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Dionysian Fury and Vibrating Voice

The Physical Performer in Hugo Ball's Performances and Writings

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Abstract

This article concerns Hugo Ball's artistic practice in performing arts, extending from his prewar years in Expressionist theater to his performances at the Cabaret Voltaire in 1916–1917. In it, I examine how discourses on the crisis of modernity emerge in Ball's theatrical practice, focusing on the performer's physical presence in Ball's performances and theoretical writings. To scrutinize these themes in a wider context of political and cultural discourses on modernity, I discuss the notions conceptualized by Ball and other avant-gardists concerning time and history, illustrating Ball's view on modernity and German society while providing insight into his performative practice.

Keywords

avant-garde – Hugo Ball – Dada – Expressionist theater – Wassily Kandinsky – sound poetry

1 Introduction

Zurich Dada has come to be epitomized in a photograph of Hugo Ball (1886–1927), one of the main initiators of the Dadaist movement; in the photograph, Ball recites a sound poem while wearing a bishop's costume made of cardboard. Research on Ball's artistic practice in art history mostly concentrates on his Dada activities in Zurich in 1916 and 1917, but his artistic, political, ideological, religious, and theological perspectives were highly heterogeneous and varied, spanning from a dissertation draft on Friedrich Nietzsche and anti-

German writings during and after the First World War to sound poetry and pre-Expressionist plays, and later in his career, to religious texts. As Deborah Lewer argues, scholars in the field of German studies often regard “Dada as a brief episode in Ball’s history”, whereas in art history, Ball is considered “a brief episode in Dada’s history”.¹ However, in recent years, in the context of avant-garde research, the focus has become more varied, and manifold influences on Ball’s artistic work and writing have been emphasized in addition to his Dada period.²

One of the less well-known periods of Ball’s career is the prewar years from 1910 to 1914, when Ball was occupied with theater and the development of his ideas of Expressionist theater practice, which was gradually taking shape in this period. In this article, I analyze Ball’s artistic activities in performing arts and focus on the physical and bodily aspects in his performances and writings. These years are divided into two phases—the prewar years in theater when Ball was engaged with Expressionism, and the Dada period, mainly known for Ball’s sound poetry and experimental performances. These periods share many similarities, as shown below. Nevertheless, from cultural, institutional, and intellectual perspectives, the beginning of the First World War marked a clear boundary in Ball’s life; therefore, his artistic practice shifted after the summer of 1914.

In addition to the aesthetic quality of Ball’s performative practice and his influences, I discuss this practice from the perspective of social, political, and theoretical discourses of cultural crisis and the meaning of art in modern society, which are deeply embedded in Ball’s artistic career in performing arts. The analysis of his theatrical practice opens wider perspectives on the question of the crisis of modernity, as well as the theoretical and practical dimensions of concepts regarding time and modern society. Ball, a man who wanted to flee contemporary culture—as the title of his published diary, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit* (*Flight Out of Time*, 1927),³ suggests—observed modern developments

1 Lewer, 2009: 19.

2 One of the most recent examples is the article by Päivi Mehtonen and Sami Sjöberg, “The Experimental Gothic: Avant-Gardist Interpolations in Gothic Literature” (2021). Debbie Lewer analyzes iconoclasm and the religious dimension of Ball’s Dada activities in her article titled “Hugo Ball, Iconoclasm and the Origins of Dada in Zurich” (2009).

3 Ball’s edited diary was published in 1927. When using the diary as a source, it is important to remember that some of the entries may have been edited retrospectively. Ball first freely summarizes the years from 1909 to 1914, implying that the text was not originally written during the period, or at least that the earlier entries were edited. The diary entries during the Dadaist period may have been edited as well, but they are in line with Ball’s correspondence at the time.

critically and thus differed from some of his avant-garde contemporaries, such as the Futurists, who wanted to embrace the ongoing technological and political developments of the early twentieth century.

In *Hugo Ball: An Intellectual Biography* (1987), Philip Mann comments that Ball's various and occasionally contradictory literary, political, and theological interests center on the German discourse of the crisis of modernity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The industrialization and urbanization resulting from this, the rise of nationalism, and a new wave of colonialism at the turn of the century coalesced into the rapid modernization process, which was also profoundly affected by the change in the cultural and political landscape with the unification of Germany in 1871. According to Mann, Ball's aim—to find a solution to the cultural crisis—led him to oscillate between irrational forces and rational stability, and this unsolved duality induced him to work intensively on diverse subjects, such as Expressionist theater, variety theater, and Dada; Nietzsche's philosophy; Mikhail Bakunin's anarchism; and hagiographic and other religious texts.⁴

Mann was not the only one to notice the connection between the crisis of modernity and the German avant-garde, especially in terms of Expressionism and Dada. In the early avant-garde theory after the Second World War, Renato Poggioli already referred to a "German spiritual crisis" as one of the conditions of the "third and more violent tidal wave of avant-gardism".⁵ A similar conception of cultural crisis as the discursive background of the theory and emancipatory aspirations of Expressionist theater is shared by David Kuhns, who argues that Expressionist "stylizations were a serious attempt to find an empowering historical rhetoric for a society in crisis".⁶

In research on Ball over the years, Ball's theatrical activities have been analyzed or touched on in terms of other subjects. The first work concentrating on Ball's career in theater is Hans Joachim Bähr's *Die Funktion des Theaters im Leben Hugo Balls: Materialien zur Bestimmung der Jahre 1910–1914* (*The Significance of Theatre in Hugo Ball's Life: Material on Defining the Years from 1910–1914*, 1982), an introductory presentation of Ball's prewar years in performative arts. A more recent study is Deborah Lewer's article titled "*Kleinkunst* and *Gesamtkunstwerk* in Munich and Zurich: Der Blaue Reiter and Dada" (2020), which is a relevant analysis of Wassily Kandinsky's (1866–1944) influence on Ball's theatrical activities. Despite the existing studies, one of the core elements of theater and performative arts—the physical presence of the actor on

