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41

gabriel orozco

projects



**The Museum of Modern Art
New York**

September 3–October 19, 1993

Gabriel Orozco is a thoroughly Mexican artist who defies many conventional notions about Mexican art. Dealing cautiously with the visual feast that characterizes the daily life of his country, he studiously avoids references to indigenous folk traditions, and uses color sparingly, when at all. Rather, he combines aspects of the most materially slight, conceptually oriented European and American work of the 1960s and 1970s with elements of the art of Teotihuacán that has been familiar to him since childhood. He has rejected his nation's powerful muralist tradition, applied in the aftermath of the Mexican revolution to spread its message. In an environment where, for almost a century, painting derived from this movement has predominated, both aesthetically and institutionally, Orozco's modest objects adamantly resist both grandiosity and the overtly political.

In Mexico, the legacy of the three most famous muralists, Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco (no relation to Gabriel), and David Alfaro Siqueiros, is a weighty burden for aspiring artists. For Gabriel Orozco, it has added personal significance. His father, Mario Orozco Rivera, is a third-generation muralist, a student of Siqueiros's who eventually became his principal assistant. Siqueiros was a virtuoso technician whose ideas about painting had international ramifications.¹ In his own work, however, he too often sounded the same melodramatic note in the way he depicted class struggle and native cultures. Orozco's development can be interpreted, in part, as a search for a radical alternative to this kind of painting, an art that would be characterized by its very lack of flourish.

Orozco was sixteen when he first made art. Acting as his father's assistant, he worked on five murals over a period of two to three years. He later trained as a painter at the Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas in Mexico City, which offered an academic art education, emphasizing conventional forms of painting and printmaking. With few exceptions, his classes bored him. Two months after he graduated, he exhibited his canvases in a Mexico City gallery, then left for Spain.

For a year, from 1986 to 1987, Orozco attended El Círculo de Bellas Artes, a private art school in Madrid, where each month a different artist holds a workshop for twenty-five enrolled students. He studied with Juan Navarro Baldeweg, an architect and painter, and with Fluxus-inspired artists Nacho Criado and Mitso Miura. Orozco gathered information about the contemporary European scene at the Reina Sofía bookstore, where he spent many hours poring through volumes he could not afford to buy. Through exhibitions held in Madrid and via word of mouth, he learned about art in the United States. He was particularly interested in the Italian Piero Manzoni, British artists Richard Long and Tony Cragg, and, from the United States, visual artists Robert Smithson and Vito Acconci and composer John Cage. He was also impressed with Walter de Maria's *Lightning Field*, an earthwork situated on a plateau in western New Mexico, which he remembers seeing in reproduction.

In Spain, partly because he was struggling with painting, and partly because he lacked funds, Orozco did his first ephemeral works, using wood scraps that could always be found in the trash at the back of a lumber store. From some of this wood, he created impromptu outdoor arrangements,



Above: *Gatos y sandías (Cats and Watermelons)*. 1992. Chromogenic development print, 19 x 28 1/2". **Below right:** *Naturaleza recuperada (Nature Reclaimed)*. 1990. Vulcanized rubber, approximately 35" in diameter. **Lower right:** *Pelota ponchada (Punched Ball)*. 1993. Soccer ball and water, 11 x 9 x 5"

which he left on the streets. At home, he fashioned the rest into geometric forms related to stretchers, which he then burned. He placed the ashes in a box tied with cord and put the box in the trash. The circularity of the process and the fact that every aspect of it was free of monetary exchange reflect interests that remain pertinent to Orozco's current concerns. He continued to work spontaneously with found objects on the streets, a practice that has taken on increased importance as he has refined it over the years.

