EMPTY CLUB

Gabriel Orozco

Empty Club was the 1996 Artangel/Beck's commission
and took place at 50 St James's Street, London SW1 from June 25 until July 28 1996.

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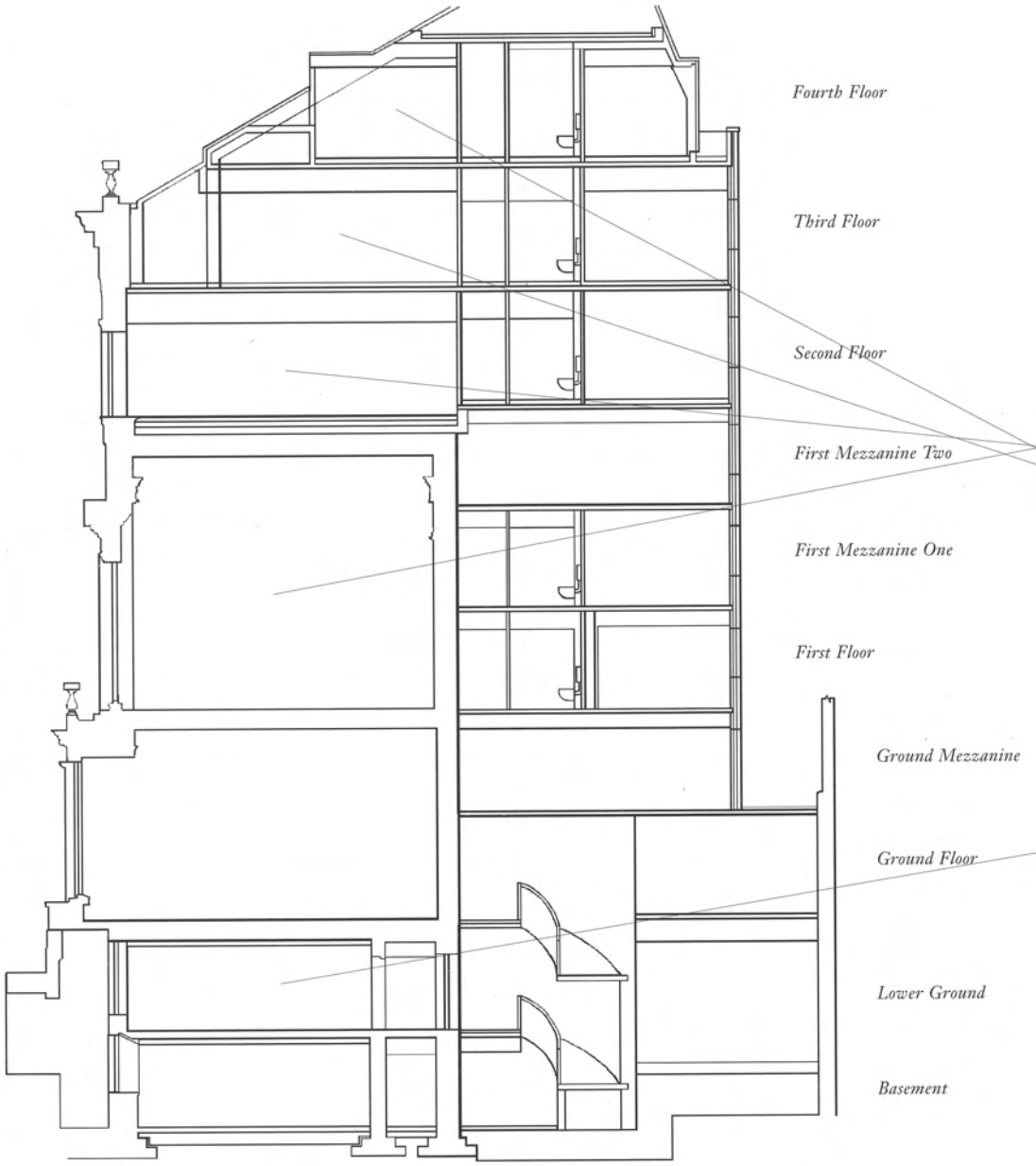
ARTANGEL



