

LOVE OF LABOR

Can a new-media art center make it in a small town in Spain?

Ten years ago it would have seemed eccentric, or downright foolhardy, to open a space for contemporary art in a rustic province in Spain. Many speculated that the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao—in remote Basque country—was mightily overestimating the local and international audience for visual art. But since opening its doors in 1997, the Frank Gehry-designed museum has drawn more than six million visitors, and what has been termed the “Bilbao effect” has led several provinces throughout Spain to clamor for their own cultural spaces to offset deindustrialization and large-scale depopulation. The year 2004 saw the successful launch of Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Castilla y León (MUSAC) in León, just south of Bilbao. The opening in March of the Laboral Art and Industrial Creation Center in Gijón, Asturias, in northern Spain was yet another such effort. The Laboral, a 50,000-square-foot space, replaces one economy, in this case industrial steel production, with another, digital cultural production. The margin of economic benefit resulting from this shift will ostensibly be provided by tourism; always unquantifiable are the intangible proceeds of influxes of internationalized artistic culture to local communities. (Of course, whether local communities subscribe to the trickle-down theory is another story: at the opening, a handful of protesters lamented resources being used for an expensive cultural center rather than as more direct aid to revitalize the region and alleviate its growing unemployment.)

The edifice housing Laboral is itself the residue of the hard economic power of a previous era of industrial might. A massive complex totaling nearly 400,000 square feet, of which the new art space occupies merely a small portion, it was constructed in the 1950s by the Spanish dictator Francisco Franco in a style that can only be called Fascist pastiche. (It was designed by Luis Moya, a leading architect and intellectual in postwar Spain.) The main portion of the complex, still used as a university, masquerades as a Renaissance-era town plaza, complete with a cylindrical, high-Baroque chapel flanked by colonnaded walkways. Directly adjacent, yet set below a knoll so the incursion of modern architecture remains only partially visible, is a large series of factory-like structures in the vaulted style of airplane hangars. This is where the art center is located. To this day, Franco's Fascistic eagles top nearly every capital of the structures, a touch of hubris typical of such vast totalitarian architecture, although the complex was never wholly operational nor indeed ever fully occupied. Laboral's industrial hangars previously housed a training plant to ease the transition for regional workers from coal to iron to steel production. Now the metaphor of reeducation can be extended further, because Laboral's new digital focus—which includes not only a range of international projects, many of which rely on live feeds and simultaneous global-net interconnectivity, but also training in digital art, artist-in-residence programs, seminars, and lectures—represents the nascent pedagogy of the 21st century.

One might ask why Laboral has invested in a gigantic physical plant for digital and new-media art production given that the rhetoric of networks and

flows portrays the realm of the digital as fundamentally dematerialized. Of course Internet-driven information still touches down in its rapid flights through cyberspace, and digital technology ultimately remains bundled in physical nodes of hardware and infrastructure. Strikingly, the disconnect between the materiality of steel and coal and the virtual space associated with new technologies becomes, perhaps incidentally, an important aspect of Laboral's opening exhibitions. Much of the art on display emphasizes the physical interface between user and ephemeral media to demonstrate the very necessity of investing in the material appearance and physical support of a work.

