

Artist Interview with Yoshua Okón, 2012

Investigator/Interviewer: Denise Thwaites (DT)

Supervisor: Professor Paul Patton

Interviewee: **Yoshua Okón (YO)**. Born 1970, Mexico City. Lives and works in Mexico City, Mexico.

DT: Re-considering and re-conceptualizing our relationship with history and grand-narratives has been of interest to philosophers and artist alike, particularly since the 1980s. This considered, in your works *Octopus* (2011) and *Bocanegra* (2007), we see subjects who are engaging with recent and modern history in a manner which appears entirely dislocated; *Octopus* showing former Guatemalan combatants re-enacting the Guatemalan Civil war in a Los Angeles Home Depot Parking Lot, and *Bocanegra: The Gathering*, documenting a group of Third Reich aficionados engaging in absurd debates regarding the relevance of notions of Aryan supremacy to the ethnic and political tensions that traverse Mexican history and politics. Do you think a sense of dislocation is particularly significant to our contemporary, global, postmodern political condition?

YO: **The word 'appears' is key in understanding the seemingly dissociative dimensions of *Octopus* and *Bocanegra* since, in both cases, the dislocation you refer to is only apparent. The Mayans portrayed in *Octopus* occupy that parking lot every day, so on that level there is absolutely no historical dislocation taking place. It is precisely their familiar presence in that location that I exploited in making the piece.**

DT: Is there something telling about the way in which their presence in the carpark is familiar, yet often overlooked?

YO: **Our not noticing them, not knowing who they are, where they come from and why they are there doesn't mean that they aren't present or don't exist. It means, rather, that they are invisible, because they don't fit into the US grand narrative.**

DT: One gets the sense that fractured political narratives are a recurring interest for you. Did it influence your depiction of the absurd and disconcerting discourse in *Bocanegra*?

YO: **Equally, in the case of *Bocanegra*, the absurdity of their debates is not entirely dissociable from mainstream debates. Their conversation is framed within the paradigm of nationalism, an incredibly predominant ideology exported from Europe to the entire world. So content wise it is almost the kind of debate you could be watching on TV. The main difference is that, since those guys are wearing Nazi uniforms instead of ordinary clothing of politician-like suits, we become aware of the absurdity and artificiality of such discourse. So where I find the dislocation is in the grand-narrative of our civilization.**

DT: So, is it fair to say that as works, *Octopus* and *Bocanegra* are in fact less about highlighting the dislocations or incongruence in your subjects' existences, as illuminating the invisible connections between their existence and our own?

YO: **Yes, you could say that these works are more about illuminating the invisible connections between the subjects and us (us as the real subjects). Or another way to put it is to say that these works are about highlighting certain dislocations and/or incongruencies of mainstream discourse.**

DT: The exploration of the transposition of symbols and myths through history in relation to your work has been discussed by writer Guillermo Fadanelli, as he describes “a need to abandon attempts to create art and instead focus on creating meaning or guidelines to navigate the contemporary chaos of signs and symbols,”¹ With regard to these opinions and your own works, how do you understand the way in which contemporary society processes or confronts the ‘chaos’ of symbols inherited through history?

YO: I think that the way we are dealing with such an overwhelming chaos of symbols and signs and with the incredibly rapid changes that have taken place in the last century or so, is through denial. In other words, I think that we are simply not dealing with it. A good example of this failure to deal with chaos and change is found in the huge return to religions and extreme nationalisms around the world, as both phenomena clearly reflect an adherence to old or obsolete cultural modes [of thought and practice], instead of the adaptation of our culture to such changes.

DT: A “fragmentary construction of a worldview” is said to emerge through your work. Is this deliberate, and do you see such fragmentation and absurdity as a particularly pronounced quality of our contemporary condition?

YO: I think that the fragmentation at play in my practice directly enables the participation of an active and creative viewer. Representation never gives us the full picture. But there is a lot of representation that works very hard at creating the illusion of wholeness. When confronted with an openly “incomplete” (fragmented) version of the world we tend to piece things together, to use our imagination and creativity in order to come up with our own formulations, constructions and relationships.

Regarding absurdity, this is a concept I can relate to a lot and one I definitely see as a pronounced quality of our contemporary condition. For instance, I can’t think of many things more absurd than the co-existence of the most advanced medical technology and the sickest population in history (75% of the population in the US is malnourished).

DT: Do you think this absurdity is symptomatic or a greater disjunct identifiable in contemporary political thought?

YO: For me, the absurdity of the time we live in lies precisely in the huge discrepancy and incongruence between the world around us and our belief systems and views. In most cases they simply do not fit. So, the absurd dislocation that I address in my work responds to the dislocation I perceive all around us. My work simply makes it evident.

Maybe we are not biologically fit to process so much information and so many changes in such a short period of time. Or maybe our culture is so incredibly dogmatic that we have a hard time transforming it. Either way, we are not catching up. For example, even if Darwin’s theories are widely accepted in the scientific world, more than a century later his ideas have not yet had their full impact in mainstream culture, as Judeo-Christian notions of our place in this planet still dominate and have a much bigger effect on our institutions and behaviors, even if the result of such ideas is clearly destroying the very conditions that keep us alive.

