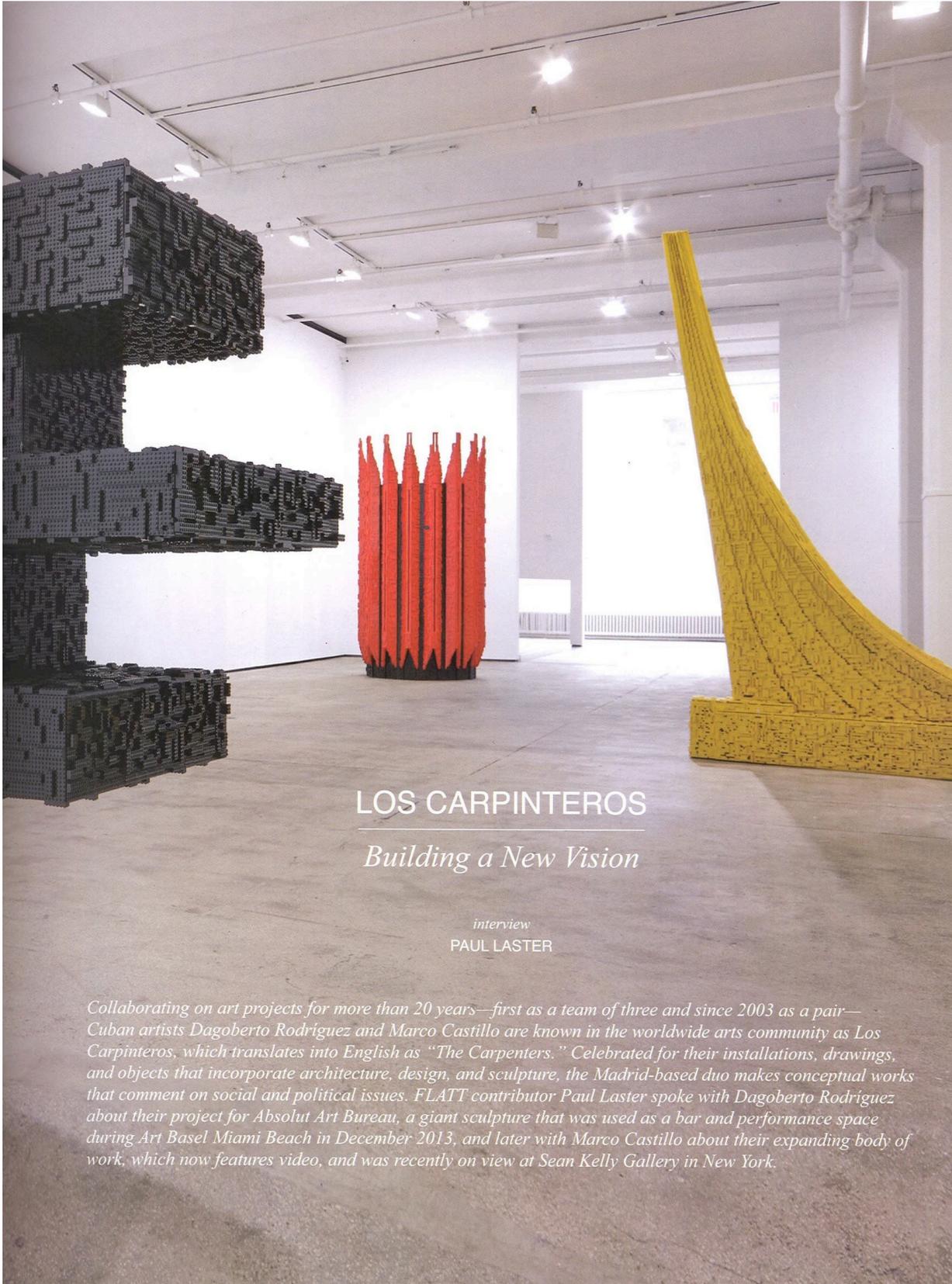


# SEANKELLY

Laster, Paul. "Los Carpinteros: Building a New Vision," *FLATT magazine*, Issue #5, 2013.

