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Josep Pujiula i Vila's Labyrinthine Environment

Jo Farb Hernandez

San Jose State University, Jo.Hernandez@sjsu.edu

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Josep Puji

By Jo Farb Hernández

LABYRINTHINE ENVIRONMENT

For almost twenty years, a spectacular art environment rose alongside a curve in the Fluvià River in northwestern Catalonia. Nestled among the medieval villages, this fantastic, sprawling construction, known locally as *poblat salvatge* (wild village), at once harmonized and collided with the well-worn stones, deep valleys, and verdant dormant volcanic cones of its surroundings. Seven soaring towers, innumerable bridges, shelters, walkways, stairwells, and, above all, a labyrinth more than a mile long comprised the most extensive incarnation of the labors of Josep Pujiula i Vila. The entire intricate construction covered about two-and-a-half acres of land, and the towers soared to almost one hundred feet, jauntily capped by Catalan flags and banners. It had been the world's best jungle gym, the most unaffected open-air sanctuary, the most devilishly enjoyable maze—the “Sagrada Família of Art Brut,” in a Madrid newspaper's appropriate aesthetic and conceptual reference to one of Spain's most recognizable architectural treasures, the Barcelona cathedral designed by Antoni Gaudí.



ula i Vila's

Eastern side of labyrinth, 2000



Josep Pujula i Vila, 2000

Early Work

Josep Pujiula i Vila was born on May 31, 1937, in the village of Argelaguer, a tiny hamlet tucked into the foothills of the Catalan Pyrenees in Spain's northeastern corner. Leaving school at age 13, Pujiula became a metal turner in local textile factories and married in his late 20s. Although working long hours and spending time with his wife and, soon, a baby daughter would seem to provide sufficient activity to fill a young man's days, Pujiula wanted to do something exciting, entertaining, and yet edifying, with the "maximum possible action and in the fresh air."² Unlike creators of art environments who have constructed their monuments to retell local histories, comment on social or political issues, or glorify religious belief, Pujiula had no initial intent other than to entertain himself and occupy his free time. Builders of such environments rarely conceptualize the entirety of their labors in advance, and Pujiula was no exception. In fact, his earliest projects were not even architectural or sculptural but a variety of imaginative, retrofitted aquatic and all-terrain vehicles. Specifically designed for self-amusement, conveyances such as his amphibious Vespa were a natural outgrowth of his machinist background, and were developed over a ten-year period.

A chance discussion in which a friend offered Pujiula the right to ride his horses tempered but did not put an end to these activities; although Pujiula enclosed an arena in which to run and stable the horses, he also bought another motorbike for when he tired of horseback riding. Pujiula built a *rancho* for the horses at the edge of a small pond formed naturally by a spring known as Font de Can Sis Rals, whose clear waters were caught and held by the slow meandering of the shallow Fluvià River. Although the property was owned by the family of the mayor of Argelaguer, with their home contiguous to the site, Pujiula decided to make a mud-and-stick dam to create a nicer swimming area and to pipe some of the spring water out for a natural shower. Ignoring any problems that might predictably arise from his trespassing, he mulled over potential improvements to this beautiful area and decided that bringing in some

ducks would add to the charm. He soon realized, however, that the ducks would need to be protected from their natural predators, so in the early 1970s he constructed a little building where the ducks could eat and grow.

Pujiula scavenged wood from the surrounding area and improvised the little duck shed without sketches, plans, models, or permits. Indeed, he had to keep everything well camouflaged so that the mayor did not become aware of these illegal "improvements." After an accident with one of the horses, he decided to give up on them completely, to "dedicate himself only to the ducks, and to construct a park." Immediately thereafter, his efforts expanded exponentially; he began to work a couple of hours after leaving the factory each day and five hours on Saturdays.



As Pujiula's construction grew, it became visible from the road, and people began stopping by to see what he was doing. He added a goat, pigeons, chickens, geese, and quail, each species with its own safety enclosure. "I continued to construct more cabins," he said, "now with one excuse, now with another." With the enclosed animals and the pristine pond, the site began to achieve some degree of local renown. He added a little cabin assembled from scavenged materials and then a hanging bridge across the duck pond between the cabins on either side of the water, with yet another small house on top of the bridge itself. Publicity about his constructions appeared in a local

magazine, significantly increasing his audience.

