

## **A Fine Marriage of Madness and the Margins at Mutek 2002**

May 29th-June 2nd, 2002. Montreal, Canada.

<http://www.mutek.ca>

"A Fine Marriage of Madness and the Margins at Mutek 2002." *The Wire*. 222, August (2002).

tobias van Veen

Mutek 2002 was a profound struggle of contradictions between the "experimental" and the "rhythmic" played out on the sonic space of the musical venue and its social milieu. By admirably attempting to situate itself "between" the high-experimentalists and the beat-oriented enthusiasts, Mutek has buffered both criticism and praise. This year, the festival was clearly demarcated, with more "rhythmic" and "danceable" acts appearing at the larger—and less friendly—Metropolis concert hall, while the "experimental" acts were granted the prestige of the Ex-Centris Cinema and New Media Centre. Those that fit somewhere in-between—the inspiration of Mutek—played the venerable Societe des Arts Technologiques (SAT). To interpret the non-rhythmic acts at Ex-Centris as the domain of high art, and the rhythmic, danceable acts at Metropolis as low-art populism takes only a cursory understanding of the subtle re-enactment of modernisms that permeate the discourse and even graphic design surrounding Mutek—the promotional material reflects this dominant aesthetic that reincorporates elegant, geometric design through the prevailing rhetoric of minimalism. However, the SAT was not the exclusive domain of a post-modern musical transgression, although it catalysed numerous anarchic highlights. The space of an event often determines the manner in which the performance is received, and the stand-out acts this year—of which there were many, and I will only be able to touch upon a few—played with the dynamics of each space, from acoustics to the audience's expectations, to pursue an agenda that broke the strict geometric-musical boundaries assigned by audience, critic, and Mutek alike.

### **Janek Schaefer's Semiotics of Space at Ex-Centris**

At Ex-Centris, Janek Schaefer's articulate and precise performance on a homebuilt single turntable with two tone-arms and contact mics, along with assorted effects and loops, entered into this spatialised play of interpretation. As Janek coaxed diverse sounds from specially cut, skipping records with tactile turntable manipulations, it became obvious that he was submersing the audience down a carefully constructed narrative that had been sketched out in intricate detail. Like other preeminent artists at the festival, he was working from a script allowing for accidents, improvisations, and chance occurrences, inscribing a conceptual as well as sonic flow that spellbound the audience.

### **Subverting Spectacle at Metropolis**

The ability to transform the space and overcome its rigidities was also an evident factor in the best of the Metropolis performances, which predominantly

took on all the trappings of spectacle. Herbert's politically-motivated destruction-sampling as RadioBoy was a singular example of a powerful reinterpretation of the agitprop tradition of seducing the spectacle. Playing the "musical anarchist" role to the hilt, Herbert in his black-clad form is perhaps one of the first cross-over musicians between the electronic music and art world to subject his body to the realm of popular music as a media-personality (and unlike Moby, he has something to say). In comparison, musicians such as Ben Nevile and Ricardo Villalobos desperately strove to subvert the expectations of the audience-dancers in the heart of the spectacle.

Nevile, whose engaging joystick-laptop performance was one of the more "live" of the "Powerbook" artists, built up successive waves of tension by removing kicks from the dancefloor while only hinting at melodies, while Villalobos led the crowd into a darker space of minimal techno that foreshadowed what was to transpire at the closeout show with Villalobos, Atom Heart, and Dandy Jack.

### **The Rise of the Indeterminate and the Question of the Live**

At the SAT, Nova Huta conjured a surreal context to his "kitsch" organ-music by lip-synching for twenty-five minutes on how he came to compose electronic music. His affect as a performer moved from the world of "electronica" to diffuse into a questioning of his overall identity: was he a performance artist? An electronic musician? With highlights including a video of Huta playing a concert in China, which likewise projected a video of a Huta performance, the moment became simulacra, jolted only by Huta's awkward and aesthetically interruptive English cursing directed at his script, which kept blowing off a nearby synthesizer.

Equally brilliant was Felix Kubin's decidedly more slick but talented two-handed organ virtuosity, complete with his trademark spaceman suit and a strong stage presence that persuaded the audience to *waltz*—a disconcerting as well as deterritorialising moment of carnival immediacy that overcame the electro-modern discourse. It was this indeterminate modality of interpretation that created aesthetically stimulating performance that opened up a broader and self-reflexive critique which Mutek seemed to offer up to its own representations, asking its audience: where should we be going, and what should we be doing, with this thing called electronic music?

Although this question was broached in words at the Friday panel concerning the philosophies and politics of electronic music—with statements revolving around the overabundance of desktop musician technologies and "homemade" music—it was persistently and forcefully responded to by the artists themselves who attempted to overflow the bounds of performance. In doing so, these same artists broached the question of "the live" in electronic performance that is a growing specter of disgruntlement. Either "the live" was imagined and realised by using analogue techniques—the organ playing of Kubin and Huta, the turntablism of Schaefer—or by engaging in new ways of computer interactivity, such as Nevile's

self-programmed Max/MSP joystick patch. The latter also saw significant and exciting advances by Alexandre Burton, who captivated an afternoon SAT show by projecting his on-the-fly Max patches, and by AGF, whose stream-of-consciousness vocal directives, full of random bites of computer code, eerily framed an erotic and stark interstice between woman and machine. New technologies were also debuted at Deadbeats' live internet jam with Berlin's Monolake. These inventive moments combated the perception of "laptop sinecure" that dominates audience reception; the question is not so much the "lack of gestural theatre" as it is the unapproachability of performativity, a feeling of hearing something imagined, in its actuality, for the listener.

### **The Absence of the DJ, the Reminder of Soul**

It was the final Sunday performance that served as an apostrophe for the question of the live and the absence of a member of electronic music's history up to this point: the DJ. Although DJs are often critiqued for their lack of "live" performance, the lack of beat-oriented turntablists resolidified the high/low art distinctions between rhythm and the experimental that many of Mutek's performers strove to overcome. The DJ, as a purveyor and selector of musical memories and a distinct link to electronic music's Afro-American histories, is a distinct component that could well combat experimental electronic music's current sense of stagnation, as well as tactically undermine popular music's appropriation of the DJ from an aesthetic weaver of narratives to a glorified, sexy jukebox. It was not through the DJ that this musical critique was carried out; instead, it was through the DJ-*gesture* of the sadomasochistic jam-session between Ricardo Villalobos, Dandy Jack, and Atom Heart that revisited the core elements of repetitious dance music in the territory of the *mix*, exploring territories of techno, electro, and the dark heart of minimalism. It became apparent that the trio was not using MIDI to synchronise their gear, jamming as freely as a laptop, sampler-based musician can, triggering samples, and playing chords and melodies on the fly, working with the other musicians to take the music beyond meaning and into the realm of physical affect beyond the spectacular and the club-trance of the masses. It was a supremely disjointed moment when Mutek not only felt (and once again) out-of-time and in conflict with its representation, but pursuing perforated points of sonic ecstasy.