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Zurich Dada, Wagner, and the Union of the Arts

In the introduction to her history of the concept of the Gesamtkunstwerk and its legacy, *Modernism after Wagner*, Juliet Koss writes:

While discussions of the interrelations between the arts did not originate with Wagner, as we shall see, his presentation of the Gesamtkunstwerk became the central reference point for later artistic practice and theory.¹

The Zurich Dada soirées, in 1916-1919, could also be said to have become a ‘central reference point for later artistic practice and theory’. Like Wagner’s music dramas, they brought together music, poetry, dance, and the visual arts, in a revolutionary way which seems to have left an indelible mark on our cultural memory. Their key protagonists were certainly aware of Wagner and of Wagnerian theory. It seems reasonable to suppose, therefore, that the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk would have been present in their minds as they forged their own union of the arts. However, if one looks more closely at the words of the Dadaists themselves, one finds an echoing void where one might have expected Wagner to be. Whenever they are writing about Dada, its principles, and its productions, they scrupulously avoid the topic.

It is Hugo Ball who provides the missing link between Dada and the history of Wagnerism, in his writings, not on Zurich Dada performance, but on creators who might be considered among its intellectual precursors: Nietzsche and Kandinsky. Nietzsche’s relationship to the concept of a specifically Germanic culture fascinated Ball in the years before Dada. The evolution of Nietzsche’s opinions on this subject was inseparable from his changing attitude to Wagner and his art; therefore, when Ball discusses Nietzsche, he tends also to mention Wagner.

In fact, in *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*, the edited diary which Ball published shortly before his death in 1927, and which constitutes the fullest and most often cited first-hand account of the birth of Dada, Ball mentions Wagner only when discussing Nietzsche,² and he never mentions the ‘Gesamtkunstwerk’, since, doubtless, it did not seem to him central to the question of the relationship between culture and nationalism. The case of Kandinsky is more interesting for the purposes of this essay. His links with Dada were much closer; and as Ball saw, his take on the Wagnerian ‘Gesamtkunstwerk’ helped to explain both his interest for the Dadaists, and his distance from their endeavour.

On 7 April 1917, Ball gave a lecture entitled ‘Kandinsky’ in the Galerie Dada, in Zurich. It was one of a series of lectures and guided tours held during the first ‘Sturm-Ausstellung’ in the gallery, to introduce the public to the new art on display, which included paintings by Kandinsky and by Klee. The general tone of the lecture is hagiographic. Ball plainly considers Kandinsky to be, along with Picasso, one of the two truly original painters of his day, in the way he takes his art back to ‘die wahre Form, den Klang der Dinge, ihre Essenz, ihre Wesenskurve’,³ rather than to the representation of the object. However, when he considers Kandinsky’s theatrical achievements, Ball is less convinced. Kandinsky’s theatrical model is conceived in reaction to Wagner’s; but the reaction, it seems, has been insufficiently powerful to create something really new.

Im «Blauen Reiter» hat Kandinsky eine Kritik des Wagnerschen «Gesamtkunstwerks» geschrieben zugunsten des Monumental-Kunstwerks der Zukunft. Seine Kritik richtet sich gegen die Veräußerlichung jeder einzelnen der von Wagner zum Gesamtkunstwerk herangezogenen Künste, die nur zur Steigerung des Ausdrucks, zur Unterstreichung und Bekräftigung des Ausdrucks, zuwider den ihnen immanenten Kunstgesetzen verwandt wurden. Kandinskys Idee einer monumentalen Bühnenkomposition geht von entgegengesetzten Voraussetzungen aus. Ihm schwebt ein Gegeneinander der einzelnen

