

# In love with *Puppy*: flowers, architecture, art, and the art of irony<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*Jeff Koons's installation, Puppy, symbolizes the move from modernism to postmodernism in contemporary Basque culture. It constitutes a break from the modernist aesthetics of artists such as Jorge Oteiza and Eduardo Chillida. The article argues that Puppy can only be understood from an ironic perspective. The subversive potential of irony in Basque culture is contextualized in this article.*

## Keywords

irony  
modernism  
postmodernism

In her 1988 recording, *Seven Deadly Sins*, Marianne Faithful's broken voice sings Kurt Weill's enticing 'Bilbao Song' from his opera, *Happy Ending*. Bertold Brecht's words of irony evoke a fantastically decadent cabaret scene of the early twentieth century in Bilbao, a place of excess, fun and laughter where for one dollar you could get all the noise and pleasure you wanted, where patrons smoked Brazilian cigars and brandy bottles flew through the air, where grass grew through the dance floor and the green moon shone through the roof:

Hey, Joe, play that old song  
They always played

That old Bilbao moon  
There where we used to go  
That old Bilbao moon  
Casting its golden glow  
That old Bilbao moon  
Love never laid me low  
That old Bilbao moon  
Oh, ay, why does it haunt me so

I don't know if  
It'd have brought you joy or grief  
But it was fantastic  
It was fantastic  
It was fantastic  
Beyond belief  
(So long ago)

Yet it was not so long ago. Thomas Krens, the Director of Guggenheim Museums Worldwide, made fashionable the Brazilian cigars again, *El Correo* reports. Tourists are back and rumours of fantastic recoveries abound. And if

*For Jorge Oteiza*

1 Acknowledgements: I have benefited from the comments and editorial help provided by Ibon Aranberri, Nere Arruti, Jill Berner, Goretti Etxaniz, and Asier Pérez.

you want to see a sign of the glorious return of that old Bilbao moon with its golden glow, look at the *New York Times Magazine*'s cover of Gehry's 'miracle' or sense its aura in the hundreds of magazines and advertisements in love with his masterpiece.

### **A tiger in your bedroom**

Yes, love is back in Bilbao. Listen to Krens's repeated mantra: 'The Guggenheim Bilbao is a combination of Egypt's Pyramids, China's Forbidden City, and the Taj Mahal.' It is the Taj Mahal analogy that most intimately conveys the amorous pleasures of the lover, a man engulfed in rapturous desire for the once-in-a-lifetime beauty. A love so heroic that the entire world must know about it. The Taj Mahal – the ultimate splendour of a pleasure dome, the archetypal emblem of a lover's exuberant folly, the ultimate gift of a prince succumbed to eternal love – is now in Bilbao and the world has taken notice.

I found out about all of this on a summer day in his Manhattan office. Who but the exuberant Krens would invite a perfect stranger like me for a night-time interview with sushi and plenty of wine? It was almost a date for him. Only an amorous man could display such discourse of wonderment, passion, and optimism over his museums, his projects, his challenges. The theatrics of his self-aggrandizement were just a part of the play. But a man so intoxicated by Bilbao, so passionate in playing the politics of seduction with a post-industrial ruinous city, so full of excitement for taking risks in auction houses and in the global arena, so thoroughly committed to his self-definition of 'professional *séducteur*', he could not be a machiavellian despot. He was too much of a playboy, too vulnerable to the trappings of his own game, too exhibitionistic in his passions. Most journalists dislike his megalomaniac arrogance, but you could not disregard the intensity of his desire, his love for risk, his dismissive sleight of hand of the conventional art world, his *jouissance* at it all.

'Krens has two brass balls', summed up the then Whitney Museum's director David Ross when discussing the Bilbao project. 'Krens doesn't want to fuck Bilbao', Ross added. He only wanted to respond in kind; seduction was enough. Let them adopt the strategy of force and challenge; he would passively allow himself to be taken in. 'Why are you going to allow the tiger to enter your bedroom?' Krens asked rhetorically as if to assuage any qualms I might have about his tactics. World cities had become for Krens what women were for Don Juan: useful accessories to satisfy his fantasies of power and conquest. But this time, in that most unexpected Basque provincial city with its famed blast furnaces in ruin, he found himself in the bedroom. Krens was doing nothing more than letting the tiger be a tiger.

### **From the shibboleth to *Puppy***

Krens felt betrayed by my chronicling of his love affair with Bilbao.<sup>2</sup> But in fact I could be his best accomplice. I have learnt the most from him and I am even willing to make him the indispensable hero in the entire Bilbao success. All I did was to complement his and Gehry's voluptuous 'Cinderella story', that pleasure dome of love and romance, by couching it in the discourse of

irony. The professional *séducteur* must promise the world right and left, but for the seduction to work something more than mere belief is required. It needs irony as well, that Kierkegaardian baptism by fire of modernity. Without it, the global love museum project will remain unfinished business. By using the ironic strategy of ‘a deliberate refusal to resolve contradictions’,<sup>3</sup> my critique was also complicitous with Krens’s seduction.

