DADA: DEAD AND LOVING IT

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The historical period of the avant-garde art movements coincided with two phenomena which can be interpreted as the failure of the rationalism characteristic for the modern, capitalist system. One of these is Taylorism, which dehumanized and robotized the person involved in the work process, and the other is the First World War. Several movements of the avant-garde related critically to reason and conscience (expressionism, surrealism), but the most radical was Dada. The manifestos and Dadaist activities reveal that the Dada wants to do away not only with the heritage of the past, but also with the linguistic and logical structures which form the texture of society. Bruitist poems, meaningless words and sentences, simultaneous poems, and the various uses of sound are all aimed at tearing apart language itself. The refusal of logic is most evident in the manifesto of Tristan Tzara, in which the series of mutually contradictory affirmations is concluded with an exceptionally clear statement: "I hate common sense." Logic, argumentation, and dialectics are all dismissed in the name of freedom and life, which are characterized by Tzara in the following way: "the interweaving of contraries and all contradictions, freaks and irrelevancies: LIFE" [Tzara 1918]. In my paper, I supplement the thesis of Peter Burger on the failure of the avant-garde (which is explained by him through its artistic success) by calling attention to the failure of its fight against reason, which is most evident in the search for meaning as an essential part of artistic reception. Thus, Dada is only interesting as long as the meaningless phenomenon is associated with some kind of meaning during the artistic reception.

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1. The avant-garde and the disappointment with reason

Avant-garde art is a priori related to the semantic field of war. Originally, "avant-garde" is a military term designating the small search party which undertakes the risky task of mapping alien terrain. The term was applied to art by Olinde Rodrigues, follower of the utopian socialist Saint-Simon, in 1825. In his essay entitled *L'artiste, le savant et l'industriel* [The artist, the scientist, and the industrialist], he presents the idea according to which the leading elite of the ideal society would be composed of artists, scientists, and industrialists. Even among them, the artists are those who can determine the direction for the development of society. Since artists are the natural owners of imagination, they not only foresee the future, but can also create it, being thus the pioneers on the road to the happiness and wellbeing of mankind. They are the avant-garde of society, which accelerates social, political, and economic reform.

The idea of the avant-garde could be developed under the conditions of the rational building of society, within the progress narrative: "It was modernity's own alliance with time and long-lasting reliance on the concept of progress that made possible the myth of a self-conscious and heroic avant-garde in the struggle for futurity" [Calinescu 1987: 94].

Although he borrows the metaphor of the "avant-garde" from the military vocabulary, in Rodrigues' essay it is not yet clear what the avant-garde must combat. Utopian socialist ideas belong to the circle of the idea of progress, which is characteristic for the modern capitalist world. The prerequisite of this idea of progress is that man can influence the development of social processes, and he can rationally plan the future of the community. This, then, is the planning process in which utopian socialists intended a central role for artists.

Artists themselves will only assume the role of the avant-garde half a century later, and by then the artistic avant-garde will have already turned against capitalist society. In his excellent book on the faces of modernity, Matei Călinescu [1987] argues that an unbridgeable gap opened between bourgeois and aesthetic modernity in the first half of the 19th century, when the two fell into a hostile relationship. Bourgeois modernity continued the tradition: the doctrine of progress, preoccupation with measurable time, the cult of reason, the abstract humanistic conception of freedom, pragmatism, the cult of action and success. However, the other modernity, which gave birth to the avant-

garde movements, is radically anti-bourgeois. The opposition of the avant-garde poets of the 19th century to bourgeois society was essentially motivated by their effort to develop and preserve the autonomy of art. Thus, modernism as an artistic movement has become opposed to modernism as a social structure.

By the end of the 19th century, the "avant-garde" will have become a term for a narrow group of innovative authors and artists, who speak the language of radical critique. The members of this group want to revolutionize art, because they believe that the revolution of art is, at the same time, a revolution of life. Hence, the artistic avant-garde has consciously turned against the stylistic expectations of the larger public, while the political revolutionaries would have wanted to attract the larger public through the propagandistic use of art. Hence, after 1880, the two avant-gardes will have separated [Calinescu 1987].

