

Research Article

The paradox of the basque farmhouse: The enfolding and unfolding of a cultural infrastructure

La paradoja del caserío vasco: El pliegue y despliegue de una infraestructura cultural

Onintza Etxebeste^{1*} and Iñaki Martínez de Albeniz²

¹ Mondragon University, Faculty of Humanities and Education Sciences, Dorleta, 20540, Eskoriatza, Gipuzkoa, Spain.

² University of the Basque Country, Department of Sociology and Social Work, Sarriena, 48940, Leioa, Bizkaia, Spain.

*Correspondence: oetxebeste@mondragon.edu, i.albeniz@ehu.eus

Abstract: This article addresses some of the interpretations that have consolidated the cultural-symbolic-cultural imaginary of the Basque farmhouse, and then broadens the form of approaching the narrative of its identity. From the notion of prototype to that of infrastructure, from anthropological object to artistic object, the Basque farmhouse is conceived as a framework, with an axis open to unfoldings that go beyond the reproduction of its essential image. Concepts related to mediations, performativity and cartography make it possible to track the operativity of this framework, in a process that interweaves different fields of research and controversies that can lead into forms of transdisciplinary, post-qualitative study and cultural innovation.

Keywords: basque farmhouse; infrastructure; art, mediation; mapping.

Resumen: Este artículo aborda algunas de las interpretaciones que han afianzado el imaginario simbólico-cultural del caserío, para, posteriormente, ampliar la forma de acercarse a la narrativa de su identidad. Desde la noción de prototipo al de la infraestructura, del objeto antropológico al objeto artístico, el caserío se concibe como un entramado, como un eje abierto a despliegues que van más allá de la reproducción de su imagen esencial. Conceptos afines al medio, la performatividad y la cartografía proponen el rastreo de la operatividad de esta trama reticular, en un proceso que entrelaza diferentes campos de investigación y controversias que pueden desembocar en formas de estudio transdisciplinares, post- cualitativas y de innovación cultural.

Palabras clave: caserío; infraestructura; arte; medio; cartografía.

1. The basque farmhouse, a cultural infrastructure

We define the modern Basque farmhouse as a rural, agricultural and autochthonous exploitation that is situated in the north of the Iberian Peninsula, in the geographical area of Euskal Herria (the Basque Country). At first glance, the traditional entity resembles a typical large house or farm, a space that we could identify as an anthropological place (Augé, 1993); that is, as

a symbolically constructed space conceived as the modus vivendi of a rural setting, interwoven with its cultural heritage. Nonetheless, the phenomenon of the Basque farmhouse proves to be a particular institution, exceeding its anthropological conception towards a multiplicity of dimensions that we will explore in this article.

The first Basque farmhouses are contextualised at the end of the War of the Bands (late XIV century), linked to the Basque laws and the ideology of ancestry (Gorriaran, 1993). Consequently, the estate bore an identitarian seal that named the family inhabiting it. It emerged as the institution responsible for securing, protecting and transferring the traditional political and juridical values of Basque identity. Nobility, lineage, the surname and the indivisible transfer of the estate situated these buildings as infrastructures that underpinned a traditional ideology. Thus, the Basque farmhouse is capable of articulating in a characteristic form all the spaces needed for the survival of the family in one single building and setting, consecrating a "durable" productive, cultural and social system (Berriochoa, 2012). All of this sustains the significance of the social and collective dimension of the Basque farmhouse, serving as the infrastructure of a series of cosmovisions that constitute it into a distinctive emblem of a place and an age.

In keeping with the above, the studies of Basque cultural anthropology of the early XIX century played a primordial role in the characterisation of this narrative. These investigations focused on the origin of a people whose enigmatic language, Euskera, linked it to a primitive ethnic past, thus making anthropologists and ethnologists into the legitimate guardians of the discovery. In this sense, "messianic time" defined by Benjamin (2016) is separated from "historical time" as an interval that goes beyond concrete events and cases, that is, as the encounter of a utopia suspended in time. Basque culture and identity are discovered in this messianic time, in a primary and singular past that was supposedly on the point of disappearing. It is in the rural setting with its traditional substratum that the infrastructures, the assemblages between humans and nonhumans that connect up with a lost paradise, are identified. It can be observed that the millennialism attributed to the Basque people, according to Zulaika (2009), clutches onto prehistoric memory in order to revive the collective consciousness of its culture (Zulaika, 2009, p. 234). In the genesis of an essentialist and atemporal cosmovision, inherited land does not date, but instead consolidates, the rural setting as the axis of the Basque ethos.

