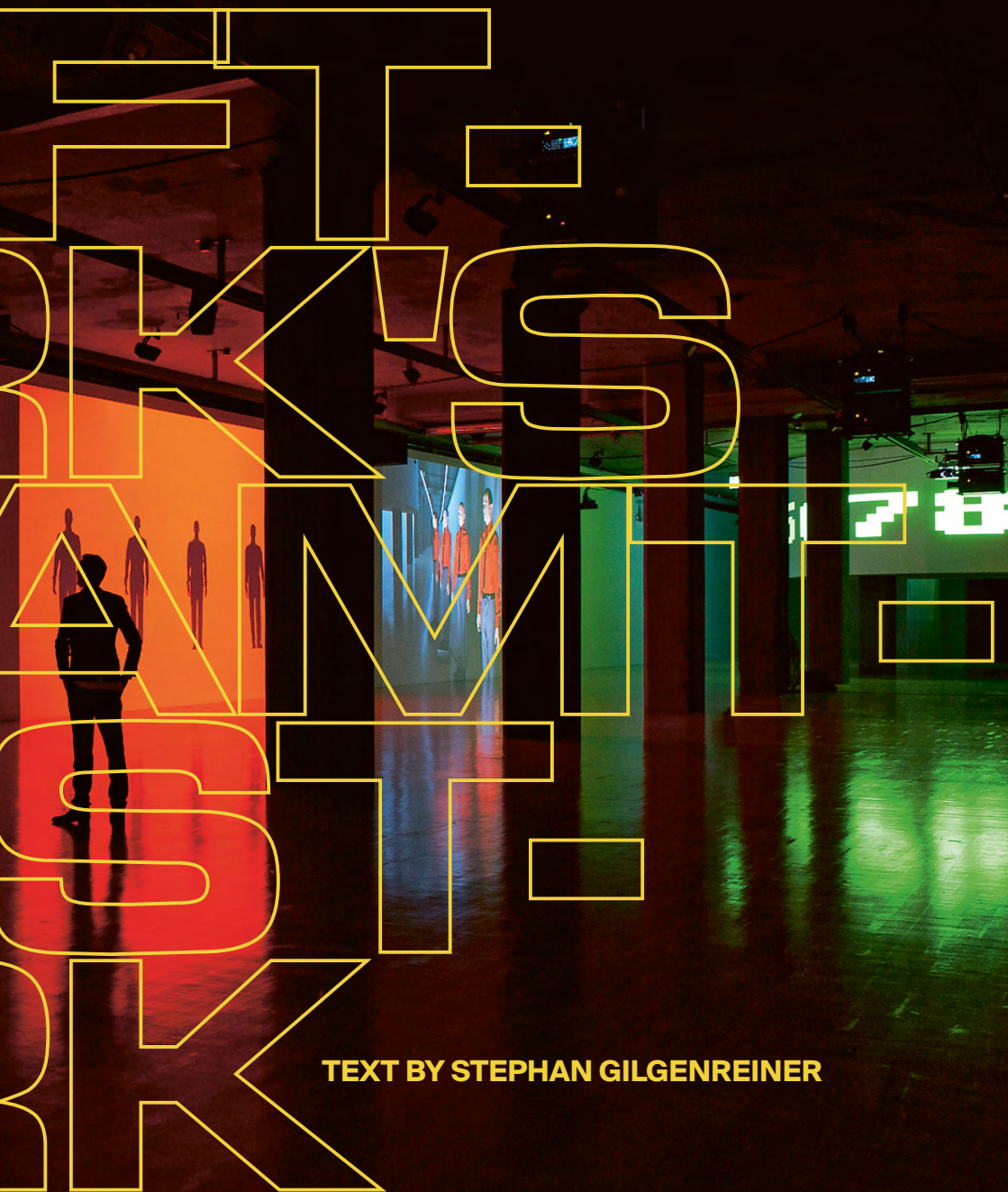




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3-D Video Installation
Installation view, Kunstbau Lenbachhaus, Munich, 2011
© Kraftwerk, Courtesy Kraftwerk and Sprüth Magers



TEXT BY STEPHAN GILGENREINER

In the summer of 1968, Ralf Hütter and Florian Schneider, the founders of the multimedia project Kraftwerk, met as young music students in Remscheid. They began making music together, initially under the name *Organisation zur Verwirklichung gemeinsamer Musikkonzepte*, or *Organisation* in short. In 1970, Ralf Hütter and Florian Schneider installed their *KlingKlang* Studio in Düsseldorf and composed and produced the first album for their electro project Kraftwerk.

