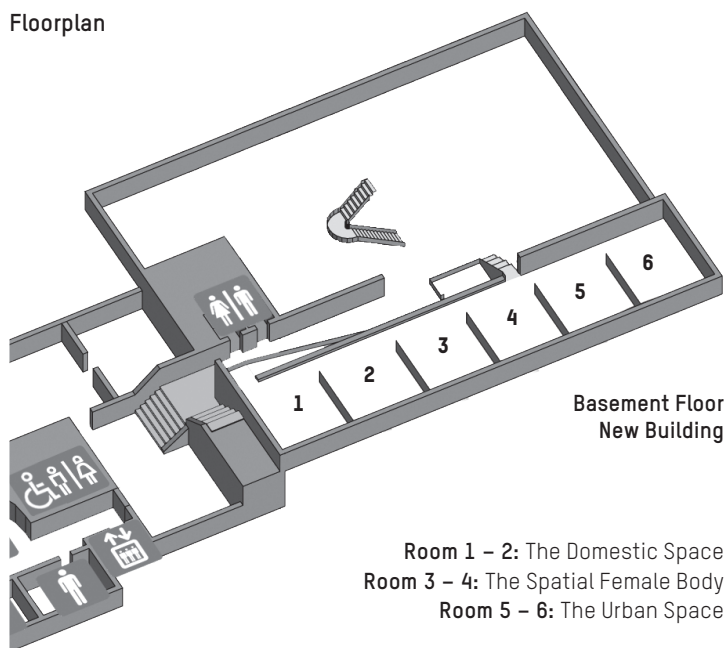


# Without Restraint

## Works by Mexican Women Artists from the Daros Latinamerica Collection

June 3 – October 23, 2016

### Floorplan



*Without Restraint* presents a selection of multifaceted and thought-provoking artwork by contemporary Mexican women artists from the holdings of the Daros Latinamerica Collection (Zurich)—shown together at the Kunstmuseum Bern for the very first time. The photographs, videos, objects, and installations by Ximena Cuevas, Claudia Fernández, Teresa Margolles, Betsabeé Romero, Maruch Sántiz Gómez, Teresa Serrano, and Melanie Smith engage with the concept of Mexican national identity and challenge the traditional roles and social spaces assigned to women and minorities by the dominant hierarchies of power. These seven artists overthrow the existing order of everyday life and the routine which traps women in a labyrinth of traditional archetypes, thus contributing to a broad feminist discourse. Topics such as life and death, the violated body, identity and migration, nature and the metropolis are critically examined in the work of these Mexican women artists. *Without Restraint* addresses the struggle of many women artists in contemporary Mexico for gender equality and for the rights of the indigenous peoples, as well as the struggle, in

Mexican society as a whole, against uncertainty and for the promotion of social justice.

In Mexico, even nowadays it is quite exceptional that art by women is exhibited solo or within thematically coherent all-women exhibitions in museums or galleries. *Without Restraint* was therefore conceived with the aim of fulfilling two main goals. First and foremost, the exhibition aims to show a focused selection of some of the most dazzling and thought-provoking works of art among those created in Mexico in recent decades. Exhibited all together the selected artworks provide the Kunstmuseum Bern's public with a stimulating overview of the artistic trends developed in Mexico during the last decade of the twentieth and the first years of the twenty-first centuries. Each of the works exhibited mirrors Mexico's rich aesthetic culture and its geographical, social, and political life. The exhibition attempts to bridge art and society, seeking to provoke in the audience a reflection on these relations and to instigate curiosity for their visual manifestations in contemporary Mexico. *Without Restraint* wants to highlight the common preoccupations that emerge from contemporary Mexican art when it is analyzed in context, fostering an intercultural dialogue and exchange between Mexico and Switzerland.

On a further level, the decision to concentrate the selection on art produced by women living and working in Mexico emerged from the curatorial desire to venture into what is a vast but only partially explored territory, and to center the discourse around reflection on the controversial topic of gender identity in Mexico and on its representations in contemporary art. By doing so, the exhibition aims at approaching women's art with attention to the ways in which in Mexico has contributed to the shaping of a new identity in opposition to the traditional emblems of womanhood and of the nation. Giving space and voice to what in Mexico is still a neglected minority within the art establishment, *Without Restraint* also seeks to dismiss some of the stereotypes upon which rests the exoticized and hybrid image of "authentically" Mexican art by women that is still so often encountered in Europe. *Without Restraint* should thus be understood as a contribution to the study and diffusion of feminist and women's art from Latin America and also be used as a platform to give further international visibility to the agendas of these artists.

