

## ANDRÁS KAPPANYOS: DADA AS A FEELING<sup>1</sup>

"A murderous madness was on the rampage when in 1916, in Zürich, Dada emerged out of the primaeval depths," writes Hans Arp at the beginning of one of his memoirs. Only a few Dadaists acknowledged (in writing at least) that Dada was a creation of war. It is true that mankind had been through many wars and had already experienced the weapons of modern warfare in the colonial wars at the turn of the century, but this was something else. The battle of Verdun, for example, consisted of two armies, dug deep into their trenches, shooting at each other for almost a whole year. The front essentially did not move, but a million people perished. This was something that a sane mind could not comprehend. The traditional military values of courage, valour, and patriotism lost their validity. A soldier was nothing more than ammunition and he was aware of this if he had any remaining soundness of mind. Therefore governments made an effort to eliminate this last little bit of sanity as well. Patriotic, wartime propaganda became overwhelming as it attempted to create a moral duty out of something that went directly against the Ten Commandments, the bedrock of European culture.

The propaganda was not without effect. It was not only the nationalist, pro-government intellectuals who welcomed the war with great excitement and not only the Futurists who sang its praise, but even Apollinaire himself marched off into the slaughter enthusiastically. Many saw a great common purpose in war, a form of purgatory that would bring about a never-ending era of peace and freedom. Later, many realised that they were living a monumental, collective lie that was impossible to escape from. The only way for the mind to fend off madness was to become attracted to the demons of war and death. The war came to be seen as an apocalyptic festivity, a danse macabre, because Europe entered a moral vacuum much like it had done at the time of the Great Plague.

Documentary films often feature the scene of heroic French soldiers proceeding from Paris to the front in taxis, as if they were off to work. This is, however, not an example of heroism and manly virtue, but rather of the fateful enervation of a sound moral sense and the will to live. He who does not fear death (violent, meaningless, untimely death) is not brave but ill. This disease is described poignantly by Wilfred Owen, one of the best English poets of his generation, who also lost his life in the war.

<sup>1</sup> The full Hungarian text of András Kappanyos' essay can be found in the online version of his *Dada Anthology* on Artpool's website: <http://www.artpool.hu/dada/antologia.html>



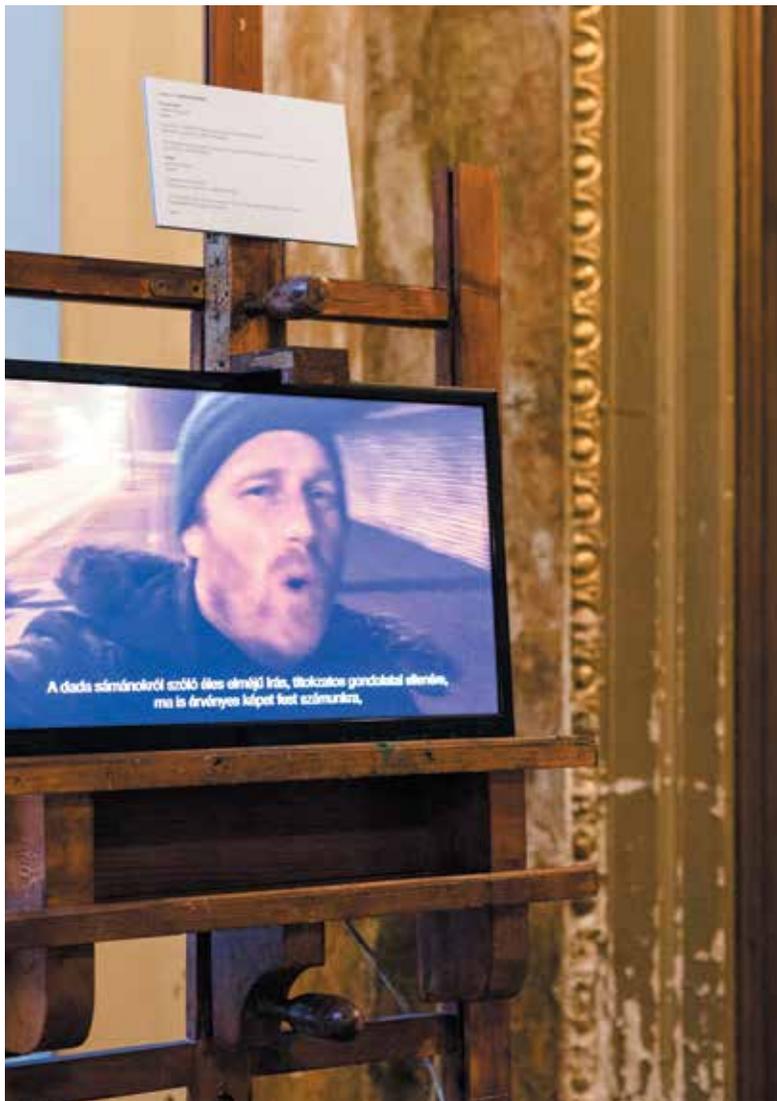
*Out there, we've walked quite friendly up to Death,-  
Sat down and eaten with him, cool and bland,-  
Pardoned his spilling mess-tins in our hand.  
We've sniffed the green thick odour of his breath,-  
Our eyes wept, but our courage didn't writhe.  
He's spat at us with bullets and he's coughed  
Shrapnel. We chorussed when he sang aloft,  
We whistled while he shaved us with his scythe.*

