



ADAMOWICZ, ELZA. Dada Bodies: Between Battlefield and Fairground

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ADAMOWICZ, ELZA. *Dada Bodies: Between Battlefield and Fairground*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019. ISBN 978-1526131140. xiv, 260 pages.

Elza Adamowicz's *Dada Bodies* explores the pivotal importance of images of the human figure in the Dada movement. Explaining that Dada's bodies occupy not only a physical reality, but a social and political reality, Adamowicz examines how the body in Dada art becomes the locus of questioning, eroding, or subverting social conventions and dominant political ideology in post-World War I Europe. Aesthetic and philosophical challenges posed by Dada include, but are not limited to, undermining notions of fixed identity, enshrined gender differences, and corporeal integrity. Adamowicz shows us how the image of the body in Dada becomes a platform for staging these wider cultural phenomena.

Dada Bodies is arranged around various themes emerging from the study of the image of the body in Dada: the distortion of the classical body, the fragmented body of wounded soldiers, the machine body, and the body liberated by carnival aesthetics as Bakhtinian grotesque hybrids. Adamowicz recognises the methodological challenges of organising this expansive subject and reflects that inadequate though these themes are as common denominators, they are useful aspects of Dada to be examined.

Each chapter contains case studies from across Dada's artistic practices and geographic locations. Therefore, rather than providing case studies arranged by urban centers, as is common in monographs on Dada, the book compares the diverse representations of the body in Dada art across locales. Mirroring the subject of the book, Adamowicz's structure is conceived as an assemblage. This thematic arrangement provides a navigational challenge to the reader. Additionally, as there are few essays devoted to individual artists or locations, *Dada Bodies* may be less accessible to readers new to Dada. However, *Dada Bodies'* interwoven structure is also its attraction. Presupposing a certain knowledge of the differing trends issuing out of Dada's various host cities, Adamowicz conceives a novel approach to discussing the subject's diversity. Respecting Dada's heterogeneity and refusal to be contained or defined, this book rejects the possibility of traditional cohesive narratives and proposes alternative micro-narratives.

Adamowicz's creative structure is perhaps best exemplified in Chapter Five, on the theme of the grotesque hybrid body, which discusses works as disparate as Kurt Schwitters's sculptural project *Merzbau* and a poetry collection by Richard Huelsenbeck illustrated by George Grosz. This is followed by an account of Otto Dix's paintings of deformed returned war veterans, which are related to the body in Tristan Tzara's play *The Gas Heart*, a body which is at once dismembered and partly refigured.

Each case study examines how the body in Dada acts as a critical statement on pervasive ideologies: Dada's bodily images expose the hypocrisy of a doctrine which attempted to reassemble or disguise the fragmented body and mind of the

war-wounded. In Chapter Three, for example, Adamowicz undertakes an examination of how Max Ernst, Johannes Baargeld, and George Grosz parodied the cult of the healthy body as part of early twentieth century European propaganda. The fragmented and mutable Dada body performed the demise of the integral body of pre-war Europe: both the political body fathered on the principles of an authoritarian state and the aesthetic body modelled on the classical idealised human form. Chapter Ten explores how the human figure is disembodied, abstracted, or surrogated in works as unlike as Man Ray's films, Max Ernst's lithographs, Marcel Duchamp's readymades, and Francis Picabia's portraits. Dada replaced the wholesome body with disfigured and fragmented bodies, essentially dehumanised, as exemplified in the case studies presented in Chapter Seven. Equally and alternatively, Dada presents new and wonderful hybrid bodies, challenging contemporary aesthetics of the body, such as those in Hannah Höch's photomontages and Man Ray's photographs (Chapter Nine).

Adamowicz explains that, crucially, Dada's strategies to undermine the normative body extend beyond an anti-art or defiant act against social norms, creating a dialogue about new trends for individual and collective experience. In Chapter Eight Adamowicz traces Dada's fluid identity in terms of the multiple and mutable selves put forward in self-portraits (both in text and image). In addition, Adamowicz discusses the representation of male/female bodies as couples (often bride and bridegroom) in dadaist works. These bodies respond to the campaign to re-traditionalise gender roles which had become destabilised during and post-World War I. Finally, Adamowicz addresses shifting gender roles in the dadaist formulation of cross-gendered identities.

Dada Bodies claims neither to posit Dada as a homogenous movement (anti-war, anti-logic, anti-modernity) nor to attempt to identify a unifying principle "beyond the proliferation of its spare parts" (5). The strength of Adamowicz's book lies in its methodology which recognises the multiplicity of Dada, makes room for its contradictions, and points up the paradox that is central to the movement. *Dada Bodies* provides a detailed study of these various "spare parts." As Tzara stated in his 1920 "Dada Manifesto on Feeble Love and Bitter Love": "Dada has 391 different attitudes and colours. . . . Dada is the chameleon of rapid and self-seeking change (qtd. 5)." As Ernst asked in 1970, "Dada was a bomb. Can you imagine someone, almost half a century after the explosion of a bomb, intent on collecting the shards, pasting them together and displaying them?" (qtd. 5). *Dada Bodies* does not claim to put Dada back together.

Adamowicz's study is by no means exhaustive or concluded. While it cleverly relates unified notions from across the expanse of Dada, it would have been interesting if, for example, the discussion on full body masks and restrictive performance gestures in Zurich Dada as discussed in Chapter Two were related to the physicality of the actor's body in Tzara's Paris Dada plays (of which only *The Gas Heart* is mentioned). While Adamowicz points out the differences in mood between Paris and Zurich, there are similarities to be recognised also. In addition,

Chapter Six includes an incisive discussion on how the dadaists aimed to collapse the distance between actor and spectator, artwork and viewer. Adamowicz exemplifies this notion by detailing how Picabia encouraged audience interaction at the premier of his ballet *Relâche* by selling whistles to spectators before the show. However, there are several other, more visceral, audience/performer interactions which occurred during the Paris Dada period — the Festival Dada of May 1920 being a prime example, or the 1921 excursion where spectators became active participants on a tour to the church grounds of Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre near Notre-Dame.

However, as Adamowicz states, *Dada Bodies* is not a final project; it leaves room for future scholars to contribute to this first detailed discussion on the body in Dada. With *Dada Bodies* Adamowicz assembles parts from the body of works on Dada and leaves a gift for others to build on. Or, in the words of the author, *Dada Bodies* forms a “body-in-progress to be cut up, mutilated and expanded by future scholars” (19).

The ten episodes covered by Adamowicz, each relaying aspects of body culture in Dada, provide a sourcebook for the various means by which Dada artists employed the image of the human form in their respective practices. Adamowicz’s case studies are a selective slice of cultural history, and detail how perceived notions of the body have changed within their cultural milieu and how Dada artists contextualised the body within their historical moment.

Dada Bodies provides an excellent resource for researchers and enthusiasts of the early twentieth century avant-garde. More strikingly, *Dada Bodies* is an engaging study on our changing perceptions and experience of the body in art and culture, as told through the lens of the Dada revolt.

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