

# Dada in Context

Professeur émérite Henri Béhar

Université de la Sorbonne-Nouvelle, Paris III

*The superb Dada exhibition held at the Pompidou Centre in 2005 (and after in Washington) inspired a large number of publications that I would like to go over and discuss here. In the preface to his recent illustrated guide, Gérard Durozoi states that "Rebellious avant-garde movements challenge the notion of progress, concerning themselves more with meaning than with form. They consider that their potential for subversion cannot be reduced to a narrowly political engagement, which may indeed involve certain individuals, but not the movement as a whole, and that from this point of view the misfortunes of surrealism should provide a clear warning".<sup>1</sup> Following the example of Isidore Ducasse, we could reverse each of these propositions and find them equally apt. If we consider merely the overall thrust of the assertion, we find that this critic contrasts an apolitical Dadaist movement with the tendency of early Surrealism (after Futurism) to engage firmly in politics during its "période raisonnée". This view would give us, on the one hand, a pure white dove (or almost pure, subject to the removal of a few elements, contaminated by politics in individual cases, free from any form of engagement), and, on the other hand, an impure group, permanently compromised by a youthful error, its involvement with the Communist Party.*

## New Revisionism Is Here!

Obviously, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 functions as a cut-off point here: any art which in some way made its compromises with Marxism and/or with the Soviet regime is henceforth doomed to oblivion, denied the right to exist. Scholars less scrupulous than the present one have paid no attention to the historical context, the fascist and dictatorial regimes, the Spanish Civil War, the Second World War, the Cold War and its aftermath, in order to reconsider earlier avant-garde movements and eliminate from them all the poets and artists who were politically involved at some stage in their lives. In short, we are being offered, if we are not watchful, a

---

1 Gérard Durozoi 2005. *Dada et les arts rebelles*. Paris: Hazan, 11.

new artistic and literary history, revised in the name of 'liberalism', a history every bit as false as the one formerly promulgated by Marxist education manuals.

Not having a youthful error of this sort to confess to, and rejecting both extreme views, not because they are extremes but because they violate the historical facts, I would like today to take a fresh look at the much-debated question of the political attitudes of the Dadaists.

In fact, matters are not as simple as they might appear: traditional histories of the Dada movement have for many years contrasted the apolitical attitudes prevalent in Switzerland, New York and Paris with the political engagement of the German Dadaists. Adopting such a view would amount to applying to the movement, particularly in its German incarnation, the criticism described above in connection with surrealism. I shall therefore try to formulate here a global approach to Dadaism and politics, seeing it as a collective movement having many branches.

Ninety years after the birth of Dada in Zurich, we need to reconsider all the writings that have accumulated on the subject and spell out carefully the involvement of the movement in the world of politics.

But first I would like to explain some methodological principles which seem to me of great importance in discussing a topic so elusive and ever-changing (nowadays, for example, we hear about Dadaist movements in Finland, Russia and Poland, movements which in their time were called cubo-futurist or something else).

A word of warning: we must be more than ever on guard against the sin of anachronism against which the historian Marc Bloch sought to warn us. We must date each quotation meticulously, placing it into its historical and geopolitical context. In fact, whether they like it or not, the subsequent writings of the actors in the Dadaist drama are all marked by the time and place of their composition.<sup>2</sup> Their statements are all the more dangerous for having been formulated by sincere individuals who are innocently putting forward untruths and who are themselves the playthings of history... Thus, one cannot begin to understand the quarrel pitting Richard Huelsenbeck against Tristan Tzara at the New York Exhibition of 1950 if one fails to place it against the fiery backdrop of the Cold War.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, we must consider the object of our investigation for what it was, namely, a collectivity, the result of a combination of diverse individual positions

---

<sup>2</sup> Hubert van den Berg demonstrates this clearly in connection with some works published between 1950–1960 by Richter, Huelsenbeck, etc. See his article *From a New Art to a New Life and a New Man. Avant-garde Utopianism in Dada*. In Sascha Bru & Gunther Martens (eds.) 2006. *The Invention of politics in the European avant-garde (1906–1940)*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 133–150.

