

Clemente Bernad

HEMENDIK HURBIL/ CLOSE ENOUGH



Hemendik Hurbil / Close Enough presents a photographic frieze on the lengthy cycle of violence that began in the 1960s in the Basque Country. Clemente Bernad (Pamplona / Iruñea, 1963) does not reject the tenets of photojournalism, but he does strenuously refuse to abandon his photographs and leave them in the hands of the media. All in order to prevent the violence from spreading.

26.10.2024 – 26.01.2025



Ajuntament de
Barcelona

[LA VIRREINA]
CENTRE
DE LA IMATGE

A VIOLENCE THAT AFFECTS IMAGES

Clemente Bernad's photographs on the Basque Conflict

Carles Guerra

Over the last thirty years, Clemente Bernad (Pamplona/Iruñea, 1963) has devoted himself to photographing the major social and political crises in southern Europe, conflicts that require long-term observation. Despite the fact that his work adheres to the fundamental tenets of photojournalism, his images rarely appear in the media that generally feed on this genre. Rather, they are to be found in self-financed publications and in exhibitions in which the documentary nature characteristic of his work is in keeping with the practices of contemporary art. *Hemendik Hurbil / Close Enough* is the latest of the projects that he has given shape to, in this case in the form of a volume containing 470 images. In this book, Bernad has brought together one of the most exhaustive portrayals of the Basque conflict, featuring photographs taken between 1987 and 2018. The exhibition deriving from this project highlights the empirical nature of this kind of photography for which the photographer must be at the scene of events, at those moments when violence suffers —as Bernad himself puts it— from a perverse viscosity.

Even though we may have seen, heard or read in real time the news of the violent incidents throughout these years, none of it will have been useful or helpful to us in arriving at an understanding of events viewed by many as in the past. The account capable of putting in order everything that took place still does not exist. Bernad's photographs aspire —despite the considerable difficulties— to re-establish a relationship with a traumatic experience, to become the object that enables us to go back to the events of a past that we wish never happened. But even though the documentary aesthetic is closely related to the history of photo reportage, photographs like those taken by Bernad cannot nor should they be seen as an exercise in information. These photographs no longer have the ability to illustrate because they are shot through with violence. They have become artifacts, objects close to the most dreadful, but that does not help them to explain what happened.

Hernani, 1996. The money box in a bar to collect money for Basque prisoners' visits, broken by the Ertzaintza.

All photographs by © Clemente Bernad.

In fact, these photographs do not provide information, something that is true of most of the images produced within the visual regime typical of photojournalism. The photograph ceases to serve the function of providing a record or evidence of events. Even so, there are photographs that comply with the requirements of documentary aesthetics, an empirical aesthetic that requires above all else direct contact with reality and a policy of access that aims to get to the heart of events. It is necessary, however, to underscore the fact that these photographs prove nothing but that the photographer was there, at the spot where the events took place. Not even the captions accompanying the images can help to characterise them as evidence of anything except proximity to the recorded incidents.

Bernad has produced a number of photographic reports over the course of his career, notable among them *Jornaleros* (Day Labourers, 1987-92), a project that illustrates the nomadic existence, precarious conditions and trade union struggle of a group of workers in Andalusia hired by the day, and *Mujeres sin tierra* (Landless Women, 1994), about the life of Sahrawi women in refugee camps in Tindouf Province in Algeria, for which Bernad won the FotoPress Human Rights Prize. Other projects include *Pobres de nosotros* (Poor Us, 1995), a collective initiative on marginalism in Europe, *Canopus* (2001), about the economic crisis in Argentina, and *Basque chronicles* (1987-2015), one of the earliest versions of Bernad's extensive coverage of the conflict that has blighted the Basque Country for decades (the version shown in the exhibition *Chacun à son goût* [Each to Their Own], curated by Rosa Martínez at the Guggenheim Bilbao in 2007 and the subject of a bitter debate that resonated among the headlines of the most conservative newspapers). That project is presented here under the title *Hemendik Hurbil / Close Enough* now that it has achieved the scale and structure of a lengthy essay in black and white images that cover the events linked to the violence and the pain unleashed, with the addition of images from *Egin* newspaper, closed down and vandalised following the judicial order issued by Judge Baltasar Garzón in 1998. An order that accused the newspaper of having links to ETA, though later, in 2009, the courts determined that its activity was legal. By that time, the newspaper's infrastruc-

ture had suffered irreparable damage, as Bernad's photographs show.

