

Fuga Saeculi - Hugo Ball. Cabaret Voltaire, Zurich, 14 September 2007 – 29 February 2008.



Fig. 1: Zurich in the 1920s, postcard.

During the First World War, Spiegelgasse 1 in Zurich's Niederdorf quarter was the location of the *Meyerei*, an earthy Dutch restaurant and hostelry with a self-proclaimed reputation for 'great cosiness' and 'first-class wines.'¹ [fig. 1] Of course, the address is known today for a different reason: for five months from 5 February 1916, the back room, with its rudimentary stage and primitive facilities, also functioned as the venue for the nightly Cabaret Voltaire, known in modernism's vernacular as the 'birthplace of Dada.' As such, Spiegelgasse 1 has become over the years something of a leftfield pilgrimage site, itself one large stony relic – and reliquary – of a distant avant-garde. Back then, the long-suffering landlord, Jan Ephraim, presumably used the cellar beneath the building's thick medieval walls for storing the 'first-class wines' and other liberal quantities of alcohol that were consumed by his customers (a lively mix of locals, student groups and exiles from Europe's warring countries). Since September 2004, the 'Cabaret Voltaire' in the Spiegelgasse has been enjoying a second life as a small but dynamic arts venue with performance space (in the original cabaret room), exhibition facilities, shop, informal Dada 'library' and café-bar. Its programme of performances, art events, meetings, discussions, symposia and exhibitions is dedicated to Dada and to wider aspects of its putative contemporary offspring. Today, that same wine-cellar below the cabaret space has undergone a temporary transformation. It has become 'Hugo Ball's Crypt,' a subterranean space of (ir)reverent dedication, consecrated in homage



to the founder of the Cabaret Voltaire. This essay reviews this small, unconventional exhibition, *fuga saeculi – Hugo Ball* (13 September 2007 – 29 February 2008) and reflects on the wider implications of its suggestive thesis. It also considers some of the recent events staged in Zurich by the organisers to complement the show.

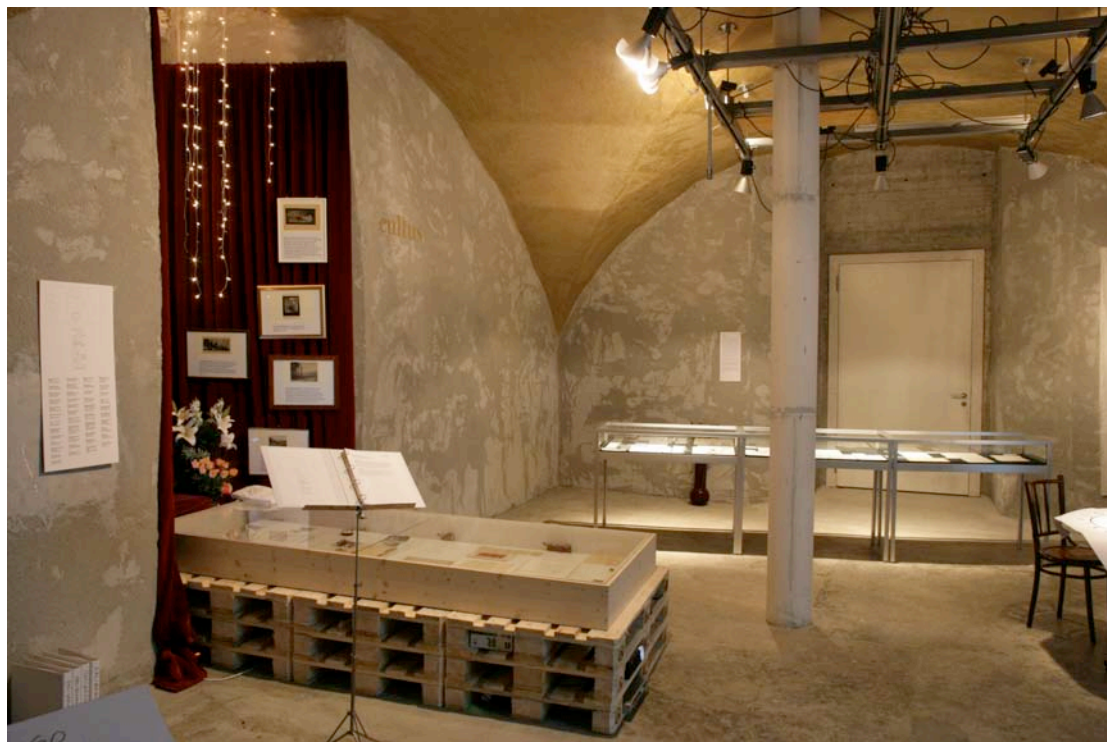


Fig. 2: Hugo Ball's 'crypt,' Cabaret Voltaire, Zurich, 2007. Photography: Martin Stollenwerk, Zurich 2007.

