

CONVERSATION

GABRIEL OROZCO AND DAMIÁN ORTEGA

Damián Ortega and Gabriel Orozco were friends and neighbors in Mexico City in the 1980s, years before they established international careers as artists. Son of painter Mario Orozco Rivera, a longtime assistant to the muralist David Alfaró Siqueiros, Orozco (b. 1962, Jalapa, Veracruz) grew up in an artistic household, attended a prestigious art school and was well traveled when he met the younger Ortega. By contrast, Ortega (b. 1967, Mexico City) is self-taught, except for weekly meetings with Orozco that evolved into an experimental art course over the span of some four years beginning in 1987. Along with artists Gabriel Kuri, Abraham Cruzvillegas and Dr. Lakra (Jerónimo López Ramírez), they established what they called the Taller de los Viernes (Friday Workshop) at Orozco's home in the Tlalpan district, a provincial outpost during the colonial era and now part of the capital's urban sprawl. It was an oppressive time politically in Mexico, where progressive thinking was routinely discouraged if not effectively squelched. For this special issue of Art in America, Ortega and Orozco met up in Tlalpan—where they both continue to live and work for part of the year—to discuss the early days of the workshop, as well as a number of more recent plans and projects.

GABRIEL OROZCO We just returned to Mexico after participating in the 11th Havana Biennial. Did you feel any difference there from other biennials you have been to? Do you think that Havana's is more alternative than other biennials?

Opposite top, Damián Ortega: *Cosmic Thing*, 2002, 1983 Volkswagen Beetle, stainless steel, wire and Plexiglas, dimensions variable. Courtesy Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and kurimanzutto, Mexico City.

Opposite bottom, Gabriel Orozco: *La DS*, 1993, modified Citroën DS, 55¼ by 190 by 45¼ inches. Courtesy Fonds national d'art contemporain, Paris, and kurimanzutto.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

"Gabriel Orozco: Asterisms" at the Deutsche Guggenheim, Berlin, through Oct. 21. Orozco has concurrent gallery shows in Paris at Marian Goodman and Chantal Crousel, Sept. 8–Oct. 20. Damián Ortega's exhibition "Traces of Gravity" is on view at White Cube, London, through Sept. 8.

DAMIÁN ORTEGA There's something harsh and brutal about Havana itself. There's a confrontation with Latin America in the most pure, blunt and, at the same time, imaginative way regarding solutions, resources and variables. When I got invited I was advised to bring everything I was going to need, including a hammer and nails. Havana does have a language of its own, a very special character, and a vitality that I enjoyed. It's an interesting time to go to Cuba, and the group of biennial artists was strong; that was most important to me.

OROZCO With "Alias," the project you've been working on for several years, and the one you presented at the biennial, you select and publish texts by writers and artists from various countries, those who have attracted your attention over the years. It's important for you to promote them and make them accessible to young

people, especially Spanish-speaking students who otherwise would have no access to publications like these.

Some aspects of the project remind me of our Friday Workshops in the late 1980s, which you proposed to do in my house. I liked the workshop idea right away because it was the initiative of a younger artist. With Abraham Cruzvillegas, Gabriel Kuri and Dr. Lakra joining us, the workshop became a kind of extra-official school that lasted four years. During that time, information about what was going on in the international art scene was very limited in Mexico. One of the reasons for setting up our workshop was to share the books that I used to bring from my trips abroad. We would gather at my house to discuss them. At the time, Mexico was quite isolated from the contemporary art world. Today things have changed, and Mexico now plays an important role in contemporary art, mainly due to a new generation of artists.

It was interesting to observe how in Cuba, a country isolated largely by the U.S. embargo, people have no access to foreign publications, and their international exposure is very limited. However, Cuban artists are quite well informed. They have a long tradition of sharing the information they do have, and of distributing among themselves books and magazines that become community objects. Your "Alias" printing concept is consistent with mass produced, inexpensive editions. For this biennial you published a documentary book on the U.S. Black Panther movement of the 1960s and '70s. I imagine it was of great interest to the Cubans.

ORTEGA The idea was to take the "Alias" project to Cuba to show the editorial work that we've been doing for the past five years. I wanted to present translated works

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[Spanish texts translated mainly from English]—books that I think are important. “Alias” is a way of studying, and the books have turned into reference materials for many students. The project also represents a personal need for me. It’s not just a kind of charity gesture. I had difficulty reading English, and in fact, my spoken English is still very poor.

