

Francesc Torres. Aeronàutica [vol] Interior. National Art Museum of Catalonia.

Oval Room. Between June 18 and September 12, 2021

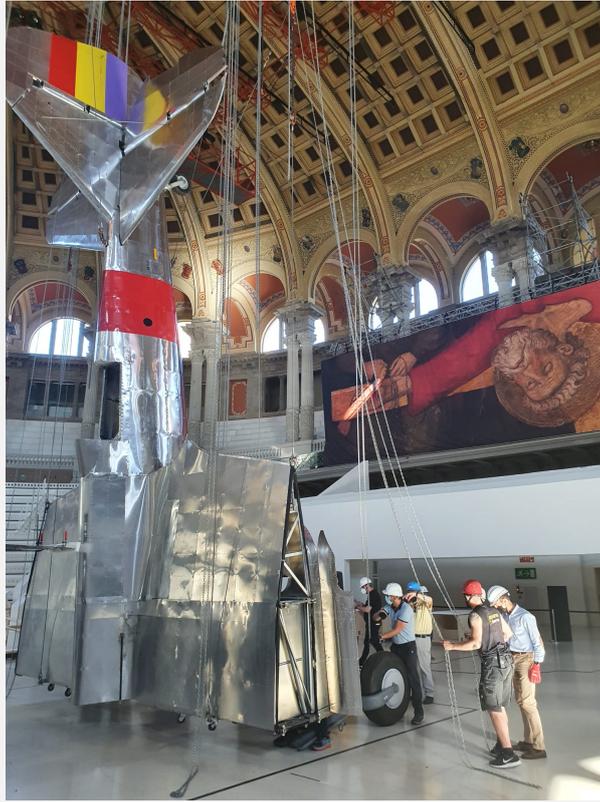
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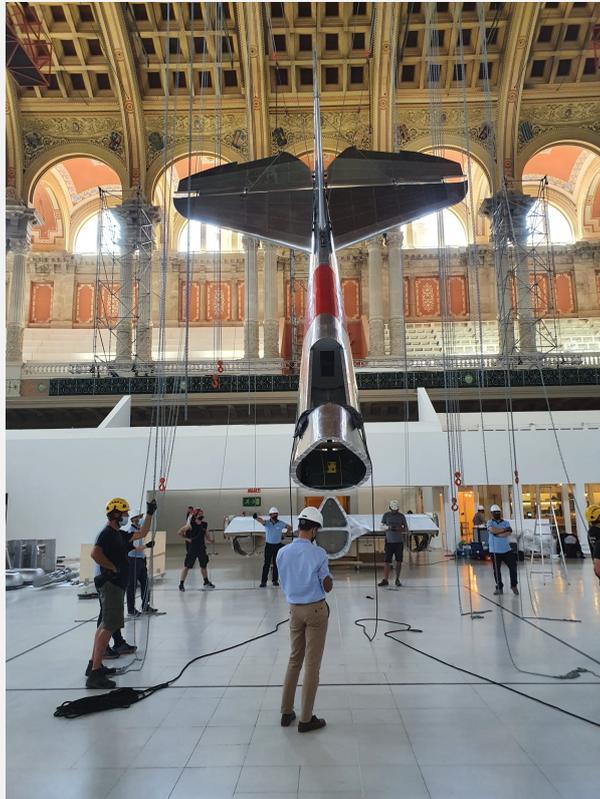
Abstract

Difficulties and technical misadventures in the assembly process of “Aeronàutica [vol] Interior,” an installation by the artist Francesc Torres in the Oval Room of the National Art Museum of Catalonia. Disassembling two replicas of the Tupolev SB-2 aircraft “Katiuska” and the fighter Polikarpov I-16 “Mosca,” moving them from the hangar where they were built in the Historic Aviation Center of La Sénia to Barcelona, introducing them inside the National Museum, hanging the largest one, the Tupolev bomber, from the Oval Room dome. Is such a technically ambitious project that borders the unlikely even legitimate?









