Spirograph: The Circular Ruins of Drawing (2004)

Briony Fer

> As soon as you tire of squares draw circles.
>
> —*John Ruskin*

> Circling, shattering: these are ways to disappear into space without ever reaching the limits of the sphere.
>
> —*Gabriel Orozco*

Drawings can be made or they can be found. They can be kept or they can be discarded. They are found in a photograph Orozco took of spirograph drawings on sheets of white paper laid out on a pavement in Delhi. The street context shows drawing at its most disposable, but retrieved by the photo and kept in the sort of limbo that seems to interest Orozco most—not entirely permanent but not entirely thrown away either. Spirographs for sale on a street. This isn't where we would expect to find drawing and yet here it is, as he might casually have come across it, at his feet, as he passed. These aren't his drawings, but drawing as happened upon. It invites us to think of drawing as a kind of transaction, connected to the way things circulate in the world, as well as something made in a fairly mechanical physical action. We probably all know how spirographs work, making intricate patterns by rotating a point in clear plastic circular stencils. The elaborately looped rings and wheels are made by rotating a smaller circle inside a larger one. There is something about the elements of a spirograph that resonates in Orozco's work. For a start, the rotating movement is always identical but, depending on the size of the inner

stencil, the result is always different. Precisely the same turning movement of a stencil proliferates infinite difference—the lacing of lines tighter, the loops more extended, making endless circles that are more or less elaborate. The patterns were once futuristic, like fantastic planets or flowers in orbit, yet they now seem archaic. This kind of drawing has no art status yet can touch on something as infinite as a constellation of planets. This is drawing as cheap and ephemeral, pointless and playful. It is organized doodling that immediately invokes something both intensely handmade and intensely repetitive and mechanical. When Orozco produces drawings himself, these same elements seem to inform his sense of the graphic, and to impinge on everything he makes.

Historically, drawing has stood for both the greatest discipline (*disegno,* or design) and the greatest indiscipline (doodling). We might be inclined to think that modern art took up the second, improvisatory, experimental model, and abandoned the first. One might want to think that the spontaneous, the unplanned, and the automatic has taken precedence over the authority of drawing as a model of conceptual thought. *Disegno* was the term used in academic discourse to describe the conceptual articulation of compositional structure. The authority once associated with it may simply have migrated elsewhere, to other forms of orthodoxy. But drawing as a way of thinking and as a way of reflecting on what kind of thinking artists do is certainly not dead.[1] Drawing is nothing if not contingent. Over its history it has tended to attract a mixture of benign neglect and overinvestment. If drawing has been seen as less than painting or sculpture, then this view was always countered by the high claims made for it. Among other things, it stood for prolonged study and preparation—the long work demanded of art—and this was part of its allure. At the same time, its status as labor, the work necessary to make art, in terms of both practical endeavor and ethical value, was laced with anxieties about the *work* that art does in the world.

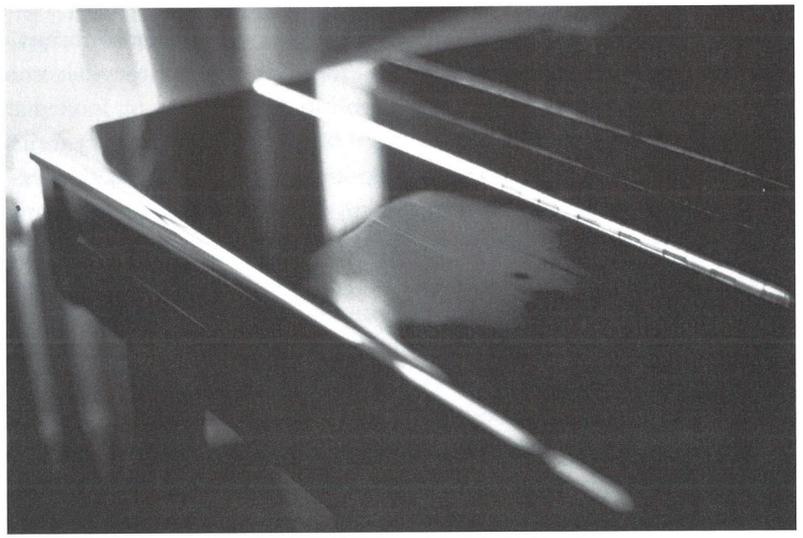
Nowhere was the process analyzed more closely than in artist and critic John Ruskin's 1857 manual *The Elements of Drawing.* On the surface, this volume teaches the discipline of drawing, element by element, in the face of the ever-present danger of failure, of a drawing becoming a "scrawling." But the intoxication of describing the intricacies of the process of observational drawing belies the mastering of the medium. The object of Ruskin's desire is the intense labor of the hand as it moves. He describes himself drawing in order to exemplify his method, with an almost narcissistic sensibility to the process. If Ruskin betrays the compulsion of drawing, then the exercises he describes betray his fascination with an almost bodily mechanics of drawing. Of course this is to read Ruskin against himself, to read his heightened sensibility against his own prohibitions. It is to imagine what the physical and mental labor of drawing means beneath what it says it means. But then drawing has always had that double edge—the capacity both to articulate the structure of representation and to disobey its rules—to tap into what the philosopher Gilles Deleuze has called in another context the "unconscious of representation."[2]

