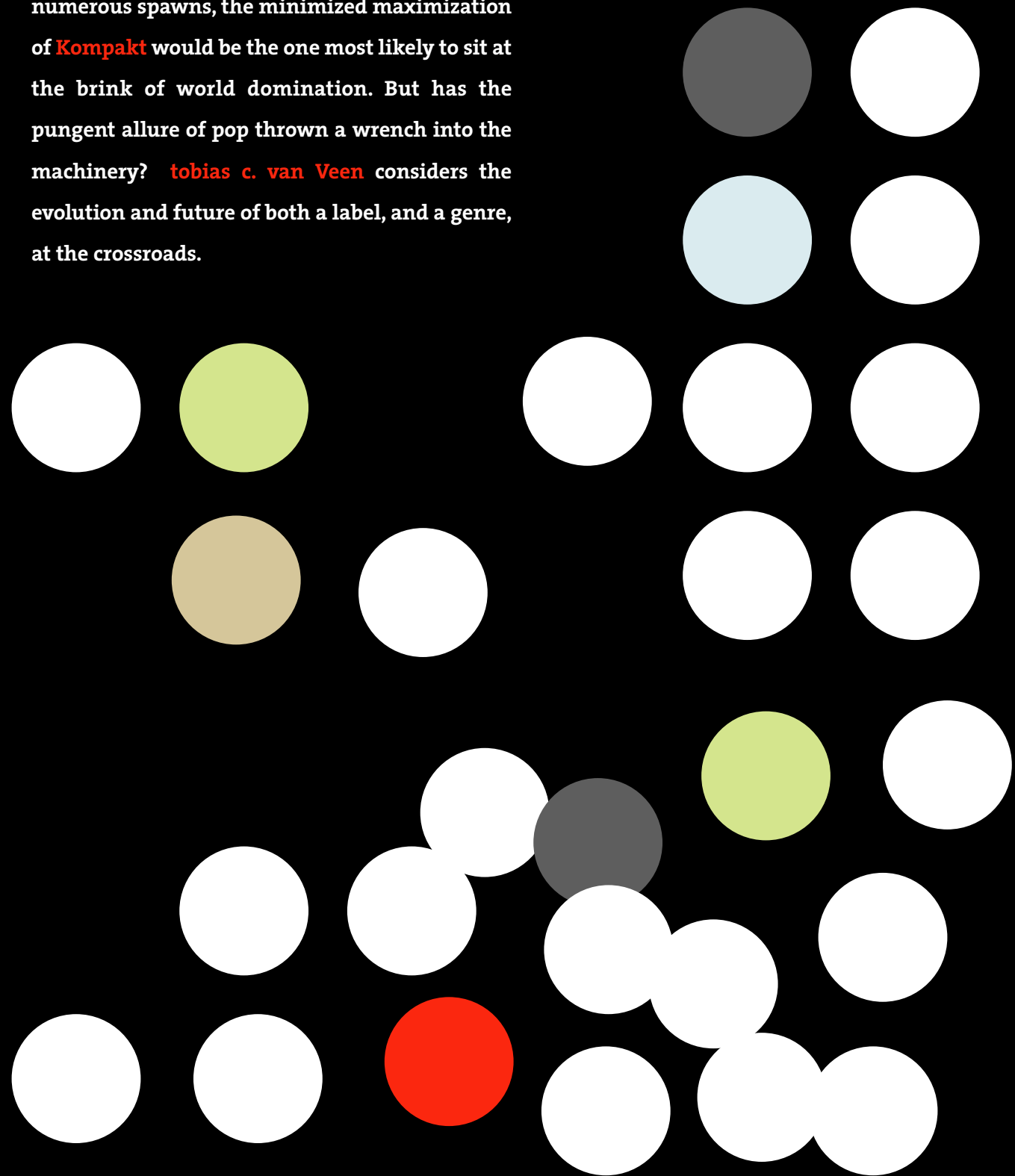


# kompakt+recycle

Who could have guessed that of techno's numerous spawns, the minimized maximization of **Kompakt** would be the one most likely to sit at the brink of world domination. But has the pungent allure of pop thrown a wrench into the machinery? **tobias c. van Veen** considers the evolution and future of both a label, and a genre, at the crossroads.



