LABELS

Making Independent Music

Dominik Bartmanski
Ian Woodward

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LABELS

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Michael Bull, University of Sussex, UK

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DOMINIK BARTMAŃSKI

&

IAN WOODWARD

BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC

LONDON • NEW YORK • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

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Writing this book shares many similarities with the work of small independent music labels we describe – inspired and improvised, created in scant free time, with infinitesimal profit prospects and no designated budget, and 'with a little help from our friends'. It was in the making for over four years, a labour of love borne out of a commitment to understand a music scene worthy of this kind of recognition. Not unlike those who run independent labels, we approached and completed the task in the vein of what American sociologist Richard Sennett calls 'craftsmen'. According to him, this implies a few key dispositions such as first, 'not knowing quite what you are about when you begin', second 'placing positive value on contingency and constraint', and third, 'avoiding perfectionism, learning when it is time to stop'. This book bears the traces and marks of such an endeavour. Its creation has been imperfect and constrained in certain regards but alert to contingent serendipities of field research without which it could not fly. We had to stop work at a certain point knowing that much yet remains to be said. In this sense it is similar to our previous book, *Vinyl*, and can be seen as a kind of sequel to that work. Whereas the other book focused on the materiality and meaning of that iconic object, this volume investigates the social organizations and cultural frames that produce vinyl and other musical artefacts. What hasn't changed is that, then and now, we have worked with a sentiment expressed by Sennett that 'against the claim of perfection we can assert our own individuality, which gives distinctive character to the work we do'. Human character over generic perfection.

For Dominik, writing and researching *Labels* meant deepening both anthropological acumen and intimate understanding of the relevant music scenes and their hub, Berlin, the city he has called home for years now. He would like to thank all people listed below who agreed to be interviewed,

sometimes on repeated occasions, finding time in their busy schedules to share stories and facts of their life's work, some of which would perhaps not have surfaced otherwise, and without which this book simply would not be possible. Time and undivided attention are the ultimate gifts people can offer each other. Special gratitude on Dominik's part is due to Professor Martina Löw, with whom he works at Technische Universität in Berlin, for her full trust and indispensable institutional support over many years. Again, this book would not have been possible without it. For Ian, *Labels* has been another chance to work collaboratively in special, unique research settings where aesthetic practice links with moral outlooks and calculative economic practices. Key sociological ideas like trust, reciprocity and collective endeavour develop new meaning after completing this type of research. Ian would like to thank his research assistant, Joseph Bernasol, for transcribing the majority of interviews, as well as Katrine Høj Keseler and his research group at Syddansk Universitet for providing resources for meeting Dominik repeatedly in Berlin on fieldwork and writing excursions, as well as organizing a couple of joint workshops in Odense, Denmark. We are grateful to the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions on our manuscript. We would like to thank Martin Fuller from Technische Universität Berlin who provided written feedback on parts of the manuscript, as well as Robert Lutz and Timothy Pape – Dominik's university collaborator – for their professional photo/graphic assistance. Dominik would also like to thank his Brazilian friends, Viviane Riegel from Escola Superior de Propaganda e Marketing in São Paulo, who made interviews with Brazilian labels possible, and Pérola Mathias, music sociologist from Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, for her knowledge and support. We are also grateful to Bloomsbury Publishing for helping to bring our work to fruition once again. Needless to say, time-consuming as it was, this book would have been much harder to complete were it not for the forbearing understanding of Kathrin and Leanne. All who supported and trusted us, we thank you.

CAST OF INTERVIEWED CHARACTERS

	Interviewee* (alphabetical order)	Label	Label location	Interview data: Type of interaction, date, place	Interviewer**
1	Anonymous	Quintessentials	Undisclosed	Email exchanges in October 2015 & August 2018.	DB
2	Kai Alce	NDATL	Atlanta, USA	One-hour Skype interview on 15 October 2015.	DB
3	Amanda Brown	100% Silk	Los Angeles,	Two-hour Skype interview on 2 October 2015.	DB
4	Jenus Baumecker-Kahmke	Ostgut Ton / Unterton/ A-Ton	Berlin, Germany	Two-hour personal interview on 12 August 2015 at Berghain offices, Berlin.	DB & IW
5	Caio Beraldo	Somatoria do Barulho / Candonga	Sao Paulo, Brazil	Two-hour personal interview in the artist's private apartment in São Paulo in April 2015.	DB
6	Stephen Bishop	Opal Tapes / Black Opal	Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, UK	Email exchange in January 2016.	IW
7	Claas Brieler	Sonar Kollektiv Jazzanova	Berlin	Three personal interviews, each one hour long, on 29 September (cafe), and 5 and 9 of October 2015 in a cafe and private apartment, Berlin.	DB
8	Martijn Deijkers *aka* Martyn	3024	Rotterdam, Holland / Washington, DC	One-hour personal interview*** on 24 June 2017 in a hotel in Berlin, followed by email exchanges in July–August 2018.	DB
9	Lawrence English	Room 40	Brisbane, Australia	Email exchange in October 2015.	IW

10	Hauke Freer *aka* Session Victim	Retreat	Berlin	Two-hour personal interview on 25 September 2015 in a cafe in Berlin.	DB & IW
11	Tobias Freund	Non Standard Productions	Berlin	Two-hour personal interview ***, on 11 April 2018 in the artist's own Non Standard Studios in Tempelhof, Berlin.	DB
12	Dana Gerth *aka* DJ Dana Ruh	Brouqade & Polynom	Berlin	One-hour personal interview on 18 September at the artist's own Polynom Productions Studio in Kreuzberg, Berlin.	DB
13	Emeline Ginestet *aka* DJ Molly	Rex / Récit de Voyage	Paris, France	One-hour personal interview on 28 November 2015 in a hotel in Berlin.	DB
14	Konstantin Grismann aka Glenn Astro	Money $ex / Box aus Holz	Berlin	Two-hour personal interview on 9 November 2015 at OYE Record Store in Berlin.	DB
15	Max Graef	Money $ex / Box aus Holz	Berlin	Two-hour personal interview on 9 November 2015 at OYE Record Store in Berlin.	DB
16	Ryan Griffin	A Strangely Isolated Place	Los Angeles	Email exchange in March 2016.	IW
17	Rafal Grobel	S1 / Most	Warsaw, Poland	One-hour personal interview on 26 September 2015 in a cafe in Prenzlauer Berg, Berlin.	DB & IW
18	Jack Haighton	Hotflush	Berlin	One-hour personal interview on 26 August 2015 at OYE Kreuzkölln record store, Berlin.	DB
19	Matthieu Hebrard	Goma Gringa	Sao Paulo, Brazil	One-hour personal interview in April 2015, in a cafe in São Paulo, Brazil.	DB
20	Toby Heys	Audint	Manchester, UK	One-hour personal interview on 26 September 2015 in a hotel in Berlin.	DB & IW

	Interviewee* (alphabetical order)	**Label**	**Label location**	**Interview data: Type of interaction, date, place**	**Interviewer****
21	Felix Kubin	Gagarin	Hamburg, Germany	Two personal interviews in September 2015: first by DB following the Phono Festival, Odense, and the next in a hotel cafe in Hamburg, Germany.	DB & IW
22	Markus Lindner *aka* DJ Delfonic	Money $ex	Berlin	Two one-hour personal interviews on 9 November 2015 & 10 August 2018 *** OYE Record Store in Kreuzkölln.	DB
23	Edward MacKeithen *aka* DJ Jus-Ed	Underground Quality	Bridgeport, CT, USA/ Berlin	Two-hour personal interview on 31 August 2015 in a restaurant in Friedrichshain, Berlin.	DB
24	Marcus L	Ameniia / Faust	Seoul, South Korea	One-hour personal interview*** on 28 May 2018 at the office of the artist's own Faust Club, Seoul, South Korea.	DB
25	Jenifa Mayanja	BuMako	Bridgeport, CT / Berlin	90-minute Skype interview on 19 September 2015.	DB
26	Steve Mizek	Argot / Tasteful Nudes	Chicago, USA	Two-hour Skype interview on 20 October 2015.	DB
27	Luca Mortellaro *aka* Lucy	Stroboscopic Artefacts	Berlin	Two-hour personal interview on 1 September 2015 at Lucy's recording studio in Neukölln, Berlin.	DB
28	Ivan Napreenko	NEN Records	Moscow, Russia	Email exchange in February 2016.	IW
29	Peter Quicke	Ninja Tune	London, UK	Two-hour personal interview on 24 June 2016 at Ninja Tune headquarters, London.	DB
30	Monique Recknagel	Sonic Pieces	Berlin	One-hour personal interview on 28 September 2015 at the artist's private apartment/studio in Prenzlauer Berg, Berlin.	DB & IW

31	Yanneck Salvo *aka* Quarion	Retreat	Berlin	Two-hour personal interview on 25 September 2015 in a cafe in Neukölln in Berlin.	DB & IW
32	Alex Samuels	Ostgut Ton	Berlin	90-minute personal interview*** on 11 September 2018 at DB's apartment in Berlin.	DB
33	Kiran Sande	Blackest Ever Black	Berlin/London	Two-hour personal interview on 14 August 2015 in a cafe in Kreuzberg, Berlin.	DB & IW
34	Erik Skodvin	Miasmah	Berlin	One-hour personal interview on 28 September 2015 in the artist's private studio/ apartment in Prenzlauer Berg, Berlin.	DB & IW
35	Guy Sternberg	LowSwing Records	Berlin	Two-hour personal interview*** on 5 October 2018 in a cafe in Pankow, Berlin.	DB
36	John Talabot	Hivern Discs	Barcelona	Skype interview, 22 September 2015.	DB
37	Turtle Bugg	Basement Floor	Brooklyn, NY / Detroit, MI	One-hour personal interview on 28 September 2015, in a cafe in Kreuzberg, Berlin.	DB & IW
38	Veronica Vasicka	Minimal Wave / Cititrax	NYC, NY, USA	One-hour Skype interview on 25 November 2015.	DB
39	Frank Wiedemann	Innervisions	Berlin	Two-hour personal interview on 8 December 2015 at Innervisions headquarters in Kreuzberg, Berlin.	DB
40	Dario and Marco Zenker	Ilian Tape	Munich	Two one-hour Skype interviews on 8 and 13 October 2015.	DB

* Interviewees were either owners, managers or members of curatorial teams of the labels at the time of the interview. The interviewees received and authorized the cited interview excerpts.

** The interview preparation, design, conduct and recording by the stated interviewer (© DB – Dominik Bartmański; © IW – Ian Woodward). The interview preparation for interviews that were conducted by both authors: © DB for the following interviews: 4, 10, 17, 21, 31 and 37; and IW for interviews 20, 30, 33 and 34.

*** The interviews or interview excerpts were transcribed by © Dominik Bartmański. All other interviews were transcribed by Joseph Bernasol and Katrine Høj Keseler.

LIST OF FEATURED LABELS, THEIR OWNERS AND ARTISTS

	Labels (in the order presented above)	Active From	Owner	Among Featured Artists Are:
1	**Quintessentials**	2008	Anonymous	Vakula, Anton Zap, Borrowed Identity, Javonntte
2	**NDATL**	2008	Kai Alcé	Kai Alcé, Stefan Ringer
3	**100% Silk**	2011	Amanda Brown	Octo Octa, Fort Romeau, Cherushii, Maria Minerva
4	**Ostgut Ton** (with sublabels Unterton & A-Ton)	2005	Berghain Club, Berlin	Answer Code Request, Barker & Baumecker, Marcel Dettmann, Ben Klock, L.B. Dub Corp
5	**Somatoria do Barulho / Candonga**	2010/2014	Caio Baraldo	Wilson Simonal, YOka
6	**Opal Tapes / Black Opal**	2012/2015	Stephen Bishop	Huerco S., Tuff Sherm, Karen Gywer, Patricia
7	**Sonar Kollektiv**	1997	Jazzanova	Jazzanova, Ame
8	**3024**	2007	Martijn Deijkers	Martyn, Leon Vynehall, Trevino
9	**Room 40**	2000	Lawrence English	Lawrence English, Merzbow+HEXA-Achromatic, Norman Westberg, Mike Cooper
10	**Retreat**	2009	Yanneck Salvo + Hauke Freer	Quarion, Session Victim, Iron Curtis, Hunee
11	**Non Standard Productions**	2006	Tobias Freund	Margaret Dygas, Max Loderbauer, NSI
12	**Brouqade & Polynom**	2007	Dana Ruh	Dana Ruh, Danilo Schneider

	Labels (in the order presented above)	Active From	Owner	Among Featured Artists Are:
13	**Rex / Récit de Voyage (RDV Music)**	2015/2017	Rex Club, Paris	D'Julz, Trus'me, Phil Weeks, Electric Rescue
14	**Money $ex Records**	2015	Max Graef Delfonic, Glenn Astro	Max Graef, Glenn Astro, Christopher Rau
16	**A Strangely Isolated Place**	2008	Ryan Griffin	Markus Guentner, Lav & Purl, Leandro Fresco & Anton Rafel Irissari, Merrin Karras
17	**S1 Warsaw**	2012	Rafal Grobel	Eltron John, Linkwood
18	**Hotflush**	2003	Paul Rose	Scuba, Mount Kimbie, Sigha, Sepalcure, Jimmy Edgar, George Fitzgerald, Dense & Pika, Joy Orbison, Recondite, Locked Groove
19	**Goma Gringa Discos**	2013	Frédéric Thiphagne and Matthieu Hebrard	Metá Metá, Tribo Masahi
20	**AUDINT Records**	2014	Steve Goodman (Kode9), Toby Heys	AUDINT (Kode9, Toby Heys)
21	**Gagarin Records**	1998	Felix Kubin	Felix Kubin
22	**Underground Quality**	2005	Edward MacKeithen	Jus-Ed, Levon Vincent, Aybee, Dana Ruh
23	**Ameniia /Faust**	2014	Marcus L	Marcus L
24	**BuMako Recordings**	2007	Jenifa Mayanja	Jenifa Mayanja
25	**Argot / Tasteful Nudes**	2012/2013	Steve Mizek, Gianpaolo Dieli	The Black Madonna, Amir Alexander, Octo Octa, Savile
26	**Stroboscopic Artefacts**	2009	Luca Mortellaro (aka Lucy)	Lucy, Kangding Ray, Lakker, Chevel, Dadub, Rrose, Pfirter, Perc

	Labels (in the order presented above)	Active From	Owner	Among Featured Artists Are:
27	**NEN Records**	2015	Ivan Napreenko, Sal Solaris, Konstanin Mezer	Paul Begge, Sal Solaris
28	**Ninja Tune**	1990	Matt Black and Jonathan More (aka duo Coldcut)	Coldcut, Bonobo, Bicep, Peggy Gou, Helena Hauff, Machinedrum, Letherette, Amon Tobin, The Cinematic Orchestra, Skalpel
29	**Sonic Pieces**	2008	Monique Recknagel	Nils Frahm, Erik Skodvin
30	**Blackest Ever Black**	2010	Kiran Sande	Dalhous, Raime, Regis
31	**Miasmah**	2006	Erik K Skodvin	Clarice Jensen, Deaf Centre, Volcano the Bear, James Welburn
32	**LowSwing Records**	2017	Guy Sternberg	Lianne Hall, Port Almond
33	**Hivern Discs**	2008	Oriol Riverola	John Talabot, Pional, Benedikt Frey
34	**Basement Floor Records**	2013	Soul 2 Seoul	Steve Murphy, Floppy Life
35	**Minimal Wave / Cititrax**	2005/2008	Veronica Vasicka	Oppenheimer Analysis, Felix Kubin, Borusiade
36	**Innervisions**	2005	Steffen Berkhahn, Kristian Beyer, Frank Wiedemann	Ame, Dixon, Laurent Garnier, Recondite, Osunlade, David August, Ian Pooley
37	**Ilian Tape**	2007	Dario and Marco Zenker	Dario Zenker, Marco Zenker, The Zenker Brothers, Skee Mask, Stenny, Andrea

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dominik Bartmański earned his PhD in sociology at Yale University and works within the Institute of Sociology at Technische Universität Berlin, and as a research fellow at the Collaborative Research Center 'Re-Figuration of Spaces' in Berlin. He is interested in how cultural icons emerge and stay meaningful in the areas of music, science and urban design. He is co-editor of *Iconic Power: Materiality and Meaning in Social Life* (Palgrave, 2012), contributor to the volume *National Matters: Materiality, Culture, and Nationalism* (Stanford, 2017), and author of numerous peer-reviewed articles, most recently 'Reconstructing Berlin: Materiality and Meaning in the Symbolic Politics of Urban Space' (with Martin Fuller, *CITY*, 2018). With Ian Woodward, he is co-author of *Vinyl* (Bloomsbury, 2015).

Ian Woodward earned his PhD in sociology at the University of Queensland, Australia. He is Professor in Department of Marketing and Management at Syddansk Universitet, Denmark. A cultural sociologist, he has written extensively about material cultures and everyday cosmopolitan ethics. His books include *The Sociology of Cosmopolitanism* (with Gavin Kendall and

Zlatko Skrbiš, Palgrave, 2009), *The Festivalisation of Culture* (co-edited with Jodie Taylor and Andy Bennett, Routledge, 2016), *Understanding Material Culture* (Sage, 2007), and *The Oxford Handbook of Consumption* (co-edited with Frederick F. Wherry, Oxford, 2019). With Dominik Bartmański, he is co-author of *Vinyl* (Bloomsbury, 2015).

Prologue

'You can't put a price on freedom'

'Independence' is a powerful sentiment in the field of contemporary music. Industrial mass production of music and musical entertainment might seem to be a domain of 'power, corruption, and lies'. But outside of it, and somewhere in between, there are musicians and label managers who work with the creed of 'art for art's sake'. There remains a belief that 'true' art and 'real' music should be something 'pure'. Such coveted 'realness' of music would entail a disinterested and genuine pursuit of an aesthetic value, and eschew the chase of profit maximization. This implies being 'outside the norm', or – as Zack de la Rocha once sang – to 'fuck the norm'. But how can someone reject the mainstream norms of commercial music-making, yet still make their living from music? How do smaller market players and producers of highly creative, innovative music use their resources to assemble capital, build networks and have influence in the field? Using the methodological toolkit of qualitative and interpretive research, this book analyses how small to mid-size independent electronic music labels can be economically viable and personally and culturally meaningful for the people who run them.

The aforementioned distinctions around what is real, pure and valuable in the realm of music are traceable to basic structures of our culture. To a large degree, they are based on a classic binary of 'purity and danger' that Mary Douglas (1966) made a central theme of her seminal anthropological work and it continues to ring true today. In the sociology of artistic production, Pierre Bourdieu also employed these foundational cultural structures in his research, contrasting economically disinterested and financially motivated cultural pursuits. As he states, 'the position of "pure" writer or artist, like that of intellectual, is an institution of freedom, constructed against the "bourgeoisie" (in the artists' sense) and against institutions . . . it exists only at the lowest degree of institutionalization, in the form of words ("avant-garde", for example) or models . . . which constitute a tradition of freedom and criticism' (1993: 63).

This quote touches on several themes that this book sets out to explore in greater detail by delving into the world of independent electronic music production. Independent labels within this variegated but discernable sphere are typically loosely institutionalized entities, anti-structural instead of corporate, counting on aesthetic inspiration as much as on return on investment, preferring freedom to security, cultivating the status of outsiders and wary of 'selling out'. They seem to be more reliant on material affordances of art than on quantifiable materialities of economy. By 'affordance', we refer in relatively simple terms to qualities of aesthetic objects and material settings that 'invite' and facilitate certain types of actions rather than others. In other words, affordance signifies a latent set of possible actions that specific objects and settings enable and tend to be amenable to. While appropriation, use and interpretation of such emplaced objects is always to a certain degree contingent, they are not arbitrary either. As American cultural sociologist Terence McDonnell (2010: 1807)

explains, following J.J. Gibson and music sociologist Tia DeNora: 'for any object, there is a degree of "wiggle room" around the kinds of meanings and actions that are materially and symbolically available and culturally appropriate. Despite the lack of perfect determination, there is a strong *partial* determination of meaning. More often than not, people converge around a constellation of affordances when interacting with a cultural object to make meaning.' We will return to this issue later, adding to this definition of affordance.

What matters at this point is that learning from Pierre Bourdieu, and incorporating the notion of affordance, we can recognize independent music producers as actors engaged in creation of music with their own relatively well-defined set of objects, settings and role models and 'consecrated' traditions. Rejecting mainstream patterns, independent music scenes typically create separate sets of consciously assembled symbolic objects and aesthetic references. Subsequent generations often draw on them in order to authenticate their own subversive identity and thus carve out their niche in a given field of independent cultural production. In underground music, there is an eternal return of this dualistic and partly ambivalent pursuit – to be at once free of 'societal pressures', while belonging to a communal 'scene'.

The trope of freedom is indeed an important leitmotif in the stories of the independent electronic music labels that this book focuses on, and we show its manifold incarnations throughout. It signifies a desire to be the master of one's time, to do things your own way. In the field of underground dance music production especially, being 'independent' constitutes a claim for music-making *free of* the pressures of corporate agendas and mainstream capitalist profit-making obsessions. It is thus emphatically *not* about the freedom in the neoliberal economic sense; on the contrary, it is

about resisting or eloping its ramifications, because 'the system of freedom to which neoliberalism gives rise amounts to a precise and systematic normalization of the subject of desire' (de Beistegui 2018: 211). As we will show, some exemplary milieus in this field, for example the Berlin techno scene, resist such normalizations and choose to try 'non-standard' approaches to creative life. They often consist of self-described 'families' and 'collectives' that have managed to work out niches for what people in the scene would call 'creating your own shit'. The origins of this scene are well documented in the tellingly entitled book *The Sound of Family: Berlin, Techno and the Reunification* (Denk von Thülen 2012). In our book we show that the story goes on, despite well-known changes in economy and culture in the early twenty-first century. In fact, the emergence of some iconic institutions such as the legendary Berlin club Berghain in the 2000s, i.e. *after* the 'zero gravity' time of the early 1990s (Alec Empire 2014), indicates that each period gives rise to its own special phenomena, its own exemplary atmospheres, auratic works and iconic spaces. We try to document this ongoing process and some of its main manifestations in the last two decades. And we show that independent electronic music labels are propitious – albeit somewhat under-represented – cultural lenses through which to discern the patterns of continuity and transformation in vibrant urban ecologies such as Berlin.

This book differs from the oral histories and extant accounts of the relevant scenes in that we not only talk to the movers and shakers but also provide conceptual commentary to make sense of it as a contextualized social practice. While observing and portraying our compelling characters, and recording some of what artist Brett Anderson might call 'voices from the margins', we also try to develop vocabularies that push cultural self-reflexivity further. In philosophical

terms, we aim to develop what Ludwig Wittgenstein aptly called a 'language game', one that could be conducive *to grasp* what many find hard or even impossible to grasp: meanings of music and significance of labels and spaces that make it happen. Adapting a phrase by Paul Gilroy from his writing on black music genres, we believe that although certain things are hardly speakable, this does not mean they are 'inexpressible'; grasping them in language 'requires this reorientation towards the phatic and the ineffable' (Gilroy 1999: 73). Herein lies the importance of the conceptual work we engage in.

Before we delve into our narrative, let's return for a moment to the central topic of independence and *freedom*, since it repeatedly arose in the conversations we had with musicians and label curators. It has a dual meaning. It implies being not only materially but also symbolically independent from major corporate structures of the music, art and entertainment industries. Although the binary of the 'major' and the 'independent' is increasingly blurred these days – certainly in rock music where majors tend to act as distribution and marketing companies for so-called 'indie' bands – the sentiment which has animated the binary prevails in some corners of electronic music, and also in genres like metal, hardcore and punk (Bennett and Guerra 2019; Hannerz 2015) and is also observable in the production of musical equipment and instruments. We observe that the symbolic practices of maintaining that binary are still recognizable, even if some of them are currently in flux. A drive to create a cultural niche that thrives on family-like bonds, not just on purely utilitarian ties has stayed alive in certain pockets of the music world. We have ventured to understand their standing commitment to outsiderdom and their continued relevance.

Consider the case of Ostgut Ton, the in-house label of the Berlin club Berghain, a world-renowned institution within electronic

music scenes cherished for its fiercely independent stance. The head of the label between 2011 and 2017, Jenus Baumecker-Kahmke, offers an exemplary insight:

> it's like a family thing and we are like the child a little bit . . . we have quite a lot of freedom here, and we wouldn't want to miss that, even though we get also stressed out sometimes and think: 'Jesus, this is so much work all the time' . . . .

Freedom is key. It is not genre-specific but instead tends to be highly valued across different genres of electronic music. Freedom as a kind of ideal condition of 'pure' artistic pursuit is perhaps a most contradictory concept to the economic logic of capitalism. Why? As many artists we interviewed say: because it's *priceless*. Crucially, it is the freedom of choosing the timing and direction of your emotional, creative and economic energy. That freedom often feels absolutely invaluable. This feeling which explicitly places freedom at the core of music production is what DJ and producer Jenifa Mayanja expressed so plainly when prompted to offer a 'definition' of being independent:

> What does it mean to be an independent label? It just means that, yeah, you do have freedom . . . you can't put a price on freedom . . . It just means that you have the freedom to set your own pace, set your schedule, decide what you want to spend the money on, decide where you want to put your energy.

The concept of freedom comes in two general forms: either as freedom *from* something, for example external control, or freedom *for* something, for example, being able to speak and act as one chooses. When it comes to musical expression in independent labels, freedom counts as an indispensable value. In particular, working to preserve a

FIGURE 0.1 ***DJ and owner of the BuMako label, Jenifa Mayanja, performing in 2016. Photo by Marion Doucet.***

domain of artistic production *outside* neoliberal capitalist demands remains essential to the integrity of production within contemporary art worlds. In underground music scenes, that kind of freedom has not only been a necessary condition but also a badge of distinction that sits at the core of building one's identity. It is viewed as a freedom from the limitations and requirements of standardized mainstream calculations of value, where creative liberty and experimentation is often ignored or considered detrimental. Consider this quote by the legendary Steve Albini from his 2018 interview with Dominic Haley published in the London-based music magazine *Loud & Quiet*: 'There's a very small number of independent record labels that are run by enthusiasts . . . they're very respectful to the bands and operate very efficiently. I understand those people very well, but people in the mainstream music business? I don't get those people at all. They're

like fucking space aliens to me.' Interestingly, this trope of the 'majors as aliens' surfaced regularly in our conversations with underground electronic music labels too. In other words, an independence from the massive structuring power of the industry, whose main imperative is to search for a mass 'product' and to commodify it to a broadest common denominator of preference, still resonates with some people. All of this points to the realization that 'independent' has been a classic binary concept related to its opposite – the 'mainstream'.

But there's more to independent music scenes and the labels that represent them. The story of creative freedom and independence is full of caveats and disclaimers. Ambiguities, tensions and contradictions are not uncommon. As we show in this book, independent labels are small 'communities of taste' that form local bonds and translocal networks which in turn contribute to the emergence of music scenes which have their own ways of defining the good, and excluding those or that which is constructed as bad. Like all communities, networks and identities, these too have fuzzy boundaries, even if some generic binaries that undergird them are enduringly legible. The binaries such as 'mainstream/independent' shift their references but remain remarkably stable as the referential template we think with. Independent labels materialize musical taste and ethical stance through their work on records of the sound they pursue and exist for. They curate and fix the sonic output of their favorite players, forging them into 'names' to reckon with. If they're lucky, committed and persistent, in time they build catalogues and form discographies. They can build a culture. In Latin America, for example, most classic records literally wore that sentiment on their sleeves: *disco es cultura*. Less explicit but no less prevalent is a similar feeling in contemporary independent electronic music. This book is devoted to all who not only verbalize

this feeling but also try to live it, those who continue to nourish this drive, who subscribe to DIY ethics, risking not only their own hard won money but also their biographies, and who attempt to maintain a sense of 'outsiderdom' and independence that prevents bottom-up musical scenes from being co-opted.

Introduction

Understanding independent labels

Meanings and metaphors

Cultures live by metaphors and so does our understanding of cultures. In social science, culture has been seen and understood in manifold ways, for example as text, as software, as symbolic universe, or as landscape. This book delves into a particular cultural landscape called 'independent music'. In particular, we tune into soundscapes created by electronic music producers, hosted by legendary cityscapes, and punctuated by clubs and stores that together give rise to tight cultural 'ecologies' replete with ecstatic and dramatic stuff. How do these producers figure into such a cultural ecology? What does producing electronic music independently mean today?

For the sake of preliminary discussion, independent music could be likened to a relatively enclosed sea within a larger sonic ocean, alive with waves and currents, subject to ebbs and flows, dotted with shallow and deep points. No doubt all such metaphors should be employed with caution. But they are 'good to think with', to borrow

Lévi-Strauss's term, and to the extent that this simile works as a heuristic device, it enables us to employ related notions as fruitful points of departure: How does one stay afloat and navigate often troubled waters? Spot and ride the 'right' waves? Anticipate and avoid the 'wrong' currents? Be visible when it's essential, but stay off the radar when it's beneficial?

Sticking to the present metaphor, we might say that the right vessel is needed. Traditionally, the institutions we refer to as 'independent music labels' have indeed been vessels of sorts. They traversed the sea of music, mapped the massive expanse of soundscapes and forged whirls of creativity and turbulence within it, discovered and defined currents, and charted new courses. Some were homes to remarkable creative collectives that gave rise to and left their imprint on countless projects. Think about 4AD, Creation or Factory. Some of those 'crews' were a bit like pirates, or 'madmen and mavericks', to use Richard King's apt phrase (King 2012). Today, the landscape and modes of navigation are changing, sometimes beyond recognition. The number of crews seems to have increased, even if most are smaller in size than hitherto.

And yet certain terms of the independent musical trade remain in place. Banners and distinctions, borders and territorial divisions, flagships and rituals continue to function as reference points and signifiers of worth. Some vessels are bigger than others; they benefit from the moorings of a friendly, sheltering harbour, while others seem more free-floating, sometimes at the mercy of chance. But they all occupy a certain sovereign, translocally connected ecology that has its own spatial, temporal and experiential characteristics. In the chapters that follow we present our first-hand exploration of the labels that work at the unique intersection of a *digital* zeitgeist and translocally connected *metropolitan* spaces.

The sociological crux of this context is one where tangible analogue products still matter, and where the profitability and excitement of the gig is the fix that the musicians need in order to survive as workers and to thrive as performers. In this context, 'being independent' is about an attitude to the means and ends of life in music rather than style or genre. The DIY approach remains central but has taken on some new meanings galvanized by digitality. Nowadays, the world of independent labels we look at is in a position to rearticulate the value and feeling of craftsmanship, artisanal production and community. But these things do not matter to all in the same way: some people do not care about this at all and we should not equate independence solely with a commitment to artisanal production. We find it compelling, however, that the proclivity to avoid the mass industry and to abscond into a DIY lifeworld is still there. In the homogenized mass market dominated by intangible streams and the all but anonymous, leaden hand of the three big corporate music businesses that control the vast majority of global music production, small independent labels that craft tangible records stand for genuine creative autonomy in music and for more experimental cultural production more generally.

Real utopias and iconic signs

In their book about the meanings and experience of creative labour, David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker (2011: 1) ask: what kinds of experiences do jobs and occupations in the cultural industries offer their workers today? In this sense they have provided a useful general template for questioning and understanding the pleasures, anxieties, dilemmas and challenges present in the independent music industry

too. Similarly, we inquire about which meanings, practices, networks and spatial and urban contexts afford and sustain independent cultural production in the music industry. Documenting these cultures is important, but we also need to ask why acquiring such knowledge is important. Why do we need to know what it means to be a creative worker in an independent artistic industry? How do these forms of work relate to patterns within the economy broadly, and how are they changing our cities and sites of cultural participation? And last but not least, how can we simultaneously do justice to individual perspectives *and* the cultural tropes that these perspectives reproduce, often unwittingly?

While digging deep into the independent electronic music scene, we deem these kinds of meta-questions valuable and try to reflect systematically on why we need to care about experiences of the independent music producers and how to approach them. Answers to these questions depend on answering another one, namely what these insights about independent creative labour tell us about times and spaces we inhabit, and the extant social structures that shape our experience of them. Again, this question presupposes a link between the forms of creative aesthetic work and the patterns of more general culture. While the link is not always stable or straightforward, we see its manifestations in artistic works that respond not just to specific internal desires but also to general external conditions of life. This in turn leads us to acknowledge that the same experience of engaging in artistic work can be assessed, as it were, from within and from without. The painter Wassily Kandinsky wrote in one of his manifestos that 'every phenomenon can be experienced in two ways. These two ways are not arbitrary but are bound up with the phenomenon – developing out of its nature and characteristics: externally or inwardly' (Kandinsky 2017: 17).

This view can be readily adapted to the present topic. We can imagine a more 'external' and relational understanding of independent music labels as cultural signifiers, and we can also try to describe what they are from the inside as forms, experiences and desires, taking producers' own viewpoint as pivotal reference. Both strategies are valid and yield particularly fruitful insights when combined. In fact, in this book we try to account for both perspectives, seeing them as imbricated rather than disjointed. This means simultaneously using cultural sociology and ethnography as vantage points of understanding that help reflect the significance of both dimensions. Regardless of analytic angle, however, we find that the way cultural organizations such as independent labels gain their distinctive meanings are not arbitrary. Instead, they are: first, afforded by the material circumstances of their existence; second, motivated by experiential situatedness of the scene; and third, guided by interpretive schemas with long histories of lived practice. One way of encapsulating this three-fold sociological figuration in regard to independent musical practice is the acronym DIY – Do It Yourself – which Bennett and Guerra (2019) defined as a form of cultural practice pitched against more mainstream, mass-produced and commodified forms of cultural production. As Andy Bennett observes about DIY organizations, over time they have evolved from being bluntly resistant statements of independence to collectives where professionalism and economically sustainable creative practice are more prevalent (Bennett 2018). It is vitally important to acknowledge here that being on one's own, without the external structure of financial help to fall back on, lends a powerful existential meaning to one's creative practice, and life more generally. And it is also for this reason that independent music of the past – from punk to drum'n'bass – exerted such an influence on the general artistic imagination.

In this context, another useful understanding associated with the proposed 'navigational' metaphor of labels as vessels comes from Michel Foucault who observed that 'the sailing vessel is the heterotopia par excellence' (1994: 185). According to him, 'heterotopia' is a place of otherness, a kind of 'actually realized utopia in which all the other real emplacements that can be found within the culture are represented, contested and reversed (ibid.: 187). Put differently, it is a cultural space carved out in a given 'landscape of meaning' (Reed 2011) (e.g. the music industry, art world) or 'affective topography' (Pugh 2013) (e.g. the club scene, record store, city neighbourhood) that exists both as concrete spaces and collective representations, at once localizable practices and enduring non-material meanings. It is a cultural ecology that allows meanings to be expressed and concretized as experiences for their own sake.

We propose that this realization is crucially important when it comes to art, and music in particular. This is partly what Brett Anderson, the lead singer of the British group Suede, may have hinted at when he wrote in his autobiography: 'art generally is just a process of documenting and interpreting and channelling one's experiences and turning them into something that lives in a place beyond reality' (Anderson 2018: 34). Looking at independent music labels today, we discern the ongoing vitality of these sentiments. In his tracing of cultures of resistance in Britain since the 1960s, George McKay (1996: 8) asserts that 'utopian desire doesn't go away – it may even be stronger today'. Twenty years after his study, this recognition still rings true in some pockets of independent music.

We therefore propose to understand contemporary independent labels in electronic music as *heterotopias* or 'real micro-utopias' within the broader landscape of meaning called the music industry.

They are micro companies with typically low profit margins in an industry dominated by just three big corporate structures – Universal, Sony and Warner. Independent music labels could be seen as alternative branding agents of sorts, prioritizing identity and stance over market share and profit, and valuing style over stardom; often contesting, ignoring or reversing what are considered 'normalized' mainstream values, but constantly remaining as operations where certain combinations of capital matter and where value is being negotiated and fixed.

Established independent labels can be seen as what Foucault dubbed 'heterotopian emplacements', because in order to become

FIGURE 0.2 ***Entrance to the building in which the legendary Hard Wax record store and label are headquartered. Located at the deep end of a typical Kreuzberg courtyard, this iconic institution is synonymous with the Berlin–Detroit connection that has profoundly shaped the development of techno music. Photo by D. Bartmański.***

part of them one 'has to submit to rituals and symbolic purifications' rather than just to the logic of economy (ibid.: 183). This does not mean simply submitting to certain rites of passage; it entails acquiring the embodied knowledge needed to perform symbolic choices genuinely – to live them rather than simply enact them. As we will show, for independent labels a kind of 'symbolic economy' (Chapter 3) is at least as real and important as a material economy (Chapter 2), sometimes to a point of financially non-rational commitment. As they pursue their vision, they try to attain sufficient symbolic resources to become respected players in specific scenes that are tied to specific places and translocal networks. Once this goal is fulfilled, the mobilized symbolic resources can be converted into social and economic capital, although the 'conversion' is neither automatic nor simple. A successful and sustainable breakthrough in the scene depends on alignment of manifold factors we more systematically explore in subsequent chapters.

Importantly, independent labels are aesthetic heterotopias ensconced in larger cultural contexts as well as in concrete 'urban ecologies' (Chapter 4) that function as social magnets for and magnifying glasses on aesthetic pursuits and political critique.

The cultural magnification that metropolitan cities provide can be understood in a twofold way: not only as an amplification and increased visibility of certain concerns, but also as concentrations of critical heat on a point of transformative social energy.

We describe this dynamic in greater detail in Chapter 4. For now, we would like to point out that in independent music, labels can be such focal points of aesthetic concentration, some of them may even

assume over time the role of cultural lighthouse. Their defining meanings are experiential, running against convention, intimately bound up with the phenomenon of autonomous music-making and independent interpretation, each of which has sources and motivations that transcend the boundaries of what the mainstream value order considers 'standard', 'rational' or 'profitable'.

Insofar as these independent imprints are sustainable and systematically productive, they are able to create over time not just records but also quasi-utopian institutions and sonic legacies. Some of them grow significantly over time, but growth is not the fundamental value here; sustainability is. One project supports the next, creating a series of revenue-investment loops. The income from a gig or previous musical release finances the upcoming one, or some new equipment. The economic timing of the outputs of fiercely independent labels is cyclical. As independent labels release their sonic loops, imprinting them in form of spiral grooves on records, it is the tight loop of profit they count on rather than profit maximization. The mystery and cult-like devotion surrounding certain labels can count for more than their bank balance, especially when bills can be paid by other music-related revenues like gigs or licensing of tracks. As a result, explicitly or implicitly, independent labels show that one can resist the system, or – as economic sociologist Viviana Zelizer would say – at least challenge the purely utilitarian and instrumental imperatives of capitalism (1989: 371).

Of course, while researching this book, we have become very aware that while 'independent creativity' remains a powerful intrinsic source of energy and inspiration to music-makers, it may also be exploited and perverted as an insidiously attractive ideology in casualized work conditions, or materialized in the hardware

and coded in the software of music production. Understood in this way, independent creative pursuits and their philosophy of autonomy might seem just another exploitable fetish in a new, supposedly 'liquid' but in fact unprecedentedly tough economy. In this interpretation, autonomous but often struggling artists would still be 'neoliberalized subjects' with false consciousness. While important, this perspective does not capture the multiplicity of meaning-making practices in music and neglects the relevant space- and time-related experiential conditions that may mitigate pressures and enhance satisfaction. Such a perspective economizes culture without an off-setting effort to properly culturalize work. Contrary to the popular accounts of sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, not that much is really 'liquid' in late modernity. There is, however, some wiggle room when it comes to negotiating trade-offs between life and work in contemporary art. There must be an alternative way to make sense of it. What would that entail?

We propose that specific combinations of the three dimensions that we call the 'material economy', 'symbolic economy' and 'urban ecology' shape musical heterotopias over time. These three dimensions overlap, interrelate and are in flux, and so work relationally as sets of constraints and opportunities for music production. There are always different musical lifeworlds that possess different sets of advantages and experiences. Some labels enjoy relatively high levels of various forms of capital and therefore do not face economic risks and the associated self-exploitation of workers so well-documented in much of the literature on creative economies. Still others, notwithstanding their position in the material or symbolic economies or urban ecologies, do operate under conditions of self- (and other) exploitation. Regardless of specific conditions, however, it is useful to underscore that the widespread critical view which foregrounds capitalism's

pervasive effects may miss a deeper humanistic element that continues to matter – a quest for fun and meaning, and an appreciation of good work.

Work done well and on your own

Craft, derived from early modern conceptions about forms of labour, is an idea we rely on to understand labels' creative commitment. Colin Campbell argued that craft is constructed as a quintessential human activity, 'seen as ennobling, humanizing and, hence, the ideal means through which individuals could express their humanity' (Campbell 2005: 24). In the sense we apply it, craft means the pleasures of work done well and on your own. This attitude underpins the practice of making music for music's sake. But it is simply a key mental ingredient of a sacrosanct task which sits at the heart of small-scale independent music-making. It is all too easy – but wrong – to miss or misrepresent this aspect of work. The American sociologist Richard Sennett (2009: 9) points out that 'craftsmanship may suggest a way of life that waned with the advent of industrial society – but this is misleading. Craftsmanship names an enduring, basic human impulse, the desire to do a job well for its own sake.' This is not to be conflated with the description of another late modern, but antithetically different, phenomenon identified by anthropologist David Graeber in his book *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory* (2018). Graeber compellingly recognizes a proliferation of 'bullshit jobs' that, seeming to have no concrete productive purpose, often become hollow ends in themselves. If Sennett tries to reclaim a phenomenology of *meaningful* ***work*** *that is an end in itself* because of its inherent sensory and symbolic rewards, Graeber analyzes an

economy that generates *meaningless* ***jobs*** *that are an end in themselves*, i.e. giving only financial rewards, and related to no other source of satisfaction or significance than the wage that the workers must earn to survive. One interpretation of this difference could be that in Sennett's example, the workers mostly work for themselves or for what they genuinely believe in, while in Graeber's example the workers work for others and/or for what they do not genuinely believe in, and which therefore alienates them. We will investigate some facets of this difference in Chapters 2 and 3, but it can be stated here that the independent labels we explore in this book aim to remain on the side of the binary that Sennett identifies as craft.

In our view, Sennett rightly emphasizes that 'social and economic conditions often stand in the way', and he is also aware that gaining reward of 'art for art's sake' is not simple. This book touches on these ambiguities throughout. Nevertheless, in *The Craftsman*, Sennett importantly strives to return our attention to an amazingly enduring impulse to work independently of the standard set of purely 'pragmatic' or seemingly 'natural' utilitarian motivations propagated by mainstream institutions of corporate capitalism. We attended a lecture he delivered at a conference about 'Creative Locations' in September 2018, where he tellingly connected this impulse to the notion of improvisation. He argued that neoliberal capitalism thrives on standardization, which not only *rules* contemporary society but also *rules out* possibilities of improvised adjustment, making free experimentation difficult or downright impossible. Improvisation, not coincidentally crucial to exciting musical developments, is invaluable in art and life because – as Sennett explained – it helps to deconstruct what is *permissible* in a given field in order to show what is *possible* in that field. He further insisted

that improvisation by no means denotes unbridled spontaneity – both as a cello player and a sociologist Sennett emphasized that spontaneity alone does not work in complex arts. Nor does it necessarily mean a classically understood virtuoso performance that plays with conventions.

Improvisation is an open but self-aware practice of broadly conceived experimentation within an established form, and a good improviser is an unprejudiced but self-constrained *bricoleur*.

This is what we still see today in some strands of underground ambient, house and techno scenes and among the variety of 'beat-makers' in contemporary electronic music. Towards the end of this introduction, one example is offered to illustrate how a related notion of improvisation guides the practice of an independent label and is evident in its symbolic make-up. Chapter 3 delves still deeper into this topic. What should be clear from the start, though, is that many of the labels we have interacted with are shrewd players, not just lucky ones (although luck has its place too). They are successful because – to paraphrase the saying attributed to Picasso – they learn a set of rules like insiders in order to break them like outsiders when they feel like it. This understanding of improvisation is not new, of course; it was well understood in jazz, for instance. Take Miles Davis's approach: for him, improvisation and freedom to experiment meant being 'cool' but was also something you learn, not just something you're born with – 'After you've learned how to play your instrument the right way, you can turn around and play it the way you want to . . . But you've got to first learn how to be cool . . .' (Davis 1989: 182). Electronic music artists and label curators are successful

because they create or help create heterotopias of independence in which they can learn, experiment and then practise the principle of the 'work well done for its own sake'. And it is precisely in such open but self-aware cultural heterotopias that independent creative solutions are still being created, tried and tested. We want to acknowledge these creative impulses, while also interrogating the conditions of real risk and difficulty that make these impulses not just tricky but also respect-inducing and sometimes even awe-inspiring.

Established and resilient music labels of this kind can, and sometimes do, become iconic. From Motown to Underground Resistance, and from Warp to Ostgut Ton, they have shown how it's done. But the way these cultural icons generate social and aesthetic significance is not of a merely conventional or purely contingent kind. They are not just instrumental players in the calculated competition of the often cut-throat worlds of music and entertainment. Nor are all independent labels merely spontaneous sub-cultural entities, although many have rich stories of precarious bottom–up critical emergence to tell, to be sure. Frequently, they are rooted cultural agents with multiple external connections to other such agents and manifold symbiotic – and note, not purely competitive – relations to their immediate environment. If a music label becomes synonymous with a distinct style, sensibility or attitude (which is precisely what being an iconic label means), this result is not simply a matter of the arbitrary attribution of value via the media, or a result of merely elective affinity between sounds, words and deeds. While the ingredients of contingency, luck and media power play their respective roles, this is not the whole story. Original input and independent approach arise from within communities, spaces and lifeworlds, from intersubjective aesthetic convictions and collectively

felt circumstances, not just out of deliberative strategizing of entrepreneurial kind on the part of some 'powerful' individuals.

As we know from the history of the mavericks of independent music, often 'nobody had a clue about running a record company' (King 2012), and yet they changed musical history and wider culture in the process! This candid evaluation surfaced in some of our interviews too. Asked about his ideas about identity-building for the distinctive label Innervisions that he co-owns, Frank Wiedemann admits that when it was first established in 2005, he himself was not fully aware of how to proceed. At that time it was not yet clear that specific forms of organization of music production and promotion, visual and media positioning, would prove critically important to the success of the label a decade down the line.

> At the time, at least me, I didn't think too much about what would happen in the next ten years, and then it turned out that exactly this kind of branding will be very important, and also the inclusion of making parties around which you create your own identity.

Also not to be forgotten is the simple fact that at independent labels things are often done for the fun of it, for the sheer satisfaction of producing something on your own that was not there before. Things are also done for the sake of reckless experimentation and personal interests; they are done out of passion, too, and the desire to be recognized by one's peers. The musical change, let alone the cultural one, often comes as an unintended by-product, and perhaps that is the best thing about DIY cultural production. Even if planned, cultural changes have a way of doing their own thing over time, irrespective of original intentions of their nominal or official 'authors'. Cultural organizations, once up and running, are not

reducible just to their curators and managers; over time they become collective representations of larger cultural landscapes that gain a life of their own. This book tries to capture some of these dynamics.

As noted above with regard to improvisation, a considerable degree of freedom to exercise artistic control over creative work is not only possible but in fact required in independent music production. These are the key existential and aesthetic meanings, often actualized through entrenched binary distinctions between worth and worthlessness, honesty and sham, sustainability and greed, the genuine and the mercenary. These lived meanings enable resonant reception and media amplification in the first place. What our book aims to show is that today, the vital independent labels in electronic music are not mere commodified logos, and never intended to be such. They may be brands but they are typically not up for grabs, usually keeping their distance from other brands outside music proper. Whether running a label is to be seen as a 'means to an end' or an 'end in itself', the *ends* are expressive rather than pecuniary. This does not imply, however, that independent producers are idealists; indeed they are keenly aware where the profit is possible and that some regular financial rewards are necessary over time to keep the business running. First and foremost, independent labels make sense as outlets of a DIY work ethos, as platforms for one's own vision, as style markers and aesthetic organizations whose resonance is in great part artistically motivated and symbolically defined. The cultural 'signal' transmitted via labels' artistic output can then be extended, modified, recirculated and disseminated in various ways, but we must remember that neither amplifiers nor speakers are the base sources of the signal. These are to be found elsewhere, for example in the interstitial spaces between external and internal realities of life that Kandinsky talked about,

the spaces between vision and technology, feeling and thought, craft and art, 'internal' experience and 'external' codes, personal desires and cultural repertoires for expressing these desires. How might we think about these issues in a more systematic and concrete fashion?

Labels and records as agents

Although novel and foreign to some of our fellow cultural sociologists, the perspective that aims to balance the material and the symbolic would not be surprising to many artists and appears intuitive to many of our interviewees. Connecting meaning-making to material and spatio-cultural parameters of artists' existential situatedness is an important analytic step. For instance, Claas Brieler of the legendary Jazzanova group that own the Sonar Kollektiv label offers the following observation.

All great stylistic innovations in music, from jazz to drum'n'bass and house, came from the underground, from lower status and under-represented or initially ignored cultural positions.

Their vital power can be traced to the deeply felt existential message and raw expressive desire rather than to external institutional support or some grand strategy; indeed, being rejected by the establishment has often been an initial source of symbolic power, and rejecting the established norms in turn is a great manifestation of this power.

These subaltern 'positions' should be recognized in all their figurative and literal senses. These positions and existential situations are where space and discourse, body and technology, emotion and

reason, awareness and access co-mingle to give rise to specific concerns, solutions and creative outputs. This is also what makes the 'social and cultural critique' associated with such organizations more convincing than that present in other, top-down initiatives. Such an 'organic' critical alignment is not just a matter of purely contingent choice and chance; it hinges on real experiences of difficulty and exclusion and the specificities of initial situation of performance, i.e. on what side of the relevant binaries a given performance sits, as well as on the specific pragmatic entanglements that constrain and enable main actors, human and non-human. One of the important reasons why certain key binaries such as mainstream/underground still matter to independent labels is that the corporate agents which orchestrate mainstream markets continually seek to appropriate and commodify on their own terms the genuine pursuits of the independent. This constitutes a 'symbolic pollution'. The original milieus that produce new art forms often experience exclusion, lack of access and acknowledgement, and this should not be forgotten.

