

Carol Bier

*Vanishing Points, Deformed Planes, Negative Spaces, Empty Solids and Topological Genius
– Or, How I Got Lost in Bilbao*



Figure 1. Louise Bourgeois, *Maman* (1999), at the entrance to Guggenheim Museum Bilbao

Midsummer's green along the flanks of the Pyrenees in Basque country welcomed us as we drove from Donostia (San Sebastian) west to Gernika and Bilbao. The mountains to the south physically separate this area of northern Spain from the rest of the Iberian Peninsula. To the north lies the Atlantic with its vast expanse of water, gentle waves lapping at the shore. The mountain slopes here are profoundly uplifted and folded – nature's deformations of the plane – and the steep valleys and rushing rivers exhibit visible geometric perspectives of geological forms.

To be here in summer makes one especially aware of the lushness of the landscape and the bounty of both land and sea. We could enjoy seafood and fresh fish, ripe figs and grapes, pork products and a variety of cheeses, all specialties of the region, justly famous for their Basque flavors as well as attention to presentation of colors and textures and perfect balances of bitter, sweet, salty, sour tastes.

Our bus wound its way along the paved highway; around each bend we passed a bustling hillside town of stone houses dominated by an old church and spire with evidence of industrial buildings along the river banks below, tall smokestacks rising from within the depths of each valley. In the lower reaches by the river, huge grey apartment blocks now reside. Every turn in the road yielded an acute view of the Atlantic. In this anomalous region in the north of Spain, pine forests and deciduous trees and grassy meadows host free ranging cattle, pigs, sheep and goats, an odd cluster of animals with diverse ecological requirements not so easily conjoined in the more arid climates of Andalusia, North Africa or the Middle East.

Along the silhouettes of ridges are periodic square prismatic towers, defensive installations hinting at strategic needs and watchful protection. We visited Gernika (Guernica, the town that inspired Pablo Picasso's depiction of the horror of war – this was where civilians were killed by Nazi bombs in 1937 during the Spanish Civil War) and walked to the General Assembly of lords who would gather collectively to solve the problems of the territory that is today the Basque Autonomous Region of fiercely independent peoples. They claim no historical connection to other cultures or languages, isolation being a factor of Basque identity.

To the front of the old Assembly Hall (fig. 2), Neoclassical in style, is a young oak tree alongside the conserved remains of an ancient trunk under whose branches conflicts were resolved and sacred truths spoken. The old oak is carved on the pediment, shown when it was young (fig. 3). Branches of the tree were distributed to towns throughout the region, where they were grafted and cultivated to support peaceful initiatives and sustained resolution of conflicts.



Figure 2 (left) Old Assembly Hall, Gernika

Figure 2 (right) Detail of pediment

In the newer Assembly Hall in a room adjacent to the oval tribunal chamber is a monumental stained glass ceiling (fig. 3) illustrating the old Assembly Hall with the oak sheltering three classes of Basque society – fishermen and divers with their nets and

paddles, industrial workers with their mining gear and quarrying equipment, and farmers with their farm implements. The women, it seems, must comprise an invisible class.



Figure 3. Stained glass ceiling (detail) in new Assembly Hall, Gernika

In a public park nearby (fig. 4) is the work of Basque sculptor Eduardo Chillida, *Gure aitaren etxea* (*Our Father's House*, 1987), a curious enclosing wall-like form poured in concrete with projections and open-to-sky (but not-quite-interior) space. It converses with Henry Moore's *Large Figure in a Shelter* (1986), cast of metal warmed by the sun.



Figure 4 (left) Eduardo Chillida, *Gure aitaren etxea* (*Our Father's House*, 1987)
Figure 5 (right) Henry Moore, *Large Figure in a Shelter* (1986)

The strength of art in this environment is powerful, preserving historical memory, offering lessons from the past with metaphors of war and death – not just as a tourist destination, but expressive of local values and pride.

