

DOING BY NOT DOING?

MINIMAL PACKAGING AND DESIGN
IN TECHNO MUSIC

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While hosting a podcast given over to the mixing skills of the techno producer Function (a.k.a. David Sumner), CLR record label boss Chris Liebing says - in a cheerful tone of voice seemingly denoting approval - that "[he] has successfully avoided any Internet appearances so far...so you won't find a direct Facebook page or web page [for him]."¹ Liebing immediately follows this disclaimer with an impressive laundry list of upcoming Function-related projects (remixes, solo works etc.), which none-too-subtly suggests that an absence from online social networking is anything but an absence from networking 'full stop', and certainly not a concession to laziness. That this little morsel of information can actually be refreshing and unexpected testifies to the contemporary ubiquity of online social grooming, but it also hints at the persisting paradoxical qualities of techno music. Not only does the genre, despite its relentless quest for sonic innovation, continue to embrace the vinyl record as its idealized storage and playback medium², but many of its constituents continue to embrace other more distinctly 'pre-digital' means of communication.

Case in point: the UK label Sandwell District (not to be confused with a similarly named production duo pairing the aforementioned Sumner with Karl O'Connor, a.k.a. Regis) features no web address or email contact on its recorded output. They are by no means the lone exception to a rule here, and Sandwell District mainstay Function is representative of another long-standing trend within the international techno community, whereby artists operative over the past two and a half decades have made a habit of bucking the recorded music 'star system' with elusive pseudonyms that are either evocative of technical precision (e.g. Surgeon, Designer), virtuous anonymity (Silent Servant) or ominous world-building aspirations (Forward Strategy Group, Planetary Assault Systems.) Plenty of these artists use these pseudonyms with full knowledge that their birth names remain available to the listening public, though there are more enigmatically anonymous representatives of the culture's cutting edge: the identity of Sandwell District recording artist Rrose is deliberately withheld. He / she uses no profile photos other than an image of Marcel Duchamp's feminine alter ego Rrose Sélavy as photographed by Man Ray (and even this image finds itself partially obscured by an overlay of a human skull.)

When these variants on anonymity are considered alongside sonic and graphic design features, a picture of techno culture throughout the years gradually emerges in which every possible access point to the culture is potentially a point of blocked entry. And this will

certainly remain the case if the novice listener fails to invest his or her own communicative and interpretive resources back into the 'scene.' Some of the most pivotal moments in the genre's sonic development have involved the subtraction or withholding of information, such as the then-innovative low-pass filtering on Porter Ricks' tracks that gave listeners the distinct feeling that they were listening through the walls for evidence of a clandestine musical gathering. 'Minimal techno' or 'dub techno' pioneers such as Porter Ricks, Maurizio and Basic Channel also seasoned their music heavily with the sounds of disembodied, delay-effected voices and with cavernous reverberation or lengthy decay times applied to isolated elements within the total mix, all leading to an outright romanticization of the perpetually out-of-reach. As could probably be expected, this music was largely complemented by the simplest of visual designs, adding still more emphasis to this alluring sensation of spatio-temporal distancing.

Calling the trend towards genericized design a monocausal phenomenon is something that should be resolutely avoided: it is clear that, even within the limited purview of techno, this practice is a convergence point for a number of different subcultural genealogies. Most of these seem to have adopted this style of design for practical as well as aesthetic reasons, many of which I hope to sketch out here. I argued in my earlier book, *Unofficial Release*, that music genres from the more confrontational end of the spectrum use information deprivation as a kind of paradoxical strategy for self-promotion. That is to say, it is a matter of these artists' playing to their core audience of fans, who find a higher 'truth value' in creative artifacts that come from a place where the human striving for recognition and renown is not a consideration. Some alternative musicians of yesteryear - e.g. the San Francisco sludge-punks Flipper, notable for their plain yellow "generic album" - knowingly employed this strategy as a means of indicating their skepticism towards the exhibitionist gimmickry of elaborate sleeve designs, and of telegraphing the comparative integrity of their own music, which presumably would have the power to maintain its integrity even while visually represented in the blandest possible manner.

