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DECEIVE, INVEIGLE & OBFUSCATE:



AN
INTERVIEW
WITH
JOAQUIN
SEGURA*



Joaquin Segura
Someone Else's Doc Martens, 2002
 action and documentation
 (action in which the artist and some colleagues stole a pair of black 12 inch heel Doc Martens from a passerby in Mexico City, identical to those worn by the artist at the time of the robbery)
 courtesy the artist and Yautepc Gallery, Mexico

Joaquin Segura is a Mexican artist living in Guadalajara. He travelled to Australia and New Zealand in 2010, exhibiting in *Omega*, curated by Tony Garafilakis at Margaret Lawrence Gallery, Melbourne, and *Carry On Or Stow Away* at Gambia Castle, Auckland. His work was also included in the group show *Evidence of Absence* at Death Be Kind, Melbourne in 2011. His work engages with governmental, educational and art institutional hegemonic structures and the reactions they spawn, in which contradiction and corruption maintain a constant presence. Building from both current and historical reference points, Segura's themes are enlivened by the cultural-political environment of Mexico, so far from the conditions that generate the contemplative conceptualism of Europe and the United States. Evidencing this, he eschews subtlety in favour of a brash immediacy; a strategy for working both within and against the greater Mexican context.

Joaquin Segura: This is a series of images I did called *Homemade* (2010). This is the first image that I did, now I'm working on the third piece of the series. Basically, it's a series where I research homemade alternatives for producing incendiary or explosive agents with materials accessible to the common citizen. The elements of the explosive agents that I refer to are those used by radical groups that I've been researching for the last few years — either far right wing groups, or violent left groups — and the US military as well.

Thomas Jeppe: I remember doing this myself when I was a teenager. So on the one hand this subject matter is political tools, on the other hand it's also the domain of boys having fun.

JS: Absolutely. I am interested more in the social aspect of it. This idea of mayhem just floating around. But this material is readily accessible, for anyone who wants to look into it. So it has this double nature.

TJ: In a way, this is aestheticising the processes of political incidents, and it's also crystallising some aspects of the aesthetics of anarchy as well.

JS: My practice has something to do with the idea of aestheticising sabotage. I'm trying to formulate some sort of poetics of disaster. Like the idea of mayhem, and different levels of violence pervading different parts of contemporary social nuclei. That's where I've been working within the last few years. In a way I'm also interested in processes of information and coding and decoding; researching these obscure political or social references with very specific social contexts, decoding them through research and recoding them into works. I like the idea of a mute work, a self-contained work.

I think it's more clear with works like this one, *Untitled (Zimmermann)*, a reproduction of a telegram sent from the German government to the Mexican government during World War II, proposing them an alliance, the famous Zimmermann telegram. This was a point where the United States were neutral in the war, and Germany figured that if they supported Mexico to wage war against the States, offering military, economic and logistical support for Mexico to recover their lost territories from the Mexican-American war of 1846 — almost a hundred years later. This was just a scheme for Mexico to comply with them, to wage war with

the States, so the States would be busy in this war with Mexico and wouldn't enter the global conflict. Of course, this didn't happen, but I'm interested in how these obscure historical episodes do pervade our contemporary context.

TJ: So this is somehow a reflection on the foundation of national identity.

JS: Yes. I absolutely despise the idea of national identity, and I don't really believe in the idea of country, and most of the work I produce just mocks this idea of Latin-American art, or Mexican contemporary art, which I think is absurd; it's just an accidental geographical event that I was born and work here. I think it has nothing to do with the work I actually do.

TJ: But then I think it's clear to see, as far as contemporary Mexican artists go, there is a series of themes and approaches that run together, a series of themes that are very much unlike Western European cities and countries, very much unlike the United States, separate from Asian forms of cultural production. It appears that, for contemporary Mexican art, there is something about violence being very common, there's something about economic states and the way value is determined — Santiago Sierra (Spanish-born but Mexico-based), for example — you must admit, there are some aspects of these art forms that are iconically Mexican.

JS: Of course, there are some recurring themes within Mexican contemporary art, and of course you can't fully escape your circumstances. But there is a whole different set of artists working in a direction that's almost opposite to the artists I'm interested in. Still, there are some things that you can't fully escape.

