

Why Dada?

An Inquiry into the Connection between the War's Ruins, Peace-Time Insanity, and the Latest Sensation in Art

By SHELDON CHENEY

In writing about Dada I find myself embarrassed. I am enough of a Dadaist to wish to be loyal to Dada tenets, and the first of them is that Dada must not be talked or written about; but in being embarrassed about it I am also showing that I cling to certain minor moralities of my pre-Dada period, since to talk about what you should not is of the very essence of Dadaism. It is perhaps that I am not yet that Dada.

I believe—one is never sure, since Dada has abolished logic—I believe that the conception of Dadaism might be traced back to people and events long antedating the late war, say to the *fin-de-siècle* generation of Beardsley and Wilde; but the war and its ruins were the immediate precipitating cause. Thus M. André Gide, editor of the "Nouvelle Revue Française," exclaims: "What! while our fields, our villages, our cathedrals have suffered so much, our language is to remain untouched! It is important that the mind should not lag behind matter; it has a right, it, too, to some ruins. Dada will see to it."

The war, then, fathered the child. Tristan Tzara is generally credited with doing the rest. The christening, if not the birth, took place in Zurich. M. Tzara, who shares with Francis Picabia the honor and the notoriety of chief place among the Dadaists, describes the event somewhat mystically as follows:

In Switzerland I was in the company of friends and was hunting the dictionary for a word appropriate to the sonorities of all languages. Night was upon us when a green hand placed its ugliness on the page of Larousse, pointing very precisely to "dada." My choice was made.

In the light of subsequent events, which have probably outrun even M. Tzara's anticipations, the name does seem to have been chosen with superhuman canniness. The original meaning of "Dada" in the French is "hobby-horse"; but the associations the word has taken on through recurrence as the first spoken syllables of millions of generations of infants are rich beyond compare.

I can imagine some one asking at this point, "What is Dada?" The

question is a fair one according to the standards of the days before Dadaism. The average reader can hardly be expected to gain more than a glimmer of meaning from the classic reply, "Dada is nothing." After all, I have little to lose in essaying a definition that can be understood by ordinary folks, for while my friends already think I am Dada, the real Dadaists still call me bourgeois. Dadaism, then, is primarily an artistic and literary *mouvement* which has, by the startling nature of its publications, exhibitions, and public (very public) actions, suddenly become the sensation of the cultural worlds that revolve about such centers as Paris, Rome, and Berlin. Among thinking persons (I claim Dada immunity) there seem to be three explanations of the phenomenon.

The first is that all Dadaists are crazy; that their humor is either nonsensical or diabolical, their art accidental, their bits of accomplishment the chance stumblings of the madman. This is the most widely held opinion.

The second and opposite explanation is that behind a mask of irresponsibility and humor there stands a calculating and unlaughing monster; that beyond the apparent purposelessness there is a deadly, serious intelligence, with the ultimate aim of undermining civilization by destroying its props, art, culture, religion, and militarism. Thus Hi Simons, in the Chicago

"Musterbook," calls Dadaism "a universally inclusive, desperately serious, supremely conscious hoax intended to undermine the whole fabric of decadent European society."

There is a third, and to me more plausible, explanation: that it is only human for a certain number of people to be crazy, some in the way that gets them into "retreats," others who only occasionally get "crazy with the heat," others only as crazy as the average artist is; and it is equally human for a lot of other folks to get awfully serious, to take culture seriously, to be patriotic, martyrs, college professors, etc. And there is a class that combines characteristics out of both the others. Then there comes a thing like the war, which upsets all the values, and a lot

of these people get "het-up" to an extraordinary degree. And there emerges a Dada movement, of which nine tenths of the manifestations look crazy and probably are meant to look crazy; and irreverence is showing itself all over the place; and behind it are all the incompetents and near-thinkers and degenerates and cynics and roisters who always tag on to the "latest" movement; and along with them a few crea-

tive geniuses; and a little group of disillusioned clear thinkers directing the center of the current because they really see that it is necessary to discredit bourgeois culture, academic seri-

