

2019

## Living Tangent

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Living Tangent

Cornelius A. Hugo

Thesis Submitted to the Collage of Creative Arts at West Virginia University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Masters in Fine Arts in Sculpture

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Morgantown, West Virginia

2019

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## Abstract

### *Living Tangent*

**Cornelius Hugo**

**“In art, rebellion is consummated and perpetuated in the act of real creation, not in criticism or commentary.”-Albert Camus**

A living tangent is how I am known by many and how I have lived my life for some time. I think in tangents and my life and art seem to evolve through them. Everything I make is connected by multiple thoughts or tangent lines that run from something as simple as the color red, to the idea that I believe communism has invaded my family’s homeland. This then leads to the recollection of childhood games, taught to me by my family in Venezuela and the importance these games played in my psychological development and in my presence as an individual in society. These tangent understandings are the first few stones thrown onto the path that has become my life as an artist and politically conscious individual. In my thesis work, I am exploring the connection of random thoughts in the construction of reality and art. As one idea flows into many different tangents, these elements are linked in the chain of events that connect them together, helping to create a more unified world. My art is an attempt to unify my world.

*Living Tangent* is about exploring the connections in my psyche and in the real world (that have become strained over the years) through the reimagining of childhood games, new games, and the political problems in Venezuela. Games are played in cycles, and as children, we play them over and over each time hoping to beat the person we lost to last time or hoping to stay on top. The rules to these games almost never change, and while there may be variations to the rules, they can be played over and over with one thing never changing; there will always be a winner and a loser. This cycle repeats and everyone has a chance of winning, but when the cycle is disrupted the continuity is broken, leaving the only one that can win being the one that caused the disruption in the first place. This is represented in the way the political parties in Venezuela have rigged elections, killed or captured their rivals, and basically changed the rules of the game. Consequently, I have decided to change the way the games are played and the way they are set up and able to be played.

### Acknowledgement

I would like to give thanks to the people who have supported me throughout the last three years. To Dylan Collins, Jason Lee, Alison Helm and Joe Galbreath, the faculty that saw potential in me even when I did not. To Luke Doyle and Rachel Simpson, my friends and fellow graduate students for helping me through the tough times and letting me bounce ideas off of them. To my family for never giving up on me even when I could not see the light. And finally, to my fiancée Caroline Wall, who has become my center, never giving me any reason to stop. As time passes I know you will be a driving force in my life.

I would also like to make a special acknowledgment to the people of Venezuela for as they struggle through their day to day lives. I hope they understand I feel their pain as I try to bring an understanding of their situation to the rest of the world.

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## Thesis

In trying to look at what was happening in Venezuela and to make sense of the rising power of the dictator and its relation to the country where I had spent much of my youth, I draw on the ideas of memories, games, and history which seem to have been forgotten and how these seemingly un-related things have led to the current situation in Venezuela. By exhibiting these seven works that relate to these three ideas and using materials (such as iron, wood, plaster, paint, rope, fuses, steel and photographs) that relate to childhood, industry, and history, I hope to get people to question what they have left behind in order to get where they are and if what they keep secret are things from their past that help them stay true to the lessons of childhood.

## Importance of Process

I don't think that I have ever been satisfied with artworks solely for their aesthetic value. I could, for a while, enjoy something simply as it was in its design, as it appeared to me aesthetically. Yet, in truth, I was more fascinated with how the thing came to be and how it functioned in the world to generate meaning. I can remember taking apart my old radio when I was six or seven years old, removing all the wires and chips inside looking at each one, getting lost in how they fit back together and wondering why there were a few extra screws and why these parts seemed not to be necessary in the first place. I was captivated by how the circuit boards reminded me of cities with their buildings and roads, and how the building that my friends and I lived in did not look the same but served the same purpose, or how most of us had cement driveways but the main road we lived on was gravel and it was the only one inside the city of Manhattan, or in Kansas, that was not paved, and yet the rocks in the street were all white and chalky, nothing like the shiny crystals and polished stone eggs that my father had collected on his travels around the world. That transistor sure did look like a shiny rock with its blue shrink wrap around it, and so based on this, I would take apart the radio to check if I was right.

