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Dadaism

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Apart from its anecdotal place as a colorful moment in the history of art and aesthetics, Dada, for better or worse, significantly changed the concepts and practices of art in the twentieth century. The noisy debates and wild theatrics of the Dadaists across Europe, and the work and writings of Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, and Francis Picabia, among others, raised profound conceptual challenges that altered the course of art and aesthetics in the twentieth century. The shift from the idea of art as a selection of attractive visual objects to art as a vehicle for ideas forced artists and aestheticians to reexamine and modify their thinking about the very concept of art, as well as its practice. The upheaval fostered by the Dadaists has called into question all essentialist definitions of art (such as Plato's mimetic theory of representation), as well as the formalist and Expressionist theories that were advanced during the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. Modern theories espousing the purity of art media such as painting also would have found no favor with the Dadaists. In contrast to modernist purity, their practices fostered the dissolution of the boundaries of the separate art media. The combined assault of wild, irreverent Dadaist experiments with the cool but deadly wit of the likes of Duchamp and Man Ray called into question all assumptions about art.

Dada represents an aesthetic of action grounded in conflicting anarchist sentiments extending from idealism to nihilism. It exhibits a nonconformist human spirit with respect to societal and artistic conventions and traditions. Dada first established its presence in Europe, and was ultimately more successful there, perhaps owing in part to its incompatibility with the progressive and pragmatic sentiments of American culture. It refers to the artistic practices and ideas of gifted émigré writers and artists in Zurich who founded Cabaret Voltaire in 1916 and launched a movement that appeared more or less coincidentally with related happenings in New York and Paris. The German poet-philosopher Hugo Ball, the Romanian poet Tristan Tzara, the German writer Richard Huelsenbeck, and artists Jean (Hans) Arp and Marcel Janco were the principal activists in Zurich. In New York, the main Dadaists were the artists Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, and Francis Picabia, who also engaged in Dada activities in Barcelona. In Paris the dominant figures were literary: Tzara, the poet Paul Eluard, and André Breton (who later was active with Surrealism), aided by Duchamp, Man Ray, Picabia, and others. Huelsenbeck took Dada ideas to Berlin, where he attracted the support of such artists as John Heartfield and George Grosz. Artist Max Ernst was active in Dada circles in Cologne, and artist Kurt Schwitters was the leading proponent of Dada in Hanover. Officially, Dada was a short-lived enterprise lasting from 1916 to 1924, when it more or less dissolved over differences among the principals active in Paris. Dada action in New York virtually ceased when Man Ray and Duchamp left for Paris around 1920. While relatively brief in duration, the Dadaist spirit and ideas still dominate within the avant-garde forces of contemporary art.

Although identified with this particular movement in the arts, the term *Dada* exemplifies a prevailing anarchistic element that has existed in some form throughout human history. Both its idealist longings for change in oppressive social and political systems (as espoused by Ball), and its abhorrence of the stifling bourgeois art and life (as expressed in the Dadaist manifestos of Tzara and others), are rooted in the intellectual ferment of the nineteenth century. In general, the Dadaists invoked Arthur Schopenhauer's antirational views that rejected the primacy of reason in favor of unconscious mental processes, although not his Platonist views on aesthetic objects.

Both Ball and Huelsenbeck were inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche's critique of bourgeois life and aesthetics. Their belief that reason is the enemy of new and vital forms of experience echoed Henri Bergson's views in *Creative Evolution*.

For the most part Dada's advocates were against Futurist, Expressionist, and Cubist art movements. They did, however, owe some debt to these movements, as well as to Wassily Kandinsky and the *Blaue Reiter*. From the Futurists, they inherited the manifesto as a means of expression, *bruitisme* or noise music, and the practice of altered typesetting in the design of their publications. The use of art as social protest was shared with the Expressionists in Germany, and the radical break with the past found in Cubist art was carried further in Dada art. In Munich, Ball had studied with Kandinsky, who experimented with sound poems lacking semantic elements. Such practices were adapted by Ball and others in the Dada performances at Cabaret Voltaire.

