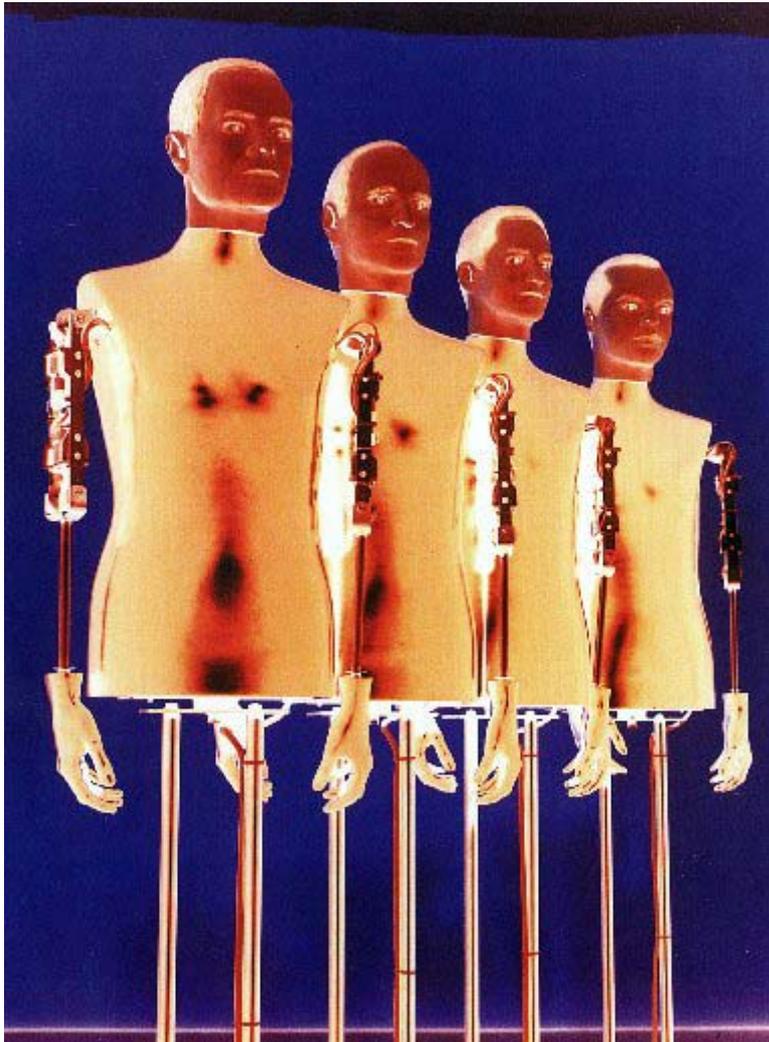


"KRAFTWERK" UNPLUGGED? (A DESCRIPTION OF SURFACES) EDEK BARTZ / BIRGIT FLOS



Scene: Professor Rodchenko, in the year 1920, at the Vchutemas Art College which was founded after the revolution and where El Lissitzky also taught for a time:

"On the first day of lectures a man entered the studio who looked like a combination of pilot and motor cyclist. He wore a beige uniform-like jacket and gray-green plus-fours. He had a black cap on his head with a huge leather peak. His face was very pale and the intensive red lips stood out in the white of his face. Immediately I knew that this was the new type of human being" (By a former student).

In the 1970's, "Kraftwerk" from Düsseldorf presented themselves programmatically in constructivist colours and typography — red and black; circle/line/plane, in energetic fields as "Man Machine". "Organization" was the original name of the project. This constructivism "loan" was probably too internationally interpretable for them; "Kraftwerk" also meant concentration on the regional idiom: "We make regional music from the Rhine and Ruhr areas". Rodchenko: The MAN who organized his life, his work and himself is the MODERN MAN. Even "Kraftwerk" have a program for modern men. It aims for the precision of a machine. The machine corresponds to their discipline and creativity. Man loves machines, machines love men (who love it etc.). "Sometimes we surprise machines, sometimes they surprise us". The symbiotic relationship "Man Machine" constitutes modern men.

"Kraftwerk" appeared "live" on their last tour as robots and/or left their live-performance to robots. The "Kraftwerk" clones look like imitations of "Kraftwerk" imitations. "Kraftwerk" trigger off endless series: They present dummies of dummies, imitations of imitations, they produce the mix of mix of mix, etc.

