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| Cabaret Voltaire |
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| The Cabaret Voltaire was the original breeding ground of Zürich’s Dada movement. The cabaret became notorious for performances united by two complementary aims: to protest the madness of the war by depicting madness in sharp relief, and to return art to its primordial origins through an anti-rational embracing of primitivist forms of expression. |
| File: Cabaret Voltaire, Zürich.pdf  Cabaret Voltaire, Zürich, 1935 Copyright: Kunsthaus Zürich and International Dada Archives  The Cabaret Voltaire, housed within the Holländische Meierei bar at Spiegelgasse 1, in Zürich’s Niederdorf district, was the original breeding ground for the Zürich Dada movement. Co-founded in February 1916 by the German writer and performer Hugo Ball, and his lover and future wife, professional cabaret singer and poet Emmy Hennings, the venue was conceived as an “artists’ local” [künstlerkneipe] and promoted as a “centre for artistic entertainment.” Its name, however, bespoke a more political objective: so-called after the eighteenth-century Enlightenment philosopher and aggressive social reformer, Voltaire, who, in his satirical novel *Candide,* derided the religious and philosophical optimism of the time. The cabaret was thus envisioned by Ball as a modern “Candide,” or stage from which to protest positive appraisals of the unfolding first world war and the ostensibly rational society that had produced it. On its opening night, 5 February 1916, the cabaret drew future Dadaists as well as core cabaret performers Marcel Janco, Tristan Tzara, and Hans/Jean Arp, who were soon joined by Richard Huelsenbeck at Ball’s behest.  The cabaret became notorious for chaotic and brutal performances which, although stylistically diverse, were united by two basic, complementary aims: to protest the madness of the war and the society engaged in it by depicting madness in sharp relief, and to return art to its primordial origins through an anti-rational embracing of ‘primitivist’ forms of expression. Modelled on prototypes in Berlin and Munich, the cabaret initially operated as a traditional variety theatre, offering an eclectic mix of modernist and popular entertainment. Yet following Huelsenbeck’s arrival, it took on an increasingly anarchic tone, evolving rapidly into the “gladiatorial” arena through which the incipient Dada group enacted its attack upon Western norms and culture. In July 1916, after a rigorous five months, the cabaret closed it doors, due in part to diminishing revenue at the bar, but largely to the exhaustion of its performers. In March 1917, the Dada group embarked upon a second phase of activity at the Galerie Dada (formerly, the Galerie Corray) at Bahnhofstrasse 19.  Experimental forms of performance at the Cabaret Voltaire included “bruitist” and “simultaneous” poems, premised on the Futurist principles of bruitisme [“noise-music”] and simultaneity (inherited from Cubism); abstract or phonetic “sound” poems rooted in Wassily Kandinsky’s spiritually inflected theory of abstraction; and primitivist performances described as “chants nègres,” featuring poems composed in an imaginary, pseudo-African language set to rhythmic “negro” drumming and accompanied by “primitive” masks and costumes.  File: Cabaret Voltaire.pdf  Marcel Janco, *Cabaret Voltaire*, 1916 (photograph of a lost work) Copyright: © ADAGP, Paris, and DACS, London 2003. Kunsthaus Zürich |
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