

Sex and the Cabaret: Dada's Dancers

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The photograph of Hugo Ball, dressed in cardboard costume and conical hat, reciting the sound poem *Karawane* at a Cabaret Voltaire soirée, before being carried off stage in quasi-religious paroxysm, has achieved iconic status in the history of Dada. It is a—if not *the*—quintessential image of Zurich Dada. Ball's image, reproduced countless times, embodies and mythologizes the Dada cabaret and its innovation of sound poetry. It is scarcely surprising that the photograph is treasured, granting as it does a glimpse into Dada performances that have become infamous but remain irretrievable.



Illustration: Hugo Ball, courtesy Stiftung Hans Arp und Sophie Taeuber-Arp e.v.

Ball's diaries record the moment he is transported by this radical event, which combines both a striking physical, visual presence and innovative verbal experiment.¹ The text of the poem persists, along with the image as remnant, allowing scholars to comment on and analyse the moment using a conjunction of image and text.



Illustration: Sophie Taeuber, courtesy Stiftung Hans Arp und Sophie Taeuber-Arp e.v.

¹ Hugo Ball. *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*, Zurich: Limmat Verlag, 1992. English translation by Ann Raimés: *Flight Out of Time: A Dada Diary*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1996.

Another photograph that also makes its way into the pages of Dada histories is of Sophie Taeuber dancing at the opening of the Galerie Dada. She wears a large rectangular mask made by Marcel Janco. Painted with ox blood, it is inspired by non-Western or so-called primitive tradition. Her costume, designed by Jean Arp, is made up of cardboard tubes for arms, which end in mechanical pincers instead of fingers. It is an arresting image. But this photograph is not treated to quite the same passion of report and celebration as that of Ball, and generally remains rather at the level of decoration: to illustrate the Dada tendency to dress up outrageously and caper on stage. Often it is linked in to a discussion of the impetus of primitivism within Dada, including references to Janco as mask-maker and to the Dadaists' fondness for negro music and drumming. Meanwhile, the most apparent fact, which is that Taeuber is dancing, is as good as glossed over, limited to the caption, and not explored in any detail.

Critical literature on Dada does not care too much for dance. Whilst performance is almost unanimously underlined as the touchstone of Zurich Dada, it is less frequently taken apart or dissected. When it is interrogated, the emphasis is almost always on the crucial performative aspect of sound and simultaneous poetry: we still have the comfort of the printed text to fall back on, after all. Thus, the huge *Dada* exhibition at the Centre Pompidou this year made very welcome inclusions on the level of sound, with two rooms offering recordings of sound and simultaneous poems, in a sort of recreation of the aural experiences of the Dada cabaret, but sound was entirely divorced from any visual, physical or corporeal stimuli, which remain elusive. It is this physical, embodied aspect of Dada that Ball's photo recalls for us, and that Taeuber's photo implies even more strongly, with its more evident suggestion of action and movement.

Our forgetting of dance may be put down variously to the difficulties of recreating performance, the lack of any static cultural artefact and the privileging of written texts and paintings. How can dance be documented in a book or displayed in the museum? What sources are there to draw on? And who says dance featured in Dada in any significant sense? The excuses are manifold, but soirée programmes alone, which list events and name dancers, testify to the fact that dance was a scheduled element in many Dada performances. Memoirs and accounts also describe performances. They vary in detail, limit and subjectivity, but can be combed for content and significance just as they are for illuminations of the significance of poetry and painting. It may instead be a question of the value (or lack of it) placed on dance, both in secondary literature and in memoirs.

I suggest that tracing the genealogy of neglect illuminates revealing attitudes not only towards dance, but also in relation to gender.

