

Hans Richter

HOW DID DADA BEGIN?

IN 1915, SOON AFTER the outbreak of the First World War, a rather undernourished, slightly pock-marked, very tall and thin writer and producer came to Switzerland. It was Hugo Ball, with his mistress Emmy Hennings who was a singer and poetry reader. He belonged to the 'nation of thinkers and poets', which was engaged, at that time, in quite different activities. Ball, however, had remained both a thinker and a poet: he was philosopher, novelist, cabaret performer, journalist and mystic.

*I had no love for the death's-head hussars,
Nor for the mortars with the girls' names on them,
And when at last the glorious days arrived,
I unobtrusively went on my way.*

(Hugo Ball)

It is impossible to understand Dada without understanding the state of mental tension in which it grew up, and without following in the mental and physical footsteps of this remarkable sceptic. (The diaries of this extraordinary man were published after his death in 1927, under the title *Flucht aus der Zeit* ['Flight from Time'].) Guided and perhaps plagued by his conscience, Ball became the human catalyst who united around himself all the elements which finally produced Dada.

It was not until many years later, when he already lay in his grave at San Abbondio, in Ticino, the little village where he had lived with his wife Emmy, that I learned about the latter part of his

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life. He had renounced all the excesses of his youth, had become very devout, and had lived among poor peasants, poorer than they, giving them help whenever he could. Fourteen years after his death, people in Ticino still spoke with love and admiration of his nobility and goodness.

There can be no doubt of Ball's unswerving search for a meaning which he could set up against the absurd meaninglessness of the age in which he lived. He was an idealist and a sceptic, whose belief in life had not been destroyed by the deep scepticism with which he regarded the world around him.

On 1st February 1916, Ball founded the Cabaret Voltaire. He had come to an arrangement with Herr Ephraim, the owner of the Meierei, a bar in Niederdorf, a slightly disreputable quarter of the highly reputable town of Zurich. He promised Herr Ephraim that he would increase his sales of beer, sausage and rolls by means of a literary cabaret. Emmy Hennings sang *chansons*, accompanied by Ball at the piano. Ball's personality soon attracted a group of artists and kindred spirits who fulfilled all the expectations of the owner of the Meierei.

In the first Dada publication Ball writes:

When I founded the Cabaret Voltaire, I was sure that there must be a few young people in Switzerland who like me were interested not only in enjoying their independence but also in giving proof of it. I went to Herr Ephraim, the owner of the Meierei, and said, 'Herr Ephraim, please let me have your room. I want to start a night-club.' Herr Ephraim agreed and gave me the room. And I went to some people I knew and said, 'Please give me a picture, or a drawing, or an engraving. I should like to put on an exhibition in my night-club.' I went to the friendly Zurich press and said, 'Put in some announcements. There is going to be an international cabaret. We shall do great things.' And they gave me pictures and they put in my announcements. So on 5th February we had a cabaret. Mademoiselle Hennings and Mademoiselle Leconte sang French and Danish *chansons*. Herr Tristan Tzara recited Rumanian poetry. A balalaika orchestra played delightful folk-songs and dances.

I received much support and encouragement from Herr M. Slodki, who designed the poster, and from Herr Hans Arp, who supplied some Picassos, as well as works of his own, and obtained for me pictures by his friends O. van Rees and Artur Segall. Much support also from Messrs. Tristan Tzara, Marcel Janco and Max Oppenheimer, who readily agreed to take part in the cabaret. We organized a *Russian* evening and, a little later, a *French* one (works by Apollinaire, Max Jacob, André Salmon, A. Jarry, Laforgue and Rimbaud). On 26th February Richard Huelsenbeck arrived from Berlin, and on 30th March we performed some stupendous Negro music (toujours avec la grosse caisse: boum boum boum boum – drabatja mo gere drabatja mo bonooooooooo –). Monsieur Laban was present at the performance and was very enthusiastic. Herr Tristan Tzara was the initiator of a performance by Messrs. Tzara, Huelsenbeck and Janco (the first in

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Zurich and in the world) of simultaneist verse by Messrs. Henri Barzun and Fernand Divoire, as well as a *poème simultané* of his own composition, which is reproduced on pages six and seven. The present booklet is published by us with the support of our friends in France, *Italy* and Russia. It is intended to present to the Public the activities and interests of the Cabaret Voltaire, which has as its sole purpose to draw attention, across the barriers of war and nationalism, to the few independent spirits who live for other ideals. The next objective of the artists who are assembled here is the publication of a *revue internationale*. La revue paraîtra à Zurich et portera le nom 'Dada' ('Dada'). Dada Dada Dada Dada.

Zurich, 15th May 1916

I shall often quote from Ball's diaries, because I know of no better source of evidence on the moral and philosophical origins of the Dada revolt which started in the Cabaret Voltaire. It is entirely possible that any or all of the other Dadaists – Arp, Duchamp, Huelsenbeck, Janco, Schwitters, Ernst, Sermer, or another – went through the same inner development, fought similar battles and were plagued by the same doubts, but no one but Ball left a record of these inner conflicts. And no one achieved, even in fragmentary form, such precise formulations as Ball, the poet and thinker.

