

Gego.

The Architecture of an Artist

February 19–July 10, 2022

With *Gego. The Architecture of an Artist*, the Kunstmuseum Stuttgart is presenting its second monographic exhibition on the work of Gego (Gertrud Louise Goldschmidt, 1912, Hamburg–1994, Caracas). It was developed out of a three-year research project conducted by the Kunstmuseum, the University of Stuttgart, and the Wüstenrot Stiftung. The main goal of the research project was to explore, present, and offer educational programming for an ensemble of works by the artist that has been on long term loan from the Fundación Gego to the Kunstmuseum Stuttgart since 2017. The occasion for the transfer of the long term loan was the retrospective *Gego. Line as Object* organized by the Kunstmuseum Stuttgart in collaboration with the Hamburger Kunsthalle and the Henry Moore Institute in Leeds in 2013–14.

The selection of Stuttgart as the place to preserve and research the extensive partial estate has to do with Gego's close biographical connection with the city. From 1932 to 1938 the artist studied architecture and engineering at the TH Stuttgart (Stuttgart Institute of Technology). The long term loan provide the basis to examine the link between architectural training and artistic concepts in Gego's work in detail for the first time.

Gego's professors in Stuttgart, including Paul Bonatz, played a key role in ensuring that the Jewish student still received an official degree at the end of November 1938 and was able to flee to Venezuela shortly thereafter. Following an indirect path, Gego decided in the mid-1950s to become a visual artist. A short time later, in 1960, the MoMA in New York purchased one of her first works. Since then, Gego has been one of Latin America's most renowned women artists. Her position in the context of her time has always been described as very independent. One reason for this might be her architectural training in Germany.

The ensemble on long term loan to the Kunstmuseum Stuttgart comprises one hundred works by Gego. With eighty-six works on paper, eleven objects, and three artist's books, the loan offers an opportunity to devote special attention to the artist's graphic work for the first time. The fact that the holdings are now in Stuttgart is also of great importance since it is precisely the drawing practices that she learned here that had a decisive impact on her entire oeuvre. From the time she studied, Gego was familiar with drawing as a medium for designing, planning, and communicating. The research project thus consciously focuses on the architectural and artistic practices and content learned in Stuttgart, which trained Gego's understanding of space and urban-planning perspectives and flowed into her artistic work.

The exhibition *Gego. The Architecture of an Artist* features a total of 103 works by Gego, including objects on loan. The presentation of the works doesn't follow a strict chronological order. Instead, Gego's œuvre is introduced by themes that are interwoven with one another and influence how we view all the works. Gego's œuvre is diverse, playful, and at the same time precise. These characteristics were important guidelines for the design of the exhibition.

Gego in Stuttgart (1932–38): In the course of the research, it was possible to reconstruct Gego's entire curriculum at the TH Stuttgart as well as the content of the courses she took using in part unpublished manuscripts by her professors. The exhibition presents the few historical materials from her training that are still preserved in Stuttgart and introduces the people who were most important for Gego during her studies.

Gego enrolled in the TH Stuttgart on October 29, 1932. While a student, she was one of in total of six “non-Aryan” architecture students, according to the research documents. On July 1, 1938, Gego passed her final exam. She officially received her diploma on November 24, 1938—fourteen days after the November pogroms. Gego was therefore among the last Jewish students in Germany who obtained an official degree after what is known as the “Reichskristallnacht,” or “Night of Broken Glass,” carried out by Nazi paramilitary forces. It was only through the help of her professors that Gego was still able to complete her studies. In June 1939 she fled to Caracas via England. There she began pursuing her artistic interests in the mid-1950s.

Abstracting spaces: Sketches, drawings, and prints hold special importance in Gego's œuvre. At the outset of the 1960s she created countless works on paper as well as objects that feature a common stylistic device: “parallel lines.” This line practice can be derived from architectural drawing, in which different types of hatching are used to mark planning ideals. The individual strokes usually lie parallel to one another, designating surfaces and describing their materials and characteristics.

During the time she studied, Gego regularly attended the drawing classes of the German-Austrian painter and graphic artist Karl Schmoll von Eisenwerth. He taught his students that drawing is always accompanied by a process of translation and abstraction. Gego's works on paper often depict spatial and architectural abbreviations that indicate a preoccupation with these considerations.

Forming new geometries: In Caracas, Gego taught at the Universidad Central de Venezuela and at the Instituto de Diseño der Fundación Neumann in various “(thinking) workshops.” She was already familiar with the workshop as a place for collaborative experimentation and development, for production and exchange since her time as a student in Stuttgart. Gego herself described her teaching as technical and rational; she required her students to engage in playing with geometric shapes: “It was pure training. We were like children who were learning to count.” This sort of focus on mathematical-thinking games and geometric experiments emerged in Gego's artistic œuvre beginning at the latest in the late 1960s.