Ruskin's exercises involve the student holding up a sheet of white paper against the light or cutting a hole in another piece. They start with the most basic procedures and build up to the most complicated. The simplest thing to set before the eye, Ruskin says, is a sphere, and the most effective way to learn to draw a sphere is to work from "a child's toy, a white leather ball."[3] Rather than impart the rules of geometry, let alone convey a platonic ideal, Ruskin seems to advocate a pragmatic kind of improvisation, drawing on what is most easily found. "Go out into your garden or into the road," he hastens, "and pick up the first round or oval stone you can find."[4] He discusses setting up some of the exercises (placing a fossilized sea-urchin on a windowsill, for instance) in a way that suggests a slightly exotic and meticulously observed dream narrative or ritual; the look and feel of each element is lovingly described. It is as though the strictures of observational drawing license an almost excessive concentration of attention on the overlooked and fortuitous. Before they become pictures, in the sense of coherent compositions, things can be looked at in such a way as to make them strange. At moments when drawing seems most in thrall to the authority of composition and the symbolic, this precarious and disruptive desire, as in Ruskin's case, can also be most clearly felt. Drawing *without* thinking and drawing *as* thinking come to look, oddly enough, less like opposites.

One of the things they hold in common is the habitual character of drawing. Whether it is a study from nature or whether it is a spirograph, repetition generates drawing. Drawing leads to more drawing. It just goes on, to infinity. Drawing embodies a powerful sense of incompleteness. For Orozco, this seems something productive. He has always drawn. He always draws. He makes endlessly different kinds of drawing, from little sketches in his notebooks to computer drawings to automatic drawings to spit drawings. Aside from the fact that they are all made of paper they share little, on the surface at least. Although most artists draw, not all of them

exhibit their drawings, or allocate to them the role that Orozco does. The fact that his drawings haven't been written about much almost proves the point that they provide a kind of background noise, something that just goes on. This doesn't do justice to the drawings themselves, but it is an important part of their dynamic.

Set starkly against this sense of endlessness is the way Orozco has used drawing to mark time. In his *Breathing Drawings* (2002), for example, which he has made since 1998, he sets himself an exercise—he closes his eyes and breathes. As he does so, he blindly draws a line on the page. The pressure exerted on the line of chalk varies with his breathing, and at the end of a breath he terminates the line. We could think of this process in relation to the model of automatic or "blind" drawing of Ellsworth Kelly who worked blindfolded, and Cy Twombly, who drew with the lights out.[5] But in a sense Orozco's exercise in drawing has less to do with the absence of sight than with the bodily rhythm of breathing and—most of all perhaps—with the *matter* of breath. It is more like the material trace of a breath he photographed on a piano in 1993 (fig. 34). In a small, simple gesture, these drawings both dramatize and trace the body's sensory circuits. In them, he does not draw blindly; he cuts off when a whole breath has been exhaled. It is a temporal marker. This is about as handmade and



34 *Breath on Piano*, 1993.
Chromogenic color print.
16 x 20 inches.

as mechanical, as concentrated and as distracted, as a drawing can get. To make a work in the time frame of a few breaths is to make it in an instant. Yet to repeat the exercise will make a drawing that is completely different.