It all started many years ago when I asked some friends to translate passages from a book on Duchamp, so I could understand the work better. In fact, you had given me that book, and it became the first one in the “Alias” collection. The translations are informal and personal, made for me by my friends. The language is often colloquial, confidential and full of jokes.

OROZCO In a way, they became underground translations that you transmitted to others.

ORTEGA That’s where the project’s title, “Alias,” comes from. An alias is a pseudonym or nickname that refers to something personal, like one’s physical features, for instance.

OROZCO Your relationship with the academy or with the official learning apparatus has always been very ambivalent. You never went to art school, but you’ve always been interested in education. You’re a guy with a tendency for research and for making up your own way of learning.

In fact, the Friday Workshop was your way for us to show each other what we were doing and to analyze our work. We had a sort of pedagogical activity that substituted for the traditional training at a Mexican art academy. I had already finished my bachelor’s degree at the ENAP¹ and my “graduate school” was traveling through Europe.

ORTEGA I feel that the workshop emerged in the same way as the “Alias” collection—as a necessity. It wasn’t just an idea, but a solution, a search for an alternative.

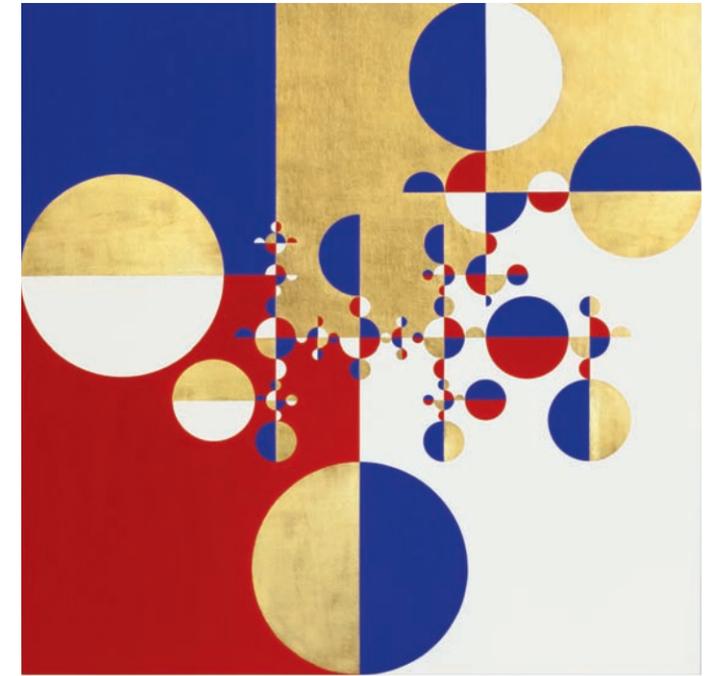
OROZCO One of the reasons why I gladly received you in my house in Tlalpan each week was because I was quite lonely in my own work. In 1986 I went to Spain, and while traveling through Europe my art practice began to evolve. The change was also the beginning of an intense period of loneliness. Back in Mexico in 1987, I didn’t see any parallels to what I was doing. My work had become “strange” in the context of Mexican art in those days. That’s why it was important for me to generate independent projects and alternative exhibitions. In that regard, the Friday Workshop turned into a great support for me.

ORTEGA All of us workshop artists were harshly judged by our peers at that time.

OROZCO Many colleagues put us down as a group, although we never actually made a “Friday Workshop” exhibition. I did organize, as a parallel activity, exhibitions and projects with other artists and young curators, but that was not one of the workshop’s objectives at the time.

ORTEGA For me, it was not about exhibiting. I remember the first time I went to talk to you was because my brother told me to go look up Gabriel, and that you had just come back to Mexico with some new ideas. I had an invitation for an exhibition, and I showed you the drawings that I would have displayed. You advised me to wait, not to rush anything. It’s better to let the ideas mature, you said, to better understand them, and then have an exhibition.

OROZCO We were sequestered away, doing our own thing, working in a community of loners. We had occasional



Above, Orozco: *Samurai Tree 6S*, 2011, tempera and gold leaf on canvas, 35½ inches square. Courtesy kurimanzutto.

Left, view of Orozco’s 2012 Havana Biennial intervention, showing the partially mopped bathroom floor of the Instituto Superior de Artes. Courtesy kurimanzutto.

