

Helen Escobedo's Transparency¹

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Courtesy of Patronato Ruta de la Amistad

Helen Escobedo, *Door to the Wind* (Station 18 of the "Route of Friendship").

In many ways, the Route of Friendship, the sequence of urban sculptures along the southern stretch of Mexico City's Beltway, were a series of standards proclaiming the fortunate growth of this part of the city. At least, that meaning of the project crossed through the minds of the government officials who supported Mathias Goeritz (1915-1990) in his endeavor to invite a group of outstanding internationally known sculptors in the context of the 1968 Olym-

pic Games. More than 40 years later, we can see that the city's growth was not all that fortunate; the feverish inertia of real estate speculation covered up the very sculptures that represented the enthusiasm about modernity.

The paradoxical tensions between authorities, artists, and the use of public space that come with projects of this scale were felt by Helen Escobedo from the moment her own sculpture for it began to be built. Goeritz had tenaciously insisted on her participation; several of Helen's models were rejected before the project committee approved the nth version, to be located in the —at that time— remote area of

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Cuemanco.² While preparing the foundations for the work, Helen realized that the placement was not the best *vis-à-vis* the direction of traffic that the sculpture would be the aesthetic framework for. But not much could be done: the inertia of resources and infrastructure totally alien to this kind of consideration meant that the construction was already finished. According to the pre-established plan, that inertia would also cover the steel rod skeleton with concrete. But, before that happened, Helen could divine in that skeleton a work that she had not anticipated, one that in its transparent form enriched the sensation of volume and scale as well as its interaction with its surroundings. However, the piece Helen discovered inside the other seemed provisional, “unfinished” in the conventional view of how public sculpture was viewed at that time.

This episode was one of the many that guided Helen’s artistic criteria toward more flexible strategies for creative action. If permanence affected the work’s fluidity, impact, and flexibility, Helen tended to sacrifice it in favor of the ephemeral. If the resources invested compromised artistic criteria, she found another set of resources to work with, always favoring the intellectual over the material. If the context of the installation affected the piece’s consistency or look, she would consider and integrate it in the concept of the work from the beginning. This is not the first time I write about this anecdote, but I repeat it because of its significance: when asked about the graffiti on the Cuemanco sculpture, Helen responded that it would be best to offer the urban tribes scaffolding so they could tag the work evenly, as a whole.

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Goeritz was not inviting a novice to contribute to the Route of Friendship. Before she was 20, Helen had already studied with Germán Cueto and at the London Royal College of Art; she had handled both traditional and new techniques, and she knew figures like Henry Moore personally. In a characteristic gesture, she said that in England she had learned more from watching her fellow students work than from her teachers. Before she was 27, she had already been invited to head up the UNAM Department of Visual Arts. From the platform of the University City’s University Museum of Arts and Sciences (MUCA), Helen developed a program of exhibitions that was an effective counterpoint to the orientation of the National Fine Arts Institute. As the intense, conflictive year 1968 approached, Helen organized national and international exhibitions facilitating the dissemination of new

trends in Mexico, turning the MUCA into a space for young artists to be known and recognized: informalism, opt art, or kinetic art combined with shows of Siqueiros’s work, the creative use of garbage, or folk art celebrating the Day of the Dead. At the same time that some of the new proposals hosted by the MUCA, Chapultepec Park’s House on the Lake, or the Aristos University Gallery were a far cry from traditional formats and strategies, favoring group and experimental ways of working, for Helen—as well as for museographer Alfonso Soto Soria—the MUCA itself became a laboratory for exploring new ways of presenting art and its relationship with the public. Helen would repeatedly recognize the importance of the MUCA’s museographical exercises and how enriching teamwork was for her own work.

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Last May, while Helen was still with us—she passed away in September—I participated in the roundtable discussions organized by the La Esmeralda National School of Painting, Sculpture, and Engraving at the National Arts Center to honor her and reflect on the importance of her work. A few days before the roundtable, I thought I should talk about

**Her awareness of
the need to extend the social scope
of contemporary art may well have been one
of her main contributions.**



Helen Escobedo in her studio.

Photo by Barry Domínguez