

# A magma of ruptures, continuities, and variations. On Basque art in the 1970's and 1980's



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**110**  
URTE AÑOS

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Surveying half a century of art in the Basque context enables us to compare the modern emergences and transitions, recurrences and ruptures of a period laced with disparate phenomena and times. Given that historical events are magmatic in nature and impossible to interpret in a univocal way, this should also be borne in mind when “historicizing” a segmented history of artists and works from a period of genuine upheaval, as the one between 1966 and 1985 is recognized as being: from the manifesto of the Gaur group to the presentation of the show entitled *Mitos y delitos* (Myths and Crimes), which conferred visibility on other critical modulations of the theory and practice of art. A simultaneous, tumultuous bevy of transitions appeared in this period defined by a modernity which, after the truncated experience of the emerging avant-gardes in art and culture in the early decades of the 20th century, was revived a bit late but soon showed its own array of crises, anachronisms and paradoxes. It is common knowledge that the boundaries between historical periods are diffuse and porous, and that sometimes they take on a unique interdependence, a specific complexity, such as in the case of the Basque Country and Spain during the period from 1975 to 1985, which was a border period between two decades. In this genuine *kairos* of multiple emergences, the modern condition and the seeds of the post-modern outgrowth coexisted amidst jubilant or problematic passages and returns concerning culture and the arts: in a brief historical period, the modern and the contemporary coexisted in an unheard-of, contentious way. For example, the Pamplona Encounters (1972) perfectly embody this intersection and its amalgam of situations. Oteiza, Chillida, and Ibarrola, who had been contributing substantially to the revamping of modern art and its connection to the international scene since the 1950’s, would become the main inductors of this new web of artists, without all the various fleeting groups determining their formidable creative careers. In retrospect, art in the 1970’s and 1980’s could be perceived as a landscape which never ceased to transform depending on the vantage point chosen, and which gradually took shape through passages among generations, practices, poetics, appropriations, ruptures and continuities, and shaded area.

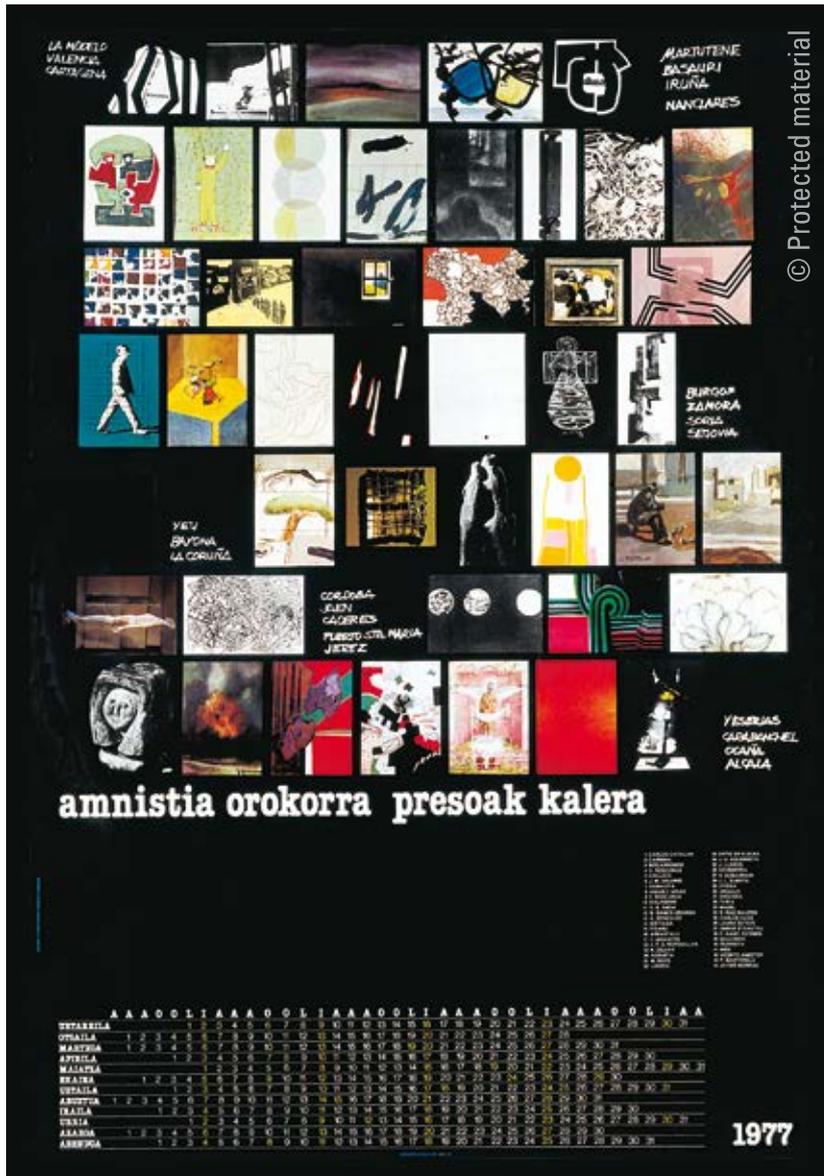
Before attempting an examination of Basque art from this period, I should issue a preliminary caveat: this publication compiles four critical viewpoints on the last 50 years in Basque art. To avoid excessive overlapping, we were invited to examine different periods; however, given that the thresholds between periods (whether they refer to those associated generically with decades or other time sequences or with certain currents and artistic practices) and their interpretation are nonetheless controversial, some repetitions or juxtapositions of the aspects that Francisco Javier San Martín or Peio Aguirre have discussed are inevitable. The arts from those years cannot be addressed without some kind of genealogy from the previous period or without discussing their subsequent offshoots. On the other hand, how can we limit artists to a specific timeframe when their poetics and practices change or transcend this time limit? It is common knowledge that artistic careers extend beyond specific periods, including decades. For example, Amable Arias actively participated in the genesis and development of the Gaur group between 1965 and 1967. However, his most important and experimental works came between the mid-1970's and his death in 1984. The same could be said of Esther Ferrer, who participated in the actions of the ZAJ group starting in 1967 (the work shown in this exhibition dates from 1968); however, her individual career became particularly prominent starting in the mid-1970's with her performance *Íntimo y personal* (Intimate and Personal, 1977), and in the ensuing decade, when she started her series *Autorretratos en el tiempo* (Self-Portraits in Time, 1981-1999).

## 1. The 1970's: A turbulent landscape

The second half of the 1960's was brimming with international ruptures and events, including those of 1968. Indeed, an entire rebellious mythology, primarily for European culture and politics, is associated with that year. May of '68, which shook up Paris and other French cities, became the prime emblem of a heteroclitic series of events that year, including most prominently the democratic revolution in Prague, the student uprising in Mexico City which ended with the murder of students and civilians in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas, the cultural and student dissidence in Berkeley and Berlin, and the Vietnam War protests which spread through different countries. Despite the controversy which still persists regarding the meaning of this upheaval, it is an accepted commonplace that it was a colossal collective outpouring (presided over by the slogan "The power of imagination"). In the words of Michael Löwy, the spirit of '68 was a Molotov cocktail comprised of different ingredients, among which he highlights a collective imaginary which he defines as "revolutionary romanticism," given that it associated subjectivity, desire, and utopia in its protest against the very foundations of modern industrial/capitalist civilization.<sup>1</sup> The promise embodied in the celebrated slogan "Let's be realistic, let's ask for the impossible" was manifested as the yearnings of a collective enthusiasm as performative and transformative power. However, except for a controversial memory of the political culture and some artistic practices, little remains from that tumultuous time, although perhaps the desire for "togetherness," as Blanchot posits, to invent other forms of emancipation and community. In the 1960's, European artists with formal ruptures incorporated unheard-of stances, other slogans, and critical poetics such as the one revealed by Mario Merz in the piece *Che fare?* (What To Do?, 1968). This artistic and political interrogation spread to different contexts in the ensuing decades, and new nexuses were invented to update the yearning for "togetherness" and the intent of what to do. Certainly, that desire to create community through the encounter of singularities was also expressed in other ways in our own local cultural, social, and political milieu, which—so close to and yet so far from that upheaval—was conditioned by the

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1 Michael Löwy. "El romanticismo revolucionario de Mayo del 68", in *RUTH*, 2008.



Cover of the calendar of the Basque pro-amnesty organisation Gestoras Pro-Amnistía, 1977

continued existence of the Franco dictatorship. However, new practices of protest and political and cultural dissidence would emerge in a magmatic, lacunar way (with a combination of legal and underground routes). Art and culture plunged into political action to demand freedoms. With lights and with ominous shadows (1968 is also the year of ETA's first deadly attack), our history is riddled with events which can be judged in different ways, even in the specific realm of the arts, and whose meaning also entails a creative act. In 1970, at the Culture Gallery of the Caja de Ahorros de Navarra (Pamplona), Pedro Osés and Juan José Aquerreta presented a series of works entitled *Mayo 68* (May 68, 1968-1969), where they recreated a visual form as memory and empathy with the French uprising.

The turbulent 1970's produced a magma of plural dissidences against the Franco regime and in favour of a future democracy; nevertheless, the differences between reformist and rupturist alternatives were magnified in the middle of that decade. The unique peculiarity of this tumultuous period can be seen in two main aspects: the first is the shift from the dictatorship to a parliamentary democracy, which is a dense, complex historical milestone; and the second is the accelerated expression of a collective enthusiasm—a form of the

future of a dream—which would mobilize political, cultural, affective, and aesthetic predicates enmeshed in a yearning for freedom, which was in turn sublimated by diverse and contradictory meanings. I have defined that magma of artistic practices and actions which merged the contemporary and avant-garde with popular culture as a unique “heteroclitic action.”<sup>2</sup> In those tempestuous years, creative and dissident action seemed capable of magically suspending the real. The power of the imagination to make worlds was perceived with unheard-of power. The experience of that decade has been melancholically recalled by Bernardo Atxaga: “I could see all of those irretrievable days / posing like a flock of imaginary birds.”<sup>3</sup> In the Transition which started in 1976 after the death of Franco, artistic and cultural action took on a creative protagonism in the production of symbolic forms and agitprop for a variety of causes which projected collective, identity-based, and emancipating significations. However, other imaginaries also emerged in the wake of a utopian, redemptive rhetoric which mystified exclusionary or totalitarian projects. There was a surfeit of political voluntarism and sectarian ideology, along with a host of fair aspirations which participated in the political and cultural atmosphere of those years. The political urgencies of the situation fostered a fluctuation of implications between the arts, pro-Basque culture—inherited and to come—and democratic culture in a conglomerate of urgencies and dissidences. A peak in this collaboration between the agitprop format of the day was the publication of a calendar in 1977 calling for a general amnesty, which reproduced works by the most outstanding artists. Oteiza, Chillida, Ibarrola, Basterretxea, Amable Arias, Balerdi, and Zumeta, among others, would implicate their artistic practices and political commitments in different ways. On the one hand, each artist’s independent sphere of creation and experimentation revealed a keener interest in taking a stance on the reality of the day by making their political leanings explicit. On the other, they contributed to creating and disseminating a social imaginary for a variety of mobilizations.

Oteiza remained the most prominent referent in the 1970’s, and even though he had justified his departure from sculpture in 1959, he remained focused on investigation in his chalk laboratory and in the development of interventions in urban planning and architecture, as well as events and debates on cultural policy. He was involved in writing essays and poetry, yet he also sporadically made new sculptures as well, like *Navarra como laberinto* (Navarra as Labyrinth, 1972) and *Estela funeraria señalando la proximidad de la central nuclear de Lemóniz* (Funeral Stele Showing Proximity to the Lemóniz Nuclear Power Plant, 1973).<sup>4</sup> He chose several pieces from his chalk laboratory to carve in a larger size. The title leaves no doubt as to his political aim. At the same time, he developed a protean dedication to writing essays on aesthetic, linguistic, and anthropological issues, and on poetic writing. However, almost every initiative and project was always accompanied by the shadow of failure. In such an agonizing time as that, Oteiza posited a “Proyecto de escuela militar de artistas vascos” (Project of a military school of Basque artists, 1975), whose objectives were

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2 See Fernando Golvano. “La acción heteróclita : notas sobre el irrepitible calidoscopio creativo y disidente de los setenta en Euskadi”, in *Disidentziak oro : poetikak eta arte ekinbideak euskal trantsizio politikoan = Disidencias otras : poéticas y acciones artísticas en la transición política vasca*. (Exhibition catalogue, Koldo Mitxelena Kulturunea, Ganbara Aretoa). Donostia-San Sebastián : Gipuzkoako Foru Aldundia, Kultura Zuzendaritza Nagusia = Diputación Foral de Gipuzkoa, Dirección General de Cultura, 2004, pp. 11-45. Likewise, in a more fleshed out manner, in the publication of the show I curated: *Laboratorios 70 : poéticas, políticas y crisis de la modernidad en el contexto vasco de los setenta = 70eko hamarkadako laborategiak : poetikak, politikak eta modernitatearen krisia hirurogeita hamarreko hamarkadako Euskal Herrian*. (Exhibition catalogue). Bilbao : Sala Rekalde Erakustaretoa, 2009.

