

A Dark Play

By Andrew Berardini

Every sin is the result of a collaboration.

Lucius Annaeus Seneca

Collaborator. You can almost hear it hurled like an insult, tossed at the accused like a rotten egg, a Molotov cocktail, a paving stone. *Collaborator.* I picture the *tondues*, the French women whose punishment for consorting with Nazi soldiers was to be marched through the streets with shaved heads. A few bore their fate with deadened stoicism; many more wept in abject humiliation. Looking at the photographs, the actors—*tondues* and *tondeurs*, shaven and shavers—seem to be performing a debased pantomime for the camera: the crowd happily jeers, more than a few of them likely hiding their own guilt behind the public persecution of an easy target, while the behavior of many of the women strikes me as a theatrical personification of shame that responds to the crowds' expectations.

When an occupying country wins a war, collaborators become heroes. Sacagawea, the Shoshone wife of a Quebecois trapper who accompanied the famed Lewis and Clark expedition, has become one of the most celebrated women in American history, whose champions include Native Americans and feminists. She helped the Americans claim the prize they had recently purchased from a bankrupt Napoleon. If the war against the natives had gone the other way, she might be remembered as another Benedict Arnold; instead, her face graces the one-dollar coin. Most other American coins feature white men.

Collaborator. Nowadays, with the fall of Berlin a distant, dying memory, and the Indian Wars a footnote to the American conquest and seeming inevitability of Manifest Destiny, the word “collaborator” sounds like a good thing, heartfelt and diffuse, decentralized, and egalitarian, a touchstone for communes and community projects. For artists who work together, it means an equal partnership. For the safer, softer side of collaboration, examples abound: progressive utopian communities like the ones that dotted the northeastern United States during the nineteenth century, the Paris Commune of 1848, grassroots community development projects across the modern world—the list could go on and on.

Like all words with multiple meanings, the truth is that the word “collaborator” contains both good and evil: on the one hand, the seemingly traitorous services rendered

by members of an occupied people for their occupiers and, on the other, a working partnership between equals. In both, the collaborators yield some power, autonomy, and benefit to the other; resources are somehow shared; roles are performed in tandem. The French prostitutes who served the German army, unlike many of their compatriots, did not go hungry. As German writer Ernst Jünger observed from the luxury of the Tour d'Argent restaurant in Paris—and the safety of his position as an administrative officer for the Nazis—, “food is power,” which is to say that collaboration is more complicated than it may appear.

The Wikipedia entry for “collaborators”—Wikipedia itself is a “collaboration” with somewhat dubious truth-telling—mentions several utopian experiments. The Oneida colony, one of many communes in upstate New York during the nineteenth century, was one such experiment. The Oneidans' egalitarian principals included sexual initiation for teenagers by older members of the community, which in the case of founder John Humphrey Noyes meant having his way with his thirteen-year-old niece.

Collaborators—also called “collaborationists”—are not simply traitors to be purged, nor are the good, egalitarian-seeming collaborators entirely free from the stain of exploitation of one kind or another. The term is muddy. Working together implies certain costs.

Though we all accept the artistic product of a group of musicians as a natural and desirable whole, sole authorship has long been the rule in the visual arts and especially the art market. Until recently, that is. In the art world, collaboration has become a watchword. The term “collaboration” has come to refer to an arrangement in which artists become co-conspirators with their subjects and their audience.

In the end, what separates this kind of collaboration from mere participation? What does it mean to work together, especially after a couple of generations of artists have tried to involve us, the audience, in the making of the work, and some of them have even declared that we (“we” again) are their collaborators? Two distinct problems arise: the community being subsumed by the artist and the artist being subsumed by the community, both producing ineffectual gestures that never quite gel in the modes of contradictions, subtleties, and disharmony that define art.

