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DECIDEDLY FOR AND AGAINST THE FUTURE: DADA AND OTHER ARTS FOR  
LIFE

STEPHEN FORCER

The protests and works of the Dadaists were for them the one sane answer any artist could make to a world apparently gone insane.

Lee Harwood<sup>1</sup>

The world is on fire, and the Arts and Humanities are coming.

From to circular economies and climate catastrophe to displaced people and cancer treatment, arts and humanities researchers are taking a leading role in the design and delivery of responses to global challenges and UN sustainable development goals. To quote Christopher Smith, Executive Chair of the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council, arts research has the power to tackle pressing contemporary issues and translate crucial but complex research ‘in a way that will resonate deeply and emotionally with diverse audiences to inspire lasting change’.<sup>2</sup> The AHRC’s vision echoes the mission statements of national funding councils around the world: ‘We will place our values, creativity and imagination at the heart of the reinvention of public life, successful economies, constructive civil discourse and a rich cultural infrastructure’.<sup>3</sup>

As noted by Doris Sommer, Founder and Faculty Director of the NGO Cultural Agents, to combine arts and research in the service of civic development is to revive a long humanistic tradition, not to invent one.<sup>4</sup> Sommer’s reminder contextualizes the contemporary drive for arts and humanities work on social challenges and, moreover, is a cause for hope in the sense of positive and potentially counter-intuitive functionality emphasized by Václav Havel: ‘Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.’<sup>5</sup> From hard-nosed policymakers and the ‘anti-woke’ press to a university executive board looking to make ‘difficult decisions’ and ‘sharpen its offering’, it can be a

fashionable sign of moral and strategic seriousness to ignore, downplay or deride the ‘sense’ (in Havel’s terms) of the arts and humanities in order to ‘focus more heavily upon subjects which deliver strong graduate employment outcomes in areas of economic and societal importance, such as STEM [Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths], nursing, and teaching’.<sup>6</sup> Behind the rhetoric, executive plans for restructuring and strategic ambition can involve dynamics of (remote) violence and self-validation.<sup>7</sup> Equally, effective counter-moves are likely to involve careful consideration of the signifieds behind institutional statements and strategies. Students want and need decent jobs and careers that fulfil them; countries require sustainable and fairly distributed prosperity and the well-being, dignity and social cohesion that come with that. Even if a certain amount of cross-subsidy between subject areas may make good sense, the realities will mean that no subject area can reasonably expect a free lunch.

Of the subject area in which I work, languages and cultures, skeptics and supporters alike often ask: ‘What is the value of studying languages?’ There are numerous very sound responses to such a question.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, to answer the question risks validating the question, along with the unspoken but lurking consequences of responses felt to be inadequate. One might ask if colleagues teaching and researching gravity, sub-atomic physics or other fundamentals of human existence in the universe are subjected to such questioning and justification (they surely are). Regarding languages in Scotland, the diversity of the picture – over 150 different languages spoken at home as the first language – both speaks to the question ‘What is the value?’ and makes it irrelevant.<sup>9</sup> Not that we should neglect the numerous historic and current attempts to extinguish different dialects and languages in human and cultural genocides. Like gravity and sub-atomic physics, however, languages persist, along with the human capacity and need for multiple forms of spoken and written communication.

What does this worthy, challenge-based preface about the arts and humanities in the twenty-first century have to do with Dada? Nothing and everything. When one looks at a Dada readymade or a surrealist object, the response to hostile questioning about ‘What is this for?’ amounts to, ‘Bring it on’. But the practice and spirit of Dada go so much further than a gestural raspberry or middle finger presented to mainstream ‘seriousness’ and capitalist use-value. As an instructively coded playbook and as an explosion of playful, angry counter-intuition, Dada is hope that makes sense for real-world living. Using this centenary moment about Dada to affirm, deny and reconcile the idea of Dada commemoration, I argue that the good sense and functional hope of Dada are evident in a huge range of contexts that have nothing and everything to do with Dada ‘the movement’, from techniques for effective (self-)care and social justice to entanglement and other paradoxes of the physical universe that are both bewildering and true.<sup>10</sup>

### **Here Lies Dada**

‘Ci-gît le dadaïsme. Ni fleurs, ni couronnes’

Anon.<sup>11</sup>

In 1924 Tristan Tzara joyfully proclaimed the death of Dada, having previously stated that ‘Dada [est] pour et contre l’unité, et décidément contre le futur.’<sup>12</sup> A hundred years or so later, these anti-future statements about the passing of Dada turn out to have been hopelessly optimistic. Or rather, to borrow from Havel, hopelessly hopeful, in that there was arguably much sense in Tzara’s wish for something that he believed to be true regardless of whether it subsequently happened. The future of Dada turns out to have been remarkably bright, albeit not always in ways that Tzara might have endorsed. Markets in Dada and the modern and conceptual art it inspired have blossomed and boomed. Audiences have revelled in Dada

at international exhibitions and in the centenaries of the Armory Show (2014), Cabaret Voltaire (2016), Berlin Dada Club (2018), and Dada's arrival in Paris (2020). We will surely revisit the triumph, conflict and voluntary self-termination of Paris Dada as we approach the centenary of André Breton's *Manifeste du surréalisme* in 2024, a text which famously emerged from the immediate future of Tzara's eulogy for Dada. A thriving academic research scene is seeing Dada afresh in relation to aesthetics, gender, sexuality, philosophy, ethics and the international geography of art history. And Dada is all around us as human subjects in the twenty-first century. Tzara wrote that Dada was in part a reaction against the moral putrefaction of his age and its perversion of institutions and values: 'Honneur, Patrie, Morale, Famille, Art, Religion, Liberté, Fraternité, que sais-je, autant de notions répondant à des nécessités humaines, dont il ne subsiste que de squelettiques conventions, car elles sont vides de leur contenu initial.'<sup>13</sup> How many of those same notions are today contorted into nativism, nationalist isolationism, fundamentalism and other forms of self-interested aggression led by political figures who are simultaneously preposterous and in power. Dada is dead; and Dada is on a permanent display as an expression of absurdity and disgust at the world around us.

