

Traveling with Gego

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ABSTRACT

This EXHIBITION REVIEW about Gego: *Midiendo el infinito (Gego: Measuring Infinity)*, set up in the Museo Jumex (Mexico), reflects on the world that unfolds behind it: how is the artwork prepared?, how does it get to be exhibited?, what is the journey that it takes before it is opened to the public? Thus, this review presents examples of conservatory manipulation and exhibition from two of the artworks by Gertrud Goldschmidt, Gego (Hamburg, 1912-Caracas, 1994). In general, she created her sculptures mainly by using lines, networks and gravitational meshes that intersect in the void and model spatial structures, whose fragility, together with the fact that they always require to be handled with very special care, make them difficult to move and to install. This fact is highlighted, due to its complex manipulation and installation, in *Réticula cuadrada (Square Reticularia)*, formed by three elements. In contrast, the curative restoration is described for the *Esfera en hexaedro (Hexahedron Sphere)*, as well as the conservatory adaptation of the packaging of the work, which allows the exhibition to travel.

KEY WORDS

Gego, manipulation, preventive conservation, itinerancy, courier

For more than 20 years now, the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA, Spain) and the Fundación Gego de Caracas (Gego Foundation of Caracas) have maintained quite a good collaborative relationship. This was a result from a

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first contact in the year 2000, when we set up *Force Fields*¹ at the MACBA, an exhibition curated by Guy Brett, which proposed a transversal journey through a period of art history between 1920 and 1970. Back then, the Foundation lent a great number of artworks by the artist. A few years later, in 2006, the MACBA organized an anthological exhibition, curated by Manuel Borja Vilel and Bartomeu Marí: *Gego. Defying Structures*, which brought together more than 130 pieces created by the artist between 1958 and 1988 (Bois, Amor, Brett, & Peruga, 2006). As a result of the good institutional relationship, the Foundation made a generous deposit of artworks by Gego to the MACBA.

During these last 20 years, the international recognition of the figure of the artist has increased significantly. The fund of artworks deposited in the MACBA has accompanied us, either in exhibitions in our museum or in loans to other national and international institutions. Along this path, and from the point of view of conservators-restorers, we have come closer to a better understanding of Gego's creative world.

On the occasion of both the exhibition *Gego: Measuring Infinity* at the Museo Jumex in Mexico City (October 19th, 2022-February 5th, 2023), curated by Pablo León de la Barra and Cindy Peña, and its subsequent tour at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, *Gego: Measuring Infinity* (March 31th-September 10th, 2023), the organizers requested several of Gego's works that we have deposited in our collection from MACBA (González, & Peña, 2022).

The pleasure of visiting Gego's exhibition at the Museo Jumex makes us reflect on the world that unfolds behind it. How does the artwork get to be exhibited? What is the journey that it takes before it is opened to the public?

For the Museo Jumex exhibition, MACBA has lent a total of 12 works by the artist, belonging to the above-mentioned fund which the Foundation deposited in our Museum.

In this article, we will present two examples of conservatory manipulation and exhibition display of works by Gertrud Goldschmidt, known as *Gego* (Hamburg, 1912-Caracas, 1994).

The team of conservators-restorers from MACBA carried out a series of conservatory actions, so that the artist's works traveled under supervision from their departure in Barcelona to their arrival in Mexico City, and for their subsequent installation in the Museo Jumex.

In general, Gego's sculptures are composed of lines, networks and gravitational meshes that intersect in the void and model spa-

¹ Editorial note. All titles from exhibitions and artworks in English are taken from the Macba's site.

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tial structures, whose fragility, together with the fact that they always require to be handled with very special care, makes them difficult to move and to install.

Firstly, we present the characteristics of *Retícula cuadrada* (*Square Reticularea*), a piece made up of three elements (95 x 95 x 366 cm height): a square iron base painted matt black, a body of wires creating parallel planes placed on the original black base and, above this body, one more, longer and with the same wire structure, suspended from the ceiling at four points (Figure 1).

