

DADA 1916 – 1923

Sidney Janis
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DADA vs. ART

The attitude of Dada toward art is impregnated with that equivocal spirit of which Dada cultivated the ambiguity more or less wilfully, and if the irrefutable, imperative tone used by Dada to impose its doubt is a proof of its own dynamism, it is in this very contradiction that one finds the richness of Dada's own nature.

Dada tried to destroy, not so much art, as the idea one had of art, breaking down its rigid borders, lowering its imaginary heights—subjecting them to a dependence on man, to his power—humbling art, significantly making it take its place and subordinating its value to pure movement which is also the movement of life.

Was not Art (with a capital A) taking a privileged, not to say tyrannical position on the ladder of values, a position which made it sever all connections with human contingencies? That is where Dada made its anti-Art declaration. But inasmuch as it was an expression of the individual, Dada accepted, even advocated the use of the different plastic and poetic disciplines. If Dada partly made of this practice a Trojan horse to penetrate into the inner sanctum, it is, nevertheless through art realizations that Dada's criticism toward these "spiritual" institutions can be revealed as well as its device of a line of conduct and a generalized conception of vital phenomena.

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It should be noted—and this is a trait common to all its tendencies—that the artistic means of expression lose, with Dada, their specific character. These means are interchangeable, they may be used in any form of art and moreover may employ incongruous elements—materials noble or looked down upon, verbal clichés or clichés of old magazines, bromides, publicity slogans, refuse, etc.—these incongruous elements are transformed into an unexpected, homogenous cohesion as soon as they take place in a newly created ensemble.

To the collages and objects of Max Ernst and Schwitters must be added chance introduced by Marcel Duchamp as a source of creation (i.e., broken glass) and the Readymades, sort of collages of a reality super-imposed upon the reality of things which no longer need the confrontation with other objects to bring out the efficacy of the processes of transformation of the significance in images.

It is a known fact that the Futurists as well as the Cubists have made use of certain forms of advertising, a modern phenomenon, as plastic elements or poetic values. Dada, on the other hand, made use of publicity not as an alibi, an allusion, nor as a material applicable to different aims. Dada actually used these forms of advertisements as a reality at the service of its own publicity. Schwitters' constructivist period, with all his originality, is an example of this conception of Dada.

Moreover Dada, rather than merely advocating the use of means outside of their intrinsic meaning, aims at the confusion of genres and this is in my opinion, one of its essential characteristics, (manifesto—paintings or poems of Picabia, photomontages of Heartfield simultaneous poems with phonetic orchestration, etc.) While it is evident that the use of different materials derived from the Cubists, if not solely the same reasons of plasticity which come into consideration in the case of Dada. The polemical meaning attached to the object is no longer descriptive or explanatory but included in its own conception in the same way, to a certain extent, as Heraclites' demonstrations are actions belonging to an uninterrupted movement. The result takes the form of a sort of humor, neither white nor black, which is an attitude of mind, a manifestation of the true reality of things, a particular way of envisaging them.

Dada never preached, having no theory to defend; it showed truths in action and it is as action that what is commonly called art will, henceforth have to be considered.

Dada advocated the confusion of genres as one of the most efficacious means of giving some play to Art, to this rigid edifice, taken also as play, to this mongrel notion used to cover, behind a sham disinterestedness the lies and hypocrisy of society. One can therefore affirm that the meaning of Dadaist works, their value as examples took precedence over all aesthetic or moralizing preoccupation.

The confusion of genres was not, in the case of Dada, a sort of marriage between different arts, as it was for Wagner who, by juxtaposing them, left to each one its specific nature. Apollinaire's Orphism, aiming at the essentials common to all arts, did not go further than the creation of a new expression strongly impregnated with futuristic

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modernism. It is not in vain that Dada always claimed not to be modern. And yet far from declaring itself partisan of the old-fashioned, Dada tended towards novelty by a natural movement, but denied itself any formal novelty.

If, for Dada, surprise, which Apollinaire advocated as an important poetic factor, became scandal, it was not to be used as an art formula but as an identification of Dada, scandal itself, with its *modus vivendi* and manifestations.

