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# A House of Drone, Ecstatic and Raw, With a Potent Aura of Largess

'Drone Activity in Progress,' at the Knockdown Center

By BEN RATLIFF MAY 3, 2013



**Drone Activity in Progress** Waking dream: Kim Gordon performing Thursday night as part of the duo Body/Head in a one-night festival organized by the Red Bull Music Academy at the Knockdown Center in Queens.  
Brian Harkin for The New York Times



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There's an irreducible element of music that connects metal, industrial music, power electronics and classical minimalism, and no word exists for it. It involves deep pulsations; excited provocation through sound and concept more than traditional technique; low-end frequencies rarely encountered in life; long sustained tones enlarged through overdrive; or distortion or just force of hands on instruments.

At least 1,000 people in the New York City area are evidently aware of that commonality and have positive associations with the word "drone." That was the number coaxed out by "[Drone Activity in Progress](#)," Thursday's 16-act, 3-stage, 6-hour show at the Knockdown Center, a renovated century-old door factory in Maspeth, Queens. It was a one-night festival of music made committedly by ecstatic loners — there were never more than two people on any stage. And it created a grimy symbiosis between performer and audience.

The event was one of many being presented by the Red Bull Music Academy, the mixture of music school and live-event promoter that has taken up residence in New York this month. Its money, from the energy-drink giant, went toward the right space (raw, old, lots of brick and glass, high ceilings, dream-world dimensions); the right accouterments (earplugs handed out at the gate, shuttle buses from the L train, mobile pizza ovens from Roberta's); the right sound and lighting; and the right price: \$8.

This event had a presence, a clean, expensive, judicious power. It felt like a marker, and an unlikely one. Fifteen years ago, when music like this drew far less attention from the idly curious, such an event would have been unthinkable. That was before the reinvention of consumer habits in Brooklyn and Queens, and before the energy-drink industry, apparently, saw the marketing appeal of abrasive noise.

There was a room with red lighting for a subclass of performers who have been moving toward music with beats. (Notice the mildness of the corporate branding. Red lighting can suggest a particular product, if you let it, but it's also very nice.) This was where you saw Pete Swanson, whose music is elegant, highly repetitious, all deep bass and twinkly highs; [Pharmakon](#), a.k.a. Margaret Chardiet, who uses imposing guttural screams as parts of a provocative primitive-electronics whole; and Dominick Fernow, who performed with iPods and effects pedals in two different warped-techno guises: At 9 p.m., he was Prurient, raw and assaultive, and at 2 a.m., Vatican Shadow, focused and severe.

There was a second-floor stage for guitarists including Alan Licht, [Noveller](#) (Sarah Lipstate) and Mick Barr, all finding their way to a more organic kind of drone, and grassmass, the Brazilian laptop-electronics artist and one of 31 current "participants" in the academy's educational initiative. (In this program, the students get on the same bills with their heroes).

But the main stage, a deep rectangular space with surround-sound speakers, consistently put forth not only the evening's best stuff, but also one concise set after another that each would have been worth traveling a long distance for: musical, spacious, contemplative, properly loud. [Oren Ambarchi](#), the Australian musician who lived in New York for a while 20 years ago but is now too rarely seen here, played a detailed, startlingly intense set of drones and pulsations with the drummer Joe Talia, who kept a steady, almost swinging cymbal beat.

With cathartic waves of drumming, Kid Millions of Oneida formed a duet with the tenor saxophonist Jim Sauter of [Borbetomagus](#). Kim Gordon, once of Sonic Youth, played with Bill Nace in a new guitar duo called [Body/Head](#): it was more discontinuous than most of the rest of the acts, with lurches and dropouts and strange turns and Ms. Gordon's chanting, waking-dream voice.

And there was KTL, a duo formed by the guitarist [Stephen O'Malley](#) of the band SunnO))), and the laptop artist Peter Rehberg, who has often recorded as Pita. Mr. O'Malley is a tone obsessive: he gets a warm, rounded, tube-technology sound in his noise and drone, and for an hour he carefully interacted with Mr. Rehberg's shifting and corroding electronic strafes. The deep-frequency music grew louder by degrees, nearly past pleasure into discomfort, but not quite. This was a sound-rhetoric of beauty, not pain and degradation.

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New York events organized by the Red Bull Music Academy run through May 31; [redbullmusicacademy.com/events](http://redbullmusicacademy.com/events)

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