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| Dada and Dance |
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| Dada’s origins on neutral ground in Zurich during the First World War were less rooted in a new style of art than in an effort to provoke a passive world into action. Performance and bodily expression were core modes of expression for the majority of the movement’s members, connecting Dada to dance in its earliest manifestations. Dada founders Hugo Ball and Emmy Hennings had been a part of a circle in Munich guided by Vasily Kandinsky’s theatrical ideas on the interconnectedness of colour, music and dance. Once in Zurich, Ball created a fitting metaphor for Dada performance in his 1916 poem ‘Totentanz’ (‘Dance of Death’), which frames the war’s dehumanisation as a *danse macabre*. As the First World War exposed the human expense of nationalist propaganda, political manoeuvring, and greed, Zurich Dada performers toppled conventions of thought, language, and behaviour, thereby staging a mimicry of their war-compromised time and seeking an alternate expression of humanity and intelligence. Variously associated with trance, ritual, mime, and the rhythms of popular entertainment, dance represented for Dada authentic and unmediated expression. Dadaists also made early contact with the free dance movement around Rudolf Laban and Mary Wigman, who theorised movement as the connector of soul-spirit-body and the cosmos. Dada Zurich used the performance of bodily humour, grotesque miming, and expressive dance as forms of resistance in the face of bourgeois propriety amid the ongoing carnage of the First World War. Following the war, Dada artists in Berlin, Paris and New York continued to employ dance in the service of political subversion and non-discursive intelligence. |
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Dada and the New Dance In 1911 Rudolf Laban opened a school of art and movement within the utopian community at Monte Verità in Switzerland. There, he and his followers developed the theories and notation for a new dance. Modern dance pioneer Mary Wigman and Dadaists Sophie Taeuber and Hans Arp were among those drawn to Laban’s school on the mountain. Taeuber trained extensively in dance under Laban and performed with the group in Zurich. When Laban opened a Zurich-based school of dance in 1917, many Dada artists became both personally and artistically involved with Laban’s circle. In an assertion of dance’s autonomy from the other arts and of its role as the unifier of emotion, intellect, and spirit, Laban and Wigman’s dancers often performed in masks to the spare sounds of percussion, thus invoking the Dionysian associations of the ecstatic and grotesque. The impact on Zurich Dada performance can be seen in repeated Dada descriptions of masks, a gong beat, and the direct and primitive expression of dance. Bypassing the corrupt discourses of language and logic, the theories of the new dance offered Dada access to an authentic expression of the self in connection with nature. Dance in Zurich, Berlin, and Paris Dada An anonymous photograph of Sophie Taeuber as dancer in full body costume and mask provides the only image of Dada dance in Zurich; yet dance played a role in the Cabaret Voltaire’s first event on February 5, 1916, where Tristan Tzara wiggled his behind and Emmy Hennings perform ‘simply demanded that their wearers start to move in a tragic-absurd dance.’ During five months of near-nightly performances, absurd costuming, masks, and puppets were used for their allegorical and mimetic potential. After the closure of the Cabaret, the opening of Galerie Dada in March, 1917 included fully choreographed ‘Abstract Dances’ by Taeuber to the sounds of Ball’s poems. At least seven more Dada soirées followed, including one for which Ball rehearsed five Laban school dancers in masks and caftans for a geometric dance of ‘studied, deformed ugliness’. Mary Wigman gave a performance for Dada artists in 1918, and in a special issue of *Der Zeltweg* in October 1919 her photograph shares the page with Dada Tristan Tzara’s ‘Carnage Abracadabrant’. As if in confirmation of the centrality of dance to Zurich dada, the key event of the group’s final soirée on April 9, 1919, was Sophie Taeuber’s *Noir Kakadu*, a dance with abstract sets by Hans Richter and Hans Arp.  Dada’s continuation in Berlin, Paris, Cologne, Hanover and New York has left fewer records of formal dance events, but Dada continued to incorporate the body as an insubordinate provocateur. At Berlin’s ‘First Dada Evening’ on April 2, 1918, George Grosz improvised a syncopated jazz dance. In another matinée, the cabaret performer Valeska Gert, a sheaf of asparagus in her arms, danced and mimed to the sounds of Grosz and Walter Mehring battling on a typewriter and sewing machine; and Gerhard Preiss’ mimed invention known as the ‘Dada-Trott’ was photographed for *Der Dada* 3 in 1920. Among the Berlin Dadaists, Raoul Hausmann was most formally experimenting through dance. In the early 1920s, Hausmann performed a series of his own dances and discussed dance in writings for *De Stijl* and *Der Sturm*. Even as a poet, he considered the body’s movement primary over language; it was for him the form and articulation of relations in space. In Paris, a more formal collaboration was forged by Francis Picabia when he signed on to write the scenario for the 1924 Ballets Suédois production *Relâche* and accompanying *Entr’Acte,* an absurdly Dadaist anti-ballet and film. After the First World War, the image and idea of dance appear often as a subject or signifier in Dada art. In Berlin, for example, Hannah Höch’s 1919-20 photocollage, *Cut with a Kitchen Knife Through The Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch in Germany,* visually generates a chaotic commentary on Weimar culture and politics from the centrally placed headless body of dancer Niddy Impkoven. Here and elsewhere in Dada works, the connective figure of the dancer initiates provocative visual correspondences, as both a citation and mimicry of popular entertainment, consumer culture and desire, gender and the new woman, or colonial fantasies of primitivism.  Image: Puppet.jpg  Figure Emily Hennings with Puppet  <http://40.media.tumblr.com/tumblr_mbd55stihQ1r9j6pro1_1280.jpg>  Image: Taeuber.jpg  Figure Sophie Taeuber  <http://36.media.tumblr.com/tumblr_lxuphm6Ga61r9j6pro1_500.jpg>  Video: [no file, just link]  Figure Mary Wigman. *Hexentanz (Witch dance)*. Version 2. 1926 (video).  <http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2012/inventingabstraction/?work=238>  Video: [no file, just link]  Figure Rudolf Laban (video of dancers)  <http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2012/inventingabstraction/?work=237>  Image: Picabia.jpg  Figure *Dancers at the Spring,* 1912.  <http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=80659> |
| Further reading:  Hugo, B. (1996) *Flight out of Time: A Dada Diary.* Edited by John Elderfield. Berkeley: University of California Press.  Macel, C. and E. Lavigne, eds. (2011) *Danser sa vie: Art et danse de 1900 à nos jours.* Paris: Éditions du Centre Pompidou.  Hemus, R. (2009) *Dada’s Women*. New Haven: Yale University Press.  Melzer, A. (1994) *Dada and Surrealist Performance*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.  Motherwell, R., ed. (1981) *The* *Dada Painters and Poets*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.  International Dada Archive, University of Iowa [http://sdrc.lib.uiowa.edu/dada](http://sdrc.lib.uiowa.edu/dada/index.html)  Museum of Modern Art, Interactive Dada Exhibition, 2006 <http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2006/dada>  National Gallery of Art, Interactive Dada Exhibition, 2006 <http://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/2006/dada/artwork/index-main.shtm>  DADA Companion <http://www.dada-companion.com/>  https://www.nationalgalleries.org/collection/artist-rooms/august-sander/20680 |