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To Make an Inner Time: A Conversation with Gabriel Orozco

by Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, Carrie Lambert-Beatty, and Megan Sullivan
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Gabriel Orozco*

BENJAMIN H. D. BUCHLOH, CARRIE LAMBERT-
BEATTY, AND MEGAN SULLIVAN

Benjamin Buchloh: We just had a panel on Fluxus.¹ I wish Gabriel could have attended it, since Fluxus was very important in his art-historical horizon. We have set up the conversation in traditional academic fashion. One of us will talk about sculpture, one will talk about painting, and one will talk about performance. Megan Sullivan, Carrie Lambert-Beatty, and I developed some questions in advance (which we gave to Gabriel). Gabriel has been making extraordinary work for . . . I was going to say fifteen years, but when I saw the Mexican retrospective a couple of months ago, they started the exhibition with work he did when he was twelve years old.

Gabriel Orozco: My mother was the curator.

Buchloh: There is a certain cult in the construction of a national hero that has afflicted Gabriel by now, and that will inevitably become part of our discussion as well. So Megan Sullivan, who is working on questions of postwar Latin American art, will initiate this conversation.

Megan Sullivan: Gabriel, I wanted to begin by talking a little bit about your recent paintings. Why, after so many years working mainly in sculpture and photography, did you decide to return to painting, and why in the sort of abstract geometric way that we can see in *Symmetrical Tree*, for example?

Orozco: This type of geometric investigation has been happening in my work since the beginning. You can see it in my drawings and in my notebooks. Developments with circles and four colors and axes: they were always applied to collage or text or next to things. They were in the back of my work. I used them in the *Atomist* series in 1996. The first time I showed this type of work was in the Gwangju Biennial in 1994 or '95, with pieces in which geometric figures had been applied to sports photographs. And

* This public conversation took place at the Sackler Museum at Harvard University, April 18, 2007, under the auspices of the M. Victor Leventritt Lectures on Latin American Art.

1. "Between Object and Event: Beuys and Fluxus in Context," a M. Victor Leventritt Symposium at the Harvard Art Museum," April 13–14, 2007.

then four years ago, I decided to show them in a big format and with no readymade background. In the *Atomists*, the photograph in the background is the readymade and on top of that I applied the geometric structure. I took the color from the background of the photo—expanding the dots of the photographs, from which I took the colors: bringing them to the front plane and amplifying these dots, and then crossing them with axels so that they form a kind of structure that is independent of the photo, completely arbitrary. I wanted to elicit the dynamic that is intrinsic in the photo. Somehow most sports photography gets boring over time, and I don't know why. It can be a great photograph, and it can be a great photographer—even Rodchenko—but somehow time passes and the photograph becomes uninteresting. So I was thinking maybe we need to disturb the photograph with something, and in this case I decided to disturb it with some kind of structure, some kind of geometric thing that will cancel, partially, the photo, and that will reveal the photo in a different way. It is a kind of a static geometric structure, but when applied to a kind of dynamic photography, it starts to interact with, and I think revitalize, the motion of the photograph.

Basically, I am not thinking about painting so much as I am thinking of the structure of this geometry, and I apply that to everything I can. So now I am applying colors on a canvas, or on wood, on gold, but this is still a kind of sculptural—I don't like the word “sculptural,” but maybe a three-dimensional investigation. Though it is kind of weird to say these are three-dimensional investigations, this is something that has to do more with structure and with movement and gravity and three-dimensionality than with painting. Painting is just a support that I am using for this research. And I don't consider it going back to painting because it is like another planet; it is not like I was doing painting and now I am doing painting again; it is just completely different. It is like traveling to a new country. A country that I have visited before, but this is a new trip.

Sullivan: You carry over the motifs of the circle and the ellipse—which have shown up in your sculpture, your photographic work, and your drawings—into your paintings. But a found sphere like an orange, or a sphere made in a hand or with the body—do these spheres function for you in the same way? Or is there a difference between the perfect geometrical shapes in the paintings and an imperfect sphere that you find in the world, or that is interacting with reality?

