

## **Electronic music as a mechanism for gender identification**

by Ulrike Mayer

What is the significance of electronic sound for the dissolution of binary-code conceptions of gender? Can electronic music lead to a sustainable rewriting of gender hierarchies, or diminish identity-driven conceptions of music in media and fan representations for good?

Feminists received club culture with hope: anonymous bodies, authorless tracks, and faceless laptop performances could work to replace artist-subjects and the gender-biased cult of authenticity associated with Rock, they thought. Electro music entered the feminist imagination as the formulation of new free zones where biological ascription and gendered star-cults would disappear. Has electro music met those demands?

Working as a pop feminist journalist, I am aware of gender-stereotyping in music writing, in spite of all the so-called anti-humanistic approaches and strategies of de-subjectivisation. This essay will chart the mechanism of identification within the music industry.

Club Culture - Disco, House, Techno

The cultural scientist Birgit Richard states that the club, especially the dance floor, offers the opportunity for free zones and expression without restraint. She defines frenzy - the uniformity of movements corresponding to the loops and beats of the music as well as being cut off from the outside world - as a positive way of finding a new or alternative social order, and an alternative way of communication for gender.<sup>1</sup> The author and sociologist Rosa Reitsamer writes:

## dig me out

The idea of club culture - as a youth and pop culture with a wide scope of alternative staging of and performing masculinity and femininity - goes back to Disco. Disco, as an early form of club culture, evolved in the 1970s from a homosexual and Afro-American background and provided an urban space for many Black people, Latinos, Queers and Transgenders to escape homophobic and racist attacks in their daily life.<sup>2</sup>

This initial idea picked up pace with the House and Techno movement of the 1980s and early 90s, when Disco had already celebrated its commercial breakthrough. Chicago House combined the music of the 1970s, such as Soul, Funk and Disco, with electronic influences of bands like Kraftwerk and Can. This fusion of different and heterogeneous traditions - pop with female soul singers, Gay-Disco and funky rhythms - put androgynous and robot-like body and gestures in to a new context. Akin to the early Disco movement, Chicago House was the mouthpiece for the Afro-American and gay subculture that strove for the eradication of racist and sexist patterns of thoughts and habits.

In the 1990s, the house movement spilled over to the industrial city of Detroit and found itself in a more reduced, cooler sound: Detroit Techno. DJs performed their tracks intentionally machine-like to break with the old cliché of the suffering, suppressed Black man and to undermine the dominance of a white established rockist macho habit. The techno and house movement withdrew from the (male) star-celebrity-cult and played with identity. Anonymous tracks, faceless videos, and booklets with hardly any or no information about the producers/DJs' origin, gender, or ethnic background were strategies of self-empowerment; they gained autonomy without any stereotyped ascriptions and imposed categories.

## dig me out

### From Club Culture to Sound Culture

The development of a club and dance culture through house, techno and a gradually emerging electro scene has had a significant impact on the construction and communication of gender and body. Not all was equal though, despite the inebriated collectivity that provided a space to live the longing for a like-minded community: the hierarchical separation of stage and dance floor and the mostly male gaze on female dancers, for example. With the commercialisation of Techno and the gaining media attention on events like the Love Parade in Berlin, Vienna and other European cities, the former protected club area was now subject to a capitalist logic that concentrated itself merely on the production of female body imagery (for example, as found on party flyers).

In their article on the experiences of female producers in electronic music, Christine Braunersreuther and Marcus Maida state, "the initially propagandised and so-called 'androgyny' of electronic music is an illusion that's never been claimed." They ask, "Whether electronic music by women would soon enter the fatuitous hypes on terms like 'women's literature' or be tagged by catchwords like 'cheeky women' or 'the all new woman' as a good selling line."<sup>3</sup>

It is challenging to write about electronic music, especially sound-oriented electronic music not intentionally made for the dance floor - lacking structured melody, a leading voice, a chorus-verse pattern, traditional notation or lyrics, it is difficult to put the bits and clicks of sounds, noise, changing timbres on paper. Electronic music is often referred to as sound culture: working with sound apart from a traditional listening habits and eliminating any sense of subjectivity. Often wrongly described as being "speechless", electro music creates a blank field for heterogeneous interpretation.

