

## *The Mimetic Exacerbation. Revolution at the Gates*

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**Abstract:** *The Mimetic Exacerbation. Revolution at the Gates.* The paper retraces the lineages between Dada and contemporary artists like Iza Genzken or Thomas Hirschhorn whose critical view upon social and political reality is based on the same ideas of equality, collective body and *commonism* as in the case of early avant-garde. Contrary to more recent neoliberal reductions of Dada to a romantic, irrational cry for freedom, more complex interpretations are revisited in the texts of Adorno, Benjamin or Hal Foster that prove that the aesthetic and political relevance of Dada (then and now) is to be found in the connection between anarchic forms of deconstruction and the idea and the forms of the commons.

**Keywords:** revolution, commonism, equality, Event, collective body, spaces-of-flows.

### *Two Curious Incidents and the Politics of Dada*

In 1918 in Lausanne the world premiere of Igor Stravinsky's *L'Histoire du soldat* took place. At the time, shortly after the Russian Revolution, the composer was broke and cut off by war in Switzerland. He believed that a small performance theater, capable of moving from town to town, would provide an income so he set about to compose a piece suitable for these conditions. The result was not a success. On the contrary it provided one of the scandals of the age. Among those who a bit later were shocked and highly critical of the work was Theodor Adorno. Writing a review in 1923 he strongly condemned the work and his main accusation portrayed the composer as a Dadaist: "the old forms have been destroyed; the formless

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soul refreshes itself amidst the ruins. Vive Stravinsky! Vive Dada! He has torn down the roof, now the rain pours in on his bald plate. This modernity does not go beyond the externals of the Paris artists' ball, a cigarette-filled atmosphere and bogeyman of the middle-classes. It will serve as a dismal Bohemian prank; but, taken seriously, it is no more than a musical version of civilized literature, as distinct from true art."<sup>2</sup>

The piece is indeed risky. It contains unexpected time changes, the instruments (of which there are just seven) break in and interrupt the flow of the music, and elements of jazz are mixed with those of waltz, tango, ragtime and even a chorale. It is interesting to mention that all the knowledge Stravinsky had of jazz came from copies of sheet music brought from America. He imagined how jazz sounded: "My knowledge of jazz was derived exclusively from copies of sheet music, and as I had never actually heard any of the music performed, I borrowed its rhythmic style not as played, but as written. I *could* imagine jazz sound, however, or so I liked to think. Jazz meant, in any case, a wholly new sound in my music, and *Histoire* marks my final break with the Russian orchestral school in which I had been fostered."<sup>3</sup> Adorno's dismissal of jazz music is well-known. In his view only structured art could have a claim to value and he positioned jazz on the wrong side of this requirement. Even more, in *L'Histoire du soldat* all the elements combined to invent something new with the added effect that the piece definitely departs from the logic of previous forms of music. Few pieces at the time came closer to this degree of inventiveness and innovation. It is interesting to note here that for Adorno this inventiveness is unacceptable mainly because it is, in his view, bound to remain a "prank" – one could not take it seriously and consequently it will never be a piece of true art. In his critical attack, it is also quite obvious that Dada represents for Adorno little more than this seduction of unseriousness.

Adorno's commitment to structured works of art and an understanding of aesthetics that still had its roots in the developments of the previous century and a half of German thought made it necessary to dismiss Dadaism. Although it was obviously not a popular art and it was in no danger of producing consumer engagement (and thus fall from the necessary detached

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<sup>2</sup> Theodor Adorno *apud* Stefan Muller-Doohm, *Adorno: A Biography*, Polity Press, 2005, p. 77.

<sup>3</sup> Igor Stravinsky in his interview with Robert Craft in Igor Stravinsky, Robert Craft, *Expositions and Developments*, University of California Press, 1981.

and intellectual experience of art that he valued<sup>4</sup>) Dada Art was too unstructured and too radical to be admitted inside the borders of Art. Apart from dismissing it there was no reason to insist anymore. But of course he did. He would later include his dislike of Stravinsky in a larger analysis of art in relation to history, focusing on the period during and immediately after World War I, but the framework remained one in which the composer is analysed in the language of Dada: “musical infantilism belongs to a movement which designed schizophrenic models everywhere as a mimetic defense against the insanity of war; around 1918, Stravinsky was attacked as a Dadaist”<sup>5</sup>. The interpretative framework has slightly shifted. There is no longer just a problem of structure and form. Nor is it a question of pranks and tearing down the roof. Although still considered infantile, Stravinsky’s music is now read as a symptom. It is a reaction to the insanity of the times, even a seismograph of deep anxieties and changes. A *mimetic* defense. It is however essential to note here that this mimetic mechanism does not refer to the surface of things, to their appearance, to any logic that could be extracted from events and reality. It is as insane as the times. It mimics the insanity and formlessness and schizophrenia of history itself. And at this point, as if no longer including himself in what he exposes, Adorno reminds his readers that Stravinsky had been attacked as a Dadaist, accepting the fact that both his music and the Dada strategies can be read along the same lines. He would later put it even clearer and in even more general terms when he defines in his *Aesthetic Theory* modern art: “art is modern art through mimesis of the hardened and alienated”<sup>6</sup>. According to this definition, art constantly accepts (but not without prudence) new practices and radical strategies that were not previously considered to be art. And the author continues: “after the catastrophe of meaning, appearance becomes abstract. [...] The modern is abstract by virtue of its relation to what is past; irreconcilable with magic, it is unable to bespeak what is yet to be, and yet must seek it, protesting against the ignominy of the ever-same [...] The force of the old presses toward the new, without which the old cannot be fulfilled.

