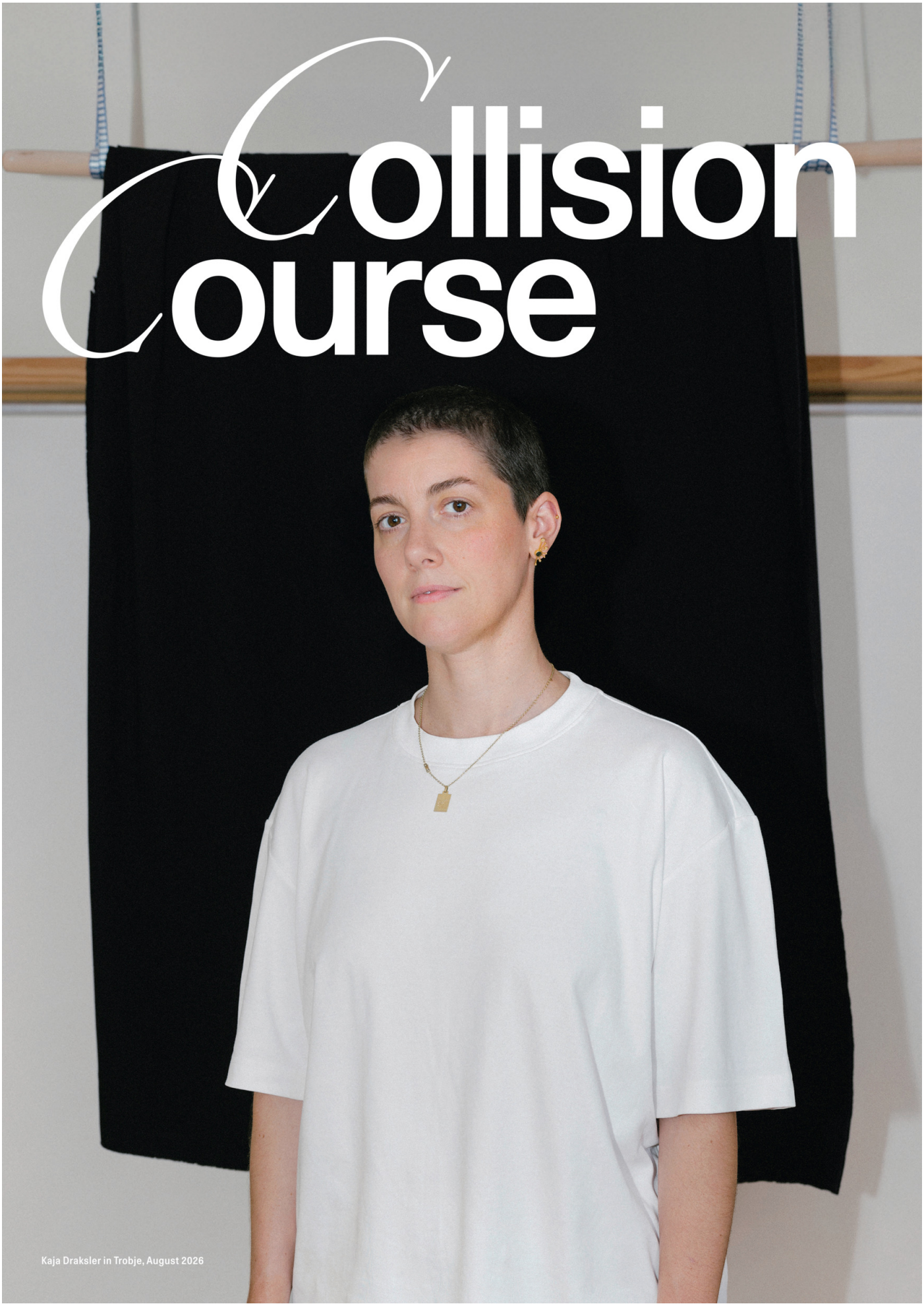
Collision Course



Kaja Draksler in Trobje, August 2026

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Kaja Draksler

The improvising pianist and band leader extends, subverts and upends the jazz tradition in a series of anarchic groups and collaborations taking in electropop, punk poetry and choral singing

By Peter Margasak
Photography by Lucija Rosc

Soon after earning her master's degree in Amsterdam in 2013, Slovenian pianist Kaja Draksler had a revelation. "I started to see that some of my heroes at the time got to this place where they had some sort of musical signature, and they began just reusing the same shit over and over. I was like, 'What is this?' I really don't want to end up here. It became conscious, I want to keep it fresh for me, or else I'm gonna fall into the trap."

