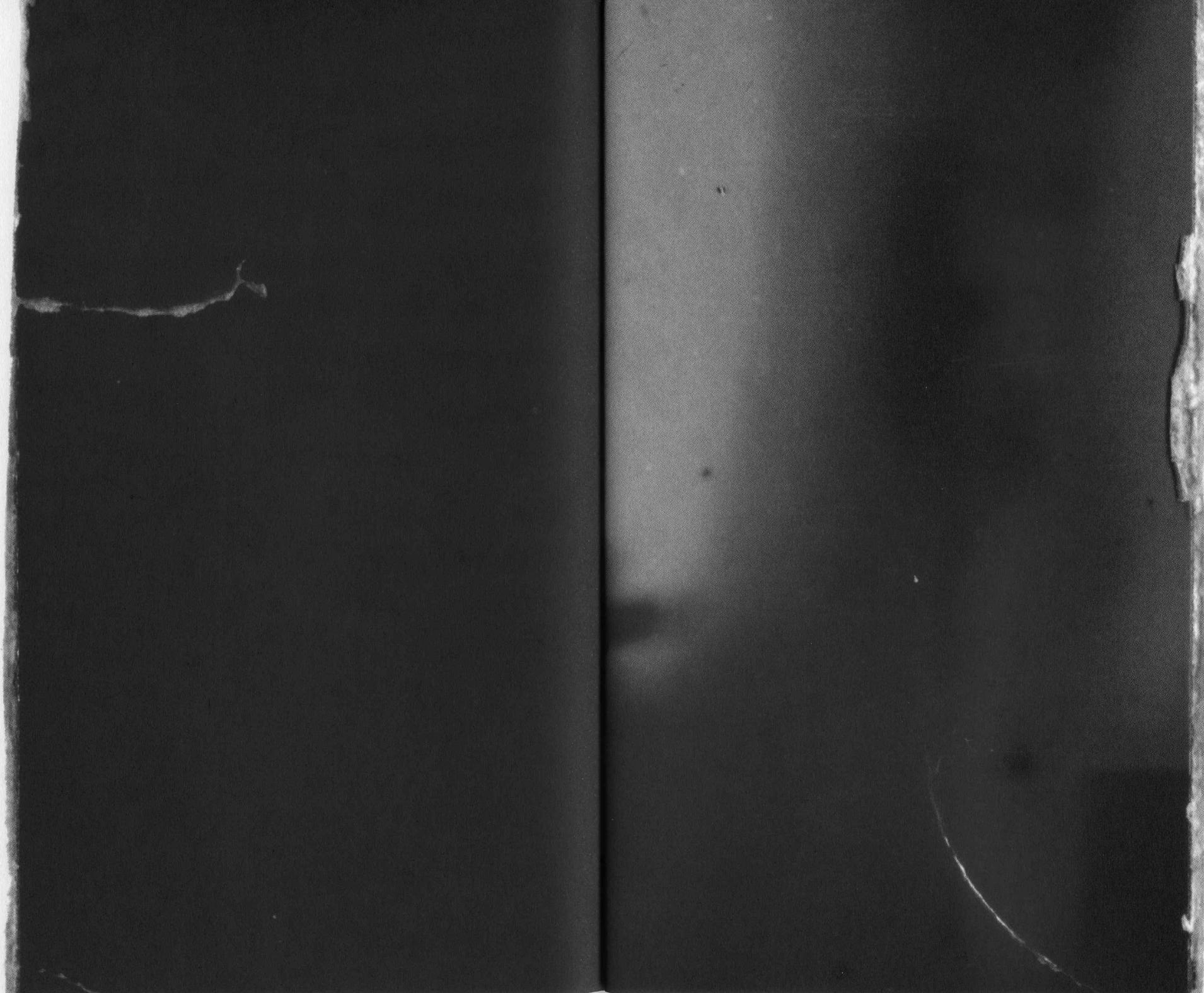




A letter arrives at its destination
Asier Mendizabal 2011

A letter arrives at its destination

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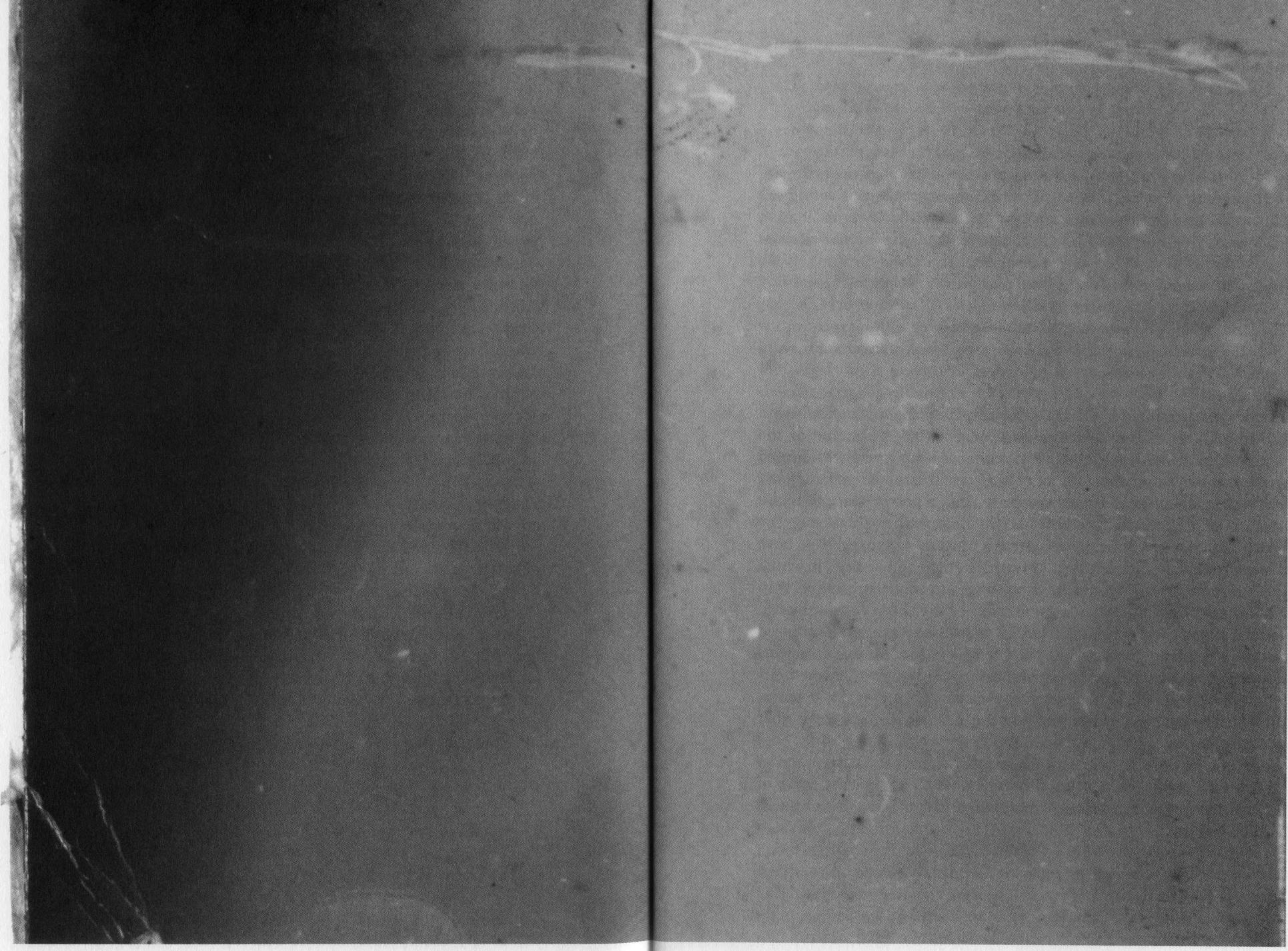


Revista Nacional de Arquitectura, the official publication of the architects' association in Spain during the height of entrenchment of the Franco regime, published in 1953 a protest letter written by the sculptor Jorge Oteiza, that was not, in principle, addressed to the readers of the magazine.¹ In a forward to the letter, as was peremptory at the time, the magazine communicated: "we would like to state that Jorge Oteiza's article has been previously approved under the consultation of the architect José Fernández del Amo, Director of the Modern Art Museum in Madrid."² This was an official exculpation, not uncommon under the asphyxiating climate of generalised censorship and was part of another, more conceptual one that rather patronisingly admitted: "An important competition has taken place in London, an in-depth account of which can be found in the indignant observations made by the sculptor Jorge Oteiza. We would like to note that in view of the complexity of the subject matter of new art, we are very unprepared. Consequently, our always uninteresting opinion, in this particular case, does not count. However, inasmuch as the current art movement has an undeniable universality, it seems timely and necessary for the *Revista Nacional de Arquitectura* to take note of its existence, furthermore when it provides manifestations of the importance of this competition in London."

The aforementioned competition, the motive behind the sculptor's protest, was the international competition announced in London in 1952, through the Institute of Contemporary Arts, for the creation of a Monument to The Unknown Political Prisoner. The first addressees of that protest letter were the members of the jury, who had awarded the prize, and on doing so, had relegated Oteiza's proposal to the selection of 140 projects that were chosen from a total of around 3500. The letter never reached its destination.³

This, my protest, is against the International Jury that just granted, in London, the first world competition of our time on one specific theme of sculpture, and has done so with a critical lightness that manifests the extension of the general crisis of knowledge that affects the majority of artists and authorities of our contemporary art.

This, my protest, could be plurally addressed, but to do that I would have to be much more ingenuous than I am still, and I would have to clarify many things, for which,



fortunately as a sculptor, I do not have enough time. If the sculptor has had to live by night, he will put things in place as if it were day. If it is still not day, he will have to wait and keep renouncing this little but human and justifiable appetite for clarity or external consent. But he will on no occasion renounce denouncing what in all conscience must not keep quiet. This is what I am now doing, without addressing anyone, but aloud: I leave written in my notebook of operations this experience, one more in the incessant process in which all creative intimacy is formed.

