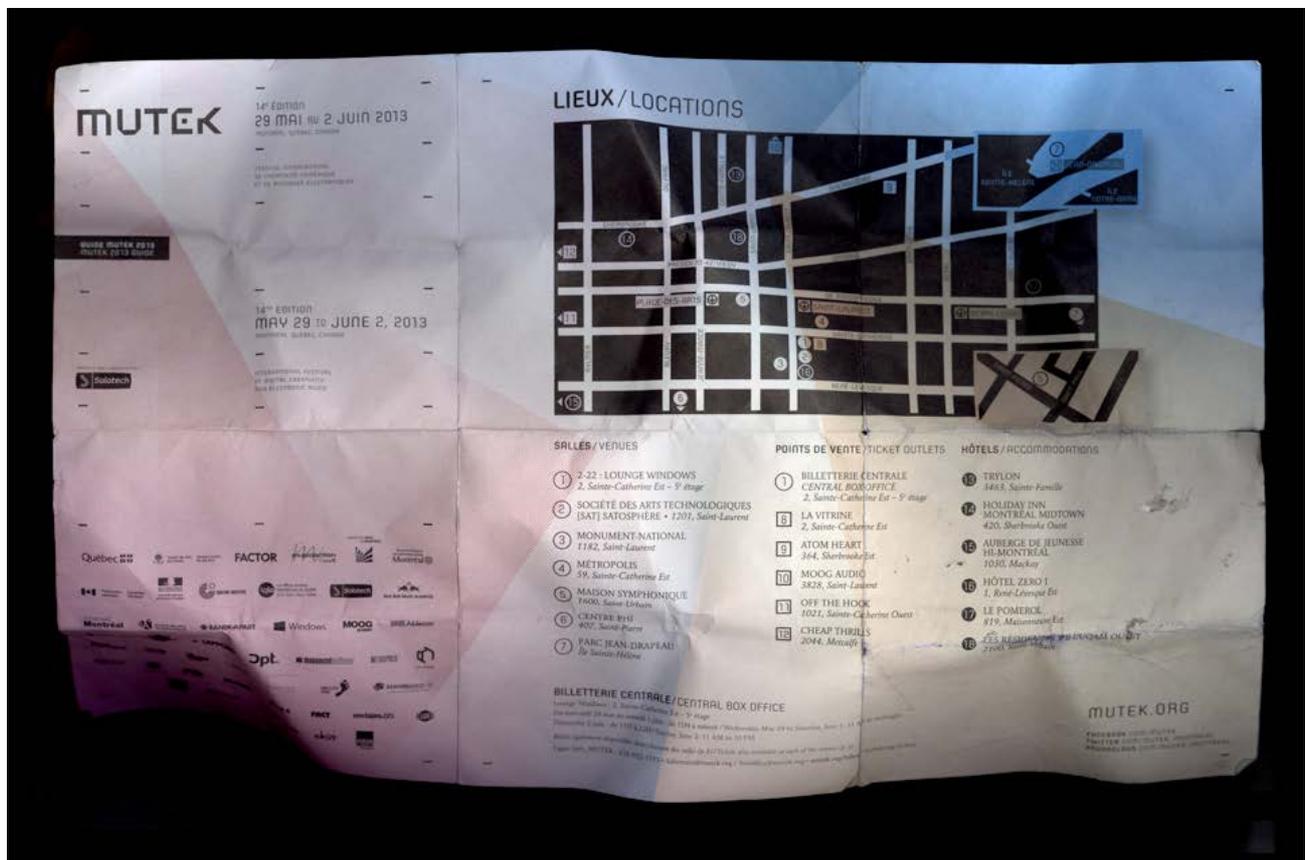


HOME / MUSIC / MUSIC NEWS

## Live: Mutek Festival Day One

STORY BY: EMILIE FRIEDLANDER



### NAVIGATING ELECTRONIC MUSIC IN A STRANGE CITY

This past weekend, I took a plane to Montreal to catch days three and four of Mutek, an annual electronic music and digital art festival at the heart of that city's Quartier des spectacles, which is French for "entertainment district." Being new to Mutek, I didn't really know what I was getting myself into, aside from the fact that the five-day festival would be home to about 140 international artists, and that it seemed to have been made possible in large part by the Canadian