

# Dada: art as a weapon against the establishment

Tuesday 23 May 2006, by [LÖWY Michael](#) (Date first published: 19 November 2005).

**The French Marxist Michael Löwy looks at a new exhibition of Dadaist artworks.**

The French Centre for Modern Art in Paris is featuring a rich exhibition about Dada until 9 January 2006.

In some 40 interconnected rooms one can hear sounds and see objects, paintings, drawings, documents and films from Zurich, Berlin, Cologne, Paris and other cities where the Dada movement developed from 1919-23.

Key exhibits, which have become symbols of the irreverent and provocative spirit of Dadaism, include Marcel Duchamp's famous mustachioed *Mona Lisa* (1919), graced with the title LHOOQ (read in French, the initials mean "she has a hot arse"). Also by Duchamp is the readymade object *Fountain* (1917), a simple and elegant ceramic urinal turned upside down.

A pig-headed dummy with a German army officer's uniform by George Grosz and John Heartfield (1920) hangs from the ceiling. Other artworks include Francis Picabia's Holy Virgin (1920), a huge inkblot on paper, and René Clair's fascinating picture *Entr'acte* (1924).

So what was Dada? Born in Zurich, Switzerland, at the Cabaret Voltaire in 1916 under the initiative of Hugo Ball, Tristan Tzara (an immigrant Romanian Jew), Sophie Taeuber and Richard Huelsenbeck, it came out of the despair and disgust which reigned among young people opposed to the First World War.

It was first of all a cultural protest against war, militarism, chauvinism and the bourgeois civilisation that gave rise to such monsters. The name Dada was chosen by sticking a knife into a dictionary, and it became the rallying cry for a movement which soon spread to Berlin, Cologne, Paris and New York.

Irreverence, derision, black humour and absurdity were the weapons used by these young artists in order to express their rage and supreme contempt for the values of the established order. The slate had to be cleaned of all bourgeois conventions, traditions and expectations.

The movement had a powerfully destructive attitude towards official art and culture, but it was also an immensely creative force, inventing new and unexpected forms of expression.

In a formal sense it is hard to identify a specific Dada style or a favourite Dada medium, so little unity was there among their works. What is there in common between the proto-surrealist paintings of Max Ernst, the disturbing photos of Man Ray or the collages by Hanna Hoch?

Not much, except a certain Dadaist spirit... All dogma was rejected and no activity eluded the Dadaist fury.

The political dimension - insufficiently represented, as one might expect, in the Paris exhibition - was very much present in Dadaism from its origins in Zurich and then, in a much more direct way, in Germany.

Berlin Dadaists supported the revolution of 1918-9. At the Congress of the Weimar Constitution, Dadaist Johannes Baader launched a tract signed by "The Central Council of Dada for the World Revolution". Their Communist sympathies were very much visible in the International Dada Exhibition of 1920, which proclaimed "Dada is political".

After 1920 Paris became the centre of Dada. André Breton, Tristan Tzara, Louis Aragon and Paul Éluard organised a mock trial of Maurice Barrès, a gifted but ultra-reactionary writer.

However soon afterwards in 1923 disagreements between Breton and Tzara led to the dissolution of the original Dada movement.

With the publication of Breton's *Surrealist Manifesto* in 1924 a new movement appeared which inherited the Dadaist subversive spirit, but aimed at an alternative culture, against bourgeois society and art, an alternative tapping into the infinite resources of desire and the marvellous.

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## **P.S.**

\* From Socialist Worker Online, 19 November 2005 | issue 1977.

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