DT: You have described the political dimension of your work in the following terms:

My work is political in the sense that it makes you think about power and social issues. But it's not propagandistic. There's no political agenda behind it. There is no activism per se.ⁱⁱ

In your work there is a clear resistance to a traditionally didactic relationship with the audience, which distances your practice from Art that uses the 'tools of politics'ⁱⁱⁱ to convey a message. How do you relate the political dimension of your work to this resistance to didactics?

YO: I'm not interested in telling people what to think. I think that the paternalistic, and authoritarian tone of our culture's authorities is a big part of the problem and in some ways what is preventing us from being creative in our thinking. For instance, many people go to contemporary art museums feeling very intimidated and thinking there is something definitive they need to know or understand. I am not, and no one is for that matter, in the position to provide absolute answers to the many huge problems that we face as a society. I am interested in dialogue, in the sharing of knowledge and in the personal and collective process of re-thinking basic notions that concern us all, in the re-thinking of our core belief-system. What I try to stimulate with my work is a creative response to the world around us. For a response to be creative it has to come from within the subject, originating from a place where no one tells us how to think.

DT: So, your work doesn't tell the audience how to think, but possess a kind of force that stimulates or catalyses a kind of creative, original thought that has longer-term political implications? What is it, precisely, about your work that encourages creative responses from people?

YO: Well, I don't think there is one single thing. I could speak about different strategies that I use. For instance, the juxtaposition of very disturbing aspects, like violence or exploitation, with humor. Once we laugh we have no way of distancing ourselves from what we are experiencing and we have to engage with it. But generally speaking, like I mentioned above when referring to fragmentation, when we are put in a position where we need to piece things together, we automatically have to use our creativity in order to formulate our own constructions. We live in a society of spectacle, a society with little room for interaction. So when an artwork is able to catch our imagination, capture us through humor and seduce us through form, but at the same time presents a scenario which doesn't fit with what we have been taught and is not giving us a fixed definition of who we are, then art can be very powerful.

DT: You have highlighted the integral role played in your work by "that moment of uncertainty on the part of the audience"^{iv}. To what extent do you think that this play with uncertainty resists the traps of didacticism and brings something important to both contemporary art and the contemporary political sphere?

YO: Uncertainty places us in a position in which we have to come up with our own answers. The dominant attitudes in contemporary society are either to pretend everything is great or to wait for the messiah to come and save us. To me both these positions are very passive. I think we need to take more responsibility than that and uncertainty is a great starting point.

DT: In your 2008 interview with *Art Talk*, you describe the way in which your work is a 'hybrid' of many things, citing the particular influence of documentary and mockumentary upon your work. This influence could be considered to echo your expressed interest in the "tension between what's incredibly artificial, and what's incredibly hyper-real."^v In many of your videos you have used the idea of fantasy to question the authority of the opposition between reality and fiction, describing

fantasy, in your 2009 interview with Olga Fernandez, as a space which 'ignores this dichotomy'.^{vi} Ursula Davilla-Villa identifies the way in which fantasy is excited through the artistic space created in your work *Poli IV*, stating that: "It is clear that in *Poli IV* the camera provides the space where the cop's fantasies and desires are projected through his body language and even exaggerated under the guarded "safety" of performing behind the mask of a uniform."^{vii} In this regard, the 'reality' or 'artificiality' of the scenario is put into question, as the cop's performance permits this intermediary condition of fantasy.

How do you see this deconstruction of the boundaries between the real, fiction and fantasy, as pertinent to the contemporary political landscape?

YO: The moment in which we question these boundaries is the moment in which we can gain distance from our own ideas, the moment in which we can begin to re-formulate. Reality is a construct and the more we can understand that, the more engaged and creative we become. Regarding fantasy, if we understand it as a manifestation or outcome of our imagination, I definitely think it is politically relevant. We desperately need a lot of imagination to re-invent our collapsing civilization.

DT: Do you think imagination is more politically pertinent to contemporary politics than, say, logic or reason?

YO: I would not create hierarchies. I think imagination and reason complement each other incredibly well and their healthy balance is essential to our political energy.

DT: Andrew Berardini has explored your work in relation to the term 'collaboration,' highlighting both the positive and negative connotations of the word. He equally draws out the dark and light qualities of your work as it utilizes humour yet "delivers our preconceived notions back to us as a very dark kind of comedy, where the jokes and pantomimes made by the community show them playing with their own negative stereotypes."^{viii} You have highlighted your interest in parody for the way it positions the spectator in an active role^{ix}, being prompted to formulate ideas in response to the images and symbols they are presented with. In this regard, Berardini has described the spectator of your work as a 'collaborator,' as "[o]ur discomfort, always subtle, becomes our contribution as viewers to the collaboration in the ethical and political transaction that occurs. Everybody, ourselves included, is implicated."^x

These descriptions of your work have highly political connotations. Is it your intention to 'implicate' the spectator in the historical and political dimensions of your works of art, as described by Berardini? If so, to what purpose?

