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# From DIY Avant-gardism to Icons of German New Wave: Einstürzende Neubauten and the Legacy of “Ingenious Dilletants”

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## ABSTRACT

Originating from the avant-gardist part of Berlin’s “ingenious dille-tants” of the late 1970s and early 1980s, Einstürzende Neubauten have been playing a significant role in Western popular culture for more than 40 years. This article investigates Einstürzende Neubauten’s reception and legacy-building process by using ethnographic field research and documentary analysis. The analysis focuses the dimensions of musical traditions and innovations within the Neue Deutsche Welle (German New Wave) movement, the artistic and philosophic approach of the “dilletants” as well as the social and local context of Berlin during the times of Cold War.

## KEYWORDS

New Wave; Neue Deutsche Welle; ingenious dille-tants; Avantgarde; DIY; Berlin

## Introduction

In 2015, the German Goethe Institute set up a touring exhibition on *Geniale Dilletanten: Subkultur der 1980er-Jahre in Deutschland (Brilliant Dilletants<sup>1</sup>: German Subculture during the 1980s)*, which shows the history of German New Wave, its innovative potential, and the cultural memory associated with this formative and iconic era of German popular music during the late 1970s and ‘80s (see *Geniale Dilletantents*). The event, which was very well received by the international arts and music press made its way around the world during the second half of the 2010s, reaching as far as Australia where it was featured in Melbourne’s RMIT gallery.

During the same period, Einstürzende Neubauten (Collapsing New Buildings) were once more appearing at international festivals like Primavera Sound 2015 as well as in classical concert halls and opera houses as they have done since the mid-1980s. In 2020, the year of their 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary, they released their current album *Alles in Allem (All in All)* (see Shryane, *Blixa* 194; Koch 146; Liebert). As an essential part of Berlin’s Ingenious Dilletants and as (co-)founders of the experimental and avant-garde noise scene then, Einstürzende Neubauten remain at the time of writing active and popular. Their early experimental musical style—originating from self-constructed metal drums, machines, and tools like pneumatic drills or circular saws—was widely atonal and became known as

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*machine music*. The band also used unusual recording settings like, for example, in the void of a highway bridge. Together with the other “dilletant” groups of the time, like Die Tödliche Doris or Mania D, they have always been sharply distinct from other parts of the German post punk and new wave scene—especially from the commercially successful Neue Deutsche Welle acts like Nena or IDEAL (Jäger 142). Thus, this group of artists and bands originating in Berlin in 1980 have written a history of their own—at an artistic, philosophical as well as at a socio-spatial level (Ryszka; Shryan, *Blixa*). The perception of ingenious dillettantes seems to be the striking aspect of (international) iconic recognition, fandom, and collective memory related to this German-based music and its heritage as a scene that originated from the post-punk era in the Cold-War setting of the former West Berlin.

Drawing on such perceptions of these bands, and also on the alternative history written by the bands, this article aims to reveal the cultural legacy and heritage associated with ingenious dillettants by focusing on the group Einstürzende Neubauten as their musically most influential and still active part. Therefore, the analysis relates existing work on their esthetic and performative strategies, the artistic approach, and the social surroundings of late 1970s Berlin to question the group’s building of cultural memory, their continuing relevance, and the role of local narratives and the situation in Berlin in the late 1970s, for their initial appearance and development of a legacy associated with nihilism and collapse (Bettencourt 351).

Methodically, the article uses ethnographic materials and documentary analysis. Further, available academic research about the work of ingenious dillettants and Einstürzende Neubauten (Carpenter; Bettencourt; Shryane, *Blixa*; Ryszka) has been integrated for secondary analysis related to the questions explained above. In addition to these few but very valuable academic perspectives on German New Wave and ingenious dillettants (Longerich; Shryane, *Blixa*; Hornberger), the article refers to broader concepts of scene space, DIY, and popular music as cultural memory (Bennett and Peterson; Connell and Gibson; McKay; Bennett and Rogers). In order to widen the analytical perspective, this examination also uses ethnographic materials—from historical reflections on German punk, new wave, and ingenious dillettants (Reynolds; Müller; Teipel), press materials, and interviews as well as documentaries and the catalog of the exhibition mentioned above, including accompanying articles and essays.

Using these documents and their factual information, I will trace and analyze the legacy of this scene. Therefore, the first part of this essay will provide a general approach to German post punk and new wave as heritage and, in doing so, provide some historical context for the emergence of Einstürzende Neubauten and the ingenious dillettants. Although Einstürzende Neubauten never understood themselves as punks—“We are not punks and we were never punks” (Bargeld, qtd. in Rüth)—this is an important precondition to capture the spirit and the dynamics that fueled their artistic and esthetic approach. The second part of the article offers a closer look at the local avant-garde scene in Berlin around the year 1980. Here, the emergence, structure, and collective identity of ingenious dillettants will be gathered and linked to the local situation of West Berlin as an isolated enclave during the Cold War period. The final part then examines the legacy of Einstürzende Neubauten by analyzing their peculiarities in regards to their artistic approach, their upholding of punk’s destructive strategies and DIY strategies as well as the impact of space and place within their cultural heritage.

