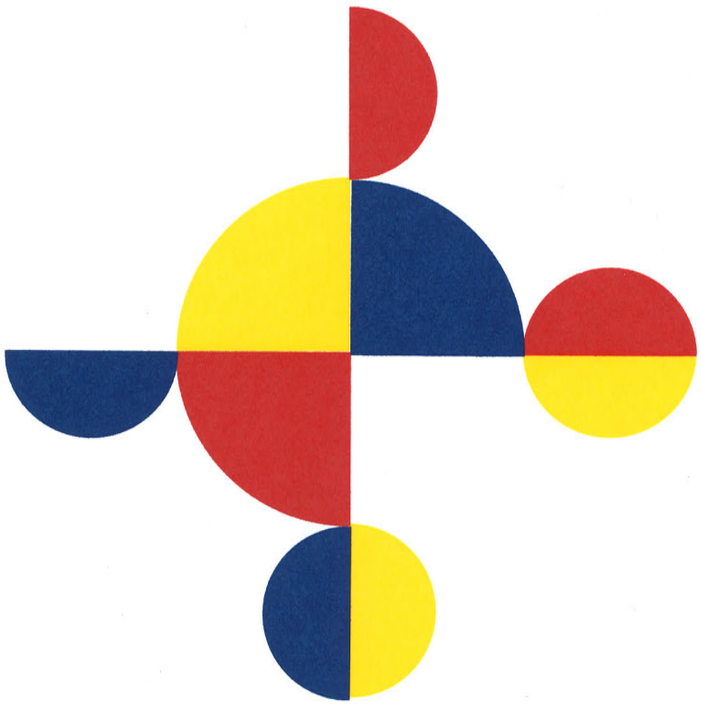
CAHIERS D'ART



40TH YEAR REVUE 2016–2017

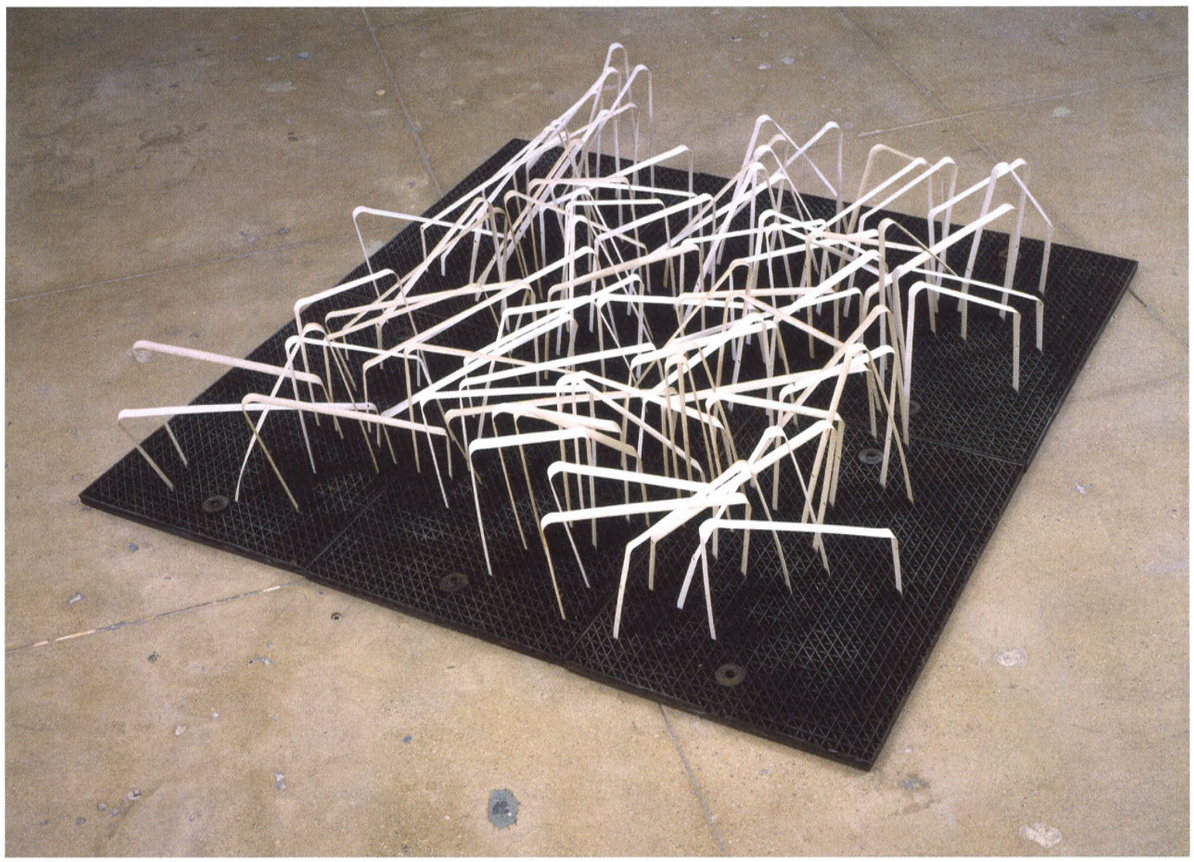
View of Gabriel Orozco, "Free Market Is Anti-Democratic"
at Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, 1998.

