The reality of fiction
The ECO by Mathias Goeritz

Fernando Quesada

1. La polémica fue desatada por la publicación en prensa en septiembre de 1965 de un memorandum firmado por Luis Barragán en el que acusa a Goeritz de minimizar su aportación al proyecto en diversas publicaciones mexicanas e internacionales. En su informe, Barragán considera que este fenómeno habría comenzado con la monografía sobre Goeritz editada en 1960 por por Oliva Zúñiga, en la que Barragán aparece como arquitecto pasajista. Más tarde se incorporaron a las discusiones en la prensa otras personas de los circulos de Barragán y Goeritz en un ciclo de ataques mutuos que duró años. El archivo del CENIDIAP custodia la totalidad de recortes de prensa de esta polémica, que fueron cuidadosamente conservados por Goeritz a lo largo de los años.

2. El Espacio Escultórico es una obra de escultura en el paisaje de lava en las inmediaciones de la Ciudad Universitaria y fue firmado por el colectivo de artistas Hernus, Helen Escobedo, Sebastián, Mathias Goeritz, Federico Silva y Manuel Felguérez.


5. Todas las monografías y catálogos de obra completa sobre Goeritz dan esta información además de él mismo en innumerables fuentes bibliográficas y de archivo.


9. RODRÍGUEZ PRAMPOLINI, Ida, El arte contemporáneo, Explorador y agnóstico, Pomaca, México, 1965. En este libro pionero las Rodríguez articula la relación entre las vanguardias históricas y las neoavanqüis de su momento, además de revisar las raíces de las de los neo en el primitivismo, el expresionismo y el dada.


14. KASSNER, Lily, cit., vol 1, p. 76.


18. Ibid., pp: 42-43.


20. Ibid., p. 79.


23. ‘A estudiar las crónicas y demás textos que me sirven de apoyo, me guía el sentido de apartarse de la manera tradicional de concebir los eventos, de decir, de sólo ver en ellos una especie de inventario de hechos y fechas que se aceptan como errores o verdades, según cierto criterio impuesto por el método llamado cientifico de la investigación’, RODRÍGUEZ, Ida, Amadises de América, cit., p. 15.

24. Ibid., p. 29: Cita 21.


27. TUDELILLA, Chu, cit. 15, pág. 289.

28. Combató entre Daniel Mont y Mathias Goeritz, CENIDIAP, Fondo Goeritz, México DF.

29. TUDELILLA, Chu, cit. 15, p. 335.

30. Ibid., pág. 341.

31. Ibid., pág. 339.

32. RIVERA, Diego, ‘Arte puro, puros marxistas’, en Choque, Órgano de la Alianza de Trabajadores de las Artes Plásticas, México 27 de marzo de 1934.


34. Ibid., pág. 102.

35. Hija veladora, CENIDIAP, Fondo Goeritz, México DF.


37. CÉSNEROS, Luis, informe dirigido al Sr. Rogelio Díaz Redondo, Director General del periódico Excélsior, CENIDIAP, Fondo Goeritz, México DF.
The formal and plastic journey of Mathias Goeritz's work (Danzig, 1915 – Mexico City, 1990) is hard to follow, since he made numerous inroads into many of the conceptual fields of the time: expressionism, dada, surrealism, primitive art, informal painting, monochromatic abstraction, monumental abstract sculpture, land art, typography, concrete poetry, happening, and architecture. Moreover, Goeritz systematically built the biography of his life and artistic path by incorporating considerable amounts of fabrication.

Given the complexity of his pathway, criticism has systematically oscillated between mystification and unveiling. This was favored by the cunningness with which Goeritz handled his biography, along with his enormous capacity to generate controversy in the media. His work has always been controversial and was often haunted by the ghost of plagiarism, opportunism or authorship battles, such as the famous break up with Luis Barragán in the race for internationalization in which they clashed, in the aftermath of the enormous success of the Satellite Towers, in 1957.  

This discontinuity entails, however, two fundamental vectors of conceptual continuity. The first is that of the artist as a producer of contexts, a cultural and social actor that superseded the work of researching an artistic language, in order to fully commit to tasks of organization, advertising and knowledge production, at all possible levels. The second is that of the artistic work understood as producer of a wide environmental space that includes the corporeal, architectural, urban, and territorial layers, condition for understanding the art work as a point of emanation of space. These two goals, in the case of Goeritz, maintained a relationship of complete subordination: the first was a vehicle for the second, at least if we read Goeritz's work as a major evolving project that took him from the practice of easel painting, in 1942, to the construction of large-scale environmental works, culminating in the sculpture space (Espacio Escultórico), carried out collectively with other artists in 1979-80.

