



20th-century art

Dadaism as a Response to the Fall of European Culture and the First World War

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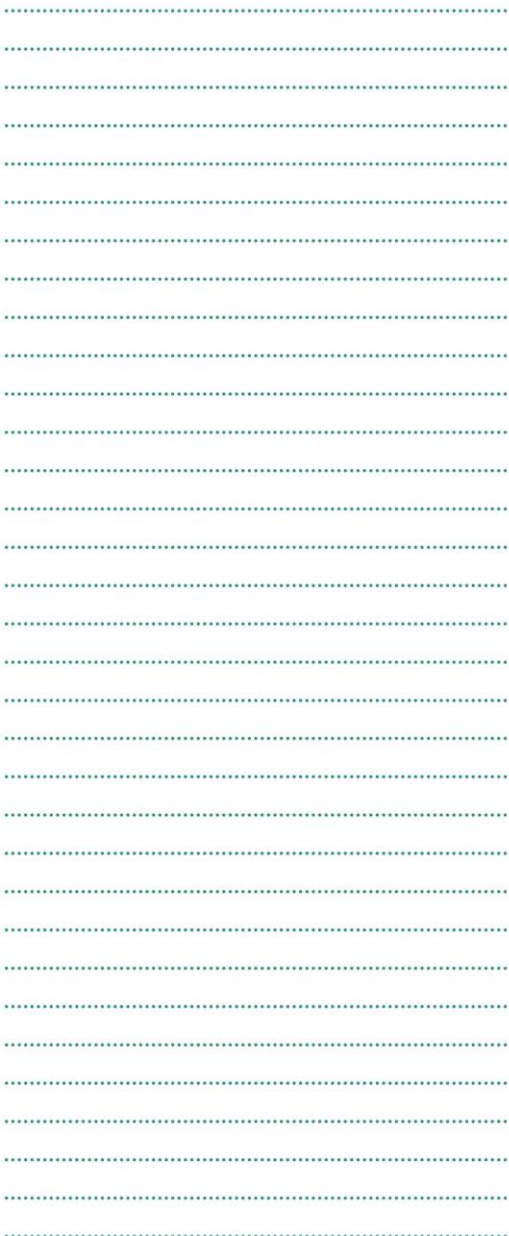


Because of the outbreak of the First World War, numerous émigrés, including artists and intellectuals from Central and Eastern Europe, began to come to neutral Switzerland seeking a safe refuge, a place where they could live and create undisturbed. In that way, in 1915 to 1916 Zurich became the birthplace of a new artistic grouping, which – although without a consistent agenda or uniform style – revolutionised the 20th-century perception of art and the role of the artist. Later called Dadaism, the movement was initiated by poets and writers active in *Cabaret Voltaire* set up in February 1916. It was a literary and artistic club serving as an arena for creative experiments of its founders led by the Germans Hugo Ball and his wife Emma Hennings, the psychoanalyst and man of letters Richard Huelsenbeck, the Romanian poet Tristan Tzara and the French painter Hans Arp. However, *Cabaret Voltaire* turned out to be not just a venue for artistic fun and games with form and first Dada performances – paratheatrical shows initiated by artists – but also a platform for expressing opposition against the situation in Europe of that time. Despite many differences, the members of the movement undoubtedly shared two things: unconditional condemnation of the war which they perceived as pure absurdity as well as the ultimate proof of the fall of European culture; and the desire to oppose the petrified artistic tradition, to radically transgress all norms in art.

The Dadaists were not the first avant-garde grouping focusing on war, as the subject had already appeared in manifestos and declarations of Italian futurists. What made their views markedly different from those of the creators of Futurism who praised the war as ‘the world’s only hygiene’(1) and supported Fascism, however, was that unconditional opposition to such an absurd manifestation of violence on a large scale. The First *uświęcony* dimension showed what cruelty the fallen western civilisation could perpetrate. The Dadaists thought that the collapse of Western civilisation was also a result of the weakness of the pre-war culture which did not play the role it should have as it was too separated from real life. That conclusion inspired the key idea of Dadaism: the notion of a total artistic revolt.

Their objective, in Zurich and elsewhere – as the movement developed in Paris, New York and then also in several German towns – was a pursuit of the total destruction of art understood as the object of an aesthetic cult. Until the early 20th century, art had been treated with nearly religious reverence and the work of art had been a ‘sanctified’ object of worship. Creators such as Tzara and the visual artists Hans Arp, Marcel Duchamp or Francis Picabia opposed that position, ridiculed it and refuted it. According to the Dadaists, art should be freed from aesthetic and social rules and norms. Consequently, they proposed the notion of anti-art, or anti-rationalist and anti-aesthetic creation which made absurdity, joking and irony the main forms of its ‘artistic’ expression. That unique creative attitude could be seen in each and every aspect of what the Dadaists did – from the name of the group, originating from the French *dada*, a term found accidentally in the dictionary meaning something trivial, a child’s toy, ‘all and nothing,’ to their works.

The greatest aesthetic revolution brought about by the movement was the introduction into art of ready-mades, i.e. objects already made, produced in factories rather than by the artist, who still elevated them to the level of a work of art by changing their intention and the context of their presence. The best known examples of ready-mades are those by Marcel Duchamp, i.e. *Bottle Drier* (1914) or the controversial *Fountain* (1917), the latter a sculpture where the artist used a ready-made ceramic urinal with a signature which he exhibited in an art gallery. In the early 20th-century, such artistic activity outraged the public as crossing the line of good taste and desacralising the work of art. Experimenting with form and making use of jokes, the Dada artists proved that art was still alive and that it could not just be an object of aesthetic rapture but also a comment on reality and, above all, that what mattered most was not the very physical work but the artist’s idea behind it.



The international milieu of creative Dada artists was growing at a record pace, embracing two continents and several countries. Numerous manifestos were issued, Dadaist periodicals also appeared. Although the movement's activity developed more intensively in 1916–17 in Zurich, after the war they became particularly active in Germany. The Berlin-based Dadaists focused mainly on political and social issues, creating for instance engaged collages to criticise the flaws of the new post-war reality. *Cut with the Dada Kitchen Knife through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch in Germany* (1919) by Hannah Höch is a prime example of Dadaist photomontage, in which the artist shows the post-war chaos as well as the political and cultural fragmentation of the newly-established Weimar Republic. That courageous stance and innovativeness of the German Dadaists also landed them in trouble in the face of the increasingly radical authorities. That was one, although not the main, reason why the movement began to die out in the early 1920s. However, the Dadaist revolution left its clear mark on artistic output in the decades that followed as well as orientating and paving the way for contemporary art.

1. F. T. Marinetti, "Manifest futurizmu" (Futurist Manifesto) [in:] *Artyści o sztuce. Od van Gogha do Picassa*, selected and edited by E. Grabska and H. Morawska, Warsaw 1969.

Translated from Polish to English by Mikołaj Sekrecki
Proofread by Dr Ian Copestake

Further reading:

1. H. Richter, *Dadaizm: sztuka i antysztuka (Dada: Art and Anti-Art)*, Warsaw 1983.