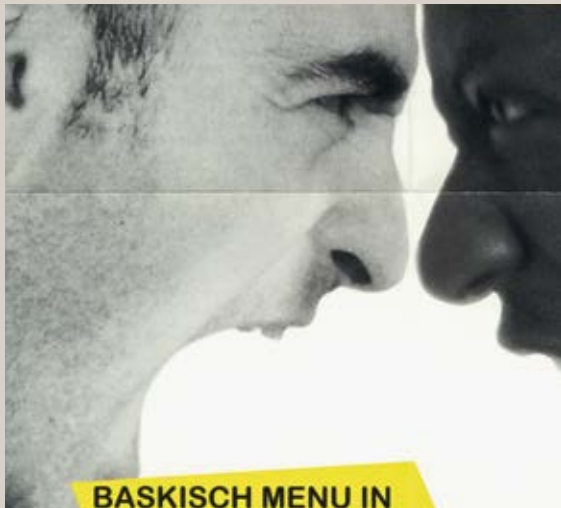


Periodising the Nineties. (Desiring Subjects)



Peio Aguirre

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I'll make my report as if I told a story,
for I was taught as a child on my homeworld
that Truth is a matter of the imagination.
Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*

Desire wants the impossible:
it wants the law that casts the subject into
abandonment (abjection) to legitimise it.
Jean-François Lyotard

We'll begin with a date and a place: on 17 September 1993, the philosopher Jean-François Lyotard delivered a lecture in the context of the seminars organised by Francisco Jarauta at Arteleku, which attracted some of the leading names in international philosophy and art at the time. In his discussion of the postmodern imaginary and the notion of the Other in thought and architecture, Lyotard wove together a series of philosophical and psychoanalytical ideas to outline a renewed imaginary in keeping with the spirit of the age.¹ The presence of the author of *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) can be used to take the pulse of a decade marked by the following preoccupations: the modernist/postmodernist debate; theories of alterity and the Other; the collapse of absolutes and a sceptical view of modern "grand narratives" and metanarratives; the proliferation of specificities in the local/global or centre/periphery relationship as a result of globalisation; and, above all, anything related to margins and "difference" (différance). The collapse of real socialism in Eastern Europe and the prophecies of numerous Hegelian demises (the deaths of art, history, the subject, the author, etc.) gave way to a setting stimulated by new technology and mass

1 Jean-François Lyotard... [et al.]. *Pensar, componer, construir, habitar*. Francisco Jarauta (ed.). Donostia-San Sebastián : Gipuzkoako Foru Aldundia : Arteleku, 1994. The title of this compilation [Thinking, Composing, Building, Dwelling] alludes to the famous lecture given by Martin Heidegger in 1951, "Building, Dwelling, Thinking" (*Bauen Wohnen Denken*), in which the German philosopher reflected on reconstruction after the catastrophe of war and the possibility of "dwelling in the world".

media. This is the big picture, a general overview of the time to be periodised. Here it must be noted that postmodernism is synonymous with a third, multinational phase of capitalism which would include the free market of neoliberalism and Baudrillard's controversial 1991 statement that "the Gulf War did not take place". These and other arguments and theories (the deconstruction of Derrida and the psychoanalysis of Kristeva) are referenced here, not to demonstrate art's reliance on or submission to discourse, but rather to show that art, far from floating freely over a void, is rooted in the economic and social transformations of the era in which it blooms. Those attempting to periodise an era should avoid the neutral, detached perspective of the art historian and historicise themselves: in my case, the memory, recollection and dissection of that timeframe corresponds to an experiential and formative period of my life. This is just one of many possible narratives.

The transition from the 1980s to the 1990s was marked by a constant tug-of-war between old and new. Madrid's ARCO fair was the thermometer of Spanish art: in many ways, until well into the 1990s the *Zeitgeist* of the previous decade continued to hold sway. That *Zeitgeist* or "spirit of the age" was on everyone's lips in those days, when festival and mercantile fever was still running high in the art world. The air was thick with the scent of a new phase for art, driven by global economic and cultural changes predicated on, among other premises, the fictional notion that the art market was becoming a thing of the past. In that context, postmodernism undertook a critical reassessment of the principles of modernism while simultaneously reviving regressive, defunct forms from the modern catalogue (Neo-Expressionism and Transavantgarde). The intrinsic ambivalence of postmodernism justified anything remotely suggestive of a return to the past, nostalgia or historicism, but at the same time every effort was made to cast off the burden of modern authoritarianism. This withdrawal from the "modern project" entailed the revival of everything that had formerly been repressed (the decorative and all the ironies permeating the bulk of contemporary art).

In a singular and rather exceptional way, this modern/postmodern dialectic gave rise to a peculiar phenomenon on the Basque art scene of the late 1980s: a new generation of artists who attempted to dialogue with the work of Jorge Oteiza. As we know today, some of these artists were Txomin Badiola, Ángel Bados, Juan Luis Moraza, María Luisa Fernández, Pello Irazu, Ricardo Catania, José Chavete, Elena Mendizabal and others.² This exceptional initiative focused on the discipline of sculpture, a fertile, open field which eventually came to be known as New Basque Sculpture.³ The formalising quality of this sculpture represented a point of departure, adding a layer of specificity to an otherwise universal problem—the relationship between form and the ideologies of modernism—despite being rife with anachronisms and revisionisms at the time. When it first appeared, this "bridge" with the "modern project" was viewed as both an anomaly and a novelty in Spanish art, then engrossed in the (re)discovery of the regional particularities that surfaced in the wake of Spain's transition to democracy. The Promethean figure of Oteiza, whose aggrandised legend

2 Txomin Badiola published a noteworthy text on this modern/postmodern dialectic in 1989, "Notas sobre intenciones y resultados", delivered as a lecture at ARCO 1990 for the Instituto de Estética y Teoría de las Artes, Madrid. In it he underscored the desire for meaning on a quest doomed to failure yet still able to energise and fuel the determination of artists with sculptural affinities. Badiola quoted Lyotard: "What the philosopher (and, we might add, the artist) desires is not that different desires be convinced and conquered, but that they be inflected and reflected." Quoted in *Txomin Badiola : obra 1988–89*. [Exh. cat.]. Madrid : Galería Soledad Lorenzo, 1990

