

[A Short History of DADA](#)



"Beautiful like the chance meeting on a dissection table of a sewing machine and an umbrella." —Compte de Lautréamont

Is it possible for an art movement to be anti-art? What would such a movement (anti-movement?) even look like? For the founders of DADA, which grew out of the aftermath of World War I in Europe, the answer is disruption—of society, of culture, and of art itself.

On February 5, 1916, Hugo Ball, a German writer and pacifist who had crossed the Swiss border to escape prosecution for his political activities, opened Cabaret Voltaire in "a slightly disreputable quarter of the highly reputable town of Zurich."

We were agreed that the war had been contrived by the various governments for the most autocratic, sordid and materialistic reasons. —Hans Arp

Zurich was a safe place in a violent time, a prosperous bourgeois city where writers, arms merchants, artists, bankers, revolutionaries, students, and refugees gathered to wait out the First World War. Unable to find employment, Ball and his lover, Emmy Hennings, often walked the lakefront, envying the fat swans that fed at water's edge.

While the guns rumble in the distance, we sing, paint, make collages and write poems with all our might. We are seeking an art based on fundamentals, to cure the madness of the age, and a new order of things that will restore the balance between heaven and hell. —Hans Arp



Ball convinced the owner of a small Zurich café to let him use the back room as a new sort of nightclub—a place that combined art, theater, song, and poetry to create an environment in which Ball and his friends could espouse their anti-war message. The group shared a desire to overthrow convention, insulting the public to shake them out of their willingness to blindly follow the authority of cynical leaders. They called their new home Cabaret Voltaire.

One day while Ball and his friend Hans Arp were hanging paintings for the Cabaret's opening, "Four little men with portfolios and pictures under their arms" approached them. One of the men was Romanian writer Tristan Tzara, who charmed the audience that night by reading poetry off scraps of paper absentmindedly pulled from his coat pockets.



Evenings at the Cabaret Voltaire were tame until the arrival of Ball's friend Richard Huelsenbeck, who had come from Berlin to study medicine, or so he'd told his draft board. He immediately joined the inner circle of the Cabaret Voltaire, adding an element of youthful arrogance, immediacy, confrontation, and violence.

