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PERFORMING *WITH* THE MASQUERADE: TOWARDS A CORPOREAL RECONSTITUTION OF SOPHIE TAEUBER'S DADA PERFORMANCES

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Introduction

Swiss Dada artist Sophie Taeuber (1889–1943) is one of the pioneers of the classical avant-garde in the first half of the 20th century. However, her name was hardly mentioned in the abundance of contemporaneous Dada source material such as manifestos, Dada-magazines (*Dadaphone*) and reviews. For a long time, she only appeared off the record as Hans Arp's wife, until scholars such as Julia Dech and Katy Deepwell started rewriting the avant-gardist art history from a feminist perspective. Nevertheless, these valuable studies and even the gender-related publications of the late nineties (Sawelson-Gorse, Felski) remain mainly descriptive: in-depth studies about Taeuber's (dance) performances remain scarce. As it was rather uncommon to record Dada performances at the time, the only documentation at hand are a handful of pictures (usually taken before or after the show) and written testimonies (by fellow artists and spectators), hence prioritizing text and (static) image over movement in live (dance) performances. The consequences of this priority come to the fore in Hal Foster's article "Dada Mime," in which the iconic photograph of Taeuber's dance performance at the opening of the *Cabaret Voltaire / Galerie Dada* in 1916/17¹ is reduced to an illustration of Marcel Janco's² mask design, thereby completely neglecting her bodily presence as

a dancer (Foster 2003, 170). In Foster's article, Taeuber is merely functioning as "a stand-in for any masked Dadaist;" her "trained dancer's body remains unmarked, even imperceptible" (Andrew 2014, 17).

This contribution aims for a "corporeal reconstitution" (Irigaray 2002, 197) of Taeuber's (dance) performances. Following Luce Irigaray's corporeal philosophy, a corporeal reconstitution facilitates new words, signs and images that allow the body to speak instead of excluding it. As she observes in *To Be Born: Genesis of a New Human Being*:

In reality speech is produced by our body, but we do not use it to develop shapes from our physical belonging, to enable our body to speak. [...] Such saying is not necessarily articulated in words, but it performs and structures our: I live, I exist, I grow, I become, and even I will, I desire, I love. (Irigaray 2017, 47–48)

The corporeal reconstitution in Taeuber's dance performances entails a double move. First, it implies a rendering perceptible of the trained dancer's body, its particular movements, and the quality of these movements. This demands to re-imagine the movement from the static images on photographs informing the history of Dada art. As Irigaray observes: "We must also find, find anew, invent the words, the sentences [...] words which do not bar the corporeal, but which speak corporeal" (Irigaray in Whitford 1991, 43). Taeuber's static body is put in motion through the few, but detailed contemporaneous descriptions of Taeuber's dance performances, by, amongst others, fellow dancers from the Laban School she attended. Allowing the body to speak for itself, means recognizing that Taeuber is not dancing *behind*, but *with* a mask (and costume). As we shall outline in this article, a corporeal reconstitution *with* the mask inaugurates a particular negotiation with the notion of masquerade as it has been developed by Irigaray in *The Sex Which is Not One* (1985).

Second, this corporeal reconstitution entails, as Irigaray further explains in *To Speak is Never Neutral*, "the production of a new age of thought, art, poetry and language: the creation of a new *poetics* [...] a revolution in thought and ethics" (Irigaray in Whitford 1991, 10). Taeuber's playful repetition of the masquerade or, to put it in Irigaray's words, mimetic strategy, entails a "radically new mode of relating" (Obler 2009, 223) between human and non-human materiality. The revolution in thought and ethics is thus informed by a new mode of relationality in an ethics of mutual encounter. However, as we shall outline in this contribution, Taeuber is not only moving in between puppet and puppeteer, movement and stasis, abstraction and expressivity, performer and mask, presence and absence, but also in between feminine and masculine. The hybrid movements in her mimetic strategy disrupt the binary nature of all oppositional pairs. In this respect, art historian Bibiana Obler points at the "radically new mode of relating" at work in the patchwork of artforms and materials that Taeuber and Arp created. Taeuber was not "bound by conventions of gender," as she abandons the history of gender implicated in the media she uses (Ibid.).

The result is a "radical statement across gender" (Andrew 2014, 19). Applying what Irigaray coined as a mimetic strategy, Taeuber moves beyond stereotypical thinking about gender. Taeuber's

hybrid dancing body is not a female body expressing her essential womanliness. As Judith Butler writes in *Bodies that Matter: On the discursive limits of "sex"*, Irigaray's tactical mimicry occupies "no place between 'his' language and 'hers', but is, instead, only a disruptive *movement* which unsettles the topographical claims" (1993, 36. Italics hers). For Taeuber, the live presence of the body, performing *with* the costume and mask, is a tool for deconstructing stereotypes regarding the female other, while also uncovering the complexity of her experiences in modernist and wartime avant-garde Europe. In dancing the perpetual movement in between dualities, through a patchwork of genres and materials (her drawings, embroideries and tapestries are also driven by kinetic forces), Taeuber not only playfully rebels against patriarchal discourse, but also against the dehumanizing effects of World War One violently raging through Europe.

