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# DOCUMENTING DADA // DISSEMINATING DADA

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# DOCUMENTING DADA // DISSEMINATING DADA

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From 1916 to 1923, a new kind of artistic movement swept Europe and America. Its very name, “DADA”—two identical syllables without the obligatory “-ism”—distinguished it from the long line of avant-gardes that had determined the preceding century of art history. More than a mere art movement, Dada claimed a broader role as an agent of cultural, social, and political change.

Its proponents came from all parts of Europe and the United States at a time when their native countries were battling one another in the deadliest war ever known. They did not restrict themselves to a single mode of expression as painter, writer, actor, dancer, or musician; most of them were involved in several art forms and in breaking down the boundaries between artistic disciplines.

Indeed, the dadaists were not content to make art. They wanted to affect all aspects of Western civilization, to take part in the revolutionary changes unfolding as inevitable results of the chaos of World War I.

They were not interested in writing books and painting pictures for an admiring and uninvolved public; rather, they created work designed to provoke public reaction. For the dadaists, violently negative reactions were superior to passive acceptance.

Originating as an anti-war protest in neutral Switzerland, Dada rapidly spread to many corners of Europe and beyond. The Dada movement was perhaps the single most decisive influence on the development of twentieth-century art, and its innovations are so pervasive as to be virtually taken for granted today.

This exhibition highlights a single aspect of Dada: its print publications. Since the essence of Dada was best reflected in ephemeral performances and actions rather than in concrete artworks, it is perhaps ironic that the dadaists produced many books and journals of astonishing beauty.

What you see here is not merely a display of pretty objects. Rather, this exhibition highlights ways in which Dada’s printed output documents the ephemeral aspects of the movement and shows how the dadaists used their publications to spread the movement beyond its origins in Zurich.



— *Timothy Shipe*  
Curator, *International Dada Archive*

## ZURICH: The Beginnings

On February 5, 1916 a motley assortment of exiled writers, artists, and performers opened the Cabaret Voltaire, a performance venue housed in a café in a moderately seedy section of the otherwise very bourgeois city of Zurich. Among the founders were the German poet and dramatist Hugo Ball, his partner Emmy Hennings (a popular actress, singer, and poet with ties to the German expressionists), and a group of students from Romania, including Tristan Tzara and three Janco brothers.

Lasting a mere five months, the Cabaret presented an eclectic array of acts ranging from classical piano music, popular songs, and Russian balalaika tunes to abstract dance, lectures, manifestos, and sound poems. By April, the word “Dada” had been chosen to describe the activities of the Cabaret Voltaire. The word was resonant with a variety of meanings. It could be read as “hobby horse” in French, as “yes yes” in Romanian, and even as the name of a hair product heavily advertised in Zurich.

When the Cabaret closed, Dada activities continued in other venues. Before the end of World War I, word of the radical art movement spread to many corners of Europe, even though many Dada participants denied its status as a codified movement.

*Cabaret Voltaire* (ITEM 1) was also the title of the first Dada publication. Edited by Hugo Ball and published in May 1916, its innocent subtitle -- *A Collection of Artistic and Literary Contributions* -- understated the radical nature of some of its contents, such as the “simultaneous poem” read in three languages by the German Richard Huelsenbeck and the Romanians Marcel Janco and Tristan Tzara.

Tzara edited the review *Dada* beginning in 1917 in Zurich. The first two (ITEMS 2-3) issues featured a consistent, relatively conventional format, but beginning with issue number 3, the format varies radically with each issue. Numbers 3 (ITEM 4) and 4/5 (ITEMS 5-6) give evidence of Tzara’s desire (as the self-proclaimed leader of the movement) to take Dada to Paris, the capital of

the artistic world. *Dada* pointedly printed contributions in several languages from both sides of the Great War—including German. But with the war barely over, French censorship prevented the importing of any German literature. Tzara’s solution was to issue alternative editions, switching French for German content in the last two numbers published in Zurich. We see this tactic in the two versions of no. 4/5 (“Anthologie Dada”).



(ITEM 8) Inside pages from *Vingt-cinq Poèmes*. By Tristan Tzara; illustrated by Hans Arp. Zurich, 1918. (Collection Dada).

