

Dada and the ethical need for revolt in art

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Almost a century after Dada burst upon the western 'art'-scene, scandalizing the bourgeoisie and execrating conventional, academic art for its complicity with a culture that could give rise to something as horrendous as the First World War, which witnessed death and destruction on a scale never seen before, the question should again be raised: Did Dada represent a revolt that was too extreme to have a salutary effect? And related to this – is another revolt of that kind not long overdue (or is it perhaps already happening in certain 'artistic' quarters), given the obscene prevalence of war in the globalized world? Perhaps the thought of the psychoanalytical thinker, Julia Kristeva – especially on the need for 'revolt' in society – could shed light on these questions.

Key words: Dada, revolt, Kristeva, psychoanalytical theory, art

Dada en die etiese noodsaak vir opstand in kuns

Byna 'n eeu nadat Dada stormagtig op die westerse 'kuns'-toneel verskyn het met 'n onkompromiterende kritiek op die middelklas en op konvensionele, akademiese kuns vir medepligtigheid aan 'n kultuur wat kon aanleiding gee tot die gruwels van die Eerste Wêreldoorlog, moet die vraag opnuut gestel word: Het Dada 'n opstand verteenwoordig wat te ekstreem was om 'n gesonde uitwerking te hê? En verwant hieraan – is 'n ander opstand van daardie soort nie tans dringend noodsaaklik nie, veral in die lig van die obsene aanwesigheid van oorlog in die wêreld van globalisering? Of is sodanige 'opstand' miskien reeds besig om te gebeur in sekere gevalle van 'kuns'? Die werk van die psigoanalitiese denker, Julia Kristeva, oor die noodsaak vir periodieke 'opstand' werp lig op hierdie vrae.

“The beginnings of dada were not the beginnings of an art, but of a disgust.” (Tristan Tzara).

The present (February - May 2006) retrospective exhibition on Dada at the National Gallery in Washington, DC, shocks one into the realization that there was something profoundly ethical about the phenomenon. This may come as a surprise to those 'educated' members of society who associate Dada with ostensibly nonsensical marks on paper by Hans Arp, Raoul Hausmann's grotesque *Mechanical Head – The spirit of our age* (c. 1920), or with Duchamp's 'readymades' such as *Fountain* (1917; porcelain urinal). What could possibly be ethical about this (they might ask)? And yet, I believe it should not be difficult to convince such people of the ethical status of Dada's 'anti-artistic' practices (see Exhibition Brochure 2006: 1,7) firstly, by situating it in the historical context of its provenance, and secondly, assessing it as a multi-faceted phenomenon in terms of what Julia Kristeva calls 'revolt', which she associates with the western tradition of thought in philosophy and in art, specifically literature.

The Dada retrospective at the National Gallery, referred to earlier, has the particular merit of reconstructing and elucidating it as an (anti-)artistic-social phenomenon in historico-geographical terms, that is, by presenting it by means of its when and its where. It is with a feeling of shock and outrage that one (re-)discovers, when walking from one room of the exhibition to the next, that the early dadaists' work was a 'direct'¹ response to the advent and the horrors of the First World War, or the Great War, the war associated above all with the dehumanisation of trench warfare.² It is no accident that Tomkins (*et al*, 1973: 55) remarks that, at 'the very beginning...the Dadaist revolt was clearly and specifically a revolt against the War'. As the organizers of the exhibition note in the (very informative) Exhibition Brochure and Student Guide (2006 & 2006a: 1-2), these 'artists' were jolted into anti-artistic action by the (one might think *conspicuous*) fact of the war erupting from within a supposedly 'civilized' society which, to add insult to injury, enthusiastically sent their young men to the front to die there ignominiously in their millions (see also Tomkins 1973: 55).³ It was this very society that simultaneously valorized art of the aesthetically pleasing variety. As the dadaists saw it, these were pictures that prettified a world which had, by the consent of the same smug bourgeoisie who fawned over

such ‘academic’ art, become indescribably ugly and squalid, unrepresentably horrific, through the social and political promotion of death and destruction on an unprecedented scale.

To cling to traditional aesthetic values in such a world was tantamount to more than hypocrisy – it was ethically hollow, reprehensible, and utterly blind to the lie perpetrated by an art which claimed to be able to *represent* the extant world by means of canonically enshrined parameters of beauty and representation. Instead of continuing the practice of traditional art, therefore, the individuals who would become known as dadaists⁴ turned to the newly emerging mass media and graphics-technology, such as newspaper-print, photography and film, among other things, for the means to attack traditional art (and through this, society), proclaiming that ‘art needs an operation’ (2006a: 4-5). The result was Dada (2006a: 1-2):

For the dadaists, World War I discredited the notion of a civilized European society...

Dada’s chosen weapon was art, but it was art the likes of which the world had never seen... They wanted art to be the equivalent of a slap in the face that compelled people to confront life’s ugly realities and goaded them to think about the forces, structures, and clichés in society that gave rise to them.

