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Yoshua Okon's video monument pegged 'us'

2:30 PM, May 1, 2009

Four years ago, Yoshua Okon, an artist who divides his time between L.A. and Mexico City, showed an animated video commissioned for a San Francisco exhibition that, with each passing day, becomes ever more resonant. It's one of those rare works whose topicality has legs.

Curator Ralph Rugoff invited an international roster of 61 artists to ponder the values they associate with contemporary America. Here's how I described the Okon work in a review of the show at the CCA Wattis Institute, titled "Monuments for the USA":

A schematic aerial view of the National Mall in Washington, D.C., all cheerful forest green and liquid blue, sports a pair of colossal, shiny, translucent golden

letters, erected on a plot of otherwise empty land that corresponds with the location of the White House. The letters are at least 10 times taller than the Washington and Lincoln memorials, over which they loom.

Accompanied by the faint, ominous soundtrack of a helicopter's chopping rotor blades, the video image swoops around these monumental golden letters, which look like corporate headquarters the late Philip Johnson might have designed for the Dallas skyline. (Or think of the infamous, turning Enron sign repeated endlessly on the evening news.) The initials of the United States are bluntly conflated with a vulgar declaration that this monstrosity is us.

Aside from the general economic chaos of the past year ...

... news reports in recent days and weeks keep bumping Okon's video-loop into mind:

- The Senate Thursday delivered a slinging rebuff to President Obama by **rejecting a measure** under which bankruptcy judges could order lenders to reduce the principal on home mortgages to help homeowners facing foreclosure (the so-called cramdown provision). After sweeping the House, the Senate vote was 51 to 45, with 12 Democrats joining Republicans in opposing the proposal. According to the Center for Responsive Politics, finance, insurance and real estate rank as **the largest lobbying sector** in Washington; commercial bank employees donated \$22.5 million to congressional candidates -- more than half of it to Democrats.
- With surprising candor, Sen. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.), chairman of the Senate subcommittee on financial services, declared that banks, despite their role in creating the current economic meltdown, effectively own the Senate. "And the banks -- hard to believe in a time when we're facing a banking crisis that many of the banks created -- are still the most powerful lobby on Capitol Hill," Durbin **told WJJO-AM 1530**. "And they frankly own the place."
- In the jobs-stimulus bill, **the National Park Service received \$55 million** for projects relating to maintenance and repairs of the crumbling National Mall, the nation's premier work of civic art. The figure is less than one-sixth the \$350 million in deferred maintenance the Mall requires.
- The world's 25 top-earning hedge fund managers raked in \$11.6 billion last year, according to **a recently released ranking**. The average was \$464 million per manager.
- When Chrysler was forced into bankruptcy Thursday, President Obama **blamed the move** on hedge funds and investment firms that would not agree to sharply reduce what the automaker owes them.

In the introduction to the Wattis exhibition, Rugoff explained that he commissioned the monument designs because of "a nagging suspicion that the United States has metamorphosed in profound and inadequately acknowledged ways." Okon's video depicts the power ratio between today's political class, fueled by corporate money, and historical visions of the citizen-leader (Washington) and the savior of the union (Lincoln), which are dwarfed by the gigantic golden letters in his schematic depiction of the Mall. We -- "us" -- aren't let off the hook for the grotesque sight, out there on our nation's front lawn.

The spinning logo occupies the position of the White House on the Mall, a pointed location when Okon made the animation in 2003. It will be interesting to see whether that placement retains its relevance under a new administration.

Okon's "US" is a one-minute animation that runs as a continuous loop. A short clip of the video can be seen **here**.

-- Christopher Knight

