

SALA AIXELÁ (1959-1975)



A pioneering venue that played a part in the reconstruction of a modernity that the Franco dictatorship interrupted, Aixelá created a model in which cultural experimentation coexisted alongside a commercial offering. Between 1959 and 1975, under the direction of the critic Josep Maria Casademont, it was a meeting place and a platform for promoting photography, comics, mainstream and independent films and the latest trends in music.

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IN STRUGGLE FOR LIVING ART

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About Aixelá

Back in the 1960s—and just as it is now and indeed at all times—Barcelona was a living and relatively healthy organism. Every neighbourhood was an organ essential to its survival. At its centre was its privileged heart. And very nearby, its lungs. Of which there were an untold number. One of these was Aixelá. It was not known how big or small this lung was until it began to inflate. Then—and this is why it was so important—it gradually began to return the air it had processed. It flushed enriched blood throughout an entire body that was able to work, to move. Even to think.

Before all this, however, the father of the Aixelá family ran a photographic shop called Alexandre on Carrer de Sant Pau. One of his sons, Francisco Aixelá Duc, who was 36 at the time, decided to improve and modernise the operation by opening an extension of the family shop ‘above’ Plaça de Catalunya in order to appeal to a better class of customer. The Aixelás, who in their day had already bought Lázaro, a photographic business formerly called Cosmos Fotográfico Fernández on Carrer dels Tallers that had supplied the Royal Household back in the 19th century, aspired to give the new Aixelá an up-to-date, innovative image, an elegant, contemporary architecture, finishes in luxury materials, large shop windows, especially-designed furnishings and exclusive uniforms for the staff. All intended to showcase a selection of international products made by leading brands that were difficult to find elsewhere in the city. Thus it was that in July 1958, Aixelá opened its doors at number 13 on Rambla de Catalunya in premises with an architectural design by Nilo Tusquets and a décor by M. Paglia and B. Planas. That first year, the floor below ground level was used as a store and as a repair workshop. But by February 1959, it was already in full swing as an exhibition room, the Sala Aixelá, so frequently

Entrance to the Aixelá shop at number 13
on Rambla de Catalunya, Barcelona.
Photograph: Maspons+Ubiña

named in photography manuals as that space where a third way for photography emerged, a way that encompassed both creative amateur photographic practice and the applied photography of professionals. This exhibition focuses on these activities and looks at the people who made them possible.

Aixelá soon made a name for itself as a business at the cutting edge of the sound and vision sector. Its technical staff travelled to Germany to learn about the latest technologies. The brands sold there were mainly from abroad and were state-of-the-art. They also appealed to a remarkable clientele: there were even customers who bought a television set before Televisión Española had begun broadcasting. They picked up waves from foreign broadcasters using special aerials that Aixelá also sold. These clients were progressive types who sought out information in the free media, who listened to jazz, went to film premieres in France and would later share copies of the films and tapes recorded in the shop's workshop. Intellectuals, people working in the liberal professions and businesspeople, most of them connected with Club 49, who made Aixelá a kind of headquarters where they could exchange things of potential interest.

Aixelá's status as a central space for culture came about due to this connection with the members of Club 49, as this association used the Aixelá as a venue from the outset for its activities related to art, film and jazz and contemporary music. The first photographic exhibition at Aixelá, *Terré-Miserachs-Masats*, was also held under the auspices of this club, founded in the year from which it takes its name under the aegis of the Hot Club in Barcelona, given that it needed a legal front in order to register as an association. The Hot Club in Barcelona, founded in 1935 in the likeness of the association in Paris, revived in 1950 following a long interruption during the war and post-war years. Its activities revolved around jazz: record launches, jam sessions and the organisation of festivals. It was the only club of its kind in the whole of Spain.

In addition to these moneyed clients, Aixelá attracted fascinated youngsters who were nervous about setting foot in the sumptuous premises to browse through the LPs or buy a roll of film. These young clients gradually got to know Sala Aixelá by making small purchases or by going into the lis-

tening rooms, the only ones of their kind in the city, to listen to stereo recordings for the first time, to see a television set, something they'd never done before, or to check the power of a radio... And while there they found out about the activities that went on below the shop. The classical and contemporary music listening sessions put on for others by owners of record collections that they had built up patiently and expensively through the black market for culture and smuggling across the border. And they grew hooked on the mainstream, amateur and independent film screenings, the talks about international contemporary art and the screenings of iconic repertoires by Gomis and Prats.

For film buffs—members of the Amateur Film Youth Association and of the AFC (Catalan Photographic Group)—Aixelá became the shop of reference. As photographic film and cinematographic film stock was rationed by Spain's central government, the shop assistants at Aixelá filled camera bodies with film to length and supplied stock to amateur filmmakers at a good price, film that in some cases had passed its use-by date. The shop had cine cameras and projectors for hire, equipment that was hard to find at that time as it was regarded as highly suspect. Aixelá also sold records from abroad and tape recordings of rarer LPs, which were difficult to buy in Spain. Records were also shared in listening sessions—jazz, the very latest in contemporary music, on occasions never heard before in Spain, popular music from around the world and also the first opportunities to hear Catalan *Nova Cançó*—mounted by people with close connections with Aixelá. Similarly, considerable effort was made to raise awareness of mainstream as well as arthouse film and documentaries, which were very rarely screened in commercial cinemas. In addition to screenings in its own room, it offered a movie rental service, so people could watch films, most of them aimed at children, in their home. Aixelá's educational work in the field of communication was exemplary.

The driving force behind all this activity, the unifying factor for all these proposals, was the enthusiast Josep Maria Casademont (Barcelona, 1928-1994), who gave up his career as a lawyer in the autumn of 1958 to run Aixelá's advertising

department, later taking on the co-ordination of its exhibition room and editing *Imagen y Sonido* magazine from the time it was created in 1963. His aim as an editor and curator was to promote the younger generations in each era, giving them the opportunity to present—and to discover—new ways of viewing photography as culture, always in connection with the various arts.

The professional relationship between Casademont and Aixelá was initially based on family ties, since Casademont was married to Pilar Galindo, a sister-in-law of the Aixelás who was responsible for the till at the shop till the day she married. Casademont was not a member of the company's staff, though he worked full time with the total understanding of his boss. In 1963, a few years after the shop opened, by which time the programme of events in the downstairs room was up and running, Casademont suggested to his friend Pere Figuera that he should come and work as a co-ordinator on the newly-created *Imagen y Sonido* magazine, which began life as an advertising medium for Aixelá but soon became the leading magazine specialising in images in Spain. Figuera and Casademont had studied law together and had embarked on their careers as lawyers in a legal practice of their own on Ronda de Sant Pere. However, the circumstances in which they were forced to work, having to defend laws that were ran counter to their own views, made them decide to give up the law at the age of 30.

For both Casademont and Figuera, working at Aixelá was more a way of life than a means of earning a living. They enjoyed dealing with the intellectuals and artists who visited the shop and with educated members of the public. They were what people of the time described as 'bohemian types'. They could not hide their pro-Catalanist stance, and even though talking of these political interests aloud was impossible, even within their families out of fear that their children might inadvertently reveal secrets from home at school, everything that was organised and promoted by Aixelá was imbued with this nationalist sentiment, though the Catalan language could barely be used in leaflets. Those who frequented Aixelá were politically opposed to the regime, albeit in thought only, though as the

years passed they became more open. The slow naturalness in expressing content, the type of film screened, the topics of the talks, the exhibitions and the people who visited the Sala Aixelá changed, as can be appreciated in the evolution of the forms and discourse that occurred between the opening of the shop and the death of the dictator in 1975, which is when the activities run by Casademont came to a halt. In any event, throughout all this time, most of the events were held behind closed doors below the shop where the exhibition and screening room was situated, with someone on guard at the entrance to keep out anyone unknown. Even so, openings were extremely popular, though publicity had to be kept to a minimum and was based on word of mouth among those in the know. In this way, Aixelá served as a meeting place and a platform for promoting and raising awareness of experimental photography, contemporary music and jazz, and independent film.

From its window display to its exhibition room, Aixelá largely played an educational role. It made the most of Casademont's interests, about which he was passionate and messianic, giving him all the tools he needed to fulfil his post as head of advertising to his heart's delight, and it benefited from his persuasiveness, his curiosity about all things new, his urge to teach people about art and culture and to embrace the projects of groups and individuals who needed a space where they could express themselves. It was as a result of this that Aixelá began to offer a course in alternative film, which gathered momentum in the eventful counterculture years inspired by the events of May 1968 in France.

Photography: A means of reproduction

I'm going to begin with the most emphatic remark.
The most shocking. Photography is nothing more than
a means of reproduction. Period.

