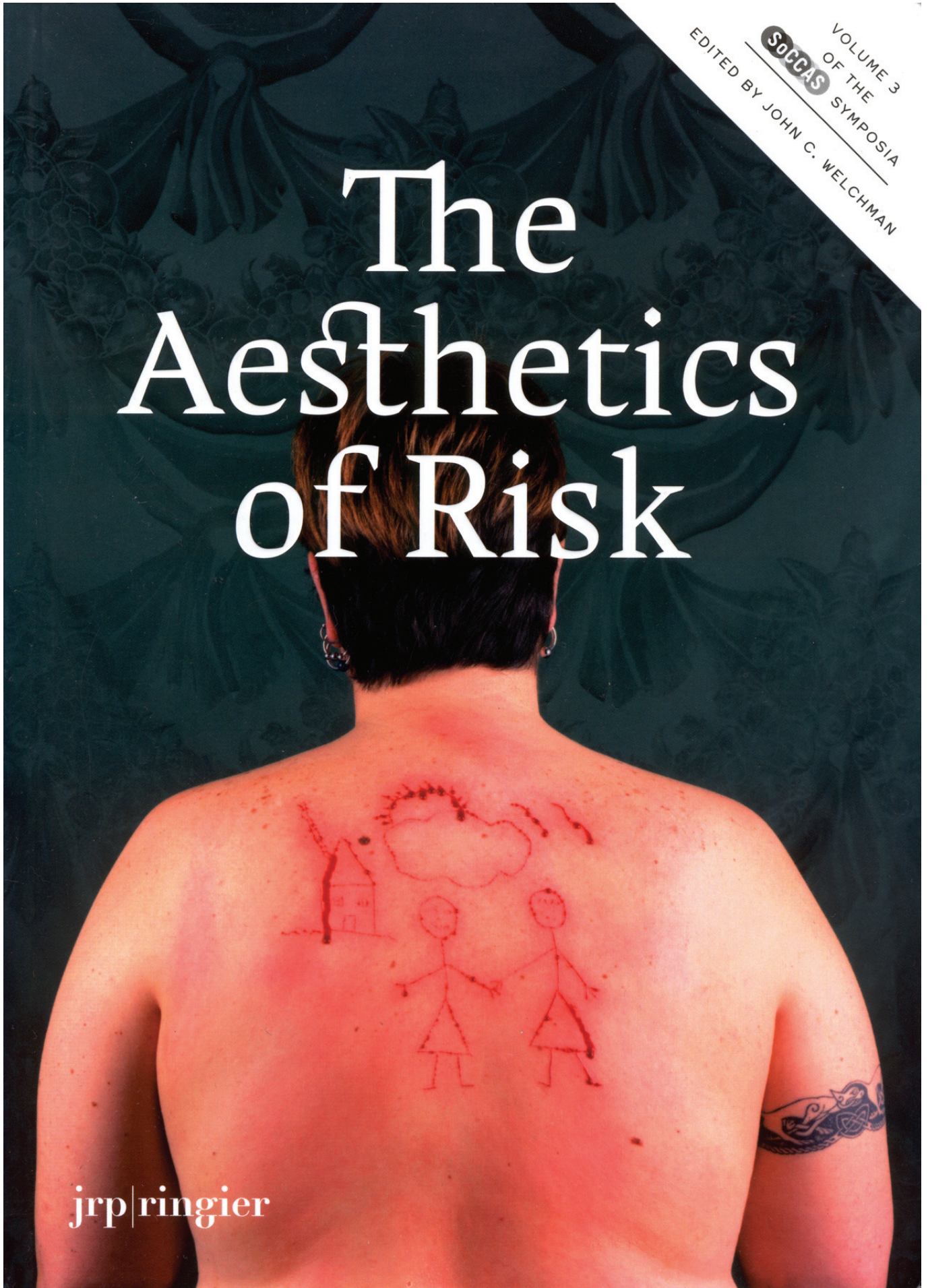


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# The Aesthetics of Risk

jrpringier





COURTESY THE PROJECT, NEW YORK

Yoshua Okón

*Bocangegra: A Walk in the Park*, 2007

Five-channel video installation,  
dimensions variable



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Joaquín Segura

*Someone Else's Doc Martens*, 2002

Video, 40 sec.

own reflection as viewers and our credible proximity to what transpires, which implicates us in the artist's many problematic and polemic issues. Thus, Okón's performances-as-portraits (or portraits-as-performances) reveal not only the ethical risks of art for the artist and his collaborators, but also pose a risk to the viewers' subjectivity by making us uncomfortably complicit. Okón's pieces mirror our constructed ideas of the world and its inhabitants, our artificially and neatly drawn borders between truth and fiction, reality and artifice, dream and life. In Okón's work, risk is the twin of uncertainty.

