

Andreas Busche "the 1000 rhizomes of achim szepanski"

The label, which has always been famous for the 'Other Sound of Frankfurt', has extended itself by another sub-unit, Force Tracks. And parallel to the first Mille-Plateaux tour for four years, the discourse as well forges ahead.

One could well think of Achim Szepanski as a typically German phenomenon with all the features the local author film of the 60s was reproached with willingly again and again: too intellectual, too tensed, too hostile against consumption, too complicated and always anxious to intellectualise the banalities of everyday life or to justify them in an intellectual way. Form is everything, and aesthetic becomes a means to an end.

Of course, in the case of Szepanski this reproach is not tenable because his theoretical system which he constructed carefully of a fine network of neighbouring philosophies, theories and sciences functions within a comparatively hedonistic field: Techno resp. electronic music. And exactly this purely hedonistic disposition (Love Parade, Mayday) in 1992 became the undoing of Techno after the first riots against foreigners in the happily reunited Germany (Rostock). In a very painful way, the grandchild generation had to learn that the wounds of German history apparently were not healed so well to allow ideologically uncritical mass marching ups without thinking.

However, the consequences of these encroachments didn't leave any marks on the Rave Society. Achim Szepanski was the first who forced the state of Techno, which was very young then, into a fundamental discourse with his label Force Inc.. "Hetzjagd auf Nazis" (Hunting Nazis), "Fight Against German Nazis" , "Destroy Deutschland". Techno transported the hatred for German Nazis, and by eloquent exponents such as Alec Empire and Mike Inc., the young label quickly found its own identity in the musical scenery of that time who, especially in Frankfurt, the home base of Force Inc., felt not more than just a bit embarrassed about that social developments. "Force comes from 'to attack'", as Szepanski said then.

Thousand plateaus

Szepanski's 'postelectronic dancefloor' in these times as well was influenced already by postmodern French philosophers, a theoretical field which he approached purposefully over the stations university, Maoist circles and Frankfurt School at the end of the 70s (a left career!). Especially from the large complex of his favourite theoreticians Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Szepanski took out various terms and approaches and set them in relation to electronic music. On the over 700 pages of their second book "1000 plateaus" (in fact, it is only 15 chapters which also can be read across), Deleuze and Guattari thoroughly dealt with the political, social and real relations of power which are examined very detailed by means of concrete examples of different eras. The essence of this absolutely practice oriented excursion: The rhizomatic structure (organised after the model of very heterogeneous root network) is always to be preferred the hierarchical one. Every known form of society sooner or later automatically develops new relations of power which discipline the free will of development of the individual. Only in the rhizomatic structure of society, it is possible for the individual to emancipate himself from all restraints and institutions.

The rhizome also was the central principle in the beginning of Force Inc. and especially now becomes more and more central for Mille Plateaux since one cannot talk of a fix pool of artists any longer because quite a large number of new artists has been signed lately. Every release is a targeted strategy out of the label policy; the artist deals with certain theoretical views and so puts his authorship into the service of a self-production of the label. However, within the rhizome, he has the possibility to build his own structure (e.g. another artist identity, another/new label, another pool of artists) by social contacts which again stands in exchange with others. Moreover, this collaboration of the creative potential favours a bigger variety of musical styles enormously. The network grows in all directions. Today, Mille Plateaux has come exactly to this point. While the release policy of Force Inc. and Position Chrome, the third label in the Szepanski network, is kept under merely musical aspects at the moment, at Mille Plateaux a high emphasis is put on a clearly defined line more than ever. During the last year, a strikingly large

number of artists debuted on Mille Plateaux: Kouhei Matsunaga, Dean Roberts, Robert Babicz, Ultra Red, Crank/Low Res, snd, Neina, Frank Bretschneider, Autopoieses as well as Noto, Rehberg & Bauer, Thomas Brinkmann, Ryoji Ikeda, Achim Wollscheid and the A-Musik people included Lithops. Everything to the health of policy. Szepanski: "One can select the label under the condition that problems, platforms and concepts are provided for discussion. Lately, acts and projects have been addressed offensively and there were discourses and arguments on the music and its Technological implications. Personal relationships rather stand back at the selection of the acts, i.e. one works less with home base acts."