What began as the rambling thoughts of a child turned out to be more of a permanent way of processing the vast amount of information my mind seemed to connect with. As I grew, I would listen to the conversations that adults were having while playing with the kids my own age. I wanted to join the adult dialogue, so I would sit and wait for a moment when I could interject something I believed to be related to what they had said. This may not have been clear to people involved at the time or to my younger self, but it started to create moments of embarrassment for my parents. For me, it caused quite a bit of confusion as to why my innocent offerings had gotten me in to trouble or had caused general disruption to the adult conversation.

People eventually began to placate me with pats on the head and “good job.” A fake award for *Greatest General Knowledge* was awarded to me during an assembly, and I remember the awkwardness of wearing the button-down shirt, slacks and black tie, and the feeling of ridicule. I still hold this award in high esteem today, even if they all laughed at me when I got it. It was then I began to realize that my thought patterns differed from those of most people. I remembered what they had forgotten, that everything is connected and to me everything that I had ever seen, heard, and experienced twirled inside my brain circulating around a few key points that seemed to be indirectly linked to each other. It really was not until my late twenties, thanks to a new friend, that I began to learn about what these thought patterns were called: tangents. This would be a word that I would unpack for some time to come.

### *Living Tangent Exhibition*

This is a direct representation of how my thoughts affect the way in which I process information and make decisions. In my mind, I see the many ways in which seemingly unrelated things are in fact related. This makes it difficult to explain to many people how my thinking refers to the fact that I am living thousands of miles from my family and our homeland of Venezuela and for the past twenty years, I have been watching the destruction of that country, my country. Sometimes what I am trying to make or say tears at my family and the countless other people, the citizens of Venezuela. From my tangent trajectory, I can see points of cause and effect, as well as what I believe to be the reasons for the down fall of the country. My brain makes it easy for me to see and say what I believe needs to be fixed and how it should be fixed. All this is done through the comparison of images and stories that I get through social media platforms and from family members when we have time to talk or as they are fleeing Venezuela as refugees, giving up much of what they had in order to find something that may give them some stability.

I take the images and stories they send me and compare it to the memories that I have, these recollections from my childhood spending time with family and friends in Venezuela and reminiscing of the games that were played with the family. This reminds me of the values and lessons we learned from



the games that were played, and the faces and names of my ancestors long gone and almost forgotten. As a current outsider, I can see how suddenly and desperately things have changed in Venezuela, and I also see how one of the causes of the problems is that the adults have forgotten the lessons of the past. They have given up on these childhood ideals, in order to adapt themselves to their leaders' views of attaining wealth, power, influence and money. They set all the old ways aside, even if it inevitably leads to their own destruction. Despite efforts by the current populist leader, the people will continue to hold the past in high regard, even if it is in secret and for most long forgotten. These innate truths will hold even if the population cannot point out the specific things that made the country great. They will say we had it all, but they cannot say what they had.

In order to point out these things, I have created a body of work that revolves around my adolescent games and memories and more specifically, the games of my childhood in Venezuela. Some of these works point to the forgotten collective history of the country of the last hundred years, while others are a personal reflection on my own constructed identity. Finally, all the works are linked through personal reconstruction or reinterpretation based on the ideas of constantly changing games, memories of family, and re-envisioning of history that contains a more complex definition. All the work has a process-heavy creation, and it is just as important to me that the process be as meticulous as the final pieces that sit in the gallery. Because each piece I make informs the next one, I find that my mind begins to reconnect them in new ways and I start to find methods of making and of process that continually affect each piece I create.

