

Yoshua Okón on the difference between activism and art



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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 3008 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Process](#), [Politics](#), [Inspiration](#).

You've talked about how video cameras allow people to act out. Your piece, "Poli V," has a policeman dancing and one twirling a baton and grabbing his crotch. Have you seen this sort of reaction to a camera change in the age of Snapchat and Facebook Live?

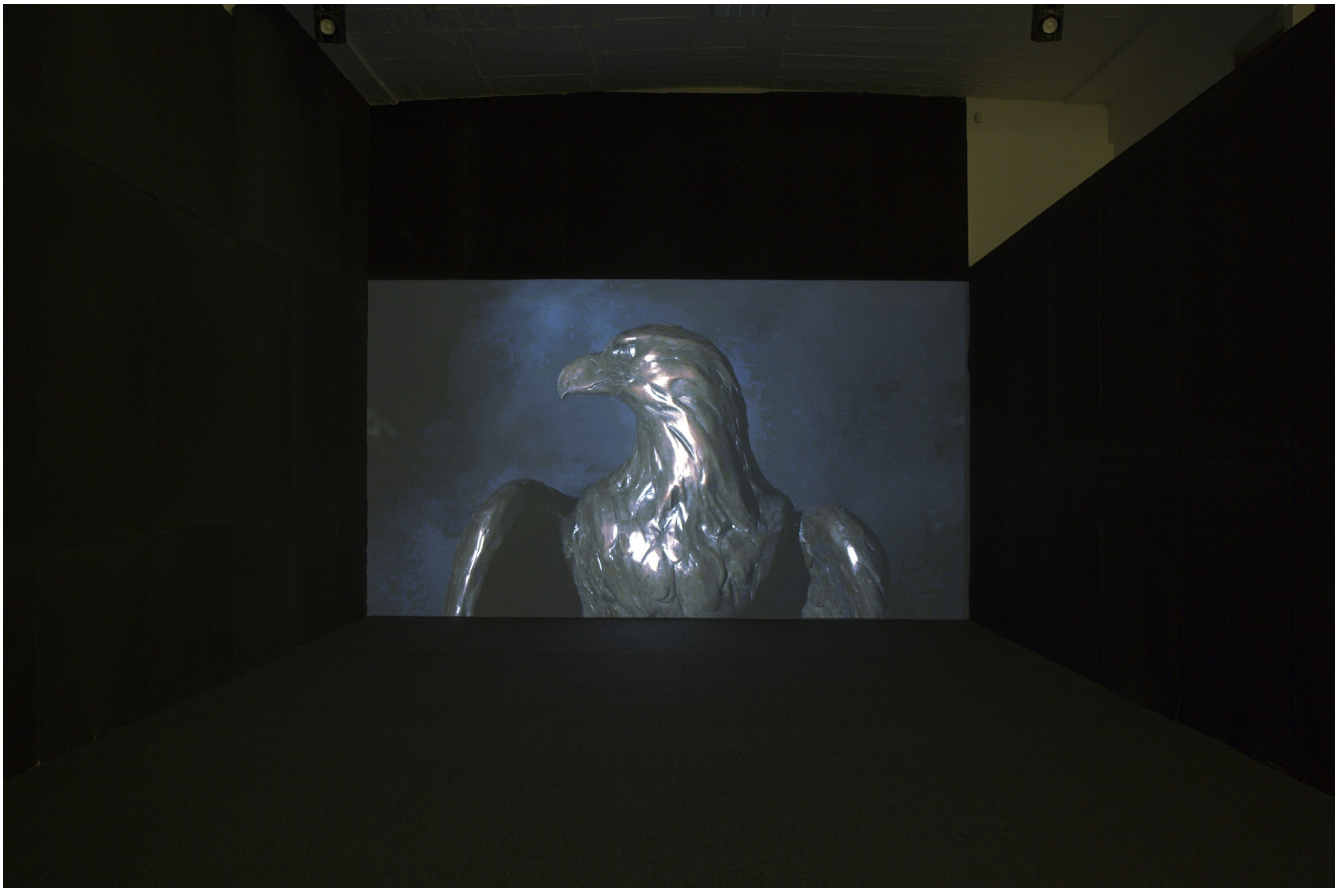
It's shifted to a degree because people are used to the presence of cameras. But, still, when you're aware that you are being recorded, there's something that affects the way that you behave. It opens up possibilities.