Of all Mille Plateaux acts, in this respect Terre Thaemlitz surely is the most exciting. Apart from that, he belongs to the most important artists of the last twenty years in electro-acoustic music. As a figurehead of the Californian gay scene, Thaemlitz closely scrutinises the sex of electronic music anew on every album, but also gladly goes into in a critical discourse with his own people. He fits in with the label constellation very well but also continues a micro policy out of his own approach to cultural studies (above all identity political and gender specific topics) and releases on other labels such as of YMO co-founder Haruomi Hosono.

Deleuze Version 2.0

Techno never has been working in a certain field of reception only but always as well was the result or consequence of its production relations. This is one of Szepanskis approaches to get electronic music to a political statement again. Blind bondage to technology has lead to the general erroneous belief that electronic dance music was more democratic than any previous musical style. Szepanski wants to scrutinise the technologies and so the production relations of sound to make this problematic audible. This is the field of discourse which he treats especially with the Force Inc. sublabel Mille Plateaux since 1995.

Traces of Deleuzes/Guattaris theories can be found in the entire network of Szepanskis labels; constantly returning terms such as Ritornell, de-territorialisation, Rauschen (´noise´), virtuality, micro policy and, naturally, rhizome. However, he also states clearly that Mille Plateaux and Force Inc. as well as the new label Ritornell never were seen as transformers of Deleuzian theory into music. For that purpose, the theoretical approach of Mille Plateaux is far too extensive. Meanwhile, the tangled mass of Szepanskis crossover theory, besides Deleuze and Guattari, is influenced by approaches from Media Theory (Kittler), Information Theory (Weibel), Cultural Studies, Michel Serres and Claude Shannon. This subject area, not least because of the more and more intensive exchange with artists from all over the world, constantly develops. The freely available pieces of theory absolutely make sense in Szepanskis combinations.

Sometimes one gets the impression that he dominates his terrain as good that he could sell anything even to a discourse trained person. His loose manner of application of terms from the topic areas mentioned above easily arouses the suspicion that he liked to force a theory upon his favourite music. However, when Szepanski starts to talk about his concrete intentions, as for example in the case of "Modulation And Transformation IV", the major context becomes obvious.

"On the level of the operating systems, of course one always has to work with the standards. The point is that music or sound design not only takes place on the level of symbolisation and signification, but that asignificant material, i. e. non-coded forms of expression and elements, as well play a role in the production of sound. Then, ´Machinisation´ means that, in the production process, in the combination of music and composition, things have to be considered, circumstances which concern the artist but also exceed him, e.g. all the social-political implications in which music and electricity are made available. So our acts as navigators or coordination authorities don't function in the sense that ideas and concepts are transformed into music any longer, but that a process of production is initiated in which sound and composition, selection and production in the context of digital synthesis go together. The effort and the realisation of ideas which precede the music are no longer the point. Digital music does not function like this any more. Ways of working develop which are above the binary codes and the reproduction of standards. So this is not simply working out technology but making the social, political, economic and artificial implications of music audible. Then, the dealing with software is setting free potentials, impulses and constructions which no software engineer ever could have imagined."

The standardisation of software and hardware, the translation of signals by binary codes,

therefore the fact that meanwhile a range of written rules is steering music which, in addition, makes the subversive concept of Rauschen ('noise'), of the disturbing sound, obsolete, the general problematisation of digital affinities, the finding of new and significant forms of expression which are not 'translated away' by the binary code, the cartography of frequencies, the definition of raw files and acoustic fields, the contextualisation of digital processes, the aesthetic of sound design: These are just some of the very specific questions by means of which Mille Plateaux is searching for solution proposals when dealing with the altered conditions in electronics: "Technology is always a part of the relations which imply the music."

What is actually going on?

On the still very DJ-related mother label Force Inc., sound design or production relations are less under discussion than questions about functionality on a high level. However, this is a handy approach which, moreover, can be practically understood. After the wave of Sägezahn-releases (among them "Rauschen 14" mixed by Rush), which was quite a surprise for all the fans, the acquisition at Force Inc. goes towards the releasing of artists which would also well fit on Mille Plateaux. The co-productions of "Electric Ladyland VI", Stewart Walker and Porter Ricks/Techno Animal for a short time give a direction which is not subject to a continuous development. There always have been major ruptures in the history of Force Inc.; unforgettable the year 1992, the breakbeat era. Expect the Unexpected; a shift of the audience because of this consequent policy is already included in the label calculation. And the Sägezahn shock well was calculated. "It surely was a coquettish position, coming from one record which Wolfgang Voigt had produced for us last year: Strass. We regarded it necessary to combine functionality and freshness in Techno once more. But just for a period which was fixed from the beginning."

