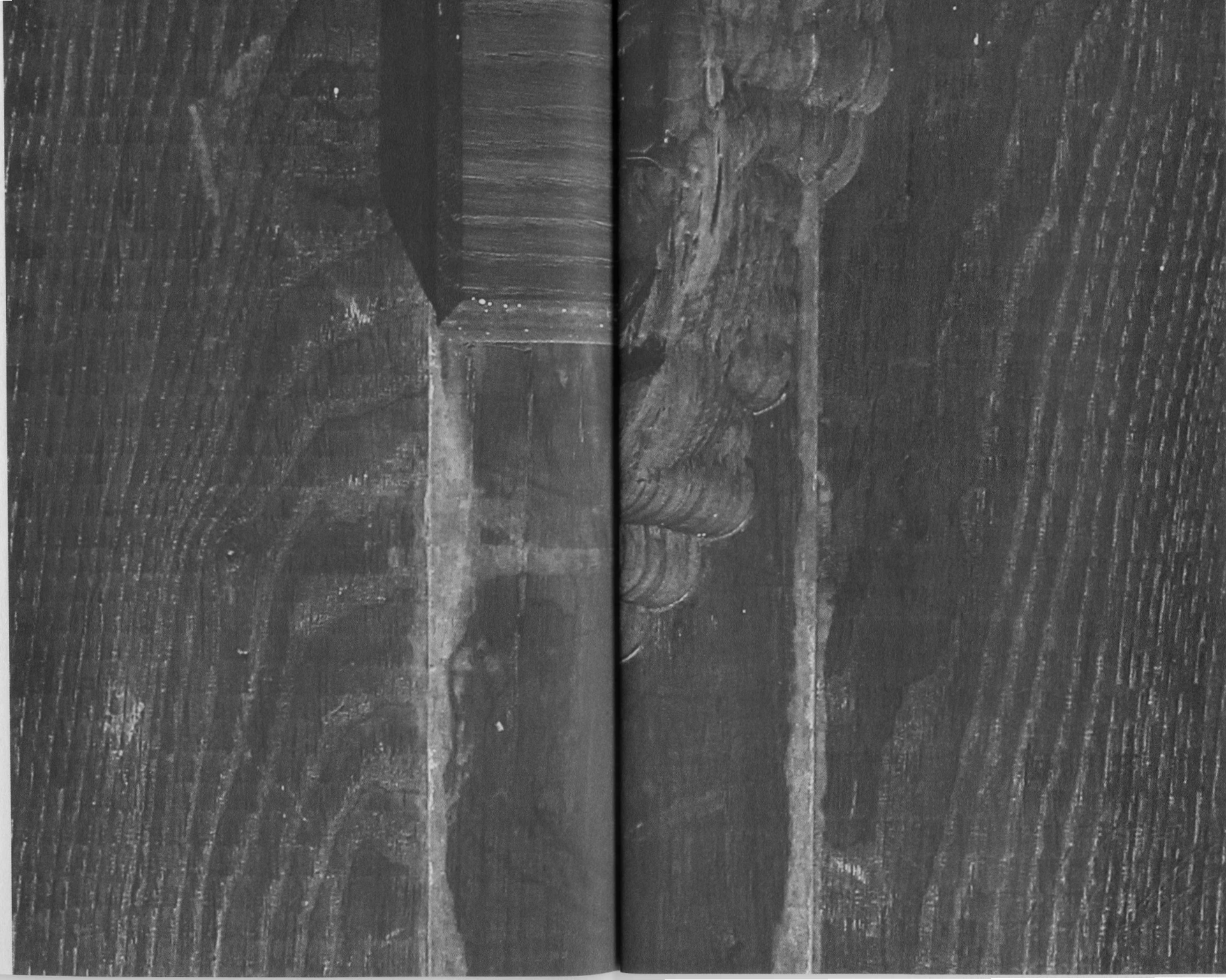




Peeling a Trunk

Peeling a Trunk



1.

