

# dada vu

THE 20TH CENTURY'S MOST FAMOUS ANARCHIC ART MOVEMENT STILL EXERTS A HUGE—SOME WOULD SAY STIFLING—INFLUENCE ON MAINSTREAM ART AND DESIGN.

By Steven Heller

I was a bit apprehensive about seeing the recent Dada retrospective exhibition at the renovated Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan. But last July, when I was invited by Paola Antonelli, MoMA's curator of architecture and design, to join Art Spiegelman on a private walk-through of this landmark show before its formal opening, I readily accepted. New York was its final stop after earlier runs at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

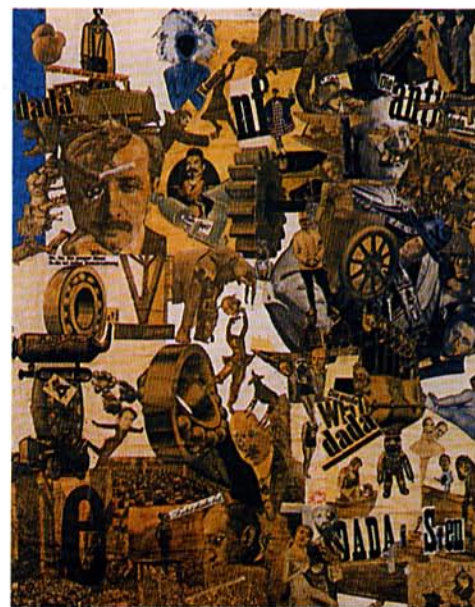
My apprehension had to do with the show's apparent, and jarring, contextual contradiction. Dada, the legendary anti-establishment art and design movement, was being given major-event treatment in the high temple of establishment culture. Would all that it represented be reduced to just another quaint historical style, no more or less threatening today than other once radical movements that have been turned into popular tropes and mass commodities? It's as if the original Sex Pistols, with Sid Vicious in tow, were to play Carnegie Hall. Dada was rebellion incarnate—a strident, sardonic reaction to the horrors of World War I. It was anti-art, an attack on the verities held dear by the bourgeois society that had supported the war, and for decades since its introduction in 1918, Dada has been an influence on anti-establishment (and even mainstream) artists and designers.

My qualms notwithstanding, as I walked through the sliding glass doors at the exhibition, it was hard not to be awed by the unprecedented collection of Dada artifacts—posters, handbills, periodicals, prints, collages, paintings, dolls, mar-

ionettes, experimental films—as waves of Dada nonsense music and poetry washed over us from hidden speakers. Iconic works by leading Dadaists, including George Grosz, Hannah Höch, Raoul Hausmann, Tristan Tzara, Kurt Schwitters, Marcel Janco, Max Ernst, and Marcel Duchamp, were assembled as a group for the first and possibly the last time since the movement's heyday in the '20s. Being confronted by so many original pieces that I had known only from books was sheer ecstasy, and I giddily allowed myself to be pulled into the vortex of the movement I had long revered.

I responded audibly, possibly with an *ooh* or *aah*, as I passed from one to the other of the many display cases generously filled with historic ephemera. After one such hyperventilation, Antonelli asked, "What are you feeling?" What an interesting question, I thought, as opposed to, "What do you think of the show?" I paused a few seconds before saying, "It's just so great to see all of these things in one place." Of course, I knew that's not what she meant, nor was it what I was *feeling*. What I was actually feeling, apart from the adrenaline rush of the private tour, was a kind of *déjà vu*—or maybe "Dada vu"—an eerie sense I'd seen it all before.

The exhibition, in fact, makes it palpably evident how Dada has influenced and insinuated itself into contemporary design and illustration. While I hadn't seen all of these original artifacts before, I'd certainly seen their contemporary adaptations many times over. From Paul Rand to David Carson, designers have dipped deeply into this mother lode of 20th-century innovation

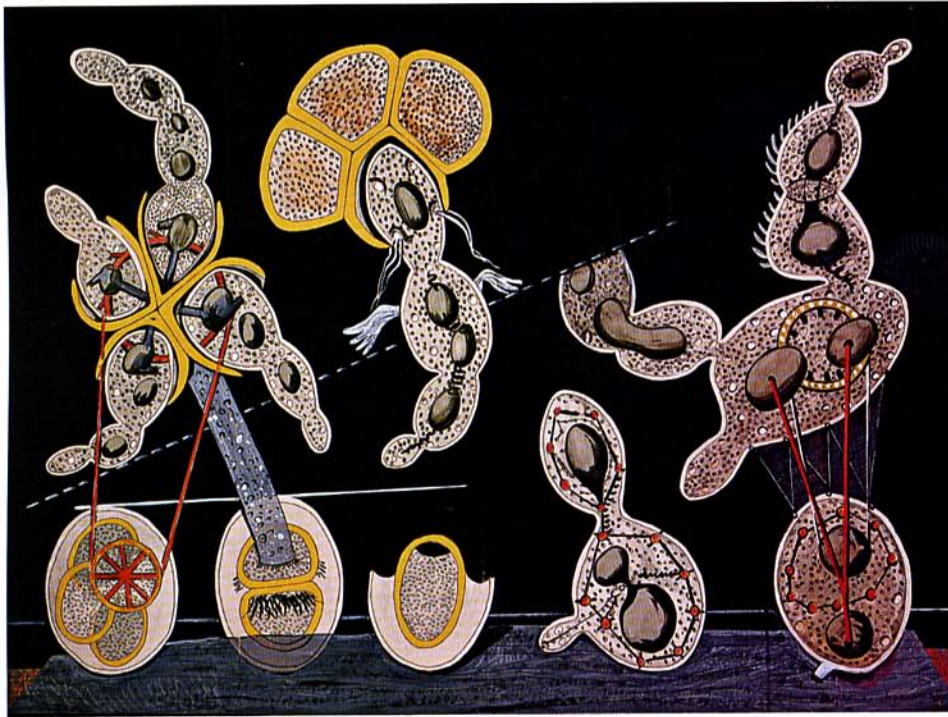


Hannah Höch, *Cut with the Kitchen Knife through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch in Germany*, photomontage and collage with watercolor, 1919–20.