In the years since she has held tight to her resolution, not only developing a disparate body of work, but putting exploration and experimentation at the centre of her dynamic practice. Beginning with *The Lives Of Many Others*, her debut solo album in 2013, Draksler has remained on a steady artistic quest, trusting her instincts, heeding her curiosity and ignoring the demeaning logic of the music business.

If she has a musical signature of her own, it's unpredictability and independence. While she remains a fervent improvisor, her work has often travelled far from her jazz roots, be it via wacky electropop improvisations she cooks up with her partner Szymon Pimpon Gąsiorek in the duo Czajka & Puchacz, or the free-wheeling settings she's composed for the work of the late American poet Dean Young in her wide open art-rock sextet matter 100.

After studying jazz at a music-oriented high school in Ljubljana, not far from Trboje, the tiny Slovenian village where she grew up, and earning her a bachelor's degree in Groningen, Draksler was already chafing at jazz orthodoxy, so when she enrolled at the Conservatory of Amsterdam in 2010, her focus turned to composition. Her primary instructor was the British composer Richard Ayres, and she still marvels at the fact that he was the first teacher who had ever asked her, "What do you want to do?" The experience was liberating, sparking the path of discovery she's been on ever since.

When she became pregnant four years ago she and Gąsiorek returned to her hometown, a relative isolation that's only emboldened her artistic choices. In August Punkt.Vrt. Plastik, her long-running trio with Swedish bassist Petter Eldh and German drummer Christian Lillinger, released their fourth album, *Kompress*, while matter 100's debut *True Or False* arrives this month. In the meantime, she's begun a new solo project in which she fills the rhythmic vessels of stride piano with microtonal improvisations. Earlier this year her octet released their third album, *Bare, Unfolding*. While her playing across all these projects is identifiably hers, the stylistic thrust of each endeavour is miles apart.

"I want to be pushed because I know that when I'm pushed I will also be more interested," says Draksler over Zoom. "I want to develop as a player and as a musician. The way to do that is to put new challenges on myself so that I reach further and further. I'm not very conceptual and I'm quite critical. I know what I don't want, and I think a lot about all the pieces that I make. I listen back to them and I plan them. I'm not just improvising with it. I mean improvisation is a big part of it, but it's not like, 'Oh, let's see what happens.' I try a lot of things. I leave out a lot of things that I don't like. It is quite a long process normally. I guess in a way I'm not so consistent with what I do, and the next thing is not always an extension of what was before. In some ways it is an extension, because I like some of the things, but some of the things I'm not interested in any more."

Such candour is typical for Draksler, who admits that some of her recent work stems from a growing boredom with playing freely improvised music. "I just get tired of stuff, and I want something fresh. But I bring with me everything that I did before, because you can't avoid it."

It took Draksler a long time to figure out who she was artistically, even though her father noticed her innate musicality when she was only four. He'd play simple single-note melodies on a toy piano he purchased for her, and she'd effortlessly repeat them. A year later her parents bought her a modest upright piano and she began taking lessons from an instructor just a few minutes from their home. Yet music remained a hobby for Draksler, even after she enrolled in her high school jazz and popular music department. "I didn't go fully into the music programme," she says, noting that no one in her extended family had played an instrument. "It just seemed like this could never be an occupation. Somehow it was not logical."

She had little knowledge about jazz when she began, but that changed in high school and, when she could, she checked out concerts and jam sessions in Ljubljana. That uncertainty about pursuing music professionally was compounded when she neared graduation, with her piano teacher trying to convince her not to carry on studying music. Still, in 2005 she enrolled at the Prins Claus Conservatoire in Groningen to study jazz piano. She was allowed to spend one semester studying with a teacher who wasn't a pianist, and that's where she met reedist Michael Moore, the brilliant American expat musician who has long been a force on the Amsterdam music scene, particularly through his membership in the ICP Orchestra.

"He was definitely the best teacher I had there," she declares. "Through him I heard that the Dutch scene was a thing, that it exists, and that it's historically important. Michael was definitely an outsider in that school, in terms of aesthetic and vibe." If many of the teachers were visiting musicians from the US, Moore had a more peculiar, holistic and personal approach to music. "He introduced me to a bunch of people that I wasn't really aware of, like Jaki Byard and Herbie Nichols. Those are not Dutch people,

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but they are a bit outside of the canon they were teaching us in the jazz piano department."

Draksler led her first bands during her Groningen days, including groups with other non-Dutch musicians, including the Turkish singer Sanem Kalfa. Foreshadowing her interest in disparate musical traditions, she arranged folk material each member brought in to represent their respective homelands. She also made her first albums during this period, but it was the move to Amsterdam that blew things open, balancing her growing interest in classical music with a welcoming improvised music community.

