

Chillida in America. An encounter with modernity on the other side of the Atlantic

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The Graham Scholarship

On February 24, 1958, Eduardo Chillida received a Western Union telegram from the United States at Villa Vista Alegre, his family home in Hernani. The cable addressed to “Aduardo Chillida” (sic) is signed by William E. Hartman, member of the scholarship advisory board of the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts of Chicago. The purpose of the telegram was to offer him one of his artist scholarships in the event that he was in a position to join the stipulated scholarship program. The Graham Foundation had been founded just two years earlier and its mission was to maintain the legacy of Ernest R. Graham (1866-1936) as well as to promote projects and events related to architecture and design. [Fig. 01]

The Foundation awarded a total of eight scholarships, three of them for architects, two for painters, another two for sculptors and finally one for a philosopher whose work was closely linked to the arts and aesthetics. The list of winners that year was filled with figures whose projection has been confirmed by time, such as the Japanese Fumihiko Maki (1993 Pritzker Prize), and the Indian Balkrishna V. Doshi (most recently awarded in 2018). Among the artists, José Guerrero from Granada stands out, by then naturalized American and settled in New York, an active participant in the circles of abstract expressionism, and the Cuban Wilfredo Lam, a highly recognized painter, sponsored by Picasso in his initial years in Paris and with close ties to André Breton and Claude Lévi-Strauss. In short, the list of winners in this second edition of the scholarships was attractive enough to be an enriching experience in the eyes of a young Chillida whose main endorsement was being part of the prestigious Maegh gallery. [Fig 02, 03 and 04]

But if the winners were certainly notable, the Foundation also wanted to have an exceptional jury for those first years that would give relevance and visibility to its activities. For these first editions, the selection committee was made up of renowned names such as James Johnson Sweeney, curator of MoMA and second director of the Guggenheim Museum in New York, Sigfried Giedion, Swiss historian and critic responsible for the transfer and dissemination of modern architecture postulates from Europe to the United States, the Spanish architect Josep Lluís Sert and

above all, Mies van der Rohe, an essential figure of 20th century architecture. [Fig. 05]

After his acceptance, Chillida will receive the following month, March 1958, a new letter describing the details of the scholarship, the program for his stay in the United States, the commitments and remuneration to be signed and completed by the Basque artist. The objective of his stay and the rest of the year as a scholarship recipient was clearly defined in this dossier: “Grant will be used to determine the possibilities of greater collaboration between sculpturing and architecture by the study of the foundations of modern architecture in the United States.”¹

This interesting possibility comes to Chillida at a time of doubts and hesitation, when he is still a figure to be formed. This gives greater significance to the event, as Chillida finds himself more open to new avenues of work, which is precisely what the scholarship was proposing: to explore in depth one of the fields already present in his activity consolidating his artistic identity. The fact that the most outstanding figures of modern architecture in America recognized the importance of his emerging work and the relationship that it could have with the architectural discipline, was decisive for Chillida to value the interest in this avenue very positively.

Implications of the scholarship on his career and recognition

Chillida's true recognition as the great abstract sculptor worldwide came with the individual exhibition that the Maeght gallery dedicated to him in 1968 in Paris. Ten years earlier, his international consideration was only beginning to be cemented and his jump to the other side of the Atlantic in 1958 was decisive. This year², different events happened that were a boost for its international recognition. Between 02/12/1958 and 04/27/58 the collective exhibition at the Solomon R. Guggenheim in New York is held, curated by J.J. Sweeney with the title *Sculpture and Drawing from Seven Sculptures*. This exhibition undoubtedly serves as a business card for two other subsequent opportunities that the American market will offer him that same year: the acquisition by the Carnegie Institute of Pittsburgh of his work *Aizeau* – his first sale in America – and the aforementioned scholarship from the Graham Foundation, whose trustees included Sweeney himself.

The sculptures selected for the Guggenheim exhibition in February 1958 still belong to a time in which Chillida's motivations were more linked to material exploration with steel and the ability to make it vibrate, and not so much to the space exploration that the scholarship he claimed. The three sculptures exhibited were *Desde Dentro* (1953), *Desde el Horizonte* (1956) and *Hierros de Temblor II* (1957). The attributes related to these pieces are still objectual and do not explore the emulation or creation of spatial experiences, so in that sense it can be said that the scholarship goes ahead and encourages you to explore these avenues more intensely

through the study of examples of modern architecture.

It is then that he begins to incorporate two work fields that are absolutely essential for understanding his artistic relevance. First, the overcoming of this object concept to turn its pieces into vehicular tools for spatial phenomena, whether these happen inside or around them.

