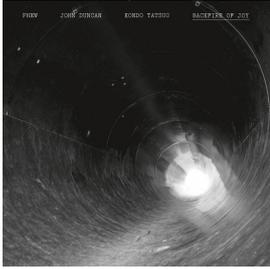


Brainwashed - Phew / John Duncan / Kondo Tatsuo, "Backfire of Joy"

Written by Duncan Edwards

Sunday, 02 May 2021 11:58 - Last Updated Monday, 03 May 2021 02:10



This short release captures the only performance from the trio. Recorded at Hosei University, Tokyo, on John Duncan's first visit to Japan in 1982, it is a fascinating document both in the context of that visit but also in terms of the creativity, emotion, technique, and improvisation. The participants are meeting here for the first time, although they were familiar with each other's work through tape exchange. Duncan is finding and processing shortwave radio signals, Tatsuo using piano, tape loops, and synth textures, and Phew vocalizing in English and Japanese.

[Black Truffle](#)

On the first of two pieces, "Backfire," the group plunges straight into a tense section dominated by percussive tape loops and Phew's hybrid chant-song. The effect is of a woman plodding around in metal boots and tinkering on a broken stylophone while absentmindedly reading aloud the labels of electronic appliances. Yet she is actually offering up a kind of liturgy "I already sold you... an electric plug, an electric bell, an electric cooker, an electric kettle, an electric toothbrush, an electric knife...don't let me sell you... an electric chair." If this is a serious message against consumerism or the death penalty then the paradoxical mundane glamor in the charming tone and rhythm of her voice elevates it far above dull moralizing. Around the seven minute mark comes a halt and bare smattering of applause gives way to a more mournful flow, with chiming and buzzing synth melodies. Then Phew switches to Japanese and the abrasiveness ratchets up in a thumping swirling climax.

"Backfire" is the more gritty and dissonant of the two pieces but the creative extemporization holds together very well. Pearls are made by grit, and the second, slightly shorter, "Joy" has a soothing and ecstatic atmosphere and more breathing space for the music. There is a wonderful feel to this track, and Duncan's spluttering bursts of shortwave noise provide perfect contrast to elegaic singing and echoing piano notes. A slightly over-the-top comparison would be stalactites dropping into a moonlit pool of molten silver. Phew manages to sound as if she's singing backwards.

The tape exchange meant these collaborators will have had an idea of what the others would bring to the performance, but it is intriguing to wonder if some of the audience knew of Duncan's

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previous events and expected to be challenged by upsetting or confrontational elements. To describe him as notorious would (still) be a massive understatement. It is arguable that this recording only exists because of his self-exile from the USA. He had acquired a reputation for transforming his personal experience into disturbing art and also using disturbing art to trigger transforming personal experiences in others. I refer in particular to the 1980 performance combining two separate but linked events: an audio recording of Duncan allegedly having sex with a cadaver (which he'd obtained by bribing a mortuary assistant in Mexico) and projected photographs of his later vasectomy, presented to a Los Angeles audience as *Blind Date* - a depiction of male rejection turning into rage and self-punishing loathing. This work made his earlier

Scare

from 1976, wherein people answered their door to be confronted by a figure (Duncan) in a head mask, pointing and firing a blank-loaded gun in their face before fleeing, seem relatively benign.

Blind Date

provoked a backlash of such fierce critical and personal opinion that two years later Duncan relocated to Japan as something of a cultural leper.

Backfire of Joy occurred as Duncan was deliberately submerging himself into a new country and the alienating effects of a foreign language. A creative dialogue works here, though, with Phew and Tatsuo at least equal partners in the trio. The record can be enjoyed without an understanding of how Duncan's upbringing and personal history affected his art. Equally, the event did not rely on Reichian breathing exercises or rather "hyperventilation used to create a complete loss of physical and psychic control" or the need for an audience to confront or dissolve the personal armor preventing us from getting in touch with our true nature. That's just as well, as I won't be shedding my armor any time soon - at least not the visor and codpiece.

Samples can be found [here](#) .