

Oliver C. Speck

The Joy of Anti-Art: Subversion through Humour in Dada

Much has been said to the effect that the everyday is already heavily aestheticized, while art is losing its romantic mission to subvert. The point of differentiation between serious art and 'joke' art is here exactly that of the humoristic context. The question, 'Is this serious?' decides if the artwork is 'really' subversive or 'just a clever joke'. By means of humour, Dada – this, rather short-lived, multinational and multilingual art movement – achieved what is the commonsensical expectation of modern art: a subversion of the prevalent ideology. The techniques employed here such as collage, pastiche (e.g. Raoul Hausmann, John Heartfield), performance (Hugo Ball, Kurt Schwitters), assemblage, nonsensical or pseudo-metaphysical titles (George Grosz, Max Ernst) certainly inspired artists as diverse as Andy Warhol, Joseph Beuys and the Ant Farm collective, to name a few of the late-comer Dadaists. This article will examine Dadaist techniques of subversion, among them techniques to subvert the gendered body, and look at DADA vis-à-vis present day art.

The rather short-lived international and multilingual art movement known as Dada has been only recently emancipated from its more famous successor, Surrealism. The exhibition entitled “DADA” shown in Paris, New York, and Washington, D.C. in the fall of 2004 and spring of 2005 presented an extensive overview of Dada’s manifestations in its different locations in Germany, France, Switzerland, the USA and elsewhere. A German exhibition in 2003, entitled *Grotesk! 130 Jahre Kunst der Frechheit* that found its way to New York in 2005 as *Comic Grotesque: Wit and Mockery in German Art, 1870–1940*, grounds Dada in the tradition of the grotesque in German art. But even the latter exhibition and the accompanying scholarly material – regardless of the title – appears to be avoiding an analysis of the combination of the specific Dadaist humour and its subversive strategies. This oversight is indeed even more curious when we consider that, by means of humour, Dada achieved what constitutes a commonly-held expectation for modern art: a subversion of the prevalent ideology. The techniques employed – collage and pastiche (e.g., Raoul Hausmann, John Heartfield, Hannah Höch), performance (Hugo Ball), assemblage (Kurt Schwitters), nonsensical or pseudo-metaphysical titles (George Grosz, Max Ernst) – certainly inspired artists as diverse as Andy Warhol, Joseph Beuys and the Ant Farm collective, to name a few of the late-comer (post-)Dadaists.

In order to put the phenomenon of Dada into relief and examine the way in which Dada’s strategies of subversion by humour work to debunk ideology, including the very ideology or myth of art that animates the Dada movements with all its paradoxical force, this article will first look at Dada vis-à-vis two instances of present day art, both of which insist on being taken seriously. With

Walter Benjamin, Gilles Deleuze, and Giorgio Agamben, the prevalence of strategies aimed at the subversion of gender and other ideologies can be explicated. While Dada's sometimes sophomoric humour might appear as nonsense, I will show that the Dadaists are dead serious about art. Indeed, they embrace the paradox of the Romantic programme to the bitter end.

Is this Serious?

Much has been said to the effect that the everyday is already heavily aestheticized, while art is losing its Romantic mission to subvert. The point of differentiation between serious art with the mission to subvert and 'joke' art, lacking this mission, concerns precisely the humouristic context. The question – 'Is this serious?' – decides if the artwork is 'really' subversive or 'just a clever joke'. The seriousness is, of course, debatable, and in the age of computer generated images, always in doubt. To take the example of self-mutilation and self-destruction in the artwork of David Nebrada,¹ we need to believe the authenticity of the documents (rather than their computer generated origin), or the content of the artwork, to judge whether 'he is really serious about that' – serious because his body bears the imprint of his art, making him a latter-day 'hunger artist'. Another, diametrically opposed point of reference would be the T-shirt marketed as underground art by alternative manufacturers. While conservative art critics will certainly bristle at the idea of an art form based on corporate branding, a recent article in the *New York Times Magazine* makes clear that the creators of these so-called 'minibrands' want to be taken seriously both as artists and entrepreneurs. Self-consciously channelling the bohemian lifestyle of the avant-garde artist, they attempt to abolish the difference between art and advertising. Given this trend, the journalist muses that "a product-based counterculture is inevitable" (Walker).

