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Author(s): Hannah Nailor

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Anti-Body: The Body and the Evolution of Dadaism as Performance Art

Hannah Nailor

This article was originally written for a course entitled 'Body, Flesh, Subject', taught by Dr. Kelli Fuery for Chapman University's Honors Program. The course focused on considerations of the body as the grounds of phenomenological experience and examined both the physical and the socially-constructed borders between bodies. This article brings together those discussions through a history of Dadaism, a radical art movement beginning in World War I, and influencing performance art of the 1970s and of today. By focusing on one key figure in each of these periods, I will seek to demonstrate how Dadaists use their bodies to mediate non-meaning, causing spectators to critically examine the socially-constructed borders of the body.

This article, drawing on scholarship from Michel Foucault, Amelia Jones, Roland Barthes, and Sara Ahmed, will analyse the evolution of Dadaism, an art movement allowing performers to use their bodies in a form beyond typical artistic expression and, ultimately, transcending social constructions of the body. By examining Dadaism as an attempt to produce non-meaning, the article will seek to determine how Dadaists use *affect* and *abjection* to utilize the body as a source of non-meaning. Ultimately, with these things in mind, I will show how Dadaism began by tapping into growing anxiety over strengthening social boundaries, thus creating a dialogue which informed performance art of the 1970s, permeating genre and modes of mediation. With reference to the works of Andy Kaufman and YouTube performer Steve Kardynal, I will illustrate how Dadaism has evolved into the modern era.

Dadaism may be defined as an art movement the central goal of which is to shatter previous notions of truth and meaning without attempting to create any truth or meaning to take their place. According to the pre-existing construct of Dadaism within art history,

HANNAH NAILOR was born and raised in St. Louis, Missouri in the United States. She is studying Screenwriting at Chapman University in Southern California and is currently on an exchange year at the University of Glasgow. Her academic interests vary wildly. As a result, her philosophy essays always include film references and her film essays always include Barthes and Foucault. She has previously been published in Sapere Aude, the online publication of Chapman University's Honors Program. Her personal interests include film, film, and film (in that order).

it stands for ... the disgusted response of artists to the debacle of Western civilization and its values in the First World War. Dada represents a revolt against art by artists themselves who, appalled by developments in contemporary society, recognized that art was bound to be a product, reflection and even support of that society and was therefore criminally implicated.¹

Dadaism began during the war, as European artists saw a need to address the crumbling and clashing of the Western world. These artists reacted not only to the unprecedented warfare and pain of World War I, but also the social changes it instigated; Dada was charged by the breaking of Europe and the strengthening of its sociopolitical borders. Throughout the war and into the 1920's, Dadaism sought to challenge these borders and borders in general, attempting to overcome all rules of genre and classification. Of course, despite 'Dada' being a nonsense word applied to a nonsense art movement, nothing is beyond definition. Dada artists automatically insinuated a definition, given that 'there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations'.² Once there were powerful people practicing the same artistic styles in the same areas of Europe and New York, the Dada movement was loosely classifiable as a radical movement in the *avant-garde*, which in this instance, translates as popular male artists whose works were seen as important and 'progressive'. Two innovative types of art were brought about by this movement, both represented below: the photomontage and the assemblage.

¹ R. Short, *Dada & Surrealism* (New York, 1980), 7.

² M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London, 1977), 175.



Left: Raoul Hausmann, *ABCD*, 1923-24.³

Right: Raoul Hausmann, *Mechanical Head (Spirit of Our Time)*, 1920.⁴

These works offer new insight into Foucault's concepts of the 'body politic,' a concept in which the bodies of the subjugated masses are seen as 'a set of material elements and techniques that service as weapons, relays, communication routes, and supports for ... power and knowledge relations'⁵. The Dadaists viscerally display this, recognizing themselves as parts in a power-relation that they choose to revolt against through these works. Although they may lack the composition of works that came before, these works are not nearly as chaotic as their authors might believe. Hausmann's above works clearly demonstrate an adherence to notions of balance and construction. Arguably the most infamous, provocative Dada work, Marcel Duchamp's 'Fountain', seen below, is radical both as a found object displayed as art and as an abrupt statement about the nature of art. The urinal's inverted placement and graffiti give it (albeit minimal) artistic form, but its very display betrays Duchamp's artistic purpose; Duchamp knew that his audience would wring even the most banal object for meaning. He therefore makes a statement that art is arbitrary, that art means nothing, because people will force themselves to see something in nothing. Duchamp questions

³ R. Hausmann, *ABCD*, photomontage, 1923-24. Available:

<<http://beautyovertime.blogspot.com/2011/05/abcd-by-raoul-hausmann.html>>

⁴ R. Hausmann, *Mechanical Head (Spirit of Our Time)*, assemblage, 1920. Available: <<http://www.clg-daumier-martigues.ac-aix-marseille.fr/spip/spip.php?rubrique52>> [Accessed 10.12.2013].