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<sup>4</sup> In this context, the polemic between Adorno’s view and the Konstanz School represented by Hans-Robert Jauss is suggestive. See Hans-Robert Jauss, *Aesthetic experience and literary hermeneutics*, University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, New York, Seabury Press, 1980, p. 168.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*; *Aesthetic Theory*, London and New York, Continuum, 1997, p. 21.

Yet the moment this is invoked, artistic practice and its manifestations become suspect; the old that it claims to safeguard usually disavows the specificity of the work; aesthetic reflection, however, is not indifferent to the entwinement of the old and new."<sup>7</sup>

It is at this point that we can refer to a second incident relevant around the same time. In March 1919 in Bern Walter Benjamin encountered Hugo Ball. They became friends. At that time Benjamin was already impressed by the paintings of Chagall and Kandinsky, but he also admired the paintings of the daughter of Emmy Hennings (who would become in 1920 the wife of Hugo Ball), Annemarie, of which he told Ernst Schoen in a letter from 1919 that "our interest in her is like that we take in exact accounts of dreams or in an absolutely precise description of a person's fleeting state of mind"<sup>8</sup>. The two men shared many interests and in spite of the few biographical facts available to us (and the absence of references to one another in ulterior texts), an influence (which went both ways) and a dialogue of ideas is obvious. In his essay on Surrealism published in 1929, Benjamin starts from diagnosing "la crise de l'intelligentsia ou, plus exactement, du concept humaniste de liberté"<sup>9</sup> in order to trace the ways in which the group (and Benjamin adds here Dadaism itself) tries to activate a possibility of emancipation or even Revolution.

The analysis is worth insisting upon. In his 1927 *Flight Out of Time*, Hugo Ball observes that, caught in the chaos of the world, the Dadaist "is still so convinced of the unity of all beings, of the totality of all things, that he suffers from the dissonances to the point of self-disintegration"<sup>10</sup>. The Dadaists "took the corrupt language of the European powers and played it back as a caustic nonsense"<sup>11</sup>. But this attitude in front of the symbolic order challenged, even deconstructed the subject to the point of its possible annihilation. The politics of Dada was thus caught in the fragile space

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 22.

<sup>8</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, edited and annotated by Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, translated by Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson, The University of Chicago Press, 1994, p. 144.

<sup>9</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Le Surréalisme. Le dernier instantané de l'intelligentsia européenne in Œuvres*, tome II, traduit de l'allemand par Maurice de Gandillac, Rainer Rochlitz et Pierre Rusch, Paris, Gallimard, 2000, p. 114.

<sup>10</sup> Hugo Ball, *Flight Out of Time: A Dada Diary*, translated by Ann Raimés, New York, Viking Press, 1974, p. 66.

<sup>11</sup> Hal Foster, *Bad New Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency*, Verso, 2015, p. 91.

between exposing the failures of the order and in activating its own failure. This fragility may appear (and it obviously appeared so in its epoch) as a powerful limitation. It is for this reason that Dada was refused at first aesthetic relevance and at the same time political power. But the fact that the two were and are related was obvious from the beginning to both Ball and Benjamin.

The breakdown of the symbolic order was not a simple parodic or carnivalesque reflection. It was also, in the case of early Dada, not the replacement of a set of old rules with new ones. But this did not limit its political impact and target which were still revolutionary-oriented, a fact sadly missed or erased by many critics including Andrei Codrescu. In the presentation of his *The Posthuman Dada Guide*<sup>12</sup>, he positions dadaism in opposition to communism and misses the fact that Dadaism was on the same side. As usual, Walter Benjamin is a much better observer and his nuanced analysis is much more relevant even today. In his 1929 essay he concludes that the aim of the avantgarde is “gagner à la révolution les forces de l’ivresse”<sup>13</sup>. This however cannot be done only through the anarchic dimension or the surprise/shock effect: “il ne suffit pas que tout acte révolutionnaire comporte une part d’ivresse. Celle-ci se confond avec sa composante anarchique. Mais y insister de façon exclusive serait négliger entièrement la préparation méthodique et disciplinaire de la révolution”<sup>14</sup>. The surprise element is still caught in the web of a romantic attitude that would prefer to focus on the mysterious side of the mystery, never understanding in fact (and this is Benjamin’s diagnostic) the dialectical interpenetration of the everyday life with the realm of mysteries. Along the same lines, a romantic or anarchic attitude will fail to grasp, as it is clear in the case of Andrei Codrescu and many others, the same interrelatedness between politics and art. The avantgarde solution is, in the reading of Benjamin, “une politique poétique”<sup>15</sup> and it is here that “le surréalisme s’est rapproché toujours davantage de la réponse communiste”<sup>16</sup>.

