

BERLIN, THE DADA-METROPOLIS

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Ironic Affirmation of Urban Chaos

At the end of World War I (1914-1918), Berlin was seething with unrest. Klaus Mann incisively described the mood in the capital of the fallen empire: "If imperial Berlin had flaunted with much sabre-rattling the aggressive dynamism of a young German nationalism, the Berlin of the early postwar years reflected just as convincingly the apocalyptic state of mind of defeat."¹

This was a Berlin rocked by a cultural breakdown, decisive political power struggles and events like the November Revolution of 1918. It was the turbulent centre of the new Social Democratic republic and home to both the Spartacist revolt and a monarchist counterrevolution; it was a military city that had witnessed the March 1919 executions by firing squad. But Berlin was also a metropolis that bustled and flourished in spite of the political turmoil, a fun-seeking city of black marketeers and war profiteers, a magnet for impostors and would-be prophets of every bent, a city whose devastated North End swarmed with the jobless, crippled, destitute and with armies of criminals. All this made Berlin the most appropriate simultaneous "da...da... location".² And it was the North End, in particular, that fired the social-critical imaginations of the Berlin Dadaists, although – dandies that they were – they preferred to spend their time in the city's more affluent West End.

But the Berlin Dadaists' field of vision encompassed even more than these diverse realities. For them the city was also a crossroads of Western and Eastern influences. Their cultural rebellion was nurtured as much by the myth of America, the land of the Gold Rush, the Wild West and a democratic working people's culture, as it was by the October Revolution of 1917 in Russia. More than in other centres of Dadaism, the volatility of the urban hodgepodge – in the eyes of many contemporaries, a mixture of Chicago and Moscow – had incited this outrageous cultural revolt. It covered a wide spectrum that included radical leftist politics as well as autonomous aesthetic experiments. The movement even found itself harbouring the self-proclaimed world redeemer Johannes Baader, the "President of the Earth and the Universe, Chief Justice of the World Court, Veritable

1. Klaus Mann, *Der Wendepunkt* (Frankfurt, 1952), p. 133.

2. Johannes Baader, *Dadaisten gegen Weimar*, leaflet (Berlin, 1919). The choice of the name Dada was completely arbitrary. Here, it is a pun on the German *da*, "there".

Secret President of the Intertelluric Superdadaist League of Nations". His trajectory as a "fool in Christ", as a street prophet and saint, crossed that of Dada's artistic avant-garde, which was militating in favour of taking art into the street. Baader's staging of his life as a public provocation echoed the intentions of the Berlin Dadaists to deal "a blow to the chin and solar plexus" of the cultural establishment (George Grosz).

In addition to Oberdada (Superdada) Baader (1875-1956), the inner circle of the Berlin Dada Club, which was formed in 1917-1918 and remained active through 1922, included the Dadasoph Raoul Hausmann (1886-1971), Dadasophin Hannah Höch (1889-1978), Welt dada (World dada) Richard Huelsenbeck (1892-1974), Pipidada Walter Mehring (1896-1981), Propagandada George Grosz (1893-1959), Monteur-dada (Assemblydada) John Heartfield (1891-1968), Progressdada Wieland Herzfelde (1896-1988), Musikdada Jefim Golyscheff (1897-1970) and writer Franz Jung (1888-1963), as Dada Anarchist.³

Using productive destruction, the Dada Club attempted to break out of the "putrid, decomposing culture of Europe" (Grosz). The Club declared war on the "spiritual and social mechanisms of the Christian bourgeois world"⁴ that had ideologically paved the way for World War I, and it undertook a process of decontamination involving not only the fine arts and literature, but also music, psychoanalysis, theatre, philosophy and politics. In this context, it turned to laughter as a subversive instrument of scepticism, confusion and enlightenment. It sought to help overcome the despair that the War had sown and to transform hatred of bourgeois society into grotesque criticism of reality and culture.

The Berlin Dadaists' spontaneous embrace of an urban life-style was one of the signs that they had radically rejected the traditional image of man and culture. Influenced by Futurist activities, they resolutely opposed the cultural aristocracy's late Expressionist "head-in-the-clouds" tendency.

