

2016

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Recommended Citation

Jo Farb Hernandez. "Singular Spaces: The Power and the Passion of Spanish Art Environments" *Revista Sans Soleil - Estudios de la Imagen* (2016): 285-303.

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SINGULAR SPACES: THE POWER AND THE PASSION OF SPANISH ART ENVIRONMENTS

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Resumen: Los entornos de arte brut en España – al igual que todos aquellos lugares que encontramos alrededor del mundo – revelan una creatividad conceptual impresionante y una visión vernácula e improvisada donde el artista, a la hora de construir, aprovecha lo que encuentra en su entorno: los materiales procedentes de objetos naturales, reciclados, o bien fabricados por él mismo. El resultado de cada visión es único, y pone de manifiesto los intereses, los desafíos, y los aspectos personales de la vida del artista durante todo el proceso creativo; de ahí la complejidad del entorno donde se encuentran las obras. Gracias a que los visitantes pueden físicamente disfrutar de las creaciones de los artistas, caminar, recorrer, y explorar estas construcciones, el público empieza a darse cuenta de la importancia no sólo del espacio sino del tiempo en el que las obras residen. El entorno puede ser considerado como algo vivo, y como la vida misma, se encuentra en continua evolución al mismo tiempo

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que es continuamente acabado. Por tanto, estas manifestaciones artísticas no pueden ser comprendidas desde una única perspectiva o punto de visión ni por una sola visita. Aquello que inicialmente percibimos como algo caótico y desordenado, tras sucesivas visitas y perspectivas, va tomando forma y sentido: es entonces cuando entendemos que el entorno puede ser entendido dentro de una matriz parecida al ritmo y los patrones en el jazz improvisado. En este artículo, Jo Farb Hernández describe su proyecto enciclopédico basado en las investigaciones de entornos de arte brut en España a lo largo de más de 14 años. Durante todo este tiempo la profesora descubrió y profundamente documentó y analizó las miles de obras encontradas en unas decenas de estos entornos, siendo muchos de ellos totalmente desconocidos más allá del lugar donde se encontraban. Aquí la escritora nos presenta una breve sinopsis de 12 artistas repartidos por toda la geografía peninsular, artistas que forman parte de los 45 autores que están incluidos en su revolucionario libro, *Singular Spaces: From the Eccentric to the Extraordinary in Spanish Art Environments* [Espacios Singulares: Desde lo excéntrico a lo extraordinario en los entornos de arte brut en España]. De este modo, Hernández propone eliminar los estereotipos negativos que acompañan a estas monumentales obras cuando se refieren a ellas como arte “outsider.” Además, la investigadora insta a los que agradecen

Revista Sans Soleil - Estudios de la Imagen, Vol 8, 2016, pp. 285-303.

www.revista-sanssoleil.com

Recibido: 15-01-2016.

Aceptado: 15-03-2016.

la creatividad de estos artistas autodidactas a que les apoyen en sus proyectos y se involucren en la realización de defensa y acción política, si hace falta, para resistir a los riesgos existenciales cuando las obras se vean amenazadas. Con la protección permanente de estos espacios singulares no sólo se permite la continuación del trabajo de los artistas, como se van explorando y extendiendo sus visiones innovadoras, sino que se preserva estos lugares para el disfrute de nuestras futuras generaciones. Y con cada éxito alcanzado, avanzamos en el propósito de romper las fronteras teóricas de la historia de arte y evitar la tendencia a crear distinciones artificiales entre los géneros artísticos, lo que nos lleva al progreso positivo y una definición más amplia del arte en sí mismo.

Palabras clave: espacios singulares, arte brut, entornos, España

Abstract: The art environments of Spain – like those the world over – display an astounding conceptual creativity and a vernacular, seat-of-the-pants approach to construction that makes use of locally available found, natural, and recycled objects as well as fabricated components built from scratch. Each result is unique, revealing each creator-builder’s interests, challenges, and concerns as they have developed over the course of a lifetime; as such, it is easy to understand why art environments are so complex. And because we are able to physically enter into and explore the constructions as visitors, we complete the artworks in the same way as an audience completes a work of theatre. At the same time, we also begin to understand the time-based element that is central to their essence: unlike a painting that is in process until it is finished and is then studied and understood solely on the basis of that final product, art environments are constantly evolving at the same time that they are constantly

complete. Yet they are typically neither entirely comprehensible nor clearly viewable from a single perspective; what may at first seem rather chaotic or disordered will often evolve, after multiple viewings from multiple perspectives, into a patterned, rhythmic milieu that is akin to those gestures found in improvisational jazz. In this article, Jo Farb Hernández discusses her encyclopedic project researching Spanish art environments, through which she discovered and thoroughly documented and analyzed dozens of these sites, mostly unknown by the larger world, over the course of more than 14 years. Here she provides short vignettes about twelve of those artists from across the mainland, out of the 45 that were published in her groundbreaking book, *Singular Spaces: From the Eccentric to the Extraordinary in Spanish Art Environments*. In so doing, she argues for elimination of the negative stereotypes typically invoked in describing these monumental artworks as the work of “outsiders,” and urges those who appreciate the creativity of these self-taught artists to stand with them, via political advocacy and action, to resist the often existential hazards that threaten their safety and stability. Securing ongoing protection for each of these art environments not only enables the artists to continue to explore and extend their visions while safeguarding these sites for future generations to enjoy, but it also serves as another step toward breaking down theoretical art historical barriers between genres, thus leading us to a more expansive understanding of what art can be.

Keywords: art environments, singular spaces, art brut, Spain

This extensive project began in 2000 with a whiplash-provoking screech to a halt on the side of the road where Josep Pujiula was high up in the branches building his towering labyrinthine structure. Having documented and studied such idiosyncratic constructions since 1974, I mentally flashed back to what it must have been like to see Sabato Rodia building his iconic towers in Watts (Los Angeles, California), and immediately knew that full and immediate documentation of Pujiula's efforts was essential.

