

Bleeps In the Heart of the Beast—Mutek 2002 in Montreal

"Bleeps in the Heart of the Beast—Mutek 2002 in Montréal." *Discorder* July (2002).

By the (late?) tobias v in Montreal

[The following has been excerpted from what we presume to be the cold hands of the famous writer tobias v, RIP; we take no responsibility for the coherency or plain accuracy of this journal. We found it all in this little red book and we think its his. If anyone has seen tobias, please let us know. For more info on Mutek, see www.mutek.ca—Ed.]

Wednesday—May 29th—Mixing with the PiBs

The sun is setting on the cemetery across the street, reflecting off the headstones & onto my laptop... The weather here has been mixed and unexpected boiling desert heat with Miami sweat and humidity combined with vast dark and sinister rain, thunder, showers, monsoons, and hurricane wind. Every day is a surprise. Sometimes it is noon and pitch dark from fog and cloud. Then the monsoon sets in at 32c and we sweat through the rain. That's the way it is out here. It's weird and I need a new toothbrush. Somebody knocks at my door. I hide all criminal objects and flush the toilet. The door opens. "It's time for Mutek," they say.

Later, I'm at the Société des Arts Technologiques (SAT) for the Press Gathering. I get my pass and nod and smile, hoping they won't recognise me from last year. Things are déjà-vu as I stumble into the bank vault-turned-art-gallery-space that sports enough quad sound to sterilize a well-hung horse. Somehow I get too drunk and completely miss the first show that evening at the beautiful post-modern video building, Ex-Centris. Acts missed include SND, Dioxyde, vitaminsforyou and Mens/Koolwyk. But what can you do when the pusher man arrives? He works on his own schedule. Word is that SND lays down a building-block set of minimal beats culled from their latest *Tender Love* album on Mille Plateaux. I cry into my beer.

Fragment I

...I just got back from the strangest night—& it is only Wednesday. Hellothisisalex began the evening with an honest performance of Warp-ish IDM—all gear & young. But the real meat was Nova Huta. ALL I CAN write in my little red notebook IS "speed organ metal solos" and "Andy kaufman meets Thomas Brinkman with a 12" polish sausage..." "Deep duchadelic," says Nova Huta. Indeed. I mean what do you say

to a performer who lip syncs a story for 25 minutes about how the birds of socialism told his uncle to play an organ in an Eastern European factory and then he goes a little crazy and dies and bequests his musical project to his nephew—Nova Huta? Sweet Jesus... Then Mr. Huta plays out of tune to his beer hall techno rhythms and his paper with all the programming info gets all mixed up and he swears in poor English and gives away records for answering pop quizzes about his uncle. Later he takes out an inflatable Stars N' Stripes baseball bat and bonks audience members on the head while yelling "Politics!" Then he shows us his robot, and it falls on the floor. Behind us is a video showing Nova Huta playing in China. I don't think they got it. I don't think I did either—but that didn't stop me from flailing all arms and legs. Polski! Putsch!

Next was Felix Kubin who can play three synths at once. He composes techno waltzes while wearing high heels and a white sparkle suit which he tears away to reveal a space uniform. And his mad music insanity: techno-rhythms meet an S+M organ and weird choruses sung live: "Hit me! Provider! I've lost my mouse—Oh No!" That one is apparently a real kicker in Berlin. And Felix Kubin CAN sing...it's inspiring and weird all at once and I am leaving at 4:30am feeling like Eastern Europe is the place to be because that's where all the acid is—just one look at Kubin's video will confirm such suspicions—I cannot even begin to explain what was essentially ultra-fucked colourful 1969 surrealism; no computer graphics here, all filmed scenes of Felix with silver hair in space suit getting probed by weird doctors and twin girls in highheels and weird green dresses...

Thursday, Tanked & Toasted, Backwards Lineup

I arrive at the SAT for the free cinq-a-sept with my friend Mr. Baphomet. The Devil always catches the late train from Toronto... As I walk in, Montreal's Deadbeat is just finishing up a marathon dub-techno webjam with Berlin's Monolake. It's wild: Deadbeat has the specially-programmed patch projecting on the screens—you can see them altering and affecting each other's sounds real-time. Next is Alexander Burton, who begins with a quick microphone sample, and then, live and before our eyes, builds a massive Max/MSP patch spurting out weird and wonderful squelches in one long improvised stroke of software wizardry until his machine crashed under the strain. Not to be outdone, Zack Settel sends everyone into a tizzy by panning sounds around the room with his joystick. Unfortunately I

