

**FEMINIST  
PERSPECTIVES  
IN ARTISTIC PRODUCTIONS  
AND THEORIES OF ART**

**III. EDITION**

2014

Author

**HAIZEA BARCENILLA**

Title

**EYES THAT DO NOT SEE**



**AZKUNA ZENTROA  
ALHÓNDIGA BILBAO**

The objective of this article is to analyse exhibition and acquisition policies of the *Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao* [Bilbao Fine Arts Museum] (FAM) from a gender perspective. This museum contains the most representative publicly-owned art collection in the Basque Country. It is jointly owned by the city of Bilbao, the provincial government (*Diputación de Bizkaia*) and the Basque Government through an ad hoc foundation created for this purpose. The museum also offers a complete programme of temporary exhibitions that include works from outside its own collection.

Before I embark on an in-depth analysis, it seems appropriate to explain my reasons for selecting this institution as a subject matter. In 2008, female artist Saioa Olmo and I launched a project called *Wiki-histories* ([www.Wiki-histories.org](http://www.Wiki-histories.org)). It sprang from our shared concern over the lack of female references in what I will broadly refer to as the Basque artistic context<sup>1</sup> where we worked. We knew of many active female artists but found their public presence to be fairly limited. The disproportion intensified as we looked back in time. We had heard of numerous female artists but had seldom seen any of their works exhibited. We also realised that many of these names had reached our ears through female friends, colleagues or researchers, but very few had been included in our formal training —as an art historian in my case, and an artist in Saioa's case— and fewer still through exhibitions in public institutions.

Since we knew these women existed and were aware of their absence in the official narratives, we decided to create a platform by which we might attempt to recover their history. We sought to identify as many female artists as possible who had worked from the 1970s on and offer them the opportunity to tell us their story and record it in a common place. We created a wiki-site where artists could contribute their own narratives and build another history, very distant from the official one. Though methodologically questionable, it was at least much more inclusive.

Running parallel to this was our concern about how Art History was being written. We realised that recovering the memory of women artists and agents in the Basque cultural context would be the key to change. Mindful of warnings from historians such as Linda Nochlin (2008)<sup>2</sup> or Griselda Pollock (1995, 2013)<sup>3</sup>, we also realised that including women “drop by drop” would do nothing to question the system that had constructed that history. That system would automatically label such women as second-class exceptions, if they were ever accepted at all. According to the rules established for evaluating art in Art History, the work of these female artists lacked the genius of their male colleagues. We should study why: what factors lead to underestimation of the value of female works, which are accordingly less known, appreciated or studied? While these questions have been examined through the lens of feminist art historiography, we also saw the need to examine them in our context.

Wiki-histories presented us with several points of interest that we considered worthy of deeper research, which I will briefly list as an open invitation to other female researchers; so much work remains to be done in this area. As a starting point we found that the number of women studying at the School of Fine Arts was considerably greater than the number of men and had been for some time. The oldest data available from the University of the Basque Country (EHU/UPV) described the 1996 incoming class as 67.13 per cent female, and the proportion increased slightly in the following years. It has remained between 68 and 71 per cent female for the last decade (*La universidad en cifras*, 2006: 74). However, the number of female participants in young artist competitions for that generation was proportionally much lower. For example, in the 2005 *Concurso de Artistas Noveles de Gipuzkoa* [Gipuzcoa Young Artists Contest], it would be reasonable to

---

<sup>1</sup> We had some difficulty in defining the geographical delimitations of what we understood as “Basque art”, since it could refer to The Autonomous Community of the Basque Country or to Euskal Herria, which includes Navarre and the French Basque Country. We also considered the fact that certain reference persons for “Basque art” have lived outside this territory for long periods. “Basque” could also be understood as a way of practicing and identifying with a certain artistic tradition. For this reason, we chose to adopt a more ambiguous and open definition, which can include anyone who feels a part of this context at a conceptual, geographical or personal level.

