DADA PORTRAITS AND IDENTITIES
Chapter 11

Dadaist Poker: The Body and the Reformation of Form

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Einstein insisted that God does not play dice. As Duchamp was unable to disprove, Roulette has always been a sucker’s game.

But there may yet be a game of chance in which One can still come out on top. And it begins with a squint.

Writing in October 1915, just a few months before the effective formation of Zurich Dada with the opening of Cabaret Voltaire, Hugo Ball (1996: 34) wrote:

We have no sense of form because we are atheists. Without God and without distance to life there is not even psychology. What can we see of man if we do not see him from a distance? Then, if we do not admit of the existence of the soul, how can we read things in it? Natural laws can be established without God, but only with difficulty because the concept of law is contrary to nature. But laws of the soul? What Nietzsche, for example, calls psychology is only an explanation of intellectual and cultural phenomena by biological hypotheses.

Ball was apparently one of the first people to fully comprehend the notion of the death of God as it had been articulated by Nietzsche, and the full implications of the sense of philosophical pessimism that were entailed by it. Such a philosophical pessimism would include not just the “true” moral world, but also the material, only “apparent” world as well – or as Nietzsche would alternatively distinguish them in Ecce Homo, “the mendaciously invented world and reality” (Nietzsche 1992: 674). Dada is, of course, primarily known for its negation, its stripping away of values given to identity, both of people and of things. However, as it was with Nietzsche, this manner of philosophical pessimism was only the first part of the story. I can only