4 Mann, 1987: 11, 12, 17–19.

5 Poggioli, 1968: 228–229.

6 Kuhns, 2004: 15.

stage—has only been marginally discussed in recent research. Among the main themes in his book titled *The Magic Bishop: Hugo Ball, Dada Poet* (1998), Erdmute Wenzel White refers to the significance of physical expression in Ball's conception of theater.⁷ Studies on Ball have often been conducted from the perspective of literature, art history, or visual studies, and therefore, the performative aspects have remained comparatively marginal.

In research conducted after the Second World War, the avant-garde was often regarded as a radical gap in the traditions and canons of arts and literature, and Dada, in particular, was considered an antagonistic disruption in the tradition. The disruptive and destructive aspect of the avant-garde is undeniably evident in the European avant-garde movements of the first decades of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, there are also continuities between Ball's prewar Expressionism in theater and Dada, and Ball's various influences that challenge the idea of Dada as pure provocation. My aim is to scrutinize these themes in connection with wider discourses on modern society.

2 Hugo Ball on Expressionist Theater

Before devoting himself to theater, Ball had other plans for his future, and these plans affected his later career in theater and the arts. Ball studied philosophy in Heidelberg and Munich from 1906 to 1908; during that time, he became acquainted with Nietzsche's philosophy, which had become an important theoretical point of reference in intellectual circles at the beginning of the century and among early Expressionist circles.⁸ Between 1909 and 1910, Ball was working on a dissertation on Nietzsche,⁹ but the project was never finished—although the brief references to his dissertation in the correspondence before and during the First World War suggest that Ball did consider reviving his research.¹⁰ What remains of his research is an approximately 40-page draft with the title *Nietzsche in Basel*, which was published posthumously.¹¹

As the title of the study indicates, Ball was mainly interested in Nietzsche's early works, especially *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik* (*The Birth of the Tragedy*, 1872). In this, his first published work, Nietzsche examines the origins of Ancient Greek tragedy, arguing that it was based on intertwining

7 White, 1998: 64.

8 Taylor, 1990: 16.

9 White, 1998: 10.

10 See, e.g., Ball's letter to Käthe Brodnitz of December 29, 1915. Ball, 2003: 96.

11 The script has been published, e.g. in Ball, 1988: 61–101.

irrational Dionysian and harmonizing Apollonian drives. Whereas Apollonian art is represented by a sculptor or image maker immersed in the world of semblance and *principium individuationis*, the Dionysian drive is based on intoxication (*Rausch*), which dissolves the individual in the irrational collective.¹² Nietzsche portrays the Dionysian character as follows:

These Dionysiac stirrings, which, as they grow in intensity, cause subjectivity to vanish to the point of complete self-forgetting, awaken either under the influence of narcotic drink of which all human beings and peoples who are close to the origin of things speak in their hymns, or at the approach of spring when the whole of nature is pervaded by lust for life.¹³

The fusion of the Apollonian and Dionysian drives was crystallized in Ancient Greek tragedy, especially in Aeschylus' and Sophocles' works.¹⁴ The mythic realm of these tragedies was about to disappear, as according to Nietzsche, Euripides brought the spectator onto the stage and thus made Ancient Greek tragedy mundane by focusing on the individual.¹⁵ Nietzsche's work encompasses an emancipatory undertone, framing the rebirth of tragedy in Richard Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art).¹⁶

For Ball, Nietzsche is primarily "the first immoralist"; Ball's reading aims to outline Nietzsche's argument that in modern society, the void left by an absent God and the moral values destroyed by secularization should be filled not by a new religion but by a philosophical work of art.¹⁷ Ball's dissertation draft was part of a larger Nietzschean wave among left-wing Expressionists before the First World War and before the exploitation of Nietzsche's philosophy by the National Socialist ideology in the 1930s.¹⁸ In the field of performative arts, Nietzschean influences merged with Wagner's theory on *Gesamtkunstwerk* and Expressionist theory in visual arts and literature.

12 Nietzsche, 1999: 14–17.

13 Nietzsche, 1999: 17. Ronald Speirs, translator of *The Birth of Tragedy*, translates the Nietzschean concepts of "Apollinische" and "Dionysische" into "Apolline" and "Dionysiac", respectively. I instead use the more common terms "Apollonian" and "Dionysian".

14 Nietzsche, 1972: 60–64.

15 Nietzsche, 1972: 72–75.

16 Nietzsche, 1972: 100.

17 Ball, 1988: 61, 62, 98. Ball does not describe any particular work of art but, instead, highlights the meaning of aesthetic values in the sphere of politics and culture ("*statt einer neuen Religion eine Art philosophisches Kunstwerk mit ästhetischen Werten*"). Ball, 1988: 98.

