

Open Letter from the Directors of Art Museums in the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg (Benelux)

A long time ago the Low Countries of what is now Belgium, Luxemburg and the Netherlands were part of the Spanish royal lands and we in the north were very aware of what Madrid had to say to us. Now, and over the past decade, we have once again been watching the Spanish capital intently, at least in the field of museums. Hearing last week that its director Manuel Borja Vilel had decided not to apply for another mandate, we felt compelled to act.

It was Manuel Borja Vilel and his dynamic team of collaborators who pushed aside the controlling influence of the modern art museums in New York, London and Paris on our policies and imaginations. He created the space for us to tell the story of art in a different way, one more intimately connected to social change over the past 150 years. Reina Sofia is today the leading modern art museum internationally. All over the world, recent collection presentations are inspired by what Museo Reina Sofia has done and the paradigms that Borja Vilel has launched. One of his outstanding insights was that the relevance and beauty of art would only be strengthened by presenting it on an equal level and in constant dialogue with photography, film, architecture and archival materials. Fifteen years ago, this was barely seen in museums except in occasional temporary art exhibitions. Today it is commonplace. Borja Vilel and his team succeeded to wield such influence because this formal innovation was the outcome of a greater one: a desire and capacity to embed art in more general reflections on aesthetics, ethics, popular culture and forms of governance.

As the influential US novelist Octavia Butler said: “the only lasting truth is change” and the nature of that change is what Museo Reina Sofia has so skilfully portrayed in its exhibitions over the past years. It is a museum that follows the best artists and keeps them close. It is always critical to the limit and propositional to a fault. It addresses issues that are often the neuralgic points in society, never fearful of whatever reactions may come. It is keen to listen and learn without compromising the task of addressing change – to the point that the words “modern”, “art” and “museum” are themselves put into question.

Borja-Vilel’s policy embeds art in its society. His recent collection displays take on the consequences of colonialism, extraction and toxic masculinity as well as the reactionary authoritarianism of our current age. His work is always situated in the history of Spain and Madrid while connecting to many other locations and histories. The recent history of exhibitions at the museum renders visible the exceptional and inspiring capacity of art when it is put in dialogue with visual culture. They open up the artistic value of ephemeral media such as posters, banners or editions. Neglected artists, forms and media are suddenly set in a new light in the museum. This is what has made our visits to Museo Reina Sofia the past years so exceptional and so enriching.

The museum rightfully addresses sensitive but vital issues about which there is no consensus. It chooses to make those public and give audiences the chance to reflect and form their own opinion. Its exhibitions pick great works and then change our view of them by placing them in visual ecosystems. They liberate Dali from the cliché of Dali; they put Picasso back in the pavilion of the Spanish Republic and shed a new light on the art of Antonio Saura. One of us recalls how during a certain edition of Arco one could categorise international visitors depending upon which exhibition at the museum they referred to. When asking ‘Did you already see the exhibition in Reina Sofia’ some would refer to the exhibition of Latin American artists resisting the dictatorships, others to the Cisneiros collection of concrete art. The programme of Reina Sofia embraces all these different forms of artistic practice and gives them the respect they deserve.

With its 3 to 4 million visitors annually, Reina Sofia proves that our societies want modern and contemporary art more than ever, but also that this museum's way of relating art to life and to our collective capacity for renewal reaches people in a very direct way. The impulse to write this article was our strong hope and request to the Spanish government that they maintain the success of Museo Reina Sofia as it opens a new chapter. Against the unfounded recent criticism of the programme and the staff, we ask that the new director and existing team are encouraged to build upon Borja Villeda's policies. The government has supported Museo Reina Sofia to allow it to become what it is today. For that we give thanks. We ask you now to help take it forward as the vital place it is today. Art, artists and publics, including in the Low Countries, will be forever grateful.

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