



#### Biography

Yoshua Okón was born in 1970 in Mexico City, where he currently lives. He received his BFA from Concordia University in Montreal in 1994 and his MFA from the University of California, Los Angeles, in 2002 with a Fulbright scholarship. Okón founded the artist-run space La Panadería in 1994 and the artist-run space and school SOMA in 2009, both in Mexico City. His work has been presented in one-person exhibitions at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco; Galería Gabriela Mistral, Santiago, Chile; Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil, Mexico City; Viafarini, Milan; Armory Center for the Arts, Pasadena, California; Städtische Kunsthalle, Munich; Galería Revolver, Lima, Peru; The Project, New York and Los Angeles; Herzeliya Museum, Herzeliya, Israel; Galleria Francesca Kaufmann, Milan; and Art & Public, Geneva. Okón has participated in numerous thematic exhibitions, such as *The Workers*, Mass MOCA, West Adams; *Amateurs*, CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco; *Laughing in a Foreign Language*, Hayward Gallery, London, *The Age of Discrepancy*, MUCA, Mexico City; Mercosur Bienal, Porto Alegre, Brazil; *Pantagruel Syndrome*, Castello di Rivoli, Turin, Italy; *The Virgin Show*, Wrong Gallery, New York; *Adaptive Behavior*, New Museum, New York; *Don't Call It Performance*, Museo Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, and Museo del Barrio, New York; Istanbul Biennial; ICP Triennial, New York; *Terror Chic*, Sprüth/

Magers, Munich; and *Mexico City: An Exhibition about the Exchange Rates between Bodies and Values*, MoMA P.S.1, Long Island City, New York, and Kunstwerke, Berlin.

All images: Still from *Octopus*, 2011. Four-channel video installation. 00:00 min. Image courtesy the artist.

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## Yoshua Okón

August 13 – November 6, 2011

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John C. Welchman

Deployed in signature orange shopping carts, squatting on low-slung lumber trolleys, or crawling commando-cum-campesino-style on the parking-lot asphalt between ranks of SUVs, light trucks, and pickups, the combatants in Yoshua Okón's multichannel video installation *Octopus* (2011) face off in the precincts of the Cypress Park Home Depot, a couple of miles northeast of downtown Los Angeles. Dressed in jeans and black or white shirts, they tote imaginary handguns, invisible AK-47s, or hand-faked binoculars. Ducking around the commercial signscape ("California's Home Improvement Warehouse," "Rent Me Hourly At . . .") and weaving between vehicles, Okón's irregulars act out abbreviated conflict simulations in a ritualized replay of the civil war in Guatemala. Set off by a CIA-led coup that ousted the reformist president Jacobo Árbenz Guzmán in 1954, the conflict simmered—and raged—in the Central American nation for nearly four decades before being drawn down to an uneasy conclusion in 1996. The title of Okón's work refers to the nickname used by Guatemalans for the United Fruit Company, which had enjoyed tax-exempt export privileges since 1901, controlled 10 percent of Guatemala's economy through exclusive rights to the nation's railroad and telegraph systems and a monopoly on its ports, and was the nation's largest landowner when the conflict began.

One point of origin for the deployment and critique of historical reenactments in the art world is the postmodern strategies of appropriation of the 1980s. Warren Neidich's series *American History Reinvented* (begun 1986), for example, offered several levels of engagement with key episodes in U.S. history, notably in the text-image diptychs that made up the third part of the four-part series, which addressed everyday life in black communities in the mid-nineteenth-century antebellum South and in the internment camps set up to hold Americans of Japanese ancestry during World War II. Recent projects have more explicitly considered the languages and assumptions of historical reenactments, several focusing on episodes of military conflict or civil war. In *Seeing the Elephant* (2002), which derived its title from an expression used during the American Civil War for a soldier's first experience in battle, Robert Longo expanded the appropriational paradigm by creating grainy but historically impossible "snapshots" from images of Civil War reenactments. Sascha Pohle's *German Indian* (2005–10) offered another methodological reprise of appropriationism in the form of redrawings, rephotographs, a reedited 16mm film, and replicated artifacts based on images and objects made by German "Indian" hobbyists since the 1890s. Omer Fast's two-channel video projection *Spielberg's List* (2003) proposes a meta-commentary on the process of reenactment by juxtaposing images of the remains of the set built in Kraków, Poland, for the concentration camp depicted in Steven Spielberg's film *Schindler's List* (1993) with shots of the nearby ruins of the real camp. Fast renders equivocal the speaking position of the elderly people who appear on-screen, refusing to identify them as actors, extras, or survivors and thus exposing the "fetishist lure of Spielberg's images and . . . the rhetorical pathos of his narrative."<sup>1</sup>

