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Exhibiting Dada and Surrealism

Stavriniaki, Maria. Dada Presentism

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STAVRINAKI, MARIA. *Dada Presentism: An Essay on Art and History*. Translated from the French by Daniela Ginsburg. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016. ISBN 978-0-8047-9812-9. 107 pages.

As Virginia Woolf's character Orlando flows in and out of various geographies, temporalities, and bodies, she is suddenly struck by the present moment. The past and the future no longer protect Orlando from the vividness of sensation and experience. Dada "when it in turn found itself projected into its own present, in the midst of the Great War" is refused the "same crepuscular protection," writes Maria Stavrinaki (3). The author's use of Woolf's 1928 novel *Orlando* to introduce her approach to Dada highlights a driving impetus of *Dada Presentism*: a desire to locate the spirit of the dadaists within a temporality of the present. Stated succinctly, this book frames Dada as a movement that is propelled by ideas of presentism.

The term presentism defines an understanding of history in which questions of meaning and truth are primarily or exclusively located in the present moment. Drawing on François Hartog's conception of two "regimes of historicity," Stavrinaki locates the celebratory form of presentism used by the dadaists as strictly opposed to the melancholy of contemporary presentism. This division, however, does not fully acknowledge what are the two main discursive uses of this concept. The first, which reflects the contemporary perspective we have been discussing, represents the projection of current ideas, beliefs, and perspectives onto the past – significantly connected with debates of historical revisionism. Claire Bishop in *Radical Museology* describes an extreme form of this process in art history as "the condition of taking our current moment as the horizon and destination of our thinking" (6). Hartog's study is primarily concerned with this understanding of presentism, ignoring much of the historical literature and treatment of the concept that is the second use of presentism.

Often termed philosophical presentism, this version more generally argues that the past and the future do not exist as proper entities, leaving only the present moment as a real site of meaning and truth. Saint Augustine discusses this idea in his *Confessions*, most notably in book 10; Stavrinaki cites Augustine in her discussion of Raoul Hausmann's "utopic" use of presentism (65). More current assertions of presentist philosophy are tied to vital ontological and epistemological questions that have defined (one might say haunted) modern subjective existence, particularly in relation to notions of temporality. It is interesting to note that J. Ellis McTaggart's important essay "The Unreality of Time" was published in 1908, during the early twentieth century flurry of avant-garde experiments and a mere eight years before the opening of the Cabaret Voltaire. The contemporary use of the term is an obvious extension of this philosophical version of presentism, which

became tied to the unbearable sense of historical loss felt as a result of the First World War – compounded, for us, by the Second World War. It is this latter sense of presentism that Stavrinaki in fact addresses when she states, “For those intellectuals and artists who found comfort neither in the past nor in the future, the only remaining choice was to gain a foothold in the present” (5).

Stavrinaki grounds her arguments for what she terms *Dada presentism* in a multitude of artworks and writings from the time period, locating Dada within the numerous creative practices and perspectives around the First World War. Two key figures who dominate the book, George Grosz and John Heartfield, were important members of the Berlin Dada group. While we find passing mention of elements of the other Dada manifestations, it is the German dadaists working in Berlin that dominate the scope of this study. In particular, Stavrinaki focuses on the famous historical photograph of the First International Dada Fair of 1920 and several works pictured in this and related images of the monumental exhibition. Among the artworks discussed, Grosz and Heartfield’s collaborative assemblage *The Middle-Class Philistine Heartfield Gone Wild (Electro-Mechanical Tatlin Sculpture)* is given pride of place, used as a core piece of supporting evidence and a secure point of analysis for the book’s thesis; other key works pictured as part of this exhibition include Hannah Höch’s *Cut with the Kitchen Knife Dada Through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch in Germany* and Johannes Baader’s assemblage *Great Plasto-Dio-Dada-Drama: Germany’s Greatness and Decline*. However, it is Stavrinaki’s treatment of the famous 1920 photograph that remains one of the truly unique approaches in this book.

In this photograph we witness numerous people, mostly Berlin dadaists, within one corner of Doctor Otto Burchard’s gallery space, walls covered with works of art and non-art, chairs and plinths with assemblage-sculptures on the floor, and a German soldier with a pig-head hanging from the ceiling. Instead of treating this as a photograph of an event that happened in the past, Stavrinaki argues for a presentist reading of this image. She suggests that we can understand the photograph “on its own terms – that is, not as the transparent document of a legendary event but as a . . . meticulous staging of the formal, rhetorical, and ontological strategies forged by Dadaist subjectivity in its struggle with the temporality of the present” (23). She proceeds to delineate the choreographed qualities of the image, suggesting that the photograph was not simply highly posed but rather strategically composed, which reflects the ideals of presentism that she sees at the heart of (Berlin) Dada. While the originality of this claim is compelling, and enjoyable as a conceptual exercise, the author’s attempts to redefine the frenzied mess of Dada as a more cunning, purposefully enacted event – in and through the reconceptualization of the immediacy of the *photographic click* – undermines what is a vital critique of Hegelian history and its

Enlightenment roots through its claims towards a *heroic* sense of being present (one might say) at all costs.

For this reason, the idea of Dada as fundamentally presentist is immediately appealing, as is Stavrinaki's proposal for a specifically dadaist form of presentism. In the turmoil and effects of the First World War it makes all too much sense that people would reject the past that led them into such destruction, as well as the future that necessitated a utopic view that no longer seemed feasible. This, again, can be seen as a crucial basis for the development of a melancholic contemporary presentist perspective, which Stavrinaki contrasts with "the Dadaists' heroic presentism in the face of a simultaneous world that spared none and a history whose infernal repetition took away human freedom" (7). At its base Dada presentism must therefore be uncompromisingly concerned with history's active and seemingly "rational" questioning of the temporalities and historiography of modern subjectivity, which, as the dadaists' consistently declared in their work and ideas, is constituted through its "noncapitalizable historical nature"(77).

Interestingly, the present moment is characterized as an abrasive experience throughout much of the book, a quality of presentism that makes the idea of a *dadaist presentism* all that more convincing. This abrasiveness is in apt alignment with Dada, the goal of which, according to Stavrinaki, "was to achieve sensorial amplification capable of grasping the complexity of the present" (73). The dadaists' nonsensical artworks and events can in this way be seen as embodying a collective frustration with the demands of a history that had abandoned culture to a brutal war. "Dadaist eternity was that of a world of chance, *indifferent* in its intentions, knowing neither good nor evil" (78). Only the chaos and turbulence of a life lead without past or future interested Dada, a schema materialized in assemblages, photomontages, writings, and exhibitions. It is the distinct lack of overt purposefulness, beholden to the logic of either a past or future state, which marks "the equality of the present" that Stavrinaki encounters in her reading of the ideas and activities of the Berlin dadaists (78). This inclusionary pluralism, when taken seriously, powerfully allows us to see in Dada a fully encompassed expression of the present moment as the possibility of multiple meanings and truths without limits.

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