

Quiet Rebellion: Emmy Hennings and the Politics of Subversion

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Amidst the clamor and upheaval of World War I, Zurich proved to be fertile ground for a blossoming literary and artistic movement dedicated to the eradication of the social, political, and creative norms which allowed the war to come about, through a campaign of abstraction and reduction into *Nichtigkeit* (Nothingness). This was Dada. The means by which this campaign was made operational were varied, as were the many artists and writers who placed themselves on the front lines. One such artist, Emmy Hennings, has, in recent years, become the subject of increased examination and debate, due to her problematic and twice-marginalized position as both a woman and a liberated avant-garde within a still-repressive Wilhelmine society. Under intense scrutiny is the question of whether Hennings served as a leader of the Zurich Dada movement, or as a passive follower, operating under her husband's able direction; whether she used the Dada movement as a platform on which to voice her contrary opinions or simply as an outlet for politically and socially indifferent self-expression, as some modern scholars contend.

I. Introduction: The Birth of Dada

Out of the ashes of Europe rose a movement composed of artists, writers and intellectuals from the farthest reaches of the continent, dedicated to reclaiming language from those who abused its power through propaganda, and to reclaiming art from a society which had abandoned all reason. Dada was revolution. The founders of Zurich Dada were Hugo Ball and Emmy Hennings, a highly artistic German couple which emigrated in the wake of World War I to neutral Switzerland. Ball was a writer and editor, while Hennings was primarily a singer, dancer, and cabaret performer. Some contemporary scholars contend that Hennings played a submissive role, passively following the social and artistic direction of her partner. However, close examination of the writings of her contemporaries and associates indicates that she occupied an altogether different position: one of leadership.

Women played a unique role in the history of the Zurich Dada movement. In leading a campaign of artistic abstraction against a society which, in their mind, had lost its direction, they served to free themselves, if only for a short time, from the pervasive political and social restrictions placed upon them. However, this story of personal liberation has rarely been told. Modern scholars have put forth various explanations for this phenomenon: sexism, the relative unavailability of the women's personal writings, and the relative abundance of their husbands' written works.

When viewed through her own words and

those of her contemporaries, Emmy Hennings clearly assumed a position of leadership within this newly-established amalgamation of artists. The author will attempt to establish the extent to which Emmy Hennings consciously utilized her position to supplant the expected and accepted roles of the women of her day, exhibiting a keen sense of political awareness in the process.

II. On The Condition of Women

The Zurich Dadas have been credited in history with granting each other a considerable degree of support and respect. It is a fact that they generated the majority of their songs, poems, plays, and other art through active group participation. However, the seemingly progressive atmosphere fostered by the group did not reflect the nature of the environment which existed outside the protective walls of the artists' studio.

In order to grasp the revolutionary nature of the female Dada's role, one must first understand the social and artistic atmosphere in which she operated. Though the dynamic Zurich Dada movement consisted of individuals of countless different nationalities and backgrounds, it remained, in essence, a fundamentally German institution. Of the movement's early founders, only two were Swiss. The remainder was largely German emigrants, who fled to Switzerland for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was the opportunity to avoid military service. The Zurich movement itself was headquartered in the *Cabaret Voltaire*, which was modeled

after the *Künstlerkneipen* (Artist's Taverns) in which Hugo Ball and Emmy Hennings had previously worked in Germany. These factors produced an environment within the *Cabaret Voltaire* which was, in many respects, distinctly separate from the Swiss culture outside. The prejudicial mindset which prevailed at that time in Germany also played a prominent role within this group.

The years prior to the First World War were instable: culturally, economically, and politically. During this period, social rules and rolls were undergoing significant and fundamental changes, but even as new freedoms and possibilities appeared, old laws and dispositions remained. In the winter semester of 1899/1900, women were allowed, for the first time, to study at German universities.¹ The *Vereingesez* (Association Act), which, since 1851 had forbidden the involvement of women in politics, membership in political societies, or attendance at public events at which political topics were discussed, was finally repealed in 1908, enabling the active engagement of women in political discussion, and free expression on political and social topics.

Educated and emancipated women founded their own organizations, to make use of their new rights. The workforce increasingly consisted of women. Female authors contributed more than 20% of the literature that was published under the Wilhelmine Empire. However, despite these laudable advances, the situation of German women remained repressive. Women still lacked the right to vote, and worked for lower wages. As was commonly said in Germany, the life of a woman revolved around "*Kinder, Küche und Kirche*" (Children, Kitchen, and Church). For most of those who strove for a career as an actress or musician, their creative, unconventional life often resulted in marginalization, continual poverty, and societal condemnation. Despite these pervasive threats, Emmy Hennings pressed on, determined to use her involvement in the male-dominated movement to transmit her expressive messages.

