

Transitional Physicality:

The Dadaist Legacy of Creativity in the Digital Age

Rodanthi VARDOULI^{a,1}

^a*Massachusetts Institute of Technology*

Abstract. How does the historical moment of transition from the organic and the formal to the fragmentary and the processual embody the hybridized rhetorics of the digital age? The argument of this paper is that within the expanded world of information and scattered subjectivity, the tools to address the problem of creation can be drawn from the conceptual and philosophical landscape of a marginal period of time: the so-called “heroic” avant-garde. In this paper, the radical processes of creation that Dada evangelized through its polemic manifestations and propagated through its bizarre artworks, are raised to the working prototype of poiesis within the electrate paradigm of our times. The first part of the paper examines the aura of ideas gathered around objects of assemblage; the dadaist paradigm for the process of *poeticizing*, through Berlin dadaist Richard Huelsenbeck's lecture on “The metaphysics of assemblage” and Roger Shattuck's “The mode of juxtaposition” during the 1961 Symposium at MoMA, entitled “The art of assemblage.” The analysis focuses equally on the ideas that brought these objects into existence, and also on the ideas raised by the existence of such works. In the second part of the paper, the dadaist practice and discourse are raised into the backbone of a contemporary theory of *electracy*. This theorization is based on Professor Gregory Ulmer's supersession of hermeneutics with the paradigm of heuristics. The process of electrate invention is also examined within the philosophical context of the Heideggerian terms of *Entbergen* (bringing forth) and *poiesis* (bring into form); the former referring to the transformation of what is already present yet invisible and the latter to a direct shift from absence to presence. The overall vision in this paper is to review Dada both as Art's escape from its cultural and institutional history, and most importantly as a critical enterprise that evangelized a new reality through the debris of a collapsed world. The ultimate contribution of this review is to suggest a way of reviving the dadaist spirit within the emerging electrate paradigm.

Keywords. dada, electracy, fragment, assemblage, avant-garde, poiesis, entbergen

¹ varo@mit.edu

US tel: +1 (617) 513-7134

GR tel: +30 697 96 98 110

US address: 22 Suffolk Street, Cambridge, MA 02139

GR address: 37 Koutsomyliion Street, Trikala, Greece 42100

1. Introduction

“We do not wish to reproduce [...] but to produce directly”
Hans Arp, 1917 [1]

“The goal of heuristics is not only to reproduce historical inventions but also to invent new
poetics”
Gregory L. Ulmer, 1994 [2]

This paper is placed within a trans-historical discourse on creativity. Attempting to problematize the notion of invention in the era of “electracy,” [3] a term with which Gregory Ulmer frames the emerging digital epoch, we may find ourselves shifting from object-oriented formal representations to a new kind of creative mentality, which appears to be highly approximate to post-linguistic mediums of multi-disciplinary nature. In what terms could the creative process and its cultural formations identify themselves, in a time where the paradigm of literacy converges with digital culture?

Founder of Berlin Dada Dr. Richard Huelsenbeck described the dadaist alienation from the notion of organic physicality as a creative force of “nothingness.” The profound conviction that founds the basis of the present argument is that we live in the dadaist legacy of transition, in which creativity signifies an attitude of constant rupture with the articulated physicality (physical objects). This liberating impulse signifies a never-ending channeling of the divine forces of creation into ever-evolving physical forms, which exist in a state of constant flux. The overhaul of temporary physical structures manifests an act of constant poeticizing beyond the formal constraints of language and history. The profound conviction in this paper is that, if taken out of its parenthetical historical moment, the dadaist spirit of creation might arise as a valid and explanatory contemporary worldview, that superposes the chaotic and the fragmentary over the organic and the complete.

In the stormy periods that succeeded the First World War, the radical avant-gardist rhetorics which were soon translated into the fierce polemics of the Dadaist revolutionaries, manifested the sublation of art into life. Avant-garde artists in Zurich, Paris, Berlin and Hannover attempted to re-align their artistic practices with the very praxis of life. They attempted to liberate the latent creative potential that was imprisoned within instrumentalised rationality and mechanized social order. Their vision was to revolutionize both the conception of the world (logic) and the very experience of reality itself (being-in-the-world.)

In this paper, the early twentieth century dadaist declarations of a hyper-historical “spirit of negation that contains the ferment of the future [4]” provide the focusing lens for the poetics of the electracy period of time. The notion of *transitional form* or *multi-channelled performance* dates back at a time in which the multi-disciplinary nature of the creative process and the process of meaning-making beyond symbolic significance was established as the (non)model of creation. Through a parallel discourse on Heideggerian *poiesis* as the language of metaphysics, and the early 20th century artistic attacks on the established status quo, manifested through the non-organic artworks of assemblage, Dadaism is raised to the **prophecy** of electracy invention.