18 Taylor, 1990: 18–22.

Ball's plan for a dissertation never materialized, although Nietzschean elements were present in his artistic and theoretical work in the following years. In 1910, Ball moved to Berlin to study acting at Max Reinhardt's theater school. His decision to abandon his dissertation project and study acting was not completely surprising since he had already been studying theater, especially the methodology and technique of modern drama and German theater history, in Munich and Heidelberg.¹⁹ After his studies, Ball worked as a dramaturg at a provincial theater in Plauen in 1911. In the provincial theater, the tasks varied, and Ball worked both as an actor (e.g. the role of Baron in Maxim Gorki's *Ha dne* (*The Lower Depths*, 1902)) and as a director during that period. Unfortunately, the productions remain inaccessible to historical research because no documents on them have been archived.²⁰

In 1911, in Munich, Eugen Robert took over the Lustspielhaus, later renamed Münchner Kammerspiele,²¹ wanting to open an ambitious stage for modern drama.²² In October 1912, Ball took a position as dramaturg of the Kammer-spiele. As his staging of the world premiere of Franz Blei's *Die Welle* (*The Wave*, 1913) demonstrates, Ball managed to secure projects that he considered artistically engaging, and he exerted a considerable impact on the Kammerspiele's program.²³ Ball's correspondence reveals that the terms of his work agreements varied, and his level of commitment changed as a result.²⁴ He was searching for options to develop his artistic ideas freely, without the restrictions of an institutional theater.²⁵

As Ball writes in his diary, he was utterly occupied with theater in the pre-war years: "From 1910 to 1914 everything revolved around the theatre for me: life, people, love, morality."²⁶ One attribute that describes Ball's active years in the theater is Expressionism; although Expressionist theater practice was not yet fully developed in the prewar period, Ball was strongly influenced by Expressionism, particularly Kandinsky's theory of art, as he developed his con-

19 White, 1998: 63.

20 Bähr, 1982: 63–64.

21 Robert wanted to find a more appropriate name for the reformed theater. According to Ball's diary and correspondence, he was the one who suggested the name 'Kammerspiele', which is still used for the theater. *Kammerspiele* refers to chamber plays, such as Henrik Ibsen's and August Strindberg's dramatic works and their productions. See Ball's letter to Willy Deutschmann; Ball, 2003: 22.

22 Petzet, 1973: 38–39.

23 Ball, 2003: 31, 33.

24 See, e.g., Ball's correspondence with his sister, Maria Hildebrand. Ball, 2003: 25, 32, 36, 41.

25 See, e.g., Ball, 2003: 35–37.

26 Ball, 1996: 4.

ception of theater at this time. In visual arts and literature, Expressionism was introduced around 1910 and matured into a significant artistic movement before the First World War, but it did not reach theater institutions at its full scale until after the war.²⁷ David Kuhns dates the culmination of Expressionist theater from 1916 to 1921, when Ball was no longer actively engaged with theater.²⁸

There are only fragmentary materials remaining from the theater productions involving Ball, but his prewar conception of theater can be reconstructed to some extent by analyzing his brief prewar articles on theater.²⁹ In the article “Wedekind als Schauspieler” (“Wedekind as an Actor”), published in *Phöbus* in 1914, Ball scrutinizes the significance of the actor and playwright Frank Wedekind.³⁰ Wedekind, who was a precursor of Expressionist theater, had an enormous influence on theater practice during and after the First World War. In his article, Ball portrays Wedekind primarily as a physical actor with a strong bodily presence who embodies the Dionysian drive, as opposed to conventional acting based on identification with the character (*Einfühlung*). For Ball, Wedekind epitomizes the man standing on the stage as the “end of moral[ity]” and “as the moral idiosyncrasy of his age.”³¹ Ball retrospectively depicts Wedekind in an enthralling image: “My strongest impression was of the poet as a fearful cynical spectacle: Frank Wedekind. I saw him at many rehearsals and in almost all his plays. In the theatre he was struggling to eliminate both himself and the last remains of a once firmly established civilization.”³²

27 Taylor, 1990: 3.

28 Kuhns, 2004: 4. One reason for the absence of prewar Expressionist theater could have been the institutional character of theater practice, which made it more dependent on other cultural, political, and economic institutions and thus less flexible in adapting to new artistic currents. Expressionist theater practice was first developed in small provincial theaters, where it was easier to experiment with a new expressive style. See Kuhns, 2004: 94–96.

29 For example, the archives of the Münchner Kammerspiele do not include any documents concerning the productions in which Ball was involved. Wolfgang Petzet’s book *Theater: Die Münchener Kammerspiele 1911–1972* (1973) discusses the early history of this theatre and Ball in particular, but the remarks on actual productions are fragmentary. Many of Ball’s articles on theater have survived and have been published in the periodical *Hugo Ball Almanach*, as well as in the collection *Der Künstler und die Zeitkrankheit* (1988).

30 The article has been published in Ball, 1988: 15–18.

31 Ball, 1988: 15–18. All translations are by the author unless otherwise stated.

32 Ball, 1996: 4–5.

In addition to Wedekind's ferocious physical expression and the strong bodily dimension, Ball was also preoccupied with modern dance, which aimed to liberate bodily movement and physical appearance from the codified conventions of classical ballet. Ball was first introduced to modern dance in Switzerland, when he met the choreographer and dance pedagogue Rudolf von Laban and some of the dancers in his community, who frequently visited the Cabaret Voltaire.