Profanations of Play: Gabriel Orozco's Games

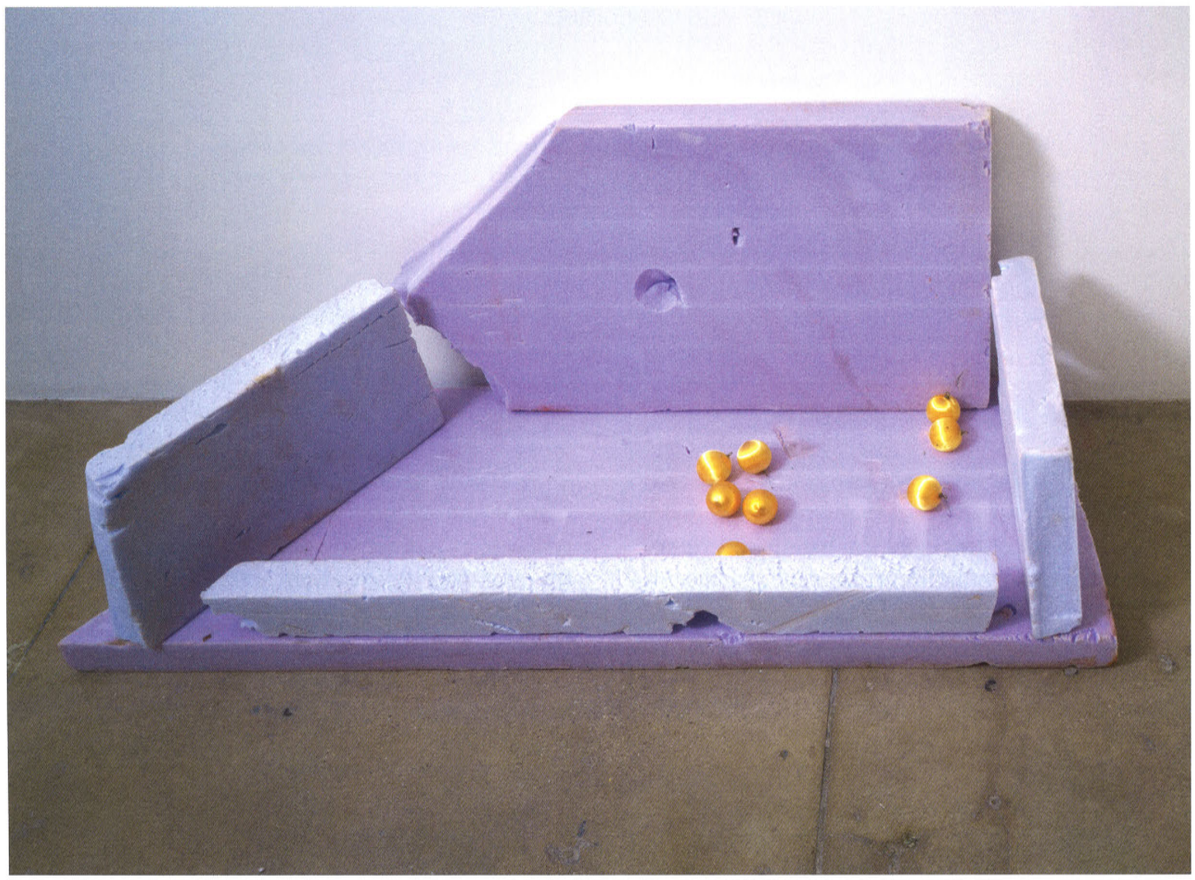
In the summer of 1998, Gabriel Orozco embarked on his *Penske Work Project*. Upon returning to New York from Paris, where he had produced and mounted the exhibition "Clinton Is Innocent" at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, the artist rented a truck from the moving company Penske. Accompanied by a small team of assistants—including the Mexican film director Juan Carlos Martín, who at the time was documenting the artist's daily practice[1]—Orozco drove around the city over the period of a month in order to engage in a series of sculptural interventions that combined a restricted set of actions and free improvisation: Collecting the remains of building materials (as well as their packaging devices and containers, for instance plastic buckets, cardboard boxes, and Styrofoam slabs) that had been discarded in dumpsters or simply disposed of onto sidewalks near construction sites, Orozco created impromptu, modestly scaled assemblages at the very locations where he found the respective scraps, pieces, and chunks of metal, wood, stone, plaster, wire mesh, membrane, concrete, mortar, etc., in varying degrees of decay and decrepitude. Intermittently occupying public space as a temporary studio and employing a panoply of basic procedures such cutting, tearing, and scattering, but also simple techniques of suturing, arranging, and ordering, Orozco transformed the seemingly random refuse he encountered into artworks that were suspended between the poles of the industrial and the handmade, (former) use- and (future) exhibition-value, mere fragment and makeshift construction.[2] Once completed, each of these sparse sculptural propositions was photographically captured on Polaroid (so that the artist would be able to precisely re-create it later) and stored in the truck—which then moved on in search of a subsequent discovery of potentially viable debris.[3]

Penske Work Project was first exhibited at Marian Goodman Gallery in November 1998 as part of the exhibition "Gabriel Orozco: Free Market Is Anti-Democratic."[4] On this occasion, the assemblages were displayed in a sprawling installation that seemed to stress the haphazard trajectory that had instigated their production. Orozco's collected works occupied the gallery space as mundane modulations of the accidental, transitory, overlooked, and fleeting. For *Penske Project: Blinds on Rubber Mat* (all *Penske Project* works, 1998), for instance, Orozco bent bright aluminum strips stemming from window shades and attached them to the black square surface of a doormat so as to form a dazzling labyrinth of intersecting arcs; *Fractal Bucket* presented three dirty white buckets (still including waste, e.g., three empty paper coffee cups treated by the artist to double the morphology of the structure containing them *en miniature*), the sides of which were partly cut out and then combined so that their edges when seen from above gave the outline of an abstract shape of triangulated circles; in *Jingle Bed*, five fairly large pieces of light purple Polystyrene were mounted in a way that rendered them reminiscent of the ruinous leftovers of a bed that now sheltered nothing more than desolate bits and pieces of shiny yellowish fabric. In these works, lifted from litter and made on the spot, the medium of sculpture was defined less as a stable entity than as a provisional, even precarious constellation of elements at the brink of disintegration and disappearance.

