

## Art enticements in cultural waterfronts: their perimuseal span in the Bilbao estuary beyond the Guggenheim

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## Abstract

The opening of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao in 1997 intensified a discernible presence of monuments, museums, galleries and other establishments in its surroundings by defining a cultural district. In this gentrified neighbourhood, there are still a few artists-run spaces left, while ever more studios of architects and designers are spreading by the riverside, where the domino effect seemingly results in a musealisation of public art as civic heritage and a tourist attraction.

**Key words:** waterfronts, regeneration, public art, museums, Guggenheim

## Resum

L'obertura el 1997 del Museu Guggenheim-Bilbao va intensificar al seu entorn una visible presència de monuments, museus, galeries o altres establiments que el singularitzen com a districte cultural. Després de la gentrificació del veïnat, encara queden uns quants locals gestionats per artistes, mentre que cada cop més estudis d'arquitectes i dissenyadors s'estan estenent a la vora de la ria, on l'efecte dòmino sembla redundar en una museïtzació de l'art públic com a patrimoni cívic i atracció turística.

**Paraules clau:** waterfronts, regeneració, art públic, museus, Guggenheim

## Resumen

La apertura en 1997 del Museo Guggenheim-Bilbao intensificó en su entorno una visible presencia de monumentos, museos, galerías u otros establecimientos que lo singularizan como distrito cultural. Tras la gentrificación del vecindario, aún quedan unos pocos locales gestionados por artistas, mientras que cada vez más estudios de arquitectos y diseñadores se están extendiendo a orillas de la ría, donde el efecto dominó parece redundar en una musealización del arte público como patrimonio cívico y atracción turística.

**Palabras clave:** waterfronts, regeneración, arte público, museos, Guggenheim

## The Bilbao estuary, another tourist destination with culture as an anchor.

Bilbao and many port cities fell into decline in the second half of the 20th century due to industrial reconversion and port activity modernisation. The loading and unloading of goods, which used to be lengthy and laborious, were made easier when mechanically transferable ISO containers among ships, trains or trucks were introduced, which led to the abandonment of the old urban docks from the 1970s. As the draft of ships increased, maritime trade gradually moved away from traditional urban cores in search of deeper waters and larger hangars by centralising naval activity in certain coastal bases. Rotterdam became the main port of Europe and many other havens languished little by little, with devastating effects for respective cities, which entered a spiral of economic decline, unemployment, crime, depopulation, urban ruins, etc. Not only were many traditional jobs associated with shipping activity lost, but also the economic crisis harmed collective self-esteem, entailing a depressing deterioration of obsolete facilities, which had been a source of wealth and emblematic spaces in local history.

At almost the same time as this spiral of grave trouble however, a hope of reactivation appeared because the singular attractiveness of river fronts made them the vanguard of urban revitalization processes based on the tourist 'industry'. It is easy to get lost or disoriented in unfamiliar cities, but this circumstance is provided with some type of certainty if one has a natural reference, such as the banks of a river or the sea that, besides, have always been typical routes for foreigners to come by. Thousands are arriving on large cruise ships to attractive port cities! Reviving the memory of the transatlantic packet boats of the Belle Époque, this way of seeing the world has re-emerged since the 1970s as an alternative for leisure and pleasure trips, without having to look for accommodation at each stop or to worry about anything else but having a good time on the passage. Cruises through the Caribbean from the USA took the lead, but soon the Mediterranean and the North Sea became favourite European cruise destinations. In the middle of both routes, in the 1980s Bilbao followed the American model of using degraded port areas for cultural, recreational and commercial venues. In addition to museums, offices, hotels, shops and cafes or restaurants, the usual formula of tourist lures could not be without an aquarium, a planetarium, IMAX cinemas, or other attractions of spectacular architecture. This culture-leisure-business combination was successfully applied to the waterfront in Boston, the South Street Seaport in New York, the Pittsburgh waterfront, Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco Bay, the North Pier in Chicago, Quincy Market in Boston, or Baltimore's Inner Harbor, by managing to revive their waterfronts (Bonillo, Donzel, Fabre, 1992; Brownill, 2013). Taking the cue on the other side of the Atlantic, port warehouses were open for cultural and recreational use by bringing new life to the ports of Malmö, Copenhagen, Hamburg, Amsterdam, Antwerp, Liverpool, Bordeaux, Porto, Barcelona, Marseille, Genoa, Thessaloniki, Istanbul, and a long etcetera.

Barcelona became a spectacular European case after large investments of all kinds were made on the occasion of the 1992 Olympics, particularly on its seacoast.<sup>1</sup> With them, ambitious urban renovation was fostered by Mayor Pasqual Maragall, who had previously been a visiting professor at John Hopkins University in Baltimore (Ward, 2006). That city was the recognised model for the Maremagnum initiative, a shopping centre with an aquarium opened in 1995 in the old port, where the History Museum of Catalonia was inaugurated the following year immediately in front of a former warehouse. Then on the occasion of the Universal Forum of Cultures in 2004, the commitment to recreational or cultural facilities was reinforced, particularly a gigantic convention centre and some museums, which concentrated at the Besós River mouth, the apex of the regeneration of Poblenou, a district whose manufacturing identity was reconverted for creative industries. Exploiting the appeal of Gaudí and other tourist lures, Barcelona became the most popular European maritime destination, a must-see visit for large cruise ships, but also one of the favourite cities for fairs and congresses. Soon problems would rise along with such an impetuous tourist boom, whose failures/remedies were also taken into account in other cities like Bilbao.

The main alleged reproach would be the drastic loss of historic identity landmarks with the disappearance of port heritage. Obsolete buildings or amenities are usually eliminated, even if a few are somehow preserved, often just the façade, which has been the case of the demolished Depósito Franco of Bilbao Port. Only some exceptional historic sites and accoutrements are still carefully maintained inside and outside as tourist attractions, and are sometimes visitable as museum venues. Thus Baltimore and Barcelona had already historic ships in their waters, managed by veteran maritime museums that have been recently renovated, and even new ones have been founded like the Baltimore Museum of Industry, established in 1977. Another regular procedure has been to preserve some curious vestiges of 'industrial archaeology' in the public space: chimneys, old pipes, pieces of cranes, anchors, etc., as memorials or monumental ornaments. Such heritagised mementoes of dockland activities preserved *in situ* would be cherished by old people as Proustian anchors for personal memory or historical remembrance, and assumed by young people, who are more familiar with the postmodern taste for theatricality, as stage props in a 'theme park' urban scenery.

Both these kinds of appraisals could have inspired the Bilbao Port Authority to donate

1 Including generous public art commissions, such as the Urban Configurations project, which cost 150 million pesetas and, after 1992, an exorbitant municipal budget for its maintenance and successive restorations. In the Barceloneta, La Ribera and Port Vell neighbourhoods famous artists, such as Lothar Baumgarten, Rebecca Horn, Janes Kounellis, Mario Merz, Juan Muñoz, Jaume Plensa, Ulrich Rückriem, and James Turrell, installed artistic interventions. Many of them are conceptual works that frequently go completely unnoticed by passers-by because they are not perceived as works of art from lack of identifying labels, information panels or other signage *in situ*.



Fig. 1 The Carola crane, next to Itsasmuseum, by the Bilbao docks

to the City Council the slender Carola crane (Fig. 1),<sup>2</sup> which is still a predominant feature of the dock, now converted into a venerable historical monument next to Itsasmuseum, the Maritime Museum of the Estuary, opened in 2003 on the old Euskalduna shipyard premises. At its gates, as in the public spaces of any port, some anchors are found, which are not as large as those that adorn the Moll de Sant Bertran in Barcelona, but are, nonetheless, on the small scale compared to the enormous dimensions of the colossal anchor that occupies a place of honour at Baltimore docks and is one of its tourist icons. Anchor is, by the way, a metaphorical term widely used in English in urban revitalisation texts, and very specifically on waterfronts, whose cultural facilities are often described with nautical terms (for more examples see Breitkopf, 2008). In the case of Bilbao, its 'flagship' has been repeatedly identified with Frank Gehry's building, and further visual/

2 This crane, the only one preserved of the more than 10 stowage machines that worked in the Euskalduna shipyards, bears its name after Carlota Iglesias, known as Carol, according to a the local newspaper Periódico Digital de Bilbao <https://www.bi-aste.com/articulo/que-ver-en-bilbao/grua-karola-bilbao/20220310164343001071.html>

written marine tropes abound for the Euskalduna conference centre architecture, which supposedly evokes the shape of a ship (Marshall, 2001).

