

Curatorial > INTERRUPTIONS

This section proposes a line of programmes devoted to exploring the complex map of sound art from different points of view organised in curatorial series.

With **INTERRUPTIONS** we make the most of the vast musical knowledge of the artists and curators involved in the Ràdio Web MACBA project, to create a series of 'breaks' or 'interruptions' in our Curatorial programming. In à-la-carte-music format, our regular curators have carte blanche to create a purely musical experience with only one guiding parameter: the thread that runs through each session must be original and surprising. This program takes a listen to techno-pop of the seventies and early eighties as a brief yet deliberate interruption into the realms of pop, rock, soul and R&B.

Curated by Terre Thaemlitz

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Born in 1968, Terre Thaemlitz grew up a fag in the American Midwest. She was drawn to electronic music as an antithesis to the rock and country music listened to by those who constantly harassed him. At age 18, she fled to New York City, where his record collection expanded exponentially. In 1997 she moved to Oakland, carrying the collection along with him. Then in 2001, she moved to Japan, once again taking the records in tow. In 2004, upset by the revival of eighties electronic music in which the sounds of freaks and nerds was being rebranded as 'cool', he joined forces with eighties legend Haco (After Dinner) to reclaim the uncool in techno-pop and new wave. Calling themselves Yesterday's Heroes, they released an unpopular album '1979' through the French bedroom label La Louche Qui Fait Déborder Le Vase. Thaemlitz currently resides with her records in Kawasaki. comatonse.com/thaemlitz

INTERRUPTIONS #12

Lost Techno-Pop Weekend in Rural Midwestern America

This mix takes a listen to techno-pop of the seventies and early eighties in a deliberate attempt to vindicate it as one of the most important genres of the last century.

01. Summary

By the time mainstream pop music really became electronically based in terms of synthesizer/sampler instrumentation and editing (first with R&B and hip-hop, then mainstream pop), the techno-pop synth sound would be utterly abandoned by both pop and underground electronic cultures (techno, house, etc.). In this sense, techno-pop constitutes an isolated and rarely discussed 'lost weekend' from standard pop practices. Techno-pop is most often dismissed as a shade of new romanticism, punk or electro. However, I believe its strict emphasis on electronics and critical rejection of rock culture (at least in the beginning) make techno-pop in and of itself one of the most important, albeit short-lived, genres of the last century. Then again, my views are admittedly warped by an upbringing in the rural Midwestern US, where electronic music was not only scarce, but phobically abhorred by most people.

Terre Thaemlitz, 2013

02. Notes

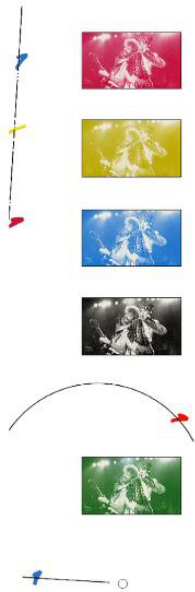
Discussing seventies and eighties techno-pop in 2013 is a tricky thing. By today's standards, it probably appears to have been more of a mood than an actual genre. Much as a disco classic (and techno-pop classic) like Donna Summer's 'I Feel Love' was an electric black sheep amidst an otherwise easily forgettable soul/R&B album, so were the majority of techno-pop classics collected on a track-by-track basis. Many came from typically guitar-based European new wave bands, such as 'Somnambulist' by XTC, or 'Mixer X' by Ultravox. Others came from less likely places, like 'Coo Coo U' by Manhattan Transfer, and 'I Need Somebody to Love Tonight' by Sylvester. The early listeners of techno-pop adjusted our definition of the genre to incorporate whatever electronic music we could get our hands on. This is not to say we were not brutally opinionated and exclusionary. I am sure that many techno-pop fans will look at this program's playlist and compulsively begin imagining how they could have done better.

By contrast, today's younger consumers of electronic music are accustomed to complete albums done in a singular, codified style. This conditioning runs so deep that it can trigger disappointment—even frustration—when a producer disrupts the homogeneous flow of an album. For example, online comments left after Resident Advisor's review of my own semi-eclectic house album *K-S.H.E Routes not Roots* included someone who had to register just to say: "'Track 06- 'Stand Up'... way to fuck up a beautiful arrangement! At least put it on the end of the album for christ sake". Quickly concurred by another: 'This. Why wasn't this even mentioned in the review?'. Within such a climate, I have little confidence of conveying how the electronic music of techno-pop had once functioned so differently.