Dada reimagined what art could be and should be in an age reeling from the world’s first industrial-sized slaughter and the onslaught of modern mass media that it triggered, which included war propaganda posters, films, and the photo-illustrated press...

Dada was not a particular style of making pictures, like impressionism. Rather, dadaists called into question the idea of art as a picture of the world... Scorning traditional painting and sculpture, dadaists created new categories of art objects, embraced new technologies, and redefined ideas about artistic creativity.

Against this backcloth of Dada’s historical novelty and ethically motivated inventiveness, the question should perhaps again be raised: Did Dada represent a revolution or revolt that was too extreme to have a salutary effect? (What would ‘too extreme’ entail?) And related to this – is another ‘revolt’ of that kind not long overdue (or is it perhaps already happening in certain ‘artistic’ quarters), given the obscene prevalence of war in the globalized world (see Hardt & Negri 2005: 36-95)? Perhaps the thought of the psychoanalytical thinker, Julia Kristeva – especially on the need for ‘revolution’ and ‘revolt’ in art, literature, and in people’s personal lives – could shed light on these questions. But first it is incumbent upon me to provide some persuasive evidence for my earlier reference to the ‘prevalence of war in the globalized world’, lest anyone doubt that claim – a doubt all too easy to fall into, given the ubiquitous, media-disseminated information, that the dominant world-order (the dominant states and multi-national capitalism) is in constant pursuit of world peace. Keeping in mind that Dada was triggered by the First World War, perceived to be obscenely contradictory to the values putatively espoused by European society at the time, is it not the case that the global situation described as follows by Hardt and Negri (2005: 37-38) calls for a similar, or stronger response (a ‘revolt’ in Kristeva’s sense) on the part of ‘artists’ today?

One might say that the world has not really been at peace since early in the twentieth century. The First World War (1914-18), which was centered in Europe, led directly, after a tumultuous quasi-peace, to the Second (1939-45). And immediately upon completion of the Second World War we entered into the cold war, a new kind of global war, in some sense a Third World War, which in turn gave way with its collapse (1989-91) to our present state of imperial civil war. Our age might thus be conceived as the Fourth World War. Such a periodization is a useful starting point insofar as it helps us recognize both the continuities with and the differences from previous global conflicts. The concept of cold war itself already established that war has become a normal state of affairs, making it clear that even the cessation of lethal fire does not mean that war is over, only that it has modulated its form temporarily. In a more complete way today, perhaps, the state of war has become interminable.

It does not take much reflection to be convinced by this passage from the second book (*Multitude*, 2005) by the authors of *Empire* (2001), the latter of which is their striking analysis of the new global configuration of power at the juridical, political, economic and cultural levels (see Olivier 2002). Simply consider that, as soon as one travels to overseas countries, and even within one’s own country, the security measures imposed upon one at airports, for example, are tangible evidence that global space has become precarious, subject to unpredictable irruptions

by acts of global war. What makes the situation comparable to the one faced by the dadaists, is the fact that on both sides of the conflict – recognizable by various descriptions, including the misleading ‘war on terror’ – appeals are made to high moral (and even religious!) principles, supposedly underpinned by a belief in a *loving* God (whose love, one would suppose, ought to be emulated by ‘his’ worshippers on both sides of the divide)! Need one say more to demonstrate the moral incongruity of the conflict?

Hence my question, whether ‘artists’ (or neo-dadaist ‘anti-artists’) ought not perhaps take their cue from the historical Dada by staging a global ‘revolt’ against the present inhuman state of war. At the level of other social and political practices such a ‘revolt’ is already unfolding across the globe today. This becomes evident in Hardt and Negri’s extended coverage and discussion of what they call (2005: 268-288) ‘global demands for democracy’ in the contemporary world, which are correlative to the ubiquitous state of war, and which represent embodiments of the kind of ‘revolt’ referred to above. In so far as they are directed at state authorities and multinational companies, they are attempts to communicate a variety of grievances pertaining to the drastic undermining of the principles of democracy – a form of social and political arrangement which can only, justifiably, happen or ‘arise *from below*’, as ‘the rule of everyone by everyone’ (Hardt & Negri 2005: 237), that is, governance with the participation of the people. These worldwide protests or revolt against the global political and economic system (and its manifestation in the guise of intermittent irruptions of war) can therefore be understood as a sign that ‘democracy cannot be made or imposed *from above*’ (2005: 237). They list three principal elements which recur constantly across the board in all the global demands in question as preconditions for democracy, namely (2005: 269-270): ‘...the critique of existing forms of representation, the protest against poverty, and the opposition to war’. As such, they are manifestations, at a fundamental level, of what may be described as a revolt, signifying a contemporary crisis at many levels. In *Empire* Hardt and Negri (2001: 56) formulate this crisis as follows with reference to the ‘struggles’ or protests that they thematize at length in *Multitude*:

All these struggles, which pose really new elements, appear from the beginning to be already old and outdated – precisely because they cannot communicate, because their languages cannot be translated. The struggles do not communicate despite their being hypermediatized, on television, the Internet, and every other imaginable medium. Once again we are confronted by the paradox of incommunicability.

