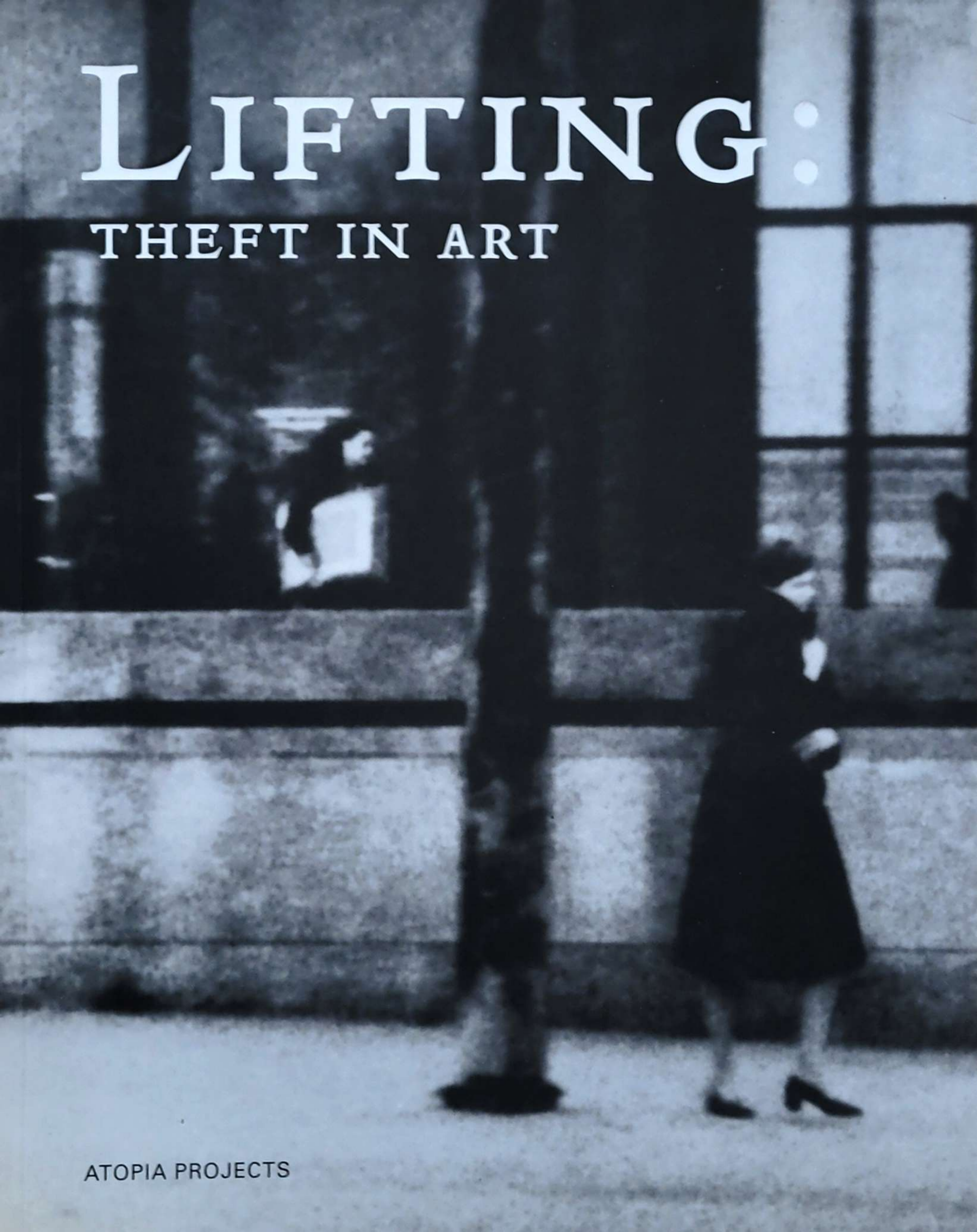


LIFTING:

THEFT IN ART



Miguel Calderón and Yoshua Okón

A Propósito... (Incidentally...), 1997



Installation consisting of 120 stolen car stereos obtained on the black market, and a looped video projection documenting the artists stealing a car stereo. Digital video transferred to DVD (00:52, color, audio), installation dimensions variable.

Above: installation view, La Panadería, Mexico City, 1997.

In 1997 Miguel Calderón and Yoshua Okón exhibited a stack of 120 stolen car stereos on the gallery floor of La Panadería (Mexico City, Mexico); upon the wall a looped video projection showed the artists smashing a car window and wrestling the stereo from the dashboard. *A Propósito...*, is now in La Colección Jumex, Mexico City, Mexico.

