

# Touching the Common

## Contemporary Art and Mesoamerican War

Samuel Steinberg

At first glance the Mexican artist Teresa Margolles' 2000 installation *Vaporización* develops a scene as spare as the work's title: the spectator enters a misty space, filled with water vapour. The viewing public convoked by the work begins an itinerary – to breathe this trace of history mediated only by what is insubstantial. Mist, water, evaporation, condensation; this cycle cannot be broken or destroyed; it cannot produce anything new. However, the spectator's contemplation of her own displacement through this veil of steam is soon interrupted by the violent caption of the work, an explanation or addendum that does not appear in its title. As the work's description reads: 'Vaporized water obtained from the washing of corpses at [Mexico City's] Medical Forensic Service during autopsies.'<sup>1</sup>

Vapour is a phase of water, so to speak – a future or past iteration, but without history. Into its own trace structure Margolles does not inscribe, but rather forces the viewer to *infer*, another trace, another phase, not of water, but of life itself. And here the trace suggests a history, demands to be read historically, at least in a present that is so damaged, a moment in which impunity, murder and violence have not ceased to haunt the Mexican landscape. The anonymous death of the marginal subject that has not touched the gallery-goer in life now forces its way into the very breath that sustains her. Perhaps the spectator, only now realizing that the vapour she has drawn into her lungs has touched the bodies of the dead, desires the only solution our present would seem to offer: freeze this water, force its entry into another, less mobile state. Our spectator's body becomes, involuntarily, the site of an artistic collaboration.

*Fin* (2002), a work by Margolles presented on the occasion of the closing of La Panadería, the celebrated Mexico City art space operated from 1994 until 2002 by the artist Yoshúa Okón – and I will soon have a chance to comment on his work – also employs water in order to convoke a gathering and yet more profoundly marks the finitude of its possibility. Here a cement truck backs up in front of the gallery door in order to pour a mixture of

1. See the catalogue published to accompany a PS1 exhibition curated by Klaus Biesenbach in Anthony Huberman et al, *Mexico City: An Exhibition about the Exchange Rates of Bodies and Values*, PS1 Contemporary Art Centre, Long Island City, New York, 2002.

cement and, again, the water used to wash corpses, onto the gallery floor. There is no way to write about these works without turning to a witness. ‘A gigantic truck,’ recalls Itala Schmelz,

... whose torso seems to twist and turn in strange ways, parked its behind at the building’s door and we saw its gooey contents, like a never-ending blob from a B-movie, spill out into the gallery. We backed away with increasing speed and astonishment.<sup>2</sup>

The work closes the gallery, burying it, an archive or a crypt, and forces the retreat of the spectator, effectively *producing* the gallery closure for which it was commissioned. The backing-up of the gathering renders the fragility of the public, its passivity, its fear of the death that haunts – effectively, imaginarily – the cityscape and consecrates its failed event, laying the foundations of what is already in ruins.

Finally, a 2003 project by Margolles, *En el aire*, also finds its basis in the water from washed corpses. As the title indicates, the work once again is a vector for the aerial dispersion of a deathly trace. Here, however, the work seems to realize a certain logic of immunity, for its precise vehicle is effectively a bubble, a field of bubbles that engages the play of the viewer. The bubble holds death at bay; but invites our playful touch. Compared with the mist of a vaporization or the ghostly admixture poured by a cement truck, there is a certain lack of mystery in the bubble; bubbles are clear, clean, light and airy. The bubble seems innocuous, resists contamination being both discretely contained and also made of soap; yet the bubble invites one to touch it, to pop it; a bubble not so discrete once its soapy residue is sticking to your skin. In the end, it is perhaps the spectator whose bubble is burst: touching this playful return to childhood, touching this future death, a memento mori in the shape of a globe.<sup>3</sup>

These works by Margolles would seem to be inscribed within the millennial trope of the ‘Mexican obsession with death’.<sup>4</sup> While such works might, indeed, owe something to such traditions (and let us say, only in accord with whatever understanding of such traditions that would not see them as millennial, metaphysical, or primal, but rather as an always-historical, culturally specific working-out of being and finitude), such a view would be highly reductive. Let us imagine, then, that they are a development of that now clichéd cultural trajectory, but let us also insist that they are something else. Each of the three works I have discussed turns on a kind of fundamental immateriality, a tracing of death, and the peculiar convocation of a public around that death, in a play of engagement and disgust, dashed hopes and thwarted expectations. The three works all refer implicitly to the horizon of a present crisis. Or we could say that the works refer extra-discursively to their moment, for perhaps there is nothing implicit in this reference – as the title of Margolles’ installation at the 53rd Venice Biennale puts it: ‘¿De qué otra cosa podríamos hablar?’ (‘What else could we talk about?’). The work thus attends both to Mexico’s present crisis as well as to a host of contemporary preoccupations surrounding the art-object in relation to the community it convenes or demands, whose rethinking is the occasion for its very production: these works are about the finitude that haunts our lives and our being together, and they are about the fear of touching.