To grasp what is at stake here Kristeva’s concepts of ‘revolution’ and ‘revolt’ must be clarified, because the ‘incommunicability’ alluded to, above, calls for precisely the kind of artistic-communicational intervention – like Dada before it – that has the capacity to invent revolutionary visual, symbolic and audial means to shake a complacent contemporary society into a wide-eyed state of shocked awareness.

Kristeva’s notion of ‘revolution’ is inextricably tied up with her early work on poetic language (1984). Taking her cue from Freud’s notion of the ‘structuring *disposition* of drives’, as well as of ‘*primary processes*’ (Freud 1977: 757-761; 770-771) – iconically mediated, hallucinatory wish-fulfillments at the level of the unconscious, as distinguished from the word- and thought-mediated functioning of the secondary process⁵ – Kristeva (1984: 25) argues that this suggests the functioning of a distinct, ‘...precise modality in the signifying process’. She associates this mode of generating meaning with what she calls, borrowing from Plato, the ‘semiotic *chora*’, ‘...a nonexpressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated’ (1984: 25). As in Plato’s thought, where the *chora* denotes a kind of hybrid receptacle which is said to be neither in space, nor out of it, but which is an inchoate non-place or matrix that marks the provenance of spatial entities, for Kristeva (1984: 26) the ‘semiotic *chora*’ ‘...precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality, and temporality’. And in a significantly poststructuralist⁶ gesture, she continues:

Our discourse – all discourse – moves with and against the *chora* in the sense that it simultaneously depends upon and refuses it...Neither model nor copy, the *chora* precedes and underlies figuration and thus specularization, and is analogous only to vocal and kinetic rhythm.

Kristeva thus sees in this paradoxical notion of ‘non-spatial place’ the possibility of accounting for signification at a level distinct from and anterior to iconic, specular meaning (corresponding to Lacan’s ‘imaginary’ register) as well as symbolic, linguistic meaning (in the register of Lacan’s ‘symbolic’).⁷ Moreover, again taking her cue from Plato (but without the derogating implications of his characterization), Kristeva attributes a maternal character to the semiotic *chora*, in so far as she interprets the mother’s body as the ‘ordering principle of the semiotic chora’, which ‘mediates’ the ‘symbolic law organizing social relations’ (1984: 27). What significance does this have for the present theme (one may wonder), namely Dada and the supposed need for (ethical) revolt in contemporary art? Kristeva’s pertinence should become clearer when the distinctive nature of semiotic signification, as opposed to the symbolic mode, is considered.

Whereas Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory of the human subject – which is extended and enriched by Kristeva – accounts for the subject’s ‘iconic’ and linguistic dimensions via the distinction between the registers of the ‘imaginary’ and the ‘symbolic’, Kristeva therefore amplifies the function of both. Of the imaginary, with its specular-iconic mode of generating meaning, and of the symbolic, with its implicit connection between signifiers (*inter alia* words, images) and signifieds (the conceptual ‘meaning’ of a signifier such as ‘cat’, to wit: ‘a furry, quadruped mammalian carnivore’), by positing another, ‘non-linguistic’ mode of signification, namely the ‘semiotic’, which she associates with the *chora* of the mother’s body, because the drives (for example the oral drive), are ‘...oriented and structured’ around it (Kristeva 1984: 27). In contrast to the symbolic, with its inescapable conceptual aspect, the semiotic accounts for ways of generating meanings which are not easily subsumed under conceptuality, for example sounds like ‘shhhhhhhhhh...’, ‘grrrrrrrrrr...’, ‘hmmmmmm...’, ‘dadadadadada’, ‘mamamama-ma’, ‘zzzzzzzzzzzz’, ‘auuuuuuuuu’, rhythms of various kinds, textures, colours in their ‘expressionistic’ valencies, and so on.⁸ While these semiotic elements do not lend themselves to clear conceptual analysis, they are not therefore devoid of meaning – on the contrary. But their meanings are harder to determine, and call for greater inventiveness of interpretation.

From what I have said about the *semiotic* as conceived by Kristeva it should already be apparent that the dadaists, by rejecting traditional, conventional art, and resorting to highly innovative ‘statements’ by means of a great variety of artefacts and ‘events’, unavoidably drew on elements of a ‘semiotic’ nature (the very name, ‘Dada’, suggests this) – elements and means of communication which had not been assimilated and ‘domesticated’ by conventional iconic and symbolic practices and codes of signification. Moreover, as psychoanalytic thinker, Kristeva – like Freud and Lacan before her – inscribes the semiotic as ‘quasi-transcendental’⁹ in the context of the subject’s provenance. This means that it simultaneously marks the ‘ground’ of possible signifying activity, *and* of its corruption or failure. Importantly, it also highlights the site of the possibility of poetry and of all figural language, specifically in its rhythmic, textural, or ‘grainy’ aspects, as well as – and here the semiotic becomes directly relevant for the dadaists’ work – of ‘revolutionary’ changes and innovations in poetic (and by implication all) language. In fact, by highlighting the semiotic as signifying modality that precedes and subsequently co-exists with the iconic and symbolic, Kristeva has uncovered the conditions of possibility of ‘revolutionary’ signifying practices – practices that draw from, and elaborate on, the inexhaustible signifying potential of the kinds of energy-charged elements (sounds, movements, and so on) that comprise the ‘semiotic’.¹⁰ She captures this well where she says (quoted in McAfee 2004: 24) that the semiotic is ‘definitely heterogeneous to meaning’, although it is ‘always in sight of it or in either a negative or surplus relationship to it’. She continues:

Language as social practice necessarily presupposes these two dispositions [the semiotic and the symbolic], though combined in different ways to constitute *types of discourse*, types of signifying practices.

Here one should note that, because the semiotic is expressive of biological and psychic energy (as represented by drives), it underlies innovations of all kinds, which manifest themselves in the iconic or symbolic realm (as the dadaists' work did) and do not leave the human subject untouched. The human being, according to Kristeva, is essentially a 'subject in process' or 'on trial' (the French *procès* has both meanings). It should be noted, however, that someone who, in her or his signifying practice, is *either* completely governed by the *semiotic* in its utter motility, *or* by the *symbolic* with its tendency to exercise a tyranny of conventional 'meaning', and hence, morality, would, to say the least, not be a 'healthy' subject (McAfee 2004: 29-30; 105-106). In terms of this criterion it appears that, by introducing 'revolutionary' *semiotic* elements into their anti-artistic practices – practices which were ineluctably expressed and embodied in iconic *and* symbolic guise – the dadaists arguably staged, as I intend to show, an exemplary 'revolt', and an ethical one at that, in the history of western art and culture. Their 'revolt', I would argue, was neither subject to the utter flux and instability of one-sided *semiotic* signification, nor expressive of unilateral *symbolic* stasis, but played itself out in the interval between these two extremes.

Kristeva's later work on 'revolt' proceeds along the trajectory initiated by the 'revolutionary' potential and functioning of the semiotic dimension of signifying practices, and is especially pertinent to the present theme. Noteworthy, first, is the etymological connection that she uncovers between 'revolt', 'revolution', and the Latin *volvere*, from which words with meanings such as 'turn', 'return', 'entourage' and 'curve', as well as, in Old French, 'curvature', 'vault' and 'to roll' derive (Kristeva 2000: 1). From this one can already gather that Kristeva thinks of 'revolt' and 're-vol-ution' as a 'turning' of sorts, and not surprisingly, she insists that those human subjects who do not succeed in staging intermittent (personal) 'revolts' against the symbolic order – in so far as it represents the conventionally valorized norms or ideologies of society – run the risk of stagnating as subjects. At an earlier stage, she showed how *avant-garde* poetry registers a revolt – a 'productive violence' (1984: 16) – against the relatively rigid meanings of discourse or language, comparing it to (1984: 17):

...political revolution: the one brings about in the subject what the other introduces into society. The history and political experience of the twentieth century have demonstrated that one cannot be transformed without the other...

And yet, Kristeva is not prepared to grant that political revolution is all it is sometimes made out to be. Historical events suggest that all too often political revolutions turn out to be a 'betrayal of revolt', she points out (2002: 102), adducing the French as well as the Russian Revolution as instances of the revolutionary replacement of one (outdated or unjust) set of values by another, only for the latter to rigidify into tyranny, terror or totalitarianism. The reason for this, she argues, is that (2002: 103):

Social protest should not be a purpose in itself. It should be an integral part of a larger process of general anxiety which is simultaneously psychic, cultural, religious anxiety, etc...What concerns me essentially is to provoke people's anxieties and to free their creativity. At that point, it is up to them to decide if this creativity will play itself out at a political level, at a union level, at a cultural or sexual level...

It may seem incongruous that Kristeva posits an intimate connection between 'anxiety' and 'revolt', until it dawns on one that it is indeed the case that, to be able to challenge a prevailing set of values or practices, a certain anxiety in the sense of 'nothingness' within, or 'annihilation'¹¹ of oneself, of the self or ego shaped by prevailing norms, has to occur first. This could take the form of questioning or challenging the 'superego-norms' governing a society at any given

time, whether it is those hollow patriotic norms that sent millions of young men to the trenches in World War I (challenged by the dadaists), consumerist values which create the illusion that the 'final' socio-economic revolution has already happened (a mirage challenged by Kristeva, among others), and that anxiety is superfluous because there is a technological solution to every problem (Kristeva 2002: 101-104), or, for that matter, the bureaucratic values being foisted on academics at universities in South Africa today. 'But what is the meaning of nothingness', she asks (2002: 101) – 'the possibility to change, to rebel and to transform'.

