

The Dadaist Text: Politics, Aesthetics and Alternative Cultures?

Rainer Rumold

Visible Language XXI 3/4 453 - 489

© 1988 *Visible Language*

c/o Rhode Island School of Design

Providence, RI 02903

Rainer Rumold

German Department

Kresge Centennial Hall

Northwestern University

Evanston, IL 60201

Looking back at Dada

Compared with German Expressionism, Italian or Russian Futurism, and French Surrealism, Dada was the least literary, the least theoretical, the most spontaneous, and the most insistent of the historical avant-garde movements so richly documented by the Kleinschmidt collection. Looking back at Dada, we are reminded that the very radicality of its embrace of the spontaneity and complex richness of "life" was the reaction to the death-urge of European civilization, which, with the First World War, had erupted through the surface of reason. Today the documents of two world wars and the documents of Dada appear to rest in peace in their respective museums and archives; in the indestructible vaults of rationality and security. Viewing a collection such as this one, the phantoms may unfreeze for the sensitive and imaginative viewer, and various questions may come to life again. Are we not still somewhat uncomfortable rereading the various Dada-manifestoes, confronted with proclamations such as: "Dada is not a new trend in art. Dada is a direction of life itself turning against everything that we imagine to be the meaning of life?" Would most of us not recoil as did the late sixties philosopher of modernist art Theodor Adorno, when faced with the international student revolution in the wake of the Vietnam war, which demanded his leadership that signaled the advent of the sublation of avant - garde art's utopia into political life? As had the political philosopher Herbert Marcuse, in the aftermath of a failed revolt which he had accompanied and,

to a degree, master-minded, would most not have reduced their expectations of revolutionary potential in artistic utopianism: toned them down and conceded that art can render only a momentary anticipation of freedom? Dada, however, insisted, in greatly varying degrees of concretely political engagement, on total liberation. Whatever date literary history reserves for the end of historical Dada, its spirit was dead when the Nazis pulled the revolver on all of Western culture.

Seen from the vantage point of historical experience, the spirit of Zurich Dada appears to have by no means signaled a revolution. But like all significant artistic production of our culture, it may have had a power of analytic imagination and a seismographic sensibility that was capable of anticipating at least certain aspects of the future. In his "Dada Manifesto" (figure 20, cat. # 42), published in the third number of *Dada*, Zurich 1918 (figure 19, cat. # 42), Tristan Tzara projects the ideal of "Je m'enfoutisme" (as Motherwell suggests, roughly translatable as "I don't give a damnism.") Dada's tireless promoter advocated a type of "ah shucks" mentality; "...the kind of life in which everyone retains his own conditions, though respecting other individualisms, except when the need arises to defend oneself, in which the two-step becomes national anthem, curiosity shop, a radio transmitting Bach fugues, electric signs and posters for warehouses, an organ broadcasting carnations for god, all this together replacing photography and the universal catechism."¹ Has not Tzara's vision, whether one likes it or not, become a fair image for today's daily life in the industrialized world? The cosmopolitan Dadaists had not been vacationing in Switzerland. They had come there, in 1915/16, at the height of the war, as political refugees, as exiles avoiding censorship and military draft: Ball and Huelsenbeck from the Kaiserreich, Tzara and Janco from Rumania, the Alsatian Hans Arp, legally a German citizen, from Paris because he was unwilling to fight for either side. Thus, the vision of a state of global "Je m'enfoutisme" was an expression of their concrete fear and hatred of the hybrid European ideology of rationalism and nationalism which had resulted in the institutionally sanctioned mass murders of the First World War. The main-stream intellectuals and artists of Germany, France, and England had been not only sup-

portive of the war of the nation states but had actively produced ideological snake oil through their prowar essays, the signing of manifestoes and works of art. In Germany, for example, Thomas Mann's *Gedanken zum Krieg* (Thoughts concerning the War) represented such major-ity sentiments which had inspired the 93 signatories of the chauvinist manifesto "An die Kulturwelt" (To the Cultured World) among them Gerhardt Hauptmann. In June 1915 a petition signed by 1,347 intellectuals, addressed to Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg, demanded the annexation of conquered territories and extensive economic and military measures.² Mentioning names like Maurice Barrès, Charles Maurras, and Rudyard Kipling may suffice to recall an equally frenzied nationalist chauvinist climate in France and England at the time.³

At least equally disturbing was the fact that many members of the early European avant-garde, had put themselves into the service of chauvinist propaganda or at least did not shy away from prowar sentiments. In Italy, there was d'Annunzio and the Italian futurists who shouted the slogan "War the World's only Hygiene" and pressed for Italy's entry into the conflict on the side of France and against Austria; Guillaume Apollinaire wrote poetry in the service and for the glory of war and France; in Germany even the sensitive Franz Marc, in a series of letters from the Western front to a rather startled Paul Klee, envisioned a rejuvenation of European civilization through war. Dada reacted to the betrayal of art and the intellect by these artists and intellectuals.

