

TERRITORIES

In the spring of 1995, the Guggenheim Museum in New York, put on a spectacular exhibition of the work of the late Cuban-born artist, Félix González-Torres. The amplitude of curator, Nancy Spector's selection and display of González-Torres's works, provided an opportunity to engage the elliptical and complex meanings of an artist whose economy of form has less to do with diffidence and more with precision, discipline, and rigour.

The sensations that shadowed each contemplative step that one took, while immersed in the ambiguous dispensation which the artist left for viewers, invited all kinds of metaphors and clichés; from sublimity to elegiac, and cerebral. I walked through the exhibition picking, rolling up and filling my pockets with (against the stern edict of "one per visitor" imposed by the museum) the spills of candies and stacks of offset prints (a trademark sign of the artist's generosity and quiet subversion of museological etiquette) which form the basis of González-Torres's most recognizable gestures. González-Torres had often composed these installations into groupings that are given "ideal weights" for the candies and "endless copies" for the offset prints; both of which refer to or commemorate a lover, event, and place. That these candies (ravishing seascapes of silver foil-wrapped Baci chocolates, black licorice

Gabriel Orozco: Infinite Silences

in clear cellophane, an odd tasting mint green lozenge, red, blue, and white wrapped Bazooka bubble gums, etc.) and prints were meant to be eaten and taken home as souvenirs, lent the entire experience an air of solemn grace and ritual. It evoked a sacramental feeling that is at once catholic and very Latin American.

On the notion of the catholicism and Latin American character of these gestures, the critic Coco Fusco has pointed out to me how González-Torres's work embodies and assimilated the palpable vestiges of the mourning rituals of Latino culture throughout the Americas. And the association with sugar in the candies run tangentially with one of the most historical cash

crops of Cuba. And the strings of light bulb sculptures –bundled or displayed in cascades of incandescent splendour– which the artist is also famous for, refer less to Dan Flavin's fluorescent light sculptures than to the devotional altars and votive memorials one, again find throughout Latin countries.

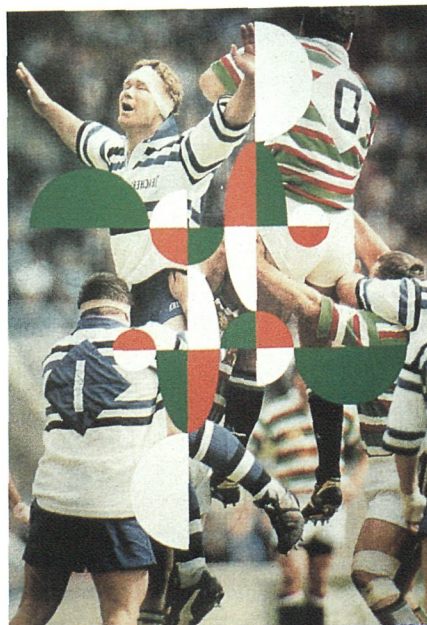
I point to these observations because, very little mention has been made of these influences in the critical examination of González-Torres's career. It seems that such affiliation to a non-European, native, vernacular culture is seldomly acknowledged. Despite the great noises of postmodernist critique of these kinds of elision, the preferred narrative still hinges on the adoption of the chemise of modernist universalism, of a kind which disavows the specific and local, for perhaps a more fulfilling excursus into what ostensibly is a variation on the theme of european genius. Part of this unfortunate scenario, is the complicity of the artists who participate in this form of self-censure. This perception, that to be unbound from the bonds of one's origin or from the iconographical influences of one's culture provides an artist easy passage into the canons of contemporary international art, remains one of the great fallacies and travesties of recent critical writings on successful non-European artists. Certainly, in some ways, this issue inflames the debate,

isolates the artist, and resolves nothing. Undoubtedly, it could also be exasperating to be thought of as an artist or intellectual only in relation to one's given identity or affiliation.

But then, I am less convinced by the argument that peremptorily admonish us to jettison such identity *mongering*. I am thinking here of Robert Storr's admonishment to those of us who see in González-Torres's artistic practice the wonderful virtues of and references to his gay and Latino identities which *deeply inform his work*. Both of which, in any case, enrich more than diminish it. Storr writes of the artist's "refusal to play to type." Alive to how such playing to type downgrades the audience's full appreciation of a given artist he notes further that "In an art world too often obsessed with *simplistic* (my emphasis) affirmations of origin or essence, González-Torres eschews the role of Latin artist or queer artist or even activist artist..." Obviously aware of the paradox that confronts him, as he works to extricate González-Torres from the clutches of "simplistic affirmations of origin or essence," Storr quickly offered a corrective to his initial comment, by declaring the artist's usage of "everything that his experience as a Cuban-born, politically committed gay man has taught him." [1] So, rather than appreciating González-Torres in the full image of what his work is about, the critic is forced into the posture of *equivocation*.

