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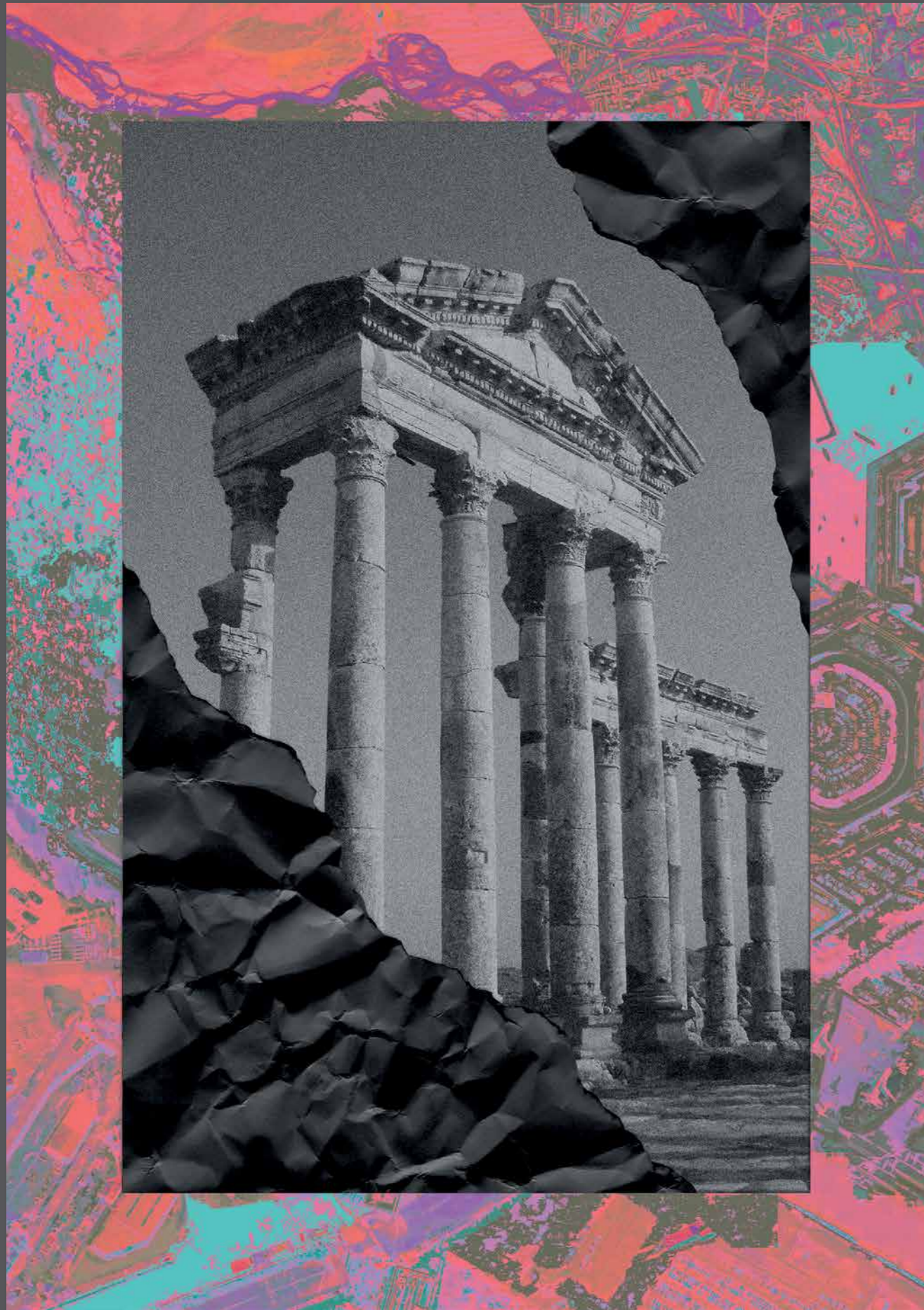


G E O G R A P H I E S

NEW GEOGRAPHIES

CTM FESTIVAL 2016
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MUSIC'S MORAL GEOGRAPHIES – AFRICAN DRUMMING, MINIMALISM AND DJ CULTURE