### Electro Intensity

## dig me out

How can a music journalist define electronic music - especially its (political) expressiveness - when it refuses habitual processes of comprehension? One approach is to focus on the vibes and ambience: on the music's effects and impacts, or its "intensity", as Gilles Deleuze describes it.

In his article on Deleuze and experimental electronica, Christoph Cox argues that electro music works with noises without reference as a specific composing technique: cutting up and re-organising sound fragments to create musical montages without an intended sound or regulated musical output in terms of notation, pitch, or given harmony.<sup>4</sup> Rock music and pop songs are characterised by a story: the narrative change of chorus and verse; tension and relief; and feel-good harmonies. Most sound-oriented electronic music is free from these structural forms, creating a different melodic flow. A Deleuzian idiom would translate this phenomenon in a number of ways: indefiniteness; the escape from established harmonies and listening and performing habits; deterritorialised music instruments/sound against stable entities; and electronic music as a constant process of being and de-subjectivisation.

To capture and perceive this music, one pays attention to the sensuous experience of what is heard - its affects and intensities, described, for example, as 'cold', 'warm', 'bombastic' or 'gentle'. These intensities do not have any ideological affiliation per se; it is with the connection to mainstream ideas of gendered ascriptions that they are ideologically and politically charged. It is this habit of association, as we shall examine through the gendered treatment of artists on the label Areal Records, which reactivates gender-stereotypes and brings the subject back to the sound (despite the music's audio qualities and attempts to outpace subjectivity).

Ada battles the Pink Pony

Originally from Cologne and now Berlin-based, Areal Records was

## dig me out

founded in 2000 by Matthias Klein (aka Schorf), Sebastian Riedl (aka Basteroid) and Michael Schwanen (aka Metope). Its musical genres span from Electronica and House to Minimal Techno. Ada (aka Michaela Dippel) is the only female producer and artist on the label, having released its first and highly celebrated full-length album, *Blondie*, in 2004. Her musical outputs include instrumental driven tracks, singing, synth melodic sound fragments, catchy bass lines, and playing with clicks of sound. Her label-mates include Metope, who released the second album *Kobol* on Areal Records in 2005, and Basteroid.

Areal Records does not provide much information about their artists' background, biography or musical production process. Instead, the label tells made-up stories inspired by its artist's music, title, and artwork. The music itself, mostly instrumental driven electronic tracks, gives few references to a gender origin - except Ada's voice appearing on a few of her tracks. Reviews of Ada, Metope and Basteroid's work, taken from music magazines, blogs and Areal Records promotion sheets, demonstrate how "differently gendered" the artists' music is packaged by the music/media industry.

### Gender Still Matters

Whilst the possibility of electro music qualifying for disembodied descriptions were raised by optimistic feminists, the music media quickly provided a more familiar response: it hooked into normative sets of well-known gender codes. This was pre-empted by the promotional sheets at Areal Records:

With utmost sense and sensibility, Ada perfectly knows how to rock the house and the dance floor: wicked rhythms, full of melancholic deepness and weirdo saw-tooth sounds [...] because she is no direct descendant of Adam, but raised by pink ponies, most of her songs are not really adagio, but she seems to be the long awaited adapter between Electropop and

## dig me out

Snotrock.

Different music journals picked up these gender codes, such as the American online music magazine *Dusted Magazine*, comparing Ada to her labelmate *Basteroid* in dichotomous terms; it is the "sensualised" and "playful" feminine description of Ada's music that sticks out in the gender lexicon:

Where acts like *Basteroid* favour fuzzy, granulated textures, beats that puncture the eardrum like feet through floorboards, and thick, reamy midrange, Ada's music is sensual and playful, riding on air, topping the treble with micro-managed motifs (...) and Ada's devotional vocal like huge, wind-billowed sheets of taffeta and velvet.<sup>5</sup>

The German pop culture magazine *Intro* similarly couched Ada's music in an "irresistibly sweetness of pop [and] sentimentality".<sup>6</sup> *De:Bug*, a magazine for electronic music and lifestyle, reassures the reader that her tracks, despite "snotty" wallowing harmonies, demonstrate "excellence in her ingenuous approach to those old bastards house and techno (...) with her particular own sense for sweet melodies."<sup>7</sup> They also congratulate her that "she can even sing".

