Hugo Ball: Dada Fragments (1916-1917)

March 3, 1916—Introduce symmetries and rhythms instead of principles. Contradict the existing world orders . . .

What we are celebrating is at once a bufoonery and a requiem mass . . .

June 11, 1916—What we call Dada is a harlequinade made of nothingness in which all higher questions are involved, a gladiator's gesture, a play with shabby debris, an execution of postured morality and plenitude . . .

The Dadaist loves the extraordinary, the absurd, even. He knows that life asserts itself in contradictions, and that this age, more than any preceding it, aims at the destruction of all generous impulses. Every kind of mask is therefore welcome to him, every play at hide and seek in which there is an inherent power of deception. The direct and the primitive appear to him in the midst of this huge anti-nature, as being the supernatural itself . . .

The bankruptcy of ideas having destroyed the concept of humanity to its very innermost strata, the instincts and hereditary backgrounds are now emerging pathologically. Since no art, politics or religious faith seems adequate to dam this torrent, there remain only the blague and the bleeding pose . . .

The Dadaist trusts more in the sincerity of events than in the wit of persons. To him persons may be had cheaply, his own person not excepted. He no longer believes in the comprehension of things from one point of departure, but is nevertheless convinced of the union of all things, of totality, to such an extent that he suffers from dissonances to the point of self-dissolution . . .

The Dadaist fights against the death-throes and death-drunkenness of his time. Averse to every clever reticence, he cultivates the curiosity of one who experiences delight even in the most questionable forms of insubordination. He knows that this world of systems has gone to pieces, and that the age which demanded cash has organized a bargain sale of godless philosophies. Where bad conscience begins for the market-booth owners, mild laughter and mild kindliness begin for the Dadaist . . .
The image differentiates us. Through the image we comprehend. Whatever it may be—it is night—we hold the print of it in our hands...

The word and the image are one. Painting and composing poetry belong together. Christ is image and word. The word and the image are crucified...

June 18, 1916—We have developed the plasticity of the word to a point which can hardly be surpassed. This result was achieved at a price of the logically constructed, rational sentence, and therefore, also, by renouncing the document, dismembering, and logically ordered syntax. We were assisted in our efforts by the special circumstantiality of a (which is only possible by means of a time-robbing grouping of sentences in a) time-robbing; as well as by the emphatic elan of our group, whose members sought to surpass each other by an even greater intensification and ascension of their platform. People may smile, if they want to; language will thank us for our zeal, even if there should not be any directly visible results. We have charged the word with forces and energies which made it possible for us to rediscover the evangelical concept of the "word" (logos) as a magical complex of images...

August 5, 1916—Childhood as a new world, and everything childlike and phantasy, everything childlike and divine, everything childlike and symbolic in a world of grown-ups. The child will be the accuser, the coward, the judge, the Crucified One will judge, the Resurrected One will pardon. The distrust of children, their shut-in quality, their escape from our recognition—their recognition that they won't be understood any longer...

Childhood is not at all as obvious as it is generally assumed. It is a world to which hardly any attention is paid, with its own laws, without whose application there is no art, and without whose religious and philosophic recognition art cannot exist or be apprehended...

The credulous imagination of children, however, is also exposed to corruption and deformation. To surpass oneself in naiveté and childishness—that is still the best antidote...

November 21, 1916—Note about a criticism of individualism: The accentuated "I" has constant interests, whether they be greedy, dictatorial, vain or lazy. It always follows appetites, so long as it does not become absorbed in society. Whoever renounces his interests, renounces his "I." The "I" and the interests are identical. Therefore, the individualistic-egoistic ideal of the Renaissance is repined to the general union of the mechanized appetites which we now see before us, bleeding and disintegrating.

January 9, 1917—We should burn all libraries and allow to remain only that which every one knows by heart. A beautiful age of the legend would then begin...

The middle ages praised not only foolishness, but even idiocy. The barons sent their children to board with idiotic families so that they might learn humility...

March 30, 1917—The new art is sympathetic because in an age of total disruption it has conserved the will-to-image; because it is inclined to force the image, even though the means and parts be antagonistic. Convention triumphs in the moralistic evaluation of the parts and details; art cannot be concerned with
this. It drives toward the in-dwelling, all-connecting life nerve; it is indifferent to external resistance. One might also say: morals are withdrawn from convention, and utilized for the sole purpose of sharpening the senses of measure and weight . . .

March 7, 1917—One might also speak of Klee as follows: He always presents himself as quite small and playful. In an age of the colossal he falls in love with a green leaf, a little star, a butterfly wing; and since heaven and infinity are reflected in them, he paints them in. The point of his pencil, his brush, tempt him to minutiae. He always remains quite near first beginnings and the smallest format. The beginning possesses him and will not let him go. When he reaches the end, he does not start a new leaf at once, but begins to paint over the first one. The little formats are filled with intensity, become magic letters and colored palimpsests . . .

What irony, approaching sarcasm even, must this artist feel for our hollow, empty epoch. Perhaps there is no man today who is so master of himself as Klee. He scarcely detaches himself from his inspiration. He knows the shortest path from his inspiration to the page. The wide, distracting, stretching-out of the hand and body which Kandinsky needs to fill the great formats of his canvases, necessarily brings waste and fatigue; it demands an exhaustive exposition, and explanation. Painting, when it seeks to retain unity and soul, becomes a sermon, or music.

April 18, 1917—Perhaps the art which we are seeking is the key to every former art; a salononic key that will open all mysteries.

Dadaism—a mask play, a burst of laughter? And behind it, a synthesis of the romantic, dandyistic and—daemonistic theories of the 19th century.

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