

Sub'tronic

Didi Neidhart in Conversation with Wolfgang Dorninger



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Sub'tronic is a slogan referring to events with music as their medium. "Sub" stands for the dominant frequency in the sub-bass range, "tronic" for the electronic orientation of the performance styles. Sub'tronic also stands for nightlife in public spaces — which are, generally speaking, used in a way other than the one for which they were designed, reconfigured with transient media, and frequented by highly unusual people.

DN: This year, Sub'tronic's entertainment space features a bar, a "dancecube," a relaxation area, and something that you've named Pulse. Tell us a little more about what each has to offer.

WD: Sub'tronic is setting up a bar and a dancecube in the Concert Hall of the Stadtwerkstatt. The bar and the dancecube are approximately 70% visually and acoustically insulated from each other. Partitions limit the bar guests' view of the dancers, audio volume is acoustically reduced to conversation level, and events taking place in the dancecube are being displayed by means of time-delayed video. Pulse is a small, dramatically lit space, a transit corridor leading to the relaxation area. Both Pulse and the relaxation area can be reached only through the dancecube. In the relaxation area, guests (who have prereserved) can kick back, wind down from the festival stress, and enjoy fruit juices, a little peace and quiet, and a massage.

DN: According to the press release, the soundscapes in the relaxation area have been designed to enhance human qualities in the areas of sexuality or management. What kind of sound mix can we expect from the DJs this year?

WD: Primarily Bhangra, Latin House, Electro, Jungle, Drum & Bass. In general, music styles whose roots are to be found in the import or re-import of various different cultures. Essentially, this has to do with the cultural expressions of émigrés and modern nomads seeking to establish something like a "homeland" and cultural [self]confidence in a foreign country. In the same vein, data banks are also being set up, primarily to provide future generation of different minority groups such as Afro-Americans, Latinos, Gays, or Indian and Pakistani young people in England with a public voice for the first time, as well as a consciousness of their own history and their own social and cultural status. The best example of this is HipHop. But here, we have to keep in mind that these cultures regard themselves as "displaced." They do not think in terms of territories — either real or virtual — defined by fixed borders; rather, they feel committed to sort of a partisan mentality. That means that the styles and sounds actually tend to sneak up and grab you, so that when someone who has been brought up in the tradition of Western Culture thinks he's finally figured them out, they've either already disappeared or they pop up in a totally different place. In this way, the fusion of the various traditionalistic styles of imported [youth] culture with the new technologies [the sampler as digital historical library of minority groups] has led to de- and re-contextualizations and the emergence of new forms — as well as the re-animation of old forms — of tribalistic youth cultures.

Musical styles like House came into existence in small, relatively compact urban spaces [houses]. Chicago House, from which Techno is ultimately derived, oriented itself stylistically on the Munich Sound [Giorgio Moroder] and employed the reduced pattern of this music as a soundtrack for "vouge'ing." House originated in the competition between the "houses." Coming out of the Black transgender and Gay movements, this sound became world music through the transculturally operating music industry. It goes without saying, of course, that practically all innovations in Pop music stem from groups on the margins of society who have been ethnically, socially and culturally oppressed. Being Black, Hispanic and Gay in America means being subject to multiple forms of oppression and leading an existence on the edge of oblivion.

The question is: how can a structure that is so very small — a microstructure — culturally survive for very long, before it becomes an object of desire on the part of major corporations? And what changes are brought about in the lives of those people who just wanted to have fun, because they and their friends liked mixing new and old codes and created something new in the process that suddenly became so interesting that other people in completely different places wanted to share it? Another example is "Bhangra," the mixture of Indian folkloric and film music with Reggae, Techno and HipHop created by the English-born children of Pakistani and Indian immigrants. This music is the music of a certain neighborhood and a specific milieu; certainly, it can be exported but, at the same time, it requires roots. It's not postmodern fusion music; it's a form of crossover that has really been lived, that has actually already taken place in the lives of these human beings. All that they have done is to interweave those strands that were essential to the fabric of their lives. And this is how you hear history happening.

DN: In addition, Sub'tronic is also putting on live concerts. What's the concept behind these events?

WD: All of the concerts are taking place outdoors, each one at a different architecturally appealing venue — in a tunnel, under an arch, in channels, on the docks, under bridges... Sub'tronic needs spaces like these — the stuff of which festivals are made — in order for the transient media to be able to diffuse and to provide the electronic music with a resonating body and a means to escape the space of the apparatus-world.

Parallel to the commercialization of Techno that has been going on since 1992, there has developed an intensified awareness of experimental action. Rebelliousness and conscious refusal to accept the status quo created new forms and scenes which also provides, paradoxically, the very potential — both aesthetically and with respect to content — which commercial Techo so desperately needs as an infusion to enable it to survive. The acceleration of this process of accumulation has created new markets and opportunities for everyone involved. Experimental electronic music, administered in elitist and academic fashion as an appendix of the New Classicism, is thus being confronted by a wily new contender outfitted with the lightness of Pop, which can also market these forms accordingly. The outward appearance of this scene has also changed correspondingly.

DN: How is that being portrayed and communicated at Sub'tronic?

WD: For Sub'tronic, we're seeking venues that are acoustically seductive, visually interesting, and can be reached only with special modes of transportation. On one evening [Wednesday, September 10th, 11 p.m. to 4 a.m.], this will be by ship. We're sailing out to the edge of the known world, where we're going to hang overboard as far as we can and try to look all the way down. This cruise will be navigated by the head honchos of Mego Records in Vienna. There's going to be concerts taking place under bridges, at the harbor, in a channel and on the Danube — space as an improvisational partner. Any visitor who gets on board will not be able to leave the ship in the usual way. What that means is that individuals who have a problem with the extreme positions that are being presented cannot simply go home. Okay, there's a soundproof room for anybody who gets really stressed out — we don't want anyone jumping overboard. But there's not going to be any half in, half out; no more voyeurism.

DN: Last year, there was a live music performance aboard a panorama [observation car] train rolling through the nighttime ambiance of the VOEST Steel Works. Will you be doing something similar this year?

WD: Last year, the audio mix on the train was provided by two men who got into issues dealing with work, a world dominated by men. And Aural Screenshots & James Plotkin constructed a trap which everyone promptly fell into: the world of industrial and mechanical romanticism. This year, it's time for two women to take their stand. Ikue Mori and Tenko will be conducting the panorama train through the VOEST plant grounds. The other concerts are taking place in the vicinity of the Ars Electronica Center — under the Donautor, on the banks of the Danube, and in the tunnel under the Nibelungenbrücke.

DN: What technologies are being employed, and how are different artists showcasing their individual talents with them?

WD: Home-made analog synthesizers, samplers and computers are being used. Artists will be working with film, video, and light. Here, I ought to mention that the performers will indeed be "reconfiguring" the space, but not reconstructing it. There will be musicians whose mode of playing is not oriented exclusively toward festivals, but rather more toward the music

business. They see themselves as part of the Pop mainstream. And I like that, because we need more Pop in the avant-garde and more avant-garde in Pop.

Program

Live PA:

Mego Night feat. General Magic, Farmers Manual, Fennesz, Pita [all A], Hecker [G], Haswell [UK] and Bruce Gilbert [UK];

others: Ikue Mori [J], Tenko [USA], Plotkin [USA]/ Linschinger [A], Leo Anibaldi [UK], Lilith [USA].

DJs:

Charlie Cabrañez [USA]

BMG [USA]

Martha Hurry [A]