



YOSHUA OKÓN: ORACLE

July 2 - Aug. 22, 2015

In 2014, Oracle, Arizona was the arena for the largest-yet protest against the entrance of unaccompanied children from Central America into the U.S. During Okón's first trip to the town of Oracle, he spoke to the leaders who orchestrated the protest. They agreed to gather those that participated in the protest, in order for Okón to create a live reenactment based on what happened from their ideological perspective. *Oracle* questions the relevance of nationalism in this transnational age.

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AMUSEUM

6/22/2015 EMAIL INTERVIEW WITH ARTIST YOSHUA OKÓN

Julio César Morales: *Oracle* is the second part to your 2011 video project *Octopus*, where you collaborated and asked Guatemalan day laborers, who were also ex-fighters in the Guatemalan civil war, to reenact war memories at a Home Depot parking lot in Los Angeles. Can you describe what original interest led you to develop this body of work and specifically what initialed the *Oracle* project?

Yoshua Okón: Sure. My original interest began when I realized how little is known in the U.S. about foreign policy in Central America. That knowledge is key in understanding root causes for immigration and essential for any kind of discussion about the subject. Hardly anyone knows where Guatemalan immigrants come from (most people called them Mexicans) or why are they here. I have never heard an immigration debate, either on the left or on the right of the political spectrum, that considers foreign policy. This to me is highly indicative of how deeply rooted nationalism is in the U.S. Nationalism creates the illusion that we live in a contained and isolated bubble that is sealed from the outside. Conversations then tend to go inwards, lacking perspective. Especially when it comes to issues like immigration. Borders are always porous and we are all interconnected, especially in this era of social media, transnational economies and financial capitalism. And especially after the U.S. invaded Guatemala and continues to exert a huge influence there. Just to give an example, 99 percent of the profits from mining, by far Guatemala's biggest industry, leave the country. People, therefore, are fleeing from areas that have been economically and socially devastated due to hunger and desperation, not out of will.

But nationalism is so deeply internalized that it becomes very difficult to see. And that of course is reflected in the way immigration issues are being addressed.

More specifically about *Oracle*, it was the huge wave of more than 60,000 unaccompanied Central American children who arrived to the U.S. in 2014 that got my attention. That is very clear and dramatic evidence of the brutal side effects of neoliberal capitalism, a system that the U.S. and other governments, in conjunction with transnational corporations, have been aggressively pushing around the World for the past 60 years or so. And which is directly connected to the aforementioned devastation of Guatemala and the arrival of thousands of children. Therefore, watching images of women, who are probably mothers, holding signs saying, "Stop the Invasion" in the context of an anti-Central American children

immigration protest, was an incredibly powerful and troubling image to see. As well as incredibly ironic considering the U.S. invasion to that country. That protest took place in the small town of Oracle, Arizona, because some of the Guatemalan children where temporarily sent to an academy there. The title of the piece not only refers to the town but also to Oracle Corporation, a corporation with strong ties to the CIA that embodies our current global system's tendency to blur the lines between governments and private transnational corporations.

JCM: The current video project *Oracle* can perhaps be misunderstood as an examination into racism and immigration in Arizona, but your interest really lies more with investigating notions related to "nationalism." Can you elaborate on this concept?

YO: Sure. For this piece I made several research trips to the town of Oracle where I was able to interview and spend time with the protestors. My conclusion is that the basis for most of the discrimination and violence from these kinds of groups, like the "Arizona Border Protectors," with regards to immigrants is nationalism, not racism, as it is commonly believed. Some people from the pro-immigration counter-protest that took place in the same town even compare the anti-immigration protestors to the KKK, which is a big distortion and misunderstanding. This is a different phenomenon. Many of the people involved in these groups are mixed race and they openly acknowledge it and have no issues with that. These are people that are reacting to their own state of relative poverty and marginalization and who are obsessed with the nationalist paradigm. They are highly frustrated with transnational capitalism and with the complicity between the government and corporations, which contradicts the logic of the nation state and its borders and betrays the national pact. So it is this contradiction that I am interested in investigating. The contradiction between nationalism, as a still incredibly powerful and rooted ideology, and the reality of a world in which government structures are increasingly working for corporate transnational agendas. I am interested in the way in which nationalist rhetoric is being manipulated for private corporate agendas. Most forces driving our societies, economies and our governments are transnational but yet the whole nation-state system is still in place. Why is that?

by ASU Art Museum Curator Julio César Morales

My piece reflects a lot of the tensions and side effects that have been accumulating around such systematic contradictions. The millions of undocumented human beings that have entered the U.S. in the last couple of decades are a direct result of such contradictions. The deep anger from U.S. nationalists who feel betrayed is another symptom.

JCM: In the past you have worked with amateur actors such as police officers, parking lot attendants, homeless people, Mexican Nazi aficionados, to people shopping at a furniture shop becoming accidental actors. What is the advantage and strategies of working with “non actors?”



I ask the question of whether nationalism is a relevant and adequate ideology to face the challenges of our age.

Global neoliberal capitalism is what I am trying to critique here and in that respect I have an affinity to some of the protestors concerns. I just don't agree at all with them that nationalism is the answer, on the contrary, in my opinion holding on to nationalism is making the problem bigger and creating a lot of hatred against immigrants who are victims of the same forces they are ultimately opposing. Nationalism can be a very dangerous ideology, as it became evident in Europe during the first half of the 20th century.

YO: Yes. I am interested in creating fictional scenarios that unfold within real places and with real people. By “real” I mean that a Home Depot is still a Home Depot and that a police officer is still a police officer ... In that sense, more than being amateur actors, the performers in my pieces represent fictionalizations of themselves, they play themselves and their histories. The advantage of these strategies is that they allow me to ground the pieces in ways that, beyond poetics and formal explorations, which are also very important, allow me to connect and engage viewers around specific common ground issues.



JCM: Can you talk about one of the new videos in which you appropriate the *Marine's Hymn* that you have re-written and are also now sung in Spanish by Guatemalan youth? What is the history of the hymn and how does your new version function in the overall body of work?

YO: The exhibition is divided into three sections, which are in dialogue with each other. The section you are referring to is a single channel video of a chorus where nine Guatemalan immigrant kids, who belong to the approximately 60,000 Central Americans unaccompanied minors who came to the U.S. last year, sing about the root causes of why they are here. The song is based on the U.S. Marine's Hymn, which narrates the history of U.S. invasions starting with the invasion of Mexico in the 19th century ("From the Halls of Montezuma" is a reference to the Chapultepec castle in Mexico City). But in this new version the children sing, from their own perspective, about the invasion to their own land, including the complicity between the CIA and the United Fruit Company¹. So the function of this section in the installation is to contextualize and provide a historical framework.

¹ "For decades, one of Guatemala's most influential corporations has been the U.S.-owned United Fruit Company, what some Guatemalans call *el pulpo* ("the octopus"). The company is the largest landowner and employer in the country, and many people have criticized it for receiving large tax breaks and using its political influence to instigate a U.S.-backed coup in 1954 that led to an era of human rights violations against Guatemalans."

"Timeline: Guatemala's History of Violence," *Frontline World: Stories for a Small Planet*, PBS, <http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/guatemala704/history/timeline.html>

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