*Oh, Death was never enemy of ours!  
We laughed at him, we leagued with him, old chum.  
No soldier's paid to kick against His powers.  
We laughed, -knowing that better men would come,  
And greater wars: when each proud fighter brags  
He wars on Death, for lives; not men, for flags.*

It was WWI that spun the first Dadaists to Zürich and New York. Hugo Ball was a deeply religious man and a radical pacifist. He refused to undertake military service and left Germany with fake travel documents in 1915. A few months prior to this, his partner, Emmy Hennings had to serve a prison sentence for providing conscientious objectors with fake papers. In the beginning, Ball was hassled by the Swiss authorities as well; he was even prosecuted once. They had no work, no income; in their desperate situation, Ball was assailed by suicidal thoughts. Later on, they were able to join a travelling ensemble (Emmy had been a cabaret actress in München), which then inspired the idea of founding their own cabaret.

As Alsace was still a German territory at the time, it was the German authorities who wanted to conscript Hans Arp. He travelled to Paris where he was soon hassled because of his German origins and would have been imprisoned had he not escaped to Zürich. The others had a similarly visceral relation to the war and they all agreed that they wanted nothing to do with it. Those who behave normally in times of insanity are often labelled mad. It was this situation that spurred the Dadaists to conquer the domain of madness in the name of art.

They were immune to wartime propaganda. However, this propaganda was based on the real human principles of religion, homeland, family, civilization, etc. that, until then, had been core values for every sensible person. If they were to keep their integrity, the Dadaists had to eliminate every corruptible value from their art. And as everything had become corrupted during the war, they had to detach their art from all



Jivens O. BREWENSES's *Valid* at the entrance of the exhibition

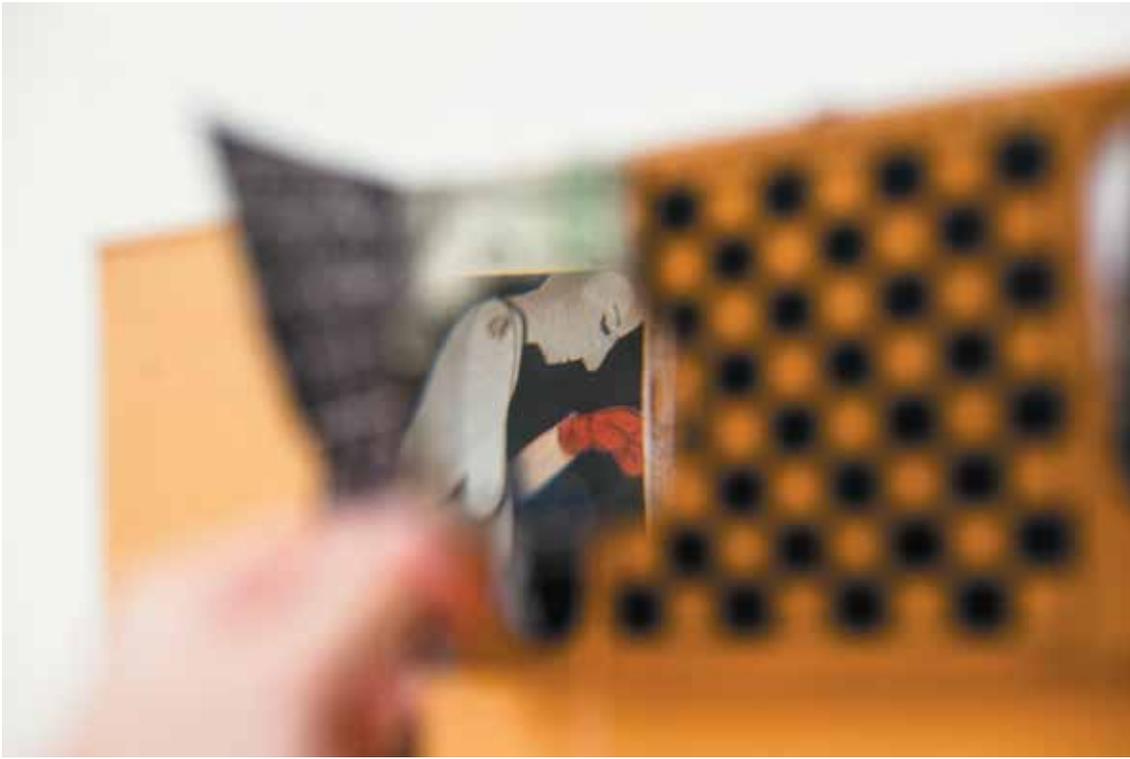
values. This is where the Dadaist independence war of art began.

