

# Watching Us Watch Ourselves: Spectators as Protagonists

By Juan Carlos Reyna

Nobody believes politicians. Why should we believe artists?

If not for the formidable apparatus composed of museums, art schools and, above all, an art market that is apparently exempt from the global economic crisis, the existence of artists would have lost its meaning. Long ago, contemporary art, especially art produced in Mexico, stopped criticizing the corruption and stupidity that prevails in society, at least in any obvious way. By taking part in what economist Ernest Mandel popularized as late capitalism,<sup>1</sup> the artist stopped taking sides. No wonder art in Mexico is poorly supported by the grateful state.

The other side of this coin is the development of careers that, regardless of public institutions, do have some relevance to the social order. Without artist Yoshua Okón (Mexico City 1970), for example, Mexican art would have taken very different directions. In 1994 he founded La Panadería, a controversial gallery in Mexico City's Colonia Condesa that revolutionized the sleepy country's cultural scene. The neighborhood where the gallery was located—and where Okón still has his home and studio—became the favorite neighborhood of yuppies and bohemians, whose patronage has led to a proliferation of restaurants and bars that did not exist fifteen years ago. Okón also founded SOMA in late 2009, a unique school and residence in Mexico for experimental artists.

Despite this, his work is little known in Mexico. His work is included in collections at the Tate Modern Museum in London and the ARCO Foundation in Madrid, yet has rarely been exhibited in Mexico. This is no coincidence.

In 15 years, Okón has created a body of work that pointedly and lucidly questions the ambiguities that operate in contemporary societies, especially Mexican society. It is a truth that is difficult to confront: his video installations and performances reveal the prejudices and inconsistencies that define our daily lives. No one is untouched by his criticism: by exhibiting the contradictions in our interactions with the world, his work forces us to reconsider convictions that are the basis of one or more identities (what I call “the great paradigm of nationality”).

This is not to say that his art is itself a critique of the Mexican idiosyncrasy: his work is not intended to attack the political failings of any country. Rather, it aims to reveal the contradictions with which each individual, regardless of where their passport was issued, faces his or her reality. We the spectators are the protagonists of his work.

The title of his latest exhibition, *Ventanilla única (Full Service Window)* is the name given to the offices where most government paperwork is submitted. In Mexico, they are typically characterized by a bureaucracy that is sluggish and absurd. Thus, the “window” is also a metaphor for limited perspectives: the prejudices and manias with which we face life. A window always invites us to fantasy, which is to say, to lies.

One of the pieces in this exhibition is entitled *Bocanegra*. Originally exhibited in 2005 at the Francesca Kaufmann gallery in Milan, *Bocanegra* is a video installation that shows the rituals of a group of Mexicans who have formed a Nazi cell. In one of the fictional documentaries in *Bocanegra*, group members are dressed in uniforms of the National Socialist Party. They discuss the principles that justify their existence in a mestizo country. “Aryan is anyone who respects his own race,” says one. “The Aztecs were Aryans, since they didn't mix with other Indians. Being Aryan is respecting yourself.”

The group concluded its colloquy with a “walk in the park,” where group members waved flags with Nazi insignia. Okón, who is of Jewish descent, created this installation after proposing to document the group. For the past decade, Mexican pseudo-Nazis have operated as a kind of social club whose goal has always included members wearing their uniforms in public, which they had never before dared to do.

*Bocanegra* reveals that the identity of a fringe group, mirroring and reflecting society as a whole, is defined by the ideological forces behind its political discourse (Nazism, racism) as well as its seemingly trivial daily actions. This, like the rest of the pieces in *Full Service Window*, reproduces the tension at both extremes. In *Bocanegra*, the artist confronts the historical weight of the Nazi uniforms and symbols with the ridiculous, megalomaniacal delusions of a community lost in isolation. Thus, the piece is a yardstick of the political farce that flushed many societies down the drain. Political myths of the past and present have absurd effects on ordinary citizens. The work, meanwhile, reveals the profound breakdown of our identity, almost always based on concepts that, despite being at odds with reality, we believe are absolute.

In one of his previous video installations, a group of teenagers from wealthy families chase away their boredom by snorting cocaine and harassing domestic workers. *Rinoplastia* (2000) features teenagers who play themselves, in most cases improvising. The way these budding actors interpret the stereotypical roles of their “class” reveals the layer of fantasies that characterize many of the internal conflicts in Mexican society. What is real in these pieces, in the words of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, is that they do not refer to a raw reality but rather to the void left by a reality that is wounded and incomplete.<sup>2</sup> In their simulation we see what we do not want to see.

