

Desperate dreams
– Thomas Lawson

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I have been thinking about this in part because I have been teaching a class on the topic this semester, and I'd like to thank my students at CalArts for both their patience and their insights as I have struggled with this essay.

I find I have been thinking a lot recently about the early twentieth-century avant-garde.¹ This probably has something to do with my long-standing nostalgia for the idea of standing apart from mainstream culture. I have always valued most highly art that rejects easy assimilation, one that chooses the path of difficulty over popularity. The refusal to flatter conventional taste, the desire to confound connoisseurship; these are traits I admire. The work of that moment of rupture/rapture in European culture, when nothing seemed possible, and as a result anything was, appears to offer a perfect fit. This is obviously a romantic, and to some degree absurd, position to take. But over the course of much of the twentieth century it was often the correct position, the one most likely to generate productive ideas and challenging art. But as a result of this undeniable success, anti-formalist dissent has become the mode of the establishment, and we seem stuck in an odd cycle of repetitions whose rhetorical clamour seems increasingly hollow. Thus does it seem urgent to reconsider the contributions of the early avant-garde again, to discover what we can still learn that may be of use.

The great dream of the avant-garde was to make art anew in such a way that it would cause people to be somehow jolted out of their everyday prejudices and forced to reconsider the various conventions shaping their lives. It was a dream of emancipation, a breaking away from the various tyrannies of culture that served to repress and suppress emotional growth and social liberty. To achieve this avant-gardists put every form and practice of art-making under intense scrutiny. Worn ideas were discarded, established techniques were torn apart and rejected, new technologies avidly embraced. The already known was made unfamiliar, the shocking and the new made commonplace. Above all, art was to be given a kind of higher usefulness that would save it from the fate of luxury.

Writing in the diary that has become one of our principle sources of information about the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich and the consequent beginnings of Dada, Hugo Ball describes a performance staged by three of the prime instigators. 'All the style of the last twenty years came together yesterday. [Richard] Huelsenbeck, [Tristan] Tzara, and [Marcel] Janco took the floor with a "*poeme simultan*". That is a contrapuntal recitative in which three or more voices speak, sing, whistle, etc., at the same time in such a way that the elegiac, humorous, or bizarre content of the piece is brought out by these combinations [...] Noises (an rrrr drawn out for minutes, crashes, sirens, etc.) are superior to the human voice in energy.'² The Cabaret brought together a particularly volatile mixture of artists and anarchists, political activists, performers and writers, many already active in various Expressionist groups around Germany before the War. They shared a potent and eclectic brew of ideas that combined elements of extreme romanticism, aestheticism and spiritualism. Antagonistic toward the politics and culture of the belligerent states, they sought refuge in neutral Switzerland, intent on finding some way to protest their alienation from a society devoted to greed and violence. From this shared problem came many solutions, some directly political,

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Hugo Ball and John Elderfield, *Flight Out of Time: A Dada Diary*, (Documents of Twentieth Century Art), New York: Viking, 1974, p.57.

others more concerned with questions about art and its function in the broader culture. Within that continuum it is possible to argue, as Peter Bürger does, that what was at stake was a critique on the very idea of art as a cultural institution of value.³ As Ball remembers: 'We discuss the themes of art of the last few decades, always with reference to the questionable nature of art itself. It can be said that for us art is not an end in itself, but it is an opportunity for true perception and criticism of the times we live in.'⁴

What comes across in Ball's diary is a radical desire to make art serve a higher purpose than the market. As a poet and dramaturge his instinct was to reduce language to its basic elements, to extract all external reference, break down grammar and sense in an attempt to reach some essential quality of communication. A utopia of instant, unmediated messaging. Ball again, writing the first Dada Manifesto: 'I let the vowels fool around. I let the vowels quite simply occur, as a cat meow.... Words emerge, shoulders of words, legs, arms, hands of words. Au, oi, uh. One shouldn't let too many words out. A line of poetry is a chance to get rid of all the filth that clings to this accursed language, as if put there by the stockbrokers' hands, hands worn smooth by coin. I want the word where it begins and ends.'⁵