A friend of Pujiula's soon offered him truckloads of unneeded doors, windows, tables, and other wooden objects from a building he had purchased. The wood and fixtures formed the basis for Pujiula's first building for humans on this site. He rigged up a way to level the floor, utilizing two old electric-line posts as a base for support, and developed the structure into a three-story house. He built extemporaneously: "[W]hen I began one thing, I never knew how it would end up. I always worked by improvising with the amount and type of wood that I had." Pujiula added a deck and an area for outdoor cooking, and his wife, daughter, and friends would come out on weekends for a swim and a barbecue. Not surprisingly, the owner of the land soon heard about what Pujiula was doing and came to investigate, but contrary to Pujiula's fears, he encouraged further construction efforts. With this nagging concern relieved, Pujiula continued on: At its most expansive, the environment consisted of twelve small buildings of locally gathered or scavenged wood, roofed with heather branches.

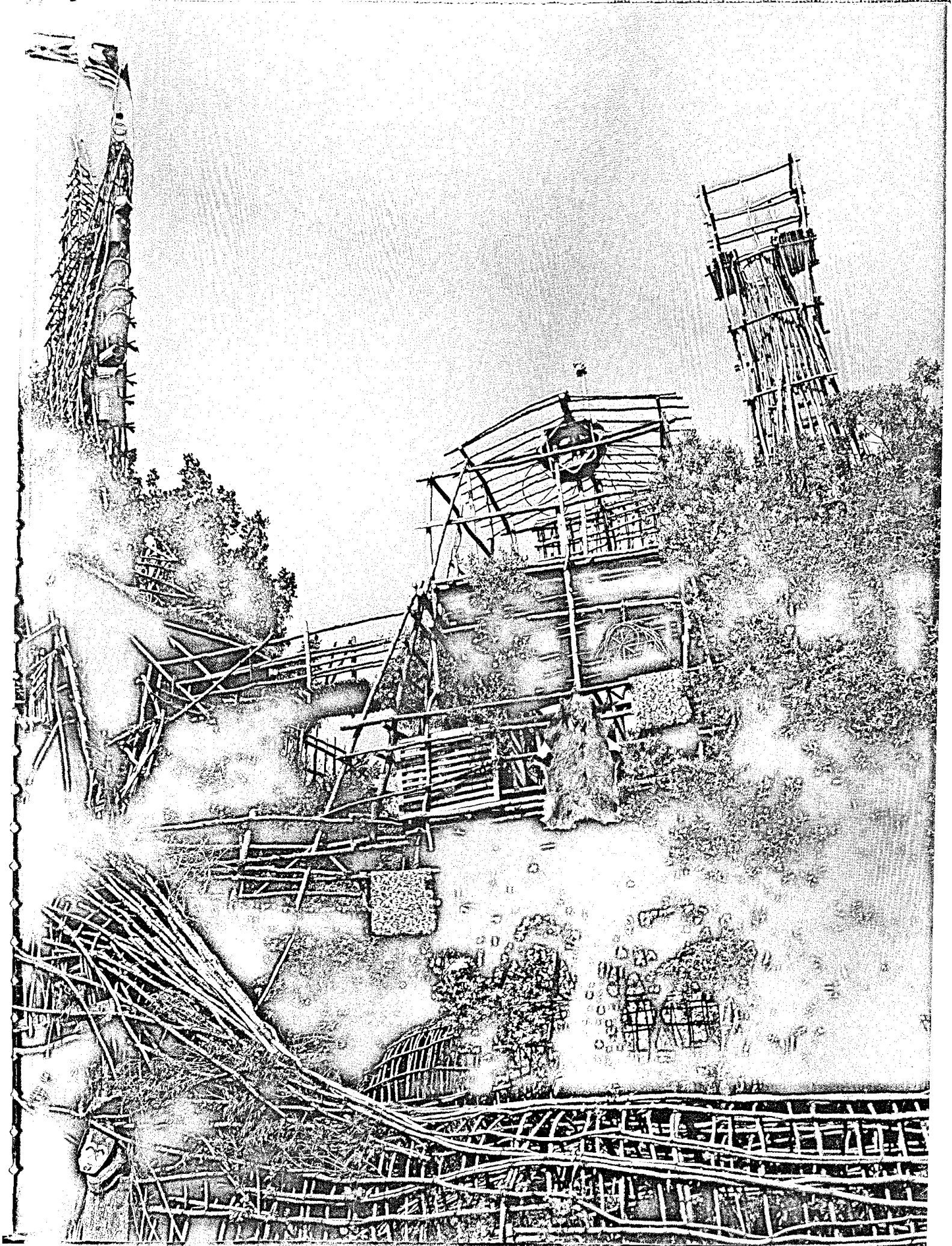
As more and more people learned of and began to visit the park, and he saw their pleasure in his work, Pujiula started constructing new amenities specifically with the visitors in mind. He added a covered picnic area with tables and benches that could comfortably accommodate twelve people, balancing several hammocks above. Groups of young people would come with their guitars and linger for hours.