50 St James's Street, London SW1

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THE ATOMISTS

MARK HAWORTH-BOOTH

The summer of 1996 saw not only the usual fixtures of the English sporting calendar but the more global events that come round only at four year intervals —the Olympic Games and the European Football Championships. The latter, Euro 96, was held in England for the first time. Partly because British participation in the Olympics was somewhat muted, and the form of the English cricket team sporadic, Euro 96 caused the major adrenalin rush of the sporting summer. There was collective euphoria: at last the national football side had played with style and success. Narrowest, and honourable, defeat at the hands of the Germans in the semi-finals allowed the English to fall back once again —if they wished— on a time-honoured formula. We may have failed in Atlanta, lost match after match to the cricketers of former colonies, and achieved less than was hoped for in Euro 96, but England had at least 'given the world' most of the sports and pastimes that enthrall it. The long list of games originated here even includes, some say, baseball (grown stupendously from the humble English game of rounders). In recent years the native fertility in inventing sports has been linked by scholars to that other great British invention —the Industrial Revolution. As Michael Oriard summarises: "The Industrial Revolution completed the triumph of capitalism ironically by devaluing work through the total separation of capital from labour. With the Industrial Revolution came not just a new kind of leisure but the beginning of an uncomfortable awareness that perhaps leisure, not labour, offered the best opportunities for human fulfilment". Thus, "a work-centred culture increasingly granted play a vital place in human life".[1] The Industrial Revolution gave leisure first, of course, to the 'leisured classes'. One hundred years on, the rituals of collective labour began to transfer to mass identification with sport. By the 1990s football, in particular, had become not only the 'people's game' but its ballet, theatre, grand opera and religion as well.

Empty Club was on show in the period of the year quaintly known as the London Season. In the months of May, June and July the Court, the Establishment, and fashionable society gathered —and apparently still do—

1. Michael Oriard, *Sporting with the Gods: The Rhetoric of Play and Game in American Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1991, p.xi.

for balls and other rituals. The round of social/sporting spectacles includes rowing at the Henley Royal Regatta, cricket at Lord's, tennis at Wimbledon and the opening of the Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition just up the road from 50 St. James's. Presumably the Season originally served a larger biological purpose as an opportunity for mating and marrying-off the offspring of usually farflung landed families. Matches were made, or rather brokered by men, in gaming clubs like Crockford's. It is typical that the spheres of sport and romance combine in words like match, while phrases like 'the Great Game' —redolent of London club culture and its power— embrace the complexities of nineteenth century British diplomatic policy in Central Asia. As Britain's imperial administrators drew new sets of lines across continents, they simultaneously marked out the smaller territories of games pitches, establishing new codes and regimes at every level.

The room in which Orozco displayed *The Atomists* was bright with summer. It had something of the informal glamour of a party in a marquee and the festive flourish of a big sporting occasion. The walls jostled with giant cricketers, footballers, rugby players, oarsmen. The athletes in these pictures are easily recognizable, many of them, to countless fans. We see, for example, Newcastle United's Colombian hero Faustino Asprilla attempting a bicycle kick. Elastic-muscled and rubber-limbed, 'Tino' has been given the affectionate nickname 'Bag of Snakes'. However, you don't need to know the local sporting scene, or habitually read newspapers from the back, to get the point. It's more than tabloid sport at mural size. These are generic figures on a larger ground, players in a cosmic game. They tackle, tangle, grow extra arms and legs, become far more than individual beings. These heroes, whirling in the heraldic colours of their sports, mingle and collide not only with each other but with flying planets, spinning spheres and stars. Different families of forms and orders of knowledge have been dynamically intercut and blended by Gabriel Orozco to become *The Atomists*. They are visual structures which recall an observation by Cynthia Farrar (to whom we shall return later) "Physics and ethics coalesce in the atomist construal of human nature".[2]

Considering the rise of sports to social centrality in the past 100 years, it is remarkable that artists have kept their distance from it, as if art should not be contaminated by the pleasure pursuits of the people. There are wonderful football paintings, of course, by Robert Delaunay, Léger and De Stael. Delaunay's footballers of the century's second decade are cognate with his aviators, dancers in the new space/time discovered in the laboratories of physicists and the studios of Cubists. A longing for a heroic painting of modern sport informs John Berger's novel *A Painter of our Time*

2. Cynthia Farrar, *The Origins of Democratic Thinking: The Invention of Politics in Classical Athens*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1988, p. 229.

