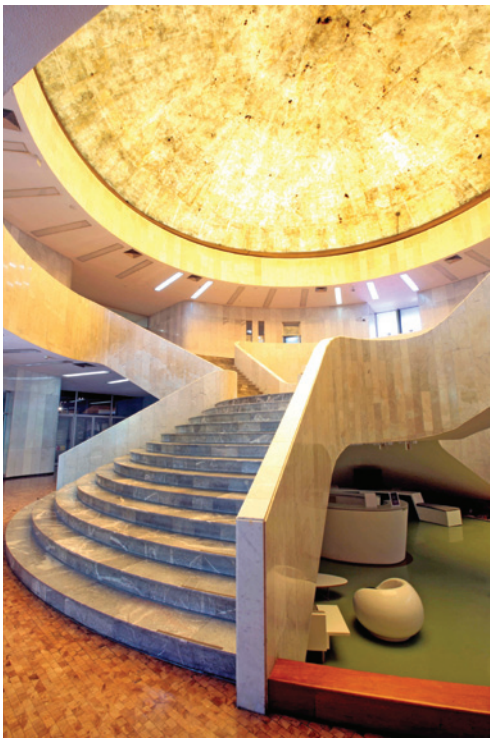

THE MODERN ART MUSEUM

Christian Gómez*

At the end of the last century, art historian Michael Ann Holly co-edited the book *The Subjects of Art History. Historical Objects in Contemporary Perspectives*,[1] in which she put forward a provocative perspective: since our knowledge of the past is constructed without the benefit of the panoply of possibilities afforded by being present during the historical event, no final word or truth exists about it. Using a historiographic approach, she invited the reader, then, to think of the ways that the history of art has been written in different contexts, at different moments, and with different motivations. When reflecting on Sigmund Freud's persistent interest in ancient Rome and on the debate about a late-nineteenth-century work by Gustave Klimt, she said that, like ghosts, the structures of the past overlap and silently reverberate in the present and can become visible to anyone who tries to see them with a change in viewpoint.

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Photos courtesy of the Modern Art Museum, National Institute of Fine Arts.

To wend your way among spirits and ghosts, Holly's proposal consisted of a kind of history that dealt with the artistic in conjunction with its circumstances: working in narratives sensitive to the political, cultural, and intellectual context. Thus, the complex task of narrating the histories of somewhere like Mexico's Modern Art Museum (MAM) is situated amidst spirits and ghosts, amidst the works and their contexts, amidst the space and the viewpoint. More than half a century after its inauguration in 1964, a review of its legacy reveals its dynamism: far from an immovable history of art, it is a laboratory of narratives; and, in contrast with museum-as-depository, a space for the great renovations of art in our country in the second half of the twentieth century. Suffice it to note how its activity reverberates in the present.

▲ Frida Kahlo, *The Two Fridas,* 170 x 170 cm, 1939 (oil on canvas).

A Face of Mexican Modernity

Like in the Julio Cortázar short story "Axolotl," in which the protagonist goes for interminable afternoons to watch with fascination a Mexican salamander or *axolotl*, only to change places with it in an unsettling play of the gaze, visitors go to the Modern Art Museum to become involved with its most emblematic works. They update the suffering in *The Two Fridas* (1939); twist and turn like in Remedios Varo's *Disquieting Presence* (1959); share Rosa Rolanda's angst in her *Self-portrait* (1952). To do this, they enter a building with glass walls that at the same time merges with its surroundings: the Chapultepec Forest, Mexico City's urban park *par excellence*.

Far from an immovable history of art, the museum is a laboratory of narratives.

▲ Remedios Varo, *Roma Caravan,* 1955 (oil on Masonite).

The MAM has blended in with its surroundings since September 20, 1964, when it was inaugurated under the administration of President Adolfo López Mateos. It was created simultaneously with other significant exhibition spaces (the Gallery of History and the National Anthropology Museum, all by architect Ramírez Vázquez) as part of the era's developmentalist, modernizing policies. This was part of a larger project to show "what is Mexican" to the world.

