

## Shaken, not stirred

There is more to it than the newly opened Guggenheim museum in Bilbao. A totally new city profile is being created.

by **Cecilia Andersson**

The recently opened Guggenheim museum in Spain has put Bilbao on the map. Many magazines, practically all over the world, have featured the city (and here is another one...). Magazines about art, architecture, cooking or travel all seem to find something to say about this city in the Basque Country with 900,000 inhabitants. Or why not the New York Times slant on the story. Recently they brought up the history of fortunes made in the silver mines in Colorado about a hundred years ago. That is where the Guggenheims initially got the capital to start their art collection.

But the museum in Bilbao received its funding from an enthusiastic local government. Indeed, the name belongs to the parent museum in New York, and the Bilbao branch is franchising it. The general idea behind the museum here has remained a bit unclear, both to the general public and to the more initiated art-related crowd. But what seems clear, is that Bilbao's politicians are eager to change their city's image which until recently have been rather dull. A full century of steel and shipbuilding industries have left the fourth largest city in Spain rich but rather ugly. Now, it is time to change to a more contemporary look and one idea is that the museum will carry the emblem of a new image and possibly open up new lucrative businesses.

After initial doubts, once the museum was finished, the Bilbaoans came to love it, even if there has been considerable controversy around it being erected. For the people in Bilbao, the building is like a huge UFO which has landed on the riverbank in the middle of the city. It is surrounded by an active train freight area on one side and the Nervion river on the other. Cars pass by on two bridges, which sort of encapsulates this shining titanium colossus into a rather solid position. Funnily enough, it does not matter that Frank Gehry's museum severely contrasts with the rest of the city. Now, it looks as if they were made for each other.

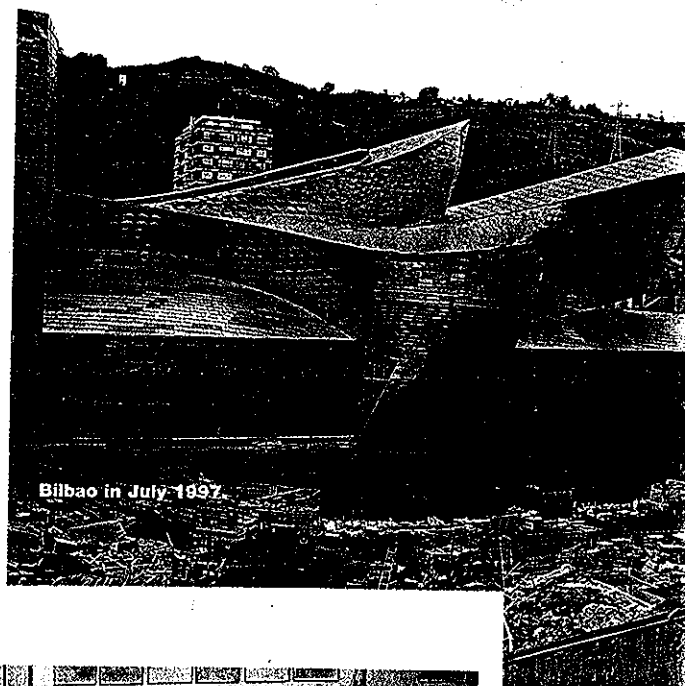
This relationship of harsh contrasts is something that seems to go hand in hand with Bilbao. First of all, there is this tremendously ambivalent emerging at the

moment. The subway designed by Norman Foster opened a little over a year ago, a new music palace is being erected, a new airport designed, a new soccerfield planned for. Also, a bridge by the Spanish architect Calatrava came floating along the river and was erected early one morning this summer. The grey city kernel has added spots of light as the subway entrances shine impeccably. Secondly, all of a sudden, hordes of tourists walk the streets.

