



TEXTE ZUR KUNST

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TEXTE ZUR KUNST – ARTISTS' EDITIONS

Art criticism has been said to be in crisis for decades, and that crisis has inevitably also affected one of the practice's mainstays: the review. Both quantitative and qualitative evidence suggest that the genre is in trouble. The number of art reviews published by legacy media has been in continuous decline. An archival survey of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung's* arts and culture section, for example, reveals that the paper ran an average of over 600 exhibition reviews per year in the 1990s; in the years prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, that number had gone down to just below 400. And in qualitative terms, we find that discussions of works of art – unlike, say, theater reviews – often eschew contentious or controversial judgments, a development that is no doubt in partly due to the increasingly precarious circumstances in which freelance art critics live and work. They don't want to get on the wrong side of potential clients; future dinner invitations are on the line, and perhaps also lucrative commissions to write catalogue essays.

In art magazines and other periodicals for which reviews are part of their core business, the volume of criticism hasn't declined as it has on the pages of newspapers. Yet the structural changes of the past 30 years are palpable here, too: carefully argued critical objections have increasingly yielded to affirmative descriptions. TEXTE ZUR KUNST examined this shift previously in its issue dedicated to the "Verriss" or hatchet job, which came out two decades ago, and more recently by shedding light on debates over art-critical methodology in which the questionable nature of universal value judgments has been a point of contention. The observation of critical timidity, of overcaution in judgment, has only become more pronounced since then, at least with

regard to the criticism of art exhibitions: in their apologetic-descriptive style, many reviews more closely resemble the exhibition booklets or press releases available by the gallery door. The genre distinctions between review, catalogue essay, and artist's portrait are rapidly being blurred.

Yet a purely functionalist perspective on the role of art criticism cannot fully explain this insight: it disregards both the instruments of art criticism and the variable and changing maneuvering room within which the review as a journalistic format operates. The transformation of the media landscape in recent years is yet another factor that must be taken into account. With the move from offline to online media, reviews are now more widely and easily accessible, and so professional critics have additional reason to exercise caution before rendering negative or controversial verdicts – not only because they work under economic constraints but also because they fear being cancelled, triggering a shitstorm, or losing their reputation. In the comment sections of social media and on blogs, meanwhile, we observe that rapid-fire evaluation threatens to supersede informed criticism. Polarizing professions of opinion not tempered by theoretical ambitions of any kind thus stand in contrast with a methodologically well-founded criticism that appears to have lost its capacity to initiate and engage in debate.

In light of the review's precarious situation, the present issue is intended to make the case for this historically specific genre and take a closer look at the various parameters that define it. What are the characteristics of a review? What can and should it accomplish, and which methods and language games does it rely on? Most basically speaking, reviews are articulations of critical

contemplation that introduce, examine, appraise, and contextualize a publicly accessible cultural object.

How their value-generating potential has shifted, in no small part due to the rise of new digital media, is the question of a roundtable conversation between Claire Bishop, Jarrett Earnest, Eva Hayward, Christian Lclair, and Eric Otieno Sumba. Acknowledging the current threats to the form as well as its entanglements in the art market, the participants nonetheless underscore the productive influence that less fast-paced publishing processes, the demand for certain word limits, and the presence of a (paid) editorial team can have on reviewers' critical thinking. Moreover, by keeping its distance from clickbait and polarizing thumbs-up/thumbs-down rhetoric, (professional) reviewing provides a space in which prevailing standards of value, questionable aesthetic conventions, and dated art-theoretical paradigms can be subjected to scrutiny. Last but not least, criticism can establish a lasting archive of those creative practices that the conventional historiography of art tends to overlook or marginalize.