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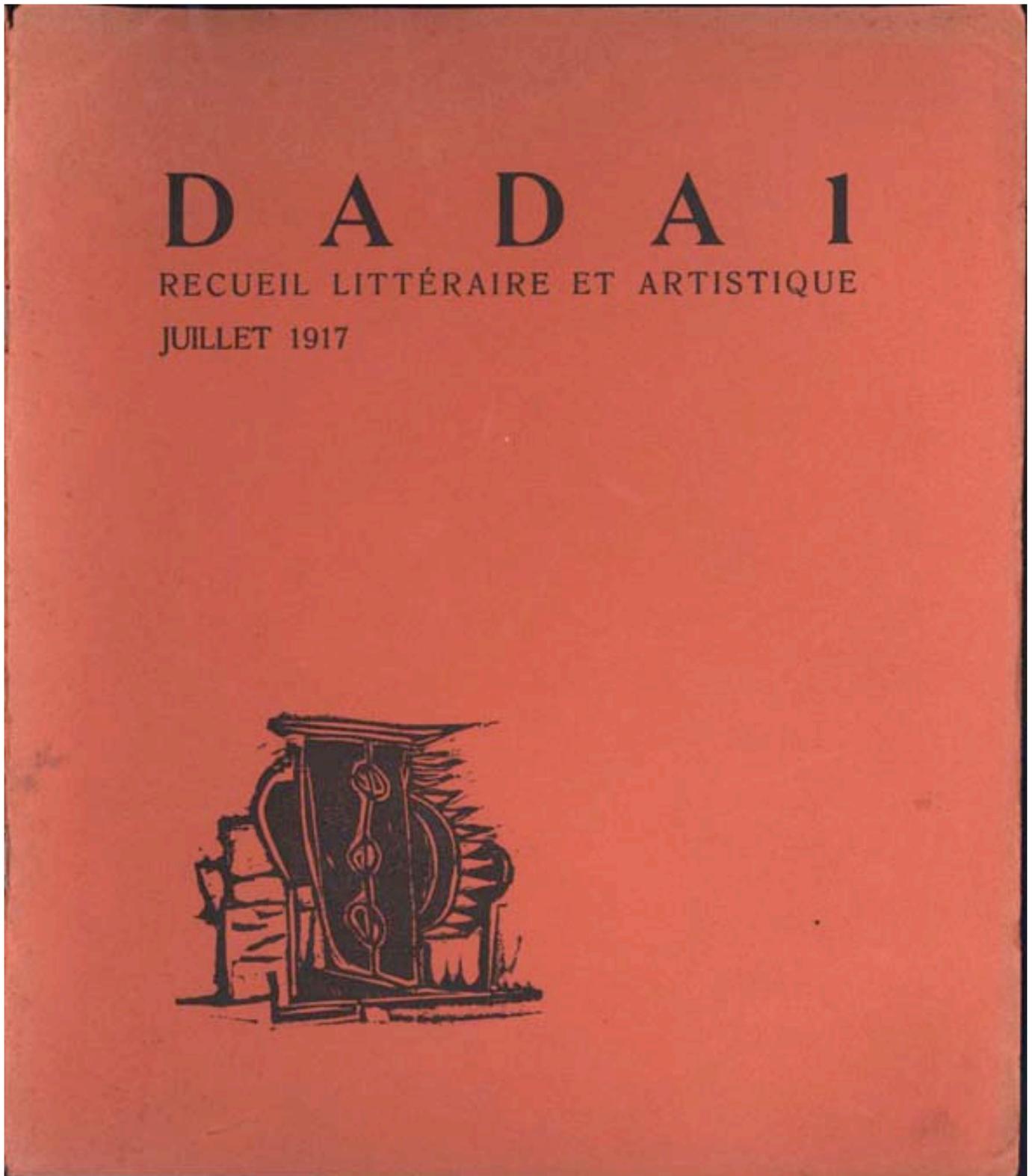
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The people around us are shouting, laughing, gesticulating...Tzara makes his bottom jump like the belly of an oriental dancer. Janco plays an invisible violin and bows down to the ground. Madame Hennings with a face like a madonna attempts a split. Huelsenbeck keeps pounding on a big drum, while Ball, pale as a plaster dummy, accompanies him on the piano. —Hans Arp

Looking for a word to describe their movement, the group found DADA: “hobby horse” in German, “yes, yes” in Romanian, nonsensical in most other languages, and fun to say.

DADA's predecessors include Leautréamont, Nietzsche, Rimbaud, and Alfred Jarry. Cubism and Futurism informed its break from tradition; the spirit of the movement was exported by Kandinsky to Berlin, by Apollinaire to Paris, and by Marcel Duchamp to New York City.

Cabaret Voltaire closed after six months. Ball produced an anthology of the art and writing of the café's short life called *Cabaret Voltaire*, where the word DADA appeared in print for the first time. But uncomfortable with the growing chaos in DADA, as well as with Tzara's ambitions, Ball left Zurich soon after, as did Huelsenbeck.



As the new leader, in July 1917 Tzara proclaimed, "The DADA MOVEMENT is launched" in the first issue of the movement's eponymous magazine. He brought new members into the fold locally, while exchanging letters, books, and poems with Marinetti in Italy, Apollinaire and Jean Cocteau in Paris, Francis Picabia in New York City and Barcelona, Andre Breton near the French front, Max Ernst on the German front, and many others.

In New York City, DADA was best expressed by the work—and pranks—of Marcel Duchamp. An artist in a family of artists, Duchamp left Paris in 1915 after being rejected by the army, sailing to New York City where, like his friend Francis Picabia, he became involved with photographer Alfred Stieglitz and his magazine *291*, as well as the art patrons Walter and Lou Arensberg.