Love is back, thank you – says Bilbao under the spell of its Taj Mahal. But, please, allow us the return of irony as well – many *bilbainos* were begging while the art critic descended from New York to fall in love with the masterpiece. His language could only be messianic, deliberately: “‘Have you been to Bilbao?’” In architectural circles, the question has acquired the status of a shibboleth. Have you seen the light? Have you seen the future?<sup>4</sup> is said in the *New York Times Magazine’s* review. Apotheosis of the architect as saviour, the one who ‘has transcended the future and taken us into eternity’, as a letter to the editor of the *Magazine* put it.

But Gehry certainly is not for a new cult. His unique gift to Bilbao might tolerate religious hyperbole but his ship/artichoke/flower/fish building is no less attuned to flamboyant irreverence and fakery. One only has to look at the photograph and consider the building’s titanium skin with its silvery palette of cold, greyish tones drenched, on the *New York Times Magazine’s* cover, in the torrid, golden, crackling flames of sodium lamps and photographic colouring. It reminded one reader of ‘a major meltdown of a nuclear power plant’. I asked the museum’s photographer how you could achieve such glittering yellow colours that are so completely unavailable to the naked eye given the building’s usual pallid tones. The trick is to take a long exposure on a rainy evening with daylight film. You could then have incredible colours produced by some nearby lamp in the street or by car headlights. The edifice’s pallid, sedate image was not good enough *per se* for the magazine’s cover – there had to be a Las Vegased neon version of crackling colour of gold melting into a glittering splash of yellows, whites and reds, so unlike Gehry’s white whale – yet so familiar to *bilbainos*. For these are precisely the colours that they cannot remove from their retinas or memories. They were also the colours needed to photographically evoke Bilbao’s new-found glittering museistic aura, by making its blazing iridescence visible from back home, while bathing the cover of the *New York Times Magazine* in glowing yellows, whites and golds.

Bilbao was once a place of edifices with real fire at their centre – great steel plants providing the everyday blinding sight of that incandescent yellow volcano, symbol of work and life, that could not be contained by buildings, machinery, noise, night, distance. They were the ‘Altos Hornos de Vizcaya’ – tall furnaces dealing in liquid fire and present time on the left bank of the Nervión river. Now those buildings of fire are all gone, but their ghostly ruins still remain. It is the end of an era in which British capital, rich Bizkaian iron mines, Basque aristocratic families and cheap immigrant labour conjured up a steel bonanza. The ten-mile corridor from Bilbao to the Atlantic was producing almost 20 per cent of the world’s steel at the turn of the twentieth century. Then came obsolescence, ruin ... an industry destined to vanish into

3 L. Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, New York: Routledge, 1988, p. x.

4 Herbert Muschamp, ‘The Miracle in Bilbao’, *New York Times Magazine’s* cover, 7 September 1997.

- 5 Max Weber's letter to his mother was reproduced in the monthly magazine *Bilbao's* six issues 31–36 (June–December 1994). 35, p. 4.
- 6 The Alhóndiga, a listed building built by Ricardo Bastida in 1909, was offered by the municipal council to Oiza and Oteiza as the site for their Cultural Centre in the late 1980s. Their plans were contested because of its architectural significance and the project collapsed. During subsequent negotiations between the Guggenheim Museum and the Bilbao authorities, Gehry visited the Alhóndiga and declared the site non-viable for his proposed new museum.

history's trash can, one famed volcano after another extinguished 'like a candle in the wind'. A magazine cover of postmodern photogenic furnace – a glorious return of the repressed – was all that remained. The New York art critic never discovered the incredible history of Bilbao that made Max Weber exclaim, 'The panorama of the mountains ... rising up above the sea and the Nervión Valley, smoking with a hundred chimneys, forms a spectacle that is simply so stunning as to become unforgettable.'<sup>5</sup> Herbert Muschamp, *The New York Times* architectural critic, was unaware of the enormous historic parallels between the rise and fall of the Guggenheim family and Bilbao's industrial cycles. All Muschamp discerns is 'American art and architecture' amid Bilbao's rubble while he prays for the auratic miracle of 'a Lourdes' for his crippled American culture.

He is also oblivious of the powerful artistic undercurrents that link Frank Gehry and Richard Serra, the sculptor enshrined like no other artist at the Bilbao museum, and Basque artists such as Jorge Oteiza and Eduardo Chillida. Gehry's love for Bilbao's aesthetic of toughness has to do more with what these artists went through than with messianic hyperbole. It was Serra who first 'discovered' Bilbao and its artists and talked about it to Gehry. Serra went as far as calling the old proscribed Oteiza 'the greatest sculptor alive'.