The Jury's error is the same one made by most of the prized sculptors, the same error that extends across the entire contemporary nature of sculpture.⁴

The project presented by Oteiza, departing from the mythical allusion to Prometheus as the sole figurative nexus with the theme of the competition, already anticipated his concern with a very widespread confusion regarding abstraction. In his work, the act of lightening the statue was meant to activate a receptive void, a poetic space of inclusion of the observer that established, in an almost mythical way, the possibility of a symbolically effective, sculptural language. "We have conceived this monument as (...) a formal lightweight system, in which the interior void constitutes its expressive and tragic substance."⁵ In his project, this emptying activated itself in the space cut out by two vertical shapes, hyperboloids from his formal experimentation based on non-Euclidean geometry. Applied to this particular situation, this disoccupation would come to symbolise "a new image of Prometheus triumphant with his *active heart on the exterior*."⁶ It is not strange, then, that he felt concerned directly by the insistence of a large number of the sculptors of his generation (and very specifically, the ones chosen by the jury of the international competition as the new canon of a universal language) in using different ways to lighten the mass of the sculpture by using rhetorical materials and symbols, which he considered an error.

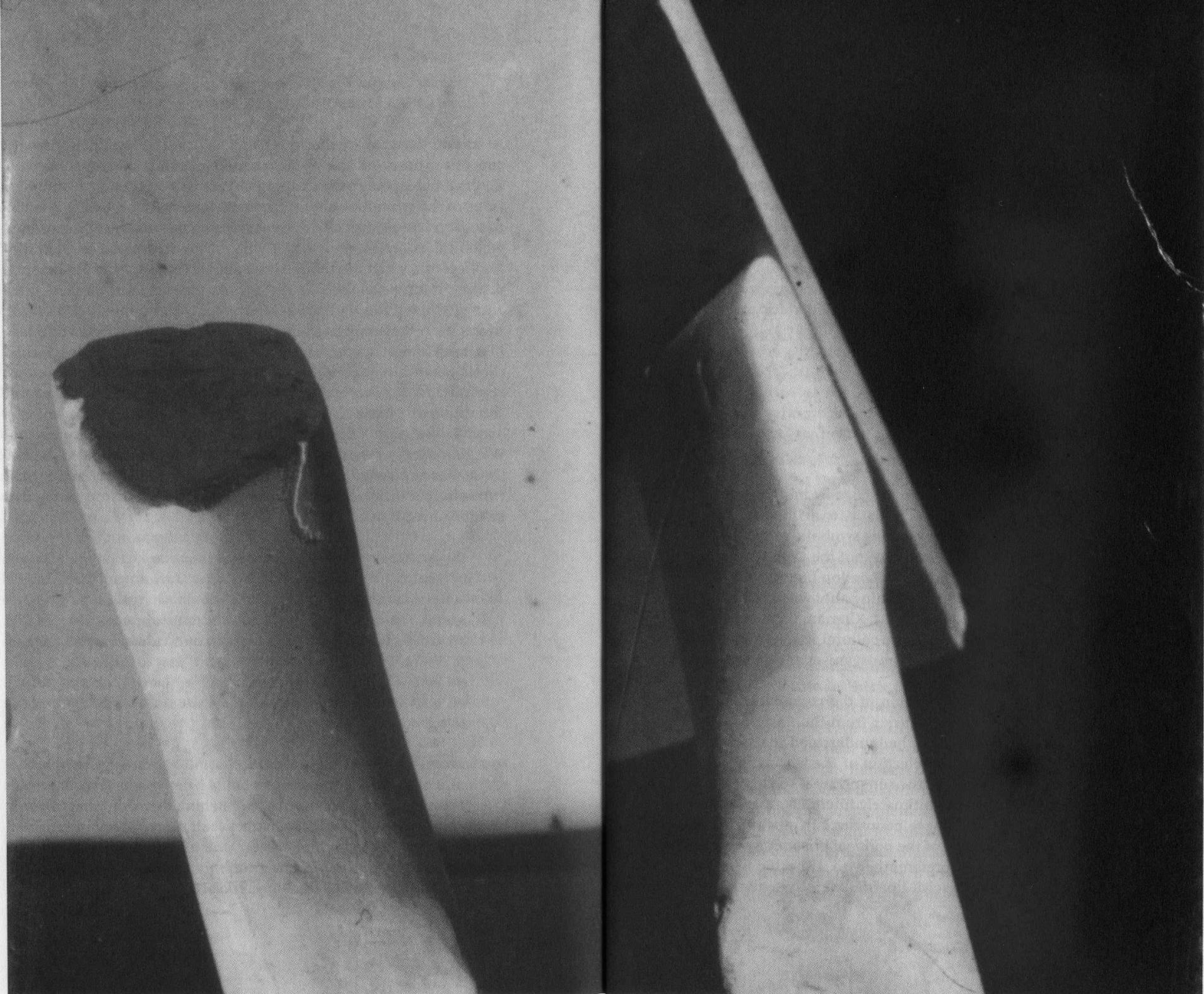
An aesthetic error, a superficial conception of the nature of the statue, a confusion, even now, rooted in Aristotle. There is still a theoretical confusion on considering the plastic mass as the formal material of the statue,

mistaking the spatial agent for the purely material agent: the clay, the marble, the bronze.

