

An Interview with Manuel Cirauqui

Akin Oladimeji

Manuel Cirauqui has been a Curator at Guggenheim Bilbao since 2016. Amongst the shows he has curated are major solo presentations of June Crespo (2024); 'Motion. Autos, Art, Architecture' (with Sir Norman Foster and Lekha Hileman Waitoller), 2022; and the largest retrospective of Henri Michaux in recent times (2018). He has also overseen the film and video exhibitions programme for the past decade at the Guggenheim, including acclaimed solo shows for Anthony McCall, Cecilia Bengolea, The Otolith Group, Metahaven, Monira Al Qadiri, Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla, and Michael Snow. Since 2020 he has divided his time between Bilbao and Barcelona, where he has been committed to the teaching of art and design in academia as the director of the research platform **einaidea**. For the 'Arts of the Earth' exhibition at Guggenheim Bilbao (5 December 2025 – 3 May 2026) he travelled to Ghana for research. Cirauqui and I had our Zoom conversation on 23 January 2026. It has been lightly edited here for clarity and details.

Akin Oladimeji: It makes sense to start off with a question about smells since we have been talking in the last few minutes about Guiseppe Pennone, whose exhibitions, I've noticed, immerse the visitor with the strong scent of bay leaves. I love how Pennone normally takes over space, both visually and with scent. But were you worried that the aroma might be off-putting? Do you think people might find it overpowering?

Manuel Cirauqui: This can happen. Let me say, first of all, that the show is very olfactive, it is very multi-dimensional. The sounds, sights, but also the touch, the smell, the vibrations, the energies, are extremely present on all levels and in all senses. But you just made me think that when you really try to be immersive in a physical way, people can feel uncomfortable. This is the case when you engage with natural elements or untreated or unfiltered agents of the ecosystem, like pollen, dust, certain aromas and certain processes, of blooming or rotting. And this does happen in the exhibition. And as a result, in the first days, we placed a sign at the entrance indicating that people with allergies to pollen or a certain organic volatile substance could feel uncomfortable and that

they should be aware. The show is not a major hazard on the allergy level, or anything remotely near that, but people could be sensitive and we should be very cautious. When something has a strong smell, people could actually react... like simply to flee! The thing is, besides things that have a strong scent... Delcy Morelos's installation (*Witch* [Sorgin] 2025), for example, has a very complex scent that is engineered by her. She works with scent engineers; she has engaged in conversations with them over the last couple of years to craft the actual olfactive atmosphere of her installations. There is one level in which the soil she uses is mixed by hand, or through different mechanical devices that she uses to prepare the dirt on site. She mixes dirt with cinnamon, with cloves, with certain spices that are important for her and reminiscent of values that are in those plants that are present in her land of birth, Colombia. That's one level, the physical mixing of dirt with spices, but there is also the application of scent to certain areas of her installation so that certain aspects are emphasised. For instance, she respects the traditions in the Amazonian communities, the traditions related to the tobacco plant, which has nothing to do with the tobacco industry. Tobacco is a plant of knowledge and power like other plants, like the coca plant, for example, in Central America. She likes to include the essence of the plant, not of a cigarette but the plant. It has many qualities that are medicinal.



Giuseppe Pennone, *Fingernail and Laurel Leaves (Unghia e foglie di alloro)*, 1989, glass and laurel leaves, courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, installation view at Guggenheim Bilbao, 2025, photo by Alex Yudzon

AO: That brings me to my next question. Are there any challenges in bringing in materials like mud and plants into the gallery. Is there any possibility of disease or infection?

