

UNITED 
Hemispheres

Crazy Tourist

*Conceptual artist Gabriel Orozco travels the world,
finding art in the most unusual places.*

by Aaron Gell (December 2009)



Portraits by Fiona Aboud

In 1991, the artist Gabriel Orozco went to Brazil to be with a girl. “I followed her because I was in love, okay?” he says of the Spanish anthropology student with whom he was smitten (she’s not his wife). “It was, you know, ‘Let’s go to Brazil.’ ‘Okay, whatever!’”

While his companion pursued her field studies, Orozco spent his days wandering the streets, thinking about art and philosophy and poetry and life, and mostly just looking. The 19th century poet Charles Baudelaire had a name for devotees of this sort of urban exploration—he called them *Flâneurs*—aristocratic gentleman who made an art form out of strolling aimlessly through the Paris, soaking up the ironic details of modern life. Orozco would take the practice a step further. When the urban landscape declined to offer up the sort of poetry he sought, he’d toll up his sleeves and create it.

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For instance, one day at dusk, Orozco found himself in the town marketplace in Cachoeira, a town in Bahia on the Paraguaçu River. The vendors had all gone home for the evening, and their rough-hewn wooden tables, normally laden with produce, were bare. A bustling town center by day, the place was deserted except for a handful of indigent men, who looked on quizzically as the young visitor contemplated the scene for a moment, spied a pile of rotting oranges in the corner and began bustling around placing them on the tables, positioning the fruit just so.

Orozco was performing what art world types might call “an intervention,” but his audience that evening just thought he was nuts. “Turista maluco!” they teased, as the artist took a few steps back and began to document the odd tableau with his camera.

Truth be told, the resulting photograph, *Crazy Tourist* (which will be on view at the Museum of Modern Art in New York beginning December 13 as part of Orozco's mid-career retrospective before traveling to the Kunstmuseum Basel and the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris) isn't really much to look at. Then again, that's kind of the idea. In fact, Gabriel Orozco is absolutely determined to underwhelm you.

It might seem an odd ambition, but for Orozco, who grew up in Mexico City surrounded by art (his father was a prominent muralist and his mother a pianist), only a viewer whose expectations have been dashed and presumptions shattered will be truly receptive to the elusive poetry of the moment, the kind that can creep up on you and change the way you see the world.

“Disappointment has always been important in my work,” the 48-year-old artist says with a smile, sitting at a sidewalk table at a coffee shop in New York's Greenwich Village.

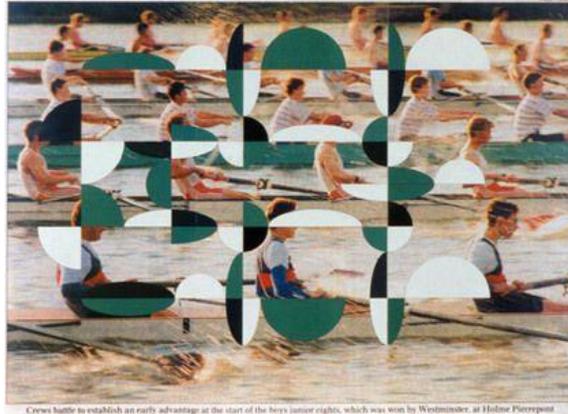
Dressed head to toe in black, Orozco is small and intense, with knowing eyes and slightly wild gray curls spilling over his ears. He currently divides his time between New York, Paris, Mexico City and Bonn, Germany, though he insists he feels at home everywhere. “It's not just traveling,” he says. “I think of it as *travel-living*, really a multicountry life. And I feel like we're really the first generation to do this. We're making it up as we go along.” With a four-year-old son, Simon, about to enter kindergarten, Orozco admits he may have to settle down soon. He's leaning toward New York, where he's currently overseeing construction work on a townhouse in the Village—not far, he points out with a raised eyebrow, from a Five Guys burger franchise. Orozco has an impish side, and while he generally gravitates to cerebral topics such as Monet's *Water Lilies* and the music of avant-garde composer John Cage, he's equally at home debating the merits of the *Speed Racer* movie, of which, perhaps surprisingly, he's a big fan.

Still, much as he loves the occasional visual extravaganza, he has no real interest in creating one. Having entered the art world at a time when in-your-face gestures and eye-popping if—not always profound—spectacles predominated, Orozco has generally headed in the opposite direction.

