Lecture on Dada by Stefan Wolpe

AUSTIN CLARKSON

I am not a Dadaist, and I don’t say it apologetically. I learned very much from them in my early youth, because what they did attracted me enormously. I learned very much from their tendencies, which were mine at the time in 1920. I learned that all things are in the immediate reach of the human mind, that, if not of the human mind, the objects are adjacent to each other, the spectacles of the universe. Objects are terribly lonely and helpless things. That gives them their haunted look. And as long as they look haunted, they are useful. They always look haunted. That is the infinite breadth of objects.

Once one has incorporated into one’s art certain obsessions of the Dadaists of forty years ago—

Stefan Wolpe gave this Lecture on Dada in 1962 at the campus of C. W. Post College of Long Island University, where he had been Chairman of the Music Department since 1957. It was one of a series of lectures on the arts organized by Wolpe and the painter Jules Olitsky, who at that time was also a member of the Post College faculty. It was Olitsky who proposed to Wolpe that he talk on the subject of Dada. The lecture was given in a room in the campus Administration Building and was attended by about thirty colleagues and students.

The lecture was tape recorded, although the recorder was not turned on until after Wolpe began to speak. He opened with a few remarks read from prepared notes, but he then continued extemporaneously. The prepared remarks have disappeared, but a notebook survives in which he jotted down in pencil some preliminary thoughts on the topic.

The tape was first transcribed by Howard Rovics, who came upon the tape while helping Wolpe to catalogue his music. I have since revised and corrected that transcript and with the assistance of the editors of this journal prepared the lecture for publication. The text of the lecture has been reduced by about one-third, the principal excision being the bulk of the question period. No attempt has been made to regularize Wolpe’s grammatical and linguistic usage, which is so colorful and characteristic. Hesitations, some reiterations of ideas, and various passages that do not contribute significantly to the central theme have been deleted. I have attempted to line out the text in such a way as to clarify the thought and give some indication of the rhythm of Wolpe’s delivery. The complete text will be available in the edition of Wolpe’s lectures and essays now being prepared for publication.
for example, extreme positions of suddenness,
of extremely unforeseen turns of events—

once one has incorporated into one's art extreme
contradictions as a feasible form of sequence of the movement of thought,

once one has incorporated into one's art the simultaneities of all kinds
of similar though unrelated happenings, incidents,
or dissimilar, though related happenings,

moves of tones,

moves of voices,

then one has ceased to be a Dadaist,
because one has learned to make use of these things,

which then were enormously new and radical,
in a rational way.

The mind has extended the views of the world
in a way of connecting everything with everything,

like God's eye (to take a theological point of view)

connects everything with everything.

Now, since that is the case where all these radical, extreme, innovations,
as suddennesses,
contradictions,

extreme positions,
shocks,

simultaneities,

dissociations, et cetera,

once these become workable elements of a composer's daily practice,
then the mind, the creative mind,

makes use of them in as rational a way as possible
within all its hierarchic abilities

to put objects together in a meaningful way. . . .

*The moon has come in the reach of my grasp,*

*Then a lost shell somewhere at the bottom of the Mediterranean*

*Can find its way to the notes, which daily I am writing.*

It is a sort of poetic trance, poetic transactions,
in which objects move into all directions,

from all directions,
everywhere.

The boundaries have disappeared—
this is what the Dadaists tried to make disappear—

the boundaries have disappeared,
and art has attained infinity,

has become highly attractive again.
I was born in Berlin, and
came early in contact with the radical movements
(artistically speaking) of Germany.
I came in touch with the Dadaist movement in the year 1920.
That was two years after the collapse of the Kaiser Reich.

The Bauhaus1 was the place in which modern art was being taught, experimented on.
Where Gropius taught,
where Klee taught,
where Feininger taught,
where Kandinsky taught,
where Schlemmer taught,
where van Doesburg and Mondrian came to give lectures,2
and I, as a young lad, lectured myself about highly abstruse things
like the miraculous proportions and that sort of thing.