Peter Geimer's contribution likewise underscores how writing reviews for publications can be productive for a writer's critical thinking. Each art magazine, he argues, implicitly comes with its own specific audience – which may compel writers to chart an unfamiliar approach to a familiar object. Assumptions about readership can also be an incentive to rethink methods or basic premises that are thought of as generally accepted. For example, Geimer claims that a reader of TEXTE ZUR KUNST expects reviews to proffer a theoretically informed discourse that zooms out from the works to inquire into the institutional, ideological, or economic frameworks in which

they're embedded. Yet the review itself, as the contributions to this issue demonstrate, is also entangled in the actions of the art market, and not only because economic considerations often preexist the object under discussion and allow it to become visible in the public sphere in the first place. More saliently, the review helps propel the generation of value: it creates a symbolic worth that, in the right circumstances, can be converted into market value.

To point up the potentials of the review as a literary form, this issue of TEXTE ZUR KUNST mostly consists of examples of the genre. But we encouraged authors to use the opportunity to reflect on the status of the review, the methods they employ, and their own role as critics. On the one hand, this brings out the rich stylistic diversity of the review. On the other hand, several writers explicitly note the specific qualities that make the form so vital to (art) criticism.

Ultimately, this issue is intended as a tribute to criticism. Reviews do not only contribute significantly to the formation of the cultural and monetary value of works of art. They also set intellectual standards for conversations within the art world and provide a platform for experimentation with theoretical perspectives, writing practices, and methodological approaches.

SABETH BUCHMANN, ISABELLE GRAW, ANTONIA KÖLBL,
CHRISTIAN LICLAIR, ANNA SINOFZIK, AND BEATE SÖNTGEN

Translation: Gerrit Jackson

Die seit Jahrzehnten diagnostizierte Krise der Kunstkritik betrifft zwangsläufig auch einen ihrer Grundpfeiler, die Rezension. Dass die Rezension in Schwierigkeiten steckt, lässt sich sowohl quantitativ als auch qualitativ beschreiben: So nimmt die Anzahl von Kunstrezensionen auf den Seiten überregionaler Tageszeitungen kontinuierlich ab. Ein Blick ins Archiv des Feuilletons der *Frankfurter Allgemeinen Zeitung* zeigt beispielsweise, dass in den 1990er Jahren im Schnitt jährlich über 600 Ausstellungskritiken erschienen, in den Jahren vor der Pandemie waren es nur noch knapp unter 400. Auch lässt sich auf der qualitativen Ebene konstatieren, dass Besprechungen bildender Kunst, anders als beispielsweise Theaterkritiken, häufig streitbare Werturteile scheuen – was sicherlich auch mit der zunehmenden Prekarisierung des freiberuflichen Kunstkritiker*innenstands im Zusammenhang steht. Man will es sich nicht mit potenziellen Auftraggeber*innen verscherzen, möchte auch weiterhin zu Essen eingeladen werden und möglicherweise Aufträge für lukrativere Katalogbeiträge erhalten.

Als Kerngeschäft der meisten Kunstzeitschriften und Periodika haben sich Rezensionen dort, anders als im Feuilleton, nicht reduziert. Doch die strukturellen Veränderungen der letzten 30 Jahre machen sich auch hier bemerkbar: Gut begründete kritische Einwände treten hinter zunehmend affirmative Beschreibungen zurück. Diese Verschiebung thematisierte *TEXTE ZUR KUNST* bereits vor zwei Jahrzehnten mit einer als „Verriss“ betitelten Ausgabe oder zuletzt mit dem Blick auf kunstkritische Methodendebatten, in denen die Fragwürdigkeit eines universellen Werturteils diskutiert wurde. Seither hat sich der Befund einer gehemmten Urteilslust, zumindest was die Besprechung von Kunstausstellungen

betrifft, konsolidiert: Viele Reviews gleichen in ihrem apologetisch-beschreibenden Duktus eher den in Galerien ausgelegten Ausstellungs- oder Pressetexten. Die Gattungsgrenzen zwischen Rezension, Katalogtext oder Künstler*innenporträt verschwimmen zusehends.

