DADA

The Anti-Art Movement that Forever Changed the Face of Art

Rejecting Art internally, the Dadas secrete it externally…if they look at their feet out of the corner of an eye they are indeed obliged to realize that they have walked in art.
Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, 1921

Marcel Duchamp, *LHOOQ*, color reproduction with added goatee and mustache, 1919

The Dada movement of Europe and the United States remains among the most unique and influential movements in the history of art, "perhaps the most decisive single influence on the development of twentieth-century art" (Shipe 1). A powerful and passionate reaction against World War I and the corruption of what they considered "bourgeois" society, Dada erupted as a remonstration against traditional art and culture while youths across the continent perished by the millions. Dada was a rejoinder to the insanity and atrocities of World War I and the socio-political structures that gave rise to its gruesome and deadly conflict.

Dada declared that mainstream art, order, and rationalism "had been implicated in the deaths of millions; that bourgeois culture was no more than a mask of civilization laid over a deeper barbarism" (Harrison 223). Founded on a desire by young artists, writers, and philosophers to undermine and destroy the established socio-political order and a cultural system that supported and promoted the mindless waste and madness of war, "its votaries had grown convinced that all artists, including the most uncompromising anti-establishment schools, had betrayed their true subversive vocation by collaborating with the bourgeois exploiters and philistines" (Gay 143).

The irony of the Dada movement and what this paper will explore is that over time, the very structure and culture Dadaism sought to obliterate slowly embraced its words, actions, and works. From its inception in 1915 to its self-induced demise in 1925, Dada in

large part became accepted by and incorporated into the very socio-economic system it sought to destroy. As German Dada artist and writer George Grosz described, the Dada movement was “startlingly novel to the people, consequently we were hugely successful” (Grosz 87). Dada’s objective in action, object, poem, and manifesto was to oppose the celebrity, high culture, and trappings of bourgeois elitism. Many Dadaists, however, became celebrities within that very system, famed for having generated a profound paradigm shift. “[T]he first step toward a comprehension of Dada is necessarily a leap over the initial paradox: this agent of immediacy and destruction has created some of the most enduring objects and attitudes of our times” (Lippard 1). The founders of Dada—including Marcel Duchamp, Andre Breton, George Grosz, Francis Picabia, Man Ray, Tristan Tzara, and many others—became cultural icons and the forefathers of a movement canonized forever in the history of art.

To understand the social circumstances that incited Dada and its charge to reject and subvert the current social order is to recognize the profound and devastating impact of World War I. “On average almost 900 Frenchmen and 1,300 Germans died *every day* between the outbreak of war in August 1914 and the armistice that ended it in November 1918. All told, nearly ten million people were killed” (Levitch 1). To many, including the originators of Dada, the Great War was an undeniable portent of “the bankruptcy of nineteenth-century bourgeois rationalism. That logic could be used to justify the killing and mutilation of millions revolted some men of sensibility" (Rubin 12). The reason and rational that had historically defined Western advancement and pre-eminence now justified madness, destruction, and inconceivable bloodshed.

The entire Western world felt the effects of the war and "many of Europe's finest writers and artists were lost during the First World War. Those who survived were often physically or psychologically scarred… artists began to question the values of Western civilization and its culture" (Wood 284). Dadaists condemned what they perceived to be a widespread corruption of society and its mores and was "a whole-hearted and unremitting attack on all the norms of the bourgeois culture: social, ethical, political, and philosophical—a kind of guerilla warfare against the establishment" (Motherwell xii).

Dada artists, enraged by the blatant hypocrisy of the world in which they lived, were disillusioned by the traditional artistic schools of thought of their time, including Impressionism, Cubism, and Futurism. Dadaists believed that these systems of ideals perpetuated the corruption of the current economic system and its obliviousness to the dreadful realities of the war. The Dadaists wanted to eradicate a structure that sold widespread denial in the form of pretty paintings to the churlish and vapid bourgeois elite. George Grosz described Dadaists' distain for students in the "hallowed halls" of rarified art schools, "brooding over cubes and Gothic art while the generals were painting in blood" (Grosz 81).

