



Gabriel Orozco

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thinking in circles

Briony Fer



boomerang : throw

Over the last few years, Orozco has become more and more interested in throwing boomerangs (the title of the river stone *Black boomerang* (p.127) names a passion as well as a coincidence of shape). This is hardly predictable, but does make sense in terms of his work. Throwing a boomerang is, after all, an action not an image; you could even say it is the antithesis of image. Successfully thrown the boomerang travels in a vast circle around you. The action of the throw, and the catch, the movement of the piece of curved wood or plastic at high speed, the circling arc of its movement, the sound of it spinning in the air, are impossible to photograph or film. When he has done so we see the artist cast as thrower but frequently lose sight of his object: the throw. The movement is extremely simple and yet it falls outside what is possible to make an image of. It is the purest expression of groundlessness.

I hesitate to use a word like 'paradigmatic' for an action that is so far from totalising, but there is something

more than evocative in the throw of the boomerang for Orozco's work. That is, its resistance to being caught in an image. This applies also to his work in two dimensions – even when the image is a photograph or a painting of entirely flat shapes it contains its own inner antagonism to the flat image. The schematic device of the circle destroys the image within an image culture. Maybe that's why Orozco has always been ambivalent about talking about his photographs as art photographs: he always prefers to see the things in the photographs as close to sculptures.

If you are right-handed a boomerang moves in an anti-clockwise direction, spinning gyroscopically. The aerodynamics of its flight create a turbulence in the air, and its movement depends on wind and other atmospheric conditions – it is never a perfect circle. There is, as there always is in Orozco's work, a physical topology of the curved surfaces of the boomerang itself, and then the invisible movements that it creates through its movement through the air.

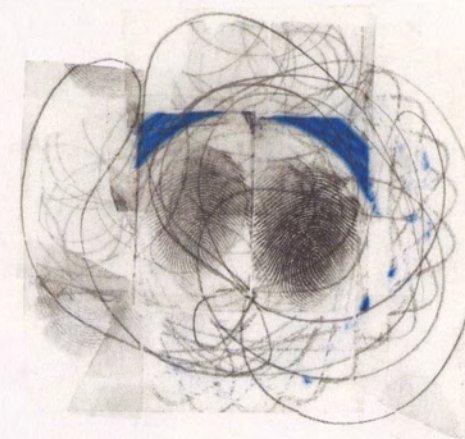


In some ways this echoes some of his earliest interests in the clockwise movement of a wristwatch, but also far exceeds them. Most of all though, the 'throw' is susceptible to chance and creates movements that cannot be contained within the spatial paradigm of the grid. It takes Stéphane Mallarmé's poem *Un coup de Dés* (A Throw of a Dice), that modernist model of radical dispersion, and opens it up again to another vast sky. And it does so by turning the throw, quite literally, into a circular movement.

I began by asking a simple question about how circles work and have ended up thinking about their capacity to be both recursive and generative; and paradoxically to be propelled by a complex inner logic and to open onto a world outside it. If I have occasionally got lost in them – entirely as predicted – then surely that is par for the course in any attempt to get close to

Orozco's work. The idea of a boomerang throw says something about the precarious hold we have on our own subject-position in the face of work like this. In addition, a boomerang could even be seen as a sort of *wind instrument*, not the kind you play music on, but one which plays and is played by currents of air. Well, maybe I am going too far: real boomerangs (as opposed to stone ones obviously) need windless conditions, but still Orozco had noted those words down when he first began to use the idea of an instrument to think with.¹

This takes us back to the way he treated air as a material like any other in work from the early 1990s onwards. A cursive throw both expresses something about his earlier propositions but also re-describes them in terms that are even more susceptible to agitation and turbulence.



