

COGN

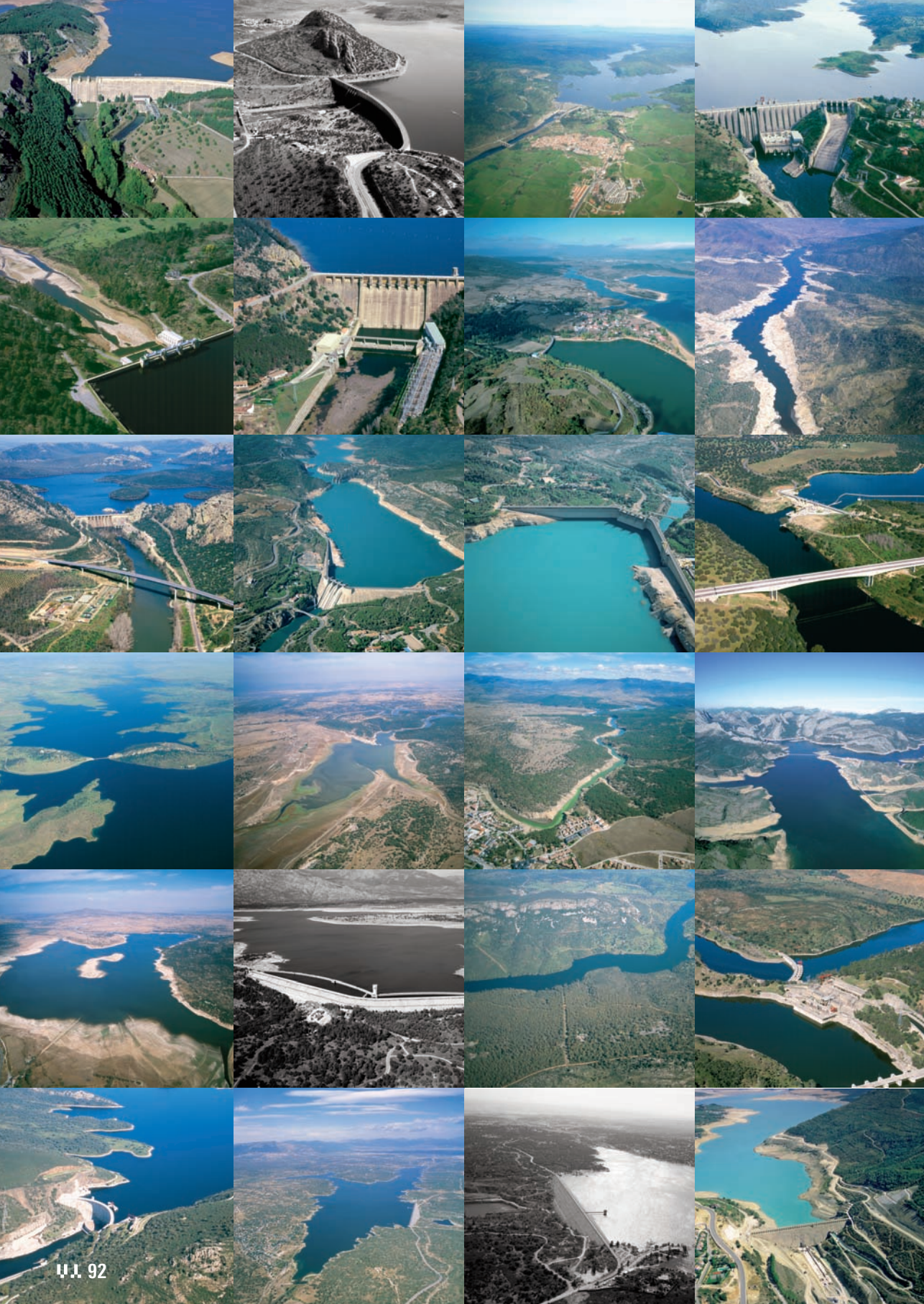
AN INTERVIEW WITH IBON ARANBERRI BY PEIO AGUIRRÉ



IT IVE MAPS



Photographs of reservoirs and dams; the closing-off of a prehistoric cave; a silhouette of pine trees; the explosion of fireworks beside a nuclear power station, that had never been activated and are a continuous reminder of a dramatic past; a mountain documentary where a "film" has been created through various fragments and traces, indefinitely collected and ordered – all of these form part of the imaginary of the Basque artist Ibon Aranberri. His practice links apparently different problems under the same narrative structure, and his work provides space for others by turning to his surroundings and a lived experience that is not necessarily autobiographical. His practice is a place where photography, design and sculpture meet – as well as techniques from other disciplines such as the social sciences – and is persistent and methodical. Even during this interview we can immediately perceive his resistance to labels and categorisation. You could imagine Aranberri as an teenager, carefully updating his natural-science notebook. Like archaeology, old dilemmas – perhaps almost entirely forgotten – come to the surface as if they were new, modern and up-to-date, to be put under a new light. Werner Herzog once said that the mystery of landscape doesn't imply looking outside, towards nature, but looking inside ourselves. Aranberri's artistic manipulations offer us such introspection. We met on a damp March afternoon to discuss why ecology has returned to being such a hot topic, or if it really ever was, and we tracked from natural resources, such as water and their administration, to the Romantic taming of wild scenery.