The work of Yoshua Okón—his many actions, gestures, installations, and videos—is clearly the work of a collaborator in all the complex senses of the word. Mexico-born Okón is neither an Oneidan nor a French hooker, but in each of his projects he plays, ambiguously, dangerously, and humorously with the exchange of power and the act of working with others that falls under the broad definition of “collaboration.” The non-actors who participate in his videos often become tongue-in-cheek exploiters of their own myths and our expectations of them, whether they are poor trailer-parkers in the desert exurb of Joshua Tree or a group of contradictory Nazis with stumbling goose steps marching through Mexico City. If the concept of collaborator is explored honestly in all its complex definitions, as Okón does, then the results are both potently poetical and highly discomfiting.

As Magali Arriola wrote about Okón in *Bidoun* magazine (Spring 2007)...

In his practice, Okón engages in a close collaboration with his subject-actors—mostly ordinary people leading ordinary lives—underscoring the fact that we represent ourselves as open constructs on a daily basis. His videos and installations are thus located somewhere between staged reality and everyday fiction, seeing to dislocate existing social types and the cultural archetypes they continuously reenact.

But for Okón the collaboration (with all its messiness) doesn't stop at the borders of the frame or the walls of the gallery: the collaboration includes us. We are not allowed the simple voyeurism of the average consumer of images. The works involve us, our relationship to power and history, our expectations, and prejudices. Our discomfort, always subtle, becomes our contribution as viewers to the collaboration in the ethical and political transaction that occurs. Everybody, ourselves included, is implicated.

This may sound a bit... dark. It is, but these transactions are not without humor. In *Bocanegra* (2007), a quartet of video installations, the cast of characters performs as themselves, seriously in most cases, and less seriously in a teleplay that one of the subjects writes and directs. The title, *Bocanegra*, refers to the name of a street in Mexico City where a regular meeting of modern Nazis—history buffs, would-be national socialists, fetishists, and hobbyists—is held. Incidentally, the street is named after Francisco González Bocanegra, who wrote the lyrics of the Mexican National Anthem—including the memorable line, “War, war! Take the national pennants and soak them in waves of blood”.

The four works that make up *Bocanegra* are called “The Movie,” “The Gathering,” “The Salute,” and “A Walk in the Park.” Each video-work marks a different aspect of Yoshua Okón's collaboration with the Bocanegrans, who invited him into their world after he befriended them. A gang of Nazis might seem a supercharged subject, but Okón's handling of it unlocks all the ambiguities and narrative potential without ever drifting into the anthropological. He achieves this by inserting his subjects into dark, playful fictions and performances that really fuck with us as spectators and pose deeper questions of spectatorship.

There are two works that show the Bocanegrans performing—or attempting to perform—their own roles as Nazis seriously, “A Walk in the Park” and “The Salute.” The first piece, “A Walk in the Park,” consists of five monitors positioned in the center of a room in the shape of a pentagon that show the Bocanegrans marching through the streets of Mexico City, the leader calling out the steps in German, a huge bright-red banner with a swastika proudly emblazoned on a round white field. The men are all assembled in a hodgepodge of World War II-era uniforms, with no hierarchical or functional reason why one Bocanegran should be dressed as a foot soldier and another as an SS officer. Their circular march through the mostly empty park seems the strangest of gestures in Mexico City in 2008, when the film was made. In the U.S. (where I and sometimes Okón live), Nazism has a particular resonance, not only because of American involvement in World

War II, but also because of the large Jewish population in the U.S. and the role that neo-Nazis have played in shaping the national conversation. The American collective memory includes events like the ACLU lawsuit over a Nazi march through Skokie, Illinois. American neo-Nazis are obtrusive reminders of the racism that has been the driving force behind much of our history.

But in Mexico, a country with little involvement in the Second World War and with a slim Jewish population (Okón amongst them), the Bocanegrans look more like escapees from an insane asylum than they do a dangerous gang of subversives. This may be my own cultural transference talking—I won't deny it. But the reaction to their march seems muted: no one seems to pay much attention to their antics.

The march of the Bocanegrans is trapped in a never-ending loop across the five screens, forever circling in a sort of Dantesque poetic justice. In his website, Okón notes that one way to read “A Walk in the Park” is as an “antithesis to the heroized sublimity of Leni Riefenstahl's 1936 *Triumph of the Will*.” Instead of butch Aryans in art-directed costumes and carefully choreographed militarist Busby Berkeley routines, we have this ragtag group of multicolored Mexicans, aged, often overweight, in ill-fitting clothes, carrying the banner of an organization that would almost certainly reject them as members. Their seriousness (or perceived seriousness at the very least) stands in stark contrast to their motley appearance.

