

# Dada Contra Art History

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# Dada Contra Art History

Mark Hutchinson

## Introduction

Dada has been subject to much critical reappraisal in recent years. If traditional art historical accounts of Dada, which treated it as an expressive reaction to social crisis, on the one hand, and a precursor of surrealism, on the other, had a consistent, concise, and coherent view of Dada, then the new scholarship on Dada can be characterized by its breadth and diversity. From gender politics to social networking, contemporary ideas are being used in an attempt to reconfigure our understanding of Dada (see, for example, Jones, Hopkins, and Sheppard). Why? What is at stake in this art historical reassessment and what makes Dada such a suitable subject for revisionist art history?

Part of the answer is the inadequacy of traditional accounts of Dada. Those accounts which speak of Dada primarily in terms of nihilism and despair, in fact offer little explanation of why the Dadas did the things they did. The new, revisionist accounts of Dada seek to recuperate Dada from its neglect and re-integrate it into art history: rather than being seen as an aberration born of the particular conjuncture of circumstances in Europe in 1916, Dada is addressed as a seminal art historical moment, in many ways the beginning of our present concerns in art. These accounts tend to look at what Dada produced rather than listening to Dada's negative rhetoric: Dada is re-described in terms of innovation and the expansion of possibilities for art. If mention of the dramatic historical circumstances that surrounded Dada, in particular the First World War, are still pretty much *de rigueur*, the contemporary art historical preference is to treat these circumstances as a motor for creativity and aesthetic revolution. Dada becomes the historical precedent which opened the way for contemporary art.

This is a process of normalization: in being taken seriously as an art movement Dada loses its exceptional status. Against this revisionist trend, which sees the positive in Dada, I wish to vindicate Dada's negativity. However, this is not in terms of nihilism nor inchoate rage nor the epiphenomenal expression in art of social disintegration – some of the attitudes which the revisionist trend sees in conventional accounts of Dada. On the contrary, we should think of Dada in terms of the precise and deliberate negation of art. Dada sought to destroy art. Why? It is my contention that for Dada, art was itself negative: Dada conceived of art as absence, exclusion, and division. This is not in the sense that art was somehow in a state of decay or socially compromised. Rather, for Dada, art *was* its processes of

negation, processes which were not contingent but constitutive and essential to art, in the same way that, from a Marxist perspective, material and social inequality are not contingent facts of capitalism but a necessary condition of and for its functioning.

This is the conflict between Dada and art history: for Dada, the positive object of art historical enquiry – art itself – is in fact a negative, something to be transcended through the violent destruction of art. As the Dadas reiterated time and again, Dada was not a literary school nor an artistic movement: rather, Dada was a call to arms against art. To address Dada as an art movement is to be against Dada.

### **The Re-description of Dada**

Contemporary art history overwhelmingly treats Dada as a rebellious yet positive art movement. No longer considered a nihilistic rant in the margins of modernism, Dada is re-inscribed into the art historical mainstream, in one way or another. Despite the diverse ways in which art history attempts to recuperate Dada, the reconsideration and normalization of Dada has two prominent, key aspects. First, there is the positive language used to describe Dada, including the deployment of conventional art historical terms and references. Second, there are the connections made between what the Dadas did and subsequent art practices and works, with, on the whole, a particular emphasis on contemporary concerns. These twin operations are usually taken for granted rather than explicitly formulated.

Both traits are clearly assumed in this passage from Marc Dachy, for example:

[T]he Dada Movement . . . transformed art, reinventing every discipline from within. An inherited culture that had now become unacceptable was replaced by a new inventiveness and a direct relationship between the artist and his art – as opposed to the art that until then had been imposed by social constraints. (14)

Here, Dada is given credit for a positive transformation of art, in terms of inventiveness and immediacy, against externally imposed restraint. On the first page of his book Dachy had already claimed that “the incandescence and integrity of this individualist revolt were to become the yardstick for all avant-garde art in the future” (11).

From a very different perspective, Thierry de Duve addresses Dada in terms of what he calls, in his typical postmodern style, “the whatever.” De Duve’s position is interesting in that he doesn’t simply use a vocabulary of positive terms (such as Dachy’s “inventiveness” and “integrity”) but reinterprets Dada negativity as such:

With dadaism, this formula [“it’s forbidden to make whatever”] is taken over by the avant-garde artists and turned against itself out of provocation. These artists counter the prohibition of the whatever with

its claimed authorization. "It is permitted to make whatever," expresses the gist of the slogan of the Dada liberation, with the consequence that their aesthetic judgment assumes a negative formulation: "this is non-art." Thus the Dada artist adopts the posture of the jury in the nineteenth-century painting salons and derisively inverts it. He pretends to be a technician of the absence of technique, a warrantor of the destruction of the trade, a traditionalist of the anti-tradition. He depends on the exclusion of the avant-garde to call himself avant-garde; he relies on the judgment "this is not art" to annoint [sic] his art with the negative ontology of non-art. (330)

Thus, for de Duve, Dada's negativity was a ruse: the only way to free art, to expand the possibilities of art so that it was possible to "make whatever," was under the guise of not making art. The key, positive term of re-description here is *liberation*. It is, perhaps, odd that de Duve implies that this liberation takes place against the authority of the juries of nineteenth-century painting salons, an authority long since overthrown by over fifty years of modernism: the *Salon des Refusés* was in 1863. Nevertheless, for de Duve this liberation of art was Dada's true, positive aim – it was simply that it was not possible to realize it directly in the historical conjuncture in which Dada found itself. Instead, Dada had to rely on the future recuperation of its non-art output as art. The purpose of this re-description is clear: all of Dada's negativity is repositioned as a smokescreen which allowed the Dadas to be working secretly for posterity or, to put it another way, for future art historians.