And today? In the West, intellectuals seem to display a certain "I don't give a damnism" vis-à-vis ideological issues. However, this is not an "I don't give a damnism" as a fulfilled state of affairs, but rather a measure of jadedness *in spite* of a continuous threat of global ideological divisions. What the exiles in Switzerland could not have envisioned is that the intellectual of the future would have capitulated and conceded his powerlessness in regard to any fundamental change, his inability to create new values or even to sustain traditional ones. Dada's provocative and explosively anarchist freedom of play, envisioned as a model for the whole of social life, has since degenerated into a tired postmodern "anything goes" attitude. Dada's attack

on the authority of all styles of the past has been flattened into an acceptance of the meaningless simultaneity of all styles as decor. Dada's original radical attack on the bourgeois quasireligion of art, on the status of art as an "autonomous" sanctuary of values, promoted by the culture and consciousness industry and the educational system, has apparently been deflected. Its spontaneous energies have been funnelled back into an ever growing market for "revolutionary" and "avant-garde" art. Thus the status of the art establishment has been recaptured and extended. What is shocking about avant-garde art today, is its market value, the ever increasing prices achieved at auctions and in the galleries for articles that had originally been directed against them as "anti-art" artifacts.

Dada ("We recognize no theory") and Theory

Musing over the significance of the hundreds of diverse materials of the avant-garde contained in the Kleinschmidt collection, the overall question arises, why such a fate for such an impressive and vital movement in the culture of our century? Will we find an answer in the texts themselves, which are, of course, marked by what seems to be a certain overdose of negativity and cynicism to begin with, or does it lie in their context? Most of the Dadaists were convinced that only the total eradication of the old tablets could somehow ensure a new start. The Russian Futurists, on the other hand, had implemented the destruction of the old art establishment by the constructive replacement of the illusions of art in galleries, journals, libraries, salons and palaces with a functional art on the walls of houses, fences, rooftops, streets, on the back of cars, streetcars, locomotives, or people's clothes. The mass media, newspapers, film and radio, theatre and concert, all were to be put into the service of a "recreation of life", so that Meyerhold could exclaim, "Soon there will be no more spectators, all will have become actors, only then will we have a genuine, truthful art of theater."⁴ In other words, before its inevitable repression through Stalin's terror, the Russian avant-garde had embarked on a program which abolished the concept of the everyday and introduced the ideal of the complete man, an individual integrated into the world of work. By comparison with the opt-

imism of the Russian avant-garde (however ill-fated), the seeming nihilism of Dada—"you give us the honorable title 'nihilist'"⁵—raises a number of issues for an assessment of the significance of the movement, its achievements and shortcomings. In the terrifying light of the experience of World War I, brought about by the supposedly most refined, most humanistic, and rational cultures of the planet, did the everlooming threat of such catastrophic and total reversals in the social realm prompt the Dadaists to reject all aspects of the functionality of art and refuse any participation in the productive aspects of our culture? Such refusal to adopt a moral vision, as is well known, led to the

Figure 35

split between Tzara's Dadaists and Breton's proto-surrealists, in 1921, at the occasion of the mock trial against the nationalist writer Maurice Barrès (figure 35, cat. # 78). Was there, as Arnold Hauser has maintained in his *Soziologie der Kunst* (1974), indeed nothing constructive in the Dadaist events? How can one justify the verdict that Dada was no more than "an-archic vandalism"? Were their texts really "cynically nihilistic", not only beyond the good and

evil of bourgeois morality, but also against art?⁶ Literary history, like much of Dada's contemporary audience, must have taken the provocation of the Dada texts ("the fraud of all art") *literally*, something, as we shall see, that the essence of the Dadaist text was opposed to. What then are the categories through which we could understand Dada ("I am against all systems")?⁷

The classificatory impulse of the historian will note that the texts from the early Dada period in Zurich reveal a single common denominator with which Tzara's "Manifeste Dada 1918" (figure 20) ends emphatically: "Life," a concept so broad that it is (as with Nietzsche, the key philosopher of the European avant-garde) really not a concept at all, whether it refers to individual (Nietzsche) or collective life (the avant-garde). Such an unruly premise could not have been very effective. In Berlin of the twenties, the

indistinct but vigorously upheld vision of "life" becomes transformed into, and is substituted by, the common denominator of "social life" as *political* life. Nevertheless, the genuinely political objectives of a new proletarian culture did not fare any better. Such must be the historian's conclusion in view of the restorative developments of the Weimar republic and of the subsequent victory of Nazism.

Looking at the state of current academic theoretical discussion concerning the socio-political and cultural impact of Dada and the avant-garde, one would think that the avant-gardists were social planners on the grand scale of a Hegelian "Zeitgeist" rather than artists. We know, on the other hand, that they were, inspired by Bakunin and Russian anarchism. Clearly we cannot, nor would we want to, do without the profound insights of theoreticians such as Peter Bürger or (for the so-called postmodern era) Jean-Francois Lyotard. They render a philosophically coherent, intellectually exciting frame of reference. Nevertheless, we should be aware that theoretical brilliance and logical perfection do not altogether do justice to the reality of the historical conditions of actual artistic production or its contemporary reception. The avant-garde's artistic creativity was inextricably intertwined with the anarchic bohemian atmosphere of the café house, with the spontaneous soirées, the "sabbaths" of the Dadaists, and of Hugo Ball's Cabaret Voltaire in the Spiegelgasse in Zurich, from where it spread to New York, Berlin, Hannover, Cologne, Leipzig, and Prague. The Dadaist's tumultuous happenings were exercises in offending, provoking and ultimately engaging an audience in the abandonment of the inhibitions imposed by the cultural status quo. It becomes questionable whether Bürger in his seminal analysis *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974) is correct in positing as an unconditional premise that the avant-garde programmatically meant doing away with the "institution of art." According to Bürger, the avant-garde directed its onslaught on the "institution" of art, because it was a sub-system of bourgeois society, a society that prevented the critical and liberating impulses of art from being implemented in concrete social life forms. Yet it seems that the avant-garde was much less programmatic, much less revolutionary in a specific political sense, much more spontaneous in its broad attempt to remove the

