

Along the Threshold between Peacefulness and Hostility: A Review of Bucharest Dada Week

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Abstract: From the 20th -25th of June, Bucharest celebrated the Dada Centenary. *Dada Week* was organized by the Center of Excellence in the Study of Image at The University of Bucharest, on the initiative of the director of the Center, Professor Sorin Alexandrescu. It included one evening of film projections at the Romanian Cinematheque, four days of open lectures at the Romanian National Museum of Art (MNAR) and a two-day International Conference at the Central University Library (BCU). Such interdisciplinary events are always a great opportunity for extended debates and the fertile exchange of ideas. *Dada Week* was no exception.

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Dadaism regained momentum this centenary year and it well-deserves all of the newfound attention and academic focus. The outcome of *Dada Week* was impressive and the overall conclusions reconfigured many of the traditional reifying impressions of this particular avant-garde movement.

As an overture to *Dada Week*, Sorin Alexandrescu expressed his position in regard to the movement in an article published by *Observator Cultural*, in mid March 2016: "Dada, inconturnabilul punct zero". It functioned as a prelude to the debates that emerged over the course of the week. Alexandrescu attempted to scrutinize the idiosyncrasies of the Dada as compared to other avant-gardes of the times, such as surrealism. He invited the reader to interrogate the Dada deities in light of the past 100 years, a trajectory that might reveal hidden shades. For example Alexandrescu drew attention to the

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movement's lack of unity, given the diversity of its protagonists' cultural backgrounds. There was Tristan Tzara, Marcel Janco (Iancu in Romanian) and his brother Jules Janco – a Romanian apolitical francophone group – Richard Huelsenbeck and Hugo Ball two radical leftist Germans, Hans (Jean) Arp an Alsatian, and Picabia a francophone New York-ish Cuban living first in Barcelona then Switzerland. Both their dissociation from any tradition and their “inadherence to the local” (Alexandrescu: 12) bred their eventual success.

Alexandrescu developed his point employing text and visuals, and raised a provocative question regarding the issue of violence. He found Homi K. Bhabha's theory of the notion of home very pertinent in the case of the Dada expats: “They have a home, therefore they are not homeless, but they lack being «at home», therefore they are «unhomed», they feel «unhomely»” (*Ibid.*). Acknowledging the etymological and semantic resemblance to the German “unheimlich”, only placed in a social frame, he went further declaring:

I am tempted to believe that it was this terrifying social isolation, this cultural vacuum that sparked the hostility towards the locals and the fierce denial of all that was culturally produced back then, including both anarchy and revolution. (*Ibid.*)

Dada's initial hostility towards its own audience, for example during the *Cabaret Voltaire* theatrical performances, hints at the fundamentals of the movement's tenets. These principles return within a manifold of artistic formats and techniques that the Dadaists will initiate. Sorin Alexandrescu claims that from Dada's inception through the public performances in Zürich, “the human communication was disqualified through the unhuman” (*ibid.*). Despite the Dadaists attempts to dismiss any generalizations about them, two major aspects seem to define Dada: on the one hand the provocation of the human through what was historically dissociated from the human (body, organs and fluids, as well as drives), and, on the other hand, the provocation of the media via a multimedial means of expression. The distortion (of language), cutting (photocollage), and dissonance (sound poems) are many ways of disfiguring the reified human – returning to the human its inhuman face. Ultimately the Dadaists insisted that knowledge is anything but neutral, that it requires action, violence and provocation to bring it forth. True knowledge of the human emerges from human interaction, and human interaction involves aggression. The scandalous potential became the ensign of the movement.

Several interventions in the international conference followed a similar track. In a videoconference, Matei Vişniec affirmed the Russian revolutionary character as an inspiration to the Dadaists in Zürich, offering the hypothesis of an “atemporal Dada spirit” that comes and goes at certain historical junctures, an assumption traversing his play *Dada Cabaret (a draft and permanently work-in-progress play)*. Vişniec also suggested that the Eastern European Jewish culture may have exerted an equally powerful influence upon the movement. In a plenary lecture, titled *The Spring’s Words. Marcel Duchamp, Fountain (1917)*, Ervin Kessler deployed an arsenal of examples of Dada’s appeal to a canonical manner of aggression through the scatological. This seems to me related to Kristeva’s definition of the abject. Frequent recourse to the corporeal – to a certain extent displayed for their scandalous potential – were also part of the centenary panel dedicated to Women’s Contribution to Dada. Baroness Elsa Von Freytag-Loringhoven’s famous body-sweating as well as her infamous corporeal displays were discussed by the researcher Cosana Nicolae Eram. My own presentation also focused on phallic and scatological weaponry in order to explain and justify Hannah Hoch’s betrayal of the Dada movement.