Underlying the judgements concerning the seriousness of art is, of course, the fact that the point of no return for art has long been passed with the ultimate ready-made by Marcel Duchamp, the infamous urinal with the enigmatic signature "R. Mutt" that was displayed at the Salon of the Society of Independent Artists of New York in 1917 and entitled *Fountain*, as well as with his mustached Mona Lisa with the vulgar *subscriptio*. While it is obvious that these two works subvert normative expectations as to what is admissible in a museum and what is not, it is important to underline that Duchamp's works, as well as Dada art and especially its performances, use gender as a framework for breaking down norms. As Andreas Böhn points out in his introductory essay to this volume, sex and gender are generally assumed to be congruent, i.e. 'natural',

¹Recently, in turn, the subject of a documentary film, *ADN* by Judith Cahen, 2005. David Houston Jones provides a succinct introduction to Nebrada.

and the comic subversion of gender identities therefore identifies and aims especially at assumptions about gendered role models. Duchamp's *Fountain* underlines the contingency of gender norms by an unfolding of anal and sexual transpositions and slippages. The literally *ob-scene* object, the receptacle of urine – normally banned to the restroom for men, not to be seen by women – is not only displayed in the public space of an art gallery like it would be in a showroom for plumbing supplies, but also turned horizontally, thus revealing its vaginal form, while the signature's meaning is open to unlimited interpretation – is it “Mutt-eR” (mother, in German)? A reference to the actual manufacturer of the urinal, Mott (Molesworth 179)? A mutt . . . – as much as the title is equally open to lewd interpretations. Given Jacques Lacan's intimate acquaintance with the Dadaist and surrealist artists, the proto-Lacanian nature of this joke should not surprise us. Lacan famously demonstrates the uncoupling of sex and gender in his article *The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious* by using an amusing anecdote about two identical restroom doors.

The sovereignty of the signifier over the signified, and in extension, of the signifying chain, over the biological being, is also demonstrated by one of the most famous, intriguing, and perhaps the funniest of Duchamp's creations, the character – or “trademark”, as Helen Molesworth calls it – of Rose Sélavy. This crude pun (*éros, c'est la vie*) serves as designator for a female alter-ego, (her) authorial signature, as well as brand name:

She was an easily identifiable image and brand name; an identity for a given set of producers, as identity shielding the identity of her 'parent company.' The placement of her name or image on works 'authenticated' them. The version of authenticity being offered, however, is a puzzling one, for our surest belief in Rose Sélavy comes not from Duchamp, but from Man Ray's famous portrait of her (Molesworth 181).

Looking, then, at the portraits of Marcel Duchamp as elegant lady (Dickerman 376; Molesworth 180), we notice immediately that Duchamp does not appear like a drag queen but rather ‘plays it straight’. However, the appearance of “Rose” on these head shots is that of a star beyond her prime. We could imagine this type of photo in the display case of a second-rated theatre or variété: the female star as narcissistic object of the fetishistic gaze has a short shelf-life. Man Ray obviously also ‘plays it straight’ and mimics the style of theatrical publicity shots, complete with soft filter, key light stressing the cheekbones, expensive jewellery, and hat deep over the piercing eyes. The portrait of a woman is thus turned into an image of women. Indeed, as George Baker points out in a lucid article, “the practice of Dada photography cannot be separated from a reflection upon the image of women” (193). This image depends as much on the fetishistic gaze as it does on the accessories like jewellery, fur collar, and ostrich feathers. Roughly at the same time these photographs were taken, Walter Benjamin describes the prostitute, the incarnation of woman-as-commodity, as