Consider the origins of house music in Chicago, according to Simon Reynolds (Reynolds 2013: 19):

> Chicago house music was born of a double exclusion: not just black, but gay and black. Its refusal, its cultural dissidence, took the form of embracing a music that the majority culture deemed dead and buried. House didn't just resurrect disco, it mutated the form, intensifying the very aspects of the music that most offended white rockers and black funkateers: the machinic repetition, the synthetic and electronic textures, the rootlessness, the 'depraved' hypersexuality, and decadent 'druggy' hedonism. Stylistically house assembled itself from disregarded and

> degraded pop-culture detritus that the mainstream considered passe, disposable.

The elements of the initial situation of a given music scene live on in its signature attitudes and foundational cultural mythology. 'Roots' are perpetually rearticulated and reconfirmed. We will address this issue in Chapter 4, where we note the shift of the house and techno music from their original urban 'ecologies' of Chicago and Detroit to Berlin. The socio-cultural dynamic described by Reynolds is not, of course, new or restricted to contemporary underground electronic dance music. For example, in his analysis of Cuban timba music, Umi Vaughan (2013: 79) conceives of it as 'a maroon aesthetic because it represents embodied knowledge passed down from generation to generation. In the process a distinct Afro-Cuban culture has developed'. Similarly, Barbara Browning writes in her book *Samba: Resistance in Motion* that this Brazilian music can be understood as a 'form of cultural inscription' whose bodily expressions in dance are 'embodiments of the principles of belief which bind a community together' (Browning 1995: xxii–xxiv). In short, house and techno can be interpreted as musical forms that inscribe themselves in and contribute to a much longer line of meaning-making through dance and alternative music practices.

Researching and understanding artistic agency

Music labels and the records they produce can be interpreted as agents involved in the process of 'transmitting culture' (Debray 2000). If we approach them as such, acknowledging their histories of social predicament or aesthetic dissidence or both, we need a

particular conceptual tool to delineate forms and meanings of the transmission at hand. As we have just mentioned above, while approaching our topic we have discovered congenial interpretive sensibility in anthropology, archaeology and the latest strands of qualitative sociology. There are at least two observations worth noting here. The first refers to the anthropological method which connects the academic with the personal in a critically important way. The second refers to the cultural concepts of *icon* and *artwork*. Both are explicitly present in one seminal book by Alfred Gell – *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* – that has come to inspire recent iterations in material culture studies that we in turn feel inspired by. First, what Gell (1998: 10) saw as a defining general approach of anthropological thinking fits part of our agenda as it has just been sketched above. He writes: 'Anthropology is a broad church and is only very ambiguously distinct from other disciplines such as sociology.' Nevertheless, he continues:

> anthropology is considered good at providing close-grained analyses of *apparently irrational* behavior, performances, utterances, etc. Since almost all behavior is, from somebody's point of view, 'apparently irrational' anthropology has, possibly, a secure future. How do anthropologists solve problems about the apparent irrationality of human behavior? They do so by locating, or contextualizing behavior not so much in 'culture' (which is an abstraction) as in the dynamics of social interaction, which may indeed be conditioned by 'culture' but which is better seen as a real process, or dialectic, unfolding in time.

We concur and realize that this has specific research consequences to which we will return again below. For now, it is important to

emphasize that we have cited here this extensive excerpt from an academic argument because we find it revealing of what kind of trade-offs and dilemmas the cultural analyst still encounters. It enables us to offer correctives to widespread mainstream views of what 'independent' means. Quite a few of the independent labels are – or border on being – 'apparently irrational', or 'idealistic', as far as the general context of the for-profit corporate industry is concerned. Yet, as we have already suggested above, a better way to think about the activities of their participants might be to frame them as a type of autonomous search for a 'real utopia', an instance of imaginative collective practice that implicitly challenges the rationalist economic assumptions regarding profitability. Thinking of them as 'idealistic' will not get us very far. 'Idealism' implies a certain lack of regard for real conditions. We need to stress, however, that the independents we look at are not unaware of the conditions, nor are they simply ignoring them. Rather, they start with a different approach and choose to emphasize different ends. The apparently non-rational quest to create real micro-utopias or small heterotopias tends to render the independent electronic music labels misunderstood in mainstream academic treatments of contemporary music, or – unless they gain some notoriety – downright invisible. The problem with such mainstream treatments is that they see small independent labels as residing 'at the fringes' of corporate music industry, where they 'do not control the means of the distribution of their physical recordings' (Taylor 2016: 154). The labels we analyze should instead be seen as self-positioned mostly 'outside' or beside corporate music business, with their own spaces and channels of production and dissemination, whereby artistic quality control and logistics are much less subject to purely economic imperatives and systemic pressures of fast-paced star-making. Of

course, occasionally some independents *do* enter into agreements with majors, for example licensing their tracks to other media productions, but in the cases we analyze that would be an exception rather than a rule. Consider this statement by Amanda Brown, who runs the label 100% Silk in Los Angeles, and who is known for launching such successful house music acts as Octo Octa:

> People look at independent labels as if they're baby-Sony or baby-Arista or something. They looked at us as if we wanted to create this smaller lesser version of that. But we do not want to do that. We don't want to be a smaller version of the mainstream. We are other. We are based on passion. We are based on diligence, we are based on curation, we are based on relationships. This is not the same business model but on a smaller scale. We are not trying to be a mini mainstream. We are a different thing. And independent record labels exist in their own universe. We are not a machine behind an artist. We are not trying to commodify them. We're not smaller versions of those things. We are artists ourselves who are attempting, with an entrepreneurial spirit, to continue the art history.

There is a glaring problem with the approaches which see independent electronic music acts as operating 'in the shadows of neoliberal capitalism'. What these approaches consider a 'struggle to maintain non-economic sorts of values' in the music business would already be regarded as a paradigmatic example of opportunistic commodification and a sell-out within the genuine independent electronic dance scenes from Detroit to Los Angeles to Berlin. For example, in his book *Music and Capitalism*, Timothy Taylor (2016: 158–61) considers the story of the French DJ David Guetta's signing

to EMI as an incident in which an A&R officer 'prevailed in a debate with an executive' (ibid.: 159), and a 'vivid example of the work of translation required to move from one regime of value – musical, emotional – to the capitalist economic regime' (ibid.: 161). But what this anecdote shows instead is how far removed the mainstream industry and the standard academic discourse are from the message of the independent labels such as 100% Silk. Within the heterotopic musical emplacements that we study in Berlin and beyond, such artists and situations as cited by Taylor represent 'symbolic pollution' par excellence, a definitive no-go area for independent DJs and producers. They do not think about, let alone pursue, that kind of translation.

Interpretations like Taylor's overlook or dismiss the underground independent venues as inconsequential 'idealistic' margins. Insofar as such underground independent labels sit today at a centre of digitally enabled autonomous creativity, the 'independent-as-periphery-of-mainstream' argument fails to grasp how such labels make sense as real commitments that worked out their own niches within specific urban and more broadly cultural 'ecologies'. They are 'real' in that they are not divorced from their roots or deeply held interests in order to be made palatable to the homogenized general preference; they are heterotopic because they do not need any 'translation' to neo-liberalized corporate mainstream. Indeed, some make it their main point to be and to remain in line with their original ideas and – at least to a certain extent – 'untranslatable' to mainstream vocabularies and sensibilities of musical experience.

Consider as an illustration this statement by Matthieu Hebrard who co-owns Goma Gringa, an independent label based in São Paulo:

> We didn't open Goma Gringa for everybody. We got my friends, our friends at the store and we work with them. We will not say, like: 'oh, whatever you play, you can enter Goma Gringa'; this is not true. We've got this line, which is, like, African, Afro-Brazilian music. We don't stay out of this line. There is always African something in it.

The independent labels can be appreciated in all these capacities, however, only if we dig deeper and shift the evaluative emphasis from the economic to the expressive, from the arbitrary power of industry to the motivated meanings of scenes, from quantity-driven to quality-driven projects, and from the marketing of commodities to the projection of culture. Adapting George McKay's reference to the linguistic conventions that guide organized practices of cultural resistance, we might say that the mantra he saw guiding resistance cultures in the 1990s – 'go and commit a senseless act of beauty' (McKay 1996:6) – makes some sense in the contexts we study. It is important to note, however, that the work of labels we present in this book plays not just with what is regarded as 'beautiful' but also with what is considered 'ugly' or 'sublime', especially when it is viewed this way in what the independent circles see as commodified 'normalized' mainstream. In techno and ambient music, it's often the 'sublime', not the 'beautiful', that's at the centre of creative attention. Categories such as 'senseless acts of beauty' may be seen as mainstream nostrums par excellence. And the more the mainstream industry tries to commodify what it believes to be bottom-up emotion-driven musical production, the more the variety of underground scenes we observe are convinced that 'senseless acts of beauty' make sense, both as potential acts of resistance and simply in themselves.

No translation needed

These symbolic, linguistic and interactional contexts of independent scenes are not yet all that counts. We also need to have a robust conception of how they concretely 'frame' and ground independent music-making *in situ*, and to identify what elements of these contexts are particularly significant as 'cultural transmitters' in a given cultural ecology. This leads us to the second aspect of anthropological thinking that inspired our book. Anthropology of art, as defined by Gell, provides an elaborate general conception according to which the cultural power of collective iconic representations of aesthetic kind is not merely based on symbolic 'convention' ascribed from without. Instead, iconic power derives at least in part from combined agency of aesthetic objects and spaces, as well as from a shared sense of resemblance between cultural forms and the elements of life they stand for (Gell 1998: 25). This is by no means a simple or unmediated relation. The line of analytic distinction we tread here is a delicate one. The 'agency of objects' is a slippery phrase that we are reluctant to use without qualification, preferring instead the relational concepts of 'affordance' and 'entanglement' that we put to action in chapters two, three and four. Our previous book, *Vinyl*, delineates in greater detail how the analog record itself affords auratic cultural interpretations and correspondingly intensive experiences (Bartmań ski and Woodward 2015).

This iconic meaning-making may often be under-specified and thus seem completely open-ended. As Alfred Gell observed, however, 'under-specified is not the same as "not specified at all", "purely conventional" or "entirely contingent"'. It is certainly true that much of what tends to pass for 'natural' or 'necessary' in our regular social affairs is anything but that. This 'de-naturalizing' effort of

anthropology and cultural sociology has been valuable and remains important but we also need a detailed understanding of limits and exceptions to this rule. Gell's general conception helps in this task. What does it mean for our project? We can discern these 'exceptions' and 'agencies' precisely when looking at certain forms of DIY music-making and at the processes that create and transform iconoclastic cultural values. The world of independent music labels, then and now, provides propitious case studies. We argue that it takes the length and rhythm of a whole book to unravel some of the intricate pathways and techniques through which experiential iconic and iconoclastic meanings are motivated, created, maintained and transformed. And here we do not just follow the object but listen to the human agents who narrate and make sense of this field of artistic production. Our message will fully unfold only in the course of the narrative that these persons help us construct. But the theoretical intuition behind the ideas of iconicity and agency of cultural forms is simple and not as novel or radical as it may seem. Cultural anthropology and cultural sociology have some productive templates to offer.

In anthropology, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966: 18-19) admitted – despite his structuralist agenda – that cultural signifiers do not have unlimited capacity to change their meanings, or substitute them at will, because they depend on extant objects and histories 'pre-constrained' by actual uses and modifications. The German sociologist Georg Simmel had made a similar observation regarding art objects back at the beginning of the twentieth century (2008: 384). Richard Sennett (2009 129) pointed out that 'what Lévi-Strauss insists on is that symbolic value is inseparable from awareness of the material condition of an object'. We agree. Today, cultural scholars focusing on music cultures meticulously delineate this interplay between sound, technology and its use (e.g. Weheliye 2005). Indeed, cultural

sociologists working closely with music and material cultures have developed a more fine-grained understanding of this crucial approach. Weaving through complex intersections of materiality and narrative, they realize that the discursive analysis of 'culture as text' cannot explain the variability of symbolic power, as it typically ignores the agencies of objects and actors' embodied perspectives. For this reason a 'music sociology' perspective as outlined by the sociologist Tia DeNora provides a framework better suited to our purposes. DeNora writes, 'it is a focus on what actors do and on how they confront and interact with objects, how they act and react in order to exist, pass, feel and do. It is also a focus on how actors make do with circumstances that exceed their control' (DeNora 2016: 390).

Aesthetic works can be anti-material in spirit but are never non-material in life. Their socio-material biographies always count and restrict a range of plausible symbolic interpretations. Situations matter a great deal as factors in meaning-making. Symbolic action is not like an open-ended text, although it often has a discursive component. Once such a materially conscious perspective of aesthetic practice is adopted, it is easier to take independent labels for what they are.

An independent imprint is typically idea-driven but not simply idealistic, critical of hype but not immune to all its temptations, not materialistic but attuned to materiality, preferring low profile but caring about high standing, disowning fame but cultivating a reputation, seemingly powerless as company but powerful as style-maker.

Above all, this perspective makes it easier to recognize a whole variety of finely differentiated labels and their symbolic impact:

from sizable collectives to one-person acts, from iconic club imprints to legendary family-like organizations. What unites them is that they are usually inspired by taste groups that in turn make communities of style coalesce around them. These communities are unconcerned with outwardly directed stylistic translation. The stories of techno or house music are significant cases in point.

To fully realize how this disregard for the mainstream can perform its symbolic role, we need to conduct a kind of a cultural archaeology of the present: dig for records as records of culture, not just music; to reconstruct a sense of lifeworld from fragments and glimpses of material culture; to see how interviews connect to larger narratives of a given time and place; and to link the material detail to the bigger picture of life. In this context it is revealing that the definitive book devoted to the iconic German avant-garde jazz label ECM carries the subtitle 'A Cultural Archaeology' (Enwezor and Müller 2012). It is also the context in which several important strands of our thinking about labels come together. As Hugh Silverman (1997: 330, emphasis ours) observed in his book *Inscriptions: After Phenomenology and Structuralism*, 'instead of trying to escape our heterotopias, an alternative route is to undertake an *archaeology of heterotopias* – to describe their plural sources and origins in the discontinuous segments of history'.

As we develop our own take on this kind of cultural archaeology, we recognize that independent music labels are symbols that stand for attitudes and styles, and that the most emblematic of such labels sometimes become cultural icons. American scholars Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites symptomatically entitled their seminal book on photographic icons *No Caption Needed*. Insofar as this title captures an important aspect of iconic power of aesthetic forms, we may think by analogy and understand iconic independent

labels in electronic music – from Warp to Ostgut Ton – as ones where translation is neither needed nor sought. These labels have been focusing on realizing their singular vision first, relegating other considerations to secondary status.

Going beyond our anthropological inspirations and consulting actual archaeologists and art historians along the way proved helpful too, especially to conceptualize how niche aesthetic commitments perform 'authenticity' and 'originality'. In her book *Communities of Style*, Marian Feldman (2014: 9) writes that: 'artistic practices contain within them a peculiar efficacy in social life and enable the temporal process of becoming a community. Style – as a central, physical element that engages with people – participates in these processes of collective becoming. Through the consumption of styles and objects, we can see how art constitutes community identity rather than simply reflects it.' This definition of aesthetic agency maps onto many of the cases we have observed. The field we study is one where particular types of 'making' take centre stage; and not just the making of pieces of music, but also communities, networks and scenes. In our story, the independent music consumption as a type of making is enabled and shaped by what we are inclined to see as 'conspicuous production', where many independent producers are 'prosumers', while music consumers and intermediaries like online music magazines or bloggers produce and circulate symbolic content in their related domains.

Writing independent urban culture

The writing of this book emerged from an ongoing immersive engagement with sounds, scenes and players that occupy this specific

cultural landscape and which therefore define an active valence of the 'independent' today. While due to proximity and contacts Berlin has been the epicentre of our focus and the main example of propitious 'urban ecology', we have also reached out to other cognate scenes and labels around the world, recording narratives of players in those scenes and documenting the distinctly global and trans-urban nature of contemporary independent music networks. The authors who engaged in writing about similar themes and problems from a participant point of view noted the distinctive risks associated with such a process. For example, in their book *Discographies: Dance Music, Culture and the Politics of Sound*, Jeremy Gilbert and Ewan Pearson (1999) offered a useful template of reflexivity when they showed why music and dance are 'problematic territories' to write about ethnographically. For one thing, there is a danger of trying to articulate in discourse what is 'an expressly non-representation form' (ibid.: 6). Similarly, the aforementioned Barbara Browning (1995) reflects along these lines on writing about dance cultures such as Brazilian samba. Our approach reclaims material and subjective consciousness precisely to offset some of the aspects of this danger. This book's epilogue, which deals with this and related issues directly, emphasizes the theoretical significance of these concerns and their ongoing existential importance.

On the other hand, there are also 'problems with the continual invocation of the city within accounts of pop music and youth cultural activity, namely in its perceived 'authenticity' and the accompanying fact that this discourse almost inevitably results in bolstering the political and cultural monopoly of the capital city, traditionally the home of the cultural elite' (ibid.: 29). It is partly due to tackling this issue that we have a separate chapter devoted to what we call 'urban ecology.' That said, not only have smaller cities been home to great scenes and important labels, such as Warp in Sheffield,

there are also different kinds of 'capital cities' and 'metropolitan areas' that resist easy generalizations under the heading 'metropolis'. This kind of differentiation makes sense because capital cities, despite their cosmopolitanism, can hardly be disentangled from their respective national contexts (Therborn 2011) and each one has its own unique logic (Löw 2008) and its own connections to other cities, metropolitan and non-metropolitan. Cities differ substantially. These differences notwithstanding, we can develop heuristic vocabularies that enable us to be reflective about 'ecological' similarities and homologies between cities which – as we shall show – play such an important role for independent scenes we describe.

Perhaps the most important part of the reflexive act of writing is related to the status of stories arising from the interviews we conducted and the relation between individual narratives and socio-cultural discourses. Interestingly, despite the fierce individuality that underpins their life in music, electronic music producers outside the mainstream tend to experience their world through tight communities nested within well-defined assemblages of taste and event opportunities concentrated in interconnected urban centres. While personal expressions of style do matter here, personalities are not the main criterion of self-classification that this musical field has embraced over decades. Labels, genres, club spaces and cities are, however. And while resisting genre-related identities has nowadays become a common gesture of asserting uniqueness, the related aesthetic boundaries are as strong as ever.

Thus, to write about labels as 'style communities' and 'taste curators' means to write with verbal as well as sensual transmission of specific embedded visions, sometimes quite literally so. One of the most revealing visualizations of the cultural significance of labels as

style icons is their role as the default classification tool in most independent record shops dedicated to electronic music. Productive association with a recognized club or iconic label raises one's standing as an artist, and once such an artistic standing is attained, the desire to have your own label usually follows, whereby another cycle of identity projection and scouting for talent is set in motion. Consider Ben Klock, who made his name as a resident DJ at the Berlin nightclub Berghain and as producer of landmark releases on Ostgut Ton, and who also launched his own label, Klockworks. Today nearly every major producer deems it vital to run their own imprint.

Record shops have been among the key agents who put the resulting tapestry of micro imprints and aesthetic niches on display. They stand as spatially arranged materializations of tastes and genres, but also as concrete expressions of broader style awareness.

Yet to an untrained eye, these archives of the present soundscape may seem inscrutable. One needs a modicum of arcane knowledge to navigate it, and a taste that is gradually acquired rather than instantly absorbed. One needs to be initiated. Indeed, such record stores still provide a kind of mystic and a ritual space that visibly separates their clientele from the mainstream, and demands effort that seems special vis-à-vis the industry context in which ease of access is almost everything and label-identity almost nothing.

In independent electronic music, labels as well as record shops and clubs have been venues where the craft and art of music combined to give material expression of an era in sound and life. This is one of the aspects our book wishes to explore. These institutions have been instantiations of the self-motivated creative

FIGURE 0.3 ***Records organized by label at Hard Wax store in Kreuzberg, Berlin. Photo by D. Bartmański.***

impulse that Richard Sennett talks about. Following his definition, we realize that a line of continuity can be traced between artists and curators of latest electronic music and ancient craftsmen and art forms. To illuminate the meaning of this deeper desire, we may even go further and draw far-reaching yet intuitive heuristic parallels between specific moments in ancient times and the evolution of electronic dance music scenes in recent decades. Consider this classic observation by the art historian Ernst Gombrich (2017: 81):

> Though artists were still looked upon as craftsmen and, perhaps, despised by the snobs, an increasing number of people began to be interested in their work for its own sake, and not only for the sake of its religious or political functions. People compared the

> merits of the various schools of art; that is to say, of the various methods, styles and traditions which distinguished the masters in different cities. There is no doubt that the comparison and competition between these schools stimulated the artist to ever greater efforts, and helped create that variety which we admire in Greek art.

Indeed, it is not difficult to see that at some level, things have not changed that much: Chicago, Detroit, New York or Berlin are synonymous with underground styles which have their 'masters', 'temples', 'high priestesses' and 'founding fathers'. They have not emerged as such accidentally. Urban ecologies matter as complex bundles of materiality and myth. In his history of rave music and dance culture, *Energy Flash: A Journey Through Rave Music and Dance Culture* (2013:1), Simon Reynolds (2013: 1) symptomatically titled the first chapter 'A Tale of Three Cities: Detroit Techno, Chicago House and New York Garage'. The clubs, DJs, producers and labels that were the places and the signifiers of those scenes became legendary. These pioneering underground scenes of the 1980s gave rise to musical styles epitomized by landmark releases on their independent underground labels. Music was the medium of collective effervescence and forms of anti-mainstream resistance. John Iozia (cited by Reynolds) described – in a doubly revealing way – the New York club The Paradise Garage as at once pagan and ecclesiastical, 'an anthropologist's wet dream … tribal and totally anti-Western'. The clubs were seen as 'Saturday churches' and key players, such as the pioneering DJs Frankie Knuckles or Larry Levan, were first examples of 'the DJ-as-shaman' (Reynolds 2013: 35). Many of the records they span during their dancefloor rituals sold tens of thousands of copies. But it was not just a vibrant culture of pure weekend hedonism.

Derrick May, one of the founders of Detroit techno, emphasized: 'We never just took it as entertainment, we took it as a serious philosophy' (ibid.: 5). We will return to this differentiation later in the book. At this juncture we would like to emphasize that writing independent music culture means accounting for how specific art forms have mixed together the entertainment aspect with the intellectual aspect, each of which is always specifically emplaced and embodied.

In the subsequent wave of musical development of Detroit, labels such as Underground Resistance were even more explicitly iconoclastic and 'dedicated to "fighting the power" not just through rhetoric but through fostering their own autonomy' (ibid.: 252). By the mid-1990s, that energy migrated to cities in Europe such as Berlin, which 'became a haven for many Detroit producers' (ibid.: 265), and which hosted clubs such as Tresor that were both the key signifiers of the underground techno scene and renowned independent labels. In the following decades, it was the grand temple of a club called Berghain that carried that spirit across music and club communities wordwide. It is for this reason that Berghain's label Ostgut Ton – and related imprints that the club showcases – are at the centre of our narrative. By 2016 Berghain was officially recognized by the Berlin-Brandenburg fiscal court as a 'cultural' institution, not an 'entertainment' venue – the first club to make this leap. This not only changed its formal cultural qualification but also positively affected its fiscal obligations, adding yet another symbolic valence to its independent standing.

In other words, despite quite eventful pasts, it is only relatively recently that the underground forms of electronic dance music such as techno or house have become more formally recognized as music cultures rather than youth sub-cultures, as artistic visions rather than mere entertainment practices, as signifiers of lifestyles not just

underground micro-genres. This shifts the writer's perspective from 'subcultural' or counter-cultural to a more broadly cultural one. The mainstream has no monopoly to dictate what 'culture' is. Underground aesthetic production is, quite obviously, also culture. Reconstructing a period of creative development which was needed to fix key cultural parameters of the scenes is an important part of the story we have to tell. This period created an opportunity for the scenes to morph into art forms that branch out and thrive beyond their original niches. As some of our interviewees point out, the scenes and labels may also have lost some of their 'underground' features along the way. We aim to narrate the last phases of this process through the stories of some pivotal independent labels as well as some of their less well-known peers. We focus mainly on those that, despite all the technological and economic changes of the twenty-first century, still stick to a set of basic ideas about doing things on their own. We find this continuity, in the face of obvious changes, worthy of explanation. And it is in this sense that independent electronic dance music can and should be seen as being not so different from punk and post-punk independents in rock music. Indeed, as Tim Palmer – cited by Alex Ogg (2009: 255) in his seminal book *Independence Days* – points out, 'the DIY ethos of punk was also there in house music. Although the music sounded very dissimilar, the spirit was very similar'.

Naturally, one of the main questions we asked our interviewees was how much and what of that initial spirit has survived to the present day. On the one hand, all agree that conditions changed dramatically after the digitalization processes of the first two decades of the twenty-first century. That sea change in the music world is another reason why we direct most of our attention to the labels that started in that period. On the other hand, a recognition has emerged out of our research that, despite all the changes in doing business, a

certain sense of iconoclasm prevails; that being off the radar and low profile, going against the grain, having fun with whatever it is that one genuinely likes, and remaining separate from whatever happens to be the broad current norm – all this remains present as a regulative desire in independent music production. Interestingly enough, these defining sentiments are preserved in the very names of many labels that we talked to: Non Standard Productions, Underground Quality, Blackest Ever Black, Argot, Retreat, Basement Floor Records, A Strangely Isolated Place, Candonga. It is worth looking a bit more closely at two of them now to drive the point home and indicate how deep and wide the cultural meanings of labels can reach.

Sonic smugglers

The first example, the Brazilian label Somatoria do Barulho, and its sublabel Candonga Discos, is one of the more interesting discoveries when it comes to how the symbolic aspect of labels' approach is both locally motivated and tightly connected (rather than loosely linked) to the musical content. Both labels are vinyl imprints only, and were established in 2010 and 2014 respectively in order to re-issue old forgotten Brazilian musical gems and thus project them back to the club scene, while also supporting new artists coming from the contemporary underground in São Paulo and beyond. The main label's name means 'Sum of Noise', and the way it plays on the noise–melody binary is self-explanatory and directly evocative of the label's independent commitment. The sublabel's name goes even further, though, and draws on a thicker web of locally rooted meanings. Caio Baraldo, who runs the label, explained that its name has roots in an African language, and has several interconnected meanings. One is 'a light sense of improvisation, different and perhaps slightly dodgy

way of doing things, improvising your life instead of waiting for an official action'. Another is 'trade of illegal things', or a smuggling activity. As a tongue-in-cheek metaphor, this is a properly 'thick' signifier apt for importing one set of meanings of the 'underground' (unofficial commerce) to another one (official but independent music). This typically Brazilian hybrid meaning underscores the specificity of Caio's label that 'smuggles', as it were, the ignored or neglected artists into the contemporary attention space. This good metaphoric fit between the signifier and the signified is something that characterizes contemporary 'underground' labels more generally, and we will delve deeper into this issue in Chapter 3.

For now, it is worth bearing in mind that in rare cases, music *literally did* mean a dangerous thing, and that records *did need to be*

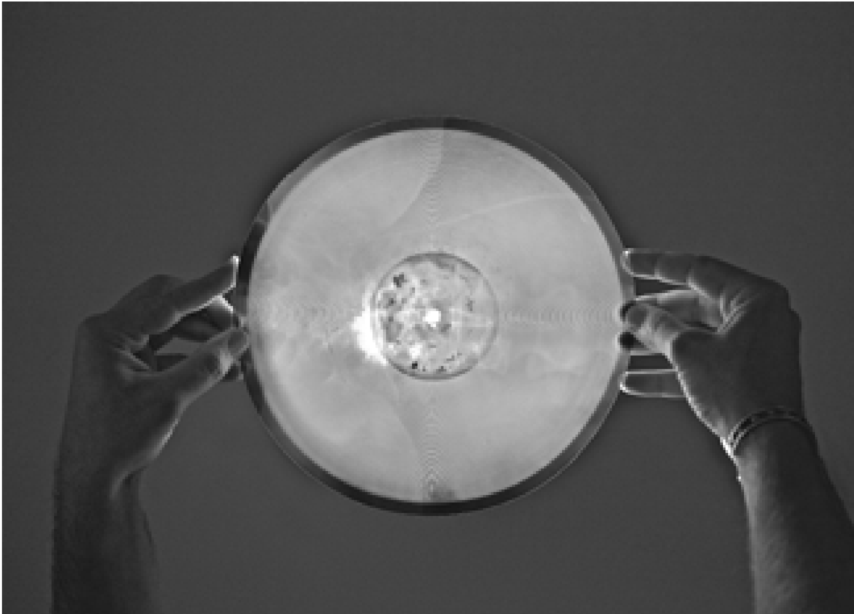


FIGURE 0.4 'Roentgenizdat': ***unofficial 'records' with banned Western music, made of x-ray slides in the late 1940s in Soviet Union. Photo by R. Lutz; from the private collection of D. Bartmański.***

smuggled to certain locations. In the bleak years after the Second World War in the Soviet Union, Western music was banned, and those who wanted to listen to or dance to 1940s tango or jazz there resorted to pressing music on discarded x-ray slides: thin and flexible 'records' became discrete portable 'music on bones'. The lesson is: when music can exist only literally underground, labels cease to exist, but the drive to hear it and celebrate it seems unquenchable.

The non-standard

The second telling example is the Berlin-based label Non Standard Productions, whose name and philosophy can offer another story of how the symbolic set-up of committed independent labels is genuinely motivated by specific taste commitments rather than purely conventional. This imprint was established in 2006 by Tobias Freund but the idea had been in the making for a longer time. Around the mid-2000s, Tobias began releasing techno records under his own first name on Berghain's Ostgut Ton, but felt a need to have an outlet for both more personal and more concealed expressive pursuits venturing into other music genres, or – to be more precise – into musical territories where genre boundaries are less prevalent. His principal inspiration came from the Japanese artist Haruomi Hosono, one of the key figures in Japan's indie movement of the 1970s and 80s. Tobias explains that what amazed him about the music of Japanese artists such as Hosono was their apparently boundless freedom in pursuing whatever they wanted, as well as a strong sense of playfulness and simplicity. The record by Hosono entitled 'Non Standard' captured an essence of what the independent music production was all about to Tobias. It was an evocation of an off-beat avant-garde approach, formulated already in the 1970s and

FIGURE 0.5 ***Tobias Freund, resident artist at Berghain/Ostgut Ton, and owner of his label Non Standard Productions, with the inspirational LP by Haruomi Hosono. Photo by D. Bartmański taken on site at Non Standard Studios, Berlin.***

carried over into the next decades. Tobias saw himself as resisting 'systemic' approaches that by the 1980s have become standard ones in the music industry; he distances himself from the relentless looking for 'hits' and 'standards'; he strives for simplicity both in the composition and organization of his work. Hence the name of his label, and of his collaborative relation with Max Loderbauer known as the Non Standard Institute (NSI).

Of course, independent electronic music is a heterogenous terrain, and in this book we attempt to work out a sense of differences and commonality between the labels we have looked at. In Chapters 2 and 3 we discuss more systematically various approaches and their artistic and symbolic ramifications. But there is a common bottom line.

A sense of artistic control, intrinsic aesthetic motivation and *accountability* to small communities rather than to big standardized markets are pivotal values for the majority of these labels.

The two labels presented above differ in style and form but they are types of similar independent attitudes incarnated and institutionalized. Their 'aesthetic agency' makes them *aesthetic filters*, but while they are doing that they also mediate and help articulate attitudes of an ethical kind.

Talking independent culture

All this may seem nearly intractable at first glance. Heterogenous cultural fields of increasingly political relevance where taste is venerated and the finest of sonic-stylistic distinctions loom large may be difficult to navigate. Indeed, both for insiders and participant observers sometimes it truly is. Style seems properly ineffable or inexpressible, and so do many musical experiences. Perhaps herein lies the very mystery of aesthetic life that music-lovers cherish so much. There is some room to unpack this enigma. Last but not least, musical taste is typically considered completely subjective and

therefore 'not to be discussed' – as the Latin maxim goes, 'de gustibus non est disputandum'. So why do we use 'taste' as a discursive category that supposedly objectifies collective action? We do use it and it does 'objectify' us, whether we like it or not. The question is how it happens and to what ends. We still keep talking about music, and we do so passionately, adjudicating between preferences and negotiating levels of originality, just like it has been done with art throughout the centuries. From a sociological point of view, the expression of taste in and through music is not primarily an individualistic intention, although it ostensibly serves the demands of individualism. In independent electronic music, the expression of taste often is an act of allegiance to a community of listeners, and in this sense the scene at hand is a form of 'imagined community'. It is an intersubjective alignment of shared outlooks. People may 'dance alone' in techno parties, and yet it is the sense of collective effervescence on the dance floor that makes the music reverberate with all its power. Places and spaces may seem secondary to production and reception of musical content, and yet there's no accident that some are more auratic than others. Space matters as a relatively independent variable (Löw 2002). Spatial design and urban morphology shape habits of spatial orientations that in turn contribute to how performance sites and cities assume specific meanings. Underground DJs may disown fame, sometimes literally hiding behind masks, and yet the multitude of dancers orient themselves towards the booth in a half-conscious gesture of communal worship. The significance of the work of labels can be lost on music-lovers and ravers who insist that 'music speaks for itself' and the rest is noise. In the scenes we have surveyed, label managers and curators indeed get less attention than DJs and producers, unless one distinguished personality fulfills all these roles. But as time elapses, scenes come and go and party

memories recede, labels once again prove useful as cultural navigating devices. As noted above, to a sociologist at least, the existence of labels aids the work of a future 'cultural archaeology', because labels represent the zeitgeist and offer stylistic classification schemes. But as lay consumers of music, we all engage in this kind of work too as we trace paths of influence and inspiration without which neither originality nor continuity would be usable notions. Looking into the past to understand the present and to imagine a future is a key part of the process. And revisiting the past is like stepping into the same river which is not quite the same anymore. Insofar as this is the case, labels are symbolic landmarks that materialize music and introduce a semblance of order into the chaos of creative life.

If club music in particular seems to be more about spontaneous vigour than preconceived rigour, we have evidence that the former is actually not sustainable as a cultural form without a modicum of the latter. Labels fix and objectify that elusive and yet irresistible sense of aesthetic belonging and desire to classify.

They do so by acting as rather rigorously unified brands, but – crucially – they also achieve this effect through the indispensable act of concrete materialization that building a recorded catalogue affords.

Catalogues build collections, collections build legacies, legacies build musical identities which in turn help form whole cultures.

And just like 'judging a record by its cover' is a well-known disposition among independent record-buying public, so is a

completist's devotion to a label. Both for producers and consumers labels can be a matter of serious passion, seemingly superficial and fetishistic, yet irresistibly practical as legible forms of organizing the musical content. They happen at an intersection of 'subjective' feelings and attitudes, and 'objectivized' cultural forms and meanings that organize those feelings and enable us to see them as immemorial archetypes of social roles and institutions.

Rituals, temples, churches, altars, shamans, worship, congregations, cults, sacred scripts and holy grails, orthodox and heterodox denominations are still with us in independent electronic dance music scenes, even though there seem to be no fixed rules of 'good' or 'authentic' music. The very existence of the structured practices and classifications that are readily amenable to anthropological interpretation underscores the existence of cultural principles, symbolic boundaries and aesthetic binaries. But again, within the cultural landscape itself, most of these meanings are felt rather than articulated, intuited rather than known, experienced rather than formalized. This does not necessarily make them any less influential than formal norms. Seemingly weaker informal ties can be surprisingly powerful (Granovetter 1973). All kinds of gatekeepers and authorities guard traditions no less than in other domains, even if they seem to be less strict than in other codified aesthetic domains. Rankings and 'best of' lists are now being created in independent music not unlike in the pop industry, where they are vehicles of marketing. Problems of commodification and encroaching mediatization aside, there is nevertheless something compellingly real about the boundaries and bonds forged by independent labels as taste-makers. Timing and emplacement and its affordances make things happen the way they do more than we realize. These 'pre-constrained' assemblages of things, sites and biographies give rise to

the culture's meanings. Practical tacit knowledge based on these assemblages matters, making the comprehension of the ineffable that much more essential to the scenes which base their symbolic cache on rejection of the into-your-face obviousness of the mainstream.

The chapters that follow seek to offer such a comprehension. In this capacity, we again owe something to Ernst Gombrich (2017: 32) who grasped the vexing 'subjectivity' of art's value in a concise manner: 'As there are no rules to tell us when a picture or statue is right, it is usually impossible to explain in words exactly why we feel that it is a great work of art. But that does not mean that one work is just as good as any other, or that one cannot discuss … The old proverb that you cannot argue about matters of taste may well be true, but that should not conceal the fact that taste can be developed.' Labels are taste-developers. And the labels active in the scenes that we are interested in are run by 'craftsmen' who – like Sennett (2009: 262) – tend to believe that not perfection but 'allowing the object a measure of incompleteness, deciding to leave it unresolved' is what constitutes 'good' craft.

Of course, music – the most abstract of aesthetic phenomena – cannot be fully captured through analogies to visual and tactile arts. As Tia DeNora (2016: 392) rightly states, music is 'un-denotative, flexible, mobile, a virtual-physical repository of embodied practice. It is a trans-migratory, temporal, mnemonic, symbolic and sensory medium'. The aforementioned general insights about what constitutes the character of artistic aura and about the process of bottom–up taste development can be nonetheless applicable. And it is especially so in independent electronic music, where top–down promotion and information has never been foregrounded, and where embodied motivations, instruments, club architectures and technologies of life

are of central importance to how meaning arises and persists. It is symptomatic that today DJs and electronic music producers are often referred to as 'artists.' For these reasons the concept of affordance proved a productive tool for us to think about musical curators called labels. It was already in the 1920s that the psychologist Kurt Lewin developed a related notion of 'affordance character' (*Aufforderungscharakter*), denoting the mutually constitutive character of a field situation and perception. Affordance means a relational quality of something that makes it amenable to specific kinds of uses and interpretations. Today, the elaborated sociological definitions of affordance such as the one cited by us earlier are used by sociologists (McDonnell 2010) and archaeologists (Hodder 2010) to show how meanings of artworks and artists emerge out of complex human-non-human entanglements instead of mere conventional attribution.

Bringing all these names and metaphors, notions and stories, insights and intuitions, past and present, into a conversation with each other creates a context in which we hope to describe and perhaps also demystify some aspects of contemporary electronic music independents. What fills that context with the substance of real life, though, are the interviews we conducted with the labels' heads, managers, curators and producers. To write about independent music culture, one must talk about it first. Showcasing the voices of the scene's many committed players is essential, not only to present exemplary cases and shed light on a grey eminence or two, but also to concretize the story with accounts of those whose biographies and views are critically important, yet often hidden. We prioritized our interviews over journalists' opinions and second-hand media discourses. Talk may be cheap, indeed, but only when it is not lived.

Thus it is precisely these biographically framed accounts that the aforementioned anthropological perspective proposed by Alfred

Gell (1998:10) recognizes as giving weight to social understanding. As he explains, it

> 'tends to focus on the "act" in the context of the "life" – or more precisely – "the stage of life" – of the agent (. . .) This specific biographical depth of focus has of course also a spatial correlate; the spaces of anthropology are those which are traversed by agents in the course of their biographies. Moreover, it dictates a certain view of social relations (. . .) Sociological relations are, so to speak, "perennial", like the relations between classes in capitalism (. . .) Anthropological relationships are real and biographically consequential ones, which articulate to the agent's biographical "life project"'.

The musical relationships we trace are of this kind, because 'music is much more than a form of communication and much more than the sonic representation of meaning; it is a constitutive ingredient of association' (DeNora 2016: 397).

This is another moment when the benefits of combining sociological and ethnographic methods become clearer and when the role of interviewees emerges as indispensable. In this book we provide a broader cultural context of independent music-making (Chapter 1), deepen the meaning of the 'independent' in two subsequent ethnographically driven chapters, and then we put these narratives into what we consider a key sociological context of 'urban ecology' (Chapter 4). Most of the conversations were based on mutual trust and a reciprocated sense of documenting a self-conscious culture. This does not mean we paint a pretty portrait of our friends. 'Independent' doesn't mean 'cool angels against mundane devils'. The legendary John Peel expressed his reservation about such a simplified notion of the independent when he stressed that 'there

is always the danger of assuming that "indie" somehow means "good" or morally correct, neither of which I think are right at all . . . the idea that it represents an area of superior morality is a non-starter. But the fact is, the best thing that came out of punk was the demystification of the whole process of making records' (cited in Ogg 2009: iii). Similarly, and importantly, the French sociologist Didier Eribon (2013: 224) provides an understanding that frames Peel's observation in a more general fashion important for our book:

> Absolute 'subversion' exists no more than does absolute 'emancipation'. Something is subverted at a particular moment; something gets slightly displaced; you push something aside; you take a step in a different direction. To put it in Foucauldian terms, we should not be dreaming of some kind of impossible 'emancipation'. Our best hope will be to breach certain frontiers that history has put into place and that hem in our existence.

Before we demonstrate in detail what our stories of independent record labels can reveal about the relevant 'frontiers' and symbolic boundaries, and practices of aesthetic and social 'subversion', we present a broader cultural account of what 'being independent' meant in the recent past and what it appears to be meaning today.

1

Being independent

Both *independent* and *mainstream* are imagined categories, socially contextualized and relational. They are terms describing clusters of real experiences rather than singular entities. Such categorizations are relatively fluid – what is considered mainstream is not forever fixed, just as the notion of what qualifies as independent changes over time. Nevertheless, even though their boundaries have been blurred, the idea of a binary opposition between mainstream and independent remains a useful orienting device. The mainstream–independent opposition remains useful because certain practical binaries – such as standard vs non-standard, experimental vs profit-oriented, art-for-art's-sake vs commercial art, or bohemian vs bourgeois – can be drawn upon dynamically by actors and mapped onto this classical master binary. This pattern was thematized by Pierre Bourdieu (1993: 64) in his seminal work *The Field of Cultural Production*, where he observed that the perception and appreciation of such binary 'schemes' are resources that mediate meaningful engagements within a given field of cultural production. Each field is a space of objective possibilities but it is also an imagined and emergent set of social relations. Making independent music is no different. Like other fields of cultural production, it is necessary for the actors engaged in it to

respond adequately to field-specific problems that are nevertheless framed by the same constitutive binaries found in other fields. As Bourdieu (ibid.) observed regarding the imagined spaces of cultural production, 'writers and artists ... do not react to an "objective reality" but to a "problem-raising situation"'.

Let's think inductively about the basic meaning of independence by examining some cases in order to understand its boundaries and to provide a background against which we might begin to appreciate the idea of the independent in contemporary electronic music. To do this, we look for some of the most notable independent artists or albums, and some of the iconic and popular representations of the independent musical form. We start with the case of a recent global bestselling independent artist, namely Adele. Yes, that's right – Adele. It might seem incongruous that we are writing about the artist Adele in the context of musical independence. Adele's albums '21' and '25' each topped the US music charts for two years running, '21' in 2011 and 2012, and '25' in 2015 and 2016. In Great Britain, where Adele's mainstream popularity was cemented and where her albums also peaked at the highest position, her musical releases appeared on the label XL Recordings. XL is an independent London-based record label, once famous for launching The Prodigy to the international stage, and now one company within the largest conglomerate of independent record labels called the Beggars Group. Moreover, XL Recordings sometimes relies on making distribution deals with major companies such as Columbia and Sony in certain market territories, such as the US. This was the case with Adele's releases. The Beggars Group is in itself an interesting case as well, because it partially or wholly owns and distributes the products of some of the most historically important independent labels in the UK, such as 4AD, Beggars

Banquet, Rough Trade, XL Recordings, and Mo Wax. Adele is a remarkably popular, talented and unique performer whose records have struck a major chord with millions of listeners globally, but are her albums 'independent' because they were released on XL Recordings? Is it in the spirit of the term to include her in such a nomenclature? In part, the fact that Adele's globally bestselling albums were released by a company independent by dint of its 'independence' from the global majors tells us something important about the changing meaning of 'independent' in the music industry.

Let's step back a little first to consider some important historical context for the growth of independents before we further consider the status of Adele as 'independent'. The fact that this large corporate group, the Beggars Group – though one still technically 'independent' – now manages such an array of important post-punk and indie labels is itself notable and reflects the consolidation of smaller labels into larger ones as a results of phases of market crisis and consolidation (see Taylor 2016; Webb 2007). In the 1980s, for example, many larger and successful independent labels like Island, Motown and Virgin were sold to or bought up by major companies. This period was one where what we now understand as emblematic independent labels of the era were taken over by larger corporate entities. At the same time, the notion of independent was irrevocably changed in this period, being atrophied to become 'indie'. While indie became a hugely popular staple, the term also became culturally polluted in the consciousness of critical audiences who considered it a sell-out. Richard King (2012:487) observes this process of the retreat of the UK independent labels in his book *How Soon is Now?*. Drawing attention to Warp Records, his statement quintessentially sums up the way the spirit of independent music

making moved into different scenes and began to have different incarnations:

> By the midpoint of the 1990s the momentum of the independent sector had stalled almost to a halt: . . . the most creatively successful independent label of the era had nothing in common with the perky ordinariness of Britpop. Warp Records, or Warp, as it instantly became known, had started casually in the back room of a Sheffield record shop.

This shift in independent production was associated with a large-scale consolidation of economic power within the music industry. In their review, Peterson and Anand (2004) observe that at the turn of the 1950s and 1960s an important change marked the music industry. On the one hand, smaller independent firms were better placed to capitalize on cultural changes in the 1960s. As they note, 'in the rock era, innovative, small, loosely structured organizations gained market share by being attuned to changing tastes of a particular slice of the public' (Peterson and Anand 2004: 313). On the other hand, changes in law, regulation and technology enabled these independent smaller labels to remain on the market and successfully compete with big corporations. By the end of the rock era, however, many of the successful independent labels had been bought by the majors, who consolidated on their successes in popularizing niche markets and styles. Hracs (2012) describes this process of consolidation, commenting that in 1999 the music industry was controlled by five large majors, concentrated in a selection of global cities: Tokyo, London, Berlin and in the US, Los Angeles, New York and to a lesser extent, Nashville. Agglomeration processes were based on achieving economies of scale and vertical integration of many aspects of the business, from recording,

production and pressing, and distribution, turning them 'in-house' (Hracs 2012: 444). Hracs also notes that during this growth phase there were few external market disruptions, only technological interventions and innovations that represented opportunities for growth and expansion, and profit, rather than market disruption and re-organization. File sharing and MP3s eroded the power of both independents and majors and consolidated power in fewer companies, including companies offering digital and streaming services. A consequence was also the 'wiping out' of many traditional music retailers – one estimate is that between 2000 and 2003, around 1,200 music retailers closed down as the music world largely turned to digitality and streaming (Hracs 2012).

Many researchers and theorists have commented on the commodification of music production through the twentieth century. This is part of a broader cultural and political critique of alienation, exploitation of labour and the systemic erosion of authenticity within the relation between makers and listeners. Yet, with the rise of flexible means for making, producing, releasing and also consuming music associated with digitality and the internet, there has supposedly been – at least ostensibly – a democratization of music production, dissemination and consumption. This process also manifests in the rise of the so-called mythical 'bedroom music-makers', new digital tools for making music, and small-venue, ad hoc spaces for gigs. An emblematic outcome of this trend toward the 'DIY' in the music industry has been a proliferation of small and micro music labels that allow more actors to become creators.

In an important sense, this changing historical context of the music industry was one important space for opening up the growth of a different generation of independent labels. At the same time, it was also an opportunity, especially for electronic musicians, as the

availability of technologies for making, recording and distributing music become cheaper, more mobile, and 'domesticated'. Granted, since the 1970s there have been some stellar examples of independent labels going on to bigger things or achieving the (perhaps dreaded) status of becoming 'emblematic' of the indie movement – Rough Trade, Factory, Mute, Creation, 4AD, to mention some famous UK examples. But in the last few decades there seem to be more and more smaller and independent labels springing up. This can be broadly contextualized within social changes of work in the digital era, as well as of the entrepreneurialization of the music industry more broadly. The concentration of a relatively mobile, culturally voracious and lifestyle-conscious youth population in metropolitan areas is also relevant to the independent scenes we explore.

In the British context, Alex Ogg (2009) documents the complex ties and personalities that forged the UK independent scene from the punk and post-punk era through until the mid-1980s. But prefacing his remarkable descriptions of the ties, ideas and networks that drove those labels, Ogg points to an era of growth and relative openness to independent music after the Second World War. Enabled by technological factors like the growth of home listening technologies, radio, and the popularity of television shows like *American Bandstand,* which showcased and produced mass musical celebrities, this was an era associated with development of new genres such as rock and roll and soul and was, in Ogg's assessment, largely understandable as a relative 'golden age' for independents (Ogg 2009: 13). Additionally, this era was relatively much less tied around a small number of large companies who had achieved substantial vertical and horizontal integration. Alongside being an intense period of musical innovation, this relatively free space of

production meant that small labels were able to flexibly respond to market, audience and artistic developments. In their history of small labels in the postwar era, Kennedy and McNutt say that 'the 1950s decade was the golden era for small independents, which embraced blues, gospel, modern jazz, country, R&B, and rock'n'roll' (Kennedy and McNutt 1999: xvii).

Quoting the label chief and journalist Greg Shaw, who was a major player in the development of garage and lo-fi rock via his label Bomp! Records, which the *New York Times* described as 'a major force in the spread of underground music and fanzine publishing since the mid-1960s' (Sisario 2004), Ogg states that 'between 1956 and a decade later, some 150,000 independent records were released, on not less than 500 imprints' (Ogg 2009: 13). Ogg (2009: 13) also points to the growing reach and mobility of booming locally and regionally popular musical genres like R&B and soul, alongside emerging mass technologies that afforded their mobility:

> *Sun* prospered with Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins et al, *Specialty* with Little Richard, *Chess* with Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley, *Vee-Jay* with John Lee Hooker and Jimmy Reed and *Imperial* with Fats Domino. Dozens of new labels sprang up.