Künste, eine symphonische Komposition vor, in der die einzelnen auf ihr Wesentliches zurückgeführten Künste als Elementarformen nur die Noten abgeben zu einer Konstruktion oder Komposition auf der Bühne, die jede der einzelnen Künste als selbstständiges Darstellungsmaterial gelten läßt und aus der Mischung dieses gereinigten Materials ein neues Kunstwerk das Monumentalkunstwerk der Zukunft schafft. In zwei solchen Bühnenkompositionen, dem im «Blauen Reiter» gedruckten «Gelben Klang» und dem noch ungedruckten «Violetten Vorhang», hat Kandinsky seine Theorie praktisch erfüllt. Vielleicht nur schematisch erfüllt. Sein in dieser Form vielleicht relatives Talent besagt nichts gegen die Genialität der ideellen Konzeption, die selbst Schriftstellern von der Abgewogenheit Ibsens, Maeterlinks, Andrejews gegenüber eine starke, umstürzende Gewalt erweisen würde, wenn man sie endlich mit Liebe einmal auf die Bühne brächte.⁴

This subtle analysis ascribes to Kandinsky principles which, as Juliet Koss points out, subsequently became received as diagnostic traits of Modernism, in opposition to Wagnerism:

critics and scholars [...] oppose the Gesamtkunstwerk to such basic modernist principles as artistic purity, autonomy, and medium specificity (the idea that each art form should develop and present those attributes specific to its medium).⁵

Kandinsky, according to Ball, rejects Wagnerism because Wagner would like each art to contribute to a common expression, rather than developing its own immanent character. Nonetheless, Kandinsky retains a central element of the Wagnerian ‘Gesamtkunstwerk’: the simultaneous presence on stage of all the arts, each operating at its highest intensity and working towards a common goal. How will they relate to each other, if not through a common expression? How can their ‘Gegeneinander’ be formed into a ‘symphonische Komposition’, rather than a cacophony or a mere simultaneous presence of unrelated artworks? This remains

vague. It 'schwebt [...] vor', rather than being realised, as Wagner's principles could be held to have been, in performance.

The distinction between Wagner's concept and Kandinsky's seems to be summed up, for Ball, by Kandinsky's replacement of 'Gesamtkunstwerk' by 'Monumentalkunstwerk'. Does this indicate a replacement of an aesthetic of totality, where all the arts work dynamically and dramatically together, by one of monumentality, where all are simultaneously present, but their relationship requires no development in time? In any case, Ball makes it clear that for him, Kandinsky has not succeeded in creating a convincing example of this new monumental theatrical art. He is a great painter; he is not a great creator of staged events. The ideal conception may have genius in it, but it is not clear that it could ever have the effect for which it aims. One might ask why not; why Kandinsky's ambitions, which have led to such definitive results in the medium of painting (and indeed, Ball suggests, of poetry, in 'Der gelbe Klang'), should have been less successful in the theatre. Perhaps this question is best answered by looking at how Kandinsky's painting, poetry, and theatre compare with what was on show at the Galerie Dada in that momentous year.

There is no doubt that the Dadaists were at the forefront of the campaign for abstract art. 'DADA est l'enseigne de l'abstraction', as Tzara put it in his 'Manifeste Dada 1918'.⁶ Hans Arp, one of the founders of the movement, was a key figure in the movement towards abstraction.⁷ Arp, Janco, and Ball, with his long-standing admiration for Kandinsky, ensured that the exhibitions in the Galerie Dada were as avant-garde, from that point of view, as anything in Europe. But the movement towards abstraction, for the Dadaists, did not concern only painting. Crucially, it was central to their poetry, too; and here again, Ball's reception of Kandinsky played a key role. Abstraction in poetry meant using words as material objects themselves, as sounds and as marks on the page, rather than merely as signifiers, just as abstraction in painting meant using paint as material, and not to represent an object; this linguistic abstraction gives rise, in performance, to the 'sound poetry' of Ball, which he explicitly places in the wake of Kandinsky's

‘gelbe Klang’. Abstraction is a reduction in the role of expression in the work of art; a renewed focus on what it does within its medium, rather than on a message it conveys, a message which might to some extent be expressed in other media (as both words and pictures, for example, can express the notion of a sword). Abstraction would thus, as Kandinsky saw (according to Ball’s analysis), tend to render Wagner’s expressive model of art redundant. What it does not do is to provide a replacement for the Wagnerian expressive model’s capacity for bringing the arts together on stage. What, if not expression, could the arts have in common, that would allow the creator to make them work genuinely together, as part of a single coherent work?