Second, the activation of fields of essential forces present in nature that will turn his pieces into authentic “fights against Newton”³, as he liked to name them.

Precisely, the Graham Foundation scholarship was intended to serve as a platform for a way of doing things in the plastic arts closely linked to the values associated with the Modern Movement. The figure of Mies as president of the scholarship jury must not only be understood as a cultural marketing operation – Mies was a tremendously respected figure since his arrival in the US in 1937 – but he was also an enthusiastic defender of disciplinary transfers and the didactic work that the rest of the arts could exercise on modern architecture⁴.

During his stay in Chicago as a scholarship recipient in September 1958, Chillida had the opportunity to attend a series of interesting activities and establish contact with very relevant personalities on the American cultural scene. First, the scholarship recipients attended a course taught by John E. Burchard, professor and dean of MIT, historian and critic of architecture, author of the books *The voice of the phoenix; postwar architecture in Germany and Symbolism In Architecture: The Decline Of The Monumental*, about post-World War II architecture, the new values they advocated and their role in the reconstruction of Europe. In that same year, the official biography of the Basque sculptor indicates a meeting with Frank Lloyd Wright⁵, although there are no documents that illustrate it. Also in this year it took place his meeting with the architectural historian Sigfried Giedion, jury of the scholarship, and what is almost more important, the contact with his wife, the collector and art historian Carola Giedion-Welcker, who will show great interest in the sculptor's work and to which he will dedicate his text “La poésie de l'espace chez Eduardo Chillida”⁶.

Implications on his artistic identity

Beyond the implications that the scholarship and contact with American architectural culture could have on the recognition of Chillida's figure in the international artistic scene, a series of influences on his interests and his own way of working are detectable.

Firstly, contact with the American market gives Chillida the possibility of undertaking large institutional commissions for which he was not having access in Europe, even less in Spain⁷. These commissions allow him to work under two new premises that condition his task: the situation of the work in public spaces and work with large formats not explored until now.

Although Germany is the country that houses the most Chillida sculptures in its public space, with a total of eleven, it was the United States⁸ that gave him, for the first time, the possibility of working in its public space. *Abesti Gogorra V* was installed in the gardens of the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston in 1966, coinciding with the first major retrospective dedicated to it. It starts from a previous version in wood, which on this occasion turns into a piece in Porriño Pink granite of considerable proportions (465 x 587 x 428 cm) and which represents the first large-format work by the Basque artist. Working with these dimensions is not only a challenge in terms of size and material way of working: it involves, above all, a scalar change. The viewer is not a mere passive subject, but now becomes an active user of the sculpture: They can surround it, establish routes, entering it. In short, it can be inhabited. Sculpture ceases to be an emulation of human space, and becomes architecture in itself. The great dimensional change becomes essential when it represents a leap in scale with respect to the human figure, when it makes it possible for man to take shelter in it. *Homenaje a Hokusai* (1992) or the *Elogio del Horizonte* (1990) projects are good examples of this. [Fig. 06]. As Kosme de Barañano would point out in the writing he dedicated to him upon his death: "Chillida builds a sculpture like a topography, like a meeting place for archaeologies aimed at Memory, forcing the viewer to enter his universe."⁹

On the other hand, the fact of placing it in public space means that its presence alters and modifies the space that surrounds it. Sculpture in Chillida will no longer be an exclusively object: the activation of space will from then on form an essential part of its sculptural activity. His sculptures will no longer be limited to occupying public space, but will harbor an ambition to be public space themselves, a question that inevitably brings his work closer to that of the architect's: "the space will be anonymous as long as I do not limit it. Before, my works were protagonists, now they must be means to make the space a protagonist and for it to stop being anonymous."¹⁰

The activation of the void now enters another category, since it becomes inhabited space and, therefore, activated. It is, as in architecture, the starting point of the gaze. As Manuel de Prada points out, emptiness in Chillida does not take the meaning of an absence, but rather that of a "space lacking material."¹¹

Large formats also bring you closer to architecture in the methodology with which you approach your work. The fact of working with large pieces produced in factories with intervening personnel makes his work abandon the processes of expressive spontaneity and come closer to the execution of a intentional concept. In short, your works will require, as happens in buildings, a project that precedes them. The creative act is carried out in the generation, not of the final work, but in the creation of a previous model, using tools that mediate reality such

as models or planimetric documents.

