

# Damián Ortega

## Casino

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HangarBicocca

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**Cover**

Damián Ortega, *Controller of the Universe*,  
2007 (detail). © Damián Ortega;  
Photo Stephen White; Courtesy White Cube

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# Damián Ortega *Casino*

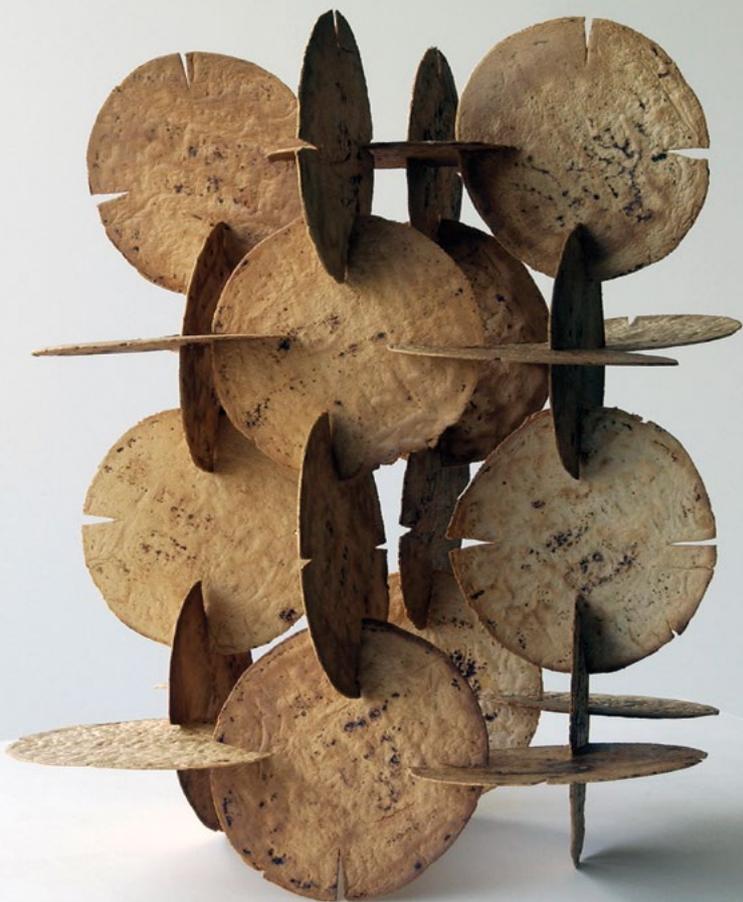
**5 Jun – 8 Nov 2015**  
curated by Vicente Todolí

**HangarBicocca**



## Damián Ortega

Emerging internationally midway through the 1990s, today Damián Ortega is considered one of the most interesting contemporary artists. His poetics focus on the exploration and use of everyday objects, the functions and meanings of which he subverts with subtle, personal irony. His artistic practices experiment with different languages and mediums ranging from installations to photography, from moving images to performance, and concentrate on projects and interventions that involve multiple shapes and sizes: exploded and deconstructed, his works investigate the fundamental forms of sculpture, their relationship with the surrounding space and the transformational processes of material. Ortega is among the main protagonists of the renewal of contemporary Mexican art, born during the last two decades of the twentieth century in response to social and political disillusionment that swept through the country and its artistic traditions, characterized by an emphasis on national identity. The artist's work captures a universe of references from the twentieth-century history of art and popular culture into essential forms with an immediate visual impact. His oeuvre expresses a variety of references: from engravings by José Guadalupe Posada (1852–1913, the precursor to Mexican mural paintings) to Mexican B-movies, to historical avant-gardes from the early 1900s and reflections on objects developed by Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968), to Led Zeppelin's music, extreme performances by Chris Burden (1946–2015) and investigations into material conducted by Robert Smithson (1938–1973).



*Módulo de construcción con tortillas*, 1998. 52 tortillas; variable dimensions.  
Courtesy of the Artist and kurimanzutto, Mexico City

## The Exhibition

Damián Ortega's first solo show in Italy, "Casino" presents a broad perspective on the artist's work through sculpture, installations and film from the early 1990s to recent works.

The show includes nineteen works of art, ranging from small to large scale, that dialogue with the "Shed" space in Hangar Bicocca. At the centre of the exhibition visitors find *The Beetle Trilogy*: an "epic" work that focuses on a Volkswagen Beetle, among the most iconic automobiles of the modern era.

Material and energy, accelerations and dispersions, explosions and implosions of everyday forms and objects come together into the exhibition space creating a dynamic and vital whole in which time, actions and sounds overlap and interact with one another.

### ***The Beetle Trilogy***

Damián Ortega uses a Volkswagen Beetle to create *The Beetle Trilogy*, his best-known body of works. The trilogy includes an installation (*Cosmic Thing*, 2002), a performance (*Moby Dick*, 2004) and a film (*Escarabajo*, 2005). The choice of the Beetle car model is extremely significant because it is closely connected with the history of both Mexico and Ortega himself (the artist owned and drove a Beetle for years). Developed during the Third Reich at the behest of Adolf Hitler as an automobile of the people thanks to its low cost, the Beetle went into production after the Second World War, becoming a symbol of Germany's economic recovery. In Mexico it was one of the first



*Prometeo*, 1992. Light bulb, candle; 10 x 10 x 15 cm.  
Courtesy of the Artist and kurimanzutto, Mexico City

economical cars available on the market. The car's mechanics made it easy to repair, even by non-professionals, inspiring a lucrative black market for replacement parts.

The artist produced *Cosmic Thing* in 2002, the same year this model of the Beetle went out of production, making the car an archaeological and mythical object in Ortega's installation, almost as if it were a fossil dinosaur skeleton on display in a museum. Talking about the choice of the Beetle, Ortega has said, «Undoubtedly, the Volkswagen Beetle is a powerful symbol of an epoch: it refers to a historical moment, and the use of particular technology that has been declared obsolete and will not be produced anymore, no matter how popular it was.»

*The Beetle Trilogy* develops as an investigation into the icons of modern society, blending mythological stories with experiments on the dysfunction of mechanical systems in an ironic and unpredictable manner.

## 1 *Cosmic Thing* (2002)

Using a 1989 Volkswagen Beetle, in *Cosmic Thing* Ortega furthers his investigation into the relationship between an object and the fixed space into which it is placed, calling into question our perception of everyday objects.

During an interview, the artist detailed the circumstances that led him to creating this work: «I went to a used-car dealership and asked for help in taking it apart. Three fourteen- or fifteen-year-old kids, using very simple tools, like wrenches, disassem-

bled it in about four hours. They were expert car scavengers. Car theft and the selling of auto parts are a multimillion-dollar industry in Mexico.»

Using the Beetle repair manual, Ortega hung every single component in the exhibition space, creating an expansive, three-dimensional schema of the original automobile. Within the work, each element is suspended at regular intervals, defying the laws of gravity.

Through *Cosmic Thing*, the artist highlights the correlations and interdependent relationships that exist between different frag-



*Cosmic Thing*, 2002. Beetle '89, wires; variable dimensions. Courtesy The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, purchased with funds provided by Eugenio López and the Jumex Fund for Contemporary Latin America Art

ments of the Beetle: «My desire was to offer the expanded vision of an object. [...] In the process I started to understand the conceptual importance of technique, and how it is related to form: the whole working process is what composes the piece.»

## 2 *Moby Dick* (2004)

The performance *Moby Dick* consists of a true physical battle between artist and machine, during which Ortega uses a series of ropes and pulleys to attempt to control the driving force of a white Beetle as it roars “indomitably” across a layer of grease.

The action is accompanied by a band playing a song of the same name by Led Zeppelin – featuring the performance of legendary drummer John Bonham (1948–1980), one of the most influential drummers in the history of Rock and Roll – positioned inside a space bordered by three intersecting circles that echo the symbol the drummer chose for the cover of the 1971 album for which *Moby Dick* was recorded. The title is also a citation of the novel *Moby Dick* by US writer Herman Melville (1819–1891), published in 1851. Ortega notes, «I wanted to use the name *Moby Dick* to create an obvious reference of the white car as a white whale, like a cartoon... there is something cartoonish about thinking of it as an animal, a fabulous reflection of the power and vastness of nature.»

In this segment of the trilogy the artist analyses the relationship between man and nature within the urban context, as well as how this is manifested in contemporary culture.