As historians Gabriela Álvarez and María García Holley write,

> The Modern Art Museum (MAM) sought to offer a place to the new generations of artists and their novel expressions. Architects Pedro Ramírez Vázquez and Rafael Mijares set themselves the task of designing a museum without a program, a project that was open and flexible in terms of its possible uses, ways of circulating, and exhibition areas.[2]

And they add,

> The museum's architecture reflected a total break with tradition: it was a new building with absolutely no carry-overs from the past; only industrialized materials were used and there was no place for visual integration.[3]

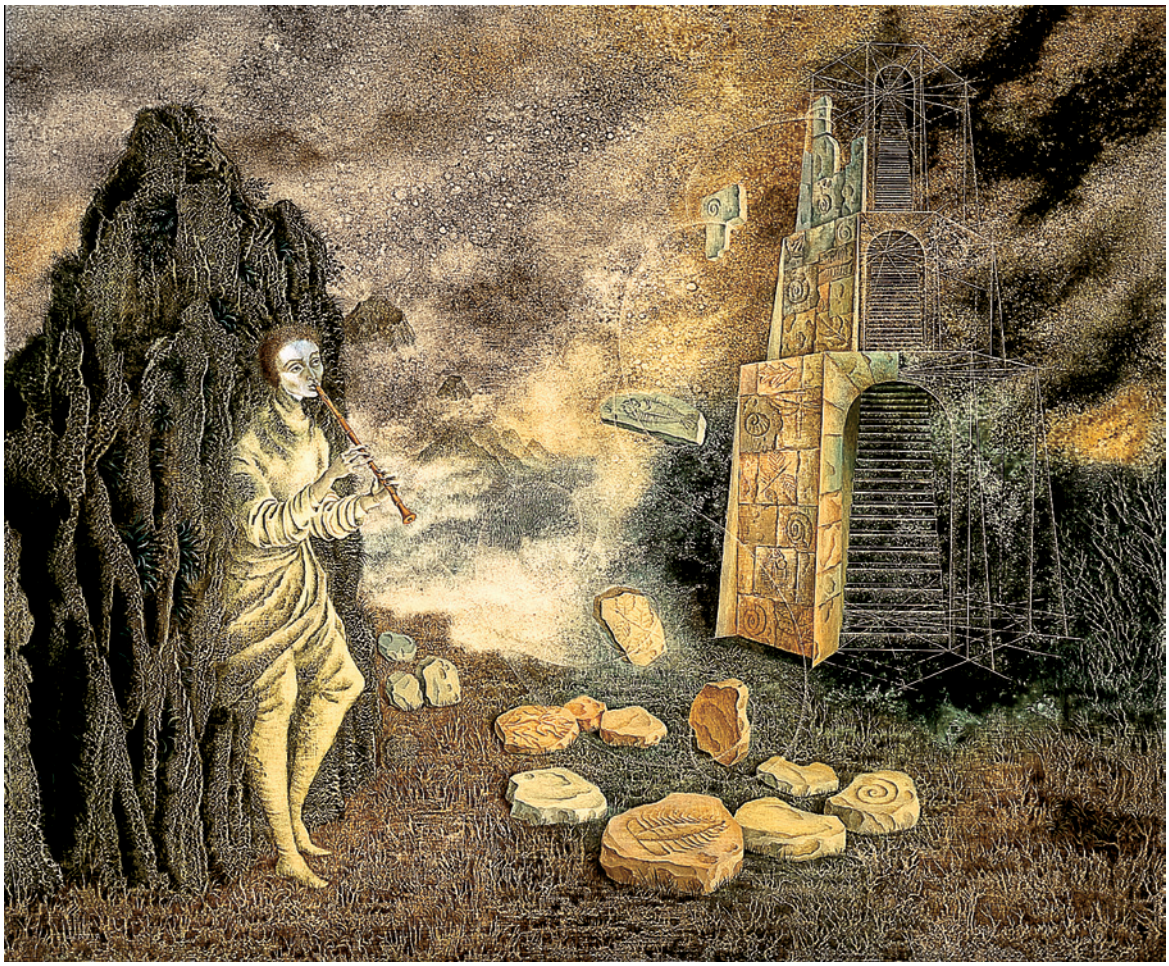
In these authors' opinion, the organic form of the museum, which used materials like marble, aluminum, and fiberglass, was also an exercise in experimentation in accordance with the artistic disciplines. In this sense, the glass façade sought to be a response to the landscape to reflect its content, but also to invite the public in. In the same way, initiating its activities with an exhibition of works by Rufino Tamayo, the museum opened the door to the renovation of artistic practices that was inescapable at the time.

