

Dada's Boys: Identity and Play in Contemporary Art. The Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, 27 May–16 July 2006

In a year in which Dada has been subjected to blockbuster treatment in Paris, New York and in Washington, David Hopkins' compact exhibition, *Dada's Boys*, at the Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh, offered a refreshingly partial and intimate encounter with Dada and some of its putative conceptual offspring. Freed of aspirations to encyclopaedic coverage, it created an opportunity to see select works, in a mid-size gallery space, by Marcel Duchamp, Francis Picabia, Man Ray, Douglas Gordon, Jeff Koons, Roderick Buchanan, Keith Farquhar, John Bock, Paul McCarthy, Sarah Lucas, Martin Kippenberger, Matthew Barney and several others. The declared aim of the exhibition was to propose a 'provocative new perspective on dada, contemporary art and gender.' This article reviews both the exhibition, which ran for just six weeks in the summer of 2006, and the accompanying publication; a catalogue with a long essay by Hopkins also titled 'Dada's Boys: Identity and Play in Contemporary Art.'

Hopkins' well-known scholarly work on Dada and surrealism and aspects of contemporary art, together with his interest in issues of gender and identity, intellectually ground this exhibition. A number of 'thematic touchstones' are clearly established by the first handful of exhibits. Judicious selection and juxtaposition of works ensure that the themes resonate in different registers throughout the show as a whole as well as throughout the catalogue essay. A broad theme, clearly, is humour. Hopkins' project might have become a rather arid and worthy excursion into avant-gardist genealogy and the vexed question of male identity, were it not for the subtle (and occasionally unsubtle) wit with which the exhibition insinuates its hypothesis. It is already there in the punning title of the exhibition, which for Hopkins 'serves chiefly to evoke dada's ironically paternalistic role for a lineage of predominantly male artists concerned with developing themes of male identity.'¹ The cover of the catalogue bears nothing but the slick image of a black plastic joke moustache. A more apt signifier could not have been found: like the exhibition itself, it evokes a faint nostalgia for prankish old-school(boy) humour. It nudges suggestively at cross-dressing and male impersonation. It tickles art historical funny-bones by reminding us of Duchamp's assisted ready-made of 1919, *LHOOQ*, in which his rogue moustache 'de-faces' a reproduction of the Mona Lisa, and it makes knowing gestures towards a whole Dadaist/surrealist iconography of facial hair and the masculine ritual of shaving. Appropriately enough, the catalogue essay begins with a good joke told by Man Ray, salacious and absurd, about two wise old men contemplating in sanguine gestures and tones the vagaries of sex and desire. Hopkins argues that a love of jokes, play and wit are often expressions of what he identifies as the central concern of the exhibition: a particular 'self-reflexive' kind of masculinity, subjectivity and male identity 'in a specifically heterosexual register.'²



The dual themes of play and identity are cogently articulated at the outset in the first, and arguably the most persuasive, section of the exhibition. Two works encountered on entering the gallery space, separated by three quarters of a century, already suggest a subversive and semi-private dialectic between self and other, played out narcissistically by means of dressing-up, aliases, stand-ins, and implied transgressions of both masculine and artistic identity. Marcel Duchamp's *The Non-Dada* of 1922, a lesser-known ready-made, consists of a religious pamphlet showing the image of a chirpy, squeaky-clean lad, smiling for the camera. Hopkins uses the work as a 'perfect emblem' of the way in which New York Dada, as a homosocial network whose participants were 'unified by a quasi-adolescent sense of humour,' were able negatively to establish their identity.³ Here, the mummy's boy, hair brushed and parted, is emphatically the non-Dada. Read in Duchamp's mother tongue, he is the *no*-Dada. Significantly, this work is titled in Duchamp's hand and signed 'Rose' – his female alter-ego, whose shadowy presence lurks elsewhere, literally and figuratively, in the exhibition. Hopkins sees in such gestures a 'conceptual succinctness' that he regards as one of the defining legacies of Duchamp, Picabia and Man Ray.⁴ The *Non-Dada*'s juxtaposition with Douglas Gordon's *Self-Portrait as Kurt Cobain as Andy Warhol as Myra Hindley as Marilyn Monroe* (1996) is just one of the many suggestive and slyly comic pairings to be found at several points throughout the exhibition [fig. 1]. This passport-sized photograph shows the unshaven Glasgow-born artist wearing a cheap blonde wig and deadpan expression. As if to underscore its multiple 'inversions,' the backdrop to Gordon's cack-handed transvestism is provided by an inverted film poster. However, Hopkins' curatorial and discursive positioning of this image argues refreshingly for a reading (via Duchamp and others) that is predicated more on complex questions of male subjectivity than on gender mutability.