traditional dividing wall between art and life understood independently of the social conventions. Therefore these impulses could easily be stored *affirmatively* as cultural ideals in a sanctuary elevated above social practice.⁸ After all, Dada's most influential artists such as Hugo Ball and Hans Arp, or Tristan Tzara were ultimately contributing to the resurrection of art—in radically new forms, of course. They did not really destroy the “aura”, the singularity of art, the ideological basis of the status and cult of a market-driven bourgeois culture.⁹ What, in terms of production and the intentions of the individual creator, was designed to disrupt as “anti-art,” was received as an enrichment of the art market. Averse to stagnation, the market was ready to take political “risks,” and redefined Dadaist “anti-art” as an innovative “work of art.” Huelsenbeck, in his somewhat precocious, but incisive *En Avant Dada: A History of Dadaism* (1920), censures Tzara as a mercurial manager in the field of the international art business for his insistence on the “very old hat” of “abstract art,” which Berlin Dada had turned against “gun in hand.”¹⁰ One does witness, in the Kleinschmidt Collection, a multitude and variety of alternative journals, publishing houses, a flourishing counterculture—all within the friendly confines of the traditional.

It seems that the avant-garde—on the whole—was specializing, as the Russian formalists put it, in “laying bare the device” of the techniques of artistic production through the new provocative text or icon of art, in order to estrange, demystify, and to debunk the ideological claims of the old text of art. Most of all, Dada wanted to disrupt the by then outdated complacent classical equation of an aesthetic totality of beauty, organically self-contained, with ethical integrity and purpose. By virtue of the programmatic openness of the new text to the cultural *context*, the avant-garde text was intent on laying bare the ideological mechanisms of artistic productions *within*, rather than altogether against, what Bürger calls the “institution of art.” The institution of art here refers to the “affirmative” function of bourgeois culture, in terms of its concrete social forms, the exhibition hall, the publishing house, methods of distribution, the relations between author, critic, and public, etc. At any rate, it is the process of evolution towards changes through reflection rather than through revolution, that prevails. Bürger

himself points out that the market-place of ideas, insatiable as it is, will assimilate also that which wants to do away with it. The *circulus vitiosus* of bourgeois culture ultimately causes the theoretician's reversal into sublimation of his original premise of the avant-garde as revolutionary. The very text of avant-garde art—marked by culture's double-bind of criticism and affirmation of its context (Marcuse) — is ultimately valorized to be the only vantage point from which the relative freedom of critical distance can be achieved.¹¹ Such a critical resurrection of the “autonomy” of art is, indeed, necessary for the survival of the distance of criticism, since advertising industry's pseudo-creative activities have commodified the original play-factor of the avant-garde text. A “relatively autonomous”¹² art is, indeed, necessary, it seems to me, because the consciousness-industry has commodified the archaic utopian images of the avant-garde in trivial literature and mass culture.¹³ If Schulte-Sasse were right in his assumption that the “institution of art” today has collapsed after all,¹⁴ ironically—and disastrously—any avant-garde potential would have self-destructed. In the end, there would be only the high art of the past, advertising and trivial mass culture. However, I maintain that because the economic sphere of our culture is omnivorous, it is also blessedly pluralistic. The critical impulses of both the historical and contemporary avant-garde and the influence of mass culture will coexist—in tension. Thus, it is increasingly important for the literary critic and general audience to understand the nature of the avant-garde text in its contexts.

The Avant-Garde Text

Although Dada was as an exile movement highly aware of and reactive to the political situation of the world at war,¹⁵ the beginnings of the movement were essentially directed towards a revolution of art. Zurich Dada believed in the text itself as a means of changing consciousness through a deconstruction of the “ruling” texts fabricated in the interests of the bourgeoisie. Thus, the Dadaist text was to compete in the struggle for cultural influence¹⁶ by subverting the ideological texts of the chauvinist press and the literary texts of traditional art claiming the eternal values of the bourgeois ideal of humanity. In the eyes of the

Dadaists, that ideal had sold out to the political powers. The Dadaists were specifically provoked by national art based on the traditional aesthetics of beauty and truth; an art which had supported the war-effort in a wave of enthusiastic poems and manifestoes.¹⁷ In that specific sense they were “anti-art.” In other words, the earlier Dadaist texts competed *within* the institution of art, while the Berlin Dadaists later attempted a political destruction of the institution of art for the establishment of a proletarian culture.

