



2-2017

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### Recommended Citation

Page, Dwight (2017) "Zurich and the Birth of French Surrealism," *Swiss American Historical Society Review*. Vol. 53 : No. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: [https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/sahs\\_review/vol53/iss1/2](https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/sahs_review/vol53/iss1/2)

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# Zurich and the Birth of French Surrealism

*by Dwight Page*

Paris has long been regarded as the artistic and literary capital of the world. Yet little known is the historical fact that Zurich played an equally fundamental and key role in the development of modern art, the birth of the avant-garde in literature and the arts, and the advent of French Surrealism.

The reasons for the importance of Zurich in the genesis of twentieth century Modernism are obvious: since the sixteenth century Switzerland has been a neutral country and a safe haven for free thinkers from around the globe. It is therefore only natural that the pioneers of the avant-garde would have gravitated to Zurich in the second decade of the twentieth century. They knew that their novel and unprecedented ideas would be welcomed in the Swiss metropolis, by then recognized as the second home of so many disenchanting foreign artists and exiles.

On the eve of the First World War (1914-1918), the continent of Europe was dominated by five Great Powers: the British Empire, the French Empire, the Prussian Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Russian Empire. Moreover, the power of the Hohenzollern dynasty in Germany, the Hapsburg dynasty in Austria-Hungary and the Romanov dynasty in Russia was uncontested. The rulers of these royal houses governed by divine right and were perceived by their obedient subjects as the vicars of God in their respective kingdoms, who had been appointed by the Church to minister to their people from whom they received unquestioned loyalty and veneration. Thus, in the early twentieth century Europe was still governed much the same as it had been in the days of the ancient Roman Empire, by venerable



*Peter Paul Rubens, a painting from the Marie de Medici cycle, glorifying the reign of Marie de Medici and Good King Henry IV of France (1589-1610).*

and mighty emperors. Historically and traditionally, art had always served in European history and political affairs as a mechanism to glorify the State and to increase the prestige and the power of the ruling houses of the various European constitutional monarchies and autocracies. In other words, art had always had a didactic and a political purpose and had always been perceived as being in close alliance with the State. In this regard, one remembers Peter Paul Rubens, who created an entire cycle of paintings to commemorate and glorify the reign of the French King Henri IV (1589-1610) as pictured above; and the late eighteenth century painter Jacques-Louis David, whose paintings praise and buttress the civic virtues regarded





*"The Oath of the Horatii"* by Jacques Louis David.



*"Impression Sunrise"* by Claude Monet.

as *de rigueur* by the government of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Empire.

With Claude Monet (1840-1926), however, dawned a completely new conception of the meaning and function of art. His 1872 painting *Impression: Sunrise* exemplifies an innovative and unprecedented technique of painting, known as Impressionism, which had no avowed didactic or civic purpose but which rather sought to give an impression, rather than a photographic image, of reality. Moreover, Monet abandoned his predecessors' concern with grandiose historical themes and august matters of state and chose instead to focus upon the sources of artistic inspiration provided by the everyday French countryside. Thus, with Monet, art divorced itself from its hithertofore intimate alliance with the State, and merged with daily life and ordinary experience.

This new spirit of artistic experimentation and exploration found a congenial environment for its development in Switzerland, especially in the city of Zurich. In the opening decades of the twentieth century, Switzerland was an island of democracy in an otherwise imperialistic Europe, and thus attracted like a magnet a large number of iconoclasts and revolutionaries who had been forced to flee their native lands. Indeed, a close neighbor of these new artists in Zurich was Nikolai Lenin, who had chosen the Swiss metropolis as the ideal place to lay covertly the groundwork for the Russian Revolution. Thus, circa 1914, Zurich stood as a symbol of the radical and revolutionaries new ideas, where the practitioners of these beliefs could express their concepts in an open and free public forum, without fear of reprisals from the local authorities.

On February 5<sup>th</sup>, 1916, the German writer Hugo Ball, the Alsatian painter Jean Arp, and others, opened the doors of the Cabaret Voltaire at No. 1 Spiegelgasse, Zurich, as a meeting ground for "independent men—beyond war and Nationalism—who live for other ideals." On opening day, the Rumanian poet Tristan Tzara, and the painter Marcel Janco and his brother appeared at the cabaret, and became staunch participants in its activities. These were the beginnings of the Cabaret Voltaire, seat of Zurich Dada.

The word Dada first appeared in print in the Cabaret Voltaire, June 15<sup>th</sup>, 1916, to designate a forthcoming publication, *Dada*. Although its origin is still shrouded in contradictory accounts, the name became connected with the antimilitaristic, anti-aesthetic attitude of the Zurich group, which was conditioned in part by the horrors of World War I, but also, in a more professional way, by a revolt against the established traditions in art and literature. The term was soon applied to the Zurich group and the arts they propounded, as well as to a small gallery which was opened in 1917 at 19 Bahnhofstrasse, Zurich.<sup>1</sup>

During the late teens and early twenties, Dada spread from Zurich to Berlin, Paris and Hanover, while affiliated groups espousing the new spirit of the avant-garde appeared in Holland, Belgium and Austria.

