DADALENIN

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“Dada, sure. But Lenin? And DADALENIN? I don’t know…”

This will be the common reaction to an intellectual project like the one at hand. According to the dominant thought regime, Lenin and Dada have nothing in common. One would be nothing more than a totalitarian leader, while the other would be the liberating force of avant-gardist art. Lenin’s name stands for the dark past of politics, when the liberal democratic doctrine had not yet been settled, while Dadaism, finally, seems to have triumphed in post-modern playfulness and late-liberal individualism.

Amongst the representatives of the dominant doctrine, the Romanian-American writer Andrei Codrescu expressed this prejudice most explicitly in his little ‘Posthuman Dada Guide’:

Dada played for chaos, libido, the creative and the absurd. Communism deployed its energy for reason, order, an understandable social taxonomy, predictable structures, and the creation of ‘new man’. [...] The Dada man was an actor and a performer, a clown, and a drunken fool, a mystic. The ‘new man’ was a well-behaved worker.1

Dada appears as the “funny” and liberating force that would be the clearest antithesis to the apparently anti-modern dogmatism of communist orthodoxy and tyranny. Codrescu continues:
Dada was born onstage from satire, disgust, angst, disgust [sic!], terror, improvised materials, and channeled snippets of verse, while Communism came out of books of philosophy and economy, terrorism (with its technologies of disguise, conspiracy, and homemade explosives), and church-inspired forms for synthesizing dogma.\(^2\)

Unfortunately, things are not quite so simple. It is well-known that Dada was founded on Zurich’s **Spiegelgasse**, just a few houses away from Lenin’s residence at that time. And this very coincidence suggests a number of deeper affinities. Their itineraries converge in the kind of place municipal administrators and social hygienists considered a hotbed of alcoholism, crime, illicit sexuality, and political anarchy.\(^3\)

According to the Dada protagonist **Marcel Janco**, Lenin had regularly been present at the **Cabaret Voltaire**.\(^4\) There have been numerous more extensive interpretations about encounters and mutual influence.\(^5\)

The historical coincidence on the Spiegelgasse leaves room for speculation. It might, however, be more than pure coincidence, and telling in a number of ways. Just the pure fact that Zurich’s Spiegelgasse served as a refuge for both the political and artistic Bohemia, expelled from the warmongering bourgeoisie of belligerent countries, already suggests richer affinities.

Whatever the facts are, a naïve antithesis of Dada and Lenin faces a number of problems. It neither comprises the rampant passions of revolutionary moments and the revolutionary follies of Lenin himself, nor does it do justice to the strictly anti-bourgeois intuitions of Dadaism and their very specific historical origin: the apocalyptic clash of the great imperialist blocs in World War I.

In some sense one could even say that Lenin appears to be far more Dadaist than Dadaism itself. For what would it mean today to “**épater la bourgeoisie**”? While the main tactics of Dadaism do not surprise too many educated bourgeois liberals anymore, Lenin certainly still does.

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5 The bravest (or most adventurous) probably being Dominique Noguez’ book Lenin Dada.
One could say that Lenin’s name has become a metonymy for a certain impossibility of thinking within the discursive settings of liberal democracy. His name expresses the idea that a different sociopolitical order could in fact be established and that radical means might even occasionally be all right. This, at least, is how the editors of the 2007 volume ‘Lenin Reloaded’ depict the discursive career of Lenin in their introduction:

Liberal-democratic hegemony is sustained by a kind of unwritten ‘Denkverbot’ (thought prohibition) similar to the infamous ‘Berufsverbot’ (banning the employment of leftists by any state institution) of the late 1960s in Germany. The moment one shows a minimal sign of engaging in political projects that aim at seriously challenging the existing order, he or she receives the following immediate answer: ‘Benevolent as it is, this will necessarily end in a new Gulag’.

If you want to provoke the bourgeois juste-milieu under post-modern conditions, then to be sure being a Leninist will do the job better than being a Dadaist.

But even irrespective of the general shock value of Lenin’s political legacy, Dada and Lenin seem to have more convergences than one is lead to believe by the false dichotomy of triumphalist doctrine. So again, what about the follies and passions of the Leninist project itself? And, what do Lenin and Leninism stand for anyway?

The project of Leninism is inseparable from the idea of the vanguard party, which Lenin developed in his 1902 book *What Is to Be Done?* Eventually the book led to the historical split of the ‘Russian Social Democratic Labor Party’ into Bolsheviks and Mensheviks (which prepared the separation of the socialist movement into Second and Third International), while some of his key claims later came to characterize the October Revolution as well.

In ‘What Is to Be Done?’ Lenin argues for a political party of professional revolutionaries that could claim leadership of the revolutionary proletariat and finally lead the socialist revolution. In the internal debates within the socialist movement this book marks one of the two extremes of debate: Party-oriented Leninism stands against the faith in the spontaneity of the masses, argued for by Rosa Luxemburg and others.
But Lenin was always more ambivalent than that. The American historian and Lenin scholar Lars T. Lih has questioned the image of the allegedly ice-cold, merely strategic collectivist pragmatism of Lenin’s thought. Even in his apparently least Dadaist text ‘What Is To Be Done?’, which introduces the idea of the vanguard party, Lenin’s understanding of politics is far more aleatoric than one would expect. Here, he writes against the Marxist economists:

You boast that you are practical, but you fail to see what every Russian practical worker knows, namely, the miracles that the energy, not only of a circle, but even of an individual person is able to perform in the revolutionary cause.⁸

In Lenin’s politics, individuals have miraculous energies and these energies are amongst the most powerful potentials of his vanguardist conception of politics, some of them within the spearhead of the revolutionary party, but some of them without as well.

The strict antithesis between the bureaucrat totalitarian and the playful freaks doesn’t seem to hold. Even less so if one takes the further political careers of the Zurich Dadaists into account: Some (like Tristan Tzara) turning into active members of the communist movement and the French résistance, some (like Hugo Ball) becoming fascinated with the catholic reaction as represented by the Nazi-Kronjurist (i.e. the president of the Union of National-Socialist Jurists) Carl Schmitt.

The structural affinities between Dada and Lenin, however, reach far deeper than political-biographical coincidence, as three main protagonists of contemporary leftist aesthetic theory have repeatedly emphasized. Fredric Jameson has underlined the fundamental historical relation between the two avant-gardes as a ‘condition moderne’, at

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¹¹ Ibid.
a time when political radicalism and aesthetic radicalism were still inseparable:

in the twentieth century art itself is bound up with the problem of the avant-garde—that people today cannot imagine the degree to which, before the break of Stalin’s socialist realism in the early 1930s, the two avant-gardes were absolutely linked, and the fortunes of avant-garde art were never felt to be dissociated from those of vanguard.9

Susan Buck-Morss has emphasized a deeper-reaching convergence between Bolshevism and Dadaism as an aesthetico-political project that reconceived the very logics of both art and politics. As she reminds us:

There are countless possible stories about Bolshevik revolutionary culture, and many have been told. While heroes and villains abound in these narrations, few have engaged this site of the temporary convergence of political and cultural avant-gardes in order to rethink both art and politics in a revolutionary mode.10

Dadaism and Bolshevism are connected in the idea of the vanguard/avant-garde, with all its fascination for the radically new and for the possibility of rethinking the relation between art and politics: “politics aestheticized as art freeing both to relate differently to one another”.11

And both avant-garde and vanguard sought to harness groundbreaking revolutionary energies.

Terry Eagleton points out three main structural reasons why Lenin’s project of the political vanguard does indeed, to a certain extent, coincide
with the project of the aesthetic avant-garde. With the avant-garde the vanguardist project shared, firstly, the ultimate modernist condition: it had to invent its own style. Just like Dada, revolutionary politics had to start at the very beginning and create its own tradition against all odds. And in that sense, Eagleton suggests:

Lenin was the great virtuoso of political modernism, the practitioner of an innovative art form known as revolutionary politics for which there were as few established paradigms as there were for expressionism or suprematism.

Lenin’s politics contained, secondly, counterintuitive reassessments of the outdated and the brand new—a revaluation of the profane, the marginalized and the antiquated comparable with the modernist poetics of, say, James Joyce’s ‘Ulysses’:

If, in a bizarre modernist logic, a seedy Dublin Jew can play Ulysses, then in Russia the proletariat can stand for an absent bourgeoisie and spearhead itself.

Lenin’s mobilization of the proletariat—of the utterly profane and devaluated—marks him as the radical innovator of the art of politics. His masterpiece of Arte Povera was the revolution itself.

Thirdly, Lenin developed a politics of form, which reflected its own conditions of possibility beyond the realm of already existing institutional frameworks to redefine and open up the sphere of agency as such. Lenin’s claim in ‘State and Revolution’, Eagleton stresses was that “socialist politics involves a passage [...] from one modality of power to the other”. It was precisely such an avant-gardist climate, he continues, which prompted Walter Benjamin to insist in his essay ‘The Author as Producer’ that

14 Ibid., p. 51.
16 Terry Eagleton: Lenin in the Postmodern Age, p. 56.
17 Ibid.
19 Dominique Noguez writes (Lenin Dada, p. 75): “Sowohl bei Dada insgesamt als auch bei Tzara im besonderen erkennen wir einen Hang zum Leninismus.” [Both in Dada in general as particularly in Tzara we see a general inclination to Leninism.]
genuine revolutionary art transforms the cultural institutions themselves, rather than pumping a new kind of content down the old channels.\textsuperscript{17}

These essential moments of the avant-gardist project are hard to deny. But there is more to be said. None of the three seems to be aware of Lenin’s most radically avant-gardist move. In his early 1918 discussion with \textit{Lunacharsky}, people’s commissar for enlightenment, Lenin pled for a form of “monumental propaganda”. He aimed at an artistic force in support of the revolution that would mobilize the creative power of artists to create a socialist city modeled after Campanella’s ‘City of the Sun’.\textsuperscript{18} The artistic forces should be mobilized to paint walls and erect monuments in public spaces, to bring the ideas of socialism into life and, by the same token, bring art into life, into the streets and translate it into real practice. Lenin performed a style of politics that was avant-gardist in its own fashion: A valorization of the profane, experiments with (political) form, institutionally critical interventions, attempts to bring art into life and probably more.

For all of these reasons, it was no coincidence that a number of the Dadaists (especially in the highly politicized Berlin-scene) were strongly impressed with and influenced by Lenin.\textsuperscript{19} Dada and Lenin have to be seen in context. There is a certain epistemic necessity for DADALENIN.
Fig. 6 AHA, Dinge zum Lernen/Things to learn, Lenin’s residence in Zurich, 2007, digital print, size variable
ÜBERVOLKSBILDUNG,
PEOPLE’S SUPEREDUCATION

Let us proceed from Dada and Lenin to DADALENIN and to the conceptual logics of the work of Rainer Ganahl and, thus, from the early experiments with avant-gardist art and vanguardist politics to contemporary neo- and retro-avant-gardist practices.