The lineage of museographers I belong to jumps from the meeting table to the battlefield with ease. My teachers taught me how to plan, sketch, discuss arrangements, design spaces in the coldness of paper or a computer screen, but also how to confront all decisions on the field, getting my hands dirty. I have been inspired by technicians who want to know everything— In what direction does a screw rotate? How far from the ground is the gaze of the average viewer? How is an engine cooled? Which industrial paints have organic matter in the composition? They are technicians who want to feel their body tired after an assembly, to have their hands dirty, their tools worn. To place a work of art in space, they need to know the artist's biography, know their techniques, study museological narratives, deploy historical contexts and conjunctural social realities... But also, the guidelines of lighting for the works, the type of metal alloy of the supports, the aesthetic tastes of the management teams, the opinion that the project deserves for the departments of education, and so on. These are technicians whose holistic optimism transfers character to the museological settings in which they participate.

“Seven centimeters more yet?” shouts the coordinator.

For months we have been preparing the entrance of two reproductions of Civil War planes in the Oval Room of the National Museum, and now we are seven centimeters short so that the central body of the Polikarpov I-16, known as “Mosca” (fly), fits into the last one of the planned gaps. The museum’s technical teams have dismantled four of the access doors, dismantled Pladur® walls and ceilings, created specific protocols for these inconveniences to coexist with keeping the museum open to the public, and now, we are seven centimeters short? Santi, the coordinator of the transport and handling of these aircraft (technician of the company SIT, one of the best art-handlers of the Iberian Peninsula, hardened in a thousand battles, immune to discouragement), gets off one of the forklifts that allowed us to raise and rotate the central body of the Polikarpov to put it through the last doors. The ambient is tense. A dozen technicians, so far working in unison, are losing manners and harmony, and they are beginning to comment on possible solutions. One of the apothegms of any manipulation of heritage objects is that there is a time for digression and a time for action, but they should never be mixed. Once a move is in executed, there is no discussion about how to do so. Santi relocates us around the fuselage. He is convinced that a kind push will allow us to overcome the obstacle of these centimeters. We have the fuselage hanging from to forklifts, slightly rotated diagonally, trying to take advantage of the widening gap in the last doors. At three, we press the central body of the Polikarpov. We get through. We did it. We applaud. We already have inside the Oval Room all the fragments with which we are to assemble the two planes.

Aeronàutica [vol] Interior (Interior [Flight] Aeronautics) is an installation by the artist Francesc Torres that aims to explore the impact of incorporating air warfare into modernity, as well as the ethical updating of the concept of sacrifice in the era of weak thinking *pensiero debole*. The origin of the project goes back to a visit he carried out about two years before to the Historic Aviation Center of La Sénia, and to the adjacent airfield. The latter was built by the Government of the Second Republic at the beginning of the Civil War. But two years later it was occupied by the forces of the insurgent side and used as a base camp for many of the bloodiest battles of the war. During the visit to the Historic Center, led by José Ramón Bellaubí, Francesc was captivated by two full-scale replicas of the famous Tupolev SB-2 bomber “Katiuska” and the fighter Polikarpov I-16 “Mosca,” being both of them aircraft of Soviet origin that had a significant presence in the Spanish Civil War. Seduced by the management and technical team of the National Museum in a later guided tour by the artist, Francesc was commissioned to articulate an installation that would allow us to rescue both planes to new generations who have forgotten or never knew the secrets of a war that is already far away. Francesc Torres thought of placing the bomber (weighing about three tons and a maximum size of 22 x 14 meters) hanging from the dome of the Oval Room, falling down, about to crash, suspended a few inches from the ground. The silhouette of Tupolev would dialogue with a large-scale reproduction of a Gothic painting of the martyrdom of Saint Peter, by the master Pere Serra (14th century), which the National Museum exhibits in the rooms of its Permanent Collection. The installation would be completed with the 1:1 scale reproduction of the Polikarpov, some enlargements of photographs obtained among inhabitants of La Sénia river, a video, some elements taken from the Airfield (vintage petrol drums, three uprooted olive trees and more), and a soundtrack that would mix ambient sounds from La Sénia with the bomber engine or Jimmy Hendrix’s electric guitar. All these elements, combined and exalted by the design work of the Lluís Pera/Lali Almonacid team.