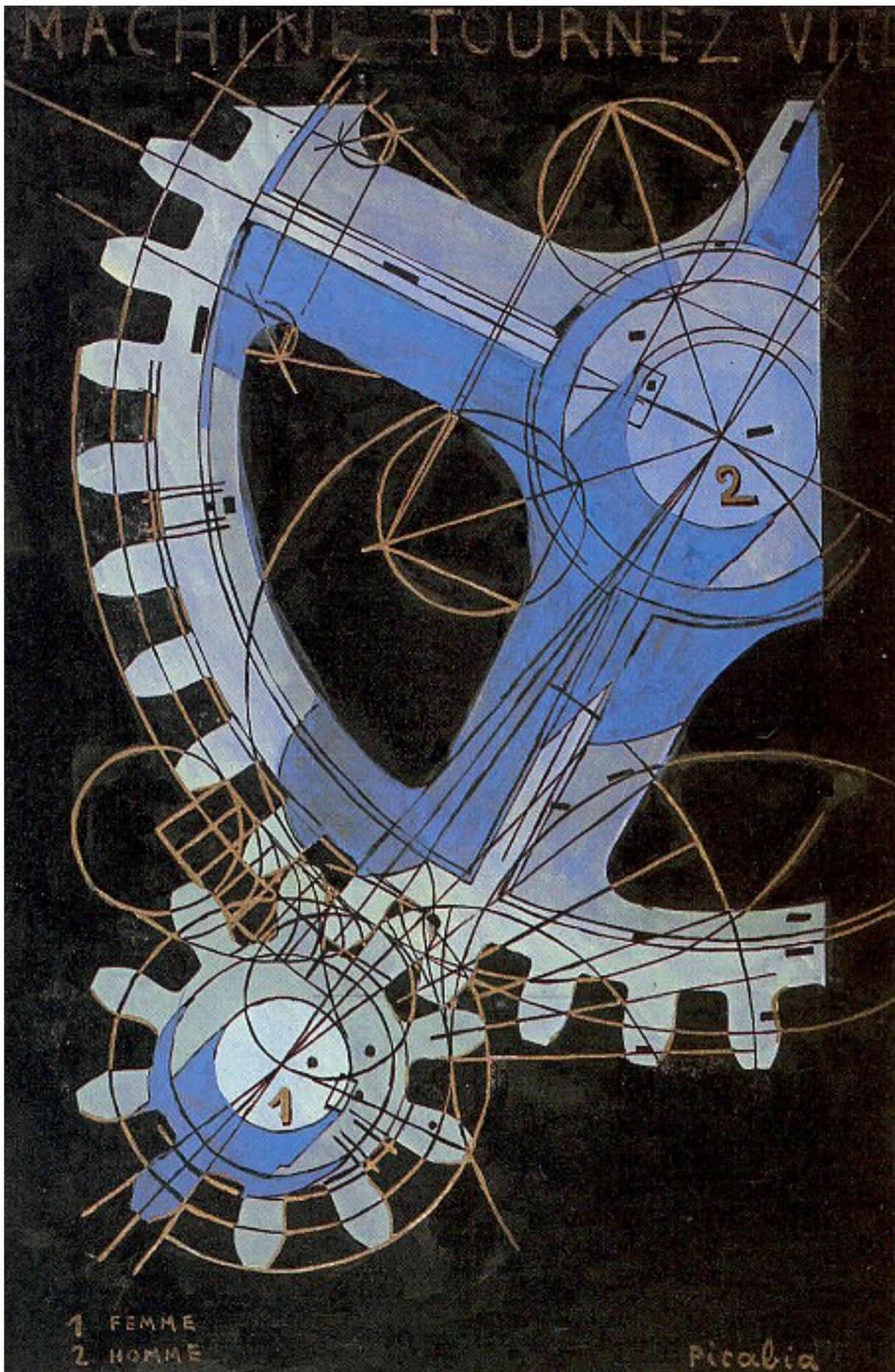
Duchamp was a deep young man, a loner with few friends whose intellectualism led him to reject the conventions