Happy at the increasing numbers of visitors, Pujiula decided to install a donations box so that people who wanted to leave a few coins for the continued maintenance of the ever-growing "attractions" could do so. Because he scavenged most of the construction materials, his expenses were few, yet the increasing numbers of animals and his continuous building required more money than his small salary could provide. The extra funds enabled him to buy items that he otherwise would not have been able to afford, and were therefore essential to the expansiveness of his creations.³

Pujiula envisioned his first tower as a spire from which he could

Western façade, 2000

Pujiula in the process of constructing a tower, 2001



observe the surrounding foothills of the Pyrenees, above the trees where he could enjoy the sun. He built this and two subsequent towers on top of existing trees, with no part of the towers touching the ground. High on top of the first tower he installed a truck wheel; people who managed to scale the heights would bang on it, ringing it as if it were a bell.

Increasing Challenges

Visitors' enjoyment of Pujiula's efforts motivated him to continue to build. Yet along with the increased attendance came associated problems. By the mid-1980s, he began to find garbage left over from people's picnics, including beer bottles and, more disturbingly, syringes and even human feces. His retreat became a draw for "undesirables" and vagrants who, without oversight or prohibition, freely indulged in extended orgies of sex, drugs, and alcohol. Pujiula estimated that over time, more than three hundred visitors spent the night in his installation without his permission. He realized that he needed to be more vigilant about the visitors, and he soon found himself spending his time policing the area rather than enjoying himself by expanding his constructions.

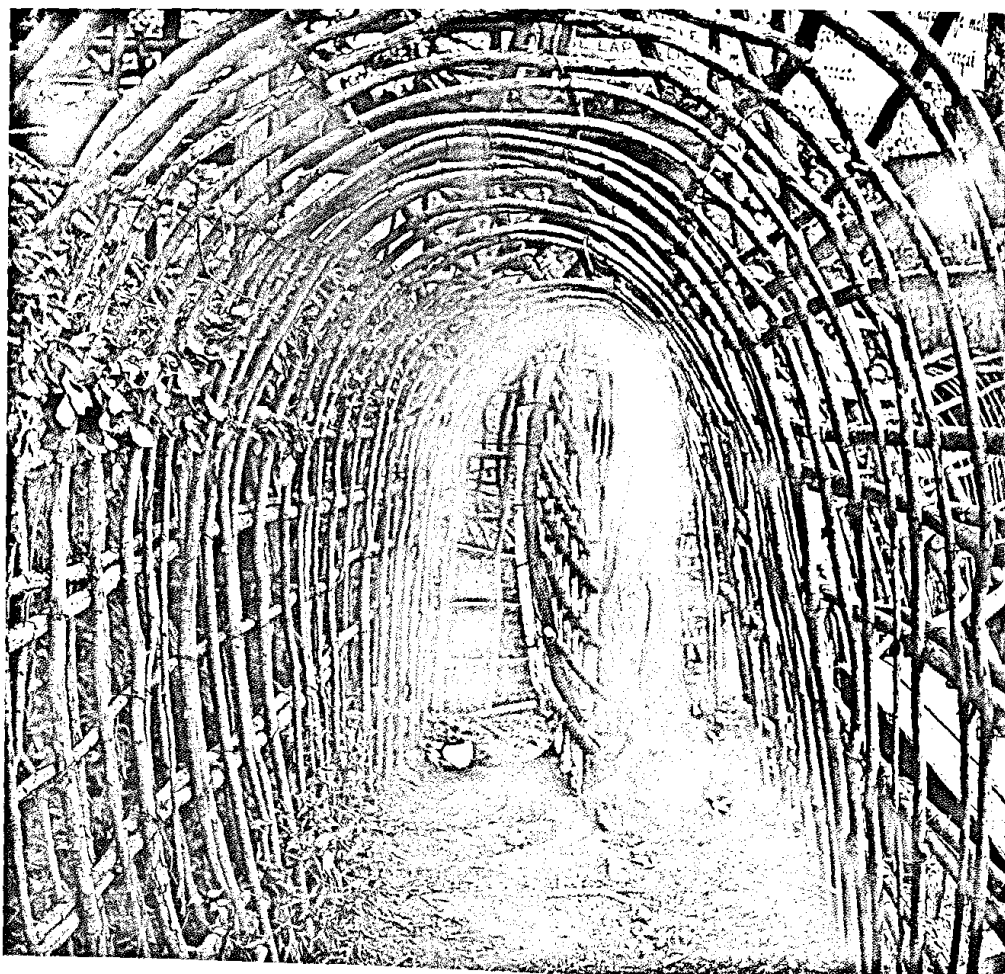
At times, Pujiula felt like he was being specifically targeted by all the "current tribes" of lowlifes: "those that don't give a damn, pill-poppers, thugs with sticks or razorblades, skinheads, hobos, and others." They stole money from his donations box and broke into visitors' cars; "good" people stopped coming to the park, wary of being robbed. Pujiula was depressed because instead of making a lovely park where people would have a good time, he had created the "perfect trap" where thieves could operate easily while visitors were viewing his constructions. Furthermore, because the undesirables had ripped out many of the niceties there, the entire site became much less inviting.

