



Otxarkoaga/Targu Jiu/Hernani
Asier Mendizabal 2008–2010

Otxarkoaga

1

There is a hyperspecificity in the codes that shape subcultures that proposes a model of how group identity is constructed that is half-way between what is shown and what is hidden. The friend-enemy distinction established between those who can, and those who cannot, understand the semantics arbitrarily assigned to signs, which is, at the same time, a model of the more generic working of ideology itself. The subtle detail that becomes a sign, not through associative legibility or the evocative capacity of the iconic, but because of an arbitrary symbolic decision, understood as relating to the identitarian mandate of ideology. Althusserian interpellation.

In the necessary codification of difference, after the eruption of the philofascist temptation in the skinheads' proletarian imaginary that divided the scene in two, a series of almost imperceptible details acquired the highest possible degree of signification through the need for difference. The original skins, rude boys belonging to the left-wing workers' tradition, seemed indistinguishable from the boneheads attracted by the political opportunism of the British National Party. The unmistakable and strict dress-code of the bomber jacket, Dr Martens boots, braces and the essential shaved head did not vary according to ideological option. Thus difference was established in codes of almost absurd specificity: the laces of the Doc Martens boots, originally black, replaced by bright white laces betraying the racist inclinations of the signal's emitter (white power in the laces). In certain places, too, red laces distinguished those who wore them as national socialists. The bomber jacket, always identical, transmitted a somewhat less binding signal, but a tendency could be supposed in the choice amongst the three varieties: black, green or blue.

"It's a type of signal that let's you smash someone's face in without asking him anything, which is an advantage in that situation", was a substantial argument when attention to the code was stricter than it is today.