That said, when I started making videos in the '90s, reality TV didn't exist. It was very different. It was an exceptional situation to take out a camera. That has changed, but with that said, I don't think the basic operation of the way I work with non-actors has been affected all that much. Even if we are more used to having cameras around, I don't think the psychology of being recorded has significantly changed. In those days, the first question people asked me was, "Will I be on TV?" because the association of a TV camera would come up right away.

With YouTube and social media, you can anticipate the outcome, but performing in front of a camera, even if it is your girlfriend's cell phone, is still associated with a fictional space and therefore a space in which we are freed from our everyday life roles. We get a sort of license to behave in ways we would normally not behave and go beyond our strict behavioral roles in society. It could be argued that in front of a camera we get a closer to who we really are.

Your exhibition, *Miasma*, deals with the CIA's covert operations in Mexico. Surveillance is often hidden video documentation. Was that at all in your mind when you started working on this project?

To be honest, no. I wasn't consciously thinking about that. This exhibition is more about what's culturally being projected versus what's actually happening behind the surface. There's a discrepancy there that the exhibition attempts to highlight.



Yoshua Okón: *Miasma*, on display at Parque Galería 07 Feb 2017 — 28 Feb 2017, Photo by Ramiro Chaves

In your earlier days, you were described as a punk. You had a project that involved you smashing car windows and robbing car stereos. Do you still have the impulse to do that kind of thing?

I still feel like smashing car windows. But my strategies have changed. Maybe they're less punk or less in your face, but I think that deep down what I'm looking for has not shifted all that much. In my work I have always tried to address different aspects of the underbelly of our culture, and by our culture I mean Western Civilization in a broad way. Our highly mediated culture tends to project an image of itself that generally doesn't correspond all that much to its violent underlying structure, and it's these sorts of discrepancies that I

have been interested in highlighting. Be it with an in-your-face approach or with a more subtle language.

Did you get any blowback for the early work? When you film a police officer and they end up in a gallery show, or project yourself stealing car stereos... Did anyone say, "Hey, you've implicated yourself here."

I never got into trouble. In Mexico we tend to be quite cynical. At least in those days. That's a big difference with the US, where this façade of democracy and human rights is important, even if structurally the system is highly corrupt. That's the basis of consumer culture. It's a media-aware and image-aware culture where what you see on the surface is what constitutes reality. Here there's not as much an obsession with the surface. Corruption is much more in your face, not as hidden.

It seems like the strongest reaction was from the guy who owned a dog that your dog ended up mating with—you had to abort the puppies because they were different breeds.

Oh yes. That's a piece about a sex encounter between a French Poodle and a Mexican Hairless dog. In this piece I dealt with race issues through dogs. It just really amazes me how in the dog world we still talk in terms of "pure breeds" in a hierarchical way. When we describe humans we would never speak in those terms, unless we are white supremacists or something like that, because it is not politically correct. But that doesn't mean we don't still conceptualize race in those racist terms. Biologically speaking, race doesn't exist, it is an artificial construct invented in Europe as a way to justify slavery and colonization. But we still talk about race as if it existed and in that way we keep normalizing that system and perpetrating its implicit hierarchical structure. The piece highlights how we haven't been able to re-conceptualize that very basic understanding, even when scientific advances in mapping our DNA are clearly telling us that we cannot think in terms of race. So it's about how, through the way we think about dogs, we can get an insight into how we understand ourselves.

In art, people are presented with a surface. How do you inspire people to look beyond that surface to the deeper meanings?

This is the big challenge and where artists need to perform a sort of magic trick. A game of simultaneously being able to seduce and play with the public's expectations. In consumer culture, we tend to be passive consumers; we are not used to working hard conceptually when confronted with representation. Art is no exception. In other words, we don't tend to be creative and critical in our everyday lives.