Orozco: I think in general, time and erosion are important in all the spherical objects I use and draw. I am not claiming any kind of purity in the painting or any kind of geometric perfection; on the contrary, they are hand-made, and when you see them in reality they look quite imperfect, almost child-like. I will even say that they are quite clumsy as paintings, they don't look

like Vasarely's—which I always admired—but I just cannot make it the same. I got interested in this idea of erosion and time being manifested in bodies that are circulating, in how you can perceive and sense time in the constant erosion of things happening. For me, a sculpture or an object in movement is represented by a sphere, like a planet, which of course is not perfect because it is an organic shape. I am interested in the accident and the accident tends to erode structures. So if we think of a geometric structure in our brain, how we believe things should be, this is a kind of structure. And then reality and accidents collapse our notions of what things are at a philosophical level or a geometrical level or a phenomenological level. The sphere and movement in this constant happening is what I am interested in. Sometimes they look more geometric and sometimes they look more organic.

Sullivan: But time and erosion, these categories you are bringing up, are they operative in these recent paintings?

Orozco: I think so. They will be—I mean painting is in many ways the most fragile support in art. Of course we have a big apparatus in the art industry to keep paintings alive, but if you think about it, it is the most fragile thing. I am sure they are going to get damaged. And I am not only interested in time in painting in a physical way but also in a mental way. We know how time erodes a painting through weather exposure, dust accumulation, or color vanishing, but it is interesting to remember how our mental changes can influence (and potentially erode) even more dramatically and more quickly the perception (and eventual durability) of a painting. We should remember that our mentality changes the status of a painting much faster than the weather does. Today most paintings don't last more than six months.

Sullivan: Yve-Alain Bois has talked about your recent paintings in relation to the prewar European avant-garde, particularly Piet Mondrian. I was wondering if you had thought of them at all in relationship to the postwar Latin American reading or misreading of that movement, particularly because there have been many exhibitions of geometric abstraction from Latin America recently, both on that continent and in the United States.

Orozco: "Postwar Latin American"? Which war? In Mexican terms, the revolution was more important. We had the revolution and then the muralists, and then I guess the Cold War was happening in a way and was affecting art in Mexico like in all of Latin America.

Sullivan: But after the Second World War, there was a dramatic change. In Argentina, Venezuela, and Brazil, there was a lot of hard-edge geometric abstraction coming out of that moment, and this has been billed to the international scene as a legacy of twentieth-century Latin American art.

Orozco: I was kind of joking, but I have to say that we don't talk in those terms. I don't think in those terms: first of all I am not specifically into Latin

American geometric abstraction. Of course, I like to see and think about abstraction in general, but from before the war. I am much more into thinking about Rodchenko or Schwitters (who were, by the way, very influential in Latin America, Schwitters especially); but the classic geometric Latin American artists are not something I would say is important for me. The funny thing is that geometry looks so much the same, and in the word “abstraction” we tend to put so many things together that we need to analyze; probably we need to fragment the words “abstraction” and “geometry” and divide them in many ways. I think that geometry is something that has to be in the work of every artist somehow. At least for me that has been very important, as I said, it is in the back of my work, in the way of thinking, in the way of building up my sculpture—even when doing actions outside there is always a geometric interest behind them. My main critique of Latin American abstraction, if you want to call it that, is that it became a one-liner and in the end is kind of flat. I am generalizing, but I would be more interested in Lygia Clark’s abstraction and how it became a kind of body action in relation to many things: that kind of abstraction collapsing with reality. The problem is that abstraction in general (not just in Latin America, it happened in this country too)—abstraction in itself, just like that, like a Platonic image—is boring at the end. Sorry to be so flat.

Sullivan: So for you these paintings are . . .

Orozco: Flat and boring.

Sullivan: That is not what I was going to say. I saw them more as a break with your earlier work, but the way you are speaking about them it seems that you understand them as quite a natural outgrowth of what you had been doing before with your photographic practice, with your sculptural practice.