Those who have come to knowledge of electronic dance music through mawkish TV programs like *Dance Energy*, or whose iconic image of the techno enthusiast is that of a pacifier-munching, Ecstasy-addled and glowstick-waving 'raver' (or, perhaps, the notorious 'club kid' Michael Alig as he appeared on the American talk show circuit of the 1990s) may

indeed be taken aback by the stark and functional lack of semantic information conveyed by the techno variants mentioned here. Similarly, they may find it hard to comprehend that techno and the busier, sample-swamped styles of yesteryear do not see eye to eye on all issues of presentation. Many flyer artworks for parties of the mid-1990s represented the polar opposite of the minimal aesthetic, with their excited "feature-ism" pointing to the greater accessibility to Adobe design software and an infatuation with its ability to render alien landscapes populated by, say, floating reflective 3-D orbs and fantastic terrain typified by unnatural color gradients. Advocates of both aesthetic approaches will likely contend that theirs is the most representative of real progressivism and the spirit of authentic community, and that the other is pandering to a false ideal of what the public wants: supporters of a more hectic "feature-ist" style may attempt to call out minimalists on their capitulating to the uniformity of a creatively neutered society, while supporters of the minimal aesthetic can also accuse "feature-ists" of being complicit in the kind of "bells-and-whistles" showiness that encourages passive astonishment in the place of real interactivity. Suffice it to say, there is plenty of middle ground as well (a good deal of techno records are designed with covers that exude the visual complexity of non-orthogonal architecture while also maintaining a 'clean' sense of layout), but this is a subject for another day.

So, the question has to be asked, what is the role of information deprivation in electronic dance music, which, even in the 'darker' modes mentioned above, is still comparatively friendly and community-oriented than much of what can be found in the myriad cultural undergrounds? Can the visual negativity inherent in techno designs actually be commensurate with positive ambitions in other areas, i.e. maximizing technological efficiency and communicating across linguistic and geographic boundaries? One has to be cautious when saying that these ambitions are shared across the entire cultural spectrum of techno, though the Sicilian producer and Stroboscopic Artefacts label boss Lucy (a.k.a. Luca Mortellaro) provides one viewpoint that it is safe to posit as a recurring one within the scene: namely, that controlled doses of reduced or just unfamiliar information are necessary as a kind of educational imperative that will re-energize the listener, and continue the chain reaction of influence crucial to the scene's perpetual renewal. As he claims in a 2011 interview:

What I always think is, to try to give [the audience] what they want but [also] what they didn't know they wanted...let them discover things as you did. Be smart; bring them to a certain place where they can accept...they can be joyful and start to jump, and at that point, [take a] risk, you know. And at that point you can see that they will not forget the DJ set, they will say, like, "that was unique, I never heard something like this."³

Lucy's enthusiastically stated words cut to the heart of techno's appeal: it is a form that thrives on the rapid, dynamic interchange between identification and estrangement, or between the familiar comfort of a 'groove' and the epiphanic shock of the new. This dynamism itself enables techno's continually oscillating between a status as a popular and avant-garde style.

A genealogy of constructive simplicity

Techno has never been alone in its hybridizing of both popular and avant-garde approaches, where recent art history is concerned. Encounters with the visual and audio components of this culture invite comparisons with similar minimalistic methods, not the least of these being the "capital M" Minimalism inaugurated by the New York-based school of Robert Morris, Carl Andre, Eva Hesse Et. Al. As Anne Chave insists, "Minimalist projects typically entailed a paradoxical combination of humbleness and pretension, being ordinary in their forms and, seemingly, in their materials and means, yet grandiose in their claims to art status."⁴ The same can capably be said of techno, which is projected simultaneously as being very accessible to aspiring musicians, and as having the special, even supernatural power to rise from out of 'nothing' or 'nowhere' (depending on who you ask, these void-like entities from which techno emanates can be either the ruins of Detroit, or the static living environments of suburban bedroom communities.)

