

Jorge Oteiza's Modernity and His Latin American Travels

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Along with Eduardo Chillida, Jorge Oteiza (1908-2003) is one of the most internationally acclaimed Spanish Basque sculptors of his generation. In 1933 he received his first prize in the Young Guipuzkoanos Artists' Competition and began touring with his art in the Basque Country and Latin America, where he lived from 1935 to 1948. Although many scholars have written on Oteiza's significant contribution to the field of sculpture and have analyzed his aesthetic theories, very few take into consideration Oteiza's 13 years in Latin America, much less acknowledge that these years had a decisive impact on his art, critical essays, and poetry. Here I take as a point of departure Oteiza's first theoretical essay "Carta a los artistas de América sobre el arte nuevo en la post-guerra" (Letter to the Artists of Latin America on the New Art in the Post-War, 1944) in order to analyze how his Latin American years allowed him to conceive an artistic modernity that challenges some of modernity's contradictions. I explore how his stay in Latin America contributed to Oteiza's reevaluation of the avant-garde movements in Europe and Latin America, and how it led him to redefine his relationship to progress, science, reason and nature, to space and time, ethics, and national art. Oteiza's strong sense of spirituality exhorted him to liberate traditionally defined conceptual opposites, such as the intellectual and the sacred, from their teleological confinement.

As a Basque, he also had to come to terms with Spain's desire to annihilate Basque cultural particularity and Basque nationalism, as well as with the conflict between Basque national aesthetics and the universalist European artistic idioms of the avant-garde. While

Basque nationalism, at least since 1894 with the foundation of the PNV (Basque National Party) by Sabino Arana, fostered cultural isolation and the production of an identifiable Basque art, Oteiza hoped to create an artistic space where the singularities of the local could express themselves more individually through abstraction, an idea that, although conceptually rooted in western thought, takes multiple forms in non-western cultures. By physically distancing himself from the Basque Country, which like Latin America was and still is concerned with national art, and by engaging in his “Carta” with Latin American artists on the question of what constitutes art and cultural identity in regions that have suffered colonization and cultural imperialism, Oteiza was able to better understand and conceive his own artistic practice and to critically address questions pertinent to his own culture. Witnessing the dilemmas that many Latin American artists faced in their pursuit of national cultural expression led Oteiza to create an art that does not attempt to resolve the colonial and historically fabricated contradictions between non-western and western, regional and national art/culture. Instead, Oteiza used this tension to settle into a mature aesthetic position that encompasses his most primeval connection to his place of origin and a universalizing European aesthetic that gave him the freedom to transcend the confining artistic precepts that surrounded him.

Given his own cultural legacy, Oteiza was sympathetic to Latin America’s nationalist aesthetics, but he also hoped to convey that limiting the understanding of art to racial and ethnic characteristics leads to cultural stagnation (Vergez 23). Doubtless, Oteiza’s later writings—*Interpretación estética de la estatuaria megalítica americana* (1952 Aesthetic Interpretation of American Megalithic Statuary), *Propósito experimental 1956-57* (Experimental Purpose 1956-57), and *Quousque Tandem* (1963)—exemplify the way he conceived art after his stay in Latin America, and we need to examine some of his theories of art in order to grasp what he hoped to convey in the “Carta a los artistas de América,” where he asked: “What are the bases of the formal artistic differences between two continents with a common culture?” (89). By focusing on his understanding of time, the void, and Basque pre-history, and examining how his thinking could lead to an artistic, psychological and spiritual decoloniza-

tion process on both sides of the Atlantic, we begin to unravel Latin America's profound influence on Oteiza.

As many critics have shown, Oteiza was greatly influenced during the 1920s and 1930s by Russian avant-garde movements (Badiola and Rowell; Manterola; Vergez). Vladimir Maïakowski and constructivism particularly marked him. But Oteiza also voiced a strong critique of the censorship that institutionalized communism forced upon the new and autonomous artistic language on which the Russian avant-garde movements were founded. From Spanish sculptors such as Alberto Sánchez, Oteiza learned how to combine abstraction and morphology, and his experience with Sánchez's approach to the void in his sculptures also influenced his own future work.¹ German aesthetics as inscribed in Spanish intellectual life also reached Oteiza through his readings of Miguel de Unamuno, José Ortega y Gasset, Oswald Spengler, and Baruch Spinoza. Throughout his life, he focused on his metaphysical relation to nature and the universe. Like other sculptors such as Hans Arp, Jacob Epstein, or Henry Moore, Oteiza drew from "primitivism" and tribal art. Yet, as French art historian Valérie Vergez points out, Oteiza was more interested in the spirituality inherent in these cultural and artistic artifacts than in their aesthetic quality (28). Early on, he aimed to give shape to the various metaphysical links between artistic and universal creation and to communicate with nature. His affinity for primitive civilizations stems from their ability to address their relationship with nature plastically. However, Oteiza's approach to nature is also scientific; it falls within the province of order and intelligibility: "It is the physical-mathematical nature of Galileo and Newton that attracted Oteiza, laws by which all disorder is only apparent since the universe works mechanically according to immutable laws. It is nature in all its truth, and not its appearances any longer" (Vergez 28). Oteiza was not interested in the imitation of nature in its various appearances but rather "what nature is, in order to approach truth, as closely as possible, and hence create new forms" (Vergez 28).²

