Singular Spaces: Spanish Art Environments.

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Although we can now define a worldwide genre of unique sites, monumental in scale or numbers of components, the threads that bind these personal, idiosyncratic works to each other are nothing more than superficial. Influences can occasionally be traced between artists or, more specifically in Spain, to inspiration from the works of the Catalan Modernist architect, Antoni Gaudi (1852–1926). There are no “schools,” no established lineages or disciples or students, no traditions, no manifestos. These sites are distinctive in form, in medium, in plan, in focus, in intention.

My research took me to all four corners of mainland Spain, crisscrossing the country as I visited major cities and small villages, rural farms and oceanfront shores. The works that I “discovered” run the gamut of the kinds of manifestations we see in art environments the world over: new architectural-like structures, elaborately decorated interiors, modifications of existing buildings, assemblages of rocks or found objects, monumental sculptures, monumental numbers of smaller sculptures, shrines, grottoes, gardens, personal museums, and on and on.

I photographed, took videos, and interviewed artists when they were available, or family or community members if they had died. I measured sculptures and paced off buildings, drew site plans and examined the property from above (when possible) via Google Earth. I followed up with letters and phone calls and emails to spouses, to children, to nieces and nephews, to grandchildren. And as a tangential part of my fieldwork—but an essential part of what we as researchers of this material need to address—I started petitions and letter-writing campaigns, made phone calls and took meetings with governmental representatives to advocate for the sites’ continued existence. I worked to convince these officials that they should celebrate these idiosyncratic environments in their midst and find ways to support the artists’ creations, rather than myopically pointing to urban plans or municipal codes in an effort to undermine and/or demolish the work. And at times we were successful.

Out of these explorations came the book and exhibition, *Singular Spaces: From the Eccentric to the Extraordinary*
in Spanish Art Environments, published by Raw Vision and exhibited at the Natalie and James Thompson Art Gallery at San Jose State University in the Fall of 2013. This project introduces and analyzes the work of 45 artist-builders across the Spanish mainland. Most of the art environments are still extant, and the artists are still working. A sample is described here.

1. Peter Buch (b. 1938), Puebla de Benifassar (Castellón)

During the 1960s and 1970s, Spain experienced a new tourism as Franco’s ministers tried desperately to bring in hard cash from the outer world through international promotions. Among those who began to take advantage of the lure of the sunny beaches were hippies from the northern countries, some of whom stayed and made their homes here. Peter Buch, born in Frankfurt, Germany, was among these early expatriates.

After the beach scene on the islands became too expensive, Buch found an end-of-the-road refuge in the mountains of Castellón. Drawn to the rocky landscape, he wanted to try his hand at sculpture, not knowing what he was going to do until he was actually doing it. He started creating small buildings with rocks found on site, adding earth and small stones to set them and smooth out the shapes. He then covered the infrastructure with a concrete mortar, adding bits of broken tiles that he found in the garbage or that friends would bring him to ornament the structures. He never plans anything out—that would be too boring, he says. He prefers to work spontaneously.

As of late 2011, six buildings and dozens of animals and figures populated the mountainside site of more than 8.6 acres.

2. Manuel Fulleda Alcaraz (b. 1933), Rojales (Alicante)

Manuel Fulleda Alcaraz worked in an astounding variety of jobs as a young man. He wound filament for fishing wire, pounded hemp fibers so they could be twisted into twine for baskets and shoes, laid tracks for the railroad, harvested crops, worked in a cotton factory, plucked chickens among other tasks. He worked hard, and between all of the jobs, despite their general low pay and menial nature, he was able to save a bit of money. In 1974, he purchased a house in Rojales near the outskirts of town. After he retired around 1993, he would occasionally go to the sea, less than four miles away. One day, seeing the...
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thousands of shells tossed up by the waves onto the beach, he began picking them up, thinking that perhaps he could sheathe the walls of the house with them instead of undertaking the periodic regular drudgery of painting.