We did learn then (and I think Klee taught us these things)
to bring anything in relationship to anything.
I am not a painter (I am a composer),
but I participated at these lectures of Paul Klee.3
He made us look for objects in the street.
And we all went out with a little luggage
and collected everything what we found—
from cigarette bottoms,
to little files,
to little screws,
to little fragments of letters,
to bread crumbs,
to dead birds,
to feathers,
to milk bottles...
tiny little objects, big objects,
haunted objects with no use.
And these objects became our friends, meaning,

1 The Staatliche Bauhaus in Weimar, founded by Walter Gropius (1883-1969) in 1919.
2 Paul Klee (1879-1940), Lyonel Feininger (1871-1956), Vassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), and
Oskar Schlemmer (1888-1943) were Masters of the Bauhaus with whom Wolpe formed a particular
attachment. Theo van Doesburg (1883-1931) and Piet Mondrian (1872-1944) visited from Holland,
although van Doesburg lived in Weimar for some time.
3 The Israeli painter Mordechai Ardon (formerly Max Bronstein) was a close friend of Wolpe's.
In an interview recorded on Nov. 27, 1979, Mr. Ardon recalled that Wolpe had attended classes
at the Bauhaus and had made designs of various kinds along with the other students.
we really extended our eyes, like humble people, to the little unseen things, which became formal elements in a design to be set up.

We had to combine things—
a spiral at the bottom,
with an artificial eye,
with a shoelace—
and we had to use these things independent upon their subjective meaning.

We had to use them as formal elements, and as formal elements they became neutralized, so a dead bird existed only in its formal textural relationship.

And we learned a certain callousness in relation to the objects, because we observed them only formally, and not empathetically, without any empathy.

That was a tremendous experience, because many of us grew up in academies with the severe training which taught us logic, though we didn’t understand, really, what that was good for, because it was nothing else but staying in one area of thought, and that didn’t interest us at all.

We immediately learned from collecting these thousand objects that thoughts must be probably, as objects are, coming together from many dimensions in a many-dimensional space—so thoughts must behave that same way.

If one can connect an artificial eye with the feather of a goose, so one word can leap out into any other word, and connections are established.

Connections are a great drama, because we didn’t know what a dead herring has to do with an aspirin bottle once we put them next to each other.

But it was a startling combination, and things didn’t continue on too even a level.

I remember the experience of the adjacencies of opposites. That was a new concept—
a new experience which then became a concept (perhaps the experience was preceded by the concept)—that all things are in the reach of the human mind, and that to connect is a mental act, depending on the will to connect.

If I don’t want to connect your nose tip with your earrings, I don’t. However, if I wish to connect it, I can do it.
I grew up in Berlin,
but Weimar is not very far from Berlin,
and we all traveled to Weimar
like pilgrims to Jerusalem or Mecca.

In Berlin I came in touch (just in touch) with the Dada movement,
of which certain people became close friends of mine,
though I was young.

But I was a bold honest open fellow.
So I came in touch with young Dadaists,
which later became my friends,
like Kurt Schwitters, Hans Richter,
and a strange guy called Hugo Baader.4

I came in touch with these people and the youngsters who lived together,
poets, composers, painters.
We gave our first Dada performances.

One could have come to these movements for many different reasons.
Some people were terribly disgusted and disappointed
with the trends of the times.
There was a big war, 1914 to 1918.
We all starved terribly.
The slogans didn’t make sense to us.

People were in a state of despair
about their whole insufficiency,
their whole inefficiency of cultural values,
that cultural values cannot take care of themselves
as cannons can take care of the fate of man.

And many people in despair about the helplessness of culture
became Dadaists as a form of revolt.

They said, if nothing makes sense but murdering and cutting people to pieces,
then art, and poetry, and philosophy doesn’t make sense either.

And these people formed during the war, in 1916,
a famous cabaret in Zurich,
where the emigrés of all the world came together—
all the people who were refusing military service
in distaste about the directions which the fate of man takes—
and there they performed their protests against