YO: It is very common in our culture of consumption to be passive spectators, to look from a comfortable distance and disassociate ourselves. We tend to avoid responsibility and to externalize problems. This is very convenient in the short term but also very alienating and politically problematic in the long term. In that sense, it is not only my intention to implicate the spectator in what they are watching but also to make evident the fact that to begin with they are already implicated in the historical and political dimensions addressed in the work.

DT: Juan Carlos Reyna has associated your work, in particular *Bocanegra*, with the condition of democracy, stating:

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....^{xi}

How do you think Reyna's image of a 'traumatized ego' relates to the contemporary political concerns and in particular, democracy?

YO: My interpretation of Juan Carlos Reyna's text relates specifically to the effects of Nationalism. In my opinion Nationalism leaves no room for democracy, there is an inherent contradiction between the two concepts. I think nationalism leads to alienation or, in the words of Reyna, to "trauma" on an individual and political level.

DT: How so?

YO: Nationalism, on the one hand, creates the illusion, partly through the voting system's farce, that we individual citizens have power and say. And on the other hand, it prevents us from seeing ourselves as the citizens of the world we are. In the end, we are left in a terrible mid-way point in which we cannot exercise our individuality and cultural specificity, nor our universality. I do believe in democracy but definitely not in the "democracy" that is been sold to us. Democracy to me has more to do with the creative process of the collective conceptualization of ourselves.

DT: So according to your conception of democracy, should a truly democratic process of collective collaboration, considered within our contemporary globalized context, put into question or challenge traditional boundaries of nationhood and national identity?

YO: Yes, I think nationalism gets in the way of democracy and should be challenged. In the end national identity and boundaries of nationhood are mostly abstract constructions and don't define much of who we are. On the contrary, I think this ideology is the perfect excuse for denial and it creates divisions and hierarchies. Nationalism creates the perfect scenario for double standards. For example: in such and such territory a company is not allowed to dump toxic waste in the rivers. But a few hundred kilometers away it can. The problem is rivers don't respect borders and pollution will still spread all over. Nationalism prevents us from understanding interconnectivity; it is a very dangerous ideology that is mostly used to justify exploitation. Democracy only makes sense if it is applied universally, otherwise it is something else disguised as democracy.

DT: You have described your work, and in particular the power of the camera, as a 'detonator' which catalyzes indeterminable interactions between yourself and the participants in your videos. In this sense, your work has been described as creating an open space where historical and political stereotypes and fictions can be played out, explored and critically reflected upon, resembling descriptions of the ancient democratic forum. Could your work, in one sense, be viewed as a 'detonator' for the creative relationships and processes necessary within your understanding of creative and collaborative global democracy?

YO: For sure

Notes:

- ⁱ Guillermo Fadanelli, "Who's Looking at Whom?", in *Yoshua Okón*, Ed. Chiara Arroyo, Co-publishers: Landucci, SerieVe, YBCA and MACG, 2010, p. 121
- ⁱⁱ Yoshua Okon, in episode of *Art talk*, Copyright 2008, VBS IPTV, LLC
- ⁱⁱⁱ Andrew Berardini, "A Dark Play" in *Yoshua Okón*, Ed. Chiara Arroyo, Co-publishers: Landucci, SerieVe, YBCA and MACG, 2010, p. 105 – 106
- ^{iv} Andrew Berardini, "A Dark Play" in *Yoshua Okón*, Ed. Chiara Arroyo, Co-publishers: Landucci, SerieVe, YBCA and MACG, 2010, p. 105 – 106
- ^v Yoshua Okon, in episode of *Art talk*, Copyright 2008, VBS IPTV, LLC.
- ^{vi} Yoshua Okon, "Interview with Yohua Okón" by Olga Fernandez, Tragicomedia. 2009, p. 119
- ^{vii} Ursula Davila-Villa, "Yoshua Okón: The Psychology of Power", in *Yoshua Okón.*, Catalogue essay for the exhibition *SUBTITLE 1997-2007*, Städtische Kunsthalle München., NY: Prototype Press and München: Stadtische Kunsthalle, 2008, p. 3
- ^{viii} Andrew Berardini, "A Dark Play" in *Yoshua Okón*, Ed. Chiara Arroyo, Co-publishers: Landucci, SerieVe, YBCA and MACG, 2010, p. 104
- ^{ix} Yoshua Okon, "Interview with Yohua Okón" by Olga Fernandez, Tragicomedia. 2009, p. 119
- ^x Andrew Berardini, "A Dark Play" in *Yoshua Okón*, Ed. Chiara Arroyo, Co-publishers: Landucci, SerieVe, YBCA and MACG, 2010, p. 100
- ^{xi} Juan Carlos Reyna, "Watching us watch Ourselves: Spectators as Protagonists", in *Yoshua Okón*, Ed. Chiara Arroyo, Co-publishers: Landucci, SerieVe, YBCA and MACG, 2010, p. 91