Opposite, Ortega with his “Alias” book project, at the 2012 Havana Biennial. Courtesy kurimanzutto. Photo Isadora Hastings.



visits from friends and young curators who were curious about what we were doing. Each of us was at a different stage or level of artistic maturity.

ORTEGA Someday I would like to review the work we did at that time. Many of the ideas and possibilities that were generated then have emerged, many years later, in the work we do now—only today it’s more comprehensible. At the time, ideas came out in the most intuitive, essential and basic way, but also maybe in the most confusing way.

In Cuba, I was very surprised by the work you did at the ISA.² I thought it resembled some paintings that you did over 20 years ago at the workshop. After all that time, the idea has reached maturity, only transformed into a political, collaborative effort.

OROZCO It was very interesting to work with a group of students at an abandoned school. That week turned into a workshop or a seminar about light, dust and architecture. It was also about nature, open air and the body. In some ways we also dealt with public art and the crisis of public education.

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Speaking of public art and art schools, I remember one work that you made as an adolescent. It was related to mural painting—you had a brief period as a muralist. You and I shared that interest. I always liked, and I still very much admire, the generation of Mexican mural painters—Diego Rivera, Siqueiros and others. As you know, I assisted my father on some of his murals when I was young. **ORTEGA** One thing that came out of that interest is a greater consciousness of public space, the political space. Murals have a dialogue with architecture and with a specific point in time, yet they remain throughout the years. It helped me to understand the idea of site-specific work, which became very important to me later on. When I was in high school I visited the ENAP and La Esmeralda³ to learn



Above, stills from Ortega's video *Use alternate route*, 1991. Courtesy kurimanzutto.

Left, Orozco: *Untitled*, 2011, 3 terracotta sculptures, each approx. 8½ inches tall. Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

Opposite, Ortega: *Architecture without Architects*, 2010, furniture and mixed mediums, dimensions variable; at Art Unlimited, Basel, 2012. Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels. Photo Stefan Altenburger Photography.



about those schools' programs, in order to decide if I would continue studying. I didn't want to continue in high school. I was fed up with the teachers and with all the political indoctrination. After visiting the art schools in Mexico, I realized that the prevailing tendency was toward an affected, decorative and conventional abstraction that I wasn't interested in. **OROZCO** In those days as also today—to a lesser degree, luckily—there was something not very motivating about Mexican art. There's an obses-

sion with the idea of the artisan's work, a preference for sweet, sensual lyricism in painting, and with the expressive anxiety of the cathartic gesture. And there's a fixation on the immediate visual impact of "local color." On top of that we can add exoticist surrealism or the good political intentions of the Catholic catechism, and you get the whole enchilada of the cliché that was then Mexican art. Our workshop tried to displace those dogmas. We were

constantly discussing structures and conceptual aims, and we tried to create research systems instead of systems of expression. **ORTEGA** We used to talk about how Mexico was entering into an economy that was selling qualified labor at a low price, developing industry and setting up factories at the U.S. border. There was something parallel happening in the art scene. There was a sort of bogus justification of artwork in terms of working hours, like adding to an invoice the value of an artwork based on the number of hours the artist invested in it. For us, it was a political statement to make work that was not a manufactured object but something more conceptual, intellectual and critical. It's interesting to see in Latin American art, including Mexican art, of course, a tendency to disbelieve that an idea can be powerful enough to fill a space. The artist becomes



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shy and starts to overwork the piece in order to somehow justify it. It's a conviction that the artwork requires an elaborate pedestal or an explanation in a text to accompany it. This kind of overproduction makes the work less direct, less truthful as an experience, and it becomes politically and artistically “correct,” and thus gains charm but loses a lot of its force.

OROZCO This is the case with a lot of international contemporary art. We see everywhere what you call shyness, when the piece presented has already been tamed by the artist or approved by the political establishment in countries like Cuba, but also in any country with an overprotective government, like Mexico under the PRI [the political party that ruled from the 1920s to the early 1990s and won reelection earlier this year], or like France or the U.S. today. In Cuba, political art is very important. Oddly, it appears frequently under a cover of “ethics” or the words “social commitment,” which somehow shield it from criticism. But it makes the work of many artists seem demagogic, predictable and somehow controlled.

ORTEGA It can be easy to find a space of inclusion in an international art circuit when you assume this kind of “politically correct” stance with work that appears to address social concerns. But we need to be careful about distinguishing active and genuine expressions from the ones that are not. One can easily fall into a “folklorization” of the political arena, and to take on all the identity stereotypes and clichés in order to come up with an international product.