Um diesen Befund zu erklären, greift eine rein funktionalistische Perspektive auf die Rolle der Kunstkritik jedoch zu kurz. Denn eine solche Betrachtung lässt sowohl die Instrumente der Kunstkritik als auch die jeweils unterschiedlichen publizistischen Möglichkeitsspielräume der Rezension außer Acht. Auch die geänderte Medienlandschaft der letzten Jahre muss zur Erklärung herangezogen werden. So führt die Verlagerung von Reviews ins Internet und die damit einhergehende Verfügbarkeit dazu, dass professionelle Kritiker*innen vorsichtiger werden, negativ oder kontrovers zu urteilen – und zwar nicht mehr nur aus ökonomischen Zwängen heraus, sondern auch aus Angst vor möglichen Shitstorms und dem Verlust ihrer Reputation. Gleichzeitig lässt sich in den Kommentarspalten Sozialer Medien oder auf Blogs jedoch beobachten, dass schnelle Evaluierungen informierte Kritiken zu ersetzen drohen. Diese polarisierenden Meinungsbekundungen ohne theoretische Ambition stehen also einer methodisch fundierten Kritik gegenüber, die ihr Debattenpotenzial verloren zu haben scheint.

Angesichts der prekären Lage der Rezension ist es das Anliegen dieser Ausgabe, sich für diese historisch-spezifische Gattung starkzumachen und ihre Rahmenbedingungen genauer zu beleuchten. Was sind die Charakteristiken einer Review? Was kann oder soll sie leisten und welcher Methoden und Sprachspiele bedient sie sich? Grundsätzlich handelt es sich bei Rezensionen

um versprachlichte Formen der kritischen Betrachtung, die einen kulturellen, öffentlich zugänglichen Gegenstand vorstellen, wertend behandeln und einordnen.

Wie sich ihr Wert generierendes Potenzial nicht zuletzt aufgrund neuer, digitaler Medien verschoben hat, ist Gegenstand eines Round Table zwischen Claire Bishop, Jarrett Earnest, Eva Hayward, Christian Lclair und Eric Otieno Sumba. Obgleich die Teilnehmenden auf die aktuellen Bedrohungen dieser Publikationsform sowie ihre Verstrickungen in den Kunstmarkt verweisen, betonen sie den produktiven Einfluss, den Entschleunigung, Zeichenvorgaben und die Anwesenheit eines (bezahlten) Redaktionsteams auf das kritische Denken der Rezensent*innen haben können. Abseits von Clickbait und polarisierender Thumps-Up/Thumps-Down-Rhetorik bietet das (professionelle) Rezensionswesen zudem einen Raum, in dem vorherrschende Wertmaßstäbe sowie fragwürdige ästhetische Konventionen und überholte kunsttheoretische Paradigmen auf den Prüfstand gestellt werden können. Zudem kann durch Rezensionen ein nachhaltiges Archiv jener künstlerischen Praktiken geschaffen werden, die von der klassischen Kunstgeschichtsschreibung mitunter übersehen oder marginalisiert werden.

Auch Peter Geimer stellt in seinem Beitrag die Produktivität heraus, die das Rezensieren für Publikationsorgane auf das kritische Denken der Schreibenden haben kann. Unterschiedliche Kunstmagazine implizieren ihm zufolge eine jeweils spezifische Leser*innenschaft – was es den Autor*innen möglicherweise abverlangt, den vertrauten Gegenstand anders zugänglich zu machen. Auch kann die vorausgesetzte Leser*innenschaft dazu anhalten, allgemein angenommene Methoden oder Grundannahmen neu

aufzurollen. Wer etwa, so Geimer, *TEXTE ZUR KUNST* liest, erwartet von der Rezension einen theoretisch informierten Diskurs, der neben den Werken auch ihre institutionelle, ideologische oder ökonomische Einbindung thematisiert. Doch auch die Review selbst ist, so machen es die Beiträge in diesem Heft deutlich, in das Geschehen auf dem Kunstmarkt eingebunden; nicht nur, weil dem zu besprechenden Gegenstand oft ökonomische Überlegungen vorrausgingen, die ihn im öffentlichen Raum erst sichtbar werden ließen. Mehr noch wohnt auch der Rezension ein Wert generierendes Moment inne: Sie schafft einen Symbolwert, der sich unter Umständen in Marktwert transformieren lässt.

