

Another Geometry: Gego's Reticulárea, 1969-1982

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Reticulárea, 1969–1982

MÓNICA AMOR

For Lucas

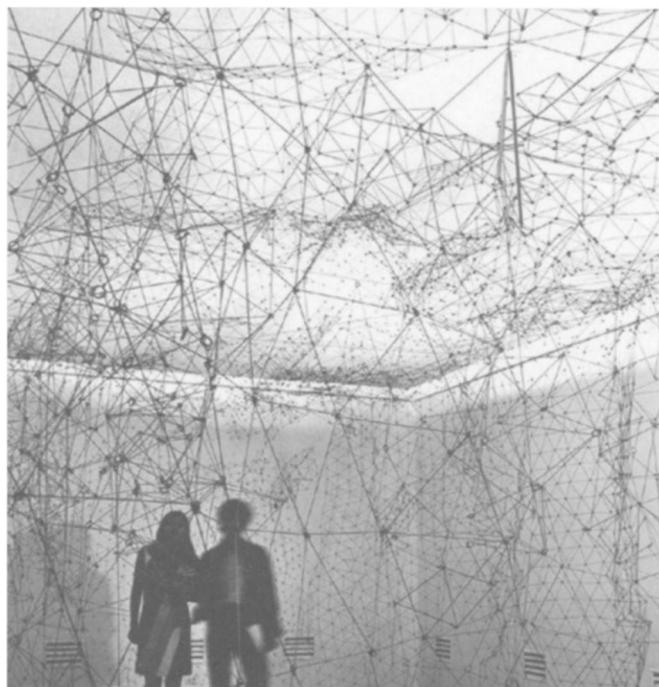
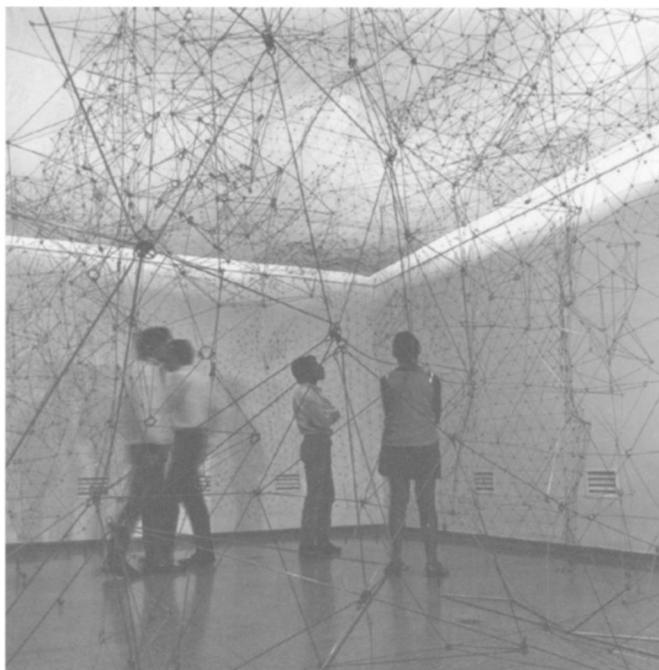
What is this image? As it has no value, it has nothing obscure; as it has no meaning, it has no top or bottom, right or left; as it has no density, it is superficial, which is to say geographical and not geological; and as it has no center, its boundaries are nowhere, for any scansion would allow for meaning to emerge and would constitute objects and singularities through discontinuity. In short, it is an open surface in the pure light of weightlessness.

—Bernard Cache, *Earth Moves: The Furnishing of Territories*

Only the increasingly calligraphic quality of Gego's (Gertrud Goldschmidt, 1912–1994) work and her interest in experimental engineering prepares us for the radical leap performed by her *Reticulárea*, which was first exhibited in June 1969 at the Museo de Bellas Artes de Caracas. The work, made of meshes and nets of metal connected and dispersed irregularly within the space of a room, was titled by Venezuelan art critic Roberto Guevara prior to its first exhibition. The Spanish word "reticula," as in the English "reticulate," refers to a network of lines or a net; therefore, *Reticulárea* alludes to an area of nets.

The *Reticulárea*, I will argue in this essay, rehearsed an artistic paradigm of production that in its refusal of the conventions of sculpture (mass, volume, scale) made line and space the means for a critique of architectural enclosure and sculptural monumentality. In its systematic undoing of the calculated geometries and gridlike structures favored by Venezuelan artists at the time, the work interrogated these idealized models of representation and their illusory reflection of a modernized urban space. Gego's "weaving," as she called the process of production

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*Gego. The Reticulárea.
Museo de Bellas Artes, Caracas, 1969.
Photos: Paolo Gasparini.*

that the design of the *Reticulárea* implied, was part and parcel of the constructive ethics that had fueled the country's artistic imaginary in the fifties but which, by the late sixties, was domesticated by the government and the economic elite as a symbol of the country's riches. Gego's *Reticulárea*, in its attack on form and architectural demarcation, went against the grain of standard sculptural bodies (delimited, contained, and massive) to engage marginal spaces, such as the peripheries of rooms that she was at pains to activate in her installations, and to symbolically respond to the repressed borderline sites occupied by the shantytowns of Caracas.

A niece of the medieval art historian Adolph Goldschmidt, who taught the likes of Alexander Dorner, Erwin Panofsky, and Rudolph Wittkover at the University of Berlin, Gego studied architecture and engineering at the Technische Hochschule under the tutelage of Paul Bonatz.¹ With this double degree, from one of the few institutions among Germany's polytechnics that structured its curriculum as an architecture school, the young Gego, a native of Hamburg, arrived in Caracas in August 1939. Gego's artistic development is intimately related to her architectural and engineering training in Stuttgart, the latter predisposing her toward an architectural reading of sculptural space. Intellectually influenced by the polemics surrounding the downfall of modern architecture and avant-garde culture in Nazi Germany, Gego was eager to embrace a sculptural practice prepared to recapture, and later redefine, sculpture's use of real, i.e., architectural, space, and to develop an acute awareness of the urban contradictions of the built environment. It seems logical that at some point her work would go beyond the simple object to engage more complex situations that, as in architecture, would develop modes of public address in which viewers collectively confronted a spatiotemporal field organized according to the matrix of dedifferentiation, which one also recognizes in the post-Minimalist work of Robert Morris and Eva Hesse, whose *Right After* (1969) came to fruition the same year as the *Reticulárea*.

It has often been observed that Gego's *Reticulárea* bears the influence of American engineer Richard Buckminster Fuller, particularly of his geodesic domes. Already in 1969, Venezuelan art critic and historian Lourdes Blanco, in her short but insightful text on Gego's *Reticulárea*, mentioned Buckminster Fuller and Alexander Calder as influential antecedents for the work.² Engineering, like architecture, was for Gego (and a whole generation of artists in the sixties) a compelling field in which radical reconceptualizations and experiments with

1. Gego registered in the department of architecture of the Technische Hochschule of Stuttgart in the winter semester of 1932–33. Bonatz was one of the main exponents of the modernist masonry style that developed in Germany between the wars. He had been influenced by Theodor Fischer's masonry buildings and had put in practice a modernized version of his teacher's style in the railroad station of Stuttgart, which he constructed in collaboration with F. E. Scholer from 1911 to 1928. But Bonatz also favored rather traditional forms and methods of construction. He was a major advocate of the so-called Heimatstil, which derived from the rural German vernacular architecture of the nineteenth century. Bonatz is also known to have opposed the neoclassicism of the Nazi regime, which he regarded as pompous and ornamental, and is best remembered for the bridges that he constructed for the National Socialist government.

2. Lourdes Blanco, *Gego: Reticulárea* (Caracas: Ediciones de la Galería Conkright, 1969).

urban space were taking place. Fuller's masterpiece, a geodesic dome seventy-six meters in diameter constructed on the occasion of the 1967 Universal Exhibition in Montreal for the American Pavilion (and of which Gego was probably aware), embodied a "futuristic optimism"³ directly connected to the new structural and spatial challenges of the period. The geodesic domes, along with other proposals and engineering techniques which focused on lightweight structures that counteracted the tendency toward industrial standardization and institutionalized functionalism of the postwar period, were widely publicized in architectural magazines during the fifties and sixties. In 1962, when Gego was traveling in the United States and Europe studying various pedagogical programs for the first year of architectural school,⁴ André Bloc, editor of *L'architecture d'aujourd'hui*—who had written widely about Carlos Raúl Villanueva's City University, where Gego was a professor of architecture—published an issue on "Architectures Fantastiques." The magazine featured many experimental projects which reconceived the city dweller's relationship to the urban metropolis. The projects shared a fluid conception of space that circumvented the corporate functionalism that had developed within modern architecture and urbanism. All of them, according to architectural historian Mark Wigley, were indebted to the pioneering work of Buckminster Fuller and Konrad Wachsmann.⁵ And indeed, given the fact that Gego's *Reticulárea* is not meant to enclose or cover space as geodesic domes do, it is tempting to find in Gego's work a stronger affinity with Wachsmann's large "metal space-frames" of the early fifties.

