

2023 Zurich Art Prize

# Damián Ortega

## *Essay on Exchange*

Oct 26, 2023  
– Jan 14, 2024

MEDIA ORIENTATION

Oct 24, 2023, 11 am

OPENING

Oct 25, 2023, from 6 pm

Curated by Sabine Schaschl

In 2023, the Zurich Art Prize, awarded annually by Museum Haus Konstruktiv and Zurich Insurance Company Ltd, goes to Damián Ortega (b. 1967 in Mexico City, where he lives and works). This artist is the 16th winner of the renowned award. Worth a total of CHF 100,000, the prize consists of an CHF 80,000 budget for the production of a solo exhibition at Museum Haus Konstruktiv and CHF 20,000 in prize money.

Damián Ortega has been well known on the international art scene since, at the very latest, his involvement in the 50th Biennale di Venezia in 2003, when he presented his sculpture *Cosmic Thing*, a systematically dismantled VW Beetle reduced to its individual parts, in the group exhibition at the Arsenale. Suspended from the ceiling by barely visible wires, the meticulously positioned elements created the impression of a technical diagram (a so-called 'exploded view') of the classic Volkswagen in the space. This has been followed by other highly memorable installations made from everyday products, be they stacked, twisted, dismantled or otherwise deconstructed, consistently raising questions about the historical, political and economic conditions of their production in a global context. Over the past three decades, in both the institutional and public space, Ortega has developed a distinct artistic language that is simultaneously poetic, humorous and filled with tension.

Ortega began his professional career as a political caricaturist. He became involved in art during the late 1980s, for instance via the so-called *Taller de los Viernes* (Friday workshop) given by Mexican conceptual artist Gabriel Orozco. To this day, the mixture of wit and sharp criticism that the role of the drawing commentator entails, along with the influence of conceptual approaches to art, still characterize Ortega's work, which encompasses the media of installation, sculpture, photography, video and performance. Drawing still holds an important position within it though, as shown, on one hand, by his precise project drawings that, since the early 1990s, have provided an overview of how past works came about. On the other hand, Ortega's way of conceiving artworks is to be seen as a kind of graphic sketching, in that, according to the artist, it is a free process of discovery: personal and playful, with no preordained results.

At Museum Haus Konstruktiv, Ortega is presenting two installations under the exhibition title *Essay on Exchange*. They differ radically from one another in terms of materiality and conception, but do have subtle thematic commonalities. The focus of the show is on the large installation on the first floor. Here, ten carefully prepared display cases are arranged in the space in such a way that (from a bird's-eye view) they resemble numbers on a clock. They are supplemented by two multipart sculptures, one placed on the floor and the other hanging from

the ceiling. Both the sculptural works and the objects positioned in the display cases (there are thousands of them) are made by hand from clay, most of which comes from the Mexican state of Oaxaca: a region with a long tradition of pottery production. Ortega began working with this naturally occurring material several years ago. For his Zurich Art Prize exhibition, he has tried to approach it in a completely open-minded way, by engaging in a 'graphic' process with no predetermined outcome: Starting with the simple operation of shaping a small lump of clay into a handheld ball, the concept for the formal design and technical processing of the material gradually emerged from his experiences when handling it. "The pieces appeared throughout a period of experimentation and intuitive play," explains Ortega, "in which the ceramic began to form its own concepts and links as it was modeled and fired in different facets – from raw material to high-temperature firing." In the exhibition space, this conceptual and material process of maturation is visualized, in that the objects are presented primarily in the order of their creation – clockwise.

The circuit begins with the first display case, to the left of the entrance (*The Earth Units*, 2023). It shows the mass of raw earth formed by hand into a sphere, which constitutes the basic unit in Ortega's sequential exploration of the material. This grows in four steps, with the addition of one, two, three and four more spheres, to such an extent that the largest accumulation only just fits in the artist's hands. With these so-called *Units*, as well as the *Folds*, which exhibit a continual accumulation of foldings, Ortega literally feels his way toward questions of quantifiability and (artistic) value creation. *Mother: The Part About Private Property; The Mother Soil* (2017) in the middle of the room is the second stop on the circuit and one of the few pre-existing works that the artist has integrated into this new installation. It consists of a considerable chunk of clay, from the interior of which, hundreds of lumps have been extracted and distributed all around on the floor. Although the combined volume of the fragments corresponds exactly to the cavity created in the source object, this expansion into the space seems to have increased both the material mass and the material value: The theme of materiality and valuableness is amplified, as Ortega uses simple extractive manual actions to illustrate the process of value creation, i.e. the transformation of a raw material (earth in this case) into a commodity with a higher value (ceramics/artwork).

