

Antoni Tàpies's Catalan Turn (1962–75)

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Abstract

During the 1950s Antoni Tàpies entered the international artistic scene as a follower of the American Abstract Expressionism and the French *Art Autre*. Tàpies was rapidly considered as the representative artist of the “materic painting” due to the support of international art dealers, but also due to his collaboration with the program of artistic promotion conducted by the Spanish regime during the 1950s and the 1960s. Participant and beneficiary of the “desideologization” produced in postwar Spanish art, from 1965 the Barcelona artist started to gradually approach a politicized position where Catalan nationalism played a fundamental role. In this paper, I analyze the construction of Antoni Tàpies' Catalan profile during the late years of the Francoist dictatorship. As I demonstrate, while the political character of his work was still disregarded in Spain, by the late 1960s, France became the irrigator center of the ideologization of his artistic production. Thanks to the renewed image projected by the French art circles, after 1968 Tàpies was promoted in Catalonia as a fervent anti-Francoist artist and a defender of Catalan freedom. Far from naively accepting this change, this paper critically discusses how this politicization was produced. Delving into his ideological ambiguities, we will see how this politicization did not only emerge from Tàpies political convictions, but also from his strategic artistic interests

Keywords

Antoni Tàpies; art; political art; Franco dictatorship; Catalan nationalism; Catalan artistic nationalism

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Almost a year after Francisco Franco's death, on October 25, 1976, the abstract painter Antoni Tàpies appeared on the front page of the newspaper *Treball* ("Ja sóc legal" 1976), the weekly periodical clandestinely run during the dictatorship by the Partit Socialista Unificat de Catalunya (Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia, PSUC). The publication announced that Gregorio López Raimundo, the PSUC's general secretary, who had been arrested on his return from exile, had been released from Police Court. Crowned with the headline "Finally, I am a legal citizen of the Spanish state," the article had a celebratory tone, echoed by the photographs it included. In one of these images, López Raimundo spoke to Tàpies at the painter's exhibition organized by the Joan Miró Foundation in Barcelona. The two men appeared in profile, looking each other in the eye, with friendly yet serious expressions that suggested the significance of the occasion. Behind them, the poster that Tàpies had made to commemorate the party's fortieth anniversary hung on the wall. Entitled *PSUC: For Catalonia, Democracy and Socialism*, the print consisted of a gouache on paper with a yellow background, the acronym of the party painted in red on top of the composition, and the four blood bars of the Catalan Senyera painted below, also in red. Handwritten words appeared in Catalan across the poster, such as "workers," "peasants," "writers," "veterans," and "Catalonia=Freedom."¹

The appearance of the artist and his work on the newspaper confirmed how much PSUC had relied on its affiliated intellectuals, but also revealed the important role that Tàpies started to play in the reconstruction of the Catalan cultural scene. In June 1976, before the party was legalized, the painter had signed with other "Catalan democrats of various ideologies and political positions" such as Joan Brossa, Josep Maria Castellet, or Raimon, a statement in which they "cordially greeted" PSUC (Carbonell et al. 1976). In this declaration,

¹ The original terms were "obrers," "camperols," "escriptors," "veterans," and "Catalunya=Llibertat," amongst many others. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

the signatories paid tribute to Catalan communists “whose loyalty to the working class and to Catalonia had cost them their own lives, time in prison, and exile.”

During the immediate years after the dictator’s death, Tàpies’s political positioning did align with PSUC, but after Catalonia’s consolidation as an Autonomous Community of Spain in 1980, he was approached by other political parties. Despite the ideological differences that distanced PSUC from parties such as *Convergència i Unió* (Convergence and Union, CiU) and the *Partit Socialista de Catalunya* (Socialist Party of Catalonia, PSC) — by then the governing parties of Catalonia and Barcelona respectively — Tàpies’s relationships with different political organs intensified. These collaborations, regardless of their diverse nature, contributed to his consolidation as the most important living Catalan artist of the moment. As early as 1981, Catalonia’s Autonomic President, Jordi Pujol, in a speech at UNESCO headquarters, referred to Tàpies as the youngest representative of a long genealogy of Catalan avant-garde artists (Jenkins 2017, 228). That same year, the Barcelona City Council commissioned Tàpies to create a tribute to Picasso, which further reinforced such lineage.² In 1983, some months before Joan Miró’s passing, Pujol put aside his personal distaste for contemporary art and awarded the Golden Medal of the Generalitat — the Catalan government’s highest cultural distinction — to Tàpies, in a ceremony where he highlighted “the projection of the artist’s work and his fidelity to the country” (Pujol 1983).

These recognitions would later be accompanied by other commissions such as the work on wood *Les Quatres Cròniques* (1989)³ — now located in the Tarradellas Room, the Government’s meeting area at the Palace of Catalonia’s Generalitat — but also by economic contributions to the Tàpies Foundation in Barcelona when it opened in 1990 as a private organization. According to Joan Rigol, culture secretary (“conseller de cultura”) to Pujol’s government, from 1984 to 1985, Tàpies, who was an artist with a certain public standing, was “instrumentalized to support the Catalan political institutions” (“Katalanii” 2022, 30:40min). Beyond the accuracy of such allegations

² Despite Pablo Picasso’s Andalusian origins, the formative years the painter spent in Barcelona, his later visits to Horta de San Joan and Gósol, and the opening of the first Picasso Museum in the Catalan capital in 1963 have all contributed to his being considered part of Catalonia’s cultural heritage. Nowadays, this understanding of the artist as Catalan is openly put forward by the Generalitat, as can be appreciated, for instance, on the institution’s official cultural patrimony website. See:

<https://patrimoni.gencat.cat/en/collection/picasso-museum> [accessed 4 November 2022].