The trees planted by the inhabitants of the neighbouring farmhouses, whose foliage now almost conceals the small hermitage of Otsaurte, were seemingly their only contribution to the peculiar religious building. A local parish priest on very good terms with the powers that be had the chapel built in 1967, and procured funds to locate it in the lands of the Marquises de Zegama, with no need for local donations or fundraising. The hermitage was built for the use of residents in the scattered farmhouses nearby; workers from the nearby quarry; and until recently, for mountaineers and hunters whose excursions into the Aitzkorri mountains depart from the site. What is striking about the building, which was the work of architect Luís Alustiza and stands in a bucolic mountain landscape, is its 'modern' typology. Its inspiration is recognisably Brutalist, and recalls the time when it was built, a moment of aperture towards the characteristic technical pragmatism of the time. Almost at the same time, the hierarchy of the Catholic church, with the Second Vatican Council, and the rise to power in Spain of its Opus Dei technocracy, was also favouring a renewal of form in architecture – with, of course, a dissimilar ideological intent. The paradigmatic illustration of this transition is, of course – because of the complicated vicissitudes that delayed its culmination – the Sanctuary of Arantzazu, at the other end of precisely the same mountains that Otsuarte is the gateway to. It is highly improbable that Don Lorenzo the parish priest would have been seeking, for his little hermitage, the emancipatory political social and cultural implications set in motion by the sculptural language at Arantzazu.

The church is closed now. Used ever more sporadically, mainly for wedding ceremonies, it is almost abandoned today. Inside it, visibly penetrated by the damp, stands the enigmatic form of the piece of wood that brought me here.



The piece of wood is a prism-shaped beam which stands vertically by the altar of the hermitage. It is made of several planks, joined in the usual way to make a larger block for carving. Its presence in this place is disquieting. It is around the height of a fully-grown person, and its rectangular shape and rough finishing remind one a rudimentary coffin. Or a strange contemporary totem. On the front of it at the top is a face, crudely hewn but with precisely expressive features, which comes forth from inside the block of wood inside a concave hollow excavated with clear grooves by the same gouge the sculptor must have used to form the face that emerges in the wood. The bite-like marks of the gouge that hollowed out the wood are no different in their energy from the grooves which carve precise expression on the face which looks out from inside the hollow.

The priest who determined the need for and shape of the hermitage of Otsaurte also decided that it should house a wooden figure carved by master figure-maker Julio Beobide. An image of Saint Joseph. The piece of wood is, would have been, the Saint Joseph he was thinking of. But Beobide died in 1969, leaving no preparatory sketch on paper and having only managed to hint at the saint's face in the wood, in which, nevertheless, the serene expression the sculptor sought is already visible in his skilful rendering. Abandoned just as it was begun, the sculpture technically exhibits the way the artist worked and the precision of his handwork, even in his first assaults on his material. Beyond the technical interest of the work, the strange figure of the block with one side roughly hollowed out with the precise immediacy of the carved sketch makes the face seem to want to break out from inside its material, or appears to have been unburied by someone from inside the wood.

Sculpture is always, in the symbolic remnant of its original function, disquietingly bound to death. This idea, which diffusely

arises when we think of the condition of a commemorative landmark, a funerary statue or monument; which we attribute to vertical form, the form of the stela, or of any remotely anthropomorphic sculpture, exudes from this particular piece. It is overwhelming - not so much because of the aforementioned similarity to a coffin with a face emerging from it, but because of the more concrete awareness that it was the sculptor's sudden death which froze the strange object into its final form. Time halted by death has given shape to it.

In a half-technical, half-poetic act which the unfinished object almost lent itself to, somebody decided after Beobide's death that the sculpture would be used for its original purpose regardless of its state, and placed a wooden sign underneath the hollow the saint's face emerges from, carved with an inscription in a typography derived from traditional Basque woodcarving, in a form of Basque used before unification, which reads, "*Done Ioseph, Beobide'k etzinduan osotu, otoitz-bidez guk osotzen zaitugu:*" Saint Joseph, Beobide was unable to complete you, we will do so ourselves, by our prayers.

2.

Friar Ramón Pané, the Hieronymite brother who sailed with Cristopher Columbus on his second journey to the Americas with the task of "learning about and understanding the beliefs and idolatry of the Indians," and the first missionary to have learnt native languages, wrote in his *Account of the Antiquities of the Indians* on the Cemi, the ritual idols of the Taino culture.

