

Wittenborn, Schultz, Inc., 38 E. 57 St., New York 1951

25¢

DADA MANIFESTO 1949

by

Richard Huelsenbeck

The signers of this manifesto are well aware that the recent venomous attacks on modern art are no accident.

The violence of these attacks stands in direct proportion to the worldwide growth of the totalitarian idea, which makes no secret of its hostility to the spiritual in art or its desire to debase art to the level of slick illustration.

The signers of this manifesto are not political thinkers; but in the matter of art they believe they have something significant to say because of a particular experience that made a lasting impression on them. The experience—Dadaism—occurred many years ago, and it is still too soon to foresee all its possible reverberations.

Dadaism was founded in Zurich in 1916 (see the note at the end of this manifesto). As an active movement it has long since gone the way of all things. Its principles, however, are still alive, and have demonstrated their vitality, although many of the founders, charter members and original supporters are dead.

This strange, surprising vitality has convinced the signers of this manifesto that the experience of Dadaism and its innermost creative principle endowed them (and others) with a special insight into the situation of modern art.

And because the creative principle in Dadaism has survived, we are at last in a position to pass fair judgment on Dadaism itself.

The more we contemplate, the more evident it becomes that the creative principle developed in Dadaism is identical with the principle of modern art. Dadaism and modern art are one in their essential presuppositions; consequently the misunderstandings that arise in connection with modern art are identical with the misunderstandings that have pursued Dadaism since its founding in 1916.

The signers of this manifesto believe, therefore, that if we can dispel the widespread misapprehensions about Dadaism, we shall have rendered an appreciable service to modern art in its struggle against popularization and sentimentalization. It is difficult to sum up the innumerable expressions of hostility to Dadaism in a few words. Nevertheless, at the risk of one more misunderstanding, we shall attempt a brief formulation; the misunderstanding from which Dadaism suffered is a chronic disease that still poisons the world. In its essence it can be defined as the inability of a rationalized epoch and of rationalized men to see the positive side of an irrational movement.

Over and over again, the drumming, shouting and dancing, the striving to *épater le bourgeois*, have been represented as the chief characteristics of Dadaism. The riots provoked by Dadaism in Berlin and Paris, the revolutionary atmosphere surrounding the movement, its wholesale attacks on everything, led critics to believe that its sole aim was to destroy all art and all the blessings of culture. The early Dada manifestoes, in which nonsense was mixed with earnestness, seemed to justify this negative attitude.

In the considered opinion of the signers of this manifesto, Dada had both destructive and constructive sides. The destructive aspect is obvious and requires no further description; the constructive aspect is not so easily discernible. It lies hidden beneath the manifest destructivism and must be elucidated in some detail if it is to be understood.

To forestall any possible misunderstanding, the signers of this manifesto wish to state that this document is not the confession of a superannuated criminal who has espoused the principles of the YMCA. Nor should it be identified with the protestations of a lady of easy virtue who takes up the Victorian way of life at the end of her career. This manifesto is rather a free declaration of men who have recognized the need for a constructive movement and discovered to their joy that they have never been far removed from such a movement. The worst that could be said is that the world has indeed come to a sorry pass if even the Dadaists feel it necessary to stress the positive and constructive aspect of their nature and principles.

The positive element in Dadaism is not a mere accident deriving from the structure of the mind (the positive always turns up when the negative goes out the door); on the contrary, Dadaism was positive and pursued positive aims from the very beginning of its existence. If this positive element has always been disregarded, any

innate nastiness in Dadaism is less to blame than the generally negative, critical and cynical attitude of our time, which drives people to project their own vileness into persons, things and opinions around them. In other words, we believe that the neurotic conflict of our time, that manifests itself in a generally negative, unspiritual, and brutal attitude, discovered a whipping boy in Dadaism.

But let us consider the credit side of Dadaism. In this credit column stands first of all the uncontested fact that Dadaism became the father and grandfather of many artistic and philosophical movements; we can go so far as to say that Dadaism provided us with a precept for life, by expressing the principle that you must attain to the Ultima Thule of self-renunciation before you can find the way back to yourself. The Surrealist movement, founded by André Breton (whose writings should be reread from this angle), is a scion of Dadaism. Surrealism undertook to realize the spiritual aspiration of Dadaism through an artistic direction; it strove for the magical reality which we Dadaists first disclosed in our constructions, collages, writings, and in the dances at the Cabaret Voltaire. As the philosophical consequences of Dadaism represented a positive reaction to a long series of negativistic, neurotic and aggressive manifestations, Dada was and is the termination and rejection of everything that had been said by Rimbaud, Strindberg, Ibsen, Nietzsche and others. Unconsciously or semi-consciously, Dadaism anticipated many formulations that are now current—Sartre's Existentialism for example. It is no accident that Sartre calls himself "the Nouveau Dada." But we believe that there is an essential difference between Dadaism and Existentialism. Existentialism is essentially negative, whereas Dada lived its extreme despair, expressed it in art, and in this "participation créatrice" found a therapy for itself.

