PW-MAGAZINE

Anne de Vries. Photo by Helge Mundt

Die Große Freiheit: From Ruins to Speculative Realities

At Kraftwerk in Berlin, a 30-year trajectory of techno culture through the works by Anne de Vries, Arthur Jafa, Bahar Noorizadeh, Hito Steyerl, Jenn Nkiru, Joe Namy, John Akomfrah, Mark Prendergast, Otolith Group, Rebecca Salvadori et al.

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The title of the exhibition celebrating the 31th anniversary of the foundation of Tresor, *Die Grosse Freiheit* (The Great Freedom), seems to be a more adequate title for the celebration of a political event than of a techno club. Yet the foundation of Tresor can actually be seen as a political event; an event that connected two communities, which until then had almost nothing in common, and activated a politico-cultural project that in a few years spread throughout Europe and beyond. Initiated by members of the African-American working class community of Detroit, living in an environment devastated by the fordist car industry, the "techno project" was soon joined by a young generation of Berliners who witnessed the collapse of the world in which they were born and grew up, which followed the fall of the Berlin Wall. They embraced the sound, which was not centered around individuals, as a counterculture. What these two diverse communities, that dealt with different (class) struggles, shared was indeed the intention of inhabiting the ruins they lived in, deploying them to build a new reality. Techno was the vector of this project. Far from being a form of escapism, the "techno project" is therefore grounded on the idea of reconfiguring a collapsing world with the aim of generating a space of freedom where to experiment with multiple forms of subjectivities.

Tresor was one of the catalysers of this project, which starting from the city of Berlin introduced techno in Europe and made possible the rise of a new culture in a time of radical changes and upheavals.

Combining films, sculptural work, and archival material, *Die Grosse Freiheit* traces a trajectory of this political project, the exhibition unfolds on the three levels of the post-industrial building of Kraftwerk, located inin the area of former East Berlin, and can be navigated as a diagram developing according to two fundamental coordinate axes: 'ruins' and 'speculative realities'. All the exhibited works address a specific aspect of this constellative and non-exhaustive narrative, offering a cartography of the techno project and its implication in contemporary culture and politics.

RUINS

Ruins as the debris of a collapsed world; ruins as the remains of devastated cities; ruins as fragments of a dissolved dream that for a moment became true; ruins as a chaotic archive of an ecstatic collective experience.

The ruins resulting from the social, human and historical tragedies that converged in the city of Detroit became the substratum from which techno culture emerged and flourished. As one of the characters featuring in the film *Black to Techno* (2019) by Jenn Nkiru frantically declares, while walking on the streets of Detroit, "bright men came from poverty, from slavery, from definitive destruction of the great migration and made his way in this place [...] and here I am, standing on the shoulders of these giants [...] standing on a place that is gonna be the stone corner of a new civilisation, standing on a place they say is gone, standing o a place they say was never gonna exist and never gonna make it".

This dramatic sequencing of defeat and revenge, suffering and liberation, violence and bliss also powerfully appears in *APEX* (2013) by Arthur Jafa. A hectic sequence of hundreds of stills from found footage flows on the Tresor track *Minus* by Robert Hood, addressing the history and present situation of Black culture, in the attempt to transfer the "power, beauty, and alienation" – as Arthur Jafa put it – "of African-American music to film". The ruins as fragments of images and footages are also central to *Tresor Tape* (2022) by Rebecca Salvadori. Commissioned by Tresor, the film deploys archive footage from the club's 30-year archive, composing a work that outlines a non linear narrative of the history of Tresor and a portrays some of the people that made its history, starting from the club's founder Dimitri Hegemann to the dj and producer Jeff Mills.

Tresor Tape is screened next to a previous film by Rebecca Salvadori, *The Sun has no Shadow* (2022)*, which mainly takes place in the London Techno club Fold. Archival footage is central to this film, too; in this case, however, the archive has been built by the artist herself over the past ten years. Here she uses the footage to represent the organic environment of the club, while adding further cinematic layers to reflect on the representational possibilities of the moving image itself. The 1998 **Hito Steyerl**'s film *Die Leere Mitte* (*The Empty Centre)* is almost entirely shot in the Potsdamer Platz in Berlin, which was at that time a vast building site. The former centre of Berlin, totally wiped out during WWII and crossed by the Wall during the Cold War, had been a waste land until the reunification of Germany, from that point becoming the object of a huge urban speculation plan and the economic centre of the city. The rebuilding of what was becoming again the centre of the capital of the reunified Germany, becomes a site of reflection on the colonialist past of Germany, whose legacy resurfaced the post-Cold War-Germany.

It is no coincidence that this place, Postammer Platz, which epitomises the vicissitude of Berlin, was also the site of another pivotal event of the history of this city: the foundation of Tresor. The first venue of Tresor, the vault of the former Wertheim department store, was indeed located on Leipziger strasse, near Potsdamer Platz. Demolished in 2004, this venue is reproduced in *Stamping Ground* (2022), Anne de Vries' large-scale sculpture. The work is a 1:1 imaginative

reconstruction of the first Tresor's venue as a haunted dusty ruin and animated by an interactive soundscape by Rowan Ben Jackson and Odysseas Constantinou. The crumbled walls, crashed speakers, scattered rests of a bar – all covered with a thick layer of sand – and the recorded voices and sounds of the past, appear as the ruins of an ancient civilization that has suddenly disappeared, creating a dreamy scenario pervaded by a sense of melancholy for that experience that will never be recovered in all its magic explosivity.

