

REVIEW

FORT WORTH

Yoshua Okón in conversation with Noah Simblist

Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth

Noah Simblist

January 15, 2014

Mexico Inside Out: Themes in Art Since 1990, was a groundbreaking exhibition at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth that included work by twenty-three artists. One of those included, Yoshua Okón, had two works in the show. Both are multi-channel video pieces that use relatively humble production values to produce tremendously complex works that engage social and political themes. Noah Simblist sat down with Okón to discuss the exhibition, his practice and its relation to locality and history. The interview below is a small portion of a much longer sprawling conversation that discussed not only Okón's work as an artist but also his involvement in cultural platforms such as La Panadería, an artist-run space, and an ongoing pedagogical experiment called SOMA.



Yoshua Okón, still from *Octopus (Pulpo)*, 2011; image courtesy the artist.

Simblist: *So I wanted to ask you about the premise of the show, Mexico Inside Out, in relation to your work. You have shown in places around the world such as Los Angeles (USA), Milan (Italy), Herzeliya (Israel) and Santiago (Chile), and often it seems like you make work in relation to the places where the exhibition was commissioned. So I'm wondering how you think about this question of being classified in relation to an identity that is based on nationality or location?*

Okón: Sure. The concept of identity is very, very complex and we tend to simplify it in order to communicate. But it can serve as an excuse to bring things together. If you look at the show carefully I think that the notion of national identity falls apart completely. For example, almost all the artists are from or live in Mexico City, an incredibly heterogeneous, liberal and cosmopolitan city where gay marriage, abortion and marijuana are legal. There are big cultural differences with the rest of the country. In that sense we don't necessarily represent Mexico as a whole. But, in my view, this show doesn't pretend to say, you know this is how art gets done down there. The show tells us that this is art that was made by artists that live in a specific territory. So it's a tricky thing

because people may get the wrong expectations. But I think that anyone that comes and looks at the show carefully enough will realize that.

Yes and also because some of the artists were not necessarily born in Mexico City, they have emigrated from various places around the world.

Well, it could be argued that that's an integral aspect of the culture of the city. Mexico City is historically a city of immigrants. For at least the last eight hundred years or so, since pre-Hispanic times, it has received a constant flow of immigrants. So again, it further complicates this idea of a monolithic and homogeneous identity.

Are there particular characteristics that may not be about the city but about the art scene? In terms of relationships or collaborations?

Well, there is more than one art scene. There are so many artists and there are several art worlds. For instance some artists make a living out of incredibly conventional paintings. But I think this show *does* focus on one specific scene. I'm not sure how intended that was, but in one way or another it's all artists who are in some sort of dialogue and have influenced each other. It's also representing, roughly speaking, three generations of artists. So, I think that the show establishes a nice dialogue by showing young artists that have been influenced by older ones.

Connected to the idea of multiple art worlds that exist within one city, you were involved in a couple of artist-based projects such as an alternative gallery and then the art school that you are also working on now. I'm curious about your intentions with both of those projects. What were you trying to do with them? Was it simply to fill a lack in the art scene in Mexico City?

Yes. Well, in the context of the 1990s the artist-run space that I was involved with focused on opening things up and bringing cultural agents together. Even though Mexico City historically has been a cosmopolitan and plural place, the 1970s and '80s were a dark period. It was a period where the country closed too much of the outside world off and there was pretty much a dictatorship that alienated citizens from each other. Not as openly a dictatorship as in other parts of Latin American during the same period, but Mexico was not an exception. The dictatorship was just hidden better. I don't know how much you know of the history. In 1968 there was a huge student movement, as big as the one in Paris, which ended up with a massacre. It's called the Tlatelolco Massacre. In 1968 the military went to a huge demonstration in the plaza, then started shooting and killed a lot of students. That was the beginning of this dark depression era. In that period, even though there were a lot of artists working in the city with different kinds of approaches and mediums, the government privileged abstract artists and marginalized all others. These abstract artists, who came from a 1950s movement, were convenient for the regime since abstract art is ambiguous, it can be interpreted any way you like.

By the time I grew up in the 1980s, that's almost all you could see. In the 1990s we opened up artist-run spaces and created a scene and reconnected with the city's cultural traditions. And I think this exhibition really comes straight out of that moment in Mexico City during the 1990s. So, going back to your previous question, I think that there definitely are some particular characteristics to the scene that is being represented at The Modern.



Yoshua Okón, installation view of *Coyotería*, 2011, at the Städtische Kunsthalle München; image courtesy the artist.

That makes a lot of sense. I was asking because we were talking earlier about the curators' intentions of trying to deal with the complications of putting together an exhibition about a group of artists working in the city without essentializing them based on their nationality, especially because they are outsiders coming in to construct a history. But I am curious about your own actions within that history, actions that create one possibility, maybe not a movement or a scene that follows from a manifesto, but of one possibility for a small set of people that can have something that might not have been available for them.

Exactly.

So is that to say that these artist-run spaces were making works in reaction to the ambiguities of abstraction supported by the government? If so, how would you characterize the kinds of work that you were supporting in these new spaces?