At the beginning of the 20th century, the concept of the "avant-garde" is already so wide that it includes all those art movements which reject the past and worship that which is new [Calinescu 1987: 116]. By this time, at which the avant-garde movements [e.g. expressionism, futurism, cubism, Dadaism, surrealism] are really established within art, it has become clear that the enemy of the avant-garde is, at one hand, an art movement [i.e. academic art, which is built on the criteria of realism, moral message, and incidentally, pleasantness], and at the other hand, the social structure behind this conception – capitalism and the bourgeois world with its economic inequalities and limiting and hypocritical morals.

Mechanization, the result of the rational planning of production, is one of the negative aspects of capitalist society, which was noticed early on by artists. The defining book on production planning, Frederick Winslow Taylor's *The Principles of Scientific Management*, was published in 1911. This text scientifically proves that the increase of profit can be reached through the uniformization of the individual and its inclusion as an impersonal factor into the mechanized process. This is a point at which the inhuman consequences of the work process are evidently discernible. The principles of Taylor will work perfectly in the factories of Ford, which will adopt the moving assembly line in 1913, thus revolutionizing mass production. Mechanized production also had repercussions on the "rationalization" of the human body: "Taylorism and Fordism also function to rationalize bodies, which are virtually made into machines through repetitive labour" [Jones 2004: 14]. Machines also had their admirers among artists, e.g. the futurists, with Mari-

netti's ode to the race car and Fernand Léger, who saw "the machine as being so plastic" [Sík 1982: 122]. However, the majority of artists, whose "profession" is originality and authentic and individual expression, considered the perspective of mechanization as unacceptable and opposed the idea of the nameless individual involved within the efficient work process. Some artists even attracted the attention of their contemporaries to the dangers of mechanization [see, e.g., the film *Modern Times* by Charlie Chaplin, produced somewhat later, in 1936].

World War I, which broke out at the beginning of the 20th century, also seems an unacceptable consequence of the modern society built on rationality. Until now, war has never revealed its irrational character. Previous wars could be rationalized, their causes could be shown, and patriotic rhetoric and the cult of heroism could be built around them. The attacker and the attacked, offensive and defensive wars, our side and the enemy could be distinguished. Men fought against men, and it could be passed off as a test of courage.

The First [!] World War, however, created a situation that was completely new. It wasn't about a "civilized" nation fighting against a "barbarian" folk, about neighbouring countries fighting for territory, nor even about the struggle for freedom of some nation, but about civilized, modern European states fighting against each other, without it being so easy to decide about what exactly. The succession of events could be described and the direct motivation for each step could be identified – yet, the war itself as a whole did not have an acceptable narrative. The World War does not lend itself to rationalization. As Adorno and Horkheimer [1991] later established about the Second World War, it seems that reason has become entangled in its own web. The absurdity of reason as objectified within war has been first noticed by artists, who gave such loud voice to their opposition that it can still be heard echoing today.

These were, perhaps, the causes that impelled the artistic avant-garde, which should have ensured progress with the aid of imagination, to turn its back on society, the capitalist set-up, and social modernity, along with that which formed the basis for all these: reason as such. The avant-garde of the 20th century is much more radical as compared to that of the 19th century. It does not only want to break with the past, but also with that which seems to be the basis of the capitalist system, namely reason. The "*épater les bourgeois*" is not some mere self-serving provocation, but the instrument of the courageous avant-garde artist to open up new paths for society, just as Rodrigues imagined.

We can observe many forms of the struggle against reason within fine arts: expressionism liberates emotional expression from the shackles of reason, surrealism replaces conscious control with the unconscious, and Dadaism wants to eliminate reason and to elevate senselessness in its place. Artists, according to whom reason has failed, reject it in many forms. The most radical standpoint within this context has been adopted by Dadaism, which was born during and against the war.

2. The struggle against reason

For speaking about the Dada, what better path could we choose than the one laid out by Tristan Tzara, the *par excellence* Dadaist artist, as the "mind-set of a bacteriological order", aimed "at least to discover its etymological, historical or psychological meaning" [Tzara 1918].