In addition, the historical development of the Dada movement has attracted the attention of several authors. The most objective account of Dada is Hans Richter's *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*.<sup>2</sup> In this book Richter attempts to present as many verifiable facts as possible. Zurich Dada has been interpreted from a social viewpoint by Miklovž Prosenec in *Die Dadaisten in Zürich*.<sup>3</sup> Holland Dada has been studied in K. Schippers' *Holland Dada*.<sup>4</sup> An account of Berlin Dada is given by Raoul Hausmann's *Am Anfang war Dada*.<sup>5</sup> The basic work for Paris Dada is Michel Sanouillet's voluminous *Dada à Paris*.<sup>6</sup> The New York branch of Dada is treated by Arturo Schwarz in *New York*

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<sup>1</sup> Ileana B. Leavens, *From "291" to Zurich: The Birth of Dada* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Research Press, 1983), p. 1. For a particularly lucid account of the historical origin of the avant-garde and Modernism and their sociological implications, the reader is referred to the following work of literary and aesthetic criticism: Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw, vol. 4 of *Theory and History of Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

<sup>2</sup> Hans Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1965).

<sup>3</sup> Miklovz Prosenec, *Die Dadaisten in Zürich* (Bonn: H. Bouvier Verlag, 1967).

<sup>4</sup> K. Schippers, *Holland Dada* (Amsterdam: em. Querido's Vuitgeverij B.V., 1975).

<sup>5</sup> Raoul Hausmann, *Am Anfang was Dada* (Steinbach/Giessen: Anabas-Verlag Guenter Kämpf, 1972).

<sup>6</sup> Michel Sanouillet, *Dada à Paris* (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, ed., 1965).

*Dada: Duchamp, Man Ray, Picabia,*<sup>7</sup> and in William Agee, “New York Dada: 1910-1930.”<sup>8</sup>

The culmination of this well documented Dada movement is most definitely the movement known as Paris Dada, which also represents the merging of the Swiss Dada movement with the even more extensive and influential movement of French Surrealism.

However, the history of Paris Dada really begins with Zurich Dada, for within this extraordinary cultural milieu, the founder of Dada, Tristan Tzara, formulated his model of the revolutionary artist. Zurich Dada originated early in 1916 when the Rumanians Tzara and Marcel Janco, the Germans Hugo Ball, Emmy Hennings, Richard Huelsenbeck and Hans Richter, the Alsatian Jean Arp, and the Swiss Sophie Täubert-Arp, gathered in exile to escape the pan-European war and to protest the mandatory draft.<sup>9</sup> At their Zurich nightclub, the Cabaret Voltaire, these early Dadaists provided an open stage for all performers seeking a forum for their art. There, each evening, Tzara led multilingual “choruses” of simultaneous poetry, Ball recited works seemingly composed of sounds alone, Ball and Hennings performed Expressionist plays, Hennings sang, Janco provided masks for everyone to wear, and Huelsenbeck accompanied the whole affair on his big brass drum. The resulting chaos was purposefully cultivated by the Dadaists, who celebrated the irrational, invited irony and rejected all logic in order to attack the warmongering power structures surrounding neutral Switzerland and their so-called “rational” traditional cultural codes. History had proven such rationalistic culture, controlled by the State, to be dangerous, and the Zurich Dadaists were determined to save the world from this menace to human freedom.

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<sup>7</sup> Arturo Schwarz, *New York Dada: Duchamp, Man Ray, Picabia* (München: Prestel-Verlag, 1974). Also, for further study of the anarchist movement in twentieth century Europe, see: Arturo Schwarz, *André Breton, Trotsky, et l'anarchie* (Paris: Union générale d'éditions, 1977).

<sup>8</sup> William Agee, “New York Dada: 1910-1930,” in Thomas B. Hess, ed., *Avant-garde Art* (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1968), pp. 125-54.

<sup>9</sup> Theresa Papanikolas, *Anarchism and the Advent of Paris Dada: Art and Criticism, 1914-1924* (Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2010), p. 84.

In fact, the Zurich Dada movement is characterized by two distinct historical phases: initially, the movement was marked by introverted ideological and epistemological skepticism; subsequently, it evolved into significant extroverted and strident political activism.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, it was the strong political *engagement* of the Zurich Dadaists—their dream to enlighten and to improve European society—which bore directly, via Tzara, on Paris Dada. Hugo Ball's famous study of the revolutionary Russian anarchist and founder of socialist syndicalism, Bakunin, was, for example, the basis of the undeniably anarcho-individualist theatrical and poetic genres that formed Zurich Dada's ideological cornerstone.<sup>11</sup>