3 In 1988, Francisco Calvo Serraller published a review in *El País* of Ángel Bados's solo exhibition at Galería Fúcares, titled "Nueva escultura vasca". He wrote, "The rise and consolidation of a new Basque sculpture is one of the most exciting developments on the contemporary art scene in our country. Some of its most iconic representatives are even beginning to enjoy a measure of popularity, such as Txomin Badiola, Pello Irazu, Ricardo Catania, María Luisa Fernández, J. L. Moraza and, among others, Ángel Bados, who now has a one-man show at Galería Fúcares. Though not an organised group per se, most of the aforementioned artists share similar preoccupations and have found inspiration in similar sources, and it is therefore hardly surprising that their works have, if not a common style, at least a family resemblance."



Txomin Badiola
Casa Encantada (Utopía en Bañiland)
 (Haunted House (Utopia in Bañiland), 1992
 Construction made of painted wood, silkscreen
 prints on paper glued to wood. 99 x 55 x 47 cm
 Private Collection, Bilbao

eclipsed the reception of his work, seemed to offer a unique historicity and a first-hand account of the artistic avant-garde movements associated with the modern project then being questioned by postmodern thought—in other words, a direct link to the European avant-garde before their formal languages (most notably abstraction) had been turned into an aestheticised vocabulary and stripped of their emancipatory potential in the twilight years of modernism. Meanwhile, the idea of a personal (singular, vernacular) brand of modernism was at once alluring and incompatible with the postmodern, post-structuralist critique of Lyotard, Foucault and Derrida. Times had changed, and the notion of a cultural vanguard or cutting-edge group—with the precedent of the Basque School and its renewal of modern Basque culture—could no longer be looked to as a model. In a period fraught with social and political tensions, the reception of the Oteizian megalith was directly at odds with the construction of a less essentialist, more contingent, more customised identity: a certain distance from symbols subject to political and ideological manipulation was required.

When the long shadow of sculpture became more oppressive than liberating, this new generation of sculptors distanced themselves from the disciplinary tutelage of another intermediate generation of genuinely Basque sculptors. Oteiza himself wrote in 1988 that “postmodernism is a cultural reaction to the contemporary art of those who missed the boat, those of you who arrived late, too late to participate in a creative endeavour already consummated and lost”, alluding to the “current Mannerism in Basque art” of this fresh batch of Basque sculptors.⁴ By that time, the dialogue with Oteiza was a deaf conversation. When it came to choosing between tradition or treason, the wayward personality of the traitor was not an entirely repreh-

4 Jorge Oteiza. *Cartas al príncipe*. Zarautz : Itxaropena, 1988, pp. 52–53.



- ◁ Pello Irazu
Summer Kisses
 1992
 "la Caixa" Collection. Contemporary Art

- ▷ Juan Luis Moraza
Ornamento y Ley (Ornament and Law)
 From the *Arte de armario* (Closet Art) series, 1994
 Silkscreen print in acrylic satin sheets
 5 x 45.5 x 33 cm
 Museo Nacional Centro de Arte
 Reina Sofía, Madrid

sible option. Oteiza's 1988 exhibition at La Caixa (which opened in Barcelona the same month that he and Susana Solano teamed up to work on the Spanish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale) marked a turning point. Curated by Txomin Badiola, that retrospective signalled the beginning of the "great transformation" of Basque art at the end of the 20th century, a transformation that consisted in embracing artistic practices with all the benefits of an inheritance and none of the drawbacks of a legacy. Light baggage without the burden of tradition and myth—in other words, how to sever ties with the paternal side of a certain artistic lineage.

1. Tainted minimalisms and new materials

Fortunately, everything did not begin and end with Oteiza. The sculptures produced by Badiola, Irazu, Moraza, Bados and María Luisa Fernández prior to 1988, approximately, can be viewed as transitional elements: a transition from the metaphysical to the minimalist box. By then the minimalist aesthetic had already dissociated itself from the social and economic base that brought it into being several decades earlier. However, it was still considered useful by artists born in an era when the reception of modernism was subject to more than a few distortions. The recourse to those geometric lines allowed them to break away from more expressive, subjectivist art forms, stimulating cognitive and experiential processes. At the same time, these sculptors established points of convergence and difference with a more narrative or theatrical vein in the sculpture of Cristina Iglesias, Juan Muñoz and Pepe Espaliú. Practically every sculptor devised new readings of Donald Judd's "specific object" while avoiding the pitfall of exclusive dogmatism, taking only what suited their purposes in each particular case.⁵ This "new" artwork was minimalist (or Constructivist) and yet not.

⁵ In 1996, Juan Luis Moraza wrote a text that can be read as a settling of scores and a revision of minimalism from every angle. See Moraza, Juan Luis, "Alusiones e ilusiones : la parte del minimalismo", in *Zehar*. Donostia-San Sebastián : Gipuzkoako Foru Aldundia, Kultura eta Euskara Departamentua, no. 30, Spring 1996, pp. 26–31.

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Why would anyone want to base their work on Constructivism, Suprematism or minimalism, except as a source of something they could put to a different use? The same postmodern condition described above rendered the handbook of reusable models (the catalogue of 20th-century aesthetic forms) obsolete as a simple investigation of its own limitations; the useful part was the poetry emanating from that archive of forms, a tool with which to communicate and even embrace allegory as a means of enunciation.