Oteiza was also the one who opposed the franchising of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao with murderous fury. For Cinderella stories to work, you need monster figures. For global love museums to be real, you need local primitives opposing them. Except that Oteiza was also the artist who for half a century had preaching the gospel of artistic avant-garde to the Basques. Bordering on madness, in his 90s he could still be frightful in his fury. It was also he who had designed the great Cultural Centre at the old winery or Alhóndiga,<sup>6</sup> with the help of his friend the architect F. J. Saenz de Oiza, just before Krens came knocking at the door of Bilbao's Treasury. The Cultural Centre would have combined a museum with workshops for artists, a public library, an auditorium, etc. It was to be an 'experimental' centre as much as a museistic one. It would display the world's avant-garde artists, and the Basque avant-garde would be second to none. It would embrace the great aesthetic movements, but without forgetting what Oteiza had been labelling for decades, 'Basque anthropological aesthetics'.

This was all fine, but who in the world would pay attention to Basque aesthetic concepts and modernist art? Oteiza's building was to be a glass 'cube', the very signature of modern architecture. Thirty years earlier it might have been worthy of celebration, but not at the turn of the millennium, not when you needed a New York critic to certify whether or not you mattered. Certainly *La Alhóndiga* would never have made *The New York Times* art section. Remember, the goal was universal art, redemption by beauty, a global museum.

Oteiza's aesthetics were and are, of course, modernist to the core, art being for him a heroic quest for formal truth and radical transformation – a substitute for religion, in the most literal sense of the expression. He wrote passionately about the statue as sacrament. His revolutionary rhetorics of art,

expounded in his many writings over half a century, affected the Basque writers and artists of my generation like no one else did. Yet the Bilbao officials who fell for Krens had all been steeped in Oteiza's aesthetics.

As the Guggenheim had been commissioned, Oteiza wanted a blood wedding instead of the golden one. Heroic modernism and sacramental commitment had put him in murderous mood. He might blame Krens for it, but in the end Krens was doing Oteiza a great favour as well. Frank Gehry and Richard Serra, accompanied by photographers and journalists, would visit and laud Oteiza, their gesture making front-page news. They secured his silence with embraces and flattery ('one of the four or five most fundamental artists of the century', 'the greatest sculptor alive', etc.). It was an uplifting story even for Oteiza, a proscribed artist who abominates the international art market and whose lifelong work has been stored for decades in the basement of his house, whose iron sculptures could not make it into the United States even after winning the Sao Paulo Biennial (US customs officials considered them to be scrap iron and not art), and who has for all of his life been a sort of guerrilla conspirator demanding respect for Basque art. Yet his contemptuous rage and his trumpeting of modern art's total defeat were finally paying off. His final coup was to finally obtain the international recognition that has eluded him all along. It is *his* Cinderella story and paradoxically he owes it all to Krens.

Romance and miracle are not sufficient to capture the whole thing. Irony is a must, which is why Jeff Koons's *Puppy* is so unique to the new Bilbao culture under the Guggenheim's shadow. Many of my generation were forced to replace religion with Oteiza's and Chillida's heroic sculpture. In their powerfully abstract and radical formalism, their *Metaphysical Boxes* (the series of sculptures experimenting with the concept of void created by Oteiza in 1959<sup>7</sup>) and *Comb of the Wind* (Chillida's 1977 monumental comb-like group of sculptures<sup>8</sup> facing the Cantabrian sea) were aesthetic objects that seemed to provide us, by synthesis and transgression, the bare, figural skeleton of archetypal forms and crumbled mythologies. They were works of nourishment, almost of spiritual survival, in a world of cultural and religious ruination. But even this remaining shelter of art as truth was too much complacency. For this we needed a different type of sculpture. We needed *Puppy*.

*Puppy*, the flower sculpture by former stockbroker Jeff Koons is a 15-foot-tall terrier supported by a metallic structure that has four floors and an internal irrigation system. The structure is covered with soil and protected by a perforated geo-textile mantle; the flowers that make up the skin of the spectacular dog are inserted into holes in this mantle, requiring a change every six months. In the autumn and winter *Puppy* is covered with 50,000 pansies; for the spring and summer a combination of 45,000 flowers of warmer colours are chosen: begonias; petunias; Chinese carnations of red, orange, pink, and white. *Puppy*'s change of skin takes a week and it requires scaffolding to be erected; the discarded flowers are offered as gifts to museum visitors. During this week the museum's education department organizes workshops to teach nature conservancy to 3 to 11-year-old children who are 'Friends of the Museum'.