⁵ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 175-176.

the socially-constructed concept of ‘art.’ Despite attempting to hide behind absurdity, Dada artists still convey artistic values and intentions.



Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917, replica 1964.⁶

Having defined Dadaism, I will now briefly define two terms key to the discussion of Dadaism which will follow: *affect* and abjection. *Affect*, a psychological term, is defined as ‘specific physiological responses that then give rise to various effects, which may or may not translate into emotions’.⁷ Dadaists create visceral art meant to garner a physical response, typically that of repulsion. This repulsion feeds into the abject, which Kristeva defines as ‘what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules’.⁸ Dadaists force a confrontation with the abject, thereby triggering *affects* which overpower a subject, demanding its attention.

Now, to find the true Dadaist in the 1910s and ’20s, one must travel to New York where, unlike the Dada movement in Europe, artists acted more or less in a vacuum of self-motivated art. Here, we find a body ‘that both epitomized and, in its performative lived forms, radically disrupted the movement from inside and out. This body (and the

⁶ M. Duchamp, *Fountain*, found art, 1917, 1964. Available: <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/duchamp-fountain-t07573>

⁷ E. Wissinger, ‘Always on Display: Affective Production in the Modeling Industry’ in P. Clough & J. Halley (eds.), *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* (Durham & London, 2007), 232.

⁸ J. Kristeva, ‘Approaching Abjection’ translated by L.S. Roudiez, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York, 1982), 4.

subject that enlivens it)... [is] the Baroness, a poet, autobiographer, artist, artist's model, and self-performative cultural provocateur⁹.



'Baroness von Freytag-Loringhoven working as a model', 1915.¹⁰

The Baroness, the enigmatic persona of German expatriate Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, established Dadaism in a way that her male bourgeois counterparts did not. She enlivened and embodied Dadaism, her body being the 'intersubjective ground of experience'¹¹. Rather than experiencing Dadaism from an objective or subjective standpoint, the Baroness *lived* Dadaism: she wore refuse on her body, walked the streets as a constant performance, and lived her life as an abject Dadaist carnival. The Baroness adopted an identity intended to create an *affect* of abjection. She is described as:

⁹ A. Jones, *Irrational Modernism: A Neurasthenic History of New York Dada* (Cambridge, 2004), 5.

¹⁰ 'Baroness von Freytag-Loringhoven working as a model', photograph, 1915, *Interviewmagazine.com*. Available: <http://www.interviewmagazine.com/fashion/obsession-baroness-elsa-von-freytag-loringhoven#_> [Accessed 10.12.2013].

¹¹ T. Csordas, 'Embodiment and Cultural Phenomenology' in *Perspectives on Embodiment: The Intersections of Nature and Culture* (London & New York, 2003), 143.

disruptive and terrifying in terms of gender (a proactively heterosexual female...), ethnicity ... , as well as class (... overtly performing her abject poverty, notoriously refusing the personal refinements of the mostly bourgeois or upper-class members of the avant-garde).¹²

The process of becoming abject was a Dadaist aim; the Baroness ultimately sought abjection, disrupting borders not only within society, but within the popular avant-garde:

from the Baroness's point of view, Duchamp and [William Carlos] Williams exemplified the tendency among male avant-gardists to make radical art in their free time, while living more or less bourgeois lives, driven by neurasthenic fears of the modern challenges to their coherence as male subjects.¹³

Using the body as the canvas in every waking moment, the Baroness aimed to reject typical art forms entirely. Jones clarifies that 'the erasure of the subjectivity of the artist—the messy and potentially compromising aspects of her or his sexuality and other biographical vicissitudes — from the artistic encounter ... is a fantasy, one that inevitably fails'.¹⁴ The Baroness attempts to erase her subjectivity from her body, which is of course impossible; but she does come frightfully close.

