

THE ROUTE OF FRIENDSHIP A TESTIMONY TO MEXICO CITY'S AESTHETIC MODERNITY

Raymundo Ángel Fernández Contreras*



The Route of Friendship, a collective work of 19 monumental concrete sculptures built to celebrate the 1968 Mexico Olympic Games, is unique in the history of world contemporary urban art. Nineteen artists of different races and ideologies, from all the world's continents contributed pieces, which are placed along southern Mexico City's Beltway.¹ It was a special version of what in the 1950s urban sculptors concerned about taking art to the nation's roads and highways called an Artistic Way.

Contingent on the capital city's modern urbanism, the road was the outcome of common interests in the plans of architect Pedro Ramírez Vázquez, the chairman of the Olympic Games Organizing Committee, and artist Mathias Goeritz. Ramírez Vázquez wanted to visually integrate sculpture and architecture with the Olympic Village as part of the Cultural Olympics activities. Goeritz used the opportunity of being appointed Olympic Committee artistic advisor to organize an international symposium with International Sculptors Federation (FISE) support, and to make ideas that had been buzzing around in the heads of a group of sculptors for at least 20 years a reality.

* Architect and art historian. Professor-researcher at the Acatlán School of Higher Learning (FES-Acatlán).

Previous page: Angela Gurría, Mexico, *Signs* (station 1). Photos by Lourdes Grobet.



Architect Pedro Ramírez Vázquez archive

Herbert Bayer, Austria, *Articulated Wall* (station 13).

IT WAS THE FULFILLMENT OF 20 YEARS
OF ATTEMPTS BY IDEALISTIC SCULPTORS TO CREATE
A COLLECTIVE BODY OF ART INTEGRATED INTO A HIGHWAY
AS PART OF URBAN PLANNING.



Willi Gutmann, Switzerland, *The Anchor* (station 2).



Raymundo Fernández archive

Willi Gutmann with his model, 1968.

Lourdes Grobet



Lourdes Grobet

Constantino Nivola, Italy, *Man of Peace* (station 7).



Lourdes Grobet

Mohamed Melehi, Morocco, *African Candy Twist* (station 17).

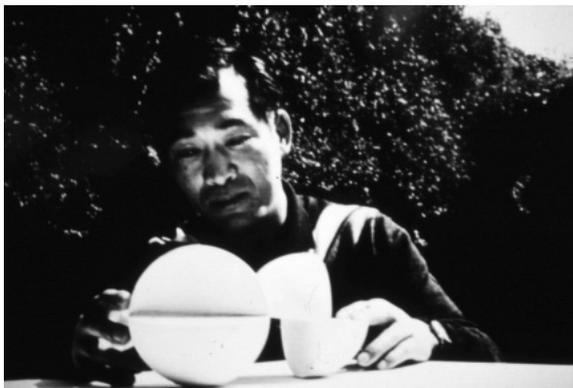
The planning of this artistic way implied unprecedented efforts on the part of the Olympic Games Organizing Committee, which bowed to the argument that it was important to avoid formal languages associated with representations of meanings alien to the Olympics' apolitical spirit. For the artistic way, in consequence, the committee proposed abstract art. This was the first time in Mexico that government-sponsored public art was not done in the style of 1910 Mexican revolutionary muralism.

It was the fulfillment of 20 years of attempts by idealistic sculptors to create a collective body of art that would celebrate

universal peace, integrated into a highway as part of urban planning, in which visual artists would play an active role.

GOERITZ'S EMOTIONAL URBANISM

Born in Germany, Goeritz arrived in Mexico in 1949. In the diverse fields of artistic creation he ventured into, urbanism was perhaps the one that brought him the most personal satisfaction. There, he was able to concretize his constant aspiration and personal conviction about what he thought



Architect Pedro Ramírez Vázquez archive

Kioshi Takahashi with his model, 1968.



Lourdes Grobet

Kioshi Takahashi, Japan, *Spheres* (station 4).