Ball was not alone in wanting to root out the structures of representation. His colleagues in arms attacked literature and theatre, painting, photography and sculpture. In terms of the visual arts this meant Arp's torn paper collages pushing past Cubism's assault on the pictorial towards the realm of random abstraction. Or it meant Janco's roughly made masks, blending an assumed primitivism with an adopted childlike guilelessness to make something uncivilised, and therefore real. Or Picabia's diagrammatic paintings, based on the techniques of mechanical drawing. Or, a continent away, Duchamp's experiments with found objects and images, reducing the depicted to a series of philosophical points in an ongoing inquiry into the nature of art. All shared a belief that the imagination was a dusty warehouse of received ideas, and the job of the artist was to unpack this truth with a demonstration of an underlying reality.

What these artists had come to despise particularly was what seemed to them the false accumulation of meaning gathered within the frame of a composition, organised within the illusionistic space created by perspective. That this kind of image was given extra authority by the rhetoric of repetition and quotation, the building blocks of a cultural narrative revered generation after generation in the Academies of Europe was an imposition no longer to be borne. Representational painting was a towering edifice of signification, weighted down by its service to a self-evidently false and faithless culture. It had to be brought low by the howl of originality. The order of art, its rules and procedures, its conventions, was to be flattened under a merciless grid or to be replaced by a throw of the dice, by a chance gesture. The timeless space of art was to be replaced by the rushing moment, by life.

It's easy to project our own wishes onto the Dadaist moment, so little actual evidence remains. Much of the work is long gone, preserved in memoirs and the shadowy corners of indistinct photographs, or recreated by enthusiasts of a later date. Much of the writing from the period now seems deranged, and looking at the blurred pictures of higgledy-piggledy exhibitions in shabby rooms one gets a palpable sense of desperation and rage. These artists may have been interested in experimental play but many never recovered from the delirium of destruction. Originality exacts a heavy price. Ball sought peace in extreme religion, Huelsenbeck in political activism and psychotherapy, Tzara in the peripatetic life of the impresario and dandy. Malevich, Schwitters, Mondrian found an original kind of liberty within the confines of the grid. Duchamp, who rejected any systematic answer, found it difficult to maintain the imperative of originality, preferring to retreat into the world of the invented archive, creating, in his *Boites en Valises*, relics of despair.

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Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

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Hugo Ball, *op. cit.*, p.58.

5

Ibid., p.221.



In many ways the grand apotheosis of Matthew Barney at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in early 2002 should have heralded the triumph of this wonderful, liberating idea. The signature tropes of avant-garde art practice were all on display – hybrid forms that mix (electronic) media, live performance and various hand-crafted and found objects, the ambitious mixing of narrative and sculptural structures, the bold use of simultaneity and complex scripting, the use of complex montage techniques. Throughout the installation five already discontinuous stories played out at the same time in different parts of the museum, uniting the spatial experience of walking the spiral ramp with the temporal one of the unfolding narrative. This was surely the total artwork imagined so fervently in the beginning of the twentieth century, the merging of the arts in a great expression of human hopes and feeling.

Of course it didn't do this. The show seemed oppressive and over-calculated, its meaning both too much insisted upon and simultaneously incomprehensible. The forms of avant-garde practice were celebrated and enlarged beyond expectation, but predetermined to such a degree that nothing was left to chance, nothing open to the surprise opening of something other. To a significant degree, the idea was betrayed. On a simple level it could be said that the work was undercut by the aggressive packaging and marketing that surrounded it – the hype in the local newspaper, the ten-ton catalogue, the elaborate over-production of the staging, which required the entire museum. This was an important cultural event, we were led to believe, the elaborate presentation a device to lure a broad public into contact with an elaborately articulated set of meanings about the nature of human existence. That these meanings seemed either cult-like, or so banal as to be beyond discussion, seemed to be part of the appeal. This was not the art of dissent, but of the blockbuster.



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Lucy Lippard, 'The Dematerialisation of Art', reprinted in L. Lippard, *Changing, Essays in Art Criticism*, New York: Dutton, 1971, p.255.