Breaks, Fractures, and Renovation of Languages

The number of artists from the first half of the twentieth century represented in the museum's collection is disqui-

▲ Juan O'Gorman, *Self-portrait,* 1950 (distemper on Masonite).

Both due to the period the works cover, from the avant-garde artists of the early twentieth century until those from recent years, the whole collection poses big challenges such as rereading the works and establishing new perspectives.



▲ Remedios Varo, *The Flautist,* 76.5 x 63 cm (oil and mother of pearl incrusted on Masonite).

eting. More than 350 very important works have come from the ateliers of artists like Ángel Zárraga, Gerardo Murillo (Dr. Atl), Roberto Montenegro, Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, José Clemente Orozco, Frida Kahlo, María Izquierdo, and Rufino Tamayo. We cannot neglect to mention the photographic work by Manuel Álvarez Bravo, Tina Modotti, and Edward Weston either. Despite this, it is even more important to point to the close relationship between the museum space and the artistic practices carried out after it was created.

This allows us to underline the role of the MAM as a natural space for creative renovation. This is the case of the movements that emerged as a response to muralism and the Mexican school of painting. For this reason it is useful to underline the place that the artists of what has been called "the generation of the Break" occupy in the museum's collection. This current saw abstractionism as a mechanism for distancing themselves from muralism's politically committed realism, as well as a way of getting involved in the international art conversation. Among them are Lilia Carrillo, Fernando García Ponce, Vicente Rojo, Pedro Coronel, Manuel Felguérez, and José Luis Cuevas. Other artists bent on renewal but unclassifiable also enrich the collection, among them Juan Soriano, Arnaldo Coen, Alberto Gironella, Gunther Gerzso, Mathias Goeritz, Carlos Mérida, Kasuya Sakai, and Vlady.

In addition, the museum has hosted more experimental practices, represented to a lesser extent. Some publications review specific cases in which the museum has accompanied the development of artistic practices, such as *La máquina visual: una revisión de las exposiciones del Museo de Arte Moderno, 1964-1988* (The Visual Machine: A Review of the Expositions of the Modern Art Museum, 1964-1988) by Daniel Garza Usabiaga.[4]

Others, like Rita Eder's *Tiempo de fractura. El arte contemporáneo en el Museo de Arte Moderno de México durante la gestión de Helen Escobedo (1982-1984)* (Time of Fracturing: Contemporary Art in Mexico's Modern Art Mu-

seum under the Directorship of Helen Escobedo [1982-1984]),[5] examine how the museum has welcomed new practices. These include installation and performance art, the artistic setting of an ambiance, what has been called non-objectualism, and collective works by artists known as "The Groups," with their critical consequences for the artistic system, the myth of the creative genius, and the art market. All these are precedents for contemporary artistic practices.

The museum later opened its doors to what has been called the movement of "neo-Mexicanism." And then, as Daniel Montero documents in his book *El cubo de Rubik, arte mexicano en los años 90* (The Rubik's Cube: Mexican Art of the 1990s),[6] the Modern Art Museum also opened up spaces for the so-called "alternative artists," many of whom would later be considered contemporary and would participate in the process of renovating Mexico's cultural institutions during the 1990s.