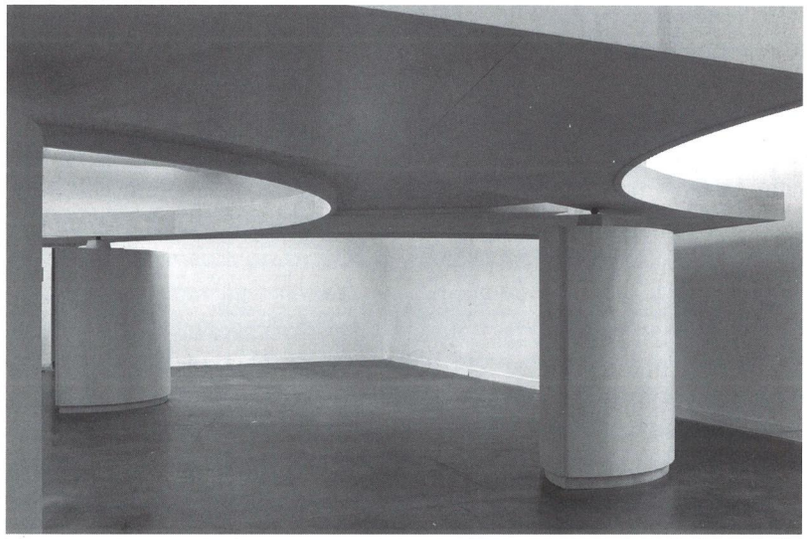
Drawing is like breathing. It, too, just goes on. Another meaning of the word spirograph is "an instrument for marking breathing movements." Orozco has spoken of the importance of Piero Manzoni, and this is reminiscent of the work that the Italian artist made out of breath, like his *Corpo d'Aria* series (1959–60). To do this Manzoni blew up a number of balloons, claiming to be breathing his soul into each one and making it eternal. As they shriveled he mounted them as relics on bits of board. Manzoni wanted to touch infinity. He also wanted to deflate it by the literal fact of its materiality. Manzoni's absurdist metaphysics, all his talk of infinity, was pneumatic: it blew things out of all proportion. It is as if he set up situations where the viewer enters into a kind of transaction with a proposition that is often absurd, as this one is, and bleakly targeted against the inflations of a commodity culture.

In 1997, Orozco began to draw on the surface of a human skull, resulting in the seminal work *Black Kites*. Unlike the creation of his breathing drawings, this was a long and difficult process—it took him six months to mark out and cover the whole thing. In his notes, he wrote at the time, "Line over volume. Topography of the cranium. Entering the eyes. Losing itself." The laborious task triggered other thoughts too: "To kill time." "To waste time."[6] How time-consuming can drawing be? (Even Ruskin never took six months to make one.) It is as if drawing, as it measures time, also eats away at it. Drawing competes with the skull as a *memento mori*. But it also consumes time the way Manzoni had made a spectacle of consumption—engaging with it and resisting it at the same time. In itself, the thing is a contradiction: a two-dimensional grid superimposed on a three-dimensional object. One element is precise and geometric, the other uneven and organic. The two are not resolved so much as overlaid one upon the other: a lack of fit almost perfectly rendered. "Volume made graphic," he wrote in a notebook at the time. And as quickly as he wrote it, he added, "Object made image."[7] This is a two-way street, or rather, a busy intersection. It is an extension of the computer-generated drawings he has been making since the mid-1990s insofar as it extends the grid to cover this most awkward of terrains: a skullscape. It is a graphic way of thinking volume. But on the other hand, he thinks about what

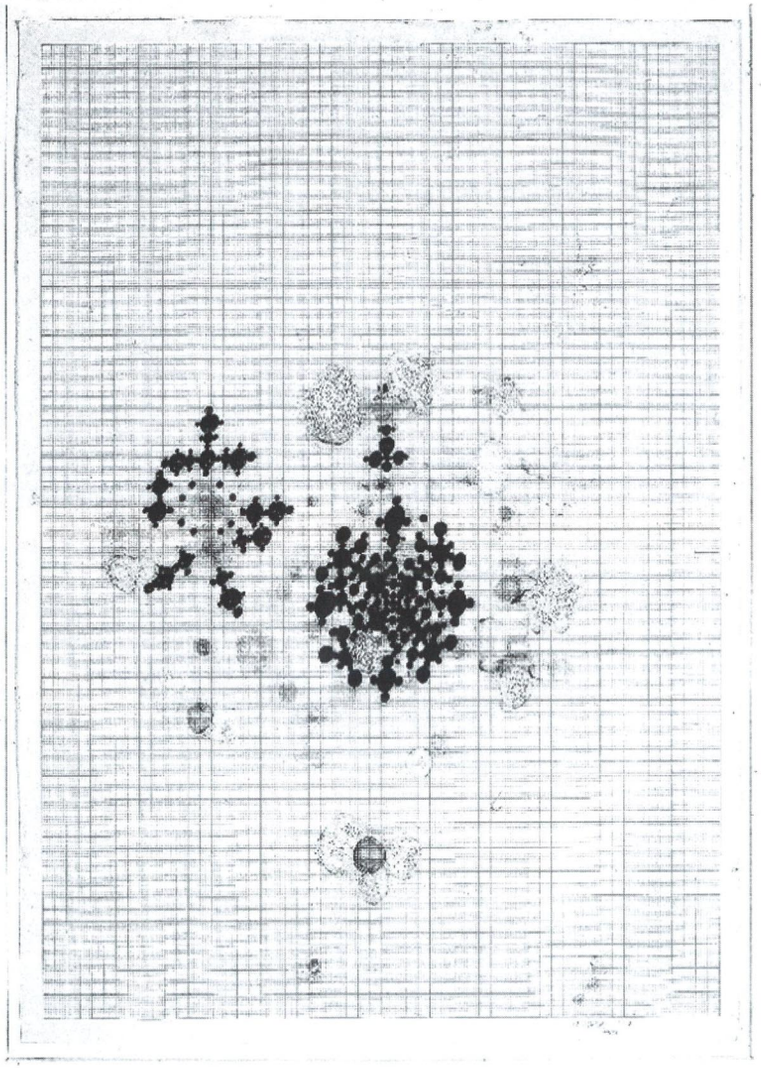
the graphic means in the most material, not to say sculptural, ways. In an interview with critic and art historian Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, he insisted, "It's lead. It's metal in dust form over the bone,"[8] as if lead had been poured through the pencil.