*Orillese a la orilla (Pull Over to the Side)*, exhibited at the Art & Public Gallery of Genoa in 2002, is also a fictional work produced in documentary style in which several real cops play themselves in compromising and stereotypical situations. In one of the videos (*Poli III*), a lecherous guard is drunk. While dancing, he invites the camerographer who is recording him—we infer that it is Okón, and therefore the eye of public art—to accompany him to a small security booth as he flatters and compliments him. In *Poli I*,

the longest video in the series, a police officer demands that the camera—again the eye of the artist/spectator—stop filming him. When the camerographer refuses, the cop calls him a “lazy-ass bum” and goes on to say that “until you get your asses kicked... lousy sons of society,” and snatches the camera away violently. The cop reproduces the long history of abuse at the hands of the Mexican police against the angry youth of the seventies and eighties. This reality, usually hidden behind the public discourse of the judiciary, emerges in this kind of psychodrama. As *Poli I* progresses, the playful tone of the police officer is increasingly replaced by insults that are “more real.” Naturally, the officer ends up being possessed by the character.

The artificiality of the acting in Okón’s work is only an appearance: in fact, it is a critical distance accomplished through cinematic and psychodramatic techniques. Heidegger reminds us that “technique” comes from *techné*, which in Greek means to reveal, to bring forward.<sup>3</sup> At this distance, the work seems to seek to return to the principles that, though they lead us back to the social arena, originate from the individual experience of everyday life. In the representation of their own characters, the men and women in Okón’s pieces *are there*. Their performances, therefore, are rituals in which the prudish members of society are redeemed when expressing their deepest desires. These wishes have led to contact with the other, i.e., the experience of the social. That is why the artist has chosen to stage conflicting archetypal relationships in modern society: the marginal delirium of a universally despised ideology versus the political correctness of the democratic city—the park where they are allowed to march—, demonized authority versus the *enfant terrible par excellence*: the artist or the idle and perverse rich versus poor workers who are their victims. But these figures are not the objects being addressed; rather, they are the spectator’s experience that is identified not only in situations but in their origin.

Okón has refined this principle in *White Russians* (2009) the most moving part of *Full Service Window*. *White Russians*, a complex video installation that is divided into four screens or “stories,” simultaneously records the coexistence of the “cultivated” public of the California Biennial and a family that lives in the Mojave Desert’s Wonder Valley. The sophisticated visual editing of the piece takes what seems like a documentary to a dimension beyond narrative fiction: *White Russians* is a snapshot of characters that confront each other to the degree of delirium and hyper-violent drunkenness.

Wonder Valley, a poor area that lacks water and urban infrastructure, is on the outskirts of the place where the biennial was held. In *White Russians* a clearly impoverished family plays itself for a weekend as it receives curators, artists and art critics. During the reception, they serve *White Russians* (a cocktail), a favorite of the mother of the family, which evokes the quasi-cinematic glamor of the United States in the middle of the twentieth century.

The two groups, despite sharing a drink that is charged with meaning (the American dream), are increasingly in opposition. As they get drunker, the contrasts between urban and rural cultures and the ways in which each is perceived are revealed.

Even more than the California family and their guests, it is the spectators who become the center of the action. From off-stage, they become voyeurs who project their prejudices

about communities isolated from urbanization as well as the world of art and its relationship to concepts such as ignorance, violence and chaos.

*White Russians* becomes a strategy to address the way we perceive our realities, so that they end up collapsing. This piece is not intended to mirror the miserable conditions of the inhabitants of the Mojave Desert, one of thousands of backwaters that showcase the failure of the American dream. On the contrary, it is a kind of symbolic mediation with regards to the fate of its inhabitants.

Frederic Jameson argues that this is the only way to impart a social function to artistic production. The capacity of “symbolic mediation” of a given work seeks not to accuse reality but to reveal it.<sup>4</sup> By bringing reality into the symbolic dimension, the work forces one or more ideologies to the level of consciousness. For a society to keep its sanity, the need for symbols and ghosts is well known. Slavoj Žižek, a thinker close to Jameson, reminds us in many of his essays that ideological battles are won or lost in these arenas.<sup>5</sup> Only then do we regain the ability to criticize our surroundings.

The relevance of Okón’s work to our daily lives is that it confronts the invisibility of citizens with the identity that, paradoxically, constitutes a nationality. A phantasmagorical nationalism founded on prejudice and contradictions (I repeat: on fantasy) is a traumatized nationalism. The construction of the imagination that is, so to speak, the ego of nationality has occurred because of these comparisons, but even more, because of the conflict between the self and the other, which is so well illustrated in Okón’s work. The archetypal antagonisms of his pieces reveal the deep desire to attack the other. It is no coincidence that early in his career, during the boom of La Panadería, his work was associated in artistic circles with manifestations considered “violent” in relation to Mexican institutions: the late counterculture. Nor is it a coincidence that the less discreet recognition of his work occurred at precisely this time (the late nineties): the pieces were force fields nourished by their context.