“An artist can always entertain or amaze or amuse,” he says in his slightly accented English. “It's not really very difficult to do that. But as usually happens with the spectacles put on by the entertainment industry, you tend to forget them as soon as you leave the theater or the gallery. Creating something that you actually remember later, that becomes important for you—that is not so easy.”

That's why, the artist adds, he tries so hard not to fulfill viewers' expectations. “Because only if your expectations are unmet can the poetic happen.”

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Crews Battle, 1996. Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery, New York

This counterintuitive approach has made Orozco one of the most celebrated artists of his generation, widely praised for his cryptic and deceptively low-key touch. One of his most famous pieces is a photograph of condensation from his own breath on a grand piano; another depicts the ephemeral trails left by his bicycle tires passing through a puddle. He's made mobiles from dryer lint and from ribbons of toilet paper suspended from ceiling fans. For one major European art fair in 1993, Orozco showed a piece titled *Empty Shoe Box*. (The real challenge of creating that work, he later said, was replacing the boxes when the custodial crew repeatedly tossed them out with the garbage.)

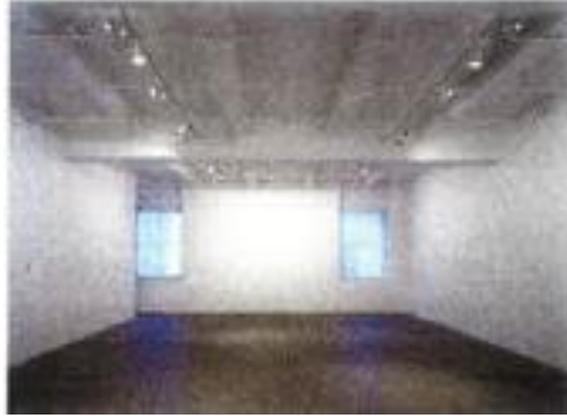


Empty Shoe Box, 1993. Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery, New York

And then there was Orozco's first solo show in New York, at Marian Goodman Gallery in 1994, which consisted of nothing more than four yogurt lids, affixed to each of the gallery's four walls. That piece, too, will be in the retrospective—and, yes, in case anyone's wondering, they're actually the same lids. "They were in the hands of a young collector," Orozco says incredulously. "He was crazy enough to buy them at the time. A New Yorker, of course."

It's tempting to discount such work as silly at best, a total scam at worst. That's exactly what many gallerygoers did when *Yogurt Caps* opened in 1994, emitting a knowing snort and heading down the block to the next gallery.

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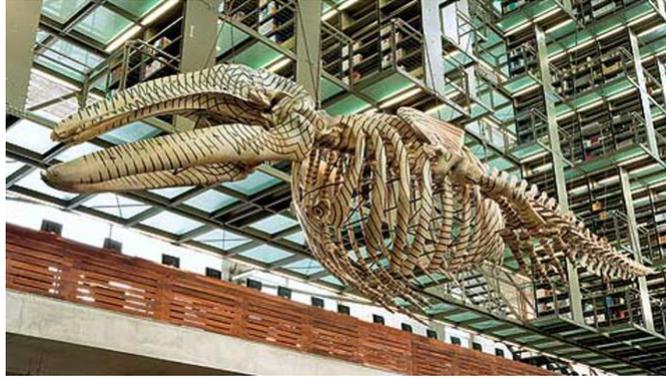
Yogurt Caps, 1994. Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery, New York

But then, Orozco would later recall, they started trickling back in. And this time, instead of dismissing *Yogurt Caps* as a smug joke, they let themselves sit with the work and actually absorb its strange resonance. Some no doubt recognized the piece as a direct descendant of the readymades of Marcel Duchamp and of Andy Warhol's famous Campbell's soup cans. Others might have noticed how the caps seemed to form an invisible cross, turning the room into a sort of shrine (a reference perhaps to the Catholicism of Orozco's homeland?). To others, the four caps recalled the points of a compass, prompting a new awareness of the empty space of the gallery itself, and of the cosmos beyond its walls. Because they were made of clear plastic, they were a little like windows or lenses, too, maybe portholes—but looking where? Some viewers studied the sell-by dates for some secret, like evidence at a crime scene. Others no doubt thought about the yogurt itself suddenly transported, like Proust with his madeleine, by their own memories of breakfasts gone by. And what of the artist? Presumably he'd actually eaten this yogurt, in which case the piece was a kind of self-portrait once-removed, hinting at a favorite snack. And on and on ...

