

Plastic Paradise: Ibiza's 1971 ICSID Congress¹

SHORT BIO.:

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Abstract:

This essay discusses the use of plastic at the annual meeting of the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design (ICSID), held in Ibiza in 1971. It focuses on the pneumatic sculptures of Josep Ponsatí and the inflated architecture of José Miguel Prada Poole, whose

maquettes are today catalogued in museums as sculptures. The congress took place in the Sant Miquel cove during Franco's dictatorship and illustrates how plastic was understood under those specific social and political conditions, and how it was used on an island embodying traditional Mediterranean culture, albeit dramatically transformed by tourism. The essay also reveals the links established between that ICSID gathering and the plastic industry: Aiscondel, the plastic factory that provided the materials for some of the sculptures, used documentary images taken at the festival in aggressive publicity campaigns in subsequent years. In adopting this focus, this paper aims to show how the imagery of plastic has evolved in recent decades from the utopian vision prevalent at the time to its current association with a dystopian Anthropocene.

As this essay was being written, another environmental catastrophe struck the Galician coast in northern Spain: a shipment of enormous pellet bags—tiny pieces of plastic used in the production of all kinds of objects—fell off a cargo ship and was dispersed into the sea (fig. 1). The pellets were washed up in their millions on the same sandy beaches that, twenty years ago, were covered by the Prestige oil spill. Several commemorative exhibitions about that disaster were held in the summer of 2023 and the photographs taken by Allan Sekula of volunteers, in full hazmat suits, cleaning the oil spill were recently included in the Reina Sofia Museum's permanent exhibition. Their presence at the flagship of contemporary art in Spain attests the importance and continuing relevance of that environmental catastrophe. As the pellets disperse along the same coastline some two decades after Sekula's photographs, the feeling that prevention policies have not been adequately undertaken tragically prevails.

Few images are more powerful today when denouncing the pollution of the sea as those of plastics in the sea or on coastal beaches. The number of film-documentaries dealing with this subject has increased exponentially in recent years, and the topic has become an archetype of human effects on natural environments.² Plastic islands of ever-increasing size, plastic found in the stomachs and even bowels of fish and marine birds, and microplastics in our own bodies as we consume those very animals have all contributed to an awareness of plastic pollution as a key global concern. In the public imagination, the mixture of seawater, beach-sand, and plastic has become a clear iconography of environmental degradation. This was not always the case. At the annual meeting of the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design in Ibiza in October 1971, the image of plastic on the coastline conveyed quite a different set of associations, much more utopian in spirit.

Cala Sant Miquel, a small cove in the north of the island, hosted the meeting of the International Association of Industrial Designers (ICSID) that summer. For the occasion, plastic—that ‘triumphal material of the post-war petrochemical industry’³—was used extensively in four different projects. The first in the list was Antoni Muntadas, then an emerging artist, who created *Vacuflex* with the collaboration of Chilean artist Gonzalo Mezza. A more than one-hundred-meter green plastic construction pipe delivered by the eponymous plastic company Vacuflex was carried by assistants to the beach. At one point, as the temperature rose, it was used as a float for swimmers (fig. 2) and as a tool for writing huge words in the sand. Plastic was also an essential material in the performance-ritual organized by Antoni Miralda, Dorothée Selz, and Jaume Xifré—a party staged to celebrate the opening of the meeting: the capes and Venetian-like masks distributed among the partygoers, all made of plastic, conveyed the carnival-like spirit that was aimed for by these artists with this work

(in fact, the objects were even brought into the sea by the assistants in the following days as bathing props) (fig. 3). Thirdly, architect José Miguel de Prada Poole planned a colourful plastic *Instant City*, a type of tubular structure in inflated plastic used to house younger students so that they could attend the meeting without incurring many expenses (fig. 4). Many of Prada Poole's architectural maquettes are now considered sculptures by different museums (for example, Seville's CAAC), which is why he will also be considered in this essay. The fourth and last of the ICSID projects using plastic was that of Josep Ponsatí, who launched an inflatable sculpture composed of several helium-blown geometrical modules connected to each other to fly over the Sant Miquel cove (fig. 5).

The congress, organized in a Spain still under Franco's dictatorship and its traditional values, was a wake-up call to the political authorities who in turn saw in it a younger generation knocking at the door of history. The events that took place at the cove of Sant Miquel between 14 and 16 October 1971 contributed to a shift in the modernization of art and culture in Spain. Shortly afterwards, in 1972, the famous *Encuentros de Pamplona* was organized attracting artists from around the world—from Europe, Latin America, and the USA—which included the presence of John Cage and Merce Cunningham. The presence at *Encuentros* of some of the artists who had also participated in Ibiza the previous year (Prada Poole made another inflatable construction, and Muntadas installed an exhibition of video works, possibly the first exhibition of its kind in Spain) links both events to the history of the social acceptance of experimental arts in Francoist Spain, previously blacklisted in international cultural affairs because of its exceptional political situation.

These *Encuentros*, the most significant event under the dictatorship in terms of the internationalization of art in the country, also draw attention to the contradictions within the avant-garde under those political conditions: Prada Poole's pneumatic dome was damaged—presumably by the local authorities—since its bubble-like structure created an isolated atmosphere that propelled the eruption of spontaneous public debates against Francoism, something completely forbidden by the law; the Basque terrorist group ETA planted two bombs during the *Encuentros* causing material damage in the city and kidnapping a member of the financing entity, the Huarte family, the following year. That same family had enjoyed close ties with the dictatorial government through its eponymous construction company which had previously been involved in the building of the Valley of the Fallen—the projected tomb of Franco himself and still today a controversial monument—as well as several US airbases built when Spain shifted from Hitler's ally to anti-Communist buffer. The situation of this family, which both financed experimental art and took advantage of the economic favours of the dictatorship, awoke the political concerns of certain artists. Some of the Catalan conceptualists, represented by Pere Portabella, film director, anti-Francoist activist, and part of the emerging Grup de Treball, refused to participate in an event so closely linked to that family.