<sup>3</sup> See Robert Motherwell 1951. *Dada painters and poets*. New York: Wittenborn & Schultz.

which it is easy to contrast with one another later on... I have sought to show elsewhere that Dadaism was an international movement with no “establishment”, no founding text, no self-proclaimed leader, no constitution, no organizing committee or executive branches.<sup>4</sup> In its way, Dada is an excellent example not of democracy but of anarchism applied to the avant-garde.<sup>5</sup> Logically, this should prevent us from making any attempt at systematization.

By its very nature Dadaism expresses confusion, proclaims links between opposites, negates the principle of non-contradiction, assuring us that yes=no. If an opponent calls into question its principles, the Dadaist enters into the quarrel by professing his total indifference. In short, the movement tends to install idiocy everywhere, but does so deliberately, just as Tzara suggested.<sup>6</sup> It is difficult in such circumstances to separate out a clear theory of Dadaism, to affirm that this is Dada and that is not. For example, is abstraction in poetry and painting one of the essential characteristics of Dadaism? At first one might be tempted to say no, but in so doing one would dismiss the entire oeuvre of Hans Arp and a good number of the poems of Tzara, the “Rumanian abstract artist”, as he was called by the short-lived Italian journals which published him during the war.

We need to add that Dadaism is by definition a movement, in other words a loosely-linked group of individuals defending common goals or interests. We must therefore understand it in terms of its own dynamic, in the context of local circumstances. I know, of course, that Dada is frequently discussed according to its various sites and settings, but the reason the groups adopted the common name was, surely, that its members felt that to do so made sense, and that it did not tie them to formal rules and regulations – of which there were none. At this point we may remember Tzara’s response to his New York friends when they asked his permission to call their new publication “Dada”. He replied that Dada belonged to everyone, and reminded them of the source of the name: “For Dada should say nothing, should not explain this offshoot of friendship, which is neither a dogma nor a school but rather a constellation of free individuals and facets”.<sup>7</sup>

Last but by no means least among the caveats required in discussing this difficult matter is the fact that we must constantly critique our primary sources. I am

---

4 Cf. Henri Béhar 1992. Dada : une internationale sans institutions ? In Judit Karafiath & Gyorgy Tverdota (eds.) *Les Avant-gardes nationales et internationales. Libération de la pensée, de l'âme et des instincts par l'avant-garde*. Budapest: Argumentum, 55–61.

5 See Hubert van den Berg 1999. *Avantgarde und Anarchismus. Dada in Zürich und Berlin*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, and Hubert van den Berg 2006. “From a New Art to a New Life and a New Man”, *Avant-Garde Critical Studies* 19, 133–150.

6 Tristan Tzara 1975 (1920). Dada Manifeste sur l’amour faible et l’amour amer. In Henri Béhar (ed.) *Œuvres complètes* I. Paris: Flammarion, 384.

7 Tristan Tzara 1975 (1921). “Autorisation”, *New York Dada*, April 1921. In Henri Béhar (ed.) *Œuvres complètes* I. Paris: Flammarion, 572.

always amazed that the precautions taken with regard to any historical document are not automatically applied to our own discipline. Should we blindly trust a narrative written ten years after the end of the movement, a narrative such as that of Friedrich Glauser?<sup>8</sup> What credence should we give to an aging German Dadaist who arrives completely drunk on the scene hoping to rediscover his youth? Here I am referring to Walter Mehring, the esteemed editor of *La Bibliothèque perdue*, I remember once taking with me to the Goethe Institute in Paris.<sup>9</sup> Mehring was unwilling to recognize the painter and musician Jef Golyschef, another member of the Berlin movement. How can we trust the memories related by a certain great poet (Philippe Soupault) who altered his earlier statements to agree with documents provided for him subsequently by a graduate student?

The accounts left for us by the chief German Dadaists (Hans Richter, Richard Huelsenbeck, Raoul Hausman, as well as others less well-known in the Dada pantheon, such as Franz Jung,<sup>10</sup> Erwin Piscator,<sup>11</sup> and Ernst Toller<sup>12</sup>) tend to transform and minimize their own active role in politics while others, who at the time rejected any suggestion of the influence of politics on their activities, now seek to set these activities in the wider setting of the relationship between the individual and society's regulatory systems.

