

# Scars of Resistance: Manolo Millares's Aesthetics of Negativity

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**Abstract** Manolo Millares emerged as a key figure in Spanish Informalism during the 1950s, a time marked by Francoist censorship and repression. This article examines Millares's complicated position during Franco's regime, arguing that his focus on absence and materiality, analyzed through Adorno's negative dialectics, constituted a radical form of aesthetic protest. Millares utilized mixed media to create works that evoked themes of death and violence, yet transcended mere figuration. Millares's innovative approach, characterized by the use of burlap and incisions on the canvas, challenged traditional aesthetic unity and formalism. By engaging with multiple forms of absence and non-identity, his work resisted subsumption into political or aesthetic narratives.

**Keywords** Informalism. Adorno. Millares. Absence. Nonidentity. Non-being. Mixed-media.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Background and Theoretical Framing. – 3 Historical Context and Representational Conflicts. – 4 The Work of Art's Resistance Through Concretion. – 5 Homunculus: Scars and Non-Being. – 6 Conclusion.




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## 1 Introduction

Manolo Millares (1926-1972), recognized in contemporary art criticism as a prominent figure in Spanish informalism, emerged as an avant-garde artist in the 1950s during a period of censorship and repression by Francisco Franco's regime. In his work, which involved an ensemble of materials and mixed media, Millares was influenced by Surrealism (whose traces can be seen in the asemic writing he sometimes used, a successor of automatic writing), Art Informel, Arte Povera, and other international post-avant-garde currents, all of which contributed to his unique style. Although Millares's works often evoke themes of corporeal death and violence, they nevertheless transcend figuration. Instead, they invite viewers to engage intimately and literally with the artwork, fostering a closeness that stems from the materiality of the works, the rigid fabrics, and the absence-made-present through incisions on the canvas. The fragility of the ensemble, seemingly on the verge of disintegration, creates a sense of impermanence and vulnerability, prompting contemplation of one's inherent proximity to death. The use of materials sourced from the streets and garbage dumps, whose histories the artist deliberately preserves, complicates the relationship between works of art and their historical and social context.

This article starts with an account of the difficult political situation experienced by Manolo Millares, along with other Spanish artists from the informalist movement, due to the appropriation of avant-garde art by Franco's dictatorship. After WWII, Spain, while grappling with the aftermath of its Civil War, found itself isolated under Franco's repressive regime, which enforced severe censorship and controlled cultural expression. Nonetheless, artists like Millares gained international recognition, participating in prestigious exhibitions such as the Venice and São Paulo Biennales. However, this success came at a cost because it was facilitated by the very regime that the artists opposed. The Francoist government strategically used cultural diplomacy to bolster its image abroad, integrating avant-garde art into its propaganda efforts to outwardly project a modern image while internally maintaining its authoritarian grasp.

Critics such as de la Torre (2015), Guasch (2008), Medina Martín (2016), Rivero Gómez (2020), and Vilas (2021) have described Millares and his contemporaries either as ethical artists exposing the regime's brutality or as its instruments. However, the reality was more nuanced, and my article explores this tension between resistance and co-option in art under complex political circumstances. More specifically, I argue that Millares's work embraces a different kind of aesthetic resistance by engaging with absence and non-being, concepts whose aesthetic dimensions can be productively understood using Theodor W. Adorno's philosophy. Adorno's negative dialectics, which

emphasizes the importance of nonidentity and the materiality of objects, provides a framework for understanding Millares's art beyond its immediate political and purely formal dimensions.

## 2 Background and Theoretical Framing

Informalism<sup>1</sup> is an art movement that emerged in postwar Europe, animated by the rejection of traditional forms<sup>2</sup> and echoing the existential anguish felt after WWII. Although France is regarded as the starting milieu of informalism, with artists like Jean Fautrier, Henri Michaux, George Mathieu, and Jean Dubuffet gaining international recognition, Italy and Spain developed their own forms of informalism. For example, in Italy, Lucio Fontana, Alberto Burri, and Emilio Vedova became representatives of spacialism and exhibited an intense engagement with material, texture, and performance. Spanish artists, such as Antoni Tàpies, Manolo Millares, Rafael Canogal, Antonio Saura, and Luis Feito, hindered by the political restrictions of Franco's regime, looked to Italy's art scene as a gateway to broader European influence, especially as the Venice Biennale became a major venue for their international debut in the 1950s. While Lucio Fontana's explorations of space and Alberto Burri's expressive use of material influenced Spanish artists (notably Manolo Millares and Luis Feito), who incorporated a similar rawness and material intensity into their works, Spanish informalism displays a dynamism and tension that sets it apart from its European counterparts. As Pasini notes,

In these reverse sides of paintings<sup>3</sup> rises the cry of the most authentic informal challenge, with a dramatic [...] quality difficult to find in the rest of Europe: there is a Goyaesque hallucination,

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**1** The term *art informel*, translated into English as 'informal art' or 'informalism', was coined by Michel Tapié in his influential book *Un art autre* (1952). In fact, Tapié used both *art autre* and *art informel*; however, the latter became more widely used (for an account of informalist terminology, see Pasini 1995, 179-82). The umbrella-term *art informel* includes currents such as lyrical abstraction, tachism, gestural painting, spacialism, performative painting, and art brut (see the entries "Art Autre" and "Art Informel" in the *Oxford Dictionary of Modern and Contemporary Art*, 2009, 116, 122).

**2** Informalist artists were reacting not only against the classical figural forms (represented, especially in Spain, by Christian realism and classicism) but also against the formalism of the historical avant-gardes. As the critic Lawrence Alloway notes, informalism "dispenses with most of the conventions of traditional modern art. The rejected rhetoric includes geometry, formal composition, and the purification of art by the exclusion of objects" (cited by Whiteley 2012, 96).

**3** Pasini is referring here to the informalist strategy of exposing the 'back' of a painting, as well as the frame, mounting materials, and hardware, as an integral part of a painting.

a continuous and devouring 'sabbath' of unprecedented bestiality. (1995, 287)

In questi rovesci di pittura sale l'urlo della più autentica sfida informale, con una drammaticità [...] difficile da riscontrare nel resto d'Europa: vi si respira un'allucinazione goyesca, un continuo e divorante 'sabba' di inaudita bestialità.<sup>4</sup>

Because the aim of this article is not to offer a systematic classification of the different forms of negativity in Millares's work, my framework is speculative rather than analytic. More specifically, this article adopts a speculative dialectical approach to exploring Millares's work and his socio-historical context. I propose Adorno's concept of nonidentity from *Negative Dialectics* (1973) as a lens through which informalism and particularly Millares's work can be theorized as resistance against rigid forms and a drive towards raw expression. Adorno's method of negative dialectics is only 'negative' insofar as it adopts nonidentity as foundation. Although the terms 'negative' and 'negativity' appear frequently in Adorno's work, he never approaches negativity as an independent concept; rather, negativity is always at work in a dialectical process.<sup>5</sup> Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* (1973), which David Sherman called "his philosophical masterpiece" (2016, 353), sets out to turn dialectics around by emphasizing negation (the operative aspect of negativity):

As early as Plato, dialectics meant to achieve something positive by means of negation; the thought figure of a 'negation of negation' later became the succinct term. This book seeks to free dialectics from such affirmative traits without reducing its determinacy. (Adorno 1973, xix)

However, exposing the rationale and *modus operandi* of negative dialectics as a manner of doing philosophy is an arduous task, seeing that discontinuity and concretion are emphasized in contrast to and in tandem with the syllogistic structure of classical metaphysics. *Negative Dialectics* (1973) is perplexing because it seeks "to

<sup>4</sup> All texts that appear in both English and the original language (Spanish or Italian) are translated by the Author.