—Josep Maria Casademont, March 1994

Josep Maria Casademont was an educated man with a curious mind. He was passionate about the Hellenistic world, in which he found all kinds of references and metaphors to explain his own world. He began, like everyone else, with an interest in photography but which went no further than using a camera for family shots. As mentioned earlier, he was a lawyer by profession till he realised that he was unable to help his clients in a context dominated by unjust laws. Without any ambition to rise in society or to become wealthy, he tried his hand at another occupation: running the advertising department of a company that he was connected to by marital ties. Before taking this step, he had used his knowledge as a lawyer in running the secretariat of the AFC, the largest photographic society in Spain in terms of the number of its members, which reached its zenith during the period in which Casademont was the main voice in its newsletter and then later its secretary. In addition, the AFC was known for its forward-looking proposals. Its members were eminent figures in the liberal professions, industrialists and important personages in 'cosmopolitan' Barcelona of those years of Francoist closed-mindedness. Argument and polemic were admitted in its rooms. Young people had almost the right to declare themselves opposed to the rules. And to steer them in the right direction, the Board of Directors created prizes such as the Avant-garde Salon and theorised in its newsletters about modern photography. Casademont served as a bridge between officialdom and dissidence. He attempted to blend ground-breaking trends with the establishment, without which he could not do: the Catalan bourgeoisie, "people with a box at the Liceu [opera house] and a burp after lunch", as Oriol Maspons graphically described them. Without weighing the consequences, Casademont helped to dismantle that perfect world of salon photography by giving shape to the idea that was inspiring his colleagues:

photographers did not want to take pretty photographs; they wanted to live off photography and for photography, which they saw as a useful and a living art.

In the occasional auction, you can still come across a photograph taken in his early years as a member of the AFC, signed diffidently with his name. These photos by the young Casademont are test pieces in which he sought to apply his knowledge of metaphysical art and Surrealism, to distance himself from the official photography that was then indulging in an outmoded Romantic approach to the landscape and the posed portrait. Studio sets provided more options for the imagination. In contrast, for photographic reporting, a photographer needed determination, a quick eye and very clear ideas in order to overcome the difficulties of every kind that he would encounter as soon as he stepped out onto the street. Casademont soon realised that 'making' photography was not for him. Rather, he was better at teaching others how to view it, to understand its crucial role in achieving social change, at helping to steer decisions so that his peers, the truly talented young photographers who emerged from the AFC, could thrive in that environment and break down the barrier separating photography from culture. Photography would leave the hothouse and expose itself to the clean air of culture, to the demands of the public, of the technique, science, education and even art. Casademont wrote many articles to give form to this third way intended to distance photography from the vices of *salonisme*—photographs taken solely for the purpose of winning a prize in competitions—and the mediocrity of professional photography in the dark post-war years. His own ideas and those nurtured in the gatherings of the Afal Group filled letters and articles in the latter years of the 1950s. The intellectual silence was so thick that Casademont was able to circumvent the echoes of replies and perhaps the reprisals from the more influential members of high society by signing with various pseudonyms, which some people still today do not associate with the author: Aquiles Pujol, which pays tribute in the first name to the Greek hero and in the surname to his friend whom he admired, Jordi Pujol; and Anaxágoras, the enigmatic Pre-Socratic philosopher. Whichever voice he

adopted, Casademont advocated a diverse, multiple photography, a photography that was applied, useful, profound, creative and communicative, a photography always in keeping with the consciously-adopted stance of the photographer in his time. Photography was meaningless if it was detached, if it did not go back and forth between art and life. And music, literature, the popular arts and science too. Applied photography—being pure—was more effective than artistic fantasies. This applied photography was an unpretentious art form for simply capturing and pointing at the world, even at that which those who call themselves artists generate as art. In this interpretation, art is ‘everything’ that can be seen: the way gypsy women do their hair, a bullfighter’s moves with his cape, the steam rising from a train standing at the platform, precision machinery, the yarn in a fabric viewed through a microscope, a detail of a painting by Miró, the impetuous sweep of a figure during a half-second exposure... By way of a conclusion, Casademont proclaimed: “Photography is nothing more than a means of reproduction. Period.”

Photography was riven, however, divided by a thousand labels attached to different styles and functions. How is it possible that photography could adopt so many forms and discourses given that it is a mechanical procedure? This is where the Greek philosopher Anaxagoras helped him to explain this seeming chaos of purposes. At bottom, over and above the appearances of the technique or the expression of the photographer, there is an immutable element, one that is unique in each photograph: the unrepeatable instance that has been caught. The ultimate reason why it has been captured lies in the need for someone to perpetuate it. The differentiating elements that distinguish each of its registers spring from the technical characteristics of cameras, the limitations and determining factors of the surroundings, trends, fashions, the obsessions of the particular individual using the device, the ego that drove them to feel like they were protagonists, so much so that they wanted to leave evidence—testimony—of their presence before the situation portrayed. Anyone looking at the photograph needs to be astute and capable of eliminating any superfluous element in order to get to the heart of what it contains, of

remaining mindful of what it is that differentiates photography from other languages, not some photographs from others. That difference, which can be seen among the drawings by Napoleon’s archaeologists and the first daguerreotypes of the pyramids, provides an understanding of the grandeur of a humble yet dramatic means of reproduction.

Even today in the 21st century, Casademont continues to teach us a brilliant lesson. Even though it is almost impossible due to fact that the medium has been eroded by all these years of evolution and overabundance, the constant bombardment of trivial images, it is still important to continue to identify, amid the noise of forms and styles, the almost electrical intellectual shock that the photograph causes in the human brain when it bursts into the world. The mystery of eternity vanquished, at last, by photography. The possibility of observing things far away close up, the small big, the fleeting still, the now dead alive. But to Casademont’s displeasure in his day—and we still suffer the same problem now—photography criticism dwelled unfailingly on trivialities to do with photographers’ styles and the reasons that prompted them to take their pictures. Elements that are mere superficial trifles that will end up drowning that mystery of the real if we prove incapable of isolating them. Drawing inspiration from Anaxagoras, Casademont recommends that we focus on the final cause, the message harboured in the forms, which is nothing other than that reality whose weight moves us. Seen from a distance, the presence—albeit blurry—of a man condemned to death in a photograph asserts itself above any other value. He always gave this example to depict the inexorable quality of the photographic shot. What matters is what is explained. Not the way it is explained. Lying is impossible because to someone capable of reading to the end of this analysis, the photograph plainly reveals the fraud. “Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me”, as the saying, also often used by Anaxagoras, goes.

There was a shared understanding of functional art back in the 1960s. Casademont’s relationship with Alexandre Cirici Pellicer reveals his influence. Both regarded the tool (Eina) as the symbol of the end towards which all human endeavour should aim: function and loyalty to it in the forms.

Photography will be more or less faithful, more or less accurate, but there is something that will not be open to question and that is that, at the magical moment of pressing the shutter release, the camera and the photographer were there, before that reality. And that is unrepeatable, almost a mystery of eternity. It is that magical instant and that unrepeatable instant alone! For that reason, basing myself on this argument, I will only be able to explain myself after I have said at the outset that I see photography as a method of reproduction. If your mental shutter speed allows it, you will understand that I continue to believe in everything else: creativity, testimony, expressiveness... Anything else you want to add, I will accept. But it will always pale alongside that observation: photography is a method of reproduction.

—Josep Maria Casademont, March 1994

Advertising in the zen style

The modern concept of advertising as a discipline is what set the Aixelá project in motion; it is what gave rise to everything else, the cultural activities, the need for a new aesthetic with which to present itself to society, to seek connections with art, music, literature and photography... In his capacity as director of the Aixelá advertising department, Casademont turned his office into a space where he could try out ideas and raise awareness of everything he believed in. It was the need for an advertising component for the company and the products sold there that led to *Imagen y Sonido* magazine. As Miserachs had remarked in his writings, advertising offered the possibility of expressing ideas that were unimaginable outside the realm of commerce. The product provided a pretext for expressing aesthetic and moral issues that were totally unthinkable in the public sphere in the Franco era.

The Zen studio, set up towards the end of 1951 by Paquita Granados and Alexandre Cirici Pellicer, gave Aixelá's advertising character and created its style. Casademont had done business with the Zen studio before he started working at Aixelá. All the evidence indicates that he was the one to ask for their professional help in designing the shop window displays, the stationery and exhibition installations—"to install them, not to sponsor them or look for exhibitors", Casade-

mont insisted. He alone was in charge of *Imagen y sonido* magazine except for the design of the company's advertisements, which set the tone of the magazine. Gradually, as Casademont himself remarked, "the publicity agent employed by the company ousted the agency", meaning that Casademont gradually took on the role of creative.