Predicated on a modulated system based on standardized elements that allow for multiple combinations, Wachsmann's structures are articulated on the basis of a node (called "universal connector") situated around a main member. From a ring, up to twenty secondary tubes can radiate in any combination of all directions, allowing for an unlimited adaptability to all possible geometric systems.⁶ An analogous connecting device was used by Gego in the *Reticulárea*, where she attached metal rods ending in a loop to a large ring, allowing for pliant articulations. Furthermore, the infinite modularity and open quality of Wachsmann's "space-frames" also resemble, more than the geodesic domes do, the logic of Gego's work.

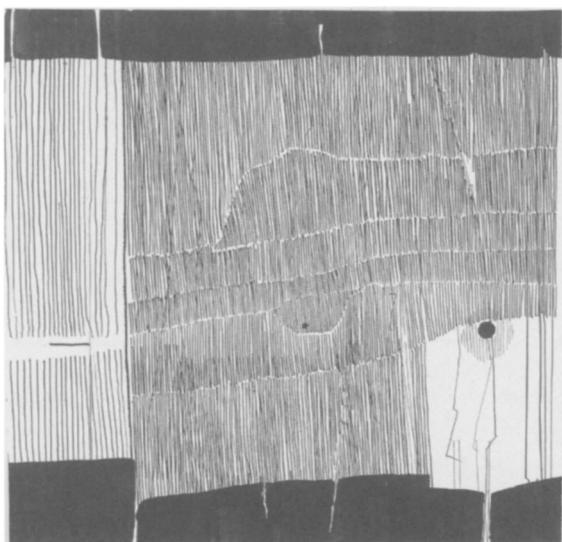
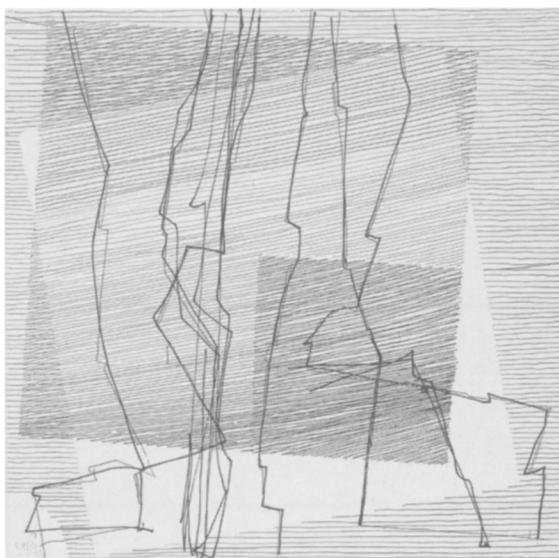
But if these spatial experiments in engineering provided Gego with material to

3. Antoine Picon, ed., *L'Art de l'ingénieur, constructeur, entrepreneur, inventeur* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1997), p. 152.

4. Between 1958 and 1967, Gego taught the basic course in art, and later the workshop for basic composition, at the school of architecture of the Central University in Caracas. From 1964 to 1977 she was professor at the Institute of Design, Neumann Foundation. There she taught courses on "bi-dimensional and three-dimensional form" and "spatial solutions." At the Institute, between 1971 and 1977, she devoted great efforts to develop a seminar on spatial relations, which culminated in two important publications: *Space, Volume, Organization*, published by the Neumann Foundation in 1976, and *Space, Volume, and Organization*, vol. 2, edited by Monteavila Editores in 1979.

5. Mark Wigley, *Constant's New Babylon: The Hyper-Architecture of Desire* (Rotterdam: Witte de With, Center for Contemporary Art, 1998), p. 41.

6. Konrad Wachsmann, *The Turning Point of Building: Structure and Design* (New York: Reinhold Publishing Corporation, 1961), p. 172.



*Gego. Top: Untitled, 1963.
Bottom: Untitled, 1963.
Collection of the Gego Foundation.
Photos: Reinaldo Armas Ponce.*

develop her (anti-) sculptural practice, which she defined in relation to its dismissal of volume and mass, she circumvented their spectacularity, grandiosity, structural precision, functional efficiency, and industrial optimism through strategies of precariousness that bespoke the contradictions of technology. It was through drawing, a medium which, in art as in architecture, is associated with preliminary, that she was able to break free from the containment of the sculptural object.

Indeed, Gego seems to have found in the endless iterability of the line the basis for an alternative artistic practice in which the ideality of geometric abstraction, enthusiastically embraced by artists in Brazil and Venezuela in the fifties, was suspended in the dialectics between the spatial and temporal registers operative in the displacement of line from its pictorial support to real space. Her drawings and prints from the sixties foreground line and the materials used—pen and ink, graphite, crayon, etc.—to deploy, through repetition and disruption, or through minimal interventions on the white page, nonsensical systems and structures that advanced the more radical attacks on the sculptural object of the late sixties and early seventies. Not one of Gego's drawings is like another, and their inordinate force is twofold: they

produce a literal disruption of form and gesture, and they reveal as obsolete any kind of stylistic categorization and/or line encoding. Indeed, browsing over a fraction of the two thousand works on paper, including etchings, lithographs, collages, hand-made books, watercolors, and drawings that the artist made during her lifetime, one is amazed at the diversity of approaches toward form, material, and technique. The one thing shared by these works on paper is the systematic use of the white surface of the support to create diagrams of dispersal that celebrate the margins, interstices, and in-betweenness of the lines, on the one hand undoing the self-sufficiency and semantic transparency of the line, and on the other underscoring the necessarily contextual nature of meaning. Despite the fact that the drawings all feature the line as protagonist, the line shifts dramatically within the work, or from one work to the next, producing modes that oscillate between, while undoing, the gestural and the mechanical.

Drawing provided Gego with strategies of diffusion and disruption akin to the liminal character of the medium. It was her prolific work on paper that delivered the liberatory effect that one perceives in the large environment presented to the public in 1969 and in the small works that preceded the *Reticulárea*. In much of her graphic work, Gego was prone to exploring the boundless possibilities of line, combining structures, moods, and inflections that disrupted any preconceived order. Thus in 1968, aware of this insubordinate quality in Gego's work, Blanco wrote in regard to drawings exhibited that year: "In other cases, this kinship with sculpture takes place when lines break away from their parallel formation and twist in playful disarray in and out of the stated plane." Later in the same article she added,

The lines in Gego's drawing will just as soon submit to a controlled parallel rhythm as to a playful fussy form. And just as she realizes and gives importance to the thickness of a line, Gego knows precisely what the white unmarked space can mean and how it can be brought into a totaling relationship with line.⁷

A series of untitled drawings made in 1969 with black, red, violet, and gray ink rehearsed the structural system deployed by the *Reticulárea*. In this series of drawings, an irregular triangular net covers the white or cream sheet of paper until it overflows its borders. The density of the depicted modules and the thickness of the line varies, at times suggesting volume, at times emphasizing flatness. Continuity with real space was suggested by reference to a long-lasting visual tradition that sought to incorporate the frame by dismissing the margin as a limit, an operation that led to the displacement of line to space and to the ever expansive web of the *Reticulárea* and then on to the deployment of a logic of connectivity and transformation, a process of becoming that would permeate all of Gego's work. It is likely that these drawings were produced in conjunction with, or maybe slightly before, the individual pieces that constituted the large *Reticulárea* of 1969. It was Blanco, once

7. Lourdes Blanco, "Gego's Drawings Appeal to Visual," *Daily Journal* (Caracas), May 19, 1968.



Gego. Untitled. 1969.
Collection of the Gego Foundation.
Photo: Reinaldo Armas Ponce.

again, who recorded this peculiar symbiosis among drawing, sculpture, and space taking place in Gego's work:

Early this year [1969], however, her line took on paper an entirely different character: it became radial, it traced triangles, hexagons. The step into spaces was made with linear elements such as florist and stainless steel wire—clipped to manageable lengths—with which she could draw freely in space, delineating volume without confining it.⁸