## 3 *Escarabajo* (2005)

*Escarabajo* is the most recent episode of *The Beetle Trilogy*, but although it was developed after the other two works, it is not the trilogy’s conclusion. For the artist, these three works are part of a narrative that remains open, and does not necessary follow the chronological order in which the works were produced.

During the film, the car takes a mythical voyage of exploration, returning to its origins. This trip unfolds amid peripheral districts and along country roads. The last scene shows the artist, helped by several other people, as he buries the Volkswagen Beetle in its hypothetical birthplace in Puebla, Mexico – one of the last places where these cars were still produced. Buried upside-down like a defenceless overturned



*Moby Dick*, 2004. Video still, colour, sound, 9' 42".  
Courtesy of the Artist and kurimanzutto, Mexico City

insect, the Beetle completes the “epic voyage” that puts an end to its lifecycle.

#### 4 Objects

Set up on a number of different plinths, this group of works seems to evoke the multiplicity of systems devoid of a given order, but in reality offers a broad vision of Damián Ortega’s work, and presents sculptures that date back to the beginning of his artistic career in the 1990s, all the way to his most recent productions, connected with the investigation of fossils and memory.

*Escarabajo*, 2005. 16 mm film still, colour, silent, 16'.  
Courtesy of the Artist and kurimanzutto, Mexico City



Composed of a candle inserted provocatively into a standard light bulb, **Prometeo** [Prometheus] (1992) was inspired by a vignette by Mexican illustrator Manuel Ahumada (1956–2014), and is a reference to the energy crisis Mexico was experiencing during those years. The use of caricature – a reminder of Ortega’s past work as a satirical cartoonist – can also be found in **Pico cansado** [Tired Pickaxe] (1997), in which the handle of a pickaxe seems to sag beneath the weight of its metallic extremity. Negating its original function, the artist transforms the object into an obsolete instrument with anthropomorphic characteristics. In **Liquid Center** (1997), a golf ball is captured on video, set against a black background, as it is being cut and opened by the artist, who displays its contents for the camera. The sphere, white and simple, betrays all its interior complexity: countless elastic filaments are wrapped around a small dark ball, enveloped by the liquid that keeps it stable and balanced. Conducted with surgical precision, the action displays the dispersion of energy contained inside the little ball, which as Ortega explains «is a kind of liberation, an almost animal gestation that leads to the expelling of its centre as if in a biological process.»

Born as a pseudo-scientific project to categorize and classify material, in **Elote clasificado** [Classified Cob] (2005) Ortega numbers every single kernel in a dry ear of corn in order to highlight the fragmentation present within the object; while in **Módulo de construcción con tortillas** [Tortillas’ Construction Module] (1998) he creates a fragile structure made of tortillas, assembled in scale as if it were a modernist building.

Work on the study of minimal building units can be seen in more recent works like **Cubo Modulor III** [Cube Modulor III] (2008), in

which the artist builds a cube of sixteen blocks of pigmented cement, playing with the dimensions of the *Modulor* designed by Swiss architect Le Corbusier (1887–1965), a symbolic figure in the modernist movement. In the treatise *Le Modulor*, published in 1948, Le Corbusier theorizes a scale of proportions based on the golden section used to define the proportion standards between human body and inhabited space.

A cubic form and the physical characteristics of cement also characterize **Organism 4** (2012), in which Ortega highlights the process of creating a volume: starting from an external structure that reproduces the form of a cube and functions as a mould, the artist sets different-coloured blocks of cement inside until he has completely saturated the available space. Thanks to the energy and force impressed in these not-yet-solidified blocks of cement, Ortega manages to modify the material and create a perfect geometrical form.

**Visceras 1** [Viscera 1] (2010) is an investigation into systems used to assemble and build a given form. Using cylindrical segments of pigmented cement, the artist creates a structure which, when viewed from above, recalls an anatomical cross section of human flesh. Speaking about this work, Ortega notes, «it's an abstraction of the brain, I want to show how things are connected.»