According to Cirici, advertising consisted of steering ideas through TV adverts, posters and window displays, as if they were cultural socio-political messages. The quality of the window displays in Barcelona was a reflection of the recovery in commerce that took place in the late 1950s. The Zen studio was a pioneer in exhibiting contemporary art in window displays alongside goods sold in shops, among them Aixelá. These displays were installations consisting of objects, photographs and graphic art connected with the activities mounted in the room underground. The photographs and cultural content engaged in a dialogue with the design of objects sold in the shop. Zen's very name hints at the Japanese feel of its designs: the taste for empty spaces, design based on the line, plain colours alternating with maculatures, and long formats for its leaflets.

Paquita Granados was responsible for the administrative and business side of Zen, whereas Cirici was the art director, helped by Miquel Porter i Moix, who also took part in brainstorming sessions, and Francesc Vicens, who joined in 1954 as a creative who wrote articles. Many draughtsmen and women worked for Zen, but we do not know for certain who among them was responsible for the designs supplied to Aixelá. When Cirici left the company in 1957, Granados remained as a collaborator with the painter and draughtsman Eduard Alcoy. At that point, Francesc Vicens took over as art director until 1960, the year he had to go into exile due to his political activism.

The nature of the printing press and the mechanical character of the typefaces gave an aesthetic to the Aixelá papers that was perfectly in tune with the ideas of functional art, photography as a technique but one that was, nevertheless, capable of stirring the emotions, of triggering memories and of kindling desires. Design for Cirici, like photography for Casademont, was a hybrid activity that reconciled art and technology and all for a social purpose.

The movies at Aixelá

Club 49 organised film screenings in various venues around Barcelona: Sala Gaspar, the British Institute, the Institute of North American Studies, the Institute of German Culture and especially at the French Institute, the same place where the first family film club, the Cercle Lumière, was created early on in 1950.

In 1958, when Aixelá opened its downstairs room, it joined this circuit, in which Miquel Porter i Moix, Alexandre Cirici Pellicer, Joan Francesc de Lasa, Enric Ripoll Freixes and Francesc Vicens were leading lights. Aixelá also played an important role in facilitating activity in other venues by supplying films, specialist equipment and projectionists for screenings.

Oriol Bassa and Joaquín Romaguera were looking for a place where they could set up a film school, a proposal that Casademont found extremely interesting. He spoke about it with Francisco Aixelá, who approved of the idea, and they started work on it in the autumn of 1968. The key figures behind the school were Arnald Olivar, Quico Espresate, Pere Portabella, Sílvia Gubern and Alfons García Seguí. The teachers on the course, the seed for the Barcelona Film School, included Pere Balaña, Oriol Bassa, Andreas Boglar, Paco Candel, Cirici Pellicer, José Luis Guarner, Román Gubern, Joan Lahosa, Andrés Lewin, Ferran Llagostera, Jordi Peñarroja, Miquel Porter, Arnau Puig, Enric Ripoll Freixes, Emilio Rodríguez, Enric Sió, Llorenç Soler, Manuel Vázquez Montalbán and Albert Viñals.

The biannual film course finished in June 1970. As the project was expected to expand, Casademont rented other premises, as the Sala Aixelá could not accommodate a larger initiative. However, the venture came to a halt due to an accident in which Pere Figuera died and Casademont was injured, causing him to be absent for a lengthy period of time. Pere Portabella took up the reins and continued the courses at the Theatre Institute.

Concurrently with the course, Casademont began to put on screenings of amateur films made by young filmmakers such as Joan Baca, Toni Garriga, Albert Viñals and Llorenç Soler. There were also clandestine screenings of films banned by the censors that were supplied by keen film buffs at Aixelá like Joan Pineda and Joan Casadevall.

Activities in Sala Aixelá

The exhibition we are presenting at La Virreina Centre de la Imatge is the result of a labour-intensive process to locate photographers, documents and works. It constitutes the first methodical research into Aixelá carried out to date.

The museographical itinerary has been structured on the basis of a selection of 29 photography, comic and painting exhibitions presented in Sala Aixelá between 1959 and 1975, together with a section given over to film and a compilation of music available for download.

In addition to a tribute to Josep Maria Casademont, the exhibition presents an overview of various generations who shaped the cultural scene of the day. Works that are now iconic were shown for the first time in public at Aixelá, and creative figures who had already made a name for themselves both nationally and internationally shared the exhibition space with others just starting out on their subsequently successful careers.

March 1959 – Terré-Miserachs-Masats

Sala Aixelá opened in March 1959 with this exhibition that is regularly mentioned in accounts of the history of photography as the starting point of a renewal in the discipline. This new way of understanding photography was nothing other than the possibility of opening up photography to new audiences by breaking down the barriers erected by photographic associations. And this was made possible by the opening of Sala Aixelá as part of Casademont's project to connect photography with the other cultural activities taking place in Barcelona. Photography left behind the merely technical and formal concerns that were prerequisites for associations and established itself as a communicative language.

The installation of this exhibition was seen as particularly noteworthy: the photographs were large format and hung without a mat on a wooden stretcher. Compositions were formed on the walls so that the images were presented clearly and directly without titles or explanations to viewers, who were thus able to interpret them as they saw fit. This approach was used by other photographers in the exhibitions that followed in later years at Aixelá.

Ricard Terré (Barcelona, 1928 – Vigo, 2009), Xavier Miserachs (Barcelona, 1937-1998) and Ramón Masats (Caldes de Montbui, 1931) were very different in temperament, yet they shared the same motivation: to show their work to elicit a response from the audience for art interested in content rather than methods. Ramón Masats presented a selection of his *Sanfermines* that he later published in a book for Espasa-Calpe 1963. Xavier Miserachs' selection centred on photographs of the Costa Brava, which he also included later in *Costa Brava Show* (1967). Ricard Terré showed three series *Easter*, *Death* and *Childhood*, which also featured prominently in *Afal's* recently published yearbook for 1958.

Francesc Vicens, a member of the team behind the activities of Aixelá, wrote a critique for Club 49 which, together with the piece by Casademont, tells us of the shift in the evolution of Spanish photography as a tool for interpreting contemporary times. According to Casademont, this exhibition attained the 'third way'—not the way of art nor that of mere function—which consisted of photography applied with a creative intention.

April 1959 – Maspons+Ubiña

When they showed work at Aixelá, Julio Ubiña (Santander, 1922 – Barcelona, 1988) and Oriol Maspons (Barcelona, 1928-2013) had been partners in the Maspons+Ubiña studio for a year and were working as photojournalists for *La Gaceta Ilustrada*. The exhibition showcased some of the reports they had been working on: the interior of an enclosed convent (December 1958), the first photographs in the series for the book *Toreo de salón* (Lumen, 1963), a report on the esterista community in Barcelona, etc.

As the general secretary of *La Gaceta Ilustrada*, Francisco Noy, pointed out in the exhibition leaflet, the fusion of their characters made it virtually impossible to discern which photograph had taken by which photographer despite the difference in their temperaments. This complementarity in the interpretation of reality was a quality that Casademont sought in all the group exhibitions he organised thereafter.

November 1959 – Ramón Dimas

Ramón Dimas (Pont d'Armentera, 1919 – Santes Creus, 1965) was one of the most notable photojournalists of the time and

was famous for working on major reports such as the wedding of Prince Rainier of Monaco and his portrait of Ava Gardner. He increasingly specialised in sports photography and was one of the most admired photojournalists on the weekly *El Mundo Deportivo* sports magazine. He and the Editorial Destino publishing house formed a company to exploit his photographic archive in publications and magazines. As a day job, Dimas ran a photographic shop on Carrer de Casp in Barcelona, very near Aixelá. His shop was a meeting place for the photographers who took their rolls of film there to be developed. He died young at the age of just 46 and as a result of this and the consequent sudden sale of his studio and shop, his photographic archive—one of the best organised and catalogued of the time—was absorbed by the Destino publishing house and, due to the difficulties surrounding the change in ownership of this company, its whereabouts are today unknown.

With this exhibition, Casademont once again drew attention to the capacity of professional photography to reach out beyond the realm of the daily press and to become an artwork fit for display in a gallery. The photographs, enlarged to mural size and hung in such a way as to form compositions on the walls, showcased the modern vision of the photographer in the way he framed his shots. Dimas made the most of the intervention of chance to endow the image with a sculptural motionless quality that called to mind the classical world that so inspired Casademont, and at the same time called to mind the gaze of photographers in the socialist world through the exaltation of the energy and vitality of the bodies portrayed.