Taeuber's interdisciplinary patchwork of art

Since little "Söpheli" was already confronted with arts and crafts through assisting her mother in fabricating table-cloths and pillowcases for sales (Mair 2013, 17), it didn't come as a surprise that in 1907 she attended the *Zeichnungsschule des Industrie-und Gewerbemuseums* in St. Gallen (28) to continue her studies at the *Lehr- und Versuchsatelier für angewandte und freie Kunst* (better known as the *Debschnitz Schule*) in Munich in 1910 (36). Subsequently, in 1915, Taeuber, passionate about dance, enrolled at the *Rudolf von Laban School* in Zurich (54), transferring his method to her own artistic needs. As fellow student Ludmilla Vachtova observes: she "learned dance with Laban not as chance improvisation but as a creative game with variable rules that unfolds in time and space as a unique, moving, ephemeral sculpture" (Vachtova about Taeuber in Prevots 1985, 5).

When the First World War raged through Europe, Taeuber fled to neutral Zurich. She joined the famous Dada movement at the *Cabaret Voltaire* in 1916 and shortly after, *Galerie Dada* came to light. During that period, she executed her iconic dance performances to the sound poems of Hugo Ball. In the meantime, she continued working as a teacher in textile art at the Zurich University of the Arts in order to guarantee a steady income for both Hans Arp and herself. Taeuber also joined the *Werkbund*, a German association of architects and designers in the spirit of the English *Arts and Crafts Movement* (Bargues 2017, 103). In 1918 she signed the *Dada manifesto* (although under the pseudonym G. Thauber) and was approached by Alfred Altherr (director of the *Kunstgewerbeschule*) to create the puppets for the theatre play *König Hirsch*. Taeuber's unique way of designing, crossing boundaries between different genres (sculpture, drawing, dance, embroidery, tapestry, performance, painting, jewelry, etc.) and materials (wool, wood, thread, paint, etc.), resulted in an interdisciplinary patchwork of art. She continued working in several cities (Berlin, Tirol, Paris, Strasbourg, etc.), fled the German occupation of Paris in 1940 and died of carbon monoxide poisoning in Zurich at the age of fifty-four (Rumjanzewa 2012).

Throughout her extensive body of work, Taeuber refused to restrict herself to genre and media boundaries. She applied a diversity of materials and art forms in order to maximally explore the "dynamics of space, rhythm and balance" (Andrew 2014, 21). Even when engaging with seemingly static media such as drawings, painting, tapestry and embroidery, Taeuber often referred to the kinetic potential of dance. As such, not only her dance performances, but also her so-called applied

arts are full of dance and movement. As Hubert observes in her drawings: “the harmonious distribution of Sophie’s lines, their unnerving flexibility, their modulations and rhythmicality, their refusal to pose vertically within the frame, in sum the graceful traces or designs they inscribe on the paper surface are features pertaining to the world of dance” (1993, 30). After all, Taeuber had distinctive ideas in her choice of material, adhering to the *Arts and Crafts Movement*. Her embroideries, for example, are a clear statement with regard to the more mechanical movement of stitching, and the rise of mass production in modernity (Obler 2001, 221).

Unfortunately, Hugo Weber excluded all tapestry, fabrics, puppets and jewelry in his influential *Catalogue Raisonné* (1948). As a result, Taeuber’s art work was only catalogued in a limited way. Arp was furious about the improper reception of Taeuber’s art work and wrote: “The serenity of Sophie Taeuber’s oeuvre is inaccessible to those devoid of any soul and who live in confusion. Her works have sometimes been referred to as applied art. Both stupidity and wickedness are at the root of this appellation. Art can just as easily express itself in wool, paper, ivory, ceramics, or glass as in painting, stone, wood, or clay,” he says (Bargues 2017, 103–104).³ Hemus linked this problematic selection to the patriarchal structure of the Dada art scene (and of art history itself), as “some materials chosen by women (handicrafts for example) or art forms (dance) are considered less appropriate or trivial” (2007, 100).

A similar superficial reading of Taeuber’s art can be spotted in the essay “Dada Mime” (2003) by Hal Foster. Foster uses the iconic photograph of Taeuber’s dance performance at the opening of the *Cabaret Voltaire*⁴ as an illustration of Marcel Janco’s mask, completely ignoring her bodily presence as a Dada dancer. By separating the mask from the body performing *in* or *with* it, the mask in fact remains a “dead” shell without content, neglecting Hugo Ball’s vision on “the motive power” (1996, 64) and the unique dialogical potential of masks. In his diary *Flight Out of Time* Ball testifies:

We were all there when Janco arrived with his masks, and everyone immediately put one on. Then something strange happened. Not only did the mask immediately call for a costume; it also demanded a quite definite, passionate gesture, bordering on madness. Although we could not have imagined it five minutes earlier, we were walking around with the most bizarre movements, festooned and draped with impossible objects, each one of us trying to outdo the other in inventiveness. The motive power of these masks was irresistibly conveyed to us. All at once we realized the significance of such a mask for mime and for the theater. The masks simply demanded that their wearers start to move in a tragic-absurd dance. (1996, 64)

As such, the mask cannot be considered without its wearer, and hence also not without its particular mode of relating to the (dancing) body and vice versa. Referring to Foster’s superficial reading of the photograph, Andrew regrets that Taeuber’s body remains “a mute enhancement for the Janco mask beside it. [...] It leaves Taeuber a stand-in for any masked Dadaist. [...] All signification that the photo might derive from its capture of a woman artist and a trained dancer’s body remains unmarked, even imperceptible” (Andrew 2014, 13, referring to Foster 2003, 170). Hence, a corporeal reconstitution (Irigaray 2002, 197) of Taeuber’s dancing body *with* the mask

(Janco), costume (Arp) and sound poem (Ball) is urgently needed in order to reveal a more profound artistic practice.