Characteristically for the Dada, we know precisely where [Zurich] and when [1916] it was born, although we have two different versions about the circumstances of its birth. According to the recollection of Hans Arp, the word "Dada" was first found by Tristan Tzara on 8 February 1916, while Hugo Ball states that he himself proposed it as a title for the journal planned by Tzara on 18 April [Ball 1996]. However it may have been, the name "Dada" hit the spot. Dadaism was invented by young people who have fled to Zurich from the war. They were angry youths who broke with their roots – their countries, which destined them to become cannon fodder, their families, which only meant the unacceptable bourgeois world to them, and their culture, in which they could not find their place. Germans [Hugo Ball, Richard Huelsenberg, Emmy Hennings], Romanians [Tristan Tzara, the Janco brothers, Arthur Segal], and an Alsacian citizen [Hans, or Jean Arp], who have fled to Switzerland, Frenchmen [Marcel Duchamp, Francis Picabia] and Germans [Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven] immigrated to the United States, – all spoke the international language of insolence and kept in contact with each other. They were the members of a movement which did not expect camaraderie, obedience, or the following of any ideas. Henri Béhar describes the Dada movement as "an international without any institution, founding text, leader, constitution, organizing and executive committee" [Béhar 2011: 23]. What the Dada expects instead is the refusal of all expectations. This is a point perceived very acutely by Walter Conrad Arensberg, who belongs to the New York Dada, and stated that "I, Walter Conrad Arensberg, American poet, declare that I am against Dada, because it is only thus that I can be for Dada" [Beke 1998: 176].

a. The magic of names

"Dada" – the name in itself means nothing which would express the essential character of the movement, and it is precisely because of this that it expresses this so well. At the same time, the expression carries meaning in more than one language, and thus it can start an association process in many directions. According to one of the narratives on the birth of Dada, Tzara opened a French-German dictionary at random, and the word that came up at the top of the page was "da-da". We can instantly feel that this hits the spot perfectly. On the one hand, it is not the result of any rational planning, but pure chance, on the other hand, it is a word that does not push itself into the foreground of attention with its meaning, since it does not even have one – it merely indicates the letters with which the words start on the page. It is not a meaningful word, but a sound without meaning. And that is precisely what the Dada needs, as it is aimed at freeing itself from the confines of logic.

In Romanian – Tristan Tzara's mother tongue –, "da-da" means "yes, yes" (just as in Russian). If we also take this fact into account, the exaggerated affirmative immediately seems ironic, and it can only be taken as a joke, especially in the case of such artists, who are specialists in saying "NO". In French, the meaning of the word is "horsey", "hobby-horse" – which reminds us of the playfulness and the rough innocence of children. The way in which the word "dada" functions is very much Dada: its open meaninglessness ejects possible meanings as a centrifugal hub.

The name "MERZ" shares a similar backstory and functioning. The artists who invented it, Kurt Schwitters, would have wanted to join the Dada exhibition of 1920, but he received no invitation. Thus, he created his own Dada, with a name of its own: MERZ. The word is the middle of the German word for "commercial bank" (Kommerzbank), which did not mean anything in itself until then. After Schwitters, we associate MERZ with the Dadaist attitude which rejects capitalist society built around commerce and commodified art.

b. The manifesto

The manifesto is the battle trumpet of the avant-garde: it awakens, motivates, and shows the direction. It is the characteristic custom of the avant-garde that artists should also deal with manifestos along with creation, as is the habit of signing them collectively. The genre of

the manifesto as such objectifies one of the internal tensions of the avant-garde, namely that avant-garde art has an ideology, which integrates artists into a group, while art is *a priori* about the strong dissimilarities between artists and their strong individualities.

The Dadaist manifesto is extremely dysfunctional. A manifesto fulfils its function if it states the revolutionary ideas for which it seeks followers clearly and simply, with an attractive rhetoric. However, Dadaist manifestos contain poetic and meaningless collocations. Sometimes, the visual monotony of the text is disrupted, and the text appears as image in these manifestos. We also have some individual manifestos (e.g. Hugo Ball's first manifesto from 1916, and Tristan Tzara's from 1918), and manifestos signed by twenty people (from 1918).