Kandinsky, it seems, would have liked to think the answer to this question might be found shortly, and preferably by himself. Ball, on the other hand, one suspects, felt the answer would have to remain in the realm of inspiration, of the conception of genius. Kandinsky’s ideas might provide powerful inspiration, overthrowing earlier certainties; but they could not themselves give rise to a definitive work. In *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*, writing in characteristically laconic style about his Kandinsky lecture, he proposes a new revision of the Wagnerian term ‘Gesamtkunstwerk’. Kandinsky, as presented by Ball in his lecture, had amputated the ‘Gesamt’, and replaced it with ‘Monumental’. Ball removes the ‘Monumental’, brings back the ‘Gesamt’, - and takes away the ‘Werk’:

Gestern mein Vortrag über Kandinsky; ich habe einen alten Lieblingsplan verwirklicht. Die Gesamtkunst: Bilder, Musik, Tänze, Verse – hier haben wir sie nun.⁸

The total art, perhaps; but not the total *work* of art. This corresponds perfectly to what happened in the Zurich Dada soirées; and it creates, perhaps, their true revolutionary character, which marks them out as neither Wagnerian, nor anti-Wagnerian, but simply, and uniquely, non-Wagnerian.

There is one fundamental difference between a Zurich Dada soir  e and a Wagnerian music drama or Kandinsky's 'Monumentalkunstwerk', a difference so obvious that it would be easy to overlook its implications. Both Kandinsky and Wagner operate within the great Romantic tradition of the artwork.⁹ *Lobengrin*, like *Der gelbe Klang*, is a work with a title and a creator, to be envisaged as a whole, summed up under that title. A Zurich Dada soir  e is never a work with a title and a single creator. Two of those soir  es were devoted to the work of a single man – the composer Hans Heusser, on 25 May 1917, and Tristan Tzara, on 23 July 1918; but each of those soir  es was composed of a number of works, of different styles and dates. In the middle of the programme for the 'Soir  e Hans Heusser',¹⁰ as one item among more than twenty, one finds: 'Fragmente aus der B  hnenkomposition: 'Der gelbe Klang', von W. Kandinsky'. Was this a piano work by Heusser, inspired by Kandinsky's publication? Was Heusser's piano playing accompanied by recitation, or by singing? There is no indication; but what is absolutely clear is that Kandinsky's work did not make it onto the Dada stage as a 'Monumentalkunstwerk'. It was present only in 'Fragmente' – and under another man's name.

All the other soir  es, even when they had thematic titles, consisted of many different works, in different genres, by different people. To give the example closest to the above considerations: the 'Sturm-Soir  e' was performed exactly a week after Ball's lecture, in the Galerie Dada, where a second 'Sturm-Ausstellung' was on display, including, again, works by Kandinsky. The programme was as follows, according to Ball in *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*:

Programm der II. («Sturm» -) Soir  e

I

Tristan Tzara: Introduction.

Hans Heusser: «Pr  lude», «Mond   ber Wasser» (gespielt vom Komponisten).

F. T. Marinetti: «Die futuristische Literatur».

W. Kandinsky: «Fagott», «Käfig», «Blick und Blitz».

G. Apollinaire: «Rotsoge», «Le dos du Douanier».

Blaise Cendrars: «Crépitements».

Musique et Danse Nègre, exécutées par 5 personnes avec le concours de Mlles. Jeanne
Rigaud et Maria Cantarelli. (Masques par M. Janco.)

II

H. S. Sulzberger: «Cortège et fête», exécuté par l'auteur.

Jacob von Hoddis: Verse, rezitiert von Emmy Hennings.

Herwart Walden: August Macke†, Franz Marc†, August Stramm†.

Hans Heusser: «Burlesques turques», «Festzug auf Capri» (gespielt vom Komponisten).

Albert Ehrenstein: Verse. Über Kokoschka.