## Post Punk and New Wave in Germany

Studying cultural memory and heritage—or even a lasting legacy ascribed to distinct styles, scenes, or artists—always involves capturing and discussing the history of a specific kind of collective identity associated with cultural practices, social circumstances, and socio-spatial constellations of the past. As such, heritage practice “distils the past into icons of identity, bonding us with precursors and progenitors, with our own earlier selves, and with promised successors” (David Lowenthal, qtd. in Brandellero and Janssen 229). According to current work on popular music heritage, narratives—often closely linked to unique local contexts, bands, and venues are an important aspect of forming emotional and identificatory potentials for individuals (van der Hoeven 209; Connell and Gibson 90). In this sense, memory “is something that individuals can collectively ‘work on’ to produce a particular representation of the past . . . and their collective understanding of how particular cultural circumstances in the past have helped to shape the present” (Bennett and Rogers 38). Within local or trans-local music scenes understood as alternative cultural infrastructures and contexts of common musical tastes and collectivity (Peterson and Bennett 1), specific spatial environments and place represent important factors of this kind of memory-building. Here, the production of meaning and legacy is the process in which “popular music artists, song texts and various examples of associated material culture become inscribed with forms of collective emotional and aesthetic meaning with a built-in longevity” (Bennett and Rogers 43).

In the case of ingenious diletants and *Einstürzende Neubauten* as sub-scene of the German post punk movement called *Neue Deutsche Welle* (German New Wave, NDW), this process cannot be fully retraced without getting into the broader context and places of NDW. After punk hit the UK in 1976, the first German punk movement formed in the course of 1977. Despite the quite short period of German punk and new wave, which lasted only until 1983, the movement evolved in different social as well as artistic directions and esthetic forms (Shryane, *Blixa* 42–46; Hornberger). “Although many activists had come to punk for similar reasons, the scene quickly diverged” (Koch 134). One part of this was the German New Wave (*Neue Deutsche Welle*, NDW), which was firstly described by music journalist Alfred Hilsberg and in the following years has been designated as an umbrella term of all new German music from that time. Though, from a more differentiated point of view, it is worth briefly considering the history and the different strands in order to comprehend the developments and shifts within the German punk movement, from which German New Wave, ingenious diletants, and *Einstürzende Neubauten* have originated from 1979 onwards.

Punk in Germany started as an underground culture, especially with the formation of four central scenes in the cities of Hamburg, Hannover, Düsseldorf, and West Berlin. Compared to their role model of British punks, where punk was a phenomenon originating from a broader range of social backgrounds, “German New Wavers came from a fairly well-off German middle class. This meant that their songs and music manifested ‘the boredom and indifference of youths whose parents provided for their financial security and who did not know what to do with themselves’” (Larkey 240, quoting Longerich).

This has not only caused a quick conversion of punk and art, as for example in Düsseldorf, that became well known for its art punk scene (Longerich), but also led to

a more sophisticated view and integration of concepts of artistic destruction and protest as, for example, Dadaism (Hieber and Moebius 9) and Walter Benjamin's argument for destructive characters making room for the new (Bettencourt 349).

So, punk and NDW in Germany have to be understood in differentiated ways, especially as punk did not keep its initial form for long. In contrast, after a short period of imitating reception of "the British original," "[t]he raw, unbridled power of English punk caused countless German musicians and music fans to rethink their approach to music . . . and understood the new music they were now trying to make as the result of a way of thinking" (Longerich 54).<sup>2</sup> Hence, punk's revolutionary power encouraged many German musicians to break with the rock tradition of punk music and to start more experimental forms of music using German lyrics. Beside the "basic" punk motivation of getting over the assimilated 1960s' counterculture, to destroy the social order and to overcome the lack of perspective for the young generation, Winfried Longerich identifies two important cultural influences fueling the esthetic differentiation within German New Wave (54–57). First, the meaning and inspirational power of Krautrock and bands like Can and Kraftwerk and their experimentation since the early 1970s, that foster the integration of electronics and non-familiar sounds into the "new music."<sup>3</sup> Second, the development of a suitable German language for critical rock music by Udo Lindenberg and Ton Steine Scherben—as well as its usage by early German punk icon Nina Hagen as a mixture between art song and rock intonation—has been crucial for the emergence of NDW. Compared to the difficulties of German language and identity in popular music after World War II, these pioneers enabled NDW to "reintroduce colloquial speech and subcultural idioms into lyrics, thus affording bands the opportunity to sing about genuine personal feelings or frustrations, distinguishing them from . . . Schlager in their openness, anxiety, and sensitivity" (Larkey 241; see also Vowinkel 470).

As a result of increasing experimentation with new ways of musical expression under punk's destructive attitude, the scene quickly starts to divide between the part insisting on keeping the musical punk(–rock) tradition, and the other focusing on their creativity to reshape and to expand their musical understanding and esthetic expression (Longerich 59). In the end punk and new wave (NDW) divided at the musical and social level:

The differences between punk and "new music" by no means refer only to the musical, but also include the lifestyle. The gap between pogo and avant-garde eventually widens to such an extent that the common style and scene term "punk" no longer holds water. . . . 1979 becomes the key year for the splitting off of the NDW, now the first records appear with sounds that quite obviously no longer correspond to what had been understood as punk up until then. (Hornberger 100)

If there still was a shared motivation and strategy of music production, this can only be seen in the formation of an alternative and DIY-driven infrastructure of music distribution containing labels (e.g. ZickZack, Atatak, or Eigelstein), distribution networks (e.g. Rip Off, Zensor) and venues (e.g. SO36, Ratinger Hof, Markthalle) handling and hosting punk as well as new wave, and, at the same time, becoming important platforms for ingenious dilettants (Longerich; Hornberger).

The consideration of at least four different sub-scenes in West Berlin exemplifies the heterogeneity of punk and new wave in particular. Beside the initial punk scene mainly originating from Kreuzberg, at least three different strands of NDW "sub-scenes" evolved

between 1978 and 1980 (Longerich 82–89). Firstly, there was a rather politically oriented part deriving from the original punk scene with bands like Katapult or Äztussis. Using a rather simple and aggressive sound, this fraction particularly “expressed their socio-political concerns in the description of the most elementary and immediate living conditions: realistic impressions of Berlin; descriptions of the living situation in the big city; and, above all, a description of the social and economic situation in the city” (Longerich 85).