Similar urban regeneration policies have been followed almost everywhere. In fact, another increasingly widespread problem is cultural homogenisation, often sarcastically dubbed as 'Disneyfication', meaning the thematic recreation of the downtown as a scenario. It looks real, but it is just a safe setting for entertainments or the idyllic backdrop for shopping and dining experiences, at the end of which such spaces remain deserted of inhabitants. Truly enough, following the American model enshrined in Baltimore or by other precedents, the Nervión estuary in Bilbao has been sanitised and greatly gentrified. By becoming a mixed-use public-private conglomerate it has been designed to target, above all, the upper-middle class: wealthy residents, business travellers and well-off tourists. It is a worldwide repeated cliché, from Shanghai or Hong Kong to Kuala Lumpur, Dubai or Abu Dhabi, among others. Their waterfronts are very similar, with analogous lookalike establishments, including some projects of Guggenheim branches, because the same architectural firms are ubiquitous everywhere.

Nevertheless, when cities compete in cultural investments, with some kind of iconic museum building as totem, it rarely raises alone. Bilbao has multiplied art landmarks around the titanium building along the waterfront, providing cultural attractions for all kind of people, not just for those who enter the Guggenheim, who are, according to tourism specialists, a relative minority (Velilla & Rodríguez-Escudero, 2007; Álvarez Sainz, 2005). Specially in the summer months, many tourists arrive in chartered coaches, from which they get off near the museum to wander around taking photos and buying souvenirs in a very limited time. Such travelers appreciate art and architecture but they are not very interested in visiting exhibitions indoors; they just enjoy the visual glamour and social vibrancy of the vicinity (Lange-Valdés, 2018: 119). On the other hand, those who stay in Bilbao for a day or two would go inside the Guggenheim, but tend to spend most of their time in the amenable riverfronts, with fountains, playgrounds, public art, street musicians, stall vendors, all sorts of foreign and local people, variegated transport systems, restaurants, bars, shops, gardens, benches, free public toilets, cultural and sport programs: an intense 'space of flows' (Franklin, 2016: 81). Such social ecosystem is admired worldwide; hence, to be fair, perhaps the 'Bilbainisation' of Baltimore and its progeny ought to be considered. Wherever a museum of glittering postmodern architecture has been introduced, it is often surrounded by other aesthetic insertions to reinforce the artistic dimension of urban frontages.





Fig. 2 A popular photo call: the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao with Puppy, by Jeff Koons

## The multiplication and visibility of art attractions around museums.

Architectures daring to draw attention would perhaps be the most distinctive feature to reveal the global influence of the 'Bilbao Effect', a designation applied particularly to the urban impact and the economic returns that are ultimately scattered around, and trickle down. However in Spanish, the commonest expression, with other connotations, is the *Efecto Guggenheim* [Guggenheim effect]. This denomination has been interpreted by journalist and professor Iñaki Esteban Azurmendi as paradigmatic of a 'logic of ornament' which, following the theories formulated by Adolf Loos or Siegfried Kracauer, assumes that embellishing an emblematic area in decline will boost more beauty in its urban environment (Esteban, 2007). It could be the reverse of the 'broken windows theory' of social scientists James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling: just as misdeeds are spread, the cultivation of beauty could also be propagated through aesthetic empathy, promoting an atmosphere of order and legitimacy. The proliferation of art enticements in the Bilbao estuary

seems to confirm this, but it must be pointed out that the Guggenheim has not only spur seductive inspirations around it; it has also had proactive outreach involvement, with significant investments in cultivating the arts in its vicinity so that they also flourish outside its walls. This is literally what the museum does with Jeff Koons' *Puppy*, whose maintenance costs about 100,000 euros per year; its 40,000 flowering plants must be replaced every 6 months and, in the meantime, they have to be watered and fertilised, soil needs to be changed, etc. That monumental floral dog, the gigantic spider by Louise Bourgeois or the upright 80 spheres of reflective stainless steel by Anish Kapoor have become complementary visual landmarks to the sculptural building by Frank Gehry, with which they form, in the collective imagination, a universally recognised cultural landscape, to which other more immaterial, but very photogenic pieces of the collection, have been added: i.e. the fire fountains by French artist Yves Klein or the fog by Japanese Fujiko Nakaya. This singular *skyline*, a new icon of Bilbao for its citizens and tourists (Fig. 2), has inspired many other cities a comparable combination of postmodern architecture with very similar art installations.

However, the strident transformation of the Bilbao estuary initially aroused local antagonism. A more conservationist intervention, as in Liverpool, would have been less confrontational. Back there they did not initially target very striking ornamental outputs during the rehabilitation of the Albert Dock, a port complex of warehouses whose meticulous restoration, financed by the British government with abundant European funds, culminated in the inauguration on its docks of the Maritime Museum in 1984 and, most prominently, an offspring of the Tate Gallery in 1988. As James Stirling had studied architecture at the University of Liverpool and greatly respected the city's heritage, he wished to keep a low profile in redeveloping the old docks, which he turned into an icon of postmodern architecture by merely adding a touch of intense chromaticism. That Victorian enclosure, historically inaccessible to outsiders, was opened with remarkable success to local and foreign visitors, with a growing offer of shops, cafes/restaurants, hotels, business and cultural enticements to act as crowd-pullers.<sup>3</sup>

Developing new audiences for the Tate's collections and activities in social contexts afar from London's artistic epicentre was indeed the goal that justified the founding of what was originally called the Tate of the North, which especially targeted young audiences or people uninitiated in artistic taste. It has fulfilled that mission so well that to accommodate ever more visitors and activities, its premises have been extended in 1998 and once again in 2023. Nevertheless, it does not attract as many visitors as Bilbao Guggenheim because art is not a major concern for most of the tourists who typically arrive in Liverpool for a short stopover on a cruise ship or for a day trip/weekend getaway. The numerous admirers

<sup>3</sup> After 6 pm in the evening, when shops and establishments would close, the Albert Dock was dangerously empty of people. So the installation of hotels, restaurants or bars was encouraged.



of the most famous popular music group in the world might prioritise an interpretation centre, The Beatles Story, opened in 1990. Those more interested in sailing or social history will visit the historic ships of the Merseyside Maritime Museum and the naval heritage shown at its headquarters, in the basement of which the National Museum of Border and Customs Forces has been active since 1994, while the International Slavery Museum has been operating on the third floor since the summer of 2007. At the Pier Head stands the monumental Museum of Liverpool, opened in 2011, which is the latest addition to the city's exceptional collection of national museums. Such a multiplication of cultural venues on a riverfront made it advisable to place outdoors some pieces from the collection of the Tate Liverpool as a marketing strategy. In fact since its foundation, there has been a sculpture located on the banks of the Mersey next to Piermasters' house at the Albert Dock. It was commissioned by the Tate to Tony Cragg, the region's sculptor with the greatest international projection, and is part of its permanent collection, although many of the tourists and locals who pass by ignore the significance of a pile of horns mixed with bollards and even their status as an art work.<sup>4</sup> The Tate has been more Bilbao-like intrepid when installing another piece from the collection in front of a side façade of the museum in 2018, the colourful 10 metre-high sculpture entitled *Liverpool Mountain*, which is Ugo Rondinone's first public art work in the UK, commissioned to mark the 30th birthday of Tate Liverpool, the 20th anniversary of the Liverpool Biennale and the first decenary of the city's success as European Capital of Culture; another conceptual sculpture, but one that could not go unnoticed by anyone due to its size and its bright Pop colours. In fact it has quickly become a popular *photocall* for people in Liverpool and abroad. Meanwhile, other monumental pieces have also proliferated on the waterfront, some of which are very popular, although they may not arouse much enthusiasm from art critics and art historians.<sup>5</sup>

4 This enigmatic work, entitled *Raleigh*, was made in August 1986 in a local factory and was supervised by the artist, who set out to condense various tributes to his childhood memories in Liverpool by using, on the one hand, typical materials from everyday life in an industrial British city (combining conical shapes looking like traffic bollards with objects resembling musical tubes) and, at the same time, evoking the historical stories of sailors that fascinated him so much as a child, like those featuring Renaissance navigator Walter Raleigh, promoter of the English colonisation of the North American East Coast, to whom Pre-Raphaelite painter John Everett Millais had already dedicated a famous painting in 1870: *The boyhood of Raleigh*, which is also owned by the Tate. The title of this sculpture would allude to all this, according to the interpretation of Professor Gabriel N. Gee, in a book in which he analysed recent developments of the contemporary art system in north England (Gee, 2017: 80).