<sup>2</sup> *Why haven't there been great women artists?* This text was originally published in 1971 and can be found in ARTnews, January 1971: 22-39, 67-71. It was not published in Spanish until much later (2008).

<sup>3</sup> Pollock's research career has focused on clarifying the importance of the artistic canon, the exclusion of women from that canon and the need to re-think the art system itself, in order to include those left outside official history due to gender, class or race.



expect to see some of the people who began their art studies in 1996 and graduated in 2001. Thirteen of the works exhibited were by men and only five by women<sup>4</sup>.

Here we find two significant aspects that merit research. The first is to ascertain whether women enter fewer competitions, and if so, why? Informal surveys suggest that many women focus their professional career more towards teaching and art restoration. These vocations should be thoroughly analysed, as they may conform to social prototypes in which women are assimilated into caretaker and educator roles while men assume the role of genius. We also reflected on the fact that the promotion system in the world of art has certain codes that require entrepreneurial abilities and strategic social relations, often in highly masculinised settings. From infancy, men are educated with greater emphasis on these tasks, while many women may feel out of place in such environments.

Second, it is important to examine whether competition selection processes lead to a greater proportion of male “winners”. For example, themes related to femininity are often considered “minor” or lacking in universal value, while certain forms—such as sculpture in the Basque Country—and even materials are more linked to male values but are assumed to be universal. The question of femininity has been addressed by several female historians, but not in our context. Visibility constitutes another variable: if an artist’s trajectory is known to the jury, it is easier for that artist’s project to receive a positive evaluation or at least to be evaluated in relation to prior work. If women are less visible, their work is less recognised by juries. Finally, another useful analysis would of course involve discovering how juries are formed. All these matters await further, much needed research that might prove very useful.

We also observed the weak presence of women in public collections and exhibitions in the Basque Country, which brings us to the main point of this article. Public collections—and here we refer specifically to the Bilbao FAM collection—are responsible for creating a common heritage that reflects an understanding of Art History. Artists in these collections have status as key figures in the historic narrative; integration into the museum and heritage system fosters acceptance of the quality of their work. They also become examples and foundations for canons and forms of representation. Exhibitions not only reflect the ideology of a time, but contribute essentially to creating common imaginaries. We clearly observe this characteristic in the Basque art collection of the Bilbao FAM, which seeks to weave together a specific identity and artistic language with sentiments of belonging to Basque culture and the political particularities of the times.

Griselda Pollock argues (2013: 111-163) that women do not create different art due to being biologically female, but due to the fact that society has established gender separations that affect our vital experiences and access to certain spheres. Thus, we need to understand the features of each time period and how gender influences world views and artistic work at different moments. Women’s voices as a subject have been excluded from the construction of history and canon, effectively consigning any agent departing from its criteria to oblivion. This deeply disturbing dynamic shuts women out of a supposedly common narrative, and the concern intensifies if we are talking about establishing a lasting public narrative.

In this sense, the work of museums should be vital. Decisions regarding the content of collections and acquisitions—or what to exhibit and how—shape the narrative that is transmitted to every visitor. Museological and curatorial studies in recent decades (Bennet, 1995; Bolaños, 2003; O’Doherty, 2011 and many others) have amply demonstrated that a narrative is never neutral: it always communicates an ideology. It is impossible to not position oneself when exhibiting, purchasing and researching.

For this reason, we turned our attention to the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum, as the oldest institution in this area and one that should demonstrate social responsibility. As I mentioned earlier, within its mission and defining characteristics, it claims to possess ‘the most important collection by Basque artists’ (*Historia*, Museo de Bellas Artes). In 2008, through Wiki-histories, we dedicated time and effort to an in-depth analysis of the Museum and encountered a raw, offensive reality: women were scarcely present in its permanent collection and exhibitions. Once this became conclusive, we decided on two activities: first, to organise a special visit to the museum to see the works by female artists that were actually included in this collection; second was to propose a series of guided visits of the museum collection from a gender perspective. We analysed how women were represented in the most historical portion of the museum, through the late nineteenth

---

<sup>4</sup> It would be important to examine more precisely the number of people who competed by gender, as this is only the final list of those selected. In conversations with organisers of this competition, we were told that the number of women competing in the first decade of this millennia was generally lower than the number of men.



century. From that point on, we included the figure of the female artist as an active subject rather than the passive object of inspiration and representation, assessing the presence of works by women in the collection and exhibitions.