Um die Potenziale von Rezensionen als Textgattung aufzuzeigen, setzt sich diese Ausgabe von *TEXTE ZUR KUNST* fast ausschließlich aus Rezensionen zusammen. Wir haben die Autor*innen jedoch angeregt, im Rahmen ihrer Review deren Status, die verwendeten Methoden sowie ihre eigene Rolle als Rezensent*innen zu reflektieren. Auf diese Weise tritt zum einen die stilistische Mannigfaltigkeit der Rezensionen deutlicher hervor. Zum anderen weisen einige Autor*innen selbst auf die Spezifik dieser Textform für die (Kunst-)Kritik hin.

Letztlich wollen wir diese Ausgabe auch als eine Hommage an die Review verstanden wissen. Denn Rezensionen tragen nicht nur maßgeblich zur kulturellen und monetären Wertbildung von Kunstwerken bei. Sie bestimmen auch das Niveau der Diskurse innerhalb der Kunstwelt und bieten zudem ein Experimentierfeld, in dem theoretische, sprachliche oder methodische Verfahren erprobt werden können.

SABETH BUCHMANN, ISABELLE GRAW, ANTONIA KÖLBL, CHRISTIAN LICLAIR, ANNA SINOFZIK UND BEATE SÖNTGEN

LIFELINES

Amanda Schmitt on Gertrud Goldschmidt (Gego) at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York



"Gego: Measuring Infinity," Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2023, installation view

Both art criticism and art history cannot shake their curiosity when it comes to the relationship between an artist's life and work. The question of whether one can explain the other continues to linger. Amanda Schmitt addresses this head-on in her review of the Guggenheim's Gego retrospective. Gertrud Goldschmidt's biography as well as her artist statements provide ample material for exploring this question: persecuted as a Jew in Nazi Germany, the trained architect emigrated to Venezuela, where her career as an artist unfolded. Without disregarding Gego's insistence that the historical context that impacted her life did not affect her work, curator and writer Schmitt lays out a case for the connection between the artist's experience and expression.

Throughout the majority of her artistic career, which lasted from the 1950s until just before her death in 1994, Gertrud Goldschmidt refused to ascribe any meaning to her non-objective art. She also made a point not to acknowledge any part of her personal biography as exegetic toward the development of her work.¹ Despite this silence, and perhaps because of it, seemingly every critique or piece of writing on her work refers to and outlines the extraordinary transformation that happened in her life when she left her home country of Germany, escaping Nazi persecution as a young Jewish woman, and arriving as a foreign transplant in the tropical landscape of Venezuela in 1939. Perhaps it is due to the radical delicacy of her (mostly) three-dimensional work, which she refused to define as "sculpture," or to the confounding impossibility of circumscribing her practice within one "movement" or another. Or perhaps it is the dismantling of her architecture

and engineering background into something as intimate as handicraft that forces us (her reviewers) to seek some sort of grounding, some narrative to help explain or contain such a singular and vibrational oeuvre.

The retrospective at the Guggenheim presents over 200 works that illustrate the evolution of Goldschmidt's oeuvre, featuring her sculptures, prints, textiles, works on paper, and artist books. The exhibits are mounted in a roughly chronological manner that ascends Frank Lloyd Wright's iconic inner rotunda (itself an architectural feat) and are presented alongside supplementary materials that include sketches for public artworks and monuments, exhibition pamphlets, and publications – as well as a section of photographs of the artist at her home in Caracas, reflecting the curators Pablo León de la Barra's and Geaninne Gutiérrez-Guimarães's efforts to insert biographical aspects of her life in dialogue with the work.

