OCTOBER FILES

GABRIEL OROZCO

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Cosmic Reification: Gabriel Orozco's Photographs (2004)

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We live on a sphere, we sculpt spheres and we make them sparkle.

—*Constantin Brancusi*

One day in the near future, the whole galaxy of objects will become readymades.

—*Marcel Duchamp*

When we try to identify the central features that conceptual artists introduced into the deployment of photography, three strategies emerge instantly as having been shared by all of the major photographic conceptualists (i.e., John Baldessari, Dan Graham, Douglas Huebler, Ed Ruscha).[1] The first feature was the systematic deskilling of photographic practices, a radicality that would soon enough come undone in the hands of the next generation of postconceptual artists (from Jeff Wall to Andreas Gursky), for whom the renewed emphasis on the carefully constructed and diligently produced photographic image would once again become central in the definition of artistic work. In manifest opposition to these tendencies, Gabriel Orozco resuscitates the conceptualists' original dismissal of photographic artistry and craft, and he continues their deskilling of the photograph: his images are distinguished neither by the high resolution generated by advanced digital camera and printing techniques, nor by extreme care and preparation in the preliminary phases of image selection and production. In fact Orozco's seemingly haphazard snapshot aesthetic conveys a sense of the universal equivalence and ultimate irrelevance of

42 *Green Paper,* 1991.
Fuji crystal chromogenic archive C-print.
16 x 20 inches.

images (fig. 42). Least of all does he inflate his photographs to the size and scale of the very paintings that photographic conceptualism had, in fact, critically displaced.

The second feature of conceptualist photography had been its ostentatious denial of the viability of documentary and narrative traditions. Conceptualism acknowledged from the start the relative opacity, if not outright inaccessibility, of sociopolitical realities to photographic documentation. What is more, it even emphasized the insufficiency of the photograph to record the seemingly impenetrable complexities of a particular historical, ideological, or social formation. And the third manifest change in photographic practices, brought about by conceptualism's epistemological skepticism, is the development of new strategies that conceive and perform social interactions between a laboratory situation and theater (e.g., Vito Acconci, Dan Graham, Douglas Huebler), or that form collections of found semantic or architectural systems (e.g., Bernd and Hilla Becher, Ed Ruscha), or that initiate chance permutations or aleatory combinations of preestablished serial objects or modules (e.g., John Baldessari, Ruscha).

All of these strategies were clearly motivated by the insight that photography from now on could only give very limited and specific, and only relatively accurate, accounts of spatiotemporal and social processes. Furthermore, these strategies testified to the fact that photographs could at best enumerate and quantify objects, but not critically analyze their status and function in the variety of historical contexts that were photographically represented.

Conceptualist photography thus originated in a critique of some of photography's most traditional claims, namely to facilitate social transparency or to report on social subjects and relations, and to account accurately for quantifiable objects. In their stead, conceptualism now substituted lists and samples, staged systems and microsocial interactions, whose ephemeral, transient, and often random qualities only underlined the actually existing principles of a collectively governing anomic sociality, in which social relations, both those of production and those of communication, could no longer be properly detected or documented.

If the conceptual photograph succeeded in defining the authentic parameters of a highly mediated and alienated sociality and subjectivity, it had to confront a third, and equally complex, task: that of recording and representing a perpetually expanding, and increasingly unmanageable overproduction of objects. It does not appear accidental at all, then, that random accumulation and willful yet systematic quantifications would become the crucial strategies of conceptual art (both in its textual and its photographic operations). Two reasons come to mind in reconsidering the necessity of these enumerative and regulating formats. From now on, the list, the schema, and the permutation would appear as the solely adequate models of recording contemporary object relations.

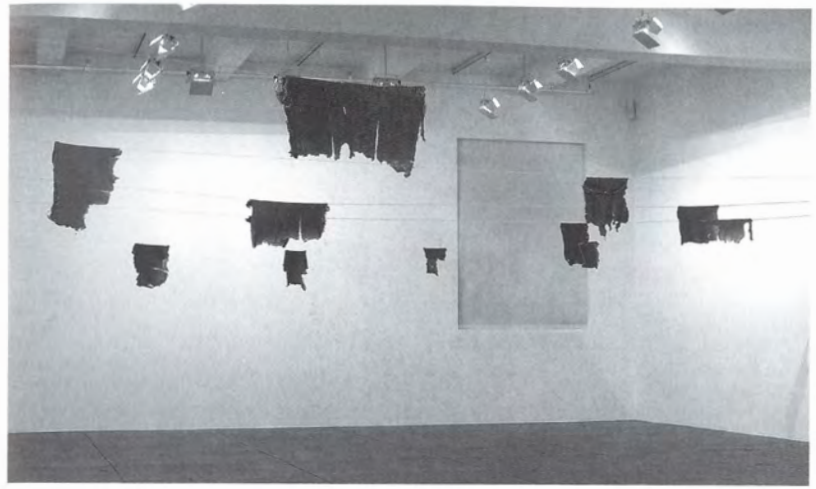
First of all, if it had indeed become impossible to deploy photographs in order to situate a subject in its social context or spatiotemporal continuum, it would seem even more unthinkable to use photography to recognize a subject's relation to objects under the conditions of an advanced universe of reification. It is precisely in its attempt to give the most credible possible account of the subject's bodily situation in space and time, in its incessant recognition that only in a continuous fragmentation of that experience and in its quantificatory particularity, that conceptualist photography had also challenged traditional forms of sculptural production. In fact, it is on those grounds that it could claim to articulate the most credible parameters of sculpture available in the present. This necessitated, of