Touching; being together is a kind of touching – to work together, shoulder to shoulder on the line, or to engage one another in combat,

2. Itala Schmelz, ‘Transfiguration’, in Alex Dorfsman and Yoshua Okón, eds, *La Panadería: 1994–2002*, Turner, Mexico, 2005, pp 272–273

3. Rubén Gallo writes of the memento mori in the context of another, now painfully relevant, work by Margolles, *Cards for Cutting Cocaine* (1998), in which the artist provided partygoers with cards, each containing a photograph of someone killed in drug-related violence. See Rubén Gallo, *New Tendencies in Mexican Art: The 1990s*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2004, pp 121–123.

4. Amy Sara Carroll critically notes that such readings are both reductive and trivializing. See Amy Sara Carroll, ‘Muerte Sin Fin: Teresa Margolles’s Gendered States of Exception’, *TDR: The Drama Review*, vol 54, no 2, summer 2010, p 104. Claudio Lomnitz, for his part, has authored a compendious anthropological study of Mexican deathways, in which, as Carroll notes, he cites Margolles’ work in what she characterizes as a ‘wonderfully dismissive’ fashion (ibid, p 122). See Claudio Lomnitz-Adler, *Death and the Idea of Mexico*, Zone, New York, 2005, p 25.

or perhaps even in the indifferent brush against the coat of the other, we are touching, in a way. Touching creates a literal sense of community that recalls the way that Aristotle spoke of the parameters of a community being the very limit of the human voice's audibility. Democracy is delimited by who can be heard and what is within reach. Beyond that point we need the tyranny of political representation. Politics becomes a mapping of what lies beyond the audible voice, or retranslating back to touch, a mapping of the tactile relation between entities and those who represent them or claim to do so.

Touch stands also as a possible condition for what has been called the 'community of sense' – community understood now as a place of retreat from representative relations, as a return to the very sensory and affective contacts that would ground being together in less abstract and symbolic forms. Today conceived around particular aesthetic and political reconfigurations of the world, I propose that touching is a sign for our being together, whether that being together is antagonistic or not. (Or perhaps *because* it is always, *sometimes*, antagonistic.) In touching we are not immune to the touch of the other. In language we put touching into words, the 'merely' symbolic reckoning of the vicissitudes of our togetherness or apartness. The sensible world 'merely' touches language. This 'community of sense', however, as the laboratory for the point-of-touch between contemporary art and politics, posits, through this touching, through the linking of the plastic and the conceptual, the overcoming of the plastic arts' 'merely' symbolic intervention, at the same time winning for political thought its possibility beyond thought, beyond politics.

Here, then, I propose to consider some of the 'haptic' and literally sensual procedures of postconceptual work that might suggest a new way of thinking the politics of the aesthetic today beyond the limitations – by now widely known and well theorized – of so-called 'relational aesthetics'. I do so in the context of what I want to designate – however provisionally, modestly, and in the spirit of both the aesthetic and also political experimentation that is at stake in the works that interest me here – as the 'Mesoamerican war', by which I understand the devastating forms of an organized violence that extend from the US–Mexico border to parts of Central America, in both its criminal and redemptive forms. While my aim here is not to convince anyone that there is, strictly speaking, a single war raging in so-called Mesoamerica, but rather to think this violence on a regional scale, it might be useful to recall that Mesoamerica shares a common legacy of crushed or corrupted revolutionary popular states, US neocolonialism, left armed struggle and narco-terror. That shared situation as a common project for political thought and aesthetic practice should be understood as the horizon of the pages that follow.

### **POSTPOLITICS OF THE RELATION**

There is a certain groundlessness that inflects such questions, in both the sphere of art and the sphere of politics. We have long perceived the tendential dematerialization of the art object as a revocation of the very materiality that had defined it against the other arts (literature, music,



*Octopus*, 2011, four channel video, installation view, Hammer Museum, photo: courtesy the artist

cinema). At the same time we continue to face the question, in increasingly critical forms: what is to be the object of political thinking today? Without the state as the sovereign figure that might organize such reflection and lacking any critical endpoint but the vague signifier ‘emancipation’, what, precisely – or imprecisely – are we talking about? But, to quote Margolles, what else *could* we talk about? Here I hope to address the way that politics and aesthetics *touch* today, in Mexico. A host of recent interventions, critical as well as creative, have sought to understand the place of Latin American art and politics once they have been unmoored from the function assigned to them by an incipient modernity, understood as the restitution of the violence of conquest and the consolidation of a socially (and perhaps economically) equitable state of affairs, the construction of the ‘people’ as the horizon of a common politics. While, to be sure, Latin American art and politics have not always, nor in their totality, fulfilled a duty to pursue such a justice – and very few would argue the case – this role or duty has been the horizon of their appearance. In a sense one could call this work propaganda art without the shelter of the party; lacking this ground, it must become its own site of politics and the organization thereof.

