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Turner Contemporary

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"Everything starts from a dot..."

— Wassily Kandinsky

Why is the circle so ingrained in our visual language? Whether in the form of spheres, orbs, discs or voids. this simple shape recurs across millennia, in all cultures, as both symbolic and ubiquitous. Van Gogh famously stated that "life is probably round" - a distinctly three dimensional perspective that he translated into his handling of paint and the great swirling forms he saw in the world around him. Just as evocative as his depictions of the physical world, is the received idea that Van Gogh was also revealing as much of his inner landscape in his use of the circular form. The Starry Night (1889) is distinct in its depiction of the night sky, where the seemingly unending spiraling movement is said to affirm more of Van Gogh's mental state in search of hope during a time of great illness. It is this liminal space, in the intersection between inner and outer, that we can begin to understand the circle and its relationship to our collective imagination.

Seeing Round Corners explores our fascination with this deceptively simple form through painting, performance, film, photography and sculpture. The artworks range from the 17th century to the present day, such as JMW Turner's quietly dramatic watercolour of Stonehenge (1811) which draws you further back to the circle's primitive and inaccessible history, hinting at the mystical and ritualistic functions this shape has provided as a tool or form of technology in the story of our evolution. The breadth of astonishing inventiveness generated by the circle can also be found in the objects which performed a scientific and technological function; others provide focus for more metaphysical aspects of religious and spiritual traditions. This provides a broader context which is both far-reaching (for few artists have not used this shape at some point in their career) and intimately familiar. This telescoping of proximities only serves to remind us of the seismic and pervasive influence the circular form has and continues to have on art, design, architecture and

In recent years questions have been raised by artists about the dominance and subsequent legacy geometric abstraction has had on 20th century art. Many of the artists represented in this exhibition, such as Ben Nicholson or Bridget Riley, are just as associated with the straight line or rectilinear form that defines much of the visual lexicon of Constructivism and Modernism. In this context, at best the circle was utilised as a formal counterpoint to the straight line; at worst it embodied signifiers that did not tally with the dynamic trajectory of the straight line. Rather the circle connoted the irrational the organic, the corporeal. As a symbolically female shape the circle was perceived as introspective, mystical and symbolically representational – a problematic issue in the quest for pure abstraction. Historically perhaps, in the art of the inter-war years, the circle did not represent hope or the progress towards another possible future but an unending futility of nature trapped inside a perpetual ouroboros loop. For the Modernists, the future was represented by the purity of the clean line and subsequent rejection of the ornamental. In looking for historical antecedents to the circle's relative unpopularity in Modern art, we approach the circular motif across cultural and historical perspectives. However, contemporary artists (and curators) have been re-examining this universal form and artists such as Gabriel Orozco utilise the circle almost as a system of thinking, a visual language in which to question the 20th century preoccupation with the grid and to re-examine issues relating to abstraction and ornament. Similarly sculptor Anish Kapoor's work is

defined by voids: the materials he uses vary, but his 'empty' spherical forms are for Kapoor truer to symbolising space than any other form. Many artists in this exhibition are simply celebrating the circle. We see some of that joy in Bridget Riley's two Yellow Composition paintings (2011) in which her overlapping yellow circles are liberated from any evident system or pattern. The eye refuses to settle on any part of the painting, instead our field of vision is dictated by the serpentine cursive rhythms as each curved circle overlaps another. As the cones and rods of your eyes literally dance, the act of looking itself becomes a reflexive and self-aware experience.

The eye as an 'l'

"The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end". It is the highest emblem in the cipher of the world"2

'Seeing round corners' is an idiom commonly understood to convey the skill of foresight a more metaphorical idea of 'vision', where experience, subjectivity and imagination are employed in the perceptual processes of thinking rather than just seeing. It evokes the processes involved in understanding what you see and what you think you see, particularly when viewing visual art when we are presented with images out of context or not found within our normal visual environments. On first seeing Barry Flanagan's diagram Seeing Round Corners, my initial reading was that the large circle was an eveball 'body' perched on top of two spindled. optic-nerve 'legs' with eyeballs as 'feet'. I imagined this character had stopped mid-stride and was looking at something off the page that we couldn't see. However the prevailing interpretation of Flanagan's diagram is of two eyes at the bottom of the page simply 'looking' at the same point on a circle as viewed from plan perspective. Flanagan draws the sight lines from the eyes to the circle to illustrate that one eye sees slightly differently from the other. This is based on the fact that each eye has a different vantage point and by illustrating this, Flanagan proposes that indeed one eye has the advantage over the other in seeing 'round corners'. My initial anthropomorphised misperception only serves to illustrate just how differently we perceive visual information depending on our experiences, our cultures and our attitudes. However, there is one anomaly: the circle. This simple form is interpreted as a symbolic cipher universally recognised across cultures and millennia. Because the eyeball is spherical, the total area of sight, the visual field, is circular. Our visual information is literally taken in through a circle and as a consequence our visual field is predisposed to understand circles from the very beginning of our lives. As part of our bodies our eyes inform us that we are in the world, a commonality that links us all together

For most of us, our immediate experience of circles started when we were less than one week old. Research has shown that healthy babies, when given a choice of forms, will choose to look longest at a circle³. From three to five weeks old, babies will fix their eyes on the oval hairline framing a face and will actively seek out circular face-like stimuli in order to establish a bonding process. According to Gestalt psychology, simple closed forms such as circles, are more quickly perceived and recognised as meaningful4, and physiologically the eye will identify circles more easily from a mass of random forms because they are registered as a known and familiar shape and therefore processed directly into the visual cortex without any intermediate processing⁵. We respond to circles as we once responded to our



Gabriel Orozco, *Another shower head*, 2010 Chromogenic color print 16 x 20 in. ourtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery

parents' faces, and most of us, with or without any artistic skill, can draw a circle. It is the most universal and democratic of forms and it would appear from the reams of research in psychology alone, that the circle simply reminds us that we exist. This initial physiological experience of the

circle, as something 'of' the body can be recognised in the performance works of Rebecca Horn, whose White Body Fan (1972), poetically reveals her preoccupation with reclaiming some of the nascent sensations rooted in childhood and infancy of being acutely aware of our own space in the world. During this period she constructed a series of body extensions in the form of wearable sculptures that she used in performances. White Body Fan was a metal and fabric construction measuring 300 cm in diameter and belongs to the film'Performances II' from 1973. Wearing White Body Fan she extends her body out into the world using her arms to lift both sides of the fabric semi-circles, moving towards (and away from) the moment of total expression when both arms point to the sky revealing her transformation the embodiment of a full circle

Movement is key to this moment of realisation. I am reminded of the story of Giotto's execution of the 'perfect' circle. In searching for 'the best painter in Italy' to paint the ceiling of St. Peter's Basilica, Pope Boniface VIII sent a courtier to Giotto's workshop who explained his mission, and asked him for a drawing which would give the Pope some idea of his competence and style. Giotto apparently reached for a brush dipped in red paint, closed his arm to his side to make a sort of compass of it, and in one even sweep scribed a perfect circle, which he handed to the somewhat shocked courtier who duly delivered it to the Pope and explained how Giotto had scribed this perfect O – freehand, without a compass. The Pope and his advisors recognised this achievement and famously gave Giotto the commission. It is this haptic and tactile intimacy between our bodies and the circular form that can be seen in Edmund de Waal's relationship with the making of vessels. Every pot or bowl echoes the form of the cupped hand; beginning with the ball of clay warmed and pushed into a repeated series of cylindrical forms or turned on the potter's wheel - all the time it is essential to its realisation that the clay is being touched. Similarly Japanese ensō ink paintings embody this mind/body convergence, following a long period of meditating on the form of the circle and using the flow of breath to guide the movement of the hand in one fluid expressive stroke. Nanajyūkyū ō Nantenbō sho's exquisite ensō circle is inscribed with the poem:

"born within the ensō of the world the human heart must also become an enso.'

When viewing ensō, we see that form and void are interdependent and, in fact, define each other. What de Waal's porcelain vessels and the ensō paintings make visible are the corporal rhythms of the circle, making concrete the interconnectedness of the eye, the breath and the hand.

Everyday Ellipses

"The windows were blurred, the lamps haloed with fog."6

— Virginia Woolf

Our cup of coffee...our shower head and drain...the circle that's formed by our arms when embracing... the wheels of our bike...the lid from our take-away drink...the rings on our fingers...the record on our turntable...our lives are indeed permeated with O's of varying scales.