Whereas this part seems to be quite close to “traditional punk,” the second and rather commercial orientated strand represents its counterpart. Mostly rooted in an earlier and more or less alternative rock tradition, groups like IDEAL and Spliff “admitted that they utilized the NDW movement in order to become known . . . and to be discovered by the record industry” (Longerich 83). In this sense, IDEAL and Spliff became two of the most well-known NDW bands despite having no direct links to the former punk and early NDW movement. Regarding their musical and artistic evaluation, it is not surprising that the work of the commercial fraction is merely seen as modest in the best sense (see Longerich 84).

This, for sure, cannot be said about the third sub-scene, the artists and avant-gardists. As Longerich points it out: “This is the most interesting scene of the German New Wave. Here, musical and linguistic developments took place that are unprecedented for the entire NDW. . . . Something ‘new’ was brought forth, which for the first time had not been created under Anglo-American influence” (86). A notion, that is also true for some other, especially Düsseldorf based bands of the time, as particularly in the case of DAF. That said, the Berlin-based scene described is exactly the group of artists and bands who later become known as ingenious dilettants. “The scene was mainly shaped by experimental bands like Einstürzende Neubauten, Mania D., DIN-A-Testbild, Sprung aus den Wolken, Geile Tiere, and other genre-defying acts like Die Tödliche Doris, Mechanik Destruktiv Komandoe [M.D.K.]” (Jäger 141). Using various materials and instruments for sonic experimentation, lyrics related to Dadaism and the expectation of an upcoming apocalypse, this kind of esthetic and artistic ideas became a phenomenon strongly related to West Berlin and a scene, in which “. . . no one was a professional; decisions were driven by enthusiasm, energy, drugs, and a commitment to the ideals of DIY art as life” (Shryane, *Blixa* 42).

It is actually this artistic innovation by avant-gardists which has to be seen as the musical heritage of German New Wave—the playful, in parts artsy usage of German language and the shifting of frontiers of what can be understood as music (Koch 137). Together with DIY policy and the establishment of an alternative music infrastructure, NDW actors, music, and their texts—as well as the associated places inscribed in a collective sense of identity (Bennett and Rogers 43).

But whereas this movement was already significantly appreciated for its cultural innovation by Anglo-American music media like *NME*, *Melody Maker*, or radio DJ John Peel from its early days (Hilsberg 231), in Germany, NDW has been rather associated with the more commercial acts from the early 1980s than with the experimental part of the scene. The reason for this can be found in the avant-gardists strict refusal of the music industry and in the dynamic and parallel developments within the different strands of NDW (Walter 151). Even when this is said about broad parts of the NDW, “it is only in this underground, that the original spirit of the punk revolution has been preserved” (Hagen 54).

Hence, one does not only have to differentiate between the different trajectories among NDW, but also between various processes of memory production and legacy building. Referring to the Berlin underground and specifically to West Berlin's Ingenious Dilletants, the question would be how this scene was able to produce its own lasting heritage and how this can be specified and differentiated from NDW as a kind of DIY and grassroots based "self-authorized memory" as Roberts and Cohen put it (248). And for instance, what specific legacy surrounds the more than 40-year enduring career of *Einstürzende Neubauten* as a former part of the dilettants-scene? Therefore, the next section focuses on the formation of the Berlin avant-gardists scene discussing their initial motivation, their artistic and performative approach as well as the role of the narrative of the former "Wall City" of Berlin for building legacy.

### **Memory Building, and Collective Identity of West Berlin's Ingenious Dilletants**

The local situation in Berlin during the late 1970s and early 1980s represents a crucial precondition to understanding the formation of ingenious dilettants and the processes of memory building surrounding them. The fact, that the city had been divided by the Berlin Wall since 1961—turning West Berlin into a Western enclave within in the territory of the former German Democratic Republic, leads to a very specific social and spatial situation. "The Quadripartite Agreement of 1972 reaffirms the four World War II Allies' supreme control over the entire metropolis, West and East; the pact only permits 'ties' between West Germany and West Berlin to be 'maintained and developed'" ("West Berlin" 129). The Cold War and geopolitical tensions have always been culminating there, especially during the end of the 1970s when this conflict entered its last phase (Breyvogel 86). At the same time, and additionally to this inconvenience, the effects of World War II have still been evident in the ruins and reconstruction projects all over the city (Bettencourt 350). Berlin has been in a state of collapse, buildings in a state of disrepair, and was recalled "as a gray isolated place, which looked bombed out and very brittle" (Dax and Defcon, qtd. in Ryszka 31).

This very special environment, as research among music scenes and their geographical embeddedness clearly implies, seems to provide highly specific potentials regarding local narratives and socio-spatial conditions representing localized resources for creative and artistic expression (Bennett 60–63). In this sense, the music community of the time and their artistic processes have to be related to these circumstances, according to the notion that "music is made in specific geographical, socio-economic and political contexts, and lyrics and styles are always likely to reflect the positions of writers and composers within these contexts" (Connell and Gibson 90). As a closer look at 1970s Berlin reveals, the situation and atmosphere for cultural activity manifests as being twofold.

