

FERNANDO SÁNCHEZ CASTILLO

The Wayward Pearl



Fernando Sánchez Castillo, *Ciudad sin héroes: Bolívar* (City without Heroes, Bolívar) 2001. Artist's studio.

DATES: 24 June 2026 – 8 March 2027

LOCATION: Palacio de Velázquez, Retiro Park

ORGANISED BY: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía

CURATED BY: Ferran Barenblit

COORDINATED BY: Nieves Sánchez

The exhibition ***Fernando Sánchez Castillo: The Wayward Pearl***, on view from **24 June to 8 March** in the **Palacio de Velázquez**, takes as its point of departure the image of the pearl at once as a metaphor of transformation and memory and as a reflection on art's role. More specifically, it is the Perla Peregrina, the wayward pearl, one of the world's most unique jewels and with a history that runs in parallel to some of the central episodes in Spain's history. Found by a slave in Panama in the sixteenth century, it travelled to the court of Philip II of Spain and was worn and displayed for centuries by the Spanish monarchs; it was also depicted by Diego Velázquez as a symbol of the Spanish Monarchy. Its designated name expresses the pearl's peculiar, gallant nature, its journey also reflecting the turmoil of modernity: it was taken from Spain by Joseph Bonaparte, travelling to Paris, crossing the Atlantic, and passing through countless hands, before being acquired, finally, at auction by Richard Burton as a gift for Elizabeth Taylor.

Sánchez Castillo draws from the symbology of this storied pearl, using it as a common thread to weave a reflection on power and its official narratives, voids and erasures. Through it, the artist unfurls a critical reading of the history, monuments, objects and images that have shaped social and cultural memory, while entering into dialogue with some of the key passages from art history, from the Baroque to the avant-garde, Minimalism and Conceptual Art.

The pearl's transformation from a luxury object associated with monarchical representation into a popular symbol integrated into mass culture anchors an exhibition which examines art's place as a medium of critical intervention in narratives of power. Pearls are a mollusc's response to an attack, turning intrusion into something strangely beautiful. Like the pearl itself, many of Sánchez Castillo's works start from a wound, friction or historical intrusion to produce new forms of beauty, conflict and meaning.

The Wayward Pearl assembles some 200 works, including watercolours, sculptures, installations, videos, objects, loaned works which are resignified through their presentation form, recently made works and works in progress. Hence the exhibition's curator speaking of a “**retro-prospective**”: a show in which the artist's trajectory is revised while also remaining open to the present. The exhibition conception situates **Sánchez Castillo's studio as the axis of the show, a space where the artist will work in front of visitors.**

Culture as a Medium of Critical Reflection in Power Narratives

The Perla Peregrina and its transformation from luxury object to popular symbol is the linchpin for Sánchez Castillo to reflect upon the place of art. The show uses the idea of an “irregular pearl” or a *berrueco*, the etymology of baroque, given that the name of this pearl **comes not from its far-and-wide travel but responds to its unusual form.**



View of an exhibition room from *Fernando Sánchez Castillo. The Wayward Pearl*. Museo Reina Sofía, photographic archive. Photograph: Fátima Sanz

Pearls are born of intrusion. When an undesired piece penetrates a mollusc shell, the mollusc responds by coating it with successive layers of nacre in a dance that bides its time, where the wound becomes a unique, one-of-a-kind object. It is this biology of defence that forms the central metaphor of the show. Just as a bivalve creates a pearl to cocoon an aggressive act, as human beings we turn trauma into art. History operates through initial aggressions, such as armed conflicts, which form layers of narratives and liturgies so the social body can move forward without looking at the wound. In the words of the show’s curator, Ferran Barenblit, **“monuments also arise from damage. History is not just told; it**

is also shaped and forged”. Art is used as a way to counter aggression. **There is no beauty without brutality.**

History, Memory, Erasure

Sánchez Castillo's work is framed inside a specific context: recent history which has not fully closed. In his practice, Spain is less a theme and more a structural condition, a territory crossed by overlapping layers of narrative, memory and erasure. The dictatorship and Transition to democracy, and the way in which both have been narrated, configure a field in which the visible and the hidden are constantly at odds. **The same power governs erasure.** In manufacturing memory, it is in charge of what must disappear, resulting in a series of mechanisms which continue to operate in the present under the form of symbols and strategies of authority. This is the place where the artist operates to intervene in the same infrastructure that upholds power, laying bare the discontinuities, silences and violences that still run through it.

