

THE

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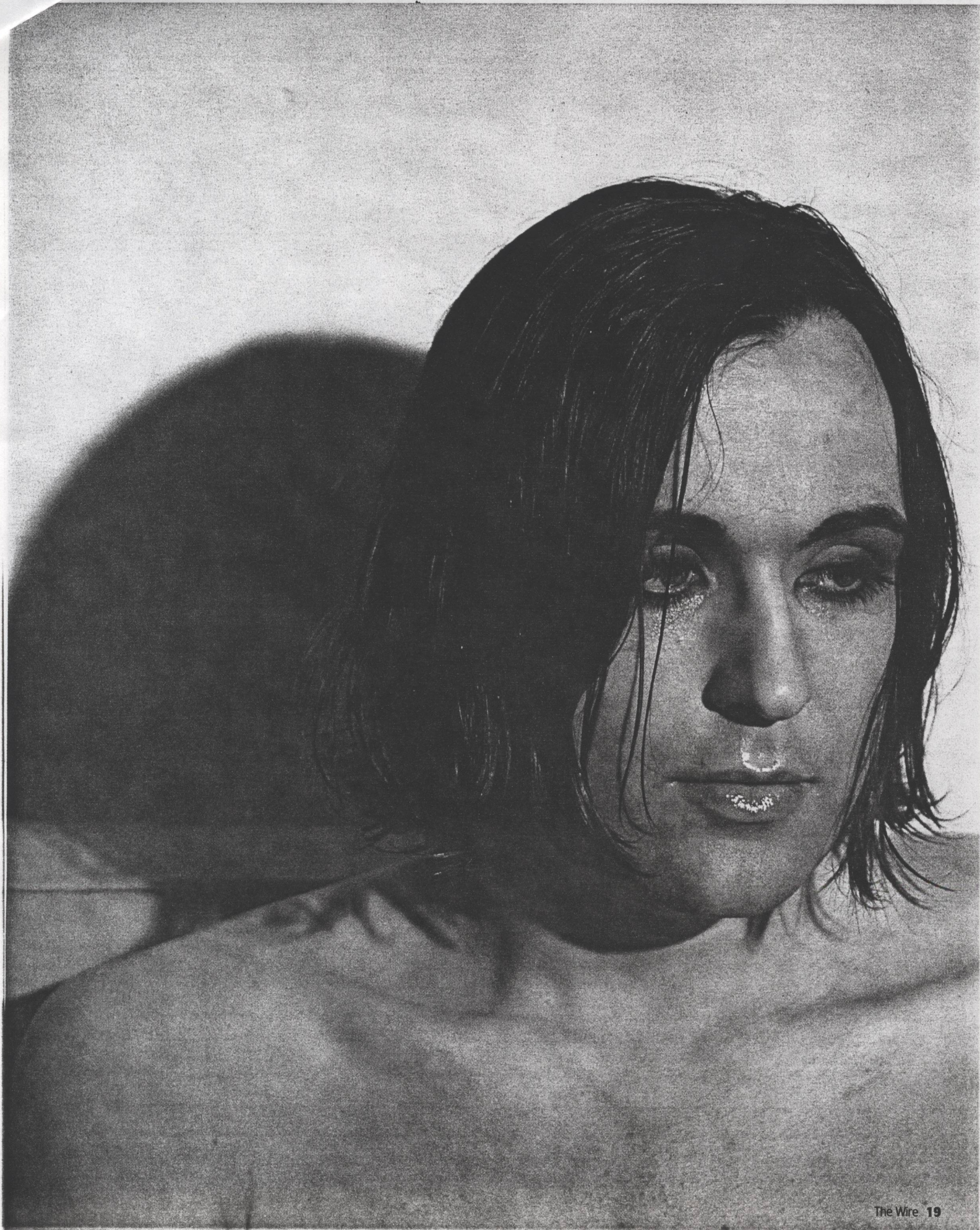
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REWIRING THE MAN-MACHINE

ELECTRONICA • AVANT ROCK • BREAKBEAT • JAZZ • MODERN CLASSICAL • GLOBAL







Cosmic Echoes fragments spraycanned with piercing tonalities, while Thaemlitz shifted them round the speakers and cleaved them apart in a disorientating 3D mix.