On the one hand, there is an obvious *premier degré* contradiction in commemorating Dada and marking its centenaries: the movement was famously against permanence, and yet Dada has become enshrined in popular culture, exhibitions, catalogues, and indeed academic research. To paraphrase Dada sloganeering, perhaps the true Dada researcher should be against research into Dada. On the other hand, let us not be too fetishistic or precious about Dada intentionality. Private and public statements by Céline Arnaud, Pierre de Massot, Tzara and others show that many Dadaists were in fact anxious not to be written out of cultural history. Curated evidence of this is held at the Bibliothèque Littéraire Jacques Doucet, Paris, in the multiple scrapbooks of Dada press cuttings ordered by Francis Picabia.<sup>14</sup> A great lover

of life, Picabia wanted to record, commemorate and look back on this self-avowedly impermanent movement.

If Picabia was anxious about Dada falling into the abyss of cultural history, he need not have worried. Dada's far-reaching influence can be traced across twentieth and twenty-first-century cultural history through Surrealism, Nouveau Réalisme and Fluxus to punk music and European electronica,<sup>15</sup> Black Mirror, and Lady Gaga's meat dress. As with 'Surrealism', a keyword search for 'Dada' on creative apps and platforms brings up endless retrospectives, reboots and fan pages. Henri Lefebvre and Greil Marcus attribute a foundational (and often secret) role to Dada within twentieth-century culture as a whole: 'To the degree that modernity has a meaning, it is this: it carries within itself, from the beginning, a radical negation – Dada, this event which took place in a Zurich café.'<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, there is something distinctly anti-Dada about understanding the future of the movement only or predominantly in terms of published statements, acknowledged influences, as a general aesthetic or practice of shock, provocation and absurdity and as a 'legacy'. As with numerous other Dada statements, we should also see in Tzara's comment about the future his general scepticism of all authors and leaders including himself, and his awareness that language can mean what it means but also contradict itself. In other words, Tzara is surely sincere in his rejection of a conventionally understood 'future' and all that is likely to entail, such as the edification of Dada into History and the wider drive towards 'progress' by dominant structures and mainstream society. Equally, we should not consider Tzara's comments as the final word on Dada and the linear future. On the contrary, Dada's relationship to time is coherently contradictory, encompassing both Euclidean and 'irrational' models of thought, time and space. In the Euclidean sense, Dada is self-evidently a rupture – with the conventions of art history, 'right-minded' society and even with itself – and Dada represents an unequivocally identifiable moment within the chronological

progression of cultural history. Equally obvious, but less researched, is Dada's rampant affinity with 'irrational' models of time, space and mathematics and the movement's elliptical connections with humanistic and intellectual phenomena that are well outside its own moment and which at face value may have nothing to do with Dada whatsoever.<sup>17</sup>

Elsewhere I have explored Dada's relationship with Buddhism as an example of the extensive contact that can exist between the former and temporal and geographical points of reference well before and after those with which the movement is generally associated, including Paris of the 1920s. I will not deal at length with those connections here but the Buddhistic seam of Dada does emphasise Dada's asynchronous affinity ('unité') with others and also its awareness of human experience as timebound in the dual sense of rootedness to the present and the inevitability of death. All of this adds up to life as a philosophical 'problem' to which Dada-Buddha-ist answers can be offered.<sup>18</sup>

Tzara was well aware of the connection. In his 1922 Paris 'conférence', Tzara famously evokes his appealing phrase 'jemenfoutisme'.<sup>19</sup> Inevitably, and not unreasonably, *jemenfoutisme* has been largely understood as a nihilistic rejection or dismissal, but it is clear in Tzara's 'Conférence' that he understands and values the term less as a form of anarchy than as a Dadaised version of Buddhistic 'indifference'. Instead of looking sideways or thrustingly forwards (like Futurism) via modernist projects such as Alberto Savinio's *homme nouveau* or Breton and Surrealism, Tzara casts back in time to a form of kindred spiritualism: 'Dada n'est pas du tout moderne, c'est plutôt le retour à une religion d'indifférence quasi-bouddhique'.<sup>20</sup> In this sense Dada is not against knowledge (as typecast) but against rational Positivist knowledge. Ko Won spotted this in a book written half a century after Dada but perhaps still ahead of its time, in that Won's hypothesis about Dada and Buddhism was rejected by a formidable group of major scholars.<sup>21</sup> Among other examples, Won noticed the



connection between Dada proverbs and Buddhist *koan* phrases, which are variously frivolous, ambiguous, obscure and meaningful:

the manner in which [*koan* phrases] are employed might give an impression of a game of paradox, wordplay, joke, or, in the Dada-Surrealist sense, black humour; and yet they have a serious purpose, aiming at *satori* (enlightenment) and self-realization. The use of *koans* is [...] an art of immersing oneself in the hidden, inner treasures of universal truth, there to commune with the Buddhist state of nothingness in the sublime sense.<sup>22</sup>

Like a hypothetical cat in Schrödinger's box, Dada is more than one thing at once, both anti-knowledge and knowledge, recognising that in ethics as in cosmology antonyms and contradictions sit in truthful coexistence.