Fernando Sánchez Castillo's artistic practice dissects monuments, gestures and legends to show history not as a stable narrative, but as a permanently conflictive field which determines how we must remember and move under authority.



Fernando Sánchez Castillo. Narón. 2003-2007. Bronze. MUSAC Collection. Museo Reina Sofía, photographic archive. Photograph: Fátima Sanz

The artist maintains that “art is a force that makes state narratives tremble”, by subverting the original purposes of objects — a statue made into a child’s swing, TEDAX robots making abstract art — or via operational structures, such as riot trucks or Franco’s yacht, the Azor, which are transformed into the spoils of an authority that can no longer navigate. As Barenblit highlights, “the exhibition acts in this place: not only around iconography but the infrastructure of power within which it is inserted. Not only around what is represented, but how it is inscribed”.

Further, **the exhibition is concerned with absence**. Spain’s history is built on glaring forms of absence: from the forced expulsion of Jews and Moriscos to the those who disappeared in roadside ditches during the Civil War and Franco’s dictatorship. The artist reflects on this void, inviting spectators to imagine and reconstruct memory by making visible the topography of physical and symbolic voids that power leaves in its wake, while also addressing the persistence of imprecise memories filtered in the present.



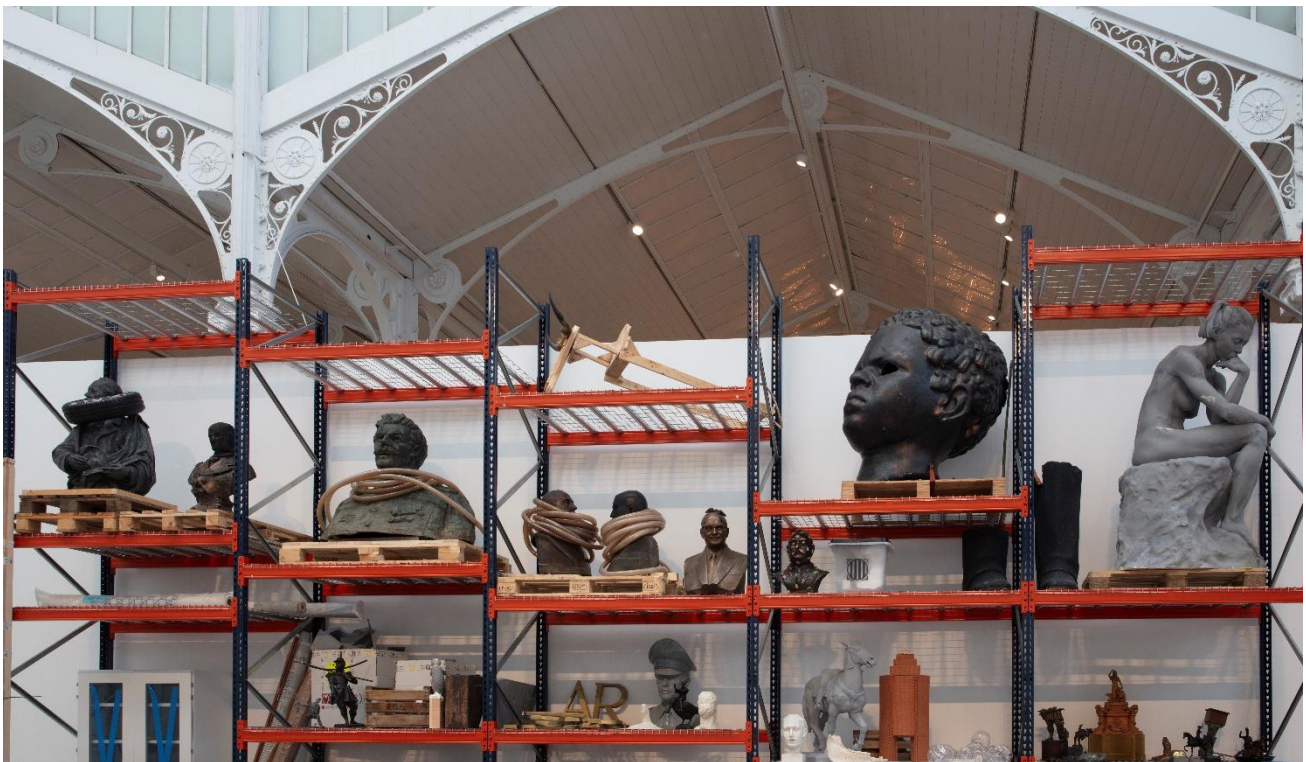
Fernando Sánchez Castillo. Figures of Expanded Memory. 2017–2026. Bronze, 3D printing. Artist’s studio: Miss Liberty; Madre de la plaza de Mayo; La cueca sola; Celeste dos Cravos (Celeste Martins Caeiro); Lorca; Rapadas; Tomiko Higa, la niña de la bandera blanca; Navalny