(1958). His fictional socialist-realist, Janos Lavin, paints such a picture, as monumental as a Léger. The book opens in his deserted studio: "The huge figures in *The Games* canvas, that leant along the whole length of one wall, looked certain and unalterable." Elsewhere in the empty studio Berger's narrator observes "several photographs of athletes in action —hurdlers, skiers, divers." Here was society's, and the painter's, secret image life.

Sport found its true champion in photography. Photographs of archery, cricket, target shooting date back in England to the 1850s. A set of photographs of the 1896 Athens Olympic Games was recently rediscovered in the National History Museum in Denmark and exhibited there and in Atlanta in 1996. The faster cameras, films and lenses available from the 1920s provided the possibility of action photography for the new illustrated magazines. Martin Munkacsi in Germany and Alexander Rodchenko in Russia were major figures. Munkacsi brought to the subject an acute sense of timing, of composition and of the modern heroic —'the decisive moment' *avant la lettre*. Rodchenko possessed the same qualities, allied to an understanding that space is as active as form. The rhetoric of sports photography, combined with geometric blocks of colour and asymmetrical layouts, was projected most vigorously in Constructivist Central Europe and the Soviet Union. Its dynamism expressed new social and political energies. While the utopian collective dreams faded, the technical accomplishment and cultural hunger for sporting drama grew. Sports photography became a staple of the world's media, developing to new sophistication, immediacy and omnipresence from the 1960s via faster colour film, longer telephoto lenses, remote controls, motor drives and —from the mid-80s— accurate colour-printing in newspapers. In the same period media-imagery became the subject of artists from Rauschenberg and Warhol to John Baldessari. The latter seems especially germane: Baldessari invented a language of found-photos, half-cancelled by circles and discs, which projects the clamour of contemporary media overload while simultaneously fashioning sophisticated meanings out of the apparent chaos. These sources all seem to be part of the cultural mulch from which Orozco's series has grown.

However, the roots of *The Atomists* are everywhere in Orozco's own work. As constantly and inventively as Mondrian examined the rectangle and square, Orozco explores the circle and sphere: *Nature Reclaimed* (1990), *Crazy Tourist* (1991), *Extension of Reflection* (1992), *Soft Blue* (1993), *Frozen Portable Puddle* and *Coins on Window* (1994), *Green Ball* (1995), *Common Dream* and *Parachute in Iceland* (1996). The catalogue of his touring exhibition in Europe in 1996 featured Orozco's photograph of a bird's nest —a breathtaking semi-sphere intricately poised among sprays of twigs and filled with the ovals of eggs. Even his most famous creation, *La DS* (1993),

the spliced and reconfigured Citroën car, is organized around a circle: the steering wheel repositioned at the exact centre of the saloon. Elsewhere in *Empty Club*, paper moons were cut into the individual leaves of artificial trees beside an improvised bowls green. Circles and spheres, sometimes elliptically stretched, flip, spin, roll and bounce through the oeuvre. Or stop in enchanted stasis.

Orozco's work does not proceed as a programme but unfolds organically. He plays with hierarchies, mixing high and low, like and unlike. Since 1986 most of his work has been site-specific, using found materials, local things; he picks up and transforms what's available, whether it's wooden bowls from a London market or daily newspapers from a corner shop. Two works are particularly significant in preparation for *The Atomists*. In 1993 Orozco was invited to participate in the *Projects* series at The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Among the works he created is *Home Run*. Orozco placed oranges in the windows of the buildings of Fifty-Fourth Street, facing the Museum's Sculpture Garden. Fresh oranges were provided each week. Anyone —residents or office workers— could join in this project by placing an orange in a clear tumbler on their window sill. The oranges could be seen through the greenery of the garden.[3] Descriptions of the installation remind me of Andrew Marvell's poem *Bermudas*:

> He hangs in shades the Orange bright,
> Like golden Lamps in a green Night.