It is more common simply to ignore Dada negativity in favor of considering it in terms of a positive conception of diversity. The introduction to a recent collection of essays on Dada claims:

... a comprehensive insight into the sheer diversity of Dada practices: it considers its various geographic centres, and the various creative forms it used, including text, collage, photomontage, objects, dance, performance and film. The collection reflects the interdisciplinary nature of the movement and its lasting legacy in the work of artists and writers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. (Adamowicz and Robertson 12)

There are several things going on in this re-description which work together. Although it is true that Dada took place in various places, the elevation of geographic diversity into a central consideration emphasizes difference over underlying unity. Similarly, the re-description of Dada activity as "various creative forms" applies a conventional art historical vocabulary to activities the Dadas themselves described as being against art, thus implying that this diversity was the conventional production of diverse artistic products rather than multiple attempts to undermine such production. Finally, applying the contemporary idea of *the interdisciplinary* to Dada plucks it out of its historical conjuncture and re-

describes its anti-disciplinary activities as nascent twenty-first-century disciplinary promiscuity. Overall, the consideration of Dada in terms of its breadth of operations in itself precludes, or at least hinders, thinking of Dada as fundamentally negative in its unified attack on art.

These brief examples point to how the negativity of Dada is obscured, by various approaches by different authors, in ways which enable the application of wider, positive concerns to Dada. However, there is one revisionist project in relation to Dada which is particularly useful and warrants longer consideration because of its clear and explicit statement of its aims: it is *Dada: Zurich, Berlin, Hanover, Paris, New York*, consisting of an exhibition, a catalogue, a seminar series, and a collection of seminar papers (Dickerman *Dada Seminars*; Dickerman *Dada: Zurich*). This project describes Dada as a set of innovate, positive, and historically prescient art practices. The first two sentences of the catalogue state:

Born in the heart of Europe in the midst of World War I, Dada displayed a raucous skepticism about accepted values. Its embrace of new materials and methods created an abiding legacy for the century to come, with strategies that include collage, montage, assemblage, readymades, chance, performance and media pranks. (Powell IX)

From the very beginning, this project is an attempt to impose a new vocabulary on Dada. The language used in this opening description inculcates a normative and positive view of Dada activity. The authors claims Dada “displayed” a “raucous skepticism.” Here the word *displayed* is not simply descriptive: it implies participation within the existing state of things at the level of representation; Dada is posited as concerned with constructing a spectacle for consumption rather than, for example, the radical attempt to change things through action and words. The word *raucous* is used repeatedly in relation to Dada in this publication, especially by Leah Dickerman in the introduction. If *raucous* literally means rough and rowdy, it implies something *ad hoc*, lively and ill disciplined. In relation to Dada, it names Dada excess in such a way as to block descriptions of Dada which take its actions to be willful, violent, and destructive. To see what is being re-described, here is a typical passage from Tristan Tzara:

Every product of disgust that is capable of becoming a negation of the family is *dada*; protest with the fists of one’s whole being in destructive action. (“Dada Manifesto 1918” 13)

*Raucous* is coupled with *skepticism*, a word which simply implies doubt. “Skepticism about accepted values” means having reservations about what exists: *skepticism* excludes the possibility of the Dadas being committed to the negation of accepted values. The Dadas, I would argue, were not skeptical but, on the contrary, quite sure of what they thought of accepted values:

No more painters, no more writers, no more musicians, no more sculptors, no more religions, no more republicans, no more royalists, no

more imperialists, no more anarchists, no more socialists, no more Bolsheviks, no more politicians, no more proletarians, no more democrats, no more bourgeois, no more aristocrats, no more armies, no more police, no more fatherlands, enough of all these imbecilities, no more anything, no more anything, nothing, *nothing, nothing, nothing.* (Aragon 181)

Having reconfigured Dada negativity as boisterous irreverence in the first sentence, the authors wholeheartedly set about constructing a positive image of Dada in the second. Even the *skepticism* of the first sentence has already gone, as we are told of Dada's *embrace* of the new. *To embrace* implies a positive and unequivocal acceptance of that which is embraced. The embrace of "new materials and methods" implies a set of positive objectives for which these new materials and methods will be used: it implies a continuity in objectives – and it becomes clear later that this continuity is the conventional production of art objects. More on this below. For now, suffice it to say that *the new* can be made or forged, rather than embraced, and forged out of necessity and discontent rather than creative zeal. For Dada, the new involved the destruction of the old, not simply the extension of the old through the addition of extra methods and materials. Tzara put it thus: "Every man must shout: there is great destructive, negative work to be done. To sweep, to clean" ("Dada Manifesto 1918" 12). It is only in retrospect that Dada's "negative work" can be construed as positive new methods. For example, it is quite possible to think of the Readymade, in its historical moment, as the aggressive absence of any and every method rather than the proposal of a new one (regardless of its subsequent history).

The sense of positive creativity is inculcated further by the assertion that these alleged new materials and methods "created an abiding legacy." Whilst there is no doubt that Dada has had an abiding legacy, the critical question is how this has happened. By this I mean to ask what has happened to Dada: how have the intentions and actions of Dada been represented, misrepresented, and transformed in the creation and perpetuation of this legacy? Here, Dada's legacy is not presented as something in dispute but simply as a history of the appropriation of good ideas. But the Dadas themselves not only considered their actions and events the site of conflict but realized that Dada itself was and would be a site of conflict, too: "*Beware of forgeries! Imitators of DADA want to present DADA in an artistic form which it has never had*" (Varèse et al. 163). This is to say that part of Dada's battle was to resist being labelled in conventional cultural terms: "Dada is not a literary school nor an aesthetic doctrine" (Dermée 248). The danger with approaching Dada in terms of its legacy is the temptation to extract it from its artistic conjuncture and the conflicts inherent therein, retrospectively constructing a narrative of development rather than a recognition of rupture.