### **1970s Berlin and Its Local Subculture**

Imaging the social and spatial dynamics of West Berlin during that period of time, the already enduring political crisis of geopolitical tensions found themselves confronted by further negative socio-political impact. "In the political arena the cataclysmic consciousness that arose in the nineteen-seventies and eighties is a response in particular to

ecological disaster and nuclear threat” (Schütz 132). Following the economic crisis of the early 1970s, especially in cities of the Western world, the conflict among the question of the use of space culminated around the year 1980: Zurich, Berlin, Amsterdam, London, and Birmingham were central places of youth protest and squatting, pitted against housing speculation and the exclusion of poorer sections of the population (Breyvogel 86). In Berlin, this situation was exacerbated with some postwar buildings collapsing in 1980<sup>4</sup> and a construction scandal in 1981 (Lanz 212); several dozen homes that had been purchased and left vacant by real estate speculators during an acute housing shortage were occupied by squatters at that time, manifesting “Lieber instand besetzen als kaputt besitzen” (“Better occupy and renovate than own and wreck”) (“West Berlin” 131).

But despite the depressing social and critical political conditions, the city has become a reservoir for alternative cultural production since the 1960s, mainly because of two important facts: the special legal circumstances that inhabitants of Berlin have been exempt from military service and the permissiveness of the city, that considered culture and cultural activity as a vital force against the Eastern Block (“West Berlin” 129; Shryane, *Blixa* 65). This has led an influx of especially young and progressive-thinking Germans, “giving rise to a large dissident population of squatters and students, who take to the streets at the drop of a brick” (Bohn). For these people, living under the given circumstances even increased the feeling of a free life:

The feeling of freedom in the western part of Berlin was immeasurable. Here met all those who wanted to lead an alternative, free and unconventional life in some form or other. . . . [Y]ou didn’t have to join the armed forces, could live cheaply and had one thing above all else: plenty of potential for going out without curfew. Legendary places like Dschungel, Sound, Risiko and SO36 ensured that the nightlife in the districts of Schöneberg and Kreuzberg pulsed. (Synkova)

Towards the end of the 1970s, the alternative cultural infrastructure of backroom record stores, illegal bars, and clubs exploded as different movements (punks, squatters, gays, students) interacted with each other forming a new rebellious and active kind of youth culture (see Ryszka 7; Teipel 7–8).

Indeed, especially in the late 1970s and in the 1980s, Berlin hosted a tremendous diversity of culture and subculture. It seems to be permanently bubbling here, the mixture of intellectualism and the drug scene, and the “powder keg” touch that the enclosed city has in the middle of the Cold War give the city a morbidly gloomy charm that is not only a true El Dorado for the punk scene. (Hornberger 155)

Incorporating the highly contrasting atmospheres of being at the edge of apocalypse and at the same time representing a center of freedom and excessive alternative lifestyle, Berlin became a unique and even iconic place to live and work—especially within the mythology of popular music:

Berlin has at times become an important site . . . as a place with its own “sound,” and “feel.” The roots of this reputation date from the 1920s and 1930s, when Berlin was a famous centre for jazz, hedonism, political conflict, cabaret and night life. During the 1970s and 1980s, in a dramatically altered post-war environment, this reputation remained an attraction. . . . Berlin . . . represented a location, with a political and cultural style, that somehow combined pre-war hedonism with post-war geopolitical tensions. (Connell and Gibson 104–105)

As in other cases, like Montreal, for example (Stahl 51–64), in Berlin an influential music scene grew from a city in crisis. But following on the meaning of the specific situation and state of isolation, which John Connell and Chris Gibson (93) compare to Iceland’s music scene of the 1990s, Berlin not only provided an inspiring ground for local or German artists and musicians, but far beyond. “This influence has been translated into musical expression, evident in recordings made by Iggy Pop and David Bowie” (Connell and Gibson 104). Other Anglo-American musicians, including Nick Cave, Depeche Mode and Brian Eno have also been fascinated by the city’s specific atmosphere.

Although these artists and their relationship to 1970s and ‘80s Berlin mainly has to be seen as a result and further popularization of the mythology of Berlin as an isolated creative biotope—nevertheless this also might have fueled the memory-building processes among the local scene of that time. Following John Connell and Chris Gibson (111), Berlin’s authenticity and mythology mainly emerged from the inside and from an innovative generation of Berlin—or at least Western Germany—based artists and musicians.

The new noises emerging from West Berlin and especially from the young bohemian lifestyles . . . rebellion and struggle were taken more seriously here . . . people fixated on the imminent downfall . . . they now even celebrated it. . . Industrial noise, archaic electronics, percussion pounded on hardware stolen from building sites and saxophones played with a complete lack of skill. (Diederichsen 15–16)

These aspects, bohemian intellectuality, rebellious experimentation, and DIY avant-gardism within a chaotic political and socio-spatial environment exactly describe the environment that Ingenious Dilletants emerged from.

### The Emergence of Ingenious Dilletants

The Ingenious Dilletants originated from Berlin’s avant-garde orientated NDW scene as a more or less loose group of artists and musicians comprising bands like Einstürzende Neubauten, Die Tödliche Doris, and Mania D. (later Malaria) (Longerich 87–88). The group’s name derived from the intentionally misspelled festival entitled Die große Untergangsshow—Festival genialer Dilletanten (The Great Show of Doom—Festival of Ingenious Dilletants) held on 4 September 1981, at Tempodrom, an alternative circus tent next to the Berlin Wall, and has become a synonym for this period of artistic change in Germany (Weh, “Soul Burning” 6; “West Berlin” 130f.). Actually, the term *Ingenious Dilletants* was used intentionally by the group in order to tease the press (Teipel 314)—something that worked very effectively: “The media success was much more beautiful than the concert. . . . Now everybody uses the term *Geniale Dilletanten* for every non-describable music, especially if it comes from Berlin” (Bargeld, qtd. in Bohn). Hence, the scene made a claim for labeling as soon as it was emerging and, therefore, was also perceived and appreciated at an international level, as press coverage in well-known music magazines such as *NME* illustrates: “In the headily claustrophobic confines of the walled city. . . . Geniale Dilletanten have cultivated a consumptive and highly contagious virus

based on the city's *Untergang* mythos... Their refusal to compromise is finally paying off, as the worse things get, the more appropriate they sound" (Bohn).