Her body, made into a site of non-meaning, forced society to see it as disruptive and then to question, if perhaps subconsciously, why it was disruptive. Her hypersexuality, her abjection, and her use of objects on her body made her objective identity the primary focus at all times. Her subjective identity is only understood through that objective identity, and her subjective identity is constantly buried beneath Dadaist non-meaning. Ultimately, she divorced herself of as much subjectivity as possible. The Dadaist method is to provoke questions, not to answer. By witnessing the non-truth of the Baroness, the audience must decide whether the social constructs challenged by her body are 'true' or not. The Baroness died in 1927, largely due to her

¹² A. Jones, *Irrational Modernism*, 23.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

poor quality of life. But Dada's influence marched on and would soon find a new means of expression.

Dadaism in its purest incarnation can be said to have died just before the start of World War II, largely due to the fact that Dada could not sustain itself due to the myriad conflicting opinions of many differing artists, each with an opposing view on the definition of 'Dada.' In its place, surrealism rose to great popularity. Dada's influence, however, permeated into surrealist film, freeform jazz, and stand-up comedy. In the 1970's, performance artists like Nam June Paik and Vito Acconci began to emerge, showing a Dada influence. At the same time, a figure came onto the scene who would later be spoken of as either a genius performance artist or the worst stand-up comic of all time: Andy Kaufman.

Launching his career, Kaufman's performance on the first broadcast of *SNL* showcased him playing the theme from 'Mighty Mouse' on a record player; standing completely stationary, looking nervously at the crowd, and suddenly moving his arm in a gallant gesture to the lyric 'here I come to save the day' then returning to his awkward stationary stance. Barthes argues that if all other signs

are removed from the image, we are still left with a certain informational matter; deprived of all knowledge, I continue to 'read' the image, to 'understand' that it assembles in a common space a number of identifiable (nameable) objects, not merely shapes and colours.¹⁵

Kaufman illustrates here the power a Dadaist body can have. His performances are devoid of all other meaning, leaving one with nothing but the knowledge that he is a male body, usually in a ridiculous outfit, on a stage, and supposed to be funny. This vacuum of comedy constantly creates a non-meaning. His simple stage performances reject a need for form. There is 'not only a gap between content and effect. It is also between the form of content—signification as a conventional system of distinctive difference—and intensity'¹⁶. Kaufman's performances truly encapsulate this notion; there is no definable indicator for his humour, and yet people laugh. Kaufman often drew attention to this.

¹⁵ R. Barthes, 'Rhetoric of the Image' in *Image-Music-Text* (Glasgow, 1977), 35.

¹⁶ B. Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, 2002), 24-25.

After being heckled at a separate stand-up performance, Kaufman became emotional, saying, 'I am trying my best. ... I have never claimed to be a comedian'.¹⁷ He eventually storms off. After a few seconds, Kaufman returns to the mic, yelling at the audience and sobbing. His sobs become rhythmic moans and his angrily waving hand manages to hit conveniently placed conga drums. He starts a steady beat, his sobbing becoming an African chant. Kaufman manufactures, through *affect*, an empathy that ultimately becomes false when he smacks the conga. It seems he cares what his audience thinks but negates it by using his body to create a separation between himself and the audience. In doing so, Kaufman directs the audience to the socially constructed borders of the body. Kaufman recognizes that 'emotions create the effect of the surfaces and boundaries that allow us to distinguish' between bodies, and he uses this distinction to his advantage.¹⁸ He demonstrates the fact that "most of our ideas and our tendencies are not developed by ourselves but come to us from without".¹⁹ Kaufman calls attention to how bodies, their flesh borders, and the subjectivities beneath them are devoid of independent meaning; he forces the audience to question the truth of their own emotions and whether or not those emotions are socially constructed.

The essence of Kaufman, the Performer, was that one never really understood his true identity. He began his career as an Elvis Presley impersonator (said to be the King's favourite). But there were two layers to most of Kaufman's performances as Elvis.



