

The museum as a site of contest The Bilbao Guggenheim

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"Museums are just a lot of lies, and the people who make art their business are mostly impostors (...). We have infected the pictures in our museums with all our stupidities, all our mistakes, all our poverty of spirit. We have turned them into petty and ridiculous things" (Pablo Picasso quoted in Barr 1946: 274).

A state museum is intended to give substance to, to express, and to promote the values of its country's ruling elite. It is built in order to provide a physical focus upon which a cultural consensus (whose content is to be decided by the elite) may be constructed or strengthened. Museum directors may claim to espouse universalistic, transcendent values but the institutions they run are still used to pursue much more particularistic, nationally-bound ends. Carol Duncan (1991) speaks of these museums as ceremonial monuments where nationals can enact rituals of citizenships. The Louvre is their model. This equation of nation and museum is now so well-established that today a nation without its own museum appears gravely deficient. Tourists, from the provinces or abroad, visiting the capital of a country would find it very odd if the city did not include at least one major state-funded museum: difficult for them not to feel that something was not deeply lacking. What kind of nation is this, they might wonder, which does not wish to display its commitment to culture? What kind of state is this which does not provide its members with a built space in which they can participate collectively in civic, civilizing ceremony?

Despite the best intentions of its founders and promoters, however, the possibility of a state museum providing the platform upon which a cultural consensus can be forged may be denied from its very inception. For the idea of a state museum may be constantly contested, from the initial moments of its conception, by all interested parties, both within and beyond the borders of the state. Far from being a secure focus of unity, the nature of the museum and its programmes become the product of continuing, intense negotiations by all those parties. Instead of achieving its originators' ideal of acting as a stable component within the state-managed mode of cultural production, the museum turns out to be but one of its evolving elements, continually subject to revision.

The aim of this paper is to exemplify this argument by examining the continuing debate, centred in (but not exclusive to) the Basqueland, over the establishment by the Basque

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Picture 1. The Museo Guggenheim Bilbao under construction, June 1996
(Courtesy of Consorcio del Proyecto Guggenheim Bilbao)

Government, of a Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, the capital of the Basque region.

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On 13 December 1991 the Basque Government officially announced the signing of an agreement, reached after nine months of negotiations, with the Guggenheim Foundation of New York, to build a Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. The Museo Guggenheim Bilbao, as it is to be known, would be a world-class building designed by an architect of great international repute, Frank O. Gehry, and sited on disused land on the waterfront in the centre of the city. Over the 30 years the agreement would run (with an option to extend it for a further 75 years), the Foundation would supply the Museo with a permanent display of some of their paintings as well as a continuous

series of exhibitions, all of high quality, while the Government would gradually assemble its own permanent collection. The building would cost 10,000 million pesetas and 5,000 million would be dedicated to the purchase of pictures and sculptures for the collection.

To the leaders of the Basque Government, this lavish project was a great investment in the future of the Basque Country. It defended its action with three main arguments. First, given that the Foundation is generally regarded as having the best (in terms of quality, size and scope) private collection in the world of twentieth-century art, the agreement was the most effective way to establish a museum of modern and contemporary art in the area. In recent decades the work of most Basque artists had suffered because of the lack of such a museum in the peninsula. The building of the Museo would rectify that.

Second, the heavy industries (the mining of iron ore, shipbuilding, and the manufacture of steel) upon which the original prosperity of Bilbao and much of the surrounding area was based had declined greatly in the last twenty years. The level of unemployment had risen dramatically while disaffected nationalist youth entered the ranks of the local terrorist organization ETA (*Euskadi ta Askatasuna*, 'the Basque Country and Freedom'). In this context of industrial decay and guerrilla violence, the Government saw the Museo as a key component of their strategy to improve the image of the country. It would become an emblematic building for Bilbao, in the same way that Sydney Opera House had become for Sydney. Also, it would demonstrate that Bilbao was not closed in upon itself but open to international currents, as the Museo would be an integral part of a transatlantic axis, linked to Venice and New York (the homes of the two other Guggenheim Museums). On this argument, the Museo was an exercise (an extremely costly one) in public relations.

Third, the Government planned to revitalize Bilbao generally, by commissioning the construction of a series of impressive buildings: a business centre, a conference and performing arts centre, a large transport interchange, a metro system, a new terminal for the city's airport, and new bridges over its river. All of these buildings were to be designed by architects of the greatest renown: Sir Norman Foster, James Stirling, Santiago Calatrava, Cesar Pelli. The overall strategy behind these projects was to establish Bilbao as a European centre for service industries, modern technologies, and upmarket tourism. The Museo was meant to be a central part of this strategy, attracting businessmen with cultural aspirations and cultivated tourists with deep pockets.'