Fulleda's shell house is particularly notable not only for the intensity of the shell wall covering, but for the series of six terraces, each on a slightly different level, that adorn the upper reaches of his house. It is rare to find a rectangular space, as the building as a whole conforms to the topography of the hillside. Each of the terraces is also an irregular polygon in shape. The height of the terraces and the intricacy of their balustrades, particularly as one looks from one side of the house across to another, create an almost Baroque density that appears to visually vibrate in the heat of the southern Spanish sun.

3. Manuel Garrido Villalba (b. 1926), Villatoro (Burgos)

Manuel Garrido Villalba had little formal education, and his early years were filled with a variety of menial jobs. He was a potter (for a time serving a formal apprenticeship in this vocation), a goatherd, and a harvester of *esparto*, the fibrous grasses widely used for a range of domestic and occupational functions.

However, he seemed to have a special talent for nurturing plants. He carried this skill with him throughout his life, working as a gardener and, later, as a forest ranger, safeguarding the national and regional forests. He was always a prodigious worker, rising early and outpacing his co-workers with his energy. He was also a dowser, locating not only flowing streams and springs, but also lost items. In addition, he was able to diagnose illnesses, and he treated the sick with the herbs he grew.

Although he had never had any training in working with stone, Villalba had wanted to do so since his early apprenticeship with the potter. After purchasing land in 1974, building a house and planting gardens, he began gathering stones from the fields or from the ruins of old buildings. Inspired by their shapes, he began to chisel away at them, never sketching out in advance how the work would be developed.

Using the simplest of picks, chisels, and mallets, his primary subjects were the birds, animals, trees and human inhabitants of the plains and forests, as well as religious figures and several self-portraits. With his characteristic tenacity and capacity for labor, Villalba estimates that he created some 4,000 sculptures, all of which are installed and displayed within or on the high walls of his property.

In addition to freestanding works, Villalba used ladders and simple scaffolding to install and ornament several monumental tableaux, building up three discrete arches over the garden paths. He decorated the rooftop and façades of his garage with a spectacular multi-layered accumulation of carved stone animal, plant, symbolic and human forms. In about 2008, Villalba gave up working with stone, as it was becoming too hard for him. He continues to carve wooden figures and is making more time to care for his garden.

4. José Giralt (b. 1925), Llers (Girona)

Born in Spain's northeast autonomous community of Catalunya, José Giralt spent his entire working life in southern France as a tile-setter, avoiding the terrible war years and the following "years of hunger" that plagued Spain in the 1940s and '50s.

After his retirement, he returned to summer in his natal village. In 2006, he began to ornament the exterior of the
family home. Most of the adornments are fully three-dimensional: colorful and somewhat stylized images from daily life (local birds and animals), history (medieval warriors, Spanish artists), and legend (dragons, witches, and even Robin Hood).

Giralt works quickly and intensely. As the exterior has begun to fill up with sculptures, he has also begun to add painted scenes on tiles—again, heroes from history and legend, animals and flowers. Working every day as long as he is able, "my days pass and I do not even realize it," he says, taking great pleasure in the work he is doing. Giralt is back home, speaking his native tongue, creating artworks that express his pleasure in his surroundings, his history and his homeland.

5. Francisco González Gragera (b. 1935), Los Santos de Maimona (Badajoz)
In 1988, when Francisco González Gragera began the construction of the Capricho de Cotrina next to his stonework business,
he envisioned the site as a new and extraordinary country home for himself and his family. For him, it was an opportunity to explore his expanding interests in sculpting natural forms.

On the outskirts of the village, the site is adjacent to a major thoroughfare and attracts a number of visitors who are drawn off the road by the organic crenellation of three towers. The towers are sheathed in bright tiles affixed in a random but formally balanced trencadís [often described as picassiette mosaic] composition. Fronted by an undulating fence of vertical finials thrusting upward into the sun, the towers and accompanying domes melt down into asymmetrical cylindrical shapes, pierced with an assortment of abstractly-shaped windows.

A curvilinear exterior staircase provides fine views of the site’s complexity and his meticulous craftsmanship. In contrast to the products of his decades-long vocation—flat marble and granite floors, façades, and sober geometrically rectilinear headstones—his architectural/sculptural Capricho flamboyantly celebrates the curve.