Gego (as she was known) was born in Hamburg in 1912 and obtained a degree from the Technische Hochschule Stuttgart in architecture and engineering in 1938 – an accomplishment uncommon for a Jewish woman at the time. Determined to finish her studies, she had stayed in Germany while much of her family had already fled to England. Unable to obtain a visa to follow them, she ultimately landed in Venezuela, where she lived for the remainder of her life. The first work in the exhibition, a 1952 watercolor sketch of Caracas nestled into the El Ávila mountain-scape, situates the beginning of her artistic practice in her 40s (after marriage, a divorce, and giving birth to two children). Walking through the exhibition (which will soon travel to another architectural icon, Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Bilbao), I couldn't help but wonder what sort

of buildings she would have made if she had continued a career as an architect in Europe. Yet, an inner dialogue retorted, "Thank goodness she became an artist, as her contribution to art is as simple as it is relevant": Gego took the authoritative rationality of geometry into a lyrical world, a world of openness and possibility. During her formal training in Germany, she worked with pure forms, squares, and triangles, platonic solids, and spheres. Finding refuge in a Caribbean landscape, she hijacked elements of pure reason and pursued organicism, developing a style that was intimate, sensual, even exuberant.

After passing a sequence of representational and then abstract works on paper, the viewer encounters Gego's earliest sculptures, such as the beach-ball-sized *Esfera* (1959), which is paradoxically a sphere constructed out of several planes of intersecting and overlapping straight lines, welded out of brass rods and painted black. Just a few years further, the jungle landscape's influence begins to creep in with *Selva* (1964), an iron sculpture that consists of ten vertical elements connected via a welded base, reminiscent of a system of roots. The rods, while still structurally straight and even, are arranged amongst each other in a manner that is tangled and irregular, evoking the sense that they may represent little trees. Continuing up the rotunda, the sculptures become more minute, delicate, raw, and gnarly. In *Pequeña vertical* (1970), a handful of steel wires are grasped and enmeshed in an ensnarled form, each bent multiple times, hooking over onto itself and then upwards; some wires resolve in little eye-hook loops (a feature that becomes a distinct technique for the artist over time). This tabletop sculpture is presented alongside a group of works that are similar in scale and appear to spring to

life, as if they could simply walk, hop, buzz, or scamper off the table.

By 1969, Gego's departure from the weight and staticity of traditional forms of sculpture became evident in the ongoing *Reticulárea* series, free-hanging sculptures composed of networks of metal wires and rods that are subjected both to infolding and expansion, every joint connected by evidently handmade eye-hook loops. At this point, Gego was no longer working with the assistance of welders or technicians and was making everything by hand. The *Reticuláreas* feel light, porous, penetrable, and relate more to the haptic quality of textiles than to traditional sculpture. For *Columna Reticulárea* (1969), she uses steel wire to form repeating triangles and pyramids in space. Rather than appearing orderly by means of the progressive accumulation of these forms, it looks alive and amorphous, like a fantastical creature or insect (her late works even take on titles referring to little critters, as in the *Bichos* series from 1987–1991). Subjecting the logic of construction to craftwork, Gego established delicacy, mobility, and ephemerality using a material traditionally used for permanence, strength, and resilience. In the *Chorros* series from 1970, she went as far as to represent waterfalls using thin rods of wire gathered together, appearing to cascade or trickle down from a point in space. They are static objects, yet they appear as if vibrating. The power in this work is that space and form themselves transform into something unstable, the established conventions of elemental states of being thrown into ecstatic disarray. Through Gego's personal alchemy, metal becomes water.

Further up the rotunda are two sculptural works that relate to the *Reticulárea* series in their net-like forms. *Esfera no 4* and *Sin titulo* (both 1976)

resemble biological forms or planetary bodies: the former a sphere within a sphere (fertilization), the latter a cell splitting into two cells (mitosis). Even within Gego's non-objectivity, the acts of creation, growth, and reproduction are celebrated to the fullest degree. Perhaps one reason why she declined (throughout most of her life) to speak about her past is because she did not want herself or her work to be defined by violence, loss, and destruction, but rather by joy and creativity. The exuberance of the tropical natural world (jungles, waterfalls, insects, etc.) gives way to biological metaphors about life formation.

