



Agents of control: Dopplereffekt

Dopplereffekt

Cellular Automata

Leisure System DL/LP

Gerald Donald is a man obsessed with control. Rudolf Klorzeiger, the alias he's currently using to deflect his true identity, seems especially sensitive to the unseen forces that shape our universe. In the 1990s, as one half of the definitive Detroit electro project Drexciya, he and James Stinson posited an alternate reality that was firmly rooted in the past, turning actual, tangible bodies – bodies of pregnant slaves, bodies of water – into a Black Atlantean mythology that was both personal and political.

But with Dopplereffekt, the mutating outfit he founded in 1995 – not to mention related projects such as Arpanet, Der Zyklus and Japanese Telecom – Donald tends to turn our gaze to the present and the future. The early run of Dopplereffekt releases gave listeners a bleak yet worryingly seductive vision of a totalitarian state, a retrofuturist parallel universe populated by rocket scientists, eugenicists and porno actresses. But this century, his interests have become more abstract and intangible, as signalled by increasingly impenetrable track titles – “Z-Boson”, “Tetrahymina”, “Hypersurface” – referencing the frontiers of science and mathematics, from string theory to gene editing.

Perhaps Donald's retreat into the controlled conditions of the laboratory is understandable. In an era of Snowden and Trump, CRISPR and Pornhub, the

high-tech, selectively bred “Fascist State” of Dopplereffekt's early run is no longer simply the stuff of his 20th century pop-dystopian fantasies.

With *Der Zyklus*, a project about the control of bodies through data, his focus has shifted from the human experience of surveillance (“Facial Geometry”, “Iris/Retinal Scanning” on 2004's *Biometry*) to the invisible science that enables this monitoring, with 2016's *Renormalon* listing titles like “Photopolymer” and “Spatial Multiplexing”, a term that relates to the transmission of data streams.

The first Dopplereffekt album since 2007 comes with a lofty introduction: “*Cellular Automata* approaches mathematical growth and decay as an iterative process, with each data input considered individually relative to the overall model.” The 21st century Dopplereffekt has evolved far beyond the headsnapping thwock of Detroit electro, sinking into deep, drumless drifts where rhythms might emerge from the tick-tocking of machines or the slow undulation of frigid synths.

The lay person (that is, me) will struggle to infer a direct relationship between the music of *Cellular Automata* and track titles like “Ulams Spiral”, “Mandelbrot Set” and “Pascal's Recursion”, but Donald has created a precise mood regardless of our exact understanding; electronic abstraction refined into the kind of beauty that mathematicians talk about when proving a theorem.

For many years Donald has been introducing himself, both on record and to those he meets, as Heinrich Mueller. More than an alias, it's a tactic that demonstrates his dedication to controlling his identity and that of Dopplereffekt, a duo which currently includes Michaela To-Nhan Le Thi. This record is credited to “Rudolf Klorzeiger and To-Nhan”, the former seemingly Donald's newest Germanophile disguise. More specifically, Dopplereffekt remains the most committed Kraftwerk tribute act in existence. Their earlier sound and image made this clear, in the robotic vocals of former member Kim Karli and their lipsticked faces on the sleeve of “Sterilization”, but even as the music has moved away from obviously Kraftwerkian references, Dopplereffekt's fundamental mission remains the same: to explore the interface between human and machine, society and science.

From knowing pastiche, Donald has continued Kraftwerk's project as a contemporary investigation, considering what the man-machine could become in the 21st century. We've reached quantum level now, where the mysteries of the universe are joined from infinite to infinitesimal scale, like scrawled algebra on a blackboard.

For the most part, a human presence is barely detectable on *Cellular Automata*. The opening title track offers the ghost of a symphony, a synthesised string sweep that feels utterly cold; machines cycle through arpeggios as if scanning for radio signals from another galaxy. A trembling, wordless

vocal drifts into view like a holographic scrap from an old, extinct world on “Von Neumann Probe”, a title that refers to a self-replicating spacecraft. In the future, it's suggested, humans will not be man-machines so much as machine memories. Without breaking into Dopplereffekt's studio lair to hear a composition programmed into life, it's hard to say exactly how, for instance, “Isotropy” enacts its titular concept of uniformity in all directions – but for Donald, the music is intended to be representative. “It's imperative that the soundscapes faithfully represent the natural phenomenon in question as much as possible,” he said in one rare interview. “But the observer can also form his own interpretation.”

On “Ulams Spiral” – a track which, incidentally, highlights just how much Actress has drawn from Donald's catalogue – we find ourselves hovering in an abstract realm that's not so much emotionless as inscrutable; nebulous synth arpeggios dissolve in clouds of silvery-white noise.

Dopplereffekt is now said to be based somewhere in the Alps. As ever, Donald keeps himself out of public view, but as the glittering patterns of “Exponential Decay” falls like numbers in the matrix, it's reassuring to imagine one of Detroit's most singular artists toiling wordlessly in his lab coat in the shadow of those peaks, perhaps imagining himself as an invisible assistant to the particle-blasting laboratory just down the mountain range.

Chal Ravens

Jellyfish and Yes. The resemblance to the former is strong enough to fool the unwary listener. The Wakemansque keyboards, jazz-inflected drumming and Steve Howe-alike guitar clinch the second. Whatever the provenance, though, *Once And Future Band* is the darnedest and most beautiful sound of the year so far.

Brian Morton

Oxbow

Thin Black Duke

Hydra Head CD/DL/LP

Beginning with a weary intake of breath before launching into some wry whistling, Oxbow's seventh album, and their first in a decade, sees them on melancholic

orchestral form. Where earlier albums, 1989's *Fuck Fest* or 1991's *King Of The Jews*, were much more direct in their experimentation, mixing rock, jazz, blues and noise, *Thin Black Duke* paradoxically sees Oxbow sounding much more early 90s than the albums they actually made at the time. While in the past the band worked with Lydia Lunch, Marianne Faithfull and others, the new record sounds much more isolated, abandoned and nostalgic, with Eugene Robinson's voice majestically deep, cracked and powerful over sweeping, grungy guitars, bell-like piano and strings. Somewhere between despair and deeply buried anger, Robinson cries out, “*The shuffle of a dark, sleek new day but you*

are in possession of a deadened, silencing anger” on calamitous final track “The Finished Line”.

Intricately structured, both motif and riff-heavy, the album veers towards the symphonic and feels strongly narrative, with central character The Duke (who one assumes is Robinson, or at least his alter ego) takes a dour and angst-ridden look at the world. It is hard not to read into some of the lyrics what it must be to feel the commitment to the Oxbow project after so many years, as respected but as quietly recognised as they are: “*It is not the artefact it is the art/And the fact of the matter is/No one does what they did for the money/Leastways that is not why we pay it/*

And it is here that the Duke laughs” (“Letter Of Note”). Compared to earlier Oxbow releases, the record is melodic, almost radio-friendly, but here and there surreal experimentalism hinting at deeper extremes creeps in – Robinson's hectic, mad spitting on the first half of “A Gentleman's Gentleman” eventually slides into smooth patter (“*The Duke is deluxe and delightful/ And the lovers of him all say so/Before they leave and after they go*”).

The record is a meditation on masculinity, both lyrically and musically (see track titles “Ecce Homo”, “A Gentleman's Gentleman”, the Duke himself, and lyrics like “*He turns and returns and there is a residual tenderness for the man with the ax handle*”

Adriano Ferreira Borges