For me, there is a very real and important requirement that the works are made of the most appropriate material. I do not feel that forcing an idea to fit a material or forcing a material to fit an idea is acceptable. If the concept has a heavy meaning or feeling, then it needs to be made out of the correspondingly heavy material. This may lead to it not being practical in the sense of moving, storing or displaying, it but it will lead to it being more impactful for the viewer while staying true to my belief system. Sometimes, this process can lead to many failures, and *The Iron Dictator* is a good example in that for the original idea, I had planned to make the pawn out of cast iron. *The Iron Dictator* was originally a very simple interpretation of a concept, but throughout the long process of making the pattern out of foam (first by hand and then by lathe), I came to the realization that the concept of the piece was that we are nothing more than a pawn being used by outside forces to control and damage Venezuela. Therefore, the piece evolved and it made sense to make the foam pattern into the main material by painting it to look like faux iron. This action gave it the conceptual balance and dedication to form that I needed to get my point across.

The long process of making work also helps to keep the different in progress works in front and center, instead of just discarding the pieces when I finish them. Even when I start a new piece of work, I find that in many instances I can begin to relate the different works to one another and in some cases combine them, especially as they may stem from an overarching interest. This can be seen in the combination of *Dominos* (2019) and *The Iron Dictator* (2018). I see all of this as fundamental proof that the process is just as important, if not more important, than the finished work. As I continue to make work and the process of each one takes more time or begins to overlap, and I have to jump from one piece to another to get them finished, I found that each one informs and improves the one that was started before it. Whether these artworks are combined or finishing techniques are taken from one piece to another, it helps to make each work part of a greater whole.

Most of the works in my exhibition have a beginning in a memory of Venezuela or of a connection to my family. All the games I've referenced are ones that I played with family members or games that they had played when they were young. Many of these games had been held in great esteem by my family, but for some reason they stopped playing them (as they became adults and they had to start playing the new game of life that required them to forgo them for lesser things), while others are rooted in learning about the history of both the country and my family. In my family tree, I found out that there are many artists that have succeeded in the art world in Latin America and Europe, as well as relatives engaged with the lost industries of Venezuela that seem to have been forgotten by the country and the world. I enjoy how my relatives are connected to the current political situation and how they could foster new ways of helping the out both the people and the country. Most importantly, I found that many members of my family, like other expatriate Venezuelans, are left with just their memories of a country they once knew and reflect on this any chance they get. Some of these memories are good, while others are bad, but they all appear to bring a smile and a renewed energy to continue the fight against the destruction of their beloved land.

While researching the artists in my family, I have also begun to look more closely at various artists that have influenced my work. In general, artwork was found in that homes of my grandparents for most my life, but I had never really given much thought to it. In Venezuela, I was drawn to artists like Elsa Gramcko (Figure 1) and her iron sculptures and assemblage paintings (Figure 2), as well as Carlos Eduardo Puche (Figure 3) with his photography of the Venezuelan landscape. The work of these artist seemed to speak to me, and the more I probed, I found out that Elsa Gramcko was my aunt and Carlos Eduardo Puche was my uncle. Growing up, they were simply known as "Tia" and "Tio," since I never knew they were artists.

My thesis exhibition *Living Tangent* is comprised of seven works that represent the seven stars on the Venezuelan flag. This is symbolic of a time before the dictator Hugo Chavez added an eighth star, because I feel this action put a stain on both the flag and country. Several of my artworks have been designed around an alteration to the number of stars so that eight becomes an important number, while some pieces inspired by influences before the reign of this dictator are in sets of seven. When entering the gallery, the viewer will see a set of three photographs, each one representing what could be bought with the equivalent of one month's salary in Venezuela if you had the same amount of money in the United States. After coming down the ramp, there are seven wall mounted sculptures that are abstract studies relating both to the history of Venezuelan artist and to my relative Elsa Gramcko. To the left of that is a sculpture combining the *Iron Dictator (2018)* and the *Dominos (2019)* on the floor, creating an installation like space that controls an area of the gallery. In the center of the room stands the *Faliques Tower*, which the audience can walk around. On the wall next to the dictator are three bronze orchids on steel shelves that represent the lost industries of Venezuela. Finally, against the back wall are *Ammo Case (2019)* (a sculpture filled with both wood and metal tops) and *Trompo, are you ready to play (2019)*, both waiting for an opponent.

#### *Dominos (2019)*

This simple yet skilled game of chance and wit revolves around two to four players laying down tiles that have two sets of numbers on them ranging from zero/blank to six, which are represented to as pips on the surface of the tiles. As a child I would play this game with my cousins and friends. We would try our best to play by the standard rules, but at times we would play in an unconventional format by standing the tiles up on end and letting them knock each other down. At that point, it was more of how long and extreme we could make it rather than how well we could strategize with our partners in order to get out of tiles the quickest. However, as we grew older, we began to play by the rules. In the end, we would only play if we could find an opponent stronger than us, trying to beat them more for the status and the bragging rights rather than for the fun of it all.

As the dictators of Venezuela gained power, they began to change the rules from a fair game to one where they can control the outcome, similar to the strategies employed by the governments of Cuba, Russia and China. Recognizing this relationship, I began to connect the words "Domino" and "Dominion," thus leading to the final name and appearance of the work. The process of making the dominos came to me slowly as all the ideas began to match up. The first step was to make the master pattern of the domino by gluing MDF (medium density fiberboard) and cutting, shaping, painting, and

sealing the patterns so that they were ready to be molded. I decided to use a type of hydrocal plaster called TufCal to make each domino, and a rubber “gang mold” was created to help mass produce them. The plaster material was chosen due to its strength and quick turnaround time and the molding aspect to me sounded like a good comparison to the way the dictators of Venezuela began to remold the people of Venezuela and the political system to better maintain their power.

I decided to exclude the pips from the *Dominos* (Figure 4), removing both the ability to definitely say who goes first by the tendered rules and the ability of one player to plan ahead or to truly come up with a winning strategy. The components for this sculpture were split between black and white versions. As the piece became finalized, I saw that they resembled tiles more than anything else, so I was induced to place them on the floor. By mixing black and white covering a large area or the galley floor, the pattern they made resembles that of a checker board or the floor of some grand palace of a despotic ruler. My sculpture bears resemblance to the work of Carl Andre, specifically *Aluminum-Lead plain* (Figure 5). When I saw this Andre work up close, I enjoyed how he challenged both the gallery space and long-established rules on our interaction with art by making sculpture that the viewer could walk upon. This made me feel more connected to Andre’s art and less like an outsider simply looking in on some sacred thing that was not meant for me. Therefore, I gave this power to my own work, making room for people to tread on the dominion of a despot dictator (that only cares about the shiny new game) and giving people the opportunity to take back some control of the game. As we look down on this very foreign thing that is only a little bit similar to the game we knew before, we begin to diminish the power that he has taken from us and show him that we will not back down.

#### *Iron Dictator (2018)*

Seeing so many images of dictator Chaves and president elect Maduro ruling over the Venezuelans like ancient kings sent tangents through my mind, making it very difficult to calm myself down. I find I have a very emotional and visceral reaction to these culturally dominant figures. Fearing that dictators would murder or imprison their political opponents and send more people fleeing was a constant pull on my mind and emotions, but then I started to see the tangent lines forming and I could see what so few people were willing to acknowledge. It was not that the dictators were strong and that they had the unwavering support of foreign powers but in fact, they were reliant on these powers for everything that they could not or were not able to do things without the political backing and financial support from either Russia, China, Cuba or all of the above. They were in effect a puppet of these outside Communist governments, or more accurately, a pawn. All of this led to the idea of symbolizing these dictators as nothing more than a large pawn of a foreign government. To make this an effective mockery

of the dictators, I decided to make this pawn out of foam insulation and paint it with house paint to resemble faux iron (Figure 6). By scaling the pawn up to 24 by 20 inches, this makes it quite large, and if it was in fact a metal piece it would be intimidating. The choice of the pawn helps to show it is an unimportant sacrificial piece, as the real powers that be on the game board would use the pawn until they got what they wanted then leave it to die (much like what is happening with the Maduro regime due to the withdrawal of Russia and China, leaving only Cuba to play the board).

