

a
brief
history
of
dada

In *The Dada Painters and Poets*, Robert Motherwell described Dadaism as “an organized insulting of European civilization by its middle-class young.” Dadaism expounded upon cultural and political expressions that had been fermenting in European and American avant-garde circles since at least the mid-1800s. It also selectively appropriated attitudes and art forms of Italian Futurism. Most of the manifestations of Dada can be traced to four main influences: Bohemianism, Anarchism, Futurism, and World War One.

The War decisively shattered any vestiges of respect for the social order, especially the institutions of religion and the military, held by those already disposed to question and criticize (i.e. the avant-garde). It precipitated transatlantic and European migrations of the key Dada individuals. First they went to the neutral havens of New York and Zurich, but most eventually returned to Berlin or Paris, the real crucibles and targets of protest for the nascent movement, even as it coalesced in exile. The influence of Dada spread to other European cities, through further migrations, traveling Dada performances and the numerous Dada publications. However I will confine my essay to the four principal centers already named.

In late 19th-century Paris, the Bohemian districts of the Left Bank and Montmartre spawned creative irreverence and violent antagonism toward bourgeois mores. Proto-Dada individuals and cultural formations explored chance and nonsense (i.e., anti-rationalism), which had been broached in the writings of Charles Nodier, Jean-Pierre Brisset, Henri Bergson and Auguste Strindberg.

The prevailing philosophy among politicized intelligentsia was anarchism. The embrace of anarchism was a response to rotting political structures and a dehumanizing social order brought about by rampant capitalism, which offered no sustenance for avant-garde culture, but greeted it with derision and philistine intolerance. Literary censorship by the authorities became unenforceable in the economic crisis of the 1880s (due to a lack of funds to pay censors), and radical reviews were established as a mainstay of avant-garde culture.

In Montmartre, seedy nightclubs and literary cabarets such as Aristide Bruant’s *Le Chat Noir* pandered to jaded clientele with insulting and scandalous performances — the sort of humor used by Alfred Jarry in his influential 1886 play *Ubu Roi*. Raymond Roussel’s bizarre *Impressions d’Afrique* (1911) was made into another important play. It featured a ‘drawing machine’ that harnessed the chance movements of worms.

At roughly the same time period, a tradition of political theatre and cabaret was being forged in Germany. The Austrian Frank Wedekind achieved notoriety with plays such as *Springs Awakening*, about the failure of the adult world to inform children about sexuality. Banned in Vienna, Wedekind went to Munich, where all his performances at *Simplicissimus* cabaret (no theatre would hire him) were seen by a future Dadaist, Hugo Ball (Ball also met his partner-in-Dada Emmy Hennings at one of the performances).

Under the impetus of the poet Filippo Marinetti, Italian Futurism proclaimed a contemptuous attitude toward past art with a vehemence that the Dadaists admired and, to a degree, emulated. The Futurists published provocative manifestos calling for the destruction of libraries and museums, and the elevation of machines to objects of aesthetic worship: “the racing car is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace.” They also staged raucous performance evenings (*serrata*) and art exhibitions around Europe, and published “*paroles in liberta*” (onomatopoeia using experimental typography); all of which were appropriated by the Dadaists.

Ball and the other Zurich Dadaists Richard Huelsenbeck and Tristan Tzara were big admirers of Marinetti, reciting his poetry at their own cabaret performances. The Futurists were rabidly hawkish, while the Dadaists were anti-war, except for some later Parisian Dadaists who chauvinistically supported France’s military role, and spurned any contact with the Germans.

New York Dada

Alfred Stieglitz and his cohorts Marius de Zayas and Francis Picabia made important contributions to the early development and spread of Dadaism, although their efforts in New York have been relegated to ‘proto-Dada’ status. Stieglitz’s Photo Secession Gallery and journal *Camera Work* became influential condensers of radical politics and avant-garde European art. Aided by a motley coterie of anarchist sympathizers and society dilettantes, Stieglitz introduced to America the most advanced art and aesthetic theories of the day, and reflected them back to the Europeans through editorial exchanges with all the avant-garde publications as they emerged.

