# YOSHUA OKÓN

(1970, MEXICO CITY - MX) / ARTIST, REPRESENTED BY GALLERIA FRANCESCA KAUFMANN (IT), BARÓ (BR) AND REVOLVER (PE) / CO-FOUNDER OF SOMA IN MEXICO CITY / BASED IN MEXICO CITY

**BY PEEPING TOM**

# *Interview*

**Peeping Tom: In the middle of the 1990s, your art practice brought a new energy to the Mexican art scene. While politically engaged, denouncing social and cultural patterns, your approach is principally based on humor, between comedy, satire and parody. Even if they command different levels of reading, your artworks are very straightforward and accessible: they can be understood by everyone. We, at Peeping Tom, share the same ambitions to stray away from artistic gestures that are taken too seriously, that are only directed towards an elite. Is it important for you to engage a larger audience? Do you feel it is more difficult to gain recognition from the art world by doing that, instead of creating a highly intellectual and challenging work, based on numerous art history references, that for the most part is opaque to the general public? How did you perceive your approach initially when most artists around you were developing conceptual and minimalist practices? Did the art community have any difficulties in taking your work seriously?**

**Yoshua Okón**: I consciously have always avoided the term denouncement when describing my work. I feel this term can be incredibly misleading. I'm interested in creating works that provoke self-reflexivity in regards to how we perceive social and cultural phenomena; in regards to our own sense of reality. Humor and satire are excellent tools for such intentions because they allow us to take some distance from ourselves. Due to the use of humor, during the 1990s, some of the art community in Mexico had problems taking my work seriously because, for some reason, there was a very strong association between solemnity and seriousness as well as between humor and superficiality. Maybe the reason, as you suggested, is that humor is associated with popular culture, I'm not sure. But humor can be very serious if properly used and contextualized.

Regarding the other part of the question, when I make art I'm not primarily thinking about a specific audience but I'm concerned with addressing issues that concern others as well, broad social issues. Nevertheless, I don't believe in universality and I think that different people relate to what I do in different ways. I am not interested in reaching the masses and I don't think that the effectiveness of art can be measured in terms of how many people it reaches. On the contrary, I think that attempting to reach the masses usually ends up compromising art.

**Your work does not only counteract the conformity in Mexican society but also the conventions in art: the positions of art institutions and the artist and moreover the image of a Mexican artist from a foreign perspective. It seems you are constantly "desacralizing" the establishment and denouncing stereotypes. Where is this aspiration coming from?**

I think that stereotypes and conventions are very limiting. For instance, the very definition of Mexican society as one single monolithic abstract entity I think is very problematic. Identity is incredibly complex and my work attempts to open the door to such complexity.