Ortega continues such mental exercises and material experiments with the remaining objects. One display case at a time, a multilayered treatise forms in the space, an object-based spatial essay that ponders the invention of commodity-currency and coinage, and generates a history of bartering, just as freely as it establishes formal links between coins, the wheel and the potter's wheel. For example, the display case *Exchange: The Value of Fragment* contains modeled corn kernels (*Seeds*, 2023). These represent a new system of exchange based on fragmentation of a whole, whereas the clay tortillas next to them (*Dry Tortillas*, 2023) depict a product for which the individual parts have been further processed and combined to form a new whole. And while the objects in the display case *Classification: The Value of Knowledge* explore the relationship between sphere, disc, coin and currency, the small *Wheel Carts* (2023) in *Toys, When the Abacus Became a Wheel* are meant to convey exactly what the title suggests: namely a history in which the wagon wheel allegedly evolved from the famous calculating tool's beads.

Finally, the material clay is catapulted into the digital age by *The Intangible Value: iCloud* (2023). For this hanging sculpture, hundreds of clay balls have been attached to fishing-line in such a way that, together, they form a hypersphere. An immaterial space is created, a kind of floating data store, which is in an interesting tense relationship with the comparatively archaic 'down-to-earth' vessel that the observer encountered at the beginning of the circuit. A group of small vessels (*Urns: The Value of the Void*) make up the last stop and conclude the maturation process of material and concept, "from the individual to the social, from the singular to the group, and from childhood to old age". This leads back to the beginning, to the earth, with which everything began.

*Essay on Exchange* adeptly plays with notions related to the imparting of historical knowledge. The setting, as we know it from cultural history museums in Europe (the presentation behind glass, the categorization into groups of objects, the codification by means of titles and subtitles) conveys a certain degree of authoritativeness and gives the objects the status of historical artifacts. This status turns out to be extremely precarious though, insofar as the objects were created only recently and from one material, so they are always artworks and material studies as well. Instead of a linear narrative and verified

information, the observer is thus confronted with a markedly speculative and associative history of bartering or exchange, which makes it possible to experience abstract processes of value creation in everyday life and in art, and gives rise to an interesting temporal overlap between cultural history and contemporary art.

Meanwhile, an equally speculative interweaving of the present and the near future plays out in the piece *Acrylic Ocean* (2023) on the second floor of the museum, where palpable clay gives way to ephemeral video images. Two textile screens each have a 25-minute sequence projected onto them, in which plastic bags, drink bottles, rubber tires and other discarded everyday objects move about in water like jellyfish, rays, sea snakes or other marine life. In front of filmed underwater scenes, the shots of the jettisoned inorganic materials blur the distinction between what is natural and what is artificial. Accompanied musically by dulcet tones, an oppressive and simultaneously enticing image emerges: It shows the potential process of nature and industry interconnecting under the sea's surface in new ways, previously unknown to us. In other words, the residues of the exchange dynamics emerge as a new form of life, and now come to light as an epilogue to Ortega's *Essay on Exchange*.

Damián Ortega can look back on numerous institutional solo exhibitions, for instance at Centro Botín in Santander (2022), the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art in Moscow (2018), Malmö Konsthall (2016), Pirelli HangarBicocca in Milan (2015), Museo Jumex in Mexico City (2014), the Freud Museum London (2013), Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris (2008), Tate Modern, London (2005), Kunsthalle Basel (2004) and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia (2002). In addition, he has participated in multiple group exhibitions, such as *Excepciones normales: Arte contemporáneo en México*, Museo Jumex, Mexico City (2021), *Latinoamérica: Volver al Futuro*, MACBA, Buenos Aires (2018), *Art and Space*, Guggenheim Bilbao (2017), *Mexico: Expected/Unexpected*, Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego (2011) and *Made in Mexico*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (2003), as well as the Biennale di Venezia (2003 and 2013), the Bienal de São Paulo (2006) and the Havana Biennial (2012).

Ortega has been nominated for the Hugo Boss Prize (2006) and the National Gallery Prize for Young Art (2007). He was also awarded a residency in Berlin by the DAAD Artists-in-Berlin program (2006–2007).