"How they make and store wooden or stone cemi.

Wooden cemi are made as follows: when someone is walking along a path and thinks he sees a tree shaking down to its roots, that man will halt in fear and ask who it is; the tree answers, "Bring



me a *buhitihu* (shaman); he will tell you who I am." The Indian goes to the doctor and tells him what he has seen. The witchdoctor goes to the tree the man has told him about, sits next to it and does the *cohoba* ceremony. Once the *cohoba* is done, he stands up and tells it all its names as though they were the titles of a great lord, and says to it, "Tell me who you are, what you are doing here, what you want from me and why I was called here; tell me if you want me to cut you down, or if you want to come with me, and how you want me to carry you; I will build you a home with an inheritance." Then, the tree or cemi, now an idol or a devil, replies, telling what shape it wants to be made into. The witchdoctor cuts it down and gives it the required shape."

Pané's book, the first one to be written by a European in the Americas, was also the first one to bring ethnography and anthropology into the New World.

3.
Faith in the form that dwells inside matter, condensed in Michaelangelo's famous complaint that he hated the stone that separated him from the statue, seems to be a particularly ingenuous form of idolatry, even when compared to the more conventional relationship we have with the completed image. The symbolic force which recognisable images exercise over us through the conventional meanings we attribute to them may be relativised as pertaining to culture; but such familiarity with the idea that the form already exists as a realized potentiality creates a dilemma. A friend used to tell a joke, by way of a parable, which I always remember when I come to Otsaurte: a carpenter takes on a new apprentice and gives him a test of his skill. "Get me a Saint Joseph out of this piece of wood," he challenges him. The apprentice bangs away with his mallet and finally the carpenter approaches the young man, to find him stripping the last splinters off the tiny piece of wood. "What are

you doing, you idiot!" he shouts, and the apprentice says, "If Saint Joseph is in here, he'd better come out soon..." To trust in the idol hidden in matter seems, at the very least, to reveal a kind of superstitious thinking.

This idea, however, becomes more complex when we consider the peculiar consistency of wood. Anyone who has sculpted a form out of a tree trunk knows that the capricious nature of the material means that it is more than just our previous decisions or search for the imaginary form that guides the movement of the chisel. The knots and the grain of the wood that are the solid imprint of the trees growth mean that we have to work with some respect towards the will already living in the matter; which is not so different to imagining that there is already a form inside it resisting the one we want to impose on it. My indistinct use of the words wood, matter and material in this last thought is deliberate. It is revealing to observe that the etymology of the Greek philosophical generic term for matter (as opposed to form), *hylé*, refers precisely to wood. The homonym also exists in Latin, where in several Romance languages, *materia* (matter/material) becomes *madeira* or *madera* (wood). To try, literally, to imagine wood's particular complex consistency when speaking of matter brings about a small change in the perception of this abstraction. But it also makes one think of how, by opposition, the matter-form coupling that then arises in the imagination unconsciously privileges the process of subtracting (*taking away* matter) as a way of generating, rather than organising form. To propose a similar etymological relationship in Basque is more difficult, but seems evocative enough to make it worth mentioning a measure of correspondence between *zur* (wood) and *zuri* (white), through the verb *zuritu* (to whiten, but also to peel). Or the probable relationship between *zur* and *hezur* (bone) that will allow me to introduce here, in case the image might help, Hegel's speculative proposition *the spirit is a bone*.

ETZINDW

OTCAT

EVK C/OTZ

4.

Leonardo da Vinci's notes contain a small drawing of a tree, which provides a diagram of the tree's growth pattern, and also a system for learning to draw one. The trunk divides into the two halves of its main branches, which in turn divide into two, and again until the archetypal form of the tree is drawn. Da Vinci draws a concentric arc at each point where the branches split, with the central arc encircling the trunk, and each of the outer arcs encircling each series of new branches so that the entire tree is encompassed as if inside a target. The way the concentric arcs portray growth ends up as an involuntary image of the form of time in the tree's growth: the concentric rings in the cross-section of a tree trunk.