To me, the secret lies on being able to push art goes into a zone of conceptual discomfort, a zone in which they will be put in a position in which they will have to question what they are experiencing and therefore will have to formulate their own interpretation. In this way, by shifting from the default consumer culture's passive modality into the active and engaged modality of creative participation, we can attempt to go beyond the surface.



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***Miasma* is timely. One thing I was thinking about was when George Bush Sr. came out in a wheelchair before the Super Bowl. It's a stark contrast to the video piece in *Miasma*, where you do close-ups of this idealized statue of him. With everything going on in the States, people are talking about how as horrible as George H.W. Bush was and George W Bush, it's like "Now, we've reached a new level of horror." But the horror was always there.**

In the exhibition, I use George H.W. Bush's as a symbol of neoliberalism and as a way to talk about the imminent collapse of the unsustainable system he helped to establish. So yes, H.W. Bush's recent visit to the hospital is timely. Actually the curator of the exhibition uses a similar metaphor in his text by connecting the collapse of his body to the collapse of global capitalism.

I find it astonishing that when Obama was in office the Left in the US, and elsewhere, was hardly critical. Even when his administration deported more immigrants than any president in U.S. history—close to 3 million—when he bombed all over in the Middle East, when he bailed the corrupt banks, when he didn't do anything about climate change and the environmental catastrophe we are facing, there was very little opposition. Why? I think it has a lot to do with the fact that he's a smooth talker, he's an intellectual, he looks great, and he tells

us what we want to hear, even if his policies contradicted his speech. We are a culture obsessed with the surface image, and there are powerful mechanisms that prevent us from digging beyond that.

The following story illustrates what I mean. When I was living in LA, where I lived for eight years, at one point a bunch of articles came out in *L.A. Weekly* talking about pollution in the city of Los Angeles. They made the very direct connection, backed by specialists from the Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, between vehicle generated air pollution and a huge rise in brain tumors and many other health problems. The articles were saying that the "solution" to the pollution problems of the '70s was the catalytic converter. But what the catalytic converter does is to simply break the polluting particles creating the illusion that they don't exist. In other words, particles still come out but we are not able to see them anymore. And these much finer particles go straight into your bloodstream. Therefore, health-wise they are even worse than the puffs of black smoke, but we can't see them. The articles were alarming; they even called it "the silent killer," but they came and went with no consequences.

I think this is how neoliberalism has operated. By placing emphasis on the image, it's managed to create a powerful illusion that has kept us in denial and away from dealing with all the underlying problems of global capitalism.

Now things are just falling by their own weight. Neoliberalism's idea that the markets self-regulate is simply not true. When not regulated, capitalism begins to bite its own tail and becomes unsustainable. I think that's what we are facing right now. Trump is just a symptom of such collapse. Many people are trying to boycott New Balance because of their support of Trump. But why haven't we been boycotting Nike when they are exploiting people and polluting the environment in far away places? That's because we can't see it, it's too far, and Trump is in our face. He's not sophisticated, he's not even a politician, and doesn't have Obama's magic. He's breaking the illusion and bringing all these problems to the surface. Unwillingly he is giving them visibility and opening a big can of worms. Of course it is easy to demonize Trump, but these problems existed way before his presidency and it's important to put them into context. And please don't get me wrong, I don't think Trump is a solution by any means. But I do think that in an unwilling way he might be able trigger a reaction that can awaken and activate the left around the world, which has been pretty numb for a long time.



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On the way here, we were talking about art fairs. Your art is often overtly political. Is this part of the complication of art fairs for you?

One of the reasons why I make art is because art can challenge the viewer and help us have a more nuanced and complex experience and interpretation of the world around us. Art fairs serve an important function in the industry, and I have nothing against them in that respect, but I do have something against how they present themselves as places where general public can experience art, because that's not what they're about. Art fairs are a terrible environment to experience art because art gets fragmented and decontextualized. It's very hard to have artistic integrity in an art fair and it is very hard to look at art. The average attention span is literally three seconds. Only professionals can make sense and use of such a context.

You just did a talk about art and money at the art fair, Salon Acme.

