

From Here to the End of the World. 2008-2018



Miren Jaio

110
URTE AÑOS

BILBOKO ARTE
EDERREN MUSEOA
MUSEO DE BELLAS
ARTES DE BILBAO

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A small white-bound catalogue published in 2005. On one of the pages, a list of works. Among them is a video with no italicised title or date, simply identified as “Back in 1997” and accompanied by the following description:

The black tyre rolls steadily downhill, as if something had happened above. Sometimes it gets away and rolls all the way down to the road, but nothing happens. Strenuous pushing is required to straighten its course. It can pick up considerable speed, in which case it’s hard to keep upright. The worst part is constantly lugging the tyre uphill — it’s exhausting. Repeating the exercise can lead to hypnosis. And the people who’ve stopped to watch will document the action in photos and videos.¹

The little white catalogue, the video of the black tyre and its description belong to Ibon Aranberri. The video shows exactly what is described: a wheel rolling downhill and, at one point, a figure seen from behind carrying it.

“Back in 1997” contains several references to the idea of time. One is the circular nature of the repeated action, underscored by the video’s loop format. Another allusion is found in the title, or quasi-title, which situates the action, abstract in its brevity, in a specific temporal context: “Back in 1997” was first presented in 1998, at the *Ethnics* solo show at Espacio Abisal in Bilbao. At the time, this gallery run by artists occupied a basement in Alameda Mazarredo, not far from the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao. The previous year, “back in 1997”, the museum had opened its doors, forever altering the local landscape and marking the birth of a global economic paradigm that turned cities into major hubs of cultural tourism and consumption.

1 Ibon Aranberri. *Ibon Aranberri*. Arles: Actes Sud : Altadis, 2005, p. 56.



Ibon Aranberri
Firestone, 1997
 Single-channel video, colour image, without sound, 16'
 Bergé Collection

Back in 1997—now in italics²—also alluded to another temporal aspect, this time of a structural nature. The title, which retrospectively referenced something that had happened a short time earlier as if referring to an event from the distant past, signalled something which now seems quite obvious: time passes swiftly, but in recent years its acceleration has become unstoppable, like a tyre picking up speed as it rolls down a slope.

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The acceleration of time—the perception that more things are happening at a faster pace, and that new events cancel out what came before—is a sign of the times. In this survey of the decade from 2008 to 2018, the last ten years of art in the Basque Country, adopting the approach used in *Back in 1997*—distancing oneself from recent events by means of a linguistic operation—may be a smart strategy for writing about something still too fresh to examine with critical detachment, about works of art which, in addition to being symptoms or contextual markers of their historical time, are ideally capable of transcending that time and providing critical tools for doing so.

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² The video is listed under the title *Firestone* in the Colección Bergé y Cía. and in all other consulted sources, except the little white-bound catalogue from 2005.



Itziar Okariz
¿Dónde estás justicia? (Where are You, Justice?)
 2008
 Performance

Let's give it a try: *Back in 2008*. A high-angle shot of a bland new urban landscape by night. A landscape dominated by the orderly forms, shiny surfaces and synthetic materials typical of today's urban areas, products of development plans that wipe the slate clean, leaving no trace of what once existed there. The view has an air of virtual reality. We might be looking at any city on the planet, or a scale model in an architect's studio. Various parallel lines—two tram tracks in the middle and, on either side, a station platform, a car lane, a stretch of pavement and a cycle lane—run across the image and fade into the distance at the top. Two colours dominate the composition: the garish green of the signage on the shelters and the grass covering the iron tracks; and the metallic grey of the pavement, the tram rails and the street furniture—shelters, railings, street lamps, etc. A handful of figures are strolling along the pavement or waiting for the next tram. One seems blurred as it crosses the track in the wrong place. The figure's path follows a straight, fluorescent-orange line perpendicular to the rest of the lines in the picture (rails, platforms, lanes, pavements).

¿Dónde estás justicia? [Where are you justice?] is a little-known action by Itziar Okariz. Performed in 2008, at a location not far from the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum, it involved drawing a line, with the fluorescent paint used by topographical surveyors, to indicate where an eponymous graffiti message had been located one decade earlier. Painted on the rooftop of an outbuilding at the Euskalduna shipyard, where it was visible from the Deusto bridge, the graffiti became a symbol of the shipyard workers' demands during their sit-in in the mid-1980s. The graffiti remained on the Euskalduna rooftop long after the protests ended, and it disappeared when works were begun in the Abandoibarra district, the heart of the "Bilbao effect" urban remodelling project that transformed the city at the turn of the century.

Ten years ago, "back in 2008", Okariz placed her body on the spot which, twenty years earlier, had caught the eye of everyone who crossed the Deusto bridge. Her intervention in a place once occupied by an ephemeral monument, now a transited area opposite a shopping centre, made an important point: memory is a product of the body's relationship with space. When that relationship changes, so does memory.



The feeling that the realities and spaces around us have become strange and unfamiliar is not merely a product of accelerated time and change. It is also due to the fact that the use of technological devices has increasing virtualised many of our everyday experiences.





