



Who's Looking at Whom?

By Guillermo Fadanelli

Art. Art creates objects—not necessarily material objects—that are new to the world. Definitions of art, like anything that refers to an abstraction, are diverse, can be mutually contradictory, and almost always appear ex post facto. Indeed, in these times of reaction against the transcendent, art is a word that makes artists uncomfortable. “We are more children of our time than our parents were,” wrote Guy Debord. Given this rootlessness, there is 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. The work of Yoshua Okón creates meaning inasmuch as it is the result of his own thoughts and experience, but above all because it is a fragmentary construction of a worldview that, contrary to what we might expect in the avant-garde arts, is becoming increasingly entrenched in time.

Bocanegra. This video installation (2007) offers the testimonials of a group of Mexican neo-Nazis who meet to discuss their ideas but end up spouting slogans and squabbling. The piece includes videos of these discussions, a modest march of the fascist contingent, a military salute to the camera and a short film directed by a member of the group. In this work, Yoshua Okón proposes a crossroads bristling with interpretations, though parody seems to be the four videos’ common thread. Calling it *black parody* is no exaggeration. The uprooted symbols, transported to circumstances foreign to their origin, reveal a certain historical comicality that survives the sense of tragedy and adds bitterness to it. If the symbols that represented and encouraged Nazi atrocities during the war can be released and relocated to a timeless and inconsequential order, historical memory—if a thing by such a name exists—vanishes or is transformed into a kind of untethered madness. Reality is not somewhere else, but remains in its place, focused on the exercise of its own annihilation.

Chimera. We experience a sense of illusion and deception in the presence of the uncontrollable profusion of artistic works and the inconsistency of the values in the modern art market. “If God is dead, everything is permitted,” said Dostoyevsky, who thus stigmatized in a single stroke a future that at least in art and philosophy would be defined later as distrust of the past and confusion about the present. It is because of this situation, so rich in misunderstandings and vacuous proposals, that artists develop a language over time and not just a body of work that is merely anecdotal and ephemeral. There lies one of Okón’s

most prized virtues: his insistence on creating a language that is not depleted over time or the desire to satisfy a voracious and forgetful market.

Concept. Gilles Deleuze has written that every concept has a history, is amorphous and feeds on digressions. Rather than an argument or a proposition, it is a nexus. There are no simple concepts, but rather compositions that vary according to the proximity of their elements. The question that concerns us is whether, unlike in philosophy, it is possible to create concepts through art. The answer will not come easily. However, the work of Okón approaches and parallels Deleuze's description of concepts as meeting points that do not propose an argument but merely suggest events that, when observed and narrated from a certain perspective, either change or show us a veiled face. Yoshua does not create from a vision that is homogeneous or closed in meaning. Instead, he chooses certain points of contact or thematic interest in order to alter the semantic body that we call *reality* and start creating sense. In almost all of his work there is room for participation, complicity or rejection by the spectator.

Ego. The idea that the subject has disappeared from our horizon and that the *self* is more of a hindrance to understanding or living in the world around us tends to be a constant feature of art forms that are headed for extinction. The *self* or the individual who responds to a given name leaves nothing more than a modest imprint on the endless succession of signs and anecdotes, and is doomed to survive only as an echo of what it was in life (a languishing presence). Artists who insist on building a myth about themselves in order to put down roots in history will end up being consumed by the suffocating weight of the concrete and assaulted by a centrifugal force that will always push them towards the edges. If one feature is explicit in the video installations of Yoshua Okón, it is that, despite being built from the experience of a subject with a life of his own, they tend to deny the individual artist with his own name as a historical or moral reference. The idea of a world without a set of guiding principles is pessimistic but tends to be more and more recurrent these days. Like many other philosophers, Thomas Nagel wondered how we could prove that the world is something in itself (an object) without distorting it through our human prism. The only way to be absolutely sure that the world exists would be to abandon the individual *I* who is the observer and questioner. Is that possible in art?

Fragment. The greatest injustices ever committed were done in the name of the Whole. It is therefore quite relevant to begin to separate the Whole into a set of parts that can never be reassembled. No wonder the objects that an artist makes over a lifetime are often only fragments of a single piece that will play out over time, even if they are never completed—*being incomplete* is, of course, the most effective strategy in the battle being waged against the Whole. I have been observing the work of Yoshua Okón for over a decade, and I wondered if it would always lead in the same direction, or if his formal concerns would be evident even if his works tend to be or seem to be so different from one another. And I think, without this being a conclusion, that the fragment as part of an impossible whole is the means Okón

has chosen to create his work and search for an art that is centrifugal, diffuse, decentralized and charged with multiple meanings.