The construction of Basque identity is inscribed in an "originary moment", which legitimates the Basque farmhouse as a pillar or archetype of an authentic identity (Gatti & Muriel, 2006, p. 28). The Vasquista Aesthetic of the late XIX century also based itself on these interpretations, and portrayed the ethno-typical features of identity. An enthusiasm that sublimated the rural world was sketched that continues to be referential in the imaginary of contemporary society, in spite of the fact that "the idyllic image of the Basque farmhouse (...) contrasts greatly with the enormous penury and material decadence from which many suffered in this period" (Gorriaran & Aguirre, 1995, p. 124). Art thus becomes a new infrastructure, a type of iron representative device of Basque idiosyncrasy, a model that deals with transcendental, optimistic or ideal images with all their connotations (Manterola, 2017).

In any event, in spite of the biased view of an anthropology that conserves an identity, and the sublimation of the Basque farmhouse as carried out by art, the complexity that characterises this infrastructure connects diverse fields of study and action, and it can be addressed from multiple disciplinary fields. The traditional notion of the Basque farmhouse affects both its mixed production – agricultural and livestock – and the religious beliefs of the family that inhabits it, their organisation – jobs, tools, hierarchies, functions – and the configuration of the natural and cultural landscape with which it enters into contact. From a more general perspective, as we noted above, it is essential to conceive of it not as a mere object of representation, but as a type of association or assemblage that has been adapting itself with an extraordinary versatility to historical change, that is, to different social, cultural and productive models.

Figure 1. Matxienea farmhouse, Oiartzun, Gipuzkoa (2021).



Source: Produced by the authors.

Up to this point we have observed that the Basque farmhouse has acquired the role of an archetype, that is, a cornerstone that represents the most categorical characteristics of the Basque cosmovision from its remotest origins. However, it is worth underscoring that, considered as infrastructure, the Basque farmhouse can be displaced from its condition as an archetype to that of an open prototype. The idea of the Basque farmhouse as a prototype can be read in different ways. We have said that one of these was that of the archetype, a type of prototype as the first and unique example; the prototype of a lasting infrastructure, which serves as an identitarian device or unchanging symbolic model. Another very different reading is that of a prototype understood as an experimental exercise, as an element open to pro-vocations¹ through which it continues optimising, adapting and transforming itself into new infrastructures. Thus, as an “open” prototype, this icon can circumscribe a representative imaginary – a trap – or have the capacity to disseminate another type of social actions (Corsin, 2014; Gell, 2016, p. 58).

The crux of the matter lies in how we address the object’s functioning, from the most ethnographic – and most agglutinative – modus vivendi to the most controversial – and changeable – modus vivendi. In this sense, it is worth stressing that by immersing ourselves in the Basque farmhouse we are seeking to hack the very notion of identity, to pursue the potential of its operativity (Etxebeste, 2022). To this we add the re-conceptualisation of a collective imaginary, which has enfolded and unfolded over time, and we enquire into the capacity for action of its (de)composition, of its possible new unfoldings².

2. The symbolic framework of the Basque house

The conception of the Basque farmhouse thus descends from an important framework of social discourses and practices. In this respect, the symbolic construction of Basque identity has been sustained by a strong sensation of loss (Gatti & Muriel, 2006, p. 28). This was combined with a context in which there was a clash between industrial and rural development, the Foral laws were abolished (1876) and the rise of Basque nationalism advocated an ideology based on racial, linguistic and cultural difference. From then on, the meaning of the Basque farmhouse was framed in a nostalgic vision, as preserving national values, the antithesis of external invasions and industrial progress. A dichotomy arose between the countryside and the city, the traditional

¹ The sociologist of science Bruno Latour used to insist on the etymological meaning of the verb provoke: pro-vocare means to produce new voices, or, we would add, interpretations.

² Dominguez & Fogué (2017), expound the notion of unfolding as a process where design, instead of inscribing the political, strengthens its infrastructural capacity towards multiple fields and operativities.

and the modern, the vernacular and the external. The institution began to be discerned as a scenario that helped to integrate the discourse of the cultural and symbolic national essence.

This consciousness was rekindled following the Civil War (1936-1939) and the Francoist Dictatorship (1939-1975), a period during which the persecuted and castigated cultural and linguistic identity had survived in these mythical farmhouses. From the 1960s onwards, there was an important movement of cultural rebirth. Nonetheless, the Basque farmhouse continued to be a plausible element to which identity had retreated and from which it was now reflected. The popularity and the logic of survival of the late XX century were, of course, to be the basis of its system of representation. This system – understood as a complex framework of material relations and socio-cultural events – defined it as an infrastructure of cultural resistance (Gurrutxaga, 1990, p. 30-39). Montoya (2004, p. 47) observes that this is the “scenario of reproduction of a cultural logic”, a framework of readings that correlate and reconstruct symbolic, political and collective visions of identity.

