

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

BOMB

Gabriel Orozco

by Carmen Boullosa (Winter 2007)



La D.S., 1993. All images courtesy of the artist and, unless otherwise noted, Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

Lyricism and humor. Who hasn't seen one of Gabriel Orozco's works? A Citroën sliced lengthwise into three long pieces, then reassembled without the middle part (La D.S., 1993, on exhibit at the Beaubourg in Paris). A ping-pong table made of four courts and a small pond in the middle (Ping Pond Table, 1998). A small billiards table that functions as a pendulum (Oval with Pendulum, 1996). Full-size pianos with two keyboards (Mother, 1998). Ribbons of toilet paper suspended from a ceiling fan (Toilet Ventilator, 1997–2001). An elevator, outside its shaft, situated in a room (Elevator, 1994). A ball of modeling clay that was rolled through a city and picked up trash as it went, the marks left in it forming a sort of urban fingerprint (Yielding Stone, 1992). Reconstructed chessboards with varied proportions, their pieces strangely arranged (Horses Running Endlessly, 1995).

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A handful of clay, marked with the impressions of the artist's fingers, clenched in his hands against his naked chest (*My Hands are My Heart*, 1991); the trace that a dog's tail leaves in the sand (*Dog Circle*, 1995); yellow Schwalbe motorcycles, alone and in groups (*Until You Find Another Schwalbe Motorcycle*, 1995); watermelons wearing empty cat food cans like hats (*Cats and Watermelons*, 1992); an ice cream cone on top of a bush (*Ice Cream House*, 1995); a mist of breath on a surface of polished varnish (*Breath on Piano*, 1993). And one very long et cetera of sculpture, photography, video, installation, and drawing.

Gabriel Orozco refuses to produce a specific kind of piece. His work is a continuous exploration, revealing a spirit of equal parts wit and amazement, open to surprise. The variety and spectrum of his oeuvre is astonishing. Nonetheless, his aesthetic is consistent, closer to that of a poet than that of a painter: he finds hidden revelations in the everyday. His pieces appear almost drenched in laughter, but the ideas behind his work, although they celebrate spontaneity, don't scorn the intellectual. He's aesthetically the opposite of Duchamp or of the Surrealist project: Orozco finds hidden meanings, he leaves his own mark. He avoids mixing dreams with reality. He holds close to what is real, forcing it to be "realer" than it already is. He unmask's art's essence, playing with objects while at the same time practicing a sort of dissection of his own constructs.

Without doubt, Orozco is Mexico's best-known living artist. Having returned to live in Mexico, where he was born in 1962, Orozco spoke with me about how he sees himself in relation to the Mexican artistic tradition, his reformulation of public art, his roots, if he wants to be classified by one particular label or none, his role as an artist, his cities, his current projects, and some aspects of his vast oeuvre. During our conversation, Orozco referred to only two writers, Wilde and Borges, but it's evident to anyone who views his work that his ties to literature run deep. If the richness of Orozco's work owes as much to literature as to his willing, daily contact with the world at large and art in general, that may explain why so many writers as well as visual artists are fascinated by his art.



Yielding Stone (Piedra Que Cede), 1992. Plasticine and dust.

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Carmen Boulosa Where do you place yourself within the Mexican tradition of visual arts? How do you feel face-to-face with our “classics”? Do you have any dialogue with them? Your father was the artist Mario Orozco Rivera.

Gabriel Orozco The artists who always interested me, the ones I have felt most drawn to, were the muralists. I grew up seeing their kind of art. My father had worked with Siqueiros for all those years, so he had the same kind of political leanings as the muralists, their social commitment with leftist political tendencies. It was always very exciting for me. The truth is that I strongly identified with the muralists. And, on the other hand, I felt a certain distance from and distaste for the following generation, the generation that broke with them, the self-proclaimed “Ruptura generation.” I don’t think they made any important break, not even with the type of government (the PRI: Institutional Revolutionary Party) that was somehow created at that time, with the muralists and their ideology, and that over the years became decadent. This Ruptura generation was apparently not interested in political issues, or building an idea of nationality or retelling our history. Formally, they weren’t very exciting to me either. After that, what came next was a sort of postmodernist tendency that tried to revive the cliché of some Mexican symbolism, which I didn’t like either. The neomexicanismo after the Ruptura was like trying to solve the problem of dull formalism with surrealistic identity folklore, and that was the worst.