Finally, we must explain the meaning we give to the word "Politics". There is what Durozoi calls "a strictly political engagement", which, in his terms, probably means militancy, adherence to a given party. Then there is politics in the global sense, that of the citizen of a democracy, conscious of his rights and duties, going to the polls whenever he can. Finally, there is the politics of the person who declares that he has nothing to do with politics; in other words, that he is letting someone else run his life.

Dadaism was skilled at making a clean sweep (others might call it scorched earth), wanting to leave nothing standing of bourgeois civilization. Dadaism could not avoid politics. "We know what Dadaism had done with politics, it had destroyed it with a stroke of the pen, ignored it. The movement revolted against power of all sorts,

---

8 Friedrich Glauser 2005 (1931). *Souvenirs du Mouvement Dada*. In Henri Béhar & Catherine Dufour (eds.) *Dada circuit total*, Cahiers H. Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 185.

9 He was supposed to give a conference named "Mais où sont les neiges d'antan", 6<sup>th</sup> January 1966 at the Goethe Institute, Paris.

10 Franz Jung 1993 (1958). *Le Scarabée-torpille, considérations sur une grande époque*. Translated by Pierre Gallissaires. Paris: Ludd, 612.

11 Erwin Piscator 1962. *Le Théâtre politique*. French version by Arthur Adamov in collaboration with Claude Sebish. Paris: L'Arche, 288.

12 Ernst Toller 1974 (1933). *Une jeunesse en Allemagne*. Translated by Pierre Gallissaires. Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 225.

in favor of liberties of all sorts”, wrote Ribemont-Dessaigues in *Déjà jadis*.<sup>13</sup> Politics cannot escape the reach of subversion. But are we talking here about politics as it is practiced in bourgeois societies or of other forms of action seeking to transform our collective life? The struggle against all forms of power may be conceived merely on the level of a revolt, but surely the conquest of liberty demands that revolt be transformed into revolutionary action? Refusing as they did to consider a vision of history, were the Dadaists even capable of imagining this sort of action?

Having spent too long on these preliminary considerations, I propose to give up on a political history of Dadaism and try instead to shed some light on some of the constantly recurring questions related to the topic. Taken as a whole, for instance, was Dada anarchist, communist or concerned solely with art? Within these large categories, what was the movement's point of view concerning different forms of society in different circumstances?

\*\*\*

There is a widespread view that Dadaism was either anarchist or libertarian, (which comes down to the same thing) and that it was therefore in favour of individual liberty with no social constraints. Such a label certainly fits a number of artists of the time, but can it be extended to the totality of the group as a shared doctrine?

A recent essay, *Dada libertin et libertaire*<sup>14</sup> should surely answer our question. Unfortunately, this proves not to be the case. Using a mass of undocumented and ill-digested references, the author claims to be linking the 'libertin' philosophers of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and our Dadaists. The latter group are said to be libertines in the philosophical but not in the literary and novelistic sense of the word, which developed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and is closer to meaning libidinous. In other words, the Dadaists, according to this critic, are “the apostles of a liberty more absolute than that defended by the revolutionary anarchists” (12). Not libertarian, then, but libertines, insofar as they play the game, denouncing art while excluding the passions and desire. Developing this theory further, the author recognizes two trends in Dadaism, the first, Germanic, exemplified by Hugo Ball, having a messianic revolutionary tenor; and the second, Latin, defended by Tristan Tzara, being solely “libertin”.

---

13 Georges Ribemont-Dessaigues 1974 (1933). *Déjà jadis*. In Ernst Toller. *Une jeunesse en Allemagne*. Translated by Pierre Gallissaires. Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 185.

14 Giovanni Lista 2005. *Dada libertin et libertaire*. Paris: L'insolite, 274.

While agreeing that Dadaism was marked by a number of contradictory movements, I am afraid I cannot accept this nationalization of the Dadaist philosophy.

