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# The life aquatic



Gudrun Gut spans 30 years of underground activity in Berlin, her longevity connecting post-punk experimentation with the rise of Techno and fluid 'living room' electronics. Philip Sherburne hears about her role in early Einstürzende Neubauten and her own groups Mania D and Malaria!, the Ambient 'pacific state' of her Ocean Club radio station and social space, and how her Monika label encourages young artists to live out their fantasies in music. Photography: Olaf Unverzart

This is a story about a 'geniale dilettante': a punk and a No Waver and an early adopter of computer pop; a girl from the German heatherlands who moved to Berlin to become one of the city's central figures – feminist agitator, festival organiser, entrepreneur. Plus of course musician, performance artist, DJ, radio presenter, club organiser, cultural ambassador and label owner. She has done all of this largely by maintaining her independence. Not in the rejectionist strain that characterises knee-jerk American individualism, but rather by creating and attending to niches and spaces of possibility in the interstices and the margins. By operating on the peripheries, she has not distanced herself, but rather made the hypothetical centre – or more accurately, centres – seem themselves remote, quaint, outdated.

Interviewing Gudrun Gut can be a daunting task. Not because she is stern or severe – quite the contrary. I can think of few more candid interviews I've conducted over the years. No, it's precisely because she's so genial, so open – and so filled with energy. How can anyone keep up with her? Gut and her post-punk peers never paused for breath, and she still doesn't now. Not in the course of our interview, during which she cooks, chainsmokes, digs through memorabilia and reels off a dizzying spool of names and dates and intersections. Not in the course of the interview's aftermath, during which she drinks me under the table while elaborating architectural plans for the country home she has recently purchased outside Berlin.

Let's pretend, for a moment, that you *don't* know who Gudrun Gut is. Not really. Maybe you've heard the name, seen it in connection with her label Monika Enterprise or perhaps Ocean Club, the radio show/promotions entity she runs with partner Thomas Fehlmann. You know that last year that she released a solo album with the curious title *I Put A Record On*, one that initially crept out quietly but by year's end had seduced the publisher and more than a few contributors to this magazine. You skimmed a review or two that mentioned a handful of groups in rapid succession, a stutterer's nightmare of outfits with names like Malaria!, Mania D, Mutabor, Matador, Miasma. But beyond that, let's pretend for a moment that you really don't have any idea who Gudrun Gut is. And let's work our way back.

Gudrun Gut was born in the Lüneberger Heide, the heaths of northern Germany, "in a small town where everything is controlled", as she describes it. "I went to Berlin because I had a boyfriend who lived in my town who was half gay – but not really, because he was my boyfriend! He was a little bit older, and he had lots of friends in Berlin because he was working in an antiquarian bookshop. He brought me to Berlin for the first time and I met all these gay people. I clearly remember getting off at Schlesisches Tor and breathing this air of kebab, these strange smells – it was a sense of freedom, city freedom. Berlin has this thing of doing whatever you like, and I just thought, I have to come live here."

Gut – she declines to share her birth name – came to Berlin to study visual communication at the Hochschule der Künste in 1978, and quickly fell in with an art school scene of punks, post-punks and creative malcontents. "At school, when I was living in the heatherlands," she recalls, "I was working in a mail order distribution called Flash Shop. They had all these underground records from all over, Henry Cow and all this shit. I was packing the parcels after school. So in Berlin I naturally got in contact with music people again." It was in West Berlin's network of improvised venues and underground record shops that she encountered Bettina Köster, Beate Bartel (later of Liaisons Dangereuses) and Blixa



Bargeld, all future bandmates. Bargeld, in fact, renamed her Gut, German for 'good'. If punk was so famously about negativity, what could be more punk than an affirmative – that is, a double negative – name like Gut?