“menschgewordene Allegorie” (“humanized allegory”), as he explains: “Die Requisiten, mit denen die Mode sie ausstaffiert, sind die Embleme, mit denen sie sich behängt. Der Fetisch ist das Echtheitssiegel der Ware, wie das Emblem das Echtheitssiegel der Allegorie” (*Gesammelte Schriften* 1151) (“The requisites with which fashion dresses her up, are the emblems which she hangs on herself. The fetish is the commodity’s seal of authenticity, as much as the emblem is the allegory’s seal of authenticity”).² By cleverly playing on gender stereotypes, this complex strategy of setting textual, contextual and cultural significations against each other, Man Ray’s portraits of Duchamp as Rose Sélavy show that the fetishization and commoditization of art is linked to the fetishization and commoditization of women. By exposing this link and opening the differentiated fragments of this allegory up to ridicule, Dada finds a unique strategy of mocking the bourgeois fetish image of women.

As we know from numerous sources, this strategy certainly provoked public outcry insofar as the Dada exhibitions were accompanied by scandals and police interventions (e.g. Gale 146–148, Molesworth 184–186). The outrage and indignation that these subversions cause, as well as more benign, humorous reactions, undoubtedly form part of Dada’s strategy. Looking at Benjamin’s essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, we find assigned to Dada the position of a proto-filmic art that anticipates film’s “physical choc effects” that, at the time, cinema itself with its limited technical capabilities was not yet able to achieve. Referring to the use of waste and devalued items such as old bus tickets in their collages, Walter Benjamin describes the program of the Dada artist thus:

What they intended and achieved was a relentless destruction of the aura of their creation, which they branded as reproductions with the very means of their production. [. . .] Dadaistic activities actually assured a rather vehement distraction by making works of art the center of scandal. One requirement was foremost: to outrage the public (*The Work of Art* 237f.).

Ready-mades, and with them the entire Dada movement, problematize the notion of works of art proper, and constitute a clever comment on the commoditization of art and also of the entire *Lebenswelt*. With Dada, the event of art is transposed away from the object, the ‘artwork’ as such, to become a purely discursive event.

Let us now look at how the decisive event of Dada still casts a shadow over the production of art, indeed the very notion of what art is and does. Instead of pointing to the many neo-Dadaists, for example the Fluxus-movement of the sixties, let me come back to the above-mentioned examples. If Dada posits art

²Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own and emphases according to the original.

as hovering between discourse and the embodiment of an object, Nebreda's art insists on the embodiment in the artist himself. The Nebreda phenomenon, however, is a post-Dada possibility, as one of Dada's premises is that the work of art has been done away with. Indeed, Nebreda tries to find a more secure object in the subject 'artist'. The studied art-historian and self-proclaimed "non-artist" (Surlering) short-circuits the classic mechanism whereby art, having *technē* in the Greek sense, has its origin outside itself, favouring instead the artist who paradoxically finds his essence in the work of art, the "absolute abstract inessence", as Giorgio Agamben puts it in his book, *The Man Without Content* (54). Agamben defines the modern artist as follows: "The artist is the man without content, who has no other identity than a perpetual emerging out of nothingness of expression and no other ground than this incomprehensible station in this side of himself" (55). For Nebreda, the origin of the work of art seems to inhabit his own artistic self, making him the new though impoverished version of the Romantic genius.

In this light, the creation of underground brands appears here equally as an attempt at a new grounding in the purely tautological gesture of creating a brand for a subculture, defined by those who share the aesthetic object by buying this 'cool brand'. The artistic process emerges here in a pure form, reduced to a self-conscious creation of an aesthetic object *ex nihilo*, a moment where the artistic community imagines itself as whole, retroactively projecting its founding moment as the mythical origin, that is, the creation of a commodity with an inflated exchange value, which gives the work of art its value.

