



SHOOT: 245(D)(1)

YOSHUA OKON

THE PROJECT, LOS ANGELES

39

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All photos video installation
(Courtesy of the gallery)

By Jesse Lerner

More than five decades ago, the tabloid weekly *Alarma!* discovered the commercial potential of a certain brand shock journalism trading in blood and violence. Upping the ante of set by earlier crime periodicals like gloriously lurid *Magazine de Policia*, *Alarma!* offered not only an unprecedented level of graphic gore, but

also, in contrast to the theatrical dramatizations of the former publication's crime *fotonovelas*, the promise of unflinching realness. Adamantly proclaiming the claim to the real, *Alarma!* took as its motto "*unicamente la verdad!*" ["only the truth!"]. Yoshua Okon, long-time aficionado of dancing security guards, performance artist/car stereo thieves, and other dubious denizens of the world

of law enforcement and criminality, exhibited at the Los Angeles outpost of "The Project" with an installation that added another twist to the seemingly insatiable desire to witness spectacles of violence, but which might have been subtitled, with a wink to *Alarma!*, "only the phony." But then perhaps that wasn't necessary, as no one would have mistaken the spectacle on view for

the real thing. The real spectacle of violence that *Shoot* evokes is clumsily elided as it is put upon display, in a documentary parody of unreality television.

The title of this installation refers to that section of the criminal code addressing the "assault with a firearm on a peace officer." The centerpiece is a wrecked police car, riddled with bullet holes, dented and smashed. Above it are four video projections, two on each of the walls that define the corner in which the car is parked. Each projection provides a different camera view of a rather inept group of actors in a studio scrambling under, around and over the vehicle as they recreate the circumstances by which the cop car was destroyed—a prolonged shootout with some off-screen criminals. This exchange of fire is the pretext for much bang-bang-banging into the air with imaginary weapons and thrashing on the floor and on the car's hood in protracted death scenes (preceded with the obligatory, balletic turn, arm-flail and collapse). The occasional presence of one of the videographers in some of the shots is further reminder of the artificiality of it all. That Okon recruited his "actors" (and perhaps this term is too generous, would "hams" be more appropriate?) at a day-labor center for undocumented workers is almost a guarantee of ham-fisted (no pun intended) performances as what are colloquially referred to as "pigs".

The project differs from Okon's previous single channel "Rhinoplasty" (2000, shown at the *Centro de la Imagen* and elsewhere) or "New D'Écor" (2002) installation (shown at

the Enrique Guerrero Gallery in Mexico City, and subsequently at New York's International Center for Photography Triennial) in that the reality reconstructed in "Shoot" is a much more distant one from the actors' lives. "New D'Écor" also uses amateur actors, recruited on the street, but gives them more universally resonant scenes to enact: the jealous girlfriend, the painful breakup, and so on. While the resulting performances

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evoke and draw upon mass media forms, principally the soap opera, the potency of the work derives largely from the revealed and inferred relationships to the performers' own lives, and thus occupies a hybridized terrain somewhere between daytime television and (as critic John Welchman has pointed out) the late Jean Rouch's fiction improvisations (*Moi, un noir, Petit a Petit*). In contrast, *Shoot* revolves around a scene that few of us have witnessed except on television and in film, much less lived through, a territory both overly familiar because of mass media saturation yet at the same time utterly alien. Although the hulking presence of the ruined vehicle roots the entire scenario in reality (exhibit A: evidence)

with the undeniable traces of real violence, the beyond-Brechtian overacting in the projections above it, a childish game of cops and robbers, screams out phony. Without the benefit of props or fake blood, without costuming or added sound effects, the prospect of a real *Alarma!*-style violence that wrought destruction on the cop car is dissipated with so much histrionics and just plain bad performances.

Which brings us back to the question of the real. Rouch's perpetual search for a documentary strategy suited to the mutating, de-colonizing Africa that fascinated him evolved from illustrated lecture to the vérité style that he helped create to the hybridized documentary fictions that are kin to Okon's directed improvisations. In the latter, the undocumented immigrants (day laborers from the interior villages of the Niger scraping by in colonial Ivory Coast in the case of *Moi un noir*) hid their identities in adopted Hollywood celebrities, boxing heroes and distant places of enchantment to both protect themselves in their precarious status and to add a missing quotient of glamour and fame to their marginal lives. As much as collective dreams and nightmares, the success in both cases results from the exposure of mass-media saturated psyches. Though instead of Edward G. Robinson and Dorothy Lamour, Okon's subjects channel the reality-TV exploits of *Cops* and *Crime Scene Investigation*, they achieve, like Rouch's films, an equally compelling and real document of precarious experiences that wears its artifice on its sleeve.