One might be tempted to ask, therefore, what *is* drawing for Orozco? But I don't think this is the question. Rather the question he seems to invite is what *isn't* drawing in the world? There is another moment in the same conversation with Buchloh when Orozco suggests that works of his we might readily class as sculpture, like *La DS* (1993)—or as photography, like *Until You Find Another Yellow Schwalbe* (1995)—could equally well be called drawing. *La DS* could be drawing in the sense that the car was cut into sections. "It's the line that crosses," he says, "a line that cuts, a line that shapes."[9] Drawing as cutting and cutting out crosses over into collage, just as it does into sculpture. But the procedure of cutting also, as Buchloh has argued, "splits and splices industrially produced structures" and so crosses over into "the entire spectrum of spectacularized modernity."[10] Buchloh focuses here on Orozco's radicalizing of sculptural procedures, but the same case could be made, I think, for his drawing. The work he made for the 2003 Venice Biennale called *Shade between Rings of Air*, for example, seems to reflect on the condition of sculpture by replicating in wood the concrete sculpture garden that Carlo Scarpa designed for the 1952 Italian Pavilion, now a forgotten ruin in the patio outside (figs. 35, 36). Orozco doubled and turned the structure 180 degrees, yet if a line that cuts is drawing, then this scalloping and rotating of space is also intensely graphic, not so unlike the way he uses a compass with a blade to splice his airline tickets.

Orozco links this expansive sense of the graphic back to the tradition of Mexican illustrator and printmaker Jose Posada and "the graphic as a political instrument"[11]—the kind of drawing that infiltrates minds and brains (and seeps into skulls). Graphic models cut across categories and extend into mass imagery. But Orozco has also made drawings using coffee stains and spat-out toothpaste (*Untitled*, 1992) (fig. 37). Bodies seep into drawing as much as drawing seeps into minds. Just as this does not have to do with the medium of drawing as such, neither is it to be described in terms of the kind of hybridity or mixing of media that is now pretty much ubiquitous in contemporary art. Rather, there is a different logic at work, one that can be traced back to Manzoni, which focuses attention on the interlocking series that criss-cross Orozco's work in whatever medium, whether it is an object or a photograph or a drawing.[12]



35, 36 *Shade between Rings of Air*, 2003.
Wood and metal.
45′ 11 3/16″ x 26′ 2 15/16″ x 9′ 2 1/4″.

