

## *Revived Contexts for Dada. The Cluj School of Art and the Composition of the Avant-garde's Archive*

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**Abstract:** This paper examines, from the interdisciplinary perspective of cultural analysis, the ways in which several artists belonging to the so-called "Cluj School," such as Adrian Ghenie, Victor Man and Mircea Cantor, share a common need for recontextualizing the "aura" of Dada in their paintings, performances and installations. An apocalyptic reappraisal of the Dada movement is to be found in Ghenie's famous paintings *Dada Is Dead* and *Duchamp's Funeral I and II*, as well as in his immersive installation *The Dada Room*, while some of Victor Man's paintings and installations, and Mircea Cantor's film *Deeparture* revive the Neo-Dada artistic subversion of Fluxus and Joseph Beuys's ironic pedagogical performances. Following a conceptual scheme that blends art theory, cultural criticism and anthropology, I resort to Bruno Latour's notion of "composition" and to his method of "compositionism," conceived as an alternative to *critique*, in order to analyze how the "Cluj School" approaches the Avant-garde's paradoxical legacy.

**Keywords:** Dada, Fluxus, archive, Bruno Latour, composition, Adrian Ghenie, Victor Man, Mircea Cantor.

More than once, canonical works and key events in art history can be considered to belong to an aesthetic code that allows visual and performance artists to create dialogical revivals, in a reverential or parodic vein, whereby they rewrite and reconstruct their own "archive" or subjective "museum." I have chosen, as the objects of my analysis, several works of the Cluj School of Art, which can be looked at as part of a Post- or Neo-Dada subjective archive.

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Some well-known artists of the so-called “Cluj School,” such as Adrian Ghenie, Victor Man and Mircea Cantor<sup>2</sup>, share a symptomatic preoccupation to recontextualize the “aura” of the Dada movement in their paintings, performances and installations. The apocalyptic nature of Dada’s anti-aesthetic is to be found, for instance, in Ghenie’s famous paintings *Dada Is Dead* and *Duchamp’s Funeral I and II*, as well as in his immersive installation *The Dada Room*. In addition to this, some of Victor Man’s paintings and installations, and Mircea Cantor’s video work (film installation) *Departure* revive the Neo-Dada artistic subversion of Fluxus, being somewhat reminiscent of Joseph Beuys’s ironic pedagogical performances.

These innovative artistic revivals of Dada in the works of the Cluj School of Art are relevant for the creativity involved in the process of documenting art history. Artistic “rewritings” engage in a vivid intertextual dialogue with the past, which blends cultural mythology with a nuanced aesthetic and even a political attitude towards the canonization of artworks. Symptomatic for the ways in which the aesthetic either implies or explicitly calls for a political perspective, Adrian Ghenie’s *Duchamp’s Funeral I* (2009) dramatically superimposes the ideological ghost of a famous dictator upon an overwhelming artistic myth of the avant-garde.

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<sup>2</sup> Adrian Ghenie (b. 1977), Victor Man (b. 1974) and Mircea Cantor (b. 1977) – along with other representatives of the so-called Cluj School of Art, such as Marius Bercea and Șerban Savu – are world-renowned on today’s art scene.



**Fig. 1.** Adrian Ghenie, *Duchamp's Funeral I*, 2009

Oil and acrylic on canvas, 200 x 300 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Judin, Berlin.  
Photographer: Adrian Ghenie; Private Collection, Switzerland

The pretentious funeral, as if meant for some political dictator, is staged and “filmed” from behind, by an anonymous hand. The father of conceptual art is somehow seen as the dead protagonist of a huge farce, a play-within-a-play in which we are involved, as some kind of accomplices, but also mocked at, as mere obedient spectators. It is as if the ideological specters of a tormented past have come to haunt the politically charged scene of the art world.