Art also alters scale, displacing the spotlight on the hero towards anonymity and the monument towards an accidental remainder. That variation of scale reaches its most playful and subversive juncture as the authority figure is reduced to the size of an object that

can be handled, removing aura and distance. The figure becomes a toy which allows the image of power to be touched, to fall, to wear down, eroding its solemnity through laughter and repetitive gesture. The monument, designed to be seen from below, is now at hand height.

The Palacio de Velázquez as an Artist's Studio

Fernando Sánchez Castillo. *The Wayward Pearl* also encompasses the artist's studio in the central area of the Palacio de Velázquez. With this “ethic of being”, Fernando Sánchez Castillo sets forth a shared situation with the viewer and **inverts the conventional regime of the museum, with the space amounting to a place of exhibition and a space of creation.** In blurring the authority a finished piece represents, attention turns towards how it is exhibited and how it is transformed.



The artist's studio in the Palacio de Velázquez
View of an exhibition room from *Fernando Sánchez Castillo. The Wayward Pearl*.
Museo Reina Sofía, photographic archive. Photograph: Fátima Sanz

Inside such a context, the studio ceases to be solely a place of production, becoming instead research space. The exhibition stresses the artistic process as a collective construction, whereby the figure of the artist does not appear isolated but is inserted inside a network of

relationships with the public and with the social context of his work — the artist does not hold a position of authority to convey certainty. Rather, he works for a community he constantly questions.

This idea also translates into the same physical organisation of space. Delimiting the artist's workshop with the colour of the floor plays a pivotal role inside this museographic set-up and turns surfaces into an essential narrative element. The place upon which the objects rest, from both a material and conceptual perspective, becomes part of their meaning and establishes a parallel reading of the show. Visitors are invited, therefore, to observe not only the works but also the platforms, supports and territories sustaining them, understanding how the institutional and curatorial construction of these spaces precedes and conditions the artistic experience itself.

Among the ideas the artist's practice touches on today — and which he will work on in the studio set up inside the Palacio de Velázquez for the show — is the representation of Lorca's skull. In an inverted process in comparison to that employed by anthropologists in the forensic reproduction of the face, Sánchez Castillo uses photographs to reproduce the poet's disappeared cranium, pierced by the bullet of his executioners. Another work we can see in this space is the horse of Casa Velázquez attacked by both sides during the Spanish Civil War.

The idea of opening the studio to the public resonates within the context of the Palacio de Velázquez, a building historically conceived as a space for displaying feats, collections and forms of power representation. Opposite this contemplation-based exhibition tradition, the exhibition considers a change of paradigm: not only to show, but also to capture, listen and incorporate the responses of those who move through the exhibition.

Equally, the relationship of space between Fernando Sánchez Castillo and his work takes on a further dimension as an exhibition of his native city, Madrid, and is located a short distance away from many of the places his stories are rooted in, from Cibeles to the Casón del Buen Retiro.

The Palacio de Velázquez, built to house the National Exhibition of Mining in 1883, later housed a show devoted to the architecture of the Third Reich, celebrating the value of art as a technology of domination (*Neue Deutsche Baukunst/New German Architecture*, 1941).

Further, it served as a workplace for sculptor Moisés de Huerta y Ayuso to make his equestrian statue of Francisco Franco.

The exhibit is also close to the place in the Retiro Park where, with the upmost discretion during Francoism and owing to Madrid City Council's technical draughtsman, José Pradal, the bust of Pablo Iglesias, made by sculptor Emiliano Barral, was officially reinstated after being concealed underground for its protection during the entire dictatorship. This piece is also shown in the exhibition.



View of an exhibition room from *Fernando Sánchez Castillo. The Wayward Pearl*. Museo Reina Sofía, photographic archive. Photograph: Fátima Sanz

A Visitor-Constructed Narrative. A Route through the Exhibition Rooms

Sánchez Castillo's work examines different episodes of contemporary history, establishing a dialogue between the symbols associated with Francoism and other models of authority and citizen-built narrations and struggles for freedom. Thus, historical memory does not appear as a unique, closed narrative, but more as a territory of permanent negotiation with the co-

existence of monuments, objects, documents and daily gestures capable of questioning traditional forms in the representation of power.