Orozco: I will try to say I agree. I know the fact that they are paintings is disturbing. I was thinking maybe I should make them in lacquer or in some different technique. Somebody told me that they could be considered photographs, which I thought was an interesting thing to say. Some people say that my photographs are not photographs, that they are like sculptures. And obviously, I like to break the division of techniques. I don’t think it looks like a painting, I think it looks like a mobile. I mean, maybe it’s just me, but I see something floating there. You could imagine that it is rotating or floating like a Calder. I tend to think about them as if they were flat mobiles. Of course, the background is important and I put the background in other ones, but I also think they look like structures of some kind of molecular thing. So I think the fact that they are paintings is secondary: I think they are just objects that represent, or behave—I don’t like the word “represent”—like a real or natural or regular object or structure in the world. I was not interested in representing three-dimensionality in a visual effect like Op Art does. Trying to make the illusion of three-dimensionality, that is not



Gabriel Orozco. *Cats and Watermelons*. 1992.

something I am interested in. But thinking in three dimensions, I developed this system that I think is a way of expressing three dimensionality, and movement and growing and all the things I am interested in in my other work.

Sullivan: I know that the titles of several of your works seem to have references to nature: *Tree*, *Moon*, *Bubble*. Is that the ultimate referent for you for these works? Does it somehow refer back to the natural world?

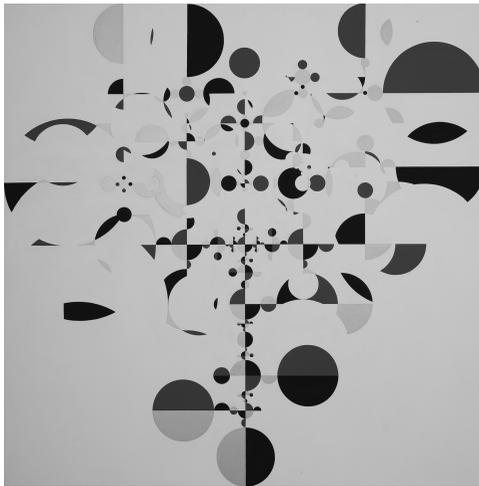
Orozco: Well, I don't like that question.

Sullivan: And why don't you like that question?

Orozco: Well, a lot of my photographs have titles that are very factual like *Cats and Watermelons*. They are real watermelons but they are not real cats, but if I titled the work *Cat Food Cans and Watermelons* it would be like, I don't know . . . Protestant? So, in the supermarket I did something absurd, I put this like that, and then I took a photo. And when you title an action that has this level of artificiality and at the same time has both natural and artificial objects, it can't be a baroque title, or a very strange title. When I say "cats and watermelons," I am lying; it is obviously not cats. But I tend to use a title that is very fast and easy to understand and plain. In the paintings, it is a little

bit more problematic, because when you say “moon axel” or “kite tree,” painting has a tradition, with Miró and others, where abstraction got a little bit organic and kind of figurative. I realize that, but I don’t think the title resolves the painting, just as it doesn’t resolve the photograph. There is a way of having a title that is maybe connected with facts, like “red on red.” But titles in paintings should be almost forbidden.

Buchloh: A question that I ask myself again and again when I am confronted with your work is, What is it like to be a sculptor in the digital age? In the history of the twentieth century, we have heard a lot about the last painting or the end of painting, which has been declared again and again ever since 1921.



Orozco. Kytes Tree. 2005.

But I don’t recall anybody having declared the end of sculpture. I am sure sculpture has confronted similar problems: obviously we can say, looking at Brancusi, that the historical conflict where the sculptural became the mechanical, the machinic, never went away after it had been introduced by Duchamp. But now we are witnessing a technological development that dislodges all sculptural credibilities, and it seems the only option for sculpture is to become the fetish—the substitute of object experience, the substitute of corporeality that is not to be found anywhere anymore. And I wonder what it is like to knowingly, consciously, enter into that historical situation with work that has recourse to primitive forms of object experience—such as distributing a bunch of oranges in an empty stall in a Brazilian market—and call that sculpture. What type of spectatorial experience do you anticipate or aim at? Is it accurate to describe such a sculpture or sculptural performance as a kind of retreat into an object relationship that can be found nowhere else in everyday life?

