

## ECHOES OF THE CLUB: AFFECTIVE MATERIALITY & VINYL RECORDS AS BOUNDARY OBJECTS

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Grand Öl & Mat, a fixture in Malmö's nightlife, is not easy to find. It does not announce itself from the street, sitting nestled two stories above a car park on a quiet avenue near Folkets Park, a 120-year-old public space in the centre of the city. A pool hall with a similarly understated façade occupies the space upstairs. This section of the street offers itself up to people who know what to look for, where they are going.

It is November 24, 2017, and it is the 7<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Too Cute to Puke (hereafter TCTP), a self-described 'strictly female-fronted dance party', founded by DJ and club arranger Daniel Novakovic. Eight women DJs will spin records, and two all-women Swedish punk bands will perform. We are here to mingle and dance with(in) the crowd. Using field recorders, we will also conduct impromptu, semi-structured interviews with willing guests and performers, and we have brought with us two MA students from the Media & Communication Studies programme at Malmö University who will film the evening. Our objective is to investigate the role the physical environment and its objects played in creating the specific affective atmosphere of the club, and also to create a material object that will keep the club evening alive (1).



Figure 1: Flyer for Too Cute to Puke's 7<sup>th</sup> anniversary party. Design: Daniel Novakovic.

### Imagining the Scene: On Affective Atmospheres & Affective Materiality

While affect is a notoriously challenging concept to pin down, it can be used to understand what happens in moments of encounter, not only between bodies but also through objects. Stewart (2007) describes it as ‘a kind of contact zone...more directly unpredictable than symbolic meanings’ (p. 3). As such, it can include many things alongside bodies: events, conditions, technologies, and experiences that take place together (ibid.). This ‘taking place’ cannot be mapped as something fixed, but rather must be understood, or felt, through ‘the actual lines of potential that a something coming together calls to mind and sets in motion...[as]the pressure points of events’ (ibid: 2). This coming together, according to Ahmed (2010), happens because affects are something ‘sticky’ that circulates not only via bodies, but also through objects. Affect is ‘what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects’ (Ahmed 2010a: 29). While Ahmed focuses on how one particular affect – happiness – circulates, we might substitute any other affect as something that can be ‘catchy...a kind of brimming over that exceeds what [we] encounter’ (2010b: 575). An object can carry an affect around and eventually become inextricably associated with that affect, a phenomenon that accounts for how social bonds are, at their core, sensational: if we are similarly oriented towards objects, we might be directed towards each other.

Ash (2015) argues that affect is not only relational (constituted through an encounter between two bodies, or a body and an object), but can be examined less anthropocentrically by paying attention to the capacities and properties intrinsic to non-human objects *before* their encounters with human bodies. Dealing specifically with sound, Ash argues for considering affects as material objects transmitted through their ‘perturbations’ (Bryant 2011) or selective encounters with other objects. Objects retain affect, but the specific affect produced in an encounter depends on the specific qualities of an object that emerge in its encounter with another object. These encounters – between objects or between objects and humans – produce affective atmospheres, those ‘feelings and moods that circulate through particular spaces’ (Ash 2013: 22). As we shake off our umbrellas and leave the rainy night behind for the warmth of the packed club, these ideas are forefront in our minds. What sorts of affective atmospheres and objects will we encounter, or perhaps be part of producing?

### Joy and Struggle: Too Cute to Puke’s 7th Anniversary Party

Grand consists of two main rooms. One holds the stage and dancefloor, which sits under a rotating light fixture adorned with paper vines and decorative birds. The larger room is bordered by a series of cozy booths along one side, bars at either end, and a middle lounge area set up with shag carpeting and retro furniture. The golden-orange lighting is warm and welcoming, the vibe straight out of a 70s film.