David Hopkins, for example, discusses dance in his 2004 *Short Introduction to Dada and Surrealism*, highlighting the connections forged between Taeuber and her dance teacher, the experimental choreographer Rudolf von Laban. However, he states that:

these innovatory dances, which bespeak an attempt to rid the body of constricting habits of expression [...] were not, in the strictest sense, motivated by Dada concerns. They sit a little oddly next to the edgier, more anarchic aspects of Dada performance, including the 'negro dances' of the male Dadaists.²

An opposition is drawn not only between expressionist and dadaist concerns, but also between male and female dance performances. The implication is that women's dances were not 'edgy' and 'anarchic', and not quite Dada.³

Alternatively, the connections between Laban and Dada might be fêted as mutually productive: not only on the level of dance, but with reference to other dadaist concerns 'in the strictest sense'. With Taeuber acting as a bridging-point between the Laban school and the Cabaret Voltaire,⁴ dance became a component of soirées in the spring and summer of 1916.⁵ By the time of the establishment of the Galerie Dada, Laban dancers, too, were taking part in Dada soirées, alongside untrained (male) dancers like Ball, Huelsenbeck and Tzara. A comment by the dancer Käthe Wulff testifies to an active dialogue: "If someone wanted to do a dance, for example Sophie Taeuber, I would have her show me the dance and discuss it with her."⁶ Here was an opportunity for the Dadaists to reach into another area of the 'Arts with a capital A', to both interfere irreverently with a

² David Hopkins. *Dada and Surrealism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 116.

³ It should be noted that Hopkins nonetheless deals with gender extensively in this volume, especially in chapter 5.

⁴ Taeuber saw Laban's dancers in Munich as early as 1911. See: Roswitha Mair. *Von ihren Träumen sprach sie nie: Das Leben der Künstlerin Sophie Taeuber-Arp*, Freiburg: Herder, 1998, p. 34. Mair quotes a letter to her sister dated 27 November 1911. She then visited his school in Monte Verità a few months after the start of the Cabaret Voltaire, in Summer 1916, with Käthe Wulff, and signed up as a pupil in Zurich.

⁵ Hans Bolliger, Guido Magnaguagno and Raimund Meyer (eds.) *Dada in Zürich*, Zurich: Kunsthaus Zürich and Arche Verlag, 1985, p. 42.

⁶ Conversation with Wulff on 20 January 1982, in Bolliger, Magnaguagno and Meyer, *Dada in Zürich*, p. 43.

traditional art form and to discover more about the potential of stage performance to jolt the expectations of their audience.

No-one doubts Laban's impact on modern dance, but there is a reluctance to associate him with Dada because of his interest in the expressive qualities of the body. This would initially seem to clash with dadaist principles, where individual expression was rejected and derided as inward looking. It is exacerbated by the popular imagination, fuelled by photographs of Monte Verità, in which waif-like women flail their arms around in heightened moments of self-discovery. However, the questions asked of dance by these innovators were firstly multifarious and, secondly, scarcely confined to that single art form.

The investigation of expressive freedom implicated a full spectrum of testing. Suzanne Perrotet, for example, remembers being 'eingengt' ('restricted' or 'cramped') in a Dada costume, such that the performers could hardly move.⁷ Here, the costumes were designed to limit the performer's physical movement, conceal the body, and prevent individual psychological expression. The dancer is somewhere between body and machine, agent and puppet, nature and technology. The dressing-up and stylization of the face and body, reminiscent of the abstraction of the body in cubist painting, here constitutes a rejection of representation or mimesis. It drives a wedge between the spectator and the performer, inciting shock instead of empathy and identification. Masks were similarly Dadaist in this respect. Wulff recalls, "A new addition was the masks: that belonged to the group, to us and to the time."⁸ And Ball writes: "What fascinates us all about the masks is that they represent not human characters and passions, but passions and characters that are larger than life."⁹ The dancers' masks and costumes, as in the photograph of Taeuber, are discomfiting, their effect contrasting starkly to the traditional European aesthetic of dance.

Why, then, should Laban's dancers and Taeuber fall into a different category from Ball and Huelsenbeck, dancing to their drums? It may be that this is an issue of reception, whereby women's activities and women on stage are perceived differently from men: the men are 'at play'; the women are being 'expressive'. Hans Richter's memoirs, in particular, suggest that gender was a powerful factor in the reception of the dancers. According to his accounts in *Dada Kunst und Anti-Kunst* the male Dadaists viewed the Laban school dancers chiefly as potential, or in fact actual, sexual conquests. Richter writes:

⁷ Ibid., p. 71 note 55.