Over the next decades Kraftwerk had a formative influence on global pop culture by dint of its innovative approach of conceptually transferring the then 'new' electronic music into the realm of pop music and thus creating a multimedia *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Due to Kraftwerk's cultural relevance, which has lasted for more than 50 years, it is in the interest of this essay to outline this conceptual approach of Ralf Hütter and Florian Schneider, which is largely responsible for it. In this sense I want to highlight two aspects of Kraftwerk's *Gesamtkunstwerk*:



(i) Born in the post-war period, which came with a German identity crisis but especially within a cultural vacuum, Kraftwerk's art is to be understood as a renegotiation of a (lost) cultural Germanness that is tied back to Weimar-culture and thus proposes a new cultural perspective. (ii) At the same time, however, Kraftwerk is always oriented towards a Pan-European future and all projects with a pro-to-futuristic relationship between man and machine. In this sense, a dense web of cultural retentions/protections can be identified which seeks a reflection of the present. This interpretation should open up a perspective that deconstructs Kraftwerk's pop-cultural heritage *qua* concept-art as a critical examination of current issues such as modernization-industrialization, digitalization, and the relationship between man and machine.

Industrielle Volksmusik

While the first three albums *Kraftwerk*, *Kraftwerk 2* and *Ralf & Florian* can still be classified as early experiments, Kraftwerk's album *Autobahn* (1974) marked a paradigm shift in German pop music

and the advent of electronic pop music: In order to understand this influential turning point, it is useful to reconstruct Kraftwerk's initial era as *industrielle Volksmusik*. In a 1992 interview, Hütter gave the following answer to the question of what Kraftwerk's original artistic idea was: "To create music that reflects the moods and sentiments of modern Germany. That's why we named our studio Kling-Klang [literally ding-dong], because those are typical German onomatopoetic words. We call our music *industrielle Volksmusik* from Germany". "We are music workers ...*Musik Arbeiter*"

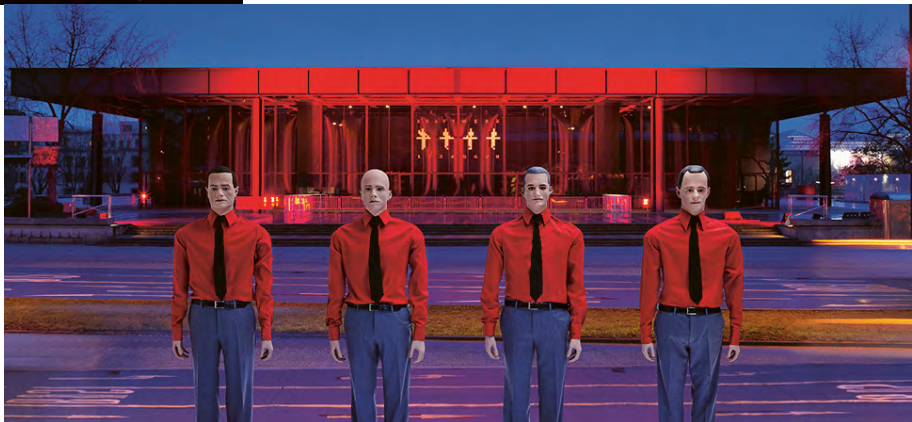
In the late 60s and early 70s Kraftwerk music was characterized by the thrust of creating an alternative to the dominant, commercial, Anglo-American rock/pop music. In contrast to other bands, however, Kraftwerk did not seek inspiration for this alternative in the cosmic (like the Berlin School, e.g. Tangerine Dream or Ash Ra Tempel), in foreign cultures (like Can, Agitation Free, Popol Vuh etc.), in a modernist cut-up technique (Faust) or in jazz (Embryo).