Decks have been set up in both rooms for the eight DJs on the bill. Each DJ or DJ team touts their own styles, ranging from old school country to indie to electronica, the common factor being that every song in rotation is performed by women musicians. Most of the DJs play vinyl. People dance in the lounge area, relax in booths, chat while waiting at the bar, and carefully navigate the crowd to deliver drinks to their friends. In the stage room, musical equipment is set up by the stage, awaiting the two bands playing that night. Before they go on, and between their sets, the dancefloor is a crush of bodies dancing and singing along to the DJs’ tunes.

The party's milieu is largely made up of women, dressed in such a way that they can be 'read' as part of the scene. Faux fur coats, vintage dresses, winged eyeliner, and carefully curated hairstyles (whether beehives or shaved heads) are in abundance, marking their wearers as connoisseurs of a particular aesthetic. This is particularly true of the evening's performers. However, many clubgoers can also be read as more mainstream and, similarly, the mix of ages is evident from the outset: teenage girls sit at the bar next to women in their 30s and 40s.



Figure 2: Band Katthem plays Too Cute to Puke's 7th anniversary party at Grand, Malmö. Photo: Daniel Novakovic.

During the night, bodies, sonic technologies, and sound itself mix, collide, and collaborate, creating an exuberance within the space of the club. Several clubgoers explicitly mention to us the atmosphere, which they describe as unusual, social, happy, and safe.

Cornelia, in her mid-20s, is sitting with two friends near the lounge area. She notes the novel mix of music which, in its embrace of both old and new sounds, is nevertheless grounded in an overall *feeling*:

I think the music is very joyful in a way that it's not usually in clubs... And it creates a kind of atmosphere that you don't see usually, and people are dancing spontaneously in a way that you don't see all the time... [It's] the rhythm of the music, I guess, and the energy it gives.

Several interviewees connect this joyful atmosphere to the DJs' practice and the material objects with which they work. Ellen, part of a trio sitting in the lounge, describes her excitement at finding a DJ she liked:

I think nine out of ten times it's a man DJing... and we really found a favourite DJ here tonight. We asked about her name so that we could at least go listen again because she was really, really good.

While Ellen and her friends tap into the affective atmosphere produced by how a DJ deployed vinyl records to create a specific mood in the club, other clubgoers link these objects to spaces beyond

the club. Ulrika, a TCTP regular, connects the male-dominated indie music scene to both her work as a creative, and to the record stores she and the DJs frequent.

...where I work, it's in advertising, and it's only men and I'm so tired of it, especially because I really love music and when I go to concerts or record stores, it's the same. When I go to my favourite record store, it's like me and maybe someone's girlfriend, and it's only men. It's like we discussed with the DJs playing tonight. They also said that you have to be really dedicated to find other stuff. They went to a record store in Malmö today and they said there's like only records by guys.

These reflections correspond to Novakovic's reasons for starting TCTP, and the potentials he saw in bringing 'girls to the front', to echo Bikini Kill's Kathleen Hanna:

The club's theme is to promote female-fronted music, to promote more girls and women to start DJ-ing and start their own clubs...The reasons I started the club, is that I was compiling a mixtape for a friend of mine like '77 punk, and she got it and she was like, 'There are only dudes on this.' And I was like, 'Yeah, you're right.' So I thought, well ok, I'm going to challenge myself because...it's kind of the same every time... [I'm going to] see if I can do a set with just female fronted [bands]. So I did it at a small bar, and that went really well. And then I started doing it at a place with a dance floor, and that went really well, so I started booking female friends, and they would play fantastic stuff, which like a dude would never play...I learnt so much.

### Vinyl Records as (Research/Scene) Archives: Affective Materiality and Boundary Objects

Vinyl records are material objects that collect the affective atmospheres of a community and the struggles at its heart: they can be deployed to produce affective atmospheres in the context of a club – to *sound* a feeling back to a community. As DJ Louise reflects on the importance on playing vinyl:

I am not going to exaggerate. There is a lot of nerdiness in relation to these genres. But I have to say: It does give a certain feeling. And if you compare the originals – I am not the nerd of nerds – but if you compare the sound, it is much, much better on the original recordings than on many reissues.