2

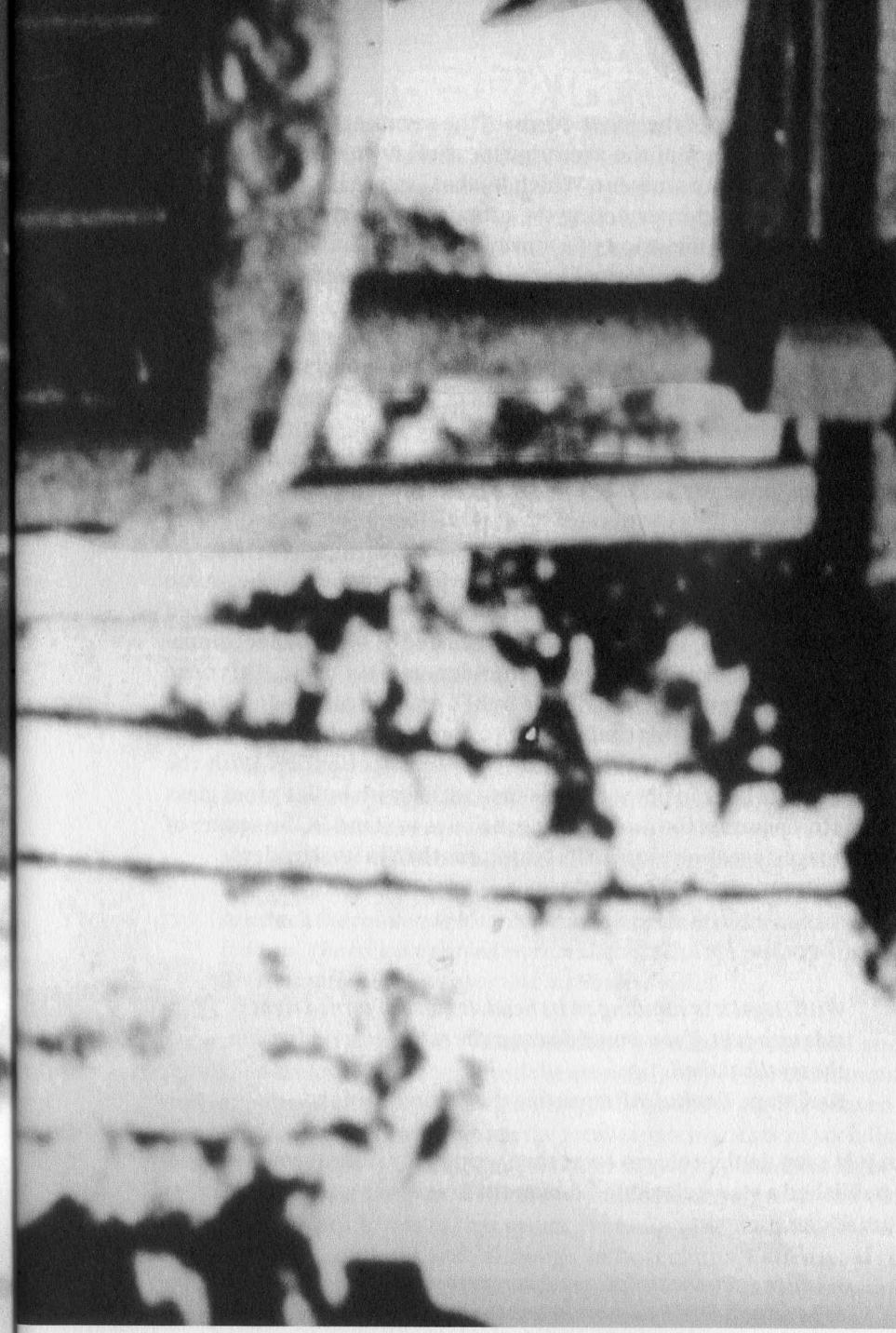
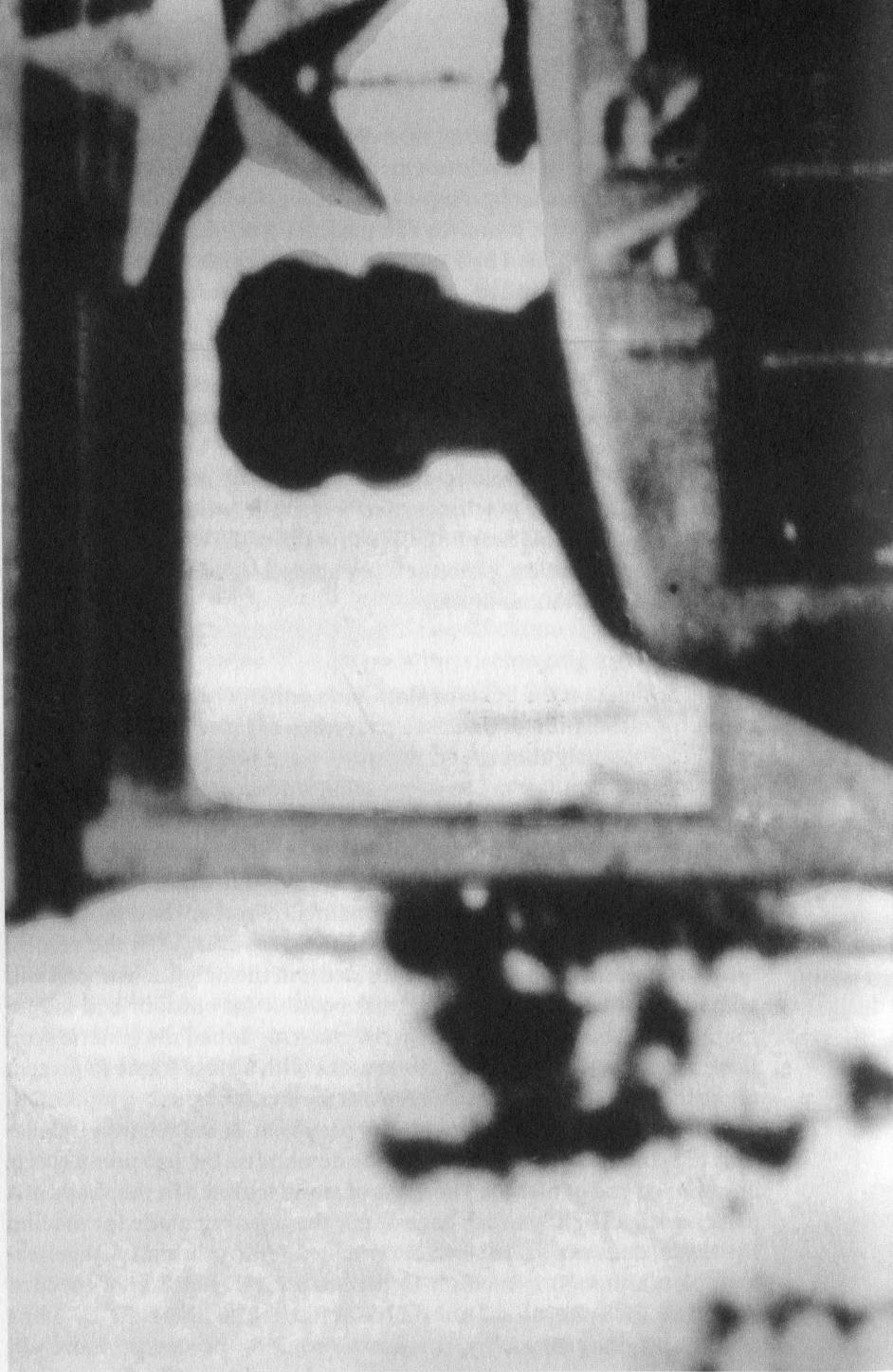
I am trying to coin a term that would name a formal language that is specifically proletarian, stubborn and invisible: the product fabricated at the workplace, in hours stolen from the working day, with materials and tools stolen from the boss. The exact opposite of the