"The whole performer-audience paradigm is totally played out, and uninteresting to me," he says. Sure enough, when Terre drags up for one of his now rare public appearances, he's nothing like the camp-as-Christmas, 'get her' screamer archetype celebrated and nurtured by gay media. "I guess I'm kind of an anti-spectacle drag queen," he laughs. "I get dressed up and go out, and stay in the back of a club somewhere — not like the real extroverted, 'Here I am, honey!'"

Not outing so much as *inning* — coming out involves assimilation into a different but equally proscribed system of identity and lifestyle traits. "I don't see a resolution to that," laments Terre. "At the exact same time, take the very nature of avant garde music: electroacoustic music is a fringe commentary on pop culture, right? Once those signifiers change, when the transgender revolution hits, and everybody becomes a drag queen or king, or some sort of hermaphrodite, then all of the signifiers change again. All of the content and discourse would be wiped away, and that's why I don't like some sort of idyllic, teleological planning: 'This is the way of the future.' Everything is contingent on those power structures of repression."

Terre's latest CD, *Love For Sale — Taking Stock In Our Pride*, attempts nothing less than an examination and redefinition of queer identity as represented in sound. The opening soundbite salvo is a montage of sampled voices from TV coverage of San Francisco's Gay Pride March which brilliantly deconstructs the running commentary into a series of thinly veiled and cynically delivered product placements, such as: "*I'd just like to mention that the car that [local politician] Mable Teng was in happened to be a Pontiac Convertible...*" Also including the soiled piano elegy of "Handsome — Ballad For George Michael", the record is a Sonic Fiction which calls the American gay community's self-image into serious question. Labouring under a faintly perceptible sense of ennui, his typically lengthy sleeve notes — something of a Thaemlitz trademark — introduce the music thus: "As I stand on the runway ready for an attack run, my critique not only targets the standard implications of myself as an operative within dominant cultural structures, but I find myself entrapped by the execution of my vehicle of resistance — a commodified Queer identity. Catharsis is truly harder to come by these days."

Love For Sale functions as a lament for the way financial and economic issues are the keystone in making gay lifestyles acceptable to the American mainstream. It also describes, through the ripped fabrics and tattered tissues of its textures, the psychic shredding of one individual caught in the maelstrom of change, and on the horns of a dilemma about where his soul should follow. "I had a real difficult time dealing with what my subjectivity was in the era of political correctness in the late 80s and early 90s; trying to deal with what my identity was as an individual, versus my identity as a white male-type social thing. . . I basically went into this weird personal repression. Many people [involved in activism] by that time started burning out, and all these groups started dismantling. And part of that, which I tried to deal with in *Love For Sale*, was that it coincided invisibly with this shift towards a politics of representation, rather than a politics of self-actualisation. Instead of being about grassroots organisation, with ACT-UP [the US HIV awareness group AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power] it suddenly became about: 'Look, now people are picking up on our activist tactics, and people are listening to us, and we're able to go and have meetings with political representatives. . .' And that led to this alienation from political process again: we don't have to be on the streets any more, marching and that sort of thing."

"The big thing these days," he goes on, "is that you get this huge list of e-mail names: 'Add your name to this and forward it to all your friends, this is really gonna make a change. . .' Half the time, the e-mail accounts aren't even active any more. For me, that's the real expression of this whole political conundrum we're in. It's the illusion of representation."

By the end of *Love For Sale*, Terre has indeed identified a particular problematic within queer culture and within himself, and has moved some way towards a

resolution which is itself in flux: the conjuring of what he calls "an irresolvable sound which declares its presence at the same time as it eviscerates itself". It's hard to imagine a better description of his collected works.

"Music is discourse," Terre once asserted during a combative response to this magazine's review of a CD compilation on which he featured. His CD sleeves are plastered with reams of notes in the dry, abstracted and overdetermined style peculiar to postmodern theory: "That's the way I feel comfortable writing," he comments by way of justification, "but at the same time, electroacoustic music is associated with academia, and the content of those notes is trying to deconstruct and reposition the contents of academia." Because they affirm that all artistic production is already dialectical — part of a dialogue — as soon as it leaves the hands of its creator, his obsessively detailed writings inflame critics who think it's the musician's job merely to rock out. Thaemlitz, of course, will have none of it. "Criticism never has the cultural impact it presumes to have," he states. "The way that a lot of people talk about their music is really just in terms of this kind of abstract sound-as-sound, something that is removed, or extra-social, super-social. . . which, for me, is an ideological front in itself. There is no way to escape the social. Through the text, I try and have that play with the music, and have them all feed off each other."

