

Much More Than the Notes

Episode 4. Terre Thaemlitz

Transcript of interview by Rubén Coll for "Much More Than the Notes," for RSS Radio Reina Sofía, Reina Sofía Museum (ES: Madrid). Recorded in English on May 30, 2023. Published on November 27, 2024.

Audio download: <http://www.comatonse.com/reviews/rss241127.mp3>

Note from Terre: This transcript has not been proof checked. Although at a quick glance it seems pretty accurate, I can already see the breakpoints of some sentences are off. Please consider it a reference only.

[Audio: DJ Sprinkles. "Sloppy 42nds (Terre's Neu Wuss Fusion)" from *Gayest Tits and Greyst Shits*. Comatonse (1998/2021)]

Terre Thaemlitz: Although I really enjoy club music I've never really been much of a partygoer, and part of that is because I never drank or did drugs and so, you know, going through the height of house culture totally sober kind of takes quite a punch out of it, but at the same time it allowed me to really witness and share in the activities in a way that I think maybe not so many other people could. You know, maybe it also had an advantage in terms of a more... I hate to use the word sober again, but a more sober take on what was happening around me, but of course also, I'm sure, filtered by my own lens of alienation and loneliness that happens in a club when you're kind of out on your own.

Much More than the Notes. Music, its Poetics and its Politics

Episode 4: Terre Thaemlitz

TT: My name is Terre Thaemlitz. Most people would probably consider me an audio producer. I work in multimedia, ranging from audio to text to video and graphics.

Primarily doing work that is coming from a culturally critical perspective on the music industry and other media industries, and some of the main themes of my work relate to gender, sexuality, immigration, ethnicity, race, class and things like that. I'm quite, what you would call, non-essentialist; quite critical of the ways that identity politics have led us down a deeper path of alienation from our social processes, and historical materialism is also core to my analyses of those previously mentioned issues of gender, sexuality, etc.

In New York in the late 1980s, Terre Thaemlitz cut her teeth as a deep house DJ in the trans clubs of Midtown Manhattan, like Sally's II, close to 42nd Street. A street that "can boast of being the most famous in America", as writer Samuel Delany put it in *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*. This 1999 book reflected on the disappearance of a place characterised by sex work, cruising and other forms of "interclass contact", as it was suddenly deemed to be potentially dangerous during the 1980s AIDS crisis. Disney's subsequent acquisition of the area in the early '90s paved the way for a

drastic gentrification process, uprooting the communities and networks that people had built there.

Thaemlitz's prolific output ranges from electroacoustic works to art installations. But some of her most dancefloor-oriented projects are reminiscent of that vanished space. She released her first record as DJ Sprinkles, "Sloppy 42nds", in 1998, a year before Delany's book was published. It was a 12-inch that was subtitled "A Tribute to the 42nd Street transsexual clubs destroyed by Walt Disney's buyout of Times Square".

In 2009, more than a decade later, DJ Sprinkles launched her acclaimed, if not misunderstood, album *Midtown 120 Blues*, a critically charged sonic artefact devoid of nostalgia and based on her sleepless nights at those clubs. From its whispered intro opening, the album reminds us of the often-forgotten context that the sound of deep house emerged from:

"Sexual and gender crises, transgendered sex work, black market hormones, drug and alcohol addiction, loneliness, racism, HIV, ACT-UP, Thompkins Sq. Park, police brutality, queer-bashing, underpayment, unemployment, and censorship — all at 120 beats per minute".

This interview was conducted through a video call on 30 May 2023 between Madrid and Chiba, where Terre resides, just a couple of weeks after the opening of *Reframed Positions*, her first European retrospective at the German gallery Halle für Kunst Lüneburg.

[Audio: DJ Sprinkles. "Brenda's 20\$ Dilemma" from *Midtown 120 Blues*. Comatonse (2009/2014)]

TT: I grew up in the American Midwest, born in Minnesota, which is a state just south of the Canadian border, and then moved to Missouri, which is right in the kind of dartboard centre of the United States. And when I was 18, you know it was a typical queer migration story about fleeing the countryside to go to an urban epicentre in hopes of escaping certain types of harassment and oppression that were experienced in the rural countryside. So I moved to New York. I had only managed to really do that because I got myself into a scholarship programme at a university called Cooper Union, where I was going to study painting and art. And I did, I finished the programme, but it was quite a frustrating course to be in. But yeah, that was basically super typical, like the Bronski Beat song "Smalltown Boy". Nothing original or eventful about that move.

