

YOSHUA OKÓN

Born Mexico City, 1970 Lives and works in Mexico City and Los Angeles

Yoshua Okón works as a mediator and recorder of ordinary people's lives, reversing the construct of artist as performer. He calls into question the distinction between providing visibility and creating spectacle. Likewise, by both promoting earnestness and highlighting artifice, he complicates the process of representing his subjects and his own participation. While setting up the parameters of his photographic and video shoots, he allows or provokes the participants to express themselves in their local environments, from isolated communities of Mexico City to a furniture store in East Los Angeles.

For *New Décor* (2001), East LA became the setting of a mock soap opera. Within the space of an afternoon, Okón employed passersby to act out various cliché scenes involving seduction, jealousy, and breakups. These performances range from the over-the-top, in which a woman unleashes her fury by demeaning a rabbit statue, to the believable, in which a couple's situation of domestic violence devolves into a sexual act. The reality aesthetic of the amateur actors is reinforced by the work's transparent production values. Presented on three monitors, each displaying different angles on the same scene, the viewer catches glimpses of the production crew and the various cameras as the segments unfold. By subverting the *mise-en-scène* quality of television programs, the artist draws attention to the improvised performances as exercises in self-representation.

Okón has recently completed projects with a more direct collaboration between artist and subject. In *Crabby* (2004), he worked with a Oaxacan friend to undermine the supposed universal objectivity of *National Geographic*-type documentaries.¹ Similarly, in *Lago Bolsena* (2005) Okón questions the anthropological construction of the "uncivilized" other. Focusing on the inhabitants of a single street in the Santa Julia neighborhood of Mexico City, the three-channel video is shot similarly to *New Décor*, where production is made apparent. In one projection, we see a series of closely shot scenes including residents emerging from a subterranean tunnel, mothers caring for children, and a man eating grass while growling at the camera. These actions purport a pseudo ethnographic study with slippage among what is bestial, what is a game, what is put on, and what constitutes real emotion. Another projection shot with more depth incorporates shots of Okón filming the residents and eventually being overtaken by them. Taken as a whole, the three projections convey a sense of the residents employing their own agency to undermine their cultural and geographical marginalization. JM

¹ See Erica Burton, conversation with Yoshua Okon, *Human Nature*, exh. cat. (London: Pump House Gallery, 2005), pp. 29–31.