◁ Lorea Alfaro
Nike
 2011
 Photograph

▷ Peter Friedl
Bilbao Song
 2010
 Video (Digital Betacam and DVD), 5' 53"
 Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid

Moving on. *Back in 2012*. Several digital prints in a showcase as part of the exhibition *Imágenes de un proyecto entre el arte y el feminismo* featuring the Erreakoizoa-Reacción collective at the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Castilla y León (MUSAC). One is an elongated black-and-white photograph by Lorea Alfaro. The artist poses beside a statue in a gallery at the National Archaeological Museum of Athens. On the left, the stone sculpture of a *kouros*, a young nude athlete of Archaic Greece. On the right, the artist imitating his pose: the same arms held close to the body and the same clenched fists, the same left leg put forward and the same half-smile, an archaic smile. Even the same proportion and the same scale. But a few details are different in the second figure: as one would expect of a museum visitor, she is clothed and shod and stands on the gallery floor, not on a pedestal. The word "Nike" is emblazoned on the dark sweatshirt in white letters.

The original image is a colour photograph taken in 2011 with a mobile phone the artist had bought that same year. The low-resolution photo showing a young athlete from 3,000 years ago and the young artist from seven years ago in the same room is a rarefied image. Its blend of the anachronistic and spectral points to the aforementioned potential ability of art to produce its own temporal regime.

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Another contemporary symptom: we live in the age of immediacy. Immediacy is the property that allows all things, no matter how distant they are in time and space, to be near at all times. Paradoxically, immediacy in the age of immediacy comes at a cost: something always comes between things, and that something is mediation, the screen. This lets us cling to the promise of constant, immediate, seamless contact between our body and the things of the world, things become images.

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Back in 2010. A series of *tableaux vivants* of paintings, united by the common theme of Basque identity and encapsulated in a six-minute tracking shot. Among others, the group includes several canvases by the Basque pictorial school of the first third of the 20th century—*El paria castellano* [The Castilian Pariah] (1917) by Juan de Echevarría, *El orden* [The Order] (1918–1919) by Gustavo de Maeztu, and *Tríptico de la guerra* [War Triptych] (1937) by Aurelio Arteta—and three local celebrities—Julen Madariaga, founder of ETA, and the clowns Pirritx eta Porrotx—as themselves. In the background, a piano and an accordion play *Bilbao Song*, composed by Kurt Weill for Bertolt Brecht’s musical comedy *Happy End* (1929).

Austrian artist Peter Friedl (Oberneukirchen, 1960) shot the video *Bilbao Song* at the Serantes theatre in Santurtzi. Friedl’s works are based on local stories inserted in the general context of modernism. In the case of *Bilbao Song*, he focused on the narrative of Basque national identity and the ability of images to take on modern relevance—every image is at once anachronistic and contemporary, as we have already seen—and offer new readings of supposedly closed chapters. *Bilbao Song* was shown for the first time at Sala Rekalde in Bilbao, a few months before ETA declared a temporary ceasefire—which eventually became permanent—in September 2010.



At the beginning of the final quarter of the 20th century, the end of the modern era was pronounced. Five decades later, we have apparently failed to find suitable substitutes for its values and ideas, returning to its images and representations time and again.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the acceleration of change, it is only natural that the images and representations of the recent past—those of the 20th century, the modern century—continue to haunt us. And not just because we cling to them with the melancholy that occasionally follows traumatic loss. Those images



Iñaki Garmendia
Líneas de montaña (I-IV) (Mountain Lines (I-IV)) and *Sin título (Verja)* (Untitled (Gate)), 2011
View of the exhibition *katakarak*, La Virreina Centre de la Imatge, Barcelona

and representations remain useful because there is still a “here and now”; they serve as a benchmark for reminding us how we got to this point.

Back in 2011. Black strokes on a white ground. The tangle of horizontal, vertical and diagonal lines forms a geometric shape reminiscent of a spiderweb grid. Beside that drawing, another one. Straight and broken lines whose segments never quite meet, tracing an open form that seems to disintegrate against the white background.

Sin título (Verja) [Untitled (Gate)] and *Líneas de montaña (i-iv)* [Mountain Lines (i-iv)] are two series of drawings from the Iñaki Garmendia exhibition *katakarak*, held at the Palau de la Virreina in Barcelona in 2011. The former consists of variations on the design of the entrance gate to Txitxarro, a nightclub in Itziar (Deba, Gipuzkoa) where an ETA bomb went off in the year 2000. The second series of drawings also features variations on a single theme: the mountain lines that criss-cross the Basque Country. Superimposed, at the turn of the century, the two series sketched the same landscape, associated with a specific relationship with the territory. In those years, several nightclubs in rural areas of the mountainous Basque Country became mandatory stops on the itineraries of young techno fans. This particular brand of cultural consumerism was marked by times, signs and rituals unlike those that characterised what had been the great social mobiliser years earlier: the sense of belonging to a specific national identity.

More contemporary symptoms: we have witnessed the dissolution of the great ideologies, and of the collective attachments in which they served as a binder. In the age of global capitalism, different technological tools with catchy compound names—Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, etc.—have made it possible to create collectivity in ways that are virtual, ephemeral and often opaque. While this is going on—while new virtual groups form and disperse like schools of fish—the algorithms of companies like Google and Facebook cluster individuals with similar traits into target groups and sell them to other companies for running persuasion campaigns. These campaigns aim to stimulate consumption—of products, experiences, political choices ... Today the factor which, more than any other, clusters individuals around a collective identity is their patterns of consumption, lifestyle consumption.