The exhibition in the Spiegelgasse 'crypt' is aptly titled. *Fuga saeculi* refers to the title and Latin motto of Hugo Ball's edited diaries, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*, ('Flight out of Time'), first published in 1927.² But it also resonates as the keynote to an exhibition which foregrounds above all the shifting metaphysical aspects of Ball's thought, life and work and indulges in the occasional foray into necromancy. Curated by Adrian Notz and with a supporting programme conceived by Bazon Brock and others, *fuga saeculi* hovers somewhere between documentary exhibition and programmatic installation, theoretical exercise and blasphemous hagiography. The exhibition's rationale is *not* straightforward biography. Its hermeneutics are more critical, playful and occasionally ironic. The stone walls and arches of the medieval cellar have been specially painted in gold and silver, turning the entire space into a reliquary of sorts [fig. 2]. The crypt is divided into three 'chapels' signified by Latin inscriptions on the walls: *communio*, *devotio* and *cultus*. The key exhibits relating to Ball's life and work are enclosed in a long, low, glass 'sarcophagus' projecting into the room before an illuminated 'shrine' to Ball. Other niches and cases contain further objects, props and exhibits, but aptly, the coffin-like case is the focal point of the exhibition [fig. 3].





Fig. 3: Hugo Ball's 'sarcophagus,' Cabaret Voltaire, Zurich, 2007. Photography: Martin Stollenwerk, Zurich 2007.



Death and the museum

The show itself is intimate, indeed miniscule by the standards of the encyclopaedic *Dada* exhibition at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 2005-6 and its subsequent versions in the USA. The majority of the 40 or so exhibits relating to Ball are drawn from the Robert Walser-Archiv in Zurich, augmented by some items from the Kunsthaus Zürich. A second display case houses an intriguing selection of documents and press cuttings. They relate to a pioneering exhibition on Hugo Ball curated by the young Harald Szeemann in Bern in 1957 to mark the thirtieth anniversary of Ball's death.³ A vase of dried up sunflowers stands nearby in the crypt in double homage to Ball and to the eminent and much-respected Szeemann, who died in 2005.⁴ Szeemann's interest in Ball grew from a university research paper he wrote on the *Freie Zeitung*, the paper Ball went to work for in Bern after he disengaged himself from Dada. It also came from Szeemann's own attraction to the cabaret form as an antidote to traditional theatre. As he recalls, in the 1950s, Ball was relatively little known and his posthumous reputation had stagnated into that of a 'Catholic thinker and writer.' The current exhibition in Zurich both revisits and redresses this image of Ball.

It is clearly not the remit of the 21st-century 'Cabaret Voltaire' to defer to conventional museological practice. Neither is its task to compete with the Kunsthaus Zürich and other local museums and galleries of art. The exhibition *Dada Global* at the Kunsthaus in 1994, rich in material though it was, exemplified the perennial problem of exhibiting Dada: confined to the glass case of the museum's expert culture, the dry, material traces and documents of Dada's active radicalism are bereft of their medial function. *Fuga saeculi* does not restore the function, but instead thematises the bereavement. Dada's artefacts in the museum or archive can be seen as doubly vulnerable – not only are they now the inert remains from what was a purposively dissonant programme of live action, they are also widely subject to classification in accord with a schematically consonant 'modernism.' Douglas Crimp prefaces his essay 'On the Museum's Ruins' (1980) with an apt quotation from Theodor Adorno:

The German word *museal* [museumlike] has unpleasant overtones. It describes objects to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which are in the process of dying. They owe their preservation more to historical respect than to the needs of the present. Museum and mausoleum are connected by more than phonetic association. Museums are the family sepulchres of works of art.⁵

It strikes me that *Fuga saeculi* grasps this thorny problem and cheerfully turns it to its own advantage by acknowledging and engaging performatively with both the 'dead' and the 'cultic' nature of the material traces of Dada – its relics. Seen from this point of view, the otherwise eccentric gesture of placing of Ball's effects into a glass sarcophagus acquires a sudden, trenchant logic.



Self-evidently, Death is a prominent trope of this exhibition. Even the opening, a midnight vigil of sorts, was timed to coincide with the 80th anniversary on 14 September of Ball's death. Death is both subtly thematised and less subtly theatricalised. The gothic *frisson* to the experience of entering, down a flight of steps, Hugo Ball's 'crypt,' right in the bowels of his former place of Dadaist work, is heightened by the discovery of his plaster death mask at the head of the 'sarcophagus.' There is obviously some black humour at work here, but there is also poignancy. Ball was just 41 when he died in Sant'Abbondio, in the Ticino, of an aggressive stomach cancer, leaving his wife, Emmy Ball-Hennings (whom he had married in 1920) and step-daughter, Anne-Marie. With the mask in the case are photographs and personal items from his life. Above his 'head' are – in frames and on a monitor – the so-called 'war pictures' (*Kriegsbilder*), rarely seen photographs of military and quasi-military manoeuvres from around the world with short, wry inscriptions in Ball's hand.⁶ They have been coupled with well-selected quotations from *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*.⁷ The conscription document or *Kriegsbeordnung*, dated 14 October 1915, calling him up to report for military service is there (which Ball supposedly tossed into Lake Zurich). Its presence together with the *Kriegsbilder* highlights the susceptibility of the individual's fate to the global mobilisations that drive the war. There are photographs of Ball as a smiling child and as an earnest-looking youth. The writer's mortality and his immortality, at least within the living 'cult' of the historical avant-garde, are laid unusually bare here.