Along with the transformation of material, Ortega is fascinated by those processes that conserve elements, and by fossils in particular. These two aspects are the focus of **Estratigrafía 4** [Stratigraphy 4] (2012). Created in Berlin, this work is a collection of show and event posters that Ortega spent over a year



*Estratigrafía 4*, 2012. Newspaper, paper, glue; 21.5 x 33.5 x 27.5 cm; 14 x 31.5 x 30 cm. Courtesy of the Artist and kurimanzutto, Mexico City

*Borromeo's Knots 3*, 2011. Concrete cast; 60 x 86 x 45 cm.  
© Damián Ortega. Photo © Stephen White. Courtesy White Cube

*Pico Cansado*, 1997. Wooden pickaxe; 54 x 92 x 8 cm.  
Courtesy of the Artist and kurimanzutto, Mexico City

*Elote clasificado*, 2005. Dry corn cob; 15 x 5 x 5 cm.  
Courtesy of the Artist and kurimanzutto, Mexico City

gathering from city streets. The posters were compressed and glued together until they formed a sphere, which was exhibited cut into two pieces, and preserves the cultural memory of the city at its nucleus.

The structure of language and its infinite creative possibilities are the subject of ***Borromeo's Knots 3*** (2011), a work that is part of a series created using cement poured into flexible plastic tubes that act as moulds and are subsequently removed. On one hand, their shape reminds the viewer of a serpent, the extremities of which become lost in the whole, creating a hypothetical Möbius strip (in mathematics, a continuous one-sided surface). On the other, the title is a reference to the language theory of the same name, first theorized by French psychiatrist Jacques Lacan (1901–1981). Lacan's thinking is based on the possible distortions and disconnections that extend between a real object and the word used to define its meaning.

In ***The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man (F. Engels)*** (2013), the title of which is derived from the name of an unfinished essay by Friedrich Engels (1820–1895), the German economist and philosopher who, together with Karl Marx, founded Marxism, Ortega presents a wood reproduction of a hand, the extremities of which are set with metal blades similar to those on a Swiss army knife. The work was conceived during a trip he took in Nigeria's Gashaka region, where he got to watch the way a group of native chimpanzees behaved. First presented at The Freud Museum in London in 2013, the work is part of the artist's reflections on the evolution of instruments and body language. It contains a strong bond with the scientific discipline that investigates these subjects, as Ortega himself has

stated. «The idea was that art and science could come together in a more playful way to open up the perspective.»

In an interplay of appearances and similarities, ***Incidental Configuration*** (2013) interacts in a direct, ironic manner with all the other works on display in the exhibition space. Its shapes bring to mind a normal plinth on which different sculptures are placed, but the modularity and geometry that distinguish this object are altered by the presence of a shadow created by numerous cubes of cement set out along the floor. The origins of this work can be found in Ortega's interest for forms of spontaneous and organic aggregation he first observed in the favelas, and shed light on his investigations of architecture and urban planning. In this manner, the white, minimalist plinth becomes a symbol for modernity and the monumentality of contemporary cities, hiding the chaotic, vivacious organisms that are slums, where buildings are made of discarded materials, and which develop and grow in the shadow of skyscrapers out on the outskirts of South American megalopolises.

## 5 ***Hollow/Stuffed: market law*** (2012)

This installation replicates an image the artist discovered in a newspaper, where it was reported that the Army had found a submarine used by Narcos to transport cocaine from South America. The vehicle was built of common materials like fiberglass. Fascinated by the image, the artist created a small-scale submarine made up of numerous biodegradable plastic sacks filled with salt and hung from the ceiling on cables. At first glance, the work appears to be a monolithic, imposing object.



But looking closer the viewer finds that a constant flow of salt is pouring out of the rear section of the submarine, which is destined to empty its materials. The constant fall of salt on the pavement creates a cone-shaped heap on the floor.

The title of the work – *Hollow/Stuffed: market law* – recalls the poetry of T. S. Eliot (1888–1965): *The Hollow Men* (1925). The concept of moral “emptying” connected with modern man’s condition, which can be heard in Eliot’s composition, is in turn connected with a novel by Joseph Conrad (1857–1924), *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and the failure of colonialism.

The submarine, presented as an object that has been stripped of its functions and is destined to decay, dialogues with the history of salt understood as an element capable of modifying and supporting the economic system of an entire country. With this work, Ortega establishes an ironic parallel between the salt market in the colonial era and our present day: just as salt once formed the foundation of commerce, today drug trafficking is an important source of income for many countries.

