Interview with Luis González Robles, Government official with overall responsibility for contemporary art during Franco's regime.

"Can art, for example, represent a danger to the national character? Can it attack the integrity of that particular collective and human condition? I find it difficult to believe that enemy cannons of the aesthetic variety might be turned against a country in order to annihilate it and describe its history. And yet, a model where art, or even culture, cannot be directed against anyone [...] The qualification "anti-Spanish" cannot be awarded simply because a painter creates in his own way [...] The epithet is even more inappropriate when applied to artists who, in all their works, have shown themselves to be Spanish to the bone; get them out of Madrid, they'll paint in the Gran Canarias.

This paragraph by the critic Eduardo Ducay, writing in the Madrid magazine "Indice de Artes y Letras" (Index of Art and Letters) in 1952, illustrates perfectly a question which, for a number of social, cultural and political reasons, has not been adequately tackled by art critics. We refer to the relationship established between Spanish avant-garde art of the post-war, and the cultural policy of Franco's state. Was there really a close relationship on both sides? Did those in power really, in fact, wish to manage the creative arena to their own advantage? How could such very different social perspectives merge? Ducay points out with reason that it is to be a key fact regarding the state's cultural policy: the practice of art, as conceived by the artists of the time, could not represent any kind of alternative to the established order -that is to say, contemporary art did not damage. Perhaps from there stem the paradoxes and contradictions of those artists who considered themselves to be warriors of criticism yet were at the same time pampered by the state; of which, furthermore, they took full advantage.

Amongst those of the previous regime who were responsible for fine arts, Luis González Robles, Commissioner for Exhibitions of the Department of Education in the Franco era, appears to have remained in his post. In 1953, without doubt, the most relevant and influential figure in the conception and application of the state's policy in relation to avant-garde art. His senior ministerial responsibilities and his constant contact with the artists of the day make him a key figure through whom to know, at close range, the social and political effects of the contemporary art which, at the very least, was never easy. The interview presented here seeks to examine that relationship, the lines of contact with the international artistic situation, and the role which the state considered art should play. The words of González Robles seem to confirm what Ducay wrote forty years ago.

**Question:** If you agree, we could begin by talking about the general international post-war situation in which we encounter three basic artistic movements; French informality, American expressionism, and the movements of the Soviet Union. Two of those, the first and the last, have left. Apart from these, following the civil war, Spain found itself possessed of various national referents such as Picasso, Miró and Dalí.

**L. González Robles:** In the main, very confused. In almost all epochs, there is always an element of confusion, which is due to the fact that a period of relatively poor art which, the artist has always lived in a somewhat isolated environment, and did so above all at that time. There were very few who took a look at what was going on beyond the hill that stood above their village.

**Q:** But nevertheless, it's not difficult to see that while Paris exercised a significant physical influence, New York came to represent, above all for non-Catalan artists, an important touchstone.

**LGR:** New York was a long way off then. In many ways Paris was much closer. Artists would out to Paris. The image of Dalí's "Cada" (1) at the Maryl Guarro Theatre in Madrid... Miró was in New York. But he was also there... I was one of the organisations with Manolo Fraque and others.

**Q:** If that talk seems to outline clearly the conflicting positions of each of those two artists, the figure of Miró is more difficult to place.

**LGR:** Well you see, Miró always kept himself on the edge of all that. He didn't mix well with that salt.

**Q:** However, the majority of artists and critics - Cirlot, Guasch, etc. - had recourse to Miró as a direct source for their aesthetic, and even political, motives.

**LGR:** Cirlot had an incredible amount of information; he was the most important point for me, you understand? But what happened is that no-one of DAU AL SET was anything like exactly Miro's area of action. Miró himself, in the conversations we had, told me that he was rather annoyed because he saw that no-one really considered him seriously.
that those shows were deftly proposed by the American institutions as socio-political mirrors for Europe, with the intention of countering current cultural development.

LGR - I wasn't aware of any of that. I just went to the paintings. But you realize that those kinds of exhibitions didn't influence me. When I did 'Art of the day in America and Spain', for example, I didn't pick any of the artists for those exhibitions. No-one ever said to me: "Hey, don't forget to bring so-and-so." It wasn't talked about, or commented on. You'd see that in those American catalogues my name wasn't even mentioned when even the museum attendants at the Reina Sofia have a get together.