Jorge Oteiza traveled to Latin America in 1935 hoping to find new creative energies. He was particularly eager to flee Spain's cultural stagnation. Many of his sculptures in the 1920s and 1930s, such as "Saint Adam" (1933-34), already challenge the church and its precepts with an unorthodox mix of abstraction, geometry, nat-

uralism, and science. In “Forms at the End of the Road” (1933), he also questioned the prevailing Basque provincialism and conservatism. Oteiza spent most of his first seven years in Latin America between Argentina and Chile. In 1937 he wed Basco-Argentinian, Itziar Carreño Etxeandia, and in 1941 he was offered a professorship at the Escuela Nacional de Cerámica in Buenos Aires. In 1942 he moved to Colombia, where he taught ceramics at the Universidad de Popayán until 1945. Oteiza quickly engaged in both the culture and politics of these countries. It was a time of great political effervescence when many ministries of education and culture thought it necessary for Latin American culture to reject the “isms” or European avant-garde movements, including those being redefined or created by Latin American artists, such as Argentinian Emilio Pettoruti and Uruguayan Joaquín Torres García. During his stay in Argentina, Oteiza’s study of pre-Columbian cultures allowed him to refine his understanding of avant-garde techniques, exemplified by the primitivism and minimalism that characterized sculptures such as “Figure Understanding Politically” (1935).

It was during his stay in Colombia that Oteiza published “Carta a los artistas de América sobre el arte nuevo en la post-guerra,” fruit of years of reflection on the state of the arts. As a response to the many aesthetic manifestos that were published in the 1920s and 1930s in Latin America (Oswald de Andrade’s poetry manifesto “Pau-Brasil” [1924] and his “Anthropophagite Manifesto” [1928] that emphasized American art as singular and independent from Europe), it offers a new aesthetic and ethical understanding of art’s meaning for artists from a continent in search of a new aesthetic language. But it more directly responds to the 1943 “Manifesto of Independent Colombian Artists to the Artists of America,” which also rejected new art forms (especially Cubism) that had emerged in Europe toward the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. Oteiza’s open letter reminded his Latin American colleagues that, “the isms participated heroically in the struggle against decadence and vacuity. They were at the forefront of fierce battles to renew art’s spiritual life” (78). For Oteiza it is not just about painting as an American, but rather, as a painter who “draws from a common reservoir in which we can explain all cultures plastically,” in order to create a future with a new language. According to

Oteiza, "the artist fails when he only represents his individual culture," and one of his main concerns was that American artists were being told how to imagine and how to inscribe in their art the era in which they were living: "the language and ideas of the artist have to be measured by the events they originate and not by those they translate." Oteiza asserts a need to rethink ethnic, local, and historical sensitivity and to engage in an inter-generational dialogue with different artists regardless of their origin, their political, historical and cultural circumstances.

Oteiza's work is more analytical and spiritual than formalist, and his letter advocates for abstract art, a plastic phenomenon that ensures permanence "when the extraneous signifying elements and the world that originated them exhaust themselves historically" (100). Oteiza's letter especially critiques Mexican muralism. He was disappointed with the muralist movement because he believed it did not capitalize on its radical precepts about space. He also calls attention to Diego Rivera, who, during an August 1944 Pablo Picasso exhibition at the Society of Modern Art in Mexico City, decried the Society's dedicating a solo exhibition to a European rather than a Mexican artist. Oteiza qualifies Rivera's reaction as shortsighted and laments the Mexican artist's scorn for the "obscure, albeit tenacious and beneficial, European movements of artistic expression" (90). Oteiza had experienced first hand the ravages that institutionalized politics can have on art. To his great disillusionment, he had witnessed how the Russian Revolution appropriated the notion of an art for the people to impose a controlled and impoverished cultural nationalism. As a result, Oteiza rejected art as propaganda, while Rivera celebrated it.³

David Alfaro Siqueiros was one of the muralists with whom Oteiza engaged most in his letter. He singled out Siqueiros because he respected the artist's stylized and organic forms that border on abstraction without abandoning morphological references. Oteiza must also have been taken by Siqueiros's declarations in "Three Appeals for a Modern Direction. To the New Generation of American Painters and Sculptors," published in Barcelona, in 1921.⁴ In his appeal, Siqueiros rejected "the isolation from new important trends" that Latin America was imposing on itself, decried Spanish archaisms, and called for "a move beyond tradition." Siqueiros favored a

“constructive spirit over the decorative” and looked for “volumes in space” (Ades 322-23). Furthermore, he invited his fellow artists “to build on our own personal emotional reactions to nature, with a scrupulous regard for the truth” (322). In 1921 Siqueiros was already advocating for a “primitive knowledge of nature as a point of departure,” while rejecting “archeological reconstructions” such as Indianism, Primitivism, and Americanism, artistic principles contained in Oteiza’s letter. Just as Oteiza would 23 years later, Siqueiros called for rejecting “theories anchored in the relativity of national art. We must become universal” (323).