For what Storr's latter statement

confirms is, that whatever González-Torres's work finally come to mean, it resonates for us the way it does, because *it has much to do with "everything that his experience as a Cuban-born, politically committed gay man has taught him,"* including its burdens, its entanglements, refusals, failures, pleasures and heartbreaks. Rather than



Gabriel Orozco. *The Atomists. Empty Club Project*, 1996. Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

a renunciation of his identity, González-Torres celebrates it, questions it, struggles with it, and uses all its instructive particularities and complexities to shape and unpack what *undeniably represents one of the most pleasurable and humane attentions to issues of art, identity, politics, love and faith in contemporary art*.

Now that he is gone, dead at the height of a fully blossomed career at the young age of 37, another Latin

American artist, the Mexican, Gabriel Orozco, is quickly ascending the same platform that made González-Torres so indispensable as an artist who brought to critical light, the sublime vision of the Latin American world, its sybilline excess, its intelligence. As a precedent for Orozco, there is no doubt that the same obfuscating market forces have emerged again, in the midst of the critical noises, now being made on the Mexican's behalf. It is a commentary which steadfastly avoids mention of Latin American influences in his work. Most importantly these critiques avoid the fact of Orozco's immediate art historical heritage in Mexico, which includes such modernist figures as Diego Rivera, David Siquieros, Rufino Tamayo, Clemente Orozco, Frida Khalo, etc. According to the provenance which he has to carry like a badge of honor, there is *no shortage of commentary* in which the artist is thought to emerge fully borne on the wings of the phoenix-like birth of Duchamp; forefather of any artist who decides to make a go at *conceptual art*.

In spite of this, we will find, if we follow the lead dilligently, first by chucking the abstruse enigmas that decorates his work, that Orozco's art owes as much to an older generation of Latin American artists, including tinges of surrealism, than to the almost exclusive European lineage that is being constructed for him.

Thus, to say that Gabriel Orozco's conceptual work carries a Latin

American surrealist accent is not to damn his prodigious talent with an ethnic slur. Nor is it to indulge in a disparaging form of stereotyping which often filters the work of non-European artists through the distorted lens of exoticism, which invariably is thought to announce them as uncontaminated, authentic natives. One already knows how burdened art history is today through such ethnification of artists. Hence, pointing to the existence of the notion of Latin Americanism in Orozco's work is worrying on that account of invoking certain essentialist tropes. I am aware of the kind of danger which may attend my confining the broad-based view of an art which is multifarious in its many uses of references, particularly through the invocation of a Latin American identity, as part of what informs Orozco's work, entails.

Though such a term in reality disavows ethnicity, what in reality follows from such an invocation, is how it allows a rich opportunity to map and explore the numinous and complicated geographies that criss-cross the history of 20th century art. Thinking of art history in this manner not only presents the critic and historian a challenge and chance to establish the genealogical identification and procedural practices of a given artist, more importantly it helps to situate such artists in a productive critical axis. Furthermore, it opens up new vistas that could show how certain local variants of international culture ultimately prise

open a discursive space within dominant discourses, in such a way that internationalises contemporary art and culture, making it less a province of European tutelage.

Positioning Orozco's art in the durational and interstitial sites of local and international geo-political and socio-cultural economy, such a revelatory survey works to produce an intense examination of tendencies that often shadow much of his work. Examining how these tendencies are deployed and unpeeled in his work creates both ambiguity and clarity. For it helps to reveal to us a way to focus on a kind of Latin American conceptual tradition that is not only unsubservient to its Euro-American counterpart, but indeed exists almost in competition with it. The essential point to make here is that what distinguishes Latin American conceptualism from the Euro-American model is its highly political nature. While the post-minimalist conceptualism of the late sixties and seventies in Europe and America were mostly concerned with and freighted through a Kantian empiricism and reductionism, whose exemplification is rooted in institutional critique, on the other hand the Latin American model resolutely stands its ground on an existential strategy and phenomenological inquiry, of which two Lacanian disjunctions: the imaginary and symbolic converge. Yet such conceptualism is also related to the critique of institutional relationship between the military dictatorships that

ruled much of Latin America from the fifties through the early 1980s.