To the Foundation, the agreement was a part way out of their current economic difficulties. As a totally private body which receives no public subsidy, the Foundation had gone deeply into debt in the early 1990s to pay for the renovation of their famous Frank Lloyd Wright building which overlooks Central Park. Its new director, the art historian-cum institutional entrepreneur Thomas Krens, decided that the most effective way to balance its books was to exploit its underused resources. Since only 3% of its collection could be exhibited at any one time, he argued that the Foundation should embark on an 'economics of scale'. The first part of this plan was the opening of an extension in Soho, the artistic quarter of New York. The second part was to reach agreements with foreign governments or city halls for the construction of new Guggenheim Museums, designed by famous architects, in which a travelling series of exhibitions selected from the Foundation's collection would be shown. In return, the Foundation would receive, in each case, a large fee for lending its name, pictures, and expertise (Durieux 1995). The agreement with the Basque Government was the first it had signed. The payment by the Government to the Foundation was fixed at 2,000 million pesetas.

Basque reaction to the agreement was immediate, and much of it negative. Generally, representatives of political parties were infuriated by the secrecy surrounding such a large project, which, they claimed, offended "the

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most elemental sense of democracy" (*El Mundo*, 31 December 1991). More specifically, they criticized its economic basis (*El Correo Espanol*, 18 December 1991). They questioned the elevated number of visitors the Government claimed the Museo would attract and pointed out that, even if these numbers were to be achieved, the Museo would still generate a loss of 400 million pesetas a year. To them, the money would be far better spent tackling directly the problems of the Basque Country; raising a world-class building would only serve to mask them (Barrena 1991). In the local legislature, they attempted to have the project halted, but were outvoted (*El Correo Espanol*, 18 December 1991).

Basque journalists critical of the project echoed opposition politicians in making much of the fact that the Foundation was able to impose extremely stringent conditions for the running of the museum, as well as providing many of its most important personnel (*El Mundo*, 11 February 1992). And they delighted in advertising the fact

that the Foundation only entered negotiations with the Basque Government after its plans to establish a branch in Salzburg or Boston had fallen through (*El Mundo*, 5 October 1991, 14 February 1994). Why should their government, they reasoned, be prepared to commit so much money on a project they could not properly control and which other, richer cities had turned down?

Creative artists were particularly vituperative in their condemnation of the project. Architects criticized the suspicious manner by which Gehry, a friend of Krens, had won the closed competition to design the building; also they petitioned against the demolition of important industrial architecture on the site of the future Museo (*El Mundo*, 11 December 1991). Over 300 Basque painters, writers, filmmakers, actors, and singers formed a collective, 'Kultur Keska', to oppose what they called the 'pharaonic' pretensions of the Government (*El Mundo*, 24 January 1992, *Ya*, 30 January 1992). Since the Government, only a few months before, had refused to fund the construction of a grand Basque Cultural Centre in the centre of Bilbao, and since it had recently started to reduce its subsidies to a broad spectrum of regional cultural groups, Kultur Keska regarded the Museo as the central part of a shift in strategy from supporting local activities to sponsoring prestige projects imported from the United States. Jorge Oteiza, who was to have designed the Cultural Centre and who, besides Eduardo Chillida, is the only contemporary Basque artist of international standing, wrote an open letter to the leader of the Government, in which he called the signing of the agreement "authentic double-dealing, something worthy of Disney, totally anti-Basque, and which will cause great damage and the paralysation of all the cultural activities which could be produced in our country" (*El Pais*, 5 February 1992). Other critics have seen it as an exemplar of the economically-motivated 'culture of spectacle', where culture is treated not as source of creativity and dynamism, but as a profitable commodity meant to lend tone and lustre to its commodifier, in this case the Government. As one put it (Araluze 1992), "The powers that be do not concern themselves with the state of Culture if the Culture is not of the State". These critics were opposed to the commercially cynical exploitation of culture - what is called *el negocio del ocio* (the business of leisure) - especially if it is conducted at the expense of local, less internationally prestigious initiatives.

The Basque painter Fernando Illana (*Egin*, 12 January 1992) disparaged the project because it sanctioned consumption over production, turning potential producers into passive clients. Following this general line of argument, others censured the agreement as another unwelcome instance of the 'Coca-colonization' of non-American culture by American forces. In their eyes the Foundation was renting out its prestige as though it were a brand-name, and was treating its pictures, not as a collection to be curated, but as stock to be played on the world art market.