Instead, Hütter and Schneider focused on the technical aspects of everyday life and modern culture, in particular Joseph Beuys' art iteration, the Bauhaus school, and German Expressionism in film history. Within this background of this emphasized context, it now becomes understandable to what extent Kraftwerk's *œuvre* can be described as contemporary industrial electro music. Track titles of all Kraftwerk albums by Hütter and Schneider show this industriality: The titles originate (i.) from the field of electrical engineering: "Strom" (Current), "Wellenlänge" (Wavelength) or "Spule 4" (Coil 4); there are also (ii.) German onomatopoetic or compound words such as "Kling-Klang" (ding-dong), "Ruckzuck" (in a jiffy) or "Tongebirge" (Mountains of Sound); furthermore (iv.) the titles have a programmatic character: "Tanzmusik" (Dance Music) or "Heimatklänge" (Sounds of Home). In this sense, the '*industriell*' in *industrielle Volksmusik* does not refer directly to factories – even if the incorporation of industrial sounds and the self-designation of the Kraftwerk musicians as music workers does just that – but rather to the modern technology that makes



Kraftwerk, Spacelab, Radio City, New York, 2022, © Peter Boettcher
Courtesy Kraftwerk and Sprüth Magers



Kraftwerk, Roboter, Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin, 2015, © Peter Boettcher
Courtesy Kraftwerk and Sprüth Magers



Kraftwerk, Memphis Tennessee, USA Tour 2025
© Kraftwerk / Ralf Hütter,
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Kraftwerk, Ralf Robot
© Kraftwerk / Ralf Hütter
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Kraftwerk, 12345678 Zukunft, Kunstpalast Düsseldorf, 2021, © Peter Boettcher
Courtesy Kraftwerk and Sprüth Magers



Kraftwerk, Computerwelt, Karlsruhe, 2023, © Jürgen Rösner
Courtesy Kraftwerk and Sprüth Magers

the new music possible in the first place. The 22-minute track "Autobahn", for example, is therefore not only industrial because it captures the sound of cars on the Autobahn, the German highway, accompanied by the noise of wind and motors running, but also because it is produced electronically with synthesizers and tape machines and places this electronic style in the foreground.

The extent to which Kraftwerk's work can also be understood as industrial folk music becomes clear when one considers the romantic simplicity of their melodies. This applies to "Heimatlänge" or "Tanzmusik", but also to later tracks such as "Morgenspaziergang", "Schaufensterpuppen", or "Tour de France". These are simple, cold and at the same time of poignant warmth. Such a conception of folk music can also be associated with artists such as Johannes Brahms and Franz Schubert, who themselves transposed folk songs into art music (cf. Schubert's *Winterreise* or Brahms' *Hungarian Dances*). Kraftwerk dedicated a separate track to the latter on the album *Trans Europa Express*.

K R A F T W E R K



Kraftwerk's industrial, electronic music now represents the early impetus of the turning point in music history, which clearly shows itself in "Autobahn". Kraftwerk had a significant influence on the emergence of electro, house and techno, as this new electronic music with its industrial aesthetic found a breeding ground in Detroit in particular. Kraftwerk reached Techno father-figures such as Juan Atkins, Derrick May and Kevin Saunderson, and later Jeff Mills via "The Electrifying Mojo". Interestingly, this new, genuinely electronic music from Germany was a breath of fresh air, especially for the Black community. If you compare Kraftwerk's album *Trans Europa Express* and Juan Atkins' (Model 500) "No Ufo's", or later electro records such as those by Egyptian Lover, the parallels are obvious. However, the influence of Kraftwerk's idiomatic sound aesthetic has resulted in a broader and global musical landscape. Their influence on early hip hop culture specifically such as by Afrika Bambaataa and many other artists like David Bowie, Depeche Mode, New Order, U2,

Yellow Magic Orchestra, Giorgio Moroder, Daft Punk, Underworld, Aphex Twin, but also Jay-Z and Fergie, remark Kraftwerk as a clearly traceable inspiration worldwide.