To understand the climate in which Dada began, it is necessary to recall how much freedom there was in Zurich, even during a world war. The Cabaret Voltaire played and raised hell at No. 1, Spiegelgasse. Diagonally opposite, at No. 12, Spiegelgasse, the same narrow thoroughfare in which the Cabaret Voltaire mounted its nightly orgies of singing, poetry and dancing, lived Lenin. Radek, Lenin and Zinoviev were allowed complete liberty. I saw Lenin in the library several times and once heard him speak at a meeting in Berne. He spoke good German. It seemed to me that the Swiss authorities were much more suspicious of the Dadaists, who were after all capable of perpetrating some new enormity at any moment, than of these quiet, studious Russians . . . even though the latter were planning a world revolution and later astonished the authorities by carrying it out.

Press announcement, 2nd February 1916:

Cabaret Voltaire. Under this name a group of young artists and writers has formed with the object of becoming a centre for artistic entertainment. The Cabaret Voltaire will be run on the principle of daily meetings where visiting artists will perform their music and poetry. The young artists of Zurich are invited to bring along their ideas and contributions.

They brought them along.

On 5th February 1916, Ball writes: 'The place was full to bursting; many could not get in. About six in the evening, when we were still busy hammering and putting up Futurist posters, there appeared an oriental-looking deputation of

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four little men with portfolios and pictures under their arms, bowing politely many times.

'They introduced themselves: Marcel Janco the painter, Tristan Tzara, Georges Janco and a fourth, whose name I did not catch. Arp was also there, and we came to an understanding without many words. Soon Janco's opulent *Archangels* hung alongside the other objects of beauty, and, that same evening Tzara gave a reading of poems, conservative in style, which he rather endearingly fished out of the various pockets of his coat.'

Ball's night-club was an overnight sensation in Zurich.

Cabaret

The exhibitionist assumes his stance before the curtain
and Pimpronella tempts him with her petticoats of scarlet.
Koko the green god claps loudly in the audience –
and the hoariest of old goats are roused again to lust.
Tsingtara! There is a long brass instrument.
From it dangles a pennant of spittle. On it is written: Snake.
All their ladies stow this in their fiddle-cases now
and withdraw, overcome with fear.

At the door sits the oily Camoedine.
She hammers gold coins into her thighs for sequins.
An arc-lamp puts out both her eyes;
And her grandson is crushed by the burning roof as it falls.

From the pointed ear of the donkey a clown catches
flies. His home is in another land.
Through little verdant tubes which bend
he has his links with barons in the city.

In lofty aerial tracks, where inharmounious
ropes intersect on which we whirl away,
a small-bore camel makes platonic
attempts to climb; the fun becomes confused.

The exhibitionist, who in the past has tended
the curtain with a patient eye for tips,
quite suddenly forgets the sequence of events
and drives new-sprouted hordes of girls before him.

(Hugo Ball)

Readings of modern French poetry alternated with recitals by German, Russia and Swiss poets. Old music was played as well as new. This produced some unlikely combinations: Cendrars and van Hoddiss, Hardekopf and Aristide Bruan a balalaika orchestra and Werfel. Delaunay's pictures were exhibited and Eric

Mühsam's poems performed. Rubinstein played Saint-Saëns. There were readings of Kandinsky and Lasker-Schüler, as well as Max Jacob and André Salmon.

He is a humble patron of a tenth-rate music-hall,
 where, florally tattooed, the devil-women stamp.
 Their pitchforks lure him on to sweet perditions,
 blinded and fooled, but always in their thrall.

(Hugo Ball)

The poster for the Cabaret Voltaire was by the Ukrainian painter Marcel Slodki. He was later to participate from time to time, both through personal appearances and by submitting his works, but he never really belonged to Dada. He was a quiet, withdrawn individual whose voice could hardly be heard above the general uproar of the Cabaret Voltaire – or, later, that of the Dada movement.

Thus the Cabaret Voltaire was first of all a literary phenomenon. The creative energies of the group were devoted to the composition, performance and publication of poems, stories and songs. For each of these poems, songs and stories there was an appropriate style of delivery.

Cabaret Voltaire: its members

Ball's qualities of thoughtfulness, profundity and restraint were complemented by the fiery vivacity, the pugnacity and the incredible intellectual mobility of the Rumanian poet Tristan Tzara. He was a small man, but this made him all the more uninhibited. He was a David who knew how to hit every Goliath in exactly the right spot with a bit of stone, earth or manure, with or without the accompaniment of witty *bons-mots*, back-answers and sharp splinters of linguistic granite. Life and language were his chosen arts, and the wilder the surrounding fracas, the livelier he became. The total antithesis between him and Ball brought out more clearly the qualities of each. In the movement's early, 'idealistic' period, these anti-*Dioscuri* formed a dynamic, even if serio-comic, unity.