In other words, the *Encuentros* gathered those in favour of Francoism but essential in the spreading of contemporary art on Spanish soil (the Huarte family), those against Franco and in favour of a politicization of contemporary art (the anti-Francoist avantgarde artists), and those in opposition to Francoism but for whom art was an intimate expression of a national spirit then forcefully repressed (ETA). This succession of important events in recent Spanish art history ends with the Venice Biennial of 1976, the last cry of the avant-garde, organized

while Franco was still alive but opened after his death, followed by the subsequent Spanish transition to democracy, and which was equally polemical.

Among these recently re-evaluated events, in the historiography of Spanish avant-garde practice,⁴ only the ICSID congress retains its mythical utopian status. In the exhibition *Subversive Practices: Art under Conditions of Political Repression*, curated by Iris Dressler and Hans D. Christ in Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart in 2009, the Ibiza ICSID was contained in the museum's proposal with an exhibition of a full report on the gathering published in *Hogares Modernos*. An architecture and interior design magazine, *Hogares Modernos* was then very famous among young people for essays such as those by *Jack el decorador*, pseudonym of Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, a prominent writer linked to the left. His writings, using design as a platform for oblique political criticism, made this magazine earn public notoriety among the underground culture practitioners before it became an essential tool for distributing news about the organization of the ICSID events in Ibiza.⁵

The close link between Ibiza's ICSID and the subversive spirit implied by the Stuttgart exhibition's own title, took a more notably utopian direction in the 2012 exhibition at Barcelona's Contemporary Arts Museum (MACBA), *La utopia es posible: Eivisa, 1971 (Utopia is Possible: Ibiza, 1971)*, where the ICSID congress was monographically addressed in depth. However, no catalogue was published for the occasion. This process of mythologization finds its latest chapter in *Underground and Counterculture in Catalonia in the 1970s*, an exhibition held in Barcelona in 2021. Curated by an established publisher-editor of Spanish underground culture, Pepe Ribas of *Ajoblanco* magazine, the exhibition established the ICSID congress as the decisive moment in the emergence of the

counterculture and all the libertarian discourses around it.⁶ In the exhibition catalogue, Prada Poole's *Instant City* is presented as an emblem of utopia: a utopia built out of the same material that today epitomises dystopia. As will be seen throughout this essay, my intention here is to follow a different line of argument.

In Ibiza in October 1971 many issues arose that were connected in an unusual way. Firstly, the myth of the island of Ibiza: situated in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea and suspended in time and space. It was already by then a hotspot for international tourism. Since the early 1960s, its tourist industry had boomed, paving the way to ending Spain's long international isolation since the end of World War II which defeated Franco's allies. The influx of international tourists, mainly from Northern Europe, implied a source of capital that soon contributed to the Spanish economic miracle.⁷ Secondly, the ambitions of a young generation of artists, designers, and architects who wished to internationalize a Spain still subject to the wishes of General Franco. Thirdly, the use of plastic as a utopian material capable of forming buildings similar in form to soap-bubbles and geometric shapes that floated on the sea for everyone's amusement. Finally, the contribution of all these phenomena (island, countercultural youth, artists, bright-coloured plastic) to the advertising strategy of Aiscondel, a plastics factory based in Cerdanyola in the province of Barcelona, half-owned by the American company Monsanto. This company actively promoted plastic as a new and colourful wonder material in the Spanish media. One of its strategies was to donate all of the plastic material for the works and events at the ICSID congress, with the exception of that used in Muntadas's *Vacuflex*, which had been donated by the eponymous company. In this respect, Ponsatí's inflatable structure embodied a material entanglement that sculpture was facing at that time, which combined advertising, plastic, and publicity. It is worth noting that

Ponsatí's work was presented under two artistic paradigms: the immateriality of conceptual art practice (Lucy Lippard's *Six years: The dematerialization of the art object* was published one year later) and the paradigm of mobility as a symbol of modernization. Far from encapsulating the massive material waste we see in it today, plastic was then associated with immateriality, with the literal dematerialization—to borrow the term from conceptual-art—of the artwork itself.⁸

Ibiza: History, tourism, hippies, congresses

The year 1971 saw a peak in tourism and hippie culture in Ibiza. The first airport had been built in 1958 which, combined with the lower entry requirements introduced the following year, led to a boom in the island's tourism. The place still retained its reputation of rebelliousness and escapism thanks to the influence of famous visitors during the first half of the twentieth century: from Tristan Tzara and Gisèle Freund to Raoul Hausman, Walter Grupius, and *Wols*. It is worth mentioning the long tradition of utopian projects that implied displacement to far-away places, which emerged since the nineteenth century in Western Europe and elsewhere, as examined by Robert Kramm.⁹ In that sense, it is easy to see the fascination provoked by Ibiza in a culture that intertwined distant places and utopian dreams. Walter Benjamin stands out among the most relevant visitors to the island, especially during his stay in 1932/1933, when he wrote "Experience and Poverty". In this well-known article, Benjamin reflected the ambivalences provoked by modernity, which was capable of crushing human flesh to the bones on the battlefields while simultaneously producing geometric buildings with light and modern materials such as glass and iron. This last detail is curious given that his accommodation on the island had no glass windows and one-metre-thick walls,

a clear contrast to the prominence of glass, iron, and fluid inner spaces defended by modernist architecture. The island's precariousness, still structured around smallholdings well into the second half of the twentieth century, was evident up until the mid-1950s. Even so, many things had changed¹⁰ and, among them, tourism had greatly modified more than the island's living conditions: the massive building of hotels had even changed its physical appearance, a process exponentially pushed forward when the island's first airport was opened at the end of the decade. Numerous hotels had appeared, constructed at lightning speed—sometimes in only six months—indicating the expectations that tourism had placed on the island.