3 Bernardo Atxaga. “Un explorador cansado”, in *Nueva Etiopía : conversaciones, poemas y canciones*. Madrid : Galería Detursa, 1996, p. 54. It was first published in Basque: “Esploradore nekatu batek zer ikus lezake”, in *Etiopía*. Bilbao : Pott, 1978.

4 In a catalogue of the show in the Txantxangorri gallery (Hondarribia, 1974), Oteiza expresses his commitment: “We are left with a single objective which interests all of us and one that is urgently concerning; I think that it is our physical defence (nuclear power plants whose location and future is the same: the desert), defence of the land, ecology, and our country.”

“cultural, but as urgent operations.”<sup>5</sup> It should come as no surprise, then, that within this context antagonistic towards the dictatorship, Oteiza created his *Retrato de un gudari armado llamado Odiseo* (Portrait of an Armed Gudari (warrior) Called Odiseo, 1975) based on one of his metaphysical boxes, a variation on the *Homenaje a Mallarmé* (Homage to Mallarmé, 1958). It could be said that *Odiseo* is a self-portrait of a heroic artist in the Basque avant-garde. In 1990, Oteiza commented that this sculpture is “the most important sculpture of our late avant-garde in contemporary art” within Spain. He believed that it should be made part of the permanent collection of the Reina Sofía and displayed near *Guernica*, since “unquestionably it is the work with the most historical sense and dignity that deserves to be placed near *Guernica*, with which it is related by the same theme of its approach, as is obvious in its title.”<sup>6</sup>

Eduardo Chillida, in turn, also made a piece that he entitled *Gudari* (Warrior, 1974) with a commemorative aim related to the figure of the resisting Basque soldier in the Spanish Civil War, yet without the nationalist connotations of the present or Oteiza’s pretensions of avant-garde self-representation. Keeping step with the political culture of those years, he got involved in works which became echo chambers of the social imaginary significations that were in vogue. For this reason, he designed several of the most prominent logos in dissident culture, such as the one for the antinuclear movement (1974) and the pro-amnesty advocates (1975). Likewise, in his actions restricted to formal inquiry, his graphic series *Euskadi I-IV* (1975-1976) and *Enda I-VII* (1979) recreate a visual and identity-based image of a Basque Country under construction. Among the screen-printed posters that he made, *Para el hombre, por los derechos humanos* (For Man, On Behalf of Human Rights, 1980) stands out. At the same time, Chillida continued inquiring into a kind of sculpture that embodied formal tensions harking back to informalism, geometric abstraction, and Oriental calligraphy. He also drew from new materials like weathering steel and concrete. In 1977, *Peine del viento* (The Comb of the Wind) was unveiled in San Sebastián, a true public crossroads between art and nature, between an artistic and an architectural intervention (by Luis Peña Ganchegui), between artwork and public.

Agustín Ibarrola developed a dissident imaginary aimed to defend the working class and culture. His fists, interlinked working-class figures sublimated into a common body for mobilization, are totally recognizable, along with his graphic series from the 1970’s which he had started in the previous decade called *Paisajes de Euskadi* (Landscapes of the Basque Country), some of which incorporate references to Picasso’s *Guernica*. His *Ceras* (Crayon Works) series and woodcut prints made in the 1970’s use a formal economy to summarize a streamlined synthesis of an expressionistic figuration and critical abstraction, and they serve as an atlas of the visual manifestos in favour of the working class and the mythicized rural world.

Dionisio Blanco closely resembled Ibarrola in the way he intertwined art and society; he participated with Ibarrola in *Estampa Popular* and was likewise censured from the Pamplona Encounters (1972). In the 1970’s, Blanco developed a mixed figuration with different realistic legacies. Through elementary lines in his drawings and a contained lyricism in his use of colour, he allegorically depicted solidarity with anonymous figures who were suffering by being deprived of their rights or from repression. His work *Represión* (Repression, 1975), included in this show, is exemplary of his formal and ethical choices.

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5 Oteiza, Fundación Museo Jorge Oteiza, Archivo, document, record 9447.

6 Oteiza, Fundación Museo Jorge Oteiza, Archivo, document, record 15088.



Eduardo Chillida  
*Gudari (Warrior)*, 1974  
Weathering steel. 185 x 146 x 107 cm  
National Gallery, Berlin

Néstor Basterretxea was very actively involved in creating the nationalist identity-based universe, either from his own artistic practice—the documentary *Ama Lur* (1966-1970) made with Fernando Larruquert; his *Serie cosmogónica vasca* (Basque Cosmogonic Series, 1972-1977) sculptures carved in oak with the goal of conferring a mythical, ancestral imaginary that emerged from reading the essay *Mitología vasca* (Basque Mythology) by the ethnographer José Miguel de Barandiaran, which updated a collective identity under construction;<sup>7</sup> and the monuments dedicated to the historical memory—or from poster design for the *Aberri Eguna* (1976), the *Bai Euskarari* (1978) and other cultural and political initiatives. The sculpture *Izaro* (1983), which presides over the Basque Parliament, was the corollary to this yearning to create emblems for a nationalist-tinged collective identity. Other younger sculptors, such as José de Ramón Carrera and José Ramón Anda, also took an interest in representing nationalist symbols like the idea of the *Zazpiak bat*: with this same title, the former made an abstract piece in aluminium (1962-1970) and the latter created a set of wooden prisms (1978). Remigio Mendiburu was strongly committed to the exaltation of popular culture—*Txalaparta* (1961) was his most representative sculpture in the 1960's—and the symbolic universe associated with the telluric-mythical. He designed the baton used in the Korrika race in favour of the Basque language. In the period 1973-1978, Rafael Ruiz Balerdi implemented an innovative pedagogical commitment in the public schools in Andoain and Lasarte and contributed to the *euskalzale euskara* movement. He also occasionally participated in the agitprop from the pro-amnesty crusade and painted murals for the communist movement. Furthermore, he was one of the artists who was the most heavily involved in promoting the cultural weeks in the mid-1970's, which favoured encounters between artists and other cultural collectives in numerous towns around the Basque Country. José Luis Zumeta was another artist who belonged to the Gaur group and who most prolonged his collaboration to the emerging *Abertzale* (nationalist) culture: he designed posters for the mobilization in favour of Basque language and for the assemblies and festivals of the Ez Dok Amairu group (for example, *Ikimilikiliklik* in 1976) as well as record covers for Mikel Laboa, starting with the celebrated *Bat-Hiru* (1974).

Other institutions joined the art landscape by training the new generations: the 1970 opening of the official academic programs at the Escuela Superior de Bellas Artes of Bilbao became the embryo of the future and much-needed Fine Arts Faculty (EHU-UPV), which opened in 1978.<sup>8</sup> However, this project could not avoid sparking controversies, which were almost always triggered by Oteiza: counter to the academic and disciplinary conventions, he postulated—as he had set forth in *Quousque tandem...!* (1963)—the creation of an Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas Comparadas (Institute of Comparative Aesthetic Investigations) where training, research, and practice could transcend the conventional disciplines to generate encounters among the arts.

In the 1970's, primarily in Bizkaia, a sequence of events and ephemeral groupings catalyzed the yearnings and aims of the heterogeneous Basque art scene. A younger generation than the members of the Basque School groups took over in their attempt to assert artistic and political stances; to do this, the manifesto became a necessary action which associated them with a memory of the avant-gardes, both nationally and at home. Javier Urquijo became the mentor of the New Abstraction group<sup>9</sup> (Bilbao, 1969-1974), the defender of

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7 Through different means, Basterretxea's project also had affinities with the projects of Oteiza and Mendiburu in this identity-based *telos* which paradoxically coexisted with an avant-garde and modern practice that inquired into the forms and missions of art. The most ancient memory becomes a future memory; mythical imaginaries are translated into modern statuary; the phantasmagorical becomes corporeal.

8 For an examination of the vagaries behind the genesis of the Fine Arts Faculty, the controversies around the model of art education, and its management model, see Javier Viar. *Historia del arte vasco : de la Guerra Civil a nuestros días, 1936-2016*, vol. II. Bilbao : Bilboko Arte Ederren Museoa = Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao, 2017, pp. 587-594.

9 It did not maintain a stable group of member artists, and the majority chose to dedicate their professional work to artistic practice.

abstract spatialism. Simultaneously, SUE emerged on the initiative of Morquillas, Mirantes, and López, and with them Brancas, Dol, Uriarte, and Urrutikoetxea. The manifesto written by Morquillas posited geometric abstraction as the group's referent. The humus which nurtured that initiative came from the informal encounters created by the Grises gallery and in the lectures that José Luis Merino held at the Athenaeum of Bilbao. ZUE was founded by splitting off from SUE and was a new group without the participation of Morquillas but with artists associated with the Communist Party of the Basque Country. From ZUE, Mirantes organized two exhibitions, namely *ZUE 2* and *ZUE 3*, which featured different artists. In this fleeting effervescence, other groups like Indar joined the scene in 1970's, with some survivors from the previous groups.

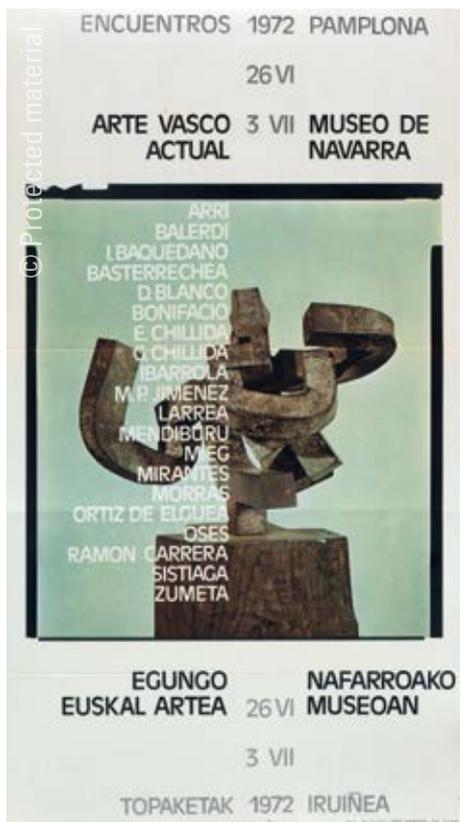
The *1st Fine Arts Show* of Barakaldo (1971), curated by José María Moreno Galván, Santiago Amón, and Enmanuel Borja, which sought to showcase contemporary Spanish and Basque art, enlisted Oteiza's participation. The curators' approach was questioned by several assemblies of Basque artists.<sup>10</sup> For the second edition of this show (1973), the City Council selected a collegial group of curators, including Basterretxea, Morrás, Ibarrola, and Ortiz del Elgea, to choose the Basque artists; however, old and new rifts among artists and with the institutions jinxed the continuity of this event. Between these two editions, the Pamplona Encounters (1972) were held, whose significance and importance were not properly grasped at the time. Envisioned and overseen by two creators, Luis de Pablo, who was in charge of the experimental music laboratory Alea, and José Luis Alexanco, who was associated with the Centro de Cálculo (Calculation Centre) of the Universidad Complutense, the encounters prioritized the action arts or intermediate art without limiting it to the Western artistic tradition. Under the sponsorship of the Huarte family, and with the collaboration of the Pamplona City Council and, to a lesser extent, the Provincial Government, it called on public participation "in the artistic act." With regard to the works, it made the ambiguous call for them to "be a real mirror of the time in which they are fated to exist."<sup>11</sup> The family's patronage, and particularly the contributions of Juan Huarte, was decisive to the production and dissemination of works by Oteiza, Chillida, Sistiaga, and Balerdi. X Films and the magazine *Nueva forma* were other platforms for experimentation and inquiry into art in the 1970's which were also cultivated with Huarte's patronage. Contemporary music, action art, happenings, visual poetry, and other new artistic practices from the European neo-avant-gardes in the 1960's came upon the incipient Spanish art and found a presence in the local scene through the *Arte Vasco Actual* (Contemporary Basque Art) exhibition curated by Santiago Amón, in which Oteiza and Chillida were the stand-outs. The web of mistrust and suspicion among the promoters of the Encounters and the heterogeneous Basque art scene on the one hand,<sup>12</sup> along with the rifts among them on the other, ended in a new failure: Chillida withdrew his works before the show opened, alleging that he had been plagiarized by other artists; Ibarrola and Arri did the same in solidarity with Dionisio Blanco, whose work had been censored; likewise, the presence of artists from Navarra was marginalized. That attempt at a Basque show collided—with just a handful of exceptions—with the experimental, neoteric tone that ran through that unique artistic event and which, in

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10 Assemblies of Basque artists and students of the Escuela de Bellas Artes wrote a manifesto in which they called for the creation of local institutions, a new social status for artists, and a reform of art education. That document and others from the period can be found in María José Arribas. *40 años de Arte Vasco, 1937-1977 : historia y documento*. San Sebastián : Erein, 1979.