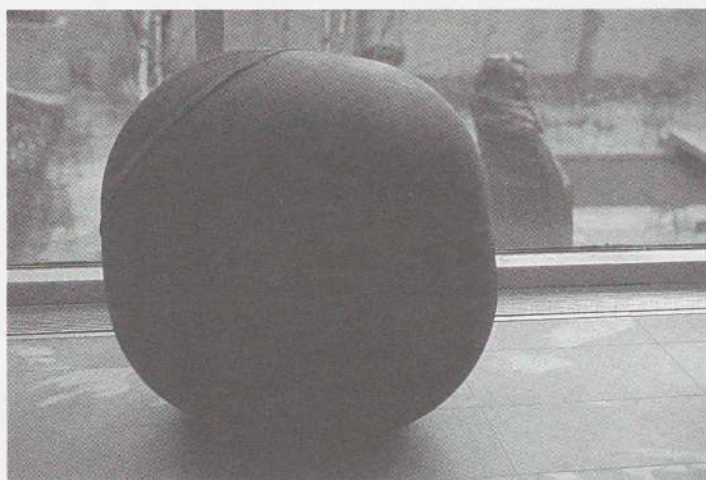
When Orozco returned home to Mexico City in 1986, he found little understanding of, or interest in, his newly conceived aesthetic concerns. In 1987, however, the section of the Salón Nacional de Artes Plásticas devoted to "Espacios Alternativos"—the least esteemed by curators and critics—provided an opportunity for him to realize a major project. Working with an architect, Mauricio Rocha, and a painter, Mauricio Maille, Orozco created an installation entitled *Apuntalamiento para nuestras ruinas modernas (Support for Our Modern Ruins)*. In this piece, a wooden structure at the entrance to a gallery inside the Museo de Arte Moderno made reference to similar structures used throughout Mexico City to prop up buildings damaged in the devastating 1985 earthquake. Orozco and his colleagues were awarded a national prize, and he began to gain recognition in Mexico.

In 1989, with Guillermo Santamarina, a curator based in Guadalajara, Orozco organized an exhibition entitled *A Propósito (Regarding)*, an homage to the German artist Joseph Beuys, who had died three years earlier, and was well known in the United States and Europe, but not in Mexico. The exhibition took place outside Mexico City, in what had been a convent. Orozco and Santamarina invited fourteen artists to participate; of different nationalities, they all were living in Mexico at the time. For his own installation in a small white chapel, Orozco removed a cross from a wall and hung a stuffed elephant's head in its place, its trunk pointing toward the dome. He placed segments of gnarled tree trunks on the chapel floor: their bark resembled the elephant's skin. Orozco saw the two elements as dead bodies, one animal, one vegetable—twin martyrs. The exhibition had no catalogue and engendered little press coverage, but it was well attended and influential among some of his contemporaries.



print, rubber, soccer ball

Orozco's work can be divided into two categories. The first includes impermanent pieces—spontaneously created from found objects on the street, or in other locations not commonly associated with art—the second, sculpture made to be installed in museums and galleries. He photographs his ephemeral works in order to document them, but the pictures are not in themselves intended to be art. A photograph may record an intervention in a New York supermarket: for *Gatos y sandías* (*Cats and Watermelons*) of 1992, the artist set cans of cat food amid a display of watermelons. Or it may bear witness to even more transitory instants: *La Extensión del reflejo* (*The Extension of the Reflection*) of 1992, shows wet bicycle tracks made by Orozco, who rode repeatedly through New York City puddles.



In contrast, Orozco's sculptural objects are parts of a repertoire of three-dimensional forms that can be mixed and matched; they rarely remain in a fixed context. They are transmutable elements, designed to interact with the world around them. At times small and delicate, in some cases almost amorphous, they often retain the muteness of raw materials.² This makes them easy to overlook, but also allows them to meld with the environment.

The ideas of extending art into daily life and of blurring the distinctions between the two are central to much of the work of twenty or twenty-five years ago. They are as intrinsic, for example, to the walks of Richard Long as to the early Body Art of Vito Acconci. This commingling of contexts is essential to Orozco's endeavors. Before he left Mexico, he used to photograph his paintings in the garden of his house; now he believes that, unconsciously, he wanted his work to be subsumed by nature. A photograph taken in preparation for this exhibition shows *Naturaleza recuperada* (*Nature Reclaimed*) of 1990, a sculpture in the shape of an oversized, misshapen rubber ball, placed by the window in the Museum's Garden Hall, on the second-floor landing. The sculpture enters into a dialogue with the outside world, and especially with Rodin's *Monument to Balzac*, which stands over a story high in the garden. Orozco also integrates the worlds of culture and quotidian life by combining detritus with conventional art materials: dried orange peels can be viewed through small holes in *Naranja sin espacio* (*Orange Without Space*) of 1993, one of his round plasticine

sculptures. Another, *Piedra que cede* (*Yielding Stone*) of 1992, was rolled in the dirt of the New York City streets, thus acquiring its unique patina. Significantly, this intermingling of what are conventionally considered discrete modalities is evident in aspects of Mexican life. For instance, the Pino Suárez metro station in Mexico City also acts as a museum, housing the base of an Aztec pyramid unearthed during the construction of the subway.

