Conversation between Yoshua Okón and Ursula Dávila-Villa
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"For some La Panadería represented a gallery space. But for me, for over eight years it represented a life-project." (Okón: 2005, La Panadería 1994-2002)

This past June 22, I interviewed Yoshua Okón while he was visiting Austin to be part of *Artistic License* at the Blanton Museum of Art. Okón is a Mexican artist living and working between Mexico City and Los Angeles. His work can be characterized as a series of sociological experiments executed for the camera (and the artist). Through his videos, he blends staged situations, documentation, and improvisation, questioning habitual perceptions of reality, morality, and power. While living in Mexico City during the decade of the 1990s he co-directed the gallery La Panadería (1994-2002). The space began as a collaborative project between artists of the 90s generation in Mexico City. La Panadería was envisioned as generator for new ideas, dialogue, and provided an exhibition space for contemporary art in Mexico. Excerpts of the conversation that took place with Okón follow.

1.
Ursula Dávila-Villa: Let's discuss your perspective of what was the 90s in Mexico, specifically what were the implications for your generation and the place of La Panadería in the context of these years.

Yoshua Okón: For most of the artists that are part of my generation, the 90s were years of rapid changes, and most of the time it was difficult to adapt to this situation. It is important to mention that we experienced first-hand the new living conditions that came with NAFTA. For many of us the idea of selling our work was not part of the picture in the early 90s, much less the possibility of exhibiting our work in national museums, and even less showing in international art spaces. What resulted from this atmosphere was a communal desire to create and find circuits to exhibit, discuss, and engage with other artists, critics, etc. By the end of the 90s the situation [political, economical, and social] was so different that it was difficult to "catch-up" with the new set of relationships. Mexico was now on the spotlight of the international art community. La Panadería served as a platform for new ideas and a space for dialogue, at a time when there were very few spaces that engaged with contemporary art in Mexico… By the end of the 90s the institutional cultured was already changing, La Colección was up-and-running, new and old galleries were looking for "new talents" and began attending contemporary art fairs, and Gabriel Orozco returned to Mexico. I think that the climax of this frenzy moment came with the P.S.1 exhibition [P.S.1, *Mexico City: an Exhibition about the Exchange Rates of Bodies and Values*, 2002].

2.
UDV: You mention before that leaving Mexico after La Panadería closed was beneficial to your artistic practice, but the years in Mexico and the intense work towards the gallery space became more than just an art project; it became a life-project for you. In retrospective and in relation to La Panadería, could you briefly describe the positive and not so positive results of the 90s transformation in Mexico?

YO: What I find interesting about the 90s [in Mexico City] is the context… There were artists as individuals, but there was also a whole cultural dynamic... [I see] Art as a social practice. Artists do not exists in isolation. People, places and situations can be abstracted from their original context when analyze within a historical framework. But in the everyday practice these [interactions] occur more organically, and artists do not exist in isolation, on the contrary we are part of a social and artistic context. La Panadería provided this [organic] context… [La Panadería] found a significant audience within a younger generation of artists [some from the late 90s and others from the early 1990s] … it also attracted some individual artists from the 70s [generation] that shared a sensibility with a younger crowd… Something important [for my generation] is that due to the lack of an international art context within Mexico, [at the time] when we started La Panadería, we were really focused on the process and not the results of our collaborative efforts. This has been different for a younger generation. [Younger] artists are used to immediate rewards and thus [they] are more focus on the result rather than the process. During 2000-2001 Mexico was on the spotlight of the international art market and there was a major interest for Mexico from international institutions. But there was [also] a sudden sense of anxiety and the collaborative efforts between artists were lost, changing into a constant competition… for a couple of years there was a persistent need for results and not a careful consideration of the process and the context. There was a feeling that this attention would not last long so most artists were tryinmg to get as much as they could as fast as possible

3.
UDV: You have been living between Mexico City and Los Angeles for the past years. You briefly mention before that you are excited about the present conditions within Mexico. What is your vision of the present situation in the city?

YO: Lately much of what happened during 2000 and 2001(between 2000-2002) has been digested by the Mexican art world and the "new" conditions and dynamics are part of the every day practice. There is a new context and we are learning how to operate within this structure. Another important thing is that young generations of Mexican artists [most of them are still in art school] have now understood that as an artist you have to work hard every day, and that most of the time there is no immediate reward… There's good energy and new dynamics are occurring in Mexico… the anxiety of the early 2000s is not so present [anymore]. The glorification of the 90s is over and there are interesting things happening in the city.

4.
UDV: Some years have passed since you stop working in a context of constant collaboration, like you did in La Panadería. With the recent publication of the book *La Pandería, 1994-2002* I feel that you had the opportunity to examine the project from the outside and re-evaluate what La Panadería meant for you and for Mexico. Do you see the possibility of engaging again with new projects based on collaboration, and if so, where would you envision these possibilities?