*Octopus* (known also as *Pulpo*, 2011) is a recent work by the Mexican artist Yoshua Okón (born Mexico City, 1970), who is both a product of and reaction to the ‘relational’ scene that characterized the 1990s and early 2000s. In *Octopus*, produced for the Hammer Museum’s Artist Residency Program and exhibited at their Los Angeles museum (13 August 2011–6 November 2011), the artist explores the aftermath of the Guatemalan civil war – itself a tragic episode of this end (or

this end of the end) – by staging a re-enactment of that war by its former combatants in a Los Angeles parking lot. While his own suggestion for reading the work would have the spectator adopt its supposedly ‘depoliticized’ gaze, I mean to argue for the contrary: the work stages an attack on precisely the apolitical ‘relationality’ that would *guarantee* its depoliticization; in this sense what Okón means by ‘depoliticized’ is simply that the work refuses to repeat a series of truths about Central America and the United States’ engagements there, truths that one hopes are by now recognized by all – by even the very criminals who perpetrated the atrocities. Put otherwise, the work avoids averring a moral judgement on what – unless we are genocidal monsters – we should all agree is bad. But this refusal to reaffirm the immorality of genocide should not be interpreted as a rejection of morality as such; it should rather be seen as a rejection of the relational politics that administer and police the political with their prescribed analyses that usurp and foreclose the space of what I wish to argue are true politics: the politics of disruption. Okón may consider his work ‘depoliticized’ because it refuses to collaborate with the tyranny of prescribed political representation; yet, the politics to which it bears witness – the politics on which it turns its so-called ‘depoliticized gaze’ – while not precisely designated, nor expressed in positive terms, are the radical politics whose seeming irrelevance is expressed symptomatically by the relational turn. Okón’s piece calls attention precisely to the foreclosure of ‘radicality’ and also ‘universalizable hope’ presaged by a relational turn that implicitly bears the adjective ‘neoliberal’.<sup>5</sup> This denunciation of meaninglessness is properly politics, understood as not the calculated administration or policing of the social, but as its disruption.

A comparison might serve by way of highlighting the very contemporary nature of the works I am trying to understand here, which is to say, not only their ‘post-1960s’ inscription, but their attempts to renew both politics and art in light of that inscription, which I understand not in terms of a failure or defeat, but more importantly as the renunciation of political and aesthetic experimentation in the most radically hypothetical mode possible. To understand that conjuncture, then, I move to another installation, the Polyforum Cultural Siqueiros, at the site of the Mexico City World Trade Centre (the intended site of the Hotel de México). Its surfaces are covered with David Alfaro Siqueiros’ murals. The most significant among them, his sublime, vaginal *La Marcha de la Humanidad* (*The March of Humanity*), a monument to the mestizo future (the people to come) covers the ceiling and walls at the top of the forum, making it the world’s largest mural.<sup>6</sup> The work, truly the site of a reproduction, figures the history of all human civilization, opening onto its future. This total representation, a complete projected itinerary, as well as the (never finished) site upon which it was built, the Hotel de México, suggest the fate today of linking art with politics.

Intended to be a monument to Mexico’s achieved modernity, the project was supposed to have been completed by 1968, in time for the Summer Olympics in Mexico City. However, the hotel was never finished and remained in a state of incompleteness and disuse (apart from the Polyforum, where concerts were held) until the early 1990s, when it became Mexico’s World Trade Centre. Siqueiros’ mural remains the last such piece produced, finished in 1971, long after the end of the principal

5. Alain Badiou, *The Century*, Alberto Toscano, trans, Polity, Cambridge, 2007, p 172

6. Mestizo subjectivity is understood as a form of fictive ethnicity that projected the symbolic overcoming of the deep racial, cultural and class differences that haunted Mexico’s development from its foundation in the sixteenth-century Spanish conquest.

phases of Mexican muralism. It remains a monument to the crisis of any stable transit between an art scene and its link to its horizon or world, understood here as the project of Mexican modernity. Without this horizon, we face a time of crisis, of transition, of waiting and preparation. (For how can we now read our Mesoamerican present?) In this time, we can only ask: what will happen? What future conditions will allow us to appreciate and understand our present and the artistic and political forms to which it gave birth?