And so, to both the old-school techno-pop aficionados and today's younger listeners, with regard to your impending disappointment I offer my apologies in advance.

The Beginning and the End

This is where we start



t o u c h
d a n c e

[Mixed signals: Completely inappropriate and misleading rock'n'roll imagery on the cover of the Eurythmics' sonically brilliant electronic remix mini-album *Touch Dance*]

This now takes our hearts
Away
Thus we reach the end
The beginning and the end
You see
I could not try
And here you and I
Parting due to me only
And now

– **Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark**

In many ways, those lyrics summarized techno-pop's arrival as the music of those who refused to try to rock, as well as anticipated its impending fold back into the musical mainstream from which it sought to diverge. As early as 1984, the majority of techno-pop producers had already caved to record industry pressures, shedding their synthetic sounds for more standard rock-oriented productions: The Human League, Eurythmics, Depeche Mode, Gary Numan, Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark, and Yellow Magic Orchestra, to name a few. The two most notable exceptions being Devo (who pushed deeper into electronics with time), and Kraftwerk (who disappeared all together, only to emerge from their cave in 1986 with the eulogistic album *Techno Pop*).

The theme of 'parting ways' captured in 'The Beginning and the End' was also integral to the techno-pop consumer experience itself. For those of us who cared for purely synthetic techno-pop – even faced social ostracization or violence for our choice in music (perhaps more commonly in the rock-centric US than in Europe) – discussions of what producers we liked were often secondary to discussions of which albums marked those producers 'selling out' to mainstream pop-rock culture. One never forgets the feeling – or sound – of realizing one shall no longer collect another album by one's favorite group. Deciding upon 'cut-off albums' for one's collection was invested with such serious self-reflection that I can still not only list, but emotionally feel, each and every title: Eurythmics, *Touch*; Thomas Dolby, *The Flat Earth*; YMO, *BGM*; Yello, *You Gotta Say Yes to Another Excess*; The Human League, *Dare*; OMD, *Dazzle Ships*; and Depeche Mode, *Black Celebration*. In a pre-internet era when record stores didn't even have listening stations, each hard-sought and hard-fought purchase of a new album of electronic music had the equal possibility to play like the best sex ever, or the funeral of a loved one. My traumatic desire to find ways to continue loving those who were clearly dying provided an eery soundtrack for the beginning of eighties AIDS panic, in which love, deviance and loss would culturally take on new forms of inseparability.

Sorry, what's that? You stopped listening to Depeche Mode after *Speak and Spell*, when Vince Clarke left to start Yazoo, by which you are passive-aggressively inferring the banality of my mainstream musical leanings? I have met many of your kind, so don't consider yourself special... Besides, if you missed out on *Construction Time Again*, then you really missed out. Let's just agree the important thing is that we both stopped listening to Depeche Mode before 'Personal Jesus'...

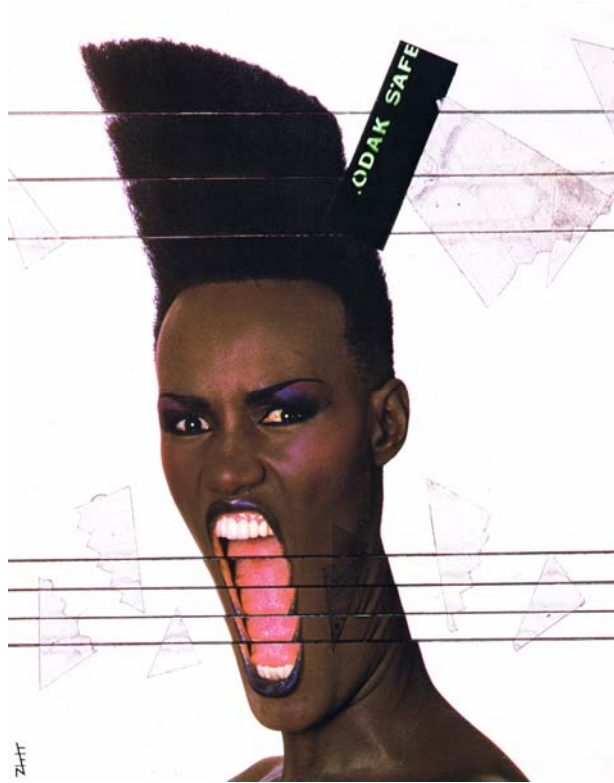
No, 'cut-off albums' were not decided upon lightly.