**FLATT** *magazine*



## LOS CARPINTEROS

*Building a New Vision*

*interview*  
PAUL LASTER

*Collaborating on art projects for more than 20 years—first as a team of three and since 2003 as a pair—Cuban artists Dagoberto Rodríguez and Marco Castillo are known in the worldwide arts community as Los Carpinteros, which translates into English as “The Carpenters.” Celebrated for their installations, drawings, and objects that incorporate architecture, design, and sculpture, the Madrid-based duo makes conceptual works that comment on social and political issues. FLATT contributor Paul Laster spoke with Dagoberto Rodríguez about their project for Absolut Art Bureau, a giant sculpture that was used as a bar and performance space during Art Basel Miami Beach in December 2013, and later with Marco Castillo about their expanding body of work, which now features video, and was recently on view at Sean Kelly Gallery in New York.*



LOS CARPINTEROS: *"Irreversible"* (Installation view, Sean Kelly, NY), 2013.  
Photography: Jason Wyche, New York. © Los Carpinteros  
COURTESY: SEAN KELLY, NY



LOS CARPINTEROS: "*Cuarteto*" (*detail*), 2011.  
Painted wood, metal and chromed bronze, dimensions variable  
Photography: Jason Wyche, New York. © Los Carpinteros  
COURTESY: SEAN KELLY, NY

PAUL LASTER: How did the opportunity come up to work on a project with Absolut?

DAGOBERTO RODRIGUEZ: We met the Absolut Art Bureau through our New York gallerist Sean Kelly. He shows the French artist Laurent Grasso, who knows Vadim Gregorian from Absolut for some time.

We organized a studio visit for Vadim to come see our work in Madrid. He freaked out in the studio. He was very happy with the things we were doing and we decided to collaborate.

This was not a commission. This was collaboration between Absolut Art Bureau and Los Carpinteros. In a very short period, they decided many things and we decided many things and we worked as a team.

PAUL LASTER: Did they come to you and ask for ideas around something for Art Basel Miami Beach or did they come to you and say what would you like to do?

DAGOBERTO RODRIGUEZ: In the beginning the idea was very abstract. We had no specific plan. The collaboration had to come from the energy that you give to and get from the other partner. We felt a connection and we were comfortable with each other. They said, "Let's do something for Miami Basel," but we thought it was too short of time. We thought they were dreaming.

Vadim saw some of the maquettes that we were making in the studio and said, "Hey, what about this?" And we said, "This is impossible in a short amount of time. We cannot make this thing in four months." And, hearing that, Vadim said, "That's what we want. Let's do it."

We thought it would be a nightmare. At first we were very skeptical that we could realize this project, but then amazed at how fast they were. We sent our ideas to their team and we would get immediate responses. They worked so hard that we postponed a project in Madrid to dedicate our time to fabricate the piece. We cancelled a show and focused entirely on the sculpture for Miami.

PAUL LASTER: It started with Vadim seeing something in the studio. Was it a work on paper, a sketch or a model?

DAGOBERTO RODRIGUEZ: We showed him everything we had in the studio—small pieces that we were producing and all of the maquettes that we had done in the past. He was knowledgeable of our work and looked at every single piece for the potential to make the project. With this approach, a solution came easily.

PAUL LASTER: Was the site already set? Once he said, "Let's do this piece for Art Basel Miami Beach," did he already have a site in mind?

DAGOBERTO RODRIGUEZ: He showed us the space as a possibility. It wasn't a done deal, but a maybe. We were still skeptical whether it would happen, but

every step was positive. We were fortunate to be able to make this work.

PAUL LASTER: Because of their commitment?

DAGOBERTO RODRIGUEZ: They were 100% committed when we stopped everything else to make this happen.

PAUL LASTER: When you got this idea that you were going to be making this sculpture, this bar space, that might be on the beach, did you start making drawings?

DAGOBERTO RODRIGUEZ: We already had some advance drawings on the idea, but we didn't think of it as a bar. We consider it a sculpture that can function as a bar. The idea to fabricate a piece that was going to be a bar scared us a lot—even more so because it was a recognized brand. It was a tricky thing, so we always kept the collaboration as a piece of sculpture that could have many functions. It could be a bar, a concert place, or just a sculpture.

PAUL LASTER: It has a shape of a gourd, but it also has the kind of shelving that you have worked with before, like a bookshelf that has another form.