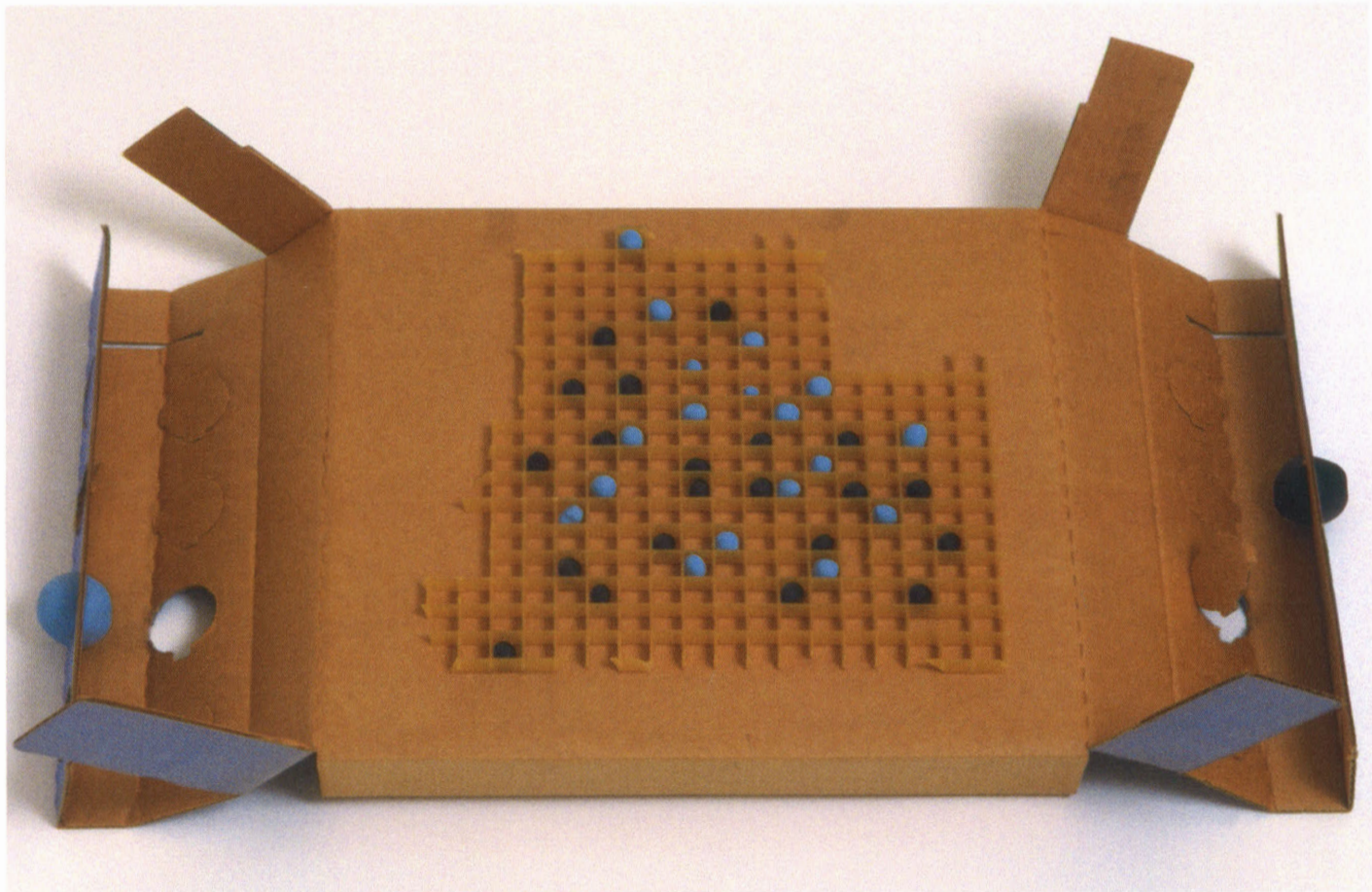
Despite their utter heterogeneity, the result and process of what Benjamin H. D. Buchloh has called a "performative collection of construction detritus"[5] may most adequately be conceived in terms of a double negation vis-à-vis the history of aesthetic engagements with the materials of everyday life and the attendant organization of urban space to which Orozco's *Penske Work Project* nonetheless remains indebted: Neither do these objects, for example, qualify as objets trouvés in the sense provided by Surrealism (because they are devoid of any mnemonic or libidinal investment), nor does the artist's method of roaming the streets of New York equal the practices of Psychogeography and *dérive*, i.e., the playful drifting around urban environments that was propagated and theorized by the Lettrist and Situationist Internationals throughout the 1950s (because an alternative exploration of the cityscape evidently is not the goal of his primarily sculptural endeavor).[6] To the



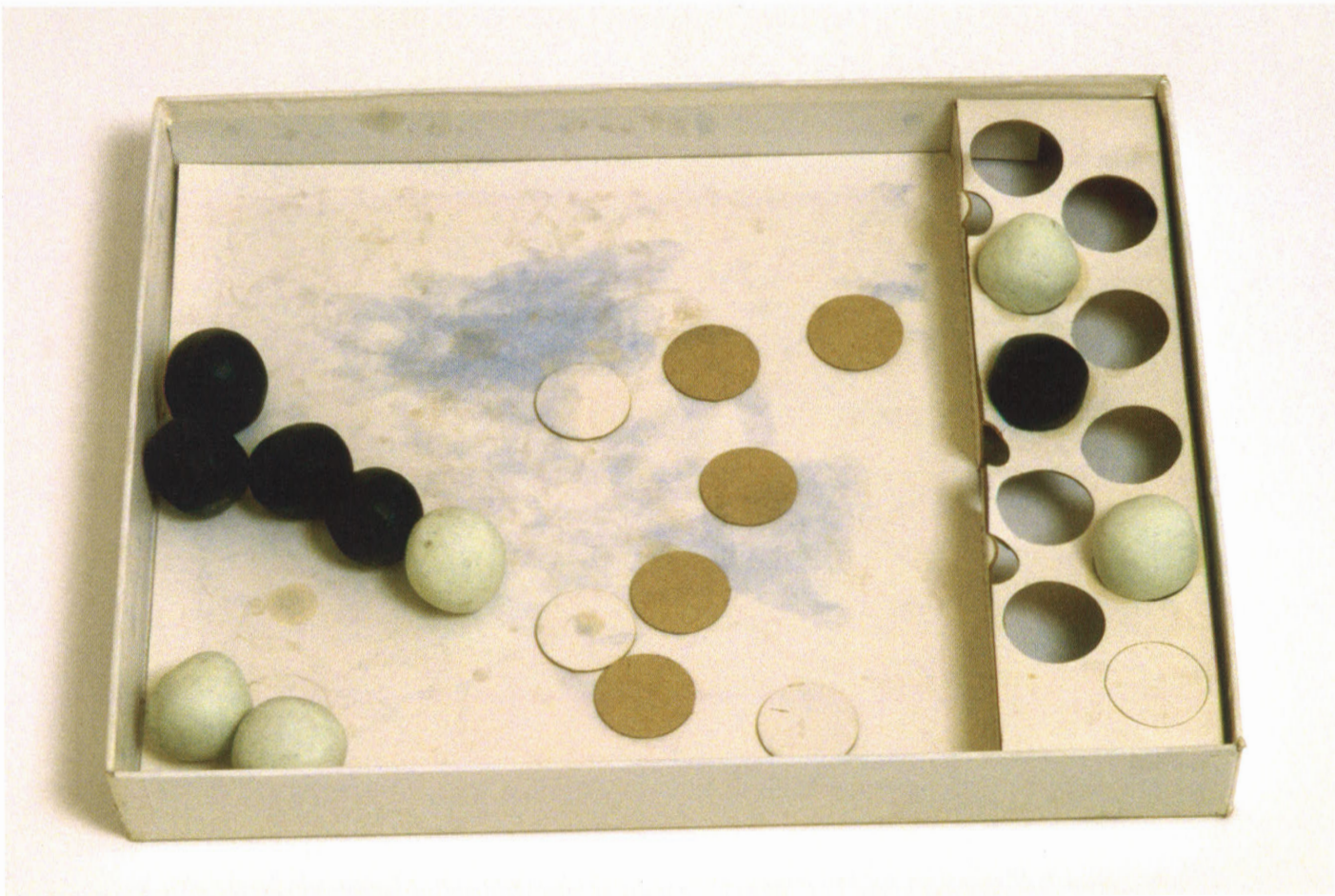
PENSKE WORK PROJECT: BLINDS ON RUBBER MAT, 1998, aluminum, rubber, 40.6 × 175.3 × 175.3 cm (16 × 69 × 69 in.)