The visual arts at the moment seem to hover at a crossroad that may well turn out to be two roads to one place [...] art as idea and art as action. In the first case, matter is denied, as sensation has been converted into concept; in the second case, matter has been transformed into energy and time-motion.⁶

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'Joan Jonas: Five Works', curated by Valerie Smith for Queens Museum of Art, December 2003; 'Trisha Brown: Dance and Art in Dialogue, 1961–2001', curated by Hendel Teicher for The New Museum of Contemporary Art, December 2003.

With shows dedicated to a survey of Joan Jonas's career and to the work of dancer Trisha Brown made in collaboration with visual artists, two New York museums were host this winter to reminders of a more idealistic time, a time when a revived interest in the ideas and methods of avant-gardism seemed to presage a new age when art would be a lively encounter, something vibrant and important and relevant to everyday existence.⁷ Not a revival so much as a rediscovery, fueled in part by the enigmatic presence, in New York, of Duchamp. Both exhibitions presented artists who were interested in pushing the limits of art to find a more authentic way of communicating complex ideas about modern life. Walking through these shows we encountered various and often quite raggedy solutions being offered to the problem of making art that aspires to be more than aesthetics, and more than social commentary. A place where art was life, and vice versa.

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Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and other essays*, New York: Farrar Strauss and Giroux, 1961.

Downtown New York in the 60s and 70s was a place where artists, writers, filmmakers and dancers consistently came together to investigate new possibilities. From various kinds of performance in which movement and light were key actors to installations of minimalist structures that foregrounded the experience of being there, experiment was in the air. Nothing seemed unthinkable. The pictorial conventions of representational art were challenged as insufficient; art was again taken to be a question of means, not ends. Process was all, art objects of little interest. Innumerable propositions concerning the nature and practice of art were floated, some deadly serious, many absurd and nonsensical. Grand existential themes were shelved in favour of a more intimate kind of inquiry, and something Susan Sontag identified as 'an erotics of art came into play.'⁸

These artists were intent on expanding the possibilities of art, not closing them down. A nexus of activities that seems improbable in some ways, not just the collaborations between painters and performers and dancers documented in the Trisha Brown show, but also between artists with open-ended practices and those with more restrictive views. The city provided a moving laboratory of change, pushing the boundaries of the possible in reaction to the apparent closure presented by the inimitable paintings of Newman or Pollock. There was a widespread feeling that art, in becoming fixated on the significance of the intuitive gesture, had become too aestheticised. Rauschenberg's famous remark about seeking a gap between art and life was a sentiment echoed in statements and actions throughout the 60s and 70s. Once again the paradox of repetition and originality was full of generative promise. The acceptance of the given came to be seen as an opportunity to act.

In this environment Brown's collaborations are emblematic. Using the walls of an art gallery as her stage, she creates a dance that seems to defy gravity. Strapping a Super8 film projector to her back, in a feminist reversal of Dziga Vertov's camera eye, she turns her body into an active producer of an image rather than a passive recipient of information or gaze. Suspended from a grid of pipes strung with leotards and leggings, struggling in and out of the clothes while the audience decides to sit beneath her or above and to the side of her, she forces that audience into an uncomfortably intimate recognition of its complicity in viewing the work.

This was a utopia of sorts, a community of like minds seeking interdisciplinary methods to generate an art that would be more honest, more transparent, more participatory. The talismanic presence of Duchamp, nurtured and filtered through John Cage, ensured a sense of connection to the issues of the historic avant-garde. But the Dadaists witnessed the end of a culture that had precipitated an unforgivably internecine war, the organised death of millions. The artists of the 60s also witnessed war, but at a remove. Vietnam was an unforgivable war, but the crisis it brought to America was far from cataclysmic. Indeed the economy grew at such a healthy rate that artists who had originally made a virtue out of scavenged materials began to see their ideas realised on a much more ambitious scale. Perhaps the presentation of *Einstein on the Beach*, the great collaborative project of Robert Wilson, Phil Glass and Lucinda Childs at New York's Metropolitan Opera in 1977, is emblematic of the success and failure of this stage of avant-gardism. The hypnotic grid of Glass's music underpins the repetitive gestures of Childs, as Wilson's geometries of light and fractured language slow down the passage of time, until it becomes the space of a dream. Once again we are in thrall to an image mysteriously conjured before us, and the real is banished as we are swept away by the rushing waters of the mainstream.