The development that accompanies and constitutes this subsystem provides us with models that also adapt to and update a social imaginary. In fact, starting from the 1960s, the pictorial and allegorical scenario noted above was to transcend into artistic conceptions³ that resignified the role of the Basque farmhouse. We can see that the identitarian circumstance and the rural world have a strong power of attraction in art, given that, taking them as its basis, a thematic style is shaped that is suitable to the cultural parameters of the time. The power of art in the construction of the Basque imaginary becomes apparent since, beyond its patrimonialisation, it generates a corpus that makes visible certain social, intersubjective and relational processes that are found in the setting (Gell, 2016, pp. 206-170; Manterola, 2017).

Far from becoming devalued, this perception of the Basque farmhouse is also materialised in other fields. With respect to the patrimonial proposals, the tendency is to enclose the Basque farmhouse in a series of “static cultural models”, as an element whose capacity of transformation is not open to consideration (Zulaika, 2000, p. 213). Concerning the codification of the original, what we could call devices of romanticisation maintain the Basque farmhouse in the reality that the ethnographers of the start of the century spoke about, that is, inscribed in an archetypical past. This imaginary, for example, is also reconstructed and stabilized in the sphere of television, as shown in the “Baserria” reality show, where pairs of kaletarras and baserritarras⁴ compete in rural tasks (EITB, 2022)⁵. Against the backdrop of a logotype evoking the style of the painters of the last century and locked in the struggle to determine who will win and hence be able to sleep in the “father’s house”, we see which of the participants are the most capable of perpetuating this identitarian challenge.

The tourism tendencies in the Basque Country are based on the same taxonomy. Using the pretext of offering “100% Basque experiences”, scenarios are recontextualised so that tourists can live the “Basque experience”, with the aim of protecting its essentiality. In fact, adapting the contribution by Butler (2007), this series of events naturalises categorical fictions about the Basque farmhouse’s identity, at the cost of maintaining its successful framework. It is sufficient to simply type the word “baserri” into any online search engine to see that the majority of results reproduce the same rhetoric.

³ Amongst other artistic expressions, Basque sculpture of that time drew inspiration from the rural and material tools of the setting. Jorge Oteiza published “Quosque Tandem...!” (1963) an interpretative essay on the aesthetic of the Basque soul, and the poet Gabriel Aresti (1964) connected the idea of “la casa del padre (the father’s house)” – a simile of the Basque farmhouse – with defending the nation, thus collectivising its nature, which later would be condensed in the transmission – “mother” – of the cultural and linguistic essence – “fire/hearth” (Manterola, 2017; Amezaga, 2018, p. 52; Etxeberria, 2022).

⁴ The names “baserritarra” [a person linked to the farmhouse] and “kaletarra” [a person linked to the street] refers to the differentiation – in a certain sense disparaging – made between the inhabitants of the rural setting and those who live on a street in a town or city, respectively.

⁵ The idea of this program is to show a parallel image of Basque rural sports or “herri kirolak”, and it is notable for drawing no distinction between work and sport; it is a good example of otium and negotium as characteristics of the traditional Basque cosmopolitanism.

It is clear that the offers linked to the Basque farmhouse propose experiences that instrumentalise its image, whether this is translated into contemporary gastronomic entities, folkloric celebrations and herri kirolak, commercial settings or other cultural events. It could be defined as a pop distillation of the rural world, where the very notion of identity is instituted in a strategic way, as a “stylized repetition of acts” (Butler, 2007). These offers reconvert the Basque farmhouse, that productive and primordial identitarian entity for the family inhabiting it, into a souvenir or fetish that transcends the service sector. In all the examples presented there is a kind of immersive reality, an identitarian reconstruction that makes the infrastructure or framework that sustains the receiver’s experience vanish from sight (Bolter & Grusin, 2011, p. 30). As a result, the “authenticity” of the Basque farmhouse brings out the cultural identity that it previously undervalued, and places it in the socio-technical machinery of the market, just as its role is optimised and reconstructed from more or less specialised fields of knowledge (Yudice, 2002).

Figures 2. & 3. Images from the second season of “Baserrria” in EITB (2022).



Source: Compiled from the program's website. <https://www.eitb.eus/>

As we can see, there are multiple productions and interferences that adapt the Basque farmhouse to new fields and interpretations. For such purposes, the Basque farmhouse is a framework of identity, an organism that does not depend so much on the imaginaries that have constructed and unified its meaning, but instead, as an identitarian infrastructure it is also able to weave new projections. An infrastructure is what sustains a functioning system (Corsín, 2018). Adapted to the case of Basque identity, this would be the accumulation and function of narratives – discursive, symbolic, material, technical and imaginary – that sustain and make up this cultural identity. Following Sánchez Criado (2016, p. 88), the Basque farmhouse is a “conglomerate of entities” that “infra-structures” a form of being. Stated differently, the Basque farmhouse is the base or structure on which other objects operate, making a determinate identitarian system function (Larkin, 2013).