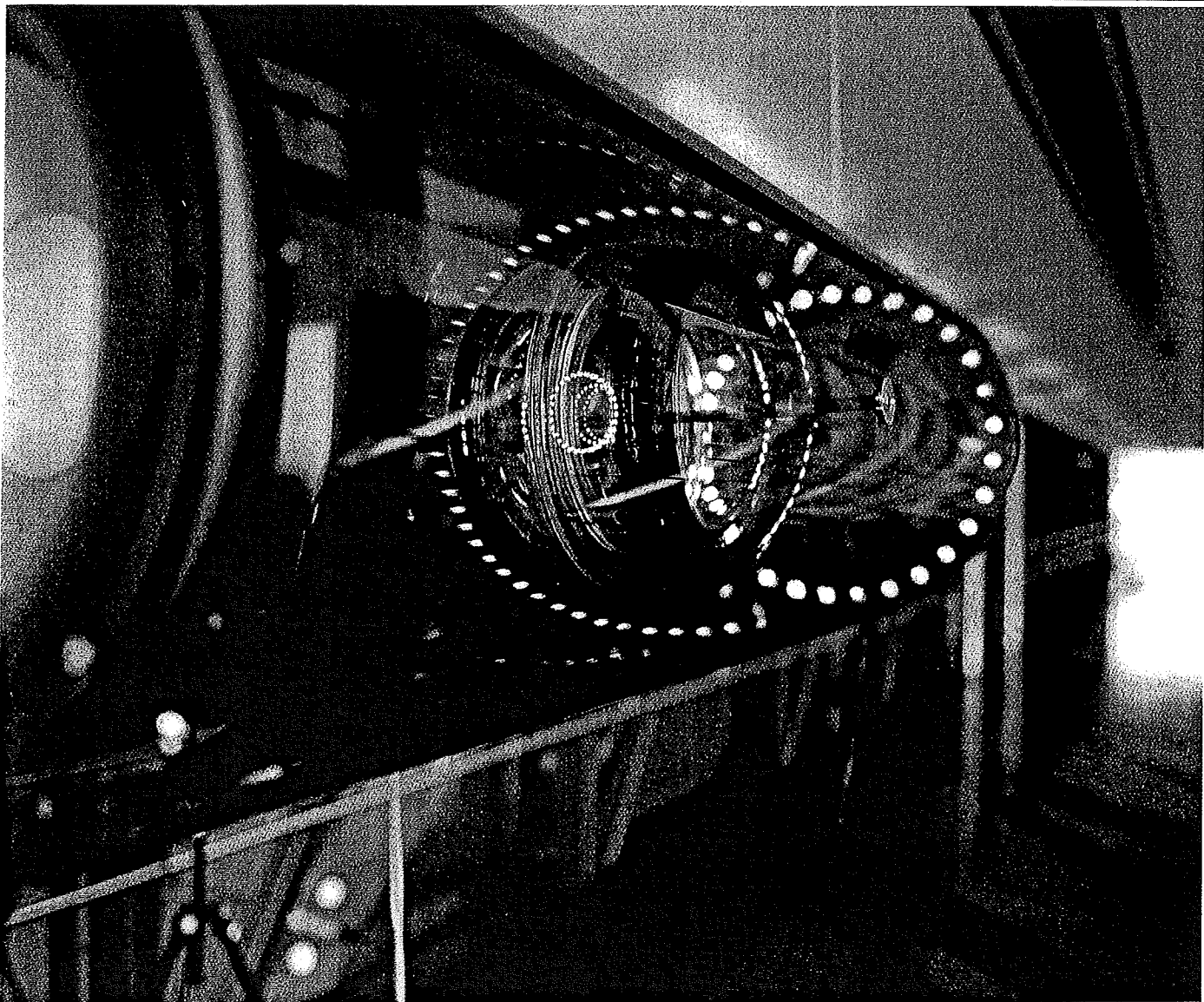
The idea that someone is “out there,” that a digital work must adopt forms of address that have some purchase for an audience operating in real space and time, is highlighted in curators Christiane Paul and Jemima Rellie's exhibition “Feedback.” The show, one of three marking the space's debut (the center's rotating programming will total seven shows in 2007), is a massive compendium of nearly 40 historic and contemporary interactive media projects. The exhibition draws connections between mechanical and digital applications of technology in art in their shared emphasis on the viewer's phenomenological perception of a work. Early examples of kinetic art like Marcel Duchamp's “Rotoreliefs” (1926/1965) and László Moholy-Nagy's *Light-Space Modulator* (1930) are evidence of the early 20th century's fascination with the light effects of cinema. Duchamp and Moholy-Nagy utilized the repetitions of motorized turntables to induce trancelike flicker or vortex effects. An updated version of these technologically euphoric projects is Herwig

Weiser's 2005–2006 sculpture *Death Before Disko*. Flashing LED lights and complicated hardware are encased in transparent plastic, shaped like a spaceship, that emits sounds apparently derived from noise in “outer space” found on the Internet. This is a disco ball that bites.