Erlea Maneros Zabala
Pilgrimages for A New Economy (Museo Soumaya, 2011, Mexico City, Mexico), 2012
Digital print made from analogue photograph. 41.3 x 52.1 cm

Back in 2009. Several black-and-white photographs, some positives and others negatives. They are views of Los Angeles, the city which, at the end of the 20th century, embodied the urban ideal for the new global era, the age of the rootless, centre-less, fragmented post-metropolis where every district, every neighbourhood feels like the suburbs. Taken at different locations across the city, each photograph features a hoarding. Other typical elements of the LA landscape are clustered around it: a straight street that extends outside the photo frame, immense cloudless skies, tropical trees, roads with passing cars, pavements, buildings and vacant lots. But there is an anomaly in the photos that does not tally with the typical image of the city: the hoarding that dominates each picture is blank.

In 2009, the silence of the hoardings in *Los Angeles, May, 2009 (2009–2013)* spoke volumes. When Erlea Maneros Zabala presented her photographic series at Galería CarrerasMúsica in Bilbao in June of that year, it had only been a few months since Lehman Brothers declared bankruptcy, initiating the financial crisis from which we have yet to fully recover. Those empty hoardings announced that something had changed, and nothing would ever be the same again.

In addition to the demise of the modern project, we have also witnessed the collapse of the Enlightenment myth of progress as the driving force of history, the idea that we are always moving forwards, faster, farther and better. The lie has been revealed by all the crises grouped under the umbrella of the so-called systemic crisis: financial crisis, environmental crisis, migration crisis, humanitarian crisis, demographic crisis, the crisis of ideas ... Yet despite all the signs, warnings and alarm bells, the wheel keeps on turning. Neoliberal doctrine requires it; the unstoppable capitalist machinery demands it. We're moving forwards. Faster, farther, better.

Back in 2012. A monument of gargantuan proportions, a building, rising from a promontory and reached by a flight of steps that traces a rising diagonal line where dozens of people queue up. With its scaly metal surface and skewed profiles, the building looks like an enormous fish splashing its tail, about to dive into the depths.

Pilgrimages for a New Economy (Museo Soumaya, 2011, Mexico City, Mexico) belongs to another photographic series by Erlea Maneros Zabala, also focused on an element of the urban landscape. In this case it is the contemporary art museum, the great temples that have proliferated in recent decades, designed by starchitects and built to house the art of today.

In *Pilgrimages* ... these iconic, spectacular buildings—which, as the title indicates, have become the new meccas of global tourism—are shown in an unconventional light. The artist downloaded images from the internet and photographed them on her computer screen. The resulting images are quite odd due to the visible traces of the chain of procedures used to produce them—glare, dust, fingerprints and flecks of spittle on the screen, digital pixellation, etc. These ultra-modern buildings, constructed to house the new and preserve it for future generations, look like futuristic, timeless ruins.

Before resuming our survey of contemporary symptomatology, let us go back for a moment to the age of modernism. In *Imagined Communities* (1983), Benedict Anderson identified the museum as one of the three institutions—the other two being the census and the map—used first by colonial empires and later by the new colonial states to imagine their dominions in the 19th and 20th centuries. Thus, while the census served to imagine the human landscape and maps represented the physical territory, the museum supplied the narrative of a common history.

For proof, we need look no further than the great national museums of present-day Europe. However, some things have changed: in the new neoliberal order, financial markets have occupied the central position of nation-states. And in a context where business logic pervades every sphere of life, including the production of subjectivity—we individuals are our own product—museums, the storehouses of memory, have become corporations, part of the global cultural tourism industry.

Here the term “museum” refers to the specific category of contemporary art museum, and not just for the obvious reason that this text is about art made in the last ten years, or that this particular type of museum is the most media-friendly and ubiquitous—a direct consequence of the contemporary art boom that began thirty years ago, when the market value of works by living artists skyrocketed and contemporary art museums, biennials and major exhibitions multiplied across the globe. No. The main reason why this text focuses on the contemporary art museum is that it is the modern institution which best exemplifies our problematic relationship with time since the birth of modernism.

“You can be a museum, or you can be modern, but you can’t be both.” These words, supposedly pronounced by Gertrude Stein when the MoMA opened in New York in 1929, underscored the two-fold yet paradoxical mission of the contemporary art museum: in order to be a museum, it must preserve objects from the past for the future; and in order to be contemporary, it must embrace new art that will soon cease to be new.

Contemporary art museums are therefore anachronistic spaces where the new inevitably becomes old. From this, we might infer that the contemporary art museum is a failed enterprise. But we might also conclude that its anachronism paradoxically gives it a uniquely privileged position: in a museum, objects exist in a temporal vacuum, oblivious to the general acceleration of change, in a place where time stands still and where moments of attention can be generated with precision.



Juan Pérez Agirregoikoa
The Muntadas Syndrome
 2009
 Series of 36 drawings
 Charcoal on paper. 100 x 75 cm

Back in 2009. Two charcoal drawings on paper: three aeroplanes soar across the sky, leaving white trails behind them. At the intersection of the three trails we read: “THE MUNTADAS SYNDROME”. The next drawings in this series of thirty-six show the same bespectacled figure engaged in frenetic activity: boarding and deboarding planes, climbing in and out of yellow cabs on the streets of Manhattan, inside and outside the Guggenheim in New York, attending press conferences, having drinks at openings, talking on his Blackberry and checking his schedule, watching Sponge Bob on TV in a hotel room...