BY SEBASTIAN KLOTZ

DO WE EXPOSE *DIFFERENCE*, OR SHOULD ONE ACTIVELY TRY TO ENDORSE *SAMENESS* WHEN COMPARING CULTURES? USING AMERICAN MINIMALIST STEVE REICH'S TIMELESS PIECE, »DRUMMING« AS AN EXAMPLE, SEBASTIAN KLOTZ, CHAIR OF HUMBOLDT UNIVERSITY'S DEPARTMENT OF TRANS-CULTURAL MUSICOLOGY, EXAMINES THE »MUSICAL IMPERSONALISM« OF THE COMPOSER'S APPROACH AS AN ALTERNATIVE METHOD OF MUSICAL APPROPRIATION THAT CIRCUMVENTS MUSEOLOGICAL, ETHNOLOGICAL AND PEDAGOGIC ASPECTS.

Since its existence in human societies, music has served as a medium through which to appropriate, modify and transgress locality and the experience of space. One could even argue that the geographical imagination is deeply embedded in musical and sonic allusions that inform our understanding of geographic phenomena and experiences. In the global age, it becomes more and more difficult to understand music's geographic entanglements, as places of production and consumption can easily span across continents, and as the conditions of consumption have proliferated to a previously unknown extent. While this seems to suggest that locality has become irrelevant, recent research has underlined the relevance of locality and its re-configurations against an increasingly global background (Connell/Gibson 2003).

I would like to argue that these configurations carry a moral charge. Although any potential cross-fertilisation between musical cultures seems to be possible, anchoring vectors that are deeply ingrained in a pre-global geographic imagination organize the cultural field of global musical encounters. These moral geographies steer expectations, mobilize traditions of

ascriptions and affect the cultural meanings that listeners, concert-goers and clubbers make of the music they engage with. Faced with a vast array of musical manifestations, and their respective geographic entanglements, it seems impossible to even identify suitable points of departure for any kind of reflection. In light of this challenge, it is suggested to work towards rich contextualisations of phenomena that touch upon the issue voiced here.

Non-Western musics have exercised a strong appeal on the Western imagination. A case in point is Steve Reich's visit to Africa, which influenced his landmark composition, »Drumming«. Does the secessionist attitude of repetitive and minimal music towards the Western European avant-garde also reflect in its wider moral geography? »Drumming« in turn served as sampling material for DJs. How do we gauge these appropriations: do they confirm or modify these geographies? What are the underlying academic motivations in studying these relationships – do we expose *difference*, or should one actively try to endorse *sameness* when comparing cultures?

Africa is the continent that has perhaps triggered the most coherent set of projections in the field of music among non-African actors. Rhythm has become the most powerful descriptive category in singling out the special features of African musical cultures. As descriptive and normative dimensions tend to mix, the rhythmic capacity has been praised as »a natural gift« of Africans. This discourse on rhythm played a major role in essentializing African musical cultures as body-driven, sensual, spontaneous and rhythmically alert. It comes as no surprise that a recent cross-cultural study of musical emotions, undertaken by a prestigious research institution, would turn to a seemingly remote African population for psychological tests on the validity of emotional musical universals (Fritz 2013, and below).

»Drumming«, at least according to one critic, did conjure moral geographies when it premiered in 1971:

»It's not very often that a long complex piece of new music receives a standing ovation. What was it about Steve Reich's »Drumming« that brought the audience to its feet at the Museum of Modern Art on December 3? The simple fact that 13 musicians had performed intricate rhythms with amazing precision for an hour and half no doubt had a lot to do with it. Or perhaps it was because the simple white-note scales were refreshing to ears grown weary of dissonance. Or perhaps it was the joyous blend of marimbas, glockenspiels, drums and voices that turned everyone on. Or was it the pleasure of seeing African and European elements so thoroughly fused – almost as if we really did live in one world. Or perhaps it was because the music had spoken directly to the senses, with the sound itself never sacrificed for the more intellectual rhythmic side of the piece.«¹⁾

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How can a composition suggest that we live »in one world«? Which compositional strategies support this argument? Can the »African and European elements« be identified? Why would a self-consciously U.S. American composer resort to European elements, especially as the reception of minimalism in European intellectual communities has been highly problematic?