In the tradition of baroque gardens in which monumental sculptures were

7 See J. Zulaika (ed.), *Oteiza's Select Writings*, Reno: University of Nevada, Center for Basque Studies, 2003.

8 See P. Selz, *Chillida*, New York: H.N. Abrams, 1986.

- 9 H. Foster, 'The Un/making of Sculpture', in H. Foster with G. Hughes (eds.), *Richard Serra*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2000, p. 183.
- 10 See J. Zulaika, *Basque Violence: Metaphor and Sacrament*, Reno and Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press, 1988, p. 263.

used to welcome visitors, *Puppy* greets the Guggenheim-Bilbao visitors. Created in 1992, it was first installed in the gardens of Arolsen Castle in Germany, then travelled to Sydney's 1996 Festival where it stood in front of the Museum of Contemporary Art. But it found its perfect and apparently permanent spot in Bilbao. Artistic kitsch is *Puppy*'s greatest attraction. If Oteiza and Chillida emblemized the titanic struggle for freedom and spiritual survival during Franco's dark period, the emblem of the new culture of irony overtaking Bilbao had to be something different, far less intense, far more hip. Initially, many people of my generation felt *Puppy* to be a provocation. Even if they hated the silly dog, they were embarrassed to issue an opinion, afraid they might be seen as ignoramuses – as those critics of the Guggenheim had been shown up to be. Then some critics declared it was okay to like it. It was after all for the mindless tourists, and whatever made them happy should be okay, many thought. The flowery *Puppy* presented the challenge of giving acceptance to a new art. While greeting the tourists, *Puppy* also introduces and foregrounds the architecture of the museum, not as a foil 'to contradict the architecture', but as its chosen complement for even Gehry's magnus Bilbao opus is crowned with 'metallic flowers'.<sup>9</sup> If 'Guggy' is the emblem of the new Bilbao, *Puppy* is the emblem of the emblem, the perfect postcard for the tourist.

### ***Puppy, raving, and cyborgs***

A popular joke about the Guggenheim has two guys from Gipuzkoa (the neighbouring province that competes for funds with Bizkaia and that most protested about Bilbao's grandiose museum) looking at *Puppy*. One exclaims: 'What a dog, eh!' And the companion points to Gehry's building: 'And what about the doghouse behind!'

Dogs belong, like humans, to a shifty category. Their association with the police, targets of the terrorist group ETA, provides a salient case of a blurred category between beasts and human beings in Basque politics.<sup>10</sup> The metaphoric equivalence works by implying that what humans are to gods, so are dogs to humans. Museums are routinely described as 'temples'; discussing the design of the Bilbao Guggenheim's atrium, Krens is said to have ordered Gehry to make it so magnificent that the visitor had to 'kneel down' in awe. Gehry delivered the temple for the gods of modern art. But gods and dogs can easily be interchanged in Basque political ritual. On the day of the opening, the Basque terrorist group ETA put a bomb in one of the Guggenheim's flowerpots, killing a policeman 'dog' right next to the flowery *Puppy*.

But the metaphor could also be applied to the politics of Basque democratic nationalism. Scrupulously avoiding any consultation with the Basque public to the point of secrecy, the final decision to build the controversial Bilbao Guggenheim was made at a Rioja winery in a meeting of the leadership of the Basque Nationalists, the party in power, and chaired by its president, Xabier Arzalluz. Arzalluz has been described frequently as the tough 'guardian dog of Basque nationalism', certainly not a poodle or a terrier, but rather a menacing Dobermann. It is no small feat that the severe 'Dobermann'

Arzalluz has succeeded in making the lovely *Puppy* into the ultimate symbol of a softly nationalist Bilbao. Such historic realities condense the ironies of art and politics in the present Basque situation.

This flower-skinned happy puppy at the Guggenheim entrance is Bilbao's most emblematic artistic cyborg, a combination of stainless steel and flowers, machine and organism, an asexual terrier that, while turning *Puppy* into a hybrid, protects the imaginary bridge between New York and Bilbao. This is not only the best-known but, many would argue, the most important work of art in the Bilbao of the Guggenheim era. On the occasion of having cloned *Puppy* at Rockefeller Center in New York, Koons gave an interview to the *New York Times*.<sup>11</sup> The journalist Debora Solomon asked him:

Q. What kind of a dog is it?

A. West Highland terrier. If I had done a poodle, it would have seemed very feminine. And if I had done a Doberman [*sic*] or a sheep dog, it would have come off as masculine. But a West Highland terrier seems natural that way, which is good, because I don't want anyone in the audience to feel alienated. It's a very spiritual piece.

Q. Since when did you start sounding like a choirboy? About a decade ago you were married to the Italian porn star Cicciolina and making paintings and sculptures that showed you copulating in every which position.

A. At that time I wanted to make a body of work that was romantic in the tradition of Boucher and Fragonard. I don't think I would show those pieces today.

Q. I'm not surprised. For a while, your divorce and custody battle got more attention than your artwork. Is all that settled?

A. My son and I received tremendous injustice from the Italian government. It's not in the interest of my son that he's in the custody of his mother. For the past six years I've gone to Italy every month to visit my son. I hope *Puppy* is a symbol of the rights of children. The rights of children are neglected.