With the construction of the Experimental Museum El Eco in 1953, Goeritz realized his first complete work of ‘Emotional Architecture’, a category that he defined in a brief manifesto published the following year, pleading for architecture as an abstract spatial plastic assemblage generated out of pure form, planes and colors, in empathic reverberation with the human body.

El Eco is a small building set around a courtyard, hidden from the street by a wall. The 7-meter high building is configured as a two-story L-shape around the courtyard. The entry is on the right through a vertiginous corridor with a red tiled ceiling, walls and columns, so that the space acts as a perceptual accelerator of the movement of entering. At the end point of this corridor one enters the double height exhibition space, and from there in the courtyard. Closed to the street, the courtyard is conceived as an outdoor exhibition space or ‘sculptural yard’. Both are connected through a large window with a cross-shaped carpentry, almost identical to the one built by Barragán for his house in Tacubaya, in 1947-48. Two staircases, one behind the bar and another for rear service, gives access to an upper floor with exhibition space.

A metal ‘architecture, like the obelisk, which Goeritz called ‘emotional’ is adhered to that separates it from the street. Goeritz carried out behind the street wall, an isolated wall-piece called the ‘snake’--affixed to a wall of Altamira for two years before his arrival in Mexico, in early 1947, the German expatriate to Mexico Paul Westheim. Arte antiguo de Mexico, published in 1950 by Westheim in Spanish (The Art of Ancient Mexico in the 1965 English version), was a book that Goeritz studied carefully. Westheim meant to propose an aesthetic that mathias Goeritz's El Eco has received, only that more or less mimetic anthropomorphism and clearly awakened by the ‘snake’ –, to an affective empathy, through the great synthetisation of the vision and the detachment of the spatial forms of architecture from the formal logic of the human body and even the animal. By means of formal abstraction, integrating the movement of the spectator, the aim is to achieve a mode of empathy that grants a certain vitality to forms. This aesthetic stance was not ignored by the interpreters of Goeritz’s work at the time, and was also cherished by Goeritz himself. Yet Worringen, Vischer or any of the authors of the German space aesthetics that inspired Goeritz are largely absent from the critics' writings. According to Mexican historian Luis Kassner, for example: ‘El Eco’ had an internal dynamics, as the architectural elements had acquired vitality, or the qualities of a living organism, for the disposal of its walls and compartments was radially arranged according to the dynamic principle of diagonals, avoiding the symmetrical and formal repetition by rejecting the conventional structure of straight construction. After having lived in Morocco since October 1941, and two years before his arrival in Mexico, in early 1947, Goeritz had settled in Madrid. In Morocco he was as a delegate to the German Consulate in Tetouan Cultural Institute. The book was first published in 1953, according to the documentation Goeritz carefully filed in his own archives that he was born to a German family of evangelist religion. The facts of having been a public employee of the Deutsche Akademie of Munich during his life, and a resident in Madrid, is also related to his ties with the Museum of German Art in Berlin, and to be granted the permission from the House of Culture in Berlin to publish his doctoral thesis – all three institutions firmly controlled by National Socialism – add a strong novelistic or fictional component to the Goeritzian biography. From the beginning, the path of Mathias Goeritz was marked by an enormous tension between fiction and reality. Literary fiction, rather than demanding to be unveiled in order to make truth come to light, can in this case be considered, just like in all the cases in which fiction intervenes in history, as a machine that not only produces interpretative truth but also, and more importantly, works that persist well beyond their interpretations.

A photograph from 1968 shows Goeritz playing a pose before a revolutionary mural by Guillermo Chavez, so that he seems to snatch the sword from the painted
figure, performing a knight in some kind of guerrilla parody. Twenty years earlier, in the summer of 1948, Goeritz and his wife at the time – German photographer Margot de Azevedo –, ended their Mexican stay in Altamira del Mar, north of Spain; painter Alejandro Rangel, and very shortly after Josefina Muriel and Ida Rodríguez Prampolí. Three of these students made up the ‘group’ Goeritz called ‘pictorial School of Altamira’, which he advertised tirelessly to build his ambitious project of a ‘School of Altamira’ turned instead of modern painting in Spain. Altamira was the site of the famous primitive cave covered with bison paintings and the ‘schoo’ actually existed between 1949 and 1951. Two major international conferences were held there, launched by Goeritz, who could not have foreseen that it would succumb to the destructive forces of the modern art movement before the conferences took place.