Wiki-histories had multiple fronts: emphases and activities changed over time, so our monitoring of the Museum was less specific in the following years. Through the printed word our critique has revealed allies among other specialists, such as Ismael Manterola and Iñigo Astiz in *Berria*. However, our appraisal and various actions by women's groups, which I will name further on, have had no effect on the target. The situation calls for detailed examination and collective social protest.

## A BRIEF EXAMINATION OF QUOTAS AND NUMBERS

Before scrutinising the policies of the Fine Arts Museum, I would like to clarify my position regarding counting, proportions and quotas. In the next section I will include specific figures, realizing that figures must be interpreted and that interpretation affects the meaning we attach to them. I consider quantitative analyses of gender questions to be problematic for many reasons, as they prevent sufficient attention being given to deeper elements hidden behind them. I will return to this in the conclusion. However, examination of the Museum data will clarify why we have made recourse to this system, which informs deeper conclusions.

At this political moment we hear a great deal about quotas; legislation regarding gender equality issues is no exception. In the Basque Country, Law 4/2005 regarding the equality of women and men specifically addresses cultural questions. Chapter II, Article 25.1 of this law indicates that 'Basque public administrations, in their spheres of competence, must adopt necessary measures to avoid any sort of discrimination due to gender and foster balanced access and participation of women and men in all cultural activities developed in the context of the Autonomous Community of Euskadi'. In Article 25.2 it continues: 'Basque public administrations may not offer any sort of subsidy, nor will its representatives participate as such in any cultural activities, including festivities, artistic or sports activities and those relevant to the linguistic mainstreaming of *Euskera*, that discriminate by gender.'

This law was reinforced by Spanish Organic Law 3/2007 of 22 March for the effective equality of women and men, which in Chapter 2, Article 26 specifically focuses on artistic and intellectual creation. It establishes that 'public authorities in their areas of competency shall ensure the principle of equality of treatment and opportunities between women and men in all matters concerning artistic and intellectual creation, production, and diffusion.' Article 26a clearly instructs relevant entities to: 'adopt initiatives intended to foster the specific promotion of women in culture and combat structural and/or diffuse discrimination'. Likewise, Article 26c instructs regarding the need to 'foster the balanced presence of women and men in the public offer of artistic and cultural goods'. Section d of the same article addresses equality of representation in consultative and decision-making organs. Finally, the First Additional Disposition defines 'balanced participation' as 40% - 60% presence of both sexes.

However, the laws have not been fully developed to establish control measures for these sections, nor possible fines, punishment or other consequences for non-compliance. Currently, they serve to create more of an illusion of equality, while most institutions ignore them entirely. This generates some reticence in me towards the quota system. However, as it is the legal framework in force today, I will begin my analysis of the Bilbao FAM policies from this perspective. From there, I will embark on a deeper examination that will include other critiques from the feminist perspective.



## THE BILBAO FINE ARTS MUSEUM: COLLECTION AND EXHIBITIONS

The Bilbao Fine Arts Museum was founded in 1908 and opened to the public in 1914. In 1924, the Museum of Modern Art was inaugurated and the two museums merged in 1945. Since then, the Museum houses both historic and contemporary works. It contains an important collection of Western art, along with what the Museum itself claims on its website as ‘the most important collection of Basque artists’. This institution grew out of the combined interests of society and the involvement of artistic agents of that time: namely artists, patrons and collectors. For this reason and due to its responsibility to represent its context, much of its collection and the greater part of its permanent exhibitions contain works by Basque artists.

Nonetheless, the Museum’s representation of Basque artists is biased at the very least, and this has intensified since 2002, when the current director Javier Viar<sup>5</sup> assumed his post. This statement is based on the exhibition and acquisition practices of the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum.