Aren't they also pre-emptive strikes launched against potential misreadings by the media? "Early on, I had a lot of problems, where press people were saying, 'Who does he think he is, telling us what his music means?'" But the thing is not to pre-empt the media at all, but to be able to have a lyric sheet or something like that. You just have more information that is part of the project. So it's not an analysis of the project, but an integral part of it."

"I used to wear rhinestone chokers and bracelets all the time, with my Flock Of Seagulls hairdo. In Missouri, this wasn't a good thing for self safety"

Few musicians write so eloquently about their own aims while identifying the inherent flaws, contradictions and limitations of their particular projects. His second solo album, *Soil*, on the American Ambient label Instinct, with whom

he never quite saw eye to eye, featured only a close-up photo of a used condom lying on the ground instead of text. Later, Terre wrote of the title: "Soil as ejaculate, referencing the masturbatory nature of music production and 'artistic' or 'creative' processes. . . Soil as a cynical reference to spiritualist 'Mother Earth' Ambient music titles. Soil as an English translation of my first name from the French 'terre', avoiding the more romantic and universalist semiotics behind its common translation as 'earth'."

On *Die Roboter Rubato*, his 1997 collection of piano versions of Kraftwerk favourites ("Rubato: music performance that does not adhere to a strict sense of time" — this was cyborg-musik with its restraining bolt unscrewed), he wrote it up as an attempt to "construct a style and sound which reflects the complexity of thematics established by Kraftwerk over the past two and a half decades", intruding upon "Kraftwerk's meticulous clarity of technique" with "noise which distorts and clouds like interpretive processes".

If the visual art of this century since the readymades and conceptual objects of Marcel Duchamp has moved toward the realm of the *anti-retinal*, so Thaemlitz's music — and that of contemporary terminal pharmacists exploring the social meaning of sound — is *anti-aural*. Noise and disturbance are generated, while digitally processed sample-readymades are ploughed and seeded with conceptual landmines. Sound eviscerates itself, mangles its conventional bodyform, pattern, development, proportion and rhythm, fleeing its romantic role as a pathway to the psyche of its own creator. Terre's walls of sound are made of glass; a perpetual play-off of surface against subject, paralleling his attempts to define himself as ultimately undefinable.

"Yeah, there's a kind of schizophrenia to it," he says, "but I developed socially in this way that was about rigid splits in behaviour, and I think that I project that onto everything. Definitely for this kind of music, and this kind of media, and the whole idea of electroacoustics — post-processing of other people's materials — it's all about the mixture of other people's works. It creates this audio-slurry that is inherently between definitions."



As a teenager growing up absurd in the heart of America's Midwest — "I used to wear rhinestone chokers and bracelets all the time, with my Flock Of Seagulls hairdo. In Missouri, this wasn't a good thing for self safety" — Terre soon found that rock 'n' roll's established set of differences were not meant for him. Instead, he turned to electronic pop as the music that expressed most about alienation, and all that was unattainably from the future imaginary. "I was pillaging the 99 cent bins for Kraftwerk and Yellow Magic Orchestra," he remembers. "The futuristic Japan was the society of tomorrow type thing, the whole utopianism." His next Mille Plateaux release will be *Replicas Rubato* — a Gary Numan piano album. "Numan was very much about technology, but he also had this soured, more nihilistic approach, if not overly introspective. The promise of electronic music was that this is *not* what is dominant culture."

In Springfield, Missouri, he remembers, "There was an emerging punk scene, but I was so suspicious of any sense of community that I would alienate myself even from the fringe's weirdos. I had to be different, I had to be unique. I had all this stuff invested in being different, that I couldn't even associate with other people who might have shared those feelings."

Thaemlitz has since found allies in figures who have made it their life's duty to adapt and mutate as often as they change their shirts. *Web*, a collaboration with Bill Laswell, was released on Subharmonic in 1995; and Terre has cropped up on several of the ensuing Axiom compilations, as well as composing a soundtrack for a dialogue with psychedelic spokesman Terrence McKenna. He has also participated in a tribute to John Cage, played downtown NYC experimental gigs with Ben Neill and Tetsu Inoue, and beamed into a Future Sound Of London ISDN uplink. And he eventually made the connection with YMO founder Haruomi Hosono, whose Daisyworld label licensed *Couture Cosmetique* for release in Japan after Terre remixed one of Hosono's 1996 *Interpieces*. Admiring the tropical dandy's twisted career trajectory, he says: "I really love that idea of being able to move between genres and personalities, while at the same time not having to make a progression — not leaving the old one behind. Playing with personae like pieces of a puzzle all at once. For me, that's reflective of the current state of identity politics."