In many ways Orozco's work occupies the territories between these two distinctions. What makes Orozco's work particularly interesting amongst the group of highly visible young artists in the international scene, is that there is a certain reciprocity in his work between what may be deemed, on the surface, a vernacular format and a cosmopolitan sophistication in his work. Such a reading of course, does not come without a proviso. One has to remain attentive to the implications of creating a binary opposition, in which vernacular means degraded and cosmopolitan signifies fulsome. Nonetheless, it seems to me that Orozco's work is not at all engaged in this ying and yang struggle. It would then be accurate to say that his work finds equal favour with the work of many conceptual figures in the history of Euro-American and Latin American art. This would mean that references to Robert Rauschenberg, Joseph Beuys and Marcel Duchamp or to Cildo Meireles, Helio Oiticica, Ana Mendieta, Gordon Matta-Clark, and Félix González-Torres easily find themselves applied to Orozco as well.

These influences or kinships, as it were, in some ways would seem to contradict my earlier insinuation of Latin American conceptualism as being part of the first condition of Orozco's practice. It remains so. Insofar as such a contradiction proposes an essentialist paradox in his practice. Implicated in

this complex negotiation is what one could allude to, from a classic postcolonial standpoint, as Orozco's double consciousness.

Orozco's work embraces such fidelity or double consciousness, which at any rate are not antagonistic but complementary; a redoubling of what Kwame Appiah would refer to as the collision between the postcolonial and postmodern. Thus making his work less a hybridised activity. Since his emergence in the last four years, Orozco has diligently made himself an elusive figure to track; impossible to predict. What makes his work truly magnificent is its fugitive nature. It occupies with delicate precision, long moments of silence and passages of hilarity. Accompanying these, are his acts of social and sensory reordering of our perceptions, often turning objects we think we already know into sculptures and installations stripped of their original public meaning. Some of these ideas and philosophical issues one finds in the works of the aforementioned artists are partly borne out in two recent solo exhibitions of Orozco's work staged in London; first "Empty Club," a project in June, 1996, for ArtAngel in a former gambling hall and Victorian gentlemen's club and the other at the Institute of Contemporary Art, in July.

THE ARTIST AS ETHNOGRAPHER: EMPTY CLUB

One of the most notorious consequences

and effects of colonization of so-called native cultures by Europe is the rendering of very complex patterns of thinking and cultural motifs in the smudgy light of ethno-fantasy of the colonizer. Through ethnographic depiction and study of the native, European scholars seemed to believe, during the golden years of anthropological study of the conquered as specimens of curiosity, in the idea that they were providing a bird's eye view of those pre-literate cultures who due to an absence of written records, lack the requisite insight to record their own cultures. The task of the ethnographer then, seemed to be an earnest, if not always sincere attempt to reveal the ethnographic subject fuller in his cultural regalia and primitive mannerisms. Such a position of power worked invariably to situate the European as the natural interlocutor of

such a scene of attentive study and projection. That a once studied subject of this encounter could in any way attempt the inversion of such a process by turning his own microscope on the ethnographer is not oftentimes deemed improbable. But where imagined, the question would be, in such an attempt what sort of "objective reality" of an European culture would come under scrutiny? To know the "other" what kind of answer would one demand from him? What aspect of his culture would come under the fascinating spotlight of such a study? One must concede that such matters sometimes relate more to a question of taste and interest, as evinced in a rather crude ethnographic study done awhile back called "The Sexual Life of Savages," than any real scholarly interest. This aberrant study of sexuality, of course, is hilarious in its intent, but quite disturbing in its abject



Gabriel Orozco. Empty Club Project, 1996.
Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.



Gabriel Orozco. *Oval Billiard Table*, 1996. Wood, slate, mixed media, 35 x 121-3/4 x 90".
Edition of 3. Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

suggestiveness, if not outrightly brazen in its appetite.

Seeking a point of entry, as it were, into what makes a culture what it is, particularly from the position of its daily affirmations, a recent work by Orozco operates within this scope in the context of his examination of English mores through sports, leisure, and various social spaces. As is evident in recent incidents internationally, the English are simply crazy about sports: football, cricket, horse racing, and gambling. In terms of gambling, every aspect of life provides a rich opportunity to place a bet on something. In relation to sports, especially football, the English football holican is a character unto himself. He is as much a character of the imagination, as he is a product of the disaffected working class, driven to

racial and social hysteria under Thatcherite Britain. He represents one of the most insolent stains on English character, bisecting the social faultlines between the aristocracy and the working class. He is the epitome of the aggression, violence, and nationalism that has often marred the putative fantasy of sports as a contest between gentlemen, particularly the gentleman as especially mythologised in English socio-cultural ideology.