[Audio: Jovonn. "Nite Roads" from *Goldtones*. Clone Classic Cuts (1991/2014)]

New York: the 42nd Street and the Midtown District in the '80s/'90s

Once I was in New York I started collecting deep house records and I had already, since childhood, been collecting whatever electronic music could fall my way, mostly techno-pop, synthesizer-based new age or things like that. I wasn't into the new age philosophies, but just into the electronic music. And once in New York, of course, I had a lot more access to different styles of music and my school and my apartment were also located in what's called the East Village of Manhattan. And the East Village and also New Jersey, where a lot of

the deep house, instrumental club music that I liked was coming from. The clubs in that area were places like the Garage, Save the Robots, The Loft, Pyramid Club... The places where you had like RuPaul, Deee-Lite, these sorts of groups. That area wasn't really my scene. It was a bit too laborious, I guess. But it was an alternative... in the West Village, which was just directly west of the East Village, you had the white gay clone scene, and then also at the very west, riverside, you had the meat market, waterfront, sex worker scene, and then up in the Midtown area, which is where I was DJing, and also where some of the clubs that I really enjoyed were, especially my favourite club called La Escuelita — it was a Puerto Rican transgender bar with a pretty good mix of gay and lesbian, male and female clientele and really nice drag shows and stuff.

It was a great club. I mean, the music was horrible though, the antithesis of house music. It was a lot of... oh what did they call it? New jack and things like that. The new jack sound.

[Audio: Keisha Jackson. "Mama Told Me" from *New Jack Swing Mastercuts vol. 1. Mastercuts (1991/1992)*]

I really cannot relate to the sound of the drums. It's that whole kind of super compressed, Janet Jackson *Rhythm Nation* style. You know, it's really mainstream pop. Really not my style. But the vibe of the club was just amazing and the show queens were wonderful.

[Audio: Jovonn. "Nite Roads" from *Goldtones. Clone Classic Cuts (1991/2014)*]

Sally's II

I was a resident DJ at a place called Sally's II, which was on 43rd Street in the lounge of the Carter Hotel, and at that time 42nd Street was really the centre of the Midtown district and it was almost all sex work and sex shops, porn theatres, things like this, and Sally's was a transsexual sex worker club. So most of the girls there were Latina and African American and then Sally was Puerto Rican. The name of her house was the House of Magic — Sally Maggio was the owner's name — and a lot of the johns were really mixed ethnicity and background, really from everywhere, most of them it a more kind of straight-identified guys who wanted sex with transsexuals as opposed to gay men having sex with gay men kind of scene, and in that way it was much more of a kind of queered scene which also resonated with the kind of queerness that I grew up with in Missouri and Minnesota, where it was more of this rural, closeted kind of thing and sex between men wasn't necessarily about to self-actualize out loud and proud gay-identified people — maybe one was out, maybe neither, that sort of thing. So closets have always been part of my sense of queerness and also continue to be part of my strategies for working through those issues, and also a kind of foundation for my critical rejection of the corporate-laden, Pride-based movements that are so fundamental to dominant LGBT organising. So anyway, yeah, the Midtown scene with Sally's. It was, like I said, a straight-up sex scene and what happened was then gentrification was really happening and Disney came in and basically bought up the 42nd Street district and as a result then, of course, they shut down all of the sex industry in the area and they also wielded tremendous power. You could tell because they had like... once they had kind of finalised the purchase, they had a Disney

World-style electric parade down the street and they actually... the city allowed them to turn off all the city lights and everything so that the only lights were these you know kind of well-lit floats, like the electric parades at Disney World, blah, blah. And it was really amazing having been someone who was involved in some activist work with ACT-UP New York (the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), and also Women's Health Action and Mobilization, or WHAM, which was a women's health and abortion rights group. From the activist and social organising side, of course, the restrictions placed against activists, and in terms of, like, what you were and weren't allowed to do in terms of disrupting the city and all these sorts of things were... there were all these really intense, strict regulations that, of course, were meant to obfuscate and block you from doing any sorts of actions or organising, but of course, in classic fashion, you know, when a huge mega conglomerate like Disney comes in, they're allowed to break every fire code in the city by just turning off all the lights at night and things like this. So it was really a grotesque level of gentrification going on and, of course, as a result of that scene, the sex work scene and all the clubs and everything being shut down, that also meant that a lot of the queens that went to Sally's, and also for the other venues and things in the area that weren't necessarily trans clubs or anything but just other sex work areas and stuff... people were basically forced to go elsewhere and it was basically like people who had spent years together, forming networks and helping each other in terms of understanding which hormonal therapies worked or didn't work, sharing information on doctors and procedures, also just protecting each other, and things were suddenly, you know, like disbanded in a way and kicked out of the city. I knew some of the girls moved upstate and others went to New Jersey, others moved back down south to family they had down south and different states and things. So it was, yeah, it really was the demolishing of not only a neighbourhood but of social networks and, for some people, community. Yeah, so that's kind of what happened there. That was probably around 1995, between '93 and '95, I guess, that Disney managed to make that purchase.