of his time. Like Hugo Ball, he had enormous influence on his contemporaries, including the Brooklyn-born artist Man Ray. In 1916 Duchamp stunned those attending the International Exhibition of Modern Art in New York City with his cubist/futurist painting *Nude Descending a Staircase*. Soon after, Duchamp gave up painting altogether for chess and hobnobbing, but his ideas on what constituted art—from found objects to readymades—were the seeds of modern art (though unfortunately, didn't make his work any more palatable to the public).



With Picabia, Duchamp organized the only known DADA event in New York City at the Grand Central Gallery, where they invited provocateur Arthur Cravan, a boxer, poet, burglar, forger, and nephew of Oscar Wilde, to give a talk. Calling himself “the poet with the shortest hair in the world,” Cravan had published a precursor to *DADA* in Paris called *Maintenant*, wherein his wicked, vituperative wit earned him a beating by a crowd of his rivals.

Cravan “pursued the destructive urge inherent in Dada to its ultimate conclusion: the destruction of himself.” At the New York speech, he arrived late and dead drunk, slammed his valise onto a table, pulled out his dirty linen, and began to strip for the society crowd, who thought they’d been invited to hear a lecture on Futurism. After Cravan began hurling obscene epithets, the police handcuffed him and took him away.



Francis

Picabia was a cubist painter and a very rich man who collected fast automobiles and fast women. He was extravagant, outgoing, bored, and independent of thought, with a love for a well-turned prank. He reached for the excessive and embraced the paradoxical.

“Art must be unaesthetic in the extreme, useless and impossible to justify,” Picabia wrote. He had, according to Hans Richter, “an absolute lack of respect for all values, a freedom from all social and moral constraints, a compulsive urge to destroy everything that had hitherto been given the name of art.”

Using his formidable political connections, Picabia had steered clear of the war, first as a French general’s chauffeur, later as a buyer for the French Army. On his way to Cuba to purchase sugar, he reached New York City, sailing no further. Instead, Picabia painted what he called “machine pictures” and “object portraits,” partied heavily, and wrote diatribes that were published in 291.

Scandal and malicious humour were the usual formulae of their manifestations and publications. —Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia

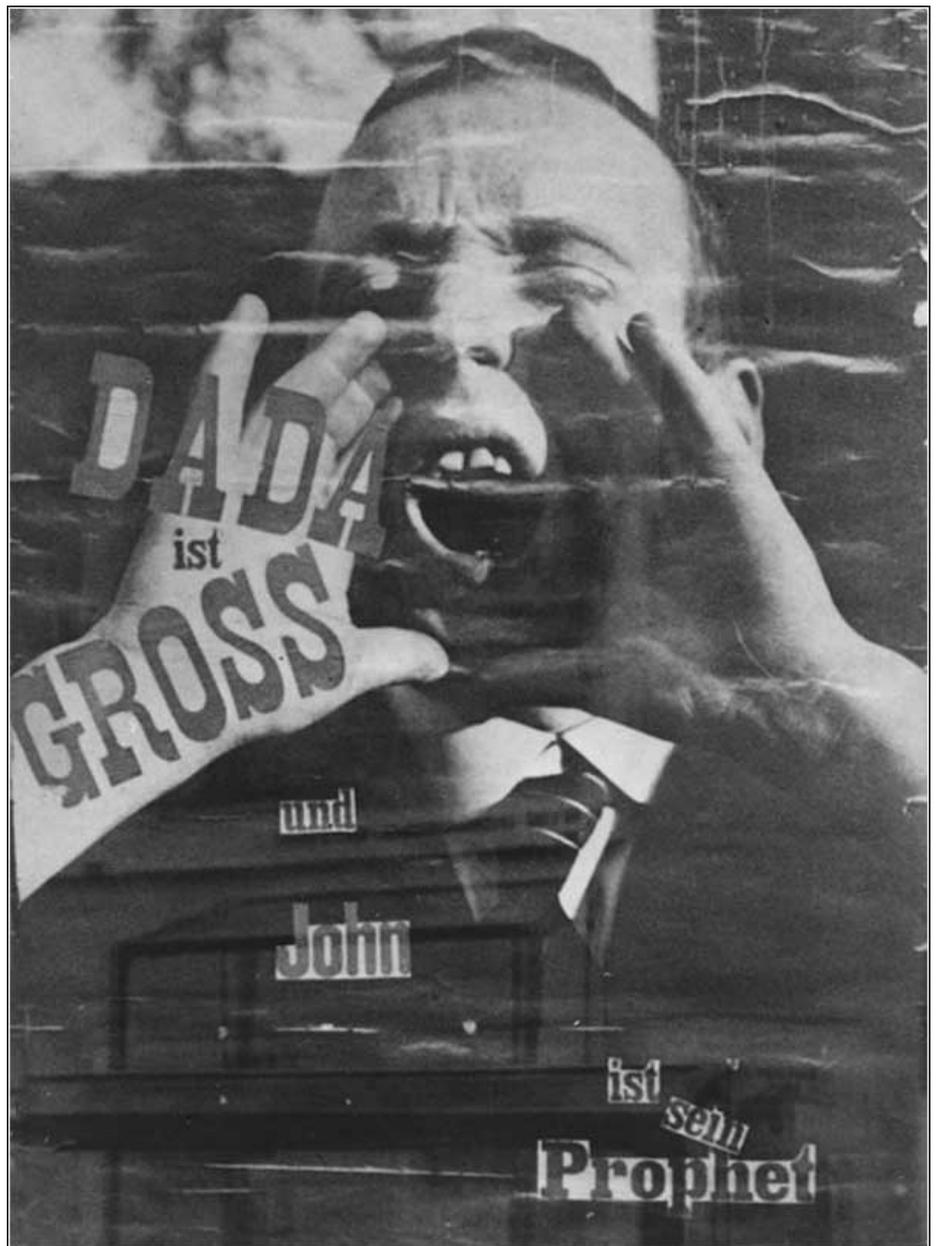
Together, Picabia and Duchamp terrorized the local art scene until Picabia, physically ill from too much frivolity, left for Barcelona on another futile mission for the French military. Despite (or because of) a nervous disorder that had disrupted his painting, Picabia began publishing a magazine called 391. There he printed the writing of Andre Breton, Paul Eluard, Tristan Tzara, and Louis Aragon.

Germany always becomes the land of poets and thinkers when it begins to be washed up as the land of judges and butchers.—Richard Huelsenbeck.

Fed up with DADA and Tzara’s grandstanding, Richard Huelsenbeck arrived in Berlin from Zurich. The great city had changed dramatically in the short time he’d been away: as the war ground on, Berlin was increasingly hungry, fearful, angry, and consumed with questions of basic survival. And in contrast to Zurich’s DADA, in Berlin it was immediately politicized, with real enemies in the street. Soon after the end of the war, right-wing militia known as the Freikorps periodically “cleansed” Berlin of its radical elements, which, of course, included DADA.

To make literature with a gun in my hand, had for a time, been my dream. —Richard Huelsenbeck

One night, at a literary reading, Huelsenbeck related the Zurich shenanigans with “nostalgia and sympathy.” Flourishing his cane and “unmindful of the consequences,” he gave the audience a good dose of DADA, going so far as to insult a crippled war veteran



and inciting the crowd to his own near-lynching. The owner of the room threatened to call the police, but was persuaded by members of the audience to let Huelsenbeck have his say. He ended the evening with a spirited reading of his always-provocative [Phantastische Gebete](#) (*Fantastic Prayerbook*).