5 Next to *Raleigh* is the statue of Billy Fury, a local pop/rock singer portrayed in 2003 by self-taught figurative sculptor Tom Murphy. In front of the Maritime Museum is the bronze statuary group entitled *Sea Trek*, donated in 2001 by American Mormons, who commissioned it from a Mormon sculptor, Mark DeGraffenried, who represented with very conventional realism a family of emigrants looking with deep melancholy at the sea. Very different, but no less kitsch, is the colourful monument to the memory of John Lennon, erected in 2010 next to Kings Dock with the pretentious name of *European Peace Monument*. Its author, Lauren Voiers, intends to perpetrate a similar one in each continent, and in fact already has her Asian Peace Monument in Singapore.

Despite some analogies with Bilbao, scholars tend to stress differences. The impact of the Tate Liverpool as a catalyst of urban regeneration would be a typical example of 'Firstspace' according to the terminology of sociologist Volker Kirchberg, who elevated the Bilbao Guggenheim to 'Secondspace', a word taken from a video game set in Los Angeles that inspired geographer Edward Soja the category of 'Thirdspace', which Prof. Kirchberg would rather reserve for experimental museums where collective cultural identity is politically constructed as a result of citizen participation (Kirchberg, 2010). In general, social theory continues to take establishing ideal conjunctions between the art system and citizenry as the supreme goal; just as many activists passionately advocate for 'public' art deserving such an adjective, if it results from community participation (Remesar, 2000:69-78). Yet curatorial practices are still far-removed from that ideal, not only in museums and galleries, but also in public spaces, where decisions to emplace artworks should be made with much more consideration. As a matter of fact, the Bilbao Guggenheim has not only set up outdoor art installations at its will on its own site, but also on public land, with some complaints. Wishing to celebrate its tenth anniversary with an innovative revamp of the neighbouring La Salve Bridge, the Bilbao Guggenheim asked its visitors to vote for one of the three projects by Daniel Buren, Liam Gillick and Jenny Holzer shown at the museum. However, some citizens protested because a municipal property was about to be drastically changed in a contest among three foreign artists who had been preselected by a multinational corporation by giving the vote to its visitors, mostly foreigners. Adding insult to injury, all the Guggenheim Bilbao collection artworks installed outdoors were by foreign authors at the time, with Jeff Koons being doubly represented because, in addition to *Puppy* in front of the main door, his colourful *Tulips* occupied pride of place on the terrace overlooking the river until November 2022, when they were replaced with two sculptures by Eduardo Chillida, *Consejo al espacio V [Advice to space 5]* and *Abraza XI [Hug 9]*.

### Something more than 'ornamental' sculptures: a district with curatorial bravura.

Despite some missteps, mostly already overcome, it must be recognised that putting part of the museum's collection outdoors has revealed as a great asset in a sustained strategy of audience development for contemporary art. Especially noteworthy is the fact that each artwork set by the Bilbao Guggenheim in the open air is accompanied by a museum label and a QR code with additional information (Fig. 3).<sup>6</sup> This initiative has set a trend in the museums of the neighbourhood, where the sculptures in public spaces installed in

<sup>6</sup> There are even QR code signposts outdoors, as well as indoors, for Jenny Holzer's *Like Beauty in Flames*, an augmented reality experience created in 2021 to interact with the observer's point of view, either inside the Bilbao Guggenheim Museum or outside it.



Fig. 3 Guggenheim Museum label on Puppy's pedestal.

pre-Guggenheim times did not have any identifying label. There is no such information for the monument to musician Arriaga by Paco Durrio, which dates from 1906, or on the pedestal of the monument to painter Ignacio Zuloaga by Julio Beobide, made in 1947, both placed before the main entrance of the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum, nor even for Chillida's *Lugar de encuentros IV [Meeting Place 4]*, a 1974 sculpture located in front of the rear entrance. Yet a museum label is appropriately placed by the installation *Fanal (Garden of Delights)* by Juan Luis Moraza, a living Basque artist who donated it in 2002 (fig. 4). In addition to didactically labelled boats, anchors, chains and other elements of naval heritage, Itsasmuseum has some materials from its Department of Communication placed in public spaces to draw the attention of passers-by.<sup>7</sup> For years there was also a

<sup>7</sup> In 2007, the Maritime Museum, Itsasmuseum, placed in front of its entrance a structure of stacked containers advertising its sponsoring institutions and companies. Since 2013, with the participation of the Faculty of Fine Arts of the UPV/EHU and the City Council from Bilbao, other containers distributed along the dock are used for a wide variety of art interventions: paintings, sculptures, audiovisuals, performances, etc. Every year, the public call usually has a thematic axis related to naval history or Bilbao's port memory.





Fig. 4 Art installation by Juan Luis Moraza in front of the Museum of Fine Art.

2 metre-high cyclopean statue at its doors, which represents an athlete and is poetically entitled *Hombre vence al hierro* [*Man defeats iron*], made in 2006 in an expressionist/symbolist style by Basque sculptor Jesús Lizaso, who donated it to the Maritime Museum in 2013. However, that spot has since 2021 been occupied by another monumental sculpture by the same author, *Raíces del océano* [*Ocean roots*], a work in corten steel and wood made in 2010, according to its museum label (Fig. 5). The identification plate of the previous one, installed since 2020 on the right River Nervión bank, informs us of its nickname: *Tuercebarras* [*Ironbar twister*], a Basque folklore hero, namely the strongman able to twist iron who deserved special admiration. There are many thematic concomitances with the expressionist bronze monument by Vicente Larrea, a Biscayan artist who entitled it *Dodekathlos* in allusion to the Labours of Hercules, signed in 2022 at its base with a dedication written in Basque and Spanish to honour shipyard workers,