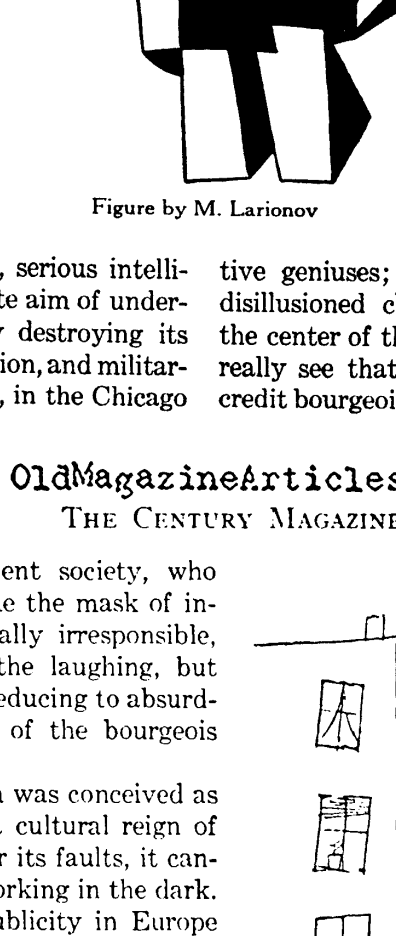


Figure by M. Larionov

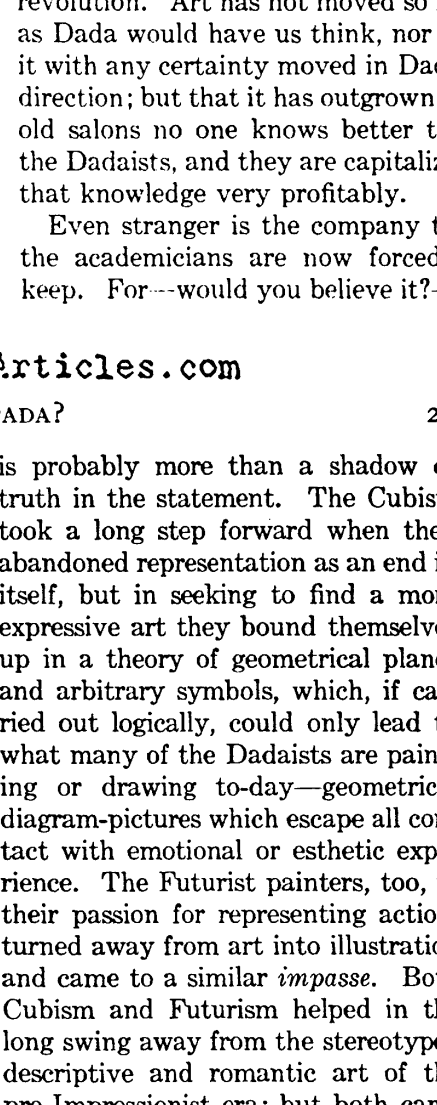
ousness, and decadent society, who are willing to assume the mask of insanity, with the really irresponsible, in order to cloak the laughing, but serious, purpose of reducing to absurdity the pretensions of the bourgeois elect.

Whether Dadaism was conceived as a huge joke or as a cultural reign of terror, and whatever its faults, it cannot be accused of working in the dark. It has had more publicity in Europe during the last year than Cubism, Futurism, Vorticism, and Einstein combined. Since the first Dada group was arrested for whatever form of lese-majesty they practised first, Dada has been oftener suppressed by the police of Europe, civil and artistic, than any other movement in history. Dada meetings and Dada exhibitions are regularly held or broken up,—it makes no difference to the Dadaists,—and even the highest art authorities and social leaders have had to take cognizance of the movement. The Dadaists publish many reviews in various countries and varied languages, and most of them are so obscure in meaning that neither the obscene department of our post-office or its anti-Red bureau will be able to suppress them with any show of virtue.

In the world of painting Dada has picked a quarrel, of course, with the academies and with all official or traditional schools and movements, and is getting away with it very nicely. The academicians in Paris have gone to some trouble to explain in the public press that the reason why Dadaists are selling more pictures than the really good painters is that the true lovers of art, those who are cultivated enough to recognize fine painting, lost all their money in the war; and a new genera-

tion of millionaires without any standards of taste goes to the exhibitions today—and buys of the Dadaists simply because they are making the loudest noise! There is a naïve note in this complaint that makes one feel that these older painters never will understand that art progresses, until they are put to cleaning bricks after the communist overturn or some other revolution. Art has not moved so fast as Dada would have us think, nor has it with any certainty moved in Dada's direction; but that it has outgrown the old salons no one knows better than the Dadaists, and they are capitalizing that knowledge very profitably.

