

JOSE MARI ZABALA

``Écfrasis''

Videowork 1986-2016
06-02-2016

Curated by: Leire Vergara
CarrerasMugica

ÉcfrasisBideolanak 1986-2016

Jose Mari Zabala

CarrerasMugica is pleased to present *Écfrasis. Bideolanak 1986-2016* an exhibition by Jose Mari Zabala, from 2 June to 9 September 2016. Curated by LeireVergara, the show features a selection of works on video made between 1986 and 2016. Among the works on show are three installations: one with the series of video-portraits called *Videographos* (1986) while the other two introduce new work such as *Hondartza* (2014-2016) and *Mendibil-goMagnolia* (2015-2016). The works are accompanied by three programmes of short videos made between 1986 and 1999 shown on tv monitors.

Jose Mari Zabala's exhibition is centred on a group of works produced over the last thirty years which speak of a practice committed to the potential of immediacy and the everyday through audio-visual media. Using long takes, sometimes accidental or indeed what could be considered outtakes, Zabala's work explores the power of the image outside the confines of generic narrative strategies and the canons of conventional regimes of representation. His works on video forge a direct relationship with the power of the image, without any form of mediation, in such a way that the apparently untranscendental, private and personal ends up being revealed as an abstract construction. Disclosing this process of transformation, some of the works on display return the past to the visible field of today, while others project the present onto a time still held on pause that will gradually reveal its potential in the future. The exhibition outlines a dialectic crossing between the different lived times in the images, while also keeping in mind that, as bearers of these images of a personal temporality without known limits, it is only a transitory confrontation.

WORKS ON DISPLAY

Hondartza(The Beach) 3h50mn (2014-2016). Following an absence of forty years, on his return to the places where he was born and grew up—Irun and the estuary of the river Bidasoa—in 2004, one of the first things that caught Zabala's attention were the spaces and objects that were able to preserve the living memory of past eras and even remote times. This cluster of sensations gave rise to a project that examined the environs of the estuary of the river Bidasoa, the bay of Txingudi, and the area around the Basque Corniche. Soon however his interest began to be polarised particularly on the singular possibilities of the Ondarraitz beach in Hendaya with the emblematic Jumeaux (The Twin rocks) in the background. After six years there, he was surprised to learn that in 1896 the Lumière brothers had undertaken a similar project, which consisted on filming a one-minute shot of the waves crashing against the rocks. The shot is devoid of people and of sound, limiting itself to showing the natural phenomenon for the duration of a film reel at that period. In the version on show in this exhibition, *Hondartza* is divided into two sessions daily, one in the morning and the other in the afternoon.

Mendibil-go Magnolia (The Magnolia in Mendibil Park) 24mn (2015-2016). *Magnolia Soulangeana*, the tree known as the Chinese or Japanese magnolia, is originally from China and is often considered a living fossilZabala knows the magnolia in

Mendibil Park since he was a boy, serving as it did as a backdrop for childhood playing and games in his hometown of Irun. Mendibil Park has a very particular story. It was once an ancient cemetery, as well as a bullring and also a private estate, before becoming the public space it is today. As far as the tree itself is concerned, partly owing to a concern for the scant attention given today to a tree of such high value, the initial goal of *Mendibil-go Magnolia* was at least to preserve its memory, through the process of recording its life during a full cycle, beginning with its flowering in 2015 and concluding in 2016 with the falling of its leaves and the sprouting of the first new buds. The video is composed of a succession of low-angle shots of the tree top and branches, with the odd bird or wake of an airplane occasionally cutting through the sky, and specifically omitting any other visual element of the context on ground level. On the other hand, the sound is what roots the tree in its place, providing all the information of an environs characterised precisely by a luxuriant soundscape: the murmur of the traffic in the neighbouring Irun, classes and rehearsals in the nearby music school, children playing, the coming and going of planes in the airport...

Videographos (1986) came about as a result of observing people in a medium which, in principle, is as contrived as an artist's studio, under a direct spotlight. The main goal, however, is to let each person reveal him or herself as naturally as possible in an atmosphere one would have thought to be counterproductive; this is ultimately feasible thanks to such simple methods as, for instance, engaging in conversation. And yet the topic and the content of the conversation would be completely secondary. Nevertheless, with the passing of time, valuable aspects emerge from these supposed trivialities, composing an unexpected portrait of a period of time in Donostia.

