

## Article

# Rebirth and the Eternal Return in Modern and Contemporary Catalan Art and Identity

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**Abstract:** This article explores how themes of birth, rebirth, genesis and coming into being are present in modern and contemporary Catalan art, focusing on the works of Eugènia Balcells (b. 1942), Xicu Cabanyes (b. 1946), Mari Chordà (b. 1942), Salvador Dalí (1904–1989), and Joan Miró (1893–1983). In particular, the article looks at how these themes emerged for the artists as a way of expressing Catalan identity in the wake of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) and the dictatorship of Francisco Franco in Spain (1939–1975), as well as following Catalonia’s broader history as a nation without a state in Europe. In exploring the artists’ lives and works, the article also considers the topics of rebirth and the eternal return as they occur in the philosophy and history of religion of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), Albert Camus (1913–1960) and Mircea Eliade (1907–1986). Ultimately, the author interprets the artworks of the study as physical representations of rebirth that relate in part to a longstanding Catalan sentiment of an eternal recurrence to life after destruction.

**Keywords:** Catalonia; Spain; eternal return; rebirth; Spanish Civil War; modern art; contemporary art; Mircea Eliade; Friedrich Nietzsche; Albert Camus

## 1. Introduction

Birth is an overlooked topic within the arts and humanities, but in Catalan art of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries it is easy to find if one looks for it. The topic, which can pertain to physiological birth or more broadly to cosmogony, genesis and rebirth, is ever-present in the works of Catalan modernists, surrealists, and contemporary artists. This article traces different themes of birth and genesis as they appear in Catalan art of the past century, focusing on five artists whose works represent a diversity of style, medium, politics and personality: Eugènia Balcells (b. 1942), Xicu Cabanyes (b. 1946), Mari Chordà (b. 1942), Salvador Dalí (1904–1989), and Joan Miró (1893–1983).

These artists have utilized themes of birth as a material means of rebirthing both Catalan identity and their own identities not only following the events in which they have lived, including the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) and the dictatorship of Francisco Franco in Spain (1939–1975), but also in the wake of Catalonia’s long history as nation without a state in Europe. As the wartime Catalan surgeon turned exiled writer Josep Trueta (1897–1977) documented in *The Spirit of Catalonia*, his concise 1946 history of Catalonia, the spirit of rebirth after destruction has endured in Catalan culture since the Middle Ages. This article examines the topic of rebirth and the eternal return in the history of religion and philosophy, and shows how through their representations of birth, Catalan artists have captured this spirit of an eternal return in the physical form of art.

### *A History of Cultural Rebirth after Destruction in Catalonia*

Catalonia is a region in the northeast of Spain, bordering France, with a long history and many traditions. As a nation without a state, it has struggled to keep its identity, and yet has survived since the Middle Ages, in part due to its abilities at adapting and rebirthing itself. Dating back to its early formation as a borderless, cultural nexus in the Mediterranean during the Middle Ages, Catalonia’s history has been marked by a series of wars, conflicts and repressions, but also of rich cultural, artistic, and linguistic traditions.



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As Catalan historian Josep Fontana explains in his 2014 history of Catalonia, *La Formació d'una Identitat*, Catalan national identity did not grow out of the formation of a state. Rather, shared cultural practices, including those related to agricultural expansion and language, united people by the twelfth century in and around the city of Barcelona and the region of what is now northeastern Spain and southern France (Fontana 2014, p. 11). Integral to Catalan identity since its coalescence in the Middle Ages is a deep history of cultural, artistic, political, literary and technological development that continually resurrects and evolves after war and conflict.

Catalonia was part of the Crown of Aragon, one of Europe's major powers at its height in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Catalan was an official language of the Crown, used across the Mediterranean in the consolidated territories of eastern Spain, southern France, and parts of Italy and Greece (Buffery and Marcer 2011, p. 46). Catalan is still spoken in some of those locations today and is also the original literary language of Spain (Lledó-Guillem 2018, pp. 134–35).

Beginning in the early eighteenth century after the dissolution of the Crown of Aragon, however, the governments of France and Spain began dismantling the Catalan language and customs, imposing dozens of prohibitions between the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries that ranged from bans on the use of Catalan in writing, speaking or the naming of geographical sites and locations, to full illegalization of the language and traditions (Bradley 2020, p. 87). Defying authority, sometimes quietly within families and local communities, the Catalans kept their language and customs alive. Today, the Catalan language thrives and many of the same traditions practiced hundreds of years ago have been maintained into the present day.