During, and even before the War, the Dadaists had begun to understand the "insolence" and scepticism of the metropolitan spirit. As Hugo Ball, who was fascinated by Berlin, noted in May 1915, "a new life is starting here, anarcho-revolutionary... contradictory... active!"⁵ No doubt, his intellectual experience of Berlin, especially of its hybrid theatrical genres, including music hall, cabaret and literary readings – which were staged in the city by small groups of artists – was one of the reasons Ball founded the Cabaret Voltaire. From early on, these hybrid genres had challenged high culture's superiority over mass and trivial culture. With the arrival of the Berlin Dadas, this challenge became a radical rejection of so-called high culture; they replaced it with the street's noisy protests intended to rip apart the city's pretentiously elitist and introverted art and cultural scene.

By their irony, the Dadaists undermined much of the traditional hostility to the city; they exuberantly embraced urban chaos, thus giving new value to the urban experience, which from the time of the Romantics had been seen as negative. Rootlessness was

3. Hanne Bergius, *Das Lachen Dadas: die Berliner Dadaisten und ihre Aktionen* (Giessen, 1989).

4. See Raoul Hausmann, "Objektive Betrachtung der Rolle des Dadaismus", in *Texte bis 1933*, vol. 1, *Bilanz der Feierlichkeit*, ed. Michael Erlhoff (Munich, 1982), p. 112.

5. Hugo Ball, *Briefe 1911-1927*, ed. Annemarie Schütt-Hennings, with a foreword by Hermann Hesse (Zurich and Cologne, 1957), p. 33.

rehabilitated; perpetual mobility, anonymity and randomness were welcomed as Dadaistic “unbridled freedom” (Höch). Dissociation was deemed by the Dadaists to be productive fragmentation that leads to an “ex-centric” worldview: “The Dadaist exploits the psychological possibilities inherent in his faculty for flinging out his own personality the way one flings a lasso or lets a cloak flutter in the wind. He is not the same person today as tomorrow, the day after tomorrow he will perhaps be ‘nothing at all’, in order to be ‘everything’.”⁶ Aloofness and flexibility became the cosmopolitan characteristics of the Da-dandy. Simultaneity was his central concern: “We want to be spun around and torn apart by the mysterious dimension, our sixth sense, movement. Only then will we be aware that we are alive, alive today!!!”⁷ The city appeared to Dadaist Huelsenbeck as a “simultaneous whirl of noises, colours and spiritual rhythms that Dadaist art coolly incorporates along with all the sensational screams and frenzy of its intrepid everyday psyche and in all its brutal reality”.⁸

A photograph in a June 1917 issue of the weekly *Die Neue Jugend*, one of the first Berlin Dada magazines, showed an acrobat who is able to remain standing on the inside of a wheel because of its momentum. Among Dadaists in Berlin, the wheel was frequently used to symbolize the challenge of technological, urban life that they so often examined. However, wheels represented not only the attainment of intoxicating weightlessness but also a major source of danger. It is no longer man who holds centre stage but rather the interpenetration of man and his technical urban environment. His presence in the moment signified “all” or “nothing”.

Because their attitudes were elastic, their art was able to playfully rework the alienation of modern life as “home” (Hausmann) or “homeland Berlin” (Mehring) and, not without some eccentricity, seek identity in the transient – though melancholy could not be denied:

Oh noisy world, you amusement park,
You blissful cabinet of abnormalities,
Watch out! Here comes Grosz,
The saddest man in Europe,
“A phenomenon of grief”.

Thus George Grosz opened his “Gesang an die Welt” (Song to the World); then, feigning an aptitude for real life, the artist dissolved into the hustle and bustle of the city:

His bowler hat pushed back,
No weak-kneed chump he !!!
Negro songs echoing in his head,
Colourful like fields of hyacinths
Or roaring express trains
Rumbling over rattling bridges –
Ragtime dancer!⁹

6. Richard Huelsenbeck, *En avant dada: eine Geschichte des Dadaismus* (Leipzig and Hanover, 1920), p. 32. English translation from Lucy R. Lippard, ed., *Dadas on Art* (Englewood Cliffs, 1971), p. 50.

7. Raoul Hausmann, *Am Anfang war Dada*, ed. Karl Riha and Günter Kämpf (Giessen, 1980), p. 131.

8. Richard Huelsenbeck, ed., *Dada Almanach* (Berlin, 1920), p. 38.

9. George Grosz, “Gesang an die Welt”, in *Paß auf! Hier kommt George Grosz: Bilder, Rhythmen und Gesänge 1915-1918*, ed. Wieland Herzfelde and Hans Marquard (Leipzig, 1981), p. 16.

