

Curator's notes

Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro, Curator of Latin American Art, Blanton Museum of Art

These notes are intended to shed light on the curatorial context of these recent acquisitions, and why they were selected for the permanent collection.

1. Social Realism

One of the reasons for purchasing this work was to activate the Museum's existing collection of Social Realist prints. If we look at a typical Social Realist print like Leopoldo Mendez's *Fascism* [see illustration], we can see an example of how art has dealt with social and political themes.

In this print, the forces of Good and Evil are clearly defined, even to the point of parody. In the black and white world of Social Realism (even more so in Socialist Realism), power is always exercised in one direction, from an oppressor against the oppressed. The remarkable thing about Okon's video is that it complicates this relationship. The agent of power (the policeman) acts out a ridiculous routine to an audience (the artist), who then distributes it on the international contemporary art circuit (the gallery)

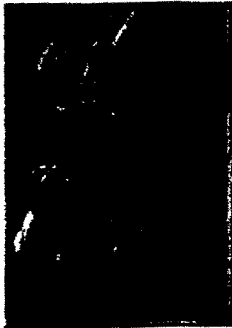


to a museum-going audience (you). The web of power and transactions is so complex that it becomes difficult to know how to read this Mexican policeman in this new context. Apart from the obvious humor of this work, it also raises important moral questions about the application of power. In another context, this policeman may not appear quite as benign. The bodybuilding routine he acts out for us speaks volumes about his masculinity and sense of power. This is undoubtedly a work of Social Realism, in that we are presented with an unmediated social situation in which class, race, power, and politics are all intertwined, but it is difficult to know what the final message is. In this sense, the work is truly contemporary.

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2. Figures of power

The police and the military appear frequently in the Latin American collection. Given the history of Latin America, this is hardly surprising. The works of Antonio Segui, Augusto Rendon, and Carlos Alonso [see illustrations], for example, use military figures to comic effect.



Okon's work could be seen as a continuation of this tradition of using humor to de-stabilize and lampoon figures of authority. Where Okon's work is different is that he does not use caricature or distortion to achieve this. Instead we have a deadpan recording on a handheld video camera with no editing. Rather than a representation of power, Okon gives us a real situation, made all the more so by its life-size projection and presentation in real time. His role as an artist is to provoke and record a real situation in the street, rather than create a technical artifice in the studio.

3. The ethics of art

Most of us probably feel somewhat uncomfortable looking at this work. After all, the policeman clearly had no idea that we would be laughing at him in a museum in Austin four years later. Neither could this policeman guess that this young artist would be making thousands of dollars by selling copies of the tape to museums and collectors (there are six editioned copies of this work). Okon frequently bribes policemen in this series (although not in this specific work). Does that transaction make his subsequent commercialization more legitimate? Is the policeman entitled to a share of the profits? How is this work different from a photograph in which he may have appeared doing his regular job? Does our laughter make the compensation higher? How would we feel if he lost his job over this video? All of these questions are legitimate, and difficult to resolve. One of the virtues of contemporary art is its potential to make these issues explicit, and to underline how art works within a larger complex system of values, decisions, and power.