The dual identity of turmoil and growth of Catalonia's history relates in part to the region's geographical location as a crossroads in Europe, located near to the sea and as a passage towards the Pyrenees through which many people from the north and south have traversed (Trueta 1946, pp. 4–6). Historically, Catalonia has maintained two parallel histories: one of destruction and trauma, and a different one of renewal and resurgence. Following the degradation of its language during the early modern period, for example, the Catalan Renaissance (La Renaixença) flourished in the nineteenth-century, reestablishing the Catalan language and literary tradition.

During the more recent history of the twentieth century, the Catalans also suffered numerous repressions and yet managed to resurrect themselves and their cultural identity again and again. A true understanding of the traumatic impact of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) and subsequent dictatorship (1939–1975) on the people of Spain as a whole is lacking, both in Spain and around the world. This is due in large part to inadequate condemnation of the regime led by Spain's fascist dictator, Francisco Franco (1892–1975) in Spain, and Europe more generally, as well as the United States and abroad (Shaffer 2016). It is also due to denial and a repression of memory in Spain following the dictatorship (Resina 2000, 2017; Shaffer 2021).

During the years of the Spanish Civil War and Franco's dictatorship, Catalonia was one of Spain's strongholds of resistance against the dictatorship, and the Catalan people suffered for it. During these times, Catalans were murdered, disappeared, imprisoned, sent to concentration camps, had their children taken from them, or were economically disenfranchised (Hochschild 2012; Preston 2012). The Spanish government also banned Catalans from speaking their language and other aspects of Catalan culture were suppressed under Franco's regime. Teaching and speaking of the Catalan language became legal only after Spain's restoration to a democracy in 1978. In the wake of these events, however, Catalan language and culture have still flourished.

This article now turns to discuss five Catalan artists whose lives and works evolved during this tumultuous period of twentieth century Spain. Emerging from the work of these artists is a reification of this Catalan spirit of a rebirth and eternal return to life after trauma.

## 2. Results

### 2.1. Modern and Contemporary Art: Birth, Rebirth and Renewal in Catalonia

#### 2.1.1. Salvador Dalí (1904–1989)

A flair for the theme of birth is readily apparent in the work of some of Catalonia's most well-known twentieth-century artists. Surrealist Salvador Dalí (1904–1989), for example, adorned the rooftop of his home in Port Lligat, a village in the province of Girona, with a series of immense plaster eggs, some depicted as having already hatched. Eggs, symbols of birth and renewal, play an important role elsewhere in Dalí's work. In Dalí's 1943 painting, *Geopolitics Child Watching the Birth of the New Man* (Figure 1), one of the artist's most recognized works, Dalí depicts a man emerging from within the soft shell of an egg. The egg is also a globe and the continents of the world protrude and melt. The man hatches from North America, and in particular from the United States. To the right of the egg, a figure points out the event of the man's hatching to a young child, a toddler who clings to the figure's legs and looks at the scene in awe.



**Figure 1.** Salvador Dalí, *Geopolitics Child Watching the Birth of the New Man*, 1943. Photo by Lluís Ribes Mateu 1969, licensed under Creative Commons: CC BY-NC 2.0.

In Dalí's *First Study for the Madonna of Port Lligat* (1949) (Figure 2), the artist represents the Madonna and Child in the style of Italian Renaissance artist Piero della Francesca's *Brera Madonna* (1472–74), painting an egg that hangs from a half-shell above the seated Madonna (Carter 1984, pp. 49–51). Dalí's version of the Madonna and Child, for which Dalí's wife Gala served as the model, presents the two figures as if intertwined while floating in space. The Child appears both inside and outside of the Madonna's body, her torso an open space through which the viewer observes the Mediterranean Sea in the background. In the case of the pendulant egg hanging above the Madonna's head, the object holds a prominent position in the painting. Thus, the viewer's focus is on the open womb of the Madonna, the infant child, and the hanging egg, all symbols of birth and fertility.



