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Can a Virgin Microbe Have a History?: The Poisonous Gift of Dada

Jed Rasula

Dada's quips and slogans are its calling cards. Richard Huelsenbeck begins the introduction to his *Dada Almanach* by declaring, "One has to be enough of a Dadaist to adopt a Dadaist stance toward one's own Dadaism," then dandles a parade of unhelpful definitions before the reader until emphatically claiming "If you're alive, you are a Dadaist" (9). Similar pronouncements cascade through Dada publications like victory parade confetti: "Dada is the cork in the bottle of your stupidity"; "*the holy virgin was already a dadaist*"; "Dada is a virgin microbe that penetrates . . . all the spaces that reason has not been able to fill with words or conventions."¹ Such pronouncements served notice that Dada would be mercurial, in stark contrast to the blunt bulletin points of Italian futurism (although the dadaists learned much from Marinetti about honking the horn). These are not so much pithy sayings, aphorisms, or observations; they're Dada products.

As "products" (*Erzeugnisse*, the preferred Dada term) these slogans are varnished with what Hans Arp called "aquadadatint," a quality guaranteed by "the dadaist rasputin and spiritual head tzar tristan" (239). Aquadadatint could be what George Grosz applied to a painting by Lovis Corinth when he mimed pissing on it during a Dada soirée in Berlin. Dada ridiculed Art with a capital A. "The Dadaist considers it necessary to come out against art, because he has seen through its fraud as a moral safety valve," declared Huelsenbeck, even calling it "a large-scale swindle" (*En Avant Dada* 43). He regarded Dada as "the international expression of our time" — very American, he said (shortly after America entered the war) ("Dadaistisches Manifest" 47). But he didn't mean the intimidated pieties mistaken so often for art in America or anywhere else. For the dadaists, the purpose of art was not edification. "Dada is forever the enemy of that comfortable Sunday Art which is supposed to uplift man by reminding him of agreeable moments," he insisted, adding: "Dada hurts" ("Dada Lives!" 281). "A picture is something that needs just as much smartness and viciousness as crime does — forgery with a dash of Nature thrown in" (qtd. in Benn 198). Although this sounds

¹ Doesburg 45; "Dada Excites Everything" 163; Tzara, "Lecture on Dada" 251.

like something a dadaist might have said, it's actually a remark by Edgar Degas, famous for his paintings of ballet dancers. But it goes to the heart of Dada's filibuster concerning art.

In Hugo Ball's estimation, the artists of the war generation could no longer be content with decorating hunting lodges. For him, Dada was resolutely anti-war, provoked by years of pointless slaughter. "Our cabaret is a gesture," he wrote. "Every word that is spoken and sung here says at least this one thing: that this humiliating age has not succeeded in winning our respect." As the carnage went on unabated, Ball realized, "they cannot persuade us to enjoy eating the rotten pie of human flesh that they present to us" (61, 67). Dada was anti-war, and against militarism in any form, but was it cognate with an anti-art posture? Dada had snarl, but its proponents were artists, after all.

Dada had many facets: Dada as a movement, Dada as a mood, Dada as a prerogative, Dada as a contagion. Dada was a sort of cultural chameleon. It was attuned to local habitats and adapted accordingly. In Zurich Dada was cabaret-artistic; in Berlin it was politically anarchic; in Paris it was avant-garde; in New York, as in Zurich, it was a Bohemian frolic among exiles, albeit with an edge of desperation. Its hydra-headed manifestations left perennially hanging in the air the question, *What is Dada?* As the government collapsed at the end of the Great War, Berliners took notice of a placard asking "What is Dada? An art? A philosophy? A fire extinguisher? Or a state religion? Is Dada actually *energy*? or is it nothing at all, or maybe everything?" ("Was ist Dada?").²

Whatever it was, Dada was an engine for proliferating products, as documented in the catalog for the enormous Dada exhibition at Centre Pompidou in 2005. There are 658 items listed under the broad heading of Collages, Drawings, Paintings, Photomontages, Reliefs, and Sculptures. Under Manuscripts there are 309. There are 213 photographs, 110 books, 82 periodicals, and 149 printed artifacts (posters, press clippings, programs, flyers, and so forth). Added up, we find that the exhibition was equally divided between artworks and text-objects. It indicates that, where Dada is concerned, there's as much to *know* as there is to *show*.