A decisive factor was the change in material. This was particularly evident in Txomin Badiola's case, whose materials began to incorporate prefabricated DIY aspects, moving away from the heaviness of iron in a change triggered by his relocation to New York in 1990. The repetition and difference found in the sculptures of his "bastard" series and Bañiland was combined with the melancholy of Malevich's black square (1913) as an allegory of denial, closure and death. This idea of bastardry delves into the issues of legitimacy and inheritance by virtue of blood affiliation, with the consequent latent threat of expulsion and excommunication: a bastard is literally someone who is born and raised fatherless. Badiola turned patricide into a kind of intergenerational relationship (or a metaphor for the conflictive relationships between inheritance and historicity, past and present, individual and community, etc.).⁶ The Bañiland series, presented at Galería Soledad Lorenzo in 1993, alluded to a utopian, sentimental place, a "homeland". In *Casa encantada (Utopía en Bañiland)* [Haunted House (Utopia in Bañiland)] (1992), a scale model somewhere between the International style and architectural deconstruction coexists with a newspaper diagram of three deceased ETA members resembling a love triangle. And so began a game of signifiers whose ultimate aim was to undermine and shatter the cohesion of monosemous meaning. Thereafter, pop culture (comics, music and film) and Lacanian psychoanalysis encircled a fragmentary oeuvre whose longing for an impossible totality was met in multimedia installations, synchronised with that other "return of the real and the repressed" staged in *El juego del otro* at Koldo Mitxelena Kulturunea in 1997.

6 Txomin Badiola. *Arreglárselas sin el padre*. [Exh. cat. of the workshop led by Txomin Badiola and Ángel Bados at Arteleku]. Donostia-San Sebastián : Gipuzkoako Foru Aldundia, Kultura eta Euskara Departamentua, 1994.

The switch to new materials is equally apparent in Pello Irazu's work, combining plywood with cardboard, gaffer tape, Formica, rubber and brightly coloured paints. In this way, the artist entered into a playful yet sensitive and sophisticated dialogue with the language of minimalism (Judd, Richard Artschwager, etc.). At once sensual and heterodox, Irazu squeezed every last ounce of freedom from the sculptural object, influenced by the urban fabric of New York and pop culture.⁷ *Watching Television Together* (1, 2, 3 positions) (1990–1991) subverts the relationship between sculptural object and furniture, presenting three identical modules in different positions that illustrate the open meaning of form. Irazu's objects show the skin of things and how they are made. Family, the routine of home life and emotions were present in drawings, sculptures and mural paintings, occasionally combined as in the enveloping *Summer Kisses* (1992). These pieces signalled Irazu's departure from the literality of the object, revealing a more private, suggestive side of himself in works like *Dreambox (La Casa) [Dreambox (Home)]* (1994), an upside-down house resting on one side of its roof that speaks of a world of slippery codes where there are no certainties.

Juan Luis Moraza combined sculpture and thought in a unique intellectual endeavour riddled with conceptual twists and folds: the metalanguage of art, introspection and an extravagance tinged with humour are some of his hallmarks. His introduction to *Más allá de la muerte del autor*, a seminar and exhibition at Arteleku organised by Moraza, began as follows: "The ontology of Heidegger, the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss, the psychoanalysis of Lacan and the Marxism of Althusser ... are joined by a common theme that has to do with setting aside personal experience and the dissolution of man."⁸ These words clearly reveal the importance of theory and discourse. That seminar ("on the modern experience") revolved around a popular topic at the time, "the death of the author" and his/her dissolution into culture and interpretation, described by Roland Barthes in his famous essay and echoed by Foucault's question "What is an author?" and Umberto Eco's "open work". We can view that seminar as a synthesis of certain traits of a totalising philosophy expressed in imbricated texts and diagrams that drew connections between various fields of knowledge: politics, demographics, religion, philosophy, psychoanalysis, sexuality ... without renouncing a sculpture where the minimal, conceptual and pop tended towards the allegory of "non-specific objects" (José Luis Brea).

The exhibition *Un placer*, held at the same time as the seminar, focused on the relationship between act and author, creation and delight, taking that rising Barthesian or necrological "death of the author" as its point of departure. For the occasion, Moraza asked forty artists to choose an object, an image, something. His intention was to cast doubt on the category of the ready-made and underscore the resignification of the object: from María Luisa Fernández's folded yellow raincoat and Txomin Badiola's Mondrian-esque boots to Ana Laura Aláez's retro shoes, Darío Urzay's telephone card and the surprising presence of an unemployed worker whom Morquillas brought into the exhibition hall.⁹ Appropriationism and the poetics of the object (Surrealist, conceptual, as a critique of consumer society and all the rest) were hot topics, poised between object and art. A short time later, Moraza explored the principles of pleasure and delight (ecstasy/statue) in a series of problems related to alterity in art-historical aesthetics (from Baroque to Neoclassicism) and turned high heels, female contraceptives and screen-printed silk scarves into meaning-reflecting objects, as in the 1994 *Ornamento y Ley* exhibition at Sala América in Vitoria.

7 New York was the capital of Basque art in the 1990s, when the American metropolis welcomed a considerable number of artists: the aforementioned Txomin Badiola, Pello Irazu, Darío Urzay, Prudencio Irazabal, Txuspo Poyo, Sergio Prego and Itziar Okariz, and many others who passed through, including Miren Arenzana, Ana Laura Aláez, Bene Bergado and Ibon Aranberri.

8 Juan Luis Moraza. "El gozo del auge, la propiedad de la culpa", in *Cualquiera, todos, ninguno : más allá de la muerte del autor : seminario sobre la experiencia moderna*. Donostia-San Sebastián : Gipuzkoako Foru Aldundia, 1991–1992, vol. 2, p. 23.

9 *Cualquiera, todos, ninguno : más allá de la muerte del autor : seminario sobre la experiencia moderna*. Vol. 1: *Un placer*. Donostia-San Sebastián : Gipuzkoako Foru Aldundia, 1991–1992.

In *Seis sexos de la diferencia* (1990), Moraza wrote that “our potential as a generation lies in being able to transcend those three distinct legacies: a traditional modernism, a modern tradition, and a postmodern tradition or sum of traditions”.¹⁰ This may be the summation of a generation’s quest to find its own voice and path. Moraza anticipated what was destined to be one of the vectors of the incipient decade: sexuality and pleasure as a means of overcoming the order of the symbolic and the law.