The early Dadaist texts were most consistent in deconstructing the normative social sign system which suppressed the uniquely individual and heterogeneous for the totalized and totalizing general. Their texts, generated on the basis of a decentering spontaneity and chance, attempted to deflate the illusionist spectacle of Western ideology which championed the omnipotence of the logocentric subject, rationally and ethically autonomous. However, the problems of a criticism that stayed, in spite of all appearances, within the established cultural context were manifold in the realm of reception. The Dadaist assault on the audience’s “horizon of the expectations” (Jauss) through soirées and happenings ultimately created—as the mass media reported on the Dada events with predictable bias and hostility—a counterproductive *expectation* of a disappointment of expectations. Once the initial shock value of the Dada performances had rubbed off, the Dadaist deconstructive event, as an instructive performance, degenerated for the audience into a tumultuous secular carnival of aggression either towards no particular end, or against the Dadaist performer. Thus Tristan Tzara’s *Coeur à gaz*, staged in the early twenties in Paris’ Salle Gaveau, served as a mere cue for throwing eggs at author and actors.¹⁸ The public’s reaction did not favor the eradication of the division between author and audience. The public merely became bad actors with very conventional and predictable roles. The often brutal provocation (“Hoosenlatz”), for example, Huelsenbeck’s *Phantastische Gebete* (Phantastic Prayers, 1918) (cat. # 39) was lost in negatively primitive havoc, not in mutually shared bruitist-primitive rhythms as a primordial expression of life. As Huelsenbeck became increasingly preoccupied with the

political mission of Dada, he became oblivious to its textual medium per se. He was intent on destructing the aura of art. On the other hand, there were Hans Arp's finely tuned texts weaving in dreamlike fashion patterns of romantic images, onomatopoeia, fragments of every-day language and slang into an intricate texture. The evocative play of these "Arpaden" would ultimately dwell on and expand the cognitive dimension of linguistic constituents and particles of meaning rather than provoke shock. Texts like Arp's *Wolk-enpump-en* (Cloud Pump, 1917) give rise to subliminal aesthetic meditation rather than to a mood of revolt. Here, for example, is one of Arp's early poems "Dem Ausgang zu," rendered in English by Herbert Read:

die nachtvögel tragen brennende laternen im gebälk
ihrer augen.

sie lenken zarte gespenster und fahren auf
zartadrigen wagen.

der schwarze wagen ist vor den berg gespannt.

die schwarze glocke ist vor den berg gespannt.

das schwarze schaukelpferd ist vor den berg
gespannt.

die toten tragen sägen und stämme zur mole herbei.

aus den kröpfen der vögel stürzen die ernten auf die
tennen aus eisen.

die engel landen in körben aus luft.

die fische ergreifen den wanderstab und rollen in
sternen dem ausgang zu.

the night birds carry lighted lanterns in the beams
of their eyes

they guide delicate ghosts and drive
fine-veined carriages

the black carriage is yoked to the mountain

the black clock is yoked to the mountain

.....

the dead carry saws and timber to the nearby jetty
from viscous goitres crops gush onto the iron
threshing-floor

angels land in baskets of air

fish grip their pilgrims' staff and roll through stars
to the exit.¹⁹

Arp's texts would quietly participate in the subtle, reconstruction of art in a form only Roland Barthes' "aristocratic reader" could savor. Contrary to proclamation, Arp's

ideal reader could not be the innocent printer, the man of the masses, even if his typesetting errors were welcomed as chance additions, as creations of a collective enterprise, in which the ivory tower barrier between author and reader had supposedly been removed. Arp, who knowingly compared the imaginative capacities of the "normally organized bourgeois" with that of a "worm,"²⁰ was keenly aware of the problematic art character of his texts when he qualified his statement, clearly directed at the conventions of what he considered dead academic art as well as trendy avant-gardist posturing; "Dada is for nature and against art" by emphasizing his profound trust of nature: "I believe that nature is not in opposition to art. Art is of natural origin and is sublimated and spiritualized through the sublimation of man." I agree with Herbert Read who wrote that "Arp was always guided by his aesthetic feelings."²¹

In other words, it is insufficient to understand the Dadaist manifestos and happenings merely as provocative, anarchist aggressions against Bürger's "institution of art." It is time to decisively lay to its final rest the widespread cliché of Dada as "anti-art," still advanced by leading theoreticians of recent "experimental" or "concrete poetry" in an attempt to justify their "experiments" as aesthetically innovative and artistically superior to Dada.²² Any reassessment of Dada cannot rely on such evidence of its reception, but has to scrutinize the Dadaist text by itself. By the same token, we cannot cite as evidence for an aesthetic valorization of Dada, the retrospective mellowness of, e.g., Huelsenbeck, who in 1920 attacked what he perceived to be Tzara's ambitious aestheticism and railed against the "fraud" and "humbug," the commercialism of art, and who in 1950, decades after Dada's prime—insisted on its original "faith in the evolution of art" and that the movement was "never anti-art."²³ Such expressive reversals rather are based on the experience of the disappointed hindsight of the renegade; the avant-garde did not succeed in breaking down the barrier between life and art. Consequently, Dada and its protagonists now have to be saved for the history of literature. What can be said is this: while Dada was boisterously anti-establishment, it nevertheless participated in a struggle for dominance of its texts over traditional texts, in the "cultural activity"²⁴ rendered by even the most sub-

versive argument. The radical Dada text in that sense constitutes a choice of alternative communication and dialogue within the context of a potentially seminal and exemplary countercultural community of art. The evolving community of art relied on its own publishing houses and a growing number of sympathetic critics. In that sense it fostered an alternative elitist audience, while the avant-garde ultimately failed in creating a new collective public. Because potentially anybody could freely and without coercion participate in the proposed counterculture, Dada was very much a part of the bourgeois culture of its time.