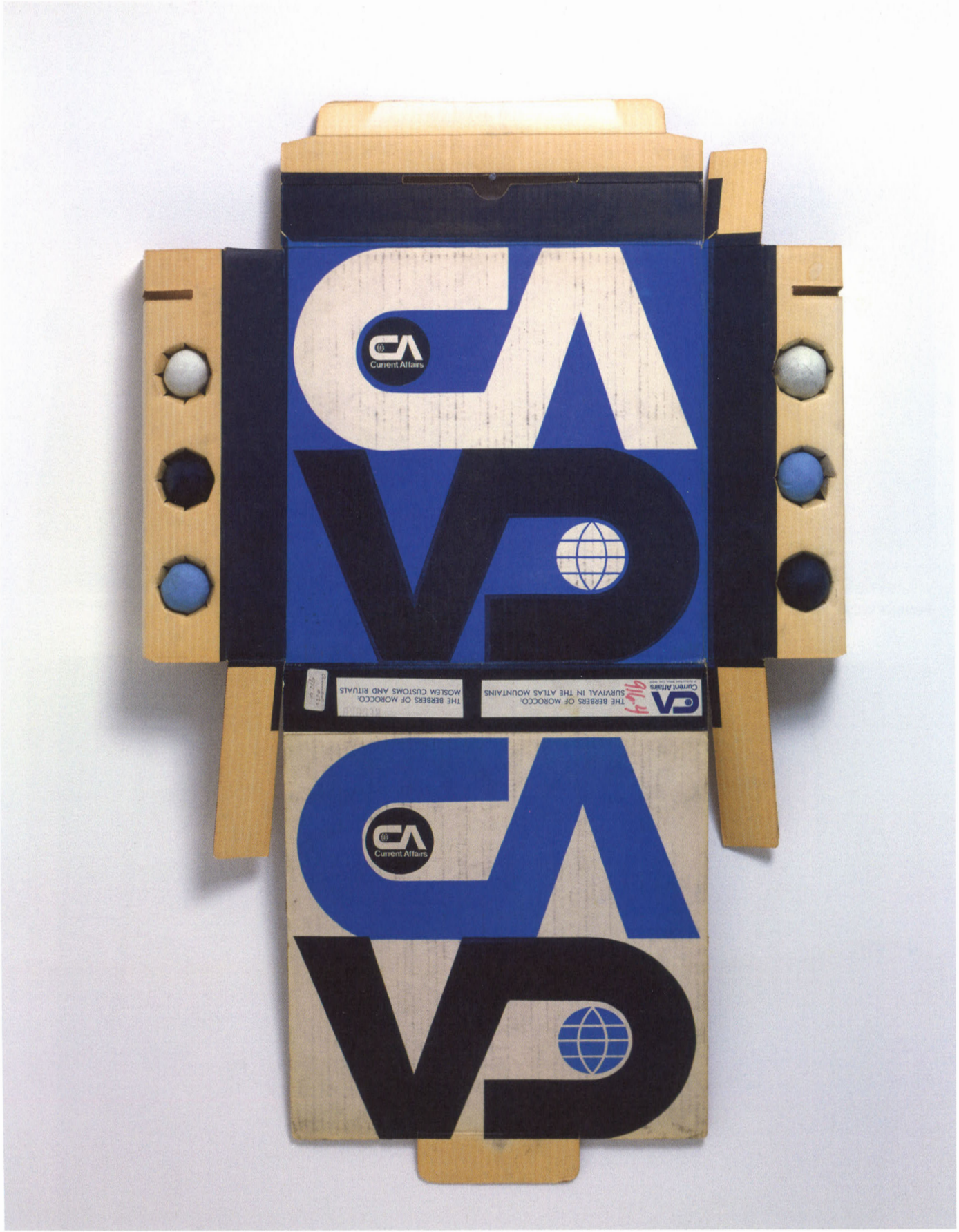
PENSKE WORK PROJECT: JINGLE BED, 1998, Styrofoam, fabric, 68.6 × 170.2 × 58.4 cm (27 × 67 × 23 in.)



PENSKE WORK PROJECT: GAME NO-GO, 1998, plastic, cardboard box, Plasticine, 14 × 50.2 × 64.8 cm (5 ½ × 19 ¾ × 25 ½ in.)

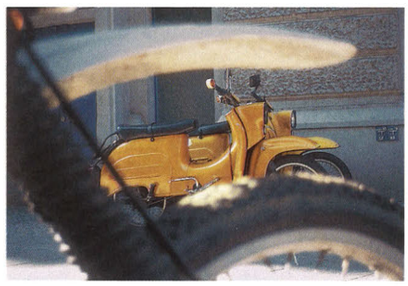


PENSKE WORK PROJECT: BLACK AND WHITE GAME, 1998, cardboard box, Plasticine, 6.4 × 41.3 × 33 cm (2 ½ × 16 ¾ × 13 in.)



PENSKE WORK PROJECT: CURRENT AFFAIRS, 1998
Cardboard, Plasticine
85.1 × 53.3 × 5.1 cm (33 ½ × 21 × 2 in.)

opposite page:
PENSKE WORK PROJECT: BUCKET FRACTAL, 1998
Plastic buckets, garbage
52.1 × 58.4 × 58.4 cm (20 ½ × 23 × 23 in.)



UNTIL YOU FIND ANOTHER YELLOW SCHWALBE, 1995
Forty C-prints
Each: 31.6 × 47.3 cm (12 7/16 × 28 5/8 in.)

contrary, Orozco's *Penske Work Project* in its entirety dialectically articulates, as Buchloh has convincingly argued in his 2006 essay "Sculpture as Recollection," the dissolution both of the possibility of redeeming the found object from the incessant cycle of production, consumption, and obsolescence (a potential that had informed and propelled earlier moments in avant-garde art) and of the critical aspirations of regaining public urban space for the purposes of truly collective modes of communication (hopes that had accompanied and guided various movements in twentieth-century [counter-]culture).[7]