The few documents we can rely on for this corporeal reconstitution are one iconic (undated and unlocated) black-and-white picture and some written testimonies of fellow Dadaists and spectators.



Image 1: Sophie Taeuber at Galerie Dada 1916/17. Stiftung Hans Arp und Sophie Taeuber-Arp e.V. Rolandswerth (photographer unknown)

The picture was presumably taken off-stage before or after the show, as there was no tradition of recording live performances. Taeuber's posed posture hence cannot account for an ephemeral three-dimensional performance (Andrew 2014, 14).⁵ However, combined with the written testimonies of spectators and fellow Dada artists, the unremarked and even imperceptible body is finally allowed to speak, inaugurating a powerful dialogue with the mask, and—on a conceptual level—with the notion of masquerade. As we shall see, this corporeal reconstitution reveals a playful, but unsettling repetition (as in an Irigarayan mimetic strategy) of the masquerade.

Taeuber's "hundred-jointed body" at the *Cabaret Voltaire / Galerie Dada*

The photograph displays Taeuber in full length, wearing a long, straight, white dress, imprinted with a frightening face: a giant open mouth and dangerous-looking half open eyes ostentatiously addressing the viewer. The print on the dress echoes the frightening rectangular mask that Taeuber is wearing. The mask itself is double the size of her head and was "made of cardboard, [...] painted and glued" (Ball 1996, 64). Its open mouth reveals sharp teeth, and a long, dark tongue in paper or cloth is hanging loose from the suggested opening. On top of the mask are four shiny points, referring to a crown, rendering the grotesque figure as belonging to a royal lineage, or functioning as a suggestion of hair. In his description of Janco's masks, Ball stresses the frightening effect of the oversized masks: "They were designed to be effective from a distance; in the relatively small space of the cabaret they have a sensational effect" (1996, 64).

Being profoundly influenced by all kinds of non-Western traditions in his search towards new, "spiritually and morally purified" forms of expression (Burmeister 2016, 9), Janco also designed this mask with "Japanese or Ancient Greek traditions, yet [they are] wholly modern" (Ball 1996, 64). Through this, Janco rejected the "Western" principles he believed had led Europe towards the trenches (Oberhofer 2016, 29). However, rather than confining itself to the Japanese or Ancient Greek tradition, the painting on the mask depicts a face in a Cubist, geometrical style. As Hugo Ball describes it in his Dada diary: "The mouth of the mask is wide open, the nose is broad and in the wrong place" (1996, 64). The mask addressed the audience with deformed and grotesque facial characteristics and fit with the abstract (textile) designs Taeuber and Arp made at that time. Its diabolic features seem to echo the devastating experience of wartime Europe. As Ball himself observes in relation to Janco's masks:

What fascinates us all about the masks is that they represent not human characters and passions, but characters and passions that are larger than life. The horror of our time, the paralyzing background of events, is made visible. (1996, 64–65)

"The motive power of these masks" (64) seems to suggest that a body dancing *with* the mask is an evident *conditio sine qua non*. The mask is "brought alive in their performances" and should not be hanging on museum walls as was done in former times (Oberhofer 2016, 33). Inspired by Janco's masks, Ball composed a short piece of music for dance at the *Cabaret Voltaire*. For the dance called *Fliegenfangen* (*Flycatching*), Ball goes on to say that, "the only things suitable for this mask were

clumsy, fumbling steps, and some quick snatches and wide swings of the arms, accompanied by nervous, shrill music" (1996, 64).⁶

Taeuber's notable suit matched the mask and was presumably made by her partner Hans Arp. Taeuber is dressed in a long, bulky costume, with her arms enclosed and extended by long cardboard tubes. The cylinder-like arms have five tentacles at their ends, referring, in a geometrically restrictive form to the five fingers of a hand, described by Krupp as "scissor-like hands" (2016, 52). The five tentacles might further represent the fire being produced by war machines used at the time. In this respect, several scholars referred to the cannon imagery in Hugo Ball's similar use of "carton prostheses" (Burkhalter 2014, 228) in his performance of the Magic Bishop at the *Cabaret Voltaire* in 1916. Andrew, for example, following Janice Simon's ideas, refers to the long rigid tubes "as if in parody of exploding French 75 cannon shells" (2014, 13). As such, the motive power of Janco's alienating mask is in line with the motive power of Arp's costume and calls for a "tragic-absurd dance" (Ball 1996, 64) that echoes the horrors of war. The design of the mask and costume relates to the Dadaist mechanical imagery that was often used to criticize the bankruptcy of both language and logic in times of war (as often translated into the well-known machine portraits of Francis Picabia). The frantic movements that were subsequently being "dictated from the mask and costume," stressed this tendency even more in their striking resemblance to the neurasthenic⁷ symptoms of *shell shock*, caused by the highly technological ways of warfare produced during WWI. In this respect, Taeuber's body seems riddled with a neurasthenic imprint, similar to the experiences of soldiers at the front those days: "there came a dance full of flashes and edges, full of dazzling light and penetrating intensity," (Ibid.) but also:

Every gesture consists of a hundred, is sharp, bright, pointed. The narrative of the perspectives, of the lighting, of the atmosphere brings the over-sensitive nervous system to real drollness, to an ironic gloss. (Ball in Hemus 2007, 98)

In this way, Taeuber's "hundred-jointed body" echoes Duchamp's notion of the "deferred body, broken in pieces and thus severely compromised" as a result of military service (Jones 2004, 62). The fragmented and mechanical visions of the body as illustrated here both by Ball and Duchamp can as such be considered the symptoms of the disillusionments caused by the cruelty of modern warfare, carefully destroying holistic conceptions of body and mind. Obviously, war had a deep impact on all human beings regardless of whether they were actively engaged in war or not. Witness thereof is Hans Arp's testimony after fleeing to Zurich: "While the cannon rumbled in the distance, we pasted, recited, versified, we sang with all our soul. We sought an elementary art, which, we thought, would save men from the curious madness of these times. We aspired to a new order which might restore the balance between heaven and hell" (Arp in Jones 2004, 67).

To Hugo Ball, the horrific background of war was "paralyzing" (Ball 1996, 65). Notice Ball's writings in a letter to his sister: "*Kunst? Das ist nun alles aus und lächerlich geworden. In alle Winder zerspreng. Das hat alles keinen Sinn mehr*" (Art? It has become ordinary and ridiculous. It doesn't make sense anymore. Ball in Mair 2013, 65). The paralyzing effect of war is iconically rendered visible through

the staging of his alter-ego, the Magic Bishop, appropriately dressed for the occasion in a “special costume:”

My legs were in a cylinder of shiny blue cardboard, which came up to my hips so that I looked like an obelisk. Over it I wore a huge coat collar cut out of cardboard, scarlet inside and gold outside. [...] I also wore a high, blue-and-white striped witch doctor’s hat. [...] I could not walk inside the cylinder, so I was carried onto the stage in the dark [...]. (Ball 1996, 70)

Ball was thus literally paralyzed in his performance at the *Cabaret Voltaire* as the restrictive forms of the cylinders prevented him from moving. Interestingly enough, Taeuber menacingly raises her arms, maybe “widely swinging” them (Ball 1996, 64), while Ball has his arms hanging like weights. Moreover, Taeuber has her legs free for moving, as Andrew aptly observed how, “unlike Ball’s Bishop, Taeuber could in fact dance [...] and could do so with fluidity and curves that upset the static geometry of the covering” (2014, 28). In one archive print, with a considerable higher contrast in the left under corner of the photograph, Andrew observed a foot being visible in the otherwise gloomy darkness, “a foot trailing to her side that produces a graceful curve through her leg and waist to shoulder” (Ibid.). As such, she in fact reveals here how the upper part of Taeuber’s body seems to be more restricted in movement than the lower part; the arms cannot bend as they are covered with long cylinders, but the legs and feet can, as they are not covered in obstructive costumes. As such, “Taeuber seems to have created a dialectic between the body’s palpable form and presence and its disintegration or absence” (Ibid., 19) behind the mask and costume.



Image 2: Hugo Ball in *Cabaret Voltaire*, 1916

A reconstitution of Taeuber’s body dancing reveals an interesting tension between movement and stasis, echoing the paralyzing effect of wartime, but also the corporeal desire to rise up again. As such, this corporeal reconstitution puts in perpetual motion the dualities not only between movement and stasis, but also between abstraction and expressivity, performer and mask, puppet and puppeteer, presence and absence. In what follows below, we will unfold these dualities even further, digging into the testimonies of spectators and fellow Dada artists of the time. Of primary importance in this corporeal reconstitution is that not only the mask but also the body has a motive power. In a mutual dialogue, or the double movement of “instauration” as Bruno Latour would put it, an interesting dialectic unfolds in the dance performances, inaugurating not only a new mode of relating with and within the different elements of her performance (mask, costume, and sound poem), but also between feminine and masculine.

The double movement of instauration as a radically new mode of relating

In his philosophical writings on the particularly joint movement of puppet and puppeteer, Bruno Latour unfolds his concept of “instauration” or the double movement of *faire faire* (following Souriau 1943). He unfolds his concept of instauration by referring to *The Secret Life of Puppets* (2002) by Victoria Nelson, observing that “puppeteers will rarely behave as having total control over their puppets. They will say queer things like ‘their marionettes suggest them to do things they will have never thought possible by themselves’” (Latour 2007, 59–60). These words remarkably resonate with Taeuber’s interaction with the materiality of the mask and the costume in her dance performances. The “motive power” of the mask and the obstructive costume make Taeuber move in tragic-absurd ways. These movements don’t seem to be driven by Taeuber’s body alone, they are co-created by body, mask and costume.