The city's heavy machinery of circulation was experienced by the Dadaists as a fascinating, dangerous totality. *The Pneuma Circles the Globe* (1920), a montage by Heartfield of photographs and printed material, contains the word "total". The momentum of the wheel seems to have indiscriminately swept up objects and people. Apparently neither the artist nor the public has a place to hide from the market.

The City as a "Bloody Carnival"

While the city had been revitalized by the structural changes brought about by industry, it was still clearly reeling from the catastrophic *danse macabre* of World War I, which had also plunged the Dadaists into a "stormy vacuum" (Walter Serner). Hence, George Grosz's sober motto "Onward into the rubble"¹⁰ is the melancholic flipside of this ironic acceptance of big-city life.

A "bloody carnival", a "grotesque harlequinade under a bloody gallows", is how Grosz saw the postwar years, especially in the city. In his *Funeral Procession, Homage to Oskar Panizza* (1917-1918), the city resembled the vainglorious ship of fools of a foundering culture. The microcosm of the street represented a *circus mundi*, a play of delusion and disillusion, of illusion and deception that blurred the boundaries between appearance and reality. Through this "drunken alley of grotesque corpses and lunatics",¹¹ Grosz also came to terms with his traumatic experiences of the War and of a psychiatric clinic. He drew on James Ensor's depictions of Brussels and on their dance-of-death masquerade in his treatment of the theme. To his images of the city as a Babylon of death and eros, Grosz added trivial, trashy caricature portraits of stereotypical figures as well as references to the American myth. The "real devils and princes of darkness" of this bourgeois warmongering society were, in the view of the Dadaists, still ensconced among the ruling class of the new Weimar Republic, which, with its tangled mix of capital, the "cultured" and reactionary middle class, the jingoistic military, and the nationally inclined Church, pursued the goal of entrenching its power. 335

By their grotesque compositions, by the distortion and alienation of proportions and dimensions, by the opposition of different perspectives, surprising juxtapositions of incongruous subjects and formal approaches, and by simultaneous dislocations – by all these elements that constituted the Dadaist montage technique – the artists vented their social and cultural criticism to draw attention to abuses and try to uncover underlying interrelations, or even to allow the surface of things to speak for itself. 336

In the burlesque saturation of their montages, the Dadaists let objects, people, places and events overlap or come together in time and space. The city's hectic pace meant that space could not develop organically into places offering security. People and objects thus found themselves without a space or location.

Also incorporated into the Dadaist's vision was material issuing from the zeitgeist, from realms outside the fine arts and decorative arts, including graffiti scribbled on toilet

10. George Grosz, letter to Otto Schmalhausen dated June 30, 1917, in *Briefe 1913-1959*, ed. Herbert Knust (Hamburg, 1979), p. 54.

11. *Ibid.*, letter of December 15, 1917, p. 56.

walls. The culture industry, amusement parks, advertising, film, illustrated dailies and weekly magazines – these new media aimed at the anonymous metropolitan masses and the accelerating tempo of reception – inspired Dadaist montage and quotation techniques, as did the disposable, the banal and the random. The theatrical qualities of the street were important instruments in rendering the Dadaist concept. The city itself became the object of Dada performances. Dadaists crisscrossed their city on exploratory raids; some adopted the Kurfürstendamm as a “boulevard of discussion”. One fine summer evening – July 23, 1918 – Hausmann and Baader took to the streets of Friedenau in Berlin and read, simultaneously and at random, from Gottfried Keller’s *Der grüne Heinrich* (Green Henry), their voices gradually disintegrating into a delirium of sounds. This action marked the centennial of Keller’s birth. Another manifestation that caused a sensation was the Dada tour across Berlin advertising the magazine *Jedermann sein eigener Fussball* (Everyman His Own Football, 1919). What is more, their ability to play with the public and the press in relation to Dada events, as well as to conceive events such as the legendary *Dada Fair* (1920), demonstrated their ingeniously subversive strategy for catapulting the artist above the anonymity of the city and, temporarily at least, tickling the sensation-craving nerve of society with anticulture propaganda.

The First International Dada Fair

337 At the *First International Dada Fair*, the galleries were taken over by the “actionist” elements of the street – so much so that they almost seemed to burst at the seams. In two rooms of Dr. Otto Burchard’s gallery, some one hundred and eighty-five Dadaist works were mounted below, above, next to and even one on top of each other, thus transforming the walls into large montages that resembled billboards.