Regarding exhibition policy, our analysis will be brief: between 2002 and 2014, not one of the Museum’s 43 exhibitions of individual artists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries featured a female artist. Among the artists whose works were showcased in these exhibitions we find Txomin Badiola, Ramos Uranga, John Davies, Carmelo Ortiz de Elgea, Peter Blake, José Luis Zumeta, Alberto Schommer, Jesus Mari Lazkano, Daniel Tamayo, Antonio López, Fernando Botero, José Ramón Anda, Ramón Zurriarain, and the recently deceased Néstor Basterretxea. This bears witness to the significant presence of men working in the Basque artistic context since the 1970s; but I find it surprising that not one female artist was considered interesting enough to merit her own exhibition.

The Museum has offered collective exhibitions on women. The first, titled *Mujeres impresionistas. La otra Mirada* [Women impressionists. A different view] (2001-2) was actually programmed under the prior director, Miguel Zugaza. It began with the exceptional presence of a work by Mary Cassatt, and included pieces by Marie Braquemond, Berthe Morisot and Eva González.

Five years later, the Museum hosted another exhibition featuring women: *Kiss, Kiss, Bang, Bang: 45 of Art and Feminism* (2007), curated by Xabier Arakistain. It offered a retrospective on feminist art that was entirely foreign to the Museum’s collection, which contains no works of this type. Thirty-six artists and three feminist groups displayed their works in a thoroughly novel exhibition for this institution. As a result, the Museum acquired seven Guerrilla Girl posters. Curiously, these acquisitions were not entered in the annual ledger of purchases and at the time of this writing were listed as a “gift”. Such classification may be due the modest price of these pieces, which might have been purchased through the exhibition funds<sup>6</sup>.

If anyone were to imagine that this exhibition would lead the Museum to reconsider its position, it would be entirely mistaken. At no time did the exhibition generate reflection on, or re-consideration of, the Museum display policy, which remained void of female presence during the next four years. It became clear that for the Museum management team, feminist art was a movement as specific and residual as the most obscure tendencies of contemporary art, and that women as agents of artistic production could only be found in that backwater. Once the exhibition ended, I am inclined to think they felt they had “ticked the box” and could return to their usual practices with a clear conscience.

---

<sup>5</sup> Due to space and research limitations, combined with the fact that the current situation and the most recent law were developed during the directorship of Javier Viar, this article focuses only on that period.

<sup>6</sup> Given that the Museum until now does not consider these works as part of its collection purchase programme, I will not include them in the results of this section. I conclude that the fact that the Museum neither made their acquisition public nor included it in its ledger shows that there was no intention of acquiring them beforehand and that they probably entered the Museum collection through some exhibition agreement. This would indicate that the Museum does not consider them as pieces that enhance its discourse.



It seems that recourse to the “theme of women” every so often proves beneficial, as it shows the supposed good-hearted disposition of the Museum towards the weak ones of society. So four years later, another exhibition about women appeared: *There Is More in You. Images of Women in the Middle Ages*, which was dedicated to the representation of women during that time period.

The latest museum initiative consisted of a series of exhibitions by female artists as part of the *Miradas de Mujer* [Through the Eyes of Women] festival, instigated by *Mujeres en las Artes Visuales* (MAV) [Women in the Visual Arts] in connection with 8 March. All art galleries and centres were invited to exhibit art by women in relation to that key date. The 2013 and 2014 events involved “temporary exhibits” (called thus by the Museum and not considered exhibitions) of some 20 works, with female authorship as the only common thread. In disturbing resemblance to a neighbourhood civic centre exhibition, the works were displayed almost at the artisan or amateur level in a residual area of the Museum and without any organization or discursive lines. The installation and set-up of the exhibit communicated that these works merited less attention, were not integrated within aesthetic or conceptual discourses, and were perhaps treated in this way because they were done by women. However, the Museum used even this situation, which I classify unequivocally as an insult to the work of women, to commend itself. The online exhibit literature that still appears on the FAM webpage states: ‘this presentation is offered as part of the Museum’s aim of raising awareness, through exhibitions and publications, regarding the role of women in society and their contribution through art’. It cites the exhibitions we have already mentioned as examples of this ‘Museum priority’ (*Miradas de mujer*, 2014).

