

62 - THE SMOKE OF MY OWN BREATH



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Future histories of Detroit will include the long unacknowledged and almost secret influence on Techno of a Detroit-based French Canadian computer scientist named Richard T. Gagnon.

In 1970, working in the basement of his home, Gagnon developed a prototype speech synthesizer using a phoneme-generator based on recordings of his own voice. In 1972, backed by Michigan auto industry money and working under the company name Votrax International, Gagnon released the world's first commercially available synthetic speech engine, the Votrax VS4. An early customer was a German musician named Florian Schneider, who visited Gagnon in 1974 while Kraftwerk were touring the U.S. with their breakthrough record *Aufobahn*. Schneider bought the current Votrax upgrade, a VS6, establishing it as part of Kraftwerk's sound on the following record, *Radio-Activity*, in 1975, and all of the group's subsequent records.

Schneider in fact used a vocoder to filter the actual sound of the Votrax chip. Kraftwerk were anyway known to operate under a code of secrecy, and neither Gagnon's name nor his voice would ever be directly associated with them. Then again, Teutonic Technopop is unlikely to have been a priority on his list of integrated-circuit speech interests. But it meant that while the first wave of Detroit Techno, notably Juan Atkins' phenomenal early records from 1984 onwards—as Model 500, and with Richard “3070” Davis as Cybotron—could hardly fail to acknowledge the unmistakable impact of Kraftwerk, Richard Techno-voice Gagnon went unheard and unheard of. If 1984 can be considered Techno's year zero (release of Cybotron's *Techno City*), it was also the year that Votrax International filed for bankruptcy. By now part of a greatly expanded micro-electronics consumer market in which Votrax products were widely used, many of its employees moved on to, or set up, further influential electronic speech related companies in different parts of the U.S.

Richard Gagnon quietly maintained the workshop at his Michigan home. With 18 successful patents to his name, he was honored by the Smithsonian's Speech Synthesis History Project, and the legacy of his work is clearly important to present day synthetic speech technology. In 1994, however, Gagnon survived a stroke that has left him unable to remember any of his past work, and unable to speak.

— “I am the Daughter of Richard T. Gagnon,” Poul Elliman, *Bulletins of The Serving Library* #8, 2014

Paul Elliman,
The smoke of my own breath, 2009,
print on parachute fabric, 100 x 100 cm