³ Due to copyright restrictions, images of Tàpies’s artworks will not be reproduced in this article. When possible, links to reliable online sources with images of cited artworks will be provided. If such sources are not available, all the mentioned artworks are listed at Tàpies’s catalogue raisonné. For an image of the mural, see:

<https://mdc.csuc.cat/digital/collection/afceccf/id/3428> [accessed 4 November 2022].

and Tàpies's awareness of his instrumentalization, it is true that all through the 1980s and 1990s, the artist was institutionally recognized as one of the most representative figures of post-war Catalan art, heir to a century of national tradition. His proximity to the Catalan political establishment allowed him to inherit the role of the "universal Catalan" that Joan Miró, who Tàpies considered his master, had occupied until then a position that was key to Catalonia's national restoration project. This interpretative trend endures today, offering a naive characterization of the painter as the quintessential embodiment of the region's cultural and social spirit.

In this paper, I propose to read Tàpies's categorization as a Catalan painter through a theoretical framework that departs from and complicates the official political discourses on the artist. Based on Benedict Anderson's conception of nationality as a historically constructed and determined "cultural artefact" (2006, 4), I decouple Tàpies's interpretation as Catalan from its cooptation by Catalan politics during the 1980 and 1990s. Following Arjun Appadurai's invitation to think culture "beyond the nation" (1996, 40), I analyse Tàpies's "catalanitat"⁴ as an interpretative process that exceeded the painter's nationalist convictions and Catalonia's political arena. I call this process Tàpies's "Catalan turn" and understand it as a response to three entangled problems that developed during the 1960s: the rise of new objectual trends in the Western art scene; Tàpies's dismissal by the art world in Spain; and the change in galleries representing him in France, with the necessary rebranding of his profile entailed by such a shift. Without disputing the artist's political commitment and his ideological convictions, in what follows I show how Tàpies's "catalanitat" was the result of a transnational process that cannot be reductively circumscribed to the painter's committed battle, along with his allies, for the preservation of the "Catalan Spirit."⁵

Collector of the Ordinary

The beginning of Tàpies's Catalan turn can be dated back to 1962, when his image as one of the most important Spanish painters of the time was internationally recognized, and he began experimenting with the objectual trends that, almost a decade later, in 1973, would consolidate his "catalanitat." In the early 1960s, Antoni Tàpies was

⁴ Due to its untranslatable quality, I have decided to keep the Catalan version of the idea of "catalanitat." By "catalanitat," I am not referring to the painter's possible nationalist convictions, nor his defense of Catalan culture, but his quality of being Catalan. A similar use of the term has been recently used by Mercer and Song (2020).

⁵ For more information on Tàpies's definition of the "Catalan Spirit" and his commitment to "fighting for it" please see the article he published in 1971 entitled "L'art d'avantguarda i l'esperit català" (Tàpies 1971).

one of the most important young abstract painters of the Western art scene. During the 1950s, he had been able to take advantage of the regime's cooptation of abstract art as a tool of cultural diplomacy by navigating the international paths that the Spanish *Dirección General de Relaciones Culturales* (General Direction of Cultural Relations, DGRC) opened for him. He had soon jumped to the Parisian art scene, where he joined critic Michel Tapié's *informalist* art circle, and began to be represented by the *marchand* Rodolph Stadler in 1956 (Tàpies 2010, 234). Around the same time, Tàpies also started a commercial relation with the American art dealer Martha Jackson, exhibiting at her New York gallery as early as 1953, although he would not sign his first contract with her until 1959 ("Official contract" 1959).

The market speculation of the Parisian art scene of the moment (Verlaine 2012, 477), and the USA's desire to spearhead avant-garde art after the Second World War, allowed for a fast increase in the economic and cultural capitalization of Tàpies's work. On both sides of the Atlantic, his Spanish origin was an important asset for his notoriety. In Paris, it allowed him to stand out among the wide range of international painters that Tapié and Stadler amalgamated under the category of *Art Autre* (Tapié 1959). In New York, he was labeled the "young Spaniard" who created "matter paintings" where the Iberian atmosphere and the austerity of Spain's pictorial tradition resonated (Burg 1953; *Antonio Tàpies of Barcelona, Spain* 1957).

As soon as 1962, Tàpies was holding his first international retrospectives in some of Europe and the United States's most important museums: the Kestner Gesellschaft in Hanover, the Kunsthaus in Zurich, and the Guggenheim Museum in New York. In all these exhibitions, Tàpies showed works that represented his finest matter abstraction, although the Guggenheim exhibition was particularly successful. He ended up exhibiting almost seventy works, and the show was extended due to the huge interest it aroused (Jackson 1962).

Despite the importance of such shows, these retrospectives did not showcase the most recent developments in Tàpies's work. In 1961, the artist had spent his first work period at his country house, located at Campins, and had returned to the practice of assemblage and collage. While he continued to use canvases for his matter paintings, he also started to use paper, cardboards, and newspapers as supports on which he painted the silhouettes of identifiable objects. Over the next two years, these investigations continued on an occasional basis, lasting until 1964, when he began incorporating real objects into his canvases. Throughout the decade, Tàpies would use his minor exhibitions to show these experiments with the representation of objects, while his larger shows were still populated by his well-known works.

Tàpies's renewed attention to objects happened at a thriving time for the international art scene. During the 1960s, the dominance of abstract painting was destabilized by a new wave of art trends such as *Nouveau Réalisme*, *Pop Art*, or *Art Brut*, which moved beyond the medium of painting and paid special attention to real objects. These trends, nowadays categorized as part of a same Neo-Dada current, problematized the referential dimensions of the artwork, blurring the limits between conceptual couplings such as representation and presentation, realism and reality, or figuration and objecthood. Artists associated with such movements countered abstraction's detachment from the real world and opted for an aesthetics that aimed, as the art historian Julie Verlaine has put it, to "penetrate life in its daily dimension" (2012, 455), frequently conceiving artworks as social or political commentaries.