Let us now turn our attention to Museum acquisitions. In light of the extensive possibilities for acquisition afforded by the centuries of Western art housed in the Museum, a focus on specific lines of acquisition would be understandable. So it is surprising that, contrary to ICOM recommendations, the Museum has no document that identifies purchasing protocols, priority lines of acquisition and collection logic. The Spanish Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports [abbreviated MECED in Spanish] requires such a document for State museums. A section of the MECED web page titled ‘Expanding collections’ states:

In accord with the conceptual definition of each museum in its museological plan, one of the museum’s functions is to acquire cultural goods that guarantee the necessary and appropriate growth of its collections.

All museums must have a document listing the basic criteria that guide this growth, along with a future strategy. Aspects to be taken into account include the following:

Priorities for increasing collections.

Sections of the collection that need to be completed to make the exhibition discourse more coherent and relevant types of cultural goods that the museum prioritises for acquisition.

Preferential form of increasing the size of the collection (purchases, donations, deposits...) and means of achieving this (field work, auctions, counter-loans or benefits to donors).

Deontological criteria regarding the acquisition of cultural goods.

Technical criteria defining the acceptance of donations and deposits.

Internal procedures for expanding collections.

The Bilbao Fine Arts Museum is not a State museum and therefore not under legal obligation to fulfil this MECED requirement. However, disregarding universally accepted indications shows a lack of good practices. I find it equally astonishing that the institutions financing this entity and overseeing its management do not require such a document; they fund acquisitions without specific purchasing criteria.

The absence of organised and externally validated lines of action makes it difficult to discern what criteria the Museum uses to select its purchases. We do know that the Museum’s Commission for Artistic Evaluation was formed in 2003 at the proposal of Director Javier Viar



and includes the following members: Jorge de Barandiarán (former Director of the Museum of Fine Arts), Kosme de Barañano (Chair of Art History), Alfonso Gortázar (painter and professor at EHU/UPV), Vicente Larrea (sculptor), Mikel Lertxundi (researcher), Marco Livingstone (art critic and independent curator), Tomàs Llorens (former Chief Curator of the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum), Pilar Mur (historian) and Pierre Rosenberg (former Director of the Louvre). This group clearly sidesteps any gender-balancing stipulations for consultative organs established by the Law for the Equality of Women and Men. Moreover, Alfonso Gortázar and Vicente Larrea have works in the Museum collection that they donated or that were acquired during the time they served on the Commission for Artistic Evaluation, creating a fairly blatant conflict of interest.

The fact that the Commission was not modified after Laws 4/2005 and 3/2007 became effective is indicative of Museum's policies and practices, which resonate throughout the collection. Specifically, 41 of the 1,846 works listed in the online collection search engine *Corpus*<sup>7</sup> are the works of 18 female artists. However, this search engine does not separate the rather extensive historical collection from the contemporary collection. By refining the search to twentieth and twenty-first centuries, 35 of the 1,019 works listed can be attributed to women. Proportionally, this amounts to 3.43 per cent.

Logically, the closer we get to the contemporary period, the greater the proportion of female artists. However, the increase of female works in the Museum is not at all proportional to the presence of women as professional artists and is clearly not aligned with current legislation on equality. Some of the 35 contemporary works by women did not enter the Museum as acquisitions but rather as deposits, donations or payments in kind: including two works by the Guerrilla Girls<sup>8</sup> and one each by Miriam Ocariz, Carmen Calvo, Ixone Sádaba and Susana Talayero. Since the Commission for Artistic Evaluation began its work in 2003, 28 contemporary works have been purchased, dating mainly since the 1950s and especially after 1975. Two of these 28 works are by female artists: one by Mari Puri Herrero, a name already present in the collection through some of her other paintings, and a purchased work by Susana Talayero. If we calculate the gender proportion, we arrive at the scandalous figure of 7.1%. Works acquired during this time were mainly by Chillida, Oteiza, Mendiburu and Basterretxea, along with others such as Xabier Salaberria, Balerdi, Pello Irazu, Lazcano, Zumeta and Zurriarain.