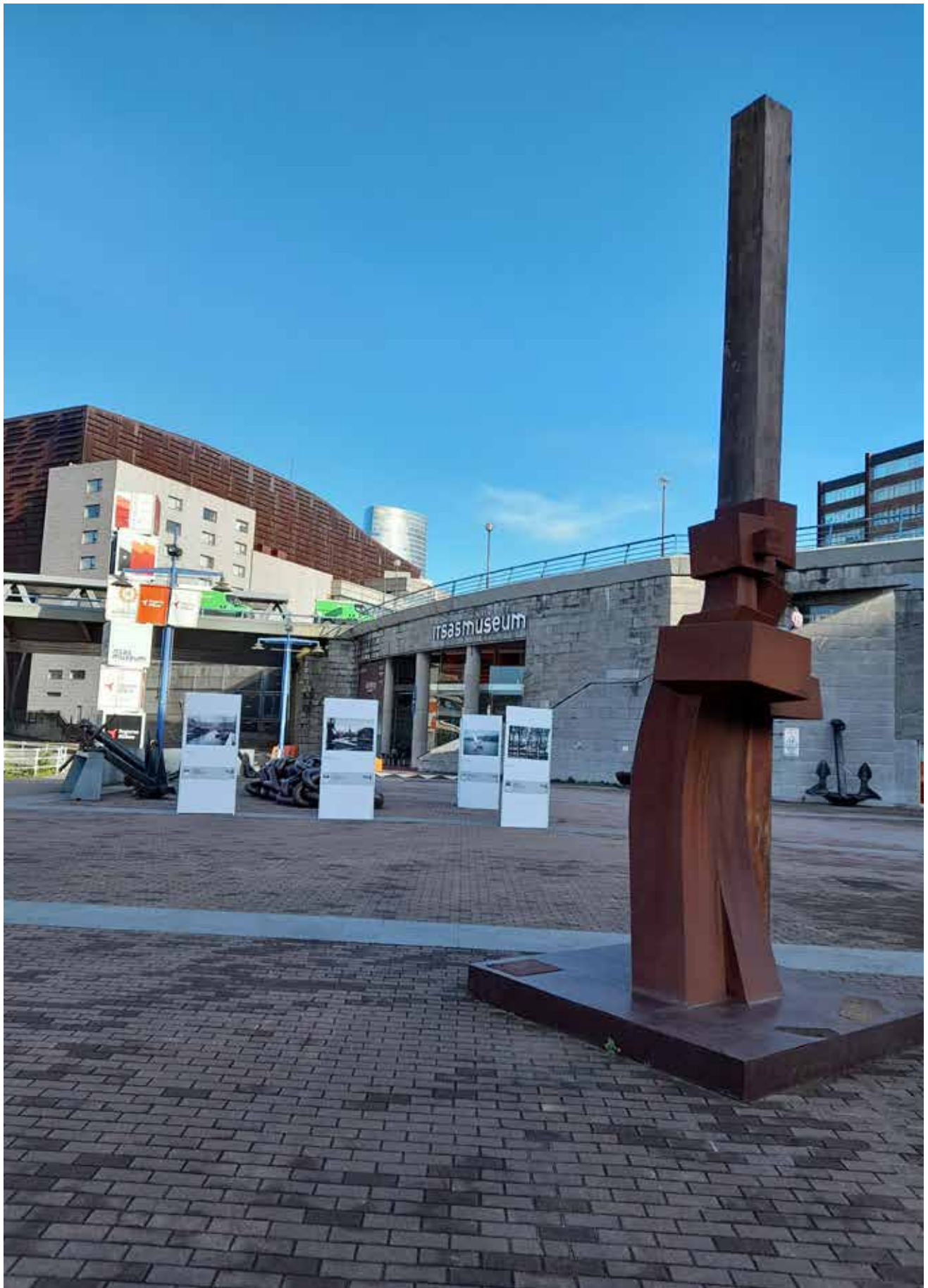


Fig. 5 Sculpture by Jesús Lizaso, with label on the ground, in front of Tsasmuseum



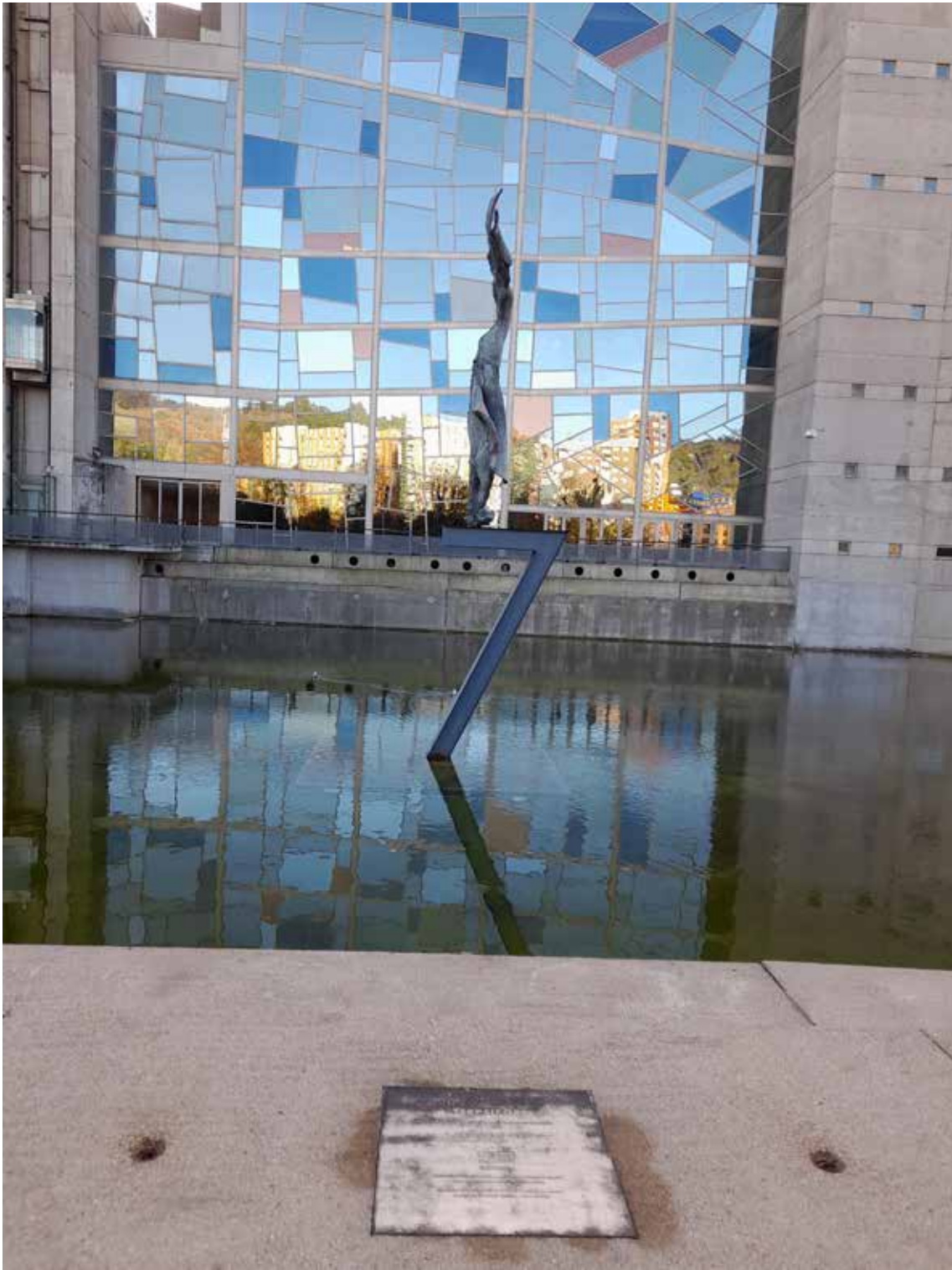


Fig. 6 Statue by Salvador Dalí in front of the Euskalduna Palace of Congresses and Music

as can be inferred from its location next to the entrance to the Euskalduna Palace of Congresses and Music, an institution with another bronze sculpture in front of its riverside façade, with a noticeable metal label providing plenty of details. Entitled *Terpsícore, Muse of Dance*, it is a work by Salvador Dalí from around 1971, and acquired by the Provincial Council by a donation in 2003. (Fig. 6)



