

Yoshua Okón:

The Psychology of Power

By Ursula Davila-Villa

Since the mid-1990s Yoshua Okón has produced works that explore the complexities of contemporary societies, addressing issues such as reality and fiction, power and authority, and social stereotypes, among others. His artistic practice – which blends video, installation, and performance – aims to mirror the constructed ideas of society. But Okón's work does not only operate as a vehicle of simple reflection: his video installations render and project social paradigms and cast light on the numerous nuanced negotiations that take place within today's complex social web of ethical and political implications.

His use of a handheld camera occupies a critical role as the central mechanism that mediates authorship, while also operating as a device that questions institutional frameworks. Okón reveals his presence (and authorship) within the work by strategically choosing the "eye" from which an action is seen (or shot), a process that empowers the viewer to critically question the nature and veracity of the characters and actions upon the screen. In addition,

he weaves together humor and provocation to create a connecting tissue between the political underpinnings of his work and the audience. He thus transforms the act of passive observation into an active – and in some occasions uncomfortable – engagement with the work's projected meaning. Furthermore, Okón's understanding of architecture brings a sculptural quality to his installations and provides the right formal elements to incite the viewer's engagement.

His videos present situations that appeal to two basic human sensations: desire and rejection. The tension between these feelings becomes intrinsic to the experience of viewing, and more specifically, confronting his work. Each video pushes the audience to explore and understand the limits of their comfort zones by constantly negotiating the relationship between these two opposite sensations. Through this mechanism Okón's artistic practice sheds light on one of the virtues of contemporary art: its potential to make ethical and moral concerns explicit by aiming to underline how bigger in-

frastructures operate within the same system of values, decisions, and, most of all, power.¹

This essay explores two key aspects of Okón's work, which surface as important agents of critical and artistic expression. First, I will discuss Okón's social critique that manifests itself through his exploration of the psychology of power and authority. Second, I will analyze Okón's strategies of intervention, specifically looking at the viewer's role as an active participant in the process of examining the ethical and political transactions inherent to contemporary societies.

Dance, March, and Bite: Social Realism as a Critique of Power and Authority

"What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, and produces discourse."
Michel Foucault²

Since the early twentieth century the significance and implications of power have been frequent subjects of exploration for thinkers, historians, philosophers, and artists. French philosopher Michel Foucault has devoted much of his research to such questions by historicizing institutions like the clinic, psychiatric hospitals, prisons, and the family. His approach speaks of power not as something wielded by specific people within societies and repressive institutions, but as the group of mechanisms that "reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives."³ In the same light, Yoshua Okón's artistic

practice explores the question of power through works that operate as vehicles of reflection to consider the complex web of ethical, moral, and political negotiations within contemporary society and which allude to the viewer's role within such a dynamic.

One of Okón's most emblematic works is the series of six videos collectively titled *Orillese a la orilla* (1999–2000). The videos explore the limits of power and authority by mapping the thin interface between judiciary enforcement, represented by the figure of the street cop, and civilian conduct, embodied by the artist's intervention. Each video in the series shows a different situation in which the policeman's power is questioned and his authority is negotiated between him and Okón.⁴

Poli I depicts an argument between the artist and a fully armed cop in which the latter threatens and insults Okón as he is filming the scene (though the artist's voice is noticeable, his figure is not evidenced). In this case, the aspersions thrown at Okón echo the class and socioeconomic tensions that have long existed in Mexico. Okón's physical invisibility becomes the key element that leads to a more complicated interpretation of the authorship behind this violent scene. The existent tensions within this work illustrate the relationship between the State's repressive use of power and authority – represented by the policeman – and the civilian's use (or abuse) of the system, embodied by Okón's camera.

In *Poli IV* the video shows a silent but fast-moving street cop in full uniform posing with a baton. His routine combines emblematic postures of bodybuilding, martial arts, as well as sexually charged movements (such as him rubbing his crotch).

His body language is arrogant and insolent as it conveys a certain masculine pride. Okón's decision to shoot this scene in a fixed frame results in a stronger presence of the camera that empowers the actor. The policeman projects his authority by exhibiting his muscular strength, self-defense mastery, and strong sexual behavior. But the resulting video reveals a ludicrous figure and thus ridicules the presupposed reliability of law enforcement and questions the power given to police corps by the state. Additionally, the sexual overtones of the work place the tension between desire and rejection at the forefront of confrontation, pushing the viewer to negotiate the relationship between morality and authority. The policeman might seem to be playing, but at the same time he conveys a strong desire to control, seduce, and impose a projected sense of power.