The Pompidou exhibition did not — could not — include some of the most iconic products of Dada. Possibly the two most famous artifacts associated with Dada disappeared shortly after they were denominated and photographed: Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* and Man Ray's *Gift (Cadeau)*, the former an overturned urinal and the latter a clothing iron onto which a row of thumbtacks was glued. The fact that both *Gift* and *Fountain* promptly disappeared puts them in a league with other Dada artifacts, shading over from objects to events — opportunities for misinformation to take on a life of its own. Misinformation blended in with avowed Dada practices like misdirection, and repurposing of available materials. So collage and photomontage emerged as optimal resources, a natural fit for Dada's vocation. Hannah Höch's repertoire of African and

² Where no published translations are cited, translations are mine.

European bodies recombined in a whimsical rogues' gallery is one example; the political photomontages of John Heartfield are another, persisting beyond Dada as trenchant repudiation of the Third Reich. But before such a large target presented itself, everything was up in the air, including any righteousness the dadaists might claim for themselves. "The Dada gets over his own need for sensation and his own gravity by bluffing," said Raoul Hausmann. "Bluffing is not an ethical principle but a practical means of detoxification" ("Dada in Europe" 93). *Fountain* and *Gift* are artifacts of detox. Where the bluff begins and ends, nobody knows. But it raises supplementary prospects in which taunt and ridicule, boast and curse, misinformation and hoax are all on the agenda.

It's also the case that Dada everywhere encompassed performance, publication, and exhibition, not always as distinct categories. Dada periodicals were acutely performative, its exhibitions were theatrical in nature, and its writings designed to thwart reading. Yet accidents and misfires could occur, and they too became part of the countenance of Dada. In November 1920 four dadaists sent out a solicitation letter for *Dadaglobe*, to be edited by Tzara as a sumptuous international profile of the movement. He'd conceived the project after a similar enterprise by Richard Huelsenbeck proved too costly: in February 1920 the publisher Kurt Wolff abandoned *Dadaco: Dadaistischer Weltatlas*. In the end, Tzara's *Dadaglobe* also exceeded the budget of Parisian publisher Sirène. So the two most comprehensive attempts to synthesize Dada foundered. But they didn't disappear altogether. The dozen colorful proof-sheets of *Dadaco* have enlivened catalogs ever since, and the considerable stockpile of contributions Tzara received for *Dadaglobe* have likewise fertilized exhibitions and publications to the extent that they may be said to have constituted a surrogate repertoire of Dada without having been consistently recognized as the dispersed contents of his anthology.³

In light of the fate of *Fountain* and *Gift*, *Dadaco* and *Dadaglobe*, it seems that Dada's accomplishments are to some extent coextensive with erasure or obliteration. And this would seem to comply with the dadaists' own prescriptions. Tzara declared Dada to be "for and against unity and decidedly against the future," an outlook fine-tuned by Walter Conrad Arensberg's suggestion that the "life expectancy of real Dada works should be just 6 hours."⁴ In 1920, Jefim Golyscheff exhibited an object described as "a herring skeleton and a dried-up slice of bread laid down on brown wrapping paper with a dark spot resembling nothing so much as a squashed bedbug" (Ockman 94). This sounds like the very

³Materials from Tzara's prospective anthology are abundant in exhibition catalogues, rarely credited as such. See for instance Schwarz, ed., *Almanacco Dada*; Gallwitz, ed., *Dada in Europa*; Meyer et. al., *Dada Global*. Because credits generally go to current holders, it has been challenging to determine which items were from Tzara's dossier (until the 2016 publication of Adrian Sudhalter's *Dadaglobe Reconstructed*).

⁴Tzara, "Manifesto of Mr. Antipyrine" 191; Arensberg 191.

prototype of perishable art, but in the end Golyscheff's entire artistic output was snuffed out by the Nazis in 1933.

Many of the contents of the exactly curated First International Dada Fair that culminated Berlin Dada disappeared. Katherine Dreier tried to take some of it to New York for Société Anonyme but was denied an export license. (Wieland Herzfelde, however, was to claim that the works went down in the North Atlantic courtesy of a German torpedo). At least one major work was verifiably decimated by military assault: Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau* in Hanover was destroyed by an Allied bombing raid (albeit long after he'd fled the country). Raoul Hausmann's exile — first to Ibiza then France — meant the forfeiture of most of his Dada creations. But these are circumstantial losses, historical fatalities hardly unique to Dada.

