

# Nothing less than a euphoric melange

Interview by Max Dax  
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**Thomas Fehlmann, your remarkable career started with the formation of Palais Schaumburg: Looking back, how do you see that time today? It was your time as a student at HfBK—the Hamburg University of Fine Arts.**

Yes, I came from Switzerland to study art there. I was lucky enough to have Conrad Schnitzler as a guest professor at HfBK, and his contribution was building a music studio in his workshop where students could enroll to work under his supervision. Even though Holger Hiller wasn't yet a student at HfBK, Schnitzler's room somehow became the cell of initiation.

**That sounds like a small studio and work in an intimate setting.**

It was. Everything was very very simple. He had brought with him a small synthesizer, a delay, and a Revox tape recorder. My experiences there really set the way for me.

**Was Joseph Beuys' spirit palpable, since Conrad Schnitzler was a Beuys student?**

Beuys' spirit hadn't been that unfamiliar to me before since I met him a couple of times as a student, as a guest at HfBK as well as at the Academy of Arts in Düsseldorf where I went to see him. I also saw his performances and exhibitions in which he was always a strong presence. I particularly remember documenta 6 in 1977 where he held his Information Office every day from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. I went there a lot. You know, I really like that we're starting off this conversation by talking about Beuys, who was indeed a strong influence on me. Thanks to him, my interest in art turned into an understanding of life and art always going together. Of course back then, I only had questions and none of the answers. I had no idea what it was all about or where it would take me. In hindsight though, those questions standing between me and art were clearly driving me. This basic understanding of Beuys continues to have an effect on me to this day: The fact that questions can result in approaches possibly quite unlike the artist's original intention. They simply set something in motion. A couple of years ago I released an album on Kompakt titled "Honigpumpe" (Honey Pump), which was also the title of an installation by Beuys at that very documenta 6 pumping 150 liters of honey through a circulatory tubing system extending over several rooms.

**The Honey Pump! You actually saw it! As far as I know, the pump ran constantly throughout his discussions with various invitees from art and science and representatives from political groups. It is regarded as a prime example of his "extended definition of art".**

Exactly. And he also talked to the audience. It was his Information Office, after all. You can find cross references to Beuys here and there throughout my work. His Social Sculpture concept is essential in this context! Because of course, it could and should be applied to an "extended definition of music" as well.

**That's also an ever-recurring theme in the debate about electronic music and techno—or at least it should be. Techno in any case originated in Berlin and Detroit and not**

**anywhere else because those cities provided open spaces in an urban context where music could happen free of commercial motives. That's not far from Beuys' understanding of art. The term "Social Practice" can apply both to techno music and a type of art that's not intended to produce pictures for someone's wall but instead finds its basis in service to humankind.**

I'm very pleased to hear you say that, because I was somewhat disappointed that nobody seemed to relate to the title or cover when I released the album in 2007. They completely ignored the context, as if I'd just made up a title. I've always applied the concept of "Social Sculpture" to Ocean Club as well: The club without a fixed location that invariably worked with people and spaces, constantly building connections to new collaborators—be it on the radio, the Museum of Modern Art in Bonn, or at Tresor.

**I'm fascinated by the way Beuys indirectly influenced music. And I'm not even referring to his bizarre recording of "Sonne statt Reagan" ("Sun instead of Rain"), but to the fact that for instance Kraftwerk's Emil Schult was a Beuys student, and so was Conrad Schnitzler.**

Beuys as an impulse generator for ideas played an important role on several levels. I'm always a little shocked that Beuys seems to have become insignificant to the modern discourse. To me, he is and will always be an important inspiration.