We're through being cool

If you live in a small town
You might meet a dozen or two
Young alien types who step out
And dare to declare
'We're through being cool'

– **Devo**

Devo knew exactly what it meant to listen to techno-pop in the Midwestern US during the seventies and eighties. But I must confess that, even today, I do not know what it meant to listen to techno-pop during that same time in Europe, Asia or the rest of the world. In the US it was urban legend that techno-pop was standard radio fare in Europe, with absolutely no special outsider appeal at all.



[Product working the system: Grace Jone's poster]

Could that really be true? As a youth, the notion of techno-pop functioning as mainstream media struck me as more disturbing than promising. From an early age, every experience with electronic music taught me that the medium was synonymous with social isolation amidst a nation of homophobic rockers. And I believe that Devo-esque purge of Futurist-infused idealism is what set many US techno-pop experiences apart from those in places like Europe and Japan. It was in those latter regions where one was more likely to hear techno-pop absolving Futurism of its ties to facism.

Another major cause for my inability to perceive the 'pop' in techno-pop was related to US codifications around race and music. Specifically, the near uncrossable segregation between Black musics (soul, R&B, disco) and White musics (pop, rock, country). This genre segregation mirrored real social segregation, despite virtually all Americans containing a mix of musics in their personal record collections. Segregation that continues to this day, despite Obama in the Whitehouse and hip-hop ruling the music marketplace. The early eighties US lacked something Europe and much of the rest of the world had: a concept of pop electronic dance music that was not exclusively restricted to the color Black. Given the absence of a racially complex model of dance music in the US, there was no cultural opening for the non-rock synthetic rhythms of predominantly White and Japanese producers within the hegemony of the rock/soul racial divide. As crass as it may sound, I believe that because most techno-pop producers were not Black, US record labels almost exclusively marketed them in the category of pop-rock. This doomed techno-pop to obscurity in the US, since pop-rock culture was antithetical to nearly every aspect of techno-pop, both sonically and ideologically.

Time has proven the pop-rock marketing of techno-pop to have been paradoxical, given the influence groups like Telex, Kraftwerk, Yello and YMO had on African American dance music producers from Detroit, Chicago and New York (and vice versa, of course). Indeed, some techno-pop acts charted in both US pop-rock and soul/R&B charts. However, White pop-rock charting producers crossing into soul/R&B charts were rare. Similarly, synth music by African American producers such as Newcleus, George Clinton, Herbie Hancock, Cameo, Midnight Star, Afrika Bambaataa, The SOS Band and others were never marketed together with techno-pop. In general, there was no place for the genre of techno-pop to comfortably take root and grow amidst the segregationist dynamics of US music industries.

It is interesting to note that concurrent with the emergence of techno-pop, themes of racial crossover and selling out were being increasingly addressed by soul/R&B producers, including George Clinton, Marvin Gaye and Rick James. Ironically, Gaye's 'Clique Games/Rick James' was an attack on James' pop success with 'Superfreak', a song that was itself James' spoof on what he considered to be funkless White dance music like the Knack's 'My Sharona'.

None of this is meant to imply that music industries outside the US were liberated of the problems of racism. To the contrary, the British fascination with White reggae bands always struck me as inseparable from a whitewash of the problems of colonialism. And Grace Jones herself says her music career started because of White French producers who held the prejudice that all Black women could sing, despite the obviousness of the contrary. Similarly, since the seventies in Japan, the sophisticated curation of Black Music in record stores has always come hand-in-hand with an inversely naïve fetishization of 'roots music' and the Black Other (who is never to be confused with the White or Asian other). Without overlooking those cultural systems' biases, their cultural distance from the unique workings of US racism strikes me as core to their proliferation of electronic dance music such as techno-pop, which was not explicitly soul, R&B, disco or hip-hop. Although the majority of the world's dance music is heavily indebted to American soul and R&B, the non-U.S. producer has more ability to openly interact with those influences as 'American influences', regardless of one's own race.

This was the underlying dynamic of the Euro-disco movement in the seventies, while the U.S. was engaged in anti-disco campaigns that were both homophobic and racist. To help illustrate my point, consider how African American rock bands remain anomalies to this day, yet in a country like Japan indigenous producers may make either rock or soul liberated of the demand for racial authenticity required within the US.