In other words, 'revolt' is indispensable for society at large, as well as for individuals, and she appeals to psychoanalysis for evidence that (2000: 7):

Happiness exists only at the price of a revolt. None of us has pleasure without confronting an obstacle, prohibition, authority, or law that allows us to realize ourselves as autonomous and free. The revolt revealed to accompany the private experience of happiness is an integral part of the pleasure principle. Furthermore, on the social level, the normalizing order is far from perfect and fails to support the excluded: jobless youth, the poor in the projects, the homeless, the unemployed, and foreigners, among many others. When the excluded have no culture of revolt and must content themselves with ideologies, with shows and entertainments that far from satisfy the demand of pleasure, they become rioters.

Keeping all of this in mind, one may return to the question raised earlier, whether Dada was too extreme in revolutionary terms to be salutary in its effects, with a view to determining whether it could play the role of an exemplar, a model of sorts, in the contemporary global situation characterized by ubiquitous war, as well as by widespread protests against the dominant world order. The fact that Kristeva makes no secret of her disdain for this smug, ideologically self-satisfied, capitalist-technocratic order is already an indication that there is something which calls loudly and insistently for revolt as she understands it. The work and self-reflection of the artist Kurt Schwitters, who conducted what was 'largely a solo operation' in Hannover (2006: 4), is instructive in this regard. Schwitters is notorious for the invention of collage-type dadaist works (constructed from discarded, waste materials) that he dubbed 'Merz' – a telling neologism derived from the German 'Kommerz' (commerce), but conspicuously 'resonating' with other words such as the French for 'shit', namely 'merde', and the German for 'pain', to wit, 'Schmerz'. As we read in the Exhibition Brochure (2006: 4), the word hinted (eloquently) '...at the interconnectedness of money, pain, and waste'. It is worth quoting Schwitters on his 'discovery' of 'Merz' (in 2006: 4):

In the war, things were in terrible turmoil. What I had learned in the academy was of no use to me...Then suddenly the glorious revolution was upon us...I felt myself freed and had to shout my jubilation out to the world. Out of parsimony I took whatever I found to do this because we were now an impoverished country. One can even shout with refuse, and this is what I did, nailing and gluing it together. I called it 'Merz': it was a prayer about the victorious end of the war...everything had broken down...and new things had to be made out of the fragments: and this is Merz. It was like an image of the revolution within me.

The ironies in his words are obvious: the end of WW I did not signal 'victory' (in the usual sense) for Germany, nor would one normally think of a state of dereliction in the wake of a war as a 'glorious revolution'. Yet, for dadaists like Schwitters, the society that could countenance (and give rise to) the advent of something as inhuman as World War I, was in dire need of destruction, so that it could be 're-built' in a radically different way – as long as 're-built' is not understood as simply being reconstructed as it had been before the war; quite the contrary. 'Schwitters' use of fragments', one reads in the Exhibition Brochure (2006: 4), 'was an analogy for society shattered by war and traditional culture torn asunder by modernity'. Like his dadaist colleagues, Schwitters refused to practise an escapist art, instead inventing new, disconcerting ways – formally and materially – to '...make visible the violence, chaos, and hypocrisies of contemporary life' (Exhibition Brochure 2006: 1).

In its diverse practices among its various (and variegated) exponents, therefore, Dada embodied a thoroughgoing critique of the society within which it emerged. Moreover, the inventiveness with which Schwitters, for example, approached his task, in so far as it simultaneously broke with, *and* reinvented ‘art’, clearly signals something consonant with Kristeva’s notions of ‘revolution’ and ‘revolt’. It is hardly necessary to point to the striking similarity between the early 20th-century world alluded to with the words, above, ‘...the violence, chaos, and hypocrisies of contemporary life’, which the dadaists set themselves the task of somehow ‘making visible’ by uncommon means, and the contemporary world – not only the social reality of South Africa, but the global, international world. *It is (or should be) completely redundant, in a country such as this one, where the official figures show that, on average, between 50 and 60 people are murdered every day, to encourage or exhort artists of every stripe to harness their creative, ‘semiotic’ powers in the guise of a revolt against the defeatist or conformist acceptance of this inhuman situation, instead of merely churning out commercial, escapist kitsch to feed and anaesthetize an already comatose, complacent public with its head buried in the sand.*

Returning to Schwitters’ remark that ‘everything had broken down...and new things had to be made out of the fragments’, one is struck by the unwillingness to be beaten into submission or fatalist passivity by the sheer enormity of the war’s catastrophic effects. In this respect Schwitters articulates well what may be called, in Nietzschean terms (Nietzsche 1968: 17; Olivier 2004b), the ‘active nihilism’ (the willingness to create new values in the place of those found hollow or void) that characterized Dada across the board. This means that Dada instantiated, as suggested earlier, something truly ethical, with the startling upshot that it focuses one’s attention forcibly on the contrast, in ethical terms, between Dada and the society rejected, ridiculed and mercilessly criticized by dadaists: this society upheld a morality that one can only characterize as ‘conventional’, and which is therefore unmasked as hypocritical and morally bankrupt. Consonant with this Nietzschean evaluation, Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, too, delivers judgement of Dada in ethically affirmative terms: for Lacan, a human subject acts ethically only when she or he ‘takes up’ or affirms her or his ‘desire’ in the face of a conventional morality that would prohibit or outlaw the actions consequent upon the affirmation of one’s desire in this manner (Lacan 1997: 311-325; Olivier 2005 & 2005a).