Soon, Huelsenbeck found himself at the center of the people inspired by his reading, and Club DADA was born. As in Zurich, performances often consisted of deliberately provoking the audience with insult and name calling, but the Berliners added a bellicose note of their own, deriding everything, respecting nothing. As a result, they became wildly popular, and ironically, the authority-hating DADAs often had to call the police to protect themselves from their own audiences.

A series of publications followed, each one banned in turn, only to reappear under a different title. When a publication was ready for sale, a hired small band marched through the streets yelling, "Art is dead, long live DADA!" while selling the new item.

Meanwhile, Max Ernst, a recently discharged soldier in Cologne, was also creating DADA events, as was artist Kurt Schwitters in Hanover, although he called his flavor of the movement MERZ.

The struggle for priorities in dada gradually gets on one's nerves. —Richard Huelsenbeck

In early 1920, the Berlin group embarked on a "DADA Tour," starting in Leipzig to much enthusiasm; in Prague the performance attracted a crowd of 2500. Tempers ran high. "The Czechs wanted to beat us up because we were unfortunately German; the Germans had taken it into their heads that we were Bolsheviks; and the Socialists threatened us with death and annihilation because they regarded us as reactionary voluptuaries," Huelsenbeck wrote many years later.



The climax for Berlin's DADA was the First Annual DADA Fair (Dadamesse) in June of 1920. Exhibits included a mannequin suspended from the ceiling dressed in uniform and sporting a severed pig's head, and a female mannequin sporting an Iron Cross on its rear end.

In Cologne, homeboys Max Ernst and his good friend Theadore Baargeld published an incendiary journal called *Der Ventilator*, which they distributed outside factory gates. With longtime friend Hans Arp, they organized an art show called Dada Vorfruhling (Early Dada Spring). Entrance to the café courtyard where it was held was made through a beer hall urinal. Exhibits included a young girl in a communion dress reciting obscene poems; a wig, wooden arm, and alarm clock in an aquarium of red water; and a "destructible object," complete with hatchet and an invitation to destroy it. Of course a fight broke out, the aquarium was smashed, and the police closed down the show.

Reason and anti-reason, sense and nonsense, design and chance, consciousness and unconsciousness, belong together as necessary parts of the whole. —Hans Richter

In 1919, Francis Picabia arrived in Zurich, plying the DADAs with whiskey and champagne from his room at the Elite Hotel, and things quickly took on a sharper edge of anarchy, nihilism, and cynicism. "Reason shows us things in a light which conceals what they really are," he told them. "And, in the last resort, what are they?"

A performance before an audience of 1500 at the Grand Soiree would prove to be a savage climax for DADA in Zurich. Predictably, Tzara created the first disruption with a simultaneous poem featuring twenty readers reading twenty different scripts. But it was Dr. Walter Serner's "Final Dissolution" that caused the audience to go berserk, breaking chairs and ornaments in the respectable bourgeois theater, as well as cursing, fighting, and chasing Serner, who ran for his life out of the building.

Nevertheless, after twenty minutes of chaos, the performance continued for a shocked audience. For Hans Richter, the crowd "had gained in self awareness...The public was tamed." A great DADA victory was proclaimed.

We are circus ringmasters and we can be found whistling amongst the winds of fairgrounds, in convents, prostitutions, theatres, realities, feelings, restaurants, ohoho, bang bang. —Tristan Tzara

With the publication of *Dada 4–5*, DADA became a fully international movement. Thanks to its association with Tristan Tzara, Andre Breton, and Surrealism, DADA is remembered, if at all, for its Paris flavor where disgruntled World War I veterans like Breton and his cronies roved the literary and artistic soirées of Paris, picking fights and being generally obnoxious.

But amazingly, the fiercest anti-intellectual of them all, Jacques Vaché, had already passed from the scene, having died during an evening's excess at the war's end. Vaché had no use for literature whatsoever, accepted nothing, trusted no one, and ridiculed everything. He always grimaced instead of smiling and never shook hands or said goodbye, sometimes ignoring his colleagues entirely. Curiously, he also rejected sexual passion, sleeping fully clothed with his mistress.