Gut and Köster opened a small shop in the neighbourhood of Schöneberg. Called Eisengrau (Iron Grey), the shop sold tapes, fanzines and clothes. "I had a knitting machine in there," recalls Gut, who manufactured some of the merchandise herself. "Eisengrau was more of a meeting point. We had a pinball machine in there. We didn't really sell much, we'd just hang out." But as a hangout, Eisengrau proved a crucial locus for the so-called 'geniale dilettanten', the loose grouping of 'genius-like dilettantes' whose notorious Grosse Untergangsshow festival of 1981 effectively launched a new Berlin underground: members of Einstürzende Neubauten, Die Tödliche Doris, Gut and her collaborators. "I wanted to do my own band because I was sick of just listening to music by other people," she says. "Because punk was: you can do it all by yourself." Gut spent a month or so in London, immersing herself in punk. "And then I started my first 'girl group'." She laughs, recalling the innocence of the scene. "Did we even rehearse? I think we just made photos. I don't know."

The initial line-up of Einstürzende Neubauten arose out of this mix, featuring Bargeld (guitar), Gut (Korg MS-20) and Bartel (bass). Gut was already involved in another group, the all-female Din A4, as well as its co-ed spinoff, Din A Testbild, but it was her next project, Mania D, that proved definitive.

Mania D featured Gut on drums, Köster on vocals and saxophone and Bartel on bass; they also used backing tape – "atmospheric tapes, like jungle noise," she recalls. Rather than songs, Mania D and the early Neubauten concentrated on improvisations designed to evoke a theme or a mood. Mania D and Neubauten co-existed for a while, until Gut left Neubauten to focus exclusively on Mania D. They recorded almost nothing, just a three-track 7" single for the Monogam label in 1980. But one song, "Track Four" – reissued in 1991 on Zensor's *Als Die Partisanen Kamen* compilation – suggests that these geniale dilettanten were on to something. It's a sludgy mess of detuned electric bass, electronic squeals, Gut's tribal drumming and Köster's atonal sax skronking, nodding both to The Contortions and Blurt. Strangely EQed vocals slide like ipecac down the tune's gaping maw. For a largely forgotten piece of post-punk history, it still carries a powerful charge.

Mania D's biggest break came in the form of an opening slot for Siouxsie & The Banshees. "She was the picture of a new woman for me," says Gut. "She was strong, not a hippy, she looked great. So to play and support them, wow, I thought, cool! And then what happens? One week before the show I break my leg." Gut spent the week before the gig in bed, programming rhythms on a rented drum machine. The night of the show, a bandmate rolled her

onstage in a wheelchair and she complemented the electronic beats with live tom-tom patterns. This sense of inventiveness was a defining characteristic of their time and place.

Mania D played a few more shows and called it quits. "We got into a little fight, but I don't even remember why," sighs Gut. "Stupid." Undeterred, she and Köster, who were more enthusiastic about playing live than Bartel, formed Malaria! – named after a cat in their rehearsal space. They released their first self-titled 12" in 1981 on Marat, a sub-label of Zensor. The label was a project of Burkhardt Seiler, one of the coiners of the term Neue Deutsche Welle, who initially sold records at a West Berlin flea market before opening the Zensor shop in Schöneberg's Belzigerstrasse.

With Mania D, Gut and Köster had spent time in New York, where they became enthralled with No Wave. "It was more interesting than punk," asserts Gut. "I didn't like the commercialisation, I thought it was really fake. I liked The Clash because of their political attitude, but musically, when I started my own bands, I was looking for something different – not repeating something that was already there." Malaria! solidified their New York connections when the group met Christine Hahn, who had played drums with Glenn Branca and Barbara Ess in The Static. They recruited her to play drums on Malaria!'s first record, and she later became a full-time member, alongside Die Haut's Susanne Kuhnke and the Dutch musician Manon P Duursma.

Malaria! existed until 1984 or so, recording a handful of singles and one album for labels like Les Disques Du Crêpuscule, New York's Cachalot and ROIR, which in 1983 released *...Revisited*, a cassette documenting live sessions at New York's Danceteria and Washington DC's 9:30 Club. The group's first appearance at the latter venue, years earlier, was significant for another reason: it was where they met The Birthday Party. "We were supposed to have a gig at the 9:30 Club," recalls Gut, "and they wrote to us saying, 'You're not so famous, but there's this other band that's also not very famous, The Birthday Party – would you mind sharing the bill?' Because I worked in the record shop I knew them; I think they had one single out with a birthday cake on it, and I played it for the girls and said, 'I think we should do this. There's something interesting there.' So we met them there and it turned into a longer relationship, and they moved to Berlin. It was great, this little thing that happened. They were from Australia, we were from Berlin, both of us from countries that were not designed for musical careers. You had to be from England or America to be someone."

