

## NOTHING THAT IS EVERYTHING

Interview by Annemarie Peeters

'Gi Bi The Buddha' roars the group through the microphone. And then Stef Kamil Carlens and his companions mumble a few dozen words that are difficult to make out. Is it our hearing? No, this is Dada. A balloon serves as a pick, an old jingle-jangle piano rolls across the stage, a toy drum keeps time. Absurd dance moves are paired with songs strung together like scraps of paper. Stef Kamil Carlens was inspired by a film with a fragment of one of the first Dada performances in 1916, in the legendary Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich. First-wave Dadaists like Hugo Ball, Sophie Taeuber-Arp, and Tristan Tzara wander across the stage in an absurd protest against the horrors of World War I. Hugo Ball recites his tone poem *Karawane* for the first time. 'Jolifanto bambla o phalli bambla': speech without words to escape the twisted language of war of the time. The film became the prelude to *Nothing That Is Everything*, the new interdisciplinary project by Carlens and his Zita Swoon Group, together with two dancers from Needcompany and with Jan Lauwers as artistic director. Playful absurdity, a good dash of poetry and even a hint of indignation: because the world today is just as absurd as ever.

### What is your connection with dada?

Stef Kamil Carlens: 'I had of course already been familiar with the works of Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp. But the clip on YouTube in particular got my imagination going. The absurd atmosphere really drew me in, how the Dada artists were looking for a way to break the conventions of the past and so to escape the violence of the war machine that was running at full tilt at the time. Dada was very diverse: some Dadaists remained within art and philosophical reflection, but a part of the movement was also very politicised and saw salvation in leftist thinking. There is no direct link, but that in 1916 Lenin was living in the same street as the Cabaret Voltaire says something. The quest for another world had a strong impetus then, and thus also in Dada art.'

### What can dada mean today?

'The parallel with today is one that is hard to miss. We live in a time with a lot of violence. The tension that you feel today is, I think, similar to the one that prevailed then. Since 9/11 a constant threat of war has hung in the air. There are so many wars going on and our country – herein lies the absurdity – also participates in them; our tax money is used to pay soldiers to go to Afghanistan and Iraq, but the reasons why are almost never fully explained. Meanwhile, life goes on. Impending environmental disaster hangs over our heads like the sword of Damocles and for all that we act as if there's nothing wrong. The reality today is just as absurd as ever. We have to live with the legacy of Edward Bernays; he was the man who, on orders from the American Tobacco Company, managed to link smoking to the emancipation of women. He initiated a tradition of subtle manipulation of public opinion, first in the world of advertising, but later also in politics. Today, that lobbying machine is a very powerful institution that permanently strives to win the general public over to their cause.'

**How much 'dada' is there really in the show?**

'We're certainly not going to copy dada-language literally. Today, that language no longer has the same effect as it did then, because so much has happened in the meantime. A copy would only exude nostalgia. What we find important are the references to Dada, the playfulness of Dada and some typical Dada techniques, like collage techniques, cut-up techniques [in which texts are cut up from existing sources and merged in a new configuration, ed.] and, of course, sound poems. That's the framework. Within that framework, new meanings emerge.'

***Karawane* by Hugo Ball is one such sound poem. How does it fit in?**

'Hugo Ball's texts are completely irrational, there is no way to situate them and of course that was the point. Language was, according to Hugo Ball, so polluted by politics, by the war propaganda, by legal parlance that took a thousand and one detours to serve the purposes of the powerful. Today we are still in the middle of this. Think of LuxLeaks: our laws allow for that kind of situation and yet everyone feels that something is not right. Hugo Ball wanted to detach himself from all that. He wanted to create something pure. The text of *Karawane* is raised several times in our performance. Apart from their abstract form, our own sound poems can also be linked to a real content. For instance, I refer to Buddha in one of the songs. Many of the problems today could possibly be solved by looking at what Buddha said. His message was essentially very simple: respect life. This can have so many consequences: empathy, the ability to inhabit someone else's emotional world and how to deal with desire. Buddha not only talked about these things, but also passed on a lot of techniques to achieve them. This mystical tone can clearly be found in Hugo Ball's writings from back then [Ball would later convert to Catholic mysticism, ed.]'

**The Cabaret Voltaire's ideas were very multidisciplinary, is that what attracted you?**

'Yes, it clicked immediately. When I first saw that movie, I knew immediately that I wanted to do something with it. Because it is so simple. Just a piano and a dust pan that they used as a percussion instrument. Some artwork in the background. And then a dance, which is quite classical at first and then a very funny Pythonesque thing. The 'simultaneous poem', with three poems recited at the same time, and then the masks. I immediately thought 'this has everything'. The simple formal language of that brief presentation is very artistic, but at the same time is also close to everyday reality; in the days of the Dadaists, that meant the all-consuming war machine. In our time, it's that of modern Western humanity, sandwiched between the advantages and disadvantages of the capitalist system, losing its bearings a little at a time.'

**You have been working on multi-disciplinary projects for quite a while. Was music alone just not enough for you?**

I don't know. This is how I've always been. Before I became a musician, I had already been drawing and painting. It was in that order. My sister danced, so that has also always been a part of my world. By going to see dance and theatre performances often, I began to feel that I also wanted to take part in them. I've often worked for

theatre directors or writers like Jan De Corte, Bart Moeyaert and Ivo Van Hove. I also want to take the same route in reverse, that is, to start from our world and then to adapt elements from other arts within our project.

**How do you actually start a project, with the music or the dance?**

'I definitely didn't want to start with the music this time. In previous projects, I did that. In *New Old World*, for example, every note, every sound, was written in advance by Aarich Jespers and myself. This time I wanted to start from scratch and, together with the dancers, to let the show grow out from that open space. Of course, this also requires a very different approach. While jamming we experimented with the instruments. Everyone plays many different instruments, so there we already had to define our roles a little. This quickly gave rise to each of us occupying a kind of fluctuating sound island. Each musician works with their own speaker set-up on wheels, which makes the overall sound change constantly. You don't get the more typical stereo effect, which always comes from the same direction, but a much more complex sound results. When a musician stands more to the back of the stage, the audience will hear his playing differently from when he stands up front. We also work with a mix of pure acoustic and amplified instruments, which gives the show a very dynamic sound.'

'We watched a lot of movies with the dancers and focused on certain artists. Then we recorded the teaser, in which we quite literally act out the film from Hugo Ball's *Karawane*. This created common ground from which to start improvising. Through working in this way, the music for this performance sounds a lot simpler than in the previous projects, especially with its strong rhythmic base. The chaos that sometimes arises, of course, is also completely at home in Dadaism. There is no strict structure, no hierarchy, no score either. This happens in the show as well; there will be a lot of improvisation. That's why it's so important to take enough time to discover each other's feeling and explore the framework. Only then do you find the confidence to move freely within that loose structure.'