"This year I thought to myself, how long will I be afraid to do it? I'm old enough to just face this fear. What the fuck? It's never enough, you know."

"I didn't want to study jazz any more," she says. "It was eight years of that and I wanted to go somewhere else, at least intuitively, if not rationally. It was a very good decision."

Draksler found serious momentum after finishing up school in Amsterdam, already welcomed by elder figures from the ICP generation, while forming an improvising duo with drummer Onno Govaert called Feecho. She cemented a number of ongoing partnerships with musicians she met as a member of the European Movement Jazz Orchestra, an EU-funded cultural exchange project featuring players from Portugal, Germany and Slovenia. Here's where she first connected with Lillinger and trumpeter Susana Santos Silva, who remain important collaborators.

In 2016 Huub van Riel, artistic director of Amsterdam's Bimhuis, invited her to participate in the 2016 October Meeting, a gathering of 22 young European improvisors, where ad hoc groups suggested by the curator spent a couple of days developing ideas and rehearsing before giving livewire performances. Two of the pianist's most meaningful projects emerged from the event: the trio with Eldh and Lillinger later christened Punkt.Vrt.Plastik, and Hearth, an improvising quartet with Silva and reedists Ada Rave and Mette Rasmussen.

The Punkt.Vrt.Plastik trio has become one of the pianist's longest running projects, a band marked by colliding aesthetic tendencies, whether Eldh's turbulent physicality and hiphop grounding or Lillinger's rhythmic complexity and stunning dynamism. "We were different from the start, but somehow we have the jazz thing," says Draksler. "That's our common background and it kind of binds it together. I think the attitude is pretty anarchic, which is what I like."

The dance of three disparate perspectives was clear on their 2018 debut, but it's grown more pronounced as each musician has dug deeper into their own practices. Draksler cites the 1963 album *Money Jungle* as a model, where Duke Ellington, Charles Mingus and Max Roach elided aesthetic differences to create a tense new modern sound grounded in tradition. "I don't think anyone feels like we need to take care of the other person. Each of us can just play on our own, but at the same time."

Eldh's skills as a producer and Draksler's deployment of MIDI software that approximates microtonality have increasingly impacted their sound. Their new album *Kompress* embraces post-production and overdubbing to fracture its acoustic foundation, splintering grooves, piling up the timbres of two pianos and smearing pitches. At the same time, some tunes are closer to post-bop tradition than anything they've previously done.

Shortly before that trio coalesced into a working band, Draksler formed an ongoing octet exploring a radically different sound and ethos. Since her days in Groningen she's worked with text, and she enlisted two very different voices – Icelandic singer Björk Níelsdóttir and Latvian vocalist Laura Polence – to shape her settings of some of her favourite poets. She assembled the ensemble, including reedists Rave and Ab Baars, violist/violinist George Dumitriu, bassist Lennart Heyndels and drummer Govaert, with versatility in mind. On their three albums Draksler's sophisticated chamber arrangements reflect her compositional ambitions. Growing up in Trboje, Draksler was steeped in choral music and occasionally played organ with her local church choir. "I feel like singers can enter music in a different way, and it feels closer to me than just instrumental music even though I'm an instrumentalist," she says. Draksler explains that she enjoys starting the compositional process through texts, "to work with something external that I can sort of contrast or juxtapose or layer".

While the octet's 2017 debut *Gledalec* juggled heavily composed material and improvised excursions, subsequent work has grown more refined and focused, achieving an apotheosis on *Bare, Unfolding* (2026). The latter sets the haikus of Matsuo Bashō to deeply patient, richly nuanced music that occasionally taps into the time-stretched elegance of gagaku tradition. "It took a lot of patience from everybody to stay in that repetitive thing and to keep the tension, but not be minimal," says Draksler. "There were a lot of micro-adjustments, really working on the details more than before. And things were less intuitive, working into this tension between what feels like should happen and what is actually happening. We are pushing it a little bit more, which is definitely more challenging with a big group. I wanted to have more limitations or some challenges, because I didn't want to use the same recipe once more."

In 2018 Draksler began to spend most of her time in Copenhagen, where Gąsiorek was studying. While she continued to play with the octet, the trio and in duo projects with Silva, guitarist Terrie Ex and pianist Eve Risser, she began to stretch her compositional muscles further. Her stunning 2022 solo album *In Otherness Oneself* tied together various strands, whether overdubbing readings by Robert Frost and Witold Gombrowicz of their own poetry or incorporating digital fuckery and microtonality using a MIDI set-up she adapted from the great American pianist Cory Smythe, with whom she worked in Lillinger's ambitious *Open Form For Society* project in 2019.