In *El síndrome Muntadas* [The Muntadas Syndrome] (2009), Juan Pérez Agirregoikoa portrayed one of Spain’s most international artists and created a parody—or self-parody, if you will—of the “international artist”, as successful (and often precariously situated) artists are known in the neoliberal era, the age of low-cost flights, rampant consumerism, global tourism and art as a media phenomenon. In a context where business logic pervades every sphere of life, including the production of subjectivity, a large part of the artist’s job is to constantly promote him/herself.

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Some general observations on art as a human activity: art is what artists do. Art is what artists do for art’s sake. Art is what artists do for work. Not everything that artists do for work is art.

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Performance by Inazio Escudero in Larraskito Kluba, Bilbao
2010
Video by Txema Agiriano

Back in 2010: a performance at Larraskito Kluba, a Bilbao venue managed by artists. A bearded man sings accompanied by pre-recorded sounds, a guitar and assorted noise-making objects. He sings and lets himself go off-key, verge on the ridiculous, discomfit his audience, make them laugh, make them suffer, make them wish they were somewhere else:

As work becomes satisfaction. / As work becomes satisfaction. [...] WORK! / SATISFACTION! / [...] TADATADATA-DATADA! / [...] You must be convincing, CONVINCING! / [...] You've posted your name / You've managed to connect / With social media / WITH SOCIAL MEDIA! / You do quite well / On social media / And on the you to you-hoo / Impervious to prejudices that keep you from / NOT WORKING! / Because you you you you you you youuuuuuuuu / you you you you you youuuuuuuuuuu. [...]

A menudo [Often] is not an ode to work, even though the song by Inazio Escudero (Bilbao, 1972) talks about its central importance in the construction of personal identity, the miseries of ego, and the role that joy and suffering play in work when its purpose is to make art. Like the rest of the songs the artist released on an album in 2013, *A menudo* is primarily about the need to be acknowledged by the other, the need to communicate.

Some general observations on work as a human activity: work is what people do. Work is what people do to make a living. Work is what people do to get paid. Work is what people often do without getting paid. Work is what people do during their work time. Work is what people often do during their free time. Work is what people do all the time, even when it's time to sleep. Work is what people are forced to do and often do not want to do. Work is what gives our lives structure and meaning. Work is increasingly scarce.

More contemporary symptomatology: in the age of neoliberal capitalism, the category of work as we once knew it has crumbled. The division of time into "eight hours' labour, eight hours' recreation, eight hours' rest", as the labour rights slogan demanded, no longer works. We have less and less time to work because we have less and less work to do. And less and less free time. Time to consume, to be creative, to be free.

Yet we are still chained to the assembly line and its governance of time. As consumers, we are highly productive; we work steadily, because consumerism is the most exacerbated contemporary form of production, and all time—our time—is, as Jean Baudrillard noted, "governed in its chronometry by the total abstraction which is that of the system of production".³

Back in 2018. An artist speaks before an audience. She is talking about her experience at Guardian Industries, a glass factory in Laudio owned by Koch Industries, which she frequented regularly between 2015 and 2017 to research its photo archives. During her speech, she describes the route followed from the guard box at the entrance to her station on "work" days. "Work" is what she calls her activity in a room in an out-of-the-way area of the factory, a semi-derelict place where cigarette butts littered the floor.

Her narrative weaves a daily choreography of actions and movements along corridors, galleries and staircases: "At the bottom, do a 180 turn, walk to the end of the room, turn right ..." A choreography governed by the company's internal regulations: "I put on a yellow vest that read 'Visitor'"; "when moving about the factory I had to follow the markers on the floor; a bunch of horizontal white lines ..."

Before becoming an artist, says Ainara Elgoibar (Mungia, 1975), she worked as an accounting analyst for an American multinational corporation. Her story has a performative, sculptural quality. As it unfolds, two architectural designs take shape in the minds of her listeners: one is the physical space of her route; and overlapping it is the management plan of Koch Industries, a plan that controls each and every move its employees makes in order to maximise profits.

Elgoibar delivered her speech, "En caso de duda: parar, pensar y preguntar" [When in Doubt: Stop, Think and Ask], in February 2018 at an event called *La gran conversación* [The Great Conversation]. Over the course of one day, a dozen artists and thinkers discoursed upon the idea of exercise at Tabakalera, an international centre for contemporary culture that had opened two years earlier in San Sebastián. Each spoke for 20 minutes. The artist wound up her allotted time with a quote from *Good Profit* (2015) by Charles Koch, business management guru and one of the owners of Koch Industries: "The key to achieving perfection is statistical application in security systems." She also concluded with a statement based on her own experience at Guardian Industries: the workspace of art is necessarily marginal and unregulated, and it starts where, if you look at the floor, the horizontal white lines end and the cigarette butts begin.