Beyond the very history of the School, its genesis and its importance for the Spanish and international art of the moment, the presence of Ida Rodríguez Prampolí was key to the construction not only of the Goeritz fiction, but also of his real and brilliant career in Mexico, after he moved to that country in October 1949. Ida Rodríguez, born in Veracruz in 1925, had obtained his doctorate in history just before her trip to Spain, with Rodríguez, born in Veracruz in 1925, had obtained his but also of his real and brilliant career in Mexico, after a good day of October 1492.

What is deliberately at stake here is the distinction between event and act, and their mutual relationship, so that ‘substantially the matter is to recognize that any act, when it is presented as a product of human interaction, is definitely out of question and systematically ignored, even for the purpose of stylistic procedures. 22 Despite the preponderance of impulses and emotion over reason and judgment to determine many human acts – something that current neuroscience fully supports –, the possibility of fictional writing about historical events rarely entered the sort of historical scientific literature Ida Rodríguez challenged.

For Ida Rodríguez, the aim was twofold: firstly to analyze the chivalric spirit of the epic that would explain the reasons for Castile to boost the Indies enterprise; and secondly to point and show the reflection and mutual influences between chivalric fiction and the Chronicles of the Indies. Although chivalric literature was condemned by Spanish Erasmist humanists, it enjoyed an enormous social capital and prestige that allowed it to be used to create an idiom for all the aspects of the Indies, be it the interpretation of the voyage, the business of the voyage, or the representation of the voyage. 23 Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, Captain of the Emperor Charles V of Spain, governor of the Fortress of Santo Domingo, and the author of Historia general y natural de las Indias (General and Natural History of the Indies, 1526), abhorred the chivalric genre, although he himself practiced it in a novel dedicated to the Indies, Don Claribate in 1519. Oviedo’s history, as argued by Ida Rodríguez, is full of stylistic features taken from chivalry literature, featuring the nautical explorer as a maritime errant-knight. 24 For its part, the chivalric literature was assimilating new characters, plots and figures from the Chronicles of the Indies, and representing phenomena in exotic tropical landscapes with their strange human and animal creatures.

In Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España (True History of the Conquest of New Spain, 1575), author Bernal Díaz del Castillo described himself as a protagonist of the history, and his memoirs were published in 1580, also. The Indies Feat as Chivalrous Company), defended in 1947, Ida Rodriguez challenged the chivalric point of view of the Indies by Anglo-Saxon historiography for its excessive confidence in documentary and archival sources. 21 According to Ida Rodríguez, for Anglo-Saxon historical schools archival Ibles are the only and main historical evidence. 22 If the aim of historical research is demonstrable truth, fic-

In antiquity it was assumed that the Orbis Terrarum, i.e., the world, consisted of three distinct entities: Europe, Asia and Africa, which also responded to a cultural hierarchy in that order. 22 Christianity endorsed those ideas, so that in 1492 the fourth land-mass was eventually absorbed as another part of the Orbis Terrarum, thus producing huge epistemological changes. The sea was no longer seen as the limit of the world, and this canceled the possibility of the existence of different worlds as assumed by ancient non-Christian cultures, the sea becoming just a kind of a lake located in between different masses of the same land-world. In O’Gorman’s territorial and political system, the genuine idea of discovery as an encounter – that by not having taken place in historical chronicles only existed in his fictional system and alongside the reality of invention, involves a pluralistic conception of worlds equally relat-

According to O’Gorman, the fact that the interpretation of that event as a discovery had remained unquestioned for centuries – despite the fact that even his starring agent Columbus had not admitted it, in his stubborn insistence on the Spanish hypothesis –, turned into a value-laden nonsense that could only be dismantled by the deterministic. However, in the reality of invention that involves a pluralistic conception of worlds equally related, the relationship can only be subsidiary regarding the interpretation – discovery, in this case –, and its potential replacement by an interpretative mechanism which could allow the complete redefinition of the original event from new interpretations, not burdened by the past. In his own words: In diametrical contrast to the attitude adopted by all historians, that start with an America in background of Ida Rodriguez when she ground the existence of God; destiny emanated from something that current neuroscience fully supports –, the possibility of fictional writing about historical events rarely entered the sort of historical scientific literature Ida Rodríguez challenged.