The last artists represented in the MAM collection reflect the heterogeneity of practices and interests: Gilberto Aceves Navarro, Enrique Guzmán, Helen Escobedo, Feliciano Béjar, Martha Palau, Julio Galán, Francisco Toledo, Germán Venegas, Francisco Castro Leñero, Gustavo Monroy, Fernando García Correa, Daniel Lezama, Patricia Aridjis, and Miguel Calderón.

The Modern Art Museum is facing the challenge of continuing to offer novel perspectives about its collections and to be a space for dialogue about the artistic production of different eras.

◂ Abraham Ángel Card Valdés, *The Girl in the Window.*

◂ Agustín Lazo, *At School* (Poetry 1), 1943.

Parallel to artistic practices no longer being conceived as uniform, chronological movements, in the last analysis, the discrepancies in the museum's collections indicate a process of institutional, social, and political transformations. This process at the same time reflects the interests of different leaderships, the changes in Mexican art, and the reconceptualization of an institutional cultural infrastructure after the turn of the new century, a change whose dimension is barely comparable to the one that the MAM was a part of in the 1960s.

Revista Artes Visuales

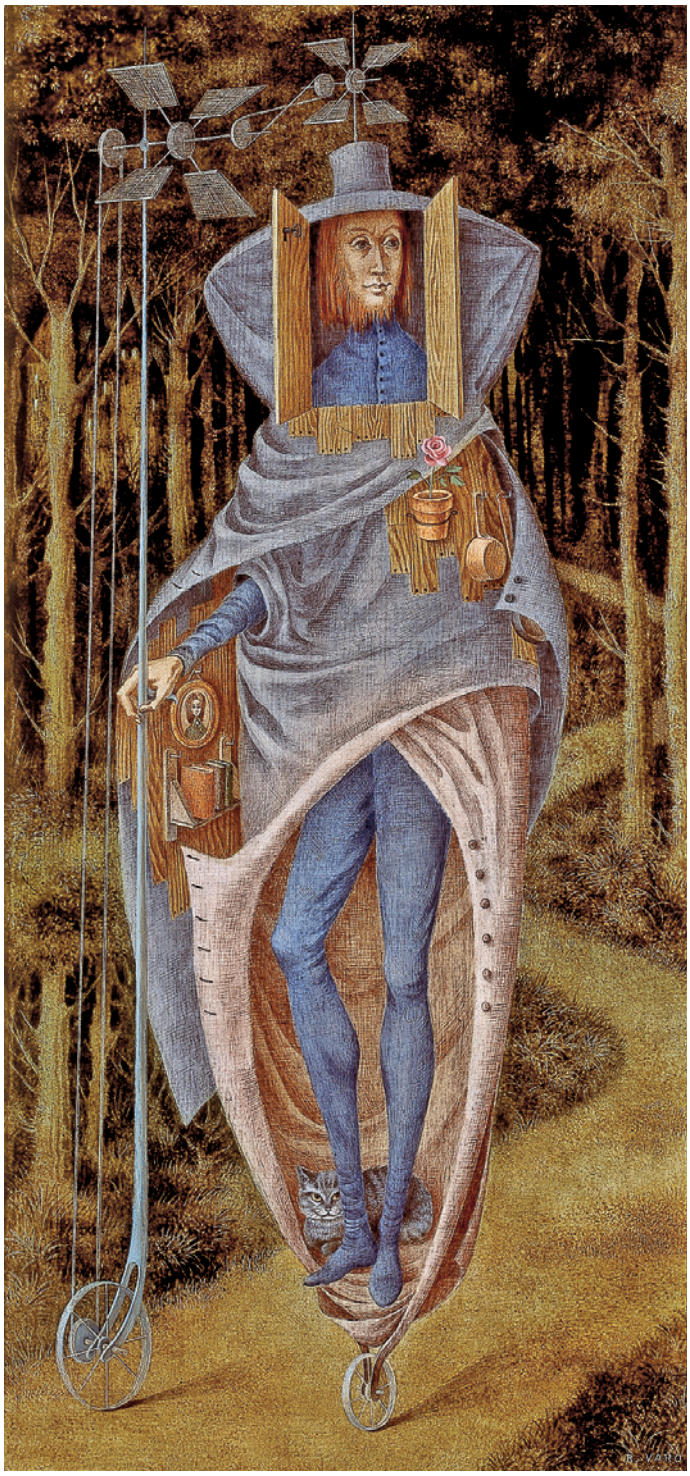
Edited by art historian Carla Stellweg between 1974 and 1981, *Revista Artes Visuales* (Visual Arts Review) was indispensable for the Modern Art Museum. Its 20-odd issues brought together the fundamental art critics and dealt with urgent topics related to the artistic practices of those years.