Okay, well a lot of us started making art that openly acknowledged the social context, that interacted with the surroundings and with other people. So an emphasis on “relationships,” as you put it, is definitely one important characteristic of this scene.

Unlike abstract artists, who tend to only be connected to their emotions and not acknowledge the inherent political dimension of art. By political I don't mean it in the vulgar sense like politicians ... I mean it in the full sense of politics, our every-day life, how we interact with each other and with the institutions, etc. A good example of what I mean is when the CIA famously appropriated Abstract Expressionism for their own nationalist and imperialist agenda, which had nothing to do with the artists' intentions.

Yes, it was more easily appropriated because they didn't take overt political responsibility for their work. Ironically, they were working for the Mexican muralists ... like Pollock studied with Siqueiros.

Yes, that's very ironic. Siqueiros was a big influence on Pollock, he was the first one to use commercial paint, but clearly he was not such a big influence in terms of Pollock's understanding of the relationship between art and society. During the '50s in Mexico there was a big reaction against muralism by a group of artists that favored a so-called "universal language." And up until the late 1980s they were the status quo. Museums and galleries would only show their work. I remember as a kid going to the museums and thinking, "What does that have to do with my life?" So, in a weird way, taking the strong Marxist element out, many in my generation reconnected with the legacy of muralism in bringing art back to the social arena.

This notion of cycles of history that you were just talking about brings up another dimension of your work. You have often dealt with reenactments. There is the piece Octopus (2011) in Mexico Inside Out and then there is Coyotería (2003) which is not necessarily about a political reenactment; but it's within an art dialogue in which politics are embedded since it was Joseph Beuys's action that invoked everything from the Native American genocide to a critique of capitalism. You also made a work about Nazi reenactments. You laid out a history for what happened at this moment in the '90s in Mexico, where a number of artists were interested in the political, but it seems to me that part of that could have involved looking to past politics. That's what reenactments do, right?



Yoshua Okón, view of *Coyotería*, 2011, at the Städtische Kunsthalle München; image courtesy the artist.

Well to me reenactments are not about the past. I don't mean reenactments in general, but my approach to reenactments is about referring to history only to come back to the present day. Let's take the example of *Coyotería*. Beuys did *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974) as a reaction to his first trip here. For him European culture has a spiritual side as well as a myopic one. In his view, Europe fucked up by not following its spirituality but rather its greed. America

represented a second chance but, based on his first visit, his conclusion was that Europeans fucked up again. So, through a shamanistic action as Europe's representative where he lived with a coyote for a week, he symbolically attempted to heal the wounds and suggest a spiritual commune between Europe and America as opposed to a colonial and violent one. As I read about this artwork, I also read a compilation of texts written by surviving Aztecs right after the conquest. In one of these sixteenth-century texts the writer uses a diametrically opposed symbolism while referring to the Spaniards as coyotes. Whereas for Beuys the coyote symbolized American spirituality, for the Aztec it symbolized European greed. In contemporary Mexico the original term has evolved. Now "coyote" refers to a middleman, a character that navigates between legality and illegality. For instance, a Coyote can provide fake documents, cross people over borders or, in the U.S. context, it can bribe politicians on behalf of private corporations (a lobbyist).

Oh, it can be that also?

Yeah, the border theme is one of many possibilities. So the piece is a way to talk about our present day with historical perspective. A kind of update, thirty years after Beuys and 500 years after the conquest, which asks where are we standing today in relationship to questions of alienation and exploitation in Western Civilization.

Recognizing that the symbols have evolved since that time, right?

Yes, on the one hand, and also talking about a violent cultural tradition that unfortunately still exists. Let's jump to *Octopus*. *Octopus* is not about the Guatemalan Civil War, but rather about the consequences of the U.S. invasion in Guatemala. It is about the here and now in southern California and the fact that there is a double standard. The reenactors, all of them Mayan ex-fighters, came here in the first place because their county was invaded, plundered and devastated. And yet they are considered illegal, are not given full rights and are left to fulfill the local economy's need for cheap labor (in most cases under minimum wage). So I use the past as a way to contextualize, as a way to look at the present with a different light, does that make sense?



Yoshua Okón, still from *Octopus (Pulpo)*, 2011; image courtesy the artist.

Yes. Because even with what you were telling me earlier about these Guatemalan undocumented workers, they had their own personal history with this war. So it's not as if that's just the past in a historical sense, it's that their present is defined by that past.

Exactly. The fact that they are in the U.S. is completely defined by that past. And people around the reenactors, Home Depot's customers, are as important. In fact these customers are my central subjects. Their reaction, or rather their lack of reaction, their indifference, is even more important than the war reenactment itself. So again, it is about using the past as a way to try to understand our present.



Yoshua Okón, still from *Octopus (Pulpo)*, 2011; image courtesy the artist.

Noah Simblist is a writer and artist based in Dallas. Yoshua Okón was born in Mexico City in 1970 where he currently lives. His work, like a series of near-sociological experiments executed for the camera, blends staged situations, documentation and improvisation and questions habitual perceptions of reality and truth, selfhood and morality.