<sup>5</sup> Adorno was skeptical of the idea of pure, or strong and unmediated, negativity. For him, the dialectical process was essential to philosophical understanding. In "How It Is (After Auschwitz): Adorno and Beckett" (2020), Jean-Michel Rabaté notes the following regarding Adorno's reception of Beckett's emphasis on negativity in relation to theory of art: "Adorno expressed some incomprehension about the issue of negativity, and noted: 'Very enigmatic remark about a kind of positivity contained in pure negativity. In view of such absolute negativity, one could be said to quasi live'" (119).

serve authentic concretion" (xix) while remaining, for the most part, a "largely abstract text" (xix). It is important to note that Adorno's position is, however critical of classical metaphysics, is nevertheless not anti-thought. Adorno emphasizes the importance of conceptual work in reaching the concept's other. His project in *Negative Dialectics* is an attempt "by means of logical consistency to substitute for the unity principle, and for the paramountcy of the supraordinated concept, the idea of what would be outside the sway of such unity" (xx). The contention that the concept is not identical with the object to which it refers underpins Adorno's critique of identity, which is at the heart of *Negative Dialectics*. The anti-identitarian premise that concepts and their counterparts in the world (objects) never completely overlap sets up one of his most important theses regarding negative dialectics, which is that "dialectics is the consistent sense of non-identity" (5) in which "contradiction is nonidentity under the aspect of identity" (5). Thus, Adorno turns the unity of the concept into the heterogeneity of the object.<sup>6</sup> Adorno's negative dialectics is based on Hegel's dialectical method, which reconciles opposites through the process of thesis-antithesis-synthesis. As Sherman points out,

while Hegel argues for 'the *identity* of identity and non-identity' [...], Adorno argues in effect for the *non-identity* of identity and non-identity: 'To change this direction of conceptuality, to give it a turn towards non-identity, is the hinge of negative dialectics'. (2016, 355; emphasis added)

Therefore, Adorno's notion of nonidentity resists the reductive impulse of philosophy to encapsulate reality in static concepts, just as informalist artists reject the confines of traditional aesthetic categories and opt, instead, to foreground the expressive materiality and unique particularity of their works. Adorno's critique of identity-thinking – that is, the philosophical tendency to subsume particulars into overarching, totalizing concepts – finds a parallel in the informalists' rejection of classical representation and compositional harmony. In *Aesthetic Theory* (2013), Adorno aims to complicate the negative-affirmative structure internal to the work of art to such an extent that, under the weight of the excess of negative determinations, art's very structure would collapse, uncovering its instability.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> As Andrew Bowie explains in *Adorno and the Ends of Philosophy* (2013), Adorno links identity (and its counterpart, nonidentity) to Kant's categories of understanding, upon which constitutive subjectivity is built, and Hegel's concept (*Begriff*) "as a dynamic structure of inferences that encompasses the changing status of things which results from their shifting relations to other things" (26).

<sup>7</sup> For more on Adorno's dialectical approach to aesthetics as representative of his view of art as a meaningful reflection of social and historical truths, see Melaney 1997.

Moreover, Adorno focuses on art's constitutive 'absence' - the elusive aspect of art mirrored in the informalist treatment of material as an active, resistant force, made most apparent by the use cuts in the canvas (by artists like Fontana, Burri, and Millares), which emphasize the object's resistance to smooth conceptualization and reveal an underlying tension between materiality and form. Regarding the relationship between philosophy and this constitutive absence of the art object, Malt states the following:

The accumulation of propositions creates a limit, a place where the discourse comes up against the absence of its object - against art's 'not saying'. Adorno continually reapplies his language to that place, accumulating new metaphors which displace without replacing the old, shifting the ground from which his critique speaks, multiplying the angles of approach in order to map the surface of that absence. His language is negative, but it does not negate its object [...] so much as it negates or continually modifies itself. (2018, 212)

Although Malt collapses the discussion of the work of art into the matter of negative philosophy and critical language alone, I would like to insist that Adorno develops an understanding of art in which art achieves what philosophy cannot perform: the collapse of the material and productive forces that it incorporates in establishing a (false) semblance to the world. Speaking about modern art in particular, Adorno (2013) argues that art absorbs the accelerated modes of production and discards the old, obsolete forms that pedants may cling to. Unlike philosophy, which operates with rigid logical operations that it cannot discard, the work of art, when it is authentic and autonomous, always has something of the new and opposes the *Zeitgeist* while also bearing the scars of its past reconfigurations. Unlike philosophy, art does not have reason, order, and clarity inscribed in its content; rather, it opposes discursive modes of thought and bears truth and criticism in its core. Modern art carries forward the disintegration of what it contains, not least by turning against itself, against the forces of accelerated production which it appropriates: "The murderous historical force of the modern is equated with the disintegration of all that to which the proprietors of culture despairingly cling" (47).

Informalist art likewise rejects the confines of representation and, in particular, abstraction's "essentiality, the formal

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Melaney focuses especially on Adorno's critique of the Enlightenment as it is reflected in twentieth-century literature, culminating in a discussion of the political dimensions of Adorno's aesthetic theories.

rigor, the compositional brevity, the geometric order, according to a need to prune the existing for the benefit of its general elements" ("l'essenzialità, il rigore formale, la brevità compositiva, l'ordine geometrico, secondo una necessità di potatura dell'esistente a vantaggio dei suoi elementi generali"; Pasini 1995, 40), while informalism "indicates a way of entry, of intrusion into existence and its vortices, seeing as the artist wants, metaphorically, but also physically to dive into the work, attack it, possess it" (40; "indica un modo di entrata, di intromissione nell'esistenza e nei suoi vortici, in quanto l'artista vuole, metaforicamente, ma anche fisicamente tuffarsi dentro l'opera, aggredirla, possederla"). Therefore, similar to Adorno leading dialectics to its collapse from within metaphysics, informalism places the artist "inside the work, between matter and energy" (41, "dentro la cosa, fra materia ed energia").

In more concrete terms, Manolo Millares's use of burlap and mixed media in his paintings reflects a materiality that resists subsumption into a singular narrative, whether political or formal, as well as resistance to full codification. His work, marked by themes of death and disintegration, parallels Adorno's critique of identity and totalizing thought. I argue that Millares's focus on absence – a space where the material world and its histories are both present and negated – is an attempt to create a radical form of artistic expression that resists immediate co-option by political narratives, authoritarian and progressive alike. This absence, or non-being,<sup>8</sup> generates a radical site of protest that challenges both the political and aesthetic status quo.