Dada's scorn for modernism was based, above all, upon the idea of relativity since any dogmatic codification could only lead to a new academism. In virtue of that, Dada did fight against Futurism, Expressionism and Cubism, declaring itself for continual change and spontaneity. Dada, wanting to be constantly in motion and transformable, preferred to disappear rather than bring about the creation of new *pompier*s. Confusion of genres was for Dada a postulate. It had to be arbitrary and left to the hazards of invention and disposition of mind. As yes was equal to no, order and disorder found unity in the momentary expression of the individual. One can see in this the aspiration of Dada toward an indubitable truth which was the truth of man expressing himself outside of formula learned or imposed by community, logics, language, art and science. Dada was making its way towards a kind of ethical absolute which, presupposing an impossible purity of intentions and sentiments, made its aim akin to those of the Romantics.

By bringing an end to its own activities Dada proved that, if the experiment was to be justified, its prolonged existence would have been the very negation of its profound nature. But even its end was only relative. Its growth into Surrealism and beyond, through which its fertility in the spiritual domain was amply asserted, gives enough reasons for Dada's historic necessity as a reflection of the epoch as well as a link in the long course of the transformation of ideas.

Tristan Tzara
Paris, January 1953
Translated by Marcel Duchamp

FOR THE LOVE OF DADA

This is an article for Dadaism and not against Dadaism. This is an attempt—and not the first one from my side—to take DADA seriously and reject the stupidities that have been said against it.

DADA was one of the great spiritual revolutions of our time. It was a real revolution of the spirit, of the mind and of the soul, and it is this revolutionary spirit that has kept it alive and justifies this exhibition.

DADA was no fun and it has been thought of as fun only by the people that think man's fate is directed by comic strips. DADA's fun—and here I reveal a secret for the shirtless ones of the spirit—was a self-ridicule with the purpose of self-realization. The Dadaists

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were the discoverers of the new personality, and only the fact that they were a few generations ahead of their time made it impossible for others to understand them.

DADA was a spiritual and psychological revolution whose purpose was to find the NEW MAN. With this purpose I wrote the **Fantastic Prayers**, **Schalaben**, and the **New Man** and two dozen DADA manifestos in Zurich and in Berlin.

DADA was founded by people who hated war and they fought against the militarists, conventionalists, bourgeois within themselves. The Cabaret Voltaire with its drunken student audience was nothing but a symbol and a poor and negligible framework.

DADA was a psychological and literary revolution. It wanted to change the world by magic, or better by magic words. With this purpose I shouted my poems against and into the audience of the Cabaret Voltaire. DADA was not the invention of one person but a general revolt of the artistic personality all over the world against the shackling of the spirit and the threat against freedom of the creative individual. DADA was therefore against all mass solutions, all sociological solutions and against all political solutions.

DADA has fought for the rights of the individual against anything that could have suppressed it. DADA had and has nothing to do with Marxism, Communism, Mesmerism, Pugilism, Monotheism, Monogamism, and other Isms, even if they are on the official preference list.

DADA is a conspiracy of magicians and does not necessarily have anything to do with art. But if it decides to go into art, it sides with The UNCONVENTIONAL or an art that has nothing to do with the Sunday afternoon pleasure of the citizen nor has it anything to do with the likes or dislikes of the art magazines. DADA when it is artistic is necessarily against the heavy contents of an ill-conceived romanticism. It is for space and time, movement, definiteness and a form of spiritual aggression that is called transcendence by philosophers and theologians, arrogance by others and—thank God—madness by psychiatric nondescripts.

I was a Dadaist and I will always be one. I shall not care who is against me or for me. I shared the extraordinary experience of piercing the wall of stupidity that made the year 1916 ripe for the Cabaret Voltaire. I salute my old collaborators in Zurich and Berlin. I salute Hugo Ball, Emmy Hennings, Marcel Janco, Hans Arp and others, names to remember, and I leave out the politicians who tried to benefit from the movement. There is friendship forever and there is hostility forever. DADA was so great an explosion that one needs to have the courage to explode others and to explode oneself if this is necessary. DADA LIVES.