Okón's project departs from the discourse of critical post-appropriation in several salient respects. First of all, unlike the simulated touristic townships visited by Neidich, the actual Civil War reenactments attended by Longo, the nativist homages that preoccupy Pohle, or the Hollywood rehistoricization that supplies one aspect of Fast's piece, *Octopus* is not predicated on any explicit or voluntaristic gesture of reenactment. It depends not on the historical desires and fantasies, and the concomitant techniques and protocols, of a reconstructivist group but rather on a directorial regimen orchestrated in a U.S. location by a Mexican artist. In this sense, Okón can be said to have staged a restaging. Second, his work is not, strictly speaking, "historical" in that the war that it purports to re-create was concluded only a decade and



half ago, and its ramifications are still clearly unfolding for those who participated in, lived through, or survived it. The relative proximity of the conflict gives rise to a third distinguishing characteristic: Okón's reenactment is played out by individuals who actually participated in some way in the "original" events, occasionally serving on both sides at different times. It could even be termed an "extension" of or coda to the conflict.

Moreover, Okón's piece is radically deterritorialized. Instead of joining in the kind of veristic representational pilgrimage undertaken by actors, participants, and artists to traumatically hallowed locations, such as the sites of American Civil War battles or a Nazi concentration camp, Okón set his reenactment in the parking lot of a big-box store not far from Dodger Stadium. Unlike the ordinary fields, campsites, and prairie-like expanses chosen by Pohle's hobbyists for their generic equivalence to the American West, Okón's setting is at once utterly discrepant and contextually appropriate. For while the precincts of Home Depot are radically distinct from the indigenous villages and working-class suburbs that bore the brunt of the violence and destruction during the Guatemalan civil war, they constitute perhaps the only zone in which, out of shared economic necessity, combatants or victims on both sides of the conflict might stand side by side waiting to be picked up for an off-the-books construction or gardening day job. But the resiting of the conflict in an immigrant neighborhood in Los Angeles—itsself notorious for gang violence by and among ethnically calibrated groups—is also the product of another recursive logic, for it stages the symbolic return of the conflict to the disenfranchised margins of the nation whose actions and crusading financial self-interest fomented the war and then stoked it for forty years. Okón thus offers a kind of shadow economy of the "original" conflict funded by the negative dialectics of simulation. In this scene the high stakes, tax exemptions, institutional privileges, and sheer military power of mercantilist imperialism are answered by the "invisible" solicitation, low-grade tax evasion, undocumented lives, and utter social disempowerment of a displaced underclass.<sup>2</sup>

The final equivocation negotiated by Okón is perhaps the most significant. For while post-appropriational reenactments foreground a number of performative or critical questions—how reenactors are caught up blindly, passionately, and economically with the work of making a battle or a way of life over again or how the quest to redo history relies on a new set of assumptions, apparatuses, and ideologies—Okón has maneuvered his

remake into a signifying space that is at once more ironic, more humorous, and more absurd, though not for all this any less telling. It is by virtue of the almost uncanny structure of its emotional disaggregation and situational dysfunction that *Octopus* comes into relation with the artist's previous work. For he has long been interested in the pressures and dissipations according to which those operating in situations of social responsibility—policemen, guards, even artists—are uncomfortably unburdened of the power or force conferred on them by profession, position, and institutional ethos. Relying in somewhat equal measure on directorial finesse, confidence trickery, and contrived happenstance, Okón reverse engineers the self-performative assumptions of the "actors" with whom he works, so that they are caught not merely "off guard" or in some recursive or infantilized psychological state (though such positions are somehow necessary to the psychic diminution that unfolds) but rather in a simultaneous process of being framed by the positions of their history and experiences and unframed by an unaccustomed injunction to participate in interactive performance. The point of reference for all this, and what really sets Okón's work apart from other interventions in the practice of reenactment, is the corrosive work that he does on the fault line between then and now, self and institution, war and peace.

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### Notes

1. "Omer Fast, *Spielberg's List*," website for *Life, Once More* exhibition, Witte de With, Rotterdam, January 27–March 27, 2005, <http://www.wdw.nl/project.php?id=36>.

2. In a statement on *Octopus*, Okón cites some of the research on the U.S. role in the Guatemalan civil war, including the government's receipt of more than \$66 million in military aid from the United States between the 1960s and the 1980s. Between 1957 and 1972 some two thousand Guatemalan army officers were trained in U.S. schools; more than 425 police officers received training at the International Police Academy in Washington, D.C.; many of the tactics of the Guatemalan army were based on counterinsurgency manuals designed in the United States, while the highlands of Guatemala were a test laboratory for the "scorched earth" strategies later used in Vietnam.