11 Luis de Pablo ; José Luis Alexanco. *Encuentros = Rencontres = Meetings = Treffen = Incontri : Pamplona, 26.VI - 3.VII, 1972*. (Exhibition catalogue). Madrid : Alea, 1972.

12 With Oteiza's support, a group of artists gathered in the Escuela de Deba set forth minimum requirements to participate in the Encounters: "1. The opening of a venue for cultural information and management of artists from Navarra in Pamplona, a center which would be organized and run by the artists from Navarra in conjunction with the Basque artists. 2. The cession of the materials used in these encounters in duplicate, one for this centre and another for the Escuela de Arte de Deba. 3. Subsidies for both centres. 4. The guarantee of the organization's active participation in all future Encounters in Pamplona" (María José Arribas, *op. cit.*, 1979, p. 194).



Poster from the exhibition *Arte Vasco Actual* (Contemporary Basque Art) organized on the occasion of the 1972 Pamplona Encounters



Poster from the exhibition *John Cage / David Tudor*, organized on the occasion of the 1972 Pamplona Encounters

the words of Pedro Manterola, “was totally incongruent with the plan of the Encounters.”<sup>13</sup> Thus there were too many intertwined conflicts in an event which suffered from the incomprehension if not the active boycott of ETA and the underground anti-Franco-leaning dissidents, who disparaged the new artistic behaviours as elitist and avant-garde, just as a certain current of Basque artists did. Far from perceiving them as an opportunity to open up to the international scene and engage in a controversial dialogue with the new practices, the ideological sectarianism and mystification of popular culture led to an unfortunate discord. As Marchán Fiz observed, “if the Pamplona Encounters were trapped in the internal juncture of Spain from a political standpoint, they were virtually condemned to fail in advance from the artistic vantage point. Indeed, how to reconcile the environmental social realisms, no matter how epic they may have been, or the works which fell within the tradition of the artistic genres, even the modern ones, with proposals that left them behind?”<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the sublimated Basque School did not seize on that opportunity to reaffirm itself but instead revealed the limits and paradoxes of its self-appointed name.

Other episodes of artistic groups with a purely political dimension included the Ikutze group (Bilbao, 1973-1974), made up of José Ibarrola, Montxo Maoño, Elena Badía, Aurelio Garrote, Iñaki de la Fuente, Jesús Pastor, José Bayo, and Raúl Ortega. Their manifesto expressed their affiliation with the avant-gardes, but

13 Pedro Manterola. “Encuentros y desencuentros”, in *Los Encuentros de Pamplona : 25 años después*. Pamplona : Caja de Ahorros de Navarra; Madrid : Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 1997, p. 43.

14 Simón Marchán Fiz. “La Escuela Vasca en el escenario del arte español de los setenta”, in *Laboratorios 70 : poéticas, políticas y crisis de la modernidad en el contexto vasco de los setenta = 70eko hamarkadako laborategiak : poetikak, politikak eta modernitatearen krisia hirurogeita hamarreko hamarkadako Euskal Herrian*. (Exhibition catalogue). Bilbao : Sala Rekalde Erakustaretoa, 2009, p. 86.

without a normative zeal—their affinities fell within the legacy of the social realism of Estampa Popular—and they were critical of the cultural industry and the conventional art system. Likewise, the Taller de Aya (1975-1986), spearheaded by the sculptor Reinaldo, was a social, communitarian, and pedagogical project which was aligned with Oteiza's postulates. In around 1977, with the addition of Xavier Laka and other artists, the experiment was extended to anyone who was interested in integrating artistic and life practices in an open, communitarian project.

The Basque participation in the Venice Biennale (1976) was also the subject of numerous internal complaints related to the show *Vanguardia artística y realidad social 1936-1976* (Artistic Avant-Garde and Social Reality 1936-1976), curated by Tomàs Llorens, Alberto Corazón, Manuel Valdés, and Rafael Solbes. The political Transition had hardly gotten off the ground, and participation in the Biennale was an alternative to the cultural policy that the dictatorship had pursued. The different anti-Franco opposition platforms engaged in an interne-cine battle for hegemony over the new artistic and cultural proposals. In the initial proposal for the Biennale, the presence of Basque artists was limited to Oteiza, Chillida, and Ibarrola. The first two and an assembly of other Basque artists rejected this proposal and demanded a pavilion of their own, with the support of anti-Franco political platforms and the provisional Basque General Council. The management of the Biennale did not even entertain the proposal, and an alternative event was organized by a Basque Country-Italy committee.<sup>15</sup> Morquillas commemorated that frustrated attempt with acerbic melancholy: "The assemblies of the taverns of Gros to decide on the models of participation in the Venice Biennale were the swansong and raven song. The starting gun in the race to flee from the reaper's scythe. The death certificate, unofficial and definitive, of the groups in the Basque School. By then, everything was derivative."<sup>16</sup> The complaints regarding the 1972 Encounters re-emerged with new factors at stake. Marchán Fiz has claimed that the conflict around the Biennale was yet another milestone in a series of disconnects between Basque art and the Spanish art "with which it was obviously related, if we bear in mind the Basque artists' insertion in the Spanish scene since the Civil War."<sup>17</sup> He lists other events in which Basque art was also sidelined: the exhibition entitled *Antes del arte* (Before Art, 1968) and the series *Nuevos comportamientos artísticos* (New Artistic Behaviours) held at the German Institutes of Madrid and Barcelona (1974).

The Fine Arts Faculty was launched in 1978 and did not remain on the sidelines of the highly politicized atmosphere that prevailed in those years of the Transition. Students from the first graduating class (Txupi Sanz, Xabi Idoate, and Toño González) founded the Peatonos collective (1978-1980), spurred by their Trotskyist and situationist ideas, and their critical actions were targeted at the institution of art, the mystification of authorship, and the market. That same year in San Sebastián, a group of young poets and writers with artistic leanings in the Dadaist spirit assembled the group Cloc de Arte y Desarte (1978).<sup>18</sup> Fernando Aramburu and Álvaro Bermejo were the prime driving forces behind this eccentric group which published a magazine and played a key role in surprising actions such as the graffiti at Chillida's *Comb of the Wind*. That enthusiastic effervescence of art and culture in the 1970's and the early 1980's was also manifested in the onset of an underground and grassroots phenomenon, namely the publication of magazines and fanzines overseen by the writers, poets,

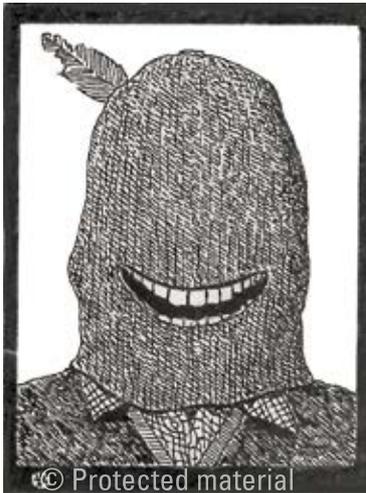
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15 María José Arribas reports on these events and their associated controversies in *op. cit.*, 1979, pp. 217-234.

16 José Ramón Sáinz Morquillas. "Los 70. Una infancia triste, pero voluptuosa", in *Disidentziak oro : poetikak eta arte ekinbideak euskal trantsizio politikoan = Disidencias otras : poéticas y acciones artísticas en la transición política vasca*. (Exhibition catalogue, Koldo Mitxelena Kulturunea, Ganbara Aretoa). Donostia-San Sebastián : Gipuzkoako Foru Aldundia, Kultura Zuzendaritza Nagusia = Diputación Foral de Gipuzkoa, Dirección General de Cultura, 2004, p. 65.

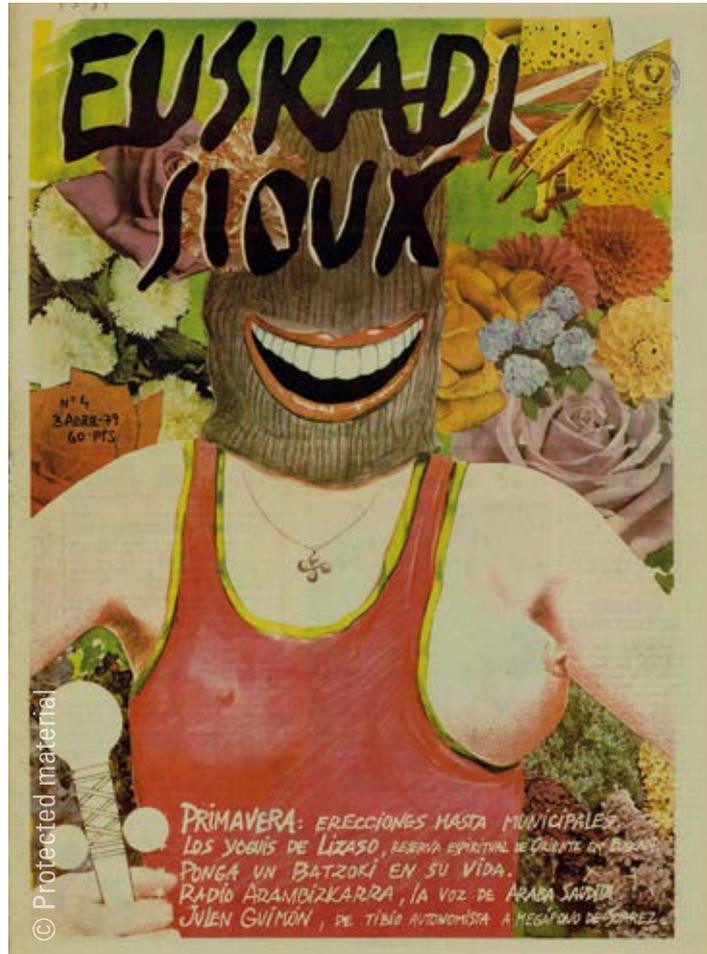
17 Simón Marchán Fiz, *op. cit.*, 2009, pp. 81-90.

18 An in-depth analysis of the genesis and development of that group can be found in Juan Manuel Díaz de Guereñu. *Cloc. Historias de arte y desarte*. Madrid : Hyperión, 1999, which was published on the occasion of the show presented by Ganbara at the Koldo Mitxelena Kulturunea in San Sebastián.



△ Vicente Ameztoy  
Drawing for *Euskadi Sioux*  
1979  
Ink on paper. 19 x 7 cm  
Private collection

▷ Vicente Ameztoy  
Cover of the magazine *Euskadi Sioux*,  
April 1979  
Fundación Sancho el Sabio Fundazioa



and artists themselves. A brief sampling would include the following names: *Kurpil* (1973-1977), *Panpina ustela* (1975), *Zorion ustela* (1976), *Mermelada ustela* (1976), *Kantil* (1977-1981), *Pott* (1978-1980), *Oh! Euzkadi* (1979-1983), *Euskadi Sioux* (1979), *Caballo canalla a la calle* (1979), *Xaguxarra* (1980-1981), *Susa* (1980-1994), *Idatz & Mintz* (1981-...), *Hegalez hegal* (1981) *Maiatz* (1982), and *Stultifera Navis* (1982-1983); along with the fanzines like *Sanfermines 78*, *Araba Saudita* (1979), *Muskaria* (1980-...), *Destruye* (1981-1986), and *eta kitto* (1981-1985). Despite its fleeting life—only seven issues were published in 1979—we should also spotlight the venture of *Euskadi Sioux*. Vicente Ameztoy was in charge of the graphic image, where the ominous figure of the hooded ETA member was ironically transfigured into a cheerful, unarmed hooded figure. The writer Rafael Castellano, who also participated in this caustic experiment, wrote: “*Euskadi Sioux* struggled over its heteroclitic idiosyncrasy and for the sake of the Basque Country once again laughing at its own shadow.”<sup>19</sup> Other “Sioux” writers, artists, and agitators included Maya Aguiriano, José María Aguirre, Iosu Bilbao, Juan Carlos Eguillor, Laura Esteve, Juan Ignacio Echart, Mentzu Iglesias, Fernando Illana, Juan Mendizabal, Ernesto Murillo, Antton Olariaga, Teo Uriarte, Rosa Valverde, Jon Zabaleta, Paloma Zuloaga, and Iván Zulueta.<sup>20</sup>

19 Rafael Castellano. “La movida vasca (1970-1980). Política versus culturas”, in *Disidentziak oro : poetikak eta arte ekinbideak euskal transizio politikoan = Disidencias otras : poéticas y acciones artísticas en la transición política vasca*. (Exhibition catalogue Koldo Mitxelena Kulturunea, Ganbara Aretoa). Donostia-San Sebastián : Gipuzkoako Foru Aldundia, Kultura Zuzendaritza Nagusia = Diputación Foral de Gipuzkoa, Dirección General de Cultura, 2004, p. 123.