In the article "Das Psychologietheater", published in *Phöbus* in 1914, Ball discusses the tendency in performing arts which he describes as "psychological theater".³³ According to Ball, the so-called psychological epoch, with authors such as Nietzsche, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, and Henrik Ibsen, was characterized by the psychological analysis of the characters, along with the aim of embodying them by understanding and experiencing their emotions and lines of thought (*Einfühlung*). Ball's main argument is that psychological theater gradually lost its significance as psychology, as a behavioral science, became increasingly prominent in the modern society of the early twentieth century. As an alternative, Ball proposes the Expressionist actor who is not seeking to represent any object (i.e. character) but is instead aiming to find the self again through "manic wantonness" ("*mit wahnsinniger Wollust*").³⁴

In the above context, Ball uses the notion of *Einfühlung*—often translated as "empathy"—which was an essential concept in theatrical discourses at the beginning of the twentieth century. In theater, *Einfühlung* refers to acting that aims to reproduce the psychological richness of the character by the actor's technique of immersion in the character's emotions, motives, and social relations.³⁵ The notion originates etymologically from the verb *sich einfühlen*, which could be translated word for word in this context as "to feel oneself into the character". In theatrical discourses, the notion was closely connected with naturalism and so-called psychological theater, in which the stage had a mimetic relation to the outside world, with all its social and psychological phenomena. Expressionist theater practice challenged the concept of *Einfühlung* by moving from mimetic representation to abstraction or unequivocally theatrical expression. This shift also encompassed a political aspect: The Expressionists not only rejected the mimetic approach aesthetically but also liberated themselves from bourgeois Wilhelmine values by creating new aesthetics.³⁶

33 The article has been published in Ball, 1988: 19–20.

34 Ball, 1988: 20.

35 Kuhns, 2009: 20–22.

36 Kuhns, 2009: 21.

One of the artists who influenced Ball the most during his prewar years in theater was Kandinsky.³⁷ Ball became acquainted with Kandinsky in Munich and was profoundly influenced by his theories, especially his work *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (*On the Spiritual in Art*, 1912), as well as his articles in the collection *Der Blaue Reiter Almanach* (*The Blaue Reiter Almanac*, 1912). Kandinsky laid the foundations of his theory in his work *On the Spiritual in Art* and in such articles as “Über die Formfrage” (“On the Question of Form”) in the *Almanac*. According to Kandinsky, in times when society and culture are in crisis, one “turns away from the external toward himself”.³⁸ The significance of art lies in the internal process in which the artist, spectator, or listener concentrates on the inner nature of things and the self:

In all that we have discussed above lie hidden the seeds toward the non-naturalistic, the abstract, toward inner nature. [...] Consciously or unconsciously, artists turn gradually toward an emphasis on their materials, examining them spiritually, weighting in the balance the inner worth of those elements out of which their art is best suited to create.³⁹

According to Kandinsky, art should present inner value, ultimately generating an inner sound that purposefully touches the soul.⁴⁰ Kandinsky defines the esoteric concept of inner sound and its relation to the work of art as follows:

[I]t is not in the form (materialism) that the absolute is to be sought. Form is always temporal, i.e., relative, since it is nothing more than the means necessary today, the means by which the revelation of today sounds forth, manifests itself. This sound is thus the soul of form, form that can have life only by virtue of this sound and that produces its effect upon the external world from within. Form is the external expression of inner content.⁴¹

Kandinsky was primarily a visual artist, but he was also interested in theater. He outlined his conception of theater in the article “Über Bühnenkomposition” (“On Stage Composition”) and his manuscript for a theater production *Der gelbe Klang* (*The Yellow Sound*, 1912), both published in the *Almanac*. In

37 Kandinsky's influence on Ball's artistic practice and theoretical writings has been analyzed in Lewer, 2020.

38 Kandinsky, 1982: 145.

39 Kandinsky, 1982: 153.

40 Kandinsky, 1982: 156–160.

41 Kandinsky, 1982: 237.

the article, Kandinsky defines the foundations of this practice as a theatrical work that creates, analogously with other works of art, vibrations and inner sound in the recipient or the spectator in the theater. Kandinsky's abstract ideas are encapsulated in his manuscript for the stage composition *The Yellow Sound*. The list of characters already reveals the non-naturalistic nature of the work: Among them are five giants, indistinct beings ("undeutliche Wesen"), and a choir. The manuscript contains five images (*Bilder*) in which there are only a few lines of dialogue. Most of the texts consist of parentheses and descriptions of scenes, activities and movements, which are more reminiscent of dream-like images than suggestive of actions as part of a coherent plot. The performance draft, based on the harmony of visual and sonic elements, relies profoundly on Kandinsky's theories on color and inner sound. Despite the characters' actions, they are predominantly part of the scenery rather than individuals with agency.

The Yellow Sound was not staged during the prewar years, but Ball was planning to stage it in this period because he was keen to put Kandinsky's ideas into practice. He intended to publish a collection of writings on Expressionist theater with a distinguished group of artists, and concurrently, he had ambitious plans to develop Expressionist theater in practice.⁴² One of the theaters focusing on modern drama, the Münchner Künstlertheater, ended up in a crisis in 1914; in response, a group of theater professionals that included Ball, playwright Franz Blei, scenographer Richard Seewald, and author Thomas Mann wrote a declaration aiming to secure the continuation of the theater.⁴³ In the declaration, they asserted having a plan for the summer program. Presumably referring to the publication, Ball retrospectively mentions the following in his diary:

A Künstlertheater should, in theory, look approximately like this:

Kandinsky	Gesamtkunstwerk
Marc	Scenes for <i>Der Sturm</i>
Fokine	On Ballet
Hartmann	Anarchy of Music
Paul Klee	Sketches for <i>Bacchantinnen</i>
Kokoschka	Scenes and Dramas
Ball	Expressionism and Stage

⁴² Ball, 1996: 9, 10.

⁴³ Mann, 1987: 29–32.

Yevrenov	On the Psychological
Mendelsohn	Stage Architecture
Kubin	Sketches for <i>Floh im Panzerhaus</i> ⁴⁴

Ultimately, the First World War interrupted his plans, both in terms of publications and theater productions.