3 Jean Baudrillard. *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. London: Sage, 1998, p. 152 (1st ed. 1970).



"[Business] management discourse ... today constitutes the form par excellence in which the spirit of capitalism is incorporated and received."⁴ On the threshold of the new century, Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello presented their diagnosis of the world to come in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (1999). In that book, the authors identified two modes of criticising capitalism, social critique and artistic critique, both destined to be assimilated by the target of their criticism.

According to the two sociologists, "artistic critique" is unique in that it counterposes the autonomy associated with artistic practice to "the objective impulse of capitalism and bourgeois society to regiment and dominate human beings, and subject them to work that it prescribes for the purpose of profit".⁵ The modern artist—a Charles Baudelaire type, for instance—is the best representative of this "artistic critique". An artist who openly expresses a "refusal of any form of subjection in time and space"⁶ makes no distinction between work and life and is wholeheartedly dedicated to his or her chosen profession. Paradoxically, Boltanski and Chiapello note, the hardships—instability, uncertainty, endless workdays, etc.—touted by modern artists, which they were willing to suffer for the sake of independence, have become normal conditions for workers in the age of job insecurity.

Back in 2017. Surrounded by a handful of people, an artist holds a box with plastic DYMO labels on the lid. *Her Majesty Sylvia M* (2015) resembles a book, an unbound book consisting of 24 x 32 cm sheets. The best way to see it is by unfolding it, as Gema Intxausti proceeds to do on the tables at Bulegoa z/b, an office of art and knowledge in Bilbao. Each sheet contains a drawing in pencil. Most of the drawings are texts, in upper-case letters made with a stencil plate bought at a corner shop, the artist explains. Every once in a while, between the sheets of text we find a sheet with a drawing and no text. These are drawings based on illustrations made by the poet Sylvia Plath during her travels, which Intxausti came across in another book.

4 Luc Boltanski ; Ève Chiapello. *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. London ; New York : Verso, 2005, p. 14 (1st ed. 1999).

5 Ibid., 38.

6 Ibid., 38.

◁ Ainara Elgoibar
Glas Marte Cut
2017
HD video, 18' 05"

▷ Gema Intxausti
Her Majesty Sylvia M
2015
Pencil on paper
24 x 32 cm (each sheet)
Presentation in Bulegoa z/b,
Bilbao, November 2017



More than a narrative, the textual and figurative fragments form a landscape. One of the photographs taken at Intxausti's presentation in 2017 shows several sheets lined up in a row: "OUT OF VANITY" / "A MARRIAGE HAS BEEN ARRANGED" / "IGNORING HER FUTURE" ... In another photograph we read "THE DIGGED LANDSCAPE IS GIVEN GREATER PROMINENCE THAN THE NARRATIVE" and, beside that sheet, another with a drawing of a flower.

The sketched text excerpts were taken from informative labels at the National Gallery, London. The artist became interested in the labels displayed alongside artworks in museums while working as a gallery attendant. From 2001 to 2009, after signing a "zero-hour contract" with a local temp agency, she worked at several London museums. At the Hayward Gallery, she had to sign another contract agreeing to follow certain rules ("Do not lean against the wall. Do not stare at the floor. Do not take notes. Do not draw ..."). Those hours spent in museum galleries changed how she looked at works of art and what went on around them, she explains. However, she never actually worked at the National Gallery. She went there as a visitor, to take notes.

An artwork is produced in material conditions to which it is not impervious. Implicit in every work of art is an awareness of operating from a marginal, if not precarious place. This is nothing new: the poets Plato banished from the polis in his *Republic* are a case in point. That marginal position should be understood as primarily functional, rather than from an elitist perspective of moral superiority—after all, we are all in the same boat. Being in the margins, on the fringe, means being outside the centre, situated at a certain distance. And that distance makes it possible to maintain a critical perspective, something inherent to art.

Back in 2017. The phonetic transcription of a saying in dialectical Basque: *esàk-esà*. A saying that's barely said and never written, doomed to disappear as hardly anyone uses it, and quoted here because someone transcribed it and gave it the status of title, an artwork title.

esàk-esà. "Nay nay." This double negative indicating a potential indeterminate space sheds some light on the working method of the artist who used it as the title of an installation—and on what motivated him to do it. Josu Bilbao works with materials drawn from two sources: oral tradition and sculpture. His materials are fragile, residual and marginal, and barely even that until he gives them a moment to shine and become visible in the exhibition space.

esàk-esà was shown for the first time at Galería etHALL in Barcelona in 2017. The following year it appeared in *Itinerarios XXIV*, an exhibition showcasing the work of Fundación Botín grant recipients in Santander. The same materials were presented in a different arrangement alongside others found in situ. The latter included the large window in the hall overlooking the bay of Santander and the light that pours through it, casting shadows on the wall and floor.

Strolling among the humble materials arranged on the floor opposite that magnificent view of the bay, one is inevitably reminded of the fact that deciding to put something in an exhibition space always means discarding other options, and that this decision carries the weight of responsibility.

Back in 2014. Three years before *esàk-esà*. *Aidxená*. Another title, another work. Some of the materials are live plants, but here there is no window or sunlight. The exhibition space is in the basement at Azkuna Zentroa in Bilbao—still called Alhóndiga Bilbao in 2014—and the show is *EL CONTRATO*.⁷ *Aidxená* is another dialectical Basque word. One of its definitions is the part that protrudes from the soil on certain plants, like garlic and onions, whose edible parts grow underground.