To these local critics, the Museo would not be a place to contemplate aesthetic visions, merely the local franchise or branch of this particular American business. To them, nationalist politicians were meant to be boosting nationalist forces, not aiding imperialist practices.

In the United States, the new economic strategy of the Foundation has attracted a similar degree of criticism, though not from such a broad constituency. Art lovers' hackles were first raised in the spring of 1990 when the Foundation sold three of its important paintings (one apiece by Modigliani, Chagall and Kandinsky) for \$47 million in order to pay for the acquisition of a collection of contemporary art. Critics of the sale argued that 'deaccessioning' (as it is known) changed the very nature of a collection because it was to put the market value of a collection above its cultural value. And, as far as they were concerned, this sort of revaluation was not meant to occur at such a level. An art museum might choose to sell off some of its much lesser possessions, but one which sold a trio of such value was acting in a way incommensurate with what an art museum should be doing. Moreover, once such deaccessioning had become an accepted practice, where would it stop, as a collection was meant to serve as the patrimony of a succession of future generations (Weil 1995: 139-43). There was also the question, which paintings were to be deaccessioned? For if, as is the case, critical judgements change with time, then what is sold today could well be viewed in the future as having 'special aesthetic value' (Heilbrun and Gray 1993: 182). Observers of the Foundation's development were also disturbed by its \$55 million bond issue to pay for the renovation of the Museum. An art museum usually secures any major bond issue by funds from endowments so that its collection is never put in jeopardy. But the Foundation had secured its issue from the future revenue it claimed it would raise. And if the number of visitors failed to reach the optimistic level set by the Foundation then deaccessioning would be a very tempting way of meeting the gap.

Critics were further worried that Krens's idea of a 'global museum' would endanger the life of paintings, for the more they were transported from one Guggenheim site to another the greater the probability that some would be damaged, if not destroyed, en route. A plane could drop from the sky, a lorry could crash. As the arts correspondent for *The New York Times* (Kimmelman 1990) remarked, this constant moving of the pictures might discourage potential donors: "Why should paintings donated to the Guggenheim Foundation with the implicit

understanding that they contribute to the cultural life of New York be put at risk for the sake of franchises in Salzburg or Tokyo?"

The Foundation replied to its critics by claiming that time would demonstrate the wisdom of its new strategy. The Basque Government replied to its critics by reiterating the supposed benefits of the Museo. To counter the accusations of unnecessary extravagance, it also proposed to reduce its budget for the Museo by reducing its size (*El Mundo*, 24 February 1992). But costs increased so quickly that when, in February 1993, the reduction was finally announced (from 33,000 square metres to 22,000), the budget remained unchanged (*El Mundo*, 26 February 1993). Since the Government had not changed its arguments in support of the project, the debate surrounding it has not progressed, but simply persisted. Opponents of the project continue to question the economic logic of the future Museo (Uriarte 1996) and to criticize its inherent cultural imperialism (*El Mundo*, 13 March 1996). In the words of one local, "The truth is that we put up the money, they [the Foundation] administer it, and the politicians make off with the medals" (Vallejo 1996). In March 1996, the Government belatedly responded to the charges of secrecy by organizing a three-month season of guided tours around the building site. They proved to be so popular among the curious public that

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They were all booked within two weeks.

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It is worth examining some of the key notions which lie behind the criticisms launched by others at the project proposed by the Foundation and the Government. By doing so we can gain a clearer idea of what exactly people are objecting to and where precisely they stand. In this analytical process central actors in the continuing debate may be seen to take on new, seemingly contrary roles, with political conservatives emerging as cultural revolutionaries and members of the artistic avant-garde as die-hard traditionalists.

The Partido Nacionalista Vasco (Basque Nationalist Party) is the main partner in the coalition which constitutes the Basque Government. The impetus for the Guggenheim project came exclusively from its deputies and representatives. The PNVI founded in the 1880s by the pioneer ideologue of Basque nationalism Sabino Arana, is situated on the centre-right. Its nationalist policies aim to boost and consolidate Basque identity. While its present leaders do not call for independence, they strive to wrest the greatest degree of autonomy for the Basque area from the central Spanish Government. It is therefore initially surprising that such nationalists would embark on a massive project which local critics thought would do "great damage to our own culture". "It is", one said, "a way of entombing Basque identity" (*El Mundo*, 24 January 1992).