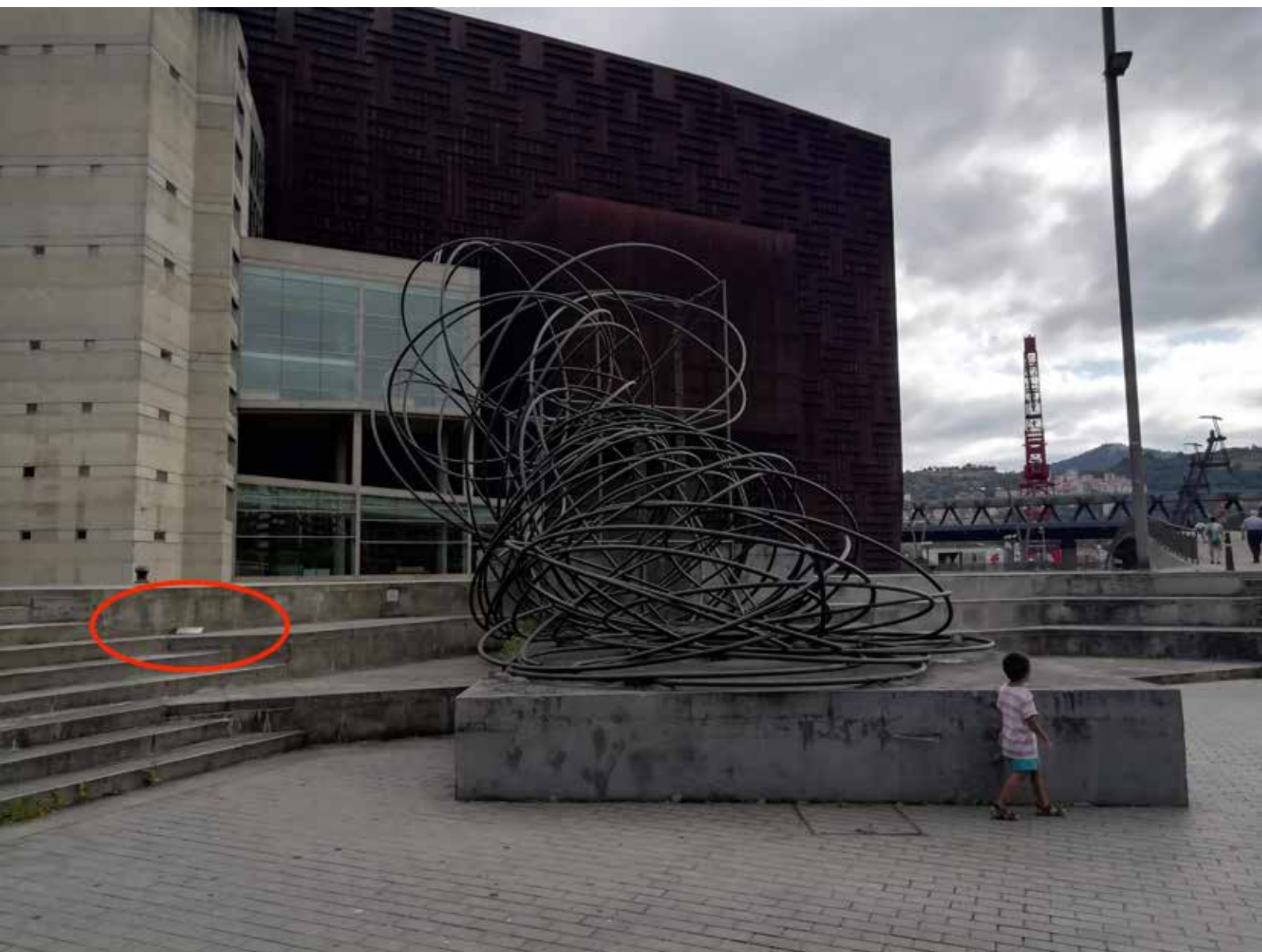


Figura 7. Art installation by José Zugasti, with museum-like label to the left.

Moreover, not only these artworks brought out by museums or other cultural establishments have acquired their respective identification labels, but also all the sculptures that have lately landmarked both River Nervión banks in this part of Bilbao. The resulting open air art assortment could be called 'perimuseal' given its location around museums, but also 'paramuseal' for its museum-like display. Some artworks even share standard labelling, designed to identify seven sculptures set in 2003, whose authors are Anthony Caro, Eduardo Chillida, Ángel Garraza, Markus Lüpertz, Ulrich Ruckriem, William Tucker and José Zugasti. This is an impressive record of distinguished authors, although it would seem that their works hardly relate to one another or show obvious thematic links with local history, despite the fact that the ensemble was emphatically baptised as 'Paseo de la Memoria' [Memory Walk]. Such designation seems to suggest a thematic itinerary of public art; indeed, this was claimed to be the purpose of the municipal corporation and the Bilbao Ría 2000 society when acquiring works by native and

foreign artists with supposed references made of local history or others with allusions to Basque folklore and traditions (Vivas, 2012). If only they had commissioned more complete interpretive panels because on-site information is limited to the title of the work and the name of the author, which is too little for the public to form a complete idea of the possible cultural references involved in each case. Although the title can sometimes give a clue, such data are probably too scarce for the public to grasp the cultural references distilled in each case. One such example is the work by Eibar artist José Zugasti, and is a swarm of chrome steel rings poetically entitled *Sea-drift*, a naval motto taken from the book *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman, whose reflections on the passing of life imbue us with this memento of iron and wire ropes, which were once abundant along this Nervión bank (Fig. 7). In the same way, there are remains of naval anchors embedded in a concrete block in Anthony Caro's sculpture labelled *Explorer's Book*, a title that might help us to realise that it is shaped like an open book and is, therefore, appropriately located in front of the library of the University of Deusto. In other cases, such as the sculptures by Lüpertz, Tucker or Chillida, the title can identify a theme or iconography with no evident local connections. Yet things become even more difficult when there is no longer any identification sign, which happens with Garraza's work because the stolen notice with the title and author was never replaced.<sup>8</sup> A museum-like label, however succinct it may be, fulfils a function of distinction because some of these art works would not be perceived as such without public signs identifying the collection of this sculpture park; e.g. the aforementioned steel rings by José Zugasti or the conceptual installation by Ulrich Rückriem.<sup>9</sup>

Designed by architect Javier López Chollet, after winning a competition with an ambitious beautification project for the new urban epicentre on the Bilbao estuary banks, this tree-lined promenade has many aesthetic ornaments that can be perceived as works of art: the cybernetic fountains, where children playing next to the Guggenheim imitate the playful aquatic mazes of multimedia artist Jeppe Hein; the curious lampposts in front of the Euskalduna Palace serve as a visual linkage between the trees and the building because this metallic forest was also designed by auditorium architects Federico Soriano and Dolores Palacio, who are also the authors of the stony mounds on its sides called *The Klinker Mountains*. Close by are Plaza Euskadi and Parque Campa

8 *Sitio y lugares* [Site and places], a work by Navarran sculptor Ángel Garraza, represents two traditional vessels for making cheese which, due to their exaggerated size and the vivid chromaticism of the colourful ceramic tiles covering them, look Pop-like. *Judith*, a colossal statue more than 3 m high, is an expressionist work by Markus Lüpertz, who may have intended Biblical references. Even more inextricable is the piece by British artist William G. Tucker, a mysterious silhouette of undulating biomorphic protuberances that he entitled *Maia*, the name of a goddess who, in the Hindu religion, represents the female part of Brahma and the personification of illusory matter. Also following a parallel path from prehistoric arcane art to modern abstraction, Eduardo Chillida's *Begirari IV*, a corten steel totem that is more than 8 m high, and topped by a wider part with a hole like an eye, might evoke the figure of Polyphemus and, hence, its title, which can be translated as 'Watchman' according to the label.

9 As usual in Ulrich Rückriem, there were several milestones to mark an itinerary, but only a 4 m<sup>2</sup> block of granite remains because the other slabs at the ground level caused passers-by to stumble.





Fig. 8a & 8b Chaos Nervión, a bronze sculpture by Jedd Novatt donated to the city, as stated in the informative plaque on the ground

de los Ingleses, designed by landscape architect Diana Balmori Ling, with artistic street furniture and urban vegetation. On an adjoining green hill there are several chaotically superimposed cubes; hence, the title of this puzzling tower, *Chaos Nervión*, a bronze sculpture by Jedd Novatt dated 2011, which was donated to the city the following year by American collector Mary Spencer in memory of her husband Sash, as declared on an informative plaque put on the ground by the City Hall. (Fig. 8) The glazed architecture of the nearby terraced riverside café, next to the granite blocks of Rückriem, is also very minimalist and surrounded by other geometrical structures that look like art, and sometimes indeed constitute an artwork, such as the two twinned cubes made out of reclaimed oak



Fig. 9a & 9b Four female figures of towline pullers, by Dora Salazar, with identification plate on the ground.

railway sleepers and united by means of a curved stainless steel bar to a third cube. This sculpture was made by Bilbao artist Germán de los Ríos in 2013, according to the identification plate at the bottom, which also includes its title *Amatxu*, the popular Basque appellation given to the Virgin of Begoña, the Patron Saint of Bilbao, whose public cult is closely linked with the Nervión estuary.

Professor Íñigo Sarriguarte is right when he criticises such a tangled concentration of art and ornamental installations in public spaces, which can be indistinguishable and no clear boundaries are set with the artworks from the Guggenheim Bilbao outdoors collection (Sarriguarte, 2022: 220). On the more eastern side of the museum, there is a much clearer physical and visual separation. Very close to the La Salve Bridge, the monumental Puerta de los Honorables [Gate of the Honourable] was inaugurated in 2001, as well as the portrait of Ramón Rubial Cava, a work by Casto Solano, which represents the socialist politician in a walking attitude. Up the riverside, there are other statues of walkers, *Las sirgueras* [The towline female pullers], four figures that are 2.5 m high in corten steel that pay homage to women workers who, for very poor wages, pulled ropes to tow barges in the 19th century (Fig. 9). As the identification plate on the ground indicates, it is a monument commissioned to Dora Salazar in 2020 by the Biscay Provincial Council. This same institution also has installed an abstract sculpture next to the Santiago Calatrava footbridge, in the centre of the Plaza de





Fig. 10 Sculpture by Mikel Lertxundi, with label on the ground, in front of Isozaki Gate

la Convivencia, whose catalogue data are fixed to the ground: Mikel Lertxundi, *Izenbururik gabe* [Untitled], iron, wood and stone, 2008 (Fig. 10).