It published articles on art criticism, design, cinema, video-art, Latin American art, the sociology of art, biennials, Chicano art, and the Groups, all contributed by authors like Jorge Manrique, Juan Acha, Marta Traba, Carlos Monsiváis, Salvador Elizondo, Octavio Paz, Alaide Foppa, Jorge Romero Brest, Teresa del Conde, Marshal McLuhan, Lucy Lippard, Judy Chicago, Aracy A. Amaral, Damián Bayón, Helio Oiticica, and Felipe Ehrenberg.

The caliber of the contributions and the way in which the publication covered the development of artistic practices have turned this journal into a reference point for research about the decade.

New Readings

The number of paintings, sculptures, photographs, sketches, and engravings in the MAM Collection comes to 3 000. Both due to the period the works cover, from the avant-



Remedios Varo, *Vagabond*, 1957.

garde artists of the early twentieth century until those from recent years, the whole collection poses big challenges such as rereading the works and establishing new perspectives. Ongoing research plus curatorial work from new perspectives and with new selections have demonstrated that the works can always benefit from fresh readings and that their meaning is never fixed.

In 2015, for example, researcher Natalia de la Rosa developed the exhibition "Cineplastics. Film about Art in Mexico, 1960-1975." In it, she evoked the concept of "film about art," which emerged in Europe as a visual essay about the work of artists from different disciplines. The exhibition put forward an apparently simple exercise consisting of countering works from the collection with audiovisuals about the process for creating them. The result was a series of fresh approaches about well-known pieces; among them a work in which Frida Kahlo appeared in the shot challenging death, obligating viewers to pose her vulnerability and the power of her paintings in a new way. The way it was curated forced the public to look with different eyes. The research from different perspectives ended up restoring our gaze with a renewed point of view.

As in that case, the Modern Art Museum is facing the challenge of continuing to offer novel perspectives about its collections, of creating room for new proposals, and continuing to be a space for dialogue about the artistic production of different eras. As Michael Ann Holly has said, the structures of the past overlap and silently reverberate in the present and can become visible in different ways to anyone who tries to see them with a change in viewpoint. VM

Notes

[1] Michael Ann Holly, "Spirits and Ghosts in the Historiography of Art," in Mark A. Cheetham, Michael Ann Holly, and Keith Moxey, eds., *The Subjects of Art History. Historical Objects in Contemporary Perspectives*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[2] Gabriela Álvarez and María García Holley, "Museos para la modernización," in Rita Eder, ed., *Desafío a la estabilidad. Procesos artísticos en México 1952-1967* (Mexico City: UNAM, 2014), p. 350.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Daniel Garza Usabiaga, *La máquina visual: una revisión de las exposiciones del Museo de Arte Moderno, 1964-1988* (Mexico City: Conaculta-INBA-MAM, 2011).

[5] Rita Eder, *Tiempo de fractura. El arte contemporáneo en el Museo de Arte Moderno de México durante la gestión de Helen Escobedo (1982-1984)* (Mexico City: UAM-UNAM, 2010).

[6] Daniel Montero, *El cubo de Rubik, arte mexicano en los años 90* (Mexico City: Fundación Jumex Arte Contemporáneo, 2013).