Late July 1916 saw the publication of the first book in the series “Collection Dada,” Tzara’s *La Première Aventure céleste de Mr. Antipyrine* (ITEM 7). The work is an abstract play of sorts, which incorporates a manifesto the author had read earlier the same month in a local guild house, at the first Dada event held outside of the Cabaret Voltaire. The book was illustrated by Tzara’s countryman Marcel Janco.

A later publication in the “Collection Dada,” Tzara’s 1918 *Vingt-cinq poèmes* (ITEM 8) featured woodcuts by the Alsatian poet and artist Hans (Jean) Arp. Born in what was then Germany, Arp became French after the war, when Germany lost Alsace to France.

Like many Dada writers, Arp composed poetry in two languages.

The French artist and poet Francis Picabia played a major role in the dissemination of Dada, and his review *391*, published in four different countries during its eight-year run, was a key vehicle for interaction among avant-garde circles in Europe and America. Number 8, the only issue published in Zurich, grew out of Picabia's two-week stay in that city. There, early in 1919, he met Tzara and the other dadaists before departing for Paris, where he set the stage for Tzara's eventual arrival in the French capital. The cover of *391* number 8 (ITEM 9) graphically displays the links among artistic trends in Paris, New York, and Zurich.

## Meanwhile, in New York...

Artistic activities bearing marked similarities to those of the Zurich dadaists emerged from the 291 Gallery, housed in the apartment of famed photographer Alfred Stieglitz (291 Fifth Avenue). New York, like Zurich, was a refuge for European artists fleeing the war. Pre-eminent among them was the French painter Marcel Duchamp, who had achieved notoriety in the United States when his *Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2* was shown in New York's Armory Show in 1913.

A few years later, Duchamp was at the center of one of the most famous art scandals of the twentieth century. Duchamp served as a director of the Society of Independent Artists, which for its 1917 exhibition promised to display any work that was submitted with the proper entry fee. One submission by an "R. Mutt" was a porcelain urinal displayed on its back and entitled *Fountain*. The directors rejected the piece, and Duchamp resigned in protest. The review *The Blind Man* had devoted its first issue to promoting the exhibition; the second issue (ITEM 11) was devoted to the "R. Mutt Affair" and pointedly featured an image of the offending sculpture taken by Stieglitz, the pioneer of artistic photography. Only later was it revealed that Duchamp himself had submitted the urinal, one of his many so-called "readymades" (found objects). Recent research suggests that another notorious New York Dada figure,

the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, may have been responsible for the work.

The review *291* (ITEM 10), named after Stieglitz's gallery, featured avant-garde work by American and European artists and writers, including a number of visual poems reminiscent of works by the Zurich dadaists. Women writers had a significant presence in *291*. Francis Picabia was an important collaborator, whose own *391* obviously took up the torch of *291*. After four issues published in Barcelona, Picabia returned to New York, where he published three issues of *391* (ITEM 12) with covers featuring his "machine drawings." After the single issue that appeared in Zurich, Picabia took the review and the Dada spirit to Paris, where another eleven issues appeared.



(ITEM 11) Inside pages from *The Blind Man* no. 2. Edited by Henri-Pierre Roché, Beatrice Wood, and Marcel Duchamp. New York, May 1917.

## PARIS: Dada Invades the "Capital of the World"

In January 1920, Tristan Tzara finally achieved his dream of taking what he regarded as "his" movement to the center of the artistic world, Paris. Eagerly awaited by Picabia and by a group of young writers associated with the ironically titled review *Littérature* (including André Breton, Louis Aragon, and Philippe Soupault), Tzara and Dada took Paris by storm, organizing the first Dada

program within a week of his arrival.