My residency at Sally's ended in probably early 1992, I want to say, if my chronology is right, either '91 or '92. I was fired for not playing a Gloria Estefan record for one of the rich johns that had requested it. So that was how that ended.

[Audio: Ricardo. "High Flyer (Angel Mix)" from *High Flyer*. Vibraphone (1992/2019)]

Sally's was quite a special place because it was an intergenerational, transgendered scene, but it was highly essentialist transsexual. So a person like myself who was a non-transitioning drag queen, essentially; really I had to closet my transgenderism from the girls in the club because they were just really brutal towards non-transitioning people. Even back then, of course, when you mentioned transgenderism, most people jump to the conclusion that you were talking about transsexuals, despite transgenderism being a broader umbrella category that can include all different types of gender non-conformity and gender variance.

So anyway, at Sally's, though, in this scene there were first-wave transsexuals, people who were at that time in their late fifties, going on sixty, who had their operations in the late sixties, early seventies. You could see the long-term effects on the body of those procedures and also the hormones and things. Also, you

could see how economics were a big factor, and this is especially true in the United States, where we will never have socialised medicine for all. It's always a struggle against extremely expensive healthcare systems there. So the drug dealer, like you know the coke dealer in the club, he was also the supplier for hormones and things like this, which is something that maybe you wouldn't experience in most normal, you know, non-trans clubs or something. But then, but also you know, as a result of that, you saw like when some of the girls had money they'd buy some hormones, but then when they were down on money, they'd end up selling some of their hormones to some of the other girls for cheap — just for quick cash — and then those girls who bought it would take it, but then they'd be deregulated because they were only taking these partial doses. Meanwhile, the girls who had originally bought a proper dose from the drug dealer, then they had just sold half of it so now they were going to be deregulated.

And so it was really a sad situation, with a lot of hormonally deregulated bodies struggling against homelessness and a lack of healthcare, a lack of mental healthcare, a lack of all kinds of social networks. Disownment from families was extremely frequent, violence from some of the johns was also an ongoing problem, etc. At that time I guess I was 21 or 22, so for me it was really the time when I made clear decisions that transitioning was not for me and I'm really appreciative of that experience giving me the kind of material grounding to make that decision, not out of any kind of affect or feeling, but about really witnessing material conditions and making a pragmatic judgment about the long term implications of financial burdens, etc, health risks etc, all those things. But so, as I mentioned before, when Disney shut everything down and everybody became dispersed, that kind of networking of people sharing which doctors, which drugs, which therapies etc. worked... that network was lost.

Japan and the Morality Code

We're jumping subjects here. That was kind of something that was also paralleled here in Japan, maybe about 10 years ago, with the *Fūeihō* or morality code, restrictions that were starting to be enforced on nightclubs here in Japan that were basically enacting long-standing laws that prohibited dancing after midnight. And these laws existed in Japan since 1947 as a reaction — it was like a post-war legislation that was related to dance halls being one of the main places where American GIs used to pick up sex workers in Japan. So nightclubs fell under the jurisdiction of the morality codes that also largely were meant to regulate sex work and these sorts of things. Most people became aware of the *Fūeihō* code around 2012 when there were the shutdowns in clubs like Noon in Osaka, which is the club where I have my regular *Deeperama* events, but the club successfully sued the government in response to those closures, although the results of those lawsuits really didn't resolve the core problems for small clubs here. But anyway, 10 years before the whole club stuff happened, the police had really done large crackdowns on the brothels in Japan and they also enacted a similar disruption and created a kind of sex work diaspora throughout the country by dismantling these places where basically sex workers were working together and able to share information and also other certain types of safety that can come in numbers and those sorts of things. And, as a result, what had happened was that this was, you know, in the early 2000s; a lot of the girls started switching towards making appointments with johns and stuff online and just freelancing it and meeting them at love hotels here.