Despite all that fascination with the muralists, though, I never tried to make murals. But growing up, I worked as an assistant with my father on his murals, firstly because I wanted to buy myself a car and needed some money (which means that by the time I was 16 I was already quite well trained), but secondly because it’s true that I always wanted to be an artist.

CB And it is also true that you too create a strain of public art. No doubt the Mexican muralists did go in a totally different direction—they were rebuilding the idea of Mexico, reformulating history and our identity, in small or big formats, in open spaces or on canvas meant to be indoors—but in some ways you share the same will: you pick up what people have abandoned in the streets and turn it into a piece or part of a piece; you want to involve the individual in the “City.” You have reformulated the tradition of public art.

GO I’ve always had a conscious desire to do so; I was very interested in showing my work to the public. The fact that I didn’t have a permanent studio, that I didn’t want my work to enter the abstract bubble of formal circulation, was part of that. I try to make language confront reality, the reality of the street and what goes on there. That’s how I’ve developed a lot of my artistic activities.

Now, I wasn’t interested in having a political experience with the public, nor an ideological one, meaning I tried to avoid using clichés like “What does it mean to be Mexican?” or “What is the nation?” et cetera. Mostly, I tried to face myself as an individual, as a person of a determined physique. I wanted to recuperate a sense of human scale in dealing with the public. Mexican muralism, which tends toward the monumental, is art for the masses, for the people, the Mexican people. It’s aimed at the public in a very general way. I wanted the opposite, a sort of intimicism that was directed at the isolated individual—not only in the physical sense but also in the symbolic sense, in the way that a body leaves a mark on the landscape.

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In my work, I wanted to leave the mark of the human body, the mark of my own body, but I wasn't interested in affirming a particular race, gender, creed, or anything like that. I wanted to leave that space open, to be occupied by that someone else who is looking at my work.

So I have been intrigued by public art since my childhood, but I've also had a desire to free myself from the clichés of Mexican public art, without falling into the spiel, if you will, of abstract intimicism, isolated from all reality.



Galaxy Pot, 2002. Plaster and gouache.

CB I would say that you are obsessed with making visible what's private, what's not visible to others.

GO All of this points to an intention. My piece with the oranges (Home Run, 1993) is clearly public art; I think of it as a mural, although it's obviously not a painting, but it happens on one plane, on a temporal level. In that piece I intervene in the building that's facing the Museum of Modern Art in New York, asking the neighbors to place oranges on top of teacups and vases in their windows that face the museum windows. In my eyes it's public art. Public doesn't just refer to a spatial level anymore; it's not just what happens on the street, it's also when private spaces become part of a public experience. Of course, it depends on the type of material that's used and other factors. There's a dialectical relationship between private and public, between personal and general, between individual identity and collective identity. This point is very important for me on a thematic level as well.

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CB But can I in fact say that you are a Mexican artist, or should I say that you are an artist of the Americas? Or do you prefer to choose other roots? There's no doubt that the Mexican muralists were influenced by contemporary European art and Russian Constructivism, but they did choose to use the Mexican label. Their generation needed it; it was part of their work. Would you use any identification of this kind for yourself?

GO I'm not interested in applying a label or identifying my work. There are certain works of art, or periods, when artists turn into patriotic symbols and acquire a great collective importance. But what makes a piece—or a body of work, or a particular artist—become part of the identity of a nation or a group of people? That, in the end, is what makes an artist great—becoming part of that identity—and not so much the premeditated subject matter. In art, the original intention of the artist isn't what counts: what counts is when, in the end, a society, or a group of people at a historic moment, choose to identify with a piece or an individual artist. It seems useless to disagree. It is useless to disagree; it is the way it is.

All art, in every part of the world, is made up of different “international” influences. They are found in every artistic movement in every period, because artists will always be inspired by what's around them. At the end of the 19th century, the influence of Japanese art was decisive for the Impressionists, for example. Japanese art is very important for the West today, and for me, just as Zen Buddhism is. Hindu art has also been very important to me, since I was a child. These sweeping mixtures and interests are necessary for any artist.