A printed postcard bearing his darkly macabre and embittered anti-war poem, *Totentanz 1916* ('Dance of Death 1916') is also exhibited. The text itself plays on a double inversion of life and death. Not only does it revive the *danse macabre* tradition of the animate dead dancing to admonish the living for their vanity and remind them of their mortality, but it is also a blackly satirical rendering of a popular marching song, *So Leben Wir* ('This is How We Live'). The words are modified and their meaning inverted in the midst of war into a grim soldiers' chorus *So sterben wir* ('This is How We Die'). In an interesting parallel, a caustic drawing by George Grosz appeared under the caption from the same popular song, 'So leben wir alle Tage!' in a special issue of the Berlin journal *Der Blutige Ernst*, published in the aftermath of the war.⁸ According to Ball, his *Totentanz* was performed 'with the assistance of a revolutionary choir' on the second night of the Cabaret Voltaire. His letters indicate that Emmy Hennings sang it several times; there is also an atmospheric literary account of her charismatic performance of it in the Cabaret Voltaire, leaving the unnerved audience unsure as to whether applause would be appropriate.⁹

Dada as medium

Accepting that Dada's medial function is vital involves thinking about Dada less in the habitual terms of resistance, protest and anti-art and more in terms of conduit, agency and of medium in an expanded sense. One of the most thought-provoking aspects of *fuga saeculi* and its



events programme is the way in which the implications of Dada as 'medium' are teased out or emerge in unexpected ways. A striking feature of Ball's mysticism and religiosity was his profound belief in and concern with the medial power of the *word*. Throughout his life – before and after his conversion, or 'reversion'¹⁰ in 1920 to radical Catholicism – he was preoccupied with the 'innermost alchemy of the word,' its metaphysical properties, whether 'magical' or sacred.¹¹ In the midst of his involvement with Dada at the Cabaret Voltaire, Ball wrote:

We have now driven the plasticity of the word to the point where it can barely be surpassed ... We have loaded the word with strengths and energies that have allowed us rediscover the evangelical concept of the 'word' (logos) as a magical complex image.¹²

Ball was strongly drawn to asceticism. During his involvement with Dada, his asceticism was most often an aesthetic and theoretical strategy articulating a fundamental ambivalence about the relationship between spirit and matter, the word and the image. But in keeping with his developing and increasingly embittered cultural critique and with his theological consciousness, asceticism also became both that which had been lost, 'desecrated' (*entweiht*) within the culture of Prussian militarism, and that which was now a theological imperative for withdrawal from the contingencies of a dysfunctional earthly life.¹³ Ball's asceticism, complex though it is, is the framework in which many of his ideas about the 'word' are formulated. Following his radically devout return to the Catholic faith of his childhood, there are also repeated echoes and modifications in his writings of his earlier irrationalist interest in the 'magical complex image' of the 'word.' It is there in his preoccupation with ancient gnosticism,¹⁴ with the mystical Latin poets of the Middle Ages,¹⁵ the fifth-century mystic Dionysius Areopagita (also known as pseudo-Denis the Areopagite) and, increasingly, with the divine manifestation of the 'word.' 'That is the meaning of the coming of Christ,' he wrote in his *Byzantinisches Christentum* (Byzantine Christianity) of 1923, 'that the word becomes flesh and man is saved from abstraction.'¹⁶

It should already be clear that *fuga saeculi* does not claim to provide a comprehensive nor even impartial survey of Ball's life and work. It would therefore be both churlish and pointless to go looking for too many gaps in its coverage. However, in one respect the exhibition's partiality (in both senses of the word) can be questioned. Precisely because *fuga saeculi* foregrounds the metaphysical, emphasising Ball's mysticism and Catholic religiosity, in my view, it tends to suppress – or at least marginalise – the important *political* dimensions of his personal and intellectual theology, including his chiliasm and asceticism. Ball repeatedly formulated his critique of German culture, politics and ideology with and through the discourse of faith. His path to conversion and the inflections of his mysticism are only inadequately comprehended without a grasp of, among other things, his persistent quarrel with Luther, articulated most vociferously in his *Zur Kritik der deutschen Intelligenz*, ('Critique of the German Intelligentsia') and his attribution to the Reformation of the roots of modern Germany's evils. Anson Rabinbach has convincingly diagnosed in Ball's politics and theology



what he terms 'inverted nationalism.'¹⁷ In Ball's view, German corruption and materialism were protestant (personified by Luther), rational (personified by Hegel), and Prussian (personified by Bismarck). It comes then as no surprise that he envisages salvation in the form of a renunciation of contemporary Germany's value systems and a 'return' to catholic, mystic, German religion. Ball did not mince his words. In 1920 he stated publicly that he saw the re-instatement of religion in Germany as 'the most important German task of the present and the future, in which all other national tasks are involved.'¹⁸ In 1918 he was already privately lamenting that Hans Arp did not recognise that 'German mysticism was anti-state (*staatsfeindlich*).'¹⁹ He repeatedly associated his own spiritual experience with questions of the fate of the nation. In his reflections on 'conversion' itself, for example, he made clear that, just as personal pain is a pre-requisite for adult conversion, so might the war play an analogous role for a 'collective,' national, conversion and 'return to belief' (this having pre-emptively established that it is possible only to speak of conversion in its true sense as conversion to Catholicism).²⁰