Gego had been working on the three-dimensional nets that formed the *Reticulárea* during the first half of 1969,⁹ but their environmental scale was probably influenced by director Miguel Arroyo's invitation to exhibit at the Museo de Bellas Artes de Caracas in June of that year. The work was placed in gallery number eight, a rectangular space that measures 8.34 by 4.35 by 4.50 meters. Photographs of the period, checklists, and several sketches that Gego produced for the installation indicate that the work was composed mostly of "columns," "screens," "appliqués," meshes, and nets made of florist wire, steel, and aluminum based on triangular-hexagonal modules that hung from the ceiling and were distributed irregularly throughout the given space. These individual pieces (there were thirty-six according to one of Gego's checklists) varied in density, scale, and size. They were enumerated and described,

8. Blanco, *Gego: Reticulárea*, n.p.

9. A press review indicates that Gego had worked on the *Reticulárea* for three months prior to the June opening. See "'Reticulárea': Redes Metálicas de Gego en un Ambiente del Museo," *El Nacional* (Caracas), June 6, 1969. On the other hand, a certificate, dated 1974, through which the *Reticulárea* was temporarily given to the Museo de Bellas Artes, dates the piece to 1968–69. This suggests that Gego might have started working on the individual pieces at the end of 1968 (typewritten document, Personal Archives, Gego Foundation, Caracas).

though never titled; and Gego's handwritten notes indicated the orientation of the pieces in relation to the ceiling (i.e., horizontal, vertical), the wall on which they were to be located, and their placement on that wall, or if they were to go in the center of the room. From other checklists we learn that the "screens" were the larger, more bi-dimensional nets that Gego situated at irregular intervals along the perimeter of the room.¹⁰ The "columns" hung from the ceiling toward the floor. The "appliqués" and "horizontals" designated the smaller pieces that were attached to the wall and those which hung parallel to the ceiling, like "clouds" or "beehives," to use Venezuelan poet Hanni Ossott's terminology.¹¹

The checklists were structured loosely and their nomenclature, while simple, was not consistent. They attested to Gego's habit of organizing and recording all aspects of her work, while also mirroring the unregulated, unforeseeable, and arbitrary way in which she distributed the pieces in the space. Contingency went hand in hand with the unpredictable metamorphosis and fluid boundaries of the work, to which new pieces were added on account of sales, accidents, or the artist's habit of giving her work to friends. As a consequence, the identity of the work was constantly destabilized, not only by the different spaces in which it was shown and by its lack of conventional supports, but also because the constitutive units changed, with some accidentally destroyed or sold and others made anew to dialogue with the corresponding space.¹² Indeed, Gego's sketches and checklists, like the *Reticulárea* itself, were constantly transformed: words and instructions were crossed out; new units, new shapes and new positions were added; numbers symbolizing nets were repeated in the sketches; and floor plans for the organization of the piece were rehearsed. Everything indicated the fluid structure of the work

10. Sketches and checklists produced for the exhibition in Gego's personal archives, Gego Foundation, Caracas.

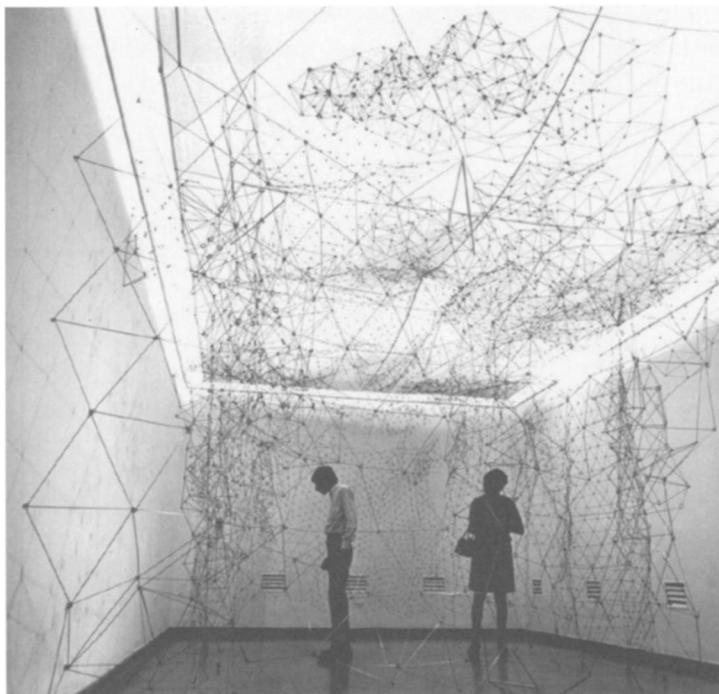
11. In 1977 Hanni Ossott wrote—with Gego's collaboration—the first thorough analysis of the artist's work. It was published in the catalog that accompanied Gego's important retrospective at the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Caracas. See Hanni Ossott, *Gego* (Caracas: Museo de Arte Contemporáneo, 1977).

12. In December of 1969 the *Reticulárea* was also shown in New York at the Center for Interamerican Relations as part of an exhibition entitled *Latin America: New Paintings and Sculpture: Juan Downey, Agustín Fernández, Gego, Gabriel Morera*. In March 1975 the work participated in an exhibition entitled *Relations and Contrasts in Venezuelan Painting* at the Museo de Bellas Artes. Remaining in the same gallery, it was also in an exhibition that celebrated the official opening of the renovated Museo de Bellas Artes building on October 15, 1976. The exhibition was entitled *The Plastic Arts in Venezuela* and it was organized as a salon, while also featuring works from the permanent collection. It was then that the *Reticulárea* was awarded the first prize and acquired by the Museo de Bellas Artes. At the end of 1976, the *Reticulárea*, along with the entire collection of Venezuelan art of the Museo de Bellas Artes, became part of the collection of the Galería de Arte Nacional. There, the *Reticulárea* was installed in gallery one at the beginning of 1977, and that year it was in another group show entitled *Venezuelan Contemporary Art*. After three years of discussions, the permanent installation of the *Reticulárea* took place in 1980. In 1982, Dietrich Mahlow, a German curator and critic friend of Gego, invited the artist to participate in a group exhibition at the Alte Oper in Frankfurt entitled *Spielraum-Raumspiele (Playroom-Roomplay)*, which opened on August 28. The work was shown along with *Roaratorio*, a sound piece by John Cage. In approximately four months, Gego created a new *Reticulárea*. The production of this iteration of the work involved, more so than on previous occasions, an intense amount of labor, which relied on the participation of friends and colleagues.

despite Gego's detailed planning. These documents oscillated between an orientational plan and the diagrammatic representation of a zone of indeterminacy that testified to Gego's frustrated attempt to bridge the gap between idea and representation, knowledge and understanding. In notes for her class, probably written in 1969, she stated in her still stilted Spanish: "There is one thing: to do something and to understand something [*sic*]. But one understands only when one knows and one knows when one has experienced, lived it."¹³ But as the *Reticulárea* plunged into excess and disarray, order, as advocated by Gego's rigorous architectural training, proved unsustainable: terms, diagrams and sketches could not map, project, or rationalize the spatial and linear reversals operative in her work. The decentralized, antihierarchical, layered, and multiplicitous logic of the *Reticulárea* defied the structure of the logos in favor of affection and perception, advancing the rhizomatic associations that the work would later generate in its displacement of volume in favor of a surface of intensities.

The various ensemble of pieces that constituted the *Reticulárea* defied description. Even some of the most regularly modulated screens enhanced the irregularity and formlessness of the whole by their undoing of two-dimensionality, as some of them were bent to purposely deform the gridlike structure of the web.

13. Gego, untitled manuscript, Personal Archives, Gego Foundation, Caracas.



Gego. The Reticulárea. Museo de Bellas Artes, Caracas, 1969. Photo: Paolo Gasparini.

Several of the horizontal pieces created three-dimensional clusters of metal that were defined as “clouds,” “nests,” or “beehives,” but they did not correspond to any shape or form, either natural or machine made. Despite its basic geometric configuration, one that is predicated on a triangular grid with variable intersections, the *Reticulárea*'s most obvious operation was to dismantle the eidetic quality of geometry, the “ideal realm of construction.”¹⁴ In Ossott's words,

where in the work of Gego the most rigorous ordering of the elements is presented, a mocking to the number, the measurement, is also introduced. And if there, an eye thinks, another part of [this eye] devotes itself to erase all knowledge. Error means here willingness to fail . . .¹⁵

An unconscious, formless, “other” geometry emerged, one in which defined form was substituted by flexible and unpredictable connections. To this end, Gego devised systems of linkage that facilitated an irregular modularity, which undermined the homogeneity we associate with grids. Discontinuity, disjunction, heterogeneity, and fragmentation were woven into the *Reticulárea* to produce a space that disregarded the univocity and internal coherence of cubic architectural spaces and self-contained sculptural bodies. Most important, the performative dimension of the *Reticulárea*, through which the work shifted from two-dimensional to three-dimensional, from object to environment, from field to collapsible net, from art to event, embodied a pliant logic rather than an organic one.

