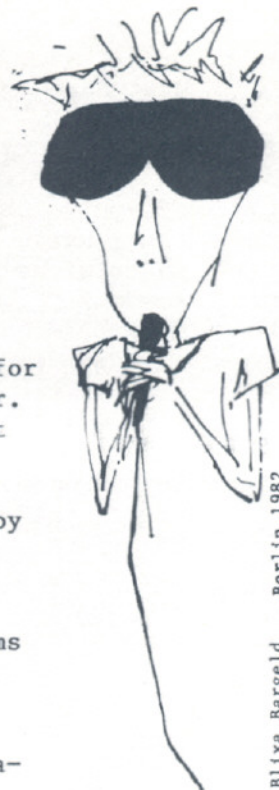


EINSTURZENDE NEUBAUTEN
ON BROADWAY
MARCH 6, 1984

Einstürzende Neubauten



Blixa Bargeld Berlin 1982

The headliners from Germany, heralded by some as part of an international avant garde, by others as certifiable pop stars, played second not last, occupying the stage before Non got off. Those onstage as Blixa Bargeld seized the microphone and called (vainly) for new sound levels remained on. Everyone's gear lay in heaps together.

And what gear. There was much talk about whether they brought it all with them. What else?... for the most part, it's home-made.

Some instruments used at the On Broadway show:

- a pair of metal pounders, struck against a slab on the floor by a percussionist (kneeling, clad in a diving suit);

- an oversized metal ring, suspended from a coil, giving off a tensile percussive note when bounced floorward;

- an elongated electrified object on which planks and bulky items were dropped, rubbed, etc.;

- a bass guitar and guitar;

- a rusty-looking coil which, thrown against anything wired for sound, rang out. (At one point it was thrown against a video camera-man who intruded into the performing space.)

Other objects, used more sparingly but to great effect, were a drill -- volleying sparks off an old washer lid -- and a file device that seemed to be keyed to affect the brain through the teeth as it was played.

It's true that all this could have sounded better. If you listen to EN's records it does sound better. Isn't that usually the case with complicated music heard live, in the acoustic conditions we routinely submit to?

The vocals, though never (despite appeals) brought up to a level that could have mastered the clangor of metals, were strongly rendered. Blixa Bargeld's round-shouldered air of warding off foreign soundboards and foreign curiosity highlighted a detached, craft-oriented stance different from what we are used to -- especially in the production of intense sounds.

He wore his black leather costume as if he found it cozy. With its centurion shoulders, its layered chains and straps and snaffles, it looked like something Labelle might have awarded him back in 1975. The addition of rubber Wellies and crested Woody Woodpecker hairstyle conferred, at closer range, a pleasing sense of sultry spoof on the ensemble.

What does Einstürzende Neubauten say to us? I'm inclined to think an iconoclastic European group can strike with more heart-felt force than American counterparts. I know you're tired of hearing we Yanks are spoiled. But isn't it true? First of all, Europeans, not excluding European punk/industrial/new music performers, are better educated (they leave school knowing geography, history, philosophy, politics, languages) and so they have a clearer idea what it is they're rejecting. Then, they hate and fear the U.S. government's nuclear arms buildup policy in a much more concentrated way than many too-comfy Americans seem able to summon up.

Though the lyrics were not in English, it was piercingly clear that EN had discovered a few flaws in western civilization.

Strategies Against Architecture (on Mute Records) and Notebooks of Patient O.T. (on Some Bizz:Arre, distributed through Virgin) are recent LPs from the group. The first is an inventory of EN techniques compiled from three years of work; the second, more thematic, limits itself to polished development of a scenario.

Strategies gives a stronger reading of the group's intense musical and moral

effort. It opens with "Tanz Debil" ("Dance Devil"): strophes, shouts, screams over a speedy rockbeat on metal drumkit. Its swift power and the vocals' accusatory hoarseness make a good introduction.*

In fact, the easy scattering of "rock" moments throughout Strategies suggests that on top of, or under, the vocals' propulsive agony, this band delights in the beat. "Zum Tier Machen" ["Becoming Animal"] plays with it, and "Kalte Sterne" ["Cold Stars"] is a splendid rock anthem that can incidentally scare you silly.

"Stahlversion" ["Steel Version"] shows EN instinctively in touch with sound pioneers worldwide (at this frontier there is little division between classical and pop). Recorded in an overpass as the players thrash and bang against the chamber's steel innards, guitars and vocals wound in an enviroing echo, "Steel Version" is a ritual delight, a stout hymn on the possibilities of industrial-era noise, modernistically largo at 60 beats to the minute.

There is the matter of Blixa Bargeld's casual statement to Unsound last year: "I hate music." "Most musicians today say they hate music," he admitted, adding for good measure, "I hate musicians."

The group's viewpoint was more conscientiously developed in a long interview published in Tip in 1982. "We don't play music [wir spielen keine Musik]," Blixa told the German magazine then. "We're breaking new musical ground... At first, it's not music, but when we have kept on doing it long enough it may become music...."

Nothing stops us from asserting that what EN play is music, conscious and fully adept. However, disavowing music is a tactic a group has every right to. Indeed, art would never move forward if radical artists did not attack the immediate context in which they find they must create.