In his diary, Ball writes about his prewar conception of Expressionist theater, which he regarded as a new *Gesamtkunstwerk* based on the idea of a *Festspiel* (festival play), a conception of theater and music drama originating from Wagner. According to Ball, Expressionist theater should touch the unconscious instead of the reason on which the prewar Impressionistic theater was based. He describes his conception of *Gesamtkunstwerk* as follows:

My thesis went like this: that the purpose of the expressionist theater is the festival play; it contains a new conception of the total work of art. The form of the present-day theater is impressionistic. What happens on the stage appeals to the individual and his intellect. The subconscious is not touched at all. The new theater will use masks and stilts again. It will recall archetypes and use megaphones. Sun and moon will run across the stage and proclaim their sublime wisdom.⁴⁵

In his study on Ball's theater career, Hans Joachim Bähr underlines that the idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk* should not be understood as a programmatic declaration because there is only a fractional number of theoretical texts or works in which Ball's conception of the total work of art is present.⁴⁶ However, the total work of art can be seen as a theoretical point of reference in early twentieth-century German theater, which connects the ideas of theater put forward by Ball, Kandinsky, and Nietzsche. They share an emancipatory conception of art, where art plays a crucial role in reforming society. Kandinsky was also interested in Wagner's concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, but in Kandinsky's view, Wagner touched on the essence of art through his concept purely theoretically, whereas in practice, he could combine the arts only on an external level.⁴⁷

The destructive elements of Wedekind's artistic practice, anticipating the oncoming Expressionist theater, merged with Kandinsky's more harmonious ideas of *Gesamtkunstwerk* in terms of vibrating the inner sound. Mann accen-

44 Ball, 1996: 10.

45 Ball, 1996: 9.

46 Bähr, 1982: 56.

47 Kandinsky, 1982: 261.

tuates the destructive Dionysian side of Ball's thought in the prewar theater period as follows:

[A]lthough both Kandinsky and Ball had an irrationalist concept of art, and believed that art appealed to a force beyond reason, they regarded this force in different ways. Whereas Kandinsky believed that art gave expression to an objective spirit (the 'Ewig-Künstlerische') continually at work beyond the empirical world, Ball tended to regard this force as demonic and chaotic, as something which would violently break through the sterile crust of society.⁴⁸

Considering the questions discussed here, more important than reconstructing Ball's position between the two antipodes is analyzing the diversity of influences in his artistic activities. The importance of Nietzsche, Kandinsky, and pre-Expressionist theater—as notably emblemized by Wedekind—re-emerges during the Dadaist period and in Ball's sound poetry, as discussed in the next section.

3 Dadaistic Language and the Vibrating Voice

There is a clear end of Ball's Expressionist theatrical practice in 1914. Ball wrote to Maria Hildebrand on August 7, 1914, how he had become disaffected and lost his interest in art and how the war was the only thing that still excited him, but that was also "*nur eine halbe Sache*"—only a half concern.⁴⁹ Like many of his contemporaries in the German art scene, Ball was enthusiastic about joining the war, but after a short stay at the Belgian front, he became a devoted pacifist and secured a release because of medical conditions.⁵⁰ In addition to his experiences at the front, in September 1914, the death of a close friend—the poet Hans Leybold—shocked Ball profoundly.

Although Ball's plans for a new theater were ruined by the war and he seems to have lost his interest in this art form, he did not abandon theater completely. During the first months of the war and after his brief stint at the front, Ball wrote theater reviews in Berlin, as can be confirmed by a letter to August Hofmann on November 23, 1914.⁵¹ However, it seems that his writings were more of an

48 Mann, 1987: 37.

49 Ball, 2003: 62–63.

50 Mann, 1987: 77.

51 Ball, 2003: 64.

economic necessity than a realization of artistic intentions because he wrote to Hofmann in January 1915 that writing reviews did not bring him anything and that he was willing to leave Berlin for good.⁵²

In May 1915, Ball and his spouse, Emmy Hennings, went into exile in Switzerland, where they both worked in a group performing variety shows. During this period, Ball was also working on his novel *Flametti oder vom Dandysmus der Armen* (*Flametti, or the Dandyism of the Poor*), which was eventually published in 1918. Ball wrote to Käthe Brodnitz on December 29 that he was planning to open a cabaret and that his friends would help him by performing there.⁵³ The plan was realized in February 1916, when the Cabaret Voltaire opened its doors in Zurich. Expressionistic poetry was included in the program, especially in the beginning. On February 6, 1916, for example, the selection consisted of poetry by Kandinsky and Else Lasker-Schüler, as well as the “Donnerwetterlied” by Wedekind.⁵⁴ On April 9, the second series of “Der Sturm” was presented in the Cabaret Voltaire with paintings by Paul Klee, Oskar Kokoschka, Lyonel Feininger, and Johannes Itten, to name but a few.

Ball’s original idea was a cabaret with an artistically diverse program, political consciousness, and an emancipatory undertone, as the reference to the Enlightenment in the name suggests. Despite the ironic, provocative, and satirical nature of the artistic movement, the name of the venue was not intended as a pun.⁵⁵ Instead, it illuminates Ball’s emancipatory endeavors and aspirations to enhance critical vision in the cultural state of emergency caused by the war. The movement denominated as Dada was initiated a few months later as a label for the artistic community around the Cabaret Voltaire, which was based on a few close friendships, and in some cases, looser relations between the artists involved.