In his conclusion, after an extensive historical view, our cut-and-paste scholar makes the quite logical claim that Dadaism represents libertine thought because it defends limitless freedom, rejects the future in favour of a life with no other purpose, and ends with the principle of indifference (211). How could the conclusion be otherwise, given that the end was already inherent in the premise, in the content arbitrarily attributed to this so-called libertine philosophy, an artefact constructed *a posteriori* by forcing together under one heading the highly nuanced thought of a number of philosophers from very different times and places. This work is a fine example of the ‘rabbit in the hat’ trick or, to put it in more scholarly terms, of a kind of ‘emanatism’ that I remember attacking more than 25 years ago in the preface to my work on *Dadaist and Surrealist theatre*<sup>15</sup>.

We must not abandon critical thinking. For us to accept the thesis outlined above we would have to have far more documentation and proof than that provided by this critic. Above all, these so-called libertine philosophers, concerned primarily with the existence of God, with critiquing religion and dogma, would have had to subscribe to a definition that sees them as excluding desire (even though most of them were Epicureans), as being constantly preoccupied with artistic creation (whereas they were chiefly analyzing the varied faces of materialism), and as adopting a philosophy of Nature satisfied with the absurd, with simultaneous contradiction. Dadaism, in its entirety, would have to fit this definition exactly. But this is far from being the case. Personally, I think Dadaism could just as easily be called libertarian as ‘libertin’.

\*\*\*

In reality, everything shows that most Dadaists were immersed in the culture of anarchism, from Hugo Ball translating Bakunin to Max Ernst, Theodor Baargeld, Julius Evola, Marcel Duchamp and Picabia reading Stirner; from Julius Heuberger, printer of the “Dada” review in Zurich, to Man Ray, the brilliant American Jack-of-all trades; from the painter Hans Richter’s links to the Zurich anarchist group to the anarchist tendencies of Berlin Dadaism (Hausmann, Baader, Huelsenbeck). Thirty years after the Zurich demonstrations, Tristan Tzara, who had himself learned of the anarchist movement in Bucharest, believed in this idea: “It is obvious that the anarchistic nature of Dadaism, together with the idea of a moral absolute that

---

15 Henri Béhar 1979. *Le Théâtre dada et surréaliste*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Paris: Gallimard, Folio, 20.



the movement placed beyond any practical contingency, was bound to keep the Dadaists away from political struggles".<sup>16</sup>

And even beyond this original influence, which derived chiefly from the great thinkers of Anarchy (Stirner, Bakunin), the fundamental attitude of the Dadaists derives from this doctrine. A contemporary drew the following portrait of Hugo Ball: "What good were logic, philosophy and ethics in the slaughterhouse that Europe had now become? Intelligence was bankrupt. Every day provided new examples: with the help of language, it was so easy to justify this carnage. But to try to fight it with words and sentences seemed at first sight naïve and impossible. Dadaism was therefore an attempt to destroy the tools that materialism had seized to defend its universe".<sup>17</sup>

Tzara's 1918 Dadaist Manifesto sums up this idea magnificently: "Let everyone proclaim that we have a great work of destruction and negativity to accomplish. Sweep and clean. The cleansing of the fellow will take place after a period of total madness and aggression, the mark of a world left for too long in the hands of bandits who are tearing apart and destroying the centuries". (*Œuvres complètes* I, 365)

Of course it is not a question for the Dadaists of formally joining some anarchist group, and even less a matter of belonging to some sort of federation, Jurassian or otherwise. But we do find in their attitudes the components of anarchy - the rejection of the authority of the State, the notion of spontaneous revolution, confidence in the masses, condemnation of specialization.

In a similar vein, I think it is important to make a distinction between the nihilism professed by certain anarchist doctrines and Dadaist negation. While it is true that references to Nietzsche are frequent among Dadaists, especially in Richard Huelsenbeck's *En avant dada* and Picabia's *Jésus-Christ rastaquouère*, we cannot therefore limit this movement to the thought of the author of *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft* (The Joy of Learning). The reason is that there is no will to power in Dadaism, no eternal return, no fundamental pessimism. On the contrary, Dadaism expresses joie de vivre, the desire to live, the joy of creation in spite of the most unfavorable conditions. In short, Dadaist negation attacks all the forces of material, moral, and philosophical oppression, all the rules that tradition imposes on creativity. In addition, it reaches a synthesis already proclaimed by Marcel Schwob: creation is born of destruction. I have always wondered how Kurt Schwitters managed to select the debris washed up on a beach and make of them, when juxtaposed on a

---

16 Tristan Tzara 1982 (1947). *Le Surréalisme et l'après-guerre*. In Henri Béhar (ed.) *Œuvres complètes* V. Paris: Flammarion, 85.