Within the *Penske Work Project*, those objects based on thrown away boxes, hulls, and shells arguably constitute a category of their own insofar as they repeatedly take games, specifically board games, as their model and matrix: This choice is most explicit perhaps in Orozco's *Penske Project: Black and White Game*, for which the artist used an open white carton and inserted circular cutouts into one of its inner compartments; the excised discs of paper are kept as integral parts of the piece rather than being treated as disposable excess, and hence they mimic tokens. They are additionally complemented by five black and five white Plasticine balls that Orozco modeled by hand at a scale that matches the holes. If the act of cutting can be regarded as an epitome of all sculptural activity (i.e., the removal of matter to create identifiable forms), these small spheres in turn indicate the absolute degree zero in the field of plasticity (i.e., the addition and molding of material in the service of an overriding figure or gestalt). With these lapidary gestures and primitive objects, Orozco, according to Buchloh, is "setting the imaginary rules of a game yet to be invented or yet to be understood: namely, how to regain access to the object, how to recover use value. . . . "[8] Even though the arrangement of these basic elements, for instance the distribution of opposed colors, appears deliberate, the logic of this game indeed stays shrouded in mystery. This sculpture (as do all the others that form the series) addresses the beholder as an active participant only to immediately thwart that suggestion. *Penske Project: The Industrial Revolution* likewise confronts viewers with the unfathomable moves of an unknown game, as miniscule black and bright blue Plasticine balls are carefully placed on a playing field that is organized by a yellow plastic grid with frayed edges that Orozco has positioned on the brownish interior of a gray cardboard box. Once more, the artist is conceiving of a game without providing a manual on how to actually play it. In contrast to these sculptural experiments and their horizontal orientation, *Penske Project: Current Affairs* takes on the semblance of a dysfunctional slot machine; for this work, the artist completely unfolded an anonymously discarded box from a company named Current Affairs and simply hung it onto the wall of the gallery; the corporate logotype, based on the initials "CA," fills out the entire surface of the box and features schematized globes that Orozco duplicates with the help of white and blue Plasticine balls—which also resonate with the color scheme of the container's design. These spheres are stuck into perforated holes on both sides of the flat vertical plane and thus remotely convey a sense of utility or purpose, evoking, say, buttons to be pushed or lights that indicate certain stages in the course of a game. Yet again, however, the terms and conditions of this playful object register as impenetrable. All bets are off before we can even enter the game, but our initiation to it might be imminent.[9]

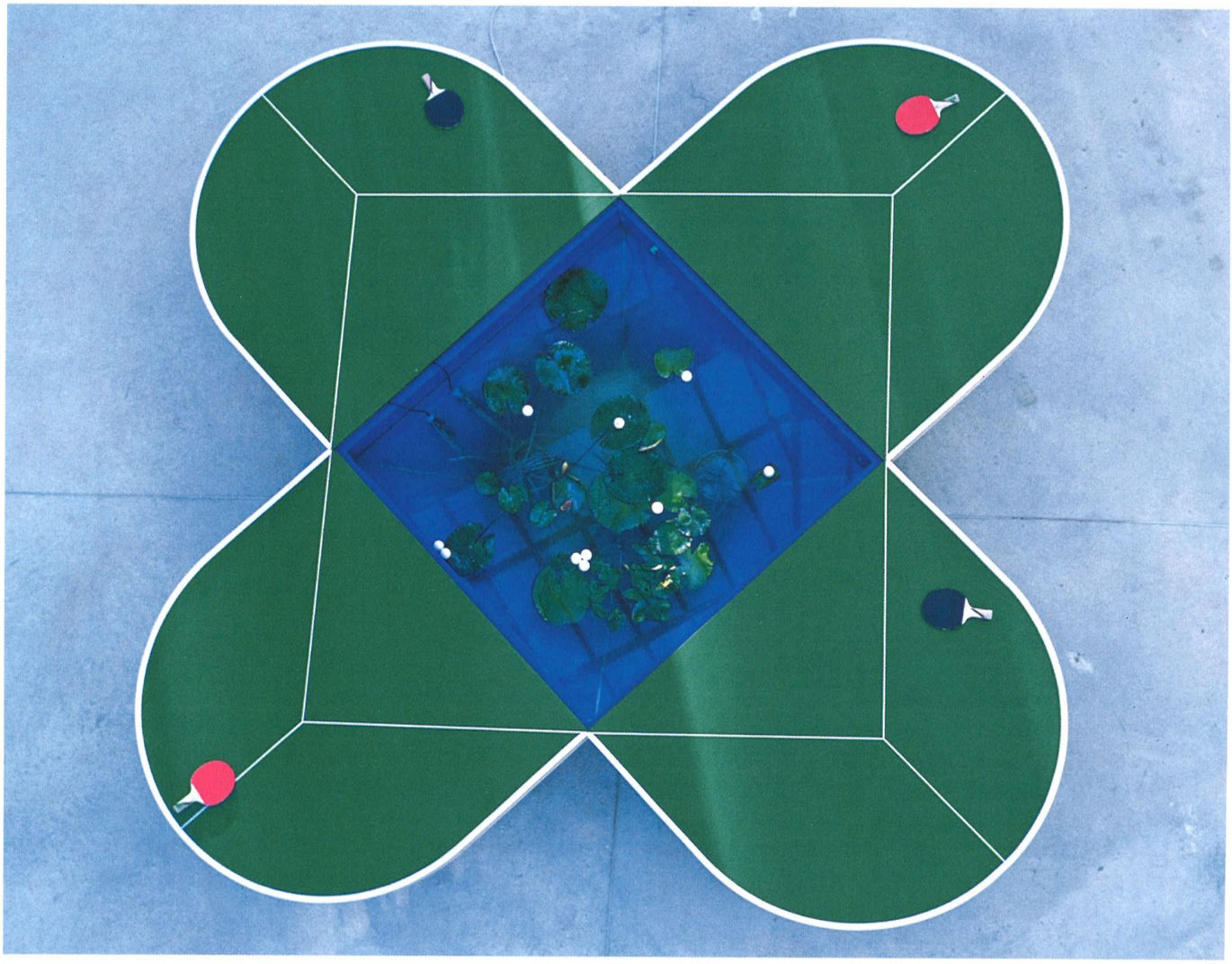
It therefore could be argued that Gabriel Orozco's *Penske Work Project* entails two dimensions of the ludic: First of all, the very modus operandi of producing art objects is defined in terms of a game with predetermined parameters. Molly Nesbit has described Oroczo's process as a sequence of self-imposed constraints: "Each piece in the set was made quickly on the street, the result of a fishing expedition in a dumpster. The work had to be finished there on the spot; it had to be light enough so that one person could lift it. Its scale would be personal, its reference the city. . . . "[10] In other words, the creative process can be deemed playful not because it would defy all criteria in favor of a laissez-faire attitude, but precisely due to the fact that it established and followed its own principles and rules. Orozco himself in this context has stated: "It's a kind of game to drive this truck around the city."[11] In the eyes of the artist in transit, the (grid of the) cityscape becomes an expansive game board on which he freely moves with, or rather in, his game piece, i.e., the truck rented from Penske. In his celebrated work *Until You Find Yourself Another Yellow Schwalbe* (produced in 1995 while the artist resided in Berlin for a year as a recipient of the DAAD – Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst [German Academic Exchange Service] grant), Orozco had already taken a similar approach to the public urban sphere when he drove his Simon Schwalbe KR51 scooter—a socialist design object that had enjoyed great popularity in the then recently disintegrated German Democratic Republic—around town in search of an identical model; whenever he came across one, he would park his vehicle next to it and take a photograph of the encounter. The tableau of forty chromogenic color prints that resulted from Orozco's motorized wanderings through the German capital presents a sequence of these pairings—which remained unknown to the owners of the other vehicles—captured from angles that emphasize equivalence and symmetry. Architectural details as well scenes of traffic in the backdrop of these images by the same token casually document pedestrian life in the formerly divided and still disparate city of Berlin—here already being defined by the artist as a game board that in the ensuing two decades would change dramatically at the hands of triumphant Western consumerism while the game pieces of the Schwalbe scooters would vanish not only from the streets, but also from cultural memory.[12]