Figure 1: Douglas Gordon, *Self Portrait as Kurt Cobain as Andy Warhol as Myra Hindley as Marilyn Monroe*, 1996. Courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery, London.



There are other small works by Duchamp, Picabia and Man Ray in this first room. Together, they venture and substantiate the conceptual premises on which the exhibition is built. Many of them have a private, intimate, collaborative, improvised or ephemeral character emphasising Dada's and other boys' 'clubbishness.' Several weave in-jokes relying on the use of punning language. In a nearby room, yBa hipster pals Damien Hirst and Angus Fairhurst dressed in clown costumes, drinking and smoking, conduct on video a grotesque and meandering pub conversation.⁵ All are redolent of homosocial familiarity and shared humour and are, for Hopkins, vitally constitutive of a masculinist concern with identity and its contingency.

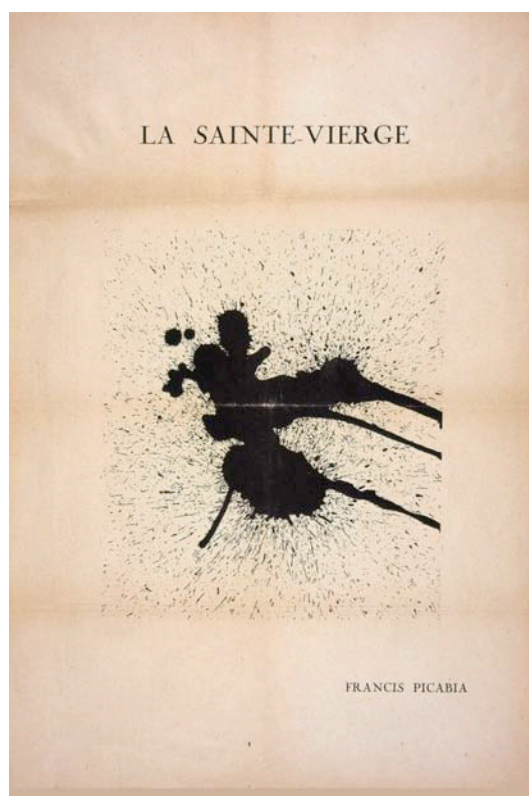


Figure 2: Francis Picabia, *La Sainte Vierge* (*Blessed Virgin*), in 391, no. 12, 1920. Courtesy of Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2007.

Most of these works rehearse some form of gender, aesthetic, bodily, sexual or moral transgression. They range from one of Man Ray's photographs of Marcel Duchamp as his feminine alias *Rose Sélavy* (1920-21) to Picabia's blasphemous ink-splat *La Sainte-Vierge* (*Blessed Virgin*) [fig. 2] to his machinist drawing *Voilà Elle* (*Here She Is*) from the journal 291 and Duchamp's cover, using a found matchbook showing two dogs sniffing each other's behinds, for a 1917 magazine, *Rongwrong*. In this room we are also introduced to more 'wrongness' and examples of Hopkins' playful curation: it is there in Keith Farquhar's *Kats Mask* (*Bum-hole eyes*) (2001), while up against one wall a man (in a 1995 video piece by Knut Åsdam) pees his pants. We see only his immobile crotch as urine seeps and spreads like a pale blush across his smart trousers. The play on and with masculinity here is



ambiguous: the differencing, 'manly' ability to urinate while standing is destabilised depending on whether the act is understood as wilful or as an *inability* to control the bladder/body. Not least by its physical proximity in the exhibition to Picabia's *Sainte-Vierge* and its connotative relation to the iconic urinal of Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* of 1917, Åsdam's *Pissing* is also made to participate in what Hopkins identifies in his essay as 'a major strand of modernist/postmodernist art concerned with the indexing of the body's processes via emissions, stains, traces and so forth.'⁶ There is, however, a caveat to this interest in the unrulier aspects of bodily processes worth mentioning: it is part of this exhibition's distinctiveness that Hopkins takes care to foreground a masculinist discourse of the body that is not of necessity indexed to guilt, trauma and abjection. While *Dada's Boys* does have its darker recesses (the inclusion of the work of Paul McCarthy springs to mind) with respect to post-war art in particular, Hopkins argues persuasively 'for a more affirmative view of male subjectivity than that which is on offer in the self-punishing tropes of "body art".'⁷

From these few examples of cunning juxtapositions alone – and there are many more – it should be clear that this is an exhibition that derives much of its sophistication and persuasiveness from its many knowing nods and winks to existing avant-garde traditions and academic discourse. In effect, the 'clubbish' collusiveness and witty self-ironisation that is so much Hopkins' subject here, has also become a feature of his curatorial method. This is not to say that the exhibition or its catalogue are rarefied – on the contrary, both are very accessible – but there is an exclusive dimension in the sense that, more than most exhibitions, *Dada's Boys* operates 'at two speeds.'⁸ The many art-historical asides, cross-references and insider-jokes ultimately mean that the audience is split between the initiates who 'get' the boys' jokes (the artists' *and* the curator's), and everyone else.