The visual reductionism in techno design also has some kinship with the earlier avant-garde aesthetics of Soviet Constructivists such as El Lissitzky, for whom "every organized work - whether it be a house, a poem, or a picture - is an 'object', not intended to

estrangle people from life, but on the contrary to call upon them to take part in its organization."⁵ Critic Barrett Watten, in his perceptive association of this aesthetic with Detroit techno, saw in both projects an "unfolding work of culture in which social negativity - the experience of rupture, an act of refusal - invokes a fantasmatic future: a horizon of possibility, an imagination of participation."⁶ This tendency is salient in the fact that, moreso than in other genres of electronic dance music, techno has traditionally favored the "track" over the "tune": that is to say, it has envisioned stand-alone works as individual components to be integrated by a DJ into a complete mix much in the same way that other forms of "track" converge to enable transportation or navigation throughout a complex network.

Much of the simplicity of techno tracks owes itself to this fact; to the knowledge that they are going to see a much greater degree of creative re-use than the music products of other genres (a fact that is truer now than ever, with the increasing ability of home multi-tracking software to aid in tasks like beat matching and quantization, and with digital sales and downloads allowing for simple importation of new music tracks into larger music project files.) Many downloadable techno singles or EPs available through online retailers offer an even more functional reduction of the track in the form of the "tool," a looped remix reprising two or three essential elements from the parent track in a way that allows it to be used as a kind of inter-track "suture" in new mixes. Seen in this way, techno has never been an over-simplified, Barthes-ian "death of the author" but has instead extended authorial responsibility to a host of secondary creators. Given this state of affairs, where music releases are a kind of transitional product that can be either enjoyed in isolation or integrated into other creative projects, the choice of simplistic visual design seems to make more sense. Lavish gatefold LP designs pieced together from psychedelic bricolage and massed iconography would, presumably, play too much of a role in directing any creative processes deriving from the primary work, and so it is no accident that designs of this complexity are reserved for more complete or definitive statements (see Surgeon's *Breaking the Frame* or Planetary Assault Systems' *The Messenger* for two recent, pertinent examples.)

As enthusiasts of the style will be happy to tell you, the minimalism inherent in the music is not a spur to boredom, nor an abnegation of craftsmanship. As to the latter, much minimal techno involves a kind of 'detail displacement' where much of the real virtuosity or workmanship can be heard in the hyperreal production and mastering work done on

individual recordings, rather than solely in the composition phase. The ease of entry into creating techno music can thus be deceptive, since the production techniques employed to continually renew this structurally simple music are more complex than immediately evident, requiring a steeper learning curve than that simple structure may let on.

Records available from techno labels such as Sandwell District, Echocord, Blueprint, Perc Trax and Sleaze Records have typically relied upon simple center label templates consisting of a single color field and one graphic element along with the requisite text identifiers for the releasing artist. When and where graphic elements appear - such as the slightly pixelated rectangle used on Blueprint singles, or the hexagon motif of CLR releases - they are generally flat, monochromatic and free of texture-enhancing illusions like drop shadow or beveling. Though a pareidolic sensibility can and will be put into play when looking at designs that are this simplistic, they rarely feature images of humans or other forms of organic life. Usually the design templates in question will be "color-swapped" in order to distinguish individual releases (though even this is not a given), and it is rare for a series of techno releases to deviate from the template any more than that. The Electric Deluxe label provides an interesting compromise here, restricting its releasing artists' sleeve designs to artist name and track title spelled out in the label's proprietary typeface, though also allowing said artists to take some liberties with this one ground rule, making for a satisfying variety of color gradients, font sizes and experimental lettering arrangements.

Much as Minimalist art distanced itself from nihilism (being famously defended by Gregory Battcock as a form that showed how "one can make a fully affirmative gesture [...] by *not* doing something")⁷, this sort of visual reductionism should also not be seen as a rejection of the possibility of innovation. The minimalist record design template succeeded in this process of "doing by not doing" by inspiring the investment of creativity into realms of perception that had been previously neglected. Several techno labels merely shifted design emphasis away from the two-dimensional graphics and towards the creation of fully realized, visuo-tactile pieces of industrial design. The Basic Channel sub-label Chain Reaction, active throughout the mid-late 1990s, provided a much-referenced example of this with their line of embossed metal CD boxes. The 'Static' series of recordings from Raster-Noton - though at times deviating heavily from the dancefloor-friendly musical formulae associated with techno - provided another example of largely bypassing two-dimensional graphics in order to make a package whose unique contours and tactile minutiae seemed inseparable from the

enclosed audio: the series in question came housed in the type of translucent anti-static bags normally meant to protect items like network cards and hard drives, and as such communicated much about the fragility of technological artifice even while screened with bold, confident minimalist layouts.