Roy Shuker (2005) estimates that around 1,000 new labels were launched in the years between 1948 and 1954. The success of independents in this era can be ascribed in part to their different organizational structures and practices for releasing records (Ogg 2009). Major labels opted for a Fordist approach, serving records in industrial quantities to huge territories. Such an approach relied on them being able to have an equally industrial A&R policy: those artists deemed to have best-selling appeal and national reach had priority. The point was, however, that the independent

and small labels were in touch with energetic and innovative musical movements and scenes on the ground. Quite literally, they had their 'ears to the ground' as participants in independent scenes.

This was the case with the aforementioned Bomp! Records' Greg Shaw, but it is also a feature more generally of the independent approach. In a short obituary honouring his career published in the *New York Times*, Ben Sisario (2004) notes that Shaw 'founded and operated a series of magazines and record labels that had limited sales but much influence'. Sisario observes that Shaw preferred to describe himself as 'a developer of scenes' rather than a music businessman, noting that Shaw once said of his approach to promoting and releasing independent music: 'I don't really look for isolated bands. I look for a movement that I think is going in the right direction and then I put my energy behind it' (Sisario 2004). This last statement also points to the possible economic and artistic exchanges whereby independent labels acted as 'talent developers' for the majors, or as scene and sounds innovators, with major labels sometimes buying out artists or even whole label catalogues.

Now we can revisit and conclude our earlier discussion about Adele's status as an independent musician. The head of her record company, XL Recordings, Richard Russell, also talks about his unique approach to releasing music and moves away from describing XL as a business. In spite of operating with very large sums of money – Adele's signing from XL to Columbia for releases in the US market was reputedly worth around £90 million to XL Recordings – he asserts that it tries to operate with 'anti-business' principles. The performative discourse of artistic value, artistic credibility and communicative relevance wins out over money. In an interview

published in the *Guardian* in 2011, the XL boss talks further about the way his label operates. Rather than look for celebrity, easy-money, and short routes to artistic fame and sales volume, he claims that XL Recordings pursues an approach which is 'truly artistic . . . an obliteration of the rules and the norms' within the music industry. Embracing a philosophy of focusing on the value of music for arts' sake, Russell explains that XL looks to sign artists who are not interested in the job of music, but make music for the love of it, asserting that 'It's much more about the person and their ideas and strength of character and the direction they want to go in'. Richard Russell (quoted in Jonze 2011) went on:

> We get offered 200,000 unsolicited demos a year and yet only sign about one artist a year. We're basically saying no to everything, lots of big artists as well. You need an element of fearlessness to do that. It's basically an anti-business philosophy.

This stated resistance to corporatization is consistent with the template for being independent, emphasizing artistic vision and integrity as one of its ultimate values.

Yet this doesn't fully explain the success of Adele, an 'independent' artist also at the very heart of mainstream appeal across multiple global markets. Some commentators ask of Adele: 'Would she have been as successful if she'd been signed to a major? Would she have been asked to lose weight and get some media training to be more polished when dealing with journalists? Would she have been put together with younger and "hipper" songwriter/producers? . . . Probably' (Lindvall 2012, in the *Guardian*). But a significant part of the story is that Adele ended up relying on one of the global music giants

to move her music internationally, especially into US markets. A common issue for independent labels and musicians who operate across size and scale is getting their music heard more widely; independents need to get it noticed online, on radio, and stocked in physical stores. As even larger independents like XL often struggle to move outside local and regional networks, they rely on distribution companies to promote and move their stock, and sometimes to fund production plans. In effect, they become 'hybrid' business entities, sitting somewhere between independent status and major label scale, embracing an independent philosophy of releasing music in line with their aesthetic and artistic goals, but sometimes relying on financial and infrastructural deals with powerful majors. This is an example of how the boundaries between independent and mainstream are blurred. However, what XL can do is vastly different to what a label like Stroboscopic Artefacts or A Strangely Isolated Place, or Room40 can or want to do. The latter are much more specialized in terms of genres, operate at vastly different scales and therefore have access to different opportunity structures. This difference is not merely one of scale and economics, but about taste, openness and purity of aesthetic vision. XL operates with a more open-ended stylistic roster that enables cross-over translation to mainstream audiences, while the smaller labels we studied would not consider this part of their vision, or might even consider it in conflict with the identity they want to project and sustain. For Adele, to operate effectively within the expansive and complicated US markets, her music had to be released on a major label such as Columbia Records, a subsidiary of Sony Music, with all the marketing and promotion vehicles this implies. For DJs and producers that we interviewed here such as Jennifa Mayanja or Dana Ruh, this business strategy is simply not part of what they do as musical artists who subscribe to a DIY ethic of making and performing music.

Independent as types of connectedness and resistance performed

'Independent' carries a significant freight of meaning which is much more powerful than the appropriated, commodified and contentious term 'indie'. To be sure, although the two are not mutually exclusive categories, there should be no confusing them, conceptually or practically. 'Indie' became known as a music style, originally expressive of certain alternative rock and post-punk sensibilities, whose symbolic currency got subsequently laundered by the corporate music industry to fit global mainstream markets. Larkin, presumably with some irony, defines indie as 'music after the Sex Pistols played by creative on the edge musicians with lots of nice guitars that sound a bit like the Byrds, Velvet Underground and MC5' (Larkin, cited in Shuker 2005: 145). Richard King (2012: xvii) also observes somewhat wryly that 'indie' music 'is a genre, a type of music played by four or five white young men'. He notes the evolution of the etymology of 'indie', 'from a definition of means of production and distribution to a meaningless adjective', and flatly states that as ubiquitous as it is today, the word 'indie' 'was long ago dispensed with by the independent music business'. Alex Ogg (2009), in his account of the history of UK independent labels understands 'independent' not as a style or sound, but more broadly as characterized principally by an independence from major labels in terms of the production, making, distribution and marketing of music. Keeping these four fundamental dimensions of the definition in place, one would not describe Adele's releases as fully 'independent'.

Some fuzziness over the meaning of the independent category remains, and this fuzziness regarding what is rightly considered

'independent' explains why it is a contested term. Lack of clarity about the meaning of the term arises partly from the fact that the words 'indie' and 'independent' remain relevant as marketing tools for corporations and perhaps as 'historical' musical genres, and partly because consumers and listening communities do not necessarily have full information about all the conditions under which cultural goods are produced. Fully independent producers, to be sure, are more likely than others to specify the production chains and actors involved in making their product. Additionally, because 'independent' relates at least somewhat to the aural qualities of music and their performative traces – how it sounds, its production, its adherence to particular song or track structures and sonic tropes – different interpretive communities are not necessarily likely to agree on the qualities and meaningful connotations of the music they hear. This might seem especially the case within independent communities, where music is either technologically and sonically extending boundaries in ways that are aesthetically challenging, or where the intellectual associations of music are emphasised. As an example of this latter instance, consider *Room40*'s Lawrence English, label chief and noted ambient artist who states in an interview published on *National Public Radio* that 'in a live performance, I want to know how the body encounters sound. The body is a heavily politicised zone, and sound encounters the body in a particular way. Sound occupies the body—that is part of vibrational affect. The live performance is very much about that activation of the body. Each person experiences it differently, but there is a collective experience of responding to the same source' (Lawrence English, quoted in Frere-Jones 2017).

In relation to independent music labels, no matter even if they are one-person ventures, being independent doesn't always mean alone, in the sense of a one-person operation, but commitment to

a particular ethos of underground production and strict refusal of certain values associated with commercial music production (Hesmondhalgh 1998, 1999). In our interview with Jenus Baumecker, this point was made unequivocally clear when we asked him if he would use the word 'independent' to describe Ostgut Ton. Jenus replied that the very character of the label demands it; 'it wouldn't even exist if it wasn't independent. It would be totally impossible.' Pushed further on what defines the independent label, Jenus explained that:

> It is on the look-out [sic], but it has a particular sensibility that it cultivates. I think the question is not whether or not what you do is commercial, but if it is all high quality. If you do something that on the first look seems very anti-commercial, if it's like real art or something, then it's still possible for it to have a following big enough to make it sustainable. So I think you should always think about the quality of what you do. And the rest will come naturally if what you do is good.

Kiran Sande, chief at Blackest Ever Black, a label formerly located in Berlin and now based in London, known for releasing an eclectic musical roster that intersects with techno, doom, ambient and gothic, also expresses to us an understanding of the independent as a type of artistic vocation, an openness to extending and cultivating one's tastes and experiences. Talking to us over coffee in Kreuzberg, Berlin, Kiran put it to us very clearly when he reflected on what defines the attitude of the independent artist:

> Whatever era they lived in they'll have this attitude, a good one: 'I'm selfishly making music for myself. I'm not making it, or doing anything in order for it to be profitable.'

We can give another example of this. Luca Morterallo – aka *Lucy*, his 'nom de techno' – is an Italian-born and Berlin-based musical artist and producer. When asked by Dominik if the idea of independence is helpful to understand the label he founded and runs, Stroboscopic Artefacts, Lucy asserts that it is at the very heart of his work with the label, evoking the idea of making art free from the 'chains' of mainstream expectation:

> For me it's *the* point. The *key*. For me it's not just about financial independence. It's also about making a difference with mainstream culture. That is for the main point. The mainstream culture changes a lot in circumstances. Today it's this in six months it's blah blah. Boom. It's all given that the public is totally fine with that. Today it's dubstep, tomorrow it's pop. That's it. . . . While for us it's a bit different because what we're trying to do is build our own fashion let's say . . . *Independence means being able to not submit, in the sense of submissive, to not submit to certain normative rules that you otherwise have to stick* to . . . *It means getting out of certain chains*. And I'm not just talking about financial chains. I'm mainly talking about approach and intention of expression of the self, and what is related to that. So, like, record label, like platforms that allow you to do that [*italics added*].

Undoubtedly, punk movements were a vital influence on both the DIY philosophy associated with being independent, and the related artistic philosophy of making things first and foremost to 'please oneself'. Invariably, the idea of a commercial mainstream becomes the reviled and polluted. As he usually does, John Lydon sums up the matter plainly and with some coarse erudition reflecting on a career riding the tightrope of being independent and driving home the idea that independence is defined as a position against the

mainstream: 'at some point you have to admit that the masses are incredibly fucking stupid, and if you're pandering to them you'll find that they'll change you and not the other way round . . . I'm quite happy to know that 90 per cent of the people out there listen to shit because to be a diamond in a mud-pile, first you need a mud-pile' (John Lydon, quoted in an interview on Teamrock, 2016).

This takes us back to the operational definition of independent. Surely even the most micro of labels and the most extreme musical performances operate within certain commercial entanglements and play to particular aesthetic and stylistic communities, meaning they are generally not exclusively independent actors or entities, but almost always tightly connected ones. This does not necessarily mean that they are the infamous 'pseudo-independents' Everett True highlighted, concocted as subsidiaries of majors which are made to look and act as if they were somehow truly independent of concerns of commercial music production. It must be remembered that to make and distribute music, and also to have some relevance to particular musical communities of taste, all artists and labels are in some sense connected and entangled; they are not – and can never be – 'independent' in the literal sense. Indeed, in many cases, independent labels who want their physical music releases to be widely accessible need to strike distribution deals with specialized and often larger corporate entities, who also distribute or stock releases for many other labels (Lee 1995). This means that there is sometimes an interaction – both financial, aesthetic and organisationally – between independents and other independent distributors, stores and labels, or between independents and major labels, as described by Lee (1995). Accordingly, for example, releases by Berlin label Ostgut Ton are distributed by Kompakt Distribution, an arm of Cologne's Kompakt Records that offers 'global distribution

of digital and physical releases alongside an ever-growing list of label services so independents can thrive from the ground up' (see kompakt.fm/distribution). But this entanglement between label businesses also works both ways and cuts across business, economic and cultural dimensions. Majors need access to independent labels' musical and cultural capital – their ability to find fresh, scene-based and 'real' sounds with established currency in 'organically formed' listening communities; independents may sometimes need access to major's cash and resources, as well as to their networks to get their music heard by wider audiences, or to just survive economically (Lee 1995). However, for a fiercely independent label reaching out to a major carries a significant risk of what cultural sociologists call 'symbolic pollution'.

In many cases, crossing over to major channels of production or distribution and marketing is to cross the point of 'no return'; banishment from one's artistic community of independent producers.

The risk has a distinctly socio-cultural character. For majors, taking an independent act on board means a chance of a 'new discovery' and a potentially risky investment as the larger businesses are driven by profit motives rather than expressive desires. Here the risk has a distinctly financial character.

Independent as phenomenological category

We often think of being independent as defined simply by a rejection of and practical disengagement from corporate and economic settings

and values in music-making. However, being independent is just as much a set of affective, moral and aesthetic structures and practices than it is an objective economic relation. That is, the independent cultural good generally – and in this case, the musical product – is discursively, materially and morally made in the context of specific spatio-temporal settings. Being independent is a quality of music-making and music-listening whose character we trace in this book, but which emerges from particular discursive, material and spatial entanglements with music-listeners, music-makers and places where music communities and networks are born and thrive. In the end, being independent signals a position on artistic production and an aesthetic attitude which require a certain relationship to a type of meaningful 'art world' (Becker 1982) of scenes, styles and sonic signatures.

In developing this idea of *being dependent* in social communities and scenes, we can see a series of relational entanglements in how independent music is made, distributed and sold. Any 'independent' cultural good must be interpreted and 'made' through communally oriented modes of sensing, tasting, hearing and feeling 'independent' cultural goods. Sensing the independent – a sub-category of experience, and a phenomenological category making it – requires attunement to and activation of particular qualities. As Antoine Hennion (2007) suggests in his theory of taste attachments, any taste is a product of combined sensitizations and techniques, and therefore we argue that knowing the independent is a process whereby we 'feel differences infinitely multiplying, multiplying indissociably "within" the objects tasted and "within" the taster's sensitivity . . . to taste is to make feel, and to make oneself feel, to feel oneself doing' (Hennion 2007:101). This general abstract insight, we suggest, can profitably be applied to a more concrete understanding of the making and reception of independent musical endeavours.

Independent music is something brought into being by the sensitization of communities of makers and publics to the qualities of a music's making and hearing, and its contextualization within that community's scene rituals and rules. Independent scenes are sensory formations, not just discursive or economic ones.

In analysing the meanings of punk and the plurality of punk scenes, Erik Hannerz highlights his goal as understanding 'how patterned sets of meanings have as their consequence a diversity in styles and identification, and how participants work the boundaries so as to define and protect what is deemed as sacred and central to participants' lives, communicated, experienced, and interpreted through cultural structures based on differences and similarities' (Hannerz 2015: 16). Crucially, as highlighted and suggested by Hannerz (2015) based on his study of translocal punk scenes, what is defined as independent must always be contrasted to its binary opposite, the mainstream, or we might also suggest *the commercial* in a profit-maximizing sense. Both exist as a type of foundational culture structure that informs the way product, experience and hearing are evaluated. It is a type of cultural formula or code that communicates experience and helps interpret it.

As we have mentioned in the prologue, the independent electronic labels, especially the ones associated with underground club scenes, share with punk not only the DIY sensibility but also the rejection of the mainstream norms as a pivotal principle. They are therefore amenable to a similar kind of general cultural understanding, even though stylistic elements of underground electronic music are vastly different from rock and punk music expression. Paraphrasing Hannerz (2015: 22), understanding the independent can be undertaken by tracing how participants construct and understand their difference to the mainstream and commercial, profit-driven music industry. This

is carried out using various types of boundary judgments, practices and moral frameworks that locate 'the mental maps and symbolic boundaries through which these individuals define "us" and "them", simultaneously identifying the most salient principles of classification and identification that are operating behind these definitions' (Lamont and Aksartova 2002: 3). It is the aesthetic content and formal qualities of such processes we set out to analyse in this work.

Seeing the independent across multiple social sites, not just sonic commodities, we can observe it in the physical spaces for buying music and in this example we can profitably see how independence relates to perception and experience within spatial settings. Music-listening is not just a matter of what songs or artists you listen to. In underground electronic music scenes that we pay special attention to, 'song' in the traditional sense is not an aesthetic form that structures people's understandings of creative process and interpretation. Instrumental 'tracks' amenable to mixing and extended 'soundscapes' in abstract ambient compositions are more common modes of approaching the musical medium. Having spent a good deal of time understanding vinyl music markets in particular, one of the interesting patterns we notice is that in the principal independent record stores it is not necessarily the artist – if it was ever the case – who rules in how records are organized and presented for sale, but the record label. In stores that support translocal and avant-garde music scenes, and which in turn support independent artists and the specialist musical genres, the stock is frequently organized by record label and style/genre, rather than artist.

An important generalization can be made, which we hope to comprehensively support in this book, that in mainstream markets, labels are record companies and as such only the background markers of quality and machines that constantly churn popular

musical outputs, working towards the artist as a pop star and sales, and trying to build big stage careers. Economic capital is principally important in this context. There is no special label brand, let alone cultural identity, to protect; it's star/artist driven, and big volume. In independent markets, in contrast, labels have been front-stage signifiers of artistic style or attitude, of local meaning and scene-related capital, innovation and even cultural identity that can involve ideas and practices of resistance, critique and provocation. Especially in underground electronic scenes, integrity and style have usually been more important than star-system and profit margins, even though today the technological and economic changes reduce the labels' physical output and the associated risks. Cultural and symbolic capital remains at least as important as financial capital; it is just that volume has been simply of a lower order. The radical contemporary decrease in record sales compared for example to the 1990s when producers and DJs in demand could hope to sell even hundreds of thousands of records, means that club performances become more important not only for establishing oneself economically but also for building an artistic name that epitomizes a style. Marketing-driven rankings, and the resulting hierarchies and stardom system, creep into previously underground scenes that used to eschew such forms of publicity.

A few examples from the field illustrate our point about the centrality of the label in independent music scenes. In 2016, the influential music label and website The Vinyl Factory listed the store Hard Wax in Berlin first in its list of '1,000 places to visit before you die' for record collectors (see Figure 1.1). But what would a visit to the store be like for a newcomer to the electronic music Berlin scene, or the vinyl scene generally? The store is optimally located for an independent venue: hidden away inside two old typical Kreuzberg

courtyards, through a not-so-obvious door at the bottom of a large building, then up three rather forbidding and dark flights of stairs covered in graffiti art, stickers and tags that are either creepy or cool, intimidating or exciting, depending on how one sees it. The entrance is intimidating in a dystopic way, like a living artwork that one might step into. On the third floor, one opens a heavy door into a smallish room of rough industrial aesthetics, full of records, decks for listening and a sales counter.

Should one be an unsuspecting or neophyte vinyl enthusiast, navigating the space will likely be unfamiliar or confusing, or at worst alienating. Shopping for vinyl by looking for artists that one might recognize becomes a waste of time in this context. A different kind of musical knowledge and cultural competence is required.

FIGURE 1.1 ***Underground aesthetics: the entrance to Hard Wax record store, specializing in techno, house, dub and reggae music. Photo by D. Bartmański.***

Here, the stock is organized exclusively by record label not by artist. Rare or personalized producers' works are prominently exposed on the walls and these serve to remind the community of key artistic statements in the field. The labels are in turn classified by geographical regions: Germany, Europe, UK, US. For most people, the labels stocked in Hard Wax will be unknown. The store then becomes a type of test of cultural capital and scene-related musical acumen. We reiterate one of our basic arguments: what matters in independent contexts is the label – its style and connectedness to the scene-inspired 'authentic' goals and ambitions, and aesthetic interventions can and often do speak more than any one artist. The label becomes a token of musical taste, sonic style, and of artistic ambition. In some cases, the label is an extension of the personal taste and musical cache of a respected producer who curates the catalogue. Unless the imprint is set up exclusively for the purpose of releasing the music of the label's owner, the hope is that in time it will assume a life of its own.

The bigger picture here, in a context where values around commodity and production stories are shifting and where digitality and immediacy can obliterate ideas of provenance and locality, is that the idea of 'being independent' means a great deal.

Semiotically, the notion of independent works alongside a universe of other linguistic signifiers: local, small-scale, authentic, ethical, experimental, subsistent, sustainable and, above all, free from the influence of big, global capital.

Being independent means enmeshment within (trans)local communities rather than global capital networks, of placing emphasis on intrinsic dimensions of value rather than economic ones, and giving value to the pure or artistic side of production, rather than the economic

ones. Indeed, this valuing or artistic output is necessarily entwined with a need to focus on the money aspects of production. Attaining the 'simplicity of essences' where 'things appear to mean something by themselves' (Barthes 1978 143) requires careful narration around the status and meaning of the qualities of musical production.

Independence as fragmentation and flexibilization

Although there is undoubtedly a hierarchy of performers in artistic and independent musical cultures, the idea of pop stars as celebrities is largely eschewed. Moreover, for small-scale production, widespread celebrity status is not an issue. It is almost as if mainstream rock/pop music and Anglo-American rock as a musical canon never needed genres, categories, sub-genres and micro-genres. As a mythically and really monolithic body of work, it simply existed, supported by faceless but large companies that functioned as brands in the sense they signalled a certain quality and style of musical composition, production and performance. The world of music was smaller and apparently simpler until the global and digital revolution opened up possibilities of both music production and consumption – AM or FM, music store or record club stocking corporate music labels, cassette or vinyl? Now, thanks to globalization, digitality, the internet and travel, music is produced and consumed globally and translocally, meaning it spans the earth but is locally networked within scenes and hubs that interconnect according to tastes, friendships and ties. No longer is the music universe represented by the universal idea of a music canon – musical creation, innovation and music consumption is informed by the growth of more and more styles of genres.

Despite not being connected to corporate entities via core activities of release, distribution or advertising, independent music labels might promote a different approach to the meanings of work and production but are economic enterprises that risk real capital and reputation and, more or less, typically operate like businesses in terms of their goals to sell distinctive products, build symbolic or 'brand' capital, and expand their market reach or impact. Contradictorily, while they deal with the same problems that other small businesses face around finance, distribution and costs, for the most part they are explicitly not meant to feel or work like traditional small businesses. As our interviewees frequently tell us, and as we describe in greater detail later in this volume, independent music labels operate and feel more like communities: families and tribes of like-minded listeners and music-makers who reject mass musical entertainment and support music made for the sake of making music and for the sake of a specific vision shared by a community, not for a mass market.

Here there are distinct collective bonds between label and listener and audience communities. We are reminded here of the deep, soft beats and repetitive keyboard line Richard D. James aka *Aphex Twin* put to music on his track 'We are the music makers', replete with its evocative sampled lyrical refrain: 'We are the music makers. And we are the dreamers of the dreams.' The sonic signatures and material signifiers of independence come to stand for political and cultural positions, and this happens often around the meaning of genre, and the attendant aspects of listening and hearing the genre that are involved. Commenting on the meanings around notions of community in some independent scenes and the focus on the space of the club, Stephen Lee notes that the 'bond was complex, involving within it a variety of social statements about sexuality, sexual orientation, and concepts of social propriety. The industrial dance

genre is difficult to conceptualize without the dance club as a key element in its dissemination and promotion' (Lee 1995: 27).

With internet, digitality, changing ways of making music, dynamic city and club scenes, shifting economies of music production and consumption, all of which arguably add up to a type of democratization of music (Hracs 2012), we now see thousands of small-scale, independent record labels popping up in and around cities with large creative scenes, with established club and night-time economies, and where there are large numbers of young people who want to make different choices about how they spend their lives and how they make a living. This is a creative and intellectual community, but also a shaking, moving and grooving one viscerally attuned and connected and operating within a cultural politics entangled with their tastes and leisure choices. Hracs argues that 'technology has created a new structural and spatial order of independent music production in which individual musicians can make and sell music from anywhere' (2012: 443), though we would argue that the density and distribution of independent labels is not random, but ordered by socio-economic processes. Thus, as the shape, functions and forms of cities change, so do the cultural scenes within them. Often, more generally, this goes hand in hand with processes of gentrification (Ocejo 2014).

Furthermore, while corporate music – or perhaps 'industry based genres' (Lena 2012) – consolidates into what seems like fewer major companies, musical releases proliferate and fragment into multiple micro-genres at the level of small-scale and self-released music. In such a world, even artists selling hundreds of vinyl copies or a few thousands streams have a slight hope of sustaining influence or making a meagre career without transforming any recording notoriety into club and live musical performances, and even then money or career isn't what it's all about. In other words, does believing in the independent doom one's

efforts to failure? For many, the struggle is not to get too big, as that would mean strongly felt ideologies being challenged or having to be modified and that would involve a significant shift in narrativization of the meaning of musical production as economic activity. Lee (1995) for example, points to a widely held, implicit assumption that small companies are best in cultural fields. That is, size is connoted with a company's style of business and their cultural-political orientation to market ideologies, especially when it comes to making 'cultural' and 'aesthetic' goods like music.

The expansion of independents into more mainstream markets can present its own practical problems. In his study of the work patterns of employees of Wax Trax! Records, Lee (1995) shows that as they interact with the institutions operating as part of the dominant ideology of musical culture, the company's employees lacked the necessary means to critique or resist the seemingly implicit 'logic' of the market. The challenge was then to explore alternative logics, and modes of narrativization, a different 'belief system'. According to Lee, finding a language is key, as independent labels operate 'within' the system not exterior to it, and thus 'their efforts to establish a different space at the edges of this social formation began not exterior to the system, but well within it. They also faced the unrelenting task of maintaining and invigorating their alternative perspective, to give teeth, for example, to their advocacy for the artist. The effort grew only more difficult with the label's increased visibility and success' (Lee 1995: 25).

Setting up the problem of the independent

Often, given an emphasis on consumer markets, we hear about the changing ways people listen to music and these stories of the music

consumption markets tend to be the ones that stick – the Sony Walkman, the compact disc, the iPod and iPhone, the MP3, mobile listening, headphone cultures, the death of vinyl and its celebrity-like renaissance. But what about how the way music is made, distributed, marketed and how it becomes an agent entangled with other things and forces in cities, scenes and spaces? And, moreover in the context of this project, what happens to music-makers and music professionals who make music for public consumption, but who aren't affiliated with the big-music industry? How do they go about making, materializing and distributing their music? Here we agree with Hracs' (2015) assertion that 'the structure of contemporary independent music production is still poorly understood'. For example, in relation to understanding the work of independent music production, only a small portion of an independent musician's tasks involve the production of music; one of Hracs' interviewees says it is 'only about 10 percent'.

In the current global music industry, there are only three major global record labels: Universal, Sony and Warner. It is estimated that even by the late 1990s the majors controlled 80 per cent of recorded music in the global market (Laing 1998: 328). Music is a commodity, no doubt, and one that becomes inextricably linked to other large media and communication interests. So this large chunk of the commercial music market is the music of mainstream radio, streaming companies like Spotify, of big festival line-ups, of popular TV and advertisements, of sync-ups with music-related, lifestyle and drama television shows, of breakfast and late-night television appearances, of online music sellers like iTunes, the music one might buy on a CD or perhaps a vinyl LP. A large bundle of various independent music labels makes up the remainder of the market, but even then there are thousands of labels which don't even register

in terms of sales and revenue, as well as countries, for example in Africa and Asia, whose market outputs have not been consistently captured by mainstream statistics agencies such as International Federation of Phonographic Industry (IFPI) (Laing 1999: 416).

The idea of 'independence' is such a powerful message about a music producer's status – and sometimes even of a musical style or 'sound' – that its meaning has been bent, co-opted and distributed across multiple fields within the music industry. For the musicians and label entrepreneurs we interviewed, being independent does not mean doing it all yourself, or that money doesn't matter at all in relation to music production. It doesn't mean that you are less serious about your craft, or less competent in terms of doing business. Quite the opposite, in fact:

being independent requires developed networks, articulated or refined artistic vision and taste, enduring commitment and a capacity to be a 'DIY' all-rounder, and above all staying power in the face of adversities or struggles.

The power of claiming independence within music markets is to be found in part in the narratives it mobilizes around the meaning of music production and musical performance. To be sure, such narratives can never exist without performative partnerships, and emerge seamlessly within the practical contexts of creation, performance and audience reception. Being independent might sometimes be an advertising claim made by some musicians, a specific musical or sonic style, or a field-situated set of practices. Yet using the evidence we have assembled, we aim to show that it is much more than this – it is a discourse entangled with a certain type of cultural production, a signpost for highlighting ideas of purity and pollution, autonomy and

self-determination in music scenes. Independence, then, is a meaningful category of social action and organization that links to larger stories, myths and culture structures related to work, authenticity, control, and the performative power of artistic and scene capital. Being independent is about maintaining a certain sensibility, aesthetic and ethical, on which specific lifestyles and possibly also whole lifeworlds can be built. In the chapters which follow, this book sets up a series of problems which we deal with in the context of a study of electronic independent music labels. The issues at hand reflect broader socio-cultural and economic processes in late-modernity around cities, cultural scenes, work, leisure and the politics of cultural value.

As we have noted above, the meaning of the independent has changed, generally as a result of commodified branding of the term (Cummings 2008), to the extent that 'indie' can itself now be a term of derision and irony. Clearly, the term 'independent' is heavily loaded and contested. Though its meaning in the music industry might seem aligned with objective criteria about not being associated with corporate capital or artistic imperatives of the popular music industry, the more you look into the term, the fuzzier it gets. There is a range of blurry contradictions in making, moving and selling music and this is why independence needs to be conceptualized not just as an objective condition, but as a performative accomplishment.

The abbreviated term 'indie' represented a rather dark appropriation and amplification of a particular production status in the music industry, turning it into a depthless style in the strict postmodern sense Fredric Jameson (1991) described so effectively. This postmodern empyting out of meaning occurred at the same time indie was thoroughly commodified and mined of its critical potential and authenticity, not just for listeners, but also for the industry makers and marketers themselves. As Alex Ogg points out in *Independence Days*,

'"indie" music has become the stodgy staple of the charts, a generic for anodyne guitar based music of middling pace . . . a flat-packed rhythm section, verse-chorus-verse mechanics, and an angsty vocal . . . The concept of "indie" has become almost meaningless beyond branding' (Ogg 2009: 571). While we endorse Lee's statement that (1990:14) 'we must consider independent record companies as cultural articulations as well as economic entities', we should conceptualize independent record companies to be part of a larger cultural system – being independent is also a marketing and boundary-drawing tool.

Yet music is also fundamentally an emotion, feeling, community, art and work. It is an aesthetic thing that is entangled with other social agents and which is put to various types of social and cultural uses. As listeners (or 'consumers') we see and hear music in a range of settings and circumstances, but we often have no sense of how the backstage of music making and music production works. Probably for good reason, however, music is sometimes called things like an 'industry', a 'commodity', a 'factory' and a 'career'. This project asks what does it take and what does it mean to be someone who makes and/or releases music as a small, independent enterprise? Assuming all companies, big or small, who exist to make and distribute music also need to make at least some financial return, then it comes down to the meanings ascribed to such activities and to the limits of sustainability. For example, how much profit, what releases and how many, and how to advertise and distribute? What is our imagined market and our field of operation – our buyers, distributors, selling agents and partners, our mode of operation, our goals and ambition, our aesthetic and music community? Though the interviewees we talked to would rarely admit to explicitly asking such blatantly strategic questions, their practical effort includes them, and around these questions the crucial meaning of the independent as a cultural activity can be recognized.

2

Material economy

What does it take to make a record label that has scene impact and artistic notoriety, and what does it take to keep it running? One thing is for sure; these days there are more and more independent record labels. This is an exciting new feature of 'democratized' and 'DIY' music markets, but how can labels have longevity and how can their managers keep them alive and kicking? How can a small scale label survive among hundreds of other such labels and – more generally – in the market dominated by a large-scale music industry controlled by just three corporations? No matter how aesthetically refined or artistically oriented you are, the questions of investment and financial sustainability are always there. No matter how critical of capitalism or idealistically 'artsy' the people behind independent labels might seem, they are typically shrewd and savvy observers of contemporary culture, technological developments, music markets, and music and artistic scenes. At the core of their work as label managers, they must routinely deal with managing economic risks. What is crucial, however, is that independent music scenes follow their own logic of economic operation. Kühn calls this the 'economy of the techno scene', which is predicated on a tight 'ascetic delimitation' of the aesthetic that they offer to the market, and on the existence of a specific "reception context" that supports that aesthetic' (Kühn 2017: 14–17). Before we

show what this means for our labels, we need to briefly address what a sceptical reader might immediately pick up on: what makes this unique scene-specific logic possible in the first place, and what about the risk that must surely be there? After all, there's no such thing as a free lunch.

As observed by Boltanski and Thévenot (2006: 161) in their account of the discursive worlds that order worth and give weight to moral expressions of value, working in the so-called 'inspired world' of artistic production calls forth a mode of operating where 'calls for sacrificing forms of stabilization and the contrivances that ensure the identity of persons in other worlds. One must '*break out* of habits and routine', 'accept *risks*''. Barcelona-based John Talabot, the boss of Hivern Discs, emphasizes that taking risks is a key part of the game, at the core of what it means to be independent: 'I do with the label what I would like to see from other labels, or what I like with other labels; I like [it] when labels try to keep their work; I like [it] when they try to release different music; I like [it] when they take risks.' What does this mean in practice? There is a lot at stake here and economic capital and staying afloat are just two of the immediate concerns label managers have to deal with. If we consider the related practice of uploading releases online, for example, it has the 'benefit' of being associated with few financial liabilities or risks. Not selling digital musical files may not be good for a label, but it does not necessarily mean that monetary debts are incurred as the production costs of incremental unit releases are nil. Recording the music, and building an architecture for promoting and selling releases will incur expenses but reproducing and exchanging digital files does not attract any cost. The situation is obviously very different with producing physical records, a process that retains special symbolic value in underground electronic dance music.

Manufacturing records requires input from multiple humans and machines, and it's a labour-intensive process that takes money and time. Today especially, when the mainstream corporate music companies have realized vinyl is hot again, having your music released on time can be tricky. Massive orders from the majors cause 'traffic jams' at the limited number of existing pressing plants. What amounts to a painful paradox of the revival of analogue record in the digital age is that the small independent labels that kept the format alive when majors consigned it to oblivion are nowadays faced with considerable delays at pressing plants. Regardless of specific technical and market-related difficulties, pressing records always requires a series of material conditions to be met, which in turn implies different literal and figurative weight of the whole enterprise. As DJ Jus-Ed puts it in a humorous way, 'it's a tedious job, the actual manufacturing of a record. I actually went to the pressing plant, and I saw what they do. There's no way I would do that job. No way. If I had the money to buy a pressing plant, there's no way. I'm standing around waiting for, watching each piece of vinyl come through.'

Moreover, a failure to realize sales of physical musical releases leaves labels not only with unwanted surplus stock, but also with no capacity to generate enough profits to feed into funding of the next release. Ryan Griffin from independent ambient label A Strangely Isolated Place underscores a point we heard from all of our participants about the commitment and care one must have when releasing a physical product:

> 'the label started purely as a hobby and a passion, but as soon as I started pressing vinyl, the economic pressure became apparent . . . When you're working with vinyl, as an independent, you

FIGURE 2.1 ***'Optimal': a record-pressing plant in Germany. Photo by D. Bartmański.***

> can't get much further ahead of yourself. I go from release to release right now, but on the plus side, it ensures I commit every part of me to each release. And given each release is so close to financially ruining you, you can only really do it for the love at this level.'

If the financial threat hanging over your head wasn't enough, the lack of sales means lack of physical circulation and scene visibility, which can potentially lead to a damaging negative spiral that impacts the record label's credibility. As the quote from Ryan Griffin above shows, whilst it is true that a profit mentality does not dominate the work of independents, matters of money cannot be ignored and in this study we deal mostly with labels that release physical products of cassettes and vinyl records, sometimes alongside CD as well as

digital and streaming releases. In this sphere production costs are higher, and require an effective distribution and advertising strategy.

Label owners might operate outside the *ideology* of mainstream capitalist narratives of worth and value, but independent record labels cannot be completely outside of capitalism as a *system*.

The conditions of possibility – making enough money to survive, to make the next release, developing ways to make money to pay the bills, to avoid financial catastrophe – cannot be merely talked aside. At best, you can try to play the game in your own time, and according to your own schedules, visions and rules, but your efforts are always to some degree over-determined by objective conditions of possibility which influence and frame the label's effectiveness and success. This is, in the end, what frames the DIY approach as 'real' and symbolically meaningful – you're on your own, out on a perilous sea of the market. How can one become a label owner that anchors itself in the unique economy of the scene, keeping the dangers of the system at bay?

Becoming a label owner

Sociologist Howard Becker wrote a famous essay in 1953 titled 'Becoming a Marihuana User'. The paper became a classic of interactionist sociology, arguing for the primacy of social context and immersive, embodied learning in processes of developing and performing any type of social identity. Becker sets out to chronicle the sequences and series of events that lead to people to become recreational

marijuana smokers. Based on his interviews with users, Becker's argument is that one doesn't just start to smoke and immediately experience a transformational and ecstatic high. One must learn to smoke marijuana the right way, to be inducted into the feelings and words required to appreciate it, recognize its effects, and describe the particular feelings it generates. There is a transition into becoming a user, a series of embodied and felt learnings combined with taking advice and cues from other experienced users. The lesson from Becker is that becoming *something* – a pot smoker, a coffee drinker, a skater, or video gamer – is represented by a culmination of learnings, appreciations and refinements of valuing that emerged from being with others who were into the same thing. Much in the same way that Becker described stages and steps to becoming something or someone, we can see how our participants *become* record label managers. There are many lessons learned via trial and error, and learning through doing, but work is done with passion so that it feels pleasurable and as if it is related to self-development. Marco Zenker's description of the growth of the Ilian Tape label chimes with the point we make:

> I think it started super chaotic and naïve in a way too, but without trying to be. And not really knowing also how some things should be done or work better. So it was a lot of learning by doing. But, what I really liked about it was, we were always passionate about it, but, the way of how you see it, and the way it grows, changes you a lot, and changes your vision of it. Right now I think we are at the point where a lot of things just came together and it feels much more solid than the beginning.

So, label owners become more – and *feel* more – in command of their tasks as managers. This is partly a result of personal competency

and learning, but also represents a deepening immersion and penetration into scenes, markets and networks. Most of the participants in our study do not necessarily recognize in their own career path a direct or clear route to starting a record label, as if they were somehow born for it. It is rarely very clear at the outset how one establishes a label so that it can profit from the relative stability of the scene-specific logic and associated groups of support. But, through their stories, they let us see this process as a culmination of experiences, establishment of networks and contacts, and clarification of values about good music and productive work. In the section which follows we explore these accounts and give narrative and biographical flesh to the pathways and experiences that lead to a decision to start running an independent music label and making it sustainable.

It is likely that the feeling of 'slipping into something' such as starting and running a record label feels accidental only because we are often unaware of the discursive and structural forces that shape our experience and guide our choices and life goals. But, could one just 'slip into' starting a record label? Maybe. Starting a record label requires no formal education. Label owners generally don't have degrees in commerce, business or marketing. They aren't trained entrepreneurs or managers. They might have qualifications in some aspects of music studies – one of our interviewees was recently awarded a doctorate for research into aspects of musical experience, and another is a Reader at a British university who has a lot of experience working with and writing about sound, technology and cultural production, though this is exceptional – but label owners are just as likely not to have formal education or have training in areas unrelated to music. Moreover, they might sometimes have main jobs in other professions.

For example, Toby Heys from Audint Label is a university lecturer in Manchester; Glenn Astro works for the sound and audio company Native Instruments; Lawrence English from Room40 sometimes works with commissions from art galleries, recently completed a PhD and has had some of his outputs funded by national cultural organizations; Ryan Griffin from ambient label A Strangely Isolated Place works in advertising and has recently worked in London and now in Los Angeles where he continues to run the label on weekends and evenings. Dana Ruh from Brouqade Records in Berlin worked in TV production management at the time she and a friend collaborated to start the label, which she later expanded into a carefully curated record store and distribution company. For her, creating the label while still working began as a creative love and hobby: 'Yeah it was romantic, so we started it like this: we do it, we build something up, we were more free, because the money was coming. I was not dependent on this.' Her full-time work allowed her certain freedom and comfort, and helped put the label in a position where it could pursue an artistic agenda with a certain unrestrained purity of vision. But, as the label's vision grew larger, and enjoyed some success, she had to consider whether to leave her 'other' paid work. Now, the label suddenly had to be pursued with a new seriousness because 'we wanted to make some profit for the label, and of course the artist that gives you the music'. She explains this shift and her emphasis on ensuring the business side of the label works, even as it faces the vicissitudes of digital and vinyl market realignments:

> But then I had to make a decision. Do I work full-time or do I do the music? And I took the risk and I decided to do music and the label full-time. I quit my job and then that changed. Then it was not so romantic any more, because you want to keep the label

> going, you have to invest more, then you see the numbers. Okay, all the digital things came up; the records, we do vinyl, so the records were not really selling. Still selling, but the numbers had fallen.

So it seems that some people *do* seem to 'slip into' having their own label, as if almost by accident rather than design. This is sometimes how our respondents understand it themselves. But, we think there is a certain type of person for whom running a label is the obvious or natural thing to do, a 'next step'. These are people with a vision and a strong sense of musical aesthetics, a brain for organizing and overseeing several musical projects at once, building up a label's brand and taking care of all sorts of musical details, and a personality and lifestyle able to connect with the scene. Many would also have likely made significant investments which actually constitute steps toward starting their label, including having a music blog which reviews music and publishes digital mix-tapes, working in a record store or publishing music reviews and interviews with music websites. Though formal education is not essential for running a successful record label, it takes a special mix of learning, combining cultural and embodied capitals to succeed, and these also take time to accumulate.

The account of Veronica Vasicka from New York, who founded Minimal Wave Records in 2005, and the sub-label Cititrax focusing on contemporary releases, is illustrative of this feeling of 'slipping into' running a label. At the same time, her account demonstrates how it was based on years of accumulated knowledge and scene participation. In fact, her love for certain styles of underground electronic music from the 1970s and 1980s represented by the label fits this idea of working in niche scenes rooted in a specific urban context. Here she describes the beginning of her label, its vision, and

the process of gradually building the business through various activities as a DJ who also had a radio show. Realizing her commitment to and love of the music, she gradually moved to the point where releasing this important part of music heritage became something that justified starting a label:

> The goal really wasn't to run a label. It was really just to initially release Oppenheimer Analysis, which was a very under represented band that had only self-released their music on cassette in 1982. So after playing a lot of their music on the radio and in bars in New York when I was doing DJ nights, and seeing the response and hearing responses from people, the excitement that they had about the music, it was a pretty quick realization that that music needed to be properly released, like on a wider scale. And I didn't really know how to do that, or learned along the way. Every step was a learning process. But the goal initially was to release that Oppenheimer Analysis's music, and I also had initially built the website and made a database of bands. I was doing a radio show, so I had a lot of bands, and a lot of their archives. Bands from around the same era from the 80s, from the early 80s. Pretty much underground music that existed in these small close-knit scenes. And so, from what I gathered for the radio show, which I did for ten years, every Sunday night I also, along the way, discovered that so much of this music hasn't ever been released beyond the band putting out their own tape; like fifty or a hundred copies. So, then it became my mission to play and expose the music on the radio. So that was the starting point – during the radio show. And then I thought well this is more important than that. It requires more than just being played on the radio. So then I registered the name, Minimal-Wave-dot-

> org. Then I made a database of all these band names. And then I gathered cassettes, scans, and record sleeves, artwork, and photographs of the band, and I started building the database around that, around that content. And out of that came the label. So it was just a very natural progress. It wasn't ever 'oh, I want to start a record label, how do I do it?' It was vaguer, like historical research and realizing this stuff really needed to be heard on a broader level.

Another one of the most striking and memorable narratives about getting into running a label came from Kiran Sande, director at the now London-based label Blackest Ever Black. Kiran met us for morning coffee at a cafe located in an urban zone between the Landwehrkanal and Görlitzer Park in the Berlin neighborhood of Kreuzberg, where multiple types of hipness mix with as many types of urban grit, coming together in a densely mixed urban culture of mobile and leisured youth scenes, independent record stores like Hardwax, a long-established Turkish community, and a canal that divides the neighbourhood and becomes a central zone for leisure, relaxation and meeting up. Kiran vividly connected devising the idea of having a label with the strengths of his personality. Of prime importance were the experiences and the connections he garnered while working as a journalist for a well-known electronic music website and digital content creator, FACT Magazine. This desire to run a label was something Kiran felt strongly, even though he admits that at the earliest stages of thinking about having his own record label it wasn't viable simply because he hadn't signed any artists to release music on it. In this sense, it existed as a daydream.

Though he wasn't a musician himself, Kiran had a fascination and love for music in all its detail and a growing knowledge of how

things in that world got done. In terms of his personal interest it was not just about the music, but the artefacts and stuff around music; 'reading sleeve notes, and trying to work out what everyone's role was, like what's an A&R, what's a mastering engineer, what's like this kind of shit? You know, sitting there with my little drawing pad, doing like fake credits for imaginary records, and made up names and roles and not knowing what they were.' At this stage, Kiran admits it was the 'idea' of running a record label that fascinated him – one might observe it to be a blended mix of creativity, business order, and bohemia – 'it was like a fantasy. Much like being in a band or writing a book. It's like a "thing"'.

Stephen Bishop tells an equally interesting but very different story about starting his label in his interview with Ian. Stephen is originator of the pair of related UK record labels Opal Tapes and Black Opal. Opal Tapes, founded in 2012, is described by the website Resident Advisor (RA) as a 'tape-centric label', releasing music mostly on cassette. According to Juno Plus, another website, 'Opal Tapes has cornered the market in decayed, experimental music that the steadfastly DIY label itself describes as "electronics and scuzz"' (Juno Plus, 11 June 2013). The latter label, Black Opal, is sister to Opal Tapes, founded in 2013 and releasing music exclusively on vinyl. This second label reflects a growing interest in distributing certain types of music via vinyl releases and also the growing reputation and influence Opal Tapes had garnered. Initial releases were 'slow burners', but Stephen told Juno Plus that 'the time is right' for starting the sister vinyl label, Black Opal. Stephen's account demonstrates the entrepreneurial drive and visionary commitment required to make the rather brave step of starting a label. What is more interesting is Stephen's own position when he started the label – without a job and on unemployment benefits and in a position

where he decided to put his unemployment benefits into a creative venture rather than 'the usual stuff', as he put it to us.

Bishop started the label from his hometown of Redcar, in north-east England, but now runs it from Newcastle-Upon-Tyne. In a 2013 feature on RA, where Opal Tapes was a 'Label of the Month', Bishop tells the website that he is 'a ten-minute walk from the beach, and a ten-minute walk from a hill 500 feet above sea level with loads of woods and forest which continues for a few miles. I could walk in one direction and not go past another house for the best part of 35 miles, [or] I could walk 15 minutes in the other direction [and end up] in one of the biggest petrol chemical plants in Europe'. It doesn't seem like exactly the right type of place to start a record label, but Stephen's life situation combined with his musical vision and contacts allowed him to start a label from a seemingly geographically isolated position. His story points firstly to his commitment to make something interesting, to mobilize a creative drive which is also evident in his background as a musician releasing on CD-R. It also points to his immersion within music scenes and the connections and knowledge that permitted, and which constitutes, essential priming for him starting his own labels. Stephen was a consumer of DIY cassette releases before starting his own label, and was already seemingly fascinated not just by music but the culture of releasing on different music mediums, from CD-R, to cassette, and vinyl. He recounts the way he got into his label:

> Opal Tapes began in early 2012 when I, as an unemployed person in a jobless north east England, decided to put my then benefits into a project rather than the same old. I released three tapes from Tuff Sherm, Personable and Huerco S., all of which sold so quickly I chose to make more of them instead of buying a delay

pedal or two. Being unemployed and wanting to work I made a job for myself and was fortunate to find early support from other writers, musicians and distributors. I've always been around tapes and with my limited funds would still buy a few now and then from the labels I was following, Gel, Phaserprone, Peccant. So producing tapes was an extension of the CD-R releases I'd done of my own music previously but at that time I knew that CDs were proving harder and harder to sell and there was this fecund tape scene just growing and growing, has been since 1980.

Though Stephen Bishop's home and business location in a relatively remote part of the United Kingdom is notable in terms of his determination to start a label, his account makes it clearer to us the critical importance of the role of established musical knowledge and networks as key forms of operational capital for starting a label that is viable. And, though the remote location may not yield rich immersion in artistic and musical urban scenes, it is this very remoteness which becomes an important suggestive element of his label's 'outsider' identity. Stephen's relative isolation allows him to cultivate a DIY label with an off-beat vision, with a roster of releases that are identified by their DIY medium, as much as surroundings. But how does this story contrast with two guys who have a long history as friends and run a label together from Berlin?

Based in Germany's capital, Hauke Freer, aka *Session Victim*, and Yanneck Salvo run the house label Retreat. Yanneck is a house music DJ and producer known as *Quarion*, and he and Hauke met when Yanneck moved to Berlin from Switzerland and ended up sharing a flat with Haucke. Sharing the same home, they became aware of a mutual admiration for similar types of music and owned many of the same records. While this does not, of course, explain

everything about how they started a label, it does teach us something important, to use an old axiom from positivistic research, namely that love of music scenes and musical genres is a necessary but not sufficient condition for starting and sustaining a label. For sure, it takes the music and its energy and excitement to draw people together. More important to make a label work, however, are contacts and connections – being part of networks, and specifically friendship circles, where tastes and leisure choices are shared and participants meet and interact in similar artistic communities. This contact builds collectively shared cultural capital and multiplies and mobilizes the cultural energy which grows from common experience. Combined with some luck, such connection is what brought Yanneck and Hauke together, as they told us over drinks one sunny afternoon in Berlin:

Yanneck: I moved from Switzerland at the end of 2006. I was actually living at his place; I was his flatmate for a few months. Then we stayed in contact after I moved around. I always liked what Hauke was playing musically – his whole music knowledge. And at some point I had some tracks I wanted to put out, and I thought I should a do vinyl-only label, and I thought maybe I should do it with Hauke, and that's how we did it. That was the beginning of 2009.