But when I tried to access bibliographic sources in order to include Pujiula in my first book on Spanish arts – *Forms of Tradition in Contemporary Spain*¹ – I found nothing substantive, only anecdotal accounts in local papers. The paucity of information about Pujiula's work – paralleled in my searches for information about other art environments in Spain that I was starting to discover – made me eager to begin a more comprehensive project that would document as many more sites as I could find. By the time I was honored with a Fulbright Senior Scholar Research Award in 2008, I had done preliminary fieldwork on a half-dozen sites, and expected that I might find a total of fifteen to twenty around the country as I began an extensive period of *in situ* research.² But with each new part of the country that I visited – traveling tens of thousands of kilometers around the mainland – I discovered dozens of artists building sites new to me – and mostly unknown by the larger world – and by the time I had to conclude work on the book *Singular Spaces*³ in early 2013, I had visited almost fifty sites, 45 of which I featured in my encyclopedic work and the accompanying exhibition. Yet while I felt I had truly scoured the country and drilled deeply down into any possible resource, since the book's publication I have now learned of at least three dozen more art environments on the Spanish mainland: these, along with an exploration of the sites located on Spain's islands, will form the basis for an upcoming second volume.

The art environments of Spain – like those the world over – display an astounding conceptual creativity as well as a vernacular, seat-of-the-

pants approach to construction that makes use of locally available found, natural, and recycled objects as well as fabricated components built from scratch. Each result is unique, and may include topiary gardens and public parks; monumental castles and fortresses; figurative representations of gods, saints, heroes, politicians, real or imaginary animals, folk dancers and castle-builders (*castellers*), and the artist and his/her family; personal museums, memorials, and shrines; assemblages and collages; architectural miniatures or colossi; and invented spaces of all sizes, shapes, and scales. And while some of Spain's art environments have been lost through natural erosion, vandalism, governmental sanction, or inherent vice, many more are still extant, and the artists continue to work, every day, to realize their visions. In most cases, they are delighted when members of the public show interest and visit their sites, and many post signs, markers, or exhortations to ensure that the audience fully understands their intentions and their aims. While each artist has his or her own motivation for construction – and, at the most primal level, each is doing it because she or he “has” to – along the way public response becomes an important component that stimulates continuing construction. The viewer thus becomes essential to the completion of the artwork in much the same way that an audience completes the intent and production of a work of theater.

The artists' delight results, in great part, from appreciation of those who celebrate their work, rather than seeking to destroy it. For almost all of these sites have – periodically, routinely, or catastrophically – been subject to existential threats, and, as noted, some are no longer extant. Yet the supposed threats posed by these unorthodox, idiosyncratic constructions are radically less offensive than those caused by the outrageously insensitive and distasteful constructions Spain's governments have approved along its coasts and on the edges of its cities. Nevertheless, too often the artists' special spaces are deemed an affront to local building codes, urban plans, and neighborhood values. In this distorted worldview, then, they are targeted for demolition, and the mandate for destruction is often ag-

gravated by the added insult of absurdly high financial penalties for daring to express their personal creative visions in such a public way.

My fieldwork with these artists has been intensive: in most cases, I returned again and again to document, and then to assess my documentation, and then to confirm and check again, noting adjustments and alterations, additions, and deletions. With each visit I understood that I was taking time away from the artists as they often stopped work to answer my questions or show me new pieces, even as they seemed excited about doing so. But because of this, I felt a moral imperative to help them address existential challenges when they arose. More so than for contemporary mainstream artists who understand the capriciousness and fickleness of the art world – although I would certainly write letters of support if their works were threatened – I was moved to political advocacy and action to support these artist-builders. Not only did I write letters, but I met with government officials, started petition drives, helped to organize local community supporters, and more, trying with each new initiative to persuade government officials that these unique works could help to promote and enhance their communities, linking their distinctiveness to an inimitable new identification that would bring in visitors and tourist dollars, often at little or no cost to municipal or regional coffers. And we have seen some gratifying successes: Francisco González Gragera (Badajoz) was able to resume work on his *Capricho de Cotrina*; Blas García Camacho's (Tarragona) financial fine was retracted, as was the mandate to demolish his life-size dinosaurs; Josep Pujiula's (Girona) *Laberinto i cabanyes*, demolished and rebuilt three times, has been finally recognized as a local heritage site. Securing ongoing protection for each of these art environments not only enables the artists to continue to explore and extend their visions while safeguarding these sites for another generation to enjoy, but it also serves as another step toward a more expansive understanding of what art can be.

We don't always win these matches, however. The historical art environment *Mas de les Figures* by Josep Jordà (Tarragona) hardly reveals

any visible remnants of the glory it displayed in the heady days of the early 1930s; Diego López's *Montaña Azul* (Murcia) is disappearing after the artist's own dislocation from the site, exacerbated by the community's indifference; José María Garrido's *Museo del Mar* (Cádiz), located in a now economically strategic urban neighborhood, was razed after his death. And Roberto Pérez's *Finca de las Piedras Encantadas* (Granada) is threatened, José Prades Ceuma's (Tarragona) site is deteriorating, Joaquim Gifreu's (Girona) site is being decimated as works are removed, Emilio Pérez's (Cáceres) decorated home is degenerating, and Cesareo Gimeno Martínez's *Era* (Teruel) and Manuel Palomares Félix's *Villa Pechina* (Valencia) are, for all intents and purposes, no longer extant. And there will be more such losses, unless each of us in our own communities takes the initiative to join together to do whatever is necessary to convince government officials to take responsibility for these special and singular spaces within their borders: to protect them, stabilize them, and ensure their preservation for the cultural enjoyment and educational edification of future generations of residents and visitors alike.

Art environments such as those I study are personal, individual spaces that nevertheless reveal significant public ramifications on a variety of levels. Yet while they might not fall within the parameters of what their neighbors may think of as "Art," this does not necessarily imply a disconnection from their local community or the inability of the creators to function therein. More often than not, neighbors accommodate these constructions as a "hobby," a word often introduced by the artist-builders themselves. The use of such a non-judgmental term may help to neutralize the assertiveness of the site in the eyes of the community, and the art environment is thus rendered more entertaining and socially acceptable. But, even when their neighbors may express concern at their works or may decry them as "ugly," the builders are not "outsiders," and for the most part they are not estranged from their communities.

Leafing through my book, people often ask me which art environment I like best. It's an unanswerable question, however, as every site and every artist speaks to me in a different way. The diversity and distinction of these idiosyncratic works is overwhelming, and the passion and commitment of the artist-builders is moving and inspiring. So while I won't choose favorites, here are a dozen sites (in alphabetical order) that, in my opinion, are worthy of increased visibility and acclaim:

JULIO BASANTA LÓPEZ (B. 1933) *LA CASA DE DIOS*, ÉPILA (ZARAGOZA)

Although Basanta has described his site as a House of God, in fact it appears to be occupied to a greater extent by what he defines as demons. A religious man who nevertheless claims to not belong to any single church or sect, Basanta's life was periodically touched by personal trauma, beginning with early abandonment by the father of young Julio and his ten siblings, and later by the deaths of his brother and his only son, both in unresolved circumstances involving the police. These recurring shocks convinced him that demons exist everywhere, although people might not always acknowledge or recognize them for what they are.