Okón made almost all the videos in this series by negotiating an exchange of money for a performance with the cops. The actions executed for the camera were slightly sketched and heavily improvised and in some cases randomly shot.⁵ Okón situates himself vis-à-vis the policeman in order to draw a parallel between the state and the citizens as equal agents in any use or abuse of power and violence as devices to control. *Orillese a la Orilla* speaks of the broader problematic entailed in social frameworks wherein all participants of society are implicated at some level in this abuse. It also provides a platform from which to understand our place within the tensions associated with class, race, gender, and civic consciousness. Additionally, this series illustrates how desire and fantasy constantly oil the wheels of society. The fact that the policemen agreed to collaborate with Okón speaks of more than just an economic transac-

tion. 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.

Okón's ability to operate within the liminal space between constructed categories of reality and fiction has developed in past years, and his most recent body of work, *Bocanegra* (2005–2007), deeply explores these ideas. This piece, divided into four sections, explores the interesting dynamic within a group of Mexican middle-aged Nazi enthusiasts dressed in military uniforms from different Nazi divisions and ranks. The work functions as a web of psychological twists that folds in issues such as Nazi history, class, masquerade as empowerment, and the camera as a mirror of subconscious fantasies.

In *Bocanegra: A Walk in the Park* a group of five monitors hangs from the ceiling forming a pentagon. A scene depicting a military march of seven men dressed in Nazi uniforms parading around a city park with a Nazi flag appears in one monitor at a time, strategically moving around from one screen to another. The pentagon hangs in such a way that the distance between the monitors is close enough to suggest its geometry, but sufficiently open so viewers can enter the semi-enclosed space. To observe the work one needs to be at the center of the pentagon turning constantly as the march moves from one screen to the next. This pushes the viewer to engage with the work visually, emotionally, and physically, creating a more complex and visceral relation with the projected images and actions on screen. In addition, the soldier figure – emblematic of power structures – is complicated by the appearance of Nazi symbology in what seems to be a Latin American country.⁶

This work transforms into an arena from which to critically question military history, dogmas, and reality, and pushes the viewer to reflect on assumed ideas of reality and fiction. The video suggests that the march is fictional – though the actors choreographed it for the camera – but the aims and desires of the individuals are in fact real, and it is the camera's presence that justifies the realization of a public military Nazi march.

A second component to this piece, entitled *Bocanegra: The Gathering*, presents a more complicated situation that speaks to the psychology of power. It shows the same group of men dressed in their military outfits in an informal gathering as they drink and discuss their understanding of Nazi ideology, Mexican history, and nationalism. Additionally, these scenes are interwoven with footage of the group reenacting war-like situations, such as a bomb evacuation. Okón shot this video in a documentary style, but on a first reading, the scenes appear to be fictional. Interestingly, as the video progresses, the characters and discussions transform and rapidly evidence the veracity of the actions on screen. One of the most interesting aspects of this video is the relationship between the group's focus on power as the main theme of discussion, and the relational forces that dictate the power structure within the brotherhood as the discussion unfolds. This relationship progresses from a subtle use of psychology by the group's leader in order to control the gathering, into a violent and disordered scene of drunken, fighting men. As in *Orillese a la orilla*, Okón infiltrated this group through a negotiation, but in this case the transaction was not monetary. The currency became a verbal agreement: the group committed to meet and be video-recorded if Okón accepted to shoot the march that they much desired.

The third component, *Bocanegra: The Movie*, is a video of a story entitled "Masturban-Führer," which was written and directed by one of the group's leaders. Three of the most outspoken members performed scenes that depict an orgasmic ecstasy inspired by Hitler's portrait, culminating with the ejaculation of the main character. This video illustrates how Okón's exploration of authorship extends beyond a thematic approach and becomes part of his artistic process and methodology. For the production of this video he provided the group with a cameraman and gave them complete freedom to write and direct *The Movie*. He later integrated this work as part of the entire piece, creating a sense of shared authorship that erases the boundaries between his role as artist and that of the group as the "actors" in the videos. The component that completes the piece is *Bocanegra: The Salute*: a video that shows each member of the group performing the Nazi salute individually. This video activates a very specific identity in each man. Their body language uncovers what is left unsaid at moments of communal desire and speaks to their individual understanding of the dynamic within the brotherhood and their relationship to Nazism and military tradition.