The loss of works through fragility and historical circumstance has accentuated the anti-art proselytizing of Dada. Dada noncompliance did not shy away from producing artworks (or works destined to be seen as art), but it did make it all too easy to discount the results as trifling and inconsequential, a position reiterated, for instance, in Peter Gay's *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy* (2008), which dispatches Dada in just four of its five hundred pages. And yet, Ernst, Picabia, Schwitters, Arp, Höch, and others have taken pride of place in many museum retrospectives. In their time, the dadaists did not shirk the art market. But how would they respond to their works being enshrined in museums, especially now in the age of art tourism? For one, they would be astonished at the whole phenomenon of global capital engulfing the planet like one of Christo's wraps, and contemptuous of artists complicit in the securities market for the one percent — "plutocrats trying to scrub their cash clean with art" (Cotter) — so that art is primarily discussed in terms of investment portfolios. In this milieu, the Dada concentration on perishable, debased, and less traditional materials has only moderately compromised its market potential.

Dada not only resisted the accreditations of art and literature, it went out of its way to discredit or cast doubt on itself. In the Parisian milieu of avant-gardes tumbling over themselves with a steady diet of updates, proclamations, and denunciations, a manifesto was like money in the aesthetic bank. To issue a manifesto openly declaring its own pointlessness (e.g. Philippe Soupault: "I am writing a manifesto because I have nothing to say" (185)) made a valid point about the junk bonds of the culture industry. In addition to blatant gestures of self-contradiction, rumor, innuendo, and false information were consistent features of Dada wherever it went. In Switzerland the dadaists specialized in planting fake news items in the press — as when Tzara and Arp were reported as having fought a duel, implicating a local Swiss writer who was astonished and distraught to find himself portrayed in the newspaper as having served as one of the seconds. In Paris, the dadaists announced that Charlie Chaplin had joined the Dada movement and would be making a personal appearance at their next soiree at the

Grand Palais. Thousands showed up, although Chaplin did not. I doubt that the dadaists made any effort to recruit him.

Dada pronouncements were intrinsically unverifiable or blatantly hyperbolic. Dada publications were likewise designed to arouse incredulity and enhance gullibility in equal measure. In the first issue of *Der Dada* a flyer was inserted with the title "What is Dadaism and What Does It Want in Germany?" It advocated for the adoption of the simultaneous poem as Communist state prayer, demanded "immediate regulation of all sexual relationships, in the international Dadaist sense, by means of the establishment of a central Dadaist sex board," and insisted that "all clergymen and teachers . . . pledge themselves to the Dadaist articles of faith" (75, 73). This outsized litany was reprinted in newspapers throughout Germany, evidence that any program making "demands" had to be taken seriously.

Presenting Dada as an advertising agency (Reklame-Gesellschaft) in Berlin, *Der Dada* confidently declared: "Advertising is the road to success. . . . Your adverts must become more *psychological*. . . . Our advertising *lacks any scruples*. . . . *Bring your problems to us. Dada is just what you need*" ("Dada Advertising Company"). Leading by example, Johannes Baader published an article in *Der Dada* titled "Reklame für mich" (Advertisement for Myself). Against a general background of bloat and bluster, seasoned with political violence, Baader could come across as a plausible public figure. Certainly Chicago reporter Ben Hecht saw him that way, apparently impressed by Baader's claim that "in the nonsense of dadaism lies the only real sanity Germany has ever achieved." In the circumstance, Hecht regarded Dada as "a new art of government," and in fact Baader did end up running for a parliamentary seat, but his more incendiary activities included his intervention during a service in the Berlin cathedral, saying something about Jesus Christ and sausage.⁵ The current American president rivals Baader in advertisements for himself, though he has not thus far declared his own death and resurrection as the German dadaist did.

Baader's unhinged exploits, thought his old friend Raoul Hausmann, were just what Dada needed in Berlin. In a cultural sphere that became incorrigibly political at the end of the war, Baader was a juggernaut soloist, jettisoned out from the unit called Club Dada in a way that would have been impossible in a strictly aesthetic program. As the case of Baader makes patently clear, the force of Dada was its polypotentiality: it could mean something different from day to day, even moment to moment. An artifact like Hausmann's Mechanical Head, *The Spirit of Our Time*, is a weathervane spinning outcomes in different registers. As a work of period portraiture it captures the transition between a discredited Wilhelmine Reich and the festering boil of the Weimar Republic on the body politic, with its seamless transition from wartime culprits to *eminences grises* of the new political

⁵ Jesus Christ "ist Euch Wurst": literally, "is sausage to you"; colloquially "you couldn't care less" about Christ. (Bergius 50, 92)

establishment. That's the background against which we might see projected the puffy doughboy countenance in *Der Dada* no. 3, kissing cousin of the political victors arrayed on the cover of *Jedermann sein eigener Fußball*.