Gadamer. According to Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Artists create free of all ties and do not allow themselves to be measured by the common patterns of public morals,” and it is precisely this feature that “is the basis of their independence and gives them the perspective of the socially marginalized.” This notion of what an artist is or represents is deeply rooted in a romantic tradition of art in which the instinct of play is expressed as the instinct of form and matter. But is it wise to emphasize the romantic character of artists when their refusal to embody a historical entity or a hero of sensibility is so obvious? In Okón's work, both inclinations can be seen. On the one hand, he continues to be an artist without social ties, and therefore, as Gadamer claims, an *outcast*; and, on the other, his work gives the impression of having been created by a distant observer—an entomologist of sorts, devoted to his study without further aspiration than to concentrate on the object of his analysis. *Being* and *not being* are positions that in artistic endeavors go hand in hand and are often interchangeable. And this constant tension between the romantic artist and modest producer of aesthetic work leads me to recall Gadamer's affirmation that “any encounter with the language of art is an incomplete event and is even part of this event.” In short: open work.

I. See “Ego.”

Information. I am under the impression that, with few exceptions, nobody knows what they are talking about. Today, *being aware* is one of the most refined forms of ignorance, and I would assume that knowledge does not quite mesh with the obscene and interminable accumulation of references. The ability to understand through language requires time to work out the relations that exist in experience. I included the word *information* in this alphabet because it is common for spectators of modern art to come to believe that, without sufficient information or prior knowledge, participating in a work that requires interpretation to be complete will require extra effort. This is a half truth inasmuch as it depends on the complexity or obscurity of the language used by the artist. In the case of Okón, he has placed his work in a specific environment so there is no need for further information beyond what is offered in the work itself. There is no enigma to decipher since the work depends on the environment in which it is presented. Spectators are also actors whose only responsibility is to be located in the middle of a network of meanings. I get a similar impression every time I visit a Yoshua installation: I represent the reality that becomes fictitious to the degree in which the video appears, and then I disappear as a spectator.

Jean Baudrillard. Always passionate and almost prophetic in style, Baudrillard told us that modern societies are absorbed by the ecstasy of communication. So great is this frenzy that we attach importance to the fact that communication may have no meaning or effect. What matters is to simulate realness through a pantomime from which escape is

impossible once it has begun. The actors are unable to take off the mask because their faces have disappeared in over-representation. Reality is simulated by actors who are not actors, and the traditional theatrical setting (the public square) is transformed into a screen or an illusion without a precise physical relation. Freed from the roots that in the modern era still endowed historical subjects with character, we—the inhabitants of the screen—moved to that arena where we practice visual and iconographic mysticism obsessively. In *Bocanegra*, for example, the Nazis who bicker amongst themselves onscreen are unable to find the roots of the fascist leaning or at least a common explanation for their *cause*. They do not know where they are or who they are. Symbols are all they have.

Kafka. Devoted readers of Franz Kafka may never agree on the precise definition of *Kafkaesque*. No good writer or artist can be reduced to a subset of features, especially if their work is deep and even hermetic. So I have been careful about using this term to describe Yoshua Okón's work. But when I see in his videos a group of people emerge from a manhole and walk over train tracks with a simian gait (*Lake Bolsena*, 2004) or a cop with a sinister face insult the camarographer (*Orillese a la orilla*, 1999-2000), I cannot help but think that feeling like a beetle is actually being a beetle. There is something absurd in our every act. Like flies, we buzz tirelessly around a void.

La Panadería. Gilles Deleuze suggests that the concept is not an object, but a territory, a space that meets or incites concentration in those who are willing to do so. A map (in geometric and symbolic terms) is required to deploy theories, face them or change their direction. Concepts, theories, works—all this is inexpressible without the existence of a territory that is conducive to the match. I mention this in relation to *La Panadería* (The Bakery) as a physical nucleus that has expanded in all directions and which had as its basis an unusual freedom in proposing exhibitions and implementing them. This was the spot where I met founders Miguel Calderón and Yoshua Okón.

Mexico City. Although most artists see themselves as citizens of the world (Stoics) and refuse to be part of a community that could limit their experience, Mexico City is a good place to pursue a war of signs and senses. This is because the city confronts its inhabitants with the worst excesses of society (no matter where you are from, you are always in a foreign city). Corruption, impunity and daily violence (in short: a descent into barbarity) have also served to stimulate Okón's imagination [*Orillese a la orilla* (1999-2000), *Cockfight* (1998) or *A propósito* (1997)]. This is because this agglomeration that we insist on calling a *city* contains the elements needed to cultivate deep disappointment, rebellion without consequences, skepticism and suicidal humor. No matter your vantage point in this city, there will always be a trigger to set off the sensitivity of the most cynical and experienced.