In 1912, Stieglitz avowed *Camera Work* to be “a revolt against all authority in art ... [and] in everything.” Benjamin de Casseres published a series of essays in *Camera Work* (recalling Marinetti in this excerpt): “There is a healthy mockery [and] ironic spirit abroad ... No art is perfect until you have smashed it.” De Zayas, an exiled Mexican political cartoonist, also wrote radical commentary for *Camera Work*, and developed a theory of “abstract caricature” that directly inspired Picabia’s “machine-portraits”. De Zayas and the others persuaded Stieglitz to change the names of his gallery and review (both) to *291* in 1907, and to present the most experimental art in the two forums. De Zayas travelled through Europe as Stieglitz’s representative, making contacts with the avant-garde and arranging shows for *291*.

In 1913, Picabia brought from Paris works by Marcel Duchamp, including “Nude Descending a Staircase” for the giant New York Independents exhibition (known as the “Armory Show”). Duchamp’s “Nude” was a *success de scandale*, drawing much publicity to the show. The publicity was all negative, of course, but it had the effect of raising the profile of modern art to a degree unprecedented in America.

After the outbreak of the War, Picabia encouraged Duchamp to come to New York, in order to capitalize on his newfound notoriety (i.e., everyone concerned was eager to capitalize on it). Duchamp's paintings had earlier been rejected by a group of cubists in France, an experience that turned him against the essential conservatism and hypocrisy of the 'modern' Parisian painters.

Duchamp, by virtue of his art-historical stature, is sometimes held to be the most (indeed, the only) important Dada figure in New York. However, the basic ingredients for a Dada-like formation were already in place, having been established chiefly through the efforts of Stieglitz, de Zayas and Picabia (in that chronological order). Nevertheless Duchamp propelled Dadaist principles into entirely new spheres of conceptual sophistication.

Duchamp's greatest innovation was his concept of "Ready-mades," which he demonstrated in New York with his famous *Fountain* (urinal) of 1917.¹ This time Duchamp anticipated the limits of avant-gardism, and he baited the second New York Independents exhibition committee (of which he was the most prominent member) by submitting the urinal anonymously. Within days of the inevitable rejection, Duchamp's co-conspirators were peddling the short-lived review, *The Blind Man* at the entrance. The review featured an article penned by Beatrice Wood with the assertion, "Whether [Duchamp] made the fountain [sic]... has no importance. He CHOSE it."

Zurich Dada

Trilingual, neutral and geographically close, Zurich became a natural refuge for European avant-gardists during the War, and this is where Germans were to give the Dada movement both its name and typical characteristics.

According to Hugo Ball, in "A Critique of the German Intelligentsia" (1919), prewar German society was riven into two spheres: one of political power and action — the military, Junkers (aristocracy) and industrialists; and one of thought, ethics and morals — the idealistic, politically impotent intellectuals (the same condition more or less applied to the other European powers). It is significant that this schizophrenia (attributed by Ball to the Protestant Reformation) penetrated to the level of individuals. Many German artists and writers (including Ball) were initially swept-up in the war-mongers' mentality of 'comradeship.'² Ball attempted to enlist in the early days of the War and, when refused on medical grounds, went

1. In *Dadaism and Surrealism Reviewed*, Dawn Ades credits Guillaume Apollinaire with having designated the first "Ready-made", though it wasn't publicly exhibited.

2. According to *New Studies in Dada: Essays and Documents* .

to the Front for two months as a civilian volunteer. This was after his involvement with the socialist anarchist publications *Die Aktion* and *Die Revolution*.

Those who weren't killed received searing lessons on the madness and depravity that European civilization was capable of. Ball's shocking experiences fueled Nietzschean ideals dating from his 1912-'13 work for *Die Revolution*. His Dada activities may be read as an acting-out of Nietzsche's invocation that "he who wants to be a creator must first be an annihilator and destroy values." Ironically, Ball was among the first Dadaists to burn out.

Ball rejoined Emmy Hennings (who had been imprisoned for aiding draft dodgers) and the two went to Switzerland in order to escape the oppressive militarism of Germany. Richard Huelsenbeck later wrote of "The German university professor, a volume of Goethe clutched to his heart like a charm," striding side-by-side with "saber-swinging officers." In 1916, Ball and Hennings, after touring with a variety show, decided to open their own venue in Zurich, which they called the "Cabaret Voltaire." They were joined in performances by the Romanian Tristan Tzara, and several other, lesser Dada figures.* At the earliest performances, conventional variety show acts were interspersed with readings of Expressionist, Symbolist and Futurist poetry. The arrival of Ball's friend and *Revolution* colleague Richard Huelsenbeck was the catalyst fusing together these disparate elements into full-blown Dada performances (though they hadn't yet got the name). Ball wrote, "What we are celebrating is both buffoonery and a requiem mass," and, "Every [nonsense] word ... spoken and sung here says ... that this humiliating age has not succeeded in winning our respect."

