

**Jordi Colomer, Cyprien Gaillard, and aernout mik go west: destination Mexico**

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Jordi Colomer 'Avenida Ixtapaluca' in laboratorio de arte alameda

This summer, MoMA visitors queued underneath a screen showing Aernout Mik's 2005 'Osmosis and Excess'. Around the same time in Mexico City, Proyectos Monclova featured Cyprien Gaillard's 2009 film 'Ciudades de Oro y Espejos', while the centrally located museum Laboratorio de Arte Alameda showcased Jordi Colomer's 'Avenida Ixtapaluca (Houses for Mexico)'. The MoMA survey dedicated to Mik included six works made by the Dutch artist between 1996 and 2006. Colomer's exhibition comprised ten videos and a series of photographs created between 1997 and 2009. Cyprien Gaillard's gallery solo show, by contrast, focused on a specific location in the Mayan Riviera, which provided the 'matière brute' for a Polaroid series and a 16mm film.

All made in Mexico, these three films also premiered in Mexican, or near-Mexican, venues. Coincidentally, neither Mik, nor Gaillard or Colomer make documentary or reportage art. Their work depends on concrete references to reality, but never ends there. Looking at the site-specific ingredients in their Mexican work, I wondered: to what degree did the three European video-artists avoid falls into romantic tourist traps?

#### TIJUANA 2005: AERNOUT MIK

'Osmosis and Excess' had its debut at the Tijuana-San Diego art project inSite. Since 1992, this biennial supported by the Centro Cultural Tijuana and the San Diego Museum of Art as well as several high-profile private funders, aims to promote public participation. With this purpose in mind, they invite a diversity of artists to produce work for a 3-months long exhibition (late August-mid November). The participants are flown in for three one-week periods, to map areas and explore potential sites for production and exhibition. While 'Excess and Osmosis' was shot in the Tijuana urban area, the video was projected as an installation in a San Diego parking.

The video is shot on HD and adapted to a panoramic frame. It shows two settings of symbolic weight: a typical Tijuana pharmacy and a junkyard of car carcasses. We see a handful of white-aproned pharmacists at work. At the outset the scene depicts their hygienic turf, which then changes into a mud-invaded store that becomes the playground for children. Next, Mik shoots a landscape from afar and focuses on another group of children. They line the contour of a landfill hill and take turns at beating a 'piñata'.

The contrast between cleanliness and dirt, and imagination and commerce are obvious, as so are the suggestions about the trafficking of prescription drugs northward, while wrecks go south. In this video, the children, their playing habits, and their imagination are the vehicles through which Mik stages his didactic show of opposites.

#### CANCÚN 2009: CYPRIEN GAILLARD

Cyprien Gaillard's expedition to Cancún coincided with the yearly invasion of the Mayan Riviera by 'springbreakers' - mostly young US American tourists whose vacation centers on consuming massive amounts of alcohol.

'Cuidades de Oro y Espejos', a close to 9-minutes long 16mm film transferred to DVD, was presented together with Polaroids of 1970s tourist infrastructure. Gaillard so reminded his viewers of the birth of Cancún as tourist destination. Gaillard made the works specifically for his first gallery show in Mexico, and he realized the greatest part of the shooting a few months prior to the opening. 'Cuidades de Oro y Espejos' takes as initial subject a raucous group of twenty-some springbreakers who gulp beer and liquor in front of the camera. Gaillard juxtaposes the adolescent 'gringo' with images of dolphins in a hotel pool, the inside of a disco, and a scene where a red-dressed masked character dances in front of ruins at El Rey with the Cancún skyline in the background. The piece ends with the demolishing of a seventies mirror building.

If Aernout Mik brought the reality of uneven commodity exchanges between the US and Mexico to a screen in a shopping mall in La Jolla, Gaillard's Mexican film combines the stereotype of the stupid US tourist with the aura of pre-Colombian ruins. 'Cuidades de Oro y Espejos' echoed Gaillard's masterful

2007 'Desniansky Raion', but had a distinct and at times overly stereotypical Mexican flavor.

In the Polaroids, the video, and a series of intervened postcards of Angkor Wat also at Proyectos Monclova, Gaillard tells a story about the human drive to build and a consequent fall into ruin. As he exposes tourism's ugliness, he also makes clear references to pre-Colombian remains and possible resurrections. In the El Rey scene, a figure dressed like a Bloods gang member suggests resistance and possible uprising. As in his other videos, Gaillard also introduces a soundtrack, this time it is 'Le Feu de St Elme' by Haïm Sabam and Shuki Levy. While the artist and his peers might associate the tune with 'Les Mystérieuses Cités d'Or' (a French-Japanese animation), the reference was lost on most visitors, for whom the soundtrack gave an eerie, quasi out-of-time feel to the film. This combination of the artist's own childhood imagery of pre-Colombian grandeur with semi-poetic imagery (the dolphins and the dance) forms the backdrop to the colonization of white men (albeit this time hammered youngsters).