The title *Home Run* may be partly a deft pun on the communal aspect of the installation (which was, so to speak, run by people in their homes) but it obviously refers to the US national game. I like to think of the oranges as baseballs, hit high and true from the dynamic diamond of the Sculpture Garden. Maybe this is because the first baseball game I went to was so memorable: the ball was struck right into the stand where I was sitting with an American friend. He caught and kept it, with the dazed delight of a suddenly-six-year-old, as the luckiest omen. A home run, of course, is an exceptional moment anyway. It is a collective release in game terms —as all players on bases can walk through to complete runs— and thus quite unlike the triumph of a six in cricket. All this —the collective euphoria of sport and the cat's cradle of trajectories and associations created by Orozco in MoMA's urban canyon— prepares us for what he was to do in *Empty Club*.

Equally important, a major part of the form of *The Atomists* appeared in Orozco's work during the Kwangju Biennale in Seoul, Korea in 1995. Using local materials, as is his custom, Orozco cut abstract shapes in vinyl. These

3. *Projects 41*, a brochure published by The Museum of Modern Art, New York 1993.

were laminated onto lightboxes. His sketchbooks are full of geometrical motifs of the kind he transferred to coloured vinyl. The lightboxes were shown in Seoul and then at the Marian Goodman Gallery in New York. These are the forms he was to blend digitally with sporting photographs in London in Spring 1996 and output as inkjet prints. Their aesthetically neutral surfaces referred neatly back to the newsprint from which the images derived.

Given his ongoing research into circles and spheres, solids and voids, it is not hard to see why Orozco has immersed himself in the philosophy of Atomism. First of all, the Atomist philosophy conceived in the fifth century BCE by Leucippus and his pupil Democritus, was itself an extraordinary feat of imagination. Direct evidence of the existence of atoms did not arrive until 2,300 years after they had been first posited in theory. Their point of view was remarkably like that of modern science, and avoided most of the faults to which Greek speculation was prone. They believed that everything is composed of atoms, which are physically, but not geometrically, indivisible; that between the atoms there is empty space; that atoms are indestructible; that they always have been, and always will be, in motion; that there are an infinite number of atoms, and even of kinds of atoms, the differences being as regards shape and size.[4]

The question of variable shape and size exercised later commentators. Some thought that heavier atoms fell faster, knocking lighter ones aside like billiard balls. However, Bertrand Russell —whom I just quoted— credited Leucippus and Democritus with a more sophisticated understanding: it seems more probable that, in their view, atoms were originally moving at random, as in the modern kinetic theory of gases. Democritus said there was neither up nor down in the infinite void, and compared the movement of atoms in the soul to that of "motes in a sunbeam when there is no wind".[5] The void in which the Democritan atoms have their motion rhymes with the emptiness of the club, where the handsome athletes perform in eery silence —while, on a computer screen in the basement, a programme generated atomic forms silently and endlessly.

Some see atomism as implying a harshly individualistic model of humanity, "based on conflict and confrontation, on part against part".[6] However, a quite different reading is possible. Those who know Orozco's now considerable body of achievements are alert to a subtle and persistent politics in his work, a habitual substitution of units of measurement, which can be drastically simplified as a contrast of peripheral dynamism and central void.

4. Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy*, London: Routledge 1961, p. 83.
5. Ibid., p. 89.
6. Danah Zohar and Ian Marshall, *The Quantum Society*, London: Bloomsbury 1993, p. 15.

His use of atomist ideas is inflected in a particular way. We can understand *The Atomists* in the light of this reading of Democritus by Cynthia Farrar in her book *The Origins of Democratic Thinking*:

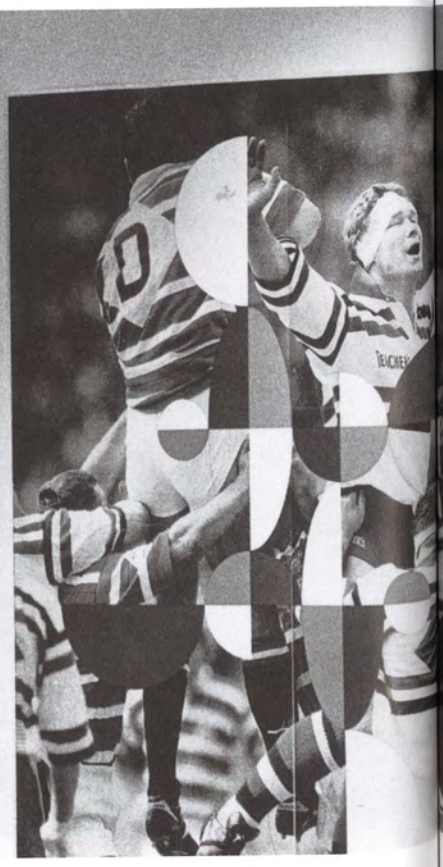
"Because the normative constraints postulated by atomism, the view of the world as consisting of atoms and void, operated at the level of particles, they could serve as the foundation of order across the whole range of complex human behaviour and interaction. The atomist did not need to appeal either to a crudely primitive or a socially determinate concept of man's nature and his good. That is, Democritus' account provides man with a way of understanding himself and his interests which is not defined in terms of those qualities associated with social status nor those required for and shaped by democratic political interaction. The norms postulated by atomism apply to all men *qua* human beings, not merely *qua* members of a social order or citizens of a democracy. Like the democratic vision of civic equality, atomist ethics rests on a concept of personal autonomy not limited to those with superior social resources and privileges."[7]

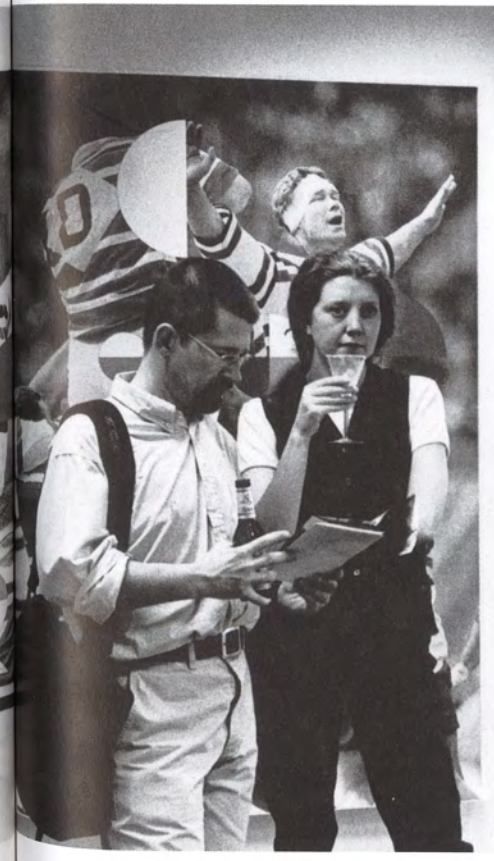
The work we are considering makes use of images of games in which the brilliance of the individual is classically integrated within the collective performance of the team —a highly adequate statement of human aspirations and accommodations at the deepest levels, and one which helps explain the profound popular fascination with football in particular. In his series *The Atomists* Gabriel Orozco has choreographed an extraordinary spectacle, in an unrepeatable time and place, to reflect on the physics —but also the ethics— of being.

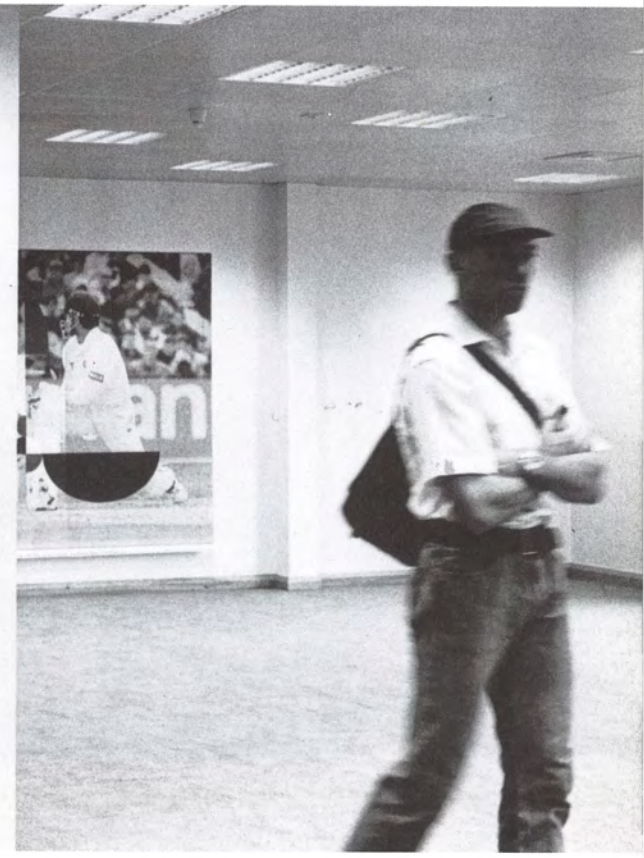
7. Cynthia Farrar, op. cit., p. 192.