By analyzing his works and their sociohistorical context, this article highlights how Millares's art navigates and ultimately transcends

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**8** In Adorno's philosophy, absence and nonidentity are distinct but intersecting concepts. Absence refers to a deliberate rejection of images or fixed representations (for a thorough investigation of Adorno's 'ban on images', see Truskolaski 2021) – a refusal to overlay reality with idealized or conceptualized images that obscure its material truth. Absence thus acts as an ethical stance, as well as aesthetic and conceptual strategy, by keeping thought open to the complexity of reality and resisting the impulse to reduce it to simple, conceptual identities. In this sense, absence can be seen as a form of negative space, one that holds a disciplined openness towards what exists outside of full comprehension or conceptual closure. Non-being, on the other hand, relates to what is denied presence within the bounds of conceptual identity. For Adorno, the concept of non-being connects to his notion of nonidentity, which emphasizes the aspects of reality that elude thought's ability to define, categorize, or assimilate it fully. Non-being is not mere emptiness or nothingness; it is the excess of reality that resists being subsumed under thought. Non-being also represents the limit of what thought can contain – what remains 'other' and, thus, nonidentical to any conceptual framework imposed upon it. In Adorno's view, both absence and non-being serve as markers of resistance against systems of thought that attempt to fully encompass and harmonize the world. In this article, I use the two terms as overlapping and coextensive in both Adorno's and Millares's works. Thus, I maintain that absence captures the openness to what exceeds the grasp of knowledge and remains irreducibly other, while non-being serves as the accumulation of non-representable material that conceptual thought cannot fully absorb and categorize.

the contradictions imposed by the Francoist regime. I argue that the power of Millares's paintings lies not in their political content per se but in their ability to convey a broader critique through their materiality and engagement with absence. This approach offers a new reading of Millares's art, one that emphasizes the importance of non-being in understanding the resistance embedded in his work.

### 3 Historical Context and Representational Conflicts

At the end of WWII, Europe saw the establishment of new political regimes and a reconfiguration of the continent along the East-West line of division. Spain, often excluded from accounts focusing on this division, was still coming to grips with its own bloody Civil War (1936-39). After the military coup organized by a nationalist military junta and the subsequent civil war, won by the coupists, Spain became closed off to the rest of the world. Held down by the iron fist of the Falangist organization, which was supported by the Carlist (traditionalist) faction and blessed by the supreme authority of the Catholic Church, Spain found itself under the dictatorship of general Francisco Franco (aka El Caudillo). For the following three and a half decades, Spain suffered under severe censorship, repression, and control of politics, culture, and social life enforced by acts of public violence, such as execution, torture, and military and police brutality. During the Franco dictatorship, Spain became a place from which no scream could escape. Therefore, it was not the abstract potentiality of death or the glorification of the subject's valor in the face of demise but the horror of concrete death at the hands of an authoritarian regime that concerned Spanish artists at the time.

During this period, Manolo Millares emerged as one of the most radical avant-garde artists. Along with other artists of his generation<sup>9</sup> - the generation that followed the world-renowned Joan Miró, Pablo Picasso, and Salvador Dalí - Millares succeeded in piercing the wall of silence and censorship surrounding Spain. In fact, he became internationally recognized and appreciated, presenting his work in some of the most renowned art exhibitions, such as the Venice Biennale (1956 and 1958) and Saõ Paulo Biennial (1957). Or, at least, this is the story endorsed by some critics (de la Torre 2015; Salazar 2019; Gómez 2017) - that of an ethical painter committed to exposing the pain and grief of a country under political repression. In reality, behind the international success of Spain's radical artists of the 1950s and 60s was the very Francoist regime that the artists were condemning.

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<sup>9</sup> The most celebrated avant-garde artists in Millares's generation are Antoni Tàpies, Manuel Rivera, Rafael Canogar, Antonio Saura, and Pablo Serrano.



During the Cold War, the ideological rift between East and West, represented by distinct cultural and economic models - capitalism and communism - placed Spain in a strategic position in relation to the US, which wanted to extend its military presence in Europe. The negotiations between the US and Spain aimed to establish US military bases in Spain in exchange for economic aid. The talks were complicated by mutual distrust but, informed by shared opposition to the USSR and its sphere of influence, the agreement took place gradually, with the final document signed by President Harry S. Truman in 1953. The Spain-US bilateral agreements bolstered Franco's regime, countering any immediate prospects for political change in Spain (see Bowen 2017). In the early 1950s, Spain received significant economic assistance from the US. Moreover, the international condemnation imposed on Spain in 1946 by the United Nations Security Council for Spain's support of the Axis Powers during WWII was gradually relaxed and eventually lifted, with Spain being admitted to the UN in 1955. During the Cold War, UN member countries prioritized security strategy over ethical concerns with an anti-democratic regime. For Spain, as Franco was aiming for international integration while maintaining his authoritarian yoke at home, international public support was key. Therefore, towards the end of the 1940s, cultural diplomacy became a crucial component of Spain's foreign policy.

As Víctor Nieto Alcaide and Genoveva Tusell García (2015) indicate, the regime began to gradually integrate artistic manifestations that went beyond academicism, the officially-endorsed style in post-Civil War Spain. Consequently, during the late 1940s and 1950s, avant-garde art started to be integrated into exhibitions mandated by the regime, which sought to modernize Spain's image internationally. Initiatives like the opening of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Madrid in 1951, Spain's participation in the Venice and São Paulo Biennales, the launching of the Hispano-American biennales (1951 in Madrid, 1954 in La Havana, and 1955 in Barcelona), with varying degrees of success, as Miguel Cabañas Bravo (1996) documents, facilitated this cultural shift. Although the political landscape within Spain remained largely unchanged, these cultural efforts broke the cycle of post-war isolation and integrated Spanish art into the global scene.

Particularly important for the development and recognition of Spanish informalism, of which Manolo Millares was part, was Spain's participation in the Venice Biennale. The country sought to project an image of modernity through its cultural exports while continuing to rely on traditional stereotypes, such as realism.<sup>10</sup> This approach

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**10** Realism was aligned with the regime's cultural policies, which sought to project an image of modernity while maintaining a strong connection to Spain's historical and cultural heritage. By promoting realism, the regime aimed to integrate contemporary

gradually improved the reception of Spanish art in Italy and, subsequently, all over Europe. Over a decade, Spain's art scene distanced itself from fascist tropes, initially replacing them with religious and traditional themes. By the end of the 1950s, abstractionism, especially in the form of informalism, became the official art style of the Franco regime, under the direction of Luis Gonzales Robles, Chief of Exhibition Services in the Office of Cultural Relations of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The 1956 Venice Biennale was particularly notable. Spain's exhibit included solo shows of 19th-century painter Juan de Echevarría and sculptor Pablo Gargallo, alongside contemporary artists. For the first time, the Spanish Pavilion included abstract works, thus aligning with international trends while maintaining a connection to Spanish tradition. The Spanish commissioner Marquis of Lozoya framed contemporary abstract art as a continuation of a long-standing tradition, neutralizing its potential political implications. As Romina Viggiano notes:

The informal artists – Tàpies, but also José Tharrats, Antonio Saura, Rafael Canogar, Manuel Millares, Luis Feito, Manuel Mampaso Bueno, Enrique Planasdurá, and Ángel Ferran in sculpture – arrived in Venice presented by Luis Felipe Vivanco, an intellectual close to the avant-garde before and after the Civil War, who in the catalog retraced the Spanish artistic experiences of recent years, highlighting the renewal of religious art and the exhibitions promoted by Eugenio D'Ors's Academia Breve de Crítica de Arte or the Ibero-American Biennials. Vivanco considered the 'new art' a spiritual style where the artist follows his 'inner necessity', like his ancestors when they drew the bison in the Altamira cave. The interpretation allowed justifying the traditional realism of Spanish painting even in non-figurative compositions.