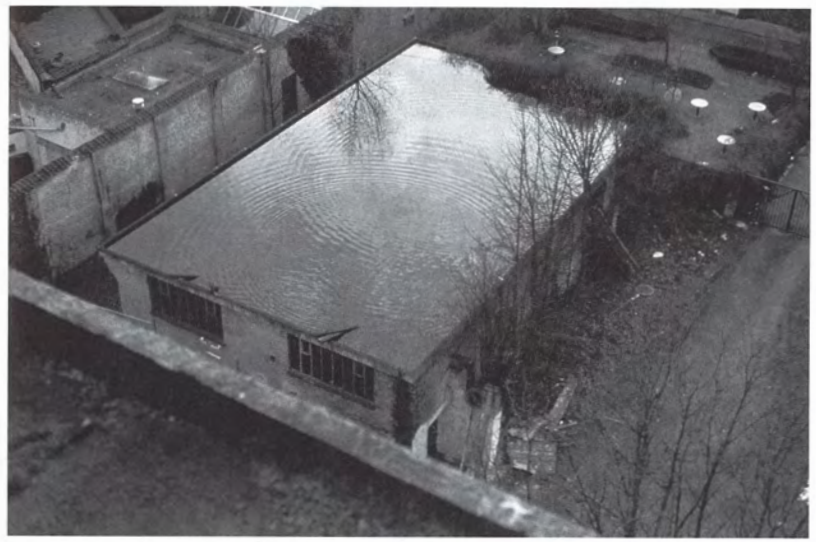
course, a real insight into photography's capacities to collect and represent information on the subject's modalities of spatial and temporal experience within a medium that—all the more as a result of its manifest deskilling—was bonded to the everyday.

Second, one particular historically formed aesthetic had already corresponded to these advanced forms of totalized reification. Since the early 1950s, the experimental composer John Cage had abolished all criteria of aesthetic selectivity and artistic decision-making processes. Eventually this aesthetic was bound to have an effect even on a photographer's relationship to the world of objects. But while Cage's theory of a universal equivalence of all objects and structures had initially promised a total dissolution of traditions and a decentering of hierarchical criteria, it has clearly proven itself to be also an aesthetics of universal passivity and affirmation (as most obviously became the case in the work of Andy Warhol). The Cagean legacy would make it impossible even to begin the formulation of potential strategies for a radical reconceptualization of object experience, let alone for changing the object itself.

This Cagean aesthetic of a universal equivalence of all textures, procedures, and materials has had a tremendous impact on Orozco's conception of sculpture and photography in general, and on their interdependence in particular. From the beginning of his work, the multiplicity and simultaneity of seemingly incompatible materials and processes of sculptural production attest to that impact. Found industrial readymades (such as the *Yogurt Caps*, 1994, in his first exhibition at Marian Goodman Gallery in New York), or his *Penske Work Project* (1998), an unfathomable accumulation of construction debris, or a large-scale installation of suspended sheaths of lint (*Lintels*, 2001), are only a few examples of a truly inclusive and discontinuous theory of decentering and unstructuring the traditional materials and processes of sculptural production (fig. 43).

The same can be said for Orozco's seemingly random iconography of photographic images. These range from his careful arrangements in public spaces (e.g., *Crazy Tourist*, 1991, and *At the Cotton Factory*, 1993) and on the shelves of supermarkets (*Cats and Watermelons*, 1992), to the accidental encounters with natural phenomena (e.g., evaporation in *House and Rain*, 1998, or *Wet Watch*, 1993), to the circularity of the reverberating impact of stones in puddles (e.g., *From Roof to Roof*, 1993) (fig. 44). Those fortuitous relations of objects and constellations of materials, locations, and inhabitants seem to correspond to Orozco's search for sites and incidents where his complex concept of the sculptural can articulate itself in the





43 *Lintels*, 2001. Installation view, Marian Goodman Gallery, New York. Dryer lint. Dimensions variable.