One of the key historical events at the Cabaret Voltaire was Ball’s performance of the sound poem “Karawane”, which consists of non-semantic syllables composed primarily for recitation by the human voice. The photograph of Ball performing in the cubistic costume—the embodiment of Dadaistic imagery—was taken that evening. Ball described the performance as follows:

The stresses became heavier, the emphasis was increased as the sound of the consonants became sharper. Soon I realized that, if I wanted to remain serious (and I wanted to at all costs), my method of expression

52 Ball, 2003: 70.

53 Ball, 2003: 95–96.

54 Ball, 1996: 51.

55 Mann, 1987: 82–83.

would not be equal to the pomp of my staging. [...] I feared a disgrace and pulled myself together. I had now completed “Labadas Gesang an die Wolken” [“Labada’s Song to the Clouds”] at the music stand on the right and the “Elefantenkarawane” [“Elephant Caravan”] on the left and turned back to the middle one, flapping my wings energetically. The heavy vowel sequences and the plodding rhythm of the elephants had given me one last crescendo. But how was I to get to the end? Then I noticed that my voice had no choice but to take on the ancient cadence of priestly lamentation, that style of liturgical singing that wails in all the Catholic churches of East and West.

I do not know what gave me the idea of this music, but I began to chant my vowel sequences in a church style like a recitative, and tried not only to look serious but to force myself to be serious. For a moment it seemed as if there were a pale, bewildered face in my cubist mask, that half-frightened, half-curious face of a ten-year-old boy, trembling and hanging avidly on the priest’s words in the requiems and high masses in his home parish. Then the lights went out, as I had ordered, and bathed in sweat, I was carried down off the stage like a magical bishop.⁵⁶

Ball’s sound poem performance reflected the idea of language that he was developing in 1916 and 1917. By rejecting words and sentences with a semantic, and therefore in his argumentation, an ideological dimension, the artist can approach a pure—or purified—language that also has a political meaning. In the diary entry for June 24, 1916, he elaborates on this as follows:

In these phonetic poems we totally renounce the language that journalism has abused and corrupted. We must return to the innermost alchemy of the word, we must even give up the word too, to keep for poetry its last and holiest refuge. We must give up writing secondhand: that is, accepting words (to say nothing of sentences) that are not newly invented for our own use. Poetic effects can no longer be obtained in ways that are merely reflected ideas or arrangements of furtively offered witticisms and images.⁵⁷

Ball’s aim—to revert to the origins of language and develop an ideal of purified language—was not unique; similar ideas developed among the avant-garde

56 Ball, 1996: 70–71.

57 Ball, 1996, 71.

and in the cultural theory of the early twentieth century.⁵⁸ However, as Ball's diary entry on the recitation of the sound poem illustrates, his conception of purified language is initially based on spoken language. The nuances of sound that replace semantic meaning can be achieved through bodily actions and the infinite potential of vocal expression. Ball's conception of pure language resonates with Kandinsky's ideas of the relation between language and inner sound:

Words are inner sounds. This inner sound arises partly—perhaps principally—from the object for which the word serves as a name. But when the object itself is not seen, but only its name is heard, an abstract conception arises in the mind of the listener, a dematerialized object that once conjures up a vibration in the 'heart'.⁵⁹

Kandinsky's harmonious approach to language and sound collided with Wedekind's physical acting practice as a theoretical and practical background for Ball's sound poetry. In addition to stage performances and cabaret appearances, Wedekind organized readings of his plays, which were to become known for his exceptional vocal expression. Wedekind's contemporary, Artur Holitscher, depicts Wedekind's extraordinary use of voice, particularly in the readings of his own plays, as follows:

[A]s an actor of his own pieces, [he] developed to a mastery. It was a special pleasure to listen to Wedekind. When he read he was in love, one might almost say, with each of his words. With voluptuous joy he fashioned a creation out of vowel and consonant. He willed sentences into the manifest fullness of a harmonious form. In these readings, his dialogue achieved, and his characters received, a contour and depth as they never did on the stage [...] Through an imperceptible retardation of tempo, a

58 Renato Poggioli, among others, points out that the aim of "absolute expressive purity or perfect innocence" characterizes several avant-garde movements and styles, from nonobjective and nonrepresentational art to formless painting. Poggioli, 1968: 203. For example, in the field of theory, Walter Benjamin's essay "Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen" ("On Language as Such and on the Language of Man", 1916) retraces the origins of language by constructing his theory on the biblical story of creation and the naming of things as the essence of language. Language and its ability to represent reality were also questioned by, e.g., Hugo von Hoffmansthal and Fritz Mauthner in the first decades of the twentieth century.

59 Kandinsky, 1982: 147.

tiny pause before or after a word, what he said took on a meaning which could sooner be apprehended intuitively than intellectually.⁶⁰

The nuanced and deliberate use of human voice embodying language certainly intrigued Ball during the prewar years and affected his experiments in sound poetry at the Cabaret Voltaire, and later, the Galerie Dada. These influences merged with the religious traditions of the Catholic Church, as Ball describes his childhood memories of recitation at the Sunday Mass in the passage describing the performance of “Karawane”.