III. Emmy Hennings and the Dada Group Dynamic

At least superficially, it would seem that Hennings and her fellow female Dadas enjoyed relative equality with their male counterparts. On the program of the first public Dada presentation on July 14, 1916, all performers were listed alpha-

betically, perhaps reflecting the lack of any hierarchical gender structure within the group. This trend of public egalitarianism seems to have continued as the movement matured. When Hugo Ball eventually compiled and published a volume of the materials produced by the Zurich Dadas, the title page featured photos of him and Hennings, both granted an equal amount of space. However, one need only read the personal letters and diaries of the men of Dada to discover that the group dynamic was far more complex than these public gestures of equality would seem to indicate.

As is evident in the written accounts left behind by the many male Dadas, their progressive ideals did not always follow them home. For them, the women were often simply muses or objects of sexual desire. Naomi Sawelson-Gorse, in her volume *Women in Dada: Essays on Sex, Gender and Identity*, states, "Their female colleagues were to be seen and not heard, were to be nurturers, not usurpers, were to be pleasant, not rancorous."² The German painter and Dadaist Hans Richter seemed to be of this opinion as he wrote approvingly of the prominent Dada dancer Sophie Taeuber-Arp, "wenn wir bei den Arps zu Besuch waren [...] blieb Sophie [immer] unhörbar."³

One of the most apparent contradictions of the Dadaists was their adherence to the traditional ideal of proper femininity. While the female Dadas constantly attempted to eradicate this concept, it is clear that their male counterparts actively supported it. The majority of the descriptions of Emmy Hennings, such as those by Richter, focus on her humble, shy personality, rather than any of the many varied works she produced. Others describe her and the other female Dadaists as alternately nonintellectual, naïve, childlike, and aloof. Whatever the precise nature of the characterization, subordination to the men of the movement is presupposed through such language.

The contributions of these women were neglected not only by their colleagues, but often by their own husbands as well. In his many writings, Hugo Ball almost never describes the performances of his companion Emmy Hennings, though he does occasionally give insight into certain aspects of their home-life. In his letters, he describes how Hennings supplied him with cigarettes or otherwise served him.⁴ In Hans Richter's memoirs, many more pages are dedicated to recounting the numerous affairs which the various Dadaists had with the dancers performing in the *Cabaret Voltaire*, than to how their performances appeared or what impact they

had upon the audience.

The modern critic Renée Riese Hubert contends that the problems with which the women of Dada Zurich were forced to contend were of a primarily social rather than professional nature, because they were generally provided with support during the creative process. However, this observation proves somewhat ironic, as the same women who worked with the male Dadaists in a communal, productive atmosphere during the day returned with them to a strongly stereotyped and repressive environment at night. In their case, the professional and social spheres were deeply interwoven.

IV. A Star Revealed

Despite the male prejudices exhibited in the written histories of the movement, there are also many irrefutably clear indications of Emmy Hennings' critical importance to the movement in notes, letters, and media reports of the day. In one particularly glorifying letter, her partner Hugo Ball writes:

“Oh, wie mich Deine Stimme zum Schreiben anregt! Ich hielt nicht viel von meinem >Totentanz<, als Du ihn mir aber das erstemal vorgelesen hast in der grauen Schoffelgasse in Zürich, oh, Emmy, das werde ich nie vergessen und wenn ich hundert Jahre alt werden sollte. [...] Ja, Deine Stimme kann ich nicht vergessen. Sie kann wie eine klagende Flamme sein, die den Lauscher entzündet und sein Herz in Brand steckt...”⁵

This combination of alternating sincere appreciation and neglect is indicative of the conflicted mindset of the men of Dada Zurich. Ball's praise is echoed by that of countless other individuals. One need not look far before unearthing statements which call into question why the written histories of Dada by and large fail to include women such as Emmy Hennings. On May 7th, 1916, the Zürcher Post reported:

“Der Stern dieses Kabarets aber ist Frau Emmy Hennings. Stern wie vieler Nächte von Kabarets und Gedichten. Wie sie vor Jahren am rauschend gelben Vorhang eines Berliner Kabarets stand, die Arme über die Hüften emporgerundet, reich wie ein blühender Busch.”⁶

Dada cofounder Richard Huelsenbeck stated explicitly that “the existence of the Cabaret depend[ed] on the success or failure of Emmy as a singer.”⁷ Hans Richter reflected: “It was impossible to measure the influence this frail girl had

on Hugo Ball. Hugo was so strongly influenced by Emmy that one cannot love his writings unless one fully and deeply understands her influence.”⁸ Such a statement seems, on the surface, to be entirely positive. However, there is a deeper layer of meaning. The calculated use of the adjective “frail” is telling, in that, while recognizing Ball's dependence upon Hennings, Richter simultaneously criticizes it. Hennings was to be viewed as a dependent of Ball, a protégé. She was to be weak, submissive, and subservient to her male counterpart. However, given the very public recognition that the *Cabaret Voltaire* was made a success as a direct result of Hennings' participation, Richter seemed to find it particularly difficult to recognize that, in fact, Ball may, in some respects, have been dependent upon Hennings. Though Emmy was clearly the “star”, her male counterparts were uncomfortable with the power which she wielded over her husband, as well as the movement itself.