2. Sculpture and desire

No less relevant in this history is the role played by Ángel Bados and his influence as a mentor of future artists at the Faculty of Fine Art of the University of the Basque Country and in his sculpture workshops at Arteleku. His vision of art is marked by an irrepressible poetic objectuality, specificity as an ethos to be subjectified on the deepest level: a sculptural seed which insists that everyone must find their own place and way of interacting with the object. Freed of all scholastic constraints, debunking the myth of masculinity became a priority. We see this in María Luisa Fernández’s *Melenas* [Manes] and *Burladeros* [Coverts], which expressed a determination to construct a personal, unorthodox narrative. In her case, draining the material of its energy (rather than charging it, as Beuys did) was an act of immanence and unbelief. At the turn of the decade, the sculpture/woman tandem emerged as a significant trait thanks to María Luisa Fernández and Elena Mendizabal, who some years earlier had made an ironic commentary on Oteiza as an authority figure by putting a brass handle on a metaphysical box. The “woman factor” was reinforced in the two workshops Bados led in 1989 and 1990. A new generation of women sculptors was unabashedly pushing to the fore: pieces-that-come-apart, three-dimensional collages and youthful freshness in the work of Miren Arenzana, Ana Laura Aláez, Idoia Montón, Belén Moreno, Bene Bergado, Gema Intxausti, Lucía Onzain ... an outburst of new voices in sync with the displacement of situations and attitudes once held to be universal. Characterised by the intrusion of the everyday and associated with the trivial and physical sensations, this sculpture reinstated the female unconscious as content. A new New Basque Sculpture?

This sculpture was distinguished by an emphasis on material and corporeal aspects that challenged the patriarchal order of language, adopting a constructive, abstract form. For instance, in Miren Arenzana we find no distinction between male and female, with recycled materials and detritus rearranged using a pop, punk DIY approach. Arenzana’s chic brand of Constructivism, using Plexiglas, plastic and embroidery, denoted a predilection for retro fashion, furniture and the (dys)functionality of sculpture, subtly laid out in the gallery like an indoor display: a sophisticated cultural-domestic domain, an “atmosphere” like that presented in the exhibition *Joseph & Josephine* at Galería Trayecto in 1992. The “artefact” became the most refined representation of the ambiguity of the object: feathered hats and fragments of women’s shoes alongside the subversion of the Dada-object.

This (hedonistic) mindset is present in Ana Laura Aláez’s art. *Mujeres sobre zapatos de plataforma* [Women on Platform Shoes] (1992) brought her to the attention of the art world, with its departure from the previous focus of sculpture and humorous questioning of feminine stereotypes. One defining feature of that sculpture (and the sculpture of Paco Polán and Bene Bergado, for that matter) was the fragmentation of the constructive method using interconnected clamps, plates and rings. Another was the subversive, poetic use

¹⁰ Juan Luis Moraza. *Seis sexos de la diferencia : estructura y límites, realidad y demonismo*. Donostia-San Sebastián : Arteleku : Gipuzkoako Foru Aldundia, 1990, p. 10.



Miren Arenzana
Untitled (Red)
 1993

View of the individual exhibition entitled RED held in the BBK Gallery in Bilbao, 1993

of materials associated with the home and traditionally considered “for women”, such as Gema Inxtausti’s works made with cleaning rags, or others based on adhesive tape, made with a painstaking labour and patience that allude to the notion of unproductive time. These subtle works marked by defamiliarisation and ostranenie had the power to communicate on a close, approachable level.

Meanwhile, the subterfuge of art history was common practice. Alberto Peral’s fascination with beauty, the classical world and anthropomorphism found an outlet in his plaster swimmers’ heads: the “classical dream” as the death rattle of pure libidinous fantasy. Poised between the Surrealist image and the body as a quest for an ideal, split self: the perfect young artist is persuaded by the eclecticism and nostalgia of a forbidden paradise where an adolescent impulse reigns supreme.¹¹ And all this transpired in a context where vitality, freshness, naivety, youth and “the emergent” were becoming valuable commodities in Spanish art.

11 This adolescent mode of relationship was one of the topics discussed in the course led by Txomin Badiola and Ángel Bados at Arteleku in 1994. That positive experience inspired both artists to give another workshop in 1997. Badiola wrote that “the adolescent personality is an open structure, the product of constant interaction with others but not yet consummated in the order of the law”. In the same text, he quoted Kristeva: “The frontiers between differences of sex or identity, reality and fantasy, act and discourse, are easily traversed without one being able to speak of perversion or borderline.” See Txomin Badiola, “Representación (cuatro películas)”, in *Zehar*. Donostia-San Sebastián : Gipuzkoako Foru Aldundia, Kultura eta Euskara Departamentua, no. 26, July/August/September 1994, p. 18. Badiola and Ángel Bados co-authored a significant essay for the catalogue of the Arteleku exhibition that same year featuring Gema Inxtausti, Alberto Peral and Manu Muniategiandikoetxea.

3. Body politics (and the critique of representation)

Alberto Peral's work was symptomatic of this relationship between sculpture and the body through figuration. The human figure had already appeared, albeit in a different way, insinuated and incorporeal in Aláez's wigs and platform shoes, or in the fibreboard and fabric silhouettes of Idoia Montón. Meanwhile, this womanly sculpture was beginning to process the abject, the corporeal remnants and residues of "the formless" as posited by Kristeva, and the renowned work of Louise Bourgeois and Eva Hesse.¹² Raw material signified a rejection of the language of the patriarchal order—a return to the Lacanian "real"? This tendency favoured the use of polyester, latex and hair in sculpture, matter-rich and "poor" materials in painting, and dry, bare charcoal and fibre paper in drawing and printmaking.¹³ This obsession with the body, its technology and its physical and mental limitations, is connected to another overarching theme that went by different names in its heyday: "self-image", "self-regard", "self-portraiture" and basically every art form that falls under the heading of "narcissism". Moreover, portraiture and self-portraiture shared an affinity with sculpture, as with the rest of the artistic disciplines. Two prime examples are Peral's aforementioned swimmers and Baúl universal [Universal Trunk] (1989) by Paco Polán, a cubic object covered in mirrors on all sides, with wheels and a handle for pulling it and an inverted cast of the artist's head inside.