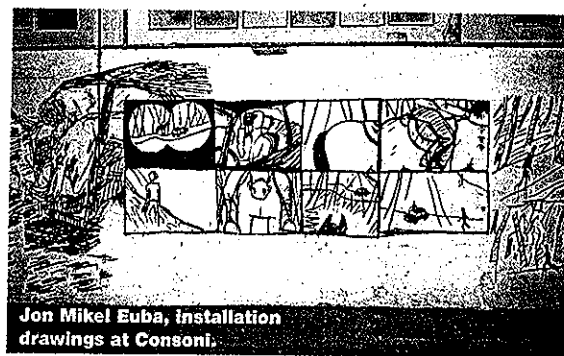
The art scene has been shaken by the arrival of multinational museum administrators. In the beginning, few people actually believed it to be true. Were they really going to build a Guggenheim museum in Bilbao? Slowly, once the word spread and the building started to take its peculiar shape, artists, local gallerists and alternative spaces actually realized it was going to happen. But there is little faith in the museum's programming and actual function besides its purely commercial aspect. Perhaps because no artistic director has been elected, and because there won't be one in the future either. Thomas Krens is running it all, and therefore the communication process within the museum is cumbersome. Nothing can be done until orders are given from Krens and

the others in New York. To this date, no Spaniard, much less a Basque person, is in charge. Of the few works by Basque artists they have added to the new collection, only two were installed for the opening date and this seems to imply something. The museum is not about Basque art, in that case the Basques would have considered building their own museum. This is an international contemporary art museum, distanced and detached from its geographical location and surrounding culture.

What is so striking about this detachment, is the fact that the Basque country have a tremendously rich culture. They have their own language, a language that makes linguists scratch their heads trying to determine its origin. It is also a language with increasing popularity. A majority of young people study Euskera rather than English or



Bilbao in July 1897



Jon Mikel Euba, installation drawings at Consoni.

French. Musicians and writers revive the language constantly, and it serves as the official language of the local independent government. Only recently,

after Franco's dictatorship, was Euskera allowed to be taught in language schools. The Basque cultural richness is also reflected in traditional dances and in ancient sports. The cuisine is world famous. The wine, cider and txakoli as well. It seems as if this enormous richness also feeds nation-

were screened on a local television network during the show at Consoni.

The people behind the Consoni project, Guadalupe Etxebarria, Jerome Delormas and Frank Larcade, run their idea based on independence. This means that they do not want to commit themselves to one space or one program. What they are trying to achieve is an open circuit of artists and activities. Under the name of Consoni, they work with individuals rather than with administrative tasks.

Art and its administration has been a highly political issue

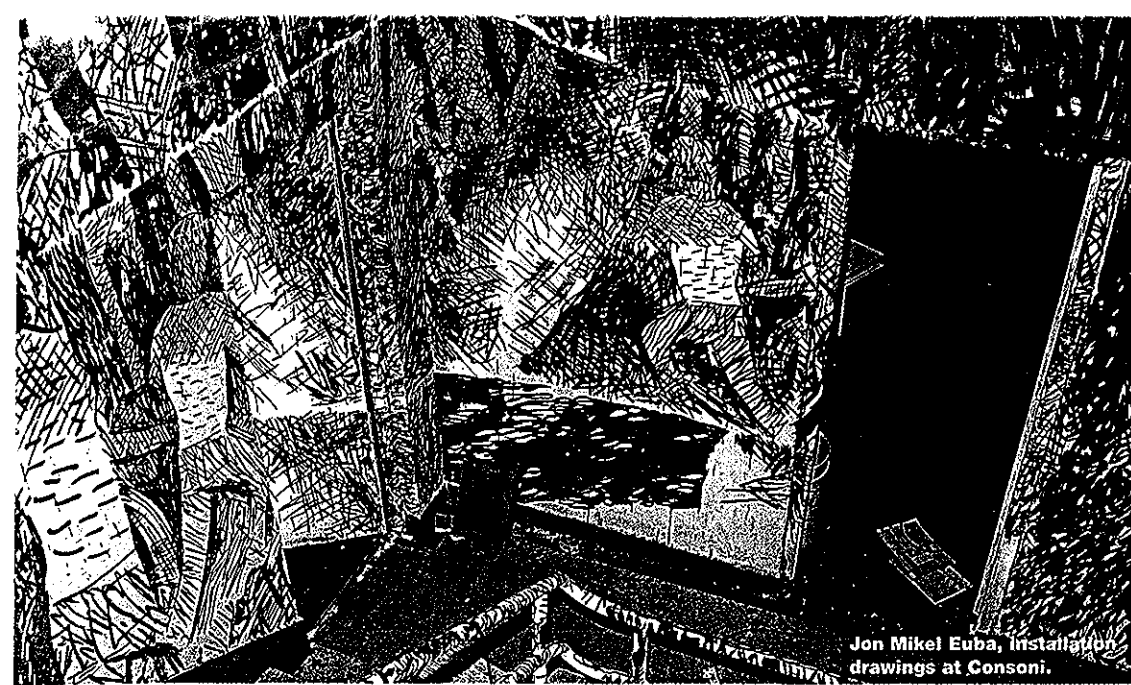
No doubt the city will change, it already did, but the question is if this high art profile will serve the local artists, gallerists and alternative spaces.