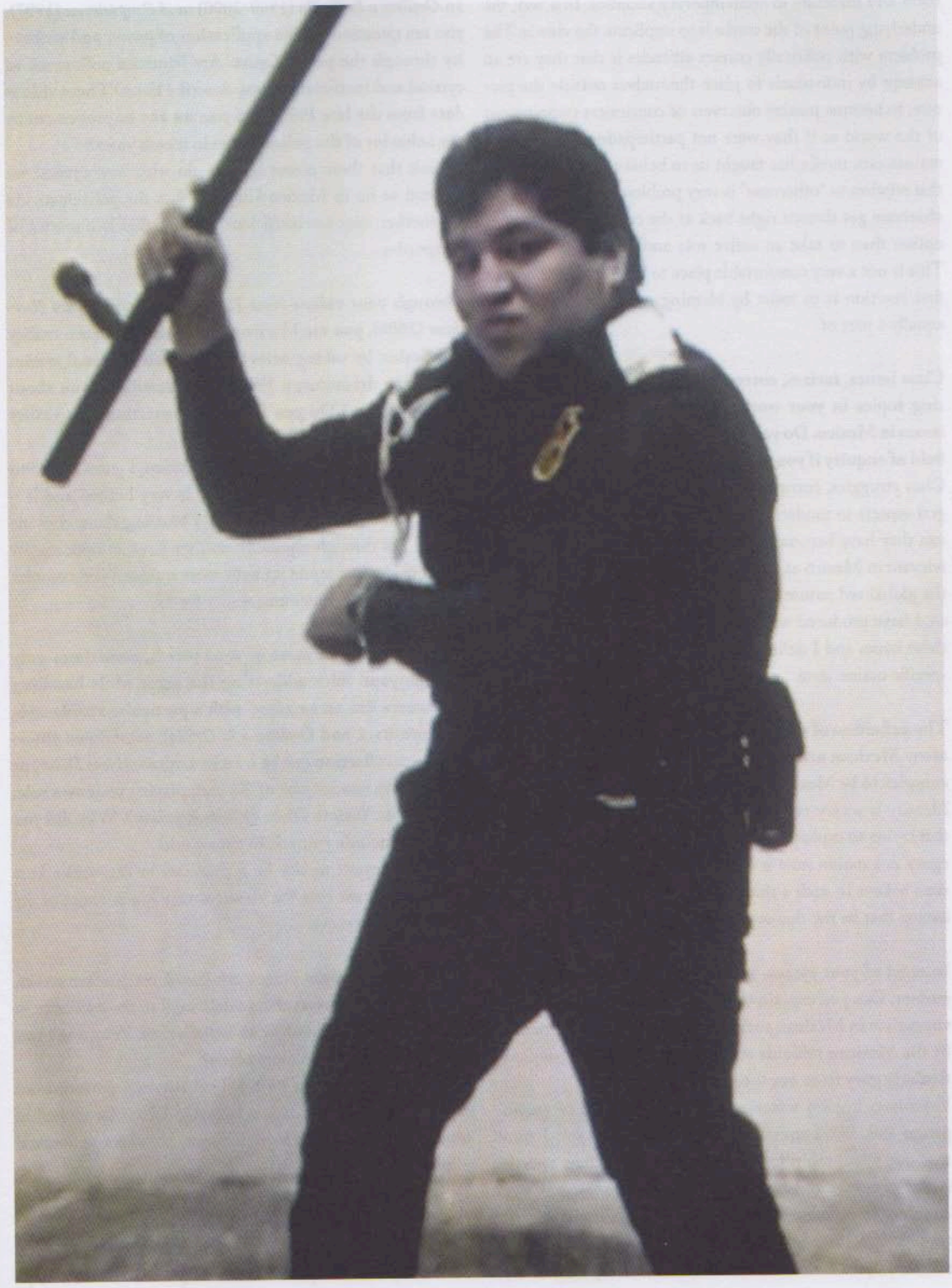
**The participation of ordinary people is crucial in your body of work. This usage of non-professional actors leads to a significant part of improvisation. What is the role of the unpredictable in your practice?**

My semi-orchestrated performances are explorations for me as well as for the participants and for the viewer of the resulting videos. In this sense, unpredictability is essential and it is integral to the way my works are constructed.

**For the purpose of your videos, you bribed some of your models. For example, in exchange for 200 pesos some police officers agreed to dance for you, to tell a joke or to fight with you. You also recruited undocumented workers from a day labor center. Do the people you hire get to see the final videos? Do you maintain a relationship with them? Are they aware that these videos will be shown in a museum or a gallery? Did this method lead to some sort of controversy in the art community, raising some moral questions?**

In the past I have had some "politically correct" people complain about ethical issues in my work. In a way, my work is precisely designed to trigger such reactions. I try to be as

*Orillese a la Orilla*, 1999-2000. Six channel video installation. Variable durations (detail: Poli IV, 2 minute 47 second loop). Courtesy of the artist.



self-referential as possible and to expose the very structure of what you are watching. My works are naked and don't hide the very problematic and messy relations implicit in them and therefore in contemporary societies. In a way, the underlying point of the works is to implicate the viewer. The problem with politically correct attitudes is that they are an attempt by individuals to place themselves outside the picture, to become passive observers or consumers stepping out of the world as if they were not participating. This is how mainstream media has taught us to behave and I think that this relation to "otherness" is very problematic. In my works observers get thrown right back at the center with no other option than to take an active role and become implicated. This is not a very comfortable place to be and many people's first reaction is to resist by blaming me for what they are equally a part of.