RICHARD HUELSENBECK
(Charles R. Hulbeck)
New York, March, 1953

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I comply with your desire, dear Janis, to write you a few words on the occasion of the opening of the Dada show in your gallery, and like the actor who becomes familiarized with the role of the king, a tyrant, a criminal or a hero, I try to put myself in unison with Dada of 37 years ago. It is not easy for I have changed a great deal and am ready today to believe in angels and what was to me art at that time, seems to me today to be nature. But here is where my role already begins, for nature is Dada.

What you see here is Dada. You also, handsome man, beautiful woman, you are Dada, only you don't know it yourself. Tomorrow Dada will have a different face from today and for that reason will be Dada—Dada is life. Dada is that which changes (I would almost say the perpetual change, the eternal return, Heraclites). Dada is life that will transform itself tomorrow and behave differently from today. Dada is gay, sad, anti-Art, laughter, tears, consistent, inconsistent, extremely simple, extremely complicated, practical, edible, heavy as lead, candy pink, square, venomous. All these paintings and sculpture, cigars, chairs, windows, tables are Dada. Even you, Sidney Janis, you are Dada as were Mary Wigman, Duchamp, Picabia, Man Ray, Ball before the "word" Dada existed. But "In

the beginning was the word," that is to say in 1916 A.D. (*anno Dada*). Dada, in one word, is liberty. Every Dadaist can sing and say anything he likes without the risk of being hanged. Moreover the Dadaist is sometimes just. Tzara, Huelsenbeck, Hausmann and myself were also Dadaists. It goes without saying that Marcel Janco, Hans Richter and Sophie Taeuber also belonged; and furthermore everyone in his inner self wants to be Dada.

(Dear Sidney Janis, don't for goodness' sake stride about your gallery with the winged step of a troubadour; your visitors will have eyes only for you and not for our "*beaux arts*"!)

All is Dada and Dada does not end in the Institute of Mummification where all is brown and the walls are all covered. Dada does not even finish in the "Beaux Arts" Museum where the brown "masterpieces" of which the prices go up incessantly, cover the walls and bring to the owners of such brown objects a joy that approaches mental alienation like the folly of grandeur wakes in the dictators, bloodthirsty instincts.

Dada is cheap and dear, like life. Dada gives itself for nothing, for Dada is priceless.

Jean Arp
Basle, January 1953
Translated by Marcel Duchamp

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The Dada movement is tremendously important. We live by it.
Jean Van Heeckeren.

Dada may be considered as having two aspects, one enveloping the other: the Dada spirit and the Dada movement.

The Dada spirit has always existed and will always exist, but through the ages and throughout the world the men who possessed it are extremely rare. This is not strange when one realizes that the Dada spirit, as indefinable as life, though in the final analysis identifiable with life itself, condemns inexorably literature, art, philosophy, ethics, and reason, because it believes them ineffective, not only theoretically but also for the pretentiousness of the men who are their high priests and exploiters.

The Dada movement, which historically was born in 1916 and came to an end towards 1923, was the conscious, extraordinary, and paradoxically fruitful expression of this spirit, since life's manifestations are never identically repeated, due to the diversity of circumstances, such a movement is, and will remain, unique in the history of thought and of art. It is exceptional that such a pleiade of individuals, whose horizons were so varied, should have joined forces even for a while in so unusual an affirmation.