This tragicomic performance of their roles as proud Nazis is underlined in “The Salute,” seven ten-inch monitors placed on the floor and playing simultaneously, where all the members give the camera the familiar Nazi salute—chest thump followed by right arm straightened and inclined upward, with the hand open and palm down—, adding their own little flourishes—an occasional *Sieg Heil!* or *Heil Hitler!* and clicking bootheels. As in their march, their attempts at looking really serious end up looking really silly, but Okón's take on the Bocanegrans isn't all sad jokes at the expense of easy targets. Okón takes them as seriously as they take themselves. The Bocanegrans understand the comical side of their story and are willing to explore it with Okón as their collaborator.

The central work of *Bocanegra* is *The Movie*, written and directed by Manolo, a member of the group, and produced by Okón. The resulting short movie, played on a monitor and titled *Masturbanführer*, is about a character (Ejaculhector) who is so intensely aroused at the mere sight of Nazi paraphernalia and Hitler's portrait that he can't help but climax every time he sees either.

Hilarity ensues.

This work touches on some of the central themes of Okón's work, especially in regards to his collaborations. The work is not pure fiction. At one point, one of the Bocanegrans turns to the camera in exasperation and declares he isn't acting anymore. This tension between the facts and fictional stereotypes of this subculture creates gaps in meaning that Okón deftly utilizes. Manolo has a basic grasp of the gritty, sexy underpinnings of Nazism and his own risqué relationship to “fascinating fascism.” But the whole exercise is more John Waters than Susan Sontag, a schlocky rib-tickler made with subject-actors.

In the fourth work of the *Bocanegra* series, the group meets after its march to celebrate and talk. The members' ideas turn out to be as contradictory and disorganized as their march was.

A few choice quotes:

"The Aztecs are the Aryan race!"

"They didn't mix with the Olmecs or any other race."

"Being Aryan means respecting your race."

"As long as you don't make the mistake of mixing your race, you're Aryan."

"It doesn't matter if they're dark, it doesn't matter if they're assholes, it doesn't matter if they like soccer or if they're highly cultured."

"If you separate a people and make a race, that's even better; that's Aryan."

"Oaxacans are Aryans!"

"To simply say, 'Yes, I'm a National-Socialist' doesn't mean that you are fighting for Germany but rather that you respect your nation, which in this case is Mexico."

Again, fiction and fact are jumbled: the Bocanegrans are all attracted to Nazism for different, often contradictory reasons, endowing the German political movement and their crackpot ideas with all kinds of outlandish, debased meanings. But throughout all these performances, the actors know very well that they're being filmed and, in fact, as in "The Movie," very actively collaborate. All cameras elicit some kind of self-aware response from their subjects. But this is more than that. There is no objective eye here—no anthropologists in the midst, no distant academic or fetishizing subcultural tourism. Well, maybe a little, but only because all collaborations are impure. But if there's any taint, it's readily subsumed in the active and collaborative awareness of the Bocanegrans. They come off as mildly and sweetly gullible guys, who just happen to be Nazis.

The kind of participation that the Bocanegrans have in their representation is different from many of the other varieties of participatory art-making that seem to litter contemporary practice. For a recent Allan Kaprow retrospective in Los Angeles, someone came up with the bright idea of mounting a series of recreations of the artist's famous happenings. In these scripted simulations, restaging Kaprow's actions with a modicum of historical accuracy led to a number of problems. Kaprow himself would likely have snubbed the projects, which were mounted anyway, though many of those involved ended up feeling like bit players eclipsed by the myth of the individual artist. None of their names, talents, attributes, or individual identities were taken into consideration. The monument to the dead artist overshadowed everything and everybody.

This is often the case with participatory art. I wonder if those who sat at Thai artist and relational aestheticist Rirkrit Tiravanija's table during his now-legendary exhibition at 303 gallery, *Untitled 1992 (Free)*, left the event feeling that there's no such thing as a free lunch. The performance involved the Thai artist (or a stand-in) making and serving Thai food. The artwork consisted in the interactions of those who came to the gallery to nosh.