OROZCO Another problem is the phenomenon of overproduction, the tendency toward big-budget mega-productions. We also see that not all contemporary artists are obsessed with that approach. Not everyone believes the materialist dogma that the more expensive a production is the more interesting it will be, the more serious attention it will get and the higher price it will bring.

ORTEGA It's incredible to see how art-as-spectacle has expanded so much in countries that have incipient collectors, new museums and audiences for art, a proliferation of art fairs, biennials and so on. This situation favors the setup of an art-production industry.

OROZCO Art-as-spectacle also erodes social consciousness by avoiding critical issues, such as the exploitation of cheap labor, the prioritization of money over creativity and an institutional reverence for all that is technological, as if that were synonymous with vanguard ideas. Some of us are not obsessed with videos, or spectacular photography, or with great factory-type artistic productions.

ORTEGA To me the experience of living outside Mexico, in a place like Berlin, was important for understanding the work of art as part of a production and distribution system that affects and is affected by a whole community or tradition. The artwork doesn't end with the object, but it actually starts with it. Where and how you distribute it is also important. Its circulation is part of its sense and meaning. The same thing could apply to the “Alias” project. I am involved in the whole editing phase, as part of the work process, and, later, in the distribution. It can be a hand-to-hand transaction, or it can be negotiating with a single vendor or a distributor. It is very important for me to be involved and to try to understand those systems.

OROZCO New situations emerge, as well as new materials and new realities, when you are living in different societies. You have also researched and developed different modes of production, from a mega-production like *Cosmic Thing* to more ephemeral pieces. You have also been involved with video and photography. There was a lot of diversity in the way in which you confronted your new reality in Berlin. You went to Brazil and lived there for a while, traveled for a decade, and eventually returned to Mexico. Latin America was very different 10 years ago; now there's a much bigger circulation of art, artists and artifacts.

ORTEGA It's strange that you refer to *Cosmic Thing* as a mega-production, because we did it in my workshop inside the house I rented. It was quite a complicated work, and doing it cost around \$4,000. That to us was a fortune. My gallery in Mexico City had to ask for a loan to sponsor the work half-and-half with a gallery in New York. Abraham Cruzvillegas loaned me a ratchet set to take apart the car. Today, it's possible that the production cost of such a work in Europe would reach 60-80,000 euros.

OROZCO It was quite similar for me doing *La DS* in 1993, although it cost me 400 euros for the old Citroën car; and the work was done with the help of one assistant. It was not so expensive at all. Referring to the production scale of public projects, I'd be interested in your approach to doing a project in a Mexican public space. I'm thinking of public sculpture, perhaps similar to a situation like my *Mobile Matrix* at the Vasconcelos Library in 2006 [a state-sponsored work consisting of a Gray Whale skeleton, covered with graphite lines, suspended from the ceiling]. At that time, the commission was appealing to me because I liked the building, and the political climate in Mexico was unusually hospitable in terms of having just had the first democratically elected president [Vicente Fox, served 2000-06]. It was a very important historical moment in the country and I accepted my first and only public commission in this context, which, somehow, I thought had to deal with monumentality.

ORTEGA I'm attracted to the idea of a public work that doesn't imply monumentality of any sort, and that can, therefore, assume an antiheroic attitude. In a way, the “Alias” collection is a public sculpture, but it's private at the same time. These objects—the books—transmit ideas that can circulate under the arms and in the pockets of people. In that way, the work expands in fragments; it is viral or “acupunctural,” intervening minutely and selectively in space. It's about particles that affect an organism or an organization. ○

Opposite top, Ortega: *Hollow/Stuffed: Market Law*, 2012, biodegradable plastic sacks, metal and salt, approx. 29 feet long. Courtesy White Cube, London. Photo Todd-White Art Photography.

Opposite bottom, Orozco: *Boomerang*, 2012, video, 20 minutes. Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery.

Translated from the Spanish by María del Carmen Arriola de El-Zaim

¹ ENAP Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas (National School of Plastic Arts, Mexico City). ² Havana's Instituto Superior de Artes (Cuba's leading art academy), where Orozco collaborated with students to create site-specific interventions, mostly circular drawings and mud paintings on the walls and floors, in one of the buildings. ³ A well-known art school in Mexico City.

