

The Dream of the 90s is Alive in Poitiers

How does it feel like to let forever be?

How does it feel like to spend a little lifetime sitting in the gutter?

To scream a symphony?

--Chemical Brothers

[Note 1:]

One June evening in 2018 the 24-hour party people convened in Poitiers for the founding of “The Pan-European Socialist PartY.” In attendance were Y, V, P, N, S and L. “It needs to be party with an Ygreque” someone said, hence PartY.

Before and after La Chatte took the stage it was agreed: a new Socialist movement needs to start on the dance floor, where the people move; it needs to be invented from the feet up —which doesn’t exactly make it a grass root movement, but does lend it rhizomatic potential —because that’s how we dress and that’s how we dance. Any new Socialist party must be untethered from the nation state and be founded on our right to PartY. ¹

Wild Beast roared “Why can’t we just fucking love each other?” and thus declared our PartY politics.

Were there drugs? Why, of course! Love is the drug, you see.

In Poitiers there is a place where such frivolity seems completely reasonable, where in fact we can be serious about such playfulness, seriously playful, yet playfully serious about art, music and the general quality of the fabric of life. It is

¹ This idea is not new; Socialist old timers Alexandra Kollontai and Emma Goldman already preached and practiced free love a hundred years ago, but if we should take a lesson out of their book, it could be this:

If I can’t dance, I don’t want to be part of your revolution!

In sync with this ideal of a revolution born on the dance floor, Silvia Federici’s essay “In Praise of the Dancing Body” concludes:

Our struggle then must begin with the re-appropriation of our body, the revaluation and rediscovery of its capacity for resistance, and expansion and celebration of its powers, individual and collective. Dance is central to this re-appropriation. In essence, the act of dancing is an exploration and invention of what a body can do: of its capacities, its languages, its articulations of the strivings of our beings. [...] Since the power to be affected and to affect, to be moved and move, a capacity which is indestructible, exhausted only with death exhausted only with death, is constitutive of the body, there is an immanent politics residing in it: the capacity to transform itself, others, and change the world.

(of course) housed in an old factory building, which was (of course) squatted before being turned into (of course) a music venue/exhibition space/restaurant/bar/record store/fanzinotheque.

That place is called Le Confort Moderne.

[Note 2:]

A few nights later another meeting congregated, in the kitchen, again, because that's the heart of the PartY. In attendance were S, M, T and L.

The topic was the party as show and the show as party. It was agreed: the objects in the show are not important anymore, but important all the same, because the [objects in the] show bring people together. Just like the people make the PartY, but the dance floor brings the PartY together.

Someone said: "You basically have to be a woman or queer to be in that show!" – meaning, since when did straight, white, cis-guys get on the dance floor by themselves – but we do not discriminate. This is an equal-opportunity PartY.

We then established, as the most fundamental right to PartY, our right to bliss. ²

Bliss can be practiced on and off the dance floor. In a late night gathering in the kitchen, or nature tripping on "Little Fluffy Clouds" under little fluffy clouds on a warm summer's eve in the garden of Le Confort Moderne. A return to a paradise, imagined lost.

² Again, we were not exactly breaking new ground here, but instead tapping into a deeper knowing, underscoring what is often frowned upon in the (object driven) art market – fueled as it is by capitalist notions of "originality" and copyright laws – that ideas originate from a collective consciousness, a shared knowledge, and that, sometimes, when more people have the same idea, it is because it is a good idea.

What we in our blissful non-ignorance dubbed "bliss," others have called "joy." In her essay "In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism" Isabelle Stengers concludes that the (only) adequate response to our current catastrophic event, the global ecological and political malaise we find ourselves in, is...JOY! Yes, joy!

Before you get all Christmassy, let me assure you that this "joy" of which Stengers speaks has nothing to do with an interventionist GOD, but instead is borrowed from the vocabulary of Spinoza:

Joy, Spinoza writes, is that which translates an increase in the power of acting, that is to say too, of thinking and imagining, and it has something to do with a knowledge, but with a knowledge that is not of a theoretical order, because it does not in the first place designate an object, but the very mode of existence of whoever becomes capable of it. [...] Joy is not transmitted from the knowledgeable to the ignorant, but is a mode that itself produces equality, the joy of thinking and imagining together, with others, thanks to others.

