

Hans Ulrich Obrist
Interview

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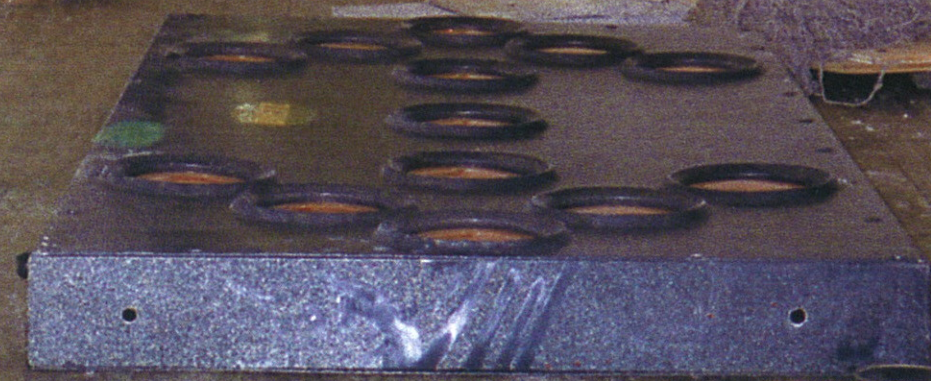
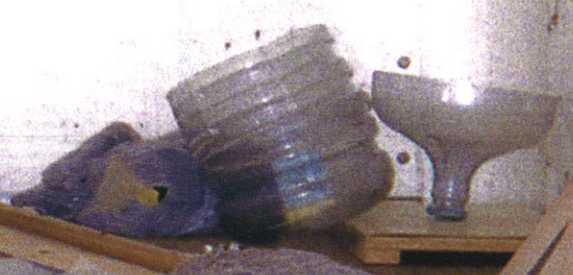
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Gabriel Orozco
Paris, Francia/France
Studio dell'artista/
Artist's studio

Un video con l'intervista a Gabriel Orozco
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HANS ULRICH OBRIST: To start at the beginning, and before we discuss the Merzbau topic, I would like to ask you about your relationship to Schwitters in general. I remember that in one of our very first meetings – this was in the early 1990s – you told me that Schwitters was a very important figure to you. When did your interest in Schwitters start?

GABRIEL OROZCO: I've been looking at books on Schwitters since I was a kid. They have been coming back throughout my whole life, in one way or another. The most interesting thing I find is that every time you look at his works you will always discover something new and interesting. There will always be something to learn from it. It is not easy to understand the rules of his compositions and this is something very nice. They are not evident; they are even mysterious sometimes. His work is still very alive and intriguing. The whole project of Schwitters, the poetry, the Merzbau, the design background, this broad scale of the entire work: all this makes him a very complex and rich artist. He is one of those artists that I have liked since I was very young. There are artists who become important at some point in your life, such as Picasso or even Dali – the old masters... but Schwitters has been with me all the time, like a good friend. Whereas with the others, at some point you change your mind, suddenly they are not so interesting anymore. Schwitters has always been present. He is contemporary in many ways.

HANS ULRICH OBRIST: Can you remember the moment of first contact with Schwitters's work and what was the first work that you saw?

GABRIEL OROZCO: Not exactly. It was a long time ago and my interest in his work developed slowly. To me, as a kid, he was never as famous as painters like Picasso,

Mondrian or Dali, who were the big names in the late 1960s and 1970s when I started to look at art. But I came across the collages of Schwitters here and there. I remember this book that I was always looking at when I moved to New York in the early 1990s, and which came back again and again in many ways. It's a famous book on Schwitters but I can't remember the title or the author of this book right now. There was also a very nice book produced for a show about the relations between Schwitters and Arp...

HANS ULRICH OBRIST: Before we move on, let's talk a little bit about the Merzbau concept, which is also very topical at the moment in the architecture context. In the early 1990s, museum architecture was mainly dealing with the museum as a facade. That is, let's say, the Guggenheim-Bilbao symptom or effect where the museum's interior condition becomes ancillary. But today, we can witness a shift of focus from the facade to interior complexity. What does the Merzbau mean to you in this context, i.e. the Merzbau as interior complexity as well as a shrine or a house of friendship? I can see a clear link between your work, which grew almost organically over many years, and the Merzbau's evolution.