### The Structure of the Exhibition: A Spatial Triad

The exhibition *Without Restraint* recognizes three major critical spaces of artistic intervention: the domestic space of the home, the female body, and the urban space of the city. Introducing the female body as a spatial entity—an active producer of space rather than just a body represented within a space—into the private/public dichotomy breaks with the supposedly natural affinity between the woman and the space of the house. The works by Cuevas, Fernández, Margolles, Romero, Sántiz Gómez,

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Serrano, and Smith are therefore arranged in the exhibition both by artist and thematically, following this tripartition centered on the active production of space and on the artists' efforts to inform new social relations and subvert traditional hierarchies of power and gender roles.

## Rooms 1 – 2: The Domestic Space

If the familial hearth is the space most conventionally assigned to femininity, not only in Latin America but still also in many Western societies, in Mexico the home has also been invested by politics with the role of symbolizing a strong and stable nation and is the model for the patriarchal state.

Choosing the supposed intimacy of the domestic space as the primary setting of their works, the artists Cuevas, Fernández, Sántiz Gómez, and Serrano turn this patriarchal rhetoric upside down and suggest a view which does not conform to the dominant male gaze. They become active producers of alternative meanings of domesticity and womanhood and establish their identity by assuming unconventional or nonconformist behaviors within the space traditionally assigned to woman.

**MARUCH SÁNTIZ GÓMEZ** was born in 1975 in Cruztón, an indigenous village in the highlands of Chiapas, a region in southern Mexico where almost only ethnic groups directly descended from the Mayas live. At the beginning of the 1990s Sántiz Gómez was introduced to photography and started working on her long-term project *Creencias* (Beliefs, 1994–1996). For it she researched, studied, and collected dozens of traditional beliefs from her community and the neighboring villages, which she subsequently wrote down in her language Tzotzil, translated into Spanish, and combined with one black-and-white or color photo each. In the pictures, she portrays domestic objects and utensils from her everyday life, like a broom, a pot, or a mirror, and animals. The texts are folk sayings charged with the spirituality of an indigenous, pre-Hispanic wisdom that has been passed on orally for generations and that now risks being lost forever if not recorded for posterity.

Being a woman and an indigenous person in Mexico, Sántiz Gómez embodies the double "Otherness." In her work, by taking on the active role of the artist-anthropologist, she speaks up for herself as a woman and for the ethnic indigenous minority that she represents. She subverts the exoticism of the male-dominant gaze and, from behind her camera, becomes an agent of social change.

**CLAUDIA FERNÁNDEZ's** work questions the ordinary value of objects and actions from everyday life by taking them out of context and investing them with unexpected meanings. Two anonymous women are the protagonists of the videos presented in the exhibition. Their faces are never shown to the viewer. Yet, if their individual identity is kept undisclosed, the social role of these women is underscored by the representation of some archetypal conventions. Their clothes and shoes, the spaces they occupy, and the very actions they accomplish orient and influence the viewer's judgment about these women's social identity. In *Sustituto* (Substitute, 2002), the protagonist is a lady of Mexican high society, with seemingly no other occupation than wearing exquisite high-heeled sandals in her home and playing with an extravagant domestic pet. The solitary protagonist is not engaged in any kind of productive or cleansing activity. The setting of *Limpia* (Cleaning, 2003) is completely different. In the first and the last scenes that frame the video, what seems to be a fugacious and illicit encounter between the woman protagonist and a man is suggested by a close-up of their feet wearing shoes. This time, the action does not play in the familiar and domestic space inhabited by the woman but in her working environment. This unidentified woman, who wears an apron over her humble outfit, is clearly employed as a cleaner in an opulent private home in Mexico City. She is obviously the only living thing amid a collection of stuffed game animals: a lion, a buffalo head, an ibex ... Is this cleaner-worker a "fallen-woman" of disputable morals, who is having an affair with the patron of the house? Or does Fernández imply here that the man is the predator and the woman, like the other animals in the room, only one of his numerous prey? Is she objectified, fetishized, and kept captive by her male employer?