**THE SPANISH CHANDELIER DANGLES SOME 25 FEET ABOVE MY HEAD**, careening above the swells of sweating bodies as the heathens scream and dance. The sound is at full throttle. The speakers hold court, all eight stacks, massive towers of black wattage sustaining 120 decibels of punishment. Everyone is apparently *avin it*.

But this is not 1988 on the Orbital, 92 in the Black Rock desert or 95 in the warehouse dark, but 2003 in Barcelona, at the Nitsa club, and it is four AM, with no sign of this Kompakt label juggernaut obeying the second law of thermodynamics.

Entropy.

Michael Mayer has just left the decks, preceded by Ellen Alien from Bpitch Control—and now on into the night.

## THE TWISTED WRECKAGE OF TECHNO IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Today I am *almost* convinced of my own respinning of the evening, which feels like a comparable peak moment after rave's demise and the subsequent years of "ironic" music and its cocaine culture. Half of my memory of that long journey in Catalonia is taken up by Eric Mattson and Alain Mongeau, the curators of Montréal's Mutek, thrashing around in their generational angst front-stage and center. Their madness was infectious at the time, and perhaps more so today than I care to admit.

In the past I was even less convinced; in 2003, I wrote:

*The much anticipated Kompakt records showcase—the German powerhouse of all things minimal techno—revealed that what the supermen are up to today is nothing less than a compacted minimal trance. Boring as hell, for both mind and body, like the never-ending repetitions of the Roland gog that grace ubiquitous drum trax.*

When this magazine's editor asked me to give the shakedown on Kompakt, I knew I was wading into the infested waters of *doxa* and all the subsequent whiplash the incisive cut generates in these here small circles. Will I ever get a press pass again? Tact is a word I have mishandled from the start. But here the mutant is certainly suitable for the mission at hand: taking to task the Kompakt cabal and its myriad sublabels, its rise in the industry from an imprint to a distributor on the scale of the now-defunct EFA, and its triumphant takeover and subsequent detheorization of the intellectualized territories left behind by the imploded Mille Plateaux/Force Inc. empire. Apparently it's okay to get weird again, even if the music isn't as alien as its twentieth century emergence...or is it? Is this question too deep for Kompakt these days anyway?

The beats are a far cry, or so wage the unsigned critics, from the minimalist abstraction that marked Kompakt's debut. It has been a long journey since the late 90s and the early releases, since the bone dry, technotriadic rhythm experiments on Profan, the anatomy of microdub writ through Studio One, the 1999 Kreisel series of abrasive yet *compact* acid 7-inchers. Rewinding the archives of production, the *leitmotif* of Kompakt already granted ample place to the acidic, transestate and ambient motifs of the past. And in what feels like an eon before the millennial comeback of acid house, it is mind-boggling to chart the degree to which the various pseudonyms of the prolific Reinhard and Wolfgang Voigt, Dettinger, Sascha Funke, Jürgen Paape, Joachim Spieth and of course Michael Mayer—along with a list of names too numerous to mention here and who for the most part still remain involved—*hinted* at the directions to which retrofuturist techno would be able to cannibalize its archives. Its acidic bricklaying, a kind of exploration of every 4/4 beat structure possible while still "techno," nevertheless ate away at its skeletal structure, including the most sacred of its sinews. It displaced Detroit's fantasy of unlimited genres of technofuturism, and in hindsight reanimated the only remaining corpse: what had been excluded and rendered taboo from techno: trance. Which, to wrap up this all too neat narrative—to which any (ethno)musicologist as well as technohead will shrug off as mere conjecture—not only invariably led to trance, a genre whose trajectory seemed for the most part an aborted, commercial write-off after its banalization in the mid-90s as cheap psychedelia, but seemed to do so

with only the slightest of hesitations. (That it followed on Detroit/Submerge's cosmic *Red Planet* series some decade after the fact bears further reconsideration.)