In the first Dadaist manifesto (Zurich, 14 July – perhaps it is not a mere coincidence that this is the day of the fall of the Bastille and the beginning of the French Revolution), Hugo Ball starts with emphasizing the novel character of the Dada as an art movement: "Dada is a new tendency in art. One can tell this from the fact that until now nobody knew anything about it, and tomorrow everyone in Zurich will be talking about it"; although he corrects himself a couple of lines below by calling the Dada a world-spirit [Ball 1916]. He makes clear two important points at the very beginning: the first is that it is an artistic movement, and the second is that the word "Dada" is an international one.

In its own poetic way, the text also highlights the aim of Dada, which is to escape from the burden of the past and "everything nice and right, blinkered, moralistic, europeanised, enervated", for which "Dada is the world's best lily-milk soap" [Ball 1916]. According to the manifesto, the specific medium for this cleansing is traditional language, and its means is poetry, which consists of emancipated words: "A line of poetry is a chance to get rid of all the filth that clings to this accursed language, as if put there by stockbrokers' hands, hands worn smooth by coins. I want the word where it ends and begins. Dada is the heart of words". [Ball 1916]

Dadaists have dealt with language daringly, as they dismembered it, tore it apart, reduced it to its elements, i.e. letters and sounds, they put the codes of conventions of language in parentheses, and performed a kind of "language dissection" [Schaffner 2011]. By breaking down linguistic conventions "they withdrew the most fundamental prerequisite of cultural consensus: the adherence to given linguistic laws" [Schaffer 2006: 117]. Thus, they have attacked the very web which

holds the texture of society together. Language and logic are the essential foundations of culture – thus, the fact that they have challenged precisely these, also shows the radicalism of the Dadaists. They experimented with language, in its visual and auditory aspect, both within their poetry and on posters. Dadaistic representations also assigned an important role to meaningless sounds along with articulated language: "Sound in all its facets, sound as carrier of meaning, sound as imitation of nature, sound as harmonious composition and sound as stimulus for associations, is explored" [Schaffer 2006: 129]. Dadaists have also used the bruitist poem, which is built not on the meanings, but on the sound of words, and created the simultanist poem, in which events take place in parallel. The print-out version of one of the most memorable simultanist poems, *The Admiral is Searching for a House to Rent*, which is a *recitativo* composed for three voices, reminds of a musical score. Huelsenbeck, Janco, and Tzara have recited their text simultaneously: Huelsenbeck in German, Janco in English, and Tzara in French, also relocating accents within words and shortening or lengthening syllables. At the same time, Huelsenbeck banged away on his drum, Tzara shook the rattle, and Janco blew the whistle – while performing strange movements. The centralized structure of traditional representations was completely shattered, and thus the audience had no chance to construct anything solid from the fragmented events. Their disjointed performance only came together at the end within a final statement from which they could learn that the admiral never found anything. Cornelius Partsch describers the event in the following way: "Like philosophers equipped with drumsticks, the Dadaists pound and play out their cultural critique" [Partsch 2006: 50].

If Hugo Ball wanted a new language, which would not be structured by the inherited codes, Tristan Tzara has dug down to the roots, to the logical structures themselves. He consistently attacks logical consistency, on the one hand, announcing explicitly the falseness of logic as a thesis, on the other hand, at the practical level, with texts full of open contradictions. Contradiction is assumed already by the opening lines of the manifesto: "I am writing a manifesto and there's nothing I want, and yet I'm saying certain things, and in principle I am against manifestos, as I am against principles [...]. I'm writing this manifesto to show that you can perform contrary actions at the same time, in one single, fresh breath; I am against action; as for continual contradiction, and affirmation too, I am neither for nor against them, and I won't explain myself because I hate common sense" [Tzara 1918].

In addition to listing contradictory statements, the text contains a single positive thesis, from which we learn that Tzara hates common sense. It seems that this rejection of reason is motivated by a radical aspiration for freedom.

Dada's discontent with the contemporary social conditions and events is also evident. Tzara does not elaborate on the historical and social context in the *Manifesto*. There is a single allusion to the war situation, referred to simply as "the carnages" in a statement in which he says that "after the carnage we are left with the hope of a purified humanity" [Tzara 1918]. However, he does not spare art which sells itself, and only exists "in order to earn money and keep the dear bourgeoisie happy", while "rhymes have the smack of money, and inflexion slides along the line of the stomach in profile" [Tzara 1918]. Here we can clearly notice the characteristic avant-garde attitude of being against bourgeois modernity.