government, which is something a bit hard to fathom when you're a music journalist working out of New York. Stepping off the plane into the Montreal-Trudeau airport, I braced myself from a weekend of trying to make head and tail of what felt like an unending list of mysterious dance music producers and professorial electric-acoustic

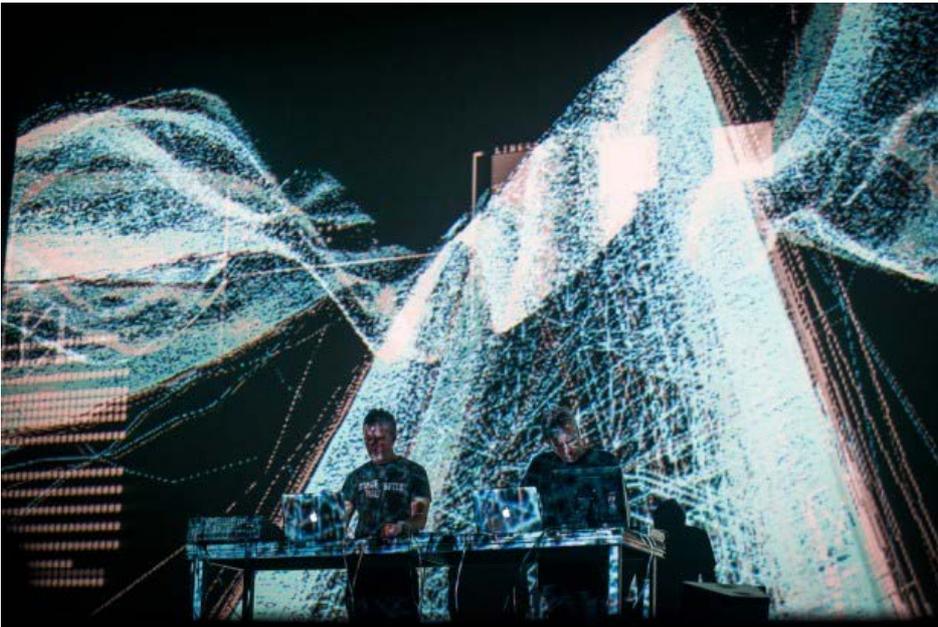


musicians. What I didn't take into account was that I'd also spend a lot of the weekend just trying to successfully navigate a new city, starting with an emergency text message I received before we even reached the hotel, warning me that I'd already incurred over \$50 of roaming data charges.

