

Einstürzende Neubauten: *Alles in Allem* (2020)

When the Einstürzende Neubauten make an album that undertakes an exploration of the topos “Berlin” on the band’s terms, then it isn’t a retelling of their own Sturm und Drang, nor nostalgia, nor wallowing in memories. It is more a journey to a place that lives in a time all its own; the era of the Einstürzende Neubauten. There are no ruins – not any in 40 years – because the conditions remain the same; the buildings keep collapsing forever and ever. It’s the case wherever there are people. Then you see with your ears, hear the dust, taste it from the ruins of your own experience rising to your cerebral cortex. You see something rising from the haze; something that crackles through the day and echoes into the night; something that needs no understanding; where no permeation is required. No, it’s very existence as an object of thought is enough. It hovers over the crumbling city. The total mass of the various elements is maintained at all times; before takeoff or after landing – it doesn’t matter – a whole life long and far beyond, through the recordings of these songs. “Alles in Allem.” Anything else would be devoid of meaning. “Alles in Allem” also includes nothing. It is the only way that meaning can develop, by fusing contradiction: sandblasting, whiplash, intimate embrace. Something splinters apart, something else patches it up.

For 40 years they have been collapsing and exhaling the dust amidst the spread of decay, in flickering slow-motion images, in flying debris, in slow-moving particles. Then they spit it out again, and there is shouting. *Who would’ve thought that?* At the birth of the Berlin band, in 1980, it already burned so brightly at all ends and beginnings that it may come as a surprise to experience the Neubauten so alive and composed today. But actually, it is no *real* surprise: Their discipline, reflexive observation of the process, the collective, experimental work, the unbroken, curious exploration of their text worlds and the consistently predominant ambition to go beyond the corset of “rock music” to develop unique soundscapes (which always integrate the current environment, turning it into sound, documenting the world in this way), has made the relationship of band and time into something quite original. The Einstürzende Neubauten always seem to reside in the *here and now*. Even when

– and at times on this album it seems like throughout – they deal with the past (and sound like the future): “Wir hatten tausend Ideen / Und alle waren gut” (We had a thousand ideas / And all of them were good), Blixa Bargeld sings in 2020 in the unusually swaying beat of the song “Am Landwehrkanal.” The first impulse is to confirm, but then, to correct this statement: No, *present tense!* – the ideas *are* good, both old and new. But that’s the point. Even in the time-traveling explorations of past versions of the city of Berlin, instead of nostalgia and romanticization, an astute awareness speaks for the here and now. How does that work?

Let’s first turn to the essentials. After 40 years of globally increasing popularity and cultish admiration for their personal and social uniqueness, Blixa Bargeld, N. U. Unruh, Alexander Hacke, Jochen Arbeit and Rudolph Moser have released their first regular studio album in twelve years. It is called *Alles in Allem* and – despite the transcendence eluded to in its title – proves to be approachable, intimate and inviting. The very first time you listen to the album, you feel like you are literally wandering through the topography of its ten tracks. The voices and sounds get into your head, wandering through your mind and pulling you in closer. *Alles in Allem* thrives on a clear directness, a connection that seems to be evolving – even if “Zivilisatorisches Missgeschick” chants: “We don’t live here anymore.” That’s its effect!

With the ruins of the music industry left behind them a long time ago, for *Alles in Allem* the Neubauten again turned to their fans. The neubauten.org website, which simultaneously hosts the band’s supporter forum and densely written archives, became the linchpin of an unprecedented innovation. Here’s the backstory: As early as 2002, the band, under the administrative and technical direction of Erin Bargeld, had developed a funding model for a first album that would be available exclusively to supporters. This model has proved its worth and still allows the band a degree of relative independence. Long before Radiohead’s fan-financed “In Rainbows” and even before the emergence of crowdfunding as a concept, the Neubauten proved themselves to be forerunners in this domain as well in their music. And once again, the supporters could watch and listen in. Not only did they receive special singles for them solely, but they also participated in webcasts, Q&A sessions and creative experiments. They watched the band over the group’s shoulders, rewarded through exclusive songs and the consciousness of being right there, close by, involved, and

helping to make it all possible. In a limited edition deluxe boxset, released in parallel, the supporters receive additional material featuring seven tracks. Some of these are alternative versions, and some are songs that didn't make it on the album because they didn't fit in, but work better alone. To write about them fully would require another essay. Instead, what follows is a review of the tracks on this album, some of which are also closely connected with the supporters.