The young Dadaists had every reason to be restless. The world around them was undergoing monumental political, technological, and artistic changes. Political upheaval in Germany and throughout Europe led to World War I. Down the street from the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich, Nikolai Lenin was plotting the Russian Revolution. Technological innovations required clearing the way for the changes leading to modern life. Among the remarkable happenings of 1913 to 1920 were the establishing of telephone service between New York and Berlin, the opening of an electrified Grand Central Station in New York City, a constitutional amendment to provide for the graduated income tax in the United States, assembly line production at Ford Motors, the opening of IBM's office in New York, women marching for the right to vote in the United States, and the opening of the first American radio broadcasting station (in Pittsburgh), to mention a few.

Other major intellectual and artistic changes were happening concurrent with Dada. Sigmund Freud published *Totem and Taboo* (1913), and Albert Einstein published his *General Theory of Relativity* (1916). Respectively, these works demanded the rethinking of the psychological and the physical worlds. The arts were rampant with changes: The 1913 Armory Show in New York introduced many Americans to modern visual arts. Vaslav Nijinsky's ballets, D. H. Lawrence's novels, James Joyce's writings, Charlie Chaplin's films, the musical compositions of Erik Satie and Igor Stravinsky, and the emergence of jazz as an art form all happened during the Dada era. Compared to these monumental changes, the voices of the Dadaists might have produced only a small if irritating echo. Nevertheless, Dada added considerable spice to the art of its time and cleared the way for future developments in the arts, initially abstract art and Surrealism.

Differing views among the Dadaist writers and artists and their geographic diversity made agreement on a definitive program for all Dadaists virtually impossible. The very essence of Dada is controversy. This controversy begins with respect to the term *dada* itself, which first appeared in the sole issue of *Cabaret Voltaire* in June 1916. Dada literally refers to a child's hobbyhorse, and was chosen randomly by Huelsenbeck and Ball from a French-German dictionary while they searched for a name for the chanteuse at Cabaret Voltaire. Tzara also claimed credit for the discovery of the name. Dada thus came to symbolize this anarchic social and artistic outlook born in Zurich, and was referred to variously as "a farce of nothingness in which all higher questions are involved," "having a good time," and "life without carpet

slippers.” A recent exhibit at the Whitney Museum of American Art described Dada simply as “Making Mischief.” Both the seriousness and the farce that Dada embraced are suggested in these references.

Dada represented for Ball, Janco, and their colleagues a way to express their profound sense of rage and grief over the suffering and humiliation of humankind as exemplified in the evolving world war. Through their outrageous actions and writings they hoped, however naively, to clear away the debris of an overly rational world and establish a new social order. They attacked art based on the aesthetics of beauty and art for art's sake, as well as Futurism, Expressionism, and Cubism, representing modern art. Despite their assault on art, some of the Dadaists (Ball, Janco, Arp, and Schwitters) believed passionately in art as a meaningful instrument of life, and viewed their efforts as a means of social criticism and as a positive search for meaning and substance. Huelsenbeck placed a lesser value on art, as being only one expression of human creativity.

Apart from these differences, the efforts of the early Dadaists were grounded in a collective social outlook, which fostered collaborative performances and literary efforts. Their chief weapons were an entire arsenal of tactics grounded in deep social concern, as well as satire and laughter. They drew upon elements of irrationality, the unconscious, and a determination to confront the established ways of thinking about art and life itself. Fearless and at times foolhardy, they used their literary and artistic skills to shake the complacency of their fellow citizens with respect to social codes, language, and the practices of the arts. By freeing themselves from established conventions, they in fact invented new forms of expression and opened the way for subsequent generations to follow. Underlying their actions were references to radical philosophical ideas found especially in the works of Nietzsche.

