



Cover image: The Einstürzende Neubauten symbol, based on an ancient petroglyph (rock engraving) of probably Toltec origin, that was discovered in a cave in central Mexico. According to band leader Blixa Bargeld (according to Wikipedia ...) its meaning is undefined.

R

On June 1, 1980, in Berlin, Einstürzende Neubauten recorded their first album, *Stahlmusik*. It documents a performance in a pillar of the Stadt-autobahn bridge in West Berlin. The inner core of the pillar could only be accessed through a crawl space, and candles were lit to monitor oxygen levels. Instrumentation was basic—a crude guitar and amp setup meant the tall singer, Blixa Bargeld, could play and sing if he bent almost double, while the percussionist, N.U. Unruh pounded two large bricks on oil drums on the walls of the autobahn. Surviving film shows the pair grinding slowly through a piece called “Hör mit Schmerzen” (listen with pain), but it’s the third track of the album that is most arresting. Titled “Alphabet,” it is dominated by Bargeld screaming each letter accompanied by cavernous explosions and the metallic toll of empty pipes. Language falls apart, and the other vocal sounds that smear the air around each letter become indecipherable howls in that claustrophobic cell.

H

In 2008, on their most recent album—*Alles wieder offen*—Blixa Bargeld tells us a story. With the precision of a natural scientist, he lays out the facts: “I had a word—a long, homespun one like guttering, with wheels, narrow like a dugout or something that’s meant to channel cement, no more than a model, streamlined and windswept, but mine.” Then Blixa reveals the problem with that word: “Someone has concealed the meaning from me in a corner very far away, hidden too.” And, almost as if thinking to himself, he adds “I’ve got no proof,” and drifts off into a child-like, nursery chorus, “di di di, di di di, di di di, di di di, di ...”

Beneath his vocals, a bass guitar drives the song along at a stately trot, metal strings beating like horses’ hooves across a dark landscape, until finally an answer appears:

**I had a word
an alien one, most inimical to me ...
one day it grew with little heads on either side out of my skin
then in the morning we three mustered each other in the mirror
and found it hard to believe—so unfamiliar**

somehow it then also disclosed itself to me
no longer kept itself hidden in its corner
there was the proof

Words in this world are like tumors, familiar as a fetus in fetu, a parasitical twin that grows in its own significance.

U

Blixa Bargeld: Did you know that if you take the first letter from each of the songs we have ever done it spells out the true meaning of the universe?

Mondo 2000: Really?

Blixa Bargeld: No, but I will tell you that the work is composed of many independent fragments, particles that go in different directions. This interview is itself one of these particles.

E

There is no event or thing in either animate or inanimate nature that does not in some way partake of language, for it is the nature of each one to communicate its mental contents ... An existence entirely without relationship to language is an idea; but this idea can bear no fruit even within that realm of Ideas whose circumference defines the idea of God ... God made things knowable in their names.

To whom does the lamp communicate itself? The mountain? The fox? —but here the answer is: to man. The truth of this answer is shown in human knowledge and perhaps also in art. Furthermore, if the lamp and the mountain and the fox did not communicate themselves to man, how should he be able to name them? And he names them; he communicates himself by naming them. To whom does he communicate himself?

... in the name, the mental being of man communicates itself to God.

— Walter Benjamin, “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” 1916

L

From that first assault on the German language and alphabet in 1980 to the present, Einstürzende Neubauten and Bargeld have attempted to break the language down, eviscerate it, remove the old traces of authority and recuperate it as they have done with old machines and industrial detritus. It is as if Andreas Baader and Ulrike Meinhof had seized the blackboards of Joseph Beuys—their anger and his spirituality melding in a palimpsest where chalk scrapes become song lines.

“Die Wellen” opens with muted piano chords that swell aggressively towards a climax in which Blixa Bargeld castigates the sea for its inconsistency—at one moment smooth enough to support a carpenter’s son and the next engulfing the world and its redeemers:

**I listen between the peaks of your rollers, and from the highest waves,
from breaking spume, a thousand voices break away, mine, yesterday’s
ones that I didn’t know, that otherwise just whisper, and all the others
too, and in their midst the Nazarene. Over and over again those stupen-
dous five final words: Why have you left me?**

With that sea of drowning voices, Bargeld puts his faith in the sound of the human, the breath that forms first a letter and then a word. It is the magical power of shaping air by the voice that echoes Walter Benjamin’s mystical theory of the naming of things.

Later again in the album’s penultimate song, “Susej,” Bargeld points out that the origins of the recording can be found in a guitar sound recorded in a cramped flood cellar in Hamburg. The song itself, with its coded Christian inversions, becomes a dialog between the younger singer and the older man who find they share “on the lips the same questions still about the first things, the last days or simply just about substances.” And when the younger Bargeld wants to know, “is it inscribed or was it drowned?” the later Blixa replies, “it is yet still engraved,” and ends:

**Call the astromagic off
even the Magi can go home
Susej**

They can all go home
All
Ajulellah
Ajulellah
Ajulellah
Ajulellah
Be transitory!

That sense of constant becoming or transitoriness which infuses the whole album helps connect it to the magical dimensions of the alphabet. “Susej” plays on heavy metal’s mischievous Satanic inversions, but it also taps into much deeper lore, such as the tetragrammaton, or God’s four-letter name; its use in the Kabbalah (“all that exists is founded on the mystery of this Name and upon the mystery of these letters of which it consists”); the later 20th century chaos magick emanating from artists such as Austin Osman Spare and Alistair Crowley through to writers such as Grant Morrison; and the ancient druidical language of Ogham.