Indeed, assessments of Gego's work have used the term “organic constructivism” to describe her precarious geometries. In 1977 the Argentine critic Marta Traba defined the organic in relation to Gego's work:

Gego thinks that adequate forms correspond to the functions that exist in nature. She thus establishes a homology between the real and dynamic *existence* of that vast organic ensemble, and the *aspect* that covers each one of its components. Things live, namely, they function, with an end and a goal: such a necessary and just functioning determines form . . . to Gego it is crucial to understand the structures of the organic form, the internal order that is verified in nature, the adequate relations of the parts to the whole.¹⁶

But despite Gego's continuous interest in and references to nature, the transitional and marginal, peripheral and supple, pliant and twisted behavior of the *Reticulárea* defied the functional logic of organicism with its significant relationships among parts. Instead, the work's “rhizomatic” behavior was acknowledged by German architect Christian Thiel, who helped Gego install her last *Reticulárea* at

14. Ossott, *Gego*, p. 9.

15. *Ibid.*

16. Marta Traba, *Gego* (Caracas: Museo de Arte Contemporáneo, 1977), n.p. Emphasis in original. On the organic and constructivist metaphors in modern sculpture, see Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1977), pp. 57–67, 138–46.

the Alte Oper in Frankfurt in 1982. In a brief letter dated November 12, 1983, Thiel indicated to Gego how much her work seemed to operate according to this term appropriated and developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their book *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, which had been recently published (in 1980) and was popular among architects.¹⁷ There is no doubt that the association was motivated by the work's open and dysfunctional demeanor. As Deleuze and Guattari observed in "Rhizome," the introduction to their book, the tree is the image of the world in classical thought. The classical book responds to this notion of the root as the image of the tree-world: "This is the classical book, as noble, signifying, and subjective organic interiority (the strata of the book)." They add:

One becomes two: whenever we encounter this formula, even stated strategically by Mao or understood in the most "dialectical" way possible, what we have before us is the most classical and well-reflected, oldest, and weariest kind of thought. Nature doesn't work that way: in nature roots are taproots with a more multiple, lateral, and circular system of ramification, rather than a dichotomous one.¹⁸

Against the binary logic of classicism, multiplicity engendered by rhizomes operates with a frank disregard for centralized systems that rely on a strong principal unity. Against idealized structures (social, visual, conceptual, linguistic, etc.), rhizomatic performance undoes Platonism and instead favors heterogeneity, antihierarchical connections, and an affective materialism that is mutable and transitory. It changes its nature as it increases its connections: in it, there are no positions, only lines.¹⁹ Reticular configurations are also antagonistic to centralized structures.²⁰ Not only do they not have a center, top, or bottom, but they also mark and disrupt the homogeneous quality of a space organized according to Cartesian coordinates. Their capacity to occupy interstitial spaces was exploited by the *Reticulárea*, whose reticules can be expanded infinitely while welcoming disruptions and broken lineages generative of multiple differences that dismiss ideas of unity, sameness, and identity. Instead of treating her reticules as objects, the artist wove together the margins of the room, celebrating an in-betweenness that attested to the connective impulse of the work. The implications of this scattered configuration are clear: it undermines the authority of the autonomous sculptural object and of the monument; it is attentive to circumstances and context (the socio-cultural milieu in which the work is produced) in its transformation of abstract space

17. Christian Thiel, letter to Gego, November 12, 1983, Personal Archives, Gego Foundation, Caracas.

18. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 5.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

20. According to Yves Christen, as quoted by Deleuze and Guattari, a nonevolutionist scheme might have to substitute "reticular schemas . . . for the bush or tree schemas used to represent evolution" (*ibid.*, p. 10).

into specific place; and it problematizes recognition and representation in being dismissive of identity (of fixed artistic categories such as sculpture, architecture, and drawing) and the ontological certainty that accompanies our classical understanding of space, mind/body, and objects. Accordingly, one of the work's most palpable operations is a diffracting effect that undoes the fixed boundaries between perceptions and positions, not to mention drawing and sculpture, volume and space, virtuality and reality, in favor of a nontotalized process of aesthetic production that acts as a figuration of the historical, material, and affective situation the work occupies. Indeed, in Gego's substitution of a pliant geometry for the geometric abstract object, the work does away with conventional hierarchies that rule spatial apprehension: inside and outside, up and down, left and right: in short, *point of view*. Thus, the *Reticulárea* manages to deliver a subtle critique of classical rationalism and the fixed structures upon which it is predicated by decentering the viewer's positionality and frustrating the artificial separation of the spatiotemporal registers upon which objective analysis depends.

As German social theorist Niklas Luhmann has observed, European rationality, as a unified semantic, is characterized by its use of distinctions. At stake is a "narrator who stages the narration—whether of the novel or of world history—in which he no longer appears,"²¹ an observer who draws distinctions and who remains unobserved; who distinguishes what he observes from everything else that remains as "unmarked space"; who observes from this "unmarked space": "The person, whom one could ask: why this and not another way."²² This presupposes a society of consent "arbitrated" from positions of authority within the system. To challenge these "uncontested standpoints," Luhmann proposes to operate on the basis of only one distinction: that between system and environment, self-reference and external reference, and the imaginary space of possible combinations this distinction produces. Such a strategy, claims Luhmann,

calls for consistently "autological" concepts, since the observer must also recognize himself as a system-in-the-environment as long as he carries out observations and connects them recursively. The narrator appears himself in what he narrates. He is observable as an observer. He constitutes himself in his own field—and thereby necessarily in the mode of contingency, that is, with an awareness of other possibilities.²³

The reentry of the observer, the "self," in the system, shatters the false unity of a world in harmony. Instead, it reveals the observer as observable, and underlines the condition that "observation in the world makes the world visible—and invisible."²⁴ Therein, argues Luhmann, lies the foundational contingency of modernity,

21. Niklas Luhmann, "European Rationality," in *Rethinking Imagination: Culture and Creativity*, ed. Gillian Robinson and John Rundell (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 67.

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*, p. 73.

24. *Ibid.*

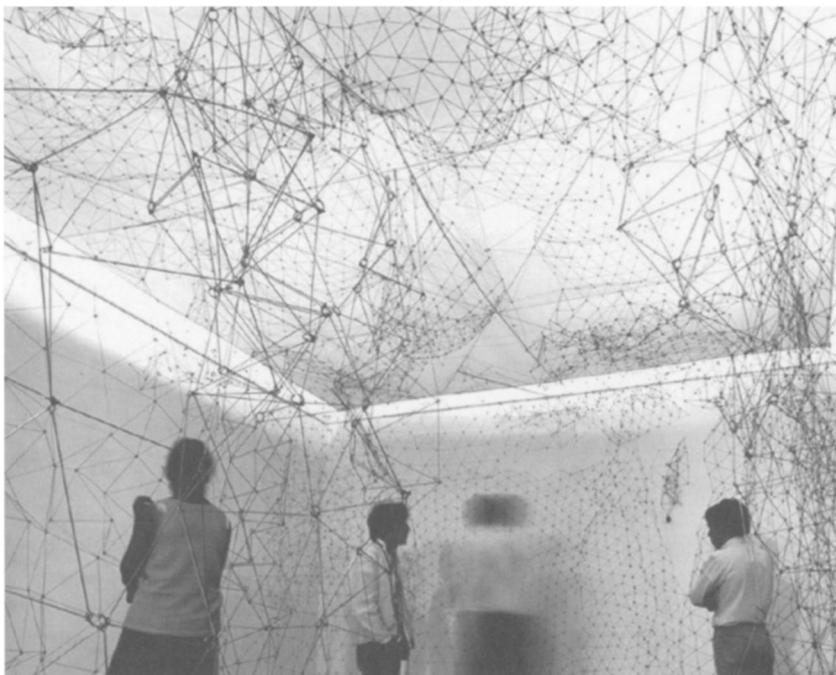
predicated on a set of linked alternatives in which value has been substituted for positions and functions vulnerable to further observation. Without a center of consensus, a vulnerable space of intensities, of competing descriptions and partial observations, is the only ground for the legitimacy of modernity.²⁵

That Gego's work would embody a spatial field of multiple connections between its constitutive units—materially discontinuous, and structurally and visually inconsistent—would suit her position as a Jewish woman émigré in the periphery who produced her most radical work at the age of 54—challenging expectations about hegemonic cultural production, male artistic supremacy, and the myth of a youthful avant-garde, and substituting instead a politics of location and contingency. I would like to suggest thus, that Gego's *Reticulárea* articulates a model of spectatorship in which, following Luhmann, the observer reenters observation, “constitutes [herself] in [her] own field—and thereby necessarily in the mode of contingency, that is, with an awareness of other possibilities.”²⁶

How important the observer was for the meaning of the work is evident in the photographic record of the different installations of the *Reticulárea*. Most of the photographs feature visitors and their interaction with the work. The images

25. Niklas Luhmann, *Observaciones de la modernidad. Racionalidad y contingencia en la sociedad moderna* (Barcelona: Paidós, 1997). On Luhmann's understanding of modernity and its affinities with the semantics of postmodernism, see William Rasch, *Niklas Luhmann's Modernity: The Paradoxes of Differentiation* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000), pp. 1–28.