In contrast, no information whatsoever is provided next to another work by Lertxundi, *Topari II* [Meeting II] located near the Guggenheim since 2019, in the fringes of República de Abando Park, as if curatorial didacticism efforts were fading a stretch away from the waterfront. The same could be stated about the absence of an identifying label next to the large cones called *Volcanoes*, designed by Arata Isozaki as an ornamental complement to his huge architectural complex Isozaki Atea [Isozaki's Gate].<sup>10</sup> However back on the riverside, and following upstream, we find three iconic monuments that are labelled, even though they are rather succinctly identified by their respective inscriptions. On the one hand, a stylised statue on the left bank signed by Vicente Vázquez Canónico in 1975, but moved to Paseo Uribitarte for the Commemoration of the Day of the Sea in 1981. On the other hand, on the right bank, *Mascarón de Proa* [Figurehead], commissioned from distinguished Basque artist Nestor Basterretxea in 1986 to celebrate the centenary of the Bilbao

<sup>10</sup> There is a sign that prohibits climbing them because "They are artistic elements that could deteriorate", but there is no information *in situ* about their author, title or dating. These are provided by Rafa Olalde's blog *Bilbao: Arte en las calles* <https://bilbaoartenlacallecontinuacion.wordpress.com/2021/11/27/los-volcanes-de-isozaki/> where the catalogue details of the aforementioned sculptures by Mikel Lertxundi Argoitia can also be found <https://bilbaoartenlacallecontinuacion.wordpress.com/category/mikel-lertxundi/> (checked on 23 January, 2023).

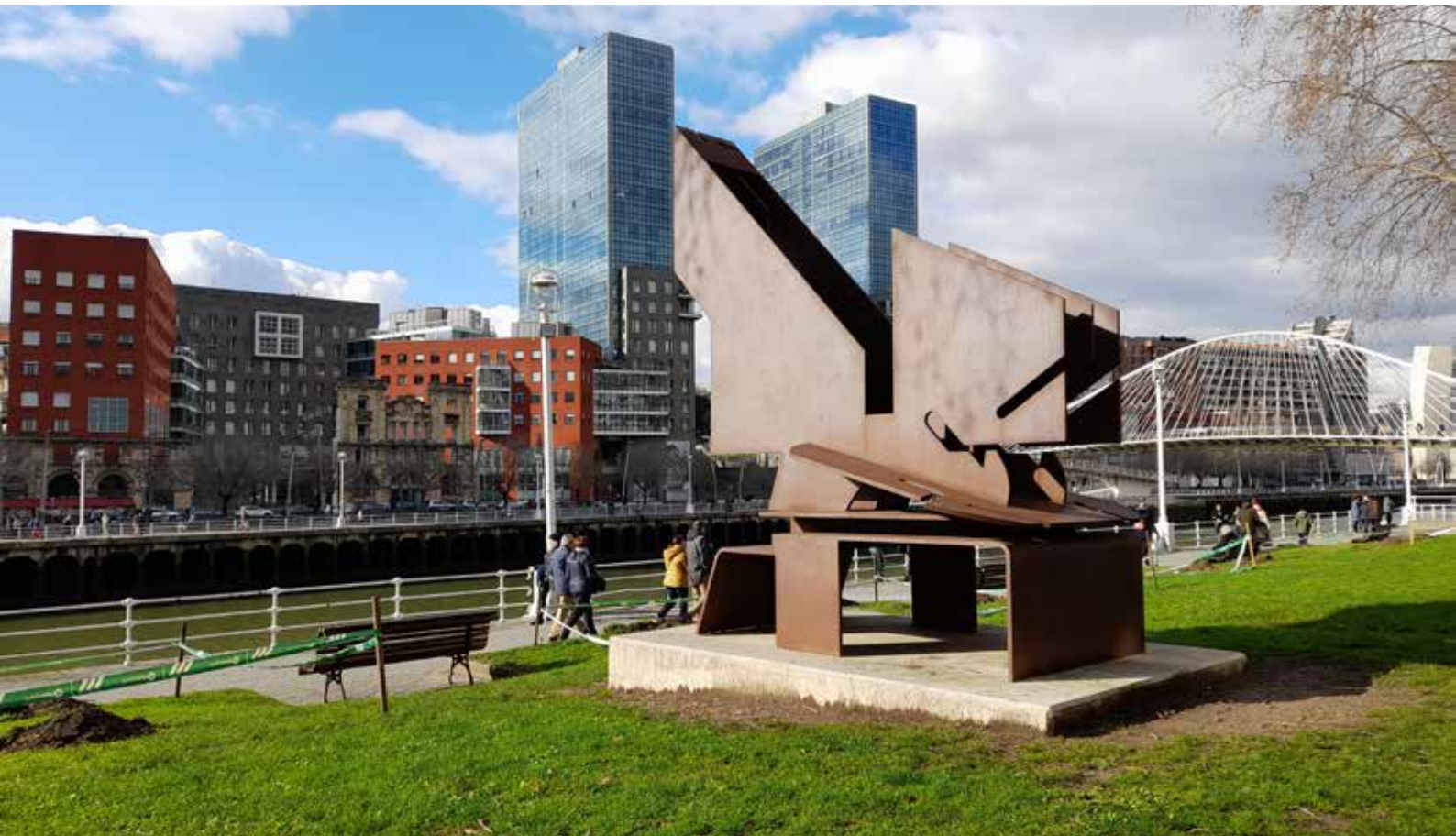


Fig. 11 Mascarón de Proa [Figurehead], by Nestor Basterretxea, on the Nervión right bank.

Chamber of Commerce, that had originally installed it in front of its headquarters on a high shopping street until 2012, when the sculpture was ceded to the Bilbao City Council. Since 2017, it is set up to overlook the river on the Campo Volatín promenade with the respective museum-like label (Fig. 11). Next to it, and immediately in front of the City Hall, there is a monumental version in corten steel made in 2002 of Jorge Oteiza's sculpture Ovoid variant of the vacancy of the sphere, whose creation dates from 1958, although this is not indicated in situ (Sáenz de Gorbea & Rueda, 2008). These landmarks would be, according to our perception, the boondocks that mark the eastern limits of the 'waterfront of art', a cultural district whose core is defined not only by a high density of art, but also by its visibility, which has increased thanks to the identifying labels and urban signage accompanying the art works. Its northern boundary is marked by the right bank. To the south of the Guggenheim, this flamboyant art district extends to Plaza San José, featuring since 2004 three bronze sculptures by Vicente Larrea, with their respective identification plates on the pavement (Fig. 12). Going further into the luxurious business area of Bilbao, there is no shortage of ornamental art, but not even the popular sculptures with which Philippe Starck decorated the sidewalks around the Azcuna Cultural Centre in 2010 have identifying labels. It is very likely that both the children who each day have fun with them and their parents are completely unaware that they are enjoying 'new genre public art'.





Fig 12 Bronze sculptures by Vicente Larrea, with the church of St Joseph and the Guggenheim Museum in the background.

So the outstanding and noticeable presence of art in public spaces characterises this new Bilbao neighbourhood next to the estuary, the Abandoibarra district, which is also highly renowned for its postmodern architecture because, in addition to Frank Gehry, this part of the city prides itself with projects signed by Arata Isozaki, Rafael Moneo, Álvaro Siza, César Pelli, Eugenio Aguinaga, Carlos Ferrater, César Portela, Rob Krier, Luis Peña Ganchegui, Ricardo Legorreta, Robert Stern, etc. Their works have very sculptural shapes: the adverts for the Sol Meliá Hotel assure that its design is inspired by Eduardo Chillida. The constructions are often complemented by sculptures that can be visited, such as the monumental *Ciprés fósil* [Fossil Cypress] by Valencian designer Javier Mariscal in the atrium of the Hotel Domine, or the statues by Robert Krier all over the Artklass building, erected in 2011 and placed between the Bilbao Museum of Fine Arts and Plaza Euskadi. Many of these imposing sights are marked and photographed on the map in the brochure 'Bilbao on Foot: five tours of Bilbao's architecture', distributed free of charge at the tourist information office next to the Guggenheim (Fig. 13). Perhaps they should also publicise the wide range of public art on view in this district using brochures, maps or other publications.