alienating effect of industrial work. Normally applied to work done on the home, the car or the allotment, the excessive technology of industry and the precarious technology of replicating the specialised divisions of an assembly line found in the patience and dedication, between working hours, applied by a single worker to a garden fence or a forged piece. The design applied to resolving those domestic needs is always determined by the limited availability of raw materials and productive processes. In metalworking sheets, platens and tubes, through soldering or forging, make a wider range of solutions possible. In more specific industries the method is associative: the bearing from a crane makes a perfect base for a balcony table.

Unconsciously evoking 19th century Luddism, which proposed the destruction of the machines that caused alienation, this appropriation of non-countable time and the use made of the tool on the margins of planned production, generate a poetic settling of scores concerning the ownership of labour power.

3

The fact that the busts of Marx and Lenin – which the members of the *Pa-yá* association of Otxarkoaga decided to place in a public square of this Bilbao neighbourhood in 1993 – were originally conceived for indoor exhibition, seems to propose an unexpected metaphor. They originated from an embassy of the Soviet Union and the technique with which they were made (at first glance they seem to have been modelled in plaster) make them unviable as a monument exposed to the elements. Their size also betrays the ornamental rather than monumental intention with which they were made. However, with the resolve symbols sometimes demand, the residents of the neighbourhood built an *ad hoc* container to make the work suitable for outdoor and monumental use. That resolve shown in the construction of the generic symbolic assembly – a prominent stone niche with a glass frame to protect the urn – is what is added as an involuntary metaphor, as a symptom, to the more obvious political metaphor proposed in the recovery/relocation of symbols whose scrapping was demanded by that prematurely announced end of history. The mass of stone sculpted in the shape of a prism, with a slightly wider base under the opening made for placing the busts, does not seem to intentionally refer to a minimalist genealogy. Nor, although it is closer to this, to a local tradition of modern sculpture (in spite of the inevitable reference to the stele by Jorge Oteiza at Agiña). In reality, the formal solution proceeds, above all,



from the adoption of the generic form of the monument, reinterpreted from the immediacy of the precariousness of means and techniques characteristic of the amateur. Which is what, on occasion, we identify as the exercise of reinterpreting the artistic sign characteristic of *the popular*. The later inclusion of a sturdy frame with bullet-proof glass, resolved with the same formal urgency, responds to the adaptability that popular re-readings require of their artefacts with respect to the real conditions in which they appear: the original glass was repeatedly destroyed by gunshots, which nobody in the neighbourhood hesitated in attributing to the fact that the monument was located close to a Civil Guard barracks.

It was precisely after one of these episodes that the busts were withdrawn, so as not to be left unprotected from the climate and the police. For some time the mass of stone was left empty. The involuntary metaphor it proposed could not have taken a more prominent form. Or perhaps it could, given that, making use of the empty niche, some neighbours decided to create a second double bust – this time created specifically for the situation – in which the head of Marx was accompanied by that of Txabi Etxebarrieta, a founder member of eta. This once again made the monument visible to public opinion nine years after its festive inauguration, this time through a controversy that was resolved with the confiscation of the bust by the municipal police. With the original busts back in place and the case sealed with bullet-proof glass and a sturdy frame, the monument continues to stand in the square of Otxarkoaga, revealing more in its symptoms than in its signifiers.

Targu Jiu

With Hegel it is standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again, if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell.

Karl Marx, *Capital*. Afterword to the second edition.

In July 2009, in the column I was then writing for a Basque newspaper, I published a story related to Constantin Brancusi's well-known sculpture *Endless Column*.