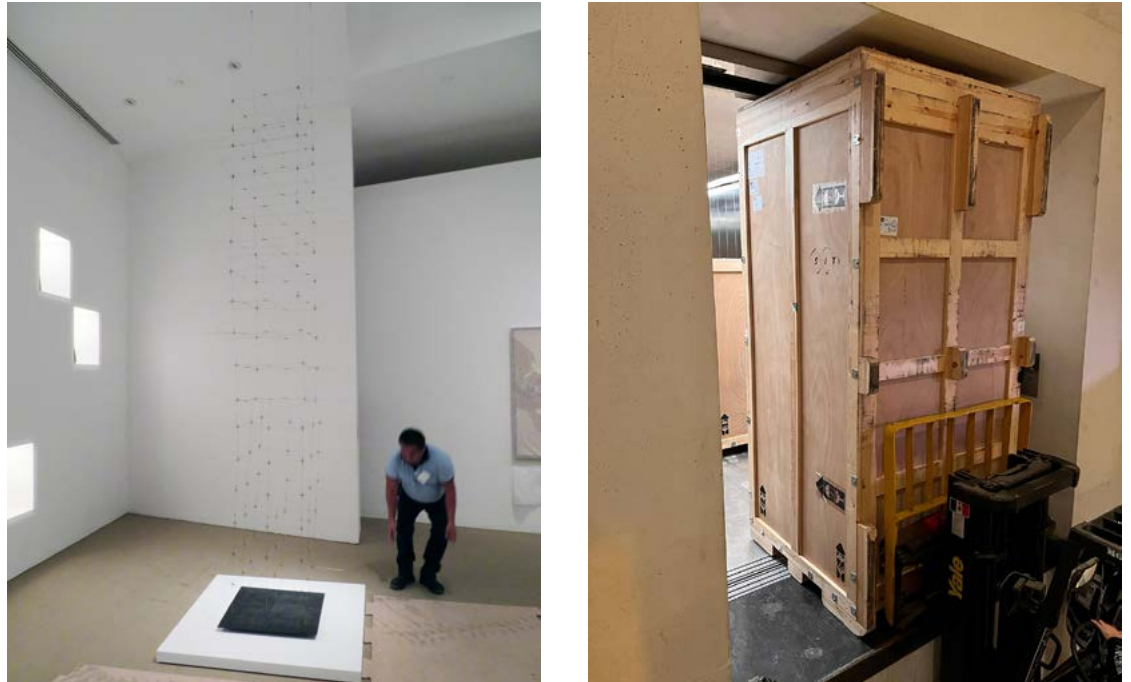


FIGURE 1. *Retícula cuadrada* (*Square Reticularea*) exhibited in the MACBA/Wooden box from the superior element (Photograph: Xavier Rossell, 2019; courtesy: MACBA).

Each body travels in its own box, and, in the lower part of each one of them, the black iron base is also transported.

The boxes are designed with an interior travel-frame, or cage, where the bodies are suspended with cotton tape to prevent irreparable damage to their structure. The part of this artwork which has the longest length is always stored in an upright position in the cage, but when it travels by air cargo its position must be changed due to the requirements of aircraft, which have a limit on transport holds in terms of height. Once the piece reaches its destination, it is important to return the box to its upright position and to wait 24 to 48 hours to open it. Thus, we avoid any thermal shock and let the wires return to their original position (Figure 2).

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FIGURE 2. Wooden box from the *Retícula cuadrada* (*Square Reticularea*), inferior element (Photograph: Xavier Rossell, 2020; courtesy: MACBA).



For the installation of this work at the destination site we always have to give prior instructions. In this case, as the *Retícula cuadrada* does not have a heavy weight, it is not necessary to reinforce ceilings to install it, as long as they offer guarantees of supporting 50 to 100 kg. In the Museo Jumex, the holes were made in the plasterboard ceiling, and some hooks (“*angelitos*”, called “little angels” in Spanish) were placed so that the nylon threads could later be passed through. Being attached to the ceiling at four points, the best option to level the artwork is to place some type of stopper touching on the ceiling, to achieve a perfect horizontal position at those attachment points (Figure 3).