## 6 *Nine Types of Terrain* (2007)

Made up of nine 16mm films featured simultaneously in loop by nine projectors, *Nine Types of Terrain* was inspired by the military strategy text *The Art of War*, attributed to General Sun Tzu, who

Previous page: *Hollow/Stuffed: market law*, 2012. Biodegradable plastic sacks, metal, salt; 198 x 87 x 874 cm. © Damián Ortega; Photo © Todd-White Art Photography; Courtesy White Cube

lived in China between the VI and V centuries BC. The text, divided into thirteen chapters, is also viewed as a treatise on Oriental philosophy, and its teachings have been used in many aspects of daily life, including economic flows and business management.

The scenes described in the film are set in a “no man’s land” where the Berlin Wall once stood. Each of the films is characterized by different bricks – a recurring element in Damián Ortega’s work – laid out on the ground to form several of the tactical formations described in the book. The nine episodes, each of which is very short, end in a series of “falling domino” effects that knock over each brick combination, one after the other.



*Nine Types of Terrain*, 2007. Still from 16 mm film, colour, sound, 3' loop. Courtesy of the Artist and kurimanzutto, Mexico City

In this work, the artist is investigating the relationship between object and action. Formerly passive elements, the bricks are driven by an external force capable of setting them in movement, which in turn sets off a series of uncontrolled and unstoppable events that all seem to lead to the same result. The sound of bricks falling on the dusty ground accompanies and connects all the different scenes being projected and interacts with the exhibition space through an acoustic harmony between the noise of the projectors and the sounds of the falling bricks, in a temporal reference that connects the projected images with the energies it portrays. As Ortega says, the space cannot be defined as a purely physical reality, but is the result of numerous relationships and exchanges that extend into the political and social spheres, «In this way, the sculpture could be understood as a flow of energy and not as an object.»



*Controller of the Universe*, 2007. Found tools, wire; 285 x 405 x 455 cm. Courtesy of the Artist, White Cube and P.S.1. Contemporary Art Center, 2008. Photo: Matthew Septimus

## **7** *Controller of the Universe* (2007)

This installation appears as an explosion of hundreds of seemingly old-fashioned work tools: saws, pickaxes, hammers and so forth. The artist found these tools in a number of different flea markets around Berlin, then used wires to suspend them in mid-air. The centre of this vortex is characterized by an empty space accessible to visitors through any one of four different entrance points which, like Cartesian axes, divide the structure into four equal segments.

Caught between empty spaces and volumes, *Controller of the Universe* seems to call into question – as the artist confirms – the physical identity of an object. Ortega notes, «it makes rela-

tive the limits between exterior and interior – the limits of a closed and hermetic space, or those of a solid body or volume, and the context around them.»

The title of the work was inspired by a controversial mural by Mexican artist Diego Rivera (1886–1957), *Man at the Crossroads*, realized on commission in 1933 for the Rockefeller Center in New York City. Due to the presence of a portrait of Lenin that Rivera had inserted provocatively within the mural, it was destroyed, and the following year was painted again by the same artist for the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City and entitled *El hombre controlador del universo*.

Damián Ortega's piece is based on the ambivalence that exists in the relationship between man and technology; although the artist is fascinated by work tools and production systems, this work expresses his scepticism in the face of the excessive, indiscriminate faith contemporary man places in technical progress.

## 8 *Unión-Separación* (2000)

*Unión-Separación* appears as an artisan-built object constructed from a workbench, firmly anchored to the ground with two weights (a rock and a cement plinth), and a rotating mechanism that can be set in motion with a crank handle. The crank handle has a wood axis, the extremity of which supports a video camera that records the movement of a liquid substance inserted into a Plexiglas parallelepiped, and a hammer, attached haphazardly with some packing tape. Once the device is activated, the liquid is subjected to centripetal force and gradually begins to separate and split in two. The recorded image is sent in real time to a screen set near the table. On the screen, the liquid appears motionless, while the surrounding exhibition space and any visitors present rotate faster and faster until they become a blur.