miss duul_drv from Winnipeg because I want to find the Beer Festival-

Fragment 2

That evening & a little sideways; at Ex-Centris half-way through Helen Of Troy's loop-violin-feedback set. The crowd is either rapt in attention or paralysed on the floor from back pain. I sit down to enjoy the spasms and the complex and evolving post-dub beats of Montreal's Ghislain Poirier, and then the looped Handel remixes and subtle ambience of Germany's Stephan Mathieu. But certainly the house-closer- if not the most amazing performance of the festival-is from the UK's spectacular Janek Schaefer, whose turntable improvisation, set in the middle of the room, blows minds and ears with directional panning and a linear and LIVE scape of clicks, drones, loops, and layered samples, all mixed live from his own innovative record pressings and his dual tone-arm, homebuilt turntable with built-in contact mics. Interwoven with a subtle and evocative video which corresponds with the lights dropping on Schaefer and leaving us all in darkness, this man has messed with my goddamn mind. "Art," I mutter, to no one in particular. But several people move away from me. It might also have been because I have broken my Black Minimal Techno Glasses, and they kee[falling off my face at weird angles...I don't really know...

And then dinner. And then hurrying back to the SAT to see the last friggin' 15 minutes of the beautifully stark and vocoded electro-duo Solvent + Lowfish (TO). Tonight was some of the worst programming of the festival, with S+L only playing a short set with no encores, leaving the rest of the evening for ambient music which filtered everyone out of the SAT. After S+L were IDM legends Bola (UK), whose amazing visuals complimented a live performances of their audio rarities from the Skam label. The visuals are every bit as acid-good as the rumours say... However, by now everyone was lounging on the sticky floor and wanting something a bit different. Montreal's Ensemble was a bit of a let-down not because of his expansive soundscapes and ambient beats but because no one wanted to lie on the cold & dirty SAT floor at 2am. Solvent + Lowfish should have been on last so they could play encore after encore of sweet electro lovin'...

Friday & the Beginning of the End

Where are we...I am writing this at the Sunday show...sleep deprivation is setting in...But we aren't there yet: I've got to catch up.

Arrived at the 5-7 just in time for Camp, aka Montreal's David Turgeon of NoType. A real sonic treat: very linear, unexpected, and it went in a bunch of different directions that was anything but repetitive. David is all about the linear exploration of uncharted topographies, he's an explorer with all sounds & hums & samples & he wants to see how they talk and relate to each other. This is fundamentally different than the dureé-time of the groove: David's time is a time of the event.

Unfortunately, my memory is not up to commenting on the music past this point as my mind hears sounds from every direction. There is a crazy man who lives above me in Montreal with a cane who rocks back and forth on the squeaky floorboards at 9:20am every morning. This morning it sounded like he was sawing a table. I was pondering this as I tried to sleep a little this morning: grabbing a broom and pounding out rhythms on my ceiling...or anti-rhythms...and that's the whole thing with David, the division between sounds repetitive and linear—a strange dichotomy that is also at the point of ripping Mutek in half as it attempts to satisfy both experimental purists on the one hand and dance purists on the other. As for the rest of the evening, it's Mutek's first massive. Metropolis is a humongous old and round theater, three levels of bars and security and no-smoking enforcement. Oh, the irony, given that Metropolis is in the heart of seedy Hookerville—an amazing experience walking out at 3:30am into a city bursting with life and a potential dangerous energy. Look: there passes the ghost of Leonard Cohen...but don't light up that friggin' cigarette, bon ami...

Metropolis is a concert venue & things feel "staged." The Friday night, however, is good in the sense that it is rammed; everyone is here and the performers openly mingled with the public. This is important, because the next night, Saturday, the crowd is much different. Hostile and vicious. Security is called in to remove drunken/high jocks from the dancefloor, and all the whose-who are sitting behind the fence separating the backstage from the floor...& the hierarchies form found at raves and concerts: are you important enough to be back here, do you have the right pass?

But I am getting ahead of myself: the Friday is a rammed affair. Yes, Herbert as RadioBoy is good. His performance is very similar to what he was doing in 1997 and I am having strange memories of him playing a packed 200 person warehouse in Vancouver. In fact, I run into David Turgeon later and we talk about this. He is trying to understand Herbert's popularity; fact is, Herbert was quite popular, a strange anomaly in the rave era, even more so than now when what he is doing is more conveniently packaged under Art. Several years ago it was just madness...Herbert in a suit and tie, with blenders and chip bags making weird noises to 200 people fucked on many drugs who at that point had only been schooled in house and techno. Herbert came off like a being from another sonic planet.