4 Kurt Schwitters (1887-1948), the collagist and poet, lived in Hanover and did not belong
to the group of Berlin Dadas. Hans Richter (1888-1976) was a painter and filmmaker. Wolpe mixes
up two members of the Berlin group: Hugo Ball (1886-1927) and Johannes Baader (1876-1957).
The poet Ball was the founder of the Café Voltaire in Zurich in 1916, where the Dada movement
began. Baader, of no fixed occupation, was the most uninhibited of the Berlin Dadas. Wolpe straight-
the lovely, beautiful, helpless situation
of the painting,
of a piece of music,
and of a poem.
Culture became so helpless as the objects I spoke about—
the little artificial eye of a goose,
of a shoelace,
of a cigarette box—
helpless little things which stand there.
So part of Dada was an act of getting rid of all cultural responsibilities
in defense of the singular cultural aspiration of man.
They tore down culture in order to free man from any kind of prejudice
that culture can save man from endless slaughter.
That was the point of view which I couldn’t grasp, because I was too young.
I would have needed more time to see and to grow.
We only suffered.
We didn’t eat.
We froze terribly.
And my father, who was then an officer, preached silly slogans to us,
which didn’t make sense at all.
But he was only so preconditioned in that specific culture
that he didn’t know of any other possibility.
So that was one thing,
one of the revolts,
and one of the disgusts,
one of the attempts to save racing fallacies of culture,
the singular voice of man.
I came for other reasons there.
I had a severe academic training which, in view of what I wanted to do,
didn’t make sense altogether.
But then
forty years ago Schoenberg was a relatively young man of thirty,
and he was not in Berlin.⁵
And those people taught us the things we didn’t want to know,
because it didn’t concern us anymore.
So naturally the other teachers, the new teachers, weren’t yet born.
It took me another fifteen years to teach young people.
But what we knew was how to attack a piece of music.

⁵ Wolpe would probably have joined Schoenberg’s composition class had he lived in Vienna. But by the time Schoenberg came to Berlin in 1926, Wolpe was already performing and composing for cabarets, the theater, the Novembergruppe, and for various left-wing political organizations.
We just start to smear on it,
the same smear which led Duchamp to put on Mona Lisa a moustache.

Or, as he said in a Museum of Modern Art panel,
"The good thing about a Rembrandt painting is that
one can use it as an art form."

These are terrorizing statements.
They have terrible implications for me,
as I'm on the other side. I cannot make use of them.

But a similar terror plagued me, namely, here was a piece of music—
and I was capable of writing fugues five in a minute,
I was that well trained.

But inside of me that was not what I wanted.
So I took the shoddiest kind of tune, a gutter tune,
and combined it with a fugue of Bach.

It was an act of violation, a kind of act of vengeance,
which satisfied me terribly much.

I'm sure my conscience was in a bad shape.
I must have suffered terribly while under that sin,
because it's a sin.
Though I intended it as revenge,
I also got punished.

I was an honest fellow and couldn't saw off my guilt.

When I showed this to my teacher (he was a famous theoretician of seventy-four),
he hit me in the face and threw me out.

That was nothing new to me, because I grew up
continually beaten up by my father.

But one thing besides the act of vengeance became of interest to me,
namely, that an extreme condition of isolation,
of dissociation between two events
can be established as an aesthetic experience.

That means I can really put dirt on a flower, or smear iodine on a rose,
and can take that act of bringing two opposites together
as a position of conceptual intention, or intentional conception,
to bring together, to combine, to connect two opposites.

Because the classical position doesn't know of the absolute opposites.
The classical position knows of antitheses, which then have to be
consolèd in a form of synthesis.

6 Alfred Richter (1846-1919), a celebrated pedagogue, choral director, and writer of textbooks
on harmony, form, and piano playing, was the son of Ernst Richter, a Thomaskantor in Leipzig.
In the last years of his life Richter taught at the Klindworth-Scharwenka Conservatory in Berlin. His
death at the age of seventy-three (not seventy-four) must have occurred soon after this episode.
But that two things coexist in a totally isolated, dissociated form,
and you still receive a form,
the sensations of a strange relationship of estrangements,
   that was fantastically new to me.
Today one doesn’t need to practice Dada.
I don’t practice it at all, because I’m no Dadaist whatsoever.
But it has become the formal element which allows the two opposites,
two completely disparate things to be brought together,
   like you put a monkey next to a clock.
Now that leads to great consequences, namely,
   that the opposites as such disappear.
Or certain opposites like death and life,
   painful opposites, unpleasant opposites, remain.
I remember when I was at Black Mountain,
somebody wanted to photograph me with a skeleton.
She made a skeleton out of flowers—
   she put flowers, and roses, and green leaves.
And so then, I remember, I embraced that fellow.
   I didn’t sense it as a joke,
but I sensed it as a form of anticipation and incorporation
   of an artistically grave situation of opposites.
It would be wonderful to reside as a living person
   next to one’s dead body.
   That’s not possible.

