

# Art Dialogue in the Classroom

by Connie Stewart



*This article is the third in a series of articles about guiding group interpretations of contemporary art. In each article, I will briefly discuss purposes, format, and classroom atmosphere for guided conversations. I will also provide some background information on a specific artist and/or artwork. Finally, I will offer questions. The questions are a means for a facilitator to find his or her own questions and lead students into finding theirs. I welcome comments and suggestions at [connie.stewart@unco.edu](mailto:connie.stewart@unco.edu) or (970) 351-2426.*

## Class Talk about the Work of Gabriel Orozco

### **Review of Previous Ideas**

Previous articles advocated the creation of a safe classroom environment for open discussions and diverse ideas while using contemporary art as a catalyst. Ideas for structuring such an environment included:

- Asking questions that are truly questionable;
- Teaching participants how to respectfully agree or disagree with another's idea;
- Changing the teacher's role from one of asking a question and giving an evaluative response to one of raising provocative ideas and directing the discussion back to the group.

One previous concept used to discuss contemporary art is the idea of "index." An index is a portrayal of an object by showing a physical trace of the object's presence, such as Janine Antoni's chocolate self-portraits showing the marks left by her licking away the surface and Gabriel Orozco's photo showing the marks left by his breathing on a piece of fine furniture.

### **Articulation in Artmaking and Art Dialogue**

Making and talking about art can be thought of as a process of articulating and rearticulating. English words as diverse as "arm," "arthritis," "article," "articulation," and "art" are derived from the root syllable "ar" meaning to "fit together" or "join." All of these words have the common concept of joining, di-

viding between joints, and rejoining. Lewis Hyde in his book, *Trickster Makes the World* (1998), uses this etymology to connect artmaking with translation and divination, of finding or creating flexible joints or permeable membranes between separate entities. When I am leading a discussion, I am looking to be the one who connects, translates and articulates. As I listen to the responses in a discussion, I try to connect one person's opinion with another's in a new way. I try to create joints that connect the past with the future, a story with an image, or a new idea with an old preconception. A class discussion that takes images or ideas apart and rejoins them in new ways can help students "articulate" ideas and create new imagery. "What if?" questions (i.e., "What if I had a tail and my dog had two thumbs?") can be engaging and humorous at the lower grades while promoting fluency in discussing ideas at upper grade levels. Questions that divide and rejoin ideas can stimulate new understandings of the way our contemporary environment is constructed. The work of Gabriel Orozco is an excellent vehicle to discuss concepts of joining, dividing, and rejoining.

### **Gabriel Orozco**

Gabriel Orozco was born in Veracruz, Mexico and educated in Mexico City and Madrid. He currently lives and works in Mexico, Paris, and New York. He is an avid soccer fan and plays at a competitive, amateur level. He can be classified as



a “Post minimalist” artist. His work exemplifies many of the ideas discussed in postmodern art critique including the concept of artmaking as portraying the index rather than copying the object.

He also uses common objects and transforms them in some way either by actual manipulation of the item or by changing the context in which they are viewed. Examples of literal transformation include the labor-intensive 1993 work, *La D.S.* (reflecting the word “goddess” in French), a Citroen car reconstructed by removing a section of the center of the car and rejoining the sides. Another example is *Ping Pond Table* (1998), a game table taken apart and reconstructed with a lily pad in the center. Contextual transformations include the 1989 *Stones in a Fence* which simply places a series of stones in a straight line in the center of a chain link fence.

A 1993 exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in New York placed still life arrangements in windows of the apartment house next door, separating and rearticulating the relationship between art museum and artwork. In 1994, Orozco took an elevator out of its shaft and displayed it as an interactive sculpture, allowing visitors to explore the confines of its space. He took the idea further when he specified that an empty shoebox, without placard, be placed on the floor of a gallery space. Museum directors and gallery curators were left with questions about how to insure the work and it was finally thrown away by a Venice Biennale janitor.

### **Questions for Guiding Discussions about the Work of Gabriel Orozco**

Questions about the work of Gabriel Orozco can identify ways that Orozco has taken objects or ideas apart and rejoined them in order to create a new meaning. The questions can be used for reflection on everyday items in our society and as well as stimuli for the student’s own artmaking.

### **Questions about *Three Works: Owl, 5 Problems, and Cats and Watermelon***

All of these works involve rearranging items in a grocery or drug store and photographing the arrangement.

- What would you do if you saw cat food on watermelons or potatoes on notebooks in a store?
- Is it “gross” to put cat food on top of food humans eat?
- Would you notice the potato differently if it was with other produce?

- Is it important to notice potatoes?
- Can Orozco claim to be an artist because he rearranges grocery items?
- Can the grocery store employee who stocks the merchandise claim to be an artist?
- Is it vandalism to rearrange products in a store that doesn’t belong to you?
- If you were allowed to rearrange things in a store, what would you move? Why?
- What are other ways to arrange items in a store? Would you like it if the items in a store were arranged alphabetically or by color or shape, instead of by categories like “produce,” “meat,” or “pet food?”
- Do you need to study art to learn how to move things around?
- Would the art have more value if Orozco had painted the images instead of photographing his rearrangements?

### **Questions about Orozco’s Reconstructed Car: *La D.S.***

- It most likely took more work and time to make *La D.S.* than to create *5 Problems*. Does the greater amount of time involved make it better art?
- Is there something wrong with taking a useful, functional object and making it non-functional?
- Does *La D.S.* waste something valuable rather than create something beautiful?
- Can you think of anything else that would make an interesting sculpture by cutting out the middle and reconnecting the sides?
- Orozco named his piece with initials that could sound like “goddess” in French. Is the new car a “goddess?”

### **Questions about Orozco’s Game Pieces: *Ping Pond Table* and *Oval with Pendulum***

Orozco’s game series include *Ping Pond Table* (1998), which is a ping-pong table with a lily pond in the center that can be played by two to four players, and *Oval with Pendulum* (1996), which is a modified game of billiards that has a ball suspended from a pendulum.

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- Can you think of other artists that work with games?
- Are games important in your life?
- Orozco is also a dedicated soccer player. Does that interest inform his artwork? Is he a more competitive artist because he plays a sport?
- How does he change ping pong? Billiards?
- He says his billiard table is a more boring game now. Does that mean his work was a waste of time?
- He says he is interested in the spaces created when he takes a game board or table apart. Can you think of interesting spaces created by taking a game apart?

### General Questions about Orozco's Work

- Do you prefer the work where he uses only everyday objects or the work where he spends the time to create something new?
- Orozco has been accused of just copying the ideas of Marcel Duchamp and not doing anything really new or interesting. Do you agree? §

### References

Hyde, L. (1998) *Trickster makes the world: Mischief, myth and art*. New York: North Point Press

### Resources

Gabriel Orozco is featured in the PBS ART 21: Season 2

Images can be found at <http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/orozco/index.html>

Other resources featuring Gabriel Orozco include:

<http://www.cmoa.org/international/html/art/orozco.htm>

<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/museo/orozco/>

<http://www.absolutearts.com/artsnews/2000/06/08/27066.html>

<http://arts.guardian.co.uk/features/story/0,,1255017,00.html>

<http://www.yvonneforceinc.com/yfinew/orozco.htm>

A website providing images and information about the work of Marcel Duchamp is <http://www.marcel Duchamp.net/>

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