The emergence of these trends in Spain was directly related to the artists' interest in finding new models of political commitment. As indicated by the art historians Jorge Luis Marzo and Patricia Mayayo (2015, 249), a large part of the aesthetic discussions that took place in Spain during the 1960s and early 1970s concerned the relative effectiveness of different forms of expression in rejecting the dictatorship. The emergence of these debates was accompanied by a "Marxization" of progressive Spanish art critics, who also drove the politicization of both veteran and young artists (Barreiro 2017).

Although Tàpies's attention to objects arose while such changes in the Spanish and international art scenes were happening, he never openly admitted their influence over his work. In a 1988 interview, the French art critic Barbara Catoir asked Tàpies if he had been "impressed" by *Pop Art* artists like Robert Rauschenberg or Jim Dine (1988, 124). The painter answered:

I don't know. There was a Neo-Dada current that revalued objects. But the idea of the object had already existed for a long time in my paintings. I have always considered the painting as an object, not as a window, as it is normal in painting. This is the reason why I give relief to the surface, and sometimes I even work on the back of the painting.

(Catoir 1988, 125)

Indeed, Tàpies's aesthetic takes on painting possessed an objectual component that he had developed by altering the limits of the canvas, as well as its component parts. Since the beginning of his career, he had experimented with various materials. As early as the 1940s, he was using glued papers, ropes, and boxes, such as those in

Capsa de cordills (1946)⁶ or *Fils i argolla* (1946),⁷ and often showed an interest in non-traditional techniques like collage and assemblage. During the 1950s, his work with unusual materials focused on the use of marble powder and sand, which he mixed with oil painting and other chemical solutions to achieve his renowned matter paintings, best exemplified by some of the works he sent to the 1964 Kassel Documenta like *Relleu negre per a Documenta* (1964).⁸ However, it was not until the second half of the 1960s and the early 1970s, during the triumph of Neo-Dada art, that Tàpies systematically used recognizable daily objects in his artworks.

The objects in which Tàpies showed most interest were those that belonged to everyday life and that, according to the artist, possessed a residual quality (Tàpies 2010, 331). Pieces of cardboard, boxes, trays, dirty clothes, old furniture, sheets, napkins, threads... joining his fellow Neo-Dada colleagues' interest in exploring the ordinary, Tàpies used what he considered the remains of our daily existence in multiple ways. He assembled and employed them as the main support of the artwork, as in *Taula capgirada* (1970).⁹ He attached them to canvases, while manipulating, cutting, and painting them, as he did with the pants in *Pantalons sobre bastidor* (1971).¹⁰ He glued other elements such as wood, straw, or clothes over them, and even stamped them on the surface of his paintings. Some of his most renowned objects-assemblages, such as *Cadira i roba* (1970)¹¹ or *Armari* (1973),¹² were the product of these experiments.

As Tàpies stated in the introduction that opened the catalogue to his exhibition with the fiber artist Josep Royo at the Sala Gaspar in Barcelona in 1971, the carpets they had collaboratively created, as well as any other misunderstood daily object, were “a way of connecting us with the essential things” (*A. Tàpies: Tapissos* 1971). For Tàpies, these elements were important because individuals did not usually pay attention to them, and, when deteriorated, they were usually forgotten and detached from any significant use. By incorporating common, unimportant objects, the painter aimed to bring the traces of lived stories into his canvases, without necessarily telling them through a narrative or figurative format. In terms of the art historian Valeriano Bozal, those objects functioned as “an extension of the human skin” (Julián 1977, 10) and connected the

⁶ <https://fundaciotapies.org/es/la-coleccion/obras/?o=34> [accessed 4 November 2022].

⁷ <https://fundaciotapies.org/es/la-coleccion/obras/?o=31> [accessed 4 November 2022].

⁸ https://www.fondationbeyeler.ch/en/beyeler-collection/work?tx_wmdbbaselbey_pi5%5Bartwork%5D=106&cHash=f09128ee9ffbo95ee45db80be9b82cdc [accessed 4 November 2022].

⁹ <https://fundaciotapies.org/es/la-coleccion/obras/?o=130> [accessed 4 November 2022].

¹⁰ <https://fundaciotapies.org/es/la-coleccion/obras/?o=133> [accessed 4 November 2022].

¹¹ <https://fundaciotapies.org/es/la-coleccion/obras/?o=132> [accessed 4 November 2022].

¹² <https://fundaciotapies.org/es/la-coleccion/obras/?o=146> [accessed 4 November 2022].

artworks to their immediate context, which at the time indexed the histories of poverty, repression, and violence that were kept in the collective memory of Catalonia.

The inclusion of detritus and poor objects also made a statement in the face of Pop Art's use of modern commodities. As Tàpies declared, his art participated in the idea of the popular, but not the conception stemming from the new consumer's society (Julián 1977, 83). His works' popular character did not correspond to the new Pop influences coming from London or New York, but to his long-lasting inclination towards a conception of the popular rooted in his homeland, Catalonia. The art historian Glòria Moure would later point out that Tàpies's humility evoked a certain tone "of accusation against the alienating degeneration of the object in modern society" and proposed a radical exercise of authenticity (1994, 95). His objects denounced the limited individual liberties imposed by the new global capitalist society, and revindicated tradition, forgotten values, and obsolete objects.

Despite the artist's reluctance to associate his objectual turn to any contemporary art trends – including *Arte Povera*, whose artists were guided by very similar artistic ideals (Catoir 1988, 177) – he did affiliate his works to a particular genealogy: that of the early twentieth century Catalan avant-garde artists. Beyond mentioning Joan Brossa as one of his main influences regarding his takes on objecthood, Tàpies also identified Joan Miró as his predecessor (Julián 1977, 83; Tàpies 2010, 184). Miró's work had stimulated him to experiment with daily objects in a pictorial way, specially using deteriorated pieces of wood and furniture. Ascribing to Miró's self-designation as an "International Catalan" (qtd. in Jenkins 2017, 183), Tàpies considered him the ultimate embodiment of Catalonia's spirit. He had been a constant witness to his country's hardships and uniquely expressed the anguished cry of its people by projecting "their exuberance, their rage, and their blood" (Tàpies 2010, 185).