One morning, ready to continue building with the full load of acacia branches that he had cut and brought up to the site the previous day, he saw that the wood had been used to start a bonfire, which had been further fueled by a bench he had constructed for visitors' use. Pujiula surprised four young

men who had clearly spent the night at the site; startled, one pummeled Pujiula in the face before running off. Pujiula reported the incident to the Guardia Civil but was told that they could not help him because it had not happened on his property. He decided to burn the structures down and then bury them—the only way, he thought, to terminate the hooliganism once and for all. He began to do so on what he thought was the last "burn day" of the

Pujiula's problems continued. In the early 1990s, he received an official notice that his construction was dangerously close to the high-tension wires that stretched over the property and thus constituted a public danger that had to be removed. He thought he could head off these concerns by putting up a "private property" sign, and he removed a small piece of the house to lower it slightly, dismantled one tower, and made several other

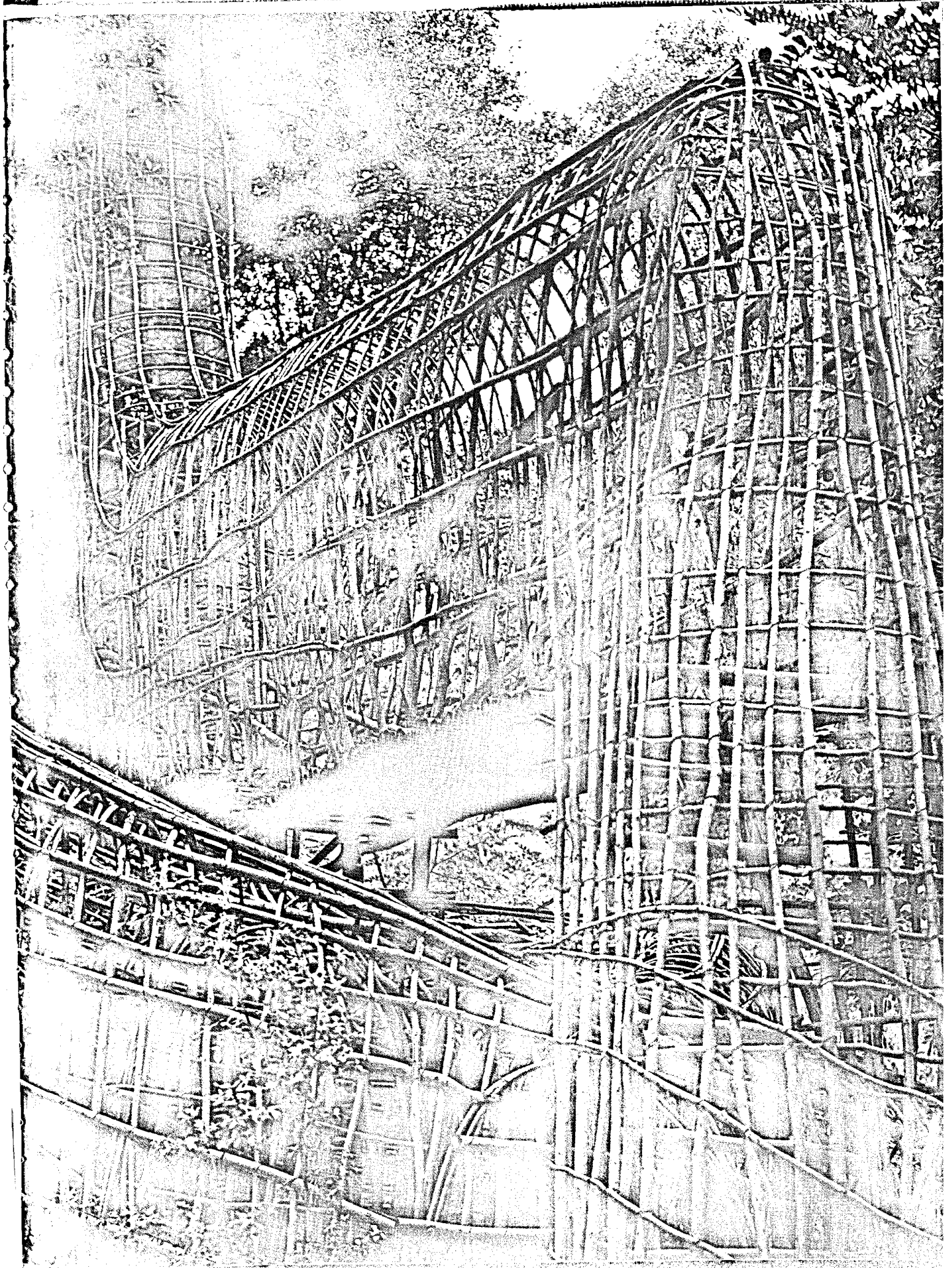
Labyrinth with three-level ladder, 2000



Interior of labyrinth with movable trick door, 2000

season, but he had miscalculated, and the police soon came and made him extinguish the fire. He told them his story, hoping to garner their help and sympathy, but again they told him that they could not help him. Pujiula began to feel as if no matter what happened, he would bear the difficulties and suffer the consequences, and that the true perpetrators of any misdeeds would escape scot-free.

minor modifications. Pujiula heard nothing else about the matter until a year later, when he received a letter telling him that he had eight days to level the three-story house, photograph the demolition, and submit the photos to the industrial delegation in Girona, the regional capital. Frustrated and disappointed, he swore that he would build no further improvements. He put up a sign to say good-bye to the many



people who had helped and inspired him: "This park has broken me. . . . I don't want people to come any more because something bad might happen to them. Thanks to the people who have visited and who have respected my work. Private property."

The Labyrinth and Towers

