

HEATHER HANSEN CELESTE – MODERN DEATH

The so long waited comeback of the USA artist **Heather Hansen Celeste**, casually found by the french label **Anywave Records**'s talent scouts (and, recently, by **Lentonia Records**) and deeply followed and interviewed since her really long composition *Austere*, released by the twin netlabel **Evawyna**, is, without any doubt, a very complex work, that ask for several listenings in order to be completely understood, and represents, at the same time, a new milestone in Heather's career, that, thinking about **Along the axis**, in the meanwhile felt in love for techno music and for its perfect squared danceability, afterwards working on its manipulation.

Describing a double album, the best result obtained in terms of compositive complexity and goodness from the artist, is not easy, but this is without any doubt the result of a journey made of constant experimentation, both in the video field (in particular way, the '60s and '70s video art) and in the musical one. It's good to say that, between this release and *Austere*, loads of material had been released upon several musical channels, such as Mixcloud and, obviously, her Bandcamp page. Her music costantly redefine itself, which only limit is the fact that she hasn't any.

Although easily, from a strictly musical point of view, **Modern Death** could be defined as a succession of more or less long episodes (and that's a reason for that that goes beyond the act of doing it) in which a way to link perfectly the smooth beat of detroit techno and the visionariety of wave music (in its more generic meaning, that translates itself into a use of lysergic synths and the use of an oniric-whispered voice) is searched, it is, first of all, a try to bring back in music the ongoing artistic-musical flow, to reactivate the compositive process not intended as the sum of several parts but as the evolution, flow characterized by undefinable properties, that develops itself and that constantly changes starting from a simple basic ideas, from a motif.

This logic is much more linked to Fluxus's happenings and, in general, to the experimental musicians of that epoch than to classical music and to its popular forms, properly as this flow tends to get rid of its content and to bring far the listener to oniric landscapes, to raise everytime different emotions. The formal perfection doesn't exist maybe because Heather neither searches for it, and the only physical linkage with his music is the squared beat. It's necessary to say that her thirst of experimentation characterizes her as a particularly complex artist and interesting: it could be said that the listener is in front of a revolutionary album in the easily minimal synth label genre music, and probably it's true.

From a lyrical point of view, the topics faced are several, and, as happened in her previous songs, Heather doesn't search for a direct relation between their development and their lyrics: her songs are mainly short or long poems, dissertations and stories. *Modern death* is a quite complex work because is rich of metaphors and inner visions of a world that is ever less modern and ever increasingly postmodern, whereas this one is represented by the tearing down of all those additions of our world, by the tabula rasa of all what we know, to create a mental world, Surrealist, in which *walls are dissolved and curves are deleted [...] to make us feel away from nature*. Heather's world is mental, artificial, built from an Architect who closely reminds the universe of Matrix, in which the Architect has created a fictional system which is perceived as real: Heather must have deeply appreciated this trilogy, if in *Prototypes* she calls back all its details: *we are prototypes of an Sentient Architect that created externalised 3 dimensional space so that we can become internalized*, and in addition: *homogenous objects embedded in solid state, Matrix that is external so that we can wander through Alternate Realities*. Here a clear metaphor is made to Neo, the prototype of Matrix. Even in *Psychosynth*, the Architect is talked about as if he was a divine-like

figure, and Heather asks herself how much the human being is divine-like and if something greater exist, a drawing already written (from the Architect).

Instead, the *title track* is a thought about human relationships and dehumanization, caused even by the digital revolution (both virtual and not), an analysis upon its pros and cons: once again an important question is asked, if would be better to be able to prove feelings eventually obtaining pain back or if would be better to be cold and, at the same time, to avoid the pleasure of sharing happiness and feelings. The modern world is, in some way, a manifestation of modern death in which the human being I-digital is always closer to death as man and to the rebirth as cyborg or digitalized entity, nickname and avatar. In addition, there are those lyrics that bring back Heather's particular interest for technologic evolution and human brain, that in *Polarize*, clearly recover the interest for quantum mechanics already analyzed in *Along the axis*.