For the first song, "Ten Grand Goldie," Blixa put out a call live on camera to worldwide supporters, using telecommunications to talk with people in Norway, Italy, the USA: "Which word in your language do you especially like? What was the last snippet of a sentence you overheard coming out of someone else's mouth, whether or not the meaning was clear, or if the words were addressed to you?" The result is a song that pre-formulated the album epilogically, in which Bargeld's text fragments and the callers' answers got woven into a narrative. And so, "Ten Grand Goldie" enchantingly combines reflections on a city in transition with words borrowed from foreigners. Bargeld calls this process "harvesting." He picks various things together and reprocesses them.

The next song "Am Landwehrkanal" was just mentioned. It tells of the death of Rosa Luxemburg, her murder at the Eden Hotel, and how her body was thrown into the Landwehr Canal, a waterway in Berlin only 2½ meters deep. Might it not somehow connect to the previous song? With the icon of communism encountering the neo-liberal patchwork system "Ten Grand Goldie"? The dream of communism that had been envisioned falls away into the hard reality of a gentrified cemetery, which is no longer an adventure playground. A narrative emerges, also in the dialogue between the songs.

"Möbliertes Lied," which took shape over several months from May 2019 to the end of January 2020, was the first song that the band recorded for the new album. Here, Bargeld swept away everything that had gone before, exorcising old ghosts, making the music accessible, entering it like his own living space. The creation of this musical prelude became the accessway into a thoroughly spatial compilation. Nevertheless, the song wrests the album away from a stricter conceptuality through its position in the third track. We're told quite clearly that possible meanings can only be derived by revisiting a song. They only come about later. For instance, "Ein großes

Bett ist neu bezogen, freischwebend installiert.” (Clean sheets are put on a large bed, installed to hang freely.) And so, the Einstürzende Neubauten become the henchmen of an idea seeking meaning.

Anyway (here’s a short digression), the marked presence of the city of Berlin on *Alles in Allem* was not its original objective, but came about instead from a very personal path and detour. There was a song that was initially central to the album called “Welcome to Berlin,” a cynical turn of phrase in a vicious, subjective reflection on developments in Bargeld’s native city. But the piece was banned. It also wasn’t included as one of the four B-side singles, an exclusive gift in appreciation to the supporters. No, it disappeared altogether. The feeling wasn’t right. Suddenly there was a big gaping hole in the album. And just as a hole in the ground can only exist as the antithesis of the earth’s mass, the album and its reference to Berlin first emerged from the absence of this groundwork. It could only find its form through the void: Berlin as a thematic subject spread; literally crawling out of the hole. The city passed itself along from song to song, and once past the initial cynicism, it was sung about quite differently. It became more complex: indulging here, yearning there, infused with visions, then full of disgust, tangible, subtle – and never quite explicit.

But to get back to the music: “Zivilisatorisches Missgeschick” follows on the fourth track. It is another song that came about through the card system “Dave” (named after the voice of the first navigation system in Bargeld’s car). Cards are drawn from a set of 600, in a game of chance that the band developed decades ago. These cards generate instructions which the group must then convert into free associations. In this case, it led to a work that stands alongside the other songs as a short intermezzo, almost as if half asleep. In the dramaturgy of the album, however, it plays a significant role despite its brevity. It is a symbol, perhaps a statement: *Alles in Allem* also takes this path, surreptitiously like a ghost, and thereby all the more unsettling.

“Taschen” is interesting in many respects. In keeping with tradition, the band wanted to gather materials from the scrapyards at the start of the recordings to be able to develop new sounds – an essential step for the band thus far. But in the neo-liberal and bureaucratically-furrowed arena we recognize as our 21st century present, the sound researchers remained largely cut off from these adventurous places. So, just