Finally, Dada's legacy is connected to a list of "strategies"; in this way, the things Dada did are given a continuity with later art-making activities. Dada actions are presented as a set of well planned, discrete, positive options for making

art, like tools in a tool box. There is no sense of the possibility of improvisation and desperation: of doing things, not for their own sake, but out of the attempt to avoid everything else: everything taken for granted in art. We should at least consider the possibility that the actions recounted in this list were born of tactical immediacy rather than strategic planning. This is not to say that the Dadas carried out these actions without an overall understanding of what they were doing. On the contrary, I would argue that Dada's strategic goal was a negative one: the destruction of art as a prerequisite for its transformation into something else. From this perspective, the list appears as a list of absences: collage, montage, assemblage, readymades, chance, performance, and staged events were all ways of *not* making art.

I have addressed the casual beginning of this catalogue in some detail in order to raise the question of how the language of a discipline molds its object of study. For the Marxist philosopher of language Jean-Jacque Lecercle, all language is a site of conflict. Every utterance seeks to position and persuade. All use of language is an intervention in an existing linguistic conjuncture: a response to the *rapport de force* which determines the conditions in which the utterance is formed. This is to say not only that language cannot but be used in a situation which is always already loaded but also that it cannot but take sides within that situation. In the case of Dada, the terms used to describe what Dada did set the possibilities for how we might think about Dada: for which questions it might be possible to ask. A small but not insignificant example is the name given to adherents of Dada: revisionist accounts of Dada always call them *Dadaists* not *Dadas*. Although the Dadas themselves used both terms liberally and interchangeably, the art historical preference for *Dadaists* is, perhaps, a sign of the desire to see Dada as a proper art movement.

So the catalogue's re-description of Dada makes the negations of Dada unthinkable. Not only is the negative repeatedly shifted onto a positive register but, moreover, Dada is always already approached as a proper art movement. It is always possible to re-describe an absence in terms of presence. However, following Roy Bhaskar, we could say that such re-description always involves a loss or misrepresentation. "Pierre is not in the cafe" can always be replaced by "Pierre is at home"; given that Pierre is real and alive he must be somewhere. However, as Bhaskar says: "Pierre's absence from the cafe doesn't *mean* the same as his presence at home (although the latter entails the former – which is equally entailed by his death) any more than it means the same as Jean's occupying his customary place" (7). This point is far from trivial: it is just such re-description which predominates in revisionist art historical writing on Dada. The absence of contemporaneous materials and methods from what the Dadas did does not mean the same as the invention of new materials and methods. As George Ribemont-Dessaignes made clear, what the Dadas did not want was art, including the assimilation of famous Dada moments into art:

Poetry: Art; not Poetry: Art. Words as a game: Art. Pure sentences: Art. Only meaning: Art. No meaning: Art. Words drawn at random: Art. The Mona Lisa: Art. The Mona Lisa with a moustache: Art. Shit: Art. A newspaper advertisement: Art.

We don't want it. (204)

## **Positive Things Versus Negative Words**

In the introduction to the accompanying book of seminar papers, Leah Dickerman clearly and succinctly states the axioms used to justify the revisionist approach to Dada. She begins by setting out the perceived differences between the new approach to Dada and established art historical accounts. She identifies two tendencies of the old art history. The first is to tie the works of Dada to the biography of individual artists rather than the movement as a whole. The second is the link with surrealism, which suggests that "Dada is a juvenile and generally inchoate form of the later Paris-based movement" (Introduction 1). As a corrective, she lists six imperatives for "overcoming the legacy of Dada's reception" (3). In abbreviated form, these are:

1. Recognition of the centrality of art making to the movement's concerns.
2. Understanding the practitioners' deep interest in their historical position and relation to the past.
3. Dada is to be unharnessed from surrealism.
4. Moving away from the monograph and reconsidering both figures long marginalized and group dynamics within the movement.
5. How do we understand both the distinction and relation between production in various Dada centers?
6. Recognition of the Dadas' role as prescient readers of modernity.

The list makes explicit the desire of the revisionist project to embed a positive conception of Dada within a positive conception of art.

The first imperative underpins the whole revisionist project. It is an attempt to change what counts in talking about Dada: to shift the terms of the debate in their entirety. If Dada has largely been addressed in terms of its "attitude", as Dickerman claims, this has meant the art historian has largely had to deal with what the Dadas wrote and said. To assert the "centrality of art making" to Dada is an attempt to oust the centrality of Dada's words. Moreover, it is to make an incision into Dada praxis: to separate Dada objects (and other upshots of Dada activity) from what the Dadas said.

Dealing with the things that Dada made as though they were made as conventional art objects, however abnormal and novel, moves the art historian onto the familiar territory of dealing with things and subtending the artist's words to those things. This can be seen quite literally in Phaidon's book on Dada in its "Themes and Movements" series (Kuenzli). This book normalizes Dada as art simply by fitting it into the series format: an extensive set of reproductions with

explanatory notes followed by a section of “documents.” Dada’s words are removed from its images, as though the latter were conventional artworks and the words an extraneous activity. The artist’s words become circumstantial evidence in the process of paying attention to the particular properties of things taken to be particular artworks: if one has already decided that things are the thing, anything the Dadas said can be accommodated to the priority of the art object in need of interpretation.

To oppose this position with the idea that words were the very stuff of Dada, it is not necessary to revert to those traditional accounts which take Dada words to be inchoate rage, juvenile provocation and so on. This is a false choice. There are other ways of conceiving of Dada’s refusal to make art. For example, Gavin Grindon argues:

For some artists, the systemic self-criticism of art meant autonomy-as-a-value comes to stand for something *other* than the production of art objects. The working role of the ‘artist’ is thrown into crisis. Avant-gardes often did not conceive of themselves as a vanguard of artists leading the way, but as artists refusing the role *of* artists. (84)

It is my contention that what the Dadas said and wrote was integral to such a rejection of art making. Words were not explanations of events nor footnotes to things. On the contrary, Dada manifestos, pamphlets, declarations, slogans, speeches, and conversations were fundamental to its assault on art.