Retro-futurism

With *Autobahn* as Kraftwerk's first clear attempt at a pop-cultural Gesamtkunstwerk, an aesthetic of retro-futurism also began to emerge. *Radio-Aktivität* (1975) and *Trans Europa Express* (1977) continued this tradition right up to *Die Mensch-Maschine* (1978), an album that is paradigmatic of Kraftwerk's typical retro-futurism, that is, the design and composition by Ralf Hütter, and of a retrospective style conceptually conceived into the future. The title of the album already focuses on the relationship between man and machine – a characteristic that runs through Kraftwerk's entire oeuvre, but is condensed on *Die Mensch-Maschine*. The album not only contains "Das Model" (The Model), Kraftwerk's biggest pop hit, but also the conceptually important song "Die Roboter" (The Robots), which touches



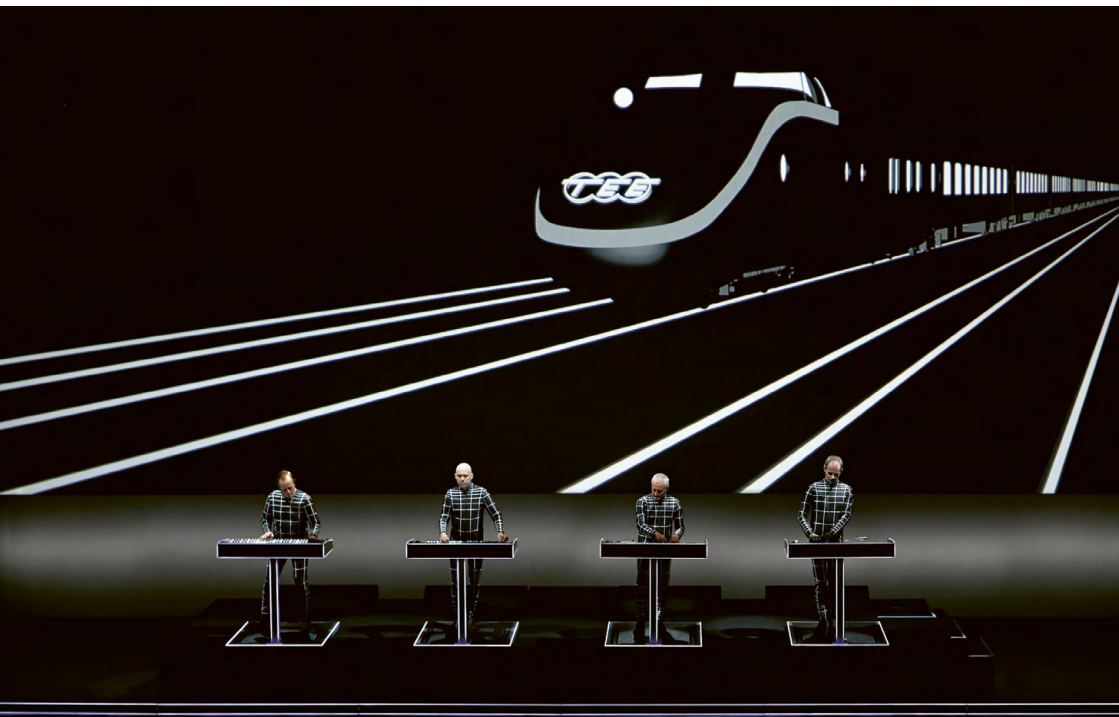
upon the doppelgänger dolls that have replaced the musicians for promo photos and album covers since 1981. The musicians repeatedly replaced themselves on stage with dolls or, in later years, with moving robots – questioning the image of man in the age of machines and computers. In this sense, the statement "Wir sind die Roboter" (*we are the robots*) can be applied to the dummy lookalikes as well as the real Kraftwerk performing musicians. The human being as a machine has been the subject of philosophical consideration since modern times, as it appeared to be a problem – based on the philosophy of the subject with René Descartes (1596–1650) and his foundation of knowledge (*cogito ergo sum*), to what extent other people can be recognized as people, as only the material body of other people and not the mind can be directly experienced. Kraftwerk indirectly addresses precisely this problem: The French translation of the album title refers directly to "L'Homme Machine" (1748), an influential treatise by the philosopher Julien Offray de La Mettrie,