In fact it may be argued that the PNV politicians are simply maintaining the aesthetic attitudes of their party's founder, for Sabino Arana was only interested in the utilitarian value of art (MacClancy 1997). Like him, his latter-day disciples are not primarily concerned with pictures as such but with the local socioeconomic ends to which they can be put: not art for art's sake, but paintings for patriotic purposes. At the same time, it may be argued that the Government is also attempting to generate locally a cultural plurality; that instead of purely subsidizing marked aspects of 'customary' Basque culture (Basque troubadours, Basque folk music and dance groups, Basque rural sports, etc.), it is simultaneously promoting an essentially urban-based culture which looks to the innovation of recent decades and the present as much as to the traditions of the pre-industrial past. (Aspects of this modern Basque culture include Basque football, 'radical Basque' rock music, and Basque town-street bobsleighs.) Of course, one political advantage, for the ruling PNV, of this Diversifying strategy is that it is much more difficult for a party (especially one in the opposition) to assert hegemonic control over a plurality of cultures than a monoculture. Also, for PNV politicians, the Museo is a way for Basques to transcend the geographical restrictiveness of an ethnic identity grounded in customary practices, by producing an emblematic building which, to be appreciated appropriately, needs to be compared with others outside the Basqueland. The same argument applies to the paintings which will fill the Museo. As two leading members of the PNV have stated, the project is a "means of augmenting the values of plurality, tolerance and openness"; it is a way of overcoming "our smallness, our provincialism, the sadness of our reality, and the narrowness of our horizons" (Laskurain 1991, Arregi 1992). These politicians do not want to support a mono-cultural (and decaying) Basque society, where 'culture' is regarded as a static bounded entity, its content legitimated by traditional use, but a pluricultural (and prosperous) Basque country, where the local intermeshes with the global, the high with the low, and the modern with the antique.

It is, however, still possible to worry whether members of the Basque Government, in their rush to reinvigorate Bilbao, have not blinded themselves by the brightness of their civic vision. As a British journalist observed,

"Certainly there is something megalomaniac about the scale of the proposals. The local authorities resemble boys let loose in a toy shop, obsessively collecting monuments and architects as if they were the components of the perfect train set. The attachment to big names (and they have gone for the very biggest) suggests that the idea of good architecture is as important as its actuality" (Moore in *The Daily Telegraph*, 5 April 1995).

A pair of arguments might be deployed against their optimistic dream of the revitalized city. Firstly, the economic rationale for bringing the Guggenheim is not as well-grounded as they claim. Supporters of the arts contend that their presence can help attract businesses into a metropolitan area, so stimulating local economic growth. Yet while it is true that the imaginative, organized remodelling of city space may reawaken a sense of life on its streets and culture in its halls (Harvey 1989), it does not necessarily bring capital in its train. Indeed, studies of how businesses have decided to locate their offices and factories have not shown that art and high culture play a significant role in determining their choice of location. In Frankfurt, for instance, the city authorities have acknowledged that their heavy investment over the past decade in the creation of new museums has not reaped the economic benefits originally expected. Moreover, the larger the city the greater the economic impact of the arts, i.e. in metropolises, the simultaneous presence of a large number of different sorts of high cultural producers has a mutual multiplier effect, known as 'the economics of agglomeration' (Heilbrun and Gray 1993: 302-23). While this sort of economic logic might hold good for conurbations on the scale of New York, it is hardly relevant to cities the size of Bilbao, with less than a million inhabitants.

Secondly, regional governments of Spain (now constituted as a 'State of Autonomous Regions' (Hooper 1995)), by pursuing broadly similar policies of economic modernization, threaten to cancel out each other's efforts. For if all regional politicians are bent on playing the same game of boosting the well-being and welfare of their constituents, by ameliorating the urban environment, creating jobs in the process, then they run the grave risk of courting a destructive competitiveness instead of a mutually beneficial complementarity. In other words, in a modern, devolved state where central politicians no longer enjoy the nationwide directive power their forebears could exercise, one regional city's economic development may well become another's economic decline. In the Basqueland, nationalist politicians wish to develop Bilbao as a distinctive centre of service industries, high-technology industry and 'quality tourism'. But if the regionalist politicians controlling other Spanish cities are trying to do the same, or similar, then the distinctiveness of the Basque attempt becomes that much less, if not null and the possibility of its succeeding becomes that much smaller. Similarly, the Bilbao authorities are not alone in trying to revitalize their city by creating emblematic buildings. Seville has its 'Expo Park', left after the Universal Exposition there ended in 1992, Barcelona has its Olympic stadium, while the Valencian authorities plan to erect an enormous tower, designed by one of the architects (Calatrava) involved in the Bilbao project (Vazquez 1992, Harvey 1996). At this rate, if every major Spanish city, engaged in civic rivalry, comes to have its own emblematic building the Museo Guggenheim would no longer be regarded as something memorably different but as merely one (albeit a very good one) of a nationwide urban series. The Sydney Opera House, after all, is so well-known partly because there is nothing like it in the rest of the Southern Hemisphere.