The large scale will then be intended to undertake concepts that are increasingly detached from formal problems and do so in a more synthetic way. Among these purposes is clearly framed the interest in the activation of signs of a basic physical system such as weight, density or gravity: "I rebel against many things, for example, as a sculptor against gravity. It's not that I defend the weight. "It's just that to fight against the weight I need the weight."¹²

The gravitational field that the sculpture makes evident shows that the viewer is sharing the same physical system. It stimulates the sensation of "living bodily in the world"¹³, a state of consciousness of physical living that represents a fully architectural experience. The experience is therefore not limited to the mere contemplation of the object, but transcends it by creating an activated field. In the words of Kosme de Barañano, architecture is "the art of dynamic sequences, of multidimensional and pluri-perspectivist cavities, in which it is expressed physically and spiritually"¹⁴, which is still Chillida's desire with his sculptures, ambitions fully architectural. This is shown in an exemplary way precisely in some of his series such as *Elogio de la Arquitectura* and especially in *Gora Bera III* (1991) that is currently exhibited at the Chillida Leku Museum.

To a large extent, the history of modern architecture is also that of the translation of this idea of dynamic balance from the two-dimensionality of the canvas in the plastic arts, to three-dimensional structures in continuous tension. Mies van der Rohe himself is a good example of this with one of his last projects in Europe that he would never carry out with that Glass House on a hillside that, in itself, was a balanced piece. He would not be the only one by any means; Several of his generation mates would carry out similar experiments, taking their fights against gravity much further. As examples we have the dutch Mart Stam with his versions of the *Volkenbügel* or *Horizontaal Skyscraper* – the first versions would be by the plastic artist El Lissitzky – or the Hungarian-American Marcel Breuer, who would make the cantilever in all scales and materials the leitmotiv of his career. From Breuer we can point out his first experiments with cantilevered furniture during his time at the Bauhaus in the 1920s, his residential projects in the US with large wooden cantilevers, such as his own *Breuer House II* house in Massachusetts, from 1947, or as a culmination, *Begrish Hall* for New York University, in 1961, in which the entire building is directly a large concrete cantilever. Contrary to what is commonly accepted, Chillida's work with the problem of gravity does not begin in the 70s with the Lugar de Encuentros series or with *Gravitaciones*, but rather it begins to be present in his work in the series *Yunque de Sueños*, and more decisively in the pieces he made from 1958 onwards. The work belongs to the same semantic field and becomes a perfect example of dynamic balance made into a sculptural piece. [Fig.07, 08, 09 and 10]

A recent exhibition about the artist, *Zero Gravity* at the Chillida Leku¹⁵ museum reinforces the importance of these years, in which precisely this approach to modern architecture took place, in the future of his artistic identity. In this regard, Estela Solana, head of exhibitions at Chillida Leku, states: "This battle against gravity or, anti-gravity, began to be sensed at the end of the 1950s when he began to suspend sculptures from the ceiling and later, in the Yunque series of dreams or Comb of the wind from the late 1960s, whose upper part consists of a structure branching to the wind."¹⁶

The relationship between architecture and sculpture shows an essential change with modernity that is well reflected in the examples described. They will no longer simply be a shelter for the other, but disciplinary transfers will be established between the two since both will serve as vehicles for the same fields of experimentation. As Jorge Ramos-Jular points out in his article "The room is empty and the inhabitant enters"¹⁷, "with the emergence of modernity and its experimentation through the abstract vision of the world, [...] architecture and the arts have become "seen destined to evolve, modifying the roles of each of the agents towards proposals in which complexity and relationality have prevailed to seek new formulations in their combinations to be able to propose a modern model of artistically active space."¹⁸

It is also symptomatic how in those years Chillida substantially changed the titles he chose for his works. The terms that the sculptor uses speak volumes about the concepts that inhabit his head at every moment of his career. Thus, until the end of the 1950s, words such as "vibration", "music", "song", "sound", "birds", "rumour", "wind", "tremor", "lightning" appeared, in short, a semantic universe closely linked to the sensory, contrary to what was more common among abstract artists of the time. However, it is from the 50s onwards that this semantic universe moves, as if it were a verbalized intention, to a more material, topological, spatial and, if you will, architectural world. Terms such as "space", "emptiness", "limit", "modulation", "architecture", "place", "window", "light", "encounter" or "house" will be used recurrently, as if the artist wanted make evident with them a reorientation of interests.