This disconcerting diversity was not only created by the crowding of the walls but also by the variety and contrast of the various materials employed, and by the differences in techniques, sizes, frames and execution. There were printed sheets, book jackets, watercolours, drawings, montages, magazines, title pages, photo enlargements, posters, advertisements, assemblages, flyers, Dada pillows, dolls and paraphernalia from the art of living such as a drawing of a dessert, a prize from a cooking competition, a certificate: all this in combination changed the exhibition rooms into a grotesque environment.

The general effect of the exhibition was of an open, rather than a closed, process – one that invited spectators to provide additional materials, to rearrange and recombine, to conceive new texts and pictures. A visit to the exhibition was a dynamic and provocative experience.

Text and typography had a visual impact equal to that of pictures and assemblages and, at times, appeared to compete with them, or merge with individual images, then separate again. The texts of posters formed a semantic layer that, like the Dada photographs, cropped up throughout the exhibition. Among the slogans were “Down with art”, “Open up your head”, “Leave it free for the demands of our age” and “Dada is the voluntary disintegration of the bourgeois world of ideas.” “Dada” became the exhibition’s watchword.

The aesthetic materials used went beyond art to include the artistically untreated material of daily urban life. The "raw material" of contemporary life invaded the exhibition rooms: in this impoverished, desolate form it brought to mind a cynical, satiric inversion of the costume parade that had been the reign of Kaiser William II. On display were ration cards, military braiding, gnawed bones, ribbons, bus tickets, rusty knives, broken forks, razor blades, medals, doorbells, buttons and above all, paper of every imaginable kind – newsprint, magazine stock, photographic paper, inflation banknotes, wartime toilet paper – as well as artificial limbs, stuffed carcasses, a mask of a pig's head and a pair of military boots suspended from the gallery ceiling as part of a grotesque caricature representing the stereotypical German underling.

The *Dada Fair* was a sombre house-of-laugh rendition of Berlin's ruinous cultural decline. Critic Adolf Behne wrote about the exhibition, "Dada shows the world of 1920. Many will say that even 1920 is not this awful. The fact is: man is a machine, culture is in tatters, education is conceit, the spirit is brutality, the average is stupidity and the master is the military... All 'beautiful' colours and forms are a swindle today."¹²

The *Dada Fair* was indeed a "negative direct *Gesamtkunstwerk* (synthesis of the arts)".¹³ Designed to jolt the society of the day, it represented the destruction of all established art forms through a grotesque anti-act intended to become revolutionary reality. The *Dada Fair* demonstrated the movement's iconoclasm, rebelliousness and revolutionary aims.

In the installation of the exhibition, the Berlin Dadaists wove connections between time and life, politics and reality, the daily grind and art, to create a link between subjective and collective experience – a link that science, religion and political realism could no longer provide. "Where there is experience in the strict sense of the word," Walter Benjamin wrote, "some of the content of the individual past combines in memory with material of the collective past."¹⁴

Kurt Schwitters's "Merz" Concept for Berlin

Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau* in Hanover (1923-1937) extended the "creative consequence" of the *Dada Fair's* concept of open montage. His was a permanent work in progress. Gluing materials together allowed Schwitters quite naturally to break out of the picture frame: his creation became a spatial sculpture, a Merz column that eventually covered the walls and ceilings of his house with grottoes and niches made of plaster and wood, until the work extended from the basement to the roof terrace, and from the balcony down to the water in the cistern.

Drawing on the principle that new works result from the growth, interplay and fusion of heterogeneous elements and different materials, Schwitters created an irritating,

12. Adolf Behne, "Dada", *Die Freiheit* (Berlin), July 9, 1920.

13. Odo Marquard, "Gesamtkunstwerk und Identitätssystem", in *Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk* (Aarau and Frankfurt am Main, 1983), p. 45 ff.

14. Walter Benjamin, "Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire", in *Charles Baudelaire: ein Lyriker im Zeitalter des Hochkapitalismus*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main, 1974; published in English as *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* [London, 1973]), p. 107. Translation from "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire", in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York, 1969), pp. 155-200.

disconcerting and grotesque work. Destruction and re-creation were the fundamental principle of the *Merzbau*. From it Schwitters developed the "supreme rhythm of his architectural concept", with which he sought to "merzerize" Berlin in 1922.

