

## Brainwashed - The Hafler Trio, "Masturbatorium"

Written by Anthony D'Amico

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The first part of Andrew McKenzie's unresolved sex trilogy was created as a soundtrack for performance artist Annie Sprinkle's "masturbation ritual," a role that it apparently filled quite successfully. As a stand-alone effort, however, it is not among McKenzie's most rewarding and enduring works. The problem is not lack of quality or ideas, but rather that it feels too unnaturally condensed to be truly satisfying.

### [Touch](#)

I have a difficult time accepting The Hafler Trio as an especially erotic entity and the first half of this 1991 EP does not do much to help me make that leap. It's still quite good, but it sounds more like vaguely tense ambient drone than anything libidinal. It begins with an insistently repeating piano note over a sustained bass hum buried low in the mix. Gradually, a shimmering bit of feedback drifts into the picture and something resembling a processed inhalation/exhalation begins ominously echoing the piano. Around the three minute mark, however, Andrew begins to go for the throat: the bass drone swells dramatically in presence and a deluge of alternately shrill and spectral noises begin bouncing from speaker to speaker. The layering quickly becomes impossible to keep track of, as orchestrated chaos erupts and various mechanical sounds cohere into a dense throbbing rhythm that is probably as compelling as anything McKenzie has done.

Unfortunately, that highlight almost immediately segues into the markedly less beguiling lull of the second movement, which sounds like a web of crackling field recordings lazily unfolding over a deep and seismic pulse. At some point, it begins being buffeted by mutant digitized birds, which is not an especially sexy sound. That turns out to be a clever feint though, as the conspicuously eroticized final movement eventually evolves from the bass. The party commences in earnest at the precise moment that the early-Autechre-meets-futuristic-strip-club beat kicks in (supplied by The Anti-Group). I am surprised that Andrew allows the piece to flirt with IDM as long as he does, but he does ultimately crush it beneath a landslide of dissonant synth, increasingly seismic and overloaded bass, and (most significantly) the breathy sound of Annie experiencing some variety of Tantric orgasm. Knowing the source of the sounds and their originally intended context distracted me a bit from the full picture at first, which is that the

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climactic crescendo is an extremely dark one: *Masturbatorium* ends as a frightening mechanized aural apocalypse. It must have been quite a memorable show.

Given the provocative title, provocative purpose, and the decidedly immodest album art, the actual music on *Masturbatorium* is comparatively tame, content to serve as a tense and slowly intensifying backdrop for Sprinkle's live spectacle. I was a bit wrong-footed by the overt nod to contemporary electronica, but I suppose it is fairly essential to the tone of the piece and the dynamics of the show. More troubling is the fact that the piece sounds like three separate and truncated pieces oozing into one another. The transitions aren't clumsy, but the whole feels rushed compositionally—it progresses faster than seems natural. That may be by necessity though, as I imagine a 45 minute or hour-long masturbation ritual would be pretty demanding. Nevertheless, I definitely wish the first part had been allowed to unfold longer, as it was becoming an impossibly dense and vibrant monster of a soundscape at the point of its abrupt dissolution. There are definitely some striking moments, but there are some lulls too and it is all over a bit too quickly. Fortunately, the next part of the trilogy ( F  
*uck*  
) took the unholy combination of sex and The Hafler Trio to a much higher level.

*(Note- this album is currently out of print and likely to remain so for the foreseeable future)*

Samples:

- [Excerpt One](#)
- [Excerpt Two](#)
- [Excerpt Three](#)