Let us for a moment imagine this subsystem, this infrastructure that sustains identity and the interrelations amongst different moments, spaces and actions. At this point we could evoke Bakhtin’s notion of the “chronotope” (Bajtin, 1991), and understand this framework as a narrative interface of meanings and events that proceed from different spaces and times, but that find points in common and, insofar as they bind together as a network and expand as a rhizome, multiply and open up their meaning to new complexities. This is the projection that interests us, a projection that, as Corsin (2018) would say, “claims” the matrix of the Basque farmhouse from an infrastructural dimension in which, in spite of its quasi-rural and self-referential imaginary, we can appeal to its reflexivity and capacity for agency.

Now, the narratives in keeping with the construction of the symbolic Basque farmhouse directly affect the problematic of identity, and the fact is that the Basque farmhouse is an example of dogma, of interpretations and discourses subjected to an order. Nonetheless, according to Larkin (2013, p. 329), infrastructures are “conceptually unruly” as they also have the capacity to propose itineraries, to weave forms of participation and, in short, to make visible the potential of

the elements involved in the process of their construction. In this respect, uncertainty remains about the margin of error existing between the codification of the Basque farmhouse and the power of the political and material framework unfolded in this series of events.

3. Deploying the paradox

The projections related to the construction of the Basque farmhouse, as we see, are subordinated to diverse expectations and interests. Within this order of ideas, the mechanisms of production and reproduction of its imaginary convert it into an element that operates in a “sub-political idiom of mediation” (Merres & Lezaun, 2011). It is worth saying that this is equally applicable to the network of the Basque farmhouse and to any other cultural and symbolic object that might operate as a fetish-object.

With the idea of the fetish, we are referring to cultural elements that possess a great seductive power (Latour, 2001). In this sense, the Basque farmhouse represents an essential symbol, it conceals an identitarian formula, which is why we venerate it. Now, the reflection of this framework generates unease about whether, as a fetishized element, the Basque farmhouse might be a social fiction, a naïve projection of identity, or, as an active agent, it might be able to promote new forms of operating.

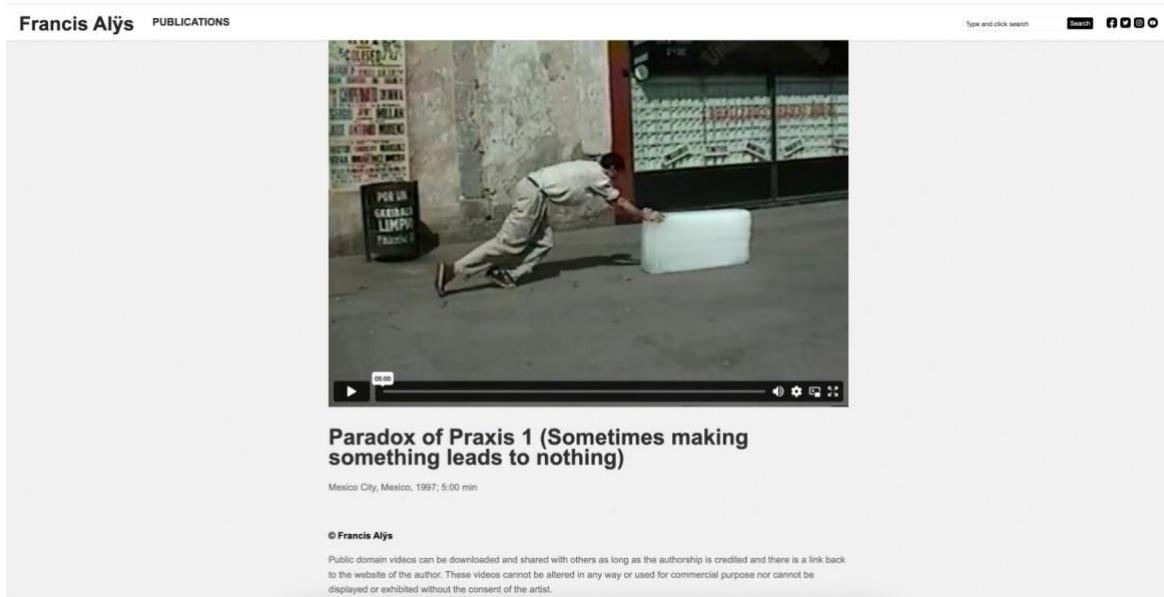
Perhaps, it is precisely this fetish nature that causes us to forget its infrastructural nature, that is, the network of technical, semiotic and material relations and interactions that shape and reshape its identity. Hence, we can consider it to be a black box of Basque social and cultural identities, a substantial emblem that hides the complexity that directly or indirectly constructs meaning (Etxebeste, 2022). We could say that this blackboxing conceals the way in which the infrastructure of the Basque farmhouse has been – and continues to be – woven in its process of “coming into being” (Martinez de Albeniz, 2017; Latour, 2001, 2008).