Ball was a fixture in the politically vital Expressionist circles in prewar Munich and Berlin, and he directed numerous plays, contributed poetry and articles to such German political periodicals as the anarchist *Die Aktion* (1912-18), edited the anarcho-Expressionist review *Die Revolution* (1913-14), and knew such socialist writers as Carl Sternheim and such anarchists as Landauer.<sup>12</sup> When the First World War broke out, he made three unsuccessful attempts to enlist, for, like many Modernists, he believed that the cataclysm would ultimately bring about spiritual and social regeneration. After traveling voluntarily to the Belgian Front, however, his optimism quickly faded, and in 1915, he fled to Switzerland, a committed conscientious objector and political activist. Accompanying him was Emmy Hennings, whose activities as a passport forger had already resulted in one prison sentence, and together they lived under assumed names and worked as itinerant vaudeville performers. Eventually—and ironically—being arrested for their aliases guaranteed them of

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<sup>10</sup> Stefan-Sebastian Maftai, "Between "Critique" and Propaganda: The Critical Self-Understanding of Art in the Historical Avant-Garde. The Case of Dada," *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, vol. 9, no. 27 (Winter, 2010): p. 235.

<sup>11</sup> Hubert Van den Berg, *Avantgarde und Anarchismus: Dada in Zürich und Berlin* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverla C. Winter, 1999), pp. 248-79.

<sup>12</sup> John Elderfield, "Introduction," in *Hugo Ball Flight out of Time: A Dada Diary*, ed. John Elderfield, trans. Ann Raines. (New York: Viking Press, 1974), pp. xvi–xvii.



their safety as conscientious objectors, and they settled officially in Zurich to establish the Cabaret Voltaire. The couple's presence would assure the high priority accorded to political issues in that establishment.

At the core of Ball's political philosophy was his unflinching opposition to the technocratic and spiritually bankrupt "modern monster state," whose commitment to material progress, in his view, had submerged the variety and spontaneity of humanity beneath the impersonal regularity of industrial mechanization. Not only had Ball written his doctoral dissertation on Friedrich Nietzsche, he had also moved in the anarcho-Expressionist circles associated with the magazines *Die Aktion* and *Der Sturm*, where writers and artists inspired by Nietzsche and Stirner were formulating an anarcho-individualist alternative to militant revolutionary anarchism.

For Ball, Nietzsche was the ideological author of the various revolutions which transformed Europe in the early twentieth century, for he was the first philosopher to have broken with the German philosophical tradition of reason and to have extricated himself from the hitherto unchallenged Kantism which dictated the life of German and Swiss intellectual circles at that time. Nietzsche's historically unprecedented irrationalism, together with that of August Strindberg and Voltaire, had exposed the poverty of ideas and the intellectual inferiority of the political systems and the laws then prevailing in the various empires of Europe.

These latter philosophers had compelled European intellectuals to reassess the ideological foundations of their societies and to seek better moral and ethical solutions for social ills. The all-encompassing anti-authoritarianism demonstrated by these writers proved to Ball that revolutionary action need not operate only in the realm of established political structures, and he concluded that the proletarian revolt of the masses then brewing in Russia must be supplemented with an even more necessary revolt in materialistic philosophy. Thus he transformed the Cabaret Voltaire into a forum for cerebral revolt, as well as a forum for rebellion against the Kantian assumptions and conclusions which up until that time had

always guided the schools of philosophical and ethical thought of the German speaking world. Consequently, Zurich became the center of a new philosophical and artistic *Weltanschauung*.

Naturally, the professors and theologians in the Departments of Philosophy and Theology at the great universities of Vienna, Tübingen, Jena, Erfurt, Bonn and Basel continued to defer to the ideas of Immanuel Kant in their lectures and curricula, and they continued to value and to disseminate the central Kantian theme of the free and proper exercise of reason by the individual, in their approaches to the various problems of philosophy. Nonetheless, the advent of the avant-garde movement and ideas in the cabarets, the public forums and the intellectual social circles of Zurich during the second decade of the twentieth century did cause the intellectual prestige of Zurich to irrevocably ascend in the hearts and minds of the German speaking people and, after 1916, intellectual discussions and academic research in the German speaking lands were greatly enriched by the dialogue between the rigorously reasoned philosophical ideas first developed by Kant in the late eighteenth century and the new avant-garde literary, aesthetic and philosophical concepts then being formulated in Switzerland.

The reader will recall at this time that the activities at the Cabaret Voltaire in 1916 were actually directed by three intellectual leaders: 1) the German-French sculptor, painter and poet, Jean Arp; 2) the afore-mentioned Hugo Ball; and 3) Tristan Tzara, the Rumanian avant-garde poet, essayist and performance artist. If Arp abandoned reason for intuition in the anarcho-naturalist tradition, and if Ball studied anarchism in order to formulate a poetic solution and antidote to Kantian rationalism, then Tzara developed their personal political philosophies into a public, definitively “Dadaist” manifestation of cerebral defiance.

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<sup>13</sup> These poems are chiefly melancholic lamentations on the passage of youth, some, however do express dread at the approaching World War, though without any obvious basis in political theory. The first—and main—French translation of Tzara’s early works is: Tristan Tzara, *Tristan Tzara: Premier poèmes*, ed. and trans. Claude Sernet (Paris: Seshers, 1965).