But who hasn't missed the uplifting ascension, that "high white note" that resonated so strong and clear with the melancholic anthems of, say, Orbital? In everything that followed, on the one channel into the brooding, aggressive and dark channels that hard, repetitive techno pursued in distancing itself from rave's similitude, and on the other into the abstract era of late 90s "Köln" minimal techno, whatever was left of the classic truth/beauty complex so ominous in *Halcyon* and *Belfast* was burial mixed deep into silence. However necessary the repression in marking techno's difference, it couldn't last. Uncut expressions of emotional volume surged onto the wax of Kompakt Extra's Speicher imprint, returning as if from the dead. An irruption and a temporal rupture that marks the shift of a generation and a recycling that is almost dialectical overcame the strictures laid down against the machinic expression of affective impressionism.

That tie-tight shuffle had to loosen sometime, and it did, but in a different milieu. On the one channel, an almost unaccountable number of producers, DJs and ravers who occupy a special place in my acid-eaten memories have long since abandoned the music entirely, and those left, at the edge of burnout, have found themselves forced to confront the ghosts of the past and the shells of a once massive musical movement. On the other channel, for those burnt bodies who predate the 90s, the change-up is almost incomprehensible: *that with the change of guard, old dance music is now more radical than recent experimental music*. Or at least more pleasurable in the revolving door of club culture. A reductive account might read like this: the current milieu in its impressionable youth-audience, producer, DJ—was forced the often severe and restrained minimalist beats during its early years sans the context that marked minimalism's attack on rave's programmatic musical mafia. Reoccupying trance is their rebellion. For the 90s technohead, trance was the ultimate taboo, the mark that divided the serious from the sellouts. And like any aesthetic barrier, it had to come down. Hence Speicher.

But this is not much of a cogent thesis, and if anything it leaves one spinning in and out of musical cycles too predictable for my tastes.

It is more likely and more intriguing that trance was there from the beginning, from the point in which Kompakt began its start with its own makeover. With nascent ties to Delirium, Jörg Henze's trance label founded in 1992 and home to a slew of Atom Heart productions among the faceless others, Kompakt was launched in 1998, owned and operated by Mayer, Wolfgang Voigt and Paape. Its debut reflects the influence of the starker schizophonic of Delirium's furtive trancescapes. Kompakt arrived at the intersection of a certain exhaustion of trance *and* of minimalism that marks a cultural turning point. Thomas Brinkmann's incorporation and double tone-arm remix of Richie Hawtin's *Concept 96* had found its apogee in Europe by the time Kompakt tracked into minimalism, while acidic trance had not only drained its sonic reservoir but pushed the culture of fast-track hedonism to the brink of its own extinction.

Kompakt never did push the Canadian-Detroit axis of techno with the same convincing bravado it gave to its own Voigt stormers or its sunrise hymns from Japanese artist Kaito. Trance is the backbone. Whether Kompakt suffered or benefited from an aesthetic overproduction "too late" in techno's trajectory depends on whether minimalism is viewed as the catalytic crux—the energy flash that periodically jolts techno back to life—or the entropic circle of techno's momentum. That trance sought to incorporate techno's innovative strategies and production techniques, and is now engaged in the hybridization of its warehouse-era ghosts beyond what was once called "tech-trance," signals the *collapse* of the ideological battle that has long waged between these two genres.

## SCHAFFEL IS STRONGER THAN PRIDE

When DJ and critic Philip Sherburne threw down the above-titled mix (featured in the Sonar 2004 listening room, and hosted at philipsherburne.com) he knew he was bandwagon-jumping, and to paraphrase his own words, for reasons of *love* for the sound that

outweighed not only his “pride,” so to speak, but his “guilt” in playing assembler to Kompakt’s schaffel dominion (to which Kompakt had already set about “burning their bridges to”).