Dada looks backwards and forward across time and space, conceiving of itself as both ultra-modern and as part of a pan-historical continuum with human beings of all eras and places. It is aware of its return to Buddhistic spirituality and uses this for future living, drawing on medieval and renaissance cultural forms and references, populating its works with religious and other historical relics alongside beauty creams, sports cars, roller coasters and other wonders of the machine age.<sup>23</sup> For those of us in the twenty-first century, Dada has both evaporated and provided a powerful set of contradictions for living with ourselves and each other. Anticipating Jean-Paul Sartre in *L'Être et le néant* (1943), Dada recognises that existence is meaningless to the extent that there is no preordained reason or purpose to human life.<sup>24</sup> Dada and Buddhism both recognise that life can be unsatisfactory. Crucially, however, Dada and Buddhism see this meaninglessness not as a nihilistic void but as an opportunity

to fill our lives with sense of our own choosing: *Tâchez d'être vides et de remplir vos cellules cérébrales au petit bonheur.*'<sup>25</sup>

It is commonplace to present Dada as an ultra-modern shock of the new, accelerating the avant-garde project beyond Futurism and Cubism, and blasting open the road to the future for Surrealism and an innumerable body of antecedents by blowing itself up. And who could argue with Dada's place as a causal phenomenon in cultural history? Equally, Tzara's son Christophe has underlined the 'effet d'aveuglement' of Dada's spectacular appeal.<sup>26</sup> This 'blinding effect' risks losing sight of Dada's value as an ethical and intellectual phenomenon. Not that Dada is ethically or intellectually complete or perfect. As showcased in this special issue, much of Dada's philosophical content is partial, implicit, and oblique. This, of course, is the point, which is not stated but surely obvious. Pre-figuring Roland Barthes's 'death of the author', Dada thrusts us towards the vitality and ambiguity of texts themselves, and towards reader-centred hermeneutics and agency, encouraging us to exercise our own creativity, analysis and judgement in navigating the possibility and uncertainty of meaning in art, as in life.

Ethically, spiritually and hermeneutically, Dada is located not only in the past or in the future but in the now. In another oft-quoted Tzaraism, the poet describes Dada as 'le point où le oui et le non se rencontrent'.<sup>27</sup> At the 2021 Loughborough conference from which this special issue derives, it was repeatedly clear that 'oui' and 'non' could be substituted for various other terms, with Dada both evoking and evading a series of binaries such as radical and conformist (the movement was clearly both), sexed bodies and performative bodies, uncertainty (of texts, existence, or sub-atomic particles) and the moment where probabilities collapse into reality. So too 'oui' and 'non' in Tzara's statement could be substituted for past and future, focused into the immediacy of Dada but inflected towards both past and future by the encounter of those two binaries. The Loughborough conference gave a stage to the

hallmark immediacy of Dada performance, of something that by definition cannot be repeated happening in the now.<sup>28</sup> To this performance nowness we can add a more subtle but no less significant nowness of ethics and well-being, of attention to ourselves and each other. Chris Marker's *Sans soleil* (1983) reflects that we can change the present by changing images of the past. Dada implies a different take on this same idea: we can change the future by being in the present. Dada may be against the future, but it is decidedly for the quality of our own relationships with ourselves and each other in the here and now. To play Koan-style with language, Dada is for the future by not being for it. If we are in the present, mindfully mindless and filling it with *petits bonheurs*, then the future takes care of itself.

### **A Few Grams of Dada. Comedy and Sexual and Gender-based Violence**

In 2018 I had a chance meeting with a researcher from an African Studies department, Laura Martin, at an event about iconoclasm and academic media appearances on the television. Neither Martin nor I found our way onto the television, but through conversation the theme of dark humour and trauma produced an unlikely connection between my work in the French avant-garde and her research into gender and post-conflict with NGOs and local people in Sierra Leone.

An idea arose that was both absurd and made sense: what if the relationship between humour and trauma could be used not only diagnostically and post-hoc but in an applied way, to open up otherwise impossible conversations and actually tackle violence? In other words, how could we use humour not so much as a 'response' to violence (the commonplace 'coping mechanism') but as a dynamic to talk openly about the causes and consequences of violence and to do community engagement work normally left to tried and tested formats of talk and information giving? Sexual and Gender-based Violence (henceforth 'SGBV') is a deadly and serious international problem affecting Global North and Global South countries on a huge

scale. Emphatically, the use of comedy and humour would be used not to trivialise SGBV but, on the contrary, to try addressing it at a local level in recognition of the relationship already shown to exist between humour and violence in other contexts, such as military atrocities (where group mocking is a powerful driver) and the wider use of ludic, ‘incongruous’ approaches by international humanitarian NGOs such as Médecins Sans Frontières and Clowns Without Borders.

A 2019 pilot study in Sierra Leone was supported by Global Challenges Research Funding.<sup>29</sup> This prepared the way for an AHRC scoping grant that expanded the focus (comedy, theatre, dance and song) and ran a series of arts-based workshops on sexual and gender-based violence with NGOs and women and men in Sierra Leone and South Africa (2020–2021).<sup>30</sup> The two projects extrapolated principles associated with Dada and avant-garde practice – dark humour and violence, incongruity, risk, cultural experimentation, a belief in solidarity and human relations across unlikely locations (Buddhism-Zürich-rural Sierra Leone) – but very deliberately the projects did not involve any sort of attempt to ‘import’ or ‘reanimate’ Dada or any other outside movement into a regional, national or local context in Sierra Leone. Dada, after all, is dead.

Relatedly, a key component was the use of local comedians already working with communities about health issues through humour. What Dada gave to the recipe was a few grams of productive counter-intuition; its theoretical and practical basis in the interrelatedness of absurdity, humour and violence; and, by its example, a catalyst to put existing work and groups into new configurations (here, bringing well-established access-to-justice NGOs into collaboration with professional comedians and arts-based researchers). In Sierra Leone, where much of the direct fieldwork took place, a critical factor was the openness among NGO staff to experiment by putting familiar objects in unfamiliar postures and rethinking the relationship between the form and content of the NGO’s work (the

fundamental material presented by NGO paralegals to local communities was not changed but the manner of the NGO's presentation and self-presentation was significantly altered).