Tzara's literary career began in Bucharest in 1912, when, as baccalaureate candidate Sami Rosenstock, he joined forces with Janco and Ion Vinca to publish the magazine *Simbolul*, a vehicle for their youthful, symbolist poetry.<sup>13</sup> He left Bucharest for Zurich in the autumn of 1915 to begin his university studies at the Swiss *Faculté de Philosophie et des Lettres*, and, by the following January, he had changed his name to "Tristan Tzara" and had arrived on the doorstep of the Cabaret Voltaire. From the time of its inception a pivotal member of Zurich Dada, Tzara became its *force motrice* and spiritual mentor after Ball's departure, and he took the movement beyond the intimate poetry readings at the Cabaret itself to large-scale demonstrations in concert halls about town. Thus Tzara accomplished a social miracle and involved the entire population of the City of Zurich in the new, exhilarating and intellectually enriching experience of the avant-garde.<sup>14</sup>

With this increased public exposure came a transformation in Dada performances, as the obliquely polemical simultaneous and spontaneous poem gave way to the overtly political and didactic manifesto, and Ball's former optimistically spiritual anarcho-individualism was given, thanks to Tzara, a higher degree of social orientation, newfound political power, and a revolutionary twist.

Thus, Zurich Dadaism merged with social revolution in the obtuse syntax, ruptured grammar, and explosive rhetoric of Tzara's manifestoes. The crowds at these Dadaist demonstrations in Zurich were enthralled, and consequently literature and art were set on a new course into the uncharted seas of Modernism.

Yet even though Tzara's visceral anarchism and extreme desire for fundamental social change prompted him to condemn "cubist and futurist artistic academies" as excessively orthodox "laboratories

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<sup>14</sup> These demonstrations, all organized under the auspices of Tzara, were held at Waag Hall in July 1916, at the Zurich Meise Hall in July 1918, and at the *Salle de Kaufleuten* on April 19<sup>th</sup>, 1919. The Zurich Dadaists flocked to these astonishing events and also sponsored a gallery, known as the *Galérie Dada*, which opened in March 1917 and featured works by the Dadaists themselves and by such modernist groups as the German Expressionists and the Cubists and such artists as Kandinsky, Paul Klee and Giorgio de Chirico.



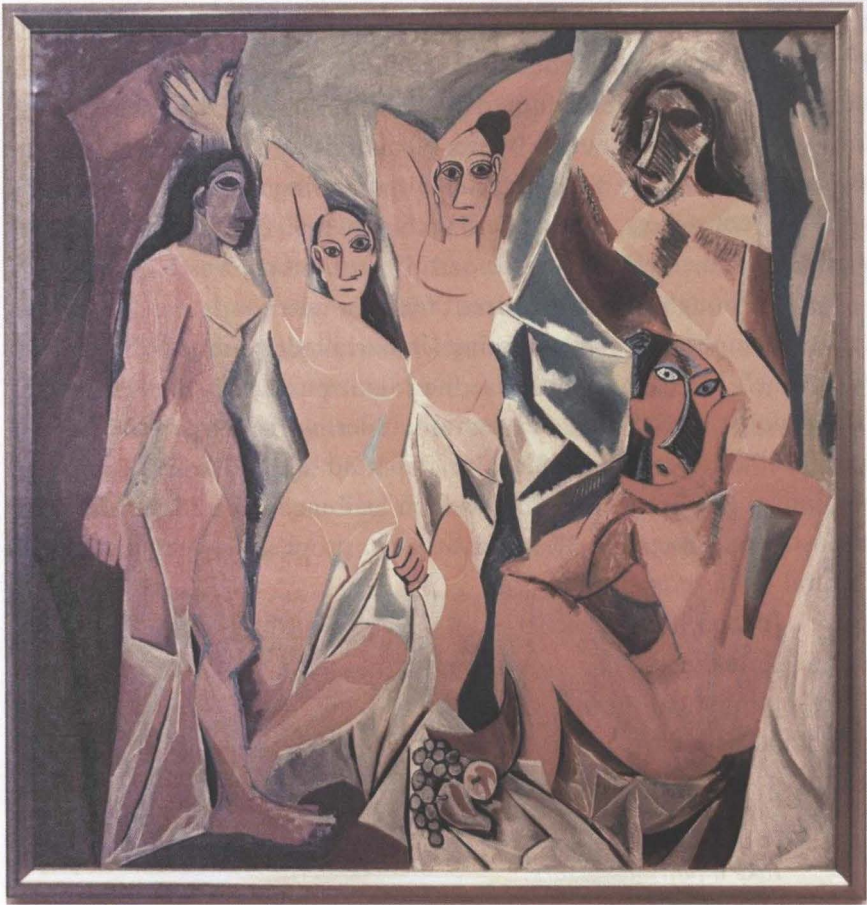
*"Cabaret Voltaire" by Marcel Janco.*

cultural milieus within which many of them had operated before joining the Dada team in Zurich.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, the Zurich Dadaists exuberantly incorporated prewar painting directly into their anarchist artistic program by regularly exhibiting Cubist, German Expressionist and Futurist works at the *Galérie Dada* in 1916 and 1917. Janco's famous illustration of the atmosphere at the *Cabaret Voltaire* pictured on this page, for instance, features multifaceted vantage points and jagged human forms that

of formal ideas," painfully reminiscent of the former unquestioned Kantian hegemony over German and Swiss thought, and technically to be rejected by true iconoclastic revolutionary Dadaists, many of his colleagues at the *Cabaret Voltaire* nonetheless did in fact express themselves visually as well as politically, and they openly acknowledged their artistic debt to the abstraction and non-objectivity which had been developed in the prewar anarchist