Tzara's attacks against logic remain at the level of statements. After all, we cannot expect arguments from someone who wants to tear down logical argumentation and characterizes dialectic by saying that "the way people have of looking hurriedly at things from the opposite point of view, so as to impose their opinions indirectly, is called dialectic, in other words, heads I wind and tails you lose, dressed up to look scholarly" [Tzara 1918]. According to the revelation of Tzara, logic is an unnecessary complexity, which is always false, and its main problem is that it limits freedom: „Its chains kill, an enormous myriapod that asphyxiates independence" [Tzara 1918]. The struggle against logic becomes thus the defining motive of the *Manifesto*: "abolition of logic, dance of those who are incapable of creation: DADA" [Tzara 1918]. We find this definition, of course, among numerous other definition-like statements, so that the reader has to select for herself from the enumeration what Dada "really" is.

Ultimately, we have to accept that "DADA DOES NOT MEAN ANYTHING". However, we are still reading a manifesto, which means that the text should urge us to do something, and as readers we should come to know what the author of the manifesto expects from us. Tzara states this in the following way: "Every man must shout: there is great destructive, negative work to be done. To sweep, to clean"; and: "with neither aim nor plan, without organisation: uncontrollable folly, decomposition" [Tzara 1918].

Everything which originates from the past must be abandoned: the order of logic, bourgeois social order, and the place which art has won

itself within the world – all this in the name of freedom and contradiction, which is identified as life itself: "Liberty: DADA DADA DADA; – the roar of contorted pains, the interweaving of contraries and all contradictions, freaks and irrelevancies: LIFE." [Tzara 1918]

The text known as the first Dadaist manifesto, which dates from 1918 and has been signed by twenty authors, renders the radicalism of Dada explicit – and artistic radicalism is not all there is to it: "Dadaism for the first time has ceased to take an aesthetic attitude toward life, and this it accomplishes by tearing all slogans of ethics, culture and inwardness, which are merely cloaks for weak muscles, into their components" [Beke 1998:80]. It seems that, within the avant-garde, Dada consciously and openly assumes that it opposes society not as artistic movement, but as its comprehensive critique. Precisely therefore, Dada does not attack other styles and trends, but art itself as a social institution, and it does not create a style of its own [Bürger 1984]. It is certainly true that Dada has lost the battle against the institution of art: it was not the museum that has become extinct, but Duchamp's *Fountain* was put into the museum. However, the victory of the avant-garde movements consists in the fact they "did destroy the possibility that a given school can present itself with the claim to universal validity" [Bürger 1984: 87].

The greatness of these manifestos comes from the consistency with which they try to think through the elimination of consistency, as far as something like this can even be achieved. As Tzara states: "Thus DADA was born, out of a need for independence, out of mistrust for the community. People who join us keep their freedom. We don't accept any theories" [Tzara 1918]. And the German manifesto ends in the following way: "To be against this manifesto is to be a Dadaist!" [Beke 1998: 81]. One can be faithful to Dada by refusing to recognize any kind of faithfulness – even to Dada itself. Dadaism is the living paradox in all of its manifestations.

c. The total artwork

Although different "isms" succeed each other in a frenzied rhythm, which is almost impossible to follow, at the beginning of the 20th century, until Dada's appearance there is never any doubt about what is and what isn't art. A painting by Matisse, about which Leo Stein – who, incidentally, collected the works of Matisse – could state that it is the most repulsive paint splotch he has ever seen, is undoubtedly a painting. But are meaningless sounds [Pierre Albert-Birot: *For Dada*, 1917] or the

mere enumeration of the letters of the alphabet (Louis Aragon: *Suicide*, 1919) – poetry? Is gluing certain materials to a surface a painting or a sculpture? Is it art if it does not belong to a certain genre? And finally, to also mention the "most Dada" object, is Duchamp's urinal, the ready-made called *Fountain* – art?