III

«Sphinx und Strohmann»

Kuriosum von Oscar Kokoschka

Masken und Inszenierung: Marcel Janco

Herr Firdusi . . . Hugo Ball

Herr Kautschukmann . . . W. Hartmann

Weibliche Seele, Anima . . . Emmy Hennings

Der Tod . . . F. Clauser¹¹

Certainly, on that evening, all the arts that one would expect to feed into a ‘Gesamtkunstwerk’ or a ‘Monumentalkunstwerk’ were present: visual art in the exhibition, music in the works of Heusser and Sulzberger, dance in the ‘Musique et danse nègre’, poetry by Kandinsky, Apollinaire, Hennings and others. To these, one could add the semi-distinct, and distinctively avant-garde, genre of the art-theoretical manifesto, notably in Marinetti’s contribution, which was read out by Ball. But how did these different arts relate to each other? Most frequently, they are simply juxtaposed. There is no attempt, for example, as far as one can see, to relate the texts to the paintings. The musical items are all for piano solo. Hans Heusser was a composer of songs and choral music as well as of piano music, but none of his songs are on the programme. Similarly, Emmy Hennings was well known as a singer, but here she recites a poem, rather than singing, despite the presence of a piano (and of pianists). One might say that what we have here is neither a Wagnerian collaboration of the arts, nor Kandinsky’s ‘Gegeneinander’ in reaction to the Wagnerian concept, but rather a simple ‘Nebeneinander’; as if the Dada soirée had transferred to the bourgeois artistic space the popular aesthetics of the Cabaret Voltaire, where the movement started. We have here, certainly, numerous works of art, in many media; but no single great work involving all media, and above all, no controlling grand dramatic plan that spans the soirée.

Only two items on the programme are explicitly presented as involving more than one medium. One is the ‘musique et danse nègre’. Music and dance were not the only arts involved; there were also the ‘Masques par M. Janco’. We are given the names of two of the dancers; but who composed (or improvised) the music? Who choreographed the dance? What were the music and the dance like, and how did they relate to each other? How, indeed, did the masks relate to the dance? To these questions, there is no answer, in the programme or, indeed, in any contemporary accounts. This absence of answers poses, perhaps, the most radical of challenges to what was normally thought of as the Wagnerian concept of art. That Wagnerian concept revolves, precisely, around the name of a creator; the creator of the work. In the Zurich Dada

soirée, there are many works, and there need be no single creator. The enterprise itself, Dada, is named, not after a person (as ‘Wagnerism’ is), but after a pair of syllables whose essential distinctive feature, as brought out by Ball in his first Dada manifesto (read out at the first Dada soirée on 14 July 1916¹²), is that they can operate with many meanings in many different languages. Dada contains many expressions, but it is none.

What of Oscar Kokoschka’s ‘Kuriosum’ entitled *Sphinx und Strohmann*, which constituted the final part of the soirée? Here, as with the ‘musique et danse nègre’, we find Marcel Janco named as the provider of masks, and this time, also as responsible for the ‘Inszenierung’. Hugo Ball’s hilarious account of the performance in *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*, however, suggests that Janco could not be held entirely responsible for what actually happened in performance. Three of the four actors were wearing huge masks (Ball’s was so big that he could read his role inside it), with electric lights within, so that the light streamed out from the eyes of the masks onto the darkened stage; the actors must have been quite unable to see out of them.

Tzara im rückwärtigen Raum hatte ‘für Donner und Blitz’ zu sorgen, sowie als Papagei ‘Anima, süße Anima!’ zu sagen. Aber er kümmerte sich zugleich für die Auf- and Abgänge, blitzte und donnerte an der falschen Stelle und erweckte völlig den Eindruck, als sei das ein besonderer Effekt der Regie, eine beabsichtigte Konfusion der Hintergründe.

Schließlich, als Herr Firdusi fallen muß, verwickelte sich alles in den gespannten Drähten und Lichtern. Einige Minuten lang war völlige Nacht und Konfusion; dann hatte die Galerie wieder ihr vorheriges Aussehen.¹³

Plainly, neither Kokoschka nor Janco, nor indeed Tzara, was in full control of what happened in the room that night. Tzara gave a false impression of deliberate confusion; in fact the confusion was not deliberate. Any such non-deliberate confusion, any such disappearance of authorial

intent or directorial control, is clearly incompatible with the monumental work as dreamt of by Kandinsky, or the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as conceived of by Wagner. Yet there is no suggestion in Ball's account that it is in any way aesthetically problematic. It is simply what happened, and Ball does not judge it. The confusion was not a disaster.