Bocanegra speaks of the duality between desire and rejection as a shared human condition. In each video the camera serves as the agent that gives license to project what is kept hidden, and thus this work points to the fact that all societies constantly negotiate between repressing and expressing the conscious and subconscious. Additionally, this series complicates the question of power at several levels. First, the power of the camera allowed Okón to break into a tight brotherhood and successfully capture their inner psychology. Second, as Okón agreed

to film the march and provide a cameraman for the shooting of *The Movie*, a shift in the initial power structure is evident, turning the control of the negotiation into the group's hands. Finally, as the work is seen in a gallery space, the ability to believe or dismiss events on the screen lies within the person who confronts the work. As in life, power never disappears, it simply moves from one end of the spectrum to the other.

Continuing with an examination of power, *Coyotería* is probably the best example that deals with today's growing brokering system. Power relations are often unidirectional, situating the oppressor and the oppressed in end sides of the spectrum. But in *Coyotería* – a performance and video installation – the actors and the viewers that confront the work constantly negotiate this relationship. The performance and video spring from two sources. First, from the Mexica accounts published in the book *La Visión de los Vencidos* where indigenous stories narrate the years that followed the Spanish conquest in Mesoamerica. In these writings the word coyote (derived from the Nahuatl) describes the greedy conquerors that savagely destroyed Tenochtitlán (now Mexico City) and imposed a new culture upon indigenous communities. Second, from Joseph Beuys' 1974 piece *I Like America and America Likes Me*, where the artist lived with a wild coyote for a week in Rene Block Gallery in New York. In both instances the coyote becomes central to the understanding of distinct human experiences that speak of power from opposing ends. In the case of the Mexica, with the traumatic events of the conquest and the oppression suffered under the Spanish conquerors, there is a parallel between the voraciousness of the canine coyote and the Europeans as opportunists who shredded their culture and lives. In the case

of Beuys, the coyote is a spiritual symbol that bridges a troubled human experience and nature as a source of elevation. Okón situates the figure of the coyote as the lens from which to consider the understanding of the oppressor and the oppressed. He does this by weaving in yet another use of the word "coyote:" a broker of various transactions that occur on a daily basis such as the selling of fake documents, the smuggling of illegal immigrants from Mexico into the United States of America, and the facilitating of official procedures, among many others.

Coyotería is an interpretation of Beuys' piece that situates the coyote figure at the core. Okón exchanged each of the components of *I Like America and America Likes Me* with objects and actors that read as a contemporary representation of the problematic entailed in society's brokering structure and its relationship to forms of repression, discipline and control. In *Coyotería*, Okón stood in for Beuys, and he replaced Beuys's felt, shamanic staff, Wall Street Journal, and musical triangle with a synthetic comforter, police baton, TV Guides, and a military trumpet, respectively. The representation of the coyote took two variants: a figure of a coyote decorating the comforter that completely covered Okón through the entire performance, and a man who in reality works as a "coyote" (dressed in a cheap two-piece suit) performing as a wild coyote. Throughout the performance Okón fights the "wild coyote" with the baton, as the latter bites and moves around on four legs as a wild animal. In reality, the man "coyote" plays an important role within the web of exchanges that occur on a daily basis, and he frequently holds the power to control such situations. The negotiations he mediates are not always regulated by an economic trade, but rather by a different currency

that values the ability to infiltrate systems and structures or find the appropriate key-holders to break into restricted networks.

The video installation transforms the set of complexities embodied in the performance into an environment that integrates the viewer as an additional and central component to the entire piece. The installation is comprised of a flat monitor projecting Okón's performance, surrounded by all the elements that appear in the video: the suit, comforter, baton, TV Guides, etc. The strategic placement of all the objects functions as an invisible map that completes itself when the viewer penetrates the space by walking around the installation. In this way, the exercise of observing becomes an analysis of the problematic entailed in judging from a distance as we, gallery visitors and citizens, are part of a web of relationships that resonate beyond our preconceived social parameters. *Coyotería* points to the difficulties and flaws of understanding life as a dichotomy between good vs. bad, oppressor vs. oppressed, or right vs. wrong, and suggests how, as members of society, our lack of complicity and responsibility to those events that might seem distant is erroneous and thus our actions, for better or worse, are part of an enormous net of transactions that produce multidirectional effects.

