

All Employees

By Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy

Yoshua Okon's work is not sociological or representative of art as institutional critique, but the interests and methods of these inform his artistic practice. His work has largely centered in the presentation of self and performativity, and how these enactments engender or confront a set of establishments. It also includes staging events and encounters to point at social structures and institutions, and at the behaviors and the conventions they support. It is imbued of satire and caricature, consistently putting in tension notions of morality and ethics.

A considerable part of Okon's work may well be considered portraiture: brief, moving images with protagonists ranging from schoolgirls to yuppies, and from policemen to clerks. The people portrayed can be classified superficially by occupation or community, either because they wear a uniform, e.g. schoolgirls and policemen, or because they dress in a style associated with a class or subculture, e.g. yuppies and headbangers. They are generally rendered with an unexpected demeanor: instead of an educated, poised schoolgirl, is a young woman cursing; in place of policeman of serious deportment is an officer amusingly dancing, another joyously rubbing his crotch.

Most of the people in the videos are instructed by Okon (recruited or bribed) to perform certain roles. They are also literally abstracted from their working environment. Bare walls and monochromatic backdrops prevail, indicating that they are on stage, where they clearly step away from the role their uniform presumes or publicize. In other works, the people are recoded performing their "real" act and, supposedly, in their social milieu. In the long-feature video *Rhinoplasty* (2000), the rich-kid is the rich kid in the rich kid's everyday life. In the video *installation Jeabangers* (1998-2001), the metal-rock headbanger is a headbanger headbanging. Some characteristics that make his videos uncanny rest in the quandary about the portrait's real or fictional aspect, and in the ambiguity that lies in the protagonists' subversive conduct. It is unclear if their performance is an act of free will and pleasure, a rewarded amusement or, by deriding the uniform they wear, for example, an attempt to debase an establishment. And whether their act is absurd, obscene, hilarious or pathetic is left open for interpretation.

Against the extroverted characters that most of his videos center on, there is another body of work where the subject is absent or disembodied. In the absence of a central character, the work presents a figure that performs their role. For reason of being figurative sculpture, *Onwards and Upwards* (2002) manifests this more apparently. This piece consists of two, identical and massive foam carvings in the shape of a wrist and an open, extended hand; a small fragment of attire is featured in the shape of a black jacket over white shirt. The artist describes them as the hands of a businessman. Each hand is hung sideways and perpendicularly to the wall, from where they seem to emerge, and are installed on opposite sides within a gallery space, making it seem as if these were about to handshake. Suspension is less encapsulated under the grounds of sculpture than in the gesture alone of the open hand.

As sculpture, *Onwards and Upwards* operates in the same way photo stills do for videos or detail shots do for pictures. It is a glimpse of a larger picture. Considering Okon's oeuvre, this sculpture acts in similar fashion to the performances executed in his videos. With their performative makeup and portraiture quality, his videos are like case scenarios registering encounters that convey, sometimes dispute, individual attitudes and beliefs. *Onwards and Upwards* stages a case scenario as well, it touches upon notions of formality in social interactions. However, everything except calculability is represented in these hands. There is a discrepancy between the sculpture's formal aspect and the gesticulation they figure. Their intensity and caricaturesque feature renders them humorous and grotesque. If the sculpture represents the hands of businessmen, as the artist proposes, these characteristics make of the sculpture less a referent of them than a mockery of the etiquette these hands stand for, illustrated with a variety of case scenarios, books on etiquette do not merely teach and foster social conventions and good manners, but train one to interact with grace, to express refinement. These kinds of books were largely written by and for the (aspiring) bourgeoisie and were fashionable during the first half of the Twentieth Century. A proliferation of formulaic manuals that instruct the workforce on labor procedures and public performance emerges later with the rise of professionalization and the service economy, and thus with the growth of a working middle-class. These guidebooks are as largely attributable to the franchise sprawl of fast-food restaurants and other types of businesses, as to the expansionism of transnational

corporations. The reason being obvious: for standardization and quality control.

In all of this, one of the general ideas behind books on etiquette lingers: that first impressions are decisive. Under the belief that there is a potential to capitalize on "impression" alone, this idea informs the commercial field at large. If books on etiquette focus on achieving and preserving a certain degree of social capital, the end of business-oriented manuals is to convert that into economic capital. In these latter types of guidebooks, the terms of engagement are instrumentalized, reckoned for consumer relations. "How to greet the customer?" and "How to introduce oneself?" are among the questions that these answer to.

In All employees, All Carl's Jr., All of L.A. (2002), Okon touches upon the mechanical aspect that salutations and presentations reach. To create All employees... he visited every branch of Carl's Jr. in the city of Los Angeles, and videotaped employees presenting themselves to the camera. Although the shots are taken in different locations, the settings are almost identical: in the foreground, the uniformed employee behind the counter; in the background, the characteristic, colorful light-box displaying the menu; and further back, a fragment of the industrialized, aluminum-furnished kitchen. The line that the employees recite is systematically the same, "My name is _____. I work for Carl's Jr. as a _____." The only element that varies from shot to shot is the person, and consequently his or her name and job.

Okon recorded 30 workers individually, obtaining approximately 10 seconds of footage in each case. All Employees... doesn't feature this footage in sequence. Instead, each portrait is played on constant loop and is placed one over the other. The superimposition of footage is based on transparency, exposing and progressively fusing each of the portraits. As the video advances, and as the layering of images and voices accrues, the people and their salutations are cluttered and transfigured into a cacophonous mass ornament. The transparent image-layers portray the employees ghosted and disembodied. They are unidentifiable. Their speech becomes a jabber. The setting appears as a blurred, disjointed, uncalibrated picture.

Contrary to the haziness of All Employees... is *Presenta* (1998), a video consisting of blunt presentation of the sponsor credits to a video program of some kind that never gets shown. Owing to what might be called a "Power Point aesthetic," this work is a visual parade of logos from various cultural institutions in Mexico, most of them from government agencies. Whereas the accumulative presentations in All Employees... ensue in a visual calamity, in *Presenta* it triggers an expectation. The equation is simple: in the former, the more and more employees are featured fewer individuals are seen. In the latter, the more logos are announced, the shorter a wait for the program. The disembodied images of the employees contrast with the paramount presence of the logos. In both videos, it is a company or institutional representation that takes precedence over the individual worker and the video program.

By orchestrating or simply registering extroverted performances, grotesque enactments, or repetitive actions, Okon's work exposes in every instance a confrontation with language. Impressions and assumptions gathered of the individual and of institutions are not only articulated and materialized; these are also generated when looking at his work. Yet the act of stereotyping or cataloguing that portraiture triggers is largely displaced. This activity resides already in the figure and the situation depicted. Thus, the work positions the viewer as an arbitrator, not in order to evaluate the depicted figure in its singularity but to assess the larger apparatus that generates and fosters the way in which this singularity is presented.