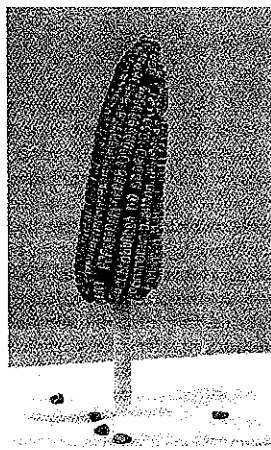
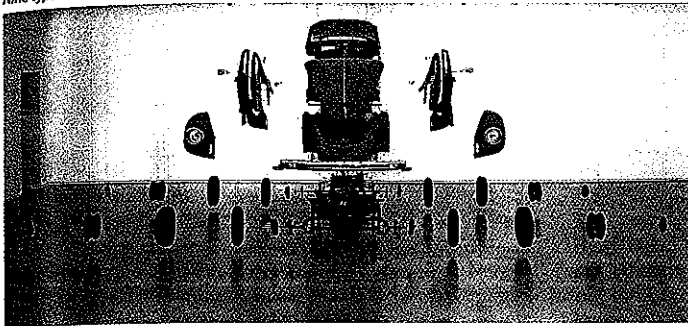


From left: Damián Ortega, *Cosmic Thing*, 2002, disassembled 1989 Volkswagen Beetle. Installation view, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, 2009. Photo: John Kennard. Damián Ortega, *Classified Cob*, 1998–2005, ink on dry corn cob, 6 x 2 x 2". Damián Ortega, *Nine Types of Terrain*, 2007, still from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



Damián Ortega

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Daniel Quiles

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 shantylite 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

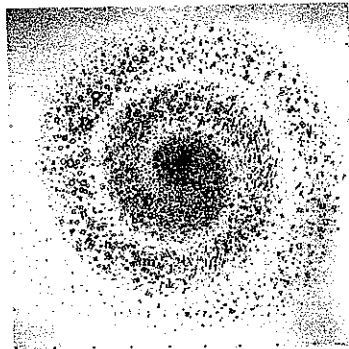
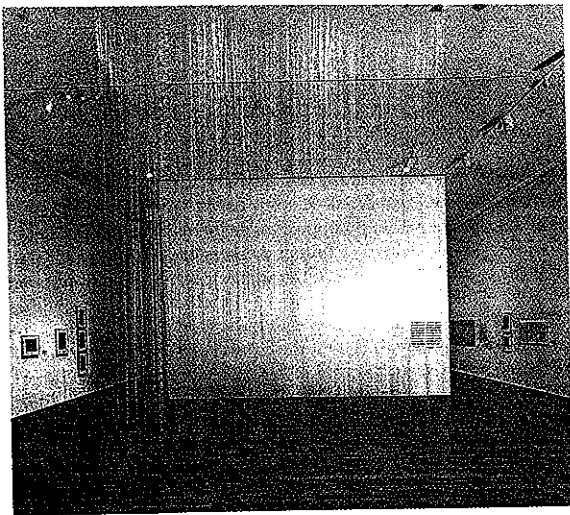
Twenty-first Street space in New York, was a corrective to a Chelsea in denial. Five mushrooming forms, their middle sections sanded down from solid masses of hollow bricks, suggested ruins, favelas, or beehives. They were accompanied by footage of a desiccated São Paulo housing block, projected onto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

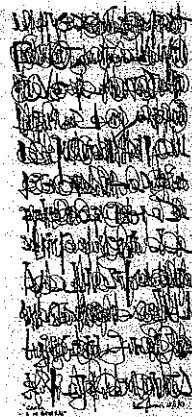
Now living in Berlin, Ortega continues to infuse his work with wry commentary on the burden of having to consistently evoke his "local" context.

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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From left: Mira Schendel, *Ondas paradas de probabilidade* (Still Waves of Probability), 1969, nylon thread and printed wall text on acrylic. Installation view, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2009. Photo: Jason Mandella. Mira Schendel, *Untitled*, 1972, transfer type on Japanese paper between frosted acrylic sheets, 37 3/4 x 37 3/4 x 3/4". From the series "Objetos gráficos" (Graphic Objects), ca. 1967–73. León Ferrari, *Carta a un general* (Letter to a General), June 18, 1963, ink on paper, 13 3/4 x 6 1/4". From the series "Cartas a un general," 1963.



León Ferrari and Mira Schendel

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK
Daniel Quiles

A PAIR OF PHOTOGRAPHIC PORTRAITS of the artists adorn the entrance of the Museum of Modern Art's joint retrospective "Tangled Alphabets: León Ferrari and Mira Schendel," the first major North American survey for either of these two key figures of postwar Latin American art. Similarly framed, equally expressionless, and each flanked by abstract sculptures, the two artists look strikingly alike. This coincidence reflects the show's primary operation: The dearth of actual historical connections between Ferrari and Schendel is repeatedly eclipsed by immediate visual affinities. While a retrospective of even one of these early exponents of what critic Craig Owens once called the "eruption of language into the field of the visual arts" would have been welcome and overdue, curator Luis Pérez-Oramas has a more ambitious aim: for the artists to clarify each other's contributions through a series of formal comparisons.