*Concerning the Spiritual in Art* by Kandinsky<sup>12</sup> was one of the most influential books of early modernism. The ascetic Chillida and the Rabelaisian Oteiza embedded their work in a highly spiritual discourse of art as the most sublime search for truth. My generation was much attuned to such a spiritualized meaning of art. But Koons's spirituality seems to be something different when he argues that, symbolizing the rights of children, his *Puppy* tries to compensate for the wrong done by the Italian government to the son he had with the now divorced porno-star Cicciolina. This sounds too banal to us. But there must be something genuine to Koons too. Even Chillida was pictured under *Puppy* while promoting his son's racing car. This was a moment of intimate

- 11 D. Solomon, 'Puppy Love', *New York Times Magazine*, 25 June 2000, p. 15.
- 12 V. Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (trans. by M.T.H. Sadler), New York: Dover Publications, 1977.

irony for people like me – the austere Chillida under the flowery shadow of the stockbroker/artist/pornographer. But leaving aside the meaning of ‘spiritual’, would they agree in the meaning of what ‘art’ is? Deborah Solomon’s interview again:

Q. That’s quite a switch for an artist who began his career making consumerist fetish objects like floating basketballs and stainless-steel bunnies. Are you trying to distance yourself from the ‘80s?

A. As time goes on, the ‘80s artists will gain more support. I enjoy Julian Schnabel and David Salle. Andy did great work, too. But visually, I’m more stimulated by advertising than by art I see in galleries. I like a lot of ice cream advertising. I like a lot of cereal-box advertising.

Q. Are you saying that a box of Frosted Flakes is more compelling than any of the art in the Manhattan galleries?

A. Yes. Visually, it’s just more exciting.

Q. What’s your idea of a great cereal box?

A. I’ve always enjoyed Cheerios. But all the breakfast-cereal boxes are exciting. The reason is they’re trying to pump energy into people in the morning, make people feel good about the day.

Q. Are you really this corny, or is it just a kind of Warholish pose?

A. I mean it. It’s not a mask. So much art is very, very gloomy now. Cereal boxes are just the opposite. Art is obsolete now. New technologies are taking over.

Q. You don’t really believe that art is obsolete.

A. I do. There was a time when Picasso was the wealthiest man in France and Henry Moore was the wealthiest person in England, other than the Queen. There’s no such thing as that anymore. Bill Gates and your technology leaders are the ones with money. Artists today – they’re nothing within the landscape of economics.

Modernist art used to glory in pretending to be a ‘refuge’ from the world, and so does Koons when he replies that, ‘*Puppy* is a shelter. It’s built out of stainless steel. It’s like the fuselage of an airplane. You could live inside it.’ When asked about the fact that his assistants do the work for him, he replies that he is waiting for the day in which the flowers on *Puppy* can be planted without his involvement.

The discourse of ‘the spiritual in art’ and ‘the void’ (central to Oteiza and Chillida) and the transcendent aesthetic shelter worked very well while



modernism dominated the art world. This appeared to be a world impervious to irony. But when the same discourse is used by Koons to describe what modernist aesthetics would despise as kitsch, the results are quite different. A world of irony emerges. Plain facts such as that money is the determining factor in the contemporary art world can now be voiced. A generation of young Basque artists in the late 1970s and 1980s, names such as Vicente Ameztoy, Andrés Nagel and many others, did in fact use powerful irony to exorcise the sacralization of modernist art. But Basques had to wait for Gehry's Guggenheim and Koons's *Puppy* to be confronted with the stark dominance of ironic culture. Yes, you could keep framed at home the posters of your old masters, but you better adapt your sensibilities to the brave new world of sinuous architecture and flowery kitsch.

All of this reminds us of Kierkegaard's view that irony is like a purifying baptism and that 'there is no authentic human life without irony'.<sup>13</sup> It is when we contemplate the differences between the lives we would like to live and those we actually live that reality appears inevitably as incongruous. We live ironic lives in the sense that frequently we feel opposition to the artistic or political or economic realities of our times and yet, if asked, we would be unable to present convincing alternatives to them. Thus, also, it is rather easy to be ironic about the way in which the Bilbao Guggenheim deal took place with the media's Guggenheim 'miracle' that turns into the exclusive news from the Basque art world. Much harder to be ironic when someone asks us to say specifically what the museums and the art world should be about. We begin by casting suspicion on the very possibility that such statements could make sense. We prefer to remain in the world of radical uncertainty, that is, of irony, as being more in tune with the spirit of the times we live.

When we have in our hands two incompatible things that are both simultaneously right and necessary, we are dealing with irony. Gehry's insistence that he, unable to even start up a computer, could not have built the Bilbao building without computer technology is a case in point. Along this line, the cyborg realities that combine organism and machine could provide further instances of incompatible things put together in a necessary fit. Given the cyborg component of his dependence on the computer, Gehry would not be offended by applying to his architecture Donna Haraway's argument that artificial prosthetics have become essential to who we are and how we live, that is, 'The cyborg is our ontology'.<sup>14</sup> And the cyborg, with all its ironic monstrosity, should provide us our politics as well. Evidently, cyborgs are neither a good model of communitarian holism, nor of romantic seduction, but they too, with their partiality and ironic perversity, look for linkages and serve as a common front against the old philosophical dualisms of body/mind, spiritual/material, organic/mechanic, or the newer political dualisms of savage/civilized, local/international, native/universal. If, against the totalistic tendencies of static identities, Haraway wrote that 'I prefer to be a cyborg rather than a goddess',<sup>15</sup> we could add that Bilbao's new aesthetic sensibility prefers *Puppy*'s ironics to modernist heroics.