Why then was Siqueiros the object of Oteiza’s most pointed criticism? First and foremost, he thought that, of all the muralists, Siqueiros would be the artist most apt to make conceptual use of the wall and its space. Yet, Oteiza quotes Siqueiros as stating in the 1940s that, “the wall is not really an appropriate space for the intellectual and decadent experiments of European painting” (“Carta” 91). Oteiza regretted that an artist with such talent obeyed “the natural impulse” to neglect the wall’s intellectual potential, and failed to take advantage of the spatial problems the wall poses. Oteiza believed Siqueiros did not exploit the void, an active element of his own spatial-volumetric compositions. Oteiza also mistrusted “monumental laws that govern the construction of art works with visible and particular organization, which carry a beautiful and old sentimental history, destined for public places or composed spaces” (“Carta” 92). Although he considered Siqueiros’s work “internationally the most advanced,” he also declared it “hindered by one of the most confused technical romanticisms” (92). Oteiza also insisted that Siqueiros’s artistic experience “is limited to the psychological and theatrical development of the spectator, in which the wall imposes itself on the painting in a desperate movement, in an ingenious persecution of the spectator” (95). Following the minimalist tradition, Oteiza considered that the artist should give the spectator an active role and integrate him in a spiritual space beyond the physical realm” (Vergez 112). The work of art needs to “absorb the spectator’s space and intervene not only in the aesthetic space but also in the existential” (Vergez 112), transcending the historical and political. As Valérie Vergez summarized it, we would then have an artwork “emptied of its psychological and expressive content that

the spectator would not contemplate or interpret any more but rather that would force him to focus the attention back onto himself" (112).

For Oteiza, the artistic dimension lies in a more essential realm. It resists a history of time conceived outside art's objective reality and that art reproduces at reality's expense. According to Oteiza, a work of art's originality resides in an in-depth investigation of its internal problems. What is a wall? How does it work? The wall as space should not be an object of analysis but rather a tool of analysis that allows the artist and the viewer to understand how we come into being as humans. He does not condemn muralists for extracting from tradition their roots in a primitive relation. In fact, in 1963 Oteiza reminds us, that "it was not in the Latin era when Basques learned how to speak and think in abstract terms for the first time" (*Quousque* 49), an idea that he had already posited in his letter to Latin Americans. Rather, Oteiza believed and questioned the fact that artists like Siqueiros drew from their primeval traditions in an anti-intellectual manner, without spirituality and following a social realist aesthetic similar to that of fascist Europe.

I have not yet found any direct response from Siqueiros to Oteiza's letter, but in a letter to José Clemente Orozco written in 1944 ("Letter to Orozco on Visiting the Exhibition of his Paintings, Drawings and Engravings at the National School, which Opened on September 25th and Runs until October 25th"), Siqueiros clearly debunks Oteiza's precepts:

Because of the way in which our work is conceived and brought to life, its fundamental aesthetic physiognomy, its monumental heroic tone, it cannot be classed as the miraculous metaphysical production of 'exceptional individuality,' with no specific origin, which panegyric poets who pass for art critics in Mexico seem to think your work is. Our poetical art critics, some of whom are sincere, while others are not, are only very poor colonial copies of the poetical art critics found in Europe today. Our work is determined by historical social causes; it is an integral, living part of a collective, intellectual movement, of a common aesthetic drive, which developed along with our collective, national political aspirations, which probably form part of a worldwide pattern. (Siqueiros 55-56)

ter in Latin America still need to be uncovered. But Colombian art historian Aurelio Caicedo has commented that Oteiza's radical ideas about art were not well received by many Colombian artists, particularly those who benefited from government patronage (Vergez 36). This opposition occasioned Oteiza's removal from his recently awarded directorship of the Industrial and Artistic Ceramics Teaching Center at the University of Popayán in Colombia, a center that the same Colombian government had invited him to create. But Vergez also establishes a positive link between Oteiza's letter and Argentinian ceramist and sculptor Lucio Fontana's "White Manifesto" of 1946. Whether Fontana's manifesto was a direct response to Oteiza's letter still needs to be proven.

There is no doubt, however, that Oteiza's letter should be seen as part of the influential statements published mostly in Argentina from 1944 to 1946 that question the ideas expressed in many of the manifestos of the 1920s and 1930s and in later manifestos such as those written by Siqueiros, that reassess the importance of abstraction. This is particularly true of "Arturo. What Arturo Stands For" published by *Revista Arturo* in Buenos Aires in 1944, the "Madí Manifesto" written in Buenos Aires in 1946 by Gyula Kosice for Madí Group, the avant-garde constructivist Madí Group, and the "White Manifesto. We are Continuing the Evolution of Art" by Lucio Fontana. The "Madí Manifesto" and the "White Manifesto" are of particular interest as they both confirm "man's constant all-absorbing desire to invent and construct objects within absolute eternal human values in his struggle to construct a new classless society, which liberates energy, masters time and space in all senses, and dominates matter to the limits" ("Madí" in Ades 330). Although Oteiza's approach to non-representational aesthetics and the necessity of integrating "the evolution of man marching toward motion evolving in time and space" ("White Manifesto" in Ades 334) grants more significance to rationalism than Fontana's ("Reason does not create. And in the creation of forms its function is subordinated to the function of the subconscious" ["White Manifesto"]), they were both rethinking their relationship to motion, form, and nature. Lucio Fontana believed that

nature as being in need of clinging to her in order to recover, once again, the exercise of her original values. . . . we are offering the substance and not the accidents. We shall never depict either man or the other animals or the other forms. . . . Their physical and psychical conditions are subject to matter and its evolution, which are the generating sources of existence. ("White Manifesto" in Ades 333)

Their tireless search for a new understanding of space led both Fontana and Oteiza to collaborate with architects.

