

# das SUPER PAPER

**25**

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**ORILLESE A LA ORILLA :**  
**POLI IV**  
 1999-2000  
 VERTICAL PROJECTION  
 (AS PART OF A SERIES  
 OF 6 VIDEOS)  
 2:42 MINUTES, LOOPED.  
 IMAGE COURTESY OF  
 THE ARTIST

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**STILLS FROM OCTOPUS**  
 2011  
 4 SYNCHRONIZED  
 PROJECTIONS. VIDEO  
 SCULPTURES: SHED  
 COMPONENTS, FLAT  
 SCREENS AND PROJECTION.  
 18:31 MINUTES, LOOPED.  
 IMAGE COURTESY OF  
 THE ARTIST

# YOSHUA

## An Uncomfortable

### by

The frontiers that distinguish outrageous hilarity from outright indecency are perilous grounds to navigate, separating the humorous from the awkward with swift efficacy. Mapping the terrain of human decency demands a shared understanding of the boundaries of accepted decorum. The traditional placement of the artist in the cultural vanguard has seen many explore this territory by challenging its limits, illuminating the shaky ground on which such borders are often built. As such, artistic practices that make us laugh or blush have long been powerful devices of critique.

A stereotypical image of Mexico City today would see the tragic and the comedic living in close quarters, with kitsch constructions of mariachi bands and *lucha libre* neighboured by spectacular drug-related violence and police corruption. The reality of contemporary Mexico City is of course far more complex, yet one cannot deny that serious poverty-related issues surrounding health<sup>1</sup>, discrimination<sup>2</sup> and social justice<sup>3</sup> affect the lives of many in Mexico today. While such socio-political issues merit earnest

attention in the public eye, are there other ways to engage with these concerns? Despite traditional associations with escapism, might a light-hearted chortle at the everyday absurdities of life in Mexico City provide a means through which the weight of socio-political concerns can find expression?

Mexican artist Yoshua Okón's work undermines any romantic notion of the artist as a trail-blazing force of social truth and political change. In fact, his performance-based, mockumentary-influenced practice can be interpreted as an inversion of that very image. It is through the banal kind of humour and absurdity of his work, as the performances that Okón films challenge the bounds of human dignity, rationality and history, that we as the viewer become politically engaged and implicated in the conditions that affect the people Okón depicts.

An earlier work of Okón's, *Orillese a la Orilla* (1999-2000), enables an encounter with the police force of Mexico City that, while operating on a humorous level, exposes

simmering tensions between different social strata of contemporary Mexico. This large-scale six-channel video installation displays policemen recorded in circumstances of varying degrees of manipulation. In regard to his process, Okón describes his camera as a 'detonator' that allows his subjects to play out otherwise suppressed and un-scripted fantasies.

Amongst them we find an officer in *Poli I*, who engages in an absurd yet playful dispute with Okón, resulting in the policeman's hurling of violent and vulgar insults and threats that allude to a history of socio-economic divisions within Mexico City. *Poli II* shows an intercepted radio conversation between two policemen in which they discuss, graphically, their strategy to entice passing girls to have sex with them. Perhaps most startling is the officer in *Poli IV* who, having been asked to demonstrate his baton twirling for the camera, spontaneously begins to touch himself, "intertwining his weapon handling abilities with short, but intense, interludes of crotch rubbing."<sup>4</sup> Intensely bizarre and

funny, the macho performances of all the officers bring to light profound social issues regarding the respect and authority of the law in Mexico City today. Indeed, Okón demonstrates how the boundaries of propriety for some of these officers are ambiguously located and require a minimal catalyst to be transgressed.