Other topic explored are, on the one hand, alternate realities and all that is unknown to the human being, inhabitant of planet Earth: concrete examples are *Palisades*, that focuses on our origin of Earth inhabitants, the clear *Hide and seek* and *Echo*, and, on the other hand, fictional and very interesting stories such as *Dream figures* and *Debt*, rich of metaphors and linked to the *giallo* genre, lyrics that, as usual, open themselves to several interpretations. If the *opener Zero population* is a song incentrated upon the studies upon issues related to worldwide overpopulation, according to which if should be necessary to control the new borns, in *Technicolour* the already noticed observation upon the *world beyond the modern, in the postmodern: everything should be perceived in white and black, because it's easy [...] everything could be perceived better in Technicolour*.

And what about the music? Assuming that's difficult to deeply talk about twentyone compositions each of which represents a different experience, deeply exploring the inner sides of her music, it seems a good idea to start from the beginning: the *opener* of the first album, *Zero population*, is a slow *minimal synth* characterized by the whispered voice of Heather and from a lopsided rhythm, all enriched by lysergic *retro* sonic landscapes, that add to it a mystic shadow. The minimalist keyboard lines, contribute in giving to the song a sinister character, but it's the following *You are here* that portraits at its best what Heather shows in this album: a long squared composition in which *detroit techno* more influenced by funk music echoes, that grows up towards its expressive climax. The opening rhythm develops step by step, modifying constantly itself until it is almost unrecognizable, while Heather voice tags along the ongoing process, like in a neverending flow. Here, in this oniric-Surrealist atmosphere, the composition shows an increasing funk sound, that goes out naturalness. *Vertical* slowly develops itself, in which the redundancy and the whispered lyrics are the main elements of a trance experience. *Traces* is another composition characterized by a gloomy and sinister mood that develops itself step by step until its climax changing its main motifs, and the same is true for *Technicolour*, a song that recovers a particular taste for *retro* sounds, evoking **Computer World's Kraftwerk** music.

Psychosynth is, instead, a song which rhythm is less oniric, more physical, more claustrophobic and *techno-oriented*, counterposed to *Prototypes*, another oniric and vaguely gothic-like song, upon which the whispered vocals of Heather stands, while with *Polarize*, the musician creates squared rhythms more feverish and influenced by the works of '90s electronic artist's music, in particular those of **Aphex Twin**, but, in general, the breakbeat. *Opaque* is one of the most direct and danceable songs, in which the dense rhythm has a primary role, the whole embellished by a constantly changing synth structure, always between tension and distension. The backbeats of *Modern death*, even in this case a strongly Surrealist experience, are the umpteenth demonstrations of the strong Heather's capacity to compose very long songs without never bothering the listener.

The second album begins with the old school of *Modern age*, and evolves letting mid tempo rhythms go out in a constant evolution. *Lasers* is lysergic in its development and even this recovers strong *retro* influences, while the fast and squared *Cups of wine* and its industrial-influenced *Hide & seek* complete the portrait of the more strongly *early techno* influenced songs. The other songs of the second album elaborate once again, in an always different and fresh way, its songwriting methodology, always succeeding in astonishing and kidnapping the listener towards lysergic, oniric and Surrealist universes.

With *Modern death*, Heather Hansen Celeste embarked herself in her most important and complex work, certainly not easily understandable, proposing a completely new formula and a rare freshness in the electronic landscape, succeeding in creating mental states that the listener will be able to explore at their best using a good pair of headphones. Work uneasily classifiable, the artist, making a Duchamp-derived operation, appropriate herself of '80s and '90s music and elaborate them with her personal, complex and stratified way of conceiving music, never disconnected by poetry, sci-fi, science, performative arts and video. This unique way of seeing music is, at the same time, her limit, as the musical universe needs, now more than in the past, to classify every kind of artist. This is not Heather's case, who, instead, has shown to have realized her better album, an authentic jewel in which the recursivity, the variation, the squared rhythms and minimalism are the main elements of her formula. At this moment, there's nothing left to do than to begin the journey, trying not to lose ourselves.

Score: 10

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