20 In 2001, I undertook a retrospective of the magazine in Bidebarrieta Kulturunea of Bilbao. The Koldo Mitxelena was in charge of the digitalization and online posting of the seven issues published. They can be seen at [www.euskadisioux.org](http://www.euskadisioux.org).

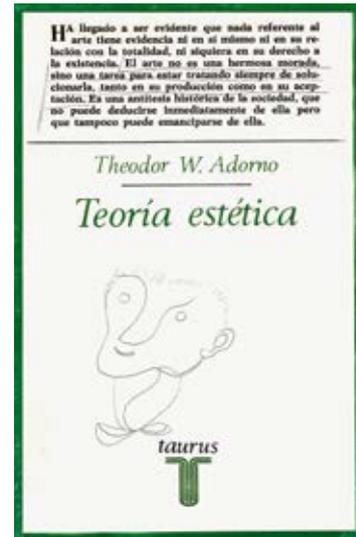
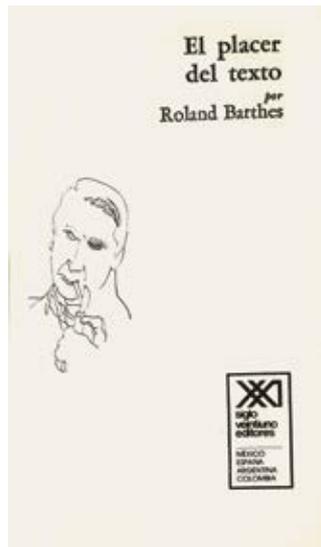
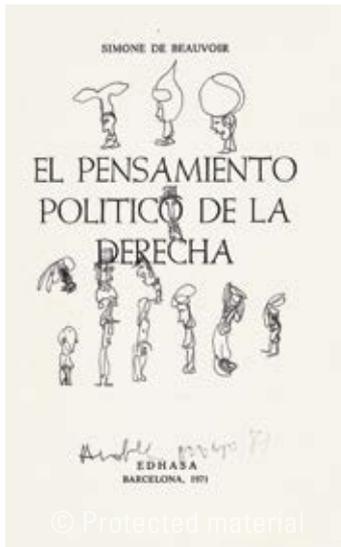
## 2. Other ruptures, ironies, and vanishing and returning points

In the 1970's, faced with the primacy of abstraction and all the different veins of informalism in painting, renewed poetics appeared in the international scene which sparked a rekindled interest in realism and figuration, which fostered new narrative possibilities and other imaginative expressions. The quest for a ground-zero of painting, the idea of retreating back on its own pictorial literalness which Ad Reinhard had postulated in an outstanding fashion, contrasted with the new forms of shaping a realm that was figurative or realistic to differing degrees and challenged art history, with the experience of the real world and the realm of the imaginary. Other figures of the thinkable were addressed with painting techniques, without their being limited to re-creating a humanist legacy or celebrating the enigma of the visible. All the possibilities opened up in the painting dimension, and sometimes in a space mixed with other techniques and media. The vitalism associated with gestural painting in any of its veins had different offshoots for its expression in a new figuration which made its first tentative appearance in Basque art in the 1970's. Faced with figuration and the inherited realisms, which did not question the painting conventions and only illusorily represented a kind of resemblance with the image of the world and of things, the new figuration stressed formal freedom, the poetic act which gives shape to that which can be experienced and imagined. Some artists in the avant-garde from the 1960's, including most prominently Amable Arias, Bonifacio, Zumeta, Carmelo Ortiz de Elgea, and Isabel Baquedano, started to drift towards figuration, which would coexist with dictates leaning towards abstraction in the next decade.

In the following paragraphs, I will proffer some comments about those artists who developed along diverse pathways in the next generation. The career of Amable Arias forked quite freely into a host of different creative pathways<sup>21</sup> and different collective and dissident undertakings. In the early 1970's, he moved towards a mixed poetic oeuvre: small shapeless or surrealist figures gravitate on a surface with evocations of lyrical abstraction. Works like *De lo Invisible I and II* (On the Invisible I and II, 1972) reveal this free, antinormative play. Supported by his pure urge to draw his works, they would harbour an imaginary universe inhabited by strange, tiny beings, figures extracted from reality, zoomorphic, hybrid, spectral, or fantastical figures, friendly or fearful bestiaries. *Diapositivas en negro* (Devices in Black, 1977) is the work chosen by the Fine Arts Museum of Bilbao for this show. That painting is associated with two others: *Piratas* (Pirates, 1974) and *Uno caído* (A Fallen One, 1977), which ironically address the game of pictorial representation that has sparked such endless controversies in the history of art. Most of the surface of the canvas is concealed with a new layer of paint which leads to a monochromatic effect. He spares two rectangular fragments on which tiny figures are projected. This kind of palimpsest or visual rewriting expresses an irony about the act of disappearance and the enigma of the visible. It masks the initial appearance, thus fragmenting the possible visual narration, and it makes us more keenly aware of the conventionality of the painted image. Through this disruptive gesture, he critically distances himself from the reductionist dispute between abstract and figurative artists, as he also does in another work also dating from 1977, *Rectángulos con moro* (Rectangles with Moor). That gesture is similar to the one by Jasper Johns, who in 1959 concealed part of his collage-paintings with new coats of paint which only left glimpses of fragments. It can also be associated with the action of Robert Rauschenberg in 1953 when he appropriated a drawing by Willem de Kooning, then erased it and left the marks as traces of his action in the new work which he entitled *Erased de Kooning*

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21 The most exhaustive and comprehensive analysis of this artist can be found in the publication by Maria del Carmen Alonso-Pimentel. *Amable Arias*. Donostia-San Sebastián : Universidad de Deusto, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, 1997.



Library of Amable Arias.  
*Tupamaros*, interventions made by the artist in books and magazines, 1966-1983  
 Maru Rizo Collection

*Drawing*. In both cases, a tension emerges between the visible and the hidden which prevents the viewer from apprehending the initial composition and makes the full representation illegible. These conceptual gestures expand painting to new interplayed practices and poetics. Until his premature death in 1984, Amable never stopped experimenting with minimal resources in his exploration of a plural artistic and poetic oeuvre through collages, notebooks, drawings, contributions to hundreds of books and magazines, sound performances, and a variety of media.<sup>22</sup> In addition to poetic writing, Amable persevered in brief essays and texts on art, aesthetics, and politics, all motivated by a critical *telos*: "Deconstruction. If art is, and it is to me, what Adorno summarized as 'the of current art is to bring chaos to order'."<sup>23</sup>

Bonifacio was a prolific drawer, an obstinate painter, and an outstanding engraver and illustrator. In the late 1970's, Merino from Grises gallery became one of the prime champions of his painting, which would gradually metamorphose between formal affinities with informalism, expressionist abstraction, and disparate kinds of figuration which betray a kind of surrealist remembrance. Saura, Gorky, Alechinsky, Johns, and finally, after the mid-1980's, Matta were the main influences shaping his visual imaginary. As Javier Viar has noted, "perhaps his most original work was the one that presented more characteristic, amorphous, and ambiguous figures which were less indebted to others' recognizable designs."<sup>24</sup> The paintings and engravings reveal shapeless, larval beings, insects, unimaginable bestiaries, and monsters that are as entertaining as they are disturbing; they emerge from the recesses of his imagination and celebrate the pleasure of the unexpected. In *Juguetes* (Toys, 1975), just as in other works, such as *Triángulo azul* (Blue Triangle, 1977-1978), he plays with blotches of colour, on which the figurative appears as an enigma of the visible. The recollection of

22 A survey of this experimental creative universe and the literature to which he contributed throughout the 1970's and 1980's was provided in the show *Amable Arias. Dar forma al caos y al azar*, which I curated at the Koldo Mitxelena Kulturunea in San Sebastián in 2013.

23 Interview in *La Voz de España*, October 21, 1972.

24 Javier Viar. *Historia del arte vasco : de la Guerra Civil a nuestros días, 1936-2016*, vol. I. Bilbao : Bilboko Arte Ederren Museoa = Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao, 2017, p. 202.

Willem de Kooning's expressionist painting is quite notable in this period, as Viar has observed.<sup>25</sup> Bonifacio's poetics can be summarized in this statement: "All my paintings are inquiries, problems, doubts, insecurities, and in this quest there is a logical development and an uncertainty."<sup>26</sup> In the late 1960's, Zumeta produced movable hanging sculptures with planes of aluminium cut and painted in flat colours, along with valuable painted wood reliefs that put forth a tension between painting and sculpture. However, that choice would not continue in his subsequent works. In around 1975, he embarked upon an expressionistic, multihued figuration brimming with multiple visual narrations; *Hombres-espacios-cosas* (Men-Spaces-Things) is a large-scale painting from that year, a notable compendium of that constructive method. Chaos unfolds in its paint through a gestural and chromatic emphasis which is clearly indebted to the German Neo-Expressionists. If the permanent element of painting is making a possible thing become visible, a world in the process of being made—as Lyotard recalled in his essay *Discourse, Figure* (1978)—Zumeta applies it passionately. He used that incipient figuration, which may have found its utmost expression in the *Papiroak* from the 1980's, simultaneously with other series of abstract compositions with grey backgrounds and fewer gestures, blotches, and lines, such as the one presented in this show: *Pintura* (Painting, 1977).

Darío Villalba is one of the most experimental artists who created an important and extensive series of hybrid images from photography and painting that he sometimes encapsulates as in *La espera blanca* (The White Wait, 1974). In these works, just as in his large formats, the colour constraints magnify the dramatic emphasis of his images. His figuration forges a synthesis of representation, affect, and desire in an ascetic, mystical vein. In his extensive painting career, Carmelo Ortiz de Elgea very freely modulates a permanent affection for landscapes, which he transmutes into abstract or figurative images. After an initial period in which he prioritized a material informalism, which was so fashionable in the 1970's, he gradually veered towards a figuration which seems to be camouflaged in landscapes, as in the work *Figuras con paisaje* (Figures with Landscape, 1970). The landscape, envisioned as an enigmatic *topos* with "motley morphology," was inhabited by new figures which were sometimes intermingled with the landscape itself. In the 1980's, the formal and expressive accents mentioned above had been succeeded by more open works that condense abstract and figurative elements,<sup>27</sup> sometimes joined in a menacing atmosphere of an impossible interplay of tangled perspectives. In most of his paintings, space is dislocated and diversified, without a centre that organizes its semiotic path: just as at a crossroads, several possibilities of meaningful choice are offered to our interpretative competence.

Other artists also fall within the spectrum of the new figuration, such as Isabel Baquedano, who participated in the frustrated attempt of the Danok group and years later would be recognized as one of the catalysts of what is called the Pamplona School. Receptive to symbolist, surrealist, and sometimes pop legacies, her figuration falls within the new realisms with allegorical emphases. Somehow, the enigmatic remnants in her images mitigate mimetic representation to activate a more complex aesthetic experience. *Estación de autobuses* (Bus Station, 1978) was exemplary in this sense. This symbolic dimension would become even denser in her future works.

25 Javier Viar, *op. cit.*, 2017, p. 198.

26 Ángel S. Hardinguey. "La pintura también deja cicatrices : entrevista con Bonifacio", in *Bonifacio*. (Exhibition catalogue). Madrid : Galería Antonio Machón, 1998, p. 11.

27 A seminal examination of the different stages and twists and turns peppering the painting career of Ortiz de Elgea can be found in the text by Javier Viar "El paisaje del origen", in *Carmelo Ortiz de Elgea : 1980-2003*. (Exhibition catalogue, Madrid, Centro Cultural de la Villa). Madrid : Ayuntamiento, Concejalía de las Artes, 2003.

