



# Interview

“I see a very strong connection  
in the way I understand art making and this space”

*By Julio César Morales*

Artist and curator Julio César Morales interviewed artist and cultural innovator Yoshua Okón about SOMA, an art school in Mexico City founded by Okón, which officially opened a few days before the conversation took place, on January 28 in San Francisco with further discussions over email in February and March of 2010.

**What were some of the influences for starting SOMA?**

SOMA started and exists out of a basic need for platforms of interaction amongst the art community. I believe the art scene shaped itself in the 2000s around an increasing tendency toward individualistic practice with a prevalence of artists catering to the demands of the art market. For instance, in the ‘90s artists in Mexico City were very much aware of what other artists were working on and there was a very strong sense of a scene. At the turn of the century, artist-run spaces which helped create a cohesive community were rapidly disappearing. There was a current among artists that the art market was going to save us and that it was a self-sufficient system. Slowly the scene started to dissolve resulting in a lack of dialogue. SOMA is an attempt to regain the sense of community that we had.

**How are SOMA’s initiatives different from artist initiatives that were created in the ‘90s?**

Like spaces in the ‘90s, SOMA tries to compensate for what is missing. Though our influences are based on artist initiatives from the ‘90s in Mexico and elsewhere, we cannot replicate older initiatives—the context has changed dramatically. Mexico City has been integrated into the international scene. There are museums and galleries producing major international exhibitions, as well as great exhibitions with local artists. The lack of communication with the outside is not an issue anymore. Locating spaces to show a wide variety of work is no longer a problem. What is really lacking is a platform to facilitate communication and dialogue. Structurally SOMA is divided into three sections designed to provide such dialogue: a weekly series of events (talks, performances or screenings), a residency program, and the school.

**In the ‘90s you co-founded La Panadería (an artist-run alternative space in Mexico City). It seems that with SOMA you are creating something that maybe lasts longer, because it is embedded with the students and with the people in the scene. I see SOMA adding to**

**what you did with *La Panadería* by creating a deeper theoretical change in the social structure within the city. Do you see SOMA as the continuation of that project?**

I definitely see SOMA as a continuation of *La Panadería*. By the time *La Panadería* closed in 2002 it either had to reinvent itself, end, or become lame. Those were the three options and I don't think that at the time any of the people involved had the vision to reinvent it.

**Well, your own art career was taking off...**

That's true, my personal art career was taking off and that definitely took a lot of my energy but even if I had been one hundred percent devoted to the space I don't think I would have been able to know what the next step was because the context changed so rapidly that I didn't have the distance to understand what was going on. SOMA basically is the result of the process of assimilating everything that went on in the first decade of the new millennium and coming up with a new structure, hopefully capable of responding to the present context.

**Why is SOMA so viable and needed?**

In general, and by this I mean in every city I have been to, there is too much emphasis on spectacle and very little on discourse. It is not a coincidence that schools and projects similar to SOMA are starting to pop up in a variety of places around the world (Brazil, Argentina, LA, New York, etc.) as a way to compensate for this situation.

Collectors are running the show and these kinds of spaces empower us as artists, they help us regain control of our discourses and agendas, they provide us with a context. In them we are able to talk about our work at length and not just cater to consumers' needs for art objects and trends of the art market. For instance, at SOMA every Tuesday we have an artist's talk. The format of a talk is incredibly simple, yet it has so much potential as a teaching tool. Having artists give presentations is a great way to establish dialogue and to get ideas flowing. We are also organizing performances, because there aren't many places for performances and screenings in Mexico City. We have a small cafeteria where people can stop by and have a coffee and read a book, arrange casual business meetings, or even meet a date. On the other hand, there are no established MFA programs in Mexico, and teaching can be a great way to create intergenerational exchange. Many of the young artists have no way of making contact with my generation, but through teaching, such exchange can happen.

My experience in Southern California showed me that the MFA programs were an amazing way to develop community and also to create incredible interactions among young artists. For a young artist, the environment of an MFA program develops the practice in addition to creating long-term relationships, connections, and links. But the problem with MFA programs is that once the program ends, that platform is gone. I remember going to UCLA. The campus art studio was not only a place where you made art, it was also a place where you hung out and had a sense of community. Making community connections is dysfunctional in Los Angeles because of the layout of the city. Some students would keep returning for years after they graduated because no other place in LA provided an art

community. When I created SOMA, I was thinking about how I could create a space that would be open to the public so that it could become the place where artists would hang out. At the same time, I wanted to provide an MFA program, where artists would be able to interact with professionals and students from other disciplines.

**Can you talk about the spaces similar to SOMA that you have seen in other places?**

There is a space in Buenos Aires called CIA founded by Judy Wertheim, Graciela Hasper, and Roberto Jacoby. It is these kinds of spaces that are creating more of a cohesive relationship among artists and different cities. We are now creating exchanges with them. They are inviting me to teach at CIA and Judy is going to come and teach at SOMA. In a way, these educational projects are serving as a platform to help us create these new networks of communication.