Peio Aguirre: Why do you think your *Política Hidráulica (Hydraulic Politics)* series (2004–07) raised an immediate connection with the ecological debate?

Ibon Aranberri: In the Spanish context, maybe not for our generation, but certainly for previous generations, evoking the inaugurations of reservoirs, any public works, etc., re-awakens the memory of the dictatorial period.

PA: Yes, the past doesn't seem so remote, and you revive it once you dig a little deeper.

IA: It's a kind of cycle, and the burden of the dictatorial system hasn't allowed a naturalised approach towards this type of scenery beyond mere social action or activist resistance. Especially in the last 15 years, since the launch of the National Hydrological Plan, there has been a big movement of protest and opinionated articles, and this set a precedent. This debate was established from within the social realm and in relation to the way the anomalous phenomenon of natural resource administration was conceived. The bond is established by the drama of it all, even among the younger generations. A relation that's further away in time is not understood as being more superficial; the instrumentalisation of the drama does not result in something interesting. I started to collect images, coming up to these type of places in my leisure time, and when the Itoiz reservoir was still under construction.

PA: At a first glance *Política Hidráulica (Hydraulic Politics)* seems to have equal resonance with your unrealised project concerning the abandoned Lemoniz nuclear power station.

IA: No. It's true that formal links can be easily established in terms of industrial archaeology and brutalism, but I'm not interested in these kind of relations. In that project I didn't consider an account of the power station's topological setting. For me this had more to do with the social and physical flows, at times invisible, that developed through time.

PA: Yes, but also there is the fact that it was connected to an ecological consciousness – this is something very much of its time.

IA: There is the common denominator of megalomania. I think that historically, the awareness of finality – of the liquidation of the planet, Cold War panic, and so on – had a great impact and weight.

PA: This planetary spirit, applied to social and political contexts or within local realities, has been able to generate a very rich iconography, and has shaped a whole collective imaginary.

IA: Yes, but first of all I must say that as an artist, I don't think my work is sustained by any ecological militancy. Nowadays ecology is centred on preservation and considers the planet to be fragile and static. Historically, fear has been built on catastrophic fiction, which fed itself on popular culture. It's as if current ecological thinking originated as a protective or defensive mechanism against vertiginous changes.

PA: Does nuclear fear exist?

IA: It exists, but more for the preservation of life on the planet than for nature itself, as something separate from the urban. That apocalyptic vision has in part weakened through time. Now what exists is a planetary consciousness concerning the preservation of nature and life's balance, and not so much a simple paranoia of nuclear power. Maybe this consciousness developed a sensitivity towards urban – as well as extra-urban – biology.

PA: Could one talk of a global ecology movement existing at that time, could we say that in the 1970s there was a global ecological spirit?

IA: Ecology originated precisely from the people, as a movement partly derived from that paranoia. There have always been ecologists: Saint Thomas Aquinas, Alexander von Humboldt during the Enlightenment, and so on, even if this was much more connected to a concept of naturalism, and the exploration of and sensitivity towards the natural environment.









PA: Could the modernist subject be a naturalist, an ascetic and a radical aesthete?

IA: Yes, this concept could be framed within the colonial period of great explorations and scientific expeditions, with the discovery of the unknown and the exotic.

PA: Going back to the Lemoniz project: it is one of your works that, due to its unrealised condition, is still alive, kind of out of time, with all those different sorts of energies floating around it: the political debate, the ecological movements, etc. It is interesting also in respect to the union of ecology with politics.

IA: Or better, it is a very hot spot on the map.

PA: And still today?

IA: Yes, for all the density it contains, Lemoniz has almost become an abstract place, an enclave that is far beyond a place that can actually be visited. Since I was a student, I have been photographing every spot apart from the closed site. I know only indirectly about the times during which Eduardo Chillida created the emblem of 'No Costa Vasca Nuclear' (No nuclear Basque coast).

PA: So there is a more obscure link – a link to the personal?

IA: It's nothing special, really. Since our generation has never been right at the front line, we have dedicated ourselves to the construction of memory.

In any case, in this project I never focused on the ruins – what was interesting was in the air, in that tension that that kind of scenery generates, like those links that are kept alive, visibly or invisibly, and that define this specific point on the map. I'm interested in giving narrative to what cannot be perceived, for example, by avoiding the documentary tendency of objective photography, that has already portrayed over and over again these entropic landscapes. Narrative is achieved thanks to what is outside of the nuclear power station: a tree, a bird. These external elements can signify.

PA: Does it have anything to do with a particular sentimental cartography, or with the attempt to create a map in the order of the invisible?