Tonight, the rhythms Herbert makes are hard, ranging from polyrhythmic techno to banging house. Dancefloor material and very good, all sampled from destroyed consumer objects—TVs, McDonald's cups, etc. He throws the GAP bag on his head and raises both arms making anarcho-devil signs with his fingers & the crowd goes wild... but are they simply entertained by him or fully grasping his political statements? I was talking to the German editors of this magazine over some hash about it, and they mentioned that in order to do the RadioBoy performance, Herbert must purchase all these consumer products; therefore he is participating in the economy and consumerizing his political statement and the domain of art. I am not so sure about that...The purchase he is making is only an economic purchase, yet the utility he applies to it is in the realm of the symbolic-like culture jamming. The symbolic exchange-value of destroying these items has more representational affect—the realm of politics—than their meager economic purchase. Of course things are not so black and white and this dialectic is a little more complex—for the same reasons that culture jamming can backfire—for the advertising potential, the representational power of the consumer objects, maintains a certain affect even when being erased, destroyed, deconstructed. Re-appropriation and counter-appropriation. The power can never be deleted—only put under erasure. The question is, then, how you affect that dialectic and whether it can be exploded into something beyond the representational mingling of music and politics. But enough—back to the show and away from the philosophizing: that was more the rambling commentary of

Saturday night in any case, when I should have had a microphone taped to my head...

Before Herbert came Repair, aka the Thibideau brothers (TO), who threw down excellent dub techno beats. I've been a fan of them ever since their releases on Blue as Altitude, they have a very deep, Toronto-influenced sound that is nonetheless driving. Their live singer, Dawn Lewis, was sonically beautiful but very shy, performing hidden vocals behind the gear.

Then: Copacabannark, whose simple techno set is nonetheless brilliant with its wild squelches and abrasive squealing sounds. There is a difference that I immediately begin to notice between performers—those who are DJs, or come from a dance background, perhaps the rave scene—and those who are rock-musicians-turned-electronic-artists...the former have a real sense of bringing people somewhere in a set; the latter often lose the floor if they are producing beats. Copacabannark are the former: instant dancefloor appreciation & they are into it, headbanging away like spring-filled robots with the smoke pouring out the back, crazy live organ playing, throwing down pounding minimal rhythms that are, for me, the heart and soul of stripped minimal techno from the days when it all meant a dark and dangerous listening experience at 4:15am in some blacked-out warehouse save for the red spot on the DJ and that strobe at the periphery of your vision...

The main event is Montreal's Akufen, the cut-and-dice techno wizard whose career has exploded. I like his records, but I find overall that his sets are usually more of the same. This set is the most varied I have heard of him yet; he plays on the house side, adding synth pads to the cut-samples, exhibiting an emotional maturity that you can hear in the first two tracks on his Force Inc. album "My Way." He is trying bloody hard—I think it is just a case of him finding the right balance with his sets—and the crowd digs it; thing is, it is too packed to dance.

At the end is Hakan Libdo, but to be honest I have trouble appreciating his washed out jazz-beats as tiredness sets in; it's too late, I want to go home and hear him, or listen to him on a sunny afternoon. See here's the deal: Mutek is trying to incorporate artists working with beats who are obviously on the cutting edge of dancefloor sounds alongside the extreme sonic experimentalism. For me this is

wonderful as it is tears down boundaries between high and low art, ripping apart the Eurocentric view that says that essentially African-based rhythmic music is not artistic but "just dance music." What isn't recognised, however, is that this was essentially the entire movement of rave culture, Detroit techno, Chicago house. Now, this music, appropriated by Europeans and North American white culture—and this is a very true observation, all one has to do is go to DEMF and then Mutek to see a serious racial divide in this music that is unsettling—is seeking validation as high art; this is not a purely negative movement, for it reasserts various territories and broadens visions on all sides. However, Mutek as the spatial nexus of this musical movement is desperately trying to figure out how to program these artists. Shall we program them like a rave, with peaks and valleys? Or mix things up to remind people that this is "Art" ? In the way that "Art" is not supposed to be fun? Euro-Art appreciation as opposed to Neo-African debauchery? Etc.

