BLANTON MUSEUM OF ART
LATIN AMERICAN COLLECTION

Yoshua Okon

b. 1970, Mexico City

m. 1989, Florence; m. 1990, Montreal; m. 1994, Mexico City;
m. 2000–present, Los Angeles–Mexico City

Since the mid-1990s, Yoshua Okon has created a series of works that appears to fall within the tradition of portraiture, but that displays none of the grandiosity, stasis, poise, or respectability usually associated with this genre. In his single-channel videos and video installations since the late 1990s, the artist has worked with portraiture's most basic proposition, focusing on the exposed figure with uncharacteristic bluntness. As with most works in the genre of portraiture, critical interpretations of Okon's work have tended to focus on the nature of its subjects rather than on the conditions and implications of their rendition.

Okon's video works portray a range of ordinary characters: the schoolgirl, the clerk, the young aristocrat, the policeman. Taking a plain and apparently amateur approach—a characteristic feature of Okon's videos—the artist renders each of these individual figures as representative subjects of a contemporary social reality. Paradoxically, Okon often leaves the specific context of his interactions with his subjects undefined. This open-ended aspect of his videos implicates the viewer, generates alternative narratives for the work, and shifts the question of value away from aesthetic categories directly into the social realm. The viewer, not the artist or the subject of the portrait, must interpret and construct the alleged reality that foregrounds the portrait itself. By its very nature, portraiture allows both the artist and the viewer to pass judgment on the subject portrayed, an aspect of the genre that is relevant in approaching Okon's work as well.

"Comical." "Humorous." "Pathetic." These are some of the terms critics repeatedly use to describe the main characters in Okon's series Oríllese a la orilla (1999–2000), an untranslatable policeman expression in Mexico City meaning something close to "edge over to the edge."[1] The series consists of nine videos featuring on-duty policemen. At times the artist paid the policemen to perform for the camera; at other times he videotaped them without their consent or knowledge. In *Poli IV* of 1999 (2003.77, plate 181), Okon recruited a policeman he encountered in the street happily twirling his baton in an elaborate weaving pattern. After Okon offered him a fee to repeat his routine before the camera, the policeman proceeded to the artist's studio, aware that the video would eventually be shown in a museum. In the resulting video, this uniformed policeman appears to follow the movements of a self-choreographed martial arts drill or pop dance routine. Presenting him as a frontal figure against a white background, Okon provided neither a stage nor additional props, allowing the subject to speak for himself.

Okon produced *Poli IV,* like the other videos in the Oríllese a la orilla series, in Mexico City, where he was living and working at the time. Several clichés about Mexico surface in this work, which critics tend to address when writing about the series—predominantly those of bribery and corruption in the country's police force. The problem with this critical approach is that it considers or interprets the characters rather than the work itself. I would argue that the central issue in this work is not so much whether the police force in Mexico is corrupt, whether policemen are taped inadvertently or recruited, or whether they appear to be comical, pathetic, or otherwise. What seems more significant is that the work provokes the viewer/critic to search for a moral or ethical position. Okon's portraitlike videos are resolutely not for absorption or contemplation: they are there to entertain. This "space between humor and discomfort" is the unsettling and most critical aspect of his work.[2]

If we can assume that the politics of representation in contemporary art entails a certain type of empowerment, Okon's videos in their relentless entertainment ultimately confuse these positions of power. *Poli IV* might privilege the viewer over the subject represented, but it does so only in a limited and temporal way. The realistic approach in Oríllese a la orilla actually conspires against the apparent subject matter: law enforcement. Nonetheless, while the work might expose law enforcement as vulnerable, the police as an institution will remain sovereign, regardless of the work's implications.

Okon created Oríllese a la orilla within a particular artistic and cultural context. The political climate in Mexico was changing due to the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the effects of neoliberalism on economic and cultural processes in the region. While the impact of NAFTA on the work itself may not have been direct, Okon made the series at a time of national and international cultural redefinition. This included a slow redefinition of the practices, spaces, and audience of cultural production and exhibition. The figure of the artist became that of the sociologist (studying and classifying subcultures and social classes), contractor (paying wages to people to act in "Conceptual art" performances), or entrepreneur (creating simulated or genuine corporations to provide services).[3]

In its own way, *Poli IV* is symptomatic of this redefinition. Its exhibition presupposes the gallery space as a safe ground where the work can exist for deliberation. There, with its straightforward presentation, *Poli IV* posits an aesthetic experience as a critique of judgment. Not merely a critique of portraiture, the work concerns itself with the possibility of any critique—a possibility granted by that gallery space. *Poli IV* presents the viewer with a mechanism through which to develop a judgment, involving the art institution's own workings and perhaps even its undeclared aspirations. Okon does not make use of the established aesthetic strategies of site-specificity or institutional critique, but simply engages with the genre of portraiture. By doing so, he articulates a double context: the "real world" in which the work was made, and the internal, instrumentalizing power of the art institution.

—*Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy*