

*From Dada to Infra-noir: Dada, Surrealism, and
Romania*

Selected Texts

Marcel Janco

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Recommended Citation

Janco, Marcel. "Selected Texts." *Dada/Surrealism* 20 (2015): n. pag. Web.

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Selected Texts

Marcel Janco

Introduction

Marcel Janco (1895-1984) is perhaps best known as Tzara's companion in the Dada Zurich adventure (1916-1921) and as a prolific painter, but he was also a theorist fully in tune with international trends and movements. He was, in addition, a practicing architect, active primarily in inter-war Romania, but also in Israel, where he would settle in 1942 in the wake of the Bucharest pogrom, as well as, very briefly (1920-1921), in northern France.

The modest selection of texts we provide here, penned by Janco himself, aims to highlight in his own voice how he positioned himself subsequent to his break with Tzara, and to offer a glimpse into his contributions to the theory of visual arts, architecture, and urbanism as expressed from 1918 onward, primarily in the review *Contimporanul* throughout the 1920s. During this period Janco consistently signed his work with the Romanian form of his name, "Iancu."

An iconic work, the mask/portrait of Tzara, dating from the very year that marks the two friends' split as reflected in the "radical Dada" manifesto of 1919, is featured on the contents page of our volume. Four images, also from *Contimporanul*, which he co-edited with Ion Vinea, accompany our selection of texts. Two are plastic works, one of them (fig. 1) a self-portrait that appeared on the cover of a 1923 issue, the second (fig. 2) a color linocut exemplifying the non-figurative art he was advocating, informed here by constructivist elements. The other two are architectural works, the first (fig. 3) a telling illustration of Janco's modernism as articulated in his theoretical texts, the second (fig. 4) the emblematic atelier he designed for Vinea.

The first text in our selection is an excerpt from Janco's "Creative Dada" (1957). The text presents his retrospective view of the Dada years as different from Tzara's view, and focuses – in its last third, reproduced here – on the splinter group that encapsulated Janco's own concept of what the movement should and up to a point did become once past its first stage: no longer a destructive and nihilistic but rather a creative and constructive Dada, collaborative, and fully engaged, through art, in society. This excerpt also devotes some space to avant-garde film, a topic he had developed much earlier (notably in the 1925 article "Filmul" (*Contimporanul* 55-56)), one indication among others of his multiple, interdisciplinary interests. First published in a trilingual edition (*Dada: Monograph of a Movement*, edited by Willy

Verkauf, with Marcel Janco and Hans Bollinger),¹ “Creative Dada” exhibits some discrepancies among its French, German, and English versions, including a few sentences that appear in the French version only. For this reason, and at the suggestion of the artist’s daughter Dadi Janco, we have re-translated the chosen excerpt from the French into a new English version. As a whole, this new iteration does not differ substantially from the published version.

The humorous bilingual dialogue “T.S.F.” (dated 1918 but first published in 1925) pits new art, capable of bringing about “new life,” against “dead” traditional, old art. The promotion of abstract art as vehicle of freedom would become a recurrent motif in Janco’s writings of the time, although he would turn to figurative art whenever certain themes required it, notably testimonials to historical fact, and first among them the atrocities of the Bucharest pogrom. A faint echo of Apollinaire’s “L’Esprit nouveau et les poètes” (1917) can be noted in this text’s resolute look to the “Future” and in its evocation of new technologies.

“Notes on Art” (1924) develops these ideas further. Just as for Baudelaire earlier on, art need not be “beautiful.” It must be “intense,” although probably not in the same sense as Breton’s “convulsive beauty.” There are no geographical or chronological hierarchies in art: folk art, for instance, is exemplary, just as it was for his contemporary, Le Corbusier.

The target of Janco’s criticism when discussing existing architecture and urbanism at odds with the modern world is vividly illustrated in his article “The Bucharest of Accidents” (1926) – where “accident” stands for error, chaos, and lack of vision in the expanding capital’s urban texture.

The article “Architecture” (1929) provides answers for such “improvised” cities. Here Janco praises new developments inspired by evolutions in the arts on the one hand and spurred by the demands of modern life and the availability of new technologies on the other. He aligns himself with the functionalism of Le Corbusier, including the rationalism and universalism displayed for the first time in Le Corbusier’s Pavilion de l’Esprit Nouveau at the 1924 Arts Décoratifs exhibition (and, although it goes unmentioned, in the eponymous review, *L’Esprit nouveau*). By evoking three other key international exhibitions (in Stuttgart, Warsaw, and Brno), he shows the role played by Central and Eastern European culture, alongside the West, in what he sees as a “European artistic renaissance.”