Vicente Ameztoy was a precocious artist: his first solo exhibition was in 1967 at the Barandiaran gallery, which was associated with the Gaur group. The imaginary universe that he recreates is a complete visual manifesto where he celebrates the metamorphosis of the human and the real, and he deploys a representative affect on the interplay of dualities and paradoxes that bisect human existence. Plays of identity frequently recur in his works: camouflages, masks, and transparencies. In the 1970's, he defined his genuine pictorial poesis, which celebrates a narrative urge in which the rural and urban worlds and the industrial landscape are populated with rejoicing or threats. He drew this strange, unclassifiable symbolism from heteroclitic sources which range from Richard Daad to Magritte, along with Antonio López, Joseph Cornell, H. J. Syberberg, and Warhol. *Sin título* (Untitled) (*Poxpoliñak. Arias navarro*) (c. 1978) is the painting included in this show, and it summarizes his technique and approach to an ironic-critical figuration. Transgressive and liberating humour is also present in his eccentric figuration, in his designs for *Euskadi Sioux* (1979), and on the covers of *Zeruko Argia* (1978). He produced a valuable set of boxes and has designed posters for cultural, political, and social initiatives.<sup>28</sup>

Andrés Nagel was another of the most innovative figures in Basque art in the 1970's in the realm of painting, graphics, and design. He has never been interested in theoretical speculations but instead has claimed that his works emerge from an obsessive, visceral intuition. When he is concentrated on his action, "trends don't matter in the least."<sup>29</sup> An architect by training, Nagel drew new attention to the displacements and hybridizations between the conventions of sculpture and painting, and between the comic and the tragic, the recognizable and the surreal unbelievable. Figures of displacement, repetition, and dislocation emerge with a creative freedom which usually encode an unclassifiable irony. The result always challenges our eyes and the receiver's inherited conventions. *La combinación ganadora* (The Winning Combination, 1975) is a symptom of how art makes us lose the certainties of our interpretation. This piece, which is built with fiberglass and polyester, just like many works by this visual artist, reveals an entire ironic device which is heavily present in his artistic practice. In this case, we could say that two opposing fields of meaning seem to be activated between the title and the sculptural representation. The victory of the winning dog is inseparable from the defeat of the fifth figure; in other words, the first figure is repeated and gradually dislocated until it ends up dejected in the course of a tragic sequence. Thus, victory becomes precarious and a kind of analogy can be forged with the course of human existence as it is threatened by chaos, catastrophe, or disappearance. The incessant conflict between Eros and Thanatos, the Nietzschean urge which codes the human condition, the *vis formandi* and the *libido formandi* as attributes of our creative potential... all of this can stimulate an artistic exploration which gives rise to unusual forms, entertaining or insignificant critical games. And therein lies the multiple and semantic potential of the arts to give shape to everyday situations, be they banal or transparent, which bear the shadow of tragedy. Nagel has created other similar pieces in which the representation of movement in the visual arts is taken on as a formal problem.

In his artistic career, Juan José Aquerreta, who was trained in the Escuela de Artes y Oficios de Pamplona and in the Escuela de Bellas Artes de San Fernando, has developed a figuration with a light and soberly temperate gestural expression. His chromatic compositions organize subtly distinct fields, sometimes evoking metaphysical and timeless compositions. A kind of effect from the absence of formal depth in his paintings emphasizes a certain atmosphere of stillness and repose; however, another kind of depth, if you will, can be

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28 The two exhibitions celebrated in his lifetime which summarize his oeuvre are *Karne & Klorofila* (San Sebastián, Arteleku, 1990) and *Sagrado-Profano* (San Sebastián, Koldo Mitxelena Kulturunea, 2000).

29 Conversation with Andrés Nagel and Alberto Rementería in *Lápiz*, no. 99-101, January-February-March 1994, p. 228.

found in the mysterious atmosphere suggested by his figures, self-portraits or still lifes with resonances of Morandi's works.

Juan Luis Goenaga re-creates the landscapes from his rural habitat and urban life. With his *Belarrak* series, painted in the early 1970's, he celebrates an experience of the landscape with rhythms, baroque undulations, and entangled lines. He expanded on it with another series, *Sustraiak-Raíces* (Roots, 1973-1977), where he extended this aesthetic, anthropological, and archaeological attention to nature and the telluric. A matter-dense informalism, at times with naturalistic notes, defines these works. Likewise, the expressionist tension does not diminish in his figurative works, which are more closely connected to urban settings, although he does recall the fauvists more in his use of colour and gesture.

Other openings came from the critical figuration with pop resonances that Xabier Morrás displays in his photomontages, manipulated picture series, and relief paintings; and in the figuration of Pedro Osés, who shows an affinity with American comics and pop art. Mari Puri Herrero, Daniel Tamayo, Alberto Rementería, Alfonso Gortázar, Pedro Salaberri, Joaquín Resano, Pello Azketa, and Ramón Zuriarrain are other artists who participated in this innovative spectrum of figuration and the new realism. Since 1982, Jesus Mari Lazkano has been a teacher in the Fine Arts Faculty at the Universidad del País Vasco, where he studied, and in his career, he has shown a uniquely empathetic attention to the memory of art—he re-creates landscape collections by Mantegna, Leonardo, and Brueghel; a longstanding interest in ruins and classical or modern vestiges; and an enigmatic naturalism with romantic undertones. With his exceptional mastery of painting technique, Lazkano completed an inventory of urban or industrial landscapes and gardens—both glimpsed and imagined—in New York, Vienna, Bilbao, and Rome. He presented his first exhibitions in the mid-1970's. Distanced from conventional realism through an allegorical and melancholy openness, in the mid-1980's he captured an archaeological memory of industrial environments and architectures in works like *La irresistible ascensión de lo fragmentario* (The Irresistible Ascent of the Fragmentary, 1986). Another artist who falls in step with this attentive realism in urban industrial landscapes is Raúl Urrutikoetxea.

Informalist abstraction in several different expressionist and gestural veins underwent new developments in the 1970's. Some artists had already embarked upon this pathway in the previous decade. Rafael Ruiz Balerdi lived in Madrid between 1963 and 1972, although nonetheless participated in the emergence of the Gaur group in 1966. In the 1970's, he promoted the dissemination and creation of avant-garde music. A master of drawing like few others, he gradually assembled an abstract visual cosmos with veiled figurative and realistic glimmers. Without a doubt, he was one of the most representative artists of action painting, in which painting mobilizes a perceptible involvement with the body and the imaginary urge. His genuine painting is essentially gestural, and his colour palette is prodigious. The repetition of his action, somewhere between compulsive and melancholy, seems to wish for the factual power of the new, the re-created, and the incessantly deferred. Like red, green, ochre, or blue flashes, his fascinating oeuvre seeks an enigmatic reception, a pleasant semiosis of the act of painting as instruction and secular litany. He wrote: "one must learn how to experience repetition."<sup>30</sup> Thus, his painting reveals a "personal experience of getting lost in a labyrinth in which only action confers meaning." Fluctuating between a minute, concentrated calligraphy and a freer line, and full of chromatic celebration, he updated, as Viar has noted, "a pictorial memory—with Velázquez and Monet at the helm of a series of wisely assimilated influences—free like never before, taking

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30 *Balerdi : la experiencia infinita = azkengabeko esperientzia*. (Exhibition catalogue). Bilbao : Rekalde Erakusketa Aretoa = Sala de Exposiciones Rekalde; Donostia-San Sebastián : Koldo Mitxelena Erakusketaaretoa = Sala de Exposiciones Koldo Mitxelena, 1993, p. 47.

informalist procedures as his point of departure yet with results that are a far cry from those of any known action painting.<sup>31</sup> *Gran jardín* (Large Garden, 1966-1974), *Los gigantes* (The Giants, 1972), and *Venecia* (Venice 1964-1972) are the works that determined the meaning and formal avenues of his future oeuvre, where the play of lines and blotches and a formidable use of colour are proclaimed in a poetic and cognitive journey open to endless enigmas.

During his sojourn in Paris between 1955 and 1961, José Antonio Sistiaga took an interest in a kind of painting asserted in the gesture and in the lyrical abstraction that was associated with a Zen legacy which advocated voluntary serenity. On the other hand, he also perennially engaged in a pioneering involvement in art education in children and educational innovation. Furthermore, since the late 1960's, he had innovated in the expansion of painting to film as a medium; ...*ere erera baleibu ick subua aruaren...* (1968-1970) is an exemplary film revealing this hybridization between painting and cinema. *Acción vital. Homenaje a nuestros antepasados* (Life Action. Homage to our Ancestors, 1970) is a work that is part of a series of paintings in which gestural chaos leads to a bundle of tensions and a fascinating chromatic dynamism. A series of works painted with ink on cardboard and made on a crossing of the Pacific Ocean, such as those entitled *Maelström* (Maelstrom) and *Expansión* (Expansion, 1973), also strive for a charming commotion.

With a repeated gesture of diminutive lines, as if it were calligraphy, Gabriel Ramos Uranga whips up dynamic compositions with an Oriental flair, along with reminiscences of Tobey. He expresses himself this way in *Composición-pintura* (Composition-Painting, 1979). In the works by Juan Mieg, compositional determination wins out over gestural urge. One can recognize a kind of kaleidoscopic effect in his paintings through more or less well-defined colour fields. *Sin título* (Untitled, 1974) reflects this way of working. Years later, he paid renewed attention to the diagonal in his constructive poetics; that element would become recurring and would serve to sow the seeds of both chaos and order. He later drifted towards compositions that were more streaked with lines, shapes, and colour ranges. There is a period in the first half of the 1980's when he practiced a quicker kind of painting whose purpose was to release the unconscious through more spontaneous action. Mieg says: "I start from the abstract, and by abstract I mean the unknown, the void where expression takes place. After that process, shapes, and colours remain as the witnesses of what is actually timeless."<sup>32</sup>

Between the 1970's and the 1980's, several artists played a transgressive role in different directions. Esther Ferrer, Morquillas, and the Roscubas brothers are among this early vein. Ferrer has been one of the pioneering artists in action art since her participation in Zaj group, which was assembled in 1966 with Juan Hidalgo and Walter Marchetti. A few years later, on her own then, she presented her performance *ESPECTÁCULO / OLUCATCEPSE* (SPECTACLE / ELCATCEPS 1971), a sound poem for two voices. As Ferrer explains, one voice pronounces the lower-case characters while the other utters the upper-case ones, either simultaneously or alternating. The words can be read left to right or right to left, in which case the word "spectacle," for example, would become "elcatceps," etc. As many variations as wanted can be made, including reading it with just one voice. Performance has always been present in Ferrer's repertoire, with an innovative, transgressive mission. She is interested in creating unusual, reflective, and disturbing situations in which the audiences both attend and participate in her actions. Furthermore, over time she never stopped undertaking a series of conceptual works: the rayographs *Las manos de la artista* (The Artist's Hands, 1970), the series of drawings entitled *PI* which started in 1987, along with the different series and variations around the prime numbers

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31 Javier Viar. "Balerdi : el camino final de la libertad", in *Balerdi*. (Exhibition catalogue). Bilbao : Arte Galería La Brocha, 2000, p. 12.

32 Captured by Santiago Arcediano in *Juan Mieg*. (Exhibition catalogue). Vitoria-Gasteiz : Centro Cultural Montehermoso Kulturunea : Ayuntamiento de Vitoria-Gasteiz, 2004, p. 12.



Esther Ferrer  
*Íntimo y personal* (Up Close and Personal), 1977  
Photographs taken in the Atelier Lerin, Paris

starting in 1988, in which she inquires into mathematical and enigmatic relations to create visual works, are other records of her poetic-conceptual quest. The action *Íntimo y personal* (Up-Close and Personal, 1977) has metamorphosed into multiple variations of situations and contexts over time.

José Ramón Morquillas, a melancholy painter, sculptor, performer, and agitator in the art and institutional scene,<sup>33</sup> got his start in the mid-1960's by making, as he himself has put it, "an abstract-expressionist art which was soon adopting elements from a rationalist geometric language which I never abandoned in my subsequent career. Along the way, I gathered information from Oteiza, Mondrian, Van Doesburg, and the Russian constructivists."<sup>34</sup> Halfway between painting and relief—and with certain minimalist undertones—he makes painted pieces on fabric glued to wood with a geometric schematism in black or red over a dense white background (1973-1974). He followed this with a series of vertical trails with geometric cracks at their base (1975) and completed this series of scratches on blank panels in 1976. After that, he launched into his *Proyecto de sistematización del monte Argalarío* (Project to Systematize Mount Argalarío, 1976-1981), through which he approximated the techniques of land art and conceptual art. This project was first unveiled in 1978 at the Castel Ruiz Cultural Center. It was a full display of photographs, maps, objects, processes, blueprints, drawings, books, and sculptures which suggested an archaeological process and artistic inquiry. Tired of the increasing competitiveness and politicization of the art world, he founded the short-lived Surrealist Party of the Basque Country with Benito Guerra with a provocative, Dadaist spirit. The Roscubas brothers participated in several actions. On a more pragmatic level, albeit not totally bereft of a kind of institutional appropriationism, between 1978 and 1988 Morquillas ran the Culture Gallery of the Caja de Ahorros Municipal of Bilbao, which played a prominent role in promoting the contemporary art scene. One of his most ironically insightful actions was *Todas las palabras del silencio de Duchamp, al rumor de Beuys a través del chillido de Oteiza* (All the Words of Duchamp's Silence, in Beuys' Buzz via Oteiza's Shriek, Vitoria, 1982), in which he included quotes from Duchamp, Beuys, and Oteiza. Initially he thought about limiting himself to reading an excerpt from *Quousque tandem...!* However, in the course of the action, this brief reading led to an attempt to read the entire book.<sup>35</sup> Another action-installation from this period which prolonged the play of intertextual appropriations was *El almuerzo sobre la hierba* (Lunch on the Grass), which he presented at the Windsor Gallery. Yet a further series opened with the set of organic sculptures which he included in installations like *Delirium tremens* (1982) in an artistic practice which, as hinted at in *Argalarío*, took an anthropological and archaeological turn. Just a few years later, he participated in the show *Mitos y delitos* (Myths and Crimes, 1985) with Badiola, Bados, CVA (Moraza and Fernández), and Irazu. This exhibition, which he first presented in Barcelona's Metronom Gallery and in the Culture Gallery of the CAM of Bilbao, provided visibility to a shift in contemporary sculpture in the Basque Country. The piece *Contenedor* (Container, 1985-1986), which is displayed in this show, asserts an objectual principle and is an allegory of functional vessels or tools from primitive times. The lightweight pieces made of wood and paper, such as *Baracaldo* (1987), or those comprising his installations on Lope de Aguirre, or those he presented in *Mitos y delitos*, ushered in new material and constructive configurations in Basque sculpture at that time.