I am not alone in suggesting that our present remains the crisis of the post-1960s period, understood on philosopher Peter Hallward's terms as 'the end of the last truly transformative sequence in world politics', and marked for him by the assassinations of Salvador Allende and Amílcar Cabral.<sup>7</sup> This crisis has its analogue in the arts. When post-1960s art has not been explicitly anti-political or a-political, contemporary collaborative practice has sought to involve the spectator in a determined social action in which to *practise* or *rehearse* what art historian Grant Kester calls an 'undetermined freedom', which I understand as a kind of freedom without grounds – a freedom whose secret adjective is 'neo-liberal' and which promises the boundless liberties of capital. According to the dominant trends of contemporary artistic production, as Kester critically observes, 'We cannot yet be trusted with the freedom that would result from a total revolution. Instead we must practise this freedom in the virtual space of the text or artwork, supervised by the poet or artist.'<sup>8</sup> The argument I wish to forward here, however, follows Hallward's suggestion that perhaps the 'end' is coming to an end. Perhaps, that is, 'the end of the last truly transformative sequence in world politics' is reaching its own conclusion and opening onto a new transformative sequence that will, like the one before it, propose again 'radicality' and 'universalizable hope'.<sup>9</sup> Margolles' exploration of our finitude, her insistence that we face the end that haunts our collective being, can perhaps even be read as an expression of the desire for the end of the end. Indeed, I want to explore here the ways in which art today might well be thinking the end of the end, the end of its own consideration of finitude, and beginning to imagine, however provisionally, accidentally and in truly improvised fashion, a politics that would deserve to be politics. In other words to think the question of touch, as a figure of a 'community of sense' is, as Beth Hinderliter et al put it,

...to particularize the meaning of community, to envision what community might mean after the fall of communism... Such a concept of community acknowledges politics to contain a sensuous or aesthetic aspect that is irreducible to ideology and idealization. This is the paradoxical core of the community of sense: that it works toward being-together only through a consistent dismantling of any idealized common ground, form, or figure.<sup>10</sup>

It thus becomes the artistic task to rethink being-in-common without common ground, to rethink the political without our traditional enemies or friends, to rethink struggle itself. The artistic task becomes the translation of the aesthetic laboratory – a trope so common to relational and collaborative arts – to the realm of political thought so that the aesthetic laboratory becomes the site for testing political hypotheses.

7. Peter Hallward, 'The Politics of Prescription', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol 104, no 4, fall 2005, p 769

8. Grant Kester, 'Lessons in Futility: Francis Alys and the Legacy of May '68', *Third Text* 99, vol 23, no 4, July 2009, p 412

9. Badiou, *op cit*, p 172

10. Beth Hinderliter, Vered Maimon et al, introduction to *Communities of Sense: Rethinking Aesthetics and Politics*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina 2009, p 2



‘Relational aesthetics’, aesthetics of a relation – the aestheticized, planned social encounter, to be documented and reproduced, is, as the art critic Nicolas Bourriaud writes, designed to produce a ‘specific sociability’, a work that suggests to us questions of the type: ‘Does this work permit me to enter into dialogue? Could I exist, and how, in the space it defines?’<sup>11</sup> Or to put it more critically: defer the question of politics to resolve the field of the political in the practised space of a social encounter. Such works, and Bourriaud’s characterization of them, while perhaps ground-breaking in their moment, betray, as Carlos Basualdo and Reinaldo Laddaga put it, ‘the early-nineties ethos of modesty, an instinctive refusal to engage in anything that could smell of Grand Politics’.<sup>12</sup> The resistance of relational art to its own collaboration with what Basualdo and Laddaga – themselves perhaps even a bit dismissively – call ‘Grand Politics’ is symptomatic of a certain ‘resigned surrender’.<sup>13</sup> These works – for example, those of Margolles – forge modest, precisely finite encounters always circumscribed by the violence that haunts our lives. These works tend to make visible the world as it already exists rather than imagining new possibilities.

11. Claire Bishop, ‘Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics’, *October* 110, autumn 2004, p 64
12. Carlos Basualdo and Reinaldo Laddaga, ‘Experimental Communities’, in *Communities of Sense*, op cit, p 204
13. Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis*, David Macey and Steve Corcoran, trans, Verso, London, 2010, p 1
14. Tania Ragasol, ‘A propósito’, in Ricardo Porrero, ed, *Código DF: Arte y cultura contemporáneos desde la ciudad de México*, Gobierno del Distrito Federal, Mexico City, 2010, p 90
15. Bishop identifies a similar tension at work in Santiago Sierra: ‘The work of Santiago Sierra (born in 1966), like that of Tiravanija, involves the literal setting-up of relations among people: the artist, the participants in his work, and the audience. But since the late 1990s Sierra’s “actions” have been organised around relations that are more complicated – and more controversial – than those produced by the artists associated with relational aesthetics.’ Bishop, op cit, p 70
16. I have in mind Margolles, the SEMEFO art collective, Santiago Sierra, and others. (SEMEFO stands for Servicio Médico Forense, or Forensic Medical Service.)