Both these gestures want to be understood as a call back to seriousness and substantiality in art, an anti- and post-Dada move to reground art, once in the doubling of the artist in subject/object and once in the empty gesture of the brand-creation. Here we encounter an interesting ironic twist: Dada itself has often, and rightfully, been labeled 'anti-art', a label, by the way, that the artists did not employ at the time (McEvelley). Dada is 'anti', because the original Dadaists understood very well that these tautological gestures are ideological gestures *par excellence*: the empty phrases of propaganda attempt to fill the brand of the respective community – be it nation or group of artists – with content by teleological reading and retroactive projection. Dada, as Roman Jakobson writes already in 1921, developed in opposition to the rampant "zoological nationalism" of the first decades of the twentieth century (40). Hence the Dadaists' fondness for mock-propaganda and fake titles borrowed from the military and commercial lingo of the day: "Dada Siegt!".

But is it Really Subversive?

To answer this question let me come back, once again, to the anti- and post-Dada examples. We should not dismiss them as simple incidences of 'postmodern

irony'. It is important to see the implicit *Romanticism* of these utopian gestures which promise relief from the fragmentation of modern life, one in the form of the suffering artist who embodies and acts out the schizophrenic modern self for us and in our stead, the other in the illusion of an artistic community, an 'in-crowd' of hipsters cynically playing into consumer capitalism and united – if only temporarily – by the aesthetic experience of the minibrand of the moment.

Being simply 'anti' is of course not a recipe for subversion. It can quickly deteriorate into a meaningless gesture. Andreas Böhn rightfully stresses the inherent paradox in an avant-gardist project based on transgression. The "laughing-with-position", as he calls the subversive mode of laughter in Nietzsche, Baudelaire, and Bachtin that violates norms, rather than reaffirming them, will quickly exhaust itself by running out of norms which it can violate. The Dada artists were well aware of the dangers of exaggerating their anarchic actions, as Hanne Bergius shows. As she puts it: "A subtle taming of the Dionysian by the moderating counterforce of the Apollonian was necessary" (167). Bergius traces the complex subversive strategies Dada employs back to the grotesque in Romanticism and points out the constant play of closeness and ironic distancing in their performances, or as Schlegel's famous definition of irony puts it, "steter Wechsel von Selbstschöpfung und Selbstvernichtung" (172) ("a permanent change of self-creation to self-destruction"). This "permanent change" can be observed *in actu* in Tristan Tzara in his famous *Dada Manifesto 1918*: "I write a manifesto and I want nothing, yet I say certain things, and in principle I am against manifestoes, as I am also against principles" (76).

Acknowledging the intention of Dada's iconoclastic performances as a tactic to subvert prevalent nationalist ideology, Leigh Clemons sees the danger of this programme. Clemons writes: "However, Dada's deconstructive tactics were so continually active, so all-pervasive that they left no space in which *any* form of representation [...] could be reformed and solidified. This created, in effect, a field of empty 'play' devoid of any referents and relations" (149). What Clemons claims here, in short, is that the Dadaists follow through with romantic irony and end up with complete nonsense. Here, however, Clemons seems to underestimate the Dadaists' determination to follow through with their own programme. Roman Jakobson's perceptiveness can help to put this nonsense into perspective. In his 1921 essay, he remarks that while the jingoism of the time attempts to particularize Europe, "space is being reduced in gigantic strides – by radio, the telephone, aeroplanes" (34). He compares this Copernican shift with the "science of relativity" (35), where indeed Dada "relativizes itself historically" (38). Such a relativized movement can not only not have a centre, but must also necessarily be without firm identity. The multinationality of Dada immunized the movement against the pitfalls of a nihilistic stance of being solely 'anti'. As T J. Demos points out in his close readings of the trilingual poem *L'amiral cherche une maison à louer* (Circulations; qtd. in