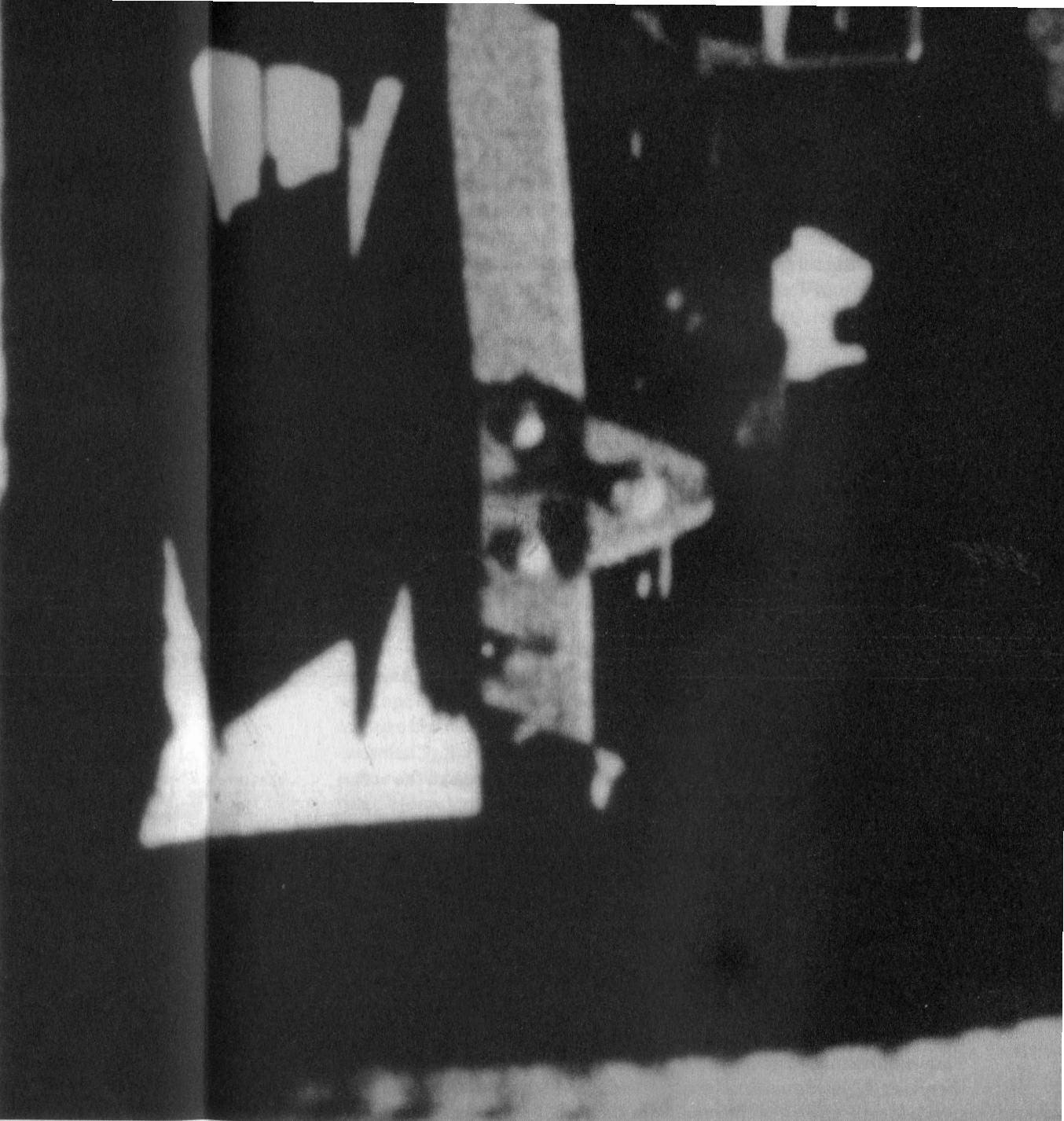
When in 1989 the sculptures that represented socialist power began to be demolished by a more or less spontaneous wave of popular

iconoclasm, the history of art ratified a convention. The episode, far removed in time from the debates over avant-garde and realism that were based precisely on the ways of forging a new character of the popular, served as a type of epilogue to shore up the conventional interpretation according to which neither the avant-garde with its estrangement, nor official realism with its presumptuous non-art managed to give form to the popular, which would end up, in the natural flow of history, correcting both excesses. In its description of the relations of the avant-gardes with politics as a project, and with the popular as the reticent Other to which reference was made, historiography has granted pride of place to a narrative that is coherent with vicissitudes that are more strictly political.