Concrete manifestations of this artillery can be found in their performances and individual art endeavors. An evening at a Dada soirée in Zurich at the Cabaret Voltaire, or later at the Galerie Dada, would have included music, dance, poems, theory, manifestos, masks, and costumes, as well as pictures. These elements were accompanied by jangling keys, gymnastic exercises called *noir cacadou*, and often screaming renditions of poetry or other texts. All of these activities took place in a tight space with audiences jammed together up to the stage, and with minimal technical expertise at stage performance. The audiences included the bourgeois as well as international artists such as choreographers Mary Wigman and Rudolf Laban, as well as the Dadaists. As often as not, the music and dance incorporated African forms, and the costumes designed by Janco featured bizarre body masks made of painted cardboard, also inspired by a mix of African themes and other images based on the machine aesthetics of the times. The paintings shown by Arp in Zurich became increasingly abstract. Ball's innovative sound poem, *Labada's Song to the Cloud*, features indecipherable utterances such as “gadji beri bimba ...” In New York, Picabia repudiated the conventions of art portraits in his *Portrait of a Young American Girl in a State of Nudity* (1915), which took the form of a spark plug. In Paris, the soirées continued as Breton, Tzara, Eluard, and others proceeded to outrage the bourgeois audiences with assaults on their art, intellectual beliefs, and the conventions of an ordered society. Audiences retaliated, or perhaps merely participated actively, by pelting those on the stage with tomatoes, eggs, and beefsteaks from a local butcher's shop.

From this account of Dadaist actions, it is evident that they differed significantly from the Bolsheviks, whose program for social change focused on political action and violence. Although there were limited attempts to mobilize Dada as a political force, particularly in Germany, the anarchistic nature of Dada was not suited to serious political action. Nor was political action the main interest of its reformist intent. Rather, the Dadaists, like the Surrealists who followed, hoped to challenge the dominance of the rational over social and artistic life and to encourage the population to examine societal conditions from the perspective of the alternative human resources to be found in the irrational unconscious aspects of human creativity. Dadaists also differed from the Surrealists, who turned inward to escape the world that the Dadaists hoped to reform.

Apart from its underlying message of aesthetic anarchy, Dada warrants serious attention for highlighting certain concepts that have further enriched the field of aesthetics, such as the social role of art, the principle of contradiction, and the principle of chance. At the center of Dada action is contradiction. As Duchamp once remarked, anything that seems wrong is right for a true Dadaist. "It is destructive, does not produce, and yet in just that way it is constructive." Contradiction extends to the Dadaists' views on art. Hence, Dada embraces both anti-art and art. Anti-art, when applied to Dada, refers to the revolutionary art intended to debunk existing concepts and practices of making art. It represents a reaction to these concepts and practices, although it may incorporate them to achieve a different end. By its nature it entails an element of protest. The principal target of this anti-art was the "noble" and "beautiful" art derived from an aesthetic of "art for art's sake" that was being used in bourgeois society to mask social ills. While aspects of the Dada performances and exhibitions in Cabaret Voltaire and elsewhere were considered anti-art, as were Duchamp's shovel and urinal, they were at the same time experiments in advancing the future of art forms such as conceptual and abstract art. In addition to an anti-art component, the events at Cabaret Voltaire regularly included a wide range of art made by the Dadaists and others. African carved sculptures, drawings, and chance collages by Jean Arp; paintings by Paul Klee, Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, and others; the sound poems by Ball, a sequence of syllables without rhyme or meaning; *bruitisme* or noise music borrowed from the Futurists; dance, skits, storytelling, and the reading of texts, including poetry and manifestos—all were integrated into the evening soirées. At the Galerie Dada in Zurich, the works of Heinrich Campendonk, Kandinsky, Klee, and others were shown in March 1917. In the same year, Duchamp attempted unsuccessfully to exhibit his *Fountain*, signed R. Mutt, in New York at the first annual exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists. In a Paris Dadaist soirée, paintings by Alberto Giacometti, Juan Gris, and Fernand Léger coexisted with poetry readings by Eluard, Jean Cocteau, and Tzara. On the same program, Breton "performed" the erasing of a Picabia drawing as it was produced on a chalkboard. All of these events suggest that the contradictory elements of art and anti-art remained unresolved in Dada circles.