They are the glass men of techno-music. In the window of the body there is nothing, it remains a smooth surface with an indication of a chest; a standard torso with no lower abdomen. Pneumatic arms with glove hands are stretched out to greet? to fight? to dance? ("Dance the "Kraftwerk"). Jim Whiting's constructions could be sitting in the audience, one would be among oneself.

This is how they present themselves on the square cover of the CD "The Mix": They are no longer spectacular hermaphrodites on the brink of man becoming machine in the optimistic cheerful advertising look of then: The gaze of the diagonally echeloned young men's heads was directed into a new future, the skin was white, the lips so red: That was the ingenious image idea which became the integral part of innumerable commercial group portraits. Here, on "The Mix", the pendulum has swung round towards machine. A sketch demonstrates the construction principle: the "legs": two steel tubes form a base; torso, head, shoulders, elbows can turn. In contrast to this, Schlemmer's triad ballet is a chaotic pulsating folklore group. "Kraftwerk" are described as being resolute, uncompromising techno-home hobbyists who program their machines in a complicated, time-consuming and radical way. The hardware gradually begins to correspond with the software in their heads. "We play studio" (not the way others play Indians, but the way others play guitar). They can't make anything of those that play guitar (or Indians). In the genre-picture of the Western, the rock musicians would be the "outlaw heroes" in their anachronistic cowboy dress, whereas "Kraftwerk" would embody the management of the enlightened establishment: The association not at the civilization stage of community but at the stage of the optimal computer brain, society as a firm. They apostrophize themselves as "children of Wernher von Braun and Fritz Lang" (whereby they store "Metropolis" at the keyword Lang and not the later Hollywood Western). "Kraftwerk" in the sterile format of "Man Machine" have nothing to do with the physical overspending and/or psycho-torture of the rock legends. No sex, no crime, no rock'n roll. They brush their teeth and head off to work in their "Ming Mang" studio. "Ja tvoi sluga, ja tvoi rabotnik", "I am your servant, I am your worker", was on the "Man Machine" cover.

In the past few years they are known to have digitally filed the entire catalogue of their analogous stored compositions. The access times lessen. "Kraftwerk" have an unlimited amount of their own material at their disposal and can produce potentially a never ending amount of mix versions that have never been heard before.

And: beautiful dialectics: The digital storing gives a sense again to the stage presence (of the dummies?). A live-intervention into the software is possible. The material can be called up, modified, "psychologically controlled" by the operators, "Computers are transmitted with everything that can operate systematically. We can have control of ourselves all the more freely, let ourselves drift". Hütter once announced that he would love to have a third hand implanted, "which then operated all the controls and buttons while the hands play freely and the feet hit the pedals".

The "Balanesu Quartet" plays "Kraftwerk". The 1001/6 machine music is transmitted into chamber music: Kraftwerk "unplugged" therefore? No, as with other contemporary string quartets, Alexander Balanesu appeared with his musicians, electronically amplified. The five "Kraftwerk" take-overs (on the album "Possessed", 1992) were recorded on the multi-track

system of rock music, First of all the rhythm track, then a track in a church — "location recording at St. Augustin's Church", then again in the studio. The mixing was just as important as the recording and had more of a rock/mix duration, much longer than the normal one for a classical production. Alexander Balanescu is now planning a multi-track recording of Bach's "Kunst der Fuge".

The system of the increasingly more efficient computer processings in storage media is brought back to the music stands. For the first time, musicians play electronic "Kraftwerk" constructions on prefabricated, classical instruments. Is that the conceptional overkill/big gag? Or is a super quartet of the booming string scene looking for interesting material as a trade mark? Will in future "Kraftwerk" sample Balanescu's rhythms of "Robots" or "Autobahn" for themselves?

Synthesizers come from the factories with a variety of "presets". Presets for various string instruments are standard. "Kraftwerk" neither use "presets" nor antediluvian "bleeps", all their sounds are self-developed and programmed. These "originals" are now being played by Balanescu (arranged and produced by the second violinist: Clare Connors). This is a reversal of the otherwise en masse productions of jazz, rock or synth versions of classics.