As in Zurich and Berlin, Dada in Paris was characterized more by transient events and actions than by concrete productions like books and paintings. A series of small one-man exhibitions (*Exposition Dada Max Ernst* (ITEM 16), *Man Ray* (ITEMS 15, 21), *Picabia* (ITEM 19), *Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes* (ITEM 20), etc.) are documented by ephemeral catalog-brochures, announcements, and invitations. A guided tour of the little-known church of Saint Julien le Pauvre was advertised as the first of several *Excursions et visites Dada* (ITEM 14), tours of “places that have no reason to exist.” In Zurich and Paris, Tzara had printed up nonsensical aphorisms and announcements on small multi-colored pieces of paper (known as “papillons Dada”) (ITEMS 17-18, 22-23) that were distributed at Dada events and in various public places around the city.

In Paris, Tzara published two more numbers of his review *Dada* (ITEMS 24-25), both in connection with Dada performances in early 1920. Besides *391* (ITEM 13) and *Dada*, Paris was treated to a generous supply of small Dada reviews edited by different writers, often running no more than one or two issues. The single number of *Projecteur* (ITEM 26) was edited by another Romanian, Céline Arnould, one of the few women in Paris Dada. Tzara’s *Le Cœur à barbe* (ITEM 27) was published in connection with a tumultuous performance event with the same title, a riotous evening that marked the definitive split between Tzara’s circle and the *Littérature* group who would soon found the surrealist movement. *Cannibale* (ITEM 28) was another of Picabia’s publications. Paul Éluard’s *Proverbe* (ITEM 29) consists of brief contributions, mostly one or two sentences long and often falsely attributed. Later numbers omitted authorial bylines altogether, creating, in true Dada fashion, a literary magazine without authors.

## COLOGNE: Dada on the Rhine

Dada in the western German city of Cologne lasted only from 1919 to 1920. As in Berlin, Dada in Cologne was closely associated with leftist revolutionary politics. The chief instigators were Max Ernst and Johannes Baargeld (Alfred Ferdinand Gruenwald), who edited

the single number of *Die Schammade* (ITEM 30) (an untranslatable coinage suggesting shame, surrender, and sham), in collaboration with Hans Arp, who was visiting Cologne at the time. The most notorious of the Dada events in Cologne was the exhibition *Dada-Vorfrühling* (ITEM 31) (a title suggesting the European revolutionary movements of 1848), held in the courtyard of a brewery and accessible only through the men’s restroom.

## NETHERLANDS: Dada & De Stijl

Dada in the Netherlands was largely the project of Theo van Doesburg, leader of the abstract-constructivist movement in art and architecture known as “De Stijl.” Using the Dada pseudonym “I.K. Bonset,” Doesburg organized a series of events in cities and towns around the country, some in collaboration with Kurt Schwitters. One of these was the 1923 *Kleine Dada soir e* in the Hague, for which Schwitters designed the poster (ITEM 35), considered one of the masterpieces of Dada design. Doesburg/Bonset issued a number of tracts such as *Wat is Dada?* (ITEM 34), devoted an entire issue of his influential review *De Stijl* to his own sound poetry (under the title *Anthologie-Bonset*) (ITEM 33), and edited the Dada review *M cano* (ITEM 32), whose four issues bore the names of primary colors rather than numbers. (Shown here is the “red number.”)

## BERLIN: Art & Revolution

In early 1917, Richard Huelsenbeck, one of the chief animators of Zurich Dada, returned to a Germany weary of the war and a Berlin ready to embrace Dada. A number of artists and intellectuals who had at first fervently supported the German war effort were now organizing anti-war events, and Huelsenbeck brought the Dada sensibility to these protests. A group of leftist writers printed a series of political reviews and tracts, using various tactics to avoid wartime censorship. In November 1918, a mutiny within the military led to two major events: the overthrow of the emperor and Germany’s surrender. As a result, a civil war broke out between two factions (communist and social democratic) vying for control of the country.





**(ITEM 38)** Inside pages from *Der Dada* no. 3. Edited by George Grosz, John Heartfield, and Raoul Hausmann. Berlin, April 1920.

The Berlin dadaists identified primarily with the communist faction, and this orientation is reflected in their publications.

Wieland Herzfelde's Malik-Verlag began life as the publishing arm of Berlin Dada, issuing the three numbers of the review *Der Dada* (ITEMS 36-38) from 1919 to 1920. These issues display some of the distinctive artistic strategies of Dada in Berlin: fragmented language and phonetic poetry, politically charged photomontage, and tongue-in-cheek political organizations, such as the office for the establishment of separatist states announced in no. 1. The latter, of course, alludes to the break-up of the great European empires following World War I; indeed, the Berlin dadaists declared their own "Dada Republic of Nikolassee" in an outlying district of Berlin.