PROGRAMMES

Donuts 37,12mn (1999). The idea for this programme was suggested by a proposal back in 1999 from the artist Juan Pérez Agirregoikoa, who Zabala had met in Paris in 1991, for the latter to show his work on video to a group of artists from Pérez Agirregoikoa's generation, fifteen years younger. The event finally took place as a session of video screenings in the studio of the painter Iñaki Imaz in Donostia and consisted in a selection of works, with the common denominator of having been made using an 1980s Blaupunkt home videocamera which had the particular feature of being, on one hand, very similar to a Super8 camera and, on the other, a VCR console that could be used as a tabletop or portable unit. Besides being easy to use for its light weight and design, this videocamera allowed Zabala to engage with all kinds of contexts without causing any interference, creating the impression of a casual presence more akin to amateur home film-making. As a result of exhibiting these works, Jose Mari Zabala made contact with the emerging art scene in the late nineties, which was to create bonds between his formal ideas and those of the younger generations, and also led to collaborations.

Programme #2 53mn (2016). Conceived specifically for the exhibition, this programme contains a selection of works made during the eighties that have rarely been shown in public. It comprises recordings made indoors, providing an indirect account of ordinary living conditions, the layout of the space, the light, and so on, in

a house. Other recordings are made on the terrace of a house looking outwards, endeavouring to portray the public space as a postcard image, or in the artist's own studio, registering the preparations for a photography session. Others are taken in enclosed public spaces as is the case of *Huelga de bares* and *Amanecer en Las Minas*, chronicles of minor events or slight alterations in daily routines which Zabala captured by chance with his camera.

Maddi 27, 18mn (1999). This video records a festive summer's day when a niece of Zabala's partner Mariví came to visit them with her recently born baby Maddi. The house is topsy-turvy because they were about to paint one of the rooms, while their little dog watched over the baby in what they called the Chinese Pavilion. After lunch, more family members arrived for coffee. The recording starts with the sound of the bells marking 1:30 and finishes with the bells at 6:30. Taking advantage of the family get-together, the video was also a kind of exercise, practicing with the new Canon XL1 videocamera which he would use to make the documentary *Cuba Corazón*, recorded a few months later in Cuba. His twelve year old daughter Andrea also took turns handling the camera.

ON THE ARTIST

JOSE MARI ZABALA (Irun, 1949)

Spanning almost six decades, Jose Zabala's practice embraces various disciplines such as painting, drawing, photography, film, video and sound. His exploration of different formats is rooted in a logical cohesion contingent on biographical and aesthetic issues. In this regard, the artist begins with sound, before passing to photography and film and then video, and also including painting and drawing. This journey does not take place in a single temporal direction, but instead leads to a multiplicity of connections, circularities and interruptions that produce a formally and thematically fertile body of work.

At a very early age, Jose Mari Zabala started to develop his artistic sensibility through sound. Rather than the melodic aspect of music, what Zabala was attracted to from the outset, and something that still interests him today, is "noise" or, as he says himself, "the particular, characteristic sounds of living beings and of natural phenomena, and also of fabricated objects and machines." At that time, the artist used whatever he could lay his hands on, working with mediums to be found in the domestic realm. In this regard, the family radio became a major tool for channelling his artistic experimentation, using it as a generator or synthesiser *avant la lettre*. For Zabala, the radio signal and its distortions were his first raw materials. Afterwards, using the phono jack which the radios of the time used to have, he managed to amplify the sound manually, thus introducing a public dimension to his experimentation. This initial interest in sound was also accompanied by his first contact with photography, after which he started to take images of the surroundings of his hometown of Irun. This early artistic phase coincided with the sixties and with processes of aesthetic experimentation taking place outside art institutions. These processes were to take more ephemeral forms and were tied to the time frame of public events like happenings, performances and concerts. Within this context, Jose

Mari Zabala met and became friends with Mikel Laboa and eventually went on to join the group Ez Dok Amairu and later, to record the album *Bat, Hiru* in which he introduced the electric guitar on various tracks and explored the technical possibilities of the recording studios at the time. Zabala's use of sound in this context of collaboration and friendship was always to take an experimental and not just musical approach. This was also borne out in some of his performances, both individually and with Ez Dok Amairu, which he usually began with a live radio connection to the RNE, Spain's national radio station. As he recalls, "if I was able to choose, I usually started performing at 10 in the evening, connected to what at the time was known as 'Parte Nacional' a news programme which, generally speaking, whether it opened with the 'Caudillo' cutting the ribbon on a dam or catching a tuna, or maybe with the arrest of a terrorist commando, always sounded hair-raising on the amplification system (and this interest in the 'casual event', the happening, has been a constant in my practice)".