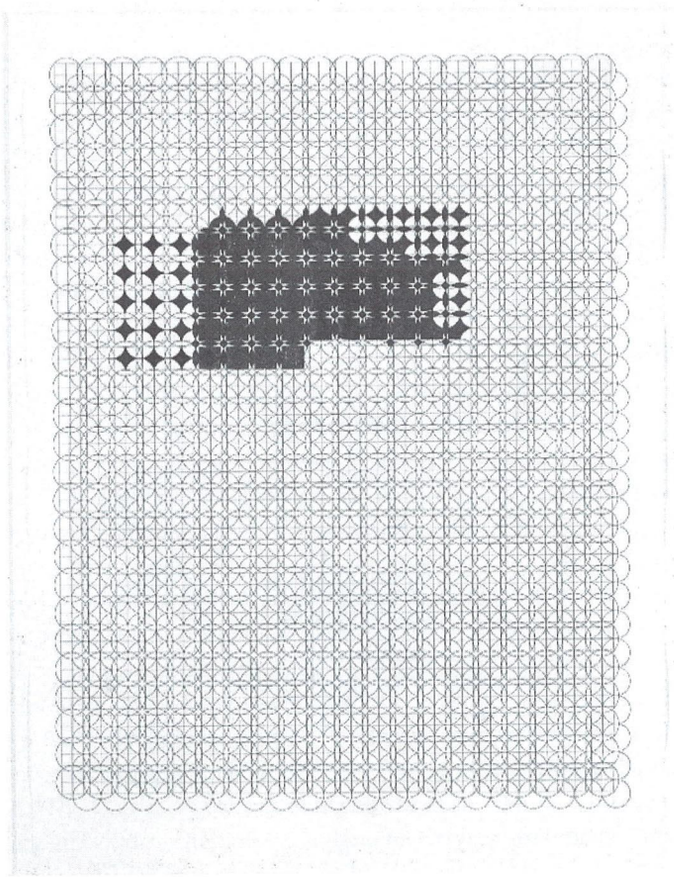


37 *Untitled (First Was the Spitting IV)*, 1992.
Ink, graphite, and toothpaste spit on graph paper.
16 1/2 x 12 3/4 inches.

In some of the first drawings he did on graph paper, Orozco added small plasticine balls. He worked outward, expanding from the center. But there is an expansion, too, from the precise structure of the grid to the leaked stains left by the bits of plasticine. The elements of drawing in Orozco's work do not combine and compose but break up and disperse—and then reassemble in different combinations that are highly mobile. Since the mid-1990s, he has been producing computer-generated drawings, which he calls *Puddles* (1996–97) (fig. 38). These start off as templates of circles and grids generated by the click of a mouse. Then, at the center of each one, he adds more circles and half-circles, ellipses and eclipses, and it begins to unravel. Orozco creates a template and then colors bits of it in, from the center outward, by hand. In *Puddle 49* (1997), he has painted sections of the template in gouache, colored them in, and marked other squares out with little dots. In another drawing from 1996, he reverses the procedure and draws out little squares in pencil. Adding these elements destroys the coherence of the whole. Beginning at the center, he destroys the center.

Using geometric elements in this way invokes an earlier moment in the historical avant-garde, in particular the language of geometry as it was explored by the Russian constructivists. The monumental scale of the idea that art could transform life in the wake of revolution was encapsulated in what they preferred to call, not art, but "laboratory research." As Alexander Rodchenko put it, "Drawing as it was conceived in the past loses its value and is transformed into diagram or geometric projection."[13] Mechanical and technical drawing was the favored means to demonstrate the scientific validity of the practice. Although the endeavor was to avoid at all cost the arbitrary and the accidental, in practice, of course, the production of the work itself was makeshift, small-scale, and ephemeral. Rodchenko's folding hanging constructions are a testament to the kind of vast utopian idea that can fold away small (and vice versa). A vocabulary once associated with imagining a better socialist future now becomes a token or leftover of that earlier graphic model.

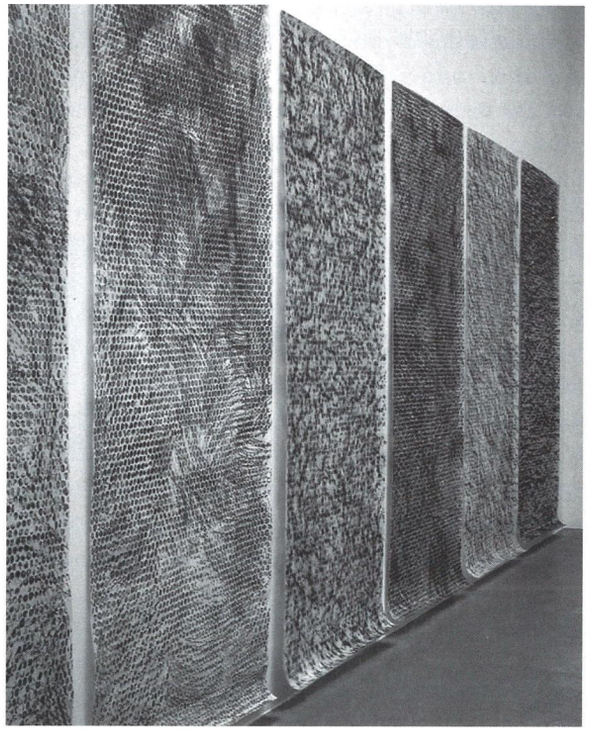
On the other hand, Orozco's use of computer-generated patterns is resolutely not about the technological or scientific, but points instead to the decorative and useless. A computer pattern has no greater use-value than spit or a spirograph. The computer seems more like a way of quickly making an infinite number of different possible patterns based on circles and grids; in the end it is more improvisatory than not. Orozco has said that when he made the series called the *Atomists* (1996) he had



38 *Puddle 43*, 1997.
Gouache and graphite on inkjet print.
11 x 8 1/2 inches.

thought about the way Rodchenko combined graphics and photographs. In early Soviet film posters, Rodchenko shaped photographs into circles and other geometric patterns. Orozco reverses the process by superimposing circular geometric elements over photographs. It is as if he splits the term *photo-graph* into component parts. The split can be seen in a work like *Extension of Reflection* (1992), where rings of tire tracks pass through a puddle and intersect a manhole in a series of interlocking circles. He finds—or does he make?—the graphic in the photographic.