The list of projects and issues that Bernad seeks to address does not end here. In 2004, he published *El sueño de Malika* (Malika's Dream, 2004), the story of the repatriation of the body of Malika Laaroussi, a young Moroccan woman. Bernad accompanied her corpse all the way to its burial in Laaroussi's hometown following her death during a bid to reach the Spanish coast in a small boat. After this piece, he made his first documentary film, included in the Official Section of the first edition of the Punto de vista Navarra International Documentary Film Festival. That same year, he presented his report entitled *Los olvidados de Tubmanburg* (The Forgotten of Tubmanburg), a city in Liberia where 35,000 people were cut off without food or supplies due to the civil war until the arrival of humanitarian aid. However, his most recent projects investigate the difficulties of putting into practice historical memory policies in democratic Spain, a problem that also affects the Basque conflict which, despite the fact that a civil peace has been reached, is still today an issue that is insidiously exploited politically, thereby reigniting the discord. Bernad, a pure and steadfast photojournalist, refuses to allow his photographs to be circulated among the media, and with good reason. By keeping them out of what would otherwise be their most natural ecosystem, he explicitly expresses his rejection of those openly demagogic uses.

Notable among the projects that demonstrate Bernad's commitment to policies related to memory are *Donde habita el recuerdo* (Where the Memory Resides, 2003-06), an extensive work on the efforts to locate, identify and exhume bodies in graves dating from the Spanish Civil War. In 2021, he published *Do you remember Franco?*, a title borrowed from the American singer-songwriter Phil Ochs, consisting of a collection of photographs taken by Bernad about three of the most important monuments of the Franco era: the Valley of the Fallen, the Triumphal Arch in Madrid, and the Monument to the Fallen in Pamplona. It is important to note here that in 2019 Criminal Court Number Three in Pamplona sentenced Bernad to a year in prison and a fine of €2,880 for the crime of discovering and revealing secrets when he

attempted in 2016 to use a hidden micro camera and microphone to document the Francoist masses celebrated by the Hermandad de Caballeros Voluntarios de la Santa Cruz in the crypt of the Monument to the Fallen in Pamplona. The fine was covered by crowdfunding organised by the Clemente Bernad Support Platform.

Here we have proof that Bernad's images address the political and civil imaginaries in each of the conflicts that his camera focuses on. However, the most significant episode that exposes the dense web of meanings that his work navigates its way through is the events that occurred in 2007 when he showed *Basque chronicles* at the Guggenheim Bilbao. The series included the photograph that showed the two X-rays taken by the medical staff that examined the corpse of the PP councillor Miguel Ángel Blanco after he was kidnapped and killed by ETA. It should be remembered that this photograph was shown during the press release of the medical report that was covered in numerous media outlets. Following consultations with Blanco's family, Bernad confirmed that he did not have permission to show it. However, other organisations came to the view that they had to challenge the project and with it the photographer. These same bodies had no qualms about making mention of this supposedly banned image. In the same way that domino pieces fall, the attacks on Bernad kept coming in a cascade. Without any evidence whatsoever, the finger was pointed at him by associations, parties and the media close to the right, such as the AVT, the PP and COVITE, who lumped him, with impunity, in with the perpetrators.

The consequences were just as catastrophic as the scenes he had reported on with his camera in earlier years whenever he covered the news and incidents related to ETA terrorism. Even though Bernad had done everything possible to dismantle the effects of the polarisation that sets up barriers by means of perpetual violence—that self-same violence that succeeds in contaminating his images and the words used to describe them—he was condemned for pointing his lens in just one direction. However, he refutes this and explains why he decides to place himself where he does for some of his photographs. He says, 'I decided to look at *kale borroka* [street violence] by looking for another



Donostia/San Sebastián, 1991



Hernani, 1996



Leaburu, 2001. Funeral of the Ertzaintza officer Mikel Uribe, assassinated by ETA on 14 July.



Iruña/Pamplona, 1996



Donostia/San Sebastián, 1997



Berriozar, 2000. The father of Second Lieutenant Francisco Casanova after his son's assassination by ETA.