More cuddly is Christa Sommerer and Laurent Mignonneau's *Life Writer* (2006), which melds analog and digital technology: the now-antique portable typewriter and its nearly obsolete paper, which, as it is fed into the carriage, is used as a projection screen. As one types, the words are briefly represented digitally on the page, only to be carried away by a swirl of projected insects. Although the typewriter is initially faithful to what is input, the qualities of the creature that emerges vary depending on the particular letters or words being typed. A physical gesture, then, is interpreted by a computer-processed algorithmic code.

Other works address the contrast between the “real” and the virtual realms by focusing solely on the latter—and its setbacks. For example, in JODI's *Max Payne Cheats Only* (2005), the artists subvert the programming of a violent shoot-'em-up video game, not with the aim of scoring points or advancing through the narrative conceit of a vengeful cop seeking retribution, but rather to probe the moments of breakdown that occur in the virtual terrain. The on-screen figure approaches columns or walls, only to reach through or beyond them as the program attempts to correct illusions of proximity. The figure may glance down at its feet, thus rendering the body hollow by the game's failure to visually cohere a character's self-referential perspective. The work is a poignant correction to the cavalier

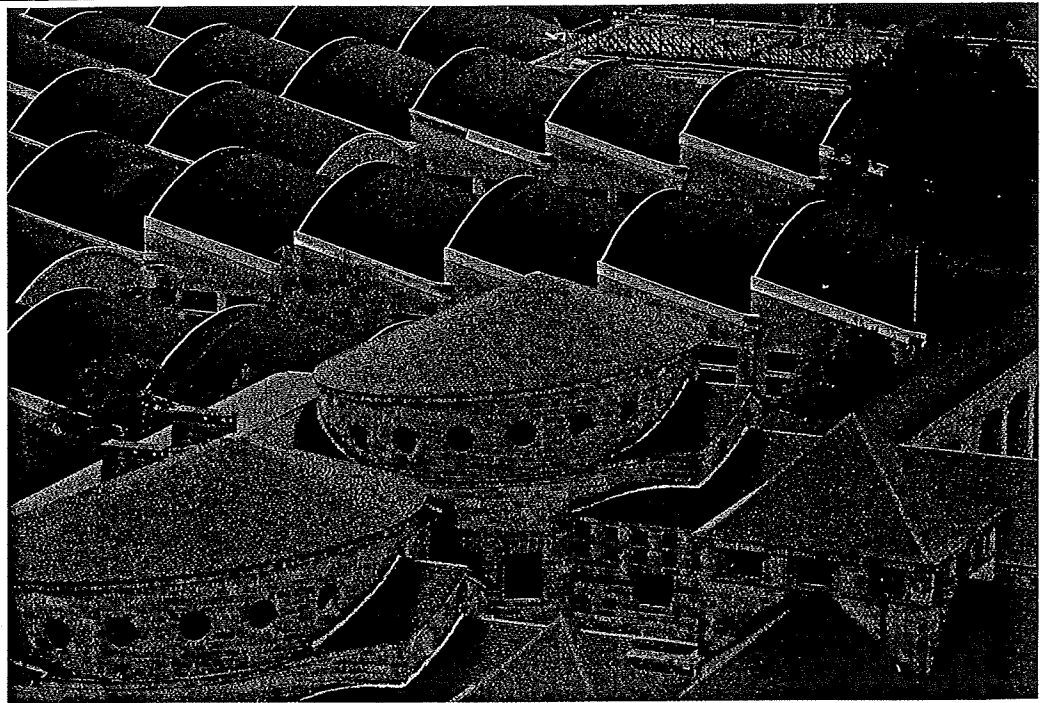
One might ask why Laboral has invested in a gigantic physical plant for digital and new-media art production given that the rhetoric of networks and flows portrays the realm of the digital as fundamentally dematerialized.