Indeed, it is my contention that we should pay attention to the precise ways in which Dada words attacked the dominant habits, expectations, and proprieties of art. If Dada’s project was to negate art, then it would, of necessity, be incomprehensible from any position which adhered to the underlying assumptions of art. Dada words were weapons against art. We might even wager that Dada *was* its slogans. Indeed, it is significant that the word *Dada* is itself a kind of slogan. As the 1918 Berlin manifesto put it: “The signers of this manifesto have, under the battle cry: Dada!!!! gathered together to put forward a new art” (Huelsenbeck, “Collective Dada Manifesto” 244). Here *Dada* was not so much the name of an art movement, nor of a literary school, but a word in relation to which one was called to take sides. This is made clear in a further passage of the Manifesto:

Dada is a CLUB, founded in Berlin, which you can join without commitments. In this club every man is chairman and every man can have his say in artistic matters. Dada is not a pretext for the ambition of a few literary men (as our enemies would have you believe), Dada is a state of mind that can be revealed in any conversation whatever, so that you are compelled to say: this man is a DADAIST – that man is not. . . . (246)

Writing of the avant-gardes of the short twentieth century, Alain Badiou claims: “*The tendency of twentieth-century art is to revolve around the act rather than the work*, because the act, as the intense power of beginning, can only be thought in the present” (137; emphasis in original). We should add that, for Dada, the act was unequivocally one of negation: not simply the fleeting moment of a new beginning but the complete erasure of what went before. In the 1918 Manifesto Tzara wrote: “protest with the fists of one’s whole being in destructive action: DADA” (13). For Dada, the task is the radical creation of nothing.

Ever since we were born some lazy gits have been trying to convince us that there’s such a thing as art. Well we’re even lazier and today we’re going to say it loud and clear: ‘Art is nothing.’

There is nothing. Once our contemporaries get around to accepting what we say they’ll quickly forget that huge farce called art (Soupault 193-194).

Badiou goes on to connect the act with the necessity for words:

... throughout the century the drafting of manifestos and proclamations constitutes an essential activity of the avant-gardes. It’s been said that this is proof of their artistic sterility. As you can see, I am diametrically opposed to this retrospective contempt. Contrary to what some maintain, the Manifesto bears witness to a violent tension that seeks to subject to the real all the powers of form and semblance. (137)

Badiou is using *the real* in a sense derived from Lacan, which is quite distinct from the idea of *reality: the real*, as one of the three basic registers of human existence (the other two being the symbolic and the imaginary), is the excessive, impenetrable, and uncontainable – that which cannot be symbolized nor imagined. What Badiou is getting at is the “violent tension” between, on the one hand, the desire to proclaim a new beginning and, on the other, the desire simply to act, without explanation nor regard for cost or consequence, in the immanent present. This action in the present is opposed to words, inasmuch as words name and contain the unnamable and limitless. Yet words are needed to locate this action without explaining it: hence the manifesto bears witness to the unnamable. Thus the manifesto does not explain – does not name *the real* – but is, rather, itself an insertion in a site of conflict, art, on the side of the unnamable. This is how we should read the many assertions by Dadas that Dada means nothing; to insist that Dada means nothing is to be faithful to the unnamable. Francis Picabia provides one example, amongst many:

As for Dada it means nothing, nothing, nothing. It makes the public say, ‘We understand nothing, nothing, nothing.’

The Dadaists are nothing, nothing, nothing, they will certainly succeed in nothing, nothing, nothing.

Francis PICABIA

who knows nothing, nothing, nothing.

Instead of contributing to the continuity of meaning, Dada words and actions create an absence: a void of an imminent and spontaneous present. Indeed, Dada's insistence upon spontaneity is as notable as its insistence that Dada means nothing: "We are looking for a straightforward pure sober unique force we are looking for nothing we affirm the vitality of every instant the ant-philosophy of spontaneous acrobatics" (Tzara "Proclamation" 16). What should be emphasized is that here *spontaneity* is not an aid to creativity but the erasure of creativity. *Spontaneity* is a means to assert the primacy of an absolute present against an art embedded in history.

As well as circumventing both Dada's acts and words, promoting the centrality of art-making to Dada also downplays the collectivity of Dada. Even framing the question of art history's approach to Dada in terms of an opposition between objects and attitude (or words) is to risk conceding too much to the revisionist point of view. To reiterate, for Dada art was not in need of more objects but, as Huelsenbeck put it, "a good thrashing": "Our best instrument consisted of big demonstrations at which, in return for a suitable admission fee, everything connected with spirit, culture, and inwardness was symbolically massacred" ("Dada Foreword" 51). It is clear that here, for Dada, exhibitions were a means to attack art rather than an opportunity to display art objects. As such, the exhibition is but one example of the collective event which was central to Dada. Whether we think of the performances of Cabaret Voltaire, or the outings in Paris, or the joining of demonstrations in Berlin, and so on and so forth, Dada was nothing if not collective action. This can be seen, for example, in Michel Sanouillet's extensive history of Dada in Paris, which is organized precisely as an account of a succession of performances; indeed, the central chapters are titled the Main Performances I & II. In all its locations, as well as the occasional object, Dada produced performances, cabarets, soirees, outings, gatherings, readings, declarations, demonstrations, manifestos, and pamphlets, all of which were joint undertakings, in one way or another, focused on doing something at a particular moment in time. Such collective events were more interventions in the constitution of art than contributions to it. Only the re-description, and thus neglect, of this wider context allows one to move art-making to center stage.

