

DADAISM

ROLLON SANTOS SUMALBAG SUNGA TEODOSIO
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Dada was an artistic and literary movement that began in Zürich, Switzerland. It arose as a reaction to World War I and the nationalism that many thought had led to the war. Influenced by other avant-garde movements - Cubism, Futurism, Constructivism, and Expressionism - its output was wildly diverse, ranging from performance art to poetry, photography, sculpture, painting, and collage. Dada's aesthetic, marked by its mockery of materialistic and nationalistic attitudes, proved a powerful influence on artists in many cities, including Berlin, Hanover, Paris, New York, and Cologne, all of which generated their own groups. The movement dissipated with the establishment of Surrealism, but the ideas it gave rise to have become the cornerstones of various categories of modern and contemporary art.

Dada was the first conceptual art movement where the focus of the artists was not on crafting aesthetically pleasing objects but on making works that often upended bourgeois sensibilities and that generated difficult questions about society, the role of the artist, and the purpose of art.



BEGINNINGS

Switzerland was neutral during WWI with limited censorship and it was in Zürich that Hugo Ball and Emmy Hennings founded the Cabaret Voltaire on February 5, 1916 in the backroom of a tavern on Spiegelgasse in a seedy section of the city. In order to attract other artists and intellectuals, Ball put out a press release that read, "Cabaret Voltaire. Under this name a

group of young artists and writers has formed with the object of becoming a center for artistic entertainment. In principle, the Cabaret will be run by artists, guests artists will come and give musical performances and readings at the daily meetings. Young artists of Zürich, whatever their tendencies, are invited to come along with suggestions and contributions of all kinds." Those who were present from the beginning in addition to Ball and Hennings were Hans Arp, Tristan Tzara, Marcel Janco, and Richard Huelsenbeck.

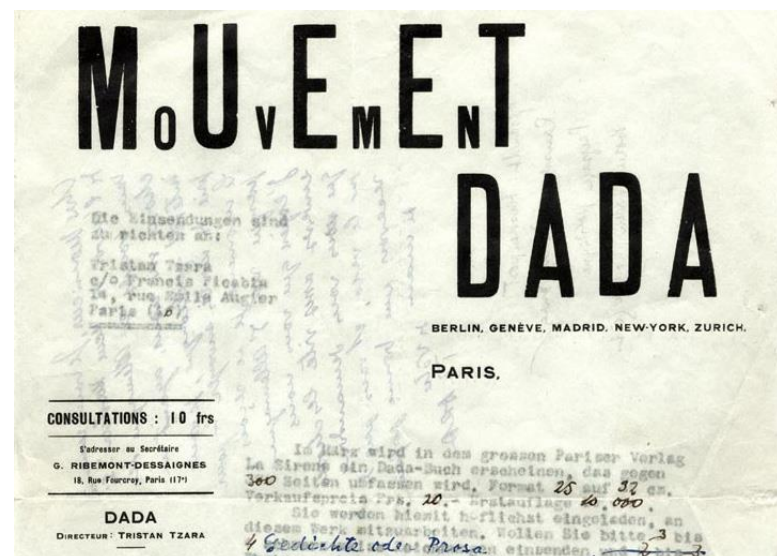
In July of that year, the first Dada evening was held at which Ball read the first manifesto. There is little agreement on how the word Dada was invented, but one of the most common origin stories is that Richard Huelsenbeck found the name by plunging a knife at random into a dictionary. The term "dada" is a colloquial French term for a hobbyhorse, yet it also echoes the first words of a child, and these suggestions of childishness and absurdity appealed to the group, who were keen to put a distance between themselves and the sobriety of conventional society. They also appreciated that the word might mean the same (or nothing) in all languages - as the group was avowedly internationalist.

The aim of Dada art and activities was both to help to stop the war and to vent frustration with the nationalist and bourgeois conventions that had led to it. Their anti-authoritarian stance made for a protean movement as they opposed any form of group leadership or guiding ideology.

THE SPREAD OF DADA

The artists in Zürich published a Dada magazine and held art exhibits that helped spread their anti-war, anti-art message. In 1917, after Ball left for Bern to pursue journalism, Tzara founded Galerie Dada on Bahnhofstrasse where further Dada evenings were held along with art exhibits. Tzara became the leader of the movement and began an unrelenting campaign to spread Dada ideas, showering French and Italian writers and artists with letters. The group published an art and literature review entitled Dada starting in July 1917 with five editions from Zürich and two final ones from Paris. Their art was focused on performance and printed matter.

Once the war ended in 1918, many of the artists returned to their home countries, helping to further spread the movement. The end of Dada in Zürich followed the Dada 4-5 event in April 1919 that by design turned into a riot, something that Tzara thought furthered



the aims of Dada by undermining conventional art practices through audience involvement in art production. The riot, which began as a Dada event, was one of the most significant. It attracted over 1000 people and began with a conservative speech about the value of abstract art that was meant to anger the crowd. This was followed by discordant music and then several readings that encouraged crowd participation until the crowd lost control and began to destroy several of the props. Tzara described it thus: "the tumult is unchained hurricane frenzy siren whistles bombardment song the battle starts out sharply, half the audience applaud the protestors hold the hall . . . chairs pulled out projectiles crash bang expected effect atrocious and instinctive . . . Dada has succeeded in establishing the circuit of absolute unconsciousness in the audience which forgot the frontiers of education of prejudices, experienced the commotion of the New. Final victory of Dada." For Tzara the key to the success of a riot was audience involvement so that attendees were not just onlookers of art but became involved in its production. This was a total negation of traditional art.