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It is a clear night in 2002, and you're taking an after-dinner walk around the small park near Cuernavaca Street in the Condesa neighborhood. All of a sudden, out of nowhere, someone cracks an empty bottle of wine on your head. You're reeling from the pain and run away before something worse happens. But if you had stayed, nothing worse would have happened; this wasn't the beginning of a mugging, as you had initially thought, but rather part of an art piece by Joaquín Segura (b. Mexico City, 1980), titled *Hangover*. The next day, your head hurts as if you'd drunk the whole bottle and a couple more. The piece documenting this violent event also relates to Segura's other performances, such as *Someone Else's Doc Martens* (2002) in which he steals a pedestrian's Dr Martens boots (a counter-cultural status symbol in Mexico City, as in London or Tokyo) identical to the ones he's wearing; and the work relates to a founding gesture for a new generation of Mexican guerrilla art: Okón's collaboration with Miguel Calderón, *A propósito ...* (1997), in which the artists steal a car stereo, self-consciously implicating themselves in the repertoire of violent or illegal actions. Taking Okón and Calderón's transgression to the next level, Segura's videos extend this discussion (dare I then call them Terrorist art?) and set out to question recent tendencies in the art world—such as the constant need to up the ante and provide increasingly shocking spectacles to attract critical attention.

Segura is Mexico City's latest *enfant terrible*, the inheritor of what Antonio Calera-Grobet terms a "shock troop" formed by "Yoshua Okón, Miguel Calderón, Gustavo Artigas, or Artemio, who saw video art and lived, documented, or post-performed action as an unbeatable support

for the scrutiny of violence as a leading theme and motif of contemporary art."<sup>29</sup> Segura has also been called a cultural provocateur, a saboteur of the status quo, and a low-tech hacker. But unlike the generation that preceded him, Segura is coming of age in an art scene in which such rebelliousness is now easily appropriated by the cultural establishment it tries to provoke. He has responded to these circumstances by making work that has become much more self-referential in its violent interpellation of the Mexican art world itself. *Los dos Gabrieles* (2005), for example, is an intervention based on Frida Kahlo's famous portrait as *Las dos Fridas* (1939), in which Segura has replaced the faces of Kahlo with those of Gabriel Orozco. During one of Orozco's talks in Mexico City, Segura stole a slide from the projector and used it to make photographic prints on demand, sold at cost, in *Orozco to the People/Cheap Prints on Demand* (2003). In these works, Segura sets out to question—even sabotage—not just the art establishment but also the art market, commenting ironically on the inflated value of the fetishized art object.

In a similar vein, for Segura's 2006 collaboration with Renato Garza, *Cuauhtémoc Buddha*, the artists made a series of sculptures of Cuauhtémoc Medina, Mexico City's foremost art critic (and, admittedly, a large man) as a Buddha. The text that accompanies the sculpture mockingly instructs us to rub the Buddha's belly in order to attain artistic success. For Segura this is a response to the deeply entrenched unilateralism of contemporary critical discourse in Mexico, which excludes the possibility of dialogue with artists.

Segura is the poster-boy for a young generation that is culturally savvy and globally connected and which, for better or worse, calculates risk and its consequences much more consciously than the generations that came before. Segura, in particular, has both appropriated and questioned the effectiveness of art as a kind of sabotage, reminding the spectator that the crimes occurring around us every day are more easily forgotten than crimes recorded for the art gallery.<sup>30</sup>

The growing attention to Mexican contemporary art in the international arena has impacted Segura in a direct and visible way, sometimes to the extent of making his work seem cynical. Nonetheless, he still engages with a lineage of questions and stylistic idioms that reaches back to Jodorowsky, Margolles, and Okón before him. Once more the release of laughter and terror blurs the line that divides exploitation in

the world and exploitation in the work. It demands that spectators be active viewers, but also forces us to become implicated as perpetrators and criminals. In Segura's work, uncertainty is the child of risk.

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In his "Manifesto," Allan Kaprow declares that, "now, as art becomes less art, it takes on philosophy's early role as critique of life."<sup>31</sup> This proposition reveals that contemporary art always already implies an aesthetics of risk, because as a critique of life, it blurs and reformulates the meanings of our most basic assertions about life, death, reality, nature, and all the ideological constructions and discourses in which they are situated. Such contingencies are revealed with special poignancy in the work of artists who live or work in Mexico City, perhaps because, as one of the world's largest cities, it is always teetering on the limit between order and chaos, caught between freedom, anarchy and repression, between development and hunger, and between a difficult past and an unforeseeable future. The city is, therefore, a fertile incubator for artistic experiments of different sorts and seems inexorably to foment the risk they entail.

All the artists discussed here deal with the very real risks of profanity (religious, bodily, artistic) and the profanity of excess. The work of all four posits very real risks to the body politic, to the embodiments of the artwork, to the bodies of artists as well as spectators. The bodies they question and re-imagine constitute sites of repression, but emerge as sites of possible transformation or resistance. And yet, is there a place for a singular concept of risk in all the pieces I've examined? If, to many, risk is abstractly linked to actuarial probabilities, market crashes, number-crunching, or to Pascal's wager about the consequences of believing or not believing in God,<sup>32</sup> then perhaps, in works I have mentioned, risk itself is un-defined as the ultimate uncertainty. Surely whatever risk there is in art is carried by the risk of complicity—of the artist, of the passers-by, of the participants who are exhibiting themselves (as exhibitionists?), of authorities who let certain things "slide," and of spectators (voyeurs) who spectacularize other things. For these artists, risk is at the same time violent uncertainty and grotesque implication.