In the extremity of its historical plight in 1918-19, Dada in Berlin faced a deadly serious situation. George Grosz and Wieland Herzfelde pointedly asked, of the lucrative gallery scene in Berlin during the war, "the shooting goes on, profiteering goes on, hunger goes on; why all that art?" (81). So Berlin Dada presented itself as a civic institution in a milieu in which institutions were collapsing all around it. Club Dada was promoted as an advertising agency, a detective agency, and a graphology institute. It also purported to offer counseling in sexual hygiene, and advertised a "Dada School for the Renewal of Psycho-Therapeutic Relations Between Children and Parents, Spouses and Those Who Once Were or Intend to Become Such" ("Join Dada!"), The *métier* of Berlin Dada was its orchestration of public opinion, or more accurately, public perplexity.

Dada thrived in the Kaiser's capital as the war came to an ignominious end and the public sphere devolved into street-fighting between workers and the Freikorps, the self-appointed vigilante brigades of the political right. In that context, a notification that a Berlin suburb was about to be assaulted by Dada troops mobilized civic authorities to call out the militia. Of course there were no armed Dada militants, let alone an organized force, but what might otherwise be deemed a hoax was in fact a timely revelation of the tenuousness of authority as Wilhelmine Germany melted away and the Weimar Republic had not yet filled the void. What interests me in this and the foregoing examples has to do with the status of events that are strictly anecdotal. These occasions clearly flesh out the history of Dada but have a precarious status in the domain of art — at least until Happenings and the advent of performance art long after Dada expired. Furthermore, the dadaist affirmation of chance and accident proved consequential for its legacy. So Albrecht Dürer's *Adam and Eve* could attain a Dada provenance when an exhibition in Cologne was closed down on indecency charges, then reopened ("Dada triumphs" proclaimed the re-opening poster: "Dada is for Peace and Order") when the offending item turned out to be a reproduction of Dürer pasted into a collage (Meyer 199).

The disinformation campaigns of Dada should be accorded the status of conceptual poetry. And these also have some bearing on the issue of the danger faced by Dada of becoming an institution in its own right. This, I think, is germane to the salient episode at the height of Tzara's Parisian eminence, when a peripheral figure from the Swiss Dada scene named Walter Serner appeared and spread the rumor that Tzara was bogus; that he had not written the 1918 manifesto accepted as divine Dada doctrine, and that he had not been involved in the founding of the movement. These claims were patently untrue, but the Parisians had no way of knowing it, and were inclined to credit Serner's account because, after all, he had been there — and, what's more, his presentation at the largest Dada event in Zurich had set off a maniacal outburst in the audience, unleashing the "circuit of

absolute unconsciousness" relished by Tzara himself ("Zurich Chronicle" 33). Agitating the audience was the exclusive focus of the Parisians. Despite his inflammatory intervention, only a month later Serner was one of the signatories of Tzara's solicitation letter for the big *Dadaglobe* anthology.

Dada's willful mingling of its artistic ventures with public events meant that it spread (or news of it spread) like the Spanish flu in 1918. Like jazz, which appeared in tandem with Dada, it was infectious. Nevertheless, if it tended to appear in the guise of a foreign agent, it came with a dossier. When Tzara finally arrived in Paris in January 1920, he was greeted by a group of young men who were clamoring to enlist in Dada, but disappointed to find Tzara small, a bit boyish, and his French not up to Parisian standards. But these deficits were easily overlooked when he revealed his cache of documents, palpable evidence of what had transpired at Cabaret Voltaire and subsequently infiltrated several German cities. So even before Paris Dada commenced, Dada had an aura of custodial oversight. Despite its legacy of wisecracks and puns, hoaxes and taunts, it was subject to the burden of proof. But what kind of proof? Tzara's cache, after all, was a mish-mash of correspondence, press clippings, and other ephemera attesting to a spectrum of activities and events: it was not a bundle of artworks.

The curatorial role of museums and literary history invariably introduces a normalizing perspective on its materials, and Dada is no exception. But to think of Dada as primarily consisting of art and literature is to misconstrue its nature. Symptomatic are *The Dada Seminars* held in 2005-06 accompanying the exhibition at Centre Pompidou, the National Gallery of Art, and the Museum of Modern Art. The nuanced approach in the contributions provides a welcome air of "thick description" (in Clifford Geertz's term), even as the art historical perspective is paramount — given pride of place in the first of editor Leah Dickerman's enumerated "imperatives": "the legacy of Dada's reception requires at the most basic level recognition of the centrality of art making to the movement's concerns" (3). My suggestion is that is that "the movement" had no such concerns, even as its participants had been and would continue to be practitioners of various arts. Dada's refusal to comply with bourgeois institutions specifically targeted the culture industry with ridicule. Accordingly, the dadaists were experts at the taunt, the withering rebuke. "We are a downpour of maledictions," said Tzara ("Dada Manifesto" 77). Dada aimed a quixotic malice against the deities of the moment. "How many poets, painters, musicians," asked Paul Dermée, "pull on a God every morning like a condom?" The dadaists denounced anything smacking of self-expression, and André Breton congratulated Duchamp on emancipating art from "blackmail-lyricism" with his readymades (88). A readymade, after all, is an instantaneous gesture. Readymade means all the making is past. But there it stands, ready and able — or is it *disabled*?

As Dada was in the throes of collapse in Paris, Francis Picabia brandished Duchamp on the cover of the final issue of his journal 391 (October 1924), under the banner of *Instantanéisme*. Picabia was perpetuating the primary sense of Dada

as the exception to everything by investing in the moment — which also means, the *momentary*. A vital feature of Dada wherever it set up shop had been its commitment to the moment and the momentary. Monumentality is about as far from Dada as one can get. The dadaist commitment to the moment was pervasive, and definitively affirmed by the presentism of Raoul Hausmann. Developing material first worked out in a Dada soiree in Berlin in December 1919, his essay “Présentismus” was published as a kind of exit strategy from Dada, first in *De Stijl* in 1921 and then in the Hungarian journal *Ma* in 1922. Long before Ezra Pound came up with his signature slogan, Make It New, Hausmann exclaimed: “The new man has the courage to be new!” (“PRÉsentismus” 28).

If *instantanéism* and presentism are keys to Dada, a question arises: how does Dada relate to more than the instant? How many instants make a history? Is it even possible to speak of Dada and history in the same breath? Historical instants tend to be portrayed as *instances*, rendering the signing of the Versailles Treaty in June 1919 a main event while consigning, say, the simultaneous publication of *Der Dada* and its political flyer “What is Dadaism and What Does it Want in Germany?” to the status of cultural oddity. Yet it makes a difference to conceive of Dada as no less an instance than the Versailles Treaty, bearing furtively within the *exemplum* of its instance a fervent embrace of the *instant*. This perspective is encouraged by the discerning treatise *Dada Presentism* by Maria Stavrinaki, in which she characterizes Dada as the child that engendered its own parents. So “the improbable, inconsistent nature of its birth meant that Dada could never become a historical object among others — or a historical object at all. It became pseudology, legend, and fiction” (80). The present, in Stavrinaki’s account, is that thin threshold (*infra-thin*, Duchamp called it) between “servile obedience to the past and the chaste utopia of the future” (4). She regards the Dada moment as a point of refusal, halted between these polarities but committed to sustaining the present. In her elegant summation: “Dada is as ephemeral and eternal as the present, which never dies even though everything it contains is mortal” (77). I can’t help but admire the way she folds mortality into the eternally ephemeral (or is it the ephemerally eternal?).

Dada was caught up in this fragile infra-thin, sandwiched between the colossus of history and the evanescence of the instant.⁶ Tristan Tzara called Dada a virgin microbe. Can a virgin microbe have a history? Of course, all human activity has a history. That is, something can be said about it. Personalities and events can be shoveled into narrative sequence — and consequence. If Dada was

⁶ Printed on the back cover of the special Duchamp number of *View* (V: 1, March 1945), with cut-out letters like a ransom note, Duchamp debuted his concept of the “infra-thin” or “infra-slim”: “WHEN / THE TOBACCO SMOKE / ALSO SMELLS / OF THE MOUTH / WHICH EXHALES IT / THE TWO ODORS / ARE MARRIED BY / INFRA-SLIM.” The verb *épousent* suggests Duchamp’s Large Glass, its bridal ceremonies distributed in both material and textual dimensions like the two odors married by infra-thin.