Dickerman further neglects this aspect of collective action in the attempt to impose another contemporary description on Dada, characterizing its collectivity as a "network". The fourth imperative sets up an opposition between two accounts of the stuff that Dada produced. The established approach, it is claimed, subordinates Dada works to the careers of canonical artist by concentrating on the production of monographs. The new approach, in contrast, it is claimed, concentrates on Dada as a broad and loose network, one which includes a diverse range of individual practices. The fourth imperative is backed up by the fifth,

which calls for a synchronic analysis of the differences between Dada centers of activity, *qua* centers of production. The choice Dickerman is offering is between locating Dada objects in a diachronic account, which situates individual works within the span of the individual artist's biography, or in a synchronic account, which situates individual works as nodal points in a differential structure. Thus the fourth and fifth imperatives rest upon and reinforce the insistence that Dada was the making of proper art objects. What they discourage is the consideration of other forms of distribution and organization of activity which were not the production of art objects. Addressing the situation in Germany, Huelsenbeck wrote: "What is German culture? (Answer: Shit) And this culture is attacked with all the instruments of satire, bluff, irony, and finally, violence. And in a great common action" (51).

Here Dickerman does not represent the opposition fairly. It might be true that some traditional art historians of Dada have a liking for monographs. But there are also established approaches to Dada which consider it, in one way or another, a collective phenomenon. Firstly, Dada 'attitude' has not necessarily been taken as a sign of individual expression: "Dada . . . offered an escape from solitude and incipient boredom and an opportunity for camaraderie in a rash collective venture. Joining Dada would mean probable rupture of family and social ties and put budding careers at risk" (Short 84-85). Secondly, Dada events, public outings, and soirées have not necessarily been taken as individual production: "the *Dada-Soirées* and *Tournées* aimed to show men that inner and outer reality are fundamentally irrational and to convince them indelibly of this fact by provoking a violent response" (Sheppard, "Dada and Politics" 67). But Dickerman has no interest in accounts of Dada which are not concerned with the production of art objects.

The fourth imperative also links group dynamics to the recovery of figures "long marginalized" within Dada. What is at stake here? The emphasis on hitherto neglected figures within Dada is a means by which to challenge the conventional understanding of the group dynamics of Dada and dislodge the figures central to those dynamics from their centrality. So the question becomes: was the centrality of the established central figures of Dada an historical reality or a subsequent concoction of art history? We should note here that several of those central figures (Tzara, Huelsenbeck, and Breton, for example) were not artists but writers. This is, perhaps, an inconvenient fact for an art history which wishes to concentrate on the production of art objects rather than words. The recovery of neglected figures is all well and good. However, in Dickerman's reconfiguration of Dada, the idea that they were "marginalized," as distinct from, for example, simply being in the margins, suggests a deliberate act of repression. Although Dickerman does not say who she thinks is responsible for this act of marginalization – bad art historians or the central figures of Dada itself, or both – the upshot is to cast doubt on whether the central, non-art-making figures of Dada deserve their centrality. This, in turn, provides more material for Dickerman's overall project of making art-making central to Dada.

## **Dada and Surrealism Disconnected**

Against what she identifies as the second tendency of conventional art history, to tie Dada to surrealism, Dickerman seeks to understand Dada in its own right, free from the retrospective shadow of surrealism. This is her third imperative, which comes from the undeniable observation that Dada has been bracketed with surrealism in a very particular way in many art historical accounts. In such accounts, Dada is, indeed, portrayed as a rebellious adolescent: its provocations, anger and contrariness are read as expressive posturing; surrealism is the mature, realistic adult that Dada grew up to be. Helena Lewis, in her otherwise excellent book on the politics of surrealism, can sum up this view of Dada in a couple of lines:

The Dadaists, forerunners of the Surrealists, exemplified the pessimism of the World War I generation by their nihilistic rejection of traditional values. Their destructiveness and violence expressed their anger at the moral bankruptcy of Western culture. But the Surrealists gave Dadaist "anti-art" a positive meaning (X).

For Lewis, this is little more than a summary of accepted wisdom. In such accounts a negative Dada is contrasted with a positive surrealism. Dada is conceived in terms of an immediate, negative reaction to negative social circumstance. The underlying assumption is that Dada destructiveness was an emotional reaction rather than a deliberate and precise attempt to negate art.

Three commonplaces of such accounts are rehearsed by Dawn Ades, while talking about Dada's use of chance:

While Surrealism was to organize these ideas into a set of rules and principles, in Dada they were only part of a great outburst of activity all of which was aimed at provoking the public, destroying traditional notions of good taste, and liberation from the constrictions of rationality and materialism (114).

The three commonplaces are: provocation, the attack on good taste, and the embrace of irrationality. Clearly Dada did provoke, exhibit bad taste, and fail to conform to dominant bourgeois ideas of rationality. What is crucial is how we are to account for these things. In Ades's account, these facts are deployed to imply that Dada was largely a reaction to the norms of contemporaneous bourgeois society. Here, the negativity of Dada is interpreted as the simple inversion of the positive values of contemporaneous society. From this point of view, if art is a set of positive values, then Dada is the violent denial of these values. This is to say that Dada is a violent outburst enacted in the realm of art to match the meaningless destruction in society. And this position also accounts for the end of Dada and the transition to surrealism. Such emotional reaction quickly loses its energy and shock value and is, therefore, unsustainable for any length of time; so once Dada's

protest had been registered, it was time to return to positive art production with surrealism.

For Dickerman, these accounts are part of a tendency which is “both Francocentric and unitary in its teleology” (*Dada Seminars* 1). Moreover, they tend to block further enquiry into Dada because they see Dada as innately juvenile and therefore lacking in the sophistication or depth that can be found in surrealism. While it is certainly true that Dada has been treated by one strand of art history as the junior predecessor of surrealism, does this observation necessitate the proposed radical divorce from surrealism? And what does addressing Dada without surrealism entail?