"Hear with pain," command the words of one song. Some portion of the anguish projected by Blixa's vocals may be owed to the embattled stance taken by Einsturzende Neubauten towards music itself.

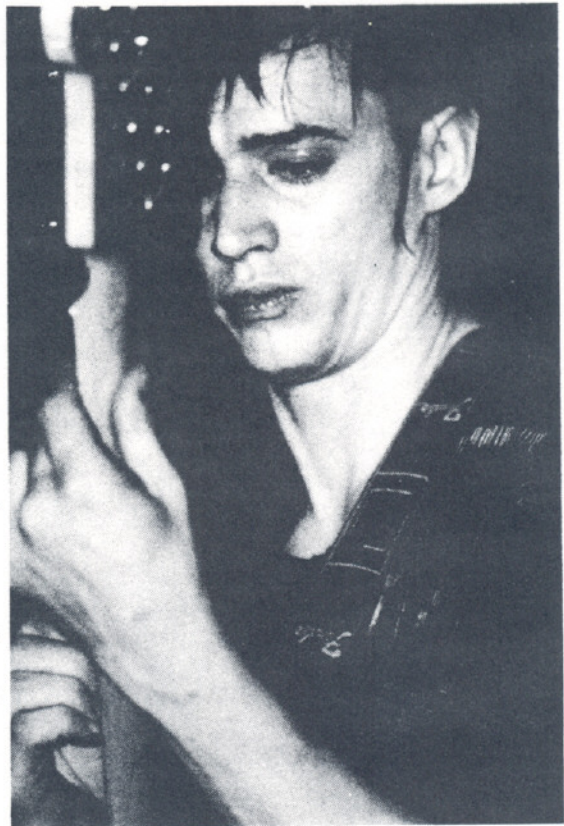
Drawings of Patient O.T. is a loosely thematic sequence on illness as social alienation and vice versa. The sound

being more subordinated to a theme, the effect is less radical than that of Strategies Against Architecture.

A chimelike sound as of struck metal pipes or bars is recurrent throughout O.T. It opens the first cut, "Vanadium I-Ching," along with other metallic sounds which might be security doors shifting. The lyrics speak of a heartbeat noise which then joins the mix. This slow beat recurs throughout the LP, sounding more or less biological depending upon the aura of each song.

"Vanadium"'s lyrics are whispered up to

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Schmerzen hören
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Blixa Bargeld San Francisco 1984

the second "Geliebte." The vocal pressure then increases until the end of the song is called out. (An apter, if freer, translation than that printed for a recurrent line might be: "Come nearer, beloved -- let me contaminate you.")

The second song opens with the voice of a child playing alone in a hospital setting. Following the child's speech, Blixa cries out the first line of the song lyric with grown-up force, backed with tremendous clashes of metal. The effect of the song is that of a Rilkean ode

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(NEUBAUTEN/Cont'd.)

infused with up-to-date violence.

In the third song ("Abfackeln," "Burnout,**") the hoarse, invasive lyric is laid over discordant rhythmic clashing of metals and guitars. "Neun Arme" ("Nine Arms") has lightly delivered absurdist lyrics. (Use of a fetal heart detector for percussion leads one to imagine the words uttered by a nuclear mutant, aborted and demanding rebirth.)

Opening side two, "Notebooks of Patient O.T." has a dangerous-sounding beat rumbling on to breaking glass and hysteric guitar. The lyrics evoke nuclear catastrophe: "I'm waiting/at the edge of the world/For the new sun/It burns more than it lights/Burns more than it lights.../It traces flames through our veins.../Hell belongs to us/[scream]/The new sun/Burns more than it lights."

This title song is especially remarkable and frightening. It follows a swanky rock 'n' roll bridge with broken soprano scream, low and high synthesizer moans, and a beat that resumes towards a collapsing-inward of sounds at the end.

"Faschgeld" ("False Gold") plays with the creak of abused strings. "Styropor" sounds an Eastern theme, as on a ney, recalling the strong Turkish presence in the poorer quarters of Berlin.

"Armenia," a song of daunting charm, sets out with splendid, filmlike buildup: stringy whine, percussive underlay.

Again, the lyrics are whispered, with finicking delicacy, up to the point of a throat-ripping scream. Suave synthesized strings are lavished on vocalizing that's like a larynx being turned inside out. In a sardonic musical fade-out, insect-swarming sounds give way to a single acoustic piano note. Bravo.

Ornamented with ambient sounds credited to Hamburg's Fishmarket, "Die Genaue Zeit" ("Exact Time") has the feel of a major attempt. The four-note melody, contained within a perfect minor fourth, is sung with elegiac force. Following the lyrics' subdued close (a little matter of predicting the end of the world), the unusual bass part begins a tremolo like the onset of a vast explosion. Cut to nothingness.

--Katherine Spielmann

*The lyrics of "Dance Devil" are excerpted in the words coming out of the radio in Armin's page 3 drawing. A rough translation: "Crave/crave/crave/A thousand animals die inside my head/Crave/crave/crave/I crave for you/crave for you/Craving for drugs/Craving for flesh/for flesh/Craving for you."

**In several cases I have substituted English translations that seem to work better than those offered on the album's liner notes.