How is the dadaist poetics of spiritual revelation prophetically applicable to the era of electracy? How may the dadaist poetics of assemblage, the never-ending act of fragmenting organic meaning and reassembling the fragments within new contexts of re-signification, provide a kind of dialectical synthesis of what Heidegger called “the

hermeneutic process of art" [4] and today's creative postulate for a constant re-writing of the world? How is the value of the transitional form manifested through this creative process of constant re-signification?

2. The Art of Assemblage, MOMA, 1961

"Dada anticipated the science of Cybernetics on an aesthetic level"
Richard Huelsenbeck, 1961

Creative tension accompanied with wry humor and dadaist irony arose between the six men who formed the panel of speakers at the 1961 symposium "The Art of Assemblage" at MOMA in New York. [5] We were already in a neo-avant-gardist period of time. The Apple of Discord: what Dada really *is/was* and what status could the unorthodox objects of assemblage that it produced, claim at a time when Dada as movement in the Arts had already dissolved. In this early time of Cybernetics, the computer has already started to conceptually replace the late modernist notion of the machine in critical theory discourses. The Question: Was Dada anything more than a cultural firework? Could the dadaist practices ever be recaptured and iterated as such? Or shall the spirit of Dada, that "enormous short-circuit" that cracked the backbone of rational and instrumentalised thought during World War I, "forever be with us"? [6]

The Symposium set itself the objective of addressing certain ideas, attitudes, and postulates raised by the existence of the objects featuring in the "assemblage exhibition on the third floor." [7] The driving force that brought both the exhibition and the symposium into being was that the ideas around the objects of *assemblage*, i.e. combined objects of diverse materials/fragments that had been detached from their provenance and initial signification, were rich and worthy of study, including "sharp edges and points." [8]

Professor Roger Shattuck initiated the debate by asserting that the advent of *montage*, the principle device of modern art and innovation, was a "change in temper." Shattuck described montage as the "mode of juxtaposition:" an act of disrupting formal coherence by introducing formally inconvenient or unexpected elements to the line of the development of the artwork. He focused on a moment of a transition, a shift in method. "The ratio was reversed," he said, when the *jolts*, the unsuitable components, were no longer the alien elements in an artwork, but a conscious juxtaposition of unconnected elements one beside the other. According to Shattuck, the absence of any coherent meaning prohibited the spectator from defining the object as a form. "We have taken refuge," he said "in saying that the parts have been *assembled*." The shift that Shattuck referred to, was from Cubism and Futurism to Dada and Surrealism. From the juxtaposition of homogenous elements, that disrupted the conventions of the immobility of the observer and the singleness of the time in which he observes, another paradigm of juxtaposition had emerged: in the dadaist objects of assemblage, the fragments had no apparent connection "unless one detours through the underground channels of choice or chance and unconscious association." [9] In the context of Shattuck's words, the term *juxtaposition* implied a new cultural mode. For Shattuck, the shift from Cubism and Futurism to Dada and Surrealism was analogous to the stylistic disjunction between a new *classic* style and a new *romantic* style respectively. In the first case, reality is still depicted, yet in its modern expression: in a simultaneity of time and motion. In the second case, the abruptness and fragmentary nature of a "*réalité*

nouvelle” dictates for a new positioning of man within a new state of seeing, thinking and remembering; a new type of experiencing the world.

Describing the effect of this new mode of juxtaposing elements beyond the ordering capacities of the human mind, Shattuck crystallized both a spiritual and aesthetic return to *zero*, “a reversion to dead level,” [10] and to a condition in which the tension between the heterogeneous components insists. In the case of zero effect, the spectator's experience may be described as *shock*: the reaction against the scandal when meaning is absent. Scandal however may only happen once per spectator. It is unique. Whereas the second type of effect is a new state of mind, in which the creative forces remain unresolved and sustained into the heterogeneous associations, until they are reactivated in a new context of signification. Beyond the characteristic gleeful destructiveness and spectator participation in the artistic act, Shattuck stated that the dadaist spirit emerging from the works of juxtaposition sacrificed the preeminence of art as object at the service of a vivid performance that either shatters or repulses. Fifty years later, the idea that emerges from these early assembled art-forms seems to prophetically describe the contemporary electrate postulate for a multi-channeled experience, “the unsettling passage from art to life, from painting to reality.”