Before moving to Latin America, Oteiza knew little about the continent. One could even say that he began his journey driven by a common desire among the European avant-garde to work and create in a territory they considered new, virgin, dynamic, and without limits and censorship, forgetting in the process the four hundred years of colonization that were still prevailing in many cultural and political manifestations. In his letter he calls for an international artistic conscience, although he inscribes it within a colonial and imperial logic:

With the French Revolution the first public museum of art comes to Paris. Napoleon supplies it with the international products of his conquests. Artists do not travel to Rome and its past any longer, but to Paris, a journey that incites them to look for the future, Egyptian art, the Greeks, Black art, Japanese engravings, and ancient art from America, all are available there for artists to see. This marks the beginning of an international conscience. (89)

Oteiza went to America as a Basque, with a genuine desire for rapprochement with Latin American artists and a profound understanding of the consequences of Spanish dominance over another. But, given statements like the one quoted above, it is not surprising that Oteiza was seen as a foreigner and was excluded from most artistic competitions. Oteiza, however, having come from a repressive climate, was baffled by his rejection at the hands of a continent on which he had hoped for a personal and collective aesthetic renewal.

Despite their essentialist and reductive undertone, Oteiza's statements deserve more analysis. For example, his 1944 letter calls attention to the concept of the unlimited evident in his early sculptures and that he developed in later theoretical and poetic writings. Oteiza's letter manifests the unlimited in its use of the first person

plural, “we,” which translates a desire for inclusion and artistic collaboration, common goals in the search for what constitutes art. He asserts that, “before we can pretend to an art with authentic new and national characteristics—which will necessarily emerge—we, Latin Americans and Europeans alike, have a long way to go” (107). But this “we” can be read, as Emile Benveniste theorized it, as a “‘junction’ between the ‘I’ and the ‘non-I’ creating a relation where there would be no equivalence between both entities, since the ‘we’ can only exist from the ‘I.’ The ‘I’ will always predominate . . . and this ‘I’ subjects the ‘non-I’ due to its transcendental quality. The ‘I’ s presence constitutes the ‘we’” (233). However, Benveniste also adds that “the ‘we’ can, in a contradictory fashion, extend the I at the same time it lessens its singular strength,” and we could argue that the way in which Oteiza resorts to this plural personal pronoun suggests less an idea of subjection than that of an unlimited relation: “The plural form entails the unlimited, not the multiple,” asserts Benveniste. This “junction” translates Oteiza’s desire to engage in an artistic collaboration without limits or restrictions.

Although the seeds of his thinking had been planted before he left Spain, they germinated during his stay in Latin America. His in-betweenness as a Basque and European artist living in Latin America allowed him to rethink concepts such as the unlimited and the void. But he also found a new sense of marginality during his stay there, which was different from the one he may have experienced in Spain. Oteiza’s writings often mention how his foreignness in Latin America and the rejection he suffered contributed to his development as a theorist: “As a foreigner I have been denied participation in contests and exhibits, and I have had to proceed during my long American sojourn with my professional hands mutilated. I had to work as a chemist ceramist, and I became a sculptor without statues, namely an unrepresentable man” (*Quousque* 18). The mutilation of his sculptor’s hands was the catalyst for his theoretical reflections about art. His “unrepresentability” as he puts it, led him toward an organic abstraction rather than the figurative path that many of his Latin American and Basque colleagues followed. In his letter he decried the containment of figurative art and the way nationalism creeps into it. According to critic and architect Guillermo Zuaznabar, “after staying 13 years in America, [Oteiza] returned to Spain albeit

with a certain nostalgia. He, nonetheless, could not bring himself to 'repatriate' his notes, letters, and American writings. With time, this 'omission' foreshadowed a life full of losses" (9). These losses, these voids, prevented him from falling prey to the kind of nationalism that many still practice today.

One of Oteiza's most interesting ideas in relation to the process of decolonization is found in *Quousque Tandem*, a book deeply rooted in his 1944 letter. In this book Oteiza focuses on the singularity of Basque cultural heritage—a concept that his stay in Latin America allowed him to develop—and he concluded that this singularity lies in Basque people's transcending the concepts of the tragic and the heroic: "The absence in Basque people of the tragic sense breeds traditions, confidence, sensibility. . . . It is not Basque to rely on the tragic" (29-30). He then adds, "Basque style means disburdenment of a sense (the tragic sense of life, precisely) that has been cured during the prehistoric artistic process, elaborated with that end and victoriously completed in the cromlech-void of the Neolithic. Basque tradition is active memory (existential), the active instinct of that completion" (*Quousque* 14). The only way to transcend the existential tragic and cultural sense is when one is able to dominate and live in solitude, "when the tragic sense by which art converts nature into society has been cured" (*Quousque* 30). Oteiza reminds us that for Nietzsche man's spiritual breadth is what gives him the aptitude for solitude, and one needs to transcend the legacy of the tragic sense of life toward an existential equilibrium "as a product of an ancient conversion of anthropogenous aesthetic energy in a religious and natural sense" (*Quousque* 15).