What Tzara did not know, could not do, would not dare to do, had not yet been thought of. His crafty grin was full of humour but also full of tricks; there was never a dull moment with him. Always on the move, chattering away in German, French or Rumanian, he was the natural antithesis of the quiet, thoughtful Ball – and, like Ball, indispensable. In fact, each of these fighters for the spirit and anti-spirit of Dada was indispensable in his own way. What would Dada have been without Tzara's poems, his insatiable ambition, his manifestos, not to speak of the riots he produced in such a masterly fashion? He declaimed, sang and spoke in French, although he could do so just as well in German, and punctuated his performances with screams, sobs and whistles.

Bells, drums, cow-bells, blows on the table or on empty boxes, all enlivened the already wild accents of the new poetic language, and excited, by

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purely physical means, an audience which had begun by sitting impassively behind its beer-mugs. From this state of immobility it was roused into frenzied involvement with what was going on. This was Art, this was Life, and this was what they wanted! The Futurists had already introduced the idea of provocation into art and practised it in their own performances. As an art it was called Bruitism, and was later given musical status by Edgar Varèse, who followed up Russolo's discoveries in the field of noise-music, which was one of the basic contributions made by Futurism to modern music. In 1911 Russolo had built a noise-organ on which he could conjure up all the distracting sounds of everyday existence – the same sounds that Varèse later used as a musical elements. This unique instrument was destroyed at the première of the Buñuel-Dali film *L'Age d'Or* at the *Cinéma 28* in Paris in 1930, when the *camelots du roi* and other reactionary groups threw stink-bombs at the screen on which this 'anti-' [Catholic] film was being shown, and then broke up the whole place: chairs, tables, pictures by Picasso, Picabia and Man Ray, and Russolo's 'bruitistic' organ, which was on show in the foyer along with the pictures. Bruitism was taken up again by the Cabaret Voltaire and gained a good deal from the furious momentum of the new movement: upwards and downwards, left and right, inwards (the groan) and outwards (the roar).

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Source

Richter, H. (1964, 1965) 'How Did Dada Begin?', *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*, trans. D. Britt, London: Thames & Hudson: 12–19. First published in 1964 by DuMont Schauberg, Köln, English edition 1965.

Hans Richter (1888–1976)

Artist, film maker and writer. Together with fellow artists Hugo Ball, Hans Arp, Tristan Tzara, Marcel Janco and Richard Huelsenbeck, he launched the Dada movement in Switzerland in 1916, with the founding of the Cabaret Voltaire, in a run-down bar in Zurich. He became a film maker, and is noted especially for *Rhythmus 21* (1921), an early abstract film, and for *8X8* (1957). He was Director of New York City College Institute of Film Techniques (1942–52), and historian of the Dada movement.

Dada was essentially a reaction against what its participants saw as the meaninglessness of the war in Europe. Similarly its artistic manifestations – sound poems, collages, chance procedures, masks, dances – were anarchic reactions against established forms. The formation of the Cabaret gave a means of creating performance forms which could unite the arts, and from its beginnings in poetry and the visual arts, Dada was carried into film, music, typography, and articles of everyday use. The principle was for poetry to discard language as painting had already discarded the

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object, and in so doing to create provocative responses from the public: a logical destruction of logic in a futile world. Often chance became a major determinant in producing literature and performance poetry, the techniques of free association producing unexpected juxtapositions of words and sounds, seen as a creative basis on which to build a 'new and universal consciousness of art' (Huelsenbeck 1969). Dada ideas soon spread to Berlin, Cologne, Hanover, Paris, and New York, where the influential presence of Marcel Duchamp became crucial in the development of American performance in dance and music.

There has always been confusion over the origins of Dada – its name, the individuals involved, its purpose and implications – and in 1964 Richter published his book to try and record what up to then had been subject to distorted accounts. In this essay he gives an apparently authoritative account of the founding of Dada, drawing largely on the diaries of Hugo Ball, the éminence grise behind the Dada idea.

Compare this article with writings by the following authors in this reader

Artaud – whose theatre attempted to stir audiences from their apathy

Cunningham – an American approach which acknowledges Dada as an antecedent

Goldberg – locates the historical importance of Dada

Hijikata – a later exponent of chaos

• Jarry – antecedent of Dada

• Marinetti – the contemporary, futurist, viewpoint

Müller – later theatrical development of collage and conflict

Piscator – early staging was influenced by Dada

Schlemmer – another, contemporary, art perspective from the Bauhaus

Further reading

Ball, H. (1974) *Flight Out of Time*, New York: Viking Press.

Huelsenbeck, R. (1969) *Memories of a Dada Drummer*, New York: Viking Press.

Motherwell, R. (ed.) (1951) *The Dada Painters and Poets*, New York: Wittenborn, Schultz.

Richter, H. (1971) *Hans Richter*, ed. C. Gray, New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.