Mimesis. Who is looking at whom? Onlookers are disconcerted because they are the object of attention. The dog chases its tail and runs in circles trying to catch itself. The video

installations of Okón propose a major contradiction when we view their content. A simple description would be: the artist takes a chapter from his own experience to somehow share it with the society in which he is a member. He then tells it as if it were a fiction that requires spectators to fulfill his mission: to see, interpret, and complete the narrative from their position as onlookers involved in making judgments or deciphering any messages, or whatever it is that is hidden or expressed in the piece on display. And then it happens: a malaise arises from a feeling that is growing stronger. Sooner or later, the work abandons its role as aesthetic expression and engulfs the spectator. And it does not matter what social class you belong to, since you are already included in the mapping of the *moral* symbols or social parody that Okón has placed in his works. As with the pseudo-Nazis who argue in *Bocanegra*, almost none of us could explain the origin of our ideals or beliefs without being reduced to babbling or aimless, empty rhetoric. A similar feeling occurs when we look at a group of old hippies living in Venice Beach taking great pains to preserve a community (*Hipnostasis*, 2009) whose members have chosen to exile themselves from the vanities and demands of their era. These men spend their days sunbathing and eating whatever falls into their hands like a group of resurrected Diogenes who have no qualms about ridding themselves of worldly trappings. And if it is true that in almost all human beings there is a longing for a golden age lost in a mythical time, it is also true that the ridiculous emerges when we attempt to reestablish such a utopia at all costs. Most spectators of *Hipnostasis* would likely feel alluded to since it is not easy to escape the sensation of the ridiculous that idealism condemns us to when it is taken to extremes.

Mood. A person's humor or mood is not built in a few days and possibly not even in a lifetime. It is not invented but is stimulated and languishes and disappears with death. And this is because mood is essential in the human temperament. Nothing escapes the nets of a black comedy or a delusion. Even the less human works or those that are developed from theoretical or conceptual premises account for a mood or an intellectual temperature. Only thus could I argue that a constant in Okón's work is the malicious mood that is hidden behind the worker working seriously on his creations. I am not aware of a single one of his video installations that can be explained or understood through mere analysis of causes or through theoretical speculation. If we fail to appreciate the venom or suppressed laughter coming from a humor that is both primal and cultivated, then the encounter with the work becomes even more incomplete than usual. From the appropriation made from a famous work of Joseph Beuys and transmuted into a rough and cryptic scene (*Coyotería*, 2003) to an instant soap opera acted out by individuals who are not professional actors but who *are* actors in a mass society full of Pavlovian reactions (*New Décor*, 2001), all his works contain that malicious residue that is capable of perturbing the audience or plunging it into a sense of discomfort that audience members cannot put a name to even if they laugh at it.

New Décor. If clichés exist, it is because their wisdom is axiomatic. This video (*New Décor*, 2001) takes place in a furniture store in Los Angeles where Yoshua has brought together

several people to represent a dramatic role with improvised dialogue that takes the participants wherever their imagination leads them. But the confusion that should arise in the audience never materializes. A person can fall apart as an individual over a few episodes of cheap melodrama. Being exiled in a region where nothing exists—except for a pervasive and idiotic *I* proposed by a simple and eternal script—is a constant in media companies. Yoshua does not put these people on display in a premeditated manner or engage in a sociological critique. He takes them in another direction: he puts the quality of our own curiosity at risk, because after watching these people improvising, we get exactly what we expect. And that brings us, of course, to boredom and skepticism.

Orillese a la orilla. The series of videos that Okón shot in the late nineties in which several policemen are gesturing or acting before the camera clearly raises questions about the dividing line between art and social documentary (*Orillese a la orilla*, 1999–2000). To what extent is Okón interested in the moral habits and social behavior of his contemporaries? The answer depends more on the reading of the images (from a social or individual perspective) than the conceptual structure of the aesthetic project. And the intention of the artist does not matter because the staging of unreality in some cases turns into the vestige of a social class or tribe acting in a particular historical time and obeying the underlying assumptions, traits or biases of a culture that not even the most incisive of his artistic works could erase from the mind and life of the spectators. The focus on the border immorality shares with the moral facts of daily public life is common in the work of Yoshua Okón. It is a game that is hard to explain but is barely perceptible as a *being* and *not being* at the same time.