According to Shattuck, every work of assemblage raised a serious issue, both compositionally and metaphysically: “Is a painting anything more than a frame-up?” he questioned. [11] The traditional rectangular frame of the Renaissance artwork, that laid out a universe within which the relationships were self-sufficient. However, the juxtaposition of an ordinary object “stuck” in the middle of the painting, wrenched the frame out of its alignment and inclosed the by-stander to a new reality, in which innumerable possibilities of re-signification co-exist. As Shattuck astutely described this bizarre new reality, in the end we ourselves are also “*assembled* into the frameless work the frames us.” [12] When a work of assemblage is made, a new object-of-the-world emerges. This object is no longer a unified system of internal correlations over which we can ponder from a distance. The object comes to life to importune us to project its field of force beyond and around us.

Taking step on Shattuck's analysis on the mode of juxtaposition, Berlin dadaist and at the time practicing psychiatrist in New York, Professor Richard Huelsenbeck emphasized the creative potential inherent in this new mode of creation. The dadaist faith in zero and nothingness, especially regarding the importance of the creative individual, is what brings Dada close to the metaphysics of Electracy and at the center of a contemporary problematization of *poiesis* within the world of post-humous emergences. Huelsenbeck described a change of scene in the subject-object relationship; a process of redefining the position of the creative subject towards its product of creation. The spirit of Dada and the dadaist objects of creation were the manifestation of a new condition, which according to Huelsenbeck, was at the time “felt stronger than ever before.” The objects themselves had started to *mobilize*. This mobilization of objects, as implied by Shattuck and explicitly celebrated by Huelsenbeck, had a tremendous effect on Dada's nihilistic attitude.

According to Huelsenbeck, Dada's philosophy of self-irony and doubt, did not allow taking the act of creation “seriously.” The Berlin dadaist strongly argued that neither Dada nor its works of assemblage were to be treated historically. Dada emerged as a spirit of revolt during the years of World War I, at a time when any logic, religion, philosophy or morality had already started to dissolve and collapse. The spirit of Dada arose with the purpose to manifest that within a world of rationality, there was an absolute absence of meaning. Dada seeks to introduce a new world; a world of multiple

possible emergences and significances. Its philosophy was at the same time a philosophy of nihilism; of a nothingness that bore a multitude of potentialities for meaning-making. Dada's nihilistic mentality did not dictate an attitude of suicidal vanity. Instead it ordered for a new positioning of man towards himself and the objects of the world qne for man's spiritual realization through an act of constant constructions and destructions. Dada aimed for the re-creation of a meaningful emergence of the world through the re-arrangement of the debris of its previous collapsed structure. The senseless collapsed reality of the World Wars became the creative material for a forceful liberation of meaning from previous structural constraints.

As Dr. Huelsenbeck described, the only principle in the universe was *movement*. The failure of fallible ideologies and systems of thought during the World Wars had to be succeeded by a new state of mind. In a new condition in which everything moves, and things themselves march toward man "in parades," [13] Dada's nihilism should by any means be protected from forming a new value. If the belief in nothingness became a new ideology, Dada should by principle attack itself. This postulate for an autoimmune condition, seems very approximate to an existential condition that Heidegger called "abandoned man." Heidegger referred to a condition within which man, after watching all his values crumble during the two World Wars, he felt completely isolated and atomized. In this condition of abandonment, "having nothing, being nothing, hoping nothing also dictated a change in the subject-object relationship." [14] Man developed the primal desire to live like a caveman again and seek for a new meaning for his existence in the world. However, he was now enriched with the profound conviction that there was no longer one true meaning to reveal. The collapse of the World War reality faced man upon the only truth, that there was a multitude of significations in the world, waiting to be framed and constructed.

Huelsenbeck therefore regarded *irony* as the only (non)principle. Irony arose as the attitude that could best describe man's new condition within a world where all happenings came to him, rather than he himself going to them. This attitude of irony denoted an irrationality of the creative forces and a subsequent elimination of the creator's importance in the act of creation. Paradoxically, this new supremacy of unknown forces such as chance over man's own creative force, was at the same time a promise to revel man's most intimate sensorial drives. The "self-accumulated, self-happening, self-organizing power" [15] of the object itself demonstrated that the creative principle had been freed from the hands and the mind of man. Man was now an existential observer within a world of mystery and potential.

3. Creating within Electracy

"The nature of art is poetry. The nature of poetry is the founding of truth ... founding as bestowing, as grounding, as beginning."
Martin Heidegger [16]

Going back to the fundamental question of the paper: *What kind of form/physicality can embody the emerging paradigm of invention within the electronic culture of the media age?*

Paraphrasing the dadaist paradigm, the answer seems to point at a creative re-invention of the world and a re-writing of its history through the liberation of knowledge using the arts and sciences as models/tutors. We shall redefine the creative process by embodying the experience of invention in it.