⁸ Ibid., p. 43.

⁹ Entry for 24 May 1916 in Ball, *Flight Out of Time*, pp. 64-65.

If the Odéon was our terrestrial base, Laban's ballet school was our celestial headquarters. There we met the young dancers of our generation: Mary Wigman, Maria Vanselow, Sophie Taeuber, Susanne Perrottet, Maja Kruscek, Käthe Wulff and others. Only at certain fixed times were we allowed into this nunnery, with which we all had more or less emotional ties, whether fleeting or permanent.¹⁰

Richter makes a clear distinction between the Odéon, (a forum for camaraderie and intellectual discussion) and the dance school: a feminised, sexualised arena. His references to the heavens and to a nunnery call on feminine stereotypes of angel and nun, and contrast with the women's actual existence as corporal and sexual human beings. He writes about love affairs between the dancers and male Dadaists (Maja Kruscek and Tzara; Maria Vanselow and Georges Janco; Maria Vanselow and himself) declaring finally:

Serner, on the other hand, fickle as he was, did not like to pitch the tents of Laban (or anything else) in these lovely pastures for too long at a time. Into this rich field of perils we hurled ourselves as enthusiastically as we hurled ourselves into Dada. The two things went together!¹¹

The equations are staggeringly unequivocal: using a decidedly macho metaphor, Richter declares that Dada, masculinity and sexual conquest go together. Of course it can be argued that this activity has nothing to do with dadaist cabaret activity, but already we note that Richter fails to go into any detail about the potential of *working* with "the dancers of our generation".

So how might these heavenly beings have been perceived onstage? Women performers were generally offered up as an attractive visual spectacle to cabaret goers, and to some extent this was continued within the avant-garde. The Dada singer, dancer and poet Emmy Hennings was undoubtedly a selling-point for the Cabaret Voltaire. She is recalled as frequently in Dadaists' memoirs for her sexual presence on and off stage, as for her spoken and written voice. Tzara described the cabaret as: "the cosmopolitan mixture of goD and bRothel."¹² If Ball's sound poetry produced uncanny religious and spiritual moments in the

¹⁰ Hans Richter. *DADA Art and Anti-Art*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1997, p. 69. Translated by David Britt. [German version: Hans Richter. *Dada – Kunst und Antikunst: Der Beitrag Dadas zur Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Cologne: DuMont Schauberg, 1964.]

¹¹ Ibid., p. 70.

¹² Tristan Tzara. *Chronique Zurichoise 1915-1919*, Crisnée, Belgium: Editions Yellow Now, 1979, p. 8.

cabaret, Hennings' physical and sexual appeal evoked a highly-charged sexual atmosphere in a cabaret filled mainly with men. As Huelsenbeck recalls: "There were few women in the cabaret. It was too wild, too smoky, too way out."¹³ The more radical aspects of Hennings' contributions are easily obscured—her choice of song; her repertoire of poetry; her deliberate shrillness—but arguably, they were all the more effective because of the audience's expectations of women performers to be looked at and enjoyed.

Equally dance, as practised by Taeuber and by Laban's dancers, was more or other than a pleasurable visual spectacle for the men in the audience and those behind the scenes. Taeuber, although not a dancer by profession, was apparently capable of the expected grace and poise, but she made little use of such conventional aesthetic effects at the Dada soirées. At the end of the first issue of the journal *Dada*, a note acknowledging the Laban dancers reads: "Miss Sophie Taeuber: delirious bizarreness in the spider of the hand vibrates rhythm rapidly ascending to the paroxysm of a beautiful capricious mocking dementia."¹⁴ It is an appropriately dadaist description, and brings us full circle to Ball's own paroxysms and his famous *Karawane* image.

