

# No nonsense about Dada

Clare Hurley  
18 September 2006

*Dada, an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York City, June 18–September 11, 2006. MoMA is the exhibition's final of three venues. Centre Pompidou in Paris (October 5, 2005–January 9, 2006) and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. (February 19–May 14, 2006) were the first two.*

Some ninety years after the outbreak of World War I, militarism and imperialist conflicts are again the order of the day. In these circumstances, an exhibition devoted to the art movement that called itself “Dada” in 1916 seems timely. Reacting to the slaughter that many of them had seen as soldiers in the trenches across Europe, Dada artists expressed healthy disgust not just at the carnage of imperialism, but with bourgeois society as a whole. Several of its adherents subsequently took their revolt a step farther and sided with the revolutionary struggle of the working class. Others, who did not take the path of political commitment, made significant contributions to the development of various trends in contemporary art in the period between the world wars.

The bloody madhouse of World War I demonstrated that capitalism had outlived its historically progressive role and now offered the alternatives of socialism or barbarism. Under these conditions, art—the most sensitive aspect of cultural life—also suffered. The artistic trends of the time and subsequent decades—cubism, futurism, dadaism and surrealism—offered a sharp, sometimes desperate, rupture with a society considered by many artists to have entered its death throes. The tumultuous events of the twentieth century guaranteed in each case that the movement would not be allowed to mature fully.

While these artists were able to grasp certain aspects of the crisis, in particular the heinous role played by official culture in legitimizing the savagery of Western bourgeois “civilization,” they emerged inevitably in the form of a left-wing Bohemianism. Unlike the Marxist social revolutionaries, these were principally revolutionaries in aesthetic form.

They represented an inevitable phase in the development of modern art between the crisis or collapse of the old world and its culture and the emergence of a new one, which, tragically, did not come into being in the next historical period due to the betrayals and crimes of Stalinism. As such, their work has had a lasting influence to the extent that traces of Dada can be found in many of the subsequent developments in twentieth century art.

“What is Dada?”—that is the question that Dadaists delighted in provoking. Apparently Lenin even asked it of Tristan Tzara, the movement's Rumanian-born impresario with whom he played chess in Zurich, before returning to Russia in April 1917 to lead the Revolution. But making sense of Dada was intended, like making sense of nonsense, to be impossible.

There is not even agreement as to where the word “dada” came from. Some said it was French for “hobbyhorse,” others claimed it was chosen at random out of a multilingual dictionary, or that it was Russian for “yes-yes”—though if that were the case, it would have been better to call it “niet-niet” (“no-no”).

United by opposition to the war and its patriotic nationalism, as well as irreverence toward bourgeois behavior and taste, Dada did not constitute a coherent artistic style, but rather an expression of a mood. The artists who

would proclaim “Dada” as a creed, did so because, in the words of Marcel Janco, “we had lost confidence in our culture. Everything had to be demolished. We would begin again after the ‘tabula rasa.’ At the Cabaret Voltaire we began by shocking common sense, public opinion, education, institutions, museums, good taste, in short, the whole prevailing order.”

But where did such a violent and thoroughgoing rejection of culture come from, and what was its outcome? The curators' decision to focus exclusively on the Dada period, which only lasted from 1916 till 1924, circumvents these questions. Even though it includes valuable historical material, the exhibition explains Dada almost exclusively as a reaction to World War I. While this is true, it is not sufficient.

It is not possible to understand the bitterness of Dada without including the 1914 collapse of German and European Social Democracy, which went over in each country to support for imperialist war (with the principal exception of Russia), betraying the working class and the ideals of the socialist labor movement. This had ramifications for intellectuals and artists as well, contributing to the sense of outrage characteristic of Dada.

The Russian Revolution in 1917 raised the hope that despite, or in fact, out of the slaughter of the war, society could be reordered on a higher, more humane basis. The assassination of the German revolutionaries Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg in 1919 represented an enormous blow to that hope, while the failure of the German Revolution in 1923 paved the way for disillusionment and played a role in the Dada's disbanding in 1924. These critical events hardly receive mention in the exhibition.