But history is more complex and offers unexpected parallel narratives that, like inverted reflections, enable us to imagine a synchronic history introducing disorder into events. The seminal abstraction of Brancusi's sculpture takes resource to the formal reduction that is repeated by all the programs of abstract art. In his case, the origin of form was, amongst other things, the popular language of Romanian folklore, to whose traditional furniture he alludes in the abstract element repeated in his Endless Column. The sculpture, in his native town of Targu Jiu in Romania, seems to anticipate the most normative minimal art. It would be logical to think, however, that a local farmer would be capable of recognising forms from his cultural tradition in it. In 1951, the mayor of Targu Jiu, convinced that the sculpture represented the decadence of bourgeois taste and avant-garde childishness, personally decided to attach the column to his tractor with a cable in order to pull it down. The column proved more resistant than the proletarian determination of the mayor and his Soviet tractor.

An article in the New York Times, written by Donald G. McNeill and published on April 16th 2001, used the eventful story of the monument and its polemical restoration as a metaphor to shore up the conventional reading according to which the totalitarian mandate of socialist realism took recourse, when necessary, to destroying the best legacy of modernity's sublime art in order to eradicate the signs of the old bourgeois society. It was in that article that I first learnt of the vicissitudes of the monument and, although in my column I attempted to make a somewhat more complex reading of the event, I could not avoid accepting some of the facts on which the text was based as valid.

Photo: *Primul tractor românesc*, 1947, from the archive Communismul in Romania (www.comunismulinromania.ro)



When I was invited to participate in the Bucharest biennial, my first request was verification of the facts that I suspected I might have been over-hasty in reproducing. The first conclusions of the inquiries that were sent to me spoke of several versions of the story in which the attempt was made to demolish the column. In spite of their seeming to be different stories – in fact, as I later discovered, they were – all of them shared one concrete detail that placed the veracity of the content of the anecdote beyond doubt: in all of them a tractor appeared as the means by which the attempt was made to demolish the column.

That tractor, as the invariable agent in the different narrations, seemed to be not only the proof of veracity, but also the signifier on which the metaphorical weight of the whole story rested. Part of the effect of meaning achieved by the version of the story put forward by the New York Times, and uncritically repeated in my text, resided in the symbolic load of the monument's resistance facing the force of traction of "a Soviet tractor". The fact, in principle difficult to verify, that the tractor was an import from the Soviet Union was the detail that reinforced the reading that the North American journalist suggested and that I was trying to nuance: it was the interpretation in orthodox realist terms of the monument as a work arising from "the decadence of bourgeois taste and avant-garde childishness" that called for its demolition.