We thank the Janco family (Dadi Janco, Josine Ianco-Starrels, Michaela Mende Janco, and Elissa Kline) for their assistance and for permission to publish these texts.

Monique Yaari

¹ This 1957 trilingual edition of the monograph, of which “Creative Dada” constitutes one chapter, credits the translators as follows: translation of part of the English version by H. A. G. Schmuckler, edited by Joyce Wittenborn; French version: Alegria Schapira; German translation of Hans Richter’s contribution: Ida Niggli.



Figure 1: Marcel Iancu, *Auto-portret* (Self-Portrait). *Contimporanul* 25 (6 Jan. 1923): cover. © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.



Figure 2: Marcel Iancu, *Linoleum. Contimporanul* 49 (Nov. 1924): n.p. © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.

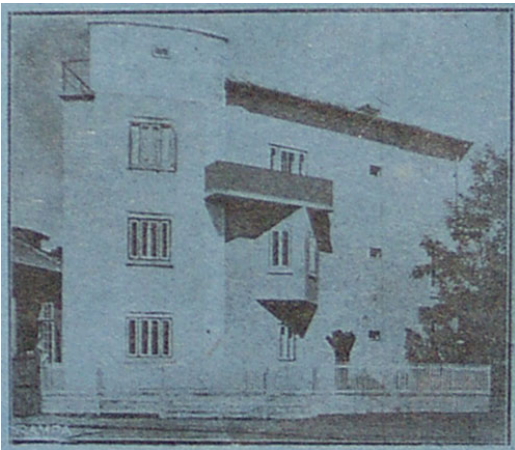


Figure 3: Marcel Iancu, *Construcție modernă* (Modern Construction), *Contimporanul* 69 (Oct. 1926): cover. © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.

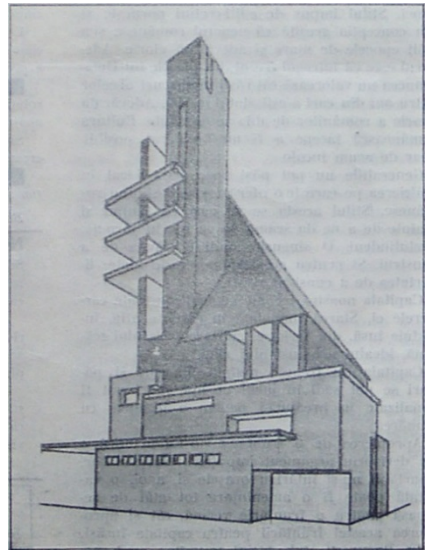


Figure 4: M. Iancu, *Atelier la țară pentru Vinea* (Country Studio for Vinea). *Contimporanul* 53-54 (Feb. 1925): cover. © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.

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Creative Dada (Excerpt)

....

If, at the beginning, Dada fulfilled the useful function of a purge, soon a number of us began to feel the need to create, and feverishly set to work. The need for a new, conciliatory attitude, in harmony with our concept of a creative Dada, weighed heavily on our minds.

At that juncture, reinforcement for Dada came in the person of Viking Eggeling, who had come from Ticino with his wife. He held a fanatical belief in art and in its social vocation.¹

Viking Eggeling had the look of a thinker. After long years of study and research in pure plastic art, he had retired to Switzerland in order to complete his first abstract film and test his theory of "plastic counterpoint."

The film introduced the factor of time into plastic art, and the sense of rhythm became a measurable element in the composition of the moving tableau. He would spend entire nights drawing hundreds of sheets forming a sequence, and then corrected them incessantly in accordance with his laws of counterpoint, which he wanted to be as clear as those of music.

As all his finances went to the realization of his film project, he was dismally poor but full of dignity. He spent the days looking for work so as to be able to consecrate sleepless nights to his immense undertaking. The Eggelings were a very austere couple and led a hard life. Their diet apparently consisted only of nuts; they always carried some in their pockets, nibbling constantly.² They had neither home nor children and spent long evenings discussing the future of art in the new society to come.

For quite some time, there had been differences of opinion in the camp of Dada plastic artists. We no longer agreed on the significance of Dada, and the misunderstandings grew. Our exhibitions of 1917-1920 reflected the new ideas.³

For our group, Dada had already long ago acquired a constructive meaning: We wanted to create a new plastic language, using an infant's babble as a starting point. Moreover, for us, Dada was an affirmation of the forces of the subconscious, an organic creation, which, as Arp put it, "grew like nails on fingertips."

With the publication of a journal, *Zurich, 1919*, our creative Dada group was to proclaim its independence.⁴ We were called "radical dadaists" because we had a

¹ A different version of this sentence appears in the English and German versions of Janco's essay: "He was imbued with a fanatical belief in art and in his own artistic vocation."

² This sentence appears only in the French version of the essay.

³ This sentence appears only in the French version of the essay.

⁴ This journal reached the stage of page proofs, but was never published. Cf. Hans Bolliger, Guido Magnaguagno, and Raimund Meyer, *Dada in Zürich* (Zurich: Arche, 1985) 93.

program and had already published a well-received manifesto. This was its wording:

A clear and uniform vision must prevail if issues of great import are being decided. Spiritually and materially we demand our right: As representatives of an essential part of culture, we artists want to take part in the conceptual evolution of the state; we want to exist within the state, as an integral part of its very life, and we want to share in all its responsibilities. We proclaim that the artistic laws of our time have already been broadly formulated. The spirit of abstract art represents an enormous expansion of man's sense of liberty. Our creed is fraternal art: this is the new mission of art within society. Art imposes clarity; it must serve to form the new man. It must belong to all, without class distinction. We want to gather the conscious creative forces of every individual, so each can contribute to the common task. We fight against the lack of a system, for this absence saps our strength. Our highest aspiration is to bring about a spiritual foundation of understanding for all mankind. It is our duty. This work secures the highest degree of vitality for the people. The initiative falls to us. We will direct the currents and lend expression to varying desires while rallying disparate forces.

(Signed: Arp, Eggeling, Janco, Richter, Giacometti, Baumann, etc.)⁵

Just as earlier the Dada writers had transplanted the cubists' collage into their poetry, so the plastic artists, as a result of another misunderstanding and under the influence of *succès de scandale*, in turn introduced this "literary" method into their art. Our radicals were vehemently opposed to this.⁶

And while anti-Dada invectives were hurled in the German Reichstag and a Mona Lisa with a moustache along with a framed urinal and other "readymades" were shown as works of art at New York exhibitions,⁷ the radical dadaists pursued

⁵ The original version of this manifesto was published in the *Zürcher Post*, 3 May 1919 under the title "Ein Künstler-Manifest," and appeared the following day in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* as "Manifest Radikaler Künstler, Zürich." It included also among its signatories Henning [sic], Helbig, and Morach. It is worth noting that its title, "Manifesto of Radical Artists, Zurich" or "An Artists' Manifesto," refers to "artists" and not "dadaists." The version which appears in the 1957 essay that we offer here differs somewhat from the 1919 version, and we may assume that these changes were intentional on Janco's part: the later version is more streamlined and, importantly, refers to the new mission of "art," not of "man," as in the early version. Small wording variations exist also among its trilingual iterations; our translation is based on the French iteration, like the rest of the "Creative Dada" essay.

⁶ This sentence appears only in the French version of the essay.

⁷ The French has "bidet" rather than "urinal." The specifics of Duchamp's readymades are treated rather loosely here.

their experimentation in silence. After the Galerie Dada of Zurich closed its doors, they tried to put their ideas⁸ into practice. Today, after thirty-eight⁹ years, the prerequisite conditions for a new art¹⁰ have still not been realized:

- Abstract art is the art of brotherhood.
- To return to life, the visual artist must become an artisan.
- Any compromise between art and the market must be rejected (the artist must no longer create work of commercial value).
- A new, rejuvenated architecture must bring about a synthesis of all the plastic arts.
- Plastic art – painting, sculpture, reliefs – must be readied for incorporation into the architectural wall.
- The teaching of art must be refashioned in accordance with the principles of the free development of the student, who must learn self-discovery.
- One must learn to work in a group, collectively and even anonymously, so as to increase vitality and reduce pride.

Under the name of “New Life,” this group of creative dadaists worked, exhibited, and developed in Switzerland until 1922.

What is still lacking is a great treatise on that “Dada spirit” which created for us a particular climate and faith in the purity of art,¹¹ source of the depths of the subconscious. Even while astonishing and mystifying, Dada succeeded in creating pure poetry. Even while demolishing, Dada – in its final positive phase – also experimented and laid the foundations of a new social aesthetic for the artist. This is a problem still awaiting resolution.

Dada will endure. Not only because of the experiments and the literary excesses that gave birth to surrealism, but rather thanks to the creation of the pure prophetic spirit found in the work of Arp, in the visual poetry of Klee, in the pictorial suites of Richter, in the abstract film of Eggeling, in our efforts in mural paintings and abstract reliefs, and in the beautiful tapestries of Taeuber.

