All images are by **YOSHUA OKÓN** *White Russians*, 2008.

Performance in collaboration with the Akien family for High Desert Test Sites, 2008. Photo: © Daiana Feuer. Courtesy of the artist.

Interview with

Yoshua Okón

a propos of *White Russians*

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This text emerged from a series of conversations following a performance by Yoshua Okón (Mexico, 1970), last year, in which I took part, to a certain degree, as co-protagonist. The artistic career and the approach of Okón is well known: all we need to do is mention his commitment to La Panadería, of which he was co-founder, in the mid-1990s in Mexico City, a decade defined by conformism and classism in the interpretation of art, an attitude which could be described as zero resistance, In this context, this group (supported by artists) opened an inconvenient and stimulating fissure, through less formal approaches which were more easily inhabitable than the prevailing ones in the established art world. The collective's activity took place between 1994 and 2002.

The work which Yoshua Okón produces focuses on the analysis of the complex and variable relationships between work and viewer, as well as social behaviours. Irony, humour, sarcasm and irreverence are the mechanisms he uses to criticise modern societies, in an often devastating way, through the rules and traditions which govern relationships between individuals and their social structures. His work, which could be described as "social-narrative sculpture", creates fictional situations which are inserted into reality, often by means of interventions and performances, which question the roles of those who operate in their own context, and those who observe, delving into, and intervening on, both situations.

White Russians was developed last year, on the invitation of High Desert Test Sites (HDTS), a programme carried out in the Californian desert –the area comprising Pioneer, Yucca Valley, Joshua Tree, 29 Palms and Wonder Valley– by artists, cultural managers and members of several local communities, which is self-financed and receives no outside help, and which suggests to both new and established artists, the creation of experimental pieces which can be inserted in this geographic area, establishing a dialogue with its inhabitants.

The location chosen by Okón is 82,620 Mesa Road, the residence of the Akien family. It is not easy to get here, as the house is set in the midst of an almost uninhabited plot of land in the Joshua Tree desert; a place in the middle of nowhere. Access is via a dirt road where the car wheels run the risk of getting stuck in the mud. Around the house, we are greeted by numerous discarded objects, as well as a few dogs; quite a few cars are parked nearby, and the door to the house is open. As soon as we go in we recognise a number of members of the Los Angeles art circuit, who are deep in conversation, while they drink a hard-to-identify whitish and sweet cocktail. The owners of the house are pleased to welcome their guests, and motion us to take a seat. They introduce us to their neighbours, their dogs, the sister, the daughter (who is speaking on her iPhone), the cousin, the uncle and the other cousin while they tell the story of how they met Yoshua Okón... We art people are charmed by all this hospitality but, at the same time, we feel observed by them, we are "the others", with that clearly recognisable air of alternative coolness. The celebration continues, and things warm up. The Akiens, like their friends and their neighbours from this remote rural community, tell us about their lives, their interests and tastes; they sing, argue and proudly show us their ceramic plates printed with the face of their beloved John Wayne... Alcohol flows, with *White Russians* (a cocktail made from vodka, coffee liquor and milk) constantly being offered round by the youngest member of the family. The party is an absolute success.

Yoshua Okón has set up four cameras in the shape of a cross

in the family living room, and everything is being recorded, from the songs played by the Akiens (old desert ballads which remind one of the soundtracks of westerns), to the gestures and conversations of the guests, who are surprised and seduced by a reality in which the melancholy glamour of old films is combined with the harshness of a late-capitalist suburban periphery which could be found anywhere in the world.

The Akiens' home, and they themselves, possess all of the ingredients needed to seduce anyone from the outside. Why do you think it is necessary to intervene with additional performances in an already highly concentrated reality?
The reason is that the purpose of this performance is not exactly to "thrill an outsider." Rather, I am interested in highlighting the moment when the viewer goes from an exoticist and voyeuristic experience (in which the illusion of the reality of the "other" is constructed) to realising that what he or she is witnessing is a constructed reality: the moment when, instead of looking, he or she feels observed. The Akien family as such does not exist: the daughter is not the daughter, the son is the nephew, the friends are really the daughter's parents, etc. The moments of obvious fiction, along with the presence of the cameras, assume the role of providing the spectator with the necessary distance to make him or her aware of his or her own presence and subjective nature.

Where I have been a viewer, if not a co-participant, there is little difference between these performances and the most saccharine soap-operas, where the limits of exaggeration are bordering on pornography. What is it that drives you to use, or to create, these fictional images of heightened, to the point of almost overflowing, hyper-reality?
HDTS invites artists to produce pieces in response to the context of the desert. *White Russians* is a site-specific piece, and, in order to understand it, it is essential to be aware of this context. Despite the fact that this project was produced some time ago, in general HDTS projects are not aimed at the local community, but instead at the urban visitors who arrive from Los Angeles and other large cities. The interaction between the visitors and locals is minimal, and this has given rise to a sense of resentment on the part of the locals, highlighting the already noticeable cultural differences. My piece is an attempt to invert the gaze: I speak to the locals as spectators and to the visitors as actors. Given the fact that the piece is founded on the common prejudices, stereotypes and fears felt in Los Angeles toward those who live in the fringe areas of the desert (so-called "white trash" culture), I have decided to stage cliché fights and scenes which display "an overflow of hyper-reality", as you point out, offering from the beginning what everyone ultimately expects to see, so that they realise, finally, that what they are seeing are their own fantasies and fears, a mere fiction, the product of predisposition.