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33 For a survey of this artist's career, see Iñigo Sarriugarte. "Rebelde con causa : la obra artística de José Ramón Sainz Morquillas en los años 80 y 90", in *Bidebarrieta : Revista de humanidades y ciencias sociales de Bilbao*, no. 19, 2008, pp. 409-432.

34 José Ramón Sainz Morquillas. "Crónica de una Vanguardia. Morquillas, una plástica racionalista", interview with Ana María Guasch in *Egin*, December 17, 1977, p. 16.

35 Says Morquillas: "This action has sparked a legend, because what happened was actually not such a big deal. Simply, the concierge warned me to bring things to a close, and later when I wasn't finished he turned off the light and I stopped reading, and after he turned it on again I kept reading where I had left off, and in the end he called the police, but they found that this matter fell outside their purview. Finally, people started leaving until just one person was left, and that was the end of it." (Sarriugarte, *op. cit.*, p. 416).

The brothers Fernando and Vicente Roscubas have forged an unconventional pathway through a range of artistic practices. In their extraordinarily free and irreverent fashion, it could be said that they have not missed any of the trends through which painting, sculpture, or installation have passed. In the words of Xabier Sáenz de Gorbea, “the exhibitions of the Roscubas brothers take on diversity and are filled with proposals, materials, procedures, and concerns. They make a true collage of intentions and results.”<sup>36</sup> It is a kind of formal eclecticism, in either their individual work or their joint practice, shamelessly tackled with ironic aplomb. With *Serie plegable n.º 1* (Foldable Series No. 1, 1980), Vicente Roscubas initiated a constructive process which he would expand upon in the future, this time with his brother Fernando, to produce a puzzle picture which is made of numerous plotter-printed folded papers. They play with the multiple and the singular to produce abstract or figurative images at times related to the history of design or art. In their polyptych *Memorias pintadas* (Painted Memories, 1980-1981), they condensed a history of visual shapes coded as stylemes. On the occasion of the 1981 exhibition at the Windsor Kulturgintza gallery in Bilbao, they published a catalogue which included a text entitled “¿Arte postconceptual?” (Post-conceptual Art?) in which they said: “We seek to extract a duality from praxis, to restore the value of the aesthetic and social use of the object, and to take the artistic process as a source of knowledge for intellectual proof.”<sup>37</sup> By the 1980’s, this question would be recurrent in the new web of artists emerging around the Fine Arts Faculty, who would leave their mark on the new contemporary byways of Basque art.

### III. Modern endgame: Post-modernism and deconstruction

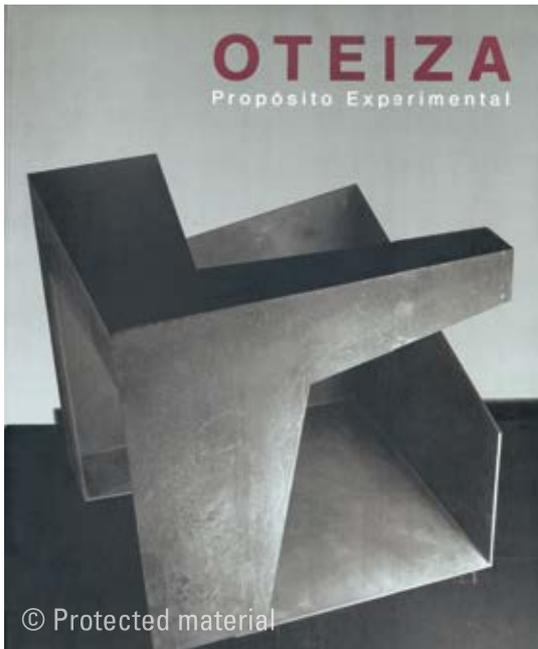
It is well known that the notion of art expanded in the 1970’s through new paradigms which had been hinted at in the artistic ruptures of the 1960’s, until the boundaries between what was acknowledged as art and non-art became porous. This crisis was heightened in the incipient post-modern condition, meant as a further late stratum of modernity more than its alternative. The fragmented present, in its modern / post-modern condition, reveals a picture of the situation which we could summarize, using Castoriadis’ analysis as our reference, by a three-fold questioning: 1) the overall view of history as progress or liberation; 2) the idea of a universal, uniform reason; and 3) the strict distinction between the cultural spheres (such as art and philosophy) grounded on a single underlying principle of rationality or functionality.<sup>38</sup> The teleological conception of both history and art history are part of the overarching stories (worship of reason and progress) questioned by the crisis of modernity, and in their place a multiplicity of interpretations of reality and the status of art have arisen, as underscored by Lyotard, Vattimo, Huysen, and other thinkers. The dichotomy or antagonism between the aesthetic and the political has not been resolved, nor will it be. And in this realm, as Huysen states, the goal “is not to eliminate the productive tension between the political and the aesthetic, between story and text, between art’s commitment and mission. The goal is to heighten this tension, even if just to rediscover it and reconsider it within the arts and criticism.”<sup>39</sup> Vattimo has postulated that “the experience of ambiguity is, like oscillation and uprootedness, constitutive for art; they are the only two ways through which, in the world of omnipresent communication, art can be shaped (not still, but perhaps finally) as crea-

36 Xabier Sáenz de Gorbea. *Arte y artistas del País Vasco*. Bilbao : (issue no.), 2002, p. 121.

37 Cited in Javier Viar. *Historia del arte vasco : de la Guerra Civil a nuestros días, 1936-2016*, vol. II. Bilbao : Bilboko Arte Ederren Museoa = Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao, 2017, p. 708.

38 Cornelius Castoriadis. “La época del conformismo generalizado”, in *El mundo fragmentado*. Buenos Aires : Altamira, 1993, p. 20.

39 Andreas Huyssen. “Cartografía del postmodernismo”, in *Modernidad y postmodernidad*. Madrid : Alianza, 1988, pp. 189-248.



Cover of the book  
*Propósito experimental* by Jorge Oteiza, 1988

tivity and freedom.<sup>40</sup> This scene of countless intertwined crises is where the condition of contemporary art cannot sidestep its contextualization within a *glocal* scene (simultaneously global and local-national).

The 1980's started with a dislocation of the modern cultural and philosophical landscape, where new world views and crises foster other historical-social temporalities which coexisted in the modern / post-modern scene. In the specific course of the arts, the new situation could be summarized in this way: an implosive dynamic of the very notion of art is accelerated and expanded, and the modalities and their respective disciplinary boundaries are fragmenting and increasingly hybridizing, thus challenging any normative temptation. The volatile boundaries between different poetics and practices—the modern manifesto as action delimiting a given aesthetic and political identity has lost ground—have made it possible for unheard-of *terrains vagues* to take shape in a contemporary landscape which is the home to an art of all the possible arts. César Aira accurately posits that within the international context since 1970, the different modern art movements and their offshoots—including the one that could be called post-modern—are encompassed by the name “contemporary art,” which “could be the realization of the teleology of modernism. It is no longer taken to be the harbinger of the future, the future development of time, but instead the plain and simple realization of the present.”<sup>41</sup> What he calls the “operation” of contemporary art consists of the fact that “everything should be allowed so that what emerges has the liberating value that we should ask of art.”<sup>42</sup> In this premise, Aira is related to Adorno—in his essay *Aesthetic Theory* published in 1970, he upheld that everything has become possible in art—by claiming that the new status of art would be “that magma of anything.”<sup>43</sup>

The shift towards new paradigms in art, which asserts a specific contemporariness, can be recognized with critical intensity in the shift from the 1970's to the 1980's. Many different factors came into play: the historical-social context showed its limitations and incipient disillusionment, while the specific context of art was interleaved with modern legacies, or with the mythical, conservative brilliance of the Italian Transavantgar-

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40 Gianni Vattimo. *La sociedad transparente*. Barcelona : Paidós, 1990, p. 154.

41 César Aira. *Sobre el arte contemporáneo*. Barcelona : Random House, 2016, p. 34.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 43.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 44.

de. Other “neo” currents—geometric abstraction, conceptual, figuration<sup>44</sup>—and “post” currents come onto the scene along with crises and paradoxes on the very existence of contemporary art—that same notion would be an “incendiary expression”<sup>45</sup> for Marc Jimenez; numerous transgressions on art’s own limits and proposals make their appearance, as does an entire universe of speculations and theories that accompany or intervene in artistic practices, as well as in their offshoots and theorizations. Within the specific context of the Basque art scene, all of this was intertwined with the emergence of other generational sensibilities, other experiences and journeys, better knowledge of the international scene—from *Arte Povera* to minimal art, not to mention the different conceptual trends—and other critical reinterpretations of the legacies of the historical avant-gardes. Likewise, the impact of figures like Oteiza and Beuys cuts through different artists. Badiola was one of the artists who has inquired the most into their influence in shaping his own career, and in the careers of others such as Bados and Moraza. The artistic projects of Oteiza and Beuys, with their genuine specificities, were perceived as failed attempts, but “the visionary nature of their aspirations and the intensity of their approaches explain their lengthy shadows (each in their different contexts) on the concerns of art today.”<sup>46</sup>

Within the Basque Country in the early 1980’s, a constellation of young artists associated with the Fine Arts Faculty forged a bond of conversations, affects, and stances which became visible under the aegis of the New Basque Sculpture. They most prominently include Txomin Badiola, Ángel Bados, Juan Luis Moraza, María Luisa Fernández, Elena Mendizabal, and Pello Irazu. They are not a group in the conventional sense, nor were they formed with a manifesto; instead, they have a series of elective affinities, journeys, and sojourns abroad, and critical approaches to art—from the constructivist avant-gardes to the conceptual, including Beuys. The impact of interpretations on structuralism, formalism, post-modern thinking, and psychoanalysis fostered this convergence and a certain generational sensibility. In Moraza’s words, “we thus emerge from this crossroads of minimalism, conceptualism, and the politics of friendship, or, in other words, from a need to be immersed in the present.”<sup>47</sup> And Oteiza, always as a referent for thinking about the theory and practice of art, was an object of fascination and inquiry. The limits that formalized it were the common thread of their debates and inquiries, and Oteiza offered a radical, exemplary case study, since his experimental quest and art laboratory concluded in his abandonment of sculptural practice in 1959 to shift instead to intervening in life. Within the new context, Oteiza’s project was not a model to follow, but he did critically inspire them to reach new responses and bear in mind an ethical dimension of their respective projects. In Badiola’s words, “regardless of any other reasons, Oteiza abandons sculpture because he literally wrecks it, and this point of uncertainty is the site of the beginning of a pathway to which some of us are committed.”<sup>48</sup> In other texts surveying the 1980’s, that new generation of sculptors insists on their impact from Oteiza, the main referent of authority in Basque art, as well as the influence from other artists: “We were not interested so much in what Oteiza pursued (a quest for the Basque essence) as in the methods and conceptual tools that he used, which pushed us towards a more far-reaching debate related to the remains of existentialism, but especially with the structuralist debate. In this way, the formalizing theme, either from the artistic perspective (Judd,

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44 A survey of this multiple dynamic of the “neo’s” in post-modernity can be found in Anna Maria Guasch (coord.). *Los manifiestos del arte posmoderno*. Madrid : Akal, 2000.

45 Marc Jimenez. *La querrela del arte contemporáneo*. Buenos Aires : Amorrortu, 2010, p. 61.

46 Txomin Badiola in a conversation with Ángel Bados, in *Lápiz*, no. 99-101, January-February-March 1994, p. 258.

47 Alfonso López Rojo. “Verbimágenes, constelaciones de complejidad : Juan Luis Moraza”, in *Lápiz : Revista internacional del arte*, no. 164, June 2000.

48 Txomin Badiola in *Geométricos vascos*. (Exhibition catalogue, San Sebastián, Vitoria-Gasteiz, Bilbao, Pamplona). San Sebastián : Sociedad Guipuzcoana de Ediciones y Publicaciones, 1982, p. 30.