DAGOBERTO RODRIGUEZ: Yes, we have been making these projects with shelves for a long time. All of them are different, but this is the first time that the shelves created a pavilion. You cannot recognize any pre-existing building. This shape is totally abstract. It's anchored in a fruit, a gourd from Cuba, which is also used as a musical instrument to make Salsa music and, in Brazil, to make folk music.

PAUL LASTER: You created a space that plays with the idea of a bookshelf yet it's an open space, a pavilion; and through the collaboration it has a function, while it is on the beach, but it could exist on its own, in another spot.

DAGOBERTO RODRIGUEZ: It's a very ambiguous form. It's the most ambiguous piece that we've ever made. You could put anything you want in all of these little frames. We wanted to make a piece of sculpture that was also a piece of architecture. It was a nice surprise for us.

PAUL LASTER: My wife and I were in Jeju Island, off the southern tip of Korea, a number of years ago and there was a housing project that we visited that had a water museum, a rock museum, and a wind museum. The wind museum was a structure with open slots between vertical, wooden planks. In a spiritual sense, Güiro functions like a wind museum, where the space is open to the elements.

DAGOBERTO RODRIGUEZ: We never made this connection, but oddly enough, even though the piece was on the beach. When you were outside and it was windy, inside it was calm—there was no wind.

PAUL LASTER: How did you decide on the materials? Obviously, you had

previously made shelf pieces, but this one was outdoors.

DAGOBERTO RODRIGUEZ: In the past, we used MDF; but since this piece had to be outside, we had to use a different kind of wood. We used waterproof plywood. It was made in Germany, with very precise construction. We were really fascinated with the fabrication of this piece.

PAUL LASTER: Did you make drawings and turn them into digital files?

DAGOBERTO RODRIGUEZ: We made the technical drawings and created the dimensions and knew more or less how it would look from outside, but it's something quite different when you have the piece fabricated. I think it's the biggest piece that we have ever made in a single project.

At night, when it was illuminated, it looked like a lamp, which was another nice surprise.

PAUL LASTER: The construction of it—when you break it down—was it big pieces of wood that are cut and layered into one another or was it many, many small pieces that were bonded together?

DAGOBERTO RODRIGUEZ: The piece arrived partially built. All of the ribs have a horizontal cut. The workers erected the columns and added the horizontal pieces. I didn't see the construction, so I'm really curious how they actually put it together. I want to see the video again, because when we made pieces like this one in the past the construction was very rudimentary, in relation to how they did it here. This piece is really solid, which was one of our biggest concerns for making a sculpture outdoors. It had to be built by code. It had to withstand hurricane winds. It had to be as strong as a rock.

PAUL LASTER: Is it bolted together?

DAGOBERTO RODRIGUEZ: Yes, the metal structure keeps the ribs in the same position, even if something happens. It double-checks the strength from inside, but I don't think it really needs it. It was just to add security.

PAUL LASTER: What about the music collaboration? Was the composer, Joan Valent, already a friend of yours? When you sat down with him, what did you discuss that you wanted to do?

DAGOBERTO RODRIGUEZ: We showed the project to Joan. He said he wanted to make something in which every second something had to happen, in terms of music, because the whole Güiro has spaces that need to be mentally filled with something. He wanted to make an interpretation of it in terms of music. He used this idea as a point of departure. He used a lot of percussion. He used the kind of instruments that influenced us to make the sculpture. We didn't want to make anything related to our ethnic background. We wanted to have a neutral kind of music, and he did it.



LOS CARPINTEROS: "Avion", 2011.  
Single-engine plane and wooden arrows and feathers, 215 x 1100 x 780 cm  
Installation view of Los Carpinteros, Faena Art Center, Buenos Aires, Argentina  
Photography: David X Prutting / BFAnye. © Los Carpinteros  
COURTESY: FORTES VILAÇA GALLERY, SAO PAULO





LOS CARPINTEROS *"Show Room"*, 2008.  
Cinder blocks, fishing nylon, furniture. Dimensions variable.  
Exhibition: *Psycho Buildings: Artists Take On Architecture*,  
Hayward Gallery, London, UK, 2008  
Photography: Stephen White. COURTESY: SEAN KELLY, NY





PAUL LASTER: What part did the making of the drink play into the project? Was it the fun at the end?

DAGOBERTO RODRIGUEZ: When the mixologist came to visit us in Madrid, he said, "You need to have something fresh."