Love hotels are a kind of cheap, by the hour hotel system here that's made for affairs and things like that. And as a result, huge incidents of violence against sex workers — rape, people being unpaid, etc — these things just skyrocketed in the 10 years before the dance club scene started getting all upset about not being able to dance all night. So when the dance clubs had problems they had enough money and financial and economic sway and political sway to open up the law for revision and investigation. And it was a multi-year process that was basically aimed so that, like, when the 2020 Olympics came around, basically the mega clubs wanted to be able to ensure that tourists were able to party all night. And the main drivers behind the “Let's Dance” movement, which is what it was called here. Salary men who were just basically saying, like, “hey, we work hard all week, so we want to party on the weekend and we're good people. Don't lump us in with the sex workers and all these other people that the morality code covers. You should write us out of the morality code. We're not those bad people; we're upright, good citizens”, and that was a point for me where I really disconnected from the Japanese club scene and really had some unpleasant discussions with organisers and club owners and stuff here, the larger clubs, because they really did want to just get away from the image of sex work. Of course, also issues with Yakuza, kind of mafia, things like that, but it was all fuelled by this incredibly bourgeois morality that is also something that we see at the heteronormative core of morality that is also at the centre of a lot of LGBT mainstream movements today as well. In all of these things, what we find, decades apart, is that the world is still operating in this way, where sex work is something that is penalised, brutalised, people being arrested, turned into diaspora and completely unsupported by a culture that claims to be about nurturing and caring, as if those are the core family values as well. And the relationship to nightclubs with these morality codes and with the upholding of heteronormative, mainstream, dominant culture ethos, with the idea... while at the same time upholding this nostalgic vision that clubs are carrying forward the torch of all the underground movements from the '80s or even starting with the '60s and '70s and disco and all these things; it's such a fallacy that these torches are being carried at all; it's all an affront. And I guess that kind of ties into the album *Midtown 120 Blues*, which is a critique on the commodification and gentrification of the house scene and stuff.

And one of the important dynamics of that album is that it is also a self-commentary on myself as a DJ who used to be a DJ in trans clubs in New York. At the time that album was made I hadn't really broken as a DJ in Europe. So I was a DJ in Japan playing for relatively asexual dance floors and questioning my own role and position simply by continuing to exist in this marketplace and also, of course, it being a kind of... also pointing a critical finger at Mule Musiq, who had requested that I make an album for them and which I kind of saw as one of the main labels that was gaining traction in Europe, as being one of the proponents of that contemporary house revival, even though I think I would categorise the majority of their catalogue as techno music. So that was not only speaking about incidents in the past but also having the process of remembering and storytelling and retelling in the present under today's conditions. That's also always a part of my work, so it's never about a romanticisation of the past. It's more about the problems of history within contemporary contexts and how can you construct histories that actually can challenge and resist certain forms of heteronormative homogenisation that globalist capitalism always brings to every marketplace.

[Audio: DJ Sprinkles. "Sisters, I Don't Know What This World Is Coming To" from *Midtown 120 Blues*. Comatonse (2009)]

Using Sound in a Politically Strategic Way

I was talking a little bit earlier about my work with ACT-UP in New York and AIDS organising and things, and one of my comrades-at-arms, you could say, Dont Rhine from Ultra-Red, said something that had a very deep impact on me when we first met and he was talking about how the HIV and AIDS activism of the late '80s generate a huge proliferation of graphic languages for speaking around direct action and to be used in direct action strategies. And yet when it came to sonic things, we were just left with "Hey, hey, ho, ho, homophobia's got to go". Nothing more sophisticated than like some kind of lame rhyme that you could chant.

And of course for Dont and myself, we both thought of our work in electroacoustic music and audio production as related to histories of materialism, histories of Marxism, histories of Constructivism, as opposed to the ways in which I think most contemporary electronic musicians would trace back their roots through the paths of Futurism; Futurism basically being the sonic language of fascism and the official music and sound strategy of fascist Italy for how many decades and actually developed by militarily active fascists. So Constructivism was basically the kind of socialist Marxist counterpoint to Futurism.