It could be added here that this was the direct and radical act of the Berlin Dada. In their 1919 *What is Dadaism and what does it want in Germany*,

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<sup>12</sup> Andrei Codrescu, *The Posthuman Dada: Tzara and Lenin play chess*, Princeton, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Le Surréalisme. Le dernier instantané de l’intelligentsia européenne*, p. 130.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 131.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 132.

the artists clearly positioned themselves on the side of radical communism, just as Tristan Tzara himself will do in the 1930s. One should also add Aragon, Breton and Éluard. The Benjaminian text is probably the key one to understand the profound similarities between the Dada act (although he extends the analysis, under the focus on surrealism, to the entire avantgarde) and the Idea of Communism. Contrary to received knowledge, both are ways of dealing with a strong pessimism that they first incarnated: "méfiance quant au destin de la littérature, méfiance quant au destin de la liberté, méfiance quant au destin de l'homme européen, mais surtout trois fois méfiance à l'égard de toute entente: entre classes, entre peuples, entre individus"<sup>17</sup>. The key is in the organization of this pessimism. Starting from a difference made by Louis Aragon between comparison and image, Benjamin considers that "organiser le pessimisme ne signifie rien d'autre qu'exclure de la politique la métaphore morale, et découvrir dans l'action politique un espace à cent pour cent tenu par l'image. Mais cet espace d'images ne peut plus être exploré sur le mode de la contemplation"<sup>18</sup>. And therein lies the great problem of revolutionary artists: how to both deconstruct and expose the symbolic order (which is the quintessence of the bourgeois identity) and start communicating with the masses. Because the two must be done at the same time or at least in strong relationship with each other. There is no avantgarde without it being communist. All other explanations are relegated to being remnants of romanticism (resurrecting the myth of the individual) or incarnating the limits of anarchy (by perceiving only the lack of meaning). And as we know from Benjamin's study of Baudelaire the problem is in the perception of art as autonomous (a futile attempt by the French poet to still imagine a world in which the work of art would be kept pure of the emerging power of the market) or political. Avantgarde can only succeed (and this also means become communist) when its aesthetic function breaks down. Just as it is the case later for Gilles Deleuze the machine of philosophy only works when it fails. In Benjamin's words: "il s'agit beaucoup moins de transformer l'artiste d'origine bourgeoise en maître de l'art prolétarien que de le faire fonctionner, fût-ce aux dépens de son efficacité artistique, en des endroits importants de cet espace d'images. Ne pourrait-on aller jusqu'à dire que l'interruption de sa carrière artistique représente une part essentielle de ce fonctionnement?"<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 133.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*.

### *The Mimetic Exacerbation*

It will be noted that it is a matter of images. A space of images that becomes a space of and for the body. The end of the text on Surrealism brings together the two main lines of the demonstration which are also, in the author's view, the guiding movements of avant garde: the extraction of the individual from the symbolic order that oppresses him and its repositioning in a space that is authentically common. Dreams or the unconscious can play such a role in the Surrealist strategy. Lack of meaning, deconstruction and the breaking of the logic of gestures and movements of the body can do it for Dada. Each fracture is a fracture of what it reflects, but this reflection is active only when it is exacerbated. The mimetic strategy of Dada is not only trying to block any simple translation (or, in Aragon's terms, comparison). It is not a passive deconstruction that simply shows what is and has always been at work inside the symbolic order, only veiled under a logical and coherent surface. At the same time it is not a romantic recentering of *mimesis* on the subject that exposes it, it is not a liberation in this sense which would be an illusion of freedom of the individual (an illusion to which Codrescu succumbs because of his ideological reading of Dada as anticommunist). It is an activation through exacerbation of an access to collectivity, to the space or body of the common<sup>20</sup>. We should not forget that Benjamin's text views Surrealism as the last instance of the humanist concept of freedom. To put it in the language that he will use in his *Arcades Project*, avantgarde occupies a position on the threshold. The rigid traditional understanding of *mimesis* (pre-phenomenological as the opposition between subject and object) or the contemporary ideological view in black and white (an example of which is certainly the position of Codrescu, but there are many others) can only miss this essential point. Dada both announces the end of the meaning of freedom as understood by tradition and activates a freedom that is to be found in the collective body.

To follow Benjamin's text once more, the space of images which can no longer be explored through the contemplation of a detached eye opens to

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<sup>20</sup> It is to this extent suggestive that an inheritor of Dada, Pop Art, was defined by Andy Warhol as a form of *commonism*. The difference is that the space of the body is now invaded or replaced by the space of the object, by focusing mainly on Duchamp rather than Ball or Tzara. The later work of Iza Genzken which we analyse in this text manages to bring together this space of the body with the space of the object creating what we will call "spaces-of-flows".

and through the destructured body: “cet espace sera encore espace d’images, plus concrètement: espace corporel”<sup>21</sup>. At this point the author shows his trust in the experience of the avantgarde which has the advantage of linking together the radicalism of anarchy with the communist forms of emancipation of the collectivity: “La collectivité aussi est de nature corporelle”<sup>22</sup>.