Tàpies's positioning regarding the Catalan artistic tradition and contemporary reality through the artistic embrace of objecthood would constitute the ground on which his "Catalan turn" was to be erected. Yet, the process did not occur without certain resistance from the Spanish art field. While Tàpies's attention towards objects increased, his involvement in politicized public events would also become more frequent, a fact that did not prevent certain Spanish art critics from questioning Tàpies's social concerns.

The Elitist Activist

On October 31, 1963, Tàpies signed, together with other Spanish intellectuals, a document protesting against the abuses inflicted by the police on the workers and women involved in the Asturias miners' strikes ("Intellectuals' second letter" 1963). The letter was addressed directly to Manuel Fraga, who at the time was Spain's Minister of Information and Tourism, and it denounced the forced shaving of Asturian women's hair, the physical violence against male workers, and the detention of various intellectuals involved in the cause. On Christmas Eve, Tàpies and other signatories were summoned to the Captaincy to sign the appeal. The artist would remember this occasion as his first confrontation with the Spanish police (Tàpies 2010, 312).

Yet, Tàpies's anti-Francoist standing was a gradual process that began ambiguously with his distancing from the regime's cultural activities in the late 1950s, and which matured throughout the 1960s. While in 1959 he realized DGRC was using his work as political propaganda in the Venice Biennale (Julián 1977, 62), in 1960 he still appeared at the New York MoMA exhibition *New Spanish Painting and Sculpture* co-organized by the Spanish institution. As Tàpies stated in his autobiography, in 1962 he also filed charges against the Spanish government for lending works to the Tate Gallery in London without his authorization (Tàpies 2010, 201), although the reasons he officially invoked to justify his refusal eluded any political causes and referred to a lack of valid artworks that could be shown at such an important museum (Judicial Declaration).

In this way, while Tàpies's aesthetic practice increasingly refocused on the objects he considered most connected to the Catalan reality, his political stand shifted as well, sporadically joining actions in which the participants' Catalanist claims were immediately signified as anti-Francoist. One such event would be the famous *Caputxinada* of Sarrià in 1966, the same year that Tàpies possibly ended his relationship with the Francoist art critic Carlos Areán, with whom he exchanged letters frequently, and who praised his oeuvre. Together with other Catalan intellectuals, Tàpies attended the voluntary students' confinement at the Capuchin convent in the Barcelona district of Sarrià to protest against Catalan culture's repression and the students' lack of freedoms. When the police evicted the participants, most of the attendants were arrested, including Tàpies. In 1971, the Court of Cassation found him guilty, issuing him with a large fine. The painter donated drawings and etchings to the auctions organized to pay for the students' fines, to which artists such as Picasso, Miró, or Chillida among many others also contributed (Szulc 1966).

After the *Caputxinada*, Tàpies did not join many other gatherings of this nature. Excluding his involvement in the 1970 Confinement of intellectuals celebrated at the Montserrat Monastery to protest against the Burgos Process – an event he convinced an old Joan Miró to attend with him – Tàpies did not show his opposition to the regime by appearing in politicized events. It was through the more modest and popular version of his work that he contributed to the Catalan resistance. From 1968, the painter produced a remarkable quantity of graphic works dedicated to events whose purpose was to support Catalan culture. The First Popular Festival of Catalan Song (1968), the Third International Festival of Cadaqués (1972), the XXIII Old and Modern Used Book Fair of Barcelona (1974), or the ceremony commemorating the five hundredth anniversary of the first book printed in Catalan (1974), were amongst such occasions. Tàpies's contribution usually consisted of the design and donation of a lithograph used as the official poster, associating his oeuvre with the restoration of Catalan culture and language after years of Francoist subjugation.

The painter filled such works with iconographic references to Catalonia: the color combination was predominantly red and yellow, the four stripes of the “senyera” appeared recurrently, and the words “Catalan” or “Catalunya” were also frequently repeated. In a similar line, he also composed them through formal elements like black crosses and grids or gray squiggles, invoking the political oppression that had suffocated Catalan culture since the beginning of the dictatorship. After Franco's death, Tàpies's graphic work acquired a much more explicit denunciatory tone that went beyond the defense of Catalan culture. For instance, in 1975, he made a colored lithography which was mainly exhibited in churches supporting the campaign in favor of the abolition of the death penalty promoted by the religious associations *Justícia i Pau* (Justice and Peace) and *Pax Christi*; and in 1976 he created an engraving to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the founding of the Assembly of Catalonia and the poster of the March for Freedom, a group of pacific marches that happened all around Catalonia to defend the release of political prisoners.

Tàpies's growing political engagement was received dryly in Spain compared to on the international art scene. While in 1966 the jury of the XV International Congress of Artists, Critics, and Researchers of Art awarded him the gold medal for the “moral commitment of his artistic oeuvre” (*D'Arts* 1966, 52), Spanish art critics, especially the most conservative ones, turned a blind eye to his political inclinations. Tàpies's commitment might have been at odds with the Spaniards' political convictions, but the artist was also

an internationally celebrated painter whom the regime could not afford to take against for political reasons. Instead of openly attacking his political engagement, the Spaniards would question Tàpies from a different angle. By disapproving of his recent artistic production, they did not oppose him, but simply rejected two aspects of his work: its lack of realism, and its everlasting affinity for an individualistic model of the artist. Both criticisms allowed the Spaniards to deceptively align with the modernization of the Spanish art scene, which, during the 1960s, would see the flourishing of new forms of realism, as well as a sharp hostility towards the figure of the traditional avant-garde painter, considered synonymous with Western neoliberalism (Barreiro 2015).

