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LIDIJA HAAS TALKS TO YOSHUA OKÓN

Portrait by felipe luna

Yoshua Okón is an artist and the founder of Soma, an independent, artist-run art school in Mexico City. He has made work - often involving unexpected elements of performance - all around the world, not least in Mexico, where his 2000 installation wittily skewering the Mexico City police is especially hard to forget. Tank sat down with him in the quiet garden courtyard of his studio's building.

Lidija Haas I'm curious about Soma's history, in the context of the city's art scene as a whole.

Yoshua Okón In the 1980s when I grew up here, there was a totalitarian, oppressive regime that prevented connections to the outside world and among local artists. From the early 20th century until the 1960s, Mexico City was a very cosmopolitan and culturally complex place, so there is a strong cultural legacy, but for my generation there wasn't an easy access to that past. I felt isolated and so did many other artists. So in the 1990s a bunch of us got together and started artist-run spaces. I founded one with Miguel Calderón called La Panadería [The Bakery], and others

started popping up, and that generated a great momentum. Most of the artists from Mexico who are known today came out of that moment, that generation. That was a very successful moment in transforming the possibilities of what art could do and in creating bridges with the outside. It was especially exciting because these spaces were not only catering to the elite, they were very much open to the public, and that helped establish a broader dialogue among different social classes, generations and disciplines. It was a huge cultural re-birth moment, way beyond art.

LH And then?

YO In the early 2000s, not only in Mexico but worldwide, an art market explosion took place - and the game changed dramatically. All of a sudden, art becomes fashionable, becomes a big industry. People from finance and other non-cultural fields start getting interested; collectors and businessmen start having a big influence. In other words, the neoliberal turn in the world also affects art in a huge way - and that comes as no surprise since art has a highly unregulated market. The market can benefit artists and help us make our practices sustainable, but it can also have negative effects for culture and society. In the 1990s, cultural agents used to interact; most of the writers I know I met as a result of that scene where different disciplines were talking, influencing each other. Then this very specialised, more corporate version of the art world started compartmentalising, isolating artists. So the scene that was formed in the 1990s began to disintegrate and all the

artist-run spaces closed. Soma reconnects to this tradition but it is adapted to this new context I just described.

LH What are you working on now?

YO My work, since the 1990s has addressed the social arena; it is very interactive with what's around. For example, I am now working towards a solo exhibition with the museum of Arizona State University in Phoenix. The museum is financing my research and producing a new piece. As a starting point I am interviewing the Minutemen, a militia of ultra-nationalists in Arizona that has been shooting immigrants as they try to cross the border. More specifically I am working around the response of this group to the 60,000 unaccompanied Central American children who arrived in the US in 2014. I am ultimately interested in questioning the nation-state paradigm and the disastrous side effects that result from the contradictions between nationalism and an aggressive free market policy - neoliberalism - that often times involves invasions, like the US in Central America.

LH Has the market's influence made that more difficult?

YO Not necessarily; fortunately many institutions are interested in this kind of approach. But what has become more difficult is to engage with other people about the content that is being raised by art. Consumer society alienates us from each other.

LH But does that have to be the effect on art? In theory, you can imagine thinking: "There's all this money

swimming around, let's collaborate, work together..."

YO That's what Soma is - I'm not saying it cannot happen. But we need to actively make it happen. I'm not demonising the market, but if we just go with the flow of the market's logic, that's what ends up happening.

LH Because it makes stars...

YO The art world is structured around individualism, the idea of the isolated genius. So for me to survive as an artist, to have a career, I don't really need to leave my studio or interact that much. One thing the artist-run spaces in the 1990s provided was a physical space where people could interact. Simple as that. And those spaces don't exist unless we really work for them. For instance, just to give one example, a great artist, Francis Alÿs, lived three blocks from my house, and all of a sudden I realise it's been eight years and I have no clue what he's been doing. Because I'm having a show in Israel and he's having a show in Peru and it's so incredibly globalised: more than 90 percent of my exhibitions happen outside Mexico. I started talking to other artists and realised that that feeling was generalised. I was not the only one missing being part of a scene, a conversation. You realise it's become increasingly about spectacle. Exhibition after exhibition and no conversation about content, about what these exhibitions are addressing. And one of the great things about art is that it's a great way of initiating conversations that are relevant in society. It's not the only function, but I think it's important. So that's how the

idea of Soma came about, as a platform for deep interaction among cultural players and the public and a space to engage with what artists are presenting. The idea of Soma is to put an emphasis on discourse and content and give agency to artists. Because a lot of artists are deeply engaged, but it's hard to see: art can be very easily de-contextualised in ways that it becomes more about the institution's or the collector's agenda than about its intended content.

LH Those places do seem to have their own gravitational pull - Jumex and the Soumaya are threatening to become the image of the city.

YO Yeah, Jumex is a great example, because when it began, Eugenio [López Alonso, Jumex's founder] is someone who had a lot of money and was just like, "Let's do things." He's generous in that respect. And luckily he got a director, Patricia Martín, who understands the importance of social responsibility in art and art institutions. Right away they were giving study grants, buying work from a very young generation and doing amazing things with those resources. At some point, the Jumex Corporation realised the economic and PR potential of the collection and they pretty much took over and created the whole spectacle that you see today. Honestly, it's become more about the corporation's agenda than about culture. They started cutting funding for grants and spent millions building that museum in the middle of a shopping mall. It's a really good example of that shift I was talking about earlier.

LH But Soma is trying to cut the other way?

YO Soma has a public program of free talks every week, and we also realised there was a huge need for education. There was no good MFA program here, so we set one up; it's a non-profit, so all the students get 85 per cent scholarship. It's very international, which we did not expect: students from Brazil, Colombia, France, Spain, the US - some people even took intensive Spanish classes to be able to enrol. And there is a residency where people who come from abroad to teach and give talks can stay. So it also works like La Panadería in establishing an ongoing conversation with people abroad. And, together with Fundación Alumnos 47, Soma is about to start a blog and publication for criticism, because that's another huge need, to have people writing in depth and with as much freedom as possible about what's going on. Being an art critic is not sexy any more. Critics don't make any money and get very little respect. Yet, their function is crucial for a healthy and complex cultural scene. So the intention is to try to compensate a bit for that situation. There's a huge need for platforms where critics can be taken seriously and remunerated ethically.

LH Has Soma succeeded in fostering more of a sense of community? You get the impression that the arts in Mexico City can be very factional.

YO I do think Soma has had a positive effect towards fostering a sense of community but there is definitely still a very long way to go. From the outset, Soma was really conscious about the need to be inclusive and to operate

beyond factions. It was established as a neutral space for the whole art community. I think a good indicator is the recent auction Soma did to raise money for scholarships. Works were donated by an incredibly diverse group of artists representing many of the supposedly different factions.



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