44 *From Roof to Roof*, 1993. Silver dye bleach print. 16 x 20 inches.

photographic record, almost as though sculpture was a naturally occurring phenomenon, and if not that, then certainly a project on the order of random play rather than planned production.

Obviously, Orozco's photographs (those taken by the artist as opposed to the found photographs of the *Atomists*, 1996, for example) simultaneously partake in this Cagean aesthetic and respond dialectically to the strategies of conceptual photography. The earliest example of Orozco's post-Cagean project of sculpture, and of the role that postconceptual photography can perform in this project, would be the image of a market in Brazil (*Crazy Tourist*). Here, at the end of the market day, the artist arranged a dozen or more found oranges on the empty display tables of the market's wooden stalls. A random constellation of found structures and the artistic intervention itself are defined as total equivalents. It becomes obvious that the wooden constructions or the roughly hewn and assembled stalls and tables are as "sculptural" as the artist's display of spherical objects (which, in their apparent state of untouched naturality, are used as stereometric and volumetric sculptural bodies).

A similar opposition is constructed in *At the Cotton Factory*, where Orozco has placed bundles of natural "raw" cotton fiber on the luggage racks of seemingly identical workers' bicycles parked in a perfect sequence at a textile factory (fig. 45). Beyond his obvious fascination with the sudden juxtaposition of the poverty of means (i.e., the naturally occurring fibrous material that had already played the role of nature in many of *arte povera*'s sculptural works, in particular those of Jannis Kounellis) with the mythical series of bicycle wheels, the photograph not only stages the work process itself and the misery of its compensation, it also reveals the cyclical conditions of exchange at the level of production: to leave the laborers at the end of the day with nothing but to continue to work the next day with the very same raw materials of production, so that the surplus value can be continuously extracted from their labor.

And in a recent photograph from a mosque in Timbuktu, Mali, *Total Perception* (2002), echoing the earlier constellations performed by the artist in *Crazy Tourist* or *At the Door of the Volcano* (1993), Orozco seems to have found his ideal of sculptural experience (fig. 46). Here it appears fully formed in a local mosque, without any intervention by the artist, as an encounter of chance, temporal flow, and the interaction of anonymous hands and materials in a natural environment. The random light projections (resulting from the perforation of deteriorated structures or the laceration of poor materials) appear almost as a historical travesty of

45 *At the Cotton Factory*, 1993.
Silver dye bleach print.
16 x 20 inches.

46 *Total Perception*, 2002.
Fuji crystal chromogenic archive C-print
mounted on Sintra board.
33 3/4 x 46 3/4 inches.

the techno-luminous projections of Laszló Moholy-Nagy's *Light Space Modulator* (1922–30). In their globular circularity these scattered projections of light fill this entire ritualistic space with the intensity of a desire for illumination and material transformation, a desire that is generally initiated in the circularity of shapes and spheres in Orozco's photographic and sculptural work. A burial ground, also in Timbuktu, seems to have offered Orozco the almost unrepeatable situation of a naturally occurring dialectic: if his images of the interior of the mosque offer the material evidence of a universally and collectively given access to the radiance of light and the emanation of energy, then the spherical clay containers serving as markers of the burial sites of the dead appear, if not as the literal *Urformen* of universal sculptural desire, then certainly as those of Orozco's conception of the sphere as sculpture. They offer concrete evidence of the body's maternal and material origins and destinations, and correspond to Orozco's profound sense that sculpture can articulate utopian aspirations as much as the conciliatory acceptance of the dystopian finality of the body.

When looking at images such as these for the first time, we might be led to believe that the artist is giving us images from zones of exemption, geopolitical spaces where the rules of universal reification have not yet taken hold, areas of refuge from the totalitarian control of production and consumption. But upon longer contemplation of the very same images, it becomes evident that they are not at all invoking the specificity of a regional culture (be it that of his native Mexico, or those countries where he has traveled such as India and Mali). Rather, while looking backward at these images of the pre-industrial past, Orozco seems to uncover their fate of being slated for an inexorable delivery to the very same principles of ecological devastation and the most ruthless forms of the exploitation of all available resources. After all, under the auspices of globalization, the hegemonic centers from within which he works and where he is situated as an artist are now incessantly expanding into those remaining parts of the world that have not yet been fully subjected to the universal principle of profit maximization. The continuously traveling artist, while not the perpetrator, is certainly the involuntary witness and messenger of that erosion.