But it's a funny thing. Cubism comes from African art, for example, but Japanese prints had a much more lasting influence in Western art, up until the end of the 20th century. If you think about a Mexican artist like Francisco Toledo, you must think about African art and also consider Paul Klee's influence, and that of Occidental art. Although Toledo is an artist who's very much identified as Mexican and, moreover, as Oaxacan. These kinds of mixtures signal a widespread attitude in any artist who is trying to understand the universe, because it's no longer just one's own country that is interesting.

Besides that, if we speak of influences or roots or something that nurtures and inspires an artist, I think that in a very natural way I am an international artist, not because I've decided to be one, but because I feel that the art world has adopted me, too. In that community, I can establish contact with people who really understand the type of work that I do.

In the relationship between art and the viewer, the place also decides temporally what is liked, who likes it, what they're conversing with, et cetera. Oscar Wilde said it well: there are three Ps that are the enemies of art: the Prince, the Public, and the Pope. I am with him there. Not for the nation, not for the money, not even for the people. As an individual you try to find yourself in the middle of all this, in this turbulent zone, but when the artist presents himself as an individual in this experiment, other people, as individuals, begin to connect to the artist. I communicate with individuals, and they are in contact with a personal and direct experience when they view my art.

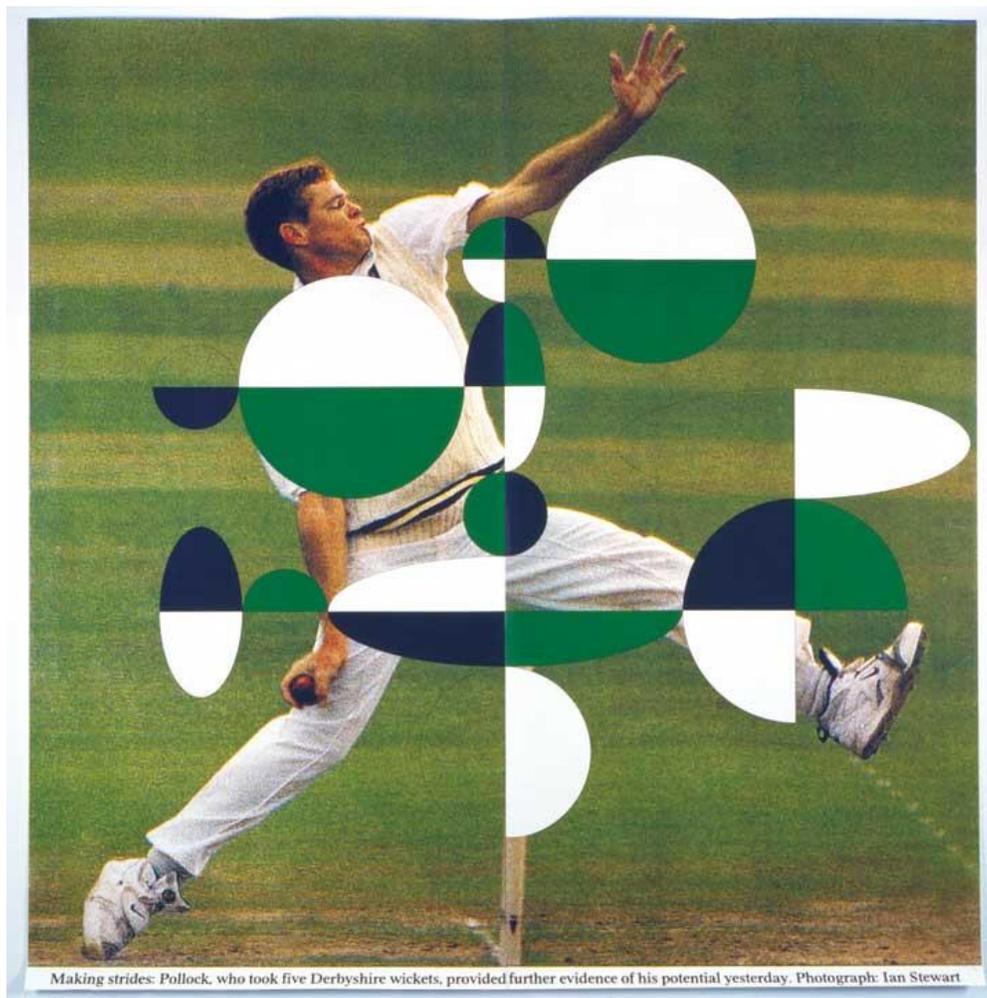
CB With what kind of memory and with which resources do you try to communicate this to individuals?

