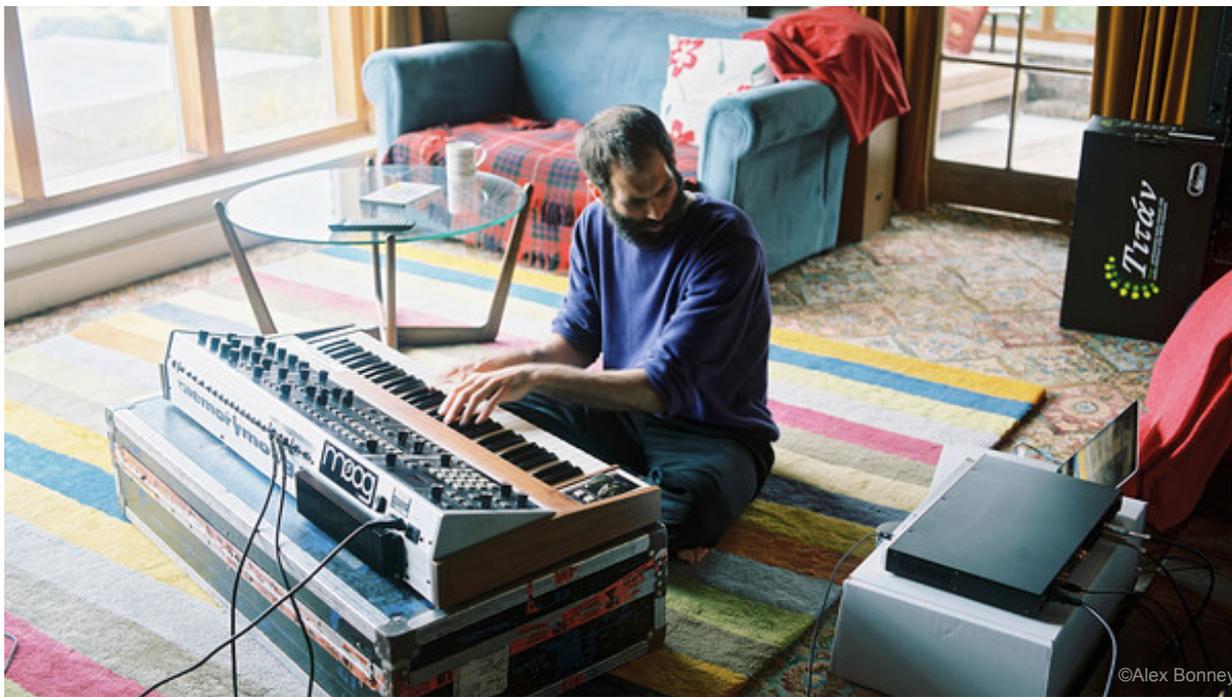


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# Electronica: Kraftwerk's 'Radio-Activity' revisited

Laura Battle

Fans of the German electro pioneers are getting serious with a reinterpretation of a seminal album — and a conference



Matthew Bourne at the Lintronics Advanced Memorymoog

Ever since Kraftwerk's 1974 breakthrough album *Autobahn*, musicians and music critics have queued up to doff their hats to this elusive group of German electro pioneers. Afrika Bambaataa sampled "Trans-Europe Express" on his groundbreaking hip-hop track "Planet Rock", many regard Kraftwerk as the godfathers of techno and, over the years, their music has been quoted by countless mainstream pop artists, from The Chemical Brothers to Jay Z.

The fervour peaked with Coldplay's sampling of "Computer Love" for their 2005 hit "Talk". Perhaps the fawning of these indie crowd-pleasers sounded the death-knell — or maybe Kraftwerk's recent sellout tours have paled the imitations — because there is now a growing sense that Kraftwerk appreciation is entering an era of more serious study.

Last month, Dr Uwe Schütte, reader in German at Aston University in Birmingham, hosted the first international Kraftwerk conference. "There has been a conference on Morrissey and the Smiths, another of my great musical passions," Schütte says, "so I thought why not put on a Kraftwerk event?" This two-day programme of papers on subjects as diverse as

“Kraftwerk and the Cultural Studies of Cycling” and “Searching for Modernity: Socio-historical perspectives on techno music and ‘das Deutsche’” included a disco, and attracted nearly 200 fans and academics from across Europe and the US.

Meanwhile, a trio of electronic artists, no less earnest in their ambition, have been working on a musical analysis of Kraftwerk’s seminal 1975 album *Radio-Activity* that will be presented as a touring show in March. Radioland, the name of the project, is far from being a tribute act. Rather, as Franck Vigroux, one of the musicians, explains, it is best compared to the way jazz players approach a standard. “We’re not remixing at all,” he explains. “Think of it like a jazz tune. You take the chords and beats and tempo, maybe, but then you change it. It’s 100 per cent new sound.”