Art thus revolted against every form of predetermination, dogma, or established norm and therefore also rejected the social functions of the artist. This decision was validated by the moral degradation of artists who supported the wartime propaganda. When Tzara demanded that artists should have the freedom to urinate in the colors of the rainbow (which obviously no one contested), he was not using the Hegelian-Marxian notion of freedom: he was not willing to recognize or acknowledge necessities and he clearly demanded the impossible. At the same time, however, he did gain artists the right to speak about absolutely anything (urination, for example) and to say complete gibberish if they chose to. This tactic proved to be very effective.

Doing away with the social function of art also meant a blurring of the line between life and art, but in a way that also abolished their referential relationship (in which art played a subservient role and always referred to life). This process had the following variants:

**Radical l'art pour l'art.** The artist creates independently from the world around him/her and regards his/her creations (with no reference to the outside world) to be on par with life. It was essentially this principle that the Zürich Dadaists followed and Hans Arp and Tristan Tzara developed it further. It was in this spirit that Hugo Ball wrote his sound-poems in a nonexistent language. If all existing words and images can be corrupted, then new words and images need to be invented, ones that carry nonexistent meanings or transfer all their possible meanings to the viewer's sphere of responsibility. The world thus created is an alternative to reality, i.e., art is elevated to the status of life. The method certainly passes judgement on reality (which can no longer be saved); this is where, to quote Hans Arp, the "deep, transcendent realism" of Dada lies.

**Guerilla art.** The recipe followed by the Berlin Dadaists; a unique interpretation of the concept of the "war of independence". The furtherance of social independence war is designated as art's sole function, which means a radical elimination of the autonomy of art. It would be a mistake to claim that Dada served the Communist agenda in Berlin. It did not serve it, but rather took its place in Dadaist circles. We can safely say that here, for the first time in history, an artistic movement endeavoured to alter the whole spectrum of life. At many points (eg. "progressive unemployment"), the demands made by Dadaists differed significantly from the demands made by Communists. The border between artistic and social revolution was obliterated; they aimed to turn life itself into art. At the same time, their demands were just as impossible as rainbow-colored urination. Consequently, their murderous irony



Katalin HAÁSZ's *Chess Variety* in the Barcsay Hall

did not only target the social order that was to be changed, but also all “realistic” attempts at making a change.

**Anti-art.** Both the outsider attitude of the Zürichians and the commitment of the Berliners involved some kind of a moral stance, but the standpoint taken by the New York Dadaists was completely amoral, or, if you like, totally free. Duchamp experimented with the possibilities of art like a child tearing out the legs of a bug one by one: incredibly creatively, methodically, and without any scruples. Duchamp’s most Dadaist works, the readymades, were basically experiments in art theory and sociology, testing the relationship between artwork and viewer, artist and bourgeoisie. When placed into an art context, does the object transform into a work of art? What is the role of reworking a piece and giving it a title? Is the bourgeoisie willing to pay for literal “nothingness”? It was indubitably Duchamp who went the furthest in this process. He was able to declare not only the rainbow-colored, but also the very ordinary urine (precisely, the urinal) as art; a gesture with which he basically eliminated the “art” component from the relation of art and life. If the artist is able to elicit the bourgeois’ admiration (and his/her willingness to spend money) with a urinal bought in a shop, then all artistic effort from Pheidias through Leonardo and Rembrandt to Cézanne has been in vain. As a result, Duchamp also gave up on exerting himself, but he accumulated a great number of ideas that still feed whole movements today.

There is only one way to go further than Duchamp did: by eliminating life instead of art. The futility of all activity, that is, the futility of life itself, followed logically from the negation of every value. From the very same standpoint, it was just as easy to get to Ball’s and Arp’s idealistic, anti-war life-affirmation as it was to reach Vaché’s or Rigaut’s ultimate and fateful spleen. These were, however, individual conclusions, suicide does not actually follow from Dadaism. (Vaché did not know about Dada, while Rigaut defied even Dada itself.)

