STEFAN WOLPE

LECTURE ON DADA

Post College, Long Island University

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LECTURE ON DADA

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[the tape begins after Wolpe starts talking]

...in a random-like situation,

so whatever comes to my mind will be good or bad.

So the only thing is that that is preceded by a sense of my own form sense,

which tells me to keep my mouth shut if I have nothing to say. [light laughter]

And that would fit certainly into a lecture about Dada---

to be silent whenever one feels like,

so virtually nothing can happen to me.

If I am blessed with a number of good formulations, the better.

So... I don't know whether I shall let proceed...


The only thing what I've prepared is the fragment of the cradle,

so that you should know where I'm standing.

This I've prepared.

But you should interrupt me and ask me questions,

and later on you will anyway treat me like an oil well,

and tap me as much as you wish to... to make me talk.

So what I have prepared on the train is this, the following:

[reads]

I am not a Dadaist, and I don't say it apologetically.

I've very much learned from them in my early youth,

because what they did attracted me enormously.

I was young then, as I am today,

that is now about forty years ago.

I've very much learned from their tendencies,

which were mine at the time in 1920.

I've 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 his art certain obsessions of the Dadaists
of forty years ago—
for example, extreme positions of suddenness,
of extremely unforeseen turns of events—
one has incorporated into one's art the extreme
contradictions as a feasible form of sequence,
of the movement of thought,
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, etcetera,
Lecture on Dada-3:

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.

[ceases reading]
Lecture on Dada-4

Now... now I am free to roam through my thoughts.

Don't expect any systematic order,

because systematic order is not what I'm interested in at the moment,

otherwise I would have prepared something.

I came in touch with the Dadaist movement in the year 1920.

That was two years after the collapse of the Kaiser Reich.

I was born in Berlin.

I came early in contact with the radical movements

(artistically speaking) of Germany.

The Bauhaus 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,

and I as a young lad lectured myself about highly abstruse things

like the miraculous proportions and that sort of thing. [light laugh]

We did learn then (and I think Klee taught us these things)

to bring anything in relationship to anything, meaning...

While I am not a painter (I am a composer),

but I participated at these lectures of Paul Klee.

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...
Lecture on Dada-5

tiny little objects, big objects,
haunted objects with no use that I just spoke about.

And these objects became our friends, meaning,
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 these 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 seems to be dead, was really dead,
and 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.

Now...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,
Lecture on Dada-6

once we put them next to each other.
But it was a startling combination,
and things didn't continue on too even a level.

So...that was an early experience of us.
I say "us", because I don't know who then was with me.
All these people are dead.
But I remember too well 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 (as I said in this little preface)
are in the reach of the human mind,
and that to connect is a mental act.
To connect is the 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 can certainly take another.
I just look into numerous many directions,
and don't see only at one direction.
I see many dimensions.

Now...I grew up in Berlin,
but Weimar is not very far from Berlin (about six hours),
and we all travelled there to Weimar
like pilgrims to Jerusalem or to Mecca.
In Berlin I came in touch (just in touch) with the Dada movement,
of which certain people became very close friends of mine,
though I was young.
But I was seemingly an acceptable young man to people twenty years my age,
because I was keen, alert, restrained, (light laughter)
somewhat refined, had good manners...
I was a bold fellow, an honest fellow, an open fellow.
So I came in touch with young Dadaists of which I remember keenly,
which later on people became my friends,
like Kurt Schwitters, Hans Richter,
and a strange guy called Hugo Baader.
(Now, names are really not important unless one connects with names
very specific achievements. This is so informal a talk that
one even shouldn't talk of names).
I came in touch with these people and the youngsters who lived together,
clogged together, heaped together, poets, composers, painters.
Schwitters was there, and Hans Richter was there, and Baader was there.
We gave our first Dada performances.

Now... one could have come to these movements quite differently,
for many different reasons.
Some people were terribly disgusted and terribly 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—
despair about the whole insufficiency,
the 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, so to speak,
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 very famous cabaret in Zürich,
where the exiles 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
the lovely, beautiful, helpless situation
Lecture on Dada-8:

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.

And the only change which they can experience
depends on the physical condition of the climate.

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 then,
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.
Lecture on Dada-9

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 one didn't have...

forty years ago Schoenberg was a young man,
no! Schoenberg was a relatively young man of thirty,
and he was not in Berlin.