**Figure 2.** Salvador Dalí, First Study for the Madonna of Port Lligat, 1949. Photo by Lluísribesma-teu1969, Fair Use.

Numerous others of Dalí's works include a focus on eggs, which often either appear world or earthlike, as is the case in *Geopolitics* or in a painting such as Dalí's *Allegory of an American Christmas* (1943). Alternatively, Dalí gives the eggs a central position in his work and paints them as either encased within the shell, as in his *Metamorphosis of Narcissus* (1937), or cracked and fried, as in his *Eggs on the Plate without the Plate* (*Oeufs sur le Plat sans le Plat*, 1932). Dalí's sculptures, such as his *Space Venus* (1977), also include eggs. French director Jean-Christophe Averty even filmed the birth of Dalí and his wife Gala from a giant egg on the beach in front of their home in Port Lligat, the scene of which appears in Averty's (1969) film, *Salvador Dalí: A Soft Self-Portrait* (narrated by Orson Wells).

#### 2.1.2. Joan Miró (1893–1983)

Joan Miró (1893–1983), a Catalan artist whose work resists categorization, also found inspiration in the theme of birth. In *The Birth of the World* (Figure 3), Miró's 1925 painting and a significant representation of his earlier work, the artist paints the origin of a new world, a beginning or genesis. As Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) Curator Anne Umland explains, the thin yellow line that reaches the balloon-like oval towards the center of the canvas appears like a spermatozoon, joining other shapes on the canvas to create a new world (Umland n.d.). Dreary, dusty colors and misty forms rest in the background of Miró's *Birth of the World* like smoke after an explosion. Contrasting with the stark, simple shapes at the foreground, these forms are more complex and appear like remnants or shadows of another place.





**Figure 3.** Joan Miró, *The Birth of the World*, 1925. Image in the Public Domain.

In Miró's sculptural work, the artist touches on themes of the egg. Well-known for his paintings, the artist has received less attention for his sculptures. Devoting time to sculpture later in life, Miró made his bronze "Femme" monuments (Figure 4), which have large central openings and egg-like heads made of golden-brown patina, all reminiscent of birth and creation. The form of the egg takes central stage in these sculptures.



**Figure 4.** Joan Miró, *Femme*, 1970. Photo by Gerd Eichmann, licensed under Creative Commons: CC BY-SA 4.0.

Similarly, *Grande Maternité* (Figure 5), Miró's bronze sculpture that is rounded with openings reminiscent of crowning during birth, robustly celebrates creation, the female form, and new beginnings. Miró created a number of these sculptures during the 1960s and 1970s, one of which rests in the sculpture garden of San Francisco's de Young Museum.



**Figure 5.** Joan Miró, *Grande Maternité*, 1973. Photo by Soonsoon, 2007, licensed under Creative Commons: CC BY-SA 3.0.

### 2.1.3. Mari Chordà (b. 1942)

A contemporary Catalan artist born in 1942, Mari Chordà has been an important artist in Spain's feminist movement. She is well-known for her paintings of the vagina, as well as for her taboo representations of female sexuality more broadly. However, Chordà has also explored themes of birth, pregnancy, and creation in her artwork (Gotti 2015).

In a series of paintings called *Pregnant Self Portraits*, which the artist painted between 1966–1967, Chordà modeled her own pregnant body when creating the works. All of the paintings depict large colorful shapes that represent themes of pregnancy and maternity. The forms on the painting are abstract with rounded edges, colored in a variety of reds and pinks (Chordà n.d.).

Rather than depicting pregnancy itself, Chordà's paintings often remind the viewer of the internal womb and of the sensation and fullness of pregnancy. One of the paintings, *Autorretrat embarassada, novè mes* (*Pregnant Self Portrait, Ninth Month*) (Figure 6) also brings to mind the fullness of a woman's breasts and the way a woman's belly swells towards the end of her pregnancy.

In 2017, Chordà held an exhibit at Lo Pati Center of the Arts in her hometown of Amposta, a village near to Tarragona in the southeast corner of Catalonia. The exhibit, which was titled "*Llots i Torbes*" ("*Mud and Peat*") centered on themes of fertility and the origin of life (Alarcón 2017). *Gran úter de vímet* (*Great Wicker Uterus*), an installation and the central piece of the exhibit, depicted a giant uterus made of basketry and containing an opening large enough to walk through. Mònica Guilera and Tim Johnson, a team of basket makers, wove the uterus. Inside the structure, Chordà included a video projection of a nude woman swimming in the clear waters of the sea and emitting the sounds of water, which are reminiscent of the neonatal sounds experienced by the fetus when immersed in amniotic fluid and the mother's womb.