Stephen Forcer of the University of Birmingham has been working with Dada for nearly twenty years. His plenary lecture, titled *DADAVision! Re-visualising Dada* unveiled a new perspective, meant to hold two contrary aspects of Dada in perfect balance: hostility and peacefulness. Dada’s reputation is that of “man doing silly things”, which mostly originates in the work of Picabia. But according to Forcer rethinking the traditional picture of Dada could give us a way to understand our vision of the world today. Forcer breaks with the lasting tropes of disgust, rupture and repugnance that linger on the history of Dada. Beyond the image of the catastrophe in post-war Europe, he believes that Dada hints at the ways in which our literary vision works in general. It gives us a way of seeing other people and understanding human relations ethically, and also a way of revisualizing knowledge. Forcer also touched on Dada’s Buddhist character in its interrelational aspects. Dada explores how we interact with each other as group or global community, and how we relate to one another in intimate interactions.

Most of what Forcer mentioned is discussed in his recently published book, *Dada as Text, Thought and Theory* (2015). The writing of the book was in itself a process by which Forcer came to understand Dada in a new light. He looked at women Dada poets in particular, trying to understand the text of their work and their particularly distinct message. Forcer researched the relevance of women’s artistic productions to the movement, plunging into a

selection of poems by Céline Arnould and Marguerite and Gabrielle Buffet, whose work appeared in the Parisian magazines of the times. He waded into their secluded structure and order of signs, exposing their deep criticism of culture and society following the principles of Dada. Forcer suggests that they also targeted the very Dada movement itself, portraying it in a less flattering light, underlining its shift into a commercial, ostentatious spectacle. This was simultaneous with Tzara's renunciation of Dada, with his proclamation of Dada's suicide.

Céline Arnould (born in Romania) acquaints us in her poems to the aggressiveness of Dada. In *Avertisseur* (Warning), a poem from 1920, she warns in a Dadaist manner about the slippages of the movement. Forcer suggested that Marguerite Buffet would also soon admit her betrayal of the movement, for reasons that I associate with a general tendency in Dada women to dissociate from a brotherhood whose instrumental weaponry was profoundly androcentric. Forcer also noted the macho aspects of the movement, punctuating a few particular elements, such as Picabia's fascination with sport cars² and luxury items, his reputation as a womanizer, and other problematic discontinuities between his avant-garde, iconoclastic principles and his everyday self-indulgent eccentricities. Forcer draws on this in order to discuss Dada's hostility toward the external world. He mentions the Dadaists getting wound up even at the journalists who were their close followers and main promoters.

According to Stephen Forcer, Dada is the visualization of a particular form of absurd knowledge, the idea that chance and spontaneity are facts of the physical universe. Here he finds a relationship between Dada and quantum physics, both flourishing in the early 20s. Both Dada and experimental quantum theory fall under the European spirit of the "formalization of doubt, of uncertainty, of chance, of approximation". The images produced by Dada are actually similar to those describing natural phenomena in quantum physics.

Forcer's interest also extends to Dada's relationship to Jacques Lacan's psychoanalysis, given a shared interest in madness; madness seen as a magnifying mirror of ourselves and our cognitive mechanisms, a better instrument than what most art had to offer. Drawing a relation between Lacan's and Tzara's concept of death, Forcer quoted Tzara saying that "Dada is not modern at all, it is a return to a religion of indifference that is almost

² The wheel becomes the phallic symbol in this new scenario.

Buddhist". Forcer identifies this indifference as signifying nothingness. In summary Forcer offered that Dada is based on a fundamental contradiction, in that it is both hostile and peaceful. Despite its confrontational attitude, Dada is also about friendship and humor; indeed humor with an ethical function. Dada "is progressive for the Dadaists".

With regard to humor, Alexandrescu, in his plenary lecture, named the concept of playfulness as one of the several denominating concepts of the movement. Yet he premised that it is almost impossible that six people with such diverse backgrounds could possibly have a common understanding of language play, both in texts and images. He claimed that the provocation in the Dadaist language play was less an act of humor and more an attempt to shut the other up in an authoritarian manner: an attempt to gain power as a consequence of feeling powerless. Even at the level of artistic practice, of material usage (cutting, importing, transporting images, concepts and symbols from one field to another), we find a need in Dada to force the boundaries. Our perspective today is that of Dada as a consolidated group, with similar philosophical ambitions, challenging the surrounding world. Yet Alexandrescu concluded they were not aware of any such unity or force.