To the west of Bizkaia the landscape changes. We passed rolling hills planted with pines in parallel rows following the contours. From here we descended to the port of Bilbao where palm trees stand amidst industrial waste. Arising anew is a global city of the arts with major architectural monuments initiated with The Guggenheim Museum designed by Frank Gehry (fig. 1). But first, we met the Mayor, and enjoyed a visit to the city hall in a reception room that offers a splendid example (fig. 5), dated 1890, of late Victorian neo-Islamic architecture in Andalusian style (scalloped horseshoe arches and columns, with all the walls and ceilings and surfaces extravagantly ornamented with colorful ceramics, stucco, and wood). Islamic in style, the central hall and two side chambers, however, are based more on the mid-19th century vision of Owen Jones, outfitted with mirrors and the requisite potted palms, than on the indigenous Islamic traditions of Andalusia to the south beyond the mountains.



Figure 5. Reception Room, City Hall in Bilbao

At the end of the nineteenth century, the industrialized port of Bilbao was poised as Spain's gate to Europe. But more recently decline set in, and floods devastated the town. Current efforts at economic recovery look to the future, leading in the 21st century with vast investment in infrastructure and the arts. The city appears to be thriving with new construction, an ultra-modern airport, and busloads of tourists. We walked across the river on the chunky glass deck of a pedestrian bridge (fig. 6) designed by Santiago Calatrava (1990-97), experiencing intended disequilibrium. The engineered curve is not a catenary

arch that supports its own weight; rather, it throws one off balance while offering an airy (and eerie) premonition of the concoction of weird forms that comprise the Guggenheim Museum of Bilbao (fig. 7 [left]).



Figure 6. Zubizuri Bridge designed by Santiago Calatrava (1990-1997), Bilbao

Approaching the museum, we came upon what appeared to be industrial and residential waste (fig. 7 [right]) that was in reality an installation relevant to Bilbao's riverside location and historical situation.

Within the museum the permanent display of Richard Serra's steel plates, "The Matter of Time," also addresses displacement in a series of torqued ellipses, the curves of which confound our sense of location in space. The rust of distressed steel lends texture and muted color to the ominous, dark, curved "flat" surfaces formed by the intersections of curved planes, which fill your field of vision. Try to sketch the forms, and you will be utterly amazed at how difficult a task you have set for yourself. I was reminded of catching butterflies. But once you release yourself to Serra's controlled manipulation of our sense perception, the confusion is somehow palpable, liberating, and joyous, all at once. And the echoes are rich in this canyon-like steel labyrinth.

Walking through the permanent installation of Richard Serra's works and looking up prompts a new series of questions – where am I? I am lost in this space -- is it interior space? If so, what is exterior? Does it matter? Where am I headed? What is gravity doing to me? Is it a plane although curved? There are, indeed, straight lines. I think they must be locally planar. There seem to be more than two dimensions, but not really three. If they are planes, they are deformed in more than one direction at once. My sense of place is distorted, my sense of direction gone. I am again lost in Bilbao.

You must walk it yourself to understand this experiential mind-bending, and at that, understanding is only by nonrational apprehension, not easy for my acrobatic mathematical

colleagues who sought to identify the equations and algorithms by which such spaces could be enclosed. Later in the year I attended a Richard Serra Retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which allowed me to think further and relate this experience to ideas explored in Islamic philosophy concerned with the apprehension of space and nonrational ways of knowing.



Figure 7 (left) Guggenheim Museum Bilbao
Figure 7 (right) Installation en route to museum

The exhibition text reads, "The torqued ellipses, spirals, spheres and toruses exist in the polarity between the downward force of gravity, their weightlessness, and their upward rise in elevation which attempts to attain a condition of weightlessness. The sculptures are not objects separated in space but, on the contrary, they engender the spatial continuum of their environment...they impart form to the entire space, they shape the space through axes, trajectories, and passages between their solids and voids," a post-modern statement that led to considerable discussion among Bridges – Donostia participants. The "Matter of Time" presents "multiple, layered temporalities," which impact us perceptually, aesthetically, emotionally. Described as "non-narrative discontinuous, fragmented, de-centered, disorienting," they are indeed perplexing. We are told, "The meaning of the installation becomes activated and animated by the rhythm of the viewers' movement." There is no prescribed view, no preferred sequence, no preferred succession of views.