Orozco: One question could be whether the digital is damaging. “Damaging,” of course, is a way to say that the relationship between photography and sculp-

ture is going to be deformed or manipulated in the age of digitalization. I think the digital has been more damaging for photography. The problem with sculpture is that it always has been an inconvenient object. I would say that in the twentieth century, they didn't even know where to put sculpture. It has been so uncomfortable that it needs a special place, but it is not intriguing enough to make its own room. So I think that probably it is because sculpture was long gone that we don't even need to say that it is now finished. In the case of painting it is different. Politically and economically, painting keeps coming back, it keeps going.

As to the "primitive" aspect, I think that one of the aims in my photography, and in my work in general, is to create an experience in the person who comes and looks at the work. I try first to generate an experience for myself in what we call reality—that can be in a market or can be with terracotta or it can even be thinking about geometry—and from that experience to generate an object that generates an experience for another person. My feeling is that in the photographs that I consider successful, people can feel the experience, or it contains the experience of that action. Even though it is a photograph, it is concentrated on the action so people can somehow recreate or re-experience mentally, but obviously also emotionally, the experience. So they are having an experience. They are not reading a document of someone else's experience. They are not looking at a fake of someone digitalizing an image that is not real anymore and that they know is not real, where they can have an experience but it is not real, it is something else, the illusion of an experience maybe. What I am trying to do is to recover the word "experience" in its full sense, from beginning to end. And in that sense, an object or a photograph or a drawing or a painting can be useful in the same way. The digital and the technological can be quite useful if they are capable of generating this experience and not just fakery or an illusion or something. It is funny, because I never use any digital corrections in any of my photographs, and you know the sizes are quite small. But there is always craft in printing a photograph. You have to talk to the lab; it is not just mechanical; you have to work on the color selection . . . it is a lot of work. So technology and craft and the mental or the intellectual and the "primitive" are always intersecting, and collapsing into each other. So that is why the word "primitive" does not work for me. I don't think in those terms. And at the same time, I am not afraid of digitalization in that sense. I think they work together. The *Atomist* works are done on a computer, selecting the dots of color and bringing them out. These ideas of micro and macro and expanding and overlapping graphics I think are about pixels and photography and perception.

Buchloh: This work (*My Hands Are My Heart*) is one that made you known to a wider audience in Europe and the United States, and I have often wondered what its secret of success and seduction is. Obviously, it is a work that comes very much out of our understanding of post-Minimal sculpture both in the European and the American contexts. I think it is almost unthinkable to





Orozco. My Hands Are My Heart. 1991.



Orozco. Half-Submerged Ferris Wheel. 1997.

look at this and not remember what Arte Povera was doing or Bruce Nauman was doing around 1968. The immediacy of incorporating the bodily imprint into the making of the sculptural object, and making the sculptural object nothing but the pure indexical trace of the process, are very much aesthetic strategies from the 1960s, and yet at the same time it results here in this sudden, striking iconographic object, the heart. And that is where the mechanism is triggered that I am particularly interested in and skeptical of, namely the reception of your work as a Mexican artist in the moment of globalization. Do you supply regional specificity, national identity, and cultural tradition at the very moment when they are disappearing, in the same way that tactility and object relationships are disappearing from the everyday life of everybody under the impact of technology? Is there a historical nexus in which you are being recruited as an example of the resources of national and regional identity for a global art world—as an international but nevertheless a specifically Mexican artist? Because I think if a German artist had made a heart, people would have just laughed. If a Mexican artist makes a heart or makes the skull people say this is the grand Mexican tradition, inescapably authentic. How do you struggle, if at all, with these questions?

Orozco: I don't struggle.

Benjamin: I do.

Orozco: I like the idea of connecting identity-specificity with body-specificity, or action. I like the idea that both of them, tactility and identity, are being erased by globalization. I think that this could be a problem not just for an artist but for anyone anywhere. But also it is quite tricky to show these works. I don't think I am an abstract sculptor or an abstract painter. I think in terms of specificity and reality. For example the *Déesse*: in this case I don't see why this would be French. It is a French car, I did it in France with a French assistant. The title is *Déesse*, because the name of the car is the Citroen DS. So it is a title that is metaphorical by accident. It is a natural title, I would say, but it is obviously a double game. With the heart I call it *My Hands Are My Heart* because somehow I thought it was a nice title. But I could call it something else. It is a title that I regret a little bit now because it is maybe too sweet or too poetic. I should call it *My Hands Are like My Shit*. It looks like a piece of shit. That would be better. Or, the *Black Kites*—you know, kites are not Mexican. They were invented in India, I think . . . And the Ferris wheel in *Half-Submerged Ferris Wheel* (1997) was related to Mexico but the Ferris wheel is an Indian invention. (Everybody knows soccer was invented in Mexico—which is why we haven't won the World Cup.) Anyway, I am trying to give many examples of this double play, of specificity transformed by someone



Orozco. La DS. 1993.

else that doesn't have to be of the same nationality. The specificity can become a common language, or sign that can be used by many other people.

