

GEGO: THE GERMAN-VENEZUELAN *ÉTUDE*

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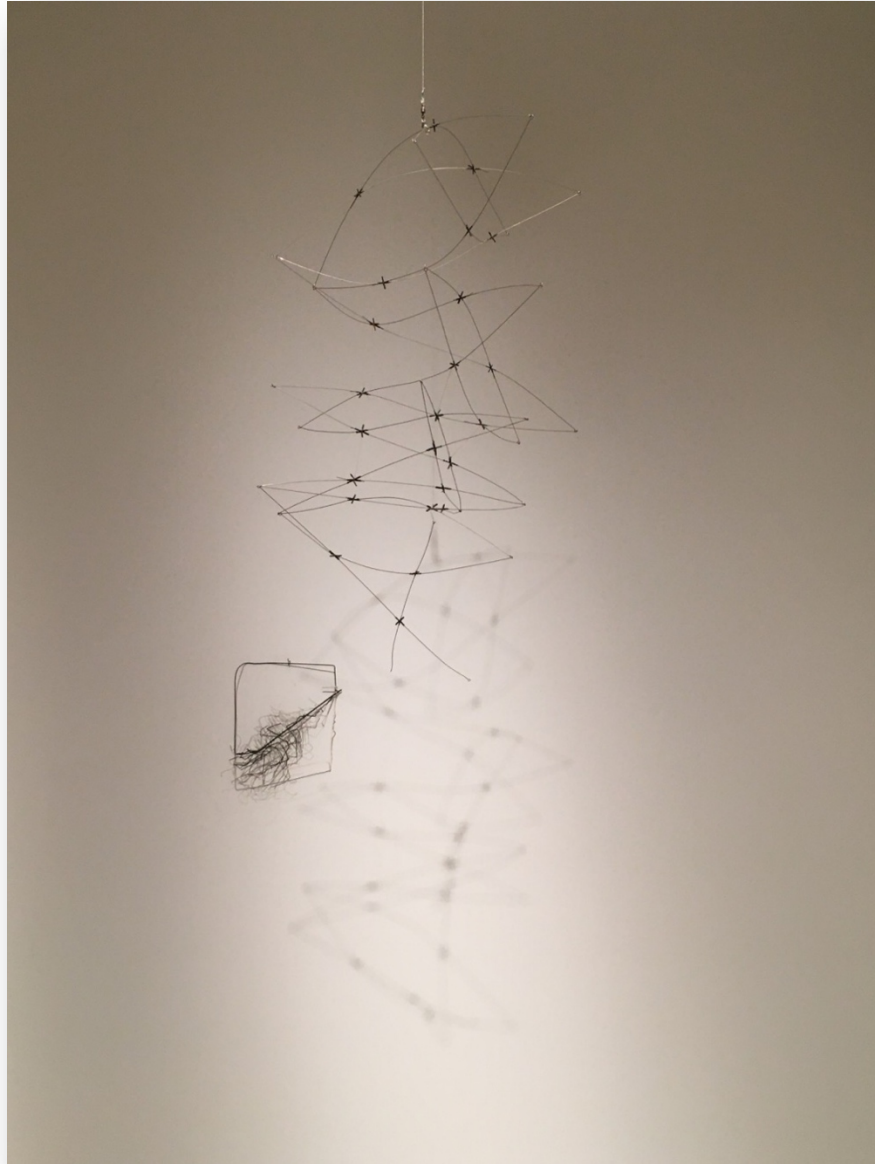


Figure 1

Gego (Gertrud Goldschmidt). *Reticulárea* (1973-76). Object number 816.2016. Museum of Modern Art. Photograph by the author.

The following card, placed on a wall behind *Reticulárea*, has sparked dozens of smiles from the Venezuelans who have wandered through the MoMA's white maze: "Gertrud Goldschmidt (Venezuelan, born in Germany, 1912-1994)." Gego, as she is known in Caracas, had her German nationality annulled in 1935 by the Nazis on the basis of her religion. Like other Jews, she ultimately landed on the Caribbean coast.

