



# Martín Chirino

AND THE LONG VOYAGE OF THE CAAM

*The will to found a modern art museum in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria was a project that had developed over the years. When did Martín Chirino start to feel the need for such an institution?.*

MC: Well, really I think it was just a sheer coincidence. I hadn't planned a museum for Las Palmas or anything of the sort. What happened was that the idea of a museum of modern art had been taking shape in the city of Las Palmas. It was a vision commonly shared by the Cabildo Insular, (the Local Government of the island), by Hilda Mauricio, and by Francisco Ramos Camejo. The building that is now the CAAM had been unsuccessfully overhauled to create a provisional structure that was not adequate. Suddenly they called me and invited me to participate in the project as adviser. At that time I was president of the Círculo de Bellas Artes in Madrid. I accepted, and following Karl Popper, the "evidence of facts" made me react and the whole plan moved forward. I used

my knowledge and experience and the final result was the CAAM. So appeared a museum of modern art that also catalogues and codifies. It was more of a momentary and sudden thing than anything else.

*A. We can perhaps interpret the activity of the CAAM as the continuity of the avant-garde that first emerged in the islands with the famous Second Surrealist International exhibition in 1935, that was buttressed by the work of the magazine "Gaceta de Arte". How does Martín Chirino regard this phenomenon of continuation and how does he consider the personality of Eduardo Westerdahl?.*

MC: As I have just said a small platform was articulated. At first all I did was to make suggestions and give advice on the building. As the inauguration drew near the issue of the direction of the museum obviously arose, and it was a prospect that at the time didn't at all appeal to me. I was prepared to help but really not

to go any further as my work as an artist took up most of my time. I didn't imagine myself as director of the CAAM then, the last thing I fancied was leaving Madrid. However the pressures began and the President of the Cabildo, Carmelo Artiles, started paving the way and making things easy. It was then that I finally accepted the post of director. I begin to think hard about what the project entails, what we have to do. Completely evident at that time was the fact that "Gaceta de Arte" was the first stone on which to build. I was aware that another magazine had also great transcendence, "La Rosa de los Vientos", but the renewal of modernity in the Canary Islands began with Gaceta and the famous Surrealist exhibition of 1935. This had left us with an extremely important cultural and historical substratum that we had to recover. I thought about the whole process of how modernity had come to the Islands. On the other hand, I was also conscious that modern museums require scientific and rational organization, otherwise they risk

becoming art galleries. In order to be museums they most uphold the ideal of being centres of investigation. This is how the process went. Gaceta had great influence and thus the presence of Maud and Eduardo Westerdahl was of key importance to this story. Eduardo had already died, and my dialogue was mainly with Maud. She offered me the chance to reconnect with the avant-garde tradition, and her courage was a determining factor in the battle for the CAAM.

*A: The museum boom of the 50's was a symptom of cultural innovation in Europe. At present, living in a theoretically more decentralized Europe, do you think that museum theories and exhibition of global significance can be organized from our atlantic peripheral situation?*

MC: Well, let us establish an order of priorities. Basically the answer is yes. During the 80's we see the birth of a cultural revolution, a strengthening and revitalization of culture.

Old models and concepts were studied and updated because they had lost their function and they no longer responded to contemporary needs and anxieties. The strength of the mass media and our media-determined world brought about a complete revision of the traditional museum, and therefore Europe realizes that the museum must become a centre for communication. They are

transformed into communicative arenas because society has increased its demand of the pleasure and delight art can provide. Attendance multiplies and vast numbers of people come to see exhibitions. Museums now function as great catalysts of leisure in post-industrial society. However if we observe Spanish situation we soon understand that in terms of a museum network the



Malevich. *Tête*, 1928-32. Oil on canvas.  
Courtesy Russian Museum of Saint  
Petersbourg.

country is still suffering from manifold deficiencies, and in order to combat the problem a complex restructuring process is called for. After the creative energy of the 80's many things were achieved, though presently, in the 90's, we are again conscious of the necessity of confronting reality. The 80's made the deep-set and numerous deficiencies of Spanish museums surface.

Gradually we see the emergence and consolidation of the museum professional. (museology was a science that figured in no academic syllabus in Spain until very recently), and at the same time institutions assumed the task of representing and furthering the evolution of modernism in the country. The museum tradition had been up to then very different, dedicating its time to cataloguing, becoming reference centres where art works were simply exhibited and symbolized the mere cognition of the object. They registered the historical process of the works, catalogued, conserved and there it all finished. All of these various processes didn't strike museums as worthy of communication. In Spain the process of modernization and structuring of a new museology has been arduous. Among the most successful institutions we can name the Reina Sofía, the IVAM and the CAAM, that has developed along very interesting lines.

*A: When the CAAM opened a theory of "tricontinentality" was specially tailored for the museum, and it became the concept that justified such an ambitious project. Does this "philosophy", that emphasizes the privileged role of the Canary Islands as a necessary enclave between the Old World and the New still inform much of the Centre's programme?*

MC: Obviously so. This was our foundational thesis and it shall not be abandoned. Then we decided to support this idea and circumstance has proved

us right. The European Union has discovered us and considered us a peripheral thought generating agent, that does pioneering work and is constantly in touch with the three continents, (Africa, America and Europe). It is going to finance and defend our activities that centre on such tricontinental links. They think it is matter of prime cultural importance. I believe these results do indicate that we have been faithful to our initial criteria, and this genuinely gratifies me.