Hauke: So we met through a mutual friend who's sort of our connector guy. He knew that we would probably get along. So I remember one of the first nights Yanneck was in my flat and we had the record players in the living room, and my record collection and we started pulling our records, and I said 'I have this and I have that'. And he owned those records as well.

But there's another interesting dimension to Hauke's story that helps us understand Yanneck's idea to make a vinyl-only record label. Hauke moved to Berlin in 2000, starting work as an intern at a techno label and ending up working there for three and a half years. He tells us that the label he worked for back then, Kanzleramt, which started operations in 1994 and still exists today, was at that time 'very, very successful . . . It was a very exciting time for me'. Reflecting on his time at Kanzleramt as an intern, Hauke tells us:

> I learned a lot about how record labels are run. That was actually a time you could pay employees off it. So that was how I got to learn. After that I was doing an apprenticeship at Sony Music because I had to, my dad always wanted me to do something proper, so I did an apprenticeship, and that was the best I could see that made sense for me as well. So I did it at Sony Music, and it was opposite than working for this independent techno label.

It is interesting to observe in the quote above Hauke's wry comment that during his time at Kanzleramt, you could pay employees out of the business of running an independent music label. The structures of the music industry – on both the production and consumption sides – have changed dramatically since then. This experience of relative luxury, of selling many – sometimes thousands – more records in the 1990s, was also put to us by Wolfgang Voigt, co-owner of Cologne's iconic electronic imprint Kompakt Records, in an interview we conducted some years earlier for our book *Vinyl*, at a Kompakt event in Berlin. Notably, Voigt is also a groundbreaking electronic music artist who releases under the moniker *GAS*, amongst other aliases. His series of LPs since the 1990s as *GAS*,

including a long hiatus from recording between 2000 and 2017, forged a unique and foggy form of techno that is reputedly inspired by his formative experiences with electronic music, drugs and nature in the Königsforst park, near Cologne. Reflecting on the trajectory of the 'vinyl economy' when we interviewed him for *Vinyl*, Voigt noted that now: 'It's smaller, of course, but it's more exclusive and expensive . . . There are still records that sell a lot, some, but not like in '99.' This pattern of selling fewer physical releases, but supplementing incomes by gigs, merchandise, running clubs or club nights, and third-party music licensing deals, is a common one in the stories we heard. It means that label entrepreneurs need a wide range of skills, contact and learning to be successful. Moreover, they have to be *genre experts*.

For some time, Hauke took the traditional route in the music industry and his apprenticeship at Sony taught him a lot about how it worked. He was educated broadly in all aspects of it and at that time he also undertook some formal education on accounting and the legal aspects of running a business. As Hauke told us, during the apprenticeship with Sony, 'I was in accounting, to radio promotion, TV promotion, to fleet management of the cars for the employees, to DJ promotion sales, release coordination sales. Everything. Learning wise it was great. *But when I was done with the apprenticeship, I knew exactly where I didn't want to work*. So, it wasn't for me' (italics added).

Hauke's last point reveals his feelings about working at Sony – although it was a valuable learning experience and partly something he did to satisfy his father's desire to see him work somewhere 'proper', the experience actually taught him about exactly what he *didn't* want. Hauke's dissatisfaction with the experience of working at a major is telling in terms of how the independent DIY ethos is

framed in contrast, most tellingly clarified in Hauke's statement below. Hauke reflects further on this dalliance with the major music industry and how it contrasts with the DIY and independent label satisfaction of being in touch with 'making things', of having contact with the artist, and being directly involved in helping to make small-team, creative and artistic decisions that he experienced in his DIY and independent 'apprenticeship' with the techno label Kanzleramt. He begins by talking about his experience with a major label:

> I think the main thing is that nobody cared about music. It was about selling a product. And when you work for a major, in Germany in particular, most of the product gets delivered from overseas. So Michael Jackson is just a market. You never have to do anything. There's not anything creative at all. It's just sales. You have to sell 300,000 units of this, or something. Then I took a break, came home. I met Yanneck, because his friend connected us here in Berlin. I started working self-employed as a label manager for a minimal techno label back then. I really liked this job, and *I was back in touch with making stuff. It was just two people, my boss and me, running the label.* Getting music, there was, like when you're running a label, logistically, you make contact with the artist, and you influence what they do (italics added).

This pattern of being exposed to the music industry and not liking everything one sees, or seeing the corporate side of the music industry and experiencing it as unattractive or alienating, is a common trope. In some cases, including the long-running, groundbreaking label from the UK Ninja Tune, it becomes a formative 'origin' ideology in the formation of a record label. Peter

Quicke, managing director of Ninja Tune for the past twenty-five years, tells Dominik in an interview:

> obviously majors don't have a sense of humour at all, but you will find artists and records on majors who do perhaps. Indie labels tend to be focused on music before commercial success, but major labels are focused on commercial success before music for its own sake, more about 'Yeah, we got this record in the charts'.

Recounting the formation of Ninja Tune, formed in London in 1990 by Jonathan More and Matt Black who are the iconic duo Coldcut, Peter reflects on the way their experiences with releasing music with majors, including brief stints with Arista and Big Life, led to disenchantments which resulted in them putting their artistic goals ahead of profit, and mainstream success:

> I think that generally there was that kind of inflexibility and the idea of that you have to do things in a particular way. That was generally what they [Jonathan More and Matt Black] didn't like about working with major labels. They signed to an indie, Big Life, but Big Life was bought by Universal Music [this occurred in 1988]. Specifically, what they didn't like [was when] they did their first album, they did those singles 'My Telephone' and 'Stop This Crazy Thing' with Junior Reid, then they put the album out. Obviously 'People Hold On' was the hit, but Matt and Jon just didn't want to do the same thing again and again – that was the problem. So when they delivered their second album and there wasn't a single like 'People Hold On', the record label more or less dismissed them. They didn't want to have anything to do with it and didn't pay proper attention to promoting it. It was clear that there was no real interest in the music. That is why they started

their own label, so they could put out the music they chose after that.

Opportunities for exposure and learning about the industry are essential; how to get records pressed, having contacts in the business of music advertizing and release, knowing key media outlets and journalists, having contacts in pressing or distribution, are extremely important. While the experience of Hauke Freer, above, is rather unique in terms of his apprenticeship with Sony, more often than not record label entrepreneurs spring from within the scene. Kiran from Blackest Ever Black's story is also relevant here. Kiran told us that he 'was just another one of the blokes that wastes their money on new records when they come in', but also admits that without the fundamentals of exposure to the scene, being in a position to know the right people in order to make things like getting a vinyl pressed or making a distribution deal happen would be impossible. As Kiran told us in a rather self-deprecating off-hand style, 'it wasn't like I was completely clueless'. To put it another way, he knew *exactly* how to talk and he had the confidence of others in the network. But, before he could strike out on his own he needed some education in the fundamentals, and Kiran received invaluable informal training during his formative time working as a music journalist at the well-known alternative online music platform, FACT Magazine. He describes these 'informal' learnings and how they led to him having a sense of how to build a record label:

> I started thinking more seriously about it because I've been working for a music magazine, I've been doing music journalism, our office was part a record store, and I was quite involved with that. And the company that owned the magazine owned a vinyl pressing plant, and so on. And over the time that I worked there,

> which was five years, but at that point it was three years. There was a lot of by osmosis, handled also by directing … all the information I needed in order to start a label was suddenly available to me. And I guess that for most people that remains, understandably as always, the first stumbling block: what the fuck do you do? I still don't know what the fuck you do. I mean seriously, there's no set … I think if I knew what I was doing, then I would've drawn a line a long time ago. Everything's sort of 'learn as you go along'. But back in those days, just being around vinyl, not taking it too far into the vinyl thing … that was very intoxicating, and I think seeing it happen, seeing friends and peers and colleagues, it suddenly seemed very possible.

The process and importance of knowledge accumulation and building networks strength is also illustrated in the following examples. Dana Ruh, DJ and producer from Berlin, releases material on the labels Underground Quality and Cocoon, and runs her own label Brouqade Records. Before devoting her career to music, Dana studied economics, telling us 'she knows how to deal with numbers' and was working with a TV company as a production manager. Working in this role, she also started to develop further her music credentials, DJing and producing, buying records and participating in the scene until, a few years after arriving in Berlin, she set up her own record label. Dana tells Dominik that her main love is music production and that doing this job well takes a lot of time and effort which is undertaken mostly in relative isolation. But this contrasts with the requirement – in order to get the most out of contacts in the scene – to attend parties, events, clubs and so on. This in itself can be tiring, or sometimes sap creative energy, as Dana explains: 'I think you can achieve a lot fast if you have a big network … in the

music scene, it's even more important. That means you have to go out, you have to show your face, and you have to connect with the people. The more you are connected, the more you are working in this network, the more you present yourself, the more you will achieve with this. But, of course, you have to offer something. If you can't offer something – like you're a good producer or that you do great music, or you're good DJ – then it won't happen. But if you have these skills and you put that together with a great network, then I think you can achieve a lot in a short amount of time.'

The account of *Lucy* who runs techno label Stroboscopic Artefacts, also develops this point. Lucy moved to Berlin in his early twenties from what he calls 'the deep south of Italy', Palermo. Soon after, in September 2009, he formed Stroboscopic Artefacts. Like the examples noted above, for Lucy, becoming an expert in the independent music industry was a gradual process of learning and mastering the knowledge required for running a label, having basic musical and music scene knowledge and some networks in place, but also taking a deep interest in and being curious about matters related to making and recording music, and the business of running a label. As Lucy tells us in a conversation in his studio: 'I started spending my nights on Google, checking how it works to press a record. Who do you have to talk to? Who are the pressing plants? What and how does it work? And at the same time there were the Dadub guys, Daniele and Marco, who were really starting to get into sound engineering, so I started having a lot of conversations with them.

Alongside this intrinsic motivation for practical and cultural learning, there was also an important ethical realization that is then cycled into a formative component of the label identity. For Lucy, moving to Berlin from Paris and originally Palermo was something

motivated by very deep feelings of not fitting in, and feeling strongly *unattracted* and even alienated by the idea of having a 'normal' day job, as he says:

> The day job, that never existed for me. I always felt like I was in chains regarding normal jobs. Actually, that was the message I was trying to deliver when I did my first album. The title was, 'Work Play for Working Bees'. And it was also a statement for myself, to understand like why don't you feel at ease in normal social patterns. There must be a reason. You can't just be cursed. You can't just label it as 'I'm an unhappy guy' because that's really stupid and un-edgy to see things like that. So at some point, I'm telling you this because it's a part of the initial concept of the label, because my last period in Paris [was] a very tough moment in my life where this uneasiness in normal social patterns became quite huge personally.

This sense of alienation from mainstream music-making dovetails with a critique of typical job lives. It is a common thread in our discussions with the label entrepreneurs. There is a strong fit between social-structural conditions centred on changing youth labour markets, the extended period between youth and adulthood, and the narrative expression of an ethos which is critical or at least suspicious of mainstream life paths. In the context of a city such as Berlin, with a large population of transient and mobile young people, a history of vibrant club and music scenes, and a relatively affordable local economic environment for housing and leisure, conditions are right for a workforce focused on creativity, self-employment and artistic risk-taking. This can be associated with a type of bohemian lifestyle philosophy, and a confluence of creativity, self-fulfillment, and devotion to the artistic and aesthetic dimensions of work. As Eikhof

and Haunschild (2006) note about the work of independent cultural entrepreneurs, it is common that a bohemian philosophy fits with the:

> emphasis on individual performance, devotion to work, networking or the ideals of being mobile and moving from project to project in order to prevent deadlocks. As a result, self-employed workers in the creative industries do not have to see themselves as cold-blooded, hard-hearted entrepreneurs exploiting their very own individual creative potential. Their work context allows them to maintain a bohemian self-understanding, for which their work involvement simply means living out the bohemian principles of self-fulfilment and devotion to *l'art pour l'art* and managing themselves is part of being an artist. Enacting a bohemian lifestyle enables self-employed (employees) in the creative industries to be both artists and entrepreneurs of their creative talent.
>
> Eikhof and Hainschild 2006: 240

In this context, the work involved in running a label is principally a creative endeavour, exciting to managers because of its capacity to allow ethical, artistic and entrepreneurial skills to be expressed in one fell swoop. The work of making and releasing music is in this sense a vehicle for creativity, building community and for doing fulfilling work. Again, we can see how the message that some independent labels wish to communicate is expressed in the label's story, and sometimes even directly signified by the label's name. Talking about starting up their label Retreat, Yanneck and Haucke explain how they started to position the label away from digital releases towards a vinyl-only release roster and how this decision was more than merely a 'business strategy'. For them authenticity

was key, and thus releasing music digitally didn't make sense when they personally did not play files or CDs at parties. Being in a position where they both had music to release and decided that releasing it through their own label was the obvious way to go, they needed a label outlet that fitted their goals and philosophy and this philosophy needed to be materially identifiable, hence releasing music on vinyl.

Reflecting on starting the label, Hauke tells us that: 'there needs to be an urge. Because there are so many labels, there needs to be an urge why you need *this* label. If you're just doing a label because you're a DJ promoter, booker, and now you need a label on top, I don't think this will get you very far, or leave you with anything substantial. (. . .) So Yanneck had music, we had music, we didn't feel comfortable enough to give to someone else. There would have been places we could have sent it, but it was like, "no". Because I had the label experience as well, it was a great feeling of freedom to do it the way we wanted to do it.' This idea of doing it their own way, and departing from mainstream music business expectations in the process, is reflected in the way they named their label, Retreat, hinting simultaneously at an aesthetically based move away from the mainstream music industry and the preservation of a special space of creativity and community. As Yanneck tellingly puts it:

> the whole idea was for us, there would be this special space. For example, back then, you were swimming into this ocean of MP3s and, like, no personality, and nothing special. And we thought, okay, let's go back to something physical. *That's the thing, you have your own place, a retreat, where you can go back to your roots or where you feel comfortable*, and that's what we thought about the label (italics added).

Doing business differently

One key to understanding the way independent labels do business is to first recognize that for them, the last thing they want is to be seen to be 'doing business' in any traditional way. Alongside this, they narrate their entrepreneurial activity as being undertaken within cooperative, family-like structures and arrangements that avoid any potentially 'polluted' associations with economic or artistic exploitation. The starting point is often a disavowal of any formally shaped skill, let alone formal qualification, as a businessperson. Such a claim, if made positively in relation to formal qualifications in fields like commerce, marketing, or business administration, would of course highlight precisely their lack of authentic qualifications to run a music label, and more so an independent label. Jo Haynes and Lee Marshall (2018) categorized musicians who manage identities as players and businesspeople as 'reluctant entrepreneurs', recognizing the complexity of this ambivalence towards an identity squarely based around the profit-based intentions of the mainstream music industry. Stephen Bishop, label head at Opal Tapes and Black Opal, expressed this ambivalence clearly, illustrating the pleasures of running a label and the requirements of managing financial obligations and performing like a 'business person': 'it was a hobby which very quickly became the most satisfying and fun job I've ever had. It exists on the rim of sustainability and anyone seeing how much music comes out through the label can gauge how hard it is to make enough money for all involved for this to propagate. I have to continually push for sales but also hate how vulgar hard selling is. I'm not a salesman at all.'

Yet we observed and heard that running a label requires a certain type of carefully performed business acumen; one that is based on

knowing about musical genres, scenes and sounds, and then having productive relationships and networks, and certain knowledge related to music and media production, whether in digital, cassette or vinyl format. This denial of most forms of traditional identity as a businessperson places label entrepreneurs in a type of identity-bind, where they have to possess and perform business skill and knowledge, but not show overt qualities of traditional managerial efficiency and ethics. In effect, they need to have enough access to networks and knowledge to make the label successful as an entity that has a roster of independent releases, events, parties or similar collaborations, but at the same time they need to prove and perform their status as music aficionados with particular tastes, scene or subcultural capital. Of course, how this scene and genre-related capital is achieved varies from label to label – some run blogs that promote new releases and offer commentaries on them, many release their own mix-tapes or playlists made up of their own label's material sometimes set amidst other similar musical styles, others with more influence run large label nights and event parties which celebrate new and important releases from the label, or which mark label achievements such as five- or ten-year anniversaries. Eikhof and Haunschild (2006), using Bourdieu's theories of artistic production, have suggested this pattern of achieving status is typical of entrepreneurs who are relatively low in economic capital but for whom accumulating cultural and symbolic capital can possibly translate to achieving economic goals. They see it as linked to the history of bohemianism in artistic production and that the economic environment they act in is

> 'conducive towards bohemian principles such as emphasis on individual performance, devotion to work, networking or the ideals of being mobile and moving from project to project in

> order to prevent deadlocks. As a result, self-employed workers in the creative industries do not have to see themselves as cold-blooded, hard-hearted entrepreneurs exploiting their very own individual creative potential. Their work context allows them to maintain a bohemian self-understanding, for which their work involvement simply means living out the bohemian principles of self-fulfilment and devotion to *l'art pour l'art*' (Eikhof and Hainschild, 2006: 240).

Haynes and Marshall (2018) reinforce the fact that being a musician, or indeed any entrepreneur who makes aesthetic things, has always – inevitably, and hence perhaps simply – involved being business savvy. Though this is the case we find it is just that one part of the label owner's identity which needs to be carefully projected, and on the contrary a self-narrative of creative music-maker or label curator is the one emphasized in narration. This is probably due to a preference for a vision of their activity allied to a form of 'romantic individualism', in Haynes and Marshall's conceptualization. We find similarly that there is less emphasis on economic and business work, and more on community, culture, authenticity and skill. An important element of this identity is the principle of working with people who share the same values related to independence, honesty and who honour authentic and collectively affirmed values of artistic production. Felix Kubin points out the principles that inform how he manages his own economic labour, essentially working with people he wants to work with, building up enduring networks and affiliations which define music business relationships in non-economic terms. For him, like many other people we spoke to, this was framed as a positive response to the alienating systemic demands and exploitative basis of capitalist production. Felix elaborates on that point in the following way:

> That's the general thing about capitalism, are you really just the best friend of the next person who gives you money? Or, let's say you make business to survive but you also look at the customer who is someone I actually want to work with, who's reliable, who's not just using me for the moment because I need it and who builds up the relationship. It's all about persistence and retainability.

In other words, the vision of musicians and label entrepreneurs needs to be beyond the short-term and put the sustainability of human relationships at the centre, alongside and even above purely economic dimensions. The particular emphasis placed on narrating the balance between profit-seeking practices and relationship sustainability depends somewhat on one's position in the independent music field, however. Take the example of Kiran Sande who (as noted) is not a musician, but the brains and vision behind the label Blackest Ever Black. More recently, in addition to the label, Kiran started up a record store called Low Company at Hackney Downs Studios, East London. He frames his way of working more as a type of creative action without having to go through what he acknowledges is the sometimes painful process of actually making art. In his comments, we can see parallels to a Schumpeterian way of thinking about the equivalences between making art and the practices of entrepreneurship. For him, part of what makes running the label satisfying and challenging is that it is a form of creative practice:

> To talk about the business side of things, I think I do like the business side of things to some extent. I suppose the puritan in my quite likes this sort of constructive 'grown-up' side compared to, it's basically like creativity without the burden of creativity. You have creative input into things. But essentially as an editorial

> role, essentially your hope is helping bring things into the world, rather than creating it yourself. I think a certain kind of personality, or whatever, takes more pleasure in that. I've got artists and friends who love the label, and they're baffled that I could be bothered to do the stuff that I do, just as I'm baffled that they can be bothered to stay up all night just programming a fucking synthesizer. I suppose that's the thing.

Anti-business principles: Playing categories of profit and capital

We might say that there is a certain scene-specific way of 'doing business independently'. It *is* business, but not as we typically know it. It might even be that it runs alongside principles that are 'anti-business'. Kiran Sande's Blackest Ever Black is a strongly music- and artist-driven label and he breaks down his philosophy to us in the following way:

> the reality is you know there's a sense with an independent label . . . you're almost chronically on a daily basis making anti-profit decisions. Or, insofar as you can, you're always making quality over return decisions to the point where I have to check if it will go out of hand. You look at the bank balance and think 'how did I commit to this project?' . . . It's just like, it's going to cost a fortune and we're not going to make any money on it. I don't feel like you can be a good sensible businessman and have like a dynamic small independent label. Because all the decisions you have to make fly in the face of all good business practice essentially, you know?

The principle of community and networks of trust matter and become a strong point of emphasis in this context.

The goal is to make enough money to continue the business, but one of the key philosophies of practical operations is not losing sight of the bonds of friendship and collective creative effort and contributing to making the scene.

The background to this context is the larger context of changed music-industry economics. The democratization of musical outputs enabled by new technologies of production and publishing might seem like an opportunity for all to make money from selling their own music. But, of course, larger economic structures do not allow that to happen, let alone the fact that many (though not all) of the labels we spoke to release music which could variously be described as underground, challenging, avant-garde, and made for niche markets where sales are likely to be restricted by tightly delimited audiences.

One dimension of this is that as market actors experienced a rise in the freedoms associated with production and publishing of their music, in a sense meaning that getting into the music business became easier as markets expanded and entry-barriers lowered, the stakes also became lower. Participants have to accept the conditions of the economic relationships they enter into, which in this field of independent production stresses club gigs and artistic, music-driven agendas. For the smaller labels in particular, the decisions about what to release are solely – even strictly – based on artistic merits, and this means participants need to accept that what they mostly stand to gain is cultural and scene capital which is evinced by certain forms of notoriety and respect amongst listening communities,

rather then economic returns. There is always a hope that the artist might make tracks that gain enough popularity to be considered a 'hit', but more than likely the desired outcome is a trade-off in the form of scene visibility and potential for other spin-offs, like playing parties or clubs. While emphasizing that there was always a possibility of making money from releases, and that telling us that 'you like to delude yourself that how easily tomorrow you could wake up the next day and just start a purely commercially, cynically commercially minded label and how successful it could be, but of course it's a fantasy', Kiran Sande emphasized the realistic expectations parties must have when releasing music:

> It's pretty much impossible to promise artists much more than the ability to publish their work handsomely, make sure they don't lose money on it and maybe make a little bit of money on it, get a bit more exposure and get some hits. Even with the biggest artists on the label, you do sell enough records, and you do make themselves and me a bit of money. But, it's still at that level that if we ever lost sight of the idea that we're fundamentally friends helping each other out, then it would be like 'what's the point?' Or if we stopped talking collaboratively, or seeing each other as peers, rather than seeing me as a business which is there to maximize profit, it wouldn't work. In some respects, I think there's a surge in independent record labels ... in some sense, the conditions are easier because the stakes are lower, and people are entering into these relationships like artists–label relationship with a more realistic sense of what's achievable.

Being an independent musician and label-owner, then, is about playing the relational and relative categories of profit and capitals, making trade-offs based on investments in the short and medium

term in the hope of long-term gains, and strategically deferring realizing profit before cashing in at just the right time. Just as economic sociologists like Viviana Zelizer have posited that there are different social types of monies, in the sense that money can be applied to and earmarked for different purposes and for different social relationships, we find that as there is earmarking concerning what profit is to be used for in relation to the label's business, there are also different types of *profit*. For Zelizer, developing a sociological model of what she calls 'multiple monies' is argued to be part of a broader cultural challenge to neoclassical economic theory. It offers an alternative approach not only to the study of money per se, but to all other aspects of economic life, including the market (see Zelizer 1988).

We also found that actors in these independent music markets trade-off costs of musical production and outputs against potential gains in different spheres of valuation. For example, sometimes economic costs of production are absorbed as debt for some duration of time, hopefully in the short term until economic returns turn around. This debt might be personally covered by the label owner and subsidized through profits made in other spheres like gigs or parties, or it might be in the form of a pressing and distribution deal. More likely, the strategy is to try to gain stocks of cultural and scene capital through successful music releases which might not make the artist much money, but which allow them to gain scene visibility and credibility, essentially establishing their identity as performers or producers. Then, over time, these releases allow the artist to cash in their scene credentials on the basis of being more visible as a producer and therefore land better paid DJ sets and live performances. According to most of the people we spoke to, rather than the release itself, this was the most likely way to make money

from independent music releases. In certain cases, this may even mean a temporary or final suspension of the label in favour of more lucrative live performance opportunities. For example, in our follow-up correspondence with Hauke from Retreat, we discovered that the label was currently 'on ice', or in a period of hiatus, while Hauke capitalized on economic opportunities with his other DJ producer act, Session Victim. At the same time, his Retreat partner Yanneck, aka *Quarion*, immersed himself in building his live act/producer persona alongside preparing a new LP. Our findings here accord with those of Michael Scott (2012), who is right to define cultural entrepreneurship as centrally involving the mobilization and conversion of different types of capital. Recouping investments via realized profits is not always upfront or a short-term realization, so investments in scene and symbolic capital open the door for possible translations into economic capital. As Scott observed, 'there exists multiple capital mobilization and conversion strategies, which are *field-conditioned* and *improvized* practices' (Scott 2012: 247, emphasis ours).

We can see these balancing and trading-off practices in Lucy's account. It shows that there is an entanglement of different types of capitals, and that stores of capital or loss are accumulated as a strategy of deferment to be translated and financially realized at a later date. For Lucy, what underpins this economic calculation is a crucial moral component; according to him, there needs to be an honesty in how he works with artists who are releasing on his label. Specifically, there needs to be a certain realism about the potential economic gains when any agreement is entered into; only inexperienced or inauthentic producers have an exaggerated or unrealistic sense of market prospects. What Lucy emphasizes helps us understand that the record release becomes a 'showcase', a material-sonic statement

of attitude, and which then sits within the label that in turn becomes the central carrier or even brand. Artists may change, producers may come and go from the label, but what remains central is the identity Lucy established for the label, with his artistic reputation as the central value proposition. As he puts it, 'it is still my label, but it also has a very wide range of artists and it has always been conceived as a very big collective. Members change over time. Sometimes you find yourself with some of the people you started with that started changing visions in a way that doesn't belong to the label, and stuff like this. Then you have new, fresh forces, new entries and stuff like this. But still there is a sense of things. People know that when they send me tracks, I mean artists, they know they are releasing on Stroboscopic Artefacts, they know what they don't have to send me, let's say. Because it's just wasting time.'

Releases might not make much money for the artist, let alone the label – breaking even is a good enough outcome – but releasing on a label like Lucy's Stroboscopic Artefacts which has built a reputation for releases of high musical and production quality may also become a kind of status symbol, and also to some degree a form of artistic promotion with the added dimension that the consistently well-packaged vinyl releases become a material carrier of artistic credibility within scenes. Lucy sums this up in a very revealing passage about managing various investments and payoffs, and realizing strategies to survive. Admittedly, his viewpoint represents that of the label owner who has already achieved quite some status within the scene, and is a respected producer in his own right. In a sense, we might say that Lucy understands the economic and symbolic values of what he has created, and the portability and convertibility of the artistic and scene investments he has made:

> Well, mainly, it's about having that minimal amount of sales that allow you to survive, physically and digitally speaking. It's about licences for syncs and things like that. We even have quite the experience in licensing artworks for clothes and stuff like that. You need to find your way. For me the real big difficulty is with the kinds of numbers we're talking about. But like once you, what is the problem with that? That the artist can tell you 'no, I don't want to release because the profit is too small with your label'? But then considering what you're giving to the artist, I'm talking as a label owner but also as an artist, like then if you have that immense space of freedom, those stories are over, you know what I mean? They are really over. Also, because, as DJs and performers, for people that only play live, as performers, we know very well that the income for our lives comes from the gigs, not from releasing records. So once you know that, you also understand, nowadays, that records are quite an expensive promotional tool ... But this perspective can also be useful from the other perspective, which is the perspective of the music content, because it's like, okay, if you take me as a platform, as promotion for you, promotion means showing. I don't mean promotion means sending promos, but more like showing sides of you that you're not allowed to, or sides of you that don't fit elsewhere. Then it's for me too. Then we find this balance between music content and performance incomes, you know what I mean. It works a bit like a non-profit organization actually. It's not about making money, that you run a record label. I have my own means about the record label.

Having made the point that most smaller independent labels are pleased to run their operation at the point of profit-neutrality,

we can distinguish between shorter and longer-term visions of economic sustainability. Smaller scale losses, perhaps up to 1,000 euros, can be accommodated by some labels in the short to medium-term, mostly covered by private savings. In the longer run, losses either demoralize the label owners to the point that they close the label, or mean that continuing becomes disproportionately uneconomic. It is clear from following online discussions from within this community on Twitter, for example, that the economic pressures can be great. Glenn Astro symptomatically tweeted 'I wonder if being fucked by tax payments throughout the year will ever stop. In fact, will being broke ever stop?' (@GlennAstro, 5/12/2018). Similarly, one of the most successful acts on the Ilian Tape label, Skee Mask, symptomatically tweeted: 'it is the first time in my life where I can buy some new gear and really not need to worry about not being able to pay my rent next month' (@sk33mask, 10/02/2019).

The current economic context of label economics has shifted quite radically since the digitalization ushered in a new market disruption, starting with CDs in the 1980s and continuing to the present day with digital and streaming formats. Experienced label owners have told us that the current situation is new and seemingly forever in flux, pointing back to a time when physical sales were relatively very high. Markets have now fragmented by medium, format and genre, meaning the number of niche music markets have multiplied and consumers have more choice about how they purchase or listen to new music. What is more, the market is now flooded with new music, and even professional DJs and producers tell us they simply cannot keep up with their new release listening regimes, hence the need for good relationships with trusted record store owners and other taste-makers.

We are again reminded of what Wolfgang Voigt (the artist known as GAS and many other performer aliases including Mike Ink and Wasserman, and co-owner of Cologne label Kompakt) told us during an ethnographic encounter for our previous book, *Vinyl*: it is rare for records to sell in the volumes they were selling twenty or thirty years ago. Along the same lines, and highlighting this downward shift in sales, Frank Wiedemann of Innervisions – originally a sub-label of Jazzanova's Sonar Kollektiv – says that: 'at the beginning we had almost 3,000 or 4,000 (sales per release). I mean, Rej, that was still on Sonar Kollektiv of course, I think probably that was the record, in the whole market, that was the last one that made like 100,000 copies. And I think that was the last release. . . . I believe we were one of the last releases in the whole house and techno world to reach six figures, 100,000 copies . . . It was very normal in like mid 90s or something like that. They sold something like 50,000 instantly. These changes affected not just labels, but also stores. Physical stores have been doubly hit, having first to endure the large-scale shift associated with the death of the last hegemonic format, the CD, and then suffering again because of the saturation of digital streaming practices in consumer markets. We discussed the fate of physical stores and some cultural-economic strategies they use to overcome these challenges in our earlier works about vinyl record as a 'resurrected' music format (Bartmań ski and Woodward 2013; 2015). Of course, a feature of recent times has been the popping up of new record stores and outlets, mostly vinyl-focused enterprises in big city environments, especially European metropolitan areas such as Berlin. One of Berlin's key vinyl stores, OYE Records, has the headquarters in the established district of Prenzlauer Berg and an outlet in the currently hip neighbourhood of Neukölln. The former, established in 2002, has 289 label sections, while the latter, established

on 4 July 2015, features ninety-six. OYE is one of Berlin's leaders in electronic, house, techno, jazz and re-releases of classics and disco-funk rarities.

Checking up on the changes that have occurred in the business during the writing of this book, Dominik and the OYE partner Markus Lindner, aka Delfonic, sat down together in summer 2018 to detect and discuss any significant trends over the preceding five years, a half-decade of high hopes and creeping worries about vinyl and independent production. For example, using 2012 as a benchmark, the relative unit sales between 2013 and 2017 indicate a decrease after the vinyl boom peak around 2012–13. The only saving

FIGURE 2.2 *Markus Lindner, aka DJ Delfonic, ran a nodal institution of vinyl record culture in Berlin, OYE Records, until 2019, with the original headquarters in Prenzlauer Berg and the second venue in Neukölln, where this picture was taken in the summer of 2018. Photo by D. Bartmański.*

grace for stores – although not for customers – is that many records have increased in price: Markus estimates a rise of 20–30 per cent in prices since 2014, but whether this pattern is sustainable in the longer term is unclear. The data speaks to the problems that such independent record stores face. There may indeed be a vinyl renaissance, but according to Markus the number of customers relative to the number of releases is progressively declining, and this is reflected in his sales data. According to Markus, and rather pessimistically based on his business experience, 'the bad news is: new music tends to get overshadowed by the classics and the big names, and especially stuff released on small labels disappears from view. So these are hard times to start a new label'.

Given sales numbers like this, it is easy to imagine the effect that the digital and streaming consumer listening revolution had on music markets, both independent and mainstream. Facing this situation, all labels – and indeed the store outlets they are economically entangled with – needed to forge a new business model. Principally, risks to capital accumulation need to be managed in creative ways, often involving combination releases of digital and

TABLE 2.1 ***Yearly relative changes (percentage) in number of vinyl sales at OYE Records, Berlin, 2012–17. Table by I. Woodward***

2012	**100%**
2013	+ 58.3%
2014	+ 23.9%
2015	+ 16.2%
2016	– 3.1%
2017	– 11%

small-run physical formats. John Talabot, Barcelona-based DJ and producer, tells us that the strategy of his Hivern Discs label was to produce relatively low numbers of vinyl, say '400 to 700–800, no more', hoping for high turnover. He was realistic about the likelihood of making profit by releasing on vinyl, especially when all the costs of producing a quality, 'artistic' release are taken into account: 'Maybe if you press 3,000 and you sell them, then you're going to make money ... So there's no way to make more money unless you're pressing like 3,000. But I'm pretty sure, 3,000, we wouldn't sell that at any point.'

Like Wolfgang Voigt, John Talabot also points to changing market conditions. In a case like this where there was surplus, the risks associated with not selling physical stocks are high, especially when costs of production rise as is the case today. This illustrates the main economic liability in the work of small independent labels, one which is a troubling reality for all kinds of special niche operations: 'at the low end of the market, where profit margins are reed-thin, any additional increment in cost is intolerable' (Greenfield 2016: 44). Physicality of the records compounds the problem. Keeping physical stock with the distributor 'costs money, space on their shelves has a monthly cost, which actually doesn't make any sense, because once you have the record out you want to sell it as fast as possible to recoup that money, then use that money to put out another record'. Talabot explains that the goal was to sell the vinyl release within six months, recoup the invested money with some profit, and then 'have new releases rolling, because we didn't want to go to a store and see all our releases. You know that moment you get to store and you see that huge amounts of releases from the same label and you don't know which is the first one and the last, which is the newest one, which is the oldest one? So we really wanted to keep it, like,

day by day.' This policy also has symbolic implications and trade-offs that we more fully elaborate on in the next chapter. Rolling physical releases can signify scene momentum and confident artistic vision, reminding people of a label's relevance. In addition, alongside small-run vinyl releases, website-based business becomes important. As John Talabot notes, the website has no intermediate people to pay; in addition, the web release strategy complements and extends the physical release strategy because it allows lower-cost flexibility in releasing extra or special tracks such as remixes:

Dominik: Do you have your own website?

JT: Yeah, we have our own website. And I think this is an important thing for the labels now. Selling the music through your website is an important part of your business, too.

Dominik: Selling directly to people, and . . .

JT: Yeah. Make exclusives and stuff for them and stuff like that. Because it attracts people to sell. That's one part of production that doesn't have any intermediates. That allows you, maybe, to recoup more money.

Kai Alcé, Detroit-based label boss at NDATL, an acronym for New York, Detroit and Atlanta, which signifies something essential about the musical, sonic elements and history which have shaped the label's sound, works somewhat in the other direction, saving special tracks for vinyl releases as a way of priming interest and promoting quick turnover. In the following extract, Kai explains why, noting that as vinyl is more expensive and more difficult to source, he likes to reward buyers with some type of listening bonus:

Dominik: Do you release digital and vinyl?

Kai: Correct. Yeah. I tend to always keep something exclusive to the vinyl. Usually the vinyl has four versions. One of the versions won't come out digitally. Maybe a different version might come out digitally. I try to keep something in the vinyl that's exclusive to the vinyl.

Dominik: So, in a way, part of the philosophy of your label is to privilege vinyl format?

Kai: Correct.

Dominik: Why would it be? What is so special about vinyl in your view?

Kai: When you go out and buy a vinyl you're putting in more effort, you're paying more, you're actually going somewhere to get it, or you're paying for it to be shipped to you. So, for the consumer, I go the extra mile to make sure they got something exclusive.

Given the importance of getting products to the right customers, labels must often negotiate deals with digital and vinyl distributors. The way their records and digital releases are distributed is an important intermediary market context for many independents. For vinyl-format releases, they most likely need to engage with pressing and distribution companies. In this case, the distribution company has – at least in theory because of their often superior experience or contacts – more knowledge about how the business works and how artists and genres are selling. In addition, they are also likely to have more clout with pressing plants, for example, in terms of pushing through smaller vinyl runs as quickly as possible. A 'pressing and distribution' arrangement is a common way for relatively new or unknown performers to get their material professionally recorded and into record stores without having to have outlay money upfront

for the release. For smaller labels, it means that the distribution company holds the future of smaller labels in their hand to a significant degree. It is not unheard of for them to stop trading, potentially risking the invested capital of smaller labels.

One way to overcome the pressing and distribution dilemma is to do your own physical distribution, though in this case the likelihood of diffusing your music beyond local stores is then relatively low. An alternative solution involves a form of horizontal integration of artist, record store, and distribution firm, as exemplified by the deal Money $ex Records has with OYE Distribution. Money $ex are closely aligned with the OYE Records store in Berlin, whose partner Markus Lindner also runs OYE Distribution. He runs Money $ex releases through pressing and distribution deals, meaning that OYE Distribution pays for the pressing and production of the recording up front. Working in a community of like-minded artists, Delfonic, Max Graef and Glenn Astro have produced numerous well-received albums and EPs between them. They produce what OYE Records classifies as 'headz' tracks: a mix of warm organic sounds and scruffy beat cut-ups, a new funky and warm pastiche of styles and sounds. Crucially, they work in an axis of labels with Money $ex at the centre, but have also released albums with Copenhagen's Tartelet Records, and on London's Ninja Tune. Part of their exchange with Dominik is reproduced below. We find it an insightful extract, illustrating some key aspects of the preceding discussion, including how the label collective interpret the economic facets of how their label works, how they highlight the collective nature of agreements between artists and labels, and how co-performers on the label are 'friends' who understand the implicit agreements about the distribution of profits:

Delfonic: So, like two years ago, I started to distribute the records and some more labels as well. We pay for the mastering, pressing, and distribution. So the label gets . . . it's like the 50–50 deal.

Dominik: 50–50? 50 per cent for the label and 50 per cent for the artist?

Max: No. 50 per cent for the distribution and 50 per cent for the label.

Dominik: And for the artists?

Max: The artists are our friends, so we basically never gave anyone money as it was all our friends. So we had the money in the end and did something with it together in the community. We had dinner and a cool party.

Dominik: So profit from the music was something that was derived from the gigs, rather than publishing music?

Max: No one ever profited from the money. It was always that we just do projects together.

Glenn Astro: The amount wasn't so big that you actually could pay someone.

Max: And no one wanted to get paid. We didn't want to get money out of it. So we expected our friends to feel the same, and they mostly did.

Glenn Astro: It's a bit like a collective.

A different take comes from the label Ilian Tape, run by the Zenker Brothers, Dario and Marco, from Munich. Talking to Dominik in an extended Skype interview, they explain that it would be relatively simple to make 'a lot of money' if you jump on musical bandwagons and aim for more commercially oriented releases, but that this would work for only 'one or two seasons' and what happens after that? 'For us',

they say, 'it was never about the money. Of course, we have to pay for everything and we want to be successful'. Their story illustrates the importance of having a favourable distribution deal. A turning point in the story of Ilian Tape was leaving their first distribution deal, which ran for up to three years. The deal was designed to help them release records, and this it did, though it also took control away from them and left them with debt that took some years to pay back. At the centre of this was a pressing and distribution deal which proceeded somewhat unconnected from a close understanding of the specific markets niche performers operate in. As they recall: 'the distribution was like "okay, let's press 1,000." It was not really transparent from the beginning. The way of working was really naïve and we didn't know what to do. We wanted to put out a record so we were like, ok, let's put out 1,000. It wasn't very, like, we thought about it of course, but it was getting into it. It was learning. It's like studying something. The label is turning eight this year. It's a life-long process I think. Even labels that last twenty or twenty-five years, the guys that run it still say, "I'm learning, I learn a lot everyday". And the next time we do things differently.'

Now, through a sometimes costly process of trial and error, Ilian Tape have found something of a successful formula. After a period of time of declining vinyl sales from consecutive releases, they now follow a pattern of releasing around 500 vinyl units, and then perhaps repressing if demand is still there. For them, this came down to paying their own mastering and pressing costs, which helped them feel closer to the market action and their market contacts. They explain that leaving their first pressing and distribution deal was a turning point:

> And then we decided from then on we wanted to do it ourselves. We want to pay for the mastering. We want to pay for the pressing.

> We want to have complete control in our hands. In the beginning we had to put some money into it, but now, at the moment, the label runs by itself. We release a record, we get enough money back to make another one. Also to make some other things for the label. At the beginning we did it also with a party. We went to one party in Munich and all the money we earned we put into the label.

Here, we need to also consider some broader market changes associated with the shifts between CDs, streaming and vinyl, and also the emergence of the 'social-mediatized' independent music prosumer. The 'prosumer' (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010) is a market actor who combines aspects of consumption and production. In consuming by, say, advertising new music releases on Instagram or a music blog, they become important producers in independent music market contexts by exchanging their 'free' labour, used to artistically and 'authentically' advertise new releases, for cultural and scene capital. Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010) see such actors as embodying a new form of capitalist subjectivity and we discuss this issue further in the following chapter. In an important sense, social media unites – or at least attempts to unite – the field, with important 'influencers' on platforms like Instagram or Twitter, informing consumers about the best upcoming independent releases, alongside important established scene spanning websites and blogs like Resident Advisor, The Vinyl Factory, Electronic Beats, Crack Magazine, or FACT Magazine, each of which is simultaneously present across various virtual platforms. Additionally, labels have regular release newsletters, sometimes even with weekly rosters of new material. This shifts the way people source and find music, and in turn changes the activities of the music producers and retailers who are to some degree beholden to somehow incorporating these new commercial

mechanisms. Markus Lindner of OYE Records sums it up most acutely; the sharp, incisive realism of his account suggests to consider how economic practices intersect with continuous and parallel process of symbolic value creation:

> Nowadays there are way more labels, way more music every week, but not more customers. The market is overflooded [sic] and at the same time the young generation do not dig in records stores the way they used to . . . much has changed in the three years between 2016 and 2018. Labels today experience the shift in sales from 2,000 copies of a record down to several hundreds, sometimes even 300. Small indie labels are happy now if they can sell 300–400 copies of a dance twelve . . . So, for labels, this situation means the same work but much less money. To break even with 300 copies is very hard without going way up with the prices. Indeed, the cost of a record has gone up generally but customers in the scene don't necessarily earn more. In 2015 and 2016 we used to ship eighty to 100 copies of records from different small electronic music labels we represent to bigger stores in Berlin such as HHV, now they typically only take five or ten.

Telling production stories: From materials to symbols

The stories we uncovered and retell here are fascinating accounts of people's commitment to musical and sonic ideas, particular underground scene tastes, and collaborative partnerships built on appreciation of shared aesthetic pleasures. We contend that the bigger picture here is really about corporate capitalism, and the valuing of music. Actors within these scenes mobilize their efforts in

the name of taste, style and aesthetic-sonic pleasures, but an important narrative anchor is their independence. Being independent remains a statement not just against musical styles, but can constitute a position against corporate capitalism. Our book intersects with what we believe are the most significant modern questions about the links between economic activity, the production and consumption of goods and experiences, and the performative construction of cultural meaning. This relates centrally to the meaning of work and the activity of economic production. Matters of meaningfulness and satisfaction around work in industrial and post-industrial society have long been considered core problems in the social sciences. In Marxist theory, this problem is foregrounded by the socio-economic dynamic between owners of the means of production and those who work for them as a bedrock element of the capitalist system. A basic conceptualization of work is that it involves the use of labour power to transform the value of materials.

This position is a rather complex one, as we expand in later chapters of this book. But it is worthwhile thinking about the context of human labour power and creativity within capitalism and here we should go back to some theoretical basics. Under capitalism, the relation of labour power to production and value is contextualized by matters of surplus value, the extraction of profit and the paying of a wage. Work is not simply expenditure of effort for the sake of sustenance of self and kin. Unless one owns the means of production, however meaningful such activities might be, work is defined by activities of value- and profit-creation for others. According to classical critical theories of capitalist economic organization, this separation of workers from the things they produce leads to alienation and disenchantment, and ultimately political uprising.

The reasons for this alienation relate to an important part of the human experience that rings universally true not necessarily as fact, but as essential truth of humanity only a certain part of the labour force are fortunate enough to experience. As Karl Marx made clear, it was in work and the making of things of value that people find the significant personal rewards related to satisfaction, effort, creativity and appreciation of the existential position of humanity related to the human capacity to transform and produce. The things people produce are important for Marx because they are the unit representations of fundamental processes of capitalist society: alienation, exploitation and estrangement. In an ideal world where people direct their own work and where they produce things meaningful to themselves for the good of their family and communities, the existential dimension of personhood is revealed in a positive way as people identify their own power, creativity and productivity in the things they make: 'It is therefore in his fashioning of the objective that man really proves himself . . . for man reproduces himself not only intellectually, in his consciousness, but actively and actually, and he can therefore contemplate himself in a world he himself has created' (Marx 1975: 329). In this context, working independently and working creatively becomes an important symbolic practice of reclaiming autonomy, constructing the meanings upon which their work is understood, redefining their relation to productive activities, decoupling them at least in part from the demands of commercial capitalist industrialization of art and culture.

Coupled with this dimension of making work meaningful is the unavoidable challenge of commodification and its effect on the meanings of production and consumption. Commodification is the incorporation of human experience, needs and wants into

systems of economic production, value and consumption and is a key dimension of capitalist economic production. Commodification means that most – probably 'all' – forms of human activity and experience become marketized, meaning they are assigned a value and made amenable to market exchange. We might forget about, or indeed repress, commodification when it comes to many of the straightforward consumer needs of everyday life. However, when it comes to the most meaningful dimensions of human existence and identity performance we are at our most vulnerable, but also potentially our most critical, of commodification processes. It is in the field of artistic production, which at its purest form must represent the untainted and direct effort of the artist separated from external constraints of monetary value and markets, where commodification becomes a key force of cultural pollution. Yet, in late-modern society, culture is now typically a commodity like any other and is produced according to the same potentially degrading logic of exploitation, appropriation and standardization. The key question appears to be how to reclaim meaning, purity and the 'sacred' in the pervasively marketized and thus increasingly 'profane' worlds of capitalist production and consumption. Providing more specific context and using these literatures as one point of inspiration, our study generally reveals aspects of the cultural politics of production especially as it forms via a type of reaction to the blatant commodification and corporatization of music. Specifically, once again, the context of study we deal with allows us to see the crafting and consumption of music in the context of its multi-layered framing, addressing the question of the strategies and practices our informants use to reclaim meaning alongside practices and feelings of genuineness, efficacy and the construction and policing of value in relation to their work.

At this point, we need to develop more fully the relation between economic and symbolic spheres, and this argument is developed comprehensively in the next chapter. The symbolic considerations must go hand in hand with the economic aspects, as they are fully mutually constitutive rather than distinct. This appears particularly important in spheres of artistic and aesthetic production that operate in the unforgiving context of neo-liberal times. As Miguel de Beistegui (2018: 169) argues, 'it would be illusory to decouple the symbolic from the economic and act as if those two spheres – the "system of needs" and the "struggle for recognition" – were entirely heterogenous: while they are not entirely reducible to one another, their fate has tended to overlap in the age of capitalism, and especially of neoliberal governmentality'. Indeed, as they are not reducible, we analytically distinguish them in the structure of the narrative. Yet their reciprocally conditioned existence transpires at all moments of observation. Alongside the directly material, 'monied', dimensions of label activity, the narrative and the symbolic are just as crucial for building operational capital. To appreciate this, we need to understand the power of stories and aesthetic materials together.

Humans are storytellers. As we have previously mentioned, as scientists and persons we live by stories and metaphors. In this field of cultural production 'independent' is part of a larger meaning system conveyed through narrative accounts of value, affect, and symbolic gravity. What makes such stories powerful is that they exude – if well positioned and felicitously articulated – a genuine commitment and are structured by cultural metaphors, schemas and symbols which underpin and generate strongly held cultural beliefs and associated actions. Stories, experienced via narratives, dramas, myths, images and tropes, help us perceive and understand the qualities of our daily existence in terms of their relationship to these

underlying culture codes and archetypes of action and social position ('genius', 'maverick', 'generic', 'sell-out', 'cool', etc.). Stories are enabling as patterns-to-follow and symbolic templates; they are encouraging a textured human engagement with the qualities of experiences that make our lives worthwhile. When we 'read' and hear stories, both as lay persons and scientists, they allow social events and cultural objects to find an internal life, compelling and committing us to the diverse things about ourselves and others we hold sacred, or reject outright. Of course, it's not just humans that have monopoly over the capacity to tell stories. Stories are enabled and brought to life in material things and all kinds of non-human agents of the digitalized culture. Especially in the scenes we observe, things have a vibrancy that stories complement and create, giving material things a capacity to resonate with humans – sometimes literally – through their qualities.