Among the new cultures of fun in Bilbao, rave dance has become

13 S. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony (With Constant Reference to Socrates)*, New York: Harper and Row, 1965, p. 338.

14 D. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, New York: Routledge, 1991, p. 150.

15 *ibid.*, p. 181.

- 16 G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (trans. by R. Hurley, M. Seem, and H.H. Lane), New York: Viking Press, 1977.
- 17 R. Rorty, *ibid.*, p. 89.
- 18 J. Richardson, 'Go, Go, Guggenheim', *The New York Review of Books*, 16 July, 1992, pp. 18–22.

notorious. This is again an activity in which the chemical effect of drugs turns the body into a sort of cyborg automaton to the point of dissolving social and sexual divisions. The body allows the invasion of technology in the form of music, lights and drugs in order to achieve an 'ecstatic' subjectivity that goes beyond the ordinary boundaries between mind and body, exteriority and interiority. Such an experience of chaos and ambiguity goes against a stable notion of identity. The subject's body turns into a cyborg overpowered by technology and submerged into a collective body reminiscent of Deleuze and Guattari's 'body without organs'.<sup>16</sup> While the mechanical music has turned into a dancing body, the new reorganizations of bodily experience are in variance from the traditional ones. We are in the world of computer technology, cyborg culture, rave – the world of *Puppy* love.

### **Ironic art and the art of irony**

There was tragic irony in the sight of *Puppy* watching – so close in space, so distant in meaning – ETA's murderous killing of the policeman-dog. And there is romantic irony to the sight of *Puppy* watching the long queues of tourists – so distant in origin, so close in culture – lined up while descending the stairs of Gehry's grandiose building. The ironic gaze of *Puppy* appears to question the dominant culture of which it has become the emblem. If Socratic ignorance undermined all knowledge and became the best sign of wisdom, *Puppy's* ironic neutrality and indifference in the midst of a city whose passions it ignores becomes an sphinx-like distancing riddle full of surprise in the tourist's expectant imagination. This is no longer art pointing to that other state of aesthetic sublimity but rather art absorbed in the everyday vulgarity of life. Everything in it, as in irony, is playful and serious, open and hidden.

What is unsettling about irony is its 'power of redescription'.<sup>17</sup> The status quo aims at imposing its own view of the situation by demanding that it be equated with truth and that it be taken seriously at face value. Thus irony becomes unacceptably corrosive, immoral, even lawless. This ironic redescription by his critics was also what Krens did not like about his planetary project of a constellation of satellite museums. During the early 1990s commentator after commentator found his projects, as John Richardson put it, 'at the brink of absurdity', adding that his schemes could 'best be understood as a new kind of conceptual art: a combination, perhaps, of [the scam artist financier] Boesky and [the German pop artist] Beuys'.<sup>18</sup> And even Basques began to chronicle the Guggenheim's secret mission of saving the world of architecture and art by means of charming Basque authorities into signing a deal that required \$100 from each Basque taxpayer, a society with 25 per cent unemployment at the time, mainly for the sake of bailing out the New York museum's expansion and renovation. The *New York Times* architecture critic called native naysayers, and rightly so, 'bean counters'. Krens and his critics were all immersed in deep irony. Nobody knew this better than Krens himself, of course. In the interview he granted me, we could not refrain from continuous laughter – everything had been so improbable and hilarious.

But could the native bean counter laugh as well at the excesses of the

gamble and the unexpected rewards reaped thanks to Gehry's instant success? The asymmetries of the relationship between New York and Bilbao were obvious: I promise, you pay; I place the bet, you put up the money; I am the postmodern ironist, you are the modernist romantic. The secret deal was signed in Bilbao in a rush on 13<sup>th</sup> December, the day of Santa Lucía, the third century's virgin and martyr, patron of the blind, who, according to legend, had offered her eyes on a tray to the suitor who was in love with them. It was the perfect symbol of a love that should be blind, never with eyes open to the immense ironies of Krens's seductive indirections.

But irony is a delicate matter. That which seems to empower it – its distant arrogance – is also what makes it vulnerable. Implicit in irony is the premise that the ironist must know what others do not. That alleged superiority can become suspect; the victims of irony can turn against it. Does he really know something we others don't or is he simply pulling our leg? I know these dangers from experience. My chronicle of the New York/Bilbao deal was also a fundamentally ironic text. Ironists can pretend to look at anything from a distant superiority without having to disclose what they really think on the matter. One can describe the relations between Krens and the Basque authorities from an ironic distance without telling the reader what you would have done instead. If the reader draws conclusions from this regarding your views on the world of art, architecture, urban renewal, and so on, it is rather easy for the author to deny them since those conclusions were never meant to be presented directly. All you were doing was pointing out the ironic consequences of positions taken by others. 'Their words do not bind them,'<sup>19</sup> says Nehamas of the ironists.