GABRIEL OROZCO: In a way, you've already answered the question, so I don't really know what more to say. I just know the Merzbau from photographs. I know that there are some reconstructions of the Merzbau, but I haven't seen them. To me, it is more about this whole enterprise of languages involved in the work of Schwitters. The system of his work can be transported to any media. So he can make collage, architecture, music or poetry. This system, this personal way of doing things, can be applied to various things. And it is this complexity of the system that makes the work

so rich. There are many artists who are good in one medium but not that many artists who can create a universe that can be applied to so many disciplines. In a way, you can appreciate an artist for this degree of richness if the system he creates can be used in such different ways. It is a kind of “Léonardo model” of the artist, the artist who can be everything: engineer, architect, botanist and so on. This model still works, I think. Maybe in the future, artists will be evaluated according to the way they can apply their work to many disciplines. But of course, the nice aspect about Schwitters’s work is that it has this absoluteness: it is absolute architecture, absolute poetry, absolute painting or collage, absolute graphic design. So here, the Dada-absoluteness is quite important. And in Schwitters, we have the figure of a super-capable man who also has a great sense of humour. He generated an absurdity in its own system and it worked. We can find the same phenomenon in Duchamp. In the notes of Duchamp, we also find this fixation with Leonardo da Vinci, but within these notes he also deconstructs this through the absurd ways of his humour and his use of language. There is research – almost a scientific research in the work of Duchamp – but at the same time there is a degree of irony, humour and absurdity lying in his work. Schwitters has a similar attitude.

HANS ULRICH OBRIST: We are here in your temporary studio. Here, you are also doing a kind of research through this series of paintings that you are working on. Can you tell me about them?

GABRIEL OROZCO: I started to use these circles and axles like growing forms. In the beginning, it was a mere background work. I never showed this early on in the 1990s. It was more like a drawing that I was always doing in my notebook. But then this work started to

appear everywhere. I started to do such things on airline tickets, or as stickers in a book and also in these plants in London. Another example is this foreign currency I made when I went on a trip to India. I had these bills and I painted some graphics on top of them. And then in *The Atomists* series (1996). It is a graphic system that can be applied in many different ways. It is a kind of system of thought that is quite abstract. It has some rules, so it is also a game. It is a game in the sense that I try to develop some rules, but then I break the rules and then I come back to the rules. They exist in terms of colour, sizes and scale. It is a little bit like writing. And I think you can relate these diagrams to many things. I leave that quite open, however.

HANS ULRICH OBRIST: Can you tell me a bit more about the rules of these games? They seem to have something in common in that you always start from the centre of the canvas. Then there is a kind of self-organised principle, following the rules from there.

GABRIEL OROZCO: As you can see, here I have a square canvas and I start from the central point with a circle, and from there I trace these axles of development. Then the circles start to append in relation to the centre. The centre circle has a specific size and then the next one has to be half of that. The next one has to be the double of the first one and then again the next one is the half of that one and the next one is the double size of the second one. So there is a growing sequence of doubling. Then you end up at the limit of the canvas. Also, you have various possibilities of directions you can take. As you have these axles, you divide the units of these circles in four, so I need four colours and they start to append in the canvas from the centre. These colours are jumping like the knight in chess. So it is one and two, or two and one.

Basically, you start from the centre and the placement of the colours is based on this rule. The background colouring is based on the contrary: if you have one quarter of the circle in the centre in red, the opposite side in the background has to be red as well. If it is blue, the opposite side has to be blue and so on. So in this case, I use that background rule. It is also a quite basic an absurd rule. Why do I have to have these rules? It is also about trying to have these limits, to have very strict limits of developing this research. When you do research like this you are on a kind of trial and-error basis. You do something, and then you realise that it is an error and so you go back. You develop the rules until you get a structure that is perfect in a way. It is perfect because it follows its own rules. In fact, it is not related to anything.