October 1961 – Juan Dolcet

Juan Dolcet (Madrid, 1914-1990) was a photoengraver employed at the Spanish Mint. He was an active amateur photographer in the Royal Photographic Society in Madrid and participated in the social gatherings of the 'moderns'. It was this that brought him into contact with the Afal Group and later with Casademont. After a successful *saloniste* period, he evolved towards modern photography, taking pictures with a strong neorealist feel of the city of Madrid and its slums and suburbs and even travelling as far as the Spanish capital's surrounding towns

and villages. As we can see in the photographs that have survived of the gallery, it was this work that he showed in his exhibition at Aixelá, though at that time he was working as a professional portraitist for the Juana Mordó gallery.

May 1960 – Cualladó/Gómez

In 1960, Francisco Gómez (Pamplona, 1918 – Madrid, 1998) and Gabriel Cualladó (Massanassa, 1925 – Madrid 2003) had shown work in Darro, a gallery in Madrid that specialised in avant-garde painting. That exhibition had been a success on a par with the presentation of *TMM* in Barcelona and had been similar in its installation, with finishes on wood and compositions of various sizes on the wall. The exhibition travelled to Bilbao, where it was shown in the Teka gallery-cum-shop, which specialised in architecture and design, before completing its tour at Sala Aixelá in May.

The importance of this touring exhibition is reflected in the special issue of *Afal* magazine that focused on it. Paco Ontañón drew attention to the visual play between the photographs and the design of the objects on sale in the various shops, a counterpoint that emphasised the use of these photographs for decoration.

November 1962 – Eleven Spanish Photographers in Paris

Andreu Basté, Xavier Miserachs, Oriol Maspons, Joan Cubaró, Eugeni Forcano, Joan Colom, Ramón Masats, Francisco Ontañón, Gabriel Cualladó, Francisco Gómez, and Leonardo Cantero.

The French General Commissioner for Tourism commissioned eleven Spanish photographers to produce a report about the city of Paris. The aim was to show the way Parisians lived as seen by foreigners but avoiding stereotypes. The photographers travelled with accreditation from the French ministry, as a result of which all doors were thrown open for them.

The photographers from Madrid and Barcelona, especially those connected with the Aixelá circle, were selected and co-ordinated by Andreu Basté, a photographer who is not included in this exhibition due to the fact that all trace of his archive has been lost, as is also the case of Joan Cubaró.

Casademont applauded the initiative of the group commission from the outset, as it was along the lines of what he had been advocating in his articles: to enrich the narrative of the report, complementary characters needed to be included in the team. The photographers participating in this commission included the advertising photographers Cubaró and Maspons, the photojournalists Masats, Miserachs, Forcano and Ontañón, and amateurs such as Colom, Cualladó and Gómez, who brought their intellectual interests to the venture.

1960-1962 – El Mussol Group

The El Mussol Group consisted of eight photographers: Josep Maria Alberó, Antoni Boada, Josep Bros and Enric García Pedret, all four of whom were from Terrassa; and Joan Colom, Ignasi Marroyo, Jordi Munt and Jordi Vilaseca, from Barcelona. They were closely connected with Sala Aixelá and Casademont was their mentor and guide. This group showed their photographs in the gallery on more occasions than any others, either in groups of varying composition or individually.

Among these photographers, what mattered most was not so much their shared photographic practice as their friendship. They would meet up at the open-air restaurants in Les Planes, a halfway point between Terrassa and Barcelona. They did not, of course, constitute a movement, and as a group they had no manifesto other than their compulsive practice of photography as a way to escape their routine jobs, since none of them succeeded in taking up photography full time, as others of their generation had done.

June 1961 – The Street By Joan Colom

Joan Colom (Barcelona, 1921-2017) came into contact with the Terrassa *mussoles* and became a member of *Afal* in 1960. It was then that he gave up his *saloniste* approach and began his instantly recognisable series on the Barrio Chino, the red light quarter of Barcelona. Even though his fellow El Mussol members were also taking photographs of the city with a view to mounting a group exhibition at Aixelá, Colom embarked on his initiative alone: “I want my exhibition”, he wrote in *Afal*. Casademont saw in Colom the emancipation of the am-

ateur photographer, whose point of view free of the pressure of the media and the censors enabled him to work on reports with a human angle in greater depth.

Colom's exhibition caused a scandal and his supporters had to present a case to the local censors on his behalf, pointing to the merit of his images and the motives behind them. Stating that his photographs were a condemnation of an unjust situation helped them to morally justify the description of prostitution. But Colom did not seem concerned about it in the least: where others were critical of misfortune he only saw the enjoyment of life.

During the opening at Aixelá, Oriol Maspons introduced Colom to the editor Esther Tusquets, who was with Camilo José Cela, at that time working on his book *Toreo de Salón*. They agreed between them to use these photographs of the red light quarter to illustrate the book *Izas, rabizas y colipoterras*—the most successful publication in the Palabra e Imagen collection—which came out three years later in 1964.

June 1961 – New York by Carles Fontseré

Carles Fontseré (Barcelona, 1916 – Porqueres, 2007) was a painter who was always on the move. He had made his home in New York after going into exile at the end of the Spanish Civil War and then travelling around the world. He had worked as a poster artist from a very early age for the Spanish Republic and had made a name for himself in this field, though he was a multitalented artist in every respect. His photographs, however, were purely documentary in their form and in their intent. During one of his visits to Barcelona, Fontseré spotted an opportunity to show this report on the city of New York that he had been working on in recent years.

Sebastià Gasch was a critic of the artistic avant-garde movements who did not have an overly favourable opinion of Fontseré's figurative works but nevertheless admired his gaze as a photographer, for which he did deserve to be termed an 'artist'. The exhibition featured over a hundred magnificently printed small-format photographs (18 x 24) in which, paradoxically, Fontseré the artist strove only to show what was visible without any aspiration to interpret it subjectively.



Ricard Terré, portrait of Josep Maria Casademont in Sala Aixelá, 1959. Arxiu Ricard Terré



Ramón Masats, *Chamaco*, Sanfermines festival, 1957



Julio Ubiña, *Interior of an Enclosed Convent*, 1959



Maspons+Ubiña, Aixelá shop window display with photographs by Francesc Català-Roca, 1958. Arxiu del Col·legi d'Arquitectes de Catalunya



Otto Steinert, *A Dancer's Mask*, 1952
Estate Otto Steinert, Museum Folkwang, Essen

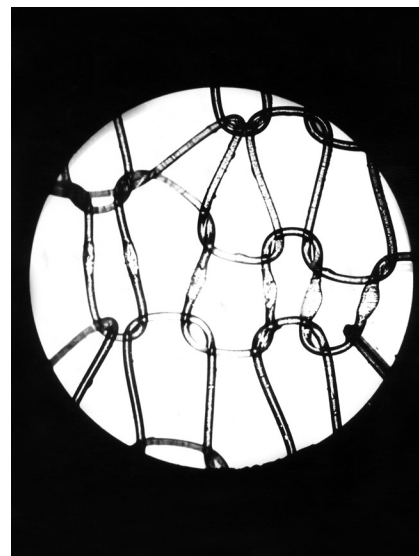


11 fotógrafos españoles a PARIS

Poster for the *Eleven Spanish Photographers in Paris* exhibition at Aixelá, 1962.
Photograph: Oriol Maspons



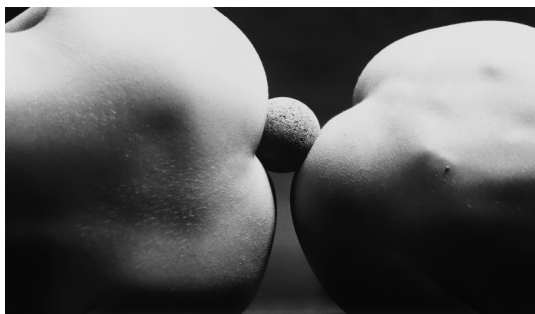
Ignasi Marroyo, *Plaça de Sant Jaume*,
Barcelona, 1959-1960.
ANC / Fons Ignasi Marroyo



Jorge A. Viñals, *Untitled*, 1969.
Arxiu Municipal de Terrassa



Pedro Avellaneda, *Witches*, 1974



César Malet, *Res*, 1970. Arxiu Fotogràfic de Barcelona



Enric Sió, original *Sorang*, 1969

*1959-1965 – La llanterna màgica projections
with Fotoscops by Gomis and Prats*

“Llanterna Màgica” (Magic Lantern) was the title given to the projections of photographs by Joaquim Gomis (Barcelona, 1902-1991), selected and arranged in order by the artistic director Joan Prats (Barcelona, 1891-1970). They were both founders of the ADLAN (Friends of the New Art) group of intellectuals, which changed name and continued its activities as Club 49 from 1949 onwards. The projections were organised as part of this society’s activities in various venues around Barcelona, such as the French Institute and the Italian Institute of Culture. Sala Aixelá was also one of those places that the audience for culture would go to in the hope of expanding their iconic referents thanks to the varied selection of themes presented by Gomis and Prats (G/P). The photographs were not always the work of Gomis, as the projections might include reproductions of all kinds of postcards, books on art, anthropological and natural curiosities, etc.