17 Glauser 2005 (1931), 185.

canvas (or grouped together in his Merzbau) the magnificent pictures that are so admired today. He really had an unusual sense of what was to come....

\*\*\*

Whether the war explains the birth of Dadaism or, as has been jokingly remarked, Dadaism explains the war is not important here. Everyone will agree with me that Dadaism occurred in neutral terrain in 1916, right in the middle of the war (both chronologically and geographically), at a moment when it seemed that none of the instigators of the world conflagration would easily be the victor. At that time the French were blocked in Verdun, trying in vain to break through the Somme front. Italy had joined the war, as had Rumania, on the side of the Allies, who had opened up a second front in the East. An offensive led by the Russian Broussilov retook Galicia.

Whatever any of them may have said (I am thinking here chiefly of Aragon boasting of having gone through the war without ever writing a word about it), the Dadaists could not remain detached from this unique situation, which affected young people above all. I could easily quote the remarks of Dadaists tormented by the worldwide turmoil. Ironically, Arp wrote some twenty years later, that: "In Zurich, not involved in the slaughterhouses of the world war, we dedicated ourselves to the fine arts. While in the distance gunfire rumbled, we glued paper, read our works, wrote poetry, and sang at the top of our voices".<sup>18</sup> They laughed in the face of the storm, embracing life over the forces of destruction.

The rebellious Dadaists were obviously opposed to the continuation of the butchery, but this did not mean that they espoused the pacifist doctrines of people like Romain Rolland. In her memoirs, Claire Goll, who, with her husband Ivan, was a member of the entourage of the author of *Au-dessus de la Mêlée*, recalls that they had to put up with the gibes of Tzara and his friends. For his part, long after these events and in a totally different context, Tzara sought to explain their attitude: "We were firmly against the war without therefore falling into the facile trap of Utopian pacifism, We knew that we could not get rid of war without getting rid of its roots".<sup>19</sup> Provocatively, Richard Huelsenbeck recalled the attitude of his Zurich friends at one of the first Dada evenings in Berlin: "We were against the pacifists because the war had given us the chance to exist, in all our glory. [...] We were in favour of war, and Dadaism today is still in favour of war. Things must clash with one another:

---

<sup>18</sup> Jean Arp 1966 (1938). *Dadaland*. In Jean Arp (ed.) *Jours effeuillés*. Paris: Gallimard, 133.

<sup>19</sup> Tristan Tzara 1980. *Entretiens avec G. Ribemont-Dessaignes*. In Henri Béhar (ed.) *Œuvres complètes V*. Paris: Flammarion, 400.



we don't yet have enough cruelty".<sup>20</sup> One can easily imagine the reaction of the Secession public, at a time when the war was not yet even over!

Dadaism thus pushed its interlocutors, peaceful bourgeois, to lose their tempers. Obviously, the question arises in a very different fashion for the Dadaists in Barcelona, New York, Paris and especially Berlin at the advent of the Weimar republic.

\*\*\*

Commentators have not been slow to notice that Dada's founders and Lenin resided a few houses away from one another on the Spiegelgasse in Zurich. From this fact it was but a short step – and one rapidly taken by novelists and dramatists - to imagine conversations between the founders of the aesthetic revolution and the theoretician of the Internationale...

In many countries, anti-Dada critics have had a field day imagining a link between artists and politicians, something that might have serious consequences. Public opinion is so easy to manipulate!

