



Dada: Art and Anti-Art

Hans Richter , David Britt (Translator)

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‘Where and how Dada began is almost as difficult to determine as Homer’s birthplace’, writes Hans Richter, the artist and film-maker closely associated with this radical and transforming movement from its earliest days. Here he records and traces Dada’s history, from its inception in about 1916 in wartime Zurich, to its collapse in Paris in 1922 when many of its members were to join the Surrealist movement, down to the present day when its spirit re-emerged first in the 1960s with, for example, Pop Art.

This absorbing eye witness narrative is greatly enlivened by extensive use of Dada documents, illustrations and a variety of texts by fellow Dadaists. It is a unique document of the movement, whether in Zurich, Berlin, Hanover, Paris or New York. The complex relationships and contributions of, among others, Hugo Ball, Tristan Tzara, Picabia, Arp, Schwitters, Hausmann, Duchamp, Ernst and Man Ray, are vividly brought to life.

Dada: Art and Anti-Art Details

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Philippe Malzieu says

Dada has been often scorned. Wedged between expressionism and surrealism, it was underestimated. This is undoubtedly because there were very strong personalities and several places Zurich, Berlin and Paris.

Richter is a singular personality. Artistically, he was a poète and painter. When he has flees from Germany, he's gone in New York where he directed the cinémathèque. He made several surrealist films with his friends (Calder, Cocteau....

Several artists dADA will wrote the history of their movement. The best is undoubtedly "Courrier Dada" of Raoul Haussmann. But this is undoubtedly the most rigorous. I bought a small collage at the auction after his death. It was a great artist.

Nate D says

From the beginning, Dada was thus replaced by a thoroughly blurred mirror image of itself. Since then, even the mirror has broken. Anyone who finds a fragment of it can now read into it his own image of Dada, conditioned by his own aesthetic, national, historical, or personal beliefs and preferences. Thus Dada has become a myth.

Dada fascinates me because it is so much more than the sum of its parts. Here Richter gives a good account of all of those parts and the greater sums they built towards, part academic research, part eye-witness. This was written 30 or more years after the fact, so there's some remove from subject (it's not nearly as breathless as I might expect from someone who was there (Zurich, 1917!) but he includes many primary and contemporary accounts when those serve better than his recollections, and, as a friend of many key players, he was able to base much of this on primary accounts. And he's actually a pretty good historian, careful to note his sources and even the places where his sources contradict eachother. But I think I like his subjective opinions and observations the best, still. A pretty good survey of the subject.

Kurt says

An enlightening and entertaining first-hand account of Dada's beginnings and its proponents. Hans Richter is charming, funny and humble as he unwinds personal recollections and accounts of the various personalities and how they left their marks on Dada, and, in turn, the 20th century. The original spirit of the anti-art movement comes through clearly as he speaks of these restless souls. If their intention was to destroy art, they failed; all were too creative not to have left art behind them as they went along. Richter speaks of the people he knew and their personalities so that you see that they all contributed to Dada in a unique way, bringing something of themselves into the movement. This is an inspiring book that allows you to be a fly on the wall as much as is possible for such things, with a really sweet tour guide to introduce you to all his weird friends.

If I only had a time machine...

Oh yeah, an aside; David Bowie copped a line from Richter from this book in his song "Up The Hill Backwards" from the lp Scary Monsters:

"Vacuum created by the arrival of freedom, and the possibilities it seemed to offer".

Nice one.

Dario says

I had to write a term paper on Dada and Tristan Tzara for one of my obligatory courses and could not find any reliable and extensive literature in Croatian, my native language, and was supposed to find some sources in English or some other language. I came across this book and it served me more than enough, while allowing me to delve deeper into the matter and understand the whole concept of Dada as art and anti-art. I truly recommend this book to all those who would like to gain some more knowledge about its founder(s) and if it could still be applied on some instances of art today. A fascinating discovery!

