

San Jose State University

From the Selected Works of Jo Farb Hernandez

Winter 2010

Josep Pujiula i Vila: Out of the Ashes

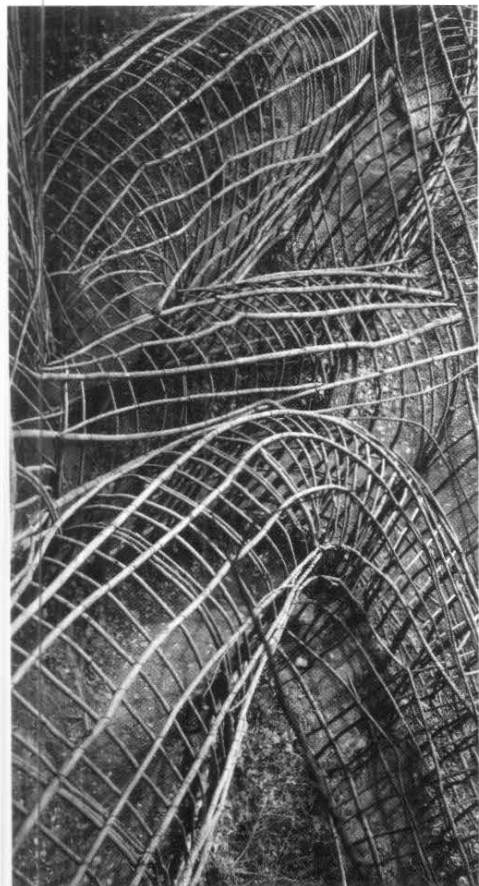
Jo Farb Hernandez, *San Jose State University*



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Josep Pujiula i Vila (b. 1937)
Out of the Ashes

by Jo Farb Hernandez



Raw Vision #40 readers learned of the impending destruction of one of the world's great art environments, Josep Pujiula i Vila's wooden towers and labyrinth in Spanish Catalunya. Pujiula's constructions—created primarily from flexible sapling branches gathered from the nearby river—were built over thirty years, culminating in an impressive array of seven 100' towers linked together with innumerable bridges, shelters, walkways, stairwells, and, most extravagantly, a mile-long labyrinth. Its multistory cage-like warrens twisted and turned through dead-ends, trick doprways, and disorienting switchbacks; located alongside a major highway, it quickly became a popular tourist destination.

However, in June 2002 Pujiula was ordered to dismantle his masterpiece to make way for the highway's expansion. First branch by branch and then later with a chain saw—when all hope for reprieve was dashed despite the worldwide clamour to local authorities—he worked steadily, destroying and burning decades of work. What sad irony that this Catalan architectural innovator's constructions were demolished the same year that Spain celebrated the sesquicentennial of the birth of Antoni Gaudí!

Pujiula, however, couldn't stop himself from building, even as the highway roadwork plowed through the site where the art environment had been. First he constructed a small tower below the highway, but then moved slightly west, hacking out tunnels and small caverns by hand from the cliff faces. Fronted by a small, graceful labyrinth, this area included a small "museum" in which he exhibited his tools, clippings about his work, and a cross marking his future resting place.

Yet this site was too far from the highway for visitors to find him. He thus moved back closer to the original location and,

convincing the highway workers to give him their "extra" concrete and steel, created a lyrical cascading fountain. Bucket by bucket, he smoothed out a shallow swimming hole traversed with additional labyrinthine tunnels. He liberally ornamented the sides of the steep spillway created by the highway's large subterranean drainage pipe with elaborate vertical concrete and openwork steel sculptures, some of which kinetically move as the water filters down. Markedly different from his labyrinthine tunnels and towers, this new fountain area is spectacularly innovative and dynamic. He takes pride in it, and articulates that he never would have modified his medium or aesthetic direction had it not been necessary to demolish the earlier construction and move away from that site.

Now that the highway workers have finished their work and disappeared, taking with them any "extra" cement and steel, Pujiula is concentrating on extending the labyrinth to join the disparate parts of the site. Although not yet quite as large as the one burned in 2002, this new iteration is nevertheless extremely complex, with but a single entrance and exit, precipitous inclines, numerous dead-ends, and deceptive pathways. Bursting with future plans, when asked about the authorities, Pujiula replies that they don't ask and he doesn't tell.

When I started this intensive annual research into Pujiula's works a decade ago, I never anticipated its convoluted lifeline, mimicking the labyrinth itself with twists and turns, highs and lows. But Pujiula's admirable tenacity over almost forty years, despite the repeated need to dismantle or demolish components of his work, makes him an icon of the irrepressible artist, pushing the limits with phenomenal intensity of effort and masterful creative drive.