However, the decision to present Dada independently of Surrealism, which has rarely been done before, does allow one to see that Dada artists took several paths after 1924. While some key personalities, particularly Max Ernst, would become Surrealists, those in Berlin, like Dix and Grosz, developed the movement of *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity), while others, like Duchamp essentially remained Dadaists even after Dada ended.

A note on the exhibition's layout: in order to emphasize Dada's peripatetic nature, the show is organized by city. At MoMA, one is able to gain access either through the Zurich or New York entrance, since the exhibition's premise is that Dada began simultaneously in both places. However Dada can also usefully be viewed as a constellation of distinctive personalities, major and minor. When, due to the developments of the war and other personal factors, various artists moved, new artists were drawn into their orbit, declaring themselves Dadaists in turn, while others dropped out, all within a relatively short timeframe.

In neutral wartime Zurich, the movement opened as a cabaret act at the Café Voltaire, which had been started by German poet/philosopher Hugo Ball and his mistress, singer Emmy Hennings, in 1916. Soon joined by Richard Huelsenbeck, the Romanians Tristan Tzara and Marcel Janco, and visual artists Jean Arp, and Sophie Taeuber, this international group of war refugees and draft-dodgers staged a series of provocative, absurdist soirees.

Ball's life's work would become a study of the Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, and his attraction to anarchism set the tone, with its theory that social progress and freedom were to be obtained not through

social revolution but by fomenting chaos and destruction. At the first public performance of Dada he proclaimed,

“Dada psychology, dada Germany cum indigestion and fog paroxysm, dada literature, dada bourgeoisie ... Dada world war without end, dada revolution without beginning, dada, you friends and also-poets, esteemed sirs, manufacturers, and evangelists. Dada Tzara, dada Huelsenbeck, dada m’dada, dada m’dada dada mhm, dada dera dada, dada Hue, dada Tza.”

This rhythmic rant, communicating its meaning through sound patterns and word plays as much as by words themselves—a method the Beat poets would reprise 40 years later—is quintessential Zurich Dada, in which cabaret and vaudeville were adapted to incorporate other avant-garde artistic trends. A typical performance might include Arp discussing randomness and chance, Hennings reciting poetry while doing splits, and Huelsenbeck joining Tzara, Janco and Ball in reciting “*chants negres*” probably at the top of their lungs.

In the context of the MoMA exhibition, the visual materials created for these performances take on disproportionate weight, since many of them were not necessarily meant to have independent artistic value. Nevertheless the artifacts are interesting, particularly for the trends they anticipated.

Janco created many of the programs and publicity fliers displayed at MoMA. His dynamic and unorthodox use of typography—setting type on a slant, combining letters of various sizes and typefaces in a single word—created a trend that is still recognizable in today’s graphic design and advertising. He also made masks for the performances out of unexpected materials that resemble Cubist portraits.

Jean Arp’s colorful polymorphic wooden cutouts would have been exhibited at the Café’s performances. His collages arranged according to the laws of chance, in which paper squares were glued down exactly where they happened to fall, still communicate an intriguing tension between order and randomness.

Arp’s wife, Sophie Taeuber, was most interested in breaking down the distinction between traditional crafts and “fine” art. On view at MoMA are abstract images she executed in needlepoint, wooden dowel-like heads painted with designs in place of features, as well as the fanciful marionettes she made for the Dada performance of the *Stag King*. Unfortunately, hanging limp in their glass case, they can only hint at what must have been the boisterous absurdity of a puppet show that culminated with the line, “Kill me, kill me. I have not analyzed myself and can’t stand it anymore!”

Entering the exhibition through the New York entrance creates a different sense of Dada. Marcel Duchamp’s “readymades” are front and center in the gallery, just as Duchamp himself was the central figure in this city’s Dada movement. Like Ball and friends, he was seeking an escape from the war and had come to New York in 1915, before the United States entered the hostilities. The inclusion of his kinetic painting *Nude Descending a Staircase no.2* at the Armory Show two years earlier had already established him as a key member of New York’s avant-garde.