Q - Specifically, McCoy and the director of the MOMA, Barr. LGR - I recall that the poor fellow was U.S. representative at the Sao Paulo Biennial. However, Barr never had any influence on anything there. I was running things, together with Matarasso [all-powerful Braz- ilian industrial, patron of the Sao Paulo Modern]. He had brought a very bad selection, nothing of which took any prizes; we won them all for Spain.

Q - As I've said, they thanked the Spanish authorities for their exten- sive collaboration in the exhibitions of modern Spanish painting that were shown in New York in 1960 [4]: at the MOMA, the Guggenheim, and the Pierre Matisse gallery. According to texts published by Robert Lubar, Millares seemed very worried because he was really afraid that members of the regime could be manipulating the artists, in order to give the impression of complete freedom when it came to working in Spain.

LGR - These are just comments. It's very human, always wanting to run with the goose and the hounds, and one can't. Don't take any notice of those matters. It upsets me to talk about people who are dead. It makes me very sad.

Q - Part of the critical establishment in America at that time had pro- blems with the exhibitions [5], basically because they said that free- dom in art was not possible in Spain.

LGR - That troubled them, yes, but at the same time they liked what they saw.

Q - In what way did you or your department participate in these exhibi- tions?

LGR - I was a very close friend of d'Hannencourt, Porter McCoy, sure by then, spots with him. We met in Venice and then I talked to them about Tom, Dick and Harry, and that was it. Nothing particular happened. What do you think about this artist or that one? Good or bad. That was it.

Q - The proximity between certain values of American formalism (uni- versalism, expressionism, expressive abstraction, "liberal" open nationalism), the individualism and internationalism as expressed in the number of state- ments made by the Spanish authorities at the time -such as the pre- vious quotation of the minister Ruiz-Gimenez -appears evident. If we are to believe the doctrine of you and yourself, were you not indeed inciting Spaniards to paint replica Pollocks (6).

LGR - I don't remember that. That saddens me. As far as Ruiz Giménez goes, it's anything that comes at the end of the day is a logical consequence of the foreign influences on each of the artists in their different countries, whether Spain, Bolivia, the Dominican Republic, Paraguay. We can't avoid foreign influences, but please don't imagine that they necessarily dictate anything to any-one, as you seem to be insinuating. To-day, just as in the past although not so much, informa- tion overwhelms and, no, that can't be avoided.

Q - But in pieces you published, you always championed a radical and vital creative individuality (7).

LGR - I don't remember that at all. It has to be made by individuals, it must be well done and well put. I mean that artists must have strong and defined stylistic personalities. It's important that artists don't limit themselves solely to a particular line, but that they be themselves.

Q - And the fact of proposing a type of individualistic and very free avant-garde art that, logically, wouldn't be fully understood by those in power, really caused no frictions?

LGR - No-one ever said anything to me. I'm not bothered by politics; that's why everything went well for me.

Q - However, the regime wasn't particularly fond of great modern leaps. It's even been said that, when visiting exhibitions, Franco would shoot a gun at the pictures simply to show his disdain.

LGR - Who's that?

Q - Juan Manuel Bonet, for example (8).

LGR - That's rubbish. I remember one scene perfectly, because it was filmed by the NOOD. Franco and I were opening an exhibition of artists from the States. Sotomayor [director of the Academy and the Prado Museum at the time] was there, and we talked about ten pictures kept behind us, beside the Cauldilo's wife and other ministers. I turned to Franco and said to him, "Can I speak freely to you, Excellency." "Of course," he said, and so I said to him, "I have an artist's necessarily academi- cal taste". He stopped and asked me what I meant by that. So then I suggested that perhaps he was somewhat too influenced by Sotoma- yor's academism. I mean, naturally, that I gestured a lot as I said this, moving my arms - which, I afterwards learned, scandalized those who were with him, since no-body normally moved their arms around when speaking with Franco. When we finished going round the exhibition, and just after seeing Rauschenberg and Rivers, Franco said to me, "This is a really fantastic experience, I'm deeply impres- sed. It's really I didn't know." Franco was overwhelmed. I swear to you, this is no exaggeration. Not, I don't think so either, that the people I lived with in the Prado. But I showed them one day, produce any laughter; it's something that some people had warned me about, having problems I
mean, but nothing happened, it was all much simpler than that; what is important is the paintings, whether they are good or not, everything else is just to do with complicating matters. So I'm surprised about what you tell me Bonet said. I can't believe that a man of over fifty speaks such rubbish, I think it is very sad. I'll tell you something else that happened with Juan Genoves. In an exhibition one day, Genoves was showing a painting that made reference to recent political events (Caracas University in Madrid. Some-one suggested that the presence of this painting wasn't very appropriate. Well, in the end the picture was in the exhibition and it didn't cause any apparent trouble.

