

Dada

A Short History

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“In Zurich, not involved in the slaughterhouses of the world war, we dedicated ourselves to the fine arts. While in the distance gunfire rumbled, we glued paper, read our works, wrote poetry, and sang at the top of our voices” — Hans Arp

Dada was a direct response to the cataclysmic events of the First World. Mass slaughter, like none ever seen before, highlighted the irrationality of capitalism and the warfare state like a flare lighting a battlefield by night. The nightmare could only be answered with a rejection of the values of a society that had allowed this to happen. In Dada this rejection was organised around a denial of the artistic and cultural values of the old society. As such it was to have a key role in influencing some of the artists involved for more than fifty years, as well as influencing later movements like surrealism and the anarchist cultural activities of the 1960s.

It was in the centre of Zurich in neutral Switzerland that artists gathered together to shelter from the horrors of the ongoing war. Here they organised events at the nightclub the Cabaret Voltaire.

In 1915 Hugo Ball and his companion Emmy Hennings set up the Cabaret Voltaire, and were joined by other artists like Tristan Tzara, Marcel Janco, both of Romanian origin, Richard Huelsenbeck and Jean Arp, from France and Germany. They looked for radical criticisms of present society and the art that it produced. Hugo Ball published *The Dada Manifesto* where he stated that “Dada is a new tendency in art... Dada comes from the dictionary. It is terribly simple. In French it means ‘hobby horse.’ In German it means ‘good-bye,’ ‘Get off my back,’ ‘Be seeing you sometime.’ In Romanian: ‘Yes, indeed, you are right, that’s it. But of course, yes, definitely, right...’”

Ball wanted to use a nonsense word to ridicule the pretensions of the old world of art. As he said “How does one become famous? By saying dada. With a noble gesture and delicate propriety. Till one goes crazy. Till one loses consciousness. How can one get rid of everything that smacks of journalism, worms, everything nice and right, blinkered, moralistic, Europeanised, enervated?”

The Dada project involved music, written works read out, displays of art works, and much else, all at the same time or succeeding each other. This radical departure has now been adopted to a wide extent by artists in modern times. Dada pioneered the sound poem, the simultaneous poem, the collage, all now taken up

“We know what Dadaism had done with politics, it had destroyed it with a stroke of the pen, ignored it. The movement revolted against power of all sorts, in favor of liberties of all sorts”, wrote the Dadaist Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes. In actual fact, many of those involved in Dada had some knowledge of anarchism and were involved with it to a lesser or greater extent. Hugo Ball had translated Bakunin. Hans Richter had connections with the Zurich anarchist group and Tristan Tzara, who had first become acquainted with the anarchist movement in Bucharest was to say “It is obvious that the anarchistic nature of Dadaism, together with the idea of a moral absolute that the movement placed beyond any practical contingency, was bound to keep the Dadaists away from political struggles”. Ribemont-Dessaignes surely means by the term politics the machinations of political parties rather than the revolutionary politics of anarchism.

Tristan Tzara summed up the Dada attitude in the *Dadaist Manifesto* of 1918 : “Let everyone proclaim that we have a great work of destruction and negativity to accomplish. Sweep and clean. The cleansing of the fellow will take place after a period of total madness and aggression, the mark of a world left for too long in the hands of bandits who are tearing apart and destroying the centuries”.

In the face of the barbarism and destruction they were seeing the Dada group embraced spontaneity (including in relation to revolution) the joy of living and the joy of creation despite the most adverse conditions. Dada negation echoed the old maxim of Bakunin: “The urge to destroy is also the urge to create”. It attacked all the forces of oppression- be they political, economic, cultural or moral. It proclaimed confidence in the masses, rejection of specialisation, rejection of the State. As Tzara was to state “We were firmly against the war without therefore falling into the facile trap of Utopian pacifism, We knew that we could not get rid of war without getting rid of its roots”...” This war was not our war; to us it was a war of false emotions and feeble justifications...Dada was born of a moral need, of an implacable will to achieve a moral absolute...Honour, Country, Morality, Family, Art, Religion, Liberty, Fraternity, etc- all these notions had once answered to human needs, now nothing remained of them but a skeleton of conventions”. Whilst Dada had originally had friendly relations with the Futurists, this ended when they learned of their extreme nationalism and militarism.