Soon after this, Tzara traveled to Paris, where he met André Breton and began formulating the theories that Breton would eventually call Surrealism. Dadaists did not self-consciously declare micro-regional movements; the spread of Dada throughout various European cities and into New York can be attributed to a few key artists, and each city in turn influenced the aesthetics of their respective Dada groups.

NOTABLE (NOT) ARTWORKS AND THEIR ARTISTS



FOUNTAIN (1917)

Artist: Marcel Duchamp

Urinal - Philadelphia Museum of Art

Duchamp was the first artist to use a readymade and his choice of a urinal was guaranteed to challenge and offend even his fellow artists. There is little manipulation of the urinal by the artist other than to turn it upside-down and to sign it with a fictitious name. By removing the urinal from its everyday environment and placing it in an art context, Duchamp was questioning basic definitions of art as well as the role of the artist in creating it. With the title, Fountain, Duchamp made a

tongue in cheek reference to both the purpose of the urinal as well to famous fountains designed by Renaissance and Baroque artists. In its path-breaking boldness the work has become iconic of the irreverence of the Dada movement towards both traditional artistic values and production techniques. Its influence on later 20th-century artists such as Jeff Koons, Robert Rauschenberg, Damien Hirst, and others are incalculable.

LHOOQ (1919)

Artist: Marcel Duchamp

Collotype - Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam

This work is a classic example of Dada irreverence towards traditional art. Duchamp transformed a cheap postcard of the Mona Lisa (1517) painting, which had only recently been returned to the Louvre after it was stolen in 1911. While it was already a well-known work of art, the publicity from the theft ensured that it became one of the most revered and famous works of art: art with a capital A. On the postcard, Duchamp drew a mustache and a goatee onto Mona Lisa's face and labeled it L.H.O.O.Q. If the letters are pronounced as they would be by a native French speaker, it would sound as if one were saying "Elle a chaud au cul," which loosely translates as "She has a hot ass." Again, Duchamp managed to offend everyone while also posing questions that challenged artistic values, artistic creativity, and the overall canon.



THE SPIRIT OF OUR TIME (1920)

Artist: Raoul Hausmann

This assemblage represents Hausmann's disillusion with the German government and their inability to make the changes needed to create a better nation. It is an ironic sculptural illustration of Hausmann's belief that the average member of (corrupt) society "has no more capabilities than those which chance has glued to the outside of his skull; his brain remains empty". Thus Hausmann's use of a hat maker's dummy to represent a blockhead who can only experience that which can be measured with the mechanical tools attached to its head - a ruler, a tape measure, a pocket watch, a jewelry box containing a typewriter wheel, brass knobs from a camera, a leaky telescopic beaker of the sort used by soldiers during the war, and an old purse. Thus, there is no ability for critical thinking or subtlety. With its blank eyes, the dummy is a narrow-minded, blind automaton.

CONCEPTS AND STYLES

Dada artworks present intriguing overlaps and paradoxes in that they seek to demystify artwork in the populist sense but nevertheless remain cryptic enough to allow the viewer to interpret works in a variety of ways. Some Dadaists portrayed people and scenes representationally in order to analyze form and movement. Others, like Kurt Schwitters and Man Ray, practiced abstraction to express the metaphysical essence of their subject matter. Both modes sought to deconstruct daily experience in challenging and rebellious ways. The key to understanding Dada works lies in reconciling the seemingly silly, slapdash styles with the profound anti-bourgeois message. Tzara especially fought the assumption that Dada was a statement; yet Tzara and his fellow artists became increasingly agitated by politics and sought to incite a similar fury in Dada audiences.

IRREVERENCE

Irreverence was a crucial component of Dada art, whether it was a lack of respect for bourgeois convention, government authorities, conventional production methods, or the artistic canon. Each group varied slightly in their focus, with the Berlin group being the most anti-government and the New York group being the most anti-art. Of all the groups, the Hannover group was likely the most conservative.

READY-MADES AND ASSEMBLAGE

A readymade was simply an object that already existed and was commandeered by Dada artists as a work of art, often in the process combined with another readymade, as in Duchamp's Bicycle Wheel, thus creating an assemblage. The pieces were often chosen and assembled by chance or accident to challenge bourgeois notions about art and artistic creativity. Indeed, it is difficult to separate conceptually the Dada interest in chance with their focus on ready-mades and assemblage. Several of the ready-mades and assemblages were bizarre, a quality that made it easy for the group to merge eventually with Surrealism. Other artists who worked with ready-mades and assemblages include Ernst, Man Ray, and Hausmann.

CHANCE

Chance was a key concept underpinning most of Dada art from the abstract and beautiful compositions of Schwitters to the large assemblages of Duchamp. Chance was used to embrace the random and the accidental as a way to release creativity from rational control, with Arp being one of the earliest and best-known practitioners. Schwitters, for example, gathered random bits of detritus from a variety of locales, while Duchamp welcomed accidents such as the crack that occurred while he was making The Large Glass. In addition to loss of rational control, Dada lack of concern with preparatory work and the embrace of artworks that were marred fit well with the Dada irreverence for traditional art methods.

WIT AND HUMOR

Tied closely to Dada irreverence was their interest in humor, typically in the form of irony. In fact, the embrace of the readymade is key to Dada's use of irony as it shows an awareness that nothing has intrinsic value. Irony also gave the artists flexibility and expressed their embrace of the craziness of the world thus preventing them from taking their work too seriously or from getting caught up in excessive enthusiasm or dreams of utopia. Their humor is an unequivocal YES to everything as art.