When Thaemlitz began DJing, he was taking a Bachelor's degree in Fine Arts at NYC's Cooper Union School of Art, where he was drawn into left wing activism, primarily in the realm of sexual political issues. "Abandoned Left", a track on *Couture Cosmetique*, is a lament for stalled insurrection. On the one hand you've got Alec Empire's invigorating breakbeat shitstorm and Molotov rhetoric, plus the still forming critiques of newcomers V/VM (do already-dead ducks like "The Birdy Song" really need kicking when they're down?), while on the farther extremity there's Terre's representation of perpetual flux and viscous dialectical enquiry: 'Marx 4-D 90s', as is printed on the Photoshopped DAT tape illustrating the cover of 98's *Means From An End*.

"Marx is equated with Stalin in the States," he complains. "It's weird, totally fucked up." He was sucked into, then spat out of New York's underground political activist community. In particular, he related to "health issues, women's health issues, and HIV/AIDS activism", and went on Clinic Defence, a necessary American phenomenon where groups of pro-Choice activists help people to get past the anti-abortionist picket lines outside abortion clinics. But now he confesses to a "pessimism when it comes to thinking about activist involvement again. But by letting my nihilism keep me uninvolved, what does that mean in terms of a bourgeois agenda of personalised, alienated, existential dynamic? On the one hand, I'm trying to be active by creating discourse through these musical projects, but on the other, in terms of real organisation, I've been kind of lost these past couple of years."

Self-imposed creative isolation has provided Thaemlitz with thinking space. His hyper-aware album concepts shame the un(in)formed, empty gestures of 'freestyle' Electronica and its seasonal micro-variations in style. You want 'intelligent' Techno? It doesn't get much more intelligent than his Comatonse label stable (as well as various Thaemlitz alter egos, there are new artists like Chugga, Ultra-Red, and Japanese group eureka!, all of whom share Terre's "material, emotionally disinvested approach towards sound"). Take *GRRL*, for example, whose "11 chart-stoppers inspired by the boardroom mentality that brought you *Space Jam*" flick through a

swathe of fashionable styles, openly mapping their generic provenance on a family tree on the sleeve. In contrast to his more rigorously electroacoustic recordings for Mille Plateaux, "the stuff like *GRRL*, Terre's Neu Wuss Fusion and DJ Sprinkles, those are all leading off into different sounds, and different approaches towards the ideas. The idea with the *GRRL* CD was to play with the ideas of reappropriations of cultural identity. In *GRRL*'s case, it was the music genres, and their associations with certain identities. All the record labels were saying: 'Ambient is out — we're doing Jungle now. Why don't you do that?' So I was saying, 'Here's all these different genres — now leave me alone.' In the same way as the Kraftwerk piano thing is saying you don't have to be a piano virtuoso or professional or any of those things — it's just about finding the right kind of sound representation, and giving people enough of what they expect, to convince them that this is really where it's coming from."

"The music that I do," says Terre, "has no inherent content, but the content comes out of the exchange between the consumer, their expectations and understandings of what they know about me, or what they know about electroacoustic music, or what they know about the CD store they bought it in, or whatever." When you buy a Terre Thaemlitz CD, a different relationship with the product is established: it refuses you the comfort of a beginning, middle and end that leave you satisfied, enlightened and ready to face the world with a greater understanding. *Means From An End*, one of two solo CDs he released last year, begins with a sequence of seven "Inelegant Implementations", where short jazz riffs are flayed and torn asunder as software processing chews through the music, abandoning it to contort in squiggly, writhing worm trails. The piece "Means From An End" itself uses a Duchampian delay/decoy strategy: as you strain to listen *through* the tesserae of high-pitched frequencies that dog the foreground of the track to reach the beautiful melody slowly revolving in its hidden shadows, you can sense the music resisting your advances. "The 'Inelegant Implementations' is playing with that idea, with jazz cymbals that are really harshly processed," comments Terre. "In academic electroacoustics, you do all these things that aren't really made for listening at all, but you force yourself to find the aestheticism in there. I was playing off the fact that these things could be on a marketed CD."