Orozco's temporal tropes are those of a perpetual in-between, those of a temporal dialectic between the not yet and the nevermore. This is evident in the images of obsolescence that he collects as much as in the images of advanced forms of devastation, and neither obsolescence nor devastation bear any residual trace of a promise, let alone a transgressive utopian hope. In many instances, these constellations are directly derived from encounters with objects of design culture, either in a context of dislocation (e.g., *Dining Room in Tepoztlán*, 1995), or in a state of advanced dilapidation, as in the fixed row of *Waiting Chairs* (1998) (fig. 47).

These biomorphic Eames derivatives in the lobby of a museum in Calcutta at one time certainly held the promise of a better everyday life with which design deceived us into accelerated consumption. Now, in Orozco's photographs, these chairs are surmounted by greasy halos, the imprints of heads. And the pointless passing of time that the imprints have recorded stands in diametrical opposition to the pathos with which design once promised the new forms of everyday life. Or, in another example of the wreckages of design culture, we encounter a dramatically curvilinear wire frame (recorded several times, in water like a shipwreck and at other times as though abandoned and drifted onto a beach). This furniture concoction might have been at one time a fashionable Bat Chair; now it merely casts its linear shadows, extending and doubling as a skeleton of its once utopian insinuations. In a typical sculptural intervention, Orozco has affixed a spontaneously modeled sphere of wet sand onto the center of the

47 *Waiting Chairs*, 1998.
Silver dye bleach print.
16 x 20 inches.

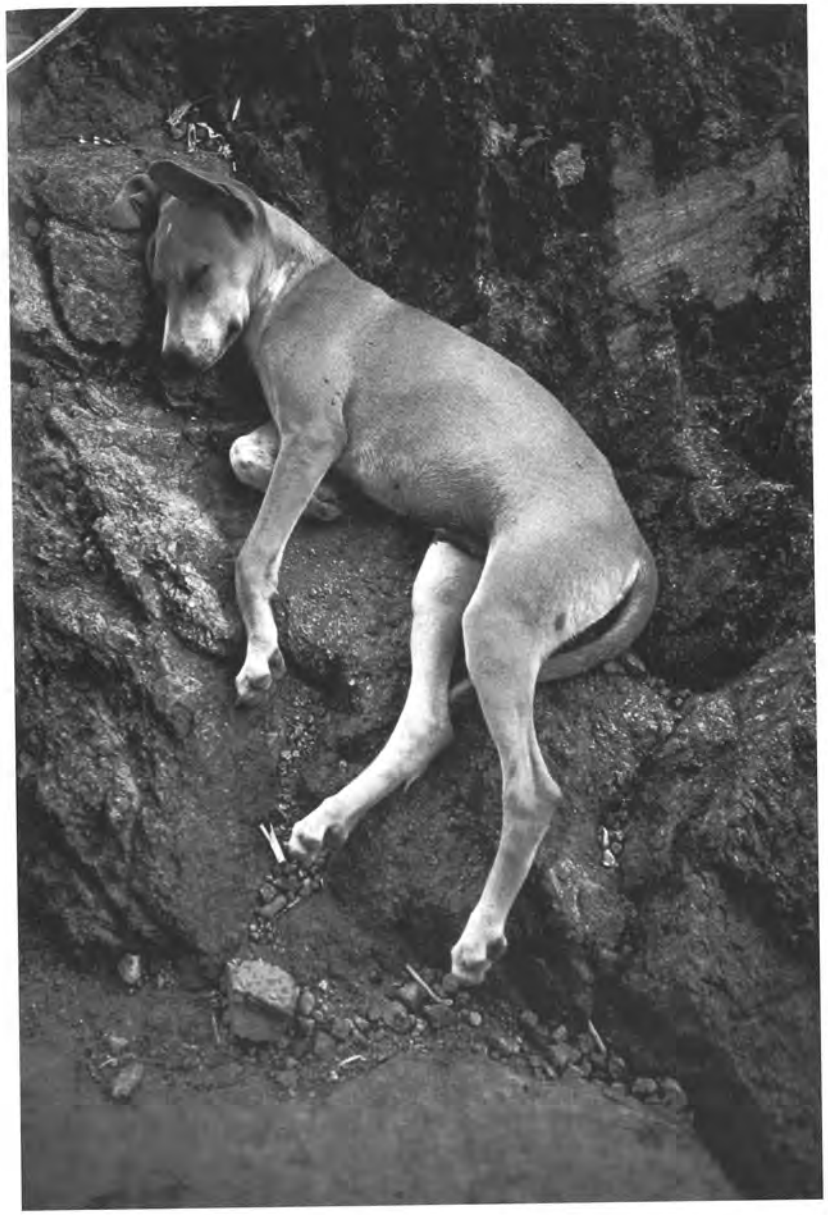
ruins of a chair, anchoring it in its state of pointless dislodged drifting, and renewing the once-promising molecular circularity and energetic expansion that had initially inspired its design. Thus the transient sphere reminds us that a never-receding energetic process of flow and transformation continues even under the conditions of total dereliction and reification.