In what follows, I aim to identify some of the geographical entanglements that are tied to Reich's study stay in Africa, to his

work »Drumming« and to a DJ adaption of the piece released in 1999.²⁾

IMPERSONALIZING EWE DRUMMING

»Drumming« is an ensemble percussion piece with voices, composed in 1970 and 1971, with the following instrumentation:

Four Pairs of Tuned Bongo Drums
Three Marimbas
Three Glockenspiels
Soprano and Alto Voices
Whistling and Piccolo

The instruments appear in specific groupings across the four parts of the composition:

Part I: Bongos
Part II: Three Marimbas played by nine players, together with two women's voices
Part III: Three Glockenspiels played by four players with whistling and piccolo
Part IV: For all these instruments and voices combined

The duration is approximately 55–75 minutes (Reich 2011). According to the composer, »Drumming« allowed him to introduce new techniques:

»(1) the process of gradually substituting notes for rests (or rests for notes) within a constantly repeating rhythmic cycle, (2) the use of the human voice in an instrumental ensemble to precisely imitate the sound of the instruments, (3) gradual but complete changes of timbre while pitch and rhythm remain constant.« (Reich 2011, »Note by the Composer«)

Quintessentially, Reich states that the whole piece is derived from one pattern: »There is, then, only one basic rhythmic pattern for all of »Drumming.« (ibd.). This pattern is unfolded by filling rests, or rather by substituting rests with beats. In the process, resulting patterns can be heard. Some sections maintain a pattern while a seamless change of instruments and timbres is undertaken. The rhythm and pace are upheld while instrumentation changes.

In his *Writings*, the composer introduces »Drumming« as a result of a biographical learning process in Africa (Reich 2002, 56). He recounts how he obtained stepwise familiarity with the intricate rhythmic patterns using a recorder that allowed him to slow down the tempo in order to grasp the interlocking patterns. It is striking that he avoids any reference to the potentially »different« or »exotic« setting of musical culture. The experience is paraphrased in the mode of very self-conscious and clear reflection of this experience within his own career and his compositional ambitions. It is not the encounter with Africa that primarily matters, but the fact that he found confirmation for specific compositional principles which affected his compositional thought in general. We learn that he took recourse to traditional African drumming, with transcriptions supplied by Arthur Jones' classical study *Studies in African Music* which was published in 1959 (Jones 1959).

»MUSIC AND AUDIO EMERGE AS PERHAPS THE MOST COMPELLING AFFECTIVE PRACTICES IN WHICH WE NEGOTIATE GLOBAL GEOGRAPHIES AND OUR RESPECTIVE MORAL CONCERNS.«

The 1970s allowed a global music market to take shape. Given the weight of these tendencies, it is quite astounding that Reich prefers to phrase his African encounter not within the frame of a wider cultural dialogue, but in terms of merely compositional issues. He was seeking ways of expressing a musical »impersonalism«, which worked against the exposed subjectivity of the bulk of Western experimentalism, and he was seeking confirmation of his ideas in the field of orchestration and timbre. In addition, familiarity with Ewe cross-rhythms led to a mature handling of musical patterns.

I would like to suggest that these were very conscious and well-reflected decisions, as they pointed towards alternative appropriations of African musics that circumvented museological, ethnological and pedagogic aspects. Reich bypasses the issues of composition/improvisation, of cultural contact and overlap, of fixing the essence of African music, of the ritual and cultural function of Ewe drumming in Ewe culture. Right from the start, he was focusing on something that would target his own creative development and Western audiences for whom he wrote his works. This is a statement in itself, given that the 1970s witnessed the first active cultural marketing of indigenous traditions by African state agencies and cultural boards. The U.S. Institute for International Education had issued a travel grant to Reich (Reich 2002, 55). The Institute still has a presence in Accra. The composer was not an independent tourist, but his contacts with Ghana's musical culture were overseen by the Arts Council of Ghana. The arrival of Reich in Accra coincided with the foundation of the Ghanaian National Dance Ensemble. Thus, quite a number of further African players got involved in the biographical and cross-cultural configuration under review. It also turns out that other Western composers, musicians and musicologists had been consulting only a selected number of well-connected actors in Ghana. The teacher with whom Reich studied in Accra, Gideon Alorworye, was among those frequently consulted by other visitors.

