

Yoshua Okón: 2007-2010

To achieve an immediacy of purpose Yoshua Okón, a Mexico-City based artist, creates his video installations in or near the locale where they are initially exhibited, setting up a direct correlation between the everyday world of particular sociological subsets and the exhibition. For *Yoshua Okón: 2007-2010*, we present five projects that are collaborative efforts between the artist and members of unique communities in Mexico, California and Germany. These works feature improvisational narratives that provoke viewers to consider questions of societal conduct within the context of the authoritative nation-state and personal behavior within those systems of social restraint. Maintaining a belief that humanity holds within its grasp a complex web of fears and desires, psychological violence shares the stage with absurdity and humor. When thinking about these works for YBCA's Big Idea ENCOUNTER: Engaging the social context, we especially consider how Okón places pressure on viewers to interrogate their own attitudes towards power, ethics, and prejudice in regard to class, status, and marginality.

In Mexico, the cultural resonance of ancient cultures; the deep and violent history with emblematic conflicts including "first contact" and the subsequent period of the conquistadors; the revolution which is now one hundred years old; and recent governments that follow neo-liberal models, all have created a strong national and cultural identity that many Mexican artists have been accessing and navigating as part of their artistic process. Like other large cities, the informality of the street culture and the spontaneity of interactions that take place in Mexico City—where Yoshua Okón was born, raised and now lives—encompasses a variety of behaviors including random acts of generosity and, conversely, acts that engender fear. It is an urban microcosm that retains traces of premodern and modern history, even at the level of everyday life.

Okón's artistic project resonates with Mexico's history, but indirectly, and often through its impact on the psychology of the individual. Power inversions and points of discomfort populate his video installations, which do not necessarily replicate events that take place outside of the theatrical frame of his *mise-en-scènes*. But they certainly allude, in a more abstract manner, to incidents of social confusion that often take place between people of different subcultures and classes. Okón often chooses to collaborate with those who feel disenfranchised from the mainstream in one way or another and are therefore already either disillusioned or unable to "fit in" to some notion of societal norms. Artists have often associated with and depicted social marginality as a way of representing their own sense of difference. Okón finds ways to side-step predictability, often choosing to work with groups who are completely outside of his own social sphere, yet with whom he connects because of their Otherness. While his home city may be a starting point for his works, Okón has found that many of the effectual conditions that he finds fascinating are identifiable in other locales. In Mexico City, Okón proceeds to upend that society's social structures and iconic identities. In Germany he addresses the role of distortion in the play of fantasy, and in California he exposes a *laissez-faire* version of existentialism¹.

Initially, Okón's filmmaking was quite simple, comprised of a series of questions or directives to "designated performers"², (non-actors who agree to perform, most often their regular identities), which were then played out in front of the camera. Over the years the works have become complex in both conception and execution. His most recent installations include multiple cameras, editing across more than one screen and coordinated planning and components produced by others such as the promotion video in *Canned Laughter* (2009). For *Bocanegra* (2007) Okón collaborated with a group of Third Reich sympathizers and enthusiasts. He spent a significant amount of time with the group before convincing them to participate in his project. As a result they felt comfortable enough to perform roles and fantasies in front of the camera, including their fascination with Third Reich philosophy and paraphernalia and obsession with the tenets of its horrific politics. Two of the videos, *The Gathering* and *A Walk in the Park* were collaboratively developed for the video by the artist and the performers. These scenes are simultaneously abhorrent and comical in that absurdity and twisted logic mark the group's ineffectiveness and the ridiculousness of their endeavors. *The Movie* component of the four-part installation was conceived and shot entirely by members of the group and then edited by the artist. This portion of the installation is a result of the group's ambivalence towards Okón and their doubts about whether he would give them a fair representation. What emerged from these feelings was a demand to regain control over how they were being represented.