As in his later essay about the work of art, this corporeality is related to technology: “la *phusis* qui pour elle s’organise en technique ne peut être produite dans toute sa réalité politique et matérielle qu’au sein de cet espace d’images avec lequel l’illumination profane nous familiarise”<sup>23</sup>. No doubt the later positive references to the Soviet cinema and to the experiments of Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov would fit very well at this point. For Benjamin, modernity signified a new conception of space and time and thus a new conception of images. The fact that the Revolution could only come through shocks and jolts in the order of history would later be criticized by authors like Jürgen Habermas in his 1985 book *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* who prefers to imagine a continuous modernity, scared by a vision of radical interruption. It is essential to note however that Benjamin’s vision of history, to which we will devote a few lines later, and his form of Marxism were heavily indebted to his understanding of avantgarde<sup>24</sup>. In fact at the time of his essay on Surrealism, he finds all hope in this position on the threshold. The profane illumination, which is sometimes to be also found in dreams or hashish, is the ability of avant-garde to estrange the objects of everyday reality. This perception of the common as unnatural or irrational opens the door for a social revolution, the one that the Communist Manifesto predicted: “lorsque le corps et l’espace d’images s’interpénétreront en elle si profondément que toute tension révolutionnaire se transformera en innervation du corps collectif, toute innervation corporelle de la collectivité en décharge révolutionnaire, alors seulement la réalité sera parvenue à cet autodépassement qu’appelle le *Manifeste communiste*”<sup>25</sup>. To be sure this weaving of avant-garde

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<sup>21</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Le Surréalisme. Le dernier instantané de l’intelligentsia européenne*, p. 134.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>24</sup> And in our view his reading of the avantgarde phenomenon is more in touch with the aims that its representatives thought they could find in communism. This reading is able to trace the difference between the Idea of Communism (shared but also shaped by these authors) and the really existing forms of Communism, a difference unavailable to Codrescu who thus remains trapped in a caricatural (but ideologically cleansed) vision of Dada.

<sup>25</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Le Surréalisme. Le dernier instantané de l’intelligentsia européenne*, p. 134.



and communism was forgotten or even repelled just as Benjamin's own texts were forgotten or restructured<sup>26</sup>. History was rewritten as to befit the new times: first the reduction of the Idea of Communism to its Soviet totalitarian image and then the world of Francis Fukuyama who predicted the end of History and the complete triumph of Western liberalism. The special position of the avant-garde (on the threshold) seemed lost and the survival of its practices happened mainly inside forms that drastically reduced their radicality.

The Benjamin essay ends with an allegory: "pour l'instant les surréalistes sont les seuls à avoir compris l'ordre qu'il nous donne aujourd'hui. Un par un, ils échangent leurs mimiques contre le cadran d'un réveil qui sonne chaque minute pendant soixante secondes"<sup>27</sup>. It can be considered itself a profane illumination. An image that borders on the collective and is itself positioned on the threshold, like a clock in a Surrealist painting. It is certain that in Benjamin's view the avantgarde was at that point the single position that understands the illumination that makes possible the relationship between images and collectivity, between the energy of what he will later call dialectical images and the radical power of revolutionary interruption and change. It is a position (and an image) that recalls his later one from *Sur le concept d'histoire*: every second could be the narrow door that allows an emancipatory event (Revolution) to enter. The fact that the position is in-between (the threshold, the fracture line) protects against easy simplifications: it is not a matter of black and white, passivity and activity or destruction and celebration. The strategy of exacerbation can also be read through the Russian formalists' concept of defamiliarization. What Dada understood quite early is that the most pervasive power is obtained through direct and insistent projection of what is otherwise presented to perception only through the medium of several veils: even words, extracted from syntax or grammar or presented in unfamiliar associations can recover a *body*, a *corporeal* form. The Dadaist, in Hugo Ball's view, is not just an anarchist, because he "threatens and soothes at the same time"<sup>28</sup>. His buffoonery is both a form of survival and a critical weapon. According to Ball, "the farce of these times, reflected in our nerves, has reached a degree of infantilism and

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<sup>26</sup> Sometimes by his own commentators and editors: Rolf Tiedemann, the editor of the first edition of Benjamin's works, felt uncomfortable with this weaving together of Anarchism and Marxism.

<sup>27</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Le Surréalisme. Le dernier instantané de l'intelligentsia européenne*, p. 134.

<sup>28</sup> Hugo Ball, *Flight Out of Time*, p. 54.

godlessness that cannot be expressed in words"<sup>29</sup>. Adorno interpreted this mimetic exacerbation as a symptom. Not in the sense of a sociological explanation, but rather in an ability to read the times, their disordered, schizophrenic and lawless images. Such a *mimesis* ceases to be passive. It is itself an act or even an activation. And this is the point of balance beyond which Adorno was not ready to go. Jazz remained for himself a sign of the commercial times and he failed to see its emancipatory ability to activate change. Dada remained on the same side and in the same understanding of mimesis. For Adorno, as we have noticed at the beginning of this text, modern art is modern through a mimesis of the hardened and the alienated. We can go further and point out following a passage from *Aesthetic Theory* that "scars of damage and disruption are the modern's seal of authenticity; by their means, art desperately negates the closed confines of the ever-same: explosion is one of its invariants"<sup>30</sup>. And in a Benjaminian style, Adorno continues: "the modern is myth turned against itself; the timelessness of myth becomes the catastrophic instant that destroys temporal continuity; Benjamin's concept of dialectical image contains this element"<sup>31</sup>.