Both images also give us rather clear indications of the spectrum of forces and processes that Orozco considers to be valid, if not of the essential strategies and materials of his sculptural pursuits. These are first of all the traces of the flowing of time and the natural transformation of matter, preferably left by others rather than imposed by the artist. In that regard the shadowy grease marks are as crucially sculptural as is the artist's breath in his image *Breath on Piano* (1993), the condensation of water contained in the shell of *Wet Watch*, or the evaporating veils of water in his *House and Rain*.

Even, or we should say, in particular, his strangely atypical yet recurring images of animals (after all, there are never any images at all of human subjects in Orozco's own photographic work) articulate precisely the final condemnation of natural experience to the fallen world. Each and every one of them (*Sleeping Dog*, 1990; *Horse*, 1992; *Bat Dog*, 1993) confronts us with states of extreme ambiguity: between death and sleep, between resuscitating rest and definitive decay, between joy and rage (fig. 48). And hardly an image could proclaim the final loss of the natural more tragically, almost comically, than the lonely dog sitting in a pavilion staring out at a vast landscape or at the ocean in the manner of a Romantic landscape painting, where the subject had positioned itself at the frontiers of infinite nature to find its constitution, if not its liberation (*Dog in Tlalpan*, 1992).

Sculpture at this point in history inhabits the paradoxical space of having to refuse objecthood and simultaneously to reassert it. If the subject's bodily situatedness in the spatiotemporal continuum is one of the parameters within which sculpture is perpetually redefined, then its opposite would seem to be the subjection to the object, that is to say, the reigning conditions of object experience within which subjectivity is currently constituted. While these might not be the two most important conditions of sculptural reflection, it could certainly be argued that both parameters are integral to any theorization of sculpture in the present.

One particular group of images in Orozco's oeuvre inverts almost all of the principles governing his photographic production: the *Atomists* from 1996 (fig. 49). As with Orozco's own photographs, it is immediately evident that the artist has contemplated these found images primarily from



48 *Sleeping Dog*, 1990.
Silver dye bleach print.
20 x 16 inches.

49 *Atomists: Asprilla,* 1996.
Inkjet print.
78 3/4 x 115 inches.

the perspective of the sculptor, yet from a position dialectically opposite to the one that defines his own image production. Apart from the fact that these are the only works by Orozco that deploy found photographs (drawn from daily newspaper images of spectacle sports), they are also the only images that deal programmatically with the representation of the human figure.[2] Moreover, all of these photographs have been recorded by professional sports photographers with the highest professional and technical competence. Once selected by Orozco, these images receive their painterly demarcations and are then enlarged with digital copying technology.

For each work in the *Atomists* series, Orozco chose images of mastered movement and arrested temporality. They represent moments of extreme bodily and psychological tension, industrial images of a ludic climax—moments, one could suggest, whose temporal intensity would decide, as the sociologist and film historian Siegfried Kracauer once famously stated, whether the photograph would trigger the athlete's transportation into the spheres of fame.

Painterly or photographic representations of the athlete in action constitute a peculiar and contradictory iconography in twentieth-century painting and photography, one that is clearly resuscitated in Orozco's *Atomists.* And though we should be careful not to compare two moments as different as those of 1912–13 (the year of Robert Delaunay's *The Cardiff Team*) and of 2004, a few historical remarks might be illuminating for the work in the present.

When the image of bodily performance enters the iconography of modernism, it originates more often than not in Etienne-Jules Marey's (and to a lesser degree in Eadweard Muybridge's) strictly scientific, chronophotographic images in which the performance of the body in a spatiotemporal continuum had not only become representable, but could also be analyzed and measured for the first time. Chronophotography was not only integral to the introduction of Taylorism, but also to the systematic improvement of the body's athletic performance powers.

Thus chronophotography contributed not only to the formation of modern athletic culture, but even more to the artistic celebration and cultural representation of that phenomenon. Increasingly, its social functions were to stabilize the industrial proletariat through physical exercise, but even more so through the production of mass cultural entertainment. Expanding further and further as the twentieth century progressed, the ideology of spectacle sports culminated in the mass cult's function to uphold collective anesthesia and incompetence in the subject's political self-constitution and self-determination in the processes of production.