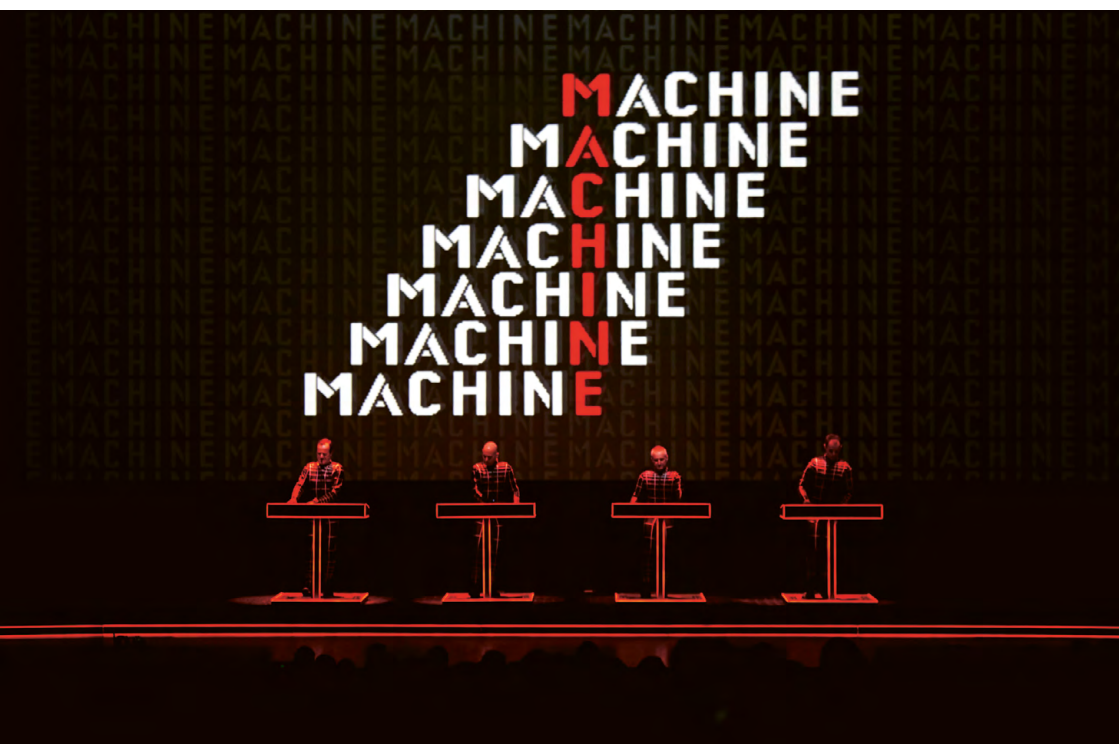
Kraftwerk, *Radio Activity*, 3-D Concert, Tate Modern, London, 2013, © Peter Boettcher, Courtesy Kraftwerk and Sprüth Magers



Kraftwerk, *Tour de France*, 3-D Concert, Foundation Louis Vuitton, Paris, 2014, © Peter Boettcher, Courtesy Kraftwerk and Sprüth Magers



Kraftwerk, *Trans Europe Express*, 3-D Concert, Akasaka Blitz, Tokyo, 2013, © Peter Boettcher, Courtesy Kraftwerk and Sprüth Magers