Writing on the football fan's need to claim the cultural centre of English life recently, Louisa Buck has noted that "If traditionally cricket has been the game of the elite, and football strictly for the lumpen masses, all that's changed now. These days, in order to have any cultural credibility within the U.K., it's almost mandatory to be a

football fan." [2] Approaching Orozco's recent work in London last summer from the vantage point of sports should not then be surprising at all. For what is embedded in such a character study is how the English come to define their national identity. Such an ethnographic study of the English character is to be found in Orozco's recent project: *Empty Club* on St. James street in London. In this project which occupies the entire five floors of the building in its various incarnations as a Regency gambling hall, the Devonshire gentleman's club, and reception home for the Nigerian High Commission, is Orozco fetching satirization of the English. But the Nigerian involvement here is of less importance, in the scenario that Orozco goes further to create and excavate.

In the *Empty Club* Orozco deceptively installed a billiard table, *Oval Billiard Table*, in an ornate, silk wallpapered interior. From the appearance of things, such a space would seem a natural setting as a private club; in otherwords such an object, as was displayed in the ornate room, is at home. Thoroughly in its context. However, the piece is an impossibility, a dysfunctional tic in the body of the space. Recomposed into an oblong shaped table, with no pockets into which players could deposit the balls (though Orozco had made the table available to the audience), the table was manifestly disarmed and made impotent. To further frustrate the audience, the

traditional red ball that kicks off the game has been suspended with an invisible thread from the room's gilded ceiling, inexorably pushing the game into the point of absurdity. Yet by literally inviting players to make believe and play the game, he has made his own seeming closure rife with possibility. This absurdity not only embraces certain concepts of surrealism, but most importantly it utilises the traditional gestures of conceptual art to question assumptions about normality, through the realignment of codes of traditional sculpture, and also through the act of disembodiment and fragmentation.

Yet, this is only half of what Orozco had in mind in this particular room. Having emptied the room of its content and refurnished it with an object stripped of its nominal and utilitarian function, he also focuses our attention to the behavioral mechanisms of such a social space; laying bare its liminal marks, inviting our presence to make use of it instead as a meditative public space. The lacuna created through the emptying of the room, gave the space a chilly aura, while also amplifying the volume of the rooms. This absence, which worked like an interval; a cunning arpeggio, created the perfect aesthetic opportunity to devour the seductive sheen of the blue and silver wallpaper, the gilded sconces, the filigreed ceilings and crystal chandeliers. In this scenario, one is able to observe and be observed by others. As the audience luxuriated on the wallpaper

patterns, on their repetitive banality; high culture reduced to modernist painterly gesture; the institutionally encoded myth of the promethean author/genius takes on an aspect of vaudevillean mockery.

Perhaps this reading might not have been Orozco's conscious intent. But the result nonetheless proved fortuitous. I could not help thinking how this dislocation impedes the very congruity and apparently settled projection of the scene as the acme of aristocracy, the principal fundament of English class system. Through such a decentering, this domain of restricted public access was effectively hybridised and turned into a semantic failure. In this space, the boisterous activity of the audience dents, with a cursive gesture, the inflated use-value of such a site of power, opening up seams in the wall between high and low culture, stability and contingency. In many ways this room represents what one would term the improbable union of opposites; a subtle meeting of two marginal communities.

In the course of my wandering through the silence of the abandoned interiors –freshly refurbished in anticipation of new occupants who, it is hoped, would turn up to take possession soon– I was alerted to the fact that Orozco's interventions, through the utilisation of the tropes national identity and ethnicity, reveals an attitude which Hal Foster has likened as the case of the "Artist as Ethnographer." Such a position is telling in its inversion of

positions of power. For here is an artist from a so-called third world domain, performing a task often associated with western ethnographic study of the other. Here, Orozco has gathered the most stereotypical symbols and icons for his quietly hilarious study of the English; their past times and obsessions. On one floor two long bolts of navy blue and grey pinstripe suiting fabrics were unfurled to form a bowling alley furnished with wooden antique bowling balls. The scene is poignantly pitched towards the sentiment of another era, when gentlemen wore suffocating suits for the most mundane recreational activities. In an attempt to enhance what already seem like an absurd proposition, and to enhance the denaturalised clubby atmosphere, Orozco arranged a row of beach chairs, beneath plastic potted plants with white paper leaf inserts which he called *Moon Trees*, along the sidelines for spectators to sit and watch. It seems, at every turn, Orozco wanted to rearrange the furnishings a bit. The plants and beach chairs literally become props for this joke. In their awkward insertion into the notoriously gloomy, grey English weather, they become synecdochally, ideas that serve as the artist's own brand of tropicalismo.

The playfulness in these slight alterations and reworking of contexts, situations, images, and objects are classic Orozco gestures. They provide a certain synchronicity to much of his work. Whereby every gesture, every action never stand in isolation. They are linked

in a cause and effect performative chain in which the action and the result could be experienced in one unbroken line.