Postmodernity. Octavio Paz wrote that modernity is the acceleration of historical time. I believe this. A speeding driver has rushed us into the disintegration of the sense of history that is now known as postmodernism and whose concept can be constructed from reading and reflecting on authors such as Vattimo, Habermas, Baudrillard, Derrida, Žižek and Lyotard, among many others. In his book, Jean-François Lyotard announced the demise of the great narratives on which Western Europe has built its humanist values. The French philosopher focuses on the phrases we use to express our opinions and ideas, and agreed that it is now possible to establish or recognize different sets of language: we can now talk of truth at local levels or about private games, we can betray the logic of a discourse by inventing and introducing new words or turns of phrase, but what is becoming more doubtful, according to Lyotard, is the notion of making all our actions and words derive from a universal logic (a metanarrative). Even positive science, to be supported by a set of statements that acquire their legitimacy from a project exposed as a discourse, cannot aspire to be universally valid—and if it does, it is because it has abandoned the complexity of knowledge to become another game whose legitimacy would come from science itself: a solipsism. No continental systems but rather islands; no rigid masses of thought but rather clouds in unlikely shapes—that is roughly what Lyotard presents to us in his books and what Yoshua Okón seems to adopt in the form of a historical anomaly that is characteristic of his creations.

Romanticism. “Romanticism is disease and classicism is health,” said Goethe in the twilight of his life. He did not live long enough to see how time would transform the notion of illness into an asset or a virtue of the arts. The vocation for breaking the rules, reliance on individual intuition, the fascination with the primitive or authentic, and the cultivation of irony as a weapon to unravel traditional solemnity and authority were all features of the romantic movement that for more than two centuries permeated the arts in Germany and England and sowed the seeds for today’s avant-garde movements. The inclination to reject the modern avant-garde as too tied to the historical (i.e., to the major narratives) and the decision to explore and invent *new* roads in art, is an essentially romantic attitude. Deconstruction and the dissemination of meaning are the last remnants of avant-garde art—which, tired of the human and the homogeneous and unidirectional vision of history, is close to becoming another science that requires no human passion or heroic epics (cursed or visionary artists) to lay the foundations of their own development. I place the artwork of Yoshua Okón in this borderland. On the one hand, it is transgressive, critical, cutting edge and thus somewhat romantic, and, on the other, it is scientific, neutral and reluctant to be embodied in any kind of historical morality.

Text. Umberto Eco has skillfully described the fundamental differences between the semiotic possibilities of a dictionary and an encyclopedia. Dictionaries attempt to give brief, conclusive, and analytical definitions, while encyclopedias attempt to be open, thorough, mimetic, promiscuous, decentralized and expansive. A good example is that a dictionary gives us a precise definition of what the word *tree* means and an encyclopedia can list all known tree species, in addition to digressions such as listing the books of fiction whose central theme is a tree. Eco says that this theoretical idea of the dictionary cannot be implemented because any rigorous dictionary contains encyclopedic elements that tarnish its purity. Hence the idea of a strong, solid mind free of impurities seems to be impossible. It is easy to imagine why the work of many modern artists like Okón agrees with the idea of a weak, open, decentralized and constantly expanding mind. Evidence of this would be the *Hipnostasis* (2009) installation, which was created with the collaboration of Raymond Pettibon: here, the monitors that show the hippies may be reproduced chaotically and indistinctly like the tiny grooves in tree bark—each monitor may display a wrinkle or a detail of the scaly skin of the sweet old people who bask on Venice Beach (See “Mimesis”).

Universal. True to his penchant for skeptical irony, E.M. Cioran wrote that after listening to an astronomer lecture about the billions of stars, he stopped washing his hands. For the Romanian philosopher, exercising or cultivating muscle was as absurd and insignificant as sculpting a grain of sand. I suppose that the knowledge individuals possess about the world is always partial and largely subjective. And it is in art where you can find the measure of the subjective and create an object that is new to the world and informs us about the incomparable nature of the objects of experience (see “Art”). It seems to me that the creative process of Okón is headed in this direction: it builds inland in order to expand in

the opposite direction later. He takes a daily or local occurrence and, through a twist of the screw, makes it cryptic and strange. In short, he gives it centrifugal motion.

