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With Help From Volkswagen, Kraftwerk Relives Autobahn

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Kraftwerk, the German techno pop group that improbably came to fame in 1974 with "Autobahn," an almost lyric-less piece of synthesizer music, has come back for a grand eight-show retrospective at MoMA. The lead-up to their premiere last night was highly anticipated, with tickets being resold for huge amounts online. What they were buying into was a specific presentation of Kraftwerk, with curatorial and advertising agendas.



TDF. Image courtesy of Sprueth Magers, Berlin and London. © Kraftwerk

Wearing black body stockings with the day-glo green drawing of a perspectival grid on them, the four performers stand at podiums symmetrically arranged at the front

of the stage erected in MoMA's atrium. Behind the band is a large projection screen. Occasionally, the performers bob a little to the beat, but mostly they are stationary, bent over the podiums and adjusting synthesizers. They almost never make eye contact with the audience or even look up. The action is on the screen behind them.

Each of eight performances is devoted to one of eight albums, performed chronologically, beginning last night with *Autobahn*. The opening also included a sampler of the rest of the shows. With the exception of one spurt of digitized black-and-white film footage showing a fashion show, the videos are computer-generated. The "Autobahn" of the group's breakthrough looks like a video game highway or a backdrop for a stationary bicycle. In several songs, musical notes float around. The video for "Radio-Activity" shows the internationally recognizable sign for radioactivity, animated so that it streams colors outward, like the sun. Sometimes these video extras feel like touring add-ons for studio-produced music; other times, they work well, as in "Computerworld," where undulating sheets of rapidly changing numbers were a perfect match for the minimalist but provocative lyrics: "Business/Money/People." The projections are supplemented with 3D glasses.

Kraftwerk's subject matter and its aesthetic are firmly grounded in modern industrial society; its name means "power plant." The music is all machine-made, though it incorporates spoken text and some mild singing by Ralf Hütter, who founded the group with Florian Schneider in 1970. Transportation, as a symbol for optimism, leisure, commerce and regularity, is a recurring theme, from the train in "Trans Europe Express" to the bicycle of their last album, 2003's *Tour de France*.

The studied banality and sanitized images of driving that make "Autobahn" seem ironic in other contexts assume another dimension, however, in the MoMA presentation, which is proudly sponsored by Volkswagen. The cute VW bug that cruises along the featureless simulated highway of Kraftwerk's video accompaniment looks like upscale advertising. The museum has to get its money from somewhere, but the all-too-clear payoff in the lengthy and adoring 3D animation of the sponsor's product raises real concerns. (To be fair, a vintage Mercedes also gets some screen time during "Autobahn.")

MoMA bills the Kraftwerk program as "the first time-based artist retrospective," which might be an inoffensive booster if it hadn't sold Marina Abramovic's retrospective with the same gimmick. ("The Artist Is Present" is still described on the MoMA web site as a lifetime of "ephemeral, time-based, and media-based works.") Not to mention MoMA's own film department, which has held numerous retrospectives.

No chairs for Kraftwerk: opening night required two hours of standing in the atrium, shoulder to shoulder. For those who couldn't get tickets, the band's elaborate and well-developed web site has extensive music and video clips, plus T-shirts, etc.

In the MoMA lobby, four Kraftwerk robots are on display, and in its press release, MoMA perplexingly tries to distinguish its presentation from other Kraftwerk museum shows "staged as concerts."

Opening Apr. 12, MoMA PS1 is rolling out a Kraftwerk audio/visual show in their new performance dome in the courtyard, through May 14.

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