HANS ULRICH OBRIST: Obviously, these paintings don't belong to representational painting. They are very different from the photo-based painting school that we can find almost everywhere at the moment. Parallel to this, we have an artistic representational string across the way of abstraction. But your work does not follow this direction either. It is more like an automatic production of reality, one could say.

GABRIEL OROZCO: "Production of reality" sounds nice in terms of nature. I would rather call it "organisms". My work is a way of growing, similar to a fruit or an organism. It is not related to anything that has to do with photography. But at the same time, my paintings behave like landscapes. You mentioned this weird combination of a portrait of a landscape. Yes, you can look at them as landscapes, but obviously, it is not a representation of landscapes, not even a representation of space or an atmosphere, like we find for example in many abstract paintings that pursue representa-

tions of spaces or textures. Even though they are flat, they somehow tend to be connected to the idea of representational landscape and to photography in particular. My work is not connected to that. On the other hand, neither is it connected to the kind of figurative abstraction coming from the Balthus school of representational painting (well, I don't even know if a Balthus school exists...). I am not even sure if the term "abstract" is the right one, because the term is too open and too big. It is a mistake to put artists like Rothko and Rodchenko and Pollock into the same box, just because all of them are "abstract" painters. They are completely different painters.

HANS ULRICH OBRIST: What about the term "concrete"?

GABRIEL OROZCO: "Concrete" was the word that Schwitters and Jean Arp used.

In many texts, they promote the term "concrete" more than "abstract" because they were trying to make a real object. It is a more phenomenological approach to the object as a kind of independent thing, with a right of its own to exist. For many artists, the word "concrete" is certainly more accurate than "abstract". Maybe Rothko is an abstract artist. But Jean Arp is a concrete artist as well as Schwitters. Also, it is not about mysticism, or symbolism, or any religion or spirituality. It has more to do with concrete things, with something that is there, like a table, or a wall or a floor. However, I am not so sure if you can apply that concept to my own work.

HANS ULRICH OBRIST: What about the relationship with the body and the size of the canvas. In Swiss culture, "concrete" is very related to Max Bill. It is a well-known fact that Bill's presence at the first Sao Paulo Biennial in 1951 triggered a whole movement of neo-concretism in Latin America... I interviewed Lygia

Pape on this subject and the influence of geometry in Latin American art and she said that it was all about associating this geometry with questions of the body. Is there a similar aspect in your paintings?

GABRIEL OROZCO: Yes. This is very relevant, especially for the big paintings. When you look at these circles you can also perceive them as holes: the holes of the body, such as the eyes, the nose, the mouth or the ears. In other words: the orifices of perception. So I think, if we get into the scale of 2 m x 2 m, it is inevitably connected to the body that approaches the painting. It is perceiving these orifices as units, developing in this flat surface. But then, they work a little bit three-dimensionally, in a perceptual way, because of the colour and the structure of the axles and the way they are growing. Of course, this is not visual; this is not like Op-Art trying to represent volume and a kind of visual effect of movement. It is quite rational, more intellectual, more like a diagram of three-dimensionality. I am interested in that "something" that happens when the body approaches the painting. That is the reason why the scale of the painting is very important for the connection with the body which is "looking" at it. Moreover, the body is somehow activating the work.

Another thing I am trying to achieve is that when you see the work, you shouldn't feel that you are looking at a painting or that it is a vertical thing or that it is just a kind of vision – like seeing through a window. Something that for example disturbs me in Pollock's painting is that it is done on the floor but then you look at them vertically. This doesn't work for me, somehow. I always feel a bit uncomfortable in front of a Pollock. It is like looking at the world upside down and then you feel that the gravity of the painting is not working. In my own painting, I try to deal with gravi-

ty in terms of the weight of the circles and how they are structuring these axles. I don't put lines between them, like we find for example in many Mondrian paintings. There, the line is very important, it is holding the colour somehow. The question is: how to do a painting which is not just a window or a flat surface, made on the floor and then just put vertically against the wall. In contrast to that, I create my pieces right away standing upright against the wall. These are not paintings you can do on a table.

HANS ULRICH OBRIST: Mondrian leads us to the next question: what do you think of the idea of paintings as models? Do you see these paintings as models?

