

The false Gods of Dada: on Dada Presentism by Maria Stavrinaki

A new book on the movement draws lessons on the dangers of eclecticism

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Artists at the First International Dada Fair in Berlin, June 1920.

In the final chapter of the art historian Maria Stavrinaki's new book, *Dada Presentism*, she imagines the origin of Dada as an immaculate conception. "Who, in fact, did invent Dada?" she asks. "Everyone and no one." Amidst the devastation of the First World War, with Enlightenment optimism in ruin, Dada arrived as a miraculous redeemer. Stavrinaki echoes the German Dadaist Richard Huelsenbeck, who wrote in his 1920 history of the movement that "Dada came over the Dadaists without their knowing it; it was an immaculate conception, and thereby its profound meaning was revealed to me."

Throughout her book, Stavrinaki hews closely to this clerical line, offering essentially theological claims about the movement. In the collages of Raoul Hausmann and the masks of Marcel Janco, Stavrinaki sees God-like reconciliation of all opposites. The Dadaists were both Futurists, with all the attendant utopian aspiration that implies, and Primitivists, insofar as they were fascinated by mythical history. "For those intellectuals and artists who found neither comfort in the past nor in the future, the only remaining choice was to gain a foothold in the present", Stavrinaki writes—a present characterised, above all, by its openness to all possibility.

Dada's "presentism"—its absorption of all that had come and all that was to be—allowed for omniscience and absolute artistic opportunity. Nothing was off limits. Dada could accommodate both the xenophilia of Janco (whose masks, drawn from African models, channeled the fables of non-European cultures) and the Marxism of Huelsenbeck and Hausmann, who in 1919 together called for "the immediate expropriation of property". This universal eclecticism—and presentism is, at bottom, simply a form of eclecticism—was, for Stavrinaki, Modernism's new covenant.

As a dutiful historian must, Stavrinaki writes of Dada in the past tense. Yet one feels that for her, the movement is still alive and has much to teach us. Beneath the book's academic pretence and style is a tract on the fundamental truth of presentism. "The improbable, inconsistent nature of its birth meant that Dada could never become a historical object among others—or a historical object at all," Stavrinaki writes. It could only become a religion, offering truth that is as valid today as it was in 1916, when Dada was born at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zürich.

Yet insofar as Dada stands in for all thoughts developed across all time, it contains within it everything, including its own opposite. Stavrinaki glimpses but never confronts this problem. She does not see clearly that, because it has every conviction, in the end Dada has none. Its earliest critics were distrustful of exactly this. In a 1920 review of the First International Dada Fair in Berlin, a journalist complained of the exhibition's "incredible confusion of all moral and intellectual notions". He added: "if one argues with them and insists that the conclusion exactly contradicts the premise, they are as delighted as savages, and say this is exactly what they intended."

Did the Dadaists consider themselves infallible? Some, at least, did. The German artist Johannes Baader, as Stavrinaki writes, "identified himself with Christ" and "was one of many total artists living and working at the end of the nineteenth century"—he was born in 1875—"who conceived colossal, utopian edifices that were supposed to encompass, and thus complete, all earthly civilizations, old and new, near and far." Yet he also "adopted an absolute—and thereby dead-end relativism", so that his greatest monument, *Plasto-Dio-Dada-Drama* (1920, now lost)—a sculptural amalgam of mouse traps, miners' lights, gears, newspapers and a powder keg, among other things—was also "a maniacal object of destruction and (self-)derision."

Baader, in the end, was not God, and therefore could not engender all things. His Catholicism and relativism cancelled one another out. In the void between the two was left a simple absence of artistic principle. This is dead-end relativism, to be sure, but precisely because it tries to do too much. It is too universal.

Baader, as Stavrinaki notes, is a special case. He was "the only Dadaist" to have led down this blind alley without turning back. The best Dadaists, it is true, saw that

only a dose of provincialism would cure them of the lack of focus that attended their presentism. When the movement splintered from Zurich into New York, Berlin and Paris, among other cities, the best artists narrowed their intentions. They found space to concentrate on specific issues—visual, political, literary—that universal presentism would not even have allowed them to identify.

When Marcel Duchamp arrived to New York in 1915, he began to isolate the formal questions Dada had raised. Works of his like *The Fountain* (1917) were a Dada critique of painting, at once more naturalistic and more abstract than anything the Cubists had ever made. In Berlin, John Heartfield and George Grosz put Dada to use as a tool of the failed German Revolution of 1918. Heartfield's Marxism, in particular, bled into his work as a Dada agitator against Fascism. Tristan Tzara, in Paris, pursued Dada's literary dimensions with works like his play *The Gas Heart* from 1921, in which an eye, a mouth, a nose, an ear, a neck and an eyebrow carry on an absurd conversation.

Yet despite greater focus in its later stages, the movement's original disorientations haunted it. André Breton, hitherto a Dada supporter, was repulsed by *The Gas Heart*'s lack of direction. Literary clarity was no longer enough; he demanded ideological clarity too. During a 1923 performance of the play, he leapt onto the stage, destroyed the set, berated the actors and broke one man's arm. It was left to him, in 1924, to roll Dada into a new tendency with a truly firm set of principles. His *Surrealist Manifesto* of that year is a rebuke of Dada's many confusions. "Surrealism", Breton wrote, "does not allow those who devote themselves to it to forsake it whenever they like."

Breton foresaw that eclecticism, whether in Dada or elsewhere, necessarily evacuates conviction. This is as true today as it was in 1916 or 1924—it is, indeed, a universal truth. But he was a dogmatist whose proposed solution—that everyone bend to his will—was bound for rejection. And so eclecticism returns in the work of those enemies of purism who seek to redistribute the pressure Breton would have tried to apply; they know that if they stand for nothing by standing for everything, they can never be said to fail. These artists—Sigmar Polke and Isa Genzken are among the chief leaders of this tendency—reject focus zealously, so that they never have to defend their work on the basis of principle.

Like Baader, they want to engender all ideas and all forms, happily indifferent to the many intellectual disharmonies that result. They have no feeling for how little one of their works has to do with any other. "No binaries satisfied, no ideology appealed, no geometry embodied the divine, and no truth held sway." This description of Polke's mind by Kathy Halbreich is exactly half true: the lack of binaries and absence of ideology are precisely divine truths for artists whose work otherwise makes no sense.

In 1921, Hausmann wrote that the "nostalgia for seeing the world through the lens of human will—as if it were a product of man's imagination... no longer [has] any

value." Was this true in the aftermath of the First World War? Perhaps. But if so, it was only a local, and not a universal truth. Today that nostalgia for a less God-like art—for art that does not try to solve all problems at once, that is conscious of its fallibility, that is made in defense of humanist ideals—has tremendous value. Stavrinaki's claim for the continued truth of Dada's eclectic presentism is valid only insofar as it explains the world as it is—a world in which artists like Polke and Genzken shrink their responsibility to take a stand. This is not the world as it ought to be. These artists, like the most confused Dadaists before them, are not redeemers, but imperfect beings. Dada is not true.

Dada Presentism: an Essay on Art and History

Maria Stavrinaki

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