But anyway, for Dont and I we valued this materialist socialist history and thought about it as really fuelling our interest in electronic and especially ambient music, not in the spiritual, new agey sense which really dominated the US culture and marketplace in which he and I both came from. We rejected that staunchly and thought more about ambient as something that emphasises the sounds of the periphery. And this also kind of related to a Jacques Attali quote from *Noise*: "if music is a kind of sonic expression of the dominant power structures in a society, what is defined as noise can represent the periphery or has a kind of metaphorical association with the social periphery". And we took that to heart and in our fixations with working with ambient music and tape music, electroacoustic and things like that, it was also a rejection of the history of electroacoustic music, the kind of French academic electroacoustic that I think most Europeans and British people think of as well. So when I say "electroacoustic" maybe I'm coming again a little more from an American usage of the term that has the potential to be counter-institutional. That was part of the ways in which we were drawn to those, and that I was drawn to that sort of sound composition as a means of presenting audio analyses, basically trying to contribute to audio discourse as opposed to simply making music.

And this is something that I've always been very aware... that music, even much more so than in the visual arts, really doesn't want producers and musicians to have a coherent analysis of what their process or work is about. It very much has to come down to affect, feeling, soul, these very essentialist, ephemeral, kind of humanist, universalist terms that tap into these fallacies of the universal human experience, the universal human condition, all of which erases and alienates us from any sort of grasp of the material differences that truly do affect our lives and our relationships to power and violence. But for me, at the same time, this has never been about a hope that these, or a belief,

that these strategies could actually garner results or the desired results. To the contrary, coming from this college background of the visual arts; during my studies in the arts, you know, I was exposed to a lot of these critiques of art institutions going back a hundred years or more. Things like George Grosz's the *Art Scab* and "Der Kunstlump", the Constructivist manifestos, these sorts of things that were really well-spoken and precise analyses of the cultural problems, economic problems, etc., surrounding the emergence of museums and galleries towards the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. And those critiques really did still resonate with the New York marketplace and art world that I was studying under in the late '80s and continue to do so today. But the thing was that by the late '80s all of my classmates and everybody kind of read these same texts and was familiar with the arguments. Everybody was familiar with, certainly Americans, people like Andy Warhol and his rejection of authenticity and originality by starting out doing his prints of newspaper articles and photos from magazines and newspapers and then doing unauthorised prints of Brillo logos, Coca-Cola logos, corporate logos. And the irony of all of that knowledge comes out when you realise that the Warhol Foundation will sue you immediately for reprinting an Andy Warhol print which is an unauthorised replication of a corporate logo or something, right. So the art industry, I got so sick of it and left it, precisely because I saw that all of these critiques were known, circulating and yet it was completely business as usual. I decided to then take those critiques, the same critiques, and start performing them in the audio marketplace, not out of a hope that this new location could somehow breathe life back into these critiques, but actually to further demonstrate the impossibility of them taking hold. If you can't tell, I'm a nihilist at heart.

So it was very much about, for example, like even people who were very in the arts, aware of the kind of critiques of authenticity and all these things, could at the same time be very quickly seduced by something like the authenticity of the blues musician or something like this. So we can see that music functions in a very different way from visual arts in a way that is even more seductive and makes these politically grounded, socially grounded attempts to use sound as discourse all the more impossible. As critical discourse, you know. The best you can get for most people is something in the lyrics, like I mean to go away with, something like Bob Dylan style. You know what I mean? It's like "oh, it's a song singing about such and such". There's no sense for people on how to actually use sound in a politically strategic way.

[Audio: K-S.H.E. "Hobo Train" from *Routes not Roots*. Comatonse (2006)]

The Constrictions of Morality and the Need for an Anti-utopian Historical Materialism