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GO One thing that I've had to learn as an artist—considering how everything that I had learned about what art should be and what art was, and what an artist should be like (disciplined, following the love of the craft)—was that this didn't work for me. Suddenly I had to take all of these notions apart, because they weren't mine, they weren't enough for me; they bored me and threw me into despair. It was a system that really didn't work for me.

Realizing this gave me a very different vision; I think it has repercussions in the way in which my pieces started to turn out, because I understood at last that my urgent struggle was to find something that was not art. In that sense, I'm not sure if people who consider themselves “educated” understand what art is; I think not.

I saw that “educated” people as well as “ignorant” ones immediately viewed my work with disapproval: the yogurt lids, the balls of Play-Doh. With ignorant people, it's obvious that you have to try to destroy their prejudices, but with educated people it's the same thing, you also have to destroy their prejudices—and their judgment. In their case, it's a prejudice regarding what they ask of and from art. But as Borges said, we don't know what art should be, and we don't need to find out, either; what we seek is to understand the reason why art exists.



Making strides: Pollock, who took five Derbyshire wickets, provided further evidence of his potential yesterday. Photograph: Ian Stewart

Atomists: Making Strides, 1996. Computer generated print.

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CB Do you think that the role of the artist has changed these days with the new global communications and the new media and the new sensibility created by the above, plus, of course, cinema?

GO The artist's role differs depending on which part of the world you're in. It depends on the political system you're living under. I saw that clearly when I lived in New York and Paris, and now here in Mexico. To be American is different from being French, and the role of the artist depends on the place. The leading trend is the American model, a model that has spread across the world with ease. It's a very developed market where art circulates in its own distinct way and the artist has his or her own distinct place. It's very different from how it works in a nation like France. In the United States, the market rules, but in France the artist has a much more elevated status, he or she functions somewhat like a diplomat. In the U.S., the artist is many times richer than in France, but considerably less important.

In Mexico, the artist's role is similar to that in France. For the French state, the artist plays an important role, but in the U.S., the state almost doesn't matter when it comes to art. Since the '70s, the market has imposed several new variations on the way that art functions.

CB What are these imposed variations?