Richard Sheppard, in *Modernism – Dada – Postmodernism*, writes that Ball's diary entry describing the Kandinsky lecture 'suggests that he envisaged the Galerie Dada as a place of reconciliation where all the arts would work together to produce a living *Gesamtkunstwerk*' (p. 243).¹⁴ As we have seen, Ball uses the term 'Gesamtkunst' rather than 'Gesamtkunstwerk'; and this, I think, is because it was precisely when the arts worked together that they did not produce a 'Werk', indeed that they brought into relief the problematic nature of that concept. Kandinsky's or Picasso's paintings, the poems of Apollinaire or of Ball himself, the piano music of Hans Heusser: all of these are indubitably works, with creators. As such, they fit into the general work-centred concept of art which had emerged a good century before Dada, and remains the dominant model today; we know what to do with them, and how to present them. Kokoschka's 'Kuriosum' as performed with Janco's masks and Tzara's noises, however, is not such a work, and we do not know what to do with it. One of the key characteristics of the work is that while on one level its true import remains impossible to pin down or rationalise and its true nature cannot be located, on an other level, it has a physical form which endures, and which allows us to speculate on that elusive true nature: the score of the opera, the painting on the wall, the poem in the book. This, clearly, does not apply to the performance of the 'Kuriosum'. Nor does it apply to the 'musique et danse nègre'. Both are lost to us, and were never intended to be otherwise.

It is clear, then, that the Dada soirée accommodates two different kinds of aesthetic experience. One operates within the great tradition of the work, of which the 'Gesamtkunstwerk'

is in many ways the ultimate expression: that includes most of the monomedial art on offer. The other fundamentally contests that great tradition, through its uncompromising refusal to consider expression to be the aim of art. This anti-expressiveness was able in the field of each art taken individually to be to some extent conflated with abstraction, with the refusal to represent; thus each art was able to thrive, to continue to produce works, in the Dada environment. But wherever several arts were brought together, wherever several languages, media, or creators were assembled on stage, Dada respected above all the right of each art not to do anything that could be translated into the language of any other art. Since art expresses nothing, there is no meaning in it that can survive any such translation. As a result, Dada in 'Gesamtkunst' performance brings to life, not the unity of the arts, but the lack of any rational guiding principle behind them. A true understanding of Zurich Dada requires openness to both these kinds of experience: to the work, within its medium, which kept alive the eternal flame of art; and to the 'Gesamtkunst' experience which asserted above all our inability to control art as such, to impose any sense upon it, or to direct its destiny.

In many of the writings of the Zurich Dadaists, this duality is constantly present in the bewildering contradictory uses of the word 'Kunst' (or 'art') and its cognates, which can be, within the same sentence, valorised as the totem of the Dadaist, or devalorised as the outdated categories of a despised society whose focus on rationality, on categorisation, and more generally on meaning had led to the disasters of the war. I would like to look at a typical example of this paradox in the writings of Hans Arp, before coming back to its relevance to the question of the relationship between Dada and Wagnerism.

Dada ist der Urgrund aller Kunst. Dada ist für den «Ohne-Sinn» der Kunst, was nicht Unsinn bedeutet. Dada ist ohne Sinne wie die Natur. Dada ist für die Natur und gegen die Kunst [...] Dada ist für den unbegrenzten Sinn und die begrenzten Mittel. Die

Kunst kann die Mittel mißverstehen und statt begrenzter Mittel unendliche Mittel anwenden. Dann wird nur Leben, nur Natur vorgetäuscht, statt Leben erschaffen.¹⁵

The apparent contradictions of the first part of this passage are in fact explained by the second part. How can Dada be at once against art, and the foundation of art? How can it be *for* 'den «Ohne-Sinn» der Kunst' if it is *against* art in general? The answer is: Dada is *for* art, and the foundation of art, only to the extent that the medium is limited. The medium must be limited for art to be possible. Unfortunately, much of what passes for art is based on a misunderstanding, on the false principle that the medium should be endless, unlimited. This art of the unlimited medium is, for Dada, not art at all, and Dada rejects it.