**In other words: Palais Schaumburg grew on humus, or rather: honey which suggested early on that there should be no barriers between the disciplines, no barriers between art and music.**

Absolutely. Take the fact that the band sort of emerged from the Sigmar Polke class. There are only a few steps leading from Beuys via Schnitzler to Schaumburg. Walther Thielsch, who died far too young in 2011, was another regular at Schnitzler's workshop studio. He was important because he was the one to introduce me to his friend Holger Hiller. All of that happened, by the way, within a very short period of time, only two or three months. Holger Hiller wasn't even interested in art at the time, he was clearly a musician. He could even read music—unlike me, who had no prior musical knowledge at all. So we met and we complemented each other. Holger Hiller was in the process of putting together a band and was looking for really good musicians. Only the good musicians couldn't grasp his vision, so he gave up on that. The collaboration with Holger Hiller started almost accidentally. We had the same modular synthesizer, a Korg MS-20. That was nearly reason enough, everything else then just fell into place. At first we were a duo. We recorded our first single in our living room and entitled it "Rote Lichter/Macht mich glücklich wie nie"—and that was the beginning of the band Palais Schaumburg. The creative forcefield between us derived from me being a visual artist while he was a musician. That seemed to pique his interest. In any case, with me he came much closer to his very clear notion of music, and much more effortlessly than with the "real" musicians. And after he left Palais Schaumburg in 1982, he enrolled at HfBK and studied art.

**Were you aware back then that with the self-titled "Palais Schaumburg" you had produced an album that would have repercussions far into the future and would soon be considered a milestone in German music?**

How could we? Of course we didn't! The way it is when you do something of your own volition. Nothing was designed strategically but arose from the means we had to work with. Technically and artistically.

**But that's what Alfred Hilsberg claims, who released Palais Schaumburg's first two singles on his label ZickZack. He never tires of stating that the importance of Palais Schaumburg was evident to him from the very beginning.**

And I actually believe him. Alfred always supported us with no questions asked. He never tried to tell us what to do in any way. Nothing to complain about there. But as a band, particularly in recording the album, we had two other intellectual influences to consider: Ralf Hertwig, who still went to school, and Timo Blunck, who had just graduated. Both of them had nothing to do with art but wanted to work with us. We all liked each other and got along great, which made things a lot easier, as the band turned out to be stronger than our differences were, which, naturally, we had as well. And all of those elements combined made for an explosive mixture.

**There is a saying that every relevant band, especially one consisting of four members, can be reduced to cartoon characters with different traits. Does this apply to Palais Schaumburg, too?**

Sure! We had Timo Blunck the snob, art student Thomas Fehlmann, Holger Hiller the loner, and pop fan and hipster Ralf Hertwig. Although the term "hipster" used to mean something different then, its connotation was much more positive than it is today.

**Let's go one step further and move on from Palais Schaumburg to you. Not only did you work with Conrad Schnitzler and Holger Hiller, but also with Martin Kippenberger, in addition to Stephan Remmler and The Rainbirds. Not to mention The Orb. All this shows an open-mindedness that doesn't seem to distinguish between cool and uncool. Which leads to the simple question: Where do you get this kind of openness?**

I should point out that I never actually worked with Martin Kippenberger, though we did hang out together. I met him in Polke's class at HfBK as well—just like Albert Oehlen and Werner Büttner. Martin Kippenberger stood out primarily as an intent supporter of Palais Schaumburg. He was one of the few people to turn up at several shows in different cities during a tour. And that's also my last strong memory of Kippenberger, who passed away much too early in 1997. After our last tour, where we had a good deal of interaction this way, I only saw him peripherally, out of the corner of my eyes, so to speak, on occasions like exhibition openings—but we never again had such a close, intense connection as we did in Hamburg, at HfBK.

**Nevertheless: When you were consulting Stephan Remmler at the start of his spectacular solo career in 1986, Kippenberger did play an important role...**

I worked as an A&R consultant for the Hamburg label Phonogram for a while—Palais Schaumburg's label. But I remember my A&R time as a rather dark chapter in my personal history. Not that I had problems with my artists. But I wasn't very active as an artist myself during that interim, only brokered creativity for others—I sort of diverted my energies. I also witnessed and accompanied Katja Wingels' transformation to Katharina Franck as singer and head of The Rainbirds as A&R back then. I happened to hear her at a birthday party, singing and playing the acoustic guitar, and intuited: This is it! And then The Rainbirds' debut album immediately climbed to the top of the German charts. In that capacity I also consulted on Stephan Remmler's first two solo albums. To answer your question: In 1981, Martin Kippenberger ordered a series of paintings from movie poster artist Götz Valien which he then entitled "Lieber Maler, male mir" ("Dear painter, paint for

me”) and declared artistic principle. Those pieces are world famous today. I wasn't aware of it though when I hired the same Götz Valien in 1986 to paint the cover for Stephan Remmler's self-titled debut album. So I guess this 'Kippenberger connection' was more of a sign that certain ideas just lie in wait.