If there is one leitmotif in Rainer Ganahl’s versatile work, it is the process of learning. His ‘SEMINAR/LECTURE’-series (Fig. 1–5) is an emblematic index of learning processes. And his series of works dealing with the acquisition of language (Fig. 7+8) emphasizes a certain internationalist strand in his artistic practice that is continued by his ‘university’, his one man university that also included reading seminars and discussion groups as well as linguistic, social and historical research as part of his art making.20

His numerous works on the representability of abstract economic and political processes, tracing their representation in public media (Fig. 9+10) are just as much attempts to learn, to grasp and comprehend. “I don’t sell much, but I learn a lot”, as Ganahl states.21 Learn, learn, and learn, one is tempted to say, is the conceptual engine of Rainer Ganahl’s artistic production.

The slogan, however, has a specific history. There is a well-known Soviet joke about Lenin. Under socialism, Lenin’s advice to young people, his answer to what they should do, was “Learn, learn, and learn.”
This was evoked at all times and displayed on all school walls. The joke goes:

Marx, Engels, and Lenin are asked whether they would prefer to have a wife or a mistress. As expected, Marx, rather conservative in private matters, answers, “A wife!” while Engels, more of a bon vivant, opts for a mistress. To everyone’s surprise, Lenin says, “I’d like to have both!” Why? Is there a hidden stripe of decadent jouisseur behind his austere revolutionary image? No—he explains: “So that I can tell my wife that I am going to my mistress, and my mistress that I have to be with my wife…” “And then, what do you do?” “I go to a solitary place to learn, learn, and learnt!”

This old Soviet joke characterizes some aspects of Lenin’s mental disposition and the typical representations of Lenin. Indeed, a major part of the imagery of Lenin shows him learning, reading and writing, researching the logics and structures of imperialism, and developing strategic and tactical solutions for the communist party. When Lenin was the direct neighbor of the emerging Dada-movement, he is said to have spent every day from 9-6h in the library (interrupted only by a one-hour lunch break from 12-1h). That is, Lenin made himself a metonymy for the enlightenment and progress itself.

Lenin’s learning is paradigmatically located in Zurich—a particular reaction to the endless terror of the ‘Great War’, as the First World

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21 In an email-correspondence with the author.
23 Ibid.
War was referred to before an even greater war took place. “Dinge zum Lernen” (“things for learning” or “things to learn”) says a little sign in the window of Lenin’s previous residence (Fig. 6). Zurich is the accurate historical site of Lenin’s learning. Slavoj Žižek, recalling the joke quoted above, emphasizes:

Is this not exactly what Lenin did after the catastrophe of 1914? He withdrew to a lonely place in Switzerland, where he ‘learned, learned, and learned,’ reading Hegel’s logic. And this is what we should do today when we find ourselves bombarded by mediatic images of violence. We need to ‘learn, learn, and learn’ what causes this violence.²³

Lenin, however, does not only perform and embody the idea of infinite learning in his Zurich period. Learning also characterizes one of the most important aspects of Lenin’s political heritage: Facing the backwardness of the Russian peasantry and the cultural lag in the new Soviet Republic, Lenin’s interest was wholly focused on learning. In his political testament, his last political letters and his diary entries, the question of a struggle against illiteracy, the state of educational underdevelopment—the ‘cultural revolution’—was on top of the agenda (for “we are”, as he writes, “all illiterates”). “Too little, far too little, is still being done by us to adjust our state budget to satisfy, as a first measure, the requirements of elementary public education.”²⁴ People’s education is thus a key slogan in the last writings of Lenin. The almost impossible enterprise of installing a socialist society in a country with a high rate of illiteracy
and underdeveloped industry is a cultural show of strength, which Lenin, somewhat desperately, fights for in the writings of his last years and months.

The irony or (even stronger) tragedy, however, is in the very structure of the slogan. “Learn, learn, learn” also expresses a repetition, a stuttering, like a revolving of the wheel that doesn’t progress, a helpless struggle against the apparently mythical forces of illiteracy and the general educational lag that the Russian revolution had to vault.

There is a German compilation of such texts by Lenin, called ‘Über Volksbildung’ (‘On People’s Education’). By deleting the empty character between the two words, Rainer Ganahl gives Lenin’s program of mass education his own interpretation. ‘Über Volksbildung’ turns into ‘Übervolksbildung’ (Fig. 11), sounding like a faint echo of the Nietzschean Übermensch, now introduced as the inherent goal of collective education.

Ganahl’s linguistically minor intervention serves as a major comment: The extreme enlightenment-project appears to be hyperbolic and, in this respect, somewhat tragic. At the same time an educational program that exceeds its own potentials might regress into something radically different: The educational program of enlightenment and the excesses of revolutionary terror might be intrinsically linked.

As is well known, first Friedrich Schiller and later Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, referred to this argument in their critical analysis of a certain type of enlightened rationality: By making itself absolute enlightenment would intrinsically be connected with terror, falling prey to its own dialectics. According to Schiller, the imposition of rational form onto the uneducated masses would have to be introduced playfully if terror were to be avoided.25 As Adorno and Horkheimer suggested 150 years later, enlightenment would have to take the resistance of the material into account, admitting its own dependency on the mythical (conceptually undisclosed, sensuous) moments that it was meant to culti-

26 Cf. Theodor W. Adorno/Max Horkheimer: Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments, Stanford/CA: Stanford UP, 2002. See for instance p. 148: “Social and individual education reinforces the objectifying behavior required by work and prevents people from submerging themselves once more in the ebb and flow of surrounding nature. All distraction, indeed, all devotion has an element of mimicry. The ego has been forged by hardening itself against such behavior.”
27 About the two versions of New Man—in Dada and in Russian Constructivism—and their convergence see Hal Foster: Dada Mme, in: October, Vol. 105, Dada (Summer, 2003), pp. 166–176, p. 168 f.
vate and overcome.26 The absolutization of enlightenment in general and hyperbolic education in particular, as Schiller, Adorno and Horkheimer suggest, carries a tendency towards catastrophe.

Fig. 11 DADALENIN, Übervolkshbildung / Super Education for the People / People’s Super Education, 2006, digital print, 51 × 86,4 cm

Fig. 12 Reading Mao to Baby Edgar. On Culture and Art and on Study (Still), 2009, video, 20 min

Clearly, although in quite a different respect, Rainer Ganahl’s own learning practices are hyperbolic as well. Ganahl keeps reading and teaching impossible subjects, books and theories that seem to have become obsolete with the fall of State Socialism. In the West, Lenin (and Mao) have turned into impossible thinkers. Hard to imagine that this is the kind of intellectual nutrition that, to take up an example, Baby Edgar needs to be fed. (Fig. 12). Rainer Ganahl stubbornly (and ostentatiously) keeps reading their works in small, often self-organized reading groups. This very process of learning is an effect of over-affirmation (or supereducation) too. For it introduces a certain logic of subversion in the apparently limitless openness of discourse: What one can (and cannot) speak about and under which circumstances.

But let us get back to Lenin’s program of people’s (super-)education. The hyperbolic idea of a Leninist educational program, with the idea of creating a ‘New Man’, overshoots the mark of what the empirically given individuals might have been capable of. In precisely that sense, People’s Super-education implies its own regression.

Dadaism, in turn, is its immanent other, a kind of people’s under-education.27 Its subversion aims at the fragmentation of the body politic rather than its re-constitution according to the new communist morality. Both, however, are reacting to the same historical kind of subjectivity: the enlightened bourgeois dispositif that tended to collapse with the First World War.
In his book ‘Lenindada’, Dominique Noguez speculated about the historical influence of Lenin on Dada and vice versa, going as far as to claim that some of Tristan Tzara’s poetry was actually written by Lenin’s hand and that Lenin was a secret but regular member of the Zurich Dadaist circle. The specific historical claims of Noguez can be questioned. But in the question of education there is a specific historical convergence and a substantial link: overeducation and regression, revolutionary discipline and Dadaist antirationalism complement each other. This correspondence between ‘over-’ and ‘under-education’ marks a decisively DADALENINist moment.

Lenin himself, in his discussions with Gorky, smirkingly allowed for certain maniacal and politically irresponsible moments in art, supplementing and compensating the one-sidedness of proletarian discipline:

The author of these lines has had many occasions, in meetings with Gorky in Capri, to warn and reproach him for his political mistakes. Gorky parried these reproaches with his inimitable charming smile and with the ingenuous remark: “I know I am a bad Marxist. And besides, we artists are all somewhat irresponsible.” It is not easy to argue against that.28

But if political super-education and Dadaist under-education are dialectically linked (each being the condition for its other), then, maybe, Dominique Noguez’ speculations on the historical convergence between Lenin and Dada in Zurich’s Spiegelgasse, and on the mutual influence of Leninism and Dadaism, contained a kernel of truth after all. Ganahl enthusiastically works with the assumptions of Noguez and shares his belief that Lenin and his wife Krupskaya frequented the Cabaret Voltaire in disguise and participated actively in its programs as performers and financiers.

Dada was founded in Zurich while a hitherto unknown war machinery was bringing a new scale of death to Europe. The ‘Great War’ was just as foundational an event in the emergence of Dadaism as it was for the Soviet revolution. The communist vanguard and the Dadaist avant-garde both agreed upon the total rejection of the imperialist war and its underlying nationalism. It is therefore against the backdrop of the paradigm of industrial killing and a new scale of rationalized killing, that Dada and Lenin have to be understood. Their shared prehistory is the imperialist War, the first war on a global scale, which will be fought with industrial means, leaving 17 million people dead. One of its paradigmatically new forms will be the ‘Gas War’—a specifically German invention.

Rainer Ganahl’s personification of the historical tragedies of the imperialist war is Fritz Haber, the Jewish scientist in the service of imperialist Germany who develops the poison gas that will later be further developed as Zyklon B. In DADALENIN the name and imagery of Fritz Haber (Fig. 13-17) are merged with the name of Lenin and with the imagery of Dadaism. And by referring to the iconography of the gas mask Rainer Ganahl, to some extent, reconstructs an originally Dadaist impulse. It is
not for nothing that the gas mask reappears in so many of the Dadaist works.

Fritz Haber is emblematic for a number of things. With his Jewish-Pomeranian background he stands as exemplary for a well-educated bourgeois Jewry. His Jewish community was an “intellectual aristocracy”: “educated, witty, humane, politically liberal” and progressive in more than one respect. Haber’s wife Clara Immerwahr (the name ‘Immerwahr’ literally means ‘always-true’, as if to signify the eternal values of humanist art, culture and science) was the first female scientist who ever achieved the doctoral degree at Breslau University. The Jewish scientist stands for a mundane and emancipated bourgeois milieu.

But this milieu and its political fate are not without their own pitfalls. The inherent conservatism of humanist ideology is present in another reading of the Immerwahr, as a homonym for that which “immer war”, that has always already past. In yet another reading of the name it becomes clear that there is not much of a promise in previous history.