Basanta began work on his site, located on the outskirts of a small village, by constructing what he calls his *castillicos*, three separate buildings each with crenellated rooftops. These buildings are somewhat idiosyncratic versions of small Spanish weekend homes, and physically resemble each other only marginally, although they were clearly built by the same hand. In fact, thanks to their small dimensions, Basanta was able to build them himself, with help from his wife as best as she was able. The *castillicos* reveal a variety of architectural styles and ornaments: they boast the rather stern crowns of medieval military architecture as well as an assortment of balustrades, projecting windows, turrets, and "towers," and thus impart a rather severe impression, as their stark, white façades glare against the almost blindingly blue sky of Aragón.

At some point Basanta was provoked to move on from the architectural construction of the *castillicos* to the creation of the numerous figurative "gods" and "demons" that now flank the front and sides of the buildings, concentrated toward the front of the property; it is unclear exactly when this component of his constructions began, as he does not seem to differentiate between the construction of the buildings and that of the sculptures when discussing his site. Basanta became increasingly prolific after the death of his son, however, identifying—and possibly hoping to exorcise—the demons that hounded him by surrounding his home with physical incarnations of these visions. Larger than life-size, leaning imposingly toward the viewer as they tower over him or her, they surround the exterior of his home but are concentrated toward the front entrance, and are clearly intended to be seen from outside the fence that surrounds the property. The assorted devils,



Julio Basanta, *La Casa de Dios*, 2009.

ghouls, soldiers, and skeletons vie for prominence with religious figures and scenes including the *Ten Commandments* and *Christ with his Executioners*; newer works also include Hitler holding a gun to his own head and the living dead arising from their tombs.

Basanta changes the population of the site regularly: new figures, new paint colors, and re-arranged groupings appear with great regularity; the evolutionary variations in shape, structure, and color provide the sensation of a slow-motion kinetic performance for the static display. The shoddiness of the construction of the figures enhances their terrifying aspect, as the craggy faces, awkward stances, and dripping paint emphasize the other-worldly nature of their personas. So, too, do the various found objects added to enhance Basanta's narratives, including dead branches, rusty chains, and assorted implements of violence, including hatchets, nooses, and guns.

Working alone, Basanta is both proud of his work and dismissive of it. At times he says that it should be maintained as a museum and taken over by the municipality; other times he says that since his son's death, with his daughters terrorized by his work and therefore unwilling to live there or maintain the property, he expects that at some point he will douse it all with gasoline and blow it all up.

PETER BUCH (B. 1938), *EL JARDÍ DE PETER*, POBLA DE BENIFASSÀ (CASTELLÓ)

During the 1960s and 1970s, as Spain's government tried desperately to bring in hard cash from beyond its borders through international promotions, new tourists began to visit, lured by the sunny beaches of the coasts and islands. Among these were hippies from the northern countries, some of whom stayed and made their homes here; Buch, born in Frankfurt, was among these early expatriates.



Peter Buch, *El Jardí de Peter*, 2014.

First landing on the islands but relatively soon priced out of living there, around 1985 he purchased and moved to an end-of-the-road refuge in the mountains of Castelló. As a youth, he had briefly attended (and was thrown out of) art school; his interest at that time had been in painting. But after his move some three decades later, drawn to the rocky landscape, he became interested in exploring three dimensions.

Not knowing what he was going to do until he was actually doing it, he started creating small buildings and sculptures with the rocks found on site, adding earth and small stones to set them and smooth out the shapes, audaciously transforming the space with color, form, and texture. He covered the infrastructures with concrete mortar, adding bits of broken tiles that he found in the garbage or that friends would bring him for ornamentation, integrating his artistic expression with the land's topography. The works are colorful and humorous, and Buch has created an extensive, whimsical

environment, transforming the original look of the site with his engaging characters and amusing fantasy creatures, all linked by an interlocking series of pathways, ponds, and flowering gardens. And although he has clearly developed his own visual vocabulary and personal style – riffing off of the fantastic, imagistic vocabulary he had developed as a painter – each work is approached uniquely and with an aesthetic freedom that enables them all to appear fresh and compelling.

Buch's work is inspired by the topographical variations of the landscape as much as by his own artistic vision; the fluctuations of the geography, both vertically and horizontally, both cradle and support his artistic explorations: he shapes new spaces as he responds to the existing zones. But yet while he is inspired and guided by the expanses and the crevices, the gullies and the rocky knolls, he pushes beyond a simple wrapping of the landscape in his imposed materials. It is clear that his improvisationally-designed spaces are not dependent solely on the natural features of the site: as the environment evolved, Buch intuitively positioned the various types of components so as to balance each other. Monumental buildings anchor central sections as well as boundary areas, providing visual interest with changes in height and drawing the eye across the terrain; these imposing markers are offset by the sunken basins of the many ornamented ponds, also spread around the property in a manner that, while seemingly randomly placed, seem to punctuate the dryness of the hillsides at just the right points. While a visit to the *Garden* provides a consistent string of visual surprises—including, regularly, initial confusions between the real and the fabricated, a hallmark of postmodern spaces⁴—as well as consistency in pictorial iconography achieved through the connections provided by his personal imagistic vocabulary, the sense of balance achieved by Buch across so many diverse creations is unmistakably the result of an almost visceral personal relationship with the landscape that has been developed over years of living and working on site. His art not only has come to encompass the existing site of the *Garden*, but has pushed the spatial limits of that site,

forming a self-contained physical world that goes far beyond the pictorial representations of invented spaces created by most artists. At the time of my last fieldwork visit in 2014, almost a dozen buildings and hundreds of animals and figures populated the mountainside site of 3.5 hectares. And Peter Buch continues to work.