The structure of the emerging tourist industry in Ibiza relied entirely on the construction of hotels of vast dimensions in places that had hardly been accessible not long before. Driven by the promise of rapid profit, tour operators would even cover the building costs upfront to be recouped after the hotel opened.¹¹ Many landowners who had previously struggled to make a profit from poorly produced agriculture became wealthy after borrowing money to build hotels. Although the hotel industry would remain in the hands of the Ibizans themselves—in contrast to the experience on other islands such as Mallorca—the transformation of the coastline was immediate: between 1968 and 1971 the number of hotel beds increased by more than 30,000 on an island whose population in 1965 did not exceed 38,000. Locals were outnumbered by tourists. And by 1968, younger, countercultural tourists began to arrive.

These transformations radically altered the image of Ibiza, from an escape for the radical European intelligentsia to a mass tourism with plenty of young “hippies” in search of group bonding and with no desire of interacting with the locals. The new “hippy tourism”

characterised by colourful dress, men with long hair (rarely seen in Francoist Spain), and tribal-like rituals attracted media attention within the country and elsewhere, enhancing the image of the island abroad as a Mediterranean paradise for younger generations. This image was so powerfully distributed as to still be associated with the island today. This libertarian image was permitted by Franco's government which, faced with the influx of both tourists and foreign currency, turned a blind eye to it and, with few exceptions, left the tourists untouched by any form of violence or repression: many of the arriving tourists were unaware that they were going to spend their vacation in what was still a brutal dictatorship.¹²

Tourism was not the only source of the economic miracle in Ibiza: the organization of *congresos*, annual gatherings assembled by diverse professional societies, constituted a path for keeping the tourist industry going beyond the summer: in April 1971, Ibiza hosted the Skäl National Congress of the professional international tourism association. Daniel Giralt Miracle, a member of the organizing committee of the ICSID congress in Ibiza, acknowledged the importance of *congresos* for building professional and personal prestige. He recommended attending at least 'one or two congresses'¹³ a year. By 1971, Ibiza, a timeless environment that had barely been touched by modernity, had experienced a sudden transformation, both material and social, brought on by tourism in its diverse forms.

Significantly, the 1971 ICSID congress reflected the character of the island—its combination of modernity, timelessness, and eternal paradise. André Ricard, one of the most important representatives of the ICSID in Spain and vice-president of the international organization since 1963, had suggested that Spain host the annual gathering on several previous occasions. Each time, the proposal was rejected: the political situation of the country made the ICSID

worry about the publicity consequences of collaborating with a fascist state. However, at the ICSID meeting in London in 1969, Ibiza was finally nominated. The fact that Ibiza was far from the Iberian Peninsula, particularly Castile which had long represented the ‘eternal Spanish spirit’ discussed in countless fascist literature, was crucial in this choice. The decision to host the conference in the isolated cove of Sant Miquel—and in the wake of the first wave of hippies to the island—aimed to counter a potential criticism of the ICSID as a legitimatizing tool for the dictatorship.

Sant Miquel had already been affected by the hotel boom: the Galeón and Cártago hotels—essentially a single hotel given their similar designs—provided accommodation for older attendees at the congress with established professional careers. These two hotels, built by Raimón Torres at the end of the sixties, embodied the typical architectural style of Ibiza: sprawling along a slope down to the sea, their design extended horizontally along the coast, altering the shoreline’s appearance. Their modern, fortress-like look played a crucial role in the ICSID’s organization in Ibiza.

The first announcements of the ‘Congreso’ organization featured a highly sophisticated design with colourful images printed on fine-quality paper. The cover of the first pamphlet showcased a closed wooden door, painted sea-blue within a white-painted cement wall that embodied the colours traditionally associated with the Mediterranean. The image was intended as a metaphor for Spain’s previous isolation, suggesting that the congress would represent the opening of that door. The text also evoked the image of a touristic Mediterranean, defined by pleasure and hedonism on one side, eternity and modernity on the other:

The Mediterranean is the main square of the ancient world. The centre of the idea of man as the measure of all things, Ibiza is the quintessence of the Mediterranean. A very personal country, which has poured out all its heights. A country entirely of its own design. With a unique landscape, architecture, and craftsmanship. The survival of an ancient perfection. An age-old voice to dialogue with the modern world.¹⁴

The pamphlet, one of the first to promote the meeting, included a registration form for those interested in reserving a room in either of the two hotels, the Galeón or the Cártago.

Get together: Plastic as the quintessence of the congress

The casual tone, evocative of Ibiza's recent tourist-attraction status, was evident from the outset. Promotional material encouraged attendees to: 'Forget your formal suits and bring your sun cream. The rest we will do together *in situ*'.¹⁵ Indeed, there was a desire to distinguish the event from the formalities implied by the term *congress*. There were no activities, workshops, or conferences programmed: meetings were improvised and were held simply by notifying the organizers, who then took care of reserving the meeting rooms that were fully equipped with audio-visual technology, projection devices, and international translation services. A document explaining the nature of the meeting and its content would be informally distributed on-site. The audio-visual display was important, as it conveyed modern, up-to-date facilities in the timeless setting of the island: the event was partly financed by Olivetti, which presented its *Implicor*, a system for projecting images and texts in bright colours.¹⁶ A certain fascination was derived from the announcement that 'all kinetic, programmed, and technological art trends'¹⁷ would be present. However, any association of

technology as an outcome of technocracy (Franco's government had been referred to as *technocratic* since 1957) was omitted from the documentation.