Pierre Székely, France/Hungary, ca. 1967.

Raymundo Fernández archive

the mission of art and the artist should be: the search for emotion. It is in urbanism, enriched artistically by his genius, where his determined vocation for the monumental can best be felt. The Satellite City Towers in the State of Mexico, his 1957 masterpiece, testify to this. The original project was to build seven, not five, towers, 200 meters high each, not the 65 meters that were actually built.

In 1968, thinking of grand projects adapted to the country's urban conditions was nothing new for Goeritz. Five years before that, in 1963, he proposed building 300-meter-high sculptures dotted along the Panamerican Highway (from Ciudad Juárez to Tapachula) and the Interoceanic Highway, joining Veracruz to Acapulco, both going through Mexico City. His idea was that they would signal the emergence of regional tourism, economic and social development.

This idea, the direct precedent for the Route of Friendship, was inspired by German Jewish sculptor Otto Freundlich's vision of an international highway system ornamented with art along two large perpendicular axes cutting cut across Europe. Freundlich's project proposed creating monumental art that would commemorate the peace achieved at the end of World War I. Paradoxically, the sculptor would die in the 1940s in Auschwitz, a victim of the Holocaust.

THE CHANGE FROM THE SCULPTURAL PARK TO A ROUTE ALONG A FREEWAY MEANT THAT AT LEAST HALF THE ARTISTS PROJECTED THEIR SCULPTURES FOR A VENUE VERY DIFFERENT FROM THE ONE THEY FINALLY ENDED UP WITH.



Pierre Székely, France-Hungary, *Two-footed Sun* (station 5).

Louides Grobet

REALIZING A COLLECTIVE IDEAL

Freundlich's idea and other proposals inspired by it were distilled into what in 1959 became the *Voie des Arts* (Route of the Arts), which brought together many sculptors, among them Britain's Henry Moore, who traveled through different countries to participate in meetings to promote the construction of that shared ideal. Renowned French sculptor and critic Friederich Czagan headed the symposia, and, as president of the FISE, was the project's main promoter. Goeritz attended several symposia, meeting Czagan in the process and familiarizing himself with the group's ideals.

In early October 1966, Czagan was invited to Mexico to offer his opinion about the viability of holding a sculptors symposium during the Cultural Olympics. Goeritz was interested in getting support from the institution Czagan headed because he wanted to invite some of its members, all outstanding specialists in issues of public sculpture associated with contemporary urbanism, which was central to Goeritz's plans —though not those of Ramírez Vázquez. In Czagan's letter to the Organizing Committee explaining the conclu-



Architect Pedro Ramirez Vázquez archive

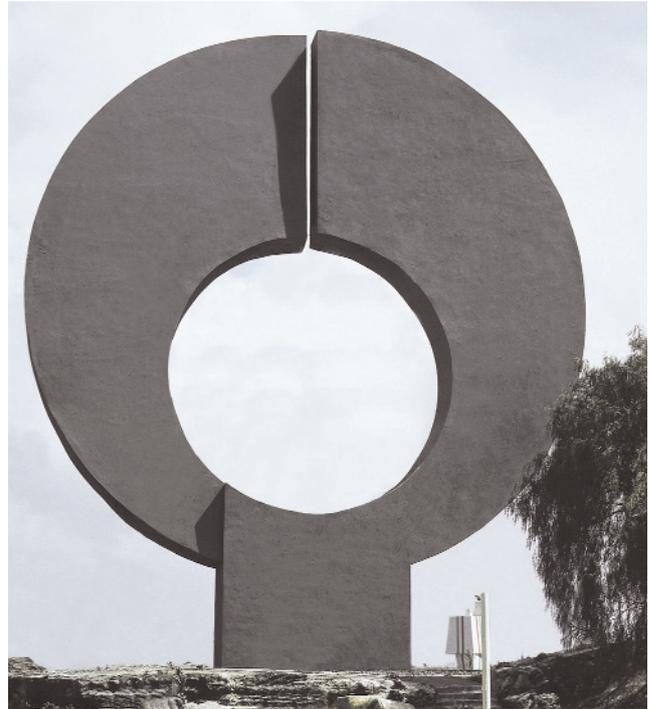
ACHIEVING MONUMENTAL SCALE WAS ANOTHER DIFFICULT TASK, PARTICULARLY BECAUSE IT IMPLIED HIGH CONSTRUCTION COSTS AND DIFFICULTIES FOR ADAPTING THEM TO THE DIMENSIONS OF THE LOCATION.