When the legacies of all three versions of the “Dada independence war” are compared, it becomes evident that the first one, radical l’art pour l’art, primarily created artworks; the second one, guerilla art, came up with methods; while the third one, anti-art, resulted in theoretical insights. All of these have been incorporated into universal culture as Dada’s legacy.

An especially interesting feature of Duchamp’s artistic experiments is that they were also able to prognosticate the slow death of Dada. Parisian Dada unified the spectacular originality of Zürich’s radical l’art pour l’art and the methodical destructivism of New York’s anti-art, presenting it to an already “acclimatised” Parisian audience. Dada



Katarina ŠEVIĆ & Tehnica Schweiz (Gergely LÁSZLÓ & Péter RÁKOSI)'s installation *Alfred Palestra* in the Barcsay Hall, with Péter HECKER's work in the background

showed its most scandalous side, but Dadaist scandals had also become fashionable. Dada was bought. It became cool to throw tomatoes and Dada had no power left to offset the self-confidence of its audience. After all, what was Dada's absurdity compared to the fact that soldiers took a taxi to go to war?

Duchamp experimented with the same thing and realised that he cannot come up with anything that the bourgeois would not want to buy. S/he would literally be up for buying nothingness itself. This is the bourgeoisie's way of protecting itself from provocation. Out of pure snobbery, the bourgeois takes the artist's side, claiming to partake in the freedom of art. Duchamp might have intended his ready-mades to be a form of anti-kitsch, an antithesis to the garden gnome, yet, his urinal ended up receiving a very garden gnome-like treatment: someone bought it (for the price of multiple gnomes) and is now parading it in front his/her dinner party guests. They are all sufficiently jealous of course, as its price is on the increase. It is a great investment.

I believe, however, that it was Kurt Schwitters who managed to come up with the real antithesis to the garden gnome. The *Merzbau* was an unmoveable, unfinishable, organic formation. To buy it, one would have had to buy the whole house and Schwitters himself as well. As this did not work, history had to take shape in a way that Schwitters was forced to escape and the house with the *Merzbau* inside it was bombed and destroyed. Not really the fate of your typical garden gnome.

A situation that is difficult to interpret: Schwitters was a maker of anti-gnomes, but he was also anti-Duchamp. While Duchamp blurred the boundary between art and life by undoing art and declaring his life to be art, Schwitters went in the other direction: he transformed everything he could lay his hands on into art. If we call Duchamp's practice "anti-art", Schwitters' should be labeled "pan-art". He was obviously a more traditional artist who did not even surrender meaning. He kept taking patterns from the disintegrating reality around him and, with manic diligence, attempted to put the pieces together in a new formation, hoping things will make sense that way.

Blurring the border between art and life was probably the most important battlefield of the Dada independence war. In fact, other Dadaist achievements can also be interpreted along the lines of "blurring borders". Firstly, borders between nations: Dada was founded by people from countries that were at war with each other. It was to become the first art movement that, even at the moment of its inception, had no ties to one particular nation. The blurring of artistic movements: although Dada mocked Cubism and Futurism as forms of academism and said even worse things about Expressionism, it still managed to maintain a



Márton FERNEZELYI & András KAPPANYOS & Imre LEPSÉNYI & Zoltán SZEGEDY-MASZÁK's work *Instant Phono-Visual Poetrizator (Pseudo-Chaotic Dadamaton)* in the Barcsay Hall, adjacent to Balázs KICSINY's *Opportunist Revolutionary*

friendly relationship with every movement of the time and was happy to accept their members and artworks within its ranks. The blurring of lines between artistic mediums: poets painted, painters wrote poems, everyone danced, sang, performed. These intermediary zones became artistic manifestations in their own right. The line between the sexes: never before had women played such an important role in the foundation of a movement. Emmy Ball-Hennings and Sophie Täuber-Arp in Zürich and Hannah Höch in Berlin (and later Hannover) played indispensable roles in the movement and (especially the latter two artists) created some of the most important Dadaist works. Naturally, Dada also blurred the boundaries of sense and reason: to complement the images with no meaning (abstraction), it also created poems without meaning. Dada's reasoning was something along these lines: "take a look at what you have done to the world in the name of your much-celebrated values!"—but this is something I have already discussed.

Dada changed the landscape of art forever (and to some extent, that of life as well). It fought some battles that we now no longer need to fight. Precisely because of this, it is somewhat laughable to relate to Dada as a tradition—it is as if the French set up and operated a guillotine every year to commemorate their revolution. However, no worthwhile artist can avoid building on the achievements of Dada, in the same way that since the French revolution (and the abolition of titles), every woman is called "mademoiselle" or "madame" and every man "monsieur". This is not a form of living up to some tradition, it is simply how the world is for them. It might be taken for granted now, but it can inevitably be traced back to a certain point in history.