## FORMATIONS

Okón began his career in the arts stealing car stereos. The 1997 video *A propósito*, produced in collaboration with Miguel Calderón, presents a mixed-media video installation consisting of a sculpture of 120 stolen car stereos along with a looped video projection in which Okón documents Calderón’s theft of a car stereo.<sup>14</sup> This early work established the gesture of violent appropriation that is a defining characteristic of Okón’s oeuvre in general. Along these lines, and unlike the works of a major influence, the American artist Chris Burden, Okón rarely appears in these pieces, and usually only as an aleatory effect of the artist’s own seeming carelessness. Indeed, *A propósito* stands as a rare exception to the artist’s general absence from the work. (And here I mean the artist only in the generic sense, for the artist who steals the radio is Calderón and not Okón himself, who is filming.) Thus, also unlike Burden’s works, the violence at their centre never quite reaches the artist, who stands on the periphery of the very situation he himself sets in play, its witness.<sup>15</sup> The artist convokes a gathering, often of marginal figures or marginal feats, which he then retreats to encounter, to witness, often from what he himself has termed a ‘depoliticized’ vantage point. Associated initially with a certain mid to late-1990s Mexican art scene that operated out of the Panadería gallery that Okón curated in a building in the Colonia Condesa district of Mexico City, his early works turn on the ghastly scenes of violent appropriation that frequent much of the work produced in the period.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps for the seeming belatedness of *Octopus* – or rather its unexpected appearance, now – in its re-appropriation of the Guatemalan civil war as civil war re-enactment, I am tempted by John Welchman’s apt comparison to a work like the Israeli artist Omer Fast’s 2003 project *Spielberg’s List*, in which the artist travelled to Krakow to document the concentration camp that Steven Spielberg built as a set for his 1993 film, soliciting the testimonies of the locals who participated in its

production.<sup>17</sup> Okón, himself a Mexican of Jewish descent, navigated this history in a similar kind of work: *Bocanegra* (2007), a multi-channel four-part video installation, in which the artist ‘gained [the] trust’ of a group of Mexican Nazis in order to collaborate with them – a word with particularly ugly connotations in this context – in the filming of several uncomfortable orchestrated situations: their goose-stepping in uniform, their performing a ‘Sieg Heil’ salute, a film involving a character who becomes aroused by a portrait of Hitler, and their drunken weekly meeting. As the work’s catalogue put it: ‘6 months to earn the group’s trust, 1 day of filming, 1 extra day of filming for Masturbanführer, 20 hours of material.’<sup>18</sup> The Nazis wrote the script and acted in the work, which was then presented in Berlin. His 2006 *Gaza Stripper* comes closer still to *Octopus*. Prepared in Israel for an exhibition at the Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art, Okón’s preliminary trip to the country coincided with Israel’s unilateral disengagement from the Gaza Strip. While Okón sought to produce a site-specific work, he had also proclaimed his intention that the work nevertheless avoid reference to political conflict. The artist later stated that the ‘the degree of intensity caused by the opposition to such disengagement was impossible to avoid’.<sup>19</sup> In a relational turn, the piece centres on a volunteer stripper – a respondent to a classified ad, the only respondent, in effect – who dances on a peculiar wooden stage-sculpture to music heard only by him through his headphones. An orange ribbon – the symbol of the Israeli opposition to the disengagement plan – is tied to his penis.

The politics of this work, its connection to any history, the very justification for its otherwise potentially silly, trivializing and embarrassing unfolding is reduced to (reducible to) the name: *Gaza Stripper*, itself the trivializing registration of the location and historical moment in which it was produced. Such would also seem to be the case of *Octopus*, the metaphor used in Guatemala to signify the destructive and forceful grip of the United Fruit Company. In this respect it is worth making a final comparison with one more recent work from Okón’s oeuvre, the 2008 *Chille*, a re-enactment of the funeral of Augusto Pinochet involving sixty-two rough plaster sculptures, vaguely reminiscent of the terracotta army discovered in the tomb of the Chinese Emperor Qin Shi Huang. They were arranged in the gallery in a formation designed to ‘suggest’ the funeral march. ‘[I]n this series of sculptures’, notes the Chilean art historian Gonzalo Pedraza, ‘one does not “see” Pinochet; we only perceive his presence through a fragment of the curatorial text that is displayed at the gallery entrance’. ‘Might we say’, Pedraza continues, ‘...that the dictator is unrepresentable?’<sup>20</sup> We might say it, but we would probably be wrong, as the work itself seems to suggest. In another room the artist arranged the video projection of his own low-budget re-enactment of Pinochet’s funeral march, with a young woman playing the role of the dead dictator, who at certain points raises his arms to the shock and also the stupefaction of his mourners.<sup>21</sup> Pinochet is figured as a zombie, alive and dead, returning to raise his arms in Chilean history, the figure of its own present: both alive and dead. He is a zombie, but so are his mourners, whose surprise at his return from the dead always ends in stupefaction.