At the same time, the two men authored the “Fotoscops” collection of books (published by the Barcelona-based Editorial RM), imbued with the same wish to provide the public of the day with a repertoire of inspiring images drawn from popular culture and modern art. It was normally Joan Prats who came up with the script and the idea, though the key to understanding the intention behind the image lay in Joaquim Gomis’s gaze.

We have been able to catalogue seven G/P screenings at Sala Aixelá from its opening in March 1959 to 1965, the year this activity came to an end. Of the various themes covered at that time, we have selected *Món i Creació Miró* (Miró’s World and Creation), which opened in July 1961, alongside the *Atmosfera Miró* (Miró Atmosphere, 1959) *Fotoscop*. Prats, a close friend of the painter’s, presented his work together with his world of strange objects, captured by Gomis’s camera, from the flat in Barcelona to the family farmhouse in Mont-roig and the landscapes in the Camp de Tarragona. This screening provides a good example for understanding G/P’s iconographic experiment in the presentation of the materials used by the creator to generate new images: a repertoire understood to be a photoscope.

December 1961 – Otto Steinert

Abstraction was a fashionable trend in art in the late 1950s. Through Informalism, art was moving away from the early Avant-garde movements that seemed to have reached the end of their ability to alter the social order. The hyperfiguration of the photomontage had been a more effective way to communicate meaning in the period prior to the Spanish Civil War, which is why the photographers who devoted themselves to product advertising later found it easy to adapt to political propaganda. But in the 1950s, reflection on the social order had become individualistic, all the more so in Spain, where freedom of expression did not exist. For the plastic arts, language had to be encrypted in order to convey ideas.

In contrast, photography played a simpler role in the pure reproduction of what was observed. As Casademont saw it, the role of the photographer was to assert himself through functionality, objectivity and description. Pointing the camera and using it to point something out was implicitly the expression of an opinion and there was no need to go as far as expressionist distortion or delving. In the plastic arts, however, the tendency was to give preference not to the object but to the vital attitude of the subject who observes by means of experimentation with new materials and new ways of painting.

Photographers also followed the path of abstraction, conscious of their connection with the fashionable trends in art. The work of some of those who pursued this trend was shown in Aixelá, among them Jean Dieuzaide, Josep Maria Albero and Ton Sirera, whose photographs were never entirely detached from the presence of the real referent as the well-spring of every image. All of these photographers were connected and influenced by the ideas of Otto Steinert, the curator who selected for the *Subjektive Fotografie* exhibitions all kinds of photographs that came to be interpreted as the expression of subjectivity. All, that is, except Jorge Viñals, a technician at LEITAT, whose exhibition was a ground-breaking proposal of Casademont and Albero.

The exhibition of Otto Steinert's work (Sarrebruck, 1915 – Essen, 1978) reached Spain ten years after it might have been regarded as a novel event within the European photo-

graphic scene. Its Afal promoters were aware of this, but the exhibition was necessary in order to sensitise the Spanish public to abstract photography. To this end, they set about organising a touring exhibition that would travel to every corner of Spain. In some respect, it was about ending the conflict between two opposing positions: those who regarded formalism as the prime motivation of the photo; and those who considered that its social content alone was important.

Afal had endeavoured to ensure that Steinert's exhibition would first be seen at Aixelá and thus outside the ambit of photographic associations, but the gallery's terms were no better than those of the AFC, which purchased 200 copies of the catalogue, a condition that Steinert insisted on for his exhibition in Spain.

The catalogue included a Spanish translation of Steinert's introductory text *Subjektive Fotografie 2*, in which he advocated the active presence of the photographer in the image, drew a distinction between the concepts of the photograph and the image, and established the boundary between these concepts in the action of the person making them, not the 'thinking being' who has mastered the technique but the 'sensitive being' who conveys emotion. According to Steinert, the time had come for photography to claim authorship in order to give it style and improve its quality and so distinguish the output of spontaneous photographers from that of 'conscious' photographers.

The 45 photographs in Steinert's exhibition were, so the catalogue states, a selection from his work during the 1950s and 60s. Portraits of a standard execution and others with more subjective traits, according to his own theory of photographic production. Landscapes with a strong visual and compositional treatment, still lifes with a Surrealist construction, abstractions, solarisations, combination prints, etc.

The catalogue published by Afal already makes mention of the criticism of subjective photography that later became widespread: the tendency to falsify reality for the benefit of a supposed personalism. Most styles are mere outward manifestations to draw the public's attention to the photographer. Thus, when we analyse Steinert's influence on his contemporaries, we can see that 'style' is nothing other than imitation.

February 1960 – Ton Sirera

Ton Sirera (Barcelona, 1911 – Lleida, 1975) was a member of the ADLAN (Friends of the New Art) group of intellectuals and was a friend of Sebastià Gasch. Gasch had seen for himself Sirera's ability to transpose reality into abstraction and convinced him to show his work at Sala Aixelà and to publish a booklet featuring a series of original photographs accompanied by a written piece of criticism.

With Sirera's exhibition, Casademont was keen to demonstrate the shift in people's perception of technical and scientific photography by virtue of simply showing it, enlarged to mural size, in an exhibition room. Sirera's photographs were pure and simple reproductions of nature and had the ability to kindle emotions and ideas, just as if they were artworks. Presented in the right context to a sensitive audience, the photograph was open to wider interpretation and was no longer a mere document.

No-one was more surprised at the result than Sirera, whose photographs had an origin and interest more closely connected with a botanical catalogue or an aerial photographic record of the land than the Informalist trends that people unquestionably began to associate his work with after this exhibition.

September 1962 – Jean Dieuzaide

Jean Dieuzaide (Toulouse 1921–2003) had won some of the most prestigious awards in France: the Niépce Prize in 1955 and the Nadar Prize in 1961. He was a versatile professional photographer who had mastered every genre. He was very knowledgeable about Spain, having travelled around the country thanks to commissions from art publishers. As a consequence of his trips, he built up an extensive archive documenting the customs and manners of Mediterranean countries from Turkey to Portugal. Casademont invited him to show his work in Sala Aixelà, expecting an exhibition related to human subjects, but to his surprise Yan—the name Dieuzaide used to sign his works—presented a collection of photographs in keeping with modern, abstract trends along the lines of those seen in European exhibitions of subjective photography, thereby revealing that his interests went further than documentary

photography. Some of the images are experiments conducted in the dark room, solarisations, double exposures, etc. Others are landscapes or human figures pushed to the point where they become difficult to identify. The photographs presented in this exhibition are a selection of the surviving prints made by the photographer at the time for his show at Aixelà in 1962.

May 1969 – Jorge A. Viñals

Presented by the LEITAT (a laboratory based in Terrassa that at that time specialised in testing and research for the textile industry) in the exhibition rooms of the Casino del Comerç in Terrassa and the Sala Aixelà, this exhibition featured a hundred black and white and 22 colour photographs used to provide visual evidence in order to determine the possible causes of manufacturing flaws submitted by various sectors in the textile industry. The exhibition at Aixelà and *Imagen y Sonido* magazine—which included an extensive portfolio entitled with his name—brought the microscopist Jorge A. Viñals to public notice, though we have found no further information about him in the archives.

It was Gabriel Querol and Josep Maria Albero, both from Terrassa, who came up with the idea of hanging these technical photographs in Aixelà as if they were a creative project. Casademont enthusiastically embraced the idea of presenting as art an archetypally useful form of photography whose sole purpose was to diagnose manufacturing defects. The images are as intriguing, rhythmical and modern as the creative works that served no useful function being produced by a number of aesthetes at that time. In the words of Gabriel Querol, it is an example of the essential photography which, emerging from modern-day society, once again projects itself back onto it in order to improve it.