Additional information is already available around town, but mainly in this cultural heart, which concentrates Bilbao's main art venues. Of them, some have devoted shows and publications to artists whose works are installed in the public places of Abandoibarra, insofar as the inhabitants



Fig. 13 Brochure with information, photos and maps suggesting five tours of Bilbao's architecture.

who frequent museums and galleries become more familiar with the creative context of the 'plop art' sculptures located in the area. Besides, the local outreach efforts of these establishments can also be gauged from another urban consideration in more physical terms because most of them tend to make selected contents visible outdoors or from the outside. Apart from the artworks installed in the open air by the Bilbao Museum of Fine Arts and the Guggenheim Museum, both institutions use windows and balconies to partly expose themselves to the outside world provoking the curiosity of *flâneurs*. For political reasons of transparency, this has been even more openly implemented since 1991 by Rekalde Aretoa, the large exhibition space of the Biscay Provincial Council on the main commercial avenue in this area, with a huge window that allows anyone walking by to take a look at its exhibitions and to sometimes see what is going on inside (Fig. 14). Similarly, the neighbouring Llamas gallery, founded in 1979 by artist and dealer Enrique Alonso Llamas at number 4 Iparragirre street, has a crowded shop window with rich assortments of art and antiques that draw the gazes of passers-by (Fig. 15). A traditional





Fig. 14 Street view of Sala Rekalde, on a main avenue towards the Guggenheim Bilbao

commercial strategy that is also practiced in the adjacent Juan Ajuriaguerra street by both the Rembradt gallery and Michel Mejuto gallery, two of the most veteran ones in town, and next door by Amasté art space, founded in 1999 by painter Antón Hurtado (**Fig. 16**). The same happens round the corner in Henao street, where an arty framing and painting shop called Macbur has operated in a commercial passageway since 1997, the year in which, on the same side of that street, the Juan Manuel Lumbreras gallery with a glamorous storefront was opened by the eponymous art dealer and his wife Mari Jose Darriba.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, each of these art institutions and dealers located in this cultural district supports socio-cultural initiatives in the public sphere, especially on the occasion of municipal festivals, such as 'Semana de las Artes' [Arts' Week] or 'Festival de Artes de la

11 Curiously, two of the most influential commercial art galleries, also located in this area, are much more introverted: Carreras Mugica, founded in 1994 by Pedro Carreras and Ignacio Mugica with their respective wives, who moved it in 2013 to the ground floor of No. 2 Calle Heros, a deep store which a discreet portal-. Around the corner, the Vanguardia gallery, founded in 1984, has operated since 1987 at number 19 of the nearby Alameda de Mazarredo, but at one floor above the street level.



Fig. 15. Street view of Llamas gallery



Fig. 16. Street view of Amasté gallery

Calle' [Street Arts Festival]. Albeit, globally the art system is still too fragmented here, with very segregated purviews and quite dissimilar audiences for art museums and other venues (Caso, 2022: 289), possibly due to the lack of joint marketing campaigns.<sup>12</sup>

More concerted action would be desirable to broaden the itineraries of tourists who come to Bilbao attracted by the Guggenheim, where they tend to spend about only 2 hours, if they ever come in. Many are content to see it from the outside when the temporary exhibitions in season do not seduce them enough to pay the high admission fee. Sightseers should be provided with more information about not only what is offered by the Bilbao museums or in the Euskalduna palace, but also in the art galleries and other cultural establishments in this district that welcome visitors, including the Bizkaia Aretoa, which houses the auditorium and exhibitions of the University of the Basque Country. Opposite is the library of Deusto University and in front the Zubiarte shopping centre, programming painting workshops and other creative activities, which in 2018 resulted in two large murals painted by Aitor Sarabia that are well-preserved and

<sup>12</sup> In some venues, visitors can pick up a free leaflet called *Mapa de museos de Bilbao*, and is lavishly published by the Bilbao City Council, with basic information, location and photos of most museums, Sala Rekalde, Azkuna Zentroa and even some theatres, but not commercial art galleries. There used to be a map, available on the Bilbao Art District website, which no longer operates, while that of the City Council provides an outdated list of them [https://www.bilbao.eus/cs/Satellite?cid=3000026515&language=es&pagename=Bilbaonet%2FPage%2FBIIO\\_listadoEquipamientos](https://www.bilbao.eus/cs/Satellite?cid=3000026515&language=es&pagename=Bilbaonet%2FPage%2FBIIO_listadoEquipamientos) (checked on 24 January, 2023).

publicly visible. In any case, the existence of such an assorted cultural cluster is surely an incentive for both tourists and local citizens with an interest in the arts. Social research studying the geolocalisation of photos uploaded by Instagram users has shown that sightseeing hotspots in Bilbao tend to concentrate along the Nervión riversides (Martí-Ciriquián & García-Mayor, 2018: 77). Curiously, most of these photos are taken on the right bank: this could be explained by the search of greater distance to get panoramic images of the Guggenheim from the opposite riverside; but also, given that Instagram is a social network favored by youngsters, it could reveal a greater identification of young people with the 'creative class' that animates that shore. Abandoibarra is still frequented by lots of artists, but lately they tend to have their homes, workshops or association headquarters on the other side of the river.

### Pollinating artists of the right bank and other cultural hotspots.

The success of Abandoibarra has not helped much to retain artists there.<sup>13</sup> There used to be a creative hub that enlivened an industrial building located at number 35 of Alameda Mazarredo: It all began in January 1995 on the second floor with an exhibition space for emerging artists, Rekalde-Área 2, funded by the Biscay Provincial Council, which decided to close it hardly 3 years later after an intense program of between six and ten annual exhibitions. In the heydays of this initiative, in June 1996 the Arsenal association settled in that building and other artists-run spaces emerged at the street level and on five floors upstairs. In 1997, number 29 of the same street became a nest of underground culture, even in a literal sense, because it was the dark basement of an old coal shop; this explains the chosen name, Espacio Abisal, which they kept even after relocating their gatherings and exhibitions in 2000 towards Urazurrutia street in the "Bilbao la Vieja" neighbourhood (Aramburu, 2022: 260-267).<sup>14</sup> At the turn of the century, institutional policies of arts-led urban revitalisation seemed to converge in that historic area of Bilbao, then a very poor and problematic district.<sup>15</sup>

13 The social ideal of a 'cultural district' thriving by the river was important for the public/private consortium Bilbao Metropoli 30, whereas the public money invested by Bilbao Ría 2000 has aimed more towards building infrastructures for the tertiary sector (Gómez García, 2007: 159-163).

14 In summarising the history of this artists' association, founded by alumni of the Bilbao Faculty of Arts keen on performative arts and active until 2011, Nekane Aramburu linked their initial activities above all to Rekalde-Área 2, but also to the Vanguardia gallery, founded on the same street, in whose neighbourhood another commercial gallery was later installed: Epelde and Mardaras. Close by in an old haberdashery shop with a store window, Swiss sculptor Thomas Hirschhorn carried out a three-week residency invited by Rekalde-Área 2, which ended with feelings of failure due to the Bilbao public's lack of interest (Aramburu, 2022: 309).

15 The downtown neighbourhoods of San Francisco and 'Bilbao la Vieja' had many buildings in a dilapidated state, street prostitution, drugs and crime. To regenerate this area, the La Merced and Corazón de María Churches were reconverted in 1997 and 2006 to house BilboRock and the Museum of Art Reproductions,