Chance represents another concept advanced into aesthetics through Dada. Chance functioned as a principle of dissolution well suited to the production of anti-art and to the Dadaist's anarchic aims with respect to the practice of art itself. It represented the voice of the unconscious in art and served as a protest against the rigidity of rational elements of art and life. Additionally, Dadaists held that chance helped restore to works of art their primeval magic power and recovered the immediacy that art had lost through the overly rational influences of classicism in prior centuries, reflected, for instance, in the writings of Wolfgang von Goethe and Gotthold

Lessing. The chance-based improvisations in the performances and exhibitions of the Dadaists at Cabaret Voltaire included experiments in “accidental” poetry, music, and skits, as well as storytelling and manifestos. Through these means, the Dadaists sought to liberate art from established assumptions and practices intended to represent the world through rational means (such as the laws of geometric perspective) or in accordance with the formalist notion of art for art's sake. Their experiments with chance and improvisation were subsequently incorporated into the work of late-twentieth-century artists, led by John Cage in music, and extended to dance, theater, and other modes of performance.

Other changes in the perception of artists and art were implicit in the Dadaists’ activities. By emphasizing the communal character of artistic practice, they helped to demystify the romantic notion of the isolated artist as the center of creativity, and thereby refocused attention away from artists and to their works and the function of art in society. Their assault on art required changes in the public as well as the art-world perception of art. An emphasis on the connections between art and life required that art function in relation to other value-related societal practices, including social criticism. From another perspective, Duchamp's introduction into the art world of commercially produced utilitarian ready-mades such as bottle racks, urinals, and shovels called into question a time-honored presumption that artworks differed from other aspects of the man-made environment, either by their function or by a distinctive set of features. Picabia's incorporation of machine images and Schwitters's practice of using found objects such as theater tickets or other discarded scraps of paper in his constructions raised further doubt about artificial efforts to separate art from other essential activities of life.

Dadaist art also requires rethinking of the canon of art. In order to admit ready-mades into the world of art, it was necessary to disassociate them from their familiar roles and also to expand the canon to include anti-art. Similarly, it was necessary to rethink the identification of aesthetic properties with art. Although attempts have been made to argue that the urinal presented by Duchamp for exhibition as *Fountain* had aesthetic features, these features were incidental to the challenge he posed to the canon of art. He tested the canon in another way in his *L.H.O.O.Q.*, made of an altered reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* with a mustache and beard. Through these efforts, Duchamp challenged aesthetics in a far more lethal way by questioning the boundaries of the concept of art. In doing so, he and the other Dadaists opened the way to a much wider practice of art in the twentieth century.

What remains as the legacy of Dada? In the arts and literature there is a considerable legacy of artworks by Duchamp, Man Ray, Picabia, Ernst, Arp, and others that has expanded the canon of visual and conceptual art. A repertory of books and poems by Eluard, Huelsenbeck, Tzara, and others has enriched the literature of the twentieth century. These works are of interest for their experiments with language and graphic design as well as for their content. Equally important are the Dada spirit and ideas that helped keep art alive and continue to inspire bold experimentation. Chance and improvisation have extended from their Dada roots to an important place in contemporary Fluxus art in the United States and Germany, especially through the work of composer John Cage and choreographer Merce Cunningham, and the video art of Nam June Paik. Contemporary Fluxus performances such as Cage's silent “performance” at the piano and the videocello performances of Paik and cellist Charlotte Moorman would have been quite at home in the era of Dada. Joseph Beuys enacted similar performances in Germany. The Dada

spirit survives even today in the works of the contemporary Belgian artist Jan Fabre, whose theater pieces such as *The Power of Theatrical Madness* continue Dada's assault on traditional art forms and the institutions responsible for their perpetuation. Postmodern art practices of the late twentieth century also benefited from the legacy of Dada, adopting art practices previously introduced by Dada. Looking at art in its cultural context and linking art practices to political and economic issues, disregarding stringent boundaries among art media, and displacing the artist from the center of attention are common themes in Dada and postmodern art.

Finally, through its irreverent attempts to subvert conventional theories and practices of art, and a concerted effort to reunite art and life, Dada enticed public art audiences to expand their understanding of art and challenged aestheticians to rethink traditional aesthetic theories and generate new ones to accommodate conceptual changes and artistic practices in the ever developing world of art.

See also [Aleatoric Processes](#); [Anti-Art](#); [Avant-Garde](#); [Cage](#); [Collage](#); [Duchamp](#); [Modernism](#); [Performance Art](#); and [Play](#).

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