Q: So you would say that there was an indifference on the part of those in charge of contemporary art?

LGR - But I never talked about such things with them. I never worried about that. No-one, none of the directors with whom I worked gave me orders in that respect. With Joaquín Ruiz Morales, who was one of the best of the critics, in Barcelona, adapting the saying, I could claim that 'on Spanish exhibitions the sun never sets', because we had exhibitions throughout the world - I never had to listen to strange or catchy words. I'm not being critical of Bonet, of his feverish mind, his political self-seeking, of wanting an immediate good post so he can continue to live off the Reina Sofia. It's ridiculous. I find such lies repugnant.

Q: Could we continue with the reception of the Spanish artists in the USA?

LGR - Yes, well in Los Angeles, New York, Washington, Yale, Boston. San Antonio in Texas, no-body expressed any political reservations whatsoever, everybody was excited by the Spanish art. No-one had any kind of reservation.

Q: If it was so well received in the U.S.A., does that imply that the works themselves are good or that the public, the critics, the list tendancies of the time? Were you fully aware of this if so, in what way was it a criteria for you, if indeed it was?

LGR - As far as I was concerned, no, I don't know about the artists.

Q: What personal relationship did you have with artists who were, or claim to have been, marked left-wing, Olitza, Genoves, and others?

LGR - I have no idea, I don't know the social background, whatever. I'm an extremely good friend of Pepe Guinovart; and of many others. I have a rule which says: 'Don't interfere with other people's lives, and don't let them interfer with yours.' Olita, for instance, the only prize he won in his day I gave to him in Sao Paulo in 1961. I went round to see him, I took him to Brazil and he won

Q: But you have must be aware of the political texts which he wrote.

LGR - But I don't care about that. And, at any rate, when I asked him to write something for the exhibition he didn't write those kinds of things, quite the contrary; and it's not because I told him not to. And when he had to speak at a press conference, Jorge spoke so calmly, without getting into any mess. I remember one day I said to him, 'Hey, don't get into that, don't interfere with yours.' Olita, for instance, the only prize he won in his day I gave to him in Sao Paulo in 1961. I went round to see him, I took him to Brazil and he won.

Q: Nevertheless it seems there is a moment at which this relationship with you broke down. According to Saura (6), following the 1958 Venice Biennial, neither he nor Tapiés, nor Chillida took part again in an official show.

LGR - Saura is a sickly lad, who, well...his physical disability has really affected his life and work. Whenever he made head or tail of that collection, we took thirteen Spanish painters to Paris. The Marquis of Casarosas, who was the Spanish ambassador at the time, invited us all to lunch. Saura didn't turn up. And me I left the appointment. He was the only one who left. Afterwards the rest of us went to where the exhibition was being held, to finish setting up. At six o'clock, I am there with Felipe, Diego and Olita. I said, 'Let's go out and have a drink.' And there, I told Saura, who just wanted to go to his doctor. I told him: "Saura..." And Saura says, 'All, well there he came to have a cup of coffee at three, and when I asked him about the lunch he said, 'I'm not going!' And I was in the exhibition. I asked him if he had told Saura him - and that I had turned up with a policeman at Juan Mora's gallery and, and would you believe it, he had taken away all of his paintings. Five or six were left in the exhibition and the rest were at his own house - and I said to Manolo Rivero, 'He really uses me, that boy, what a shame; but what does the lad do things like this? Have you got his phone number?' 'Yes,' he says, and he promised me that if I never said any of those things, it was always like that with him.

Q: But that is commentary of Saura's true, nevertheless?