It was in February 1916, in Zurich, that Tzara, Hugo Ball, Huelsenbeck, Arp and Janco found the word Dada as the sign of their movement which was to expand in 1918 after the arrival in Switzerland of Picabia—(the latter having brought to the group the Duchamp–Picabia spirit, as it was so rightly called by Pierre de Massot, who participated in the movement, and by George Huonet, in his essays on Dada; a spirit extremely free, and destructive of all conventions, a spirit born before 1914 in Paris—where, among young poets and painters, during the two years that preceded the war, an atmosphere of revolt against all conventions was in the air and was developing particularly under the violent and stimulating influence of Cendrars and Cravan, under the more discrete influence of Apollinaire, spokesman of the Cubists and of l'Esprit Nouveau—a spirit which asserted itself brilliantly in Barcelona, and New York in 1915–1916 and 1917, specifically in Picabia's magazine 391 and which in New York where Duchamp and Picabia met again, combined very effectively with the interests of Man Ray at that time as well as with those of Arensberg—reaching its peak in France as of 1919, after the meeting of Picabia and Breton, Tzara's arrival in Paris, and the combination of these forces with those represented by the men grouped around LITERATURE, the magazine directed by Aragon, Breton and Soupault, where Lautreamont and Rimbaud were particularly lauded and where appeared Les Lettres de Guerre of Jacques Vache (who died mysteriously at the beginning of 1919) and which had as collaborators Eluard, Peret, Ribemont-des-Saignes and Jacques Rigaut (the Dada Dandy who committed suicide in 1929), and shortly thereafter Max Ernst who arrived in Paris in 1922 after having played a large part in the Dada manifestations and exhibitions in Cologne from 1918 to 1920 with Baargeld and Arp; for simultaneously with the stages of Dada activity in New York, Barcelona, Paris, and Zurich (where the contribution of Dr. Serner and the activity of Richter in 1919 should be noted) Dada asserted itself very forcefully in Germany; besides Cologne, in Berlin from 1918 to 1920

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with Huelsenbeck, Hausmann, Grosz, Heartfield and Baader, and also in Hanover as of 1919 with Kurt Schwitters creator of MERZ, a word and movement corollary to Dada.

The importance of painters in the development of Dada is of prime consideration, and it is probably in the field of plastic creation, because they are liberated from the meaning of words, that one can find the most concrete examples of the Dada spirit. Although, as Marcel Duchamp says “The Dada movement, in itself a metaphysical attempt toward the irrational, offered little possibility for painting” the Dada painters succeeded in creating a physical representation of the Dada spirit which they were able to materialize. This was a real feat, for naturally they felt obliged to renounce all the conventions of the plastic medium and they set themselves resolutely apart from all the laws of the “beautiful” and the accepted values in art. The paintings, drawings, collages, and objects of Picabia, Duchamp, Man Ray, Arp, Max Ernst, and Schwitters, for example, demonstrate this clearly. Consequently, the proponents of DESTRUCTION finally CONSTRUCTED real WORKS which EXIST.

These works possess an irrefutable character of originality since they bear no resemblance to any other produced up to that time and cannot validly be placed in any known category; but they are very much a reality, having precisely that undeniable common characteristic: “to be Dada.” If by their intrinsic nature they do not give any “esthetic” satisfaction—except occasionally—they do open up new vistas, with far greater depth, truly beyond the field of art, because they have succeeded in making a concrete thing of the irrational, in a way that VISUALLY questions the validity of everything rational, a certain SHOCK may result from viewing them—A shock capable of startling the recipient out of the mechanical functioning of his intelligence, and making him “grasp with his eyes,” so to speak, the uncertainty of his accepted values, with all the consequences that may arise from such an awareness.

Jacques-Henry Lévesque
New York, March 1953
Translated by M. D. Clement

Transcribed from an exhibition poster donated by Barbara and Aaron Levine to the Hirshhorn Museum, by Greg Allen for Better Read #031, a sound project of greg.org, March 2020. An audio version of this text read by a computer-generated voice also exists.

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PUBLICATION NOTES

This transcription was made from a copy of Duchamp's poster on view at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C., which is a promised gift of Barbara and Aaron Levine. It was photographed in March 2020, shortly before the museum shut down because of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was originally transcribed for a sound project, Better Read #031, in which the text is read by a computer-generated voice.

The order of these texts follows the layout of Duchamp's poster, from upper left to lower right. Though dashes have been handled systematically throughout, other elements of the texts—notably, punctuation, spellings, emphasis, italicization of non-English words, all-capping Dada or not—are left as found in the author's or translator's original. Paragraph breaks take some cues from but do not preserve the ziggurat-like breaks designed by Duchamp. Though this transcript has page numbers, the original was one giant, unnumbered page.

The 212-item exhibition checklist portion of the poster is publicly available as a spreadsheet on Google Drive. Please visit greg.org/dada for more information, other available formats, and up-to-date links.

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