What I am trying to say is that as much as a foreign artist can make an analysis in another country and use that—as we have seen throughout the twentieth century in the use of an instrument from another culture or research in the art of another culture—the artist can also act in his own culture and bring this specificity into his own research and find these signs or these objects that can talk in a common language. Because in the end, what makes a work of art a bridge of communication to other people and other cultures is a very complex mechanism that is not just decided by the artist and his specificity but is decided in a society. So is it British that Henry Moore used pre-Hispanic sculpture? Or is it just about an artist exploring other cultures? Or did he suddenly become Mexican? When I was a kid, there was discussion as to whether you were a national or an international artist. And “international” meant something wrong in Mexico because it was being like a flat abstract painter or a pro-American capitalist-society artist, and being national was being political and committed to your roots and class and your country, defending it from imperialism. These are still issues, but now the names are different and I think that we should be aware that these are issues and they are treated in many different ways and they are issues in art too. The problem is that you cannot solve those problems by dividing things so schematically. What I try to do is to be generic and universal somehow. To get into one specific object like the *Désse* or



Orozco. Yielding Stone. 1992.



Orozco. *Crazy Tourist*. 1991.

the shoe box or something like that and put it on display in an international, globalized context, would bring out all those questions, without me trying to explain my own identity—though maybe I would be confronting the identity of the art world. I don't have problems of identity; maybe the art world has identity problems.

Carrie Lambert-Beatty: To me, as much as you are an artist who makes things, you are an artist who does things. I know it is arbitrary to come back to traditional categories when talking to an artist who has done everything possible to scramble conventional media and work across them, but we have talked about painting and Benjamin has asked about sculpture, so I was wondering how you would feel about the rubric of "performance," or perhaps alternatively, "action," being used to talk about your work.

Orozco: Well, I think that the word "performance" is about a public action, and most of my actions are done in private. The public is there by accident. For example *Turista Maluco* is called that because there were two or three guys there, drunk, and it was at the end of the day, and I was playing with these broken oranges that had been thrown away after the market day. I started taking photos and the guys were screaming "turista maluco, turista maluco"—crazy tourist, crazy tourist—and that is not the sort of public situation that I like to confront, but it happened and it was fun somehow. But in general—even in the rolling of the plasticine ball, the *Yielding Stone*—I

don't have a cameraman next to me. I don't make videos. I do these things on my own and obviously I take the photos. So the action is quite private. In the supermarket, it is also quite private. I mean, there is always a guard looking at and following me, because of my "strange behavior," but I try to sneak out and do my "work." Because for me it is very important that the actions happen in reality's terms, not as a kind of set spectacle or in an auditorium, or even in the street with a meeting point or preparation. I like that my actions are in real time, in the real world, in a real situation. Alone, as with anyone else.

Yielding Stone, for example, is obviously the specific making of a sculpture. I bring the plasticine, I prepare it, and I roll it. But most of my actions are done with found objects—it is kind of a rule or a system to bring nothing with me. So that is why I don't think it is exactly performance. Actually, yes, it is an action, but it is a private action in a public space, if we can call it that, an action that obviously will become public, via photography or via the sculpture. But I don't think it is properly a performance.

Lambert-Beatty: So to have videotaped rolling the *Yielding Stone* or to have a photograph showing you doing it; are you saying that would be to make that experience less real?