With this work, I have made a reference to Claes Oldenburg and his enlarged soft sculptures, as well as to his outdoor work based on everyday objects. There is an importance to Oldenburg's sculptures that is best seen when the material of its creation changes from something familiar to something unexpected, causing the viewer to question the circumstances that they find themselves in. My pawn sculpture will also be combined with the dominos to help create the illusion that the dictator is surrounded by a very important palace, with his influence stretching beyond that area, while his impotent power is mocked due to him being on the floor and people being able to walk around him.

#### *Phalanx Tower (2019)*

This is the second incarnation of this piece (Figure 7), with the first one being a direct representation of the Venezuelan protest and the people using oil drum shields to defend themselves from water cannons and rubber bullets. After looking into the art works of Venezuelan artist Elsa Gramcko and her assemblage painting (Figure 2) that used salvaged automotive parts, I decided to redefine and apply some of her ideas of painting to my work. I took her idea of setting oil paints with a torch and altered this through the use of a propane weed burner, and instead of painting on canvas, I switched to painting on four-foot by one-foot rectangles of cut and bent steel. Each steel unit was painted using the colors that are one the Venezuelan flag and then each paint application was set using the weed burner. This allowed for new textures and colors to come from just the four individual paints applied to the surface of the metal. The construction of this work is influenced by Richard Serra and his sculpture *Carnegie* (Figure 8). The way in which Serra's work dwarfs me and makes me feel small and at its mercy was a sentiment that I wanted that to be transferred into my phalanx tower sculpture. I stacked each steel unit one on top of each other in the same manner as Serra. This gives the work an imposing yet enticing stance that is over ten feet tall. This makes the piece tower over the viewer but the fact that the components are not linked together means that, just like the Venezuelan protesters, it leads a precarious existence.

*TROMPO, are you ready to play?* (2018)

Another game that has been played by children for generations not only in Venezuela but around the world is the “trompo” or a very simple game involving wooden rope tops. This game follows a very predictable outcome, where two people wind up their tops and throw them into an arena where the two would collide into each other and eventually one would knock the other out of the arena, or otherwise stop them from spinning altogether. In Venezuela if you were the winner, then you had the right to take your top in hand and wrap the rope around it. Then you could hit the top of the opponent’s top a few times, damaging it, and if you lost enough times your top would be damaged or destroyed.

The trompo was a very common way for children to deal both with adults and with one other, so this inspired *TROMPO, are you ready to play* (Figure 9), the variation of an armored trompo that could not be beaten so easily and that would intimidate anyone that was willing to challenge you. This sculpture started off with a three-inch internal diameter pipe that was forty-eight inches tall. The ribs and 1/8<sup>th</sup> inch steel panels were assembled to make the sculpture look like a grenade. I painted the sculpture with a military green covering, and then added more detail and texture by distressing the structure with rust and abrasions. In order to complement the metal and to help tie it back to the wood of the original tops, I then turned a new point for this piece on the lathe, making it 18-inches long (which added to the already impressive size of this sculpture). This work also references the work of Claus Oldenburg, and his enlarged replicas of everyday objects. Just as Oldenburg chose to enlarge a thing that was unmistakably recognizable to anyone from his time, I chose to enlarge a trompo because it is recognizable to most anyone from Venezuela.

