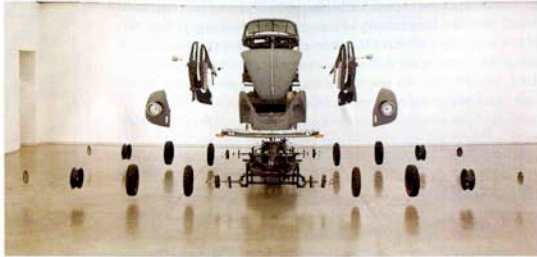


# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Daniel Quiles, "Damián Ortega", Artforum International, December 2009, 227

From left: Damián Ortega, *Cosmic Thing*, 2002, disassembled 1989 Volkswagen Beetle. Installation view, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, 2009. Photo: John Kemnard. Damián Ortega, *Classified Cob*, 1998–2005, ink on dry corn cob, 6 x 2 x 2". Damián Ortega, *Nine Types of Terrain*, 2007, still from one of nine 16-mm films, each 3 minutes.



## Damián Ortega

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**THERE IS A STRIKING DISJUNCTION** between reproductions of Damián Ortega's *Cosmic Thing*, 2002, and the real article currently on view at Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art in his first major survey, "Do It Yourself." In photographs, this dismembered 1989 Volkswagen Beetle is suspended like a digital chimera—a lost special-effects explosion from *The Matrix*, perhaps. In person, objecthood returns with a vengeance. The metal wires, taut with weight, are insistently visible, and instead of a futurist celebration of technology there are merely the rusty, dirty, and fraying parts of an old car. *Cosmic Thing* is an emblem of Mexico City's chop-shop culture—the car was taken apart by teenage mechanics—that paraphrases Ortega's neo-Conceptualist practice. Art, architecture, and design from different chapters of modernism are reduced to atomic or constituent units, then recombined.

For a midcareer retrospective, "Do It Yourself" feels truncated; each work stands in for a larger tendency. As framed by curator Jessica Morgan, Ortega's dissections and reconstitutions amount to DIY strategies born of Mexican identity at a moment when this former periphery became a talent pool for the global market. Ortega started out as a political cartoonist in the early 1980s and a few years later joined a group of artists, mentored by Gabriel Orozco and linked to Galería Kurimanzutto in Mexico City, that included Abraham Cruzvillegas, Daniel Guzmán, Gabriel Kuri, Luis Felipe Ortega, Dr. Lakra, and others. Since garnering international recognition at the beginning of this decade, the group members have continued to endorse one another. Ortega produced *The Bird: The Beginners*,

a collage/comic-strip homage to Orozco, for the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, exhibition catalogue in 2000, and for the present catalogue Kuri offers an encyclopedic text about "Chomos"—Ortega's nickname, from the Spanglish expression "the *chomosón*" (the show must go on). Now living in Berlin, Ortega continues to infuse his work with wry commentary on the burden of having to consistently evoke his "local" context.

Signs of *Mexicanidad*, such as tortillas (*Tortillas' Construction Module*, 1998) and corn (*Classified Cob*, 1998–2005), abound in Ortega's work. They are rendered sculptural substrates for Conceptualist exercises: The tortillas are joined to make geometric abstractions, while the kernels of corn are numbered to become a Hanne Darboven-like obsessive chart. Likewise, '60s art (North American Minimalism and Brazilian Neo-concretism are favorites) frequently appears, crossed with forms extracted from modernist architecture. For *Skin . . .*, 2006–2007, Ortega had a saddlemaker cut leather molds of floor plans for mass housing projects by Mario Pani, Le Corbusier, and Oskar Hansen. (Ortega's projects often feature a tripartite structure—*Cosmic Thing* is itself part of a "Beetle Trilogy," 2002–2005.) When hung from the ceiling, they closely resemble Robert Morris's felt works and Richard Serra's *Belts*, 1966–67; each is imprinted with a three-dimensional rendering of its corresponding plan. Failed modernist utopias are literally branded on dystopian sculptures—a generative, if predictable, operation.

The ICA largely omits Ortega's larger, quasi-architectural sculptures, such as *Spirit and Matter*, 2004, a set of shantylike structures spelling the word SPIRIT. This is a missed opportunity, for this unstable fusion of material and ideal would have placed the Diller Scofidio + Renfro-designed building in a new light, namely by emphasizing the absurd disparity between its spectacular presence on Boston Harbor and its surprisingly decrepit entrance and parking lot. The architectural contribution is instead a selection from the previously unexhibited *Belo Horizonte Project*, 2004, which consists of four groupings of mirrored cubes and a flattened rectangle hung on the wall like a picture. Placed in the Founders Gallery, the reflections uncritically reproduce a stunning view of the harbor, postindustrial palimpsests be damned. In contrast, "CAPITAL Less," a partly concurrent Ortega show at Gladstone Gallery's

Twenty-first Street space in New York, was a corrective to a Chelsea in denial. Five mushrooming forms, their middle sections sanded down from solid masses of hollow bricks, suggested ruins, favelas, or beehives. They were accompanied by footage of a desiccated São Paulo housing block, projected onto the gallery wall like a portent.

In its original punk guise, do-it-yourself cuts both ways. Artists and viewers share the same creative potential: They can do it, why not us? If Ortega's art is DIY writ large (albeit sometimes with the help of artisans), the entreaty for the viewer in such diagrammatic works is less clear. The ICA exhibition's centerpiece is *Nine Types of Terrain*, 2007, a room of nine 16-mm projectors looping nine short films on three walls. In each film, bricks laid out domino style outdoors knock one another over in patterns modeled on battlefields described in Sun Tzu's *Art of War*. Their rhythmic knocking together is audible on the sound track over the din of the projectors, a reminder that both the bricks and the frames of the film are contingent on the tumbling forth of units in time. The

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bricks suggest a sculptural rendering of their recording apparatus, and vice versa—what Ortega terms a "mechanical relation." The bricks and films perform their trick over and over, coldly and automatically, imbued with motion but devoid of life. This dimension is enforced by the setting: barren housing projects on the outskirts of the artist's new home city. Might not this work, and much of Ortega's production, represent a countermodel to the vogue for participation in both action-based and installation art? There is, after all, little for us to "do" here. The closed circuit can, however, be read; it focuses our attention instead of inviting some perfunctory involvement. In this sense, Ortega's art offers a refreshing return to autonomy—one shot through with the myriad collapses visible just behind gentrification's facades. □

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