

THE AESTHETICS OF *DADA*, A GAME OF CHANCE?

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Abstract:

Throughout history, for the new to emerge, there must be a challenge to the old order of a world that seeks to be abolished. It is the law of continuity which, paradoxically, is meant to function periodically through rupture. The obsession with breaking the present from the similarities of the past generates new spiritual identities, manifested also through the freedom of expression of a completely different model from the existing one. This is what happened with the *Dada* adventure, one of the most eccentric adventures of the spirit, transposed from the creed of the violent eruption of an unpremeditated language, dictated by the unconscious and freed from any rational will, from any preconceived idea.

However, the very fact of invoking the search for chance in the act of creation from the outset would no longer legitimise the status of art that claims to be designed and finalised through a pure game of chance. The search itself often means the revelation of an already established purpose, which contradicts the *accidental* and *random* traits assumed to be the foundations of *Dada* art.

In art, any momentary interpretation, whether of an improvisation or, on the contrary, of a creation refined over time, cannot be definitive; it continuously reopens to subsequent interpretations¹.

Keywords:

Rupture, *Dada*, chance, accidental, random.

At the end of 1915, as Romania was preparing to enter the war, Tristan Tzara, along with his friend, the architect Marcel Iancu, were also preparing, but not in this sense. They were preparing to revolutionise art from its foundations, somewhere far from home, at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich, where they were to be accepted by the then-famous Hugo Ball.

¹ An interpretative version in Romanian is available in *LDMD9* – Târgu Mureș, 2021, under the title “On an Atypical Discourse”.

In the pivotal moments of history, the course of the world rolls with its affirmations and negations, with the acceptances and resistances from whose contradiction change arises, along with the principle that change represents, in the long term, the very reason for humanity's existence. In any domain of life, the old and the new are placed side by side, and through comparison, one must prevail; typically, the overthrow of the old constitutes the premise for the inauguration of the new. In movements of this kind, there is initially *something* that dissatisfies and gradually becomes the germ of future change, thought from the perspective of the *otherwise*. The desire to start the world from scratch, to renounce – totally or partially – the values previously created, requires courage and boldness, sometimes even fervour, in view of renewal, of changing “what is” with “what should be.”

The Dadaist movement cannot be dissociated from the events of its historical time: the passions of a humanity driven to conflictual paroxysm engaged it in the negation, among many other things, of the destructive spectre of the First World War. The Dadaists found themselves involved in a radical *politico-aesthetic*² revolution, intended to set all the wheels of society in motion, from a real reform of consciences to changing conceptions about art, the world and life. However, for this, they needed a relaxed atmosphere that would allow them to quietly think about the foundations of the movement they were to establish. Therefore, its illustrious representatives – writers, painters, sculptors, photographers and musicians, politically exiled or even deserters – left their country of origin to settle in Switzerland³, a neutral country. Here, in February 1916, they joined Hugo Ball's artistic

² The Dadaists were political in their motivations. They deliberately embraced critical perspectives on various forms of art – theatre, visual arts, literature and music – precisely to critique society as a whole. Marcel Duchamp's “Fountain” (1917), which sparked so much controversy, is a telling example of social critique: the urinal, a sanitary object taken as such but bearing the artist's signature, is placed in a cultural setting not by virtue of any inherent significance, but because Duchamp was mocking the public, whom he considered capable of admiring art solely because it bore a famous signature, while in reality, they understood nothing.

³ The choice of Switzerland has its own significance, as it, being a neutral country during World War I, represented the ideal refuge for anti-war militants, pacifists by training and aspirations, who sought to achieve, through their actions, a kind of “multicultural experiment.”

entertainment group. Thus, the premises were created for a movement that no one suspected would completely change the conception of art. Moreover, the mirage of renewal constitutes the engine of any destructive-creative movement that tries, each time in history – when it is considered that the opportune moment has arrived – to eliminate the common, the banal, the conformities of all kinds. The zero point of the Dada movement⁴ coincided with the appearance of the *Literary Manifesto* published in February 1915 in Berlin by Hugo Ball and Richard Huelsenbeck. Openly declaring themselves negativists, they defined an attitude that future Dadaists would also adopt:

