

YOSHUA OKÓN

CRYING WOLF

John Welchman

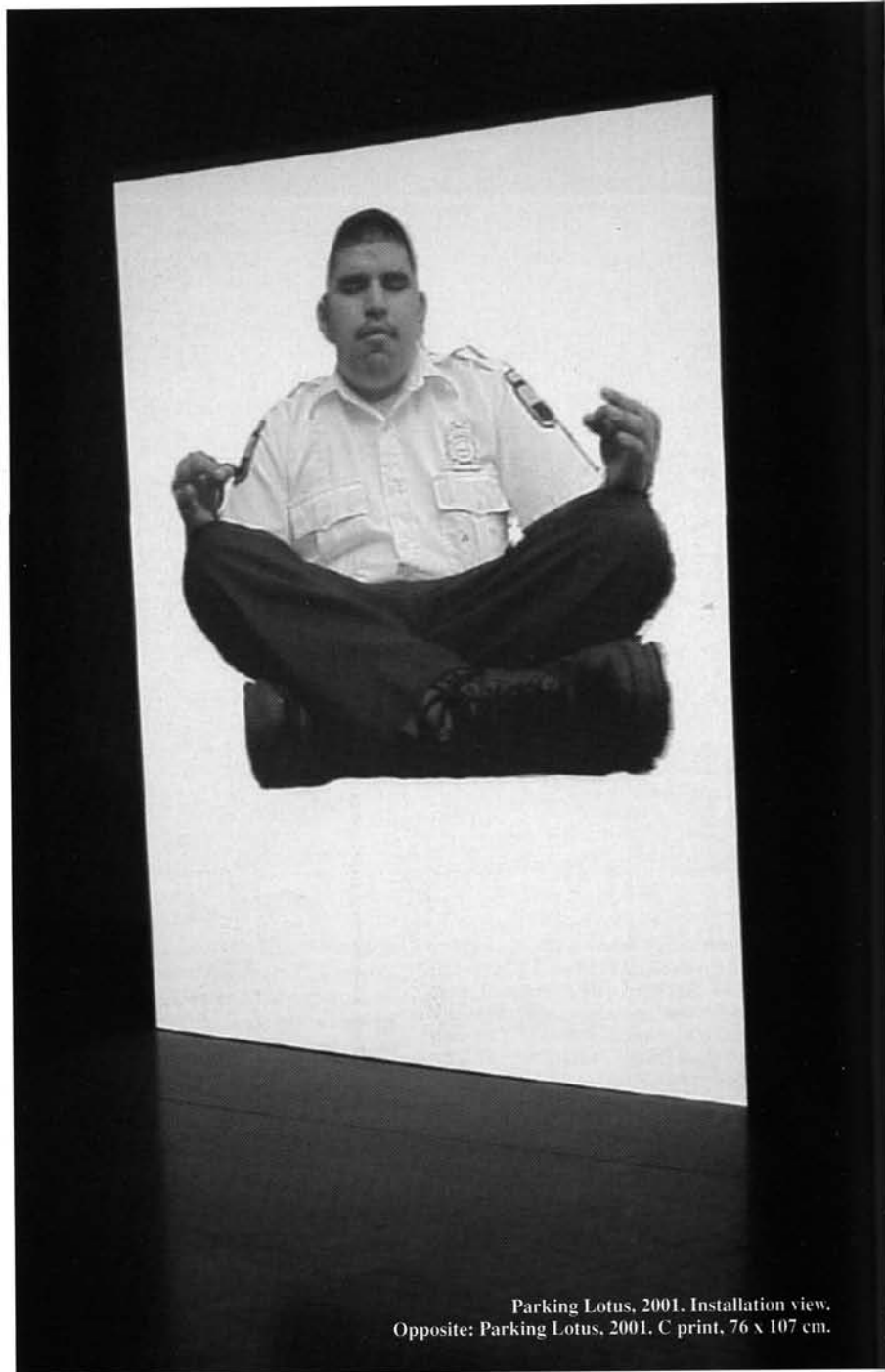
VIDEO ARTIST, UCLA GRAD, young professor, cultural provocateur, and co-founder (in 1994) of La Panadería, one of Mexico City's defining alternative spaces during the last decade, Yoshua Okón poses exciting new questions to the relation between performance and video, set and location, voyeurism and participation. At the same time, perhaps the major effect of his work is an almost uncanny triangulation between comedy, critique, and satire. Almost everything he's done adjudicates, seemingly without effort, the cultural, aesthetic, and subjective dimensions in play between these terms, so that social commentary is laced with humor, irony mediated by self-reflexivity, and improvised action tangled up in webs of class and identity. How has he managed all this?