Techno exigencies

In spite of the inclusive and communal characteristics projected by much of techno culture, it has historically found itself in situations where it had no choice but to adopt the trappings of exclusivity or selectivity: given that its parties and events took place in an alternative infrastructure that was rarely legally sanctioned by local authorities, the culture traditionally had to play its cards close to its chest for practical reasons. That is to say, full advance disclosure of parties' locations could easily lead to their being prematurely shut down, a fact that encouraged the now famous habit of making last-minute announcements about these locations via special phone hotlines or maps that could be found at a sympathetic record store shortly before the kickoff of the event. Speaking of record stores, some retailers specializing in techno, such as Somewhere In Detroit (once advertised as "the world's most exclusive record store"), also functioned as appointment-only locations rather than as the more common "walk-in" retail stores. This, again, was a practice arguably driven more by contingency than by some desire on the behalf of the culture's gatekeepers to choose its own audience: small boutique stores could ill afford to have their stock being regularly shoplifted, and the prevalence of DJs among the shops' serial customers demanded that, like it or not, they often needed to be catered to ahead of the casual "walk-in" shopper.

Meanwhile, other aspects of standardized design in techno artifacts can be traced back to the "white label" phenomenon common across several club music genres: these completely unadorned 12" records, distributed almost exclusively to club or pirate radio DJs, were made so for a number of reasons: one of the principal reasons was to prevent rival DJs from ferreting out the key sonic ingredients in a competitor's mix, and using them to upstage that DJ in the following weeks. So one possible source of the trend towards minimalistic design comes from producers' relationship with DJs, who were well familiar with 'white labels' and acclimated to receiving recordings that were not distinguished by their graphic design features. The evolution from functional 'white labels' to a more fully developed

minimal aesthetic met with less resistance than it would have from other popular music styles.

Standardized packaging as a deterrent?

When not signifying content that was outright illegal in its local area of distribution, generic packaging of media has its own history of being used to mark social disapproval of certain content. Pioneering stand-up comedian and "hip-hop godfather" Rudy Ray Moore, prior to epitomizing the blaxploitation comedy film with his 'Dolemite' character, was required to sell his "party records" at retailers who kept them behind a store counter, and only then would sell them with their sleeves wrapped in plain paper (and lest we forget, Moore began his career in an era when public performance of "blue" or obscene material was illegal in anything save for underground nightclubs.)

Much later on, the industrial music of the late 1970s and early 1980s provided a creative forum for exploring the methodology of control and persuasion, particularly as it involved the repression of socio-cultural taboos. As such, the presentation of that music was situated at an intersection similar to the techno music that claimed a definite influence from it: the generic packaging of industrial records was, on one hand, a necessity stemming from inconveniences such as pressing plants' refusal to handle more 'explicit' or shocking designs (these original designs might later be photocopied and included as an insert inside the plain sleeve), and was also an effective means of providing thematic contrast: with no expectations as to what the music inside of, say, a mostly blank Come Organisation LP sleeve would sound like, the sound's efficacy was arguably increased. Industrial acts knowingly used the banality of corporate communications and generic supermarket brands as design elements that would make the estranging power of their music more evident.

21st century iterations of techno have seen the stylistic debt to industrial music acknowledged in unequivocal ways, which tempt one to see adoption of generic packaging as a direct descendant of industrial music's culture critique rather than as the sole province of dance music.⁸ The connections are easier to ascertain when looking at some of the personnel to have participated in shaping both scenes: the segue from post-industrial psychic assault to proto-techno physical rapture was made possible thanks to transitional artists like Chrislo Haas (of D.A.F. and Liaisons Dangereuses.) This minor history provides an oft-overlooked

reference point for austere packaging schemes that have appeared in recordings since that period, not only within techno but also in those experimental audio genres that have followed John Cage's admonition to hear sounds "as themselves." Heirs to this Cage-ian tradition would view graphic adornment as an unnecessary, visuo-centric distraction blocking this phenomenological research.

