

## Helen Escobedo: A Brief Biography (1934-2010)

*I have to put in three dimensions  
what I feel in my gut.*

Born in Mexico City, July 28, 1934, of a Mexican father and an English mother, Helen Escobedo studied humanities at the Motilinia University. But, her artistic gifts, clear from the time she was a little girl and encouraged by her mother, led her to take her first sculpting classes with Germán Cueto in the Mexico City College in 1951. After receiving a scholarship to the Royal College of Art of London, she stayed in Europe from 1952 to 1956. The very year she returned to Mexico, she had her first solo exhibition at the Gallery of Mexican Art. In 1968, she met Mathias Goeritz, and from that moment on, her work aimed for integration with architecture. She produced a series of polychromatic two- and three-meter high panels called “dynamic walls,” which sparked Goeritz’s enthusiasm enough to invite her to participate in creating the “Route of Friendship” for the 1968 nineteenth Olympic Games in Mexico City.



*White Corridor*, 1969, The MUAC-UNAM Collection.

Courtesy of MUAC-UNAM

Established as an artist with special interest in urban work, she began a search for spaces related to her visual interventions. That research led her to integrate art and space to end up by creating “permanent” and “ephemeral” installations. Helen Escobedo made change her constant; she created an oeuvre that included jewelry (in silver), sketches, engravings, paintings, collages, architectural design, large sculptures, and works she called “installation art,” like those made out of organic waste (branches, trunks, and dry leaves, among other things), put outside in public recreational spaces, which meant they did not last long. About the relationship between her work and people, in her presentation for the itinerant exhibition “Exodus,” in November 2009, she said, “I’m a visual artist; everything I feel in my gut, I have to get out in three dimensions, and I almost always deal with human problems in life, ecology —water concerns me enormously. Migration has changed the country, something terrible we see among those who come from the south to cross over and among our own people, looking for a better life or more money to send to their relatives. It’s a terribly sad situation.”

In 1986, she was appointed a lifetime member of the Royal Academy of Sciences, Letters and the Arts of Belgium; in 1991, she received a Guggenheim fellowship; and, after an intense, innovative career, in 1999, the Mexican government gave her a National Fund for Culture and the Arts fellowship.

The creator of about 30 works of monumental sculpture, located in different spaces like Chapultepec Forest (Mexico), the Künstlerhaus Bethanien (Bethanien Art House) in Berlin, the Contemporary Arts Center in New Orleans, and the Helsinki City Art Museum (Finland), she died at age 76, on September 16, 2010, almost a year after receiving the 2009 National Prize for Science and the Arts.

*María Cristina Hernández Escobar*  
Assistant Editor



her dual role as creator and cultural promoter, but I later became convinced that there was actually no duality to these two aspects of her character: both came from the same creative impulse that simultaneously stemmed from her commitment as a cultural official, a contributor and independent artist. It was the same Helen who, with contradictory feelings, participated in the Route of Friendship and was disturbed by the armored vehicles parked a few feet away from her MUCA office during the student conflict. Completely alien to the hypocrisy common in Mexico's cultural milieu, Helen knew how to maintain her integrity and independent criteria in a delicate balance between her personal work and her public image. She also maintained that balance between her life with her life partner and raising her two children.

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In the early 1960s, consolidating her career as an artist and a promoter in Mexico before the age of 30 must have been no easy task. Polyglot, charismatic, and cosmopolitan, Helen's personality must have been uncomfortable for many sensibilities. Some photographers in the late 1960s portray the energetic head of the UNAM Visual Arts Department (later to become the Department of Museums and Galleries, between 1974 and 1978) wearing daring miniskirts that contrasted in their svelte lightness with the heavy dark suits of university officials. Given the provocation of the artistic proposals and communities she defended, Helen resorted to armor-ing herself with aristocratic grace, which she displayed equally when talking to a university president or, as she always did, giving an interview to a young, unknown university researcher, breaking protocol and eliminating distances by offering a glass of tequila at noontime.

This social grace, both rigorously correct and affectionate, was not divorced from her intense, professional work. Many people avoid public service fearing administrative work; but, Helen understood very well that, in the area of artistic production she promoted, one that in many senses she made it possible to formally inaugurate in Mexico, administration,



*Sui Generis*, 1970.

Courtesy of MUAC-UNAM





Courtesy of MUAC-UNAM

*Graphic Environment, 1970.*

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management, and programming were part of the creative process, not inconveniences, but parts of the substance that makes a work of art emerge as a public event. Her awareness of the need to extend the social scope of contemporary art may well have been one of her main contributions.

The political, social, economic, or ecological were not just pretexts for justifying artistic action in the projects she conceived and participated in. Rather, for her, the artistic event was a place that made it possible to represent, make visible, and conscious what was in the public interest; not an ornament for an institution or a city, or recreation or decoration for the world, but the space we share and that art makes possible. Completely divorced from any kind of pamphleteering, this place for what is public that Helen conceived of was not a place of slogans; and the depth of its meaning could be peppered with a huge sense of humor. Her raw materials became those of the day-to-day world, including what was marginalized and

discarded. By finding aesthetic stimulation in what were apparently the least favorable places and events, Helen gave us back an enriched reality. **MM**

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The author wishes to thank Pilar García for giving him access to Cuauhtémoc Medina's 2005 videotaped interview with Helen Escobedo, part of the research material for the exhibition "The Era of Discrepancies. Visual Art and Culture in Mexico, 1968-1997," hosted by MUCA in 2007.

<sup>2</sup> An area located at the southern part of Mexico City, near another famous place, Xochimilco. [Editor's Note.]

#### FURTHER READING

Eder, Rita, *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, at press).

Schmilchuk, Graciela, *Helen Escobedo: pasos en la arena* (Mexico City: Editorial Turner, 2001).