*“We are not naive enough to believe in progress. We only concern ourselves, with pleasure, with the present day. We want to be mystics of detail, pedants and clairvoyants, anti-conceptionalists and literary protesters. We want to suppress the desire for any form of beauty, culture, poetry, for any intellectual refinement, any form of taste, socialism, altruism, and synonymism.”*⁵

In line with the same radical militancy is Marcel Iancu’s conception⁶ of the Dada creed:

⁴ The origin of the movement’s name is unclear. Hugo Ball claimed it came from the Romanian affirmative adverb “*da*”, frequently repeated by the movement’s initiators, Tristan Tzara and Marcel Iancu, in their discussions: “In Romanian, one says ‘*da*’ [i.e., yes] you are right, that’s it, agreed, *da, da* [yes, yes], we will take care of it.” However, Richard Huelsenbeck had a different opinion, also claiming the paternity of the word “*dada*,” which emerged from his act of stabbing a French-German dictionary with a knife, after which he opened the tome at the point of the stabs. Another interpretation belongs to Marcel Iancu (mentioned by Marc Dachy in *Dada: La révolte de l’art*), the architect claiming that the name of the movement was due strictly to chance: the pencil inserted by Tristan Tzara into the Larousse dictionary stopped at the onomatopoeic word “*dada*,” which justified the Romanian to offer the explanation: “The name *Dada* was accepted... because it represented that feeling of naiveté, that sense of purity, of natural art, of intuitive art.”

⁵ *Ein literarisches Manifest*, 12 February 1915, in Gerhard Schaub, “Dada avant la lettre”. Ein unbekanntes ‘Literarisches Manifest’, von Hugo Ball und Richard Huelsenbeck.

⁶ Marcel Iancu, a Romanian-born painter, architect and essayist, graduated in 1917 from the Academy of Architecture in Zurich, where he had arrived to study architecture at the Polytechnic Institute. He actively participated in the meetings of the Cabaret Voltaire, creating posters, masks, illustrations, scenarios and giving lectures that were part of the artistic avant-garde.

*“We have lost faith in contemporary culture. Everything that exists at the moment must be destroyed, demolished. We must restart the act of creation from a **tabula rasa**. At the Cabaret Voltaire, we want to shake up ideas, public opinion, education, institutions, museums, common sense as it is currently defined, in short, everything that pertains to the old order.”*

This authentic declaration of war against the old order, which illustrates the scholarly disorder of absolute negation, comes after Marcel Iancu happened to personally meet Hugo Ball, a German writer, playwright and translator of French literature, also exiled in Switzerland since 1915. Accompanied by Emmy Hennings, a poet and dancer, he founded the Cabaret Voltaire, announcing its opening on 2 February 1916. Hugo Ball had had the idea of making his cabaret a synthesis of the tradition of Parisian cabarets from the late 19th century and the Berlin cabarets before the war. He had envisioned his cabaret as a special place where he would invite all “young artists and writers with the aim of creating a centre of artistic entertainment,” asking them, at the same time, “to join with suggestions and proposals.” Learning that Marcel Iancu was a painter and unemployed, Hugo Ball offered him the walls of the cabaret to exhibit his paintings, which happened a few days later, with the inauguration of the cabaret on 5 February 1916. The inaugural show was a resounding success: Ball at the piano, Emmy Hennings singing in French and Danish, and Tristan Tzara, while pulling poems written on scraps of paper from his pockets, began to declaim them in Romanian, transfigured, even though no one understood the language in which he did so, no one understood anything. Except, of course, Marcel Iancu, who had arranged the decorations – paintings and masks – together with Hans Arp. It was the beginning of a new era whose steamroller would integrate performances with simultaneous readings, spoken against the backdrop of noises that would electrify the hall into a general frenzy.