31 Ibid., p. 172.
32 Ibid., p. 145.
33 Ibid., p. 172/145. See also p. 172: “His writings on chemical warfare, in fact, sound quite familiar to twenty-first-century ears; they strike the same dispassionate tone adopted today by ‘defense intellectuals’ at think tanks such as the RAND Corporation and the International Institute for Strategic Studies. Whether calculating the effectiveness of missile defenses or analyzing the metaphysics of nuclear deterrence, their writings, like Haber’s, allow little room for the human horror of warfare.”
34 Ibid., p. 184.
In a homonymic multi-lingual pun for Immerwahr as “always (immer) war (Krieg)” the name also alludes to the mythical course of history, never really leaving barbaric prehistory behind.

And here we are, speaking about the biography of Fritz Haber. His life on the one hand, links the First World War to the continuity of catastrophes in the 20th century. On the other hand, he is a complement both to Dada and Lenin: Fritz Haber represents the harmless and legal bourgeois insanity in the guise of a neutral scientist, a Nobel laureate, whose military inventions open up a new dimension of killing and terror. Haber “viewed war, and gas in particular, with the cool eye of the technocrat.” He “played a central role in mobilizing the nation’s industrial resources” for warfare at the beginning of a development, the importance of which can barely be surveyed today: the emergence of a fully developed military-industrial complex, strongly rooted in scientific research. Haber stood, as his biographer Daniel Charles points out, “at the intersection of several worlds—military, scientific, and industrial—that had never before worked so closely together.”

In the end, his invention with the most drastic consequences—the poison gas that will be used at the Belgian front in Ypres in April 1915—introduces a new dimension to the history of warfare:

On the western front, where gas was most heavily used, it killed or injured about 650,000 people. Gas weapons claimed most of their casualties in the last year of the war, when mustard was introduced. The numbers of casualties from the German use of gas in Poland and Russia are unknown.

In its last consequence the use of poison gas also leads to the Nazi death camps. The insanity of the rational apparatuses of which Haber is a part, will in the end prove to be more insane than any Dadaist delirium.

Lenin’s ‘Red Terror’ is somewhat akin to both: to the tragedy of a failed progress, both as the continuation of bourgeois progressivism and as the revolt against it, as well as to the excesses of 20th century violence. Moreover there is a historical link between Germany’s desperate attempts to win the war by any means and Lenin’s Swiss period. Daniel Charles invites further speculation: If Haber’s Gas War would not have been started, if
Germany had been forced to surrender in 1915, Lenin might never have made it back to Russia from exile in Switzerland. The Bolshevik revolution might never have happened, or it might have taken a milder course.\(^{35}\)

Notwithstanding these historical speculations, there is a thematic relation between the intellectual impulses of Dadaism and Leninism on the one hand and the imperialist continuity of Fritz Haber on the other. While Dada appears as a rejection of the progressive ideology of scientific reason,\(^{36}\) Haber’s disposition represents its collapse from within. Haber is, as Daniel Charles emphasizes, “a scientist-warrior” and an “intellectual gunslinger”.\(^{37}\) And as a scientist of great repute, Haber was never at a loss for arguments. Even in the 1920s Haber insisted on the nihilist tautology that in war “death was death”, whether through poison gas, machine guns or disease.

Haber’s mental disposition, somewhere in the twilight zone between nihilism and progressivism, however, was exemplary of the unconditional belief in progress and scientific rationality of the high-bourgeois period:

The furious pace of technological innovation also provoked fears and apocalyptic visions of disaster, to be sure. Yet few honestly felt that progress could be stopped, or even slowed. And technology became part of everyone’s dream for a better world, even when they disagreed about what would make the world better. [...] Along the Spree and the Rhine, the Potomac and the Mississippi, progress offered people hope for the future. It was a new and optimistic faith, and Fritz Haber professed it with full conviction.\(^{38}\)

This optimism marks the bourgeois age and Haber personifies its apocalyptic leanings. Dada and Lenin are equally opposed to the old bourgeois paradigm. A sober portion of skepticism concerning apparently neutral scientific progress, which characterized the Dadaist impulse, was not alien to the communist tradition either. Lenin’s German comrade Karl Liebknecht had clearly stated an ideology-critical position against the apparent neutrality and freedom of science. The progress of rationality, to Liebknecht as much as to Lenin, had to be seen in a political context:

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37 Daniel Charles: Master Mind, p. xii, p. xiii.
38 Ibid., p. 63.
39 Ibid., p. 130.
Science was not the instrument of the common good that it claimed to be, Liebknecht argued in one speech to the German parliament. [...] “We social democrats hold no illusions. We know that in a class society ... such an ideal [of academic freedom] simply cannot be realized.” Scientific research and the university itself, Liebknecht asserted, had become a tool of the ruling classes.39

However, the impulse of both Dadaism and the communist vanguard, that this kind of progress leads at best to self-destruction, is biographically confirmed by Haber himself: Before using the outcomes of his scientific research in the most cynical ways, Nazi Germany will deprive him of all academic honors and chase him away. As a result, Haber will commit suicide in Swiss exile—precisely in the country that had hosted the historical encounter of Dadaism and Leninism.

But Haber’s own suicide is preceded by another, symbolically probably even more powerful one. Ten days after the deployment of poison gas in Ypres, Haber’s wife shoots herself with his revolver. Clara Immerwahr, whose suicide also seems to signify the falling-apart of the belief in eternal and autonomous humanist values (the critique of which, again, gives birth to both Dadaism and Leninism), allegorically stands for the failure of a good old bourgeois promise, the failure of everything that once appeared to be immer wahr, eternally true. Her name becomes emblematic of the nostalgic relation to a past, where promise was still intact.

The allusion to such promises does in fact have some importance for pre-Dadaist art forms and their references to the semblance of beauty. In aesthetic terms, bourgeois art contained the ‘promesse du bonheur’, the promise of happiness, even in times of advanced exploitation and
military confrontation: ‘Fiat ars, pereat mundus’. forty Lucky were those, who could still believe.

But this belief was in crisis. In fact the figure of the female suicide has a certain topicality in the aesthetic debates around the time of World War I: The female suicide (in the tradition of the Ophelia of Shakespeare and Rimbaud) is a key motif in expressionist poetry. Ophelia is present everywhere—as in the poetry of Trakl, Heym, Benn, Zech and Wegener. forty More often than not, Ophelia is taken as an example of spurned love, an allegory of a tragic love relation.

However, in its historical context it also has a diagnostic value: as a bemoaning of the loss of the good old bourgeois world, the love of the bourgeoisie, a bemoaning of the high-capitalist times, in which there still seemed to be reasons to believe the proper order and to hope for a better time to come that seemed to be anticipated in the beautiful semblance of autonomous artworks.

In some way the expressionist position represents one of the last aesthetic movements in which the eternal values of art and the idea of an increased aesthetic subjectivity stand central—before the historical avant-gardes emphasize de-subjectivation through montage and construction. Georg Heym’s voice and the vulnerable body of Ophelia (unburied and eternal: immer wahr) will be replaced by the new man of the machine age, by radical modernism and its respective apparatuses.

This motif of aggressive industrialization and of modernist progress corresponds with a second possible interpretation of the death of Clara Immerwahr: The motif of Gretchen of Goethe’s Faust. Here, too, we find a vulnerable female body, left behind by the progression of a “cold-hearted” world.

In Faust, indeed, we find the motif of the eager scholar (anticipating Lenin’s “learn, learn, learn”) who, just like Fritz Haber loses “connection

40 “Let art be created, let the world perish.”
43 Ibid., p. 50.
with the solidity and warmth of life with people” due to his involvement in the maelstrom of progress. Faust has dedicated his scholarship to the destructive powers of Mephistophelian progress, the powers of the masculine logics of “money, speed, sex, and power”, which eventually leads to sacrificing his love. Famously referred to by Marshall Berman, the Leninist philosopher Georg Lukács has interpreted the Faustian Drama as a “Tragedy of Development”, intrinsically connected with the logics of (capitalist) modernity. In the end, when Gretchen Immerwahr is left behind by her husband Friedrich Faust Haber, this logic of development will include the development of chemical weapons designed for mass killings in the battlefields of imperialist collapse.

* * *

As the name for apocalypse, the First World War marks the failure of the bourgeois promise of progress and its reversal into sheer terror. But let us also try to consider these historical outbursts of violence in structural terms. Amongst the few attempts to make sense of the civilizational rupture, Lenin’s book on imperialism (‘Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism’) stands out as a shining example, in its attempt to make sense of the current stage of development of capital, the struggle for a world market and the competition for resources in the periphery. Lenin’s book is as much an analysis of imperialism as it is a strategic intervention about how to deal with it, and is probably his most influential contribution to Marxist theory. It was written on the Spiegelgasse in the neighborhood of the Cabaret Voltaire, and it is one of the regular objects of study in Rainer Ganahl’s reading seminars (see 5.1. Reading Lenin).

Lenin’s book contains four key claims: Firstly, Lenin analyzes contemporary capitalism (in agreement with Rudolf Hilferding) as a form of monopoly and finance capitalism. “The twentieth century”, he writes, “marks the turning-point from the old capitalism to the new, from the domination of capital in general to the domination of finance capital.” And this turning point appears to be a major change in the composition of political and social power:

Finance capital is such a great, such a decisive, you might say, force in all economic and in all international relations, that it is capable of subjecting, and actually does subject, to itself even states enjoying the fullest political independence.
Secondly, Lenin emphasizes the inherently imperialist nature of capitalism and its inherent tendency to war:

The more capitalism is developed, the more strongly the shortage of raw materials is felt, the more intense the competition and the hunt for sources of raw materials throughout the whole world, the more desperate the struggle for the acquisition of colonies.\footnote{47}

Thirdly, Lenin underlines the tendency of advanced capitalism to develop a working class aristocracy with the effect of dividing the working class movement: Imperialism has the tendency to create privileged sections also among the workers, and to detach them from the broad masses of the proletariat.\footnote{48}

But the division of the labor movement will be a necessary price in the struggle against imperialism.

Nonetheless Lenin insists, fourthly, that the current situation of world capitalism, which imperialism confronts us with, is a world revolutionary moment as it puts capitalism in a situation of crisis and utter conflict: “Imperialism is the eve of the social revolution of the proletariat.”\footnote{49}

The first three claims have their own plausibility and, maybe, even a certain timeliness today. In its methodological clarity particularly, the first claim outshines some contemporary sociological theories by far: The analysis of the development of capital is an analysis of the dominant power relations and of the historical formation of capitalism at the same time.

Lenin’s second claim, which has always been of tremendous importance for the political self-understanding of the communist movement, might not be wrong either (the imperialist blocs have not proven Lenin wrong: at no time has imperialism allowed for peace on a global scale). But the big monopolies do not clash in the form of nationally-bound interests. Instead they are much more organized by supra-national umbrella organizations (\textit{WTO, IMF, NATO}).

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{47} Ibid., p. 260.
\item \textsuperscript{48} Ibid., p. 283.
\item \textsuperscript{49} Ibid., p. 194
\item \textsuperscript{51} Harvey, 2003, pp. 145–152.
\end{itemize}
Against Lenin, a certain Kautskyan argument has therefore returned: There is an “ultra-imperialist” tendency (that was Kautsky’s argument), a tendency away from military confrontations between the major imperialist blocs, towards alliances between them—against nationalist deviations in uprising peripheries.50

In the tradition of Rosa Luxemburg, David Harvey has argued that capital (“imperialism”) still depends on a non-capitalized outside, which continuously has to be produced to recover overaccumulation. The production of non-capitalized “underdeveloped regions” of economic peripheries is, more often than not, an act of military violence.51 Imperialism is, in that sense, indeed not capable of peaceful coexistence even though it does not lead to direct war between the superpowers.