**Class issues, racism, corruption and machoism are recurring topics in your work, reflecting social and political issues in Mexico. Do you think you would explore the same field of enquiry if you were not born and living in Mexico?**
Class struggles, corruption, machoism and racism are integral aspects to modern Western societies. And via colonialism they have become almost universal by now. They are as relevant in Mexico as they are in France or Israel. Because of the globalized nature of art practices in the last ten years or so, I have produced works in many countries that deal with these issues and I definitely do not associate them with any specific nation state.

**The definition of a Mexican identity is a frequent theme in many Mexican artists' work including yours. Why is it so complex to be Mexican?**
Identity is a very complex concept and that is why I think that trying to explain it within such a vague and abstract category as a nation state is a bad start. In other words, I don't even believe in such a thing as a Mexican identity, let alone having that be the theme of my work.

**In most of your pieces, you also tackle questions of voyeurism. Can you explain to us your vision and the place of voyeurism in Mexican society? Are you directly influenced by the Mexican tabloids and newspapers that appear particularly gory from our foreign perspective?**
Voyeurism implies watching without any kind of participation and, like I mentioned in an earlier answer, I think that our relationship to representation in modern societies is that of passive consumers, voyeurs. In this sense, my work attempts to redefine that relationship by turning us from voyeurs to actors. As for the nature of Mexican tabloids in relationship to tabloids elsewhere, I don't really see a difference in the way yellow journalism operates in different places other than in superficial ways.

**In *Oríllese a la Orilla* (1999-2000) or *A Propósito...* (1997), you are questioning the application of power and authority through the police figure. Are Mexican policemen as cynical and inefficient as you describe them? These videos date from the late 1990s. Do you see any improvement in the behavior of the police forces in recent years?**
I think that these pieces have to do with how cynical we all tend to be in Mexico City, not just the policemen. As to whether they are inefficient, I think that is a matter of perspective.

**Through your videos *New Decor* (2001) and *White Russians* (2008), you are blurring boundaries between reality and fiction by asking actors to use their personal stories within the dramaturgy. What is interesting to you about this ambiguity? Do you have the conviction that reality often goes beyond fiction?**
I don't believe that reality surpasses fiction, I guess my point is that our understanding of reality is very limited and it is full of clichés and conventions. By blurring these conventional lines through representation we have an opportunity to reconsider and come up with more nuanced and complex versions of what constitutes reality for us.

**You are present in most of your pieces, sometimes only through your voice addressing the actor while handling the camera like an amateur, with a particular visible style (*A Propósito...* and *Oríllese a la Orilla*); sometimes physically your reflection can be seen in a mirror (*New Decor*) or deliberately, you are part of the cast, playing your own role, as the artist Yoshua Okón (*White Russians*). Why did you decide to include yourself in your work?**
I consider myself to also be a character in the works. It is important for me that the viewer is very much aware of my role and my presence.

**While most of your pieces are based on performances, your artwork is almost always delivered to the audience in the form of a video and/or an installation. Why don't you use live performances more often?**
I consider my work to be a hybrid between performance, video and installation. It is a language I have developed in which none of the parts work without the others, an integral whole.

**You spend your time between Los Angeles and Mexico City. You don't have a gallery representing you in Mexico. Could you describe your relationship with Mexico today?**

**Do you share with most people we met a love/hate relationship with this country?**

I'm now full-time in Mexico City; I don't live in Los Angeles anymore. To me Mexico City serves as a base, it is a cosmopolitan city, very active in my field and placed in a very central position in relationship to the outside (as a contemporary artist I travel a lot and Mexico City is very convenient because it is not far from South America, from the US and Canada or from Europe, places where I normally find myself working). I couldn't ask for a better place to be. Nevertheless, in a professional sense I don't depend as much on any specific city. My profession is very global and I could potentially be living in almost any important urban center. On the other hand, it is very important for me to be part of a specific community and in that sense I feel very much connected to Mexico City simply because that is where I have friends and colleagues with whom I sustain a dialogue. Plus I like the city so I choose to be here. Regarding the question of the gallery, commercial galleries are secondary to me and fortunately my career doesn't depend as much on having one in the city where I live.