In *Sustituto* and *Limpia*, Claudia Fernández investigates the traditional spatial and behavioral structures of femininity in Mexican society and offers a critical and ironic interpretation of the nature of such representa-

tions. By parodying the untouchability of feminine virtues, she defeats the cliché of the maternal and untainted vestal of the hearth and reveals the drama implicit in such stereotypes.

**XIMENA CUEVA's** work is driven by a critique of the consumerist society and Mexican culture she lives in, by the need to challenge the traditional representations of national identity, gender, and sexuality—especially of womanhood—and by the desire to explore alternative ways of looking at these signifiers. The short video *El diablo en la piel* (Devil in the Flesh, 1998) included in the exhibition is part of a cycle of videos in which Cuevas unmasks the "half-lies" of the patriarchal discourse on gender and sexuality in Mexico. In *El diablo en la piel*, the spectator is transformed into a voyeur whose gaze penetrates the intimate sphere of a private house. What he or she sees on the other side of the objective is a private moment in the life of a Mexican woman—here personified by the artist herself—who is suffering due to the absence of her female lover. This woman does not conform at all to the stereotyped representation of Mexican womanhood, traditionally associated with the domestic space and with her reproductive role, as wife and mother, within this confinement. The protagonist of the video rubs her eyes with Vicks VapoRub and chili pepper, causing them to shed tears. By inflicting physical and real pain on her own body, however, Cuevas is not trying to control the nature of her lesbian attraction and return to heterosexual conventions of sexuality, but rather to merely exorcize her desire for this one very special but absent woman.

The central topic in **TERESA SERRANO's** work is her critical consideration of the woman's roles in a male-dominated, chauvinistic, and sexist environment and of her resistance against any limitation to her liberty. Serrano has always been a huge film lover in her teenage years she became familiar with the cinematographic process and met important directors like Emilio Fernández and Luis Buñuel. In her artistic practice she has managed to combine this first imprinting with Mexican popular culture and mass media. The short movie *Boca de tabla* (Mouth of Plank, 2007) was filmed in black and white in an elegant Art Deco building in Mexico City: here the camera lens follows a woman in her fifties walking inside the deserted house, up and down staircases, in and out of sparsely decorated rooms immersed in the penumbra, as if she were trapped in a purposeless, domestic labyrinth.

## Rooms 3 – 4: The Spatial Female Body

The Mexican nationalist rhetoric of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries appropriated the Indian female body, elevating it to an allegory of the nation. In the visual arts, this led to the exploitation of the representation of female corporeality. The patriarchal discourse of Mexican culture has attributed to the female body a set of moral values that determine the "should" and "should not" of the female subject and construct women's sexuality. Since the nineteen-seventies, with some rare early examples during modernism, as in the case of Frida Kahlo's eloquent self-portraits, Mexican women artists have been rebelling against these restrictive stereotypes by reappropriating the female body. They have employed the body and all its components and abject elements in their work, transforming it into a weapon of revolt and social change. Through the space of the body they have questioned their sexual, gendered, and national identity and found a powerful way to be listened to and heard.

In Mexico, violence against women has reached pandemic levels during the past decades. **TERESA SERRANO's** video *La piñata* (2003) confronts this shocking reality by addressing the problem of the unresolved and therefore still unpunished murders of Ciudad Juárez. In this city located in the state of Chihuahua, at the Mexican border near El Paso, Texas, over eight-hundred women and girls have been brutally kidnapped, raped, and murdered since 1993, their dead bodies mutilated and dumped like garbage, while thousands are still reported missing. The majority of the victims are said to be *inditas del sur* (little Indian girls from the South), who come to work from all corners of Mexico at the local *maquiladoras*, the export processing and assembly plants concentrated along the Mexican side of the border. In *La piñata*, the artist substitutes the brutalized bodies of these women with an avatar made of papier-mâché dressed up like a *maquiladora* worker. The cheerful folkloric and religious tradition of using a stick to break a colorful vessel decorated with ribbons and filled with candy and sweets is here converted into a violent demonstration of misogyny, magisterially interpreted by the actor protagonist of the video.

In the exhibition, another work by Serrano also directly addresses the problem of femicide. In **5 Rolling Stones** (1999), five wigged heads which seem to have been severed from their bodies are placed on the floor, as if they were soccer balls ready to be kicked around, a frowning metaphor of how women are often reduced to nothing more than passive instruments of male entertainment. The color-dyed natural hair acts as a repository of memory: it is a signifier of corporeality and a direct reference to all those unidentified victims of violence.

The woman protagonist of the video **Restraint** (2006)—a role which was played by the artist herself—is shown struggling desperately between her wish to write a text and her frantic, unsuccessful attempts to stop a noisy hotel bell from ringing because one of her fingers appears to be glued on to it. Here, Serrano tells a story about the supposed limitations of women when it comes to mature rational thinking and about the belief that in women mind and body are divided, because they are instinct over rationality. *Restraint* denounces those strategies developed by the patriarchal system as intending to keep women away from knowledge and power.

Serrano does not dole out her criticism sparingly, even when it comes to religious power structures, for instance pointing her finger against the inner contradictions of the Catholic Church and the pointless antagonism between different religious beliefs. In **Blown Mold** (2012), a calotte, a miter, a biretta, and a saturn—four hats invested with symbolic values in Catholicism—are made of transparent blown glass: this ancient artisanal tradition was chosen by Serrano as a metaphor for the fragility of a system which, while investing itself with universal spiritual values and pleading for the equality of all human beings, is nevertheless profoundly rooted in rituals of patriarchy which preclude gender equality. **Del mismo diámetro** (Of the Same Diameter, 2012), on the other hand, reunites the three typical head-dresses of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam under the same glass case. The fact that all of them happen to have the exact same diameter of seventeen centimeters symbolically speaks for equality among all human beings, but it is also an ironic comment about an objective that, while seemingly obvious, is nevertheless still far away from being achieved globally.

Since the beginning of her career as a founding member of the art collective SEMEFO (Servicio Médico Forense or Medical Forensic Service), **TERESA MARGOLLES** has been employing her professional background as a forensic pathologist in order to thematize the violence of her country and criticize a society built on the exploitation and marginalization of the poor. As Margolles regularly observes when referring to her work, the morgue is a “social thermometer”, and what happens inside it reflects what is happening outside, on the streets of Mexico. By approaching art production through the spaces of work (the morgue) and by using abject materials collected on the scenes of crimes (the streets of Mexico), Margolles has grounded her identity as a working woman and feminist artist, actively defeating traditional spatial gender restrictions. Death and dead bodies, the morgue of Mexico City and the scenarios of brutal crimes and killings are the materials with and the spaces within which Margolles has been working since the nineteen-nineties. Departing from the bodily remains of dead children and young, poor, and disadvantaged people—victims of violence, drug addicts, casualties of accidents, et cetera—Margolles eliminates any conventional distance between life and death. In the Minimalist audio work **Trepanaciones (Sonido de la morgue)** (Trepanations [Sounds of the Morgue], 2003) the apparently harmless sound of an electric saw immediately acquires a horrifying character after we read the description in the caption. Recorded on the tape, it is in fact the mind-drilling and disturbing sound of a saw opening a human cranium at the morgue, in forensic language called “trepanation”: flesh tearing apart as it is dissected by a blade, dripping body fluids, cracking open bones ... Death virulently infiltrates our living bodies through our sense of hearing, bringing us out of balance. The fascination with death allows us to experience with thrilling clarity the forensic process, performed while the congested traffic of the megapolis of Mexico City can be heard off in the distance.

## Rooms 5 – 6: The Urban Space

Historically and still today, the streets of Mexico City have been the preferred stage upon which Mexican society has repeatedly performed its opposition to the hegemonic power and manifested its dissent by giving both visibility to all of its miseries and still unresolved social injustice.

However, “even the spaces of protest and activism in contemporary Mexico are predominantly gendered as masculine and subject to stereotypical spatial constraints that color women’s economic and political concerns as residing ‘in the home,’ where their work goes unpaid and historically unrecognized.” (Jamie L. Ratliff, 2012) In contrast to this gendered confinement, there are many contemporary women artists who have responded by leaving the domestic sphere to which they had been relegated by the establishment in order to physically enter the space of the city.