I don't think my practice is object based at all; my role is more to point at these moments of crisis around us. I think that's precisely the function of it — to point at fissures, the crises of institutions, as in social, political, cultural institutions. [The concept of] Latin America is crumbling to pieces, and it's not something new. It's been going on since I remember. There's a funny thing about Mexicans, we refer to ourselves as 'sons of crisis' — that's a usual epithet we use. We are forced to function within this crumbling panorama, and what's interesting about this is how you learn to take advantage of this completely uncertain situation, and learn to function within that environment.

TJ: This is what we were talking about today in the car; it was so clear, looking out the window, and it struck me that this is so much a place of improvisation. When that's an element of national identity, it is in equal measure quite dangerous and very creative.

JS: I'm really interested in punk ideology, I was practically raised with DIY. Less resources. You have to learn to function within a context that forces you to do more with less. To potentialise what you have. It functions within all levels here, not only in contemporary art. You've seen it in your time over here.

TJ: Of course. It's on the street, it's in the shops.

JS: Yes, it's immediate. I do think it's because of this idea, I always have a sense that in Mexico,

in Latin America, your context is escaping through your hands, you can barely grasp at it. You should approach it in this immediate and more effective way to make it mean something somehow.

TJ: These political activist tools you are working with, they may be the most blunt and forceful way of being improvisational, and working for your place in the world you find yourself in.

JS: Of course, provocation is one of the most present languages in twentieth-century art, it's not something new. Whenever I produce something, I work the way I do, it's a recurring critique that provocation is overrated in some way, it's cheap or easy. But I think that it's only a question of approach. I don't think that realm of language has already given out, we just need to find different levels of approach. Integrating the art spectator as well.



I'm really interested, for example, in Hakim Bey's ideas about the aestheticisation of crime and sabotage as another creative tool. He said he advocated 'Poetic Terrorism', and that art should actually completely affect the people watching it. I did these works a few years ago, *Someone Else's Doc Martens* (2002) and *Hangover* (2003). (*Someone Else's Doc Martens was an action in which the artist and some colleagues stole a pair of black 12-hole Doc Martens from a passerby in Mexico City, identical to those worn by the artist at the time of the robbery; Hangover was an action in which the artist broke a bottle of wine he had just drunk on the head of the first person who walked near where he was standing.*)

TJ: I've discussed these works with many people. It may be a reflection of the time now, but people quite often dismiss the work as fake. That becomes the talking point, as if the reality of random violence is incomprehensible. This is some sort of coping mechanism.

JS: Of course, for feeling safe or something.

TJ: Yes, resorting to the idea that this can't possibly be done. But then, if it did take place, the response is shock.

JS: I think it's a bit more than that. I'm also really interested in the ethical limits of contemporary art practice. How contemporary

art deals with these borders. I do think that these kinds of works somehow push the limits, see whether there's a limit or not. I was also interested, as I mentioned before, in institutional crises, and how the whole cultural transactions take place. For example, I'm an artist, and if I make a work where I go in the street and break a bottle on the head of the first person walking by, and the work sells for thousands of dollars, and I get shown in a museum with a curator — I'm interested in this discourse of legitimating practices, how this somehow gets appropriated by the market. I'm interested in this whole set of contradictions. I think a good part of my practice has to do with somehow trying to play these strategies by the rules, but twisting them a bit in order to push boundaries more and more.

TJ: This becomes, in part, a commentary about violence in Mexico, but maybe even more an indictment of the economies of the art world.

JS: That's the first reaction you get, and relating it to a wider body of work, you are able to get a bigger picture of what I was thinking at that moment. This intention of pushing boundaries and seeing how deep the discussion of these topics can go. It's more visible in a project like *Untitled (Gringo Loco)* (2009). It's a reproduction of the Las Vegas sign, a really exact replica of it, a sculpture seven metres by five metres high. I built the sign and substituted the text, so instead of saying 'Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas, Nevada', you read 'Fuck Off you Chili-Eatin Gringo Loco up your Ass'. This was a site-specific project, a big project, absolutely absurd, [in response to the proposed] building of a Guggenheim Museum within the city of Guadalajara in a protected area, one of the last green areas of the city, in a canyon. It's an area with really strict regulations for urban development. You're not able to build

there, but there was so much money involved — the whole budget for the Guggenheim project was somewhere around \$70,000,000 — so the city completely by-passed all the regulations, and allowed the project to go on. It was absurd.