**In 1994, you co-founded La Panadería—with artist Miguel Calderón in an abandoned bakery (where you actually still live and work)—an independent gallery, the first successful alternative venue in Mexico City. Its cutting-edge and non-conventional approach revealed a new underground scene to the audiences and had a determinant role in the development of contemporary art in Mexico City. It allowed people to look at art differently and opened doors to spontaneous art practices. I read that La Panadería came about as a reaction to the frustration you and Miguel experienced towards what galleries and museums could offer at that time in Mexico City. Could you describe the artistic context of that period from your perspectives as emerging artists?**

When the La Panadería opened, museums and commercial galleries were mostly working within La Ruptura's paradigm. In the late 1950s, some artists reacted very strongly against muralism basically arguing that art is not a political tool favoring a much more abstract art form connected to their internal worlds, that was La Ruptura. Growing up in Mexico City in the 1980s, thirties years later, this movement's influence was absolute and all artists that had been working outside of this paradigm were marginalized to the degree that my generation had no way of knowing about them (for instance Los Grupos from the 1970s). On top of that, because of Mexico's commercially protectionistic policies, it was very hard to have access to information from abroad and know what our contemporaries were up to elsewhere.

**We heard that the scene could get very wild at La Panadería: fights, passersby throwing stones at your windows, even orgies…are all these true or part of the legend? If so, why do you think this place brought this peculiar energy? Do you think the conditions were right for showing and viewing art? Was this context for looking at art criticized?**

I guess these stories are partially truth and partially exaggerated. To me La Panadería served as a container and as a detonator that allowed all the already existing energy to explode and further develop. This kind of energy was in the air and all we did was to provide the right context for it to materialize.

**La Panadería had the ability to bring together a diversity of people—it not only brought together everyone from the art world microcosm but also reassembled a broader audience. How did you manage to do that? Do you think that today there are any art venues that succeed in doing the same in Mexico City?**

When La Panadería opened, people tended to associate art with a very solemn and stagnant practice that had nothing to do with their lives. I think that La Panadería proved that art can be relevant and speak about issues that concerned us all. That automatically broadened art audiences.

**La Panadería closed in 2002. Why?**

Because by that time the context had changed so much that most of the original needs that La Panadería addressed were no longer there and the rules of the game were different. In other words, to continue to be relevant La Panadería had to reinvent itself and I think that at the time it closed we didn't have the vision to do it mostly due to the fact that things were changing incredibly fast and in a very radical way. We had created a monster!

**In 2009, you created SOMA in Mexico City, a space combining an educational program, a residency program for Mexican and international artists and a forum for artists' talks, conferences and video projections. It seems that you have the ambition to make this place like a research laboratory, to keep an experimental approach while making it more established and organized than La Panadería. Why did you choose to create a space dedicated to education rather than a gallery or an exhibition space? Was this place created because you missed the dynamic of La Panadería? What was your original intention?**

I think that in your well-put question you are already implying the answers. Yes, I see SOMA as a continuation of La Panadería, it is the reinvention that was not possible at the time La Panadería closed. At that time (2002), there were

already many venues showing contemporary art with a very experimental approach, finding places to show experimental and young artists' work was not a problem anymore. Also, by then Mexico City had already connected itself to the international scene so it was no longer isolated, information was flowing in and out in a very dynamic way. Nevertheless, throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century, people kept on talking about the independent spaces of the 1990s in a nostalgic way, as if something had been lost. It was then that it became clear to me how important the social role of these spaces was (La Panadería was not the only one). In other words, they were very instrumental in creating a sense of scene and a sense of community as well as in providing a platform for dialogue and discourse. They provided a context. So even though so many things had positively changed, in this new globalized and market-oriented context we were all getting increasingly isolated, the sense of community was slowly eroding, we started to lose agency and began playing under someone else's rules (mostly collectors); we lost the context we had created for ourselves and with it the control over our own discourses. SOMA is an attempt to strengthen the sense of community and to regain our context.