**Let's go over some of the basics of SOMA... is there a studio practice, classes? What is the curricular model and how was it developed?**

The academic program is a two year program. Every instructor has the freedom to customize each class so it functions more on the model of a workshop rather than a traditional arts education. So far, instructors have been really creative in interpreting how they are going to be teaching their class. But there are also certain fixed classes like group critiques, for instance. Basically it is an MFA program designed to help young artists. Instructors don't have to be artists, but they have to be very much aware that they are teaching artists, so you can be...

**An anthropologist...**

An anthropologist or a theory person, and you can teach a theory class, but really taking into consideration that you are training artists not theorists.

**But there is no specific media that someone focuses on? When you go to art school in the United States, you have to focus on new genres, painting...**

That's true, but in real practice these divisions in most U.S. art programs are not respected anymore, they are obsolete but are being kept for some reason. I mean, I went to UCLA, and yes, it is divided into types of media, but once you are in the program, you can take classes with any professor, regardless of their specific media. Serious art schools at the post-graduate level are not technically or media oriented anymore.

**What do students go to SOMA's program for? What do they get out of it?**

The assumption is that students are already practicing artists and it is their responsibility to acquire the skills they lack. To teach specific skills at a school nowadays is difficult, because many artists change media every week. Students go into the program to workshop their work, to show it to others, and get feedback and advice from more experienced artists and professionals. Ultimately, the program provides an ideal context for them to further develop

their practice and gain a critical distance from what they do. Also their work gets exposure with curators and critics (for instance we are constantly having residents and local curators review student portfolios) so it is also a great way to get their work out there.

**So it is modeled more after an MFA program as opposed to an undergraduate program.**

Yes, this is a post-graduate program. It is assumed that students either already went through an undergraduate program or have an equivalent level of training. The agenda for us is the agenda of the student/artist, the school has to mold itself to the student's needs. It does not have to have an academic agenda. SOMA provides workshops with experienced artists, curators, or theorists and students are basically getting feedback and constructive criticism for their work and developing their own practice. The school becomes a tool for that purpose.

**It sounds more like a mentorship. The program seems to guide you a bit more than a regular MFA program, as opposed to having a very clear division between an instructor and a student.**

Exactly. We are not interested in the traditional model—the hierarchical model. What I loved about UCLA is the way the art program was invented by artists. Consequently, it really takes you seriously as an artist, and it's more of a horizontal structure. The instructors are tutors that guide students, and of course, it helps when an instructor has been working for 30 years and can offer his or her own experience.

When I went to grad school I would talk to Paul McCarthy and sometimes we had two-hour conversations about how he makes his editions, because that is what I needed to know at that moment. And other times we ended up talking about Turkish society. That's the great thing about contemporary art, it can take you anywhere, and for a program to predetermine where the discussion has to go, I think is ridiculous.

**Can you talk about your official role at SOMA?**

I came up with the structure, and invited other artists to become part of it. I separated the administrative side of things—running the space day to day—from content and the creative side. So I am in charge of putting together a team of art administrators who will be operating the organization. The content and programming will be determined by the group of 16 artists involved in the project. For instance, Eduardo Abaroa is taking care of the academic program. The school is an outgrowth of a social tradition in contemporary Mexican art.

**Do you think students that want to be involved will follow them?**

That's what we are hoping. We want younger generations to see this as an opportunity to interact with the older generations and to create some kind of continuity with the local art tradition. I think the lack of intergenerational dialogue is a problem, not only in art, but in society as a whole. That's one of the functions of mentorship.

**What do you get when you finish the two-year program?**

You get a certificate, and we are consciously making it a non-accredited program. The reasons are multiple, but a very simple straightforward one is that most of the best artists in Mexico do not have an MFA. If we wanted to make it an accredited program, then they would not be able to teach. Secondly, we are independent. If we wanted to seek official approval, then we would get caught up in the bureaucracy. It would make us much more dependent and we would have to spend a lot of time and energy on paperwork. We would much rather spend our time raising money and developing a good program. Third, there are many good young artists making interesting work that didn't go to school and we would not be able to accept them. Not making it an accredited program allows us a lot more freedom and flexibility without taking away the seriousness or the quality of what we are doing.

**It almost seems like an intervention as opposed to an art school. It seems more like an extension of your own art practice. Were there any specific previous projects that you've done within your artwork that maybe could serve as an extension to this process or that helped inspire the creation of this project?**

I see a very strong connection in the way I understand art making and this space. Art needs a discursive context for it to have any kind of relevance and in this sense I see teaching as an extension of my practice. Art to me is a means for us to have conversations about what we really care about. It is a way to stimulate thoughts, ideas, and discussions. I think art depends on a social context for it to be complete. I like to think of art as stimulating an active and creative response in whoever interacts with it. SOMA provides a context for such interaction.

**Julio César Morales** is an artist, educator and curator, based in San Francisco. His photography, interactive media, public art and video installations have been shown extensively in California and internationally. He teaches at California College of the Arts and the San Francisco Art Institute, and has created educational and artistic projects in a variety of settings, from probation offices, public schools, and museums to alternative nonprofit galleries. Morales is founder and co-curator of Queens Nails Annex, an artist-run project space and adjunct curator of visual arts at Yerba Buena Center for The Arts in San Francisco.