What were the skies like when you were young?

They were beautiful, the most beautiful skies as a matter of fact³

Not an innocuous Eden, mind you. A Garden of Earthly Delight, in which carnal, intellectual, and spiritual knowledge are assets; where art is important; where music is important; where fashion is important; and not just as commodities but as style, as substance; where open borders are considered, imagined, practiced; where walls go down (not up); where freedom is practiced (not preached).

Our blissful bill of rights can be summoned up in Faithless's gospel:

This is my church

This is where I heal my hurts

Cause tonight

GOD is a DJ⁴

[Note 3:]

A third meeting took place the following Sunday. In attendance were Y, D, and L. Previous meetings were discussed, and it was decided: The Pan-European Socialist Party should be a thing in the world.

It was agreed that the 90s should have a second coming. That our sympathy for the 90s has a completely different flavor than our nostalgia for the 80s (which is tacky and embarrassing, like binging on prawn cocktail flavored chips and ranch dressing in front of E.T. on the VHS.) That the 80s felt like "Back to the Future," whereas the 90s feel like "The Future." Still.

[Note to (Your Future) Self:]

Upon my return to the United States I rummage through a box of old photographs, including a bunch from a rooftop party in Bruxelles in the summer of 1998. My outfit – a thrifted red Adidas top, a Lurex maxi-skirt and Nike trainers – is equally Spice Girls and Margiela.⁵

³ The Orb: "Little Fluffy Clouds" *The Orb's Adventures Beyond The Ultraworld*, (Big Life, 1990)

⁴ Faithless: "GOD is a DJ" *Sunday 8 PM* (Cheeky Records/BMG, 1998)

⁵ Speaking of which: Can we have Margiela back please? With an optimistic belief in a new decade in which to leave behind all the tired things we inherited from the 80s – power dressing, breast fixation and yuppies, to name a few – to focus on hips and shoulders to build a new intellectuela, equally at home in the biblioteque as in the discoteque.

Amongst the photos are some letters from my sister, dated 1997. Written as they were, while going about our daily business just as we were about to set sail for the event horizon of the Internet, they meander:

Now I'm drinking wine with my roommate and his new girlfriend; she is nice enough, but it's a little weird to have to listen to them making out; I wish I could go out and drink some beer and smoke some fags, but I am standby on BarBar Bar tonight; now I just woke up at my new boyfriend's place, his bed is very narrow; etc. etc.

I decide to write back in the same vein, to relay my obsession with the 90s; how I have spent the week home alone, a little dazed and confused, listening to ambient and techno in heavy rotation; Underworld, Stereolab, The Orb.

I tell her I have recurring dreams about the 90s, and how these dreams are set in thrift stores. And not just thrift stores, dingy industrial warehouses filled with the most bombed out leather couches. So many bombed out sofas.

I tell her how it is important to write the history of the 90s now; that we must do it ourselves, lest somebody else does it for us.

If they do, it won't be pretty. Because the 90s were all that: crummy and crappy and grungy and bombed out. And hedonist and ironic, and that is the tune we have been hearing of late. But I don't believe that is why some people want us to remember the 90s in an unfavorable light. Social conservatives (or neo-Christians, neo-Fascists, neo-Sexist for that matter) have no reason to fear ironic hedonists, who are already doing the ungrateful work of shooting

His retrospective at the Palais Galleria in Paris was all the proof we need, that the 90s are back from never away: A defile of fashion dummies lined up in a post-punk/pre-grunge Antwerp club land - a little depri, but so f**king cool; "Maison Margiela" dioramas where clothes were casually draped in spartan 90s interiors complete with cassette decks, video monitors, industrial office furniture and the ubiquitous leather sofa; same leather sofa now reimagined as a beige leather jacket, complete with bungee-cord belt and a pleated skirt. Not sure I can get away with that bag-lady look these days, but a girl can dream, can't she?

