



Anna Ceeh in Conversation with Terre Thaemlitz

AC: Even though you are American, you have chosen Japan as the base for your activities. What is it like for you as an immigrant considering the hierarchical structures that characterize Japanese society? Are you as an artist, electronic music producer, Comatonse Recordings label operator, pansexual queer philosopher, and activist evading these rigid social mechanisms?

TT: There are so many factors involved in migration that it's hard to answer this question directly. The reason I prefer Japan to, say, Europe, is because of the higher level of personal safety in daily life. There are fewer Class-A drugs, guns, and other things that—when combined with Western ghettoization around poverty—have contributed to some of the difficulties I experienced in the U.S. But in terms of immigration, “artists” (or any freelance media producers) rank incredibly low on the scale of who is admitted. And my sexuality and transgenderism were clearly no assets with regard to my living here on a spousal visa. I dealt with some of these issues and fears in *Trans-Sister Radio*¹.

AC: You employ pop structures and mechanisms of electronic music to communicate issues regarding identity politics and activism. Can you explain these strategies in relation to more alternative modes of production?

TT: Certainly, divestment and secrecy are always important aspects of “alternative” media production, particularly when everyone wants to put everything online to swim about in the same waters as dominant media. I am uninterested in this “equality” of access (which, of course, is not equal or democratic at all). I am more interested in taking things offline, distributing them through very small and at times personal systems in which the projects may regain the specificity of context that has been lost on the Internet.

AC: Can you tell me about the potential that you see within your performances?

TT: It's no secret that I dislike performance. I dislike concerts in general and never go to them myself. I have no interest in improvisation: although I can appreciate how long ago it was an important critique of structuralism and classical music, I find the sonic results utterly worthless. I am also not trained in playing instruments, so that limits what is technically possible in a performance. I prefer to prearrange everything in the studio and then simply press “play” before the audience. Part of this antiperformativity is also a critique of the transgendered stage, which is commonly overloaded with camp and pantomime. For me, it's a different kind of drag show. What I do feel I can bring to a live performance is my voice—to actually speak to and with the audience. Introductory lectures and Q&As have become standard parts of my concerts. Since *Lovebomb* (2003), I have also been producing text-laden videos, which are screened during performances to further communicate a project's theme and decrease the poetic vagaries of arrhythmic computer music. But as to whether this has any particular “potential” beyond what one can get from private listening/reading/viewing of the projects at home—I doubt it.

AC: How do you see the potential of music and sound production as well as distribution as a strategy linked to theory?

TT: Again, it's not about the potential as much as exposing the lack of potential in a critical manner.



dustry that relies upon contentless nonsense—and our mass consumption of that nonsense—that is of interest to me. The music industry epitomizes so many problems within dominant culture that it becomes a logical place from which to produce critical analyses of those problems. Releasing projects is not a way for me to explore potentials but rather a way to disclose limitations.

AC: Please tell me about your work with radio, especially about *Trans-Sister Radio*.

TT: Although my work with radio dramas was an interesting chance to produce tracks with voices and dialogue—which was in some ways an incorporation of the lectures from my electroacoustic performances into the recordings themselves—the radio industry is quite conservative and institutionalized in ways that make it difficult to present collage-based projects. There were also disappointing—albeit not surprising—thematic limitations.

AC: Your label, Comatone Recordings, has existed for almost twenty years now. What is the basic idea of it? Who and what gets released?

TT: Comatone Recordings is basically an outlet for my projects that I could not get released elsewhere. Although there have been releases featuring other producers (Erik Dahl, Ultra-red, Simon Fisher Turner, Scanner, and Pete Locket, etc.), these are few because I have no budget and it always feels wrong to release materials without being able to properly pay people—particularly since I am so vocal in my stance about “never working for free,” which is a rejection of art and media industries that rely upon an unpaid labor pool. The releases with other producers are basically little things worked out between friends more than anything else. I personally prefer to think of Comatone as an out-of-pocket dumping site for my own failed projects and not as a “real” label in a conventional business sense.