However, beyond that participation in the social domain and regardless of the years when it was created, Okón’s work reveals the fissures characteristic of what I call “traumatic nationalism”. By unveiling the contradictions that give meaning to our identity, Okón points to a critical void: a wounded and incomplete nation predicated on the existence of identities that are the product of a disorder. Traumatized ego: those of us who make up the nation have been removed from our relationship with the fundamental other: the Father, or that which evokes his name, such as submission to a political order, the possession of money, or the existence of authorities. The Nazis, for example, had never marched in the park because they recognized an authority that gave meaning to their marginalization—that is, to their existence. Their march is the most powerful moment in the video installation since they believe they are reaffirming their identity publicly, when in fact they are obliterating it by exercising a democratic right. Democracy is the sudden disappearance of the father, the conversion of a society into a collective of orphans.

The confrontations between the protagonists of *White Russians* —and by that I mean the relationship between curators, artists, and critics on one side and the local family

members on the other—end in delirium. This occurs because no clear confrontation ever occurs. The relationship is complicated by the archetypal figures in rural American communities (drunken men, incestuous teenagers). As the piece evolves, the confrontation evaporates, and with it the artists, curators and critics: the most intriguing moments of the video installation are those in which they are absent. The authorship of the art intelligentsia is blurred.

When asked what makes us Mexican, American, or German, Okón responds by displaying trauma: the incongruity of the assault by libidinous police officers in *Orillese a la orilla* or the idle youth of *Rinoplastia*, shows us cut off from truth. Okón does not intend to deliberately acknowledge the contradictions of a society mired in failure and stupidity. His aim is to catch a glimpse, through deep contemplation of such contradictions, of the paradigms of a nationalism that is hollow but also, therefore, in permanent transfiguration. This is exemplified in the levitation of the characters in *Parking Lotus* (2001), who meditate in public parks near their jobs to counter the inhuman work hours. For them, the alternative to this kind of survival is reinvention.

In his essays on the unconscious and repetition, Jacques Lacan defines trauma as a failed encounter with reality. As the real cannot be represented, it is repeated.<sup>6</sup> The loop, common in Okón's audiovisual installations, is more than the reproduction of these conflicts or mere simulation. The incessant repetition of absurd fissures in police organizations (*Poli II* and *Poli IV*, 2000) or institutional bureaucracy (*Presenta*, 1998) reveals our inability to face the world without this absurdity. We are condemned to trauma: the loop breaks the spell of the single projection, producing not only an effect of truth, but a glimpse of the real. *Presenta* is not included in *Full Service Window*, but is associated with it insofar as it points to the trauma to which the bureaucratic absurdities lead. This is a video that shows a series of logos presenting a production that never begins. Something happens when, almost like a hint of mystical fervor, the practical futility of waiting for something that has started earlier than anticipated is revealed to the spectator. Lacan calls this point *touché*: reality emerges there, where any notion of politics also dissolves despite the fact that the piece originated in the political dimension—his critique of the cultural bureaucracy.

Okón's work, until recently exhibited in state-sponsored venues, is produced outside of government institutions. It invites us to an understanding of the political dimension that touches upon the ascetic. In the dissolution of all notions of politics, it shows a nationalism that is permanently mutable. Okón demands that spectators dissolve their own identity. In the face of trauma, renounce oneself. The dissolution of identity is proposed when these pieces attempt to represent the crudest stereotypes of reality. Conflicts that appear in the video installations are presented to maintain a distance sufficient to reveal the coexistence between symbol and reality. The characters, despite being "real" in the sense that paradoxically they are representing themselves, are participating in an improvised staging of themselves.

The audience, invited to participate in the complicity between reality and fiction, can be conceptualized outside of the conflict between the principles that govern their public life

as well as their personal life. Okón's work invites us to go beyond the failed identity, where our encounter with reality can be observed through mutation, flow, and variability. Let us think of a new subjectivity for citizens embodied in these terms.

**Juan Carlos Reyna** (Tijuana, 1980) works within the boundaries of music, literature and the visual arts. He has pursued postgraduate studies in Critical Theory and is a fellow of Nortec Collective, now the Tijuana Sound Machine. He is a frequent contributor to *Reforma* (a major Mexico City newspaper), weekly magazine *Día Siete* and *Letras Libres*, *La Tempestad*, *DEEP*, and *Gatopardo* magazines. His most recent book is entitled *La(s) estética(s) de la mundialización* (The aesthetics(s) of globalization), and won the 2008 State Journalism Prize.

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5 Žižek, Slavoj, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London: Verso, 1989.

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