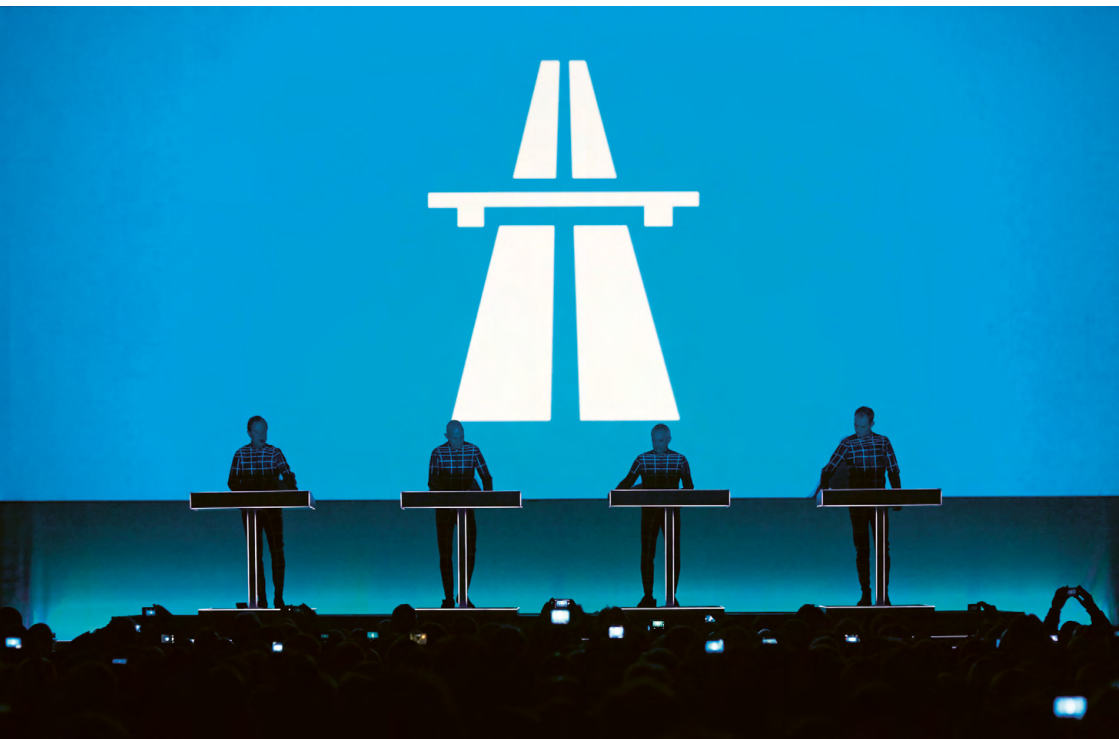


Kraftwerk, *The Man Machine*, 3-D Concert, Tate Modern, London, 2013, © Peter Boettcher, Courtesy Kraftwerk and Sprüth Magers