Branden William says

Hans Richter's first-person narrative, describing in adamant detail the Dada movement-- a storm that broke over the world of art as the war did over the nations-- is luxuriously rich in summarizing Dada on all accounts, unraveling the misunderstandings that currently constitute the image of Dada. 'Dada: Art and Anti-Art' is the Dada Bible. In 1909 the Italian Futurists were publishing manifestoes which were as like Dada as two peas in a pod. From the Futurists came the Swiss Dada movement, beginning in Zurich at the Cabaret Voltaire led by Hugo Ball, at the beginning of 1916. The Futurists had already introduced the idea of provocation into art and practiced it in their own performances. As an art, it was called Bruitism, and was later given musical status by Edgar Varèse, who followed up Russolo's discoveries in the field of noise-music, which was a basic contribution made by Futurism in modern music. These musical experimentations eventually became to be what is known as musique concrète. Richter acknowledges The Futurists as precursors to Dada, impregnating Dada with an artistic revolution free of all aesthetic and social constraints. Dada's philosophies are discussed at full-length by Richter, as well as personal accounts given, describing each individual involved in the Dada social circuit, and to the various movements that swept over Europe between 1916 and 1922.

"Dada was not a school of artists, but an alarm signal against declining values, routine, and speculation, a desperate appeal, on behalf of all forms of art, for a creative basis on which to build a new and universal consciousness of art." The Dadaists were all in their twenties, full of spontaneous energy and nonconformist ideologies, and ready to defy all the fathers of the world. Dada in Berlin had a very different tone from Dada in Zurich and New York. The situations and the cities were very different for each of the various Dadaist groups. In Berlin they had a real revolution, the ideas reflected in New York were known to only a small group but still became an intermediary link between European and American artists, Hanover and Cologne possessed independent Dadaisms of their own, which were less noisy, but no less important than Berlin Dada, and Paris Dada went off like a Roman candle, raising sparks in the shape of names, ideas and events.

Each movement successfully contributed to the anarchy of Dadaist revolution, though it was in Paris that Dada achieved its maximum volume (and here that it met its dramatic end). It had started with riots, poems, speeches, and manifestoes in Zurich in 1916, and with riots, poems, speeches, and manifestoes it came to its

end in Paris. The young writer and poet Jacques Vaché acquired special importance through his influence on André Breton, who, along with Tzara, were the dominating figures of Dada and Surrealism. Eventually these two strong personalities fought over leadership, and Breton eventually took over Dada and embraced his theory of Surrealism which became more of a popular product than Dada could have ever attained. Neither Dada nor Surrealism are isolated phenomena, as they are a single coherent experience. The significance of both movements lies in their mobilization of the subconscious in the service of a new conception of art. Surrealism gave Dada significance and sense, and Dada gave Surrealism its first breath of life.

As for Dada, it got what it wanted: the fury of the bourgeois. "Dada was the effective expression of a mighty surge of freedom in which all the values of human existence-- were turned on their head, mocked and misplaced, as an experiment, in order to see what there was behind it, beneath it, against it, mixed up in it." Despite common belief, Dada was never a 'school', a 'current', or a 'style'. Dada's points of departure had been established before the war through Expressionism, Cubism, and Futurism, however Dada was more aggressive and uncompromising, with more interest in asserting the artist's state of mind than in the finished product as such, becoming in the true sense, Nothing. The Dadaists claimed Genius, committing only to the present, freeing one's self from all bonds of history and convention, confronting reality face to face and forming it after one's own image. Dada led to a new image of the artist, producing this new state of mind, and thus bringing a new self-awareness into modern art.

Hans Richter contributes on account of his own Dada experiences, making for a critical and historically compelling narrative. 'Dada: Art and Anti-Art' is not only the history of Dada and its players in this secret society, but a first-hand account of Dadaism and everything that it stood for (and didn't stand for). Incredibly informative, this book reads like a manual for the most serious student of Dada. "Art must first be totally despised, it must first be thought totally pointless, before it can once more come into its own." Dada, Dada, Dada, Dada, Dada...