In the catalogue, Dickerman argues for the divorce from surrealism in terms of the public sphere:

[Surrealism] was much more closely tied to the culture of poetry and the book, a rarefied social world, and more focused on the individual unconscious detached from the larger social one. Nor do the issues of the public – of politics, mass communication, and audience relationships – come to center stage in surrealism as they do in Dada. Dada’s engagement with the public sphere is defining (Introduction *Dada: Zurich* 9).

The idea that the public sphere is central to Dada practice is an interesting one. However, three things should be noted. First, the public sphere for Dada was very different from the public sphere today. Second, there are many different ways of engaging in or with the public sphere: perhaps there are different ways of *using* the public sphere. It could be argued, for example, that Dada tried to create an anti-public (Hutchinson). And third, is this difference enough to justify the radical divorce Dickerman proposes? After all, no one is arguing that Dada and surrealism are the same. It should also be noted that the public sphere was not a concept Dada had to hand. But within Dickerman’s argument, invoking the public sphere is just one way of clearing the ground for the application of contemporary descriptions of art to Dada practice. It is one thing to say that contemporary art has appropriated much of Dada to its own ends; it is quite another to attempt to argue that contemporary ends were the ends of Dada all along.

In general, addressing Dada in its own right involves two operations for Dickerman. The first is to explore the synchronic connections between Dada and art movements such as constructivism, futurism, and *Neue Sachlichkeit*, in what is heralded as a more complex international perspective. The second operation is the attempt to bypass surrealism: this means the attempt to connect Dada, on the one hand, to artistic predecessors and, on the other, to modernist movements which came after surrealism. These points are covered by the second and sixth imperatives respectively. The second imperative, in calling for an understanding of Dada’s “deep” interest in its historical position, is there to combat the idea that Dada was solely an immediate reaction to social circumstance. It is important for

Dickerman's claim that Dada was proper art production that the Dadas knew what proper art was. The sixth imperative expresses the desire to read Dada as itself a prescient reader of modernity. This is to assert that Dada understood modernity so well that it anticipated developments which came much later in the century.

So while a synchronic perspective does add to the understanding of Dada, and while it is also certainly true that the Dadas knew something about art, Dickerman is to be opposed not so much in what she says as in where she remains silent. There are two points here. The first is that there are other accounts of Dada, which do not treat it as immature posturing, but about which Dickerman says nothing. The second is that there are other ways in which we could conceive of the relationship between Dada and surrealism. Dickerman does not consider any. I shall address each of these in turn.

### **The Historical Avant-Garde**

Within the traditional art historical account of Dada, there is a strand which does not take the negativity of Dada to be primarily reactive, nihilistic nor expressive but rather an active engagement with the conditions of possibility for art. "Disaster and the Habits of Culture" is the title of Stephen C Foster's introduction, as editor, to the volume of essays by various authors, *Dada: The Coordinates of Cultural Politics*. The conjunction of "disaster" and "habits" neatly sums up how Dada was formed from a negative situation and also perceived this negativity in the presuppositions of cultural activity. Foster takes the task to be, against both the reduction of Dada to its objects and its marginalization as a perceived political failure, to maintain Dada as "the hope that sweeping critiques of and revisions in culture are possible" (1).

This line of argument is the historical descendent of the theorizing of the historical avant-garde by Peter Bürger in his book *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Bürger proposes two theses in relation to the avant-garde:

- i) With the avant-garde, art becomes general rather than particular.
- i) The avant-garde is the self-criticism of art.

It follows from these two theses that the avant-garde is a critical engagement with art in general rather than an engagement with the particularities of particular art practices. The avant-garde does not work within genres nor work against the particular styles and techniques of preceding movements in art; instead, the avant-garde works against genre as such and against style and technique, as such. It follows, for Bürger, that the avant-garde works against the idea of the work of art as such. This is to say, the avant-garde is not concerned with objects because it saw the assimilation of objects as the life blood of art as institution. Thus, for Bürger, art history which accounts for the avant-garde in terms of its techniques and objects is necessarily conservative in that it is imposing a conventional art framework on things which were essentially by-products of avant-garde *praxis*.

Rather, avant-garde activity should be conceived in terms of “manifestations”: objects and techniques only arise as part of a wider set of collective practices.

Much has been written in the wake of Bürger’s work, both for and against. My point is not to enter into this debate but simply to point out that Dickerman ignores it, as she seems to ignore all art historical work which does not conform to the position against which she wishes to set herself.

For Foster the dominant choice art history gives us is between seeing Dada as art or not.

On the one hand, some maintain that Dada rejected art; on the other hand, some believe that it was precisely Dada’s commitment to art that limited its impact on larger culture and subverted its stated intentions; and yet others hold, that when all was said and done, the Dadas were, at their best, simply good artists (5).

For Foster this choice is limiting and explains “rather little”; instead, he proposes approaching Dada in terms of process, critique, and action. Dada was forced to invent its own position, *ex nihilo*, in relation to dominant culture: it was the “creation of a unique ‘place’ from which it could redirect, amend, deflect, or intercept cultural processes without submitting to existing cultural roles” (2). Approaching Dada in terms of process, critique, and action is to provide different coordinates for tackling Dada than those entertained by Dickerman. Foster’s wish is to refocus attention from what Dada activities produced to why Dada engaged in the activities it did. Thus Foster’s position contradicts Dickerman’s first imperative without conforming to her picture of how art history tends to treat Dada. For Foster, Dada was critical activity.

However, Foster situates Dada activity in a very particular way: as a critique of a social system. Furthermore, he subsumes Dada critique to critique as such, which he posits as internal to the maintenance of the social system. Inasmuch as any social system requires criticism in order to reproduce itself, Dada is positioned as a necessary balancing or normalizing force within culture. This is the role of Dada: “identification, diagnosis, and prescription for whatever it is that has caused critical activity to falter” (4). So here Dada negativity ends up being a positive, corrective force that allows a decadent art to renew itself. Foster simply side-steps the negativity of Dada. Dada’s turn against art is seen as a sacrifice to preserve culture.