In "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism" (1976), Rosalind Krauss discussed video and how it is related to narcissism through notions of reflection, mirroring and self-image. However, this narcissism found its strongest foothold in photography (in medium and large formats): the technical image was the support for a problematised, extreme sexuality aligned with an awareness of the fundamental role played by the symbolic order and representation in acquiring identity. The technical image had become a screen for a split subject. (It should be noted that there is a complementary relationship between trends in sculpture and the overwhelming presence of the photographic self-portrait in which the subject is sidelined and deconstructed, for example in Badiola's hybrid images—part superhero, part androgynous cyborg—in *Nobody's City*, 1996).

Photography was rediscovered as an artistic medium. This artist-made photography—as opposed to traditional photography—had its international correlates in more than a few leading artists and trendy media (from enlarged screen-printing to Cibachrome). New forms of production in art introduced a range of possibilities for generating images that could be incorporated in creative processes. High-speed tools for producing, reproducing and printing images with the ability to generate easily accessible infographic icons: video, analogue and/or digital photography, computers, digital photocopiers, etc. Armed with these tools, the use of the self-image—photographed, photocopied, made-up, cross-dressed, multiplied and elongated—became a wild free-for-all, a paroxysm of the EGO and the superego. This occurred at a time when the cultivation of style or association with a particular style was losing its appeal, as clear-cut disciplines gradually disintegrated and were replaced by multidisciplinary. The post-studio and editing and montage equipment on personal computers soon followed. Though still fairly solid around 1990, the boundaries between disciplines began to fade and had vanished altogether by the end of the decade. The only exception—perhaps—was

12 The influential exhibition *L'informe, mode d'emploi*, curated by Yves-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, was held at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 1996. In 1995, *Formas del abismo. El cuerpo y su representación extrema en Francia 1930-1960* opened at Koldo Mitxelena Kulturunea in San Sebastián. Curated by Juan Vicente Aliaga, this show surveyed marginal and extreme modes of sexual representation in early 20th-century French art that contributed to the development of a theory of the abject and "formless" (Bataille, Artaud, Hans Bellmer, etc.).

13 In the work of Dora Salazar, Itziar Okariz, Txaro Fontalba, Belén Moreno, María José Díez, Aurora Suarez, Mabi Revuelta, Gentz del Valle, Charo Garaigorta and Susana Talayero, among other artists.



Itziar Okariz
Bodybuilding
 1994

Set of four photographs of an action. Chromogenic print on paper. 106 x 487 cm (complete work)
 Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid

painting. In any case, artists could find themselves in drawing, sculpture, photography ... And artistic language reflected this flexibility in the use of terms such as “threshold”, “subjectile”, “liminal” and “borderline”. Every self-respecting artist was expected to avoid reductionist categorisations.

The impact of these “new technologies” is eloquently illustrated by the image of Itziar Okariz photocopying her own naked body atop the first photocopier purchased at Arteleku. Okariz’s self-portraits with a world map shaved on her scalp, *Variations sur le même t’aime* [Variations on the Same Theme/Love You] (1992) are faithful expressions of the as-yet-unconscious feminist and queer imaginary which now, in hindsight, seem unquestionable to us (in addition to the cognitive map of globalisation that was somehow beginning to penetrate people’s minds).

In that imaginary of mutant identity, the fantasies of a polymorphic sexuality circulated—somewhere between the angel and Lucifer, sometimes one and sometimes another, the beautiful and the grotesque, attraction and repulsion, with Dorian Gray always lurking in the wings. This “portraitism” was cultivated by Eduardo Sourrouille and in the early works of Jon Mikel Euba before he moved on to expanded drawing and video.¹⁴ The interesting thing about many of these proposals was the fact that they drew on the work of such disparate artists as Warhol, Cindy Sherman, Pierre et Gilles, Jana Sterbak and Boltanski. Another archetype of these “body aesthetics” was Javier Pérez: the self-portrait of the artist with clasped hands and his *Mochilas anatómicas* [Anatomical Backpacks] (1994), two leather satchels moulded to the respective torsos of a man and a woman that established a link with performance and contemporary dance. Metaphors

¹⁴ A considerable number of exhibitions hinged on this obsession with self-portraiture, chief among them *La imagen de sí* at Galería Windsor Kulturgintza, Bilbao, in 1993 and *Retratarse* at Arteleku in 1992, with Itziar Okariz, Juan Albín and Jon Mikel Euba. .



Azucena Vieites
Juguemos a prisioneras, de Julie Zando
(Let's Play Prisoners, by Julie Zando)
1994
Photograph on wood board. 125 x 180 cm
ARTIUM in Álava, Vitoria-Gasteiz

and Romantic symbolism were used to construct fragile, vulnerable images that spoke of the human and biological condition of humanity. We find something similar in the forerunner of installation art, Francisco Ruiz de Infante, whose fusion of the audiovisual and performing arts plunged into the world of illness and debility. The 1980s and 1990s were marked by the AIDS epidemic. In this respect, Pepe Espaliú's Carrying action in San Sebastián during the 1992 Film Festival—involving artists who participated in his workshop at Arteleku—remains an unforgettably symbolic event.