Listening to Malaria! today, it's hard to understand why the group haven't attained a posthumous cachet akin to that enjoyed by The Slits or The Contortions; their coolly minimalist songs are short sharp shocks with a rubber axe. Songs like "Kaltes Klares Wasser" and "Your Turn To Run" balance hypnotic, mantric grooves with chaotic outbursts of saxophone and

piano. The group reformed, briefly, in the early 90s, recording a new EP and an album, *Cheerio*. And in 2000 and 2001, remixers like Chicks On Speed, Barbara Morgenstern, DJ Koze and The Modernist briefly gave "Wasser" a second heyday.

After Malaria! split up during one of their numerous US tours, Gut resurrected Matador, a performance project launched with Duursma and ex-Mania D colleague Bartel at Kassel's Documenta 7, in 1982 as a synth-pop trio with a dark, quasi-Gothic edge. Gut laments that this era of her career is often glossed over, though in truth Matador's music hasn't aged as well as Malaria!'s. Made with the synths and samplers of the late 80s and early 90s, it carries the unmistakable whiff of an era that has yet to be recuperated as anything but kitsch. But Matador did mark the beginnings of Gut's ongoing relationship with electronic music. With studio rates rising, the group invested in an Atari computer and Casio sampler and taught themselves enough programming and production skills to mostly assemble their second and third LPs at home.

However far Matador's music had drifted from their players' origins, one lesson from the Eisengrau days remained: the importance of collaborating with other women. "I worked with men in [early] bands," remembers Gut, "and it was pretty obvious that there was always competition with men. I don't like that feeling. You want to be creative and you want to be free. You have to be open to experiment and you can't if you're competing with someone. And that was mostly with men. Maybe I'm kind of a pushy person or whatever..." She laughs. "I wasn't then. I got much more pushy later."

For feminist musicians, punk wiped the slate clean. "For me it was like starting all over again," she states. "From scratch. Even with the girl bands, I didn't think of it as anything special because we were girls, I thought, 'Everything starts all over now. It's all new and it's all equal!'"

If 1978 represented a first 'year zero', a second one followed in 1989. The Wall came down and the youth of East and West alike banded together under the banner of Techno. "Before the Wall came down," says Gut, "I wanted to leave Berlin. The scene was getting redundant. It was very dark, very macho – kind of depressive. No wonder this kind of white-light Techno thing got started. It made sense at the time, because everything had gotten so dark."

As with punk, rave required shifting allegiances. "When Techno started and I began going to E-Werk and Tresor, it was a natural move for me," Gut says. "But not many of my old friends went that way. It was like, 'Ugh, Techno, that's horrible.'" As much as the music, the sense of openness and possibility that Techno's social structures engendered appealed to Gut. Beginning in 1994, she brought together a number of longtime collaborators – occasional Birthday Party lyricist turned solo artist Anita Lane, Canadian performance artist Myra Davies, Duursma, Danielle de Picciotto, Bargeld – to record *Members Of The Ocean Club*, a vocal-fronted album of Techno-informed pop, Ambient and downtempo beats. "People think it's a compilation, but it's not," clarifies Gut. "I was working on solo stuff all the time, from the beginning. Even in Malaria!, I always had my little solo pieces. But I think I like to work with people instead of sitting alone. I already had the song with Anita done, so the idea became to do the whole project inviting friends."