The "Balanescu" "Kraftwerk" play-in is a build out to breathing, to the body and as expected, warmth could be read, passion where formerly (with "Kraftwerk") industrial (naturally cold) technology ruled. But that was exactly the program: the extensive elimination of the factor man: Will robots become vulnerable again?

In "Kraftwerk's" music, like in Cronenberg films, one believes one can follow the strands of the glass fibres, the grid points of the relay stations (most certainly a hopelessly antiquated picture) in the inside of the machine, if one didn't have this uneasy feeling when using metaphors and analogies. But "Kraftwerk" play (also) program music: how true-to-life one can hear the cars driving past on the autobahn! How one can hum along with the rhythm of TEE on the rails! (That is outdated with TGV.) Is the string quartet, on its part, now making "Kraftwerk" program music? Must it be proven that even 200 year old wooden instruments can imitate the sounds from the autobahn? (Critics emphasize the amazing cello glissandi). What do "Kraftwerk" think when they hear the Balanescu version of "Model", for example? Are the four chamber musicians not causing the "Kraftwerk" metropolis project to tumble? Is merely house music and the fire-side on the cards again after the wave of techno house music?

The disparaging comments "Kraftwerk" made about the guitar anachronism of rock culture seem to be forgotten. " You can't play the music of the 20th century on medieval instruments" or "the music of the technical world can only be presented on instruments of the technical world".

Kraftwerk's "Ming Mang" productions often have an almost crystalline transparency, not only in the hurting innocent children's language of adults, but particularly in the synthetic sound layers. It sometimes sounds so cheerful that it sends a shiver down your spine. "The change from hope to horror can take place as fast as lightening" (Hutter). Euphoria changes over directly to become a nice horror scene. The project: human progress through the progress in technology, as was first of all propagated, still unbroken, by the constructivists, has crashed. On "The Mix", the computer voice spells out, syllable for syllable: TCHER-NO-BIL / HARRIS-BURG / HI-RO-SHI-MA and adds the barely audible, somewhat forced troubled imperative "Stop"! before the refrain "radioactivity". With the strings, where is the crash into

a popular song-like danse macabre of the machines? Here death has again established its instrument and fiddles the euphorizing seduction like a minimalistic bravura.

So, there are two different scenes: For one, there are four racks at the machines, and there are four lively musicians belonging to the "Balanesu Quartet", with their instruments. The fact, alone, that a woman plays in the quartet is a sensation in direct comparison to "Kraftwerk". The human form: woman or even the species mankind as a sexual being only occurs with "Kraftwerk" in the simulation: "Sie ist ein Model und sie sieht gut aus" (She's a model and she looks good). When will the two groups appear together in a jam session?

A chair is a chair.

On the CID cover of the Balanesu production "Possessed", a chair plays a significant role. Alexander Balanesu is sitting on it. He, himself, is in the process of getting up, of going away or can be seen blurred in the long exposure behind/in front of/on the chair which is always clearly in focus. Finally, Balanesu goes away and the chair remains behind, empty.

Two associations according to the description of surfaces: the chair as a useful object appears to be very real. It could easily — and distinguishable in photography — be simulated as a three-dimensional object. Joseph Kossuth could use it for his conceptional alphabet. "One and three chairs" as a photo of the object description: chair. The "Kraftwerk" dummies will not sit down, they do not exist beneath the waistline. The "Balanesu Quartet" makes music while standing.

Even Alexander Balanesu salutes the Russian constructivism in the typography of the cover (and, of course, the "Kraftwerk" "Man Machine" layout inspired by El Lissitzky, was what it was called there). But in doing so he winks with one eye and keeps his hat on. "With a nod and a wink towards El Lissitzky"

So, warmth and wit for a humourless technoworld? Ironically, "Kraftwerk" move more freely and more "spontaneously" during their live performances — whether in person or as dummies — with the new dynamism of their material, than the machine string quartet which has to stick to the most exact interpretation of the rules of notation, under physical effort.

What was it that El Lissitzky said in 1924 in the edition of the magazine MERZ with Kurt Schwitters: "It is quite ENOUGH, always MACHINE, MACHINE, MACHINE"

Curator: Edek Bartz

Photographs: Peter Boettcher