Some Dada activities incorporated staged violence such as faked shootings "calculated to remind the civilian population of the real violence of the war" (Levitch 13). Drawing from the madness of the world as they saw it, intentional absurdity and destruction seemed the only antidote to an endless cycle of violence. Romanian artist, philosopher,

poet, and Dada founder Tzara's seminal 1918 Dada Manifesto declares: "Let each man proclaim: there is a great negative work of destruction to be accomplished. We must sweep and clean. Affirm the cleanliness of the individual after the state of madness, aggressive complete madness of a world abandoned to the hands of bandits, who rend one another and destroy the centuries" (Tzara 256). Dadaists incorporated chaos, anarchy, chance, and disorder into their work in an attempt to dissolve the boundaries separating art from everyday life. They employed art as a medium to sweep clean a social order mired in debasement and corruption "in order to ensure that such a catastrophe never happened again…what was required was that the social forces whose order in the last instance it was, be themselves swept away" (Harrison 222).

Among the most resolute and articulate of Dada's earliest members, Tzara aspired to spread its tenets as widely and raucously as possible. His 1918 manifesto verbalizes Dada's advocacy of nonsense, opposition, and revolution. "I write a manifesto and I want nothing, yet I say certain things, and in principle I am against manifestos, as I am against principles" (Tzara 253). His manifesto also unmistakably lays out an inherent ambiguity, inconsistency, and potential for fracture within its own language, canons, and philosophical mandates.

Dada began in Zurich in 1915 with a confluence of refuges from across Europe seeking a neutral destination to escape the war and a corrupt socio-political system. Artists, poets, philosophers, and writers converged in Zurich with "no other affinity to one another than their hatred of a social order whose failure was attested to by the war itself."

(Dadart.com). Hugo Ball's Cabaret Voltaire was the official birthplace of Dada. Satirical even in its title, Cabaret Voltaire was named after the French Enlightenment author and philosopher Voltaire, "the proponent of rationality, standing at the opposite extreme from the Dadaists' carefully cultivated absurdities" (Gay 144). Cabaret Voltaire opened its doors with the nebulous mission of being a gathering place for artists, poets, and philosophers to meet and interact. The Cabaret Voltaire press release of 1915 declares:

> Cabaret Voltaire. Under this name a group of young artists has formed with the object of becoming a center for artistic entertainment. The Cabaret Voltaire will be run on the principle of daily meetings where visiting artists will perform their music and poetry. The young artists of Zurich are invited to bring along their ideas and contributions (Richter 16)

From the moment it opened its doors, however, Cabaret Voltaire represented much more than a sympathetic venue for music, poetry, and ideas. It was revolutionary, electrifying, and became the hotbed for the conversations, performances, and public tirades that ultimately came to be known as Dada.

Dada spread quickly from Zurich to Europe and the United States. As Dada invaded the Western world, each country interpreted its anti-establishment, rebellious, and nihilistic dictates through a unique cultural lens. Dada's fragile thread as a unified movement was its "anti" stratagem—opposition, insubordination, and revolution. Thus, the iterations and manifestations of Dada were as varied as its artists, audiences, and countries of origin. Hans Richter recalled, "the very incompatibility of character, origins and attitudes which existed among the Dadaists created the tension which gave, to this fortuitous conjunction of people from all points of the compass, its unified dynamic force" (Richter 12). This

tense dynamism unquestionably made Dada unique, innovative, yet also inherently volatile.

Tzara introduced France to Dada via regular communications to seminal artists, philosophers, and poets including Guillaume Apollinaire, Breton, Duchamp, Max Jacob, and Picabia. Although Dada came to Paris early in the movement, French Dada surged in 1920 when many of its originators converged there, including Hans Arp, Max Ernst, Man Ray, Picabia, and Tzara. Paris was the most sympathetic and hospitable venue for Dada, and focused predominantly on Dada's more abstract concerns such as its philosophical tenants and literary concerns.