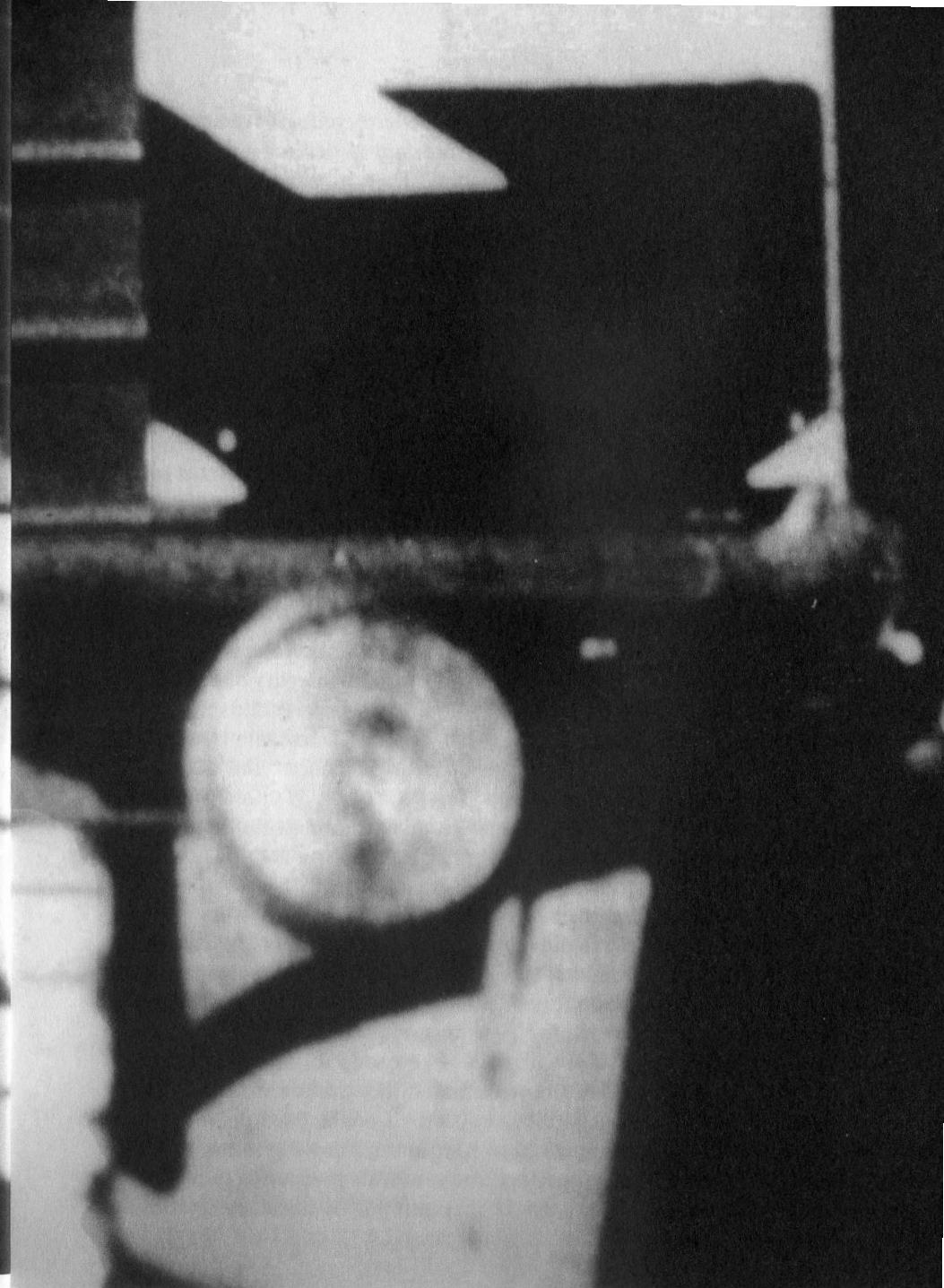
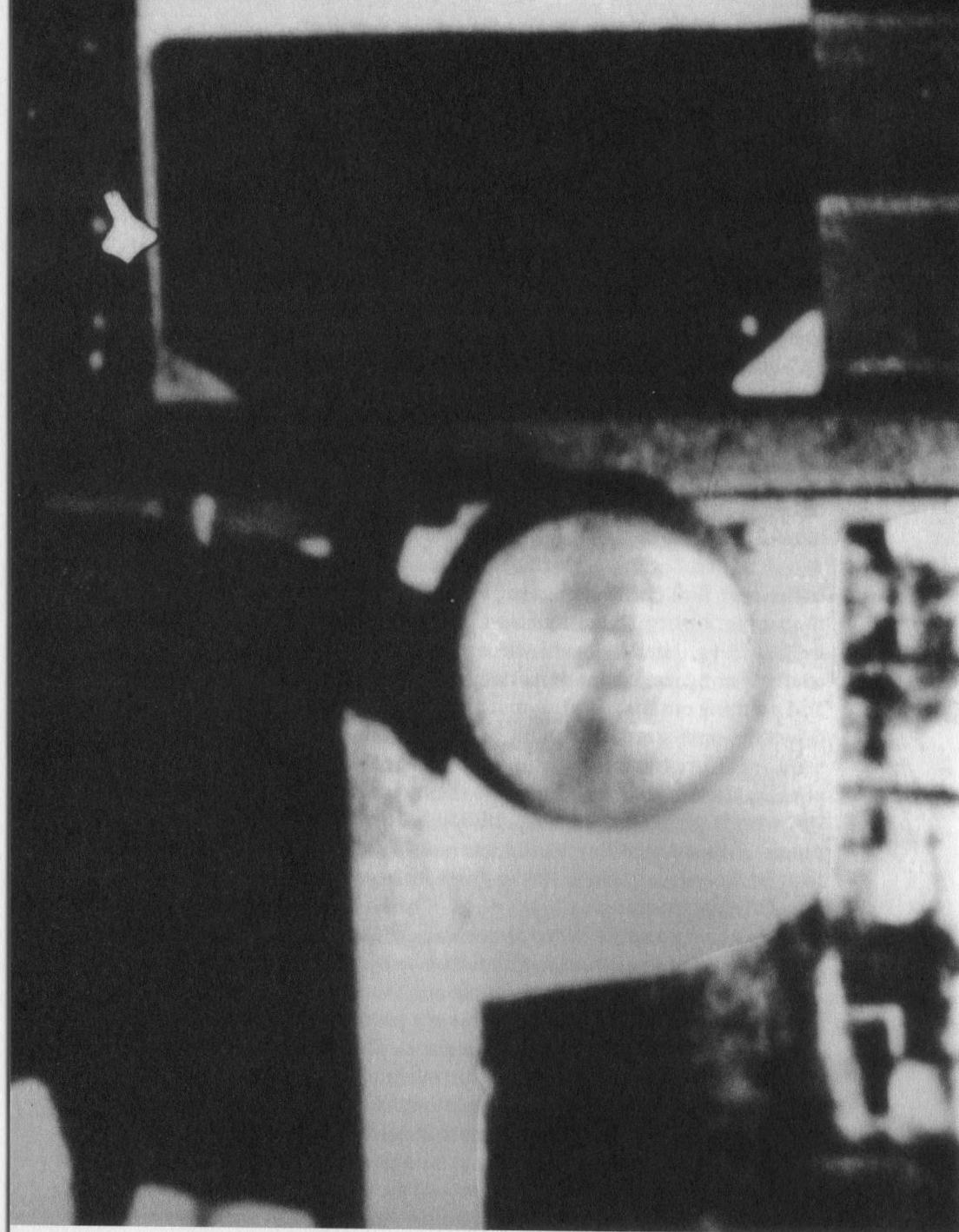
Tanasiu Lolescu is not only a witness, but also a protagonist of this story. It was he who decided to tell the story a long time ago, his story, the story of the tractor and the column. And, as one would expect, he did not stick very closely to the conventional interpretation. Lolescu, who in 1954 was a member of the Communist Youth, received the order to raise money for a festival in Targu Jiu. Part of the funding would have to proceed from the collection and sale of scrap metal, and a local authority suggested that that metal column which nobody seemed to appreciate was scrap. Lolescu relates that, in order to carry out his mandate, he requested a Kirov tractor, which was indeed of Soviet manufacture, from a nearby refinery. The refinery was one of the *SovRom*, which were hated companies involving collaboration between Romania and the USSR that better served Soviet strategic interests than local needs, and which, starting that very year and coinciding with the beginning of de-Stalinisation and the reorientation of the Community Party of Romania, were beginning to be dismantled. The tractors from the plant, however, were all busy that day, which is why Lolescu had to ask for the tractor he needed from the local tractor driving school.