**Figure 6.** Mari Chordà Autorretrat embarassada, novè mes (Pregnant Self Portrait, Ninth Month), 1966. Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported License.

#### 2.1.4. Xicu Cabanyes (b. 1946)

The Bosc de Can Ginebreda is a forest not far from Catalonia's northeastern city of Girona containing an open-air park with over one hundred sculptures created by Xicu Cabanyes (n.d.), a contemporary Catalan artist born in 1946. With a strong focus on the human body, some of the larger-than-life-size works found immersed along the paths, hills, and trails of the park are devoted to themes of birth, genesis, and coming into being. These themes are often overlooked in writings on Cabanyes' sculptures, which tend to emphasize the erotic or sensual nature of the artist's works. Images of death and mortality are also present in the sculptures, though frequently interwoven with those of birth. In Naixement de la mort (Birth of Death), a figurative work created in concrete, for example, the artist realistically depicts a skull of death that crowns from a birthing woman (Figure 7).



**Figure 7.** Xicu Cabanyes, Naixement de la mort (Birth of Death), 1980. Photo by Lara B. Gómez, 2005, licensed under Creative Commons: CC BY-ND 2.0.



All of Cabanyes' sculptures are fully integrated in the environment, interacting with the natural formations of the forest's surroundings. In one case, a sculpture called *Naixement de la vida-arbre* (*Birth of the life-tree*) depicts a woman giving birth to a tree, the trunk of which sprouts from her reclining form in a large shoot. In another, the sculpture of a larger than life-size pregnant woman holding her swollen belly with one hand, head tilted upwards towards the sky, emerges from a hidden path. Named *Prenyada*, or *Pregnant*, the sculpture is flanked by trees on each side. Cabanyes' *La taula de les prenyades* (*The Table of Pregnant Women*), is a smaller work near to the park's entrance. Figurines of seven very pregnant women rest atop a stone table that sits next to a bench. Five of the women appear to be in labor, lying in a semi-circle around the other two women, one of whom reclines on a box, the other of whom stands looking up to the sky with one hand on her belly.

While the artist devotes spaces of his forest to these images of pregnant and birthing bodies, he also touches on the more abstract themes of genesis, cosmological birth and rebirth in some of his other works. Cabanyes' *Abans del Big Bang* (*Before the Big Bang*), for example, comprises massive cylinders made of recycled concrete that rest together horizontally and partially embedded in a rock. Other such works, all of which are impressive in size, include *Gènesi* (*Genesis*), *La font estroçada* (*The Shattered Source*) and *Retorn al nucli* (*Return to the Nucleus*).

#### 2.1.5. Eugènia Balcells (b. 1942)

Born in Barcelona in 1942, Contemporary Catalan artist Eugènia Balcells has since 1968 lived and worked between the United States and Catalonia, calling both Barcelona and New York her homes. Known for her multimedia installations, Balcells' explorations of birth and rebirth are much more abstract than are those of the other artists discussed here. Central to her work are themes related to the passage of time, as well as to the shape of the circle and of circular movement in her videos and installations.

In *Roda Do Tempo* (*Time Wheel*) (Balcells 2001), Balcells' 2001 installation commissioned by the Centre Cultural Banco do Brasil in Rio de Janeiro, the artist looks at the nature of time's passage. Described on her website as, "a reflection on time: the cyclical time of nature, the dialectic time of history, subjective time, imaginary time, the non-existence of time, the coexistence of all time", the installation comprises copper-colored casts of everyday objects that hang in a large spiral moving downward in a central room. Video images and other imagery pass through the space of the room with words indicating the illusory nature of time (Eugènia Balcells Foundation 2001). *Time Wheel* reminds the viewer of how beginnings and endings merge in time, a theme similar to that of the passage of time between birth and death.

Balcells' *Exposure Time* (Balcells 1989) (Figure 8), her 1989 multimedia installation that is part of La Caixa Collection in Catalonia, shows the viewer a scene of creation, destruction, and renewal, in this case as pertains to the birth and rebirth of the urban landscape. Balcells created the installation at a time when the Olympic Village was under construction in preparation for the 1992 Summer Olympics in Barcelona. During the construction, Balcells sifted through pieces and remnants from buildings mixed in with the sand and rocks of the beach where construction for the Village was taking place (Eugènia Balcells Foundation). Influenced by this urban detritus, Balcells, created *Exposure Time*. In addition to its focus on the way that human made objects erode over time, *Exposure Time* utilizes the image of a mesmerizing circle at its center upon which plays a video showing blue water washing and flowing. The circle, water, and sound of the moving liquid, all part of the installation, are reminiscent of the amniotic waters contained within a birthing body, as well as of the regenerative properties associated more broadly with the tides and currents of earth's oceans and seas. In its utilization of urban objects and pieces from Barcelona's past, *Exposure Time* is also an exploration of the birth, death and rebirth of cities.