Aidxená and *esàk-esà* help us to think of the exhibition venue—the white cube—as a space that is both physical and conceptual. What we see in that space is only one part of the process. And what's missing is also there.

Aidxená: what protrudes from the ground and is plainly visible. *esàk-esà*: what is not, what is no longer, what no longer will be, what never was, what is left out, what could be, etcetera.

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Inside the museum—the exhibition space, the white cube—objects appear to be frozen in time, untouched by the acceleration of change. For this reason, when we enter a museum we often feel like we are inside a church. The difference is that, although the liturgy in the white cube is always the same—we enter, stroll among the works and leave—the arrangement of the elements is subject to change.

From this we can infer that the space of art is a space of exception, insofar as it is a stable environment which, thanks to its physical and institutional boundaries, is presented as a testing ground, a place for experimentation.

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Back in 2010. A white horse neighs. For the hundredth time. It has glimpsed its reflection in a glass surface. And leaves the room. Ahead of time. A spectator, editor of a horse magazine, has halted the performance, a complex piece consisting of assorted elements: a horse and its owner behind a grid, three screens, a 64-mi-

7 Curated by Bulegoa z/b from October 2014 to January 2015.



◁ Josu Bilbao Ugalde
esàk-esà
2018
Sketch for intervention in the lobby of the
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum

△ Jon Mikel Euba
Re:horse
2006-2010
Performance at MUSAC, León
February 9, 2010

nute film, a seated audience, several people manning photo and video cameras, etc. The animal could die of stress at any moment, the magazine editor says. The horse's owner smiles and denies it. The real burst in, as Jon Mikel Euba, author of *Re:horse*, later remarked.

Re:horse was the opening exercise of *Primer Proforma 2010*, a project devised by Euba, Txomin Badiola and Sergio Prego and presented at the MUSAC in León. *Primer Proforma* was essentially a sit-in experience—eight hours a day for forty days inside the museum galleries—with fifteen volunteers and a programme of thirty exercises. It was presented as an experimental activity for bringing the contexts of pedagogy and production inside the exhibition space, where artistic processes seem to end. Bringing the school and the studio to the museum. Not unlike bringing a horse.

Another contemporary phenomenon that the technological revolution has only exacerbated: the proliferation of the archive, of the rigid order and control it imposes on things that are and things that were but still exist in the stabilised virtual form of the document. And alongside the proliferation of the archive, another phenomenon: the end of history, the concept of history as a coherent linear narrative. When all things, both past and present, seem to coexist in the here and now, time is experienced differently.

Two psychological effects of “archive sickness”: frustration at not being able to remember everything, and anxiousness to forget nothing.



Marion Cruza
1,020 items
2014
Performance-screening, varying length (15'-17')

Back in 2014. An action/screening at Larraskito Kluba. On the screen, a sequence of images. In the background, a low, nervous sound coming not from the screen but from somewhere else in the room, a tell-tale sign that this is happening in real time. Someone is using a laptop keyboard to edit the images on the spot. The montage of *1,020 Items* (2014) creates a concentrated, syncopated rhythm of forward and backward leaps, pauses and bursts of speed.

The 1,020 items in the title are archival video footage and photos that Marion Cruz subjects to a live editing process. These documents from the artist's personal archives do not appear on the screen as she sees them on the computer. A camera facing the laptop "captures" what happens on that screen and sends it to the projector. Underscoring the material quality of the surfaces on which we see digital images—virtual, intangible images by definition—produces a kind of rarefied or loaded image. This effect is caused by the presence of bodies close to but not actually in those images, bodies which are neither virtual nor intangible.

In recent times we have seen a tendency towards the dematerialisation of art forms, a predominance of ephemeral, portable or virtual formats as opposed to the heavier, more costly traditional display format. One of the most obvious reasons is the economic contraction produced by the ongoing recession. Another is the development of the internet and communications, phenomena which, combined with other factors, have led to the current dominion of what some call the abstraction of different spheres of our daily lives: financial abstraction, digital abstraction, etc. This loss of contact with the tangible and palpable has created a longing for materiality, a quest for ways to experience matter.

Art is a plastic occurrence, and as such it unfolds in space and time.

Back in 2017. A paragraph in a book written in English. The author describes how his recently widowed aunt coped with the loss of her husband, felt most keenly at mealtimes when the empty chair was a poignant reminder of his absence. The widow overcame this issue “by changing her point of view, making it coincide with the point of view of her husband. She decided to sit in his place, to supplant him. From then on she would see the image that my uncle saw, the image that she had never seen.”⁸

Writing Out Loud contains the transcripts of eight lectures by Jon Mikel Euba. Originally written in Spanish, they were translated into English in real time by an interpreter connected via Skype during his classes with students at the Dutch Art Institute (DAI) in Arnhem in 2014 and 2015. The book is part of a writing project that Euba has been working on for over a decade, the purpose of which is “to define a praxis that can become technical theory”. In other words, the artist has stepped off the main track of the white cube, and he’s still working.

In *Writing Out Loud*, Euba develops a methodology and provides technical resources for approaching work in art. The anecdote about the aunt, the empty chair and the dead uncle illustrates the destabilising power of relocation. When a subject moves, his relocation necessarily produces a change in perspective (what he sees) that also affects the cognitive (what he thinks) and emotional (what he feels). That relocation may be a simple step back or to one side.