Hopkins' essay – and implicitly, much of the exhibition – makes important challenges to the tendency to read Duchamp in particular in terms of opposition to art, rather than engagement with social issues such as gender. In the context of Dada studies, this tendency might be seen as the flip-side of the way in which the work of women artists – pre-eminently Hannah Höch – has been read.⁹ Among other things, Hopkins encourages a nuanced apprehension of Duchamp's own adoption of female identity, which he sees as 'a kind of appropriation of femininity in favour, ultimately, of a male mythopoetic system.'¹⁰ That said, in the course of this and especially of his reflections on the men of New York Dada and their machinist and auto-erotic thematics, his argument tends to rehearse what has become something of an academic given; namely, an account of an unquestionable crisis of masculinity, the 'low ebb' of 'male self confidence' in the years around the First World War.¹¹ He highlights the rise of feminism and what he calls the 'spectre of the "femme-homme"' in France and elsewhere in the 1910s and 1920s as challenges to the ways in which men understood their gender roles.¹² There are of course grounds for the familiar claim that traditional male identity was compromised and that men may have felt emasculated by women's increasing political



validity and economic independence during this period. What is sometimes overlooked, and this appears to be the case with the thesis offered by *Dada's Boys* too, is that these artists were also alienated from dominant expectations of male behaviour. Such expectations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were predicated on ideas of duty and *devoir*, discipline, authority, control, order and acquiescence to hierarchy. These values pertained to social as much as to sexual life and to bodily decorum. It therefore seems especially pertinent that many Dadaist works and rhetoric involve not only transgressions of the body and gender, but also a playing out of, and playing with, more-or-less fantasised masculine identities. These include the unruly and wayward (bandits, vagabonds, con-men, fetishists, pugilists, sex-attackers, dilettantes, drunks and more) but also those that exist, disdainfully, on the margins of social life, such as the dandy and the aristocrat. Hence too, as negative identifiers, the many images in Dada of emasculated authority figures: generals, Kaisers, fathers and husbands. With regard to *Dada's Boys*, the emphasis on adolescent humour and the bachelor bonds of friendship between adult 'naughty schoolboys' might therefore also be considered in terms of a rejection of the culture of adulthood, marriage and (for many in the 1910s) military service.¹³ Given these factors and the historical context of Dada's emergence during the First World War, Peter Gay's wider observation that 'bravado joking is a whistling past the graveyard of physical fear or social uneasiness' has particular resonance.¹⁴

Although it is not made explicit, an underlying theme of *Dada's Boys* and of the masculinities it dissects is that of a particular kind of off-key amateurism. This can appear as a subversive counterpart to the 'private bluish victories' (as Tristan Tzara termed Dada hoaxes in 1919)¹⁵ in the face of the public male worlds of 'success': professional work, sporting prowess, paternal authority and so on. Hopkins' curation brings out an interesting tension between this amateurism and a concomitant 'masculine love of meticulous finish' in the work on show by Koons, Prince, Buchanan and Farquhar.¹⁶ Both could be seen as part of a particular masculinist poetics of dandyism. It is doubly significant that the Dadaists ironically celebrated 'dilettantism.' A familiar Berlin Dada slogan, which appeared in journals, photomontages and on one of the placards made for the *Erste Internationale Dada-Messe* (First International Dada Fair) in Berlin in 1920, urges 'Dilettanten erhebt Euch!' ('Dilettantes rise up!'). Intermittently throughout *Dada's Boys*, we are confronted with an ambivalent play with other kinds of amateurism. The inclusion of Martin Kippenberger in the exhibition, represented by a 1983 painting, *The Inner Life of a Laughing Sack*, is apposite because of the reflexivity of his own artistic and male persona. A perfect exhibit here would have been the amateurish 'calendar' shots of the beer-bellied Kippenberger posing (like so many 'readers' wives' in men's magazines) in his big baggy Pablo Picasso underpants in 1988.¹⁷ But Kippenberger is also fitting because he enacted in both his life and work so effective and conscious a dilettantism, in a performative, even Dadaist sense.