Reason operates with definitions and categorizations, that is, separations. It orders the chaos of experience through separating things. No wonder, then, that Dada, which is against reason, eliminates differences. This is not accidental, but a strategy. Kurt Schwitters writes about it in the following way: "My aim is the total Merz art work, which combines all genres into an artistic unity. First I married off single genres. I pasted words and sentences together in poems in such a way that their rhythmic composition created a kind of drawing. The other way around, I pasted together pictures and drawings containing sentences that demand to be read. I drove nails into pictures in such a way that besides the pictorial effect a plastic relief effect arose. I did this in order to erase the boundaries between the arts" [Beke 1998: 199].

Kurt Schwitters' aim is not to become the specialist of any genre, but to be "an artist." This can be realized best if the artist does not rely on some special skill (e.g. manual skills), but on a more general artistic skill. Although Marcel Duchamp has started his career as a painter, painting is for him only one of the modes of his artistic expression. Duchamp wants to remove from painting "the artist's touch", "his personal style", his "paw" – in French, *la patte*. He wants to distance himself from "*la patte*" and retinal painting. Thus, he paints, creates installations, "finds" and creates objects, and provides his works with witty titles, which function as so many riddles. His radical "work of art" is the ready-made, which barely retains anything from the traditional meaning of the concept: these objects are not produced, invented, or shaped by the artist, they are not "about" the world or the feelings of the artist, nor are they beautiful or sublime. Duchamp's *Fountain* is a philosophical question in a material form – what is art?

Since its beginnings, Dada mostly resembles a festival or circus where artists meet: in the Cabaret Voltaire, they recite poems (in different languages) and play music (preferably the wild rhythms of African music), dance and put on costumes designed by Marcel Janco, preferably simultaneously, between the walls exhibit which the works of Arp. That which happens on the stage is less a classic representation than a circus performance or a primitive ritual. Neither the direction of the performance, nor the public's reaction can be foreseen.

Ever since art is considered to be the work of a genius, artists have tended to be original and innovative. The pursuit of innovation also means breaking with the past. And nowhere is this break more radical than in the case of Dada. By trying to abolish the basic codes of communication – the intelligibility of language, the use of logic, and conceptual boundaries –, Dadaist works advocated meaninglessness in the name of freedom. Tzara demanded works of art which cannot be interpreted for his war against rationality. This, however, is a boundary which cannot be transgressed. Everything which is part of culture can be interpreted and thus it becomes an object for the meaning-seeking activity of reason.

3. The stalemate

The short and troubled life of Dada was full of disruptions and metastases. As the Hungarian avant-garde author Tibor Déry has observed early enough (in 1921), "this sect, which is increasingly widespread among recent generations, is already preparing for its eventual hara-kiri while being in its cradle" [Beke 1998: 247]. And no wonder: if being Dada means disagreeing with the Dadaist manifesto, tensions and oppositions between the Dadaists with different cultural roots are evidently inevitable. At the same time, anti-dogmatism also made the proliferation of Dadaist centres possible: besides and after Zurich, Dada also appears in Berlin, Hannover, Paris, New York. Everything is Dada, and anything is Dada. It is also undoubtedly true that some of the supporters of the Dada movement have remained reference points within art and Western culture, while others are barely known today. The ones whose memory has endured are those who went beyond Dada, such as Man Ray or Hans Arp. But how many members of the larger public have read even a single line of Tzara, about whom many of them know that he is the father, or at least the godfather, of Dada? Surrealists – for instance, Dalí – is known by masses of people, but how popular is the work of Kurt Schwitters outside the professional circle? Is Dada dead or alive?

Although they have been loud and bold, deliberately seeking scandal with their manifestations, the Dadaists have not been loud enough to be included in the art history of Gombrich, published in 1950, which remained a bestseller ever since. For a while it could seem that all this great commotion was for just fifteen minutes of fame, and that Dada did not put an end to art, but – very efficiently and fast, within only a couple of years – to itself. The first Manifesta of 1955, organized in Kas-

sel and meant at presenting avant-garde art, which has been dubbed "degenerated" by the Nazis in 1937, did not incorporate Dada.