---

## **MEDIATION PROGRAM**

### **OPENING**

October 25, 6 pm

Speaking from 6.30 pm: Andreas Durisch, President of the Foundation for Constructivist, Concrete and Conceptual Art, Michel M. Liès, Chairman of Zurich Insurance Group, Cecilia Jaber Breceda, Mexican Ambassador to Switzerland and Liechtenstein, and Sabine Schaschl, Director of Museum Haus Konstruktiv.

### **WALK AND TALK**

November 1, 6.15 pm

Tour through the exhibition with Damián Ortega and Sabine Schaschl

### **PUBLIC GUIDED TOUR IN ENGLISH**

January 7, 11.45 am

Further guided tours in German: Wednesdays at 6.15 pm and Sundays at 11.45 am

For more information and events, visit: [hauskonstruktiv.ch](http://hauskonstruktiv.ch)

The digital program and the mediation offered on site are constantly being updated.

---

The Zurich Art Prize is part of Zurich Insurance Company Ltd's commitment to culture.



### **PRESS CONTACT**

Pascal Schlecht, +41 (0)44 217 70 99, [p.schlecht@hauskonstruktiv.ch](mailto:p.schlecht@hauskonstruktiv.ch)

## ZURICH ART PRIZE

The Zurich Art Prize was set up in 2007 by Museum Haus Konstruktiv together with Zurich Insurance Company Ltd, patron partner of the museum, and now has a strong international presence. Each year, an independent artist is honored, who operates at the interfaces where the cultural heritage of constructivist-concrete and conceptual art, on one hand, meets contemporary trends on the other. Since 2017, the prize donated by Zurich Insurance Company Ltd has consisted of an CHF 80,000 budget for the production of a solo exhibition at Museum Haus Konstruktiv and CHF 20,000 in prize money for the artist.

## NOMINATION PROCEDURE

Each year, Sabine Schaschl, director of Museum Haus Konstruktiv, invites six curators, critics and art experts to each nominate one artist, who has already made an impression as a visible force on the international art scene, and who demonstrates an intellectual extrapolation of the constructivist-concrete and conceptual heritage within contemporary art. The nominations for this year's award came from: Katia Baudin, director of Kunstmuseen Krefeld; Bettina M. Busse, curator and collection director at Kunstforum Wien; Xavier Franceschi, former director of Frac Île-de-France, Paris; Samuel Leuenberger, director and curator at Salts, Basel; Kabelo Malatsie, director of Kunsthalle Bern; and Humberto Moro, deputy director of program at the Dia Art Foundation.

## SHORTLIST

Alongside Damián Ortega, the following were also nominated for the 2023 Zurich Art Prize: David Douard (b. 1983 in Perpignan, France), Rodrigo Hernández (b. 1983 in Mexico City, Mexico), Zhanna Kadyrova (b. 1981 in Brovary, Ukraine), Christian Nyampeta (b. 1981 in Kigali, Rwanda) and Hans Schabus (b. 1970 in Watschig, Austria).

## JURY

The composition of the jury for the 2023 Zurich Art Prize was as follows: Sabine Schaschl, director of Museum Haus Konstruktiv (chairperson); Tobia Bezzola, director of Museo d'arte della Svizzera italiana in Lugano; Carin Gantenbein, head of professional liability at Zurich Insurance Company Ltd in Zurich; Friedemann Malsch, former director of Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein in Vaduz; Matthias Mühlhng, director of Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich; and Stella Rollig, general director and scientific director at the museum Belvedere, Vienna.

## PREVIOUS PRIZE-WINNERS

2022: Kapwani Kiwanga (b. 1978 in Hamilton, Canada)

2021: Sonia Kacem (b. 1985 in Geneva, Switzerland)

2020: Amalia Pica (b. 1978 in Neuquén, Argentina)

2019: Leonor Antunes (b. 1972 in Lisbon, Portugal)

2018: Robin Rhode (b. 1976 in Cape Town, South Africa)

2017: Marguerite Humeau (b. 1986 in Cholet, France)

2016: Nairy Baghramian (b. 1971 in Isfahan, Iran)

2015: Latifa Echakhch (b. 1974 in El Khnansa, Morocco)

2014: Haroon Mirza (b. 1977 in London, UK)

2013: Adrián Villar Rojas (b. 1980 in Rosario, Argentina)

2012: Mariana Castillo Deball (b. 1975 in Mexico City)

2011: Mai-Thu Perret (b. 1976 in Geneva, Switzerland)

2010: Ryan Gander (b. 1976 in Chester, UK)

2009: Tino Sehgal (b. 1976 in London, UK)

2007: Carsten Nicolai (b. 1965 in Karl-Marx-Stadt, now Chemnitz, Germany)