Despite his vows, Pujiula found that he could not stop working at the site: Eight days after demolishing the house, he was back at work. He decided to make a tunnel within the hedges to facilitate his passage to the area where he had hidden his self-fabricated vehicles in the days when he was keeping his work there secret. He gathered long, slim acacia and willow branches, bending them and linking them with wires. The hedge grew up over the entwined branches, covering the construction. Pujiula then realized that he could utilize that technique to make it more difficult for vagrants to reach the remaining towers. He decided he would build a labyrinth with a single entrance and a single exit that would serve to guard access to the heights.

Pujiula rather feverishly began adding more "tunnels," completely enclosing the pathways with ovoid arches. Some ten years after he had begun this phase of the project, an average-size adult could pass upright through some sections where footsteps had worn deep ruts into the earth, but most of the sections of the mile-long labyrinth required people to walk bent over, sometimes almost crouching. The labyrinth was complex, with intertwined paths, yet the openness of the construction enabled visitors to see contiguous pathways as well as nearby bridges, stairs, and the towers, now numbering four. The convoluted and intricate nature of the construction, however, often prevented people from figuring out how to reach adjacent points. The cagelike warrens twisted and turned back on themselves, dead-ended, and forced people up and down ladders and through doorways. It was easy to get disoriented and lost. Pujiula indulged his puckish sense of humor by placing chairs at some of the dead ends, with signs telling visitors that if they couldn't get out, at least they could rest. He found that the labyrinth generated visitors' most

enthusiastic responses, and he delighted when people asked if they could enter, chuckling to himself that the real question was whether they would also be able to leave.

Only about one in twenty visitors could figure out how to reach the towers, and as he had predicted, the undesirables were not inclined to exert enough energy to discover the access path. Pujiula had a secret way of climbing to the top that circumvented the labyrinth, enabling him to easily reach the towers for further construction. With the site more secured by the obstacle of the labyrinth, Pujiula returned once more to the heights, building the fifth, sixth, and seventh towers, again using the oak trees as a base so that none of the supports touched the ground. He strung covered walkways between sixty-five and eighty feet in the air to provide access between the highest points and ornamented the towers with found objects and gifts. The structure rose high among the supporting trees, leafy with foliage during the summer, and provided a fine view of the surrounding foothills of the Pyrenees.

