

The Legacy of Dadaism

REBECCA LOGGIA*

Abstract: This paper aims to explore how Dadaism addressed many aspects of human nature that audiences were not accustomed to seeing – from corrupt leaders, to war, to examination of the self and its place in society and culture – and the results of that focus. We underline the importance of the historical context of World War I for the birth of Dadaism, but we mostly pay attention to the aesthetic dimensions of the cultural and sociopolitical debates which took place at that time.

Keywords: Dadaism, Cabaret Voltaire, Revolutionary, Bourgeoisie, Surrealism, Postmodernism.

“Dada does not mean anything. We read... that the Negroes of the Kroo race call the tail of the sacred cow: dada. A cube, and a mother, in certain regions of Italy, are called: Dada. The word for a hobby-horse, a children’s nurse, a double affirmative in Russian and Romanian, is also: Dada.”

Tristan Tzara

It is with this that one begins to see the true meaning of Dada: it encompasses all things. Like time, it can be translated, manipulated, catapulted into different cultures and regions, warped to fit the description of one object and portrayed to mean another. But this is exactly what Dadaism, especially in theatre and poetry, does; it proposes a sense of one belief while in reality begging its audience to contemplate something altogether larger.

* Arizona State University, e-mail: rloggia@asu.edu

It aggressively adheres to the proclamation that it is different from art – the absence of it even – as darkness is the void of all light. But what is it about Tzara's works that can so promptly claim originality in the works of Dadaism? He makes it utterly clear he is here to stay, to object, to ration out whom he feels worthy of being involved in the Dada movement – and who seems to never make the cut.

The revolt against logic and language is seen so vastly for the reason that logic and language forfeited to the greed and lust of war – something Tzara and his accomplices were rebelling against. This paper aims to explore how Dadaism addressed many aspects of human nature that audiences were not accustomed to seeing – from corrupt leaders, to war, to examination of the self and its place in society and culture – and the results of that focus. It claims separation of art, all the while using it to speak of values lost and mistaken, which make it everlasting, even after Tzara's declaration of the *End of Dada*.

The War makes an enemy

They were refugees with a voice, artists without a home. It was the year 1916 and migrants from all over Europe came to Zurich to escape the chaos of the World War I. Tristan Tzara was one of these refugees, alongside prominent artists such as Hugo Ball and future wife Emmy Hennings, Jean Arp and his soon-to-be-wife Sophie Taeuber-Arp, among countless others who thus began a small but influential movement called *Dada*. These "others" of society – burdened intellectuals, revolutionaries and enlightened devotees alike – gathered among bars during late night meetings with the purpose to create a haven for the type of art they demanded.

It was with this desire to create – in the back room of Hollandische Meierei, a club owned by Ephraim Jan – that these ideas became reality. On February 5, 1916 with the help of Jan, Cabaret Voltaire took its first breath. It contained spoken word, a combination of experimentation interlaced with passion for the poetic life; dance and music – every limb moving, every beat drummed and sung upon the stage in various ways of imagination, costume, and performance. It was unapologetic, often mirroring the society and culture around it in some disorderly way, breaking with the common bourgeois tendencies of the time. Anarchic in nature, it produced results that were sure to challenge public opinion and acceptance that stemmed from the horrors of war, as poet Hugo Ball wrote: "For us, art is not an end in itself, but it is an

opportunity for the true perception and criticism of the times we live in.”¹ Simply put, it was, “not the beginnings of art, but of disgust.”² But what were the ideals these artists were so specifically, and with widespread contempt, rebelling against?

Commanding the stage
(The use of art and its disassociation with previous practices)

It was the end of sophistication. It came in the form of burlesque and singing, of underground performances and stripteases, a dancing armada of actors or solo performances, bearing the soul in whatever form that spoke of art and a vision of the world alternate to the one which was reality. As Hugo Ball put it: “It is to exemplify the activities and the interests of the cabaret, whose whole endeavour is directed at reminding the world, across the war and various fatherlands, of those few independent spirits that live for other ideals.”³ An avant-garde movement, Dadaism was a direct reaction against the ideal artistic type – that of bourgeois, of the beautiful and alluring – which was usually aesthetically pleasing, especially when dealing with the philosophies of life or with women. Tzara himself was an avid force against such popular beliefs that proclaimed “truth” when he states, “Everything one looks at is false”.⁴ This brought on questions of self, others, and the unreliability of authority and nationalistic ideas that they believed led to war. Its practices were often chaotic, carefully crafted for their statements while allowing spontaneity to hover in the air of every performance. Not everyone, however, was in favour of such a movement against the norm, and there were many who would never accept the conviction so many Dadaists, like Tzara, lived.

As the war came towards a close in 1918, many artists continued the Dada movement back home away from Zurich. By 1919 the Zurich/Dada phenomenon began to wind down, but not before gaining significant notoriety for one of its last events where a large riot broke out. Tzara, by this time a sole leader of the movement after Ball’s leave into journalism, described it accordingly:

¹ MOMA Learning. “Dada.” *World War I and Dada*. MOMA. 2016.

² *Ibid.*

³ Olga Stefan. “Cabaret Voltaire: From Dada to Nietziet.” Itinerant Projects. SwissNews. May 2010.