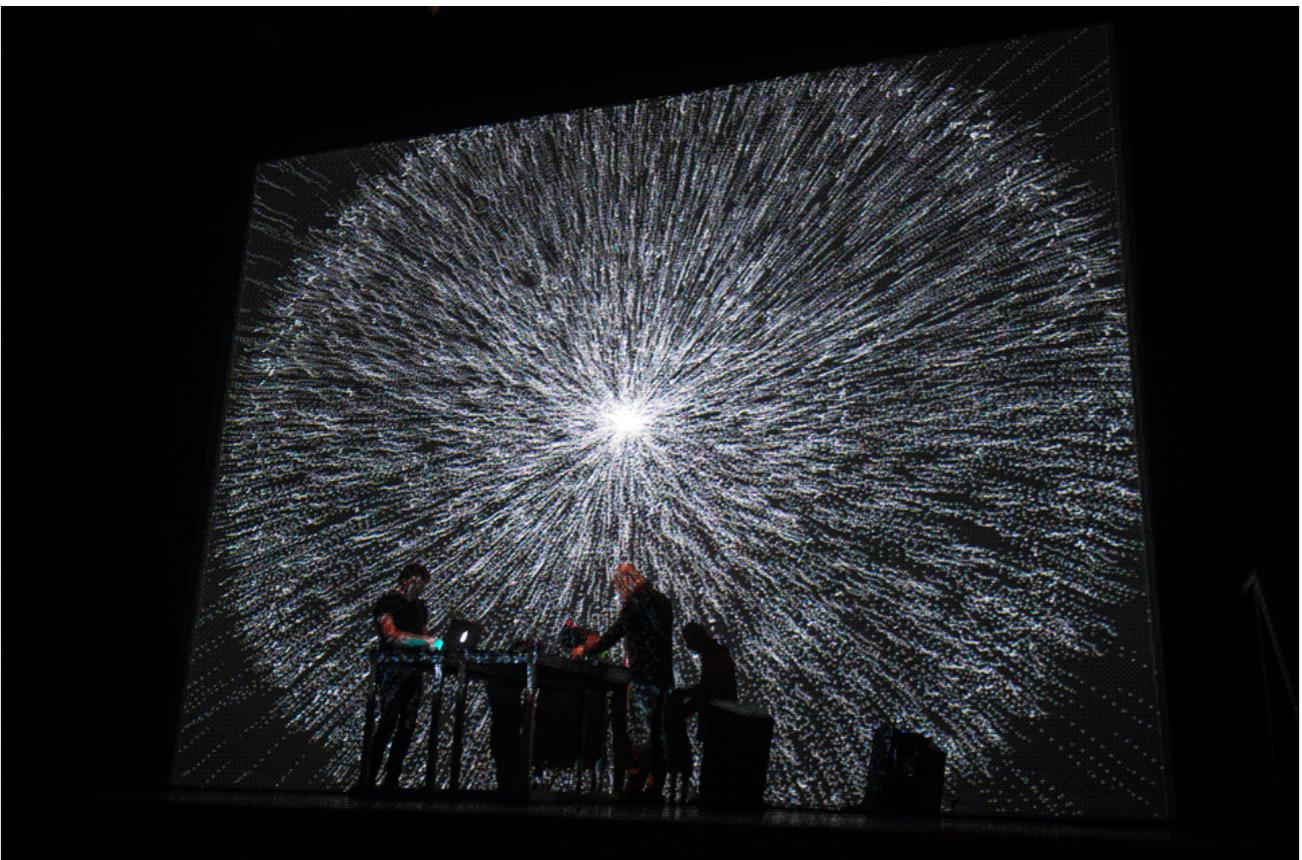
When you're a native New Yorker, exploring Montreal doesn't feel all that different from exploring any number of medium-sized, international North American cities, albeit with smaller cars, European-looking architecture and a heightened emphasis on sweets. In keeping with the enduring cliché that America and Canada are separate but eerily parallel universes, though, there's enough small differences to make you feel slightly, vaguely disoriented at all times. The Canadian dollar is roughly equivalent to the American dollar, but just different enough to make it always seem like you're paying a little more than you'd like for simple things like a cup of coffee. The chain restaurants and billboard advertisements you walk by downtown will be exactly the same as the ones you see in New York, but water in Montreal is served without ice, and when you go into an elevator, you have to press the "rez-de-chaussée" button if you want to get to the ground floor.

Most significantly, there's the bilingual aspect of the city. I speak French, but for some reason, knowing both of Montreal's official languages ended up making navigation more confusing. Enter a shop or restaurant, and there's always that awkward split second when you have to decide whether to address the person behind the counter in one language or the other, not knowing which of the two happens to be that person's primary one. Sometimes, you get it wrong, and the result is two people with the same mother tongue trying to converse in a language they don't really feel that comfortable with. Though French, I learned, was the official first language of business in Montreal (meaning that shopkeepers and bartenders and bus drivers and policemen are required, by law, to make first contact with you in French), pretty much every conversation I ended up having with primarily French speaking natives turned into a discussion of how French was an endangered language there, from which it transitioned into a broader conversation about the French-speaking community's historical persecution.