## **Dada and Surrealism Reconnected**

The second silence in Dickerman’s attempt to extricate Dada from surrealism is the lack of consideration of other ways in which they might be connected. For André Breton, for example, “Dada and Surrealism . . . cannot be thought of except in reciprocal relation, like two waves riding each other” (qtd. in Short 96). For Grindon, there is a political connection in terms of the refusal to work: in their

respective ways, both Dada and surrealism sought to operate outside the parameters of capitalism. It is my contention, on top of this, that Dada and surrealism should be linked as two distinct moments of one revolutionary process.

Slavoj Žižek has argued that the revolution must strike twice (*Revolution*). The first revolutionary moment is the immediate negation of the authority of the old order. This is the seizure of power, which will often involve violence directed against the repressive apparatus of existing power. However, the removal of the old order is the removal of a set of prohibitions, impossibilities, and absences, which is why the seizure of power is followed by an eruption of freedom and creativity. The immediate wake of a revolution is a moment where anything seems possible and everything is up for grabs. However, overthrowing existing power does not, in itself, change the everyday habits, customs, and discourses of the people. And it is precisely in these quotidian habits that the values and beliefs of a social order are carried and reproduced. The trouble for the revolution is that without a thorough transformation of social custom everything will return to normal. This is why the revolution must strike twice. The second moment is the hard work of rebuilding and reinventing everyday life. It is hard work because it must not only start from scratch but also continually and actively destroy existing, familiar practices. This will not be the “divine violence” (Benjamin) of revolutionary fervor but the calculated prosecution of division. Building the new involves destroying the old. And it is not only oppressors but those oppressed who are bound to have psychological investment in those social structures which must be destroyed.

While artistic revolution is not the same thing as social revolution, this model is useful in articulating the relationship between Dada and surrealism I am proposing. Just as the first strike of the social revolution does not aim at introducing new social practices but rather at sweeping away the old society, *in toto*, it is my contention that Dada did not aim at introducing new artistic techniques, practices, or ideas. Dada rather corresponds to the first moment of revolution in that it is a violent attack on the existing order, trying to sweep away art, as it existed, in its entirety. It is only in relation to this divine violence that the chaotic and diverse activities of Dada make sense. This is to conceive of Dada as negation in a way that has nothing to do with juvenile rebellion, nihilism, or an exasperated expression of rage; on the contrary Dada’s negation was an intelligent, precise, and political assault upon an art that was seen to be repressive, immoral and unjust.

But if the revolution must strike twice, the artistic revolution needs a second moment. If the first moment was the violent attack on the very constitution of the old art, then the danger is that in the space created by this revolutionary moment everyone will fall back on old habits and routines. The danger is that in the revolutionary void, the tactics used to destroy the old art will solidify into practices in the mode of the old art: the relations between artist, studio, and gallery remain the same but instead of paintings, readymades. In other words, whatever the

immediate differences in what artists do, everything will return to normal at a deeper, structural level. The second revolutionary moment must be the continued negation of art; but this negation involves the building of new habits and practices for art, from scratch, against the old. This is surrealism. If surrealism was the attempt to build a new art, this was only made possible by Dada's cleaning the slate. This bald assertion calls for a reconsideration of surrealism, too, which is beyond the scope of this essay. Here, the point is to show an alternative, radical way of connecting Dada and surrealism.

In this light, the isolation of Dada from surrealism is part of a process of the depoliticization of Dada: the attempt to integrate Dada into a synchronic network is the attempt to divest Dada of its revolutionary attack upon art by normalizing it as one artistic strategy amongst others.

### **Anti-art**

In Foster's summary of the art historical state of play, as quoted above, there are three basic positions in relation to Dada and art.

1. Dada is negative; art is positive. Dada is considered a nihilistic rejection of the positive attributes of art. Here Dada is a negative refusal or rejection of a positive art.
2. Dada is a positive contribution to a positive art. Here art is positive and Dada is a positive contribution to its possibilities. Dada's actions are interpreted as the invention of new possibilities for art. Dickerman's position is exemplary here.
3. Dada is positive; art is negative. Here Dada is a rejuvenating critique of a decadent art: a corrective to the perceived limitations of art. For Foster, for example, Dada bypassed art to engage directly with aesthetics. In the same book as Foster, John D. Erickson argues that Dada was a positive metacritique of the limitations of art: a discourse "upon the reductionist, negative discourse of traditional Western art and Cartesian-inspired modes of thinking that delineate, delimit, and foreclose on possibility" (13).

What is missing from Foster's summary is a fourth logical position:

4. Dada is negative and art is negative, too.

It is my contention that this fourth position is how Dada conceived of itself. Dada was not trying to salvage something in the face of the limitations and foreclosures of art (whether culture, aesthetics, or anything else) but trying to eradicate art altogether. For Dada, art was not a set of positive resources, a repository of techniques, styles, and genres. Nor was it a practice gone astray and in need of salvation or reinvention. On the contrary, for Dada, the trouble with art was intrinsic and foundational: art was produced by, and reproduces, the divisions of a divided society. From this perspective, Dada is irreducibly political. Dada's work of negation is the prerequisite for the New, for the revolutionary

transformation of art into something else. This is how we should locate the conflict between Dada and art history: Dada is the attempt to destroy that in which the art historian is invested. If Dada calls for the taking of sides, as it does, then to be for Dada is to be against art and, it follows, against the history of that art.