Dada hit Berlin and immediately was its most political incarnation. Introduced by Richard Huelsenbeck and George Grosz in 1917, German Dada relentlessly criticized the political offenses endorsed by its country in the name of logic, science, and progress. Huselbeck felt that Tzara's Dada was entirely too soft and academic; the former's manifesto of 1918 "called for political involvement, a mixture of Communism and anarchy" (Lippard, 45). While Germany was strongly political, Zurich's and New York's Dada focused predominantly on "cultural gestures with a broader ideological rather than a more narrowly political impact" (Harrison 223). Both New York and Zurich were far enough removed World War I that they served as a refuge for writers and artists.

French Dadaists Duchamp and Picabia moved to the United States in 1915 where they encountered American experimental artist Man Ray at American photographer Alfred

Steiglitz's gallery *291*. By 1916 the three were the nucleus of Dada in the United States. Distanced from the war, New York Dada lacked the immediacy of the anger, loss, and anguish their European counterparts felt. Dada "flourished in 1915-17, before America entered the war, and was, therefore the product of disgust once removed. Isolation from the political realities in which European groups were inundated gave New York Dada its frivolous air" (Lippard 3).

Notable predominantly for the objects of art (and anti-art) created during this era, New York Dada received attention from important collectors and art patrons. Millionaire art collector Walter Arensberg was a major factor in the promotion of Dada in the United States through his support and sponsorship of Duchamp. "Arensberg had fallen in love with Duchamp's work, and set out to acquire every piece Duchamp produced" (Birmingham 1). Through the advocacy of Arensberg and his influential social circles, Dada became a much more mainstream and market-influenced phenomena than European Dada, much to the dismay and consternation of many Dada radicals and revolutionaries.

New York audiences loved to marvel at, take offense at, and ridicule the creations of Duchamp. In 1917 Duchamp placed an artwork in an exhibition at the Society of Independent Artists. It was an unjuried show so all works submitted were to be included in the exhibition without censure. Duchamp's contribution, titled *Fountain,* consisted of a porcelain urinal placed upside down and signed R. Mutt. The show committee, profoundly offended by the submission, promptly rejected the piece, calling it immoral, vulgar, and plagiaristic as it was a "plain piece of plumbing." Duchamp, under his

pseudonym Richard Mutt, famously retorted:

> Whether Mr. Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view—created a new thought for that object. As for plumbing, that is absurd. The only works of art America has given are her plumbing and her bridges" (Duchamp 252).

The drama, attention, and debate fueled from this incident caused audiences to re-consider the function, purpose, and meaning of art in society. Duchamp incited precisely the fear, chaos, and confusion that Dadaists sought to provoke.

Duchamp, with his everyday objects he dubbed *readymades*, "essayed perhaps the most extreme refutation of the claim that there is some essential, or classical, property that is shared by all great art" (Harrison 222). Duchamp shook the definition of art and its purpose to its core, much to the dismay of art critics, collectors, and curators across the country. A reviewer from the *American Art News* stated that "The Dada philosophy is the sickest, most paralyzing and most destructive thing that has ever originated from the brain of man" (Kleiner 754). Dada, due primarily due to its paralyzing and destructive approach, became among the most influential movements in history, and *Fountain* forever shifted the perception, definition, and potential of an object of art.