**How different is the artistic context today compared to when you opened La Panadería? Are the ambitions and stakes the same? It seems that with La Panadería and SOMA you are claiming the importance of an art space as a social meeting point putting conversation, discourse and sharing at the center of the art community. Do you think that this is something missing today in Mexico City?**
I think I have already answered this at length above but it is important to mention that this lack of discourse and an over-emphasis in spectacle that I referred to is not unique to Mexico City. It is very much a generalized situation in all art centers that I know of. I don't think it is a coincidence that spaces with a spirit similar to SOMA have been emerging throughout the world: in São Paulo, Buenos Aires, San Juan, Los Angeles, New York, etc. ...

**How do you feel about the state of art education in Mexico?**
I think it is not very good at undergraduate levels and terrible at graduate levels.

**For several years, you have been a teacher, giving workshops in Mexico and abroad. What was the importance of education for you in your development as an artist? Is it important for you to stay in touch with the younger generation? Does it ever interfere with your work?**
I'm interested in conversations and workshops are a great way to give ourselves the space and the time for such conversations. More than teaching, I'm interested in providing the right environment for dialogue. 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.

**Our immediate impression of the art scene in Mexico City was a divided one, made of different groups and acquaintances, each "family" being highly critical of the other ones. Do you know why? From our understanding, after a wave of successes starting in the mid 1990s until the beginning of 2000, the art scene in Mexico City suffered from a slight slowing down from the beginning of the millennium up until recently. With the opening of places such as SOMA and Petra or important galleries like LABOR and Luis Adelantado in the last couple of years, Mexico City seems to have regained a diversity that was lacking for a number of years: could you explain what has happened?**
I agree that things became mostly stagnant in this period and I think that has a lot to do with the disappearance of independent spaces and the ridiculous belief that the market place was a self-sufficient system that was going to save us all. Clearly that is not the case.

**How would you describe the new generation of artists in Mexico—the one following yours, born in the late 1970s/early 1980s. Do you see any clear distinctions between their art practices and artists from your generation? Is it easier to be an artist today in Mexico now that many Mexican artists are internationally recognized and that foundations such as Jumex exist to support contemporary artists?**
I don't think it is easier but I sense that younger artists think it is easier. They mostly aspire to be integrated in the global market system. It is a bit sad to see this because I think many younger artists don't realize how unstable or lacking in self-sufficiency this system is. Also, I don't think they realize how hard they need to work to become professional artists and the fact that they need to develop a discourse beyond producing attractive objects.

**The first thing we couldn't help noticing when we arrived in Mexico is that there is a collision of two societies: the rich, middle class and the working class. The art community definitely is aligned with the wealthier side. Do you think this interferes with artistic creativity? Is it possible for a person coming from the lower class to become an artist in Mexico? For example, at SOMA is it expensive to take classes there? Do you have a policy for low-income students, scholarships...etc.**
Once again I think that what you are describing here is a condition of the modern world and not particular to Mexico. For instance, how many people from the Parisian *banlieue*

(or from the French colonies or ex-colonies) have the opportunity to participate in culture? This is represented in a very exacting way in the movie *La Haine*, for instance. Art and culture are privileged activities and very hard to access by the working class. Of course that doesn't mean that it is impossible for that to happen and I think that it is important for institutions to try to make all they can to counterbalance this fundamentally unfair situation. When students apply to SOMA they have to fill out a questionnaire so that we can determine their economic background and, based on that, the amount of their tuition is determined. You pay as much as you can afford so for instance we have some students paying one hundred percent and others only ten percent.

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**FROM TOP TO BOTTOM**
*Lago Bolsena*, 2004. 3 channel video installation. 10 minute 17 second loop. Courtesy of the artist.

*White Russians*, 2008. 4 channel video installation. 8 minute 51 second loop. Courtesy of the artist.

*Coyoteria*, 2003. Video installation. 22 minute loop. Courtesy Galleria Francesca Kaufmann.