<sup>15</sup> The connection between Cubism and anarchism has been studied by Patricia Leighton, who argues that Picasso and the artists and writers with whom he was associated before the war encoded their anarchist views in their "revolutionary" style. See: Patricia Leighton, *Re-ordering the Universe: Picasso and Anarchism, 1898-1914* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989).



*Les Demoiselles d'Avignon by Pablo Picasso.*

cannot exist independently of Cubist and German Expressionist examples, and which indeed emphatically demonstrate the influence of the Cubist French, German and Spanish masters, notably Pablo Picasso, upon Janco's technique, style and art.

Thus, the graphic arts clearly played a vital role within the Zurich Dadaist revolution. That visual culture operated so vibrantly and prominently within this multifaceted movement indicates that Tzara, as a Dadaist, was far from destructively "nihilist." Although, through Hugo Ball, Zurich Dada had been up to this point heavily influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche's aesthetic and sociological



theories, in this one regard, the movement did significantly depart from its Nietzschean predecessor. Nietzsche had defined “nihilism” as a three-part descent into total disillusionment, that began with the realization that events were meaningless, continued with the awareness that the social systems governing these events were artificial constructs, and ended with the realization that no “true world” would emerge once this earthly abstraction was eliminated.<sup>16</sup>

Although Tzara’s hatred for the war and his attack on the contemporary warmongering imperialistic culture did fulfill Nietzsche’s first two criteria, he also possessed the anarcho-individualist belief that “essential...order will flourish from this new aestheticism,” and thus he departed significantly from the pessimism of Nietzsche’s third, which had encapsulated the German philosopher’s negative *Weltanschauung*, prophesying an inevitable cultural *Götterdämmerung*.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, far from encouraging the poet to remain enclosed in a rigid exclusivism where only liberty acts and prevails, the anarchist Tzara optimistically envisioned a new world where poetry and the individual would be united by the “anti-laws” of chance:<sup>18</sup>

*To make a Dada poem  
Take a newspaper.  
Take a pair of scissors.  
Choose an article as long as you are planning  
to make your poem.  
Cut out the article.  
Then cut out each of the words that make up  
this article and put them in a bag.  
Shake it gently.  
Then take out the scraps one after the other in the order in*

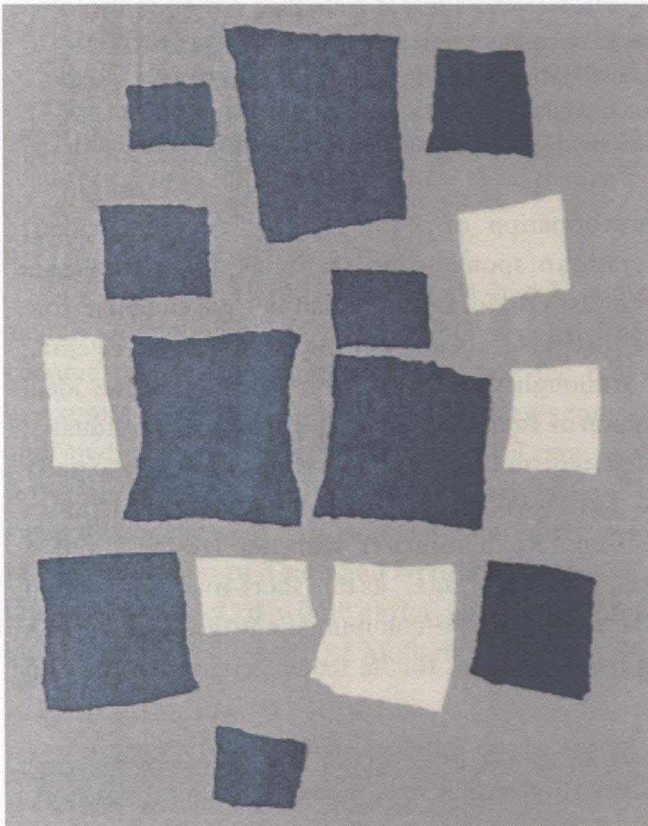
<sup>16</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1968), pp. 12-13.

<sup>17</sup> Tristan Tzara, “Note 14 sur la poésie,” *Dada 4-5: Anthologie Dada* (1919): 5. The anarcho-individualist Dadaist poets believed that cerebral revolt would automatically bring about a peaceful co-existence of diverse individuals and cultures.

<sup>18</sup> Tristan Tzara, “Manifesto of Feeble Love and Bitter love,” from *Seven Dada Manifestoes* in Robert Motherwell, ed. *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology*, 2<sup>nd</sup>. ed. (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 92.