With colonization, Latin America undoubtedly inherited this Spanish tragic sense, an existential discomfort that Basque people, according to Oteiza, had already overcome. While in Latin America Oteiza understood that the historical process of gaining power over solitude is completed when man completes (in a metaphysical void) an entire process of artistic language: "the problem is not to give language back to man but to give man back to language. Men who are able to recover themselves, will be able to recover their language, and they will be active culturally" (*Quousque* 14). As Vergez puts it, Oteiza understood Basque art "as receptive, protective, shaping men. Its purest expression is the cromlech. The essential parts of

this art lie in the value of unoccupied space as expressed in the plastic arts, in architecture, as well as in dance, music, sports and language" (103). Oteiza called upon Latin American artists to part with what he termed "the Latin habit" and to discover their own *cromlech*. But his years in Latin America also led him to conclude that, "aesthetic poverty (of a personality) is the monovalence of a person who, while facing a landscape that is not his, feels uncomfortable and does not understand it. It is a man who does not hear silence, a man who has not inhabited solitude, a man who only sees art's nature as conversational expression needing its noise" (*Quousque* 15).

Oteiza grasped the importance of the void, unoccupied space, while witnessing the impasses that many artists were facing in their search for a distinct Latin American art. Oteiza did not perceive solitude as a lack, a loss, an absence or deprivation. Rather, he saw it as the celebration of the plenitude of the void and its rhythm. The importance that Oteiza granted to the void is similar to Höderlin's understanding of rhythm: "Everything is rhythm, man's destiny is one celestial rhythm as each work of art is one unique rhythm, and everything oscillates from god's versifying lips" (qtd. in Agamben 125). In order to answer the question, "what is rhythm, and what is Höderlin attributing to the work of art as its original nature?" Italian thinker and critic Giorgio Agamben goes back to Aristotle and deconstructs multiple definitions given to the word rhythm. After carefully analyzing its different meanings, he concludes that rhythm, although linked to the temporal dimension with which we identify, measurable with instruments such as the chronometer, "seems to introduce a tear and an arrest into this eternal stream. As in a musical work . . . we perceive rhythm as something that eludes the ceaseless flight of instants and it almost appears as the a-temporal presence in time" (131). Oteiza's void equals this arrest, this rupture in the ceaseless stream of volumes and matter, so that the void becomes to space what rhythm is to time. If, as Agamben explains, rhythm reveals and "allows men a stay in a dimension more original than time," it also implies "the fall of men in the flight of measurable time" (132).⁵ For Agamben, Höderlin's notion situates the work of art "in a dimension where the very structure of man's being-in-the-world and his relation with truth and history are at stake. By opening to man his authentic temporal dimension, the

work of art also opens the space of his belonging to the world, the only space in which he can take the primeval measurement of his earthly stay and find his truth present again in the flux, impossible to detain, of linear time" (133). Oteiza's void, like Höderlin's rhythm, bestows its poetic dimension on man, and Agamben adds that it is "only because [Höderlin] achieves a poetic act, attains a more original dimension of time, that man is a historical being, who gambles his past and future at every single moment" (133). As musical rhythm phrases timelessness, Oteiza phrases the void into the palpability of the sacred. During his years in Latin America, Oteiza rethought Latin American, and later Basque, artists' relationship to location and spaces. Much of Oteiza's thinking is reminiscent of Martin Heidegger's work on poetry, language, and being, and in this particular context, it reminds us of Heidegger's reflections on dwelling and building.⁶

Oteiza hoped to materialize his ideas on space and location laid out earlier in his letter, when, together with Spanish architect Roberto Puig, he presented a project at the 1959 international competition for a Montevideo monument to José Batlle, Uruguay's president from 1903 to 1907 and again from 1911 to 1915.⁷ Oteiza and Puig redefined the concept of the monument with this project. They did not follow the traditional commemorative sculptural guidelines that, until recently, usually modeled the representation of a national hero in Latin America and Europe. It is not a bust; there is not a pedestal. It is a memorial-house, a large inhabitable white prism that sits on six pillars (it bears a striking resemblance to the house Oteiza designed and built for himself in Irún, in the Basque country [see Zuaznabar 52]). Oteiza describes the monument as "[a] large spiritual structure, empty, active, horizontal. Monumental consistency in which men, unavoidably, participate. A partially open, receptive atmosphere that satisfies and carries out the final integration of men and community" (in Badiola 229). The interior houses an amphitheater, another smaller room and a library with a reading and study room. Bay windows open onto the ocean. According to Oteiza it is a "secured enclave silent to the exterior. An altar elevated on the hill. Horizontal suspension. Without fountains, facing the ocean. Without forms, facing space. A major spatial silence, a spiritual and receptive construction. The idea of monumentality trans-

lates the provocation of religious and aesthetic activity that man has confronted with his own intimacy" (in Badiola 229).

