



SOME PARTY: Nick Cave with The Birthday Party, whose performance the writer called “the most violent concert I ever saw,” here performing at The Venue in London on Aug. 5, 1982.

Photo by David Corio / Redferns

LEAD
OFF

GUEST POST

THINKING ABOUT VIOLENT SHOWS

BY JONATHAN HAYES

A primary concern of post-modernism was the Death of the Real – the increasingly difficult challenge of having an authentic, unmediated experience. Violence – the genuine risk and experience of actual, physical pain – was one response to that. Pain is a lo-fi insistence on actualization, of being authentically present in the moment – as Mike Tyson put it, “Everyone has a plan, until I punch them in the face.”

Punk rock was a visceral response to the polished homogeneity of '70s musical culture, whether it was the arpeggiated irrelevance of Yes or the hermetically perfect sound of Steely Dan. Its appeal was immediate and vital, and the audience experience of punk moved rapidly from pogoing and spitting to slam-dancing and the mosh pit.

Life in London offered a perfect vantage point as punk gave way to post-punk. I once got hit smack in the chest by sheep innards thrown from a huge rolling tower being pushed through the darkness of a warehouse

at breakneck speed. The guts (fittingly for a chest shot, a pair of lungs dangling from a severed windpipe), hit me with a moist, elastic SLAP! and I kept moving through the chaotic dark of the vast warehouse, me and 500 other people, all of us frantically trying to get out of the way of the hurtling towers.

The soundtrack was a booming roar, the cavernous void punctured sporadically by stabbing white spotlights, and the risk of injury felt real – and exhilarating. This was a large-scale performance by La Fura dels Baus, the Catalan theater group, and my memory of it – speed, risk, chaos, innards – is as fragmentary as it is fond.

By the end of the '70s, it had become clear that punk was an idea of only transient interest, a high concept notion whose tenets were quickly digested and shat out. Punk's real value lay in What Came After: a huge cultural shift towards anything-goes, post-nihilist reinvention and often gleeful transgression. Live performances in London in the early '80s could be brutal, even dangerous; the reward for risk was exhilaration.

The most violent concert I ever saw was the Birthday Party, a relentless hail of hurled pint beer mugs, the floors a sticky beach of shattered glass, someone shooting jets of flame from a hairspray can. I saw several people half-carried out of the show. They were, at the time, labeled “the most violent band in Britain,” a notorious honor which they more than lived up to. And as unsustainable and destructive as it all was, it was thrilling.

I was at the Institute of Contemporary Art in 1984 for Einstürzende Neubauten's now notorious “Concerto for Voice and Machinery.” The stage was filled with jackhammers, electric drills and a cement mixer. Unbeknownst to the ICA, the band's plan was to drill down through the concrete floors to unroof underground tunnels that supposedly led to Buckingham Palace, a half-mile away up the Mall.

The concerto opened with the band using the jackhammers and chainsaws to excavate the floors, and to smash a piano. The chainsaws were petrol-powered, their smoke thick and choking, and the chains showered



COLLAPSING NEW ART MUSEUMS:
Einstürzende Neubauten
("Collapsing New Buildings")
on January 3, 1984, performing
"Concerto for Voice and Machinery"
at London's Institute of Contemporary
Art, which included drilling
down through the concrete floor
to supposed underground tunnels
that led to Buckingham Palace.
Photo by Kerstin Rodgers / Redferns

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sparks off the concrete. Someone tried to set the stage curtains on fire. They kept tossing glass bottles into the cement mixer, which immediately crushed them and sprayed geysers of glass shards into the audience. It was complete, terrifying/ecstatic mayhem – for about 20 minutes, then the ICA cut the power, setting off a full-blown riot. It was a different time.

The U.S. has its own tradition of violent risk as youth culture, from Chris Burden nailing himself to a Volkswagen to Mark Pauline's mechanical destruction mayhem for Survival Research Laboratories events (Pauline now has a toe where his thumb used to be, blown off when a rocket engine he was tinkering with exploded – photos available on the SRL website!) to San Diego's Crash Worship performances (who referenced Viennese Actionism of the 1960s) to Chuck Palahniuk's "Fight Club."

American hardcore music carries on that tradition, although the risk has lessened over the years – mosh pits, for all their frenetic ferment, are usually highly supportive commu-

nal environments. I'd say the space that most sustains that embrace of physical risk and pain as a rejoinder to anaesthetized modern life is skate culture, where the only way to get good is through hard falls and broken bones – bail reels are a cherished celebration of commitment to the risks of gravity.

In 2007, the ICA commissioned a reenactment of the Einstürzende concert they'd aborted almost a quarter century earlier. Video and photos from that night show it as just a performance, a polite seated crowd gathering to watch a purely commodified version of the original. It's baffling to me – the event reminds me of an interview I once read with a museum curator who described trying to put together an exhibit on Dada as "like trying to reassemble an exploded bomb."

The piece was never about drilling into concrete or shattering bottles, it was about the experience of the smoke and the shrieking noise and the burning curtain, and the uncertainty of *how can this possibly end?* The difference between Then and Now is distilled

into some photos from the recreation: as the officially sanctioned misbehavior unfolds onstage, the audience holds up their cell phones to document the moment of their refabricated secondhand experience, insisting on mediation as they try to prove they've participated in something meaningful.

The sad truth is that we age out of our scenes. It's probably seven or eight years since I was last in a mosh pit, but it had the same old chummy vibe. I mean, when I got kicked in the head by a crowd surfer, the guy immediately checked to see that I was okay. Yes, both the scenes and the music get commoditized, to differing degrees. And I think our tolerance for the fatigue and wear and tear we sustain at concerts decreases with age.

But I still don't really like sit-down concerts. ✦

JONATHAN HAYES spends his time dining, writing, listening to music and investigating violent, unnatural or suspicious deaths as a forensic pathologist in New York City.