*Which they left the bag. Copy conscientiously.  
The poem will be like you.*

The spontaneous creativity implied in this ironically instructional “recipe” represents a definitive point of departure between Dadaism proper and artistic and literary abstraction; indeed, while abstraction remained driven by aesthetic theories—however innovative—Dada’s pursuit of chance associations circumvented all such systematized boundaries. The importance of the concept of chance to Dada was documented in such collages as Arp’s *Untitled* (Squares Arranged According to the Laws of Chance), in which he evaded the constraints of conscious art-making by dropping gratuitously bits of paper onto a surface and adhering them where they fell, thereby disregarding the laws of perspective and geometry which had governed European art since the Renaissance.



*Jean Arp's  
Untitled  
(Squares  
Arranged  
according to  
the Laws of  
Chance)*

Arp's and Tzara's willingness to give creativity over to "the laws of chance" thus points to the Zurich Dadaists' broader goal of liberating literary and artistic abstraction from its troublesome traditional formalism and hence making art, as the German poet and film producer Hans Richter put it, "a meaningful instrument in life."<sup>19</sup> Indeed, so committed was Richter in his promotion of Zurich Dada's pursuit of fortuitous chance that he included in his memoirs the following statement by Ball stressing the immediacy of Dadaist creativity:

We "painted" with scissors, adhesives, plaster, sacking, paper and other new tools and materials. We made collages and montages. It was an adventure even to find a stone, a clock-movement, a tram ticket, a pretty leg, an insect, the corner of one's own room; all these things could inspire pure and direct feeling. When art is brought into line with everyday life and individual experience, it is exposed to the same risks, the same unforeseeable laws of chance, the same interplay of living forces. Art is no longer a "serious and weighty" emotional stimulus, nor a sentimental tragedy, but the fruit of experience and joy in life.<sup>20</sup>

Tzara's transformation of Ball's largely personal, poetic revolution into a liberation of spontaneous creativity through wholesale artistic and linguistic assault formed an anarcho-individualist core within Zurich Dada that reach its apex at the Eighth Dada Evening (April 19<sup>th</sup>, 1919). Although this Eighth Soirée provided the ideal forum for the expression of Tzara's and Serner's anarcho-individualist Dada, their principled egoism dismayed many of their more socially aware and engaged Zurich colleagues, who broke away to form a splinter group, the Bund Revolutionärer Künstler (Association of Revolutionary Artists). "Radical Dada," as this short-lived association came to be known, was the anarcho-communist antithesis of Tzara's introverted anarcho-individualism, for its leader, Hans Richter, had

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<sup>19</sup> Hans Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-art*, trans. David Britt (New York and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1965) (reprint, New York: Thames and Hudson, 1985), p. 48.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

associated with the Swiss anarchist Luigi Bertoni and, through him, had become inspired to organize artists on Kropotkin's model of "mutual aid." Denouncing Tzara's destructive approach to social change, these Radical Dadaists offered an alternative view of the artist as "an essential part of culture," possessing the right to "take part in the ideological evolution of the state." Their manifesto—signed by Richter, Arp, Fritz Baumann, Viking Eggeling, Augusto Giacometti, Emmy Hennings, Walter Helbig, Janco, Otto Morach, and Arthur Segal—replaced Tzara's unwavering individualism with a collective "brotherhood" of artists and offered "clarity" as an alternative to the unstructured chaos of the Eighth Dada Evening:

We believe in a brotherly art: this is art's new mission in society. Art demands clarity, it must serve towards the formation of the new man. It must belong to all, without class distinctions. We want to gather up the conscious creative force of every individual, to help him to accomplish his mission for the benefit of the common task. We are fighting the lack of system, for it destroys forces... This work assures to the people the highest degree of vitality. The initiative must be with us. It is our duty to direct the currents, to lend expression to the desires and at the same time to rally contending forces.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, by 1919, Zurich Dada had become polarized along anarcho-communist and anarcho-individualist lines, its leaders had become divided among themselves, and the movement had begun to express itself in a multitude of literary genres and artistic forms and media, motivating the disgruntled Tzara to depart Zurich and bring his revolutionary Dadaism to Paris, where it found a willing sympathizer and a devout disciple in André Breton, and where, through the collaboration of Tzara and Breton and through the inspiration of the Zurich model, it would thrive and flourish and give rise to the quintessence of the spirit of Modernism, French Surrealism.

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<sup>21</sup> Originally published in *Neue Züricher Zeitung*, Sunday, May 4<sup>th</sup>, 1919, cited in Marcel Janco, "Creative Dada," in Willy Verkauf, ed., *Dada: Monograph of a Movement* (New York: Wiltenborn, 1957), pp. 44-46.