In addition to such a ludic approach to the urban landscape, board games, as indicated above, served as formal and conceptual templates for some of the startling objects made by Orozco in the larger context of *Penske Work Project*.[13] Given the twofold prominence of play and game in the 1998 project, it can be said to epitomize central tropes, themes, and tactics Orozco has been developing in his multifaceted reflection on the poetics and politics of sculpture since the early 1990s: Inhabiting the spaces of everyday life and employing an virtually inexhaustible gamut of operations in order to either imbue or represent quotidian objects and remnants of the material

HORSES RUNNING ENDLESSLY, 1995, wood, 8.7 × 87.5 × 87.5 cm (3 3/8 × 34 3/8 × 34 3/8 in.)

HORSES RUNNING ENDLESSLY (detail), 1995, wood, 8.7 × 87.5 × 87.5 cm (3 3/8 × 34 3/8 × 34 3/8 in.)

PING-POND TABLE, 1998
Modified Ping-Pong table, water lilies, soil, stones, water
76.2 × 426.1 × 426.1 cm (30" × 13' 11 ¾" × 13' 11 ¾")
Installation view, Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, 2015
From the exhibition "Inner Cycles"

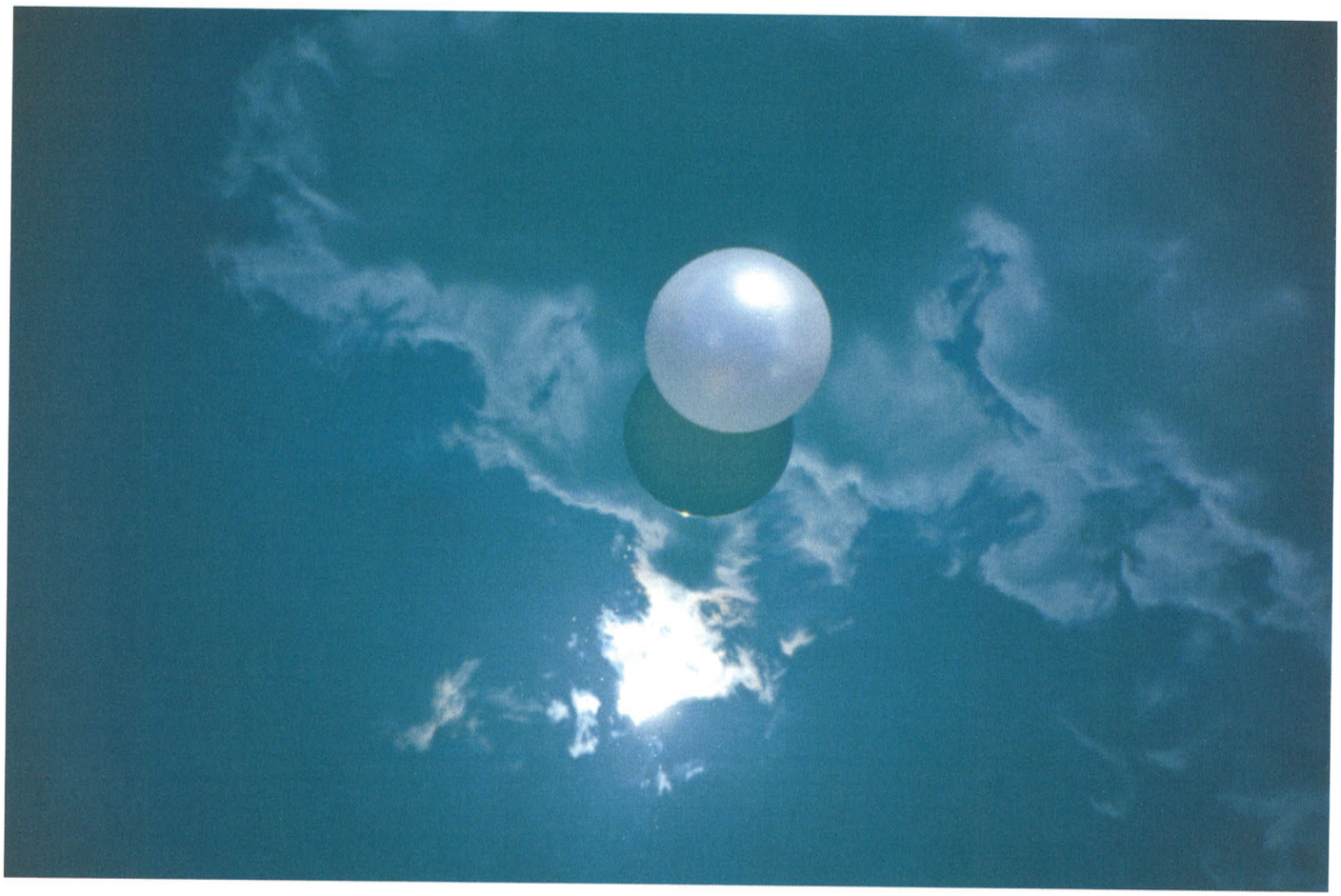


Top view of “Ping-Pond Table”

world with a palpable sense of precariousness, evanescence, and deterioration—that under the ruling conditions of design and consumption in Orozco's oeuvre would appear as the only still available access to the experience formerly deemed aesthetic—or subjecting given cultural artifacts to unexpected protocols of perception and use, the artist time and again has related his artistic production to (invented or modified) games, pieces of sports equipment, even to toy vehicles or rides of various kinds. Undoubtedly *Horses Running Endlessly*, 1995, ranks among the most iconic and striking of Orozco's alterations of a classic board game (which probably was inspired by the chessboard designed by Josef Hartwig at the Bauhaus in 1923). This puzzling object deviates from standard by inviting viewers to trace the trajectories of a match on a chessboard that is four times as large as regular ones, that features four instead of the usual two colors, and, most important, provides only knights. Because the knight is the only game piece that can move vertically and horizontally at the same turn, this figure in Orozco's version of the venerable game of military conquest harbors the abstract potential to create spherical patterns and hence virtually overarches the exaggerated playing field with imaginary lines of its incessant movement. *Horses Running Endlessly* is both controlled and excessive. Chaos reigns; but so does the long-established set of rules for how to move the knight. As already suggested by the title, this game then knows no strategy, no goal, and no end. Instead it imposes an alternative geometry that is predicated on the spatial dynamism of circles rather than on the strict tectonics of a flat grid.[14]