Dada always defines art as a sphere within which sense is not in control. Dada is indeed 'für den «Ohne-Sinn» der Kunst'. To that extent, art resembles nature, where sense is equally not in control, and both are opposed to the meaning-creating function of ratiocinating humanity. But the false art of the unlimited medium inevitably buys in to that meaning-creating function. In practice, the unlimited medium is nothing other than a multiplication of media, a bringing together of many media. The only way that several media can work together is by evoking a meaning they can all share, by producing a sense which transcends each medium and thus gives them something in common; or to use the Wagnerian word, by expression. But that meaning beyond the medium is the very opposite of art. To keep it at bay, to allow art to escape from the limits of sense, one must limit the medium.

This limitation is always something for which the artist has to struggle, against the tide of human inclination. Art is always drawn to misunderstand the medium, and with it, its own nature. The reason for this is simple. Wherever art is seen, by humanity, as a category, as a distinctive endeavour, we will always tend to try to make sense of it, as we do of all categories. As art begins to make sense for us, it will seek to express that sense by de-limiting its medium; the key distinguishing feature of sense, for Arp, as of expression, for Wagner, being that it can

operate across media. As it seeks that transmedial sense, art ceases to be natural, ceases to be life, and ceases to be that for which it is trying to take itself: art. Thus, whenever art tries to define itself, it will find Dada becomes its enemy. Dada contains within itself the eternal principles of true art; but those principles do not make sense. Art only acquires sense as it frees itself from the limits of the medium; and that sense is what Dada will always combat.

Once again, we see the dual orientation of Dada aesthetics: *for* the creation of works of art, as abstract and beyond sense as may be; and as a combat *against* the sense-based concept of art, a combat which takes place within the artistic sphere itself, wherever the limits of the medium are threatened. The performance of Kokoschka's aptly named *Sphinx und Strohmann* was the occasion of just such a combat. It federated many media; but no one could make sense of the way those media worked together. They escaped control, and in doing so, allowed art itself to escape. Dada's genius, its unique courage, which demanded endless sacrifice from its participants, was that it did not content itself with defining art and fleeing the combat. It realised that endless combat was necessary, because the definition of art would always be sought and must never be settled. That unsettling of art would always happen at the borders between media. For it is true that all art is one; but that is true only at a level inaccessible to sense or to expression; inaccessible, therefore, to the very functions that allow us to continue with our daily lives as human beings. When one brings the arts together, one will inevitably either betray the arts, or go beyond the bounds of human life. Treachery or death, the end of humanity, are thus the only possible outcomes of Dada intermediality. Those who expose themselves to this fate are heroes, as was Hugo Ball:

Dada war nicht nur eine Kesselpauke, eine große Lärm und Spaß. Dada protestierte gegen die Dummheit und die Eitelkeit des Menschen. Under den Dadaisten waren Märtyrer und Gläubige, die ihr Leben opferten auf der Suche nach dem Leben, nach der Schönheit. Ball war ein solcher großer Träumer. Er träumte und glaubte an die

Dichtung und an das Bild. In der «Flucht aus der Zeit» schreibt Hugo Ball: «Das Wort und das Bild sind eins. Maler und Dichter gehören zusammen. Christus ist Bild und Wort. Das Wort und das Bild sind gekreuzigt.» Malevitsch hat das gekreuzigte Bild gemalt und ist dafür von den Russen gekreuzigt worden. Die Träumer leben immer noch mit dem Bild, dem Wort und der Musik in den Katakomben.¹⁶

The union of the arts takes place only in dream, in the catacombs, or as an invitation to martyrdom. It makes no sense in the real world. It is difficult to read this passage in the context of Arp's book as a whole without hearing it as a work of mourning, a eulogy, for Sophie Täuber-Arp, one of the true geniuses of Zurich Dada, as heroically intermedial as Ball, and Arp's artistic companion as well as his wife. She had died eight years before he published *Unsern täglichen Traum ...*, and her presence haunts the book.