6. Eulogio Reguillo Extremera (b. 1949) and Jorge Juan Maldonado Díaz (b. 1943) Ruta de las Caras [The Path of the Faces] Buendía (Cuenca)

The harsh and relatively unpopulated high mesa landscape around the reservoirs that form the inland “Sea of Castile” is easily accessed from Madrid, only about 1.5 hours away by highway. Among those who escaped the city on weekends were childhood friends Reguillo Extremera and Maldonado Díaz. They enjoyed the scenery of the areas adjacent to the reservoir, and discovered that the rocky hills were primarily composed of a sandy limestone that could be easily carved with simple tools.

They also had a broader interest in religious sites worldwide. In 1991, “attracted by a rare magnetism” and a special energy that they felt emanated from this area, they began to carve a bas-relief face on a vertical rock wall near the shores of the reservoir. They believed an extrasensory energy was the strongest in this area.

Inspired by a Costa Rican shaman who visited with the artists at the park and who led them in a ritual offering to the forces they perceived there, Extremera and Díaz would often meditate and drink special teas prior to beginning work.

Thus fortified, they worked from a combination of representations that they felt would enhance a spiritual experience for others as well, including images drawn from familiar Catholic iconography as well as other cultural and religious symbols. In so doing, they created a succession of discrete works that, taken as a whole, comprise a series of sequential discoveries as one walks through the pines to the reservoir, each turn of the path revealing new carvings.

7. Joan Sala Fàbrega (b. 1942), Sant Joan les Fonts (Girona)

Mason and stonemason Joan Sala Fàbrega had a small collection of vintage automobiles. When his village scheduled a fair, they included a photograph of him washing his car in the publicity for the fair. When he saw that photograph, he decided to carve a sculpture of himself in that pose.

“Being a mason, I knew stone,” he said, so he just started sculpting without having had any previous training. His neighbors’ response to his work was immediately positive.

His first works were hacked out from the local basalt or from imported marble, placing them around his home or in the gardens across the street. After a trip to Barcelona where he saw Gaudí’s Parc Güell, he began to fabricate works on a base of concrete, ornamenting them with ceramic tile or glass trencadís (mosaic). As with his free-standing sculptures, most of this trencadís work is also primarily figurative and decorative.

Necessarily somewhat stylized in response to the requirements of the material, in general Fàbrega’s work with tile is of higher technical quality than his carved stone sculptures. The broken tile pieces are laid evenly, with great attention to maintaining equidistant placement. They are cleverly used to visually reinforce such forms as clothing folds or waves in hair styles.

Now retired, Fàbrega works every day to realize images he has drawn from magazines or books, and he revels in his new identity as not just a mason, but as a sculptor. “There are those who call me the Michelangelo of the Garrotxa [and others who call me] a Gaudi of the Garrotxa,” he says with pride.

Art environments such as those discussed here are personal, individual spaces that nevertheless reveal significant public ramifications on a variety of levels, not the least of which is that the creator-builder assumes a new social identity within the community as his/her visible works expand.

Although their creative work may not fall within the parameters of what their neighbors think of as “Art,” this does not inevitably imply their disconnection from their local community nor their inability to function therein. Thus, although art environments do regularly incite public questioning and even, at the extreme, demands for demolition, their creators do, for the most part, remain part of their communities. The creators are not “outsiders,” and for the most part they are neither estranged nor outcasts.

Each artist has his or her own motivation for construction—and for all, at the most primal level they are doing it because they “have” to—but every one is also trying to make a connection with other people, and to elicit a response from viewers. Although certain of these sites are difficult to find, hidden away behind farm outbuildings or at the end of country roads, many are located where a drive-by audience is assured.

Although public viewing and response is rarely, if ever, the initial stimulus for beginning work, along the way it becomes an important component in communicating the artist’s intent. In fact, it is not hyperbolic to suggest that the viewer is essential to the completion of the artwork in much the same way that an audience completes the intent and production of a work of theater.

“Making special” is a universal human trait. As we study the distinction of each artist’s work, we must sidestep the tendency to create artificial distinctions between art genres and open ourselves up to a much more expansive view of the range of influences on each creative act. As we do so, we begin to gain a sense of the power and the potency of art environments and the passion and perseverance of their fiercely independent creators.

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