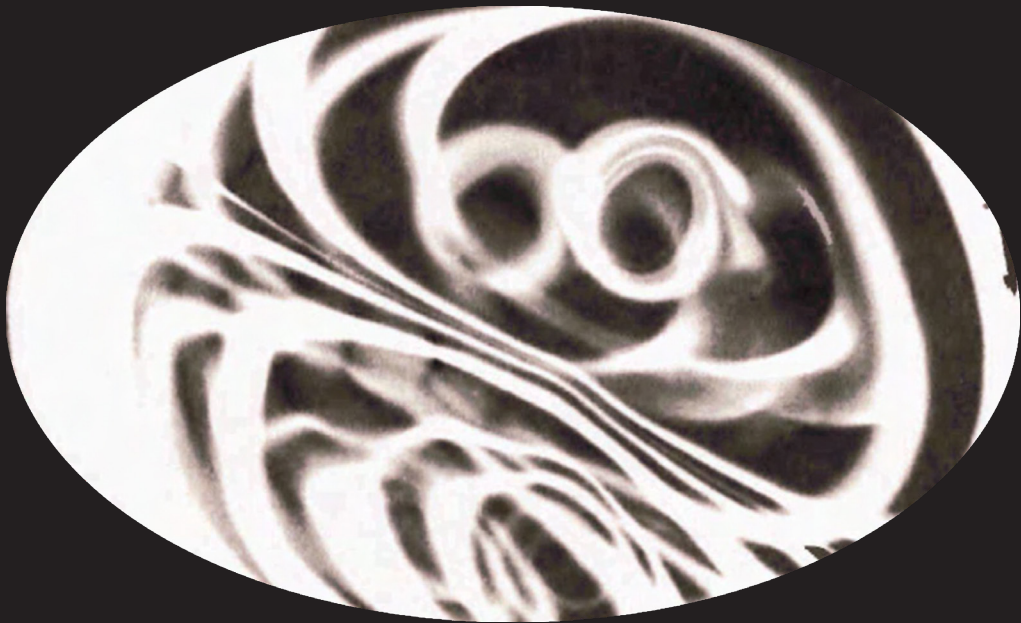




Crashing Up Against a Membrane



At 6:45 am on an October morning in Rotterdam a group of forty or so people trickle into the low-lit POING Club. The sun has not yet risen but the music is blaring as we begin to bounce in unison to a driving beat and the sensation of our edges dissolves. This is Physical Therapy, a bi-monthly morning rave organized and led by dance artist Connor Schumacher. The event takes place on Wednesdays from 7-9 am but unlike a typical sunrise rave, Physical Therapy is sober – “you are the substance” (ARK, 2023). Sobriety is a way of reminding participants that “dance is not ephemeral. It is the living, breathing, pulsating, sweat / proof of what makes us essentially human” (ARK, 2023). Schumacher suggests that through collective dance we have the agency to produce the psychological and physiological shifts that drugs do. It is a vicious way of moving and being in the world, one which can unfold in the safe space of the morning rave and whose effects continue once the session is over.

In Astridia Neimanis’s text “Hydrofeminism: Or, on Becoming a Body of Water” she writes that “we must learn to be at home in the quivering tension of the in-between... It is here in the border zones of what is comfortable, of what is perhaps even liveable that we can open to alterity – to other bodies, to other ways of being and acting in the world” (Neimanis, 2012, p. 93-94). To illustrate this borderzone she uses the term “ecotone”: eco meaning “home” and tone meaning “tension”. Physical Therapy situates the body in a borderzone and is an example of an ecotone – it is a safe space that facilitates a somatic experience of techno, a genre embedded with a sonic and historical tension. In her text, Neimanis writes that existing in this in-between is “the simultaneous recognition that this alterity also flows through us” (Neimanis, 2012, p. 96). In the warm light of the smoky club we are bodies moving as one body, reminded of our permeable edges.



Fig. 1: Physical Therapy at Poing (@arkconnorschumacher, 2023)

Like many nightclubs, the interior of POING enfolds clubbers in its shadows and the sensation of being held (fig.1). Inside this darkness the ocular is dampened and the other senses bloom. Most notably, what propels our movement is sound. The DJ on this particular morning is Amsterdam-based Dorien Van Linge AKA Angelboy. They play a selection of acid, trance and techno that ebbs and flows across the dance floor. Midway through the rave, Angelboy plays a track by Detroit electronic duo Drexciya. The song “Digital Tsunami” begins with a wet crush of sound that is persistent and trance-like. Its waves are pulling, flowing, undertow-ing as a melody bubbles onto the horizon. The space between each slap of sound is supple and perforated by wailing glissandos. It is a porous, crushing wall – a tsunami – and it produces somatic friction. While dancing to “Digital Tsunami” I am reminded of my watery body but it is not flowing, it is not flooding – it is crashing up against a membrane.