Ghenie is set on a sort of deliberate questioning of the canonical heritage of Dada, acknowledging the emancipatory consequences of such an attitude and assuming, nonetheless, a certain wariness about idolizing the avant-garde: “Although I recognize the liberating effects produced by the outburst of the avant-garde movements (of which I am also a beneficiary), I can’t help but notice the extent to which some of their ideas – exposed in time to manifold appropriations – have imposed themselves with such forcefulness as to become

canonical. I simply want to question this state of affairs without making accusations. But I feel I have the right to see idols like Duchamp or Dada in a different light.” (Adrian Ghenie in conversation with Magda Radu, *Flash Art*, no. 269, November-December 2009). This is neither a critical or parodic view upon Dada, nor a mythologizing perspective; it is a disenchanting examination of the mechanism of Dada’s canonization in art history and aesthetic theory.

His painting *Dada Is Dead* (2009) comes as yet another powerful statement of artistic ideology, reinforcing the codependency of art history and political history. The reference is the famous photograph of the First International Dada Fair held in Berlin in 1920, having as a key metaphor the image of John Heartfield’s assemblage *Prussian Archangel*, a pig-headed military mannequin strangely suspended from the ceiling. As Stefanie Gommel states, in *Dada Is Dead* Ghenie “recalls Hitler’s headquarters in East Prussia, also known as Wolfsschanze, and thus revives awareness of the fates of the ‘degenerate,’ ostracized artist.” (Gommel 2013).



**Fig. 2.** Adrian Ghenie, *Dada Is Dead*, 2009

Through the evocative narratives contained in these paintings centered upon Dada, which gather on a melancholic yet bitter personal art history archive of sorts, Ghenie comes to grips with the ghosts of the past, both the political and the artistic ones. The clearly polemical title and the hyperrealist

image of the dog that haunts the celebrated, now devastated Dada room are key elements of Ghenie's apocalyptic view upon Dada. In fact, it is exactly through such an apocalyptic reinterpretation of Dada that Adrian Ghenie dwells on the movement's destructive allegations, on its aesthetic nihilism.



**Fig. 3.** Reference image for Ghenie's *Dada Is Dead*: the First International Dada Fair, Berlin, 1920

There is a certain subversion of Dada's anti-art statements in Ghenie's vivacious use of paint, in all its thick materiality. No wonder that he consciously argues against the death of painting, upholding instead, in keeping with his polemical goals, the more plausible thesis of the death<sup>3</sup> of Dada:

The state of painting today prompted me to choose this subject. The ongoing debate about the "death of painting" may be intellectually stimulating, but I think it is also anachronistic. There is enough evidence to conclude that painting is not dead. And yet, I wanted to return to the historic context in which this

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<sup>3</sup> *Dada Is Dead* is interpreted by critic Ben Street as a eulogy for the seemingly dead avant-garde movement: "The painting has a lovely reflexive weirdness. How strange that Dada is dead, how strange it ever lived, and how strange and surprising that it should be the painting that performs the eulogy." Ben Street, "Letter from London: Dead as a Dada," in *Art21 Magazine*, 30 June 2009.

problem was first articulated. I view key moments and personalities of the avant-gardes like Duchamp from a great distance and from a reversed perspective. (Ghenie 2009).

The immersive installation *The Dada Room* (2010) takes on a similar disruptive perspective on the cultural myth of Dada, pointing to its successive artistic “deaths” and rebirths. This intriguing invention of a pseudo-archive of Dadaist sites and objects seems to be meant to stir aesthetic controversy over the longevity or the obsolete character of Dadaism. There is a silent yet vivid dialogue between the medium of painting – here, one should notice the large amounts of paint spread over the walls and the floor – and the objects of the installation which restage once again the First International Dada Fair from Berlin (1920).



**Fig. 4.** Adrian Ghenie, *The Dada Room*, 2010

In spite of his polemical and sometimes distanced relation to historical avant-garde, in *The Dada Room* Ghenie is actually performing, in the purest avant-garde spirit, a certain type of art documentation on Dadaism which becomes yet another form of life, or, more accurately, a hybrid space situated beyond the threshold between art and life. Art theorist Boris Groys can be rightly invoked in this context, as for him art documentation should be considered the process in which “art becomes a life form, whereas the artwork becomes non-art, a mere documentation of this life form” (Groys 2008, 53). The liveness of this performative art documentation, one that situates itself beyond a mere aesthetic relevance and is pervaded by a strong anthropological content, is to be found with other representatives of the “Cluj School”, among which are Victor Man and Mircea Cantor. In the mysterious Shamanic-like posture of the silhouette in his *Untitled (from The White Shadow of His Talent)*, 2011, Victor Man seems to recall the aura of Joseph Beuys’s actions.