Dadaists like Duchamp, intentionally baiting audiences and challenging all assumptions, made objects of art that proved to be timeless and unforgettable. As French Dadaist Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes explained in 1921, "rejecting Art internally, the Dadas secrete it externally…Yes, yes, they express themselves: if they look at their feet out of

the corner of an eye they are indeed obliged to realize that they have walked in art. Moreover, this brings happiness, and it is not the crowd that will hold it against them…. What is to be done/ Act against oneself?" (Ribemont-Dessaignes 176). The public felt equally ambivalent about Dada's intriguing and rebellious lure. As Tzara stated in his 1922 *Lecture on Dada*, "I don't have to tell you that for the general public and for you, the refined public, a Dadaist is the equivalent of a leper. But that is only a manner of speaking. When these same people get close to us, they treat us with that remnant of elegance that comes from their old habit of belief in progress. At ten yards distance, hatred begins again" (Tzara 246).

The more Dadaists fought, ranted, and insulted their audiences, the more fans they managed to acquire. Their radical contempt drew crowds closer to the movement. In Michael Kimmelman's words, "part of the point of Dada, and of countless art movements that have imitated it, was to be one cheerfully contemptuous step ahead of its bourgeois admirers, who were only further persuaded of the movement's radicalism by its ridicule of them." Dada represented something radical, exhilarating, scary, and alive. As Dadaists ranted against the notion of the artist as noble servant to a corrupt and nonsensical world, they brought to a jaded and broken society a glimmer of hope: "Dada Dada Dada, a roaring of tense colors, and interlacing of opposites and of all contradictions, grotesques, inconsistencies: LIFE" (Tzara 257). Ironically packaged in wholesale distain and hopelessness, Dada nevertheless held the promise of the new.

Dada represented "new energy and an exhilaration which led, in our private lives, to all sorts of excesses; to insolence, insulting behavior, pointless acts of defiance, fictitious

duels, riots—all the things that later came to be regarded as the distinctive signs of Dada." (Richter 41) Dada, in its lowbrow tongue-and-cheek, rude, offensive, and disdainful way was profoundly timely and as such invaluable to its era. In his First German Manifesto, Huelsenbeck proclaimed "the best and most extraordinary artists will be those who every hour snatch the tatters of their bodies out of the frenzied cataract of life, who, with bleeding hands and hearts, hold fast to the intelligence of their times" (Huelsenbeck 257). These heroic words are used to describe a group of artists, philosophers, and dissidents who ranted against the lofty aspirations and false promises of a corrupt and hollow socio-political structure. In their certainty, rebelliousness, and radical approach, these anti-heroes found themselves the inadvertent founders of the newest important "ism": Dadaism.

Readymades, conceptual art, performances, and manifestos became the "new art," and as such, noteworthy. Dada persuaded its audiences to consider art (as "anti-art") in a new light. Anti-art prophets, these radicals were ironically bestowed with the trappings of fame, fortune, and celebrity. With major patrons like Arensberg collecting Duchamp and hosting salons, parties, and events to celebrate his genius, many Dada artists lost their shock appeal and became genuinely appealing, amusing, and collectable within the established art world.

The original message of Dada, imprecise from its inception and by its very definition, became further muddled by market value, gallery exhibitions, and museum galas. "They were stuck in the world of art rather than the real world as an arena for their actions,

despite the fact that they, more than any other recent art movement, had succeeded in flashes of political effectiveness. Once it is connected with "art," even by the opposition of art, the strongest protest is taken with a relieved grain of fond salt by the "cultivated" public" (Lippard 12). Accepted by and incorporated into the very structure they tried to raze, the critical success of Dada was not considered positive to many of its members. "When a writer or artist is praised by the newspapers, it is a proof of the intelligibility of his work: wretched lining of a coat for public use" (Tzara 255).

Dada did not disintegrate solely due its gradual absorption into the establishment. Although Dada was far-reaching it was also extremely volatile. Unified by opposition, Dadaism was a tentative confederacy at best and splintered and fissured across Europe and the United States almost as rapidly as it spread. "[T]he often imaginative work of the Dadaists was a tribute to the freedom of their fancy, but they soon divided into irreconcilable parties" (Gay 143). Tzara led a radical wing in Zurich while Breton led a literary group in Paris. Hulsenbeck broke with Tzara and the Paris group, and in Berlin the members of Dada "soon directed their aggressions at one another" (Hofmann).