December 1968 – Eduard Alcoy

Eduard Alcoy (Barcelona, 1930 – Mataró, 1987) worked as an illustrator for the Zen studio and was responsible for designing the Aixelà window displays during the shop's early days, when, according to comments recorded, greater attention was paid to these details. In the advertising leaflets, it is possible to see his sensitivity when it came to suggesting scenes and subjects. But in addition to this bread-and-butter job, Alcoy was also

putting on exhibitions as a plastic artist associated with the circle of Informalists. There is an interesting visual connection between some of his pieces and the photographs produced by his contemporaries, including those creating abstract work and others who were clearly photojournalists, as the compositional and textural qualities of their works resemble each other. Casademont offered him the use of the Aixelá exhibition room to show an experiment: the creation of a series of unique works made by adding graphic elements and areas of solid colour to the production run of a screen print.

May 1959 – La Ventana Group from Mexico

Victor Manuel Noriega, Ruth Lechuga, Efraín Tinajero, Juan P. Deutsch, Octavio Obregón, Ricardo Calderón, Guillermo Smurzs and Mario Naver.

In early 1958, Afal contacted groups like it in Latin America in order to establish exchanges. It received a response from Esteban de Varona, spokesperson for the La Ventana group in Mexico, whose manifesto surprised the Spaniards due to the visual consistency of the photographs published in the catalogue. These are images that respond to “felt needs” according to Carlos Pérez Siquier, the director of Afal, who arrived at an agreement with La Ventana to organise a tour of an exhibition in Spain, the first stop of which was Sala Aixelá in May 1959. After paying the transport costs and agreeing to the dates, Casademont was disappointed with the content of the show, which he thought did not fit with the type of useful and living photography for society that he wanted to promote in the gallery. His view was that the La Ventana photos were nothing more than “modern *salonisme*”.

The exhibition embarked on a brief tour. The partnership between Afal and La Ventana came to an end following the harsh criticism of the show published in the magazine. As was customary practice, the photographs were not returned to their photographers and remained in the Afal archive till they were donated to the Reina Sofía in 2017. The pieces selected for this exhibition are those that were most admired by Spaniards at that time and, all these years later, unaffected by *saloniste* prejudice and unconcerned about the usefulness of the photographs, we can appreciate the quality and sensibility of their photographers.

November 1962 – Mario Giacomelli

Mario Giacomelli (Senigallia, Italy, 1925-2000) came into contact with Spanish photographers through his relationship with La Bussola, a group that engaged in exchanges with the Afal group. The connections between young Spanish and Italian photography were strong at that time. Afal and its members were no longer interested in French photography, which they regarded as mired in mere incidentals, or German photography, which they saw as too cold and formal. In Italian photography, Spanish photographers continued to perceive the heartbeat of neorealism and saw it as an escape from the conventions of salons and ‘good taste’. Josep Maria Albero was drawn to Giacomelli’s style and got in touch with him to offer him the gallery at the Casino del Comerç in Terrassa. Due to the exchanges between this body and Aixelá, the exhibition was shown in Barcelona two months afterwards.

In Casademont’s eyes, non-professional photographers were always suspect, as he regarded them as tainted with *salonisme*, regardless of whether they were modern or not. However, his prejudices did not apply in the case of Giacomelli, a typesetter whose connection with photography was through shows and publications. The power of Giacomelli’s work, closely linked to the real circumstances of the lives of the people in his locality, was such that Casademont’s misgivings were allayed, despite the photographer’s elaborate retouchings or the literary bent of his titles. In the presentation texts of the portfolios given over to his work in *Imagen y Sonido*, Casademont ponders on fashion as a phenomenon that popularised Giacomelli’s style. Certainly, we can see his influence on the El Mússol group and also on some of the most important competitions of the day, such as the Egara and Negtor awards, in which the use of high contrast and expressionism are indications of the sway he held.

June 1968 – Toni Vidal

Antoni Vidal (Es Castell, Menorca, 1934) moved to Barcelona in 1968 to work as a professional photographer. That same year, Casademont offered him the gallery where he showed a report on the Gas Maó plant. For Casademont, Vidal represented the honest photographer who respected his craft, which he placed

at the service of his theme, even drawing out 'artistic' nuances in order to enhance it.

In his hundred Gas Maó photographs shown at Aixelá, Vidal captures gruelling methods of work and even stops to analyse the thoughts of labourers in posed portrait shots. The series went beyond the photographic act, since to culminate the experience the photographer put on a musical performance inside the factory. In his photographs of this event, he draws attention to the contrast between the inferno of the boilers and the transparency and lightness of the music being played by a group of young people while the hustle and bustle of the plant goes on around them. Casademont was unable to understand Vidal's work and in his review published in the *Imagen y Sonido* portfolio, he notes the lack of precisely that which he condemned in other photographers: the manipulation of reality with 'artistic' intent. The "deliciously rotten" touch that, according to him, is lacking in the scenes in which female figures are present can probably be interpreted as an absence of eroticism. However, it is evident that Vidal remains a photojournalist in these photographs that simply capture everything that is happening just as it is happening.

Two years later, he also presented the exhibition *Contemporary Catalan Artists* at Aixelá, featuring portraits of 19 leading artists of the day, among them Salvador Dalí, Joan Miró, Antoni Tàpies, Joan Ponç, Josep Guinovart, Joan Hernández Pijuan and Ricard Bofill, a body of work that placed him among the most interesting portrait artists of the time.

October 1974 – Pedro Avellaned And Rafael Navarro

With this exhibition of work by Pedro Avellaned (Zaragoza, 1936) and Rafael Navarro (Zaragoza, 1940), Casademont returned to group exhibitions in order to present side by side the work of two artists, by now in their thirties but still unseen in public. Casademont's curiosity regarding the new trends and his efforts to arrive at an understanding of the evolution of auteur photography prompted him to give an opportunity to all those of proven quality who were exploring new paths.

The *Witches* catalogue was presented by its authors without an introductory piece written by Casademont, which seems to indicate he was stepping aside, deciding to forego his

questioning and withholding his critical opinion of this type of photographic essay. And indeed, in his article, Avellaned clearly sets out his credo concerning photography, which took another direction to Casademont's ideas: "I firmly believe that photography should not limit itself to reproducing but should create." Similarly, Rafael Navarro asserted: "I avoid capturing simple real images." This concurrence of aims is evident in the bright lights, in the blurriness, in the very idea of the presence of witches or spirits intended to lead the public into an oneiric world totally removed from reality.

February 1973 – Manel Esclusa

Manel Esclusa (Vic, 1952) was just 21 when he mounted his exhibition at Sala Aixelá. By that time, he was already a skilled dark room technician thanks to his hours employed in the family business. Artisanal technique underpinned his creations, in which he incorporated fantastical elements. All his pieces for the exhibition were large format, some of them the size of murals. Casademont was surprised that the technical quality of the works and the significant experimental content did not detract from their human aspect. He hypothesised that the reason for this was that Esclusa's creative process was a response to a 'biological-emotional' mechanics. Quoting Thomas Aquinas, he concluded that beauty is to be found in what it gives us pleasure to see, and he pointed towards a fetishist interpretation of Esclusa's work, suggesting that the artist was reproducing in his work something that cannot in reality be attained, and that it is in this possible intention to search for beauty that pleasure lies. The value of his photographs lies, therefore, in his aesthetic honesty anchored to his humanity, his instincts, his desires. This mutual understanding between the public and the photographer's privacy is the heart of Esclusa's work.

Casademont promoted the Art Castellblanc Endowment for photography—rather than just for the plastic arts, as it had been till then—with the intention of supporting the new generation of up-and-coming photographers, among them Esclusa who, in the first edition in 1974, won a prize together with Koldo Chamorro. Manel Esclusa believed that Aixelá would be the launch pad for his career.

March 1974 – Tony Keeler

Tony Keeler (Glen Ridge, USA, 1933 – Sitges, 2016) arrived in Catalonia in 1959 and opened a portrait photography studio in Sitges, where he made his permanent home. The themes he worked on were influenced by his career as a portraitist, his constant consideration of the face of the human beings he met while on his travels. His first show in Aixelá was precisely an exhibition of portraits, held in 1964. During the early 1970s, he had three more shows, all of them featuring series centred on portraiture: *Nepal* (1973), *Andalusia* (1974) and *Ibiza* (1975), the last of which was about the hippies who lived on the island, whom he portrayed in keeping with nature.

The fact that Casademont gave Keeler so many exhibitions is evidence that he was struck by the photographer's work. Contrary to his usual practice, Casademont praised his printing technique: "prints measuring 50 x 60 centimetres, and in them the grain of the emulsion is so visible as to create the impression of a veritable weave". Keeler's technique, as well as his theatricality and the use of chiaroscuro in his portraits, might be a reflection of the influence of his teacher, the American pictorialist William Mortensen. What mattered to Casademont, however, lay in the function of this style placed at the service of a profession that would otherwise be workaday: the brave way he treated light and framing, even in the portraits of the children that took him to the studio.