Although the possibility of Dada’s ‘roots’ in ‘...the French literary tradition of esthetic revolt’ (Tomkins *et al* 1973: 55) has been raised, it should be clear from Kristeva’s work that there is but a small step that separates the aesthetic and the ethical here. The extent of Dada’s ‘ethical’ revolt, or transgression of conventional values (Tomkins *et al* 1973: 57), can be gauged from the revolutionary character of their anti-art. The various manifestations of this may be well-known, but they bear being briefly repeated here (Dada Exhibition Student Guide 2006a: 4-8). Firstly, Dada rejected the notion of the ‘masterpiece’ – the ‘great’, unique sculpture or painting (the paradigm case being the *Mona Lisa*), created by a visionary genius. In the place of the traditional ‘cult of genius’ they promoted the idea of an impersonal art, detached from individual personality.¹² Dadaists also called into question the distinction between fine and applied art such as design and decoration (in this way anticipating postmodernist art by violating customary artistic boundaries). Hans Arp and Sophie Taeuber, for instance, treated embroideries like paintings by framing and hanging them, and made abstract, textile-based ‘duo-collages’, using mechanical means to reduce artists’ personal involvement considerably (something taken to extremes by Arp in his wood reliefs).

Long before CNN, there was DNN – Dada News Network (2006a: 5) – which comprised a parody of the first ‘media overload’ in history, when, during and after World War I, a veritable barrage of information in newspapers and magazines (with sensational photographs), radio transmissions, commercial films as well as newsreels, advertising and propaganda posters de-

scended on modern citizens. Dadaists' parodic answer consisted of fake news reports, Dada advertisement-filled tabloids, films with meaningless plots and mock slogans at Dada exhibitions, lampooning war propaganda (for example at the First International Dada Fair in Berlin, 1920).

In addition to heaping ridicule on conventional news reporting, dadaists sometimes established a connection between their work and social reality by resorting to the technique of incorporating press reports 'directly' into it, as when Otto Dix inserted newspaper front pages into his merciless, grotesque satire of German militarism of 1920, *Skat Players* (2006a: 7) – an 'oil painting' which 'revolted' against conventional artistic practice by adding collage elements to it. One may further refer to photomontage, which is regarded as one of Dada's 'most innovative assaults [read: 'revolts'] on traditional art' (2006a: 7). These 'remix' works consisted of mounted or assembled images and image-fragments cut from newspapers and illustrated magazines, glued together into novel (usually satirical) configurations, a good example being George Grosz's *Everyone his own soccerball* of 1919. The dadaist-*monteurs'* goal with these photomontages is admirably stated in the Exhibition Student Guide (2006a: 7): '...to take back control of the media, which seemed increasingly to control them and society at large'. If this was the case around 1920, the colossal degree to which that situation has been exacerbated today, is undeniable, even if most of the public are probably so accustomed to it that it is hardly noticed. What the public may well notice, though, would be a sustained and *novel* contemporary campaign, a new 'revolt' on the part of new anti-artists, to 'take back control of the media', whatever form this may take (or has perhaps already assumed in certain locales).

If it is the case that, for as long as there has been art, (earlier) artists promoted themselves, in the case of the dadaists this self-promotion was shameless. Moreover, what was new was that, in doing this, 'they were also parodying the new phenomenon of modern advertising and marketing' (2006a: 8) – something that depended for its success on the word 'Dada'. Selected from the German-French dictionary, it was rhythmic, short, childlike-sounding and with multiple meanings in several languages (such as 'yes, yes', in German and 'hobby horse' in French. Given its character of an artistic 'revolt', it is highly ironic that the word 'Dada' functioned like a (very successful!) brand name in its use by dadaists, 'as if it were a commercial product with a logo' (2006a: 8), frequently highlighted by eye-catching typographic means.

But another thought announces itself in the form of a nagging question when confronted by Schwitters' and other dadaists' work: What is the case among (anti-) 'artists' today, in the early 21st century? The reverse? Have all so-called 'artists' already 'sold out' to the idol of the market? Or are there perhaps sporadic signals that, in some isolated quarters, a 'revolt' of some kind (or perhaps heterogeneous manifestations of revolt: 'micro-revolts'), consonant with that of the dadaists, is already occurring? Johan Snyman's (1995: 69-72) assessment of what he calls 'post-art' from an ecological aesthetics-perspective, points in this direction. He observes that (1995: 69-70):

...post-art (or postmodern art) has two foci: the environment has become one focus [the 'event-art of Joseph Beuys comes to mind; B.O.], and in that environment the socially marginalized part of humanity was 'discovered' ... Art is practised as a means of social empowerment of the socially neglected and ignored segments of the population. The postmodernist flaunting of borders between disciplines and spheres of life is purposefully at work here: the postmodern artist is no *bohémien* anymore, but a social agent, producing social allegories in collaboration with the marginalized people of society in order to stem anonymous power and the consequent abuse of power in the constant global drive for technological domination.