Two key aspects bridge *Orillese a la Orilla*, *Bocanegra* and *Coyotería*. First, the specific situations in each work illustrate Okón's ability to create makeshift structures, which allude to power relations that mirror many of the current challenges we face as members of society. Second, in all cases the viewer plays a central role in the process of mediating the meaning and implications of the actions depicted on screen. While in most situations the relationship to the work

might seem to place the viewer in an uncomfortable position, this reaction comes as a result of a process of self-awareness that is triggered by the videos. Okón articulates a double context comprising "real" scenarios captured by the camera, and the institutional and social structures in which the work exists and circulates.⁷ The efficiency of this double effect derives from his subtle use of mechanisms that do not operate as an imposition on the viewer, but rather as a set of questions that extend beyond the gallery space.

Actors as Viewers / Viewers as Actors: Strategies and Mechanisms of Intervention

"The camera makes everyone a tourist in other people's reality, and eventually in one's own."
Susan Sontag⁸

Susan Sontag's words allude to one of the key strategies of intervention that has distinguished Yoshua Okón's practice: the camera. His use of a simple handheld device renders apparent realities that seem to derive from surrealist practices disconnected, scattered, and somehow disturbing.⁹ But contrary to Surrealism, Okón's work intertwines a sense of dislocation with the practice of documentation, blurring the boundaries between the presupposed real and imagined. The element that bridges these two constructs is the use of ordinary people as "actors" who operate in the liminal space between real-life events and fiction. In this light, *Cockfight* (1998), *New Décor* (2001), and *Lago Bolsena* (2004) speak to a process whereby Okón's co-laborators, empowered by the presence of a camera, become both the actors and viewers. Similarly, the viewers of these videos become

both observers and participants and hence also act as mediators of the ideas behind the work.

The video-installation, *Cockfight*, explores this relationship by presenting two facing projections of women in their early twenties yelling vulgar insults at each other. These insults are the kind often used by men to offend each other and to humiliate women, but, as the video shows, they are also used by women who imitate repressive male conduct as a form of power. The installation creates an environment in which the viewer is situated between these verbal abuses. In tandem with the verbal fight, *Cockfight* operates as a seductive encounter: the characters on screen project both a playful innocence and a strong sexuality that achieves an almost orgasmic quality. As the viewer stands between the two projections, the tension between the aggressive tone of the insults and the sexuality expressed through the girl's body language provokes a visceral reaction to the incongruent image of girls using humiliation of their own gender as a form of violence, but it also provokes an exhilarating sense of desire. As the video progresses the viewer's sense of discomfort grows, and in many cases an immediate and visceral reaction – such as laughter, feeling of entrapment, or anger – is inevitable. The tensions contained within *Cockfight* transform into the object of rejection and enjoyment. The longer the viewer confronts the work, the stronger the emotional engagement with the fight—and its seduction—becomes.

This sense of the viewer's intrinsic participation comes afloat in *Lago Bolsena*, which takes its title from a street name in the locality of Santa Julia, a supposedly "dangerous" area in Mexico City where Okón collaborated with a group of neighbors. The three-channel video-

installation simulates an anthropologist's observation that hypothetically documents the community's lifestyle from three points of view: extreme close-up, medium shot, and wide-shot. The premise behind the performance places the neighbors of Santa Julia as members of an isolated community acting as "savages" and Okón's camera as the anthropologist's scientific eye.¹⁰ The end result shows three screens that project images alluding to the traditional scientific method of social analysis that moves from particular to general deductions aiming to create universal frameworks for the production and understanding of knowledge. *Lago Bolsena* is a work that critically analyzes colonial invasion and comments on the tendency to continuously create structures in order to implant forms of control and segregation. This work places the viewer as the anthropologist within a society that, similarly to early anthropological practices, establishes forms of dominance to regulate the behavior of others in order to control the power apparatus.