May 1972 – Toni Catany

Toni Catany (Llucmajor, 1942 – Barcelona, 2013) arrived in Barcelona by boat when he was 21 years old with the aim of devoting himself to photography. His memory of that day is that he was surprised while walking up the Rambla at dusk to come across the team shooting *Los Tarantos*, who were using backlighting to illuminate Antonio Gades, who was dancing under the hoses. Catany told many such anecdotes from that time when he fed on images in order to gradually form his character. That is why he always described himself as self-taught. The series he produced during those Aixelá years demonstrate his research and his curiosity. Casademont defined him as a photographer loyal to documenting and succinctly

detailed the content of Catany's output in his history of photography: "countless industrial, record and fashion works and travel reporting". That versatility in the commercial use of photography is one of the traits Casademont most admired about this young Mallorcan, whose work he published in four portfolios of wide-ranging content in *Imagen y Sonido*.

Catany entitled his exhibition at Aixelá *He who Sings Drives away His Cares* and brought together in it his portraits of singers from record companies, as well as other photographs taken at shows. Casademont singled out the photographic value of the exhibition, but also mentioned "its story", as he grasped its appeal for the public, who would have the opportunity to see a large number of popular singers, from Antonio Machín to Lluís Llach. This exhibition bridged the divide between audiences for music and audiences for photography at Aixelá. Copies of some of the photographs hanging on the walls appeared in the shop window, where clients were able to recognise Catany's work on record covers.

May 1970 – César Malet

Cesar Malet (Barcelona, 1940–2015) was one of the most important professional photographers at the time he showed an experimental series of nudes—*Res*—in collaboration with the painter and photographer Josep Maria Berenguer (Barcelona, 1944–2012). Malet's photographs had also been used to illustrate the book *Informe personal sobre el alba*, with poems by Carlos Barral (Lumen, 1970), in which the photographer employs an absolutely free and open method for interpreting the poems, taking the female nude as his starting point. Even though the photographs were not descriptive, the police ordered the removal of one in which it was possible to make out a woman's pubis, threatening that the exhibition would be closed if not. The large-format works shown at Aixelá then travelled to the Juana Mordó gallery in Madrid, making it the first photography exhibition in this prestigious gallery specialising in avant-garde art.

Malet had settled in Barcelona in 1960 in order to open a professional studio shortly after his return from Paris, where he had lived for two years. In 1973, frustrated at the lack of

creative freedom, he decided to go professionally into exile in the United States, from whence he did not return until the death of the dictator. Malet thus abandoned the Barcelona ambience that he had enjoyed in the 1960s as one of the most famous figures of the *Gauche Divine*, as a photojournalist reporting on the nightlife at Bocaccio and as a contributor of photographs to the magazine. Like his other intellectual peers and fellow artists and architects, he was a creative individual who made no distinction between professional commissioned work and his own research, since in his view his art and his profession demanded the same level of freedom and quality. Malet turned his “caustic and indomitable gaze”, as his friend Juan Marsé put it, towards advertising, fashion, industrial photography, portraiture, illustration and photojournalism. This versatility, which Casademont described as “defying classification”, was particularly evident in the presentation of his second exhibition at Aixelá in 1970.

December 1971 – Colita

Colita (Barcelona, 1940) was the first woman to have a solo show at Sala Aixelá. Casademont admired her liberated way of living and thinking, free of social prejudices. There was no other woman quite like her at the time. The most unusual thing about her was her decision to become a photographer, a male profession, as we have seen in the timeline of Sala Aixelá alone.

A year after the Burgos trial and the end of a period in which the country was in a state of emergency, the chimera of a political opening-up fizzled away. That air of docile madness that Vázquez Montalbán talks about in the text for the leaflet that accompanied the Colita exhibition had vanished. “I don’t know how to describe this exhibition. But it seems to me that its own description lies in its tone and meaning: it’s a swansong. The ‘gauche divine’, which almost never existed or existed for just a very brief while, was photographed in the flesh.” The extraordinary beings shown in the photographs are merely normal citizens who cannot shake off the burden of the dictatorship.

Every time she was asked about it, Colita would mechanically repeat the story of this exhibition, which she entitled the *Gauche qui rit*: “The Gauche Divine is a Madrid invention, and

Joan de Segarra—who had the idea of the name—and I decided to organise an exhibition of portraits as if it were a catalogue of people belonging to the group. Most were staged portraits, made with ‘humour to have a good time’.” The installation of the exhibition, financed by Bocaccio, was spectacular and featured over 60 portraits, some in mural format. But it remained open for just two days, 3 and 4 December 1971, as the police closed it down.

May 1972 – Enric Sió

In the late 1960s, comics joined the new artistic disciplines with the same status and level of interest, distancing themselves from the plastic arts due to their ephemeral nature. The Barcelona intellectuals who met up at the Bocaccio nightclub were writing articles and books that followed in the wake of Umberto Eco’s essay “Pocalittici e integrati: Comunicazioni di massa e teoria della cultura di massa” (1964), a Spanish translation of which was published by Lumen in 1968, the same year that Terenci Moix’s book *Los cómics, arte para el consumo y formas pop* (Llibres de Sinera) was published. The young Enric Sió ((Badalona, 1942 – Barcelona, 1998), who by that time had already won numerous international awards, was also part of the same circle, and from his conversations with Román Gubern emerged the book *El lenguaje del cómic*, presented at the opening of Sió’s exhibition at Sala Aixelá, with a talk given by Alexandre Cirici.

Román Gubern pointed to the similarities in the way that both comics and film dealt with narrative time and space. In the light of these ideas, Casademont undoubtedly found an interesting analogy between the popular nature of the language of comics and of photography, the aim of which had always been understood within a communicational perspective and, if it were perhaps art, it would be so for the masses, and on this Eric Sió agreed: the value of the language of comics did not lie in the skill of the visual expression but in its particular grammar, which made it the ideal medium for telling contemporary stories. Eric Sió, like Miserachs before him, described himself as a narrator who used images. The interesting thing about the new language of comics is, precisely its popular connection. “We no longer need an educational strategy”, said Sió, “as young people are equipped to interpret comics in all their complexity.”

Sió was the creator of a style that encompassed the traits of Pop, the introspective methods of psychedelia, the irony of camp and the iconography of hippy culture. His drawings were clearly founded on photography, which he applied using an episcopo projector to outline forms and volumes, which he picked out using opaque shadows. His personal discovery was to leave that space of the shadow empty in order to produce an effect similar to solarisation.

April 1972 – Morgan

Very little is known about the photographer José Camarero, better known by his nickname Morgan, who died tragically at a very early age in the autumn of 1974. Morgan was a professional photographer who had no hesitation in describing his personal work, which he kept separate, as 'artistic'. Casademont regarded him as one of the most important young photographers and had high hopes of his creative work due to its authenticity, so much so that in 1973 he gave Morgan the opportunity to show his work at Sonimag 11 and pushed for him to be awarded the Egara Prize that year. He had his first exhibition at Aixelá in October 1972 and went on to publish three portfolios in *Imagen y Sonido* magazine, the last of which came out after his death with the announcement "MORGAN. An excellent artist has died".

The *Stories of a Fiction* exhibition showed the most private and subjective images that the photographer had kept during those years when he was taking documentary pictures. He was no longer interested in leaving testimony of an exterior world but in showing his own world, "as a genuine (sometimes unconscious) need to see his soul reflected in the mirror of the photographs themselves", as Casademont put it in his introductory text. Casademont distinguished between Morgan's poetic photography and his informative photography. Morgan himself noted: "The signs are the same, but a press report, for example, is not the same as a poem. The first is purely descriptive; in the second, the author includes a series of feelings." And Casademont asked him: "Do you reject the possibility that a simple news report can include feelings?" To which the photographer replied: "In this case, I think that the feelings will be in the

news itself." Seen in this light, his collection of monks living cut off from the world on Mount Athos, presented alongside his poems, must be interpreted as being clearly subjective in intention. The play of colour, the LTI image processing, the repetition, etc., give his work a Pop art look.

Casademont raised the issue of Morgan's legacy in his obituary notice, as the photographer had left a considerable number of unprinted negatives. How could the survival of an artist whose work was yet to be discovered be designed, he wondered, and he predicted that more portfolios would appear in the magazine to bring all this unseen material into the light. However, nothing more has been heard of Morgan, and the whereabouts of his archive are unknown.