26. Luhmann, “European Rationality,” p. 73.



Gego. *The Reticulárea*. Museo de Bellas Artes, Caracas, 1969. Photo: Paolo Gasparini.

point to the *Reticulárea's* capacity to address not one but many spectators. Peter Hönig, who was in charge of photographing the work in Germany on the occasion of its 1982 installation, wrote to Gego that he could not conceive of the work without people; that he had the impression that it could not be considered in isolation, without taking into account the close relationship between observer and work.²⁷ But the position of these observers is also important to understand the spectatorial model at stake. Unable to distance themselves from the work, viewers cannot occupy an “unmarked space,” a riveting point of view from where to describe the work/world. Local reviewers also emphasized the enveloping quality of the environment, which could not be apprehended as a definite whole but instead had to be experienced. The operation was one of fusion with the work rather than analytical observation of the work. Guevara, one of *Reticulárea's* most careful observers, wrote that here “the drawing of lines has jumped to real space, the environment, to surround the spectator in a new and effective experience.” In lieu of one space, the viewer was in the presence of a thousand fused spaces in “discontinuous equilibrium,” wrote Guevara. “It is as if we walked inside one of Gego’s drawings [which] suddenly materialized making real space its own.”²⁸ Against the unified quality of object-bound works of art, Guevara emphasized that within the *Reticulárea*,

each corner, each change of visual objective, each mental precision of [what has been] observed, means a new vision, a different aspect, unique in its own. From one spectator to the other, from one attitude to the other, the work also transforms itself, varies, fluctuates, develops.²⁹

This temporal sequencing that characterizes the *Reticulárea* must be sustained by the viewer, he clarified, “because we become part of it, because once inside, outside feeling is inconceivable.”³⁰ Guevara attributed the “discontinuous equilibrium” of the *Reticulárea* to the interruptions in material, scale, form, and structure posed by the work, which generated a multiplicity of spaces that could not be submitted to any kind of overarching scheme. Inside the *Reticulárea* the effect was one of alloverness, undetermined boundaries, and uncharted fields in which line demarcates but never delimits space.

Indeed, the dispersed body of the *Reticulárea* is woven into space itself—is part and parcel of our apprehension of it, not as an idealized, homogeneous entity, but as a circumstantially inflected field. The viewer, too, is woven into the *Reticulárea* and the surrounding space; she sees herself as observer, reenters observation, and destabilizes the authority of an omnipresent observer. And what is observed is always different, always partial, always a fragment, never whole. At

27. Peter Hönig, letter to Gego, December 17, 1982, Personal Archives, Gego Foundation, Caracas.

28. Roberto Guevara, “‘Reticulárea’ de Gego,” *El Nacional* (Caracas), June 10, 1969.

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*

times it might appear structural, and at times linear, at times clear and at times messy, at times geometrical but generally formless. In Ossott's words:

And if, slightly tired, the viewer abandons the discovery of the constructive character of the forms, letting the work to rest and abandoning the perception of the modes in which it was configured, so that there something other is shown . . . then, in that moment of rest, emerges an always inconclusive configuration, always in the making, a work open to error . . .³¹

Aware of what escapes all observation, Luhmann writes: "One cannot see what one cannot see, but perhaps one can at least see that one cannot see what one cannot see."³² Incapable of embodying wholeness, the *Reticulárea*'s implicit boundlessness and defiance of structure prescribes this incapacity. The viewer finds him or herself inescapably occupying, while constantly unfolding, the blind spot of observation.

*

Five years later Gego would have the opportunity to increase the rhizomatic potential of the *Reticulárea* by furthering sculptural disintegration and arriving at a sort of nothingness that would frustrate the identity and illusory culmination of the 1969 environment. In 1974 the *Reticulárea* was installed in gallery one of the new building of the Museo de Bellas Artes. There the piece acquired a more sculptural quality, since it could be read as a volume, a semitransparent and indescribable volume, which hung from a metal grid and measured approximately 3.5 by 5.4 by 5 meters.³³ Ceiling pieces and "appliqués" seem to have been obliterated, and the large screens were hung one next to the other, further undoing any kind of structural transparency. In photographs, the resulting configuration resembles a big knot, a cluster of entangled metal, formless, shapeless, and with imprecise boundaries. Grouped tightly, some of the columns and screens touched the floor while other pieces were suspended between ceiling and floor. In photographic details of the work, the triangular structure is barely discernible, so that the geometric reference seems to have been displaced by a maze of lines. This effect was produced by the proximity of the nets and meshes, whose arrangement here followed the principle of accumulation and agglomeration rehearsed loosely in the 1969 installations. As a consequence of this absolute disregard for structure, clarity gave way to opacity and the consequent dismissal of linearity, precision, contour, boundary, and form, in favor of fusion, flux, and flow. Although less dispersed and more "sculptural" than the environmental installations of 1969, the elusive "volume" of 1974, which returned the viewer's gaze and could be walked around, allowed no

31. Ossott, *Gego*, p. 6.

32. Luhmann, "European Rationality," p. 77.

33. Sketch (dated 1975), Personal Archives, Gego Foundation, Caracas.

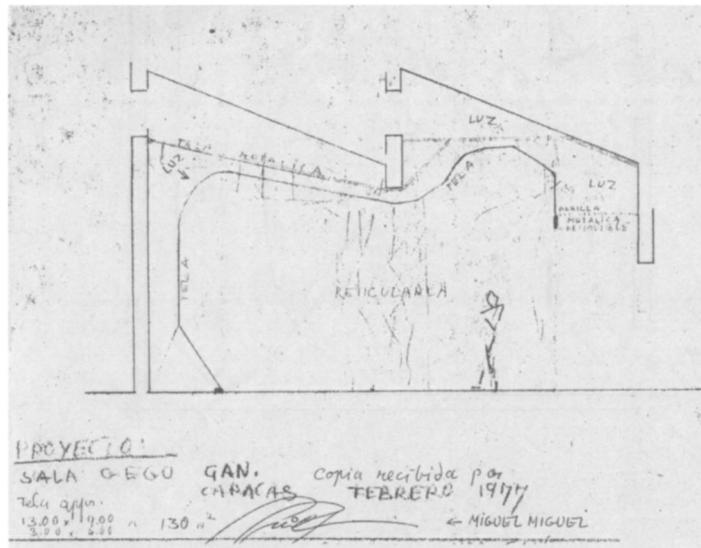
process of identification between viewer and work. Unable to grasp the underlying logic of this amorphous object, the spectator had to be satisfied with only surfaces and comply with the structural opacity of this “big nothing.”³⁴

At the end of 1976, the *Reticulárea*, along with the entire collection of Venezuelan art in the Museo de Bellas Artes, became part of the collection of the Galería de Arte Nacional, where it was installed at the beginning of 1977. Once again, the work mutated into a disfigured body that could not be penetrated or walked through as it had appeared in the 1969 installation. The large scale of the rooms and the work's relation with other works on display emphasized the fuzzy and indeterminate outlines that this version of the *Reticulárea* generated. In both installations of the seventies, the scriptural quality that Guevara had recognized in the work as early as 1970, when he defined the *Reticulárea's* behavior as “zigzagging writing,” was exploited to its fullest, in favor not of scriptural meaning but of the release that one associates with doodles, graffiti, and “automatic writing.”³⁵ A written body in which legibility was dramatically obliterated, this version of the *Reticulárea* was a direct attack on organic notions of the sculptural body as whole, unified and standard, in favor of a deformable mass irreducible to delineation.