In the art of Gabriel Orozco, the recourse to elements of play and the morphologies of popular games of all varieties evidently is far from infantile or naive. It rather articulates and instigates an acute awareness of the shifting, yet indicative status of the ludic in modern and contemporary culture. In the Schillerian tradition of European classicism, the notion of *Spiel*, or aesthetic play, still signified the utopia of fusing art and life (as well as sense and reason) under the aegis of an experience of beauty that would be based on the free exercise of man's faculties as he at once immersed himself in the plenitude of the world and discerned ideas from it. It is this ideal, unattainable as it might always have been, that still haunts Johan Huizinga's famous treatise on the *homo ludens* from the mid–twentieth century in which he concludes: "More and more the sad conclusion forces itself upon us that the play-element in culture has been on the wane ever since the 18th century, when it was in full flower. Civilization today is no longer played. . . . "[15] Following the artist's general predilection for the antispectacular, mundane, and prosaic, Orozco's games obviously no longer make such grandiose claims for a revolutionary transformation of society or human self-realization. Much more modestly, but no less poignantly, however, in this evolving group of works the artist consistently identifies culturally specific ideas of civilization as they are conveyed in those material incarnations of a now residual, perhaps even marginalized "play-instinct" and by the same token subtly defamiliarizes them in order to induce and enable the oftentimes perplexing experience of fissures and displacements in the everyday.

In this sense, Orozco has repeatedly transformed actual ball games into sculptural objects that literally and figuratively toy with routines and rules by amplifying the dimensions of chance, accident, and serendipity.[16] In the aforementioned exhibition "Clinton Is Innocent" in Paris, for instance, Orozco first exhibited his *Ping-Pond Table*, 1998, which—just as *Carambole with Pendulum*, a central piece of *Empty Club*, Orozco's project that had been organized two years earlier by the British foundation Artangel at a temporarily vacated former Imperial gambling den for British upper-class men in London—invited visitors to engage in a substantially modified version of a well-known sport. *Ping-Pond Table* consists of a table tennis table with four rounded ends that instead of a net has a small square pond filled with soil, stones, water, and floating lilies in the middle of it. Allowing four (or even eight) people to participate, a match of table tennis in this configuration demands a different awareness of spatial and temporal parameters, as players can move more freely while the pace and speed of the game are significantly slowed down, not the least due to the unusual obstacle of the water basin. To a certain extent, each new group of activated spectators therefore needs to successively conceive of how to best play the game. In the French context, a pond with water lilies evidently also evokes the painterly and botanical practice of Claude Monet, who in his garden in Giverny famously fabricated his own image of natural life. Against this backdrop, the white table tennis balls that in Orozco's piece accidently land in the pond rather than on one of the adjacent sections of the quadruple playing surface assume the semblance of randomly placed pointillist color dots or bright dabs of pigment. In such a ludic tableau—which remotely resembles Orozco's 1994 photograph *Ball on Water*—modern art's idealization (and design) of the organic occupies the center of a sculptural frame that moreover is shaped like the abstract Buddhist symbol of the lotus leaf (which denotes fortune and enlightenment). Provocatively recoding so-called aesthetic experience in terms of a popular leisure time activity, Oroczo's *Ping-Pond Table* at the same time defines playing as an activity that potentially still entails modes of perception that exceed the scale and scope of the quotidian precisely by deviating from naturalized patterns of attention and agency. *Carambole with Pendulum*, 1996, even more explicitly addresses and emphasizes the conjuncture of play and a peculiar phenomenology of chance. For this work, Orozco departed from the game of carambole, a French version of billiards that is played without pockets and only three balls (one red, two white). The artist built a table with rounded edges; oval rather than rectangular in form, the table was placed at the center of the rotunda on the first floor of the former Devonshire Club at 50 St. James Street in central London, a venue that still conveyed the sense of elitism and exclusivity of a hegemonic gentlemen's establishment. Orozco hung the red ball from the extremely high ceiling of the space so that it swung like a pendulum over the table, skimming the surface (and therefore, just like the knight's moves in *Horses Running Endlessly*, introduced a complex spatial geometry of ellipsoids). Playing this version of billiards was dramatically hindered: In carambole billiards, to score points, a player must



BALL ON WATER, 1994
Silver dye bleach print
40.6 × 50.8 cm (16 × 20 in.)

CARAMBOLE WITH PENDULUM, 1996
Modified billiard table and billiard balls
88.9 × 309.2 × 228.6 cm (35" × 10' 1 ¾" × 90")
Installation view, Devonshire Club, London, 1996
From the exhibition "Empty Club"

CARAMBOLE WITH PENDULUM, 1996, modified billiard table and billiard balls, 88.9 × 309.2 × 228.6 cm (35" × 10' 1 ¾" × 90")

Top view of CARAMBOLE WITH PENDULUM

IGO-KIGUMI/BUDDHA/FERRARI (detail), 2015
Acrylic on wood, Buddha figures, miniature car models, Go board game and stones
Dimensions variable

hit one ball in a way that strikes the two others at once. Due to the curves of the tables and the constant and unpredictable motion of the pendulum, achieving this maneuver was a rather complicated, though still possible, task. Relations of bodies in time and space in this game once more were modified in a way that demanded a talent for improvisation rather than trained skills. At a site inevitably associated with the historical confidence and entitlement of the ruling class (of a former colonial power), the implications of such a changed constellation of forces and factors are far from innocuous. As Jean Fisher has observed: "The consequence of this mutation of relations is that the people who are watching or playing, unable to map themselves within an entirely familiar field, lose a sense of certainty—and become 'decentered.' "[17] In its Orozcoesque variant, carambole becomes a "serious game" in its own right.