sions he had come to during his visit, he stated that given Mexico's commitment to 1968, what should orient the sculptors' work was the games, and that the Olympic Village was the best backdrop for an ambitious project of inter-dependence between architecture, urbanists and artists.

And, in effect, the village was a very attractive venue for this purpose since it combined a residential function and novel architecture with a spectacular pre-Hispanic ceremonial area covered with volcanic rock. This explains why Goeritz wrote to Moore in early January 1967, asking him to come to Mexico to create a work for the central space of the Olympic Village. Moore's work would be complemented by pieces by other sculptors that would adorn the village's smaller plazas. The rivalry that soon arose between Goeritz and Czagan for the leadership of the symposium ended with the exit of the latter followed by several sculptors who supported him, whom Goeritz decided not to invite.

THE VICISSITUDES OF CONSTRUCTION

The way the Route of Friendship evolved reveals shaky planning rife with difficulties. Born as an exercise in integration



Architect Pedro Ramirez Vázquez archive

Jacques Moeschal, Belgium, Untitled (station 8).

applied to the Olympic Village, its small plazas and space dictated an initial change to a larger venue, a park next to the village itself. Goeritz's insistence on achieving something more spectacular soon led him to propose a concrete bridge over the intersection of Insurgentes Avenue and the Beltway, where he planned to build 15 sculptures. However, the cost was prohibitive, so he chose a new site: the road going up to the Zacatépetl Hill, near the highway. In another order of things, the idea of establishing color-coded routes along the city's streets to lead visitors to the different Olympic venues prompted Goeritz's idea of building a Route of the Arts. That is why he proposed building the sculptures on the Beltway along the 40 kilometers stretching from the Oil Fountain to the Aztec Stadium. Finally, in July 1967, Mexico's president authorized the Cultural Olympics' including a meeting of artists, and the route as we know it today became the definitive proposal.

The change from the sculptural park to a route along a high-speed freeway meant that at least half the artists projected their sculptures for a venue very different from the one they finally ended up with. Only the ones who lived in Mexico and the few who visited the area before the meeting projected their works for the exact site where their piece was eventually placed. For that reason, some of the

sculptures adapted to a freeway better than others. However, we can say that in general, the sculptures fit in well with the landscape thanks to their form, style, colorfulness and the way they use space.

The Organizing Committee sent out a rather imprecise call for works, stipulating six points as requirements for the enormous number of sculptures, which would be seen by drivers and passengers going 70 kilometers an hour for no more than five seconds at minute-and-a-half intervals. Five of these points were successfully complied with at the time. Two were requirements for the artists: using abstract language and simple forms. Two more depended on the organizers: using concrete as the medium and making the sculptures monumental. Another, using color, was a decision to be made by artists and organizers together. However, since there was no agreement, Goeritz's criteria prevailed. The last point was that the sculptors themselves would adapt their sculptures to the landscape. However, it was Goeritz and the Austrian Bauhaus artist Herbert Bayer who resolved the details of their adaptation to the freeway. But neither Bayer nor the

GOERITZ IMPOSED HIS VIEWS IN FAVOR OF CONCRETE. THIS MEANT THAT THE ARTISTS CREATED THE FORMS BUT DID NOT TECHNICALLY RESOLVE THEM. MUCH LESS BUILD THEM.

members of the team working with Goeritz ever received any public recognition for their work. Neither did Freundlich, until 10 years after the route was finished, when in an interview with Mario Monteforte Toledo, Goeritz recognized his initially having come up with the idea.