A shrewd revision of the letter and its context would not forego the observation of the unsustainable position of someone who, determined to undertake the public act of protest, avoids the implications of the symbolic content to which, as a sculptor, he has decided to respond. Indeed, Oteiza does not refer to the thorny subject around which the competition is based, that of the figure of The Unknown Political Prisoner, even though he cannot escape the paradox in representing internationally a Spain with its prisons (and ditches) filled with victims of the repression. The protest was published, after all, in a context that supported the regime, which makes for an (if possible) even more uncomfortable reading of this elaborated formal thesis about a real core that is always absent: the political content represented. A historical perspective, however, allows us to recover the validity of Oteiza's position with respect to the stylisation of a specific "universal" sculptural language in the context of the Cold War, in order to reveal how ideological the artistic attitudes were of those who supported it, and, conversely, re-politicise Oteiza's formal commitment to a possibility that the account of art history seemed to have thwarted.

The brusque, contemporary change experienced in the nature of sculpture does not mean that the statue has lost its nature, but rather that it has been transformed. The statue has become weightless; its nature, formal; the law of tensions in space has changed; but this does not mean that all it takes to create a light statue is the exclusive use of a light material: to unroll a spool of wire or weld some iron sheets. Or riddle an antique statue with holes.

In a cartoon published in the *Evening News* in March 1953, two characters stand on a beach. One of them holds a newspaper with the headline: "Prize sculpture for Dover Cliffs?" Behind them, on what can only be the Dover Cliffs, there is an abstract sculpture made of intertwined lines connected to a mess of cables. One of the characters observes mockingly, "Dunno what they be grumblin' about... Goin' to save folk hereabouts a might lot in television aerials."



The caricatured “prize sculpture” referred to in the cartoon was that proposed by the English sculptor Reg Butler’s winning maquette from the ICA’s The Unknown Political Prisoner competition.

There is a lack of awareness of this transformation in its aesthetic being, and then, as has just occurred, a jury can mistake for a new weightless statue the material consistency of any light construction that suggests nothing (general conclusion about the abstract), or that suggests an idea of beauty (also in the most archaic and superficial Neoplatonic sense), or that manages to illustrate the idea of the plot or theme of the sculpture, even if it comes from the least intimately creative region of the sculptor, as has happened with the most distinguished works of the competition; that is, from purely anecdotal and theatrical notions and in merely physical combinations (without aesthetic conversion) of cages, wire nettings, grilles, and figurines of women, prisoners, arrows, thorns, ladders...

This international competition, undoubtedly the most important ever called in this field, would turn into a clear initiative to deliberately promote a specific artistic style as a universifiable symbolic reference of the opposition to totalitarianism in the context of the Cold War. The initiative was channelled through the ICA in London but was put forward by a benefactor who insisted on remaining anonymous. He had been introduced by the American Anthony T.J. Kloman, then Director of Public Relations of the ICA, who had been a cultural attaché of the US Embassy in London, and who would become organiser and chairman of the initiative.

In reality, the international aspiration of the competition was soon brought into question, when countries from the Eastern Bloc responded with a general boycott. They had understood that, in the terms of the competition and in the selection of the jury members, there was already an implicit claim for the superiority of the language of abstraction against what was the ultimately intended antagonist: the official realism supported by these countries.⁷ It mustn’t have escaped them either that the theme of the political prisoner was contextualized in a way that referred preferentially to a specific type of political prisoner. Countries where civil liberties were systematically