YO: I am really excited and interested in spending more time in Mexico and explore the possibilities of collective and collaborative projects. In other words, to engage with projects that can exist outside the market's logic… I do not see the 'artist' as a unique individual that works in confinement inside the studio. I am more interested in understanding our position as artists as members of a community where we are influenced by our surrounding context and thus we are part of a constant dialogue – local and international… I have been seriously thinking how, where and when to invest energy in a new space based on collaboration. Self-consciously I have not done this in LA. First because [when I left Mexico] I needed to step away from La Panadería since it had been a 9-year long collaborative project. Los Angeles provided me with space to engage and think about my individual work. On the other hand, every time that you commit to collaborative endeavors there is certain degree of responsibility and commitment involve. In my case, I was never certain if LA was going to be a long-term situation or not, and therefore I couldn't commit... I frequently travel, as we all do in this field, but I do see Mexico as a possible place where I can [again] invest energy and work with others in new projects based on collaboration.

5.
UDV: Let's talk about the idea of collaboration and authorship in your own work. An interesting characteristic of your videos is that the projected images of individuals performing for the camera invite the audience to think about the actors as well as the person behind the camera, in this case you. Let's take *Poli IV* (which is part of the series of Mexican policemen performing different activities for the camera and is on view at the Blanton Museum of Art) for example. At first one wonders about the policemen and the portrait he constructs of himself by dancing a silly routine and playing with his baton in front of the camera. But as one engages with the work the question of who is behind the camera comes to the forefront and challenges the audience's experience when facing the video. How do you perceive collaboration and what is the level of compromise you take while working with the actors? Also, and related to this, what is your position towards the idea of authorship?

YO: Well, I do see my videos as a collaborative work between the actors I hire, and myself. I normally come to them [the actors] and offer a "package": an economic remuneration in exchange for a performance. But whenever I work with them there is a high level of improvisation. The camera glues together the different levels of creation that come from different ends: the actors' and mine. Here is where I see the collaboration; it is like a pin-pong table. I throw and idea and something else comes back… it is a constant

process of negotiation. I normally start with a clear vision of what the result might be, but there are no expectations on what the process should be. Sometimes the actors go further than I expect and those are the moments where I think that the creative energy comes from both sides… In terms of authorship, [I think] the cinema industry has a structure that has adopted the idea of collaboration and direction successfully through credit lines. Unfortunately this is not the case in the art world. There is always the need for the "creator" and the need for an individual author… Galleries, press, and historians normally search for one voice… the idea of collectives has come and go and it has not been completely absorbed by the system… Through my work I intend to question and deconstruct these structures. The work is self-reflective, and problematizes the idea of the "author" as an individual artist by evidencing the process of collaboration between the actors and myself.

6.
UDV: The concept of power is implicit in your work, and it is intertwined between different realms of social interaction: the power of money, the power of class, the power of structures and institutions. This is a complicated set of relationships, could you address this in more length?

YO: The people that I work with are not necessarily aware of the collaborative process taking place in order to create artwork (though some are, but it might not be important for them). They are just playing by the rules [of capitalism] as we all do in the everyday life… [Situations] when by investing time and work one can receive a monetary compensation occur everyday… the same goes for the monetary compensation I offer to the participants of my videos… But what happens when the finished video is shown or is acquire by a museum, or a gallery in which I appear as the author? One of the intends of the work is to evidence how the everyday transactions and the power-relationships we all engage with have some degree of implicit exploitation, and that we all play this game but we might not realize this.

7.
UDV: You talked about exploitation, transactions, and power. While discussing these concepts through your work, you bring to the audience's attention the reality of social interactions. This might seem a cold analysis of the present situation we face as members of any given community. On the other hand, at the beginning of this conversation you also mention the roll of improvisation in your work, and how creativity normally comes from both ends –actors and yourself –adding an organic layer of interpretation. What is your understanding of the relationship between these two constant characteristics of your work?

YO: I would like to reference Santiago Sierra. His work has a direct relation to Marxist theory and evidences how economic transactions determine almost everything. Through my work I argue that, though I embrace this idea [Marxism] by making it apparent, I also think there are other factors that serve as motivation to perform any duty [in this case performed for the camera]. Normally persons are more complex, their motivation goes beyond an economical reward. This is how we operate in our everyday life. The actors

that collaborate with me find enough elements that serve as motivation. It may start as an economical reward, but as the projects evolves more things come into play, like illusion, or the freedom to be someone else in front of a camera… It feels like a game, the process is very ludic. As adults we always perform in a certain way everyday. Facing a camera creates a sense of illusion. The camera allows an imaginary reality, where we can explore aspects of our selves through fiction.

Yoshua Okón born 1970 in Mexico City, lives and works between Mexico City and Los Angeles. He has shown his work at the Kunstwerke in Berlin, P.S.1-MoMA and the New Museum in NY, the Istanbul Biennial, Galleria Francesca Kaufmann in Milan, The Project in NY, and Galería Enrique Guerrero in Mexico City, amongst others. In 1994, he co-founded La Panadería, an independent space dedicated to the exhibition and discussion of contemporary culture, a project, which he directed for 8 years. Since 2002, Okón has been a visiting teacher at the University of California, San Diego.

Ursula Davila-Villa completed her MA in Museum Studies at New York University in 2005. From 2001 to 2003, she was Manager of International Art Fairs at Galería OMR in Mexico City. She was co-director of cam! (Contemporary Art from the Americas), a graduate working group, from 2003-2005. In recent years, she has collaborated with The Guggenheim Museum, The Museum of Modern Art, El Museo del Barrio, Art in General and with artist Cai Guo-Qiang at Cai Studio in New York. She currently lives in Austin and works at The Blanton Museum of Art as Assistant Curator of Latin American Art.