### **I Only Laugh when It Hurts**

Dada was a scream against violence, a scream in which pain and laughter pulse around each other and merge, like the landscape forms in Edvard Munch's iconic painting of emetic shock or in the affect hurled into the night by women at 'scream groups'.<sup>31</sup> The comingling of laughter and pain is fundamental to the connection between Dada and contexts that in conventional terms have little to do with it.

Reflecting on humour and violence in Nigeria, Ebenezer Obadare asks rhetorically: 'Why does laughter constantly reverberate in spaces and places where everyone (including those laughing) agrees there is little or nothing to laugh about?'<sup>32</sup> Quoting Achille Mbembe and Janet Roitman, Obadare then reflects that, "'laughter is inseparable from the fear inspired by the immediate present", one characterized by profound uncertainty'.<sup>33</sup> Obadare is writing in the context of a particular time and place, but it is striking that his reflections evoke not rigid specifics but rather a human capacity for response and affect that recurs in all manner of societies and historical periods, if not universally.

We do not need the permission of the leaders of art movements in order to think about those movements. Nonetheless, comparative study of Surrealism must at least acknowledge that ownership and usage of Surrealism was famously protected by Breton (not without serious challenge). Subsequently, Louis Aragon mandated that, 'Il n'est plus possible de considerer le surréalisme sans le situer dans son temps.'<sup>34</sup> Dada, on the other hand, arises out of disgust at the industrial-Imperial militarisation of the First World War but makes no claim for Dada ideology and practice to be limited to, or guarded within, a particular timeframe. Dada already knows that it is simultaneously specific and derivative and is open to the fact of

an ancient humanistic relationship between the arts, (dark) humour, violence and society found in innumerable cultural phenomena from Ovid and Surrealism (whether Eurocentric or diasporic) to the postcolonial theory of Mbembe and modern satire such as Zimbabwe's Magamba TV.

The functions and power of humour are a point where two further binaries – cultural specificity and universalism – come together. On the one hand, the above-mentioned project in Sierra Leone brought out clear cultural specificities regarding the local limits of humour (custom and ritual around secrecy were, for example, off-limits) and aspects of language, law, and socio-economics in the country. On the other hand, the project hypothesized and found general functions of humour also present in a range of other contexts, such as the potential for group cohesion, the need for laughter to be authentic if it is to be effective, and the capacity for jokes to open up topics and conversations that are otherwise closed. We were also careful not to assume that humour is always a positive energy. The neurological, physiological and social effects of humour are consistent across an extremely diverse range of ethical and moral experiences but its ethical and moral effect is undetermined. In SGBV as in violence generally, humour looks both ways. Humour, pleasure and play are widely recognized as essential drivers of human learning, memory, and behaviour. Simultaneously (rather than 'however'), it is an uncomfortable but essential fact that humour, pleasure and play can be drivers for perpetrators of violence. It is not uncommon for those who survive violence to feel contradictory, conflicting feelings towards perpetrators, even as they recognise and suffer from the effects of violence and cruelty. Like a Dada collage made up of different faces, humour is not a morally pre-determined 'good' but instead laughs in many directions at once. To borrow from Elza Adamowicz's 2019 study of Dada bodies, humour and laughter carry between battlefield and fairground and are to be found in both places at once.<sup>35</sup>

## **Black Dada**

These SGBV projects did not use Dada by name in non-European contexts, but Robin G. Kelley and Franklin Rosemont have showcased a large corpus of diasporic Dada-surrealist work that could potentially be used in that way.<sup>36</sup> This includes numerous racialized majority writers and artists operating outside the self-selecting and largely white male groups traditionally associated with the Parisian avant-garde.<sup>37</sup>

Today, the spirit and principles of Dada are prominent within the theory and practice of Adam Pendleton's *Black Dada*. Aligning with the abstracted but also clear and enraged language of Amiri Baraka's 1964 poem 'Black Dada Nihilismus' and the racialised violence of which the poem speaks, Pendleton's *Black Dada* 'merges two ideas: Dada, meaning 'yes, yes' and black as an open-ended signifier'.<sup>38</sup> Pendleton's 2015 'Black Lives Matter', which appeared at the Venice Biennale, articulated acute social and political concerns using a visual language informed by Dada.<sup>39</sup> As Kathryn Brown puts it, 'in contrast to [...] appropriations of African and African American art for the purpose of fuelling European expressive forms, Pendleton shows how Dada can be used to problematise racialised histories of art and the persistence of social inequalities in the present.'<sup>40</sup> Employing language that synchronizes with my earlier discussion of Dada's relationship to time, Pendleton describes *Black Dada* as 'a way to talk about the future while talking about the past. It is our present moment'.<sup>41</sup> Pendleton's *Black Dada Reader* wonderfully demonstrates Dada's elliptical genealogy, interconnecting photocopied texts by Gertrude Stein, Hugo Ball, Tzara among other Dada figures with writing by a cast of unexpected names including June Jordan and Sun Ra.<sup>42</sup>

**Send in the Clowns. Really.**

Pendleton's work has an explicit connection to Dada and other experimental forms (Jean-Luc Godard and Situationism are among other significant French-language points of reference). Less obvious, and therefore methodologically interesting for the discussion of Dada futures, are an array of other connections that are not explicitly connected to Dada but which strongly embody dadaist beliefs in absurdity and social good through performance and solidarity.