In the field of poetry, the Dada movement aimed not only to reach that extreme limit of the split between thought and expression but also to achieve new forms of stage reading. Thus, distinct presentation practices would

appear one after another: (i) *the static poem*, which would be read from multiple parts of the hall simultaneously, (ii) *the moving poem*, whose meanings would be born through the sketching of exaggerated movements, (iii) *the vocalic poem* in search of a primordial sound etc.

But beyond the novel methods of reading poems, what revolutionised the entire vision of poetic art was the conception regarding *poietics* or the *very act of creating* verses. From this perspective, Tristan Tzara⁷ – the founder of the movement, whose real name was Samuel Rosenstock – was and remained unique in the way he imagined the break from tradition, from the conventions of poetic language up to that point. He gathers the new literary demands under the title:

How to Make a Dadaist Poem

“Take a newspaper.

Take some scissors.

Choose from this paper an article of the length you want to make your poem.

Cut out the article.

Next carefully cut out each of the words that makes up this article and put them all in a bag.

Shake gently.

Next take out each cutting one after the other.

Copy conscientiously in the order in which they left the bag.

The poem will resemble you.

*And there you are – an infinitely original author of charming sensibility, even though unappreciated by the vulgar herd.”*⁸

⁷ The complete works of Tristan Tzara were published in 2011 by Flammarion in a volume comprising 1,740 pages. In the preface, both the work and the origin of the creator are commented on from the perspective of current relevance, not without a certain malice: “Currently, Romania, having returned to the fold of Europe, is making efforts to claim Tristan Tzara as one of its sons. And why not? Even if he only published a few poems in Romanian, his roots and culture, as well as his education, belong to the land of the sad,” an allusion to the creator’s pseudonym, understood by the general public as “sad in his country.”

⁸ Tristan Tzara, *Manifest despre amorul slab și amorul amar* (1920).

As he himself confessed in another exposition of his theory on poetic creation, Tristan Tzara considers that the Dadaist poem is characterised by the traits of /accidental/ and /random/. “Nothing should be sought carefully. What matters is CHANCE,” Tzara believes, continuing to explain the concept of chance in art:

“What does Chance mean? It means the random encounter between two words, between sounds, colours, lines.”⁹

If we were to transfer from the philosophical concept to the linguistic conceptual, referring strictly to the etymology of the word *hasard* ‘chance’, in this sense we would certainly agree with Tristan Tzara. The word *hasard* comes from the Arabic *az-zahar*¹⁰ meaning the *game of dice*, derived either from *zahar* ‘flower’ (the dice had a flower drawn on one of the faces), or from the verb *yasara* ‘to play a game of dice’. From Arabic, it passed into Spanish as *azar*, with the same meaning, ‘game of dice’ or ‘unfavourable throw in the game of dice’.

From Spanish, it was borrowed into French with the only modification being the addition of an “h” at the beginning of the word due to the fact that in the Middle Ages, words with an initial vowel, of foreign origin, were regularly written with an “h-”. In French, *hasard* initially designated the *favourable throw* in the game of dice. From this first meaning comes the expression *jeu de hasard*, attested in 1538, but today the reference to the game of dice is forgotten, *hasard* being understood only in its absolute and philosophical sense. The Romanian language borrowed it from French, writing it with a “z” instead of the intervocalic “s”.

The image of the falling die would represent the reference point of the archetypal figure of chance: there is no influence or directed intervention from man in the game of dice, just as there can be no conscious influence on random events. The relationship established between the game of dice and the

⁹ Tristan Tzara, *Sept manifestes Dada*, Paris, Editions du Diorama, 1924.

¹⁰ *Le Robert, Dictionnaire historique de la langue française* (sous la direction d’Alain Rey), Paris, 1995.

random event relies on the first of the two terms, a fact also emphasised by dictionary findings:

The hazard – the game of dice – is what gave the name to hazard as a fortuitous event and not the other way around. (Littré, Author’s translation)

It is towards such a random event – as a result of creation – that the new Dadaist poetics would also tend, impregnated with the eruption of nonsense, doubt, lack of logic and reason. From now on, the artist’s mission would consist in adopting an unpremeditated language, dictated by the unconscious¹¹ and freed from any rational will, from any preconceived idea.