Berlin Dada was prolific in its output of books, largely thanks to the Malik-Verlag. Writers like Richard Huelsenbeck, Walter Mehring, and Franz Jung turned out numerous novels and social-political tracts. Many of these were illustrated by George Grosz, whose grotesque, biting satirical drawings differed markedly from the abstract style of the artists of Zurich Dada. Richard Huelsenbeck's poetry collection *Phantastische Gebete* (ITEM 39) was first published in Zurich with abstract illustrations by Arp; the expanded Berlin edition shown here replaces Arp's woodcuts with drawings by Grosz

lampooning Germany's ruling class. Grosz published several books of graphics, of which *Das Gesicht der herrschenden Klasse* (ITEM 40) is typical. Franz Jung, known initially for fiction in an expressionist vein, soon began writing a series of novels of revolution and working class life, again illustrated by Grosz (ITEM 41). Grosz also illustrated books by Malik editor Herzfelde, including *Tragigrotesken der Nacht* (ITEM 42) (recounting the author's dreams) and *Schutzhaft* (ITEM 43) (an account of Herzfelde's imprisonment by military authorities during the revolution in Berlin).

Throughout Europe, the dadaists were successful in attracting attention from the press and the public at large, and Berlin was no exception. In Berlin, this attention led to a stream of ephemeral publications originating outside the Dada movement, sometimes referred to as "crypto-Dada," "pseudo-Dada," or "anti-Dada." We present three examples here. The sheet music for the "Dadaist Fox Trot" (ITEM 44) pokes fun at the Dada movement. The "Dada encyclopedia" of Osiris (ITEM 45) (pseudonym of Alfred Saueremann) tries to mimic the dadaists' eclectic typography. Far from encyclopedic, the work (designated "volume 1") contains just eight sparsely printed pages of pseudo-aphorisms bearing little relation to Dada. Walter Petry's tract against "dadaist corruption" (ITEM 46) echoes the attacks in the conservative German press.

1920 was the year of taking stock for the Berlin dadaists. The First International Dada Fair was the culminating event of Berlin Dada; the exhibition's highly innovative installation included a number of large assemblages and puppet-caricatures, some hanging from the ceiling. One of these led to criminal charges for "insulting the military." The striking catalog (ITEM 47), printed on a single oversize sheet of paper, is the chief documentation of this event. Also in 1920, Richard Huelsenbeck published several books documenting or assessing the Dada movement. Of several major Dada anthology projects planned in various cities, Huelsenbeck's *Dada Almanach* (ITEM 48) was the only one to reach fruition. His *En avant Dada* (ITEM 49) was the first book-length history of dadaism, written just four years after the

founding of the Cabaret Voltaire. *Dada siegt!* (ITEM 50) is the author's critical and philosophical assessment of the movement's successes and failures.

## HANOVER: Kurt Schwitters & Merz

Based in the provincial German city of Hanover, the artist and writer Kurt Schwitters used the term “Merz” to describe the entirety of his artistic project. “Merz” was simply a syllable in the name of a Hanover bank (Kommerzbank) that made its way into one of his early collages, but it took on an array of meanings and grammatical forms (noun, verb, adjective) all having to do with the artist's collage techniques in literature and art that showed a close kinship with Dada procedures. Never formally associated with the Dada movement, Schwitters nevertheless participated in numerous Dada events in Germany and elsewhere, and, like Picabia's 391, his review *Merz* was an important point of contact between Dada and similar tendencies across Europe. No. 1 of *Merz* (ITEM 51) promotes the short-lived Dutch branch of Dada, in which Schwitters participated actively. The University of Iowa Libraries' copies of *Merz* no. 1 and 2 (ITEM 52) came from the personal collection of Tristan Tzara. The cover of no. 2 bears an inscription to Tzara from the editor. Like the review *Dada*, *Merz* maintained a consistent layout for the first few issues, and then experimented with a variety of formats throughout its twenty-four-issue run. No. 21 (ITEM 53) is a compilation of Schwitters's texts; no. 24 (ITEM 54) presents the complete “score” of the author's monumental *Ur-Sonata*, a forty-minute sound poem in four movements based on a few lines from Raoul Hausmann's phonetic poetry. No. 13 was a phonograph recording of the author's reading of an excerpt from the same work, making *Merz* perhaps the first multimedia magazine.