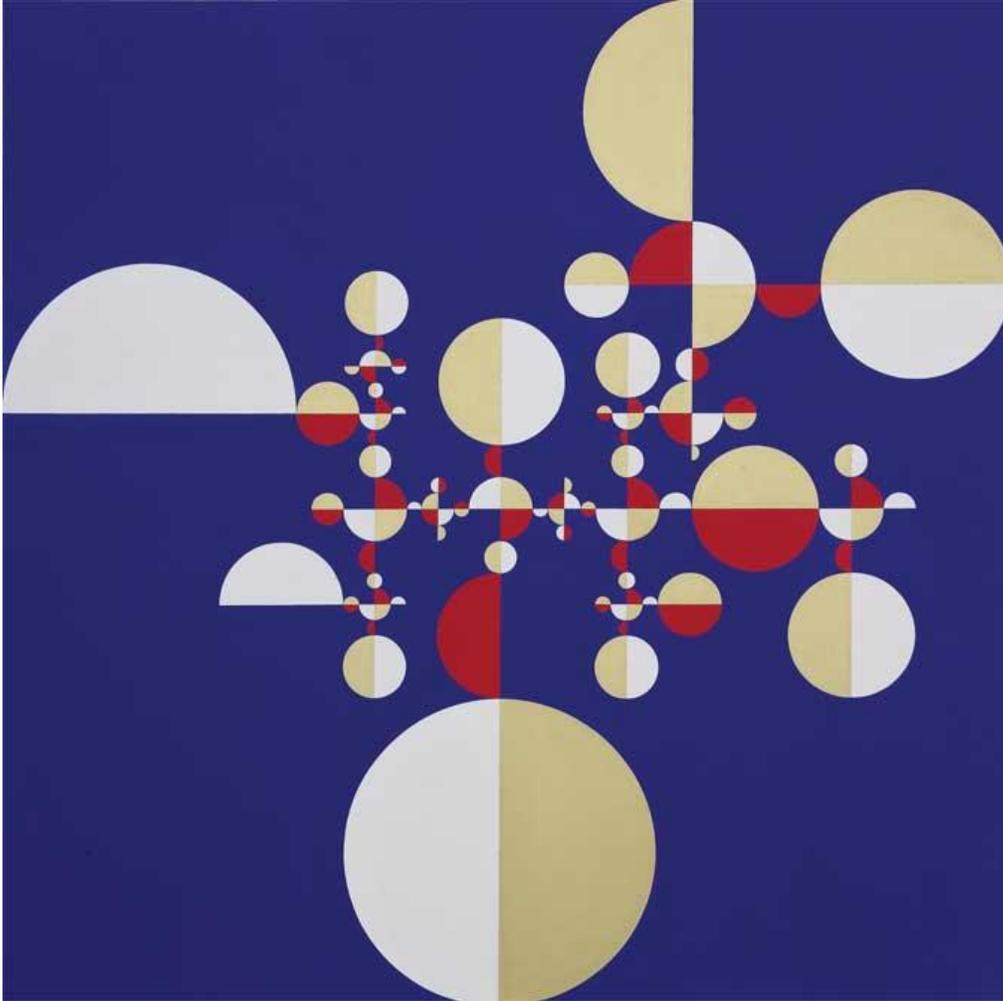
GO Big companies and the government can present the same danger, perhaps the contemporary version of what the Pope was—investing money in images and objects as propaganda of faith, taste, and status to convert people to the “free” market “democracy” discipline.

CB Is there any specific material you would like to talk about that could show us how you choose the material for a piece?

GO Like everyone, I had odd, unmatched socks. Suddenly I realized that I had a connection with the infinite through those socks. They belong, we could say, to a sort of blown-up cosmos, full of odds and ends. My piece is made of socks full of papier mâché, inflated so they look a little like a gourd or a melon. When I was making them, I was living in New York. I would hang them from my window on 12th Street, from the stairs of the fire escape where they were visible to everyone down on the street. People would stop and stare at them; they looked a little like pumpkins.

I got the idea to make this piece—separate from all of my amateurish metaphysical meditations—from watching Mr. Bean on television one day. There's a scene in the park where he's brought everything he needs to make his lunch, a sandwich. He takes out an immense jar of mayonnaise, an enormous pickle, and an entire bag of sliced bread. He takes out two heads of lettuce and goes over to the water fountain and washes them. Then he takes off a shoe and throws it to the side. He takes off his sock, stuffs the lettuce inside the sock and begins to shake it; this was drying the lettuce. Then he takes the lettuce out of the sock and puts it on the bread, finishing the sandwich. I was laughing at the scene and wanted to play as if I were Mr. Bean. So I filled my sock with papier mâché and I put it out to dry, too.

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Samurai Tree (Invariant Blue), 2005. Acrylic on linen canvas.

CB One of the qualities I admire in your work is that you can feel from your pieces what's going on now, the moral momentum. The presence of this immense amount of visual information in our society—the visual banquets that are available for anybody on the TV screen, in video games, on the web, or in movies. You don't hide from that; you face it. I would call you “an artist of our time.” Would you agree?

GO I don't believe that introspection works as a defensive weapon against the spectacle of violence all around us. I don't think that curling up like a frightened woodlouse or a snail is the solution. That's just something that an isolated artist thought up in his moment: the notion of art in seclusion, free from the world.

But I'd say no. In fact, that is the great problem here: how to resolve the confrontation between the performance and the public. It must be faced; it must be met head-on, because we should be affected by it. To begin with, we have to revise the scale. I don't believe that a bigger object is more powerful than a smaller one. I don't think that size is all that matters, because there's also the effect of time, especially when we analyze a small gesture, like a wisp of breath on a piano, that can have a stronger impact on our memory than a skyscraper ever could.