The English expression for an informal meeting, a 'get-together', which recalled The Beatles' song *Come Together* (1969), conveyed the atmosphere of improvisation and freedom that was envisaged for the congress. The idea originated from Ricard who infused the congress publicity with this expression: 'The destructuring of the congress is in everyone's hands so we can achieve an enduring *get together* [in English] state that would ease networking'.¹⁸ It is relevant to note that 1971 was precisely the last year Ricard held his position as vice-president of the ICSID and it is possible that the outcome of the event forced his departure.

Soon after the news of the congress was announced, Prada Poole's *Instant City* was mentioned for the first time. As part of this ambition to create a *get-together*, a commission, formed by architects Carlos Ferrater and Fernando Benedito among others, had been organized to build a plastic structure to house the younger, less well-off attendees, including students. As the project unfolded, it also started to evolve into an expression against the formalities of a serious congress. Soon afterwards, the *Instant City* became the main expression of a congress turned upside down: swimsuits instead of suits, relaxation instead of professionalization, and togetherness instead of individualism. As a reflection of the *get-together* spirit, the commission was premised on the idea that, in order to house the students at low cost, they would participate in the process of building their own temporary fan-inflated dwelling. The idea of the *Instant City* implied participation, temporality, instantaneity, and, of course, the use of plastic as one of the materials to best exemplify the modern ambitions

of the gathering. The *Instant City*—fragile, ephemeral, and so light that it could be lifted by the wind—soon became an ideal metaphor for the youngest attendees: while the older established attendees would stay in one of the heavy concrete hotels on the hill, the Galeón and the Cártago, the students would stay in Prada Poole's temporary, coloured plastic structure. In fact, some of the attendees understood *Instant City* as a sort of alternative venue to the 'official' congress held in the concrete hotels.¹⁹ Plastic encapsulated the ambitions of a younger generation eager for modernity, and its colourful material contrasted with the grey tones of traditional architecture.

Conceived by Prada Poole, a young architect linked to the cybernetic art trends developed previously at the University of Madrid,²⁰ the large and extensive *Instant City* consisted of huge amounts of plastic, a material that was easy to manipulate but nevertheless still expensive. Xefo Guasch, one of the assistants of the architectural firm Ferrater and Benedito, contacted Aiscondel, which specialized in plastic production at the time, to request that it provide sufficient material free of costs. At first, the company was distrustful of the project as the use of plastic in architecture was traditionally quite different from the thin sheets requested. In response, Prada Poole and Ferrater constructed a prototype in front of company engineers in the Cerdanyola factory. The material was supplied and arrived at the Sant Miquel cove for the students to staple the joints. At first there were concerns about the consistency of the construction as no one knew if the staples would be sufficient to hold the structure under the strain of the air fans.²¹ To resolve this problem, the architects came up with the idea of a double-folding staple that kept the pressure under control. The *Instant City* lacked a pre-established plan, and its final form was the result of the collaboration between various national design associations that built the parts independently so that they could be joined

together afterwards. One group decided to include a tree within the plastic structure, and this was repeatedly photographed.

The structure made a strong visual impact (fig. 6): the bright colours gave the impression of inflated balloons that were connected to each other. It looked like a structure that might have been created by Archigram or Buckminster Fuller, at once evoking a spaceship, a pleasure boat, and a Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club cartoon. It is worth pointing out the contrast with Spanish *Informel* painters—such as Antoni Tàpies or Manolo Millares—, whose practice used the same black tones of the baroque period in their representations of contemporary drama.

Such was the impact of the structure that the older and more established congress participants walked down the hill when they saw it. Participants, young and old, established professionals and students were brought together at the entrance of the structure. A night-time ritual was organized by the artists Antoni Miralda, Jaume Xifré, and Dorotheé Selz with plastic caps, masks, and brightly coloured food. The impromptu gathering ended with a party remembered by some for its paroxysm—a true *get-together* as Ricard had aimed for. After the party, the plastic garments, masks, and caps were discarded in the sand along with plastic plates and cutlery (figs. 7 & 8). After the congress, the plastic remains of the *Instant City* were transformed into temporary tents for the resident and newly arriving hippies.

The collaborative spirit between designers, architects, and students necessary for the realisation of *Instant City* was fostered through a manifesto widely disseminated in the months prior to the event as an international call for help. It was an informal invitation to a

younger generation of participants to collaborate on *Instant City*, which also emphasized the positive values associated with plastic. The manifesto adopted a New Age language as it mentioned a metamorphosis of the gods, a New Culture—with capital letters—in the process of development. It also referred to one of the main ideas behind the ICSID organization, the *trip* (the only English word in the text and, still today, a rather strange use of multilingualism): beneath such an ethos of mobility lay the image of the journey that allowed an eternal displacement, even the possibility of living several lives, of *travelling around the day in eighty worlds*, appropriating Julio Cortázar's book of 1967 that had been inspired by Jules Verne. However, the use of the term 'trip' in the manifesto also implied both the effects of psychedelic drugs and the new ethos of a nomadic life of youth culture, permanently displaced, open, and cosmopolitan. In this sense, as the manifesto indicated, the practice of design had to provide a new flexible space for an equally flexible life 'according to the trips of its inhabitants'. The manifesto ended by commenting on the effects of Prada Poole's structure to promote certain attitudes and behaviours. In conclusion, it was the plastic material that embodied some of the most powerful ideas put forward by the congress: that is flexibility, multiplicity, mobility and, of course the colourful effects of an LSD trip.

Ponsatí's inflatables

The manifesto for *Instant City* did not mention Ponsatí's inflatable sculpture, which was similarly produced: it was made of plastic from the Aiscondel factory and assembled collaboratively by the participating students. In Ponsatí's case, as with Poole's structure, collaboration was an essential component of the work.