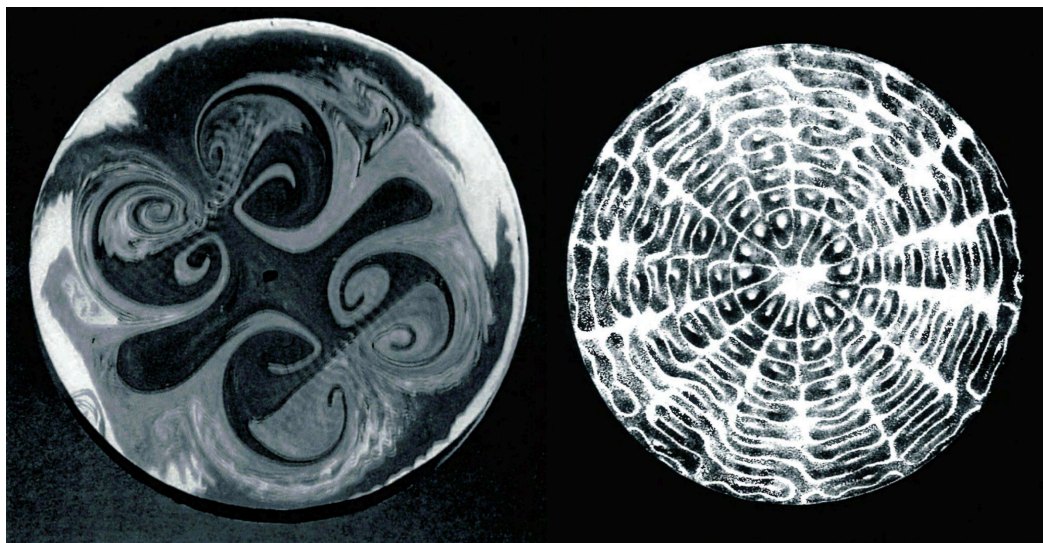


Fig. 2-3: Examples of cymatic patterns (Jenny, 1967)

The visceral sensation of techno music produces a somatic tension or “tone” that drives our movement. If one were to view our bodies from above, certain ripples might emerge reminiscent of cymatic patterns (fig.2-3). As Neimanis points out, our bodies are composed of sixty to ninety percent water (Neimanis, 2012, p. 86), so to think about cymatics in relation to our bodies is to think of our bodies as sculpted by aural tides. The tides that flow through Physical Therapy – the sparkling acid and rising trance have their origin in techno music which was created by Black Americans in Detroit. In this way, the tension of Drexciya’s “Digital Tsunami” is not purely aural, it comes from a history of lived tension and lived violence, a tension that is transmuted through sound.

Techno emerged in the early 80s in Black communities in Detroit and it carries the histories of its creators. In “Orientations Matter” Sarah Ahmed writes “What is behind the table is what must have already taken place for the table to arrive” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 239). I would like to suggest that techno can be read in this way and its arrival is preceded by the violence of slavery. To further illustrate this point I would like to look more closely at Drexciya and Underground Resistance, two early Detroit groups known for their intense, dense frequencies and engagement with Black identity.



Fig. 4: Centerfold for Drexciya's album *Neptune's Lair* (Drexciya, 1999)

Both Drexciya and Underground Resistance (UR)¹ actively identify with a tradition of Black Resistance. For Drexciya this manifested through an Afrofuturist mythology (fig.3). The Drexciyans are an aquatic race birthed in the sea by pregnant America-bound African slaves thrown in the ocean during the Middle Passage. In this future-myth, Drexciya articulates their vision for a transformed society. For Underground Resistance this desire for transformation takes the form of manifestos. One of these manifestos states that there exists “a wall between races preventing world peace. It is this wall we are going to smash. By using the untapped energy potential of sound we are going to destroy this wall much in the same way as certain frequencies shatter glass” (undergroundresistance.com, no date). UR suggests the sonic capacity of sound to obliterate boundaries and permeate membranes. Both Drexciya and Underground Resistance transmit their ideologies in aural waves through the sheer physical sensation of sound. The texture techno produces works its way through our bodies as our bodies work their ways through the darkness of the dancefloor.

Physical Therapy is an example of an ecotone which unfolds within the soft walls of POING to the sounds of techno. The club is the container for a genre whose genesis lies in Black resistance. Our bodies, in all their wateriness and sobriety, experience this tension through collective movement. It is well known that dance is a way of processing trauma and when we dance soberly and collectively we open ourselves to the processing of collective trauma. To return to Neimanis, “We gestate in amniotic waters that deliver to us the nutrients that enable our further proliferation” (Neimanis, 2012, p. 87). To gestate within the ecotone of Physical Therapy is therapy and it opens us to other ways of being where pain might pass through the body – where we might move with it and feel how it is connected to our individual experience while simultaneously, histories of systemic racial violence and oppression. The final track of the morning is effervescent. The sound is moving upwards and the entire dance floor is jumping. In these final moments it feels as though our entire body is hovering two inches above the ground.

1 Christoph Schaub points out that the initials “UR” are likely a reference to The Underground Railroad.

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