Wondering who is pulling the strings in the act of instauration, Latour comes to the conclusion that, actually, the puppets do in addition to their puppeteers. He explains this mode of mutual pulling by questioning the logic of cause and effect in movement. “When a force manipulates another, it does not mean that it is a cause generating effects; it can also be an occasion for other things to start acting” (2007, 60). However, attributing agency to things and non-humans in an Actor Network Theory does not mean a reversal of control. Puppets are not controlling their handlers either. In this double movement, or instauration, lies the destiny of human beings; they have to move away from anthropocentric ideas—such as having total control over non-human materiality—in order to embrace with a radically new mode of relating. It is exactly this new mode of relating that Sophie Taeuber demonstrates in dancing *with* the mask.

In relating with non-human materiality, Taeuber seems to transform into a mechanical, yet also human, marionette, put into motion by other forces than a puppeteer, maybe even impersonating both puppet and puppeteer at the same time, playing “a creative game with variable rules that unfolds in time and space as a unique, moving, ephemeral sculpture” (Ludmilla Vachtova in Prevots 1985, 5). As such, Taeuber instaurs a radical new mode of relating between human and non-human. The anonymity that seems to come forward out of her abstract and geometrical costume, almost completely hiding Taeuber’s own body behind the masquerade, on the one hand illustrates the dehumanizing ways of warfare; but the presence of her palpable body also shows her resistance towards it. She does not disappear behind her mask and costume. The presence of her body dancing instills the lack of individuality with the possibilities of her own subjectivity. As Bargues explains, Taeuber is “inhabiting a kind of post-human marionette,” “which is not mechanical, but quite derisory, and in any case androgynous” (following Obler and Burkhalter, 2017, 99).

Let us now have a closer look at Taeuber’s body and the particular movements she made with it as an expressionist trained dancer. Educated by the renowned Rudolf von Laban, Taeuber’s body-as-archive⁸ was acquainted with specific expressionist techniques. This explains why in his account of Taeuber’s “abstract dances,” Hugo Ball speaks of “a dance full of [...] penetrating intensity” (1996, 64). Dadaist Tristan Tzara in his turn described an ambiguous figure dancing: “delirious

strangeness in the spider of the hand vibrating quickly ascending towards the paroxysm of a mocking capriciously beautiful madness" (1992, 558). Additionally, Emmy Hennings attributed the descriptions of a "bird soaring, gliding, and a flower blooming" to her dance (Andrew 2014, 28):

I saw in Sophie Taeuber a bird, a young lark, for example, lifting the sky as it took flight. The indescribable suppleness of her movements made you forget that her feet were keeping contact with the ground, all that remained was soaring and gliding. (Hennings in Schmidt 1948, 15)

Hennings testifies here of Taeuber's corporeal desire to rise up, despite the paralyzing effects of wartime, materialized in the obstructive costume and horrific mask. Taeuber instills an image of resistance in her dancing *with* the mask and the costume. The traumatized body hence does not end up as a paralyzed body. It is still a living body after all, and despite everything. Like a flower that wants to grow, despite the mud.

However, rather than revealing her inner feelings as an "expressive dancing subject,"⁹ Taeuber's movements are putting dualities of abstract movement and expressivity in perpetual motion, never allowing them to resolve in a static synthesis. Having a closer look at the testimonies of spectators and fellow Dada artists of the time, the hybrid movements performed by Taeuber come to the fore. As an expressionist trained dancer, she instills the abstract dances with a palpable body. Taeuber's "visceral abstraction" is hence "not merely an extension of Dada's cabaret performance and bodily humor;" it is "an intentional bodily intervention within Zurich's political and aesthetic realms" (Andrew 2014, 14). Moreover, as we will outline in what follows, Taeuber is not only moving in between movement and stasis, abstraction and expressivity, performer and mask, puppet and puppeteer, presence and absence, but also in between feminine and masculine.

Performing *with* the masquerade: shortcircuiting the social codes of gender

War and modernity not only annihilated the body as a whole (through new ways of warfare and the fragmentation of the body by Taylorism and Fordism); it also explicitly upset all gender connotations. The image of the heroic soldier made way for sentiments of disillusion, emasculation and a fragmented sense of reality, since "those on the front witnessed firsthand the physical destruction and bodily mutilation that was at odds with prewar ideals of rationality and restraint" (Hage 2012, 190). Amelia Jones put it as follows:

[...] a brutal new world in which technology extended men's bodies in horrifying ways—ways that, paradoxically and with cruel irony, feminized the very bodies that were meant to be thus further empowered and phallicized. [...] the great war transformed not only nations but also gender roles and thus the individuals who enacted the effects of both nationalism and gendered subjectivity. (2004, 44)

This transformation of gender roles was also at stake in Zurich Dada through omnipresent genderplay, often intertwined by the metaphor of the machine. Not only known examples such as Duchamp's impersonation of *Rrose Sélavy* and Picabia's (gendered) machine portraits, but also

Taeuber's work actively questioned gender roles while performing live on stage. As Bargues observes: "there was nothing masculine about Hausmann as a dancer, no more than Taeuber embodied a feminine figure. Both of them shortcircuited the idea of gender" (2017, 105). As such, the dialectic she created "between the body's palpable form and presence and its disintegration or absence" behind the mask and costume (Andrew 2014, 19), also concerned genderplay. As we will now outline, Taeuber resisted the social codes of femininity and womanliness through dancing *with* (instead of *behind*) the mask and hence revealing the masquerade of femininity women were convicted to.