In 1966, after an exhibition at the Biosca Galleries in Madrid, Tàpies was discredited as a painter for the elites. Even the most favorable reviews recognized the poor nature of the show (Nuño 1966). In a survey of art critics such as José Camón Aznar, Enrique Lafuente Ferrari, and Manuel Sánchez Camargo, it became clear that the exhibition's "poor selection of artworks" was interpreted as one of the elements that demonstrated the artist's commercialization ("Encuesta" 1966). For the Spanish art critics, Tàpies had decided to send his best works to galleries where sales were assured and therefore could no longer be considered representative of artistic novelty in Spain (Figuerola-Ferreti 1966). Compared to artists such as Juan Genovés or Rafael Canogar, his works were not connected to the concerns of the contemporary world, a world where considering the artist a prophet and his art a hermetic subjectivism had started to expire. Tàpies was now seen as "the explorer lost in the Pole, who just turns around himself" and even Juan Eduardo Cirlot, one of his most faithful critics, recognized a development problem in the painter's career ("Tapies, Villagómez" 1966; Cirlot 1967, 5).

Although the artist did not directly respond to these criticisms, the statements he made to the press in 1967 are quite revealing about the attitude he adopted thereafter. Following his exhibition at Biosca, the painter defined himself as a "non-conformist and ideological artist, carried away by a dash of constant revision" (García-Soler 1967). He described the Spanish art panorama as provincial and qualified the intellectual level of Catalonia as "fabulously superior" in comparison to the rest of the peninsula. In his opinion, Spanish art movements followed, at best, the fashion trends dictated by Paris, London, and New York, while only artists who had left Spain – even "spiritually" or for a single year, as he had – could truly stand out in an artistic field that had been falsely presented as sublime by Francoist patriots (Juez 1967). As the attacks on Tàpies progressed, characterizing him as an outdated and snobbish artist, the painter staunchly reaffirmed his political position.

One of the most notable attacks that allowed Tàpies to elaborate on the use of his Catalan nationality as an equivalent to his anti-Francoist and, therefore, socially committed stance, came from Luis González Robles. In 1968, the DGRC's appointed curator during the 1950s and 1960s published an extensive article in the *ABC* newspaper where he targeted the social disposition of Tàpies' art (González Robles 1968). Tàpies was one of the painters who had moved "away from society and locked themselves in their ivory tower" (González Robles 1968, 10), the curator declared. Rather than a people-oriented painting, Tàpies's abstraction was seen by González-Robles as an elitist estrangement that played a key role in an art system privileging private economic benefits instead of social integration. The artist was one of the "big cows" who, together with art dealers and gallerists had seen the opportunity to take advantage of the collector's systematic exploitation of the art scene. To reinforce this idea, a photograph of Tàpies was placed just above one of the headlines that asserted: "Pronounced divorce between society and art."

Unlike other critics that had attacked Tàpies, González Robles received a very direct response from the painter through the magazine *Destino* (Tàpies, 1968a). Besides denouncing the "total extermination" by Francoist art platforms of the social validity of abstract painting during the first years of the dictatorship, Tàpies used the debate with the curator to position the Catalan people as a society that understood true artists. Maybe because of their "moderate *seny*" or their "Gaudí-style madness," Catalans had been taught "to see all those artists, suddenly asocial and greedy, differently" (Tàpies 1968a, 6). Amid dissimulated rhetorical references to his motherland, he stated that, in Catalonia, one could not forget that *Guernica* had been created as an elegy for a wounded people, nor that Joan Miró, with his creative force, had contributed to helping the Spanish people during the Civil War. All the gestures that old or young artists had made to "disinterestedly contribute to the peoples' fight against lies, war, rottenness, oppression [...] and in favor of justice, peace, purity, and freedom" were understood and deeply felt (Tàpies 1968a, 7).

Just as it happened with his object-based plastic production, Tàpies's Catalan self-identification was used as a response to those accusations that defined him as an artist who ignored society's problems. While in 1967, the painter had already stated that his Catalan roots were the main cause behind his painting "If I paint as I do, it is because, first of all, I am Catalan" (Tàpies 2011, 58) one year later, he brought this claim to the next level. Making an art devoted to, integrated in, and referencing Catalonia and its culture, was a way of positioning himself in the political debates of the

Spanish art scene. However, due to the still repressive censorship that the Francoist government extended all over the country, France would be the location where Tàpies's role as the new representative of the Catalans was originally devised. It would be in the revolutionary Paris of 1968 that his Catalan turn would be established.

The Catalan Witness

In 1967, Tàpies landed at the Maeght Gallery, which had represented the greatest idols of his youth, including Miró (Tàpies 2010, 249). Maeght radically changed the image Stadler had promoted of the artist up till then, centered on a metaphysical and existentialist version of his matter paintings. By broadening the painter's stylistic profile and adapting it to the contemporary scene while preserving the label of modern artist, the Maeght Gallery proposed a new Tàpies: one that was more intrepid in the plastic domain, and tougher in the political dimension. Regardless of the Spaniards' reluctance towards Tàpies, the painter's turn towards objecthood and his recently acquired political stance were two key assets that his new French gallery relied on and amplified.

Through a series of three Parisian exhibitions in 1967, 1969, and 1972, Maeght would gradually emphasize Tàpies's turn towards objects and the political dimension they possessed. In 1967, after the first individual show where Tàpies's national identity was announced through collages and graphic works displaying Catalan symbols, the French art critics discursively enlarged his rebranding. In November of that same year, intellectuals like the communist Raoul-Jean Moulin read his matter paintings as "walls of misery, leprous facades, torn with cruel cracks, in which Tàpies isolates his deserted and anonymous extensions" (1967). Already including contextual references, these walls showed "everything that is felt today in Barcelona: suffering, adversity, prison, a gesture of revolt that today joins that of the painter." As the art critic Jacques Michel stated, some of the painter's most recently exhibited works encapsulated "the memory of a stay in a Barcelona prison after the students' demonstrations" (1967, 11). The painter's reference to the immediate Catalan reality allowed him to acquire a very clear position that contested the title Spaniards disputed: "Antoni Tàpies says it without flinching: *I am a realist*" (Michel 1967, 11).