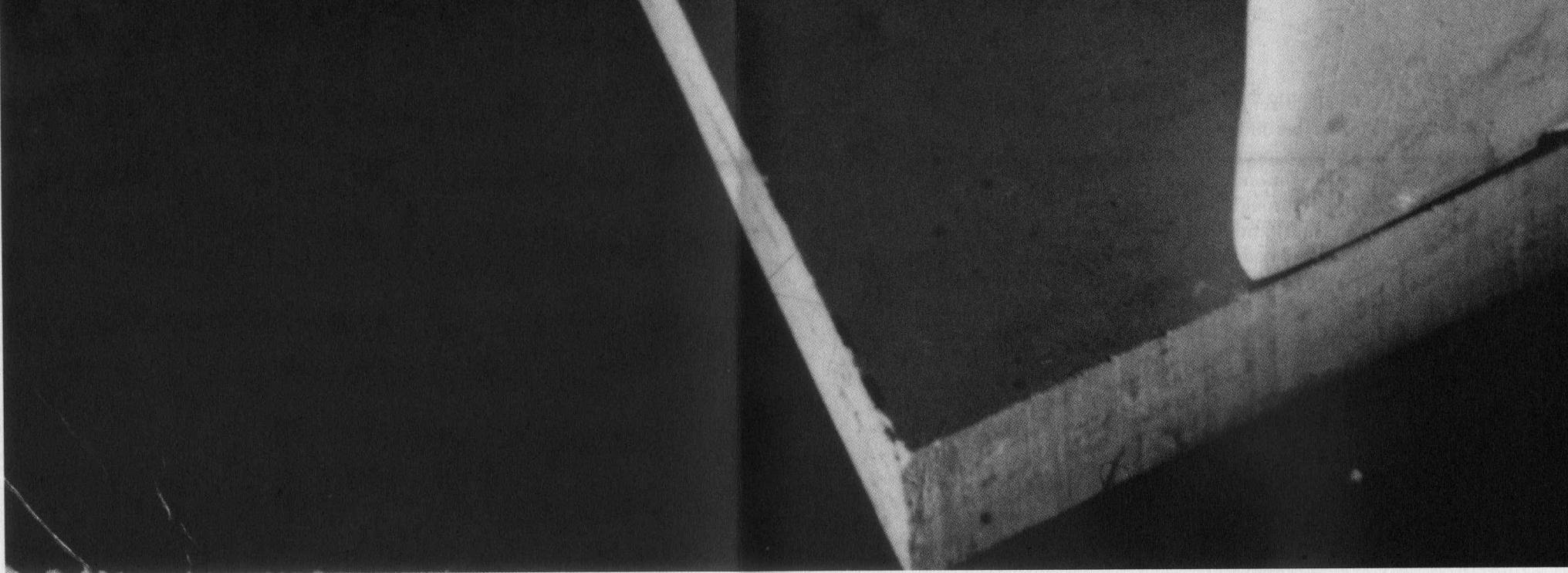
repressed, but that were a strategic ally of the US during the Cold War, did not have such a defensive reaction, as they must have understood that this invocation of the prisoner of conscience was not directed towards them.

Without imagination of a new spatial physiology of the abstract, the mere slimming down of the statue is insufficient as a means of bringing it into being and consistence. Sculptors with trite, stale, academic hearts, under the appearance of new materials, it’s a mystery to me how, at this stage in contemporary art, they have succeeded in mystifying an international distinguished jury.

An obelisk, a sphere, a pyramid, a column are not in themselves a statue, although they may provide a symbolic sign that the sculptor can convert into a statue.

Reg Butler’s project generated great controversy, which crossed the specific realm of art criticism. That the giant sculpture was going to be erected on the Dover coastline was even debated in parliament after the false rumour in the press, as in the previously mentioned *Evening News* cartoon. The exact location for the eventual memorial was never decided, and this was one of the factors that caused the initiative to fail. The most likely candidate to put up the monument was Berlin; four years after the prize had been awarded. The insulting obviousness of the sculpture’s symbolism in Berlin made the offer of this location unsustainable for its promoters, but confirmed that it was the ideological debate brought into play around the presumptions made about realist and abstract art which was most relevant, beyond populist ridicule towards the aesthetic taste of the work. Indeed, from the moment the selection of projects was made public by the jury and after they were exhibited at the Tate Gallery, the critics disapproved of the winning project and the clear predilection by the jury towards designs of an abstract nature. The harshest criticisms came from the left-wing press. John Berger hit out against the project in the *New Statesman and Nation* denouncing the preponderance of the proposals that he felt were “shapes without meaning...not unlike sounds without words.”⁸

James Dudley argued similarly in the *Daily Worker*, a periodical of the British Communist Party. It was, in both cases, a defence of realism as an artistic language with the capacity of intervening in reality and of



Jorge Oteiza, *Monument to the Unknown Political Prisoner* (model of the project), 1952,
plaster, unknown location. Oteiza Museum Archive (file number 20131).

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being shared by all citizens without distinction, which motivated the attack against what was understood to be a canonisation of abstract art as a public language. Especially when this canonisation referred to the reconsideration of a monumental language that could, from that moment on, aspire, through the non-figurative condition of abstraction, to the universality and the symbolic effectiveness that the commemorative statue had had in the past. But the assumption that it was the imprecision, the absence of specific referents, taken for granted in abstract language, that guaranteed its viability as a universal expression and, at the same time as a symbol of individual freedom, can only be sustained if one ignores the fact that almost none of the projects selected renounced the allegory and the use of openly figurative symbolic elements.

Nor is a Möbius strip or a hyperboloid enough in itself today, nor are any of the figures that contemporary scientific thinking imagines in the private nature of their domain, just as a chair, or a wire mesh, or a tree, a head, an aerial, or a radar are insufficient to make a statue if there is no rigorous system of plastic conversion, and if there is no approximate consciousness of the molecular and structural nature of the new statue.