In 1919, Breton and his French colleagues at the review *Littérature*, impressed by the diversity of literary and artistic activities in Zurich, enlisted the participation of the newcomer Tzara in planning an “action (d’art ou d’anti-art)” of their own, and, though disagreeing briefly over Tzara’s passion to destroy, they began to lay the anarcho-individualist foundation for Paris Dada. Their anti-idolatry reached vast public dimensions on January 23<sup>rd</sup>. 1920, when Breton and the newly arrived Tzara, along with the principal writers and poets of France—Louis Aragon, Paul Éluard, Philippe Soupault, Picabia and Ribemont-Dessaignes—secured the Palais des Fêtes for the “Première vendredi de Littérature” and officially launched Paris Dada.<sup>22</sup> This date would mark an important new phase in the history of literature and art.

The Paris Dadaists based their enterprise upon the Zurich model and designed their unavoidably chaotic debut in the French capital to provoke a revolutionary response in an audience already ideologically divided between economists (who understand the word *change* as “exchange rate”) somewhat lured to the performance by their alarm at the declining worth of the franc, and intellectuals (who extrapolated *change* into *changement*) interested in cultural transformation. As Ribemont-Dessaignes remembers, this First Literature Friday in Paris ended “in an uproar,” just as the Dadaists had hoped:

For the Dadaists themselves this was an extremely fruitful experiment. The destructive aspect of Dada appeared to them more clearly; the resultant indignation of the public which had come to be for an artistic pittance, no matter what, as long as it was art... showed them how useless it was, by comparison, to have Max Jacob’s poems read by Jean Cocteau.<sup>23</sup>

Subsequent performances found the Paris Dadaists bombarding their angry audiences with manifestoes, where they

<sup>22</sup> This first demonstration was quickly followed by five others.

<sup>23</sup> Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, “History of Dadaism.” *La nouvelle revue française* 36-7 (June-July 1931), trans. In Motherwell, *The Dada Painters and Poets*,



made it clear that their deliberate disregard for literary propriety and their flagrant negation of artistic convention formed part of a broader plan to topple authority in any form. At the second Dada matinée (February 5<sup>th</sup>, 1920), for example, Aragon recited the “Manifesto of the Dada Movement,” in which the rapid-fire rejection of cultural and political labels unequivocally denounced the institutions to which they referred.

Adding nuance to the Paris Dadaists’ cerebral revolt were their poetry, essays and other publications, in which they departed slightly from the blunt anti-authoritarianism of the overtly political manifestoes in order to express their anarcho-individualist ideas in more subtle rhetorical ways. Although Paris Dada assumed creative form and strength through literature and performance, a select few of its members cannibalized the visual arts as a vehicle for anarcho-individualist assault, just as their predecessors in Zurich had done. Picabia, for example, drew impetus from Duchamp’s reading of Stirner and Nietzsche to subvert artistic convention in *Portrait of Cézanne*, *Portrait of Rembrandt* and *Portrait of Renoir*. In addition, Ribemont-Dessaignes reflected anarcho-individualist anti-authoritarianism when he warned of the dangers of aligning art directly with the State. Such an alliance, in his view, would stifle individual expression by reducing art to an ideological tool, important only for perpetuating the “fatherland’s” standards of beauty and truth. He, and the other Paris Dadaists, were much opposed to such ideologically sanctioned art.

Therefore, in conjunction with Dada’s and Surrealism’s contributions and innovations in the fields of literature and theatre, there occurred Surrealism’s “real revolution” in the fine arts as well. That aesthetic revolution consisted in “the creation of a new pictorial space” as we see it since 1925 in the works of Picasso, Miró, Masson and Le Corbusier.

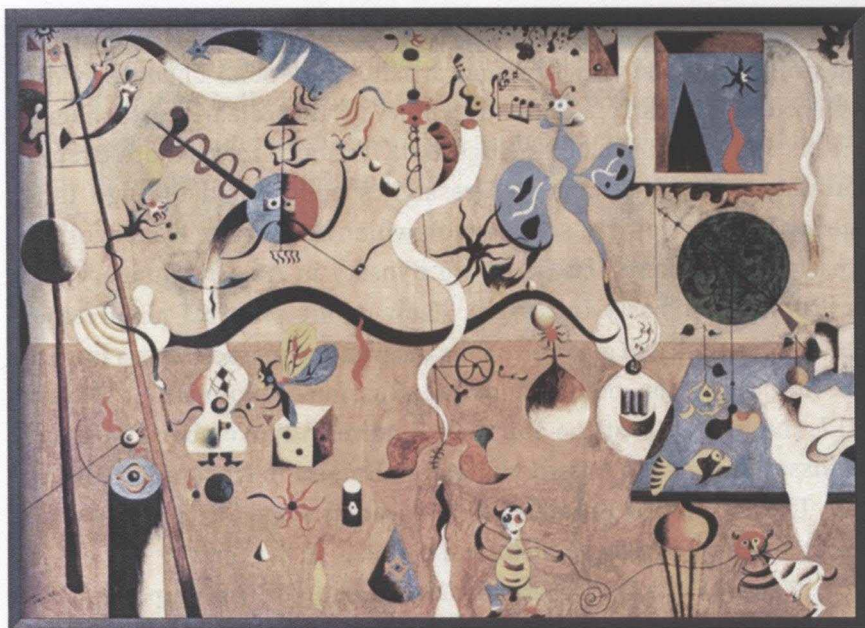
The “veristic” gaze of painters like Dalí, Magritte and Tanguy, which conjured up a visual illusion reminiscent of the Old Masters, is deemed by art historians to be less innovative and less far-reaching than the “new pictorial” space of truly Surrealist painters such as Picasso, Miró, Chirico and Masson. Essentially this critique

hinges on the way in which marginal Surrealists like Dalí reactivated the old, pre-Modernistic concept of the picture as a window on an illusionistic, three-dimensional world stretching out before us. This window had, however, been closed by important precursors of Modernism, particularly Édouard Manet, Claude Monet and Paul Cézanne. Instead, these latter French painters of the late nineteenth century had emphasized the autonomous language of paint on canvas, which evokes its own space.