For Orozco, the modern and contemporary art that interests him intersects with his Mexican experience. The artist evokes his country's ancient cultures through a temporal layering of traces. He does not reconstruct the past, as Rivera did in his murals for Mexico City's Palacio Nacional, but refers instead to the ruins themselves, the pottery shards, pieces of sculpture, and barely readable fragments of stone reliefs that are available to us today. Orozco's spontaneous works in public places become art simply by virtue of the artist's recognition and documentation of them, recalling French artist Marcel Duchamp's "Readymades" of the 1910s and 1920s, found objects turned into art by their altered context. Whether found, made, or something in between, with an odd, half-formed quality, Orozco's works also remind us of weathered pre-Columbian artifacts discovered at archeological sites and photographed in situ before they are removed for display. They share with these relics a tension between presence and absence, the sense of things fading in and out of view.

Naturaleza recuperada, Orozco's inverted inner-tube sculpture, constructed from the remains of modern, cosmopolitan Mexico City, is also similar in its feeling of weight to objects found amid the ruins of the city of Teotihuacán. The ball looks like a large stone, massive and permanent, its texture like that of an ancient relief whose imagery is no longer quite discernable. In its contradictory nature it also recalls *Why Not Sneeze Rrose Sélavy?*: in Duchamp's 1921 sculpture, a small cage that appears to be filled with sugar cubes actually contains one hundred and fifty-one small marble blocks; it appears to be light when it is, in fact, heavy. *Naturaleza recuperada*, on the other hand, is not solid rock, but filled with air; it appears to be heavy when it is, in fact, light. Orozco's plasticine sculptures, relatively small and seemingly portable, are solid and quite heavy. *Piedra que cede* weighs the same as the artist.

In the United States, strategies of juxtaposition, contradiction, and irony moved from European Dada, through Pop and Conceptual art, into the art of the 1980s. Starting in 1986, Orozco began to visit this city regularly, once or twice a year. The East Village scene interested him, as did the production of artists such as Jenny Holzer, Jeff Koons, and Haim Steinbach. At the same time, he was aware of an emotional distancing in their work that was alien to his own.

In the case of Koons and Steinbach, ideas about United States consumerism, for example, are blatant, whereas Orozco's concepts—such as the experience of time, or notions of opposition—are less easily defined. They act as generating forces for the work, and, expressed in the object, become more resonant and multifaceted, as well as harder to identify.



Orozco and these New Yorkers share an abiding intellectual interest in the nature and implications of display. Orozco's concern, however, is conditioned less by modern art galleries and store windows than by Mexican markets and archeological sites. In Mexico, anthropological and archeological displays are often sophisticated, despite limited means. At the Regional Museum in Oaxaca, for example, objects lack informative labels, but one encounters two ancient and broken sculptural reliefs housed in their own exquisite space, at the top of an elegant stairway in a partially restored convent dating from the turn of the seventeenth century. Remarkably, the faded wall paintings mirror the patterns on the reliefs below them. Orozco's sense of space, and the elegant sparseness of his presentation derive, at least in part, from these kinds of relationships.

Differing in background and sensibility from many prominent artists of the last decade, Orozco appropriates and emphasizes aspects of 1960s and 1970s Conceptual art that they ignore or subordinate. He reintroduces into contemporary art a notion fundamentally antithetical to the materialism of the Reagan and Bush era: ephemerality. To greater and lesser degrees, Conceptualism advocated the primacy of the idea over the object (a position against established monetary and cultural values that was intimately tied to the rhetoric of the Vietnam War era). Sometimes only a typewritten sheet of paper describing an art event was offered as proof that something had occurred. Often, snapshots recorded no-longer-extant works. In much of this dependence on the document there is a sense of the historical trace as containing more than just information about the past. There is the implication that, for those who know how to look, these images carry insights into the very nature of time. Orozco explores this possibility. While his photographs bear witness to his own artistic activities, they also serve as records of snowballs before they melt, tire tracks before they dry, fruits before they rot. One recalls again Mexico's archeological excavations, which, in evoking lost civilizations, function like memento mori, continual reminders of the transitory nature of existence.

The exhibition at hand was, in a sense, conceived as a single work, and is designed to express the intellectual and formal concerns manifest in the artist's individual objects and installations. Unconventional in that it does not occupy gallery space, it can be found on and between floors in the Museum's Garden Hall, and outside, in the Sculpture Garden. Orozco avoids the obviously monumental, but he makes large statements with simple means. Here, he proposes to take over a sizable portion of the Museum with visual gestures. This works only if the gesture intrinsic to each piece resonates beyond it. Thus, *Naturaleza recuperada*, on the second-floor landing, must relate, not only to Rodin's *Balzac* outside, but also to Orozco's plasticine sculptures, one or more of which will probably find a place in the Museum or its surroundings. *Hamaca colgando entre dos rascacielos* (Hammock Hanging