### **So what happened next? You said you were not happy with your work as A&R?**

Right. Towards the end of my consultancy I started getting the electronics into gear. I created and ran a sub-label for Phonogram named Teutonic Beats, which tried to give club music, that was growing like a weed in Germany as well as everywhere else, a platform. We didn't have anything like it at the time. On Teutonic Beats, Wolfgang Voigt, Moritz von Oswald, and Westbam released their first tracks. The label Low Spirit hadn't even been born yet. Phonogram's management however let me know soon that they didn't see a future for this early version of techno music and that they would like to let me take over the whole business and take it on a journey—preferably away from them. And that's how I met Alex Paterson, because he was A&R at EG Records in London. I was there when he started The Orb in 1988 and we were in close contact during that formative phase. So my interlude in music business did have profound consequences after all. Because The Orb was the start of a new life in electronic music for me. It's kind of schizo: On the one hand, I never liked the other side of the desk, but on the other hand, it got me where I am today.

### **Can you explain what you disliked so much about that "other side of the desk"?**

It had to do with a general mindset that didn't appreciate innovation as much as I thought they should. It was inherent in the system and infected my thoughts for a while. It became apparent to me soon though because going forward had always been my motor, my honey, my essence. I wanted to go back to being an explorer like I had been with Palais Schaumburg. Don't get me wrong: It's not about any of the artists I worked with during that time, and I know that all those gold and platinum records I have hidden in a closet somewhere are symbols of appreciation. But I just knew it wasn't the right thing for me to do. In 1988, the Goethe Institute invited me to Seoul, where I was one of many musicians to contribute music for an art disco. And I knew: This is finally a real challenge for me.

### **Because Seoul is exotic and smells different?**

Not quite. The disco was Germany's cultural contribution to the Olympic Games in Seoul. The Goethe Institute people thought that a new kind of German dance music should represent our country. That's how I came to be reunited with Moritz von Oswald and Ralf Hertwig in Seoul. Moritz had been part of Palais Schaumburg for a brief period during the last phase of the band.

### **If I may I interrupt you for a second: Moritz von Oswald is considered today to be one of the great pioneers in electronic music. Could you sense that enormous potential in him at the time?**

In this context I would like to tell a true story that hardly anybody knows. Palais Schaumburg's last album was supposed to be a completely instrumental rhythm-oriented record—if it had been up to us. But the label refused the finished album and sent us back to the studio to add lyrics and vocals. And we complied, which in hindsight was a huge mistake. We were working on our vision of an instrumental kind of dance music at the time, but they talked us out of it. I'm still angry that we didn't stand up for ourselves in this.

## **Why not release it now?**

Don't get me started. The recordings are gone. The masters tapes were used up in different types of edits, extended versions and stuff like that—the material had been rejected, after all. We didn't think we would have use for it anymore. There are no copies. Another 'lost album'. Historically speaking, it was exactly the time when NDW was brutally killed off. A lot of good things came to die back then.

## **So let's go back to the good things. Despite all setbacks, you did get a chance to impact electronic music—with The Orb. How did you and Alex click? How did you recognize each other?**