Neither Wagner nor the Gesamtkunstwerk is mentioned anywhere in *Unsern täglichen Traum ...*. Nor are they mentioned anywhere in any of the periodicals published by the Zurich Dada movement, or in any of the texts that Tristan Tzara published in the Zurich Dada years. This is not because Tzara, for example, had no opinion on the subject. It is, rather, a sign that for Tzara as for Ball, Wagner was the symbol of an approach to the unity of the arts which was fundamentally irrelevant not only to their art, but to the combat at the heart of Dada. Dada thrived on a live staging of the drama of art in its struggle with the implications of intermediality and of performance. Wagner, to the Dadaists, represented a closed system whose tenets it would have been pointless to contest. It is thus understandable that Tzara never published the extraordinary autograph 'Réponse à une enquête' which Henri Béhar found inserted into a copy of Tzara's *Sept manifestes dada*:

J'ai reçu votre lettre à Hohenschwangau, l'endroit patenté des souvenirs grotesques et informes d'un roi fou et d'un autre Wagner, où je puis à chaque pas me rendre compte à

quel point ces fausses gloires mondiales trouvent encore en France une néfaste influence. Du symbolisme à l'instrumentalisme, de l'orphisme au paroxysme, du futurisme à tous les etcétérismes qui mélangent musique et poésie, l'idée singulièrement primitive d'un «art universel» a tourmenté l'esprit de nos écrivains et a laissé des traces de la bouillabaisse wagnérienne [...]¹⁷

The common feature of all those damnable '–ismes', from René Ghil's 'instrumentalisme' to Marinetti's 'futurisme', is that they mix music and poetry, as if the two could form a work together. This, for the Dadaist, is the most fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of art. Tzara sees the only proper relationship between the media, in art, as a separation. They should remain as oil and water, and not artificially mixed (one might say, combining his metaphor and mine, as are the oil and stock in a vigorously boiled 'bouillabaisse'). All the '–ismes' are based on a false concept of universal art. One cannot fight that concept directly; if one attempts to do so, one is drawn into its own rational critical language, and one will inevitably fail. Better, as Tzara normally does, to ignore it, or else, as he does at the end of this piece, to demonstrate an ironic consciousness of the ridiculousness, in rational terms, of one's own position. Having denounced, in the opening paragraph quoted above, the 'fausses gloires' associated with the 'bouillabaisse wagnérienne', he concludes his letter with the words:

je ne puis pas m'empêcher d'ajouter que je préfère les plus mauvais écrivains aux meilleurs et les fausses gloires aux vraies.¹⁸

Whose is the true glory, and whose the false? Is Lautréamont, who (in this letter as often elsewhere) he clearly suggests is his favourite author, true, or false? But is truth itself a positive or negative value in art? To such questions, Tzara systematically refuses to provide a univocal answer.

Tzara's letter, like Arp's *Unsern täglichen Traum ...*, and, indeed, Ball's lecture on Kandinsky, was not published until several decades after the Zurich Dada adventure had brought the three men together. In the meantime, it had always remained apparent that 'la bouillabaisse wagnérienne' was a dish more easily digested by the public than Dada performance. Certainly, it is true that Dada had a vital and seminal influence on avant-garde artistic practices. Modern art would not be what it is without the Dadaist rejection of sense and of artistic expression. But our society, it seems, remains attracted to sense, to sense as an idealised totality, and to expressiveness in the arts. We continue, therefore, to value the work, which does not problematise too provocatively that expressive function. Generally, the works of Dada which have endured are those which can be classified, precisely, as works: works of visual art which can be placed upon the wall of a museum, or texts which can be printed and read, albeit often with difficulty. Dada, of course, also continues to signify, as it always has done, anti-art provocation in performance; that is doubtless how Dada soirées live on in popular memory. But, as Arp said, 'Dada war nicht nur eine Kesselpauke, eine große Lärm und Spaß'. The very confusion of Dada performance was not merely an empty, entertaining or nihilistic gesture. It brought to life the difficulty of bringing the arts together; which, to the Dadaists, was the opposite of an anti-artistic gesture. It showed how the true unity of the arts had to remain invisible, not realised on stage.

