

Tiny revolutions

The oft-quoted Nicolas Bourriaud is a mine of infinitely useful catch phrases, but he stretched my credulity by claiming that Mexican artist Gabriel Orozco's placement of an orange in a deserted market place in Brazil constituted a "tiny revolution"¹. Call me obtuse, but I fail to see how a misplaced citrus fruit embodies revolutionary potential, although the Ukrainians did call their political uprising of 2004–2005 "The Orange Revolution."

H In Paul Cullen's The Orange Theory, however, a plastic orange really does
 I revolve. Fox Circle and The Orange Theory are two sculptures that
 H perform tiny revolutions, thanks to appropriated mirror-ball motors. Hijacked from the disco and deployed in a makeshift science lab, both rotating works demonstrate hypotheses that remain wilfully obscure, despite my repeated circumambulations.

When thinking about models, Italo Calvino's rather autistic protagonist Mr. Palomar springs to mind. Mr. Palomar is not a maker of models, like Cullen, but a conceiver of models, of axioms and postulates which whir like cogs (if not disco balls) in his irritatingly empirical brain. His magnum opus is an ongoing effort to make the perfect model in his mind coincide with reality. Of course, it never does, and "if one gear jams, everything
 H jams"² (or in the case of The Orange Theory, makes marmalade). Mr. Palomar sees that adjustments need to be made, not just to the conceptual model, but to reality, "so we must force it, more or less roughly, to assume the form of the model."³ And in the case that the gap between "reality and principles" yawns ever wider, Mr. Palomar steels himself to the fact that his "model of models" may have to finally dissolve itself, like Jean Tinguely's self-destructive machines including Homage to New York, 1960, which blew itself to bits.

H The Orange Theory, however, doesn't appear to possess these self-destructive tendencies, though its raison d'être remains mysterious. In fact, it runs rings around me. I can tell you this much: an orange hovers over a notch in a white wooden chair. The near-noiseless path this sphere traces is anti-clockwise; a clockwork orange accruing energy the way we do below the equator – in sinister fashion. The orange is lit up, as if by the sun; fiery orange, it could pass for the sun itself. The notch in the chair is covered in aluminium foil which reflects the light, like a poorly engineered solar panel, injecting a touch of home-made sci-fi into the scenario, recalling satellites, weather balloons, spacesuits. The orange, thanks to its connection with the mirror-ball motor via some rather precarious rubber bands, charts a planetoid ellipse over the void in the seat: part bed-pan, part scientific model. As doppelganger to some heavenly body or other, The Orange Theory brings to mind another of Mr. Palomar's misadventures, his contemplation of the stars. What might have been a romantic assignation between a man and the

firmament, becomes a comic routine as the myopic Palomar tries to match each star with its location on a map, finding it difficult to focus his eyes on a map in the dark, and harder still to see the stars after perusing the map with a flashlight. As with his internal model of models, reality has a way of eluding man's cartographic fancies. In the end, Palomar asks himself if attention to the celestial revolutions is enough to effect an understanding of the cosmos, "Or would not a special inner revolution be necessary...?"⁴

- I Perhaps it is just such a revolution that Fox Circle attempts to measure; certainly, it bears no resemblance to any external system of logic! Seven shuddering plastic gherkins rammed into a length of white wooden ruler
- H are measuring something, but what, isn't clear. Like The Orange Theory, they trace a circle, though this one follows northern hemisphere, clockwise logic. As it scrapes over the surface of the chair (and its additional wood veneer overhang, which looks like a baby tray) the shadow of a circle remains, recalling Richard Long on walkabout. Like the hands of a clock, the green gherkins go round and round, creating a mobile hedge and evoking Macbeth's eerily advancing Burnham Wood, though its circular trajectory reminds me more of the sweeping green of a radar screen.

Cullen says the title came from a piece of scientific equipment he discovered some years ago while researching the Christchurch Magnetic Observatory. A cylinder on a stand of unknown provenance and function, involved in some way with calibrating navigational equipment, was labelled "Fox Circle." Perhaps it had come from the land of the foxhunt to the Little England of the Antipodes via a suitably circuitous route? Now the instrument has bequeathed its name to a model featuring rotating plastic gherkins, also mysterious in purpose.

Green cable ties are drilled into the chair leg, like sutures; a whiff of hospital detergent ghosts the air. It is not just the lab, but the play pen and the rest home that Cullen evokes with his quotidian chairs, charting a life-cycle. From baby-tray to bedpan, traces of human bodies impair any sense of scientific objectivity.

As Mr. Palomar would unhappily concur, you cannot have perfect models in an imperfect world. In that case, Cullen's 3D diagrams are a perfectly accurate spin on the way the world turns. Perhaps in watching their tiny revolutions, we will, like Mr. Palomar watching the stars, be inspired to plot the path of our own inner revolution?

REFERENCES

1. Bourriaud, Nicolas, Relational Aesthetics, translated by Simon Pleasance & Fronza Woods with the participation of Mathieu Copeland, Dijon: Les Presses du Reel, 2002, p17
2. Calvino, Italo, Mr. Palomar, Translated from the Italian by William Weaver, San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985, p109
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid, p47