To Orozco, all possible interpretations are valid. Indeed, the piece itself is secondary to the response it provokes. His intent with *Yogurt Caps* was simply to evoke that web of connections, to give birth to a moment of poetic reflection. "I want the art to be a kind of instrument for people to use for their own benefit," he says. "Art is not for entertainment, and it's not for pleasure. It's about something else altogether. Art is a tool. If someone, after looking at the work, can see things they never saw before in reality, that is one of the most important accomplishments for me."

While all of Orozco's works share the same goal, they reach it by wildly divergent paths—after all, you can show only so many shoe boxes. Indeed, some pieces have been remarkably elaborate. There was, for instance, *Mobile Matrix*, which consisted of the enormous skeleton of a gray whale, inscribed with a series of radiating lines and suspended from the ceiling of the Jose Vasconcelos Library in Mexico City. *La D.S.* was a Citroën that the artist had sliced vertically into thirds then reassembled without its center slice. *Elevator* is an empty elevator, salvaged from a demolished Chicago office tower and placed on its own in a gallery, lit invitingly within. And *Ping Pond Table* is more or less what it sounds like, but shaped like a four-leaf clover and with a lily pond in the center. In recent years, Orozco even returned to painting, going so far as to master Renaissance techniques for mixing pigments and applying gold leaf—an uncharacteristically traditional move that took the art world by surprise.

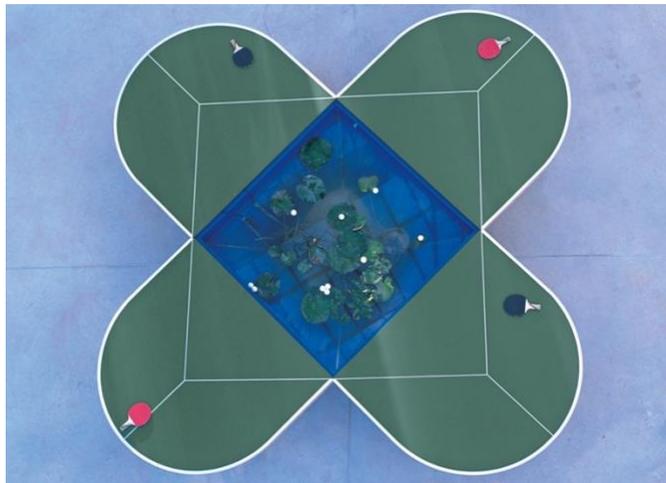
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Mobile Matrix, 2006. Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery, New York



La D.S., 1993. Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery, New York



Ping Pond Table, 1998. Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

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Oddly, whatever the medium, Orozco's pieces all feel exactly like Orozcós. But then, in a way, so does everything else. Spend a little time around the artist's work, and you begin to have the odd sensation of seeing it all around you. You notice things. I'm not sure how long the effect lasts, but after poring over his catalogs, struggling through a stack of dense scholarly essays and passing a pleasant morning with the artist himself, I find I can't walk a block without having an Orozco Moment. I spot a motor scooter locked up beside a lamppost and am reminded of a chained animal, of the potential for speed and escape, of a reclining figure by abstract sculptor Henry Moore. (Only later do I remember that Orozco has also used scooters in his work, in a 1995 piece comprising 40 photographs of the artist's own yellow scooter parked next to identical bikes he encountered around Berlin.) I notice a section of construction fencing, a half-deflated birthday balloon, the contents of a trash can—everyday fragments of city life, all suddenly pregnant with meaning.



Until you find another, 1995. Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

“That's what's really important about art,” Orozco says, “the possibility to see reality differently, to see things in a new way. The objects are just vehicles for awareness.”



Home Run, 1993. Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

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I ask him if he's planning to create any new work for the MoMA retrospective. His last show there, in 1993, included another citrus-based intervention he improvised at the last minute, sending the museum's normally meticulous curatorial staff into a tizzy. The piece, which involved placing oranges in the windows of neighboring apartment buildings, was called *Home Run*—and despite its apparent simplicity, it was one. With the opening still a few months away, Orozco has been visiting the new space, waiting for inspiration to strike. Whatever he comes up with, he promises, it will surely disappoint us. Guaranteed. “Don't worry about that,” he says with a laugh. “It's going to happen.”