That said, *fuga saeculi* does, undoubtedly, encourage a newly nuanced interpretation of Ball's Dadaism. This is much needed, particularly in the context of Anglo-American histories of Dada, which often note but fail to engage with the implications of Ball's Christian religiosity.²¹ It also signals the vital importance of the dialectic between concepts of 'spirit' and the 'material' in the German avant-garde. Looking into the glass sarcophagus and seeing the manuscript of the 'bruitist' 'Krippenspiel' ('Nativity Play') performed in the cabaret and the typescript of the 'First Dadaist Manifesto' *together* with Ball's pass to the Vatican library dated 11 October 1924 and his devotional picture of St. Joseph – 'arch-father of asceticism'²² – casts a new light on the documents and on works more commonly seen within a selective and homogenising 'Dadaist,' or indeed *museal* framework. In the manifesto Ball asks: 'How does one attain eternal salvation?' His answer: 'By saying Dada.'²³ The inclusion in the display of two editions of Richard Huelsenbeck's *Phantastische Gebete* ('Fantastic Prayers') raises still further implications for the spiritual and mystical aspects of Zurich Dada and the Dadaist investment in 'fantastic' language. It also reminds the visitor of the connections between Zurich and Berlin Dada. In confessional terms, Huelsenbeck can probably be best described as an atheistically inclined Protestant. He is in any case insistent about his 'antipathy to mysticism.'²⁴ As such, the inclusion of his work can be seen as a foil to Ball's. In conversation with me, curator Adrian Notz made a further point that, if only tangentially, at least three mystical traditions are involved in Zurich Dada – the Jewish (Tzara), the Christian (Ball) and the primitivist-cultic (Huelsenbeck).²⁵





Fig. 4: Hugo Ball in cubistic costume, Zurich 1916. Courtesy of Hugo Ball Nachlass/Robert Walser Archiv, Zurich.



With regard to the medial aspect of Ball's Dadaism, we may call to mind a well-known passage from *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*. Here he describes the experience, in 1916, of reciting his *Verse ohne Worte*, dressed in cubistic costume [fig. 4]:

Everyone was curious. So, because I could not walk as a cylinder, I was carried onto the stage in the dark and began slowly and solemnly:

gadji beri bimba
glandridi lauli lonni cadori
gadjama bim beri glassala
glandridi glassala tuffm i zimbrabim
blassa galassasa tuffm i zimbrabim ...

The stresses became heavier, the expression intensified in the sharpening of the consonants. [...] Then I noticed that my voice had no other choice but to take on the ancient cadence of priestly lamentation, that style of liturgical singing, like that which wails in all the Catholic churches of East and West. [...] For a moment it seemed as if a pale, bewildered young face appeared in my cubistic mask, that half-frightened, half-curious face of a ten-year old boy, trembling and hanging greedily on the words of the priest in the requiems and high masses of his home parish. Then, as I had ordered, the electric light went out and, drenched in sweat, I was carried down off the stage as a magical bishop.²⁶

The quasi-mystical experience Ball describes brings into blasphemous collision the sacred and the secular, the authority of priestly liturgy with the spectral horror and fascination of a childlike subjectivity and the abstractions of a mechanised world. It involves the iconoclasts' purgative urge and Ball's own Nietzschean irrationalism.²⁷ But the striking element in this context is Ball's surrender of his own individual volition: 'my voice had no other choice but to take on the ancient cadence of priestly lamentation.' Coming from another writer, this could be dismissed as not much more than an alluring turn of phrase, but given Ball's concerns, as we have seen, with the word as the *medium* for 'energies,' his concerns for the cleansing and purification of language²⁸ and his deepening involvement with ancient spiritual traditions, the implications of his statement reach beyond a secular and generic 'automatism.'

Ball's entry for 18 June 1921 in *Die Flucht aus der Zeit* reads:

When the word 'Dada' came to me [*mir begegnete*], I was called upon twice by Dionysios [Areopagita]. D.A. – D.A. (H...k [Huelsenbeck] wrote about this mystical birth, as did I in earlier notes.)²⁹

This is Ball's retrospective formulation, but the idea of the spirit of fifth-century mystic 'calling' on Ball with the word – his own doubled acronym – is suggestive. In the context of the avant-garde, séances, mediums, spiritualism, divination and telepathy are all more readily associated with surrealism in Paris than with Dada in Zurich.³⁰ Nonetheless, from the crypt of the 21st-century Cabaret Voltaire, another line of communication with the beyond was recently opened. The organisers of the *fuga saeculi* programme invited Julia Kissina, a Ukrainian



artist, photographer and writer based in Berlin, to lead a 'press conference,' in the form of a séance, with Hugo Ball.³¹ In 2006, Kissina founded the 'Dead Artists' Society' ('Klub der toten Künstler'). She uses a large ouija board with letters of the alphabet, the words 'yes' and 'no' and an upturned saucer as the medium to contact the dead artists. Together with others, she has already 'conferred' with Marcel Duchamp and Ilya Repin, among other artists. The 'press conference with Hugo Ball' was held in the 'crypt' on 22 October 2007 and Kissina's edited film of the proceedings was shown in the Cabaret Voltaire three days later, with the artist in attendance. It currently runs as a continuous video projection in the crypt, where the table used in the scéance also stands [fig. 5]. In 1915, shortly before leaving Berlin for Zurich, Ball remarked: 'It is a mistake to believe in my presence ... If I take a seat at a party, I can see, even from afar, that only a ghost is sitting there.'³² The parts of the film I was able to see documented the mediated stirring of Ball's 'ghost' to answer a number of questions from the beyond. Kissina said that she felt Ball was a somewhat reluctant interviewee. Nonetheless, he affirmed that he was responsible for the word 'Dada.' He conceded that Tristan Tzara was 'more important' for Dada than himself, and he confirmed that the famous photograph showing him dressed in his 'magical bishop' cubistic costume was taken in the Cabaret Voltaire and that he wore it there and on at least one other occasion outside the Cabaret.³³ With a keen sense of the paradox, reflexivity and absurdity that attended to the event, Kissina has given a fitting description of her own procedure as a whole: 'My works are an attempt at the translation of the unknown into the familiar, the unconscious into the conscious, the common into the uncommon, the serious into the unserious and the other way around.'³⁴