Translations: Gego's approach to translating can be seen as an artistic strategy. She always translated her creative interests and ideas in a playful manner into various media, such as from a drawing into an object, or as a shadow cast back onto the surface of the exhibition wall—as, for instance, in her group of works *Dibujos sin Papel*. These “Drawings on Paper” use projections—an important representational tool that Gego learned in Stuttgart. For architects, the

projection drawing is a central communication device to convey ideas of a building project. They help to lend shape to ideas and to anticipate the shadow effects produced by spatial bodies.

Interweavings: Gego's collaboration with other artists, printers, graphic artists, technicians, dancers, weavers, and students has hitherto received little attention. In connection with the research project, these connections could be investigated in detail for the first time.

Gego's pleasure in art developed early. In fact, according to her own account, it preceded her interest in architecture. While a student she still saw the two disciplines as standing at odds with one another. This was expressed in her acquaintance with the Jewish textile artist Viktoria Regener-Mintschina (1879, southern Russia–1949, Rottweil). Her encounters with the avant-garde artist made a lasting impression on Gego: "For me being with her was always wonderful—and dangerous! Being so much an artist, I believed I could not do that as an architect." She later united several supposedly different professions in her work; Gego was a universal artist.

Her interest in material, technology, and architecture was continuously expanded by way of her collaborations with other artists to include new artist media and is also manifested in a now little-known performance that the Venezuelan dancer and choreographer Sonia Sonoja (1932, Caracas–2017, Caracas) developed with and for Gego. A new production of this performance is being regularly staged during the run of the exhibition in cooperation with the John Cranko Schule in Stuttgart.

Gego in Caracas (1939–94): Gego initially tried working in Caracas as an architect. In her reparations file she described why, as a woman and immigrant, she was unable to gain a foothold in her learned profession—her decision to abandon it was not voluntary. She did, however, gain something positive from the loss: "Even if I have been lost to architecture and haven't been able to master life through it, it has nonetheless, certainly to an extent, shaped me." At the time when she wrote these lines, Gego was starting to become artistically active. Her interest in architecture and the associated questions about processes of creating space and inventing form can be seen in a previously little-explored group of works: Gego's art in public spaces in Caracas. Between 1958 and 1983 she created nine works in her new hometown. Today, many of these works no longer exist, have been dismantled, or are difficult to access.

The project seminar: Gego's site-specific works were examined by the curator-at-large Stefanie Reisinger during a research trip to Caracas. As part of an interdisciplinary project seminar with art history and architecture students at the University of Stuttgart, model-like objects were created that reconstruct the partially lost works in the exhibition context and highlight their characteristic features in relation to their "host architectures."

The research project was initiated by Ulrike Groos, director of the Kunstmuseum Stuttgart, Philip Kurz, managing director of the Wüstenrot Stiftung, and Kerstin Thomas, professor of art history at the University of Stuttgart.

"The Wüstenrot Stiftung is pleased and also proud that large parts of Gego's oeuvre are now publicly on view and accessible as a result of the joint research project. This state of affairs is due above all to the close integration of research and museum work. We are convinced that the exhibition and the publication will shed new light on an artist who is still too little known in this country. Gego's importance for Stuttgart will most certainly be strengthened in the long

term—a city that like Gego’s artistic impact is distinguished by diversity and creativity,” remarks Philip Kurz.

Ulrike Groos says: “Scholarly research is a central part of our museum work; after all, it allows us to make the forgotten or previously unknown visible. After several years of thorough, in-depth research relating to Gego—and building on the research on her time in Stuttgart in connection with our 2013 Gego exhibition—we are able to present essential additional insight into her career and works. This also includes a previously little-known performance that is being integrated as a living element into our exhibition. The project could not have been realized without the close cooperation with the Wüstenrot Stiftung and the University of Stuttgart, for which I cordially thank these two project partners. I am also indebted to the Fundación Gego for its support.”

“While previous literature often referred to Gego’s years of training in Stuttgart, her architectural studies have never before been examined in relation to her art,” comments Kerstin Thomas. “We therefore found it necessary to investigate the German-Venezuelan artist’s formative years in order to understand how Gego’s training shaped the understanding of space underlying her installations and drawings. The research project allowed us to clearly elaborate the character of Gego’s artistic work spanning designing, constructing, and shaping and to make it understandable for a broad audience. This sort of undertaking is not possible without the collaboration of several participants—the close collaboration between all three institutions has proved extraordinarily productive.”

With Stefanie Reisinger, an experienced Gego researcher was engaged as a member of the project team and as a guest curator. She explains: “Our unique project constellation makes it possible to not only make an important scholarly contribution to Gego research, but above all to present these findings on Gego’s multifaceted and playful work to our audience in an open exhibition format.”

In conjunction with the exhibition *Gego. The Architecture of an Artist* a two-day symposium with international art historians, curators, and architectural theorists will take place at the Kunstmuseum Stuttgart on April 7–8, 2022. The discussion will focus on the professional and social contexts in which Gego was embedded, first in Stuttgart and later in Caracas. These will be analyzed against the backdrop of the respective prevailing discourses in art and architecture and placed in relation to her artistic practice.