The ironic frame is intent on bringing to light not only the points of disconnection between the words and the deeds of a given project, between the stated intentions and actual results of the politicians, between what New York and Bilbao wanted on each end of the process, between the goals of the world of art and those of the rest of society, between the foreign artists being brought to Bilbao and the excluded yet highly praised Basque artists, and so on, but also between Gehry's architecture and its ideological hegemony, or between the global/local discourse and its concrete use in the Basque case, or between a politics of transnational culture and its secret and authoritarian imposition in Bilbao. The ironic frame of reference allows for such gaps, contradictions, incongruities, disruptures. The ironist is not responsible for what the reader might conclude from the ironic narrative. One can be in favour of Gehry's architecture, or the Guggenheim Museum, or Bilbao's urban renewal, or global culture, and still insist on the ironic results of the Guggenheim-Bilbao because only thus can one unlink diverse spheres and decouple opposing results.

As stated by Nehamas, 'Irony always and necessarily postulates a double speaker and a double audience. One speaker does and does not mean what is said; one audience does and does not understand what is meant'.<sup>20</sup> Irony is thus halfway in between truth and lie. The Socratic method obtained unparalleled success but at the same time, by using such complex irony, Plato's

19 A. Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998, p. 60.

20 *ibid.*

- 21 P.J. Smith, *The Moderns: Time, Space, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Spanish Culture*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- 22 *ibid.*, p. 186.
- 23 G.E. Marcus, 'The Predicament of Irony and the Paranoid Style in Fin-de-Siècle Rationality', in J.W. Fernandez and M.T. Huber (eds.), *Irony in Action: Anthropology, Practice, and the Moral Imagination*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001, p. 220.
- 24 L. Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*, London and New York: Routledge, 1995, p. 200.

Socrates turned into an enigma. He is an illustration that there might be powerful reasons for ironic concealment and that certain lessons may only be communicated through irony. Frequently all irony does is to project a doubt while leaving the issue untouched as before. And certainly the ironist can become the victim of his own irony. The Guggenheim-Bilbao's extraordinary success added various layers of irony to the short-sighted criticisms of its ironic detractors like myself.

And then, besides those who understand and those who do not, the ironist also has to confront audiences with their own preferred indirections. Paul Julian Smith, for example, did not see in my chronicle, as I intended, a revelatory encounter between the New York art world's aims at global franchising of museums and a peripheral society's dilemmas confronting the consequences of such a deal on its own economy and art; rather he saw the 'typically "British" austerity and modesty' of Bilbao ill-treated by my book's 'postmodern style familiar in the US academy'.<sup>21</sup> For the New York architecture critic we the critics were simply 'bean counters' – the hundreds of Basque artists and intellectuals who protested against the anti-democratically secretive means by which Krens and local officials had made a deal that would dry up most of the regional funding to the local artistic and cultural institutions; for the British cultural critic a chronicle of the affair in terms of irony and seduction ('I am a professional *séducteur*, I am the greatest prostitute in the world', Krens boasted to me) is nothing but a Baudrillardian ploy, of all things, that 'the "seduction" of US cultural capital ... transcends any simple idea of truth and lie'.<sup>22</sup> Truth was what Krens wanted to sell in Bilbao; his primary seduction consisted in becoming a missionary for the master narrative of modernist art, housed in his museum, as a heroic quest for beauty and knowledge; a refusal to buy into such narratives, which could claim their own kind of truth by ambiguity, is what makes local reactions so dangerously 'postmodern'. But for those who still hold that irony is central to knowledge in the present era of cultural interdependencies, the deployment of multicultural and open-ended analyses are 'the most effective modes of resistance to often subtle forces of domination coming from the cold, hard, and systemic processes of capitalist political economy'.<sup>23</sup> A chronicle based on the local practices of resistance and taking into account the historical avant-garde of its main artists, and which elicited heated reactions from Krens and Basque officials, is caricatured by Smith as 'postmodern' and 'tautologous' while he invokes for his own distant academic neutrality the 'logic of practice' and 'the possibility of historicity'. This is good as parodic inversion.

The Guggenheim brought back to Bilbao the love of seduction, architecture, art, and global culture. But it also brought *Puppy* and the art of irony – irony as counter-discourse to the hegemonic ideologies of globalism and salvation by architecture. Irony is not irony until it is interpreted, which is why it is so relevant that the Guggenheim effect should elicit a diversity of reactions. Such plurality of voices represents obviously 'a challenge to the "modern" anonymous, expert narrative voice of labels and text'.<sup>24</sup> And in the end irony's complicitous critique must include self-irony as well, as we

recognize that there is no complete escape from blindness and folly. As White observed, irony ‘points to the potential foolishness of all linguistic characterizations of reality as much as to the absurdity of the beliefs it parodies’.<sup>25</sup> Thus irony may turn out to be a most practical aid to understanding and responsibility.