Dada artists in New York were at a greater remove from the harsh realities of the war, and their rebellion was similarly more removed and intellectual in nature. Duchamp, together with another Parisian émigré, Francis Picabia, and the American-bred (if not born) Man Ray focused on subverting the traditions of Western art. They shared the puckish wit and delight in shocking bourgeois mores of Dada, but not its anarchist ideology.

Duchamp’s first readymade was a snow shovel he bought in a hardware store in 1915 and inscribed “In Advance of the Broken Arm.” It hangs in the MoMA gallery looking like an ordinary snow shovel, just as it did 90 years ago. The brilliant simplicity of these sophisticated jokes was Duchamp’s genius, and it became the basis for much subsequent twentieth century aesthetic debate. The question became not just “what is Dada?” but what is art?

Picabia’s drawings of imaginary mechanical devices similarly depend on witty titles for their impact. A Forever-brand sparkplug is called “Portrait of a Young American Girl in a State of Nudity” and a light bulb is simply entitled “American Woman.”

Also included are Man Ray’s “rayographs,” which he made by exposing objects to light sensitive photo paper without a camera. His work is mostly notable for odd camera angles, blurriness, and again, optical puns.

In the environment of American consumer capitalism, it is not surprising that the group challenged the boundaries between commercial and fine art, while their fascination with machines and industry extended to how they conceived of the intimacy of human relations and sexuality.

Arriving in the central rooms of the exhibition, via either of the two entrances, one reaches what one might call hardcore Dada, beyond the provocative pranks and the intellectual puns. The work of *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) painters Otto Dix and George Grosz stands out in this section; the connection is not widely known and a bit of a surprise.

After the war had officially been ended in 1918 at Versailles (though parts of Germany remained occupied by Allied forces for another year, and were then reoccupied in 1923) these artists came in contact with Dada either by encountering Dadaists returning from Zurich and New York, or second-hand through Dada materials. But Dada found fertile soil amongst artists who if anything were left more hostile and alienated by their wartime experiences.

Berlin was physically in ruins, and financially on the verge of collapse, as the weak bourgeois Weimar government led by the Social Democratic Party (SPD) desperately sought to restore capitalism and suppress an uprising of the working class. Inflation was in the quadruple digits, wiping out the savings of the middle classes. Unemployment ran at 40 percent. Starving people and war cripples wandered the streets begging, while the big bourgeoisie profiteered.

No one captured this noxious social atmosphere better than painters George Grosz and Otto Dix. Their cartoons, drawings and paintings stand out in the context of the rest of the Dada materials for their scathing depiction of the physical reality and social relations of the immediate postwar period. Employing Dada techniques of collage and photomontage in painting, their disjointed images communicate a maimed and disfigured society. In Dix’s “Skat Players,” the twisted limbs, deformed faces, and prosthetic body parts derive their power from the coincidence of their symbolic and literal meanings.

Dix’s images sometimes reach a pitch of grotesqueness that is repulsive, but he remains one of the most significant artists to come out of Dada. His portraits of the petty bourgeois and professional types of the Weimar period are especially compelling, though not included in the exhibition because they date from the post-Dada period.

George Grosz’s cartoons scathingly depict a demoralized society engaged in lewd behavior, whereas in his paintings human beings increasingly resemble robots. These figures are set in geometric urban cityscapes with their blank faces, empty heads, and truncated limbs animated by mechanical devices. These images indict the sterility of industrial capitalism and the corrupt and inhuman relations on which it is based.

Other Berlin Dadaists, particularly Raoul Hausmann, Hannah Hoch, the brothers John Heartfield and Weiland Herzfelde, (and Grosz, to a lesser extent), concentrated on photomontage. The use of montage, it was felt, would break down the tendency of art to create an illusion of reality. At their best, these collages succeed in creating a new unreal reality by dynamically (and wittily) juxtaposing fragments of magazine images and type.