The show is devised as an exhibition route which orbits around the artist's studio. By way of sculptures, objects, documents, installations and videos, visitors follow a path that reflects on protest and art's capacity to turn gestures of resistance into new forms of representation.

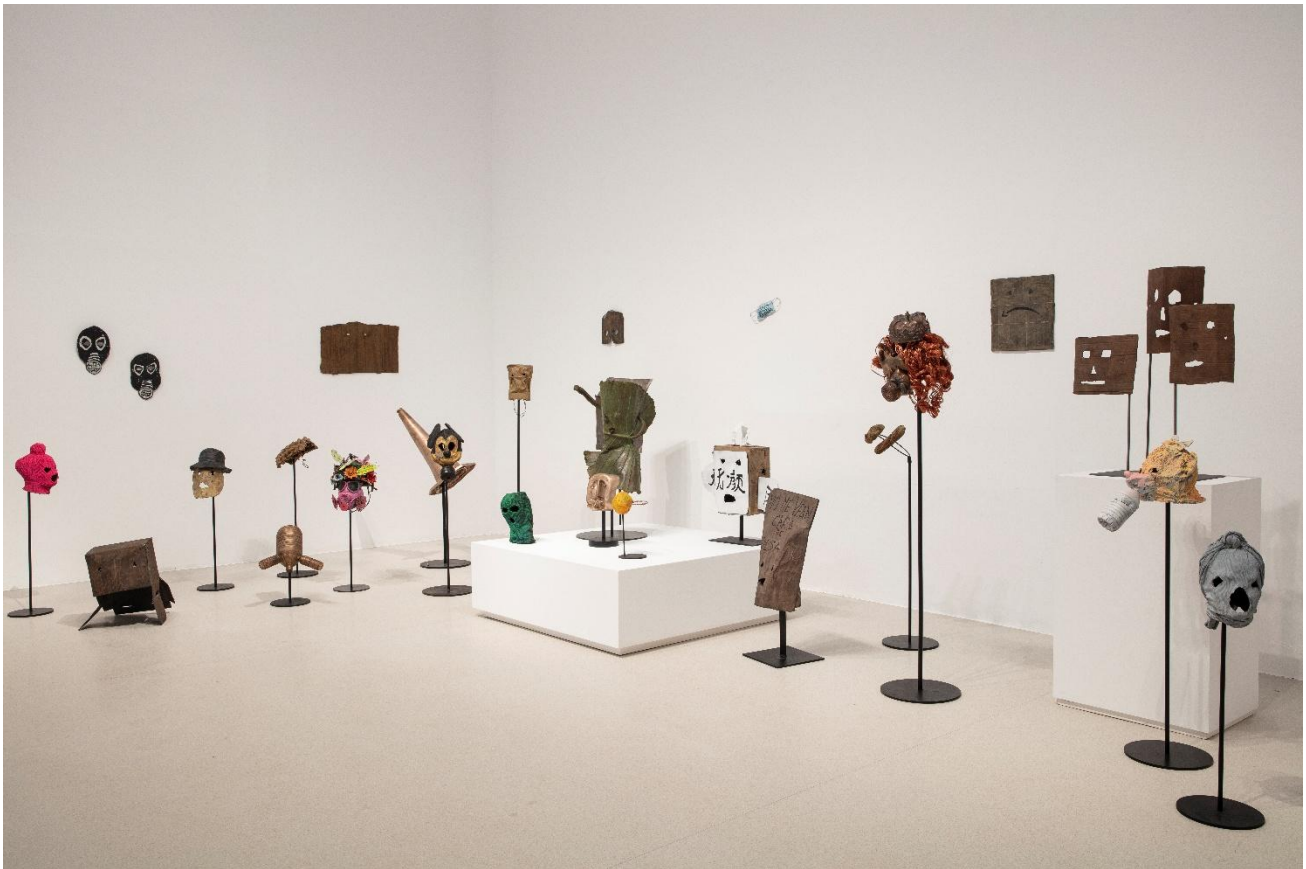


View of an exhibition room from *Fernando Sánchez Castillo. The Wayward Pearl*. Museo Reina Sofía, photographic. Photograph: Fátima Sanz

To the left of the main entrance sits an emblematic figure: the sculpture devoted to August Landmesser, the German worker who kept his arms crossed while the masses made the Nazi salute. This gesture of individual disobedience opens a section dedicated to anonymous citizens who, via pacific actions, have opened spaces of freedom or have been at the centre of acts of resistance loaded with political meaning. One such figure is *Tank Man*, the man who stood in front of a column of tanks during the Tiananmen Square protests, and now a universal image of the pacific confrontation to power.