In sum, the "cultural activity" of the Dadaist text consisted in 1) its provocative unmasking of the "big slogans" of Western culture, such as "Art" with a capital A, "patriotism" a la "Vive la France" (Tzara), "Individualism" etc. In as much as the World War triggered the Dadaists' cultural pessimism and criticism, their "demonstrations" echoed that very aggression through unique forms of violence. But we must not overlook 2) the reconstructive energies of the Dadaist text itself. They are based on the fundamentally deconstructive employment of language as it turns against its own enslavement in the service of slogans. Thus the "Dadaist Manifesto" (1918) (figure 20, cat. # 42), closes quite consciously with a retraction of its own assertions, "To be against this manifesto, means to be a Dadaist."²⁵ The paradoxical strategies of the Dadaist text allow language to liberate itself from the subject-centered perspective of the supposedly autonomous individual, permitting the text to play itself without a player, as it were, and thus to open up for its audience a wider experience of the heterogeneity of the world. Although there are no coherent Dadaist poetological treatises, we can nevertheless infer from a close reading of their texts that the Dadaists attempted to reintegrate into the text extra-literary language, formerly banned through the narrowing conventions of the exclusive styles of high culture. Through its montage of quotations from the public texts of newspaper, advertising, slang or simply *language*, the Dadaist text intended to rupture the traditional closure and isolation of the "organic" work of art from life. As such a "non-organic fragment" (Adorno), the Dadaist text intended to open itself to a reintegration with life transformed by its very own experience.

However it is defined, as an organic unity or a fragment, the Dadaist text, after all, remains a "work." No matter how heavily it relies on the montage of components quoted from the linguistic environment, it will always constitute an aesthetic sign distinguished from the world of mere objects; hence, from this perspective, its critical cognitive potential. Beyond the provocative aspects which the Dadaist work shares with much of modernist poetry, language itself will be given a chance to unfold itself in its functionally objective (metonymical) relation of letter to letter as sign to sign, image to image, sound to sound; ultimately, in its ambiguous relation to "meaning," or the absence thereof. At any rate it will demonstrate and unveil, through multiple defamiliarization effects, how meaning is generated or fabricated through signifying conventions. Because the Dadaist text gives us a glimpse into what Nietzsche called the "dark work-shop of human ideals," it throws a monkey wrench into the subjective metaphorical (fictional) mechanisms of poeticization, literalization and the fabrication of fictions of reality (Carl Einstein). While on the provocative level, it "disillusions" to the degree of the absurd, in its "deep structure" it will ideally generate energies of expression that can point to yet unrecognized experiences of the senses, experiences not labeled, not classified; experiences resisting our rational and intuitive compulsions. The Dadaist text demonstrates that the experience of reality is mediated through language which is part inner, part outer, and thus indeed a realm by itself. Our experience of the dynamics of language itself will be thrust open to the potential of new perceptions generated and aggregated in the innovative structures of what we call the Dadaist collage technique. 3) In social terms, we can state that the Dadaist text enriches our cultural realm of forms of communication: it represents the experience of a group of intellectuals who, on top of their proverbial status of the artist as social outsider, have been disenfranchised by censorship and political repression. The exile's reaction is one of anarchism projected negatively on the social realm, positively onto the complexly innovative order of the text. The Dadaist compensates for his own crisis of uprootedness by valorizing it as the existentially privileged status of a "free-floating intelligentsia."²⁶ From this vantage point, the avant-garde

feels called upon to offer to civilization, as a saving device, its aesthetic experiences and experiments in radically innovative aspects of formerly suppressed forms of communication. However, Dada's self-defeating, tantalizing problem arose from its sweeping cultural aspirations. It could only reach the ear and the eye of the "aristocratic reader."

Berlin: The Politicization of the Dadaist Experience

The subtleties of the "cultural work" of the Dadaist text, made conscious only by a very recent generation of academic ("aristocratic") readers, were in reality, in the words of Werner Mahrholz' early contemporary assessment of the new art of modernist expressionism, "specialty products for specialists": "The circles of the literati and bohemia have generated from within themselves a 'culture' of painting and poetry of their own, which in general becomes known only in the circles of the art specialists and which according to its nature does not want to influence the people as a whole..."²⁷ This is exactly what I mean: though Dadaism was in one way or other a radical revolt against the institution of art, its claim to recapture "life" could not but lead to the establishment of a countercultural institution within the institution of art which favored specialization to begin with. In this sense Tzara and Arp were quite consistent. In a way, Dada's effects are not altogether unlike those which the Berlin Dadaists attacked as pseudo-avant-garde, the "workers of the spirit" (Hiller, Adler), Expressionism and of Herwarth Walden's Sturm group dedicated to the most exquisite phenomena of the new art. This condition, resembling the specialization of aestheticism which the avant-garde professed to have broken with, would early on provoke the criticism of more clearly politically committed writers around Franz Pfempfert's *Die Aktion*. Specifically, for example the painter George Grosz and the writer and art critic Carl Einstein, who had contributed to the activist journal before the war, would in the postwar Berlin of the twenties, alongside Huelsenbeck, Raoul Hausmann, Franz Mehring, Wieland Herzfelde, John Heartfield, and Johannes Baader, be instrumental in the politicization of the dadaist revolt against the literary and artistic tradition. It is quite instructive to trace Dada's relinquishment of the practice of revolutionizing the literary

and artistic medium, the *text*, within the “institution of art” in favor of a progressive commitment to attempts at revolutionizing the “institution of art” through political events. Such a shift presupposes a growing awareness, generated specifically by the economic and political crisis in Weimar Germany, that in order to make the text into more (or for that matter less) than what is bound to remain an *aesthetic* expression of “revolt,” namely an effective instrument of social change, its social *context* has to be altered.