Besides the questions of cultural identity and economic vision, there is also that of the nature of art and how it is to be understood. Here both the critical Basque artists and American art critics seem to come together, for members of both groups have censured the

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Guggenheim Foundation's present approach to pictures. The art critics attack the Foundation's deaccessioning partly because it underlines the ever-present monetary value of important paintings. They and the artists attack the Foundation's policy of franchising because it amounts to "an almost total rejection of the traditional museum as a fixed place where art is collected and preserved and studied" (Kimmelman in *The New York Times*, 21 June 1992), and because, they claim, it leads to pictures being treated as so much stock. It is as though both artists and art critics continued to regard economics as somehow alien to the cultural domain of great paintings, as though they wished to mark out a clearly bounded social space where art might be produced autonomously, impervious to assessment in anything other than purely (and supposedly timeless) aesthetic terms. To use Bourdieu's terms (1977), they seek to retain the cultural capital on which their status rests and so they resist strongly any easy

conversion of that into economic capital. To maintain their privileged positions within society, they wish to see maintained the fictive separation of these spheres.

In this sense their arguments seem to rely on the popular conception of money as signifying "a sphere of 'economic' relationships which are inherently impersonal, transitory, amoral and calculating", and as representing "an intrinsically revolutionary power which inexorably subverts the moral economy of 'traditional' societies" (Parry and Bloch 1989: 9, 12). Yet, as the contributors to Bloch and Parry's book reveal, this conception of money as the root of all evil is a historically very particular Western one. In many societies money is not seen as inherently subversive of the moral economy. As their examples show, it is quite possible for money and morals to co-exist in an integrated, untroubled manner without the former leading to the inevitable destruction of the latter. Even in the West, there has been a series (admittedly a rather thin one) of writers who have praised money as a source of virtue (Jackson 1995:308-51).

The point is underlined by contributors to Appadurai's book (Appadurai 1986), who demonstrate that commoditization is not a singular, irrevocable process, that objects may be said to have social lives, and that their being treated as commodities may only be stages within their social lives. In other words, just because an object is being treated as a commodity does not mean that it is only being treated as a commodity nor that it will, in consequence, be only ever be treated as a commodity. The politicians' highlighting of the economic value of the Guggenheim's paintings does not thereby deny their cultural value. Indeed their economic worth rests on their cultural worth. Trumpeting the economic potential of a painting does not decontextualize it, rather, it thickens the contexts within which it can be understood and increases the connotations it can be made to bear. To this extent, the politicians are enriching the potential modes of appreciating these paintings, not detracting from them.

Following their own line of argument, the artists (despite their pretensions to cultural innovativeness) and the critics may come to be seen as partly harking back to a peculiarly Western, nineteenth-century conception of art museums, whose premises were:

".....that visual artists were people of a special, privileged and elevated kind; that the works of art created by them were objects of a singular or even, at best, inherently spiritual significance; that the people who, whether by natural taste or practical discernment, were best able to understand and appreciate these works (connoisseurs, collectors, curators) were also people of a special, privileged and elevated kind; that the accumulation and display of these works in museums must necessitate a public good of an all but religious nature" (Weil 1995: 84).

As any cross-cultural history of art would show, all of the above premises are very much a product of their socio-cultural place and time and, as Weil points out (ibid.: 85), all of them have been consistently (and increasingly) questioned over the course of this century. Thus, if we advance this interpretation a little further, the Basque artists and American art critics who complain against the strategy of the Foundation appear to be doing so from a very traditionalist position, one, moreover, which serves to boost their own self-interests. On these grounds, within this scenario, they may be regarded as the conservative actors and the Basque politicians as the cultural revolutionaries. For what the artists and art critics might see as the (to them, morally despicable) McDonaidization of culture, the politicians might see as creative recategorization for the sake of socially beneficial ends. Artists and art critics might regard a prestigious collection of masterpieces as hallowed, but to culturally radical politicians nothing artistic is sacred.

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There is no neat end to a paper of this nature, no tidy conclusion tying together its various threads. There is no foreseeable end to the continuing debate on the Museo (due to open in late 1997). In fact, it may be argued that this is the way things should be: a national museum serving as a permanent site of open discourse, as both a source of high cultural satisfaction and a stimulus to constant discussion on what such a museum is and what it should be doing. At this rate the erection Of the Museo Guggenheim Bilbao may act as a greater jolt to the culture of Basqueland than either its politicians or its artists imagined.

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Note

1. Information for this section was drawn from promotional literature produced by the Consorcio del Proyecto Guggenheim Bilbao,

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