Getting these concrete sculptures built was a long, complicated process for the Organizing Committee. Stone was plentiful around the Olympic Village, but Goeritz imposed his views in favor of concrete. This meant that the artists created the forms for the Route of Friendship, but did not technically resolve them, much less build them. The requirement that they be made of concrete showed up several of the sculptors' limitations for giving their pieces structural and construction resolution.

Achieving monumental scale was another difficult task, particularly because it implied high construction costs and difficulties for adapting them to the dimensions of the location. Goeritz responded to the criticism that he had built very small sculptures compared to the size of the venue by saying that to compete with the scale of the hills and volcanoes, any sculpture that was not the size of a cathedral would have been too small. In addition, several of them had to be reduced in size because they were placed in the central islands of the Beltway, given the lack of public property in the area.

The color requirement also created problems. Several functionalist sculptors thought the material's natural appear-

Architect Pedro Ramírez Vázquez archive



◀ Grzegorz Kowalski, the youngest participant.



Grzegorz Kowalski, Poland, *Sundial* (station 10).

Raymundo Fernández archive



Itzhak Danziger, Israel, *Door of Peace* (station 15).

Architect Pedro Ramírez Vázquez archive



Oliver Seguin, France, *Untitled* (station 16).

Architect Pedro Ramírez Vázquez archive



◀ Miloslav Chlupac.



Miloslav Chlupac, Czechoslovakia, *The Three Graces* (station 3).



Joseph María Subirach, Spain, *Mexico* (station 11).



Clement Meadmore, Australia, *Untitled* (station 12).

ance should be respected and refused to use color. Perhaps for that reason, they were rather austere in the use of color, with a predominance of black, white, yellow and blue.

The formal language, though abstract, tended toward the organic or the geometric, with a notable tendency toward the latter. The sequence picked for the stations along the Beltway was decided on the basis of considerations of form, color, use of space and the location and economic regime of the country in question: that is, whether it belonged to the capitalist world, the Communist world or was non-aligned. In addition, depending on whether you drive one way or the other along the route, it gives you the feeling of a beginning, an end and a middle, which is the Olympic Village. The places of honor fell to Mexico, which opened and closed the circuit, and to the artist recognized as the most identified with the ideals of the Route of the Arts, the Belgian Jacques Moeschal.

IT WAS THE ONLY ACTIVITY FOR WHICH THE PARTICIPATING NATIONS DID NOT ELECT THEIR REPRESENTATIVES, WHICH IS WHY SOME OF THEM DID NOT RECOGNIZE THEM, MUCH LESS FINANCE THEIR TRANSPORTATION.

For its part, the International Sculptors Conference had its own particularities. In contrast with the rest of the Olympic events, it was the only activity for which the participating nations did not elect their representatives, which is why some of them did not recognize them, much less finance their transportation. From the initial idea of a meeting for five sculptors, it grew to 22. One Polish sculptor who attended, Grzegorz Kowalski, was confused with another artist with the same name, but 50 years older. One country, Spain, participated without having been invited, and the Australian sculptor Clement Meadmore was expelled for his bad behavior. And, although the spirit of the Route was to be inclusive,



Todd Williams, United States, *The Magical Wheel* (station 9).



Todd Williams



Gonzalo Fonseca, Uruguay, *Wind Tower* (station 6) (detail).