Some months ago I saw a revival of the infamous collaborative performance piece, *Parade*, first shown to a hostile and uncomprehending audience in Paris in the spring of 1917. The work was originally produced and presented by Serge Diaghilev's Ballet Russes, and so is, I suppose, a dance. However, what set the piece apart then and continues to give it resonance now is the intersection of ideas from the collaborators: Jean Cocteau, Leonid Massine, Pablo Picasso and Erik Satie. They seem to have been intent on creating an event that would disrupt a whole litany of expectations, crossing aesthetic boundaries while still providing a coherent work of art. It is now common-place to say that at that moment various conventions were being rethought and re-examined. But at the Ballet Russes they were not being thrown away; in a sense they were being celebrated, brought new life. For it is also possible to understand this work as an act of recuperation, an attempt to salvage European culture, coming as it did as the culmination of a period of work for both Picasso and Cocteau in Rome, studying the ancients.

Cocteau's story was a simple one, but directed like a dagger at the heart of ballet tradition. Instead of fauns cavorting in the afternoon, or nymphs celebrating the coming of spring, the young poet called for a simple, self-reflexive piece of theatre business – a group of circus performers standing

out on the street attempting to lure customers in to see their show – a slice of modern life perhaps, but not a significant one. Originally Cocteau had planned to provide a commentary of sorts – disembodied voices amplified through a megaphone offering directions and observations – a likely reference to the nonsense poetry of Hugo Ball, which would have been familiar to Picasso's circle in Paris following the publication of the first issue of *Cabaret Voltaire* in June 1916. The deliberate whimsy of the idea makes it clear that the work is not about anything in particular; it has no serious claim to content. It cannot claim to be an evocation of timeless myth, nor can it claim to be a depiction of the harsh realities of a life in popular entertainment. It is certainly nothing to do with war, and the human desolation it causes. The story is simply a peg, a bare outline on which the other artists are invited to improvise.

So what did they do? Picasso made a show curtain that seems to promise the kind of mythological story the audience expected, replete with winged horse, angel, guitar playing matador, moor, harlequin and other exotic performers – a catalogue of art. But when this curtain rises the set revealed is a crude, cubistic cityscape, with skyscraper towers leaning precariously across the sky, creating a vertiginous urban space. This harsh space is further defined as unwelcoming by the dissonant sound of machines rhythmically clacking and banging. Picasso's costumes pick up the theme – two ringmasters dressed as cardboard buildings, top-heavy constructions designed, it would seem, to make any dancing impossible. The other characters are, in comparison, almost insultingly simple – a schoolgirl in uniform, a Chinese acrobat and a pantomime horse. Satie's music, pared down, full of reference to popular forms and street noise – including engines, typewriters and, most notoriously, gunshot – was created to set its audience on edge. Massine's dance would also have gone against the grain of expectation – seeming childlike and unrehearsed to an audience schooled to appreciate more sophisticated movement.

This collaboration was instigated by Cocteau a year earlier, although it took Picasso four months to agree to participate. As they worked together Picasso and Satie turned away from Cocteau's proposed delirium of miscommunication towards a safer, more coherent presentation. The artists were united in believing the work to be forward looking, presaging great things, opening new opportunities. Yet on opening night the crowd reacted negatively, in part because they saw the cubist design as un-French, and therefore pro-German, in part because the abrupt juxtapositions of elements still threatened sense. Juan Gris enjoyed the evening however, and wrote to a friend that it was 'unpretentious, gay and distinctly comic.'⁹

Seeing this piece revived in the summer of 2003, I was struck by a number of things. The signature tropes of avant-garde art practice were all on display – hybrid forms that mix media, live performance and various hand-crafted and found objects, the ambitious mixing of narrative and sculptural structures, the bold use of simultaneity and complex scripting, the use of complex montage techniques. Yet, despite its avowed radicalism, Cocteau's scenario observes the unity of time and place expected of traditional theatre, Massine's dance moves are relatively naturalistic, perhaps not ballet, but hardly incomprehensible. Picasso's sets are charming and elegant, as is Satie's music. The whole comes across as a well-mannered construct in which all the parts are in respectful balance. Yet in his programme notes, Guillaume Apollinaire wrote of the work as an 'alliance between painting and the dance, between the plastic and mimetic arts, that is the herald of a more comprehensive art to come'.¹⁰ It may have been a herald, but despite the noise of the first night audience, it was a polite one. Was Picasso merely the Barney of his period, making the avant-garde safe for a bourgeois audience? Or is this the kind of constructive engagement, blending iconoclastic strategies with time-worn tradition, the only way artists can actually continue to produce work?