My interest in Marx initially started before I actually read any of his work as a child. I was growing up, again, as I said, in a very religious, conservative, right-wing, rural Midwestern area and, of course, these right-wing, fanatical American people are always giving you these crazy synopses of what Marxism is about, what socialism is about and in their world, in terms of how they see it as a threat to their way of life, a threat to their faith, a threat to their marketplace, etc. And one of the things that always fascinated me was this idea of people who were openly atheist, and this was something that was not really allowed where I grew up, and so that was kind of a starting point. And also I

was always struck by the irony of how the anti-socialist, right-wing, crazy people that thought that they were really defending America's right to freedom were the first people to censor people, the first ones to claim that they're for free speech, but the first ones actually censor people, etc. We can see in the United States that, in this weird kind of dance that the Democrats and Republicans do throughout history, where they keep kind of flipping sides between who's Right and who's Left and that sort of thing. The Republicans are still Right and the Democrats have become a kind of right of centre that within the American framework is perceived as radically socialist Left, but they're still completely right of centre. But in their little kind of Tweedledee, Tweedledum dance that they do, we can see that now there's been an interesting flip happening, where the Right is coming out as suddenly being interested in free speech, whereas the liberal Left is advocating for a lot of censorship in the name of protection, which again ties into these morality code issues and things that I was talking about earlier.

Getting back to Marx, I first read Marx during my first year in college — everybody had to read *The Communist Manifesto* — and it made a lot of sense. It made a lot of sense with a lot of ideas that I had already previously been exposed to in different ways through music subculture. I mean, I grew up in a family of misfits where my older brother was a punk. I was a new age, not new age, new wave, god forbid I was new age! I was a new wave fag punk and into techno-pop, and my little brother was the kind of punk going into the grateful dead kind of hippie culture and stuff. So you know, I grew up with quite a range of political themes through music I was exposed to in my elementary school and through high school years. So it was nice to actually read Marx and have some of those ideas put into a clearer framework.

The thing that always threw me about Marx was, of course, the idealism, the utopianism, this teleological... the fact that he hadn't gotten himself quite out of a teleological mindset, so he saw things on a path of progress, and it's really important to note that, in his vision, even without a revolution, just given enough time capitalism will collapse and what will come in its place will be closer to the communist ideal that he tried to accelerate through the revolutionist movements.

The thing that I really loved about Marx, though, was the idea of historical materialism, and this was where he was really kind of stepping away from Hegel, and Hegel was stepping away from Kant — that student rejecting the teacher kind of thing — and I think Marx really arrived at the idea of historical materialism. That means not only what Hegel and Kant kind of inferred to as humanity constructing its own sense of history, but Marx was saying this was devoid of anything divine, which was part of the Kantian model, if I remember correctly — I might be wrong about this. And then also he was rejecting Hegel's fundamental idea that morality was also part of this. For Marx, he emphasised how morality was a social construction that emerged out of social relations and related to processes of ideological production that then sustained and replicated the power structures of the moment. And I think that model of history, this idea of historical materialism for me was all about stepping away from teleology.

And for those, by the way, who just don't know the word teleology, what it means is a path of progress. So, for example, like most people mistakenly think of Darwinian evolution and the idea of survival of the fittest. They think of that

mistakenly as being about progress, or the idea of a creature improving over time, improving itself, and Marx also carried this with the idea that society was evolving and that evolution was actually still on a trajectory of improvement. But when you get to the kind of core of Darwinian evolution, and also if you just take historical materialism for its base analytical functions, you can see that it's really not about betterment or morality or anything. It's just simply about what exists in the moment, in reaction to the moment, and that moment is of course already something that is imperfect and corrupted. So it's about these relations to power relations, to power structures and how cultures wish to sustain existing power dynamics, fundamentally, you could say through tradition and things.

And Marx had these wonderful rejections of religion; he had these wonderful rejections of ideology and superstition and things that went beyond rejecting religion, and that was all super important stuff to me and really helped lay a lot of groundwork for me and I've always carried that interest in historical materialism and understood the need to connect any sort of political analysis to a material condition, to a physical site, a material site, not to root it in emotion, feeling, not to root it in identity, because all of these things are actually influenced by our upbringing within power dynamics and so they're susceptible to the distortions of the needs of those power dynamics. And this is why I really have a strong rejection of the morality-laden, identity-driven LGBT agendas, the kind of Pride agendas, because they precisely make the mistake of claiming a proactive and inherently positive, inherently caring connection to the notion of morality and protecting people, when in fact we need to constantly question the construction of morals, the construction of ethos under any sort of social system, because we'll see that morality is also... of course, from looking at histories of sexual and gendered variance, morality has been the primary argument used to justify violence against people. So to take a kind of non-critical embrace of morality and the idea of presenting oneself as upright and as an upright citizen, as a good parent, as all these things, it doesn't mean that we aren't capable of not harming other people in the most atrocious ways that people accuse us of doing, but to unironically and naively think that claiming that kind of ethical morality, upstanding quality, is somehow not a betrayal of the very histories, of all the lessons we've learned about how morality functions as queer people, is just mind-boggling for me.