"Ocean, for me, was a word for fantasy," she continues. "It wasn't an occupied space. Because when you go diving, it's a new world. That was the idea of the Ocean Club." The Ocean Club became a real space – and a club of a different sort – when

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Gut and friends presented the disc's release party in a basement room at Berlin's Tresor in 1996. De Picciotto, a multimedia artist and co-founder of Berlin's Love Parade, used an array of fluid, shiny materials to recast the room as a sort of underwater grotto; another artist added to the effect with a light performance reflected off the rotating turntables. Tresor offered Gut and her accomplices a regular gig, and the one-off became a Sunday night weekly where Ocean Club members Gut, Thomas Fehlmann, Mermaid Jaculin, Miko Vamp and Chica Paula and guests like Sun Electric produced an eclectic, leftfield respite from the pounding Techno upstairs. In addition to DJing, some members also performed idiosyncratic live sets, like Gut's experiments with loops and delay alongside other DJs. The boundaries between genres and performance practices, appropriate to the name of the event, remained fluid. "One night, for instance," she smiles, "we only played *Wiro* CDs" – referring not to the group, but rather the *Wiro Tapper* compilations given away with this magazine.

Eventually moving to a residency at Berlin's WMF club, with later one-offs at Club Mario, the Ocean Club also began transporting its ambience across Western Europe. But its real impact turned out to be oddly infrastructural, reshaping the fabric of 'official' Berlin in two important ways. One was radio. Beginning in 1997, Gut and Fehlmann began broadcasting a weekly *Ocean Club* radio show on Radio Eins every Friday night. Like the club nights, it has refused to be bound by convention – a recent show broadcast not only music from regular collaborators and electronic music fixtures (Barbara Morgenstern, Supermayer, Junior Boys) but also Miles Davis and The Zombies. That range is typical for the show, which Gut and Fehlmann produce in the studio as opposed to live on air. "We do it like a compilation," she explains. "We record it as if it were a record, and then we do all the post-production. We are not radio people, we're recording artists, so we thought, let's do it the way we know it." Heard across the city and throughout the region, the *Ocean Club* radio show became an important conduit for the transmission of alternative frequencies at a time when Berlin's music scene entered a crucial state of flux. Today, the radio show is now syndicated across stations in Frankfurt, Nuremberg, Hamburg, Beijing and Siberia.

The Marke B festival proved Gut's other significant incursion into official city culture. When, in 2000, East Berlin's Volksbühne theatre invited the Ocean Club to fill the entire space, the collective decided to extend the invitation to their colleagues on the German underground. The first such presentation introduced the fledgling Cologne label Kompakt to Berlin audiences, while the following year, Stummte served as the launch of Mute Germany. But the idea really coalesced in 2002. "We thought, Hmm, we don't want to do another label showcase – why don't we look in our own city?" she says. "Kompakt is easy, Mute is easy, but Berlin has so many interesting labels, why not do something with them? It didn't have the style of Kompakt, that kind of clear aesthetic statement, but Berlin was a mixture of really different music scenes." A landmark moment for Berlin's independent label scene of the 00s, Gut managed to secure its funding from the city government. Presciently, the money came not from the ministry of culture, but of finance – thereby legitimising the economic force of independent music in a city that was still reinventing itself after 44 years of division.

Naming the festival *Bärenmarken* (referencing Berlin's official bear symbol), they ran into a problem:

"I like the idea of using music that isn't normally used – blues, tango, polka – old fashioned nostalgic excerpts from a different world of music put into a new dress"

*Bärenmarken* was a registered trademark owned by Nestlé; after a cease and desist order, the organisers flipped the name on its head to become Marke B.

Gut had a personal investment in the state of Berlin's independent labels, running two herself. Beginning in 1991, she rededicated Moabit, launched in 1982, to CD editions of out of print Malarial titles as well releases from Matador and Miasma. And in 1997 she launched Monika Enterprise, the imprint with which she is now most closely associated. In its origins, Monika – the name commemorates a pet goldfish's untimely demise after leaping from its tank in the night – was tied to Berlin's Wohnzimmer/Living Room scene of the late 90s. With Techno going full blast and the major labels and rock clubs devoted to mainstream rock, Berlin offered few opportunities for more esoteric artists. Frustrated with the official channels, musicians and promoters began hosting events in people's living rooms – "little parties in their homes, and somebody was selling drinks for the price they paid for the alcohol, very calm, with a moderator," says Gut.