The question is whether Mutek will become a dance party split from the experimental music ("art in the afternoon, dancing at night"). And if it does, will we have to accept that rave culture indeed has something to offer experimental culture? Today's "avante garde" is conservative compared to the hedonistic days of not only rave culture, but DADA< the Surrealists, Artaud, the Bohemians and the Beats, the punks, the French hardcore anarchists, UK Spiral Tribe squatters...We need to lighten up—not intellectually, not in the sense that people who tell you to lighten up want to infantilize you into childishness and the abdication of responsibility. We need to lighten up in the sense that we need to undergo a little reevaluation of all values at the level of the subject and the subject's passage to politics, and this passage is the realm of music..."We should consider every day lost on which we have not danced at least once."

Saturday—the Beast and the Ugly, Musork

Saturday afternoon is the Orthlorng Musork showcase and the best solid block of sound of the entire festival. Everyone is sitting down on the floor in the middle of this hot and windy afternoon in Montreal and the applause is thunderous as Stephen Mathieu leaves his laptop after a subtle and melancholic set of textures. He hands it over to Timeblind, aka Chris Sattinger, who moves into a demented set of breaks that skirt IDM but are much harsher, in your face,

and confrontational. It becomes more and more rammed in this dark cavern, above our heads are Sue Costabile's messed slide-MAX-visuals & the walls of the SAT are now echoing the strange vocal wanderings and deep bass hums of AGF, aka Antye Greie-Fuchs of German weird-pop-duo Laub. One hour of direct from the mind of this strange German—for all we know she could be telling us her washing, giving us her shopping list. No matter—our minds turn to dirty thoughts. My mind is distracted, anyway as AGF+DLAY jam together, aka Vladislav Delay of minimal dub techno fame, aka Luomo of minimal house mastery. Mr. D(e)lay has been putting out quality vinyl since his teens, and he and AGF now work very closely together.

Evening. By now you know what to expect of this second, half-filled night at Metropolis. I spent the majority of the evening dictating notes and hiding from anyone I knew. Victoria's Ben Nevile lays down the most inventive set of the night, with his joystick-Max patch projected live above my head while he dances his deep and minimal house rhythms with an intensive flair, indeed, a subtle programming that leaves everyone tense with expectation. He's set it up brilliantly for Farben, who plays deep to the point of obscurity, lost in atmospherics. It's wicked, but the energy is low. Germany's Losoul starts like he's on crack, pressing buttons like he has no idea how to operate his setup, but comes out on top with the best tech-house set of the evening. Chilean-German Ricardo Villalobos takes it hard and percussive, getting dark and stark by the end, leaving it for Luomo who warms everything down with liquid and vocal deep house. The musical description makes it sound like a good night: but something was off...

Sunday, A Good End

"Sunday was the day when it all came together." Or this is the shit I write down at 4:15am on a Monday morning as the music is *still pounding* in this black box of techno ...backtrack, rewind, earlier...

Missing completely the Cynosure/Revolver showcase in the afternoon—which included Mike Shannon's first live set—I saved my energy for that evening's extravaganza, the real techno motherfuckin' blow-out: Murcof, Juan Self, Atom Heart, Dandy Jack, and Ricardo Villalobos. All the reserves were called up for this one. People knew what to expect or at least were prepped for the duration. The last night of Mutek goes all night, and strips away the pretentious

bullshit. But first I had to grab dinner, and score the necessities, which meant missing Murcof's set—another failure in both journalism and experience; I caught the last few minutes of Juan Self but don't remember much, for everything was mindblown by the quiet little red-moustached man that is Atom Heart. Atom stunned everyone by breaking out of the 4/4 into breakbeats, and then breaking out of that into jungle, mixing in "Jesus" samples from his Geez n' Gosh material and driving the place mad. It was the real shit all over again. But it didn't let up, as Dandy Jack hands-down took the Dance-Det of Mutek Award by pounding home Latin-techno rhythms mixed with an 80s spirit. Sweet Heaven! The whole thing was only to be topped with the mindfuck that followed: a gear-jam between Dandy, Atom, and Villalobos...starting at 2am thereabouts, it moved into the pounding and one-bar loops of hard techno, but always with this strange funky edge, cutting into electro, and then building back into the 4/4...somewhere along the way it became relentless, and vicious. Sadomasochistic. Suddenly Mutek made sense. It all became clear again. I pulled out my notebook and began to write, and jotted everything down that you see now probably as the Discorder review...people are moving, not speaking, the inane and incessant chatter of the scenesters has completely been driven out of the room. The curtains of the SAT have been drawn closed and chaos reigns. Mr. Baphomet tells me that he has not seen anything like this since Richie Hawtin and Jeff Mill's Sickness party. This is where we are at. An un-named journalist from San Francisco has just offered me a bowl and we are going to lie back and listen as our minds and bodies and legs are too tired to do anything else...