The pragmatic nature of the Dadaist politicization aesthetically meant a return to the incomparably simpler, conventional sign systems of the agit-prop pamphlet, a reorientation culminating in post-Dadaist politicized treatises

in the vein of Grosz’ and Herzfelde’s *Die Kunst ist in Gefahr* (1925) (figure 36, cat. # 66), in which Kokoschka’s appeal to protect the master works of art from the destruction of the street battles waged in the revolutionary turmoil of the day is ridiculed and the thesis of “art as a weapon” in the struggle for the rights of the proletariat is put forth. Captions on Dada posters unmistakably call for political action in the manner in which Heartfield’s famous photomontages will later unmask Hitler’s claim: “Behind me stand millions” (the montage demonstratively reveals that these are not people but the millions of the capital). In short, the formerly complex Dadaist text is reduced for the sake of political effectiveness. This trend, which only in exceptional cases like that of George Grosz’ or Heartfield’s splendidly innovative work is not necessarily one of artistic impoverishment but of genuine “rev-

olutionary beauty” (Aragon), is already made evident by the outright political manifesto “What is Dadaism and what does it want in Germany” drawn up by Hausmann and Huelsenbeck in 1918. Its first demand anticipates the political radicalization of Breton’s surrealist program by more than a decade: “The international revolutionary union of all creative and intellectual men and women on the basis of radical Communism...” Huelsenbeck explained himself: “While Tzara was still writing: ‘Dada ne signifie rien’—in Germany, Dada lost its art-for-art’s-sake character with its very first move. Instead of continuing to produce art, Dada



Figure 36

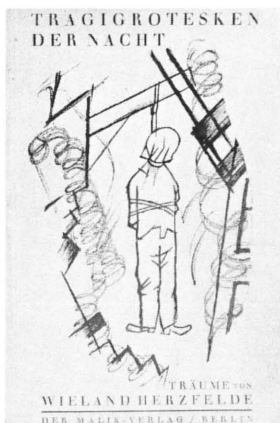


Figure 37

in direct contrast to abstract art... had to say exactly what our Dadaism was after."³⁰

Exactly. It is true that some of the "Dadaist revolutionary central council's" demands retain something of the original "creative irrationalism" (Huelsenbeck) and anarchism: "the introduction of the simultaneist poem as a Communist state prayer;..." However, others are to say "exactly what our Dadaism was after;" "the immediate expropriation of property (socialization) and the communal feeding of all..."

By contrast, Grosz's and Herzfelde's contributions to Hausmann's *Der Dada*, 1919, (cat. #s 59-61) are still marked by the Dada notion of "play" as revolt; Herzfelde's *Tragigrotesken der Nacht. Träume* (Tragi-Grotesques of the Night. Dreams, 1920) (figure 37, cat. # 63), by an early surrealist dimension devastating the bourgeois rationale that had climaxed in the war. Journals such as *Der Blutige Ernst* (In Bloody Earnest, 1919) (figure 38, cat. # 50), edited by Einstein/Grosz, are indicative of a transition towards revolutionary pragmatics: "Ludendorff's Tagebuch" (in Nr. 3) fuses the original Dadaist play-factor with the relatively straight-forward political satire in the vein of Heinrich Mann. In Nr. 6 (cat. # 53), the treatise "Abhäng-igkeit" (dependency) renders a sort of "user's manual" for understanding the concretely political function of the subversion of the repressive conventional sign system. Journals such as *Die Pleite* (Bankruptcy) (cat. #s 54-58), edited by Grosz/Heartfield, give further evidence of this trend which is inseparable from the activities of the Spartakus League and the Communists. The issues of 1923, are devoted to such topical issues of interest such as the Stinnes-case or Ludendorff's endorsement of the memorial for Schlageter, the Nazi idol fallen in the battle with Communism. The more the model of the artistic revolt was transferred, away from the text into life as the social realm and the topical political arena, the more powerful was the revolutionary vitality. Such transfers of the subversive Dadaist "play" into events range from Grosz' WWI posturing as the "merchant from Holland," at parties of the ruling class offering

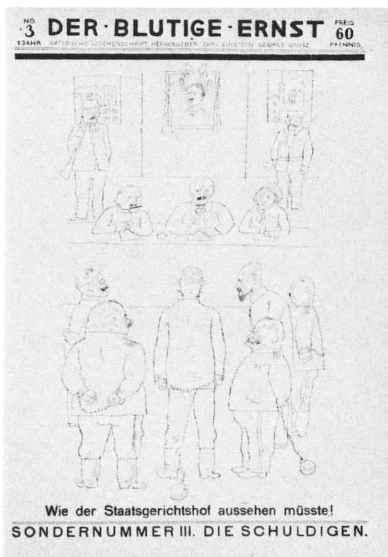


Figure 38

for sale engraved bullets from the front, to the concretely political Dadaist "happenings" at the trials against Einstein's drama *Die Schlimme Botschaft* in which Jesus Christ returned to the temples of the money-mongering Weimar Republic; or George Grosz's famous-infamous "Jesus with Gas-Mask. Shut Up and Keep Serving" ("Maul halten und weiterdienen"). They all mark the "art of revolution" as a practical political artform staging events in the *context* of the social lifeforms. The very negative "reception" of their event-related texts and sketches at the hands of the authorities implied that obvious political revolutionary advantage was gained: most crucially, the targeted recipients, the masses, were reached by such spectacular "happenings" as those highly publicized trials which Bertolt Brecht, with his killer instinct for publicity, planned to exploit for his "Lehrstück" stage. Similarly, the Malik press' hit-and-run distribution method of Grosz-illustrated pamphlets on the street corners of Berlin constituted a form of convergence of political art and political life. In this dynamic process, constituted by the text and the political context, art indeed became a "weapon." In the longer event, however, the story was not changed: while literary history, constituted by the insatiable institution of art, proved extremely receptive to the dadaist "revolutionary" text, political history, of course, was less inclined to tolerate its political contextualization.