The work of the Dadaists asks those men who have conquered the negative within themselves to band together for constructive deeds. The work of the Dadaists, we firmly believe, makes it clear that the goal of Dadaism was human development, towards spirituality and freedom. This is particularly expressed in the Dadaist rejection of totalitarian solutions to the present conflicts of mankind. The signers of this manifesto wish here to repeat that they dissociate themselves radically and permanently from all those who either seek such solutions or who support a party or society that stands for such solutions. For Dadaists, the State cannot be the ruler of man; it is man who must rule the State.

Adolf Hitler's rage against the Dadaists proves that they were on the right path. He mentions them in *Mein Kampf*. The fact that in Russia art is compelled to dedicate itself to patriotic illustration clearly shows on what side Dadaism stood and where modern art must stand. Consciously or unconsciously, the adversaries of modern art, no less than the enemies of Dadaism, are totalitarian types. On the positive side of Dadaism stands its courage; it is as famed for the baldness of its formulations as for the force of its convictions.

The force and integrity of the Dadaist position make it easy for the signers of this manifesto to say once again that they condemn the use of art as an instrument of propaganda. Art is spiritual and the first characteristic of the spiritual is freedom. Creative expression is an expression of man's most authentic personality, identical with the divine act of creation. It is therefore a blasphemy to make art dependent on the State or to debase it by compelling it to illustrate misunderstood political theories. Art is spirit and as such can accept no master, neither the aristocrat nor the proletarian. It can bow to one master alone, and that master is the great spirit of the universe.

Yet precisely because art is spirit, it has the mission to expose the unspiritual; this it does in its own symbolic language. In this symbolic language, in its close relationship to the archetypes of mankind, in the representation of the creative tension between forms and colors, in the restoration of the original feeling of space and direction in the aesthetic and ethical sense, Dadaists see the essence of all artistic activity.

For Dadaists, art has a lofty, solemn mission, and nothing must be allowed to divert it from its eternal and essential aims. The signers of this manifesto therefore

repeat that the value-giving function of art is the purpose and end of all human activity, and that this mission must be subordinated neither to politics, to social considerations, to friendship, nor to death. Returning to the positive in Dadaism, it is perhaps most evident of all in the lives of the individual Dadaists since the closing of the Café Voltaire.

Hugo Ball and Emmy Hennings became mystics soon after their departure from Zurich. Ball wrote his famous book: *Die Flucht aus der Zeit* (*Flight from Time*) (1927). It was a work far in advance of its time, and even at that early date Ball rejected all totalitarian solutions. In *Das Byzantinische Christentum* (*Byzantine Christianity*), Ball demanded a return to a spiritual attitude, and attacked materialism, machine worship, and overestimation of mass organization. Ball came out for spiritual individualism; this alone he believed could lead to new values, restore peace, and create a new world. Emmy Hennings, who first influenced Ball in many ways, wrote magnificent poems and books, demonstrating her great love for the spiritual in man and art.

Hans Arp and Sophie Taeuber agreed from the very beginning of the Dada movement that art had to be freed from illustration and imitation and carried back to its spiritual sources. They worked on constructions, collages and reliefs which today bear witness to a brilliant anticipation of modern directions in art. Eggeling, van Doesburg and Richter—to mention only a few—revealed in their works not only their joy in Dadaism, but also an ability to say positive, constructive, direction-giving things. In his paintings and objects the legendary Marcel Duchamp, who loved and championed Dadaism from the first, showed more than anyone else in our time the influence of Dada's turn from the cynical to the positive.

The development of Max Ernst, who was one of the first Dadaists and who later, along with Breton and Tzara, founded Surrealism, clearly reveals the constructive side of Dadaism.

In his *Phantastische Gebete* (*Fantastic Prayers*), in his writings on Dadaism and in other verse and prose works, Richard Huelsenbeck (now Charles R. Hulbeck) fought for the spiritual concept and the establishment of a new world of values in opposition to the old chaos and disintegration. Like Ball, he found in certain psychoanalytical works an intimate *rapproch* with his own ideas and with the requirements resulting from the demise of Dadaism. With Ball, Carl Jung and others, he stood for the restoration of man by the intellect, against the disintegration of friendship, human relations and society.

The signers of this *Dada Manifesto 1949* wish (in the firm belief that it is the last of all Dada manifestoes) to stress once more their belief that the problem of Dadaism is identical not only with the problem of modern art, but with the problem of mankind in our time and perhaps in all times. They further believe that the small group of Dadaists in the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich in 1916 were, more than any other men of our day, seized with despair at the evil of the times and overcame this despair, theoretically as well as practically, by setting up certain principles relevant both to the situation of art and the situation of the human community. Previous Dada manifestoes have been documents of accusation. This last Dada manifesto is a document of transcendence.

⊕

Note

For reasons of historical accuracy, the undersigned consider it necessary to state that Dadaism was not founded by Tristan Tzara at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich. It is self-evident that Dadaism could not be invented by one man, and that all assertions to this effect are therefore false. Dadaism was a child of chance. The undersigned hereby state that the "discovery" of Dadaism was truthfully and correctly described by Richard Huelsenbeck in his book *En avant Dada* (published by Steegemann, Hanover, Germany, in 1920) and published in English in volume 8 of "The Documents of Modern Art": The Dada Painters and Poets.

1. This manifesto was written by Huelsenbeck (Dr. Charles R. Hulbeck) in March, 1949.