The heated environment of 1968 promoted the development of this interpretative path, and the painter's political re-semanticization continued to gain traction in Paris. From the pages of *Le Monde*, Michel insisted on considering him a "a Catalan painter and an activist in a Spain that honors him and holds him in suspicion at the

same time,” and his painting as a “symbolized act of protest” (Michel 1968). Contrary to what some of the Spanish art critics believed, for the French, Tàpies’s painting was both social and poetic, retaining an “acrid and strong taste, sober and poor” that revealed everything it rejected. Important Parisian journals such as *Le Figaro*, *L’Art Vivant*, and *La Galerie des Arts* filled their pages with articles where the political readings of Tàpies echoed the uplifted revolutionary mood that invaded the city. In these newspapers, Tàpies was able to openly answer questions he could not have answered in Spain. In November 1968 *L’Art Vivant* published the following: “So your political opinions are legible in your works? Someone asked Tàpies. Yes, he replied without hesitation” (“Tàpies, un silence criant” 1968). One month later *La Quinzaine Littéraire* printed a translated version of Tàpies’s response to González-Robles (Tàpies 1968b).

Hence, when the second exhibition at Maeght opened in 1969, Tàpies had proven to be “deeply Catalan in his sense of violence, of the daily drama, and of the dark forces that subjugate us” (Abadie 1969). Considered by Catherine Millet to be the introducer of Art Pauvre at Maeght, the way he borrowed elements from his immediate reality made him the perfect example of a “transition towards a greater, and stronger expressiveness” (Millet 1969). In the eyes of the French, Tàpies had joined the lines of Art Pauvre, considered as an “art of contestation,” while he also preserved his unique and abrupt universe of loneliness, silence, and death, now enriched by the desperate realities he presented (*Nouvelles littéraires* 1969).

French criticism’s significant contribution to Tàpies’s Catalan turn would come to a head in his third individual show at Maeght, in 1972, *Objects and Large Formats*. The exhibition showed a vast collection of objectual works and mixed-media canvases that created a semantic network based on the plastic representation of Catalonia as a repressed and suffering nation, deprived from its freedom of expression. Already on the cover of the catalogue, a volume of the magazine *Derrière le miroir*, the Catalan flag and the inscription “Visca Catalunya” (Long Live Catalonia) announced the political point of view guiding the exhibition (*Objets et grands formats* 1972).¹³ But the presence of easily recognizable Catalan symbols such as the Senyera was not limited to the cover of the catalogue. Red bars appeared in the form of rags sewn to canvases *Esquinçall* (1970) or *Quatre retalls vermells* (1970) fingerprints *L’Esperit Català* (1971)¹⁴ or brushstrokes of different sizes and shapes painted over objects,

¹³ https://www.maeght.com/editions/article.asp?id_selection=8&id=1341 [accessed 4 November 2022].

¹⁴ <https://coleccionmun.unav.edu/objects/70494/lesperit-catala?ctx=a66c6ab3a2678e2833c81a448871957869f42ec1&idx=6> [accessed 4 November 2022].

lithographs, and canvases, such as *November 7* (1971),¹⁵ which referred to the date when Catalonia's Assembly first met. The Catalan message also materialized in works that Tàpies had recently made as direct references to concrete historical events or figures. For instance, *Tres escombres* (1970) or *Pila de plats* (1970)¹⁶ evoked the life of the monks who had taken part in the Caputxinada.

Next to such referentially direct pieces, Tàpies's use of everyday and residual objects accomplished a testimonial function that evoked the atmosphere of a Barcelona affected by the Civil War and post-war poverty. Free-standing or attached to canvas, the artist showed packets and bags such as those of *Gran collage amb sacs* (1969), where expatriates could have carried their personal belongings while running away from the war; dirty mattresses like *Matalàs* (1971) that would have been used for the barricades; objectual traces of people's confrontation with the authorities, like the handcuffs of *Pintura amb manilles* (1970)¹⁷; or the rubbish that would have been found in the streets of a dirty city and that people reused as packages of hidden goods, such as the box of *Capsa i bola de paper de plata* (1970) or the cardboard package of *Petit paquet* (1970). By including deteriorated objects that belonged to private spaces, Tàpies indexed the alteration of everyday life provoked by the instability of war and the subsequent period of repression. The reused clothes, dirty due to the impossibility of washing them regularly, or the old, broken furniture abandoned after people left their homes, also exposed how Spanish politics had impacted people's intimacy.

Without falling into simplistic and fashionable interpretations of Tàpies's adscription to Art Pauvre, French critics strengthened the connection of his objectual works to Catalan culture and resistance politics. Tàpies's work responded to "a need for freedom" and a revolutionary spirit, that, in his search for truth, joined "a kind of primitivism specific to the masters of Romanesque art, of which Catalonia is so rich" (Warnod 1971). As Raoul-Jean Moulin asserted, Tàpies had finally abandoned metaphysics (1972). The new artworks he presented at Maeght tended towards a more materialistic conception of existence, focused on Catalonia's suffering at the time. In this way, his abstract painting was also re-signified, and a canvas such as *L'Esperit Català* (1971) was interpreted as a "painting-manifesto," a "wall stained with the imprints of bloody hands, quivering with the last hastily engraved inscriptions, wounded,

¹⁵ In the following article you can find multiple images of the artwork's current location: <https://www.ccma.cat/324/7-de-novembre-el-quadre-de-tapies-que-ocupa-un-lloc-dhonor-al-parlament/noticia/3128179/> [accessed 4 November 2022].

