

The fog of Manchester hangs heavy in Jalisco

by: Nato Thompson, May 2009

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Apparently Morrissey is more popular in Mexico than in the rest of the world. At least this is what I hear. I find the news baffling, but then find my bafflement annoying. Why can't I reconcile my expectations of Latin music with the ironic flippancy of the Smiths? Morrissey is so white, so British, so not, well, Mexican.

Then you have this song that Valerie Tevere and Angel Nevarez put together. Standing in the plaza, the Mariachi Ciudad de Guadalajara casually rock and sing this 1979 Joy Division anthem. It actually sounds incredible. Joy Division, heirs to the throne of subcultural industrial mythology, travel across the planet to land in Plaza de la Liberación in Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico.

It is not without precedent. In 1997, artist Jeremy Deller had the Fairey Brass Band perform acid house music in a project aptly titled Acid Brass. For Deller, this was an opportunity to connect disparate working class music histories in a single musical form. The dissonance and the historic continuity would produce something altogether new. It would be a bridge between the past and present, the cultural and political. The same goes for this diddy, but in this case, the space is critical and the cultures are not the same.

Transmission is a pleurably morose track steeped knee-deep in nihilism. It is a pop-song about letting go and disappearing drenched in Ian Curtis' tragedy and alienation. Here we have it performed in a sunny plaza by a smiling Mariachi band juxtaposed with images from a public demonstration. What role does this self-obsessed European alienation have in this site of public demonstration and activity? As the music plays, and we are encouraged to dance, dance, dance to the radio, we feel the pressure of a various cultural winds. Different forms of cultural participation each with their own cadence, attire, and performativity gather at this site. What do Tevere and Nevarez offer us with this sad British song sung in an activated public space?

And we would go on as though nothing was wrong.

And hide from these days we remained all alone.

Staying in the same place, just staying out the time.

Touching from a distance,

Further all the time.

Are these distances between cultural movements and spatial production so vast? Centered in a plaza where public demonstrations are par for the course in Mexico, we find a sensibility so vastly different than what the white western world might know. But then again, Morrissey is famous in Mexico. How far is this distance really? Outside of producing just a flippant cultural experiment, Tevere and Nevarez remind the viewer of the urgency of their message. These spaces are used for the production of rights, laws, and justice. They are not just spaces of trite cultural performativity or consumerism, but in fact, they are for the production of a citizenry. The alienation that fuels the fire of Ian Curtis butts up against the activated space of the plaza.

Yet, again, alienation is a key part of radical movements. It is the lifeblood of a collective desire for social transformation. Could the core love for Morrissey be the same love that makes impassioned protests emerge at this plaza? Could a deep alienation produce an activated populace across cultural and geographic lines? Maybe. Maybe not. I can't say for sure, but this song with its plunky chords and sad lyrics, makes me smile at the beautiful alienation that stirs the plazas of the world.

Biography:

Nato Thompson is a curator and producer at Creative Time, NY. Since January 2007, Nato has organized major projects for Creative Time such as Democracy in America: The National Campaign (2008), Paul Chan's acclaimed Waiting for Godot in New Orleans (2007) and Mike Nelson's A Psychic Vacuum. Previous to Creative Time, he worked as Curator at MASS MoCA where he completed numerous large-scale exhibitions such as The Interventionists: Art in the Social Sphere (2004), a survey of political art of the 1990s with a catalogue distributed by MIT Press. His writings have appeared in numerous publications including BookForum, Art Journal, tema celeste, Parkett, Cabinet and The Journal of Aesthetics and Protest. The College Art Association awarded him for distinguished writing in Art Journal in 2004. He recently curated an exhibition for Independent Curators International titled Experimental Geography with a book available by Melville House Publishing. His book on art and activism is due out by Autonomedia in October 2009.