Nevertheless, in a later edition of his work, from 1966, Gombrich saw himself compelled to include a few sentences about Dada in the history of art. He labels the Dada group as "extremist" and considers that he could have discussed their case in the chapter on primitivism of the previous edition. He dismisses the entire movement with the general statement that "the desire of these artist has been to become like little children and to ridicule the solemnity of Art with a big A" [Gombrich 2012: 601]. Then, Gombrich goes on to make excuses: "it always seemed to me inappropriate to mention, analyse, and present these gestures of 'anti-art' with the solemnity, not to say fastidiousness, which they wanted to ridicule and eradicate" [Gombrich 2012: 601]. It is no wonder that the renowned historian of art feels somewhat uncomfortable: meanwhile it has become clear that not only is Dada, about which he couldn't be bothered to say a word, not dead, but has become one of the most important sources of inspiration for the art of the sixties.

What Dada promised, Dada has delivered: its radical, implacable, and nonchalant critique did, in fact, cleanse art. Many aspects of art once considered natural have become problematic: that art has to be beautiful, that the work of fine art is a painting or sculpture, that the artist has to learn how to work with the material, that the poem has to consist of meaningful sentences, that the artist has to pursue professional and financial success, and thus he or she must try to appease critics and the bourgeois. At once, there were no genre distinctions anymore, and the rules of taste and decency, and even moral rules, were no longer relevant. Just remember Tzara and how he hated common sense, or Duchamp, who made the last drops of taste (*gout*) evaporate on his *Bottle Rack* (Égouttoir). They have opened up the possibility to endow mass-produced objects with artistic character, to use everyday materials and objects in art, and to create works of art from trash. Art was no longer bound by the expectations imposed by tradition, critics, or the public. Artists were able to create as free and unhindered as never before. This is the freedom that will give birth to an art working in the spirit of experimentation in the second half of 20th century, with new genres and newly torn down barriers.

Dada has been destroyed by its own success – and this is a danger which threatens every avant-garde movement. The essence of Dada is resistance and refusal. Thus, Dada can only shout in its interjections from the sidelines. What possible sense would it make to criticize the

rules of the game as an established player in its own right? At the same time, radical negation leads to self-denial, that is to say, self-annihilation, which also takes place in a theatrical manner: "When, symbolically, there is nothing left to destroy, the avant-garde is compelled by its own sense of consistency to commit suicide. This aesthetic thanatophilia does not contradict other features usually associated with the spirit of the avant-garde: intellectual playfulness, iconoclasm, a cult of unseriousness, mystification, disgraceful practical jokes, deliberately stupid humor" [Calinescu 1987: 123-124].

The situation of Dada is clearly described by Peter Bürger in his study dedicated to the avant-garde. In his view, the avant-garde is not merely the most recent art movement, but a movement which has as its double goal "the attack on the institution of art and the revolutionizing of life as a whole" [Bürger 2010]. According to Bürger, the avant-garde has failed to reach its objectives. However, this failure does not mean that the avant-garde could be written off as inefficient or insignificant: "measured against their goals and the hopes that they carried, all revolutions have failed: this fact does not lessen their historical significance" [Bürger 2010: 700] – a description that perfectly fits Dada.

Although it is exactly one hundred years by now, Dada is forever young. Dada is not only chapter in the history of art or culture, but a fervent material which continues to function to this day. According to Elza Adamowicz and Eric Robertson, who have edited a volume of studies about Dada in 2011: "Far from being fossilised as a historical movement, Dada's legacy is pacifist, internationalist, sceptical, imaginative, resistant to power and artistic relocation, possessing new relevance in a twenty first century of globalisation, eco-crisis, terror and hyperpower hegemony" [Adamowicz & Robertson 2011: 11-12].

Bürger associates the failure of the avant-garde with its artistic success. Although the avant-garde has struggled against the art institution and wanted to do away with it once and for all, the art world reacted to it with incorporation and acceptance: "the institution demonstrates its strength by embracing its attackers and assigns them a prominent place in the pantheon of great artists" [Bürger 2010: 705]. The avant-garde did not reach any of its goals – it did not defeat the art institution and could not unite art with life, thereby revolutionizing life itself. However, the reverse of this failure is a complete success within the art world: "the failure of the avant-garde utopia of the unification of art and life coincides with the avant-garde's overwhelming success within the art institution" [Bürger 2010: 705].