Along with the body, the great theme of the day was representation. The critique of representation (of class, race and gender) gradually forged by North American postmodernism might be summed up in Barbara Kruger's 1989 work and slogan: "Your body is a battleground." A new feminism equipped with more powerful theoretical tools emerged: Judith Butler originally published *Gender Trouble* in 1990, but its translation and impact on Spanish audiences was delayed for some years. An early work in this vein (not limited to Basque art) is Azucena Vieites's photographed drawing *Juguemos a prisioneras, de Julie Zando* [Let's Play Prisoners, by Julie Zando] (1994), featuring transparent silhouettes of women from magazines. The title alludes to Julie Zando's 1988 film which examined the relationship of power and love between women. That low-fi piece by Vieites offered a glimpse of a feminist imaginary in a game of critical resignification of visibility. Her cold analytical gaze situated her among the ranks of women artists who identified with the critique of representation, feminists and appropriationists in equal measure.

Azucena Vieites and Estíbaliz Sádaba formed *Erreakzioa-Reacción*, a feminist collective which, in early 1995, attempted to combine art and activism using T-shirts, seminars, workshops, videos and especially fanzines. Their goal was to challenge conventionalism and question the notions of authorship, style and originality by promoting collaborative processes. *Erreakzioa* planted the seed of a feminist artistic genealogy whose practices and discourses quickly multiplied. The seminar (and workshop) *Solo para tus ojos. El factor feminista en relación a las artes visuales* [For Your Eyes Only: The Feminist Factor in the Visual Arts] at Arteleku in 1997 was a pioneering initiative in both the Basque Country and Spain. (The Guerrilla Girls with their gorilla masks in downtown Loiola remains an iconic image even today.) Meanwhile, Sádaba's own art was closer to Actionism, performance and video, as illustrated by *Parole, Parole* (1996). *Erreakzioa* represented the possibility of a practice whose strategies were drawn from a brand of political and artistic activism inserted in a tradition of feminist art.

4. Painting as resistance

Unlike sculpture, more determined by the ideology of form, painting reasserted itself as a medium in which the investigation of its boundaries and truth was conditioned by its own material restrictions. The task of painting was to constantly question representation, as well as the motivations to continue painting and the reasons for a practice where persistence, patience and obstinacy seemed to constitute the subject in the pictorial act itself. Once the figurative, Informel and expressionist phases that defined painting in the 1970s and 1980s had run their course, the new era was marked by a medium whose slow reception in comparison with the technical image established an antagonistic, dialectical relationship. This is clearly illustrated in the work of several Basque artists who settled in New York: Prudencio Irazabal, Darío Urzay and Txuspo Poyo.

The speed of the technical image is the antithesis of painting, whose experimentation with resins and thin, translucent coats of paint dialogues with photography and its chemical processes. In Irazabal's case, painting was the result of a materialisation of media and materials that managed to sublimate their own physicality in order to attain an illusion of pictorial transcendence. The complex pictorial surfaces at once reveal and conceal the gesture and the process, where even monochrome evinces a wide range of nuances. The luminous quality of the surface-screen sends photography back to the microscope, reinforcing the eye's perceptive processes in a synthesis of image, materiality and meaning. Darío Urzay performed the same technical and perceptive feat in works where spilled liquids form a synthetic image that erases the last traces of a division between painting and photography, original and copy. The real and the virtual existed in constant symbiosis: abstract hybrids constructing an imaginary that surpassed the self-referential to become a mode of knowledge. Returning to the technical image, Txuspo Poyo's celluloid patterns from 1994 and 1995 were not paintings, though they did have an undeniable pictorial quality: the vertical and horizontal film strips formed an artisanal, narrative woven fabric.

The laborious, skilled practice of painting was embodied by Luis Candaudap and José Ramón Amondarain, painters who regarded "good painting" as a myth to be tested, even while flaunting their virtuosity. The latter resorted to the use of varnishes and synthetic industrial paints with a faux wood effect, drippings and a formalist abstraction of layered planes. Amondarain may be the quintessential postmodern painter, or at least the one most visibly influenced by the postmodern theories of simulation and representation, as attested by his subsequent incursion into blurry realist figuration and the appropriation of iconic postmodern artworks. Both artists maintained a conversation with Manu Muniategiandiakoetxea, for whom the impossibility of reviving a heroic modernism produced his own ghosts, spectres without a home (Rodchenko and Russian Constructivism, Oteiza and his prolegomena). Doors and boxes that opened and closed, modern chairs, wood panels and structures and a fluid gestural quality are some of the defining motifs of an oeuvre whose fragmentary condition was shared by other artists of the same generation (I am thinking particularly of Edu López and Ana Isabel Román). This nervous, compulsive vision of a reality we only perceive in fragments produced a variety of pictorial registers and a versatility in which the principle of style lost its authoritative status. We see it in Edu López, who could make an abstract painting or depict Tintin on small 20 x 20 cm canvases with the same ease, and in Ana Isabel Román with her references to the artistic avant-garde and particularly to the machinist inventions of Francis Picabia and Dada. Malús Arbide's khaki camouflage fabrics from 1991 (tellingly titled Japón, América, Comunidad Europea [Japan, America, European Community]) might well be interpreted as a metaphor for a way of being in the world at once attentive and dislocated, fragmented.



José Ramón Amondarain
Cada día y cada día más (Every Day and Every Day More)
1993
Mixed media on canvas. 250 x 250 cm
ARTIUM in Álava, Vitoria-Gasteiz

The chasm between intentions and results is always an operational zone in painting. Although Juan Pérez Agirregoikoa is best known for the incisive drawings and banners of his later career, we must not forget that in the beginning he “painted”. Those works were actually closer to anti- or non-paintings, “traces” or “residues” as he called them (in psychoanalytical terms) that allowed him to move forwards. Laughing at the whole heroic notion of painting and ending up painting harlequins and clowns was the next step. Similarly, for Iñaki Imaz taking refuge in psychoanalytical painting (in the manner of Luis Gordillo) was a way of making sense of an activity he knew was doomed to failure and could not offer sublimation, but which was still a screen onto which he could project desire and his obsessions. Wrapping up this discussion of painting, I must mention the singularity of Ignacio Sáez (with his alias, “the obese tongue”) and his original, sensory, psychological world filled with references to his own experience: yellow and green canvases without stretchers, sharply contrasting with the black stain, where repeated patterns are mixed with icon-like representations. And last, but certainly not least, Idoia Montón and her subjectivist figuration, expressing a radical, antagonistic way of being in the world.



