works by young representatives of the Spanish *art informel* movement, such as Josep Guinovart and Tàpies, as an example of the first official support of abstraction. The Hispano-American Biennale had already "introduced the complete normalisation of the art scene, proving the impossibility of an official Falangist art and paving the way for the avant-garde that was, however, profoundly corroded by hypocrisy, revision and a terribly conservative concept of culture" (Marzo 2010, 44).

As a consequence of this strategy at the next Biennale, held in 1952, the Spanish Pavilion in Venice displayed the work of young artists like Tàpies or Guinovart, anticipating the triumph of *art informel* as an example of modernism but also of Spanishness. And yet, the need for artistic renewal, illustrating the regime's strategy of openness, aroused reservations in Spain's most conservative sectors. But although the avant-garde artists exported by the dictatorship offered an image of openness, they were in fact artists removed from republicanism and exile, whose works had no political overtones and did not challenge the values of the regime. As described by historian Alicia Fuentes Vega, who has studied the theme of Spanishness in the art of the Franco years in depth, the regime's new strategists "had to concoct a credible and, above all, an acceptable discourse of modernism for the regime's internal conservative media" (Fuentes Vega 2011, 187). Abstraction thereby became the correct language for opposing the realist aesthetics of Communism, but also for representing the new Francoist aesthetic. A campaign was launched to provide the avant-garde with a patina of Spanishness in order to respond to international demands in the aesthetic field without betraying national values and, above all, in order to redress the damaged image of the dictatorship: "The idea was to suggest that the abstraction practiced by Spanish painters formed a coherent part of the history of Spanish art, hence accepting it did not imply renouncing 'Spanish' values, nor could it be interpreted as a choice that broke with tradition" (De Haro 2015, 94).

The balance between tradition and modernity that prevailed from 1950 to 1956 was upturned in 1958 by a series of political and cultural events. The appointment of a new technocratic government the year before had given way to new policies of economic development known as *desarrollismo*, in keeping with the new agreements signed with the United States. The country's foreign exhibition programme was totally committed to the "new" art and, as a result, in 1958 the Biennale became the "showcase of new Spanish artists and the backdrop of their success" (Bozal 1995, 258), making abstraction a key tool in the development of cultural diplomacy in Western Europe — a clear example in which, paraphrasing Christine Sylvester, international relations and art/museum practices blend into each other (Sylvester 2009, 4). Hence, at the 1958 Venice Biennale the Spanish Pavilion displaying *art informel* was recognised by international art critics as the best in the show. Sculptor Eduardo Chillida won the Grand Prix for Sculpture and Antoni Tàpies was awarded the Second Prize for Painting (the First Prize for Painting was won by American artist Mark Tobey) (fig. 2). The artists who represented Spain that year celebrated the efforts of the regime's cultural policy to draw parallels between Spanish art and international trends. The specific objectives that the government had in mind when it launched the campaign of cultural diplomacy had now been met. Although changes had taken place in Spain, continuities were evident: the country was still under a dictatorship, and if it had succeeded in overcoming international isolationism, this was thanks to the Cold War.



Fig. 2. News about the prizes awarded at the 1958 Venice Biennale to Eduardo Chillida and Antoni Tàpies, artists of the Spanish Pavilion. Blanco y Negro, ABC, 5<sup>th</sup> of July 1958, p. 45. ©



El pintor (abstracto) español Antonio Tàpies, a quien ha sido otorgado en la actual exposición Bienal de Venecia el premio "David E. Bright Foundation", de los Angeles, dotado con medio millón de liras, muestra una de sus obras expuestas en el pabellón español a los pintores (también abstractos) Emilio Vadara, italiano, y Pierrehel, alemán. Venecia figura con algunas de sus obras en la exposición "Diseños de pintura italiana" celebrada recientemente en Madrid.

## ANTE LA BIENAL INTERNACIONAL DE ARTE DE VENECIA ¿MARAVILLAS, BURLAS, LOCURA, FALSEDAD O INICUA EXPLOTACION? LOS ESPAÑOLES CHILLIDA Y TAPIES HAN OBTENIDO DOS DE LOS SEIS MAYORES PREMIOS

Crónica de Julián CORTES-CAVANILLAS

**D**ESDE la primera decena de junio hasta final de octubre, en cinco continentes de la tierra se ha hablado y se hablará, en todos los tonos, de la XXXIX Biennial Internacional de Arte de Venecia que ha sido inaugurada solemnemente por el Presidente de la República Italiana, cuya cara de estupor la impusieron de emitir un juicio, dada su altísima jerarquía, mientras el séquito numeroso que le acompaña-

ha se expresaba "cotto voce", con la típica expresión italiana de "¡Porca miseria!", ante el terror de una tempestad seca, donde rayos, truenos, relámpagos y viento, estaban —se supone— en los lienzos, en las argollas, en los alambres, y en los hilos, piedras, bronce y mármol de algo que, aún, se llama escultura. El ya en Venecia, desde después de la guerra, cuando la Biennial de Arte fue restaurada para proseguir su gloriosa historia iniciada en 1894,

comenzaron a suceder estratosféricos fenómenos, y estos fenómenos se creaban y se recreaban en la maravilla de la única ciudad, artísticamente impar en el mundo, y dentro del área geográfica de Italia, la tierra de los colosos de la pintura y de la escultura, como Pier de la Francesca y Rafael, como Miguel Ángel y Leonardo, como Titiano y el Bernini, por citar media docena entre una pléyade inagotable, se suponía —aquel todo son hipótesis— que la infección

