Risky Business: The Work of Joaquín Segura

If ‘art is unkillable without risk’, as Boris Pasternak suggests1, then how does this unkillable union work, and what implications does it bear some of the riskiest business transactions by avant-garde artists? The study of the business of art is abundantly clear, getting punched and pelted after a concert with the Dandies at the Cabaret Voltaire, having a smooth shaven roust about a collaboration 1976 performance by Ulay and Marina Abramovic; getting cast on a car or having oneself shot in the arm, as in Chris Burden’s Shoot (1971) and Trout Fisk (1974). But does risk always involve the physical body of the artist or the bodies of others, as in these examples? What if, as simple pass-byers, we were hit on the head with a bottle as part of a performance? Is this a revelation of new worlds of activity that put the body in peril, for making one feel ‘Valérian’2; or should we associate it with the risk of nuclear suicide? And what about our role as spectators—how and why does a stranger seek such an assault in a mischievously complex position, at least by implication?***

This ‘hypothetical encounter’ is, in fact, a video piece made in Mexico City, by Mexican artist Joaquín Segura (b. Mexico City, 1980). Perhaps paradoxically, however, his work has not usually been discussed in relation to concepts of risk, instead his work is usually lumped together with other contemporary artists in the category of ‘dangerous art’. In the current, booming, art scene in Mexico City, many critics, from scholars to popular journalists, make comfortable—and reiterated— recourse to the rhetoric of danger (whether personal, artistic, or contextual). Mexico City is then a dangerous urban space, the whole nation is a grotesque zone of peril; everyone lives in fear of getting caught. Staged or not, through a response and the murder. But when the freely exercised of these pseudo extreme tourism fantasies is slimmed away, what remains, and what is at stake, in the kind of art practices made in art by some artists to whom I have just referred?

It is a clear night in 2002, and you’re taking an after-dinner walk on the small park near your home 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 wouldn’t be the beginning of a mugging, as you had initially thought, but rather part of an art piece by Segura titled Rumpe Arrepa. The next day, you head home as if you’d drunk the whole bottle and a couple more. The piece documenting the violent event also relates to Segura’s other performances, such as Sombras de John Marver (2002) in which he seduces a pedestrian in the Condesa neighborhood with a solitary bottle of white wine. A performance of the same name (2005) in which the artist steals a car stereo, self-constructively implicating themselves in the repertoire of violent or illegal actions. Taking Oates and Calderón’s transgression to the next level, Segura’s videos extend this discussion (date I then call my work Terrorist Art) and set out to question recent tendencies in the art world, such as the ‘sacred antinomies’ of contemporary art, as a kind of substrate in which the spectator, remembering the perpetrator of the crimes occurring around an event, is more easily forgotten than crimes recorded for the art gallery. This has been made clear in his latest work, including theUntitled (8th Floor Dess) (2008) when a tandem dropped white boat floats poetically in the gallery or museum space and the dramatic lighting then reveals the boat in fact holding a pin. At a distance the boat, symbol of peace, seems beautiful enough, but up close the engine hollow thunders, as the boat has just dropped a real fragmentary grenade.

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 out of place. Nonetheless, he still engages in a language of questions and stylistic idioms that reaches back several generations of artists before him. In his piece the release of humor and terror blurs the lines between the celebration of the world and the struggle for the work, it demands that spectators be active viewers, but also forces us to become implicated as perpetrators and criminals. More a more provocative, Segura is an agent of unearnany.***

In his ‘Manifesto’, Allen Kaprow declares that, ‘now, as art becomes less art, it takes on philosophically early role, as critique of life’. This proposition reveals that contemporary art already amply implies an aesthetic of risk and uncertainty, as an art of critique of life; it blurs and reforms the meanings of our most basic assumptions about life, death, reality, nature, and all the ideological constructions and discourses in which we are immersed. Such critiques are revealed with special poignancy in the work of Segura, who lives and works in Mexico City, perhaps because beneath all of the world’s largest cities, it is always an adjustment on the limit between order and chaos, caught between freedom, autonomy and repression, between development and hunger, and between a difficult past and an unforeseeable future. The City is therefore a fertile incubator for art’s experiences of different facets and seems incessantly to fetch the realm they entail. Segura’s work deals with the very real risks of profanity (religious—as in his Mother Teresa paintings, or the Buddha works—but also bodily and artistic), and the profanities of excess. His work also poses very real risks to the body politic and was made clear this past December when his large site-specific sculpture Untitled (Geroge Low), was seized in Guadalajara, to the embarrassment of the art world, to the bodies of the artists as well as the spectator.

2 This is a reference to Segura’s 2002 channel video titled Valérian.
3 Oates, John, backyard, Cigale Robert, Joaquín Segura, (Factory) 0140 no. 29 (Oct.
5 Segura follows Malin de Hoy’s definition of Sabotage and quotes him as an important influence.

Image credits:

The mausoleum address, 2009 mixed media, 16 x 12 x 12 cm

study for Untitled #1, 2009 glazed ceramic, 51 x 40 x 11 cm

Untitled (alive oak), 2008
taxed marble, stone granite & safety pin Dimensions variable

courtesy the artist and yadim, Mexico City and Area Mexican Arte Contemporáneo, Galería

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