In artistic means, they represent a "movement of Dadaists, dopes and filmmakers that flourished around the group—provide the most perfect expression of the moment. . . . The proliferation of groups in Berlin beating metal and junk is astonishing, as is the numbers of people turning out to watch men at work" (Bohn). Using the city and various materials as crafting tools and scrap metal as instruments, their artistic "work" was also "marked by cross-genre experimentation and the use of new electronic equipment developed particularly in and around art schools" (Weh, "Soul Burning" 6; see also Shryane, *Blixa*; Ryszka). For example, the group *Die Tödliche Doris* (Deadly Doris), founded by art students Wolfgang Müller and Nikolaus Utermöhlen, has not been a band in a conventional sense. As a performance act they produced art, installations, and literature referring to themselves and their changing lineup as "popstars without body" (Weh, "Die Tödliche" 64).

Whereas some literature situates ingenious dilettants rather to avant-garde pop than NDW (Jäger 142), the self-understanding of being "dilettants" strongly refers to a DIY ethos and artistic self-empowerment (McKay; Spencer). Within the manifest *Ingenious Dilettants*, published as a book by Müller in 1982, they not only reflect in their anti-professionalism claim that everybody can be an artist, but also explicitly explain their approach of shifting boundaries in what can be understood as art or music being based on critical art movements such as Dadaists and Fluxus (Weh, "Soul Burning" 6; Hieber and Moebius 7–8). In their view, anti-professionalism is able to liberate artistic work and to extend the understanding of what is music or art:

Dilettantism in musical fields has nothing to do with stagnation through non-professionalism—quite the contrary—development involving all possible and supposedly impossible fields can find a universal expression to which the professionals are helplessly inferior. . . . With the endless chain of refinement and complication of instruments/recording techniques . . . dilettantism can provocatively cause a shock by attacking this so-called progress . . . with noise and crash. (Müller 11–12)

Vice-versa, these kinds of strategies clearly correspond to one of the main motivations of the punk movement—to destroy the music industry and arena rock as a dominant form of 1970s' popular music.

There were various concrete enemies dilettantism had to do battle with [like] the exorbitant technology of so-called arena rock. In favour of the opposite approach of technical simplicity was the democratic-egalitarian argument of easier access to cheaper and simpler equipment, but also the aesthetic argument of the raw sound—blessed by contingency of lo-tech. (Diederichsen 13–14)

Therefore, the members of ingenious dilettants applied different strategies in performing and creation that in recent academic work has been put in relation to Artaud's concept of "the theatre of cruelty" (Shryane, "Sprich"; Shryane, *Blixa*; Ryszka), Benjamin's concept of "destructive character" (Shryane, *Blixa*; Bettencourt; Benjamin), and the imploding architecture of Berlin as a sign of catastrophe culture (Schütz 131). Whereas these philosophical references will be further regarded in the section below, the following considerations will provide some insights regarding performance techniques that describe common

characteristics among the artists and bands representing the dillettants as “comedy, lustful play and pain” (Müller 14).

First of all, the performances of ingenious dillettants groups were rather related to the body than to composing and revealed a concept of “working music” focusing on energetic expression and immediacy. “For them, the act of creation is physically and emotionally draining work, the tools for which are pneumatic drills, Black & Decker power tools, bits of girder, tangled strands of steel, led mallets, crowbars, old radios, bass and guitars” (Bohn). Within this “work,” free experimentation and sound exploration have been key elements of “musicking:” “Each ‘musical worker’ therefore had the opportunity to ‘play freely’ and improvise until they sometimes fell into a rhythmic unison that often put the ‘workers’ into a trance-like state and gave them a kind of community feeling” (Longerich 164).

At the level of textual meaning, the Dillettants used Dadaist language and sarcastic lyrics, as, for example, in songs like “Sieben tödliche Unfälle im Haushalt” (Seven Fatal Household Accidents) by Die Tödliche Doris (Weh, “Die Tödliche” 64). In many cases, the lyrics also described nihilistic fantasies related to downfall and the apocalypse—often clearly deriving from the experience of architecture and life in West Berlin, as, for example, Einstürzende Neubauten’s first album *Kollaps* (Collapse) clearly depicts (Shryane, *Blixa* 15–17; Ryszka 14). Accordingly, Diedrich Diederichsen summarizes the esthetics of the Dillettants as a combination of “sarcasm plus post-modern anti-authenticity plus originality achieved by avoiding all standards of craftsmanship—grasped and applied at an increasing pace” (21–22).

Another important aspect of ingenious dillettants represents the ethos of working independently and on a DIY base (Ryszka 28–29). Beginning by distributing their music on cassettes, dillettants bands worked with DIY labels in establishing the new wave and punk infrastructure or found their own publishing companies as, for example, Einstürzende Neubauten, did with Freibank in 1986 and later become pioneers in crowd funding by initiating a supporters’ initiative (Ryszka 29; Shryane, *Blixa* 194–95).

Incorporating these values in an outstanding and enduring way, Einstürzende Neubauten are considered as one of the most influential groups of ingenious dillettants—in terms of esthetical innovation and DIY policy as well as in terms of the dillettants’ performance philosophies and their lyrical and musical link to the depressive and brittle appearance of Cold War West Berlin. In the next section, this aspect of the band will be subject to further scrutiny in order to examine the legacy-building processes that have evolved around them.

