



International Center of Photography

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media release

Dark Is the Room Where We Sleep: A Project by Francesc Torres



Francesc Torres
Dark Is the Room Where We Sleep, 2007
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through
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In a new installation by the renowned Barcelona-based artist Francesc Torres, the excavation of a grave at Villamayor de los Montes in Spain serves as an entry point to explore the violent history and legacy of the Spanish Civil War, something which often remains buried—in both metaphorical and tangible ways—throughout the country. From September 26, 2007 through January 6, 2008, the International Center of Photography (ICP), 1133 Avenue of the Americas at 43rd Street, will present *Dark Is the Room Where We Sleep: A Project by Francesc Torres*.

Seventy-one years ago, Spain erupted in a bloody Civil War that would last three years, leading to the death of an estimated 500,000 people while serving a long-lasting, devastating blow to the economic and political landscapes. One example of the innumerable killings that occurred over the span of the war occurred on the night of September 14, 1936, in the village of Villamayor de los Montes, outside of Burgos in northern Spain. There, forty-six civilian supporters of Spain's Republican government were killed by insurgents loyal to General Francisco Franco and buried in an unmarked mass grave. This is the subject of Torres' ICP installation.

Francesc Torres is considered one of Spain's most important living artists, and a key contributor to international conceptual art since the 1970s. His multimedia installations explore themes of memory and power, often combining photography, sculpture, text, video, and other elements. His work has been exhibited and collected internationally. In addition to exhibiting his own artwork, he has also curated numerous exhibitions, and is a regular contributor to several international journals and newspapers in Spain.

Torres attempted to arrange and photograph the excavation of two different sites in Catalonia. Feeling thwarted by adverse political pressure, Torres partnered with the Association for the Recuperation of the Historical Memory (ARMH), as they responded to a request in 2004 to locate and excavate a mass grave from the Spanish Civil War in the Burgos area. Once the site was identified, Torres photographed the intricate recovery directed by a team of archaeologists, anthropologists, and medical examiners from the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, the University of the Basque Country, and volunteers from throughout Spain, Portugal, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands. What the team found were the remains of forty-six men, all Republican civilians in a town under Francoist control, who were released from jail and then promptly taken to the woods where they were shot, execution-style. The bodies were found aligned in two groups, and interspersed with the bullet shells were beer caps. Torres documented the painstaking process of unearthing and identifying the victims, as well as the communal response of the townspeople. Family members brought assistance, memories of the event, and their decades-old desire to see the victims located and given a proper burial.

The ICP installation includes twenty-nine of Torres's photographs and one artifact: a pocket-watch that was buried with its owner.

"In many countries that have suffered genocide, such as Argentina, Chile, Bosnia, or Rwanda, the process of confronting the tragedy has already been undertaken," Torres notes. "But in Spain, seventy years after the outbreak of the civil war, it is still a pending political issue. The pictures I took in Burgos in 2004, northern Spain, document one of the few efforts done, so far, in the attempt of reconstructing the historical memory of an event that still permeates the present of that country like a chronic illness. These pictures can be considered as war photography, taken almost seventy years after the fact."

The intimate images that Torres delivers from this single grave stand in for the estimated 30,000 other sites that remain covered throughout Spain, evidence of a collective reluctance to acknowledge the brutality during the Civil War. Throughout Franco's reign—which ended in 1975—such an investigation would not have taken place. In the period of transition, fears that "digging up the past" would lead to renewed divisions and strife led to a lack of political and social debate over the war. The country's economic success is now leading to the literal paving over of some of these graves, as a construction boom sprawls into once-abandoned areas, hampering the beginnings of increased openness. At this key moment, Torres seeks to "erase the distance between my interests as an artist and my interests as a citizen" and insists upon attention to this legacy, one that he feels is relevant not just to Spain's history but to any understanding of the long trail of war and its remembrance.

Dark Is the Room Where We Sleep: A Project by Francesc Torres is organized by ICP Associate Curator Kristen Lubben. This exhibition is made possible with support from Entitat Autònoma de Difusió Cultural, Barcelona and Institut Ramon Llull. Additional support for the project was received from the American Center Foundation and the Fulbright Postdoctoral Research Fellowship. It is accompanied by a book published by Actar Press, and will be presented at the Center for Contemporary Culture in Barcelona after its ICP showing.



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