The position of the artist vis à vis the drunken adolescents or the dancing man was unclear - I, for one, wondered how much booze he had to buy the vacationers to do the shooting. But beyond the politics of binge drinking: what happens when such a film is included in a venue whose visitors are anything but the subjugated colonized, and partake in a complex postcolonial culture? These viewers' approach to ruins and travel is probably less romantically tinted than that of the artist whose work comes close to professing universal tales of human grandeur and destruction.

#### MÉXICO DF 2009: JORDI COLOMER

'Avenida Ixtapaluca', a 6-minutes long video shot with a HD camera, stood out in Jordi Colomer's Laboratorio de Arte Alameda survey. Unlike the other installations or photographs in the exhibition, this video was specially commissioned for the Mexico City iteration of the show, which had originated at the Jeu de Paume. For this piece, production costs were split among the Paris- and Barcelona-based Maravills, SEACEX (the State Corporation for Spanish Cultural Action Abroad), and the Mexico-based Centro Cultural de España. Clearly, most financial support for this project came from Spanish public funds.

The storyline of this video is simple: the camera observes two girls who walk along Avenida Ixtapaluca. They carry a large 'piñata'. At the outset, the camera observes them at eye level, but it quickly moves to a bird's eye perspective. We hear the girls giggle and catch part of their conversation. The street is lined with modest uniform one-family houses. A few minutes down the road, the girls meet a man and hand him the 'piñata'. He continues the journey on the avenue and the girls return to where they came from. As the man reaches his destination, the camera takes a wider bird's perspective; it glides over the street and shoots the neighborhood at large.

The spectator imagines this scene to take place either in a worker's 'barrio' or in a social housing neighborhood (as suggested by Colomer's subtitle, 'Houses for Mexico'). When the camera takes a farther distance, the viewer becomes aware of the scope of this settlement and, at the same time, observes certain details of this urbanization. From the vigilant cockpit of the helicopter, the camera records a neighborhood of the urban poor. Yet,

remarkably so, Colomer did not choose the more chaotic 'auto-construccion' (bricolage-like 'self-constructed' housing) that lines the mountains around Mexico. The all-seeing eye glances over houses but only partially allows the viewer to imagine life at these outskirts of Mexico City. While the piece includes some conversation, most other environmental sounds are eliminated from the video. The unsentimental work therefore obtains a more poetic and less contextualized feel. Taken by the lightness and open-endedness of the transaction that was generated by the single prop, the viewer remains attentive to the way in which the landscape unfolds. The story might seem utterly ordinary to a Mexican eye that doesn't glint at the sight of colorful papier mâché. But this is precisely the point: Colomer's optic emphasizes the perspectival conditions of urbanism and the way we perceive urban landscapes.

## DEPARTURES

Of these three pieces, I only saw one outside of its native habitat: Aernout Mik's 'Osmosis and Excess'. In 2005, it hung in a California parking; in 2009, it floated over the MoMA lobby. Mik's work, like that of Colomer, is a video installation: the image expands into space and calls equal attention to its support. At inSite, the parking lot was a crucial part of the work: the panoramic screen on a concrete parking wall suggested a direct connection between the content of the film and the SUV-speckled mall. This part was lost on the MoMA visitor who approached the projection from the hygienic museum ground floor. Despite the loss of reference, this move away from San Diego also had a positive effect: it took the overt border context out and endowed the piece with a fictive, less pedagogical element.

Meanwhile in Mexico City, Colomer's piece was framed by a plywood structure and shown in a transformed church complex. The plywood set-up suggested continuity between this work and the other installations in the survey. The bird's-eye perspective of 'Avenida Ixtapaluca', however, worked extremely well in the two-story, arched patio of this colonial building. At Alameda, Colomer introduced the growing fringe of Mexico City into a building that bears witness to colonial fervor. In this context, one could hear a historical echo about urbanization and social control. I can only speculate about what might happen when this film leaves the premises of Alameda. Even if the echo fades away and the prosaic nature of the captured action might turn exotic, the film's narrative ambivalence and the absence of visual analogies or information adequately prevent the imposition of symbolic messages.

'Ciudades de Oro y Espejos' occasions the opposite effect. Gaillard's work is a straightforward projection. In contrast to the pieces by Mik and Colomer, it does not aim beyond the screen and therefore changes venues more easily. Coincidentally, 'Ciudades de Oro y Espejos' presents an allegory of universal scope. Despite the references to Mexico's pre-Colombian and most recent past, the bottom line of Gaillard's work deals with a zeal for building, decadence, and decay. He reshapes the epic human versus nature battle. This tale catches on more easily outside of the Americas as it does within. Allegory only emerges when a viewer is detached from the immediate material environment depicted in the images.

Where Colomer creates interest in a landscape seen from above, Gaillard takes disconnection to arrive at exportable myth. 'Ciudades de Oro y Espejos' beautifully joins eternal opponents but doesn't bring the antagonism to a different level. Mik's film of opposites, on the other hand, allows fictional exploration instead of myth. The line between this type of fiction and myth is not clear-cut. When visiting artists use typical locations, invoke tropes, and use folkloric props, it is crucial that they consider the exhibition context of their work. If not, they risk either being branded as moralist or losing their viewer to mythical dreaming.

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