Orozco: For me, yes, it would be too planned. In the case of *Yielding Stone*, when I showed it for the first time in Monterrey,² someone shot a video for the museum's records. But it was not part of my work. Someone was trying to have a record of how I made it. But it was very short and I was not very comfortable. Later I showed *Yielding Stone* at the New Museum, and they really wanted to make a video about it, but I didn't want that. I want the fact of doing these things not to become a spectacle but just a natural action, natural in the sense that it is actual or it just happens. For me, it is also very important that in the final image of the action I am not there. I like, in my sculpture and photography, to show that it is the space of a human body—a not particularly young, male Mexican human body—doing something. In my work, I want the person who made the work to disappear somehow. The experience is more that the spectator is identifying with that object or that action, without thinking about whether it is a male, female, Mexican, European, or something; that it is more like an open recipient. I could never work with a camera following me, because the whole context changes. If you are walking in the street with two or three people with a camera behind you, like in a documentary, everybody is looking at you in the street! And you start to look like a European artist followed by a documentary crew—like the documentaries they always do on European television.

Lambert-Beatty: By keeping your body out of the image the performance shifts to the side of the spectator—that is where the action happens.

2. Solo exhibition at Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Monterrey, Monterrey, Mexico, in 2001.

Orozco: Well, what was important for me was that my work is not a relic of past experiences. It does not document me having fun, and then other people have to look at me having fun. I think that is unfair. So what I try to do is this: when somebody looks at my work they get involved in the work and they can laugh as if it were happening right there in that moment. And that is the play of time that I am interested in, the possibility of creating real-time experience. And that can be done through photography. That, for me is what art, good art, makes: a real-time experience.

Lambert-Beatty: Would it be fair to say that somewhere in there is the politics of your work?

Orozco: Yes it is there. For sure. They talk about the museum and the spaces for art, but what for me is more important is the time for art. Of course, time and space are connected. But if you think about it, a museum, which is a space for art, doesn't guarantee that you are going to have a real-time experience with art. Maybe the space is too crowded, or the work is simply bad. There are many reasons that we can go to a museum and not have an art experience. I think there is something about generating the time for art for ourselves, in the world, that generates a situation in which the poetic—or the artistic, or the aesthetic, or the political, or whatever you want to call it—happens in real time in the spectator. That is why it has been important for me to try to erase identity, or the cliché of identity—not to show myself—because that will limit the perception of the identity of the person who is doing that. I try to make the body representation more like an empty space to be occupied rather than to represent my culture or my ethnicity or my sex or whatever, and in doing so generate this space in which anyone who is looking at it can be the one who made this, and find identity in that experience.

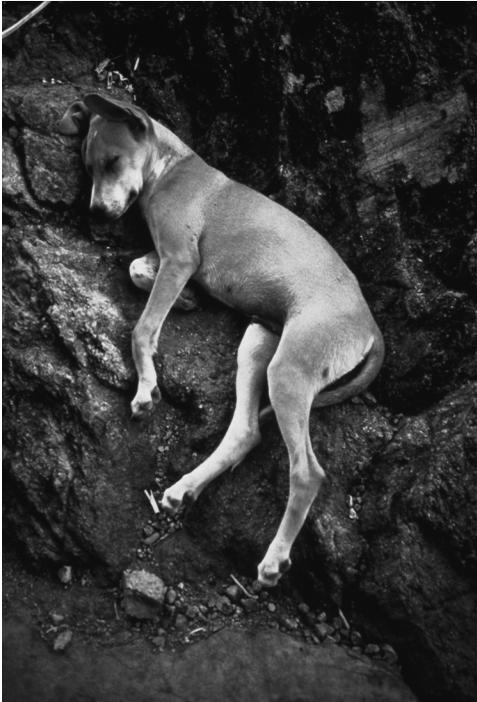
Lambert-Beatty: One of the things I love about work like *Cats and Watermelons* is the way it manifests or performs the desire to make a little mischief. A graffiti artist's mark says "I was here." To do this says: "creativity was here," or "someone with a sense of mischief was here." And in that way we get a shiver of thinking I could . . .

Orozco: . . . do that.

Lambert-Beatty: . . . make some little tiny change somewhere.