I have criticised Richter for his partial appreciation of Dada's women dancers, but his memoirs, too, can be sifted for detail on specific dance performances, and their effect on audiences.¹⁵ For example, in recalling the last major soirée in the Kaufleuten Hall, he notes that "the ballet *Noir Kakadu*, with Janco's savage Negro masks to hide the pretty faces of our Labanese girls, and abstract costumes to cover their slender bodies, was something quite new, unexpected and anti-conventional."¹⁶ He rightly draws attention to the fact that any emphasis on beauty is abandoned, but is unlikely to be aware just how strong a statement this makes in terms of gender roles and expectations. In contrast to their normal performative roles (both on stage and in life), here the dancers' femininity, beauty, sexuality and even individuality are deliberately concealed. The unconventionality of this approach is underlined, though doubtless unconsciously, by Richter's earlier description in which he characterises the Laban girls as an alluring, sexual presence.

¹³ Richard Huelsenbeck. *Memoirs of a Dada Drummer*, New York: The Viking Press, 1974, p. 15. Translated by Joachim Neugroschel.

¹⁴ Full issue of *Dada* no. 1 reprinted in Michel Giroud (ed.). *Dada: Zurich, Paris, 1916-1922*, Paris: Jean Michel Place, 1981. These notes fall on p. 112 of the volume.

¹⁵ Bolliger, Magnaguagno and Meyer in *Dada in Zürich*, p. 42, list those performances where it is proven that the Laban dancers participated as: 29 March 1917, 14 April 1917, 28 April 1917, 31 December 1918 and 9 April 1919.

¹⁶ Richter. *Art and Anti-Art*, pp. 79-80.

But it is in Ball's diaries that we find the most references to dance, and which really allow us to establish its place within Dada aesthetics. A 1917 description of Taeuber dancing reads:

Instead of tradition, sunlight and wonder operate through her. She is full of invention, caprice, bizarreness [...]. Every gesture consists of a hundred, is sharp, bright, pointed. The narrative of the perspectives, of the lighting, of the atmosphere brings the over-sensitive nervous system to real drollness, to an ironic gloss. Her dance patterns are full of romantic desire, grotesque and enraptured.¹⁷

Ball's account emphasises the unexpected and disturbing elements of these renditions that, as he states, were far from traditional, but rather shocking. His words recall spontaneity, chance, fragmentation and irony: dadaist principles through and through.

These statements point to the visual spectacle: to movement, gesture, abstraction, and the rejection of fluidity and grace. Another vital element to dance is, of course, the aural aspect. In the Dada cabaret, this included music, drumming and even poetry. Music was often basic, and frequently improvised. Again, African instruments like drums were used, and rhythm emphasised. Instead of following a dance score that is strictly conceived around a piece of music, as in traditional dance, the dancer reacts spontaneously to sound, and the transient, ever-changing act of dancing assumes importance as an unrepeatable event. The music, equally, might react to the dance: the two aspects are inter-related. This aspect relates to the Dadaists' celebration of chance over intellect and spontaneity over fixity, as evident in some manifestations in poetry, fine art and performance. Underneath an outline programme for the opening night of the Galerie Dada, which includes dance by Taeuber (with poems by Ball and masks by Arp), Ball writes, "A gong beat is enough to stimulate the dancer's body to make the most fantastic movements. The dance has become an end in itself."¹⁸

Alternatively, and even more radically, the performer might dance to poetry. On the occasion Ball describes above, his sound poem *Gadji Beri Bimba* was spoken aloud, in place of musical accompaniment, as Taeuber danced.¹⁹ On other occasions Taeuber danced to his poems *Karawane* (*Caravan*) and *Gesang*

¹⁷ 'Die Tänzerin Sophie Taeuber' (1917) in Georg Schmidt. *Sophie Taeuber-Arp*, Basel: Holbein Verlag, 1948, p. 20.

¹⁸ 29 March 1917 in Ball, *Flight out of Time*, p. 102.