Even stranger is the company that the academicians are now forced to keep. For—would you believe it?—at



"Murder," by Georg Grosz

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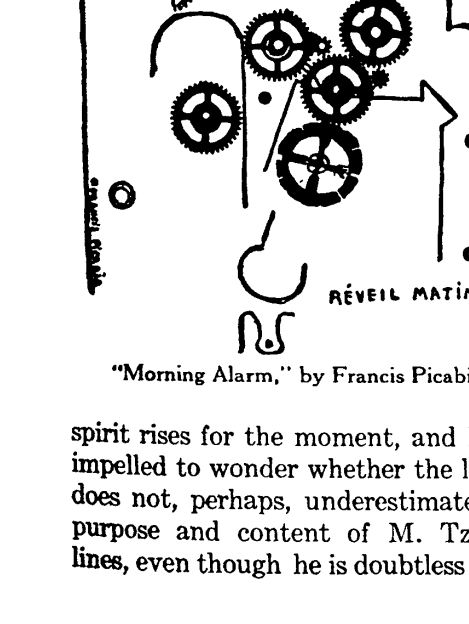
last year's exhibitions the Futurists and Cubists joined the academicians in denouncing the Dadaists as fakers, charlatans, and ignoramuses who know nothing of the laws of art and only wish to shock the public into considering them a sensation! And the Dadaists get unlimited joy out of the situation, but hold to the center of the stage. The Cubists and Futurists are powerless to do more than rage, for have they not put their chief weapon within reach of the new enemy? The Dadaists merely laugh and rejoice that people like Cubists and Futurists are really too old-fashioned and academic to be able to appreciate the latest manifestations in art. But always they laugh.

There are those who will tell you that Dada actually grew out of the decay of Cubism and Futurism, and there

is probably more than a shadow of truth in the statement. The Cubists took a long step forward when they abandoned representation as an end in itself, but in seeking to find a more expressive art they bound themselves up in a theory of geometrical planes and arbitrary symbols, which, if carried out logically, could only lead to what many of the Dadaists are painting or drawing to-day—geometrical diagram-pictures which escape all contact with emotional or esthetic experience. The Futurist painters, too, in their passion for representing action, turned away from art into illustration and came to a similar *impasse*. Both Cubism and Futurism helped in the long swing away from the stereotyped descriptive and romantic art of the pre-Impressionist era; but both came to sterility in themselves.

Dada portraits, says a Paris correspondent of "The Christian Science Monitor," "resemble nothing so much as an old-fashioned plate of clam chowder, seen from above." That is perilously like the phrases that have been hurled at every innovation in painting these many centuries. But, unfortunately, it is true of most Dada work.

There is, however, that small, but important, fraction. The Dada journals show the work of Kandinsky, without doubt one of the great painters of to-day, although not likely to be seen in the Metropolitan Museum for twenty years yet; and in America Joseph Stella and Marsden Hartley have owned to being Dadaists, and they are of the best we have. Paul Klee, too, painter of exquisite color fantasies, who works "without regard to the trivial laws of Nature," is a Dadaist who deservedly has an inter-



"Factories," by Georg Grosz

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national following. And of the illustrations shown herewith, the two by Georg Grosz certainly have points of freshness not to be found in the general run of "accepted" art. The one called "Murder," an example of that "infantilism" which is taking us back, perhaps, to the roots of all art, achieves a feeling of murder that is extraordinary: in the loneliness and squalor of the setting, in the directness of expression exhibited in the "stuck" figure and the running leg, even in the merciless, murderous sun. And the one called "Factories," a typical Dadaist drawing if judged by academic standards, expresses the jumble of bad living and crowded industry so typical of our disordered metropolitanism as no academician could. There is direction and purpose here. I fear.

But, after all, it is the Francis Picabia sort of thing that is Dadaist at its most typical. When M. Picabia, once of the Cubists, became a Dadaist, he retained at least the geometrical bias of his earlier style. For instance, his portrait of Tristan Tzara consists chiefly of two straight lines and some compass-drawn circles.

Others of Picabia's drawings look like working-plans such as plumbers or furniture-makers might use, with the names of the parts carefully lettered on. They have an intellectual interest for the puzzle-minded, and I freely grant that they may have some esthetic purpose which I have not yet fathomed. I confess to a liking for some of the hieroglyphic designs, usually done on wood, that adorn the pages of several Dada publications. Occasionally, one turns up an abstract

composition which begets such a novel reaction, such a fresh emotion, that, by contrast, one calls up the disgust, the sense of futility, which often comes with a pilgrimage through our official temples of art, with their miles and miles of descriptive canvases, examples of brilliant technique, and pale reflections of the glories of long ago.

A monograph on Dadaist verse by F. S. Flint appeared as an issue of the London "Chapbook." Although it shows evidences at times of Dada-writing, it is perhaps the most temperate expression in English on the subject, and Mr. Flint, as a poet and critic of marked progressive tendencies, has a better right than most of us to be heard. He writes:

It has been suggested that the works of the Dadaists come within the domain of the psychiatrists [meaning, in plain English, alienists]. But their authors know perfectly well what they are doing. They are amusing themselves at our expense, without, however, letting us share the joke, and with the ultimate object of discrediting all the works of the mind.