It is precisely for this reason that only the most superficial results are taken into consideration, for example, that of idealising it as a paradisiacal setting, forgetting the related realities of durability, inter-generational transmission, climatic impacts, distances, impressions, hearings, transformations, etc. To paraphrase Bruno Latour (1999) paradoxically, the more the prototypical, ideal, pre-modern images of the Basque farmhouse succeed, the more opaque and obscure they become. That is how its symbolic imaginary is perpetuated as a neo-aestheticization of quasi-religious approaches and effects.

The work *Paradox of praxis 1* by Francis Allýs (1997) provides us with an example that illustrates this idea of the black box. In this performance the artist pushes a block of ice through the streets of Mexico City, an action during which the ice gradually melts, under the pretext that “sometimes making something leads to nothing”. Amongst the numerous readings that can be made of this action, what interests us is the absurd act of moving this block of ice, given that the accompanying conditions – movement, strength, wear, temperature, energy, time, etc. – make the ice melt.

The simile between the block of ice and the black box helps to displace the Basque farmhouse from the notion of the “anthropological object” to that of an object that is also “artistic”. In reality, the idea of the cultural fetish has points in common with the traditional and essential idea of art and aesthetic experience. The aura in which this object is shrouded is inherent to its religiosity, as Gell argues (2016, p. 138), and this idolatry recapitulates the form in which societies and cultures project their beliefs. The symbolic Basque farmhouse sustains a frame of reference, like a block of ice in which the essence of Basque identity is frozen.

Figure 4. “Paradox of praxis 1” by Francis Alÿs.



Source: Image obtained from the author's website and authorized for non-commercial use.

<https://francisalys.com/sometimes-making-something-leads-to-nothing/>

Returning to Alÿs's action, it is worth underscoring the iconoclastic gesture of allowing the object to melt, that is, of considering the work of art not as a physical and closed symbolic object, but instead as a happening open to different stimuli, whose trail indicates the course it has followed. The obsolescence of the block of ice is comparable to pushing the closed prototype of the Basque farmhouse, its archetype, an act that only leads to reproducing its essential image, an action that “leads to nothing” other than reinforcing outdated imaginaries. The de-materialisation that takes place in the performance, conversely, displaces the idea of the object, whatever this might be, to a space of social, performative and experimental power.

Supporting oneself in the artistic field to transcend the idea of the monument provides an opening through which the object of the Basque farmhouse and its identity are displaced towards a different public materiality. A relevant text in this sense is the sculpture in the expanded field by Rosalind Krauss (1979), a proposal that calls for the liberation of the sculpture, breaking with artistic perspectives that tie the work of art to the fetish-monument, that is, the bewitchment of the aesthetic experience and its internal logic. Krauss proposes to free sculpture from its pedestal, opening up a field where art transcends the object, making visible the different levels of agency in which the artistic action operates.

The Basque farmhouse understood as a monument, black box or identitarian fetish, as a non-expanded infrastructure, is reinforced by the concept of “institution”. One of the competences of the institution lies in its dissimulating the agencies that it (re)presents; this unleashes the process of extolling the elements of its model, on one side, and that of delimiting its political capacities, on the other. However, we can observe here a movement where the black box of the Basque farmhouse exceeds the limits of its representation as an institution, and, as an “ex-titulation”, is unfolded towards innovative social, material and/or conceptual processes (Domenech & Tirado, 2001). The opening up of the box represents the unfolding of its infrastructure, producing a turn away from the discourse of the predetermined and generally patrimonialized cultural object.

Thus, between agencies and practices, the great paradox of the Basque farmhouse is that it is constructed in a double direction: as an auratic monument – institution, black box; and, conversely, as a translation – extitution, mediation. This idea questions the dichotomies that we have been managing up to now, resituating the construction and reconstruction of the fetish as

controversy. In the case of the monumentalisation of the Basque farmhouse, that is, in the categorical reproduction of its univocal narrative, we tend to reproduce a referential image, at the cost of forgetting another series of characterisations that also shape it. We belong to a society in which the most uncomfortable part of the totem, its character as infrastructure, is forclosed under the lens of the social ideal.

Each event linked to the Basque farmhouse is, however, susceptible to being opened up to new social transformations. Like the block of ice, each agency leaves a new trail, it takes us onto a terrain where the Basque farmhouse is assembled in multiple forms, as museum⁶, app, statistic, logotype, heritage, hashtag or pizzeria. Returning to the “Baserria” reality show, apparently the strategy consists in extolling the essential Basque farmhouse, since the reward for the winners is being able to sleep in the farmhouse and to sit down at a table spread with typical delicacies, while the losers are relegated to sleeping in a shack (txabola). As an intermediate or liminal territory between these two exclusive infrastructures, the debate about what has happened over the course of the week takes place in a chill-out style greenhouse-set.

In any case, the unquestionable meaning of the prototype is expounded and changes to the extent that its interface does, in an interactive, dialectical exercise connected to its social reality. If we reformulate the reference of Latour's cited above (2001, p. 263), paradoxically, the prototypical images of the Basque farmhouse achieve success, not due to increasing opacity, but due to the greater number of tensions and reformulations they make evident.