[Apes in the plan: Devo, *Watch us Work it*, 2007]

Unfortunately, making it big in the States was important to European record labels. That meant playing into the specific systems of racial segregation that control so many aspects of life in the US, including the marketing of music. As a result, European labels pushed their (predominantly White male) techno-pop producers to conform to a more conventional and sellable pop-rock model of sound and performance. As Andy McCluskey of Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark recollected in a 2011 interview for *The Quietus*: ‘We used to have arguments with Virgin all the time. They used to say “Will you make your minds up whether you want to be Can or Abba?”’ (thequietus.com/articles/07491-orchestral-manoevres-in-the-dark-architecture-and-morality). One could say the fate of techno-pop was sealed by the European music industry’s reliance upon sales in a racist U.S. marketplace.

Persuasion

...Checkout 5
Will the manager please go to checkout 5
There's a problem at checkout 5
Will you investigate please...

– Soft Cell

Techno-pop’s abundance of lyrics critiquing mindless consumerism were a constant reminder that there was always something painfully self-conscious about the process of buying techno-pop records. It is a bit like that feeling one gets when buying a copy of the Communist Manifesto from a commercial book store. There is an ironic redundancy in accessing critiques of capitalism through commodities. This irony was amplified in the pre-internet seventies and eighties, when the musical selection in most record stores was incredibly limited and audio previews were not possible. Each purchase was a gamble, and the less money one had to spend the higher the sense of risk. As I recollected years ago in the opening paragraph to *Repilcas Rubato*, my album of piano solos covering songs by Gary Numan:

I purchased my first record in 1979 at the age of eleven after hearing Gary Numan’s, ‘Cars’, in the now defunct Saints West roller disco in West Saint Paul, Minnesota.... With some sleuthing I discovered that the song was not performed by The Cars, as I had first suspected, and eventually located a copy of Numan’s record, *The Pleasure Principle*, in a Target discount store. The album was newly released and fully priced at \$6.99, which was more money than I had saved for it. Without hesitation, I removed a fluorescent red \$3.99 tag from another record, covered the true price tag, and proceeded to buy it. And so my consumer relationship to music began with a lie at worst, an ambiguous half-truth at best, an exuberant deception in the name of self-fulfillment in any case: *The Pleasure Principle*.

Soon after my parents relocated the family to Springfield, Missouri, where the quest for electronic music became much more difficult. To make matters worse, whatever alternative records that had trickled into town faced the risk of their young and impressionable owners finding Jesus and throwing them into the book- and record-burning bonfires held regularly at Baptist and Assemblies of God churches. Those flames consumed one friend’s collection of rare Blondie singles. Another friend sacrificed his Oingo-Boingo collection, and replaced it with records by the Christian new wave band Daniel Amos. Shortly thereafter our friendship ended when I patently refused to accept Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. I still listen to Daniel Amos records, though. One doesn’t let go of records filled with deep insider jokes critiquing Evangelical recruitment culture. As a pansexual queer and non-essentialist transgendered person, they resonate too well with my own insider jokes about LGBT culture.

It doesn’t get much funnier than Daniel Amos singing about how their own fan base is nothing but poseurs:

Home Permanent

What I believe is in my fashion
Clothes make the man here in my passion



[It's the eighties so where's your rapture at: Daniel Amos]

Gonna stand my ground for all the world to see
Look up and notice me
My hair points to the sky
The place I want to be

Home permanent
Home permanent
Home permanently

I drive my car it is a witness
My license plate it states my business
Gonna drive my car for all the world to see
They pull up side of me
My hair points to the sky
The place I want to be

I gave a toy top to my little brother
It says to 'Spin from sin'
And to my mother I gave a recipe book
It's like no other
Now she makes chocolate Bibles
A witness to my unsaved father

I dreamed I owned a TV station
A number one across the nation
And there I am for all the world to see
They take the hat off me
My hair points to the sky
The place I want to be