SPECULATIVE REALITIES

Speculative realities as future mythologies; speculative realities as the overcoming tool for cracking open the horizon; speculative realities as the effort to hope while inhabiting a climate of devastation; speculative realities as the imagination of a whole new world and not just its remaining surroundings.

Drexciya is one of these speculative realities presented in the exhibition. The film *Hydra Decapita* by Otolith Group recounts the mythical history of this world, which was created by the homonymous Tresor techno-duo. In their vision, Drexciya is a civilisation created in the abyss of the Atlantic Ocean by children born underwater from enslaved women thrown overboard by slavers during the trans-Atlantic deportation. The Drexciyers live in their aquatic world with no memories of the violences and abuses which their ancestors had to go through. "Rival hypothesis of Drexciya's origins surfaced, submerged, resurfaced – as it is stated in the film – Might they be water breathing, aquatically mutated descendants of those unfortunate victims of human greed?". Starting from the narrative of this sub-ocean world, the film also speculates on aquatic planets where the lives of the descendents of dispossessed people can develop far away from the Earth – a planet too compromised with violence and exploitation of human lives. In this way the film aims to expand the traditional historical and political field through science fiction and music in order to reconsider western history from a different point of view and generate new realities that could overcome the catastrophes linked to its advancement.

As already described, techno was originally a way to build a new world from the ruins of the past, that western civilization has produced during its unstoppable forward motion. John Akomfrah's *Last Angel of History* also comes to terms with the nightmarish project of western modernity*,* explicitly referring to the IX thesis of Walter Benjamin's *Thesis on Philosophy of History,* where he describes the painting *Angelus Novus* by Paul Klee's, as the angel of history, whose back is turned to the future, while the violent wind of progress pushes him towards it; and he stares horrified to the wreckages that keep piling before his feet in his path: "where we perceive a chain of events – as Walter Benjamin puts it – he sees a single catastrophe".

In John Akomfrah's film, this metaphysical figure of the angel of history is personified by the people that had to pay, with their lives and their bodies, the highest costs of western civilisation, i.e., black people, who were enslaved, displaced, and exploited to death in order to allow the West to "progress". However, instead of helplessly looking at the catastrophe taking place, John Akomfrah's angel of history finds in music, specifically in blues and its evolutions up to techno, the mode to subvert this process and create a link "between Africa as a lost continent in the past – as the narrator of the film declares – and Africa as an alien future". As it emerges in the film, George Clinton, Sun Ra, and Lee Perry are the three figures that initiated this subversion by pushing the historical narrative beyond Western boundaries and beyond the Earth itself, opening up new perspectives from which the western civilisations does not look as a universal ineluctable historical process any longer, but as a project to be dismantled and overcome.

This process of subversion through sound has been enhanced by the emergence of digital technology, which adopted by black producers created the possibilities for the birth of techno. As Kodwo Eshun states in the film, with techno, black producers have been able to release the potential energy of digital technology, usually used just as an inert instrument. Furthermore, according to him, digital technology generates a contradiction within the project of modernity itself:
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created by the western industrial and military complex during WWII, this technology unexpectedly became a tool for subverting the western military and industrial complex itself.

NEW RUINS, FUTURE TECHNO

At the end of this journey, the two coordinates – ruins and speculative realities – that have guided our exploration through three decades of techno, Tresor, and reunified Berlin, seem to conflate in one single dimension where a ruined world appears as the speculative reality of the future; a scenario epitomised by Bahar Noorizadeh's film *Teslaism: A Mode of Production for the End Times* (2022). That great freedom, which emerged more than thirty years ago from the working class community of the car industry in Detroit, amplified by the fall of the Berlin Wall, seems to find its nemesis and turning point in another car industry complex founded in the city of Berlin: the Tesla's Gigafactory. That space of freedom opened up by a collapsing world, in which digital technologies operated as a means to express the creative potentialities of such freedom, is now threatened by the reconfiguration of that space according to new models of production and extractive economy made possible by the same digital technologies. The devastation generated by the fordist car industry in Detroit over the 20th century finds its counterpart in a different kind of devastation brought about in Berlin by tech companies moving into the city, reshaping its urban profile and creating hostile environments for grass-root cultural production and low-income population. Thus, at the 31st anniversary of Tresor, the question emerges whether techno, or a different kind of counterculture, will be able to find a way to arise from this new socio-cultural scenario and conceive a new momentum of coalition, in order to imagine a new world starting from the ruins of our present.

TRESOR 31: TECHNO, BERLIN UND DIE GROSSE FREIHEIT was curated by Adriano Rosselli and Sven von Thülen and took place between July 8 – Aug 28 2022 at Kraftwerk Berlin.