4. Networks, mediations and cartographies

We will now proceed to employ methodological tools that are capable of intercepting how the interface of the Basque farmhouse moves in its most agential sense, to envisage how it depends on the mediations that enact it. To that end, the notion of prototype becomes a field sown with both mines and opportunities.

Indeed, considered from the sociology of associations or Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) (Latour, 2008), the Basque farmhouse is no longer seen as a closed object with a given meaning, but instead as a network of multiple actors that are interconnected and that participate in a process that is assembled in a circumstantial and always precarious form. According to this author, in order to be faithful to the social dimension, the object must be opened up to controversy, that is, to the uncertainty of mediations.

This posits a sociology of innovation that takes the characteristics of identity and culture as versatile, because it considers that any agency has a transformative effect. The contribution of ANT equips us with the theoretical resources needed for beginning to make the framework of this element visible, and for deducing its identity based on the notion of assemblage. For this reason, the heterogeneity of the Basque farmhouse is the primordial characteristic of its identity; it is not so much tied to a categorical order as based on the mediation in which deviations, disappointments and fleeting pacts emerge (Dewsbury, 2000, p. 477).

We take this series of concepts from the farmhouse's level of production, where climatology, biodiversity or ecology have an impact from dimensions considered up to now as null and void – flowering cycles, soil humidity, temperature, pollination, pesticide products, insects... All of these have a tangible effect on other areas – quality, quantity, intensity, networks, market, tools, fuel, rotation – and vice versa. It is the power of agency that is found amongst the multiple parts that, in a series of horizontal contacts, shapes the reality of the setting. Also, from the cultural and symbolic field, all the relations and reconstructions related to the imaginary of the Basque farmhouse are part of its open and changing configuration, in which, in fact, their participation

⁶ The reconstruction of the Igartubeiti farmhouse as a museum offers visitors an itinerary where they can enter a totem of the XVI century, thus providing a good example of how the identity of the farmhouse serves as an infrastructure for each experience, advertising and event related to the context. Name of website: <https://www.jgartubeitibaseria.eus/es>

ranges from the patent on a seed to the transmission of a traditional recipe, from the industrial manufacture of a plastic souvenir to the photographs uploaded to social media, etc.

For his part, Michael (2012) observes that “what these objects are – what their ontology is – rests on the sorts of events of which they are a part” (p. 171). In the theatre play *Tribiz. Baserri Galdue* (Urresti, 2021) a conversation is held with certain objects linked to the Basque farmhouse. This is about an intermediate space and the aim is to detect how different gestures, words, tools, stones, public and actors can interact, collide and thus become the mediators of new meanings. The play itself questions whether “these actions will be our best patrimony”. Nonetheless, the nostalgic meaning of the work also “domesticates” the Basque farmhouse, instead of allowing its symmetrical capacity to emerge as a political issue (Michael, 2012, p. 171). Essentially, taking one of the sides in the controversy would now be inconsistent. What we wish to make possible here is for “the actors to deploy the whole range of controversies in which they are immersed”, where we no longer try to “discipline them or make them fit into our categories”, but instead allow them to deploy their own worlds (Latour, 2008, p. 42).

Once the debate is opened, there is an urgent need for another exercise that involves thinking about the background of the Basque farmhouse as something predominantly political. In a certain sense, if we expand the infrastructure, if we dilate the interface, we are also awaking a “parliament of things” (Latour, 2007, pp. 207-211); a focus where the axis of the Basque farmhouse brings together a tense negotiation amongst agents, objects, techniques, materials, beliefs, ideals, archives, etc. To manage these new possible frames of meaning, the anthropological object must be opened up to a “cosmopolitan” dimension (Stengers, 2016), that is, to a debate that does not enfold or inscribe a given function – in its archetypical or categorical sense – but instead allows speculation about the form in which practices and elements operate and construct the world, in their most agential sense (Dominguez & Fogué, 2017; Martinez de Albeniz, 2020). Now, given the lens of the political framework that is being deployed, how is this operativity to be perceived? Or, stated differently, how is its complex process of transformation to be envisaged? Here we argue that this takes place through mediations.

Deleuze and Guattari compare the mediation to a plateau, with raised and vibrant spaces that are connected via “subterranean stems in such a way as to form or extend a rhizome” (1987, p. 22). We would say that to mediate is, in part, to go through the stem existing between plateau and plateau, like a path that hybridises one and the other. The nature of mediations, without doubt, belongs to a performative movement, in which the Basque farmhouse, “enfolded” in interferences, would show its full potential. In this sense, following Dewsbury (2000, p. 475), what is performative is the opening, that is, the space that unfolds the following moment thus enabling change to occur. From each “plateau”, from each prototype, reconstruction, event or image, the performative element suggests that we allow ourselves to be transported through the political articulation of its links.