MC: Materials are a challenge, but they are also the topic of this exhibition. The exhibition is really about the material transformation of artworks as something far more important and much more symptomatic of discussions around climate change than styles or forms or any other change in art, or media in the broad sense. So materials help us to observe this transformation of art in the past six or seven decades considering climate change. This is the focus and therefore it was very important for us to make the museum go as far as possible in the acceptance of and a hospitality towards materials. It's not only that there are many works which have been made on site with materials that are absolutely unusual, be it compacted soil, hay, or certain plants like moss. There are works that have been made with local soil, some of them fairly dirty and it has not been purified. Some museums have a habit of annihilating bacteria from artworks. In our case, we have tried to prioritise the reality of the works, and therefore some galleries have a specific system of ventilation so that the works can come as they are and then the particles that are volatile don't go into the other galleries and we have a way of sending it out of the museum.

Works had to dry out, and that created a smell. When the show was just open, there was a huge vase by Gabriel Chaile, which was made on site with adobe. It is a mix of wood shavings and fresh clay, and the wood shavings had to dry but it hadn't dried out when the show opened.



Meg Webster, *Volume for Lying Flat*, 2016, peat moss, green moss, soil and galvanized steel wire mesh, 55.9 x 149.9 x 207 cm, courtesy of the artist and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, installation view at Guggenheim Bilbao, 2025

So everything was very smelly. But going back to the other question, there are works that don't come with, let's say, unusual materials, but they have been treated unusually. There are some works that incorporate, for instance, elements of stone or even cement or concrete. But the concrete is mixed with mud in ways that make the concrete unstable. So, some of the works address the Anthropocene by breaking the stability of materials used by humans. The exhibition is very challenging on the material level, but that is exactly the point and that was the challenge that we took on as the theme of the show. We wanted to demonstrate that shows like this can happen, that they're possible.

AO: The show is brilliant in that respect. I don't know if you know the work of Otobong Nkanga, who works a lot in this field. Do you think a group show is a better way to tackle this theme than a solo show for someone like her? What are your thoughts on that?

MC: Otobong Nkanga is a major artist; I really admire her work. She had a recent solo exhibition in an important museum in Spain, in Valencia's IVAM (Institut Valencià d'Art Modern).¹ And she has had major shows recently, and won awards. There are other artists whose work I admire but they are not in the exhibition. My admiration is not a contradiction in that sense. The show itself is a configuration of conversations amongst the works. And those conversations were also informed by conversations with artists with previous work. Just to give you an idea, I've done maybe three or four exhibitions in recent years on this very topic, but I did not bring those artists back into this exhibition. I plan to do more shows with this orientation because I don't think I will be ever capable of alienating myself from this concern anymore. It is somehow irreversible, and Otobong Nkanga and other artists are very, very present in my thinking. Accidentally, major artists like Nkanga are not in the show, but that doesn't imply anything about their importance or about the show being incomplete, because the show will always be incomplete. An exhibition like this will always be completely partial and circumstantial, and also site-specific. If I had done this show in a territory like Portugal, it would have included other artists. Also, my travelling is limited. I am aware of what it means, but I do sometimes travel for research. I've done some research in West Africa, and I came across the work of Frederick Okai in central Ghana. The conversation we had at his studio in Kumasi brought me to include his work, which was sent by boat to Bilbao from Ghana, and so on and so forth. Sometimes the conversations themselves produce the circumstance. I try not to think too much about it as if I was an anthropologist or a historian; I am simply an interlocutor. The show is trying to document changes that could be found anywhere in the past decades, anywhere that art is being made. I think it resonates with these preoccupations. I definitely look

¹ 'Otobong Nkanga. Craving for Southern Light' was at IVAM in Valencia 13 July 2023 – 7 January 2024

forward to the opportunity to work with artists like Otobong Nkanga, and many others, because these questions are inexhaustible.

AO: I have interviewed her and been following her progress, so I know this is a major part of her practice: caring for the environment, that kind of thing. There was a group show I covered recently, which she was part of, that also looked at the colonial, extractivist treatment of the environment.² But maybe a group show makes more sense in a way. It's more kaleidoscopic: it gives more scope for seeing a variety of perspectives on the same issue. Could we talk about the genesis of the show? I'm assuming it was your idea initially.