Zurich Dada), Dada “refused the formation of an alternative community of consensus, one unified in opposition” (Circulations 16). Without any firm ideological grounding, this refusal can be easily misunderstood as mere gesture. Hugo Ball’s much quoted diary entry from 4 April 1916 – “our cabaret is a gesture” – leads for example Hans Burckhard Schlichting to diagnose a proto-postmodern relativism in Dada. If the cabaret is only a gesture, he deduces, this gesture can only gain a relative meaning. According to Schlichting, this relativism is developed by the Dadaists “in einem semantischen Egalitarismus, der klassischen Vorform des heutigen ‘anything goes’ ” (59) (“into a semantic egalitarianism, the classic early form of today’s ‘anything goes’”).

However, the relativity that Jakobson describes should not be confused with postmodern relativism. To better grasp this Dadaist relativity, I would like to evoke Gilles Deleuze. In his book on the baroque, *The Fold (Le pli)*, Deleuze, establishes “perspectivism as a truth of relativity (and not a relativity of what is true)” (21). Instead of a timeless “Truth” to which every subject takes a varying, relative position, perspectivism “is the condition in which the truth of a variation appears to the subject” (20). Deleuze’s notion of perspectivism relies on a Benjaminian notion of allegory. He is following Leibniz, but he is also inspired by Benjamin’s famous book on the *Trauerspiel*. In typical Deleuzian fashion, this acknowledgement appears in the last few pages of *The Fold*, almost like an afterthought (125). However, Deleuze’s notion of allegory is clearly indebted to Benjamin. Instead of a personification of a transcendent principle, this modern notion of allegory concerns a text that is the allegory of its own creation. The “destruction of the aura of their creation” that Benjamin evokes in the above quoted passage, is here also emblematic in the true sense of the word. By using waste, devalued items, and cut-outs the process of the creation is exposed. The witty, funny, and openly unwieldy titles add the inscription that every emblem needs, as, for example, in Raoul Hausmann’s collages – the collage with the inscription “Dada siegt” is entitled: *Ein bürgerliches Präzisionsgehirn ruft eine Weltbewegung hervor (A Bourgeois Precision Brain Incites a World Movement)* (for more examples cf. Dickermann 126–133).

We should understand the Dadaist project with Deleuze as a projection, a model, but not as a metaphor. A metaphoric mode of reading establishes a transcendental perspective from which a body of texts is judged. Only from a certain point of view, however, can we grasp a truth about gender-roles in our society. And this point of view, which is, like all allegories bound to time, also the only legitimate point of view. Man Ray’s portraits of Duchamp as Rose Sélavy, to come back to this example, establish this truth solely from the point of view of the commodity.

Contrary to Schlichting, I would argue that, if Dada is indeed only a gesture, this gesture points to a sophisticated strategy of subversion that works on two levels: it avoids exactly what I would label “bad postmodern relativism”, i.e.,

the commonly-held attitude that one can read a work of art in any way one wants, because everyone possesses an equally-valid personal truth, instead of establishing a relativist perspectivism. And, secondly, the refusal to build any community, even one that is only defined by its opposition, is directed against the romantic ideal of a community bound by a shared aesthetic experience. This is exactly what Benjamin pointed to in the above quoted passage that describes the Dadaistic achievement of “a rather vehement distraction”. The role of distraction in Benjamin’s work of art essay is, of course, crucial: “Distraction as provided by art presents a covert control of the extent to which new tasks become soluble by apperception. Since, moreover, individuals are tempted to avoid such tasks, art will tackle the most difficult and most important ones where it is able to mobilize the masses” (The Work of Art 240). The fascist aestheticization of politics attempts to prevent a mobilization of the masses by pressing art into the production of ritual, pseudo-auratic values, in order to preserve the conditions of private ownership.³