Even though the cult of the athlete in the beginning of the twentieth century celebrated first of all the successful symbolic adaptation of the human body to the accelerated tasks of the daily performances of production, the artistic iconography of the gymnasts, athletes, and soccer players, in works from Delaunay to Kasimir Malevich, from Fernand Léger to El Lissitzky to Alexander Rodchenko, articulated a set of counteraspirations to the ruling ideological dimensions of sport. The avant-garde's cult of a successful fusion of the primitive inertia of the human body with the perfection of the productive machine in celebratory images of the robotic athlete was, of course, initially driven by its desires to disseminate the myth of a naturally given excellence and a universally accessible equality of the human subject, and therefore the images of athletes increased the evidence (along with those of the heroized worker) of an emerging historical reality of a classless society.

It became increasingly compelling, however, to recognize that the public spectacularization of the athletic body inevitably served to compensate for the systematic depoliticization of the subject in the mass public

sphere. And that an increase in a celebratory approach to the athletic mass subject almost inevitably signaled either tendencies toward, or an already fully established condition of, totalitarianism.

Orozco's *Atomists* all partake in that complex iconographic tradition, and they are all the more remarkable for their modification of its contradictions. And if the human body appears in all of the *Atomists* in extreme forms of spatiotemporal animation, one might well consider them first of all as object lessons for the artist's sculptural projects. After all, it is here that we see some of the most advanced contemporary models synthesizing the subject's somatic, temporal, and spatial conditions of experience. Yet the subject in these images does not just appear as an example of exceptional bodily accomplishment and physical control, but also as a subject heroized in spectacle sports. In fact, one could argue that precisely because these images represent a spectacular synthesis of athletic discipline and gamesmanship under the conditions of an extremely industrialized leisure culture, they also confront Orozco with the precarious and problematic conditions of his own practices as an artist and sculptor in the present moment.

The industralization of ludic experience applies to artistic production at this point no less than it applies to spectacle sports, and as such it not only prohibits the redemption of the subject's desire for play as the primary motivation for a real unalienated human productivity, it fulfills the social function of a spectacular substitution for the eternally postponed promise of an abolition of alienated labor.

In almost all of the *Atomists* (except two out of fifteen) the object of the athletic pursuit is a ball, a spherical object, prominently visible in most of the photographs. The sphere or ball, as the ontological object of the desire to overcome spatiotemporal limitations while playing, establishes a manifest correlation between the circularity of Orozco's abstract design and the photographic representation of the spherical object. The incorporation of dynamism, speed, velocity, and physical movement has haunted twentieth-century art and sculpture since its beginning: after all, why would the very objects that promise radical transformation themselves remain static? Kinesthesia, the perception of temporality in spatiality, was the promise of futurism and of constructivism, the sculptural breakthrough of Naum Gabo's *Vibrating Column* (1921) as much as of Marcel Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* (1913). For Orozco, the kinetic performance of the athlete's body in his series the *Atomists* is just one of the examples of an unachievable sculptural synthesis, an ideal of velocity and bodily experience compressed into a manifest and concrete time-space continuum.

Beyond the selection process itself, Orozco's confrontation (and obvious fascination) with these hyperbolic images of performing athletes, with their bodily perfection and mastery of exceptional skills, seems to provoke an artistic response of almost elated modesty. Thus, in a careful and studious execution, Orozco constructs exact circular or elliptical segments with a compass and ruler, either as mere ink drawings or painted with tempera as monochrome shapes, and positions them within the photographic forcefields of spatiotemporal and specular arrest.

The circle is a strangely contested and precarious form in twentieth-century sculpture: for the most time absent, if not prohibited, it stages appearances nevertheless, furtive and marginal, again and again, only to disappear from the morphology and the doxa of what sculpture can tolerate and sustain in its formal vocabulary. Approximating the circle again and again, as if in a perpetual contestation, Constantin Brancusi in fact only adopted it in the design of elements of his bases or in the functional, almost utilitarian design of his *Table and Stools* (1937) as part of his larger project for Tîrgu Jiu. Painting, by contrast, has been more tolerant of the form, but even there pure circularity remained relatively rare: from Delaunay's *First Disk* (1913) to Rodchenko's compass drawings for his *Linear Constructions* (1920) and the group of extraordinary paintings entitled *Concentration of Color* (1920), culminating, of course, in his concentric and collapsible sculptures such as *Hanging Circular Construction* (1921).[3]

The hermetic and perfect form of the circle was apparently perceived for the longest time as a blockage to formal invention and artistic creativity. Its form is too parthenogenetic; there is an excess of self-enclosure that seems to exclude artistic interventions of any kind. The circle even exceeds the boundaries of the most radical efforts of playing the self-reflexive object against the authorial subject. The very fact that the perfect circle is a purely human construct proves that its vacuity or perfection can be neither improved nor enriched.