Just like the first claim, the third claim connects sociological with political analysis. Not only that, Lenin anticipated the organizational problems that will later be reflected in the politics of the New Left (in all kinds of radical movements that are no longer based in the working class). It poses a strategic question of central importance: How shall one deal with chauvinist particularism, such as the mounting of a fortress Europe, apparently in the name of regionally-specific labor rights? How is a political strategy to be developed against, for instance, the defense of the domestic market versus foreign labor (or “Fremdarbeiter”, foreign laborers, as Oskar Lafontaine, one of the heads of the German Linkspartei called them pejoratively)? The plausibility of Lenin’s third claim will have to be searched for in such contexts and Lenin’s general attitude is definite here: No labor rights could ever be defended without a radically internationalist perspective. Lenin’s politics were avant-gardist because they were radically globalized before the term even existed.

Even more than the first three, the fourth claim is of strategic nature. It has a performative dimension and its truth lies in the very act of being expressed. If there is the trace of a Dadaist in the author of the book on imperialism, it is probably this: To some extent, Lenin is a gambler who goes all in. Slavoj Žižek has affirmingly underlined this moment of revolutionary madness. But he locates Lenin’s moment of madness (to counterintuitively claim that the revolution is at the gates) only a year later, in the ‘April Theses’, and doesn’t refer to Lenin’s Imperialism. For Žižek, however, it is precisely this maniacal temper of Lenin that is timely and significant:
When, in his ‘April Theses’ (1917), Lenin discerned the Augenblick, the unique chance for a revolution, his proposals were first met with stupor or contempt by a large majority of his party colleagues. No prominent leader within the Bolshevik Party supported his call to revolution, and Pravda took the extraordinary step of dissociating the Party, and the editorial board as a whole, from Lenin’s ‘April Theses’ - Lenin was far from being an opportunist flattering and exploiting the prevailing mood of the populace; his views were highly idiosyncratic. Bogdanov characterized the ‘April Theses’ as “the delirium of a madman”, and Nadezhda Krupskaya herself concluded: “I am afraid it looks as if Lenin has gone crazy.”

And Žižek continues: “This is the Lenin from whom we still have something to learn.” 52 We should not forget that this hazardous high-stakes gambling craze—drawing the most radical consequences from the catastrophe—was the Dadaist option, too.

* * *

If the prehistory of both Dada and Lenin is the Gas War, then its aesthetic and intellectual momentum is the attempt to confront the imperialist war both aesthetically and politically, and its aftermath is civil war and terror. Indeed, in public opinion Lenin’s name stands rather for terror than for the uncompromising struggle against imperialism.

The documents of Red Terror have a prominent place in Ganahl’s DADALENIN: Alfred Jarry’s Ubu Roi, one of the favorite plays of the Zurich Dadaists, is used to reflect the history of the killings of monarchists. The action theatre UBU LENIN (Fig. 18-20) sketches the revolution’s falling back into the archaic figures of violence. Lenin’s instructions for liquidations (“use your toughest people for this”, as he writes in his hanging order from August 1918) 53 are like a refrain to the history of excessive violence and terror around the years of World War I (see page 363). Facing the White Terror of the Entente, Lenin repeats the logics of terror himself: hostages, killings and camps.

The continuity of terror, or, the road to Red Terror, is more ambiguous though. Red Terror does not appear from out of nowhere. In the summer months of 1918 with Volodarsky, Uritsky, and Lenin himself, some of the most popular representatives of the new Soviet regime were


53 For a scan of this infamous hanging order see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lenin%27s_Hanging_Order.
Fig. 18 UBU LENIN Mask used for the theatrical performance DADALENIN UBULENIN – A Re-Enthronement of Alfred Jarry’s Ubu King, Tensta Konsthall, Stockholm, 2008. See also 4.3. UBULENIN
assassinated or severely injured, while the British special envoy **Bruce Lockhart** was assigned to establish a military dictatorship and wipe out the young republic.\(^54\) It is hard to say on which side the terror actually originated—to some extent this question is a question of commitment and belief. But with the summer months of 1918 it began to make its presence known everywhere.

Counterrevolutionary alliances soon recruited domestic and foreign alliances that would draw the new republic into a ruthless civil war. The historical fury of revolution versus counterrevolution was in full effect, predetermining the logics of political rule for the upcoming decades.

Eventually this unforeseen internal war, exacerbated by the intervention of hostile foreign powers, became the formative experience of the Bolshevik leaders.\(^55\)

But terror was not only a matter of choice—of doing wrong in a situation that would have allowed for simply anything. Princeton historian Arno Mayer thus regards the road to terror with historical sobriety:

> Considering this extreme situation, and especially allowing for Russia’s ingrained historical-political traditions, the choice was never really between democracy and despotism, but between different forms of authoritarian rule.\(^56\)

**Rupture, revolt and insurgency, one is tempted to say, is one thing.** The establishment of a new order is another. For the Bolsheviks, too, it was much easier to liquidate the old legal and police establishment than to put in place a new one, in tune with the new dawn. With authority and law reduced to a skeleton, the successive provisional governments had to proceed on two fronts: to design and establish a new system of ‘surveiller et punir’; and to set up, overnight, "


\(^{56}\) Ibid., p. 234.

\(^{57}\) Ibid., p. 257.
a temporary judicial and police system—martial law writ large—to deal with the spiraling emergency.  

Such systems of ‘surveiller et punir’, as Mayer suggests with clear reference to Michel Foucault’s concept of the dispositif, are aesthetic regimes in the broad sense. For a dispositif is a disciplinary apparatus that organizes subjectivity through regimes of visibility and the distribution of bodies. And if anything at all, the aesthetico-political project of both Dada and Lenin aimed at the creation of a New Man, the recomposition of the sensuous and the intellectual as a general attempt at reshaping political subjectivity.  

Fig. 19 DADALENIN UBULENIN —  
A Re-Enthronement of Alfred Jarry’s Ubu King, performance / theater,  
Swiss Institute, New York, 2009  

Fig. 20 DADALENIN UBULENIN —  
A Re-Enthronement of Alfred Jarry’s Ubu King, performance / theater, MAK, Vienna, 2009  
Ubu voice: William Easton
LENIN’S EYE

The suicide of Clara “Ophelia Gretchen Eternally-True” Immerwahr marks a rupture in the history of modern aesthetics and thus introduces the biopolitical attempts to establish a New Man (a new regime of visuality, a new subjective disposition etc.). Rainer Ganahl’s metonymy for the thematic complex of the erection of a new aesthetic disposition is Lenin’s eye (Fig. 21-23). During a previous stay in Switzerland (in Geneva 1903), Lenin had, in fact, a bicycle accident that almost cost him his eye. In Ganahl’s animated movie, he replaces his lost eyeball, which had fallen out of his head, with his bare hand, a powerful and symbolically rich gesture that embraces the whole idea of the struggle for a post-organic paradigm of subjectivity.

The loss and restoration of the eyeball alludes to numerous figures of mythology, of psychoanalytical and aesthetico-political theory. When Odysseus fights the one-eyed Polyphemus he burns his eye to blind
him just before he cunningly denies his own identity. **Oedipus** blinds himself when he finds out that he murdered his father, the king (the alleged father of the Russian people, **Tsar Nicholas II** was killed in the course of Lenin’s revolution).

In his analysis of **E.T.A. Hoffmann**’s The Sandman, **Freud** spends some thoughts on the literary motif of losing one’s eye. We know from psychoanalytic experience, he writes,

that the fear of damaging or losing one’s eyes is a terrible one in children. Many adults retain their apprehensiveness in this respect, and no physical injury is so much dreaded by them as an injury to the eye. [...] A study of dreams, phantasies and myths has taught us that anxiety about one’s eyes, the fear of going blind, is often enough a substitute for the dread of being castrated.\(^59\)

In Freudian psychoanalysis the loss of the eye counts as a castration symbol and, in some sense, a symbol for a loss of subjectivity.\(^60\) From a Dadaist perspective, the figure of the artist-clown also comprises the idea of symbolic self-castration in the face of the failure of the dominant models of subjectivity: the general, the politician, the capitalist—all the stereotypes whose caricatures stand central in the Dadaist paintings of **Grosz** or **Dix**. The slapstick character of Ganahl’s version of Lenin’s bicycle suggests such Dadaist clownery.

Lenin’s loss of the eye suggests a certain primary loss, the over-compensation of which later on marks the Leninist project: the re-establishment of a strong political subjectivity. But it also underlines the very necessity of establishing an alternative visual regime as an alternative

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political regime of subjectivity, or, to refer to the terminology of Michel Foucault, as an alternative political dispositif. In light of Michel Foucault’s theory of subjectivity, a subject is always a subjugated subject—subject to the regimes of discipline and punishment that constitute the conditions of what it means to be a subject. Such regimes are explicitly visual regimes too.\textsuperscript{61}

The question of the visual dispositif of subjectivity is therefore absolutely central for the understanding of the DADA LENIN project. For both Lenin and the Dadaists are active in a field of so-called biopolitical struggle, partaking in the construction of the forms of subjectivity themselves. Antonio Negri’s reading of Lenin goes along precisely these lines. According to Negri,

\begin{quote}
this is where we find the real Lenin, in this materialism of bodies that strive to free themselves and in the materiality of life, which revolution (indeed only revolution) permits to renew itself. Lenin thus represents […] the revolutionary invention of a body.\textsuperscript{62}
\end{quote}

And if a dispositif is also and foremost a visual order, then revolutionarily re-invented bodies have new eyes as well. The loss and re-appropriation of the eye signifies the refusal of being a subject in the dominant regime of vision.

With the collapse of the old world during the First World War certain formations of subjectivity collapsed as well. For Dada, anti-art and ostentatious regression became a viable form of revolt against the previous regime. Lenin’s accident allows for a reflection on visuality, on Soviet Power as a specific type of perception—an aesthetic dispositif. What are Bolshevik eyes? How do they see? What are the visual machines of the New Man?

Sergei Tretyakov, a protagonist of the biopolitical project of a new communist visual regime, imagined the artistic project of Soviet Futurism as a supplementary element in the struggle for communism, as the dynamic re-organization of the human psyche.\textsuperscript{63} For the protagonists of the Soviet avant-garde, the machine age provided the means of an augmentation of the vital forces of the proletariat, a mechanized collective body. The new man of the Bolshevik revolution was a mechanized superman, a collectivized version of the Übermensch, an attempt to bring about the Übervolk, über, however, not only in terms of superiority (Überlegenheit),

\begin{flushright}
— LENIN’S EYE —
\end{flushright}
but also and particularly as übergreifend, as an overarching and transgressive project that was meant to overcome all regionalist limits.