Fig. 5: Table used in Julia Kissina's 'Press Conference with Hugo Ball,' Cabaret Voltaire, Zurich, 2007.



Until I looked it up, I had not known that the etymological root of the word 'ouija' is the French for yes and the German for yes – *oui, ja*. News to me, it caused a jolt, because of course *dada* also means 'yes, yes,' in Russian and in other Eastern European languages. Given that, furthermore, the word 'Dada' was claimed by Huelsenbeck to have been found at random by placing a knife in a French-German dictionary (and in a French- and German-speaking country, among other languages), more symmetries and paradigms abound. At the risk of semiotic overkill, we are left with the realisation that on more than one level, it would not be entirely unreasonable to translate the word 'dada' with the word 'ouija.'

The medial, the spiritualist and the confessional are brought neatly together in another tongue-in-cheek element of the exhibition. Making use of an existing narrow recess in the cellar, Hugo Ball's crypt includes, under the inscription '*devotio*,' a confession-box of sorts. To enter, the visitor must push through a set of rudimentary foam curtains. Inside, there is nothing other than a copy of Ball's *Die Flucht aus der Zeit* on a string. Insulated in a space that is part padded cell, part confessional, the visitor is invited to 'commune' with the spirit of Ball through his words. It is a gimmick, but not without resonance given both the centrality of the 'word' in Ball's theology and the wider thematics of the show. Less successful is the 'fan-booth' in another niche, where visitors are invited to inscribe their own thoughts on the paper-lined walls. Still, and appropriately for the chapel dedicated to '*communio*,' someone had felt moved to reflect on the ineffable nature of Dada: '*DA und doch nicht DA ... aber wo denn?*'³⁵

Ja Ja to Dada

On 30 October 2007, Hugo Ball received another eminent visitor. From the crypt, Germany's most celebrated 'iconoclast' (as the German press routinely calls him, among other things), artist, filmmaker and dramatist Christoph Schlingensiefel, telephoned his ageing mother to ask her what 'Dada' meant to her.³⁶ It transpired that the benevolent parent had once recommended Dada to the boy-child Schlingensiefel, on account of the 'sound' ('Klang') of the word. A fitting answer, received telephonically in the 'family sepulchre' (Adorno) with an *ersatz* father (Bazon Brock) waiting above. Ball and Schlingensiefel are hardly kindred spirits. But it is striking that, in radically different ways, they are both drawn to grapple with, so to re-new, the weighty complex of the German *Gesamtkunstwerk*. If Ball's way to the redemption of theatre was through Wassily Kandinsky's conception of the total work of art, Schlingensiefel has grasped the German bull directly by the horns with Wagner's *Parsifal* at Bayreuth (2004). More prosaically, other momentary echoes of Dada have rung out around Schlingensiefel. In 1920, John Heartfield and George Grosz published their angry polemic 'Der Kunstlump' ('The Art Scab') in Berlin in which they declared: 'The title "artist" is an insult.'³⁷ In unwitting assent, one enraged Viennese onlooker at Schlingensiefel's controversial action *Bitte liebt Österreich* ('Please love Austria,' 2000) in the capital searched for some time for the



most violent insult she could muster to throw at him before spluttering: 'Du ... *Künstler* du!' ('You ... *artist* you!').³⁸

Schlingensiefel's communion with his mother in the crypt was by way of a prelude to an event intriguingly billed as 'Christoph Schlingensiefel spricht "Ja"'.³⁹ The evening was conceived as part of the 'Passion of Functionality' ('Passion der Funktionalität') section of an extensive programme devised by Bazon Brock, widely known in Germany and beyond for his work as a prolific writer, speaker, teacher and unorthodox theoretician. The exchange between Brock and Schlingensiefel took place on the tiny stage upstairs in the 'Cabaret Voltaire' before a good-sized audience. It was conceived as a father-son 'initiation rite' of sorts. The premise is suggestive. Given both Ball's religiosity and Dada's tendency to blasphemous inversion, we were appropriately confronted with the (un)holy Trinity of Father (Brock), Son (Schlingensiefel) and Holy Ghost (Ball). As was to be expected, the discussion was far from organic. It lurched and meandered into many surprising territories. I will sketch briefly just some of the routes of the discussion. In my view, they provide some useful stimuli for the way we think about Dada and the possibilities for a critical aesthetics today. It should be noted, however, that this is my own impressionistic rendering only – it is not a 'transcript.'