To better understand *how* vinyl records can produce and archive these affective atmospheres through many spaces and contexts; to what novel uses they may be put; and how they might signify the gender politics of the scene, which link the personal lives of its members *beyond* the club, it is helpful to consider them as boundary objects. Star (2010) theorizes boundary objects as inherently flexible, 'at once material and processual...[both shaped and shaped by] conventions of a community of practice' (p. 604-611). Ahmed (2014) has likewise written of affects as always in-process, the 'effect of surfacing, as an effect of the histories of contact between bodies, objects, and signs' (p. 86). Understanding vinyl records as affective material objects that both shape and are shaped by (human and non-human) actors affords human participants not just the capacity to fall into affective atmospheres, but, to push Ash's (2015) argument further, the *agency* to notice them, engage them, transmit them, and shape them, in the context of the club and also into the future.

With this agency comes the potential that different actors will *use* records differently, a perspective that opens up the possibility of using vinyl records beyond the communal (clubs,

record shops) or personal (homes) spaces related to a scene and its members. Indeed, this perspective allows space for the use and *production* of vinyl records beyond the scene entirely.



Figure 3: TCTP clubgoers embrace. Photo: Daniel Novakovic.

As Bartmanski and Woodward (2018) argue, music is not only about communication of sound: 'It is also an *experience* of objects and emplaced performance'; and captured on vinyl it becomes a conglomeration of tactile, haptic, visual, and even olfactory experiences (p. 173). Experiences of such objects can be quite fundamental. As a vinyl collector states in an interview study: Records are people too (Fernandes and Beverland 2019: 1164).

Scholars have discussed how this conglomeration functions through exploring sonic boundary objects in relation to podcasts (Cory and Boothby 2021), game music (Redecker 2022), music theory (Chow 2020) and digital music (Nowak and Whelan 2016). However, scant work exists on the vinyl record as such an object (2).

Our attempt was to *produce* a vinyl record as a boundary object that transmits a co-created affective atmosphere. Although literature exists regarding the circulation of sound archives between and amongst archivists, researchers, and communities (e.g., Brinkhurst 2012, Lobley 2012), the purpose here was to create not only a sonic archive, but an archive of the *feeling* of the night, to knit together the explicitly feminist ethos of TCTP with the sounds of its happening by deploying one of the objects central to the related scene.

Out of the roughly 60 minutes of audio material that we recorded, we selected clips, edited them together, and produced a vinyl 45 consisting of an 'A' side with clips from Swedish interviews with some of the DJs and with the TCTP founder Novakovic, and a 'B' side with clips from English interviews with participants at the club. The sleeve was designed by Novakovic, who selected

photos he felt expressed the party's feeling, and formatted these in a striking black-and-white palette reminiscent of iconic punk and indie records. One hundred copies were pressed.



Figure 4: Vinyl cover and record. Photo: Maria Hellström Reimer (3).

What stands out on the record is its ethnographic content. The voices are archived in physical form. But it is not only the voices that are present. The intensity of the evening is captured through the background noise from other visitors, and from the music played by the DJs. As such, it is a text that preserves not only the grain of the voice (Barthes 1984) but also, we might claim, the texture of the night – that joy and awe (and even cynicism) that gave it its shape and sound. The intimacy of the audio format communicates this feeling in a way a standard written research text could not possibly do, affording the scene a resonance, and the reader/listener an intimacy with the sound that is not bound by time or space (Lacey 2013). The recording also illuminates the role that interviewing at the club plays. There is a performative aspect in making the interviews while things are happening; the visitors formulate what they experience in a way they may not have been able to do the day after. As the young woman who ends the 'B' side reflects on the night:

we're both feminist, so we want females to be fronting everything, I feel. I just find it so empowering to see, especially the last band. Like I haven't seen them before, but I just feel so strongly about them all being girls. And it just makes me feel like I could do anything, and

I just wanna do everything, like seeing them I just like wanna start a band with all girls, or not men anyways. I want it all!