Atopia Projects: What is the background to *A Propósito...*?

Miguel Calderón: Our own car stereos had been stolen numerous times, this reflected the powerful supply and demand economy in Mexico City and how much theft is a part of it, to the point where I can remember thinking, as I was growing up, that stealing stuff from other people's cars was supposed to be cool. So we felt like it was something we wanted to try ourselves, to understand why people liked doing it so much.

Yoshua Okón: I met a guy who steals stereos for a living and asked him if I could follow him with a camera as he was working. My idea was to make an art piece with the video documentation of the robberies along with all the stolen stereos. He didn't want to appear in video so he said no. When I told Miguel about the project he offered to do it, so we decided to collaborate. After Miguel got a "crash course" on how to steal a stereo, we went out to shoot the video. I remember that the day before we did it somebody told us a story about a bodyguard killing a car stereo thief as he was trying to snap a stereo outside a home, so we were extremely nervous. Miguel then came up with the idea to stack up the stereos creating a wall. After that, I went to a market where I knew anyone could buy stolen car stereos and proceeded to purchase them (it took about two weeks of going back until I was able to get the 119 we needed).

How would you describe the understanding that you gained through performing this action, and does this method (understanding a situation through enacting a performance) extend into other work that you have made before or after *A Propósito...*?

MC: Through this piece I got a very wide insight into how much the black market sustains Mexico City, and how easy it is to take something you want—these are certainly things they do not teach at schools. The basic concept of learning through experience applies to all my work, I recently bumped into a friend who I hadn't seen since I was about 12, and he had seen *A Propósito...*. One of the first things he said was "you finally did it"; in this he meant that, since we were kids, stealing a car stereo was like a rite of passage and kids really thought it was a cool thing to do, of course things have now changed. I remember also at that age manipulating a street sign that read maximum 40km/hour: I added a perfect "1" before the 40, so it read 140km/hour.

Of course I did not see this as art, and when the neighbors told my parents I was grounded for a week. Being able to manipulate and question reality is something that has always interested me. Most of the pieces I make now are a test of how much that goes inside of my head can be put out as physical objects or film/videos, there is often a lot of risk involved, since at first most of these ideas seem almost impossible to make.

Were you collaborating on other projects at the time, and in what ways did they relate to this work?

MC: We worked together directing *La Panadería*, and we had similar concerns and interests. We didn't like a lot of things that were happening around us, both in the art world and in this huge city, so we experimented with questioning these things through our work.

YO: We had already collaborated in a few art pieces before but mostly we had been collaborating in *La Panadería* for the previous three years. *La Panadería* relates to *A Propósito...* in that it emphasized the relation between art and the immediate environment of its creation. At the time, both Miguel and I felt that most of the art produced in the city was not addressing everyday life realities, and we were interested in both creating and promoting the kind of work that did.

What do you see as the cultural or historical precedents for this work?

MC: I think art reflects its times, I have always been a big fan of Goya and the way he portrayed people after war, to me this was simply a reflection of things we were living through at that moment. Painting and sculpture were dominant and we felt like doing work that involved more action.

YO: Aside from the anecdotes I just mentioned, I also remember being especially influenced by Chris Burden's early works in those days

In Burden's work it often seems critical that an audience (at the time of the performance or even now) is viewing mediated documentation of the act—the implications of the documented performance become more potent given the mediation. Can you discuss the structure of *A Propósito...* (in terms of the choices in the video and installation, their relationship with one another, and the way in which an audience might engage with the work or its implications).

YO: Yes, without mediation there would be no art piece, and without an art context this piece would not be able to exist either. For instance, if we had decided to steal a stereo as a performance meant only to be experienced by whoever is passing by, the piece would have been

simply regarded as yet another act of delinquency by those few who saw it. Instead, by recording the action on video and presenting this video in a clearly mediated way (for instance the sound of the window crashing was played extremely loud) and in the context of an art space, all of a sudden an everyday action (at the time car stereos were being stolen, literally, daily) turns into a highly charged symbolic gesture.

The stereos were bought from the black market in Mexico City. Was the perception that they had been directly stolen by yourselves an important aspect of the work?