For *White Russians* (2008) the process included meetings and rehearsals before the final shoot that took place as part of a larger event. The editing actively shapes the raw footage into a recognizable, quasi-narrative structure allowing for a porous relationship between the actions on screen and those within the installation space. *White Russians* features the Akien family and their friends who live in the remote community of Wonder Valley. The community has developed a unique social micro-culture in the high desert of southern California about two hours drive from Los Angeles. It consists of scattered houses with no running water on five-acre lots connected to each other by dirt roads. The title of the work refers to Diana Akien's alcoholic drink of choice. Filmed during the 2008 High Desert Test Site, an annual art festival of temporary works,³ this video demonstrates Okón's desire, as a member of the art world, for sociological reflexivity. The video features a "rehearsal" elaborated from a loose script developed collaboratively between the artist and the actors. The family and friends chose to create a "family drama," where the audience circulating the area for the art festival would be invited to "watch" the rehearsal on "set." Yet this illusion of control is subsumed by the agency of the artist, who has consciously constructed a situation that is open to a very wide range of behaviors, reactions, and demands. He achieves the best results from his actors by incorporating everyone into a role playing situation, with a regard for a social order which is suspect. In this and other of Okón's videos such as *Hausmeister* (2008), where a museum guard plays a mouse, performers exhibit embarrassing or aggressive behaviors that trigger visceral responses for their audiences. For *Hipnostasis* (2009), Okón collaborated with Los Angeles-based painter Raymond Pettibon, who supplied the handwritten word components. The six videos feature aging beach hippies who live at Venice Beach. Bare-chested, these Tritons peer out into the distance from their posts on the rocks that jut into the Pacific Ocean. While suggesting a more existential approach to the human condition, this work retains an affinity with those who seem to be living outside of historical time.

Canned Laughter (2009) centers its attention on a quintessential labor issue within the Mexican context, by deconstructing the communicative codes of the corporate image, from the uniform to the logo to the interior architecture of the factory. Shot in a section of one of the many empty shells of the ex-assembly plants in Ciudad Juarez, a northern Mexican town that shares a border with Texas, Okón created a mock *maquiladora*⁴ where underpaid workers package cans of laughter, a fundamental multimedia product used by the television entertainment industry. Okón hired workers from the area and their individual laughter was "orchestrated" into a traditional chorus to recreate different effects: hysterical laughs, nervous ones, wicked ones, and so on. The audience of the installation is invited to reflect on the limits of spontaneity of this emotion within the discourse of labor and the serial logic of contemporary industrial practice.

When Okón identifies individuals and communities of people with whom he would like to collaborate: Third Reich enthusiasts in Mexico City; a museum guard at the Städtische Kunsthalle München; residents of a small town in a desert in Southern California; beach lifers in Santa Monica, California; residents of the Mexican border city of Ciudad Juarez, he asks them to participate in a scenario that he constructs based on their normal lives and activities. While he is motivated by his desire to create a video installation that speaks to some core aspects of the lives of these "temporary actors" on a deeper level he is, like a novelist, using the lives of others to delve into his own vulnerability, which opens him up to feeling and living within the problematics of production. While the symbiotic relationships between director, actor, and viewer is a stable aspect of the work, the dynamics of how these relationships play out within each work is unique and determined by the central motivation of each of the projects.

Betti-Sue Hertz, Director of Visual Arts

1 Examples include *Gaza Stripper* (2006), a performance at the Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art, Israel and *White Russians* (2008), created for the California Biennial at the Orange County Museum of Art.

2 For more on the concept of the delegated performer see Julia Austin's interview with Claire Bishop, "Trauma, Antagonism and the Bodies of Others: a dialogue on delegated performance" in *Performance Paradigm 5.1: After Effects: Performing the ends of memory*, (May 2009). Available on <http://www.performanceparadigm.net/category/journal/issue-5.1/>.

3 High Desert Test Sites was founded and is organized by the artist Andrea Zittel and others and was inaugurated in 2002. *White Russians* was created upon Okón's invitation to participate in the 2008 California Biennial.

4 Factory owned by an international corporation that imports materials and equipment on a duty-free and tariff-free basis for assembly or manufacturing and then re-exports the assembled product, usually back to the originating country.