Orozco: Well, that is also what I don't like about documentation. The documentation is the end. Somebody comes to see the documentation of something. And that can be very inspiring, obviously, when it is a good action. That is why Fluxus documentation is interesting. But a lot of Fluxus work in the museum looks dead. It is like arriving late to a party and everybody is gone and there is nothing: that is what you feel in a bad Fluxus show. And in a lot of Conceptual art also you have these long lists of actions, and photos, usually in black and white—this is great, but I

really try to extend the experience. So in the *Yielding Stone*, for example, you have the plasticine, and obviously to roll it in the street was fun. Then you have the ball in the museum. But in the museum it still works because people come and touch the ball. Or in theory they touch it: of course the museum tries to make sure that people do not touch it. Because it is always soft, the plasticine keeps changing. Nothing happens if you touch



Orozco. Sleeping Dog. 1990.

it; it doesn't destroy the work. On the contrary, the fingerprints and the accidents are part of the piece. So the experience doesn't end in the museum, but it keeps going because the ball is rolling; it is still accidental; it is still consuming dust. Of course, you could say that if you take a pair of scissors and put it in a vitrine people could potentially still cut with it. But it has to be working intellectually through the work. "Intellectually" means, obviously, that it is an instrument that you can use again, but even if you don't touch it, it is still working. It is still generating an experience in the spectator and is not explaining a past experience, but is itself experience. It is phenomenological.

Buchloh: Thanks very much. We will take questions from the public now.

Audience: I have a follow up to the geometric-abstraction question. I was wondering, because of your stance against Latin American geometric abstraction, what you thought specifically about the work of Mathias Goeritz, who is a postwar abstract artist, somewhat geometric if you think of the gold squares for example, who was dealing with the notion of experience. He had a non-identity model of creating art—he was a German artist working in Mexico, but not necessarily representing either Mexico or Germany—and then ultimately he had a political agenda that has to do with the revival of the emotional and the experiential and the phenomenological as a catalyst for transformation in the perception of art, society, and the individual.

Orozco: I do not have the same perception of him. He was very religious, he uses a lot of crosses and Christs, and he believed in public sculpture in a very traditional way. Formally, he was connected to geometric abstraction—it was his time, also—but I think politically or philosophically he was different. He was not a concrete abstractionist, he was kind of a religious mystic abstractionist. Of course, there are many works I find interesting, but I would not identify with him. Curiously, in Mexico they just reopened the Echo Experimental Museum, one of the spaces he created, which was short-lived in the 1950s. It belonged to the university, which reconstructed the space, and I did a show for the reopening. I invited another two artists and we did the first show. There are many things I am interested in, but not this type of politics in terms of abstraction. That is why I think it is very important not to put all of abstraction in the same pot. I think there are many kinds. You have Rothko and you have Mondrian and you have Rodchenko and you have Schwitters; it is all so very different. Even the way of using language or using materials. “Abstraction” is a big, big term. So that is why, concretely, with Mathias Goeritz, I would prefer not to be too close.

Audience: The word that comes to mind is “iconic.” It seems to me, listening to you talk about your work, that it is a very un-iconic experience that you are looking for. I think with Goeritz there is a sense of the iconicity of the gesture.

Orozco: Well I don’t know how to take the word “iconic” because on the one hand I think that the photo of my hands and the “heart” is a very iconic photograph and I somehow was aware of that. It is very symmetrical, very straightforward. I could easily see that as a kind of icon, something that will stick in people’s minds. In some of my photos, like the one of the dog, you can see that. But the word iconic is a hard one. It has many directions.

Audience: You were talking about the time for art versus the space of art. You have participated in lots of biennials and in a Documenta, and, to speak generally about all those shows, they are spaces for art with no time built into them. This is a problem, and someone like David Hammons tends to not participate in

such shows because of it. In your work, including the Scarpa piece in Venice and the ceramic work at Documenta, you really used the venue as a challenge to make time in a specific way. I was wondering how you think about that problem.