In 1971, Ponsatí was a young artist. He began as a sculptor at around the age of twenty-four, although with a background in set design from his native Banyolas, and having undertaken a brief period of study at the Massana school of design. His inflatable sculpture in Ibiza was not his first. In May that same year he had designed an inflatable sculpture made of rectangles that, one on top of the other in a manner reminiscent of Brancusi's columns, reached a height of forty metres. The inflatable structure encountered several problems including the effect of the wind which moved the sections in such a way that it was impossible to maintain the intended column-like appearance.

It is unclear whether Ponsatí knew about the *Structures Gonflables* exhibition held at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris in 1968 and organized by the *Utopie* collective (which was connected to well-known figures within the field of urbanism including Henri Lefebvre and a very young Jean Baudrillard). As is well known, this exhibition represented a milestone in fostering the modern myth of plastic, especially its characterization as a material of 'maximum transformation'²² (as famously observed by Roland Barthes). It is also possible that the association between plastic and utopia emerged through this exhibition (although *Utopie's* understanding of the term was polemical).²³ A 1972 essay by the Catalan art critic Alexandre Cirici Pellicer mentions artists Keise Brockelhurts, Herbert Distel, and Hans Haacke as forerunners to Ponsatí's pneumatic structures. Given both the prevalence of conceptual art practice in Catalonia, characterized by the display of information (in the form of magazines and catalogues), and Ponsatí's position at the Eina School of Design in Barcelona, he might well have come across *Structures Gonflables* and other related exhibitions.

Ponsatí's contribution to sculpture in Spain at the time might have struck critics. His works combined two opposing lines of thought: aesthetic uselessness and functionality. Once again it was Cirici who drew attention to the connection between a technical tradition of invention (in the line of Sigfried Giedion's *Mechanization Takes Command*) and the useless character of Ponsatí's sculptures. Their visual effect in the landscape was significant for keen critics. His works were of huge dimensions (forty metres for the one in Banyolas, sixty metres in Ibiza, and reaching 160 metres in other cases). Along with the metallic rope and grips that joined the sections (in many instances), they created a deep impression of weight. As such, to see them glide through the sky seemed strange: large-scale and yet ephemeral, machine-like, and yet useless, and made from a material associated with functionality but used in this case purely for visual effect.

For Ponsatí, the visual documentation of his sculptures was critical, even more than its material result, given that many of his works were installed only temporarily and the one in Ibiza was completely lost after it fell into the sea.²⁴ Photographs and audio-visual recordings are the only lasting remains of the work. His interest in ephemerality as a sculptural quality is evident in the workshops he organized at Eina School, where he taught a course on sculptural materials. The photographs from that course emphasize the material qualities of the objects' surfaces caused by the dramatic use of light (fig. 9). The ephemeral dimension of his sculptures is even more marked in another series of photographs in which students modified an elastic fabric by putting themselves within it (fig. 10). The structures, necessarily ephemeral because of the type of material used, could only be recorded by photography, transforming the camera into an essential sculptural tool.²⁵

Ponsatí's floating sculpture in Ibiza was documented on colour film thanks to Gonzalo Mezzá and Roberto Mardones. Evoking the famous orgiastic scene in the desert-like environment of Michelangelo Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* (1970), the heroic efforts of the students assembling the inflatable is enhanced by a Pink Floyd-like soundtrack music. The images clearly show the difficulty involved in the process, blowing up the segments with helium and making the huge structure float at sea. The film concentrates on the many failed attempts to get the sculpture airborne, tightening the metal wires holding up the sections which, in turn, causes them to distort the linear composition. The film documents the structure as it starts to float but, as it glides over the beach, one of the sections finally comes free from the metal structure and flies away unexpectedly. It was this ephemeral quality of Ponsatí's work that struck Cirici who comments that it: "belong[ed] to mortal art, as by definition it is destined to immediate disappearance. Its material element is minimal while its essential element is the ritual."²⁶ Plastic, the material that today encapsulates global pollution, back then was seen as the literal embodiment of dematerialized ambitions.

This last quote by Cirici appeared in an edition of Ponsatí's work published by the company Aiscondel together with Monsanto International shortly after the ICSID congress had ended. Its luxury edition, in the form of a folder, contained several black and white photographs documenting Ponsatí's work in Ibiza (fig. 11). The document was designed in such a way that enabled it to be considered an artwork itself: the various pages with photographs printed without frames could be spread out to acquire an exhibition dimension. The design evokes the kind of documents that were common within conceptual art practice in Catalonia in which Ponsatí himself took part.²⁷ In his trilingual (Catalan, English, and Spanish) contribution to

Aiscondel's portfolio, Cirici pointed to the relationships established by the work with the avant-garde. These included Alexander Calder's mobiles, whose playful dimension, relationship with technology, and breaking down of material hierarchy recalled Ponsati's structure. But Cirici also introduced a dimension more related to the culture of the moment: the necessary collaboration between the participants, the immaterial character of the work of which nothing remained but its documentation, eschewing the final product. In this context, the Catalan critic also included an ecological concern in the structure's connection to the environment when writing:

[T]his work pertains to landscape art. It possesses a will to identify with nature itself, not to break away from it, or being the reverse of what modern art has been, which the ecology of artificial forms frequently declared war against nature obeying the European legend of Robinson Crusoe (*sic.*).²⁸

The text brings together the myth of the forgotten and still primitive island, the rejection of technology, and an embrace of nature. It is a surprising interpretation for a modular plastic structure, inflated with helium, supported by metal wires and lost at the bottom of the sea.