The aesthetic production of new sensory apparatuses was all part of the political project:

Artists of the avant-garde gave expression to the changed anthropology of modern life in forms and rhythms that left the perceptual apparatus of the old world triumphantly behind. The Bolshevik Revolution appropriated these utopian impulses by affirming them and channeling their energy into the political project.  

The Taylorist engineer, metalworker, political agitator and poet Aleksei Gastev, who later became a victim of the Stalinist purge, expresses the same kind of tendencies. Gastev described, as Susan Buck-Morss emphasizes, “with passionate enthusiasm the new industrial machines as an animate force with human beings their collectivized extension.”

In Ganahl’s DADALENIN, Rodchenko, Vertov, Gastev and a number of others appear as key-figures for the project of a Bolshevik vision. Gastev will be part of DADALENIN mediated through a documentary on the History Channel. Film stills are re-appropriated (in anachronistic ink-paintings, as if to maintain historical distance to the dream-world of mechanization) everywhere (Fig. 24-25). Both the documentary and the ink-paintings reconstruct the exemplary fate of a revolutionary and avant-gardist under Stalinist rule, when the temporality of radical innovation and avant-gardist renewal apparently had become threatening for the previously revolutionary rulers.

Gastev was, clearly, an avant-gardist in many respects. But he was not a visual worker in the narrow sense. In fact the body of works comprised in Ganahl’s DADALENIN contains numerous references to the biopolitical project of establishing a new regime of visibility, somewhere between electrification and people’s super-education. For the Bolshevik
eye was closely related to Dadaist visions. Both the Bolshevik and the Dadaist dispositif, the whole sensuous regimes of the revolutionary avant-garde thus redefined a regime of bodies and desires.

When Lenin loses his eye due to the bicycle accident and then puts it back into place with his own hands, he somehow turns into a cyborg, a half-artificial, half-human subject. And as Matthew Biro has pointed out, the cyborg marks one of the key-themes of Dadaist artistic practices (particularly in the Berlin circle). That was no coincidence: The cyborg reflected upon the lost authenticity of the natural body, damaged in the First World War, equipped with prostheses and mechanical body parts. The representation of such semi-mechanical bodies, however, was not just a reflection of shock and damage. It was also an attempt to appropriate the historical experience of industrialized modernity:

Dadaist representations of cyborgs [...], were presented as potential ego ideals—images of alternative forms of existence that could provoke their audiences to rethink who and what they were.66

One of the key attributes of chief Dadaists Tristan Tzara and Raoul Hausmann was the monocle, a cheap and somewhat outdated visual instrument, a simple prosthesis with some strong connotations. The monocle always suggested a sharp-sightedness in one eye, an almost scientific or microscopic focus.

Walter Benjamin has characterized the logics of the new vision of the machine age as a surgical method, allowing for a diminishing of distance and a both visual and intellectual penetration of the integrity of the organic body.67 Benjamin’s main emphasis is on the visual media that allowed man to visualize what was previously invisible to the human
eye. Benjamin’s interest was in the prosthesis of an artificial eye, of supportive media that would bring to the fore the “optical unconscious”, the uncultured field of vision, inaccessible to the organic body: Sharp vision through technical intervention.

The focused eye and its optical apparatuses is a central issue in the visual language of the Russian avant-garde. The allegorical use of the eye in Rodchenko’s Kino-Glaz poster for Dziga Vertov’s film of the same title (1924) clarifies the project of a Bolshevik vision. As in numerous other examples, the creation of a new visibility figures as an appropriation of new industrial technologies in the machine age. The cut-out photo of an individual eye mirrors the left eye of the viewer. Two film cameras facing downwards support it. The abstracted and anonymous eye, politicized (confronting the left eye), disembodied and mechanized, represents a paradigm of industrial subjectivity.

Dziga Vertov, maybe the most advanced avant-gardist filmmaker of his time, had his clear idea of the construction of a Leninist vision (with films like his 1919 ‘Anniversary of the Revolution’ and his famous 1934 project ‘Three Songs About Lenin’). Radical experimentation with the visual capacities of the medium and the renouncement of any narrative or scenario were the characteristic elements of Vertov’s contribution to cinematography. But new vision was never experimented with for its

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Fig. 27 DADALENIN RODCHENKO BELOMOR CANAL MEHRWERT / SURPLUS VALUE, 1931-33/1924/2009, Aleksander Rodchenko, 'Working With Orchestra', White Sea Canal, 1933, gelatin silver, printed ca. 1983, Titled, dated and stamped by Rodchenko/Stepanova Archive verso, 25.4 × 40.6 cm; inkjet ink and ink on paper, size 64 × 76 cm

Fig. 28 DADALENIN RODCHENKO BELOMOR CANAL MEHRWERT / SURPLUS VALUE, 1931-33/1924/2009, Aleksander Rodchenko, 'Osip Brik', 1924, gelatin silver, printed ca. 1983, Titled, dated and stamped by Rodchenko/Stepanovca Archive verso, 35.56 × 27.94 cm; ink jet ink and ink on paper, size 64 × 76 cm
own sake. The idea of the Kino-eye meant to install a visual dispositif that would help to form the New Man. Vertov defined the Kino-eye as the union of science with newsreel to further the battle for the communist decoding of the world, as an attempt to show the truth on the screen—film—truth.69

If one is to believe Jeremy Hicks’ book on Dziga Vertov’s contribution to the history of documentary film, the very style of Vertov’s documentaries has to be seen in the same context. With his experiments with hidden camera filming and radically unforced type of footage—ideally shot by networks of anonymous and secret correspondent-photographers—Vertov established a logic that seems to resemble the visual techniques of surveillance.

Overcoming the problem of the subject’s reaction to the camera was possible through various techniques, including the hidden camera for some shots, but this also meant the invoking of the model of intelligence work, of spying, to justify the observation and filming of people without their consent.70

Rainer Ganahl’s use of stills from the film projects of Dziga Vertov is a secret reference to precisely this ambivalence of the avant-gardist project, with all its optimism about the construction of optical machines. The sublimity of this megalomaniac attempt is all-present in the powerful imagery of the geometries of optical apparatuses. But interestingly Ganahl does not use any technical visual techniques himself. In terms of his use of media, his homage to the visual apparatuses of the Russian avant-garde is anachronistic, if not nostalgic. Watercolor paintings confront the hypermodernist promise of new biopolitical machines, as if their powerful narrative had been rinsed out to some extent and as if the avant-gardist emphasis of novelty had gotten its own patina. There is an experiential, moral and aesthetic distance between Ganahl’s retro-avant-gardist practices and the historical original. Ganahl is their doppelganger—uncanny and displaced in time.


Fig. 29 Looking for witnesses of the construction of the Belmor canal, produced 1931-33 with forced labor, 2009, ink on paper, 29.7 × 42 cm
Clearly, the desires for a new vision produced their own hazards, hazards that cannot be denied in light of the 21st century’s art and politics. Rodchenko’s cycle of images from the construction of the White Sea Canal, Stalin’s first major prestige project, with the characteristic perspectives from above and the constructivist focus on geometrical composition, with hard edges and clear lines, portray an exemplary event of forced labor, the construction of which cost thousands and thousands of casualties (Fig. 30–31). They record these massive efforts with all possible suggestions of the heroic. With his call for reports from witnesses, Rainer Ganahl’s DADALENIN tried to restore the historical knowledge of these events and to clarify the context of Rodchenko’s documents (Fig. 27–29). For in some ways Rodchenko’s images alone do not say enough.

The new dispositif of discipline and punishment was installed by force and its formation required wide alliances. Osip Brik, ‘principal spokesman for the artistic avant-garde’ in Russia71 and founder of the Lef (‘Left Front of the Arts’) worked for the Cheka, the newly established Soviet secret police. In its adaptation to the continuously bureaucratic and repressive developments of the Soviet Union, the avant-gardist project had the evil eye, too.

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71 Vahan D. Barooshian: Brik and Mayakovski, p. 45.
The avant-gardist project has classically been understood as an attempt to transgress and sublate the bourgeois institutions of art—as Peter Bürger has paradigmatically suggested in his famous attempt to frame the Dadaist and Surrealist experience.\textsuperscript{72} The question, however, remains, what shall be distributed throughout society?

The idea of \textbf{Eros} is a ready suggestion. As is well known, the Russian revolution triggered lively debates concerning sexual liberation.\textsuperscript{73} The idea that in communism the satisfaction of sexual needs was nothing but the drinking of a glass of water was of great influence. Lenin, however, reacted not only as a party communist (insisting on the importance of revolutionary discipline) but also as an aesthete (not much differently than \textbf{Herbert Marcuse} about half a century later, defending the liberating forces of Eros against repressive desublimation).\textsuperscript{74} Lenin states that, “in sexual life there is not only simple nature to be considered, but also cultural characteristics, whether they are of a high or low order.”\textsuperscript{75}

Here we find the reshaping of the classical structure of bourgeois love with its implicit promise to be always true (Immerwahr), eternally faithful to the one beloved person. But with \textbf{Clara Ophelia Immerwahr}, this promise had crumbled, too.
Lenin’s own love life, and, as during his stay in Switzerland, his temporary ménage à trois with Krupskaya and the French born Bolshevik Inessa Armand, underlines the rejection of the institutionalized structure of bourgeois love—an avant-gardist project in more than one respect. Something about the Swiss exile and the encounter with Dadaism seems to suggest a liberation of the communist libido in Lenin too.

Not a square but rather a triangle seems to be the characteristic geometry of avant-gardist Eros. The most famous example is the relationship between Lilya Brik with her husband Osip’s best friend Vladimir Mayakovksy, two of the most influential writers of the Russian avant-garde. As Lilya Brik recalls:

When I told him [her husband Osip Brik] that Mayakovksy and I had fallen in love, we all decided never to part. Then Mayakovksy and Brik were already close friends, men bound to each other by close ideological interests and joint literary work. Such is the way it came to be that we lived our life both spiritually and largely in the same place, together.76

The common life began in 1915 and was interrupted brutally with the suicide of Vladimir Mayakovksy in 1930.

The Dadaists, of course, had their own erotic visions and their own experience with prostitution, polygamy and the idea of free love: Emmy Ball-Hennings was forced into occasional prostitution, which Hugo Ball tolerated. Partly due to poverty, partly due to a willfulness to experiment with forms of life, the bourgeois lifestyle was not an option for the protagonists of Dada. Already in an earlier context, Emmy Ball-Hennings had questioned the bourgeois institution of marriage and its inherent dependency on both prostitution and the criminal-
“Love”, she concludes, “would have to be organized differently.”

The price, however, had to be paid. Passionate conflicts had to be accepted. In a different situation Hugo Ball, notwithstanding his otherwise avant-gardist beliefs, chased his wife and her lover, the Spaniard del Vajo, with a revolver, not quite so willing to accept the reordering of libido.

In Tristan Tzara’s ‘La Première aventure céleste de Mr. Antipyrine’ another geometrical, universalist, genderless, suprematist interpretation was given. It pushes the triangular logic of Eros one step further: “The sexual organ”, Tzara proclaims, “is square, made of lead and bigger than a volcano”—“l’organe sexuel est carré, est de plomb, est plus gros que le volcan.”