It took all but half an hour and was even more his doing than mine. Instead of the usual A&R conference room smalltalk, he took me out to the London Shoom Club my very first night and introduced me to his two best friends Jimmy Cauty and Youth. Especially Jimmy Cauty from The KLF really impressed me that night and we became friends instantly. After that night, I visited both Alex and Jimmy at home regularly. At the time I spent what seemed like 4/5 of my time in London and the rest in Berlin. I was considering moving to London all the way. In any case, Alex intended to release the Teutonic Beats compilation with new German music—with Gabi Delgado, Jörg Burger, Moritz von Oswald's project Marathon, and some of my music, among others. To promote it, we were planning to invite a wider selection of British press to West Berlin—and we did. The date of this summit turned out to be the exact weekend when the wall was opened. Now that's what I call good advertising! Those journalists didn't know what hit them. One of the singles from our compilation actually made it into the English Top 20 and even reached number 1 of the dance charts: "Movin'" by Moritz von Oswald's project Marathon. And after the wall came down, it was obvious that I would have to go back to Berlin, to a reunited Berlin. We knew this was going to be exciting, even though we couldn't imagine what was about to go down.

## **Berlin became the navel of the world overnight.**

Exactly. Alex had always had an affinity to Berlin. As roadie for Killing Joke he'd been to the Hansa Studios often, so he had already lived and worked in West Berlin for months at a time and taken a shine to the city. Naturally, he was very moved and grateful to be able to witness the wall falling so immediately—and in connection to the music that would be his and our future. To us, it was nothing less than a euphoric melange.

## **It has now been almost exactly 25 years since the wall came down...**

Moritz von Oswald moved from Hamburg to Berlin shortly before the fall of the wall and we restarted our collaboration—we worked intensely. We did a lovely LP with Billy McKenzie and started producing instrumental music. We then took an important trip to Detroit together where we had some good connections to the colleagues from Underground Resistance—or, to be more specific: Jeff Mills and „Mad“ Mike Banks. Mike introduced us to everybody and showed us the city through his eyes during the fortnight we spent in Detroit. We had already started working with Blake Baxter and also stayed at his place. Then we moved on to Juan Atkins and Eddie 'Flashin' Fowlkes. The results of these collaborations were released on Tresor Records, laying important groundwork for what was to come. The release documented our emotional bond as well as our own learning process.

## **What exactly did you learn in Detroit?**

That they are only human after all. Even in Detroit a good idea is essential, much more so than technical skills. We were once and for all past the time where you could claim: "As soon as we have the right machine, we can finally realize our ideas." The Detroiters really opened our eyes to that reality, but it also confirmed our suspicions. To be fair, it has to be said that technology changed radically and irreversibly during that dark time between 1984 and '88. While you still had to fork over several hundred Marks for one day in a studio in 1986, a reasonable investment now made it possible to own production resources and use them anytime, day or night. But above all else, we came home from our Detroit experience with more self-confidence, ready to make a new start. We knew there could be no more excuses and getting ahead was up to nobody but *us*. The motto was: Yes, we can. And we can do it right now.

## **How do you see the role of techno as a kind of musical Esperanto, an international language of music? Some even call it "the world's greatest youth movement".**

In a way, Techno meant equality. That was its greatest, most important quality. People in Detroit treated us Germans, us Europeans with a respect that knew no class distinction. The language barrier was forgotten, there was only the mixer as a central connection hub. We were international. The Detroiters were understood at Tresor Berlin, and so were we at Underground Resistance headquarters where we were always welcome.

## **How would you place The Orb in this context?**

In the beginning I co-wrote and produced only individual tracks. The turn of the decade was a euphoric time in my life strongly shaped by my perception of music and my music-related social environment. I enjoyed the music, I consumed it, I produced it. It went beyond all expectations, a regular trip. Every day Jimmy and Alex surprised me with new ideas. At that stage I was not yet part of the live band. The concept of those days involved Alex producing tracks with different collaborators and then developing an album from them. Alex was the link between those collaborations. After the second album, Alex and Kristian "Thrash" Weston, who had replaced Jimmy by then, asked me to join them as a permanent member, which meant from now on I would get to work on every track. That was in 1993/4. One year later we released the album "Orbus Terrarum" which established us in the States. Rolling Stone magazine praised it to the skies with five stars and gave The Orb years of touring through America, a success and impact we're still drawing on today. When we're touring in the U.S. we have an audience we couldn't dream of in Germany. Our American fans are loyal, numerous and as enthusiastic as ever. Recently someone told me backstage in San Diego: "Hey Thomas, I'd like to introduce you to three generations of The Orb fans! This is my father, and this is my son." We seem to have an audience that's growing fresh fans. I will never forget The Orb performing at Woodstock Festival 1994 on the main stage. I was standing at the edge of the stage—Carlos Santana to the left of me and Trent Reznor to the right. They were watching The Orb and grooving to the music.