Language is a politically loaded topic in Montreal, as are other questions pertaining to the city's turbulent history, such as the fate of the particular part of town where the 10th anniversary of Mutek took place, the Quartier des spectacles. Posters for the festival—which matched images of attractive, disheveled looking youths to the cutely suggestive slogan, "you never forget your first time"—dotted the way from the Holiday Inn to a giant, glass-walled spaceship of a building called the 2-22, on rue Sainte-Catherine. Here, at the festival's ultra-modern 5th floor welcome center, I picked up a geometrically designed, bilingual press packet, and tried my best to decipher the color-coded, five-day break down of events, which were demarcated by enigmatic names like "A/Visions 1," "Noctune 3" "Play 2" and "Dromos." It wasn't until I had taken a few trips around the various sites on the festival map that I even noticed that the bulk of Mutek actually took place along a major thoroughfare in the city's Red Light District, and that for every commercial concert venue and contemporary art center I visited in the neighborhood, there was an equal number of chintzy, neon-lit strip-tease spots with names like Sexotheque, Sexe-village and Café Cleopatre.



As one McGill grad student and music critic would inform me that weekend, there is a movement in Montreal to protect and preserve the city's notorious neighborhood of sex—for its quaint, historical charm, no doubt, but probably also for its seductively liberal policies on full nudity and contact dancing. Recently, however, that impulse to safeguard the past has come into conflict with projections of the city's future. Mutek sites like the 2-22, a collection of white-walled, Mac product-filled studios for various cultural uses, and the similarly glass-walled La Vitrine, which is short for La Vitrine Culturel, or cultural window, are just a few publicly funded products of Montreal 2025, a widescale modernization initiative determined to bring more art and innovation to the city.



To an American tourist taking in a festival like Mutek, this produces some surprising experiences. The name “Quartier des spectacles” reveals itself to be a confusing catch-all for pretty much every kind of cultural “spectacle” under the sun, from scantily clad, long-haired “strip-teaseuses” to artist-hosted “brunches” concerned with the intersection of technology and cuisine. It was high and low together, at every turn, but a dive into Mutek’s programming revealed an infinity of more minute distinctions to be made, even within the high cultural thrust of the festival proper. Around dusk on Friday evening, festival-goers piled into the neo-classical looking theater in the neighborhood’s Monument-National building to catch round three of the festival’s daily “A/Visions” event, which, as you can probably guess from the name, featured performances of the audio-visual variety. A presentation by the Canadian duo of Michael Trommer and Nokami set a hyper-cerebral tone for the evening, purporting to capture the “electro-magnetic spectra emitted by the informational, security, communication and power infrastructures which pervade the urban grid.” An noisy, electro-acoustic-sounding affair, with wild, squiggly graphics meant to represent electrical wave patterns picked up in downtown Montreal and Toronto, it seemed to have something to do with capitalism, but it also felt like the kind of art that can only be appreciated in full knowledge of its concept. Antoine Schmitt and Franck Vigroux’s performance, which had the much simpler and more sensual aim of simulating the big bang, packed a greater affective punch, sending the seated audience through a roller-coaster like experience through a combination of cinematic sound swells and the movement of tiny star-like dots across a pitch black screen.



Downstairs, on the rez-de-chaussée of the 19th century theater, a door opened in a whirl of fog machine smoke to reveal what felt like another world entirely, summoning wandering festival goers into a modern, black box theater in the bowels of the building. Here, Frank Oulette, the Montreal DIY scene stalwart who performs under the name Hobo Cubes, was crouched over a rig of pedals and drum machines, emitting a buzzing minefield of rough-hewn, gritty beats before an audience of much younger-looking spectators, the greater majority of which were seated on the ground. Aside from the institutional setting, it felt a lot like an ordinary noise show.