Although I consider Bürger's interpretation completely accept-able, I also think that one has to take into account another important circumstance from the perspective of the "failure" of Dada. Dada's project was more ambitious and farther-reaching than the objectives described by Bürger: Dada experimented with the realization of mean-inglessness at the level of language and thought. Although this is a bold experiment that should be appreciated, it is also bound to fail from the start, since, after all, it is carried out, within the limits of culture, which are structured by language and thought. Hence, if Dada is dead, it died trying to integrate meaninglessness into the artwork. As Tzara stated in his 1918 Manifesto, the aim is to create incomprehensible works of art: "What we need are strong, straightforward, precise works which will be forever misunderstood[1]" [Tzara 1918].

The creation of the incomprehensible artwork is already in itself a great challenge – unless we use the method of fishing out words from the hat. And, incidentally, Tzara has in fact created the algorithm for creating aleatoric and meaningless works of art:

"To make a Dadaist poem:
- Take a newspaper.
- Take a pair of scissors.
- Choose an article as long as you are planning to make your poem.
- Cut out the article.
- Then cut out each of the words that make up this article and put them in a bag.
- Shake it gently.
- Then take out the scraps one after the other in the order in which they left the bag.
- Copy conscientiously.
- The poem will be like you.
- And here are you a writer, infinitely original and endowed with a sensibility that is charming though beyond the understanding of the vulgar."

So, here you have an algorithm which guarantees "infinitely origi-nal" poetic creation, or a recipe, if you wish, which can be followed by a poet and can cure him of common sense, which is so loathsome.

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[1] In the French original: "Il nous faut des oeuvres fortes, droites, précises et à jamais incomprises"; i.e. "text which will never be understood". http://www.dada-companion.com/tzara_docs/tza_manifeste_1918.php

Bürger argues that the avant-garde has created an entirely new kind of receptive attitude, which entirely lacks the interpretation of the artwork (phenomenon, expression), and is instead aimed directly at changing the life of the recipient: "This refusal to provide meaning is experienced as shock by the recipient. And this is the intention of the avant-gardiste artist, who hopes that such withdrawal of meaning will direct the reader's attention to the fact that the conduct of one's life is questionable and that it is necessary to change it" (Bürger 1984: 80).

In my view, this interpretation is not entirely valid. We do not have descriptions, or confessions, about how the confrontation with avant-garde artworks has changed the lives of the recipients. It is much more realistic to suppose that, when encountering an incomprehensible artwork, the recipient tries to give meaning to it, provided that she is at all willing to engage with it. The reception of artworks can function if the recipient is able to place them into the context of a meaningful construction. Thus, the complete failure of Dada would be if we would completely stop engage ourselves with its manifestations. However, we do engage with them – and we do this through searching, or creating, possible meanings. If we enjoy the *Antipyrin* of Tzara, this is made possible by the fact that, in the absence of any specific clues, we create our own schemes of interpretation.

In one of his studies, Cornelius Partsch describes one of the first Dada evenings, on which Huelsenbeck, Janco, and Tzara have performed *The Admiral is Searching for a House to Rent*. Among other points, he emphasizes the importance of drums within this performance and other Dadaist actions, and the odd, mostly African rhythms which the performers played on them. Then he goes on by saying that "the Dadaists use the drum to tap into multiple strata of symbolic association, connecting horizontally with the carnage on Europe's battlefields and vertically with various archetypal regions" (Partsch 2006: 51). The case of Partsch with the Dada drums perfectly demonstrates that it is impossible not to search for meaning within human manifestations, especially if they are of an artistic nature. As far as these specific Dadaists are concerned, we shall never know what their intention really was – but, generally speaking, it is unbearable to think that the manifestation itself should have no meaning, reason, or motive.

Dadaist poems and objects endow the recipient with the same freedom which the artists considered so essential for themselves.

This is the gift of Dada to the recipient: "that kind of generosity of shared imaginative space, of permitting the observer to fill in the blanks, so we are all involved in the game" [Caws 2011: 81].

However, freedom is limited by the possibility of interpretation. In other words, you cannot checkmate reason. The struggle with it can at best end in an inspiring stalemate.

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