I would argue that the artist's ultimate achievement is the liberation of the line itself into an autonomous being. The disintegration from sculptural form (in objectively solid materials) to pure line in space (as articulated in her mature works, the *Dibujo sin papel* series²) becomes especially clear when following the progression of her oeuvre through the linear format of the exhibition. What remains constant from the early to mature works is her curiosity, exploration, and experimentation with the concept of line. Countering the common misconception that the drawings are precursors to the sculptures, the curators make clear that lines do not belong to one medium or another. Peppered throughout the exhibition are multitudinous works on paper – drawings made with pen and ink as well as with printmaking techniques such as lithography and etching – and they are especially energizing and fresh. It is this distinction and contrast between the seemingly “low” practice of drawing on paper and the “high” practice of sculpture made of metal that proves that the only consistent “medium” for the artist all along was simply “the line in and of itself.” The exhibition's



Juan Santana, “Gego installing *Reticulárea* at the Museo de Bellas Artes de Caracas,” 1969



"Gego: Measuring Infinity," Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2023, installation view

title, "Measuring Infinity," is a paradoxical nod to Gego's understanding that the line can be used to both contain and liberate, *ad infinitum*. In a 1966 interview, the artist expressed her position:

Thirty years ago, I was trained as an architect, committed to draw lines with a definite meaning, lines that determine forms or spaces as symbols of limits, never with a life of their own. Many years later I discovered the charm of the line in and of itself – the line in space as well as the line drawn on a surface, and the

nothing between the lines and the sparkling when they cross, when they are interrupted, when they are of different colors or different types. I discovered that sometimes the in-between lines is as important as the line by itself.

And stated just prior to that passage:

There is no danger for me to get stuck, because with each line I draw, hundreds more wait to be drawn. That is the circle of

knowledge with the ring around, you enlarge the inner circle and the outer one becomes greater without end.³

Rather than being constrained by the definite, Gego chose that which is infinite, without bounds.

The exhibition concludes with a series of lesser-known but equally important works on paper, the *Tejeduras*, made between 1988 and 1991 when Gego's health and dexterity were failing and she was unable to accomplish the intricate metalwork. The *Tejeduras* are paper collages using found materials sourced from magazines, advertisements, and cigarette packaging, alongside more personal clippings, including images of her own work, promotional material from past exhibitions, even calendar images from Germany. They follow a simple weaving pattern commonly taught in German kindergartens during her childhood. Aside from the aforementioned early sketches of her new home in Venezuela, the *Tejeduras* are Gego's most autobiographical works in that they reflect both her past and (then) present identities.

So I return to her biography and ask again: Why is it that all critiques, this one included, are irresistibly drawn to situating her artwork within her personal story? As I descended the spiral of the exhibition I felt as much joy in having encountered the work as the artist must have felt while making it (she was outspoken about the delight she found in making work, even describing art-making as "playing"⁴). For Gego herself, perhaps it was not the trauma of the Holocaust and the atrocities of the Second World War that informed the direction of her work. Rather, it was the radical uprooting to a new hemisphere, the adaptation to a foreign culture and language,

the formation of a new family, and the transformation of body and consciousness implied in motherhood, the abandonment of one profession to form another, or any other variable on life's divergent paths for an emigrant in the mid-20th century. Simply put, it was her own personal vitality that was most relevant at a historical moment that defined both modernity and its limits.

"Gego: Measuring Infinity," Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, March 31–September 10, 2023.

Notes

- 1 In 1977, at the time of a major solo exhibition at the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Caracas, Gego wrote a statement clarifying her position to critics and the press: "If people ask about outside influences on the work I did [...], I prefer to leave the answer to historians and scholars [...]. When I start to analyze my path, I get lost in anecdotes that may be significant in terms of my own memory but which are totally meaningless and redundant to appreciating my work." María Elena Huizi and Josefina Manrique, eds., *Sabiduras and Other Texts by Gego* (Houston: Museum of Fine Arts Houston, 1995), 39.
- 2 There are almost 40 works from the *Dibujo sin papel* series (1976–1987) where Gego uses metal wires and rods to compose floating two-dimensional "drawings" in space, without paper, as the title implies.
- 3 Huizi, Manrique, *Sabiduras and Other Texts by Gego*, 171.
- 4 Juan Downey, "Gego, video retrato" (Gego, video portrait), 1977, Archivo Fundación Gego, Caracas.

CREDITS

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