In his words, “backlash be damned.” Sherburne’s mix is a time-trip through schaffel’s mutation from the first Kompakt Extra 1 and the melancholic and lonely schaffel monster which set the tone for all that followed—Grangerman’s *Fackeln Im Sturm*—on through and beyond Mayer’s unforgettable “Love is Stronger than Pride” (renamed for legal reasons concerning Sade to “Pride is Weaker than Love”). Schaffel is the counterpoint to trance that met its nemesis in the Speicher series’ early days. As Sherburne sketches out via email from Amsterdam, “I’d always loved the schaffel sound, long before I knew it had a name—from the early Profan and M:1:5 releases into the Kompakt Extra series and then finally the *Schaffelfieber* compilation; I was intrigued by the way it had spread outwards from Kompakt until the point where every German label seemed to feel it obligatory to include a schaffel track as a B-side. And I guess I was interested in rescuing it from its B-side status and foregrounding it as A-side material. I also hoped to show that even though that lurching 4/4-into-6/8 rhythm all gets roped together as ‘schaffel,’ there’s a wide range of rhythmic variance and possibility within that framework.”

The set is successful in meeting its claim by sinking wistfully into its blend, offering a sonic argument that schaffel can indeed be mixed with brooding passion, a kind of manifesto that counters what Sherburne calls the “obviousness of most current trance/prog, which seems to flog the same three ideas over and over again, avoiding any rhythmic experimentation, structural variation, timbral risk, etc.” It is exactly this obviousness, as it becomes ubiquitous—through its appearance all over recent releases—that undermined schaffel’s sudden rise in popularity. Will Kompakt abandon trance when faced with a similar dilemma? And will love or pride for the sound win out?

#### “LOVE IS STRONGER THAN PRIDE (PRIDE IS WEAKER THAN LOVE)”

Techno has followed the trip taken by Miles Davis and jazz some thirty odd years earlier, from *Down on the Corner* to *Doo-Bop*, from Afrodelic electronic jazz and George Russell to the conservative reclamation of Golden Era tradition. Which begs the question if this kind of haunting return to trance motifs, in an attempt to do trance *better*, with software production techniques that outstrip what was possible with hardware and preset arpeggiators, isn’t a kind of “prog rock” moment in electronic music’s history. For already (and so suddenly and without fanfare), the project of multiple identities and pseudonyms that Kodwo Eshun associated with the futurhythmachines of AfroFuturism, the constellation of disappearance that marked the 90s techno producer in “its” machinic absence and cyborg bodymind, inherited from Detroit and sustained by British and Italian hard techno producer-collectives such as Utility Plastics, [USER] and the Question label, as well as Delirium, has passed in favor of the proper name, the entourage and the accolades of recognition and artist-status, if not rock star patina, for the performer. The cover picture and the politics of faciality are back again, ironically enough an effect of techno’s drive to sobriety. Just check Richie Hawtin’s latest coverboy image on *The Tunnel/Twin Cities* (M\_Nus 2005). Blond-haired and blue-eyed, he looks more German than German. Is this the new simulacra of self, a David Bowie manoeuvre as the cyborg dons human skin for global infiltration?

Ah, the naked ego. Ever baring its skin, the ego resonates sonically, a pulsing orb of desire as love dominates Kompakt’s downpour, from Superpitcher and Mayer’s overt anthemics to the subtle and restrained moodiness of former Closer Musik member Matias Aguayo and his brilliantly nuanced *Are You Really Lost* (2005). Love is perhaps never more apparent than with the Kompakt Pop sublabel, which features selections from Mayer’s *Touch* (2004) and Superpitcher’s *Here Comes Love* (2004). The Pop imprint features succulent, melancholic love songs that are as much vocoder-infused invocations of sexy house music with a trance undercurrent as a metrosexual’s sugary hip manicure. Somewhere, someone is cringing as the overall package is scarcely twice removed from the agenda of mid-90s “progressive house.” The difference (and Bourdieu

would laugh) is that it somehow feels all that much more *tasteful* this time around. Yet the love factor is also in its technical studio wizardry and software production. In terms of wax value and decibel force, Kompakt has crafted the 21<sup>st</sup> century’s take on Phil Spector’s “wall of sound.” The Speicher track overwhelms almost any mix. Yet at some point this feels like praising Joe Satriani to Jimi Hendrix; the “perfect sound of software” resounds like the anachronistic 80s, the tinny dream of “perfect sound forever.”