truly Dada *in the instant* and only in the instant, can it be said that the cumulative instants amount to a history? Or does it contravene everything about Dada Presentism to speak of its history? If there is a history, is it akin to a history of rumor and innuendo? Dada's moment *was*, in part, momentous thanks to Dada. That is, Dada remains a definitive feature of the face of its time. Dada helps us focus on what a moment can mean (and its repeated solicitations of Buddhism were not casually made). Yet Dada offers up an apparent contradiction in its fastidious self-documentation, for Dada differs from other vanguard movements through its determination to assert itself as an historical phenomenon, a documentary aspiration concurrent with — then extending beyond — its own life-span.

As early as 1920 Richard Huelsenbeck published *En Avant Dada: Eine Geschichte des Dadaismus*, and the *Dada Almanac* he edited (also 1920) included Tzara's "Zurich Chronicle," a typographically flamboyant timeline of Cabaret Voltaire and its aftermath. Two years later Tzara's modestly titled "Some Memoirs of Dadaism" was published in *Vanity Fair* (July 1922), an unabridged version of which appeared as an appendix to *Axel's Castle* by Edmund Wilson (1931). In 1925, another of the original "Spiegelgasse dadaists," Hans Arp, joined Russian constructivist El Lissitzky to produce a profile of the *isms* over the previous decade, with Dada reduced to one of sixteen. In the early Thirties, historical accounts of Dada were published by Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, a participant in Paris Dada, and by Georges Hugnet, a surrealist. After the Second World War, Tzara and Huelsenbeck were locked in a fraternal death-clutch over proprietary rights to the history of Dada when they refused to be bound together in Robert Motherwell's 1951 compendium, *The Dada Painters and Poets*. Tzara's "Introduction to DADA" and Huelsenbeck's "Dada Manifesto 1949" were instead offered as single-sheet foldouts selling for 25¢ each. (Because they were printed in the text itself when Motherwell's anthology was reprinted in 1981, the dispute has remained concealed from readers, not least because Jack Flam made no mention of the dispute in his foreword to this edition.)

By contrast, Marcel Duchamp's inimitable way of contributing to Dada, and later surrealism, while resisting membership in both, made him the perfect agent of its historical commemoration in 1953, when he designed a Dada retrospective for the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York, in which he prominently displayed a 78 rpm record, *That Da-Da Strain* by Mamie Smith and Her Jazz Hounds. The word *strain* suggests a virus, something befitting a virgin microbe. The disc furtively nods to Duchamp's own Rotary Glass Plates and his Rotoreliefs. Is the inclusion of *That Da-Da Strain* also a comment on the vicious circularity of Dada's own history? — a suggestion that history and the moment are incompatible?

There's one other episode in Dada's self-documentation that needs to be mentioned, and that is André Breton's involvement in 1922 (when he was ostensibly a dadaist) in the portentously titled "Congress to Determine the Aims and the Defense of the Modern Spirit," an attempt to validate and taxonomize the

avant-garde by mounting a conference. Tzara balked at the prospect of seeing Dada aligned with cubism and futurism, for that would make it subservient to the rosary of the international avant-garde. Yet that's exactly how Dada began, and Galerie Dada in Zurich was explicitly run as a showcase of the avant-garde — *not* a venue for bottling the spirited escapades of Cabaret Voltaire. When the inaugural Dada journal, *Cabaret Voltaire*, was published, Hugo Ball characterized it as “the first synthesis of the modern schools of art and literature. The founders of expressionism, futurism, and cubism have contributions in it” (*Flight Out of Time* 65). This early service performed by Dada on behalf of the international vanguard is one of the reproaches made by Huelsenbeck in *En Avant Dada*. The ill-fated Congress is now part of the history of Dada's downfall in Paris. Support for the Congress collapsed in the wake of Breton's xenophobic reference to Tzara as a foreigner bearing the dubious gift of Dada, to which Tzara responded by pointing out that “an ‘international’ Congress that reprimands someone for being a foreigner has no right to exist” (qtd. in Polizzati 71).