Dadaism was not formally proclaimed as a movement until Ball, Tzara and Huelsenbeck read respective manifestos at the Cabaret Voltaire in mid-summer 1916. In the context of activities prior to and since the discovery of the name Dada, and in view of the nonsensical, taunting nature of the manifestos, the significance of this proclamation is dubious. Rather, it was symptomatic of the self-absorbed nature of Zurich Dadaism, which tended to obscure (to say the least) any serious social concerns its adherents later purported to be addressing through their Dada antics.

The costliest battles of the War raged during this period, with casualty rates in excess of 100,000 per day. Huelsenbeck later wrote, "In the term Dada we concentrated all the rage, contempt, superiority and human revolutionary protest we were capable of." And, "Dada was the ironic and contemptuous response to a culture which had shown itself worthy of flame-throwers and machine-guns." In this kind of grandiose delusion, the Zurich Dadaists revealed themselves to be suffering from a far worse shock than they were ever able to inflict on their audiences of middle-class Swiss university students. And it wasn't too long before the more

*In terms of their providing theoretical direction. Hans Arp was certainly a more important and enduring visual artist than any of the others in Zurich, although his work has little (if any) Dada content or style.

politically astute Dadaists tired of maniacal prating in bizarre costumes before the bemused Swiss students, and decamped back to Berlin (Huelsenbeck), or left the Dada fold permanently (Ball).

Berlin Dada

A few months after his return, Huelsenbeck fired the first shot of a new Dada campaign, this time from the heart of enemy territory. In an essay “The New Man” (again recalling Nietzsche) Huelsenbeck declared, “one thing must end ... the overfed pig ... of intellectuality.” The word dada did not appear in the essay (indicative of Huelsenbeck’s lingering ambivalence), and the aimless disaffection of Zurich Dadaism gave way to Expressionist imprecations and white-hot irony.

In February 1918, Huelsenbeck lectured on Zurich Dada to a Berlin artists gathering, concluding his remarks with, “Politics are only a step away,” and a reference to the Russian Revolution. He, Franz Jung (publisher of a radical journal), the caricaturist George Grosz, John Heartfield (who had anglicized his name as an antiwar protest) and Raoul Hausmann formed a “Club Dada” on the spot.

At their first meeting a “Berlin Dada Manifesto” signed by all of the above (plus Tzara and Janco from Zurich) was proclaimed. The gist of it was 1. A distancing of Dada from Futurism (while acknowledging its influence); 2. Attacks on Expressionism (an “anaemic abstraction”) and on “literary hollow-heads’ ... theories for improving the world”; and 3. Graphic references to the continuing carnage of the war: “The highest art ... repeatedly gathering its limbs together ... the best artists ... collecting the shreds of their body ... with bleeding heart and hands.”

As part of their Dadaist shock tactics, the spectacle of this carnage — hideous mutilations preserved in living flesh by adept battlefield surgery — became manifested in the graphic works and paintings of Grosz and Otto Dix and, somewhat more obliquely, with the invention of photo montage. The new medium, practiced by Hausmann and Hannah Hoch as well as by Grosz, could simultaneously express the anarchic confusion of modern life, and portray the Frankenstein monsters lurching among those who survived the war unscathed (Hoch, *Cut with a Kitchen Knife* and Grosz, *Remember Uncle August the Unhappy Inventor*, both 1919).

Depending on whose description we are to believe, Berlin Dada performances were either as ineffectual as those of Zurich (J. Willet, “Dada infects wartime Berlin”) or, “It was like the outbreak of a revolution. If we hadn’t been in personal danger [from the audiences], we would have had a splendid opportunity of studying mass psychology” (Huelsenbeck, *Memoirs of a Dada Drummer*). Johannes Baader ratcheted the public aggression of Berlin Dadaism to new

levels. He got himself declared insane by the authorities (apparently with some justification) after writing a pacifist letter to the king of Prussia. Berliners sarcastically called the certification a 'hunting permit', for he was then able to carry out antics such as shouting "Christ is a sausage" from the pulpit of the Berlin cathedral during a service with impunity. Baader later toured Germany and Eastern Europe with a Dada troupe that was repeatedly assaulted by gate-crashing right wing thugs, causing him to abandon the tour.