Reich approached the »African thinking« (Reich 2002, 71) by way of intense musical instruction, and via elaborate transcriptions of rhythmic textures. His academic reference, Arthur Jones, had anticipated this »trilateral collaboration« between researcher, drum recorder machine³⁾, and African musician in the 1950s (Jones 1959, vol. 1, 14). Jones was interested in how Africans understand their music (ibid., 15) and quite aware that the score produced by the drum recorder notation would make the music »Un-African« (ibid., 127). Jones's detailed transcrip-

tions of full works should allow non-African musicians to play African music, respecting the complex cross-rhythmic structures. To Jones, transcription was a prerequisite for understanding African music (ibid., 10). Reich's ambition is narrower in the sense that he is interested in technical details against the background of »African thinking«, which is not spelled out by Reich in his *Writings*. Throughout the illustrated *Writings*, there is not a single image of Gideon Alorworye, nor of himself during his African stay. The account focuses on technical and performance matters. The social and symbolic powers of drumming and of music in general in African societies is also covered, but the actors with whom he communicated in Ghana remain silent.

Although minimalism still resonates with the spiritualistic tendencies of the 1960s and 1970s, Reich, in his *Writings*, does not make any attempt to address the relevance of the psycho-technology and social psychology of Ewe dance-drumming (Ladzepko) in the moment of cultural translation to Western concert performances.

The gradual processes that play themselves out in »Drumming« surely absorb listeners' minds, but no further social meanings seem to be tied to them. Reich seems to have chosen cross-rhythms for their technical, didactic qualities in the first place. It is precisely through this denial of an expected functionality or simple »continuation« of Ewe music that his use of patterns gains expressive powers on the territory that »Drumming« spans. The avoidance of nostalgia, the elimination of any biographical allusions, and the insistence on »impersonality«⁴⁾ contribute to a *non-identity* of »Drumming« and the African experience.⁵⁾ We are at a loss in establishing any causality here. The composer is not *dramatizing* any explicit emotion or biographical trait, but the process of gradual changes of patterns, of timbre and of texture. The combination of repetition and non-referentiality, as compared to nostalgic, emotional, autobiographical referentiality, is crucial in this context. In connection with the neglect of the social role of dance-drumming in Ewe society, Reich creates a kind of abstraction from the specific circumstances, while the patterning obviously connects to his studies in Ghana. For lack of better terms, the recombinant variants⁶⁾ of drumming as encountered in Ghana that make up »Drumming« can be read as a *de-territorialisation*.⁷⁾ Yet the question remains: Does Reich drum, literally or metaphorically, »with« the African musicians, or without or »against« them? Which moral geographies have influenced his African encoun-

ter? Is his creative approach an option for neutralising the authenticity debate?

Apparently, no African drummer has been invited to join performances of »Drumming« back home in the West. It was never meant to radiate into African communities. While this clearly estranges »Drumming« from the circumstances that inspired it, the work also stands apart from Western experimentalism and from the European avant-garde. Through its de-personalised, generic title which highlights the activity of playing, it makes a strong non-intellectualist statement. Through its man-made repetitive patterning, it collapsed the structuralistic and individualistic foundations of musical thinking in the tradition of Darmstadt. The provocation of the title extends even further, as no other instrumental group would offer itself for an acceptable activist title: *keyboarding* or *stringing*, which would quintessentially capture Western musical discursive systems, would simply not function.

Performing »Drumming« turned out to be problematic and ambivalent. Reich himself pondered the shortcomings of his manuscript score on the preface to the re-edited score. Initially, the composer had shown »how to play the piece during rehearsal by playing the patterns, showing how to phase ahead, rehearsing it, and so on. Only after the entire piece was completed did I make an ink manuscript which in many ways was difficult to read, ambiguous as to interpretation and in some cases, mistaken as to note values in the choices and piccolo parts. For 40 years, this manuscript has circulated and an increasing number of unfortunate performances have been the result.« (Reich 2011, »About this edition«)

Great care has also been taken on the engineering side, with the sound engineer emerging as a »member of the performing ensemble« (ibid.). Pace, precision, transparency, and perfection, the hallmarks of minimalist aesthetics, were relying, among other factors, on exact microphone positioning.