## **It must have felt great to be so successful with the very first album you worked on in your new capacity.**

Of course! We were really pleased because The Orb had sort of created a new genre bringing electronic music from the club into the living room. It was completely unexpected and I still wouldn't say "Orbus Terrarum" was exactly easily accessible. It's an album the

listener needs to work on, it doesn't butter you up. That was something exceptional. So there you have it: Yes, we can.

### **Shortly before that, in 1994 The Orb had recorded an album with Robert Fripp.**

Right, although we didn't release it as The Orb but as the acronym FFWD—from "F"ripp, "F"ehlmann, "W"eston und "D"uncan Paterson, Alex' first name. That album is very, very important to me to this day because it was Fripp himself whose presence had once encouraged me to buy my Korg MS-20. And two weeks later I took it to Conrad Schnitzler. That was back in 1979: Fripp was in Hamburg to introduce his new Frippertronics technology he had developed with Brian Eno: a constellation of two tape recorders set up in a row that produced fascinating tape loops. Fripp used it to create layers of Guitar tracks so he could basically play with himself.

### **Did Fripp play at HfBK?**

At first he played at Goofy, a record store at Eppendorfer Baum. He played there for free. He stayed for a week and I got to look after him because my friends who worked for Polydor didn't have the time to be there around the clock. This way, I got to spend a lot of time with him. I asked him to present Frippertronics at HfBK as well. Fripp was incredibly open: He suggested Thursday at five, and he really did show up at HfBK that Thursday and played a two hour solo concert in the screening room—for free! That served as the initial spark for me: I wanted to actively work with music. For this, I even canceled a trip to Africa with my girlfriend and instead invested the money in my MS-20.

### **How was the reunion with Fripp in 1994?**

It was great. Spending time in the studio and recording an album with him was pure romance. Incidentally, Fripp says today that he considers "FFWD" to be the best collaborative album of his career. In that sense, those sessions completed a circle of goodness.

### **What is essential for a musical collaboration?**

It sounds self-evident, but the most important thing is listening to each other. One shouldn't be awestruck when a legendary musician like Robert Fripp enters the studio. It's important for the core to be intact. For The Orb this meant the connection between Alex, Kris and myself. We were always able to communicate telepathically. Alex has never rejected any of my suggestions. He is always constructive, always says: go. He lets things happen, adds something, listens and of course he brings in his own ideas. In those 25 years we've been working together he never acted differently. And that brings a deep calm not only to me, but to all of our collaborators who can sense that they're working with musicians acting together instead of against each other.

### **Adding a new element can deal a whole new hand. I'm referring to Lee "Scratch" Perry. Could you describe your collaboration with him?**

It was very hip indeed, having him out in the Uckermark, and a big surprise as well. We had agreed to work together for a week and expected with any luck to maybe get as much as four tracks out of it. We had prepared the beats for those imaginary four tracks. What we didn't expect was for those four tracks to be finished the first day. Lucky for us, Lee Perry is a notoriously late riser while we are early birds. This time shift gave us the chance

to produce new beats in the mornings while Lee Perry was still asleep. We had to work fast which made for pleasantly spontaneous, easygoing sounds. We probably would never have agreed to work this way, but in hindsight it turned out to be a stroke of luck. We just wanted to provide more material so we would be able to make full use of this great chance to work with the master. So our only standard was the fun factor: Does the beat kick enough, does it have enough meat to make up a track—and moving on. By day two we found ourselves in a kind of euphoric autopilot mode. We were constantly grinning cause it was nice to see that when jumping down a cliff we could indeed swim. After Lee was gone we took our time to finish the tracks and were utterly amazed to find we had completed 16 tracks.