MC: The stack of stereos was shown next to a video projection of us actually stealing a stereo. After a failed attempt I managed to break the glass and get it, however I left the hammer in the car, and after doing it we both experienced a huge adrenalin rush, which in a way did make us understand why people did it again and again. A set of loud speakers played the audio and you could hear the glass breaking and the alarm going off. On the screen there was a 26 second gap with only timecode, which was the exact time it took me to take the stereo. The second phase of the project involved getting the other 119 car stereos, which we obtained in the black market—during which a gun was pointed in our faces by a nervous dealer, but in the end we got the stereos for a very good price. Stealing one stereo was enough to understand the whole thing and we never intended to make people believe that we had stolen the rest, otherwise we would have shown more videos of us doing it. The fact that we bought them in the black market was not something we hid from people, but they could interpret the work themselves.

YO: We never intended for people to believe that we had stolen all those stereos and we didn't start that rumor. I have no idea where this rumor comes from but I have heard it before. So the answer is no, I don't think that this is an important aspect of the work but it doesn't bother me either. I like the idea of rumors around artworks; word of mouth is a powerful medium.

Of the artists and projects you presented at La Panadería, which most successfully engaged this relationship between art and reality?

MC: There are two good examples for me. One from Mexico, Teresa Margolles, who for her first exhibition at La Panadería showed these amazing white sheets that you used to see at the sides of the road covering dead bodies after fatal crashes. When hanging on the wall, the sheets appeared to be abstract paintings but when you came closer you realized that what you thought to be paint was blood. The other example is from the Austrian artist group Gelatin¹ who showed a car that they had bought in L.A. and drove cross-country to Mexico City. The exhaust pipe was configured to inflate big plastic bags which went all the way up to the gallery ceiling. Both works reflected something about Mexico that was very precise, effective, and straightforward. I had to

duck a few times during Teresa's show because some people were too shocked and offended, and were throwing rocks at us through the windows.

YO: Some that come to mind are: *Qué Guapo* (1999) the show by the Viennese collective Gelatin, for which they drove a car through the desert from Los Angeles to Mexico City and then exhibited the car as it had been transformed throughout the trip; *Dermis* (1996) by the Mexico City collective Semefo for which, among other works, they exhibited pieces of tattooed human skin recovered from the city's morgue; *Lora a través de la banda* (1996) for which the local artist Ferrus exhibited a selection of artwork from Alex Lora's (a Mexican rock star) collection made especially for him by jail inmates; *Pasaje* (1998) by Philippe Hernández in which he exhibited a close circuit video with live shots of two rats he had caught outside his apartment in downtown Mexico City; and *Contaminación Cultural* (1995) an exhibition with five female artists from San Francisco who made artwork related to their experiences working in the sex industry.²

Was there a public response to or impact from La Panadería, or was the discussion contained within the art community?

MC: Without doubt, La Panadería transcended the boundaries of the art world, because to us it wasn't a gallery, it was more of a lifestyle. The neighbors thought we were some kind of satanic commune because the things we exhibited were incomprehensible to them. This goes to show that even they had their eyes on us, and sometimes worried that their kids came to all our events. It was a great feeling to be able to interact with all sorts of people. I remember going to art openings at the time and they felt exclusive and boring, whereas at La Panadería, the crowds mixed a lot—especially when we had bands playing—and you got to see all sorts of people who had no meeting point. This created a lot of interesting interactions amongst people who otherwise would probably never bump into each other.

YO: At the time we started the space, the general feeling in Mexico City was that in order to understand art you had to have "special knowledge." In a way, through the space, we were demonstrating that this is a false notion and that anyone interested can *understand* art. Our audience was incredibly varied: ranging from highly specialized art world people to neighbors passing by, kids from the marginal outskirts of the city, and rich ladies from the suburbs. Therefore, in La Panadería the line between the community at large and the art community was blurred and even though the space had a relatively big impact within the art community, the impact went beyond it, and I think it changed many people's understanding of what the role of contemporary art can be.

Do you consider *A Propósito...* culturally specific?

MC: It does come from a very specific and personal situation but I think anyone can relate to it. Ideas develop around the environment you interact with and at that moment living in Mexico it felt like something interesting to address.

YO: To me *A Propósito...* is self-consciously pointing to what goes on behind the scenes in our institutions and our way of life, it asks the question of what it takes to build our cathedrals, sponsor our artists, and have our big museums. The piece is meant to address a much wider global economic context, so not only does it apply as much to any other capitalist urban center—be it in Latin America, Asia, Europe, or wherever—but it also points to the interconnectedness of these centers.

- 1 Gelatin renamed themselves Gelitin in 2005.
- 2 For more info on these exhibitions, see the book: *La Panadería 1994–2002* (Mexico: Turner, 2005).