Through this system, which resembles a home science experiment, the artist plays with contradictions in our perception of reality, investigating the mechanisms of optical dysfunction. Ortega has presented us with a paradoxical situation that throws our certainties about movement and immobility into doubt. «Science aspires to know everything. I don't want to make it seem a caricature at all but, if I were comparing, I would



*Unión-Separación*, 2000. Table, pulley, fish tank, video camera, projector, hammer; variable dimensions. Courtesy of the Artist and kurimanzutto, Mexico City

say that art pursues exactly the opposite: the subjectivity, the single phenomenon, the analysis of particularities, the facts in their context, personal experiences. Art is un-learning process.»

## The Artist

Damián Ortega was born in Mexico City in 1967. When he was sixteen he abandoned school and started experiencing art, largely on his own. Between 1987 and 1992 he began participating in “Friday Workshop,” a project that developed through a series of informal encounters that took place once a week in the studio of artist Gabriel Orozco and brought together a group of young artists to talk about and overcome the conservatism and relative isolation that Mexican art experienced during that period. Other participants in “Friday Workshop” were Abraham Cruzvillegas, Gabriel Kuri and Dr. Lakra.

During the same period the artist, influenced by the intensely politicized work of muralists from the 1920s such as Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896–1974), began working as a satirical cartoonist for a number of different national magazines and newspapers, including *La Jornada* (one of Mexico City’s primary newspapers). Ortega saw the spirit of the muralists and Mexican political art come to life in these publications: «It was my wish to be a muralist, like the famous painters in Mexico [...] The mural comes into the format of the caricature, the print.»

Humour and irony, which distinguish this critical approach to society, are among the elements most evident in all of Ortega’s artistic production, which develops within an irreverent comparison between wordplay and double meanings. In ***Pato Bosch*** [Bosch Duck] (1997), a reproduction of a duck’s head is



*Obelisco transportable*, 2004. Cast fiberglass obelisk with metal base with wheels; 600 x 60 x 60 cm. Courtesy of the Artist and kurimanzutto, Mexico City

attached to an industrial sander turned on at full power and moving uncontrolled across wood flooring, damaging it. Within the work, the inoffensive image of the animal is set in contrast to the aggressiveness with which the device moves around in the space and, by destroying the surface upon which it sits, underlines the contrast between technological chaos and natural order.

Ortega's investigations into the accumulation and dispersion of energy continuously increase in size, becoming genuine feats of engineering that challenge the laws of gravity. The project ***Extensión, Construcciones (autoconstrucción)*** [Extension/Constructions (auto-construction)] (1997), developed in the artist's apartment and documented through photography, is structured around a series of exercises that imply the reorganization and assembly of all his objects – furniture and materials – giving life to diverse temporary, precarious compositions, such as bridges or suspended structures, that interact with the limits and peculiarities of the space itself.

Appropriating everyday objects like work tools and games, Ortega alters and transforms them, reinventing their function and reinserting them into unexpected cultural, social and political contexts. Urban space is one of the artist's preferred places to conduct this kind of exchange, as can be seen with ***Obelisco transportable*** [Transportable Obelisk] (2004), in which Ortega presents an obelisk – a classic symbol of power and memory – on a cart equipped with wheels, creating a situation that borders on the absurd: the obelisk can potentially be set anywhere and everywhere, thereby depriving it of its commemorative function.



*Pato Bosch*, 1997. Sander, wooden duck head; 30 x 30 x 15 cm.  
Courtesy of the Artist and kurimanzutto, Mexico City

Since the beginning of his career, Damián Ortega has developed his work around the social implications connected to the idea of an architecture in constant evolution, connected to principles of improvisation and spontaneous growth, clearly contradictory to the utopian projects of modernist architecture of the 1900s, which was based on the precise organization of functions in public and private spaces.

In 2003, during an artist's residency in Brazil, Ortega was struck by the way favelas were built, where families accumulate shapeless masses of bricks outside their homes before moving on to build the next part. This experience resulted in ***Matéria/Energía (sólido, líquido y gaseoso)*** [Matter/Energy (Solid, Liquid and Gas)], presented that same year in São Paulo, Brazil. Built