Psychoanalyst Joan Rivière introduced the notion of masquerade in 1929 as "womanliness [...] worn as a mask" (1986, 38). On the one hand, masquerade denotes a submission to dominant social codes of femininity and womanliness. On the other hand, the doubleness in the relation of the masked subject also provides opportunities for disruptive agency within these social codes.

French philosopher Luce Irigaray had a rather negative view on masquerade. She insisted that in the masquerade, women painfully "submit to the dominant economy of desire. They are there as objects for sexual enjoyment, not as those who enjoy" (1985, 133–134). As such, masquerade is a painful experience, and a disturbing and uncomfortable position, imprisoned in the visual realm of "voyeurism and self-display" (Castle 1986, 255). As Mary Ann Doane aptly observed: masquerade as such facilitates "an understanding of the woman's status as spectacle rather than spectator" (1988–89, 48). The woman as such is actually resorbed in this function; she disappears in the acting out of prescribed femininity (Irigaray 1985, 76). The woman's body is not allowed to appear in her own right, she is nothing but absence. She is a sex which is not one. Other scholars adopted a more positive perspective. Terry Castle, for example, considered "the anonymity of the mask [...] an abrupt exit from the system of sexual domination" (1986, 255). Women escape, through the masquerade, being "a commodity placed in circulation by men" (Ibid.).

Masquerade in these studies refers to a symbolic mask of femininity cast on female subjects by society, highlighting "the sensuality of the visual" (Ibid.). Literally wearing a mask, and dancing *with* that mask, Sophie Taeuber, on the one hand, performs her absence in the acting out of prescribed femininity. At first glance, one might assume that Taeuber falls victim to the "absent" femininity of the masquerade. On the other hand, and looking deeper, the anonymity of the mask might also be considered as an opportunity to re-appear beyond the visual, shortcircuiting the social codes of gender. This re-appearance is in line with Irigaray's concept of the mimetic strategy.¹⁰ By means of a productive, "playful repetition" (1985, 76), woman resubmits herself in patriarchal discourse, making "visible [...] what was supposed to remain invisible" (77). This mimetic strategy is not a reproduction of existing social gender codes, it is a "playful crossing, and an unsettling one" (Ibid.) that is characterized by a dynamic of differential intensities and that allows for the body to speak, for a corporeal reconstitution, "to speak, as women," for themselves (119). Irigaray's mimetic strategy as such is also not a passive mimicking of dominant social codes of gender. It is a strategic mimesis; "it is a game of specular/speculative reflection of the inner logic of phallogocentric discourse [...] redefining the parameters of subjectivity [...]" (Braidotti 1994, 131). It is precisely in her corporeal reconstitution *with* the mask that Taeuber instaurates a radically new mode of relating

in-between male and female social codes. Moving her body through dualities, or rather, dancing the perpetual movement in between dualities, Taeuber in fact moves beyond any categorization within a binary opposition.

On the one hand, Taeuber's hundred-jointed body performs "a lack in the form of a certain distance between oneself and one's image" (Irigaray 1982, 81–82). When Ball observes how in Taeuber's dance performance, "the lines of her body broke up, each gesture decomposed into a hundred precise, angular, and sharp movements" (1996, xxxi), he in fact refers to her foregrounding her inability to fit the solid image of a "normal" woman. Irigaray described a "normal" woman as someone following her presupposed trajectory of subjectification; she can only be in circulation in the phallogocentric economy by being absent. In masquerade, woman is reduced to a sex which is *not* one (Irigaray 1985, 185), in the sense that woman loses herself in the socially required masquerade of femininity. As Irigaray observes in *The Sex Which is Not One*:

Femininity is a role, an image, a value, imposed upon women by male systems of representation. In this masquerade of femininity, the woman loses herself, and loses herself by playing on her femininity. The fact remains that this masquerade requires an effort on her part for which she is not compensated. Unless her pleasure comes simply from being chosen as an object of consumption or of desire by masculine "subjects." And, moreover, how can she do otherwise without being "out of circulation"? (1985, 84)

In fact, while dancing, Taeuber does not inhabit an "appropriate" or "proper" role of "femininity" and "womanliness" assigned to her, as it is prescribed in patriarchal and phallogocentric structures at the time. Hemus observes how Hans Richter, for example, maintains a "partial appreciation of Dada's women dancers" in his memoirs, reducing them to "feminine stereotypes of angel and nun" (2007, 96–97). Richter's description follows the appropriate circulation of women in the phallogocentric economy; as "objects for sexual enjoyment, not as those who enjoy" (Irigaray 1985, 133–134). He characterizes the (mask-less) "Laban girls" (including, a.o. Sophie Taeuber and Mary Wigman) as "an alluring, sexual presence," reducing their dance qualities to a "pleasurable visual spectacle for the men in the audience" (Hemus 2007, 97). It is therefore telling that Richter regrets that Janco's savage "Negro masks" hide the pretty faces of the Labanese girls in the *Ballet Noir Kakadu*, as performed at the Kaufleuten Hall, and that the abstract costumes cover their slender bodies (Ibid.). His regret reveals that the covering up of female beauty was unconventional at the time. As Hemus indicates:

He rightly draws attention to the fact that any emphasis on beauty is abandoned but is likely to be aware just how strong a statement this makes in terms of gender roles and expectations. In contrast to their normal performative roles (both on stage and in life), here the dancers' femininity, beauty, sexuality and even individuality are deliberately concealed. The unconventionality of this approach is underlined, through doubtless unconsciously, by Richter's earlier description in which he characterizes the Laban girls as an alluring, sexual presence. (Ibid.)