Mexican artist Gabriel Orozco seeks out circles in the familiar quotidian objects or ephemera that populate most of our daily lives, to reveal poetic serendipities or new correlations. Since the beginning of this practice in the 1980's Orozco has utilised the circle or spiral motif as a system or 'instrument' in his thinking process. An entry point in his exploration of the phenomenology of structures, the symbol of the circle is for Orozco a bridge between geometry and organic matter. His photographs Drain, Shower Head (2015), Quesadilla Disc (2005) and Wrapped (2015), are diaristic and informal in tone yet reveal an intense attention to the world around him where he successfully defamiliarises our domestic and intimate experiences in order to make visible moments of beauty or synchronicity.

4 x 826 ¼ x 48 7/8 in

neter: 124 cm / 48 7/8 in.

Time itself is also perceived as circular in form; the clock face embodies the cyclical notion of time as having no beginning or ending because to contemplate a linear concept of time would be ultimately to accept that it has an end point. Just as photographs, as Roland Barthes says, remind us that what I see has existed⁷, the reassuring sound of a ticking clock also reminds us that time must be an eternal loop that measures and confirms our existence in the world. Analogue clocks or watches very quickly give us a visual impression of time that digital formats lack. Composer and visual artist Christian Marclay has spent a sizeable portion of the last thirty years working with issues relating to time. Whether vinyl records, turntables or clocks, for Marclay sound and time are intertwined and though immaterial, can leave visual traces. Most musical instruments require a sound hole and resonance frequencies often present circular geometries. In his new animation Lids and Straws (One Minute) (2016) Marclay asks us to imagine sound holes in the banal everyday objects that surround us, such as plastic take-away cups, which spin mechanically like the hands and face of a clock, endlessly looping. Just as the ticking of a clock denotes the passing of time, Marclay proposes that time can also be seen in the ephemera of our everyday lives.

Floating Spheres

"We live on a sphere, we sculpt spheres and make them sparkle."8

— Constantin Brancusi

There is nothing quite like the specific experience of awe. It is usually linked in some way to the admiration of scale. However when contemplating the unending vastness of not just our own galaxy but the many others we can't see, awe is quite quickly usurped by wonder. This is characterised by a desire to know more, a curiosity borne from the same nascent instinct we have as newborns - to know that we exist, to seek out commonalities in shape or form and to whenever we are faced with unknowable entropies.

Peter Newman's Skystation (2005) explores our relationship to the sky in a very direct way. Based on Le Corbusier's LC4 chaise longue, his chromium disc seat invites a group of reclining participants to look skywards and its circular shape allows for conversation and interaction. Newman's assertion that "to look up, is to look into the future" has an optimistic clarity and echoes NASA's crisp, clean evocations of space exploration as seen through the 'eyes' of remote optical units mounted on Orbiters or on-surface exploration rovers. Untainted by human emotion, the NASA images seem unfettered, dumbly optimistic in the exploration of unknown territories. These images are our most truthful representations of our galaxy, yet they appear abstract and evoke a version of reality that is beyond our experience. Wolfgang Tilman's photograph Transit of Venus (2004), taken when the sun, Venus and Earth were in perfect alignment (the first time in 243 years), is at first sight of a similar aesthetic to the NASA images. However, on closer inspection we get a sense that his image is mediated by optical layers: the telescope, the camera, the human eye. Tilmans explains this heightened sense of the abstract:

"To see a planet actually move in front of another gave me a visual sense of my location in

space. Those pictures are often soft in feel while the Venus Transit pictures are hard-edged, but equally they seem somehow abstract, when in fact they are totally representational, depicting the celestial body that is the source of light on Earth. I have often shown them with the abstract works."9 The pursuit of abstraction in art was rooted

in the medium of painting. Alison Turnbull, an artist known for her intricate abstract paintings, meticulously translates celestial star charts and re-calibrates them painstakingly into poetic observations. She presents the natural world as a system of dependencies and patterns of which, she reminds us, we are an integral part. Navigating Moby Dick (2012) shows her interest in the navigational dimension of stars and explores ideas around orientation and perspective. A prosaic and functional counterpoint to Turnbull's delicate abstracts are the historical devices, such as the Celestial Navigational Globe (c.1895), which conveys the scientific desire for exploration into uncharted areas. Objects like these, encountered originally in museums or as teaching aids in Universities, would have without doubt captivated the imaginations of artists and particularly sculptors who were concerned with articulating abstract form as essentially spatial. In this context, Barbara Hepworth's bronze Sphere (1973) is resoundingly planetary. She articulates the observation made by many astronauts that on viewing our own planet from the perspective of space they are struck, not by its magnitude but rather by its fragility. Her Sphere is open, its structure visible. We see that its density is being questioned in some way and are invited to look in and through her planet to something beyond. Hepworth was evidently influenced by the philosophical potential of space exploration and expressed this expansive perspective in her use of open and curved forms:

"Today when we are all conscious of the expanding universe, the forms experienced by the sculptor should express not only this consciousness but should, I feel, emphasise also the possibilities of new developments of the human spirit, so that it can affirm and continue life in its highest form. [...] we must be aware of this extension of our knowledge of the universe and must utilise it in the service of the continuity of the human spirit."10

Discs in Echelon (1935) at the time of its production provoked opinion from the scientific community, including the physicist Desmond Bernal who in 1937 observed that "the greatest thought has been given to exact placing and orientation" adding that "the separate surfaces are made to belong to one another by virtue of their curvatures."1

"A thing is a hole in

a thing it is not"

Voids are hard to pin-down. Definitions vary

pore that remains unoccupied in a composite

realms of metaphysics, including agnosticism,

depending on the context. In astronomical terms

voids are the empty spaces between galaxy filaments.

In science and engineering voids are described as a

material. They have a lineage philosophically that is

rooted in Japan and Buddhism and, more recently, the

philosophical concept of nothingness appears in the

existentialism, monism, and nihilism. Voids also have

sculptural terms, Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth

frequently referenced voids, carving or casting them.

psychological connotations, made apparent when

someone or something is no longer 'in your life'

leaving feelings of emptiness or loneliness. In

as a central motif of their sculptures in order to

and presence'. A void can

is often characterised as

circular, oval and curved in

appearance. Its universality

as a theoretical and physical

void occupies the same

imaginations as the circle.

drawn into. I recall my initial

misperception of Flanagan's

abject eyeball vacating its

socket to leave a cavity or

void, expressing a material

bodies¹². Oddly it is not the

perambulatory eyeball that

unsettled me most, but the

empty socket it left behind.

film Ink on Paper (1999), we

holding a marker pen on a

course of an hour or so the

white sheet of paper. Over the

watch the artist's hand

In Ceal Floyer's

cast-off from our own

emphatic space in our

equally repelled by and

Null and Void

— Carl Andre

Eating our Tails

There are, of course, far too many objects and artworks in the exhibition to mention in this essay, but there are two that must be considered as key. Consider concepts of the ouroboros, the ancient Greek symbol of the serpent eating its own tail symbolising the eternal return, that circulatory process that assimilates opposites such as death/rebirth, creation/destruction and so on. Imagine, at the point where the mouth and tail meet, two small objects. One is a discoidal neolithic flint knife and the other is Rosalind Franklin's image Photo 51 (1952) of the discovery of DNA. Though diminutive in scale - literally microscopic in the latter case – these two objects reflect our preoccupation with knowing and understanding who we are. Neolithic flint knives and axes were as much tokens of status and identity as they were tools, and the discovery of DNA (the very kernel of what makes us human) potentially links us back to those same neolithic ancestors as readily as it can to a future when we will shape and hone our genetic make-up as once we did with pieces of flint. That these two objects are also tactile, extraordinarily beautiful and essentially circular in form only confirms that Van Gogh's liminal world is invariably just around the corner.

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Duration: 60 seconds, looped © Christian Marclay. Courtesy White Cube

remember this experiment as bored schoolkids; we know the outcome yet we continue to watch. At first it appears to be a static image, you look around to another viewer who is riveted and return your attention to the screen. After three or four minutes we may internally wrestle with notions of impatience and futility. In choosing to stay we become oddly entranced, mesmerised by the simplicity of the action. Eventually, we are faced with the prospect of an indeterminable amount of time: no more haranguing interior monologues about what it all means. As the circle slowly expands, time becomes increasingly abstract, leaving in its wake the simple and hypnotic pleasure of watching a circular black void imperceptibly grow

pen imperceptibly leaks its ink, eventually leaving a

perfect circular pool on the paper. Perhaps we



Barbara Hepworth, *Discs in Echelon*, version 2, 1935, Plaster, 35 x 51.8 x 27.5cm, Hepworth Estate © Bowness

For Anish Kapoor the void is replete with metaphor and lyricism and has come to symbolise a threshold, a womb-like space that is full of meaning and potential. In creating voids Kapoor makes reference to the metaphysical dualities expressed in our fear of emptiness and imbues it with an almost pleasurable sensory experience:

"I have always been drawn toward some notion of fear in a very visual space, towards sensations of falling, of being pulled inwards, of losing one's sense of self."13