So our first program started, and I was very enthusiastic,
   and became music director of this little enterprise of young fanatics
   who liked to bring wrong things into the right connections—
   things which can be easily persuaded to join the other side.7
I had eight gramophones, record players, at my disposal.
And these were lovely record players
   because one could regulate their speed.
Here you have only certain speeds—seventy-four8 and so on—
   but there you could play a Beethoven symphony very, very slow, and very
   quick at the same time that you could mix it with a popular tune.
   You could have a waltz,
   then you could have a funeral march.
So
   I put things together in what one would call today
   a multifocal way.

7 Wolpe is here recalling his experiences with the Berlin Dadas.
8 Actually 78 r.p.m.
Multifocal way is if I face you people here, everyone looks different. Everyone tries to behave as the other person, but virtually doesn’t. And everyone has a different faith, a different life of his own, different forms of associations, meditations, ideas, visions, and so on. So something was there established which was another obsession of the Dadaists, the concept of simultaneities.

The concept of simultaneities is one of the most truly fascinating things. Today it is a workable element, a concrete element you work with, like a drill or a hose. It is a tool. It means what repeatedly happens anyway, what happens in a street situation, what happens on a canvas, what happens to every six, seven, twenty people of different trends, [who] find themselves at a moment of junction. What I call the panorama of activities, where, within certain confinements, spatial confinements certain things absolutely opposed, absolutely dissociated, that have nothing to do with each other, are brought together.

[The first movement of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony is played at 78 r.p.m. and 33.3 r.p.m. simultaneously on two phonographs.]

If one worried that poor Beethoven suffers a heart attack because the music is played too quick, or he’s extremely slow on the other hand, it doesn’t matter. The main thing was to put together many things of the same thing, like you put together one piece of music, and you play it in one speed on one record and another speed on another [record, like observing two people who run with different speeds. And if you observe street situations, you find the same thing—somebody stumbles, somebody goes very slowly, somebody rushes, suddenly there comes a car, there comes a bird—

Virtually what you experience is the incorporation of diversity of tempi, diversity of characters, or that the same thing can exist under a variety of conditions, as we can exist under a variety of conditions—
only that we bring this into one focus.
Which means that one revises the concept of sequences.
Sequence didn’t exist, because each instance of the sequence had to share with all other instances of other sequences at the same time.
So what you had virtually was nothing but multiple instances knotted together.
That was a tremendous experience for me.
It was the same experience which, later on, photographers made use of by imposing one picture on another one.
And everyone knows that as completely normal today.
Now this was the experience of yesterday.

First Questioner: It seems to me you got a certain pleasure out of this experience. Do you get a pleasure out of the act of combining the opposites together, or out of the by-product of the act?

Wolpe: I would think both.
To hear a piece of music at the same instant under different conditions is like living . .
Suppose you would be allowed to live your life in one instant, the life of your childhood, your adolescence, your young manhood, at the same time.
That is possible as an experience, because it depends entirely on your time sense, on how much of your life you always relive, and how much of your life you cannot fuse into an experience of your present actuality.

It is both.
I see myself walking rather quickly, and, at the same time, I see myself going very, very slowly.
That means it was a kind of multiple exposure, a superimposition of various different aspects of the same thing.
This experience led to a central experience, the experience of density.
The experience of density is today a central experience in music, which means that really things are happening within a containment or confinement.
It’s like the aquarium where you have fifty or a hundred fishes running around, and now, instead of having fishes running around, imagine you have little objects running around, little pencils, watches running around.
Imagine this for the sake of poetic transaction.
It is possible to bring not only together things of the same type,
but to really bring together different things.
It is not fifty or a hundred people
trying to reach the train at 5:40,
some people go this way,
some people go that way,
All are involved in reaching the train.
Imagine that these people would now move
where the space is not directed in one direction,
but the space is directed in multiple directions,
because multiple directions are directions which people move into.
Now you don’t have only people,
but imagine you have the plants, stars, water, everything!
That was a new experience of density
involving multiple aspects of the same thing.

Things exist where from one word you make five other words.
You use permutational devices.
You put the r at the beginning, the f in the middle, and so on.
So now you can do this with the same body,
you just change the sequence, the order of sequences,
which means the order in which the things follow.
Picasso did this, many people did this, it’s nothing new.
I mention that because that has become a serious concept in music,
what we call “aspects” today,
where we join the release from one subject matter
[to] a great many opposite aspects and bring them together
at the same instant.
So that we see a thing in a thousand layers,
we see a thing not in its empirical sequence,
but we rearrange the things for the purpose of getting a
different sequence.