In a small side gallery models are displayed, but these convey neither the monumentality of the sculptures, nor the rich echoes from within. Likewise, to see the steel plates from above (on a landing near the elevator), looking down upon them, does not allow at all for the experience of being within the spaces they enclose, surround, and imply.

In this post-Modern installation with an absence of either verticality or horizontality, meaning is imparted by each of us as we personally address issues of stability, continuity and control, the echoes differing at each point along our chosen route. The works are aggressive, to be sure, totally controlling and disorienting; our pace is tentative, measured, and progressive as we fail to comprehend while seeking to understand. The varying curvature leads to perceptual dissonance, which demands our full attention and heightened sensibilities to not fall down or perceive ourselves falling while standing up. Explanation is after the fact, but this is the artist's intent.

And then there is the transformation of the surface, offering further paradox. The metal is distressed, yielding variegated patterns of light, color, and texture, a microcosm of our universe in a stealthfully man-made environment that is the antithesis of platonic solids.

Play with space, time, materials and dimensionality is also present in the architectural vision of Frank Gehry. The curvilinear surfaces of the museum's facade are formed by overlapping rectangular plates of titanium sheathing with local planarity while the facade of stone facing is visibly denied by the supporting structures revealed behind glass – both the stone facing and the titanium sheathing look at times like an Egyptian tomb with the implications of permanence, expressing allusion and illusion at once.

Such ambiguity of forms and structures, space and time, and the confounding playfulness of contradictions, extended to many of the works displayed in the temporary installations, such as Anselm Kiefer's "Only with Wind, Time, and Sound" (acrylic and emulsion on canvas, 1997, from the permanent collection). One of the didactic galleries explored Kiefer's creative process and space, articulating his interest in the natural world, its disintegration and deformation.

Both Kiefer and Serra explore time as a fourth dimension, drawing upon an experience of duration, a theme that is also explored in the installation of "Merhaba" (2007) made of concrete conglomerate with rebar and lead books, which may leave one thinking about both the end of civilization and asking, "Where is the art?" In this work there is an ambiguity of ruins and disarray, bones of dead animals and interrupted fallen stairways, arranged in a manner that is intentionally deeply disturbing. Space and distance, deterioration over time, and conceptual incongruities seemed to inform not only the exhibits but also the very structure of the museum.

Often heard among our party as we explored the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, was "I kept getting lost," or "I got off the elevator and was on the wrong floor" – bearing witness to the goals for these interior spaces designed by Frank Gehry clearly with the intention of confounding users of this space, introducing and reinforcing the ambiguity of our presence. Although we were not with Alice (in Wonderland), we were exposed to sunflowers in ash, very low vanishing points filling our vision, and other optical exercises that thrust us out the frame and into the picture space ourselves – Art looking at us looking at art as we stood on the polished poured concrete floors with surround-sound of shrill trills and reverberating echoes.

In stark contrast and seemingly anomalous in these volumetric spaces was an exhibition of Albrecht Dürer's prints, miniscule in comparison, deriving from his "lifelong fascination with the close, faithful reproduction of reality" and "based on his own study of nature." Here, with a sure hand and precise diagonal lines that were straight, there was clear emphasis on linear perspective and vanishing points – a virtual representation of spatial infinity – an illusion that was, however, new in his time, but too familiar in our own – the three-dimensional world rendered in only two dimensions!

To experience these visual *trompes d'oeil* with colleagues and friends from Bridges – Donostia is a privilege not easily shared in a written format, yet it is one that will be treasured in each of our memories for years to come. As we departed, a ball of fire shown down, illuminating the space around us as the weather decided what to do. As night fell and the stars came out, exhausted, we were reminded of Kiefer's "Secret Life of Plants" (branches, plaster, wire, lead, canvas, 2001-02), and his dictum, "Every Plant has Its Related Star in the Sky."

Photographs by Carol Bier

For the collections of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, see <http://www.guggenheim.org/bilbao/collection>