In Hal Foster's view, the politics of Dada was not the necessity of dealing with an oppressive presence of the law but the becoming-conscious of a state of emergency in which the concept of law ceased to function: "this is the dilemma that Dada faced: how to create, how to exist, in a state of emergency in which the rule of law is suspended"<sup>32</sup>. The essential point is that the state of emergency paradoxically has ceased to be an exception and is more and more the rule so that in a way the Dada position is not just relevant, but it is today the model position. As for Benjamin, this is not a heroic position that can break absolutely with tradition or History and at the same time it is not a position that can pretend to have found a new order or a new law. For Hal Foster, who thinks that our contemporary times are also times of emergency, the Benjaminian position-on-the-threshold is to be recovered. His diagnosis takes ethical connotations, relevant both to the Dada of Ball and Duchamp and to its contemporary forms and it reiterates the challenge of young Marx to make "petrified social conditions dance by singing them their own song"<sup>33</sup>. Bereft of the security of laws (even as an

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 98.

<sup>30</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 29.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>32</sup> Hal Foster, *Bad New Days*, p. 94.

<sup>33</sup> Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1964, p. 47.

incentive to break them) and thrown into a perpetual state of emergency contemporary art should “seek to trace fractures that already exist within the given order, to pressure them further, to activate them somehow. Neither *avant* nor rear, this *garde* will assume a position of immanent critique, and often it will adopt a posture of mimetic exacerbation in doing so. If any avant-garde is relevant to our time, it is this one.”<sup>34</sup>

*Empire/ Vampire. What is to be done?*

After 9/11, Isa Genzken created a series entitled *Empire/Vampire, Who Kills Death* (2002-2003). It was an installation of variable dimensions, using disposable materials as plastic, vessels, toy figures and other detritus in order to create scenes of devastation and confusion that could also work as mock memorials. The installation contains a series of twenty-two assemblages positioned on tall pedestals among which the spectator can move freely. This is a case of mimetic exacerbation at several levels. First, each figure can be considered to be a representation, but the kitsch of the toy soldiers, for example, figures smaller than the army boots with which they interact in a disorganised and confused scene, protects from any symbolic interpretation. The common objects (the darlings of Pop Art) are not celebrated; they appear afflicted. What we witness is a complex scene in which the effect on the viewer plays as much with the mimesis of the hardened and the alienated as with the dissonances and disintegrations that prevent any return to a totalizing meaning. We are far from any modernist utopia, and yet in the ruins that the assemblages seem to present there is a powerful and complex energy. Everything seems to talk about failure (political, institutional but also aesthetic) and yet the rage that they seem to produce is not a judgemental, but an inclusive one. Hal Foster notices in his discussion of different works of Genzken that “only a true believer could still be disappointed enough by the shortcomings of the Bauhaus to tell it to fuck off, and, though her absurdist proposals for Ground Zero are scathing send-ups of urbanist business as usual, they remain committed to the enterprise of metropolitan life”<sup>35</sup>. This dialectic connects with the Benjaminian one between images and the body, or even between spaces-of-images and spaces-of-the-(collective-) body. For avant-garde dialectics works only through tension. This tension, in

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<sup>34</sup> Hal Foster, *Bad New Days*, p. 95.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 83.

which even the readymade is ruined (something that would have appeared strange for Duchamp), yet it is still asked to activate flows of energy, makes Genzken an excellent reader of our contemporary times. Because ultimately the *Empire/Vampire* series is about what we can call, borrowing a concept from Giovanni Arrighi<sup>36</sup>, spaces-of-flows.

For Hugo Ball, talking about his recent past, “the great isolated minds of the last epoch have a tendency to persecution, epilepsy, and paralysis. They are obsessed, rejected, and maniacal, all for the sake of their work. They turn to the public as if it should interest itself in their sickness; they give it the material for assessing their condition.”<sup>37</sup> The irrationality obtained through such mimetic exacerbation is not meant, as we have seen, to replace a logic with another, nor to remain at the level of nonsensical. The evolution of 20<sup>th</sup> century art under the guidelines of Dada has shown that very well. In order to innervate the collective body, the spaces-of-images can no longer be perceived through contemplation. It means that, more than being containers of meaning, they work as activators. The processes they put in motion have given birth to conceptual art, an important step in the change from art understood as a set of canonical works that need to be studied in detail to an understanding of art-in-process, a mental experiment that can retrace and reimagine the identity of individuals, but also of the common space. And it is at this point that the common objects preferred by Pop Art manage to open the door to a non-territorial understanding of the readymade: it is no longer caught in a style, and epoch, even a copyright. The same Coke is drunk, in Andy Warhol’s idea, by the Queen and the bum on the street. It *flows* and innervates the collective body. Granted, at this point, it does so in a noncritical or at least ambiguous way. The consumerism of the times is both rejected and admired by Pop Art and in this stance the movement loses contact with Dada. We may say that Pop Art does what Benjamin was demanding, through his connecting avantgarde and communism, without however enacting the (revolutionary) change. It is significant that Warhol talked about *commonism*, not communism. Thus the spaces-of-flows activated by the mimetic exacerbation are still well contained inside a regulated