The question of function still is asked when it comes to Techno, simply because of the usage of sequencers, drum machines up to digital synthesizers. Still a bit further than Force Inc. goes the meanwhile fifth label, Force Tracks. Relations to house music are not a problem for Szepanski, although he is a bit scared at the idea of contact. But Force Tracks clearly dissociates from the anachronistic forms of Disco House and propagates a new coolness which, in Szepanski's view, expresses itself best in the self-generating forms of minimal house. "The founding of Force Tracks has nothing to do with the leaving of Pooley and Tonka, but is a result of the fact that diverse formulations and the contexts in which house takes place, i.e. merry, neoliberalistic events, were incredibly boring to us. With us, this attitude has developed for one or two years already. It can be very exciting to re-generate the possibilities of expression in house music. There are always strong affinities, e.g. with people like Terre Thaemlitz. House was always connected with 'party'. But the question is what kind of party."

The second youngest label of Achim Szepanski at least by name is to be filed clearly under Mille Plateaux, as Ritornell refers to the central term of the 'music chapter' of Deleuzes/Guattaris "Thousand Plateaus". The two CD's which have been released up to now, one of the Frankfurt noise academic Achim Wollscheid, and another of the Texas software developer Akira Rabelais, in comparison to Mille Plateaux are surprisingly rough and scratchy. In contrast to the almost beautiful melodiousness of Terre Thaemlitz or snd, the ideas that are made audible on Ritornell become a downright Tour de Force.

Judging by the first two CD releases, it could be a problem that the formal theoretic approach of the labels is weighing a bit too heavy on the highly interesting sound material, although Achim Szepanski by no means wants to file Ritornell under 'music for academics'. "In comparison to Mille Plateaux, the problematic is shifted. Ritornell is tied to similar problematics as for example the Rastermusik label. Electricity in its raw form is marketed in the form of electronics and electronic music and makes its power obvious by a standardised distribution: Vinyl, CD's etc. From the point of design, we acknowledge this standardisation. The CD's are packed in uniform digipacks and only differ in text and colour. Design produced in series. But the content of what is in the sleeves refers to specific formalities, non-rhythmic music and designs, sound loops, concepts of recurring refrains which are connected and reach a relatively high complexity. Here, the conveyance of electricity is not a traditional one (drum machines, synthesizer, sequencers etc.) as it is the case with Techno. The point is the rediscovery of electricity in its pure form, the generating of sinus tones or the working with raw files and frequency spectrums."

The basic problem of theory-determined labels such as Mille Plateaux and Ritornell is the fact that the signs and stylistic means of the music never allow conclusions about its subject per se.

The lacking of liner notes will withdraw the recipient from any basis of discussion right from the start. A weak point Szepanski is aware of. To increase the practical value of the company intern discourses and to make the problematic accessible as well to the interested listener, he plans a number of fundamental changes in the near future which could be of enormous significance for the outward self-image of the label. As already with the Thaemlitz CD's and the last quite extensive compilations, secondary literature to the product has to be enclosed more often to make the music accessible to the recipient. Moreover, a book which Szepanski has been working at for a couple of years that will bundle all the theory fragments, expressions and comments in their complexity, is to be finished soon. Unfortunately, the very extensive Mille Plateaux homepage is still under construction at the moment.

Of course, Szepanski is not a secluded dreamer who lost any sense of reality because of his books. For a long time already, he knows how important such basic promotion activities are for a label like Mille Plateaux; simply because of the fact that the records of Terre Thaemlitz, even after big features in a number of important magazines, do not sell much better than before. And therefore, the Mille Plateaux tour which is up now, the first for four years, is so important. Four years in which has happened a lot. And the line-up with Thaemlitz, snd, Bretschneider and Porter Ricks sounds like a matured concept by which, in a musical, theoretical and as well practical sense, an impression will be given which approaches are followed with "Modulation And Transformation IV". Moreover, an intensive exchange with readings, discussions and lectures shall present the somewhat lifted face of Mille Plateaux, which is generally thought to bear Deleuzian features only, to a broader public. But in the end, it is somehow very assuring to see that, in spite of all theorisation and conceptualisation, the result is still wonderful to hear. After all, it's a question of music. And the tour will show this as well.

GROOVE 60 Oct./Nov. 1999-11-09

Text: Andreas Busche

Translation: Judith Funk