Photos this block: Architect Pedro Ramirez Vázquez archive

PERHAPS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING WAS THAT WHEN THE ROUTE OF FRIENDSHIP WAS BUILT, GOERITZ ACHIEVED SOMETHING WHICH MANY HAD THOUGHT IMPOSSIBLE: MAKING THE ROUTE OF THE ARTS A REALITY.

most of the artists came from Europe. This sparked criticisms of Goeritz for only inviting his friends. Since five participants came from the United States, it was rumored that three of them had dual nationality. Three Mexicans participated, but only one Asian, one African and one Australian. The youngest participant was 26 and the oldest, 75. The sculptor who was the most difficult to find was the one representing the black

race, and a big hole was created with the absence of Moore, despite the fact that Goeritz invited him five times. Calder occupied a place of honor, and his sculpture was finally placed in the building of the recently completed Aztec Stadium, leaving the venue that was a symbol of the games, the Sports Palace, without a sculptor. This allowed Goeritz to proclaim himself the third honorary guest. But, perhaps the most important thing was that when the Route of Friendship was built, Goeritz achieved something which many had thought impossible: making the Route of the Arts a reality.



The sculptress ca. 1967.



Helen Escobedo, Mexico, *Door to the Wind* (station 18).

Patrimonio Ruta de la Amistad

ARTISTIC HERITAGE SCORNE

A massive student movement broke out a few months before the games were inaugurated but came to an abrupt end in October 1968. Because of this, the formal ceremony turning the route over to the Mexico City government was canceled and the route has since then remained in total legal limbo. There has never been a formal declaration classifying it officially part of Mexico City's artistic heritage. In addition, there has been rampant land speculation in the area surrounding it; buildings, trees and billboards block the view of the pieces; and in general, there has been no under-

standing of its historic-artistic value. All this has made for its gradual deterioration and near destruction. This is why the current efforts by the Route of Friendship Trust to save it and return it to its original glory should be recognized.

At the end of his life, at the age of 70, while chairing a meeting of academics discussing how to recover the sculptures, Goeritz said that the route should be destroyed. This was perhaps because he knew, from the moment he built it, that it would be smothered by the urban sprawl that it aimed to serve. Goeritz's statement revealed that he thought it was ephemeral, made of concrete on a monumental scale —on a par with his arrogance and determination as an artist. In fact, he used the Olympics as a pretext to show that he was capable of achieving what no one else had been able to.

Contrary to the feelings of Goeritz, for whom the Route of Friendship stopped having any emotional significance, in our opinion, the 19 sculptures and their locations, that artistic way that they cannot be separated from, are testimony to the uniqueness and grandeur of a work that has the merit of showing that urbanism not only was but should continue to be an emotional act. It is up to us to make sure that these sculptures still move us. I hope this article contributes to keeping alive what a few years after they were built Mexico City Mayor Octavio Senties called "those follies." **MM**



Joop Bejon, Holland, *Gathering of Giants* (station 14).

Photos this page: Architect Pedro Ramírez Vázquez archive



Jorge Dubón, Mexico, *Untitled* (station 18).

NOTES

¹ Three more sculptors participated as guests of honor, but their work was not included in the Route of Friendship.



Special guests from left to right: Mathias Goeritz, Mexico, *Ursa Major*; Germán Cueto, Mexico, *Running Man*; and Alexander Calder, United States, *Red Sun*.

THE ROUTE OF FRIENDSHIP TODAY

The sculptures along the Route of Friendship, abandoned for many years, seriously deteriorated from lack of maintenance and from being out in the open. The city's growth made the sculptures lose presence and visibility. In fact, most capital residents know nothing about their history and the details of their construction, and many do not even know they are there.

However, in 1994 a trust was set up to rescue them and return them to their rightful place as part of Mexico City's urban artistic heritage. Founded by Luis Javier de la Torre and Javier Ramírez, the Route of Friendship Trust's objective is to recover the sculptures. One of its actions was the Adopt a Work of Art Program and another was to create a fund with support from the National Fund for Culture and the Arts (Fonca) that makes the route self-sufficient in maintaining the restored pieces.

CULTURAL ACTIVITIES

In addition to the efforts to restore and preserve the pieces, there is a cultural program to put the community back in contact with them through multidisciplinary, temporary installations.