In these works we might trace our past century and thus encounter Okón’s rather idiosyncratic archive of the very crisis of the promise of

17. John C Welchman, ‘War and Peace (Volume II)’, in *Pulpo/Octopus*, Okón Studio and Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Art Matters, Mexico City, 2012, pp 27–28

18. Yoshua Okón, Chiara Arroyo Cella, Landucci, Mexico City, 2010, p 133

19. Yoshua Okón, ‘Gaza Stripper, 2006’, *Yoshua Okón/Works*, <http://yoshuaokon.com/ing/works/gazastrripper/text.html>

20. Gonzalo Pedraza, ‘Chille in Chile’, in Claudia Zaldívar, ed, *Chille*, exhibition catalogue, Galería Gabriela Mistral, Santiago, p 46

21. The video recalls Francis Alys’s 2000 work *Re-enactments*, which was filmed twice – one version apparently the original, the other an obvious television-style ‘re-enactment’ – with both versions projected simultaneously.



modernity, from the Second World War, to the 1967 war, to the fall of Popular Unity in Chile, to the horrors of Guatemala since 1960: without the solemnity we have come to expect, Okón *returns* to each possible scene of our resigned surrender, re-enacting the story of a failed collective being, allowing us to experiment (an experience) through this encounter, through this return, with what remains for our present.

### TOUCHING WAR

2011's *Octopus* is similarly a kind of re-enactment. In it, a decades-long civil war is played out in the parking lot of a Los Angeles Home Depot, California's Home Improvement Superstore. In the opening moments, a black T-shirted brigade of pseudo-soldiers, their hands holding imaginary weapons, manoeuvres among the cars. They are followed indirectly, on another screen of the four-channel video installation, by their white-shirted enemies, who pass before a Home Depot rental truck emblazoned with the pathetic personification: 'Rent me hourly at Home Depot'. Any first encounter with the piece cannot but read this moment of trivialization: white shirts against black, armies without name or weapon, commanded not by a cause but by their own servitude. Here we spy the slogan on the side of the rental pick-up truck (the kind offered to customers who cannot take their purchase home in their own automobiles), again: 'Rent me hourly'. The object announces its own rentability, just as the rentable men make their way across the screen. For these men, were they not at the disposal or disposition of Okón and his strange coordination, would likely be standing, waiting, like the truck, to work in place of their renter on some home improvement project. And in this sense they are, like us, the spectators: aesthetic experience, Okón's politico-aesthetic experiment, suspends our own waiting in order to stage – always through some novel accident – an unexpected world.

The piece takes advantage from the way in which, as Hinderliter et al put it: 'Aesthetic experience allows for "free play"; that is, for the suspension of oppositions between sensation and meaning, form and matter, activity and passivity.'<sup>22</sup> The invisible Mayan exiles are transformed into improbable protagonists; yet their protagonism is predicated on their own return to the very source of exile, the source of their contemporary invisibility, that is, the Guatemalan Civil War. *Octopus*'s relational moment would thus seem to be rooted in its reliance on the sociability of the actors convoked by the work and their relation to the space in which the action occurs. The artwork returns as a disruption of the scene of work itself – the megastore service economy as the site of labour in the post-Fordist world, as well as the disruption of the workday of the actors themselves, the most profound spectres of the scene of post-Fordist labour. Indeed, Okón was inspired to produce the work through two relational moments: the first, a home improvement project for his house in Los Angeles. In hiring these very men to help him complete the project at his residence, he learned of their history: Mayan men who fought with the guerrillas, others who were forced to fight with the government, all of them now exiled to a parking lot, moving again from post-Fordist violence to post-Fordist labour; the difference, while