MANUEL FULLEDA ALCARAZ (B. 1933), *CASA DE LAS CONCHAS*, ROJALES (ALICANTE)

One of eight children born to a subsistence farmer, there was barely even a thought of educating young Manuel. It was assumed that he would help the family however he could, as early as he could, so he never attended school and never learned to read or write. He worked in an astounding variety of jobs over the course of his lifetime: by the age of six, he was winding filament for fishing wire; then he shifted to pounding hemp fibers so they could be twisted into twine for baskets and shoes, laying tracks for the railroad, harvesting crops, working in a cotton factory, plucking chickens, and picking grapes. He worked hard, and between all of the jobs, despite their generally low pay and menial nature, he was able to save a bit of money, so he purchased a house in Rojales in 1974, toward the top of a steep dead-end street near the outskirts of town. After he finally retired around 1993, he would occasionally go to the sea, less than four miles away, and one day, seeing the thousands of shells tossed up by the waves onto the beach, he began picking them up, thinking that perhaps he could sheathe the walls of the house with them instead of undertaking the periodic regular drudgery of painting or whitewashing.

The façade of Fullede's house is now completely covered in shells, most of which he collected himself from the nearby beaches – or cleaned after his family's meals of mussels and other seafood. He is obsessive about covering all surfaces; the lower portions of the balustrades, for example, are as carefully sheathed in shells as those surfaces that are more clearly visible.

But Fullede's house is particularly notable not only for the intensity of the shell wall covering, but for the series of six terraces, each on a slightly different level, that adorn the upper reaches of the building. It is rare to find a rectangular space, as the building as a whole conforms to the topography of the hillside, so each of the terraces is also an irregular polygon in shape. The height of the terraces—higher than most other buildings looking out across the urban landscape of Rojales—and the intricacy of their balustrades, particularly as one looks from one side of the house across to another, create an almost Baroque density that appears to visually vibrate in the heat of the southern Spanish sun.



Manuel Fullede Alcaraz, *La Casa de Conchas*, 2011.

The *Casa de las Conchas* enabled this hard-working illiterate son of poor peasants to not only surpass his humble and unremarkable origins, but to become a local celebrity, visited by outsiders, included in tourist promo-

tions,⁵ and publicized on the internet. And although he retains his modest demeanor, he is clearly delighted by visitors' interest, and proud of how he has changed the life of his village, as well as his own.

JOSÉ MARÍA GARRIDO GARCÍA (1925-2011), *EL MUSEO DEL MAR*, SANLÚCAR DE BARRAMEDA (CÁDIZ)

Art environment builders articulate different motivations for why they began to build, but few can be pinpointed as clearly as that of José María Garrido. A sailor who fished off the southwest corner of Spain, he was traumatized in 1959 when his friend and coworker was dragged off their ship during a storm and was lost at sea. Although he had spent his life linked to the sea—like the majority of Sanlúcar's residents at that time—from that moment on he never again touched the sea. It still held his heart and tugged at his spirit; he walked beside it, he collected its detritus from the shore, but he never ventured onto another boat, never fished from nor swam in its waters. The disaster of his friend's abrupt death resulted in a shock too immense to attribute to fear, too visceral for him to want to "get back on the horse." It changed his days, his work, his attitude: it changed his life.

To pay homage to his friend and to show respect and deference for the sea, he decided to dedicate his life to creating a museum. This museum, housed within a derelict building constructed in 1503, would be replete with treasures that would tell the stories of the sailors who worked the seas. And the objects that Garrido would collect would bear witness to their tales, would memorialize their lives, and would help him to work through his grief.

At its most expansive, Garrido's *Museo del Mar* "*Las Caracolas*," so named in reference to the 80,000-plus conch shells used to ornament the interior walls, revealed not a single space left unadorned; the effect was furry, pulsating, animated. Each room within the *Museo* had a unique feeling, yet was aesthetically and conceptually unified by the intense over-ornamenta-

tion of maritime abundance. Among the displays were over 250 historical photographs of local scenes; there were also some truly valuable and historic finds, including coins, ceramic vessels, fossils, and metal implements, all collected from the nearby shores. Many were annotated with captions or proverbs in the style of old-time history museums, written out in Garrido's fluid script. Placards describing ships' voyages and listing the names of the crews—particularly those who perished at sea—plaintively recounted the perils of the waters. On the rooftop terrace of the house Garrido built an extraordinary ship-like installation, complete with sailing masts, captain's bridge, and “cannons” to ward off those who might approach the museum with unscrupulous intentions.



José María Garrido, *El Museo del Mar*, 2009.

During the later years of Garrido's life, the city council tried to purchase the museum in order to tear it down, as they wanted to use that increasingly

valuable land to construct apartment buildings. He resisted until the end, wistfully describing his museum as a child that he would never betray. But after his death, the municipality had its way, and the site is no longer extant. The *Museo del Mar*, conceptualized early on as a monumental undertaking, grew through accretion and accumulation to become a powerful and compelling shrine, bearing witness to the life and creativity of its author, who opened his most personal and most private collection of objects, reflections, and principles to his family, his friends, and his city. And although the *Museo* is now closed, José María Garrido himself never forsook his project, for as one of his posted signs on the rooftop read: “*El arte es un veneno que te obliga a seguir hasta la muerte* - Art is a poison that forces you to follow it until death.”

MANUEL GARRIDO VILLALBA (B. 1926), VILLATORO (BURGOS)

Although Garrido had little formal education and his early years were filled with a variety of menial jobs—among others, he was a potter (for a time serving a formal apprenticeship in this vocation), a goatherd, and a harvester of the fibrous *esparto* grasses widely used for a range of domestic and occupational functions—he seemed to have a special talent for nurturing plants. He carried this skill with him throughout his life, as he worked as a gardener and, later, as a forest ranger, safeguarding the national and regional forests of his homeland. He was always a prodigious worker, rising early and outpacing his co-workers with his energy. He was also a dowser, locating not only flowing streams and springs, but also lost items; in addition, he was able to diagnose illnesses, and he was known as a healer, as he treated those illnesses with the herbs he grew.

Garrido had never had any training in working with stone, but he had wanted to do so since his early apprenticeship with the potter, so after purchasing land in 1974, building a house and planting gardens, he began gathering stones from local fields or from the ruins of old buildings. In-

spired by their shapes, he began to chisel away at them, never sketching out in advance how the work would develop. Using the simplest of picks, chisels, and mallets, his primary subjects were the birds, animals, trees, and human inhabitants of the plains and forests, as well as religious figures and several self-portraits. With his characteristic tenacity and massive capacity for labor, Garrido estimates that he created some 4,000 sculptures, all of which are installed and displayed within or on the high walls of his property. In addition to the freestanding works, Garrido installed and ornamented several monumental tableaux, using ladders and simple scaffolding to build up three discrete monumental arches over his garden paths, as well as ornamenting the rooftop and façades of his garage with a spectacular multi-layered accumulation of carved stone animal, plant, symbolic, and human forms.