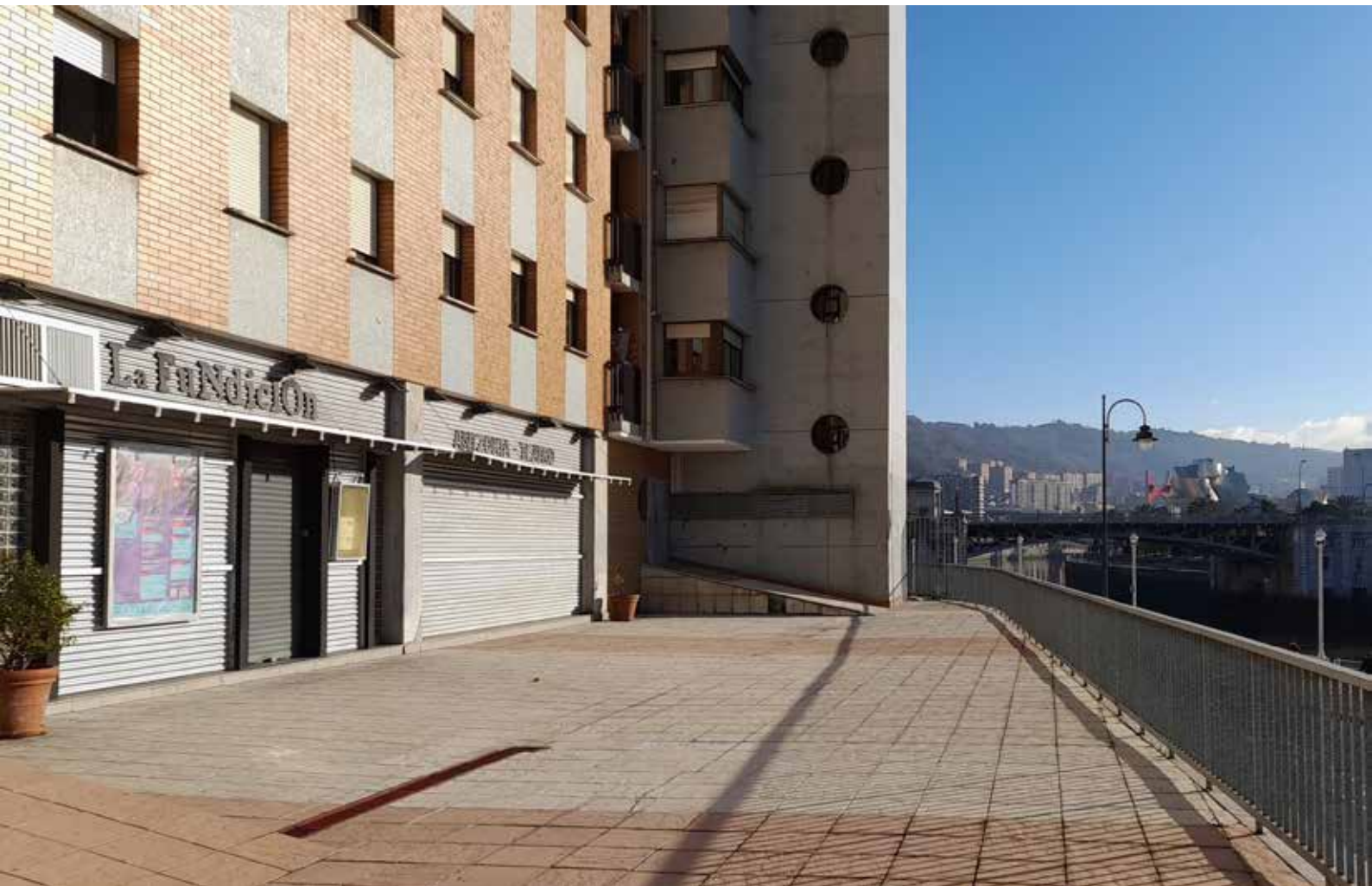


Fig. 17 La Fundación, by the river, with Guggenheim Museum Bilbao in the background

However, the exodus of artists from the Nervión estuary was not complete because some discovered the charm of industrial warehouses on the opposite river side in the industrial areas of Deusto and Zorrotzaurre, which suited them due to their quiet wide spaces, rented out at low prices. The oldest surviving artists-run initiative is an association that was created in 1986 by a dance company, which got together with visual artists to rent the second floor of an old foundry on Calle Ramón y Cajal in Deusto. Hence its name, La Fundación, which they still maintain despite them moving in 1996 to another part of the same neighbourhood, located opposite Abandoibarra, on the ground floor of a block of flats at numbers 1 and 3 on Calle Francisco Maciá, with a versatile performance hall preceded by a multifunctional exhibition space (Etxebarría, 1997). Their workshops are

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respectively. Yet the catalyst for this artists quarter would be the rehabilitation of an old school, open since 1998 as BilbaoArte, and a large municipal centre for art production and exhibition that especially targeted young people and the creative sector, but also at the service of the neighbourhood in general. In close proximity, alternative culture, gay venues and design-related businesses have flourished because the City Council and other institutions have granted aid to artists' workshops and residences. Yet as this area is still far from gentrification, it would be more comparable to Marseille's Le Panier than to New York's SoHo (Sánchez Duro, 2018: 93).



still very active there, also programming shows of theatre, cinema, dance or contemporary art (Fig. 17).<sup>16</sup>

They were the direct precedent of the ephemeral artists association En Canal, which was active from 1992 to 1996 in an industrial warehouse by the shore, where they set up their workshops and, in order to pay the rent to round off their finances, they also hosted musical concerts, which ended up becoming their main public activity. They, in turn, inspired French performer Franck Larcade at the end of 1996 with the idea of settling with other creators of video art, new technologies and performing arts in the old Consonni factory on the Zorrotzaurre peninsula. At that time, the building became the property of the Basque Government, which ceded it to the Consonni cultural association, set up for multidisciplinary artistic experimentation purposes, in collaboration with the Parisian project Usines Ephemères and with the Trans Europe Halles network. The first artist-in-residence was choreographer Loïc Touzé, who put on a public show of interactive dance and music documented by a filmmaker in October 1997 (Delormas, 1997). Another of those international guests was Andrea Fraser, who came for a television project, which ended up being her famous performance with the audio guide at the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, recorded by hidden video cameras. In 1999 they had to move away because the Basque Government decided to reuse the Consonni factory. Under that name, the association is still active in different locations as an art producer and publisher.

The HACERIA Arteak Association, founded in February 1997, has received more perennial institutional support to combine performing arts with exhibitions at the old Fernández sawmill, located at 42 Rivera de Deusto. After a few years, they began to manage a high annual budget for their activities with the public thanks to support from the Bilbao City Council, the Biscay Provincial Council or the Ministry of Culture, with such success that they have acted as an incubator for other cultural industries, which have then animated neighbouring industrial pavilions or other parts of the Bilbao metropolitan area. They have had to resettle in two old business warehouses, La Calde-Zawp and La Terminal, but always on Zorrotzaurre where they are currently promoters of the Isla Creativa project along with other groups.<sup>17</sup> In this way, the transformation of the Zorrotzaurre peninsula, already converted into an island and urbanised with macroprojects by star architects, is somehow maintaining the presence of a creative population in a gentrifying area.

Another profile of gentrification is the substitution of bohemians for upmarket art professionals, such as architects and graphic designers. Their presence is coveted both by

<sup>16</sup> They report on their activities and programming for the public on their web portal: <https://www.lafundicion.org/>

<sup>17</sup> Currently, Isla Creativa is made up of groups hACERÍA/ Zawp, Pabellón no. 6, Karolazirko, Zirkozaurre, Espacio Open, Gure Txoko Skate, Piugaz Bilbao, Eidabe, Papelera and Kunsthal. See <https://www.zorrotzaurre.com/isla-creativa/> [Consulted on 10 January, 2023].



Fig. 18 Mural on La Salve Bridge painted in 2012 by Verónica and Christina Werckmeister.

real estate investors and the authorities, who support them through grants and subsidies, notably the Basque Government's 'Creative Factories' program. The right Nervion River bank is now becoming their Promised Land, and it is no surprise to find very professionally managed art venues there, like the aforementioned case of La Fundición. Nearby the space formerly used by the operator of the Deusto bridge has been devoted to temporary art interventions since 2012, managed by academic specialists in street art and technological creativity, with the support of the Faculty of Arts, Kultur-Basque and other institutions (Sarriugarte, 2021: 218). Up the riverside, beyond the La Salve bridge, and on the corner of Fontecha y Salazar street opened BASE Arts Space in 2021 to great expectation. This is a stylish gallery and studio run by graphic designers who programme art exhibitions, sell art materials, etc. It would be wonderful if these young entrepreneurs would enhance this river bank, which lies immediately in front of the Bilbao Guggenheim, with updated examples of public art.

They might follow the precedent of the celebrated 'Cubes of Memory' in Llanes (Asturias), a set of gaudy murals painted between 2001 and 2006 by Basque artist Agustín Ibarrola with the help of local painters, who coloured the concrete blocks on the breakwater of the port with bright paintings, sometimes flat geometric abstractions, or by evoking Asturian flora and fauna, marine iconography, seagulls, travel, emigrants, etc., at other times (Álvarez, 2014: 33-34 and 43). Ibarrola himself has always been closely linked with Bilbao, where there is no shortage of street art practitioners who follow in his wake or pursue new paths. There are already abundant murals of all kinds painted on the right Nervión bank (Fig. 18). With identifying labels and interpretation panels, they could be the start of an open-air Museum of Street Art, like that of Málaga, where the colourful façades of the so-called Soho: Barrio de las Artes have become a tourist attraction in the port district. The claim to keep historical memory and the passion for creativity may seem like opposite poles of heritage activism, but both strategies can be combined on the riverfronts. Bilbao can be an example of how diversifying art provision helps to promote and expand an attractive cultural district that can be visited and lived, not only by museum goers, but by all sorts of people.

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