After the repeated critical attacks (and at least one physical one), Alfred H. Barr, Director of the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York and jury member of the competition, who had been one of the main supporters of abstract art, must have felt obliged, after the long agony of a project that kept getting postponed, to make a public act of atonement. He acquired one of the final preparatory maquettes of Butler's project for his museum and decided to present it to the public with an explanation, in the shape of a wall label, which implies a surprising capitulation: "On March 12, 1953, Reg Butler's model won a first prize of about \$12,600 in the great international competition for a monument to The Unknown Political Prisoner organized by the ICA in London. (...) On March 13 the model was put on exhibition at the Tate Gallery. On March 15 it was destroyed by a young Hungarian artist, a refugee from totalitarian persecution. He called the model "rubbish" and anti-humanistic. Artistically conservative, he had doubtless been aroused by the newspaper headlines, which attacked the prize-winning model as "futuristic" and "abstract". (The most virulent criticisms

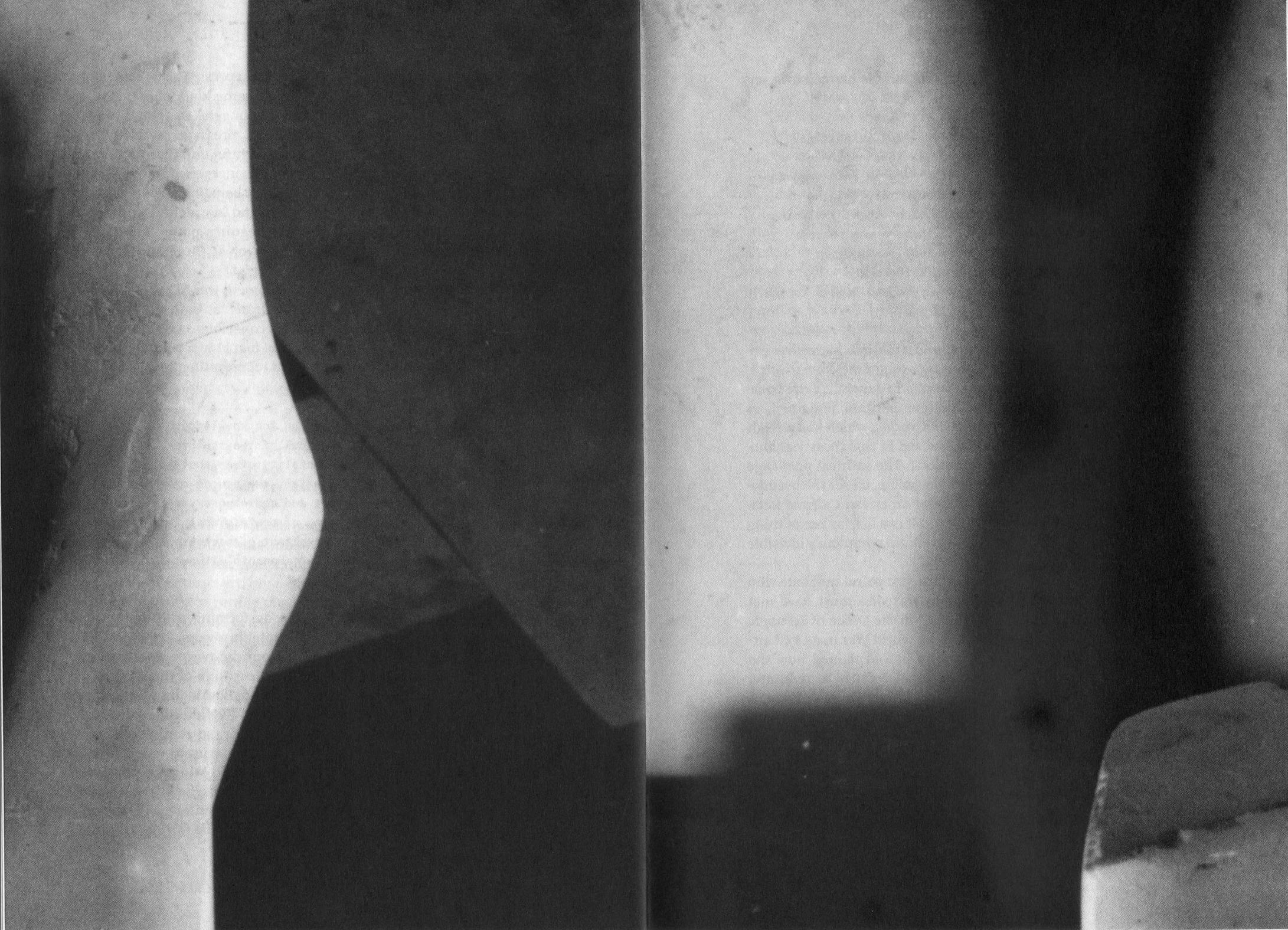
appeared in the conservative and communist press. The extreme right and the extreme left generally do like the same kind of art)... Unlike the Washington Monument in Washington or the Cenotaph in London—and contrary to hasty or prejudiced press accounts—Butler's design is not at all abstract. To many thoughtful and receptive observers, it is a movingly dramatic and human conception. In the highest sense the design seems humanistic without being banal or sentimental. The three great bronze women who stand in watchful meditation beneath the empty scaffold-cage give it meaning, pathos and dignity and recall the women beneath the cross or at the empty tomb of another "political prisoner" of 2000 years ago."⁹