Later in life, Tzara admitted to Olivier Todd during a BBC interview about Dadaism that: "I can tell you that I knew Lenin personally in Zurich and played chess with him. But I am embarrassed to admit that at that time I did not know that Lenin was Lenin. I only found that out much later".<sup>21</sup> In other words, even if he had been familiar with Marxism and had heard the name of the head of the communist Internationale, he did not know him when he saw him. It must be remembered that the Swiss authorities did all they could to suppress awareness of this Internationale. Meanwhile the socialists, fed up with the propaganda about holy union which promised a fresh and joyful battle, had regained a degree of credibility with the people at the time of the Conferences that took place in Zimmerwald, Switzerland, in September 1915 and in Kienthal on April 24, 1916. While there, Lenin and his supporters strengthened their position in favor of a third Internationale which would transform the imperialist war into a civil war. Meetings, strikes, riots, which the Dadaists could not ignore took place in Zurich after Platten, secretary of the Swiss socialist party, returned from Russia at the end of 1917. This justifies Tzara's assertion, questioned by modern revisionists, that: "At this time, among the Zurich Dadaists, Ball [...] Serner and I saluted the Russian revolution insofar as it

---

20 Richard Huelsenbeck 1980 (1920). "Première allocution Dada en Allemagne", *Dada almanach*. Paris: Champ Libre eds, 260. Here we have a fine exemple of provocative and contradictory politices of Dada!

21 Tristan Tzara 1980. Art, anti-art, interview par Olivier Todd. In Henri Béhar (ed.) *Œuvres complètes V*. Paris: Flammarion, 435.

offered the only way to put an end to the war. We did so all the more eagerly as we had adopted a position against pacifism..."<sup>22</sup> In fact, they were thinking less of the coming triumph of the proletariat than of the end of hostilities between Russia and Germany.

\*\*\*

The situation in Berlin when Germany was defeated was rather different. Dada could not remain detached from the battles between Spartakists and Social Democrats. Berlin Dadaists, less political than is often claimed, though more political than some recent critics have asserted, entered into the conflict by way of their writings. The paintings of Otto Dix, the caricatures of George Grosz, were violently critical. Accumulating dark, ridiculous materials reflective of the society they lived in, they discovered photographic montage, the destructive power of which has been well demonstrated. Particular mention should be made of Johannes Baader (who styled himself Oberdada, Superdada), whose public challenges, pronounced in the middle of a session of the Diet, were contained in a pamphlet entitled "Dada against Weimar". His attacks, his letters, making use primarily of collage and of typographical variations are still, even today, strangely poetic. Paradoxically, the huge International Dada Fair, which took place in Berlin in 1920, and was followed by a major Dada anthology, marked both the high point of the movement and its end, at least in this city. Some Dadaists (Grosz, Heartfield and his brother Hertzfelde) chose overtly political action from within the communist party. Others continued in their iconoclastic experiments.

For an idea of the difficulty of placing the remarks of the Berlin Dadaists in a political context we need only refer to the manifesto "What is Dadaism and what does it want in Germany?", published in *Der Dada I* in June, 1919, and signed by Hausmann, Huelsenbeck and Golyscheff. Measures that were quite orthodox for Marxists, such as the collectivization of private property, the recognition of intellectual workers, the nationalization of art, appear there side by side with Dadaist challenges such as the statement that teachers and priests will have to subscribe to a profession of faith in Dadaism, and recite noise and simultaneous poems; that Dada circus tours must be organized and that sexuality must be placed under the control of a Dada Centre... The result was that the bourgeois treated them as Bolsheviks, and the Bolsheviks viewed them as bourgeois or anarchists. In both cases, Dadaism triumphed! What a great political victory!

Usually, the political question can be summed up by saying that in Berlin there were two tendencies, which sometimes acted together and sometimes separately.

---

<sup>22</sup> Tzara 1982 (1947), 86.

The first, which we may call Dada-Marxist, sought and eventually managed to get close to the working class. The other sought to push the cultural revolution through to its conclusion. But both adopted the same method and produced works clearly identifiable as Dadaist. Only the goals of their creations separated the two trends. "To those who seek to create a proletarian art, we pose the question: 'What is proletarian art?' Is it art made by the proletarians themselves? Or art dedicated to the service of the proletariat? Or art designed to awaken (revolutionary) proletarian instincts? There is no art made by proletarians because a proletarian who creates art is no longer a proletarian but an artist. An artist is neither a proletarian nor a bourgeois and what he creates belongs neither to the proletariat nor to the bourgeoisie, but to everyone",<sup>23</sup> declared the Proletkunst Manifesto which, under its seemingly orthodox title, opposed the regimentation of artistic creation. We know what came of this manifesto. To make this absolutely plain, I have only to list the signatories: Théo van Doesburg, Hans Arp, Ch. Spengermann, Kurt Schwitters, Tristan Tzara. Similar statements appear in the writing of Raoul Hausmann.

