

# Undermeaning Categories

By Kenneth J. Foster

Born in Mexico City. Undergraduate education in Montreal. Graduate education in Los Angeles. Currently living and working in Mexico City. Just that much of his biography gives a clue as to why Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (YBCA) elected to present the work of Yoshua Okón in our version of the exhibition *Yoshua Okón: 2007-2010*, originally titled *Ventanilla Única* when it was mounted at the Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil from October 7, 2009-January 2, 2010.

Okón, in his life and his work, exemplifies a contemporary experience and vision of the world that is simultaneously transnational and local, drawing on influences and ideas from other nations, cultures, and geographies while simultaneously situating his work at home, connecting back to his beginnings in Mexico City. It is a new way of thinking about the global artist no longer just the jet setting art star working on the alleged “international” plane of interchangeable biennials with endlessly interchangeable art. Rather, it is the expansive but grounded individual who wants and needs influences from outside his home city, who maintains close ties to his place of origin, and returns to make an impact on that place. These are the artists that YBCA is interested in and this trajectory is a metaphor for how we think about ourselves as an institution as well.

Similarly, the consonance between the issues and ideas of Okón’s work and the issues and ideas of YBCA’s program is remarkable. Under the thematic construction of “Encounter: Art and the Social Context,” YBCA seeks out and finds artists whose work is created in response to, or is a critique of, the current social milieu. We are interested in how artists are viewing contemporary society and what their observation on that society might be. We are especially interested in artists who, through their work, provide us with the surprising, often startling view, or re-view of contemporary life. If we want political discourse we can go to the endless publications that explore these ideas voluminously and thoroughly, often in intellectually stimulating and challenging ways. But if we want to be dislodged from our current thinking, if we want the sharpness of new insights to penetrate the fog of language and rhetoric that engulfs, even overwhelms, the contemporary world, then we turn to artists; artists like Yoshua Okón.

My first encounter with Okón’s work *Orillese a la orilla (Pull Over to the Side, 1999-2000)* was just such a startling experience. Okón came to YBCA to meet with me and the staff to show and discuss his work. While YBCA Director of Visual Arts Betti-Sue Hertz had told me

about his video installations, and had showed me some images and explained the premise of the exhibition, I was unprepared for the extraordinary impact of *Orillese a la orilla*. Perhaps it is my background as a performing arts curator that made Okón’s work so powerful.

Watching the performance or the “performance” of the Mexico City policemen was a disturbing experience. Questions of authenticity, reality, and truth came immediately to mind. But just as provocative and disturbing was serving as the proxy for the recipients of these police performances and seeing the terror, the duplicity, the rage, and the ridiculousness of these men through the victims’ eyes. The self-consciousness of the performers themselves only deepened the hideousness of what we were watching and unveiled, as only art can, the despicable potential for cruelty within us. These men are not monsters; at worst they are buffoons. But they are also us.

We are finding that more and more artists are not just crossing these boundaries of form but creating truly hybrid works—works that integrate the physicality of the object and the temporality of performance into something quite different than either of these identities of “visual art” and “performance” describe, undermining their usefulness as categorical descriptions of creative expression. It is my contention that these terms are not only becoming meaningless but are destined for obsolescence, to be replaced by more expansive and generous understandings of the forms of creative and visual expression.

This is not a new trend but it is advancing in powerful ways in the worlds of both performing and visual arts. Artists like Okón are making that happen. YBCA is proud to be instrumental in bringing his work and its fresh perspective on contemporary art and life to the attention of a larger public through the exhibition and through this catalogue.

**Kenneth J. Foster** is the Executive Director of the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco. He holds a BA from Metropolitan State College, a MA from New York University and has worked in the performing arts presenting field for more than 25 years. He has directed programs at Milliken University, Penn State University and the University of Arizona, prior to coming to YBCA in 2003. Mr. Foster has been active in national arts service organizations throughout his career, including serving as Chair of the Board of the Association of Performing Arts Presenters (APAP) from 2000-2003. He is a founding member of The Africa Contemporary Arts Consortium and has a strong interest in contemporary performing arts practice in non Western cultures. In 2008, he received APAP’s prestigious Fan Taylor Distinguished Service Award for Exemplary Service to the Field of Performing Arts Presenting.