Aiscondel, advertising, plastic, sculpture

Since at least 1963, Aiscondel had been developing an aggressive advertising campaign through two important conservative newspapers: *ABC* and *La Vanguardia*. An example of this was a whole-page advert with an image of its factory and one hundred men dressed in black suits (fig. 12). These figures were the company's representatives at a sales training

convention. The accompanying text evokes the characteristics of plastic that were subsequently embodied in Ponsatí's inflatable in Ibiza: modernization, flexibility, dynamism, and mobility.

However, Aiscondel not only affected visual imagery and material culture, as its factory in Cerdanyola del Vallés had literally transformed the village in its entirety. Established in 1943, the Aiscondel factory in the province of Barcelona had a major impact on the small town, which until then had been supported solely by a rural economy and a traditional way of life. Similarly to Olivetti's city-factory of Ivrea, the company monopolized the village's young workforce with its three work shifts (morning, afternoon, and night). As also happened in Ivrea, Aiscondel transformed the townscape with buildings for the workers and sports facilities that would compensate for its centrality in the village's life. The town grew under the shadow of two products coming out of that factory: *Airon-fix* (pronounced *ironfix*)—a plastic sheet that adhered to surfaces for protection—and SKAI, an imitation leather made of polyurethane used in furniture design. Both these products still enjoy a status in the everyday uses of plastic in Spain, in part because of the effective advertising campaigns of the late 1960s. This was especially so for SKAI, as the furniture built with this product reached an iconic status during that decade. In May 1968, *ABC* newspaper published the first Aiscondel competition for furniture designs employing SKAI (fig. 13). Open to both professional and amateur designers (at the time design as a profession was beginning to emerge), the prize included an exhibition at *Hogarhotel*—an important furniture fair—and 250,000 pesetas, a considerable sum for a country where average house prices were 127,000 pesetas. This competition ran in parallel to another, under the umbrella of *Aironfix*. Announced in the same

year, it doubled the prize money. Both contests were held annually until at least 1972, when the company's advertising campaign took a new direction.

It was at that moment when the ICSID served as a new platform on which to redirect the new promotional image of Aiscondel: soon after the opening of the Ibiza congress the company started to advertise its contribution to the ICSID. At the end of November, *La Vanguardia* published an article by Daniel Giralt Miracle, an organizing member of the ICSID, in which he outlined several details of the event. The article contained an impressive photograph of Ponsatí's massive sculpture, which dwarfed a nearby dinghy speedboat (fig. 14). On the next full page, an advertisement in bright colours was taken out by Aiscondel which, with a colourful photograph of the *Instant City*, highlighted the company's essential contribution to the ICSID congress as it had provided for free all of the plastics for production. The terms used to refer to these materials, *Airon 1* for the *Instant City* and *Airon 2* for the floating sculpture, evoked for its readers the *Airon-fix* that had earned the company its fame through its widely known competitions. The material's technical term—polyvinyl chloride (PVC)—was too wordy for the demands of the company's publicity.

This more elaborate and sophisticated line of advertising, which combined information with impressive images, was developed into a new line of publicity in later 1972. The prizes gave way to *The World of Plastics*, a series of monographic articles with textual and visual information on plastic, ranging from its history, typologies, forms of production, uses, and low environmental impact.²⁹ In the third issue of this series, an inflatable structure by Ponsatí constructed in Benidorm—another famous tourist destination—appeared on the pages of *La Vanguardia* and *ABC* (fig. 15). The text referred to three key aspects: the material, with its

catchy name *Aironplay*; its colour, as the sculpture ‘for a few days put a note of colour in the cheerful sky of Benidorm’³⁰; and the youthfulness of the artist as a stand-in for the modern associations of the material.

But the cheerfulness of its publicity campaign contrasted with what was really taking place at Cerdanyola del Vallés: social struggles had affected the Aiscondel factory and the village as a whole since at least November 1971. Repeated street demonstrations and work stoppages were organized to denounce poor working conditions. Aiscondel responded by calling the authorities which finally exerted violence on the population. *Vallés obrero*, an improvised fanzine that came out of *Comisiones Obreras* (then a clandestine union organization), appeared at that time. Its second issue, published in 1972, denounced police charges against demonstrators throughout Cerdanyola, thanking the village neighbours for leaving their house doors open so protesters could get away from police brutality (figs. 16 & 17). The crude tone, the poor paper quality, the typewritten texts with many misspellings, sometimes containing designs made with a ruler or by hand, convey an image of precariousness, urgency, and fragility that sharply contrasts with the electric colours, good design techniques and glossy images that characterised Aiscondel’s advertisements.

The social struggles at Cerdanyola’s Aiscondel factory have never been included in the history of Ibiza’s ICSID, which until now reaches its mythological status by obviating the production conditions of the materials that grants its understanding as a utopian moment in Spanish recent art history. The plastic paradise embodied in Ibiza did not only used materials now embodying ecological disaster. It did so by obviating the material consequences of its production, completely erased until now from that moment. It was precisely such erasure

what made plastic disappear and merge with the landscape, with nature, as in Cirici's understanding of Ponsatí's sculpture. In doing so the narrative surrounding this event also obviates a consideration of the consequences of plastics production, especially of how it affected distant places which generally fall outside of history such as Cerdanyola.

¹ This essay was published thanks to the funding by the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities to the research project *ATLAS AV: La audiovisualización de la historia del arte y del museo* (PID2022-1367530B-100) (MCIN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033). I would like to thank Katia García Walsh for her help in the English editing process of the essay.

² *A Plastic Ocean* (2021, Dir.: Candida Brady), *The Great Pacific Garbage Patch is not What you Think it is* (2018, Dir.: Nic Davis), *A Plastic Wave* (2018, Dir.: James Roberts) are just a few examples.