In Tzara's 1922 *Lecture on Dada* he cynically expressed:

> Another characteristic of Dada is the continuous breaking off of our friends. They are always breaking off and resigning. The first to tender his resignation from the Dada movement *was myself*. Everybody knows that Dada is nothing…basically, the true Dadas have always been separate from Dada. Those who acted as if Dada were important enough to resign from with a big noise have been motivated by a desire for personal publicity, proving that counterfeiters have always wriggled like unclean worms in and out of the purest and most radiant religions (Tzara 246/7)

Dada's goal was to create an art so inextricably bound to life that art would have a place beyond the rarefied arena of the arts. Dadaists attempted to sweep clean the ruins of the wreckage of war "literally picking up the pieces of this defeated, war-ravaged country and, from these fragments, assembling a new kind of art for the future" (Levitch, 9). Dada came as close to shifting the paradigm of art and its function in society as any other movement, but by the end of World War I the urgency of Dada dissipated along with its pressing social relevance. As quickly as it materialized at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich, Dada subsided and "quiet and order returned…artists returned to the greatest possible silence to the higher regions…and so they brood again in their studios over 'really' revolutionary problems of form, color, and style" (Grosz 84).

In 1923, Dada artists were forced to face life within a socio-political system they worked so hard to subvert live on "in continual correlation to the public, to society, and [w]e cannot withdraw from its laws of evolution…a great number of artists quite conspicuously support the bourgeois system, since it is within that system that their work sells" (Grosz 83). Artists who chose to work within the system endured scathing censure, distain, and judgment from Dada peers and post-Dada bystanders. In 1921, French artist, playwright, and poet Jean Cocteau wrote a scathingly satirical essay about the demise of Dada entitled "Picabia's Recovery."

> After a long convalescence, Picabia is cured. I congratulate him. I actually saw Dada leave him through the eye….Dada is dying. Dada is dead…. My dear Francis Picabia, how good it is to see you making your get-away by automobile. How fortunate that you are a poor man rich enough to have a large automobile and that you only

steal purses that are worth the trouble (Cocteau 174).

Impossible to maintain as a movement, each Dadaist went his separate way. Ribemont-Dessaignes stated of the aftermath of Dada, “there is no afterwards. Purge yourself forever. Aside from that, take up the grocery business, farming, medicine, business with Abyssintia, politics, philosophy, suicide, and even Art” (Ribemont-Dessaignes 177).

Regardless of the choices Dadaists made after 1923, Dada left an indelible mark on the future of art. Willem de Kooning, New York Abstract Expressionist of international renown, described Dada in 1951 as “a truly modern movement because it implies that each artist can do what the things he ought to—a movement for each person and open to everybody” (Doss 72). Duchamp’s *Fountain*, rejected from to the Society of Independent Artists as insult to the nature of art, is today among of the most important and recognized art objects in history. In 2004, the committee in charge of Britain’s prestigious Turner prize called *Fountain* "the most influential work of modern art” (BBC).

Dadaists were so intensely engaged in the issues and concerns of their time that they ultimately imploded and exploded throughout the art world. Huelsenbeck stated in 1918 that “art in its execution and direction is dependent on the time in which it lives, and artists are creatures of their epoch. The highest art will be that which in its conscious content presents the thousandfold problems of the day” (Huelsenbeck 257). Unable to ultimately extricate themselves from the structure and trappings of the art world and the socio-economic structure of their countries, Dadaists succeeded en masse in raising, exploring, and bringing to the public eye the “thousandfold problems of their time.” They

also succeeded in "being young, randy, gifted and truculent, full of fun and ambition, and the impossible, unfulfillable dreams of artists who stepped out of their step-ins to dance" (Birmingham), and in doing so forever changed the face of art.

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