These are affinities across a great distance. A world shrinks and expands—could we say pneumatically? It is as if Orozco's use of repetition and repetitive patterns both draws widely disparate things close together and at the same time accentuates their differences. The computer-generated patterns he used in his small-scale drawings are enlarged in his series of *Blackboards* (1998), hung on the wall of the gallery, which in some instances spectators have been invited to draw on themselves. Even larger is the *Havre Caumartin* (1999) hung originally unframed, as a sort of double of the wall (fig. 39). These were produced by taking rubbings from the white circular mosaics in the Havre-Caumartin metro station, which Orozco was struck by when he went to Paris in the early 1980s. Blank walls might seem an unlikely thing to be struck by. They

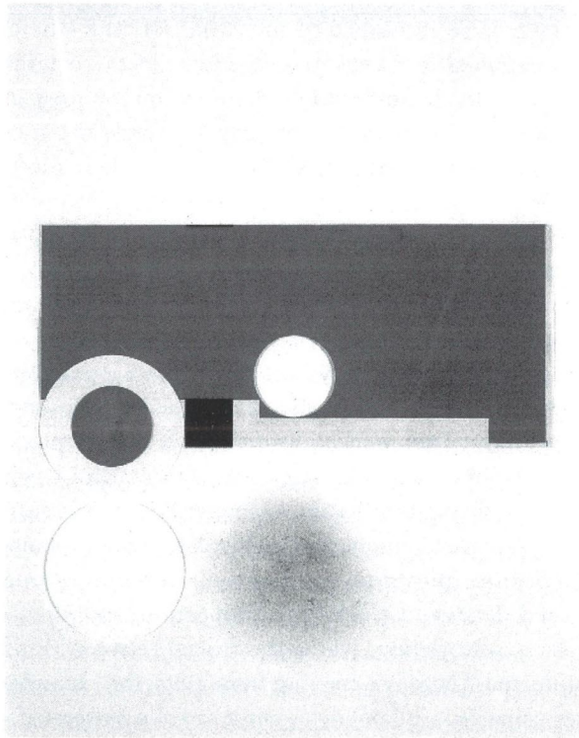


39 *Havre Caumartin*, 1999.
Installation view Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris.
Graphite on Japanese paper, each 78 3/4 x 39 3/8 inches.
Image courtesy: Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris.

are the kinds of surface you see without looking, yet they also stick in your mind as a leftover from a time when white circular mosaics signaled the new and the modern. Subway walls tend to be seen as dead spaces, but these frottages are intensely mobile and animated. Returning there some twenty years later, Orozco, with a number of assistants, made rubbings of surfaces that were, by then, far from new. What is striking about the series is how different each one turns out, depending on the pressure and the direction of the rubbed graphite. Orozco has commented on the bodily pressure required to make these large-scale drawings. There is a sense of intense physical labor here; the work is mechanical yet the results proliferate difference. Great swirls seem to break out in some, whereas in others the pattern is more regular.

In the foreword to his 1974 book *Species of Spaces*, French writer Georges Perec described how he was drawn to the ordinary spaces around us. Not the obviously spectacular though in reality "almost domesticated interplanetary, intersidereal or intergalactic spaces," but rather those closest to hand, like, he writes, the corridors of the Paris metro or a public park. To Perec the spaces we inhabit are broken into bits "and one of these bits is the metro corridor." A little further, he goes on: "At one time or another, almost everything passes through a sheet of paper, the page of a notebook, or of a diary, or some other chance support (a metro ticket, the margin of a newspaper, a cigarette paper, the back of an envelope, etc.) on which, at varying speeds and by different techniques depending on place, time or mood, one or another of the miscellaneous elements that comprise the everydayness of life come to be inscribed."[14] Rather than look toward the infinite, Perec wanted to capture that everydayness by describing the familiar spaces of an apartment or a street. The bits of experience that Perec selects—and the paper world that might offer that chance support he refers to—have a resonance, I think, for Orozco's work. But instead of opposing infinity to everydayness, Orozco positively invites that futuristic fantasy of planets and satellites, left over now as the residual forms of a utopian geometric vocabulary of intersecting circles. It is precisely the bringing together of an intergalactic space with a soap carton or a metro ticket that makes for Orozco's makeshift but spinning circuits.