Media voices take up simplified gender-biased ascriptions of sweet, fluffy or wicked sound associations for female artists and producers. Male musicians receive a similarly narrow, heteronormative repertoire of "male" characteristics. *Metope's Kobol*, for example, is the pushing and "vibrant album that you need like air to breath", "grating in a powerful way (...) a highly explosive mixture (...) a bomb!"; music that emphasises "constant progress", "amplifying its sphere of activity" and "its powerful atmosphere".<sup>8</sup> *Dusted magazine* describes *Basteroid's Upset Ducks* album as "fierce, rough (...) brutishly edited and with mine-sweeping, portentous melody-drone (...) that barely holds his

## dig me out

energy in check".<sup>9</sup>

What becomes apparent from these media quotations is the dichotomous ascription and gender-bias produced by particular adjectives or phrases. Music without any audible or textual reference to its gender composition is typically attached to a distinctly "male", active, energy-driven impetus; the "female" thrust, in contradistinction, is either sweet and devotional or snotty with wicked beats once it gets heavier on the bass.

Gender does not produce a different sound; it is with the reception of sound-texts that this process happens. The language of familiar stereotypes - of female versus male approaches towards making music - brings the subject back to the track and widens the gender gap. "It's not only the culture industry providing these clichés...listening habits [themselves] are adapted to find its fulfilment in those stereotypes", cautions Roger Behrens about the broader problem in sound sexism.<sup>10</sup> It is the strategy of subjectivisation - by the means of language and limited interpretive repertoires - that reinforce well-worn gender ascriptions and heterosexual normative concepts of identity within music writing, despite the liberation potential of the electro genre.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Birgit Richard, "DJ-Jane Kicks und Acid Chicks. Musikalische Ekstasen und Formationen der Körper", in Meike Jansen and club transmediale (eds), Gendertronics- Der Körper in der Elektronischen Musik (Frankfurt: Edition Suhrkamp, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Rosa Reitsamer, "Abstract zu Symposium Elektronische Musik und Clubkultur", in fiber. werkstoff zu feminismus und popkultur (2006:10).

<sup>3</sup> Christine Braunersreuther and Marcus Maida, "Nicht schlecht für eine Frau", in testcard. Beiträge zur Popgeschichte, Gender

---

Issue (Mainz: Ventil Verlag, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Christoph Cox, "Wie wird Musik zu einem organlosen Körper? Gilles Deleuze und die experimentelle Elektronik", in Marcus Kleiner and Achim Szepanski, Soundcultures. Über elektronische und digitale Musik (Frankfurt: Edition Suhrkamp, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Jon Dale, "Ada-Blondie", Dusted Magazine, 9<sup>th</sup> December 2004, [www.dustedmagazine.com/reviews/1875](http://www.dustedmagazine.com/reviews/1875)

<sup>6</sup> Intro (2004: 122).

<sup>7</sup> sven.vt, "Ada-Blondie", De:Bug, 6<sup>th</sup> October 2004, [www.de-bug.de/reviews/23237.html](http://www.de-bug.de/reviews/23237.html)

<sup>8</sup> "Metope-Kobol", 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2005, [www.thelastbeat.com/archives/metope-kobol/](http://www.thelastbeat.com/archives/metope-kobol/)

<sup>9</sup> Jon Dale, "Basteroid-Upsets Ducks", 24<sup>th</sup> September 2007, [www.dustedmagazine.com/reviews/3797](http://www.dustedmagazine.com/reviews/3797)

<sup>10</sup> Roger Behrens, "Soziale Verhältnisse - Klangverhältnisse. Versuch einer Entzerrung des ausgesparten Problems der Materialdialektik in der Populärmusik", in testcard. Beiträge zur Popgeschichte. Sound Issue (Mainz: Ventil Verlag, 1996).