Manuel Garrido Villalba, 2010.

Garrido's work with found, created, or altered objects illustrates one of the quintessential components of art environments: work with such materials enables a process of creation that develops additively and organically, without a preconceived plan. Working additively does not require formal architectural designs or engineering calculations, and it allows for improvisation as new concepts arise, materials become available, and time passes. Choice of medium is therefore crucial to support this manner of working, and utilizing found objects – whether natural or post-industrial – enables the artist to proceed as slowly or as quickly as materials can be acquired and time and energy can be maintained. It is also a good fit for many creator-builders of art environments, whose participation in a wider cash society is often minor (and occasionally negligible), as even the smallest fragments can be put together to realize an extravagant and monumental whole. These pieces can also be used to create all kinds of nonstandard shapes, a further imperative for creators whose forms rarely exhibit geometric rigor.

In about 2008, Garrido finally gave up working with stone, as it was becoming too hard for him as he aged. Nevertheless, he continues to carve wooden figures, and is making more time to care for his garden. Even as he slows down, he is doing more than many men half his age, and he is pleased and proud of the industriousness with which he has led his life.

JOSÉ GIRALT (B. 1925), LLERS (GIRONA)

Born in Spain's northeast autonomous community of Catalunya, Giralt exhibited significant artistic talent as a young boy, so continued his elementary education with rigorous classical academic training from the renowned art school in Olot. But he could not find work after graduation, so he spent his entire working life in southern France as a tile-setter, thus avoiding the terrible war years and the following "years of hunger" that plagued Spain in the mid-decades of the twentieth century. After his retirement, he returned to his natal village for the summers and, in 2006, began to ornament the

exterior of the family home. Most of the adornments are fully three-dimensional: colorful and somewhat stylized images from daily life (local birds and animals), history (medieval warriors, Spanish artists), and legend (dragons, witches, and even Robin Hood). He works quickly and intensely, and as the exterior has begun to fill up with sculptures, he has also begun to attach painted scenes on tiles to the façade – again, heroes from history and legend, animals, and flowers.



José Giralt, 2010.

Unlike some of the other creator-builders of art environments with whom I have worked, Giralt – reflecting his early art training – prepares to make his sculptures by first sketching fairly detailed drawings, including measurements, of the works. After the small ink drawings are finished to his satisfaction, he scales them up to full-size, using pen and marker to draw out the designs on the insides of unfolded recycled corrugated cardboard

boxes. But after these careful preparations, Giralt leaves room for his creativity to unfold, as he responds to the requirements of the media: there are typically small but significant structural as well as decorative modifications to the work between the initial ink drawing and the final three-dimensional result.

Working every day as long as he is able, Giralt estimates that he can complete four or five major works each summer in Llers, working mornings and evenings when the sun's force is not as strong. He uses simple tools: trowels, brushes, scrapers, and small plastic basins for the concrete mixture, working in small batches: he wishes he could work all day, he says, but it is impossible, not only because of the physical toll that working in the full sun would take, but because his concrete dries too fast and would crack. "My days pass and I do not even realize it," he says, taking great pleasure in the work he is doing.

José Giralt spent forty years away from his homeland and his native tongue in order to earn a living for his family. But although he worked in another trade all that time, he never lost sight of his interest in and practice of art, creating functional—although highly decorative—works of furniture as well as small paintings and carvings to adorn his home. And now, hale and hearty in his mid-eighties, he has moved to another genre entirely, a genre that lets him share his work with the public, whereas before all of his work had been privately held and enjoyed. He is back in his natal home, speaking his native tongue, creating artworks that express his pleasure in his surroundings, his history, and his homeland.

FRANCISCO GONZÁLEZ GRAGERA (B. 1935), *EL CAPRICO DE COTRINA*, LOS SANTOS DE MAIMONA (BADAJOZ)

When Francisco González Gragera began the construction of the *Capricho de Cotrina*⁶ next to his stonework business in 1988, he envisioned the site as a new and extraordinary country home for himself

and his family, and an opportunity to explore his expanding interests in sculpting natural forms. On the outskirts of a village in a rather isolated part of western Spain, the site is adjacent to an older thoroughfare, so attracts a number of visitors who are drawn off the road by the organic crenellation of three towers, sheathed in bright tiles affixed in a random but formally balanced exemplar of *trencadís* [often described as *picassiette* mosaic] composition.



Francisco González Gragera, *El Capricho de Cotrina*, 2012.

Fronted by an undulating fence of vertical finials thrusting upward into the Extremaduran sun, the towers and accompanying domes melt down into asymmetrical cylindrical shapes, pierced with an assortment of abstractly-shaped windows and limned by a curvilinear exterior staircase that provides fine views of the complexity and meticulous craftsmanship of his artistry. In contrast to the products of his decades-long vocation—flat marble and granite floors, façades, and even sober geometrically rectilinear headstones—his architectural/sculptural *Capricho* flamboyantly celebrates the curve. Sinuous lines and organic contours characterize

González's sculpture and architecture, and even the footprints of the house and garden structures rarely, if ever, manifest a straight line. The curvilinear essence of the construction is not related to the topography, as the site is generally flat; rather, it reveals the emphasis the artist places on unapologetically celebrating the fluidity of form.

González's *Capricho*, surely, is linked to aesthetic fantasy and personal aspirations. It also links to the natural and man-made worlds: local topography and vegetation are well-represented, but so too are the fruits of the local laborers—the olives, the grapes, the sunflowers, the wheat, and even the acorns that are eaten with such gusto by the hogs that will be processed into the renowned *jamón serrano*. Yet beyond this is the awareness that his architectural whimsy is also tinged with painful memories, represented by the small loaf of bread that symbolizes those postwar years of starvation across Spain and the deprivations of the wars. His sensitivity to those events—viscerally understood at both an individual and a cultural level—coupled with his personal campaign to prove to others that he is worthy, that he is special, also underlie his impetus for construction. He is working for himself and his family, but also to share his efforts, his aesthetics, and what he believes is important with others, passersby and locals alike.