In fact, the Dada movement was planning a kind of complete abolition of the coherence of spirit and language, through the uncontrolled outpouring of an unprecedented violence in art, all with a single purpose: to create *shock* in the relationship between stage and audience, between creator and receiver. The voice of the same Tzara¹² states it clearly:

*“I am about to destroy the drawers of the brain and of social organisation, to throw despair everywhere, to throw my hand from heaven to hell, my eyes from hell to heaven, to remake the fertile wheel of a universal circus in the real powers and fantasy of each individual.”*¹³

Dada, an anarchist-type movement, hoped to obtain, in the form of residue, the raw authentic, converted into scandalous performances, one of which may be the headline act. It is the performance featuring the doctor-poet

¹¹ The *systematic exploration of the unconscious* was undertaken by the Surrealist group starting in 1919, when André Breton, together with Louis Aragon and Philippe Soupault, founded the magazine *Littérature*, in which the first Surrealist text, *Les Champs magnétiques*, written by Breton in collaboration with Soupault, appeared.

¹² Tristan Tzara, *Sept manifestes Dada*, Paris, Editions du Diorama, 1924.

¹³ Tristan Tzara is a pseudonym that combines the name from Wagner’s opera – *Tristan* – and also evokes the immense sadness of the country – *Tzara* – where he was born. From childhood, he had a fierce critical attitude towards any norm, rule or principle. It is well known that one of his early obsessions was to spend his holidays on the hills, naked, to anger the priest and amuse the girls. These early steps towards later chaotic and unconventional behaviour show how, structurally, the artist Tzara was inclined towards radicalism, destruction and aggressiveness.

André Breton¹⁴, caught while literally shouting a Dadaist poem, and the dancers wrapped in cardboard, with keys and drums on them, which they hit and throw, thinking that only in this way would they make a show. A show within a show. And somewhere, in the background of the hall or perhaps right in front of everyone, the Dadaist spokesperson would ask, as indeed happened: “*You don’t understand what we are doing, do you? Well, dear friends, neither do we!*”¹⁵

The Dada movement, through its atypical discourse and the perplexed reception by the more or less informed public, was one of the most eccentric adventures of the spirit.

What we could, however, reconsider – without claiming to find an insoluble truth – is the issue related to the role of chance, of randomness in Dada aesthetics. Tristan Tzara speaks of that “random encounter between words, between sounds, colours, lines,” but their entry onto the scene is nevertheless meticulously prepared. It seems plausible to a point that a final result with the appearance of pure chance is anticipated, but the initial approach has nothing to do with the realm of randomness. The stages preceding the final aesthetic act, prepared “carefully,” cannot help but raise some controversies regarding the intervention of chance. To the extent that these stages are rigorously delineated, thus consciously recognised, even if the Dada theorist constantly invokes the explosion of the irrational and unconscious, the operational approach rather disguises that part of intentionality that seeks to ultimately achieve the appearance of a random

¹⁴ André Breton, Louis Aragon, Paul Eluard, Philippe Soupault and others broke away from the Dada movement in 1922, going on to lay the foundations of Surrealism in France. After initially carrying Tristan Tzara’s portrait like an icon, they lamentably disavowed him with the comment: “We are tired of this guy! He is an emigrant, he is a Jew, he is Romanian, he is pro-German, and probably even paid by the German Secret Services!” The *Surrealist Manifesto*, which appeared in 1924, found itself competing with the *Seven Dada Manifestos* published in the same year, when the movement had already ended. The publication of the latter had, at the same time, the air of a desire for the survival of the Dada current, which did not easily accept its end.

¹⁵ Cf. *Le siècle rebelle. Dictionnaire de la contestation au XX^e siècle*, Paris, Larousse – Bordas / HER, 1999 (trad. n.).

encounter. A kind of ordered chaos. Since there is a clear intention to reach the appearance of a game of chance, isn't this appearance likely to constitute the premises of a real search? For the search itself often means the revelation of an already established goal, which contradicts the *accidental* and *random* traits assumed to be the foundations of Dada art.

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