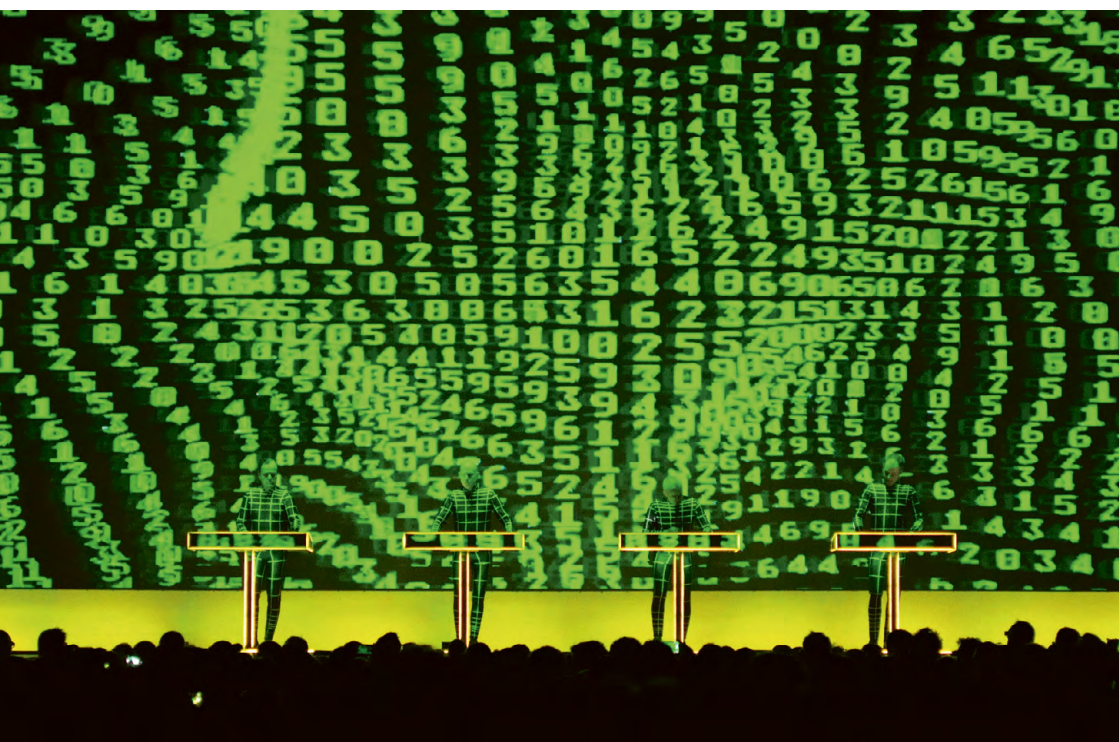
who advocates a radically materialistic thesis of the mind – and thus makes no distinction between man and machine. Man and machine are thus one – a motto whose critical incorporation is evident in Kraftwerk's art. Such thinking of man in the context of the machine age (up to the digital world) is of undiminished relevance. In Kraftwerk, this futurism is contrasted by a retro aesthetic, in which the colour scheme and the typography are reminiscent of Bauhaus and Russian Constructivism. The album cover and concept of *Die Mensch-Maschine*, which are both designed by Ralf Hütter, were highly influential in this regard (Raf Simons, for example, had his models walk as Kraftwerk doppelgangers in 1998): Now iconic, the cover shows the heavily made-up musicians as artificial humans/robots with pale faces, dressed in red shirts, black ties and black pants. It is clear that Kraftwerk incorporates the outlook into a vision of the future. Interestingly, this also undermines the naive technological euphoria that characterizes Silicon Valley. Kraftwerk's visionary project is therefore not just music of the future, but art that critically locates itself in its own time.

Kraftwerk's musealization

Kraftwerk's *Die Mensch-Maschine* (1978) was followed by *Computerwelt* (1981), *Electric Café / Techno Pop* (1986), *The Mix* (1991) and *Tour de France* (2003). Finally, in the new millennium and initiated in by Ralf Hütter, Kraftwerk began to canonize and curate their own music and visual art. A Kraftwerk concert has never been a pure concert, even since the 1970s it has been as already emphasized several times, an overall aesthetic multimedia product, a true Gesamtkunstwerk: The multimedia live performances became increasingly important, such as in Kraftwerk's "THE CATALOGUE 12345678" art exhibition at the MoMA. Hütter and Schneider were inspired by modernist avant-garde and contemporary pop art, which they came into contact with in their everyday life around the art academy scene in Düsseldorf – a city, which was definitely not a so-called music city. In particular, they adopted the strategy of subjecting their artistic ideas to conceptual principles. This strategy of artistic autonomy was particularly influenced by Andy Warhol, but also by Joseph Beuys, who taught in Düsseldorf and represented an expanded concept of art. Kraftwerk's late phase of The Kraftwerk Gesamtkunstwerk is represented and exhibited by Sprüth & Magers, next to their performances and their multimedia concerts in "THE CATALOGUE 12345678" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Sydney Opera House, the Burgtheater in Vienna, the Tate Modern in London, the Fondation Louis Vuitton in Paris: the Guggenheim in Bilbao, the Akasaka Blitz in Tokyo and Berlin's Neue Nationalgalerie. This musealization is noteworthy not as a testament to fame, but as the logical result of the multimedia Kraftwerk concept, created and thought through by Ralf Hütter and Florian Schneider from the very beginning.



Kraftwerk, *Autobahn*, 3-D Concert, Kunstsammlung NRW, Düsseldorf, 2013, © Peter Boettcher, Courtesy Kraftwerk and Sprüth Magers



Kraftwerk, *Computer World*, 3-D Concert, Neue Nationalgalerie, 2015, © Peter Boettcher, Courtesy Kraftwerk and Sprüth Magers

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