More straightforwardly, a short video piece by John Bock has the German artist flailing dementedly in a culinary and bodily chaos of his own bachelor creation: his blunt knife slips on plastic-skinned sausage, food tins spring open, fried eggs leap at him, red wine, cheap spaghetti and diabolical rollmops (the brand name translates as 'little devil's rolls') fling themselves at their yelping victim, staining the white of his business-like shirt. In a work that shares some superficial structural similarities but is much more redolent of a fraught struggle with habitual and compulsive (sexual) behaviour, Paul McCarthy's film *Cultural Soup* (1987) is, at first, something of an outsider in *Dada's Boys*. While Bock's wrestle with foodstuffs is both hilarious and compelling, McCarthy's frantic smearing of two child-dolls with mayonnaise while muttering 'the daddy begets the daddy and the son begets the son...', filmed home-movie style, is more sinister. It is only when viewed as a part of the exhibition as a whole, that McCarthy's inclusion makes sense. Beside the genealogical references to the father-son relationship and the Picabia-esque spatters, there is the 'amateur' look of McCarthy's work and the childish play with toy props that speaks of an emasculated and arrested subjectivity. As well as evoking a disenfranchised male world of alienated garden-shed hobbyists and DIY-ers, failure, inadequacy and incompetence become gestures in the work of Bock, McCarthy, Gordon and others here that consciously problematise traditional masculine identity even as they reaffirm separation from traditional 'feminine' spheres of competence.



Figure 3: Jeff Koons, *One Ball 50-50 Tank*, 1985 (from the series *Equilibrium*), glass, steel, distilled water, one basketball. Collection Emmanuelle and Jerome de Noirmont, Paris. Photograph © Jeff



Koons.

Upstairs at the Fruitmarket space, the second half of *Dada's Boys* was given over to more recent work, ranging from two key pieces by Jeff Koons from the 1980s to a specially-commissioned installation by Farquhar, *The Rules of Attraction: White Wine/White Cotton* (2006). The works by Koons were *One Ball 50-50 Tank* [fig. 3] and *Zungul Lord of Indoors* from the *Equilibrium* series of 1985. One a glass tank half-filled with water in which a basketball floats and the other a poster of a crowned, enthroned sporting hero surrounded by footballs, they are works that reference a commercial masculinist culture of sport, physicality and consumerism. All those 'balls' in such close proximity in the gallery to a work spawned by a fascination with testes and a testicular muscle (the 'cremaster' of Matthew Barney's eponymous film series) offers – for those in on the joke and with a sufficiently puerile sense of humour – another opportunity for an art-historical *and* adolescent snigger. However, for one commentator at least, the choice of *these* Koons works for inclusion in the exhibition was 'simply puzzling.' He argued that the inclusion of one of Koons' 'pornographic' works from the *Made in Heaven* series featuring his porn-star wife Cicciolina might have offered 'a far darker, morally ambiguous view of the vortex of male desire, pleasure and power.'¹⁸ Given Dada's own persistent interest not only in ciphers of masculinity but also in mass culture, advertising, and indeed *sport*, the Koons works in fact seem perfectly logical choices, particularly as they are juxtaposed with Roderick Buchanan's *Tombez la Chemise* (2002); slyly edited, silent film footage of football stars promiscuously embracing, patting buttocks and exchanging sweat-soaked shirts after play [fig. 4]. But, and indeed *because* of this, the lack of engaged, active, let alone fulfilled (hetero)sexual desire is significant. The *solitary* nature of much of the (hetero)sexuality on view in *Dada's Boys* is striking. As we have seen, there is a lot of homosociality and clubbishness, there are shared jokes and team sports. There is much physicality. There are rampant bodily functions and fluids in abundance. However, mutual sexual relationships (that is, with women) are almost entirely absent from the works in *Dada's Boys*. This is not a criticism, since it creates an unusual opportunity for engagement with masculine identity and sexuality that is *not* refracted through the prism of heterosexual desire and the power politics of gender. One intriguing side-effect of this exclusion is that the underlying homoerotics of *Dada's Boys* are allowed room to insinuate themselves. Another is that the masturbatory aspect (overt in some works) of such solitary dynamics unfolds. Although this does not appear to have been Hopkins' explicit intention, for this reviewer at least, the narcissism of the play with identity that this selectivity thematises exists in a highly suggestive dialectic relationship with the homosociality that is the show's other key theme. We are reminded of the Dadaist Walter Serner, who affirmed the dandy's rule: 'play yourself to yourself.'¹⁹





Figure 4: Roderick Buchanan, *Tombez la Chemise*, 2002, 1 hour loop DVD, colour.