Gli artisti a-formali – Tàpies ma anche José Tharrats, Antonio Saura, Rafael Canogar, Manuel Millares, Luis Feito, Manuel Mampaso Bueno, Enrique Planasdurá e Ángel Ferran in scultura – approdano a Venezia presentati da Luis Felipe Vivanco, un intellettuale vicino alle avanguardie, prima e dopo la guerra civile, che in catalogo ripercorre le esperienze artistiche spagnole degli ultimi anni evidenziando il rinnovamento dell'arte religiosa e le mostre promosse dall'Academia Breve de Crítica de Arte di Eugenio D'Ors o dalle Biennali Ispanoamericane. Vivanco reputa la 'nuova arte' uno stile spirituale in cui l'artista segue la sua 'necessità

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artistic expressions with a sense of continuity and stability. For further information, see the review of Portalupi 1954.

interiore', come i suoi antenati quando disegnarono i bisonti nella caverna di Altamira. L'interpretazione consente di giustificare il tradizionale realismo della pittura spagnola anche nelle composizioni non figurative. (2019, 336)

This portrayal of Spanish art, rooted in traditional art and extending through figures of the Spanish Golden Age, such as El Greco, Zurbarán, and Velázquez, sought to present an unbroken development from historical and modern art. This strategy presented contemporary art as an expression of Spain's enduring spirituality and cultural identity, effectively neutralizing its political and ideological dimensions, especially the modern artists' opposition to the regime. Abstraction, which lends itself to readings focused solely on the formal, aesthetic dimensions of the works of art, fit the official regime's image of innovation and openness without breaking with the traditionalist and religious line of expression endorsed by the government.

Millares's opposition to the regime was expressed subtly in his works before the 1960s and more openly afterward – for example, through such series as *Mutilados de paz* (Mutilated by Peace) (1965), dedicated to his father Juan Millares Carló, a literature and language educator and affiliate of the Republican Left, whose position as a teacher was revoked by the Franco government after the Civil War.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, from 1957 onwards, Millares started to openly express his opposition to the Francoist dictatorship through gestures such as forming the informalist group El Paso with Manuel Rivera, Rafael Canogar, Antonio Saura, and other contemporary artists, whose manifesto reads:

We are moving towards a revolutionary practice (in which our dramatic tradition and our direct expression are present) that responds historically to a universal activity. [...] We are heading towards a great artistic transformation in which to find the expression of a 'new reality'. And towards an anti-academy, in which the spectator and the artist become aware of their social and spiritual responsibility. The action of El Paso will last as long as the aforementioned conditions are maintained in our country.

Vamos hacia una plástica revolucionaria (en la que estén presentes nuestra tradición dramática y nuestra directa expresión), que responda históricamente a una actividad universal. [...] Nos encaminamos hacia una gran transformación plástica en la cual encontrar la expresión de una 'nueva realidad'. Y hacia una antiacademia, en

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<sup>11</sup> For a discussion on Millares's expression of political opposition to the Franco regime, especially as related to his family's history of repression, see Gómez 2017.

la que el espectador y el artista tomen consciencia de su responsabilidad social y espiritual. La acción de El Paso durará mientras las condiciones antes expuestas se mantengan en nuestro país. (Cited in Juan Ovejero 2014, 75-6)

Manolo Millares's participation in international biennales, despite his critical stance against the Franco regime, exemplifies the complex relationship between modern artists and the state. Some critics (i.e., Vilas 2021; Kishinchand López 2016) discuss how Millares's abstract work, initially a radical expression of dissent, became part of the regime's strategy to project a modern image abroad. Polish essayist K.A. Jelensky (1961) viewed this as an attempt to sanitize and domesticate the rebellious content of young Spanish artists for cultural propaganda. Therefore, although they benefited greatly from the international exposure they received with the help of the regime's cultural campaign, Millares and others were burdened by the contradiction between the advancement of their artistic careers and their positions as ambassadors of an image of Spain that was radically different from the social and political reality of life inside Spain, which was marked by violent repression. Eventually, the artists distanced themselves from the regime. Millares followed Antonio Tàpies and Antonio Saura in withdrawing, from 1960 onwards, from the exhibitions organized by the regime.<sup>12</sup> The artists participated, in 1964, together with Pablo Picasso, in the anti-regime exhibition *España Libre* organized in Italy "by some representatives of the Communist Party" (Tusell García 2006).<sup>13</sup>

The association between the informalist artists and the Francoist government gave rise to suspicion regarding the artists' ethical principles<sup>14</sup> and compounded the already uncomfortable position of the artists. Post-avantgarde artists, expressing themselves through abstract form, were constantly criticized for not being more explicit in their work.<sup>15</sup> The abstract expression of the Spanish informalists – specifically, for the purposes of this article, that of Manolo Millares – epitomizes this tension. In navigating these contradictions, Millares and his contemporaries had to reconcile their desire

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**12** See the discussion around the group's withdrawal and the public declarations of the artists in Tusell García 2002, 100.

**13** It is unknown whether there were repercussions for the artists in Spain for their participation in this exhibition.

**14** In today's criticism, one finds both the accusatory position, such as in Pablo Vilas's article "Manolo Millares: Anti-Francoist Art Sponsored by Franco?" ("Manolo Millares: ¿arte antifranquista patrocinada por Franco?") (2021), and decontextualized interpretations of the formal elements of the artist's works; seldomly are the two dimensions treated together.