TJ: So they were hoping for the Bilbao effect? This institutional driven economy-boost.

JS: Yes, but there's not really an infrastructure in Guadalajara to support it. The area has no access, there are no roads for it. If you invested ten per cent of the actual budget for this project, you would get an effective art education system, stronger museums, the city would actually work. But it was just this white elephant that was being built in the middle of nowhere. So the project I was involved in was about that — talking about this absurd cultural franchise, relating Las Vegas to Guadalajara in terms of cultural tourism. I worked on this project for a year, then a couple of days before the project opened, the mayor of the city, part of the major conservative party in Mexico, he bans the project and sends armed police to get us out of the place where the sculpture is being installed. We were taken out of the sculpture site.

TJ: Who organised it from your end?

JS: This was a joint project between my gallery Arena Mexico and the cultural bureau of the city. It was an official thing, there were some

official funds involved in it, and some other cultural space here in Guadalajara which already closed. The joint project consisted of this show that was a small revision of the work I did in the past eight years in a government-funded space, and a second show at Arena Mexico. The sign was created as the closing of the exhibition cycle. Something happened, someone backed out just before the sign was completed, and there was a big media outrage in the city. We went for two or three months just fighting over it in the papers.

TJ: What was the media position?

JS: The official government line was that they never authorised the project. But we do have official letters of recommendation and official documents, proof that they gave us money to work with, but the official line was that they never knew about the project and it was just a media stunt. Which, if I had thought of it as a media stunt, would be good; I would be perfectly okay with it. But it was not a media stunt.

TJ: Given that this kind of work is directly related to the context of being an artist in Mexico (though you work a lot overseas, in America, in Europe) — how do you negotiate this position between different countries and continents? Do you feel that these foreign contexts are so different?

JS: I think that the crisis of institutions is somehow global. When I go abroad, I try to do specific projects that work with references that are closer to the area of context, but not really working with something that I don't fully understand. So the strategies I've used so far have somehow universal references — to military history and radical groups of the past, World War II history, the Vietnam era. These are references that are more fully assimilated in other contexts. There are a few works I've done that refer to really specific events, such as *Olympia* (2009). In 1968, when the Olympics were held in Mexico, there was this student massacre. There are no official government numbers for the people killed, but recent investigations show that it's in the thousands.

TJ: I read that the official number of people killed was forty.

JS: Yeah, the first official numbers were five or eight, not even ten victims.

TJ: And they went on to arrest 1300 people ...

JS: This sculpture relates to that particular event. In this massacre, there was a paramilitary group code-named *Batallón Olimpia*, Olympia Battalion, which I think is a really twisted joke, code-named because of the Olympic Games. The mission of this paramilitary group was to make the army confront the civilians so they would enter into conflict, to function as a catalyst for the army to shoot civilians. They were distinguished by wearing a white glove on their left hand while firing open-range into the crowd with their right hand. This sculpture is a big white glove on a black marble base, with the word 'OLYMPIA' engraved in Greek characters. I think this is a good piece to talk about this specific context that expands when related to a wider body of work. I did also show my interest in the process of coding and re-coding, somehow creating this mute object — you know that something twisted is going on in

there, but you're not sure if you don't have this background info.

TJ: Given the story, given the background, this sculpture is not obscured — it's quite open in its coding and in its depiction. So there's something about the element of accessibility and bluntness and being a pop culture object with difficult subject matter.