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<sup>36</sup> He uses the concept in Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century. Money, Power and the Origins of our Times*, Verso, 1994 in order to introduce a difference between *spaces-of-places* in which the economy works through the strategy of state-formation and *spaces-of-flows* that better reflect an economy that is non-territorial and focused on the movement of capital.

<sup>37</sup> Hugo Ball, *Flight Out of Time*, p. 40.

system of moves and relations which even though is not territorial is not yet revolutionary. In Isa Genzken's work the readymade is in ruins. It escapes regulation but looks defeated, unable to activate anything. Perhaps this is a good moment to return to Benjamin, albeit to another of his key texts, the 1940 *Sur le concept de l'histoire*.

The problem of this text is not far from the one from 1929 about surrealism. It still tries to trace the key relationship between anarchy and a form of ethics which is positioned to be in tune with the idea of communism. It is essential here to remember that Dada was far from rejecting ethics. True, its ethics had a radical core, but this can be traced back to Immanuel Kant: the very finitude of the individual makes him or her the perfect place for an enactment of an ethical behaviour. Along the same lines, a finite act (especially when it deconstructs the rational expected ways of behaviour and even the morals of the time) is the privileged place where there can be a manifestation of ethics. Tristan Tzara considered that Dada represented the search for a moral absolute<sup>38</sup>. It is only inside an ethical horizon that a Dadaist act can function, and its deconstructing (even destructive) target can succeed. In the Appendix to his theses Walter Benjamin focuses on the difference between a traditional understanding of history and the Marxist one: "L'historicisme se contente d'établir un lien causal entre divers moments de l'histoire. Mais aucune réalité de fait ne devient, par sa simple qualité de cause, un fait historique. Elle devient telle, à titre posthume, sous l'action d'événements qui peuvent être séparés d'elle par des millénaires. L'historien [...] saisit la constellation que sa propre époque forme avec telle époque antérieure."<sup>39</sup> This is how avant-garde was supposed to respond to the past but also to the manifestations of itself. And even though it sometimes got caught in the causal understanding of the passing of time (even when it tried to break this causal relation, without understanding the complexity of historical times as meditated upon by Benjamin), it seems to do so more and more in the last years. After the fall into ridicule of the Fukuyama vision of the world, artists have returned once again to the point where Benjamin's text from 1929 positioned art: beyond the contemplative and the dictatorship of the individual towards a possible innervation of the collective body.

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<sup>38</sup> See Tristan Tzara, *Suprarealismul și epoca de după război* in Marin Mincu, *Avangarda literară românească*, p. 607.

<sup>39</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Sur le concept d'histoire* in *Œuvres*, tome III, Paris, Gallimard, 2000, p. 442-443.

Iza Genzken's work can function as a good example here, especially as its contemporary tone helps us advance the theoretical (re)positioning of the avant-garde act. As we have noticed, in *Empire/Vampire* not only the world is in ruins but so are its objects and the objects of art. It is very clear that the first conclusion to be established here is the powerful critical and political element of the work of art. Faced with the full and brutal dominance of neoliberalism after 1989, artists no longer find any fascination with it (as it was still partly the case for Pop Art). The result is often a reaction that can go from a foregrounding of the abject to the re-enactment of the critical. *Empire/Vampire* contains both dimensions. It attacks the scene of representation in order to reveal the crisis of the symbolic order, but also the breaching of the individual: his body, his rational judgement, his gaze and even his traumas. As Hal Foster notices "in the 1990s we were witness to a strange rebirth of the author as zombie"<sup>40</sup>. This is the authentic posthuman Dada, far from the ideological definition of Andrei Codrescu caught in its neoliberal frame of the world. It is also the position of the Marxist historian who, in the words of Benjamin, must first understand that "il n'est pas de témoignage de culture qui ne soit en même temps un témoignage de barbarie"<sup>41</sup> and then proceed to "brosser l'histoire à rebrousse-poil"<sup>42</sup>. What does this mean and how can it be done? A possible answer finds once again Benjamin not far from the position of the avantgarde: the Marxist historian understands that "la pensée n'est pas seulement faite du mouvement des idées, mais aussi de leur blocage"<sup>43</sup>. Each such blockage can be an opportunity. To other eyes it may appear a limit, an obstacle impossible to pass over or through: nonsense, madness, terminal crisis, schizophrenia, etc. Inside such limits, an artist could at best reflect that, exacerbating it or manipulating the effects of such a reflection or even finding a fascination with it. It is at this point that things could stop (as they have so often done, even in triumphant terms like Fukuyama's announcement of the end of history) or start to move again. In Benjamin's terms it would be a movement towards the collective body. In Hal Foster's more recent analysis, it is a matter of tracing fractures in the symbolic order, pressuring them further and even activating them. But in our times activation scares because it cannot be done for its own sake but in the horizon of an ethics or/ and of an Idea.