The sculptural part of this memorial house detaches itself from the parallel wall facing the ocean. It is a thin, long, suspended arm that connects the building to a large black limestone slab. This slab is placed one meter and a half above the ground and six meters under the suspended arm. Zuaznabar calls it:

a strange catwalk, narrow and impassable . . . a transitional element that visually unites the black slab and its opposite, the white rectangular building. . . . an umbilical-cord-duct that unites the imposing white piece and its obscure place. . . . now sitting on earth and resembling a black hatchery drained of its nutrient, returning to the soil from which it raises itself in order to nurture its off-spring. . . . When lacking strength, the hatchery falls, moves back to its place, hoping to rest. Above, the umbilical-cord-duct remains, reminiscent of the end of a relationship. (58)

Although Zuaznabar's interpretation is convincing, I do not read the umbilical-cord-duct as "reminiscent of the end of a relationship." On the contrary, Oteiza wished to emphasize a continuous relationship between nature and the black flagstone, the rectangle that houses Batlle's ideas, and the ocean. That the catwalk is physically impassable alludes to the need to cross it intellectually and spiritually, encouraging the visitor to question himself, to inquire further into Batlle's thoughts and his political and social legacy. The passageway/catwalk is the sculptural synecdochic element that constitutes the part for the whole—on the one hand the organic/natural earth, and on the other the intellectual, and spiritual represented in the rectangular repository. This receptacle or repository contains the fruit of Batlle's thinking and the future cultural, political, social, and economic debates that will take place in the conference rooms and library. The synecdochic relationship allows for a simultaneous understanding of the various elements that constitute the commemoration of Batlle's thoughts and actions.

The project won the international competition, but due to conservative political pressure, the competition was annulled, and Oteiza and Puig's monument was never built. According to Juan Daniel Fullaondo, Oteiza remained in Montevideo for four months

defending what Fullaondo describes as “the absolute winner of the International Competition” (35) against internal political maneuvers determined to prevent the project from being built. Fullaondo qualifies this period in Oteiza’s life as “the most intense and dramatic.” Although Oteiza received considerable support from Uruguayan artists, architects, and poets, as well as major recognition in specialized articles, it was not enough to supersede the prevailing official nationalism (Fullaondo 35). After all, Oteiza faced many odds: he was a Spaniard, a foreigner, an avant-garde artist at a time when buildings were not often considered traditional commemorative monuments. Yet, by choosing a house to embody Batlle’s thoughts and actions, Oteiza brought back the notion of the house/home as a stage on which Batlle’s politics had so much impact. Rather than evoke any demagogical idea of the nation, the building invited one to think, to engage in a long-lasting process of maturing, thanks to the symbolism attached to the home space in which one grows and develops. It emphasized that Batlle did not expect his fellow citizens to pay tribute to him. Nor did he need a fetishistic representation in order to have his place in history. The monument is close to the spiritual monolith Oteiza so valued; it recalls the integrity and decency of the person it commemorates. In Oteiza’s words, “We understand here the hymn to freedom as the meditation of an individual’s moral sense” (in Badiola 229). As a “house” it would never just produce aesthetic pleasure, and it is the perfect incarnation of the theories that Oteiza hoped to convey in his letter, namely that the intrinsic nature of this kind of artistic work resides in the interaction between the artist and what he commemorates, the artist and the structure, man and his ideas. A commemorative monument often mirrors the institution or the government that commissioned it. That this structure was never built reminds us that many of the concerns Oteiza outlined in his letter were still virulently debated in Latin America in 1959.

With his monument to Batlle, Oteiza pursued his examination of the nature and visual possibilities of the void (or unoccupied space)—the void as a generator that would assist the Basque and Latin American artist in his search for new ways to conceive art. Although this monument never materialized beyond its scale model form, in Lima in 1960 Oteiza created and exhibited a non-figura-

tive funereal stele in honor of Peruvian poet César Vallejo, entitled “Spain Keep this Chalice Away from Me,” also the title of one of Vallejo’s most famous and evocative poems.⁸ Today the stele still faces the Spanish colonial church of San Agustín built in Lima in 1574; the defiant bareness of Oteiza’s sculpture confronts the ornate and baroque façade of the colonial Churriguesque church. The stele’s title can be understood as Oteiza’s (and Vallejo’s) rejection of the Christian monumentality so prevalent in architecture and ideology during the colonial era and nationalist thinking during and after the Spanish Civil War. Oteiza’s steel sculpture stands stoically and immutable in the small San Agustín plaza and faces the multiple architectural alterations the church suffered over the centuries due to wars, earthquakes, and decay.