Moreover, exhibited in this first space is a series of small figures originally conceived to be activated via an exchange with the public. Although in this instance the exhibition conditions impede the development of that direct interaction, the pieces and the way they

work are present by virtue of their museographic explanation and presentation, underlining the participatory dimension that characterises much of the artist's work.



Fernando Sánchez Castillo. *Global Museum Protest*. 2015–2026. Artist's studio, Fundació Lluís Corominas Isern, Butinoff Collection, Museo Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo (CA2M) Collection. Museo Reina Sofía, photographic archive. Photographic: Fátima Sanz

In the following room masks appear, understood less as identity-concealing elements than a tool to capture public and media attention. Masks built with ephemeral, inexpensive materials which work as devices of protest; extravagant objects with the capacity to turn a protest into a memorable image. The artist therefore establishes an analogy with the elaborate ceremonial helmets of the Renaissance, such as that of Charles V, conceived also as authentic sculptures carried on the head. The comparison highlights how symbolic forms of power are reappropriated by civil society through ordinary materials and radically different visual strategies.

The survey continues with *Pegasus Dance* (2007) and with a series of audiovisual pieces, in which musicians create compositions using military helicopters, aircraft debris and other devices linked to war machinery as instruments — that which is conceived to control,

intimidate or quash a demonstration here becomes choreographic and sound matter. The potential violence of military apparatus is displaced towards a creative territory where collective images and the capacity for resignification take precedence.



Fernando Sánchez Castillo, *Pegasus Dance* (2007)

The next room is devoted to the work *Síndrome de Guernica* (*Guernica Syndrome*, 2012). The Azor is the name of the yacht used by dictator Francisco Franco, the remnants of which were acquired by the artist, who has turned them into an all but abstract sculpture, creating a space of reflection on memory and the material persistence of the past. Displayed alongside this piece is a series of altered architectures and monumental structures which work as devices of protection or shelter, questioning the limits between monument, infrastructure and sculpture.

Also in the show is a large barricade formulated as a collage of the social. Rather than being understood solely as a physical object designed to block the way, the barricade is presented as an aesthetic object and a space of co-existence, an installation which also incorporates references to historic monuments made with materials from enemy weapons, as well as

equestrian sculptures or commemorative monuments cast from canons captured in combat, throwing into relief the constant symbolic transformation of materials and the way in which art participates in the construction of narratives on freedom.



View of an exhibition room from *Fernando Sánchez Castillo. The Wayward Pearl*.
Fernando Sánchez Castillo. *Naturaleza de lo social*. 2003–2026 (The Nature of the Social Realm. 2003–2006). Bronze. Artist's studio.
La calle es mía. 2004. *Luces de feria y cables* (The Street Is Mine, 2004. Fairground Lights and Cables). Artist's studio. Museo Reina Sofía, photographic archive. Photograph: Fátima Sanz

One of the core strands of the show focuses on citizen acts on public monuments, particularly interventions on equestrian statues. Used historically to elevate governors above society, these statues fuse leader and animal in a “state centaur”, where violence is stylised as authority. In his interventions, Sánchez Castillo breaks this illusion of unity. In his works, the horse ceases to be a muscular pedestal for the hero, becoming instead an archive of silenced violence. With these interventions the artist draws attention to Franco’s dictatorship, which prolifically employed this medium, erecting bronze statues to work as mirrors of obedience and domestication at a time that was already technologically modern.



Josep Viladomat Massanas. Horse sculpture, part of the ensemble "To General Franco". 1963. Bronze casting. Museo de Historia de Barcelona. Museo Reina Sofía, photographic archive. Photograph: Fátima Sanz

Also notable in the exhibition is the display of the equestrian statue of Francisco Franco which, made by Josep Viladomat Massanas, was vandalised in Barcelona and is presented solely with the horse after the figure of the dictator disappeared. The absence of the horseman responds, therefore, to the aggression towards the sculpture. In this context, the horse acquires a symbolic autonomy that transcends the original figure and becomes a representation of the Spanish people and the complex relationships between citizens, history and power.