22. Hinderliter et al, op cit, p 6



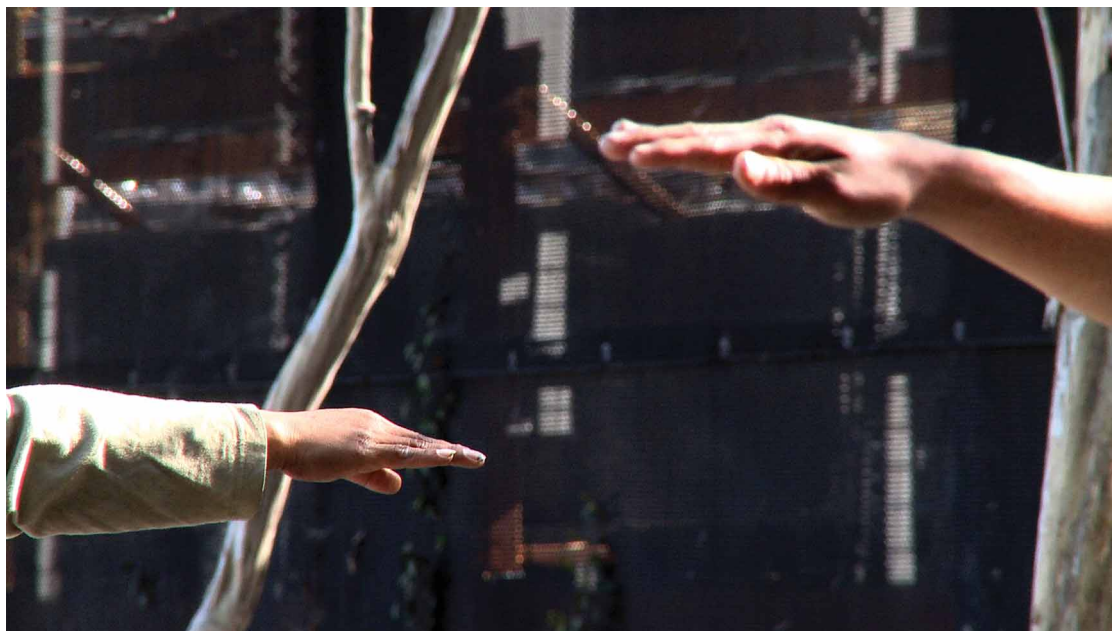
*Octopus*, 2011, courtesy the artist

dramatic, not as dramatic as one would hope. At the same time he happened to be reading his friend Francisco Goldman's book, *The Art of Political Murder*, on the slaying of the Guatemalan Bishop Juan José Gerardi Conedera, a conjuncture that suggested a work of this kind.<sup>23</sup> The work's primary witnesses – Home Depot shoppers – seem to re-create this very conjuncture; the work stages the re-enactment of its genesis. Many of the shoppers must be wondering 'Where are the day labourers?' as they are filmed walking by the unusual gathering of grown men acting out their deaths.

The video begins with quite ordinary images of a megastore car-park: vehicles entering and leaving, vehicles looking for a place to park, and people pushing shopping carts. Soon, however, black-shirted men manoeuvre across the blacktop of the car-park on their bellies, somersaulting or crouching. The position of their arms suggests that they are holding rifles – here only immaterial, invisible and imaginary. The black-shirted men seem to be pursued by other men in white shirts; these make similar movements between the lines of parked automobiles as they wage a certain low-key repetition of the war they all fled. They then engage in a playacted war. A bit like Margolles' bubbles, the work invites a playful return to childhood in its exploration of our present politico-aesthetic crisis.

It is precisely the unavoidability of Okón's selection of the site for this re-enactment that returns us to the nature of re-enactments as such. The nature of a re-enactment is compensatory: there was no camera there, in

23. Yoshua Okón, *Pulpo/Octopus*, op cit, p 42



*Octopus*, 2011, courtesy the artist

that place, for here we might also consider what Jacques Derrida calls the ‘taking place’ or having a place of the archive; maybe this work suggests itself also as a peculiar kind of archive, or an-archive, particularly in light of its partial origin in the story of Bishop Gerardi, murdered only days after the publication of the report written by the Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica project, *Guatemala: Nunca más (Guatemala: Never Again)*, 1998.<sup>24</sup>

It would seem that *Octopus* is not compensatory in this sense; it *seems* to lack the kind of site-specificity that would guarantee the stable transit between the vaguely titled work and the real events at its centre, a specificity that Okón’s other works more clearly offer, produced as they were in situ. The work re-enacts the civil war, but its name does not directly reference that war. Rather – in a partisan gesture, particularly in light of the putative de-politicization pursued by the artist – the work claims *Octopus* as the name of the war, as the horizon of war. In place of a proximity – without touching – on the edges of the authentic moment the work promises, Okón intercuts the re-enactment with what would appear to be a kind of Mayan ritual. *It would appear*, for the paratext provides little clue. The ritual stands as another uncertain authentication of the history and location suggested by the title. But the work is not about the *Octopus*, that is, the United Fruit Company; it is a war re-enactment.