THE ARTFUL DODGER

Sublime, absurd, evanescent. These three elements persistently invite attention in Orozco's work. And no better place proved more hospitable to experience these three forces at work than at the second exhibition of his work in as many months in London. Opening at the heels of the critical success of *Empty Club*, the exhibition at the ICA, which travelled from the Kunsthalle in Zurich, represented a mini retrospective of work produced by Orozco over the last six years. It includes some of his most recognizable works: installations, sculpture, photography, and slide projection. Descending into the ground floor gallery, the first work one encounters is *There is always One Direction*, 1994, a sculpture of four surgically attached bicycles performing a gravity-defying balancing act. The bicycles are joined together in such an absurd manner as to make them not only immobile, but equally nonsensical, stripped of their essential facture. It will be important to note that in Orozco's hands the most stable objects or situations are normally toyed with to such an extent that they are given fresh status and new meaning.

In this sense I am reminded of Jasper Johns statement, in which he described his working method as



Gabriel Orozco. *Four Bicycles (There is Always One Direction)*, 1994.
Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

consisting of taken an object, idea, or situation, then doing something to it, then repeating the act and so on, until something fresh emerges from that. This philosophy about process would appear repeatedly as I walked through the exhibition. I was also made further

aware of the conundrum that lies at the heart of Orozco's gestures throughout the ICA: which hinted at two things: the nature of movement and impermanence in his work. Everywhere I looked, I was confronted with the disquieting spectacle of futile attempts at movement and

flight. *Recaptured Nature*, 1990, an irregularly shaped sphere, a patchwork of rubber tubing with conical protuberances on each end, hinted perhaps slyly to crude tools of third world flight. Except in this scenario, the particular object of flight, obviously through Orozco's accentuations, would seem incapable of performing, for any duration, the task of such an escapist endeavour.

Yeilding Stone, 1992, a round ball of plasticine, also embodies within its form a kind of performative alterity. Measuring the approximate weight of the artist, in its different journeys, the artist would roll the ball down the streets of each city where it is exhibited, while the soft sculpture discreetly alters shape and picks up the refuse of the city, at once charting the imaginary and unstable routes of the traveller through the modern metropolis. This performance make allusions to shared common space: the incommensurable space of the immigrant and the local settled communities through whose space it makes its anonymous marks. This sculpture also plays off a pun, in its performative indeterminacy, around the popular saying: "a rolling stone gathers no moss." This reference incorporates the unsettled and often unfinished business of immigration and displacement.

Within such a thinking is the dangerous attachment of the idea of migrancy to the work of this Mexican artist. As if in the work of the so-called third world other, there must exist those

legible traces of difference that encapsulate their thinking and working method into the political rubric of passive oppositionality. Such an assumption would then seem to find a contrarian voice in the Robert Storr's earlier remark concerning González-Torres. But the dilemma lies in how we both disavow the experience of the immigrant while at the same time fetishising his abnormal condition as constitutive of his actual identity and "total" reality. Given also, the socio-political atmosphere of Mexico, with its squalid political intrigues, vulgar ostentation, and the materialism of the elite ruling class and mixed with the desparate, impoverished conditions of its native cultures, there is little doubt that the icarean image of flight; the albatross poised in flight with broken wings, implicitly, but always disjunctively is engaged in Orozco's work.

But these references are never produced to fulfill the fetish of those who cling, with almost dysfunctional intensity, to the sordid spectacles of postcolonial movements. The movements of the hordes charging across the Rio Grande or across the borders of Tijuana and San Diego or the Rio Grande between Texas and Mexico, or the Cuban and Haitian departure to Miami. Unlike the Cuban artists such as Kcho, who have made the searing dilemma of political and economic flight a signature of their art, raising the specter of these not always conclusive migrations and defered arrivals, gives measure to Orozco's concept of movement.

In another work *La DS*, 1993, Orozco, in a classic Surrealist gesture, has taken one of the most seductive icons of modern product design: the classic Citroen DS, first introduced in the late fifties, and turned it into a



Gabriel Orozco. *Recaptured Nature*, 1990. Edition of 3.

museum piece, a shiny impotent image of modern obsolescence. There is also something uncanny in this work that hints at some of Meret Oppenheim's festishistic and erotic works such as *Breakfast in Furs*. In *La DS*, Orozco has recomposed and transformed this penultimate symbol of metropolitan speed and seduction into a sculptural effect. To make his alteration he cut the car into three equal parts, discarded the middle section, then surgically sutured the two outer parts to form an androgynous sleek machine; at once phallic and feminine.