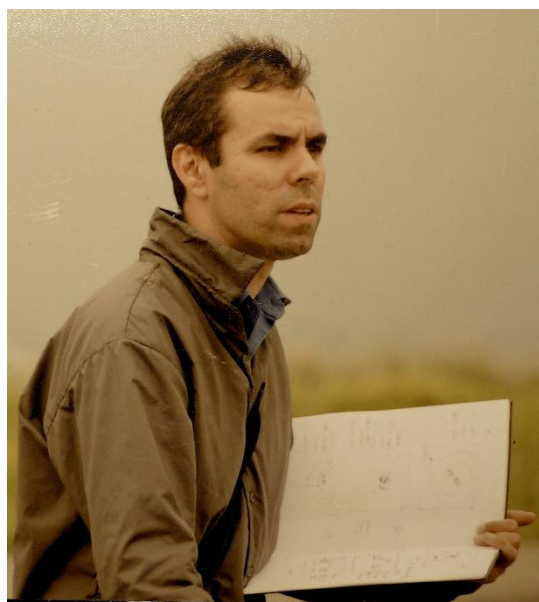
Absent graffiti occupies another space: surfaces which refer to erased and invisible urban works, evoking the ephemeral nature of certain forms of political expression. This is joined by deformed sculptures which become imaginary children's swings used in public space, scenes in which the monument stops being an untouchable object and integrates into the daily experience of play and citizen use.

Ultimately, the show offers an open experience, whereby visitors no longer occupy a passive position to become an active agent of interpretation. As in a film not fully edited, each route engenders a different reading and each gaze contributes to completing a collective narration on memory, citizen participation and art's role in building new public imaginaries.

Publications

In conjunction with the show, a catalogue in two editions, Spanish and English, will be published with texts by curator Ferran Barenblit, two essays, one by Germán Labrador and the other by Cuauhtémoc Medina, and, to conclude, a conversation between the artist and Isabel Argerich and Miguel Caballero. Moreover, the book includes numerous views of the show, as well as historical images within the artist's creative process.

About Fernando Sánchez Castillo



Fernando Sánchez Castillo (Madrid, 1970) is an artist whose work pivots around the visual materialisation of power and how it is represented, as well as the narratives it creates and their fragile nature.

He earned a degree in Fine Arts from the Complutense University of Madrid (UCM) and an MA in Philosophy and Aesthetics from the Autonomous University of Madrid (UAM), in addition to distinguished fellowships at the Fundación

Marcelino Botín and the École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts in Paris. He also studied at UAM's Institute of Contemporary Aesthetics and ENSBA Paris and held a residency at Rijksakademie, Amsterdam, as well as being a member of the UN's PIMPA (Memory, Politics and Artistic Practices) research team in Geneva.

Sánchez Castillo has exhibited his work in countries such as France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Austria, Germany, Sweden, Mexico and Chile. His solo shows include *Prisiones imaginaries* (Mataró Art Contemporani, 2023); *Fake Games* (IVAM, 2019); *Ephemeral Treasures* (MUAR, 2019); *Más allá* (CA2M, 2015); *Método del discurso* (CAC-Centro de Arte Contemporáneo de Málaga, 2011); and *Abajo la inteligencia* (MUSAC, 2007).

Further, his work is part of collections from institutions like the Centre Georges Pompidou, FNAC, Fond National d'Art Contemporain, MUDAM, Fundacion NMAC, Skisernass Museum

Lund, Rabobank Kusntcollectie, Utrech Central Museum, Museo Helga de Alvear, MUSAC, Artium Museoa, CA2M and MNCARS.

About the Curator



Ferran Barenblit (Buenos Aires, 1968) is a museum director and curator who lives in Barcelona. His professional career combines institutional leadership and curatorial practice. For over twenty years he has managed major contemporary art museums, developing a curatorial vision that is

deeply mindful of the political and social dimensions of art. His most recent position was as director of MACBA, the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Barcelona, and formerly he was the founding director of CA2M Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo in Madrid. Throughout his career he has created institutions and curatorial programmes which combine intellectual rigour, civic responsibility and a close collaboration with artists and communities.

After reading Art History at the University of Barcelona and Museum Studies at New York University, Barenblit combines academic rigour and management experience. He has lectured at the Royal College of Art in London and was a guest lecturer at the University of Michigan. He is also on different boards and committees, for instance PAC Milano, IVAM Valencia and the L'Internationale Association, and is a member of CIMAM (Congress organiser, 2016), IKT (board member, 2012–2015) and AICA (board member, 1999–2002).

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Press material



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