

FUTURE CONDITIONAL

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As Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek has remarked, how can ideology be declared dead in a Europe with such a diverse design of toilets? Where the French latrine prompts an immediate, rapid expulsion of one's excrement as if in homage to its flushes of Revolution, a typical German model necessitates a confrontation with what one has left behind, seemingly through obligation to revisit and examine the past, however unpleasant that may be. Žižek didn't mention Spanish toilets. Yet much like Anglo-Saxon ones, their usual pan design allows a condition somewhere between these two ideologies that somewhat indecisively floats between speedy exigency and studied legacy. Spain is barely middle-aged as a modern democracy. The frequently heard jibes that it is some twenty years behind the rest of Western Europe is by and large precipitated by the reality that the country was locked down under the oppressive military dictatorship of General Franco from 1936 to 1975. Thus, in the present we can perceive both the speed of a headlong rush toward popular consumer culture on the one hand, yet on the other a slowness in the task of processing recent history—recovering, archiving, and reconciling what was suffocated and often literally buried.

These two contrasting conditions in contemporary Spanish culture might find their symptoms in two cultural institutions at almost opposite ends of the nation that are certainly at ideological poles with regard to the values they seem to embody. From the outside, the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Castilla y León (or MUSAC) in the northern city of León and the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (better known as MACBA), a kilometer or so to the west as we write this in the Catalan capital, already make bold statements through their architecture. Unlike the most celebrated (or notorious) marriage of museum ideology, architecture, and city image—Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Bilbao—both MUSAC and MACBA are institutions with a municipal role that are home to publicly financed collections. The mission of the candy-striped MUSAC, designed by Mansilla & Tuñón and opened in April 2005, is to collect art made since 2000. It is an unashamedly youth-oriented approach geared at the post-dictatorial generations raised on foreign pop music, movies, and so on, with an expectation toward entertainment and the representation of street subcultures, and an eye toward usability and interactivity.

If MUSAC's analogous medium is multichannel cable TV, then MACBA's is the typewriter and the sheet of white paper. Richard Meier's blindingly white MACBA edifice, opened in 1995, is directed by the implications of proselytizing the developments in avant-garde art and political change in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Here, art as entertainment is anathema—and skateboarders very definitely belong outside, though they have taken up the adjoining Plaça dels Àngels as a favored haunt. The museum functions as a place of doctrine where postwar Spanish—and more specifically, Catalan—art practice can be sutured into the historical record.

Yet both of these crudely characterized phenomena are dwarfed by the single-biggest architect of the image of Spanish culture: tourism. Barcelona is the preeminent tourist city, a destination that since its much-vaunted hosting of the 1992 Olympic Games has been molded through civic initiatives into a seamlessly legible visitor experience. Trumping the Franco-era touristic images of flamenco and bullfighting (which are actually traditions of the south of Spain) with sun, sea, shopping, and sangria—while scripting and flaunting its historical pedigree, from its so-called “Gothic quarter” to the turn-of-the-century modernism credentials of Antoni Gaudí, Salvador Dalí, Joan Miró, Pablo Picasso, and so on—Barcelona now boasts tourist hordes that far outnumber its residents. Where the city's population hovers around 1.5 million, it hosts more than 5 million visitors every year. While MACBA wears its political and discursive credentials on its sleeve, it also offers a space in opposition to the obedient, prepackaged, predigested logic of this theme-park vision of the city. The lure of the tourist euro clearly played a role in the *raison d'être* of an initiative such as MUSAC—no doubt (Guggenheim) Bilbao-envy played its part, too—yet in León, it's the wholesale importation of the techniques of youth marketing and brand identi-

ty into the realms of the museum that make it a particularly telling touchstone for the speedy impulse in culture.

If there is a “third way” in between these contrasting cultural speeds and historiographies—and between Spain's uneasy relationship with the idea of itself with respect to its dictatorial history and the identity of its regions, as well as the rest of the world's image of it from the outside—then the traumatic events of the morning of March 11, 2004, may well have forced it to look more closely at the realities of the present. The train bombings in Madrid, now known (like 9/11's date-stamped moniker) as 11M, shocked the country and the world, leaving one hundred ninety-one dead and around two thousand injured. In political terms, the landscape changed unrecognizably in a very short period. The center-right Partido Popular (People's Party), led by its then-president José María Aznar, maintained the hypothesis that the bombings were an action by Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (Basque Fatherland and Liberty, better known as ETA), the Basque nationalist organization that since its founding in 1959 has been claiming sovereignty and self-determination for the Basque region. The main party of the opposition, the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party), the social democrats led by José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, interpreted the attacks as a punishment for the Spanish support of the war in Iraq. It was later discovered that the perpetrators were local Islamic extremists collaborating with Spanish informants.