⁴ Tristan Tzara. “Dada Manifesto.” Dadaism. 1918.

The tumult is unchained hurricane frenzy...the battle starts out sharply, half the audience applaud the protestors hold the hall... chairs pulled out projectiles crash... 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.⁵

This riot seemed to speak of everything Dada stood for, though it would never actually lay claim to any specific undertaking, as the movement was even against its own name from the beginning. What it did accomplish throughout its entirety and with evidence of this riot was to anger those that still held to bourgeois values and traditional roles – whether gender, organizational, or societal – that these artists were consistently breaking and re-mending to fit their lifestyle and what they saw as “self”.

Examination of Self in Culture and Dada

“Artists affiliated with Dada did not share a common style or practice so much as the wish, as expressed by French artist Jean Arp, ‘to destroy the hoaxes of reason and to discover an unreasoned order’.”⁶ In Tzara’s “Lecture on Dada” in 1922, he stresses the following:

It would not have been possible for us to found our agreement on principles. For everything is relative. What are the Beautiful, the Good, Art, Freedom? Words that have a different meaning for every individual... creating agreement among all, and that is why they are written with capital letters. Words which have not the moral value and objective force that people have grown accustomed to finding in them. Their meaning changes from one individual... one country to the next... The unconscious is inexhaustible and uncontrollable. Its force surpasses us... Even if we knew it, we could not reconstruct it.⁷

Though against many facets of politics and society, these artists proposed their personal, political or counter-political statements against what they felt only thwarted society from real progress. Tzara further reiterates, “I don’t have to tell you that for the general public and for you, the *refined* public, a

⁵ The Art Story Contributors. “Dada.”, *TheArtStory.org*. 2016.

⁶ MOMA Learning. “Dada.” *World War I and Dada*. MOMA. 2016.

⁷ Tristan Tzara. “Lecture on Dada.” *Dadaism*. 1922.

Dadaist is the equivalent of a leper.”⁸ This independence and title of “other” brought a keen sense of recognition of their own reflection and purpose. “If I continue to do something, it is because it amuses me, or rather because I have a need for activity which I use up and satisfy wherever I can. Basically, the true Dadas have always been separate from Dada.”⁹ It was in this that Tzara seemed to explain true purpose: that of self and perseverance of will. Simply put, Dadaism *exposed*, laying bare the true purpose of the artist. From poetic lyrics crying out against the devastation of war and brash politicians, to the revolt against usual practices Jean Arp points out, “Sophie and I resolved never to use oil colors again ... which seemed to us to belong to an arrogant, pretentious world”¹⁰ and finally landing on the tendency to bend and manipulate that of stereotypical roles, especially towards Dadaism’s women. A 1917 description of Sophie Taeuber’s dancing reads:

Instead of tradition, sunlight and wonder operate through her. She is full of invention... bizarreness... The narrative of the perspectives ... dance patterns are full of romantic desire, *grotesque and enraptured*.¹¹



Figure 1: Sophie Taeueber, Marcel Janco, *Dancing Mask*, 1916.

Recapturing Cabaret Voltaire

Dadaism, for all its liveliness of love and momentary living, quickly began to fade by the mid 1920’s. Surrealism crept up to take its place, bordering alongside Dadaism in its belief of the unconscious as a means to

⁸ Tristan Tzara. “*Dada Manifesto*.” *Dadaism*. 1918.

⁹ Tristan Tzara. “*Lecture on Dada*.” *Dadaism*. 1922.

¹⁰ Hilton Kramer. “*Moma Presents a Neglected Abstractionist*.” *New York Times*. 1981, p. 1.

¹¹ Ruth Hemus. “*Sex and Cabaret: Dada’s Dancers*”. *Research Gate*. 2007, p. 8.

unlock an artist's imagination. Like its predecessor, Surrealism revealed its contradictions to everyday beliefs taken for granted by society. Postmodernism, the late 20th century movement in art is said to also have gained its name from the history and movement of Dadaism. It is by definition the sole belief in one's own incompleteness, a believing of multiple truths rather than the traditional, philosophical belief of one singular Truth, which the original Dada artists fought so ferociously against as well.

For all of their fighting seems to have been left a legacy – of sorts. It is one that touches upon all forms of art – literary, conceptual, installation, intermedia, and pop-art – fighting its way through culture even today. In 2002 a small group, appropriately calling themselves Neo-Dadaists, attempted to recapture the old and abandoned Cabaret Voltaire and began their own Dada performances, but eventually were evicted. Though afterwards, the building was restored through a petition to the government, and it remains a museum – an institutionalized memory. Just as Dadaism rejected its own name and structures around it, it also rejects the constructs of time and every passing generations attempt to redefine exactly what it is, what it was, and what it will be. It, quite simply, leaves all who study it with one, lasting question: is Dadaism truly superior to all art or, like its counterrevolutionary rival “bourgeoisie”, does it simply defy time and logic by the people who believe it is the ultimate Truth?

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Rebecca Loggia is a recent graduate of Arizona State University, who studied English/Creative Writing and Theology, with an emphasis on art and its movements throughout history. She has previously been published in ASU's Normal Noise and hopes to travel and continue writing before furthering her studies through an MFA.