The boundaries of decency are put to the biggest test in Okón's work *Bocanegra* (2007), in which he collaborates with Third Reich aficionados to create a series of orchestrated situations, exhibited as a full-room video installation. The title refers to the location of their weekly meeting, at which this motley crew of Mexican history buffs, hobbyists and fascists re-enact the salutes and parades of the National Socialist Party. Among the constructed scenarios is *The Movie*, which presents a short film, 'Masturbanfuhrer', written and directed by a member of the group, which follows the sexual arousal of the character 'Ejaculhector' in response to the mere image of Hitler. This film consciously mediates between the ridiculous, the repulsive and the utterly perplexing.

# OKÓN

## Kind of Humour

### Denise Thwaites

The incongruence of this imagery is matched by the peculiar interpretations of Nazi ideology expressed in *The Gathering*, in which members of Mayan heritage identify with the propagandised 'purity' of the Aryan race. An ethical discomfort immediately arises for the viewer as these perverse and historically-loaded ideologies, rituals and imagery are played out before our eyes. Furthermore, our laughter at the absurd behaviours of these characters is tinged by uncertainty over whether we have transgressed an ethical limit by laughing at the symbols of a blood-stained history. Of Jewish heritage himself, Okón deliberately rattles the bounds of comfort in order to draw out disconcerting resonances between contemporary nationalism and histories of genocide. His work has been described as that of "a collaborator in all the complex senses of the word", the work emerging through an economy of implication between subject, Okón and the viewer. Critic Andrew Berardini has examined this dimension of Okón's work, suggesting that,

"[F]or Okón the collaboration (with all its messiness) doesn't stop at the borders of the frame or the walls of the gallery: the collaboration includes us. We are not allowed the simple voyeurism of the average consumer of images. The works involve us, our relationship to power and history, our expectations, and prejudices. Our discomfort, always subtle, becomes our contribution as viewers to the collaboration in the ethical and political transaction that occurs".

The transformation of the voyeuristic viewer into an implicated participant by Okón leads us to self-examination. Does our laughter arise through our comfortable self-distancing from these socio-political traumas? Is our amusement at the expense of Okón's collaborators, both immediately and politically?

The subtle implication of the viewer is revisited in Okón's more recent work *Octopus* (2011). In an inversion of traditional historical re-enactment, this work sees actual veterans of the 1990s Guatemalan Civil War re-enacting their experiences in a Home Depot parking lot in

makes light of them. Rather, through Okón's absurdist humour, he illuminates the way in which the symptoms of such political acts cannot be reduced to the spectacular images of violence and warfare seen in the media, but persist through the everyday experiences of victims.

So, as we laugh at the ridiculous performances of the Mexico City police, *Bocanegra's* Third Reich buffs and these Guatemalan civil war re-enactors, we cannot distance ourselves from a sense of implication in the persistence of political corruption, the dangers of nationalist ideology, the omnipresence of violence and social and economic political disenfranchisement. These ills manifest in the most banal, albeit funny moments. In this sense, perhaps Okón's humour is best understood in light of Robert W. Corrigan's description of modern comedy as "a special kind of comedy, a grotesque kind of comedy, which makes us laugh with a lump in our throats". Once the laughter subsides we are left with the simple discomfort of being implicated, or indeed, being a collaborator in these scenarios. This feeling of culpability is harder to laugh off. ■

Los Angeles. On first appearances, the work immediately recalls the playful imaginings of 'make believe' scenarios, with people pointing imaginary weapons at imaginary enemies in the quotidian environs of an LA parking lot. However, the reality of these enacted scenarios is rendered clear, as the men filmed draw from real and personal memories of war while simultaneously referencing their current struggles. These members of the LA Mayan community, due to their status as recent undocumented migrants, must gather to look for work as day labourers in the parking lot.