– Daniel Amos

But if miracles couldn't happen in the holy Bible Belt of the American Midwest, where else could they happen? Like Rudolph discovering the Island of Misfit Toys, I miraculously stumbled upon a dollar-bin of dead-stock electronic records at a local gas station. They ranged from Yukihiro Takahashi to Telex to Mark Isham and Windham Hill samplers. Since most records in the eighties listed the instruments used in their recording on the back cover, anything without electric guitar was an instant purchase. There was no explanation as to how the still-sealed records arrived in town, nor why they were being sold from the back corner of a gas station. All I know is that, in the American wasteland of eighties devolution, finding that box was far less surprising than it seems now. Yes, the existence of that misfit box in that misfit place and time struck me as absurd, but no more so than my own out-of-place existence. Despite everything, we both simply *were*. That box and I. Inexplicably. Our ridiculousness rendered us invisible to the farmers and good ol' boys passing through. We were as stealthy and easily ignored as a clown dressed in puffy neon clothes attempting to hand out flyers on a busy sidewalk.

Upon buying a new record I would return home to the basement bunker bedroom I shared with my younger brother. We huddled around the sixties Sears wooden console stereo I bought at a neighbor's garage sale for \$5.00, laughing about the one thing we had a gut feeling the Christian Revivalists were right about: pop-rock was the soundtrack for the race of doom to the End Times. We were the meek waiting to inherit the Earth once the religious and yuppie monkeys had inbred into extinction. 'Look at 'em scoot!'. We spoke solely in Devo lyrics, foretelling of jokes like Hajime Tachibana's anti-rock anthem 'Rock'.

The first version of 'Rock' was released in 1984 in a goofy pop-rock style that Rick James would surely snicker along with, only to be re-issued a year later as a clone of Kraftwerk's 'The Robots'. The punch-line to both versions was the same. Techno-pop, like regular pop, had clocked out.

Rock

I know you want to jam
I know you want to dance



I know you want to love
I know you want to go

I know you want to see
I know you want to touch
I know you want to run
I know you want to go

I know you want to know
I know you want to sing
I know you want to try
I know you want to go

You're so cool

– Hajime Tachibana



[So cool: Hajime Tachibana]

03. Playlist

Soft Cell, 'Persuasion' (Some Bizzare, 1981)
Jobs for America, 'Jobs for America' (Thermidor, 1982)
Guernica, 'Koujo Kengaku' (Yen Records, 1982)
Daniel Amos, '(It's the Eighties So Where's Our) Rocket Packs' (Refuge Records, 1984)
Bronski Beat, 'It Ain't Necessarily So' (Forbidden Fruit, 1984)
Haruomi Hosono/Tadanori Yokoo, 'Hotel Malabar Upper Floor ...Moving Triangle...' (King Records, 1978)
Yello, 'Assistant's Cry' (Ralph Records, 1980)
Yello, 'Bostich' (Ralph Records, 1980)
The Beatniks, 'Ark Diamant' (VAP Inc., 1981)
Severed Heads, 'Dead Eyes Opened' (Ink Records, 1983)
Men without Hats, 'Freeways (Euromix)' (Statik Records, 1983)
Kraftwerk, 'Tanzmusik' (Philips, 1973)
The Human League, 'I Am the Law' (Virgin, 1981)
Bill Nelson, 'Hard Facts from the Fiction Department' (Cocteau Records, 1984)
Manhattan Transfer, 'Coo Coo U' (Atlantic, 1980)
Krisma, 'I'm Not in Love' (Atlantic, 1983)
John Foxx, 'Metal Beat' (Metal Beat, 1981)
Depeche Mode, 'Pipeline' (Mute, 1983)
Visage, 'In the Year 2525' (Polydor, 1983)
Freur, 'Steam Machine' (Epic, 1983)
Sylvester, 'I Need Somebody to Love Tonight' (Fantasy, 1979)
Ryuichi Sakamoto, 'Milan, 1909' (Midi Inc., 1986)
Ryuichi Sakamoto, 'Variety Show' (Midi Inc., 1986)
Devo, 'Through Being Cool' (Warner Bros. Records, 1981)
Telex, 'A/B' (Sire, 1980)
Ministry, 'She's Got a Cause' (Arista, 1983)
Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark, 'The Beginning and the End' (Dindisc, 1981)
Hajime Tachibana, 'Rock' (Yen Records, 1984/1985)
Hajime Tachibana, 'Rock (New Version)' (Yen Records, 1984/1985)
Gary Numan, 'Metal' (Beggars Banquet, 1979)

04. Credits

Mixed by Terre Thaemlitz. Files aligned within two stereo tracks using standard digital audio sequencer software.

05. Copyright note

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