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The book in the age of digital abstraction, diagonal reading and anxious screen-hopping. A stable reality consisting of printed and bound pages, always the same. A mechanism that is not activated until it is opened, and that requires time and attention to keep going. An anachronistic object that waits patiently outside the flow of time and therefore, paradoxically, an object with a future. In a time of accelerating changes, the obsolete nature of the book lends it a degree of autonomy. A book thus produces its own space; it can generate its own context and summon its own audience. However, we should not forget that a book is also a consumer commodity, the result of a string of production and distribution processes, governed by the logics of the market and the production of novelty.

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Back in 2009. A cogwheel in the gears of a mechanism. Or, more accurately, one-third of that wheel’s circumference, a toothed arc, set at the point where two corners of the exhibition hall meet. Rising gracefully, as if suspended, the sculpture consists of three concrete slabs joined like the voussoirs of arch. Each is the top segment of a modular structure that recalls the platforms onto which lion-tamers make their charges climb at the circus. In the corner behind the suspended arch, like a prop supporting the elegant, airy pirouette, a fourth modular structure sits on the floor.

Two-thirds of the cogwheel and the gears of which it is a part are missing. So are the lions and lion-tamer, the cage in the centre of the ring and the circus tent. Observers can try to mentally reconstruct the complete scene. Imagine the cogwheel turning, integrated in the general movement of the mechanism, the tamer’s number with the lions, the entire show, daily life at the circus when there are no performances. Imagine perplexedly, under the big top.

8 Jon Mikel Euba. *Writing Out Loud*. Arnhem (Netherlands) : Dutch Art Institute (DAI), 2016, p. 55.

Asier Mendizabal exhibited *La ruota dentata* (2009) for the first time at Galería Projecte SD in Barcelona.⁹ The title refers to the Imaginist journal created by Futurists Vinicio Paladini and Umberto Barbaro, the sole issue of which was published in February 1927. *La ruota dentata* was an avant-garde, left-wing initiative in interwar Italy. It used a combination of text and image with the goal of creating a new art for a new society, one that would speak to the working class and society as a whole—the same moving whole that Mendizabal's sculpture suggests with a broken fragment.

Thinking about the period between the World Wars and comparing it with the present. A habit, an inevitable thought mechanism. Several different ideological options existed in those turbulent, tense modern years. Albeit with variations, all pointed in the same direction, sharing the same belief in the machine, progress and the future.

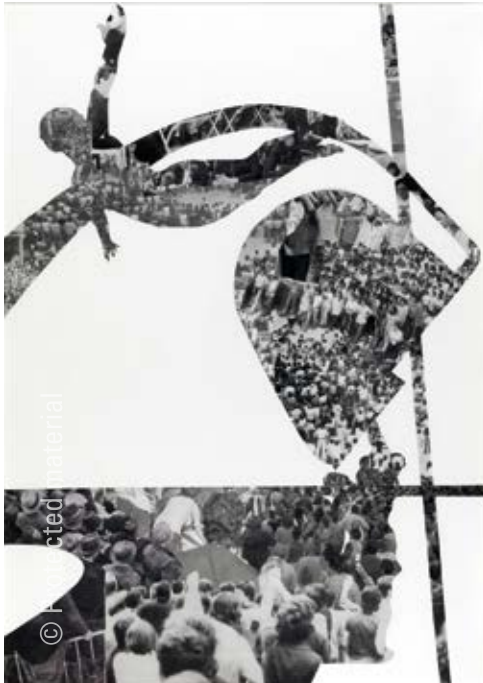
The turbulences and tensions of ninety years ago still exist, although today nobody talks about ideology. As for technological progress, it is no longer an ambition but an incontrovertible fact, the inevitable consequence of the capitalist desiring-machine. And with regard to the future, it's hard to imagine, and some say it can't be seen.

Back in 2012. The End. The film has ended, happily or otherwise. *The End* is the title of an exhibition held at Cristina Enea Fundazioa in San Sebastián. Subtitled *Naturaleza y profecías* [Nature and Prophecies], it offered "diverse takes on nature, time, climate, human activity and the spirit of negativity"¹⁰ expressed in works of art, literature and science. One of them was a small untitled oil painting by Vicente Ameztoy. Dated in 1984, a dystopian year, it offered a sci-fi view of the bay of La Concha. Yet the image is not apocalyptic or terminal, not reminiscent of the final scene in *Planet of the Apes* (1968), where a forlorn Charlton Heston contemplates the ruins of the Statue of Liberty on a beach. The vista is actually quite idyllic. It is a retrospective depiction of the bay as it might have looked in prehistoric, pre-human times.

Remembering and imagining. According to research conducted by Daniel Schacter, an expert on cognitive psychology and the neuroscience of memory, these two cognitive processes are activated in the same part of the brain and rely on the same neural network, the "Default Brain Network". Remembering the past and imagining the future are therefore closely connected. In a context dominated by the general perception that all possibilities have been exhausted, it is possible to grasp the past. It is possible to assert that, as long as memory exists, there is a future to be imagined.