And the tractor that he was able to obtain there was an IAR, from the Romanian Aeronautics Industry, which had been reconverted in 1947 into a producer of tractors.

On the other hand, the Kirov tractor that would have adorned the historical allegory is not in symbolic terms just any tractor. The Kirov was the soviet version of the North American Fordson tractor that Russia imported, in numbers that were astronomically higher than any other country, in order to promote the collectivisation of agriculture. The American Fordist system, it should be recalled, was an object of admiration and analysis of the productivist derivation, logical consequence of constructivism, which formed an inflection point in that transition from avant-garde to socialist realism that we are evoking here. Thus that Fordson-Kirov was the real object that was so often represented in the first years of orthodox realism and that became not only a recurrent title of paintings and songs, but almost a genre in itself: *The First Tractor*.

The first Soviet tractor had appeared in the middle of Red Square in the 1946 film *The Vow (Pitsi)* by Mikheil Chiaureli, breaking down at the moment when Stalin makes a timely appearance. Played as always by the actor Mikheil Gelovani, the leader, with a fond smile and a somewhat absent gaze, has to personally take a hand, checking the motor and pointing out that "it's the spark plugs". After setting them right, he drives the tractor around the entire square while he imagines the thousands of future tractors to be produced under his mandate. Symptomatically, the same scene also shows the by then defenestrated Bukharin, who is presented in his perfidious disloyalty to the revolution, precisely recommending to the peasants that they should put their trust in American tractors. Enthusiasm for Fordism had already taken on a different meaning.