Dada was in no way a hoax; it was a turning point in the road, opening up broad horizons to the mind. It endures, and will endure for as long as negation contains the ferment of the future.

Dada: Monograph of a Movement, ed. Willy Verkauf
(New York: Wittenborn, 1957) 44-46

Translated from the French by Renée Earle

⁸ “Prophetic ideas” in the English and German versions.

⁹ “Thirty-seven” in the English and German versions.

¹⁰ “New life” in the English and German versions.

¹¹ “Purity of man” in the German and English versions.

T.S.F. (By Wireless):
Dialogue between the Dead Bourgeois and the Apostle of the
New Life

[Editor's note: The original text is in French and German. Below, German text is indicated by italics.]

The apostle: Do you have any news from beyond the grave?

The dead one: No.

Since I have heard that the Union has become a group promoting abstract art, I must announce my resignation.

The apostle: (opening the door, invites the corpse to leave.)

The dead one: (rearing up) *I died for the fatherland, so I must know what you want from the people. (He pulls his papers from his pocket.) You believe that today only abstract, non-representational art is art.*

The apostle: Look, kitsch is possible everywhere, but if you want to learn something, listen: it is only through abstraction that art has liberated itself from sentimental slavery. To use abstraction in art is to desire and possess the absolute in art. This discovery is like a powerful and nervous flash in the black of night. From this moment on, we'll have a new era of civilization.

The dead one: *And pure, high.....art?*

The apostle: That's all over. Abstraction will kill that vermin, as H₂SO₄ kills fleas. Abstraction propels us into life. We want to be recognized as the very factor that raises the spiritual level of the people. So that craft may be returned to the craftsman.

The dead one: *I admit that I cannot create anything. I consider God alone to be a creator. I am too dumb.*

The apostle: Mr. Dead One, please be so kind as to not talk too much about yourself. The Future will persuade you that the airplane will be the predominant mode of transportation, and that abstract art will flourish in the streets, cities, monuments, and homes of the people. In order to renew the people's understanding of liberated art, we will plunge the demeaning art market into the most asphyxiating gases. Exhibitions will travel from city to city by balloon and will have only spiritual goals. Eggeling, the Edison of the new art, will travel with his cinema (the new music of the shot) to every corner of the globe.

The dead one: Balloon, cinema? Are you talking about the industrial arts?

The apostle: Art will once again belong to all, and contact between art and people will never again be infected by any art critic's discourse, but will always be infused with life by beautiful proportions, by painted cities, and by the social conscience with which the artist will build.

The dead one: *But please, now you're getting political! . . .*

The apostle: And the greatest joy of art will create anonymity, the point of departure for a new tradition. In the society of tomorrow we ourselves will have the power to solve the problems of art. We will create a living support for the craft and, above all, to combat the immoral exploitation by machines, we will give back to the thinking worker the joy of his labor.

The dead one: *I'm sorry, but I really don't understand you.*

Jan. 1918

Punct 11 (Jan. 1925): n.p.

Translated from the French and German by
Timothy Shipe
with Monique Yaari and Renée Earle

Notes on Art

1. The beautiful in art is a prejudice.
3. Intelligence is a negative analytic factor, art is a positive constructive synthetic factor.¹
4. Invention is ability – imagination is creation.
5. Tools have been invented that can reproduce mathematically any audio or visual virtuosity.
6. Artist-artisan-artifice, three distinct meanings with only an apparent resemblance.
7. The art of children, folk art, the art of psychopaths, that of primitive people are the most alive and expressive forms of art, as they come from the depths, they are organic, and they are without the culture of the beautiful.
8. Primitive people do not make primitive art.
9. In art there is no primitivism, there are no degrees of development. The Romantics of the past century had the opportunity, through the didacticism that was developing then, to poison the mind of the generations that came after them with the romanticism of the beautiful taken from Greek ideals.
10. Gothic art, Assyrian art, Roman art, Chaldean art, Indian art, Persian art, Egyptian art, Etruscan art, those are all arts with much stronger repercussions in the human soul than “classicism.” They are completely unknown even to critics and artists.
11. The more the creator knows how to be free, remain fresh, and avoid abilities, the more violent and ingenious the artistic expression will be.
12. Technique has nothing in common with virtuosity and artifice.
13. The teaching of art as it is practiced today kills the imagination, while cultivating prestidigitation, virtuosity, morality, tangential qualities.
14. Sensibility grows from within us like nail from the flesh.
15. Sensibility is always the only constant in creating art in time and space.
16. Folk arts: the strongest examples of a standard in sensibility. The ax always creates something from scratch on a tabula rasa.
17. The new art pursues intensity by all possible means.