³ See C. Bernárdez and J. Vega, *Materialidad y técnica. Una aproximación a la práctica artística occidental*, Madrid, Cátedra, 2022, p. 361. Also, on the relevance of material experimentation in contemporary art, see M. Pugliese, *Tecnica mista. Materiali e procedimenti nell'arte del XX secolo*, Milan, Mondadori, 2006, pp. 136–142.

⁴ The last exhibition of the *Encuentros* at Reina Sofia Museum was subtitled 'ending party of experimental art'. See J. Díaz Cuyás (org.), *Encuentros de Pamplona 1972: fin de fiesta del arte experimental*, Madrid, Reina Sofia Museum, 2009. The work of Paula Barreiro has been crucial to the revaluation of the Spanish presence at the 1976 Venice Biennial when a non-government curatorial committee provoked such a political crisis that no official state

representation was sent to legitimize it. See P. Barreiro López, *Avant-garde Art and Criticism in Francoist Spain*, Liverpool, Liverpool Univ. Press, 2021, pp. 293–308.

⁵ See H. Christ and I. Dressler (orgs.), *Subversive Practices: Art Under Conditions of Political Repression, '60s–'80s, South America & Europe*, Stuttgart, Hatje Cantz, 2011, pp. 387–409.

⁶ See P. Ribas (Org.), *Underground y contracultural en la Cataluña de los 70*, Barcelona, Terranova, 2021. It should be noted that counterculture is currently a topic of heated debate, especially from the political perspectives being drawn on it. In Spain at least, González Alcantud highlights counterculture as the origin of both current leftist and neoliberal political positions. See J.A. González Alcantud (Ed.), *Europa y la contracultura*, Madrid, Abada, 2020.

⁷ On the topic of tourism and dictatorship in Spain, see A. Fuentes Vega, *Bienvenido Mr turismo. Cultura visual del boom en España*, Cátedra, Madrid, 2017, pp. 14–24.

⁸ Plastic back then was perceived as a sort of magic material: capable of adopting any form or colour, light and cheap. Here Andy Warhol's *Exploding Plastic* inevitable concentrated, even in the title, the avant-garde iconography associated with this material. Robert Watts' everyday objects made in plastic (chairs, tables, etc.) to be sold on a mass scale as well as Philip Orenstein, Suján Souri, and Dorian Godoy's 'Mass-art' generally go unperceived in the history of art and plastic. However, these cases reveal the link between consumer culture and plastic that pervaded the US understanding of this material. See I. Estella 'The Impossible Performance of Mass Commodity. George Maciunas, Herman Fine and Robert Watts' Implosions Inc. (ca. 1967),' *Culture and History Digital Journal*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2016.

⁹ See R. Kramm, ‘Doing Utopia: Radical Utopian Communities, Mobility, and the Body in the Early Twentieth Century,’ *Journal of Global History*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2024, pp. 57–76.

¹⁰ It is worth noting that when Benjamin stayed at Ibiza, he felt that the Ibizan paradise was in the process of disappearance as two hotels had recently opened.

¹¹ J. R. Cardona & A. Serra Cantallops, ‘Historia social del desarrollo turístico en Ibiza (décadas de 1960 y 1970). Análisis desde perspectivas historiográficas’, *Investigaciones Turísticas*, 5, 2013, p. 86.

¹² As can be seen in Vilgot Sjöman’s film *I Am Curious [Yellow]* (1967), where the Swiss filmmaker interviewed tourists returning from their Spanish vacations unaware of the country’s political situation.

¹³ D. Giralat Miracle, ‘ICSID 1971 Ibiza. VII Congreso Internacional de Diseño Industrial’, *Quaderns d’Arquitectura i Urbanisme*, 81, 1971, p. 121.

¹⁴ Madrid, Reina Sofía Museum archive, untitled document, brochure on ICSID, 1971, M/Q C031 175936. Subsequent references: RSMA.

¹⁵ RSMA, *Noticias News Nouvelles*, 1971, unpaginated, M/Q C031 175936. Our translation.

¹⁶ This was not the only reference to advanced technology at the ICSID. José María Yturralde, a very important geometric abstraction artist, attended to deliver a presentation on the Centro de Cálculo, the first experience in art produced by computers, made possible by an IBM donation to Madrid’s Central University, now Complutense.

¹⁷ RSMA, *Documentos de información*, 1971, unpaginated, M/Q C031 175936.

¹⁸ Document, as in previous note.

¹⁹ Antoni Muntadas in conversation with the author, June 21, 2024.

²⁰ The *Centro de Cálculo* at the Central University of Madrid (now Complutense) was an exceptional experience relating art and computers/cybernetics. It emerged thanks to the donation by IBM of an old computer to be used for research. It implied the building of its headquarters and the organization of a series of seminars on different topics (art, architecture, music, poetry, even UFO research). Many artists already participating in the geometric abstraction tendency got involved in the experience and today it is still considered one of the most important tendencies in Spain. The Complutense University in Madrid proudly inherited this experience by permanently exhibiting many of the resulting works in its main government building.

²¹ See X. Guasch, “Instant City. Un sueño que se hizo real”, in P. Ribas (Org.),

Underground y contracultural en la Cataluña de los 70, Barcelona, Terranova, 2021, p. 35.

²² R. Barthes, ‘El plástico’ (1957), *Mitologías*, Madrid, Siglo XXI, 2005, p. 176.

²³ C. Buckley, ‘Introduction: The Echo of Utopia’, C. Buckley & J. L. Violeau (eds.), *Utopie: texts and projects 1967-1978*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011, p. 13.