The implicated nature of the US in this conflict is highlighted by the title of the work, *Octopus*: the nickname used in Guatemala for the US-owned United Fruit Company (now Chiquita Banana). Based in Guatemala, this company was linked to the CIA-led coup against democratically-elected president, Jacobo Árbenz, which in turn led to the Guatemalan Civil War. While the humour of the work enables a light-hearted engagement with histories of injustice and violence, it would be wrong to suggest that the work

1 For a thorough account of some of the poverty-related health issues facing communities in Mexico City, see David J. Fox, 'Patterns of Morbidity and Mortality in Mexico City', *Geographical Review*, Vol. 62, No. 2 (Apr., 1972), pp. 151-185  
 2 An insightful analysis of the effects of ethnic discrimination in Mexico is found in René Flores, 'Social Stratification in Mexico: Disentangling Color, Ethnicity, and Class', *American Sociological Review* June 2012 77: 486-494  
 3 The particularly tragic issues that haunt the Mexican justice system are explored in the documentary film, 'Presumed Guilty' by Roberto Hernández and Layda Negrete.  
 4 <http://www.yoshuaokon.com/ing/works/orillesealaorilla/text.html>  
 5 From Andrew Berardini's, essay 'A Dark Play' in *Yoshua Okón*, p. 99







# The Guide to Nu\*Speak for the Perplexed

## by Regine Basha

Nu\*Speak is inspired by the term “Nu-language”, which was recently coined by the British philosopher Nina Power, who links it with other fast-turnover genres in music like Nu-Rave and Nu-Metal. The terms of Nu-language are “abstractions that have the surface appearance of discussion and the exchange of ideas, but which in fact serve only in order to maintain the illusion of communication and creative dialogue.”<sup>1</sup>

Recently I have been keeping a running list of new terms that I hear in contemporary art discourse. Terms which arise from describing and deconstructing theoretical ideas and production values in contemporary art today. These include the domain of both art making and curating – which some may say is now a form of art making. This guide includes research from English press releases, lectures, magazine essays, conversations and other printed matter from the past couple of years. It hopes to offer relief to the uninitiated.

What is interesting about these terms is their timing, as if they have been waiting in the wings to spring out as soon as last year’s terms become exhausted. Often these terms refer to the very same ideas as the ones they are replacing, yet their

very change invests the idea with new energy. Or these terms shift the older terms just slightly, so as to offer a new angle on the same position. And sometimes these new terms are precise contradictions to the old terms. Translations of these terms might be tricky, but approximations and inventiveness are highly encouraged.

Please note that this list may not represent perfect grammatical pairings – in some cases, nouns are replaced by verbs, or nouns turn into verbs for the sake of efficacy. Such is the way of Nu\*Speak. These terms are malleable and can be used and discarded or mixed and matched in any direction. Perhaps some do not appear in the dictionary, but art institutions have no issue with that. Many of them are, as we like to say, “context-specific” – meaning they are homonyms that carry different meanings in different contexts. For instance, the words ‘condition’ or ‘practice’ would mean entirely different things to the medical industry. You may read these terms in press releases throughout China, Mexico, Turkey and Australia, thanks to disseminating vehicles such as e-flux. You may hear them spoken internationally in conferences, lectures, curatorial programs, MFA graduate departments, biennials, art fairs, and at late-night after-parties after

many drinks – wherever an exchange of ideas or a trade of immaterial labour is taking place. In some cases they determine positions, not meaning. They act like currency and must flow in trade routes in order to garner more value. They produce effect. They are philosophical marketing tools. They are close to theoretical code words, perhaps. Though Nu\*Speak arises from a global intellectual class mingling with a global elitist class, linguistically it might resemble a kind of pidgin.<sup>2</sup>

Learning Nu\*Speak takes practice and great concentration! But do not get too attached to the terms that follow, as they have a lifespan of 2-4 years.

Good luck! »

<sup>1</sup> See Nina Power. “The Artworld is not the World.” in *Gest/LaboratoryofSynthesis#1*, ed. Robert Garnett and Andrew Hunt, London: Book Works, 2008, pp. 106-7.

<sup>2</sup> According to Wikipedia, a pidgin language is a simplified language that develops as a means of communication between two or more groups that do not have a language in common, in situations such as trade, or where both groups speak languages different from the language of the country in which they reside (but there is no common language between the groups).