LGR - But, after that he went to Paris with me! What happened is that we never repeated people. When I'd once worked with some-one, I liked to choose different people to take to the exhibitions that we had. I won important international prizes but then I'd leave them to go their own way. They know that. They all worked with me when they wanted to. I didn't like to overload it with any one painter; in that way no-one could start saying I was favouring so-and-so.

Q: And all the artists you invited accepted?

LGR - Yes, all of them, or almost all of them.

Q: Why is your name not particularly linked to the avant-garde moves of the 1960s? Amoros, Cirioca, Realidad.

LGR - I had tremendous friends amongst them. But I mustn't always take everybody.

Q: What do you consider to be the fundamental differences between stately rapport of contemporary art in the 1950s and 60s and that given to-day?

LGR - With each day that passes I'm happier about those days and sadder about what's going on now, because I see that nothing at all is being made that I've always liked. That is, in spite of the fact that Spain has lost its standing in the world. People outside Spain are always asking me, 'What's happening in Spain, that everything is going so well?' And I try to explain to them that this is the climate of lost prestige, what is there now? For instance, in Munich when we opened a Guinovart show, people crowded to get in, because they knew that Spain meant something good. I've been offering500 pesetas for a long time now to any-one who can show me the word Spain in the international pages of the Venice Biennial. The trouble with the commissioners to-day is that they don't have connections abroad. They want to be in control of everything. They are, to-day, everyday, what wants to make eclectic selections which will satisfy everybody, and when you're trying to satisfy everybody, there's no policy possible. In the fifties and sixties my country was in the world that didn't have a Spanish artist. I was fed up with sending catalogues and slides all over the world. I'm not lying, I've hung on to everything. I've got an enormous number of slides, of Bibliotheque Nationale mostly. And I've got the Vizcaya Bank I've got various files and boxes, some of which contain letters from Tapiés. Some of the letters are very revealing about the dispute between Tapiés and Chillida. They also talk of the emotion they felt (Tapiés' wife) when they read my letters. And a lot of other interesting things.

Q: What opinions do you have about the development of the careers of those artists you helped when they were just beginning?

LGR - Look, there are all sorts, as is true everywhere. What suprises me is to compare them with the present generation. Back then, every-one was in agreement with me that the Academia was a retrograde establishment, every-one was a fierce enemy of Belles Artes and now everyone is one of their partners because they are a relic. They are all now by are. Every-one slagged off the Academia, and now we see how they're falling over themselves and doing the impossible in order to deliver their little papers. I won't name names. But among them, and I don't understand this desire to throw everything overboard and fling mud with such viciousness. The thing is, it's difficult for people to understand I'm liberal, I'm that's also an apostolic Catholic and right-wing. Full stop and Amen.

(1). On the 11th November 1951, Dalí gave a talk entitled "Picasso and me", at the Maria Guerrero Theatre, Madrid. He accused Picasso of having tried to "kill the beauty of art with his communist materialism". At the end of the talk a telegram was signed by those present, in support of Picasso for what he represented of the "gloomy of Spanish painting", over the years, and mainly after the 1936 civil war. González-Roussy called to comment with irony, "Dali holds out his hand, but all I see is the Falange". Spain. Half a Century of avant-garde Art 1959-89; Santillana Foundation and Art Museum of Barcelona. Picasso's reply: A.S. (Anonymoza); Revista, Barcelona, no. 4, May 1952. Cited, ibid.

(2) "Only helping artists to be authentic, by keeping them apart from strange innovations which might divert them from their true selves, can have a veritable artistic policy be conceived. Concerning our specific situation, it seems to us that such an assistance for the authentic should follow two different lines: one is the situating of the artist in the present epoch, avoiding all deceptive formalist traditionnalism; on the other hand, strengthen the national feeling, avoiding all superficial nationalism for anything that happens outside one's own fatherland, which does not mean - far from it - diverting artists from international artistic currents, but simply trying to be authentic..." (Dali to the Velázquez exhibit) ("Castillo de la Moncloa").

(3) This, fundamentally, is the great concern that should orient artistic policy...for those who serve art it be not a trivial or routine occupa- tion, but a conscientious one. The artist has to be at his most noble in existence, in both the individual and collective relation.

LGR - I am that I can say that from a certain day [reference to Chillida and Tapiés' prizes in the Venice Biennial of 1958], Chillida and I decided not to represent Spain officially, either in or outside the country.