**15** For example, see the discussion of Millares's brother's criticism of the artist's abstract burlap paintings in de la Nuez Santana 2017.

for artistic freedom and international recognition with the danger of being co-opted by the regime they opposed. This tension underscores the struggles faced by artists working under repressive political systems, in which their art becomes both a tool for personal expression and a pawn in larger ideological battles:

The torn burlap of Millares, the battered and damaged surfaces of Tàpies or Saura's violent brush strokes expressed their own intense feelings of tragedy, loss and suffering. Informalist art had wished to be a cry of rebellion and would present itself as a silent but effective recrimination. But its initial threat was outweighed by the possible gains for Franco's regime. This made for a strange marriage of Informalist art to the official institutions of a dictatorship. (Tusell García 2006)

The internal and external pressures on Spanish informalism are reflected in the formal tension they exhibit. Manolo Millares, seeing himself enmeshed in the very structures he sought to critique, turned to burlap to express his main concerns (such as death, isolation, corruption, and cruelty). However, the resistance that he mounts through the combination of formal elements is sustained not by the social and political tensions his work inhabits but by absence (considered, in this article, in tandem with non-being).<sup>16</sup> To understand the role of absence in Millares's work, it is important to approach it through a theoretical apparatus contemporaneous with him and marked by similar concerns. The work of Theodor W. Adorno, informed by the shadow of war and questions related to the role of art in an all-encompassing free market,<sup>17</sup> which operates in tandem with whichever dominant political force is in place at a given moment, offers an interpretative alternative, distinct from the criticism focused on the guilt/redemption binary, though without erasing such criticism either.

<sup>16</sup> Adorno's understanding of non-being and absence emphasizes the unrealized potential within society and actuality, which he views as transformative. Adorno's approach, often termed 'imageless materialism', advocates an awareness of possibilities outside the current structure, viewing non-being as the potential for social and political renewal that is obscured by societal structures. In contrast, Heidegger's philosophy sees non-being as a 'withholding' or 'refusal' intrinsic to being itself - a condition that allows *Dasein* to emerge. For Heidegger, non-being is marked by a productive presence because it is only considered from the perspective of *Dasein* and never on its own. Non-being, or fundamental absence (rather than the absence of something), are the background of *Dasein*'s process of nihilation, which is a renewal of its condition of existence in accordance to Being. For an analysis of how Adorno's approach to non-being, absence, and potentiality fundamentally differs from Heidegger's, see Macdonald 2011.

<sup>17</sup> For an elaboration of Adorno's critique of the free market and late capitalism, see Cook 1998; Prusik 2020.

## 4 The Work of Art's Resistance Through Concretion

In his seminal work *Negative Dialectics* (1973), Adorno aims to revolutionize dialectics by emphasizing negativity over synthesis and affirmation. As David Sherman (2016) notes, Adorno sought to liberate dialectics from its affirmative traits without diminishing its determinacy. This involves a challenging philosophical task of emphasizing discontinuity and concreteness over the syllogistic structure of classical metaphysics. Adorno's anti-positivist and anti-totalizing stance aims to bring closer to thought the other or alien of thought. In *Negative Dialectics* (1973), he argues that the concept is not identical to the object it represents, which is central to his critique of identity. There is never a complete dissolution of the object into the concept. Instead, Adorno posits that "objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder" (5), meaning that the relationship between object and concept, particularly in art, is never resolved completely and harmoniously.

Throughout his work, Adorno stresses the importance of the object, arguing that philosophy should engage with the diversity of objects rather than use them merely as mirrors for thought:

[The] substance [of a changed philosophy] would lie in the diversity of objects that impinge upon it and of the objects it seeks, a diversity not wrought by any schema; to those objects, philosophy would truly give itself rather than use them as a mirror in which to reread itself, mistaking its own image for concretion. (1973, 13)

Adorno's writing style, with its detailed descriptions and conceptual dissections, seeks to frame objects within their sociohistorical context, aiming for a closer approximation to reality. However, Adorno's negative dialectic method constantly shifts the ground of this reality, resulting in a constant undoing of certainty, much like Millares's art does in relation to any fixed interpretation, be it informed by his aesthetic expression, the socio-political content of his work, or the contextualization of the work as a pro- or anti-Francoist instrument. Millares's work evades rigid signification through the intensity of expression, the interplay of signification within the painting, as well as the relation that the work maintains with the world, by its incorporation of found objects or the holes which open it to the outside. Moreover, the minimal figuration that the artist maintains, in depicting vague forms of human or animal bodies, coupled with the negation of that very figuration through the commitment to abstraction and rejection of symbolic meaning, maintains the shifting relation of form and content, hindering a classifying gaze.

Another important concept for Adorno is mimesis, which refers, as in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* ([1944] 2002), to the imitative behaviors

observed in nature, but is extended, as in *Aesthetic Theory* (2013), to his broader philosophical and aesthetic considerations. In the context of art, mimesis involves the reproduction of thoughts and objects while maintaining the dialectical difference between subject and object. Nevertheless, Adorno argues that artistic expression (especially in modern art) acknowledges that mimesis, the act of imitation, is seen as outdated and ineffective for true understanding, as mimicking an object does not recreate the object's true form. Consequently, mimesis is confined to art, which critiques and incorporates this imitation by transforming it into a tangible form (2013, 152).

Manolo Millares' art resonates with Adorno's negative dialectics and theory of mimesis, especially in its engagement with the materiality of painting, expressed through the themes of death and war. Millares's mixed-media paintings depict death and the disintegration of human remains, emphasizing the material and historical preoccupations that align with Adorno's post-war philosophy. I argue that Millares's art rejects utilitarian interpretations (political or formal) and instead focuses on the irreducible materiality of his subjects. His approach mirrors Adorno's insistence on the object's primacy in philosophy, creating a parallel between Adorno's negative dialectics and Millares' method. Both Adorno and Millares emphasize the importance of engaging with the sociohistorical context and materiality, challenging conventional notions of identity and unity.

In a series of paintings that he created in Madrid after moving from his native Canarias to the mainland in the last decade of his life, Millares expressed his preoccupation with a human reality beyond experience. He was concerned with the objectivity of the work of art - the irreducible materiality of painting and death. His archaeological training brought him close to the Guanches, the indigenous population of the Canary Islands, exterminated by the Spanish settlers, and he spent hours drawing and then excavating their remains.<sup>18</sup> This experience provided him with the memories and materials<sup>19</sup> which he later used in his sculptural mixed-media paintings allowing the dead to die over and over again in his works. The closeness of Millares to the main themes of his work (cruelty, war, crucifixion, and torture, all in some way connected to finitude and death) is rooted, first and foremost, in his material and historical preoccupations. As Cirlot argues,

<sup>18</sup> As Rivero Gómez (2020, 102) argues, although I do not agree with his commentary on Millares's discovery of his fear of death in his early preoccupation with the Guanches, Millares's work reveals a transformative art practice centered on the materiality of the dead and mummified body rather than a transcendent fear of finitude.

<sup>19</sup> Millares's favorite canvas, burlap, was used in Guanche burials. Millares's first burlap painting was in 1955. Afterward, he used the material consistently in his work, either alone or together with other materials, such as metal or wood.

the archeological element alludes to the 'death of man' not in the sense of post-Nietzschean philosophy but as an encounter with the remains of thinking beings, shattered, unravelled, rummaged through, reduced to a materiality that can easily, at any moment, dissolve into dust: 'Homo humus'. (1968; 44)

Lo arqueológico alude a la 'muerte del hombre', no en el sentido de la filosofía posnietzscheana, sino en el sentido real de encontrar restos de seres pensantes, destruidos, deshilachados, revueltos, reducidos a una materia que fácilmente puede ya deshacerse en polvo: 'Homo humus'.