*Little Tops- Pick Your Weapon* (2019)

*Little Tops-Pick Your Weapon* (Figure 10) flows from the same ideas of the large top, but they are made from lathe-turned wood and cast iron. These tops sit in a wooden ammo box, waiting for the viewer to pick which one they would use in a trompo battle. The viewer could pick the wooden tops that are made much like the traditional ones, with light but sturdy wooden bodies and metal points that are easier to spin and throw. The viewer could also pick the cast iron tops that are heavy and almost unwieldy, objects which could destroy an opponent’s top in one go just as easily as they could destroy their own tops. This choice I give to the viewers is that they can choose to take a temporary, unsustainable new way that they know will only work once, or they can go with a more traditional, proven method that can be used over and over without fail. This is also enforced with the lettering on the crate directly referencing

childhood memories and the danger if these memories are not handled with care. The display also sits just off the ground giving the sculpture an otherworldly presence caught between memory and reality.

*One Hundred and Twenty-Eight Grand (2018)*

This is a set of three photos (Figure 11), with each individual photo representing what one could buy in the United States with the equivalent of one month's salary in Venezuela. One month's pay in Venezuela is 12,800 bolivars, which at the time of the photos translates to 35 cents USA. The important part about this is it took about one week and several hours of searching to find things that were worth that little American money. The time it took to find these objects gave me some understanding of what it is for people in Venezuela when they hunt from one store to another trying to find enough food to feed their family. I also decided that a photograph was a better medium of choice because when we see something that we cannot simply believe, people usually ask for photographic proof. In some cases, even with photographic proof in front of us, we still can't seem to fully come to terms with what we are seeing.

*Whistles (2019)*

This work (Figure 12) comes from research into Elsa Gramcko, a family member that happened to be a prominent artist in Venezuela in the 1950's thorough out the 1970's. In looking through Gramcko's work, I saw some images of familiar objects that had been in my grandmother's home. These statues were geometric in design with polished areas and painted ones. In order to understand this influence that I had forgotten about, I decided to replicate her style in my own way by using a brushed steel polish rather than a mirrored one. Additionally, instead of using black paint I used tracker red, which gave them a mix of a color field painting (such as with the works of Mark Rothko) that used large areas of color to express emotions and ideas. Through this exploration, I found that Gramcko influenced my interest in repetitive design and contrast of shiny with painted or matte surfaces, as well as kick starting my joy of surface treatment of metal art. These sculptures are placed on seven wall mounted pedestals that help them float above the ground, as if they are something to be revered. This also emphasizes that the whistle is the rule keeper, because everyone recognizes how the sound of a whistle means business.

*The Lost Industries (2019)*

The lost industries of Venezuela are constantly on my mind. This country used to depend on oil and when that began to fall apart, one can see a continuous pattern of big industries dying out and being forgotten. Prior to oil, well known Venezuelan industries included chocolate, shipping, and sugar, reaching back to the 1938 World's Fair orchids. I found that Venezuela used to be one of the largest exporters of orchids in the world with the most variety of species. For this particular World's Fair, the

Venezuelans imported several tons of orchids every day to keep their modern build covered in fresh flowers during the fair. This building was designed in Venezuela, and its architecture was easily 40 years ahead of its time. To represent this loss, I cast three almost unrecognizable orchid-like shapes in bronze (Figure 13). These sculptures sit on three equally small shelves that make it just as easy to pass them by. The bronze is a memorial to this lost thing and the ambiguity of the shapes allude to the idea that the orchids are nothing more than a forgotten memory that is somewhat pieced back together, but not quite legible.

### Conclusion

After three years struggling to understand contemporary art, my peers, my faculty, and myself, I realized that I could no longer hide who I was and where I came from. In watching people struggle both in Venezuela and around me at West Virginia University, I began to realize that the lessons I learned as a child playing games truly helped to inform who I have become, and I believe I am a good man today because of those lessons I learned playing games. The process that formed me, much like the processes employed in the making of my work, is crucial to informing the final outcomes of both. Never forgetting these lessons and where I came from, or the people that have passed on before, will be key to my continued development in both my art and in myself. For those around me that I come in contact with, I will always do my best to play by the rules.