But returning to Chillida's American stay and his encouraged contact with architecture through the Graham Scholarship, beyond all speculation, the pertinent thing would be to take the words of the basque sculptor himself, which he accredits through the reports he has to send to the headquarters of the foundation in Chicago during that year, how the initial objective of investigating the possibilities of collaboration of his work with architecture is bearing fruit. Thus, after traveling to the Foundation's headquarters in Chicago for the initial seminar in September 1958, he reported on his progress in a dossier sent in December of that same year [Fig.12] where he recognized how this contact with the

concerns and own figures of the architectural panorama of the moment was a breath of fresh air to continue with a work that will no longer suffer blockages and will remain fruitful until the end of its days: “direct contact with the same concerns of artists and architects from all The parts of the world that I continually receive from the Graham Foundation is a great help and a source of enthusiasm to continue my work.”

Obviously, this article does not intend to attribute to this American experience an exclusive role in the important turn that occurred in the career of the Basque artist at the end of the 1950s, since this was surely brought about by a wide range of circumstances. But it is considered pertinent to point out the relevance of this chapter in his biography, until now barely considered, as one of those experiences that cemented the interests of the Basque sculptor at a crucial moment in his artistic career.

en la filosofía y la plástica del siglo XX”, *Kobie (serie Bellas artes)*, no 1 (1983):163

15. November 24, 2022 - May 1, 2023

16. Basquemagazine. “Chillida Leku explora la gravedad en la obra de Eduardo Chillida.” Last access August 18, 2023. <https://basquemagazine.com/es/cultura/chillida-leku-explora-la-gravidad-en-la-obra-de-eduardo-chillida/>

17. Belonging to the Space Experimentation Seminar that took place during the months of November and December 2017 at the IUAV University of Venice

18. Jorge Ramos-Jular, “La habitación está vacía y entra el habitante”, (Zaragoza: JIDA’18 Congress V Conference on Teaching Innovation in Architecture, Publications Service of the University of Zaragoza, 2018) 327

Eduardo Chillida
Sculpture
Modern architecture
Weightlessness
Abstraction.

1. Scholarship report required by the Graham Foundation to Eduardo Chillida, March 1958, courtesy of the Estate of Eduardo Chillida and Hauser & Wirth. Madrid / VEGAP, 2022. Photo: Author or Chillida Succession Archive. Reference: GF-Chillida_1958-002

2. This year, it is fair to mention, important milestones also occur in Chillida’s international career beyond those mentioned in the US as he receives the International Grand Prize at the XXIX Venice Biennale.

3. As reflected in the documentary “Lo profundo es el aire”, directed by Juan Barreno, 2016, documentary film, 32:45, <https://www.rtve.es/play/videos/imprescindibles/imprescindibles-profundo-aire-screech/3743068/>

4. Good proof of this was the visual training courses that Mies established when he was appointed director of the ITT for first-year architecture students. Prior to any architectural learning, Mies considers essential to train the student in the sense of design, aesthetic appreciation in the world of proportions, shapes, colors, textures and spaces, and in order to achieve this he dedicates the first course of the curriculum to conduct exercises from other artistic disciplines such as painting, sculpture or photography.

5. Biography of Eduardo Chillida, accessed in August 2023 <https://www.eduardochillida.com/es/artista/biografia/1951-1960>

6. Carola Giedion-Welcker, “La poésie de l’espace chez Eduardo Chillida”, *Derrière le Miroir*, no 143 (april 1964)

7. With the exception of the doors of the Basilica of Aránzazu), which he created in 1954. The installation of a large individual work in public space did not arrive until 1969 in Paris, when the Comb of the Wind IV was placed in front of the new building. of the United Nations.

8. The United States is home to three works by Eduardo Chillida: *Abesti Gogora V* (Museum Fine Arts in Houston), *Alrededor del Vacío V* (World Bank in Washington) and *De Música, Dallas XV* (Pei’s Morton Symphony Center in Texas).

9. Kosme M^o de Barañano: “In memoriam. Chillida: más allá”, *Pérgola*, (October 17, 2002): pg 3.

10. Eduardo Chillida, *Escritos* (Madrid: La Fábrica, 2016), 58

11. Manuel de Prada, *Arte y Vacío. Sobre la configuración del vacío en el arte y la arquitectura* (Buenos aires: Nobuko, 2009)

12. Juan Carlos Sancho, Sol Madrilejos, “Breve conversación con Eduardo Chillida”, *El Croquis* no 81-82 (1996): 14-23

13. Juan Navarro Baldeweg, *Una caja de resonancia* (Madrid: Pre-Textos ,2007), 119

14. Kosme M^a de Barañano, “El concepto de espacio