This merely technical concern and effort is a feature that shields »Drumming« from wrong assumptions about »Otherness« or »Sameness« *vis-à-vis* »African drumming«. Reich never claims cultural symmetry. It allows him to override assumed intrinsic differences. It emphatically situates itself in the sphere of *music-making* that reaches from Africa to the Museum of Modern Arts where »Drumming« premiered⁸⁾ and thus levels differences. Looking back at his African months, Steve Reich states that

he simply »continue[d] composing, but with the knowledge of the non-Western music one has studied« (Reich 2002, 70). The statement is less trivial than it sounds and signals a moral geography that avoids normative claims and that implicitly strengthens global musicality. By not aiming to »understand« African music, Steve Reich upholds a range of options within a cross-cultural field that musically articulated *new geographies*. Ewe dance drumming is both present and absent in »Drumming«. The work opens a resonating space that cannot be measured by standards of symmetry and reciprocity which informs present-day ethno-musicological discourses that seek to enhance dialogical cultural practices (Kaufman Shelemay 2013).

ABSORBING »DRUMMING«

While there is no hint at any African appropriation of Reich's work »Drumming«, DJ culture and electronica have acknowledged the role of Steve Reich in their genres in various ways. »Drumming« became itself the object of creative manipulation: the CD anthology *Reich Remixed*⁹⁾ features a track by DJ Mantronik called »Maximum Drum Formula« which works with samples drawn from a studio recording of »Drumming«. Those who know »Drumming« will immediately recognise it. To those unfamiliar it may pass as a track with extensive rhythmic structures reminiscent of African traditions.

The highly controlled posture of Reich's »Drumming« is transformed into an immersive, dizzying sequence of dirty bass-lines, vocoded breaks, scratches and echoes, lending it depth and a physical, danceable contour. Reich's »recombinant strategy« (Fink 2005) is the subject of a new mode of recombination. The layered track structure of EDM (Butler 2007) has similarities with the resting and added part strategy that Reich tested in »Drumming«. Furthermore, EDM cultivates an impersonal, participatory attitude that it shares with Reich's search for an impersonal, non-subjectivist musical style. DJ Mantronik may have felt drawn to »Drumming« as he had started experimenting with log drumming similar to West African drumming styles before he produced the piece on *Reich Remixed*¹⁰⁾. This clearly lends the interface of African musics, minimalism and DJing a new spin that needs to be explored in future studies.¹¹⁾

As to the musical geographies, »Maximum Drum Formula« seems to simply absorb previous orientations without any further moral intent. While the creation of »Drumming« required a trip to Ghana for an on-site initiation to local dance-drum-

ming, as well as the sensitive ears, hands and the recorder of the composer, the DJ simply browsed his digital library to create samples from »Drumming«. Just as Reich imaginatively re-mixed Ewe drumming practices, his work »Drumming« is now cast according to the prerequisites of DJ culture. Reich's carefully orchestrated biographical experience is absorbed into a completely globalised musical style that neutralizes issues of authenticity, reference and origin. The delicacy of Reich's patterning, his careful moral geography of not reproducing African musics, is not further enhanced but technologically pacified and contained. The CD anthology *Reich Remixed*, from the 1990s, imports a historicizing impetus into the globalised electronic dance music market, allowing moments of homage and reflexivity into a fast-paced, future-bound industry that openly cultivated (and marketed) a retrospective view. In fact, DJs contributing to *Reich Remixed* were provided with separate tracks from the multi-track studio recordings by Nonesuch (Carter 2012), the label which released both »Drumming« and other original compositions by Reich and the anthology *Reich Remixed*.

A closer look at the programming strategy applied by the DJ yields little sensitivity for the principles that Reich had introduced in »Drumming«. DJ Mantronik has been more daring in other tracks. The transformation into regular beat structure with strong bass line levels Reich's intricate rhythmic structures. »Drumming« needs to assert itself against the metric and formal imperative of electronic dance music. No wonder only the fast-paced sections from parts 1 and 2 of »Drumming« have been selected. »Maximum Drum Formula«, therefore, is not dialogical in the sense of adopting and extending the compositional principles of »Drumming«.