## DADA CIRCUMNAVIGATES THE WORLD

The impact of Dada was felt well beyond its centers in Zurich, Berlin, and Paris—from remote corners of Europe to Japan, where a late-blooming Dada movement developed under the leadership of Shinkichi Takahashi (ITEM 56), later known as one of the pre-

eminent Zen poets.

In Romania, home of several of the Zurich dadaists, a flourishing avant-garde launched numerous innovative reviews; of these, *75 HP* (ITEM 57) had the clearest affinities with Dada. Its editors Victor Brauner and Ilarie Voronca developed a notion of “picto-poetry” that has obvious connections with the visual poetry of Dada.

In bilingual Belgium, several French-language writers were tied to Paris Dada. On the Flemish side, Paul van Ostaïjen had the closest connections to Dada. His epic multilingual visual poem *Bezette stad* (ITEM 58) reflects mixed reactions to the wartime German occupation among Flemish writers. Some felt a closer kinship to young German writers assigned to the occupation forces than to their French-speaking compatriots. *Bezette stad* seems to partake equally of Berlin and Paris Dada.

In Russia, experimental writers developed a language for sound poetry they called “zaoum.” The Georgian-Russian writer Iliazd (Ilia Zdanevich), who became involved with the Paris dadaists, published a book-length dramatic poem in “zaoum,” *Lidantiu faram* (ITEM 59).

Another Russian who settled in Paris, Serge Charchoune, published a number of Dada works in Russian, including *Dadaizm: Kompiliatsiia* (ITEM 60).

Tristan Tzara maintained close contacts with the Italian futurists, whose works were an important component of early Zurich Dada publications. Dada in Italy was closely related to futurism; its main proponent was Julius Evola, whose *Arte astratta* (ITEM 61) presents his texts and visual works. Vittorio Rieti's *Tre marcie per le bestie* (ITEM 63) parodied romantic program music, and was performed at Dada events in Germany, France, and the Netherlands.

*Garage* (ITEM 62) is an interesting tri-national collaboration, with music by the Belgian E.L.T. Mesens, text by the Frenchman Philippe Soupault, and cover design by the American Man Ray.

In the newly formed Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (later Yugoslavia), a thriving “Yugo-Dada” movement flourished in the early 1920s, centered on Ljubomir Micić (ITEM 64) and his review *Zenit*.

## THE INTERNATIONAL DADA ARCHIVE

The world's most comprehensive collection of material related to the Dada movement is housed in the University of Iowa Libraries. Founded in 1979 in the wake of a major international conference and exhibition, the International Dada Archive includes hundreds of rare books, journals, and ephemeral documents from the Dada era. Much of the archive is housed in the UI Libraries' Special Collections Department.

This exhibition represents only a modest selection from the Dada Archive, which is a comprehensive collection of material by and about the dadaists and the Dada movement, later editions of the dadaists' works, works inspired by Dada, exhibition catalogs, and secondary literature. In addition to the rare items housed in Special Collections, portions of the Archive are available in the University Libraries' circulating collections, mostly in the Main Library and Art Library.

The Archive's catalog is available online as the International Online Bibliography of Dada. Many of the rare publications from the Dada period (including most of the items in this exhibition) may be viewed in their entirety in the Digital Dada Library.

The International Dada Archive publishes *Dada/Surrealism*, a peer-reviewed, open-access scholarly journal, which is available online at [BIT.LY/DADA-SURREALISM](http://bit.ly/dada-surrealism).



## EXHIBITION CREDITS

### DOCUMENTING DADA / DISSEMINATING DADA

is an exhibition drawn from the holdings of the International Dada Archive, Special Collections, the University of Iowa Libraries.

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