The evening could be read in parallel with the fractured narrative of 'salvation' that runs through *Flight out of Time*. Hence, the exchange began with Brock outlining – via Ball – the grim spiritual and intellectual situation in the years immediately prior to the outbreak of the First World War. The Church as a site of at least potential resistance was impotent, reduced to what Ball described as a "redemption factory" of little importance.⁴⁰ Brock set up broad conceptual parameters for thinking about Ball and the ensuing crisis of intellect that came with war in Europe. A kind of critical paralysis was symptomatic of this crisis. For Brock, the incessant 'compulsion to confession' ('Bekennniszwang'),⁴¹ or the broader need for ideological co-ordinates, becomes critical at a point at which the individual and wider culture are disenfranchised from 'logic.' At that point, irony becomes the refuge for the artist, but offers no lasting healing, only a placebo. In Ball's case, the crisis involved the impossibility, in the face of the bankruptcy of contemporary culture, of substantive concepts. It is at this moment that the critical subject is faced with his/her own ineffectualness and that the attraction to (in this case religious) conversion, into the void, becomes strongest. Brock's diagnosis of the situation indeed echoes Ball's own despair. In the last year of the long war, Ball wrote:

I am beginning to understand why renunciation has become sovereign in Germany, why an agony paralyses the spirits; why the few heads still living fall prey, partly to a fruitless aestheticism, partly to a fatal belief in evolution. Whether we will or not, we succumb to an overpowering system of profanation that is difficult to escape because there is barely any possibility of spiritual and material existence outside of it.⁴²



And in the light of Ball's *Critique of the German Intelligentsia*, published in 1919 but begun in Zurich during the war, Brock's introduction made particular sense: it effectively established the interrelated crises of Enlightenment rationalism on the one hand and the culture of German militarism on the other, two preoccupations that most exerted Ball in the book.

Proceedings lightened over the course of the evening. Schlingensief gave an engaging description of his earliest experiences of his father's amateur 16mm films. Evidently alive to the creative possibilities of the 'law of chance' from an early age, he noted with impish glee the unintended effects that this unreliable medium could produce – from absurd doublings to, best of all, the film accidentally burning up during projection. Some idea of the rhetoric play that characterised parts of the exchange between Brock and Schlingensief can be conveyed by one example. Schlingensief's reflecting on the process of cutting film, prompted Brock to interject that the 'first' cut was that made in the body of Christ by the spear. An absurd doubling of another kind and the dialectic between spirit and matter insinuated itself again.

Schlingensief is clearly aware that a vapid *épater le bourgeois* stance is prone to swift enervation, after which the aspiring provocateur becomes little more than court jester. He and Brock both articulated justified reservations about a contemporary view of Dada (or indeed of Schlingensief's own public persona) predicated on its prankishness or on the expectation of scandal. Brock argued that Dada is the sensation of the banal and involves a 'theology of normality.' For Brock, it was this aspect of Dada among others that the French – André Breton for example – failed to grasp. At this point, the two Germans (on stage in Switzerland, we should remember), rather took their life in their own hands by embarking on a half-mischievous, half-serious discussion about the nature of Swiss politics, ethics and morals that ranged across 'hollowed out' mountains to the Matterhorn as a Toblerone box by way of the extreme exertion expended by the Swiss in order to maintain precisely the 'normality' that – in turn – had provided the critical conditions for Dada's growth in Zurich. With an audience other than the urbane one assembled here, it might have ended very differently.

In the wake of all this, Schlingensief's final 'initiation' was low-key but fittingly wayward. He inscribed a pair of painted and decorated, bastardised life-buoys. Appropriately, their identity as 'victory garland' or 'funereal wreath' was declared as unfixed. When the Father (Brock) invited the Son (Schlingensief) in the name of Dada, to say 'ja' to life and the world, the errant child replied in the words of another deceased channeller of energies – Joseph Beuys: 'Ja, ja, ja, ja, nee, nee, nee, nee, nee...'⁴³

By means of its reassessment of Hugo Ball, the exhibition *fuga saeculi* challenges many popular and habitual ideas about Dada, its mysticism and about this singularly complex individual. Here, Ball's 'flight out of time' and his eremitic withdrawal from profane modernity are probed both for their intellectual origins in the rejection of a mechanistic culture and for



their spiritual motivation to an 'inner departure and breakthrough to the language of God.'⁴⁴ Christian Bauer led an illuminating and wide-ranging discussion at the cabaret the following night around the phenomenon of the 'sacrificium intellectus' using the cases of Karlheinz Stockhausen, Anselm Kiefer and Botho Strauß as well as Ball as his subjects. For Bauer, 'Dada is symptom, diagnosis and therapy in one common border zone.' 'The word D.A.-D.A. is made flesh.'⁴⁵ The exhibition and the events at the Cabaret Voltaire opened up many ways of thinking about Dada. Perhaps most lucidly, *fuga saeculi* surely refutes the statement made by Paul Dermée in Paris in 1920: 'Dada is an utterly a-religious attitude, like that of the scientist with his eye stuck on his microscope.'⁴⁶

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¹ 'Bekannt für grosse Behaglichkeit ... Prima Weine,' as the regular Meyerei advertisements in the Zurich press of 1916 claimed. With the exception of the Adorno passage, all translations in this review from the German are my own. My thanks go to Adrian Notz, Raimund Meyer, Thomas Zacharias, Bazon Brock, Christian Bauer and others who offered generous help, good conversation and a warm welcome in Zurich.