What makes one belong to a nation? Evidently, it is not what, euphemistically, has been called "the blood." Gego could have spoken Spanish with an accent, practiced German architecture or read Goethe before Gallegos, but none of that would have prevented her immersion in the movement of Venezuelan Kinetic Art from the 1960s through the 1970s. Her involvement with the movement is apparent in her paperless drawings and technical exercises, like *études*, which involve calligraphy lines with enough somber recalcitrance to completely challenge boredom.

Gego's 33-inch mobile, *Reticulárea*, hangs in the MoMA's exposition "Sur Moderno: Journeys of Abstraction." The mobile's artistic expression is far from post-WWII German art surrealism or expressionism, and synchronically apart from Venezuelan kinetic art. Whereas Soto and Cruz-Diez used lines as means to create a form, Gego's lines are, in a Kantian fashion, "means to themselves." The radical re-imagining of lines and forms breaks the shackles of impermeable and rigid solid space—space, for *Reticulárea*, exists in its absence. This condition creates a sculpture that paradoxically renounces representation and mimicry, while antithetically creating a mimetic representation of itself in the shadow it casts.

The lines themselves, made of stainless steel, nylon, and lead, are modest; the product of everyday materials to be found in an architect's workspace. This choice of medium and form



has led some curators¹ to claim that Gego's works are an allegory for Latin American development, by exemplifying reason with forms and its limitations with the kinetic *trompe l'oeils*. However, I disagree with that interpretation of Gego's message. Although kinetic art was used by the post-dictatorship governments in Venezuela to adorn the concrete naves of new public buildings, I believe that abstract art (especially when non-representational), has an apolitical intention. As Gego's stated, when asked about the significance of her work: "one must have fun in art... if one doesn't enjoy work, then what's the point of it?"²

Reticulárea overlooks the European Art Academy rules: in the mobile there is no object, no historical reference, no still life, no colors, no frame, no determined vantage point. Instead, *Reticulárea* offers a single, naked emotion: "gozadera" (enjoyment). Its asymmetrical forms descending and ascending rapidly shift from points to lines and from lines to points, determined by the viewers' movement of vantage points. One can almost listen –by an art of synesthesia—to the buzzing shifting tones and scales of neighboring *bossa nova*³ and then national *onda nueva*. *Reticulárea*'s dance, despite being unexpected and recalcitrant, offers some visual cues as to how to approach it. The nodes uniting the lines that sometimes form eye-shaped ovals act as an open hand, an invitation for the spectator to join in dance with the work of art. The node's position on the left side almost forms a straight, line like the margin of a notebook, which brings some comfort to the disoriented eye. Yet as soon as a hint of strict order and symmetry starts to emerge, the illusion is broken; the nodes that could have made a parallel line on the right side instead oscillate in all four cardinal directions. The theme of oscillation also manifests itself in the vertical distance between the nodes: they collapse and expand like an accordion.

¹ <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/5061>

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WogSe83HCE4>

³ The particular piece in mind is *Seu Encanto* by Antonio Carlos Jobim, released in 1966.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X-p0ERdg9CA>



The stunts of symmetry and asymmetry, harmony and chaos, contribute to the *etude*-like quality of *Reticulárea*. Mirroring the nodes' oscillation, the oval lines also swing, in this case horizontally, between some invisible margins, bumping into each other and creating new figures in their negative spaces. As an exercise, I invite the reader to compare the drastic visual differences in the sculpture created by distinct vantage points, as shown in the annexed images.

To return to the original question: what makes one part of a nation? Gego has shown that belonging does not relate to a strict adherence to a cultural cannon, nor to a distaste for certain traditions. Her dual nationality is proof that there is nothing essential in ourselves to imply nationality; the now-hackneyed existentialist dictum "one *is* not, one *is being*" resonates with Gego's moving world and work. As much as humans try to categorize artists into an essential nationality of millennial inheritance, the artists' works and history tells us otherwise: Chopin's polish mazurkas are the work of a historically French family and Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsody is the product of a historically German family. Then, who has the right to define national boundaries? No one can deny Chopin's Polishness nor Liszt's Hungarianness, and, *a fortiori*, Gego's Venezuelanness. Perhaps we should finally ditch our static notion of nationalities and embrace kineticism.





Figure 2

To demonstrate the drastic difference in the sculpture altered by the vantage point, I have included the Museum of Modern Art collection's photograph. Retrieved from <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/205949>