5. Institutionalisation (and contextual practices)

In addition to the evolution of the two traditional arts, sculpture and painting, the 1990s witnessed the emergence of something new: ever since, Basque art has been inextricably intertwined with the framework of institutional support and the active involvement of different operational agents in artistic processes—critics, historians, managers, programmers and, from that time forward, curators. The complicated task of raising social awareness about structures for education and art in the 1980s was followed by a gradual and necessary process of normalisation. After the project of La Alhóndiga in Bilbao failed to materialise, the Guggenheim Bilbao opened in 1997, although the art community initially viewed its management with scepticism. In any event, the 1990s were characterised by a cultural institutionalisation process backed by the provincial authorities: Arteleku appeared in 1987, followed by Koldo Mitxelena Kulturunea in 1993, sala rekalde in Bilbao in 1991 (with a second venue, Área 2, from 1996 to 1998), and Sala América in Vitoria-Gasteiz. A network of art galleries, no longer extant today, spread across the Basque Country: Altxerri, Galería Dieciséis and, shortly afterwards, Galería DV in San Sebastián; Windsor Kulturgintza, Vanguardia and Arsenal in Bilbao; Trayecto and CM2 in Vitoria; alternative projects like Espacio Abisal; and all sorts of cultural centres hosting exhibitions of young artists (the most important being Kultur Basauri). Meanwhile, art criticism, writing and philosophy flourished in outstanding publications like Rekarte (sala rekalde), Zehar (Arteleku) and the journal of the Institut Français in Bilbao. On top of all this, Basque art could no longer be considered one of many local realities within Spanish art, but rather as something pertaining to an international art scene where geographical distance was not a factor (the word “glocal” was repeatedly incessantly).

In this institutional synthesis, the Guggenheim Museum was a tectonic shift that suddenly situated Bilbao at the epicentre of cultural communication: there is a dialectical quality to the fact that an infrastructure like the American franchise, destined to bring major milestones of modern art, from Abstract Expressionism to Pop art, to the Basque Country, played an (indirect) role in the renewal of Basque art. The key was the urban regeneration and transformation of the estuary of Bilbao, formerly a symbol of industrialism in decline, and the acceptance of a post-industrial reality that would favour a cultural and institutional restructuring (as the museum itself did) and the creation of experimental, reinvigorating satellite initiatives. The contemporary

◁ Jon Mikel Euba
Coche, House, Horse
1997
Exhibition designed for
the consonni space, Bilbao

▷ Begoña Muñoz
We only move when something changes
Album produced by consonni, 2004
Cover picture: Olaf Breuning



art producer and publisher consonni emerged in this context, taking over a dilapidated factory by the same name on the Zorrozaurre peninsula. The Institut Français in Bilbao, directed by Jérôme Delormas, played a decisive role by establishing productive partnerships and ties with sala rekalde, Arteleku and the École des Beaux-Arts in Bordeaux. A slightly earlier ground-breaking project, *Puente de... pasaje*, was launched in 1995. Created by the Institut Français and continued by the French association Carta Blanca and its director, Corinne Diserens, this initiative invited various international artists (Suzanne Lafont, Dennis Adams, Roman Signer, Willie Doherty and Sylvie Blocher) to create site-specific works in Greater Bilbao, with the famous transporter bridge Puente Colgante as a post-industrial metaphor and pretext for uniting two opposing socio-economic traditions.

Swiss artist Roman Signer presented his intervention on 2 September 1995 at consonni, and soon people began to seriously consider the possibility of turning the factory into an experimental art venue. Similar ideas had already been implemented in other parts of Europe, where art had joined hands with post-industrialism shortly before urban gentrification began to take off. In the spring of 1996, through the agency of the Institut Français, another Swiss artist, Thomas Hirschhorn, spent three weeks in Bilbao trying—but failing, as he later admitted—to create a work-in-progress that would take shape on the street, in contact with passers-by, which was eventually exhibited at rekalde's Área 2. It would be unfair not to acknowledge that this and other bold ideas paved the way for the subsequent internationalisation of the Basque art scene and the parenthetical treatment of any debt to local tradition (although the modernism in circulation since at least the 1960s was destined to endure, consciously or unconsciously). Around that same time, new possibilities opened up for situated, contextual, intangible and interdisciplinary practices in art. There were precedents: *Intervenciones urbanas*, the Muntadas workshop at Arteleku in 1994; and *Colisiones*, directed by Corinne Diserens at the same venue in the summer of 1995, which included ad hoc events at the old Gros market featuring artists from across the globe, as well as a presentation of Gordon Matta-Clark's installation *Open House* (1972) in the Alderdi-Eder Gardens. These activities coincided with an exhibition centred on the self-image and closed-circuit video (Vito Acconci, Dan Graham, Joan Jonas, Valie Export, etc.).

Thanks to the urban, political and economic characteristics of Bilbao—and, by extension, the entire region—it soon became apparent that this context and its artists had the potential to rival the best European art scenes, which had eradicated the hierarchic discrimination between former artistic hubs and the new peripheries (Glasgow, Scandinavia and Eastern Europe). In 1997, the *consonni* factory welcomed Jon Mikel Euba and Rainer Oldendorf. Open to Basque and foreign artists alike, *consonni* normalised contemporary art on a unique scene that deserved and demanded international status. Euba's *Coche House Horse* was a site-specific work that extended throughout the vast industrial spaces, where video, photography and mural drawings were conceived and executed at full scale, linking thoughts and processes related to the image and cinematographic narrative. The immediacy of drawing and small handmade sketches suddenly underwent a change in scale, reflected in "icon-images" associated with or inspired by films like Kurosawa's *Rashomon* and Renoir's *The River*. It was after this presentation—unprecedented in its specificity, scale and location—that Jon Mikel Euba began to devise complex "narrative-systems" which integrated drawings and technical images in the form of sequential episodes.