The standardized packaging of certain industrial records, given the oft sinister contents that could be found within, is interesting to consider not just in light of its novelty in its own time, but as a harbinger of moralistic attitudes towards standardized packaging that would appear decades later. For example, a requirement for tobacco companies to distribute their wares in plain packaging was recommended by anti-smoking activists in the 1990s, during that era's increase in the tempo of such campaigning. This strategy was embraced owing to the negative associations supposedly conjured in consumers by these unadorned packages. As much of a logical leap as it may seem, one editorial cartoon in the anti-smoking *Tobacco Control* journal bears the caption "plain packaging" underneath a before-and-after illustration in which a heavy smoker finds himself in a body bag.⁹

While standardized packaging was used in this instance to *dissuade* the purchase of morally shunned products, it was used in still other instances to *encourage* the otherwise timid consumer of the same: the now-defunct Tower Video chain, for example, housed its significant number of pornographic rental videos in identical black plastic cases with their original box artwork cut up and pasted inside. Ideally, this would make the shopping experience a little more discreet for the porn enthusiast still awaiting the porno-topia of the broadband Internet age - though the unassuming black boxes served as a marker for prurient goods, said customers would at least not have to make their particular kinks and turn-ons a matter of comic relief for snarky clerks, or potential offense for other queued-up customers.

Yet it can't be said that any of these trends are universal throughout the rest of the industrialized world, particularly in those parts of it that have had a historically positive reception towards techno music. In techno-centric Tokyo, for example, the same plain paper sleeves that would elsewhere be associated with seamy material are a standard feature of major booksellers, who wrap each book purchase, regardless of its content, in a customized paper dustcover bearing no information other than the place of purchase (a custom that both allows for free advertising and for an added degree of privacy for readers.) 'Generic' design in Japan is also popular outside the realm of media goods: shops such as the

home furnishing specialist Muji still do a fair trade in ultra-simplified home storage units built from smoked translucent plastic and other materials.

"Matter Matters" - the humanization of designs

Returning for a moment to the work of Minimalist artists, it is worth considering whether or not standardized design is really a guarantor of anonymity or "facelessness," or if it has a different function - that of overwhelming the listener with curiosity to the point where they seek out, one way or another, contact with the artist and personal disclosure of biographical information. The landmark Minimalist sculptures of Carl Andre, for example, were acclaimed in their time for refusing any kind of subjectivity or identification with artistic personality, yet Andre was not averse to revealing that these sculptures did have a metaphorical content: Andre's famous construction *Lever*, for example, referenced Andre's "paternal grandfather, who built his boyhood home in Quincy, Massachusetts."¹⁰ In the realm of Minimalist music, the same held true on occasion, with composer LaMonte Young citing formative experiences in Bern, Idaho as his initiation into the mysteries of the 'long tone' - first via the sound of wind seeping through cracks in the walls of his childhood home, and later, as Keith Potter recalls, from the telephone poles that "produced a continuous chord from which, much later, [Young] recalled the four pitches he named the 'Dream Chord.'"¹¹ This type of biographical exposition has never been completely absent from techno either, despite critics' condemnations or exaltations of information reduction as its most relevant feature: Underground Resistance DJ 'Mad Mike', a.k.a. Mike Banks, has cited his grandfather's assembly line work in Detroit as a key influence on a subsequent aesthetic of 'souled' machinery (i.e. "one day he made a mistake, and put his hand in [the machine] when he should have taken it out. And that one time, the machine refused to come down. That's what it means to be in tune with the machine, to feel its spirit."¹²)

Banks' statements are echoed today by techno's more ebullient spokespeople, such as Chris Liebing, who are fond of using terms like "spiritual" and "soulful" in relation to favored artists and tracks, with no hint of irony and with the full knowledge that they are imbuing automated or mechanized musical processes with spirit. Liebing's choice of the name "Bauhaus" for a collaborative project with Tommy Four Seven is also particularly

telling in this regard, maybe showing more than a little affinity on the part of this German producer for the modernist aesthetic tradition inaugurated within the walls of the Bauhaus schools in Berlin, Weimar and Dessau. Juliet Koss' description of Bauhaus theater actors and party revelers - i.e. "creatures simultaneously without affect and full of personality"¹³ - is striking in how it describes the public presentation of current techno producers and DJs, and also in the way they capture this aura in their products.