Ganahl’s appropriation of the Zurich Dadaist tradition is guided by this sentence—it is one of the central refrains of DADALENIN (see page 206) and by eroticized arrangements of Lenin busts (Fig. 32-33, see also page 194). But what does it mean for a sexual organ to be square, to be formed like a frame, itself framed by desires, or maybe itself framing the possibility of sexual acts?

A square, one might think, is a public space, something to be appropriated in political practice and, thus, a medium to turn the private into the public and that which is abstracted from social practice back into everyday life. And whichever sexual organ one might imagine, the square is the least dynamic of all generic geometric forms (un-
like the circle, the triangle etc.), a spatial situation in which any smooth flow is blocked by solid and stable proportions. These promises of solid and stable harmony (“se carrer” also means to make oneself at home) might also identify the main lines of interpretation, another square (or rectangular) construction of the Erotic: Brancusi’s famous sculpture The Kiss.

There are several possible interpretations of this sentence. Already the copula “is” poses a number of questions. In common sense, clearly, the sexual organ is not square. It is, however, as Tzara suggests as well, blunt and explicit. But the artistic “is” opens up an imaginary real in which sexual organs could or even should be square. Let us follow this invitation and imagine square sexual organs.

Firstly, of course, the idea of a square has a strictly geometrical sense. It is not so easy to figure the sexual organ (or even sexual organs) as square. In highly abstracting depictions it might work for breasts and maybe for the orifices of the body (vagina, anus). Given the necessary degree of abstraction, such depictions would be located somewhere in the grey area between depiction and censorship. It would be even more complicated to imagine a square penis. A square penis could hardly penetrate. Maybe, however, in a mechanized world of cyborgs and robots (in the world of Lenin’s eye—the world of Gastev, Rodchenko and Vertov) sexual organs could be square.

Such a crossfading of the organic with the inorganic and the geometrical indeed marks a central stylistic element in Tzara’s poetry.79

Being of the body, although not exclusively so, language exists in Tzara’s artistic configuration on an equal footing with “stone, wood, iron, tin, rocks ...

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79 There is an interesting relation between the early poetry of Tzara and Hugo Ball—deracinated from its mother tongue and “critical of conventional languages” (cf. T.J. Demos: Circulations, p. 149 f.)—and the linguistic experiments of Rainer Ganahl. See Rainer Ganahl’s own introduction to his book Money and Dreams: “I like to name my practice of learning many foreign languages—currently Chinese and Arabic—as a ‘moving away from my mother’s tongue.’” Rainer Ganahl: Who wants to know anyway, in: Money and Dreams. Counting the Last Days of the Sigmund Freud Banknote, Putnam/CT: Spring Publications, 2005, pp. 6–10.


83 Susan Buck-Morss: Dreamworld and Catastrophe, p. 89.
[and] sensation”, while it possesses the “spiritual” force of the “fart in a steam engine”.80

The merging of the organic and even the sexual with the abstract and the inorganic reconciles the apparently primordial and authentic with the conditions of the machine age. Its model is the cyborg, a “hybrid of machine and organism”, a “creature of the post-gender world”.81

Whatever its concrete cultural context would be—a squaring of the sexual organ (some sort of a squaring of the circle) would imply a reorganization and decentralization of sexual desire. Channeled genital sexuality would have to be replaced by expanded forms of eroticization. This is in line with the very conception of the historical avant-garde (as famously theorized by, for instance, Peter Bürger). For the logics of the avant-garde had been defined as the transgression of the institutionalized field of art (and sexuality) in the generalizing movement of sublation: What had been sanctioned as legitimate art (and sexuality) had to be realized in an expanded field of the aesthetic (Eros). The avant-gardist idea that every place can become a museum and every human an artist then also implies that every place can become a bedroom and every (tiny little square) pixel can trigger sexual sensation. The reconfiguration of subjectivity follows the lines of expanded desire.

Secondly, of course, the square is not an innocent form, certainly not in the foundational years of Dadaism. Lenin’s compatriot Malevich elevated the square as a suprematist archetype. Libidinous drives, Tzara’s sentence seems to suggest, find themselves expressed in it. The sexual organ is, we could say, a suprematist, a Russian avant-gardist signifier. It stood for the mechanistic assault on authorship and the rejection of the aesthetic ideology of craft—a double rejection of overstated claims to aesthetic subjectivity.82

Thirdly however, the square has an aesthetico-political career of a specific kind. Like so much of the revolutionary iconography it started to be banned in the early 30s and ended up in the exile of US modernism.

As nonrepresentational, geometrical abstraction, the square became the prototype of “pure” and “true” art, which, as experimental and “advanced,” could only flourish in a political democracy.83
After its migration to the West, Josef Albers, Ellsworth Kelly, Ad Reinhardt, Robert Ryman, Frank Stella and some others will become the protagonists of a squared libido. Interestingly the whole idea of the geometrical universal, the whole idea of an aesthetic internationalism comprised in it, drastically changed its political colors.

The decade of the sixties witnessed an explosion of artistic imperialism under the banner of “internationalism.” As a form of U.S. Cold War cultural hegemony, black squares, yellow squares, red squares, etc., were painted by “avant-garde” artists around the globe.\(^4\)

The square began to become politically bourgeois. In precisely this sense ‘square’ has a colloquial and idiomatic meaning. This interpretation is fully dependent on the English translation and probably only makes sense for Rainer Ganahl’s usage of the quote, not for its original meaning. The sexual organ is square could thus also mean the sexual organ is bourgeois, i.e. boring.

It might sound paradoxical to state that the sexual organ, the ultimate organ of virility and, thus, hipness, is square and bourgeois. But in the end, Ganahl’s Tzara would not have been the first one to claim that. This idea is, in fact, not quite as paradoxical as one might think. In fact the opposite claim—“the sexual organ is hip”—would be at best a tautology and at worst the very idea of a compulsive genital fixation. Herbert Marcuse identified precisely this one-dimensional form of sexuality (based on the phallic straight line) as repressive desublimation, followed by Adorno, emphasizing how potentially subversive, libidinous energies were integrated into society by means of ‘sportification’ and cosmetic administration.\(^5\) The ‘hipness’ of genital sexuality reaffirms the already coded, channeled, legitimized and canonized forms of sexuality and ends up being ridiculously banal.

Paradoxically, the calling for a realization of one’s own sexual potential would ultimately be opposed to erotic pleasure—some kind

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\(^4\) Susan Buck-Morss: Dreamworld and Catastrophe, p. 89.

\(^5\) Cf. Theodor W. Adorno’s emphasis on the reduction of sexuality to the conformist idea of a “healthy sex life”. As he writes in Sexual Taboos and Law Today, in: Theodor W. Adorno: Critical Models. Interventions and Catchwords, New York/NY: Columbia UP, 2005, pp. 71-88, p. 75: “A true, intrinsically erotic life, the relations that generate pleasure, is by no means that healthy sex life that in most advanced industrial countries today is encouraged by all sectors of the economy, from the cosmetic industry to psychotherapy. Rather the partial libido lives on within the genitality into which it was fused. All happiness is aroused by the tension between the two.”
Fig. 34  DADALENIN MODERNA FAHLSTRÖM LENIN’S LAST KISS IN SWITZERLAND, 1964–66/2008
detail, acrylic paint on two pieces of wood. Lenin approx. 110 × 875 × 1 cm, Tzara approx.
115 × 105 × 2 cm
of a death of desire through excessive (and maybe hyperbolic) symbolization. The implicitly prudish and affirmative dimension of pornography (or of phallocentric sexuality, one-dimensionally directed at the eventual realization of the sexual act) reduces the imaginary to the codes of a uniformed imaginary. It thereby deprives the imaginary of its unlimited and radically open character, which comprises all possible desires. Such a reductive simplification could literally be bourgeois. In precisely this respect one could say: The sexual organ (the fixation on primary sexual organs) is indeed square. And if that is true, then the avant-gardist project is the geometrical generalization of Eros rather than repressive desublimation.

But let’s come back to the protagonists of DADALENIN and devote more attention to some thoughts on their own erotic dispositions. Lenin’s encounter with the Zurich Dadaists was mainly focused on Tzara, who admits to have “exchanged ideas” with Lenin and who, indeed, had the strongest Leninist inclinations of all the Zurich Dadaists. But the political inclinations, maybe, went much further than that. Rainer Ganahl takes up a few lines from Tzara’s 1931 text ‘L’homme approximatif’, in which he writes about his nightly passages: At night, he writes, “I was following those miserable figures of the night, really nameless emigrants like Lenin, the Russian emigrant living underground. And Tzara goes on to write:

On a cord one man leads another man or they walk hand in hand on his side and yet, one is incorporating the other... (L’homme mène en laisse un autre homme ou se promène à côté de lui, la main dans sa main et pourtant l’un est enfermé dans l’autre...)

86 Cf. Dominique Noguez: Lenin Dada, p. 83.
88 Another indication for this might be Salvador Dalí’s Partial Hallucination, Six Images of Lenin on a Piano (1931 Centre Pompidou, Paris) as Dominique Noguez (Lenindada, 84 ff.) suggests. Dalí, Noguez emphasizes, had been a close friend of Tzara and might, indeed, have known some of his most intimate secrets. The painting depicts a man resembling Tzara in front of a piano. On the piano a sixfold apparition of the portrait of Lenin is to be seen. With the cherries but also a number of allusions to Tzara’s erotic poetry there are strong insinuations of erotic desire and Eurocapitalism. The Making of Neoliberal Globalization, in: Studies in Political Economy 71/72 (Autumn 2003/Winter 2004), pp. 7–38, p. 12.
For Rainer Ganahl these lines have to be interpreted as a hidden coming out and the confession of a gay love affair. That would be the most radical confrontation of the question of avant-gardist free love.

Ganahl depicts Tzara and Lenin in two-dimensional cartoon-like portraits that strongly allude to the visual language of Öyvind Fahlström (Fig. 34). Lenin is shown with sensual red lips and eyelids closed longingly. Both faces are presented in—nearly erotic—close distance, as secret lovers. Given the avant-gardist and DADALENINist background of Tzara and Lenin, and given the fact that the Soviet Union was one of the first countries to legalize homosexuality (before Stalin recriminalized homosexuality in 1933), these thought experiments come to mind rather naturally. The history of Dada and Lenin is reconstructed as a playful intervention in the formation of Eros, as a story of and about love.
Fig. 35 LENIN TZARA, 2010
Cast bronze, ca. 9.3 × 10.7 × 0.7 cm, chain 35.5 cm
In view of the DADALENIN-project, Lenin is not just a contemporary of Dadaism who shares some of its avant-gardist desires. Ganahl in fact turns Lenin himself into a Dadaist object, or, to be more precise, a ready-made. The portrait of Lenin is the most predominant icon in the visual language of DADALENIN and in most cases Lenin-images (photos and busts) are picked up somewhere in the iconic jungle of the Internet. By doing so, Ganahl repeats one of the key elements of the original readymade impulse.