AC: On your home page you have sound files from speeches of Vladimir Lenin in 1919 and 1920 for download! Why Lenin?

TT: The free download is actually called *iLenin* (spelled like iTunes), which is intended as a rather sarcastic commentary on the commodification and commercialization of “the left” over the years. The recordings themselves are from a box of old Soviet-era records that I found in a secondhand shop here in Japan. I felt they had historical value and thought someone might find them interesting.

AC: You have released more than fifteen solo albums, as well as numerous twelve-inch singles. You have also produced a few video works and you publish a lot of theoretical texts. Can one assume that you are more or less constantly producing?

TT: I don’t know. I’m certainly not one of those “musicians” who is constantly churning out sounds on their gear. I’m quite slow with producing things. For example, my current project *Soulnessless*², a deconstruction of issues of spirituality and religion in the audio marketplace, has been in production for four years now, and I can only hope to finish it this year. But in my mind the main “project” I am working on is always something that will have no distribution (such as *Soulnessless*), or even more “personal” things such as digitizing my entire vinyl collection. You could say that it’s part of my critical strategy to resist emotionally prioritizing or getting enthusiastic about projects with economic support—it’s one way of trying to stay sane within the pressures of life under capitalism.



AC: You have created a really wide spectrum of art. You are an engaged activist. I personally think of you as a pioneer in this field, since you have been doing it for more than twenty years. Who inspired you and kept you going over all these years?

TT: This is the third time this year people have used the term pioneer in relation to my work, which—although I appreciate its intended meaning as a compliment—I find disturbing. I have put so much energy into deconstructing “talent” and showing how all my projects (as with everyone else’s) are completely referential and devoid of anything “new,” so a term like pioneer somehow denies the very thing I’ve tried to discuss—although it simultaneously verifies the utter hopelessness of changes in perception around audio and media production. As odd as it may sound, it is precisely this kind of cultural confusion that keeps me going more than any list of other people I could name for you as “inspirations.” I guess I am more motivated by crisis and confusion than by feeling affinities with things I enjoy.

AC: At your last DJ act (as DJ Sprinkles) in Austria in 2010 you wore very masculine, almost macho clothes: blue jeans, boots, a baggy shirt, all supported by a strong and visibly muscular body. The contrast of your very fine and feminine face to this outfit was striking, especially as you often wear women’s clothing for your performances.

TT: DJ Sprinkles is a “male” character, you could say. This began back when I was a youngster DJing in transsexual sex worker clubs. The overwhelming majority of the girls were transsexuals (medically transitioned), whereas I was not interested in hormone therapy or surgical alteration. Since transsexuals tend to place enormous pressure on nontransitioning persons such as myself to undergo treatments, I felt more comfortable remaining closeted around my own nonessentialist transgenderism in that context. I am much more concerned with giving visibility to this sort of crisis than to your more typical visibility around “self-actualized” transgendered people who came into a singular, familiar, media-friendly trans-identity construct. Under patriarchy, I cannot imagine any available form of gender “self-actualization” that is not ultimately a capitulation to systems of domination. No “masculine” or “feminine” form offers us any escape from the crises at hand, no matter how much we feel these desires for reconciliation on a bodily level. Of course, if it is psychologically impossible for a person to live as the thing society expects them to live as, I can totally respect gender transitioning as a form of self-preservation. In such an instance it is more urgent to distance oneself from what one was than to believe that one has become something other. But that individual need for preservation is often twisted culturally and used to justify the very conservative practices and ideologies of the medical establishment.

AC: In your experience does sound actually play a more important role today? Do you think that sound adds impact to visual media?

TT: No, no, and no.

AC: Do you see it as having potential in relation to the current development of new terms and knowledge transfer?

TT: It seems that every new “potential” is accompanied by equally horrific new forms of exploitation. If we are lucky, they neutralize each other. We are generally not lucky.