**Figure 8.** Eugènia Balcells, *Exposure Time* (still), 1989. Multimedia installation, Sound by Peter Van Riper. Photo: Copyright 1989, Eugènia Balcells Foundation, published with permission.

## 2.2. Cultural Identity and the Theme of Birth in Catalan Art

The preceding overviews demonstrate that birth is a prominent theme among these Catalan artists. However, reasons vary as to why the artists have continually returned to the theme. Part of Salvador Dalí's interest, something that he describes in his 1942 autobiography, *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí*, had to do with Dalí's focus on an intrauterine self and world, his own prenatal life, which he claims fantastically to have remembered. In the second chapter of his book, "Intra-Uterine Memories", he discusses his memories (or fantasies) of the womb. Yet Dalí is also interested in the topic of birth in a figurative, broader sense, which has to do with the spiritual rebirth he felt when he was away from European war, having traveled to the United States:

"I had a growing desire to feel myself in contact with a 'new flesh,' with a new country, that had not yet been touched by the decomposition of Post-War Europe. America!". (Dalí 1942, p. 346)

Due to his political views, described at times as either apolitical or pro-Franco, Dalí was a controversial figure, both within the strongly leftist Surrealist group based in Paris he had been a part of and more broadly within Spain and Catalonia (Miralles 2000, pp. 216–18). And yet one notes from Dalí's autobiography that the artist was grappling with war in Europe and was looking for a renewal, a "new flesh", which he found in the United States (Pine 2008, pp. 37–58). In the meantime, the Catalan landscape, and in particular that of the region of the Empordà where Dalí's hometown of Cadaqués was situated, figured strongly in Dalí's artwork throughout his life. He and his wife Gala never moved elsewhere in Spain and spent the bulk of their lives together in the small Catalan village of Port Lligat, near to Cadaqués. It would be difficult to separate the Mediterranean land of Catalonia, the region's cultural traditions, and the Catalan-ness of Dalí's personality from Dalí's artmaking. The colors and tones Dalí used, and the forms of land and sea in his works are intimately connected to the earth and water that he lived by. Dalí also celebrated Catalan tradition, regularly wearing the "barretina", for example, which is a cap worn in Catalonia and a strong symbol of Catalan identity.

While not primarily a political artist, Joan Miró opposed the dictatorship in Spain and created anti-war art, which included strong politically motivated works such as his monumental mural, *The Reaper* (1937), commissioned by the Republican Government for the Paris World Fair in 1937 and depicting a Catalan peasant revolting against fascism and the Spanish Civil war; as well as Miró's 1974 triptych, *The Hope of a Condemned Man*, devoted to the Catalan anarchist, Salvador Puig Antich (Miralles 2000, pp. 164–65). Franco had ordered Puig's execution that same year. However, Miró's life and work are also representative of a retreat and escape from war and trauma. Focusing on the creation of a new world through his art, Miró utilized a variety of techniques in his work. Surrealist automatism and the use of stream of consciousness influenced Miró in his earlier years as an artist, for example. His interaction with the Surrealist movement in Paris beginning in the 1920s played a part in his creation of *The Birth of the World*.

The land and earth of Catalonia, particularly its colors and forms, as well as objects Miró found while walking around his studio in Palma de Mallorca and that he used for his sculptural work later in his life, also influenced the artist's new envisioning of the world. While prehistoric art had an important impact on the work of both Pablo Picasso and Miró, influencing Miró's representations of nature and earth (Fatás Monforte 2021, pp. 24–36), Catalan church painters and Catalan artists such as Modest Urgell (1839–1919) and Josep Pascó i Mensa (1855–1910), both of whom had taught Miró when the young painter was in Barcelona, heavily influenced Miró's fresh approach to painting images of Catalonia (Sweeney 1948, pp. 208–12). The influence, which one sees in early works such as *The Farm* (1921–1922) and his 1924 painting, *The Hunter* (*Catalan Landscape*), carries through in much of his oeuvre (Figure 9).