and inspiration—the scrap file to end all scrap files. And at every turn I found Rosetta stones, such as Sophie Taeuber's futuristic marionettes from 1918 that prefigure the current trend in vinyl toys sold at Kid Robot, or Hans Arp's 1923 portfolio of abstract glyphs that clearly anticipate the recent trend in comic computer icons and logos.

Nor is it hard to see the idiosyncratic hand lettering of Saul Steinberg and Ed Fella in Max Ernst's *Large Orthochromatic Wheel That Makes Love to Measure* (1919–20); the early *Emigre* or *Ray Gun* magazines in Francis Picabia's covers for 391 (1917–24) and Kurt Schwitters's *Merz* (1922–26); Sue Coe's raw political satire in Otto Dix's *Memory of the Mirrored Hall in Brussels* (1920); or many of the early *New York Times* Op-Ed illustrators in Rudolf Schlichter's *Dada Rooftop Studio* (1920), which looks exactly like most of those conceptual illustrations. In fact, J.C. Soares, the art director responsible for the original look of the Op-Ed page in the early 1970s, called his own design firm Dada Studios.

Dada's legacy provided a license for designers and illustrators who, restricted by aesthetic rules and regulations, broke the grid, eschewed realism, and threw



Max Ernst, *The Gramineous Bicycle Garnished with Bells the Dappled Fire Damps and the Echinoderms Bending the Spine to Look for Caresses*, gouache and ink on chromolithographic art, 1919–20.

type willy-nilly on a page. Dada was a justification to be rowdy: I remember a young designer once arrogantly telling me, “I’m going to do the ‘Dada’ thing and make a mess on the page.” For him, historical Dada was a useful model for how to be acceptably anarchic and safely ironic.

Yet after seeing the real things displayed so pristinely, I felt a bit depressed thinking what little new and inventive work we’ve created as 21st-century designers and illustrators. While I accept that all art builds on previous art, Dada was a more unprecedented movement than most, and its impact on contemporary practice is more lasting. At this exhibition, I couldn’t help musing on the reinvention of the Dada wheel: Everywhere I turn today I see another painting, another collage, and especially, another faux typographic concoction that recall their authentic Dada forebears.

At one point, Spiegelman wondered aloud, “What did all this look like in 1920?” We see all this stuff through today’s eyes, but back then the Dadaists were cultural

pariahs, angry men and women incensed over the catastrophe of World War I and the growing power of Big Business. The authorities in Weimar Germany routinely closed down their exhibitions and arrested some of their members—Grosz and John Heartfield were tried for blasphemy against the military in a German court. In 1936, the Nazis labeled Expressionists and Dadaists “degenerate artists” and humiliatingly hung their confiscated work in “Degenerate Art” exhibitions (later selling them to make money for the regime). Yet here in their air-conditioned, well-guarded MoMA settings, these “anti-masterpieces” were celebrated as the gold standard of modern art.

The immaculate MoMA installation made me feel uncomfortably detached from the unbridled nature of the Dada movement. I’d seen photographs of the Berlin Dadas in their messy surrounds; that rawness was conspicuously absent from the beautifully mounted show in New York. As we were entering the last gallery devoted to New York Dada, Spiegelman quoted Franz Kafka

on Dada in the 1920s that seemed to sum up this transition from raw to cooked: “Panthers broke into the temple and drank the holy wine. They did the same thing the following year, and so on. Eventually it was incorporated into the ceremony.”

This exhibition was perhaps the last stage of the “ceremony.” If these influential works haven’t already been co-opted by those who have copied and cannibalized them, they have now been forever transformed in the MoMA reliquary from anti-art to art, unacceptable to embraceable. By the time I came across the once infamous R. Mutt urinal, titled *Fountain*, along with the original copy of Duchamp’s magazine *Blind Man*, in which he gives his rationale for the work, I felt that Dada had become classic art—establishment to the core.

But then something unexpected happened. As I neared the end of the exhibition, I heard a curious sound emanating from the adjacent gallery. It wasn’t the din of Dada poetry or music that had been following us, but rather, someone speaking. As I peered around the wall of the New York Dada room into the Berlin Dada room, I saw 15 or so children about five or six years old sitting in front of a display of Hannah Höch’s Dada rag dolls, being lectured to by a man in a wheelchair. With their little notebooks in their laps, they sat in almost hypnotic reverence. A few adults looked on as the disabled docent explained why Dada was such a significant art movement—and still is—and urged them to go back, presumably to their urban summer camp, and make art—lots of art—art of every kind. For these kids, Dada would be an incentive to creative freedom.

It was a redemptive moment. A Dada moment. **P**