The First Romanian Tractor was also the title of a photograph kept in the archive of Romanian National History Museum. In it can be seen, from the front and a little out of focus, an IAR 22 tractor, the first produced in this country, adorned with a big number one and a red star, driven by a peasant who appears as a black silhouette due to the effect of the light. It could well be the same IAR tractor with which Lolescu tried to demolish the column. As we know, he was unable to demolish it, and while it was the concrete base, efficiently designed by the engineer Stefan Georgescu-Gojan, that prevented its demolition, Lolescu joked in his account about whether a Soviet tractor might not have completed the job.



The fact that this story designates the recycling of the column's material as the main motive for the attempt to destroy it would serve to throw doubt on the conventional idea that there was a more or less official aesthetic-political judgement against the formalist excess of the sculpture, but it is not enough to rule it out completely. There is, however, another revealing repetition in this collection of stories and testimonies. The recycling of the column's material was also the reason why an earlier request to demolish it had been made by the local authorities. In 1951, three years before Loleșeu's attempt, the Department of Agriculture and Industry sent a petition to the Ministry of the Interior with the intention of destroying the monument, which it described as a metallic ensemble with a concrete base lacking in aesthetic value, in order to employ its raw material in more needed infrastructure. After the petition had passed through the hands of the Bucharest Committee of Arts, and finally the Academy, the authorities turned down its destruction, recognising the interest of the work and emphasising its "decorative" value, inspired in the forms of local folklore. It cannot be said that this was an enthusiastic description of the importance of the sculptor's work, but it must be admitted in any case that if the need to destroy the bourgeois formalist legacy of Brancusi's ensemble in Târgu Jiu had been an ideological priority, the sculpture's heroic refusal to buckle could have been easily overcome by a bigger tractor. And we should note the revealing fact that the other two elements of the sculptural group (*The Door of the Kiss* and *The Table of Silence*), much more fragile and certainly more symbolic than the column, were not destroyed in all of this time, in spite of this not needing more than a good sledgehammer, Romanian or Soviet.

The ethereal column, apparently free of gravity in its infinite ascension and its fragile piling up of ideal octahedra, taken from local popular tradition, owed its sturdy construction to a perfectly designed engineering mechanism. Into a subterranean concrete foundation, in the form of a stepped pyramid, was inserted a steel profile onto which the modular pieces were threaded "like beads on a necklace". This ingenious technical solution, concealed like a bone in the sublime ideal form ("the spirit is a bone"), which could have been secretly admired by the enthusiasts of technique who drove tractors towards the future, was what guaranteed the column's resistance to buckling and, paradoxically, shored up the metaphor of the heroic resistance of the pure artist facing materialist progress.

Hernani

In 2008, the political and judicial drive to eradicate any allusion to political violence from the public space of the Basque Country resulted in an order to withdraw the official denomination of *Jose Manuel Ariztimuño, Pana* from a public park in the locality of Hernani, which had thus been named after a member of ETA killed in 1981.

In fulfilment of the order, a police contingent withdrew the plaques identifying the park by that name, together with an abstract corten steel sculpture that was also in the park. It later became known that the untitled sculpture was a work by Txema Kalero, a sculptor who had won a competition for local artists organised in 1987 by the town council in order to "decorate" different places in the township, and it bore no relationship to the name of the park. However, the mistake, which has still not been rectified, came to reveal, as a symptom and in a contradictory way, a greater truth. By means of a mistake, a type of truth was produced: facing the need to interpret a public artwork belonging to a formalist tradition that is easily recognisable in the Basque context – an epigonic example of the modern moment incarnated by Oteiza and Chillida – and given the lack of recognisable symbols, the very language of modernism comes to acquire an apparently unequivocal connotation through the history of its use. In the 1960s, the updating of the Basque identitarian imaginary by certain artists working in analytical terms, whose references were more indebted to formal constructivism than to nationalist essentialism, brought a popular acceptance, due to historical circumstances, of the political efficacy of their abstract visual language. The iconography and especially the graphic representation of the political demands of those years incorporated a formal style taken from formalist sculpture, which the conventional explanations of the tension between realism and abstraction (above all through the historical paradigm of orthodox socialist realism) always seemed to declare as being inefficient for popular use, precisely due to its illegibility. The anecdote we are alluding to would seem to contradict this maxim due to the sophisticated hermeneutic exercise that resulted in the dismantling of the Hernani sculpture. The paradigmatic interpretative instance incarnated in the juridical-police apparatus unconsciously identified a symbolic potential of effectively subversive (and therefore criminal) political representation in the formal abstract language of the Basque tradition of modern sculpture.