¹⁶ <https://fundaciotapies.org/es/la-coleccion/obras/?o=131> [accessed 4 November 2022].

¹⁷ <https://www.pacegallery.com/journal/antoni-tapies-how-art-can-operate-as-soft-power-hyperallergic/> [accessed 4 November 2022].

lacerated, tortured through pain,” a wall of “execution,” “insurrection,” and the “song of a whole people marching” (Moulin 1972). Together with this portrayal of Tàpies as the representative of Catalonia’s cry, other art critics also defined his work as a “penitentiary painting” that anyone who knew about “the human context of the Catalan Tàpies’s work and personality” could understand (Conil Lacoste 1972).

The Galerie Maeght was the space where Tàpies presented his “Catalan temperament,” as Georges Boudaille named it (1972), and his “intellectual anarchism,” as Alain Jouffroy put it (1973). In 1972, the gallery would present a second version of the 1971 Parisian exhibition in their Gallery in Zurich, following the same emphasis on the bond between Tàpies’s “catalanitat” and his politics, an interpretation that the painters at the Museum of Modern Art in Paris in 1973 would also ratify. Regarding a knotted sheet that Tàpies had suspended from the museum’s ceiling for the exhibition, Jouffroy underlined “its accusing presence, because the most ignorant viewer of things in art still knows that a knotted sheet can only be used for prisoner escapes” (1973). The artist was responsible for “the double articulation of an aesthetic language and a coherent subversive ideology” that Maeght curated, and the French press put into words. Years later, Tàpies would endorse such interpretation, by stating that the practice of his own art had “made him gradually realize its social implications” (2010, 160).

The New Catalan Prometheus

As the art historian and critic Catherine Millet stated in 1969, Tàpies had always remained faithful to a metaphysical “universe, of loneliness, silence and death” but also to the impoverished and desolate aspect of “the desperate Catalan reality” (Millet 1969). Based on this double conception of his art – both aesthetically and socially concerned – the Catalan interpretation of the painter created by the Parisian curators and critics would soon travel back to the peninsula. During the years of Tàpies’s reinterpretation in Paris, certain Catalan media and art critics started to recognize the social aspect of his work. His works were seen as “fragments of a social context,” or denunciations of the “aspects of existence overly commercialized” (Ribalta 1968, 5; Vallés Rovira 1969). In 1969, the important Catalan art critic Alexandre Cirici Pellicer even saw in Tàpies’s objectual work the revelation of a new historical and social dimension that was not local but universal (1969). For Cirici Pellicer, Tàpies was the prophet of a young and engaged art movement and occupied this position under the figure of the “Marxist mole,” by “opening

underground paths in a decomposed ground.” Following this interpretative line, in 1970, Cirici Pellicer would characterize Tàpies as a “testimony of silence,” insisting on how his works referenced the historical components of the Civil War, the local postwar years, and a universalist Catalonia (1970, 235).

However, it wouldn't be until his definitive French Catalanization that Tàpies's Catalan roots would be intellectualized in the region. From the Barcelona of the *Gauche Divine*, the poet Pere Gimferrer would advocate for the interpretive tension between the artist's universe of silence and the contentious character of his works. Since the early 1970s, Gimferrer—with whom Tàpies maintained a solid friendship—had begun to publish numerous articles defending Tàpies as the true fighter of Catalan culture. As the French also defended, for Gimferrer “nothing could overcome his power of liberation, and his cry for the revolution” (1971). However, beyond the hermeneutical parallels between the Catalan poet and the French art critics, Gimferrer's efforts focused instead on detaching Tàpies from the Spanishness that had allowed him to triumph internationally during the 1950s, while repositioning him within the Catalan cultural tradition. As Eloi Grasset has argued, this repositioning of Tàpies was an integrative part of Gimferrer's efforts to incorporate the discourse of modernity in the tale of Catalan culture (2020, 237).

For Gimferrer, Tàpies was part of a mystical tendency that, contrary to what had been proposed in the United States during the 1950s and fostered by the Francoist regime, was at odds with the Spanish sixteenth century spiritual climate. According to the poet, his roots were other: he was indebted to the medieval Catalan tradition of mysticism and alchemy, characterized by Arnau de Vilanova, Enric de Villena, and Ramón Llull (Gimferrer 1972). This relocation of Tàpies within the local Catalan tradition was connected, as well, with the poetic principles of the great European tradition. For Gimferrer, Tàpies's work was situated at the heart of Europe's modern art because he dealt with its core debates: the challenge between the artist and the absolute, the desire to reconcile opposites, and the will to cancel the split between men and cosmos (Gimferrer 1972).

Gimferrer would further develop his ideas about the Tàpies's Catalan and modern affiliation in his 1974 book *Antoni Tàpies i l'esperit català*. According to the poet, Catalan history was dramatic and risky, and the source of Tàpies's rebellious and, at the same time, mystical character (Gimferrer 1974, 31). His Catalan antecedents, investigators of the mysteries of the mind, could be compared to Arthur Rimbaud's poetic alchemy of the verb. The avant-garde poet, the Catalan mystic, and the plastic alchemist were successive incarnations of the myth of Prometheus: they were images of men

who wanted to steal part of the mystery of the unknown and project it onto their daily reality or inner world.

For Gimferrer, being truly Catalan and being an avant-garde artist were synonyms since they both shared the adventurous character of exploring new spiritual territories and delivering their secrets to the people. The poet situated Tàpies's work as the natural continuation of this equivalence between avant-garde art and the Catalan tradition, defining him as a new Promethean artist. Due to his tendency towards mystery and his insistence on experimenting with the expressive capacities of plastic language, pushing them beyond the ordinary, Tàpies was, like Ramon Llull or Rimbaud, a solitary figure who had explored the depths of silence. In this way, Tàpies's paintings were also "civil elegies" (Gimferrer 1974, 60) that converted the silence of the people into a plastic clamor. The artist's elegiac character derived from the "progressive" attitude of his plastic particularities combined with his work's themes, which, as Gimferrer illustrated, normally included heraldic symbols, emblems, and allusions to great Catalan poets such as Josep Carner or historical characters such as Wilfred the Hairy.