Paradoxically, by smoothly incorporating »Drumming« and Reich's African experience as mediated in this composition within EDM, a move towards sameness is becoming visible in which the abstracting forces of digital technologies and present-day academic effort do coincide to work towards *sameness* rather than *difference* (Agawu 2003). At the same time, non-Western institutions and actors insist on setting themselves apart and on fostering local traditions.¹² It is against this background that current geographical and moral negotiations take place. They enable a variety of transculturally situated musical listening. If we concede to Steve Reich a kind of situative understanding of African musics that did not compromise these traditions, it still remains to be shown how specifically this understanding informs affective geographies and how it translates into social, aesthetic and commercial effects.

Which new geographies arise out of these situations? Are they in any way sustainable? Why does Africa continue to be thought of as an entity partially unaffected by the West? Biolo-

gist and music psychologist Tom Fritz who travelled to the Mafa population in Cameroon for field research on musical universals unknowingly re-enacted a phonographic research practice that was invented around 1900 in the formative years of comparative musicology. Contrary to music cognition studies, the present reflexive ethnomusicology regards musical universals as strong cultural constructs that form part of wider strategies of representations and cultures of measurement. In addition, ethnomusicologists with particular emphasis on Africa and the Western study of African musical practices have suggested recalibrating the relationship between specific local traditions and the contingent:

»The idea would be to unearth the impulses that motivate acts of performance, and to seek to interpret them in terms of broader, perhaps even generic, cultural impulses. Such a project would ultimately look beyond the immediate material level, not by denying that Africans blow on elephant horns, cover drums with animal skin, or make flutes out of bamboo, but by emphasizing the contingency of their material and conceptual investments. Objects function as means to an end, and it is the complex of actions elicited by such objects that betrays the untranslatable impulses behind performance. Focusing on such impulses promotes a cross-cultural vision without denying the accidental specifics of local (African) practices [...] Restoring a notional sameness to the work of ethnomusicology will go a long way toward achieving something that has hitherto remained only a theoretical possibility, namely, an ethical study of African music.« (Agawu 2003, 234–5)

The academy, too, promotes its moral geographies. Here, Dr. Tom Fritz introduces the research set-up:

»The investigation of musical universals with Western music stimuli would ideally require participants who are completely naive to Western music [...] The individuals investigated in the present study belong to the Mafa, one of approximately 250 ethnic groups that make up the population of Cameroon. They are located in the Extreme North in the Mandara mountain range, where the more remote Mafa settlements do not have electrical supply, and are still inhabited by many individuals who pursue a traditional lifestyle, some of whom have not been exposed to Western music. Interestingly, the Mafa do not have a word for music, because all musical activity is an integral part of actions or rituals. This indicated that for the Mafa, music is highly ritualistic, interpersonal and symbolic and Mafa music is rather unlikely to be appreciated for its iconic-sign-quality.« (Fritz 2013, 2)

While the Mafa actors function as *passive respondents* in a psychological test series that relies on Western stimuli, the Ewe musicians that taught Steve Reich about cross-rhythms were

strong *active actors*. Reich fulfilled a *mediating role*, while DJ Mantronik is an *adaptor* of Reich's work. Both Reich and Fritz visited Africa as collectors. Their experience and data were processed and displayed back home in the West.

Each of these social and cultural roles is linked to geographic sites (the Mafa village and the Max Planck Institute for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences in Leipzig/Germany; Accra and New York City; the RCA recording studio A in New York City for the Nonesuch Recording of Reich's »Drumming«; The Robot Crib in New York Studio for Mantronik's studio work for *Reich Remixed*). Actors show various degrees of mobility and social agency. It is their musical, academic and commercial aspirations and the medium of music that links these sites. Music seems to function without even understanding the specificity of traditions. For this reason, no musical and receptive strategy in the complex cluster of musical practices presented in this essay can be termed right or wrong. Reich was legitimised to gear his focus in Africa toward his own creative interests and to resist a mere reproduction of ethnic dance-drumming. Ewe musicians were free to share as much of their own culture with their visitor as they wished. Musical universals carry a strong fascination among psychologists, and DJs will select samples that work best in their technological environment and on the dance floor.

I have been trying to elucidate some entanglements of music's moral geographies that reach from Ewe dance drumming via minimalism to DJ culture and psychological tests. These entanglements embrace de-territorialisations and appropriations that can disregard moral dimensions that were previously linked to specific musical productions under specific circumstances. Music conjures these connectivities within split seconds. It can articulate a sense of belonging and blend real and virtual geographies. Music and audio emerge as perhaps the most compelling affective practices in which we negotiate global geographies and our respective moral concerns.