The first thing that should strike one is the similarity – alluded to earlier – between the dadaist crossing of traditional boundaries between different cultural practices, on the one hand, and the practice of postmodernist art. Dada clearly prepared the way for postmodernism in this respect. The second pertinent issue raised by Snyman reflects another similarity between Dada and at

least one variety of postmodernist art alluded to by Snyman, namely socially and critically engaged (perhaps: ‘ethically revolting’) postmodernist art. Snyman (1995: 70-72) discusses two such artists, namely Polish-Canadian Krzysztof Wodiczko and South African Willem Boshoff. Here I shall concentrate on the former, given the pertinence of his design-work for the present theme. Wodiczko has attained notoriety, mostly for his so-called Homeless Projects in the United States. In accordance with his basic training as an industrial designer – which already suggests a certain closeness to the dadaists – he designed a *Vehicle for the homeless* in Philadelphia or, as he called them, the ‘nomads of the city’. This consisted of a supermarket trolley and rubbish bin, transmogrified into a convertible vehicle of sorts, which simultaneously provided shelter and a means of storing and transporting their meagre possessions.

One may wonder what connection this could possibly have to anti-art of the dadaist variety, let alone to traditional art. This is not hard to grasp, however, if one considers the fact that – as Snyman (1995: 70) points out – *Vehicle for the homeless* became a ‘mobile icon’ that provoked varied responses from people, in accordance with their different positions in the layered socio-economic fabric of the city. Significantly, the greatest challenge posed by this hybrid artefact has been to the wealthy, in an effort ‘...to conscientize the population of this environment towards changing it so that it becomes a real and proper shelter for people’ (Snyman 1995: 70). Moreover, the *Vehicle* is not as arbitrary as it may seem – according to Wodiczko (Snyman 1995: 70-71) the ‘dispossession’ of the homeless entails the ‘design’ or the ‘architecture’ that they lack, and the non-possession of which seems to signal their relegation to ‘statusless non-persons’. A striking confirmation of this occurs when puzzled observers, inadvertently mistaking the (usually) ostentatiously designed *Vehicle(s)* for objects that they can purchase, tend to touch and inspect them – in this way ‘...betraying the unconscious assumption that, as non-persons, the homeless have no claims to privacy or property’ (Snyman 1995: 71).

Snyman further points out that, although Wodiczko’s ‘designer objects’ (there have been several) have been exhibited at art galleries, they nevertheless ‘...do not function as works of art’, and reminds his readers that artworks customarily ‘...enhance an environment for the sake of pleasurable contemplation’. These ‘trolleybin-vehicles’, by contrast (1995: 71):

...are owned by the dispossessed, eliciting social responses imbued by socially biased significations, making the presence of a disclaimed social conflict and social injustice felt in the same way as an icon is supposed to allow the worshipper to experience the presence of the deity in the observed representation.

In other words, the ‘post-artistic’ *Vehicle for the homeless* constitutes a concrete oxymoron, signifying ownership and dispossession at the same time. In this way it echoes the dadaists’ pioneering ‘anti-artistic’ transgression of the boundaries dividing the aesthetic and social realms, and can legitimately be understood, in my judgement, as an instance of the kind of ‘revolt’ that Kristeva regards as being part of the salutary European tradition of ‘revolt’, characterized by periodic challenges to, and transformation of, existing conventions which have become sterile and suffocating. Recall that she warns against the tendency, on the part of the contemporary culture of the ‘show’ and ‘entertainment’, to create the illusion that there is no need for revolt of any kind, with the consequence that people cease being ‘subjects in process’, and instead stagnate at the level of being media-junkies. Wodiczko and other ‘post-artists’ like him, seem to me to be repeating the ‘ethical revolution’ of Dada, albeit in a different guise. In so doing, they may well succeed in drawing the attention of at least *some* people empowered by the present economic system to social injustice and to the superfluity and obscenity of war across the globe (the way Anselm Kiefer, has done, for example through his works exhibited at the National Gallery in Washington, DC, although it is less clear that he may be considered to be another ‘post’-artist, given his more traditional, if ‘deconstructive’ approach – for example by

constructing a sculpture of a bomber out of non-lethal, perishable materials, thus subverting its aggressive-thanatic symbolic character).

To be sure, even the most heartfelt affirmation of the revolutionary character of Dada – as a model for contemporary artistic revolt against the obscene ubiquity of war and exploitation of people as well as natural resources globally – should not ignore the fact that, as Tomkins (*et al*, 1973: 65) reminds us, the majority of the ‘leading Dadaists went on to become what they had fought so hard against’; that is, exchanged their revolutionary anti-art for more or less conventional lives. The only exception to this seems to have been Marcel Duchamp, who ‘...would carry the implications of Dadaism to their logical conclusion’ (Tomkins *et al* 1973: 65). But that is the subject of another article.