That these clustered, more bodily than spatial configurations of the seventies became a relevant model to Gego is evident from two 1977 sketches for a future permanent installation of the *Reticulárea*. As soon as the work became part of the collection of the Galería de Arte Nacional, plans were made to house the work permanently in one of the galleries. Sketches for this installation show plans

34. From Eva Hesse's diaries in her description of *Right After* (1969), as cited in Lucy R. Lippard, *Eva Hesse* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992), p. 161.

35. Roberto Guevara, “Revision,” *Papel Literario*, *El Nacional*, (Caracas), June 21, 1970.



Gego. Sketch for the permanent installation of *The Reticulárea*. 1977.



Gego. *The Reticulárea*.
 Museo de Bellas Artes,
 Caracas, 1974.
 Photo: Paolo Gasparini.

to install the work in a tent. But this time Gego placed the majority of nets in a central area while a smaller group of hanging pieces was to be located to the right of the entrance to the room. The central grouping was to be approximately 4.5 x 4 meters and the circulation of the visitor predicated on a rotary motion bordering the conglomerate of nets. It is obvious that Gego was thinking of recent installations, such as the ones described above, as a viable, if crucially different model of undoing spectatorial stasis and sculptural equilibrium.

If the 1969 installations of the *Reticulárea* were able to postpone the transcendentalism and universal character of geometry and Cartesian space, these later installations resisted the idea of a sculptural body and the related notions of defined shape, proportion, and interiority. The work's distorted and amorphous effects were partly the result of unpredictable connections between drawing and sculpture, space and line, geometry and cluster, inside and outside. And in this hybrid approach the work advanced the concept of *bicho* (bug), which was the term increasingly used by Gego to refer to all her three-dimensional work, probably in an effort to avoid a conventional terminology associated with sculpture and the fine arts. This word, which can be found on the cover of the three notebooks that record all of Gego's three-dimensional work from 1957 to 1989, first appears in reference to a small work entitled *Invisible Dog or Bug* from 1965. The small piece, accidentally destroyed, was Gego's most iconic work, although sketchy and freely made with strands of thin metal that were easy to manipulate. In Spanish *bicho* means animal or bug. In Venezuela, *bicho* is also used as a colloquial interjection of rejection, a pejorative designation, and a related word such as *bichero* is used to refer to groupings of heterogeneous animals or objects.

The word *bicho*, like the term “messy,” recurs throughout Gego’s lists and descriptions of her work, and is evidence of the artist’s disdain for tectonic legibility, structural precision, and medium specificity. Curiously enough, in Spanish, *bicho* also refers, according to the *Real Academy Spanish Dictionary*, to a person whose form or appearance is absurd, and/or a person with bad intentions. While it is likely that Gego, in using *bicho* to describe her three-dimensional work, was appropriating the humble and anti-idealistic connotations of the word, it is interesting to note that installations of the *Reticulárea* in the seventies did resemble a huge, disfigured, deformed sculptural body—a sculptural *bicho*, one might say. This flow between space and body that the *Reticulárea* incarnated has been theoretically articulated by architect Greg Lynn in his counterproposal for “The proportional correspondence between a temple and a *well-shaped man*. . . .”³⁶ Against the notion of body and architecture as a closed system of proportional orders and functional relations between constituent parts, Lynn proposes bodily deformations through the deployment of local alliances and connections of base matter. “This model of ‘continuous transformation’ proposes that ‘bodies emerge through processes of differentiation, yielding varying degrees of unity based on specific affiliations and mutations.’”³⁷ And borrowing from feminist French writer Luce Irigaray, Lynn proposes an alternative bodily scheme, one ruled by the condition of viscosity. Thus, he writes, “Viscosity is a quality of being mutable or changeable in response to both favorable and unfavorable situations that occur by vicissitude.”³⁸ Or, again, referring to Irigaray’s exploration of the fluid quality of the feminine: “the viscous [is] the model for relations of the ‘*near and not the proper*.’”³⁹

In its improper use of geometry, its attack on gestalt and organic integrity, its deployment of a deformative matrix and dismissal of proportions, symmetry, and delineation, the *Reticulárea* of the seventies advanced the idea of *bicho*, of residue and disfiguration used by Gego to counteract the authority of the sculptural signifier. In its dismissal of the notion of self-identity and its mutational capacity, the more bodily *Reticulárea* of the seventies rejected the correspondence between the ideality of geometries and the ideality of bodies, of “man as measure of all things,” of “man” as the standard ideal. Hence these seventies installations, in their dialogue with central geometric abstract works of the period (produced by Gego’s male colleagues), rebelliously embraced a certain monstrosity.

For Brian Massumi, “monstrosity,”⁴⁰ following the rhizomatic logic of Deleuze and Guattari, is associated with processes of becoming and mutation. “Becoming-other” responds to a desire to escape fixation, sameness, bodily limitation, and idealized abstraction in the face of constraints that the body-in-becoming transforms

36. Greg Lynn, “Body Matters,” in *Folds, Bodies & Blobs: Collected Essays* (Brussels: La lettre volée, 1998), p. 135. Emphasis in original.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 137.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 145.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 146. Emphasis in original.

40. Brian Massumi, *A User’s Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992).

into opportunities. The body-in-becoming undoes habitual patterns of action, and preestablished organization and boundaries, and it is always singular in its mutational capacity to challenge the standard. Accordingly, feminist writer Rosi Braidotti, in her exploration of the sequence “Mothers, Monsters and Machines,”⁴¹ refers to the idea of monstrosity as a deviation from the norm. A closer reading of the term in relation to the feminine body leads her to unearth disturbing but by now expected historical associations. In literature, Western philosophy, scientific discourse, and psychoanalysis, “woman” is the negative term of the binary logic that rules Western thought. Furthermore, Braidotti writes,

The woman's body can change shape in pregnancy and childbearing; it is therefore capable of defeating the notion of fixed *bodily form*, of visible, recognizable, clear, and distinct shapes as that which marks the contour of the body. She is morphologically dubious. . . . Woman/mother is monstrous by excess; she transcends established norms and transgresses boundaries. She is monstrous by lack: woman/mother does not possess the substantive unity of the masculine subject. Most important, through her identification with the feminine she is monstrous by displacement: as sign of the in-between areas, of the indefinite, the ambiguous.⁴²

In-betweenness, indefiniteness/infinity, and ambiguity are of course tropes that I've been using to describe the spatial behavior of the 1969 *Reticulárea*. And if I am compelled to displace these tropes onto a bodily reading of the 1970s installations of the work, it is because they seem to be aware of the (sculptural) body as something that has to come under attack. Opaque and impenetrable, clustered and unruly, the *Reticulárea* was the “other” to the perfect virtual cubes of Kinetic art, which, by the seventies, had become the “standard” in the Venezuelan urban landscape.⁴³

A text by philosopher Elizabeth Grosz links feminist concerns about monstrosity with an architecture of excess.⁴⁴ She proposes, through a confrontation of structures of waste (Alphonso Lingis's community of outcasts and the marginalized, Georges Bataille's notion of “unproductive expenditure,” and Irigaray's

41. Rosi Braidotti, “Mothers, Monsters and Machines,” in *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). Braidotti's intention here is to delineate “a new figuration of feminist subjectivity” that takes into consideration recent developments in the field of biotechnology, “particularly artificial procreation” (p. 78).

42. Braidotti, pp. 82–83. On the relevance of the Deleuzian text and the logics of the rhizome for feminism, see also Rosi Braidotti, “Toward a New Nomadism: Feminist Deleuzian Tracks; or, Metaphysics and Metabolism,” and Elizabeth Grosz, “A Thousand Tiny Sexes: Feminism and Rhizomatics,” in *Gilles Deleuze and the Theater of Philosophy*, ed. Constantin V. Boundas and Dorothea Olkowski (New York: Routledge, 1994).

43. Luis Enrique Pérez Oramas has written thoroughly and intelligently about the relationship between Gego's work and Venezuelan Kinetic art. See his “Gego and the Analytic Context of Cinetismo,” in *Inverted Utopias: Avant-Garde Art in Latin America*, ed. Mari Carmen Ramirez and Hector Olea (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), and “Gego: Laocoonte, las Redes y la Indecisión de las Cosas,” in *Gego: Obra Completa, 1955–1990*, ed. Iris Peruga (Caracas: Fundación Cisneros, 2003).