German Dada

The situation was a little different in Germany, where in Berlin another Dada group was created when Huelsenbeck returned there. Max Ernst who had been involved in Dada in Zurich returned to Cologne where he set up another Dada group with Johannes Baargeld. The Dadaists contributed to *Die Aktion*, the great artistic-political review edited by Franz Pfemfert. Revolution was breaking out in Germany and Dada could not remain as gloriously detached as it had been in Zurich. German Dada contributed in its own way to the insurrectionary ferment with the savage caricatures of George Grosz, the paintings of Otto Dix and the collage and typographical variations of Baader. Photomontage was pioneered by German Dada.

In the Spartakist uprising in Berlin in 1919 Dada made its own particular intervention. They marched into the working class neighbourhoods singing antimilitarist songs and were met with much amusement. As the Dadaist Mehring was to say :” Our Dadaist procession was greeted with delight as spontaneous as the on y danse of the Paris mob in front of the Bastille”. For this the authorities arrested them for seeking to bring the armed forces into contempt, and one of them, Herzfelde, got eight months in jail. By 1922 Dada was dead in Germany. Some of its members had identified with the Bolsheviks, mistakenly identifying them with the real spirit of the Russian Revolution. Grosz, Heartfield and his brother Herzfelde became members of the Communist Party whilst Ernst returned to Paris. The impact of Dada in Germany was important enough for Hitler to fulminate against it in *Mein Kampf* calling it “spiritual madness” and “art Bolshevism”.

Whilst some Dadaists were absorbed by politics others sought to carry on the cultural revolution they had pioneered. Their disagreements with the cult of proletarian art were summed up thus:

“To those who seek to create a proletarian art, we pose the question: ‘What is proletarian art?’ Is it art made by the proletarians themselves? Or art dedicated to the service of the proletariat? Or art designed to awaken (revolutionary) proletarian instincts? There is no art made by proletarians because a proletarian who creates art is no longer a proletarian but an artist. An artist is neither a proletarian nor a bourgeois and what he creates belongs neither to the proletariat nor to the bourgeoisie, but to everyone” This appeared in the *Proletkunst Manifesto* signed by Arp, Tzara,

van Doesburg and Spengermann which under its seemingly favourable title actually attacked the bridling of artistic creation to an ideology.

The struggle to steer a path between “art for art’s sake” and the strictures of “proletarian art” was a difficult one and was never adequately resolved with divisions within Dadaism itself. The “cultural revolutionist” (for want of a better term) current of Dada, which preserved its original intentions, was castigated by the Bolsheviks as bourgeois or anarchist, whilst the bourgeois themselves called them Bolsheviks or anarchists!!

Dada in France

As we have already seen, Max Ernst had gone to Paris at the end of the war. Other members of Dada also congregated there like the only fully fledged American Dadaist Man Ray, along with other Europeans who had returned from New York like Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia. They continued the epic struggle of Dada against establishment art. They were joined by Tzara and reinforced by among others, Andre Breton, Louis Aragon, Benjamin Peret, Paul Eluard, Ribemont-Dessaignes, and Philippe Soupault. They continued the Dada pursuits of antimilitarism and anticlericalism. Actions included the mock trial of Maurice Barres, the raving nationalist and anti-Semite.

Breton was establishing his leadership of a movement that he would take in a more political direction. This was resented by Tzara, Picabia and others who saw Breton’s efforts to give Dada a clear direction as anathema to the original spontaneous spirit of Dada. Breton wanted to move from the “destructive” phase of Dada to a more “constructive” approach. Out of these divisions emerged the new movement of surrealism.

But that’s another story.....

Dedicated to the late Jim Duke, who carried on the work of Dada

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