In his New York student days, Terre took part in several art subversion projects not unlike those perpetrated by Vienna's Sabotage organisation. One of these is illustrated on the cover of *Institutional Collaborative*, the two-way exchange of sound files with journalist and computer musician Jane Dowe. With fellow conspirator John Consigli, he secretly installed a number of home-made 'beeping devices' in galleries and photographed their effects. "The beepers were in boxes that looked like explosive devices," he explains. "We stuck them under benches in modern art galleries, just to accentuate the whole institutional humming of the air ducts. The intent was to make the gallery visitors a little bit more aware of the whole institutional construction around them. So it wasn't that you were in this time portal looking at pieces of art that exist outside of space and time, but that the only way these things could be assembled is through the intense institutional, industrial mechanism of the museum and gallery space."

Whose space is it anyway? Another Comatonse release, Ultra-Red's *Ode To Johnny Rio 12*", literally cruises California's Griffith Park, with protagonist Dont Rhine recording and manipulating the sounds of outdoor sex. Probing the limitations imposed upon supposedly 'free' zones is another strand of Thaemlitz's enquiry. Who, for example, is king (or queen) of the electronic music frontier? For musicians such as Terre, it's the legions of amateur software writers who are silently painting the new

horizon. Terre uses a combination of these aural shredding devices to process his sound sources, alongside the sanctioned applications he can get his hands on as a paid up member of Paris's controversial Ircam facility. Can he unveil what goes on behind his screen?

"There's two primary ways of doing electroacoustic music," he says. "One is where you use the software to calculate and generate wave patterns [from scratch], strictly based on formulas. And the other one is based on external source material, which is how I do most of my processing. I use found sound sources — taken off a CD or something like that — like the mathematical foundation of a process. Once you get the waves into your computer, you can run analyses on the waves, which are all just numbers, so what you end up with is this long string of numbers, and then you use software to apply different formulas, or edit, or change around those numbers, and create a new sound file out of that, which is your post-processed sound. I look for the point where some combination between the processing power of my computer combined with the software creates some sort of glitch, and for me those glitches are the most real point in the process."

"Shareware's so brilliant, because so much of it is devised outside of a real marketing strategy. So it's not about stereophonic Dolby sound; it's about some undergrad student going off into some weird esoteric realm, and coming up with something that is full of good intentions that never quite deliver. And I think there's something in that very process that is a good political gesture. It's instantly deconstructing any idealist application of its use."

His favourite application is the curious program Argeiphontes Lyre. "The graphic interface is really overdone, and it's full of all this pretentious French text everywhere, and filled with all this weird modernist philosophy, mixed in with directions on how to use it... It's really overwhelming, but at the same time you can do some really fun things with it if you're patient enough. And every function has some really looped-out name, totally removed from what it actually does."

There's an expression that comes from academic electronic music: 'black box strategy'. It means feeding a sound in one end of a computer or application, and taking

whatever the function excretes the other end, with no further involvement in the process. To shape the results with aesthetic choices, as Terre will do, is a kind of blasphemy, but it's needed as a strategy against governments, media and welfare organisations black-boxing the lot of us through blackout structures of disinformation and control.

"There's nothing natural about computer music — which I like. Because *nothing's* natural, and so that presumption is automatically taken away from me. You don't even have to deal with any of that baggage, or any 'natural' approach to production. It's kind of liberating for me. The conventional goal in media expression is to present something that has a singular content, a 'true meaning'. For me, the end result isn't supposed to be about a singular content, it's supposed to be about this state of existing in contradiction, and with these convoluted contents that don't really sync up and resolve, don't give you the satisfaction of walking away, saying, 'It's finished'. It's recognising yourself in the state of incompleteness."

The final paragraph: a content of conclusion, manifesting the desire for a construction of momentary closure. Otherwise known as: The End. □ Love For Sale — Taking Stock In Our Pride is out now on Mille Plateaux, who also release Ultra-Red's Second Nature CD this month. Fagjazz, a 2CD compilation of 12" tracks plus a collaboration with Taiwanese group Funk Shui, will be out in spring on Comatonse. Terre Thaemlitz's Website is at www.comatonse.com