And those people who taught us, 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 then another fifteen years to teach young people.

But what we knew was...we knew how to attack a piece of music.

We just start to smear on it,

the same smear which Duchamp led to put on Mona Lisa a moustache.

Or, as he said the other day in the Museum of Modern Art in a panel,

"The good thing about a Rembrandt painting is that
one can use it as an art form." (light laughter)

These are terrible statements. These are terrorizing statements.
By terrible I mean not naughty, but they have terrible implications for me,
and 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,
that trained I was, that well-trained.

But inside of me that was not what I wanted.

It is like being involved in the wrong love affair--
you find yourself living with a person that's not what's yours--
So what I did was 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.

And I'm sure my conscience was in a bad shape,
Lecture on Dada-10

and I must have suffered terribly while under that sin, because it's a sin.

And I who did these things paid, though I intended it as revenge, but I also got punished for the bad feelings.

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

I lived with the contradiction of my guilt that I prostituted a fugue of Bach with a gutter tune, or prostituted a gutter tune with a fugue of Bach...

in both their ways, quite miserable about this thing.

When I showed this to my teacher (he was a very famous theoretician of 74), he hit me in the face and threw me out. [laughter]

That was nothing new to me, because I grew up continually beaten up by my father, [laughter] so that was not so difficult to take.

But one thing beside the act of vengeance became of interest to me, namely, that an extreme condition of isolation, an extreme condition 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 (I don't forget now about the violation), I can take that act of bringing two opposites together, I can take that 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 consoled in a form of synthesis.

But that two things coexist in a totally isolated, dissociated form, and you still receive a form, you still receive the joys (joys is a bad word), the sensations of a strange relationship,
Lecture on Dada-ll

of a strange relationship of estrangements, that was fantastically new to us, to me.

And became then later, or today, that 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.

Or if you go to Walgreen, then you find all those things laid out which don't make sense whatsoever, and that makes sense only by the common denominator that they have to be sold.

But if you don't look at things as objects to be sold, but as objects to be married, to be joined, to be brought together, then you bring together two extreme opposites, and they remain opposites.

Now that leads to great consequences, namely, it leads to one great consequence that the opposites as such disappear. Or certain opposites like death and life, painful opposites, unpleasant opposites, remain.

But in the world of objects I cannot bring my body still alive together with my dead body, though one takes pleasure sometimes...

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. [laughter] 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.
Now! 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—wrong things is a bad word, things which can be easily persuaded to join the other side.

What did I do?
I had eight radios at my disposal—not radios, eight gramophones, record players, at my disposal. And these record players were lovely record players, because one could regulate their speed. Here you have only certain speeds—74 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 what I did was, I put things together in what one would call today, not in a bifocal, but in a multifocal way.

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 different faith, and everyone has different life of his own, different forms of associations, meditations, ideas, visions, and so on.

So something was there established then which was another obsession of the [Dadaists, namely, the concept of simultaneities.

The concept of simultaneities is one of the most (not the most what is not fascinating?), one of truly fascinating things. Today it is a workable element, it is a concrete element that you work with, like you work with a drill, a hose, or anything.

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,
of different directions, [who] find themselves at a moment of junction.

Or where 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.

Now, I don't have here eight machines. Would you kindly?
[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.]
That didn't work here too well. The machines, eh? [light laughter]
But it was something extraordinary that things of different speeds,
of different characters, of different behaviours,
of different structural types, are brought into one focus,
and you've got a certain experience of multifocal, multi-dimensional
[situations.

If one worried that poor Beethoven suffers here 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,
just 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--
I mean 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--quick, slow--
only that we bring this into one focus.

Which means that one revises the concept of sequences.
Lecture on Dada-14

[The delivery becomes more excited. Pitch rises and speed increases.] 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 else 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 known, 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. I wonder, do you get a pleasure out of the act of combining the opposites together, or out of the by-product of the act?

Wolpe: That is a good question. I would think both, I would think both. I would think that 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 at the same time, in one instant, the life of your childhood, the life of your adolescence, the life of your young manhood, at the same time. That is very well possible as an experience, because it depends entirely on your time sense, upon how much of your life you always relive, and how much of your life you cannot fuse into an experience of your present actuality.
Both! It is both!
It was both that 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, what one calls today, multiple exposure, a superimposition of various different aspects of the same thing.