¹⁹ 24 May 1916. *Ibid.*, p. 97.

der Flugfische und Seepferdchen (Seahorses and Flying Fish). Ball writes, in reference to a dance accompanied by the latter poem: “Here, in this special case, a poetic sequence of sounds was enough to make each of the individual word particles produce the strangest visible effect on the hundred-jointed body of the dancer.”²⁰ The qualities of the sounds were reflected in, and reflected, the physical movements of the dancer. Words, usually confined to the pages of a book, were broken into sounds, transferred into the space occupied by the performers, and contributed to the creation of new performance experiences not dulled by visual, linguistic and aesthetic sets of conventions.

The dance elements of the Dada soirées offered exemplary contributions to the search for a ‘Gesamtkunstwerk’ in that they each combined physical movement, colour, shape, texture and sounds. In themselves they can be viewed as ‘Gesamtkunstwerke’, whilst also significantly intensifying the visual and physical elements of the shows as whole. Moreover, dance was not simply added as a new, separate element, but incorporated into the ongoing experimental aspects of the Dada cabaret. Taeuber created dances that responded to the impromptu music practised in the soirées as well as to the rhythms of words and language, in sound poems. The collaboration between Ball in particular, as poet, and Taeuber, as dancer, was highly productive to both parties, allowing for the conjunction, exploration and extension of both poetry and dance, and contributing to the release of the latter art form from its restrictive traditions, in line with the revolutions taking place in approaches to literature and painting.

Dance offered the Dadaists huge potential: to explore ‘primitivism’; to break with tradition in an art form that was severely restrained by expectations; to democratise dance (anyone should try it); to exploit the fact that it is unmediated by the worn-out language of words; and to communicate directly and physically with the audience. Taeuber, in particular, recognised this potential. Moreover, she could act with comparative autonomy, possibly because it was not an art form in which the men had any experience. Other Dadaists did take part in some dance performances, an acknowledgment of its place, and also an opportunity for play, shock and physical presence, but it is doubtful whether they perceived its true potential. Ball, however, apparently recognised the crossovers with other Dadaist experiments and explored it on a more theoretical level.

Far from being merely decorative or sexual, as Richter’s less measured comments would have us think, or purely expressive, as the immediate view of Laban and expressionist-genre dance suggests, Dada’s female body is often concealed in dance. With the aid of costumes and masks, the contours of the

²⁰ 29 March 1917. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

human body are disguised, the figure geometrised and personal, individual expression assigned a lesser role. The body is used as sign to represent areas beyond the single figure. It is shown in various guises: as primitive or as machine, as threat or under threat, as agent or pawn. The physical body is put into the service of aesthetic experimentations that involve language, music and movement. These performance activities challenge dialectical divisions between the intellectual and physical, mind and body, poetry and performance, human and inhuman and male and female. The body as the artist's tool or material anticipates later modern and postmodern performance where the body becomes the artwork, and the performance space the artwork event.

The fate of Dada's dancers in accounts of the movement has been paradigmatic of the fate of women artists and writers excluded from histories of art and literature. A close look at Dada reveals that such exclusions are not confined only to the canon or mainstream but extend also to the avant-garde. Even on the so-called social, cultural or aesthetic margins there will be yet more margins. Even where art and literature are called upon to extend their materials, some materials chosen by women (handicrafts for example) or art forms (dance) are considered less appropriate or trivial; even where the notion of the author or artist as personality is rejected, women's lives are analysed more than their work; and even where in those cases where mimetic realism is rejected in favour of interior or fragmented experiences of life, women's concerns are labelled 'personal' or 'intimate' as compared with some elusive male standard.

Suzanne Perrotet states of the impetus for her involvement in Dada soirées: "I wanted to get away from harmony, from a consistent style ... It just didn't work for me any more. I wanted to screech, to fight more."²¹ Whilst dance was central to the atmosphere, practices and appeal of the cabaret, its potential as an experimental art form was not fully realised either by Dada protagonists at the time or by critics at a later stage and this, in large part, because of attitudes towards women, the female body and sexuality. Dance has been perceived as peripheral to 'real' Dada concerns, rather than integral, Dada's dancers as less noteworthy than Dada's painters and poets, and Dada's women then—and now—as 'other' to Dada's men.

²¹ Bolliger, Magnaguagno and Meyer, *Dada in Zürich*, p. 71, footnote 145.

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