La Extensión del reflejo (The Extension of the Reflection). 1992. Chromogenic development print, 19 x 28½"

Between Two Skyscrapers) of 1993, in the garden, suspended between two trees—as explicit a reference as the artist will make to the indigenous cultures of his native country—is meant to signify the unlimited space within which he attempts to work. The hammock is a memorial to a failed idea, since Orozco originally conceived it as suspended between two buildings. It also acts as pure form, a curving line that harkens back to the wave formed by *Tono de marcar (Dial Tone)* of 1992. Including parts of three scrolls composed of telephone numbers from the New York City, Mexico City, and Monterrey, Mexico, white pages, this work occupies the areas that separate the up and down escalators between floors. In this situation, Orozco's photographs, which document ephemeral works and found objects, are also meant to reinforce and clarify one's experience of the pieces that are physically present. The originality of his materials and the way they are configured relative to their contexts mean that an exhibition of Orozco's works requires—and rewards—keen attention.

For *Home Run*, the artist has placed oranges in some of the windows of the buildings on Fifty-fourth Street, facing the Museum's Sculpture Garden. The Museum will provide fresh oranges each week, but participants living or working in these buildings, who are free to eat the fruits, may replace eaten ones with new ones themselves, should they wish to do so. Anyone can join in this project simply by placing an orange in a clear tumbler on their window sill; professional supervision is not required. Seen through the greenery of the garden, the oranges form a lyrical and provocative sculpture, but communal creation is the defining process of the work. Thus, Orozco demystifies art-making by associating it directly with the processes of living. At the same time, he engages the active involvement of a portion of the show's audience.

Many visitors to the exhibition will no doubt note that Orozco is remarkably sensitive to light, space, and materials; in short, his work is beautiful. There is enormous refinement in the way he handles waste. For him, even used toothpaste, what one spits into the sink, can become a seductive texture when it is isolated amid an ample quantity of fine paper. At the beginning of this essay, I said that Orozco's work was not "overtly" political; rather, it is in the tension that he creates between what we prize and what we disdain that his social concerns are evident. To elevate what others throw away is a choice with political implications, time-tested

among Modernists. And in creating a quiet art out of modest means, and requiring that we exert effort to perceive it, Orozco admonishes us to rethink our values, resist our expectations, and take the time to see what may be quietly awaiting our attention. Today, the use of materials that are inexpensive, recycled, even disposable, can read as a critique of the unbridled consumption and waste that characterizes many aspects of contemporary life in "developed" countries. Implicit, too, may be a critique in the same vein of the excessive size and cost of much of the more publicized art of the 1980s.



Mis manos son mi corazón (My Hands Are My Heart). 1991. Terra-cotta, 4½ x 4 x 3½"

Orozco's work resonates in many directions, some planned and others not. This open-endedness is absolutely central to the artist's endeavors, an essential by-product of the transmutability of the works themselves. It is the odd beauty and character of these unpredictable objects, juxtapositions, and spaces that are Orozco's most original contribution. They soften his irony. Without denying the difficulties we face, he offers pleasure, humor, and insight to a jaded intercontinental art world.

Lynn Zelevansky
Curatorial Assistant

Gabriel Orozco was born in 1962 in Jalapa, Veracruz, Mexico, and now lives and works in Mexico City and New York. His work, which is currently on view in the Aperto section of this summer's Venice Biennale, has also been included in such exhibitions as *In Transit*, organized in 1993 by the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, and *America: Bride of the Sun*, mounted in 1992 at the Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp. This past spring, the Kanaal Art Foundation in Kortrijk, Belgium, presented a one-person exhibition of his work.

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Cover: *Caballo (Horse).* 1992. Chromogenic development print, 19 x 28½".

Photographs by Gabriel Orozco. All works courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York. The artist wishes to thank all those participating in *Home Run*.

1. When he worked there in 1932, Siqueiros served as a moral exemplar for a number of Los Angeles artists, among them Philip Guston. In 1936, Jackson Pollock joined the Siqueiros Experimental Workshop in New York. It is possible that the workshop's emphasis on innovative techniques and tools such as spray guns and air brushes, as well as its philosophy, which endorsed spontaneity and "controlled accidents," aided in the development of Pollock's "drip" style. See, for example, Dore Ashton, *The New York School: A Cultural Reckoning* (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), pp. 42 and 67.

2. See Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Refuse and Refuge," in Catherine de Zegher, ed., *Gabriel Orozco* (Kortrijk, Belgium: Kanaal Art Foundation, 1993), pp. 45-46.