To recapitulate, it is not just lives and personal experience that are narrated. The economy and markets – for example, markets for music, vinyl, DJs and producers, music-players – are also crucially shaped by stories. As we have tried to show in this chapter, specific kinds of narration pervade the domains of markets, economies and economic activity which we may commonly think are fields dominated by 'pure' modes of economic and behavioral rationality (Akerloff and Kranton 2010). Consumer objects and products have the partially autonomous power to tell their own stories and come loaded or 'packaged' with stories, and therefore work alongside people as storytelling agents. Increasingly in marketplaces, in fact, products require backstories to be at the front of stage and the top of the mind. In the aestheticized economies of late capitalism, producing and consuming becomes a performative interweaving of identity, utility, the sensual or material features of products, and the product's unique affordances, narrative, story and history. Products,

consumers and market intermediaries make certain types of engagement with products an experience with cherished values and desires, and stories contribute to our understandings of this experience. This large-scale cultural-economic change impacts directly on economic practices of consumers, but also points to the need to go well beyond economic explanations as the symbolic resources and symbolic positioning of labels becomes a crucially important part of their value proposition within independent music markets. In short, the economic dimension must be fused with the symbolic, and we explore the mechanisms that drive this field in the following chapter.

3

Symbolic economy

As a business and a livelihood, music is a tough topography to navigate. But it is also a terrain of extraordinary temptation and seduction. It is a playground to fall in love with. And it is also a story. The French DJ Emeline Ginestet, aka Molly, who runs the label of the Parisian club Rex and her own imprint RDV (Récit de Voyage), emphasizes this aspect: 'For me, the best DJs are the ones who are telling stories. And this is what we are doing with the label.' She goes on to explain that music she looks for as the label curator should be evocative, capable of encapsulating an event, an experience or a moment in time. She says, 'I want the music to reflect the memory of a night', and insists that it should have a lasting quality: 'For me, proper music is not something you listen to and then put in a bin. It is something you keep listening to for years and years and years.'

Music is widely believed to be capable of carrying emotional states beyond the immediate contexts in which the emotions arise, and if it can achieve that, the memories of these states can stay with us for years. But music is not only a feeling to give in to but also a topic to think of and talk about. How does music work its magic on people? What makes music memorable, and what are the conditions of good musical storytelling? Reflecting on these questions is a

useful starting point to understand the distinctive role of 'symbolic economy' in independent music making. There's an insidious inclination among music lovers to assume that *'(good) music speaks for itself'*. But sociologists turn assumptions into questions. Does music really speak for itself? What could it mean?

While we concur that music's power consists of what Randall Collins (2000: 33) would call 'emotional energy' and its ineffable capacity to move us, it is also the case that much of its cultural resonance rests on how the material symbols that crystallize creativity energize the audiences. In other words, social reception of music depends on a broad but definable set of non-musical factors that fashion the material symbols and frame their presence in life contexts. Music's power also depends on ways in which these elements are combined, intentionally or otherwise. Persons and places matter a great deal, and so do the larger cultural contexts that more or less subliminally influence our perception. Music seems to have obvious and intuitively graspable meanings but there's also a valence to musical performance that is experienced by people in a more diffuse manner. This valence lends unique aura to music. Perhaps this is the 'it' of music. But there's still more to the power of music. Working with the concept of symbolic economy can help unravel music's enigmatic affordances. For example, in certain illustrious cases of independent music production, it is the way in which labels and artists *combine* the obvious meaning of the release (e.g. functional or political) with its 'obtuse' meaning (Barthes 1978: 61), with that something which 'cannot be described' and yet remains integral to music's impact on us.

Being typically devoid of narrative lyrics, electronic dance music such as house or techno seems to have this kind of dual character that is rooted both in the concreteness of club situations and in the

abstraction of its indescribable significance, its nature of being an inalienable end in itself. One vital aspect here is that underground club tracks woven into musical stories called 'DJ sets' combine body-oriented dance functionality with mind-oriented 'obtuse' affordances capable of 'transporting you to a different place', perhaps with some help from all kinds of substances too. To understand this dual potential of music better, two historical references might prove helpful. In the famous song by The Smiths, 'Panic', Morrissey sarcastically sings, 'Hang the blessed DJ, because the music that they constantly play, it says nothing to me about my life'. While it's a problem and a limitation to some, it is precisely why club music has become a blessing and a liberation to others. Techno and house are good examples: they make you forget about your life, and especially about the oppressive textures of life. The famous line associated with Berghain – 'don't forget to go home' – is not there for nothing.

Another useful reference derived from the same time of the first half of the 1980s is thematized by Tim Lawrence in his account of the New York club scene during that period. He discusses the seemingly obvious importance of sonic volume. While some rock artists, for example The Cure, explicitly noted on their *Disintegration* LP to 'turn it up' and listen to their music loud, this is now quite self-evident in such genres like house or techno. Legendary DJs of the pioneering era analyzed by Lawrence, such as Larry Levan, insisted on having club sound systems 'run at 130 decibels or higher, leaving dancers overwhelmed by the force of the music', and 'combining precision and force' (Lawrence 2016: 192). In such a context, powerful amplification is a necessary vehicle of combining the two valences of music's meaning, not just optional increase of loudness. Again, the aura of the Berghain floor comes to mind, as it perfectly instantiates the combination of power and precision of its custom

made Funktion One speakers that make the music reverberate throughout the space.

These aspects of music are significant because they are among the main contexts of reception and they illustrate the importance of material affordances for the construction of symbolic meanings of music. One could conclude that a vital part of the symbolic power of underground house and techno music is that it is at once something superfluous and necessary, luxurious and basic, hedonistic and ascetic, abstract and concrete, out of place and yet space-related. An enticing set of paradoxes, indeed. But meanings of this music get created not only in the party and club contexts and the associated memories. They get fixed through physical releases whose character is both more stable, more durable, and more 'ready to hand', to use Heidegger's phrase. Records aid our fallible memory in more than one way. They literally record musical soundtracks of our lives. They preserve the rhythms of our parties and biographies. Their longevity mirrors the lasting value of music. Sociologists refer to this form of material fixing of meaning as the objectification of cultural value. It is here where the significance of labels becomes pronounced. Labels are one of the key agents that endow music with certain longevity, recognizability and material objectification. Evanescent sounds are physically recorded, multiplied and disseminated under an identification sign. And as Steve Mizek, the head of Argot and Tasteful Nudes labels points out, in this objectifying capacity labels build larger aesthetic and symbolic structures through their sustained catalogues. They streamline musical production in a palpable way, giving material symbolic form to the seemingly immaterial sound of a given time.

Of course, in daily practice, this means managing a variety of factors involved in the finding, production and dissemination of

new music. Some factors are of a strictly material and economic nature, as we discussed in the previous chapter. Others have to do with modes of presentation and display as well as with the interpretation of values that a given work expresses or is said to manifest. Today, independent music is packaged not much less than more mainstream forms, and it is the case both literally and metaphorically. Labels do an important part of the packaging. How they go about this process of 'packaging' also matters for the perception and reception of music, not only upon release but also in the long run. Herein lies another pivotal dimension of labels' significance. To understand the logics of this 'packaging' means to understand a central aspect of symbolic economy of music.

The enactment of the 'packaging know-how' is not necessarily always of the strategic kind we know from the world of material economy. Nor are the 'rules of the game' elaborate or written in stone. But music is constantly being symbolically shaped, used and interpreted. These processes are socially contextualized by audiences regardless of producers' awareness of this fact. Independent music never appears in a social vacuum. Nor is it as immaterial or idealistic as its abstract nature suggests. It is always already framed – by the context of production and release, by the media, reviews (or lack thereof), cultures of listening, and modes of transmission and recirculation in other domains of culture. A virtuoso performing incognito at a subway station may receive much less attention than in a prestigious and grandly advertised concert hall. Releasing on a recognized label may mean different symbolic weight and visibility than a self-released work of an unknown artist. That's part of symbolic economy.

Independent electronic music producers are not in a radically different situation than other musicians: they begin the artistic

process but are usually not in a position to definitively shape its cultural meaning. Channeling their work by labels and media gives essential direction and spin without which they can hardly resonate with broader audiences. These mediations of musical meaning work in a patterned rather than random manner. The patterns, in turn, depend on affordances and entanglements that constitute the contexts of production and reception. For this reason, the forms of cultural mediation have partially expectable effects and traceable origins. To know the music business means not only to comprehend its finances and material costs but also its cultural mediations and aesthetic trade-offs. The two are intertwined and produce recognizable structure. There are dos and don'ts when it comes to value-laden and style-oriented action. Balancing these aspects constitutes *the symbolic economy* in the broadest sense.

The message then is the following: that there's an inalienable ability of music to move human body and mind doesn't change the fact that music's social resonance and cultural meaning occur when external symbolic vocabularies are deployed as well. Likewise, although it's true that the mundane conditions of possibility (music's material economy) shape artists' chances and choices, that's not the whole story either. And while the birth of the cool in music – its aura and atmosphere – is notoriously elusive, it begs explanation. We can pin-point it intuitively as listeners and perhaps more systematically as cultural analysts. In each case, we eventually come to a realization:

music does not speak for itself.

Moreover, nowadays independent music is perhaps less capable of speaking for itself than ever before due to the profound and pervasive influence of social media on the process of distribution, promotion,

interpretation and contextualization of cultural production. The terms of symbolic framing are both more important and differently important today than in the past. Crucially, the breakthrough of house and techno music scenes and the internet occurred roughly simultaneously. As Matthew Collin (2018: 6) observes: 'the global expansion of internet access helped to propagate trends that might previously have remained localized for much longer, and allowed new borderless networks to coalesce around any kind of sound that one might hope to invent. Electronic dance music culture grew up at the same time as the internet and took advantage of its possibilities instinctively; this was digital culture for digital times.'

To employ our initial metaphorical scheme, we might say that digitalization was a kind of tsunami that rolled over the ocean of music, not sparing the independents. Indeed, as many of our interviewees insist, independent music has changed profoundly in the first two decades of the twenty first century. For example, looking back at three decades of continuous operation of his label, Peter Quicke, the manager of Ninja Tune, reflects on what has happened to independent music:

> Everything is different, isn't it? The market is different; the way people listen to music is different ... If you think about music, you can listen to it three seconds later. Back then it was impossible. How would you do that? You had to go to the record shop. But today underground music is everywhere, on Soundcloud, on Spotify. There are still niches and they are approachable from all angles.

Undoubtedly, the landscape seems thoroughly transformed. But the 'instinctive' digitalization of the scenes is not a description that exhausts the specificity of the turbulent transition from the

analogue world to the reality of digital streaming. This liminal phase is more complex. Importantly, while certain elements have changed irrevocably, some of the key symbolic terms on which independently motivated artistic creation works remain in place. Peter Quicke admits that the way we find music and listen to music now is different. Back then it was more 'linear', as he phrases it. Now we could perhaps say it resembles the rhizomatic structure of the web itself.

What seems unchanged in independent scenes is the sense of full artistic control on the part of the producer and the feeling inspired by music in the listener. For the Ninja Tune manager, approaching the comprehensive artistic control – then and now – 'is at the core of what label is all about'.

Quicke goes on to say also that 'the emotional connection is the same from the listener to the music but I think that more people are more likely to spend less time on (a piece of) music, because there is so much'. So while the conditions of production and reception have changed, basic meanings, intents and purposes have continued to matter. What still matters, albeit in a much less clear-cut way, is the structure of distinctions in taste-making. Sarah Thornton (1995: 3–4) observed in her analysis of rave culture at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s: 'club cultures are taste cultures. Club crowds generally congregate on the basis of their shared taste in music … taking part in club cultures builds, in turn, further affinities, socializing participants into a knowledge of the likes and dislikes, meanings and values of the culture.' She goes on to argue that 'club cultures are riddled with cultural hierarchies', and that these are related to 'three principal, overarching distinctions: the authentic vs the phoney,

the 'hip' vs the mainstream, the 'underground' vs 'the media industry'. While the ways these distinctions are understood and applied needs time- and place-specific adjustments, the sentiments behind them continue to tacitly orientate the symbolic positioning and interpretation of independent music.

An inspired world

Independent music production does not only run the risks related to robustness of material economy or those inherent in the purely musical and technical challenges of the craft. There's more at stake. In addition to fiscal concerns, a pivotal aspect of labels' work is to project genuine artistic meaning and gain recognition for that. Then and now, the question of meaning is central. Without it, doing independent music loses inspiration, it threatens to be just a job, without reaching the level of art, which is what underground and avant-garde movements have typically held against the mainstream. It is in this sense that organizations of cultural production such as independent labels engage in navigating the intricate topography of symbolic economy. What does it mean in practice?

The way we understand symbolic economy here is *not* primarily about a crass for-profit instrumentalization of symbols (e.g. prioritizing creation and capitalization of a brand, especially by pairing with industry brands). Nor is it about strictly financially motivated advertisements which of course have their place in all of contemporary music. Although substantial symbolic capital accumulated in the independent sphere can be converted into economic capital, it is not the only goal and it is much harder – if not

impossible – to achieve the reverse. You might make money with street credibility but money can't make street credibility or freshness. This suggests in turn that symbolic economy is a relatively self-contained dimension of cultural production.

Questions of symbolic economy are about meaning, feeling, judgment of taste and value-commitments understood as aesthetic and social choices made for their own sake.

Like all choices made in conditions of scarcity of resources and attention, the symbolic ones have consequences too, sometimes more fateful and irreversible than the material ones.

Admittedly, *symbolic economy* may come across as a kind of counter-intuitive oxymoron. It sounds as though we unduly mix the domain of value, fairness, visceral feelings and emotional involvement with the domain of price, efficiency, rational calculation and pecuniary investment. Yet the seemingly 'subjective' sphere of taste and artistic creativity is not as idiosyncratic and free-floating as popular beliefs might suggest. On the contrary, this sphere has always been structured by informal principles, conditioned by material affordances, and framed by binding cultural narratives. All these things are powerfully effective and subject to quite specific, even if unwritten, rules of worth and exchange. It is partly for this reason why French sociologists Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot talk about different 'economies of worth' when they distinguish between different schemes of justification and thus between different 'worlds' based on them. These worlds could also be understood as games, and games – however different – always need rules if they are to be playable, and they incur costs and rewards, which make them feel real.

As we mention at the outset of the previous chapter, the work in independent musical production belongs first and foremost to what Boltanski and Thévenot call the 'inspired world'. As they explain:

> In an inspired world, the state of worthiness has the attributes of *inspiration* itself, in the form of *illumination*, a gratuitous benefit that is at once external and internal . . . It is manifested by feelings and passions, and it is experienced as devouring, terrifying, enriching, exciting, exalting, fascinating, disturbing, and so on. What is worthy is what cannot be controlled or – even more importantly – what cannot be measured, especially in its industrial forms.

Anyone familiar with the scenes we focus on in this book will instantly discern elective affinities between them and this description. However, we need to be careful here. Just because emotional intensities and their independently created manifestations should not be subjected to industrial forms of measurement does not mean they are not subject to other kinds of social control and cultural evaluation. Even freedom-oriented milieus presuppose a series of practical borders separating their work from what they see as unfreedom or crass opportunism. They are full-time symbolic guardians who cultivate a sense of what is 'cool' and what is not, what is genuine and what is not, what symbolizes freedom and what stands for dependence. In other words, while the inspired world of independent music production is in a certain sense 'outside' the imperatives of material economy that *measure* performance, it is typically framed by a symbolic economy of aesthetic worth that *qualifies* performance.

To be sure, there exist some forms of concrete 'measurement' of music's significance in independent electronic scenes as well.

There are, for instance, particular discursive strategies of such a 'measurement'. Despite its more intangible nature, symbolic qualification can take forms of verbal comparison and hierarchization (this DJ is 'bigger' than others in her genre; somebody's influence is said to extend 'farther', etc.). Some media outlets involved with independent music tend to 'rank' DJs and performers or even parties. If new small labels plan to obtain specific visibility by having their releases reviewed in established independent magazines, they need to be prepared to pay for it and prices will vary depending on outlets' market reach and symbolic power.

For example, when it comes to number of vinyl copies, pressings, and shows, sometimes less is indeed more. DJ Molly cultivates this approach in her work for the label:

> I hate quantity. I see labels that release every month. This is absolutely not quality. First, because you get so many emails that you can't get attention anymore, and, second, such music you're going to listen to one time and then throw it in a big bin.

Small-batch production or simple white-label releases can be intended as signifiers of underground or artisanal standing. Some labels wear this attitude on their sleeves, for example Underground Quality whose very name says it all, and whose avoidance of artwork suggests the entire focus is on the music. This reversal of industrial economy, which is typical in an economy of large-scale production, remains an ingredient in making independent electronic music. However, also in this context the symbolic valence of labels' choices is relationally defined. It is a matter of proportion and constantly under scrutiny of the scene. For instance, artificially keeping the supply way below a level of demand can be felt as unfair or criticized as forced – and thus 'inauthentic' – exclusivity. Irregular

or sporadic releases may mean that the label doesn't lodge itself properly in the collective consciousness of the scene. As the manager of Quintessentials label explains, usually there is a brief window of heightened attention paid to a new exciting label. That opportunity gate should be recognized and used wisely because one can never be 'fresh' again.

Generally speaking, the following trade-offs are at stake in underground electronic scenes. On the one hand, the releases should be relatively regular to establish a recognizable presence in the scene. On the other hand, there is a risk that releasing too many titles per year deflates their value. This is what many labels – especially young ones – fear and try to avoid. Ultimately, the freedom to determine one's own schedule belongs at the very core of what it means to be independent because it allows one to improvise, adjust on the fly, and prioritize quality for quality's sake. Quintessentials is a good example of an established underground label that tries to distill a quintessence of house music culture – it is small, run by one person, visually minimalistic and not in it for the profit. It's focused on what it sees as an 'essential' approach to showcasing good club music whenever it comes, regardless of time and source. The head of the label, who Dominik interviewed anonymously, breaks it down to this key message: 'Working as an independent label gives me much freedom: picking the artists, setting the release dates . . . if I don't feel like releasing for some months then I can do that, if I get some hot tunes, I can release them rather quick. There is less pressure "from outside", for sure.'

Of course, timing decisions and aesthetic choices are never that easy because fresh labels' resources are normally not limitless, both money-wise and in terms of hired personnel. Although small, at the time of writing Quintessentials has the benefit of ten years'

experience on the market, working with the distribution company Word & Sound, and in 2018 it released its ten-year anniversary compilation. Part of the Quintessentials approach was to bet on young unknown artists chosen for their artistic promise rather than an already existing place within the scene. Among them were producers who went on to achieve acclaim in independent club music, for example Vakula, Lerosa, Quarion, etc. Over time, that has reflected well on the label's integrity and acumen. Fresh labels, by definition, do not yet have rich experiential resources at their disposal and need to take risks. Dilemmas for the promising beginners often boil down to whether to quickly capitalize on enthusiastic early recognition, or focus instead on slower, low-profile but refined curatorial work. Sometimes the resulting tensions expose radically divergent visions within a label, some of which are more income oriented and others more about quality. Frank Wiedemann, one half of the house duo Âme, recalls an exemplary moment in the early years of the Innervisions label that he runs with Kristian Beyer and Dixon:

> We split up with the label manager because he wanted to do more and more releases, and we said, 'no, we don't want to release more, we want to stay with the same numbers, not to sell more records, because we want to stay with the quality'.

Similarly, for an independent artist, appearing frequently in vastly different contexts as a performer might be problematic. Diversifying one's output or portfolio is fine but only up to a point, and such an approach needs a symbolic leitmotif of sorts, or it needs to be scaffolded around stylistic pillars and allied with specific actors. Music production which proves unable to attract gate keepers (support of other DJs and the media considered in the scene as

cutting-edge) and which mobilizes no signifiers considered 'sacred' in the scene (e.g. Detroit) can have a hard time in a fiercely competitive environment. In this sense, one's entry to the game is always already pre-structured by existing social and artistic affinities and connections.

Personal creativity inflects the pre-existing language of worth in a given scene rather than invents a new one.

While contestable or overly mundane, such discursive and material strategies can be experienced as legitimate because there exists a shared sense of collectively tried, tested and negotiated value of musical work, the value that exists for and within a *scene* which always has its historically embedded sensibilities and proclivities. Styles are created and defined in a variety of bottom-up, grass-roots musical movements. Labels could be said to institutionalize, classify and ultimately qualify some of these creative energies. In an exchange with Claas Brieler, a founding member of Jazzanova and the band's label Sonar Kollektiv based in Berlin, this realization comes strongly to the fore and mirrors what many others, regardless of generational differences, report as well:

Dominik: Would you say that labels are institutionalizations of particular sensibilities in the underground?

Claas: Styles are defined there.

Dominik: In the underground?

Claas: Of course. No major has the power to define the style [laughs mockingly]. They're the last ones to bring it over into the mainstream. That's their business. They are no creators.

It is not only comparison that pits the independent and the bottom–up against the mainstream and the top–down but also the continual juxtapositions of styles and strategies within the independent scenes. The popularity of such comparative discourses of worth attests to the existence of the impulse to weigh artworks and to channel social attention along the lines of merit, fun and symbolic influence. But the qualitative rather than quantitative character of symbolic economy shifts emphasis from absolute numbers to relational meanings. What does it mean? The significance of music unfolds in specific social and technological contexts, and in relation to what happens in the scene and outside it. For example, small-batch production can be a viable scheme for an established label in London or Paris but not for a new imprint in Chicago. A vinyl-only house label such as Retreat or store-only offline releases such as special series from the Clone label can make sense and be positively coded in the mature market of Germany or Holland, but it may well be seen as an upper-class exclusivism in Brazil or Colombia where access to funds and equipment has been much less evenly distributed and where this particular genre has different standing vis-à-vis other local kinds of club and dance music.

Crafting material symbols

Perhaps most importantly, the relationality of meanings central to independent labels becomes visible in the ways in which labels' tangible products – records – are masterminded, prepared, crafted and finally offered to the world. As noted in the preceding chapter, many independent music labels still focus on labour- and cost-intensive physical releases – vinyl as well as CDs and cassettes –

despite the fact that contemporary culture has undergone a wholesale virtualization. This means that traditional issues of material economy of things get translated into opportunities and liabilities of the 'inspired world'. Even if the use of and demand for vinyl among DJs plateaued and has now uncertain prospects of further growth, the unique meaning of the analog record does not evaporate. Successful independent music labels that entered the market in the mid 2000s, i.e. at the time of the definitive transition towards fully digitalized culture, remain attached to an artistic ethos of craftmanship and the aesthetic difference that well designed physical releases can make. In fact, in some cases, it is precisely the full scale digitalization and virtualization of culture that makes re-articulation of analogue sensibilities possible and worthwhile for some people. This context makes analogue production suited to emphasize the symbolic importance of independent production focused on high quality as well as on cultivation of expressive features that have become 'non-standard' in fully digitalized culture. This is significant not just for vinyl-only labels but also for other actors that appreciate various aspects of record production.

Still, looking at some vinyl-only all-analogue imprints provides perhaps the most telling and comprehensive insights into what it means for music to be produced independently and with strong commitment to the nowadays 'non-standard' values. Let us glimpse into the work of LowSwing Records – a small label based in Prenzlauer Berg, Berlin – to get a sense of how combined meanings of quality, uniqueness and independence emerge in its practice. It's a small-scale one-man-show imprint that works under rather strict financial limitations. Nevertheless, as the owner Guy Sternberg explains, 'while the budget of my releases is considered small, the percentage of money that goes from the budget to quality

control – for example, not cutting corners in any way – is way bigger than in most labels, including majors'. This is a serious commitment, and it is to his advantage that Guy has his own fully analogue studio – LowSwing Studios – that gives him not only the sense of freedom we described before, but also certain production affordances unavailable otherwise. These affordances impose their own technical limits compared to digital process but, as we shall see, they feature specific effects – artistic and interpersonal – that LowSwing Records consciously aims at achieving. Upon visiting the studio, one learns that it is equipped with a custom-modified sixteen-track 2" Telefunken M15 machine to capture the sound, and that at the heart of it is a vintage Neve recording console, as Guy says, 'a "Rolls Royce" of audio from 1978 – perhaps the zenith of the recording era'. All the music released on LowSwing is recorded in the studio, always using analogue tapes which are currently being produced only in two locations in the world, one in Europe and another in the United States. As Guy explains:

> the cost of one tape reel, which amounts to thirty minutes of recording time, is nearly €300, and if one approaches the production of an LP frugally, as I need to, three tapes must do. Still, such a parsimonious recording session ends up costing close to €1,000. It is not possible to keep many alternate takes. I can do as many takes as I want but due to tape amount restrictions, I'm able to *keep* only a small number of takes, maximum two, maybe three takes per song – the rest is recorded over. Often only one take is left for the song after we have decided on the master take. The artists are aware of it, and this typically induces a special attention in them, a particular approach to creating a moment, a focused improvisation, not unlike the one

described by Bill Evans in his liner notes to the iconic Miles Davis' album *Kind of Blue*.

Typically, 500 copies of a vinyl-only album are released, which enables the label to break even. The tapes are retained, which should not necessarily be taken for granted – in the past, when the tapes were also expensive, some labels/studios re-used them for other recordings, which meant forever losing the original recording, hence the high value of the remaining vinyl copies of some old albums. In addition to these financial/material limitations, there are the limitations of the analogue process itself, a unique phenomenology of the analogue recording preserved on tapes and transferred to vinyl. Guy points out that the fully analogue process excludes many operations that are normal or 'standard' in a digital process – for example, the possibility of endless corrections to the sound or a visual engagement with the recorded music via the computer screens. LowSwing recordings are 'computer free' and this means that the entire process and aesthetic judgments are based on human hearing and studio experience. A unique moment created by actual people is captured on an analogue tape and the decision on what to use is fully aural. As Guy writes in the liner notes to the third release from his label, Port Almond: 'Recording onto tape always feels like some kind of magic – real voodoo! It's amazing to think how an electric current can make tiny magnetic particles arrange themselves in a way that creates such a beautiful sound. But even more than just the unique sound and texture of tape, recording entirely analogue forces the musicians to perform in a different way: more honestly, to listen more closely to each other and to be there in the moment. It's a very intense experience for everyone.'

While in contemporary electronic music – which is produced partially with computers and often entirely with them – these specific aspects of analogue production are obviously not as salient, the significance of having the music released on vinyl remains pronounced to many independent labels' work ethic. Similarly, producing techno and house music with analogue synthesizers can elevate the value of music performance, both in studio and live, to a higher level and typically commands added respect. Crucially for the creative philosophy of many labels, producing tangible analogue products means creating a particular kind of durable aesthetic value and experience. Jenus Baumecker-Kahmke of Ostgut Ton described this sentiment in the following way:

> I think even the smallest labels realize that the physical vinyl product needs to be something that you can appreciate, and that it somehow is decorative and collectible, that it's a quality product to look up to, to handle, to listen to. So I think labels have to really concentrate on offering you a really good vinyl product, just because that's their main revenue.

Similarly, Frank Wiedemann of Innervisions points to the fact that 'if you do something on vinyl then you create something valuable. A file isn't valuable, in my opinion . . . If I look at myself and how I use music, of course I listen to music on iTunes and Spotify, but the music that really lasts is on records'. This kind of attitude is by no means risk-free, and was particularly difficult in the second half of the 2000s when vinyl sales fell sharply and few believed the format would ever fully recover. When German DJ Dana Ruh set up her label Brouqade Records in 2007, the zeitgeist did not seem particularly auspicious. But even if the practical utility of the format was about to be significantly altered, she shared the

belief in its symbolic meaning with people who around a similar time set up such labels as Ostgut Ton or Innervisions.

Dana: There were a lot of labels that stopped vinyl releases completely. They went digital. I said 'no, we won't do this'. I want to have the physical thing. I need it.

Dominik: Why?

Dana: As an artist it's not just a file that you want to have. I know because I wanted to have that for myself, and if I do a label, then I want to give other people the possibility. I know what I want for myself, and I want to give this to the other people too. So it's a, if you produce music, it's nice to have that on the record – to have that.

Dominik: That tangible object?

Dana: Yes, because you see that this is what I achieved. Here's my product, here's my music. It was very important.

Last but not least, there's a symbolically potent quality to tangible works that come from somewhere as physical items and can therefore also travel somewhere else, exerting their appeal across time and space. And because their creation required physical effort and material sacrifice, they are invested with the symbolic weight that exceeds their default meaning or an immediate use. Lucy, the head of Berlin-based label Stroboscopic Artefacts, describes this meaning in the following way:

'the physical aesthetic of something is never innocent. It's the same thing with the art works. It's never innocent.'

Contextualizing this idea, he points particularly to the importance of physical production behind the record, i.e. the effort, the material

investment and the expertise and quality control provided by dedicated trained individuals. He emphasizes the

> 'manufacturing of it, the processes of it, the fact that you have to spend time and money on something because there is a human work behind it. This is all way less alienating than other forms of life. And when you are in those frames and when you sustain them over time, then also the output, of course, gets influenced by that approach to things. And then you can really sense the efforts, the artistic efforts in the music itself, which is still the main point.'

This intuition expressed by Lucy is not new, and can be detected throughout intellectual and artistic traditions already known to us. Its presence in the independent techno scene illustrates the continuity that we mentioned in the introduction, namely that there is certain commonality of approach and an appreciation for skill and creative awareness that connects the attitude of artistic craftsmen who are historically as far apart as ancient Athens and contemporary Berlin. Richard Sennett (2008: 293) observes in *The Craftsman* that 'the ambivalence about material culture marked out our civilization from its origins . . . the man-made material object is not a neutral fact; it is a source of unease because it is man-made'. In fact, Sennett (ibid.: 294) qualifies this unease in terms remarkably similar to those of Lucy: 'The craftman's skills, if natural, are never innocent.' In the context of this book one could suppose that it is precisely this kind of self-reflective attitude that distinguishes the 'independent' from the 'mainstream', in that the former dwells on it, while the latter pays scant attention, if at all, to the impact of mass production on society, seeing people first of all as buyers who are the source of profit. This difference in the construal of the end receiver of music between the mainstream and the underground remains important

FIGURE 3.1 ***There is substantial expertise, precision and skilled human labour behind the multi-stage production of vinyl records. Independent mastering studios, such as Calyx in Berlin, have been crucial to the manufacturing of records for independent electronic music labels in Berlin and far beyond. Photo by D. Bartmański.***

as an ideal-typical distinction: consumer vs prosumer, shopper vs digger, etc. Today the virtualization of musical consumption makes access to music much easier and thus compounds the problem of value. As Lucy puts it:

> With the social networks and stuff, your life becomes exploded. The border between fake and true, privacy and non-privacy becomes more and more thin [sic] . . . mainstream culture – in general the liberal economy and the capitalist philosophy of things – makes you dependent. And then tools are in a novel way presented as something that can help you, and in reality it's something that keeps you in chains.

The question of prolonged significance, timeless value and durable quality comes to the fore at many independent labels. Nevertheless, there is also a growing sense that the attitude represented by people based in metropolitan areas such as Paris or Berlin, for example the Rex club's label run by Molly, Berghain's Ostgut Ton, Dixon's and Âme's imprint or even smaller labels like Lucy's, are now becoming a kind of luxury within the scene, an exception in the extensive and saturated independent sphere, not the rule. Symbolic economy and material economy need to felicitously splice and combine their powers to produce conditions of possibility in which such types of labels can bloom, or at least sustain themselves in the long run, reaching recognition and maturity, at least symbolically if not also financially. Put differently, the two 'economies' – the material and the symbolic – remain connected, and with them the discrete logics of the two worlds – the inspired and the industrial. A palpable sense of motivated organization exists in each 'world', so that a set of patterns can typically be detected. In his interpretation of Boltanski's and Thévenot's approach, David Stark (2011: 13) emphasizes this aspect when he writes that their work 'shows in rich detail how the principles of evaluation established in each order of worth entail discrete metrics . . . and proofs of worth objectified in artifacts and objects in the material world', so that from a theoretical point of view 'the familiar culturalist versus materialist opposition becomes meaningless'.

This overlap between material objectification of sentiments and ideas, and the symbolic power of aesthetic work is perfectly showcased in the story of Ostgut, whose name was derived from the underground club that had been the direct predecessor of Berghain and which now represents the sound of Berghain as its main musical imprint. The club's unique phenomenology – its dimensions, look, feel and sound – inspire the music of the residents whose tracks are

in turn 'tested' before the release on the customized sound systems of the club. Alex Samuels, the head of Ostgut Ton since 2017, explains the logic behind the setting of some key symbolic boundaries of the label as follows:

> I think those boundaries are drawn less by aesthetic and more by internal rules of what Ostgut Ton is seen as a platform for. It's a platform, first and foremost, for the residents of the club . . . That pretty much had been the rule. What that meant in the past was that the music was kind of reflective of the experience in the club, but I also think that some – but by no means all – of the music Ostgut Ton released became increasingly reflective also of architecture of the club. So it is literally the sound of the space . . . hard, cavernous, to a certain extent punishing form of techno that you hear in some of the releases and mixes.

In short, there's a kind of phenomenological feedback loop between the club's space and its materialities, and the music showcased on the label and on the dancefloors; the feedbacks between music, visual experiences and space. This is a propitious moment to briefly return to the issue of non-arbitrary origins of the meanings of art works and aesthetic experiences that Wasily Kandinsky talked about. The contemporary artist closely associated with Berghain, Wolfgang Tillmanns, whose works hang on the club's walls and were also occasionally used on Ostgut record covers, describes the meaning of the club in this way:

> The atmosphere in the club is like art is supposed to be: it's totally open and doesn't tell you what to think. At the same time, it's not arbitrary, but instead very special and specific . . . I think that stimulating meetings between art and nightlife do not come from

> the fact that artworks hang in clubs, but rather from the open character of music, and nightlife more generally (2015: 36).

Even in this uniquely powerful case of the iconically potent interaction between the concrete space, art and the techno sound, the beginnings of the club's flagship imprint were anything but obvious and easy. What helped was a sense of an independent, steady commitment to the music as the symbolic manifestation of what was going on in the club and to the visions of its residents. Jenus Baumecker-Kahmke recalls the early stages of his work at Berghain's label this way:

> When Nick Höppner was leading the label, he always had a work ethic to say 'I'm going to be in charge of managing the label, and I'm going to make sure that it's somewhat independent.' . . . I think it took a while, I think two years, until releases started to become more regular, and he could see that there was a way of making this more than just a one-off thing, that the label could support itself. Then there was a plan being made of what kind of releases do we want to do. Then there was a thought given to how much of what kind (of music) . . . The concept of the music evolves as naturally as the family of artists, because they are all active in the same field of club music, and are all working on some level to further what's going on in club music.

As we have seen, the rule that Ostgut Ton is the platform reserved for Berghain's resident DJs remains in place. What makes independent labels such as Ostgut Ton as well as artist collectives like Innervisions uniquely positioned within the scene is that: first, they have been *consistently* shaping their releases in a sovereign manner; and second, they connected the label project to building and maintaining very strong DJ acts.

Records materialized styles and experiences of the specific art of DJing, and DJing fuelled an understanding of what good records should sound and look like.

But to arrive at such a sustainable creative position, creativity must meet stamina and calibrated symbolic vision of a disciplined kind. In an independent sphere whose financial economy depends almost exclusively on sustained stage performances, and whose symbolic economy puts a premium on artistic autonomy and aesthetic control, robust presence in the right club landscapes and cityscapes translates into social resonance that can transcend the confines of a specific moment. Being currently at the top of their game, these labels have the asset of consistent presence in the scene over years. When they started, they were in the right place at the right time. But the strong recognition factor that they currently enjoy has been worked out over a decade of sustained work (both Innervisions and Ostgut Ton were established in 2005 in Berlin).

Independent world in flux

Most small independent labels cannot, however, count on plentiful artistic, material and institutional resources, so they have to increasingly rely on boot-strap strategies and access to the social media and its rules of the game. According to Markus Lindner, the boss of the record store OYE in Berlin, the symbolic economy of the current independent music market is in large measure shaped by the symbolic economy of the media, especially by the logic of attention-seeking and the visual display of personal and social values encoded in musical life. Like Peter Quicke of Ninja Tune, he concludes that neither record stores nor clubs are the privileged places of music

discovery the way they used to be. They no longer have that exclusive power to endow underground releases with the definitive symbolic stamp of approval. Online tools such as Instagram or Facebook are instrumental in shifting the roles of 'analogue' institutions of independent music.

Virtual machines are making formally independent underground musicians increasingly dependent on the external structures of electronic communication and their algorithmic advertisement mechanisms. Artists do retain cultural agency, but not under technological conditions chosen by themselves.

These conditions affect all, not just producers but also consumers of music, and they do so in an increasingly sophisticated and profoundly insidious way.

This has specific consequences for independent producers. For those who have no other structures to fall back on, releasing and selling physical music – which they often agree is an ideal goal – may be difficult to sustain, and without a sustained release schedule neither exemplary catalogues nor symbolic recognizability is feasible for labels. Moreover, because the platforms of social communication are run by algorithmic mechanisms of for-profit companies, producers must join the game whose commercial motivations and corporate logic they don't necessarily approve of. Artists must catch up with technology, not the other way around, and they must face the trade-offs included in the package. For an independent musician, the attention-seeking process is fraught with symbolic pitfalls and risks. Consider the story of DJ and label head John Talabot, who runs Hivern Discs in Barcelona:

> We really didn't want to spam people, so we were never really inviting anyone to events or inviting to anywhere. We just did Facebook, people that go on Facebook, they receive our posts, but we are not those kinds of people spamming people for getting attention. So it took us almost eight years to receive attention with the label. So it's not something that was done like this. We had a lot of patience.

One can mitigate some negative aspects of the social media but it is almost impossible to escape them altogether. As far as smaller independent labels such as Money $ex and mid-size imprints like Hivern Discs are concerned, the digital social media are essential.

The once fundamental grammar of digging in stores is being steadily challenged by the 'instagrammar' of taste-selling.

Not having a professional PR manager or robust technical knowledge may mean a difficult, protracted start in such circumstances. Despite the vinyl revival of recent years, analogue products from boutique independent labels are increasingly discovered online, not in stores. Another effect of this structural shift is that word of mouth – once the key to the independent scenes' mystique – is being increasingly supplanted by communication patterns based on hashtag browsing and social media bubbles. Independent labels committed to traditional production face a curious paradox – they know that their music is propagated virtually as pictures and tweets but sold physically as records and party experiences. At the same time, a growing number of actors in the scene simply no longer care about the binary of physical release and digital signifier.

As we explained earlier, from Markus's perspective this has partly to do with the fact that the youngest generation of customers – who grew up with smartphones as everyday tools – do not have a strong 'organic' relation to physical releases and 'discovering' labels in shops. Indeed, music is increasingly produced, disseminated, played and consumed via virtual systems. Under such technological conditions, the symbolic economy moves part of its emphasis from the sonic to the visual environment. As artists can make themselves discoverable online, and create a following there, independent labels as the framing institutions of the underground seem to be losing part of their traditional distinction. Their ecological niche in independent culture seems to have been eroded. The classic role of labels as actors who yank new music out of obscurity, and package and categorize it is challenged. Their capacity to independently design and contextualize the release can be diminished and gradually overtaken by streaming devices that push the scene toward worshipping of artistic persona rather than discovering of musical content itself. To the extent that this tendency is now explicitly bemoaned by some DJs and promoters, the classic spirit of underground dance scenes is kept alive. But keeping this spirit in practice means creative adjustments and learning process are necessary. This may prove difficult, drawing attention away from music. According to Markus, that traditional meaning of independent labels as unique A&R agents and of record stores as central curators is no longer the default setting of being 'authentic' and relevant for young, bottom–up musical energy. He goes so far as to say:

'there is no "underground" anymore.'

Insofar as this rings true, the base structure of independent music is getting closer to the logic of pop music that is predicated on the star

system, and where identity and significance of the label is typically relegated to the background. But the situation is nowadays perhaps more complex than ever, in that processes of cultural and technological hybridization abound. For instance, digitalization is interpreted in relatively positive terms too by DJs who grew up with records and still cherish them. Martijn Deijkers aka *Martyn*, a Dutch DJ and producer currently based in Washington, DC, who runs his own label 3024 and is a record collector himself, offers the following insight:

> I think it's important to not let the negative aspects of 'the scene' get to you too much, and focus on your own music and other endeavors, rather than on what is happening around you. Obviously record sales are down (though not always in the independent market), it's harder to get gigs, and competition is fiercer. On the other hand, I think the dedication from fans has increased. If you look at a community such as bandcamp, it's really encouraging, and even if you are talking smaller numbers, the positivity that comes from these numbers and eradication of the middle men still give you motivation and inspiration.

There is little doubt that media-driven *star-making* has entered independent electronic music and competes with the label-driven *style-making* typical of the historically earlier iterations of the underground. Nowadays the two systems co-exist. The DJ has been elevated to the status of 'artist' and 'creator' with much of what this position implies in public and commercial domains. Once referred to as 'producers', electronic music DJs and musicians are now 'artists', just like any other performing instrumentalist. And yet, both 'star' and 'niche' acts remain committed to having labels or being present on specific labels. Important tracks are rarely – if ever – free-floating.

FIGURE 3.2 ***Martyn, DJ, producer and the head of the 3024 label in 2017. Photo by D. Bartmański.***

Likewise, DJs need promotion and booking agencies if they are to turn their work into their main bill-paying job. They are also often inclined to have their own label in addition to releasing music on labels with which they have established stable working relations. That is one phenomenon that suggests that the two systems form hybrid arrangements rather than mutually exclusive modes of publishing. This has partly to do with the strength of techno and house music traditions, in which labels used to play a central symbolic role as tools of stylistic classification. It has also to do with the fact that every culture rests on certain symbolic classification schemes. Recalling earlier decades of house and techno tradition, Frank Wiedemann notes:

> people who bought records at the time did it because they followed labels. Which is probably the same now, but at that time, like in

> house music, I think it was generally always the case. It was like that in mid 2000s, but also before that . . . people bought (records) not so much because of the artist but because of the label.

Today, labels as releasing platforms compete with digital channels of production and dissemination of music, whereby also self-released albums and singles can generate considerable attention. The ease of access to the internet and its platforms can mean relatively quick success for some artists but it is by definition not possible that Warhol's notion of 'fifteen minutes of fame' becomes everybody's experience. What may be called 'the Warhol Economy' (Currid 2007) – the enriching urban concentration of creative industries fuelled by a vibrant social (night) life – has its own logic but it does reproduce stratification and inequalities known in other domains. The reality of the independent world is not flat. Again, to use the initial topographic metaphor, it is criss-crossed by waves and currents. Scenes in which labels are active exist in specific urban-cultural 'ecologies' and these ecologies have spatial and material affordances that create variability within a given opportunity structure. Actors are swimming in the same waters, but they are not in the same boat. In this context, from the point of view of music lovers and aspiring producers, labels can still be touchstones in the increasingly crowded terrain of the independent world. The underground independent music may be over as we knew it, but the symbolic terms of filtering the flood of sounds and preserving the sense of musical direction linger on. And so do desires that have always animated musicians' search for expression, distinction, and genuine belonging. Fulfilling the desires comes at a price though. And non-monetary symbolic wherewithal is required, not optional, regardless of how fluid the current state of affairs seems to be.

Symbolic capital

Having to live within a specific symbolic economy means hard choices that have consequences. There are potentially rewarding and destructive kinds of actions, not unlike in the economy of the market, except here you deal with symbolic capital, not money, and this symbolic capital is at least as important as a financial one. Symbolic capital in independent music manifests itself in taste, style, street credibility, aesthetic reputation, professional standing, attitude and cultural importance. Symbolic capital can be converted into a financial one, but not really the other way around, although money helps as a facilitator. Money is a universal reduction of value to monetary measure. Symbolic currency, on the other hand, is more context-specific and meaning-oriented. There are symbolic boundaries that cannot be crossed if a message is to be received the desired way; there are symbolic no-go zones that need to be avoided, or at least tolerated, if one is to possess the real rather than counterfeit 'currency'. These boundaries imperceptibly shape our understandings of what counts as consequential transgressions or legitimate orthodoxies. You can be 'canonized', if you creatively engage the 'sacred' core of the genre. If you do x and y, which is considered bad or 'uncool', you become 'symbolically polluted', and as a result you may never be able to return to the fold. Motivation and its symbolic and social projection matter in genuinely independent music.

For example, engaging in artistic production only or mostly for money is not authentic in the symbolic field of the avant-garde or DIY underground. This is the case because 'authenticity' hinges on the idea of genuine personal expression and inherent aesthetic drive unconcerned with stuff not directly connected to the furthering of an aesthetic vision. It is for this reason that artistic freedom and

creative control amount to the 'sacred' principles of the independent music production. You *must* have the freedom and control to remain truly faithful to your own vision and to maintain a sense of autonomous direction. This transpires clearly in the exchange about the meaning of the independent for techno producers Marco and Dario Zenker who run their own label Ilian Tape, based in Munich:

Dominik: What does it mean for you to be independent today?

Dario Zenker: First of all, to fully have control over everything. About the artwork, about the mastering, about the pressing, about the solutions, about the communication with the artist, about freedom to just do what we want to.

Marco Zenker: We invest a lot into it, and therefore, we want to do it exactly how we want to do it. There may be mistakes we make but then we can learn from it. We don't want anybody else to decide anything. It's really our thing and the main thing for us is control.

Dominik: You also said, it's because you invest so much, but I guess it's not just about the financial investment? Also personal investment?

Dario Zenker: Yeah, and that's even much more than the financial aspect. The personal attachment and the timing.

Similarly, trying to please very large crowds does not exactly count as a genuine motivation – it is said to belong to for-profit popular music-making that looks for formulas of success, not for playing with or challenging these forms. Not caring about anything other than music is sexy. Especially in the times of neo-liberal capitalism, rising rents and austerity measures, alternative attitudes of 'not giving any fucks' matters as something truly audacious and uncompromising. That is a significant kind of symbolic capital, but

one that is hard to obtain and sustain, and one which requires that specific conditions of realness be met. It is easy to care about art only when someone else covers the cost of the proverbial lunch. That's one way in which material economy can frame the meanings of one's symbolic economy.

Echoing what Claas Brieler noticed about the difference between the major and the independent labels, Turtle Bugg, an American DJ currently based in Detroit, says it straight: 'independent music is the only genuine real music coming out. When it comes to major label stuff, they got it down to a formula. It's the lowest common denominator.' Turtle Bugg's label, tellingly named Basement Floor Records, is an exemplary low-key imprint that strives to stay true to the original values of American underground born in the scenes of Chicago and Detroit. It is partly for this reason that the artist has relocated from Brooklyn to Detroit. Fusing work and life in this way is a symbolic statement as well.

But the desire to not get pigeonholed in a bland formula is present across a wider spectrum of different independent labels releasing electronic dance music, for example also in the established powerhouses of house and techno. According to Frank Wiedemann, not to get locked in a formula is one of the artistic principles of the label. Music comes first. As he says, 'I think the only leitmotiv we have in our concept is that it's really song oriented, and it's about special moment tracks.'

It is vital for a label, nevertheless, to have not only the recognizable sonic angle and dancefloor hits but also a certain kind of visual and cultural identity which is consistently maintained and thus recognizable and classifiable in a hip and genuine way. Innervisions is one example of a label that cares about this aspect while being DJ-friendly. Many of the labels that we write about in this book

FIGURE 3.3 ***Turtle Bugg, American DJ based in Detroit: 'Independent music is the only genuine real music coming out. When it comes to major label stuff, they got it down to a formula. It's the lowest common denominator.' Photo by D. Bartmański.***

possess such distinctive aesthetic identity, from Stroboscopic Artefacts to Retreat, from Kompakt to Argot. Asked whether he wants to control not only the sonic but also visual identity of the label, Steve Mizek, the head of Argot, responds in a slightly self-deprecating but confident manner:

> Absolutely. From day one, I started working on getting a logo designed, getting a professional graphic designer, and even then I wouldn't let him come up with his own ideas. I basically said: 'dude, I like this kind of thing, let's do this and I want you to make it

> happen.' At this point all the graphic design is done by my husband, he does all the execution and I do all the conceptualizing. I was really specific, like: 'That is really cool, but I don't like that, I like this instead.' And it came out better in my eyes because I was super hands-on with the visual identity. When you are buying a product you are not buying sound. You are buying a physical object that you want to be able to look at and be happy about holding it in your hands. I want to feel happy about having it in my hands. So it is very important for me to spend a lot of time on it and try not to make myself go bankrupt on that stuff because that is the hard part too, that it is very expensive to make artwork without breaking the bank.

Even having no artwork or ostensibly renunciating most of the standard aestheticization practices is also a formal statement, one that belongs to the core of DIY independent ethos. This can be a minimalistic strategy (think German label Giegling) or a solution to financial limitations of some labels (Underground Quality), but these choices too carry a symbolic message. In each case, what matters is to find a visual vocabulary that can project genuine commitment in a tactile way. Consider Innervisions again, whose approach echoes that of Mizek:

> it's really about the physical manifestation of something, and this is something we want to keep doing because we think it's worth it. And to say this – because it is worth it – we want to make it as good as we can. That's why we spend a lot of money on artwork and printing.

There are distinct symbolic liabilities here, though. While on the whole independent music is now nearly as branded as any other marketplace goods – think of the logos of independent companies which are often more unusual or distinctive than others, but

nonetheless representations of their products – a full-scale branding aimed at maximum commodification would mean a kind of 'symbolic pollution', a point where the brand takes central position at the expense of the music and experimental stance. This is still a boundary that independent labels are usually careful not to transgress. Self-indulgent deviations may be 'punished' by the scene in an informal way, not unlike the irrational way economic behavior would typically be punished by the market. Yet the harnessing of the symbolic power of an 'authentic' signifier for money making purposes is not necessarily always bad in itself, nor is it unanimously frowned upon. As we indicated in the previous chapter, many independent music labels engage in certain branding practices and some of them may use their symbolic advantages for profit as well.

Branding becomes a source of 'symbolic pollution' when a 'wrong' chain of signifiers is set in motion, for example when certain corporations get involved with certain kinds of independent music to which they have no long-standing or direct substantive connection.

We have observed reluctance to get involved in such relationships. Alex Samuels, the head of Ostgut Ton, explains this phenomenon with the acuity of someone who had previously worked in creative industries associated with the corporate world:

> The question is not about 'brands'. It's about non-musical brands, and their relationship to music. Because – for example – RA (Resident Advisor) is a brand. Wire is a brand. There's plenty of brands. It's about the relationship between something which has no obvious connection to music and their attempt to, you know, brand themselves as cool through music.