In general, all medium and large three-dimensional objects are hung from the ceiling with nylon threads, fishing line type, or very fine braided steel wire.

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FIGURE 3. Examples of hooks and stopper (Photograph: Alejandro Castro, 2023; courtesy: MACBA).

Although it is important to follow the previous indications regarding the safe attachment points of this piece on the ceiling or wall, the difficulty in their installation comes from their manipulation. For example, in the case of the installation of *Reticula cuadrada*, the wooden cage is first removed from the interior of the box and it is brought closer to its location without yet manipulating the artwork. This is not removed from the cage until everything is settled to be hung. In our case, the transport cage has wheels to get as close as possible to the attachment point without having to manipulate the part.

For the *Gego* exhibition at the MACBA, we designed a set-square-type object, which we called a “*jamonero*” (or “ham slicer” in English, because it looked like a support for cutting ham in reverse), which consisted of some wooden angles that served as a temporary hanger for the artwork before the exhibition final installation (Figure 4). This allowed the curator to see the object and play with the heights and positions. In the case of the Museo Jumex, it was not necessary to use them, since the location of the piece was defined in advance by the previous work of the curatorial team.

In this exhibition, the *Reticula cuadrada* was the piece which presented the greatest difficulty at the time of installation, since, as it has been said before, it has four attachment points and they are very fragile.

The cage should be as close as possible to the point where the artwork will be installed. In order to do so, it is necessary to count with stairs, an electric lift, or scaffolding. There must be four handlers in addition to the curator.

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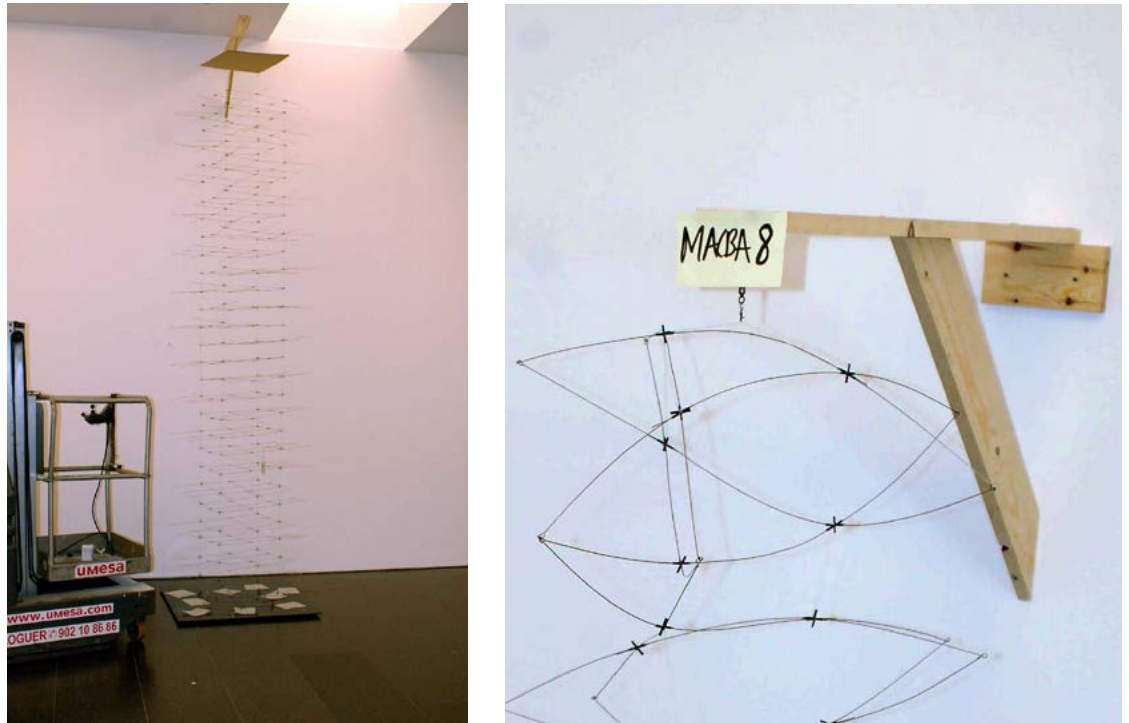


FIGURE 4. Two artworks held by the “*jamonero*” (“ham slicer”) (Photograph: Xavier Rossell, 2006; courtesy: MACBA).