In 2022 she returned to Trboje, moving into the space above the garage of her childhood home. "I thought I would never move back here," she admits. "And then as soon as I got pregnant, I was like, shit, I have to go back to Slovenia. I wasn't thinking about how it's going to be afterwards, I just thought I have to give birth there. I cannot do this abroad. Three years later, we're still here and we're probably not moving anytime soon anywhere. We'll see how it goes."

Still, her Amsterdam connections endure. In 2023 current Bimhuis artistic director Frank Van Berkel commissioned a new project from her. "It wasn't my wish to start a new band because I always feel like I want to continue with what I have," she says. "But now I'm really happy that I started this band."

The line-up she assembled for matter 100 guaranteed a different aesthetic, as she wanted to explore something closer to pop music. It gave her the opportunity to work for the first time with a few close colleagues from Amsterdam: Ex guitarist Andy Moor and keyboardist Marta Warelis. She invited Polish drummer Macio Moretti, and Samo Kutin of Širom to play prepared hurdy-gurdy. Draksler also enlisted Ex guitarist Terrie Hessels's daughter Lena as a vocalist, the most overt decision in embracing that pop-oriented slant. "I thought maybe it's about time for me to say something, so I tried to write some lyrics for matter 100, but I'm miserable at writing texts."

Instead she chose the work of a poet she had recently discovered, Dean Young, who died in 2022 from complications of Covid-19. "The thing with Dean Young is that his poetry sounds so good when it's spoken. It was really a challenge to put melody to it." But, sung by Lena Hessels with a youthful, hooky insouciance, those melodies reveal another side of Draksler's gifts, whether the sweet sway of "Alternating Current" or the punkish sneer of "Flood Plain".

By now it should come as little surprise that Draksler's musical interests are broad, but the collision of Moor's noisy, chaotic guitar, the bashing rhythms of Moretti, the sometimes abraded, always abstract synthesizer gestures of Warelis, the

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bracing drones of Kutin, and the leader's sturdy but eloquently supportive piano parts, chart radically new territory for her. The ensemble, she says, felt like a real band almost immediately, with everyone contributing ideas. "They did not have this thing where she's the leader, she should decide. I just brought in the music and they helped me shape it."

While Lena Hessels is the primary singer on the album, frequently shadowed by Draksler's vocoder-treated voice, Moretti steps up to the mic on the comedically nightmarish "The Brutal Filament Inside Aglow", while Moor does the heavy lifting on the epic 27 minute title track. Hessels asks, *"true or false?"* 100 times, answered by unreliable claims and absurd statements spoken by the guitarist, like *"I like jury duty"* and *"There are too many stars"*. Draksler initially intended to pick a selection of lines, but Moor insisted on running through them all, reciting them over a cycling piano pattern buffeted by his own skronking guitar commentary.

Thanks to geographic distance and a complicated matrix of conflicting work routines, matter 100 is yet another Draksler project that doesn't perform frequently. In fact, since forming the sextet have only played a couple of shows each year, although Draksler hopes they'll play more in 2027.

With free time on her hands she recently began working on her new solo piano project. She's long appreciated stride piano music, the pre-jazz style developed by musicians like James P Johnson and Willie 'The Lion' Smith. It was later an important component in the music of piano modernists like Thelonious Monk and Jaki Byard, and she discovered transcriptions she made of stride tunes in personal notebooks dating back two decades. She had thought about doing something with stride, but feared she didn't have enough technique and historic expertise. "This year I thought to myself, how long will I be afraid to do it? I'm old enough to just face this fear. What the fuck? It's never enough, you know? This new solo thing is somehow closest to my jazz studies. I suppose I always had this feeling in jazz school that I wasn't good enough, that something was missing. So it's a bit like addressing those fears. I'm not saying I'm the best jazz pianist, but why do I care? I'm a good pianist, I can do this."

A recent Berlin performance proved that Draksler certainly can do this. Her compositions initially reference traditional stride rhythms before either fracturing or dissolving, leaving her with abundant space to work over harmony, bringing a smeared microtonality to her themes. In these pieces her connection to stride is elemental, but there's nothing coy or facile about her methods. The harmonic conception she explored on *In Otherness Oneself* deftly fills the stride forms, holding on to the rhythmic undercurrent as it undergoes gripping transformations. Reconciling seemingly distant approaches is accretive but, as usual, also totally new. ● *Kaja Draksler Octet's* Bare, Unfolding *is released by Sploh. Punkt.Vrt.Plastik's* Kompress *is released by Intakt. matter 100's True Or False is released by BMC*



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