**Fig. 5.** Victor Man, *Untitled (from The White Shadow of His Talent)*, 2011

A conjugated aesthetic and anthropological perspective upon such revivals of the Dada and Neo-Dada (Fluxus) performances and installations could address the relativist, subjective character of the process of art documentation, as well as the ideological layer of any apparently objective archive of art history. Therefore, I propose to resort to Bruno Latour's term "compositionism" as to a proper operational concept whereby to approach the contemporary artistic revival or questioning of the Dada movement. In Latour's interpretation, resorting to a compositionist method would mean proposing a consensual, and hence a more viable alternative to critique, since:

...It has been necessary to move from iconoclasm to what I have called iconoclash —namely, the suspension of the critical impulse, the transformation of debunking from a resource (the main resource of intellectual life in the last century, it would seem), to a topic to be carefully studied. While critics still believe that there is too much belief and too many things standing in the way of reality, compositionists believe that there are enough ruins and that everything has to be reassembled piece by piece" (Latour 2010).



**Fig. 6.** Beuys's celebrated performance *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, 1965

In Latour's seductive theoretical narrative, the compositionist approach loosely oscillates between a qualitative research method and a metaphorical prose fiction. What can be retained as a principle of compositionism is that it



recognizes the primacy of artistic practice over the theoretical narratives derived out of it. A flexible interpretative theory is hereby drawn out of the live process of artmaking, and Latour acknowledges that “it [compositionism] has clear roots in art, painting, music, theater, dance, and thus is associated with choreography and scenography” (Latour 2010). The Dada and Neo-Dada anti-art attitudes are reinterpreted by several artists of the “Cluj School” in a reversed kind of “compositionist”, noncombat manner. The paradoxical mythologization of the avant-garde’s anti-art statements over the last decades of art history needs to be counterbalanced, I would say, by its very decomposition, followed by a dialogical recomposition, which is merely a non-critical or post-critical artistic revival, in Ghenie’s view, as well as in some Neo-Dadaist painterly and performative intertexts of Mircea Cantor and Victor Man.

In Mircea Cantor’s film installation *Deeparture* (2005), the live protagonists are a wolf, behaving in a strangely peaceful manner within the white cube of the stage, and his most unexpected stage partner, the ingénue character “played” by a deer. The tender irony included in the “moral fable” of Cantor’s video work invokes another mythologized figure, the Fluxus or Neo-Dada artist and art pedagogue Joseph Beuys, with his totemic performance *Coyote* (1974).



**Fig. 7.** Joseph Beuys,  
*Coyote: I Like America  
and America Likes Me*,  
1974

We may be prompted to ask ourselves an appropriate rhetorical question: is there still an *aura* of Dada, or an aura associated with Dada? The seemingly unreproducible artistic *aura* (a controversial aesthetic notion, highly disputed ever since Walter Benjamin asserted its paradoxical character) can actually be

reconstructed and reterritorialized, since it has a contextual and fluctuating nature. Boris Groys argues, for instance, that installations are relevant forms of art documentation in which the difference between the artistic original and the copy becomes “a topological and situational one”<sup>4</sup> (Groys 2008, 63).



**Fig. 8.** Beuys recalled by contemporary artist Mircea Cantor, in his video work *Deeparture*, 2005

In the case of the performances, paintings and installations of several artists from Cluj, the “aura” of an apparently non-auratic art such as Dada is relocated or recomposed, and therefore understood in its dynamic historicity and in its intrinsic ideology. Their Neo-neo-Dada artworks compose a non-critical and a non-mythologized vision upon the artistic avant-garde; a vision that properly relativizes, though, the status of avant-gardist discourse as the “master narrative” of modernism.

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<sup>4</sup> The copy comprised in an installation gains, as Groys states, a certain aura as a live artwork, therefore reaching the condition of a new original product. Modernity thus exposes different removals “from sites and placing in (new) sites”, the *aura* being successively displaced and restored (Groys 2008, 63).

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