Hernani, 2015



Hernani, 2015

place from where I could observe it', and he comments that in these situations 'the photographer normally positions himself on the side where the police are because, understandably, he's protected'. But Bernad goes on immediately to ask: 'what happens when you look from the other side?' It is at this point that he reveals how hard his work is and states 'it is very difficult'. He does not hesitate to admit 'I did it and it brought me suffering from both sides', demonstrating that any attempt to repair the effects of the polarisation, the same polarisation that fans the glowing embers of violence, will rebound against those who wanted quite the opposite, the end of violence.

What this reveals is that photography generates new events other than those it portrays. These new events have often eluded or remained outside what the camera saw. The extensive press dossier that sparked the case of the photograph showing Miguel Ángel Blanco's X-rays, taken at the hospital in San Sebastián/Donostia, has become a discursive prosthesis that expands the original photograph but can no longer be separated from the image. From now on, they form a single corpus. In some instances, this debate may even replace the photograph and make the press clippings occupy the place where we might expect to see the cause of so much dissent. So much so that what was said about this image prevents us from seeing the very photograph that triggered the controversy. In any case, we will see a different image given that before we view it, we will have to wade through the thick layers added by the debate.

Consequently, the notion of an event cannot be limited to what the camera captured. Everything that is said is unavoidably attached to it. The photographic event now includes an event of a civil nature because such images have ceased to demand an aesthetic response from us; instead, they turn us into citizens and so we have to react to them. This is why it is difficult to show the photograph of the two X-rays of Blanco's skull, or to return it to the public sphere, without bearing in mind the large body of declarations that in the end drastically altered what we see in it. Images and their exploitation forge a perverse link that, paradoxically, removes them from public debate. These photographs—it could be said—become victims of a violence that does not stop at

bodies, objects and buildings, but instead transcends everything around about. In this process, the photograph can also be seriously damaged. The delirium that rules over the perception of these images twists their meanings.

Even though Bernad's portrayal of the conflict spans the period between one photograph taken in 1987 in Pamplona/Iruñea and another from 4 May 2018 in Kanbo/Cambo-les-Bains that evokes the Arnaga Declaration certifying the final dissolution of ETA, neither of these are moments in time with sufficient legitimacy to encapsulate the conflict. Time flows between them in an anomalous manner. If we compare them with the order of events in the real world, we will not find a sense of causality in the photographs. What chronology can be determined when, due to the effect of the trauma, the anchoring of the images in relation to the time of the events is broken? There is no chronological order to the presentation of earlier and later images in the sequence of photographs, nor is there a balance between the parties involved in the conflict. *Hemendik Hurbil / Close Enough* relies on a flow—one that is clearly intolerable—that blends acts of violence by opposing sides and which the photographer evokes with great sorrowfulness. He then explains that this sum of events provides no indication as to how near or far a solution to the conflict is. It should be said in his favour that in the lengthy sequence of images that make up this account, at no point do we find a temptation to convey a position of cognitive privilege about what is taking place. As the American photographer Susan Meiselas often recalled when discussing her early days during the uprising that overthrew the Somoza regime in Nicaragua in the late 1970s, at the time she was forced to admit that she was taking photographs without fully grasping the meaning of what was taking place in front of her. She recognised that only later, after some time had passed, was it possible to give meaning to the shots she had taken, prompted to a large extent by a sense of urgency and instinct.

But this absolute ignorance in the face of the outbreak of events is very often paid no heed and even refuted by professionals working in photojournalism, who claim to act and respond on the basis of a prefabricated story concerning the conflict they are covering. As if being close to the events guaranteed immediate

access to the causes. With regard to this, Bernad states 'with the passage of time and of events month after month, year after year, I became aware that my work was gradually acquiring the rhythm of the conflict, a tedious, tiring, monotonous rhythm. The grief, the lack of any expectation of a solution, the accumulated pain, the repeated disappointments and weariness were a constant source of pressure.' Words that admit without shame that the causality suggested by his photographs is utterly contingent. In short, that his photographs could be arranged in a different sequence. But it is even more telling when he admits 'there were moments when the work seemed to organise itself and other moments when it completely collapsed. Time passed in it in the same way that it passed in the conflict itself and for me.' Because among other things, violence also destroys the sense of progress in time.