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<sup>40</sup> Hal Foster, *Bad New Days*, p. 28.

<sup>41</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Sur le concept d'histoire*, p. 433.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 441.

*How to Explain Lenin (And Not Only to a Dead Hare)*

In recent years we have seen many reenactments of the famous Joseph Beuys performance from 1962 *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*. The original act was a solo performance by Beuys, filmed for three hours as he moved through a gallery exhibition whispering to a dead hare that he was holding in his arms. According to his very own explanations, the performance was meant to show that in contemporary times even a dead animal is capable of more powers of intuition than stubborn human beings especially when they keep on invoking rationality. Up to this point the performance can be decoded as an avant-garde event refusing once again the rational forms of the world and the tradition and privileging of the powers of irrationality, unconscious or simply shocking behaviour perpetrated solely for the sake of their shocking effect. Such interpretations have of course been repeatedly made from the first avant-garde acts to the present, either from a critical point of view or an approving one under the illusion of a reenactment of the romantic figure of a free and/because of irrational individual (as again is the case of Codrescu). But Beuys's performance was of course much more complex. His entire head was covered in honey and gold leaf, a felt sole was tied to his left foot and an iron one to his right and the performance ended with him positioned on a stool and keeping the hare in his arms in a manner very much like a Pietà. It was not a matter of destruction or liberation from rationality or tradition. It was a way of dealing with them at the same time through dialogue, mourning and activation. In Benjamin's language, Beuys combed history in the other way. He perceived the blockage, traced its causes and movements and activated fractures in it, small openings through which something else could pass.

It could be said that reenactments of the performance are such things that pass through the opening that Beuys enacted in the history of art itself. They thus go back to a performance that has become an Event: something that has retraced the frames of understanding and action. In Alain Badiou's definition<sup>44</sup>, an Event breaks a blockage, it permits and even demands the radical re-understanding and redefinition of everything that up to that point looked to be definitive. Crucially, Events can and do appear in politics as well as in love or/and art. The relevant aspect for us here is when an artistic

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<sup>44</sup> See Alain Badiou, *L'Être et l'événement*, Paris, Seuil, 1988 and Alain Badiou, *Manifeste pour la philosophie*, Paris, Seuil, 1989.

Event is also a political one. In fact most likely we can talk about an Event in art only when it is political and this – in a way – would be an appropriate definition of Dada as well. In order to advance this line of thought we will distinguish here between two types of reenactments of Beuys' performance by focusing on their understanding of history: they either perceive the 1962 performance as an element in a continuous and even causal movement of history or they perceive it as an Event which is demanded a certain loyalty and in which the present must recognize itself. We will limit this second interpretation once again to the frame of Benjamin's text from 1940 in which he observes that "l'image vraie du passé passe *en un éclair*. On ne peut retenir le passé que dans une image qui surgit et s'évanouit pour toujours à l'instant même où elle s'offre à la connaissance. [...] Car c'est une image irrécupérable du passé qui risque s'évanouir avec chaque présent qui ne s'est pas reconnu visé par elle"<sup>45</sup>.

The first type of reenactment can be best illustrated by Marina Abramović's performance from 2005 at the Guggenheim Museum which was a part of in fact seven reenactments entitled *Seven Easy Pieces* that also restaged historical performances by artists such as Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci or Gina Payne. These reenactments can be defined as mimetic exacerbation but in a time in which the capacity of the past events to shock and activate the viewer is very limited. The first reason for this is that museums all over the neoliberal world have in the meantime institutionalized the shock. It is now used for the benefit of the museum and sometimes the artist himself (the works of Damien Hirst, Matthew Barney or Abramović herself have often been very theatricalized shows in which the audience is once again reduced to the act of contemplation that, in Benjamin's interpretation, the avant-garde set out to question). Art is derealized or better depoliticized along with the predominance of the fear that any Idea with which art can enter in contact or it could produce is necessarily dangerous. For Beuys the audience was not a public but a constitutive part of the event and that is why contemporary art and avant-garde have always distinguished themselves from theater. The viewer was considered essential for the work of art. When the performance is institutionalized and canonized it becomes another image in a long line that demands contemplation and the performance could very well occur without the audience. In Benjamin's language from his 1929 text, for Beuys it was essential to innervate the collective body. In the Abramović type of reenactment we are back to the

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<sup>45</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Sur le concept d'histoire*, p. 430.



subject-object opposition, to the spaces-of-images or spaces-of-objects. "As a result, we do not seem to exist in the same space-time of the event."<sup>46</sup> There are no spaces-of-flows because everything is once again territorial. By institutionalizing the radicality of art, the collective body is once again negated or at best contained in an acceptable reduction to public, students or passive inheritors.