La DS remains the most poetic and grandest of all of Orozco's gestures. It has often been discussed in terms of its loss of velocity; as speed trapped and iconified, a wondrous sleight of hand redeployed to hallucinatory effect. My own thinking of the work edges closer to a kind of kinky, misogynist interpretation. I am inclined to receive

the specifications of the work as existing congruently in relation to the curvature of a woman's voluptuous body, as imaged in the figure of the classical nude. Here one thinks of those magnificent, but no less stereotypical fantasies of Rubens, or the reclining odalisques of Ingres and Matisse. They are figures so eroticised for our fantasies as to rob them of all humanity. Like those figures, *La DS* also reclines, sentient and sensuous; a supine nymph all dressed up with nowhere to go, immobilized by unattainable desire.

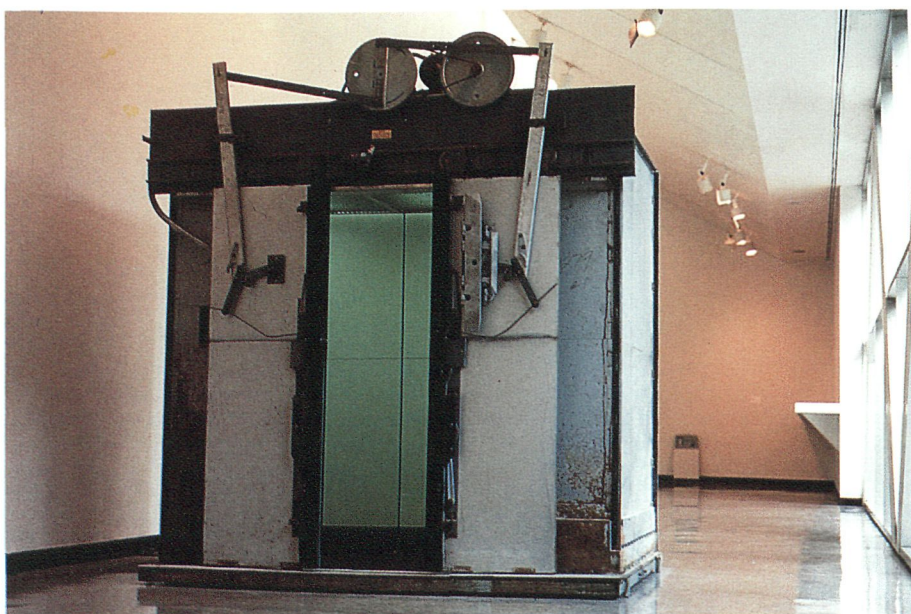
But perhaps one needs to extend the import of this work with a contemporary example. *La DS* owes its greatest debt to Gordon Matta-Clark's splitting actions of the 70's, especially *Splitting*, 1974, in which he cut through art dealer Holly Solomon's about-to-be demolished Englewood, New Jersey, house down the middle. In the same vein Orozco's destructuring and

disembowelment of an old elevator whose ceiling had been lowered to barely the height of a full grown adult to create a claustrophobic social space also recall Matta-Clark. *Elevator*, 1994, shown at the Whitney Biennial in 1995, could also be understood within the language of Matta-Clark's "anarchitecture", a process marked, according to Mary Jane Jacobs, by "an anarchist approach to architecture, marked physically by a breaking down of convention through a process of 'undoing' or 'destructuring,' rather than creating a structure..." [3] Matta-Clark is even more explicit in his intentions, noting that "By undoing a building there are many aspects of the social conditions against which I am gesturing...The question is a reaction to an ever less viable state of privacy, private property, and isolation." [4] I do not want to dwell here on Matta-Clark's Latin American origin and his seminal influence on some of Orozco's work to make the point that Orozco also draws from his own larger awareness of other Latin American predecessors. This would be true in terms of his debt to the works of Helio Oiticica, Cildo Miereles, Ana Mendiata, and Félix González-Torres.

IRRADIATIONS:

THE REAL AND THE INDEX

Thus far I have concentrated on Orozco's objects, sculptures and installations. Yet, a particularly important element of his work is its



Gabriel Orozco. *Elevator*, 1994. Altered elevator cabin, 8' x 8' x 5'.

reliance on photography as a record of his performative actions. Orozco's color photographs are not exactly documentary photographs in the classic sense of photojournalism. Rather, his photographs record moments of unwitnessed performances and interventions. They are solitary and personal, and often nonsensical and ephemeral gestures of his flaneurship. In his usage of performance and reliance on photography to trace its residue within a landscape, he could be seen as an environmental artist in the mold of such Minimalist artists as Smithson, Walter DeMaria, and Michael Heizer. Only in this case Orozco's interventions, like Mendiata's are evidently more discreet, evidently less obstrusive.