Pianist and composer Matthew Bourne elaborates: “We’ve been exploring it on a track-by-track basis,” he says. “Everything is finished; there is nothing improvised, except one or two places, but it’s very focused, there’s no room for noodling around.”

Kraftwerk are known for the exquisite precision of their melodies and crisp, thrusting rhythms — in fact it is difficult to think of a band less inclined to noodle — and yet there’s also warmth and humour in their music. *Radio-Activity*’s distinctive sound world, from austere opener “Geiger Counter”, through the sinister vocals on “The Voice of Energy”, to the deadpan finale “Ohm Sweet Ohm”, was created by a range of electronic instruments, many of which are now prohibitively expensive.

“We looked at using samples, and software on computers, plug-ins, but the sound just wasn’t the same, the grain of the original sound wasn’t present in the software,” says Bourne, adding that they will be using old analogue synthesisers and modern equivalents. “The Vocoder [a human voice synthesiser] they used on *Radio-Activity* was sold a few years ago for \$12,000, and the Vako Orchestron [a keyboard that made use of pre-recorded sound discs] . . . there are 75 of them in the world and if you want one of those it’ll cost you about £9,000-£10,000.”

Installation artist Antoine Schmitt is providing the third component of Radioland: an interactive video that draws on the industrial iconography used by Kraftwerk during the 1970s. From their early album covers through to the figure-hugging jumpsuits and 3D video projections that feature as part of their latest shows, Kraftwerk have always placed an emphasis on their visual aesthetic. The Radioland musicians plan to be less assertive. “We’re seated at the base of the visuals, we don’t want to attract attention to ourselves particularly,” Bourne says. So, they won’t be dressed in spandex onesies? “I think we’ll probably just wear traditional black,” he laughs.

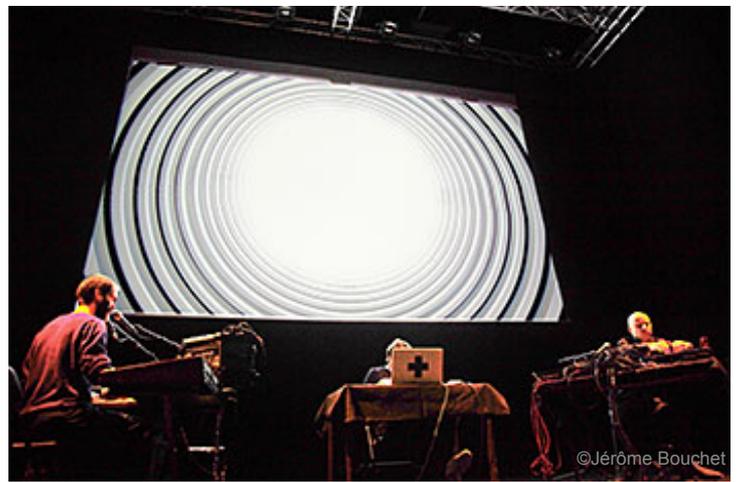
Over the past three years, Kraftwerk have performed in several modern art galleries around the world, including MoMA, Tate Modern and Berlin’s Neue Nationalgalerie, highlighting the group’s interest in visual art — and, in turn, the veneration shown by contemporary artists. “My personal opinion is

Academic papers covered subjects as diverse as ‘Kraftwerk and the Cultural Studies of Cycling’

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we'll never get any new music from them, except possibly another single or EP," Schütte says. "What's also pretty obvious is that the next release will be a Blu-ray of the 3D stage show. The lack of musical output is compensated by a new concentration on the visuals." Nearly half a century after they formed, and despite band members changing, Kraftwerk still maintain creative control.

In a BBC Four documentary *Kraftwerk: Pop Art*, broadcast last month, music critic Paul Morley argued that Kraftwerk have proved more influential than The Beatles. I put this to Schütte and there's an audible groan.



Radioland on stage in France

"These comparisons are journalistic or by music fans," he replies. "As a Kraftwerk fan I would say yes, but with my academic hat on I would say you need to show me quantitative proof. I would rather ask how this music, which developed in a specific time and place, by a group of upper-class rich kids, affluent enough to buy the latest synthesisers, could transcend the Atlantic and inspire another group of people with a completely different backdrop?"

Inspired by the enthusiastic reception of last month's event, Schütte is now planning a broader Krautrock event for 2016, and is keen to involve Radioland in an upcoming conference on Düsseldorf electronica titled "Electri\_City". "*Radio-Activity* is such a great album that it's not fake, it's not ludicrous, it's not a rip-off that Radioland do it again in a different context," he says. "It's not like the 10th cover version of a Bruce Springsteen song, it's serious art."

*Radioland opens at Leeds Belgrave Music Hall on March 13. A UK tour follows, sounduk.net*

*Photographs: Alex Bonney; Jérôme Bouchet*

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