*Extensión, Construcciones (autoconstrucción), 1997. Furniture, rope; variable dimensions. Courtesy of the Artist and kurimanzutto, Mexico City*

of 1,700 bricks, the project investigates the material's transformation processes and is connected to the concept of entropy (in thermodynamics, interpreted as the degree of transformation of material from one state to another), at the core of Ortega's artistic investigations. *Matéria/Energía (sólido, líquido y gaseoso)* documents the artist's action within the space, interacting with the different material states. Initially the bricks are set one on top of the other, and form a cube (solid) at the centre of the room. Next they are set one next to the other (liquid), completely covering the floor. Finally, they are suspended at regular intervals in the space on cables (gas) running down from the ceiling. Once the action is done, the artist shoots a photographic triptych of it. Drawn to building processes and the instruments

capable of determining them, Ortega's work is not aimed at creating a stable, defined form, but rather toward recording states of transition and the infinite possibilities inherent in combining materials. «You recycle objects,» says the artist, «you regenerate them and give them a new life [...] I think that in my work, this vulnerability and fragility are present, as well as the clumsiness.»

Subverting the classical notion of sculpture understood as a solid, monolithic and specific form, in 2002 Ortega presented the installation ***Cosmic Thing*** – part of the artist's *The Beetle Trilogy* – in which he deconstructs each single component of a 1989 Volkswagen Beetle, hanging all its various parts in the space as if recreating it in exploded form. The Beetle is an important symbol in Mexican history: for years it was the highest-selling car in the country, and even became the preferred model for the taxi in Mexico City. The work, which in appearance is connected with an archaeological, mythical object, seems to play with Duchamp's first ready-mades, in which an everyday object produced in series is subtracted from its customary context and exhibited as an action critical of the recognized, acknowledged value system. With *Cosmic Thing*, Ortega expands the ways we are accustomed to looking at an automobile, displaying it through a three-dimensional schema in which each individual element is necessary and reciprocally connected. The concepts of fragmentation and system that lie at the base of this work characterize Ortega's entire artistic production: «It is better to consider that the fragment has a meaning by itself, a singular instinct, thus significance cannot be understood from a unitary logic. The logic of fragmentation is one of chance, accident, eventuality, contingency, ephemerality and incompleteness.»



*Matéria/Energia (sólido, líquido y gaseoso)*, 2003, detail. Photographic triptych; 30 x 46 cm each photo. Courtesy of the Artist and Galeria Fortes Vilaça, São Paulo

Often in Ortega's work the relationships of connection and disconnection among different elements imply the viewer's active participation. Moving through the space, he or she can identify different points of view from which to look at the work as a whole. This aspect harkens back to the work of Helio Oiticica (1937-1980), an artist of reference for Ortega, and can be seen in works like **Controller of the Universe**. In this installation the viewer can access the centre of a structure composed of various different work tools hung at different heights in order to create a large spherical mass that seems to be held suspended in empty space by a mysterious centrifugal force. In **Champ de vision** [Field of Vision], presented in 2008 at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, the viewer can cross through an environment composed of



Alias Editorial, an editorial project by Damían Ortega. Photo: Omar Luis Olguin

numerous coloured Plexiglas modules suspended in the space which, when observed together from an opposite hole in the wall, create an image of a human eye. The work invites us to consider the tool of perception, calling our point of view into question.

The complex structures created by Damían Ortega, in which each element plays an important role in the construction of the whole, are not connected solely with a perceptive analysis of space and material, but involve heterogeneous economic and linguistic systems as well. In 2010 the artist established **Alias Editorial**, an independent publishing project that aims to make a number of key texts on contemporary art that have never been published in Spanish accessible to everyone. The first book



in the collection is *Conversando con Marcel Duchamp* (1967), by Pierre Cabanne. It was followed by (among others) a collection of poetry by Francis Picabia, a collection of texts by Robert Smithson, Lawrence Weiner and Dan Graham, and Sam Durant's *Pantera Negra: el arte revolucionario de Emory Douglas* (2012), a book that documents the history of the Black Panther movement, a storied Afro-American revolutionary movement active in the United States during the civil rights era. Presented in 2012 at the Havana Biennale, the project also republishes texts and catalogues that are no longer in print or were never distributed in Mexico.