It is important to note here the connection between acquisitions and exhibitions: an exhibition often takes place after an acquisition, or a new purchase occurs in connection with an exhibition. Basterretxea, Zurriarain, Zumeta, Lazcano and Irazu participated in the collective exhibition *Gaur, hemen, orain*. This also occurred with the Guerrilla Girls. Again, female artists find themselves at a disadvantage: because they are unable to exhibit their works in the museum, they cannot access normal acquisition processes.

The works of Mari Puri Herrero and Susana Talayero were acquired in 2006 and 2007, respectively. Since then there have been no purchases or acquisitions of any works by female artists. More significantly, the last purchase of a work by a female artist took place the same year as the *Kiss, Kiss, Bang, Bang* exhibition, confirming that this exhibition generated no subsequent reflection by the Museum regarding the role of women in art. Between 2008 and 2013, the Museum purchased 13 pieces: three works done prior to 1975 and ten after that date. Six are dated after the 1980s, a period in which female artists constituted an important and representative part of the Basque and international artistic panorama. However, all the works purchased were by male artists.

The last twelve years are resplendent with events and recognition of the work of female artists in the Basque context, which has gone unnoticed by the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum. The following examples provide a brief summary.

Elena Mendizabal (1960 —) is an artist of great local relevance and professor of sculpture at the UPV/EHU, where she directly influences new generations of artists. She is one of the most recognised artists of her generation in this area and has exhibited her work regularly in the Basque Country since the early 1980s.

---

<sup>7</sup> *Corpus* only lists works that have been exhibited. The FAM collection also contains works that have never left the storerooms, including some ten works by female artists.

<sup>8</sup> See footnote 6.

This artist represents an entire generation of women born in the 1960s who have a recognised line of work and have been systematically ignored by the Museum. The list includes Azucena Vieites, Txaro Arrazola, Gema Intxausti, Txaro Fontalba, Dora Salazar, Begoña Vicario, Gentz del Valle, Ana Román, Mabi Revuelta, Charo Garaigorta and Miren Arenzana. Male artists from this generation are heavily represented in the Museum's collection and exhibition programmes. Four pieces by Jesus Mari Lazkano belong to the collection and a 2010/2011 exhibition featured his work. Four works by Juan Luis Moraza entered the collection over a decade ago, in connection with an installation he set up outside the museum in 2001. Alfonso Gortázar, a member of the Commission for Artistic Evaluation, has five works in the Museum collection, the latter of which were purchased while he served in that capacity. After an individual exhibition in 2002, the Museum acquired a large installation and two wall pieces by Txomin Badiola. Apparently, the moment for female artists to be recognised by the Museum through exhibition or acquisition has passed and only Susana Talayero is even slightly represented.

If international projection were a criterion for including artists in the FAM collection, Maider Lopez (1975 –) serves as a representative example. Younger than Elena Mendizabal, Lopez has done specific projects in several parts of the world and received significant international recognition. She has participated in the biennial exhibitions of Venice (2005), Sharjah (2009) and Istanbul (2013), as well as projects for the Skor (Rotterdam) and the Pompidou Metz Centre. She received the Gure Artea award in 2011 and her works are included in the collections of Artium and the Guggenheim Museum of Bilbao. The Bilbao Fine Arts Museum has none of her works, nor has it ever invited her to any specific project for the institution.

Begoña Zubero (1962 –) is another nationally and internationally recognised artist. She won the Pilar Citoler award for photography and the Gure Artea award. In 2013 she was the resident artist at the *Academia de España* in Rome and has exhibited her work around the world. Curiously, the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum has 113 photographs by the prestigious Alberto Schommer, but none by Begoña Zubero.