MC: Yes, certainly. Let me say, to connect both questions, Guggenheim Bilbao has been proactive in terms of innovation in museum sustainability, and also sustainability as an important topic in the exhibitions programming. That is how I came to imagine a show like this and propose it to the previous management. This show has been in the works for the past two and a half to three years. It was in conversation with Juan Ignacio Vidarte, the founding director of the museum, that the show was initiated. The most important thing is that I am very aware as a curator that there are many shows themed around climate change, sustainability and regeneration happening, but also postcolonial reparation, climate justice and climate debt. All these aspects are present in the exhibition, but the exhibition tries to take a singular approach. When establishing the fundamentals of the show, I wanted to make a singular exhibition while being very much aware that this is a major museum with a lot of space. We have devoted its main spaces to this exhibition – that is, 2,000 square metres in the main galleries. Some of them are massive spaces and so the idea of approaching a show like this, it had to be aware of the planet and operate on a planetary scale without being 'global' in a negative way but 'global' in a generalising and extractive way. It had to be, in that sense, diverse without being multicultural in a superficial way; it had to be sustainable without being rhetoric or performative about it. All these things were taken into account.

As a result, we designed an exhibition where the artists and the works are potentially very connected to the territory and to the issues that directly affect the Basque territory, a place with strong ancestral traditions. It is a territory that many local Basque people consider a colony of Spain. Its language is 4,000 years old, but it is also a territory that has been heavily exploited by Spanish, international or even local industries, so it is damaged territory in many parts. It requires reparation. Therefore, the Basque nation is very sensitive to migration issues, to colonial issues, to solidarity amongst people who have been colonised. Independence movements or nationalistic movements have always been listened to in the Basque country, as they're seen as part of the same struggles. All these things are very present. A lot of works have been made with Basque agents, refabricated

² See Akin Oladimeji, "'The Land Sings Back' at Drawing Room, London", *Third Text Online*, www.thirdtext.org/oladimeji-thelandsingsback, 10 November/16 December 2025

with Basque materials and sourced in the Basque country to minimise travel. The colonial questions appear in works from artists, either from Africa or from Latin America, more Latin America than Spanish. Colonialism has a broader and deeper history in Latin America, but also because we have better knowledge of the ecosystems and the situations due to this common language that allows us to communicate very easily with artists in Colombia, Argentina, Mexico, as you see in the show.

AO: Yes, that is clear.

MC: There is no air shipping in the exhibition for any of the work, that was one policy we adopted. Another is that we are adapting to the works that are unstable, we are accepting that many of the works are fabricated just for the exhibition and will then be returned to the ecosystem, so they will be composted or restituted or given back to the ecosystems where the materials have been sourced. Regarding the museography, the exhibition design, we are using prototype materials – so instead of plastic, we’re using prototype materials or materials that we know are sustainable.

AO: That sounds good.

MC: There is a lot to it, but in any case, let me just give you the core formula. Ultimately, in the genesis of the show, I realised that a lot of museums are trying desperately to tell the world what to do. And in my case, I thought, well, perhaps it is more realistic, more honest and also more



Isa Melsheimer, *Wardian Case*, 2023, glass, potting soil, seeds, plants, installation view at Guggenheim Bilbao, 2025, courtesy of the artist and Galerie Jocelyn Wolff, Paris, photo by Studio Isa Melsheimer

provocative to simply accept that art has already transformed itself and that art has already documented many layers of climate change, even before climate change became the centre of all global conversations. So, to take a documentary attitude seemed more realistic and, at the same time, more provocative than to take the attitude of a pamphlet. The show simply tries to document the transformations of these past six or seven decades, from the start of when there were definite signs of a manmade alteration in the ecosystem.

AO: I have come across Claudia Alarcón's work before and I do admire it. But it is geometric abstraction. I am much more of a figurative art kind of person. Were you worried about the reaction of people like me, who, even though they love art, don't appreciate everything, including that kind of work?