Doris Sommer references a seminal example. In 1995 the Mayor of Bogotá, philosopher-mathematician Antanas Mockus, sought to address chronic road safety problems by bringing in over 400 mime artists in place of police traffic officers. By increasing civic agency and responsibility among citizens through humour, satire and performance, the incongruous but serious campaign saw the number of road deaths fall by nearly 50 per cent during the Mayor's first year in office.<sup>43</sup>

When one starts looking for other contemporary instances of irrational, performative behaviour, rather than only for conscious manifestations of Dada post-Dada, a bewildering array of instances materializes. In the area of international aid and outreach, international humanitarian organizations such as Clowns Without Borders and Médecins Sans Frontières use ludic, experimental modes of performance to engage people (especially children in the case of CWB) affected by human and natural catastrophes. During the Bosnia-Serbian war, Iron Maiden vocalist Bruce Dickinson joined the Serious Road Trip, an unlikely and highly effective operation to take music, culture and solidarity into a warzone. As much as any current 'avant-garde' art movement, Pussy Riot demonstrate not only anti-clerical, anti-authoritarian iconoclasm but also the bravery and risk of identifying with 'degenerative' art in defiance of a violent regime (lest we forget, the experience of Dadaists in Berlin and those hunted afterwards during World War Two indicates the acute potential danger to those who associated with Dadaism). In Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, women facing chronic risk of abuse and murder turn wrestling and self-defence into fun and art, as featured in the documentary



*Luchadores* (2021).<sup>44</sup> At Mexico's border with the US, on 28 July 2019 the newly built border fence was reappropriated as a frame within which to erect a Teeter-Totter-Wall for children and adults. For just under 20 minutes, people from the separated communities of El Paso and Anapra were able to sit on opposite ends of seesaws and share play and friendship between a literal and figurative structure of hostility and hate.<sup>45</sup> Academic-activist Larry Bogad promotes human rights and democracy using experimental, non-violent approaches to resistance and protest. Bogad's approach is Dadaistically counter-intuitive in that he both resists and engages opponents and authorities. In place of bricks, petrol bombs and verbal abuse, Bogad promotes acts of benign strangeness, performative risk, positivity, and love within the notion of 'serious play'.<sup>46</sup>

None of these NGOs, activists, artists, performance groups and citizens are connected to the other by any sort of manifesto. However, their activities speak to something happening all over the world in innumerable instances: Dadaistic engagement with institutionalised violence and issues of social and environmental justice through culture and performance predicated on playful provocation, but behind whose apparent absurdism lies a thoughtful, counter-intuitive defiance in which anger is channelled into humanist positivity and hope.

### **Dada Intimacy and Persistence**

The discussion of Dada in a post-Dada world poses a question that is analogous to the hunt for dark matter and dark energy: how do we detect Dada in non-Dada contexts when it is not visible by name, is nowhere apparent in the conscious intentions of those conducting activities that seem to have a connection to Dada theory and practice, and may not even be present at all? To what extent should we worry about connections that we feel exist between one thing and another but which cannot be evidenced via the standardized use of sources, methods or

formalized theories? What does our anxiety at proving or disproving connections in certain ways tell us about ourselves and academic culture?

In a liberating approach to comparative study, focused not on fixed theory but on practice, craft, resemblance and feeling, Andrew Ginger thinks of comparative connections in terms of ‘persistence’ (the ways in which ideas, aesthetics, feeling and other phenomena resist arbitrary boundaries, such as overt authorial intention or different historical periods) and ‘intimacy’ (commonality) between one thing and another over distances of time and space.<sup>47</sup> To integrate comments about Dada intimacy and persistence within Ginger’s remarks about comparative study:

Aesthetic resemblances are of fundamental importance to such connections in comparative cultural study. Put another way, comparative study involves attending to how things feel or appear to be alike, to the sensual textures of what they share, of their sameness [Dada-Buddhist humanism, for instance, or the playful subversion of cruel authority at the US-Mexico border wall]. These sensations are those of persistence [‘Dada n’est pas du tout moderne’] and intimacy [‘Dada est un état d’esprit’]. Rather than analysing the history of culture [already not a very Dada thing to do], we might engage in aesthetic appreciation of the similar shapes, forms, moods even that we find across its vast expanses over place and time [‘Dada est tout, tout est Dada’], bringing together disparate things [Dada’s stock-in-trade]. We might accept that these are a fact of our experience of the histories of culture [Dada as a meta-theory and practice of culture]. I will argue that such attention to intimate sameness does not necessarily lead to the flattening out of cultural difference [Dada and the Dada movement do not disappear just because we compare them to other things], nor to marginalization and exclusion of what does not fit in [Dada is not consubstantial with punk rock, the

paradoxes of quantum physics, Clowns Without Borders, Extinction Rebellion, or the work of the Makeni Professional Comedians in Sierra Leone]. Instead – as has historically been the case – rich ways of appreciating sameness may enable the marginalized and subjugated to reassert their own value.<sup>48</sup>

Rather than having to choose between seeing Dada as a hermetically discreet movement or collapsing Dada into an historical irrelevance because it relates to everything and nothing, we can appreciate new forms of sameness between Dada and innumerable other contexts. In this article, I have put Dada in solidarity with a range of movements, organisations and causes that resist oppression and aim to help the marginalized and the subjugated to assert their own value. It should also be acknowledged that humanist movements and ideals are themselves often marginalised, subjugated and derided as ineffectual, isolated instances of neurosis, stupidity, or criminality. Thinking comparatively through intimacy and persistence, however, sees Dada as part of pan-historical humanisms in which the immediacy of myriad specific moments is both preserved and connected. Through its rampant eclecticism and sheer energy, Dada is super-charged with comparative connections of intimacy and persistence. Dada already knows about the potential and power of such connections. In intimacy with electromagnetics – having both nothing formally to do with science and an intimate, persistent affinity with it – Dada is sensitive to the vast range of conventionally invisible spectra (intimacies) lying outside human consciousness and sense fields. So too Dada champions strangeness not only as performance value but also and arguably more interestingly, as a fact (cf. quantum entanglement).