² Hugo Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*, Duncker & Humblot, München and Leipzig, 1927. For an English translation of *Die Flucht aus der Zeit* (following a later edition from 1946) see John Elderfield ed., *Flight out of Time: A Dada Diary by Hugo Ball*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1996. A facsimile of the first (German) edition has been generously made available as a pdf document by the exhibition organisers and is available to anyone via the Cabaret Voltaire website at www.cabaretvoltaire.ch. The website also has details of the full, ongoing programme of events and includes information in both German and English. At the time of writing, the first of three planned volumes of the eponymous 'reader' – a collection of short essays and critical texts – has been produced by the Cabaret Voltaire (in German).

³ *Hugo Ball 1886 bis 1927*, curated by Harald Szeemann at the Kleintheater, Kramgasse 6 in Bern, 24-27 September 1957.

⁴ Szeemann too had placed a bouquet of sunflowers in that first exhibition, and then as now, the venue was a small, subterranean, space – a little theatre. Harald Szeemann, 'Errinerungen' von (und an) Harald Szeemann (2004) in the Cabaret Voltaire reader *Hugo Ball: Fuga Saeculi* vol. 1, 2007, 11-12. The text is reproduced from the recent, comprehensive publication Tobia Bezzola and Roman Kurzmeyer eds., *Harald Szeemann – with by through because towards despite. Catalogue of all Exhibitions 1957-2005*, Vienna, 2007.

⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, 'Valéry Proust Museum,' quoted in Douglas Crimp, 'On the Museum's Ruins,' in Hal Foster ed., *Postmodern Culture* Pluto Press, London and Sydney, 1983, 43-56, 43.

⁶ These date from the period in 1915 when Ball was working in Berlin as an editor, for the periodical *Zeit im Bild*. See his letter to Käthe Brodnitz of 9 April 1915 in Gerhard Schaub and Ernst Teubner eds, *Hugo Ball. Briefe 1904-1927* Wallstein Verlag, Göttingen, 2003, vol. 1, 75-79.

⁷ These were assembled by Christian Bauer, who also gave a talk at the 'Cabaret Voltaire' in connection with his research and the exhibition (see below).

⁸ George Grosz and Carl Einstein eds, *Der Blutige Ernst*, vol. 1, no. 4 (Sondernummer 'die Schieber'), 1919, 12-13.



⁹ Ball, *Flucht aus der Zeit*, 6 February 1916, 80. The evocative description of Emmy Hennings performing the song and its apparent mesmerising effect on the audience appears in Kurt Guggenheim's epic semi-autobiographical novel, *Alles in Allem*, Artemis Verlag, Zürich, 1957, 455-156.

¹⁰ This term is used in Bernd Wacker, 'Einführung' in Wacker ed., *Dionysius DADA Areopagita. Hugo Ball und die Kritik der Moderne*, Ferdinand Schöningh, Paderborn, 1996, 8.

¹¹ Ball, *Flucht aus der Zeit*, 24 June 1916, 106. For a more detailed discussion of Ball's concern for the word in the context of his theology, see Ansgar Hillach, "'Das Wort als ein Gottwesen von unentrinnbarer Wirkung,'" Hugo Balls Normsetzung gegen die Zeitkrankheit oder: Die Wiedergewinnung des Symbols durch den Logos,' in Wacker ed., *Dionysius DADA Areopagita*, 241-263. For a wider discussion, see the important essay by Richard Sheppard, 'Dada and Mysticism,' in Sheppard, *Modernism – Dada – Postmodernism*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 2000, 266-291.

¹² Ball, *Flucht aus der Zeir*, 18 June 1916, 101-2.

¹³ See Ball, *Flucht aus der Zeit*, 3 May 1918, 221.

¹⁴ See e.g. Hugo Ball, *Byzantinisches Christentum* (first published 1923), Benziger Verlag, Einsiedeln, 1958.

¹⁵ While reading a book of these mystic writers, Ball noted: 'All these poets are ascetics, monks and priests. They despise the flesh and all ballast. This world holds no enchantment for them ... Poetry for them is the ultimate expression of the essence of things and thus is hymn and worship. Their poetry is one of divine names, of mysterious seals, and of spiritual extracts.' Ball, *Flucht aus der Zeit*, 21 July 1920, 266.

¹⁶ Ball, *Byzantinisches Christentum*, 107.

¹⁷ Anson Rabinbach, 'The Inverted Nationalism of Hugo Ball's *Critique of the German Intelligentsia*,' introduction to Hugo Ball, *Critique of the German Intelligensia*, trans. Brian L. Harris, New York, Columbia University Press, 1993, vii-xl. The essay is also included in Rabinbach, *In the Shadow of Catastrophe: German Intellectuals between Apocalypse and Enlightenment*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997, 66-94.

¹⁸ Hugo Ball, 'Aufbruch und Wiederaufbau,' in Hugo Ball, *Der Künstler und die Zeitkrankheit*, ed. Hans Burkhard Schlichting, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 273-296, 293.

¹⁹ Ball, letter to Emmy Hennings (9-11 April 1918) in Schaub and Teubner eds, *Briefe*, vol. 1, 252-3, 252.

²⁰ Hugo Ball, 'Die religiöse Konversion' (1925) in Ball, *Der Künstler und die Zeitkrankheit*, 336-376, 342-343.