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William Rubin (ed.), *Pablo Picasso: A Retrospective*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1980, p.298.

10

Guillaume Apollinaire, *Apollinaire on Art*, (Documents of Twentieth Century Art), New York: Viking, 1972, p.452.



[...] 'to produce', 'to bring into existence'. It does not have to be books (or works of art). One can produce artists too. Reality only begins at the point where things peter out.¹¹

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Hugo Ball, *op. cit.*, p.53.

One way to look at the art of the past one-hundred years, which is still the art of today, is to see it as a series of denials and refusals. This is to take Rodchenko's black response to Malevich's mystical white painting as the first step towards a more realistic view of art, no longer a representation of some thing, or place, or state of mind, but the construction of a particular and present reality that only comes into focus once the artist has left the scene, and a viewer is left alone with the work. This is a view that seeks progress in negation, in the accretion of reductions – no composition, no representation, no originality. Paradoxically this ascetic aesthetic leads to a rich history of great complexity, one instilled with the dark glamour of honourably refusing cultural disaffection. This is to use a ju-jitsu tactic, accepting a certain alienation from one's practice in order to defeat a greater, and more debilitating sense of the meaninglessness of life in a culture that seems to reward only the trivial or the dishonest.

The other possibility, which also springs from the great European crisis of 1914/18, is the embrace of new technologies in an experimental collaboration aimed at opening up new avenues of communication. Writing and performing, unfettered by the responsibility to make sense, to be morally uplifting, to change the world. Concerned only with finding pure, non-ideological channels of communication through broken language and clipped, shattered and collaged vision, somewhere in the 90s a disparate group of artists began tinkering with the idea of using the internet as a site for their investigations. Thus, just as the web was being developed commercially on a massive scale, a loose network of artists, activists and pranksters ushered in a final repetition of the hundred-year-old hope of a utopia of free and transparent communication. The web would provide a membrane of interconnectivity that would topple the hierarchies of power and reduce the grand illusions of representation to the level grid of binary code. (This, of course, was to ignore the unprecedented ability of that code to build ever greater illusions – illusions that would enable us to see and be awed by the deeply conservative vision of civilisation created by JR Tolkein out of the Wagnerian mythos that underpinned the society that the original Dadaists so despised.) As Jason Brown wrote in what may be something of an epitaph for a non-existent movement: 'When the web still felt like a brand new field of nomadic possibilities, some people equated it with Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's rhizome – the concept of a multiplicity with fuzzy edges and connections passing between categories, as opposed to the divisions and stark categorisations of an indexical "branching tree" style hierarchy [...] Lines of striation could impose homogeneity, but rhizomatic lines of flight were far more risky with their constant lunging after schizoid rupture. Attempts to flee oppressive structures could turn into the repetitious pathos of psychosis.'¹²

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Jason Brown (ed.),
NTNTNT, Los Angeles:
CalArts School of Art,
2003, p.xlvii.

So it's a mess. Avant-gardism begins as a military metaphor, and ends entangled in the web of a communicative systems designed to ensure the efficient delivery of weapons of mass destruction. Every attempt to unpack and dismantle the mechanisms of representation ends in some form of mental illness or a grandiloquent restatement of the status quo. What happens in a world dominated by a mass culture that can and will co-opt anything that presents an alternative? If mainstream culture denies us an interior life as it celebrates pure surface, how can we develop and nurture a counter-culture, one that would bring an end to such alienation? As we contemplate the tightening vise of the security state and the abject terror instilled by random bombs and suicide attacks, we face a future of violence or desperate daydreams. Can art find a way to help us, or must it be content to offer solace?