²⁴ Although Ponsatí played a key role in the dissemination of conceptual art preoccupations, his leadership diminished as the end of the ‘70s approached. Health conditions progressively impeded him from an active art career which stopped during the mid ‘80s. It is probably this that explains the very little scholarship on his work, generally reduced to his involvement at Ibiza’s ICSID. Amongst the few writers of his work, Cirici stands out especially in his highlighting of the documentary relevance of his inflatables. See A. Cirici, “Els inflables de’en Ponsatí (1972)”, in *Ponsatí. Escultures–els inflables (1971–1986)*, Ajuntament de Girona/Museu d’Història de la Ciutat: Girona, 1986, p. 19. Ponsatí himself commented on

this same fact when writing in the only published document we know he authored: “My sculptures are accessible through their mediatization on photographs, films and videos. These should not be considered as an ally or a side-effect of my work, but as its own continuation.”

See J. Ponsatí, “Esculturas, els inflables” (as in previous reference), p. 7.

²⁵ See S. Hamill and M. R. Luke (eds.), *Photography and Sculpture. The art object in Reproduction*, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, 2017. Especially on the relation between minimalist and pre-conceptual documentary photography in this same edition, see J. Weiss, ‘Evidence of Sculpture’ (pp. 235–250).

²⁶ A. Cirici Pellicer, ‘El II Inflable de Ponsatí en Ibiza’, *Ponsatí, el hinchable de Ibiza*, Barcelona, Aiscondel, 1972, unpaginated.

²⁷ Ponsatí, although a sculptor and design teacher, had a very important role in the early development of conceptual art tendencies in Catalonia along with Muntadas, Jordi Benito, Carles Santos, Francisco Abad, Ferrán García Sevilla or Carles Pazos. In the unfolding of conceptualism, these artists organized several exhibitions of their work which were accompanied by documentation (magazines, books, and catalogues) that served as a form of contextualization of what was exhibited. Both, the works, and the documentation, could be copied on nearby xerox machines. See J. Albarrán, *Disputas sobre lo contemporáneo. Arte español entre el antifranquismo y la postmodernidad*, Publicaciones Exit, Madrid, 2019, esp. pp. 85–90. More encyclopaedic in its approach to conceptual art practices in Spain: P. Parcerisas, *Conceptualismo(s) poéticos, políticos y periféricos. En torno al arte conceptual en España, 1964-1980*, Akal, Madrid, 2007.

²⁸ A. Cirici Pellicer, ‘El II Inflable de Ponsatí en Ibiza’, *Ponsatí, el hinchable de Ibiza*, Barcelona, Aiscondel, 1972, unpaginated.

²⁹ Authors unknown, “El mundo de los plásticos 3”, *ABC*, 22nd September 1972. Starting on 16 March 1972, and ending on 27 June 1974, Aiscondel published the series “El mundo de los plásticos” in national newspapers such as *ABC* and *La Vanguardia*. Reaching up to 13 issues, it informed readers about the different uses, modes of production and events in which plastic was central. It should be mentioned the importance given to artistic work related to plastic, in which Ponsatí’s sculptures played a key role. Pollution increasingly became a repeated topic in the series, but it always was included in an alleviated tone.

³⁰ Document, as in previous note.

Figure 1: Pellets arriving at the sea coast in Galicia in early 2024. Photography by Surfrider España.

Figure 2: Antoni Muntadas and Gonzalo Mezza, *Vacuflex*, 1971. ARXIU/AM Asociación Archivo Muntadas. Centro de Estudios e Investigación, Barcelona.

Figure 3: Antoni Miralda, Jaume Xifré and Dorotheé Selz, *Ceremonial*, ICSID, Ibiza, 1971. ARXIU/AM Asociación Archivo Muntadas. Centro de Estudios e Investigación, Barcelona.

Figure 4: Xavier Miserachs, *Inflatable at VII Congrès Internacional de Disseny held in Ibiza, 1971* (1971), transparencie, 6x6, color. MACBA collection. Centro de Estudios y Documentación. Fondo Xavier Miserachs. © Herederas de Xavier Miserachs.

Figure 5: Josep Ponsatí, *Instant City* (film-still from documentation), 1971. MACBA Arxiu.

Figure 6: Roberto Mardones, *Instant City* (film-still from documentation), 1971. MACBA Arxiu.

Figure 7 & 8: Ceremonial remains at Sant Miquel, ICSID, Ibiza, 1971 (detailed image as appeared in *Hogares Modernos*, November, 1971, unpaginated). Biblioteca Nacional de España, Madrid.

Figure 9 & 10: Volume work from Josep Ponsatí's class. Photograph by Albert Font, 1971–1972. Archive of EINA, University Center of Design and Art, Barcelona.

Figure 11: Cover page of booklet *Ponsatí, el hinchable de Ibiza*, Barcelona, Aiscondel/Monsanto, 1972. Archive of EINA, University Center of Design and Art, Barcelona.

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- Figure 12: Aiscondel ad as published in the newspaper *ABC* March 4th, 1965.
- Figure 13: Aiscondel's SKAI contest ad as published in the Newspaper *ABC* July 24th, 1968.
- Figure 14: Detail of Daniel Giralt Miracle's article in *La Vanguardia* (31 October 1971) with a photography documenting Ponsatí's inflatable sculpture. Biblioteca Nacional de España, Madrid.
- Figure 15: Detail of "El mundo de los plásticos 3", as published in newspaper *ABC*, September, 22nd, 1972.
- Figure 16: *Vallés obrero: plataforma de CCOO de empresa del Vallès Oriental* (cover), no. 2, February 1972. Arxiu Històric de la Ciutat de Barcelona (Fons Hemerogràfics).
- Figure 17: *Vallés obrero: plataforma de CCOO de empresa del Vallès Oriental* (10th page), no. 2, February 1972. Arxiu Històric de la Ciutat de Barcelona (Fons Hemerogràfics).