Chris says

Absolutely positively one of the very best intros to Dada history, from one of the original prime movers in Zurich and later (I think) Berlin. Much more comprehensive of non-central Dada locations (like Spain and France) than other similar histories. Like all histories written by people who were there, though, it is pretty subjective at times (Richter doesn't have much nice to say about Tristan Tzara, though he's considerably more generous than Richard Hulsenbeck in his "Memories of a Dada Drummer"), but I think that's kind of the way to go at first. Dada's most interesting feature is that there wasn't one universally-accepted way to do it. The infighting and vigorous discussion about what it's actually about (to say nothing of what it's FOR) is all part of the program. Enjoy it, folks.

Zoe says

A primary resource written by a Zurich Dadaist.

I read the book because I need to do some dramaturgical work for Tom Stoppard's play, TRAVESTIES.

Laurie Hertz-Kafka says

Focuses mainly on the lives and personalities of the characters of the Dada movement, most of whom Hans Richter knew personally (he was a Dadaist himself). I am more interested in learning about the philosophies behind the art, and the stories here are more about the antics (events, live performances, gatherings) of the Dadaists as well as its history. Dada was not so much an art form as it was an artistic and personalized expression of a philosophy. Its philosophy reflected reactions to the social upheavals of the period surrounding WWI as well as the shifting perspectives in all fields of knowledge and politics.

Gatherings, staged performance art, and public "scandals" were an integral part of the Dada movement, but the descriptions seemed repetitive to me (and even, after a while, to the Dadaists themselves). As Richter describes in the chapter on Paris Dada, "Paris was - in this way - captured, and there was nothing left for Dada to do. The demolition of bourgeois attitudes had been set in train. Everyone was discussing Dada and reacting, whether positively or negatively, to its programme, which consisted of anti-authority, anti-conduct, anti-church, anti-art, anti-order, deamonic humor." The chapter on Paris Dada also described how some artists ultimately fought for artistic control over a movement that was based on anti-authority. So ironic, but that's human nature. Its significance for me is as a precursor to Surrealism and a response to the new world disorder.

I saw an exhibit of the Societe Anonyme several years ago at the Hammer museum here in L.A. and loved it. So many prominent artists came of of the Dada movement and the Societe, and I was hoping this book would provide more information about their beginnings. If they weren't involved in the public performances, they were merely given mention in this book. It does make sense, though, of a lot of the "found art" and "ready mades," such as the reasons behind Marcel Duchamp's submission to an art exhibition by the Salon de Independents of a urinal as a work of art entitled, "Fountain."

It does contain historical elements and provides context for the movement as a reflection of the times, including its start in Zurich a movement of people who were avoiding involvement in the war. Covers some musicians, but no mention of the birth of modern dance, which took place at the same time and scant mention of the artistic movements taking place in Russia. I just saw the performance of "Isadora," based on the life of Isadora Duncan, and it added an interesting perspective.

My favorite part is about Max Ernst; this chapter does get into some of the influences ideas behind his work.

James F says

Hans Richter was an early if not prominent member of the Zurich Dada movement, who was involved in much of what he describes here; contrary to what I expected from the polemical tone of the quotations in the introduction by Dacha that I read previously, he does not try to present himself as a more central figure than he was or attack other figures in the movement. In fact I was impressed that he deals sympathetically with all the people involved from Ball and Tzara to Heulsenbeck and Hausmann and even Breton -- all of whom ended up as hostile to each other.

The book deals with the movement in a geographical-chronological fashion, and discusses its relations to its precursors, Futurism, Cubism and Expressionism, as well as to the later surrealist movement of Breton. It gave me a much better idea of what it was all about than Dacha's book. It also made it clear why it splintered

and dissolved when it did, and how that was inevitable and not a result of egoism and betrayal, but of the very nature of the movement itself. He discusses the influences of Dada on later art in two short ending chapters. The book is well illustrated although not as heavily as the shorter book.

Richard says

Dada was, according to this book: "a unique mixture of insatiable curiosity, playfulness and pure contradiction."

