

Yoshua Okon

Oríllese a la orilla

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Okon's series of nine videos (six of which will be shown at the Mercosur Biennial) are collectively titled *Oríllese a la orilla*, the term used by Mexican policemen to pull over cars for real or imagined traffic violations. The videos explore the limits of power as expressed through the figure of the street cop, simultaneously the most ubiquitous and most volatile agent of the state. The street cop represents the most common interface between the civilian and the judiciary through millions of daily transactions in which laws are variously implemented, interpreted and corrupted across the thin line that separates legality and power.

Armed only with a handheld camcorder, Okon walks through Mexico City searching for interactions with these cops. The resulting situations range from the comic to the dangerous to the absurd. In all the scenes presented there is an undercurrent of uncertainty about what is it exactly that we are seeing. Was the cop bribed? Was the artist in any danger? Was the encounter scripted beforehand? The impossibility of separating fact from fiction underlines just how provisional and delicate these transactions are, and how fragile our expectations are. When, in *Poli I*, the cop argues with the artist, he insists several times "soy un servidor público" ("I am a public servant"), a phrase he no doubt learned during his training, but which he can only understand

as a protective symbol of power and status rather than a responsibility.

Each video in the series shows a different situation in which the cop's power is somehow questioned. In *Poli I* we see an argument between the artist and the cop in which the latter threatens to beat up the former if he does not stop filming. In the process of the argument the cop clearly states his position on human rights, class, and blames the artist and 'his type' for creating corruption in Mexico. Given Okon's white, middle class status (the artist never appears in the videos, but the various insults thrown at him leave no doubt as to his socioeconomic class), the cop may even be right, but the final scene in which the cop hits the artist presents an extreme scene of a class struggle far removed from the idealized and hieratic representations of Mexican Muralism. In *Poli III*, a security guard is dancing in his cabin and engages in a bizarre conversation with Okon that soon takes homosexual overtones as the guard invites the artist to come and dance with him given the lack of available women. In *Poli IV* a cop carries out a bodybuilding routine for the camera, incorporating Michael Jackson crutch-grabbing and Arnold Schwarzeneger moves into a performance that is both comic and threatening. *Poli V* shows a young cop dancing to *norteño* music. *Poli VII* plays an intercepted radio conversation in which two cops discuss the sex they plan to have with a girl who just walked by. *Poli IX* presents a more complex scenario in which we appear to see a cop being mugged in the street. We then discover that this is a set-up in which the artist paid a cop to act, and that the actors (including Okon, but not the real cop who escaped) are arrested for

impersonating a police officer. In the ensuing negotiation — recorded by a camera pointing at the ground — the issue is solved with a bribe. All of these videos record situations in which the ideal legal order of things is undermined and, instead, we see the underbelly of sexism, class tension, and corruption that lies under the surface. However, what differentiates Okon's work from an exposé documentary is the complexity of the ethical and moral issues presented.

These videos represent the complex effects of an underpaid and corrupt law enforcement system. The cops who are put on the street have little training, are barely paid survival wages, and have a very limited understanding of the limits of their role. When small-scale corruption becomes an accepted way to negotiate your way in and out of the system, this entire system becomes infinitely more complicated. This complexity is the raw material of Okon's work. The psychology of the police uniform becomes the backdrop for these works in which the outward symbols of power and authority are placed in tension with the inner uncertainties and doubts of the human being who has to wield this power through countless small incidents and episodes in which that power is tested and reshaped day by day. When the cop takes a bribe he simultaneously accepts and destroys his own authority; his physical power exists only as a means for the destruction of his moral standing. In this sense, Okon's work is exemplary in questioning the right/wrong division that has characterized political art through the 20th century. There are no obvious heroes or villains in his work. Instead, we have a series of

negotiations in which the artist is as much part of the work as the cop. Both are actors in a system of tensions and uncertainties, and both are complicit in a society that allows these boundaries to be crossed as a matter of course.

Another central aspect in Okon's work is the role of the spectacle in contemporary society. Okon's camcorder seems to open the door to the most bizarre behavior on the part of the cops. In all of the videos in the series, the camcorder becomes the channel through which the transactions take place, a particular form of permission that rather than intimidating the cops who might think that they will get into trouble if their actions are recorded, actually seems to encourage their most candid behavior. The glamorous promise of reality TV shows seems to have changed the status of the camera from a documentary tool to a fantasy generator. In this light, Okon's *Orillese a la orilla* series can be seen as one of the great social realist works of the last decade. The use of simple handheld technology to record the moral and ethical complexities of street life in Mexico City give us a glimpse into a world of fact that is certainly more uncertain, complex, and ethically challenging than any fictional work could ever be.