The strong political character of the Berlin Dadaists is somewhat minimized by the exhibition. The group organized the First International Dada Fair in 1920, which drew a good deal of self-generated publicity,

and fines for indecency, but not much attendance; the scandal it created was primarily for insulting the German military. A life-sized dummy of a German officer with the face of a pig was hung from the ceiling, and is also hung up at MoMA. To appreciate its original impact, however, one should imagine it in today's terms—as wearing a US army general's outfit instead.

And though it is mentioned, no particular weight is given to the fact that Weiland Herzfeld, his brother John Heartfield (born Helmut Herzfeld, he anglicized his name in protest against German nationalism), and George Grosz all joined the German Communist Party (KPD) at, or shortly after, its founding congress held December 31, 1918—January 1, 1919.

Heartfield and Grosz collaborated in producing inflammatory political publications and manifestos calling for artists to become revolutionary by participating in the revolution. Heartfield was fired from his job at the Military Educational Film Service for calling for a strike after the murders of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg in January 1919. Grosz was a member of the leftist artist Novembergruppe, and went on to serve as chairman of the Rote Gruppe, Germany's Union of Communist Artists in 1924, after he had left his Dada activities.

But the rise of Stalinism, including the Stalinization of the KPD, had a disorienting impact on these artists. The victory of Hitler and the physical destruction of the Bolshevik party by Stalin, along with the other defeats suffered by the working class in the 1930s, deepened the process.

Some, like the Herzfeld/Heartfield brothers, made their peace with Stalinism and settled in East Germany after World War II. Grosz was ultimately embittered to the point that he repudiated his affiliation with the Communist Party after his emigration to the United States in the 1930s. Nonetheless, these artists' transition from the antics of Dadaism to an attraction and allegiance to the promise of socialist revolution embodied in the nascent KPD was not incidental. Rather, it represented the logical, if not entirely realized, extension of the social criticism of their art.

The rest of the MoMA exhibition is a muddle. Max Ernst, the leading artist associated with both Dada and Surrealism, is represented by only a handful of collages and paintings that hint at, but hardly do justice to this complex artist. Ernst's work, like that of Dix and Grosz, intersected with Dada, particularly in its use of photomontage, and Ernst did call himself "Dadamax ernst." But his primary interest in human consciousness and traumatized sexuality led off into phantasmagorical images that cannot be understood divorced from Surrealism.

Additionally in Paris through contact with Andre Breton, like their German counterparts Ernst and other Surrealist artists would develop a political affiliation with the Communist Party, though of varying degrees and duration. In the 1930s, Breton collaborated with Trotsky, and his "Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art" remains the most eloquent expression yet produced of the commonality of interests of the artist and the revolutionary Marxist" (See "André Breton and problems of twentieth-century culture").

But by downplaying the links between Dada and Surrealism, this trajectory is entirely lost in the MoMA exhibition. By contrast, the lesser-known Kurt Schwitters, the "one-man Dada show in Hanover," looms far larger. His Merzbau, a sculptural installation of found objects—bits and pieces of wood, coins, cigarette butts, fabric, newspaper, sand, wire mesh, etc., which took over the interior of his entire house—might well be considered the foundation of installation and found-object art.

True to its contrary nature, Dada exerted an influence far beyond its brief duration, and the actual artistic achievement of what it left behind. As a result, a sense of disappointment lingers after a direct encounter at MoMA with these Dada materials—many of which are well-known at second hand or have been incorporated into aesthetics and become commonplace by now. It is hard to tell whether Dada was never in fact as shocking as it made itself out to be, or whether the far more extreme art and further breakdown of culture that has followed has numbed our ability

to perceive it. But despite, or including, its serious limitations, Dada gives an apt expression to the violent and extreme nature of the crisis of bourgeois society and culture ushered in by World War I.

Exhibition Catalogue: *Dada: Zurich, Berlin, Hanover, Cologne, New York, Paris* by Leah Dickerman, Brigid Doherty, Dorothea Dietrich, Sabine T. Kriebel, National Gallery of Art, Washington, 2006

*Images provided courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art, New York.*



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**