



Experimental Museum

Tobías Ostrander*



THE VENUE

El Eco is open to artists who experiment, play with emotions, and venture into interdisciplinary art. It is inspired in the matchless architecture and conceptual interests of Mathias Goeritz, Mexican sculptor of German ancestry who settled in Mexico after World War II. Goeritz left one of the most important artistic legacies in our country's cultural history.

The museum's construction has a singular history. At a painting and sculpture exhibition in 1952, Goeritz met Daniel Mont, a Mexican entrepreneur interested in art galleries, among other things. With the intention of discovering something different from the status quo, Mont commissioned him to design a museum that would meld his commercial interests and the avant-garde spirit of the times. The premise was, "Do whatever you feel like doing." So, on Mexico City's Sullivan Street was born El Eco, designed like a poetic structure based on what Goeritz called "the Manifesto of Emotional Architecture," in open defiance of the reigning functionalism. The idea was that the layout of corridors, roofs, walls, rooms, and doorways would lead its visitors to reflect on their experience emotionally.

It is specifically within this museum's spiritual theatricality that the Mexican-born, São Paulo-based artist Héctor Zamora positions his artistic intervention *Offered Paradises*. The artist has filled the central patio with a multitude of mini-architectures, the brightly colored inflatable castles, arches, mountains, and ramps that are normally rented to entertain children on their birthdays or at other family celebrations. He has closed the entrances to the patio, denying access; transforming the space into a gigantic box, open to the sky, but sealed on its sides and filled to the top with these gigantic toys. The viewer is only allowed visual access to this fantastical, inflatable world, to gaze at it through the large square window of the main gallery, evoking the experience of looking through a shop window at desirable items. The artist has placed a single element in the interior of the building: a framed photograph, hung on the surface of black tower. It portrays these plastic elements deflated in the patio, as flat, wrinkled shapes.

Inflatable sculptures have featured prominently in Zamora's recent work. The artist has described his interest in them as primarily formal. He is drawn to the transformative play they establish as they move from two dimensions into three, symbolically referencing a transition from painting to sculpture. These investigations are emphasized in *Offered Pa-*



Offered Paradises

A Project by Héctor Zamora

radises by the photograph the artist has included, whose two-dimensional format and subject both reference painting, while concurrently offering a comparison between the flat elements depicted and the three-dimensional, sculptural forms on view in the patio.

Most of Zamora's recent projects involving inflatable forms have been produced for art fairs or biennials, giving his use of these materials a site-specific character. Within a contemporary context, inflatable structures are often placed along highways to advertise car dealerships or other businesses; they have been used for entertainment or sightseeing in the form of hot-air balloons or blimps. Within the spectacle of art fairs and biennials, the inflatables Zamora shows become a critique of the commercial or high-end entertainment environments that these cultural contexts have come to represent.

Spectacle informs the cultural critiques that the current installation establishes. Perhaps the first spectacle *Offered Paradises* addresses is that of high modernism, its historical weight and spiritual aspirations, as exemplified by the building and manifesto produced by Goeritz. The structures Zamora chooses reference the architecture of El Eco and geometric

* Curator of the exhibitions and the museum's director.
Photos by Patricia Pérez.

abstraction in general, but challenge these cultural sites' seriousness through their status as temporary and silly constructions, offering themselves as primal, simplistic examples of emotive architecture.

The artist also sees these inflatable toys as particularly ubiquitous in Mexico, and his more acute reference to spectacle involves a critique of his native country. In the past, the Mexican government has invested heavily in dramatic public spectacles, ice-skating rinks and snow in the Zócalo central square, or parades and aquatic events on Reforma Avenue. These extravaganzas multiplied during the 2010 Bicentennial year, but have come to characterize the current presidential administration and its political strategies. These kinds of events offer a paradise of entertainment to a public increasingly burdened with unemployment, drug-war violence, and general insecurity. They evoke sites of wealth, travel, and leisure that are inaccessible to the majority of Mexico's population and, as such, represent "castles in the air," unreachable aspirations. The inflatable castles and temporary entertainment structures of the installation directly reference these political dynamics, most acutely through their inaccessibility, since Zamora denies access to the temporary pleasures that these forms offer by sealing them behind the museum's glass doors and windows.

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Appropriation, Reproduction and Seriality In Erlea Maneros Zabala's Work

Originally trained as a painter, Erlea Maneros Zabala has developed a conceptual practice that analyzes and deconstructs how images are put together, while addressing the contemporary cultural implications of the diverse forms and mediums she engages. Her works address abstraction, but often through the use of figurative material. They involve appropriation, reproduction, and seriality. These production strategies challenge the traditional emphasis in painting placed on the creation of a unique, authored object. Imbedded in her investigations is a critique of conventional values placed on art, particularly romantic notions of beauty, the sublime, and art as a spiritual experience.