**Figure 9.** Joan Miró, *The Hunter (Catalan Landscape)*, 1923–1924. Licensed under Creative Commons: CC BY-ND 2.0.

In the cases of both Dalí and Miró, the artists' identifications with Catalonia—its culture and its earth—were a strong part of who they were, both as people and as artists. Both artists spent time living abroad. However, their primary homes were in Catalonia. Like Dalí, Miró wore a barretina and celebrated Catalan cultural traditions. Parallel to their lives as creators of artworks about birth, renewal, and re-envisioned worlds, all of which were infused with colors, forms, shapes and objects intimately connected to Catalonia, they kept close to Catalonia's earth and traditions. Through their art about birth, they reflected on their selves and their worlds, rising up and rebirthing both their art and their identities in the wake of the cultural turmoil of their time.

Up until 1965, Mari Chordà was involved in student revolts against Franco's dictatorship that took place in Barcelona. She was connected to *Estampa Popular*, a political and artistic movement in Spain that used activism and art to counter the regime (Reina Sofia Museum 2013). Chordà then moved to Paris in 1965 but made art about the dictatorship, which included her use of dark colors in collages on wood that she describes in an interview with Tate Modern as dealing with, "events and significant figures relating to the dictatorship, monstrous animals crushing the multitude" (Tate Museum: Artist Interviews 2015). In 1966, however, an interesting occurrence changing the course of her artwork happened in Chordà's life. Without planning for it, she became pregnant. Embracing the pregnancy, Chordà drastically shifted the colors, forms and themes of her artworks. She used her own body as her model and painted new works in vibrant color devoted to the topics of birth and physiology. An interest in representing the shape, feel, and sensations of the female body, including its experiences of birth, fertility, and intrauterine sensations then became primary influences in Chordà's work. Chordà began both to explore female sexuality and to validate the experiences of the female body. She is recognized as an important voice in Spain's feminist movement (Muñoz López 2022).

Chordà went through a rebirth—both in the artwork that she chose to create and in becoming a mother. Rising from her works about the destruction of Spain's dictatorship,

Chordà's new art about birth bloomed, emanating in close connection to the rejuvenation of her own pregnant body. Parallel to Chordà's work as an artist, however, was her continued stance in support of Catalonia. Following Spain's transition to a democracy after Franco's death in 1975, for example, Chordà strongly supported the recuperation of the Catalan language in Catalonia.

Similar to Chordà, Eugènia Balcells is an important figure in Spain's feminist movement, considered a pioneering conceptual artist and figure of the feminist avantgarde. In the 1970s, Balcells created works that directly questioned patriarchal representations of the family, especially those propagated in Francoist Spain, which had presented a woman's role in the family as one of subjugation (Bassas 2005, pp. 5–14). Balcells' works from this time included her installation and film pieces such as *Re-prise* (1976–77), *Fin* (1978) and *Boy Meets Girl* (1978), all of which involved Balcells' use of film stills and other materials such as pictures from magazines to create a new envisioning of family and personal identity (Bassas 2005, p. 9). In Balcells' 1979 photo series called *Ophelia* (*variacions sobre una imatge* [variations on an image]), the artist re-imagines Ophelia, the tragic female character of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In the series, Balcells again questions cultural and popular representations of women in Spain, especially those that emerged from the dictatorship and were indicative of a woman's identity as bound to Spain's Catholic Church and patriarchal family structure (Ugalde 2015, pp. 35–45).

For Balcells, her reimagining of a woman's role and identity was a key part of the conceptual art she produced in the late 1970s. It is worth noting that the artist created this work during Spain's four-year transition to democracy (1976–1980) after Franco's death in 1975. By the late 1980s and Balcells' creation of *Exposure Time*, the artist was exploring how the remnants of a world or society, pieces of a city in the case of the renovations taking place in Barcelona at that time in preparation for the 1992 Olympics, could be reborn after deterioration and destruction. Balcells explores the regeneration of land and of culture itself, in particular, the land and the culture of Barcelona, Catalonia's capital, which her work shows have the capacity to be born again after destruction. Balcells exemplifies a Catalan artist whose work looks broadly at a theme of the eternal return: the repetitive intervals of time between birth and death, and destruction and renewal, including the renewal of earth, culture and people.