The Creative Process

Pujiula worked carefully, bringing each load of raw materials up into the trees and then measuring and cutting the wood with a bow saw, dropping the scraps down to the ground to be gathered later. He filled his pockets with nails that he used to join the branches together to shape the structures, adding further reinforcement by lacing the cross timbers together with wire. As he built, he regularly pulled and prodded the supports to test for strength, adding supplementary horizontal and vertical timbers as needed. He knew that his construction was solid, he said, because he had seen fifty people at a time in the heights, and the work remained sturdy and stable.⁴ Unlike at the factory, where

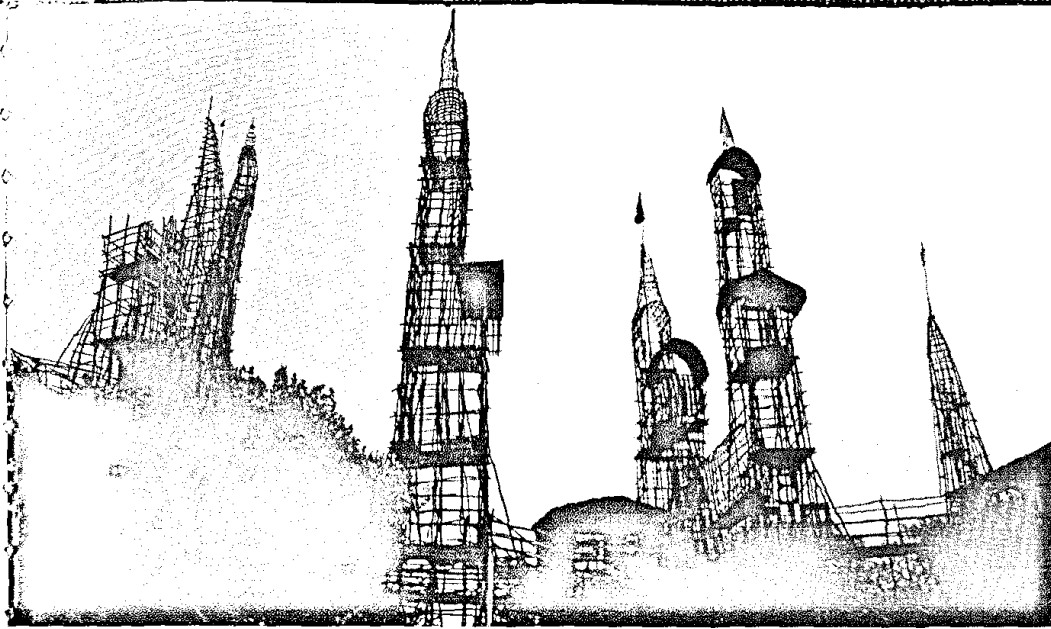
everything was controlled and planned out in advance, Pujiula's work at the Font de Can Sis Rals was completely improvised. He worked forcefully and intuitively, moving from one area to another as ideas struck him, resulting in a somewhat erratic stream-of-consciousness creation that could be appreciated best as a whole despite the interest and intrigue of small nooks and crannies and the impressive details of technical construction.

After retiring from his job in 1999, at age 62, Pujiula came to the park every morning, working five or six



Lower sections of labyrinth, 2000

hours before breaking for lunch and siesta. If the weather was mild, he often returned in the late afternoon, gathering wood from down near the river and loading it into his car, repairing, renovating, or cleaning into the shadows of the early evening. As he walked through the various parts of the structure, he was constantly checking them, picking up stray leaves or bits of garbage and noting what needed repairing or replacing. "My work is never done," he commented, but he never acted as if these ongoing labors burdened him. Like any working artist, Pujiula was less concerned with his past creations than with the work lying just ahead.



Western view of towers after removal of turret at far left, 2002

Despite the various setbacks and official rebukes, visitors from all over the world remained entranced by his efforts and provided continual encouragement through direct comments as well as notes left in his donations box, many written in languages Pujiula did not understand. He occasionally would stand to the side, surreptitiously listening in on visitors' opinions of his work as a means of getting "a more authentic reaction," and he was usually pleased with what he heard.⁵ His intense curiosity to understand the effect of his constructions on anonymous viewers nourished his muse and was essential to his continued creation.

Pujiula never thought of himself as particularly special: "I am a normal man like any other, in that in my free time I do what I feel like doing," he said. "Well, okay, I am a little peculiar. To work for twenty years on land that isn't mine, very few people would do that. . . . I do this as a hobby. I didn't start doing this for people to visit. But when people started to come it made me excited to see how they enjoyed it. . . . Everyone that is here is in their own house."⁶

Ironically, the local government officially disavowed any knowledge of the structure, a situation made particularly curious because the mayor owned the land and lived so close to the site. Following the lead of many other small Catalan villages, Argelaguer published a small tourist brochure describing its local attractions; it omitted any mention of the art environment described as one of the "largest spontaneous works of art in the world."⁷ Pujiula was

annoyed and frustrated that his work was respected and appreciated by tourists from afar but not by locals.