"I saw Barbara Morgenstern in a living room for the first time," she continues, "and I was like, wow. Because I think it's much more difficult – for me it's much easier to play a big audience than a small one. And they were in the living room and she was with her keyboards and a rhythm box, singing to it with people just sitting around her. She has kind of a strange voice, too, and I thought, What is she doing? It was a very friendly atmosphere, nice, in opposition to – not against, but a reaction to Techno."

One such Wohnzimmer artist was Jovanka von Willsdorf, whose Quarks duo with Niels Lorenz crossed a focused, melancholic pop sensibility with electric guitars and subtle electronic treatments. "I thought it was really something," says Gut. "I tried to get her a deal but I realised there was no company into this kind of music, they all wanted stadium rock. This was the opposite." Quarks' 7" "Widerkomm"/"Geklopft" became the first Monika release. The compilation *Musik Fürs Wohnzimmer* followed shortly after, showcasing artists like Quarks, Morgenstern, Hausmeister, Schlammpeitziger, Harald 'Sack' Ziegler and even DJ Koze (in his Adolf Noise guise).

Monika maintains a reputation for foregrounding upcoming female artists – indeed, Gut is currently assembling the third edition of the compilation series *4 Women No Cry*. Beyond gender, the series also attends to the centrist nature of the music industry by seeking out artists far from the usual music capitals – the first two editions have drawn from Buenos Aires and Tbilisi. Gut declares that it's still essential to give a platform to women. "Not that women only play together – I think it's great if it's a mixed band – but to have the female voice," she continues. "The pop world is really conservative there. It's mostly 50/50 in the working world, or maybe a little worse, but in the music world, just look at the magazines – it's a boys' club. I don't like

that." Not that Monika is a closed shop – its ranks also include James Figurine aka Dntel and Robert Lippok, as well as Laurenz Pike, whose *Drums For Fun And Fitness* is a nine-minute drum solo.

The day to day business of running a label, alongside her Ocean Club and Marke B commitments, meant Gut went a whole decade without releasing her own music on it. That changed last year with its 55th release – Gut's *I Put A Record On*. For all its dusky, loop based computer pop, thrumming with accordions, Schaffel rhythms, glitched electronics, organ samples and husky vocals, there's a continuity with her earlier work. While the beats are nowhere as pronounced as her drumming in Mania D, the album has an unmistakable rhythmic insistence.

"I'm lusting for a noise band," enthuses Gut. "I want to play drums again, after hearing so much singer-songwriter music and folk." And in a nod to the Ocean Club, there's a distinctly aquatic quality to her loops and layers: backmasked samples, brushed percussion and filtered delay swirl together like tangled seaweed, with her voice swimming coyly between.

The album's highlight is its opening track "Move Me", a slo-mo collision of tango and dub that first appeared in 2005 as a 7" on Ireland's Earsugar Beatbox label, backed by a remix from Thomas Fehlmann. The idea for the song came partly from a Monika party in Buenos Aires that ended in a tour of the city's tango bars, and partly from a mix CD of old 45s that Gut put together for her mother. "I like the idea of using music that isn't normally used," she explains, "like blues, tango, polka – old fashioned nostalgic excerpts from a different world of music, put into a new dress. But not being cheesy, at the same time – it's a bit of a task."

We end our interview staring at an empty bottle of vodka. Gut is talking about artists in Berlin who have promise but need to focus. "That's why it took me so long," she says. "Working on music, you really need to be able to create your own bubble and live in that bubble for a while. Otherwise it's not worth it. I used to have this unfocusedness. Because I didn't finish anything for such a long time, it was really important for me to finish the album, and now I really want to cling to it. I think I found a kind of door, with a tiny little key there, and there's much more beyond it. I don't want it to get too cluttered, so that I can't get in there any more. You have to have this inner thing happening. If you find it, you shouldn't lose it. But when you work on music, you find this point where you think, Oh, now I'm close. When you get really close, that's interesting and you feel it. To not ignore that but just go for it, that's interesting. But I think it's important always to remind yourself when you're at that stage – because otherwise it's too hard to get in any more and you lose it." □ *I Put A Record On* is available on Monika Enterprise. To hear music by Gudrun Gut, go to [www.thewire.co.uk](http://www.thewire.co.uk)