With her project for El Eco, the artist requested the opportunity to investigate the Mathias Goeritz archive, currently housed at the National Center for Research, Documentation, and Information on the Visual Arts (Cenidiap). In reviewing this material, which includes slides, photographs, and newspaper and magazine clippings, Maneros Zabala was particularly drawn to a set of images and related materials by Michel Zabé. This photographer documented Goeritz's work in the

1950s and 1960s, including several images produced during the opening days of El Eco. The archive includes contact sheets and notes by Zabé on these photographs. Through the croppings, edits, and other aesthetic negotiations these materials reveal, a particular voice is articulated in the archive, one deeply involved in the imaginary constructed around Goeritz. Maneros Zabala was interested in giving presence to the normally hidden role of the documentary photographer, as a way of de-mystifying the "master" Goeritz and destabilizing his centrality within both the archive and the museum, the commissioning site for her production.

A hand-written note from Zabé becomes central to her project: two index cards that address his envisioned user of the archive, the phantom viewer of his photographs. With underlined words and exclamation marks in various sections, this short text emphatically describes how any reflections of light one might see on the surface of the Goeritz mural recorded in the images, is indeed intentional and an integral part of the conception of the artwork. The text goes on to share anecdotes about the German artist's strong personality



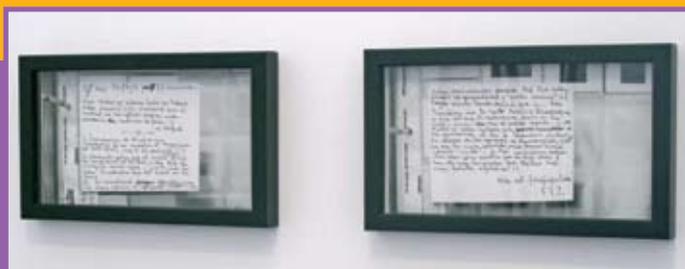
The two copies of Zabé's images.



The works produced by Maneros Zabala became elements within a larger installation that engages the architectural character and history of the Mont Room.

and aesthetic convictions. For Maneros Zabala, in form and content, this note reveals several conditions. While its tone is condescending regarding his public's possible misreading of these slides, it displays extreme reverence of the creator of the source material, an importance demonstrated by Zabé through his emphasis on the truth conveyed in his photographic images, how they are able to convey the artist's genius; the elevated manner in which Zabé positions Goeritz, places himself in a secondary or subservient role, a structuring that Maneros Zabala seeks to invert through her appropriation and elevation of his comments within her new artwork. For this project, she transforms a digital image of these index cards, which she took while at the archive, into a photographic negative and prints them in a traditional photographic format. Through this analog process, she symbolically transports the text of the photographer back to the medium of its referent. Through this abstract analytical process, Maneros Zabala both layers and conflates form and conceptual content.

In a similar move, for another work, the artist reproduces two versions of a single image produced by Zabé. A black woman with a coat spread over her shoulders stands by the sculpture *Serpent*, produced by Goeritz for the El Eco courtyard. During the opening of the museum in 1953, the African-American Walter Hicks dance troupe performed a piece choreographed by film-maker Luis Buñuel, during which they moved around and through this large sculpture. This now mythical event was recorded and promoted photographically with images of the troupe in tropical costume, taken from



above and from ground level near *Serpent*. The Zabé image appropriated by Maneros Zabala most likely portrays one of the members of the Walter Hicks group. In this photograph however, the sculpture is secondary, with only the detail of its form recorded in the lower left of the frame. It is this woman who is central, with her back turned to the camera, gazing down at the sculpture. Maneros Zabala has reprinted two copies of the image, one displaying Zabé's cropping marks, editions not shown in the second, repeated image. As an "unofficial" photograph in which Goeritz's work is not central, this image depicts Zabé's own subjectivity and as such becomes another significant moment within the overall Goeritz archive when Zabé's supportive or peripheral role is altered and his vision becomes the protagonist.

These photographic works produced by Maneros Zabala have become elements within a larger installation that engages the architectural character and history of the Mont Room where they are exhibited. Through these displacements, reproductions, and formal recontextualizations, the project complicates the artist's chosen target, Goeritz's sacrosanct legacy. Her forms challenge this cultural construct, critiquing the works and spiritualist ideology of El Eco's founder through their materialist investigations of the institutions, substructures, and individuals that have helped sustain Goeritz's position in art history. Through such inquiry, Maneros Zabala seeks to establish an unromantic view of this artist's production and, in doing so, maintain its contemporary viability. Her works additionally seek to activate both the vision and analytical capabilities of the viewer. They demand that we move beyond the immediacy of the images given to us, to look behind, around, or through them, to acknowledge the cultural and political structures they perform. ■■■

MUSEO EL ECO

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