We went to the market in Madrid, where we bought every kind of tropical fruit that they had. They specialize in Latin produce, including coriander, oranges, and pomegranates. We wanted to make something very tropical, but subtle. We didn't want to make anything exotic, like a Mango Mojito, but rather something fresh.

One of the drinks was just a clove-based drink, which had a wooden flavor that related to the ambience of the piece. Another one was a smoothie-kind of drink, which seems healthy, but you don't know that there is poison inside—the coriander.

PAUL LASTER: We're you totally drunk by the end?

DAGOBERTO RODRIGUEZ: Let's just say we drank a lot!

PAUL LASTER: When did you start making your giant Lego sculptures?

MARCO CASTILLO: In the last two years.

PAUL LASTER: What was the point of departure?

MARCO CASTILLO: We were dedicating a lot of our attention to making public art, such as the Güiro collaboration in Miami Beach. But, in this case, we were interested in the public art that had previously been made in Communist countries. They dedicated a lot of effort to make monuments. In every city and village there were monuments to show the strength of the system through art. That was interesting to us and it was part of our lives when we were children. We grew up with this kind of belief for the future. The pieces in our show are good examples of it: The Robotica Institute in St. Petersburg, the Cosmonaut Monument in Moscow, and the Podgaric Monument in Croatia, which

people compare to a Star Wars kind of spaceship.

They are good examples of this kind of Socialist, technological belief in the future. We grew up with that and believed in it. We used the Lego as a sort of coating in this work. We didn't use the Lego as a construction material; we used it as a skin. We weren't building with the Lego—that's important to know. We used the Lego to make a technological toy.

PAUL LASTER: What was your motivation for the video, *Conga Irreversible*, in which Cuban carnival performers sing and dance backwards?

MARCO CASTILLO: The whole exhibition is connected to public art, to a public manifestation, a social interaction. The video draws from the carnival, which is an artistic manifestation that takes place in Latin American countries every year. No one thinks it could be used for political influence. It considered an event that's related to pleasure and fun, but it is strangely related to politics. We wanted to use it as a source to explore that relationship.

We took dancing, which is integrated in our genes, and shot it backwards. We wrote the music and the lyrics backwards. It was a big composing effort. We worked with a choreographer and made a video for the dancers so that they could learn the steps. We collaborated with a costume designer, make-up artist, and filmmaker. We had to shoot the whole thing in ten minutes. We had nine cameras on cranes, which allowed us to capture it in the way we planned. We ended up with eleven minutes of footage, but it took us a year to edit it.

PAUL LASTER: And what about the sculptural installation that looks like hundreds of tomatoes splattered on the walls after a protest? Why did you decide to focus on the tomato and not the protester?

MARCO CASTILLO: Traditionally as artists, we like to use the leftovers of humans—the chairs, the table, and the objects that we use, but not people. The

video is actually the first time that we have used people. The idea of using tomatoes probably came from living in Spain. It's not related to Cuba, at least not directly. The tomato is a big deal in Spain. It's in the food; it's in porcelains, which are very conservative. Nowadays there's a lot of discontent in Spain, a lot of protests. This piece represents a state of mind—a mix between performance, action, and traditional arts.

PAUL LASTER: How did you test-drive the tomatoes? How did you decide how they should be splattered on the walls?

MARCO CASTILLO: We just threw them as though we were attacking someone. We imagined a person trying to escape from us and threw real tomatoes, loaded with watercolors. Tomatoes are too engineered nowadays; they don't die anymore. We squeezed some of the juice out and loaded them with heightened color.

PAUL LASTER: Have you ever had a tomato thrown at you?

MARCO CASTILLO: No, but it reminds me of a childhood memory. In the early-'80s, there was a chance to leave Cuba. It was a very important moment for some people. The United States let every boat from Cuba enter the country. Cuba let some people go that the government considered garbage—gay people, religious people, prisoners, and others. I saw a neighbor leaving and people throwing eggs and tomatoes at him.. I followed him and probably threw something at him, too. I was just a kid following the crowd. When I came home I told my father and he nearly killed me. I'll never forget it.

PAUL LASTER: Are these the kind of memories that you mine in the two light pieces that are made like Cuban political icons, but that substitute your relatives for the likenesses of revolutionary heroes?

MARCO CASTILLO: Absolutely. It's our life man. These are the people who lived through the revolution, but never benefitted from it.