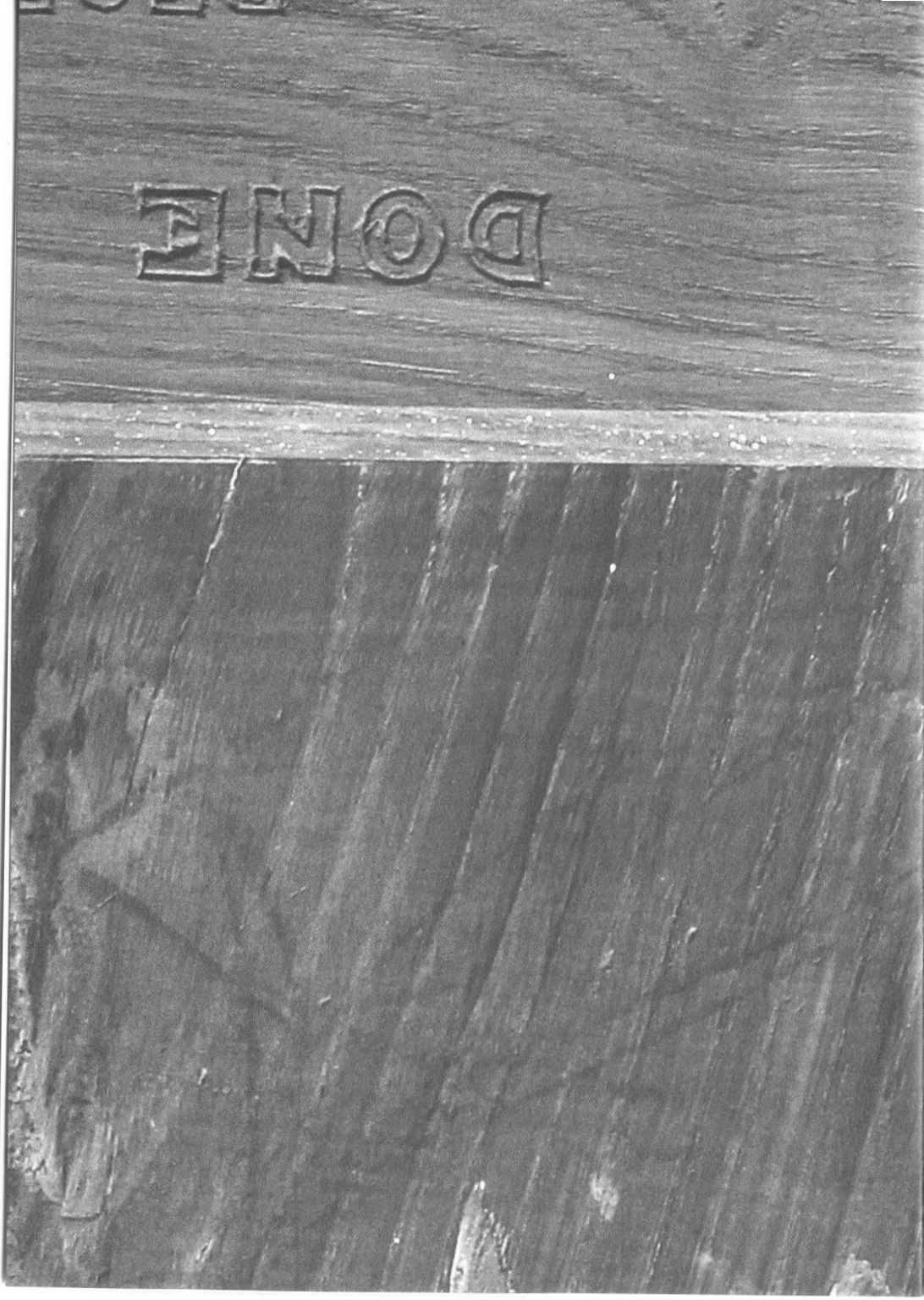
We imagine (we make an image of) History, in its becoming, as a continuous succession of potential branching off, of facts that may or may not have taken place, of possibilities which were realized or relegated, like a tree which spreads teleologically into the future through the living branches of each decisive event, but which also retains the uncanny remnants of the dead branches, the alternatives to each of these events. A kind of image of historical contingency. The intriguing "what if" scenario of science fiction's "alternative History", forever implicit as the phantom of any historical narrative. The "ex-futures", as Unamuno would say it. Yet there is no way to relate to the past without the other image: the concentric rings in the tree trunk which conceal each of the rings before them so that these can only be seen in the cross-section, or by peeling time away, layer by layer.