FIGURE 3.4 ***Alex Samuels, the manager of Berghain's in-house label Ostgut Ton since 2017. Photo by D. Bartmański.***

What we see here is a certain idea of symbolic contagion or pollution, and a notion of symbolic boundary drawing between the genuine symbolic associations, e.g. within independent music or between cognate fields, and the indirect or unobvious ones. We could conclude, then, that in some ways the symbolic economy of independent music is even stricter than the means–end capitalist economy. In the supposedly open and free market, you can be 'too big to fail', you can do business with anyone as long as it pays off, or start another small business if you went bankrupt. It is different with a symbolic bankruptcy or certain kinds of socio-cultural transgression. If one violates a well-entrenched scene-specific aesthetic or ethical sensibility, it may very well be forever impossible

to re-establish oneself in the community that anchors its master narrative on that social feeling or norm. If you decide to release on or support a label or a club which is not in line with certain principles of the aesthetic or moral good of the scene, you are likely to be sidelined or even ostracized within that scene. Perhaps most importantly, the entry to the scene is guarded by established tastemakers, DJs as well as stores and bookers without whose support it may be impossible to gain recognition in the right corners of the independent world. They act as gate-keepers, performing what in his description of 'heterotopia' Foucault called 'symbolic purifications'. In other words, one must be conscious of the power of images, words and sounds and how they get connected and distributed together. Today, you may be 'in the red' regarding your bank account for quite a while, but not even for a day on your social one.

This general cultural logic pertains not only to more obvious matters of politics and society, but also to seemingly more diffuse matters of taste and identity. Although aesthetic preferences are considered subjective and thus at least 'officially' outside of the definitive assessment, no scene ever worked according to the 'anything goes' principle. Not being 'judgmental' is a token of positively coded experimental openness, but judgment of taste rarely disappears from view. Having 'good taste' means respect of the scene as well as a possibility of gaining useful symbolic capital. In fact, in the world that prides itself on cultivating personal expression one's taste and attitude amount to 'sacred' attributes. But getting to that point of not only having a taste but also making it is a process that faces hard trade-offs between symbolic and material economy. What can it mean in practice?

Even if relatively fluid, the socially upheld and institutionally maintained distinctions of the kind recognized by Sarah Thornton

(1995) can't be easily circumvented. The talk of difference between the tacky and the tasteful, the bland and the edgy, the genuine and the formulaic permeate discourses of aesthetic judgment within the independent sphere. They are socially upheld in a sense that what passes for personal preference is often a specific group taste. They are institutionally cultivated in a sense that music-related organizations – including labels – project their idea of worth as a legitimate claim and/or genuine point of view, not simply as a random opinion. Particularly in those sections of the independent world where material economy is not extensive, judgment of taste tends to matter more. And it is there where new ideas tend to be hammered out and where finding a productive balance between fitting the genre and eschewing the trend is said to be of the utmost importance.

In short, if remaining solvent is among the chief anxieties of material economy, then remaining in an equilibrium between the generic and the original is among the chief anxieties in symbolic economy of independent music. This is connected to negotiating other binaries, for example between pleasing the target audiences and challenging them; being stylistically definable and yet idiosyncratic enough to be distinguishable as a unique 'sound'; 'being yourself' while also retaining a sense of belonging to strong cutting edge communities; and last but not least, having freedom to experiment but also an ability to entertain by giving people what they want, and thus to make one's life in music a sustained livelihood. These are inescapable dilemmas of independent producers, and perhaps the hardest set of issues of running an independent label. When asked to name the most challenging aspect of running a label, Dana Ruh symptomatically responded:

> The hardest thing is to keep it constantly going, working with a certain quality you expect . . . For me the hardest part is to find the quality, to have a certain quality that you want to keep. You can't say, 'okay, it's running good (sic) right now and we can compromise'. It's not like this. I don't want to compromise on any quality. The quality has to be in how we think it's good for us. For our taste, this is the good quality, and we want to keep this, looking for the music to keep this quality, and also sometimes you maybe do a bit more experimental stuff.

The sentiment expressed by Dana Ruh is an example of what Richard Sennett (2009: 243) calls 'quality-driven work', where 'the pursuit of quality entails learning how to use obsessional energy well'. But mastering this skill is just the beginning. One of the key substantive challenges is to put the skills and imagination to work in such a way that the product has an archetypical recognizability and a signature flair. Independent music is a balancing act between first, sticking to genre-specific stylistic orthodoxy, which is a form of 'cultural authenticity test' but may risk being generic; and second, sticking to your own taste, which is a form of 'artistic audacity test', but may mean transgressing the 'proper' field. Whether someone is creative or merely eclectic, daring or indulgent, uncompromising or careless, original or generic, is established in relation to a given scene's sensibilities. In techno, for example, creativity unfolds within a rather strictly consecrated tradition due to the functional understanding of what 'works' and what doesn't on the nightclub dancefloor. Moreover, as techno-inspired kinds of music become increasingly widespread and 'bastardized' and commercially watered down forms have permeated the market, an idea of purity becomes more pronounced than the experimental spirit that once projected

techno into a special place in independent music. Perhaps more than in other kinds of electronic music and more than ever before, techno is 'addicted to its own past', to adapt Simon Reynolds' phrase (Reynolds 2011).

Symptomatically, there's an understanding within the international techno scene according to which being only a half-step ahead of the stylistic curve rather than a full step is the only viable approach in the contemporary club landscape. This approach is always in turn inflected and specified by a given place. Working in the context of the committed but relatively small techno scene in Seoul, DJ Marcus L, the head of Ameniia Records and Faust Club that has its own imprint too, 'being just a half-step ahead' of his primary audience is crucial. While it may mean something slightly different than in Berlin or London, he nevertheless expressed a sentiment that is widely shared in the contemporary house and techno scene. Importantly, this has to do with a difficult balance between creative freedom and hard necessities of the entertainment market, both economic and symbolic, which independent actors can never easily alter at will but must always reckon with.

Independent actors

Among the key themes in studies of independent and artisanal cultural production are 'the tensions between artistic freedom and economic necessity, precarious labor and self-exploitation', and independent record pressers are considered an indicative case in this respect (cf. Scott 2017: 61). How this landscape of different meanings originating from different intersecting worlds is being navigated by independent labels is symbolically important, and therefore

distinguishing between them proves analytically helpful. The constitutive relations and notions of symbolic economy appear particularly significant when we recognize that those who run labels and produce independent music tend to be attracted to artistic self-employment which frequently can be rather precarious. Here, fusing personal values and lifestyle with one's job is more important than secure income derived from alienating work conditions. Yet this is where economic precarity typically enters. Independent musicians and label managers are among those who often define themselves as 'taste-makers and need-merchants, fusing work and leisure', who 'embody their intended markets and who "believe in what they sell"' (Bourdieu in Scott 2017: 64). While some DJs and producers have audiences so small that their activity may look like preaching to the choir, they also tend to *practise* what they 'preach'. What makes cultural production in independent music scenes unique is that they have their own sets of relationally constituted limits and boundaries imposed on the notions of money-making and legitimate popularity. There is a continually negotiated cultural frontier between business-savvy independent label that's true to itself, and the 'selling out' of a mainstream-leaning label which would typically be coded as excessively bowing to the general tastes. Of course, not all actors in the so defined, fiercely independent music sphere are simply audacious poor creatives. In fact, setting up a solvent and functioning independent label today may require much more than a brave attitude and good ideas. What is more often needed is either prior artistic success that has generated enough experience and economic and social capital for the owners to kick start a solid label, or a financial safety net that at the very least reduces the typical risks and at best covers the initial investment and subsequent contingent costs. As a career plan or even a part-time job, starting a small independent label

is a precarious proposition involving an economically unstable, and often rather modest, lifestyle. Paradoxically, one needs to be rich enough to be poor like that for some time. Economic, material and biographical risks may today often be too high to contemplate for someone without accumulated means.

The landscape of independent music production is thus rather complex. Contemporary electronic scenes do not simply embrace the postmodern tenet that 'rather than rebelling against capitalism and material necessity, nothing is cooler than converting hip into commerce' (Scott 2017: 63). While this seems to be generally true in the larger field of cultural production, it is not necessarily always the case in independent music that we have studied. There has been a considerable degree of commodification of techno dance floors around the world. But this process also has its limits connected to the character of genres such as techno for example – its being attached to specific club and festival spaces and unattached to words and singing. Particularly in musical genres of underground provenance, that overtly commercial attitude works only up to a certain point, or within rather clearly circumscribed musical landscapes. 'Selling out' is an occupational hazard one needs to control and resist rather than simply give in to at the first opportunity. Succumbing to it without caution may mean a one-way ticket to the stigmatized mass 'industry'. Edward MacKeithen, aka DJ Jus-Ed, who runs the Underground Quality label, explains this dynamic in the following way:

Edward: Once you leave the underground, you can't ever come back.

Dominik: Why do you think that's the case?

Edward: Because you've killed your fan base. Of course, you could establish a new fan base.

Dominik: But it's not the same, right?

Edward: It isn't and it won't be the same. Ever. It's like your top corporate company man. Let's say you're the top guy at a company you work for and well respected, well paid, and then you leave and you start your own business. The people in that circle, they might admire you for starting your own business, whether it's successful or not, but you can't run in that circle anymore. You cannot participate in that circle.

In other words, there are symbolic as well as social consequences of spinning out of the supporting community as labels grow bigger. As elsewhere, exceptions based on strong iconicity of a label or on individuality of charismatic performers prove the rule. However, even in the cases of extraordinary performers – one may think for instance of Björk or Róisín Murphy – the artists aim to be daring vis-à-vis broad audiences at least as often as pleasing. And this phenomenon is not new or restricted to electronic or rock music. Perhaps one of the most illustrative cases from the past is that of Miles Davis and his notorious veering toward electric jazz-funk and amplified performances in the late 1960s. Reviled by influential jazz critics such as Stanley Crouch, Davis's 1970s and 80s music alienated his conservative jazz fan base, while avant-garde people praised his audacious willingness to explore the new and be on the cutting edge. The trumpeter himself was progressively dissatisfied with his label, Columbia Records, which catapulted him to stardom in the pre-corporate period of the mid 1950s but, in his view, failed to adequately respond to the new realities of expanding music scenes in the late 1960s and to Davis' own desire to reach the large fresh young audiences. Resisting what he saw as undue commodification and explaining that he 'is not into no market', following instead his personal vision, Davis scoffed at his label:

'Columbia tries to get me into that shit but I don't let 'em do it. They wanted to put some of my music on some kind of sample record of some of their black music, and I said fuck that shit, man. Leave my music alone' (cited in Carner 1996: 154).

What this story illustrates is that retaining artistic integrity and at the same time meaningfully expanding one's reach is a difficult struggle ridden with unavoidable risky trade-offs. In any scheme of symbolic economy attached to a notion of avant-garde, or to an idea of independence, or both, the kind of move like the one proposed to Miles Davis by Columbia can 'cheapen' the value of artistic statement, diminishing its self-standing aura and suggesting that the artist is exploitable according to the demands of the day, and thus less 'authentic', less singular and by extension less timeless. This represents a potentially serious cultural liability. 'Timelessness' is repeatedly invoked as a highly desirable goal. Consider also, for example, this exchange with American DJ and house producer, Kai Alce, who has his own label, NDATL:

Dominik: Do you aim at a certain timelessness of music?

Kai: Oh yeah, of course. I'm not putting out something just because it sounds good with what's going on now. I'll put out stuff just because I like it and I think it will stand the test of time.

Dominik: But it's something intangible right? It's hard to...

Kai: Yeah, it's definitely intangible. That's why some record labels last and some don't.

Dominik: You can't really make an algorithm for that?

Kai: No. There's no algorithm for music, there's no algorithm for how to sell them either. You just have to hope that your ear and their ear meet up at some point in time.

Dominik: So to a certain extent, thinking about what to put out is like projecting your taste?

Kai: Definitely . . . it's always something about taste.

Frank Wiedemann expresses similar sentiment that timelessness of music is both the end goal he strives for and an elusive thing he knows can't be fully controlled. As he says: 'we're trying to create the timeless, or release timeless stuff which – of course – doesn't work all the time.' Timelessness is something that – paradoxically – only time can ultimately test. Projecting taste, however, seems more readily graspable and amenable to practical questions. Why do certain labels seem to have been more consistently successful in the task of creating iconic music than others? What work quality enables certain independent actors to create 'instant classics'? What makes certain catalogues emerge as 'canonical' (e.g. Warp) or 'genre-defining' (e.g. Perlon), while others slide into obscurity?

There is no single answer. One needs to distinguish between different types of labels in order to properly assess the sources and mechanisms of the emergence of symbolic power. One distinction is based on the role of the label head and a division of labour practised within the label. In a more classical sense of the term, the label owner or manager has taste and vision but little or no musical input. The label boss is primarily the curator. In a more contemporary context, many independent labels are run by individual musicians or collectives of producers who strive to be accountable only to themselves and release mostly their own music (and sometimes also the material of their associates and friends). In the first case, labels cast their nets wide, personal investment in music is external rather than internal, resembling more a role of a critic rather than an artist. Here *taste showcases music*, so to speak. In the second case, labels are

run by DJs and producers, either as a one-person show or group of people active in the club scene. Here *music showcases taste* – that of the founding musician(s). Labels such as Blackest Ever Black can be said to represent the first type, and Ilian Tape the second. The two modes are ideal typical forms of running labels. In practice, especially over time, labels evolve and can mix strategies, going from one direction to the other, and vice versa. Innervisions can be said to belong to the second type, but at the outset they employed a manager to kick-start the label properly. Frank Wiedemann tellingly narrates the origins of Innervisions as a sublabel of Sonar Kollektiv:

> I think Dixon's intention was, 'why should I do this work for Sonar Kollektiv if I could also do it for myself?' Whereas our intention was to build a label where we could release our music. And so we fit together … the problem with Sonar Kollektiv for us was that it was a label where there was a lot of stuff coming out that we also didn't like. Which is ok, because it's their taste, obviously, but we wanted to be separate. … So I think at the time I didn't think of this whole package as something. I just wanted to have a label. But it turned out to be a lucky movement. Maybe Stephen (Dixon) saw it, because he's very visionary [laughs] … At a certain point he thought about leaving Sonar Kollektiv completely, and just to have it on his own. And then he asked us if we wanted to be a part of it, because we were releasing on IV Sonar Kollektiv at the time. … Then in the very beginning, we had a manager with us who built everything, so it was like three chaotic musicians basically who didn't have much of a clue of how to run a label, and a person who was very good at it.

Returning to the question of what makes some labels more symbolically consolidated and musically iconic, it is vital to see that carefully curated projection of taste is one of the key strengths across the spectrum of label practices. And it is not so much about the projection of one's taste as a musician but as a listener or 'prosumer' – someone engaged with music not only passively but in various active ways. For a label curator par excellence, it is about actively taking the perspective of someone who listens and dances to music, not just someone who wants to compose it. This is, of course, not a new realization and it is not restricted to the contemporary music world. Ludwig Wittgenstein

FIGURE 3.5 *Frank Wiedemann in his studio at the Innervisions headquarters in Kreuzberg in 2016. Photo by D. Bartmański.*

(1984: 59), who engaged intensely with music in his later writings, once described this capacity of taste-making in a useful way: 'The faculty of "taste" cannot create a new structure, it can only make adjustments to one that already exists. Taste loosens and tightens screws, it does not build a new piece of machinery. Taste makes adjustments. Giving birth is not its affair. Taste makes things ACCEPTABLE.'

Although seemingly easy and secondary, the 'tightening and loosening of aesthetic screws' is often crucial to the process of making a good record out of the submitted musical material. The devil is in the details. And without dedicated curators certain qualities may be hard or impossible to obtain. In the conversation with one of the owners of Goma Gringa, Matthieu Hebrard, this aspect of the label's curatorial role becomes explicit. Matthieu concludes: 'That was the word I was looking for. This word. Curating. That is it.' The distinction between the personal act of creating and the scene-oriented curating of the musical content can be mapped onto the distinction between different sets of predispositions and skills. Yet even if certain people can fuse both kinds of talents, there is still a question of time which is also tied to the question of division of labour and, ultimately, financial costs. Time is money, indeed. As Matthieu Hebrard reflects, 'the ideal (label) project would be to have someone to run after public money for us. Because there is a lot of public projects in Brazil, but you need to know how to do it. And you need to pay the guy or girl who will get after the money. That would be the solution. But the problem is again, which money, where?'

When it comes to the use of time, however, it is clear to our interviewees that the full-time curators add a dimension of quality that lends a critical advantage to labels; they act as *éminences grises* in the whole production process. Steve Mizek makes this point clear:

> Artist-driven labels are great, they do great things for artists sometimes, but it doesn't jibe with me because I feel like, being a label owner and being an artist are two separate skill sets, and sometimes being an artist can be incompatible with being a label owner because you don't know your own best material and how to edit yourself. I really value labels by people who are not artists because I feel like we share something on a certain level. Our artistry and our ability is to put something into a computer and make it a finished product versus someone who also created that music and then is so deeply involved with that music that everything that happens is shaped by the ritual of creation.

This kind of label work puts greater emphasis on editorial process and presupposes a different mix of audiences and a different rapport that artists and labels aim to establish with the imagined fan base. In addition to usual suspects and devoted fans, curatorial labels cultivate aesthetic visions that engage the curious and open public at various levels and tend to treat potential customers as a kind of 'prosumers' rather than mere consumers of music. Here again, a label's work is to release musical artefacts.

Today the act of releasing music independently is essentially an artistic statement – geared more towards forming a 'public' rather than gathering 'followers'.

Felix Kubin, a German musician and performer who runs the avant-garde label Gagarin Records in Hamburg, develops this idea by giving an ultimate meaning to the symbolic aspect of musical work:

> Artwork for me only comes to existence in the space between the person who produces it and the person who perceives it. So for

> me the person who perceives it is a part of the artwork. If you try to create something that leaves enough space for the person who perceives it, if you leave enough space for audience, then they will always have the possibility to fill the poetic gaps that are in the work with their own history, their own ideas. What I love about this idea is that it doesn't so much make a division between the great artist who was kissed by god and the dumb consumer who's happy enough to perceive it and probably doesn't understand it. It's more about the idea that I as an artist create something more like a catalyzer. People look at you, but actually they look through you. You are just a symbol of something.

In short, labels as curators can perform the role of catalysts in this very sense. They can and do edit and channel artists' creative energy with greater objectivity and an enhanced sense of purpose, streamlining a musical statement in such a way that there is room for both educated interpretation and elusive mystery, for the obvious and the obtuse meaning, to use Roland Barthes' phrase once more. They achieve more than merely connecting people and filtering the music that pours out of countless personal computers and bedroom studios. They create a cultural value added that can endow artists and their musical output with surplus meaning. People who mastermind these tasks remain usually in the shadows and they collaborate closely with visual artists and sound engineers who also tend to remain in the background. Unless they are themselves music producers or DJs, they are rarely worshipped the way musicians are. We rarely hear their voices and opinions on music. Yet without these aesthetic managers and visionaries, the task of handling the difficult trade-offs of symbolic economy would be both less tractable and less traceable.

Such 'artistic intermediaries' and 'value producers' (Lize 2016) make it their job to improve the cultural sustainability of labels. Having typically less direct media pressure than musicians, they are in a position to see the bigger picture more clearly. And while musicians and DJs themselves do not – and as DJ Martyn suggests *should not* – necessarily have to be interested in the rules and mechanisms of cultural resonance, the labels that edit and release their music make it their chief preoccupation, distributing responsibilities and energy to that end. The resulting division of labour diversifies the creative roles within independent music production. Adding a layer of judgment and evaluation adds the opportunity to refine things. Curatorial musical imprints are often the first-level mediators between the inspired world of producers and the inspired world of promoters and journalists.

Conclusion: From symbolic economy to urban ecology

As we have tried to show, the symbolic aspects of making independent music can be approached as solutions to complex social and cultural problems around identity, capital and value. Narratives – especially those enmeshed with brands, spaces, objects and experiences – help us understand and respond to the most powerful 'ideological turf wars of the day' (Holt 2006: 20). Though it might seem like the above commentary applies only to branded consumer goods, it is useful to think about the term 'independent' as a nomenclature category possessive of power within particular consumption and leisure communities. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) defined brand community as a 'specialized, non-geographically

bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand . . . Like other communities, it is marked by a shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility' (2001: 412).

Approached in this way, the work of independent labels fits this definition as a category of meaning, almost like a brand meta-category. Music-listeners and makers are thus able to use 'independent' as a particular symbolic claim about the values related to certain kinds of music production and consumption, and cultural production and consumption more generally. What is different, however, is the relation of independent music to geography and space. While music is venerated as the most abstract of arts that effortlessly crosses national and cultural contexts, it is neither 'non-geographically bound' nor randomly dispersed as an emplaced practice. On the contrary, as we shall show in the next chapter, labels are concentrated in specific types of 'urban ecologies' replete with artistic spaces which in turn are integrated into global translocal networks of inspiration, exchange and collaboration. Independent music is translocal and increasingly virtually consumed but not deterritorialized. In fact, the larger the share of online activities in our schedule, the greater our desire for uniquely emplaced actual experiences of music. Iconic festivals and clubs still draw large crowds.

Furthermore, in being made by certain symbolically loaded technologies and skills, music is not very different to other products like artisanal beer or coffee. In all these cases, production of aesthetically created goods and associated practices of consumption and evaluation are about expression of social belonging and cultural awareness. In this sense, we might think of independent music being made with a set of practices characterized as 'conspicuous

production'. Labels are among the key actors engaged in conspicuous production of independent music. Whilst one of the main tropes for understanding certain types of consumption is to see it as expressing a type of conspicuous distinction (and so blending Veblenesque accounts of leisured excess with Bourdieusian notes of distinction), another way of interpreting contemporary independent labels' work is to look at how conspicuousness influences the makers themselves and how they materialize conspicuousness in their products.

As we already mentioned, one of the most powerful types of market story is the origin myth or creation story, helping us to understand a product's history and lineage in terms of who made it and how, and its relations to historically located practices enmeshed in the place of production. According to Overton and Banks (2015), such accounts are likely to be relevant to economic activities that are less concerned with profit-maximization, and more about making things which appeal to discretionary spending patterns. Overton and Banks observe that conspicuousness in production is primarily about 'the display of status and the recreation of identity, rather than being for the prime purpose of surplus extraction' (2015: 474), and that it 'primarily seeks to confer status or utility value on the individual, corporation or the state carrying out the activity' (Overton and Banks 2015: 479).

Conspicuousness as a quality is materially constituted, aesthetically marked and also discursively narrated, and these key components must find each other in a felicitous symbolic mix. A given material cannot be aligned with any narration as some cultural sociologists claim. Within the broad genre of economic production or 'maker' stories, one of the most powerful is the 'craft' narrative, which Colin Campbell (2006) interpreted as a possible counter-commodifying trope. Craft consumption – or perhaps precisely in our case, craft

prosumption – refers to processes where the person is both the maker, designer and probably part of the end-user circle, also. Craft-makers accentuate a relationship to prosumption that emphasizes care, skill, knowledge and judgement (Campbell 2006), what we might think of as particular types of cultural capital and practical knowledges. Colin Campbell saw craft engagements essentially as a desire to make the commodity and commodification process 'inalienable', or meaningful, in Daniel Miller's (1987) terms. As commodification of leisure – including music – becomes increasingly entangled with economic and big business imperatives, there is a more pronounced need within some cultural circles to escape relentless commodification, reframe it or counteract it, such that there is a need to make things that are unique, singular or even sacred (Campbell 2006: 37).

Independent labels in underground electronic music are an example of this tendency. Their work symbolizes not only an escape from what they see as excessive commodification of music but also – and more generally – can stand for a critique of unbridled neo-liberal capitalist system to which this commodification belongs. It can stand for the values of a small-scale world – a feasible heterotopia – in which genuine control and sustained attention are still possible, even if apparently threatened. Independent labels that work with dedication towards the single goal of releasing music that is to their own liking symbolize what Richard Sennett understand as the craftsman's 'deep' vocation. 'Vocation' is founded on sustained belief in the inherent value of production and one's work well fulfilled. It's unlike a 'job' for which one is hired out of strictly financial motives, without meaning inherent in it. Again, this is the difference between what Sennett describes as *work* done for the sake of good work, where artistic product is an end in itself, and what Graeber (2018) describes as a *job* that does not point beyond itself

and thus has no 'surplus of meaning', i.e. an essentially meaningless wage-generating occupation.

Sennett points out that contemporary capitalist economy is scarcely optimal to maintaining within itself the symbolic economy of the artisanal expert who feels she has a vocation. The currently growing tendency to preserve the world of small scale craft is more of an ironic last-minute counter-movement against the system that has long since been hell-bent on entrenching and promoting values of the industrial world. This economic regime, as Sennett explains, 'prizes quick study, superficial knowledge, all too often embodied by consultants who dart in and out of organizations. The craftsman's ability to dig deep stands at the pole opposite from potential ability deployed in this fashion' (Sennett 2008: 284). Label managers are not consultants. Many have dug deep – literally and figuratively – in the music to which they want to contribute their own voices and visions.

Terms like 'craft', 'makers', 'lineage', 'heritage', and 'local' are increasingly used to frame and enliven the production history of commodity stories, their adherence to time-honoured principles of making and their commitment to customs of locality, expertise, community and the flavour of local *terroir*. Think again about techno and its origins in Detroit, the strong foundational narratives and incessant repetition of the stories of the 'founding fathers' based in that city. Consider the origins of house music in queer communities of Chicago and New York. Although underground dance music has undergone multiple changes and over decades has found its main hubs in Europe, the scenes still maintain the foundational narratives and use associated signifiers not only as historical references but also as stylistic distinction. Why is that the case? Many cultural products – especially products which seek to

engage directly with cherished value systems and niche aesthetic needs – no longer come to us 'naturally', as if they appear magically from somewhere, or anywhere. Instead, they require stories and origin narratives about their makers and making. Music is no different. For example, in her study *Guitar Makers*, Kathryn Dudley highlights the way such meaning-making narratives situate makers in relation to questions of authenticity and commodification, 'and what it portends for the craft object and artisanal labor' (Dudley 2014: 16). As we indicated, larger questions are also played out in makers' attitudes about what it means to engage in satisfying labour in neo-liberal capitalism. Implicitly, this means balancing competing ideologies related to profit, investment, community, art and value.

In sociology, modernity was pronounced to be a radical disenchantment of social life. In aesthetics, techno music could be claimed to radically embody late modernity. And yet, what electronic dance music has expressed – at least in its fiercely independent underground guises – is a pursuit of enchantment as radical as it is free. There's no denying that ennui and a blasé attitude crept in over time as well, colouring the perception of the era even in underground music hubs such as Berlin. There is no denying that increasing commodification did some damage to parts of the scene too. If the underground dancefloor viewed as a social stage has in part been escapist, what it offered was precisely a hedonistic way out, a possibility to abscond – if only for a moment – from the sham of the commodified industry-driven mainstream world. Put differently, the thrust of alternative dance cultures and avant-garde music notions has always contained not only dedication to the craft and art of musical prosumption but also the kernel of urban realness and queer sense of fun, each of which challenged mainstream sensibilities and value orders. Hence the attractiveness of rave culture, bittersweet as it

is, living on under different names to this day despite all the problems. Hence the attractiveness of a fiercely and consistently independent stance in the face of rampant commercialization of general culture. We could here again use the example of Berlin's Berghain and its in-house label Ostgut Ton that may go down in history as the embodiment of the consistently independent and emblematically DIY community of the first decades of the twenty first century.

This famed Berlin venue refracts key symbolic valences of playing, sharing, producing and contextualizing electronic music in a fully independent fashion. We have already touched upon the interaction between space and sound of the club and how this

FIGURE 3.6 ***The iconic architecture of the club Berghain / Panorama Bar that houses the office of its label Ostgut Ton and now also Säule – the club's third dancefloor geared towards more experimental party formats and music gigs. The building is a former power plant located in the district of Friedrichshain, yet close to the border with Kreuzberg, hence the club's name, which combines parts of both district names. Photo by D. Bartmański.***

relation is artistically fixed in Ostgut Ton releases as well as in its sublabels Unterton and the recently launched A-Ton. On its own, this set of affordances could be described as necessary but not as sufficient condition of the venue's iconicity. We also have to pay attention to at least two other dimensions of social performance. The first pertains precisely to how the notion of independence is defined and *practised over time.* Alex Samuels elaborates on this point in his assessment of what makes Ostgut Ton special and how its fierce independence is contextualized, coming close to the heart of the narrative of this book:

> Ostgut Ton has a very specific kind of independence, one strongly related to the independence of Berghain as a club. It's defined by a resistance or impenetrability to corporate collaboration in the sense of branding, operating by its own rules and its own logic. It's a resistance to being co-opted. This is not necessarily manifested as a musical aesthetic, but rather as a general stance or position that I think can be seen as one kind of demarcation between pop-culture and sub-culture – though certainly not the only one.

Indeed, the club has always resisted any sort of co-optation, standing entirely on its own feet. Its approach boils down to not being accountable to any other artistic or corporate institution. At the same time, it is an institution that cultivates principled connection to artists and producers both in Berlin and beyond. This leads us to the second dimension of Berghain's and Ostgut Ton's iconic independence, namely to a set of entanglements between the phenomenological qualities of the venue itself and its urban ecology, both the immediate surroundings and more generally its embeddedness in Berlin. Despite the felicitous contingencies

involved, it is no accident that a space like Berghain was possible on a particular site and at that particular time. The confluence of factors that led to the emergence of this socio-material space is indicative of the indispensability of the 'right' urban 'ecology'. What holds true regarding clubs, bars and record stores also pertains to labels that often need propitious city ambience, infrastructure and a critical mass of people to develop. This is not just about the advantages of a given city itself but also about how the place is connected – physically and virtually – to other similarly vibrant centers, and how it is framed by the political umbrella of its host country. Music thrives on internal dynamics of a vibrant local scene as well as on the exchange and translocal networks that make long-distance cross-fertilization and collaboration possible, and for these networks to emerge and go on, they need freedom and safety to act productively.

Due to their special connection to club culture and record stores, underground dance music labels benefit from what we will explore below as co-locality of these intertwined institutions. There's a mutuality of influence and inspiration between these organizations. For example, as we have already mentioned, the significant aspect of Berghain's capacity to be more than a dancefloor inheres in the way it has framed and published its sound through the in-house label Ostgut Ton. This is an instructive story. While the entertainment side of electronic music has remained central to its social meaning, the artistic dimension has progressively gained in meaning too. In fact, in 2016 Berghain was granted by the courts a new legal designation, changing its status from entertainment venue to cultural institution, effectively turning techno into a 'high art' (Wilson 2016). Mapping this distinction between entertainment and culture on the categories of anthropological description, we might venture to say that entertainment seemed 'thin' and culture 'thick', thus inspiring the

efforts to shift the legal qualification. But in the cultural ecology we have investigated, the two aspects interpenetrate each other in practice. It is not always productive to try to disentangle them, just like the economic and the symbolic are not to be strictly separated. Indeed, shifting from 'entertainment' to 'high art' means lower taxation which means more resources that can be redirected to art.

This change is symptomatic of the present era. Over decades of artistic and discursive development, underground electronic dance music has worked out a significant cultural mythology and a kind of 'aesthetic thickness' that goes beyond the pure fun of it all. An important part of that evolutionary process is how it is blended with the social and material 'thickness' of dense urban ecologies around the world, connected to fates of cities, and fusing the beats with the life rhythms of metropolitan areas. It is a well known phenomenon that certain iconic labels have been rooted in the unique 'logic' of their host cities, for example Motown in Detroit or Factory in Manchester, deriving character and energy from the city. In these cases, the labels derived a vital part of their outsider credibility and aesthetic authenticity from their urban ecologies. But it is also the case that labels contribute to the cultural landscape of a given city. In the following chapter, we will explore how the so understood origins and contributions of labels – especially in electronic music – are still inseparable from metropolitan hubs and their bohemian quarters. Independent labels work in tandem with other institutions such as clubs, bars, galleries, manufacturers, studios, start-ups and record stores which in turn are expressions of and contributors to the (night) life of a big city.

4

Urban ecology

Technological and cultural changes in the last twenty-five years have inspired discourses about imminent 'deterritorialization'. However, the pivotal role of specific urban centres for cultivating independent electronic dance music culture remains important. What seems new is the way in which translocality of independent music networks plays itself out in these urban contexts. We also need to recognize that for a variety of sociological reasons, different genres and scenes are differently dependent on urbanity and the socio-cultural effects of cosmopolitan metropolises. Not all independent music genres thrive in big cities or need them the way techno or house do. Indeed, some of our own interviewees run their labels in smaller centres, or places a long distance from the key urban hubs of electronic music cultures. Others, like heavy metal, may thrive in rural areas of Sweden or the US. When it comes to underground electronic music, though, the significance of metropolitan centres is as pronounced as ever, perhaps even more than in the past. As we will see, in this respect underground electronic dance music is closer to certain art scenes than to other music genres. This pattern reflects a sociological interaction between aesthetic, sexual, political and intellectual factors that makes certain pockets of independent music more attached to bohemian

cosmopolitan urban ecologies than others. We will return to that later in this chapter.

Although it is certainly true that the 'tsunami of digitalization' profoundly rocked the labels sailing on the sea of independent electronic music, the relativization of distance and place it brought about has not displaced cities as hubs of counter-cultural, hedonistic music scenes. This does not necessarily mean that one cannot run a successful label from a smaller city, or even rural locations, but to do so requires pre-established strong networks, scene and industry contacts, and most likely a history of being artistically significant within a scene for some period of time. For the most part, based upon a set of intertwined social, political and economic reasons, it still very much matters where one is territorially and where one comes from. Again, things are not as 'fluid' as they seem to be. Moreover, certain immemorial dynamics of territorial relations continue to make themselves palpable in the kinds of cultural production we observe. As Regis Debray (2000: 16) reminds us, 'all territoriality is organized according to a center that directs and peripheries that undergo. This is the difference in nature between a network (which is technological) and a territory (which remains political).' It is for this reason that jointly discussing the effects of urban location and technologically networked translocality makes sense. And it is precisely because the standardizing capitalist entanglement of technology and territory is still so overwhelmingly present, the creation of 'heterotopias' in Foucault's sense remains an attractive proposition. In order for such propositions to materialize, though, they need propitious environments to grow, territories for something 'extra-territorial' to take root in, spaces for something 'utopian' to become real. Of course, the issues of territoriality and the urban constitute a vast and complex terrain of research that we could

never hope to adequately represent here. What matters for our project is that by holistically thematizing the 'urban ecologies' in which independent labels take root, we can better appreciate the role of space and materiality for music production. We can also see more clearly that the technology (network) and territory (space) are not mutually cancelling. If anything, they seem reciprocally reinforcing when it comes to music production so deeply marked by 'prosumer' culture as we have shown it to be.

The way we understand 'urban ecology' here thematizes the influence of the combined aspects of spatial materialities and human-non-human assemblages typically found in cities. We provide a holistic framework that aims at grasping the synergies of spatial, architectural and socio-cultural affordances, especially at the intersection of the big city environment and the liminal time that is current digitalization of culture – when certain norms and forms of action become quickly antiquated and the new ones are not entirely congealed, transparent or regulated yet. One of the relevant phenomena that occur at this intersection is the emergence of global urban connectedness and the associated translocality of scenes hosted by these cities. Reflecting on 'networked cities', Scott McQuire (2016: 161) writes that 'it has become critically important to pay attention to both the materiality and "logic" of computational-informational systems and settings. However, it is equally important not to isolate such analyses.' McQuire insists that in order to avoid naïve techno-determinism, the understanding of 'algorythmic power needs to be set alongside considerations of the institutional settings, legal and regulatory environments, business models and cultures of use that instantiate it' (ibid.). Having analyzed the last two of these aspects in the preceding chapters, we now wish to focus on specifically urban dynamics – or what sociologist Martina Löw

calls 'cities' own logic' – which foregrounds socio-material routines, forms of knowledge and affordances crucial for cultural instantiation of networks and virtual systems that facilitate the emergence and sustenance of unique scenes.

In his study of punk and post-punk worlds in Manchester and Liverpool, Nick Crossley observes that a sociological analysis of these music cultures requires 'a detailed and concrete focus upon the networks of interactivity that give rise to it' (Crossley 2015: 11). Music-making and music consumption, like all socio-aesthetic 'art worlds' (Becker 1982), is made individually or in a small artistic collective (for example, the 'group', 'band', or 'players'). Once performed in public or published, these artistic productions also involve interactional relationships with a wide range of actors, from venue owners, to pressing plants, to record labels, to media and other promoters, and record stores. In this sense, making music is a collective endeavour of building 'music worlds' (Crossley 2015). Beyond this, and at the same time, such music practice can link the social and stylistic processes necessary to contribute making a music scene. As noted by Jennifer Lena (2012), scenes can build around the merging together and refinement of genre activities, building to establish a 'scene-based' genre once a critical mass of artists, audience members and infrastructural supports are in place. In her words, 'scene-based genres are characterized by intensely active, but moderately sized groups of artists, audience members, and supporting organizations' (2012: 33). The idea of the music scene is worth visiting in our context, but as we adapt this concept to our purposes we define the scene as a socio-material aesthetic space that emerges when these specific groups of people interact with propitious urban ecologies and form organizations such as labels and music venues.

In Bennett and Peterson's (2004) account of the different geographic scale and character of scene locales, they state that 'scenes are often regarded as formal assemblages, but scenes that flourish become imbedded in a music industry' (Bennett and Peterson 2004: 4). In our cases the scenes indeed could be seen as socio-urban *assemblages* but we recognize that instead of embedding themselves in mainstream industry they develop their own business circles (see Kühn 2017) and their own economic practices around independent record stores, PR agencies, DJ booking companies, and independent clubs and local bars. In this context it becomes clear that a propitious urban ecology that allows these institutions to coalesce around each other and form tight networks of co-locality is crucially important – it creates an alternative 'industry', if you wish, or a constellation of actors and venues largely orthogonal to mainstream corporate industry. Bennett and Peterson highlight Will Straw's (1991) contribution as the first systematization of the scene-based dynamics of the 'production, performance, and reception of popular music', though they also point out the existence of various templates within earlier studies of music communities that consider the scene-based development of music-making practices (Bennett and Peterson 2004: 3).

For their own part, Bennett and Peterson (2004) structure their account of scenes into the categories of local, translocal and virtual, and we will loosely draw on this typology in showing how the activities of our labels are spatially concentrated, locally connected, and translocally (virtually) interconnected. Having said this, there are vast literatures which explore music scenes and it is not the primary intention of this book to undertake a meticulous study of the scene in this vein. The labels we have looked at are broadly united by scale of operation, with some exceptions, and often by geographical

location (Berlin, and more broadly Europe, and the Americas). Though they all draw in some part on house, techno, ambient, avant-garde and drone music traditions, they should not necessarily be seen as part of the same unified 'scene'. What unites them more often than not is the very fact of their independence, their underground stance, and their musical production which draws mainly from electronic musical instruments, machines and computers, rather than a commitment to narrow musical stylistic and aesthetic commonalities inherent in the classical idea of a musical scene.

Worthy of note in this discussion of scenes – which are more than merely the performative re-constitution of community-developed aesthetic and sonic codes and traditions – are the physical, morphological and spatial elements of cities which offer different affordances to music-makers and label workers. Scenes consolidate musical genres within spatially defined and interconnected locales, but scenes must work in and across real social spaces – neighbourhoods, sites and streets. Here, we work with development of Gibson's idea of *affordances* to refer to the 'latent set of possible actions that environments and objects enable are relationally tied to the capabilities of the person interacting with that object,' (McDonnell 2010: 1806). As in McDonnell's work and elsewhere, the idea of affordance has become an important concept for thinking through relational materialities. What does it mean?

For example, in our previous book *Vinyl* we explained how analogue records are never used in isolation but instead assume many aesthetic and social meanings in specific contexts of use, commodification and exchange. Records are, obviously, always connected to different kinds of players, turntables, which in turn can perform their function only in connection to amplifiers and sound systems. Moreover, when it comes to club music these technological

set-ups interact with architectural spaces to produce particular aural effects and afford specific party experiences. This is what Ian Hodder (2012) has in mind when he expands the concept of affordance and talks about 'entanglements'. Humans are enmeshed in dense multilayered entanglements, some visible and others not, but there's no way around them. They constitute late modern life. That's why, studying our cases, we need to add the important caveat that the affordances can be spatially inscribed and contextualized rather than just materially articulated. Following the aforementioned notion of Lewin's and newly elaborated conception of McDonnell's, we recognize that 'environments' also have affordance possibilities and characters. We use the concept of 'setting' in order to understand how our label actors make sense of the environments and 'ecologies' they work in.

Last but not least, this kind of urban thematization enables us to put another demystifying sociological spin on the seemingly individualistic, heroic act of independent musical production. As we have shown, this production belongs to the 'inspired world', and there are certain kinds of artistic inspiration that only direct contact with other people can produce. Some rituals of inspiration and exchange can only take place when people spend time together. There are few, if any, reclusive 'geniuses' or idealistic musical hermits in electronic music. Music emerges out of the multitude, even if it appears to culminate in one person's activity. Interestingly, what French sociologist Émile Durkheim called 'collective effervescence' is a central feature, albeit in different keys, of many centrally important urban phenomena: an underground night club experience, a political demonstration on a city's central square, an open air festival in a city park, or events like the notorious Love Parade that was taking place in Berlin in the 1990s and brought techno culture to the general

social consciousness. This shouldn't be lost on us. The co-presence of many people is essential to generate certain kinds and levels of what Randall Collins calls 'emotional energy', the memory of which can later be recirculated in a variety of images and discourses, 'travelling' through different formats of representation and mythopoeic function of media. The co-presence of many institutions likewise increases efficiency of social mobilization and intensity of face-to-face interactions of different kinds. The potential proximity remains key for artistic pursuits (Fuller and Ren 2019).

This is partly why we observe the concentration of certain independent organizations such as underground music labels in dense metropolitan areas. Economically speaking, an atomized and dispersed scene would only exacerbate the precarious work conditions of many small actors. Symbolically speaking, the aura and atmosphere of dense diverse locations draw in edgy artists, and in turn enable them to embody and project specific attitudes once the artists make these locations their home. In such urban areas, it is possible for artists to be at once anonymous and gregarious when they need to be. That is another productive paradox present in the scenes we describe.

Metropolitan cosmopolitan urban spaces typically enable independent actors to oscillate between individualistic and communal desires in a way most conducive to their artistic practice.

More often than not, it is about striking a balance between the two, not about the celebration of either one. In the book entitled *Absolutely on Music*, Haruki Murakami (2017: xiv) noted that 'creative people have to be fundamentally egoistic. This may sound

pompous, but it happens to be the truth . . . Still, letting one's ego run wild on the assumption that one is an "artist" will disrupt any kind of social life, which in turn interrupts the "individual concentration" so indispensable for creativity'. As we have already indicated, this understanding is not absent in the 'family-like' independent labels in Berlin and other cities we observed, even though perhaps only very few of them could claim to be free of any negative dynamics produced by all-too-familiar ego-trips. After all, music is a terrain of temptations.

Urban concentration and translocality

Randall Collins (2000: 38) writes that: 'micro-action is affected by the macro-structure. The sheer numbers of persons in the field and the shape of their network connections is the macro-context within which any micro-situation is negotiated.' Indeed, in the independent scene that is as densely populated as the milieus we look at, this dynamic cannot be discounted. The complexity of the city is one 'macro' important structure that influences cultural production. The set of social connections that transcend places is another. In what follows we want to shed some light on how this multilayered socio-spatial structure affects the work of labels. Collins argues that 'a sociological theory can move in three directions from this point: (1) We can ask still more macro questions; (2) We can concentrate on the shape of the network structure itself and its dynamic over time; (3) We can dig more deeply into the micro level and ask how the individual reacts to being in various positions within a network' (ibid.). Nick Crossley's (2015) methodology for studying music world networks is an exemplary treatment. It rests on the approach of

'relational sociology'. He is concerned with 'inter-agency' (2015: 13), the relational associations between actors, organizations (including record labels) and social contexts. In our work we use a different strategy, combining the first and the third kind of perspective that Collins talks about, in order to see how personal accounts of our interviewees relate to and reflect the specific affordances of their urban settings.

Beginning with a macro observation, independent labels in underground electronic dance music, and related avant-garde genres of ambient or drone, are not randomly dissipated in space. They cluster in metropolitan areas, and more specifically they are to be found in big numbers in cities that, first, proved traditionally strongly connected to the central genres like techno, house, electro, drum'n'bass, etc., and second, are known for hosting various other artistic milieus, music venues and media and technology companies. Of course, there are also what we would call 'outliers', often one-person labels outside of big urban centres, which are not directly part of any urban scene but rely on them symbolically to a certain extent. We will devote some attention to them below because they emphasize through a set of contrasts the advantages of the scene-based operation tied to dense socio-material assemblages of big cities. Although independent labels active in a variety of electronic genres can be found in all kinds of places, urban and rural, there is a considerable opportunity structure for a label to develop scale and impact in bigger urban centres.

What is the logic of this urban 'clustering' that we observe in underground electronic dance music? The dynamic is neither unique (strictly domain- or scene-specific) nor new (i.e. correlated with contemporary 'networked society'). The fashion industry and its urban anchors are an example, as it is concentrated in traditional centres

such as Paris and New York where high levels of cultural and economic capital co-mingle. Sociologists observed the phenomenon of a metropolitan concentration of the arts regarding the symbolic gravity of New York and the centrality of arts for its economy from the 1960s through to the 1980s (Currid 2007). This has not changed. Canadian sociologist Matt Patterson (2018) has recently found that although Los Angeles County and New York City account only for 6 per cent of the US population, they together contain 20 per cent of US arts establishments. Interestingly enough, similar proportions transpire in our investigation of independent labels. We have found that although Berlin accounts for just under 5 per cent of the entire German population, it hosts three times more independent labels (1,505) than four of the country's other metropolitan centres – Hamburg, Munich, Cologne and Frankfurt – put together, the populations of which jointly amount to roughly 5 per cent of Germany's populace (see Figure 4.1 based on Resident Advisor database).

Curiously, although similar in terms of size and standing in global financial economy, London and New York seem visibly unequal when it comes to the number of independent music labels they host today – 1976 and 496 respectively (see Figure 4.2). Although these are approximate levels based on one source dedicated first of all to scanning the state of electronic dance and contemporary experimental and avant-garde music, they nevertheless reflect the differences in running small labels in the US and in Europe that have been related to us by our interviewees. Moreover, they reflect quite well the geo-cultural shift of the centers of gravity of house and techno culture away from their original North American strongholds, especially Chicago and Detroit (165 and 151 labels respectively) to the current global 'hubs' of London and Berlin, as well as to other European cities that we call 'focal', for example Paris,

Barcelona or Amsterdam (407, 271 and 266 labels respectively). Consider this symptomatic observation of Amanda Brown, who runs the 100% Silk label in Los Angeles, which remains comparatively strong in the US market but finds itself less robust vis-a-vis the global hubs. When asked about the difference between LA and European cities, she stated:

> I'm sure it's not news to you that there's a reason why people in electronic music are obsessed with Europe. It's for a very good reason. The fanship there, the community there, the appreciation of the music is a beautiful soulful thing, and it's not something we have here often in the States. Club culture is not the same at all. In LA, what I find to be difficult to maneuver around is the segregation. There are only certain spaces you can go to make music and play music. . . . That's about the structure of the city, our regulations. Things cannot go [on] very late here, things cannot get very dark. Things cannot be very loud. If you had a Berghain here, maybe everything would change. But you're not given that sphere to perform within. So it's an uphill battle already because of venue, and then the segregation of the city, and then booking the acts and the people who are actually making that music here and the people who need to come here from other places. It's a strange city for that. So, usually, a full night where people are dancing and losing themselves to the music is absolutely the rarest thing. I've maybe only seen it once before.

Taken together and quantitatively, European urban centres contain the majority of independent electronic music labels active in the extended network of the global north, but even within Europe the geographical centre–periphery dynamic noted by Debray appears to be the case. For example, the German cities aggregated in our statistics

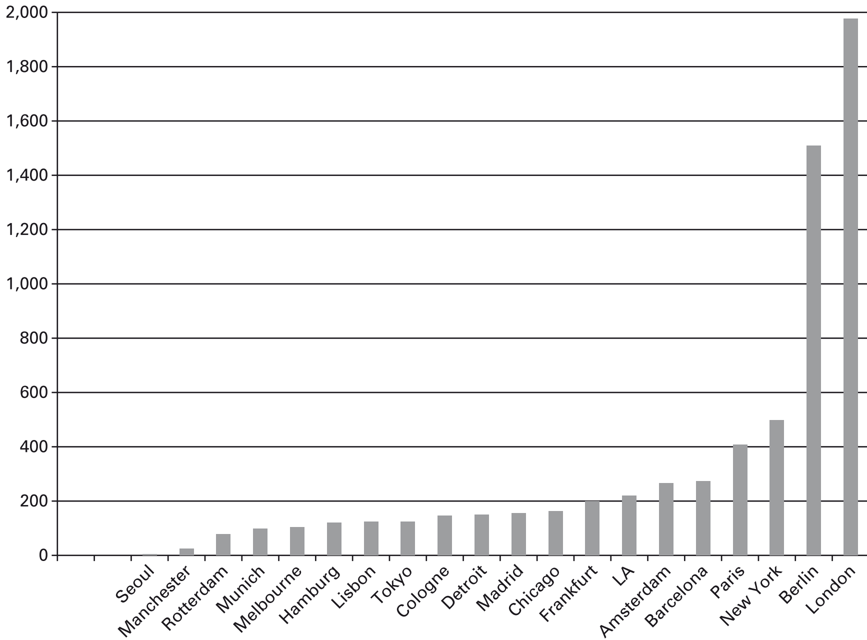
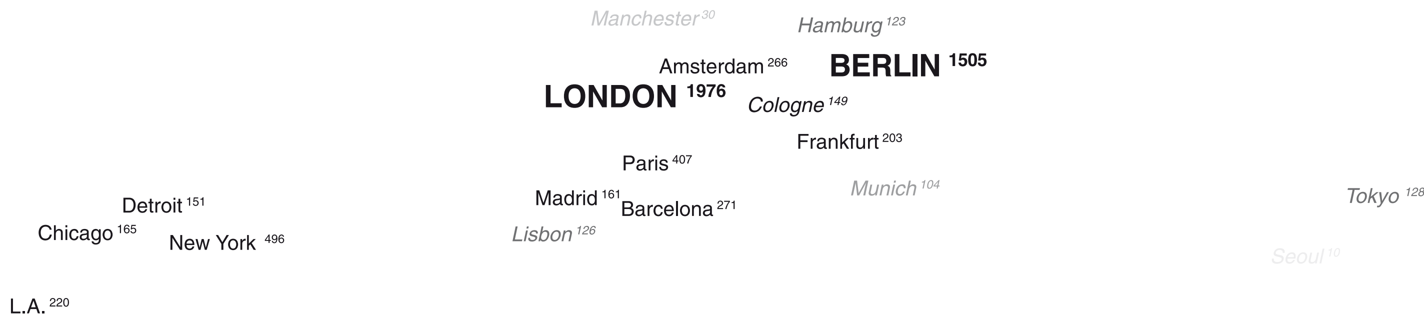


FIGURE 4.1 ***The number of independent labels in cities that have had vibrant electronic music scenes. The figures according to Resident Advisor database, as of 2017, data collected by the authors, diagram by DB.***

host significantly more independent electronic music labels than relatively vibrant Spanish and Portuguese cities. Furthermore, there's a massive disproportion between the 'hubs' (London and Berlin) and other European centers (both what we call 'focal' and 'associate' cities) (see Figure 4.2).