Perhaps the most scandalous absence is that of Esther Ferrer, a Basque artist born in 1937 and resident of Paris. Ferrer is considered a key figure for performance art and action art in Spain and throughout Europe. Her most physical works —photographs and installations mainly— have been exhibited around the world. Though she has lived in France for several decades, she remains involved in the Basque context through art courses and workshops. However, her institutional recognition in the Basque Country was gradual at best, possibly because of the tendency to support sculpture with a strong sense of Basque identity. In 2008, she received the Spanish National Award for Visual Arts (and had even been selected to represent Spain in the biennial exhibition of Venice in 1999); but the Gure Artea award in recognition of her career was not awarded to her until 2012. In 2014 she was awarded the Velazquez Prize for Visual Arts. In 2011 and 2012, she was featured in a large anthological exhibition in Artium. In spite of all this, the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum has no works by this artist and has never featured her in an exhibition.

The Museum's thoroughly nineteenth-century view of art should not be overlooked; as a variable in this equation it also affects many contemporary male artists. The FAM has almost no photographs, only one video, no installations and of course no performance art. For this museum, art refers to painting and sculpture; accordingly, most current artists have scant possibilities of exhibiting there or having their works included in the collection. It also shows a lack of control by the public institutions that maintain this museum and its artistic criteria; the debate over the hybrid nature of art formats was laid to rest almost half a century ago.

## CONCLUSIONS

The analysis presented here should raise several questions. First, we should question the relevance of the Laws on Equality for Women and Men, in force since 2005 and 2007, if in the last twelve years the institutions that finance and support this museum have been allowed to practice what could be defined as a misogynous policy. Some might argue that these institutions have erred on the side of omission: they haven't acted because they lacked sufficient information, but their omission was not actually facilitating this situation. Such an idea is absolutely mistaken.





In 2008, Saioa Olmo and I published the ratio of female artists in our project and engaged in activities that would make this knowledge public. Since then, as critical agents we have written continuously denouncing the Museum's policy for acquisitions and purchases. Activism against the Museum has intensified in the last three years. Platform A, a cultural agent concerned with the invisibility of women in the Basque artistic panorama, wrote a letter in 2012 indicating the Museum's non-compliance with Law 4/2005. They demanded that institutions supervise these practices in museums that they finance, and that public subsidies be contingent on meeting these legal criteria. This letter was given to Blanca Urgell, outgoing Basque Councillor of Culture, who met with the Platform but suggested that matters be discussed with her successor. This letter was also sent to the *Ararteko* [Ombudsman for the Basque Country], which considered the situation worthy of legal action. Another copy was sent to Joxean Muñoz, the current Vice-Councillor for Culture, Youth and Sports. He received Platform A on two separate occasions, indicated a lack of knowledge and some concern, but never acted on the matter. At no time have subsidy criteria been revised for non-compliance with this Law.

This lack of action by several individuals in positions of political leadership shows their hypocrisy in regard to the law on equality, at least in the sphere of visual arts. They have created an equality facade (the Basque Country prides itself on being the first Autonomous Community in Spain to ratify this Law) that serves as a front for inaction and the lack of support or in-depth research into actual discrimination and alienation of women. They argue that there is already a law defending women, while ignoring the fact that it is systematically not applied. The Law on Equality is the easiest to ignore: there has never once been any action against any entity for non-compliance in the sphere of culture. For nine years now, you can ignore and discriminate against women with full impunity.

Undoubtedly, these laws were established to improve the current situation of women, and perhaps in some areas this objective has been met. In the sphere of culture, however, women are systematically ignored and I think it is time to admit complete failure as regards legislative effectiveness. Misogynous policies continue to exist, and equality legislation may itself have distracted us from deeper research. For example, it seems vitally important to research female artists whose works have suffered from this invisibility, especially those born in the 1960s. I think it equally imperative to discover why fewer women graduating in fine arts actually work full-time in their profession. What are the effects of the lack of family conciliation for women as cultural agents? Going deeper, we must look at how school texts explain art history. We need to reflect on the canon and the establishment of universal values in order to launch lasting social education processes that generate mid-term and long-term change. These areas have scarcely been addressed by the institutions, which have often used the law on equality as an excuse for not investing resources into researching these matters: after all, there are legal dispositions intended to avoid such discrimination.