Just a short walk down the strip-club-studded rue de Saint-Laurent, Montreal’s Metropolis nightclub was gearing up for yet another variation on the electronic music festival setting with an offering of four headlining acts. We were entering into the “Nocturne” part of the evening, which is Mutek-speak for “party time.” I missed Japanese audiovisual artist Ryoichi Kurokawa, but I did get there in time to see a pretty killer performance by Emptyset, whose name would seem to pretty smartly sum up the British duo’s use negative space as a compositional tool. At the beginning, though, they seemed more testing our physical limits, with blasts of the kind of deep, floor shaking bass that buzzes up through your legs, tickles your nostrils and makes you inexplicably, almost frighteningly conscious of your own breathing. When this pretty startling opening eventually settled into a bongo-like techno groove, the catchiness of the rhythm felt deliciously hard earned, as though the British duo were sneakily sliding us out of the contemporary art setting and into the club.



Where Emptyset was all starkness and restraint, Jon Hopkins' set was all melody and color, complete with a lava-lamp-like light display featuring what looked like microscopic close-ups of the bacterial variety. Hopkins, whose Domino affiliation and past collaborations with Brian Eno and Coldplay made him something of a major league outlier in an otherwise pretty niche-specific festival, steered an increasingly eager crowd through a series of dramatic twists and turns, folding elements of techno, dubstep, and melodic house into hypnotic dance productions that even crested into the cinematic wonder of musicbox notes at once point (if you didn't know, Jon Hopkins is also the guy who wrote the score for the British science fiction movie *Monsters*). Onstage, he was a charismatically jumpy amalgam of knob-turning, dancing and intense focus; at one point in the show, a yellow, smiley faced helium balloon escape the grasp of its owner and floated all the way up to the ceiling.

Needless to say, the crowd at Metropolis was exquisitely boozy by the time Robert Hood hit the stage. No one was acting particularly unruly, but everybody seemed sufficiently wired to erupt in cheers and even screams whenever the minimal techno pioneer dropped the beat—which is pretty much the most amazing way to experience any music that revolves around massive swatches of rising hi-hats and the invariable moment when everything bottoms out. It was dark, economical and euphoric, and I don't think I could sum up the former Underground Resistance member's style any better than a friend of mine who was there, when she referred to his "techno mystery swag." After Hood was called back for his second encore, I wandered my way out into the night, suddenly depleted by this heightened dance music experience, which seemed to encapsulate both the technical aspects of what I had seen and heard at Mutek thus far and the parts of it that felt very visceral and human. It wasn't until a crackhead came up to me and frisked me down for change that I realized I was back in the Red Light District.

116	<b>1. Armature</b> emptyset	
	My Weekend at Mutek	
<b>1. Armature</b> emptyset		<b>4:14</b>
<b>2. Drive (The Age Of Automation)</b> Robert Hood		<b>5:55</b>
<b>3. Open Eye Signal</b> Jon Hopkins		<b>7:49</b>
<b>4. Enigmatic Fields</b> Hobo Cubes		<b>4:16</b>
<b>5. SPRING01</b> King Felix		<b>4:26</b>
<b>6. When The Past Was Present</b> John Talabot		<b>5:06</b>
<b>7. Glass Eights - Original Mix</b> John Roberts		<b>4:46</b>
<b>8. Emu</b> Lee Gamble		<b>5:23</b>

---

#### Images

1. Scan of Mutek program, at the end of the festival.
  2. Instagram #mutek: [@seventonone](#), [@baz514](#), [@andydixonart](#)
  3. Michael Trommer and Nokami; photography Caroline Hayeur.
  4. Antoine Schmitt and Franck Vigroux; photography Caroline Hayeur.
  5. Emptyset; photography Miguel Legault.
  6. Crowd at Metropolis; photography Miguel Legault.
-