Butler himself denied that his monument was "a purely abstract solution", claiming instead to communicate "at both the fully conscious level by means of *signs* and at less conscious levels by means of *symbols*".¹⁰ He could not be fully aware of just how accurately some of these unconscious symbols were indeed representing the real content of the monument.

The lack of authentic vocation for knowledge, the aesthetic weakness of the soul of the sculptor, is in the source of this superficiality of an abstract art that is insufficiently experimental, the source of the crisis of all the most recent art and contemporary criticism.

Hence this supplanting of professional intelligence, of the symbol-statue as an object of invention, by what appears as mere amateur craftsmanship without sufficient responsibility.

Metal bars, steel cables, crossed iron rods, forming grids that resembled cages, structures that resembled metallic towers, fences; ladders and scaffoldings; aerials and radars; from the twelve awarded projects, at least nine made direct use of at least one of these allegoric objects and constructive elements. Mirko Basaldella's ascending grid of interlaced metal wire, almost woven like a basket, obviously resembles Naum Gabo's facing vertical grids, so reminiscent of a radar. Barbara Hepworth's wooden organic sculpture includes a somewhat inadequate prison grille and Luciano Minguzzi's shows a body trapped in a form that looks like a nest of barbed wire. Richard Lippold's and Antoine Pevsner's are, along with Butler's winning project, the maquettes that resemble more strongly the form of an aerial.



Even Alexander Calder's less figurative sculpture is pierced by a very real rendering of a spear...

It isn't possible to abbreviate or adapt in this way the mind and knowledge -the creative imagination- of the sculptor. If these competitions are in fact important, it is because they commit us, because they examine us in public, because we all examine each other, including the jury. And the one who knows, the one who reasons, examines. Examining with greater care, subjecting the proceedings and memories of all those who were selected to close scrutiny, the jury could have oriented itself better.

Presented at the press conference as "an internationalist whose primary interest is the arts and one who has for a long time done much in a quiet way to assist artists and organisations in general",¹¹ the benefactor that provided the money for the competition remained, as stated, anonymous. The *New Statesman and Nation*, which had already published its critique on the initiative, sensed in this theatrical anonymity a key revelation of its true intentions. The satirical poet Olga Katzin published a poem about it in the magazine, under the pseudonym Sagittarius: "So in the interest of Anglo-American Cultural Relations / And the aesthetic unity of the West, / It is a far, far better thing that the Patron like the Prisoner / Should remain completely invisible and anonymous".¹²

The donor was in fact John Hay Whitney, a petrol magnate who participated in various cultural initiatives and who must have met Anthony T.J. Kloman when they both served in the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), predecessor of the CIA during World War II. As a Chairman of the Board of trustees at MOMA he had explained how the museum could serve as a weapon for national defense to "educate, inspire and strengthen the hearts and wills of free men in defense of their own freedom".¹³ When the complications, which were piling up due to the eventually cancelled construction of the monument, caused the withdrawal of the money pledged for this purpose, it became clear that Whitney was "an anonymous front for the expenditure of funds coming from quite another source..."¹⁴ as Alfred H. Barr reproached in a letter to Kloman in 1955.

I believe that among the works of Englishman Chadwick, the Swiss artist Bill (of the twelve reproduced in the edition of the Jury's selection), and mine (I don't know the others) a principle of authentic discussion was established. We would have willingly essayed an aesthetic analysis of the prize-winning works and an examination of the respective memories. We would have enjoyed doing it on closer proximity to those concerned.

Among the initiatives for which Whitney was a Board Member and active agent was Radio Free Europe, the CIA's favourite propaganda mouthpiece, whose emblem in the 1950s shows a giant antenna above the map of Central Europe launching menacing rays down onto the countries east of Berlin.



Two months after the competition was announced, Oteiza published his book *Interpretación de la estatuaria megalítica americana*¹⁵ where he had already stated:

A sculptor is neither more nor less than – he is nothing but – the initial and dramatic form of a universal type of man. A statue is a political solution. When that necessity is missing or, when the necessity is present, but has not yet been discovered, as happens today, nations shouldn't bother to have sculptors. Woe unto those who show up through sheer inertia in periods when they aren't needed.