NOTES

1. Robert Motherwell, ed. *The Dada Painters and Poets* (Boston, 1981), p. 80.
2. Michael Stark, *Für und wider den Expressionismus* (Stuttgart, 1982), pp. 182f.
3. Julien Benda, *La Trahison des Clercs* (Paris, 1927), p. 66.
4. Burckhardt Lindner, "Aufhebung der Kunst in Lebenspraxis? Über die Aktualität der Auseinandersetzung mit den historischen Avantgardebewegungen" in *Theorie der Avantgarde. Antworten auf Peter Bürgers Bestimmung von Kunst und bürgerlicher Gesellschaft*, Martin Lüdke, ed., (Frankfurt 1976), p. 78.
5. Motherwell, p. 107.
6. Arnold Hauser, *Soziologie der Kunst* (München 1974), p. 729.
7. Motherwell, p. 29, 79.
8. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis, 1984), pp. 11f.
9. cf. Eckhard Philipp, *Dadaismus* (München, 1980), p. 88.
10. Motherwell, p. 32, 33.
11. Bürger, p. 54.
12. Lindner, pp. 99f, points to Brecht as the paradigm of an avant-garde that seizes its chances for change by a systematic subversion ("Umfunktionierung") of the cultural institutions and that maintains, against a possible false sublation into mass-communication, an effective "relative autonomy" by a mutual critical exchange with other social spheres of action.
13. Frederick Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture" in: *Social Text*, 1, 1979/80, 130-148.
14. cf. Schulte-Sasse, foreword to Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p. xli.
15. cf. Theda Shapiro, *Painter and Politics: The European Avant-Garde and Society 1900-1925* (New York 1976). Rudolf E. Kuenzli, "The Semiotics of Dada Poetry" in: *Dada Spectrum: The Dialectics of Revolt*, Stephen C. Foster, Rudolf E. Kuenzli, eds. (Madison, 1979), pp. 52-72; and "Dada gegen den Ersten Weltkrieg" Die Dadaisten in Zürich" in: *Sinn aus Unsinn. Dada International*, Wolfgang Paulsen and H.G. Hermann, eds., (Bern/

München 1982), pp. 87-100. While Kuenzli correctly assesses Zürich Dada as a phenomenon deeply politically motivated, Reinhart Meyer et al. view it as a primarily aesthetic event: *Dada in Zürich und Berlin 1916-1920*, Kronberg ts. 1973.

16. cf. Schulte-Sasse, p. ix.

17. cf. Stark, pp. 178-199.

18. Richard Huelsenbeck, ed., *Dada Eine literarische Dokumentation*, (Reinbeck, 1964), p. 23.

19. Herbert Read, *The Art of Jean Arp* (New York, 1968), p. 156.

20. "Dadaland" in: *Dada*, Peter Schifferli, ed. (Zurich, 1957), p. 108.

21. Read, p. 40, 41.

22. cf. Rainer Rumold, *Sprachliches Experiment und literarische Tradition, Zu den Texten Helmut Heissenbüttels* (Bern, 1975), pp. 77f.

23. Motherwell, pp. 29, 33f., 88, 14.

24. cf. The discussion of the creative aspects of alternative groups such as the Expressionists in time of cultural crisis, which consist in the establishment of a cultural dialogue towards expanded communication by offering alternatives : Bernd Hüppauf, "Zwischen revolutionärer Epoche und sozialem Prozess. Bemerkungen über den Ort des Expressionismus in der Literaturgeschichte" in: *Expressionismus und Kulturkrise*, Hüppauf, ed., (Heidelberg, 1983), pp. 55-88.

25. Huelsenbeck, p. 29.

26. cf. Stark, pp. 73-88.

27. Stark, p. 82

28. Motherwell, p. 41.

Rainer Rumold is Associate Professor of German and Humanities,

Northwestern University.

His past publications include:

Sprachliches Experiment und Literarische Tradition (1975),

Gottfried Benn und der

Expressionismus (1982), and

"Crisis as Event: The Avantgarde, Revolution, and Catastrophe as Metaphors" (1988).