### **Conclusion. Invest in Dada Futures**

To borrow from Delia Ungureanu's magisterial comparative study of Surrealism, there remains an open question about where Dada is to be found in the twenty-first century, and what it means to understand that question not just in terms of conscious practice and aesthetic connections but in relation to Dada characteristics that can be forgotten in the rush to eulogize the movement's nihilism.<sup>49</sup> Indicatively, those characteristics (intimacies) include the constructive destruction of ego and self-centredness at a personal as well as national level; playful creativity not simply as 'provocation' or for its own sake but to actually make things. Human contradiction, imperfection, absurdity and risibility are understood here not just as a diagnosis but as techniques and as a secular-spiritual ethics: an appetite for constructive risk and one's own inherent ridiculousness; a profound disgust with so-called civilization accompanied by a playbook that is both heavily coded and open about how to live well with oneself and with others. Dada also offers built-in advice that explains why cultural movements cannot be exhausted and fixed definitely and that we should not worry about that. As formulated in Elizabeth Benjamin's important study of Dada and Existentialism, ambiguity is authenticity.<sup>50</sup>

From the shock of irrational maths in Ancient Greece to radical forgiveness after twenty-first-century terrorist attacks, the human spirit thrums with Dadaistic juxtaposition, absurd seriousness and oblique, difficult causality. Dada edified those things into a movement, in affinity with all peoples and place; but Dada also knew it only was passing through, a nothingness that relates to everything: 'Dada est un état d'esprit. C'est pour cela qu'il se transforme suivant les races et les événements. Dada s'applique à tout, et pourtant il n'est rien.'<sup>51</sup> Tzara may well have been against the future but he also knew that the future was coming.

And so to the present which, if it can be controlled, means control of the past; and control of the past means control of the future.<sup>52</sup> To proffer a colossal litotes, the present era is

not short of absurdism. Bogad has studied some of the numerous satirists and other performance artists who have stood for political election.<sup>53</sup> Politics itself, however, is one area that seems to remain resistant to the incursion of absurdist-rationalist principles within mainstream policy and manifestos. That is clearly one area of challenge for the future of Dada humanisms. However, if politicians were afraid that ‘Yes-No’ humanist principles are a non-starter for good governance and public appeal, they could learn a lesson or two not only from NGOs and performers using arts and humanities approaches but also from the Dadaistic intimacies of certain areas of business practice (business being generally given more seriousness in politics than third sector concerns). As highlighted in a 2015 report commissioned by Arts Council England and New Philanthropy Capital, the work of arts-based groups working in the criminal justice system reduces rates of re-offending and the huge associated financial costs. The methodological value of the arts is underlined by Tim Robertson, chief executive of the Koestler Trust and chair of Arts Alliance: ‘[the findings of the report] powerfully refute the stereotype of the arts as fluffy or cerebral. They demonstrate what those of us in this field already see – that the arts demand hard work, technical skills and collaboration, precisely the behaviours that offenders need in order to rehabilitate.’<sup>54</sup>

Reflecting on Zygmunt Bauman’s ‘liquidity’ as the description of personal alienation, isolation and globalized privatisation in the software-based era succeeding postmodernity, Giovanni Patriarca questions the modern subject in relation to three types: *homo economicus*, a cheerleader of positivist economics who has no anthropological or spiritual interests, avoids ‘ultimate questions’, and who sees human subjects only in terms of economic, mathematical and statistical legitimacy; *homo absurdus*, who emerges in the process of devolution from *homo economicus* in a state of ‘rootless nihilism and perpetual trouble, becoming violently accustomed to the perceived meaninglessness of life’; and *homo viator*, a subject driven by an inner need for ‘higher experiences’ and who is edified and sustained by cultural engagement,

thereby offering an alternative to *economicus-absurdus* and the dystopianism of liquid modernity.<sup>55</sup> Patriarca theorizes that through culture, creativity and renewal, *homo viator* can recover dignity and (re)discover an understanding with other people, while recognising and accepting limitations. The touchstones for Patriarca's theorisation are Russell Kirk, Oscar Wilde and T.S. Eliot. But it is intimacies of Dada – the gleefully unrepressed great-grandparent of Patriarca's *homo absurdus* – that can be found in many of the most striking practical, creative and human-centred efforts at dignity and resistance in the 'liquid' age of remote, unreachable global systems and power structures.

Many of the intimacies discussed in this article enact Dada values and incongruencies more emphatically than Dada itself. Militating against itself and welcoming its own demise, Dada acknowledged itself as an ephemeral work in progress and emphasized that Dada must and would be superseded. Dada is dead and Dada is still reaching its zenith.

The world is on fire, and the arts and humanities have been here all along. From the Ancient Greeks to Johan Huizinga's 1938 text *Homo Ludens*, it is already well understood that societies cannot flourish without artistic creativity and seriously playful resistance to critical threats. Dada offers an imperfect, unguaranteed solution to daily living and global challenges, and it offers hope – in Havel's sense – against violence and tyranny. Nostalgic for a new and better world in which it has no part, *homo dadaismus* is both gone forever and a figurehead of humanity's best chance for the future.

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<sup>1</sup> Tristan Tzara, 'dada / My Heart Belongs to Dada' in *Chanson Dada: Tristan Tzara* (Boston, Mass.: Black Widow Press, 2005), pp. 113–40 (p.121).

<sup>2</sup> Anon., 'Immersive science-art exhibition opens in Glasgow ahead of COP26' <https://www.ukri.org/news/immersive-science-art-exhibition-opens-in-glasgow-ahead-of-cop26/> [accessed 21 November 2022]

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<sup>3</sup> AHRC, ‘Our Vision’ <https://ahrc.ukri.org/about/vision/> [accessed 21 November 2022]

<sup>4</sup> Cultural Agents: Arts and Humanities in Civic Engagement. [www.culturalagents.org](http://www.culturalagents.org) [accessed 21 November 2022].

<sup>5</sup> *Disturbing the Peace: A Conversation with Karel Hvizdala*, translated from the Czech and with an introduction by Paul Wilson (London: Faber, 1990), pp. 181–2.