This desire for negation can be heard in the name 'anti-art.' Dada's claim to be 'anti-art' is habitually interpreted as a rhetorical device or provocation expressing dissatisfaction with art. It is rarely taken seriously as a critical claim. Rather than being either an exasperated refusal to participate in art or an alternative program for art, anti-art names the attempt to negate the very co-ordinates of art. Rather than thinking of Dada as negation within the existing field of art, we should think of Dada as negation of the existing field of art. Anti-art is the recognition that before the New can be forged, the old must be destroyed.

Dave Beech and John Roberts have addressed Dada's anti-art desire to destroy art thus:

Dada anti-artists systematically rid their practices of artistic qualities and skills in order to cut out the disease of art at source. It is imperative for the anti-artists to put in place systems of violation that will prevent any of his training or sensitivity from playing any part in the choices and making of artistic objects. This is why self-violation is central to Dada's anti-art destruction of art. Art is put through the sadomasochistic ring. The systematic and comprehensive subtraction of the artist from the artist (hence, anti-artist) leaves the Dada individual with no artistic resources to draw on. (292)

It is clear that for Beech and Roberts, Dada not only perceived art as negative – “a disease” – but also perceived Dada itself as negative – a “self-violation.” The art in need of being destroyed is not simply something exterior (whether paintings, galleries, or anything else) but fundamentally interior: established artistic habits, intuitions, and common sense which become one's own. Dada's anti-art negativity is hard to maintain because the Dada must be vigilant against slipping back into artistic habits: it is hard to go on while actively maintaining a position of no artistic resources. Indeed, many Dadas did slip back, sooner or later, into making art. Others, however, as I have argued briefly above, moved on to surrealism not as a return to art but as the next stage of anti-art. But at its height, so to speak, Dada sustained its position of negation and self-negation against the negations of “the disease of art”.

It is in this light that we should read Dada's claims to be against Dada, of which there are many: “the real dadas are against Dada” (Tzara, “Dada Manifesto on Feeble Love” 38). Such statements are not so much the playful indulgence of paradox as the assertion that the erasures needed for a new future must have no exceptions. This idea of radical self-negation can be seen in the idea of bringing forth “the new man,” which was common to both radical politics and radical art in the twentieth century :

Truth be told, it is not the ideological dimension of the theme of the new man that is operant in the twentieth century. What impassions subjects and militants is the *historicity* of the new man. For we find ourselves in the real moment of commencement. The nineteenth century announced, dreamed, and promised; the twentieth century declared it would make man here and now. (Badiou 32)

For Huelsenbeck, who had written a prose poem called “The New Man” in 1915, the possibilities of the new man were crucial for Dada:

The Dadaist exploits the psychological possibilities inherent in his faculty for flinging out his own personality as one flings a lasso or lets a cloak flutter in the wind. He is not the same man today as tomorrow, the day after tomorrow he will perhaps be “nothing at all,” and then he may become everything. He is entirely devoted to the movement of life, he accepts its angularity – but he never loses his distance to phenomena, because at the same time he preserves his creative indifference, as Friedlaender-Mynona calls it. It seems scarcely credible that anyone could be at the same time active and at rest, that he should be devoted, yet maintain an attitude of rejection; and yet it is in this very anomaly that life itself consists, naive, obvious life, with its indifference toward happiness and death, joy and misery. (“Dada Foreword” 50)

But even here we should add a note of caution. Revisionist art history is entirely capable of re-describing the theme of the new man in contemporary terms quite alien to the times. Matthew Biro, for example, takes “visions of the new human in Weimar Berlin” to be about identity politics: “the historical avant-garde . . . represented a turn to identity politics in art: the representation of alternative forms of subjectivity such as those evoked by the figure of the cyborg” (21). Once again we can see how the negative can always be re-described in positive terms. But if identity politics is about the recognition of alternative identities, the idea of the new man is about the erasure of identity.

Contra Biro, we could say Dada participated thoroughly and radically in the short twentieth-century’s desire for an absolute new beginning; one which entailed a revolutionary break with the present and the destruction of the old. This process, without guarantees and without the need for recognition, Badiou calls “*the passion for the real*” (32).

The real, as all key players of the century recognize, is the source of horror and enthusiasm, simultaneously both lethal and creative. What is certain is that it is – as Nietzsche splendidly put it – ‘Beyond Good and Evil.’ Any conviction about the real advent of a new man is characterized by a steadfast indifference to its cost; this indifference legitimates the most violent means. If what is at stake is the new man, the man of the past may very well turn out to be nothing but disposable material. (32-33)

If the values of the old reside in, and are reproduced by, the habits and rituals of everyday practice, rather than explicit beliefs, then everything which is familiar must be erased. This is why the anti-artist must systematically rid his or her practice of all established skills and habits and maintain a steadfast indifference to this cost: the art of the past may well turn out to be nothing but disposable material: "... art is not in danger – for art no longer exists! She is dead" (Hausmann 88).

## Conclusion

As Badiou emphasizes, the co-ordinates of the century are alien to the present time, which desires the acceptance of all that is practicable, reasonable and natural, within what is already given, what already exists. Hence the political emphasis on inclusion, rights and representation; what is considered dangerous and doomed is any attempt at radical change. As Žižek says: "Fredric Jameson's old quip holds today more than ever: it is easier to imagine a total catastrophe which ends all life on earth than it is to imagine a real change in capitalist relations" (*Living* 334). And as Badiou says: "What is dreaded, what must be foreclosed, is what is neither natural nor amendable by right alone. In short, what is *monstrous*" (177. Emphasis in original).

So much contemporary scholarship on Dada, whatever its positive qualities, accepts the co-ordinates of the present and forecloses the monstrous. It wishes to address results not ideas; artworks not actions; the positive not the negative; a network of individuals not collective will. But Dada was monstrous. More than any other historical avant-garde, it set itself the task of clearing the way for a new beginning for art: not through prudent and practicable reorganization but through the absolute destruction of art. What was important for Dada, what was heroic and epic, was the action of the moment, not posterity. Dada was the negation of art.

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