Kaufman performs as 'The Foreign Man' (Left) and Elvis (Right).²⁰

¹⁷ Joeyland, 'The real Andy Kaufman part 2' (2012) *YouTube.com*. Available: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OnLj2MLDJSs>>

¹⁸ S. Ahmed, 'Introduction: Feel Your Way' in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh, 2004), 10.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 8

²⁰ W. C. Miller, *The Johnny Cash Christmas Special 1979* broadcasted originally on CBS (DVD, 2008).

He would come out on stage as a shy man with a stuttering foreign accent, muttering flat impressions of Archie Bunker and Jimmy Carter. The crowd would clap perfunctorily and he would bow, 'thank you very much'. He would then turn, open a suitcase, slick back his hair, change his clothes, twitch his leg, and turn back around, transformed magically into the world's most convincing Elvis impersonator, dancing, singing and talking incredibly like Elvis. This demonstrates a Dadaist artistic approach to identity, using the body as the site of a series of identities, each making less sense than the last. This takes a quite literal stance on Freud's theory of the *Ichspaltung*, 'that the subject [is] fragmented, split, and often at odds with itself and its social surroundings'.²¹ Kaufman's subjectivity was split, and thus so were his representations of himself. Kaufman's multiple personas included his Elvis impersonation; the Foreign Man; Tony Clifton, a horrid lounge comic and Andy's alter-ego; and ultimately, his greatest character, himself. Kaufman actively created a representation of himself that was false and Dadaist, much like the Baroness, whose subjectivity was obscured behind her objective façade. Backstage at one of his performances, an interviewer was speaking to his road manager: 'Oh, you thought that was the real Andy?' Bob said. 'That's just a character he does: Andy Kaufman—nice, normal, sweet boy, and all that. That's not really Andy'.²² In 'true' Dadaist fashion, truth is a non-entity, always to be denied. The representation of his subjectivity presented to the world was never assumed to be his true self; Kaufman himself said it best: 'I'm not trying to be funny. I just want to play with their heads'.²³ This says everything about the *affect* Kaufman attempted to produce.

Kaufman's performance art rested on his ability to provoke. In an *affect* economy, 'value lies in producing variations within the standards'.²⁴ *Affect* values the unknown and the unquantifiable, the space Kaufman inhabited for most of his career. But the main problem with *affect*, and indeed Dadaism, is that it is 'volatile and difficult to control'.²⁵ Kaufman could never control how his audience would perceive him, because 'a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination,' the 'meaning-makers'

²¹ P. Fuery, 'The Edge of the Mirror: The Subject and the Other' in P. Fuery & N. Mansfield (eds.), *Cultural Studies and Critical Theory* (Oxford, 2000), 160.

²² J. Hecht, *Was This Man a Genius?: Talks with Andy Kaufman* (New York, 2001), 10.

²³ 'Andy Kaufman', *IMDb.com*. Available: <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001412/?ref_=nv_sr_1> [Accessed 10.12.2013]

²⁴ Wissinger, 'Affective production', 238.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 238.

of a performance therefore being the audience.²⁶ But readers tend to believe that ‘when the Author has been found, the text is ‘explained’.²⁷ Dadaist texts are more elusive, and therefore, this tendency is more profound when confronting such a text. As with Kaufman’s road manager, even Andy being Andy was seen as an act, because his persona was so strongly Dadaist. Ironically (considering his affiliation with Elvis), people still believe Kaufman faked his own death, because they attribute so much authorship to him. Indeed, a dilemma with Dadaism, especially Kaufman’s brand, is that its interpretation is uncontrollable; resolving with either, ‘this man is a genius’ or, far more likely, ‘this man is absolutely insane.’

Ultimately, through use of his body as a site of non-meaning, multiple personas, and mastering of abjection through *affect*, Kaufman was able to remain an elusive subject, forever buried beneath the Dadaist identities that he created for himself. He managed to use his body to *force* the audience to laugh at him, to question what made them think he was supposed to be funny in the first place, and to critically examine the social constructs of identity and the body. Kaufman again said it best: ‘What’s real? What’s not? That’s what I do in my fact, test how other people deal with reality’.²⁸

Although many struggle to call his videos ‘art’ (perhaps the true mark of a Dadaist), YouTube performer Steve Kardynal is arguably contributing to what might be termed a new form of Dadaism rooted in the exploration of new media technologies. Kardynal’s most viral video, with over 131 million views as of February 2015, is ‘Miley Cyrus – Wrecking Ball (Chatroulette Version)’, in which he wears a snug white tank top and even more snug white underwear, parodying Miley Cyrus’ controversial ‘Wrecking Ball’ music video.