Of course, what makes these two capital cities so special is that they not only reflect their respective national cultures but also the cosmopolitan diversity which is in turn indicative of the dense international and translocal networks that these cities have forged over many years. Fully answering the question of what makes such a process of cultural 'metropolization' possible goes beyond the scope of this chapter. There are ethnographic and sociological works fully dedicated to specific urban or national contexts, explaining the city–music

number of independent labels in cities



[**CITY**] *(bold letters)* = *hub city*
[City] *(regular letters)* = *focal city*
[*City*] *(italic letters)* = *associate city*
[100] *(superscript numbers)* = *number of independent labels according to Resident Advisor data base*
(In the category of associate cities, the decreasing saturation of the font represents the smaller number of labels)

Diagram by Dominik Bartmanski & Timothy Pape (based on data from https://www.residentadvisor.net/labels.aspx [04.08.2018]

FIGURE 4.2 *Mapping the relative standing of cities that have hosted labels in independent electronic music and remain on the international cultural map of club culture, underground dance and avant-garde music and record production.*

connection and thematizing the importance of some aspects of what we call 'urban ecology' (e.g. Ogg 2009; Friedrich 2010; Hegenbart and Mündner 2012; Roy 2015; Krohn and Löding 2015). Here we find it productive to concisely collate three tiers, as it were, of geo-cultural positioning of scenes that support multiple kinds of labels: big city 'hub' environments, 'focal' urban environments and 'outlier' environments that could be considered associate, marginal or satellite ecologies vis-à-vis hubs and focal locations. Since most of the creative energy in the scene that we are interested in is located in Berlin and London, we will limit ourselves to reflecting on the case of the German capital and a contrast it represents vis-à-vis global cities like the British capital. Importantly, the techno, house and avant-garde electronic music scenes we look at are well translocally connected, not only through direct personal and business ties, but also through a mesh of symbolic relations whereby meanings and distinctions and identities are constantly exchanged and circulated. Therefore, we proceed by: first, developing a general heuristic model of translocality of urban ecologies as refracted by big city environment; second, indicating how the specific set of spatio-material and cultural conditions in Berlin have invited the increased co-locality of music-related institutions for which the city has become famous; and finally, third, reflecting on the socio-urban position of various non-central city ecologies.

Adapting Collins' notion of the interaction between the micro and macro levels to the topic of translocality of urban music scenes channels our thinking about it more clearly. Certain cities happen to be attractive because they lend themselves to certain kinds of practices more than others. They are perhaps cheap and comfortable to live in because they are outside of the main currents of global capitalism but rich in material, social and cultural resources. They may be 'poor but they are sexy' because they felicitously combine storied 'place identity'

with substantial 'place capital', each of which has generative aspects. While material 'poverty' and cultural 'sexiness' are relational categories (e.g., Berlin is poor only in comparison to certain Western European capitals, certainly not by global standards, and not even in a broader European context), there is something to be said about how it is always about a felicitous *combination* of a variety of factors that produce certain critically important synergic effects. Moreover, it is the relative advantages of certain cities and locales that enable these places and sites to draw people and generate horizontal and vertical mobilities. When it comes to musical scenes, these relational qualities of cities do not only differentiate them but connect them to each other when cognate cultural milieus discover mutually beneficial forms of cross-fertilization and economic collaboration. Independent underground dance music scenes are keenly aware of and socially connected to cognate musical milieus elsewhere. This translocality is facilitated, maintained and developed in several interconnected aspects – we distinguish six primary ones, operative both in micro and macro social dimensions (see below). Bringing them together helps us to understand a given place's emergent character, or 'inherent urban logic', as well as to distinguish between various forms of its effective relational capital vis-à-vis other cities.

The labels we look at are active in the scenes that are typically coordinated with a set of relatively stable aspects of urban dwelling. These scenes seek gritty but adaptable districts and combine a 'traditional' sense of place and local identity with 'progressive' politics and queer attitudes. They seek safe material spaces that are financially and symbolically and practically affordable: inexpensive, disused, repurposed, post-industrial, rough and ready. Moscow, Bucharest or Warsaw, the dynamic capitals of Russia, Romania and Poland, may have plenty of those, on top of their Soviet era unique grit and 'shabby

TRANSLOCALITY OF URBAN ECOLOGIES

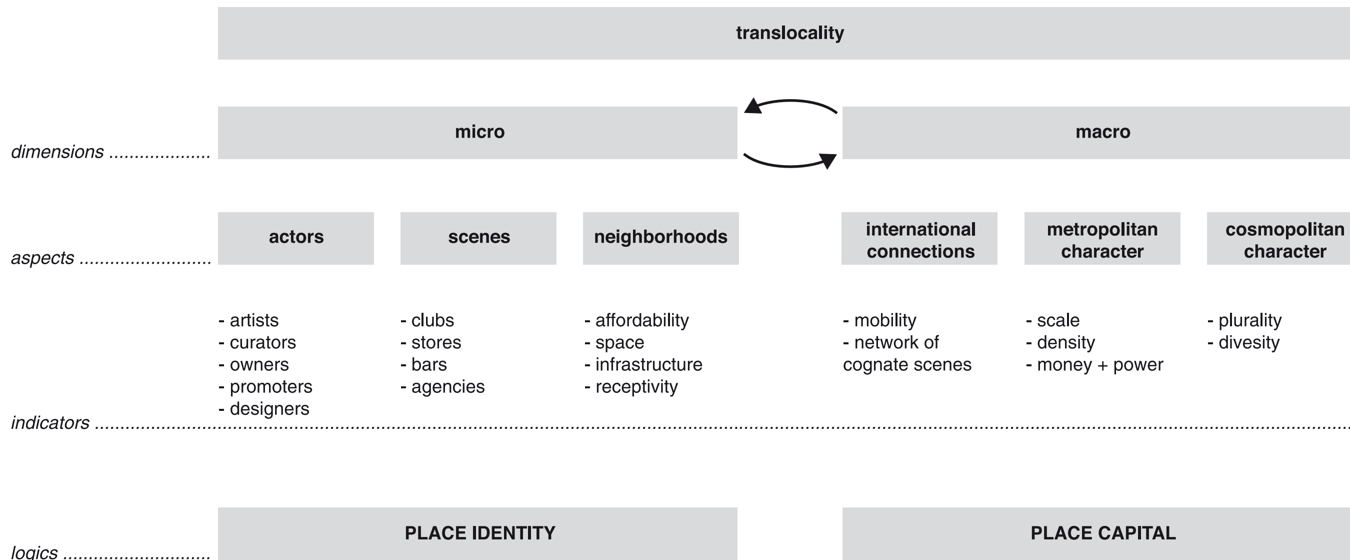


Diagram by Dominik Bartma ski & Timothy Pape

FIGURE 4.3 *Translocality is a complex sociological phenomenon that we can analytically parse as scaffolded around a host of socio-material aspects, each of which can be operationalized by constitutive indicators. Combined, these aspects give rise to what we provisionally call 'place identity' and 'place capital' of a given urban ecology, which in turn frame the main opportunities for vibrant musical production and independent entertainment environments. Of course, there is never just one single 'place identity', but it is a heuristic place-holder for a given city's significant cultural myth, for example 'Berlin as a bohemian hub of independent electronic music'.*

chic', but they do not have the liberal social and political environment that would make these material conditions usable for full-blown hedonistic musical ecology. To the extent that these cities – and formerly communist Europe more generally – have recently entered the map of independent electronic music, it illustrates the benefits of increased translocality brought about by a variety of developments after 1989, for example by access to the structures of the European Union in case of places like Warsaw and Bucharest. As we will see, however, these cities currently hope to punch above their weight rather than become new international centres of gravity. There are such centres in other parts of the world, for example in the Americas. Los Angeles has a good measure of both, the spaces and the liberalism, but as some of our interviewees have pointed out its character of a sprawling mega-city acts against physical proximity and density which are crucial to reaching a critical mass of scene-building interactions. Similar urban dynamic combined with social inequalities makes megacities like São Paulo less than perfectly suited for the development of vibrant inclusive scenes. Smaller US American cities like Chicago, which once hosted the strong pioneering house scene, may be able to avoid the predicament of LA but as we learn from those who – like Steve Mizek of the labels Argot and Tasteful Nudes – work there now, the city is under pressure of the neo-liberal economy, and is relatively separated from the leading club music hubs of today. We will return to this issue below. Last but not least, New York may have it all well worked out and the main assets seem to be continually at its disposal, but it has become prohibitively expensive, driving away some of its techno legends and up-and-coming talent. What is to be done? Enter Berlin.

In the book *Berlin Sampler*, which concisely documents the development of music cultures in the city, the standard story of

Berlin's emergence as a new global music hub is recounted by combining the national (macro) and the local (micro) dimension. Since 1968, the city (back then West Berlin) has been full of alternative types opposing conservative norms of mainstream society, especially that residence in West Berlin meant exemption from military service. West Berlin's status of an island surrounded by the Wall in the middle of the communist state of the GDR literally made it a geopolitical outsider, mapping social outsiderdom on the artistic underground. The counter-cultural scenes 'strove to distance themselves from the poorly "de-Nazified" Germany of the post-war years, and to destroy any and all structures and taboos . . . they were seekers, in essence . . . The techno movement made the rejection of politics in favor of unadulterated hedonism a form of music, perhaps even an ethos . . . partying as a way of life, and a new brand of futurism. Over time techno became a local tradition, emanating outwards from Berlin to the rest of the planet' (Lessour 2012: 6–7). The fall of the Wall made the free spaces in the formerly communist, Eastern part of the city available, unlocking the potential of plentiful but inexpensive living and working urban spaces.

This was a highly unusual situation. And any city's unusual attractiveness means it cannot stay a well kept secret for too long; it becomes a magnet for many people, triggering processes of change. The negative consequence typically associated with this process is gentrification, and we will address this issue below. On the brighter side, however, the city gains in terms of its international connectedness, benefits of co-locality of organizations of cultural production, and in cosmopolitan character. While similar process are simultaneously going on elsewhere, an international network is emerging, and this kind of socio-cultural whole can in time become greater than its parts. The aggregate effect of 'translocality', as we call

it, derives its significance from the power of advantages of localized ecologies but it also supervenes on them – it means a new emergent cultural quality. International music scenes such as techno and house evince some of the features of such an emergent cultural phenomenon. Increased and inexpensive means of travel as well as virtual technologies facilitate the development of this kind. The scene is translocal and globally observed rather than strictly localized, as was for example the case with the original Chicago house in the 1980s.

All the same, as we have noted above, some cities function as auratic nodes, or hubs: they attract more people than others, and not just visitors, but – crucially – new permanent residents. They do so for a different set of socio-material unique reasons, which combine their powers into what we call 'urban ecology'. London is neither cheap nor does it offer great affordable spaces to live and work, but it has been a relatively liberal hub of musical developments for the entirety of the late modern music history and at the forefront of nearly all cutting-edge independent electronic music developments, with lots of accumulated know-how and extant musical infrastructures of all kinds. Yet since the 1990s Berlin has enjoyed what London can no longer offer – low costs of living, relatively cheap rents, plenty of spaces to work and rest at, and 24/7 party schedules. All this has been combined with the presence of several big universities and manifold intellectual institutions, and – last but not least – considerable traditions of counter-cultural movements, from the roaring twenties to the new wave and punk of the 70s and 80s, 'from Cabaret to Techno' (Lessour 2012). This socio-material historical specificity of the city has been well documented (e.g. Denk and von Thülen 2012; Fesel and Keller 2017; Hegenbart and Mündner 2012; Lessour 2012; Empire 2014; Bartmański 2017),

but – as we will indicate – there's a need for emphasizing certain aspects more and re-linking them in a new conceptual way. In the following sections we will try to connect what we see as important dots in the scenes that inspired and gave rise to many of the labels we study.

Metropolis: 'city air makes you free'

Max Weber famously re-emphasized the adage that 'city air makes one free'. For another titan of German sociology, Georg Simmel, the metropolis was a state of mind, a special sociological condition, replete with ambiguities, blending excitement and what he called a blasé attitude of many big-city dwellers. A comparative social freedom was not in question, though. Throughout this book, we have discussed several different meanings of freedom that play a crucial role in the milieus we write about. But in the context of urban metropolitan ambience that can make one free, there is one more meaning of freedom that must be emphasized here, and especially in conjunction with house and techno scenes and that so far we only briefly touched upon. It is the freedom for homosexual and queer communities that have been traditionally strongly associated with these kinds of music to express their identity openly, mixing music, art, night life and sexuality without restrictions. In the opening sections of this book, we referred to Simon Reynolds who emphasized that 'Chicago house music was born of a double exclusion: not just black, but gay and black'. Similarly, Steve Mizek who runs Argot and Tasteful Nudes labels in Chicago, tells that 'there was a level of intolerance that has been shown repeatedly within our culture for dance music. Although disco was a huge phenomenon

here in the States, it was also aligned with being gay or being feminine and that was not tolerated.'

Under social conditions of such exclusion, music and club spaces were outlets of freedom. But they do not thrive everywhere. French sociologist Didier Eribon, himself a gay man and the author of the poignant sociological memoir *Returning to Reims*, emphasizes the role of 'the way large cities attract gay people, and the ways those people find to ceaselessly create and recreate the conditions necessary for them to be able to live out their sexuality: how they construct *spaces of freedom*' (Eribon 2013: 212, emphasis ours). In addition to the basic urban material advantages of Berlin noted above, its gay friendly, liberal, progressive and experimental social atmosphere proved important for the development of numerous such spaces of freedom, of which Berghain is perhaps the most famous but not the only music-oriented example. According to Steve Mizek, this contrasts with the current situation in Chicago where there are gay bars but very few cultivate the underground music tastes that the city gave birth to in the 1980s and 1990s:

> You couldn't be an underground house DJ and play at those places, you would be booed off or have a drink thrown at you. There is no support of that anymore. There are some places where a more liberated outlook dominates, a lot of these places are super underground, they are similar to an art scene and they're isolated, they are further away from everything else. It is cool, because there is a level of freedom, but there is not a lot of institutional support for it.

The comparative advantage of Berlin becomes more visible in such a perspective. In combination with availability of actual spaces and lower costs of life, the key conditions for the development of

vibrant house and techno scenes were in place, and it is in this sense that one could metaphorically say that the thrust of the emotional energy of these scenes migrated in the twenty-first century to Berlin. For underground labels specifically, that blend of economic, symbolic, urban and cultural factors proved irresistibly attractive, along with the sense of being able to participate in defining something new, open-ended, and potentially relatively large as well. Looking at a few different examples can illustrate how the pull of Berlin proved too strong to resist even for artists and label managers previously associated with other relatively strong metropolitan centres such as London or New York.

Consider the story of Hotflush, originally a quintessentially British electronic music label, focused on releasing quality dub step records. Founded in 2003 in London by Paul Rose aka *Scuba*, it made a name for itself as a leading signifier of the genre in the UK and beyond. Several years later Scuba moved to Berlin and took the label with him. There are many such stories in the scene, also among the people interviewed in this book: Lucy found his way to Berlin from Italy via Paris, Jenifa Mayanja and DJ Jus-Ed moved from Connecticut. But what makes people move from one hub city to another? There has been a steady movement of DJs, producers and labels from London to Berlin over the last decade and there is no sign of that slowing down. For a time, Kiran Sande moved to Berlin to run his Blackest Ever Black avant-garde label. Even the artists whose legendary position makes them stay put in London cultivate strong ties with key players in Berlin, like Luke Slater and his standing association with Berghain/Ostgut Ton. In keeping with the overall approach we present in our study, this movement has been driven by a combination of economic and symbolic factors. In a 2015 conversation with the then Hotflush manager, Jack Haighton,

the question of what exactly motivated the move to Berlin and how the city was originally viewed was of paramount importance:

Dominik: What was behind the decision to move from the UK to Berlin?

Jack: Very exciting things were happening in Berlin at that time, you know, it was definitely the place to be, Paul (*Scuba*) had been doing his thing in the London scene for a long time, broadening his horizons . . . he wanted to experience something new.

Dominik: It was 2007, wasn't it?

Jack: Yup . . . It was important for us to be close to that. Paul visited Berghain for the first time, saw this other side to techno, and ended up starting afresh, based on the sounds he was hearing here.

Dominik: Berghain and Ostgut Ton were one [sic] of the important influences?

Jack: Berghain has been a notable presence in the history of the label.

This short exchange reveals both the emotional component of the decision to move and the role of materialities and co-location of places in Berlin. Crucially, however, the affordability of rent and living costs in Berlin was a powerful draw. Jack continues by highlighting how relative affordability impacts the capacity to participate in creative work:

> I think the affordability of the city is a huge attraction to creative people who normally don't make that much money and can't afford the exorbitant rents of London. It certainly makes our lives easier with things like office overheads and stuff like that. I think

> that shares synergy with random creativity. Because it's so cheap it attracts people (who) aren't necessarily attracted to your standard money-making rat-race job and therefore come here with a lot more freedom to create and therefore you have these amazing institutions and all these clubs, and all these late nights, and all these wonderful parties, and that's what makes it so special. So obviously I think the economic situation of the city has to a large extent created what we have today. Which we all feed off.

In the 2000s and well into the 2010s, Berlin has retained this comparative advantage pulling in scores of artists, musicians, intellectuals and students from abroad. The unique combination of lower costs, a higher concentration of entertainment and genuine grit of bohemian neighborhoods proved irresistible to the existing and yet-to-be-made record labels, as well as DJs, booking agencies, independent media and last but not least – revellers, ravers, party-goers and record collectors. Different social groups of new-comers may have had slightly different motivations to move to Berlin but the allure of the entertainment factor and the affordances of free young lifestyles possible in Berlin in the 1990s and 2000s created a unique confluence of factors. Alex Samuels, who has lived in Berlin for many years but was raised in Massachusetts and educated at the University of Chicago, points to an interesting, comparatively unique socio-institutional aspect of Berlin's situation in this respect:

> Berlin felt like no-man's land, with low rents, and with not clearly defined circumstances of property ownership . . . this defined a space for quickly established ad hoc musical situations, clubs, parties, bars. There was few visible vicious forms of hyper capitalism . . . people from very different social classes could live a weird existence,

interacting and experiencing music and parties for long periods of time. Different government subsidies played a role in that, I think. But I think one contributing factor people overlook is the role of antiquated forms of higher education in Germany. For example the old Diplom & M.A. (magister) degree system allowed students to remain matriculated for a long time, not really paying any tuition, living on subsidized student loans. This meant for some being enrolled forever, working on the side, not being hyper-ambitious professionally. They didn't just have access to the city's strange spaces but massive amounts of time to explore them.

FIGURE 4.4 *Urban grit: A typical post-industrial landscape between Kreuzberg and Friedrichshain in Berlin that has a history of various forms of appropriation conducive to independent and temporary uses. The famous techno club Tresor, as well as the newer venue Ohm, are located nearby, adjacent to the Vattenfall power plant. The rooms of the clubs and the massive industrial spaces above are used by Atonal Festival every August to showcase cutting edge electronic music and visual artists. Photo by D. Bartmański.*

This particular mix of space and time availability seems crucial, and although much has changed since 2000 Berlin retains its comparative edge. Many areas of the city, some of them quite central like the lot occupied by Berghain, stayed largely undefined and therefore socially and culturally open-ended, creating an opportunity structure simply rare or downright unknown in other Western capital cities. Strolling around Berlin and looking at the architectural ground plans of its principal inner city districts, one quickly realizes the extent and connectedness of these places and adjacent architectural sites. This bohemian cartography outlines an urban ecology that affords musical and artistic practices of the underground electronic music scenes. Such spaces harbour multiple sites that exude a post-industrial, informal feel that is amenable to improvized uses. Importantly, though, they must come across as 'real' and authentic; not forced, marketized or contrived in a top–down way, they need to be there in the first place, emerging as bottom-up movements through creative appropriation, unofficial and official (see Figure 4.4). It is precisely in these areas and spaces that the clubs like Tresor or Berghain, or record stores like Hard Wax could take root, feel 'at home', develop and project their authenticity for the long term. These places form constellations around which edgy and genuine forms of artistic and social practices coalesce and eventually assume cultural cache. Grit becomes glamour. As Richard Lloyd writes in his book *Neo-Bohemia*, 'for an admittedly small but disproportionately influential class of taste-makers, elements of the urban experience that are usually considered to be an aesthetic blight become instead symbols of the desire to master an environment characterized by marginality and social instability' (cited in Duneier et al. 2014: 127).

In short, one significant element of the making of 'bohemian cartography' is the successful blending of various – apparently

disparate – elements to make a meaningful whole which – in time – becomes something greater than the sum of its parts. When this happens, as in any part of life, we sense the energy and the cultural effervescence from the object, space, or event almost as a type of 'magic'. Somehow, the object or space feels like it brings us straight to the centre of things. It's a commonly felt sentiment, although not always verbalized so straightforwardly. Here, in explaining this conceptually, we can draw on some theories from performative studies of materiality, which point to the way objects become socially meaningful when they communicatively perform deeply held beliefs and values. According to Rom Harre (2002: 25), 'material things have magic powers only in the contexts of the narratives in which they are embedded', and that 'an object is transformed from a piece of stuff definable independently of any story-line into a social object by its embedment in a narrative'. This is a standard cultural sociological understanding that illuminates one aspect of how the aura of a scene or a label is constructed through discourses attached to objects or people by other people. The power of myth in the music industry is not lost on our interviewees either, who as business people and as cultural prosumers are also scene participants with finely-tuned critical noses for the performative constitution of cultural (and economic) value. Toby Heys, DJ and producer who runs the label Audint (short for 'Audio Intelligence') with Steve Goodman (aka the artist *Kode 9*) puts this general idea about the power of musical myth in an amusing way:

> . . . those who are really good at making myths usually end up being successful. . . . The kind of technologies they're using. Someone's using Adrian Sherwood's mixing desk from 1975, blah blah blah, it's got his spirits in it. It can be technology, it can be

> people, it can be a myriad of things [sic]. And usually it is a myriad of things bound together. Again, I'm not damning that at all, because we all play that. We all play within that area. It's just sometimes, I guess what more annoys me is when the mythology ranks so much higher than the production. If you think about people like the Scientist or Mad Professor, or Lee 'Scratch' Perry is the perfect example. All the mythology around Lee 'Scratch' Perry with his tapes, and burying his tapes in his blood and his piss and all the rest of it. It's brilliant. He's a brilliant artist. So his output, sits for me, equivalently with the mythology, and I don't mind that. It's when the mythology sits up here and the product is actually pretty blah, then it becomes pretty uninteresting for me.

While this perspective rightly reminds us of the importance of discursive stories that inspire people to engage with the world in a particular way, we find it necessary in the context of our study to shift the emphasis. A reverse shot to that of Harré's reveals another key valence to the construction of cultural meaning: grand bohemian narratives such as the one surrounding Berlin and its music scenes have 'magic powers' *only* within the propitious spaces and material-aesthetic assemblages that make them ring true and allow people to realize and develop their potential in a relatively unrestricted manner. Cultural narratives and urban myths matter for objects, sometimes they provide inspiring metaphors we live by, but such discourses are never active alone, and in and of themselves they are ultimately hollow chains of signifiers, especially in the absence of felicitously aligned material-aesthetic affordances that authenticate them. Depeche Mode's famous song *Enjoy the Silence* is perhaps the most known and poignant evocation of this sentiment in music

itself. Discourses unconnected to lived experiences of emotionally engaging spaces, objects and art forms will forever remain in our heads as just that – discourses, forgettable or trivial words. Emplaced aesthetic forms must be there, they are crucially important.

For example, looking at how the sensibility of the 'cool' is established and practised we can infer that – more often than not – it is found 'on the ground' and later used beyond. The symbolic power, or at least some of its core, is not inherently in the hands of the economically powerful, it emerges somewhere else, out of the conjunctions of discourse, aesthetics, aura and socio-cultural distance between the interpreter and the signifier; the symbolic – and by extension – cultural power of places and arts 'emanating' from them resides not in the skillful deployment of discourse itself. Rather, it stems from the intersections of creativities and materialities that are not determined by money which can move it around, or the discursive power which can communicate it linguistically, but by intricate alignments of manifold affordances that make cultural phenomena happen in the first place. In short: can anything make sponsors look cool? We would like to argue – not. Just like Sennett's argument about sheer spontaneity being insufficient for good improvization in complex arts rings true, it is likewise insufficient for the sheer advertising or discursive power to alter any complex environ such as a city in any way. They have to build on something, figuratively and literally, and have to reckon with the way the context inflects generic meanings and background representations. Can any city be made cool any time? Again, we would be inclined to respond negatively, and it is also for this reason that – to paraphrase Debray – only a certain number of hubs can exist at any one time, and only certain ecologies can play those special roles at particular moments in history.

Great myths more readily adhere to places where there is not only a history of opportunities for such cultural effervescence (tradition, legacy), but also a matching density of opportunity and intensity of engagement (innovation). And what makes these opportunities and intensities possible and exciting in the first place is a set of uniquely combined productive affordances – more of what makes independent music cultures thrive such as gig venues and spaces of hedonism, stores and clubs, as well as production facilities and leisure sites. Myth is partly about connecting or fusing elements together to build something bigger than the sum of its parts. But, again, what are its parts, what is the 'glue', and what exactly do we require of the parts in daily practice? In the main, parts must deliver on promised or expected performance. In relation to the city, bigger cities win out on delivering production and income-generating infrastructures. This isn't just something that matters for bigger labels who are more likely to book clubs, or take up space in pressing plant orders. Smaller boutique labels work on DIY principles with local makers featuring strongly in the production chain. Monique Recknagel runs the label Sonic Pieces in Berlin which has in its catalogue ambient works of renowned artists such as Nils Frahm. She lives in Berlin with her partner Erik Skodvin, a musical performer who released music on Monique's label, and runs a separate label called Miasmah. Monique tells us that what helps Sonic Pieces stand out in addition to the music is 'the packaging and the artwork because from the beginning we had such a strong line. I make most of the packaging myself, they are all book-bound with nice fabric and embossed. I also worked with the same graphic designer from the beginning, it's Torsten. He does all the layout. It is a very collective process.' Both labels produce high quality, shorter-run vinyl editions and Erik tells us that they can do many of the jobs they need to make a release within 'walking distance' of where they live in

Prenzlauer Berg, including mastering the vinyl pressing, the embossing on the vinyl packaging, and the record distribution:

Ian: Where is the label based?

Erik: Prenzlauer Allee. All walking distance (*from where the label owners live in Prenzlauer Berg*). The whole collection line is walking distance, which is amazing. So we have [a] personal connection. That matters, 'cause when I started it, I was also in my apartment, everything was in Manchester.

Dominik: So here you have more opportunities for control, artistic control?

Erik: Yes, also like we are doing all the mastering with Lupo (Calyx Studio in Kreuzberg, Berlin). We can go and be there at the mastering, we can be there when we order, look at the papers. Talk to 'More Music' for the distribution, you have everything there, which is really good, I have to say.

Beyond some of the practical requirements for running a label, many label owners feel connected to the scene in Berlin for more (inter)subjective reasons, and enjoy the feeling of camaraderie afforded by the fact that like-minded others are working with them, or engaging in the same time of work. Here, there is an imagined community of like-minded others. Riffing on Benedict Anderson's idea that communities form around imagined relationships with others, and an imaginative sense of affinity with the scene, Jack Haighton, who was one of two managers at Hotflush Recordings in 2015, helped us understand the concrete and imaginative bonds between scene participants:

Dominik: Is there a special and shared creative atmosphere here in Berlin, do you think?

Jack: Yeah, certainly. Labels, DJs, artists. On a personal level that's what I like about the city, that's why I've stayed here for the last eight years. It's the only place I've lived where I've felt completely 100 per cent surrounded by kindred spirits with whom I don't have to feel uncomfortable or nerdy about records and talking about stuff that many other people would find boring. And I think that's certainly with things. Our office is based in the back of OYE record store. It's just a nice *atmosphere* in which to run a music business I think. We have two girls that work side by side with us, they do our press for example. It's nice. It's a *familial* atmosphere. It makes the day to day a lot more pleasant, rather than, say, working in an office on your own or in your home out your bedroom sending emails to people in America about distribution. Everyone's more or less gravitating towards the same purpose and that helps.

In part, as Jack states, this 'gravitational pull' is enabled by the relative affordability of Berlin compared to London, Paris or New York, and this makes participating in the cultural and leisure infrastructures of the city more possible. Again, we can see how this creates possibilities for a critical mass of scene participants and how some aspects of the place's attractive character are in part relationally constituted. This, of course, is not just a matter of relative purchasing power of money but also of life and work conditions more generally and proximity of many like-minded people (Fuller and Ren 2019). Consider this narrative from a book devoted to comparison of art worlds in London and Berlin by a young Canadian woman (Chadwick 2012: 128) who lived in Berlin for years before moving to study elsewhere:

> We are artists, thinkers, we are discontent and hopeful. We see Berlin as an open space into which we may pour our true selves, brimming with creativity, unhindered by the nine to five. . . . Berlin is the sweet antidote to the superfluous clutter of the cities we fled in the name of our creativity, of ideas, of a better future. Coming to Berlin is thus less an arrival than a departure: from cities like New York, Toronto, London. It is utopian.

Although this narrative can be seen as bearing some clichéd features of a young enthusiastic outlook, it is nevertheless a common trope in the stories that narrate countless actual experiences of those who ventured to move to and work in Berlin. It is part and parcel of what the book from which the quote is derived states in its title: *Mythos Berlin* (Hegenbart and Mündner 2012). Conceptually, the relationality of meaning creation is brought into sharp relief here. Empirically, we can see how the described process might have implications for diversity within cities such as Berlin. Whether ethnic, national or social, that diversity is a key feature of the urban environments many of our labels operate within or seek, and is assumed to be as a cosmopolitan backdrop for this independent label activity.

On this matter of the connection between real spaces and imagined musical communities, Jennifa Mayanja also reinforces the idea that belonging to a circle of cultural prosumers is important for the work of musicians and label owners. Just like the cultural-musical ecology of Prenzlauer Berg serves the purposes of Monique Recknagel and Erik Skodvin, so are other adjacent districts in Berlin conducive to forming bohemian communities of like-minded artists. Friedrichshain, Kreuzberg, Neukölln and more recently Wedding have been particularly important in this respect. Record stores, clubs, art spaces, bars and music production companies are often concentrated in these

districts of the city that occupy the eastern part of the space encircled by the Ringbahn railway system (see Figure 4.5). Jennifa presents the following take on participation within these emergent urban communities, with special emphasis on the role of record shops:

> . . . you need all these pillars. It's like building blocks to a house. You need those people, those guys that have been in the store and that've seen everything come through. You need those guys, you know, because they can turn you on. They can tell you stories about this, that and the other, sometimes not even related to the music, just the artist. They can give you a history. And you need that experience of being in the store and having that community. You know, there's a transmission of energy that's happening there. There's a community there. There's no community online. You know, it's . . . you need all those things to build a person that's whole as far as music is concerned, about ear, about taste. We would be in stores sometimes and we would be chatting with people we didn't know, and they'd say, hey, you know what, you like this artist? You should check this out. People that were just shopping. These things are important. They turn you on to something or whole other avenues that you haven't thought about. So all these things build to the local scene, and eventually to the scene all over. And if you look at pinpoints of electronic music, for instance, like New York, Berlin, London, Paris, these things are important.

Even this handful of narratives show how different aspects of dense metropolitan 'urban ecology' penetrate each other to produce artistic synergies. Label owners find it inspiring and efficient to work in an environment that facilitates interactions and eases the process of getting things done despite all kinds of financial limitations and other constraints. What we call the co-locality of critically important

institutions is the pivotal socio-material aspect of bohemian cartography we are describing here (see Figure 4.5, below), and one of the chief features of the 'happening' urban ecology – not only all kinds of music-related actors flock to the city, but they tend to cluster in the neighbourhoods in which certain community platforms already exist.

Co-locality means not only greater efficiency for independent producers but also greater fun of face-to-face interactions that can be maintained on a regular basis – a *sine qua non* in the trust-building process which is in turn a main value in 'family-like' independent labels.

As represented in Figure 4.5 below, the districts of Neukölln, Kreuzberg, Friedrichshain and Prenzlauer Berg host many relevant music-related institutions and other cultural venues that form social ties and aesthetic elective affinities with labels and companies that offer music services. Of course, there are more of such organizations in Berlin, both inside the presented districts, as well as outside the purview of this map (especially in Wedding to the north, and further east and south/south-east of the Ringbahn). New institutions are appearing as we speak, benefitting from pre-existing infrastructures and testing novel hybrid spatio-cultural concepts which shift the character of institutions from economic ventures to social platforms for community building whose concentration and proximity define vibrant neighborhoods. For example, Dana Ruh's store KMA60 located in Neukölln, Berlin, fuses the functions of record shop, vinyl distribution company and art space. Last but not least, many record-producing companies, such as mastering and recording studios (e.g. Calyx, Dubplates & Mastering, Non Standard Studios, LowSwing),

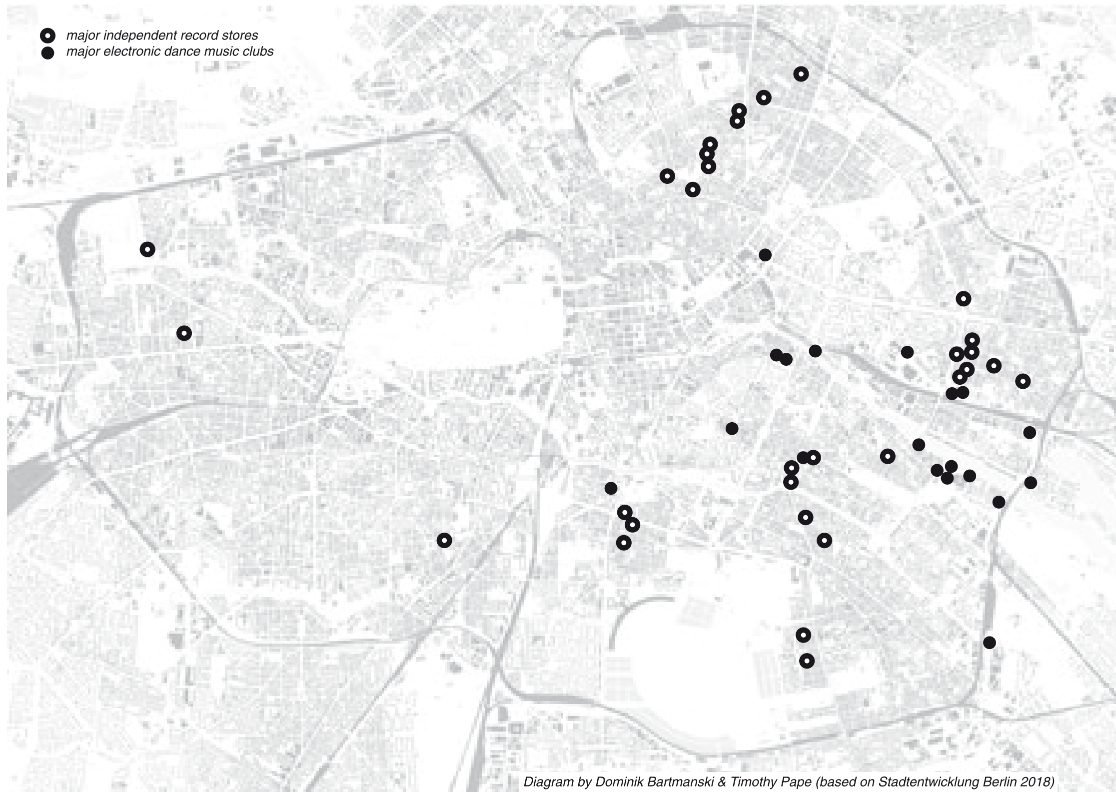


FIGURE 4.5 *Co-locality of music institutions: our labels benefit from being enmeshed in the larger system of spatial co-presence of independent record stores stocking past and current underground artists, and major underground electronic dance music clubs of Berlin as well as many other music related companies.*

manufacturers (e.g. Handle with Care) or musical software companies (Ableton, Native Instruments) are located within these central districts.

The benefits of co-locality as experienced in the aforementioned districts of Berlin can be taken to a whole new level when combined with cosmopolitan diversity. This is something that cities can build only over years and decades, although the contemporary condition of virtual connectedness can accelerate the change when the place's affordances catalyze the development of certain scenes much faster than others. Crucially, being not only attractive to the outside world but also interested in what is going on out in the world and its diverse cultures is part and parcel of being a nodal point in translocal cultural networks. Berlin's importance for the techno scene, for example, did not begin with Berghain. Older iconic institutions such as the club Tresor and the Hard Wax record store established the Berlin–Detroit axis at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s and maintained it ever since, making the mythologies of the motor city known to new generations of European ravers. The work of Tresor and Hard Wax had been prefigured by the existence of strong counter-cultural and punk milieus in Berlin, which famously connected to and welcomed artists from other countries. The iconic stories of Berlin being a propitious urban ecology for the heroes of the alternative music scene, such as David Bowie in the 1970s or Nick Cave in the 1980s, indicated how it was possible to reinvent oneself in Berlin, to have 'a new career in a new town' (Seabrook 2008).

The relative openness to other, often geographically distant, cultures and a willingness to respectfully invite them and graft their aesthetic onto a new ground is a part of the translocal dynamic that proved fruitful for different labels that developed in Berlin. A balance between self-confidence and cosmopolitan engagement seems crucial here. Such values as curiosity and de-hierarchization of cultures that belong

to the ethos of alternative and critically minded underground scenes we look at has been conducive to strengthening that translocal dynamic. As we mentioned before, there are cities that boast comparatively powerful musical scenes and vibrant nightlife but score lower on translocal openness. We find it symptomatic that Matthieu Hebrard, who runs Goma Gringa out of São Paulo, says that 'the difficulty in Brazil is to go out[side] of the national points of reference all the national musicians stay in the Brazilian references'. Of course, this kind of self-referentiality exists everywhere but it's a matter of degree: the more balanced with outward connectivity the better. We find that what makes the current hubs of independent music genres such as London or Berlin vibrant today is their developed translocal flexibility and connectivity: although aware of and dedicated to their local urban attractiveness, they also constantly venture outside, cultivating long-distance exchange practices as much as their local micro-relations.

A focus on the nature of openness as a phenomenon that emerges from entanglements with what Jane Bennett (2009) calls 'vibrant matter' might allow more complex accounts of how openness forms, coheres, dissipates and becomes an integral part of a given urban ecology. That is, we can see that openness is enabled or afforded by particular spatio-temporal and material meaning-making configurations, suggesting a cosmopolitan urban ecology has a performative and processual core rather than being solely an idealist or imaginative one based on an ethics of openness. As something identifiable in individuals, cosmopolitanism has both ideal and pragmatic dimensions, attitudinal and behavioral aspects. But, as we insist, these outlooks must be brought to bear on objects, assemblages of humans and non-humans, and particular events within suitable spatio-temporal settings. See for example, Mica Nava's (2007) historical research on particular modern, urban configurations of

cosmopolitanism, or Elijah Anderson's (2011) ethnographic study of 'cosmopolitan canopies' as spaces that are designed or lived in such a way that afford cultural mixing and exchange. Cosmopolitanism therefore involves the knowledge, command and performance of symbolic resources for the purpose of highlighting and valuing cultural difference, but such repertoires are activated within settings where there is a fusion between discourse, ideology, and spatio-material configurations (Lobo 2016; Skrbiš and Woodward 2013).

But, to this, we need to add that an adequate explanation of cosmopolitan associations also needs a phenomenological dimension. Cosmopolitanism is often talked of in practical terms via ideas about difference and descriptions of what people find through their senses. These matters of cosmopolitan and un-cosmopolitan judgement are embodied, understood and described through sensual experiences. Here, we should place a theory of cosmopolitan ethics in the material world, integrating the value and boundary work at the heart of cosmopolitanism with a theory of the senses, materials and sensory formations (Howes 2005). In this sense, urban cosmopolitanism can be formed through associations with what we can call the moral agency of aesthetic surfaces. Independent labels are agents that make, use, frame and disseminate these aesthetic surfaces.

On a critical note, we must also be reflexive about the possible collateral damages associated with growing 'cosmopolitanness' of a city. In making claims about the 'cosmopolitanness' of a given urban ecology, we must also take into account the relative position of the interpreter. One person's 'cosmopolitan experience' can be another's exploitation; or, one person's supposed 'cosmopolitanness' provides the basis for another's accumulation of cultural and financial capital. At the heart of such judgments is an idea of cultural authenticity, but of course authenticity itself is relational and partially subjectively

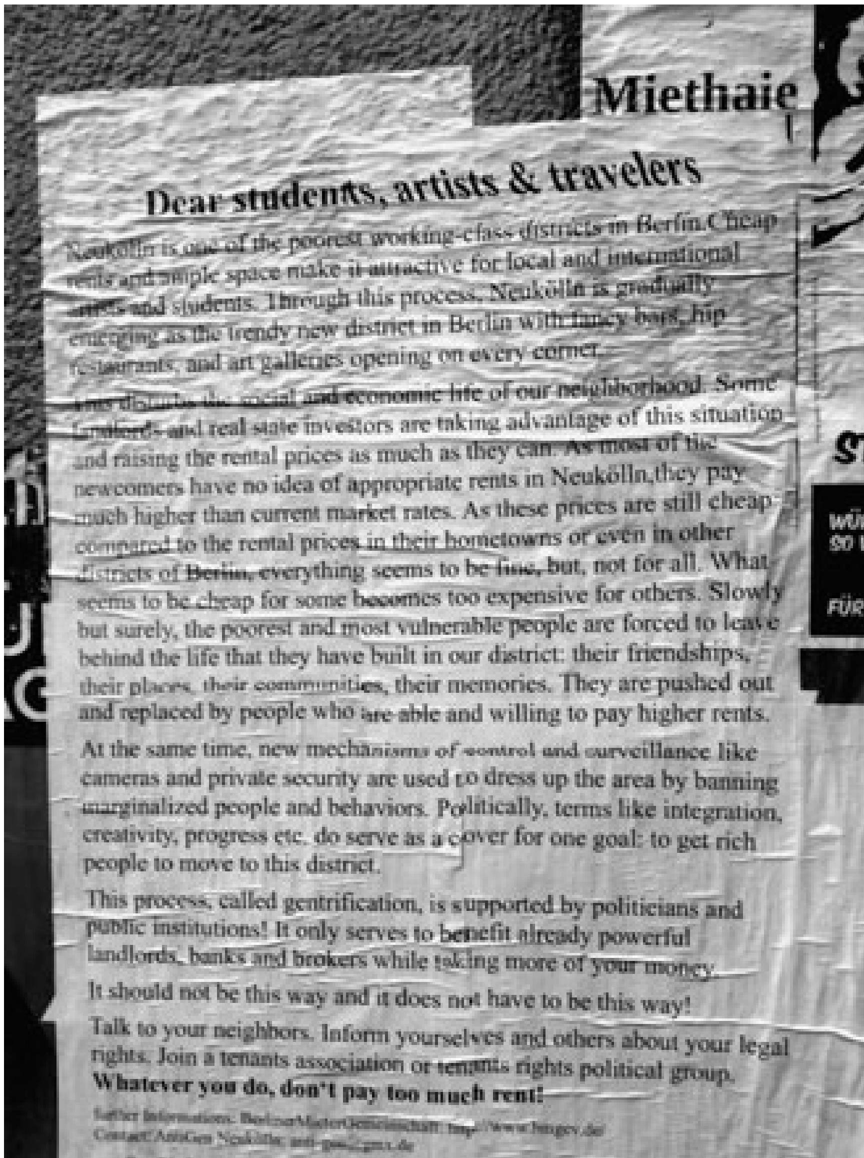


FIGURE 4.6 *An anti-gentrification poster in Neukölln, September 2013. It is clear from this description that local and foreign developers and landlords are the targets of critique rather than newcomers who want to find a place and might be willing and/or able to pay more. The German word on top, 'Miethaie', means 'rent sharks'. Photo by I. Woodward.*

constituted. As Sharon Zukin reminds us, 'we see "authentic" spaces only from outside them. Mobility gives us the distance to view a neighborhood as connoisseurs … Especially when we look at a rundown neighborhood we ask, Is it interesting? Is it "gritty"? is it "real"? Like the criteria we use while shopping for consumer products, these standards objectify the authenticity that we desire' (Zukin 2010: 20–1). One of the most notorious phenomena that refract these contradictions, ambiguities and conflicts is the process that often dovetails cosmopolitan 'upgrade' of attractive cities – gentrification. This can be described as a painful paradox of bohemian cartographies we are concerned with – as more and more independent cultural agents such as labels come to specific neighbourhoods deemed 'attractive' and 'productive', the more they contribute to the conditions of their own future displacement. What has made Berlin comparatively friendly to independent actors over years is that it has maintained the spirit and practices of resistance, with some unique results, for example the successful defence of the former Tempelhof airfield against the plans of developers – the place remains to serve the city as its biggest public park (Bartmański 2017). The adjacent neighbourhoods, such as Schillerkiez in Neukölln where the aforementioned KMA60 record store is located have been at the forefront of anti-gentrification struggles in Berlin (see Figure 4.6). While gentrification may be one of the nightmares of big city dwellers and artists active in the urban 'hubs', it is not necessarily the biggest problem in smaller, more peripheral cities. For them, it is rather a degree of isolation from the 'hubs' and from each other that can be experienced as detrimental to work prospects and developing their portfolio. On the other hand, such an isolation can also become a part of the narrative that distinguishes a given label, emphasizing its outsider status.

‘Focal cities’: Degrees of connectedness and isolation

Most of the label accounts we have told so far in this chapter relate not to complete geographic remoteness, but to degrees of isolation where geographic isolation compounds both symbolic and economic dimensions of running a label. Having local connections, and being in a position to fully exploit them, is crucial for a label’s success. At first glance, this might seem like a problem of proximity. Yet, the digital and online infrastructures that provide the template for label activity also allow for differential strategic interventions in the face of this. Given this theme, it is appropriate we start with the ambient label A Strangely Isolated Place (ASIP). Ryan Griffin’s position with ASIP is somewhat paradoxical. He has lived in London, Portland and Los Angeles and travels about the world for his day job in the business of advertising. When he moves, the label moves with him, as would a hobby or leisure activity. The label then ends up being rather unconnected to place – perhaps even ‘isolated’ – as the label name suggests. Given such a situation, in another ‘indie’ scene we might expect the label to struggle based on the fact is not connected to local spaces, to gigs, radio station networks, and to parties. But, remember, ASIP releases sonically crafted and elegantly packaged ambient records by a range of artists from around the globe. Ambient itself is a genre that is not linked to a particular ‘place’, or scene. Even if it is consolidated around a style, lets say with labels like Wyndam Hill in the 1970s and 1980s – despite arguments about the fit of ambient genre in this case, or whether ‘new age’, ‘chill out’, or ‘soft jazz’ might be better – it doesn’t coalesce around large-scale gigs or clubs; it is environment, chill-out or ‘furniture music’. Thus, to get to the point of making the ASIP concept work as a label, Ryan Griffin

started with a music blog, and then accompanied that with a mix series that was released online and included guest mixes. This helped promote the show, and Griffin's tastes as a selector, and effectively provided him with the idea and the status as a taste-maker to start ASIP. He tells us:

> After four years online, I got to know a small and passionate music community online, and realized I was one of the very few (consistent) blogs covering independent ambient artists. I didn't take any promos and I only ever reviewed music that I enjoy and still do to this day. So, I think (or I like to think) the community started to respect my views and the artists I featured as authentic. I guess it was at this point I realized I had grown a substantial amount of connections, friends, and listeners, so decided to release music.

This development of his identity as someone with the symbolic and cultural power to define the meanings and future of the genre happened alongside his own mobile lifestyle as a listener and scene participant:

> Many ambient fans nowadays come from the early sounds of Brian Eno, Steve Roach, Harold Budd, Vangelis, Tangerine Dream etc, but it seems like I did it backwards, tracing the roots of modern-day sounds back to its influences and roots. . . . I visited the island of Ibiza for seven years straight from the age of sixteen, when trance music was at (some would say) the height of its time. I was lucky enough to not only experience the stereotypical hedonistic clubbing side, but also the after-parties, chill-out beach parties, and the infamous Café Del Mar and Cafe Mambo. I didn't know what I was getting into by attending these parties, but it

> undoubtedly had a massive impact on me. I'll also remember falling in love with some of the smaller chill-out bars on the island and one in particular called 'Ancient People' in Playa d'en Bossa. It's now a gym as part of an apartment complex last time I visited, but back then, it was packed full of cushions, incense, great drinks and amazing ambient music.