In a decisive moment for the concept of History our present is largely ruled by, the idea of the *end of History* - extolled in the late 1980s in the midst of the enthusiastic cancellation of the 'East-West' dialectic embodied in the fall of the Soviet system - the German artist Hans Haacke made a sculpture titled *Waiting for the End of History* consisting of a flowerpot with two fragile branches

protruding from it and crossing at some point. One of the branches looked alive, the other dead. Two decades previously, Italian sculptor Giuseppe Penone had presented his *Tree of 12 Metres*. The piece was a large, straight-edged construction beam, from which the artist had 'peeled off', layer by layer, each year of growth, each concentric ring of the tree, following the grain around the knots, to bring out the tree inside the beam, or allow it to reemerge. Penone's sculpture brings to mind the opposite process to Haacke's piece: from the industrial wooden beam, he *unpacks* its natural form - the *complete* tree with its trunk and branches - in what emerges as the skeleton of the tree, which is the tree itself, replicated inside itself. History here is not the broken line which represents linear time - obviously akin to the genealogical or family tree, but also to the symmetrical idea of this: the root, evoked by Haacke's sculpture. Rather, it would be a way of approaching History as a past to be unburied, in concentric circles like the section of a tree trunk - more akin, therefore, to stratification, the archaeological form of knowledge; to excavation, which, as archaeologists delight in reminding us, paradoxically destroys the very material it analyses.

Such a way of proceeding evokes the hackneyed metaphor of *peeling the onion*. Jean Dubuffet, to choose a particularly precise example of the image, described his working process in a letter as follows: "Once I decided to peel an onion, and took off the first layer, and then the second, and so on until I realised I was going to peel the whole thing and there would be no onion left, as an onion is only made up of successive skins that end up not enveloping anything at all. As for the rest, *it can be said of everything that, generally, nothing is where you look for it.*"

As a counterpoint to these two intuitive images of History, the sculpture at Otsaurte, suspended in a moment of unrealised potency, evokes the thought that the figure which emerges from the wood is brought out by the movement of the gouge, or by prayer;