February 1974 – Joan Fontcuberta

In 1974, Aixelá had been running for 15 years continuously, making it the oldest specialist gallery in Spain. Casademont praised its history as a "promoter of young talent": "The interests that we have always aspired to reflect are a thing of notably regular chronological rigidity." Young photographers' work, he remarked, is noted for its attention to justifying the medium they have chosen as a means to express themselves. Veterans no longer concern themselves with self-analysis, a trait that pertains to those who are still young. At that time, Casademont, by then aged 42, noted a new direction among young photographers: introspection. They were moving away from reporting and towards the private diary.

Joan Fontcuberta (Barcelona, 1955) was one of these young photographers whose work served as a mirror for his interests, and he constantly questioned its connection with the medium he had chosen to express himself. He was invited at the age of 18 by Casademont to present himself in the magazine: "I am the person who knows myself least [...] What matters is the work." And, in accordance with Casademont's invitation, he presented himself in the photographs as if in a self-portrait.

His training as a student of information sciences equipped him with a full set of analytical tools. His connection with advertising, which he tried out professionally within the family

business, gave him forewarning of the subservience of photography in the field of commercial persuasion. His work is a parody of the advertising technique, with which he succeeds in having an impact in a truculent manner in a number of pictures that could fall within the trend for fantasy in fashion at the time. He used photomontage, combining a backdrop that was in itself already disturbing overlaid with bits of other images. Thus he produced a Dadaist effect in keeping with the extolling of the imagination over the oppressive reality, which reverberated in the echoes of the proclamations of the May 1968 events in France. Over and above this, however, these photographs invite us to flee along the paths of the underground and counterculture, just as comics, progressive music and experimental film were attempting to do. The orthodoxy of direct photography logically needed to disappear from this approach, in which his explorations consisted of pushing the medium as far as it would go. Casademont concluded that the degree to which the work distances itself from 'photographic purity' is a good indicator for assessing it as an art object. In other words, he did not consider it 'photographic'.

February 1975 – Anna Turbau

Anna Turbau (Barcelona, 1949) completed her studies at the school of design and engineering of Barcelona Elisava and worked as a designer, still as an apprentice, in Tomàs Vellvé's studio. However, her real calling was photography, which she practised on her own using her father's equipment and dark room. The Pericot brothers encouraged her in this and presented her work at Aixelá. Casademont immediately identified that she had an uncommon capacity for photojournalism, which he regarded as a commitment to society. In his comments, he admires Turbau's power, her ability to build a rapport with her subjects and so achieve intimate portraits, and above all her tremendous professionalism. The presence of women like her in the history of photography was a rare thing, he remarked.

Anna Turbau's first 'serious' report was a series on the Barcelona Jazz Festival, held at the Palau de la Música Catalana in November 1974. As it was still essential to have a press card, Alfredo Papo, her mentor at Hot Club, gave her one so that

she could move around among the stalls, though she was not allowed to go on stage or wander about the dressing rooms. Even though the intimate effect achieved in her close-ups suggests otherwise, she took her photos during the performances, the lighting for which, arranged for television recordings, helped her to endow her subjects with emotion and a sense of being detached from their surroundings.

Anna Turbau had not received a commission for this project; rather, she undertook it because she liked jazz and admired its musicians. "In a way", she said in an interview at the time, "I have gone about things like jazz musicians do, that is to say, with complete freedom of choice at that magical moment of taking the shot, but without leaving anything to chance or coincidence. This improvisation is founded on concentration, a deliberately imposed self-discipline, a determination to achieve clarity and functionality." And it is precisely this last quality, functionality, that she revealed as the true meaning of photography.

October 1975 – The Blassi Brothers

The brothers Jaume and Jordi Blassi (Barcelona, 1948), the first a photographer and the second a graphic artist, complemented each other in their work and made no distinction with regard to who was responsible for it. They went at their own initiative to Aixelá, overcoming their nervousness at entering such a luxury shop. In the basement, Casademont went over their photographs carefully and was extremely surprised at their high standard. He offered them the gallery for an exhibition in December 1971 and described them in *Imagen y Sonido* thus: "Blassi, when the art of photography bears very little relation to 'artistic photography'." Years later, in the autumn of 1975, Casademont gave them the opportunity to show their work at the Sonimag 13 fair. The challenge they faced was to make the most of a place that people passed through without using the walls. To resolve this, Jordi Blassi designed a framework on which the photographs could be mounted.

Unlike other photographers who strove to achieve a sense of consistency in their series—be they abstract, social reports or invented realities—the Blassis presented very different aspects of distant realities: portraits, landscapes, almost abstract

still lifes, etc. This mix founded on objectivity gave rise paradoxically to a surreal effect. The documentary content—the ‘evocative’—is a very important element in the picture but it does not go so far as to ‘inform’.

This review of the history of Aixelá now brings us to the lead-up to the transition to democracy in Spain. At this juncture, the photographs taken by the Blassi brothers serve as a reminder of the various proposals that followed one after another over the course of Aixelá’s existence, providing a compendium of the past and a prefiguration of the future, our present. Their oeuvre demonstrates the versatility of photography—be it as personal research or to commission, be it in the form of an untouched or a manipulated photograph, be it taken as a documentary record or as a poetic image—and its ability to constitute an unrepeatable though multiple work.

As a form of farewell from the many movements, experimentations, aesthetic enquiries, dogmas and manifestos with which the language of photography advanced at the Sala Aixelá, this work and the personality that emanates from it help us to visualise all these concerns: formal research, anthropological exploration, fantasy, photojournalism, the outburst of Surrealism, the protest message, portraiture, street life, the conceptual essay, poetry, humour and more, all of which are contained within the ‘objective art’.

Authors exposed at Sala Aixelá (1959–1975)

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|--|---|
| Albero, Josep M. (1960, 1962, 1963, 1964) | Iriarte, Juan (1975) |
| Alcoy, Eduard (1968) | Jener Vilà, Enric (1973) |
| Algué, Lluís (1972) | Keeler, Tony (1964, 1973, 1974, 1975) |
| Avellaned, Pedro (1974) | Lechuga, Ruth (1959) |
| Basté, Andreu (1962) | Malet, César (1967, 1970) |
| Berenguer, Josep M. (1967, 1970) | Marroyo, Ignasi (1960, 1962) |
| Blassi, Jaume and Jordi (1971, 1975) | Masats, Ramón (1959, 1962) |
| Boada, Antoni (1960, 1962) | Masdeu Rovira, Pere (1960) |
| Borràs Abelló, Jaime (1972) | Maspous, Oriol (1959, 1962, 1963) |
| Bosch, Emilio (1968) | Miserachs, Xavier (1959, 1962) |
| Boutin, Enrique (1962) | Morgan (1972, 1974) |
| Bros, Josep (1960, 1964) | Munt, Jordi (1960, 1962) |
| Calderón, Ricardo (1959) | Muñoz de Pablos, Ángel (1962) |
| Cantero, Leonardo (1962) | Navarro, Rafael (1974) |
| Capdevila Font, Juan (1967) | Naver, Mario (1959) |
| Capdevila Nogués, Joan (1959) | Noriega, Victor Manuel (1959) |
| Casanelles, Enric (1960) | Obregón, Octavio (1959) |
| Català-Roca, Francesc (1958) | Olivella, Eduard (1975) |
| Catany, Toni (1972) | Ontañón, Paco (1962) |
| Closa Miralles, Josep (1961) | Rey Cascales, Manuel (1973) |
| Colita (1971) | Sanchiz (1963) |
| Colom, Joan (1960, 1961, 1962) | Sarda, Luís (1963) |
| Cualladó, Gabriel (1960, 1962) | Sarrá, Jordi (1974) |
| Cubaró, Juan (1962) | Serra, Jaume (1972) |
| Deutsch, Juan P. (1959) | Sió, Enric (1972) |
| Dieuzaide, Jean (1962) | Sirera, Ton (1960) |
| Dimas, Ramón (1959) | Smurzs, Guillermo (1959) |
| Dolcet, Juan (1961) | Solé, Guillaume (1969) |
| Dugó (1975) | Steinert, Otto (1961) |
| Esclusa, Manel (1973) | Terré, Ricard (1959) |
| Fontcuberta, Joan (1974) | Tinajero, Efrain (1959) |
| Fontseré, Carles (1961) | Turbau, Anna (1975) |
| Forcano, Eugeni (1962) | Ubiña, Julio (1959, 1963) |
| García Pedret, Enric (1960, 1962) | Valls, José (1959) |
| Giacomelli, Mario (1962) | Vidal, Toni (1968, 1970) |
| Gómez, Paco (1960, 1962) | Vilaseca, Jordi (1960, 1962, 1963, 1969) |
| Gomis, Joaquim (1959, 1965) | Viñals, Jorge A. (1969) |
| Grup dels 5 (1973) | |
| Homs (1963) | (in black, those included in this exhibition) |

Curator: Laura Terré

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