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Marianne Gast. Daniel Mont could not see restaurant-ba
mented that he was engaged in building a 'insulted me for ten minutes at the Palace of Fine Arts.

Alvaro Siqueiros and Diego Rivera: functioned as a gallery, and for a very short

izer of Saturnalia at his home, located at the crossing of

audience of the capital city. Chucho Reyes settled in

ideological dart. The life-span of El Eco as experimental

homosexual dandies from Guadalajara such as Luis

against Goeritz's group of friends, including notorious

'So pure art, abstract art, is the darling of the capitalist

by Diego Rivera, called Arte puro. Puros maricones

also the subject of one of the famous polemic manifestos

The identification of the bourgeois spirit with both ho-

it's openness to international markets, and the beginning

(1946-1952), witnessed the country's industrialization,

nationalism between 1925 and 1940. Some historians

In 1949 there was already a small gay cabaret in FD, ca-

rned

In 1951 Daniel Mont, King Kong, calls high society gays who,

afterattending the theater, the opera or the symphony,

have dinner in chic-places, often wearing a smoking. They

end the night at The Eloines to rub shoulders with furs. 34

In El Eco, and in front of the long bar with the abstract

mural by Carlos Mérida, similar to that of The Eloines, the

most sophisticated gays of the capital paraded on

the catwalk.

In 1956 Mathias Goeritz’s ideogram of El Eco (one of the

very few drawings produced for the project) was

published on the cover of the American magazine

Progressive Architecture, initiating an unstoppable

presence of this building in the international media.

In June 1962 the National Autonomous University of

Mexico UNAM acquired the land property and

management of the building, installing the University

Center Theater 35, later known as Elizabethan Forum, 

undertaking major architectural reforms. The

background space became a chamber theater with a

stage on the left side; an elongated body was added to

the front of the building, next to the Yellow Tower, and

this produced the subsequent alteration of the facade,

which was wrapped with a high metal lattice. In 1972

the facade suffered a new alteration, the metal lattice

was replaced by an opaque enclosure in light blue,

and the Yellow Tower was painted in gray, as shown in

the photographs.

In September 1983, a press release recounted the

controversies among building occupants and the

Society for the Artistic Treasures of Mexico, which had

denounced the two resident associations of El Eco since

1968: CLETA (Free Expression Center for Theatre and

Arts) and Tecolote Cultural Center 36. The report

provided by CLETA in response to the aforesaid press

release mentioned that the closure of El Eco as a

restaurant-cabaret was due to a ‘fight’ that ended

in a murder, without giving the particular date of the

event, and that the building was closed for a while with

the resulting deterioration caused by abandonment. The

author of the text was Luis Cisneros, who is still leading

CLETA today, though at another venue. Cisneros wrote:

[El Eco] was a luxury theater which cost many millions to

the UNAM. Among other things, the unilateral

assignment of budget generated discontent that led to

the seizure of the Elizabethan Forum by a group of

students from the Faculty of Arts, beginning the

controversial movement CLETA. The year of the assault

by CLETA was 1968, coinciding with the student

massacre in the Plaza of the Three Cultures in Tlatelolco

on October 2, and the celebration of the Olympic Games

in Mexico, for which Mathias Goeritz devised the so

called Route of Friendship: a series of large-scale urban

sculptures installed by an international team of

sculptors in a section of the ring-motorway, in the

outskirts of the University Campus.

CLETA report concludes that: The Experimental Museum

El Eco does no longer exist as it was conceived by Mathias

Goeritz, but we believe that if the artist knew about the

history of what was born and developed here over the

last ten years, he would agree with us that his

architectural experiment has reached, in a lively dynamic

way, the goal of ‘producing [and reproducing] human

emotions through a modern concept, and without

going prey to an empty and theatrical decorativeism’ 37,

quoting a phrase (in italics) from Goeritz’s Manifesto of

Emotional Architecture.

El Eco was completely rebuilt in 2005 and its original

use as an Experimental Museum was restored, forever

closing the circle of official modern architecture in

Mexico. The Mexican modernization – of which Goeritz

was one of the main protagonists –, was a dream,

sometimes forged by the hand of biographical events. It

was crossed by tragic and even bloody events that, like

the tales of chivalry and Chronicles of Indies, render

fiction indistinguishable from reality.