But can we turn the ironic *Puppy* into an emblem of responsibility? For the artists of the heroic avant-gardes it is rather the emblem of something quite different – decadence. And this is the danger of limitless irony, that it can become, as Nietzsche objected, a snapping dog which has learned how to bark ‘but forgotten how to bite’.<sup>26</sup> This is the problem with the flowery *Puppy*, Koons’s sexually neutral and ‘spiritual’ terrier, emblem of children’s rights: the last thing we can imagine is it biting anyone.

There was of course someone who, unlike the ironist, was capable of cursing when the Guggenheim and *Puppy* were installed in Bilbao – the old sculptor Oteiza. I took the ironies of my chronicle project to him and he cut me short immediately: ‘Forget about writing and quit fooling around. Kill them. I will pay you.’ Both Gehry and Krens had told me that they admired him as the greatest Basque artist. They both had asked me whether I could convince him to sell some of his work to the Bilbao Guggenheim – that would stop the embarrassment. His obsessive call to ‘murder them’, repeated to any visitor, was too much for him to bear. ‘Hate has overtaken me’, he added bitterly. Irony was too easy a game for him. Yet his tragic stance was the ultimate irony.

So far Basque society seems to be in no danger of habituation to irony. The ‘ironist’ is defined by Rorty as ‘the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires’.<sup>27</sup> If the lesson taught by *Puppy* is the need for ironic culture, one can hardly imagine a more necessary lesson for the contemporary Basque cultural and political situation. Yet a field such as ethnographic interpretation,<sup>28</sup> for example, inextricably linked to irony in action, is unacceptable in the Basque case because of the presence of terrorism.<sup>29</sup> Cinematic interpretations can also be highly suspect, as illustrated by the recent controversy surrounding Julio Medem’s film *La Pelota Vasca* (2003). The mere fact of interviewing diverse people and presenting them as a chorus of contrasting perspectives of the so-called ‘Basque problem’ happens to make the film-maker an accomplice to terrorism. And, in fact, according to a recent claim by Mikel Iriondo,<sup>30</sup> almost all art and literature in the Basque Country suffers from a horrendous sin, not unrelated to irony: ambiguity. Most artists and writers are critical of ETA but without making the fight against terror their only all-encompassing goal. One of the leading artists is Txomin Badiola, whose words Iriondo quotes:

If there is anything that characterizes all these positions [by the younger generations of artists], it is their ambiguity. And I would like to interpret this aspect in its most radical and transforming dimension, not as something that could be taken as an act of concealment, but precisely its opposite: its revelatory power.<sup>31</sup>

- 25 H. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973, p. 37.
- 26 Quoted in E. Behler, *Irony and the Discourse of Modernity*, Seattle and Washington: University of Washington Press, 1990, p. 94.
- 27 R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. xv.
- 28 For the relationship between anthropology and irony, see J.W. Fernandez and M.T. Huber (eds.), *Irony in Action: Anthropology, Practice, and the Moral Imagination*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.
- 29 See J. Zulaika, *Enemigos, no hay enemigo*, San Sebastián: Erein, 1999.
- 30 M. Iriondo, ‘Arte y violencia en el País Vasco’, *Bidarte*, 30 (August 2003), pp.5-27.
- 31 *ibid.*, p. 18.

32 *ibid.*, p. 18.

33 L. Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*, London and New York: Routledge, 1995, p. 2.

Other words, such as 'allegory' and 'complexity' appropriated by artists, are seen by Iriondo as follows: 'what happens here is extremely simple: people are murdered because of ideological differences.'<sup>32</sup> In this totalizing discourse any attempt at artistic or discursive bridging between the two political fronts is deemed to commit the sin of 'equidistance' and must be fought as if it were part of the problem. Ironically, Basque nationalists too are adept at posturing themselves as victims; during the long decades of Francoism they too invoked the horrors of Nazi squadrons experimenting with aerial bombing in Gernika during the civil war to justify the legitimacy of their cause.

This is why a politics of irony is still so necessary in the Basque Country. As in the art of Vicente Ameztoy (1946–2001), Andrés Nagel (1947–) and Txomin Badiola (1957–), and the literary works of Bernardo Atxaga (1951–) and Ramon Saizarbitoria (1944–), and as it is the case now with Julio Medem's (1958–) cinematic style, we want irony that has 'an evaluative edge and manages to provoke emotional responses in those who "get" it and those who don't'.<sup>33</sup> Even in cases such as Oteiza's posture, when ironic challenge is deemed evasion, demystifying the cultural authority established by modernity or by postmodernity can only be salutary. For a city suddenly overwhelmed by Gehry's architectural gift and Krens's seductive discourse of global art in a global love museum, passing the test of irony's edge should be a minimal requirement. *Puppy* is in Bilbao the test for irony's risks as well as irony's subversive potential. When the tiger is already in your bedroom and it might be too late to say no, while you find your place and your breath, ironic indirection is your best bet.