Chapter 3

‘Dada is Dead – Long Live Dada’: The Influence of Dadaism on Contemporary Performance Art

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“Dada is a state of mind. You can be happy, sad, melancholy or Dada”, wrote Tristan Tzara (1998: 16). Dada was more than just an artistic movement, it was a way of life, a frame of mind. So while the movement has blown over, the state of mind can still continue to exist and can still inspire artists’ work. While it may be impossible to pinpoint a contemporary form of Dadaism, it is possible to see an influence of Dadaism in various manifestations of contemporary art and performance.

While Dada was an international movement, founded by a multinational group of artists and later spreading out across several countries, it took different forms, adapting to the special circumstances within the countries it entered, thus creating special “national” forms of Dadaism. “Dada is a state of mind. This is why it changes according to races and events”, Tzara rightly declared (1998: 21). Berlin Dada, with its political stance, for example, was the German form, adapting to German culture. This special form of Dadaism would not have worked in France or the USA, because it would have met different circumstances there. The work of German performer and filmmaker Christian Schlingensief is equally specific: he addresses German culture, history and topics, issues which are known to people immersed in life in Germany, but which are not easily understood to outsiders of the culture.

Schlingensief is known for his provocative statements: during a presentation about modern art at the 1997 Documenta, he demanded
that the German chancellor Helmut Kohl be assassinated in an event called *Tötet Helmut Kohl* [Kill Helmut Kohl]. This earned him a lot of controversial press and led to his imprisonment. Just like the Dadaists, he appears to delight in causing controversy and public outcries, and uses performances and public appearances in the same way as the Dadaists used their manifestos. In Berlin, Dadaist Johannes Baader caused a scandal of similar scope in 1918 when he interrupted a political speech and declared himself to be the president of the globe; or when he distributed a Dadaist newspaper to a similar effect in February 1919 during a National Assembly at Weimar (Riha 2003: 104). Schlingensief follows in Dadaism’s footsteps in causing disturbances in the political realm.

Schlingensief’s work goes against rational sequences, against conceivable order and expectations: he presents a

theatre of addresses and presentations of single acts, which always creates the impression that some decisive moment is just about to arrive, that what is just being presented could be the one essential message which would explain everything. The worst point, however, is that nothing happens. (Löhndorf 1998: 94)

This, in my opinion, is close to Dada’s nihilism and enjoyment of paradoxes. Tzara, for example, presented his audiences with a barrage of nonsense and manifestos, and rigorously refused to provide any relief or sense. His *Première Aventure Céléste de M.Antipyrine* (Tzara 1975: 75–84), for example, consists of meaningless and unintelligible monologues between the characters. “This play is a boxing match with words”, says Tzara (Melzer 1994: 73), which is then interrupted by a manifesto read by a character called Tristan Tzara, which makes more sense than the rest of the play, but does nothing to explain it. So an audience would expect Tzara’s appearance and monologue to provide some sort of framework in order to make sense of the rest of the play, but this never happens.

Schlingensief uses the same tactics in his work: he aims to irritate and confuse his audiences, bombarding them with his work, but never offering any form of explanation. He states that “there is no clear message” in art. His own work is experimental, and none of his performances are like the previous one: “the result of an experiment is never certain”, writes Marion Löhndorf (1998: 94). Nothing in his work is certain, nothing is simple, and there are many paradoxes. This is an important legacy of Dadaism, which was a movement full of