Finally, *New Décor* (a three-channel video-installation projected onto freestanding screens), shows a group of improvised short soap operas staged at a furniture store in the Lincoln Heights neighborhood of Los Angeles. The vivid energy contained within this video-installation comes as a result of Okón's recruitment of ordinary people from nearby streets and from within the store to collaborate with him in the fast development of the short sketches as well as to be the actors. The freedom that Okón shared with the "actors" in the process of improvising the stories provided the space that enabled all participants to liberate themselves from self-imposed limits of social conduct and to project their own interests, desires, anxieties,

and frustrations. These emotions became the motor behind *New Décor*, resulting in dramatic scenes, which included an emotional breakup, a fight among a married couple, and a forced act of sexual desire. It is interesting to note how Okón's camera reveals more than just the underpinnings of improvisation as a form of personal projection. Throughout the entire video, the background within each scene became as important as the foreground. It evidenced how the shooting of *New Décor* impacted the store's sales as wandering costumers and the passerby deviated into the store, drawn by the dynamics between the performers and the camera. By containing parallel realities (the soap-opera and the ordinary life within the shop) in one frame, Okón points to the constant permeability between the fictitious, such as television settings, and real-life events. In this way, *New Décor* becomes a liminal space that dismantles the constructed categories of assumed reality and fiction, and sheds light upon the intertwined relationship between the everyday "reality" and the fabricated events of popular media. As in *Cockfight*, the dramatic tone of the performances provokes a certain sense of discomfort and curiosity in tandem. These reactions are maximized by the installation's spatial arrangement that extends the three freestanding screens into the surrounding architecture. Okón's understanding of space results in a clever use of the gallery's interior layout that integrates moving images as the skin that contains the viewer's emotional and logical responses and incites a process of critical thinking.

The strategies of intervention employed by Okón surface as key elements within his artistic practice and become powerful statements that speak to the complexities of social struc-

tures. The outcome of recruiting and collaborating with random people mirrors many of the anxieties that are part of the human experience. At the same time, the use of low-based technology pushes the limits of our understanding of reality and thus our assumptions and judgments of society's ethical and moral values.

By implicitly placing himself behind the lens, Okón becomes an actor and an observer. This pushes the viewer to reassess their position as a passive spectator and become an active agent in the development of ideas. Hence, by rejecting or embracing the concepts and questions behind Okón's work, we become aware of our own prejudices and assumptions regarding our surroundings, as well as our anxieties, fears, and desires.

The works selected for this exhibition speak to the complexities of today's social web of intertwined forces of power, ethics, and politics. Additionally, they exemplify Okón's use of an array of aesthetic strategies that articulate a discourse that moves back-and-forth from the particular to the general and succeeds in engaging the viewer as a central figure in the production of critical observation.

This exhibition illustrates Okón's ability to shift the established negotiation and production strategies within the art world, effectively mirroring the complexities and implications of circulation and transaction systems within today's frameworks of exchange. Each piece dissects the known structures of power, ethics and politics by employing a variety of mechanisms that flirt with humor, vulgarity, and predetermined categories of reality and fiction. From *Orillese a la Orilla* to *Bocanegra* Okón's work is a powerful instrument that breaks with conventional means of political activism. His practice

upsets the relationship of an artist observing a subject from a distance. Instead, he becomes a candid mediator, explicitly placing both himself and the viewer as active participants within circuit of exchange.

In 1965 Frank Stella famously said: "what you see is what you see." Okón pushes this idea by suggesting that what we see is what we *choose* to see. His work calls us to actively observe and inquire beyond our assumptions of reality and thus construct new paths to understand the known, and make visible what would otherwise be invisible.

¹ Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro, curator's notes on the curatorial context of recent acquisitions for the permanent collection of the Blanton Museum of Art at The University of Texas in Austin, 2002.

² Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), P. 119

³ Ibid.

⁴ Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro, "Yoshua Okón: Oríllese a la Orilla," in *Zona Franca* (Porto Alegre, Brazil: Fundação Bienal do Mercosul, 2007).

⁵ The videos in the series *Oríllese a la Orilla* were somewhat edited by the artist, but their content was not altered. The third video included in *Yoshua Okón: Subtitle*, titled *Poli II*, shows footage of a conversation between two policemen discussing how they plan to have sex with a woman. This conversation was filmed by Okón without previous negotiation and without the consent of the policemen involved.

⁶ The series of *Bocanegra* was filmed in Mexico City. All research and the negotiation process also took place there. All characters that appear in the videos are non-fictional and the views and comments expressed are their own and were not prepared or planned in conjunction with the artist.

⁷ Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy, "Yoshua Okón," in *Blanton Museum of Art: Latin American Collection*, ed.

Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro (Austin: The Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin, 2006), 304.

⁸ Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux: 1977), P. 57

⁹ Robert Hughes, *A Tourist in Other People's Reality*, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,919232-1,00.html>, 2008

¹⁰ The storyline and actions within the performance were developed collaboratively between the residents of Santa Julia and Yoshua Okón.