Xicu Cabanyes is a Catalan artist who came to age in the same generation as Mari Chordà and Eugènia Balcells. In Cabanyes' case, some of his most important artistic developments occurred away from the urban world of Barcelona and abroad. Cabanyes first developed a strong connection to the earth and natural environment of Serinyà, Cabanyes' hometown and a small Catalan village in the province of Girona (Cabanyes 2007; Hernández n.d.). From a young age, Cabanyes learned about the land and how to work with his hands, helping his parents tend their farm. Sculpting wood carvings into his late teens, the artist also connected during the 1960s and 1970s with social groups in Banyoles, an important town in Catalonia known for its communal and political activities against Franco's dictatorship, as well as for its celebration of Catalan folklife.

Cabanyes' creation of his open-air sculpture park at the Bosc de Can Ginebreda began in the mid-1970s. Since then, his forest has become a vibrant hub of artistic collaboration and exhibition in twenty-first century Girona. The space of the park also acts as a communal ground for Catalan people. In February 2018, Cabanyes held a festival at his sculpture park during which time people came to express their solidarity with Catalan political prisoners and exiles following the events of the Catalan independence referendum of 1 October 2017. Widely seen on videos across the internet, on that day Spain's National Police Corps and Civil Guard used violence against Catalan citizens partaking in the democratically run election to determine whether Catalonia should become an independent state in the form of a republic. Participants at Cabanyes' festival painted their hands yellow (a symbol of the Catalan flag and Catalan identity) and wore paper masks that depicted the faces of the prisoners with cut-outs for the eyes. Wearing the masks, these participants looked through



the eyes of the prisoners, rebirthing themselves as the prisoners and symbolically sharing in their experiences of imprisonment.

Cabanyes' sculptures of birth scattered throughout his open-air park, include representations of physiological birth as well as abstract depictions of regeneration and genesis more broadly. These works represent a liberation of the body from repression and also remind the viewer of new beginnings taking place on Catalan soil. The communal events Cabanyes holds at his park also lead to a form of shared art-making that participates in birthing national and cultural identities for those who attend. These identities emerge in the face of political crisis.

The Catalan art about birth discussed in this article emerged from the physical, emotional and cultural tolls of Catalonia during the twentieth century, as well as from the region's long history of renewal after destruction. Through this theme of birth, shared by the five artists discussed, a Catalan identity of rebirth and eternal return emerges, represented in artistic form (Hennessey 2021a, 2021b).

### 2.3. Rebirth and the Myth of the Eternal Return in Philosophy and the History of Religion

Beliefs and practices emanating from an interest in immortality and an eternal return to life mark religions, philosophies, and cultures throughout human history. Different varieties of the interest include a focus on cyclical patterns of physical or spiritual rebirth, life after death in a celestial or non-terrestrial world, an eternity of recurring histories, or a repetitiveness within the human lifespan itself. We locate the interest in many contexts, across ancient traditions in numerous countries from around the world; a number of religions and worldviews from the past and present; and throughout a wide range of intellectual thought found in both the sciences and humanities.

Known for his seminal ideas on the eternal return, German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) described in his 1882 work *The Gay Science* the possibility of an eternal recurrence to existence—a repetitiveness to the human experience, one that could be painful (Nietzsche [1882] 1974, pp. 101–2; Loeb 2013). His well-known passage in *The Gay Science* describes a hypothetical demon who offers the reader an imagination of life being lived innumerable times over where, “every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence” (Nietzsche [1882] 1974, p. 273). Nietzsche's ideas on an eternal recurrence come into full force, however, in his philosophical novel, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Nietzsche 1885), in which Zarathustra, the main character, travels and preaches about the eternal repetition of human life.

Although Nietzsche's philosophy of an eternal recurrence takes into consideration the plausible dread of a never-ending and repetitive cycle of life, it ultimately finds hope and meaning embedded in the simple act of living within the moments of life's repetition. His famous description of this meaning comes forth in Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo* (1888), the philosopher's last original book, when Nietzsche describes *amor fati*, or the human love of fate:

“My formula for greatness in a human being is amor fati: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it—all idealism is mendaciousness in the face of what is necessary—but love it”. (Nietzsche [1887] 1967, Sec. 10)

We need not just bear our moments of existence, regardless of whether they happen in the past future or for all eternity, Nietzsche claims. We can love those moments.

Decades later, the French writer and philosopher Albert Camus (1913–1960) similarly explored the eternal return in his 1942 essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Camus compares the absurdity of human existence to the life of Sisyphus, a mortal punished by the Greek gods to eternity in the underworld, damned to the task of endlessly rolling a boulder up a hill. Sisyphus' eternal return is a return to perpetual life with his task, which he must live over and over again. Camus claims that although absurd, there is significance in Sisyphus's experiences of life's recurrence. The boulder that Sisyphus pushes is an object

that the man touches, feeling its form. Sisyphus experiences the walk of the hill and of his passing thoughts. Humans may experience similar significance in the eternal return of their experiences during life:

“All Sisyphus’ silent joy is contained therein. His fate belongs to him. His rock is his thing. Likewise, the absurd man, when he contemplates his torment, silences all the idols. In the universe suddenly restored to its silence, the myriad wondering little voices of the earth rise up”. (Camus [1942] 1983, p. 123)

Like Nietzsche, Camus comes to the conclusion that within the repetitiveness and that which could appear to be the meaninglessness of human life, there rests a multitude of earthly experiences to be cherished.

Other thinkers have explored the eternal return as a specific form of birth or rebirth that disrupts history’s relentless trajectory towards an end or a death. One of those thinkers was the Romanian historian of religion Mircea Eliade (1907–1986). Eliade was also specifically interested in the interrelationship between art, religion and the eternal return.

In his 1963 book *Myth and Reality*, Eliade returns to the main topic of his seminal 1954 work, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, theorizing that humans escape the crushing blow of history and time through their eternal return to cosmogony, or birth and beginnings. In *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Eliade had mapped out how through their collective repetition of certain acts, humans create a type of existential porthole through which their experiences connect them to a cosmogonic myth or an original time (Eliade 1954, pp. 73–92). By connecting their daily lives to a cosmogonic moment, humans as such may live their lives in a way that returns them perpetually to a beginning, or to an origin or a birth. Returning eternally to birth, humans escape history’s linear trajectory towards an end or a death.

In *Myth and Reality*, Eliade develops this idea further, explaining that when removed from their traditional contexts, myths of the modern world take on different forms. Modern forms of mythicization that connect humans to birth and beginnings, he claims, persist in art, literature and mass media. Eliade suggests that modern art destroys and reinvents the world of art, creating “a ‘new World’ being built up from ruins and enigmas” (Eliade [1963] 1998, p. 190). In doing so, the artist and the viewer have the capacity to escape time through the artwork, which is especially the case in literature where one becomes “submerged in a time that is fabulous and trans-historical” (Eliade [1963] 1998, p. 192).

One interpretation is that the Catalan artists discussed in this article have not only recreated their world of art through the new forms of representation they have created, as Eliade might explain (Eliade [1963] 1998, see also: Eliade 1985). These artists have also recreated their identities in Catalonia—artistic, personal and cultural identities—by representing images of birth, genesis and rebirth in the wake of the destruction that marked Catalonia during the time in which they lived.

### 3. Conclusions

Through their artworks and lives, the five artists discussed in this article have rebirthed themselves while living both in the tumultuous and traumatic times of modern and contemporary Catalonia and in the wake of Catalonia’s long history in Europe as a nation without a state. Their artworks are physical representations of birth that relate in part to a longstanding Catalan sentiment of an eternal recurrence to life after destruction. Through their creations, the artists show their viewers that Catalan culture has the capacity to live on and eternally return in difficult times, rebirthed through painting, sculpture and material representation, as well as through the lives of the artists themselves.

In *Virgin Spain: Scenes from the Spiritual Drama of a Great People*, American novelist, activist, and historian Waldo Frank’s 1926 cultural study of Spain, Frank writes, “France mastered the Catalans: and they returned. Aragon used them ruthlessly in war: they returned. Castile stifles and racks them: they are returning. For they are like the Spring, the evanescent Spring—which returns . . . This life does not resist: it returns” (Frank 1926, p. 259, see also Trueta 1946, p. 81). An interest in the concepts of rebirth, immortality, and

an eternal return to life mark human history, found within various religious, philosophical and intellectual traditions. In the context of Catalan culture, artworks related to birth make material an eternal return to life after destruction. The theme of rebirth is integral to Catalan cultural identity itself.

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