in Bilbao for a long time. Before the Guggenheim museum, the government funded both the local Fine Arts Museum and a space showing contemporary art named Sala Recalde and its subsidiary Area 2, but now that is changing. Budgets are slashed and redistributed and it seems as if the big shiny colossus is being fed most of it.

Plans for a future art scene in Bilbao includes, apart from the music palace under construction, the opening of a center where artists will be able to work and study. Called Uruzurrutia, it will be based on the model of Arteleku in the nearby town of San Sebastian. Here, they organize workshops, lectures, publish books and a quarterly magazine, Zehar. They also have several studios for artists to work in. All financed by the local government.

It will be curious to see how the implant of international culture will work on Bilbao since there is a slight possibility of rejection. No doubt the city will change, it already has, but the question is if this high art profile will serve the local artists, gallerists and alternative spaces.

**Cecilia Andersson** is a freelance writer and photographer living in Bilbao and New York. In her current photographic project she is investigating the scientific representation of nature.



Jon Mikel Euba, installation drawings at Consoni.



Opening of Ana Laura Alcazar Area 2 in 1996

alism. The Basque nationalists, some of them separatists, want to maintain this culture at any price. Therefore, it seems a little peculiar that what is now

attracting the attention of the outside world is a multinational museum conglomerate with very few Basque artists represented.

There is and has been for quite some time, a rather active art scene in Bilbao. Unofficial statistics claim that it has the highest amount of artists in the whole of Spain. Every year, the University of the Basque Country in Bilbao produces lots of graduates from its Fine Arts Program.

One of the alternative spaces, operating under the name of Consoni, has organized several performances and exhibitions during the past year and a half. Coinciding with the opening of the Guggenheim, Consoni opened the doors to the abandoned factory that they occupy, for three different events. On the ground floor and in the staircase, Jon Mikel

Euba showed installation drawings, slides and a video. In a space tremendously difficult to work in, his drawings managed to actually take this raw factory floor and turn it into an experience where the spectator for a moment forgot the location. In his installation, Euba questioned the usual clean and tidy gallery space and explored the possibility of telling his story in an opposed environment. In a way, his work can be considered a version of what is happening to Bilbao at the moment. Namely, the wish to challenge the image of what has been perceived as predetermined.

During October and November, the second floor at Consoni was activated by Rainer Oldendorf and by the video show curated by Catsou Roberts. Oldendorf uses slide projectors to narrate stories. As he said; two photos make a film, pursuing his interests in exploring the fictitious results of photographic portraits of people. Oldendorf was included in Roberts' video program, which also featured videos by artists such as Joachim Koester, Itziar Okariz, Karen McKinnon and Joel Bartolomeo. The videos