I began by quoting Juliet Koss's assertion concerning the importance to modernism of the Wagnerian concept of the Gesamtkunstwerk. Nowhere in her book is Zurich Dada performance mentioned. This is not surprising; for Zurich Dada does not fit into the Wagnerian perspective on modernism. Zurich Dada intermediality was simply at the antipodes of Wagnerism as it was understood at the time; so much so that the Dadaists saw no advantage in engaging with Wagnerism. That being the case, it would be vain to hope that Dada could shed much light on the nature of Wagnerism (or vice versa). It would be even more vain to hope that Dada could shed any light whatsoever on Wagner's achievements as a composer of operas. Baudelaire and Mallarmé both wrote highly influential articles on Wagner and his relationship to

the other arts; neither ever saw a performance of a Wagner opera. They thus participated in the great French tradition of using 'Wagner' as the emblem of a certain attitude to the relationship between the arts, rather than as the name of a composer whose musical language developed in time, and had its own artistic force. The Dadaists followed this lead. They showed no interest in the specifics of Wagner's music. They saw in him only what Kandinsky saw, according to Ball's lecture: the master of the total work of art, the work of all the arts. So absolute was their refusal of the idea that one can bring several arts together in one work, that, one might say, they simply refused to listen to Wagner.

Zurich Dada, in short, rejected Wagner as the standard-bearer of an idea which was anathema to its own concept of art. An appreciation of the reasons behind this rejection can certainly help in understanding the strange schizophrenic history of intermediality in the 20th century. However, such an appreciation also leaves one with the peculiarly tenacious sense of a residue of common value, so deeply buried that it is hardly talked about. A founding tenet of Wagnerism is that all the arts have something fundamentally in common. That is also a founding tenet of Zurich Dada. The difference between them concerns only the level at which the common ground between the arts can be situated, and the extent to which it is accessible to expression. After all, surely Wagnerians as well as their Romantic forebears would have willingly subscribed to Arp's most basic principle (as would Janco and Ball, though Tzara would doubtless have been uncomfortable with the absence of irony in its formulation) in its assertion of the value behind all the arts as one, living, and eternally elusive:

Die Schönheit versank nicht unter den Trümmern der Jahrhunderte. Sie lebt,
aber sie zeigt sich uns nur verhüllt. Sie erregt uns, aber sie enthüllt sich uns nie. [...]

Immer wandelt sich die Schönheit.¹⁹

¹ Juliet Koss, *Modernism after Wagner* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), p. xiv.

² The only exception to this rule is a passing comparison between Baudelaire and Wagner in an entry dated 31 May 1919, therefore from the post-Dada period. See: Hugo Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit* (Lucerne: Verlag Josef Stocker, 1946), p. 232.

³ Hugo Ball, 'Kandinsky', in *Schriften* (Berlin: Holzinger, 2013), pp. 21-30 (p. 23).

⁴ 'Kandinsky', p. 29.

⁵ *Modernism after Wagner*, p. xii.

⁶ Tristan Tzara, *Œuvres complètes* volume 1 ed. H. Béhar (Paris: Flammarion, 1975), p. 363.

⁷ For an irrefutable demonstration of Arp's central importance both to Zurich Dada and to abstraction in art, see: Eric Robertson, *Arp: Painter, Poet, Sculptor* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

⁸ *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*, p. 148. The entry is dated from the day after the lecture, 8 April 1917, though of course, as with the book as a whole, we have no way of knowing to what extent the original diary was later revised for publication.

⁹ For a history of this concept, see: Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

¹⁰ The programme is reproduced in *Dada in Zürich* ed. Hans Bolliger, Guido Magnaguagno and Raimund Meyer (Zurich: Arche, 1994), p. 265.

¹¹ *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*, p. 150. 'Clauser' is the French form of the name of the Swiss writer Friedrich Glauser.

¹² A photocopy of Ball's typescript of this short but decisive text may be found in *Dada in Zürich*, p. 256.

¹³ *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*, p. 151.

¹⁴ Richard Sheppard, *Modernism – Dada – Postmodernism* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2000), p. 243.

¹⁵ Hans Arp, *Unsern täglichen Traum ...* (Zurich: Arche, 1955), p. 50.

¹⁶ *Unsern täglichen Traum ...*, p. 26.

¹⁷ Tzara, *Œuvres complètes* volume 1, p. 417.

¹⁸ *Œuvres complètes* volume 1, p. 418.

¹⁹ *Unsern täglichen Traum ...*, p. 90.