__dADA was not though: ground-breaking, utterly original. Its cabaret style, its insulting of audiences, its clowning and provocations, manifestos, photo-montages and random poetry, were all lifted directly from the Futurists who preceded it.

__DADA: employed randomness, spontaneity and nonsense, not in place of order, premeditation and sense, but in combination, head-on - the *collision* was the thing.

__dADA: was *not* saying via that infamous urinal, or the bicycle wheel nailed to a coffee table, "anything can be art" or "everything is art"; it was saying "these are *not* art - there's no such thing as art."

__dada's aim was: to destroy art, in the sense of demonstrating that art does not exist, that it is an illusion.

__daDA failed in this aim: it discovered that you can't destroy anything without simultaneously creating something else - anti-art was itself just more art and its creators, ironically, have become iconic figures.

__DADA also realised that: to produce even Hans Arp's torn fragments of paper fluttering down randomly and simply glued into position where they fell, there was still the initial intent, the *idea* of doing this in the first place - and that *that's* where the art lies. Art is not the finished object, it's a state of mind.

__DaDA was of course, above all: wonderful *fun* while it lasted.

__*Dada: Art and Anti-Art* is: the most un-Dadalike book on Dada I've read. It is lucid, meticulous, measured, thoughtful and was written by one of those who were actually there at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich during those heady days during the First World War when a handful of twenty-somethings tried, and gloriously failed, to change the world.

Timothy Urban says

This book offers a history of the art movement told from the inside. An artist who was there from the start writes about the Dada 'scene'. It certainly doesn't lack enthusiasm. But even at the best of times, writing about art tends to be hard to penetrate, verbose and likely to drift onto the pompous; there's often little direct and clear explanation. Critics and artists both tend to adopt this style, as if it's something they were sworn to do at art school. If you want an academic book about Dada, with names, dates, the why and in what order, the art teacher's view of Dada, then this probably should be the book you read right after you find that one. I was after a soft-ish, hand-holding introduction to this movement and this isn't it.

John Porcellino says

Excellent first-hand (for the most part) account of the genesis, rise, and dissolution of Dada. Richter breaks the history of this international movement into chapters on each of the key groups -- Zurich Dada, Berlin, New York, Paris, etc. This volume is invaluable not only for Richter's insights (down-to-earth and filled with humor), but for the treasure trove of original documents he includes. The chapter on Kurt Schwitters, and the inclusion of Max Ernst's "auto-biography" are worth the price of admission alone.

Richter concludes with a then-contemporary look at the new modes of Dada-influenced art cropping up in the sixties, especially pop, of which he's highly critical, but ultimately sees signs of value in.

Anyone interested in Dada, or the history of 20th Century art in general, will find this book fascinating.

Paul Osgerby says

Hans Richter gives us all the juicy gossip of the distinct, yet commonly-threaded, narratives of Dada throughout Europe.

ComicoTragiki says

Story of inspiration of modern and free art.

tENTATIVELY, cONVENIENCE says

As usual, not the same edition I have, not the same cover art.. but, whatever.. I wonder how many bks had "Anti-Art" in their titles before this one? Not many I imagine. This bk was written in the early 1960s when Richter, a major dadaist, was an old man - probably in his 60s. In chapter 8: "Neo-Dada", he writes about pop art by commenting: "The anti-aesthetic gesture of the 'ready-made', and the blasphemies of Picabia, now reappear in the guise of folk-art - as comic strips or as crushed automobile bodies. They are neither non-art or anti-art but objects to be enjoyed. The feelings they evoke in the beholder's mind belong on the artistic level of a garden dwarf. The pleasure offered to the public is plain infantilism [...] Uncompromising revolt has been replaced by unconditional adjustment." HAHA! Good onya mate! As the projectionist at the Andy Warhol Museum, I can only agree! & let's not forget art as good business for the museum directors, eh?! Where else can you make SO MUCH MONEY by PRETENDING to care!