Vaché's death had a profound effect on Breton, who was convinced his friend had deliberately killed himself and another as one final act to punctuate his life—elevating his ideas from the sophomoric to the heroic. "But for him," Breton would say of Vaché, "I might have been a poet." His letters, which Breton published, reinforce the anarchy and rebelliousness of DADA: "It proclaimed the break of art with logic, the necessity of making a 'great negative effort.'"

In March 1919 Breton, Louis Aragon, and Philippe Soupault published the first issue of their magazine *Litterature*. They intended the title to be ironic but, to their horror, the literary establishment enthusiastically embraced it. They quickly adapted a more biting tone and began losing the wrong kind of admirers.

From this point on it becomes the artist who justifies the work, not the other way around—and the artist's first creation is himself. As Breton biographer Mark Polizzotti observed, "A true revolution must first occur in the mind." Poetry was a tool in this goal, but it had to stand on its own, to be as persuasive as advertising, instead of serving as an amusement for the elite.

In January 1920, a small, dark, jittery young man debarked from a train at the Paris station. He had no money, no place to live; no one greeted him because he had told no one he was coming. Tristan Tzara had finally arrived—and was immediately immersed in sensation and scandal.

Using the showmanship he had honed in Zurich, Tzara created the biggest noise made by a little man since the turbulent days of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*. Within a week he was accused of stealing a sable collar at the Paris Opera, causing Breton to observe, "I'd rather be seen as a thief than a poet."

Besides outraging the public (who loved every minute of it) Paris DADA was notable for the titanic struggle for primacy between Breton, Picabia, and Tzara (with a nod to Jean Cocteau). In truth, Breton didn't enjoy DADA's anarchy, which conflicted with his overwhelming passion for control, and he would abandon it as soon as he fashioned its successor, Surrealism. Inevitably, DADA sputtered to its demise.

Surrealism devoured and digested Dada. —Hans Richter

July 6 1923 saw Paris DADA's last gasp: a multimedia show called "Evening of the Bearded Heart" was booked by Tzara at the Theatre Michel. Breton and his gang arrived, looking for trouble; during a poem read by "pint-sized" Pierre de Massot, Breton leaped onto the stage, brandishing his heavy walking stick. As two of his pals held Massot, Breton struck the man, fracturing his arm. Tzara immediately had the police throw them out, and Massot gamely finished reading his poem while the audience continued its hectoring. During Rene Crevel's reading of *The Gas Heart*, another future Surrealist, Paul Eluard, leaped onstage, slapping him. The stagehands immediately set upon him, giving him a severe beating before he fell into the orchestra pit.

Apes and parrots are the greatest enemies of art and dreams. —Marcel Janco

Hugo Ball died a Christian mystic in 1927 in a small hut in northern Italy. Tzara remained in Paris, dabbling in left-wing politics. Max Ernst and Man Ray fervently joined the Surrealists, as did Arp, although he never let himself get caught up in their squabbles. Francis Picabia continued his rebellion for a short time, before giving up entirely.

But Marcel Duchamp, more than any other, continued living DADA, renouncing art while producing miniature collectibles of his previous works. Only at his death was it revealed that he had spent the final 20 years of his life preparing one last piece, which can be viewed only by peering through a keyhole at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Many DADAs would flee Europe for America to escape the Nazis—even Breton for a short stay (although he refused to learn English). It was then that their influence was most felt on American art, literature, and politics. Fascinated by the story, artist Robert Motherwell interviewed surviving DADAs, gathered their artifacts, and published a history in which, for the first time, the myriad threads that make up DADA's tapestry were gathered.

DADA's aggressive stance and love of chance, chaos, and freedom still appeal to the rebel in everyone. As today's world conflicts deepen, DADA's internationalist, anti-establishment, anti-war message grows more profound and continues to be an intoxicating brew.

Beauty is around you wherever you choose to discover it. —Marcel Duchamp

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