GABRIEL OROZCO: Not as models, they are more like diagrams. It is the idea of a geometric diagram, or a geometric structure. It could also be a kind of instruction or diagram of a mechanism, something that is explaining how something works. Just like the instructions of a camera or any chemical diagram like of the DNA chain or any other atomic diagram. I call them diagrams in this sense. So I do invariants of the diagrams but then try out the colours in different positions, in order to see how the colour behaves in different moments. It is always the very same diagram, only in different colours. Therefore, I call it "invariant", because it offers a variation but it is basically the same.

So in a way, I treat the first drawing as a "reality". After that, I do the variations without actually modifying this reality. I only produce invariants of that object. The colour is flat; it does not have much of a texture and not so much of a painterly quality. It is quite flat, almost like graphic design, even though it is not really graphic design. It just has graphic quality. So it escapes many ways of dealing with painting. In a

way, these paintings are trying not to be paintings.

HANS ULRICH OBRIST: Could we call them quasi paintings?

GABRIEL OROZCO: They are paintings, but it doesn't matter because it is not about painting, not about photography and painting, not about sculpture and painting, not about anything, not even about abstraction. So I think they are independent paintings.

HANS ULRICH OBRIST: What about the laboratory aspect? You showed me these sketches and some computer prints and all these research materials that are spread everywhere here. I would like to talk a little about that dimension and also about the role that the computer plays.

GABRIEL OROZCO: The computer plays a role because it helps me in terms of time. I started to do these games by hand and on very specific types of paper. Sometimes with some information on it such as airline tickets or a specific kind of paper with lines on it and such things. So in a way, I started with graphic models on top of real paper carrying information on it. Then, with *The Atomists*, when I applied the system on newspapers with images of sportsmen, I began to do them with the computer because it was the easiest way to print these elements. By hand, it was taking me a long time and I needed some fastness.

In any case, the starting point of any of my works is always canvas. This means that there is no pre-drawing or anything. I start on canvas. When I am happy with the drawing, I go to the computer and reproduce this drawing. Then I start to apply the colours and to look at variations. This is about generating a system that develops in the computer with some speed, so I can see the behaviour of the colours and the displacement of things and all that in real time. After that, I make a selection and then produce the invariants of

the first drawing. The computer has much to do with speeding up the process. So these computer prints are just studies.

I am interested in the object of the painting. I even tried to make one of these computer prints in big, with a large printer. It was almost like a simulacrum of a painting. But it didn't work for me. It looks uninteresting and un-intense. For the eye, it is like a paled image of something. It doesn't look real.

HANS ULRICH OBRIST: It is interesting that the artistic process starts on the canvas and not in the computer.

GABRIEL OROZCO: The computer is only a documentation tool in a way. It is a machine. You just put something into a machine in order to see what happens with this systematisation of the rules and how they develop mechanically.

To go back to Rodchenko, he is a similar case in the sense that he uses geometry in all kinds of things, from furniture to models of sculpture, even to photography. So here we have another artist who deals with all these levels of applications of a system. I don't know how evident that is at the beginning when you have an artist who works with different mediums. The way I like to think about an artist has nothing to do with the medium he uses. It is not the making of a video that makes you a contemporary artist. You can do video or photography and just look like an old-fashioned painter. On the other hand, you can still do painting without looking like an old-fashioned artist.

HANS ULRICH OBRIST: When we were standing in front of the 2 m x 2 m painting this morning, you were showing me that it has in fact the radius of your arms. So this is very human-scale related and this also makes me think of Le Corbusier and the idea of the Modern House. That leads us back to the architectural dimension in

your work and your project for a home, which is one of your unrealised projects. As I always conclude my interviews with the question about such unrealised projects, I would like to ask you about this work in particular. Is it maybe a Merzbau of your own?