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Asking how circles work hardly seems enough of a question to make big claims about art, but it turns out that it, at least, opens onto some larger questions not about what art is but what it does. And if we don't think about circles and grids as merely formal elements but as operational devices structuring complex spatialities then the point is more about the waning of the grid as the dominant paradigm. Orozco's work dramatises the process of its being overtaken by movement. A grid may retain some residual usefulness, but always gives way under pressure from the new topology that Orozco has been working towards to create his own constellation of interlocking spheres, bubbles and foam.²

It is interesting to consider the way Orozco was working at the end of the last century as a response to an epistemological crisis that may have been in part precipitated by globalisation but which also goes beyond it. If the grid is often residually present in the work, it no longer occupies the pre-eminent position it held within modernism, nor offers itself any longer as the key to its explanation. No doubt, then, about the need to think through these problems of morphology differently. But, on that very point, it is surely also vital to insist that art makes its own demands on us and in so doing it can also cut against the grain of the many other interests that it also serves. This is what allows us to see that the *work* of the work is an ethical as well as an aesthetic problem.

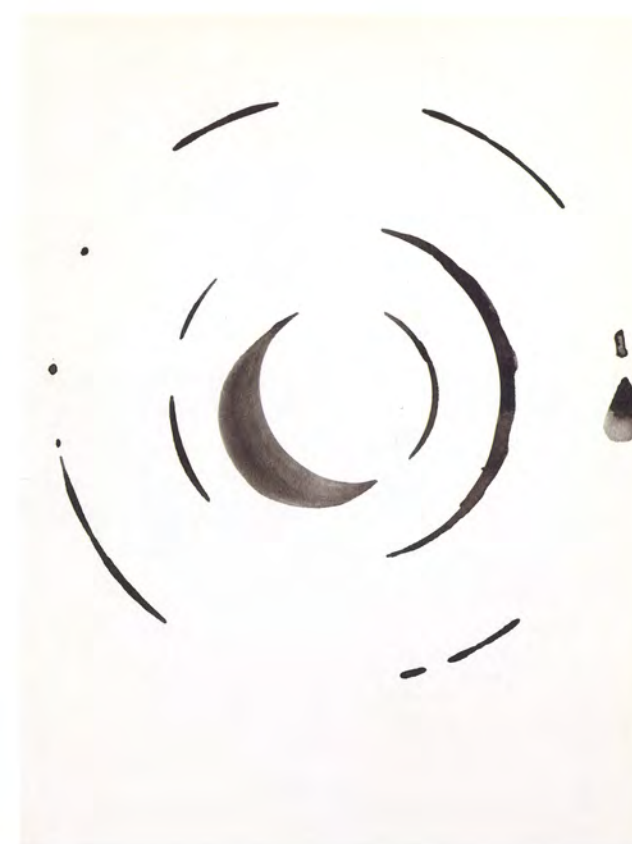
All this has repercussions for how we think about the history of abstraction, even though Orozco himself does not conceive the work exclusively within the terms of that history by any means.

Perhaps the most important point here is to stress how much his work exists *in the shadow* of abstraction and its histories. And although this has obviously become very clear since he began to make abstract paintings in 2004, it was actually the case right back at the start of the 1990s.

Of course, commentators like Buchloh have always drawn attention to this aspect of the work, but the acetates, and the trajectories traced here, lend it even more significance. Abstraction has always been a core problem, from its initial rejection to that pivotal moment in the mid 1990s when he abjected it so thoroughly in favour of its base elements. Then around 2004–5, when he came back to painting, he did not do so to idealise or reclaim it as a medium. Instead in the paintings, it is almost as if in turn he abstracted what he had previously abjected. And so it goes on.

This schematic overview dramatises the work's powerful drive to undo and then re-make itself. But already it seems too schematic and too narrow to accommodate the multiple and multi-directional strands that co-exist within the work at any one time, or over a period of time. Starting out from one work, as we have with *The Eye of Go* (p.14) has demonstrated pretty persuasively that the singularity of any one work, that is to say its distinctiveness, is entirely relative and contingent.