The materiality of Millares's paintings, grounded in the tense socio-historical situation surrounding his work, points to the encounter between those who cannot share one another's life or death - an encounter with the radical other or non-being. Such an encounter with non-being is produced by Millares's focus on concretion. Millares seeks the concretion that allows his work to break with the generality of the abstract art piece. As Moreno Galván, Millares's friend and art critic, confirmed, the attention Millares paid to the process of finding different materials and objects for incorporation into his paintings was remarkable. Millares's effort was focused on including bare materiality into his paintings without allowing the work of art to erase the reality of its existence in the world. The materials were not supposed to become identical with the artwork:

In my field expeditions with Millares, I have traced with him the possible reunion of lost archeological traces - his great passion - though I have also seen him look through the garbage dumps in search of an old espadrille, a moldy and rotten spoon, or a decrepit hat, to weigh the possibility of bringing them back to life by including them, as witnesses of life, into art. There, in that quest, there is no contradiction. What he looks for is always the similar.

En mis expediciones con Millares, yo he rastreado junto a él el posible reencuentro de perdidas huellas arqueológicas - su gran pasión -, pero también le he visto mirar por los muladares a la busca de una alpargata vieja, una cuchara mohosa y carcomida o un sombrero decrepito, para tantear la posibilidad de devolverlos a la vida incluyéndolos, como testigos de la vida, en arte. Ahí, en esa búsqueda, no hay contradicción. Lo que busca es siempre el semejante. (Moreno Galván, cited in de la Torre 2014, n.p.)

Millares, therefore, privileges a desubjectified gaze that brings to light the process of mimesis involved in creating artworks. The artist creates a common world for the found materials, though, as in



Adorno's understanding of mimesis in art,<sup>20</sup> commonness is not a synthesizing factor. Millares's works do not subsume the materials and objects that comprise them. On the one hand, the resistance of a painting in the face of aesthetic synthesis emerges from the overwhelming number of elements that constitute it. The varied textures, the thick threads that sow some of the pieces together, the fabrics contorted in myriad ways, imitating at times outstretched flesh, at other times nothing identifiable, the lost shoe, tubes, pipes, cables, and the unrelenting black, all stubbornly refuse synthesis, in spite of their proximity. On the other hand, the resistance of Millares's work comes from the obstinacy of the objects and materials in preserving their histories, their autonomy, their outsideness in relation to the work of art. Millares explained his focus on the object by describing the object in human terms, thus switching the focus from the artist as central subject to the object as an autonomous entity:

When I use, for example, sackcloth, ceramic fragments, or soil, I force myself to conserve them exactly as they are, as the importance of the object or fragment, with its worth intact, finds in the expressive medium of my painting a fundamental right, the value of something that has not been violated. (2003a, 111)

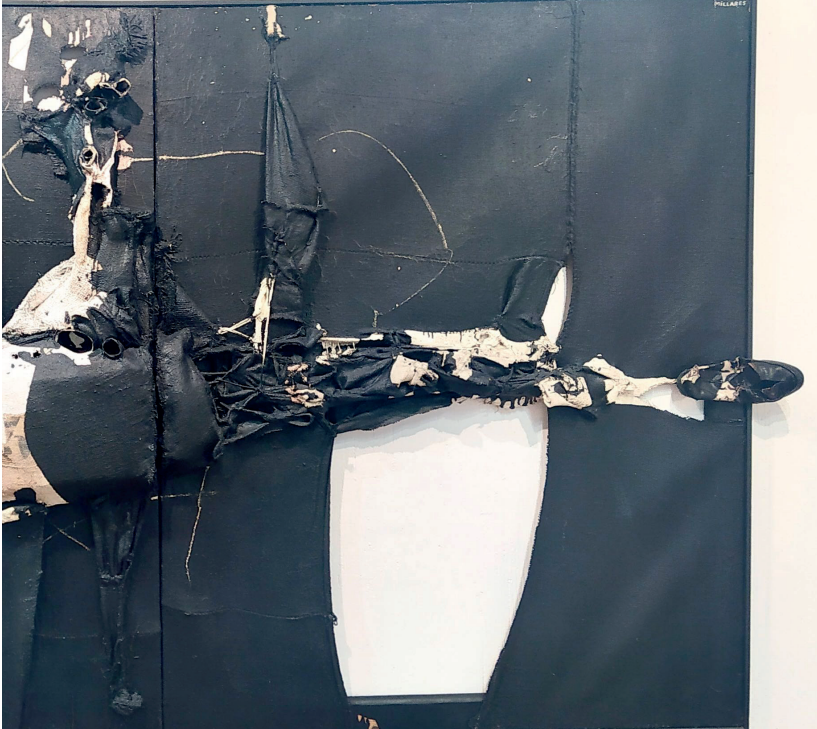
The leap out of the painting into the materials is equivalent to the leap out of abstract metaphysics into the world of experience in Adorno's work. The artist's description captures the creative process that starts with an object and does not erase or consume the object in question (just like Adorno's negative dialectic, which, starting with nonidentity, does not subsume it under identity) but allows it to partly retain its features. The shoe in *Animal de fondo* [fig. 1]<sup>21</sup> illustrates this point by being placed half inside, half outside of the painting. For the onlooker, the shoe forms part of the painting, elongating the tail-like folds of the burlap; at the same time, if read from right to left, even if just for a brief moment, the painting creates the impression of a leg, with its ligaments torn, though still shoed. Furthermore, the shoe can take center stage as an object semi-detached from the painting that maintains its heterogeneity as an object with its own range of significations in the world.

However, the materials found in a painting, whose autonomy Millares preserves so effectively while incorporating them into the overall piece, are 'materials' only when forming part of an artwork;

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**20** For Adorno, art's process of mimesis does not result in synthesis, as he argues in *Aesthetic Theory* (see pages 191, 202).

**21** The painting references the homonymous poetry book by Juan Ramón Jiménez, published in 1949.



**Figure 1** Manolo Millares, *Animal de fondo*. 1963. Detail. Fundación Ant3nio P3rez, Cuenca, 2022

otherwise, they are potato sacks, shoes stolen by dogs, stubborn rope refusing to be cut by dull kitchen scissors, plastic tubes on the Mediterranean beach... Without the work of art, according to Millares, there is “nothing else other than rubbish” (2003b, 111). Rubbish, the material of the painting, its foundation, only becomes ‘material’ when art incorporates and frames it, forcing it to speak. The ‘material’ is only possible because painting is its second nature, which also means that its materiality is partly modified by its inclusion into the painting (upon inclusion, the material not only represents itself but also signifies within the painting and in relation to the other elements with which it comes in contact). The mimetic relation that sustains a work of art is not between the painting and the rubbish but rather between the painting and its materials. Thus, given that materials are always already included in the artwork, the mimetic relation is between the artwork and itself, though in the folds of the artwork there are material, aesthetic, and historical elements without which the artwork is not possible. Adorno describes art’s ability to expose itself and the processes folded within its materials as follows:

Those artworks succeed that rescue over into form something of the amorphous to which they ineluctably do violence [...]. The violence done to the material imitates the violence that issued from the material and that endures in its resistance to form. (2013, 69)

The 'amorphous' in Adorno's text is Millares's rubbish, which, by partly keeping its autonomy and history, cannot be completely subsumed to the work of art. The work of art, in its mimesis with itself (with the materials that constitute it), exposes this process and along with it, its own outsideness (the fact that the material comes from rubbish, from the amorphous state that preceded it).<sup>22</sup> Millares instinctively expresses the folded mimesis that his paintings perform:

Beneath these canvases, beneath this disgusting antiaesthetic gash so similar to the bitter sack of caustic relics of an invented saint, someone waits for the miracle of an explosion of flowers precisely upon this very soil-shoe-in-tin-rag-rubbish that is raised upon this unspoken mound of our illustrious history. (2003b, 111)

What Millares (and Adorno in the quotation above) is missing in his description is the fact that, underneath the swaying waves in the sea of mimesis between the artwork and the colossal world that it mobilizes and generates, there is an incomprehensible moment, a moment of absence that sustains this entire structure.

## 5 Homunculus: Scars and Non-Being

Between 1958 and 1969, Millares paints his series *Humúnculo*, containing, perhaps, the works most emblematic of his style. The paintings in this series use minimal figuration to enact an estranged, tormented, and ambiguous corporeality. Over a decade, Millares's

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<sup>22</sup> For Adorno (2013), works of art, while creating a world, also participate in negating other works, currents, ideas, or arrangements of matter. The consequence of this process of negation is that "art threatens to become allergic to itself; the quintessence of the determinate negation that art exercises is its own negation. Through correspondences with the past, what resurfaces becomes something qualitatively other" (49). Art continuously negates the immediate, or what simply is, because it appropriates material and has the power to completely reinterpret it. However, this form of material negation demands the critical gesture of self-negation in order for art to perform its radically negative function of negating itself, if it is to have any claim to autonomy, to not being completely co-opted and reified by the system of production, which, Adorno argues, is the ultimate task of modern art: "Art must turn against itself, in opposition to its own concept, and thus become uncertain of itself right into its innermost fiber" (2). Moreover, the process of self-negation is cumulative because there is an aspect of historicity and sedimentation to it. As Malt (2018) notes, "form is revealed in an act of negation or denial of that which is not it, but which accumulates around it and thus defines it negatively" (202).

homunculus evolves in his art, highlighting the loss of essential human traits such as rationality and dexterity, and ultimately portraying a bleak and restrained existence (García-Perera, Andreu-Lara 2013). The figure of the homunculus is made to appear in relief by the ensemble of objects, materials, the frame, the background, and so on (the ensemble of materials and forms that we call the painting). The homunculus continues the work of mimesis with its background, while the background has a life of its own, making things appear and disappear, both within and beyond the painting. Torn apart, sown, cut out, the homunculus's unexpressed screams fill the space of representation. But the background does its work, swallowing the figure back into its intense blackness, at the same time making the work appear in its raw materiality [fig. 2].

As the homunculus screams and falls silent by means of the background, the background loses its compactness in relation to both the figure that it sustains and the cuts that expose the wall behind the painting.

The cuts in the canvas, of which Millares's work makes extensive use, are sometimes interpreted by critics<sup>23</sup> to signify infinity. This interpretation, combined with Millares's connection with the Guanches, follows the Francoist regime's narrative at the Venice Biennales, which reduces abstraction to sublimated and modernized religious expression. Instead, Millares's cuts in burlap simply show the wall, the 'outside' of the painting, putting in question the self-sufficiency of the artwork, revealing the relation between the materials within the painting and those of the wall (or of the frame of the painting, which is sometimes visible). The cuts in the canvas (employed by several artists at the time, such as, notably, Italian Spatialist artist Lucio Fontana and informalist Antonio Burri)<sup>24</sup> are a clear 'No' to the tradition of formalism in art and to the model of aesthetic unity.<sup>25</sup> And beyond all this, they express Millares's commitment to the

<sup>23</sup> Such as de la Torre 2015, 186.

<sup>24</sup> As opposed to Lucio Fontana's spatialism and Alberto Burri's materic informalism, who focuses on form and the harmonious integration of cuts and rips in his burlap works, Millares maintains a focus on materiality and a dynamic laceration of the canvas without refining or aestheticizing the overall effect of the painting. For more information and comparisons of Burri's and Millares's uses of cuts in the canvas, see Crispolti's "A Stubborn Investigation of the Image of Contemporary Man in His Existential Truth" ("Una terca investigación de la imagen del hombre contemporáneo en su verdad existencial") (1992). For a comparative study of, on the one hand, Fontana and Burri's version of informalism and, on the other, Luis Feito and Manolo Millares's particular interpretation of it, see Alonso Sánchez's *Comparative Study of Informalism in Italy and Spain (Estudio comparado del informalismo en Italia y España)* (2016).

<sup>25</sup> Aesthetic unity, a term coined by art critic and painter Roger Fry, is determined by a work of art's formal harmony and its self-sufficiency in relation to its materials and its context in the world. In *The Artist and Psychoanalysis* ([1924] 2010), Fry states the following: "The form of a work of art has a meaning of its own and the contemplation of



**Figure 2** Manolo Millares, *Homúnculo*. 1960. VEGAP, Madrid, 2016

double negation that defines the artwork: the negation of the world in its play between background and figure, and the negation, from the outside, of the painting as an intact unity; and once more, the negation of the outside as such, by the power of the artwork to reach beyond itself, to allow the bare wall to come in and to claim it as one of its materials. In the play of mimesis, the work of art performs its absolute other – the absence that envelops it and into which the work of art is dislocated.

More specifically, in the case of Millares and his cuts, there are several possible interpretations. First, the wall and the painting materials become ‘aware’, in their mutual negation, of a third area (the space – or absence – between them) that starts to interject; there is always an outside of the outside, which pours in through that opening in the painting. The elements that form the painting are, therefore, always at odds with themselves – always slightly offset in their identity to themselves (therefore, nonidentical with themselves). When the negative dimension encroaches, the aspect of absence or non-being becomes definitive for the work of art. Non-being is the agent that intervenes in the dislocation of the work of art in relation to itself.<sup>26</sup> Second, the double negation is performed in relation to the work’s signification: the way it addresses, through its artistic language, the sociohistorical world with which it comes into contact. In this case, Millares’s writing favors a reading of his paintings informed by the unknown<sup>27</sup> rather than by the author’s circumstances or creative will:

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the form in and for itself gives rise in some people to a special emotion, which does not depend upon the association of the form with anything else whatever” (8).