It was very general. The moderator was vague. But it was fun because I knew the other two panelists so we talked about local issues and about how much the scene changed with the big market explosion from the early 2000s and how that has affected the way artists work. We also talked about conflicts of interest and the big problem of Museum Boards having influence in their programs. We talked about how money can sometimes compromise culture and the importance for institutions to have ethical codes.

One thing I was arguing was that we're all immersed in a capitalist system and we can only work from the inside. The relevant questions are not whether there's a market or not, but rather what is the nature of that market and how well it is regulated. Which goes back to what I was saying. I don't think the problem is intrinsically with capitalism, but rather with our particular model of unregulated neoliberal capitalism.

In *Miasma*, the central photograph is of tourists riding around on Segways. Where is that from? Something you took or something you found?

The starting point for the whole exhibition was the book *La CIA en México* by the journalist Manuel Buendía, who dedicated many years to uncovering CIA agents in Mexico and who, months after publishing this book, was murdered with five shots in the back. The book came out in 1984 so I started looking for it in old bookstores downtown. A friend finally found a copy. Finding the book itself was already a process. I read it and there were two chapters dedicated to George H.W. Bush from the days when he was director of the CIA.

I had an exhibition in Houston, maybe a year before then. At two in the morning after having drinks, the curator took me to see this H.W. Bush public monument. It's open 24 hours because it's in a park. It has lighting that projects from the floor that makes the whole place look very creepy. I remember thinking that at nighttime the true sinister face of this monument comes to life. It expresses itself.

When I was reading the book, I remembered the monument and I thought of a way to frame an exhibition. So I went to Houston and shot a video at the monument site. The day after we were shooting some daytime photos for a sculpture idea, this group of tourists came in on their Segways. I was like, "This is too much." I just started taking photos in a very casual way. Then when I ended up editing the video, I was very happy with the result, but I didn't like the fact that the location in itself becomes very abstract—it could almost have been done in a studio. Somehow, it doesn't feel like a real place. To me it was very important to give context. So I thought back to these photos of the tourists and decided to use them as a way to contextualize. So, originally, I didn't take them for any other reason than they were funny, and I ended up incorporating them into the exhibition. These tourists symbolize the passive consumer of neoliberal capitalism.





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Did you add the smoke in the video of the monument?

I added two elements. The smoke machine and also one extra light. Because somehow they had a floor light on one side, another one behind, and another on the other side, but nothing in front. So I put a light on the ground in the front to illuminate the statue's face. It looks kind of skull-like. Like a corpse. Those are the two elements I added.

Not the cockroach?

The cockroach was there. It was full of those cockroaches. Houston is a swamp, so it's got cicadas, which you can hear in the soundtrack, and bats and cockroaches that are visible in the video.

Did anyone question you when you were shooting this monument at night with smoke machines?

Incredibly, no. We didn't need a permit because it's a public space and could shoot at any time. Cops went by, looked, and kept going. I was amazed because I lived in LA and the police are really tough. They don't like anything out of the ordinary. It looks like in Texas it might be not as strict. They didn't bother us.

Do you consider what you do to be "political art"?

This is a tricky question. If by "political" you mean activist, then I don't think art should be activist. Activism has specific agendas. "I want people to stop using plastic cups." That's a very specific agenda. The goal is to promote a very specific and targeted change in society. That's great, I consider myself an activist at times-but that's very different from my art practice.

Now if we think of "political" in the broader sense, as in the way we relate to others in our everyday lives, the way we organize ourselves, I do think art is political because it can have a deep impact in society. But this impact can't be quantified or calculated, it's out of the artist's control. To me that is the main difference. It's important to not confuse art with activism. In art, I don't have an agenda with regards to making people think in specific ways. I'm much more interested in putting the issues I consider to be relevant on the table so we can discuss them collectively, regardless of each person's conclusions.

In this sense I think all art is political, regardless of how conscious the artist is of that fact. When working in the realm of representation we take positions and make political gestures. I think a good question can be: How much are artists these days, including the formalists, aware of the political dimension of their work?

Yoshua Okón recommends:

[La CIA en México](#) by Manuel Buendia

[Pulque](#)

My ranch

[Abbie Hoffman](#)

[Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom](#) by Pasolini

Name

Yoshua Okón

Vocation

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Photo: Ramiro Chaves