Now I would like to play a piece of mine,
a work for three pianos,
where what then was really a bold and never-heard-of assemblage
of multiple aspects of the same thing
has become today a normal workable procedure
of a composer who knows what he is doing.
Then, one didn’t know so well
what one was doing,
one wanted only to try out how the thing comes out.
But in music one can try out things,  
and the musical material is very benign in its behavior.  
It doesn’t come in and hit you in the face back.  
One tries out and discovers numerously many interesting things,  
and later on one masters these things,  
and knows exactly what to put together  
in order to get the blessing of a lively simultaneity.  
There is something new in this kind of simultaneity,  
namely, so many things happening that you can move like in a landscape.  
The composer offers you a large territory through which you can move.

[“Chant,” the first movement of “Enactments for Three Pianos,” is played on the phonograph in a performance by Russell Sherman, Toshi Ishyanagi, and David Tudor.]

Many things are happening at the same time,  
curves hugely expanding,  
curves enormously contracting,  
new curves,  
a sound,  
a hit,  
a tone,  
a silence.

These are not random situations, they’re highly calculated,  
but one experiences also the disparity of different qualities of events.  
For example, the maximum activity, while much is going on in music,  
finds in a minimum activity  
its silence is a complementary condition.

I can have deeee-KA!  
and then all of a sudden shhhh.

Burst out into acts,  
then the acts can crumble,  
and I have very quiet passages.

By which is meant that you have in this kind of music  
a kind which was also one of the early Dada obsessions, or interests,  
namely, the concept of unforeseeability,  
non-influence,  
non-directivity,  
you cannot explain.  
It means you cannot infer what is going to happen.

That means that every moment events are so freshly invented,  
so newly born,
that it has almost no history in the piece itself
but its own actual presence.
It has its presence, its now situation,
and then the now situation is joined with another,
with the next now—
an unfoldment of nows!

So that was a new situation, that one operates with an ensemble of antinomies.
One can say that things which don’t have anything to do with each other
heighten and shuffle each of the focuses involved.
One can also say that the things which have nothing to do with each other
create a new ensemble of extraordinary attractions.
That was important, because today became again a workable element
to make opposites adjacent,
as one can talk to a person about serious things
in the presence of Times Square noises.
It is a question only that art, exposing these situations,
makes an irrevocable situation out of them,
whereas one has the feeling that if one speaks in Times Square
about serious things in the presence of noises and turbulences,
that the situation has nothing to do with oneself,
though it has.
I exist in my helpless loneliness,
in my unique, individual separateness,
against the background of things
which I can incorporate in what I’m doing,
or which I can leave out.

You say that it is nothing, because it has nothing to do with you.
Then it has nothing to do with you.
When nothing has nothing to do with you,
then you don’t give a damn.
You’re not involved.
But of course you can at any moment involve yourself,
at the risk of facing Times Square,
and still continue the great talks you have to do with your person.

Another Questioner: What joy would the Dadaists have gotten from, as
André Breton said, shooting a gun into a crowd?

Wolpe: Well, I’ll tell you.
I composed this Kurt Schwitters little opera, Anna Blume,9

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9 An Anna Blume von Kurt Schwitters (1929) is a scene for tenor and piano. The singer is described in the title as "Musical Clown."
and I went with Schwitters from Weimar to Jena. There was again one of those séances and Schwitters had given a recitation of his sound poems. Sound poems are those poems where you combine vowels and diphthongs—

[He ad libs a sound poem for about twenty seconds.]

He recited one of those poems, and he had twenty white mice in a glass on this table. It was a hall in Jena University. There must have been three thousand people there. After he finished, he opened the glass and forty mices went just all over the counter. I never heard such a deformation of fear and shrieks. It is an act of, not provocation, it's an act of dealing with a non-exceedable extreme. Here you create a non-exceedable extreme, a shock situation.

Of course, he is right. A shock situation cannot be repeated, because next time they just don’t go there! It is like the moment that a baby is born. That’s such an original situation of fear, of fright. So that’s what I wanted. I wanted to have this kind of extreme moment of truth.