like 40 years ago, the band had to improvise. In perplexed disbelief, Blixa Bargeld noted: “They won’t let you into the junkyards anymore – for safety and insurance reasons.” Living up to their founding myth (that in 1980 they used discarded junk in the absence of conventional instruments) the Neubauten made a virtue out of necessity. For *Alles in Allem* they decided to work with what will remain of civilization: garbage! The “Taschen” (bags) mentioned in the title refer to those box-like zippered bags, which are often used by refugees to transport their belongings. The band filled the travel bags with rags and used them for percussion, which evoked a painful allusion to the accompanying text: “Wir warten / Zwischen uns und dir / Wälzt die Wogen / Ein gefräßiges Ungetüm.” (We wait / Between you and us / Rolling waves / A voracious monster.) The references to Ghayath Almadhoun’s book of poetry *Ein Raubtier namens Mittelmeer* (a German translation of the original Arabic), opens up the context of the haunting piece. It is about flight and loss. It also vividly demonstrates how freely Blixa Bargeld interacts with his own work on a textual level. The verses sometimes leave traces in the past, tie in to them (here specifically to “Ich gehe jetzt” – *Perpetuum Mobile*, 2004), continue the writing or refer to something still to come, meandering like rootstock through the dense body of text – or proliferating like a virus.

The sixth song, “Seven Screws,” caused a sensation among the essayistic interpretations of the supporter forum – the group that could listen to the songs in the making and assiduously transcribed (and translated) the texts there. Was the author reflecting on his gender? Are the lyrics about ambivalent sexuality? Are we experiencing an outing of queerness? The songwriter smiled and remained silent. Blixa Bargeld advocates a postmodern understanding of meaning. His texts are open to the interpretations of anyone who wants to get inside them. However, he’s willing to reveal this much: For him, the idea behind the mythologically-grounded text manifests itself in one word that needs no further comment – *Uneindeutig* – nonbinary in English.

A highlight on this rich album follows, whose title-giving position may also allow for a somewhat fuller explanation. “Alles in Allem,” the album’s climactic song, a musical masterpiece oscillating between Kurt Weill and the sound of spaghetti westerns, reaped its text from the chipped flooring of an external corridor leading to

the sound studio courtyard. Yes, you read that correctly – and its documentation is preserved for posterity. Bargeld walked through the song for the supporter forum webcast. With a cameraman in tow, he revisited the text’s place of origin, pointing out those places on the ground where at least one layer of floor covering was chipped and explained how these spots created visual images for him. And a shortened truncated crocodile does lurk there, and here a windbag tries to tell something to a rock, and back there laughs a defoliation-induced tree bark pattern with a second face. That’s how it works. It can be that simple.

In “Grazer Damm” Blixa again picks up the guitar – the instrument that the left-handed musician played highly unconventionally for 20 years as a founding member of Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds. The song has no fixed time measure. All the members of the band performed simultaneously. And here, too, it was based on the card game Dave. In this song, Blixa Bargeld strides through a dream taking him back to his childhood, which he spent in the southwest of today’s German capital. The boulevard Grazer Damm was part of it and is home to clearly recognizable National Socialist architecture, which leads to an intermixing of dream and history in the lyrics.

The origins of the following song, “Wedding” (a Berlin district), can also be traced to Dave. But in this case, the musicians initially left the studio. They made a pilgrimage to five fixed coordinates in Wedding selected by chance, to make various on-site field recordings that were later inserted into the song. Mantric and set to an odd rhythm, Bargeld sings “Wedding Wedding Wedding / Wedding Ding Ding” – and again the various levels of what is documented and what is felt mix together.

The album ends with the lucid “Tempelhof.” It crystallizes a mood that had influenced the songs before it and provides a hint of a unifying thread despite their diversity. In the softly flowing final song, the notion of the “Welcome to Berlin” void, from which the city’s presence was first established, becomes evident again. In the song text, Bargeld first describes the Pantheon in Rome. Then he connects it to the airport terminal in Berlin that has been shut down for quite some time. This delicately crowning conclusion to this masterful record shows once again the great works of art that can be created when the boundaries of songwriting are broken through.

Alles in Allem is in many ways a manifestation of the mature uniqueness of this exceptional band. Wading musically in their own genre, in a category they have

created for themselves, the album draws its lyrics from extensive experience and yet remains spontaneous and fresh. It reiterates the “presentness” of the group mentioned at the beginning, although they have been active for 40 years. And in the background, the supporter forum underscores what constitutes the originality and musical journey of these experimental musicians. The band Einstürzende Neubauten has remained independent for 40 years without being cut off from the world! On the contrary, it is *Alles in Allem!*

• – Hendrik Otremba