Economically Lenin statues and memorabilia objects are junk goods, which represent the current state of political hegemony. Lenin memorabilia were serial objects of a politicized industrial production and nowadays signify the failure of precisely these politically overdetermined markets. The busts are, in this sense, radically profane objects, which have lost their original context of signification. The variety of new contexts of meaning is hard to survey: political icons turned into souvenirs, maybe into objects of some obscure obsession with history. Some marginal post-Leninist niche-existences might also use the old icons of the Soviet empire as their own fetishes, as points of reference for an imagined political mobilization.

While the Lenin-busts have turned radically profane, they also seem to violate the bounds of good taste. A urinal could have been shocking to
the uptight high-bourgeoisie in the first quarter of the 20th century. But that was a long time ago. Just under a century later, to neo-liberal post-modern elites, which have gone through all possible forms of bio-political self-techniques (flexible minds, trained to stomach all kinds of artistic provocations), Lenin and the specter of ‘totalitarianism’ appears to be the stumbling block par excellence.

When Ganahl buys Lenin busts on eBay or on markets in Moscow or Warsaw (mostly, of course, they will be sold in the former Eastern Bloc) he does not only valorize these profane objects but also documents the whole purchasing process. Turning them into readymades, he presents each statue with its own packaging materials (which also represents some of its geographic origin) and a drawing to lay bare the making of these readymades (Fig. 36+37). Sometimes the descriptions of the “figurines” of the “great Bolshevik leader” are quite heroic; sometimes the announcements are rather profane. Ganahl repeats their poetry in echolalia.

In some sense eBay is also a great source of stories, biographies and narratives. As mentioned above, most of the statues come from the former Eastern Bloc. And even in these cases one might ask why people actually sell Lenin-busts. Have they changed their mind? Has someone died? In all other cases the question is even more interesting: How did Lenin-busts end up in Brooklyn or in Israel? One can imagine biographies of political activism and of exile—particularly so in the case

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90 Cf. ibid, pp. 164.
of busts from Israel, where Lenin would have landed either in times of socialist Zionism or with the current waves of migration from the former Soviet Union.

The whole process of purchasing these objects is based on aleatoric principles: As always on eBay, chance and luck are of central importance. What precisely is available and for which price? Who is ultimately going to buy the object? But even more than that, the whole purchasing process reflects the ambivalent means of a contemporary digital world market. To some extent eBay is a grassroots economy, often distributing secondhand goods far below regular market prices.

From a Marxist perspective eBay marks another challenge: What happened to value, in a world, in which a second-hand market reopens a realm of unrestricted bargaining. In spite of the careful distinction between prices and values in Marxist discourse, the labor theory of value doesn’t seem to be applicable in the popular casino-economy of eBay. Here objects seem to gain a second life, detached from any relation to the “congealed human labor” invested in them. Spontaneous desires and subjectively perceived needs determine precisely in the short-term temporality, the respective relation between supply and demand. One is tempted to say that eBay is indeed the great digital carnival of Marx’s fetishism of commodities, where all kinds of fantasies (including nostalgia) make the commodities “dance” crazily as they do in Marx’ analysis of fetishism.

Fetish economy or grassroots economy—its immanent wealth—is in any case expropriated by the major brand, by eBay as a multinational agent in global capitalism. Lenin would have had to rewrite his imperialism book had he foreseen the contemporary structure of digitalized capitalism.

It is, to some extent, a Dadaist one: disparate collections of uncoordinated information, often based on chance and on spontaneous desires, or, as Andrei Codrescu writes:

Dada poetry is ubiquitous: the pulses of internet spam are surging around the dams and walls erected by spam-assassin software, networks, and government, and producing eerie poetry.

The same things that characterize Dada poetry count for Dada-economies as well anarchic and uncontrollable streams of commodities sold and purchased by basically everyone, everywhere and at all times.
some of these developments are documented in ganahl’s drawings of internet screenshots (see pages 442–445), which are, in some respect, readymades as well, motifs found in the realm of commercialized imagery: cartoon-like portraits of tzara and lenin, letterings in the poppy style of advertising (fig. 34; see also page 140).

readymades were somewhat tautological objects, which seemed to signify nothing but their own pure existence. the central conceptual challenge of ganahl’s lenin-busts might, however, be located exactly there: what about the referentiality of such sculptures, letterings and images? lenin sculptures as readymades complicate the whole question of representation. how intentional is a found object? are lenin-busts, or lenin-letterings composed of porcelain or fish (see pages 534–535) still signifying anything at all? how can political ideas, which are fundamentally about the dynamics and potentials of history, be represented in static material objects or through abstract signs?

it remains open, whether these busts do still embrace any of the revolutionary narratives that lenin stood for, or whether they are just examples for the emptiness of self-referential artistic signs. the perfect proto-postmodernist ironist to deal with lenin in that way, was, of course, Andy Warhol—both with his lenin-portraits and his mid-1970s hammer and sickle images (fig. 38–39), in which he photographed the symbols of revolutionary socialism with high heel shoes, pizzas and other elements of commercial culture.

But the somewhat precarious form of representation poses one of the key questions of the conceptual tradition: how can ideas be

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92 Karl Marx: Capital, p. 169.
represented in material artworks at all? Ganahl’s DADALENIN is, in this sense, just as much about the current state of Leninism (or the eBay-economic index of its decline) as it is about the very distance between the represented and its representation. Ganahl’s DADALENIN is Lenin as art as idea.

The whole question, however, becomes even more complicated—given that Lenin for sale, Lenin on eBay, signifies precisely the failure of the Leninist project. If the political heritage of Lenin, if the Eastern Bloc and state socialism would still be intact, the busts would not be for sale as they are. And in precisely this way the specific charm of such objects is, of course, based on nostalgia and on a morbid fascination with historical failure. They are souvenirs, helpless attempts to metonymically (and fetishistically) adhere to a political past. In that sense their structure is somewhat typical for commodities as such: They are materialized, metonymical objects, into which a whole history is inscribed; a structure, which Marx described as the fetishistic “magic and necromancy that surrounds the products of labour”.

But can Lenin really become a meaningless object or necromantic fetish? Have Lenin-busts really become empty signifiers, pure form and material, autonomous objects, the content of which has disappeared in the course of history? Lenin is, as emphasized before, a metonymy for a whole political sequence. The busts carry some remnants of this whole context about with themselves.

In this sense the packaging also appears as a discrete moment in a process of decay on the one hand and as a real historical process, with real histories and real materiality on the other. The material remnants mark the return of something forgotten and repressed, of something that underlies the postmodern spectacles of the market: the existence of classes, the uneven development of different economic regions and thus: real historical struggles.

These struggles aren’t always collective struggles. With the squandering of the Leninist currency, the economies, from which the busts descend, also imply the historical failure of the Leninist currency that claimed universal validity. Once the internationalist currency was a source of cultural and political pride. Now they are the source of a quick dollar. Or, as Boris Groys writes:
Meanwhile Russia, short on export products, has recognized that the exotic appeal of communist totalitarianism is (next to oil and caviar) one of the few commodities that it can actually export even under conditions of enduring economic crises.\footnote{93}

But this logic of dumping has its own paradoxes. Now, Lenin is sold to some late-Leninist circles or collectors of bibelot and trashed documents of history in the hidden niches of some Western countries. In this way, however, the network structures of Web 2.0 allow for some idiosyncratic and partly subversive, partial communities. There will always be some Leninists somewhere, connected in the spirit of a nostalgic eBay-economy.

But while eBay is a relatively and potentially open and democratic forum for sellers of all kinds (Rainer Ganahl regards eBay, as in his works on Engels’ ‘The Condition of the Working Class in England’, as the true site of an active proletariat), others—such as Wal-Mart and Toys’R’Us—are less so. The neutralizing dynamics of the market—and of the internet as the leveling machinery of the communication of contents and commodities—is openly addressed in the drawings ‘Click Lenin’ (Fig. 40+41), in which the attempt to purchase “Lenin” is expanded all over the web. From the opposite point of view (but in the same vein), the graphic reproduction of the Google search on Red Terror \footnote{see page 442} documents the gay science of the web as a collection of vast positivities, neutralizing historical contexts and contradictions.

All this, however, is not only about Lenin, eBay or the decline of the symbolic context of State Socialism. “Lenin on eBay” is also a paradigmatic statement on the possibility of political art. If radical political
thought turns into commodities, mere ornaments, high-priced jewelry with politically radical symbols (Fig. 35) or, worse, into junk goods, then political interventions will have a hard time.

Lenin shares the fate of the artistic avant-gardes. Just as Lenin can be sold on eBay, the graphic design of Aleksander Rodchenko—as the famous shapes of his ‘Knigi-Poster’ (Fig. 42), his advertisement for books—in Ganahl’s work, advertise the great internet brands (Fig. 43). Had not the vanguard and the avant-garde once hoped to become something else than luxury objects on an elitist art market or templates for advertising strategies?

Maybe the becoming commercial and “becoming institutional of the avant-garde does not doom all succeeding art to court buffoonery”, but it will certainly give the idea of a radical artistic practice a hard time. Ganahl’s Dadaist reflection on a “Lenin For Sale” expresses these tensions.
Fig. 44  Installation view, MAK 2009/10 with

DADALEMIN  Write Nothing, Read Nothing, Say Nothing, Publish Nothing, Soviet Times / 2008

2 Warsaw shopping bags, Lenin sculpture bought at Warsaw flee market, height ca. 30 cm.


books and backing box, ca. 13 × 35 × 17 cm
The primary impulse of both avant-gardes (the political vanguard and the aesthetic avant-garde) is critique, a critique of the old bourgeois regime and its institutions and to some extent a critique of institutions as such. The critique of the museum as the bourgeois institution of art corresponds with the critique of political representation in representative democracy. Sometimes the rhetoric converges directly. Malevich expressed the idea of a general avant-gardist critique of representation most clearly, as Boris Groys accentuates:

This is how Malevich demands to eliminate the ‘parliament of aesthetic taste’ just like the Bolsheviks had done with the political parliament. He gets excited about the erection of a dictatorship of the artist over the institutions of art that allows him to force whole society to a life within his total project of art.95

Both Dada and Soviet democracy need to recur at a productive capacity that is always on the verge of losing its authenticity, to be deferred to its representation, to crystallize and become static. Dada’s critique aims at the abstract and ideological institutions of art. Soviet democracy wants to replace the repressive organs of the state with “the direct initiative of the people from below”.96 The radical democratic ideas, meant to allow for an organization of the people “themselves” (a recurrent wording in Lenin’s
text on 'Dual Power'), shall avoid the political and societal abstraction of representation through state and capital.

Lenin’s proclaimed vision in October 1917 was radically anarchistic. He conceived of the self-governing councils, or “soviets,” that had sprung up spontaneously before the Revolution as becoming administrative units of a decentralized, participatory structure, a revolutionary “state of which the Paris Commune [1870/1871] was the prototype”.