## Figures



Figure 1 Elsa Gramcko



Figure 2 Assemblage painting Untitled

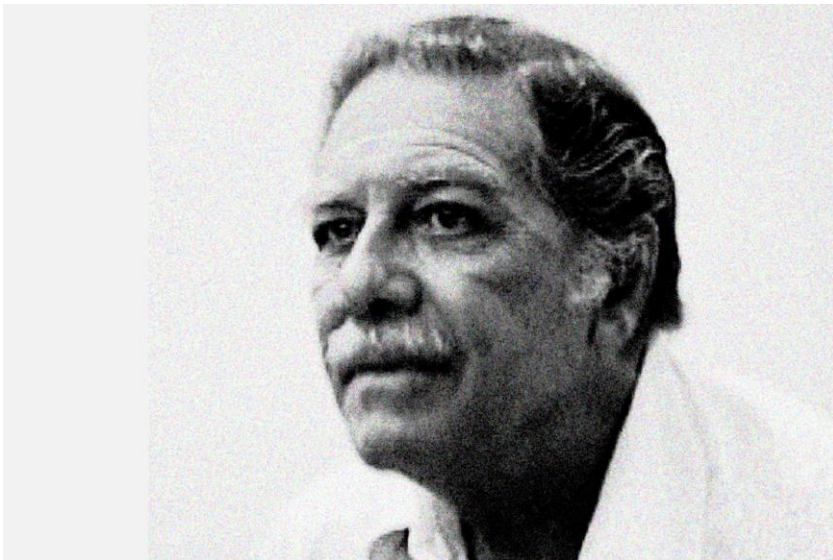


Figure 3 Carlos Eduardo Puche



Figure 4 *Dominoes* Tufcal and Paint 12" x 6" x 1.5"

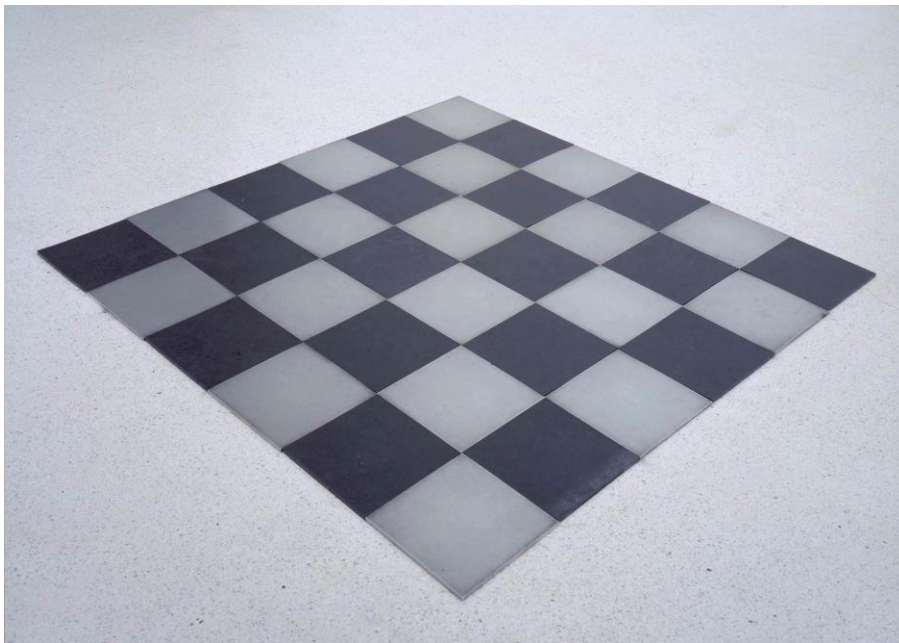


Figure 5 Carl Andre, *Aluminum-Lead Plain*



(Figure 6) *Iron Dictator* 24" x 22" Foam and Paint



Figure 7 *Phalanx Tower* Steel 12" x 4' x 10'