Unfortunately, by the mid-2000s, the artist's growing renown provoked a battle with the local municipal offices that for almost ten years appeared to be an existential threat to González's ability to complete his constructions as he had envisioned. At the time that the work stoppage was mandated, he was in his mid-seventies, and he worried that if the impasse were not quickly resolved, he would soon no longer be physically able to climb a scaffold or a ladder to continue work. While the municipality claimed the dispute was about urban planning codes and permit requirements, at its heart the dispute seemed to be a fundamental power struggle about which entity had the dominant right to define the parameters of art within the community. González had acted on an individual basis to design and develop his project, working privately without government support, spending little money, and not deferring to the laws or the pronouncements of the local authorities. In this way, he had excluded the city from exercising power in this realm; resisting this de facto power transfer, city officials took other paths to wrest it back.

Ultimately, the old administration was voted out of office in spring 2011, and the new government realized that they could use González's *Capricho* to the town's advantage. So the aging but still agile artist is now back at work, and looks forward to finishing his house and spending the rest of his life enjoying the fruits of his labors: opening the site for public visitation during the day, but closing it for the personal enjoyment of his family at night. "Imagination can't be purchased," he affirms. And now once again able to give free rein to those images of his imagination, he is working intuitively and improvisationally to, as he declares, make "the magic of dreams become reality."

DIEGO LÓPEZ MARTÍNEZ (B. 1964), *LA MONTAÑA AZUL*, CABEZO DE TORRES (MURCIA)

Born into a lower-class family, López's father died in a motorcycle accident before he was one year old. His mother, a devout Catholic, favored her older son, and younger Diego's resulting feelings of shame and insecurity eventually developed into an intense hatred for her and, indeed, for all women. He left home and school as soon as he was able, and began to work as a gay hustler. He became seriously addicted to drugs; he robbed, begged, and turned tricks, traveling around the country in a state of what he called "complete disequilibrium." At 23, he had his first divine revelation, and came to believe that he was the reincarnation of Jesus Christ, so he began calling himself The Prophet. Although he continued to be involved in sex for hire, drugs, and crime, he believed that he needed to pass through this period of acting like the Antichrist in order to be later reincarnated as Christ himself.

To focus his positive energy, he began to clean up the summit around his neighborhood, painting the rocks blue with glossy enamel, bestowing supernatural and even mythic properties to this color. He also began painting other elements around the summit—including the myriad dovecotes placed

there by neighbors—and built up rocks in the form of a medieval castle. Predictably, many of his neighbors reacted with shock and dismay, judging he was crazy and that his painting was a preposterous travesty. His mother and her fellow parishioners in the Marianist church began to collect signatures to have him incarcerated in a mental institution, so in order to avoid such confinement, he began traveling again, resuming his life of debauchery. Yet he still believed that he had the ability to judge humanity, and that it was his responsibility to unmask those he considered to be frauds. First on his list was the Catholic Church and, in particular, the Virgin Mary, who he loudly and repeatedly denounced as a prostitute.



Diego López, *La Montaña Azul*, 2011.

Around 2009 he moved to a cave overlooking a beach on Tenerife, and became increasingly agitated and aggressive in his attempts to convince people of his true identity as Jesus Christ. As of this writing, no one has heard

from him in around four years, and his current whereabouts – or even the answer to whether he remains alive – are unknown. In the meantime, the painted Mountain remains behind both as his gift to his community and as a provocation that flaunts and questions the cherished religious beliefs of that community in a way that continues to annoy the residents. Perhaps he will return again some day, clean up the garbage on the summit, inveigh against the Church, discomfit his family and neighbors with his perfidy and his erratic behavior, and pick up his paintbrush. Perhaps not. And if not, the paint will flake in the hot sun and gusty winds of the heights, ultimately returning the *Blue Mountain* to its original color, slowly erasing the visual manifestation of López's visions as it stills his voice.

JOSEP PUJIULA I VILA (B. 1937), *EL POBLAT SALVATGE/EL LABERINTO I CABANYES*, ARGELAGUER (GIRONA)

Completing his formal education at age 13 in the La Garrotxa region of northwestern Catalunya, Josep Pujiula i Vila became a metal turner in a small local factory. Not sufficiently challenged in his job, he looked to entertain himself in his free time, so he constructed a shelter for an amphibious motor scooter he had designed and was storing on a neighbor's property on the outskirts of the village of Argelaguer. He built the shelter from saplings gathered from the nearby river, and then, rather obsessively, began to expand it. He added numerous small cabins, animal enclosures, bridges, and ultimately a three-story dwelling, all completely fabricated with scavenged materials. But by then his work had been discovered, and the municipality forced him to dismantle the structures, as he had built too close to the electrical wires overhead.

Undaunted, Pujiula began weaving the flexible young trees into enclosed passageways, each slender branch tightly wired to the next. Over the next 20 years he extended them into a turning, twisting web with dead-ends, multi-level ladders, and hidden doorways. At its 2001 zenith, it comprised

seven towers soaring 100 feet high over innumerable bridges, shelters, walkways, and a spectacularly complex mile-long labyrinth. The increasing numbers of visitors were enchanted; Pujiula grinned when people asked if they could enter, chuckling that the real question was whether they could also figure out how to leave.

Visitors' enjoyment of his creation ultimately became a crucial stimulus to Pujiula's continued efforts. Yet despite this success, a new freeway was planned to be routed directly through his site, and in 2002 he was forced to demolish and burn this entire second incarnation of his construction, despite outcries from Spain and abroad.

Undaunted, he began anew in 2003, in a nearby location. Soliciting concrete and steel "extras" from road workers, Pujiula created a cascading fountain ornamented with stone and steel sculptures, some of which kinetically move thanks to the water flowing from the drainage pipe installed underneath the new freeway. Adjacent to the fountain, he next built an intricate new labyrinth, enclosing steep ascents, numerous dead-ends, and trick walkways, as well as several new towers that stretched as high as those earlier demolished. For a few years, the municipality, finally beginning to realize that his enormous construction was bringing positive energy and tourists to the town, left him alone, but after Pujiula suffered



Josep Pujiula i Vila, *El Poblat Salvatge*, 2010.

an injury in early 2012, they insisted that he dismantle all of the wooden constructions. At that time he was not willing to fight them again, so he did so, nursing the idea that he would retain the concrete and steel sculptures and cascading fountains, and that these components would immortalize his work. But then, in 2013, the agency in charge of water demanded that he remove all of these constructions as well; with this, finally, the community stepped in to challenge this mandate, backed by international petitions.