It is true that Dalí and painters of a similar persuasion turned the picture into a window again, thereby negating the pictorial surface. Yet, in the wake of the Dadaist and Surrealist revolution and in the wake of the rich aesthetic discussions and experiments in the cabarets and art galleries of Zurich circa 1916-20, that window no longer opened onto the pictorial world of art prior to Manet. With the unprecedented inclusion of sub-conscious content, the new Surrealist pictorial window opened up access to completely different and pictorially uncharted worlds, generated by the waking or sleeping mind and first analyzed by Sigmund Freud in Vienna, pictorial worlds which had not been available to even the most daring Old Masters of the Middle Ages such as Hieronymus Bosch. And it was in the Parisian *ateliers* of the great masters of Surrealism such as Picasso, Miró, Chirico and Masson that these brave, new Surrealist pictorial worlds were brought fully to life.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Philippe Büttner, *Surrealism in Paris*, ed. Ernst Beyeler, Beyeler Museum AG, Basel (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2011), 13. These remarks pertain to the famous exhibition of Parisian Surrealism in the graphic arts, held at the Beyeler Museum of Art in Basel in 2011. This exhibition was the most comprehensive exhibition concerning Surrealism to be shown in Switzerland to date. The event covered the whole spectrum of this literary and artistic movement that was so important for Modernism. In addition to making use of paintings on loan from sister museums in France and Germany, the Swiss Fondation Beyeler was able to supply works for the exhibition from its own collection, which was built up by Ernst Beyeler and his wife Hildy, and includes important works by great Surrealist artists such as Jean Arp, Max Ernst, Juan Miró and Pablo Picasso. Ernst Beyeler has long played a vital role in the dissemination of information concerning Surrealism and the graphic arts. For example, prior to this particular exhibition, he had for decades paid his respects to Surrealism by staging exhibitions in his gallery in Basel, among them *Surréalisme et peinture in 1974* and *Surrealismus: Traum des Jahrhunderts* (*Surrealism: Dream of the Century*) in 1995-96.



Above:  
"Carnival of  
Harlequin" by  
Joan Miró.



Right:  
"The Song of  
Love" by Giorgio  
de Chirico.

The relationship between the Zurich and Paris Dadaists and Surrealists and the profound artistic and social changes which occurred in the early twentieth century is thus clearly established. Writers and thinkers such as Hugo Ball, Tristan Tzara, André Breton, Louis Aragon and Ribemont-Dessaignes contributed through their endeavors to the spirit of social revolt which toppled the Hohenzollern dynasty in Germany, the Hapsburg dynasty in Austria-Hungary and the Romanov dynasty in Russia. Their public political manifestoes likewise inspired and galvanized the disgruntled masses across Europe and influenced the outbreak of the Russian Revolution in March 1917, the break-up of the Prussian Empire in November 1918, and the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in November 1918 as well. The hand of the Zurich and Paris Dadaists and Surrealists can be clearly discerned in these historical events.

Thus, Paris Dada, far from being an apolitical outpost on the radical fringe of the French avant-garde, was fundamentally based on the unique anarcho-individualist antimilitaristic philosophies first developed by Ball and Tzara in Zurich, and then consummated by Vaché and Breton in Paris. These writers' ideas and manifestoes were developed as an express protest against the horrors of the First World War. Combining Tzara's revolutionary position on Ball's theory of Dadaist cerebral revolt with the anarcho-individualism cultivated by Breton and Vaché, the Paris Dadaists and Surrealists sought to undermine the cultural codes perpetuating the concept of nationalist hegemony and nationalistic military conflicts, and thereby aspired to reinforce the political and creative sovereignty of the individual.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, in conclusion, we see that modern art and literature engage and vitalize the mind in a way that the traditional forms of artistic and literary expression characteristic of former ages were never able to accomplish. Indeed, modern art and literature invite the mind to participate in an exciting and invigorating, inexhaustibly renewed, form of intellectual and aesthetic exploration. And in the events which transpired at the dawn of the twentieth century, leading

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<sup>25</sup> Ribemont-Dessaignes, "History of Dadaism," p. 102.

to the genesis of the avant-garde and Modernism, we likewise perceive that Switzerland and Zurich hold an honored place as the nation and the city which gladly nurtured the new spirit of experimentation and cultural innovation which gave birth to the many rich and rewarding facets of modern literature and art.

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