Tzara's predicament is registered in an episode that took place during an extended break from the first Dada season in Paris, when he traveled abroad. In Constantinople he met a man who claimed to have known Tzara in Paris. “Calmly, in spite of my amazement, I asked him what Tzara looked like. ‘He is tall and blond,’ he replied. I couldn't keep from laughing, because I am small and dark” (qtd. in Wilson 312). This is virtually an allegory of how so much of what's become known as modernism was disseminated. Anecdotes have a way of entering the history books, and histories have a way of becoming slogans, wall panel and headset prompts to aesthetic pilgrimage. In the process, small and dark becomes tall and blonde. Yet in the case of Dada, disinformation has a unique status, not exactly honorable but persistent — informative and deformative at once. Dismissive of official histories (history according to the victors), the dadaists intuited self-defeat as a viable alternative, cultivating the misinformation that was bound to occur.

Tzara's encounter foreshadows the disciplinary configurations in which we find ourselves (as scholars, curators, historians). The avant-garde generally, and Dada in particular, inconveniently straddles the domains of art, literature, performance, film, photography, music, and dance. So in addressing the history of Dada we naturally engage its objects and artifacts, while also being forced to consider the role of all the seemingly ephemeral, subordinate, ancillary stuff that has anecdotal value but the status of which is unclear. When I embarked on my history of Dada, *Destruction Was My Beatrice*, it was clear that a large part of Dada consisted of verbal grout, as it were, holding together an edifice consisting of objects of various provenance. In addition, I felt that Dada had been above all a *lived experience* by a certain number of people for a brief period of time. If Dada had a history, its history was predominately biographical. Representing Dada as an art movement, I felt, was misleading. Instead of artworks, I'd suggest, we might think of Dada products as *integers*. An integer is like a whole number (the whole

numbers being 1, 2, 3, etc.), but the category of integers includes negatives (-1, -2, -3, etc.). Works like Duchamp's *Fountain* and Man Ray's *Gift* possess both aspects of an integer. That is, the objects themselves are gone, so they're negatives; but the photographs remain as positives, maybe even darkroom solarizations like Man Ray's Rayograms or Christian Schad's Schadographs. They're instances covered by the German term *Aufhebung*, a word of major consequence to Hegel, since it simultaneously means *cancellation* and *preservation*.

Dada's legacy is that of the poisonous gift. Like much in Dada, it's a pun. In German, the word *Gift* means poison, so it's one of those *faux amis*, false friends. If you're learning German and casually assume that Gift in German means gift in English, you're in for a big surprise. And yet, Dada thrived on these accidental resemblances. In this case, it suggests that any gift always comes with a little homeopathic dose of poison. Gratification is shadowed by menace. And where art is concerned, craft is displaced by insolence and wit.

Although the dadaists embraced the poisonous gifts of circumstance as a component of everything they did, it was not mindless indulgence — though it was, in a way, *headless*. The artist Paul Klee (whose works were exhibited at Galerie Dada in Zurich) made this quizzical observation: "An exercise as a joke: Represent yourself without mirrors and without the kind of *a posteriori* conclusions that you get from mirrors. Exactly as you see yourself, therefore without a head, which you do not see" (184). The word *Witz*, translated here as *joke*, steers the sense away from practical joke towards a more cosmic implication. In some existential fashion, your whole life is the butt of a cosmic joke, or maybe hoax. The Indo-European root (*gher II*) from which *hoax* derives means desire and delight, yielding, as companions of *hoax*, the words *charisma* and *Eucharist*. This serendipitous convergence strikes me as the kind of thing that would have tickled Hugo Ball. This reveals hoax as more akin to reverence than to prank. Dada preserved reverence in the midst of a chaos to which it willingly submitted. If Dada is the art of the hoax, it's an art in which the audience or recipient feels the entire universe tilted slightly in an unexpected angle. It breeds an aura of delicious mistrust, with an aftertaste of the poisonous gift: like entering a women's bathroom and finding nothing but urinals. But this is too misleading a model on which to end. Better is the anecdote with which Jack Flam concluded his preface to the reprint of Motherwell's anthology in 1981: "Not long ago," he reports, "while I was walking through the Philadelphia Museum of Art, I came upon a display case in which Morton Schamberg's *God*, a 1918 Dada assemblage made of a plumbing trap set into a miter box, is supposed to rest. That this work now resides in a sealed glass museum case might in itself be seen to have something Dada about it. But the Dada spirit never stops where you expect it to. The case was empty, except for an inventory card, which read: God — Temporarily Removed" (xiv).

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