Another essential factor in the weaving of that plot was Asier Pérez González and his constant questioning of the protocols of art and the economic situation of artists in a changing capitalist society. Although some of those "projects" devised by the impresario Pérez González can be read in retrospect as variations on relational aesthetics, they actually fall under the heading of practices of re-evaluation of conceptual art, institutional critique, and innovation in communication and graphic design. Sociability became a value in its own right as the art scene was infiltrated by fashion and pop and electronic music (the Bilbao duo Chico y Chica appeared in that same context). Begoña Muñoz showed the same unbiased attitude towards social expectations of the artist, giving rise to ephemeral actions and the evasion of roles.

As a logical consequence, *consonni* soon decided to leave the factory behind and become an office of public art projects, concentrating solely on production and distribution. According to its director, Frank Larcade, there was a determination to step out of the "immune space" of the gallery and thus "become more visible yet paradoxically invisible", occupying spaces like local television stations. Those were the days of "art in the real", and idealism was not always followed by "real" effects and results. Leaving the factory but producing from the factory seemed to be a key element in *Tetsuo: Bound to Fail* (1998) and other videos Sergio Prego made in Zorrozaurre. Today these videos have the post-apocalyptic feel of science fiction and manga, set in an all-too-familiar deteriorating landscape. The body reappeared, transfigured in the cyberpunk imaginary and in a tale of performance and video art. Analogue technology produced a virtual effect typical of the technoscience and digitisation of the world in the new century.



Ibon Aranberri
Horizontes (Horizons), 2001-2007
Installation of 499 pennants. 70 x 50 cm (each)
One edition
Guggenheim Museum Bilbao

6. The local factor (in globalisation)

The sequence I have described up to this point wove a web on which to build future practices that revolved around playing with signs. With the dawn of the digital millennium, identity took a new turn in the midst of a globalisation project alternately questioned and celebrated by art. In this context, postmodernism can be defined as a new relationship between a global culture and the specificity and demands of a particular local or national situation. A local—but not localist—factor appeared in those elements of culture and folklore that seemed more approachable or easier to dismantle.¹⁵ In a hyper-politicised age when terrorism seemed unbearable, the artist's task was not to find meaning in chaos but to unravel the underlying logic of meaning by arranging, placing certain signs alongside others, appropriating and subtly manipulating.

The landscape is one of the themes that inspired Ibon Aranberri: a landscape of pine trees, and another of cultural icons and signs whose heavy burden he attempted to lighten. Ever since *Espacio Abisal* presented his *Ethnics* (1998), a title that spoke loud and clear, his work had focused on the mechanisms that link memory and collectivity: an appropriation of icons of tradition, mediated and assimilated by the urban unconscious (the social nature of form in Chillida and Basterretxea); and an equally evocative meditation on the decommissioned nuclear plant of Lemoiz and its past. Landscape was also present in Jon Mikel Euba's videos and photographs, where group actions and landscape elements in the background (a path, a clearing

¹⁵ Some of the works and artists mentioned in this section are discussed in a previous article. See Peio Aguirre. "Basque Report : informe del 16 de septiembre", posted in December 2000 on Artszin.net; republished as "Basque Report 2.0", in *Lápiz*, no. 178, December 2001, pp. 50–57.



Asier Pérez González
Poster from the *Funky Baskenland* project
Utrecht, 2000

in a forest) invited viewers to interpret the works in an ideological or political light. The most frequently repeated word at the time was “ambiguity”.

For Asier Pérez González, “Basqueness” as a stereotype, a commodity and a brand became a content for cultural exchange. A case in point is *Funky Baskenland* (2000) at Casco Projects in Utrecht, where a Basque catering service was offered at a restaurant specialised in cuisine from Suriname, a former Dutch colony in the Antilles. The project (the artist referred to his creations as “projects”) questioned concepts such as the authentic and the traditional from the perspective of the exotic and foreign. A different kind of identity export appeared in *Kolpez Kolpe* (2003) by Iñaki Garmendia—the video of his performance at the 2002 Taipei Biennial—where a Taiwanese band played radical Basque rock songs on a raised platform. This exercise in cultural translation revealed the difficulty of spatially (geopolitically?) pinpointing a specific identity and culture and understanding it through mixture and appropriation.

The slippage between signifier and signified in Asier Mendizabal’s work is equally eloquent: there where the ideology of forms and signs in political activism (in film and rock music) creates an imaginary and aesthetic rooted in collective unity and energy. This was neatly expressed in *No Time for Love* (2000) at DAE/ Donostiako Arte Ekinbideak, whose title—borrowed from a Hertzainak track, in turn based on an Irish song about the choice between love and political commitment—gave rise to an aesthetic supported and formalised by the abstraction of group structures and collective desire.

Desire is the drive that abandons the purely individual, the ego, in search of a more libidinal other. The artist and composer Brian Eno once suggested the term “scenius”, a portmanteau of the words “scene” and “genius”, to convey the creativity that artistic groups, places or scenes can occasionally generate. According to Eno, “Scenius stands for the intelligence and the intuition of a whole cultural scene. It is the communal form



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Iñaki Garmendia
Kolpez kolpe
 2002-2003
 Installation. Single-channel video, black and white, colour, sound, 24 min, wooden table and easels, prints on paper and photographs in plastic covers. 360 x 90 x 75 cm
 MACBA Collection. MACBA Consortium



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Asier Mendizabal
No Time for Love, DAE
 2000
 San Sebastián

of the concept of the genius." The chronological span of this essay (or is it a report, or a story?) may be too broad and ambitious. However, my mission is accomplished if it helps readers to grasp the historicity that runs through that period, acknowledging the common elements that have contributed, and still contribute, to shaping something like a scene and a community.