As Jerry Saltz notes in 2007 in a review of the recreation of the piece: "Back then it was disconcerting and thrilling to be this casual in an art gallery, to go from being a passive viewer to an active participant, and doing it all for free." But Saltz later notes that when those who had been outside the system not only became part of the system but members of the academy, the thrill was gone. But for Tiravanija and the ossified remake of Kaprow's happenings in Los Angeles, the participation is always secondary to the ego of the artist. Sometimes such problematic aspects are built into the system of relation. Dave Muller's *Three Day Weekend* always listed the participants in these curated exhibitions and performances. Participants were an extension of the artist's practice, to be sure, but they were never anything less than co-authors.

The "free lunch" at 303 helped pave the way for Tiravanija to make a lot of money in the contemporary art trade and subsequently to produce more "relational" shows, such as the one in 2007 at the commercial 1301PE Gallery in Los Angeles of his "Demonstration Drawings"—though it has been shown elsewhere, including The Drawing Center in New York. The drawings, taken from photos of protests published in the *International Herald Tribune*, were farmed out to nameless Thai artists who slavishly copied them in pencil. For its installation in Los Angeles, Tiravanija never showed up to install the work or to attend the opening. I'm not sure what exactly Tiravanija did, except to place the collective under his name in an act that many critics—including myself, in an article titled "Everything is Tiravanija's, But It's Also Yours" in the spring 2007 issue of X-TRA—noted with a frisson of suspicion.

These are just two of many examples, which range from other relational aestheticists to Superflex to Oda Projesi to Jeremy Deller—and on and on. How conscious of our participation/collaboration are we? When we become a part of the art, how much of us is left over? Art-making through collaboration implies a complex set of considerations that ought not to be ignored, not even in the opposite direction, where the essential aspect of aesthetic quality tends to get lost in the good intentions of community activism.

Community-art projects abound. Indeed, a cottage industry has emerged from the phenomenon, giving rise to a bland version of liberal bureaucracy. Though difficult to hate because their stated goals seem anodyne enough (helping communities, etc.), these collaborations that fall under the rubric of community art generally succeed in turning artists into bureaucrats where other bureaucrats have failed. I'm not here to dictate what is and is not art, but what I recognize as art has a different purpose and meaning than these kinds of practices.

As Claire Bishop wrote in her response to Grant Kester's letter attacking her landmark essay "Collaboration and Its Discontents" (all three appeared in the pages of *Artforum* between February and May 2006):

Without artistic gestures that shuttle between sense and nonsense, that recalibrate our perception, that allow multiple interpretations, that factor the problem of documentation/presentation into each project, and that have a life beyond an immediate social

goal, we are left with pleasantly innocuous art. Not non-art, just bland art—and that easily compensates for inadequate governmental policies.

The “art” gets lost in the demands of the “community,” and often neither profits from the experience. Seriously moved by a heartfelt call to service, the artist often gets consumed by the desire to help, and the art—a wonderfully useless impulse of the imagination—gets consumed by the community, if only because there is nothing else to eat. Not all community projects get lost in bureaucracy or degenerate into bad art (or the more accurate “bland art” that Bishop describes), but it seems to me that far too many of them end up falling into one of these categories.

Community art or community-based art practices and programs became fashionable, fell out of favor, and are now back in vogue. A whole new wave of academic departments, residencies, institutions and awards have emerged in recent years under the banner of “art for social change,” which once again makes this kind of practice a part of the debates surrounding art. The work of Yoshua Okón flirts with the issues that are at the heart of this debate.

Okón’s work is not the touchy-feely experience-making of relational aesthetics, a defanged ‘60s flashback, community-art project where polite politics take precedent over aesthetics, but rather an almost uncomfortably participatory, even dangerous documentary fiction. A lot to unpack there, for sure, but his engagement is one that never drops into cynicism, either. He “documents” situations in the sense that he captures them on film: there is a camera and he’s often behind it, but his intervention, in conjunction with his collaborators, happily enacts fictions about themselves in order to better challenge the fictions that govern our prejudices.