## The Legacy of Einstürzende Neubauten

Einstürzende Neubauten, initially founded by Blixa Bargeld for a performance on 1 April 1980, at Moon Club in West Berlin, comprise forming members N.U. Unruh, Gudrun Gut (also Mania D.) and Beate Bartel (also Mania D.). After some fluctuation during the initial phase, in 1981 the lineup consolidated around Blixa Bargeld, N.U. Unruh, FM Einheit, Mark Chung, and Alexander Hacke. Bargeld und Unruh, as being natively born West Berliners make up an important aspect of the band’s development as this can be directly linked to their strong relationship to the landscape and architecture of

post-World War II Berlin during the early period of their work (Ryszka 37; Shryane, *Blixa* 5).

While Einstürzende Neubauten used conventional instruments for their first appearances, a shortage of finances led to the selling off of the band's drum kit and the construction of what became known as N.U. Unruh's steel drum and their radically experimental gear made from "a range of percussive instruments from found scrap metal and everyday objects including steel elements, oil barrels, hammers, electric drills, and saws, completed by an untuned electric guitar and Bargeld's blood-curdling screams" (Weh, "Einstürzende" 38).

The recording of a performance of their first single "Stahlmusik" (Steelmusic) by German Music TV show *Rockpalast* within the hollow of a motorway bridge in summer 1980 marked an early highlight of their career (Maeck 108). After experiencing rejection by large parts of the NDW and punk-based audience outside Berlin during their first German tour, the band did not perform in Germany outside West Berlin for almost two years (Teipel 314). This situation clearly depicts the separation of punk, NDW and avant-garde scenes in Germany at that time, when there were hostile arguments regarding artistic performance and musical expectations within each of the local scenes. So, whereas the band internationally was appreciated from a broader alternative (popular) music audience from the beginning, in their early time, beside the new wave avant-garde, in Germany, Einstürzende Neubauten have rather been "darlings of the fine arts" (Zips).

In contrast, their first album *Kollaps* released in 1981 on German label Zick Zack Records—strongly referring to the socio-spatial situation of West-Berlin (Ryszka 33)—immediately earned the band international acclaim. "Largely improvised, its radical noise aesthetics turned conventional listening habits on their head. This was followed by concerts in 1982 at the Paris Biennale and documenta 7 in Kassel" (Weh, "Einstürzende" 38). After signing on UK independent labels Some Bizarre and Mute with some help of JG Thirlwell (Foetus) for the following releases (Reynolds 490), the band continued to appear in an international context, especially among North America, the UK, Japan, and Germany (Chung, qtd. in "Das Prinzip"), making a name for their excessive and sometimes destructive ways of performing:

Very important was the fatal performance at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London in 1984 . . . where we mainly used voices, construction machinery and cement. It had been agreed with the ICA that the whole thing should last no longer than 25 minutes. But nobody in the audience knew that. And when the loudspeaker system started having problems, people thought the concert would be stopped. In a kind of mass riot they demolished the whole hall, so that the ICA had to be closed for renovation and we ended up on the front page of the Sun. The effect was gigantic. Suddenly we were perceived as a greatness. (Bargeld, qtd. in Storn)

During the course of the 1980s, the band evolved from their experimental spontaneity to more identifiably conceptual artists; random noises were increasingly replaced by consciously implemented sounds, and also their records became more comprehensible (Koch 146; Shryane, *Blixa*; Weh, "Einstürzende" 38). At the same time, their artistic activities differentiated and they "increasingly became involved in theatre, cultural and film projects . . . collaborating with renowned directors and dramatists such as Peter Zadek, Heiner Müller, Werner Schwab and Leander Haussmann" (Weh, "Einstürzende" 38).

Hence, originating from an underground DIY context, the band not only contributed to innovations in popular music and music performance, but also established a reputation in the fine arts. Though, the band has been following their invariant values and a never-ending pursuit of the new. “While Einstürzende Neubauten’s more recent albums have certainly become more lyrical and song-like. ... [T]he group’s output in general remains largely noncommercial. Einstürzende Neubauten’s music was and is experimental, designed primarily for live performance” (Carpenter 162). Whereas the band is still relevant after four decades of their existence, the legacy of Einstürzende Neubauten builds on three major aspects, that on the one hand derives from their values and on the other especially from their early times: Their innovative artistic potential, their radical and DIY-oriented philosophy and their association with local narratives of 1970s and ‘80s West-Berlin.

### Aesthetic and Performative Innovations

As the very valuable studies on Einstürzende Neubauten’s artistic work by Jennifer Shryan and Michael Ryszka as well as additional material point out, the esthetic and performative innovations of Einstürzende Neubauten are manifold. Due to their art on sound experiments, they had an impact on multiple kinds of popular music and along with Kraftwerk and Can are one of the most internationally influential German bands in popular music. “Today, creating sounds through objects is common practice. Einstürzende Neubauten pioneered this and shaped genres such as industrial, but also techno and electropop” (Kressmann). At the same time, the Ingenious Dilletants’ experimental and destructive visions, corresponding to the intentions of punk, as well as their “performances and recordings—comprising ‘noise-intensive, rhythmically ritual anti-pop’—were intended as a declaration of war on conventional music, and as ‘an antidote for the frightened, paralyzed and media-sedated masses’” (Carpenter 159). Especially in their early period, the expression of downfall and apocalypse met the mood of the time as highlighted on *Kollaps*: “The end times conjured up in *Kollaps* become the occasion for an excessive intensification of life with romanticistic death overtones that incorporate ruination. Here, the imagined ruinous serves to enhance the ego on the brink of destruction” (Schütz 135). In this sense, Neubauten and their memory is always associated with radical avant-gardism and destruction, on which they based their ongoing career (Shryane, *Blixa* 83–85).