### **Selected Exhibitions**

Damián Ortega has presented solo exhibitions in a number of different international institutions, including: ICA, Philadelphia (2002); Kunsthalle Basel (2004); Tate Modern, London; MOCA, Los Angeles (2005); Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris (2008); ICA, Boston (2009); Barbican Centre, London (2010); MAM, Rio de Janeiro (2015). He has also participated in numerous international exhibitions, including: "Squatters", Museo Serralves, Porto, Witte de With Museum, Rotterdam (2001); two editions of the Venice Biennale (2003 and 2013); the 4th Berlin Biennale; the 27th San Paolo Biennale (2006); the 11th Havana Biennale (2012); and the 12th Sharjah Biennale (2015). In 2006 Ortega was a finalist for the Hugo Boss Prize, organized by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York. In 2007 he was nominated for the Nationalgalerie Prize for Young Art in Berlin.

**Artist's quotations are drawn from the following sources:**

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*Damián Ortega: espace trois-cent-quinze*, exh. cat., Éditions du Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 2008.

Jessica Morgan (ed.), *Do It Yourself: Damián Ortega*, Skira Rizzoli Publications, New York, 2009.

E.C. Gogolak, "A Visit with Damian Ortega," in *New Yorker*, 7 November 2014, (<http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/visit-damian-ortega>).

Phone interview with the artist, February 2015.

**This publication accompanies the exhibition "Casino" by Damián Ortega**

**Lenders**

Coleção Teixeira de Freitas, Lisboa

Colección Axa Seguros Mexico

Coll. Fundação de Serralves – Contemporary Art Museum, Porto

Collection Francois Odermatt and Pierre Trahan

Collezione Francesco Dalla Rovere

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**HangarBicocca** is an institution dedicated to contemporary art that offers an exhibition programme featuring Italian and international artists, accompanied by a series of live events, encounters with artists and teaching labs open to schools and the general public. The project, the brainchild of the Pirelli company, is the result of a process that has led to the reconversion of a vast industrial production facility into a space dedicated to art, inaugurated in 2004 with the realization of Anselm Kiefer's *I Sette Palazzi Celesti*, the artist's most important site-specific work. Beginning in 2012, HangarBicocca has presented to the general public exhibitions entirely conceived and produced for its spaces – the Shed, Navate and Cubo – alternating works by renowned artists like Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi, Mike Kelley, Dieter Roth, Cildo Meireles and Joan Jonas with others by younger artists who have already established an international reputation, including Tomás Saraceno, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Ragnar Kjartansson, Micol Assaël and João Maria Gusmão & Pedro Paiva. Open to the city and its environs, HangarBicocca is an internationally-oriented project that reflects Pirelli's corporate culture based on values like research and innovation, fostering cultural diversity and concern for the welfare and well-being of the local community.

## Founding member and promoter

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MAINSTREAMING

**1** *Cosmic Thing* (2002)

**2** *Moby Dick* (2004)

**3** *Escarabajo* (2005)

**4** **Objects:**

*Prometeo* (1992)

*Pico cansado* (1997)

*Liquid Center* (1997)

*Elote clasificado* (2005)

*Módulo de construcción con tortillas* (1998)

*Cubo Modulator III* (2008)

*Organism 4* (2012)

*Visceras 1* (2010)

*Estratigrafía 4* (2012)

*Borromeo's Knots 3* (2011)

*The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man* (F. Engels) (2013)

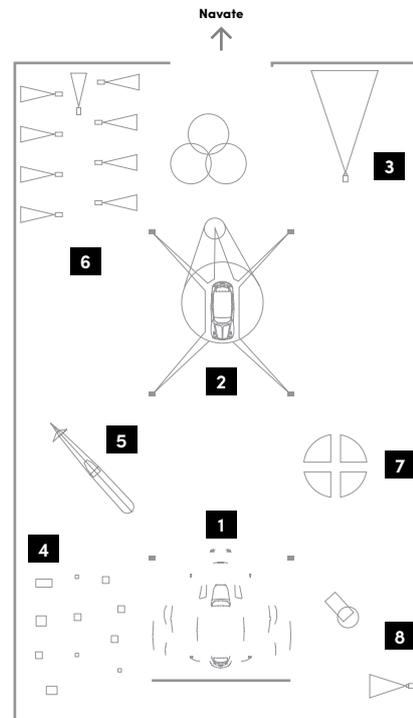
*Incidental Configuration* (2013)

**5** *Hollow/Stuffed: market law* (2012)

**6** *Nine Types of Terrain* (2007)

**7** *Controller of the Universe* (2007)

**8** *Unión-Separación* (2000)



Entrance to the exhibition "Casino" in the Shed

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