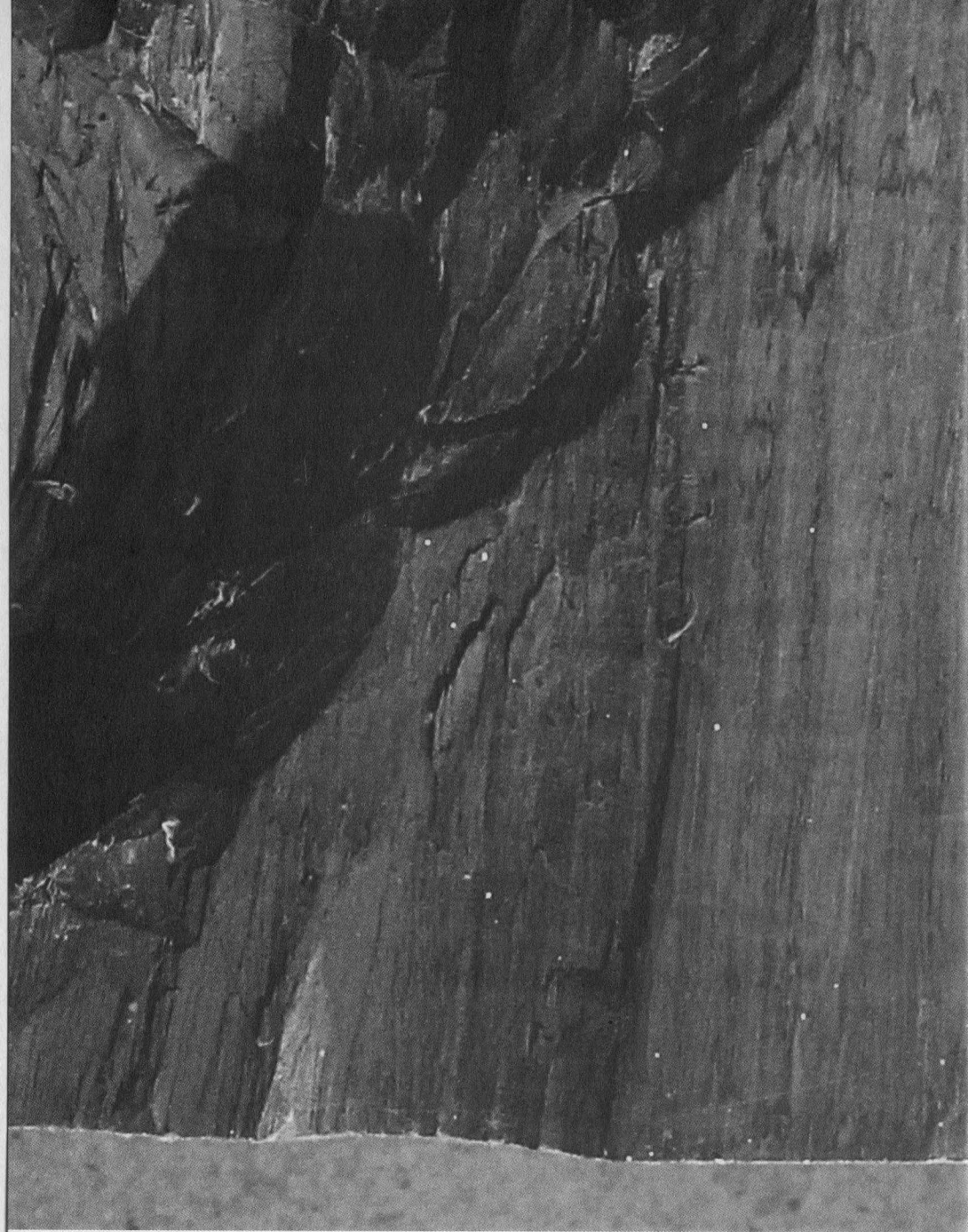


and that it is the material that determines the unburying, which is, simply, form being generated as it submits to the conditions of the search for it. Form and matter can thus be seen to condition one another in a relationship where, to use Bernard Stiegler's beautiful expression, *neither term holds the secret of the other*. Applying this image (or its corresponding technical procedure) to the two metaphors of History I have mentioned would allow us – and the metaphor becomes a true analogy here – to forge a correspondence between the immanence of matter with the matter of historiography: documents, archaeological artefacts, art objects and other material. In my view, this analogy might provide a way of taking hold of the historical imagination through the particular form of art, remembering, as Christoph Menke says, that “The historian gives shape to intrigues that documents may authorize or disallow, but will never contain,” and that, at the end of the day, historical knowledge is verified in the context of *many* comparable grounds, whereas the type of knowledge proposed by art is rooted – and this its particularity – in *one*, singular ground.

5.
The Aitzkorri landscape framing the Otsaurte chapel holds a particularity, which in actual fact is a cultural characteristic. The *pago motzak*, or pollarded beech, is still a frequent occurrence in the forests. These are beeches whose form has not followed the species' natural growth pattern. The *pago motza*, unlike natural beeches which grow vertically with a long, straight trunk, has thick branches spreading out from low down on its trunk, and is shaped like a wineglass. The trees' strange shape is the product of human artifice. A technique. By pollarding the young trees' trunks, their vertical growth was interrupted, and the strength of the trunk distributed into its thick, oddly twisted branches, almost as thick as trunks themselves, which could be used for charcoal or firewood. One historical explanation of the technique claims that deforming

the trees like this was a strategy of concealment. In wartime, the state could confiscate all usable wood for ship construction, which meant that the long, straight beech trunks were highly valued. The charcoal makers deformed the trees to prevent them from being used for ship-building. As convincing as this reason might be, their actual motivation may have been just the opposite, too: one of the most interesting aspects of ship building in history is precisely the fact that the particular shape of the ships' structure was often chosen from the shape of living trees. Specimens that held the necessary form inside them were chosen. Patterns were taken into the forest to compare with the actual shape of the trees, and the woodcutters would search for latent correspondences (V- or Y- shapes for the keel, naturally occurring curves or exactly perpendicular branches for other pieces) in the living tree. Warping the trees' natural growth, then, may also have been an attempt to create particular forms, usable not for their regularity but for the oddness of their forced growth.