Nevertheless, the band can also be related to the rock tradition. As Jennifer Shryane (*Blixa* 36–41) and Albrecht Koch (144) point out, the musical roots of *Einstürzende Neubauten* can on the one hand be found in German Krautrock, for example in *Can*’s hypnotic rhythms or *Amon Düül*’s dark sounding atmosphere. On the other, the lyrics and especially Bargeld’s aggressive and ecstatic vocals are reminiscent of the late 1960s political rock group *Ton Steine Scherben* and their singer, Rio Reiser. “Ton Steine Scherben’s lyrics demonstrated a commitment to a utopian anarchy of solidarity” (Shryane, *Blixa* 37), Neubauten can be seen as a nihilistic counterpart addressing the impossible reconstruction of the collapsing city (Bettencourt 350). In this sense, the influence of Einstürzende Neubauten and ingenious dilletants is obvious for the development of rock music, e.g. industrial (Carpenter 154–55), and especially for German rock

lyrics—here especially in regards to critical German language, for example as a model for parts of the so-called Hamburg School (Diederichsen 22).

In terms of performance, the band is highly associated with the idea of a working body and the notion of turning live concerts into avant-gardist performances. This firstly derives from spontaneous and improvised stage arrangements as “the band often spent the afternoon before the concert at the junkyard gathering materials for that evening’s performance” (Dax and Defcon 91–92). In this sense, and mainly during their early years, performances were marked by disorder representing an anti-approach to conventional performances in popular music: “With us. . . structures have emerged from chaos—and not vice versa. . . The chaos, the uncreated, the jumble—and never serving the expectation. Even if you have to change for it” (Bargeld, qtd. in Dax 127–28).

Secondly, the integration of the body as an active element in “working music” has been a key element of Neubauten’s performances. Here, “the pain refers to the intensity and presence in performance not excessive and deliberate use or abuse of bodies as performance tools” (Shryane, *Blixa* 88). Nevertheless, highlighting physical intensity also refers to the integration of destructive elements into performing as mentioned above. “Destruction for us was never destruction in the sense of an act of violence. It has always served us rather to create space. Even though many things broke on stage and I have suffered various scars and broken bones over the years” (Bargeld, qtd. in Storn).

Thus, the aim of changing conventions and transgressing borders within musical performance can also be understood as a legacy of Neubauten, which set the band in a continuum between music and performing art, and directly links to the band’s philosophical approach.

### **Philosophical Background and DIY Approach**

“Einstürzende Neubauten means: the existing, the now, has had its time, it’s used up, put into question. Something new is invented. It means constant change. You must destroy to build” (Unruh, qtd. in Dax and Defcon 94). Based on notions and references made by the band members, Einstürzende Neubauten’s philosophical approach strongly refers to the concept of destructive character introduced by critical theorist Walter Benjamin (396–98). In esthetic as in socio-political terms, Benjamin demands making room for the new, which is closely linked to the artistic realization of doom in Neubauten’s early work. “The downfall or collapse for which Neubauten wished to dance . . . in 1980 was directed at bringing down . . . the post-war structures of the Wirtschaftswunder, its escapist pop Schlager and the occupiers culture to reinvent their own untainted traditions” (Shryane, “Sprich” 325). As a sophisticated version of punk strategies, Einstürzende Neubauten used the ruin as a symbol of complex temporalities related to a present dystopian utopia (Bettencourt 352). In their artistic work, this leads to a radical focus on the now and here: “Neubauten’s sonic and textual landscapes reflect Benjamin’s denial of the past as simply that which is no more and which culminates in the present” (Shryane, *Blixa* 77). In this sense, destruction is a mantra of a never-ending renewal and the exclusion of any repetition.

It is quite interesting here, that the band has been quite familiar with Benjamin’s concept from the beginning, as academic work on Einstürzende Neubauten (Carpenter 159–60; Bettencourt 350) as well as various statements by Blixa Bargeld in interviews and

media contributions show (Storn). In combination with the manifest *Geniale Dilletanten* (Müller), pointing to ideas of avant-garde movements like Dadaists and Fluxus, this clearly points to the band's avant-garde approach. Even more as Benjamin's idea "to make room" was complemented by the band's reference to radical performance according to Antonin Artaud.

Einstürzende Neubauten's approach to ... performance was driven by the ideas of the futurists, by French dramaturge Antonin Artaud's notions of the theatre of cruelty—rejecting traditional approaches to performance in favour of an elemental, energetic and irrational aesthetic, in order to provoke powerful emotional audience responses. (Carpenter 159)

The description of Neubauten's approach to performance corresponds to the idea of musical performance as a total experience for both artists and audience. In the case of *Einstürzende Neubauten*, this occurs in different ways: "1. Neubauten's use of the body, which foregrounds neglect, disease, risk, reduction and dance; 2. their extension of what constitutes musical performance ... 3. their vocalization as non-phonemic, incantatory expression and their use of the scream" (Shryane, "Sprich" 324). Following Shryane (Shryane, *Blixa* 83), "these strategies provide the practical evidence for Neubauten's positive destructive philosophy," which in turn reveals a deeper engagement of the band with critical theory and fine arts indicating an intellectual legacy.

Apparently, their affinity to critical theory goes along with their refusal of the music industry and their insistence on autonomy. In this sense, *Einstürzende Neubauten* have always followed a DIY strategy in managing and distributing their work. Besides the foundation of their own publishing company during the 1990s, they became pioneers of internet-based community, building such a community around the band in the early 2000s. "Neubauten's strategies for independence between 2002 and 2008 centered on ... Supporters Initiative, which stressed a participatory spectatorship via the open studio ... a free grassroots DIY event ... and the self-produced ... *Musterhaus* series" (Shryane, *Blixa* 193–94). Starting a crowd funding campaign and providing audio-visual access to rehearsals in order to produce new musical material, they were the first band to actively use internet technologies for self-management and independent music distribution. Thus, the band is still keeping its DIY approach and ethos to stay independent from the music industries. "We created an internet platform through which several thousand fans supported us, paid money—and financed the production of records that only they could enjoy. Several albums were made this way. Today we can do what we want" (Bargeld, qtd. in Storn). Having been part of the squatters movement in Berlin during the late 1970s, the band has successfully preserved the DIY spirit of the late 1970s and, therefore, built a legacy in credibility and socio-cultural authenticity among their fans. This notion of enduring bond to the ideals of the broader punk and NDW movement of the 1970s sets the point for the last sphere of legacy around *Einstürzende Neubauten*—the link between their work and 1970s and '80s West-Berlin.