If it is so abundantly clear that Emmy Hennings played an indispensable roll in Dada Zurich, why, then, has so little been said about her contributions? Perhaps critics remain unsure as to the exact nature of those contributions, or of the intentions behind them. History has, at times, exhibited a tendency to forget those who leave no substantial written legacy. It seems that this may play a key roll in the case of Emmy Hennings. As it is largely impossible to hold in one's hands the work which Hennings did, it is all too easy to simply conclude that it must not have been of any great consequence. It seems, however, that her contributions were of a much less tangible, but no less effectual, nature.

Renée Riese Hubert contends in *Zurich Dada and its Artist Couples (2001)* that Hennings lacked any political or social motivation. However, close analysis of her performance methodology indicates a mature sense of political and social awareness. She utilized her position as a leader and member of the Dada movement to subvert the expectations placed upon her and women everywhere by a society which she no longer respected, through writing, song, and perhaps most importantly, through the concealment and presentation of her body in ways which defied the stereotypes of the day.

V. Subversive Politics

Emmy Hennings was a liberated woman, in every sense of the word. No stranger to going

against the grain of society, she delved into the unsavory facets of life. For a number of years, she worked as a model and prostitute, having been arrested for street-walking a number of times from 1911-1915. In Zurich, she was referred to in vice-squad files as a prostitute, with Hugo Ball as her pimp. Clearly, she didn't hold the expected norms of feminine behavior in high regard.

Hennings' very emigration from Germany to Switzerland is fraught with political overtones. In February of 1915, she was arrested for her involvement in the forging of a passport in order to help a friend evade military service, and held without charges for several weeks. Upon her eventual release, she found herself a pacifist in an increasingly hostile environment. After refusing, for political reasons, to recite pro-war texts at the cabaret at which she worked, she was fired. Realizing the unlikelihood of attaining such a position within Germany which would suit her political tastes, she fled to neutral Switzerland.

That Hennings would risk prison to assist another in avoiding conscription speaks to a considerable degree of political awareness and opinion. She also made a number of contributions to anti-war journals, such as *Der Revoluzzer* and *Die Ähre*. In 1918, she wrote the tract "*Aufruf an die Frauen*" (*Appeal to Women*), a text which advocated pacifism "at all costs." Such active political participation seems to directly contradict Hubert's interpretation of Hennings as essentially politically unaware and indifferent.

Hennings' political engagement was, by no means, limited to the written word. On the contrary, what were perhaps her most deeply political statements were expressed on the stage of the *Cabaret Voltaire*. In correspondence to the Dada aesthetic, she devised methods for provoking a more or less predictable public by emphasizing the unfamiliar and the uncanny. Through her recitations and dances, she destroyed the stereotype of the passive female performer. She presented herself on the stage in a manner which defied the expectations of feminine appearance and behavior, and created performances marked by grotesque elements. She sharply criticized the First World War, and created an unsettling atmosphere through eccentric make-up and unpredictable, sudden screams in the middle of her performances. In addition to her songs, Hennings used her dances to express a strongly political message. She frequently created cardboard costumes, in order to be converted into a *genderless*, animated collage, abdicating herself

in favor of her role. Other female Dadaists, such as Katja Wulff, used similarly expressive performance methods, such as reciting poetry from within large brown sacks, which concealed their bodily form.

The women of Dada Zurich were simultaneously painter and canvas, through the radical and bizarre presentation of their bodies on the stage. They also frequently wore masks to further conceal themselves. Such subversions of the traditional gender roles were analogous to the attacks on language, which Hugo Ball and the male Dadaists carried out through nonsensical *Lautgedichte* (Sound Poems). As the men attempted to reduce language to *Nichtigkeit* (Nothingness), in order to redeem it from the horrors of World War I, so the women attempted to reduce their genderedness to abstraction, in order to free themselves from its attendant stereotypes, and to transcend the limitations placed upon them by society.