HERWIG WEISER
DEATH BEFORE DISKO (DETAIL),
2005-2006
SCULPTURE, COMPUTER, AND
INTERNET CONNECTION,
DIMENSIONS VARIABLE
COURTESY THE ARTIST

At Laboral the emphasis on the space of the exhibition hall as a physical site is itself a defense of the material nature of artworks in an era when ephemeralization is often invoked as a new prospect for art.

notion that virtual experiences can substitute for material ones—the artists play the game to exaggerate the fallacy of treating even seductively naturalistic proxy worlds of the digital too seriously. Included in another exhibition at Laboral, titled “Labcyberspaces Project,” Christophe Bruno’s *Logo.Hallucination* (2006) comments on the fraught ideology about the Internet as a site of unrestrained information exchange as compared with the old-fashioned property disputes it frequently engenders. Bruno created an image-recognition software engine that scans the Web looking for forms evoking the logos of large multinational corporations. For example, an image of a coconut dessert posted to a Flickr.com image-sharing page contains the same lozenge-shaped parallelograms found in the Mitsubishi trademark, or a NASA photograph of a space boot’s imprint on moon dust bears a tread pattern identical to that in the stylized globe of the AT&T logo. When an image’s similarity to a logo is established, Bruno’s program fires off an



e-mail alert to the poster, indicating that his site potentially violates copyright law.

At Laboral the emphasis on the space of the exhibition hall as a physical site is itself a defense of the material nature of artworks in an era when ephemeralization is often invoked as a new prospect for art. More than that, however, Laboral’s opening exhibitions stress the interconnectedness of the digital and the material, and there is something political, even humanizing, in this subtle assertion. Each time an individual is mesmerized by a tech prosthetic or seduced by spectacles of virtuality, a residuum of real places,

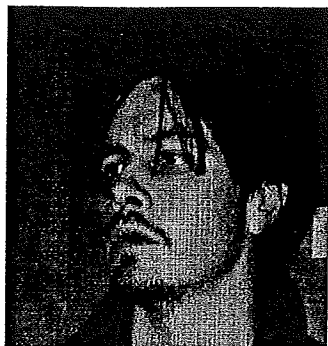
perceptions, and social effects is effaced. In the context of a space once used to train coal and steel workers, Laboral’s emphasis on art that *challenges* the notion of a seamless digital space affirms important links between labor conditions in the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries. The tools and the product may change, but the worker stays the same.

The Laboral Art and Industrial Creation Center in Gijón, Spain, opened in March. The three exhibitions currently on view, “Feedback,” “Gameworld,” and “Labcyberspaces Project,” close on June 30.

ABOVE
 AERIAL VIEW OF LABORAL ART
 AND INDUSTRIAL CREATION
 CENTER, GIJÓN, SPAIN, 2007
 COURTESY LAICC, GIJÓN

LEFT
 CHRISTA SOMMERER AND
 LAURENT MIGNONNEAU
 TYPEWRITER, 2006
 TYPEWRITER, PROJECTOR, TABLE,
 AND CHAIR, DIMENSIONS
 VARIABLE

Contributors



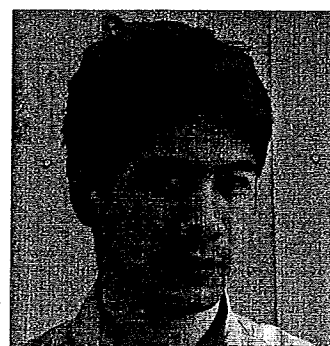
MARTIN HERBERT



PAUL SCHIMMEL



EVA DIAZ



MICHAEL WANG

DENNIS BALK (Reviews, p. 117) is an artist and writer living in Bahrain.

BEN CARLSON (Working Practice, p. 128) is an artist and writer. He currently lives in Philadelphia.