Yet the statue of Saint Augustine, standing enthroned in the middle of the façade and facing Oteiza’s stele, suggests a potential communication between centuries, styles, and modes of thinking. After all, Saint Augustine’s speculative mind and invaluable contribution to the language of theology and philosophical thought, has occasioned many critics and thinkers to call him the “first modern man.” That Saint Augustine’s thought belongs to all ages helps establish a metaphorical link between the spirituality embodied in Oteiza’s sculpture, Vallejo’s poetry, and Saint Augustine’s theories. The kind of spirituality that Oteiza, Vallejo, and Saint Augustine advocated, aims to transcend dogmas, time, and space. But ultimately, Oteiza’s stele is a rejection of Spanish colonialism and represents once again his desire to change the traditional concept of monumental scale that religious architecture embodies. Unfortunately, as Peruvian critic Jaime Bedoya laments in a recent article on contemporary building in Lima, monumentality and its Christian undertones remain the order of the day. Bedoya actually refers to the fact that Peruvians never understood the abstract lyricism of Oteiza’s stele, and he severely critiques “a population that, due to its inability during forty years to find a single element of the poet in a metallic allegory, ended up interpreting it as an elaborate structure where they can park their bicycles” (1). Oteiza would undoubtedly agree with Bedoya and dispute the rationale behind the construction of recent “national” and commemorative monuments in Lima. He would, however, find the discovery of these Peruvian city-dwellers

to incorporate in their everyday life the stele commemorating their most significant poet, auspicious and comforting.

Through his letter to Latin American artists, Oteiza advocated a dialogue between European modernity and the modernity that might have already existed in Latin America or that was in the process of being created there. As I mentioned earlier, Oteiza did not wish to "impose the canons and modes of an authoritarian modernity," as Basque anthropologist Joseba Zulaika argues in his book *Guggenheim Bilbao. Crónica de una seducción* (301). In a more recent essay, "Anthropologists, Artists, Terrorists: The Basque Holiday from History," Zulaika equates Oteiza's thought to a cultural and political anchoring of identity in prehistoric times and affirms that "this identification with prehistoric past longs for an essential innocence that turns historical time into a banality" (142), a way of thinking that, he believes, prevents historical progression. I would argue instead that Oteiza's interest in a prehistoric past (not to be confused with a desire for an anchoring of culture in ethnicity) could be inviting us to give history a banal dimension, to approach history's progression as defined by all and for all. Historical time is banality for Oteiza, an accumulation of things, unique and original stories, events, thoughts that become banalized, or insignificant, when space comes to lack.⁹ Zulaika adds, however, that Oteiza "has shamelessly exploited the subaltern condition of the Basques [and of Latin Americans as well] to compensate with art, mythology, and the linguistic imagination what history and politics have denied them" (143).

Yet shouldn't we see history and politics as mythologies as well? What would Oteiza have gained by exploiting the subaltern condition of the Basques or that of Latin Americans?¹⁰ his aim was to transcend the subaltern condition through art and to rethink what constitutes historical progression. More than 60 years ago, he encouraged Latin American artists to do the same: "I write backwards. I look forward by turning back, by walking backwards" (*Quousque* 3). Such progression through regression, emanates from a desire to allow those who wish to do so to rewrite a historical progression that has been defined, designed, and imposed by others on Basques and Latin Americans and that denied them agency. If Oteiza, as Zulaika writes, "takes a holiday from history," it is a vacation from a history

that imposed, dominated, and created subalterns. Although Oteiza believed in the right to self-determination, he rejected the idea of “national liberation” as understood by many Basque ideologues. He hoped to project the temporal suspensive function of myth in his spatial conception of the void. Yet Zulaika insists that Oteiza’s influence on generations of Basque artists, writers, ETA militants, and the general public is based on:

what Moreiras characterizes as ‘populist historicism’ referring to an always insufficient kind of historicism, thwarted by its confusion of the part on the whole, and intent upon hegemonic seizure. . . . a mode of thinking horizontally based on the positing of community values, in the understanding that such community values can and should embody a communal universality. . . . best suited to, and co-determinant of, a national-popular state form. (147)

The interpretation of Oteiza’s thought by his followers as the incarnation of a communal universality confuses the part and the whole. Oteiza did not promote “a communal universality” that implies cultural hegemony. Rather, he intended to recover and to preserve the organicity of thought by means of aesthetic forms in which parts connect or relate to the whole rather than becoming blurred and amalgamated (as he theorized in his 1944 letter).¹¹ These parts coincide with breaking-off points, arrests that interrupt the homogeneity of thought. His way of thinking is at odds with circumscribed thought that is reduced to analytical rationality and has defined human beings in opposition to nature. Oteiza longs for a union between the intellectual, the spiritual, and the sacred, between culture and creation, and hopes to transcend the established notion of conceptual opposites to which they have been confined. Oteiza’s friendship with Vicente Huidobro while he was in Chile and Huidobro’s manifesto “Pure Creation. An Essay on Aesthetics” (1925) undoubtedly influenced his views. In the manifesto Huidobro posited that “the truth of art and the truth of life” cannot be separated from “the scientific and intellectual truth” (Ades 315), an idea Oteiza developed later in his letter. Oteiza aspired to rescue the organic, which resides in the personal, to ensure that the creation of art arose from the spiritual as well as the material and the intellectual.

racial differences. Oteiza understood that, as Gellner put it, “nations as a natural, God-given way of classifying men, as an inherent . . . political destiny, are a myth; nationalism, which sometimes takes pre-existing cultures and turns them into nations, sometimes invents them, and often obliterates pre-existing cultures: that is a reality” (48-49). The art Oteiza conceived aims to provide an unrestricted space for Basques and other human beings where they can define and redefine themselves not as ethnically rooted but rather as culturally rooted; his art certainly translates a cultural allegiance and visceral tie, but in the process it asserts an ethical behavior. As Vergez points out, for Oteiza art is “an existential therapy . . . which must spur on a reflection that goes beyond time or the real” (82). Through this kind of art Basques can revert to elements of their culture that may have been obliterated by nationalism. When Oteiza emphasized Latin American artists’ right to intemporality, to conceive art as a metaphysical object that would lead them toward personal and original artistic production, he hoped to undermine the essentialism that nationalism imposes on cultures.