While Hennings' rebellion was, perhaps, more subtle than that of her male colleagues, its effectiveness was not questioned:

"Sie stellte vielmehr in ihrer ungewohnten Grelle einen Affront dar, der das Publikum nicht weniger beunruhigte als die Provokationen ihrer männlichen Kollegen."⁹

A published author since 1913, Hennings' contributions were not exclusively limited to performance. She sang to the tune of Hugo Ball's music and danced to the beat of Richard Huelsenbeck's drum, but she also read works of her own device. On the night of the first Dada gathering, she presented a work entitled "*Gefängnis*" (Prison):

Am Seil der Hoffnung ziehn wir uns zu Tode.
Benedet auf Gefängnishöfen sind die Raben.
Oft zucken unser nie geküssten Lippen.
Ohnmächtige Einsamkeit, du bist erhaben.
Da dürfen Menschen gehen, wohin sie wollen.
Einmal gehörten wir doch auch zu denen.
Und jetzt sind wir vergessen und verschollen.
Nachts träumen wir Wunder auf schmalen
Pritschen.
Tags gehn wir einer gleich scheuen Tieren.
Wir lugen traurig durchs Eisengitter.
Und haben nichts mehr zu verlieren.
Als unser Leben, das Gott uns gab.
Der Tod nur liegt in unser Hand.
Die Freiheit kann uns niemand nehmen:
Zu gehen in das unbekannt Land.¹⁰

In this work, the yearning for long-awaited freedom is palpable. It is a reflection on the down-

trodden and the abused, and with each line, one cannot help but sense Hennings' growing discontent. Within these fifteen lines lies a motivation, which far exceeds purely artistic expression. It is writing with a purpose; with a goal. Within Dada Zurich, Emmy Hennings found a means of voicing her dissatisfaction which was simultaneously artistic and subversive.

VI. Conclusion

The story of the reception of Emmy Hennings and the other women of Dada Zurich is problematic for many reasons. Perhaps most critical is that Hennings left few written works about her own participation in Dada. Following Hugo Ball's death in 1927, she dedicated a large portion of her energy to his memory, writing biographies of him and editing his many works for publication. What are considered to be Hennings' autobiographical works contain little information about her role as a cabaret performer. Given the relatively short lifespan of the Dada movement, it is not unreasonable that Hennings would not have written a great deal about her involvement in it. Published as a trilogy, the second volume of her autobiography, entitled *Das flüchtige Spiel: Wege und Umwege einer Frau* (The fugitive game: roads and detours of a woman, 1940), is, essentially, a novel, and provides no real insight into her psyche. However, Hennings warned the reader of this fact within the work's first pages:

"Many years ago I already planned to make a written confession of my life. I took a lot of notes which I each time rejected. Why? What I produced seemed quite entertaining to me in part, but was not sufficiently sincere enough, not honest enough. I tended, for example, to try to gloss over the most important defects in my nature, to soften them, or to suppress them altogether. The result was that the image of my life became unclear and incomprehensible."¹¹

Those who leave no sizeable paper trail often fade into the ether. This could be particularly true in the case of Emmy Hennings, as the majority of her work consisted of song, dance, and recitation, all of which are performance art forms often considered by theater and literary historians to be of secondary import to the written word. In addition, nearly all of Hennings' works have yet to be translated to this day, hindering worldwide scholarly research. Whatever the cause for her omission from the annals of literary and performance

history, Emmy Hennings deserves recognition for the courage she exhibited in her willingness to defy tradition and utilize her position within the avant-garde to transcend the boundaries placed upon her by a society which was far behind the curve.

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- 1 Scherb, *Ich stehe in der Sonne*, 41.
- 2 Sawelson-Gorse, *Women in Dada*, 322.
- 3 Richter, *Dada Profile*, 15. "When we were visiting at the Arps', Sophie always remained inaudible."
- 4 Ball, *Briefe 1911-1927*, 94-96.
- 5 Ball, *Briefe 1911-1927*, 121. "Oh, how your voice drives me to write! I didn't think much of my >Death Dance<, but when you sang it to me the first time in the gray Schoffel Lane in Zurich, oh, Emmy, I'll never forget that even if I should be a hundred years old. Yes, I can't forget your voice. It can be like a plaintive flame that ignites the listener and sets his heart alight."
- 6 Ball, *Flucht aus der Zeit*, 74. "The star of the cabaret, however, is Mrs. Emmy Hennings. Star of many nights of cabarets and poems.

Years ago she stood by the rustling yellow curtain of a Berlin cabaret, hands on hips, as exuberant as a blossoming shrub.”

7 Richter, *Dada Profile*, 94.

8 *Ibid.*, 160.

9 Meyer, *Dada ist gross*, 34. “Rather, she presented an affront through her odd tawdriness, which disquieted the public no less than her male colleagues.”

10 Hennings, *Helle Nacht: Gedichte*, 43. “On the cable of hope we pull ourselves toward death / Envious

of prison yards are the ravens / Often quiver our un-kissed lips / Swooning loneliness, you are sublime / There men may go where they will / Once we also belonged to them / And now we are forgotten and sunk into oblivion / At night we dream miracles on narrow beds / By day we go around like skittish animals / We peer out sadly through the iron grate / And have nothing more to lose / But our life, which God gave us / Only death lies in our hand / The freedom no one can take from us / To go into the unknown land”

11 Hennings, *Das flüchtige Spiel*, 9.