The idea is to integrate the pieces into the dynamics of urban growth, and make the new generations aware of their presence. A series of cultural activities have been orga-

nized around some of the pieces touching on issues like art, the environment, biological research and even a fashion show.

URBAN ECOLOGY PROGRAM

The sculptures located in rocky and wetland areas have given rise to a project in which the UNAM Institute of Biology participates through the Botanical Garden to take advantage of the surrounding areas.

At stations one to 13, located in a rocky area, the "Native Gardens of Pedregal" project is being developed, including the reintroduction of the area's native flora and fauna, taking care that other species exogenous to the area do not invade it. The idea is to create green laboratories for recuperating species and water to protect the area's environment and foster an appropriate combination of the sculptures and the landscape. At stations 14 to 19, located in the wetlands, another program is recreating the Mexica form of production, with the idea of making efficient use of public spaces.

Mathias Goeritz could never have imagined that in 2008, 40 years after fulfilling his almost impossible idea, the sculptures that populated the city with monumental art would still be here and that somebody would be interested in creating new projects with them. This shows just how transcendental his proposal was, despite the difficulties it continually faces.

Sculptures in the Route

Station	Sculpture	Artist	Country	Location	Sponsor
1	<i>Signs</i>	Ángela Gurría	Mexico	San Jerónimo Roundabout	Cosío Family
2	<i>The Anchor</i>	Willi Gutmann	Switzerland	Periférico Sur, San Jerónimo	Zurich Seguros
3	<i>The Three Graces</i>	Miloslav Chlupac	Czechoslovakia	Periférico Sur, Av. Sta. Teresa	Adidas





Station	Sculpture	Artist	Country	Location	Sponsor
4	<i>Spheres</i>	Kioshi Takahashi	Japan	Periférico Sur	Inmobiliaria Sare
5	<i>Two-footed Sun</i>	Pierre Székeli	France	Carretera al Ajusco	TV Azteca/Fomento Cultural Gpo. Salinas
6	<i>Wind Tower</i>	Gonzalo Fonseca	Uruguay	Zacatépetl	Grant Thorton Fonca
7	<i>Man of Peace</i>	Constantino Nivola	Italy	Intersection of Insurgentes and Periférico	Italian government
8	Untitled	Jacques Moeschal	Belgium	Entrance to the Olympic Village	—
9	<i>Magic Wheel</i>	Todd Williams	United States	Olympic Village Warm-up Tracks	Fundación Coca-Cola
10	<i>Sundial</i>	Grzegorz Kowalski	Poland	Intersection of Insurgentes and Periférico	HBO/Perisur
11	<i>Mexico</i>	José María Subirachis	Spain	Intersection of Insurgentes and Periférico	Fundación Domecq
12	Untitled	Clement Meadmore	Australia	Taken away by the Olinca School	—
13	<i>Articulated Wall</i>	Herbert Bayer	Austria	Periférico	—
14	<i>Gathering of Giants</i>	Joop J. Beljon	Holland	Viaducto Tlalpan	ING
15	<i>Door of Peace</i>	Itzhak Danziger	Israel	Av. México	Assa Family
16	Untitled	Olivier Seguin	France	Av. México-Xochimilco	—
17	<i>African Candy Twist</i>	Mohamed Melehi	Morocco	Coapa	Taco Inn
18	Untitled	Jorge Dubón	Mexico	Canoeing lanes, Cuernavaca	Pineda Covalin
19	<i>Door to the Wind</i>	Helen Escobedo	Mexico	Beltway side road at Cuernavaca	Fundación BBVA Bancomer
Special guest	<i>Ursa Major</i>	Mathias Goeritz	Mexico	Esplanade of the Sports Palace	OCESA
Special guest	<i>Running Man</i>	Germán Cueto	Mexico	Main entrance to the University City Olympic Stadium	UNAM
Special guest	<i>Red Sun</i>	Alexander Calder	United States	Aztec Stadium Esplanade	—