The artist was then to shift his interest in "noise" to film and from there to video, grasping sound's ability to evoke a situation and enabling it to be recreated imaginatively. The artist's interest in sound, and this is also true of the moving image, is, in his own words, "when sound, even the sound of a word, is divested of its narrative-literary meaning, and is reduced merely to pitch." Following this interest, Zabala started to produce films from a totally experimental perspective. His first film *Axut* was produced on 35mm in 1975 and it took almost one and a half years to shoot. Around this time, virtually no experimental, independent films were being made. In fact, Jorge Oteiza, a friend of Zabala, was surprised that Zabala undertook a project of such magnitude—making a film in 35mm. After its presentation at the Venice Biennale in 1976 where it was received warmly by the public, for reasons beyond the artist's control, the film was never given a chance in public exhibition circuits and, as a result, it has rarely been seen in our local context. Zabala's output on celluloid was scant, given the high cost entailed, and he soon moved to video to be able to continue filming and experimenting with the moving image, but with a much more affordable budget and with greater independence to produce what he felt like. The films he made after *Axut* are equally note worthy for their experimentation, the absence of a linear narrative structure, the use of abstraction in the image, and sound and image editing outside conventional film canons. In this respect, film and video offered Zabala the possibility of continuing his early experimentation with sound and photography. On the other hand, the issues he dealt with, from his beginnings right up until the present, were equally coherent, with many of them addressing their social context. In this sense, themes related with carnival and eroticism were introduced as a way of confronting the private and the public spheres, freedom and repression, ethics and the law, and so on. Worth underscoring from among his photographic output are his portraits and his ongoing series such as, for instance, the one dedicated to Irun as a border town. The photographic portraits would also make the leap later to video, imbuing the expressivity of gesture with time and movement.

At the current moment Jose Mari Zabala continues working intensely across various media such as audio-visuals, drawing, sound and photography.



Installation view.
Donuts 37,12, 1999 / Programa #2 2016 / Maddi, 1999. 27,18.





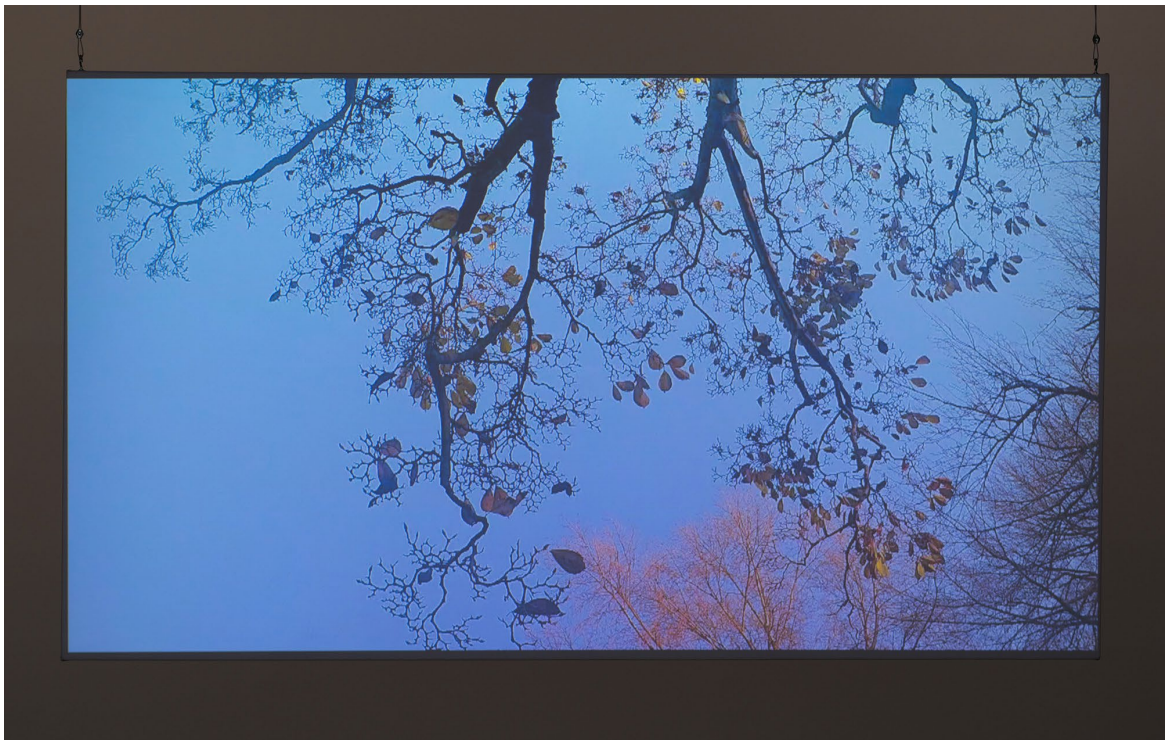
Installation view
Latino Tanz. 3' (Fotograma)