We can find one explanation by attending to the ways Okón has used the exchange between camera and director, subject and location, identity and performance, to shred and reconvene some of the modernist paradigms addressing these exchanges. Two interest me in particular: these are caught up in discourses of the candid and the case study.

The so-called 'candid camera' we associate with the work of Diane Arbus or Gary Winogrand, in the American tradition of this genre, generated opportunistic images by capturing moments that registered as casual, offbeat, or untoward. This camera was turned on its subjects imperceptibly, granting them an invisible permission to perform themselves with a minimum of cultural filtration. The scene of candid photography was unapologetically voyeuristic and the recording apparatus invariably sequestered.

That the candid camera was also deeply modernist is demonstrated by its promotion of a characterological version of the formalist mantra, "truth to materials" — the "materials" in this case being its human subjects (and the apparatus itself, deemed largely inert), while the "truth" they furnished lies in their purportedly unfettered self-declaration.

Okón's work stages an elaborate retort to these fictions of truth and material reality. First, without in any way fetishizing the camera, he posits video and its *mise-en-scène* as the leading term of an avowedly open construct. Secondly, instead of concealing his approach and relation to his subjects by effectively stalking them, Okón enters into a form of double contract or agreement based on a partial disclosure of his own status as 'director'



Parking Lotus, 2001. Installation view.
Opposite: Parking Lotus, 2001. C print, 76 x 107 cm.



From Top: Triangulation: re-making Turkish Tarzan, 2003. Still from a 3 channel video installation; New Decor, 2001. Still from a 3 channel video installation; Rinoplasty, 2000. Video Still. Opposite: Cockfight, 1998. Photographic dyptic. Courtesy Enrique Guerrero, Mexico City/Francesca Kaufmann, Milan/The Project, Los Angeles.

coupled with an indication of the action he wants (or imagines) — a vague script diagram if you like. In *Orillase a la Orilla* (1999-2000) for example, nine Mexico City policemen are asked to dance, joke, wield their batons and so forth in exchange for a payment or bribe of 200 pesos. In *Cockfight* (1998), two adolescent, middle-class Mexican schoolgirls were given a free-form invitation to talk and act dirty on camera in the artist's studio.

A third retort is located in the ambiguous nature of the performances that ensue, based on the subjects' improvised interpretation of their loose mandates, using for costume and props their own personal or professional accoutrements and for location a quiet corner of their own environment (*Orillase a la Orilla* and *Parking Lotus*, 2001), a borrowed furniture store in LA's Lincoln Heights for the three-channel video installation *New Décor* (2001), or, in the case of *Cockfight*, a neutral studio background.

One origin for this blend of performance, improvisation, and documentary, governed by what historians of the Happenings and early performances staged nearly half a century ago referred to as "semi-matrixed" actions, is glimpsed by the designation "assisted" applied to appropriated objects augmented by Marcel Duchamp with a signature, title, or material addition. Okón offers a spectacular intervention into the territory of the "assisted," showing how its ineffable panoply of supplements to the real are simultaneously liberations, delusions, and evaporations but signify equally as a play of almost appallingly visible character traits.

The second recalibration passed through by Okón's technique of assisted improvisation is a little more difficult to map. Like the candid, it centers on how a subject can be considered to declare or reveal itself and what is at stake in this revelation. While candid photography offers a snatched glimpse of intense, superficial character — often deforming this with the sensational effects of its context (dramatic angles of vision, strange boundaries between foreground and background, etc.) — we have to turn to more consolidated modern discourses of subject formation, such as psychoanalysis and anthropology, in order to consider how subjects are produced from their personal and cultural histories.

