

# Editor's Choice



*Still from Octopus, 2011, four-channel video installation, color, sound. Total running time: 18 minutes, 30 seconds. Courtesy of the Hammer Museum.*

## OCTOPUS

by Yoshua Okón  
Hammer Museum  
August 13–November 6, 2011

A lot of political art tells you emphatically what you already know all too well, or, just as frequently, it offers some pedestrian work alongside a thousand words of pretentious explicative wall text. Great way to spend a Saturday. How often does it make you laugh, or make your thoughts chase their tails, never mind make you wonder if maybe you're dreaming? The exceptions are the great ones' works—by a Maurizio Cattelan, or, in literature, a Roberto Bolaño.

Yoshua Okón, a prolific artist who's doing his best work now, is one of the greats. *White Russians* (2008)—a project ostensibly about white-trash rednecks that is really about art-world voyeurism—and the incredible *Octopus* (2011) are film installations that ensnare; mysterious parables that fall over you like a net you

didn't even notice, trapping you inside, making you a part of them. *Octopus* is set in the parking lot of a Home Depot in LA where day laborers gather in the hope of being hired, most of them undocumented migrants from, in this lot, Guatemala. Such people are a ubiquitous feature of our country's landscape now, caught in their low-wage livelihoods, risking deportation. This country scorns them and has turned them into political fodder: the embodiment of a great evil that has beset our poor struggling country. They must be sent home so that we can be noble again! Does the average US-citizen customer coming to and going from Home Depot ever give the day laborers much more thought than that?

We worship military prowess and war veterans, but does anybody look at these anonymous workers and think of warriors? Some people won't need this background information but Okón provides it for those who do: In the last decades of the last century Guatemala

was immersed in a hideously violent civil war between vanquished guerrillas and a triumphant, US-backed military. Okón realized that many of the day laborers were veterans of that war, and that they had fought against one another on opposing sides. Their war-ravaged country being unable to provide them decent jobs, they were here now, eking out a living in the country that also happened to bankroll the Guatemalan war.

How to find meaning in this, something much more profound, poetic, than the obvious explanations I've written above? Okón invited the workers to make a film with him in Home Depot's parking lot. They would reclaim their warrior selves. With the grace of expert jungle guerrilla fighters, they crawl on their bellies holding invisible weapons and roll on their backs up into firing crouches. They speak to each other softly in Mayan, and patrol—jammed into shopping carts, invisible weapons ready, holding still, they stare into this dangerous territory

from which the enemy might pounce at any moment. Ridiculous, of course. We hear the whinnying, gruesome, sublime laughter of Kafka. It is a beautiful puppet death ballet. Whose puppets are they? They lie dead in the parking lot, and the customers come and go, barely glancing, different realities coexisting, merging. I was in that Home Depot parking lot too, and it was just like that—there were no cameras, nobody was acting, nobody directing. It's always a little jolt when I remember that I saw *Octopus* on video screens. I keep thinking I dreamed it.

— FRANCISCO GOLDMAN's most recent novel is *Say Her Name*.

### LANDFORM BUILDING

edited by Stan Allen and Marc McQuade  
Lars Müller Publishers / Princeton  
University School of Architecture, 2011

Organic forms and processes, blobs, “growing” buildings, etcetera have dominated architectural discourse for the past decade. But the sophisticated design technology that uses organic models has never found its correlative in the construction process. You can “grow” a building in a digital 3-D environment, but building technology still isn't up to growing a building in the real world.

In their new book *Landform Building*, architects Stan Allen and Marc McQuade leapfrog this challenge and rethink the idea of organic on the level of larger, “geologic” processes. In this much broader view, the question of process is shifted from the design phase to “the long life of a building, city or landscape over time, enmeshed in complex social and cultural formations.”

Not every project in the book perfectly illustrates this thesis, but who's complaining when the documentation is so great? All the projects are page-turners. Notable examples are the Teshima Art Museum designed by Ryue Nishizawa for artist Rei Naito, a low concrete shell that discreetly completes the hill it sits on, featured in the volume's Atmosphere section; or Giancarlo Mazzanti's Biblioteca España, crowning a Medellín, Colombia, hilltop like a ridge of basalt cliffs, in the Artificial Mountains section.

The Rolex Learning Centre at the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne, completed in 2010, is perhaps the main article of curiosity here. Designed by SANAA, the school's gravity-defying, undulating floor slab (described by its engineer as “shell, arch, and deformed slab”) is a virtuoso work of construction. Realizing where the real story lies,



*Tsunehisa Kimura, from Visual Scandals.*

McQuade interviews the building's fabricator rather than its architects. It's a fascinating drama about the uncomfortable interface between the pristine digital realm and the obstinately clunky realm of concrete, rebar, and formwork.

The book is an exquisite object, elegantly dressed in what looks like gray flannel. Each of its five sections is prefaced by several grainy, full-bleed pages of spectacular structures, randomly ordered, like the free association that warms up a psychoanalytic session. Though these series sometimes push the envelope thematically, putting the great pyramids of Giza next to a Berlin bomb shelter loosens

up our cognitive senses and prepares us for the work to follow.

Art projects by Tacita Dean and Walter Niedermayr form tangential intermissions between the architectural documentation, and a short contribution by Chris Taylor, an educator who left the seminar room for a direct encounter with the landscape (he conducts study tours of land-art projects in the American Southwest), inserts land art—Michael Heizer's *Double Negative*—into the conversation in *Landform Building*.

— TERENCE GOWER is a NYC-based artist, currently at work on a public sculpture derived from Noguchi's early forms.