JS: These are things that are supposed to be forgotten; the institutions, the government, big structures that shape our country now want it to be forgotten. The kind of things that are meant to be swept under the rug. What I am trying to do with my practice is to not allow these things to happen. There are some other works that relate to this. For *Hey America* (2009), I appropriated an American cartoonist that signs his name AW Man, 'A White Man'; he works with White Power groups in the Southern US like the Aryan Nations, the KKK, these extremist groups. He's been working for decades, but there's not really any information that you can check to see if he's an actual person or if it's a pen name under which different cartoonists work. Anyway, this guy is against anything that's not white, Anglo-Saxon and Protestant. He's against Mexican immigrants — well, any kind of immigrants — he's against black people, he's against homosexuals, he's against Jews, anything that's not the way he sees the world. I've appropriated these outrageous images and reworked them in this exquisite tapestry technique to force this cognitive dissonance, or logical conflict that somehow the people who are watching these works should force themselves to somehow negotiate or solve. My work relates a lot to what I think is an absolute nonsense of total ideologies, crumbling notions of nation or identity. In the end, I think it speaks about denial and deception and impotence towards something that was supposed to work but you know is not working.

TJ: Though these works do not propose a solution. They just re-iterate the problem.

JS: I don't think that we as artists must propose a solution.

TJ: In that case, your work relies on the presence of conflict.

JS: If you look at the work I do, you can't really tell any position by the work itself. If you look at it from a certain perspective it could be far-right wing. From another perspective it could be far-left wing. I like this ambiguity. If it wasn't like that, I would be doing propaganda — though, I am interested in the mechanisms of propaganda. In the *Flags of our Fathers* project, I mixed up the heraldic flags and flags of different radical groups. This raises the question: how you affirm your identity through the random manipulation of colours and patterns on a piece of cloth? How can these mechanisms of propaganda and information actually lead to confirmation of identity? That's why I think it's important for the work to remain somehow mute.

TJ: At the same time, some of your work is directly reflective of the art scene. For example, the work *Cuauhtemoc Buddha* (2006) shows a Mexican celebrity art critic as a Buddha statue.

JS: That's a different body of work, but it goes into art-world politics. Of course, I am interested in how the Mexican art scene

has been confirming itself in the last few years. There are a few works that relate to that. *Los Dos Gabrieles* (2005), I cut out Gabriel Orozco's face and pasted it over *The Two Friedas* by Frieda Kahlo. I think Orozco and Kahlo are two of the biggest tragedies in contemporary art in Mexico. Not because of their appearance but because of the importance they have. There are political aspects of how Gabriel Orozco somehow acquired this demigod status he now enjoys. A few years ago, his first show in the Tamayo Museum came years after he showed elsewhere in the world. He was like this travelling artist, not really Mexican. There are several interviews where he was asked about this, and he does not define himself as a Mexican artist. He defines himself as an international artist, which I think is completely outrageous. Artemio defined Orozco as 'like Huitlacoche crap', which I think is the best way you can define him. Huitlacoche is something you can get in any market, something readily accessible that you see everywhere in Mexico — but it can also be served in the best restaurants in Europe. That's huitlacoche crap — something exoticising.

TJ: Is there something about Huitlacoche being a parasite? The fungus that grows on the local produce of corn?

JS: Yeah, if you take the metaphor to that point! But the important thing is that he's a by-product of something. I'm interested in these figures of authority, and how contemporary art practice in Mexico has this seemingly untouchable status. It relates to when I was growing up in Mexico, as I mentioned before, there are things you are supposed to forget, and there are things you are not supposed to talk about. Things have changed in the last years. I remember when I was a kid, listening to my dad and my mum talk about the newspapers they were supposed to get but they were confiscated; the newspapers were writing about something they were not supposed to. My problem with figures of authority dates back to those years. How these figures of authority formed in my perspective. That also has to do with the *Cuauhtemoc Buddha* work.

TJ: When we start to think about these specific references — the Frieda Kahlo painting, the 1968 Olympics, these references to World War II and possible German-Mexican alliance — they are anachronistic, in a way.

JS: Obviously, they are things that have already happened. But I don't think they're anachronistic at all. I think the actual situations, the very specific contexts are passed, but what they actually talk about remains relevant — the question of how you deal with this conflict, I think that's universal, and it's as actual as something you could read in the newspaper. For example, the work talking about the 1968 student massacre, those things are still happening, political dissidents and social activists are still disappearing as we speak. It's something you read in the newspapers often. I try to read back in history and locate a singular event, and then work with that event, but somehow the themes are pretty actual, contemporary and immediate.

* This interview took place in Guadalajara in November 2010. The title for this article is taken from Segura's solo show of the same name at Yautecoc, Mexico City, 2009.