Here, too, Okón's work seems to provide both a parody and a kind of paradoxical completion. In a quietly mocking retort to Freud's attempted cure of psychological dysfunction using the tools of a couch and conversation, Okón's videos deliver us, almost instantly, to a flood of delusions and desires released, not by passive, reclining patients, but as the self-performances and fantasy projections of social 'types' that make themselves over as their own



dream work — or their (or our) worst nightmares. What Okón creatively circumvents here is that view onto personal history that privileges methodical, symbolic, language-driven sleuthing in a psychoanalytic encounter that correlates dreams, lapses, and traumatic memories with the universal tokens of neurosis and obsession. Freud's insistence on the linguistic nature of the joke is another case in point, for while Okón sets in motion an extraordinary range of vernacular speech — a torrent of rants, curses, and idiosyncratic usage — language is inseparably coupled with gesture and pantomime. The cure Freud belabors is traduced, we might say, by the serio-comic diseases of selfhood Okón effortlessly conjures up. We shouldn't exaggerate the capacity of Okón's work to intervene in or redistribute the canonical analytic scenes of modernity. Yet it does not seem far-fetched to suggest that his work feeds back against the formally staged encounter with difference we have inherited from anthropology, even in the give-and-take of its postmodern redefinition. For while Okón is an observer, he is also a participant. While on occasions he appears removed from the actions he records, he also allows himself to be implicated in them and implicated again by those performing them (as when one of the policemen in *Orillese a la Orilla* rebukes him on tape for being a

spoiled rich kid). And while he is a director, he is also a producer, an editor, and, on occasions, another actor.

Several works foreground Okón's disruptive relation to the traditions of social documentation and ethnographic vérité. In the composite/serial video portraiture of *All Carl's Jr.*, *All of LA* (2002), Okón reinvents himself as a Chilango émigré version of August Sander, melting the visages of workers at all thirty Los Angeles locations of the fast-food chain, Carl's Jr. into what Sofia Hernández Chong Cuy refers to as "cacophonous mass ornament." In the 40-minute narrative video *Rhinoplasty* (2000) he disguises himself as a Jean Rouch of the Mexico City haute bourgeoisie, tagging along with his camera while the coke-sniffing scions of the city's rich and powerful dissipate their boredom in a mindless series of drive-by harassments. Leavened, then, with deviant sociology and misbegotten anthropological witness, Okón rewires the fraught history of the participant-observer paradigm with an open circuitry that connects the interactive artist-producer with the subject-as-improvisation.

By their very nature Okón's videos are not always 'even' and never reward without dragging their viewers through some of the risk-ridden routines traversed by the artist and his subjects themselves. In fact, not only does Okón thrive on the risks he brokers — the risks of

exploitation, voyeurism, preaching, even violence — but his work is, in the end, defined by them. It is about the gestural passion, automatic delivery, rhetorical mannerisms, and the eloquently self-reflexive clichés through which subjects perform — and sometimes exceed — 'themselves.'

At the same time, the work insists, in a compelling double bind of ferocity and humor, on the ritual remainders of class, ethnicity, gender, and institutional filiation that co-produce not only our everyday identities but also our desires, fantasies...and animal instincts. Mating a French poodle with a xoloizcuintli (Mexican hairless dog — Okón has two at home in LA), as he did in the single-channel video projection, *Chocorrol* (1997), offers an indelible emblem for his work on the human menagerie. Stripped of the coyness of Joseph Beuys and his coyote, refusing the violent canine mimicry of Oleg Kulik, Okón is our millennial Wolf-man, a self-described "detonator of social codes," the vicarious producer of our becoming-animal. ■

John Welchman is Professor in the Visual Arts Department at UCSD, author of Art After Appropriation: Essays on Art in the 1990s (2001), and editor of Foul Perfection (2003) and Minor Histories (2004), the collected writings of Mike Kelley. He is currently working on a survey of global art for Phaidon (London).