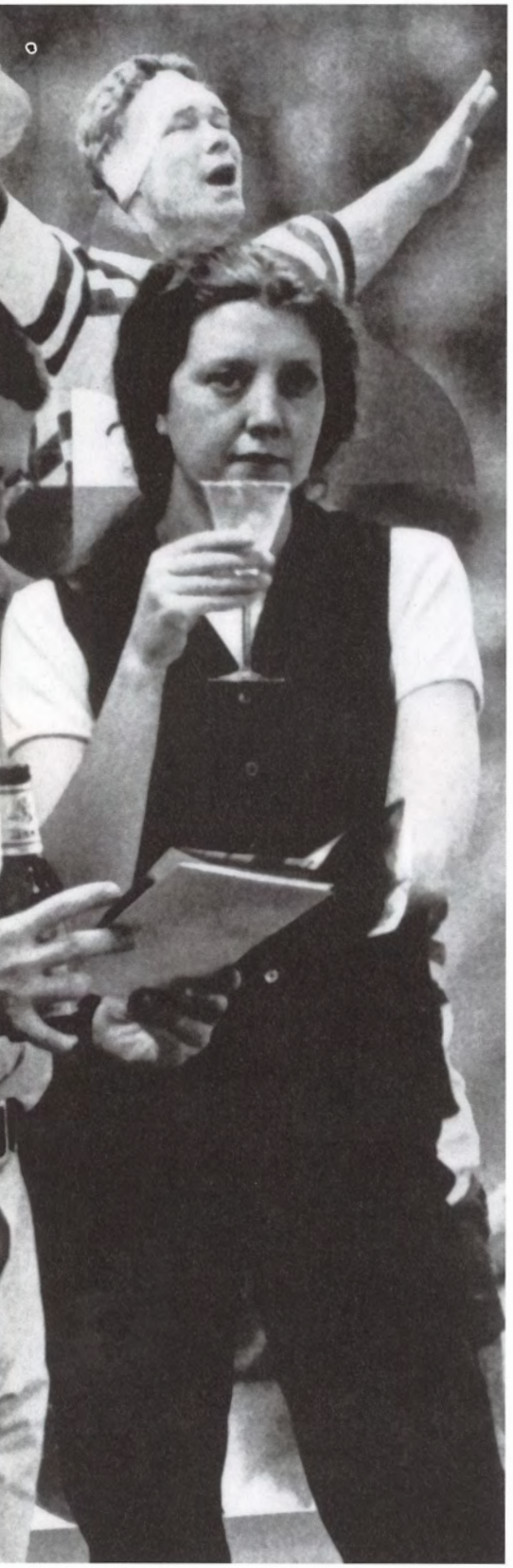
Making strides: Pollock, w

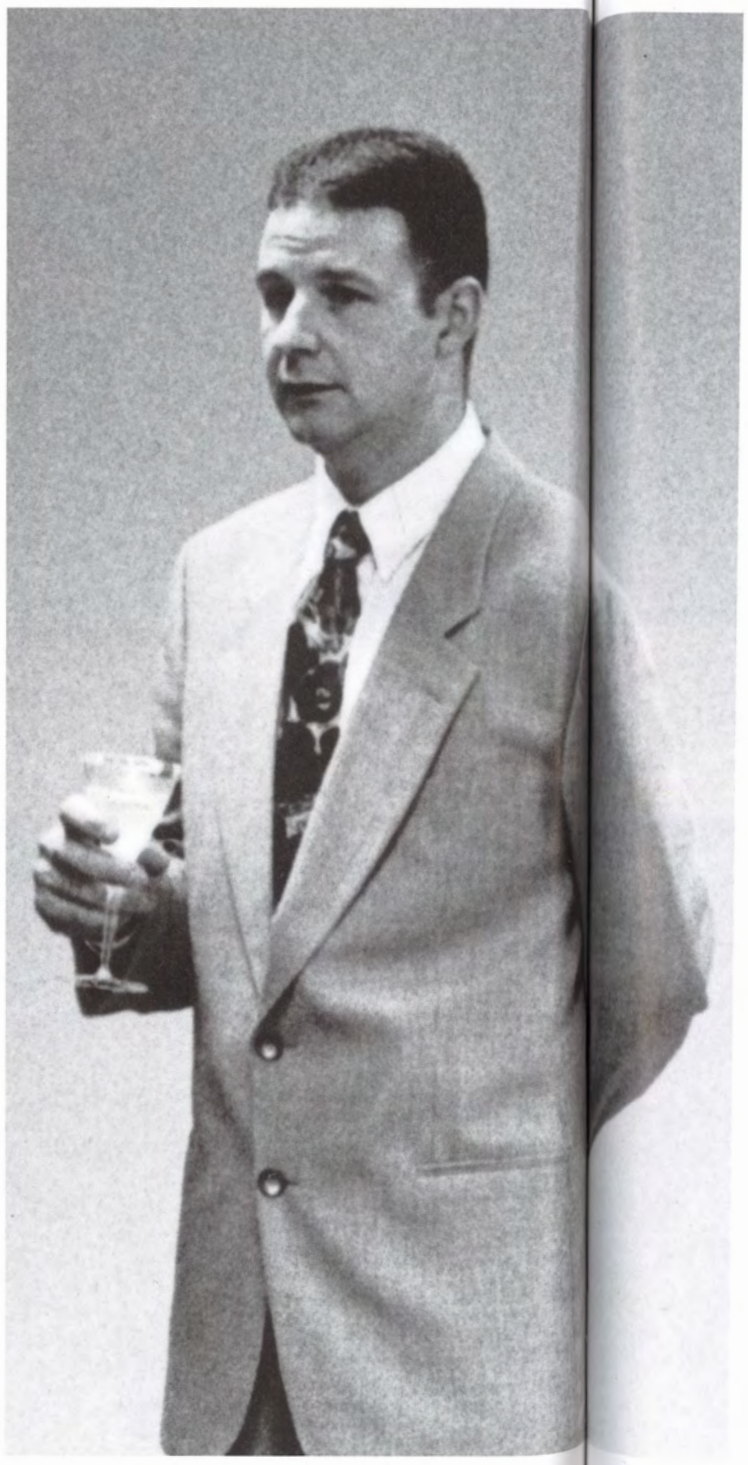
five Derbyshire wickets, provided further evidence of his potential yesterday. Photograph: Ian Stewart