Besides Lee Miller's photograph of Man Ray, there is one other work in the show by a female artist, a series of well-known 1990s self-portraits by Sarah Lucas. Hopkins includes Lucas 'as a kind of honorary "Dada's Boy"'.²⁰ His catalogue essay is careful to establish a genealogically sound basis for her inclusion, predicated on Lucas' own play on a range of Duchampian and other Dadaist gestures, but like the 'ladette' label of 1990s pop sociology (which Hopkins discusses in connection with Lucas), there is something a little too univalent, too hip, too knowing, and too flippant about the masculinist tropes with which she flirts in these poses to constitute a substantial part in *Dada's Boys'* critical anatomy. If this is not immediately apparent, it becomes so when the visitor reaches the implicit 'end' of the exhibition in the shape of Matthew Barney's film, *CREMASTER 4* [fig. 5]. Hopkins' essay acknowledges the leap that the viewer must make in order to accommodate Barney's satyr-dandy's warped quest for transformation of more than one kind on the Isle of Man, and journey through an out-of-bodily birth canal of sorts. But in terms of the exhibition's structure, its inclusion as conclusion is highly effective. Barney's figure, however absurd and unreal, nevertheless posits a distillation of the mobile, fugitive and multivalent nature of masculinity and male identity in art. Hopkins' observation that Barney's tale can be seen as 'an allegory of male self-definition, involving a merciless parody of traditionally-conceived virile masculinity' provides a more thought-provoking end to an exhibition of this broadly affirmative kind than might otherwise be expected.





Figure 5: Matthew Barney, *CREMASTER 4*, 1994-5, silkscreen laser disk in onionskin sleeve, prosthetic plastic bridal-satin banner and Manx tartan in self-lubricating plastic and acrylic vitrine, 91 x 122 x 104cm. Courtesy Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam.

Dada's Boys is an exhibition with a strong curatorial presence. The display of works and the catalogue essay are deftly composed mutually to affirm Hopkins's central thesis. As such, the exhibition has both a polemic and didactic character that – ironically – may be a touch too authoritative for some. However, for all their stridency, *Dada's Boys'* claims are not deterministic. There is enough playful and open-ended suggestiveness to the art, the inspired curation and the accessible scholarship that a pleasingly messy ambivalence remains. Dada's or otherwise, boys will always be boys.

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¹ David Hopkins, *Dada's Boys: Identity and Play in Contemporary Art*, Edinburgh, 2006, 15.

² Hopkins, *Dada's Boys*, 90.

³ Hopkins, *Dada's Boys*, 36.

⁴ Hopkins, *Dada's Boys*.



⁵ Damien Hirst and Angus Fairhurst, *A Couple of Cannibals Eating a Clown (I Should Coco)*, video, 1993.

⁶ Hopkins, *Dada's Boys*, 32.

⁷ Hopkins, *Dada's Boys*, 91.

⁸ A phrase used by the Zurich Dadaist Marcel Janco to describe Dada.

⁹ See for example Maud Lavin, *Cut with the Kitchen Knife: The Weimar Photomontages of Hannah Höch*, New Haven and London, 1993.

¹⁰ Hopkins, *Dada's Boys*, 61.

¹¹ Hopkins, *Dada's Boys*, 22.

¹² Hopkins, *Dada's Boys*, 33.

¹³ For a further discussion of these and related issues around the exhibition, see the round-table debate between David Hopkins, Debbie Lewer, Dominic Paterson and Keith Farquhar in *MAP*, 6 (Summer 2006), 34-39.

¹⁴ Peter Gay, *The Cultivation of Hatred (The Bourgeois Experience: Victoria to Freud vol. III)*, New York and London 1993, 368-369.

¹⁵ Tristan Tzara, 'Zurich Chronicle' in Robert Motherwell (ed.), *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology*, Cambridge Mass. and London, 1981, 235-242, 242.

¹⁶ Hopkins, *Dada's Boys*, 77.

¹⁷ Karola Grässlin (ed.), *Kippenberger Mutiples*, exhib. cat., Kunstverein Braunschweig e.V. and Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen, 2003, 36.

¹⁸ John Beagles, review of *Dada's Boys*, *MAP*, 7 (Autumn 2006), 48-49.

¹⁹ See my translation of Hanne Bergius' essay, 'Dada as "Buffonery and Requiem at the Same Time"' in Debbie Lewer (ed.), *Post-Impressionism to World War II*, Malden Mass. and Oxford, 2006, 366-380, which also discusses in greater detail the narcissistic aspects of Dada's dandyism.