GABRIEL OROZCO: I don't know if it is going to be my own Merzbau. It is an object that somehow already exists: the Jantar Mantar observatory complex in Jaipur, India. As in many of my other works, I like the idea of dislocation of an object, how to move it out of somewhere and then do a kind of invariant of an object. So in this case, I have started to build a house based on the idea of an observatory. It looks like a really uncomfortable house. I think it is going to be like living in a sculpture that is not made for spending more than one night looking at the stars. I am curious, and I don't know if it will work. In the end, the house looks very much like my other work: you have a centre point, which is the swimming pool, but you don't see the swimming pool because it is on the roof. So when you are in the house, you look at the surroundings instead of looking at the house. So the house is in your back. It is a house that disappears all the time, somehow. We will see. It is still an observatory, which the Jantar Mantar had been originally.

GABRIEL OROZCO

Nasce a Jalapa, Veracruz, Mexico, nel 1962. Si diploma alla Escuela Nacional de Arte Plasticas di Mexico City nel 1984 e al Circulo de Bellas Artes di Madrid, Spagna, nel 1987. Il lavoro di Orozco si sviluppa in diversi ambiti e pone l'accento sulla relazione concettuale tra gli approcci e le tecniche differenti di cui si avvale. Conosciuto per le sue sculture, i disegni, le fotografie e i video, che sono spesso il frutto di una sequenza di incontri e circostanze casuali, negli ultimi due anni l'artista ha ampliato le proprie ricerche fino a includere la pittura, esposta alla 51 Biennale di Venezia, la scorsa estate. In questi nuovi dipinti, Orozco sviluppa la propria ricerca sulla fenomenologia delle strutture, usando la tela come veicolo e l'astrazione come strumento di percezione e mezzo di comprensione, ed esplora il tema della rappresentazione spaziale della materia e i processi organici grazie a un lessico di sistemi e giochi, con una dimostrazione delle operazioni rese possibili dalla casualità. Esposizioni individuali del suo lavoro si sono tenute di recente al Palacio Cristal, Museo Nacional Centre de Arte Reina Sofia di Madrid, nel 2005; alla Serpentine Gallery di Londra il luglio-agosto del 2004; e presso The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden di Washington D.C, l'estate del 2004. Con il suo lavoro ha partecipato a esposizioni collettive quali "Monument to Now" presso la Deste Foundation di Athene (2004-05); "Universal Experience: Art, Life and the Tourist's Eye", al Museum of Contemporary Art di Chicago (2005); e "Work Ethic" al Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohaio (2004-05).

GABRIEL OROZCO

He was born in Jalapa, Veracruz, Mexico, in 1962. He graduated from the Escuela Nacional de Arte Plasticas in Mexico City in 1984 and from the Circulo de Bellas Artes in Madrid, Spain in 1987. Gabriel Orozco's practice is diverse and emphasizes the conceptual relationship between his various approaches and media. Well known for his sculpture, drawing, photography, and video works which have often resulted from a process of random encounters and contingencies, the artist has extended over the past two years his investigations to include painting shown at the 51st Venice Biennale last summer. In these new paintings Orozco continues his research into the phenomenology of structures, using the canvas as a vehicle and abstraction as an instrument of perception or tool of comprehension and explores the spatial representation of matter and organic processes within a lexicon of systems and games, demonstrating chance operations. Important one-man surveys of his work have recently been seen in exhibitions at the Palacio Cristal, Museo Nacional Centre de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid in 2005; the Serpentine Gallery, London in July-August 2004; and The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C in the summer of 2004. His work has been included in group exhibitions such as "Monument to Now" at the Deste Foundation, Athens (2004-05); "Universal Experience: Art, Life and the Tourist's Eye", Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (2005); and "Work Ethic", Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohaio (2004-05).

Dall'alto in basso/From top to bottom:
Galaxy Pot 2, malta di intonaco/plaster,
2002; *Carbonised Rolled Mass*,
ceramica/ceramic, 2005
(per gentile concessione di/courtesy
of Marian Goodman Gallery, New York)





Dall'alto in basso/From top to bottom:
Project Table, tavolo, scultura, tecniche miste/table, sculpture, mixed media, 2005;
Untitled, collage di grafite, cera, gouache su carta/collage: graphite, wax, gouache on paper, 2004;
Untitled, collage di foglia, inchiostro e grafite su carta/collage: leaf, ink and graphite on paper, 2004
 (© Marian Goodman Gallery, New York)