He attempts to be sympathetic, but concludes that, after making allowance for the "common, human, vulgar desire just simply to show off," it is only right to ask the Dadaist, and every other poet, to "accept the conventions by which he will make himself intelligible." He then quotes and translates Tristan Tzara's poem, beginning:

a e ou o youyouyou i e o u
yoyouyou
drrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr
bits of green duration flutter

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in my room
a e o i i i e a ou ii belly
shows the center I want to take it
ambran bran bran and restore
center of the four
beng bong beng bang . . .

Mr. Flint comments on M. Tzara's verse thus:

It has a *cachet* of its own and its own species of unintelligibility. . . . His sincerity is such that he dumps his personality in front of the world without reserve or arrangement; he shoots it as a scavenger shoots rubbish; and his style is strictly adequate. . . . His verse, good or bad, never says anything. It merely makes a noise.

Considering both the poem and the comment by Mr. Flint, my Dada

under the overplus of noise and the underplus of arrangement. It is all quite strange to our ears, but need it be unintelligible? I am moved to this wavering partly by recollection of the chorus of ridicule that greeted certain of Alfred Kreyborg's plays a few years back. But when they were acted or chanted, as the poet intended, the words took on a beauty of rhythm and melody, and a meaning filled out by action, music, and silences that had been unsuspected by the average reader.

Restraining our suspicions and our risibilities for the moment, we might do well to inquire whether such a poem as the one quoted above is not similarly meant to be acted out for us, whether, filled out with an imagined accompaniment of action, setting, and music, it might not take on an aspect of purpose far beyond the seemingly recognizable Dada one of purposelessness.

There is to be a Dada invasion of America. In fact, it is here in little already. There has been published the first issue of "New York Dada," less clever than its European models, and only feebly nonsensical, but a beginning. Even before that, of course, there were publications tending that way; such were "TNT" and "291." But we are likely to witness a mushroom growth of Dada journals and Dada activities.

There are those who argue that the Dada invasion of America need never be taken seriously, that it can never go far, because there is no need for Dada here, the point being that we Americans have no art traditions worth destroying. It is true that we have no such active agent for evil as the British Royal Academy or the Beaux Arts



"Morning Alarm," by Francis Picabia

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School in Paris, and our exhibitions as a rule are less attended, our pretensions to everlasting glory (except in the American Academy of Arts and Letters, perhaps) less sanctimonious. But who will say that we have not an officialdom quite as powerful in its smaller sphere, and none the less vicious for having less art to deal with? Who will say that the sacred regard for "old masters," so astutely kept aflame by the art dealers and antiquarians, is not fair target for a little bomb-throwing?

If we do not have Dada, it will more likely be because it cannot flourish in a prohibition country. Or it may be that our ears have become so used to jazz that the noise made by the Dadaists won't sink in deep enough to register. But not need Dada? Don't let us fool ourselves. Which brings me to the answering of my title-question, "Why Dada?"

Because, poverty-stricken as we are for a robust art of our own, we are far too rich in imported works of art, foreign-absorbed knowledge of art, pale native reflections of decadent European culture. Our art life is tacitly a thing of museums and special pilgrimages, and our museums are less places where one goes to respond to the peculiar, penetrating ecstasy of living emotion than places for study of dead civilizations and cultural curiosities.

Over all of it is the smug sense of officialdom, of works chosen to a standard of what people ought to be allowed to see, as examples in the traditional, the sacred, the profound course of "culture." Ah, Dada, there is work for you here!

Outside the museums—for there are rare industrial art societies and arts and crafts associations, which avowedly



"Babylonian Analysis," by Christian Schad

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opera—for whom? And the theaters, what of price there? To what caste must one belong to go there? And, yes, there is architecture, beautiful buildings to be enjoyed free by every one. Beautiful, yes, if one has been steeped in Greek and Roman tradition or Beaux Arts neo-imitation design. But architecture *creatively* beautiful, expressive of either the architect's immortal soul or the times and country we live in, what per cent. of our total building? Except where the engineer has for the moment triumphed, it is, in its perfectly polished achievement, the smuggest, most academic, most gentlemanly, most competent business art of them all. A few Dada ruins here, please, if only to show that there is something different from perfect rearrangements of Greek and Roman columns, Renaissance ornaments, and Beaux-Arts formulas.

But, after all, it is in no one of these directions that Dada, the destroyer of the gods of buncombe, will find most to do. It is rather in the whole organization of art in relation to society. For art is no longer an expression of life; it has become a theocracy and a priesthood, cultivated like a religion,

want to bring art back into some sort of relationship to every-day life—outside the museums what? Well, our