### **Cold War West Berlin**

In the work and legacy of *Einstürzende Neubauten*, their relationship to the locality of West-Berlin plays a crucial aspect in the processes of building memory. First of all, this is associated with the fact that Bargeld and Unruh were born and raised under the special

circumstances of the city, something that—at least in their early work—provides an emotional link to the local narrative of the collapsing environment. For example, growing up in Schöneberg, Bargeld was familiar with the crawl-space, where they recorded their first work, since he was a child (Shryane, *Blixa* 5). Thus, the destructive feeling and visions of downfall have been raised through their emotional associations with Berlin's state as socio-spatial mediation of their own lived experience (Davidson, Bondi, and Smith 3).

*Einstürzende Neubauten* uses the city as a resource and as an instrument and provides a strong reference to Berlin's architecture. Notions of late 1970s Berlin serves *Einstürzende Neubauten*'s as a "performance space and backdrop, resonance space and sound material" (Schütz 135). Being active members of West Berlin's musical and social environment and part of the local squat-scene, their album "*Kollaps* serves as a manifestation of the chaos and disorder that they experienced in Berlin at the time, in both the musical style and the lyrical content" (Ryszka 13).

In memory of this and related to the album's international perception, their early musical activity got inseparably linked with the experience of living and dealing with their contradictory and contested environment. As Ryszka points out, the physical space of West Berlin does not only manifest in *Neubauten*'s music; the band rather represents "an embodiment of West Berlin's society, and the various social and political factors that made West Berlin unique" (13). This is even more the case since West-Berlin does not exist anymore. "Even though West Berlin no longer exists since the fall of the Wall in 1989, West Berlin's unique space as it existed in the 1980s continues to exist in the music of *Einstürzende Neubauten*" (Ryszka 34). Hence, Cold War West Berlin, its atmosphere and its opposite poles of tension and freedom, represents an important part of *Einstürzende Neubauten*'s cultural memory.

Ironically, at the same time this means that the band's destructive approach radically focusing on the "now" has turned into history. As Bargeld states, "The city of West Berlin has disappeared. The city I grew up in and with which the *Neubauten* were associated simply no longer exists" (Bargeld, qtd. in Dax 132). Though it does: as a cultural and musical legacy of *Einstürzende Neubauten*, that is amplified by the association of the city's former atmosphere as a source of inspiration—not only for *Neubauten* and the dilettants themselves, but also for the international artists and bands mentioned above. In this sense, the mythology of Berlin as isolated creative biotope becomes an inseparable legacy of *Einstürzende Neubauten*, that goes beyond the band's early work: "[T]he contradictory flow between construction, destruction, failure, nihilism and transformative capacity experienced in the 1980s in Berlin, [manifests] consecutively, albeit in different forms, in *Einstürzende Neubauten*'s career" (Bettencourt 351).

And even further: Being an inspiration for bands like Depeche Mode or for the development of industrial music in general, *Neubauten*'s Berlin-related heritage transgresses different genres and scenes. The atmosphere of Cold War West Berlin endures in their music and this mythology is further fueled by all the histories and names of international musicians using this atmosphere as a source of creativity. So in the end, the association of *Einstürzende Neubauten* with late 1970s Berlin is manifest—it won't make room for something new.

## Conclusion

In this article, the legacy of ingenious dillettants and Einstürzende Neubauten has been analyzed in regards to their cultural and socio-spatial environment of West Berlin. Therefore, the NDW movement as a subsequent musical development of punk has been considered to provide the social and cultural context from which these groups emerged. Further, the history and situation of 1970s West Berlin has been brought to light in order to describe the specific local circumstances of artistic activity during the Cold War period. As the analysis shows, the legacy of ingenious dillettants and Einstürzende Neubauten is closely linked to critical aspects of local space and place—that according to Bennett and Rogers (50) represent integral elements of collective cultural practice. Based on the very special circumstances of an isolated city shaped by the impact of World War II, Einstürzende Neubauten and their music not only represent a legacy based on music and esthetic innovation, but even more as a materialized notion of a specific atmosphere of tension and freedom. This is further amplified by their philosophical approach, combining notions of fine art as well as an enduring DIY ethos, as well as by their artistic differentiation which helped to diffuse their heritage through various musical and cultural genres.

## Notes

1. The “wrong” spelling of “dillettant” throughout the article derives from a misspelling announcement for a festival in 1981 by the scene itself (Jäger 141).
2. The quotations from publications originally written in German have been translated in English throughout this article.
3. A strand of innovative Western-German rock music originated in the late 1960s, which was characterized by an experimental use of electronic and psychedelic elements bringing forth internationally acclaimed bands like Kraftwerk, Amon Düül, and Can (see Longerich 21–24).
4. Certainly, the most well-known case is the partial collapse of West Berlin’s Congress Hall on May 21, 1980 (see Schütz 134). The futuristic-looking building on the northern edge of the Tiergarten had been constructed with the help of the US allies in 1957 as “an unbreakable symbol of German-American friendship and an icon of Berlin’s freedom” (Conrad).

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