## CONCLUSIONS

As we have seen, governments have always used the arts as an instrument to second their political and economic objectives. While it has always been a crucial factor in foreign policy, after the Second World War culture would be recognised as a value in itself, subject to neither political nor economic determinants. From then on, culture began to be understood as the third pillar of foreign policy, or, to quote Coombs, the fourth dimension of foreign policy after the economy, politics and defence (Coombs 1964, 1-2). The arts thereby become a key element in the stability of a power system, and through the cultural policy implemented in each of the national pavilions, the structure of the Venice Biennale reflected how the different countries exerted their hegemony over culture by attending – or not – the event. The world, as we learn from Nye, isn't only driven by military force or hard power, but by cultural diplomacy, artistic and ideological means, or soft power: "the ability to entice and attract" (Nye 2008, 95).

Besides political values and foreign policy, Nye has examined the potential use of the arts to shape public opinion around the world, so our inquiry falls within his area of expertise. If the Venice Biennale is an ideological space, "a power space like any other institution," to take Sylvester's definition of art museums (Sylvester 2009, 184), then Spain's representation at the biennial through its national pavilion, built in 1922 and dependent on the country's foreign policy since the fifties, is a good way to address the relations between art and politics over the course of its history. Raymond Aron has defined power in the field of international relations as "the capacity of a political unit to impose its will upon other units" (Aron 2003, 47), a relational system like the one shaped by exhibitions and the institutions that represent them (museums, biennials and the whole 'exhibitionary complex', as defined by Tony Bennett), that

also became a favourable context for experimenting with power relations when the first *Expositions Universelles* opened their doors to the public in the nineteenth century. To quote Tony Bennett, they were "vehicles for inscribing and broadcasting the message of power throughout society" (Bennett 1995, 61).

Having reviewed the history of the Spanish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in the context of a specific period during the Franco dictatorship, we may conclude that the successive exhibitions became devices of ideological transmission, shaped to meet the specific political strategies of each particular period. Tensions and power struggles came to light at key moments, such as when the Spanish Pavilion was transferred to the instigators of the military coup in 1938, during the Spanish Civil War, or when it accommodated the abstract trends that Venice favoured to emphasise the country's position beside Western powers. In the fifties, during the Cold War, the Spanish Pavilion painstakingly followed the instructions issued by Italy. Our conclusion, therefore, is that through the Spanish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale the Franco regime designed and put into practice an ambitious strategy of cultural diplomacy that favoured the attainment of its political objectives. Spain was accepted in the European and American diplomatic context thanks to the promotion of a modern image of openness adopting *art informel* as a tool for integration in the international art scene. Besides being a modern style, *art informel* represented identity and nationalist values, legitimating the Francoist discourse of national identity. National cultures, as Fiona McLean tells us, "construct identities by producing meanings about the nation with which we can identify, meanings which are contained in the stories which are told about it, memories which connect its present with its past, and images which are constructed of it" (McLean 1998, 244). Which reminds us of the strategy of assimilating Spanishness and *art informel* in one and the same category. Accordingly, the Spanish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale was a space of national representation for shaping, through Spanish abstraction and *art informel*, a modern image of the dictatorship in the international unconscious.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Anderson defines the nation as "an imagined political community," and clarifies: "It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion." (Anderson 2006, 6).

<sup>2</sup> The event was linked to a sense of national pride. The backdrop to the origins of the Biennale was also formed by the celebration of the twenty-fifth wedding anniversary of Umberto I and Margherita of Savoy in 1893, an excuse that mayor Selvatico used to propound the idea of an international art exhibition held regularly to commemorate the occasion.

<sup>3</sup> Maria Vittoria Martini explains that "the national pavilions were (and still are) totally independent of the Biennale organisation, functioning in much the same way as actual embassies in which the principle of extraterritoriality rules. Each nation made its own completely autonomous decisions in which the Biennale had no right to intervene." (Martini 2012, 150).

<sup>4</sup> Report drawn up by the General Board of Cultural Relations, 2. 2. 1959 (AMAE, legajo R-10208/exp. 66). (Quoted in Delgado 1988, 13).

<sup>5</sup> Although the concept of soft power occupies a prominent position in International Relations, it is a proposal that has a large number of detractors who question the enormous ideological perspective of Nye's interpretations, its link to the perpetuation of US hegemony and its limitations and contradictions.

<sup>6</sup> Letter sent by the curator of the 1950 Spanish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale (Pérez Comendador) to the General Board of Cultural Relations, after which he was replaced. (Quoted in Llorente 1995, 138).