By carefully tearing down the most disturbing parts, by encompassing ugly and beautiful buildings in an overriding rhythm and by properly arranging the accents, the city could be transformed into a magnificent work of Merz art. At least painting all of Berlin according to the plans of a Merz architect, who would use light and colour to generously highlight entire neighbourhoods and a few important areas – of course not those coinciding with any existing centres of activity – would document the intention to make even the city into a work of Merz art. Perhaps we shall not live to see the "merzing" of all of Berlin, but the "merzing" of certain areas would at least partially meet the requirements of art.¹⁵

On the basis of this concept, Schwitters attempted to ironically oppose the futuristic and functionalist currents in European urbanism of the twenties. The essence of the *Merzbau* was rooted in metaphoric subjectivity and contemporary archeology and not in the objective, obsessive rationalism of modern life and its requirements of straight lines and clarity.

The *Merzbau* cultivated its labyrinthine qualities in opposition to any kind of dogmatism, rigidity and limitation. For the art critic and theoretician Carl Einstein, too, space was a "piece and a selection of human experience that can be modified at any time".¹⁶ The maze of caves, grottoes, niches, vistas, dead ends, detours and hiding places combine, as in a kaleidoscope, the infinite possibilities of a temporal experience that has been turned into a spatial one.

The Dada Manifestations

The Berlin Dadaists exploited the fragmented and unruly aspects of the street to explode their manifestations.¹⁷ The use of shock and scandal was intended to fundamentally frustrate and disorient the cultural expectations of the bourgeois public, thereby challenging it to reflect in an unusual way upon itself and its relationship to art and society. These grotesque manifestations, which at times were pushed to absurdity, demonstrated the Dadaists' refusal to stage a theatre of the world (*teatro mundi*) that allowed people to find their place. For too long, they felt, humanity had been hoodwinked with a web of lies about the world. The time had come to demolish this fraudulent framework and provoke the audience. The stage was turned into an action intended to break the unity of time and space. The resulting hybrid theatrical genres were as chaotic as big-city life itself. "The day will come when the image will no longer suffice," prophesied Umberto Boccioni. "Given the dizzying and accelerating movement of life, its immobility will appear to us as a ridiculous anachronism. We will put away our canvas and brushes."¹⁸

15. Kurt Schwitters, "Schloß und Kathedrale mit Hofbrunnen" (1922), in Ulrich Conrads, ed., *Frühlicht (1920-1922)*, (Berlin, Frankfurt am Main and Vienna, 1963), p. 167.

16. Quoted in Heidemarie Oehm, *Die Kunsttheorie Carl Einsteins* (Munich, 1976), p. 73.

17. See Bergius, 1989.

18. Quoted in Christa Baumgarth, *Geschichte des Futurismus* (Reinbek, 1966), p. 199.

For a short time, the Berlin Dadaists' manifestations and their tours to Hamburg, Prague, Leipzig, Teplitz-Schönau and Karlsbad in January and February 1920 made them the "court jesters to the masses". Their evening performances consisted of jarring presentations uniting speech, noise, movement and dance. Sound poems and simultaneous poems, manifestos, satirical lyrics, "jungle songs", sketches, insults hurled at the audience, noise actions and improvisations transformed the stage into an arena for continuously changing contradictory events. Many of the individual scenes took on a life of their own, so much so that the logic behind them was lost. Whenever a performance threatened to become too perfect, in provocation the Dadaists interrupted it. Chanting, rhythm, whispering, stammering, bawling and shrieking became the means of expression in these actions. Most of the simultaneous poems were accompanied by an orchestrated cacophony of drums, gongs, baby rattles, wooden clappers, cowbells, pot lids, ocarinas and keys.

In order to keep the confrontation with the audience alive, these manifestations had to be constantly changed and intensified. The Dadaists were only too aware that the culture industry's mighty circulation machinery could swallow anything, even protest and revolt. They ceased their activities when what they were intending as subversive revolt came to be appreciated solely as entertainment.

The Dadaists ironically adopted the transitory nature of big-city innovations:

A Dada bears the signs of his own decay clearly visible for all to see and knows full well that he is but an ephemeral being... Death to him is a completely Dadaist matter. For this reason he loves to face danger... He will put an end to the meanings associated with the word "Dada" when he feels that the time has come to do so.¹⁹

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19. Richard Huelsenbeck, "Die dadaistische Bewegung: eine Selbstbiographie", *Die neue Rundschau*, vol. 2, no. 8 (1920), p. 974.