His collaborations have none of the pieties of much of what falls under the broad umbrella of collaboration, laundry-listed by Bishop in her original article, “The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents” (*Artforum*, February 2006): “socially engaged art, community-based art, experimental communities, dialogic art, littoral art, participatory, interventionist, research-based, or collaborative art.” Rather than joining the self-righteous cavalcade of socially engaged art—as Bishop writes about other artists, but I feel is applicable here—, Okón “joins a tradition of highly authored situations that fuse social reality with carefully calculated artifice.” Rather than making us feel good about his social collaboration, the artist and his collaborators turns around and delivers our preconceived notions back to us as a very dark kind of comedy, where the jokes and pantomimes made by the community show them playing with their own negative stereotypes.

In 2008, for his participation in High Desert Test Sites, Okón collaborated on the project *White Russians* with the Akién family and the denizens of Wonder Valley, California, a fantastically named place on the edge of Los Angeles inhabited mostly by the hardscrabble desert poor. The coterie of art-goers who came cycling in and out throughout the performance were handed a White Russian, Diane Akién’s favorite drink. Every twenty minutes, the family performed a set of actions developed collaboratively with Okón, such as singing

country songs and, for the grand finale, staging a fight where Okón and the other interlopers get booted out of the house.

One of the fundamental aspects of this action is not only the collaboration between Okón and the Akiéns in developing the work, but also the forced collaboration of the audience in realizing the performance in the awkward intimacy of the Akiéns’ home. In the video documentation of the performance, some audience members placidly refuse to be anything other than passive observers, others seem to engage in the performance willingly, and in the end all are forced to play a part when the family kicks them out.

All the stereotypes about the rural desert poor come into play here. Indeed, these often derogatory and preconceived notions become ripe for pantomime. The Wonder Valley collaborators use them to confront the audience. But when seen performed again and again, the confrontation becomes comedy, though a somewhat dangerous variety. Like *Bocanegra*, there’s a disconnect between when the participants are acting and when they are not. The audience can’t always tell the difference, and even active participants can lose sight of the boundary lines. The fluidity between fiction and reality becomes a part of the collaboration, exposing the cracks and fissures in the role of the artist and his participants, whatever our preconceived notions of them may be. The spectators become involved in the spectacle, the spectacle influences their experience of being ogled and reclaims the weak end of being watched to make the viewers themselves the spectacle. It becomes dangerous as a kind of social interplay when reality and fiction disappears even for the Akién family, to the point in *White Russians* that the drama feels all too real and the art becomes challenging even for them.

One mode of participation in art-making—the oldest—is the simple act of looking. Laura Mulvey (especially in her widely anthologized 1975 text “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”) and others have attributed more power to the gaze than that of passive watcher. In this and other installations, the passive viewer’s observation of the static work of art is jarringly interrupted. The pleasure and politics of looking become as much a part of the piece as any action. The artist has activated his subjects so that they cease to be an object to be passively gazed at. The Akiéns’ home becomes the nexus where an audience activates the piece. Watching the video installation of the performance, the awkward turns and uncomfortable participation of the viewers becomes the subject.

Though this and other works have political overtones, Okón’s approach to art-making is grounded in offbeat political realities (including those of places he travels to), but does not address these problems like a politician or an activist would, but (obvious though it may sound) as an artist. So much art that projects itself into the political dialogue or community participation does so not by using the tools of art, but by using the tools of politics. The meaning of art is by its very nature slippery; it is meant to pose questions, not provide answers. Art, at least in my opinion, is meant to provoke participation from the viewer, but the provoked actions (if the art is intellectually honest) is not to promote you to vote for one political party or another or to impose a set of *idées reçues* about community activism, but to explore the ambiguities of the process. The preceding responsibility,

however, belongs to another potent area of image-making: propaganda. The action is meant to be ambiguous.