In part, Ryan's account tells something of the formative experiences that shaped the maturation and consolidation of his musical tastes. It also tells us something about the interconnectedness of listening, mobile music genres, and the role of place in articulating musical cultures. The 1990s and 2000s were an era where electronic music discovered the 'chill out' genre, with the 'infamous' cafes Ryan mentioned also having their own label and compilations to capitalize on the business of chill. But then, this is some way from contemporary progressive ambient musical forms. The development of the ASIP label is also linked to Ryan's own mobility experiences and the musical cultures he has become associated with. He originally started the label in the UK, but in the early period of the label it was more about online mixes and digital releases. Once again, geographic place in this digital context isn't so relevant. And, when he started to release vinyl it was simply sold online – due to the strength of his established following – rather than in physical stores. The impact of his move to Portland around this time, however, was significant:

> I then moved to Portland, USA and with that my next two vinyl releases. They have an amazing music community up there so I was able to make some great friends and get the record into some local record shops, purely by knowing the guys behind the counter or just walking in and talking to people. Despite all the tools at hand today, there's nothing more effective than being around

people who enjoy and support the same type of music. They have several record shops, regular ambient nights, radio shows, and dedicated parties for the style of music I love. Portland was an amazing home for the label due to the community there, and I wish that I had done more to host nights, maybe even bring some artists over. I imagine the label doing very well if I had stayed.

In 2016, Ryan moved to Los Angeles for his work, again taking the label with him. Managing an independent ambient label from Los Angeles seems kind of impossible given what the city is renowned for: movies, tourism, rock music and a huge geographic scale. According to Ryan, it is much harder to push the label forward in the 'physical' or 'real-life' world, as he calls it. Online business is already established and not a problem for the label, the virtual scenes of ambient music are strongly interconnected. As Ryan says of the online community: 'I've definitely made some friends which I can call a community. It's a great bunch of people who are all in it for the same reason. I think that's what's good about ambient music – no-one's going to get famous doing it, so everyone does it to have a good time.' Nevertheless, the geographic and economic make-up of Los Angeles is highly problematic for establishing the footing of the label in the city, including placing vinyl in stores, generating gigs and being able to be present in important scenes when the city is so large:

There's little to no ambient scene, record shops are far spread across the city, as are many of the shows that are put on. So *ASIP* has reverted to more of an online presence again, but I hope to change that as I get to know LA a little better. Luckily I've made some good friends over the years who still take my records, and help me get them out there in some small shops, no matter where I'm based.

The label 100% Silk is a prominent electronic and dance music label that is also based in Los Angeles, a city not renowned for championing those genres. The label is run by partners Amanda and Britt Brown. Though Los Angeles is more renowned as a centre for the corporate music and 'big culture' business, underground and creative scenes develop and flourish along the west coast of America, in areas like food, art, music, theatre, lifestyle and self-development, and alternative leisure. In part, the success of the city as an incubator for global cultural industries and the extreme wealth within parts of it may also create conditions for the flourishing of an alternative class of cultural and creative workers. Their first label, Not Not Fun Records, was launched in 2004 and grew as a type of 'art project', according to Amanda:

> we were very locally conscious. There were a lot of things going on here in LA that were very exciting. There were amazing bands, there were great underground venues, basically, under the umbrella of the Smell, which was a huge meeting place for all different types of weird outside music from punk, to drone, to noise and other types of experimental music. And we just wanted to be within that community making music, supporting music, being with artists, being artists ourselves. Not Not Fun was born out of what we thought was a necessity of the neighbourhood.

Whilst Not Not Fun was born to be connected locally, and to release locally inspired and initiated sounds, Amanda wanted to start a label 'with as much outreach as possible', one that creates a cultural sense in Los Angeles and beyond of being a place where people who were previously making punk, drone, noise, experimental music might be able to move in more electronic directions to 'give them a new place to make music; give them a new place to be heard'.

As Amanda says, 'Daniel Martin McCormick, who was my friend and was in Mi Ami (another project of his) and had also a soul project called Sex Worker, had told me that he'd been making these demos under the name *ITAL* and he was very excited about them and didn't know quite what to do with them. And I just was like, I will start the label, you'll be the first release, and we will go from there'.

When Dominik asked Amanda about running the label from Los Angeles, the first thing she raised is the relative lack of community there. She identified European centres as places where electronic genres are highly consolidated, and there is a strong and identifiable fan base and well-articulated channels for performances and record sales. In Los Angeles, the history of clubs is not the same, and the music appears to mean something different compared to Berlin, where hedonistic engagement with music and celebratory dance cultures are embraced by locals and visitors alike. Amanda's comments are worth quoting at some length here, as they allow us to see how matters of culture intersect with scenes and also city infrastructures:

> Club culture is not the same at all. In LA, what I find to be difficult to manoeuvre around is the segregation. There are certain spaces you can go to make music and play music. In that space you find the art kids. You won't find the appreciators of the artistry of electronic music. Those people don't necessarily want to dance. They don't necessarily want to participate. But they want to be there in a very heady academic way. They have a relationship to collecting that music, and they have a relationship to being in that scene, but it's not a club atmosphere. And it's very hard to infuse that with what is going on in West Hollywood in the exciting

FIGURE 4.7 ***Amanda Brown, co-owner of LA-based label 100% Silk. Photo by Noel David Taylor.***

nightlife of gay clubs or what is going on in vibrant latinx clubs, or amazing black clubs. So you don't get that integration that you get in Berlin where everyone is surrendering and releasing to what club life is. It is an artistic underground art form in Los Angeles. Every once in a while there will be a big show with a lot of people, and they've all come to dance and that's a rarity. Club Ronda was very good at doing that. It was good at bringing together different scenes and different people and providing an

atmosphere of ‘why stand with your arms folded, we’re here to dance?’.

Steve Mizek, who runs the labels Argot and Tasteful Nudes in Chicago, also finds it difficult to build momentum in that scene, concluding in a symptomatic way:

> Although America has been the birthplace of a lot of dance music, the cultural support for dance music is relatively small . . . There are a million things in Chicago that you can do at any given time and there are only 200 or 300 people who care about any of them. Let’s say twenty are sick, thirty have other plans, another fifty of them decide to go to a different club that night. You are left with 200 people and then fifty people are broke that week. Then you are at 150 people. And then some of them decide they are going to smoke a bong before they go to Smart Bar and are then glued to the couch.

Alongside a mix of apathy, shifting age participation patterns and a general saturation of leisure possibilities, he puts the difficulties down to establishing a geographic base for the label in a country where the scale and type of urban development is generally characterized by urban sprawl alongside great inequalities that are reflected in the urban landscape and which make scene development very difficult:

> There are a lot of people across the country who have a lot of great support and interest in this music, but given the geographic size of the US and just the nature of our musical climate here, it’s just that you can’t get really get all the people at one place or one time, except for once or twice a year for a festival in order to actually make something of that support. . . . I would say if I

would have run this label in Berlin or some German city I could probably do much better.

Outliers: being peripheral

While the position of cities such as Chicago is not considered what it once was, they remain active enough to influence international scenes and maintain a 'focal' position within the translocal network. In this sense they are apparently better off than other locations that can neither mobilize myths of past glory nor count on current world-class assets. On the other hand, you can symbolically capitalize on the novelty effect and underdog outsiderdom of being an 'outlier' in the translocal network, especially when rooted in an urban ecology that possesses some of the necessary affordances. Furthermore, being geographically isolated is a relative phenomenon. We may think in this respect about such East European cities as Bucharest, Tbilisi, Warsaw or Moscow, or Brisbane in Australia. While being geographically more remote from the metropolitan centres does not necessarily mean being beyond the radar, it does mean a degree of isolation from the intensity of scene hotbeds.

Rafal Grobel, who in 2015 ran the label S1 Warsaw in Poland, told us how being away from the perceived 'centre' of musical action creates challenges as well as opportunities. For labels geographically separated from what we might call the iconic core of genre activity – and for many genres of cutting-edge electronic music this is for the large part the cities of London and Berlin – one cannot simply reproduce music that happens in the centre, or develop stylistic clones that imitate current trends. One responds to what is happening in the metropolitan centre, but must develop an original angle that

sonically and stylistically goes beyond it. A crucial accompanying trope is that of locality, perhaps we might work with the term *terroir* usually reserved for referring to the very local conditions that structure the taste of wine. The *terroir* idea might be implied in the question Dominik asked Rafal below. In his answer, which ends on a note that is rather deeply poetic, we can see the situation the S1 Warsaw label faced being away from the heart of things, and the difficult – almost 'tragic' – position it finds itself in:

Dominik: Is local rootedness very important for the identity of the label?

Rafal: I think so. If I moved to Berlin, I wouldn't keep the label. Maybe I'd do a new label based in Berlin, like thousands of other labels here. But it's something else. It would probably be releasing different people. It would be about different vibes. My attitude would change because I would be in the scene with the community. So it would be a different approach. What I'm approaching in Warsaw is to expose something that hasn't been exposed yet. So in a way, it's a tragic situation because you have to be there to do that thing with all the consequences. Maybe tragic is saying too much because. . . . It is an advantage as well. It's like, it's a risk, or a journey.

Rafal contrasts running the label from Warsaw and Berlin. His way of putting it is telling: the label wouldn't work from Berlin. This is interesting, since we might assume that running it from Berlin, with all the opportunities it offers, might be easier. If he were running it from Berlin, he would 'be in the scene with the community' and even with 'thousands of other labels' in Berlin he would build something new. Working the label from Warsaw feels for him a bit out of time, for he is showcasing music that hasn't yet been widely

appreciated in that context, compared to the metropolitan artistic centre of Berlin. Yet Poland is itself often being lauded as being at the front of a significant wave of creativity in electronic music. For example, it hosts the renowned Unsound Festival in Krakow. Rafal, whose day job at that time was running a graphic design studio, told us that 'what happened was, with my day job, and some other activities I do, I started to work with some hip-hop labels in Poland, which you have to know is a major force in terms of pop culture in Poland. We're talking like millions of views'. Part of this meant working with the Boiler Room gigs, a series of sponsored gigs that are diffused live online and have become hugely popular ways of connecting scenes translocally and this connection provided some financial resources for his own label. However, in this extract from our discussion, Rafal reiterated to us squarely what kind of situation he faces building the label from Poland:

> I worked with Boiler Room in Poland as well. I hosted all the Boiler Room gigs. I am in between the artists and this huge machine, this whole thing that comes with the money. We want to wisely use the money to create better quality; something that's impossible to do in Poland, let's be honest. *We're beyond the radar. We're not in Berlin. We're not in London. We're not taking part in all this.* I can tell listening to promoters or label owners from Poland who move to Berlin, it's a huge gap (italics added for emphasis).

The quote is pretty starkly critical of the difficulties Rafal faces being away from the center of the scenes that really matter for success and growth of the music his label releases. In his case, proximity to genre scenes – the centre of networks and connections – has implications for the label. But, would proximity, or lack of it, be so important for a different label? In Chapter 2 of this book, we

introduced Stephen Bishop, label owner at Opal Tapes and Black Opal. On the face of it, Stephen's situation is even more challenging. Stephen started his label in Redcar, a small town in north-east England, though he now runs it from Newcastle-upon-Tyne. In an interview with Stephen published on the site *self-titled Mag*, a magazine and website covering stories on underground music in the UK, Europe and beyond, Stephen's labels were 'label of the month'. The story characterizes the music Opal Tapes releases as sitting somewhere between 'headphones and clubs'. The music the label releases takes listeners well beyond standard house and techno genres labels in big cities produce. In the interview Stephen describes the first few releases on the label like this: *Tuff Sherm* & *PMM*, The Pagan Cinema (OPAL001), 'The first release for Opal Tapes. A tweaked collision of electro-noir and body-pop rhythm', and *Huerco S.*, Untitled, OPAL003, 'Dystopic house music. Worn at the edges, warmed throughout. Sort of comfortably toxic sounding. One of my favorite things the label has been involved with'. The interview begins with a curious, but intriguing quote: '"I dance to some of the music that is released on Opal Tapes," says label founder Stephen Bishop, "but I dance in the kitchen"' (self-titledmag.com). This begs the question: can an independent label work, let alone survive, when it is located away from the usually crucial infrastructure of clubs, stores, producer networks, and gigs?

The labels Opal Tapes and Black Opal help us begin to address this question. Of growing up in Redcar, Stephen tells self-titledmag.com that:

> I've been studying and working in Teesside for six years. Redcar, where I'm from, is just a small seaside suburbia with red brick estates and a town centre. Typical Labour-voting north-eastern town really, just a bit more depressed than usual. Influences from

> the area come from the heavy industry, certainly. My childhood bedroom looked onto the horseracing course in Redcar, which was backed by semi-detached houses with the background of 200-metre-tall cooling towers and chimneys with fire and steam. I would enjoy taping the radio and doing skits with my sister.

At the time Ian interviewed Stephen, he was living in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, 'because I'm in love with a woman who lives here'. Stephen goes on:

> Opal could be run from anywhere else I'm sure but the working relationships I have in the UK and primarily in the north-east are important to me and we mutually benefit from continuing them. I'm not sure I know who the audience is? There are people who are obviously completist collectors and I love them because I am [one] too. There are heads who appreciate the hardware centric, performative view the musicians on the label follow and who dig on tapes and records. It's awesome to see people from every continent engaging in the music and I get demo submissions from all corners so the online presence the label has seems to be working. Most of the physical media sells to Europe but hopefully in future new distribution will help to make the physical releases cheaper and more accessible to people outside of Europe.

Stephen's comment that 'Opal could be run from anywhere' is telling. Acknowledging that he has already built good networks in the north-east and that the label works efficiently because of that, the music Stephen's label releases is not made for big clubs or parties. Nor does the labels's music, especially the material released on Opal Tapes, need to find particularly close affinity with current trends. Stephen tells us his audience is dispersed and that he gets demo

submissions coming from 'all corners' but he admits that physical records go mostly to Europe. Lawrence English runs the renowned Room40 label from Brisbane, Australia. Similarly, his releases are not made for clubs, or parties. In an interview in FACT Magazine from 2014, English is described as one of the 'modern masters' of ambient. Like Opal, Room40 pursues a strongly artistic agenda that finds and connects audiences translocally, something of course possible now with the internet and big international online distributors like Boomkat or Juno. Lawrence tells FACT that he wants to do things 'that have meaning', which we take to unmistakenly mean a strong privileging of an artist and artistic driven agenda for the label. The story in FACT Magazine goes on: 'Even though he lives out in Brisbane, English has been hovering around the heart of the experimental music scene for many years both as an artist and as the boss of world-class avant garde outpost Room40. He's (...) captured a series of mind-bending field recordings that have given him a well deserved notoriety. From using a hydrophone to pick up the sound of motor boats and rare sea creatures to braving death in Antarctica's perilous blizzards, English has a resolve that's rarely found in an era of laziness and instant gratification.' Described as such, one can imagine that the music released on Room40 is clearly not made for clubs, nor is it tailored for the 'new releases' section of record stores where rapidly changing electronic music scenes and sonic fashions mutually influence one another. Consequently, the label does not rely on the infrastructures and economic strategy that these 'club and gig' labels work on. Like Opal, audiences are dispersed and find one another online, through media, blogs and the label's own advertising. The audience is built up through a series of gigs, often organized through the musical programme English curated at the Institute of Modern Art in Brisbane. The feeling is more like an

art scene than a party scene. While the music is visceral and forceful, the feeling is cerebral and hence Lawrence tells us that part of his work is about opening up the audience to new music appreciations, expanding the possibilities of aesthetic language though music:

> I think all music can affect people. It's merely a matter of trying to find ways in which people can approach the work, to experience it and to understand what it does to them. I'd like to think, particularly through some of our live performance series, we've opened up those portals through which people can come to the work. I think there are always multiple audiences and within those audiences multiple ways in which people choose to have the work inhabit their lives. There's no singularity in sound.

A rather extreme example of a label being relatively separated from networked connectivities is NEN Records from Moscow, Russia. Moscow is a huge city of around 12 million people. On the basis of these figures, one would expect it to support a large number of independent scenes and electronic music labels. This is, however, not the case, pointing to the difficulties labels within Moscow may be facing while trying to get recognized in Russia and outside the country within other scene centres. The city nevertheless has a variety of small labels. For example, NEN Records is a label collective established by Ivan Napreenko, and now run in collaboration with Sal Solaris and Konstantin Mezer. NEN says it releases 'music with a displaced center of gravity, online and on tapes', firmly aligned with genres of post-industrial electronic music. Ivan told Ian that the label tries 'not to limit ourselves to any national scenes or genre. On the contrary my idea was to make a very "interscene" label, transcending the limits of genres. Something common to our releases should be some weirdness, an absence of comfort in sound'.

Having released music before on other labels, Ivan found he and his colleagues 'were really exhausted by self-promotion. So we've decided to make "a place" from were we can hold speech by ourselves, without depending on anyone. And to give a place to others, soul mates, to hold their speech.' Asked whether running the label from Moscow is challenging, Ivan confirms the difficulty they face:

> Well, as musicians we feel ourselves separated from European scene. It's a bit annoying, as we make some stuff that resonates with global trends, but it is not only question of musical affinity, but also a matter of wing-ding, get-together, possibility of easy participating in same festival; so here borders and distances matter. I know it sounds like underestimated artist syndrome, but still . . . the Russian scene is objectively small. This separation affects the label, I guess, too. As it is difficult to involve foreign musicians.

NEN releases on cassette tape and also via digital formats. Ivan believes physical musical releases have a productive 'fetish quality' that makes them more than merely 'sources of sound', though vinyl is too expensive for the label and Russia has no pressing plants anyway. Thus, NEN send their master recording files to the firm GoTape in St Petersburg, which subsequently undertakes physical production of the releases. He describes the process: 'we send them via email master files, mastered for production here, in Moscow. And our label residents send us their recordings – also via email, wherever they've recorded it. This is the production chain.' Releases are distributed by a mail-order company called Radionoise in Russia, and according to Ivan, 'NEN also distribute via BandCamp, at gigs and directly in Moscow and Rostov-on-Don for those who contact us directly via Facebook, VK.com or email. No stores at the moment, but we have plans to introduce our stuff to a small shop at a friendly club.'

For running NEN, borders and distances matter. Not only do they feel distanced musically from other relevant scenes, but practical barriers are significant and these relate directly to lack of proximity to cognate scenes and the cultural density of the city in terms of independent music-making. In turn, these are compounded by the relative cultural and economic isolation of Moscow. For one, these problems make cassette production and mailing costs of the physical product very high, Ivan says. Translocal connections become more problematic to establish as political-economic barriers, which inhibit easy trade or distribution of physical products, meaning links with labels outside Russia are difficult to build. Cooperative exchanges and market-sharing with other labels can occur, though this is relatively small-scale. For example, NEN are in touch with like-minded labels who have their own established distribution networks and through these they directly exchange their releases for another's, which Ivan says 'really helps in promotion' of the label outside the immediate environs and networks of Moscow. Generally, however, the economic impacts of being outside key production circles and also outside vibrant cognate scenes are highly significant. Here, the lack of proximity and density of similar independent labels means a lack of economic scale to generate returns; the lack of density makes growth within the scene difficult, which in turn means the label currently struggles to make an aesthetic or scene impact, as Ivan's account suggests:

> . . . in practice it is non-profitable, because we make tapes, not CDs. For tapes those exchanges are non-profitable; principal costs are higher than for CDs, and our partner Zhelezobeton Distribution should put a price for exchanged tapes that can't attract listeners. Anyway, we cannot change the situation, as we have no capacities to start our own distribution.

Conclusion

Sociological studies of place tell us that social places, as destinations and also as historically contingent social spaces, are partly constructed from myth and history, and partly from the here and now immediacy of money, accommodation, architectural spaces, institutional contacts, technological systems, food and drink and convenience, etc. For labels we have worked with, there is not one absolutely best type of 'label-friendly' space or 'ecology'. Some labels need and thrive on the energetic buzz provided in cities like Berlin or London where large populations mean bigger audiences, more buyers, and more venue options. Other labels can survive and build a reputation for themselves outside of the hubbub of the hyped cities and entertainment districts. Partly, this depends on labels' economic and symbolic approaches and strategies as we discussed them in chapter two and three, but it partly also relates to specific affordances of the cities and places themselves and their developmental dynamic over time.

It should be clear by now that music is not produced and consumed haphazardly by isolated individuals who submit to a radical sense of aesthetic incommensurability of works. On the whole even highly individualistic independent musical milieus worth their name form tight taste communities separating themselves from what they perceive as 'tasteless' mass society or bland entertainment. That's an expression of a more general sociological recognition that 'human life is collective life; action is interaction; and social actors are always-already enmeshed in relations with others' (Crossley 2015: 14). Sometimes we forget about it, overwhelmed by the fashionable narratives of lone geniuses or by the aura of the musical product or performance itself. At other

times, this sociological recognition is taken for granted and not sufficiently acknowledged. Often times, it is overshadowed by the individualist theories of musical 'stars' and iconic brands and their 'illustrious' path to greatness. Perhaps not infrequently, we willingly submit to a kind of obliviousness of simple individualism because we don't want to dispel the 'magic' of the moment or adulterate the aesthetic product with mundane stories of its creation. Yet we should be wary of succumbing to this temptation. There are at least two good reasons for that.

First, as we mentioned in the Introduction, Wassily Kandinsky tried to expand our understanding or 'theory' of art. He insisted that the human experience of aesthetic phenomena is not conditioned by arbitrary schemes but by complex affordances of these phenomena and their settings. To comprehend it, we need to take seriously the task of respective analysis, which – as he realized – seemed 'sacrilegious' to many people involved with art and cultural and aesthetic production more generally. Art, especially its 'pure' manifestations, should be taken on its own terms. But Kandinsky was undeterred and tried to show that this seemingly humble approach conceals a kind of idealistic hubris. He wrote: 'The general viewpoint of our day, that it would be dangerous to "dissect" art since such dissection would inevitably lead to art's abolition, originated in an ignorant under-evaluation of these elements thus laid bare in their primary strength' (Kandinsky 2017: 17). Returning to our realization that music doesn't simply speak for itself, we could say – *mutatis mutandis* – that musical production and reception mediated by labels is a field that needs to be understood as a complex assemblage of humans, non-humans and settings, each of which is characterized by specific affordances. In this chapter we addressed the role of the broadest, yet perhaps most intuitively graspable context – the city and its unique urban spaces.

This leads us to putting emphasis on the second reason why we should not reduce the musical creativity to solitary acts of individuals and frame it instead in sociological ways. Certain forms of cultural production thrive on communal rituals and social forms of inspirations more than others. The labels we have observed draw a great part of their emotional energy and aesthetic drive from the urban synergies and group dynamics inherent to underground *club scenes*. Labels express specific taste positions, which are attributes of taste communities rather than singular statements. For this reason, we could also say that labels express more generally the stances towards cultural production as a social practice. They not only crystallize a style that we venerate as listeners or emulate as producers, but also exemplify specific work integrity. This can take various forms. We find that one such form manifests itself not only in devotion to a specific genre but also as devotion to one's local environment that should be represented more broadly. The Zenker brothers verbalize this sentiment in the way that summarizes certain key cultural ambiguities we touched upon in this chapter: 'We stay in Munich because we want to contribute something (here). A lot of people left their cities and they moved to Berlin because it was affordable, it was cheap, there was space. But a lot of other cities, especially in Germany, suffered from that.'

Again, one of the main messages we try to convey in this chapter is that the meaning of these stances and choices is relationally established and highly context specific. Sceptics might argue that although Munich is not to underground music what Berlin is, it is nevertheless a city of many social and cultural advantages, which Dario and Marco Zenker admitted to us too. For some artists moving to Berlin or London is a no-brainer, despite the challenges, because their home towns offer none of the community support they need, or

they cannot practise their art freely at all for social or political reasons. And although it is technically true that – as Alan McGee, founder of iconic indie label Creation, writes in his book *Creation Stories: Riots, Raves and Running a Record Label* (2013) – 'these days technology means I can run a record label from a BlackBerry in rural Wales, or on the beach in Goa if I prefer', it is not the case for all kinds of music production, nor for those starting out. As we have tried to show, having a pre-established name greatly helps. Moreover, there's an urban clustering effect in underground dance music scenes partially resembling art or fashion, although for a different set of socio-economic reasons. The notion of 'urban ecology' allows us to understand this differentiating dynamic and its relational ambiguities, and to reveal both the inspiring features of 'bohemian cartography' and the counter-productive dangers of gentrification; the elective affinities that give rise to productive co-locality of sites and venues, and detrimental side-effects of centripetal social mobility; the collective effervescence of cosmopolitan clubs and the 'gravitational pull' of metropolitan centres; the iconic aura of 'mythical' places and disparities of translocal networks. Above all, it enables us to see that real cities and actual sites still matter, and that without them it would be hard to imagine the existence of all those electronic sounds.

Epilogue

Writing independent culture: A short note on method

The peculiar abstraction

Reflecting on his practice as a researcher of value creation in the metropolitan context, Georg Simmel (2008: 478) wrote:

> 'Sociology belongs in the type of sciences whose special character consists not in the fact that their object belongs with others under a higher order of generalization (like classical philology, or optics and acoustics), but rather in that it brings a whole realm of objects under a particular point of view. Not its object but its manner of contemplation, the peculiar abstraction which it performs, differentiates it from the other historico-social sciences'.

This is a useful perspective. It illuminates the general stance that we have adopted and helps explain why this book works the way it does. First, Simmel's observation allows us to quickly point out what our analysis did *not* attempt to do – namely, it was not designed to be a musicological study of electronic music or

electronic music scenes, nor is it to be seen as an in-depth explanation of the composing and manufacturing processes in contemporary music. Rather, by focusing on the record production and institutional and urban ties of the independent labels in electronic music, we explored what meanings inspire, facilitate, permeate, frame and represent certain fields of musical production like techno, house and ambient as socio-cultural phenomena.

Second, the way we performed the analysis for this book, the manner in which we approached our topic, has been conceived of in the spirit of holistic, relational analysis of things that Simmel had in mind. But it was a Simmelian exercise in sociological analysis also in another key, namely we have also observed that meaning-making practices are predicated upon the 'reciprocal influencing' of materials and discourses, objects and narratives, places and myths, sites and souls. Simmel, a shrewd observer of modern metropolitan condition in Berlin of the *fin de siècle* era, was perfectly positioned to realize that although relative, social things do not become meaningful in an arbitrary way (Simmel 2008: 384). What he saw as a flawed conception of arbitrary value-creation had been imported to cultural scholarship, especially through a misrepresentation of French structuralism, and subsequently perpetuated in academia by influential philosophies of language and mind disconnected from the practical understanding of embodied and emplaced practices of everyday life. Richard Sennett, whom we cited at various points in this book, points out in his volume *The Craftsman* that he spotted this problem when he reflected on the fact that his great university teacher, Hannah Arendt, did not equip him with the conceptual tools necessary to grasp the complexity of many modern social phenomena, for example related to urban planning or material culture.

We felt similar dissatisfaction, theoretically and methodologically, with the standard apparatus of cultural sociology, the discipline in which we were originally trained. In the past, both of us contributed in separate but related ways to developing a more materially and affectively conscious analysis of meaning-making and value-creation. In the book *Understanding Material Culture* (Woodward 2007) as well as in articles that preceded and followed it (Woodward 2001, 2003, 2012), Ian presented an outline of such a cultural sociology in a new key. Starting with an adaptation of key ideas from the consumption anthropology of Daniel Miller, and applying this framework in the domains of cultural consumption and urban cosmopolitanism, he explored ethical practices of cultural openness as they manifest in current debates on cosmopolitanism. Hitherto, in the field of consumption studies, most sociological analysis had been directed by accounts that focused on *status* as if it was unconnected to objectual practices, or by critical accounts which overlooked the complexities of meaning-making in consumer-object relations. The main idea here is to move from a discursive and cognitivist framing to a materially and spatially embedded account of how openness is afforded by particular urban and material arrangements.

Working in the fields of cultural sociology and urban design, Dominik has been developing a conception of irreducibility of meaning to language, linking it to notions of relationality and materiality of signification, and focusing empirically on the entwinement of symbolic realities and material space, especially in Berlin (Bartmański 2011, 2012; 2017; Bartmański and Fuller 2018). Partially drawing on radical constructivist notions of 'cultural landscape' (Reed 2011) but also moving beyond it (Bartmański and Binder 2015), this body of research invited a combination of interpretation of discursive formations with ethnographic investigation of sensory formations. In this context, such

categories of sociological analysis of meaning as 'setting' and 'affordance' (e.g. McDonnell 2010), 'space' (Löw 2000) and 'emergence' (e.g. Porpora 2015) have become central, and the roles of objects and places as well as human embodied experiences of these realities have been reasserted as crucial. This conceptual move began originally with the idea of 'iconic power' designed to 'make the study of material life more cultural' (Bartmański and Alexander 2012: 1) but evolved towards other, more complex, understandings of iconicity and signification, especially as recast in anthropological (Keane 2005) and archaeological (Hodder 2012; Feldman 2014) critiques of structuralist approaches to meaning. In short, the need for a reverse emphasis, i.e. *to make the study of culture more material* has become both obvious and urgent.

This is, however, not to call for a new 'materialism' but for an aesthetically conscious recognition of embodied, objectual, and emplaced valences of meaning-making. In philosophical terms this means an invitation to think of ideality and materiality together, 'as fundamentally connected and incapable of each being what it is without the other to direct and support it' (Grosz 2017: 12). In terms of sociological methodology, this means both (1) a need for more phenomenological and affectively calibrated reading of extant and elicited discursive data (Pugh 2013), and (2) transcending the strict methodologies based on linguistic constructionism as sociologically untenable (Elder-Vass 2012). The necessity of this shift has to do with the traditionally excessive reliance of cultural sociology on discursive data, either in the form of narrow focus on mainstream media analysis or reductive use of interviews (Jerolmack and Khan 2014). Curiously, in-depth interviews are largely absent in the classic studies of so-called structural hermeneutics that tries to model culture 'as text', and ethnography is often absent in the classic studies based on interviews that aims to model culture as 'toolkit'. This has

consequences for the validity of certain claims and types of analysis, as will be discussed below. Taking affect, materiality, the senses and phenomenology seriously calls for a joint use of all these methodologies to approximate better different modalities of meaning making. Thus, discourse remains a central empirical interface but it is not treated as the matrix of culture. As Elder-Vass (2012: 263) demonstrated, 'language develops in a process of interaction between social forces and our experience of the world, in which both play an important role'. This may sound perfectly intuitive and incontrovertible, but the intellectual (iconic) power of linguistic constructionism, structuralism and related agendas of social science overshadowed this key insight in the second half of the twentieth century. Today a variety of 'turns' set social studies in new motion – the material, visual, performative, iconic, etc. All have their place and use, although – again – in our view holistic approaches using mixed methods seem most promising. Focusing on assemblages of humans and non-humans, object-setting nexus, and place-specific cultural practices strikes us as important. Especially in the study of things and spaces deemed significant for specific forms of value-creation, the idea of 'cultural icon' as a sensory symbol with a restricted degree of arbitrary ascription of social meaning proved to be a key instantiation of materially motivated, embodied and emplaced meaning-making (Bartmański and Binder 2015; Bartmański 2016 and 2017).

Fusing our partially converging views on cultural research, we developed a new treatment of the topic of vinyl record, especially in the context of its revival in the age of digital reproduction (Bartmański and Woodward 2013 and 2015). Approached as an iconic cultural object, the analysis of vinyl allowed – inter alia – to expose the limitations and inadequacies of the classical and still influential

concepts, such as Walter Benjamin's notion of 'aura' and its alleged disappearance in the age of mechanical reproduction. While flawed in this original incarnation, we believe that 'aura' is an important notion that needs to be reinterpreted and paired with the relational notion of affordance for purposes of contemporary cultural studies. For one thing, it can be used as a special, complex variation on such classical sociological themes as charisma or fetish. The work on vinyl also allowed us to frame the analogue record as an object whose cultural power was linked to practices and ideals which circulate amongst, within and across production and consumption communities. Thus, the work did not aim to be an exhaustive study of vinyl as consumer object, nor to systematically map types of user communities. Nor was it an attempt to map out a comprehensive or general theory of materiality. Rather, working with ideas about entanglements and affordances, we believed that the imbricated set of socio-material contexts was important in understanding vinyl as a meaningful cultural icon. Hence we showed how myths, discourses and practices coalesce and unite in particular, non-arbitrary ways to build a plurality of consistent cultural ways of understanding, using and circulating vinyl.

Finally, investigating the meanings of analogue media in the digital era – in *Vinyl* and in the present book – has allowed us to showcase the indispensable value of combining observational studies of settings and practices with narrative interviews with practitioners. The wealth of meaning emerging out of such a methodological combination is simply unattainable to a desk researcher and can only be harnessed after prolonged exposure to the field. Trying to reconstruct any culture purely from general codes that supposedly govern all meaningful actions fails to account for contextual variability of value attribution and malleability of 'culture in action'. In short, as cultural analysts, not

only do we have to visually document the field and elicit accounts of the participants in a given cultural phenomenon, but we also need to become participant observers who go on to *live* the reality we write about, at least for some time. It is this engagement that later helps adjudicate which theoretically guided inferences drawn from interviews and media data are plausible, and this is precisely a key 'humanistic' value of scholarship in our 'post-human' heavily mediated world. The landscape of sensory values is rarely, if ever exhaustively expressed through language or visual communication that have hitherto been epistemologically privileged in research. As David Howes (2005: 3) writes: 'it is practiced and experienced (and sometimes challenged), by humans as culture bearers. The sensory order, in fact, is not just something one sees or hears about; it is something one lives.' It is for this reason that ethnographic immersion and first-hand observation of 'affordances in action' remains highly significant to cultural research.

One problem with such a combination of methods is, however, that it can indeed be hard to precisely establish 'the extent to which (we) base claims about these relational material affordances on the physical properties themselves, or what (we) learned from informants about how physical properties shape experience of music' (Bartram 2015: 351). Our critics cautioned that these are not complimentary sources of evidence, and suggested that sociologists evade 'reading' the affordances in and of themselves and make evidentiary reasoning explicit. While we generally concur, it is also the case that any act of adjudicating between 'sources' is a topic-specific *interpretive* process that is not accountable only to disciplinary standards of rigour but also relative to place-specific research questions one wants to answer. And these vary greatly. Also, the task of 'weighing' the sources is not amenable to precise

measurement – interpretive ethnography of taste-making and value creation is simply not an exact science in this sense, nor does it need to be, because the meanings it tries to elucidate have emergent rather than additive quality. This is a key methodological insight from our research.

Furthermore, there is no one standard of material culture research applicable equally well to, say, histories of built environment and analysis of object-based aesthetic practices. These are very different domains generating different questions and challenges. We find that in our practice the selection and interpretation of interview data has been crucially guided by long-term ethnographic engagement with the field (2014-2019) and repeated consultations with the informants. In the present book the effort has been made to gather different kinds of relevant data and insights and weave them into the concept-oriented narrative, but it is also the case that access to all potentially relevant exact information in the field is sometimes simply unattainable. It is precisely in such cases that a place-bound and object-focused ethnographic observation that aims at reconstruction of lifeworlds and atmospheres proves helpful. As we wrote in the introductory chapters of this book, just because something seems ineffable does not mean we have no way of approximating its meaning. But what seems certain is that without experiential immersion in the events and spaces, we will not be able to approximate these key meanings at all. Many aforementioned approaches proved helpful in writing *Vinyl* as well as this book, but some new amendments and reflective tools were needed as ethnographic observation and interviewing have become both much more salient and more intensive in researching *Labels*. Therefore it is helpful to briefly outline some of the ways in which we have proceeded with this project.

Writing about independent labels

Just like there are various genres in music, we have different production styles and specific vocabularies in which to write about the world. Each approach has its own pros and cons, advantages and liabilities. It is our self-reflexivity about the adopted genre of expression and its ramifications that furnishes a crucial dimension of the quality of what we do as writers. Each writing is inevitably an act of 'translation' or a two-way transference between human mental states (emotions and thoughts), and the interpretive, communicative and aesthetic functions of language (words and concepts). It is a translation of embodied 'internal' states of existence into a symbolic 'external' code of communication that in turn becomes an integral part of our existence. The two spheres penetrate each other, the boundaries are not razor-sharp. Therefore this 'translation' or transference, the act of grafting the seeds of feeling and thinking onto language, is always tricky, or – to bring Lucy's insight discussed in this study – it is never culturally 'innocent'. Can we do full justice to the lifeworld we seek to render in words? What constitutes an 'adequate translation' in the first place? There are many other well-established but only partially resolved questions of self-reflexivity and interpretation in qualitative research. The list is long and there is neither space nor need to address here all potentially important issues. Some of them, however, proved significant in the project we have undertaken.

First, as we have already mentioned, a degree of intimate familiarity with the fields at hand is necessary, not optional. 'Decoding' the spaces as well as understanding the nuances of the recorded interviews and media texts is not possible without years of scene-participation and hundreds of hours of off-record conversations, ongoing consulting of

record databases like Discogs, and the long-term following of blogs, news outlets and individual content creators. This process can hardly be documented fully in a book of this kind, but it forms the background for much of the thinking that went into the writing process. Similarly, participant observation matters a great deal. Visits to studios, clubs and record stores as well as participation in pre-release listening sessions for the press, and record release parties – all such activities and events have been informative. Over years, they create a 'thick' and familiar context of meaning in which more formal interviews and acts of 'focused ethnography' happen (Knoblauch 2005). This approach denotes short-term but intensive research activities in specific settings that are well known to the researcher, and therefore do not require lengthy familiarization undertaken 'from scratch'. What's perhaps most important here, however, is that instead of traditionally advocated analytic 'estrangement', a quest for recognizing forms of 'alterity' in familiar and similar stories comes to the fore. Familiarity, crucially, can mean privileged access, but it also means less of an interpersonal distance. To what extent this can be a problem is context-specific. Gaining access to certain spaces at specific times in company of relevant people is comparatively unique and therefore may offset subjective bias – it can simply be more important for ethnographic understanding of labels' work than potential 'subjectivization' of one's perception. For example, when Berghain's in-house imprint Ostgut Ton launched its sublabel A-Ton in 2016, the label managers organized the advance listening session of its first release for a very small circle of media representatives in which Dominik also took part. The test pressing of the LP was played at the famous club's main sound system, evaluated and discussed. Being invited to this somewhat 'formalized' event that approximated the unique practice of the label's release process, in the space known

mostly from party and concert contexts, was naturally exciting but it was also insightful as to how the music is selected, mastered, cut to vinyl and finally evaluated and discursively framed, both in the talks during the session as well as in the leaflet prepared for the occasion. In short, 'without an intimate understanding of context, even the best-intentioned interviewer can misunderstand the meaning of actors' words and accounts' (Jerolmack and Khan 2014: 184).

Second, a series of narrative interviews formed a central part of our understanding of the field and suggested the main narrative direction. The fragments of the interviews punctuate the storyline that was conceptually guided in a broad sense but its fashioning in words and paragraphs was always field-responsive. Importantly, in our approach to eliciting and interpreting interview data, we follow Alison Pugh's (2013) cultural sociological conception that construes the interviews not only as content-rich talk, but also as emotionally and metaphorically laden form, replete with cues, similes and tropes that form what she calls 'affective topography'. Since metaphors are integral to our understanding not only of the immanent structure of discourses (Lakoff and Johnson 2002) but also of the relation between linguistic signifiers and experiential referents, an effort was made to select the fragments of the interviews that could be indicative of this double value of talk.

Most of the forty interviews used in the book, some of which were conducted in many installments over several months, were prepared and conducted as semi-structured narrative conversations inspired by and made possible through the ethnographic engagement with the field between 2014 and 2019. Some of the key conversations would hardly be possible without prior, long-standing involvement with the scene in Berlin, and also a broader knowledge of the producers, labels and music-makers that translocally connect to this

scene (especially in the United States and the UK). This in turn made repeated meetings possible when needed. In a few instances, Dominik conducted several interviews three years apart in order to detect changes in interpretation of the scene. Some of the interviews were the result of new serendipitous encounters but even those were enabled by Dominik's scene familiarity or snow-ball technique rather than pure chance. Few things seem purely accidental in this musical world, and – like most such art worlds – it starts feeling rather 'small' after a while, even if it is nowadays perhaps bigger than ever. In short, while the interviews were treated as integral to the process of eliciting social meanings 'on the ground', they would be neither possible as research practice nor fully intelligible as a data source without numerous – prior and concurrent – instances of immersion and participant observation.

One of the key problems here was, of course, not only selecting from the rich stock of amassed interview data (nearly 100 hours of talk), but also deciding to what degree the gathered 'self-reports' of attitudes are plausible, and when and in what capacity we can make them parts of our evidentiary reasoning. In their insightful article 'Talk Is Cheap', Colin Jerolmack and Shamus Khan (2014: 181) identify it as a serious problem that 'contemporary sociology seems to tolerate scholarship that habitually infers situated behavior from verbal accounts'. Referring mostly to sociology of culture, they register the widespread 'attitudinal fallacy', i.e. erroneous inference of situated behaviour from verbal accounts, which overly psychologizes and individualizes meaning-making that, in fact, is always situational and context dependent. We tried to be mindful of that, and agree that ethnography provides a necessary – even if not always sufficient – corrective. Jerolmack and Khan (2014: 181) go on arguing that 'ethnography gives us more information about social

action than data gathered by other methods because it directly observes behavior'. But if the inference from interviews presents its own validity problem, the inference from observation presents its accuracy problem – the very fact of being present somewhere as a researcher interferes in a situation and can possibly 'distort' it. It is for this reason that interviews and observation should work in tandem. We have to 'situate' accounts in the context of repeatedly observed interactions. In order to facilitate this process, an ability and willingness to *live* a given lifeworld come in handy.

In this respect we have found some affinity with Les Back's way of approaching his sociological craft. He comments that 'sociology is a way of living and something that is practiced as a vocation, a way of holding to the world a paying critical attention to it' (Back 2007: 165). As an active prosumer connected to the scene (Dominik, based in Berlin) and visiting consumer observing the scene from a distance (Ian, based in Odense, Denmark), we have lived through the process of researching this book and tried to combine our distinctive perspectives. It transpires in two ways in the final product. First, we were committed to providing some personal and extra-artistic contexts to some of the stories we tell in the book, believing this helps readers gain extra insight into how we accessed participants and conducted the interviews, and also to show the degree to which many interviewees understood us as researchers, but also knowledgeable, trustworthy writers familiar with the scene. Sociologists researching music and other subcultural scenes, in particular, have recently engaged in debates about the value and role of friendship in qualitative research. For example, some of the respondents in our sample would constitute what Taylor (2011) calls the 'intimate insider', which in our context means friends or known acquaintances who will, to some degree, confide in us as researchers

about ‘what is really going on’. While not all of such data can be stated explicitly, it influences the presentation of the data that can.

Furthermore, in the book we have also tried to incorporate a reasonable number of what we think are the visually communicative photographs of the important places, people, and things which give at least some life to selected themes we discuss in the book. With a few exceptions, all pictures have been taken by Dominik, which means that we did not have to rely on stock imagery and which enabled us to control the use of the visual element fully, both as a way of seeing and as a vehicle of familiarity building. Here, we also endorse Back’s (2007) suggestion that listening happens with the eye as much as with the ears, and this philosophy has attuned us to embodied elements of the research process, and also the material-aesthetic surfaces that play an important role in understandings of independent music production as practice and lifeworld. Although space for photographs in books like ours is limited, we believe that even a modicum of such visual material plays a role of important basic ‘diagnostic tools’ (Duneier 1999: 342), especially when they display sites, places and materialities that contributed to forming what we call in this book ‘urban ecologies’.

To recapitulate, we have found that there is a considerable correspondence and consistency of thematic material to be found across the fields of talk, doing and experiencing that relate to our methods of interviewing, documenting, observing and participating in the scenes we describe. Again, although we acknowledge that interviewing can involve forms of ‘honorific’ talk that consolidate and reproduce platitudes about what people think they do and why they do it, for us even the presence of such more generic talk often reveals the metaphors and schemes people repeatedly mobilize to make sense of their own experiences and positions in the social and

cultural field of making independent music. For example, especially in the field of independent music production, historically formed notions of what being 'independent' entails are crucial way-finding points for guiding the label owners' current actions, forming a type of bedrock practical 'philosophy' that often channels the way business is done, and people dealt with.

Beyond this, we do not simply look to report text for text's sake, but use it to give storied flesh to the themes we have felt, and also to sociologically interpret the world. We cite the interviews relatively sparingly, opting for what struck us as most relevant rather than most 'predictive' descriptions, for the latter may often come across as banal, while the former retain insight and generate further questions. If Jerolmack and Khan (2014b) are more concerned with whether interviews can be predictive proxies for behavior, we shift our attention from prediction to plausibility of interpretation. Two aspects were conceived as important here: first, identifying the interviewed characters (with an exception of one that wished to remain anonymous to preserve the label's mystique); and second, letting them check *after* the interview whether the talk excerpts represent their views adequately. Here we followed Mitchell Duneier's ethnographic practice as described by him in *Sidewalk*. One of his practical notions, a variant of which we also identified in the sociology of Randall Collins (2000), proved adaptable to our goal of understanding the trade-offs and ambiguities of lifeworks of musicians and label owners, namely the notion of trying 'to grasp the connections between individual lives and the macro-forces at every turn, while acknowledging one's uncertainty when one cannot be sure how those forces come to bear on individual lives' (Duneier 1999: 344). Another positive aspect of 'unmasking' the interviewees is that 'disclosure weakens the researcher's gatekeeping power,

making it easier for our subjects to tell their stories independent of *our* consent' (Jerolmack and Murphy 2017: 8, emphasis in original).

We have also mentioned that the interviews aided not only the process of creating our *description* of the independent music world that labels punctuate with their catalogues, but also our *understanding* of their demystifying potential. Not just with *what* but also *how* our interviewees respond to questions formed a landscape of experiences and testimonies which Alfred Gell called the 'stage of life'. In our study it is sometimes literally a stage. The 'demystifying potential' is about showing that while independents do create what we call 'alternative heterotopias' with original content and sometimes iconoclastic form, they are not necessarily always the underground heroes actively opposing the dark side, *aka* the corporate music industry. They may appropriate bits from it, draw selectively, or occasionally even enter into agreements with large corporate entities in order to evolve new musical and business forms. In other words, there is a doubly valid understanding that certain kinds of candid conversations which fuel this book can offer. On the one hand, we help document how the DIY 'philosophy' and certain discursive templates undergirding electronic music inform contemporary music where production has become relatively democratized and sped-up. This reality means a zeitgeist when the record making is not so much mystified anymore but, rather, has gone through an accelerated cycle of disenchantment and re-enchantment. While cutting a record may nowadays be easier and more democratized than ever before, the thrill and satisfaction of holding a finished copy of one's work is still felt and widely reported as a great reward. We surmise that it is here where we see co-mingling of myth, narrative and materiality in an informative way.

On the other hand, there are more directly material structures and macro-conditions, which we apprehend from extant written

sources, that actors are keenly aware of and deal with on a regular basis. Indeed, as we show in the chapter on the material economy of labels, actors develop strategies that redefine the meaning and importance of profit, for example, and accompany such strategies with complementary, meaningful discursive framings that actively redefine the social meanings of their economic activities. This discursive and practical maneuvering reflects some foundational changes in the music economy. Crucially, as we showed earlier, if the pioneers of Detroit techno or Chicago house could count on selling their strongest releases in tens of thousands of copies, no independent label today can hope to match that level of sales. This quantitative reality of 'material economy' impacts the qualitative reality of 'symbolic economy'. Oscillating between European and North and South American contexts was particularly revealing about the difference that local cultures, material economy and urban ecology jointly make for creating techno, house, ambient and other kinds of independent music. Likewise, talking to labels who release music in the fields of more radically avant-garde styles divorced from club scenes, we learn about differently emphasized cultural-economic strategies as embedded practices. Here, we see the rationale for embedding our study of label practices within cultural and historical contexts, especially around the historically shaped master narratives of 'independent' or 'DIY'. As American sociologist of money, Viviana Zelizer (1989: 371), has stated, 'economic phenomena such as money, although partly autonomous, are interdependent with historically variable systems of meanings and structures of social relations'.

Independent aesthetic practices still reach their social audiences through various forms of what Roland Barthes called 'modern mythologies'. Such mythologies sometimes gain so much cultural

power that we can talk about an emergence of a kind of 'secular theology'. Think about the continued social *apotheosis* of the figure of 'pop star' which today manifests itself in the intense attention that the media pay to performers. Each scene or field has countless indispensable actors, prosumers and labels, and yet it is mostly the individual artists' opinions that are sought after. Iconic personification is the tip of cultural the iceberg, though. The situation is not completely different in independent spheres. Think about the way even some underground DJs are put on a pedestal, sometimes quite literally. The etymology of *apotheosis* can be revealing here – a form of deification capable of obscuring more mundane but active ingredients of musical production, both of the human and non-human side of the production line. It is also in this context that gaining access and talking to the behind-the-scenes movers and shakers listed in the list of characters at the beginning of this book can offer us some of the missing links between persons and structures that Duneier suggests are the stuff of good anthropology. While some labels attain iconic status, their managers tend to remain in the shadows. The accounts of those grey eminences matter. At the very least, they can broaden our interpretive horizon. However fragmentary, they attest to the existence of active sensibilities in the increasingly fragmented markets. They also stand for a talker-writer interaction that should not be taken for granted. For every interview that was realized, there are two that couldn't be done for a number of practical reasons. At best, taken together these fragments can tell a story of the new independents that captures both their zeitgeist and what's timeless in it.

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