Of course, the notion of the performative mediation requires creative resources for its analysis, that is, a series of tools for making it visible – which is perhaps one of the greatest challenges posed in this contribution – to both enter into the patternless network or concrete technique, and give credibility to a proposal that seeks to investigate it and contribute from an artistic, and therefore post-qualitative, practice⁷. Now, this perspective means that the infrastructure of the Basque farmhouse is seen as an experimental laboratory, as a flexible framework of disparate elements that form a single system (Larkin, 2013, p. 330) that we can affect and be affected by. Hence the trajectory of the Basque farmhouse cannot be defined a priori, since in each event new worlds will be constructed, produced and mediated⁸. This is a positioning that converts the cultural identity of the past and present into an indeterminate process, an interweaving of provisional forms waiting to be mapped.

⁷ We refer the reader to the article by Abad and González in this monograph.

⁸ In the research that preceded this article (Etxebeste, 2022) some of the artistic works that are related to the farmhouse in an experimental way are presented.

5. Ethnographies of operativity

Considered from the perspective of Actor-Network-Theory, once the agencies are deployed and stabilised, the “assemblage” composes a new logic for conceiving the object of study (Latour, 2008). This exercise involves mapping, an interpretative description where the changes that take place can be narrated as they occur. In this respect, in the anthropological and social sciences the text has been predominant when it comes to solving the intangibility of certain processes. However, this practice runs the risk of remaining inherently limited, as it involves the difficulty of making the experimental itinerary visible, and that of a formalisation where the framework’s operativity and other material expressions might be tangible.

In this respect, Larkin (2013) defines the “poetics of infrastructure” as a process of discovery that goes beyond the normative means of approaching alternative experiences and formats of assemblage, where, as Sánchez Criado (2016, p. 93) notes, “our narratives can also manage to inform new infrastructures or new forms of thinking and narrating in infrastructural terms”. Consequently, Dewsbury (2000) explains that a performative approach to the social dimension involves three perspectives: accepting the immanence of the event, having a practical view of the constant exchange with our setting, and the importance of creativity for experiencing these relations and changes (Dewsbury, 2000, pp. 492-494).

In this sense, the genealogy of contemporary art proposes a change of paradigm. Since the art of the 1960s and 1970s – Land Art, Minimal Art, Fluxus, Conceptual Art, Relational Art, amongst others – the capacities of the process, the objects and tools that mediate in the artistic process, establish culturally innovative forms of relating to the world, mobilising heterogeneous readings of the setting. The artists challenge the institutions of art, emphasising interdisciplinary proposals and radical resources of intervention, conceptualisation and registration.

For example, installation art (Bishop, 2008) is a clear expression of how contemporary art formalises a series of artefacts capable of expanding and making visible the agencies that we so much want to see. Just as the monument expands into the setting (Krauss, 1979), installation art ceases to be a representative and auratic art for contemplation, and begins to provide a field that the public can traverse, that is, a mediation with which to re-cognise and re-configure processes. The notion of installation art is comparable to understanding the prototype as a speculative element that, between identity and alterity, unleashes new imaginaries and acts of mediation.

Thus, our desire to understand the Basque farmhouse not so much as an anthropological object, but as a de facto artistic installation abandons the pretension to patrimonialise the fetish and treasure its symbolic framework, and opts instead for a format that activates the potential of the exchanges that it undergoes. This means that we move from a dishonest, representative device to another which has the potential to continue constituting itself. From the abovementioned black box that holds the identitarian framework of the Basque farmhouse – in terms of mediation – to a multiple dimension of hyper-mediation and remediation where, as in a rhizome, distributed perspectives and other points of expansion are activated (Bolter & Grusin, 2011). That is how, based on the notion of mediation, we propose to address the Basque farmhouse – installation, framework, network, rhizome – from three interconnected fields: understood as a framework to be entered, as the medium or the form of approaching and intervening, and as an exercise in articulating this process, with the aim of an alternative re-cognition.

Once the infrastructure of the object has been unfolded, the first field – installation, event, network, mediation – is that of the potential places, objects and events that are to be approached: anecdotes, relations, machines, tools, systems, images, markets, wheels, voices, experiences, etc. The Basque farmhouse as installation would be the mediation to be traversed, and with which to engage in conversation, that is, a space in which to discover new relations and compositions. More than a process of lineal mapping, it is the recognition of a dialogue that can compose perspectives open to other forms of identification, a logic where the farmhouse can transcend how it is usually perceived and become a sensorial, changing and multiple experience.