The international media reported the assumed Al Qaeda links shortly after, despite most of the national news channels showing old footage of ETA terrorists' actions. The polar opinions of the two main political parties confused and divided the nation and only three days later, on March 14, the general elections gave power to Zapatero. Spanish troops were withdrawn from Iraq soon after, on April 23, 2004. Since then, Zapatero's government has strived to promote the Alliance of Civilizations (a United Nations Secretary General's initiative encouraging alliances between Western and Islamic countries); legalized gay marriage; opened up a peace process with ETA (since stalled due to the December 30, 2006, bombing of the Madrid Barajas Airport's new Terminal 4 that killed two Ecuadorians); and initiated processes of reform with regard to autonomy in the regions, most significantly the expanded independence afforded to Catalonia with the 2006 redefinition of the *Estatut*—changing the Spanish constitution to define the region as a “nation” and increasingly recognizing economic autonomy and the Catalan language.

The immediate present, too, increasingly concerns immigration. Since the mid-1990s Spain has stabilized and grown its economy and demographics (the country has one of the lowest birth rates in Europe), largely due to a massive influx of immigrants from Morocco, Ecuador, and Romania—the immigrant population is now 8.7 percent of the total population of more than 44 million. The countries of origin have also benefited from this phenomenon: from Madrid

alone some 1,500 million euros were transferred, mostly to Latin American countries, in 2006. In 2005 the Zapatero government opened a legal process of official recognition for seven hundred thousand immigrants, the highest annual number to date, and by 2010 it is anticipated that some 20 percent of the active population will have come from overseas. As it is elsewhere in Europe, Spain's lack of recognition of foreigners' qualifications often makes it difficult for this population to find legal jobs and work permits. Cleaning, babysitting, or caring for the elderly are typical employment niches for those "without papers," while those who were dentists, lawyers, executives, or engineers at home can often only find work in restaurants, cleaning toilets, or in the building trade. Though there is a will to transform such situations, there have also been a huge number of repatriations, as the geographic reality of Spain being just fifteen kilometers from the African continent at its nearest point continues to put enormous pressure on the nation as the imagined gateway to the "European dream."

At this point in time, Spain is witnessing an unprecedented mass immigration of people arriving from the Maghreb, Mauritania, Ethiopia, and even further afield, from Pakistan. The Canary Islands, the westernmost outpost of Spain, are now regular witness to a phenomenon analogous to that of the Cuban *balseiros* as thousands of people arrive on the islands' shores after having entrusted their future to hundreds of miles of open ocean and overloaded, rickety boats known as *cayucos* or *pateras*. By the summer of 2006—and as the northern region of Galicia was burning with widespread forest fires—eleven thousand Africans had landed in the Canary Islands, a figure already double that of the previous year. July and August saw two graphic, sudden arrivals on La Tejerita beach in southern Tenerife as two *cayucos*, each loaded with almost one hundred people, made landfall. Newspaper front pages were filled with the surreal image of beach tourists and locals offering their drinks and clothes to the exhausted arrivals, and assisting Red Cross officials in carrying the bodies of their less fortunate compatriots to hospitals. That same summer in the Mediterranean, the crew of the Spanish fishing boat *Francisco y Catalina* rescued forty-eight sub-Saharaners from their stricken vessel near the coast of Malta. Having arrived at the island's port, they were stuck on board for eight days awaiting a European-level political decision about their status. Finally, eighteen went to Spain, ten to Italy, eight remained in Malta, and five now find themselves in the mountains of Andorra, while the fishermen received civic awards for their intervention.

Anticipating neither a rush for an imagined future, or an examination of a historical past—and to return to the ideology of toilets—this inundation by the geopolitical realities of the "here and now" seems to demand another kind of excremental analogy. Fortunately, Catalan tradition has long enshrined its own unique case (overlooked by both Žižek and Dominique Laporte's seminal 1978 *History of Shit*):

not one toilet design or the other, but no toilet at all. The small statue figure of the *caganer* (defecator) is commonly found squatting in a quiet corner of Bethlehem nativity dioramas, in the act of expelling solid waste en plein air. The ideological implications of this pillar of Catalan culture might call for a pragmatic, sustainable fertilization of the present, and an honest shame-free confrontation with what it means to be human. By laying bare the fundamentals of civilization, the *caganer*—however unlikely it might seem—provides a brave model for our new world. ■

IMAGE

page 41 A *caganer* statuette from Spain's Catalonia region depicts a squatting, red-capped peasant, a tradition dating back to the seventeenth-century in an agricultural society where defecation was associated with fertility and health.