The chance support of a wall, or a pavement, or a peso note, or an airline ticket. It is oddly apt that cultural critic Walter Benjamin chose the term *Anschaulichkeit* or "heightened graphicness" drawn from "the smallest and most precisely cut components" in his endeavor to "interpolate into the infinitesimally small."[15] These tokens or leftovers encapsulate everydayness. They link together like an endless series of coincidences. Orozco takes a ticket and superimposes upon it a series of intersecting circles. He may cut circles out, splicing a small thing into smaller segments. He may move its parts around, importing a globe from one ticket to another. Orozco has talked about how you can look at Kurt Schwitters's collages for a long time, "like complex space"—yet at the same time they are "just banal."[16] Some of the airline tickets have digital geometric grounds, while others are printed, superimposed by compass-drawn constellations or hand-colored in acrylic. One, *Red Air* (1997), uses the ticket's red carbon backing. He has cut out a circle, used it to rub through some of the ink in a residual trace that looks like a hovering aura, and then displaced it to the right (fig. 40). Turning around and turning over, parts are extracted and used to extend the collage beyond the edges of the ticket,

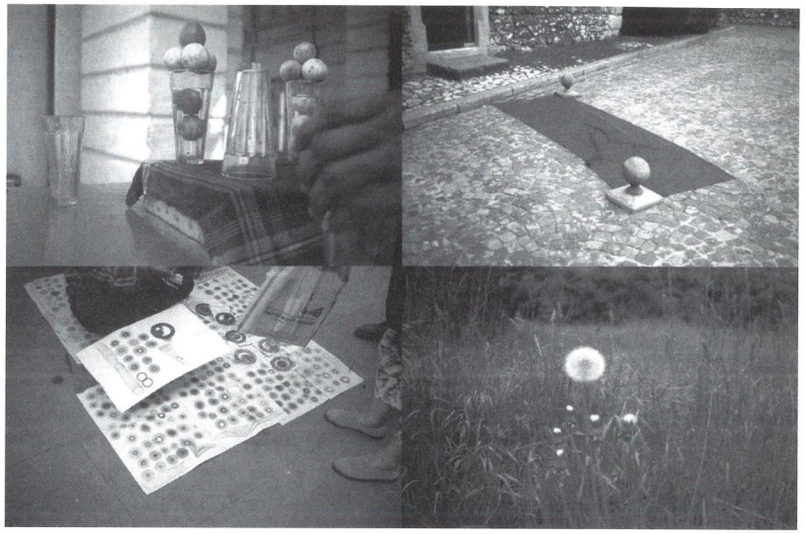


40 *Red Air*, 1997.
Cut-and-pasted red-carbon-coated airline ticket and red carbon on paper.
11 x 8 1/2 inches.

and to break it up into disparate elements. These collages seem to leap from one realm to another, covering a great distance in no time. Could this be space travel? It could be, on a very small scale—if you were able to keep it in your pocket.

It has often been remarked that Orozco is preoccupied with circles. But it is not only as a shape or form, but as a structure that circles interest him. There is a story by Jorges Luis Borges called "The Circular Ruins." In it the "obscure man" who is the protagonist comes from nowhere to the circular ruins of a burnt-out temple in the jungle. Few stories have such a vivid shape as this sequence of dreams. It is filled with circles but it also *is* a circle. It begins and ends at the same point. This story devours itself. It *is* a circular ruin, a perfect circle that disintegrates as it turns. The man is on a mission to dream another man and, as he dreams, the circular ruins give way to a circular amphitheater, only to reconfigure eventually as the beating heart he dreams, "the size of a closed fist." In the end he comes full circle to be consumed by fire at the very site where he began. And as he is engulfed in flames in a repetition of the original fire that destroyed the temple, "he understood that he too was a mere appearance, dreamt by another."[17] Circles do not simply provide the motifs in this story, they also describe its operation. To make a circle is also to break its circuit.