The second mediation is concerned with the form of approaching the setting from diverse disciplines, techniques, moments, elements and readings that would form part of the group of agencies itself – photographs, notes, affects, interventions, drawings, sounds, conversations, dance, technology, games, concepts, readings, evaluation, metaphors – from the position of a “participatory observer” (Foster, 2001). This is a positioning that, on one side, defuses the roles of the researcher, artist or ethnographer and their disciplines, adapting them to demands of the context and thus converting their agency into part of the network. On the other hand, these encounters, tools, objects and listenings will be mediating agencies. This means that everything that occurs will influence the group of agencies that map the form that the Basque farmhouse currently has or is acquiring. The interest resides in the fact that, instead of deploying, envisaging and describing the infrastructure “from outside”, assembling it in a text, we would find ourselves inside it, as one more actant. This inclusion in the infrastructure involves intervening in, and registering the social flux of the event from a social space-time, whose framework would result in a form of identity (Selgas, 2007).

Finally, considering the mediation as an assemblage, it is possible to propose a device that consists in an artistic formalisation where the mapping of the Basque farmhouse displays all of its material and conceptual strength. This interweaving, transcending the narrative of a monumental object, appears as a new mediation that, instead of relating and presenting a closed discourse, would be organised to deploy itself in other meanings and forms of analysis and understanding. This is the articulation of a “wrapping” where the fragmented Basque farmhouse appears as a sustained, enfolded, but not permanent, identity (Selgas, 2007). Based on the exploration of new settings, relations and formats, this journey through the mediation of the Basque farmhouse would produce political agencements, and move us towards assuming a position in the discovery and registration of a poetics of its operativity, where “the aesthetic dimension of infrastructure (rather than its technical one) is dominant” (Larkin, 2013).

That being said, the space midway between the previously cited modus vivendi and the modus operandi, would lead into something like a mapping of its framework. From this perspective, opening up the Basque farmhouse as a network of information empowers the circulation of changing results. The mediations propose a process of interweaving, a series of methodological options for entering into the network and agglutinating related processes and narratives into a performative relation with this or some other cultural object. However, we are taking this problematisation to a point where the aim is not to provide solutions to the identitarian controversy of the Basque farmhouse, but to situate ourselves as “ethnographers of its operativity”, making art into a kind of speculative research design, and the infrastructure into an active and performative agent of cultural identity.

6. Conclusion: The enfolding and unfolding of a cultural infraestructure

The Basque farmhouse as a referential element constitutes a closed model whose functionality irradiates an illusory and opportunistic image of Basque culture. In its more conventional form, we treat it as a fetish, an object onto which an essential cosmovision of identity is projected.

From archetype – enfolding – to infrastructure and open prototype – unfolding – we propose a displacement where the anthropological object starts to be conceived as a framework, as a network open to capacities that go beyond their “emblematic” reproduction. Indeed, we have deployed the Basque farmhouse so as to engage in a dialogue with its process of configuration, an exercise that depends on the operative potential that is unfolded or that its agencies obtain.

We repeat that the object is an infrastructure whose logic is relational. The most attractive conceptions of the Basque farmhouse, those that synthesise its imaginary are, nonetheless, incapable of showing its complexity. For that reason, we have explored the framework that sustains and produces the meaning of the object, which involves confronting the inertias that shape it as an identitarian totem.

As a result, we move from the simile of the enfolded prototype, a process of blackboxing, designed for an essentially symbolic purpose, to envisaging the cultural object as a laboratory capable of being unfolded and operating in a speculative way. In spite of everything, the problematic of the Basque farmhouse includes its being an element that is enacted in the movements of both unfolding and enfolding. In its most essential form, enfolding “inscribes specific versions of the political”, which delimits the transcendence of its meaning, attacking the cosmopolitics of its agencies. For its part, unfolding “proposes new types of bodies, entities and places as political” (Dominguez & Fogué, 2017, p. 100).

Unfolding the cultural object, where appropriate, opens up its identity to a performative field, alterable in each associative event that, nonetheless, we are obliged to crystallise in narratives – experiential, artistic, economic, commercial, etc. – where alterity is once again encrypted. Like a wave, tracking a framework imposes an enfolding that, although it is temporary, provides it with a certain commensurability. However, each one of these political negotiations might trigger a debate that is able to continue displacing the social and identitarian reality of the object towards other forms of continuing to be. This is the paradox of our practice, an exercise where the greatest potential perhaps lies in the fact of activating and expanding new vanishing points.

Also proposed throughout this article is the displacement of the anthropological object towards the notion of artistic installation. The question now is not how objects have been interpreted from one or another discipline, but how to intervene, mobilise, register and assemble from the perspective of a language, that of cultural innovation, that makes their relations tangible.

Operative ethnography would address this tracking from the perspectives of debate and political consciousness, which register the sub-flow that is given in each assemblage and their subsequent expansion, and the circulation of these agencies in other networks and frameworks. In any case, this is a subversive re-cognition, a transdisciplinary experiment that equips us with resources for a politically active mapping (Stengers, 2014, p. 27), a mediation of the forms in which an object like the Basque farmhouse can be intercepted, while at the same time shaping, and being shaped in, new forms of action.

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