Here, the subjects stand back to back – touching. They stretch their arms and spin in circles, back to back, hands still nearly touching as they move. The action breaks with the rhythm of the parking lot scenes – indeed, even the natural sound recorded here is different. Audible, finally, are the voices of the participants, the exiled ex-soldiers. They are speaking their own language (K’iche’); no subtitles are offered for

24. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Eric Prenowitz, trans, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1995, p 1

this most untranslatable moment of the work. And while I think we must read this as a kind of abstract performance piece within the civil war re-enactment, it remains yet a moment of the civil war re-enactment, for the men's arms are rifles (returning the metaphor for our prosthesis: metaphorical arms become arms, symbolically); they stand back to back, white shirt to black, and what they are uttering is finally the only truth of the work, its only reference to what happened: they are each uttering in a language few viewers would understand, without translation, their own bearing witness to the Guatemalan civil war; the piece no longer stands thus as the exploration of *our* Guatemalan civil war – US adventurism, displacement, informal labour – but as the testimony of untranslatable experience. In a revision of what seems to be the now colonial visuality of a film like *El Norte* (directed by Gregory Nava, 1983) – an early attempt to shed light on this world – Okón attempts to produce a different politics of the visual by rejecting the melodrama and moralism that might haunt our thinking of *the* Guatemalan civil war – ineffable, that experience. But no: never unrepresentable.

Yet without paratext, narration or language it seems difficult to engage with precisely what *is* represented here. Like the other 'depoliticized' readings of political events that Okón has undertaken, *Octopus* is only site-specific if we displace its connection to the history invoked by the paratext. That is to say, the work indeed is about an *Octopus* but most of all if we understand 'octopus' not only as the proper name of Central American exploitation but as the improper name of a figure of sovereignty (and perhaps the only kind of vague and multivalent figure that might be named).

As Ernesto 'Che' Guevara writes, in the correspondence that reveals yet another moment of his 'true' political subjectivation:

My life has been a sea of found resolutions until I bravely abandoned my baggage and, backpack on my shoulder, set out with el compañero García on the sinuous trail that has brought us here. Along the way, I had the opportunity to pass through the dominions of the United Fruit, convincing me once again of just how terrible the capitalist octopuses are. I have sworn before a picture of the old and mourned comrade Stalin that I won't rest until I see these capitalist octopuses annihilated. In Guatemala I will perfect myself and achieve what I need to be an authentic revolutionary.<sup>25</sup>

Even the figure of Guevara that we encounter here, referring to the octopus and to his own Central American War, must be partially ironic – the swearer of oaths to Stalin! – the inscription of another failed experiment in being-together even in its radical hope for Guatemala. But he is also right about the grip of the octopus, it seems.

Okón shows us how the world of the Guatemalan civil war touches that of the Guatemalans exiled to a parking lot, brought together by the grip of an octopus, no longer a metaphor for United Fruit, but rather the metaphor that designates the grounds of all human suffering and our being together on those grounds: sometimes as victims and sometimes as its collaborators (to return once more the most negative valence of the word 'collaborate' to the question of collaborative art). The octopus's grip establishes the touch of capital as the horizon of the supposed groundlessness to which art and politics both would seem to be resigned. And yet we are all drawn together in its embrace. This metaphor – haptic,

25. Quoted in Jon Lee Anderson, *Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life*, Grove, New York, 2010, pp 120–121

tactile – reasserts the octopus not as the origin of a particular conflict but as the horizon of ‘our’ modernity (but who are we to call it ours?): this truth – and not the untranslatable and personal truths of the Mayan men, spinning, back to back – is what Okón’s work can yet communicate to us, that is, unless what *Octopus* most desires is to unveil the most obvious truisms or callously mock the horrors of war and repression. (And I believe that it does not.) Rather, it bears witness to the grip of the octopus, its hold on our world (‘ours’ in the way that it must be), involuntarily, in a way that is ‘impossible to avoid’, as Okón put it in another context. *Octopus* bears witness not to the war that it appears to trivialize but to the horizon of that war and suffering: history itself as the history of capital, conquest, coloniality. This titular reference – *Octopus* – revokes the surrender inscribed within it and calls for the return of a war – perhaps on other terms, yet to be strategized, but war. The work – our work, if we accept our interpellation by its most radical and *collaborative* moment – is an oath; an oath for politics and also for art (against sociability and culture); an oath to – elsewhere, anywhere – inaugurate or re-inaugurate our war against the Octopus, to produce and improvise a renewed, hypothetical political experiment.

---

I take this chance to thank Yoshua Okón for many interesting conversations about his and other artists’ works and for the clarifications he has offered regarding his work in general and *Octopus* in particular. I would also like to express my gratitude to Alberto Moreiras for his invitation to read an early version of this material at Texas A&M University.

---