Orozco is not concerned with dreaming or dream narratives, but nonetheless he sets in train circuits that short-circuit. A formal vocabulary has been conventionally thought of as self-referential and hermetic. But Orozco's procedure is to use circles to *ruin* (there is no better word) rather than to endorse a formal system. Where formalism is a reductive logic, his logic of loops and circuits is expansive, encompassing ever more disparate elements in its orbit. The connections that are triggered proliferate outward. The spirographs being sold on a street with which I began were the subject of one of four photographs assembled in a work entitled *Discos Dados* (1997)—an arrangement that itself sets in train a rotation (fig. 41). In this constellation, spirograph patterns can move in the same orbit as a slightly blurred dandelion clock. The connections intersect with other work as if in a constellation, where the spaces between things become intensely animated. There is a drawing from 1995, for example, on a page of computer paper. It is full of circles but it can also be seen, if you like, as a circular ruin. There are coffee stains spread across it. There are patches of spat-out toothpaste. There are spirograph drawings, here partial and unfinished. These elements are all leftovers, just as the circles in his computer



41 *Discos Dados*, 1997.
Inkjet print.
22 7/8 x 34 1/4 inches.
Image courtesy: Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris.

drawings or *Puddles* are leftovers of a sort as well. And they cut across to others in the imagination, just as his incised circles cut through to other works he has made.

One of the striking things about Orozco's work is that it is impossible to think of his works singly—one immediately gives way to another. His method of displaying works on what he calls "working tables" creates the conditions for a field of action that is always multiple and always mobile, always in circulation. The tables, as much as a piece of paper, provide him with what he calls "platforms" on which to work. But they also provide a temporary, provisional ground that can be mobilized, not unlike Perec's chance supports. Orozco uses the temporariness of the exhibition to make this vivid, but it is there, already, in the work. It is as if the work that art does in the world, under present conditions, *has to be* contingent and incomplete. As a consequence, its radical possibility may precisely lie in its being something more like an exercise, something makeshift and improvisatory. Drawing is in no way the privileged site of such resistance, no more important than his sculpture or his photography. But Orozco's drawing nonetheless vividly demonstrates the twin action in his work, a

ruination of center and an infinite dispersal of its elements. His endless series of divergences and recombinations are continually in movement in ways that dislocate the normal coordinates by which things are linked together in the world. As the French structuralist Claude Levi-Strauss put it, "If I may be allowed the expression, it is not the resemblances, but the differences, which resemble each other."[18] So it is that the smallest found object, like a spirograph, might intersect at an imaginary point with infinity—not because there is harmony in the universe, but on the contrary, because there is dislocation at the heart of our experience of the world we inhabit. The work of art is radically reconfigured in this process, its elements continually turning, its circular ruins creating momentum for generating the new.

Notes

1. See Deanna Petherbridge, for example, on the relationship between making and thinking in *The Primacy of Drawing: An Artist's View* (London: South Bank Center, 1991).

2. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (London: Athlone Press, 1994), p. 14.

3. John Ruskin, *The Elements of Drawing* (London: George Allen, 1902), p. xvii. Quite inadvertently, of course, Ruskin's advice prefigures the chance effects of the found object as it was elaborated in surrealism. Margaret Iversen has recently discussed the genealogy of the found object with some reference to Orozco's work in "Readymade, Found Object, Photograph," *Art Journal* 62, no. 2 (summer 2004).

4. Ruskin, *The Elements of Drawing*, p. 43.

5. Yve-Alain Bois connects these two and discusses drawing "blind" in "Kelly's Trouvailles: Findings in France,'" in *Ellsworth Kelly: The Early Drawings, 1948–1955*, exh. cat. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Art Museums; Winterthur: Kunstmuseum Winterthur, 1999), pp. 23–24.

6. *Gabriel Orozco Photogravity*, exh. cat. (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1999), p. 148.

7. Ibid.

8. *Gabriel Orozco: Clinton Is Innocent*, exh. cat. (Paris: Musee d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris. 1998), p. 103.

9. Ibid.

10. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Gabriel Orozco: The Sculpture of Everyday Life," in *Gabriel Orozco*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art; Mexico City: Museo Internacional Rufino Tamayo, 2000), p. 91. In this volume, pp. 31–49.

11. *Clinton Is Innocent*, p. 103.

12. I describe this logic of series at work in Manzoni's *Achromes* of the late 1950s in my book *The Infinite Line* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004).

13. Alexander Rodchenko. "The Line," in *Rodchenko: The Complete Work*, ed. S. D. Khan Magomedov (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986), p. 294.

14. Georges Perec, "Species of Spaces," in *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* (London: Penguin, 1997), p. 12.

15. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 931.

16. *Clinton Is Innocent*, p. 159.

17. Jorge Luis Borges, "The Circular Ruins," in *Labyrinths* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 77. Molly Nesbit has discussed Borges in relation to Orozco in her fine essay "The Tempest," in *Gabriel Orozco*, ed. Alma Ruiz (Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2000). In this volume, pp. 59–83.

18. Claude Levi-Strauss, *Totemism* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1969), p. 77.