What is the vision of certain public institutions regarding the cultural resources they maintain and promote? It seems museums are understood as the turf of their directors, who may run a museum as if it were a private collection: without the bother of justifying their decisions or addressing critiques; without accepting outside proposals; without concern for the needs of the artistic community. Granted, we should exercise caution when requesting institutional involvement in the programming of cultural centres. Work methodology must ensure political, scientific, and artistic independence. However, the case analysed here constitutes an unacceptable *carte-blanche*. Institutions should justify their lines of work. We must not forget that museums create two key aspects of culture: heritage, through their collections, and the common social image of culture through works exhibited, discourses developed and narratives proposed. If a time machine is invented one day and someone from 2114 were to visit today's Fine Arts Museum in Bilbao, they would conclude that art was an exclusively male activity. The same idea is transmitted to everyone in the present, especially those who see this Museum as a reference point for artistic and cultural activities in their territory. There is no need to dictate the aesthetic, political and artistic discourse of these centres, but institutions should guarantee that they function with equality, respect and consideration for all members of our society. Unfortunately, the current situation does not reflect this.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY AND ONLINE RESOURCES

- Bennet, Tony. 1995. *The birth of the museum. History, theory, politics*. London. Routledge.
- Bolaños, María. 2003. "La exposición como utopía: algunas experiencias ejemplares" pp. 203-216 in *Museología crítica y Arte contemporáneo*, edited by J.P. Lorente, Zaragoza. PUZ.
- Nochlin, Linda. 2008. "¿Por qué no ha habido grandes mujeres artistas?" pp. 283-289 in *Amazonas del arte nuevo*, Madrid. Fundación Mapfre.
- O'Doherty, Brian. 2011. *Dentro del cubo blanco. La ideología del espacio expositivo*, Murcia. Cendeac. (Originally published in English in 1981).
- Parker, Rozsika & Pollock, Griselda. 1995. *Old Mistresses. Women, Art and Ideology*, London. Pandora.
- Pollock, Griselda. 2013. *Visión y diferencia. Feminismo, feminidad e historias del arte*, Buenos Aires. Fiordo.
- Historia*. Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao. Accessed at: <http://www.museobilbao.com/historia.php>
- Miradas de mujer (5/03/2014-7/04/2014)*, Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao. Accessed at: <http://www.museobilbao.com/actualidad/el-museo-se-suma-al-ii-festival-miradas-de-mujeres-104>
- La universidad en cifras, memoria anual, 2006*. Accessed at: [http://www.ehu.es/p200-content/es/contenidos/estadistica/universidad\\_cifras\\_2005\\_2006/es\\_cif\\_2005/adjuntos/UPV\\_en\\_cifras\\_2005\\_2006.pdf](http://www.ehu.es/p200-content/es/contenidos/estadistica/universidad_cifras_2005_2006/es_cif_2005/adjuntos/UPV_en_cifras_2005_2006.pdf)
- Ley 4/2005 Para la Igualdad de Mujeres y Hombres. . Accessed at: [http://noticias.juridicas.com/base\\_datos/CCAA/py-14-2005.t3.html#a25](http://noticias.juridicas.com/base_datos/CCAA/py-14-2005.t3.html#a25)
- Ley Orgánica 3/2007 Para la Igualdad Efectiva de Mujeres y Hombres. Accessed at: [http://noticias.juridicas.com/base\\_datos/Admin/lo3-2007.html](http://noticias.juridicas.com/base_datos/Admin/lo3-2007.html)
- Incremento de colecciones*, MEC. Accessed at: <http://www.mecd.gob.es/cultura-mecd/areas-cultura/museos/colecciones/incremento-de-colecciones.html>