Another letter, this time addressed “to the artists of America” had been published in *Revista de la Universidad del Cauca* in Colombia entitled *Letter to the Artists of America. Concerning the New Art of the Postwar Period*¹⁶, Oteiza wrote in 1944, before the war was even over, an extremely lucid proposal for the reconsideration of the debate of abstraction and realism, without hardly mentioning this pair, and without needing to mention any of the conventional political categories implied in that debate. He might as well have been referring to the fate of his own work when he wrote:

The artist always imagines scientific data as geometric beings in process of realizing themselves plastically and within a universal equivalence. “Truth carries with it a power of conviction” wrote Bergson, “and even of conversion, which is the sign by which it makes itself known. The greater the work, the deeper the truth glimpsed within it, all the more belated the effect, the greater its tendency to become universal will be”. And it is thus that the language and the ideas of the artist must be measured by the events they give rise to and not by those they translate.



1. "El concurso internacional en Londres: Protesta del escultor Oteiza", *Revista Nacional de Arquitectura*, [National Journal of Architecture] No. 138, Madrid, 1953, p. 45–47.

2. That summer, Fernández del Amo, architect and director of the Museum of Modern Art, invited Oteiza to speak at the International Congress on Abstract Art in Santander. The congress aimed to promote the normalisation of the reception of abstract art in the reactionary context of the dictatorship.

3. There is a record in Oteiza's correspondence during that time of his intention to make his protest public in an international context, with the publication of the letter in the Italian magazine *Numero. Arte e Letteratura*, through the magazine's co-director, the architect Alberto Sartoris. Sartoris was, however, a regular collaborator on the *Revista Nacional de Arquitectura*, therefore the intention could have been fruit of an opportunity rather than of a willingness to strike up an open discussion with the jury. Sartoris rejected the publication of the protest, on the grounds that the magazine had already covered the story of the competition and that, moreover, the magazine did not cover controversy. He did, nevertheless, show interest in publishing the report of the project proposal, which he was familiar with from the article published in the Spanish magazine. The Italian publication disappeared in 1953, shortly after this exchange.

4. Two English translations of the letter were made in more recent times to be included in two anthologies of texts by the artist. The first, in 1988, was made by art critic Kevin Power for the catalogue *Oteiza. Propósito experimental / An Experimental Proposition*, edited by Txomin Badiola and published by Fundación Caja de Pensiones, Madrid, 1988. The later version was made by Frederick Fornoff for *Oteiza's Selected Writings*, edited by Joseba Zulaika and published by the University of Nevada, Reno, 2003. Both versions were incomplete. The translation of the letter here is an exercise by the author of combining and editing the two existing versions.

5. "Memoria del Proyecto del Escultor Jorge de Oteiza," *Revista Nacional de Arquitectura*, No. 138, Madrid, 1953, p. 48.

6. Ibid. The italics are mine.

7. As confirmed, on the other hand, by the exception of Yugoslavia, which did participate in the competition and whose politics in cultural terms were explicitly favourable towards abstraction.

8. John Berger, "The Unknown Political Prisoner", *New Statesman and Nation*, 21 March 1953, p. 338, in Joan Pachner "Zadkine and Gabo in Rotterdam," *Art Journal*, Vol. 53 No. 4, 1994, College Art Association, New York.

9. MOMA Archives, Alfred H. Barr Papers, roll 2179, New York, in Joan Marter "The Ascendancy of Abstraction for Public Art", *Art Journal*, College Art Association, Winter 1994, Vol. 53 No. 4, p. 35–37.

10. Robert Burstow, "Butler's Competition Project for a Monument to 'The Unknown Political Prisoner'; Abstraction and Cold War Politics," *Art History*, Vol. 12 No. 4, December 1989, Oxford, p. 484.

11. Robert Burstow, "The Limits of Modernist Art as a 'Weapon of the Cold War': reassessing the unknown patron of the Monument to the Unknown Political Prisoner," *The Oxford Art Journal*. 20:1, 1997, p. 68.

12. Sagittarius (Olga Katzin), "The Unknown Patron," *The New Statesman and Nation*, 28 March 1953, p. 362, in Robert Burstow, 1997, p. 72.

13. Russell Lynes, *Good Old Modern*, New York, 1973, p. 233, in Eva Cockcroft, "Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War," *Pollock and After*, Ed. Francis Frascina, Harper & Row Ltd. London, 1985, p. 127.

14. Alfred H. Barr to Anthony T.J. Kloman, January 6, 1955, MOMA Archives, in Joan Marter, 1994, p. 34.

15. Jorge Oteiza, *Interpretación de la estatuaria megalítica americana*, [Interpretation of the American Megalithic Statuary] Ed. Cultura Hispánica, Madrid, 1952.

16. Jorge Oteiza, "Carta a los artistas de América. Sobre el arte nuevo en la posguerra," [Letter to the Artists of America. On the New Art of the Postwar] *Revista de la Universidad del Cauca* [Journal of the University of Cauca], Popayán, Colombia, 1944. Fragments of this article were published in English in the previously cited anthologies by Txomin Badiola, 1988, pp. 215–218 and Joseba Zulaika, 2003, pp. 84–105. The same exercise of translation was applied as in the case of the letter.