The last major Berlin Dada event was the *Internationale Dada-Messe* [fair] of 1920. The most political Berlin Dada protagonists, including Grosz and Heartfield, were in fact using the movement as a weapon just so long as it served their purpose. They joined the KPD (German communists) and their work published under the Dada banner began to show an increasingly unDada-like, articulate political focus. At the *Dada-Messe*, this culminated in anti-militarist displays such as a mannequin with a pig's head dressed as a German officer and a depiction of disfigured vets parading in front of shops (by Dix), which netted the group a police raid, seizure of exhibits and criminal charges.

Paris and the end of Dada

Under Tzara's leadership, the Zurich movement became more resolutely concerned with aesthetic issues, to the exclusion of socio-political references. Ball disapprovingly wrote, "One should not turn a whim into an artistic school." Tzara's *Dada* review was published in both French and German editions. Tzara had begun making overtures to Paris, and was already receiving negative feedback for fraternizing with Germans. Apollinaire refused to contribute to *Dada*, on the grounds "that I don't find that review's attitude towards Germany clear-cut enough."

Picabia arrived in Switzerland in 1919 (for an alcoholism cure), acclaimed by Tzara: "Long live Picabia the anti-painter just arrived from New York, the big sentiment machine...", and Tzara used a number of Picabia's machine-drawings, including "Reveil Matin," produced by inking watch parts. He followed Picabia to Paris in early 1920, where they published the final two issues of *Dada* (Picabia had previously made a New York – Paris round trip in 1913–'15, and probably modeled the idea for Stieglitz's *291* after Apollinaire's *Les Soirees de Paris*).

In France after the armistice, tensions eased (unlike in Germany), and any lingering sentiments of radical socialism were subsumed by internecine squabbles. The starting point of Paris Dadaism was a desire to reassert the hegemony of the French avant-garde, which had become a complacent caricature, overtaken by international developments. This would be accomplished by a programmatic discrediting of the old avant-garde.

The notion that Dadaism could be a legitimately French movement was kindled by the work of Duchamp and Picabia, both still regarded as belonging to Paris, and of Apollinaire (who died in the 1918 flu epidemic). The most prominent Paris Dadaists, Andre Breton, Louis Aragon and Philippe Soupault, originally followed the high bourgeois avant-gardism of Paul Valery's *Nouvelle Revue Française*. In 1919 they launched a similar review, *Litterature* (the name suggested by Valery). By then, they had received Tzara's Dada manifesto of 1918, and were duly impressed.

They felt Dadaism was a means to register their disgust over the War, which had been openly supported by the avant-garde establishment. However, in *Litterature* they employed subversive and ambiguous tactics to undermine the very avant-garde which had already bestowed its stamp of approval on them, and was therefore bitterly resented by Breton and the others.

The focus of Paris Dadaism was described by Georges Ribemont-Dessaigne as a need to "show the end of an intellectual conception, the collapse of the Absolute." By doing this, it would serve notice to the bourgeoisie that "affirmation, construction [and] hope... [are] under suspended sentence of death." Soupault and Aragon most wanted to serve this notice to the academician and fascistic deputy Maurice Barres (whose bourgeois nationalism they had once followed), and they proceeded with his mock trial. The trial exposed deep fissures between the outsiders and the Parisian Dadaists; Picabia walked out and broke completely with Dadaism (publishing an article to that effect), while Tzara attempted to obstruct the proceedings.

Dawn Ades, in *Dadaism and Surrealism Reviewed*, attributed this schism (as manifested in the reviews *Dada* and *Litterature*) to differences of their respective backgrounds: the Parisian avant-garde was highly complex, self-perpetuating and incestuous; while Zurich and New York were vacuums where the exiles had been able to cut their cultural ties and act with an aggressive and outspoken freedom. Purging rituals, such as the mock trial (which was conducted in all seriousness, despite Tzara's "big and little shits" testimony) were inimical to the outsiders' fastidiously groomed conception of Dadaism. Mutual denunciations, and violent disruptions of the rivals' soirees brought the Paris Dada manifestation swiftly to an end.