Dr. Sebastian Klotz is professor of Trans-Cultural Musicology at Humboldt University Berlin. His research interests span from Quattrocento dance to theories of musical action and to musical knowledge cultures. His project »Berlin, Chicago, Kolkata – Music as Medium of Urban Transformations« (2008 to 2012) was supported by Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung.

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- *1) Cf. www.newmusicbox.org/articles/Steve-Reichs-Drumming/
- *2) This essay draws on previous work of mine which is accessible online www.atodya.com/ewe-drumming/
- *3) The drum recorder is an electro-mechanical device that notates musical events on a moving strip of paper.
- *4) The notion of impersonalism which Reich attributes to Ewe music should be further explored among Ewe actors and in Ewe discourse. To Reich, it opens an important option in legitimizing minimal music in general.
- *5) Momemi captures this delicate relationship by paraphrasing the relation of the composition to Ewe musical culture as »separate but related worlds« (Momemi 2001).
- *6) Robert Fink placed minimal music against the background of repetitive cultural practices in US post-war consumer culture. I owe the idea of »capitalist abstraction« arising out of technologies and the term »recombinant cultures« to him, cf. Fink 2005.
- *7) Deleuze and Guattari address the »deterritorializing force« of music, cf. Deleuze/Guattari 1987, 302.
- *8) See the concert review as quoted above.
- *9) Various Artists, *Reich Remixed* © Nonesuch Records 1999.
- *10) Information culled from www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kurtis_Mantronik
- *11) Complex rhythmic layering that is fairly rare in mainstream electronica can be observed in Mantronik's track »Needle to the Groove«, released on Mantronix, *The Album*, © Sleeping Bag Records 1985. From 0:00 to 0:36, it features continuous fast pulsation, multi-layering and irregular break patterns that strongly evoke the textures of Drumming.
- *12) Cf. www.ug.edu.gh/music/about/brief_history