In his 2005 book *Profanations*, Giorgio Agamben stressed the political significance of play as a form of use that "does not coincide with utilitarian consumption."[18] If the sacred, in the understanding of the Italian philosopher, denotes a separate sphere into which things are transferred to prevent them from being employed, utilized, or appropriated in any possible way, then to "profane means to open the possibility of a special form of negligence, which ignores separation or, rather, puts it to a particular use."[19] Agamben further argues that the passage from the sacred to the profane is not relevant solely to the domain of institutionalized faith, but rather can take place in all areas of human life, in the disguise of play and games:

> In fact, the "profanation" of play does not solely concern the religious sphere. Children, who play with whatever old thing falls into their hands, make toys out of things that also belong to the spheres of economics, war, law, and other activities that we are used to thinking of as serious. All of a sudden, a car, a firearm, or a legal contract becomes a toy.[20]

Given Agamben's pertinent remarks on the critical value of the kind of inappropriate use made of formerly removed objects in moments of play, it suggests itself to consider Orozco's exhibition "Visible Labor," which took place at Rat Hole Gallery in Tokyo in 2015–16, in terms of a "profanatory operation."[21]

For this project, Orozco collected fragments of wood that had been discarded during the demolition of old local houses and temples and transformed them into elongated floor pieces, low plinth constructions, and wall reliefs. At the hands of the artist, who currently lives in Tokyo, these architectural leftovers—the extremities of which consistently reveal the normally hidden joinery structures used instead of nails and bolts in traditional Japanese carpentry—were cut, stacked, arranged, and combined in a room-filling installation of beams, columns, and cubes. In all sculptural elements of "Visible Labor," the interlocking systems of wooden joints are highlighted by applications of white pigment, whereby on the one hand Orozco evoked an ancient technique commonly used at temples to protect timber surfaces from decay through weather conditions, while on the other hand, the bright monochrome planes beyond compositional considerations enhanced the visibility of *tsugite* (straight joints) and *shiguchi* (angle joints) as manifestations of skill and as expenditures of craft. If Minimalist sculpture had concealed labor in its immaculate, interchangeable, and industrially produced surfaces, Orozco's patently artisanal structures not only kept but reinforced genuine traces of invested time and competence. By consequence, the various parts of the exhibition at Rat Hole Gallery exuded the sense that they could be potentially be reassembled into a coherent whole. This impression of a jigsaw puzzle to be solved was further enhanced by a series of prints on the walls of the gallery for which Orozco reproduced pages from publications on Japanese architecture and adorned enlarged details of *tsugite* and *shiguchi* with his famous motif of evolving circles (in red and white) that here suggest the imminent coming together of dismembered wooden joints.

Orozco moreover included, dispersed across the exhibition, a number of unassisted readymades, which he variously placed in niches, voids, and cracks, or simply on top of protusions: A startling yet unobtrusive presence of Buddha figures and miniature racing cars in red and white complemented the abstract wooden shapes, as did black and white Go stones that appear both on a game board and scattered across some of the sculptures' upper sides. Symbols of play and devotion hence to an equal degree occupy the interstices of Orozco's sculptural intervention, the material basis of which comprises both sacred and profane sources. In Orozco's project, to yet again evoke Agamben's formulation, the separation of spheres is playfully ignored and put to a particular use: Modest in scale and with a strict economy of means, "Visible Labor" achieves nothing less than the provisional fusing of the archaic and the contemporary, the ritual and the everyday, the local and the global, the specific and the generic, the commercial and the spiritual. Agamben has cautioned that "we must distinguish between secularization and profanation. Secularization is a form of repression. It leaves intact the forces it deals with by simply moving them from one place to another." Profanation, to the contrary, "neutralizes what it profanes. Once profaned, that which was unavailable and separate loses its aura and is returned to use." It thereby "deactivates the apparatuses of power and returns to common use the spaces that power had seized."[22] Gabriel Orozco's games allow us to participate precisely in such a profanation of play. Faites vos jeux.

ANDRÉ ROTTMANN

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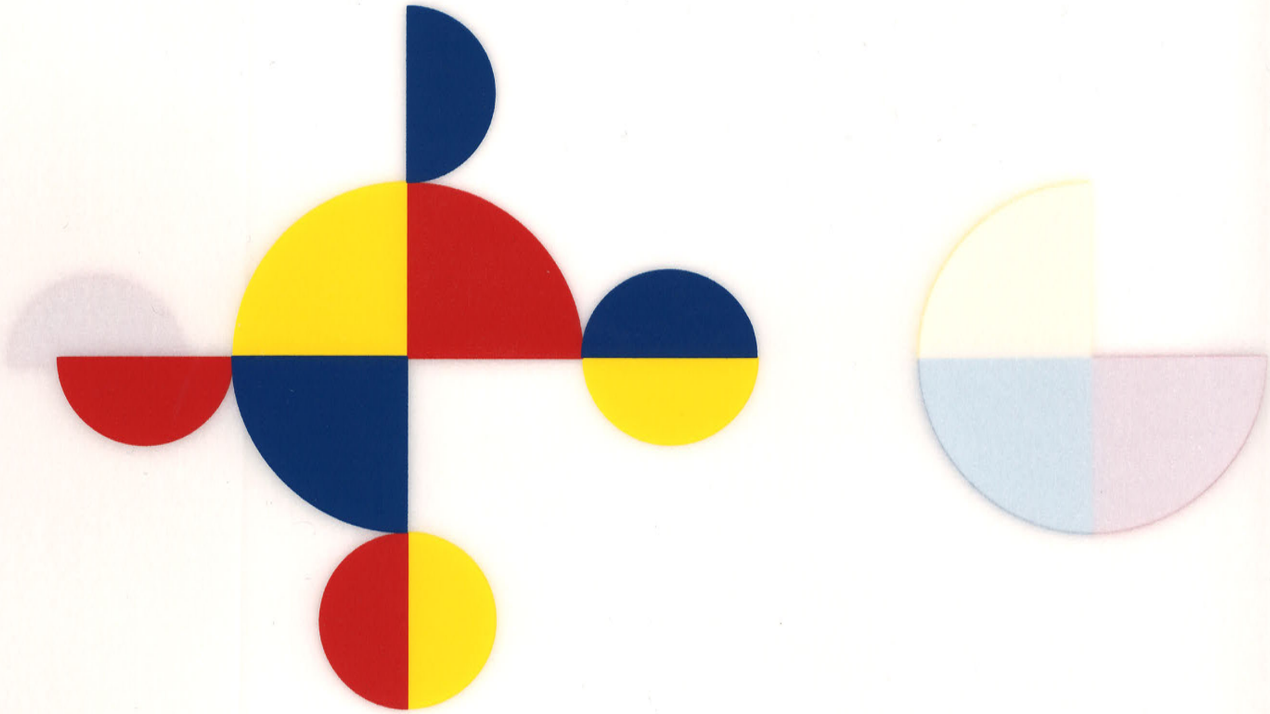
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