44. Elizabeth Grosz, “Architecture of Excess,” in *Anymore*, ed. Cynthia C. Davidson (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000), pp. 260–66.

maternal-feminine) to destabilize the authoritarian, monumental, and bureaucratic structure of architecture by positing a feminine economy of surplus as a radical alternative to patriarchal notions of space and time. The Irigarayan interval is here the operative term: “Undecidably spatial and temporal,” the interval embodies a passage, an in-betweenness that displaces the conventional opposition between externalized feminine spatiality and interiorized masculine duration—a philosophical aporia that posits the maternal feminine as the ground, the place, and the space that underlies male identity and its structured systems of spatial and material organization. Excess left by the weaving of space and time, “site of their difference and their interchange,” the interval might be made central to an architecture

in which the “more” is not cast off but made central, in which expenditure is sought out, in which instability, fluidity, the return of space to the bodies whose morphologies it upholds and conforms, in which the monstrous and the extra-functional, where consumption as much as production, act as powerful forces.⁴⁵

The utter dysfunctionality, anti-organicism, and linear excess deployed by the deformed body of the *Reticulárea* is the result of its anti-architectural stance and lawless incontinence. The latter refers to the work’s paradoxical combination of dispersed and sheltering effects, infinite and erratic, defiant of the conquering gaze of the observer. And this logic makes one ask if this pulsation of the work between entrapment and infinite release, between accumulation and dispersal, was an effort to think a “monstrous architecture.” Or was it an effort to think *the* monstrous architecture of Caracas, the same one that architectural historian Juan Pedro Posani described in the sixties, with allusions to organic dysfunction and to eclecticism as a system?⁴⁶ Or perhaps the work tried to embody that “other” “monstrous architecture,” the one that disturbed the urban “normalcy” of the city

45. Ibid., p. 264.

46. In 1969, the year that the *Reticulárea* was installed for the first time, *Caracas a través de su arquitectura* (Caracas through Its Architecture) was published. There, Posani assessed the current urban situation of the city in the following terms: “Everything proceeds without cohesion. The incongruous repetition of studies, of research, is part of all the offices and organisms concerned, independently of course, with Caracas. Confusion, uncontrol, inappropriateness dominate. Decisions are not taken, and when they are taken, either they are taken late or do not become reality for lack of adequate organic, financial, juridical, and political means.” Posani underlined as pervasive the lack of permanence and the absence of spatial and temporal rigor in urban planning. “The city,” he wrote, “renovates itself continuously by superposed or contiguous pieces, with a permanent insurgency of new uses next to the residues of others more diverse and old. Next to empty lots, the product of collapsed houses that were never substituted, rise lot-line walls belonging to tall office buildings and one-level commercial buildings. This produces a total absence of visual coherence, which does not achieve the quality of a congruent superposition either. But, aside from that, for twenty years, the people of the city have gotten used to live among works in demolition, being remodeled or in construction, to circulate through streets in permanent crisis of being open and closed between dust and noise” (Graziano Gasparini and Juan Pedro Posani, *Caracas a través de su arquitectura* [Caracas: Armitano Editores, 1998], pp. 514, 516–17).

and is consistently thematized as the residue of modernity, the marginal site *par excellence*, literally, the land of the outcast: the shantytown.

Indeed, if there is a “monstrous architecture,” an architecture of the “near and not the proper,” a sheltering architecture that grows at the margins of the city, not only on the hills that surround it, or on abandoned lots, but also in between middle-class, even rich neighborhoods, in between commercial and residential areas, in public plazas and underneath bridges and highways, it is the shanty. Totally unrepresentable, obliterated from official visual discourse (shantytowns are not marked on maps), they are defined as informal, irregular, uncontrolled, subnormal, spontaneous, and illegal. Eliminating this unavoidable residual urban architecture has been the backbone of all Venezuelan political programs. Oblivious to efforts to think the shantytown as a peculiar urban formation that requires specific ways of integration into the life of the metropolis, past governments and economic elites helped to redefine it as the quintessential negative space.

One should not be surprised, then, that some of Grosz's suggestions for a monstrous, alternative architecture coincide with the unorthodox, fluid, and rhizomatic nature of the shanty (which grows and divides itself by adapting to the needs of its inhabitants, has multiple entrances, is alterable, establishes circumstantial connections between heterogeneous spaces, never obeys a master plan, multiplies and decomposes at the same time, collapses public and private spaces, labor and leisure, family and community, micropolitics and life). Accordingly, Grosz argues for an architecture shaped by the events, objects, and people who inhabit it, a heterogeneous space capable of housing multiplicity, an architecture of passage, of domestic and civil mobility. She returns to an association between the maternal body and the sheltering function of architecture to posit as central to the radical project of a “monstrous architecture,” “an economy of pure gift . . . of immense expenditure . . . of excessive generosity.”⁴⁷ Could not one ask if, in its embodiment of a “crisis” (of geometric abstraction, of linearity, of urban space), in its aggregational logic, in its antisculptural stance, the *Reticulárea* pronounced itself as residue and margin, as nonfunctional space outside architecture, as pure excess . . . as gift? Is it possible to read in the tensions between fragmented space and irregular body in Gego's *Reticulárea* the perpetual becoming of the shanty, with its emphasis on sheltering the body as opposed to building permanent architectures?

I want to argue in light of the present study that Gego's work represents, in the isolation of its sculptural parameters, the singularity of its morphological structure, and in its peculiar historical position, a response to the spectacularity of Venezuelan Kinetic art and its formulaic and monumental organization. The *Reticulárea's* recurrent deformation of the grid and topological reversals embraced the (ideal) world of geometries, systems, and organization only to undermine it from within. In its dialogue with the legacy of constructivism, the functionalist language of architecture and engineering, the building of a country characterized

47. Grosz, “An Architecture of Excess,” p. 265.

by extremes of wealth and underdevelopment, the work was both a symptom and a model for the discontinuous social and cultural fabric of the country. Is the work's emphasis on layering, accumulation, eidetic opacity, dispersal, and formlessness then a response to the supple and precarious urban situation that characterized the South American postwar metropolis?

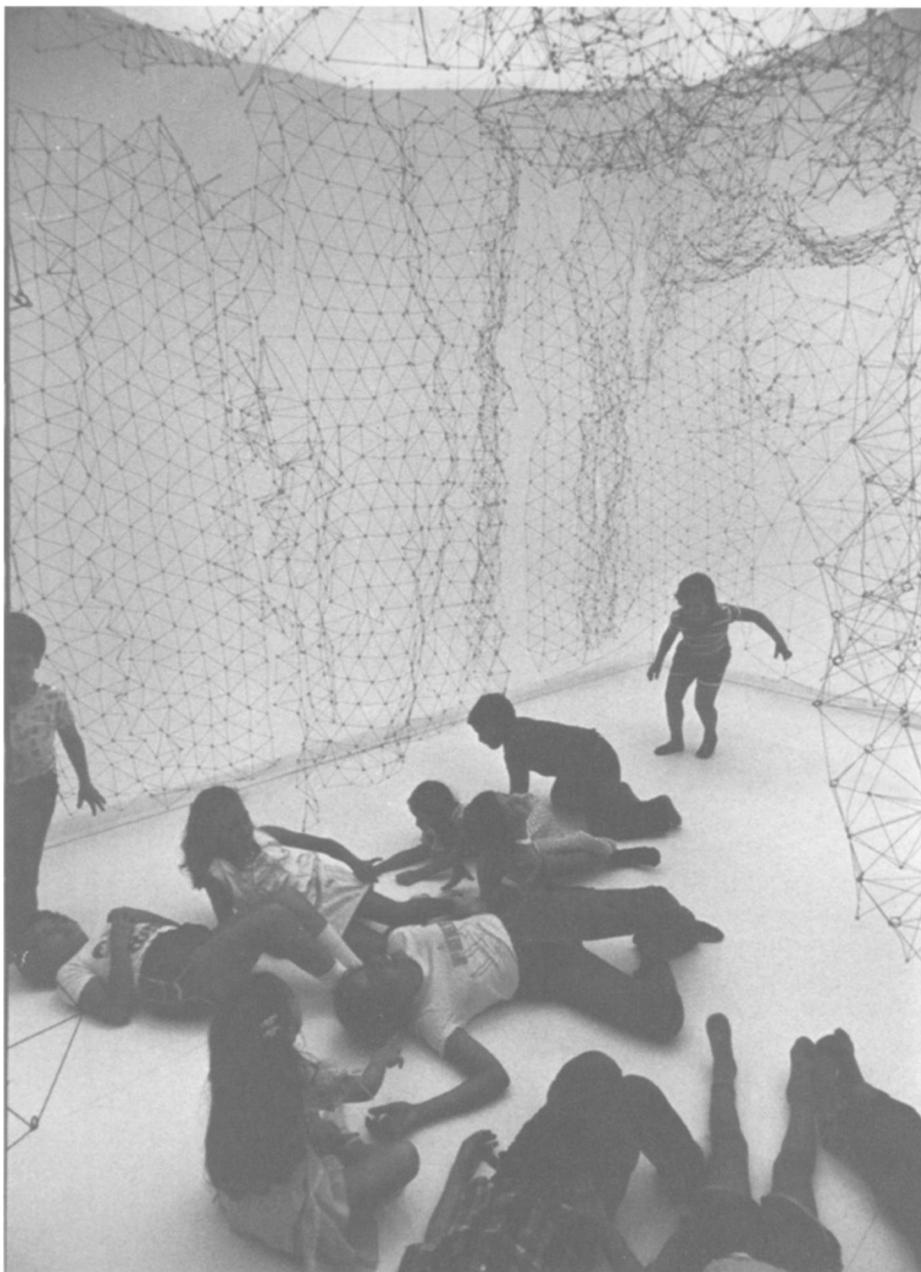
There is no larger record, aside from some scattered notes, of Gego's discursive engagement with the cultural and social issues of her time. But the times were discursive, and the fifties' rhetoric of progress and development, the ground from which a new modern and technologically advanced society, based on the riches of the soil, would be constructed, was replaced in the sixties by clashes between a wealthy state and its erratic urban and social politics. One should assume that the complexity of contemporary historical situations permeated Gego's work and that an intricate network of nuanced mediations infused its semiotic constitution.