IA: Most of all, it is an testing ground, a long process where I didn't apply a particular technique or methodology. It was instead in a narrative experiment connected to the impossibility of happening: it's a way to approach what is known by participating in the undetectable.

PA: You've worked with reservoirs and water administration, as we can see in your recent works, starting with *Dam-Dreams* (2003), *Política Hidráulica (Hydraulic Politics)* (2004) and most recently, *Mar del Pirineo (Sea of the Pyrenees)* (2006).

IA: A nuclear power station is like a bunker made of concrete but also a dam, except that everything results in a superficial repetition. What is most interesting is the collective issue – what was created in the past, and how it's been kept alive.

PA: I'm still trying to establish a link with ecology: the title of one of your books – *No trees damaged* (Sala Rekalde, 2004, Bilbao) – seems to contain a specific message.

IA: I was simply looking for a title. That book gathers very direct works, in some of them there is a cycle of construction and destruction. The title is a metaphor in which we are facing a natural catastrophe in which no trees have been damaged. We're talking about collateral effects of an altered or a manipulated natural order. I was interested in this analogy as direct action, in that what is not altered is not part of the natural order, but of the collective psychology of the social. Facing catastrophe, the collateral damage of nature itself is not physiological but psychological. Furthermore there is a hidden articulation that coexists in this publication, a tree-sense ...

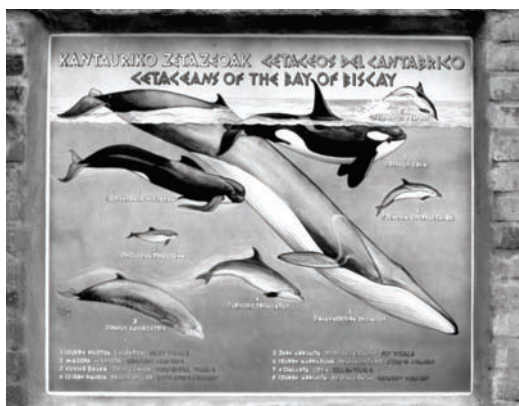












PA: Do you agree with the idea that what lies underneath nature is neither order nor harmony, but common denominators of chaos, hostility and death?

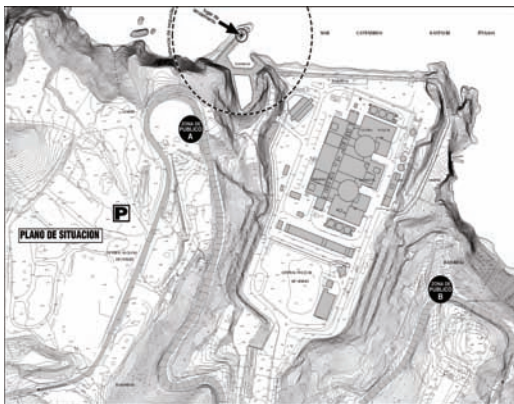
IA: I find open spaces very uncomfortable.

PA: What is your way of confronting that? In all your works there is a certain secret code, local references: do images have a decoding quality?

IA: They're the result of me being an accidental photographer. The camera functions as an interface as drawing can be, for example. It is a tool of mediation, codification and registration of what one wants to apprehend. In my case, the camera is a device for defence that approximates an external environment that's far away from the urban but is always hostile to me. The camera is like a frame, a tool to grasp what you see.

PA: You have always taken pictures. How did you use your camera when you were younger?

IA: As a tool: it's about the tension of the gaze, and there is no need for external conflict, it can be the same open nature. The camera works as a mediator with its surrounding. Through the simple act of photography you domesticate your vision, and your gaze gets accustomed to place. It's about ocular tension towards something. Anyway, I would never present myself as a photographer.



PA: I guess that in the same way, as you don't present yourself as an ecological artist, you also don't present yourself as an artist under the label of 'art and nature'.

IA: That's right. It depends on whether we start from the division between urban and natural environment – a western distinction that started from the Enlightenment and went on to the modern period with technology as a means to dominate nature. In early cultures in Asia and Africa, they do not regard this distinction but understand it as a continuity. I have never considered myself as an artist negotiating with nature, and I never try to establish any difference whenever I'm in a urban or non-urban context, because a vision of nature comes from a urban point of view.

PA: Would you reject, in the same way, an association with 'post-Land art'?

IA: My interest lies in contrasting that artifice in relation to order, and how this can be taken beyond the cultural archetype. This narrative reveals itself in relation to nature, because it has not been decodified as a space of conviviality, as the city is – or rather, as is the iconography of a city. That's why my approach is always from the urban, as distinct from Land art where the relationship meant leaving, during Postmodernism, to find a sort of escape in other primordial practices.

IBON ARANBERRI is an artist based in Bilbao. He has recently shown at the Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt and at Standard Gallery, Oslo. Future projects include participating in Documenta 12, Kassel (2007) and a solo show at Fundació Tàpies, Barcelona (2008).

PEIO AGUIRRE is a curator and art critic based in San Sebastián.