<sup>6</sup> In April 2021 Aston University announced plans to ‘sharpen its offering’ by closing the Department of History, Translation and Languages and solely focusing on Health, Engineering and Business, putting 21 permanent staff and 3 fixed-term fully at risk <https://theccwh.org/petition-in-support-of-the-department-of-history-languages-and-translation-aston-university/> [accessed 21 November 2022]. This example from Aston is indicative, given that such moves are commonplace. Comments about STEM are from Gavin Williamson (as UK Education Secretary, 2019–2021), quoted in John Morgan, ‘DfE ‘restructuring regime’ seeks to drive English sector change’, *Times Higher Education*, 16 July 2020 <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/dfе-restructuring-regime-seeks-to-drive-english-sector-change> [accessed 21 November 2022].

<sup>7</sup> See my open letter of 10 May 2021 to the Vice-Chancellor of Aston University, Alec Cameron, about proposals involving the Department of History, Translation and Languages [https://www.dropbox.com/home?preview=Aston+University+HLT+\(Stephen+Forcer\).pdf](https://www.dropbox.com/home?preview=Aston+University+HLT+(Stephen+Forcer).pdf) [accessed 21 November 2022].

<sup>8</sup> Indicatively: ‘Languages in the UK: a Call for Action by the British Academy, the Academy of Medical Sciences, the Royal Academy of Engineering and the Royal Society’ <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/languages-uk-academies-statement/>; ‘The costs to the UK of language deficiencies as a barrier to UK engagement in exporting’ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-costs-to-the-uk-of-language-deficiencies-as-a-barrier-to-uk-engagement-in-exporting>; ‘British Academy welcomes new research

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showing value of language skills to SMEs’

<https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/news/british-academy-welcomes-new-research-showing-value-of-language-skills-to-smes/> The report into language benefits welcomed here

by the British Academy was prepared by the Association of Translation Companies and, with Dadaistic irony... Aston Business School. [All accessed 21 November 2022].

<sup>9</sup> Scotland’s National Centre for Languages

<https://scilt.org.uk/Research/StatisticsonlanguagesinScotland/tabid/2914/Default.aspx>

[accessed 21 November 2022].

<sup>10</sup> My comment about ‘reconciling, denying and reconciling’ Dada commemoration is borrowed from the title of Thomas de Hartmann’s piano composition, ‘Holy Affirming, Holy Denying, Holy Reconciling’ (1989).

<sup>11</sup> Anon., undated press cutting, FP IV 586 (7164), Bibliothèque Littéraire Jacques Doucet, Paris.

<sup>12</sup> *Sept manifestes Dada* in Tristan Tzara, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Henri Béhar, 6 vols (Paris: Flammarion, 1975–1991), vol. 1, p. 81.

<sup>13</sup> *Le Surréalisme et l’après-guerre* [1947] in OC5, p. 65.

<sup>14</sup> Shelfmark 7164.

<sup>15</sup> Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1989).

<sup>16</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Le Temps des Méprises* (Paris: Stock, 1975), pp. 39–40, quoted in Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces* p. 24 and p. 184. For the track listing (Rough Trade, 1993) made to accompany *Lipstick Traces*, see <http://www.discogs.com/Various-Lipstick-Traces/release/906706> [accessed 21 November 2022].

<sup>17</sup> See Chapter 4 in Forcer, *Dada as Text, Theory and Thought*, pp. 105–32.



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<sup>18</sup> Forcer, *Dada as Text, Thought and Theory*, pp. 78–103. See also ‘Seeing Dada: A Dada Guide to Life, Death, and Radical (Self-)Acceptance’, forthcoming in Raluca Bibiri and Soren Alexandrescu with Stephen Forcer (eds), ‘Dada Visual’, special issue of *Images, Imagini, Images*, Journal of visual and Cultural Studies (CESI, University of Bucharest), 2023.

<sup>19</sup> Tzara, ‘Conférence sur Dada’, in *Lampisteries*, OC1, pp. 419–24 (p. 424).

<sup>20</sup> Tzara, ‘Conférence sur Dada’, p. 420.

<sup>21</sup> Ko Won, *Buddhist Elements in Dada: A Comparison of Tristan Tzara, Takahashi Shinkichi and Their Fellow Poets* (New York: New York University Press, 1977).

<sup>22</sup> Won, *Buddhist Elements in Dada*, pp. 98-99.

<sup>23</sup> As I argue elsewhere, Céline Arnould, Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia, Richard Huelsenbeck, Tzara and other Dadaists clearly viewed their own participation in Dada not as a separate phase but as part of longer-term development; Forcer, *Dada as Text, Theory and Thought*, p. 6 and *passim*.

<sup>24</sup> Elizabeth Benjamin, *Dada and Existentialism: The Authenticity of Ambiguity* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), *passim*.

<sup>25</sup> Tzara, OC1, p. 420.

<sup>26</sup> Personal letter from Christophe Tzara to the author dated 22 June 2001: ‘Il me semble en effet qu’une explication plausible de la situation que vous mentionnez c’est que l’éclat du scandale initial a produit un effet d’aveuglement sur le public et sur la plupart des critiques littéraires. Si on veut recouvrer une vue claire des choses, il faut essayer de guérir de cet aveuglement.’

<sup>27</sup> Tzara, ‘Conférence sur Dada’, in *Lampisteries*, OC1, pp. 419–24 (p. 424).

<sup>28</sup> Marcus views immediacy as a quintessential connection between Dada and punk rock, quoting Who guitarist Pete Townsend: “‘When you listen to the Sex Pistols, to ‘Anarchy in

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the U.K.’ and ‘Bodies’ and tracks like that, what immediately strikes you is that this is actually happening. [...] It touches you, and it scares you – makes you feel uncomfortable. It’s like somebody saying, ‘The Germans are coming! And there’s no way we’re gonna stop ‘em!’”. Quoted without source in *Lipstick Traces*, p. 1.