I am arguing that it was through Gego's relationship to line and space (urban, architectural, and sculptural) that the *Reticulárea* was able to generate a series of questions that problematized the smooth grids embraced, on the one hand, by an inconsistent project of construction and urbanism oblivious to local conditions and, on the other, by the calculated morphologies of Kinetic art. Indeed, while espousing an architectural language, employing architectural tools, and developing architectural paradigms of production and reception (spatial contextuality, attack on the contemplative mode of spectatorship, environmental scale), Gego's work celebrated linear, geometric, and spatial inconsistency, and undermined the principles of organization, containment, and structure that rule over architecture. In a short manuscript entitled "Gego: Drawings for Projects," written by Ossott in 1976 for a small exhibition at the Instituto de Diseño Fundación Neumann, the author observed in regard to Gego's architectural education that the students of the thirties had to adjust to the point of view imposed by the professor and that experimentation was only possible outside the classroom. Ossott added, "Gego, like us, despised the demands and the premises dictated by the architecture professors."⁴⁸

Indeed, there is a line of thinking that draws attention to the authoritarian dimension of architecture: its reliance on geometry, on boundaries, and on notions of wholeness, unity, and harmony.⁴⁹ In Venezuela, during the period of urban planning and modernization in the fifties, and into the social and urban decline that followed in the sixties, architecture stood for self-containment, progress, and order. It was to be the means by which the amorphousness of the city, its semirural and precarious shape, and its increasingly marginal population and uncontrolled riches were to be regulated and systematized. But by the end of

48. Hanni Ossott, "Gego: Dibujos para proyectos," typewritten document, Personal Archives, Gego Foundation, Caracas.

49. See, for example, Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989); Greg Lynn, *Folds, Bodies & Blobs: Collected Essays*; and Elizabeth Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001).



Gego. The Reticulárea. Permanent installation, Galería de Arte Nacional, Caracas, 1980–81. Photo: Christian Belpaire.

the sixties, despite official efforts to eradicate the shanty, that ubiquitous icon of underdevelopment and of the Venezuelan urban landscape, its presence was stronger than ever. The shanty's anti-architectural stance, its formlessness, its precariousness, its ever-expansive structure, was everywhere present; the modern dream of a self-contained urban grid nurtured by the wealth of the national oil industry was only political rhetoric. To Gego the shanty seems to have been not so much an outsider and peripheral construction but the backbone of social survival. Like the hut built by the Indian, the shanty was a refuge, the necessary shelter for survival. So in her introductory lecture, Gego asked her architecture students to imagine themselves constructing a shelter in what was to become one of the populated shantytowns around the urban area, the hills along the Catia-Maiquetia highway:

I suppose that each of you knows the Catia-Maiquetia highway and that you know that in that region there are hills, vacant lots, dry streams or [streams] with water. Imagine that you have to erect there a refuge without your having access to civilization! Which are the materials that you find there that could help your purpose? How are you going to combine these materials? What are their dimensions and which are the dimensions of the refuge?⁵⁰

It is worth noting that in the original Spanish text the words in Gego's description are immediately recognizable to any Venezuelan as characteristic of the shantytown landscape. For example, she used *cerros* for hills, not *colinas*, which has a more pastoral connotation. (*Cerros* is actually the generic term used in Venezuela to refer to the shantytowns.) To the urban dweller the *cerros* are stripped of their geological meaning and are instead identified with the shantytown. *Baldios* are vacant or abandoned landscapes or lots and are the perfect site for temporary constructions that grow randomly according to the immediate necessities of their inhabitants. And *quebrada*, meaning "streams," is the final crucial word, not only because streams may provide water when running water is lacking, but also because as the floodings of December 1999, the worst natural disaster in recent Venezuelan history, demonstrated that the streams can rise dramatically with the rain and then overflow, producing ground displacements and fatal mudslides that put the *cerros* population at permanent risk.

Gego's exercise, which was to generate intuitive responses from her students—she asked them to write everything that crossed their minds in relation to these questions and not to use their unfamiliarity with the matter as an excuse—displayed her emphasis on local conditions and contextual contiguity. Even in her introductory class she pressed her students to think of a particular situation, the local demands of the place, rather than an ideal construction site. Gego dismissed imported cultural models and cautioned her students to learn from them as long

50. Gego, "Programación de unas charlas durante el 1er semestre Febrero–Mayo 1965," typewritten document, Personal Archives, Gego Foundation, Caracas.

as local necessities were not overlooked. “Because in many cases,” she wrote, “the result is the unsatisfactory copy.”⁵¹

In Gego's artistic work, and from her notations on architecture, one can perceive a growing skepticism toward ideal urban, geometric, and sculptural organizations. It is in this context that the *Reticulárea* can be understood as a conflictive linear geometric body, whose behavior was a dialogical response to Gego's architectural background and the local material conditions in which her work was produced. One of the outstanding gestures of the *Reticulárea* was its capacity to mutate, to fluctuate, to change in relation to the spaces and circumstances in which the work operated, while upsetting the notion of architectural space as a container, and of line as the boundary of bodies. As opposed to the logic of the monument, which occupies and memorializes a unique space, the *Reticulárea* embraced a logic of displacement limited, however, by the built-in precariousness of the pieces, and by Gego's age—the incapacity of her body to fluctuate along with her work.⁵² Unfortunately, the resources that would have allowed a continuous mutation of the work, even after her death, were not available to the artist, and today the *Reticulárea* is poorly installed (after undergoing a restoration in the mid-nineties) in a permanent space in the Galería de Arte Nacional in Caracas. But for more than a decade after its inaugural exhibition, the *Reticulárea* was on the move, and many of its premises migrated into other important projects made by Gego in the years that followed.

51. Gego, “Programación,” n.p.

52. In 1972, the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, New York, planned to show Gego's *Reticulárea*. Gego, who had originally accepted the invitation, had to withdraw the project due to an accident that forced her to rest. In a letter, she wrote to James Harithas, then director of the museum, “I am sure you realize that to revive the sleeping beauty *Reticulárea* after three years will take a great deal of personal handicraft, but in my actual condition I am unable to handle this task. . . . A curious feature of my work is, as you know, the personal handling, staging, and displaying of the *Reticulárea* in a different architectural environment. I can only hope to develop a system by which it can be possible to arrange exhibitions without so much of my personal intervention” (Gego, letter to James Harithas, July 21, 1972, Personal Archives, Gego Foundation, Caracas). In 1974, she was invited again to exhibit at the Everson Museum and the Lowe Art Gallery of Syracuse University, then directed by Stanton L. Catlin. Her response was negative; the nomadic potential of the piece was contradicted by its ephemeral quality, its delicate constitution. She wrote: “Your galleries at the Everson Museum of Art provoke to make a huge and environmental work—which again after two or three installations will be condemned to death, a fact I can't afford” (Gego, letter to Sandra Trop Blumberg, Acting Director of the Everson Museum of Art, July 18, 1974, Personal Archives, Gego Foundation, Caracas). Despite Gego's struggles with the issues outlined above, the *Reticulárea* was reinstalled and reproduced a total of six times, always in a different form and with the help of assistants, friends, and colleagues.