Additional trouble lay ahead. The Font de Can Sis Rals site, situated on a bend in a major thoroughfare, was under review by the road authorities, the electric company (due to the high-tension wires overhead), and the forest authorities, who were interested in protecting the spring and the surrounding environment. Rumors flew that the highway would soon be rerouted to reduce the dangers of a semiblind curve (dangers that were increased by drivers craning to see Pujiula's construction); the plans would take the road directly through the park.

Demolition of the Masterpiece

It is unlikely that, left alone, Pujiula would have ever "finished" with his work on the site. Yet on June 18, 2002, he began the process of dismantling the entire construction as a result of a meeting held the week before with representatives of the Generalitat of Catalonia and the mayor of Argelaguer. The mayor and his family were concerned about public safety and liability issues. Furthermore, the department of public works had indeed determined that the highway needed to be rerouted and widened to eliminate the dangerous curve; its new route would cut across Pujiula's environment, thus necessitating its demolition.

At the meeting officially confirming the directive to dismantle the monument, some discussion occurred about the possibility of preservation.

However, the complex and apparently insurmountable liability issues, exacerbated by the varied ownership, proprietary, and access claims on the property made preservation seem unattainable. In addition, Pujiula could not visualize his work without public participation and interaction—he did not want a fence around the construction that allowed people to view it solely from afar.

With an almost visceral understanding that it would ultimately be impossible to win the battle to preserve his work, Pujiula took up the simple tools he used for creation and turned them to destruction. Building the work had been an adventure, he said; so, too, was taking it down. From mid-June through October 2002, Pujiula worked every day. He started with only his handsaw, wire clippers, and hammer but soon sped up the process with a pickax and chain saw, dismantling "gracefully," hoping that at least some portion would be saved.

As he cut, Pujiula tossed the large parts of the installation over the side to the ravine below. From there, he dragged them by hand up to street level. The first week of the demolition, legions of visitors came each day to the site. As he cut down more sections, he encircled the remaining structure with a new fence built from the dismantled pieces. However, even this fence did not prevent visitors from entering and climbing onto what remained of the structure. Predictably, they picked up discarded pieces and took them as souvenirs; people wanted a tangible memento of its existence.

To save the site, an ad hoc organization, Amics de les Cabanes (Friends of the Cabins), was formed, with a website that advertised the demolition and requested international support for opposition to the removal of Pujiula's work. Letters opposing the destruction were received from interested parties from all over the world, then forwarded to the authorities in Girona as well as to the village mayor. This international outcry had little effect: On November 5, 2002, Pujiula lit a fire and watched as it consumed what was left of this monumental and spectacular art environment.

Forms

Epilogue

Now, with a straight new road through the site where the art environment had been, Pujiula still goes down to the spring every morning, and below the road he has built a small tower for visitors to climb after taking a quick swim. Along with refining and enhancing this tower and surrounding passageways, he is also working on a more private creation, a place that contains his mementos and will someday hold his ashes.

It remains to be seen whether this site will be sufficiently accessible to the public to enable Pujiula to engage in the playful yet earnest aesthetic dialogue with his viewers that had become crucial to his work. With phenomenal intensity of effort and purpose as well as an admirable tenacity that allowed him to keep working despite the repeated need to dismantle or demolish components of his work, Pujiula created a special place of his own that he eagerly shared with others. He reveled in the fact that by

Jo Farb Hernández is the director and curator of the Natalie and James Thompson Art Gallery, School of Art and Design, at San José State University, California, and principal of Curatorial and Museum Management Services. Also, she has recently become director of the national organization SPACES: Saving & Preserving Arts & Cultural Environments, based in California.

Editor's Note

This essay was adapted from Jo Farb Hernández, *Forms of Tradition in Contemporary Spain* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi and San José State University, 2005). All rights reserved. The book is the winner of the 2006 Chicago Folklore Prize. For more information, go to www.upress.state.ms.us.

Notes

1 Enric Casasses, "Bulliment del País," *El Mundo* (May 5, 2001).

2 The author conducted a series of interviews with Pujiula during the summers of 2000, 2001, 2002, and 2004. All otherwise unattributed quotations by the artist are the author's translations from interviews in Spanish or from Josep Pujiula i Vila, *L'Home de les Cabanes* (Argelaguer, Spain: self-published, 2001), which was written in Catalan.