What was Dada's contribution to cultural history? Inquiring into the marvelous world of irrationality that permeated Europe in the years when the dadaist spirit was born out of the ashes of a dissolved world, we find ourselves before a tutor of "pure psychic automation" as was later celebrated by the Surrealists. Dada was the virus of freedom, rebellious anarchic and highly contagious. The sense-less automatism it celebrated appears as a synonym for hidden realities within the existing order. Dadaist chance and automatism manifested itself as an intervention of mysterious creative forces of the psyche leading to pure poesis.

The vision of reviving the dadaist spirit in the present time, is a vision of channeling creative apocalyptic forces to redeem man as a significant motivating *myth*. In the case of historiography however, such a vision requires critical scrutiny. [17] All constitutive characteristics of dadaist artwork production, such as the machine, this revolutionary instrument against plutocracy that became the symbol of the new order, the laws of chance, personalism and the spit in the eye for the ethos of accountancy, may be summed into a dialectic schema. In this schema, the thesis is represented by the imaginative potential of the machine; its clarity of mechanism. The conceptual antithesis is abstraction, as generated by chance. The product of their synthesis is the revelation of the *I*, situated within the very act of creation.

"Dada Lives! [18]" declared Huelsenbeck in the 1960's. His slogan attempted to maintain the dadaist vision of aligning the "I" with a path toward personal creation, through a conscious appeal to nihilism and the complete surrender to the theories and practices of the machine. After Dada as a movement was dead, statism, or the praise of form, gave its position once and for all to a new non-conformist art that no longer embodied a style of appearance, but a formula; a *process*.

The deep conviction in this paper is that instead of writing a history for this "object of universal curiosity" [19] called Dada, a general apologia for the spirit behind its practices could interpret the dadaist mystery as a praise of personalism within a time of total abandonment. Dada could therefore be seen as the "the irresistible undercurrent of thought preparing to rise to the surface, seeking formulation." [20] Dada was not a farce generated from a motley group of rebellious artists and intellectuals in the bizarre setting of Cabaret Voltaire and the Paris cafes of the early 1910's, the traditional breeding ground of intellectual and moral libertinism. Detaching Dada from the narrow interpretations of subversive exhibitionism, a new attitude can be extracted. This new attitude refers to a cohabitation of nihilism and constructivism within an act of simultaneous chaos and a will for formulation. The "let it run until it happens" dadaist motto seems to describe the exact short of self-elimination in order for something entirely new to arise, while at the same time it was at this exact state of mind that Beuys would later find the ontology for his postulate for "everyone an artist." [21]

4. Epilogue

“Creation survives in fragments under the ruins of a world for which we can no longer find expression.”

W. Wiedle [22]

The intuitive channeling of the forces of creation into forms of transitional spiritual value, as manifested by the Dada spirit, was ultimately swollen by the onslaught of History. In the march of time, Dada was reduced to a fleeting act of post-war negation; an anarchic gesture with an aestheticizing tendency. However, the metaphysics of the Dada movement seem to embody the very spirit of our times: the “subjectless subjectivity” of the digital age seems to be tightly bonded to the processes of creation as a significant act of invention.

In this paper, the Dada movement was regarded in its great affinity to pure **Theory**. As a dialectic synthesis of the World-War order of things and the avant-gardist polemics of spiritual liberation, the dadaist evangelisms of transcending History seem to provide the alive and kicking post-Hegelian paradigm for contemporary processes of invention, while we observe ourselves become electrate.

5. Afterword

“Dada has always been a thing of the present, hence its posthumous activity.” [23] When Marcel Duchamp offered a urinal as his sculptural contribution to a public exhibition, he expressed in a most authentic way a profound will to formulation through nothingness. His true contribution however, surpassed the physicality of his object and was raised to a discourse beyond History. Within a sense-less world, the avant-gardist discourse seems to arrive to the arcana of new plasticity and new poetics; to a post-Hegelian spiritual realization through the tension between predictive certainty and freedom “I was there then. And indeed we are all there now,” manifested Alford.

In this paper, the vision was to free the Dada movement from a sterile discourse of Philistine or avant-garde art, and to raise it to the ethos of creative élan, surmounting the constraints of History. The was analyzed as a chaotic impulse meeting its constructive alternative. However, the effect of the dadaist shock inevitably faded with time, as shock creates its own immunity. The subversive form eventually became conventional; re-mediated by the very norms that it initially attempted to subvert. This paper suggests a reading of Dada not as the synthesizer of modern art but as an apocalyptic moment within the History of Ideas, which established an anti-conformist transgression of any quest for certainty.

“Once kick the world and the world and you will live together at a reasonably good understanding” declared Swift. [24] Let me conclude this presentation in the spirit of Dada, by redefining creativity as an act of constant break-down of solidity, an ebullience of invention and exploration beyond the realm of the visible and the rational, guided by a violent disgust at the old, narrow security.

References

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