There is a desire which I have often seen in these photographs to leave the landscape as undisturbed as possible. His, is unlike the high modernist proclivity for grand emendations; for authorial gestures in which the artist's will is superimposed on nature, as he would the broad quivering surface of a canvas or block of granite or bronze. His interventions are always co-dependent on the silent spectator, posed between the observing subject and the object of representation. In these photographs there is always a feeling of absence that haunts the entire arena. Part of the function of this absence is the insinuation of the idea that the record of the absent physical object could be experienced in the space of the real.

It is within such a space of the real, relocated to the space of the index—as the legible imprint of the object's ontologization, its persistent presence as a supplementary record—that much of Orozco's photographs exist. What the photograph does for the object, traditional mechanisms like the woodcut or etching did for the mechanical print. For they are used to re deploy a prior gesture. While the photograph as a perceptual medium is rooted in the chemical transformation of a mimetic gesture, the woodcut or etching is rooted in the transmutation of a physical surface into a sign that simultaneously accentuates the physical referent, while valorizing its absence in reproduction.

Rosalind Krauss's argument in "The Originality of the Avant-Garde: A Postmodernist Repetition" in which she discusses the posthumous casts of Rodin's sculpture: *Gates of Hell*, as "examples of multiple copies that exist in the absence of the original" [5] casts are lasting influence here. Krauss's thesis would also apply to Orozco's photographs as well. Redploying Walter Benjamin, she notes that "authenticity empties out as a notion as one approaches those mediums which are inherently multiple." [6] In much the same vein, the notion of the authenticity of the performative moment in Orozco's photographs are also experienced as multiples, as repeat performances, as copies with no apparent original source; always refreshingly new and immediate. Of course this would not only prove

paradoxical, but also fallacious. For here, every performance, intervention, and action is always prior, and can only be experienced merely as records or as schematized traces drawn in the empty space of the object: the now apparently lost original.

A few examples will suffice as an illustrative tool here. *Crazy Tourist*, 1991, is a record of a performance in which Orozco walked through a deserted open air market in Mexico City, placing an orange on tables in individual stalls. He then photographed the scene. The record shows the objects of the performance residing on the tables in their dispersed locations. It traces also what has become a leitmotif in Orozco's work, which is the map of his wandering from subject to anonymity. The absence of the figure in the space leaves the experience of the entire performance in abeyance, manifestly incomplete. This absence cuts to the most emphatic point of Krauss' argument about the inexorable reliance of avantgardist practice on the structure of the grid as a pictorial space; as the constitutive domain that configures the artist's representational repertoire. Yet, according to Krauss, the grid as a space of artistic practice eludes the notion of originality because it can only be reduplicated. She writes:

Structurally, logically, axiomatically, the grid can only be repeated (original emphasis). And, with an act of repetition or replication as the "original" occasion of its usage within

the experience of a given artist, the extended life of the grid in the unfolding progression of his work will be one of still more repetition, as the artist engages in repeated acts of self-imitation. [7]

Such repeated acts of self-imitation can be found in the serial work *Until You Find Another Yellow Schwalbe*, 1995. This work is a photographic record of another of Orozco's incursions into public space turned into anonymous private site. It records a series of performances which the artist initiated after buying a yellow scooter for transport upon his arrival in Berlin to take up a year long residency. What ensued from this performance is an ironic and self-conscious repetition of the same act. He would ride around town in his yellow Schwalbe searching for identical yellow schwalbes. Upon finding one he will park his next to that one in almost the same symmetrical formation. He would then take a picture of the performance. This culminated in an extensive record of the routes he traversed, the neighborhoods he visited, the anonymous owners of the scooters with whom he has implicitly formed a relationship, a record of a migrant passing through town. The photographs become almost souvenirs of this travel.

One is infinitely reminded again of that enigmatic, silent, and absent subject, who in his need to configure the representational value of his daily practice, must leave visible traces of his

own impermanence, his erased corporeality, his own diminished authorial gesture within the pictorial space of the grid. Krauss notes again that: *this repetition performed by the grid must follow, or come after, the actual, empirical surface of a given painting [or photograph]. The representational text of the grid however also precedes the surface, comes before (original emphasis) it, preventing even that literal surface from being anything like an origin. For behind it, logically prior to it, are all those visual texts through which the bounded plane was collectively organized as a pictorial field. The grid summarizes all these texts: the gridded overlays on cartoons, for example used for the mechanical transfer from drawing to fresco; or the perspective lattice meant to contain the perceptual transfer from three dimensions to two; or the matrix on which to chart harmonic relationships, like proportion; or the millions of acts of enframing by which the picture was reaffirmed as a regular quadrilateral.* [8]

Sometimes, Orozco would set up a disjunction, in a classic act of *detournement*, by contaminating the grid through the emplacement of a disfunction within its pictorial surface. He would do this by first physicalizing a gesture which would then rely on an analogue, a near quotation through reproduction of the physical specimen. Such a work, *My Hand is the Memory of Space*, 1991, which was not presented in