3 Pujiula i Vila, op. cit., p. 56.

Additional items purchased with the donations included two burros, two goats, more than a hundred ducks, at least fifteen sacks of oats for the burros, two carts, and a tractor.

Encouraged by public response to the informal tours he spontaneously offered to visitors, and to document his construction activities in the event of future demolition, Pujiula

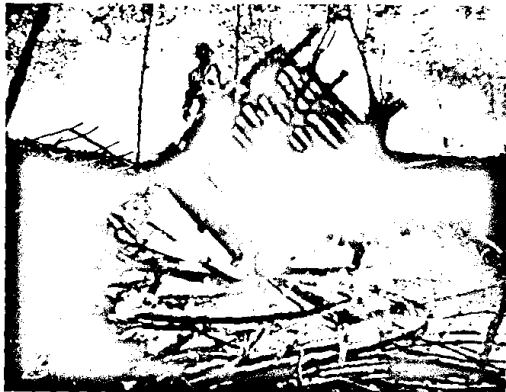
published this account of his experiences at the park with the help of the group Lluna Plena (Full Moon). The small paperback is replete with anecdotes about his adventures and some of the events and efforts that marked his time at the park. In the book, Pujiula makes it clear that the most important aspect of this project, at least in later years, was his relationship with his visitors.

4 R. Ponsati, "Josep Pujiula i Vila: L'Home de les Cabanes," *L'Argelaga* 7 (May 2000): 10.

5 Iolanda Batallé Prats, "El Tarzan d'Argelaguer," *Diari de Girona Dominical* (April 22, 2001).

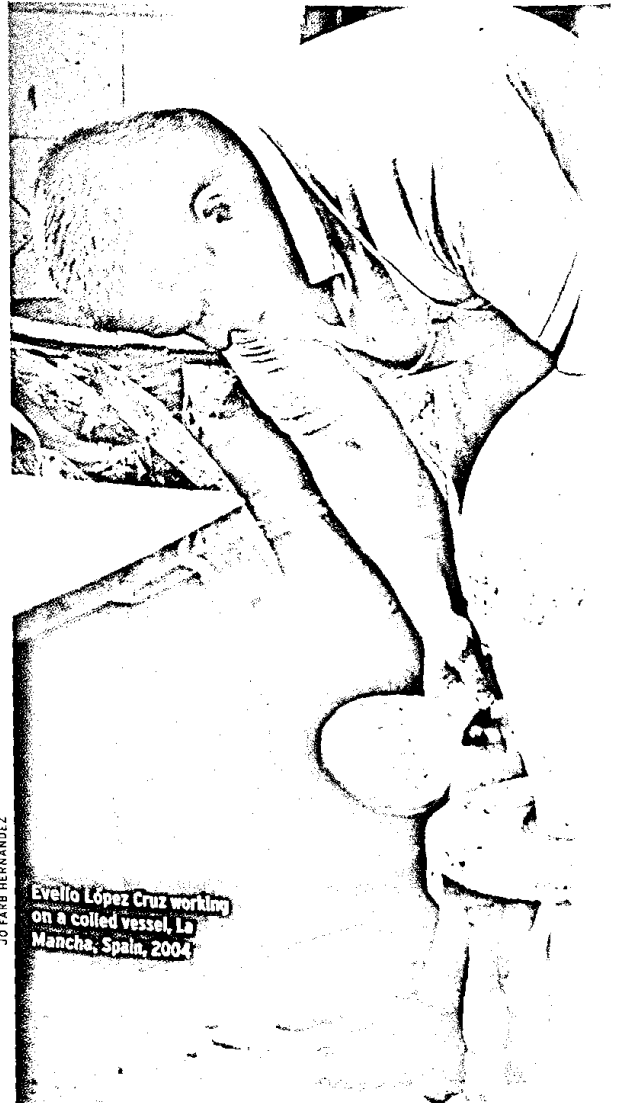
6 Ibid.

7 Casasses, op. cit.



Pujiula dismantling the last of the environment with a bonfire, November 5, 2002

inviting visitors into his space, they became part of it—as viewers, inspiration, and cocreators. Given that Pujiula's masterpiece at the Font de Can Sis Rals resulted at least partially from his being energized and inspired by public visitation and response to his work, it is ironic that the same public visitation was used as an excuse to destroy it. Further irony lies in the fact that during the same year in which Spain celebrated the sesquicentennial of the birth of Antoni Gaudí, the work of another Catalan architectural innovator was demolished in the name of progress. ★



Evelio López Cruz working on a colled vessel, La Mancha, Spain, 2004