<sup>29</sup> Laura S. Martin, Caroline Bradbury-Jones, Simeon Koroma and Stephen Forcer, ‘Bringing inside out: humour, outreach, and sexual and gender-based violence in Sierra Leone’, *Critical African Studies*, 13:3 (2021), 356–73, DOI: [10.1080/21681392.2021.2005378](https://doi.org/10.1080/21681392.2021.2005378).

<sup>30</sup> Stephen Forcer, Helen Shutt, Laura S Martin, Marie-Heleen Coetzee, Aisha Fofana Ibrahim, Susan Fitzmaurice, Embracing Aporia: Exploring Arts-Based Methods, Pain, “Playfulness,” and Improvisation in Research on Gender and Social Violence, *Global Studies Quarterly*, 2:4, October 2022, ksac061, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksac061>. An abbreviated version of the project report submitted to the AHRC is available at <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/english/research/funded-projects/performing-arts-and-social-violence-innovating-research-approaches-sexual-and-gender-based> [accessed 21 November 2022].

<sup>31</sup> Samantha Lock, ‘All the rage: the women who meet to scream into the night’, *The Guardian*, 19 November 2022 <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2022/nov/19/all-the-rage-the-women-who-meet-to-scream-into-the-night> [accessed 21 November 2022].

<sup>32</sup> Ebenezer Obadare, ‘The Uses of Ridicule: Humour, ‘Infrapolitics’ and Civil Society in Nigeria’, *African Affairs*, 108:431 (2009), pp. 241–61 (p. 243).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted without reference by Maurice Nadeau, *Histoire du surréalisme* (Paris: Seuil, 1964), p. 8.

<sup>35</sup> Elza Adamowicz, *Dada Bodies: Between Battlefield and Fairground* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019).

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<sup>36</sup> Robin G. Kelley and Franklin Rosemont, *Black, Brown and Beige: Surrealist Writing from Africa and the Diaspora* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 2009).

<sup>37</sup> Kelley and Rosemont, *Black, Brown and Beige: Surrealist Writing from Africa and the Diaspora* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 2009).

<sup>38</sup> Thom Donovan, 'Adam Pendleton', *Bomb*, 114 (Winter 2011), n.p.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20160201150559/http://bombmagazine.org/article/4718/>

[accessed 21 November 2022].

<sup>39</sup> Pendleton's 'Black Dada Flag (Black Lives Matter)' (2015-2018) is a digital print on polyester flag.

<sup>40</sup> Kathryn Brown, 'From the Harlem Renaissance to Black Dada: Adam Pendleton's Entangled Histories', *Burlington Contemporary*, 7 (November 2022), p. 4.

<sup>41</sup> Kevin McGarry, 'Greater New Yorkers: Adam Pendleton', *T* (*The New York Times Style Magazine*), 27 May 2010 n.p.,

<https://archive.nytimes.com/tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/05/27/greater-new-yorkers-adam-pendleton/> [accessed 21 November 2022].

<sup>42</sup> On the genesis of the *Black Dada Reader*, Kathryn Brown notes that between 2011 and 2016 Pendleton produced around twenty spiral-bound copies of the reader, comprising texts he had selected and photocopied, before a version of it was published in book format in 2017. On Pendleton and socio-political justice, see also Antonia Rigaud, 'From Dada to Black Dada: Adam Pendleton's contemporary Dada activism', forthcoming in Erica O'Neill and Stephen Forcer (eds), *Tristan Tzara: Approximate Humanism*, special issue of *Dada/Surrealism*, 2023–2024.

<sup>43</sup> Doris Sommer, 'A Case for Culture', *MLA Profession* (Winter 2019)

<https://profession.mla.org/a-case-for-culture/> [accessed 21 November 2022].

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<sup>44</sup> My thanks to Myrto Tapeinou at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens for this reference.

<sup>45</sup> The Design Museum. Beazeley Designs of the Year

<https://designmuseum.org/exhibitions/beazley-designs-of-the-year/transport/teeter-totter-wall>

[accessed 21 November 2022].

<sup>46</sup> Larry Bogad, *Tactical Performance: The Theory and Practice of Serious Play* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>47</sup> Andrew Ginger, 'Comparative Study and the Nature of Connections: Of the Aesthetic Appreciation of History', *Modern Languages Open*, 1 (2018), pp. 1–9.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, p. 2.

<sup>49</sup> Delia Ungureanu, *From Paris to Tlön: Surrealism as World Literature* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

<sup>50</sup> Elizabeth Benjamin, *Dada and Existentialism: The Authenticity of Ambiguity* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016).

<sup>51</sup> Tzara, 'Conférence sur Dada', p. 424.

<sup>52</sup> ““Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past””, George Orwell, *1984* [1949] (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 44.

<sup>53</sup> Larry Bogad, *Electoral Guerrilla Theatre: Radical Ridicule and Social Movements* (London: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>54</sup> 'Of the three charities scrutinised in the report, the women's theatre company Clean Break was estimated to generate value of £4.57 for every £1 of investment per year, while Only Connect, which works with prisoners and ex-offenders, saved the criminal justice system more than £3.2m over six years by halving reoffending rates. Unitas, which uses arts participation to help disadvantaged young people get back into education, employment or training, was estimated to create £5.89 of value for every £1 of investment over young people's working lives'; 'Unlocking Value: the Economic Benefit of the Arts in Criminal

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Jusitce' <<https://artsincriminaljustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Unlocking-Value-NPC-Alliance-Report-October-2011-FINAL.pdf>> [accessed 21 November 2022].

<sup>55</sup> Giovanni Patriarca, 'Homo Economicus, Absurdus, or Viator? A Brief Philosophical Journey Into Modernity', Kirk Center, 3 November 2014  
<<https://kirkcenter.org/essays/homo-economicus-absurdus-or-viator/>> [accessed 21 November 2022].