To this end, "Tangled Alphabets" juxtaposes some two hundred works while following a rough biographical chronology. Ferrari, who was born in 1920 to Italian parents in Buenos Aires, left Argentina for São Paulo in 1976 to escape the "dirty war," returning to his hometown (where he still lives) only in 1991; while Schendel, who died in 1988, was born in Switzerland in 1919 and emigrated to Brazil in 1949, settling in São Paulo in 1953. In the early 1960s, both artists began systematically exploring combinations of drawing and writing, which supplanted their earlier, more traditionally modernist investigations: for Schendel, Morandi-like still lifes; for

Ferrari, Picassooid ceramics. In series such as "*Letras*" (Letters) and "*Escritas*" (Written), both 1964–65, Schendel made prints of isolated abstract markings, numbers, and fragments of different languages by first placing sheets of rice paper between plates of glass treated with ink and a layer of talc, and then pressing onto the glass to transfer the ink to the paper. In contrast, Ferrari made ink drawings that linked compositional elements together with lines, organizing elegant gestural abstractions into text-like syntax, as in the series "*Cartas a un general*" (Letters to a General), 1963. Expressionism and writing are here mapped onto each other so that the former is rendered regular and the latter illegible. Ferrari subsequently incorporated actual writing into his works, including *Cuadro escrito* (Written Painting), 1964, which describes a painting he would have made but could not.

In his catalogue essay, Pérez-Oramas contends that the artists' focus on the materiality of writing over its ability to advance ideas sets them apart from North American or European Conceptual artists. Considering the subsequent interest in language as matter in the work of Robert Smithson, Hanne Darboven, and many others, however, it might be argued that Ferrari and Schendel offer an alternative picture of language's appearance in '60s art: not as rupture but as a result of rigorous experimentation with abstract form. For Schendel's "*Objetos gráficos*" (Graphic Objects), begun in 1967, she veiled her drawings, which were now double-sided and included transfer type, behind sheets of translucent acrylic. Ferrari used Letraset characters in mad profusion in his "*Heliografías*" (Heliographs), ca. 1980–84, enormous diazotypes that were folded and mailed internationally (of which the show sadly includes only four, none of them full-size examples). These approaches also yielded sculptural iterations for both artists—Ferrari's late-'70s wire sculptures repeat modernist grids until they become prisons, while for her "*Droguinbas*" (Little Nothings) series, ca. 1965–68, Schendel refigured her medium in three dimensions, crumpling and knotting rice paper into soft lattices.

Yet something is missing in these tangled oeuvres: Ferrari's fierce political engagement from 1965 on. If the illegibility of "*Cartas a un general*" evokes language's futility before military power, his participation in the 1968

pro-labor, antidictatorship collective project Tucumán Arde (Tucumán Burns)—unaddressed by this exhibition—speaks to a profound shift in orientation. The artist's confrontational character is acknowledged with the inclusion of blasphemous collages of the '80s and '90s, but these decay violence on a less immediately political scale. The absence of *Nosotros no sabíamos* (We Didn't Know), 1976–92, a collection of newspaper articles relating to the discovery of corpses of disappeared Argentines, and his collages for a left-wing newspaper's republication in 1995 of *Nunca más* (Never Again), the report issued by Argentina's National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons, likewise obscures the political side of Ferrari's practice, in which the message, not materiality, is paramount.

This omission points to a limitation of the show's comparative structure: The emphasis on the two artists' formal affinities suggests that they were both exclusively engaged in studious and hermetic processes that were developed and elaborated over the course of years. This is certainly true of Schendel, whose last complete series, "*Sarrafos*" (Splints), 1987, comprises austere abstract paintings in which black wood bars cross and protrude from white canvases, but Ferrari has alternated a similar working method with a parallel one of collaboration and provocation. The strongest indication here of the radical difference between the artists is the pairing of Schendel's *Ondas paradas de probabilidade* (Still Waves of Probability), 1969, with Ferrari's *Juicio final* (Final Judgment), 1994. The former is an installation of hundreds of hanging, evanescent nylon threads, accompanied by a biblical passage about God's silence. The latter is a print of Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* covered in bird shit. Beyond the question of whether MOMA, despite its newly global purview, still privileges revolutions in form over revolution itself, "Tangled Alphabets" exemplifies the contemporary challenge of exhibiting "peripheral" artists, whose implications for the canon must be balanced with points of historical and political specificity that do not translate as well, or at all. □

"Tangled Alphabets: León Ferrari and Mira Schendel" remains on view at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, through June 15, and travels to the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, Nov. 24, 2009–Mar. 1, 2010.

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