One work, then, proliferates many. One work can contain many different versions of itself which are made visible over time. Orozco's idea of erosion encapsulates something important here. Just as erosion wears things away and changes them,





so meanings of artworks 'erode' as they change over time. We can see this as an alternative to thinking about time as either universal (as it had been imagined by the historical avant gardes) or as historically specific (as it is normally imagined by art history). Instead, erosion is a way of thinking about relational time.

Few examples are more suggestive of this dynamic than the sphere that is a ball, especially a football, that has for so long been one of Orozco's preferred objects and a reminder of the fundamental idea of the artwork as 'throw'. So look again at that image of a football, worn by use and by weather, with the diagram scored in ink onto its surface. The small constellation gets in my eyes, imprinted on my visual field, just as it had done when a similar diagram was drawn on the centre of a round ball of liquid colour (p.80). The old question about what holds a work together has been turned inside out, with the graphic schema plotting out the very coordinates of the larger constellation of which this one work constitutes only one point. Though a 'diagram' is not the same as an 'instrument', the two terms hold together in the photograph.

These connections show how mutable the work is over time. And if we return to *The Eye of Go*, it becomes even more apparent that the question that needs to be asked now is not so much what kind of a painting it is, but what is it to ask if a painting is any more than the actions and movements that it sets in train over time? Does the painting retain anything that is non-relational, that whilst not specific to the medium, is *itself* rather than utterly absorbed to its outside? In answer to this, the fact that it is a painted

object with its own kind of materiality (affectless or not) is not only transformative but creates its own peculiar kind of friction and turbulence. This is not the same friction that erodes a stone yet it can be 'constellated' in some kind of relation to it.

If it is not composition that holds a work together, let's say instead it is this friction with its outside that does so. The more the abstract paintings resist direct references to the outside, the more they seem susceptible to it, the more they seem to let the world in. So entirely do they absorb that world of everyday stuff – so sensitised have their surfaces become – that paradoxically one might no longer even notice it. If *The Eye of Go* and the abstract paintings that Orozco has produced since 2004 are very far from being transparent perhaps they are as contingent upon, and adaptive to, their environment as the acetates; so much so that it becomes unclear whether those very mobile configurations of circles belong to the surface of a painting or to the surface of the world which touches it.

NOTES

1. Gabriel Orozco in conversation with Benjamin H.D. Buchloh in Yve-Alain Bois (ed.), *Gabriel Orozco*, October Files 9, The MIT Press, Cambridge and London, 2009, p.115
2. In certain respects Peter Sloterdijk's trilogy *Bubbles*, *Globe and Foam* (the first volume of which was published in 1998), setting out what he calls spherology, echoes Orozco's preoccupations with morphological transformations since the early 1990s. Sloterdijk traces a series of massive epistemic shifts which climax in our own 'catastrophic polymorphism' (*Bubbles*, The MIT Press, Cambridge MA, p.71) as he describes our present, though it should also be noted how his messianic metaphors seem in thrall to the same euphoric catastrophism he means to diagnose.



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pp.2, 6–10, 12–3, 22–9, 32–3, 39–40, 42–5, 49–52, 55–7, 60–3, 68–70, 80, 84–7, 94–9, 102, 104–7, 109, 112, 114–15, 119, 120, 130, 133–37, 139, 142: Photographs: Cathy Carver
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thinking in circles

This project began as a fairly
straightforward exercise: to place one
work at the centre of our thought and see how
far it is possible to think *with* it rather than 'about' it.
I'll start with some 'what-ifs':

What if Orozco's painting *The Eye of GO* asks us to interrogate
a problem rather than look at a composition of forms? What
if what we see is not a still 'composition' at all but rather a
configuration of circles that actively *work*, for example, that
move, rotate, spread? That is to say, what would it be to say
that *The Eye of GO* asks a question: about how circles
work and what they do? And what if, with that
question in mind, we are better able to think
through the problem of how Orozco's
work *works*?

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