From here, it is not such a dramatic leap to say that techno designers accord the same spiritual reverence to the objects that define techno culture, and that they hope to avoid projecting an air of disrespect by designing products that are wasteful or loaded with superfluous elements. In other words, there is a distinct sensibility within techno that (echoing Carl Andre) "matter matters"; or that, as per critic Jane Bennett, there is a "thingness to humans" that also implies its obverse, a humanization of "things." As Bennett argues, "agency is less a property of individual entities than of assemblages of humans and nonhumans,"¹⁴ and so designed objects must always be treated as if they will act and communicate in the place of their designers. Like the skeletal "tool" tracks that allow otherwise passive listeners to emerge as re-creators, the austere design work of techno is also an agent, tool, or provocation for its consumers to fill the negative space with imagined worlds of their own design (and the objects' occasional resistance to this process only solidifies their status as having a will of their own.)

This ethical attitude towards objects, which refuses their pure passivity, has manifested in artistic movements from Constructivism to Minimalism, and in philosophies from the hylozoism of pre-Socratic Greek philosophers to Japanese Zen. This, of course, places techno music and design work squarely within a lengthy tradition of philosophical and artistic inquiry. The fact that techno can be at once the music of "the new" and of a long-standing tradition should no longer be cause for confusion - techno's desire to mine riches from aesthetic austerity is just one of the contradictions that continues to influence the culture's evolution.



previously unpublished

¹ Chris Liebing quoted at "CLR Podcast #160." Retrieved from <http://www.cl-rec.com/pod/podcast>, April 24 2013.

² David Hesmondhalgh has claimed that this was originally due to a situation whereby "The 12-inch singles at the centre of dance music are cheap to press because the rise of the CD has left spare vinyl-pressing capacity." David Hesmondhalgh, "The British Dance Music Industry: A Case Study of Independent Cultural Production." *The British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (Jun., 1998), pp. 234-251.

³ Luca Mortellaro quoted at "CLR Podcast #131." Retrieved from <http://www.cl-rec.com/pod/podcast>, April 24 2013.

⁴ Anna C. Chave, "Revaluing Minimalism: Patronage, Aura and Place." *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 90, No. 3 (Sep., 2008), pp. 466-486.

⁵ El Lissitzky quoted in *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts* by Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, p. 340-341. Thames & Hudson, London, 1992. Unsurprisingly, the debt to Lissitzky is repaid on at least one album cover: the techno-industrial combo Clock DVA used his self-portrait *The Constructor* for their 1991 album *Man Amplified*.

⁶ Barrett Watten, "The Constructivist Moment: From El Lissitzky to Detroit Techno." *Qui Parle*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Fall/Winter 1997), pp. 57-100.

⁷ Gregory Battcock, "Minimal Art." *Art Education*, Vol. 21, No. 9 (Dec., 1968), pp. 7-12.

⁸ The British Murder Boys duo (Regis & Surgeon), for example, opened a 2004 live p.a. set at the Kosmozz Club with samples of a Jim Jones speech recorded directly prior to his leading his "people's temple" in their grisly mass suicide. It was a speech that has since circulated far and wide, but which was first sold and distributed on record by Catalonian industrial culture mainstay Jordi Valls [a.k.a. Vagina Dentata Organ.] Surgeon's embrace of industrialism is one of the stronger ones within the techno scene, with his mixes and referential track titles both exhibiting clear influence from the likes of Whitehouse, Coil and Throbbing Gristle.

⁹ Rob Cunningham and Ken Kyle, "The Case for Plain Packaging." *Tobacco Control*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Spring 1995), pp. 80-86.

¹⁰ Anna C. Chave, "Minimalism and Biography." *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 82, No. 1 (Mar., 2000), pp. 149-163.

¹¹ Keith Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists*, p. 23. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge MA., 2002.

¹² Mike Banks quoted in Warren (1997.)

¹³ Juliet Koss, "Bauhaus Theatre of Human Dolls." *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 85, No. 4 (Dec. 2003), pp. 724-745.

¹⁴ Jane Bennett, "The Force of Things: Steps Toward an Ecology of Matter." *Political Theory*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (Jun., 2004), pp. 347-372.