Contimporanul 45 (April 1924): 7

Translated from the Romanian by
Anca Roncea

¹ 2 is omitted from the numbering in the original text.

The Bucharest of Accidents

The quick and dissolute growth of our city is the product of confusion.

Despite the clumsy legislation and the various “styles” its facades display, our nation’s capital is still and unfortunately always will be an example of Levantine spirit.

In a city where a hay wagon moving lethargically hinders the way a whole borough pulsates, a city where a horse-drawn tram in a ceaseless idiotic derailment shakes traffic wheels for hours, where in bright daylight street sweepers choke up people in dust, everything is unpredictable, everything is fortuitous, an accident.

Traffic accidents, hygiene accidents, architecture accidents.

Accidents are indeed the rules that “organize” all construction, as there is no accountability or vision.

Accidents are those unfortunate connections between Lahovari Square and the Commerce Academy, and an accident is also the industrial and spectral back wall of that building seen from the square.

Accidents, the renovated architecture of North Station, an accident that in the middle of Victory Boulevard, now looking like a fair, even more new styles are spurting up every day.

Accidents and surprises unheard of in the annals of urban planning are the hostile and horrible meeting of those two institutions of higher education: the Architecture School and the University.

Though accidents are also the architecture school itself (archaic) and the university (modernizing?).

An accident is also the destruction of the old university, a last vestige of art and common sense in the capital.

Also an accident is the so called Romanian style.

If Bucharest ever displayed itself to foreign travelers under a likeable form, today they will leave with the memory of a city as a country fair, a conglomerate lacking any harmony, order, style, or soul.

Where are our elected officials? Who can be held accountable in the citadel of chance and carelessness? The reigning fate is confusion.

Contimporanul 70 (Nov. 1926): 9

Translated from the Romanian by
Anca Roncea and Monique Yaari

Architecture

However isolated and indifferent we may be, living as we are in improvised cities, the overwhelming pertinence of a truly novel architecture can no longer escape us.

The growth of triumphant new ideas can be accurately followed through the evidence of their concrete effects.

In the last 10 years more ground has shifted in the realm of architectural knowledge than in the 10 preceding decades. We must have had to go through the heretical eclecticism of the *neo-gothic*, the *composite baroque*, and the opportunistic fantasies of the *Jugendstil*, the *Secession*, and the *neo-classical*, before being able to grasp these new teachings.

The guides of the new beginnings are those who positioned themselves beyond the "*pure aesthetics*" of dry artistic-cultural forms, beyond stale traditions.

Innovative visual arts have debugged architecture; the modern aspects of life, which generally inspire new art, have imparted to architecture as well the capacity of expressing the social.

The form espoused by modern architecture answers strictly the new demands for comfort, economy, and hygiene. The aesthetic aspirations of the new man are clearly evident in the accomplishments of technology and find free expression in the form of trains, cars, transatlantic ships, or any machine.

The new style will evolve from the coordination of individual efforts. Art will clarify the architectonic alphabet, giving it an objective and universal form. The road has been opened.

The progress of modern thought is clearly seen in the almost uninterrupted succession of architectural events throughout the past few years.

1. The *decorative arts* exhibition in Paris had laid out the issues with the shyness of all beginnings. Of course, the living thought of new rationalism, thought leavened by reality, can indeed be expressed by means other than those of the ornament.
2. Last year we announced the architecture exhibition in *Stuttgart*, which had brought together the work of the best young architects of Europe. Strong benchmark work, displaying both a technical and an aesthetic orientation.
For the first time it became evident how clear and all-encompassing is the work of the clever guide: Corbusier.
3. Later on there was the exhibition of projects and models of new architecture in Warsaw, where we saw the preponderance of Russian purist ideas with that hint of a proletarian factory felt in any house or urban palace.
4. Finally this year we can enthusiastically note the exhibition of new architecture in *Brno*. A bunch of very determined young Czechoslovakian architects managed to achieve this wonder that is our neighbor's exhibit.

Among the most beautiful are the houses of Bohuslav Fuchs, Stepanek, Jaroslav Grunt, Prof. J. Kroha, H. Foltyn and Miroslav Putna.

If we think of the conviction and sacrifice required to realize these events, never before seen in architecture, we will understand that what we have here is a true European artistic renaissance.

Contimporanul 78 (Jan. 1929): n.p.

Translated from the Romanian by
Anca Roncea and Monique Yaari

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