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I think the smallest gestures that we make in our lives can have much greater repercussions than some things we might consider to be more forceful. You can say the same thing about your house: maybe there's a hotel that you only stayed at once, but the memory of that hotel could be much more important to you than the house where you've lived for years.

In art it's the same: there are pieces that require years to complete, but aren't as stunning as the quick one that came about all at once one day. Sudden illumination is possible, but you have to know how to pay attention to it and separate it from everything else, because it passes by in an instant. Some works require it, others don't. But size, without doubt, isn't the primary factor here, nor is the spectacle. There are images of great power and daring out there, but there is also a lot of empty showiness in the media these days. Art that is violent but lacks strength. Also, there's a side of art nowadays that follows Hollywood trends, because there's a market that demands that kind of thing. But an artist has to find his or her own scale. A special effect isn't all that matters. The littlest things in life can be charged with meaning.

CB To which of your three cities, New York, Paris, or Mexico City, do you now feel more linked?

GO I always keep up connections in the various cities where I've lived. But now I'm in Mexico. Mostly for personal reasons—being here with Simon, my son—but also because ever since Bush became president, I really don't feel like living in the United States. I developed a huge grudge against him. Also, New York under Giuliani changed so much. Suddenly I've realized how much I liked Clinton, and how much I felt at home in New York in those days. But it's not just the U.S. that has changed. The truth is that most presidents seem nasty these days—Chirac, for example.

It's not that I have close ties to the political elite, or that I go around chanting leftist slogans. For the first time in my life I've accepted a commission from the state here in Mexico. I'd never done a work of public art in the literal sense before, much less by commission, but I dared to take it on, primarily because, when it came down to it, the then president was the first in many years to be actually elected by the popular vote—Fox's government was elected as a democratic government. Also, I liked the building at the National Library that was going to house the piece; and the architect, Alberto Kalach, did a good project. [See Jose Castillo's interview with Alberto Kalach, pp. 76–82.] As soon as the idea for the piece came to me, to work with a whale, I imagined it on the ceiling. I decided to go through with it and accept the commission if they accepted my idea. And they did, immediately. I was aware of how difficult it would be to make public art of that type, because for the past 20 years, Mexican public art has been made as a kind of corporate, monumental, abstract art commissioned by the state or the capital to complement the structure of the party then in power (PRI).

Anyway, I wanted to work with real whalebones. So it was good that this was a commission from the government, because Mexican law protects whales; they are part of our patrimony and can't be exploited, traded, or used in any way. It's been like that since May 2002—there was a lot of pressure to make this happen. In 2000, Greenpeace presented to the president a proposal to protect the whales (to make a santuario ballenero) signed by 120,000 Mexicans and 125 Mexican and international NGOs. A commission was the only way to make this piece, because by making it for the library it remains in the hands of the state; it's national property from start to finish.

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Making it is a sort of rescue; there's something political and ecological about it, something to do with national-culture symbolism as well, like the serpent and the eagle, because since the whale belongs to the nation, it can be a symbol of another sort.

It's the only whale skeleton in Mexico installed properly. It's been slightly criticized in the newspapers, of course, because we are in a critical moment, during a very heated electoral year, and every project is perceived as an electoral move, but while I'm political, I'm no politician, and for me elections and presidents are just collateral damage.

CB What are you working on now?

GO I've been working with tempera on gilded cedar. Returning to Mexico, I found an amazing restorer, and after I watched him work, I decided to try my hand at it. I'm working with gilded wood, burnished gold, and tempera paints, using a very ancient technique. I'm very satisfied with this painting and its images and forms. That's what I'm up to now: I am painting . . . and giving interviews.

—Carmen Boulosa is one of Mexico's leading novelists, poets, and playwrights. The prolific author has recently published *La novela perfecta* (Alfaguara), a novel set in Brooklyn and Mexico City. Two of her novels have been published in English (*Cleopatra Dismounts* and *They're Cows, We're Pigs*, both Grove Press). Boulosa currently teaches at City College in New York.