As of October 2014, the municipality and county government finally announced that they would take over the guardianship of the fountain area, and they designated Pujiula's environment as a local heritage site (*Bé Cultural de Interés Local*). While they have installed railings and insist that visitors stay on designated trails (a requirement most often honored in its breach), at least the remaining artworks are being preserved. And, in the meantime, Pujiula is working on two separate sites just slightly west of the fountain area. Most impressively, he is hollowing out a labyrinthine cave, ornamenting its cliff face with pictographs representing his life; it will ultimately serve as the final resting place for his ashes.

In late June/early July 2015 Pujiula was flown to New Zealand by an international consortium that underwrites the International Award for Public Art. As one of seven finalists chosen from 125 exemplary projects worldwide, and representing all of Europe including the Russian Federation, Pujiula's 45-year construction of the labyrinths and cabins at Argelaguer received an award of special distinction at the honor ceremony, celebrating the tenacity of his efforts, the durability of his work, and the immortality of his name.

MAXIMO ROJO (1912 – 2006), *MUSEO DE LA HISTORIA Y DE LA VIDA*, ALCOLEA DE PINAR (GUADALAJARA)

Máximo Rojo was one of eight children born to a family of subsistence farmers in Cortes de Tajuña, a tiny village that by 2009 was home to only

thirty-three inhabitants. His father died when he was six and his mother was left to care for the children. Rojo never had the opportunity to attend school; he helped in the fields starting at age seven and by age fourteen was in charge of a flock of sheep. He did not learn to read until he entered the military at age eighteen to comply with his required service, and he taught himself from a scholastic encyclopedia that emphasized geography and history. In retrospect, it appears that this was the spark that shaped his worldview and inspired his interest in communicating to others what he had learned.



Máximo Rojo, *El Museo de la Historia y de la Vida*, 2008.

Although he had never before evinced any interest in art, Rojo began building a “museum” with a sculpture garden on the site of his fruit orchard after he retired in 1979 at the age of 67. Working quickly and feverishly, he ultimately packed over 300 discrete figures, animals, and forms into

this small, irregular plot of 819 square meters, once on the outskirts of the village but now sandwiched between several newer two- and three-story apartment buildings. The impact of this sculpture garden is overwhelming: hundreds of these monochrome figures, animals, and objects are crowded together with no apparent sense of organization, so that contiguous works might provide a reference to events that happened centuries apart, or mythological or literary figures might be installed next to bona fide historical characters. He defended his efforts by inscribing a Spanish proverb on the entrance wall and on more than one of his pieces: “*Obras son amores y no buenas razones* [I do what I do for love, and I do not need another reason].”

Constructed from unpainted concrete over steel wire, sticks, or a found object infrastructure (including ceramic pots and soccer balls), in general Rojo’s craftsmanship was poor and he seems to have had little understanding of a suitable way to construct works so that they might withstand the rigors of the cold, humid winters and hot summers of Spain’s central plains. During my first visit, only two years after Rojo’s death, the field had already begun to take on the look of a surreal cemetery, with concrete body parts scattered on the ground and many of the works in a marked state of deterioration. Although some of this was certainly a result of vandalism, there is no doubt that the rapid decay of the site is also at least partially due to the artist’s unknowingly careless fabrication and assembly of the works.

His works run the gamut of local figures and scenes, including animals tilling the soil and at least two self-portraits of the artist and his wife. There are also well-known historical figures, such as Christopher Columbus, Magellan, the royals Fernando and Isabel, and El Cid; literary references, including Don Quijote and Sancho Panza; representations of animals and birds; and many religious narratives, including Adam and Eve, Noah’s Ark, a Nativity scene, and the Last Supper. More conceptual works were created as well, such as the three figures representing *Fe*, *Esperanza*, and *Caridad* [Faith, Hope, and Charity] at the entrance to the site, enhanced by textual admonishments for visitors to abide by the Golden Rule and treat

each other well. Several large architectural-like structures are also on display. Taken together, the varied sculptures—often labeled with anecdotes or exhortations, numbered as if they were chapters in a book, and identified with metal wire or carved inscriptions—range in size from several inches to several meters, and provide a universal encyclopedia of what he believed to be essential popular knowledge. And although the works were, at least at one point, organized thematically according to the encyclopedias from which Rojo learned to read, the overall impression is one of chaotic excess.

Rojo’s artwork was disparaged by the local community during its development, and the village has now closed his “museum,” although one may ask at the city hall for entrance, which is occasionally granted. In 2008 the village toyed with the idea of developing a “tour” of local art sites (the *House of Rock* by Lino Bueno is also within city limits), but the economic crisis of more recent years effectively stymied that idea. With each passing season more works degrade or are vandalized, and there is no existing plan to either open the garden to visitors or to address the severe conservation needs of the sculptures.

JOAN SALA FÀBREGA (B. 1942), SANT JOAN LES FONTS (GIRONA)

Mason and stonecutter Sala had a small collection of vintage automobiles, and when his village scheduled a fair in conjunction with its French sister city, they included a photograph of him washing his cars in the publicity for the fair. When he saw that photograph, he decided to carve a sculpture of himself in that pose: “Being a mason, I knew stone,” he said, so he just started sculpting without having had any previous training. His neighbors’ response to his work was so positive that from that moment on, he says, he has been sculpting. In addition to the stone sculptures that he hacks out from the local basalt or from imported marble, placing them around his home or in the garden across the street, after a trip to Barcelona where he saw Antoni Gaudí’s Parc Guell, he also began to fabricate works

on a base of concrete, ornamenting them with ceramic tile or glass *trencadís*. While certain sections of this *trencadís* work are primarily figurative and decorative, other areas are more narrative, with phrases, dates, and identifying labels laid into the walls with broken tiles and pieces of glass.



Joan Sala Fàbrega, 2005.