This project involved an exceptional technical and logistical effort that endangered the museographic capabilities of the museum teams. But it also sent an optimistic message to the cultural sector after the forced shutdown following the past disastrous year of the pandemic. Museums could re-sketch activity and be ambitious in their approaches. 95% of the budget was for cultural companies (more than a dozen) that would help us develop the Francesc Torres’ project. The museum was again seduced by an artist who had already demonstrated his worth in the stage domain. “A museographic montage is a device of contradiction, a space of war”, I remember hearing from Francesc Torres during the montage of “La Capsa Entròpica” (National Art Museum of Catalonia, 2017). Sometimes, one has to ask what is impossible, if I may paraphrase the motto that Guy Debord threw in the streets during May 68.

Transport, assembly, and hoisting

The SIT company carried out the aircraft transport operation. Co-directed by José Ramón Bellaubí, the builder of the replicas and a real man of the Renaissance (merchant sailor, inventor, builder, expert in models of Spanish historical aviation, mayor of La Sénia...), it was decided to dismantle both planes as much as possible prior to their

transportation. The Oval Room, the largest of the covered “public squares” in Catalonia, does not have accesses that allow for large structures and elements to be carried inside. The subsequent modification of spaces by successive architectural reforms of the National Palace made this situation even worse. The technical teams, in two visits to the Historic Aviation Center of La Sénia, check the measurements of the different aircraft fragments, assess all the possibilities of reducing these pieces and study the different accesses to the Oval Room. Finally, it was agreed between the owner of the planes, the museum's infrastructure teams, and the transport company that we would dismantle the four entrance doors to the offices of the National Museum. That is why it was necessary to dismantle the historic entrance gate of the 1929 building, two glass portals, a Pladur® ceiling and a few centimeters of a fire door.

Four truck trips later, we had the disassembled planes in front of the doors of the back facade of the National Palace, packed for their protection, on custom-made wooden carts. Not only a crane truck was needed for loading and unloading, but also two forklifts, and a complex rotating device attached to the fuselages of the aircraft, as they could not pass through all the gaps made for the occasion without being hoisted diagonally. A mess that could be successfully resolved thanks to using every inch available.

Hoisting the Bomber

But there was still a lot of trouble to come. The technical teams understood from the beginning that in “Aeronàutica [vol] Interior” there was no cheap illusionism, no easy solutions. Everything was real, just as in Werner Herzog’s films. Assuming all the risks, Francesc Torres, jointly with the management of the National Museum, launched us into a project the phases of which were going to demand accuracy, veracity, and a little shamelessness.

Faced with the doubts raised by the hoisting operation between some of the rigging teams (companies dedicated to the design, calculation and execution of anchors, supports, scenographic systems, and so on), it was decided to contact an engineer to guide the needs and protocols of complicated movement. The problem was not so much the weight capacity of the dome of the Oval Room and the technical ceiling as the structure of the Katiuska itself. The Estudio S4E team, Solutions for Engineering, led by Miguel A. Bretones, was hired at an advanced stage of the project to rethink and certify the hoisting operation. The S4E studio proposed strengthening the interior of the bomber, especially the tail, made of an aluminum alloy that was to light. He also urged us to hang the two trunk bodies and the wings of the Katiuska separately. The four elements hung individually, so that in case of failure of any of the anchors, the rest of the plane would not even perceive it. A team of twelve technicians, with manual hoists, led by the engineers of the studio and by José Ramón Bellaubí, hoisted all parts of the Katiuska in three days to attach them up in the air. It was perhaps the most spectacular of all moments, in an assembly that was already ductile. Once the Katiuska was hung, and the Polikarpov I-16 fighter was mounted in a corner of the Oval Room, the rest of the elements that made up Francesc Torres' installation remained to be distributed and installed. The possibility of exhibiting the original altarpiece by Pere Serra in the very Oval Room was studied. But the difficulties of preventive conservation were virtually insurmountable. As this is a small piece, Francesc Torres also believed that the dimensions of the Oval Room would devour it. This large square, originally designed for mass events and concerts, and currently used for business, commercial and cultural events, has managed to defeat almost all the artists who have tried to deal with it. Only Antoni Tàpies, with a sculpture project never carried out (the famous sock over fifteen meters high in 1991), and Antoni Miralda with the curtain of Agnus Dei achieved brief mirages of a face-to-face dialogue. Francesc Torres accepted the challenge, leaving the cockpit of a three-ton bomber suspended fifty centimeters above the ground, arranging the largest of the murals ever exposed in the Oval Room, distributing enlarged fragments of Pere Serra's altarpiece, deconstructing it in the room, and integrating all the elements into a kind of three-dimensional stage altarpiece. It wasn't the first time a museum had hung planes in its rooms (London Science Museum, Royal Air Force Museum, Duxford Imperial War Museum), it wasn't even the first time that a plane was hung diving (the magnificent Fiona Banner's project at Tate Britain in 2014), nor that the plane's aesthetic was used in biblical allusion (the memorable 1965 crucifixion sculpture by León Ferrari). But it was the first time that this challenge came to our shores, the first time that museographical technicians of a Catalan museum would see ourselves completely overwhelmed, the first time that an artist tried to occupy all the sand in the arena and fight all six bulls in one only afternoon. Moreover, it was done being scrupulously faithful to ethical and aesthetic principles, using the instruments of a discipline (the artistic installation) that he helped to create in New York during the 70s, and that has been polishing throughout his long career. A technique pushed to its own limits in