The video, in split screen, captures the popular website Chatroulette, through which random users utilize webcams and are paired together in order to ‘chat’. The unsuspecting users instead find Kardynal performing as Miley Cyrus. The wondrous aspect of the video is that it shows the reactions of the audience, the effect of *affective production*. These reactions demonstrate how ‘in the realm of affective production, it is often the unexpected or unassimilable that proves productive’.²⁹ Kardynal’s naked

²⁶ R. Barthes, ‘The Death of the Author’ in *Image-Music-Text* (Glasgow, 1977), 148.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 147.

²⁸ ‘Andy Kaufman’, *IMDb.com*.

²⁹ Wissinger, ‘Affective production’, 241.

body creates a point of resistance and beckoning for the observer, drawing attention 'toward the place where meaning collapses' and therefore defining the borders of the body.³⁰ Like his Dada forbearers, Kardynal utilizes the overpowering *affect* of abjection to disrupt the social constructs defined by *affective production*.



Another initial reaction, 'Miley Cyrus – Wrecking Ball (Chatroulette Version)', 2013.³¹

However, Kardynal's videos also bring something new in that they confront the notion of new media themselves being sources of non-meaning. In a separate video in the style of a video log ('vlog'), Kardynal goes to a concert with his friend. He records the experience, during which he is constantly recognized and asked whether he will be 'performing'; a request he repeatedly denies. However, the presence of technology necessarily conjures performativity; one's subjectivity is altered by the presence of recording technology. There is discussion amongst those of the technological generation that new media has driven us further towards non-meaning, echoing Barthes' hypothesis that 'the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially'.³² The presence of a camera not only distances the subject from the objective world, it also presents a false reality within which the subject operates. Neither the subject nor the world seen through the camera is real, but rather a

³⁰ Kristeva, 'Approaching abjection', 2.

³¹ Kardynal S. Kardynal, 'Miley Cyrus – Wrecking Ball (Chatroulette Version)' (2013) *YouTube.com*. Available: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W6DmHGYy_xk> [Accessed 10.12.2013].

³² R. Barthes, *Camera Lucida* in R. Howard (trans.) (London, 1984), 1.

recreation and, therefore, a source of non-meaning. New technologies create yet another social boundary, one between the subject and the reality of itself. As Wissinger describes, 'these technologies are changing; they are losing their orientation toward 'representation and the narrative construction of subject identities' as they move toward 'affecting bodies directly, human and non-human bodies'.³³ New technologies create a tangible barrier between the body and its ontological being. By using these technologies to draw attention to *his* body, Kardynal attempts to use the power of new media to overcome the undeniable social boundaries installed by those technologies.

In another of his videos, Kardynal struts through a shopping mall with headphones on, singing Eminem's 'I'm Not Afraid'.³⁴ For the first few minutes of the video, the actual track of the song is superimposed, so the viewer only hears what Kardynal hears. Eventually, however, that audio fades away and we hear Kardynal's actual singing: loud and incredibly off-key. Kardynal demonstrates the false reality that new technology can propagate and the absurd non-meaning that occurs when that false reality is mediated through the body. Perhaps this non-meaning is what Kardynal was attempting to capture in this video. Or perhaps he was just trying to mess with people's heads. Or perhaps it is all just Dada.

Dadaism has evolved from a highly polarized, politically motivated artistic movement only rarely exemplified by bodies, into comedic performance art in the 1970s, and finally into performance altered by new technologies that beg new questions in the modern era. Dadaists like Duchamp and the Baroness confronted the social constructs of art and artist, Kaufman confronted those of comedy and comedian, and Kardynal confronts those of new media and new media performer. In order to disturb borders put in place by *affect*, Dada utilizes the *affect* produced through abjection. In attempting to produce non-meaning, Dadaists produce meaning by uncomfortably drawing attention to bodies and the regimented, socially-constructed boundaries between and separating them.

³³ Wissinger, 'Affective production', 233.

³⁴ Kardynal S. Kardynal, 'Steve Kardynal is NOT AFRAID!' (2010) *YouTube.com*. Available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lhaCnoY4Z_g> [Accessed 10.12.2013].

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