MATTHEW COLLINGS (Diary, p. 44) is a writer and artist. He is author of several books on contemporary art, including *Blimey!: From Bohemia to Britpop: The London Artworld from Francis Bacon to Damien Hirst, Art Crazy Nation, Sarah Lucas, and This Is Modern Art*. He and Emma Biggs are the curators of "Picasso: Le Peintre, Le Modèle, et Le Déjeuner," on view at Art Basel in June, and at Helly Nahmad, London, in September. His new TV series, *This Is Civilisation*, will be on Channel 4 in the UK this fall.

MARTIN COOMER (Reviews, p. 114) is an artist and critic based in London and writes regularly for *Modern Painters*, *Time Out*, and *Art Review*.

EVA DIAZ (Love of Labor, p. 52) is an art historian and critic. She recently completed her Princeton University dissertation, titled "Chance and Design: Experimental Art at Black Mountain College," focusing on Josef Albers, John Cage, and Buckminster Fuller. Since 1999 she has served as the instructor for curatorial studies at the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program.

MICHAEL LOBEL (Real Life, p. 56) is director of the graduate program in modern and contemporary art, criticism, and theory at Purchase College, SUNY. He is author of *Image Duplicator: Roy Lichtenstein and the Emergence of Pop Art* and *James Rosenquist: Pop Art, Politics and History in the 1960s*, forthcoming from University of California Press. He is curator of "Fugitive Artist: The Early Work of Richard Prince, 1974–1977," now on view at the Neuberger Museum of Art in Purchase, New York.

MARTIN HERBERT (Africa in the Present Tense, p. 78) is European editor of *Modern Painters* and a critic based in Tunbridge Wells, Kent. He writes regularly for this publication, *Artforum*, and *Art Monthly*.

JUDICAËL LAVRADOR (Introducing Jimmy Robert, p. 64) is an art critic based in Paris who writes for *Beaux Arts Magazine*, *Les Inrockuptibles*, and the free art review *O2*, among others. Last year he curated "Supernova," a show about science fiction in contemporary art at the Domaine de Pommery, Reims.

JANE MCFADDEN (Reviews, p. 112) is an art historian of modern and contemporary art whose work focuses on the interdisciplinary practices of the 1960s. She is currently working on a book on Walter de Maria and the issue of site. She serves as director of graduate studies, criticism, and theory at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California.

DANIEL MENDEL-BLACK (Books, p. 121) is a Los Angeles-based painter. His exhibitions have included solo shows at the Margo Leavin and Mandarin galleries in LA. He is editor and publisher of *Spring Journal*, an artist-run publication, and writes regularly on horror and science fiction, among other favorite topics, on his blog, Kulturedrome.com.

SARAH RAFF (Books, p. 120) teaches English at Pomona College and received her Ph.D. in comparative literature from Yale University. She is working on a book about the seductive maxims of Jane Austen's narrator.

JON RAYMOND (Introducing Storm Tharp, p. 68) is a writer living in Portland. He is author of the novels *The Half-Life* (Bloomsbury, 2004) and *Old Joy* (Artspace Press, 2004), which was made into a feature film released in 2006. He is also an associate editor at *Tin House* and an editor at *Plaxm*.

JUDITH RODENBECK (Reviews, p. 110) teaches modern and contemporary art at Sarah Lawrence College, where she holds the Noble Foundation Chair in Art and Cultural History; she was recently named editor in chief of *Art Journal*. She is currently completing a book on Happenings and their relation to avant-garde theater, photography, and musical composition.

PAUL SCHIMMEL (Unrealized, p. 88) has been chief curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, since 1990. He has organized such major exhibitions as "Helter Skelter: Los Angeles Art in the 1990s"; "Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949–1979"; and "Ecstasy: In and About Altered States." He is currently working on "Murakami@," a retrospective of the work of Takashi Murakami scheduled to open at MOCA this fall and travel to the Brooklyn Museum, New York, Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt, and the Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao.

MICHAEL WANG (Streaming Creatures, p. 100) is a writer and artist. He is an editor of the journal *Pidgin* and writes for Artforum.com. He is currently pursuing a master's degree in architecture at Princeton University.