What was so great to (re)discover, was the DIY-spirit of that time, the make-do-and-mend which pervaded his collections, in spite of their haute couture pedigree, as if, in the last decade of the century, we got a FFW on the remote, a re-make/re-model, a mix-tape of the sartorial history of the entire century: the cardigan, the duffle-coat, the A-line dress, the pleated skirt, the leather jacket, the fur coat. Even if these designs are highly conceptual, constructed, and refined, they invite you to get busy, to say, literally: what if we wore this old Sunday dress sideways? Then what? A reminder of how, back in the day, in the provincial towns that we jogged round, before fast fashion, before H&M mind reading, we had to make our own trends with what we could scramble together in local charity shops that culled their collections from the attics of little old ladies, who had passed away only for us to blow new life into their lace and fur, Nylon and Drylon.

themselves in the foot and should therefore be no threat to anyone (on or off the dance floor). “Beware the hedonist ironic hipster, they are the most dangerous because they mingle with all classes!” said no demagogue ever.

Instead, I believe, the 90s have been getting flak lately, because of their spiritual and political potential, a revolutionary (Molotov) cocktail, which the powers-that-be should truly fear because some of us remember. The 90s were borderline in so many ways, transcending national, political and personal borders, in ways that would not be tolerated today, not by the right, nor the left. The left was sexy back then, more concerned with liberation and less with with policing, which is now the order of the day. We need to look back at that political landscape, in order to look ahead. Because you should resurrect yourself by the same tree as you have fallen from.

I tell her that, even if it is difficult to write about our own time, because we don't have the overview, because we can only remember it in concrete and not abstract terms, people, places, pictures. Even if we can not see the woods for the trees, we need to get back into those woods and say what we see and what we saw. How the trees looked, how they smelled, how they felt, how they made us feel. What fruits we plucked, what cherries we picked, and what mushrooms we foraged. What the woods looked like at dusk, the clearing at dawn, how we danced in those woods. Those industrial woods of the 90s: studio buildings in abandoned post offices, public schools, or hospitals, awakenings on bombed out leather sofas.

*Sunday morning I'm waking up
Can't even focus on my coffee cup
Don't even know which bed I'm in
Where do I start, where do I begin?⁶*

It has been speculated (notably by art-theoreticians who can not figure out what comes after “contemporary”) that the 90s never ended. But they did, abruptly and spectacularly, when the World Trade Center's Twin Towers crumbled and floodgates were opened to pent-up emotions of paranoia, xenophobia, and misplaced patriotism. Now, being, since ca. 9/11, stuck in the post-contemporary, we are, like all major monotheistic religions, stuck on forever. A “Deus ex Machina” that will deliver us, elsewhere, out of our current malaise.

But, in the interest of the People, and the PartY, perhaps we would be well advised to once more ponder The Chemical Brother's rhetoric question:

What does it feel like to let forever be?⁷

⁶ Chemical Brothers: “Where Do I Begin?” *Dig Your Own Hole* (Freestyle Dust/Virgin 1997)

⁷ Chemical Brothers: “Let Forever Be” *Surrender* (Freestyle Dust/Virgin 1999)

To consider what is needed in this moment – not the “contemporary” moment, but in the present. Let’s consider, for a moment, that the ideal club could be not a physical geographical location. That instead of being located in space, it could be located in time. In a moment of blissful abandon, which in the 90s seemed to last forever, but which now, sadly, seems lost forever. That it could be located in the idea of liberation.

Looking back to look forward, what did we believe would liberate us in the 90s?

That Art would liberate us?

That Music would liberate us?

That Porno would liberate us?

That Science would liberate us?

That Technology would liberate us?

Perhaps naively yes to all of the above. But, at least we gave a shit about liberation. (And really, when you think about it, the internet had so much potential, so much promise, until it started eating itself.) Not like now, where it’s all about privacy, privilege, protection, paranoia.

If now, like myself, you feel implicit, perhaps because, since your heyday in the 90s, you have acquired not only the responsibilities of family life, but along with it the comfy fashion sense of a suburban soccer mom, and the carbon footprint of a Yeti, I can assure you that you, too, are invited to the Pan-European Socialist PartY. Party like its 1999. Clap your hands and stomp your feet. Free your ass and your mind will follow. Get your body on the dance floor and dance as if (y)our lives depend on it. You know it does.

[...]

[Note: Thanks to Travis Boyer for the title.]