OCTOPUS

By Hili Perlson

In *Octopus*, a four channel video installation by Mexican artist Yoshua Okón, we see a group of men engaged in what appears to be a war game. Deployed in shopping carts, squatting between pick-up trucks or seeking shelter in models of prefabricated shacks for gardening tools, the mute choreography of battle takes place in the parking lot of a Home Depot in Cypress Park, Los Angeles, where the men regularly gather in order to find work as day laborers. Clad in jeans and T-shirts—black or white according to which side they're on—the men tote air guns and peek through make-belief binoculars for enemies lurking behind SUV's and advertisement banners. But this is not a game, and the combatants in Okón's piece are not playing; they're indigenous Mayans from the Guatemalan high lands acting out simulations of scenes from the civil war in Guatemala, a war in which they have fought on either side, or sometimes alternating between both, and often against each other.

The civil war that raged in Guatemala for nearly forty years was set-off by a CIA-led coup that ousted the reformist president Jacobo Árbenz Guzmán in 1954. In June of the same year, the CIA illegally led a rag-tag army of exiled "Liberation Forces" into Guatemala, and the next president was flown into Guatemala City in the U.S. Ambassador's plane. During the following four decades, the U.S. financed, trained, armed and directed a military dictatorship that is responsible for hundreds of thousands of deaths, and for one of the biggest and yet most little known genocides of recent history of the indigenous Mayan from theGuatemalan high lands.

Upon reading *The Art of Political Murder* by his friend Guatemalan-American writer Francisco Goldman, Okón realized that the men he'd been picking up at the Home Depot to help renovate his Los Angeles home came from the very places Goldman had written about. The book details the massacre of Guatemala's Mayan population during the 40 years of a civil war manipulated

by U.S. government and commercial interests. One such mercantile interest is expressed in the title of Okón's work, which refers to the nickname used by Guatemalans for the United Fruit Company—today Chiquita Banana. The company had enjoyed tax exempt export privileges since 1901, controlled 10% of Guatemala's economy through exclusive rights to the nation's railroad and telegraph systems and a monopoly of its ports, and, at the onset of the conflict, was the nation's largest land owner.

Engaging in reenactmentreenactment as an artistic device, Okón reverses the rules of traditional reenactments; these usually occur in the actual locations where historic events took place and are acted out by people who are some generations removed from the momentous scenes they perform. The participants in *Octopus*, however, are performing scenes from battles they fought in as young men, while the site of the reenactment is a symbolic one. A dozen members of the Los Angeles Mayan community, all recent undocumented immigrants who gather daily seeking work at the Home Depot parking lot, perform fragmented war scenes they had actually experienced. They come from the Ixcán highlands rain forest region, and the reason for their presence in the parking lot is a direct result of U.S. military intervention, not to mention immigration politics.

The reenactment is, in other words, underlined by the participants' actual biographies, both past and present. Present because the unexpected interventions that go along with unauthorized filming—*Octopus* was filmed without permission from Home Depot—sometimes pulls everyday reality into the frame. Occasionally, we see a Home Depot customer rolling into the parking lot, driving past the group of men who are crawling on the asphalt holding make-belief guns, or walking past the men as they lie on the ground playing dead. The costumers ignore the men and sometimes really do not see them. The obvious absurdness of the men's actions highlights their painstaking invisibility, the marginalization of their lives in a parallel society, and the social powerlessness of an undocumented underclass.

A further element in Okón's work that distances Octopus from traditional reenactments, but also from other examples of reenactments in artistic practice, is Okón's intentional use of humor. While the men's actions may seem absurd, it is precisely the need for a comic relief that reveals the viewer's intuitive knowledge of the work's grave subject matter. "I like to make pieces that might spark humor" says Okón in a clip about the making of *Octopus*. "But you never know" he continues, "sometimes I show a piece and everyone is cracking up, and the next time [you show it] everybody is really serious. I don't know why in our culture […] solemnity is linked to depth and humor to shallowness. I think humor can go very deep." META spoke to the artist to find out more:

META: The video piece was produced as part of an art residency at the L.A. Hammer Museum in 2011, where the work was also exhibited for the first time. Did you also show the finished video installation to the Guatemalan day laborers who acted in it? How did they react to it?

Yoshua Okón: I did give them the DVD's but I haven't had the chance to talk to them since because I've been in Mexico. I'd also invited them to the Hammer but I'm not sure if they went, so I can only speculate, but I doubt the performance made any direct difference in their lives. That isn't the point of the piece though. I'm much more interested in affecting the lives, or at least the perceptions, of those viewers who encounter the work, and who are unaware of the reasons that lead to these guys' presence in the United States.

When did you start becoming interested in reenactment as an artistic device?

Well, I think that, even if we are not conscious of it, in a way we're constantly reenacting our own past or our society's past. In other words, I think that conventions play a much bigger role in the way we behave than we like to

think, and conventions are a kind of reenactment. This is where my fascination with reenactments comes from.

Do you see the act of reenacting as a translation or an interpretation of a given event?

I'm interested in the ways in which past events shape who we are now. Reenactments can be a great way of obtaining perspective, of helping us to gain some distance from ourselves. So rather than translating or interpreting the past, I'm interested in the reformulation of our notions of who we are in the present. It's important, however, to mention that not any reenactment can trigger such an effect. In fact, a lot of reenactments serve exactly the opposite purpose. For instance, if you think about the traditional Cinco de Mayo battle reenactment in Puebla, where the Mexican army defeated the French invaders or reenactments of the American Civil War, their role is to re-emphasize and reiterate the official discourse. Instead of having a critical effect, they are ways of reinforcing conventional and official views.

Have you ever needed to support yourself by doing odd jobs? Cattelan, who worked for years as a postman, cleaning floors, donating sperm or working in a mortuary, said that for him, work was always necessary to survive, so he decided to make it his goal to survive without working. "But now I have much more work than I had before," he said in an interview. "Hunting for freedom, I've found the real prison. But at least it's a prison I've chosen for myself."

Mostly I did a lot of teaching to survive, I have taught since I was 23 and I feel very lucky because I love to teach. Now I still teach when I can but I mostly live from my art. But it is funny you should bring up an Italian artist because Italy is where I held some of my strangest jobs before I started teaching. I moved there when I was 18 and stayed for over a year. One of my jobs was to bike from home to home, collecting donations for the "*Associazione Nazionale di Invalidi Civili*" (A charity for the handicapped). One morning I arrived to work

in order to collect the envelopes with the receipts and the addresses and the office was completely cleared out, doors ajar not a single chair inside. It turns out it was a total scam, the “Associazione” didn’t really exist and the guy behind it had been pocketing all the donations. But I have to agree with Cattelan, being an artist is a lot of work, much more than I like to do, but at least we get to work for our own agendas.

What are you working on at the moment?

I’m preparing a solo exhibition for a gallery in Bogota. The show will revolve around the idea of territoriality and the relationship of humans to nature in contemporary societies. It will include twoolder works, *Coyotería* and *Hausmeister*, as well as a re-edited version of *Hot Dog Stick*, a piece about pit bulls that I made last year. This piece used to be a two-channel video that was viewed in a frontal way and now it will be an all-around room installation. I’m also working on a book about *Octopus*. More than a catalogue, I see the book as an extension of the piece itself. I’m making some drawings based on 19th century drawings in which the octopus is used as a metaphor for greed and expansion. Also, I will include my story-boards, photographs from the Guatemalan civil war and other contextual material, video stills, photos, short quotes, installation drawings and views and an essay by John Welchman.