Art challenges our notions about what normalcy is and can be. Even in the most highly aestheticized version of art, the cult of pure beauty, the purpose of art, as Oscar Wilde notes at the end of his introduction to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, is to be “useless.” A chair gives you somewhere to sit, whether comfortably or not, and propaganda convinces people to support (or at the very least, fear) a given apparatus of power, but meaning serves no practical purpose. When collaboration is considered an aspect of art, its utopian modes fall away. What’s left are the holes and gaps in meaning of what it actually means to work with others, especially those that happily hack their own stereotypes, exploiting their own exploitations.

In *Hipnostasis* (2009), a collaboration that could easily have been about homeless outreach, a sanctimonious and censorious act of helping a handful of beach bums, instead turned into something that is much more interesting and challenging. In this work, Okón teamed up with artist Raymond Pettibon to mount a project that I curated at the Armory Center for the Arts in Pasadena. Echoing both Pettibon’s *Weatherman ‘69* (1989-1990) and Okón’s *Lago Bolsena* (2004) and *Bocanegra* (2007), this video installation explored the subculture of old hippies and beach bums living on Venice Beach. The video installation featured men who in some cases have been living on the beach for more than 30 years, forming a tightly-knit alternative community that, despite its lack of functionality and isolation from mainstream reality, thrives and survives on its own terms.

The inspiration behind the piece comes from the past-life therapist that Okón and Pettibon visited together, who told the artists that one of them had been the leader of a hippie cult in a past life. This led them to seek out the group of men and start working with them. The six-channel video installation, mounted on three panels, features what seem like the desperate scrawls of lost men, the kind of men one finds in ditches and tunnels. The words and phrases (“Swami X” and “Synanon,” as well as the title of the work, *Hipnostasis*), written by Pettibon, serve as poetic touchstones of the time. *Hipnostasis* is a portmanteau that combines “hippies,” “hypnosis,” and “hypostasis,” which in medicine is the pooling of bodily fluids in the lower extremities after death, and in philosophy refers to the underlying reality, as opposed to attributes that lack substance. The video follows six worn men with leathery tans and knotty beards and hair quietly eating meat on some rocks near the sea. The men are drawn from a group of beach bums that have been scratching out an existence in the once-vibrant hippie haven of Venice.

In earlier videos, Pettibon told irreverent stories of the radical counterculture of the ‘60s, of which these men are relics. The nonlinear films create a sense of timelessness, a purgatorial forever that the subjects permanently inhabit. A piece by each of the artists flanked the installation of *Hipnostasis*. From an ongoing series by Pettibon called *Tombstones* (2009), there is a wall of pages torn from books by writers of boys’ stories: Lawrence Sterne, Jack Kerouac, Rudyard Kipling and, seemingly in the center of the installation, Samuel Beckett. Beckett’s *Malone Dies* is the tale of an old man lying in bed, naked and dying, his

consciousness disintegrating. “Nothing is more real than nothing,” writes Beckett. These old men on the rocks seem to be caught in the same layer, between reality and disintegration, as the narrator of Beckett’s novel. Pettibon and Okón have often used their subjects in confrontations with the artist or audience, and in this case the subjects, the beach bums, fully understand their position in the world as the last dreamers of a dying breed, and thus Okón’s classic connection with his subjects persists. They knew how others perceive them when they developed their roles with Okón and Pettibon. Across from Pettibon’s *Tombstones*, Okón installed a giant plaster sculpture in the shape of an upright beehive tomb. Projecting from its top were the flickering words “Dead End” receding ever upward, suggesting that these men are caught in a dead end or, like Malone, are perpetually caught in the hellish half-light of consciousness, never obtaining the relief for which Beckett’s characters always seem to yearn.

Even the collaboration between the artists represents another strange adaptation of the concept of collaboration, since their collaboration extends to the beach bums, who actively experimented with their own representation. There is a circulating exchange of power, between the older artist and the younger artist and their beach bum collaborators, who tarry, seemingly forever, on the beach. And the fiction that is at play here—which is both a tool and an attack on power—is not only the social fiction that Okón has engaged with in other projects, but thanks to Pettibon’s input, we also have the literary and metaphysical aspects of their beached collaborators. These beach bums perform both as anachronisms and as keepers of the flame for a set of utopian ideals that have disintegrated in the popular imagination. These ideals, despoiled or diligent, depending on your point of view, have become metaphysical.