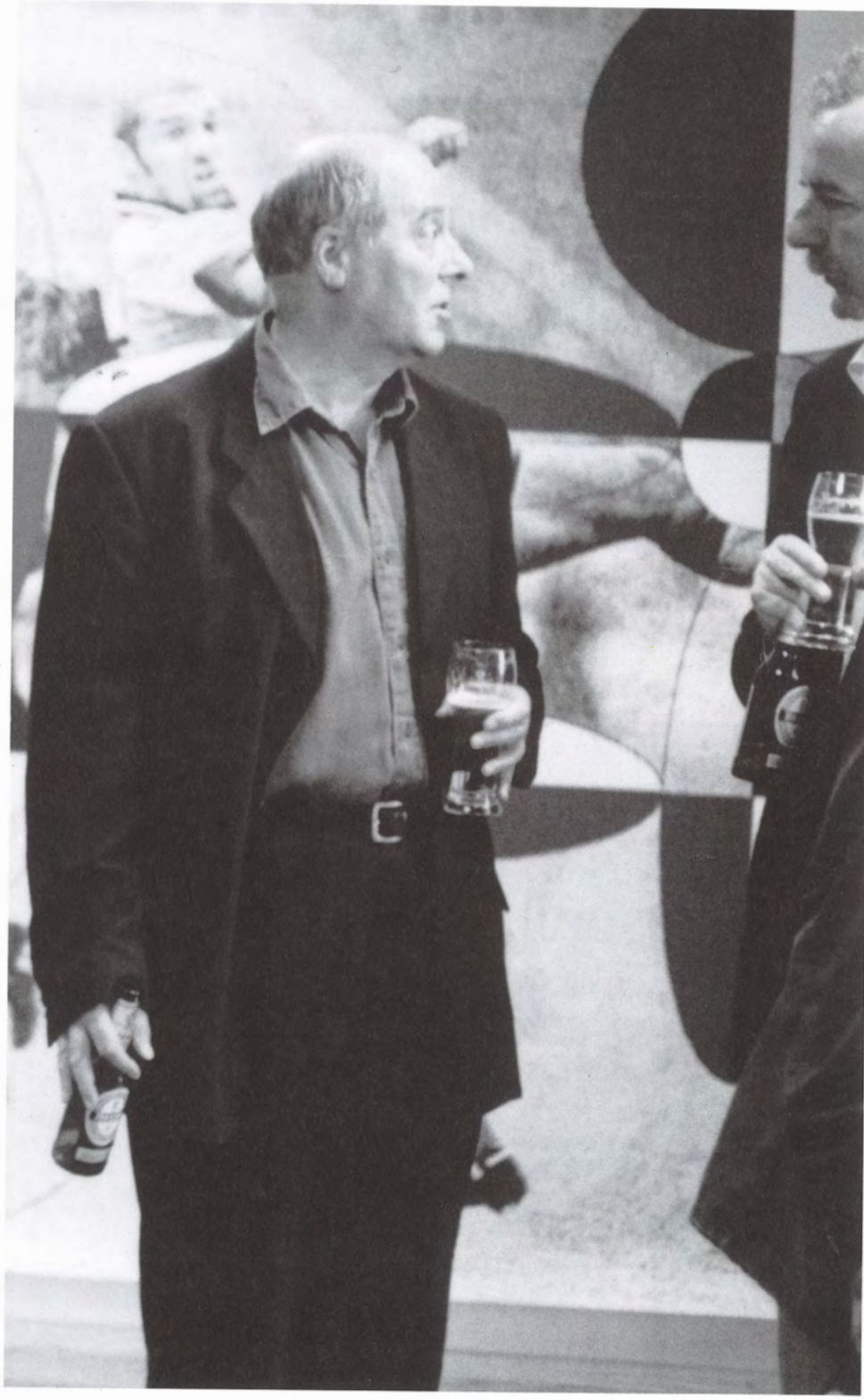












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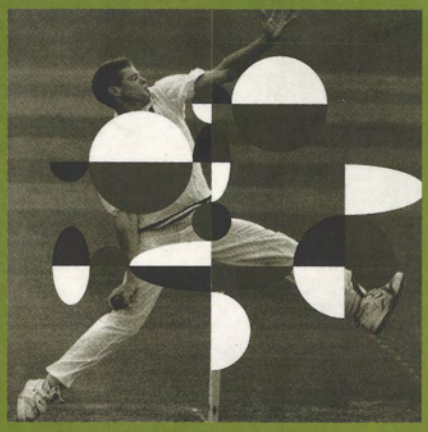

The grand Georgian building at 50 St James's stands in the centre of London and at the heart of the British Establishment. For almost 150 years, it was the home of The Devonshire Club, a domain for English gentlemen. Refurbished for a new life as a corporate HQ, 50 St James's lay vacant through the summer of 1996, suspended between an empty past and an unknown future.

Gabriel Orozco animated this sleeping building with a sequence of sculptural transformations. An exquisite *Oval Billiard Table* was installed, the red ball hovering above the green baize. Elsewhere visitors encountered *The Atomists*, an extended series of sporting prints; a dreamscape model of Lord's cricket ground and an avenue of 'moon trees'.

Guy Brett, Jean Fisher, Mark Haworth-Booth and James Lingwood discuss Orozco's subtle meditations on movement and stability, centre and periphery, rules and etiquette within its particular British context.

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