Even though contemporaneous spectators such as Richter might fail to perceive Taeuber's double movement *with* the mask, creating a perpetual movement "between the body's palpable form and presence and its disintegration or absence" (Andrew 2014, 19), Taeuber's resistant body does not disappear behind the mask. Taeuber does not create the solid illusion of being (of having become) a "normal," sexually attractive woman, thereby losing herself in stereotypes of femininity. In dancing *with* the disfiguring mask, she resists by negotiating the devastating effect of the masquerade. The mask exposes the distance in her role playing, demonstrating the suffocating principles and annihilating the effects of the masquerade. Taeuber thus reveals how she struggles with the required masquerade of femininity in society that demands her disintegration or absence. Richter's spectator experience in this is tellingly one of disorientation, as the solid binary ground that informs his habits of seeing in dominant scopical regimes becomes slippery. Hence Richter's regret that the "Negro masks" prevent the performance to be a mere "pleasurable visual spectacle" (Hemus 2007, 97).

Playing with the script of femininity provided by patriarchal and phallogocentric structures, Taeuber does not masquerade into a beautiful object of desire, nor does she disappear behind the mask. A second element in the mimetic strategy precisely concerns the resistance to any patriarchal positioning. As Mary Ann Doane observes: "Womanliness is a mask which can be worn or removed. The masquerade's resistance to patriarchal positioning would therefore lie in its denial of the production of femininity as closeness, as presence-to-itself, as precisely, imagistic" (1982, 81–82). "To play with mimesis," Irigaray explains in *This Sex Which is Not One*, "is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it" (1985, 76).

In speaking with her body rather than words, Taeuber resists "the institutional, moral, and cultural controls of written and spoken language, gender, and pleasure" (Andrew 2014, 18). In this way, "performance was key; it located speech in the body, not merely on a page or within an object, but in a speaking subject, one that would live through the new conditions of this language" (Demos 2003, 150). This is in line with the Dadaist skeptical attitude towards language. Pre-eminently, the calling name of the artistic movement, "Dada," has no fixed meaning. Holding together two identical syllables, it directly criticizes the tainted dullness of language in its own meaninglessness. Language was seen as a vehicle for propaganda in wartime, so that (according to Hugo Ball) it should be dispensed with. In this respect, the famous poem *Karawane* was meant to abolish conventional language, "separating speech's signifying units from traditional semantic functions, jarring the subject from the norms of identity" (149). To Ball, to dispense with language meant to be reborn as "manchild." In his Dada diaries, Ball writes:

Then he is reborn. He is no longer a grown man, but a child. Like a child, he gets milk and honey. He must stand naked before all the company. He can no longer speak; he can no longer understand ordinary language. (1996, 212)

This stuttering language, this juggling with words and sounds, is no regression or a retreat in speechlessness. As Stalpaert has observed in response to Gilles Deleuze's famous essay "He Stuttered," stammering or stuttering can be a particularly meaningful rhetorical device:

Stammering can also be understood as a movement of words falling forward, based on imbalance in the language. Stuttering can therefore be understood not as a cessation of speech, but as generating a constant becoming. [...] It is not about damaging of language, but about creative progress(ion), having imbalance as its starting point. (2010, 87)

With Hugo Ball's performances, the stuttered word was given a stage, it became an embodied device with Taeuber, embodying linguistic disruption as a kind of physical movement. This is no surprise, as Stalpaert observes: "When language has its linguistic yoke removed, you have room to dance again" (83). Executing her performance on Hugo Ball's sound poem *Gesang der Flugfische und Seepferdchen* (*Song of the Flying Fish and the Sea Horses*) at the opening of the *Cabaret Voltaire / Galerie Dada*, Taeuber affirmed the Dada-principles. As Ball himself describes the dance emanating from this "onomatopoeic lament:" "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" (1996, 102).

This Sex Which is Not One, but Many

Taeuber also created her own corporeal, mimetic strategies for the destruction of language as the most effective figurehead of patriarchal structures. Dancing through her dualities, she performed stutter gestures, literarily embodying disruption as a kind of physical movement. Rather than mimicking dualities, Taeuber in her mimetic strategy in fact performs hybrid movements that disrupt the binary nature of the oppositional pairs. As such, Taeuber's dancing, *with* both the mask and also the obstructing costume, might be considered as mimetic play: Taeuber plays with the role that is attributed to her, as a woman, in art and wartime society. The phrase *This Sex Which is Not One*, as it appears as the title of one of Irigaray's books, in Taeuber's case, does not refer to an absence (this sex which is *not* one), but to a irreducible multiplicity of womanhood in the mimetic strategy. This sex is *not one*, but many. Taeuber's dancing hundred-jointed body hence not only refers to a disruption, but also to "a multitude of new gestures [in] the here and now of her space, engaging the potential of her own subjectivity and the kinaesthetic empathy of her spectators" (Andrew 2014, 21). Her stutter gestures are putting dualities such as feminine and masculine, human and non-human, puppet and puppeteer, performer and mask, movement and stasis, calculation and chance, anonymity and fame, high art and low art, etc... in perpetual motion. These dualities never resolve in a static synthesis. As such, they touch upon a multiplicity as is described by Deleuze and Guattari:

A multiplicity is defined not by its elements, nor by a center of unification or comprehension. It is defined by the number of dimensions it has; it is not divisible, it cannot lose or gain a dimension *without changing its nature*. [...] *each multiplicity is*

continually transforming itself into a string of other multiplicities [...] (2004, 275, Italics theirs)

It is in Taeuber's mimetic strategy that the dualities transform into a string of multiplicities. As such, As Judith Butler writes in *Bodies that Matter*, Irigaray's tactical mimicry occupies "no place between 'his' language and 'hers', but is, instead, only a disruptive *movement* which unsettles the topographical claims" (1993, 36, Italics hers). For Ball, to dispense with language meant to be reborn as "manchild." For Taeuber, to dance her hundred-jointed body was to be reborn as well. In this light, Henning's testimony of perceiving a blooming flower in Taeuber's dancing gets a new dimension, echoing Irigaray's notion of giving birth to oneself through mimetic strategies:

The little human gives birth to itself: it brings into the world a singular living being of which it will have to cultivate life, a life irreducible to any other, towards its achievement for itself and for the world into which it takes place. (Irigaray 2017, 5)

Conclusion

The "corporeal reconstitution" (Irigaray 2002, 197) of Sophie Taeuber's dance performances at the *Cabaret Voltaire* and the *Galerie Dada* facilitated words, signs and images uttered by fellow Dadaist dancers and contemporaneous spectators that allowed her dancing body to speak. The double movement *with* (not *behind*) the mask and the costume that comes to the fore in this corporeal reconstitution touches upon a multiplicity that disrupts any binary opposition. Taeuber is not only moving in between puppet and puppeteer, movement and stasis, abstraction and expressivity, performer and mask, presence and absence, but also in between feminine and masculine, redefining the parameters of the presupposed trajectory of a "normal" woman at the time. As such, Taeuber performed and structured her "I love, I exist, I grow, I become, and even I will, I desire, I love (strategically mimed after Irigaray 2017, 47-48).

Notes

¹ Since the picture of Taeuber dancing was left without date and location, art historians have been assuming that her performance took place either in *Cabaret Voltaire* in 1916 (e.g., Foster 2003 and Bagues 2017) or in *Galerie Dada* in 1917 (e.g., Prevots 1985 and Mair 2013), sometimes mentioning both dates as a reference (Andrew 2014) as we also do in this contribution: 1916/17.

² Some historians attribute the mask to Marcel Janco (Foster 2003, Hemus 2007, Burkhalter 2014), while other scholars such as Prevots (1985) and fellow Dadaists (Tzara) attributed it to Hans Arp. In this article, we will build on the assumption that Janco produced the mask (Hemus 2007, 93 and Burkhalter 2014, 228).

³ The omission was primarily a result of Arp's concern that the inclusion of these practical activities (of applied arts) would lead to a devaluation of Sophie Taeuber's artistic achievement, placing it on a par with arts and crafts. The danger of a misinterpretation was seen by Arp especially with regard to the embroidered and woven works and the similarity of the motifs to the early paintings before 1920. In her portfolios, Taeuber herself considered all of her art works as equally important (Hoch 2014, 214).

⁴ As already stated in footnote 1, Foster assumes that Taeuber's performance took place at the *Cabaret Voltaire* in 1916 (Foster 2003, 170).

⁵ In our understanding, Foster (2003, 170) even goes further in denying Taeuber's bodily existence through the addition of a picture of another Janco mask next to the 'silenced' Dada dancer. In this way, he actively assists in what the Dadaists so much wanted to avoid: minimizing Janco's masks as museum-like objects instead of "bringing the masks (back) to life in their performances" (Oberhofer 2016, 33).

⁶ For the second dance, called *Cauchemar (Nightmare)*, "the performer's arms, menacingly raised, are elongated by special tubes" (Ball 1996, 64).

⁷ We consider 'neurasthenia' to be "a complex network of bodily/psychic symptoms that rupture the subject's smooth functioning, propelling [him]/her into a heightened state of irrationality" (Jones 2004, 28). A neurotic response to upcoming modernity (with its mechanization of labour and the human body) and the violence as a result of World War One, "stimulating the individual to the highest degree of nervous energy" (Simmel 1903, 14).

⁸ In "The Body as Archive. Dance, Re-enactments and the Pastness of the Future," André Lepecki (2010) wonders whether the body isn't always already nothing else but an archive; the body constantly gathers techniques, movements, habits, bits and pieces of repertoire that are being stored for later use. See also Stalpaert (2011).

⁹ Susan Manning describes the dance of Isadora Duncan as a projection of kinaesthetic power. This power challenges the male spectator to consider the female dancer as an expressive subject instead of an erotic object. "The kinesthesia of early modern dance challenged the voyeuristic gaze," she says (Manning 1997, 163).

¹⁰ Irigaray develops her notion of the mimetic strategy in *Speculum: de l'autre femme* (1974) and in *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* (1977).

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