In reality, Dadaism was tracing its own path, opposed to proletarian art on the one hand, but against art for art's sake on the other, always taking the side of life. We might parody Tzara and say that the artist is up to his neck in history and that his free production is its reflection.

\*\*\*

While it is true that the Dadaists did not demonstrate their rejection of war by deserting, we nonetheless cannot forget the war as a factor in their decision to exile themselves to Switzerland to carry on their efforts. These focused on the artistic domain and took the form of a dialectical movement which linked together inextricably destruction and creation.

Max Ernst formulated a major objection to any attempt at a Dada exhibition: "Dada was a bomb: surely you are not going to waste time picking up the pieces", he said to me when I told him of our intention to organize a retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art for the fiftieth anniversary of the movement. Putting to one side the extraordinary elitism manifested by such an attitude, it remained undeniable that Dadaism had happened, and that it had left visible traces in a number of artistic fields. We still, of course, have to reach agreement on what Dadaist activity really was.

---

23 M. Dachy 2005. "'Manifest Proletkunst', signed by Théo van Doesburg, Hans Arp, Ch. Spengermann, Kurt Schwitters, Tristan Tzara", Mertz 2, Nummer i, *Archives Dada*, Paris: Hazan, 224.

The goal of Dadaism, beyond the political positions of any given party, is surely quite clearly defined by Tzara in his 1918 Manifesto. In France the Dadaists understood this immediately, declaring: “No more paintings, no more men of letters, musicians, sculptors, religions, republicans, royalists, imperialists, anarchists, socialists, Bolsheviks, politicians, proletarians, democrats, armies, police, countries, we have had enough of all these idiocies, no more anything, nothing, nothing, nothing”.<sup>24</sup>

This is quite clear to anyone willing to listen: a truly new creation can only happen after this great cleansing. At the moment it occurs, destruction ushers in creation, for the human mind is made in such a way as to be unable to tolerate a vacuum.

In this way we were able to see at the Centre Pompidou everything Dadaism managed to create, or at least everything that survives today in spite of the three main obstacles:

1. The scorn of the bourgeois who sought to ignore the movement;
2. The attack that the Nazis launched on this supposedly degenerate art;
3. The destructive effects of time on these objects made of highly perishable materials.

The classic example of this resistance to the rigours of History is certainly the work of Kurt Schwitters (the man who was refused entrance to the Dada Club by Richard Huelsenbeck on the grounds of his insufficient involvement with politics). In a recent article in *Dada circuit total*, Isabel Schulz demonstrated clearly that the entirety of Schwitters' work belonged in the political domain, because of its choice of materials, and its solidifying of the real, as well as because of its hatreds (nationalism, militarism) and its demands.<sup>25</sup> For him, art was the first right of man, a means of transforming the world. For this reason he founded the Merz party, unusual in that it had only one member, himself! In fact, one has only to study his pictures to see that the found materials, once grouped together, take on a new value, both semantic and aesthetic, what we might even call a militant meaning.

\*\*\*

This last symbolic example should have made it clear that for me Dadaism was the most political of the avant-garde movements of the first war and after, due to its effort to intervene globally in the society of its day, to set it straight without being limited to the artistic domain or to the rules that controlled that domain. But also,

---

24 “Manifeste du mouvement Dada”, *Littérature* 13, mai 1920, 1.

25 See Isabel Schulz 2005, “L’art m’est beaucoup trop précieux pour qu’on l’utilise comme outil”, Kurt Schwitters et la politique”. In Henri Béhar & Catherine Dufour (eds.) *Dada circuit total*, Cahiers H. Lausanne: L’Age d’Homme, 254–267.

Dadaism was the most artistic of the movements of the inter-war period because of its desire to intervene in the politics of its day, to set that straight without being constrained by statute books or by motions passed in congress.

Let me end with an anecdote, an historical occurrence. At the end of his life, in 1979, Aragon gave to Georges Marchais, the Secretary General of the French Communist party, the 'readymade' given him by Marcel Duchamp and entitled "The Mona Lisa" (subtitle "L.H.O.O.Q."). Can there be a political gesture more meaningfully Dadaist? Can there be a Dadaist gesture more meaningfully political?