London, but which was exhibited around the same time as the London show, in Graz, Austria is an installation of hundreds of wooden ice cream spoons. Arranged into a mesmerizing sculpture, a form shaped like an unfolding chinese fan, spread out across the floor like the palm of an open hand, like the surging, undulating, ridged surface of a coral reef, the work is a subtle poetry in marking out space. To complete the act of this poetry and sly rearrangements of perception and the real, he installed on the adjacent wall a photograph of an ice cream bar on a wooden spoon melting on top of a basalt stone surface. In these two works we are given simultaneously (within the regime and pictorial manifestation of the grid) the object and its echo, its materiality and its reproduction. Such literalizations notwithstanding, it is precisely such moments, which Craig Owens identified as the allegorical impulse in postmodernist art, that give Orozco's work its intelligence and dilligence, its offhand charm, at once fugitive, melancholic, obtuse, and inchoate.

In conclusion, what makes Orozco's work remarkable, is not only its absorption of certain filmic nuances, it is also in its essential modesty, its deliberate effacements, and profound simplicity. Encountering his work in whatever setting requires a stoutly committed article of faith. The absurdity and surrealist impulse, and Latin American humour in his work, turns each encounter into tremulous acts of

commiseration with and vacillation between object and site, gesture and act, meaning and context. In his exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York he presented two evocative and poignant works. In *Homeruns*, 1993, rather than working inside the museum's galleries, he chose to work outside of it, calculatively, according to classic conceptual art methods, reposition the perspective of radical art outside the walls of the institution. Thus by placing oranges in the windows of apartments in a building across the museum, he redepicts the cognitive elisions and decontextualisations which occur daily in museums. Riffing on this rather simple idea of institutional critique, and readdressing himself to the condition of sculpture as the classical idiom of the body, in a work clearly reminiscent of Helio Oiticica's posthumously realized installation of hammocks in a room filled with the music of Jimmy Hendrix, Orozco installed *Hammock*, 1993. Slung between two trees in the museum's sculpture garden amidst the exquisite modernist

sculptures of Picasso, Matisse, Lipschitz, etc, Orozco returned instead, rather than to form, to the space occupied by the body, the unseen impression of bodies which fold into the hammocks inviting ambience. It is as if the bodies which have to adjust their shapes to fit the contour of the hammock, were in a sense being formed and molded by the unseen hands of the artist.

Such a saliently issued rebuttal to institutional colonization also led him, in his debut solo show in New York, to present four blue rimmed Dannon yogurt cups, stuck to the four walls of the Marian Goodman Gallery as his installation. It was at once a way to defuse and confound expectations, as it was to make the statement that his debut will be purely on his own terms. This quiet confidence have led to brazen acts of fresh ideas. In *Parking*, 1995, a work realized in an exhibition of his drawings at Micheline Szwarger Gallery in Antwerp, he converted a room of the gallery into available parking space, and invited the public to use the gallery as

such. In this manner, it would seem that each staged action or intervention are made to produce new questions and reconsiderations of the status of art, act, space, and context.

As one thinks through his work, the question that has often encircled considerations of Orozco's conceptual work is: "What is it exactly that Gabriel Orozco does?" Which could also be taken to mean: "What forms do his art projects bear?", that is to say the logocentric imprint of his defining style. The clearest answer is obviously contained in the ravishing indeterminacy of what his works come to mean and its infinite silences within any given social or epistemological context, particularly in the postcolonial space of Latin America and the western cosmopolitan space within which he has attempted nothing less than a reorganization of the concept of public speech and iconographical texts. Thus far Orozco has eluded classification, even though his work remains precise in its directness and clarity.

[1] Robert Storr, *Setting Traps for the Mind and Heart*. Art in America, January 1996, p.72
 [2] Louisa Buck, *Fever Pitch*. Artforum International, October 1996, p. 35
 [3] Mary Jane Jacob, "Introduction and Acknowledgements." *Gordon Matta-Clark: A Retrospective*. (Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 1985) p.8. Quoted by Ann Goldstein, in *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965-1975*. (The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles and MIT Press, Cambridge, 1995) p.174

[4] Gordon Matta-Clark in Donald Wall, "Gordon Matta-Clark's Building Dissections," *Arts Magazine* 50, no. 9 (May 1976) p.76. Quoted by Ann Goldstein. *Ibid*
 [5] Roosaling Krauss, "The Originality of the Avant-Garde," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, (The MIT Press, Cambridge, 1985) p.152
 [6] *Ibid*
 [7] *Ibid*, P.160
 [8] *Ibid*, p. 161