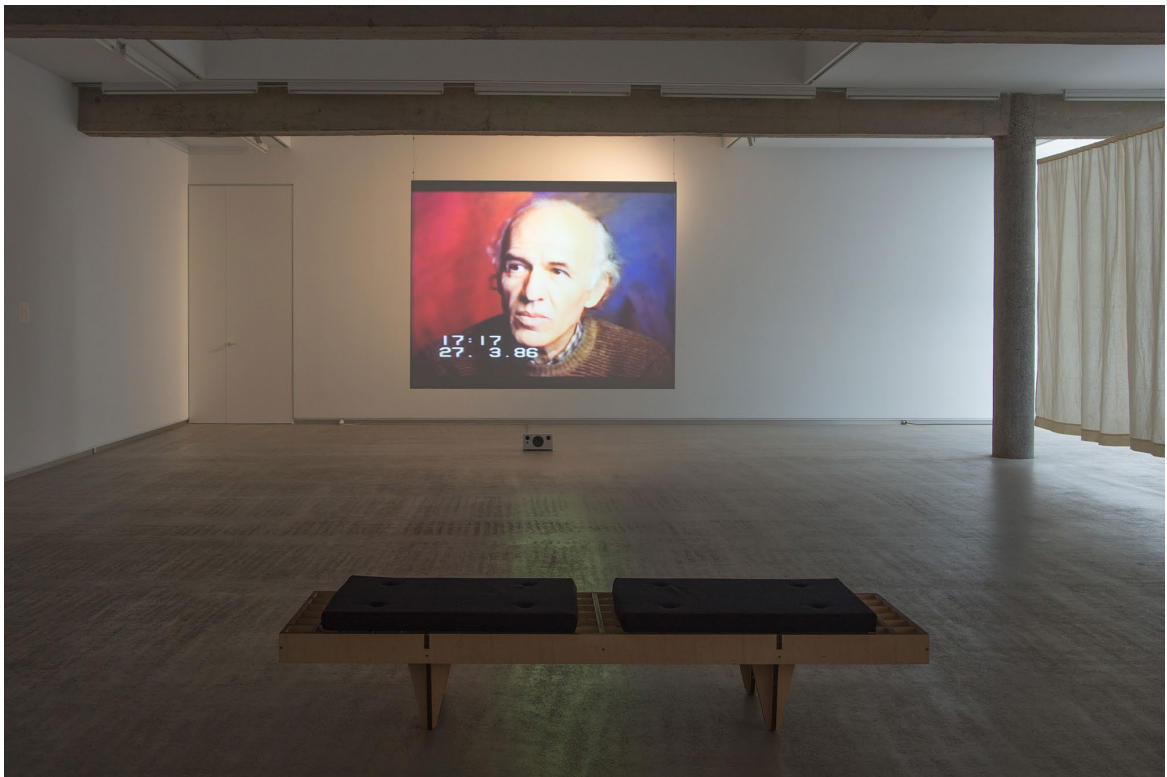
Klik. 9'
Manchas. 2' (video frames)



Installation view



Mendibil-go Magnolia (2015-16). (The Magnolia of Mendibil).



Videographos (1986)



Installation view



Hondartza (Beach), 2014-2015. 3,50 hours.