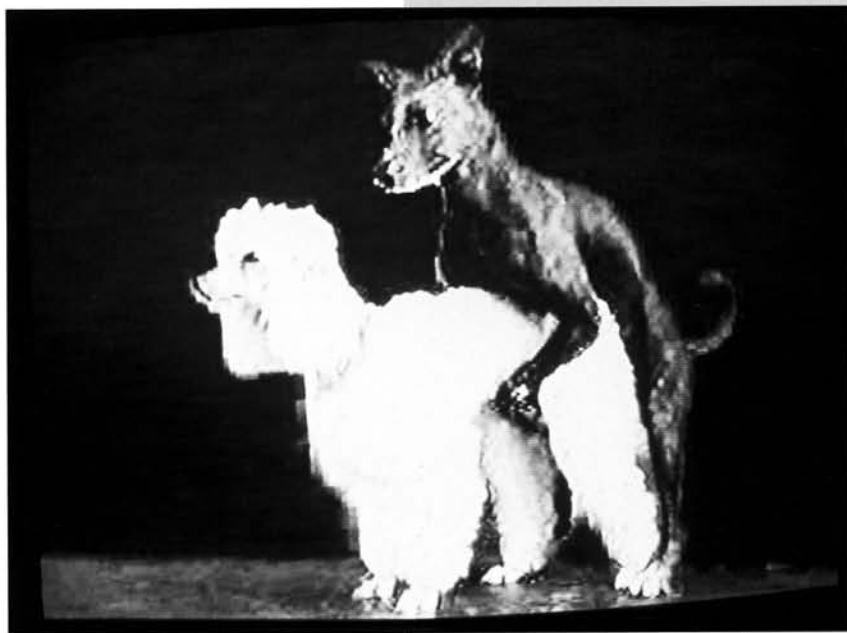


Through his provocative videos, photographs, and installations, Yoshua Okon probes moral and social issues related to racism, class structure, and corruption. With many of his works staged in his native Mexico City, he often constructs unusual or unsettling social situations and records the unpredictable consequences that result. As Okon describes it: "These interventions act like detonators that dislocate social codes, bringing along uncontrolled and unexpected effects."¹ The outcomes of his frequently confrontational and uncomfortable scenarios often call into question the artist's intent, introducing uncertainty about his moral and ethical position. At the same time, the authenticity of what he presents is also dubious, as he merges humor and confrontation in such a way as to complicate distinctions between fiction and reality.



■ **Chocorrol, 1997**

Video; duration: 1 min.
Courtesy of the artist

In an early video that introduced his edgy brand of social and political commentary, Okon presented a continuously looping scene of a brown Mexican Hairless dog mating with a fluffy white French poodle. In documenting this event, he skillfully turned the banal into a confrontation of racial, social, and cultural prejudices. As with so many of Okon's works, we are left wondering how real this scenario is and what role, if any, the artist may have played in orchestrating it.

Similar ambiguities exist in Okon's *Cockfight* (1998), a video installation that disrupts our expectations about the proper social behavior of young girls. In this work, presented as a pair of opposing large-scale video projections, two Mexican teenage girls yell obscenities and gesture rudely at each other in an endless loop of lurid remarks typically associated more with construction workers than with schoolgirls. Standing in the middle of this explicit screaming match, the viewer begins to realize, from the girls' intermittent giggles, that they are faking their fierceness and that their taunts have been improvised for Okon's camera. As *Cockfight's* barrage of catcalls and hand gestures continues, it also becomes clear that the girls are increasingly uneasy and self-conscious about delivering their raunchy diatribes. At the center of this work is a collision between stereotypical indicators of two very separate classes in Mexican society: the affluent middle class (well-dressed schoolgirls) and the worker (obscene language and primal gestures).

One of a number of Okon's works that challenge symbols of wealth and authority is a single-channel video work titled *Presenta* (1998), which features a compilation of logos from some of Mexico City's best-known institutions, introduced by official-sounding voiceovers. Installed

■ **Orillese a la orilla, 1999–2000**

Nine videos; duration: 1–8 min.

Courtesy of the artist



near the entrance of the galleries and museums in which it has been shown, *Presenta* (Spanish for “presents”) appears to be a sponsor list of an extremely well-funded cultural enterprise, yet the sheer number of bureaucratic funders borders on the absurd, as the list goes on and on. *Presenta* occupies a space of delightful ambiguity as its familiar official voices and authoritative positioning within an institution stand at odds with the video’s intentionally amateurish quality and the seemingly endless stream of supposed “sponsor” logos.

Okon’s manipulation of authority takes a provocative turn in an installation titled *Orillese a la orilla* (1999–2000), in which he deftly merges images of humor and aggression to examine the subjects of social tension, corruption, and abuses of power in Mexico City. Named after a Mexican policeman’s command used in pulling someone over, this work features nine videos of different encounters the artist had with Mexico City cops. Despite the fact that the police are some of the city’s most feared officials, they are reduced to comical figures and symbols of broader societal corruption in front of Okon’s camera. In exchange for two hundred pesos, officers agreed to dance for him, stage arguments with him, or tell jokes for the camera, all while in uniform and on duty. With each scenario we are left to question how much of this is real (in one video we even see the artist getting arrested as he films from a “hidden” camera) and how much is the result of a small bribe.

In *Parking Lotus* (2001) Okon directed his attention toward another compromised figure of authority, the office building security guard. Struck by the largely sedentary workdays of security guards and their tendency to be out of shape, poorly



trained, and underpaid, he created a series of photographs and a three-channel video focusing on this often overlooked workforce. Okon approached a number of uniformed security guards working in buildings around the city of Los Angeles and asked them to pose for him sitting on a mat and meditating (or at least trying to meditate) in their parking lots. This potentially comedic setup produced a range of images—from the humorous, to the heroic, to the disturbing—situating the work in the uneasy terrain between homage and send-up. Presented next to these images is a manifesto of sorts that describes them as the work of the “Los

Angeles Security Guard Meditation Movement,” or LASGMM, a group supposedly dedicated to initiating and supporting collective meditation sessions for Los Angeles-based security guards. Like so many of Okon’s works, *Parking Lotus* operates in the realm of ambiguity, where lines defining fiction and reality blur and the moral position of the artist is never fully revealed.

IRENE HOFMANN

Notes

1. Yoshua Okon, artist’s statement, 2002.