There is, of course, an additional, reasonable assumption to be made about modernism's slow adaptation of the circle. The geometric forms of the rectangle and the square (and the stereometrically corresponding forms) had articulated Cartesian rationality in the construction and representation of space, but as such they were, of course, also profoundly gendered. The circle as a radically alternate model of spatial organization

dialectically abolishes perspectival directionality; it equates horizontality and verticality, and it dissolves what had been traditionally a clear hierarchical system of instructions for how to see and how to position oneself in space. By contrast, the almost autistic form of the circle is nonlinear and lends itself neither to the task of measuring and quantificatory delineation, nor to the task of temporal tracing.

In Orozco's *Atomists* only one circular unit is defined at a time, since each circular emblem is extracted from the photograph as a colored pixel that anchors the geometric construction and determines the chromatic definition of the abstract form (as though it were defining a digitally mediated version of divisionism). Thus Orozco conceives of a manifest opposition between the elementary image of abstraction, the molecular or the atomist conception of matter and energy, and confronts it with the representation of technology and the spectacularized and instrumentalized athletic body in many ways reminiscent of the extreme incompatibility already operative in Delaunay's *The Cardiff Team* or even in Lissitzky's photograph of a runner where the denotative figuration representing the athlete's body in spatiotemporal expansion is opposed to that of the molecular abstraction, based on a geometrically preconceived form of vertical striation and thus is derived from and directs the spectator into a totally different order of representation.

What Orozco actually constructs in these paradoxical networks of circular and elliptical forms that spread over the photograph's spectacular figuration is not at all a variation on the classical modernist grid in the manner of Piet Mondrian. It is a structure of spatial and cognitive mapping whose circularity, dynamic openness, and propulsion counteract pictorial concepts of Cartesian space with the dynamics of an atomistic image of energy and expansion. Simultaneously, it subverts the total arrest of the forces of self-realization and articulation that the technologically produced images of spectacle sports have produced.

Orozco's *Atomists* are similar in that respect to one of the greatest icons of postwar visual culture: Jasper Johns's target paintings. Here, the insistence on the ludic dimension of aesthetic production and reception had been equally fused with a radically altered conception of painterly and visual space. In a manifest declaration of opposition and of a simultaneous redemption of the betrayed aspirations of abstraction from Mondrian to Newman, Johns reinscribed the primary colors ostentatiously in a structure of circularity (rather than within the traditional rectangularity of the grid). More than that, he explicitly counteracted modernism's progressive insistence on primacy with a dimension of the subject's own access to the ludic experience, as though the ludic, then and ever since, were the only accessible modus for radical transcendence of reification.

Thus the return of geometric abstraction and of primary colors or monochrome color segments in Orozco's *Atomists* (preceded by a set of at first rather enigmatic lightboxes that Orozco had produced in the previous year, which had simply carried segmented circles in the primary colors alone) is not a mere resuscitation of long-lost modernist paradigms. Quite the opposite is the case: in its succinct simplicity, in the almost scholastic execution of the minute geometric forms, in its seemingly naive trust in the indestructible powers of pure abstract form and color, the *Atomists*' painterly elements provide us with a rather subversive constellation. They formulate the most elementary articulation of the self and of the subject with the universally available tools and languages of abstraction. Thus they construct a denial of the universal validity of the extreme forms of spectacularized figuration in media imagery that have become totalizing and incessant: our daily Riefenstahl.

Notes

1. Gabriel Orozco has asked me to clarify the somewhat enigmatic title of this essay. It is well known that artists in the twentieth century revert to the spiritualist references of their work, and of abstraction in particular, precisely at those moments when the artistic orientation, let alone implementation of concrete political, social, and ideological changes by cultural means, appear to be definitively foreclosed. These cosmogonic longings appear either in response to the massive return of ideological constructs that convince us that cultural practices *qua* culture never had the right nor the reason to make extra-aesthetic claims in the first place. They emerge from the condition that the cultural apparatus has been so systematically severed or voluntarily detached from all interactions with any dimension of social reality that the transference to the cosmic origins of avant-garde abstraction becomes once again the first and the last resort.

Under the current circumstances of an electronically implemented global system of control and consumption, it cannot surprise us that the aesthetic impulse toward the abolition of reification and defetishization would have to be deflected toward those spheres and realms (the cosmic ones in particular) where the laws of total reification seemingly do not yet apply. I thought my two epigraphs had indicated that this dialectic of total reification and cosmic longing had been articulated with artistic means before, in fact that it had a long history in the twentieth century.