And so I think Marx is something that, in his take on historical materialism, allows me to constantly return to a social, material grounding of politics. The idea of identities as political sites, not as political essences that emerge from within, to always think of the self and the gut and the thing that you feel is most natural about you inside as probably the most suspect thing of all. That's incredibly important to me, and so that's why, yeah, when Marx... that's why I forgive Marx, not that he needs it! But when he moves on to his discussions about communism and utopias and all those things, it's all right, it's all right for people to... but that's also, we can see, that's the ludicrousness of dreams, that's the absurdity of hope, and this is also where I just kind of try to purge the language of hope and optimism and all of those things from my language, because I really find it's much more important to focus on thinking about and organising around what is no longer acceptable in the moment, rather than trying to ask future generations to organise around my dreams and hopes for what I think the world should be, when, of course, everything I think the world should be is completely fucked up by my own traumas and conditioning in this

shit world. So you have to kind of have the humility to understand that any dream that you hold is ridiculous and the best thing we can do for future generations, if you want to invoke that horrible, "won't somebody think of the children?" If you're really thinking about the children, you'll fucking leave your dreams out of it. Just deal with the nightmares of the present.

[Audio: Terre Thaemlitz. "This Closet is Made of Doors" from *Love for Sale. Taking Stock in our Pride*. Mille Plateaux (1999)]

Views from the Grand Central Hotel

One of the more recent things I did was a short film with Serge Garcia called *Grand Central Hotel* and the script is comprised of some improvised interviews that we did. But one of the things that constantly came up was my frustrations with the kind of institutionalisation of queer culture and especially in dominant education institutions, to the point that terms like queer and transgender really no longer serve the use value for me that they used to in my critiques, because they used to have a relation to, a kind of tension with the mainstream.

These days, queer has been so thoroughly co-opted by LGBT institutions that most people fail to even think of it as what it is, or what it was when it was first introduced into these kind of theoretical realms of the academia and stuff. It was a term of harassment. Queer, fag, these were the kind of typical two things that everybody growing up in the United States would have levelled at them, and it was basically like the same thing as African American communities reappropriating the word nigger. It's the same thing that the word queer was also a reappropriation. It had that connection to violence, harassment, discomfort, and it's interesting that one of those words still carries its connection to discomfort. The other one, queer, does not, and it's become also increasingly frustrating that within kind of queer academia this is also where you find some of the most absurd attempts to censor language.

And so it's a completely clueless amnesia to what actually was involved in the creation of something like a queer studies programme in the universities in the first place. Because back in the late '80s there were gay studies programmes, there were women's studies programmes, or feminist studies. That then transitioned into gender studies, gender being something that then opened up the discourse beyond womanist feminism into not only trans issues but also issues of masculinity and maleness and etc. Like that. In a similar way, queerness was an attempt by both activists and thinkers to open up the kind of gay, lesbian, bi dynamic, all of which revolved around binaries into something that spoke to sexuality in terms of shades of grey and the greys between straight and gay, between a hetero and homo. And there was a lot of institutional rejection of this idea of calling a programme Queer Studies and stuff. And so when these courses and studies programmes were named Queer Studies it really reflected a political moment and I'm afraid that that moment has been completely lost and forgotten, strategically, I'd say, to the point where now we see that mainstream politics and institutions are using queers as one of the primary vehicles to push forth dominant political agendas for censorship. Because it's much easier to sell a public on censorship when it looks like it's coming from the Left, when it looks like it's coming from liberals who are looking out to protect people rather than censorship just coming straight at you

like fucking fascism. You know, like “you can't say that” when it's framed, it's like “you can't say that because it's gonna hurt this and that and da-da-da”; this is like really the LGBT agenda being hijacked and co-opted for extremely conservative, pro-censorship agendas. And, of course, we shouldn't be surprised that this is primarily happening at the level of universities and academic institutions. This is also where we find that students are at what's called “the age of conversion”, which, in religious terms that's basically the age from — I think it's like from 16 to 20 or so — when people are basically most susceptible to conversion into new religions. I mean people like Mormons and those sorts of churches, the kind of conversion... Baptists and evangelical conversion-based churches. They developed those strategies a little different than Catholics, where you're just born into it, right, stuck with it whether you like it or not. So it is very much, I think, rooted in the American history of Evangelicalism, of these evangelical Christian cultures, even if we're not talking about Christian, active religious people themselves. I'm speaking to, as someone who grew up in the US, I'm speaking to the ways in which Evangelicalism permeates all layers of American culture, even the secular, even the atheistic.