The car and its components, especially the tires, are **BETSABEÉ ROMERO**’s absolute trademark. Since 1997, cars have been accompanying the artist all along her quest for identity and cultural roots. Through reflection on the power of traditional symbols and artifacts and on the transformation processes they are undergoing in the era of globalization, Romero’s work speaks of migration, religious and cultural rituals, consumerism, and the environment. Romero has always been fascinated by the automotive vehicle and its inner contradictions. Rescuing and recycling cars, tires, and hoods which have lost their original function—that is, materials that have been dumped as worthless by consumeristic society—the artist appropriates ready-made strategies in order to propose a process of resignification and fusion between past and present.

In most cultures, the circular shape has a profound allegorical meaning as it is strictly associated with the conception of time and its passing. In Mexico, moreover, it also evokes the country’s indigenous past, with its Aztec calendars and cylindrical sacrificial stones. Rubber is intimately connected to Mexico, too: the gum or chicle used to manufacture tires is in fact naturally produced from a tree that grows in the Yucatán, and it was already employed in pre-Hispanic times for making the balls used in the *juego de la pelota*, the Mesoamerican ball game. Romero triggers these associations with her country by incorporating other materials and decorative elements characteristic of Mexican handicrafts. For example, in **Aliento para rodar** (Breath to Roll, 1997) she employs hundreds of dried roses, a flower closely associated with the miraculous apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe; Romero also uses homemade bread, as in **Pan es destino** (Bread Is Destiny, 1999), tempering a symbol of machismo and capitalism with the most domestic, feminine, and maternal of elements.

Worn-out tires bear the traces of all the roads they have rolled on; they are like a palimpsest of memory. It is on these ruins that Romero writes her new stories: carving arabesque-like patterns on old pneumatics, she transforms them into artisanal printing machines. For **Requiem para el peatón desconocido II** (Requiem for the Unknown Pedestrian II, 2000) Romero engraved ten rubber tires with a musical notation system, with decorative elements and several skulls with crossbones—a universal symbol of death. She then used black ink to impress these motifs on Japanese paper. The result is as lyrical as it is provocative: an installation devoted to all the countless unknown individuals who have been killed in car accidents on the congested streets of Mexico City.

It is through the immediacy of photography that Romero captures and documents her participatory performances, conducted in the urban environment with the help of local communities. Produced outside the privacy of the artist’s atelier and with the collaboration of volunteers—common women and men whom she recruits in the neighborhoods she is working in and guides through the process of art-making—Romero appropriates the public space and creates objects at the crossroads of urbanity and domesticity. For **Autoconstruido** (Auto-Constructed, 2000), using different parts of a Volkswagen Beetle, Romero built a car-house which, because it does not have a motor, is not related to movement or speed as normally expected. The artist’s critical statement against the voracity of a society based on velocity and uncontrolled pollution is also reiterated in **Un oasis en el desierto de la ciudad** (An Oasis in the City Desert, 2002) and in **Taxi verdor** (Taxi Greenery, 2001), where Romero manifests her wish to re-introduce the natural element into the urban jungle.

In January 1989, shortly after completing her degree at the University of Reading in England, **MELANIE SMITH** landed in Mexico City. Nowadays, twenty-six years later, she still lives in Mexico and is considered a Mexican artist—so much so that in 2011 she was asked to represent this country at the 54th Venice Biennale.

If a prevailing leitmotif is to be found in Smith's oeuvre, it is probably evident in her ability to juxtapose and harmonize figurative representation and abstraction. The three black-and-white gelatin silver photographs included in the exhibition bear clear witness to this aspect. ***Photo for Spiral City (II), (III), and (IV)*** (all 2002) are part of a series of photographs and acrylic enamel paintings created by the artist in conjunction with or inspired by her video *Spiral City* (2002). In this five-minute film, Smith portrays the megalopolis Mexico City as seen from a helicopter flying up in a spiral over Iztapalapa—the most densely populated of the city's sixteen districts, which Smith chose precisely for its lack of green areas and public spaces. In *Spiral City*, the almost ghostly city is freed from any decoration and human presence and is transformed into a *non-lieu*, into a fragmented and abstract structure lending itself to the subject of systematic scrutiny. The center of attention is the development of the megacity that, layer after layer, grows like a crystal and is at the same time subjected to erosion. Smith's dialogue with the city is subtle and takes place between an outsider, a transient female observer, and a modernity ruled by dystopian vision. Smith's work breaks the confinement imposed by gender roles in Mexico, thus establishing herself, a woman, as an active producer of space. In *Spiral City*, the streets of Mexico City become a site of protest because Smith represents and appropriates them in her work. By indirectly thematizing the social problems that inhabit those streets, such as overpopulation, violence, poverty, and pollution, she is questioning the validity of the system that has generated them.

