

ART

Yoshua Okón's uneasy TV puts viewers on the spot

By **Kenneth Baker**
CHRONICLE ART CRITIC

"Art" frequently names a category into which something gets put when it seems to fall outside all others. The work of Mexico City native Yoshua Okón qualifies as art in this default sense, not that it completely lacks precedents or linkages with other things having stronger claims to artistry.

With "Yoshua Okón: 2007-2010," Yerba Buena Center for the Arts gives the Bay Area its first extended look at his videos.

Get ready to cringe.

Okón delves into discomfort zones that the mass media ignore, notably class friction and marginal social phenomena such as Nazi-memorabilia enthusiasts.

In "Bocanegra" (2007), Okón turned his camera on a loose Mexico City group of "re-enactors" who dress in Nazi uniforms, parade the streets carrying swastika-blazoned banners reading "Deutschland Erwache!" and harangue one another with rants about what Hitler really meant by this or that vile utterance.

One component of this multichannel installation, apparently concocted by its key performer, plays for sick laughs, perhaps with some self-satire that renders the piece no more amusing.

Editing aside, Okón deliberately makes it hard to guess the degree of his intervention in what his camera has recorded.

A group of Nazi-costumed

Yoshua Okón: 2007-2010: Video installations. Through Feb. 6. Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 701 Mission St., S.F. (415) 978-2787. www.ybca.org.

ordinary Mexicans saluting one another with "Sieg Heil!" and arguing over whether "Aryan" signified anything more than a commitment to racial purity, no matter the race, might have provoked derisive laughter from the führer himself. But this spectacle will — or ought to — make most viewers squirm.

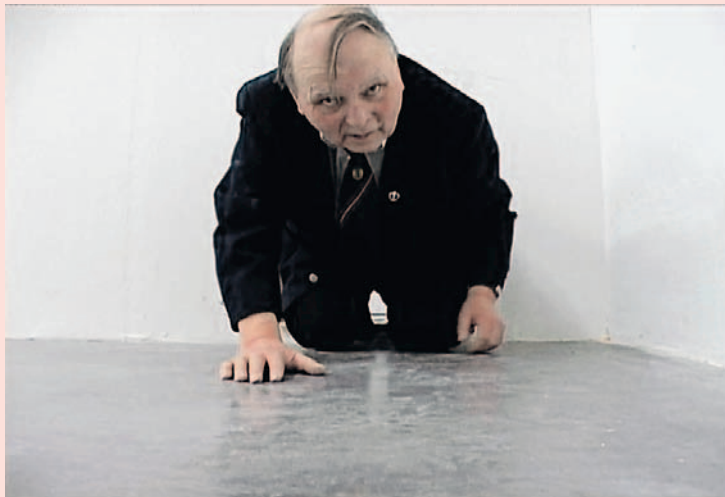
That some Nazi war criminals actually did escape to Latin America sharpens the creepy edge of "Bocanegra," which takes its title from the street on which the Mexico City "Nazis" parade.

Okón plays with scale and sound in "Bocanegra" also. Adjacent to the large wall projection with its ambiguous theatricality, he has placed several small screens, on each of which an individual Mexico City sympathizer repeatedly shouts "Sieg Heil!" before a wall-size swastika flag. Their apparent sincerity gives the installation a backbeat of nau-



Yoshua Okón / Yerba Buena Center for the Arts

Frame from "White Russians" (2008), a four-channel video installation by Yoshua Okón that blurs boundaries between scripted and spontaneous and haunts the viewer long afterward.



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Frame from "Hausmeister" (2008), a single-channel video by Yoshua Okón that presents a German museum guard.

seating sincerity.

"Canned Laughter" (2009) leaves the visitor in no doubt as to Okón's intervention. In this case, he hired real unemployed people to stage in an abandoned Mexican factory a bogus promotional spectacle. It celebrates the production of "Canned Laughter" under the fictitious corporate aegis of (Henri) Bergson, who famously argued that the mechanical aspects of human behavior invariably provoked mirth.

Intended as critical satire of the global corporate order, it feels forced in every respect, at best pleasing viewers with the thought of the artist having employed some needy people for a while.

The most effective piece on view is "White Russians" (2008), which plays on four monitors embedded in the interior walls of a lumber-clad white box that stands out in the show like a piece of minimalist architecture.

"White Russians" takes us into the home of a family in rural Wonder Valley, which is east of Fresno, who agreed to host a group of art-world visitors during an event called the High Desert Test Sites Art Festival.

Here the contrast between scripted and spontaneous, alcohol-fueled behavior blurs to riveting effect. Okón might have titled the piece "The Revenge of Reality TV" for its mingling of intrusiveness, manipulation — running in several directions — and unscriptable spontaneity. Call it art or not, "White Russians" haunts a viewer in ways that only art can.

Something similar might be said of the piece's complement here. "Hausmeister" (2008) presents a solo performance by a German museum guard who, like a Beckett character reduced to speechlessness, pops out of and back into a sort of crawl-space door, muttering, growling and gesturing unintelligibly at the camera in a lather of territoriality.

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