Obviously, the conditions of avant-gardist culture of the 1920s are almost totally incomparable with our own in the present. But in order to support my seemingly speculative argument, I will add yet another statement, made in 1931 by Walter Benjamin in his essay "A Short History of Photography," where these contradictions are even more explicitly spelled out. Better yet, they are formulated in the context of the problems of the photographic practices that concern us here as well:

> What is creative in photography is its submission to fashion, and, not surprisingly, its motto is "The World is Beautiful." In that title, a tendency reveals itself that can position the montage of a soup can in cosmic space, but it cannot grasp any of the most elementary human contexts. Even with its most oneiric subjects, it still initiates more of the object's saleability than its cognitive insights into social reality. Since the true visage of this type of photography is advertisement, (de-)construction would of course be its rightful counterpart.

Or, if theories remain ultimately unconvincing to practitioners, allow me to point to a strikingly enigmatic image produced by Marcel Duchamp as a cover for the American journal *View* (vol. 5, no. 1) in 1945. Here it is not a soup can montaged into cosmic space, but a cobweb-covered bottle of Bordeaux that literally floats like a spaceship in the galaxy Duchamp would speak of later. Mysteriously, the bottle emits clouds of smoke and steam, like a rocket ship or a pipe. As we try to read the vintage of the Bordeaux label on the bottle, we discover soon enough that it does not only spell out the name Duchamp, but it is actually a copy of Duchamp's military identity card, clearly suggesting that the inevitable outcome of total reification is the need for war.

2. Of course, there are, as usual, exceptions to this overall principle governing Orozco's photographic production, the most notable being an image entitled *Maria* (1995), depicting the artist's wife from the back, standing on a beach, seemingly contemplating rocks. The others are two or three pictures (in more than 150 that have been defined as photographic works) in which children or figures appear from a considerable distance to be engaged in a variety of games (flying kites, playing ball, etc.).

3. It only appears at first sight that the circular and the spherical are less prominent in the modernist paraphrases of geometric and stereometric matrices than the square or their rectangular counterparts. What is significant, however, is the fact that in spite of their frequency, not to say ubiquity, the circular abstractions of modernist painting have always remained in a secondary or subservient position to the Cartesian rationality embodied in angular spatial constructions. There is, of course, a *Black Circle* painting by Malevich (1923), but it has remained relatively unknown, certainly by comparison to the prominence of the *Black Square* (1915). Equally one could say that Sophie Taeuber-Arp's extraordinary circular paintings of the mid-1930s have not received even the beginning of the historical and scholarly comprehension that they deserve, all the more so since it is in Taeuber-Arp's work that one could trace the logic of her formal and feminist critique of the hegemony of Cartesian rationality in pictorial and sculptural abstraction.

In the postwar period, the subversion of that hegemony is continued most brilliantly in the work of Jasper Johns and Kenneth Noland. These artists clearly positioned themselves against the seeming universality of rectangular abstraction (as embodied, for example, in the work of Ad Reinhardt or Barnett Newman). Yet this opposition would only culminate again with the work of Eva Hesse, for whom the circular morphology became a central strategy to literally reembody abstract form with psychosomatic dimensions. If any predecessor for Orozco's continuous insertion of circularity and the spherical into traditional modernist pictorial and sculptural orders could be suggested, it would be the work of Hesse.

art

OCTOBER FILES

GABRIEL OROZCO

edited by Yve-Alain Bois

Gabriel Orozco's work is sometimes considered uncategorizable; but his sculpture, photography, drawing, collage, and installations are unified by their devotion to the antispectacular, to the everyday, and to the explorations of complexities that are not immediately obvious. Orozco (born in Mexico in 1962) pays meticulous attention to what he calls the "liquidity of things" as seen in mundane and evanescent objects and elements of everyday life—the momentary fog on a polished piano top, a deflated football, tins of cat food balanced on watermelons, light through leaves, the screech of a tire, chess pieces on a chessboard. "People forget that I want to disappoint," he has said. "I use that word deliberately. I want to disappoint the expectations of the one who waits to be amazed. When you make a decision someone is going to be disappointed because they think they know you. It is only then that the poetic can happen."

This collection of critical writings on Orozco includes two interviews with the artist and a lecture by him (this last published here for the first time in English) as well as essays by such prominent critics as Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, Briony Fer, Molly Nesbit, and the editor of the volume, Yve-Alain Bois. It serves both as the summation of critical thinking on Orozco's work up to now and as a starting point for future consideration.

Yve-Alain Bois is Professor of Art History in the School of Historical Studies at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Princeton, New Jersey. An editor of *October*, Bois is the author (with Rosalind E. Krauss) of *Formless: A User's Guide* (Zone Books, 1997), *Painting as Model* (MIT Press, 1991), and other books.

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