

BERTHA AND KARL LEUBSDORF GALLERY

132 East 68th Street New York, NY 10065

Gego and Gerd Leufert By Silvia Benedetti

November 2014

Theirs was much more than a relationship: Gego and Gerd Leufert represent two of the most significant artists working with abstraction during the second half of the twentieth century in Venezuela. Gego (Gertrud Goldschmidt, 1912-1994) was destined to become perhaps the most original, prestigious, and studied Venezuelan artist, and Gerd Leufert (1914-1998), also an artist, fathered the field of graphic design in Venezuela.

The exhibition *Gego/Gerd or Gego and Gerd Leufert: A Dialogue*, opened in October 2014 in the Bertha and Karl Leubsdorf Art Gallery at Hunter College in New York and the curator, Geanine Gutierrez-Guimarães based the selection of works on these two artists, intending to highlight their reciprocal influences through a series of objects produced between 1964 and 1990. The exhibition reveals shared motives in the couple's art production, such as the use of the line as a mean of enhancing the visual potentiality of emptiness in two and three-dimensional works, as well as parallel lines, knots, and weavings.

Gego and Leufert had similar backgrounds and their paths intersected in Caracas in 1952 and they would share their lives until the end. Both were trained in Germany and emigrated to South America due to World War II. Gego, born in Hamburg, graduated in 1938 from the Technical School in Stuttgart, having studied engineering and architecture. She moved to Venezuela and worked in these two fields before meeting Leufert and formally becoming an artist. Leufert was born in Memel, Lithuania (Germany at that time), and studied Graphic Design at the School of Fine Arts in Munich, graduating in 1939. In Venezuela, he became art director of a publishing house and the cultural magazine *El Farol* (1957), for which Gego, among other artists, contributed. From 1959 to 1976, Leufert was a key figure working at the Museo



de Bellas Artes (MBA) in Caracas, the same museum where Gego exhibited for the first time in Venezuela (1958). Gego's first solo exhibition at the MBA, *Dibujos recientes*, in 1961, was followed by Leufert's solo exhibition at the museum in 1962. Furthermore, both were faculty members of the School of Architecture of the Universidad Central de Venezuela and founding members and professors at the Instituto de Diseño Fundación Neumann-INCE, as well as consultants for Luisa Palaciós' engraving workshop in Caracas (later the Taller de Artistas Gráficos Asociados).

Excluding the work each of them did before they met, the origins of Gego and Leufert's artistic dialogues began in Tarmas, a small village on the north coast of Venezuela where they lived from 1953 to 1955. It was there where Leufert encouraged Gego to experiment with drawing and painting, and he introduced her to different printmaking techniques of which he was already a master. As a result, in Gego's early and figurative works, the line began to dominate in comparison to other formal elements. In relation to Leufert's time in Tarmas, he used to say that it was there where he became both "man and artist."

The Leubsdorf Gallery has an equal number of works by each of the artists on view, but significantly, it is Gego, rather than Leufert, whose works are highlighted in this presentation. Coherence and comprehensiveness characterize the selection of her objects that includes a variety of significant works from her major three-dimensional series, such as a variant of her seminal work *Reticulárea* from 1969 and a few *Dibujos sin Papel* (*Drawings Without Paper*), as well as her two-dimensional works including engravings, drawings and *Tejeduras* (*Weavings*), her latest series, which consists of weaving with

paper strips. Gego's work in this exhibition has the breadth to stand alone, and gives a sense of her entire oeuvre. Nevertheless there is a dramatic difference in the assortment of works by Leufert, which consist of one three-dimensional object and a number of drawings from different series. Here, the selection of objects does not convey to the spectator the quality and cohesiveness of Leufert's work. In fact, together they seem to suggest that he was formally disparate. Compared to Gego's work in the show, Leufert's work seems to lack any originality. This loss of imagination might be due to the difference in the presentation and information given for each artist. The works by Gego have a narrative flow while Leufert's do not, making it very difficult to connect his works in the first room with those in the second and third rooms in the exhibition.

In the following two rooms, the works by both artists employ parallel lines, weavings, and knottings, which are permanent motifs in Gego's oeuvre. Leufert's drawings included in these two latter rooms seem repetitive; they look very much alike although they are not all from the same series. This selection of works appears similar to the exhibition of drawings Leufert donated to the MBA on the occasion of *Espacios imaginarios y reales: Tintas de Gerd Leufert* at the museum in 1994. One of the few exceptions in these rooms is Leufert's beautiful 1964 drawing, entitled *Love*, which consists of a knot in thread drawn in black and red ink on white paper. Its title not only emphasizes the theme that runs through the exhibition but also unites the works. The knot is a constant element in Gego's work and that calls to mind Leufert's design, such as his "impossible designs" published in the book *Imposibilia* from 1967. The inclusion of some of these designs would have showed Leufert's design facet which is also related Gego's weavings and knottings but without making it look imitative.

Indisputably, Gego is portrayed as the winner in this exhibition. Her work provides the narrative framework in the rest of the show. Drawing is always fundamental for designers, but Leufert's selection for this exhibition excludes a great deal, as he worked in a variety of media including painting, sculpture, drawing, engraving, and photography. The lack of inclusion of Leufert's important history with graphic design in Venezuela leaves the exhibition incomplete. It would have been opportune to acknowledge what Marta Traba wrote in the article "El Maestro Gerd Leufert" about the intersections and differences of art and design. Reading Traba's opinion would have given the idea of showing at least something of Leufert's graphic designs. The series of

works *Imposibilia*, *Visibilia*, *Nenias*, *Flechas* and others do not provide any information of a brand, they were made without reference and could be define as pure aesthetic synthesis.

In the end, the curator of the exhibition presents a love story, not a true representation of their artistic dialogue. If the love story is what matters, the inclusion of a few other objects would have made the exhibition more meaningful. Leufert designed stationery and logos for Gego. The exhibition device designed by Gego for Leufert's exhibition *Visibilia* in 1966 at the MBA, the publication *Visibilia* by Leufert dedicated to Gego, and the 1990 photobook *Penthouse B*, a selection of photos taken by Leufert of their legendary apartment would have been compelling additions. Excluding design in favor of what could be considered "fine art," it would have been opportune to see the portraits they did of each other in Tarmas, while they "assumed the tropic," as well as their fascination with artists' bookmaking along with the infinite printmaking in multiple techniques each of them did.

Gego and Leufert erected three architectonic collaborations for public spaces. Including these in the gallery might have been a difficult task because of their large dimensions, but not an impossible one. Documentation about these works is easily accessible. Placing the actual *Cediaz Tower* (1967-1968) somewhere in New York would have been a better idea, perhaps while the restoration of Tony Smith's sculpture at Hunter College.

During the last two years, in commemoration of Gego's centennial, there have been more than ten Gego exhibitions abroad, including in Caracas, Sao Paulo, Paris, London, Leeds, Hamburg, Stuttgart, and New York at the Americas Society. In 2010, Henrique Faria Fine Art at 67th Street had a show on Gego and Leufert. It seems that in the Upper East Side, within a block radius and in a period of four years, Gego is the favorite artist. This neighborhood possesses what Gego lacked: "courtesan attributes and promotional skills" to show her work. A real challenge, and a worthwhile one, would have been presenting a comprehensive exhibition on Gerd Leufert's body of work. In 2014, on the occasion of his centennial, it would have been the perfect opportunity to pay homage.

[http://spacesobjectsart.org/text/gerd-vs-gego/](http://spacesobjectsart.org/text/gerd-vs-gego)