Necessarily somewhat stylized in response to the requirements of the material, in general Sala's work with tile is of higher quality—conceptually as well as technically—than his carved stone sculptures (although, as he works, the quality of these also continues to improve). The broken tile pieces are laid evenly, with great attention to maintaining equidistant placement, but they are also cleverly used to visually reinforce such forms as clothing folds or waves in hair styles. Too, the *trencadís* covers some of the awkwardness manifested in those sculptures that were carved in a subtractive manner out of stone. Now retired, he works every day to realize images he draws from maga-

zines or books, and revels in his new identity as not just a mason, but as a sculptor. “There are those who call me the Michelangelo of the Garrotxa⁷ [and others who call me] a Gaudí of the Garrotxa,” he says with pride; he has immortalized these words by inlaying them in *trencadís* on the high towers of the Sagrada Família that rise up the eastern side of his home, and by placing himself facing Gaudí looking up at his own sculpted version of the famous Barcelona temple.

SERAFÍN VILLARÁN (1935 – 1998) WITH LUIS MIGUEL FERNÁNDEZ AND YOLANDA VILLARÁN LÓPEZ, *EL CASTILLO DE LAS CUEVAS*, CEBOLLEROS (BURGOS)

Serafín Villarán, former machinist and welder, was a romantic, and from the time he was a child, he had had a secret dream: to build himself a castle, with turrets, crenellations, and a dungeon or two for good measure. So, when he found a small, barren piece of property in the little hamlet of Cebolleros, located about halfway between the provincial capitals of Burgos and Bilbao, a property useless for agricultural purposes due to the centuries-old caves that had been dug deeply into the dirt, Villarán bought it immediately. He later told his wife that he was going to use those caves to create a wine storage area, hiding his more ambitious plans so that she would not think he had lost his mind.

Villarán saw in those caves the base of his dream castle and started to fix them up, excavating when necessary, shoring up walls, and repairing the vaulted ceilings. To save money on construction materials, he collected flat stones from the nearby rivers and, as the walls started rising beyond what would have been needed for a mere *bodega*, he had to reveal his secret goals. And, then, the reaction of neighbors and family was swift and harsh: they were convinced that he was crazy. But within five years, after he had gathered, stored, stacked, and cemented over 550 tons of round river stones and had used more than 14 tons of cement, they began to think that perhaps he might actually realize his dream.

As he progressed, Villarán learned the extent to which he could manipulate the stones and the cement. For the vaults, the spiral staircase, the walls, the round turrets, and the sentry towers, he began by creating a wooden jig or armature to shape the space. He then filled them in with layers of the river rock and cement, and once the shapes had set, the jigs were removed. A subsequent coating of cement was laid on top to fill in any gaps in the mortar and to provide a smoother surface, and then the stone faces were

cleaned up with a wire brush and sulfuric acid. As Villarán had always intended the castle to be a home, the interiors were outfitted to comfortably serve this function. So while the floors, walls, and ceilings are all stone, the effect is not harsh; rather, it is hospitable and almost cozy, due, at least in part, to the rotundity of the river rocks and the warmth of their color.



Serafín Villarán, El Castillo de las Cuevas, 2010.

For twenty-one years Villarán worked on the castle, and for fourteen summers he was helped by his son-in-law, Luis Miguel Fernández, his daughter Yolanda's husband, an electrician and mason by trade and an artist at heart. But, as the castle reached the top of the fourth floor arches, and without having designed or delineated any of its upper level interior spaces, Villarán suddenly died at the age of 63. In another situation his construction project would have languished, unfinished, but Fernández had worked too long with Villarán to just let the dream die. Helped by Yolanda, the couple return

to Cebolleros each summer, and as they adjust the castle, modify it, and add to it – they have already completed the fifth floor living areas and sixth floor open air terrace – they are leaving their own marks onto what will, soon, become the family's true

second home, livable and comfortable, yet also a remarkable architectural treasure that is a living monument to one man's childhood dream.

As they reflect the artist's interests, history, concerns, and attractions, developing over the course of a lifetime, it is easy to understand why art environments are so complex. As a rule, they are neither completely comprehensible nor clearly viewable from a single perspective; what may at first seem rather chaotic or disordered will often evolve, after multiple viewings from multiple perspectives, into a patterned, rhythmic milieu that is akin to those gestures found in improvisational jazz.

As we physically enter into and explore the constructions, we complete the artworks as we also begin to understand the time-based element that is central to their essence: unlike a painting that is in process until it is finished and is then studied and understood solely on the basis of that final product, these sites are constantly evolving at the same time that they are constantly complete. This, then, helps to shape our understanding of why these sites are so compelling: interactively using all five senses, we become swept up in an appreciation for the totality of the oeuvre, and in so doing we open ourselves up to the wide range of influences upon, inspirations for, and manifestations of each aesthetic act. Thus through this contact – indeed, through this collaboration – we can better appreciate the drive and the determination, the passion and the pride, which have informed and inspired these spectacular and singular spaces.

Note: As I am now beginning my research into additional art environments around Spain, I ask those who may have knowledge of sites that were not covered in the original *Singular Spaces* volume to contact me at jfh@cruzio.com. All suggestions are welcomed!

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ENDNOTES

1. *Forms of Tradition in Contemporary Spain* proposed a “continuum of traditionality” between iconically traditional folk arts and more idiosyncratic expression such as that of art environment builder Josep Pujiula. Published in 2005 by the University Press of Mississippi in collaboration with San José State University, this book received the Chicago Folklore Prize in 2006.

2. By then, J A Ramírez’s book *Escultecturas Margivagantes*, had been published; the editor/author and his efforts were of great help to me, and I mourn that our correspondence and mutual assistance were cut short by his premature death.

3. *Singular Spaces: From the Eccentric to the Extraordinary in Spanish Art Environments* includes a preface by Laurent Danchin and a foreword by Roger Cardinal. Co-published by Waterford, UK: Raw Vision; Aptos, CA: SPACES; and San Jose, CA: San Jose State University, 2013. Pp. 596, and CD with 563 pages, 1,306 photographs in the book, and 4,179 photographs and 44 site plans in the CD.

4. For a further analysis of this concept, see Stephen Williams, *Tourism Geography: A New Synthesis* (London: Routledge, 1998).

5. In 2000, Fullea’s house was featured—along with the renovated windmill and the Archeology Museum—as Rojales’ submissions to Valencia’s international tourist convention, FITUR 2000. <http://servicios.laverdad.es/servicios/especiales/fitur2000/alip48.htm>.

6. González Gragera’s nickname “Cotrina” was also used by his grandfather, a shoemaker.

7. Equivalent to a county demarcation, La Garrotxa encompasses the area around Sala’s village, with its seat in the nearby town of Olot.