Recitation and onomatopoeic aspects of language are also present in Ball’s *Simultan Krippenspiel: Bruitistisch* (*Simultaneous Nativity Play, Bruitistic*, 1916), a nativity play consisting of five acts performed by the Dadaists at the Cabaret Voltaire.⁶¹ The manuscript is written in the form of a play, but it could also be distinguished as a score, as Erdmute Wenzel White does, to emphasize the musical and rhythmic structure of *Krippenspiel*.⁶² The dialogue is based on onomatopoeic lines, such as the donkey neighing “la ia ia ia ia ia ia ia” and the three holy kings answering “Ah, eh, ih, ohm, uh, ah, eh, ih, oh, uh!” There are a few brief lines in German and French, such as “*Bonsoir, messieurs*” (“Good evening, gentlemen”) and “*Schlaf Kindlein schlaf*” (“Sleep, little child, sleep”).⁶³ The play incorporates onomatopoeic language, which creates semantic meaning even though it consists mainly of syllables rather than full words. The dramaturgy of the storyline is based on the act of reciting and the physical dimension of language. Ball writes about the *poème simultané* (simultaneous poem) in his diary entry of March 30, 1916, where he describes it as a recitative consisting of speech, singing, whistling, and other human sounds. Ball gives insight into the performance of *Krippenspiel* when he describes the energy-laden existence of the human voice. In a parenthetical comment, he mentions “an *rrrrr* drawn out for minutes” and other intensive sounds, such as the sound of a siren.⁶⁴

The energy created by the physically intensive use of human voice includes a demonic aspect, which Ball discusses in his diary entry: The human voice represents the soul with all its unarticulated, fatal desires. Ball’s description of the

60 Kuhns, 1997: 48.

61 *Krippenspiel*, the nativity play, depicts the birth of the Christ. The Dadaists performing the play were Emmy Hennings, Marietta di Monaco, Marcel Janco, Tristan Tzara, Hans Arp, and Ball. White, 1998: 89.

62 White, 1998: 88–89.

63 Ball, 1992: 7.

64 Ball, 1996: 57.

archaic aesthetics of the recitation has common features with the Dionysian drive sketched by Nietzsche. Ball mentions the dialectic between individuality and demonic forces (“the individuality in its wanderings with its demonic companions”), which resembles the Nietzschean concept of tragedy as a dynamic fusion of Apollonian and Dionysian drives.⁶⁵

Ball’s experimentation with sound poetry kept him active at the Cabaret Voltaire, although the intensive pace began to exhaust him,⁶⁶ and occasionally, the chaotic mixture of artistic activities disturbed him.⁶⁷ The program of the Cabaret Voltaire was running every day of the week, and the venue gained popularity. In his diary, Ball describes the cabaret as being constantly full of customers. After taxing weeks of running the Cabaret Voltaire, in the summer of 1916, Ball and his family moved to Vira Magadino in the Swiss Alps.

The activities at the Cabaret Voltaire continued after Ball’s break with the group. However, he returned to Zurich in 1917 when the Dadaists opened a new venue, the Galerie Dada, in a divergent location on the modern Bahnhofstraße, which was the opposite of the previous venue in the working-class district on Spiegelgasse. Despite the interruption in Dadaistic activities, Ball continued his experiments with sound poetry in 1917 and developed his approach by introducing modern dance into the performances at the Galerie Dada. He describes the performance of the sound poem “Gesang der Flugfische und Seepferdchen” (“Song of the Flying Fish and the Sea Horses”) in a diary entry from the opening night of the Galerie Dada on March 29, 1917:

Abstract dances: a gong beat is enough to stimulate the dancer’s body to make the most fantastic movements. The dance has become an end in itself. The nervous system exhausts all the vibrations of the sound, and perhaps all the hidden emotion of the gong beater too, and turns them into an image. Here, in this special case, a poetic sequence of sounds was enough to make each of the individual word particles produce the strangest visible effect on the hundred-jointed body of the dancer. From a “Gesang der Flugfische und Seepferdchen” there came a dance full of flashes and edges, full of dazzling light and penetrating intensity.⁶⁸

65 Ball, 1996: 57.

66 On March 15, only a few weeks after the grand opening, Ball (1996: 57) writes that “[w]ith all the tension the daily performances are not just exhausting, they are crippling”.

67 Ball (1996: 65) describes the first moment as follows: “There were Japanese and Turks there who watched all the activities with real astonishment. For the first time I was ashamed of the noise of the performance, the mixture of styles and moods, things that I have not physically endured for weeks.”

68 Ball, 1996: 102.

The bodily dimension of sound present in earlier sound poetry varies in Ball's description quoted here. In "Karawane" and *Krippenspiel*, the physical presence of the performer was intensified through the act of reciting, whereas in "Song of the Flying Fish and the Sea Horses", the sound coming from outside—the gong—vibrates in the body of the dancer creating images on stage.

The passage quoted above underlines Ball's idea of bodily actions creating images, an idea that was typical of Expressionist theater. In her article on Kandinsky's *The Yellow Sound*, Susan Stein points out the meaning of images in Expressionist theater and plays in which the dramaturgy was not based on acts but instead on images (*Bilder/tableaux*) and stages (*Stationen*).⁶⁹ These images often created a fragmentary dramaturgy that did not follow classical rules of the unities of time and space or the linear structure of plot.

4 Escaping Time

Diverse concepts describing the time, the period, and the observer's historical position are characteristics that define the avant-garde movements of the first decades of the twentieth century. In the manifestos, articles, diary entries, and other writings by avant-garde artists, the notions of the modern, modernity, and timeliness, as well as such concepts as *revolution* and *the new* that define their essence in relation to the past and to tradition, are explicitly or implicitly present. The historical dimension of the avant-garde is not distinguished only by its connection with the past, as Hal Foster aptly summarizes, "[f]or even as the avant-garde recedes into the past, it also returns from the future, repositioned by innovative art in the present".⁷⁰

In the German context, the references to time, history, and the past can to some degree be traced to German historicism originating in the late eighteenth century and flourishing in various formations in the philosophy and historical research of the nineteenth century. The historical dimension of phenomena and their fluctuating essence were crucial elements in the many—often contradictory—theories developed by nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century philosophers, such as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Nietzsche, Karl Marx, and Walter Benjamin. Despite their diverse approaches, they all share the tendency to scrutinize phenomena as part of a larger continuum of time and history. On an ontological level, they all consider the world and exis-