**You have released a number of solo albums in your own name Thomas Fehlmann, working as an artist/producer as well as a remixer. Your solo work seems to take you much longer...**

Yes, and I do consider that to be core of my work, the phase of testing and honing production techniques. Alex has always encouraged me to pursue my own projects apart from The Orb. Which I don't take for granted. I've experienced competitive situations throughout my career, even with Palais Schaumburg, and it rather froze my creativity. Interestingly, I worked with Alex as The Orb at the same time as Moritz von Oswald and Mark Ernestus started Basic Channel. It was good timing because this way we could avoid any narcissistic collisions. Like me, he has experienced a liberation and has thrived splendidly. Only after certain barriers are overcome one can find their own musical style. And that is essential since we're all using the same equipment. That's the reason I entitled my first album on R&S in 1994 "Flow". And I've followed that narrative since. However, compared to my work with Alex, I proceed at a snail's pace when working on my own, much to my chagrin. But that's just the way it is.

**Can you describe your personal artistic style?**

It has a lot to do with the aforementioned flow, with patience and lucky coincidences. When you're riding your machine against the grain and you find out how much conventions suck—even your own—you come up with alternative methods. Then you take a look around and suddenly there is something. On the other hand, every machine has two to nine sounds I like so much I use them over and over again. And that can be one way of creating a continuity—you don't have to constantly reinvent the wheel. You can be lazy and reuse the same things, put them in a different context. And clearly a big part of my solo work is my playful meandering between different genres: There is the more dance-oriented club music, and then there's a more artsy, more ambient, more jazzy kind of music. I feel at home with listening music because breaking down borders has always been subject to my experiments. I may produce less hits this way, but I found out over the years that there is loyal audience for this kind of thing. Techno fans forget quickly if you don't feed them.

**Was there a moment when you suddenly recognized your own unique style?**

I guess it was more of a gradual process that began in the early nineties. Of course even with Palais Schaumburg I already contributed ideas that were clearly mine, but I was only one of four elements. It wasn't until I had to play all the parts that I found out a few things about myself. If I'd worked in a studio by myself in the eighties, I don't think I would have produced anything very interesting. The shift in technology played a big part. It was crucial for me to lose that somewhat inhibiting respect for the studio and instead surround myself

with machines on a daily basis. The studio itself is after all the greatest of instruments. It took me until the second half of the eighties to develop the kind of self-awareness necessary for forming a unique musical identity.

### **Do you as a musician consider the present to be a world of potential?**

A world of potential—I like that. But I'm not sure if I'd call it that. I've always designed and defined my path by differentiating. It started with Palais Schaumburg, leading from there via my choice of equipment by trial and error, the selection of gigs and going as far as maintaining loyalties even when things looked grim. In retrospect I can see some inconsistencies as well, but my choices were always meant for the long-run instead of "growth at any cost". For me, a central element of making music is letting things happen. Inventing. I've already mentioned the "happy accidents"—when I work alone, I always try to forget, turn off routine. Robert Fripp was the first one to give me that piece of advice: He once told me that practice is a good thing, but when you perform, you should forget everything. It didn't get it at first, but I could never forget it and it has stayed with me since. It's a kind of trance where a part of your rational thinking is switched off, because it's not like once you've found something you can endlessly reproduce it the same way. No, you have to search for and sometimes even recreate it from scratch. In that sense, I do experience my solitary work in the studio as a world of potential I can float through.

### **So everything is still wide open.**

Of course everything is open. And in case it hasn't become clear by now: I don't have a master plan and I love surprises. Doing a remix today and a collaboration tomorrow is a way of keeping me fresh and limber. But above all else playing live is not only crucial for my work but for my life. Exposing myself onstage and traveling the world this way answers contextual questions and, ideally, can work as a massage loosening hidden cramping. The question is: What is it you really want to do? This never-ending pleasure of finding new combinations, new ways of uniting the broken, the sexy and the beautiful. Moments like that, though sometimes lonely, help you stick with it and find a straighter path to your goal. There are, of course, waves of varying intensity, but the curiousness is still undaunted and echoes my insatiable urge to do something new...