(Text extracts from the exhibition catalogue by Valentina Locatelli, *Without Restraint*, Ostfildern 2016)

#### An exhibition with works by:

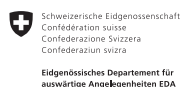
Ximena Cuevas (b.1963), Claudia Fernández (b.1965), Teresa Margolles (b. 1963), Betsabeé Romero (b. 1963), Maruch Sántiz Gómez (b. 1975), Teresa Serrano (b. 1936) und Melanie Smith (b. 1965).

## DAROS

Latinamerica

#### Patronage:

This exhibition is under the patronage of Claudia Ruíz Massieu Salinas, the Mexican Secretary of Foreign Affairs, and Swiss Federal Councillor Didier Burkhalter, Head of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA). It coincides with celebrations to mark the seventieth anniversary of diplomatic relations between Switzerland and Mexico and has been realized in close cooperation with the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs and the Embassy of Mexico in Switzerland.



## Agenda

#### Public Guided Tours in Ferman

Sunday, 11 a.m.: June 12 / August 28 / September 25 / October 23

Tuesday, 6 p.m.: June 21

Tuesday, 7 p.m.: July 19\*, August 16

\* with exhibition curator Valentina Locatelli (in English)

#### Visita guiada pública en español

Domingo 4 de septiembre a las 11h30 y martes 18 de octubre a las 19h30

#### Artist Talks

Saturday, June 4, 11 a.m.

Valentina Locatelli with Teresa Serrano (artist) and Hans-Michael Herzog, former Artistic Director, Daros Latinamerica Collection (in English)

Tuesday, June 21, 7 p.m.

Valentina Locatelli with Betsabeé Romero (artist) and Daniel Garza Usabiaga, Artistic Director Zona Maco, Mexico City (in English), preceded by a guided tour of the exhibition (in German, at 6 p.m.)

#### Mexican Films at Kino REX

As part of the accompanying program of the exhibition in collaboration with the Embassy of Mexico in Switzerland, the cinema "Kino REX" will show Mexican films by female and male directors, which reflect on the role of women in Mexican society: [www.rexbern.ch](http://www.rexbern.ch).

#### "ARTUR" Art-Tour for Children

Saturday, June 18: "Green – White – Red", 10:30 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.

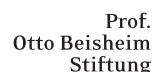
Together we tour the museum seeking to stimulate new approaches to art and instigate creative transfers. For children (6 – 12 years), costs: CHF 10.00.

Registration / Info: Kunstmuseum Bern, 031 328 09 11 or [vermittlung@kunstmuseumbern.ch](mailto:vermittlung@kunstmuseumbern.ch)

## Exhibition

Duration	03.06. – 23.10.2016
Opening	Thursday, June 2, 18h30
Entrance Fee	CHF 14.00 / red. CHF 10.00
Opening hours	Monday, closed Tuesday, 10:00 a.m. – 9:00 p.m. Wednesday – Sunday, 10:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.
Public holidays	01.08.2016: closed
Private guided tours	T +41 31 328 09 11, F +41 31 328 09 10 <a href="mailto:vermittlung@kunstmuseumbern.ch">vermittlung@kunstmuseumbern.ch</a>
Curator	Valentina Locatelli

#### With the support of:



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## Catalog

#### Werke mexikanischer Künstlerinnen aus der Daros Latinamerica Collection / Works by Mexican Women Artists from the Daros Latinamerica Collection

Ed. by Valentina Locatelli for the Kunstmuseum Bern. With texts by Matthias Frehner, Valentina Locatelli, Alma Ruiz and Interviews with Hans-Michael Herzog, Betsabeé Romero, Maruch Sántiz Gómez, Teresa Serrano. Graphic Design: Gabriele Sabolewski. Texts: German and English. Soft cover, 176 pages, 64 illustrations. Hatje Cantz, ISBN 978-3-7757-4104-0.