Oteiza in front of the poster for *Mitos y delitos* (Myths and Crimes), 1985  
Archive Fundación Museo Jorge Oteiza

Morris, Ryman, Kosuth, Hacke, Art & Language, etc.) or from the texts of Mukarovsky, Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, Menna, Moles, or Eco, or with directors like Godard, all of it mixed up with Oteiza's heterodox approach, pinpointed a precise context where one could debate and work."<sup>49</sup> To Bados, Oteiza sparked contradictory perceptions and was primarily a referent for inquiring into the notion of structure in art.<sup>50</sup> In the case of Moraza and Fernández during their stint in CVA, Oteiza is relevant because of his conception of the art laboratory. The process of expressive streamlining which informs Oteiza's law of changes was appreciated by the young artists, but they did not take it to its ultimate consequences as Oteiza did by concluding his experimentation and abandoning—albeit never fully—the practice of sculpture. The *Cajas metafísicas* (Metaphorical Boxes) were objects of deconstructive appropriation given that they synthesized problems of structure and the final shift from sculpture as mass to an open, receptive sculpture as void.<sup>51</sup>

Basque sculpture, whose top exponents since the mid-1950's had been Oteiza and Chillida, had earned a great deal of prestige both inside and outside the Basque Country, to such an extent that it even became the epitome of Basque art. In the wake of the Gaur group, a second generation of sculptors, including Vicente Larrea, Ramón Carrera, Ricardo Ugarte, José Ramón Anda, Jose Ángel Lasa, José Zugasti, and Iñigo Arregi, remained somewhat faithful to the values of modern sculpture. Formal innovations appeared in the 1980's, spearheaded by the generation of the new sculpture, which would veer towards a new reconsideration of the objectual, the performative, and installation, yet also towards other cooperative dynamics, ethical-political resignifications, and demands for audience participation. Badiola recalls that "that specific generation circulates based on an interest in *roots*, common to Basque art in the 1960's and 1970's, and it comes near the generation of *rhizomes* in full post-modernity."<sup>52</sup>

49 Txomin Badiola. "Diez años de extravío (cambios en los comportamientos escultóricos). Notas sobre intenciones y resultados II", in *Zehar* : *Boletín de Arteleku*, no. 3, March-April 1990.

50 "I didn't interact with Oteiza much, which perhaps allowed me not to hate him. I was a bit scared of him, yet I also admired him. I have always striven to transmit what is in his writings and works (such as the notion of structure) which enables us to recognize art, beyond its mandates." Letter from Ángel Bados to Fernando Golvano, 19 October 2008.

51 For an examination of this issue, see Iñigo Sarriguarte. "Del culto a la muerte de un maestro : Oteiza y los jóvenes escultores vascos en los años 80", in *Sancho el Sabio* : *Revista de cultura e investigación vasca*, no. 25, 2006, pp. 115-138.

52 Txomin Badiola. "The site for controversy : From roots to rhizomes", in Zoe Bray. *Beyond Guernica and the Guggenheim : Art and politics from a comparative perspective*. Reno (Nevada) : Center for Basque Studies, University of Nevada, 2015.

Morquillas and the Roscubas brothers had explored new pathways. Nagel had, too. The show *Mitos y delitos* (1985) was a turning point in the new sculpture. In a letter to Badiola (Zarautz, April 9, 1985) Oteiza wrote: "Your works of art are the evidence of innocence which shows the artist as a mythical hero of today condemned as a criminal." To Oteiza, the figure of the hero is a criminal subjected to tests to vindicate himself, while the myth would explain the crime. As a heroic figure in modern Basque art history, Oteiza himself recognized that his crime was rehabilitated with his experimental project. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that issue 2 of the magazine *Metronom*, put out by the gallery by the same name where the show *Mitos y delitos* was held—it was later displayed in the Culture Gallery in Bilbao with a catalogue of its own, which brought together Ángel Bados, Txomin Badiola, Juan Luis Moraza, Pello Irazu, and María Luisa Fernández; José Ramón Morquillas also participated—included those notes by Oteiza written in August 1982. It is common knowledge that he trusted aesthetics—defined as interscience and primordial knowledge—and art—defined as a practical action subordinate to the ontological and normative condition of its aesthetic—to create myths so that the artist himself and the community could cure themselves of their tragic sense of existence. His aesthetic and artistic project had an existentialist discourse, and his creative process entailed a unique alchemy of metaphysical intuitions and rationalist experimentations which were geared towards an aesthetic, moral, political, and religious *telos*. A yearning for the modern project persisted, yet amalgamated as well with existentialist assumptions. From Oteiza's legacy, this group of young artists were primarily interested in his constructivist and experimental postulates, as well as in the importance he attached to structure as a sphere of formal inquiry. Since the 1930's, Oteiza had shown an interest in the structure of the work of art, which would later be expanded in the 1960's when he further explored a structuralist and linguistic approach. Thus, in *Quousque tandem...!*, Oteiza stresses the importance of structure in defining a work of art.<sup>53</sup> In the catalogue of *Mitos y delitos*, Badiola mentions a question which is shared by the others: "The crisis in the traditional concept of project of the avant-gardes is obvious today, and yet it can still not be replaced by something that is anything other than a flight forward. The true historical challenge (although the expression sounds obsolete) which art and artists are confronting is the redefinition of this concept (Project) for a new and much more realistic situation in which the concept of the limit is the effective tool for overcoming utopian ingenuousness and, at the very least, rescuing it from the manipulated terrains of the symbol."<sup>54</sup> The formalism of his early pieces, like *Cuadrado sólido n.º 1* (Solid Square, No. 1, 1980) and others like *Conspirador* (Conspirator, 1987), gave way to a more complex inquiry into the problem of structure—its purpose was to give substance to the work while he also suggested relativizing it with a poor shape that denied a unitary meaning—and the shift towards allegorical procedures such as those heralded by *¿Quién teme al arte? (Twins VI)* (Who's Afraid of Art? (Twins VI)) from 1988-1989. This piece is a harbinger of a turning point in the appropriation of furniture and in the ambiguous meaning of modern design. In his subsequent work, the structure of his installations, where the container was the most important element, would provide the setting for narrations, multiple desires on his memory of art, and his melancholy or fictionalizing disputes about the world and existence. This breach, which remains open today, would extend beyond the more specifically sculptural through a narrative and allegorical mechanism. His stay in London (1989) in the company of Pello Irazu and his subsequent extended residence in New York in the 1990's fostered a further deepening in his deconstructive approach. But it is worth noting that in the late

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53 A work of art "is a theme with structure. It is something that is recounted, said, or showed, but that consists, that exists, with something that is its interiority, its organization, its skeleton, or its particular structure, from which its aesthetic value, its being, rises to the theme. The structure, when shown without a theme, as a pure problem, is the abstract." Jorge Oteiza. *Quousque tandem...!: ensayo de interpretación estética del alma vasca: su origen en el cromlech neolítico y su restablecimiento por el arte contemporáneo*. San Sebastián: Hordago, 1983, p. 79.

54 Txomin Badiola in *Mitos y delitos*. (Exhibition catalogue). Bilbao: Caja de Ahorros Municipal de Bilbao, 1985.



Txomin Badiola in his studio in New York, 1990

1980's, in addition to his pieces and texts, Badiola also curated the first major Oteiza anthology in Madrid. Thereafter, the publication would become invaluable material to learn more about the protean work and personality of this formidable artist.

Ángel Bados presented his first installations with found objects in 1975. In the early 1980's, he made his first pieces in steel to inquire into issues of structure, and he later went on to use materials like wood, wax, and lead. With his move to Bilbao in 1983, he started teaching at the Fine Arts Faculty and engaged with Badiola and Moraza, who were his fellow professors at the time. This relationship had extremely positive consequences for the course of his oeuvre. We have already discussed Oteiza's influence on all of them, since "he allowed us to articulate the issue of structure with the theme, which in my case was almost always sentimental."<sup>55</sup> Structure as the syntax of the object, as the formal dialectic, was a way of gaining distance from everyday reality.<sup>56</sup> This apparent formalism, as if seeking to affirm a specific literality verging on the minimal, can be recognized in series of pieces and boxes in materials like steel, wood, and bronze—which he sometimes painted with acrylic—made in the second half of the 1980's. Beuys is among the artists that Bados respected the most, and in pieces like *Sin título* (Untitled, 1985), which was displayed in *Mitos y delitos*, the echoes of his legacy are clear. To Bados, the job of art is to "provoke short-circuits" of reality, of the space-time relationship, which shed light on the identity or relational truth of things.<sup>57</sup> Pieces and installations like *Sin título* (Untitled, 1987) reveal the operation of symbolization, which he considers the most prized feature of art. That operation is renewed as a melancholy action in endless mourning. The emptiness of these boxes, as abstract as they are real, activates reminiscences of Oteiza's works. There is a memory and an affection for materials that protect: in this case, the steel is coated with copper, as if it were given a skin, a new quality to activate its own phenomenology. In other subsequent pieces and installations, he for-

55 Letter from Ángel Bados to Fernando Golvano, October 19, 2008.

56 Interview with Maya Aguiriano in *Zehar*: *Boletín de Arteleku*, no. 2, January-February 1990, pp. 4-6.

57 Ángel Bados. "(Cuestiones Técnicas)", in *Zehar*: *Boletín de Arteleku*, no. 25, May-June 1994, p. 18.

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CVA  
*Cubo* (Cube), 1981  
Wood 36 x 36 x 36 cm  
ARTIUM in Álava, Vitoria-Gasteiz

ged a dialogue that was attentive to their interpretative conditions within their space, and to the ambiguity embedded in the formal economy of their structure and image.

CVA (Juan Luis Moraza and María Luisa Fernández): What can be said about a collective whose name itself entails a problematic issue? CVA stands for Comité de Vigilancia Artística (Artistic Vigilance Committee, 1979-1985). This apologia of a vigilant moment in human dimensions, of creation and artistic experience, can only be interpreted ironically; indeed, if it is at all meaningful, it simply means to provide us with a laboratory for freedom. So, in this choice of name, the two members are expressing their first stance. Later, other stances would come from their pieces and installations. Their founding, which is also associated with the Fine Arts Faculty and the generational core of the emerging sculpture, is connected to a series of artists and a technical universe which they shared, including Malevich, Smithson, Stella, Manzoni, Kosuth, and Oteiza. But the more intimate experience of their relationship with Morquillas, Bados, and the Roscubas brothers was already there as well. Different echoes of Oteiza can be found in their texts, such as when they write that: "The laboratory of art . . . has been a place where epistemological automatism, of this and other kinds, have been challenged. Today we can collect finished experimentations, take the periodic tables as data on the aesthetic components,"<sup>58</sup> and when they write that "contemporary art, in its origin, reduced the problems that in the past were the rising and falling expression to linguistic units, fostering avenues of experimentation of space and time."<sup>59</sup> Thus, a structuralist and analytical conception appears that Moraza went on to pursue in his solo career. CVA emerged in 1979 as an artistic enterprise "capable of bringing together personal and impersonal practices: the inspiration of Buren, Kosuth, Smithson, and of Manzoni was floating in the air, as well as of C.S. Pierce and Wittgenstein, Moles and Eco".<sup>60</sup> *Sello de artista* (Artist's Hallmark) was one of their pieces that revealed a paradoxical irony to certify the true anti-art. A deconstructive action of the convention of the frame and the idea of pictorial representation can be found in *(P)*, a work from 1982. This installation is related to others like *Cicatriù en la matriù* (Scar on the Matrix, 1982) and *Superautomáticos* (Superautomatic, 1983), and, like the flotsam from a shipwreck of the history of painting—as an example of the fine arts—they are described accurately by Javier San Martín: they were "a gilded explosion, a landscape after a battlefield in which the overarching idea—representation—has been catapulted into the air in smithereens."<sup>61</sup> The artistic venture of CVA would come to an end after its participation in *Mitos y delitos*, and until today Moraza has thrown himself intensely into art and theory, which he has combined with his teaching and research, as well as curatorial work. He is one of the artists who has most deeply explored the semiological or linguistic shift in art in connection with a psychoanalytical approach with Lacanian leanings. On his own, his new output would be reflected in the exhibition *El sueño imperativo* (The Imperative Dream, Madrid, 1991). Based on his interest in critically addressing the issue of formalism in art, he would end with a notion that he defines as "performance," to wit, "performance collapses formalism, form, but does not formalize. Form, but not mould or formula."<sup>62</sup> Fernández, in turn, would also combine art and teaching. The series *Máculas* (1984-1985), which, just like others during this period, was an attempt to

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58 Alfonso López Rojo, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

59 *Ibid.*, p. 121

60 *Ibid.*, p. 105.

61 Francisco Javier San Martín. "Resplandor dorado : una interpretación italiana de CVA", in *CVA : 1980-1984*. (Exhibition catalogue, Vitoria-Gasteiz, ARTIUM, Centro-Museo Vasco de Arte Contemporáneo; Lleida, Centre d'Art la Panera). Vitoria-Gasteiz : ARTIUM, Centro-Museo Vasco de Arte Contemporáneo, 2004, p. 85.

62 Juan Luis Moraza. "Arte como cuestionamiento : performa contra el formalismo", in *Zehar : Boletín de Arteleku*, no. 7, November-December 1990, pull-out supplement pp. 8-9.