MC: There is something really beautiful about Claudia Alarcón, with whom I've been speaking for the past few years, even before this show was in the works. I had the opportunity to talk to her the first time she was travelling out of Argentina, when she was, for the first time, confronting European urban audiences for her work. When I spoke to her then, I mentioned geometric abstraction to her. And she looked at me like, what do you mean by abstraction? It is a completely alien concept to her practice, in the sense that it is a Western academic concept. Abstraction largely



Claudia Alarcón, *When the fabric manifests itself*, 2024, handspun chaguar fibre, woven in yica stitch, 200 x 300 cm, courtesy of the artist and Bienal do Mercosul, photo by Thiéle Elissa

comes from ancestral art forms in the Americas, pre-Columbian art forms. The Wichí community that Claudia comes from, or other communities in that area that are part of the collective featured in the exhibition, they don't consider their work abstract at all. They think it is the absolutely direct expression of their relationship with the ecosystem and of their connectedness with that ecosystem. If you tell them it's pretty sophisticated, they'll say to you: no, my grandmother did the same thing and my great-grandmother was doing the same thing and they couldn't read or write. So, they're not abstract at all, they are basically just saying thank you to the plants that allow them to eat, to cover their bodies, to build their houses and to make their ceremonies. They're singing around the fire and they may be reproducing patterns that are in their songs as they weave. Initially, I was like you – but that response made me think: there is no abstraction here. And it really put me in my place as a European urbanite that thinks everything is culture. For them, culture is much more agriculture and the ecosystem than it is for us.

AO: So they must have these patterns, these symbols; they depict what we might think is abstract. They probably see it as figurative in a way that we maybe don't have access to because we don't have the same background.

MC: They wouldn't even call them symbols. They would call them the presence of things. They would say 'no, this is the shape of the condor because I was thinking of the condor'. It is a very direct way of approaching it – which always puzzles me. But I think it's wonderful; it teaches us things that we have forgotten for a long time.

AO: I agree. I read that Asad Raza's work is going to be supplemented by live music and other events. What does that add to the exhibition; why do that?

MC: This piece by Asad Raza has existed for a number of years. It was first presented at the 2017 Whitney Biennial in New York City. And it has always come with, let's say, these moments of live interaction around the trees. These can be performative arts, or moments of knowledge exchange amongst the visitors and invited speakers. The fact is that Asad is completely open to what we do in every context where the piece is presented. In Bilbao, we came up with one day of programming where there will be philosophers, scholars of botany or agriculture, and also traditional Basque musicians who play with instruments made directly with the materials that can be found around the trees: wood, stone, animal horns, and so on. The programme will be based on that. For me, it's not so much a supplement, but rather a continuity. There has been performance around the work since the very first moment because the care that the trees receive every day is part of the work. The work is about the public display of care for living trees, for living beings in the exhibition space. I think the piece is about that, about some sort of social sculpture where trees are the key centre, the centre of that space. The social is composed of trees and people and other species

that lodge in the trees. Some of the lemon trees that we have here have already given their lemons, they're ripe now and we have to take them. I have made lemon juice with them. That is also part of the work.

AO: A final question. What is the next group show coming up at the Guggenheim in Bilbao this year?

MC: The Guggenheim has announced its programme for the next year. I think there are some very exciting exhibitions coming up. What I can tell you about myself is that my dream is that for future exhibitions, whether mine or not mine, in this museum or others, what we have done with 'Arts of the Earth' is a step towards better exhibition-making. And a more respectful, more diverse and more deeply committed way of exhibition-making that prioritises our ecosystems and the most vulnerable aspects of our planet. What I'm really looking forward to is this sort of transformation in every way that we can approach it.

AO: Thank you, Manuel.

Akin Oladimeji is a critic, lecturer and writer. He is currently in the second year of a PhD at University College London (UCL) funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.