Some time before Kompakt 30, which announced the launch of Speicher, the unearthing of rave’s tranced-out bliss began with Kompakt 15, *Sex mit M. Mayer*, which even if you don’t understand German should be immediately comprehensible. Kompakt’s notes on the release read: “INSANE TECHNO ANTHEM—WE FEEL ASHAMED.” This is the real nut of the much-heralded Kompakt Extra series: do we feel ashamed for bowing to hedonism’s call?

Hell, why not?

#### “HEDONISM” AND OTHER MISDEMEANORS

If there’s anyone who has written and thought as eloquently on hedonism’s jouissance it is Simon Reynolds. For Reynolds, today’s scene is for the head—more grounded in the sounds than the “countercultural trappings that were once wrapped around it, whether the ‘altered state of consciousness’/techno-utopianism/Gaia/futurism set of ideas or the more underground rave-ist quasi-military thing of jungle, gabba..” The trance-techno project was very much caught up in the cultural surrounds in which its energy erupted. It’s hard to disagree with Reynolds when he writes that Noughties techno is “a genre with defined limits, and that most of the activity is crosspollinating sounds within that defined terrain. An era of consolidation, rather than expansion, is how I characterize e-dance music since about 98.” 1998 is, of course, that fateful year when Kompakt entered the scene.

To summarize (and to somewhat reduce Reynolds’ expansive thoughts on the subject): “E-dance now exists separate from any apparatus of belief... I don’t know whether the people who are into it feel they’re into it for any reasons as such...and therefore it starts to seem inconsequential...” And where to next? To the crates? 2005’s Speicher 30 digs further into the past with the release of two classic bleep techno and rave-era tracks from that explosive year of 1990, straight from the infamous Lee Newman (deceased 1995) and Michael Wells: GTO’s *Pure (Energy)* (originally on CoolTempo) and Tricky Disco’s namesake (originally Warp 7). Kompakt is returning to the energy flash that sparked the rave regeneration. Will it arc again? What kind of hedonism lives on in “scare quotes”?

If it can even be written, the thesis encapsulated by Mayer in Speicher 2, “Love is Stronger than Pride” (2002), is that repetition and unsmiling, grim techno, in all its intellectual challenge and geometric precision, has been overcome, as if by sonic rewind, by what is nothing less than the love for a ghostly return of trance and acid. Techno sublimated and decimated, that is, ripped open by the emotional outpouring of a post-rave generation bored with its need to prove artistic sobriety, is ready to express yet again the inner love for the carnal pleasures of hedonism, in all its (sado)masochistic glory for speaker worship and aural domination. But it hasn’t happened yet...and its appearance may irrupt in a form almost unrecognizable to history’s circuits.

Where trance went sweet pabulum, Kompakt began; it intensifies trance’s potential, reinjecting techno’s machinic short-circuits and cyborg dystopian mythus into the mix. Where trance and acid devolved into predictable noodling for drooling candykids, Kompakt reinjects pop motifs, hip-hop sampledela (via DJ Koze), and techno’s armaments of the Third Wave: thundering kicks and percussion, sine wave attack formations, polyrhythmic strata of interlocking notes, wreathing flections of melodramatic timbre. Hence, the very incalculable mathematics of techno’s bodyrock equation. Apparently, Kompakt’s “avin’ it” again—remodeled and recycled perhaps—and once again upsetting the equation. **■**



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