I hold that there was more unconscious unity in this thought-wave than many historical approaches to Dada have accounted so far. For Dada had an incalculable influence on a wide 20th century palate of artistic productions, from cubism, constructivism and conceptualism to basic design. Kathryn Brown, from Loughborough University, also a keynote speaker in the conference, focused on a particular set of crosscurrents that developed between some of the key tenets of early dada. She drew an interesting link between three different artists: Tristan Tzara, Pablo Picasso and Henry Rousseau, a triad in which Tzara's criticism of language (both verbal and visual) becomes a bond for the other two.

The technical aspect that knotted the three artists was the early development of the collage (as the title of her speech announced: *Collage as Form and Idea: Tristan Tzara, Pablo Picasso, Henri Rousseau*). Brown's body of examples, navigating among photographs, drawings and paintings, documented her perception of this link. A photograph from Picasso's studio is revealed as source of inspiration for his paintings, thus capturing the particular parameters of his own sensory space, including the cognitive perception and eventual artistic representation of movement and physical dynamics. It also suggests the fragmentation of the visual field that determines the basis for a renewed dialogue with the viewer, in terms of the

appropriation of a shared mental-physical space that was meant to express, in Brown's words, "tactility through vision". Here Brown finds no mere coincidence in Tristan Tzara and Pablo Picasso's post-Dada collaboration. Tristan Tzara's interest in Picasso's work, referred to in his essays and poems beginning in the 1930s, extends beyond a simple friendship. An intriguing chain of art-language and visual concerns shared by the two artists signal Dada's potential to advance away from its early erratic episodes and interweave with other like-minded artists of the time.

Going back to the initial promoters of the Dada movement, had Dada been only a matter of youthful caprice how could it produce such an influential wave? We have to remember that this strong intersection of energies turned out to be powerful enough to move us into the 21st century. The Bucharest conference gave space to the expansion of Dada principles into fields such as architecture, photography, film, theater, music and visual arts, documented in panels dedicated to both the technical and aesthetic dimensions. The famous photo-collages of the Berliners (Hannah Höch, Raoul Hausmann, Kurt Schwitters) raised wide interest among the speakers participating in the conference, as well as the performative aspects of Dada, whose relevance for the understanding of the movement was evident by the frequent references to performance within panels different than the one dedicated to the performative arts.

Two theater performances were organized as part of the *Dada Week* events, giving a better sensory perspective of the Dada years. One such event was *Dada Dada Dada. Is he perhaps stammering?*, a reading inspired by *Travesties*, by Tom Stoppard. The other, *Tzara arde și dada se piaptână (Fantoma de la Elsinore)*³, a play by Ion Pop, Ștefana and Ioan Pop-Curșeu, was also followed by a conversation with the audience. The neo-Dada theatrical events impelled the debate. The live atmosphere of the Dada years, with their *bruitisme* and cacophonous cognitive impact, could barely make their way through the disciplined eye of the researchers in the absence of a proper re-staging of the *Cabaret Voltaire* atmosphere. Throwing the public for a loop was revitalized by the very elements that intrigued the spectators a century ago.

³ A pun literally meaning *The country is burning while Dada brushes their hair (The Ghost from Elsinore)*, suggesting that someone (in this case, Dada) overlooks the real problems. The play was a co-production between the Faculty of Theatre and Television, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj, The Cluj-Napoca National Theatre, Persona Association, and the City Hall and Local Council of Cluj-Napoca, within *Dada >100: Viață/Artă/Muzeu* project. The cast included Filip Odangiu, Rareș Stoica, Cătălin Codreanu, Cristian Grosu and Ștefana Pop-Curșeu.

To conclude, the Dadaist principles oscillated throughout various thought-spaces of *Dada Week* – political, humanistic and artistic – and proliferated through a broad range of media. Despite their ponderous attempts at political and philosophical upheavals, the Dadaists successfully challenged the artistic language all the way up to the present day. Their ambitions in terms of power relations, as well as their ostentatious appeal to hostility, left a lasting imprint on artistic language. Many interventions during *Dada Week* referred not only to the period following the Dada years but also far beyond, revealing the genuine spread of the movement. A massive collection of essays, forthcoming later this year, will offer a comprehensive picture of the academic dialogue during the entirety of *Dada Week*.

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