“bring part of this landscape to the art world,”<sup>63</sup> was her embarkation upon her own solo career, and one of the most representative pieces from her subsequent output was *Entre el amor y el odio* (Between Love and Hatred, 1987). With a post-minimalist and less normative attitude, she updated a new-objectual sensibility by using diverse materials and colours. A more conscious poetic and expressive density would be revived in her new constructive series.

Pello Irazu studied in Bilbao, where he joined the informal web of friendship, artistic complicities, and intellectual vagaries of the new sculpture. Constructivism, the conceptual, minimalism, the new British sculpture, and Oteiza informed his sculptural sensibility, just as it did that of his colleagues. However, in his case, a formalist legacy from neo-plasticism and a bold use of colour would be somewhat intensely modulated, as seems to be apparent in his piece *Damiel* (1988). Sojourns in London in 1989 and New York between 1990 and 1998—dovetailing with Badiola in his voyages—contributed to his swift access to the latest trends. The boxes he produced in the mid-1980's, such as *Wild* (1987) and *Gante* (1988), bear the deconstructionist mark in relation to Oteiza's sculpture. The minimalism of Donald Judd and his notion of specific object, which seeks to overcome the differentiation between painting and sculpture, were another artistic seam he would mine with critical and artistic passion. He does not avoid showing the strangeness and paradoxes that accompany his constructive genesis. “When I find a form that interests me, I do not act directly; I need mediation. I look for the signs and try to approach them; looking, drawing, and in the process recreating them,” he commented in his catalogue *Pliegues* (Folds, 2004). Sculpture, painting, and photography can converge in pieces that mobilize an objectual principle and a certain pleasure associated with a haptic dimension. In this, he has distanced himself from other constructive approaches used by his generational peers. In the ensuing decade, other architectural and habitat-related elements captured his attention. The house as a recurrent motif, as a diagram or sign or primary structure and, ultimately, as a spatial problem, became the object of a new deconstructive play.

Elena Mendizabal earned her degree in Fine Arts, and since 1986 she has been teaching in the Fine Arts Faculty at the Universidad del País Vasco. From the same generation as the aforementioned artists, and a participant in their initiatives, approaches, and practices, she also adopted the theoretical buzz of the different conceptualisms which interested this emerging scene. One of her first proposals was *Sin título* (Untitled, 1983), a ready-made simulated by the reconstruction of one of Oteiza's metaphysical boxes on which she attached handles. This ironic, parodical gesture is comparable to action carried out by EAE that same year, which went far to demythify Oteiza and proclaim the art of the new generation. Along with the conceptual legacy, she was also interested in furniture design, and more specifically examined the post-modern Italian trend, something which she reflected in her subsequent works. In 1985, she held her first solo exhibition called *Las manos quietas* (Still Hands) at the Culture Gallery at Bilbao's CAM, promoted by Morquillas, where her focus on sculpture became definitive: its image opened up to all modalities—analogue, metaphoric, or allegorical—and the presence of the zoomorphic, furniture, and architecture became more prominent.<sup>64</sup> Some critics, such as Francisco Javier San Martín and others, have observed a perverse drift in the geometric shapes of her pieces through additions and interventions.<sup>65</sup> *Melena* (Long Hair, 1986) is a piece displayed

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63 For an examination of her career, Beatriz Herráez's interview with María Luisa Fernández is quite revealing; it was published in *María Luisa Fernández : je, je... luna : 1979-1997 bitartean egindako artelanak = obras realizadas entre 1979 y 1997 = works produced between 1979 and 1997*. (Exhibition catalogue). Bilbao : AZ Azkuna Zentroa, 2015.

64 “Entrevista Elena Mendizabal - Beatriz Herráez”, in *Elena Mendizabal : escultura*. [Bilbao : Elena Mendizabal, 2018], p. 19.

65 Francisco Javier San Martín. “Elena Mendizabal”, in *Lápiz*, no. 69, June 1990, pp. 73-74.



Darío Urzay  
*Sin título (89-X-I)*  
(Untitled) (89-X-I), 1989  
Oil and GloLite on canvas. 185 x 185 cm  
ICO Collections, Madrid

in this exhibition which affirms a powerful material presence which seems to oscillate between its iconic dimension and its abstracting overflow.

Even though she was born in San Sebastián, Cristina Iglesias has had a tangential connection to the Basque sculpture of her generation. She started her artistic training in Barcelona in 1979, but she completed her studies at the Chelsea School of Art in London between 1980 and 1980. In 1988, she furthered her training in New York. She had an early international presence in multiple shows, and in 1986 she was invited to participate in the Venice Biennale. Her sculptural practice has been associated with a moderately expressionistic legacy which interweaves a diverse range of materials—sometimes with clashing effects—and techniques to reformulate a memory of architectural elements, spatial appropriations that activate an interplay of relations between interior and exterior, as in pieces with lattices or canopies. For example, *Sin título M/M1* (Untitled M/M1, 1987) uses copper, steel, cement, and glass, and through a poetics of the fragment it conjures up a strange habitat whose structure is missing. The architectural or landscape motifs (dead leaves, ivy, climbing plants, etc.) are integrated as strange ornamentation on the walls or drawn on the aluminium or copper surfaces, perhaps to express this sculptor's attention to the relationships between architecture and landscape.

The idea of simulation in the processes of constructing images whose status is ambiguous—paintings that look like photographs, videos created with a montage of images—and the subversion of the conventions associated with representation have always been present in the experimental defiance of Darío Urzay. The hyperrealism from his early period (1982-1985) was already a kind of deconstructive gesture of that “genre,” as the image simulated interior spaces where an appropriation of works and authors led to a real effect.



Official opening of EAE (Euskal Artisten Elkartea), 1983

Likewise, the play of images repeated within painting upturned the connection with reality. *La huella* (The Trace, 1983) dates from that time; painted with a range of grays and conjuring a blurred atmosphere, it seems to sketch a melancholy gesture: all image is construction, not a reflection of the real but imaginary creation. The series *Autorretratos dobles* (Double Self-Portraits, 1983-1984), captured with cameras, and *Doble gesto* (Double Gesture, 1990) using pictorial media, questioned the notions of identity and repetition which are also associated with the conventions of images. His residences in London in 1988 and New York in 1989-1994 fostered other experiences and constructive shifts. In the latter city, he left behind traditional procedures and paintbrushes to instead embrace a new technique: liquid pigments are poured onto horizontal boards where they are randomly mixed, leading to organic structures, random shapes that are as strange as they are seductive and then finished with a patina of transparent varnish. Like a hallmark of his images, a formal and ironic frame—there is no transparency between the image and the meaning—Urzay's universe or imaginary microcosm continued to develop in the 1990's with the intervention of digital media. The ambiguity of organic shapes, umbilical cords, and structures with a capillary or venous appearance are common elements in his images, which incorporate mirror effects. The micro becomes a fragment of the macro, mimesis in poiesis, interior in exterior, a veritable atlas of fascinating images can also seem to be perceived as an analogy of Borgian worlds.

Aware that art speaks a language of its own, and that it is impossible to translate it into other languages without falling into multiple aporias, Prudencio Irazabal has persevered in a painting action which is grounded upon a logic of the sensation but no longer refers to any modern lineage and instead addresses contemporary problems of the construction of images and their sensorial and symbolic reminiscences. The abstraction he practices is interested in haptic properties, that is, in arousing sensations that simultaneously attract visual and tactile desire. Distanced from the moral *telos* associated with the projects of the artistic

avant-gardes, he claims that art does not transform the human being but does allow us to experience the multiple; another subjectivity. He held his first solo shows in 1981, and until the mid-1980's his painting was comparable to American Abstract Expressionism. His attempt to seek a more analytical painting that promoted its material properties—the question of light and density, the use of photographic emulsions, and a kind of formal streamlining—and the metamorphic nature of images were his main concerns in the 1980's.<sup>66</sup> *Foralia* and *Domus Aurea* (Golden Dome), both from 1989, formalize that transition towards a more spiritual and allegorical painting. With a variety of formal manifestations, the byways of pictorial abstraction in the 1980's have been travelled by artists like Iñaki de la Fuente, Inés Medina, Alfredo Álvarez Plágaro, Iñaki Cerrajería, Eugenio Ortiz, and Javier Balda, or, alternating with figurative choices, by Alejandro Garmendia, among others.

The 1980's did not revive the controversies so deeply entrenched in the militant ideology of the 1970's, nor the group tensions accompanied by manifestos which outlined delimitations that became obsolete over the course of time. A new attempt to band together was the association of Basque artists EAE (Euskal Artisten Elkartea) in 1983, whose introductory action consisted—as if the 1970's agitprop leaked into the 1980's—of kidnapping an Oteiza sculpture, *Homenaje a Malévich* (Homage to Malevich) in the Fine Arts Museum of Bilbao in order to give it to the City Hall as a representation of the citizenry. In hindsight, we can better see the mystified militaristic culture behind that “performance,” as Txomin Badiola, one of the participants in it, has critically noted: “In the inevitable dialogue, or the contamination, in the time between art and politics, one gradually perceives a flirtation between the language of art and the language of violence. Some artists from the period had already begun to include this kind of image. Artists like Juan Luis Goenaga, in his series *Encapuchados* (Hooded Men) from 1977, or images of torture from the *Euskadi* series by Xabier Morrás during the same period, and from a more corrosive vantage point, the piece *Super Hero Euskaldunzarra* (1978) by the Roscubas brothers. This could be perceived not only in the iconography but also in the structure of some performative actions. A good example of this is *EAE Acción. El Museo* (EAE Action. The Museum) from 1983.”<sup>67</sup> At the end of the decade, the forms of involvement between art and politics would change, and the accent would be more on action restricted to language and formal construction and not so much on the primacy of moral, political, and other meanings.

With the post-modern declension in the new contemporariness of art, new disputes and critical forms have emerged—experimentation with and creation of new languages—yet this time without the demand for a utopian civilizing horizon, as some modern avant-gardes yearned for. The crisis of art and its grievances around the institution of art have continued unabated. Since the mid-20th century, art has become a network system, a structure which has proven to be indispensable as a container, an environment. This structure should simultaneously be able to deal with the separation between what is and is not contemporary art, while regrouping its dispersed expressions following some kind of order. And all of this is occurring with disputes between artistic choices, institutions, and markets, yet also with an array of disparate synergies and convergences. The different versions of the idea of deconstruction are an integral part of the incessant questions on form and representation, which were so prominently present in the inquiries by the innovative

66 A summary of this experimental process can be found in Javier Viar. *Historia del arte vasco : de la Guerra Civil a nuestros días, 1936-2016*, vol. II. Bilbao : Bilboko Arte Ederren Museoa = Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao, 2017, pp. 895-905.

67 Txomin Badiola. “The site for controversy : From roots to rhizomes”, in Zoe Bray. *Beyond Guernica and the Guggenheim : Art and politics from a comparative perspective*. Reno (Nevada) : Center for Basque Studies, University of Nevada, 2015. The text, updated and summarized, has also been published in *Gaur, 1966 : L'art basque en résistance = Euskal arte ihardukitzaila*. (Exhibition catalogue). Bayonne : Musée Basque et de l'histoire de Bayonne, 2018.

constellation of youthful artists discussed in this text, especially in the realm of sculptural practices. It is common knowledge how Derrida's deconstruction alerted us that all representation is deficient, that the notions of authorship and originality have lost the prestige they once had in modern culture, and that the writings/forms of art assemble an array of languages and devices. The question of what to do returns time and time again, how to update a controversial ethos for the theoretical and practical action of the arts which expand to other media, languages and supports.<sup>68</sup> The meta-politics of the resistant form fluctuates—as the philosopher Jacques Rancière has posited—between two positions: 1) the politics of becoming-life, which attributes to art a *telos* geared at the construction of common life forms, thus dissolving its autonomy and self-sufficiency; and 2) the politics of the resistant form, which challenges its transformation into a life form by maintaining its autonomy or separation.<sup>69</sup> He upholds the need to bring the differences back to politics and art, and this would require “rejecting the phantasm of purity, giving back to these inventions their perennially ambiguous, precarious, and disputable nature. This necessarily means removing them from any theology of time, any thought of the original trauma or the coming redemption.”<sup>70</sup> The arts in the 1990's have a different specificity and connectivity in view of the reciprocal involvement between the local/national and international contexts. Other poetics, other vanishing points, which transversally intertwine the political, the ethical, and the aesthetic, come into play.

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68 Experimental music, photography, audiovisuals, and other mixed options emerged once again on the Basque art scene. Another factor that has conditioned the development of new artistic practices is the gradual institutionalization of a network of resources and art centers. The pioneering experience of Arteleku (created by the Provincial Government in 1987) and its permanent mutation of purposes and programs, as well as the seminars and workshops, went on to have noticeable effects in the 1990's.

69 Jacques Rancière. *El malestar en la estética*. Madrid : Clave Intelectual, 2012, p. 58.

70 *Ibid.*, p. 160.