**26** Although this point seems to address a similar ‘dematerialization’ of art as explored by Lucy R. Lippard in her 1968 essay with John Chandler “The Dematerialization of Art” and, subsequently, in her 1973 work *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object*, Millares’s work does not belong to this trend of conceptual art. Lippard explores a shift in (mostly Anglo-American) art starting in the 1960s and 1970s from an art focused on materials to art that centers mostly on the intellectual process, bringing art closer to abstract thinking and away from tangible products. Moreover, Lippard understands dematerialization as a move towards conceptualization and even negation of the material, commodified aspects of art, thus replacing the focus on material with conceptual engagement (on this point, see Lund 2020, 73, 74). At the opposite pole from this perspective is European informalism, especially as represented by Manolo Millares, whose approach prioritizes the intensification of matter devoid of ideality and representational imagery – matter “with a brutal and desperately actualistic presence” (“con presenza brutale e disperatamente attualistica”), as Argan notes (2010, 53-4).

**27** Rather than representing a moment of indeterminacy, Millares’s engagement with the unknown is, as I theorize it here through Adorno’s work, a commitment to a form of art that is reflective of an essential yet elusive dimension – one that cannot be fully articulated or captured in familiar terms. For Adorno (2013), an artwork’s expressive power lies in its ability to gesture towards a truth that is not dictated by external logic but arises from within its own necessity. Art (particularly modern art) is “not the imitation of something real but rather the anticipation of a being-in-itself that does not yet exist, of an unknown that – by way of the subject – is self-determining” (105). Thus, the

I reject the possibility of believing myself to be the conscious controller of these paintings that have emerged from inside me. I keep the new, the unseen in the lost dimension of rough sackcloth whose only parallel is the dark, intangible unknown [...].

I have never been afraid – and I repeat it here – to say just how much escapes my comprehension. It does not frighten me because I have truly never felt the necessity to understand what I paint. Somebody is sure to accuse me of having no idea of what I'm doing. I don't care. It does hurt me however, when people say that I'm missing the point, that I am somehow avoiding the true reality of man.

To today's reality I freely add my voice of protest by tearing apart fabrics, with pockmarked textures, a chaos in rope, beauty wrinkled beyond recognition, an open wound in Mother Earth and the truly terrifying spectacle of the homunculus flowering amidst the humble willows reserved for such a day. (2003a, 107)

Surely Millares draws inspiration from the Surrealist's automatic writing practice as a way of decoupling the creative process from its signification. However, Millares's reflections about his work suggest that there is something more to it, especially given the accusation that his art was co-opted by Franco's regime. For Millares, communication is a function of the work of art's incomprehensibility. The painting's incorporation of objects from the world (which he takes great care to describe in many of his texts), which bring their own history and signification, belongs to the same process of communication – communication towards the secret, that which is unsayable, and its betrayal (by making the materials speak). Millares realizes that the work of art speaks about the manner of representation and that there is only one truth beyond the work, which, in fact, is also "the true reality of man" (107): that beyond the absence we know, there is another absence, more radical.<sup>28</sup> And it is to this second absence that the work of art, with its sacrificed homunculus, is faithful.

unknown, in this case, is a pre-conceptual element, resistant to contemplation and, as such, not contained in human knowledge and experience as such.

**28** The concept of 'second absence' or 'radical absence' that I conceptualize here extend Adorno's notions of absence and non-being through Maurice Blanchot's concept of 'the other night' in the *Space of Literature* (1982). For Blanchot, as Allen explains in *Aesthetics of Negativity: Blanchot, Adorno, and Autonomy* (2016), the other night is "the subterranean night, one without stars, without the constant mirroring between the infinite conjunctions of the constellations in the night sky and the scintillations of the waves beneath them, is thus another kind of night that is outside change and signification" (38). Thus, in this essay, a 'second' or 'radical' absence is a dimension that negates representation without, nevertheless, positing another concept as a substitute. The effect that this second or radical dimension adds is one of obscurity or opaqueness.

Millares knew that this was the only possibility for a radical form of protest in overwhelming circumstances – that is, given the death and violence of his time, and the intense political forces battling over the subsumption of art, the only possibility for emancipation could only come from beyond the limits of politicized realism and aestheticized abstraction. It had to come from art informed not merely by absence but by absence of the second degree: the nothingness that brings into community multiple nonidentities without resolving them. Such absence or non-being is not a mystical solution to an obscure problem, as Millares recognizes. The freedom to organize any kind of community, especially in times of terror and repression, that would not be either immediately repressed or, as it happened with the Spanish informalists, incorporated into a campaign aimed at whitewashing a dictatorial regime's crimes; that would not grapple for the right to signification, dividing across its own sections and assigning ranks; that would not collapse under self-righteous destructive nihilism; this freedom can only come from openness to that which calls each one of us into question most radically as subject. Millares's paintings call into question art itself, together with the critical gaze that judges it between condemnation and mystification.

## 6 Conclusion

Manolo Millares's work is an example of how art can be informed by its historical context while simultaneously standing apart from it. His work, created under Franco's repressive regime, engages with themes of death, violence, and disintegration while rejecting the modernist notion of the work of art's complete autonomy and the canvas as a mere representational space of the world. Instead, Millares's art embraces an aesthetic of pauperism, utilizing burlap and found objects to perform the process of falling apart and disintegration, embodying Adorno's philosophical method of disintegration, which seeks to dismantle the subject-object correspondence.

Millares's use of cuts in the burlap abolishes the two-dimensionality of the artwork, emphasizing the primacy of materials over harmony and order. These incisions expose the wall behind the canvas (along with an entire world beyond it, missing yet present), challenging traditional aesthetic unity and formalism, and revealing the artwork's fundamental incompleteness. This interplay between presence and absence, figure and background, material and void, aligns with Adorno's concept of mimesis, according to which an artwork maintains an irresolvable dialectical tension between subject and object.

Although Millares's works align with the international informalist movement, whose chief theorist Michel Tapié advocated a renewed artistic vision focused on materials, they are also part of the Spanish



avant-garde, particularly through Millares's involvement with the group El Paso. However, Millares goes beyond the reaffirmation of humanity through art in light of WWII and the Spanish Civil War, events that were ever-present in the art of that time. His disintegrating burlap works embody the artist's incapacity to control the materials, the expression, and, beyond the artist's studio, the incorporation of the art into a dictatorial regime's campaigns. Using his works, Millares expresses the incapacity of the artist and the human to dictate over matter and society. However, by engaging with multiple absences, an artwork can perforate the presence of various subsumption mechanisms towards an aesthetic infra-emancipation.

In summary, this article identified four types of absence. First, 'material absence', which introduces an outside dimension into an artwork, creating a tension between the contained image and the broader external reality. Second, 'historical absence', which represents past experiences and backgrounds that remain present within an artwork but are not entirely visible or explained (this type of absence includes the erased or overlooked memories of repression under Franco's regime). Third, 'absence at the intersection with non-being', which, informed by Adorno's negative dialectics, involves an absence of fixed identity and through which objects and concepts resist rigid definitions, emphasizing the constitutive openness of an artwork to dialectical engagement and its resistance to ideological or political co-option. Fourth, 'existential absence', represented in Millares's works through the themes of disintegration, death, and suffering. Millares's use of fragmented and torn forms alludes to the fundamental absence of holistic human experience, making the absence present in intimate terms while turning the human perspective into an inhuman gaze.

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