What first appeared as a simple question – ‘But is it really subversive?’ – now touches nothing less than the problem of the work of art. Let me briefly return to Agamben. Rereading Hegel’s *Aesthetics*, but also responding to Kantian aesthetics, Agamben shows that we need not fear the death of art, but the infinite dying of art. He proclaims, “as long as nihilism secretly governs the course of Western history, art will not come out of its interminable twilight” (58). Dada’s attempts at humour that sometimes seem quite desperate are indeed the final attempt to kill art in its modern conception, manifestly impossible though this might be, but this is also an attempt to come out of its twilight. It is no coincidence that, after this no-holds-barred attack on art, the Surrealists reintroduced limits, complete with jealously guarded definitions and manifestoes.

Can We Still Laugh?

The general mood at the Dada-performances must have been quite raucous. Hugo Ball, founder of the Cabaret Voltaire, notes in his diary on 26 February 1916: “Everyone has been seized by an indefinable intoxication. The little cabaret is about to come apart at the seams and is getting to be a playground for crazy emotions”. And this intoxication was certainly carried over to other Dada venues. A journalist attests for an evening 1918 in Berlin “an incredible confusion of whistling, laughter and indignation” (Wolfrath 283). A painting by Marcel Jano, “Cabaret Voltaire, 1916” (Teubner 137), can serve as an illustration of an evening at the Cabaret, to which Hans Arp gives the following

³Benjamin’s argument, especially his clear preference for the Dadaists and Surrealists and his scathing critique of Futurism, of course, has been hotly debated. For an overview of the discussion and a bibliography, cf. Antliff 154.

impression: “Total pandemonium. The people around us are shouting, laughing, and gesticulating. Our replies are sighs of love, volleys of hiccups, poems, moos, and miaowing of medieval *Bruitists*” (*Arp on Arp* 234). The description of this Dada performance sounds like the symptoms of the so-called “shell shock”: “tics and tremors, paralysis, hyperaesthesia of one or all the senses, swooning, catatonia, mutism, blindness, deafness, stuttering, rhythmical screaming, and crawling on all fours, [...] and a general lapse into atavistic or infantile methods of reaction” (Doherty 90). Of course, this atmosphere of a mad dance on the volcano can not be separated from the war raging at the same time – as Hugo Ball writes in his novel *Tenderenda the Fantast*: “The laughter increases to the same degree as the horror” (119).

Although it is certainly aligned with him and his grotesque tics, Dada’s laughter, however, should not be mistaken for the senseless, hysteric laughter of a victim of shell-shock. It is, rather, a laughter *with* this victim, a laughter that stems from the truth of relativity, a truly mirthless laughter as Beckett famously describes it.⁴ It is Hans Arp’s great insight to point out “that the Dadaists despised what is commonly regarded as art, but put the whole universe on the lofty throne of art” (Arp, *Looking* 13). This mirthless laughter is emblematic for the state of art, which is the state of the world.

Let me put in a final word of warning: nowadays, the event of Dada registers a nostalgia for what preceded its murderous gesture, and raises the spectre of the artwork that will not leave us, and that returns in major exhibitions (such as the above-mentioned Pompidou/MOMA/National Gallery of Art exhibition), and that invites us ever so playfully to reify and deify it once again. We should instead hold true to Dada’s animating force: A true Dadaist takes nothing seriously, by taking *nothing* seriously.

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⁴Mirthless laughter must be understood as a process. Beckett, *Watt* (48): “Of all the laughs that are strictly speaking not laughs, but modes of ululation, only three I think need detain us, I mean the bitter, the hollow and the mirthless. They correspond to successive, how shall I say successive. . . suc . . . successive excoriations of the understanding, and the passage from the one to the other is the passage from the lesser to the greater, from the lower to the higher, from the outer to the inner, from the gross to the fine, from the matter to the form. The laugh that now is mirthless once was hollow, the laugh that once was hollow once was bitter. And the laugh that once was bitter? Eyewater, Mr. Watt, eyewater”.

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