Danish artist Asger Jörn wrote a theoretical text somewhere near a manifesto, titled *A Crooked Bough*. In it, he unambiguously proclaimed the need for a vernacular Scandinavian artistic language, and began with his thinking regarding a Swedish proverb “Cut the branch while you still can,” which calls for useful forms to be seized when they appear in nature, because fate will probably never give us another chance. Jörn began with the widespread idea of universal technical evolution from existing forms, but insisted in linking certain particular inflections of each particular evolution to the notion of folklore, continuing the classical anthropological problem of *technics* and *ethnics*.



6.

By the time Julio Beobide died in 1969, leaving his sculpture at Otsaurte unfinished, he was a well-known, highly respected sculptor in the Basque Country, although his work was always confined to the category of religious sculpture. The pathos of his firm, skilful carving, his figures' effective expressionistic figuration, fitted well with religious taste in the portrayal of pain or the serenity of Christs and saints; or the dignity of his secular portraits of fishermen or his friend, the painter Ignacio Zuloaga. But, as also occurred with Zuloaga, his dramatic figuratism and technical finesse receded as the main values for judging his capacity to describe his present. Beobide was twenty years younger than Zuloaga. Naturally, he never achieved Zuloaga's social presence, fame or influence. Zuloaga's relevance as a cultural figure in Europe and America is hard to fully imagine today. The two artists, nevertheless, were close friends: Beobide built his studio opposite Zuloaga's, on the other side of the Urola River.

It was in this studio in Zumaia that Zuloaga received General Franco in October 1939. The war had just ended, and the General's gesture towards the artist was not an unusual one, given that Zuloaga had been an influential propagandist for the National cause during the war. The anecdote would be a banal one were it not for the fact that the visit gave rise to a much-loved anecdote in Francoist mythology. Zuloaga, who in addition to his own work also had a fairly decent art collection in his studio in Santiago Etxea, showed the dictator around his private museum. Among the pieces, Franco noticed a crucified, tenebristically expressive Christ with Baroque inflections in polychrome wood. Franco's epiphany or revelation varies in intensity depending on the hagiographical or mystical slant of the narrative we choose from the many adulatory repetitions of the story. But all of them repeat the moment when the general has to ask, "Who made this Christ?" and possibly also, "I want this Christ for my valley," the valley of Cuelgamuros, no

less, or, from then on, the Valle de los Caídos or Valley of the Fallen. Zuloaga cautiously, diplomatically, explained what he understood to be a problem: the crucifixion was the work of Julio Beobide, a friend of his, who, however, was a Basque nationalist and therefore a political enemy. In a reflex act probably invented by chroniclers of later years, Franco replied, All the better, the valley would be a monument to reconciliation between the opposing sides. This sinister mythology of reconciliation and the way it is told here takes the artists' friendship as its implicit basis. Put to the service of official narrative, however, the story has less hues or subtleties. We are still truthfully told today by media harking back to the regime that both the crucifixes in the valley (the other one is Pedro Muguruza's monumental work) were made by Basque artists. A measure of embarrassment in the narrative constructed around Franco's commission led to an insistence on Zuloaga's ruse of cautiously fooling Beobide into thinking that it was an American buyer who was wanting his Christ, knowing that Beobide's dignity would prevent him from agreeing to the commission. The fact is that the work was paid for by the Generalísimo's Casa Civil, who asked for acknowledgement of receipt in the proof-of-payment form. It is also true that in the circumstances, the artist had no alternative.

The wood that Beobide carved the Christ from was from the trunk of a juniper personally chosen by Franco himself, after a moment of revelation when he perhaps saw the figure the tree held inside it. Less understated versions of the story assure that it was the Caudillo himself who cut it down.

JOSEPH



Peeling a trunk
Asier Mendizabal 2016
Zegama-Otsaurte

Translation: Toni Crabb
Image: unfinished Saint Joseph by Julio Beobide, 1969

N OOTV

-DIDEZ

M ZAITWCV