MUSIC RECORDINGS

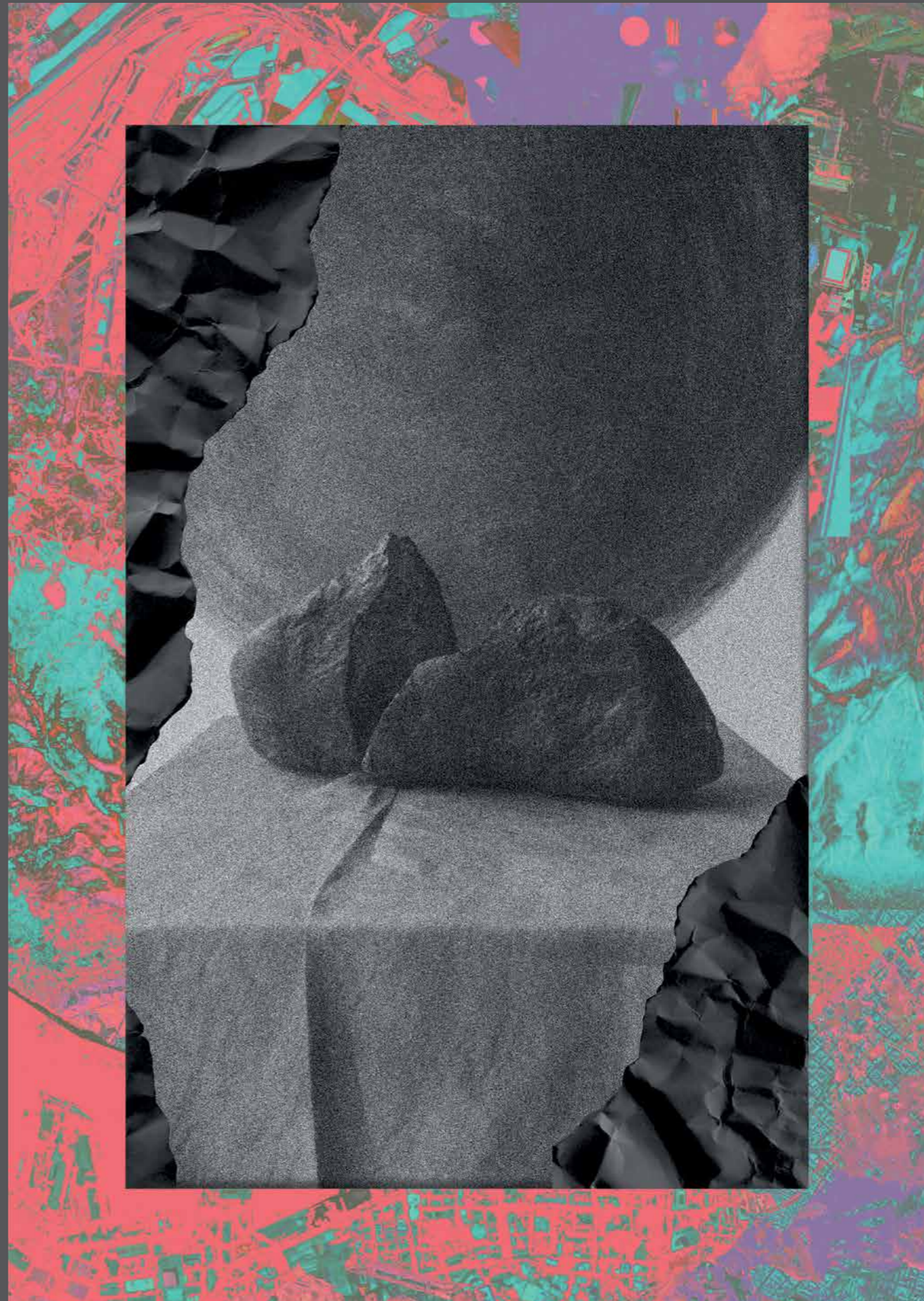
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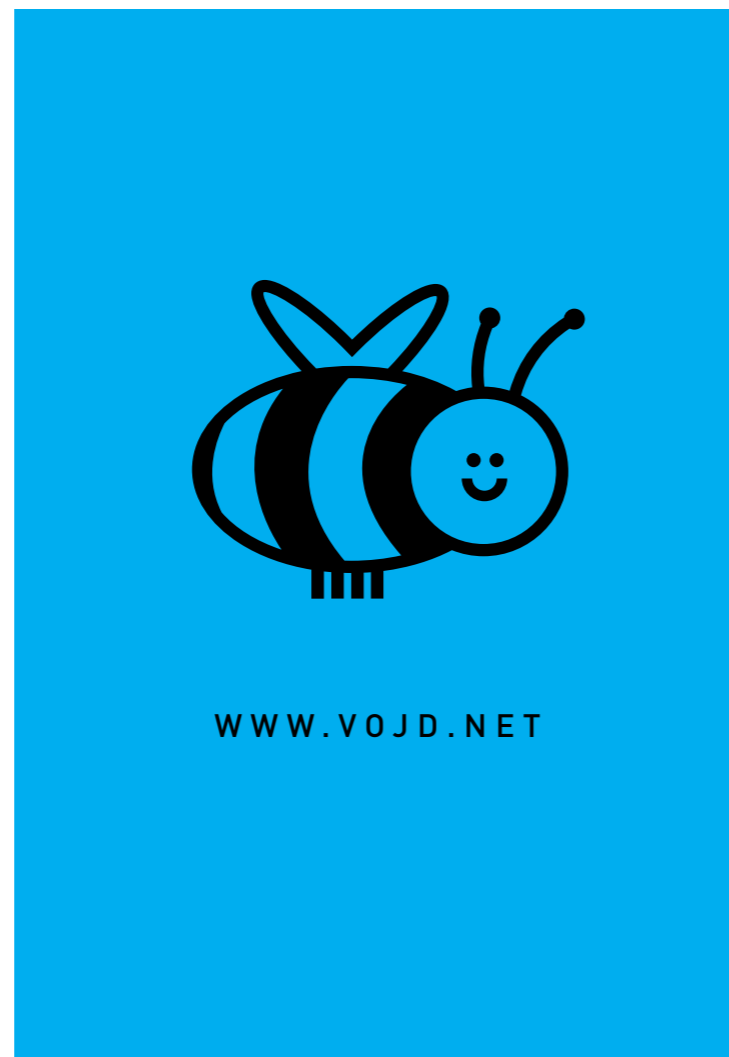
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