the Oval Room. Without any epic, but with unfathomable optimism and technical ambition.

Some technicians would have settled for having the bomber hung diving in the middle of the Oval Room. Artistic brilliance, a tribute to our grandparents, and a symbol of a collective technical effort. But Francesc Torres is a precise artist who almost always inscribes subplots in the central axes of his stories. Because there is more to this project than only a single idea of “sacrifice”—various realities come together, even some contradictory ones, and in Francesc Torres' projects there is a commitment to try to make them all explicit. Ten thousand olive trees were sacrificed in 1936 to build an aerodrome. The women and men of La Sénia had to look for new forms of subsistence after this mass pruning. And they achieved to do so by putting themselves at the service of the different tenants of the aerodrome at each stage of the war. Saint Peter renounced three times before recognizing Christ. Repentant, he did not want to be crucified as his master, he preferred to plunge. A red carpet (a river of blood, some spectators would say during the days of the show) takes us to the exact spot where the bomber will hit the ground. A place that coincides with the feet of saint Peter nailed to the cross. The machine reminds us that the pilot dies to defend a cause, but the pilot also kills. The drums where Nazi officers store aircraft fuel continue in La Sénia and, years after the war, are used by farmers to store olive oil. In many villages captured during the war, women and men were forced to survive by putting their limits at risk, reinventing their functions, devising trades that were not even imagined before the war. Many stories, not all of them glorious. Because almost all art is about Eros and Thanatos, and from walking right over one's limits. Francesc Torres is clear, and he states it again and again in his projects.

In the same way that he explains, too, that modernity is directly connected to the machine—a plane that does not fly becomes a sculpture that resignifies itself. It is a killing machine, but also a dying machine. It is beautiful. In his projects, it seems that the artist wants to tell us over and over again that placing the viewer in front of one of these machines leaves no room for error. We are fascinated by a machine made to transcend the limits of the body that somehow contains death in its metallic DNA. We see greatness, we sense misfortune.

A few days after finishing the assembly of “Aeronàutica [vol] Interior,” one of the coordinators of the education team with whom I talked about the installation of Francesc Torres, to whom I explained all the technical difficulties we encountered, the shocks, the joys of having succeeded, complains of a certain epic in my words. She reminds me that war proposes a human culture based on the model of domination—war, the idea of sacrifice, the figure of the hero. When faced with this model, we should propose a culture based on collaborative, bonding, more feminist models. She is right. This project talks even about what it is not meant to talk about, and the educator's gaze reminds me that other approaches are possible, that we need to ask ourselves new questions.

A technically ambitious project grows, is raised beyond the limits known by museography teams, is developed and implemented. The stories multiply. Is it fair to leave the comfort zone to be able to ask ourselves different questions, to generate controversy, to pay homage to our forgotten dead in the mass graves of History? Do some museum projects need to be done to stress the museum that hosts them? Should we start asking ourselves different questions to find the answers we don't like?

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Bibliografia

Vocational cartoonist. Draftsman in the late 80s; performer artist, and cartoonist for the press in the 90s. Museum technician since 1996. Currently, head of Museography at the National Art Museum of Catalonia.

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