Bernad's photographs show what is known in the Basque Country as a socialisation of violence through the spread of street confrontations. He talked about these images with the writer Edurne Portela, who compiled his comments in a text entitled 'Representaciones del dolor, la violencia y sus víctimas', included in her celebrated essay *El eco de los disparos* (Galaxia Gutenberg, 2016). In the transcript of their encounter, Portela credits Bernad with having broken the taboo of the portrayal of the Basque conflict, 'approaching the conflict on the basis of the gaps that he believed existed in the visual narrative of that conflict', though he paid a very high price. In keeping with this implicit criticism of more standard, essentialist photojournalism, Bernad suggests that he acted in response to the conflict 'as a witness who uses visual language to recount what is happening'. But moments later, he corrects himself and avers that perhaps he does not photograph in order to recount what is happening. It is more likely that he did it to recount what he was experiencing and how he felt. He concluded that 'what is happening is very difficult to tell with images' and he dismissed that generally accepted correspondence between the photojournalistic narrative and the evolution of events. A critical trait which, by the way, makes him an exemplary antiphotojournalist. In this way, Bernad succeeds in making the beliefs and fundamentals of photojournalism explicit without having to discredit the aesthetic imperturbably characteristic of it:

the habitual black and white aesthetic we find in the work of so many photojournalists.

Bernad's photographs show us deaths on both sides, those of the police and those of the terrorists and activists; public demonstrations by relatives in support of prisoners, and incidents in which police forces use repressive measures in public spaces such as universities; and the grief suffered by relatives of both sides, the families of terrorists and those of members of the security forces. A spectrum that no media outlet, public or private, had admitted as a representation of this terror. Even though these incidents have often been addressed from the viewpoint of opposing positions and with a significant measure of mutual stigmatisation, Bernad has insisted on breaking down these established and perpetuated stances that have only spread the violence by other means. However, photographing from the same place in which the violent sectors act, or showing the grief and pain of the perpetrators and victims without distinction, has earned him serious accusations of being aligned with the supporters of violence.

An excessive price by all means if we consider that his work has helped to keep a photojournalistic record that spared no efforts when it came to observing the pain and grief, whatever its source. Without altering the most basic principle of empirical contact with events—a principle without which this kind of photography would have no authority—Bernad has constructed a visual account that we value for its ability to break with the catastrophic effects of so much violence. A good example of this is Bernad's policy regarding faces that he employs in his compositional decisions while taking photographs and approaching people struggling with the loss of loved ones and close friends and family. This handling of the way faces appear or are hidden in his photographs emerges as the distinctive trait with the greatest capacity to structure the flow of images. If there is no face because the subjects of the scene have their backs to us, this signifies that these images are not suitable for arriving at a restitution, and neither is one even contemplated. If there are faces and they are looking at the camera in a moment of contained fear, then we have been questioned. Every time we look at this photo, we will become part of the circle of an excruciating pain. So as a result of this

policy, nobody can blame Bernad and accuse his photographs of not complying with the ethical duties that arise from visual testimony. Another indication that the event of the photograph expands in ever more inclusive circles, dragging us into the common space that demands we see in order to engage in debate. A term and condition that has been part of the functioning of our public sphere ever since the nineteenth century. Consequently, nothing that appears in these photographs can seem alien to us. This policy of the face that emanates, seemingly spontaneously, places all of us at the core of the same event.

The seen and unseen faces are also an indicator that the meaning of these images is never essential or proper to each photograph, but that it is forged in an exercise of iteration, with the result that these images and scenes portrayed are successively displayed in proximity with others. This ensures that no image succeeds in consolidating its meaning, a totally undesirable effect bearing in mind that the photograph manages to maintain the form of events or objects more or less clearly, but its meaning, affected by violence, has never emerged unscathed from its proximity to the catastrophe. Hence, not only is the life story of the people photographed important, but also the story of that portrayal that has suffered forms of vicarious violence. Perhaps all this explains why it is that in the Basque Country there is no centralised archive in which it is possible to find an agreed account of recent history, that history that coincides with the period covered by Bernad's photographs. The scattering and fragmentation of the archives in which these images would be found make it impossible to form a unified account of those dark years. Perhaps this also explains why this history of violence has been resolved into a civil peace but not a political peace.

Curator: Carles Guerra

B 19103-2024

Saturday, 26 October, 12 am
Guided tour with Clemente Bernad
and Carles Guerra.

Free entry until filled to capacity.

La Virreina Centre de la Imatge
Palau de la Virreina
La Rambla, 99. 08002 Barcelona

Opening hours: Tuesday to Sunday
and public holidays, 11 am to 8 pm
Free entry



#ClementeBernad

@lavrreinaci

barcelona.cat/lavirreina