I'm not sure whether my participation is direct or indirect. Obviously, by placing me in a situation which confuses me, you are forcing me to re-contextualise myself as an art viewer and consumer. I wonder if this confusion has to do with the way in which we have institutionalised and trivialised the artistic fact. In other words, the way the language in which we receive and consume art has led to self-taming.
I think you've hit the nail on the head. My aim is for your participation to be direct. I want to place you inside the equation, as an integral part of the work, where you become just another actor.

I believe that an indirect relationship with art is highly problematic, as it renders us passive consumers, spectators who observe from the outside. Rather than a political issue, it is a philosophical concern; unless we are involved, representation cannot truly touch us. For me this is what differentiates art from design and entertainment.

As for the confusion you mention, this is in no way an end in itself, but rather, it is a side effect. I believe we are highly conditioned (or self-tamed, to use your words) to look from the outside, from a safe and supposedly objective space, and by being involved in a direct way, we automatically feel confused.

The similarity between the party at the Akien residence and a badly-rehearsed, TV western, lends the performance a lack of solemnity, and I imagine the same can be said of the recorded material which you perhaps transform into a variant of the project. Is this similarity with the media representation of the popular what lends your work a role of resistance with regards to mainstream art language?
Fortunately, art and solemnity are not synonymous. Since the start of modernity, and from a long time before, I would say, popular languages have always been included in mainstream artistic languages. I can think of many artists, from Aristophanes and Baudelaire to Buñuel, Jodorovsky, Mauricio Cattelan, Paul McCarthy, John Waters etc., whom on the basis of the popular and a lack of solemnity have succeeded in constructing artistic languages that have become mainstream. In fact, I believe that, in the case of *White Russians*, it is the format that resists the mainstream. It is not by chance that, without changing the tone or the content, the day when Paul McCarthy stopped doing live performances and began to create consumer products, he went from being a fringe artist to becoming part of the mainstream. It is a question of format, not of form and content.

Is it this approach to language that causes the visual formalisation to be undeniably political?
In art, politics is unavoidable; it is just that a certain kind of art is more self-aware of its political dimension than other forms. The fact that this language refers so clearly to a political dimension does not mean the work is without a formal and visual dimension.

The family living room where practically the entire situation takes place (the Akiens, the guests and their interaction) is flanked by four cameras, set out in the shape of a cross, each of which

is different. I have the feeling that these are the most mutual elements on the set. Does the existence of these cameras, as well as the fact that a group of guests are part of the performance, imply that the project functions on two levels: action in itself, and its residue or reification? Is it a sort of two-part sculpture?
Even if they hadn't been filming, if they had been turned off, the very presence of the cameras plays an essential part in the situation's development. In this sense, the cameras did not play a neutral role, but rather, they were specifically intended to highlight the artificial nature of the situation, and to remind the guests of his or her starring role. The piece was essentially conceived as a live event, and the cameras functioned as obvious objects. The resulting recordings are intended, firstly, to document the performance, and, secondly, to be used in post-production, which can be seen as the second stage of the project[1].

Is this attitude of coarseness, or perhaps even of a certain romantic rebelliousness, what allows an artist and his work to be something of a social agitator, rather than a designer of images? Do you not think that this way of working runs the risk of becoming self-institutionalised?
Any kind of representation, from the most conventional to the most Avant-Garde, runs the risk of becoming self-institutionalised. It is because of this that one should assess the effectiveness of an artistic strategy within a specific context. If this strategy ends up by becoming institutionalised, one should change strategy, and that's it. On the other hand, your question implies that one would have to define a single role for art and artists, whereas I believe that, at this stage of the game, it is clear that there are many different ways of producing and understanding art. For me, producing art has a social and discursive purpose; it is a political act which goes beyond designing images. However, there is a very large difference between being a social agitator and being an artist operating within a social paradigm: the social agitator has a specific agenda, a purpose, while the artist alludes to social issues with the aim of encouraging reflection, regardless of the conclusions obtained.

As for the coarseness you mention, in my case, it is a strategy, not an act of rebelliousness; I use it as a way of reminding the viewer of his protagonist role.

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NOTES

1.- Editor's note: *White Russians*, in the shape of a video piece, is on show for the first time at the exhibition *Ventanilla única* [Single Window], curated by Roberto Barajas, which has just opened at the Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil, in Mexico City.