(Translation: Annette Tomarken)

## References

- “Manifeste du mouvement Dada”, *Littérature* 13, mai 1920, 1.
- Arp, Jean 1966 (1938). *Dadaland*. In Jean Arp (ed.) *Jours effeuillés*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Béhar, Henri 1979. *Le Théâtre dada et surréaliste*, 2nd edition. Paris: Gallimard, Folio.
- Béhar, Henri 1992. Dada: une internationale sans institutions? In Judit Karafiath & Gyorgy Tverdota (eds.) *Les Avant-gardes nationales et internationales. Libération de la pensée, de l'âme et des instincts par l'avant-garde*. Budapest: Argumentum. 55–61.
- van den Berg, Hubert 1999. *Avantgarde und Anarchismus. Dada in Zürich und Berlin*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter.
- van den Berg, Hubert 2006. “From a New Art to a New Life and a New Man”, *Avant-Garde Critical Studies* 19. 133–150.
- van den Berg, Hubert 2006. From a New Art to a New Life and a New Man. Avant-garde Utopianism in Dada. In Sascha Bru & Gunther Martens (eds.) *The Invention of politics in the European avant-garde (1906–1940)*. Amsterdam: Rodopi. 133–150.
- Dachy, M. 2005. “‘Manifest Proletkunst’, signed by Théo van Doesburg, Hans Arp, Ch. Spengermann, Kurt Schwitters, Tristan Tzara”, *Mertz* 2, Nummer i. *Archives Dada*, Paris: Hazan.
- Durozoi, Gérard 2005. *Dada et les arts rebelles*. Paris: Hazan.
- Glauser, Friedrich 2005 (1931). Souvenirs du Mouvement Dada. In Henri Béhar & Catherine Dufour (eds.) *Dada circuit total, Cahiers H*. Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme.
- Jung, Franz 1993 (1958). *Le Scarabée-torpille, considérations sur une grande époque*. Translated by Pierre Gallissaires. Paris: Ludd.
- Lista, Giovanni 2005. *Dada libertin et libertaire*. Paris: L'insolite.
- Motherwell, Robert 1951. *Dada painters and poets*. New York: Wittenborn & Schultz.
- Piscator, Erwin 1962. *Le Théâtre politique*. French version by Arthur Adamov in collaboration with Claude Sebish. Paris: L'Arche.
- Ribemont-Dessaignes, Georges 1974 (1933). Déjà jadis. In Ernst Toller *Une jeunesse en Allemagne*. Translated by Pierre Gallissaires. Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme.
- Richard Huelsenbeck 1980 (1920). “Première allocution Dada en Allemagne”, *Dada almanach*. Paris: Champ Libre eds.
- Schulz, Isabel 2005, “‘L'art m'est beaucoup trop précieux pour qu'on l'utilise comme outil’, Kurt Schwitters et la politique”. In Henri Béhar & Catherine Dufour (eds.) *Dada circuit total, Cahiers H*. Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme. 254–267.
- Toller, Ernst 1974 (1933). *Une jeunesse en Allemagne*. Translated by Pierre Gallissaires. Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme.
- Tzara, Tristan 1975 (1920). Dada Manifeste sur l'amour faible et l'amour amer. In Henri Béhar (ed.) *Œuvres complètes I*. Paris: Flammarion.
- Tzara, Tristan 1975 (1921). “Autorisation”, *New York Dada*, April 1921. In Henri Béhar (ed.) *Œuvres complètes I*. Paris: Flammarion.
- Tzara, Tristan 1980. Art, anti-art, interview par Olivier Todd. In Henri Béhar (ed.) *Œuvres complètes V*. Paris: Flammarion.
- Tzara, Tristan 1980. Entretiens avec G. Ribemont-Dessaignes. In Henri Béhar (ed.) *Œuvres complètes V*. Paris: Flammarion.
- Tzara, Tristan 1982 (1947). Le Surréalisme et l'après-guerre. In Henri Béhar (ed.) *Œuvres complètes V*. Paris: Flammarion.