So the fact that we see a kind of very strange moment in high morality-driven LGBT youth culture that is really being encouraged to go down the path of censorship and the idea of control for the sake of moral uprightness. This should be really upsetting to queers, but for the majority of us it's somehow not, and that is because, you know, we grow up infected with the same dreams for heteronormativity as everybody else. We just happen to have an antagonistic relationship to it that generates traumas and out of those traumas, the backlash is to try and if we have a chance to grab it, we'll go in even deeper, even more fanatically.

And that's also a kind of very evangelical moment; that's how also religions exploit people in suffering and we can find that these Queer Studies programmes I feel really are... you can see how their funding traces to Bill Gates and these sorts of people who have absolute, clear agendas that are not of interest to true social variance, let alone sexual and gender variance. And that's how we end up with all this hypercodification and you end up with this explosion of the pronouns, and all of this stuff that's about categorising, categorising, documenting, listing, you know, making everything go into a deeper and deeper bureaucratisation and categorisation, rather than thinking about the logical benefits of stepping away from legislation. Looking towards the histories of queer politics as a history of deregulation, as about trying to be no longer legislated as illegal, etc. One of the backlashes of these moments in the US right now is that, of course, we're seeing a reintroduction of more legislation that is kind of regulating where and when you can be transgendered in public, if there are children around you can't... and this is all mirroring laws that, for example, like the laws that were passed first in Saint Petersburg and then throughout Russia about 10 years ago or so, that were also the kind of anti-LGBT education laws and things. So all of this stuff is going to come back and kick us in the ass. It's already kicking us in the ass. So this is all kind of really something that I feel has gone so far and it's a real shame that LGBT has become part of the flags waving around nationalism. But I can only stress the fact that, despite that gender variance and sexual variance and taboos and what is rendered immoral, what is rendered as violent to the upright citizen and the family man and all this stuff is always going to exist and that in every step that

the dominant LGBT scenes take towards regulation and bureaucratising, creating all the lists of what is an acceptable LGBT person, what are the acceptable pronouns, what are the acceptable... what remains unacceptable in all of that is people who refuse to participate in the process of regulation, and that is where risk will always continue. That's where risk and struggle will always be taking place, and I think that, in my own interests, that is why if the language of transgenderism and queerness has become so in the servitude of those dominant, radically conservative agendas, there's a need to step away from that language or, if you do use it critically, contextualize it, as I have here, in order to then focus on what is that yet undefined space, and that is again taking us back to histories of the closet, taking us back to the history of that undefined, the hidden, that which is undocumented. All of these things of the closet that I've always been talking about for all these fucking years are right still at the core of everything that's happening right now, and I think that this is really important to locate in this specific political moment and to understand that critiques of Pride are reliant upon looking to these material histories of how closets have functioned for generations as means of self-defence, as means of protection, as means of covert organising, also as means of sexual release, as means of what has been deemed perversity for not conforming to heteronormative ambitions.

So that's where I'm at now, just at a place where language has failed. The language of queerness that has been at the centre of my work for decades has utterly failed. I mean, it's been a long process; I mean back in, what was it, 1997 or something when I did *Love for Sale*, or maybe no, that was like 2000 maybe, which was like a critique of the pink economy; I mean that's like a quarter of a century ago that I was already talking about how all these things had already failed. And, you know, it was in the early '90s when the queer nation phrase "We're here, we're queer, get used to it" used to carry the threat of our presence being something that normal people, the normative — when I say normal, of course, I'm using this in the gestural sense of majority — would have to be confronted by our open presence. But that was quickly replaced in the marketplace, even as early as the early '90s, by a sentiment where that really basically just boiled down to "We're here, we're just like you, don't worry about it".

And I think that's really been the centre of LGBT mainstream agendas for the last 30 years. This sentiment that it's not, "We're here, we're queer, get used to it, fuck you", it's "we're here, we're just like you, get used to it". So that's where we are. It's awful.

[Audio: K-S.H.E. vs Juzu aka Moochy. "Melancholy Dub" from *Spirits, Lose your Hold*. Comatonse (2006/2022)]