Void. I wonder if the recurrent sarcasm in Yoshua Okón's work is related to a deep-seated suspicion that society makes absolutely no sense—as if the sensation of emptiness, diatribe, and paradox were the most notable features of the current consumer society (even though I understand that Okón's worldview provides no explicit moral hierarchy). The void is one of the consequences of weariness in almost all its expressions. So there is no choice but to build upon nothingness in the afterglow of an era that was unable to completely assimilate the overwhelming amounts of information that are expelled from the giant bungaloes that the media have become: the media can cover everything because they fail to understand anything. As Peter Sloterdijk states categorically, we are the heirs of the encyclopedia and the circus: "The unlimited empiricism of the media to some degree mimics philosophy by appropriating its concern with the totality of being." Media outlets impose a morality that helps to link one news item to another, one on top of another, without a more or less relevant relationship between them: "A man *and* a woman, a fork *and* a knife, salt *and* pepper. What can you object to? Try other unions: lady *and* whore, love your neighbor *and* kill him, hungry dogs *and* breakfast with caviar." Art has not escaped this virus of "love your neighbor and kill him," and it is increasingly difficult for non-specialized spectators to sort out, in order to enhance their understanding and enjoyment, the myriad of expressions that fall under the rubric of *art* and circulate today as circus and encyclopedia.

Warhol. Writers turning to Warhol every time they want to understand or situate the various currents of contemporary art (or at least assimilate their pantomime) has become a bad habit. It is ironic that though Warhol specialized in disappearing through constant outbursts of shameless exhibitionism, time has turned his name into a historical reference: a revered statue and a beautiful poster that gets old in a few days. Indeed, the atmosphere of unreality and hedonistic fantasy that has spread like a plague in art in recent decades emanates from such a reference. Mocking is painful, since if the works do not remain, the name can persist in the residues of memory for a long time. Yoshua once told me by way of apology that he could not give me one of his works to take home because they are not intended to be accumulated or placed in a space as an aesthetic or decorative object. I do not know if those were his exact words, but I understood his meaning. And who did I think about? A bad habit, no doubt.

Wild. According to the *Dictionary of Spanish Usage* by María Moliner, the word *salvaje* (wild) applies to non-domesticated plants and animals or uncultivated land, particularly if it is abrupt and rugged. From my position as a writer or a mere spectator, I find that in many of the video installations of Okón there is a fascination with the untamed and most primitive side of the human condition. The two women who insult each other by appropriating the foul language of men (*Cockfight*, 1998), or people who, in exchange for a few pesos or moved

by the persuasiveness of the artist, agree to walk like orangutans (*Lago Bolsena*, 2004) prove my point. I may be reminded that in interpreting Yoshua in this way I am giving preference to only one plane of reality (psychological) and I may be told this is due to a biased reading. And I would answer that that is exactly the case, because otherwise art would awaken no interest in me. Art is nourished by our prejudices. Without them, it dies.

Xoloitzcuintle. In this video (*Chocorrol*, 1997) a *xoloitzcuintle* (Mexican hairless dog) mates with a French poodle. Although the video was shot nearly fifteen years ago, it is ideal for tracking certain features that would be constant in the future work of Okón: sarcasm in the presence of the inevitable (sooner or later the hairless would find his true love), the *voyeurism* that finds in social absurdity much of its pleasure, and video as an ideal medium for creating artwork in an era when (as Daniel Bell would say) sight has prevailed over the rest of the senses.

Žižek. "Culture is the name for all things we practice without really believing in them or taking them seriously" (Slavoj Žižek). Where the Slovenian philosopher says "culture" I would add "art." Western societies (and all their metastases known as globalization) have never taken the arts seriously, except for commercial purposes and to observe them frozen in a glass display case. Otherwise, the perspective we have of humanity now would be totally different and we would not be quoting and repeating Nietzsche as if he were the last of the gods who has not abandoned us.

Writer **Guillermo Fadanelli** was born in Mexico City. His work includes essays ("In Search of a Habitable Place" and "In Praise of Vagrancy"), chronicles ("Prayers of a Tenant"), aphorisms ("God Is Always Wrong"), and novels (*See You at Breakfast?*, *The Other Side of Rock Hudson*, *Malacara*, *Educating Moles* and *Mud*). His short story collections include *I Will Buy a Rifle*, *Terlenka*, *More German than Hitler* and *The Day I See Her, I'll Kill Her*. Part of his work has been made into movies and his novels have been translated into several languages. He founded Moho magazine and publishing company in 1988 and has contributed to fanzines and magazines devoted to literature, criticism and culture in Spain, Italy, Germany, France, Chile and Mexico. In 2007 he received a grant from the DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) in Berlin.