*A: Quite a bitter polemic arose when the function and the role of the museum as promoter and protector of Canarian art was eventually discussed in the local media. The amount and quality of the attention given to local art is still a topic of debate, as well as how and to what extent this promotion should mould the museum's programme. The universal vocation of the CAAM has nonetheless gained many adepts here. What formulas can balance the relationship between international art and the cause of Canarian art?*

MC: It is firstly a problem of strategies and secondly, a problem of social articulation. Self-evidently museums and contemporary centres of art aren't intended for the promotion of local art. That's what galleries exist for. What these centres can in effect do is to catalogue and to codify, and to acquire those works that are most representative of local artists and in this way provide

data that are objective and rigorous and are going to very useful when it comes to evaluating the criteria of art in a region. The CAAM is actually engaged on this task, with the urgency that it can give it, since it is a problem very much dictated by economy. I think that the promotion of artists occurs elsewhere and has to depend on other channels. The manifest deficiencies to be found in our region has forced the CAAM to step in with articulating initiatives. Today the museum has got the "trade mark", as I like to say, it has conquered representativity and it will try to take part in the general development of art in the Canary Islands. Moreover, this doesn't mean that the CAAM is about to sacralize things, because it is not ultimately responsible for the reactions of society to its suggestions. We have made suggestions and will continue to do so. Although it might have been more intelligent to create five state-protected galleries that tried to open international circuits and thus see what could come of this. The lack of proper structures makes everybody's attention focus on the CAAM, yet the centre is not an institution for the diffusion of artists, nor a jumping board for individual careers.

*A: Great exhibitions like Africa Today, the Russian Avant-Garde, Voices from overseas and Surrealism stand out in the agenda of the past five years, from 1990 to 1994. These "prize" exhibitions combine with other ones where more concrete theories and ideas on recent*

*tendencies and movements are analyzed. Does Martín Chirino divide between that small and the big, the more important and the less important exhibition?*

MC: Well this is really a finance related thing. I don't think that we are so categorical when designing an exhibition. We are guided by our fundatinal ideal, and all exhibitions contain a process of cataloguing, revision and rationalization. Some are imbued with exceptional significance because they are easy to approach and identify for the public. Others tend to spark off a more intellectual, mental reaction. When we set about our exhibitions I'm not so much thinking about individual shows but of the annual, global programme. The CAAM has to appear in the circuit as a versatile and intelligent centre, with a marked sensibility to the themes of contemporary art, aiming at a work model and projecting a particular understanding of what art is. That is essential. The circuit demands specialization, if not, chaos descends.

Ultimately it would be misleading to talk about exhibitions but of the CAAM's annual programme, that the museum plans and assumes fully; this is what determines our decisions about exhibitions when we sit down to discuss the yearly activities. We know where our exhibitions will be observed, the exact, international coordinates of our activity.



*A: What habits and what experience has the CAAM provided for Grand Canary society?*

MC: On opening nights you can't imagine how many hundreds of people flock to the exhibitions. They have become part of the social fabric. We have managed to attract people who otherwise would have never visited such

an art centre as the CAAM. Attendance during the course of exhibitions is also important. Then there is all the activity organized by the Educational Department, that is extremely active. All primary and secondary school children visit the CAAM and its exhibitions with regularity. They represent our hope for the future because the habit of museum-going that is being instilled in them and the information they constantly receive on art will be the consolidating social force of the museum. We mustn't forget that we work in a land devoid of certain cultural traditions. It isn't solely a question of organizing the museum's programme but of implanting the habit of curiosity and keenness that incites people to go and visit, the habit of the delight and the pleasure that art affords.

*A: At this moment the CAAM has various expansion projects, to lodge new offices and also to provide new exhibition space*



Kontcharova. *Tournesols*, 1908. Oil on canvas. Courtesy Russian Museum of Saint Petersburg.

*that will run parallel to the main building's programme. How are these initiatives developing?*

MC: Part of the CAAM's articulated strategy was to acquire more space and expand, buying the "Casa de los Ciegos", an historic, listed building near the museum. There would be fresh exhibition space here and room for setting up work-shops. For the time being these projects will have to be housed in the adjoining seventeenth century building that has been restored and is destined to become the new office area. We will certainly continue to analyze and to observe canarian art, so that we may develop new concepts. We will decide how to carry this investigation out because we have to concert the opinion of the experts, as well as seeking the participation of art critics and intellectuals, not forgetting the artists of course. This initiative will have wide media coverage and a proper campaign for its diffusion that our work

groups at the CAAM will plan. The experience that we have so far accumulated will prove invaluable for us. It is going to be a new adventure.

We'll see what comes out.

*A: The economic resources available for acquisitions are small and obviously this hampers and limits the growth of the collection. How does the CAAM cope with this limitation? Is it true to say that the museum is condemned not to have a good permanent collection?*

MC: No, that's not true. We have to state the fact that the museum has an incipient collection. Perhaps it is the best collection to date of Canarian art, it is quite solid. In another adjoining building that the museum is trying to acquire we would house the permanent collection. The architect Sainz de Oiza has already made the plans for the rooms and the building. I want to emphasize that the CAAM is an open, ever-evolving initiative, that we are making it. From not having anything at all to building up the basis of a collection as we have done in only five years is quite a feat.