The literary dimension, introduced by Pettibon through his *Tombstones*, is the space of a waking dream. Are these men still “living the dream” of *tuning in, turning on, and dropping out* from a time when sleeping on the beach was still legal in California and every suburban teen aspired to turn his or her back on society? It’s like that brief period after Kerouac when being a hitchhiker was an adventurer’s badge of honor. Today’s motorists, having seen one too many movies about evil drifters murdering unsuspecting drivers, change lanes to avoid such travelers.

Though the ideals of the ‘60s have long since turned sour, it is still heartening to see these guys carrying the torch. They understand how they are perceived (more often as bums than as beach bums). Their sense of humor is not gone, but the laughter is rather terse, muted, and uncomfortable as they chew meat on the sizzling rocks to the rhythm of the crashing waves. The darker underpinnings of the early collaborations have become distilled in this waking dream, this strange construction of something that is both real and documented as well as its status as a literary, metaphysical space, a Beckettian time of perpetual waiting. While the installation was up, most of the spectators seemed obsessed with the men: “Have they really been there that long? How do they feel about how Venice Beach has changed? Where did you find them?” Since it was obviously a work of art, one with a fiction or artifice built in, their questions reflected their own notions about the

beach bums: a mixture of awe and pity—awe for their choice to live out an ideal and pity for what they saw as a failure to adapt to modern life. The audience's own prejudices came into play. These men's dark self-exploitation became an obsession, again implicating the audience in the subjects' representation.

And this brings us back to the nature of collaboration in general. In collaborations, the rules and boundaries are fuzzy. In Okón's practice, what we think about collaboration becomes rarified as the word and its politics are played out. By actively developing his work with his ostensible subjects, he does away with the myth of the individual genius or anthropological exploitation. With Okón as impresario, they define their own stereotypes with humor and grace.

As Yoshua Okón collapses the meanings of "collaboration" into his work, he creates situations that directly challenge us, the spectators, in our passive experience with the work. We are disallowed from having our own preconceived notions of Nazis, the desert poor, or beach bums (to name a few) be anything less than a part of the work, which he achieves through the active participation of the class under examination. It's almost as if they conspired to turn the camera back on us, the audience, to make us the focal point, the brunt of the joke, the uncomfortably observed subject. And under this lens, like the visitors to High Desert Test Sites who came to see *White Russians*, we can allow ourselves to be passive voyeurs who are being provoked or participants in the pantomime. Art as a collaboration can avoid many (though not all) of the pratfalls through an engagement that never forgets that it's art.

As Miwon Kwon writes in her essay "One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity," the kind of site-oriented artworks that "routinely engage the collaborative participation of audience groups for the conceptualization and production of the work, are seen as a means to strengthen art's capacity to penetrate the socio-political organization of contemporary life with greater impact and meaning. While this penetration is key, this 'collaborative participation' cannot fall into either category of subsuming the community under the myth of the artist, nor can the artist (or a sense of aesthetic quality) become wholly lost in the surge and flux of community art-making."

The social responsibility of art doesn't necessarily require that artists paint houses or give away money, but it does require that art *be* art—the strangely inspiring stuff that through confrontation and humor, grace, skill, and a devotion to opening up meaning rather than closing it down, can change life. The works outlined in this essay do appear under the name of the artist, Yoshua Okón, as works of art to be displayed, bought, and sold as authored works in the marketplace of ideas and commerce, but they avoid many of the hazards implicit in "collaboration" through their engagement with the community and a series of aesthetic gestures that confrontationally and humorously play with preconceived notions about that community. The "art" isn't the collaboration per se, but their rude play with us, the spectators.

To return to the central argument of this essay, collaboration isn't simply the action of working together to create, but rather a territory fraught with troubling exchanges from

both sides, problems that ought not to be ignored. *Collaborate, collaborator, collaborationist*: a territory that Yoshua Okón navigates with strange humor and dark play, as only one engaged with the slipperiness of meaning can—truly, like an artist.

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