*QR Link: Vinyl video – Too Cute to Puke. Video by Maria Hellström Reimer.*

### The Release Party and the Afterlife of the Record

A club night does not normally leave any lasting physical traces. And yet, this time there was the vinyl. In the early days of March 2020, we threw a record release party with Novakovic at a small gallery in Malmö, where we gave away the record to attendees. The space was wallpapered with huge blowups of the photographs collaged on the album's cover, all taken by Novakovic himself. A DJ who spun at TCTP's anniversary party performed, and the place was just as packed as Grand had been on that night nearly two and a half years earlier. The night was a reprisal of the anniversary party – sonically, physically, and culturally similar – echoing its atmosphere through social interactions and music, with the actual echoes of the party distributed through the album itself. In retrospect, the echoes of this intimacy ring especially poignant in light of the fact that we were on the pandemic's doorstep and would be isolated from each other in various levels of restriction for the next two years.

With only 100 copies of the vinyl pressed, and most of them given away at the release party, this object might have taken on the patina of a collector's item, which one could argue did not connect the object to a particular local scene, but instead relegated it to the often gendered (male) practice of record collecting (Straw 1997, Maalsen & McLean 2018). We cannot either ascertain whom these sounds reached, or what effect they had, what inspirations or feelings they evoked, or what calls to action and community they led to.

That was, however, not the main point. Releasing a record means letting go. What happens afterwards is up to the users, who are free to make use of this boundary object in whichever ways they like. Maybe the record wound up on various turntables, creating memories of that evening and strengthening a community feeling during the COVID-19 pandemic, playing to the 'stickiness' of the affects and affective atmospheres accumulated in the object itself (Ahmed 2010). Maybe not. It opened up these possibilities, at least. And by distilling the evening's feelings to vinyl – with all its warmth, imperfection, and scratchiness – we imbricated ourselves in the communicative potentials of the research object, sonically doing what we typically do in our research and writing (that is, selecting for the most evocative moments). In this way, we were also part of the political and cultural work of TCTP, ensuring in a small way that its affective atmosphere (Ash 2015) would be carried into the future on the very material object that made this atmosphere possible in the first place.

We ourselves have listened and re-listened to the vinyl, remembering the feeling of being in the space of the anniversary party and the record release party. If we can count our own experiences of engaging the record as an object over the last two years, it has served as an archive tethering us to the sounds, people, and politics of not only a particular scene, but a particular *night*. The vinyl is a testament to a night during which the sounds and objects of a scene could not be co-opted or dominated by men, but rather were artfully wielded by women, to the delight and relief of



an appreciative crowd. The experience of holding the object, decorated in joyful images of the night, and listening to its sounds, provokes in us not only nostalgia, but a visceral memory of an atmosphere and scene to which we feel dedicated. It is our ethnographic research made public, material - an offering to a community that continues to push back, exuberantly, against the sexism that still encroaches on its liberation.

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## Endnotes

1. Thirteen clubgoers were interviewed over the course of the evening, some of them in small groups. To ensure their consent, we explained what we were doing, asked for verbal consent, and gave out cards with our contact information, in case they had follow-up questions. We had Novakovic's permission to record the night, and he also agreed to let us use his own photographs of the event for future exhibitions and publications. Interviews with visitors and Novakovic were conducted in English by Cory, interviews with DJs by Reimer in Swedish.

2. The extant work does not appear to use core theories on boundary objects (e.g., Star 2010, Star & Griesemer 1989). Instead, this work either does not cite any theory (e.g., Sarpong et al, 2016) or uses an institutional studies framework (e.g., Thompson 2018).

3. Record produced by Bo Reimer, mastered by Martin Hennel.

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