Gimferrer saw in Tàpies's avant-garde art the defense of the true Catalan spirit, an interpretation that other local collaborators would also endorse. Art critics like Maria Lluïsa Borràs joined Gimferrer's efforts to define Tàpies's diachronic modernity and used such definition as a defense against those who accused him of being a painter for the elites, removed from reality by the greedy art market. In 1969, Borràs defended the artist from the critiques he received after the exhibition at Biosca Gallery. She saw in the painter's use of humble materials an argument that questioned his supposed assimilation to the capitalist system, due not only to its poverty, but also to its Catalan cultural affiliation (1969). Borràs defined Tàpies's art as the art of "our present sensibility" and, despite attacks from Spanish art critics who criticized her for "turning Tàpies into a prophet," she would continue to insist that his work "included the new culture within the oldest and most beloved Catalan culture" (Borràs 1971a; Bonet and Rivas 1971; Borràs 1971b).

Some years later, when the polemic confrontation between Tàpies and the young conceptual art coalition Grup de Treball (GdT) broke out in 1973, the art critic was also able to use Tàpies's role within Catalan culture as an argument in his defense. In March of that year, Tàpies had published an article in *La Vanguardia Española*, in which he critiqued the pretentious position of "enfants terribles" that some members of the group had prophetically but naively shown at the exhibition *Informació d'Art Concepte* celebrated at Banyoles (Tàpies 1973a). In response to such attack, GdT pointed out how the

painter's supposed social commitment was at odds with the current exhibiting format of his works – restricted to the museum and the art gallery – and the prestigious position he held in the international art market (Portabella 1973; Abad et al. 1973). For the members of GdT, Tàpies's characterization as a socially involved artist depended on a paradoxical understanding of art's integration into the world, which was the basis of avant-garde art and which conceptualism aimed to reshape.

Beyond the series of articles that Tàpies immediately wrote reflecting on the intrinsic social integration of “true” avant-garde artist (1973b, 1973c, 1973d, 1973e, 1973f, 1973g), Borràs also stood up for the painter. In 1974, one year before Franco's death, the art critic described Tàpies as the inheritor of the creative tendency opened by Antoni Gaudí and continued by Joan Miró, using his “catalanitat” as proof of his intrinsic modernity and progressive character (Borràs 1974). As Borràs stated, despite the misunderstanding of younger generations, Tàpies was a radical artist who shared the same revolutionary profile as his masters, who advocated for the ultimate goal of the oldest Catalan tradition: freedom.

Conclusions: A Universal Catalan?

The day that Jordi Pujol awarded Tàpies the Golden Medal of the Generalitat, the President was not alone. He was accompanied by Pere Gimferrer, who highlighted the “universal singularity of the painter” (Pujol 1983). While an analysis of how Tàpies's Catalanitat ended up permeating the official political structures would have to be the subject of a different article, this apparently anecdotal occasion clearly points to how much the Catalan government would build on Tàpies's Catalan turn.

As we have seen, Tàpies's reinterpretation as Catalan was a long process involving multiple debates, political circumstances, and varied conflicting interests. Through his self-declaration as Miró's inheritor and insistence on the humbleness of his objects, Tàpies positioned his objectual artwork within a Catalan interpretative frame. His reluctance to be categorized as a member of any contemporary art trend indicated his understanding of the painter as an isolated, unique figure, in the vein of the individualism fostered by postwar abstract trends. Nonetheless, this certainty also gave him enough independence to adopt a socially accusatory tone that would mark his public political stance during the 1960s and early 1970s.

Spanish critics' condemnation of the artist's most recent works critiqued his lack of connection to society but also received Tàpies's most Catalan answers. In contrast to their scorn, the Parisian art world was to become fertile ground for Tàpies's Catalanization.

Through the Maeght Gallery rebranding of his profile and the fervorous support from French art critics, Paris became the geopolitical heart of Tàpies's politicization, which soon spread towards the peninsula, legitimizing the interpretations that would start to flourish, especially around Barcelona. Thanks to the discursive apparatus with which, since the early 1970s, Gimferrer and Borràs embellished Tàpies's oeuvre, his position as a modern, social leader was protected, because, by being Catalan, he intrinsically possessed such modernity. In 1975, Tàpies endorsed this interpretation: his art was faithful to the "Catalan progressive way," with a "primordial democratic intention to receive suggestions, based on collective decisions" (Tàpies 1975). From his point of view, all throughout his career he had refused to use solemn pragmatic and triumphal declarations to address the people—a Catalan, but also universal people for whom he had stolen the fire of political and creative freedom (Tàpies 1975).

The transnational landscape that this paper has traced gave rise to Tàpies's consolidation as the pictorial representative of Catalan culture. The debates provoked by Tàpies's political stance during the last decade of the Francoist dictatorship and the role played by French art criticism show that the cartography in which Tàpies's Catalan interpretation originated escaped fixed national limits. Faced with hostile Spanish opinion, the artist discovered in his Catalan cultural background an opportunity to represent himself as a politically and socially committed artist. In the hectic political scene of 1968 Paris, Tàpies found the allies to trigger the reading of his work as the Catalan testimony to Franco's repression. Back home, some of his closer friends worked to root this testimonial into the oldest Catalan tradition. In this sense, the political *re-semantization* of the artist's work must be understood in terms both of his political commitment and of the social and cultural debates that emerged in the Spain and France of the moment. Tàpies, his "catalanitat," and the nationalist discourse that has increasingly surrounded his figure since then respond, thus, to a transnational, rather than universal, geography.

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