Orozco: I have talked with David Hammons many times about this. I don't believe that to withdraw is a way of resolving the problem. He is a great artist, but of a different age and different background. For me, it was important to take the challenge. What I tried to generate was an inner time inside the timing of the biennial or the timing of the public art world's demands. Sometimes we are not in the same mood as the curators. Sometimes they ask me for a big work, really spectacular, and at that moment I am more into drawing. Or I know that it is going to be a huge new thing, really noisy—like with the Gwangju Biennial—and I see a lot of my colleagues preparing very big things to fulfill the momentum, and I try not to do that, but just to be very honest and ask myself what I really want to do in the moment. And I always think about the specifics of the context and the specifics of the place I am in, and then I try to combine all that, trying to make an inner time within the timing of the biennial. It works for some people, but obviously many people don't see anything there. That is part of it. So the shoebox in the Venice Biennale in 1993: this was my first Biennale, and my first international show in a way, and I showed a shoebox, empty. For many people this was shocking; for many people it looked like nothing. But I think for some people it was a special moment in the middle of this massive show. The Scarpa piece again plays with time—you have the real patio on the outside and the life-size model inside and that makes its own time, its own experience.³ So I think it is possible in any public space or museum to create this experiential time, if you can call it that, in which you can concentrate someone and generate consciousness of a very specific situation. It is possible.

Audience: Speaking of experience: what kind of inspiration do you get from Mexico City? I find it very wild as a city and very surrealistic.

Orozco: Well I don't know. It is wild like any other city. It just depends on what address you have. It is true that the city is not comfortable. It is getting better now, I like to think, in the outskirts. In New York as well, I like the borders, outside, where the city starts to collapse into nature. I can say that I like this collapse between the urban and the natural, between the structure of the grid of the urban and the plants and grass that it keeps collapsing into on the borders. It is not specific to Mexico City.

Audience: I have a rather different question about experience, following on the

3. *Shade Between Rings of Air* (2002) was a restoration and replication of Carlo Scarpa's 1952 Italian Pavilion, exhibited at the 2002 Venice Biennale.

kind of thing you were saying about the experience you hope the work catalyzes in the viewer. There is a statement attributed to Mark Rothko. It is apocryphal but I think also true, where he said that the viewer who weeps before my painting is experiencing what I experienced when I had the desire or was motivated to paint it. I am wondering to what extent you want to specify or control the experience; do you have in mind the nature of the experience that you might provoke in the viewer, or is it only important that your action is true enough, that you have an experience in your action that makes you feel confident that the viewer will respond? When you say that there is a real-time experience you want, do you have any thoughts about the nature of the experience you want to provoke?

Orozco: The problem is that you can have a great experience doing something but it doesn't mean that someone else is going to be interested and have a good experience with it. It is very interesting, because I do believe in desire in that sense. I do believe when you desire something you should not repress yourself, but start to look for what it is you want to do. You want to travel somewhere. Or you get attracted by this wall, and you have to see why you were attracted by that wall, or that puddle, or that trip. Desire is an important factor, and that is the first step. It is something that you want to provoke: desire. So there is of course sexuality involved, or the idea of the punctum of attraction, the idea of the object that has mystery and it is not so evident what it is, and you want to look for it, you have the desire to decipher that object.

Buchloh: That sounds very surrealist, doesn't it?

Orozco: Well, yes, but the end is not surrealist, I think.

Audience: Someone spoke a little bit about mischief, but you don't talk a lot about humor. In the way you approach a project or a sculpture or a moment, there is a certain amount of formal beauty that obviously goes into that decision-making. But how much do you think about humor? Sometimes, when I am drawn to certain parts of your work, there is something kind of smart-ass about it, in a very poetic way. When you approach a project, do you sometimes pull back because it is funny, or not serious enough? Or is that never a concern?

Orozco: Oh yes, it is a concern. That is why the desire is at the beginning. Then in the moment of doing, when you start to act, transforming something or building something, you get into a mood and a connection with that situation. Obviously, I do believe that a work you do in five seconds can be as strong as a work you do in one year's time, so I believe in small-gesture potential. These are proofs in a way. I didn't plan these pieces, they really

happened when I was there and they happened. Of course, doing this, and believing in your desire, you get a lot of things happening to you that are bad; you get into funny situations. But in the end, some of them are not that interesting. So editing after the action is important. In terms of the work that you show, you take the risk that in fact it is just fun and not interesting. But we have to take the risk. I try to edit myself; not cutting off the humor, but trying to make the joke or the irony interesting, so that it holds, and the humor is not just banal in the bad sense.