In this specific case at the Museo Jumex, the *Reticula cuadrada* was placed on a large central wooden base painted in white (Figure 5), which was protected with plastic to work on top of it. The base has to be reinforced since it is important that one can step on it and carry up machines if necessary.

FIGURE 5. Central base in the Museo Jumex. (Photograph: Xavier Rossell, 2022; courtesy: MACBA).



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FIGURE 6. Esfera en hexaedro (*Sphere in Hexahedron*)
(Photograph: Xavier Rossell, 2023; courtesy: MACBA).



This piece is composed of thirteen assembled elements, which make up its whole. At the base we find four screens independent of each other, on top of which sits a square iron structure with bolts, where the panels are fitted with the rods that will form the sphere.

Before traveling for this loan we had to restore the artwork, since it had been exposed in a garden and it showed rusting, losses, and dirt. Furthermore, it was the first time that the piece left the MACBA, so it was necessary to conceive and design a suitable packaging.

These new packages had to be versatile, so that they would be useful for traveling and for later storage in the MACBA. Some individual boxes with a lid and a base were built for each of the eight rod elements, made of 2.2 mm corrugated conservation cardboard, gray on the outside and white on the inside, with pH 7.5-9.5 and an alkaline reserve according to ISO 9706 and PAT (photographic activity test) ISO 18916.

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The interior trays were made with a 13 mm honeycomb panel, polyester wadding, textile protect shock, so the piece could be leaned on, and with a special 2 cm fissure for the black tube. The tray includes soft components, designed to be replaced over time in case of wear, without the need to change the base or the box. The lid has a roof lined with soft material, to act as a negative of the artwork when closing the box (Figure 7).

FIGURE 7.
 Wooden box with
 the cardboard
 conservation boxes
 (Photograph: Xavier
 Rossell, 2022;
 courtesy: MACBA).



To conclude, we can only reaffirm that part of the work of the conservation-restoration teams is to make it possible for the works to be exhibited, from the different aspects of their profession, sometimes using conservatory processes and sometimes using restoration ones, often combining both disciplines.

In both of the cases described in this review, we can differentiate two ways of acting in the preservation of the artworks. Manipulation prevailed for the *Retícula cuadrada*; this was basic for

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its conservation and possible exhibition. Meanwhile, for the *Esfera en hexaedro*, the previous conservation work for its storage and transport lead us to a good conservation of this work and to its easy exhibition display. All this is possible when the different interdisciplinary teams work together with the same purpose, and with the support, in this case from *the* Museo Jumex, which made it possible with great professionalism and agility.

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Higher degree in Conservation-Restoration of Cultural Assets, with a specialization in sculpture. Previously, he graduated from Management and Public Administration and completed a Postgraduate in Management of Institutions, Entities and Cultural Platforms. He obtained the Leonardo da Vinci international training scholarship, which allowed him to take a training residency in Italy. In 2006, he began his collaboration at MACBA as a conservator-restorer specialized in sculpture. Currently, he coordinates new additions of artworks in the Museum and participates in the various temporary exhibitions and the MACBA Collection, as well as in the conservation-restoration processes in three-dimensional works and modern materials in the collection.

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Bachelor's Degree in Fine Arts with a specialty in conservation-restoration. He holds a Diploma of Advanced Studies (DEA, acronyms in Spanish). Since 1996, he has worked as a Senior Conservation-Restoration Technician in the MACBA Conservation-Restoration Service, participating in all the tasks and activities of it. As a curator at MACBA, he promoted the bases for the project for the conservation of *Media Art and Digitization* of the MACBA collection. Currently, he is the coordinator of the loan management and mailing of the conservation department and has specialized in conservation of installations. He has gained professional experience from working in different countries, such as Italy and the United States. He has participated in international preventive conservation projects with ICCROM, INCAA and RICA.