69 Stein, 1983: 63.

70 Foster, 1996: x.

tence to be changing entities instead of static structures. These historicist ideas coalesced with the modernization of Germany, which accelerated after the unification in 1871, and the introduction of the nineteenth-century concept of the *Zeitgeist*, a notion aimed at capturing the current state of affairs. Maïke Oergel characterizes the notion of the *zeitgeist* as a tool to tackle “a critical contemporary issue: understanding radical change”, which was about to form the modern society and state.⁷¹ Poggioli refers to the *zeitgeist* as the dynamic “myth of the fullness of time”.⁷²

Ball was engaged in the questions of modernity and the *zeitgeist* throughout his life, from the early dissertation draft to the religious writings in the 1920s. In his diary entry from October 4, 1915, he connects his own experiences with those of the German nation when declaring, almost prophetically:

I tend to compare my own private experiences with the nation's. I see it almost as a matter of conscience to perceive a certain parallel there. It may be a whim, but I could not live without the conviction that my own personal fate is an abbreviated version of the fate of the whole nation. If I had to admit that I was surrounded by highwaymen, nothing in the world could convince me that they were not my fellow countrymen whom I live among. I bear the signature of my homeland, and I feel surrounded by it everywhere I go.⁷³

One of the occasions when he tackled these issues was a speech on Kandinsky held at the Galerie Dada on April 7, 1917.⁷⁴ As already mentioned, Ball withdrew from Dada in summer 1916 but returned to Zurich in 1917 to take part in the activities at the Galerie Dada.

At the beginning of his speech, Ball lists three pivotal contemporary developments that define the modern cultural landscape and condition artistic work: the secularization of Western society, or “*Entgötterung der Welt*” in Ball's formulation, referring to Nietzschean philosophy; the paradigmatic changes in science, such as the early formulations of quantum mechanics and the theory of relativity; and finally, the traumatic mass destruction of the First World War. Ball conceives of these changes as a watershed in history: “There is an epoch

71 Oergel, 2019: 5.

72 Poggioli, 1968: 73.

73 Ball, 1996: 30.

74 The written paper has been preserved and is published in the collection *Der Künstler und die Zeitkrankheit*, as well as in other publications. See Ball, 1988: 41–53.

before me and an epoch after me.”⁷⁵ The modern world that Ball describes in the speech is chaotic, dystopian, and unstable. In this chaotic situation, Ball turns again to Kandinsky in search of a meaningful orientation for the arts in modern society. In his lecture, Ball portrays Kandinsky as an almost messianic character: “Kandinsky means liberation, solace, redemption, and peace. [...] Kandinsky is one of the very innovators, purifiers of life.”⁷⁶ An extensive part of the lecture is devoted to presenting Kandinsky’s writings and direct quotes that leave Ball’s theoretical position in the background. However, the issues that Ball underlines are Kandinsky’s relation to Russian culture and his critique of Wagner, as well as the composer’s conception of the total work of art. Ball’s references to Wagner and *Gesamtkunstwerk* reveal that he was still occupied with theater and the idea of the total work of art, at least to some extent.

Soon after giving the speech, Ball permanently left the Dadaist community. Lewer suggests that Ball’s final loss of faith in Kandinsky was a crucial factor in Ball’s renunciation of Dada.⁷⁷ Indeed, Ball did not return to Kandinsky’s theory, but at the same time, there were other notable grounds for why Ball left Dada. The Cabaret Voltaire, as a place for experimenting with physical presence and sound, did not exist anymore, and the tempting, mesmerizing Dionysian *Rausch* as a destructive drive did not present an emancipatory option in the middle of the industrial-scale warfare in Europe. After his renunciation of Dada, Ball was still working on his literary works *Flametti* and *Tenderenda der Phantast* (*Tenderenda the Fantast*, written 1914–1920, published posthumously in 1967), but in the 1920s, he devoted himself to political and religious themes.

Ball’s prewar years in theater and activities at the Cabaret Voltaire were an attempt to find emancipatory and meaningful artistic practices in the middle of the modern crisis. Although the prewar years in theater differed in many ways from Dada, both of these periods share the aspiration to return to the core and origins of art and culture—pure language and physical presence, which create compelling images on stage. In sound poetry, Ball’s venturesome attempt to create a language free of the corrupt elements of the public discourse in Germany during the First World War could be interpreted as overambitious because language, as an interwoven entity in all human communication, cannot be detached from the social and political context. Yet, one can also conceive of Ball’s experiments with language and physical expression as a refuge from the cultural and political circumstances.

75 Ball, 1993: 263.

76 Ball, 1993: 265.

77 Lewer, 2020: 118.

In his 1917 lecture, Ball quotes the opening sentence of Kandinsky's work and underlines the historical aspect of art. Kandinsky begins his work "On the Spiritual in Art" as follows: "Every work of art is the child of its time, often it is the mother of our emotions."⁷⁸ Kandinsky continues: "This art, which conceals no future potentialities, and which is therefore only a child of its time and can never become the mother of the future, is a castrated art. It is of short duration and dies, to all intents and purposes, as soon as the ethos that gave rise to it changes."⁷⁹ Ball, who regarded himself as the epitome of his time, was simultaneously searching for a flight out of time: "Remove yourself as far as possible from the times to assess them. But do not lean so far out of the window that you fall out."⁸⁰ Ball's image of modern society during the First World War was critical, almost dystopian, but nonetheless it involved emancipatory elements. As an artist attempting to escape time, Ball felt that accepting one's historical position was necessary to avoid falling out of history.

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78 Kandinsky, 1982: 127.

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