²¹ Notable exceptions are to be found in the exemplary work of the anglophone Germanists Philip Mann, Richard Sheppard and Anson Rabinbach.

²² Ball, *Flucht aus der Zeit*, 22 June 1921, 296.

²³ Hugo Ball, 'Das erste dadaistische Manifest.' For a published facsimile see Ernst Teubner ed., *Hugo Ball (1886-1986) Leben und Werk*, Publica, Berlin, 1986, 155-156. It should be noted that Ball himself regarded this manifesto as an expression of his growing doubts about Dada (*Flucht aus der Zeit*, 6 August 1916, 108-110). His cynicism is evident in the next line: 'How does one become famous? By saying Dada.'

²⁴ Richard Huelsenbeck, *Memoirs of a Dada Drummer*, ed. Hans Kleinschmidt, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1991, 28.

²⁵ Elements of these are brought together in the statements by other Zurich Dadaists too. For example, Marcel Janco described the Spiegelgasse Dadaists' 'creed' as 'our faith in a direct art, a magical, organic, and creative art, like that of primitives and of children.' Janco in Willy Verkauf ed., *Dada: Monograph of a Movement*, Wittenborn, London, 1957, 21. It is fitting that the exhibition echoes and affirms the overtly and covertly mystical and religious registers of the book after which it is named. As such, it acts as a counterweight to the argument in Tom Sandqvist, *Dada East: The Romanians of the Cabaret Voltaire*, MIT Press, Harvard, 2006.



The preceding Dada exhibition at the Cabaret Voltaire, also curated by Adrian Notz, was based on and inspired by Sandqvist's revisionary thesis.

²⁶ Ball, *Flucht aus der Zeit*, 23 June 1916, 105-6.

²⁷ I have discussed in detail the wider implications of iconoclasm for Ball and Dada in a series of research papers, publication forthcoming.

²⁸ See Ball, 'Das erste dadaistische Manifest,' recited at the first 'public' Dada evening at the Zunfthaus zur Waag, Zurich, 14 July 1916 and *Flucht aus der Zeit*, 24 June 1916, 106.

²⁹ Ball, *Flucht aus der Zeit*, 18 June 1921, 296.

³⁰ In Paris in the early 1920s Robert Desnos went into trances and ventriloquised the spirit of *Rose Sélavy* (Marcel Duchamp's alter ego). See also André Breton, 'Entrées des Médiams,' in *Littérature*, no. 6, 1 November 1922, 1-16.

³¹ For more on the wide range of Julia Kissina's work see www.kunsthalle-zoo.de and Anna Kremser, 'Rollenspiele' in the Cabaret Voltaire reader *Hugo Ball: Fuga Saeculi* vol. 1, 2007, 23-27.

³² Ball, *Flucht aus der Zeit*, September 1915, 44.

³³ Indeed, several factors make it likely that Ball did perform the *Verse ohne Worte* in costume in the Cabaret and at the First Dada Evening at the Zunfthaus Waag on 14 July 1916.

³⁴ Julia Kissina quoted in Kremser, 'Rollenspiele,' 24-5.

³⁵ 'There and yet not there ... but then where?'

³⁶ The film of this exchange and many other clips relating to the Cabaret Voltaire's recent activities can be viewed at www.rebell.tv.

³⁷ John Heartfield and George Grosz, 'Der Kunstlump,' *Der Gegner* 1, 10-12, 48-56. There is an abridged translation in Anton Kaes et al, *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1994, 483-486.

³⁸ www.schlingensief.com (the incident was caught on film and can be viewed at www.youtube.com).

³⁹ 'Christoph Schlingensief speaks "Yes".'

⁴⁰ Ball, 'Die Kulisse,' in *Flucht aus der Zeit*, 11.

⁴¹ The term *Bekennniszwang* has a particular and difficult resonance in the context of post-Holocaust Germany that is not readily conveyed by the translation.

⁴² Ball, *Flucht aus der Zeit*, 28 April 1918, 219.

⁴³ Translating roughly as 'yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, no [or 'nah'], no, no, no, no,' this refers to Beuys' *Fluxus* concert of 18 December 1968. It has been directly compared to the Dadaist poetry of the Cabaret Voltaire, and to a sermon, though as Brock and others have pointed out, it also involves a more phlegmatic appropriation of local (Rhine-Ruhr area) dialectic habits in conversation. For the former readings see e.g. Martina Dobbe, 'Sprache als plastischer Prozess,' in *Joseph Beuys. Zeichen aus dem Braunraum – Auflagenobjekte und grafische Serien*, Kunstmuseum Bonn, Bonn, 2005, 25-38.

⁴⁴ Stephan Hegglin, 'Byzantinisches Christentum,' *Hugo Ball Almanach*, vol. 12, 1988, 47-66, 58.

⁴⁵ Christian Bauer, 'Balls Symptome und der Engel Ordnungen,' in *Fuga Saeculi*, 17-18, 17. See also Bauer, *sacrificium intellectus – Das Opfer des Verstandes in der Kunst von Karlheinz Stockhausen, Botho Strauß und Anselm Kiefer*, forthcoming in April 2008.

⁴⁶ Paul Dermée, 'What is Dada!' in *Z1*, Paris, March 1920, in Dawn Ades ed., *The Dada Reader: A Critical Anthology*, Tate Publishing, London, 2006, 248.