S

The Ogham alphabet is used by Druids for divination—almost all of its letters are based on trees. Signs of the alphabet were engraved in sticks thrown in magic rituals or for prophecy. The trees of the Ogham alphabet were divided into three classifications, which had nothing to do with their physical form. They merely represented their order of importance to the Druids. Chieftains came first, followed by peasants and shrubs. Two symbols, the Grove and the Sea, are not actually trees; their inclusion points out the Druidic acknowledgments of the power of both the sea itself and a group of trees. The last five letters are called the Crane Bag and were given by the sea god Manannan.

— Peadar Nugent, *The Skinned Hare and the Verb*, 1969

E

The root meanings that lie behind the early Phoenician and Hebrew alphabet letters are as follows:

Ox
House
Camel
Door
Window
Hook
Weapon
Wall
Wheel
Hand
Palm (of a hand)
Goad
Water
Serpent
Fish
Eye
Mouth
Hunt
Monkey
Tooth
Mark

**The fire of languages, the fire woven into the twists of language, in the
brilliance of the earth which opens like a pregnant belly with entrails of
honey and sugar ...**

– Julia Kristeva, “The Subject in Process,” 1972

N

“Let’s Do It a Dada” is the song that dutifully pulls together the history of the band and connects it to the wellspring (“I even once bathed with the ur-text,” he sings). Blixa (a brand of pen) was partly self-named after the Dadaist Johannes Theodor Baargeld and the influence of Dada runs like a silver thread through the works of Einstürzende Neubauten. The Dadaists’ revolt against war in 1916 is echoed by the band’s revolt against the authority of postwar Germany, while both experienced a Berlin brimming with tensions and subliminal violence. The desecration of

language that marked a contempt for Western culture (“an old bitch gone in the teeth ... a botched civilization”—Ezra Pound) was paralleled by the need to retrieve the German language from those who wielded it through the Second World War. Dada provided anarchy, creative destruction and a model for performance. Einstürzende Neubauten certainly exploited it as a jumping-off point, though twenty-seven years later their music has a more stately feel—new age folk music, as they themselves boldly described it.

Oddly too, *Alles wieder offen* has as at times more in common with the forward propulsion of the Futurists. Absorbed by N.U. Unruh and co., this Futurism becomes a rattling jalopy rather than a smooth motorik engine though Marinetti would still approve as they warn us against the slow and the old in “Weil Weil Weil” (Becausecausecause):

Don't take the advice of those who've long since frittered their winter fat of opportunities you have to behead the stars and the moon and for good measure also the tsar.

And in the last song “Ich warte,” in that wide open space of possibilities, Bargeld does not look back but instead is “waiting for the new language that will be of use to me.”

B

Unvollständigkeit, or *incompleteness:* this is the sound the band has aspired to from the beginning.

It is the music of an empty factory floor and the eruption of a whirlwind—torn metal and smashed glass pulling us into its vortex. Bargeld wakes in yet another hotel room, scrambling to assemble his persona for a performance. He is too full, and so he purges himself of an alphabet of things.

I sit upright.

I rasp the slime upwards until I catch hold of it.

With two fingers I haul its thread up out of my throat, out of my body.

Hanging to it like a charm bracelet are:

a heart, my love, a bottle, a house, a coin, a horseshoe, a six, a seven,

a shamrock, a fish, a dice, a thirteen, a bell, a padlock, a key, a hammer,
a star, a moon, the sun —
and at the very end a brush whose bristles pull out the remains,
the last couple of lumps.
Clean at last. Empty at last.
I drink a large glass of water and wait. What had stuck in and
kept me worried is hanging in front of me and drying like old vegetables,
desiccated fruit.
The water finds its way. I let it, a last trickle.
A last gas, a flatus.
Empty at last.
Empty at last.
Me: my shell.

It is the emptiness of the writer behind the star and the celebrity.

E

The jug as a vessel has a basic function; to hold. We become aware of that function when we fill the jug. It would appear that it is the bottom and sides that does the holding, the material that shapes the jug. Heidegger argues that this is actually not the case. If you fill the jug with water, do you then pour it into the bottom and walls, the material? What we are doing is to pour the water between the walls and over the bottom. It is the emptiness, the void, that is holding the water. "The empty space, this nothing of the jug, is what the jug is as a holding vessel." What about the potter? If the holding is done by the void, then the potter is actually not making the jug. He shapes the clay. This shapes the void, which is where the vessel's "thingness" actually lies.

— Idun Sira on Martin Heidegger, "The Thing," *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 1971

C

Der Mund ist die Wunde des Alphabets (The mouth is the wound of the alphabet)

— Blixa Bargeld, "Blutvergiftung"

K

Oddly, paradise comes early in *Alles wieder offen*, hinted at in the enigmatic second song “Nagorny Karabach,” which tantalizingly invites us to join the singer in a mountain retreat:

**Come and pay me a visit
I have unlimited time
and the view is most lovely
over the clouds and the town
in Nagorny Karabach**

Nagorny Karabach is a landlocked state that lies within Azerbaijan. The name translates as “highland black garden,” which is echoed by Blixa Bargeld in the lyrics of this song: “I am up on my mountain in my black garden squeezed in-between the heavens in the enclave of my choice where I am hiding ...”

Armenian culture flourished in Nagorny Karabach in the 5th century under the influence of St. Mesrob Mashtots, the inventor of the Armenian alphabet, which led to the Armenian Bible. An Armenian school he founded in the Amaras Monastery near the village of Sos was the first to use his new script, and the monastery is one of the oldest Christian sites in the world.

**Once deep forests
mountain chains, maybe ice
a brass-yellow sun
perpetrates a paradise
my sys- or diastole
and between them the moment
borne by the birds
about their business here
in the enclave of my heart
where I lose myself
in Nagorny Karabach**

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