In ‘State and Revolution’, his most important book of the year 1917, published two months before the Bolshevik seizure of power, Lenin reflects upon the withering away of the state in a forthcoming socialist society. Since Lenin regards the state as a mere function of class domination, its withering away would be a necessary element of the realization of a truly socialist society. But whatever the future perspective—first the new state had to be installed, institutionalized and its power consolidated.

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93 My translation [JFH] [So fordert Malevitsch, ‘das Parlament des künstlerischen Geschmacks’ zu eliminieren, wie es die Bolschewiken mit dem politischen Parlament getan hatten, und freut sich über die Errichtung der Diktatur des Künstlers über die Kunstinstitutionen, die es ihm gestattet, die ganze Gesellschaft zu einem Leben innerhalb seines totalen Kunstprojektes zu zwingen.] Boris Groys: Die Erfindung Russlands, p. 96.


95 Susan Buck-Morss: Dreamworld and Catastrophe, p. 23.

96 As one of the particularly obscure moments of Lenin’s text, however, the question, how the State shall eventually wither away, remains unsolved. Hardt and Negri very tellingly remark that “whenever Lenin tries to solve a contradiction by deferring it into the future—most notably in his theory of the withering away of the state—he is merely covering a real problem.” Antonio Negri/Michael Hardt: Commonwealth, Cambridge/MA: Belknap/ Harvard UP, 2009, p. 91.

97 See again Susan Buck-Morss: Dreamworld and Catastrophe, p. 60.


103 Ibid.
The idea of the purity of the productive capacity, the purity of the revolutionary project, is marked by a tragic moment from the very beginning: It is always too late. By its own temporal logics every institutional manifestation of the primary potentials tends to turn against the very potential itself. As Malevich formulated:

We must not allow our backs to be platforms for the old days. Our job is to always move towards what is new, not to live in museums. Our path lies in space, and not in the suitcase of what has been outlived. And if we do not have collections it will be easier to fly away with the whirlwind of life.

The question arises: How can revolutions be governed, institutionalized and represented? How can a new tradition be installed if its inherent temporality is all about the break with tradition? Or, how can revolutions, as Trotsky would have put it, in a somewhat avant-gardist move, be permanent. In other words: what does it mean for avant-gardist/vanguardist impulses of rupture to end up in the museum/mausoleum?

Much has been said and written about the structural failure of the (neo-) avant-garde. And the debate circles around precisely these issues: the becoming institutional as the betrayal of the original avant-gardist impulse. Adorno famously accentuated the correspondence between museum and mausoleum (notably quoted in Douglas Crimp’s ‘On the Museum’s Ruins’):

The German word, ‘museal’ ['museumlike'], has unpleasant overtones. It describes objects to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which are in the process of dying. They owe their preservation more to historical respect than to the needs of the present. Museum and mausoleum are connected by more than phonetic association.

While they discuss the “neutralization of culture” through its archival storage, neither Adorno nor Crimp mention the fateful and meaningful role that the mausoleum played in the history of the vanguard. But in fact this route from the spearhead of history into the mausoleum particularly characterizes the tragedy of the Leninist heritage.

Quite obviously the cult of personality is in conflict with the originally radically democratic and iconoclastic impulse of the Bolshevik revolution. The becoming-institutional of the avant-garde marked its histori-
cal failure. No wonder, that the vast majority of Bolsheviks, most of all Lenin’s wife Krupskaya herself, were against the idea of a mausoleum.104

Lenin’s laying out in the mausoleum, his postmortem institutional representation also expresses a second mortification. Hardly anywhere, his comrades feared, would he be as dead as in a mausoleum, a suspicion that was historically confirmed, as Boris Groys claims:

Lenin’s mummy is continuously surveyed and observed to witness its public congealment and to make sure that Lenin is dead and poses no more threat to society.105

The profane form of presentation (regular suit, tie) turns Lenin into a mere exhibit, even some kind of readymade. It is for precisely this reason that Boris Groys interprets the Lenin-Mausoleum as maybe the “most radical example for the modern idea of the museum”106—the modern idea of an archive or a canonical collection, which generates newness in its constitutive tension with the profane.107

Rainer Ganahl’s DADA LENIN reflects all of this history. In Stockholm he rebuilt the Lenin Mausoleum (Fig. 45, see also page 20) and some of the Lenin-busts, presented in their own postal packaging, are reminiscent of Lenin lying in the mausoleum (see page 493). With all the obituaries, the whole project of DADA LENIN is, furthermore, reflected in terms of its passing (Fig. 46). Likewise the overwritten copy of Louise Bourgeois’ (mind her name!) 1947 ‘Tomb of a Young Person’ presents the project of DADA LENIN as a manifestation of its own death—somewhat desperately trying to cover its own mortification in the tomb of valorized art (see page 534).

At the same time DADA LENIN tries to establish an alternative form of art-presentation: The whole exhibition project of DADA LENIN is also

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104 On January 30, 1924 Lenin’s widow Nadezhda Krupskaja protested publicly in Pravda: “COMRADES WORKERS AND PEASANTS! I have a great request to make of you: do not allow your grief for Illich to express itself in the external veneration of his person. Do not build memorials to him ... If you want to honor the name of Vladimir Illich build day care centers, kindergartens, homes, schools.” (Quoted after Buck-Morss: Dreamworld and Catastrophe, p. 114)

105 My translation, JFH [Die Mumie Lenins wird ständig überwacht und ständig beschaut, um [...] ihre öffentliche Erstarrung zu bezeugen, um sich zu vergewissern, dass Lenin wirklich tot ist und keine soziale Gefahr mehr darstellt.] Boris Groys: Die Erfindung Russlands, p. 186.

106 Ibid., p. 183.

107 Groys, however, discusses museums rather traditionally as archives and canonical collections and not so much as sites of the (more or less spectacular) temporary presentation of selected works (which are, with increased market values, presented to privatized and art markets).
TRISTAN TZARA, DADAIST, IS DEAD

Poet Founded the Movement
in Zurich After War

PARIS, Dec. 25 — Tristan Tzara, one of the founders of Dadaism, died here last night. He was 67 years old.

Although his influence continues to be felt in contemporary French literature, Mr. Tzara was little talked about in recent years. He continued to write poetry, and some of his Dadaist writings of the nineteen-twenties were republished this fall.

He said recently that he had discovered in the library of the chateau of Chantilly an unknown play by Rabelais and had intended to publish it. But he acknowledged that Dadaism as a movement was dead.

Mr. Tzara was well known in the intellectual community of Paris after World War I. It was a period of innovation and abandon in the arts and

Fig. 46 DADALENIN NY Times DADADEATH, Tristan Tzara, 1963 (detail), 2008, ink jet print on paper, 64 × 48.5 cm

see also 8.3. OBITUARIES
a countermuseum—reminiscent of the early Dadaist Cabinets, recalling the history of the pre-modern Cabinet of curiosities, just like the original Dadaist Cabinet in Berlin (Fig. 47) and echoing the spectacular display of commodities in bourgeois show-cases and shop-windows. In these three respects—as mimicry of the tomb, as the genealogical reference to the Cabinet of curiosities and as the ironical reframing of the spectacular realm of commodities, DADALENIN reflects the institutional critical impulse (or, to be more precise: the institutionally reflective impulse) of the historical avant-garde.

In the end, all these reflections of the mauseoleum and the museum are self-reflections of the very conditions of art and it institutional framing. Especially political art will, necessarily, have to ascertain its social and institutional conditions and ask the question: What is the very platform actually, on which it can finally operate ‘politically’. Dada is at the beginning of a development that leads to conceptual and institutional critical art.

But institutional critique is never only abstractly critical. It deals with social power relations and the distribution of symbolic capital, too. In this sense, some of its main issues had been discussed already and some of it can be found in Lenin’s little 1905 text on ‘Party Organization and Party Literature’, in which Lenin postulates “a broad, multiform and varied literature”\(^\text{108}\) that critically deals with the apparent freedom of bourgeois art. He claims that the

freedom of the bourgeois writer, artist or actress is simply masked (or hypocritically masked) dependence on the money-bag, on corruption, on prostitution.\(^\text{109}\)

In this interesting little text, Lenin in fact presents socialism as a quest for the realization of the freedom of art and literature, in which the false forms of freedom and its bourgeois constraints would be overcome: “we socialists expose this hypocrisy and rip off the false labels, not in order to arrive at a non-class literature and art”.\(^\text{110}\) Forms of art that will have to overcome their dependency on the elitist, class-bound, bourgeois apparatus, Lenin claims,


\(^\text{109}\) Ibid., p. 48.

\(^\text{110}\) Ibid., p. 48 f.
will be a free literature, because the idea of socialism and sympathy with the working people, and not greed or careerism, will bring ever new forces to its ranks. It will be a free literature, because it will serve, not some satiated heroine, not the bored “upper ten thousand” suffering from fatty degeneration, but the millions and tens of millions of working people—the flower of the country, its strength and its future.

Doubtlessly, Lenin’s enthusiasm is ambiguous. In his view the freedom of art is tied to the socialist party as a legitimate representation of the class interests of the majority of people. Freedom, in this respect, is the positive freedom to serve the masses and the negative freedom from the dependency of the ruling class. It leaves open all repressive interpretations that will lead to censorship and the destruction of the avant-garde art movements in the later Soviet Union. That is one side of the coin.

The criticism of commercial art, of its representative groups and main institutions, however, has been the very claim of institutional critical art in the sequence of the historical avant-garde: The private appropriation of symbolic goods, which claim to be universal, the reduction of art to an elitist hobby cancels out the very idea of artistic freedom. Artistic autonomy will therefore have to be defended and realized in political struggle. Surely Lenin’s aesthetic position was not so differentiated, or to be more explicit: politically, it was fairly reductionist and crude. But he shared the basic aesthetico-political impulses of the avant-garde.

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But Dada and Lenin are dead. Lenin died in January 1924 shortly after Dadaism had disappeared in the newly emerging surrealist movement. It is the very fact of this death that Rainer Ganahl repeats with
his obituaries, his reprints and reproductions of obituaries printed in the New York Times (Fig. 46). This moment of repetition, though, also undermines the very fact. The performative act of declaring the death of the leading Dadaists (including Fritz Haber, Clara Immerwahr and, of course, Lenin) for a second time leaves space for doubt. Pronouncing someone dead repeatedly is an absurd act. It constitutes a sequence, where no continuation is possible and thus suggests a survival. But for everyone except James Bond we are well advised to assume: You only die once. Rainer Ganahl’s obituaries could, in this sense, also be interpreted as an apotropaic performative (stay dead!).

The performative act of pronouncing the dead dead again, furthermore gets some ironic undertone by the very fact that it is a quote—even more so as it is a quote in an artistic context. It only indirectly, and in a sense parasitically, communicates a message that is repeatedly put in quotation marks. Hence it is not merely a statement but a meta-statement (a statement about a statement) leaving the very status of this primary statement in the open. Reconstructing these mere facts eventually subverts them.

Altogether one could only infer from this that DADALENIN is (not) dead. Both of them incorporate unresolved promises of their respective institutions: the political and the artistic. Dada and Lenin are metonyms for a history of broken promises and their failed fulfillments. As long as this is the case they will also keep haunting us in all kinds of monstrous alliances.