9 Koenraad Dedobbeleer / Asier Mendizabal exhibition, ProjecteSD, Barcelona, 24 April–6 June 2009.

10 Oier Etxeberria. *The End : Naturaleza y profecías*. [Exh. brochure]. Donostia-San Sebastián : Cristina Enea Fundazioa, 2012.



◁ Asier Mendizabal
Figures and Prefigurations
Divers. V. Paladini, 1928
 2009
 Collage of offset prints on paper. 84 x 59 cm

△ Vicente Amezttoy
Sin título (Untitled)
 1984
 Oil on canvas. 81 x 151 cm
 Private collection

Back in 2017. An excerpt from a book, another book in English, in a chapter titled “Discovery”: “Nor will I talk here about art’s responsibility to anticipate the future and provide it with unprecedented forms.”¹¹ The author says that “here” he will not discuss the responsibility of art. And in saying that, he reveals that this is in fact one of his themes, the theme of *Fire and/or Smoke*. Asier Mendizabal’s book was born in 2017 as an anachronistic object: anachronistic in the sense that the texts it contained were columns the artist had published years earlier in *Mugalari*, the arts supplement of the daily newspaper *Gara*; and in the sense that those columns—most of them originally written in Basque—were already anachronistic when they first appeared, as the topics they discussed did not meet the requirements of freshness and currency that govern the daily press. Ironically, the decision to focus on a non-current subject, reporting fortnightly on the duty of art, has guaranteed their continued relevance.

Art’s duty, the sculptor writes, is to give an account of its historical time: by creating new representations, “anticipating the future” and providing “unprecedented forms”, and doing so in an inexorably critical way.

According to Catherine Malabou, a philosopher influenced by studies in neuroscience, plasticity denotes the capacity to simultaneously give and take form. If art is a plastic manifestation, we can infer that works of art are not merely given or received forms but are themselves capable of giving form, as agents of transformation in the processes of life.

11 Asier Mendizabal. *Fire and / or Smoke*. London : Koenig Books ; Culturgest, 2017, p. 133.



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June Crespo
Axes (Amsterdam Ja. 2017 Bilbao Dec. 17)
 2018
 Trousers, acrylic resin and drill bits for cement. 112 x 37 x 40 cm
 Neri Pagnan Collection

Back in 2018. Foreign Bodies. An exhibition at P420 Galleria d'Arte in Bologna featuring works by John Coplans and June Crespo, *Foreign Bodies* unfolds like a conversation: the enlarged close-ups of the photographer's naked body parts on the wall reply to the sculptor's objects and volumes on the floor; the folds and wrinkles of the aged skin in the black-and-white photographs answer the assemblages of cement, "youthful" second-hand clothing, belts and pigments of structures in which materials interact with each other through folds, twists and couplings.

Axes (Amsterdam Ja. 2017 Bilbao Dec. 17) (2018) is the only one of Crespo's sculptures hung on the wall. Two crossed cement drill bits and a pair of black jeans. Rigid materials and soft, pliable materials intertwined in a relationship of tension. The form and the objects that comprise the piece allude to the "other body" that is the exhibition's leitmotiv and, more explicitly, to the idea of a tortured, disjointed body—the central figure in Jusepe de Ribera's *Martyrdom of Saint Philip* (1639) springs to mind.

Figurative allusions aside, the sculpture appeals directly to the viewer's sensory experience. Looking amounts to touching what one is seeing, standing in the place of the structure before one's eyes, experiencing the pushes and pulls that define and shape it.

Various symbols of change and novelty: "the aggressive gesture, the feverish insomnia, the athletic step, the perilous leap, the box on the ear, and the fisticuff". Today, more than a century later, these images from Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's "Futuristic Manifesto" (1909) still serve as hackneyed symbols of change and novelty: we hop on planes and travel to new places, buy clothes and change our hairstyle,

diet and lose weight, buy a new mobile phone and change our passwords ... Consumer society lets us feed the fantasy of continuous change and novelty. Change is not only possible. It is necessary, even obligatory.

A final observation on the uses and purposes of art for these modern times. How can art do its duty? How can it create new forms that help us to imagine new worlds? Works of art, as mentioned at the beginning, are objects which, in addition to functioning as symptoms or contextual elements of their historical time, are ideally able to give an account of that time, transcend it from a critical position and provide tools for doing so.

A tool inherent to art and immensely useful—a strange circumstance, considering the manifest uselessness of artistic expression—in these modern times: works of art are capable of generating moments and spaces of attention, of stopping and slowing the hands of time, if only for an instant.

Back in 2018. A video recorded on a mobile phone at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. A medium shot of a woman in profile standing before a display case. Inside the case, a female bust stares back at her. The woman is talking to the sculpture, a 16th-century reliquary of gilded, painted and scribed wood. We can tell because her lips are moving as she gazes affably at the gilded figure, although the audio only picks up other background noises, the footsteps of other museum visitors. Behind the still figure and woman, entering and exiting the frame, we see a steady stream of shuffling feet, audio guide devices dangling from necks, and darting eyes that never seem to focus on any particular spot.

The 8-minute recording is part of Itziar Okariz's *Las estatuas* [The Statues], a series of videos made at different New York museums that all depict the same situation: the artist engaged in a tête-à-tête with a sculpted head, both oblivious to what is going on around them.