The other type of reenactments can be illustrated by the work of Thomas Hirschhorn. First of all, the artist prefers to challenge the institutions and he often works outside them especially by re-imagining them. He is the enactor or activator (more than the author) of up to now four memorials for four important thinkers. These monuments are in themselves radical. They can be defined as outdoors installations that function for several weeks through an activation of communities which act as public, actors, administrators, critics and even agents of these projects. It is of course essential where these four memorials have been put into place. Hirschhorn chose each time a community that is usually kept afar from museums and also from the benefits of the neoliberal world. In 2009 the Spinoza monument functioned in the Bijlmer district of Amsterdam. The Deleuze memorial had been enacted in a North African district of Avignon in 2000. Two years later it had been the turn of the Bataille monument in a Turkish district of Kassel and in 2013 the Gramsci monument existed for several weeks in the Bronx district of New York. Each site is the place where various activities occur in conjunction with the community. They work as a space of the commons which is also a space-of-flows. The collective body is innervated not only by the fact that participants are essential to the existence of the work but also by the activation of their emancipatory energy. All the authors chosen represent key thinkers of the space of the commons. In order for a work to function, it is essential for Hirschhorn<sup>47</sup> to have four elements: *courage* (retraced to the examples of Dada or Beuys among others); the possibility to find and put in place *means of help* (and here the four authors are perfect examples): the necessity to invent *forms* that can offer this help and at the same time keep the artist free from the dangers of the market and institutions<sup>48</sup>; and the ways

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<sup>46</sup> Hal Foster, *Bad New Days*, p. 130.

<sup>47</sup> See Thomas Hirschhorn, *Where do I stand? What do I want?* In *Art Review*, June 2008.

<sup>48</sup> Walter Benjamin considered in its introduction to his well-known *L'Œuvre d'art à l'époque de sa reproductibilité technique* that art concepts and forms end by becoming fit to express fascist tendencies and for that reason artists always need to *invent* new forms and concepts so as to keep art outside or ahead of such mechanisms of capture. In a way this 1935 text follows on the demand expressed at the end of the 1929 text on surrealism and reaffirms why art is and should more than ever manifest itself as avantgarde.

in which, facing these dangers, art can become a *tool* or/ and a *weapon*. The spaces-of-flows are also spaces of emancipation, in which the revolutionary tension can innervate the collective body.

In such a context of ideas, among the different projects put in place during the Spinoza memorial, a reenactment of Beuys's 1962 performance took place. This time however, opposing the tendency illustrated by Marina Abramović, the reenactment was not done in an institution by an artist for the benefit of a viewing audience already well-informed about the past event. On the contrary the new performance took place in this special place in Bijlmer where a park had been transformed into a manifestation of the commons through or in relation to art and theory. It is worth noting here that the Amsterdam district is home to almost 150 different nationalities and that the reenactment was performed by a group of young children of African descent. One girl had in her arms a soft plush toy to which she whispered inaudibly while moving on a stage full of other children. Another girl held in her hands a printed image of Beuys with the dead hare from 1962 and a different girl talked on a microphone. The reenactment, she told the audience, is part of a child play, a collection of historical movements and of body art that also involved references and reenactments of works by Saburo Murakami, Robert Morris, Jiri Kovanda, Martha Rosler or indeed Marina Anramović and Ulay. The same girl defined an art presentation as cruel, clear, simple and of free choice and she considered a performance to be a free movement and a special kind of love. The audience was composed by local people and mostly other children.

The Beuys Event recaptures, through the way Thomas Hirschhorn chose to revisit it, a sense of actuality and a power to activate the audience. A constellation (and a surprising one, it must be said) is created between the past and a present that suddenly discovers in all its radicality the power of a performance, far from the museum crowds lulled into slumber by both the world in which they live (ruled by the market, advertising world and the ineptitude of sport and media mechanisms) and the academic world (ruled by its continuous institutionalization of every fracture, break or revolutionary event). If there is a heritage of Dada it is surely to be found in such projects that understand the key relation between anarchy (scandal, fracture, etc.) and the idea of a collective body. This has been the relevance (aesthetic *and* political) of avant-garde, as Walter Benjamin observed in his 1929 text and this is still its relevance today.

So where is Lenin in all this? First of all it is clear now that if we try to imagine a chess game played between Lenin and Tzara this wouldn't have been a contest between two different visions of the world as Codrescu (here the exponent of the neoliberal view of the 90s) considered, but a dialogue and a performance by a politician and an artist on the same side: both searching for the right form of revolution, the absolute ethics and the correct relationship between art and politics. More important for us however than this ironic disagreement with Codrescu, it is to activate again the connection between the Dada phenomenon and the Idea of equality. It is perhaps the duty of our coming age and we can start quite well (and also end this text) with this quotation from Thomas Hirschhorn: "I believe – yes, believe – in Equality. And I believe that Art has the Power of transformation. The power to transform each human being, each one and equally without any distinction. I agree that equality is the foundation and the condition of Art."<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Apud Kate Crehan, *Community Art: An Anthropological Perspective*, Berg Editorial Offices, 2011, p. 189.

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