When he advocated an in-depth study of the European avant-garde, Oteiza did not commend blind imitation. He asked Latin American artists to translate avant-garde aims into an idiom that would affirm their artistic originality. As Benjamin wrote, “no translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness to the original” (73). Oteiza tried to show that Latin American art engages in a process of constant transformation during which it becomes different from itself, maturing, constantly constructing and deconstructing itself. It is within the interstices or voids steadily produced by uninterrupted acts of constructing and deconstructing that Oteiza inscribed Latin American art: “it is because we lack that we are” (*Quousque* 110).

Notes

1 See “Mi reconocimiento a Alberto,” in *Alberto*. Valérie Vergez also notes that Oteiza’s first article written while in Latin America was to praise Sánchez’s innovative approach to sculpture (22).

2 Oteiza makes this point throughout his letter: “The artist always imagines

scientific data as geometrical entities in the process of becoming plastic in a universal equivalence The physics behind our operations is concretely experimental and can renew itself with revelations of other sciences and other modes of thinking without getting confused with them” (83).

3 Oteiza, however, admired muralist José Clemente Orozco’s stance against art as propaganda. As Ades notes, “Orozco refused to commit himself to an ideology. His painting sets up an internal dialectic between the power and the dangers of the traditional icons and political myths of the revolution, in which he too once had exuberant faith” (170).

4 Unless noted otherwise, all references to manifestos, come from Dawn Ades’s “Appendix.”

5 Agamben explains that the concept of rhythm implies the idea of reserve: “such a reserve, the one that gives at the same time it hides this gift is in Greek *εποχή*. The verb *επεχω*, from which this word stems, carries in fact a double meaning—“to withhold” or “to suspend” and “to tend, to present, to offer” (132).

6 Critics suggest that Oteiza’s theories on space and the void in his sculptures could have influenced Heidegger’s well-known essay “Die Kunst und der Raum” published in 1969. Whether Oteiza and Heidegger read each other requires a more in depth analysis that goes beyond the scope of this essay. Santiago Amón in a paper delivered at the Facultad de Bilbao in 1983, is one of the first to suggest that Heidegger may have read Oteiza’s provocative essay “Propósito experimental 56-57.” This essay, written between 1956 and 1957 and published in 1957 in a catalogue bearing the same title, was part of Oteiza’s presentation at the São Paulo Bienal where he won first prize for his sculptures in 1957.

7 José Batlle made possible Uruguay’s transition from a country ravaged by internal conflicts to a prosperous and stable democracy. His ideas laid the foundations for a modern and democratic society and he was also the first president in Latin America to establish a welfare state and to implement his theories on health services. Batlle’s reforms included a large number of social, political, and economic issues and instituted new social and labor legislations with health insurance and benefits for all Uruguayans.

8 I provide an in depth analysis of the impact Vallejo’s poetry had on Oteiza’s own poetic production and his writings, particularly regarding the concept of absence in *A Life Full of Losses: Latin America and Oteiza’s Mo-*

9 Moreover, in French “banaliser une locomotive” means that drivers drive a locomotive by shifts. For Oteiza this could be equivalent to “the banalization of the avant-garde” to which he invites Latin Americans to participate, driving the locomotive of artistic innovation by shifts.

10 In *Quousque Tandem* Oteiza notes that “it is easy for historians to see that during the Paleolithic era climatic changes oriented part of our hunter society’s nomadism. But they do not notice what the sedentary part of that society silently does. Historians also easily see that the Nile regulates agriculture and the life of Egyptians. But they cannot grasp how, in our society, the cromlech regulates an existential conscience (and moral philosophy and civil idea) in the final and static cultural complex of the Neolithic shepherd. Historians renovate their ideas but what remains dynamic in the dissemination of cultures still follows an even more dynamic and noisy, visible and migratory external movement. Ethnographic and historical cultures of the Basque people boil down to an instinctive and transbiological memory of the local man and its cromlech. But we insist upon the necessity for a man to travel while constituting himself (since that is how he becomes noticed by others). Art and culture radiate while it is in the making. But a man once constituted does not travel and remains silent and lives” (“Indice epilodal” under “Difusión de la cultura” in *Quousque*).

11 As I mentioned earlier, the notion of how we learn how to live and dominate solitude returns in Oteiza’s aesthetic theory, and points to our need to think about life in isolation, and preserve the singularity of our being while living this isolation with others by existing communally in isolation: “to forge an individual soul, to produce individual souls, is how we obtain a collective soul” (*Quousque* 14). This an idea that also appears in Emmanuel Lévinas’s *De Dieu qui vient à l’idée* (1986 Of God Who Answers to an Idea).

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