Abstracts

- The Prerequisite Text
Stephen Foster
- This essay maintains that the importance of the avant-garde text, as a prerequisite of the avant-garde, rests in the fact that it is the text itself that most bears and transmits patterns of culture. Both a visible record of its emergence from culture and the basis upon which culture could be visibly recomposed, the text was a recognition and reflection of culture. As a "configuration" of institutions, ideas, and events, the avant-garde text drew attention to the nature of culture, *per se*. This act was more important than advocating any specific historical expression of culture. Thus freed, for the most part, from party-specific politics, reigning ideologies, and the limitations of their expressions in conventional texts, the avant-garde text could intercept and critique normative culture, propose alternatives to it, and project future visions of it on an operational rather than historical basis. Although questionable as an instrument of practical politics, the impact of the avant-garde text on humanistic social perspectives and concepts of culture has been considerable.
- The Text and the Myth of the Avant-Garde
Estera Milman
- This essay defends the assumption that the avant-garde text most importantly served to perpetuate the avant-garde's own mythic basis in culture. This author, in analyzing a sample of little magazines, identifies the paradigms consulted by the artists and through which they felt they could, based on these paradigm's cultural pervasiveness, most effectively secure a viable social standing and reception as art. Rarely involved in contributing to substantial aspects of the cultural perspectives they appropriated (politics, science, etc.), they were nevertheless of heuristic value to the avant-garde which translated them into expanded and challenging artistic spaces. Arguing that they were intentionally offered primarily to arts and humanities audiences, the paper maintains that traditional interpretations of them as efficacious crossovers between the arts and other dimensions of culture confuses the myth they mean to perpetuate in text. Their purposes should, consequently, be reexamined.

The Text and
the Coming of Age of the
Avant-Garde in Germany

Timothy O. Benson

This essay traces the revolution in the avant-garde text from the initial absolutist intentions of the Expressionists to the strategic use of the text by the Dadaists. Centering on the shortlived balance between the text as aesthetic activity and its employment in broader cultural criticism, the discussion most concerns itself with Berlin Dada. The author argues that the altered appearance of the text reflects changes in the avant-garde's perception of itself and, in particular, its role within the context of culture in general. With the disillusion of rationalism and teleology, artists rejected the concept of contexts shared with its audience, ideas of a causal historical motion, and with them, the whole notion of progressive social change. Opposed to art's conventional social setting, the Expressionists sought their absolutes—the totality of experience—in art, an idealism that was perpetuated, at least in part, in Zurich Dada's appropriation and aestheticization of the text in their attempts to define an avant-garde, as opposed to establishment, art setting. In contrast, Berlin Dada turned to promotional and strategic uses of the text in their attempts to infiltrate the wider culture. Admitting a variety of influences from other, non-aesthetic, areas of culture (the press, entertainment, advertising, etc.), their approach became more materialist and their texts more objectified. Their texts reflected their historical context and social positioning and, as a result, the texts operated on a level as concrete as did their counterparts in other dimensions of culture. Their reconstructions betrayed their sources in both fragmentation and contradiction. Although wearing a public face, they continued to be evaluated in terms of their successes or failures, as the subjects of aesthetic criteria. Losing power with the stabilization of the Weimar Republic to even symbolize social subversion or significant alternatives the avant-garde text finally took its place as part of the new structure of modernism that it was instrumental in creating.

Berlin DADA

Peter Guenther

Through a careful examination of existing Berlin Dada performance documents, the present essay attempts to refocus attention from the text itself to how the text was presented. Frequently meant to be read aloud, the performatory nature of these texts provided a power and impact impossible to achieve by the text designed for reading. Direct verbal assaults intended to confront live audiences, the public's reaction was understandably hostile and negative. A radical revolt against the entire period, committed to change in society through a change in man, the mode of these text performances do, nevertheless, throw doubt on the common assertion that Berlin dada was heavily political. Although insisting in their aggression and audibility on being heard, their unqualified "no" to German culture is rarely followed by a plan for constructive

Guenther (cont.)

action. The text, centered in events, seeks neither political reform nor advocacy of a coherent Dada platform, but ". . . an image which was capable of driving one not necessarily into the arms of the Dadaists, but into solitude where one could find at least one human being: himself. And nothing else."

The Dadaist Text:
Politics, Aesthetics, and
Alternative Cultures?

Rainer Rumold

The question addressed in the following essay both affirms the mission of the avant-garde text and acknowledges its historical fate; the consignment of this vital movement to the archives and museums, staunch symbols of the very social structure that it sought to criticise and replace. The answer is to be sought in the nature of art and its inevitable structured integration into society. Contrary to this anti-art myth, Dada did not destroy art's aura but rather sought art's resurrection. Although it flourished as a counterculture, it did so within the confines of art's traditional social place. Operating within, rather than against, the institution of art, Dada sought to expose art's ideological mechanisms and open the text to social context. In maintaining art's autonomy, Dada preserved the distance required of significant criticism but limited itself to change through reflection rather than through revolution. Zurich Dada sought, by destroying ruling texts, to compete for social influence, the movement's radical alternatives and its successes as a counterculture were felt most keenly in the community of art. Ultimately creating an alternative elitist audience, Zurich Dada remained squarely situated within the structure of establishment culture. Aware of the text's role in the mediation of reality, Dada was committed to unmasking culture's "big slogans," to rupturing the closure and isolation of the text in favor of its integration with life, and to defamiliarizing the audience from culture in ways that would generate primary meanings. Although enriching existing modes of cultural communication, the text remained aesthetic and reached only the aristocratic reader. Aware of this, the Dadaists turned to the liberation of themselves from their own enslavement. Forced to adopt new strategies a self-critical Berlin Dada attempted to change the cultural context into which the text was placed; to revolutionize the institution of art through political events. Reducing art in the interest of effectiveness, the text was employed as a weapon. Engaged in what this author identifies as "revolutionary pragmatics," Berlin Dada achieved, at least momentarily, the convergence of political art and political life. Brought sharply into tension with establishment culture, it nevertheless remained with the institution of art.