Figure 8 *Carnegie* by Richard Serra



Figure 9 *Trompo* Steel and Wood 6' x 33"



Figure 10 *Little Tops- Pick Your Weapon*. Wood, Iron, Paint, Rope 4' x 2.5' x 3'





Figure 11 *One Hundred and Twenty-Eight Grand* Photographs 18" x 36"



Figure 12 *Seven Whistles For Elsa* 4 inch Steel tubing 24" tall Red Tractor Paint

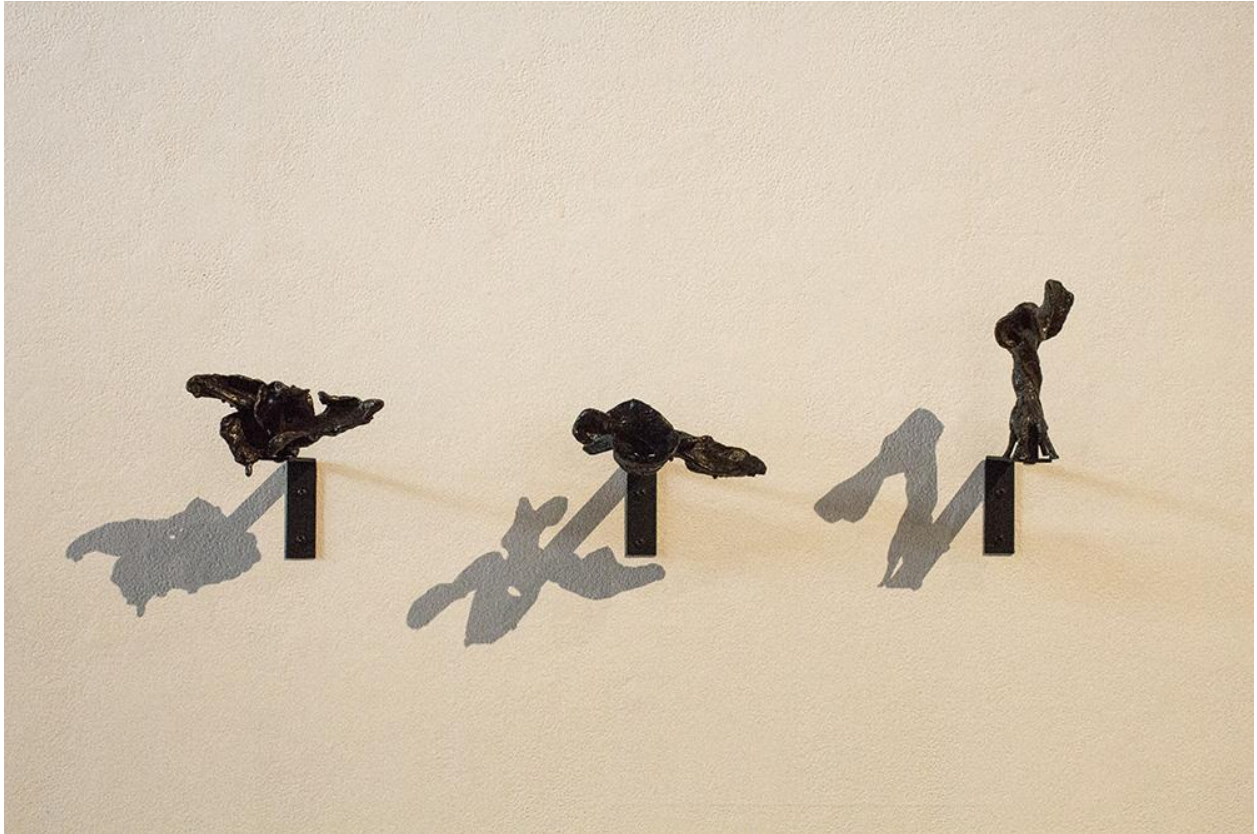


Figure 13 *Lost Industries* Bronze, Steel 6"

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