Notes

- 1 I put ‘direct’ in scare quotes because it has been accepted, since the wider reception of Nietzsche’s pioneering work in this regard, that there is hardly anything of the order of a human interpretation of sorts – and the dadaists’ work would fall into this category – which can be properly termed ‘direct’. Anything that displays the mark of human understanding or interpretation is always mediated, and as such indirect. Perhaps one may refer to the most primary ‘sense-sensations’ on the part of humans as ‘direct’ or ‘immediate’, but it goes without saying that these (if indeed conceivable) are as yet ‘uninterpreted’, that is, until such time that the person having the sensation attaches some meaning or significance to it – even something as basic as saying or ‘registering’ that ‘it is cold’.
- 2 See in this regard Olivier 2005a, for a Lacanian interpretation of Jeunet’s film, *A very long engagement*, set against the backdrop of the horrors of World War I’s trench warfare. See also John Fowles’s (1977: 120-131) evocatively horrific description of a WW I battle near Neuve Chapelle in France, which brings across the full terror and superfluity of war as no ordinary ‘historical’ account could.
- 3 It is almost incomprehensible to note that (Dada Exhibition Student Guide, 2006a: 1): ‘On average almost 900 Frenchmen and 1,300 Germans died *every day* between the outbreak of war in August 1914 and the armistice that ended it in November 1918. All told, nearly ten million people were killed’.
- 4 These included Tristan Tzara, Sophie Taeuber, Hans Arp, Francis Picabia, Hugo Ball, Kurt Schwitters, Raoul Hausmann, John Heartfield, Rudolf Schlichter, Otto Dix, George Grosz, Max Ernst, Hannah Höch, Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp and, of course, the latter’s feminine alter ego, Rose Sélavy – individuals who launched the dadaist attack on the bourgeoisie in different cities, ranging from Berlin, Cologne, Zürich and Hannover, to Paris and New York. Here I shall not go into all the details of their different strategies, personalities and histories, concentrating instead on the critical-philosophical questions raised in this article. For an exhaustive historical-‘artistic’ overview, see Powell, Lowry, Racine & Pacquement (2006), and in condensed format, the Dada Exhibition Brochure (2006) and Student Guide (2006a).
- 5 The relevance of Freud’s ‘primary processes’ for understanding media-related behaviour in contemporary society cannot be underestimated. See in this regard Olivier 2000.
- 6 What is distinctively poststructuralist about this is its paradoxical formulation. It is by now no secret that poststructuralist thinkers – including Kristeva, Lacan, Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze and Lyotard – articulate in different ways the complexity of human reality, and that paradox is one of the privileged figures for doing this. Eschewing the philosophical tradition’s penchant for thinking in terms of binary opposition, and applying an either/or, (or, alternatively, a dialectical) logic to their subject matter, poststructuralists prefer a both/and logic of paradox and aporia, in an effort to do justice to the irreducibly complex nature of the world. So, for example, instead of arguing – in a debate on the question, whether there has been cultural-historical progress or not, a poststructuralist argument would avoid a simple choice between ‘yes’ and ‘no’, preferring to demonstrate that one cannot choose between them – progress is a *pharmakon* (simultaneously poison *and* cure), and the very signs or embodiments of ‘progress’ are also the ‘grounds’ for ‘retrogression’ (for instance technology).
- 7 See in this regard Olivier 2004, for an elaboration on Lacan’s conception of the subject in

- terms of the registers of the imaginary, the symbolic and the 'real'.
- 8 On a previous occasion Kristeva's notion of the 'semiotic' afforded me the opportunity to explore the various nuances of sexual communication, specifically as thematized in literature. See Olivier 2004a.
 - 9 See Hurst 2004 for a clarification of the term 'quasi-transcendental' in relation to the tradition of transcendental philosophy deriving from the paradigmatic work of Immanuel Kant.
 - 10 For an enhanced understanding of this aspect of Kristeva's work, see Noëlle McAfee's (2004: 13-27) illuminating chapter on 'Semiotic and Symbolic'.
 - 11 Anyone who detects echoes of the link Heidegger establishes (in *Being and time*) between anxiety and the possibility of one's own nothingness or non-being here, would be correct (see Kristeva 2002: 101).
 - 12 In this respect, they unwittingly anticipated one of the major tenets of structuralism. One should note, however, that (as may be expected) there are certain tensions between this aspect of Dada and the individual, 'signal' artistic practices of some dadaists. The figure who readily comes to mind is Marcel Duchamp, who subtly asserted the principle that conventional ideas can always be challenged by (creative) individuals. A paradoxical case in point is his contribution to *Belle Haleine* (beautiful breath) of 1921, namely the original *idea* for it, as well as *being photographed* by Man Ray as a woman (Rose Sélavy; or, pronounced in French, '*Eros, c'est la vie*' – 'Love, that is life') for the label of the perfume in question, on the bottle otherwise designed by Man Ray, and adding his *signature* to the finished product – paradoxical, because this is an unambiguous subversion of traditional conceptions of art (Tomkins *et al* 1973: 79; Dada Exhibition Student Guide 2006a: 14-15).

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