



Dada Zurich

Humor and irony were their preferred means of expression. To this day, they are regarded as chaotic, irrational and steeped in legend. The artists belonging to the long misunderstood art movement known as Dadaism or Dada. During the First World War, Dadaists brought turmoil and disorder to Zurich and caused an uproar. But something happened that the upright Swiss citizens did not consider possible: from its base in Zurich, the Dada art movement conquered the world. In 2016, it returns to its birthplace to celebrate its centenary.

→ zuerich.com/dada

DADA – Zurich Conquers the World Stage

Zurich in 1916 – a Place of Exile

Why did the Dada movement form in Zurich a century ago? In 1916, modern artists regarded the city by the lake as bourgeois and conservative. So how was it that they found themselves in Zurich of all places? At the beginning of the 20th century, the whole of Europe was torn by war, hunger and death. Zurich seemed like a live-saving insular haven. And not just for the Dadaists. Other artists, too, such as Thomas Mann, James Joyce and Stefan Zweig, as well as economic migrants, political critics and intellectuals found exile in the City on the Limmat. Through until the end of the Second World War, Zurich was one of the most important emigrant centers in Europe. Here, publishing companies were established and significant exile literature was produced under very difficult circumstances.

What Does Dada Mean?

The origin of the rather bizarre name, “Dada”, is enshrouded in legend. One popular theory is that one of the Dadaists simply picked “dada” – the French word for “hobbyhorse” – at random while leafing through a German-French dictionary. Another version claims that the name derives from the Russian word “da”, meaning “yes”. However the group got its name, nowadays Dada stands for modern, mystical and bizarre art. The Dadaists were the first slam poets, collage artists, performers and creative actionists of the 20th century.

The “Who’s Who” of Dada

Hugo Ball, a German dramatist from Munich, was the driving force behind Dada. With his future wife, Emmy Hennings, he rented a room at the Meierei bar at Spiegelgasse 1, in Zurich’s Niederdorf quarter. There, on the upper floor, they ran a kind of café-club for artists called the Cabaret Voltaire, which in recent years was revived and exists again today. Emmy Hennings sang chansons, while Hugo Ball accompanied her on the piano. On the evening of the opening, they were joined by Hans (also known as Jean) Arp from France, Sophie Taeuber from Davos – incidentally, the only Swiss in the group –, and Tristan Tzara and Marcel Janco from Romania; a week later, Richard Huelsenbeck arrived from Berlin. *Further information in the Appendix

What Was Dada’s Aim?

The First World War and the great paradigm shift in the fields of economy, philosophy, art, science and politics left their mark on the Dadaists. Hugo Ball and Emmy Hennings had lost friends and relatives in the war and humanity was facing disaster. The Dadaists protested against the World War, hierarchies and traditional values, and prized nonsense and irrationality. They expressed this in manifestos, in sound and simultaneous poetry, and later in striking collage compositions, sculptures and paintings. Dadaism waged war on expressionism and was the precursor of Surrealism.

Cabaret Voltaire

On February 5, 1916, Hugo Ball opened the Cabaret Voltaire at Spiegelgasse 1 in Zurich. It is quite possible that the place was named after the great French enlightener and philosopher in order to communicate their stance of tolerance. During his time of exile, Lenin lived just a few houses away at Spiegelgasse 14. In those days, the “Niederdorf” – as this now charming part of the Old Town is known – was rather notorious. At the Cabaret Voltaire, all artists and guests were welcome who were open for new things and wanted to become actively involved. Initially, Tristan Tzara, Marcel Janco and later Richard Huelsenbeck were simply guests, but before long they were contributing their own ideas and notions. Soon after, the Dada art movement was founded. Dada rejected Classicism and Realism, and distanced itself above all from everything that was bourgeois and conventional. Hugo Ball wanted to flood the darkness of the First World War with light and create new things. This gave rise to reports about Russian dance and music events with balalaika orchestras and male choirs, and readings of manifestos, polemics and sound poems.

Too Scandalous for Zurich

The Dadaists were not really welcome in Zurich; the dandies and bohemians were too wild, provocative and unfathomable. And the Dadaists had no intention of moderating this impression. They drew attention to themselves by means of targeted false reports, press hoaxes and untruths. For example, they reported about a pistol duel on the Rehalp hill in Zurich, which never actually happened. They marched into taverns in Zurich’s Old Town and shouted “Dada!” at the top of their voices – causing many shocked guests to drop their spoons in their soup. Moreover, they played music and gave speeches at a volume that was unheard of in the conservative Zurich of the time. In line with the modern-day PR adage, “bad news is good news”, they got everybody talking about them and used an early form of marketing to further their cause.

The Dada Virus Spreads

Before long, thanks to its targeted communication and advertising campaigns, Dada has developed into a pan-European group. In 1921, Trista Tzara launched Paris Dada in collaboration with André Breton. Following a speech by Richard Huelsenbeck in Berlin in 1918, Hannah Höch, Raoul Hausmann, Johannes Baader, George Grosz and many others joined Dada. Kurt Schwitters, who was later to initiate the Merz movement in Hannover, was also inspired by him. Together with Raoul Hausmann, Hannah Höch developed photomontage; Sophie Taeuber had already laid the foundations in Zurich with her collage compositions. In New York – also an exclave for displaced literati, singers and actors – Marcel Duchamp, Francis Picabia and Man Ray got together and subsequently spread the ideas of Dada in the Big Apple.

Dada Today

After 1919, the excitement generated by Dada increasingly fizzled out. Many Dadaists joined up with the Surrealists. Life at Spiegelgasse 1 in Zurich’s Old Town also quietened down. The room on the upper floor of the Meierei still exists today, although in the 1950s it underwent a number of transformations. Over the following years, it was used for a variety of commercial purposes. After the building

was occupied in 2002 in protest against plans to convert it into private luxury apartments, the Cabaret Voltaire was restored to its former use and run as a cultural historical institution.

Zurich Establishments That Have Upheld the Dada Myth to This Day

Cabaret Voltaire

The Cabaret Voltaire is located at Spiegelgasse 1, in a part of Zurich's Old Town known as the "Niederdörfli". Before Hugo Ball opened the Cabaret Voltaire on the upper floor, a bar called the Meierei was already housed there. After the Dadaists, the building experienced several changes of ownership, and in the 1950s the room where the Cabaret Voltaire had been held underwent extensive renovation. In 2002, a group of activists successfully campaigned against the building being turned into luxury apartments, calling for it to continue to exist in line with the Dadaist tradition.

→ cabaretvoltaire.ch

Café Odeon

The Café Odeon is reminiscent of the large Viennese coffee houses. At the beginning of the 20th century, intellectuals, artists and politicians met here. Besides the Dadaists, Albert Einstein and Lenin were regular guests, although whether they had anything to do with each other is not known. What is certain, however, is that the Dadaists met here with Friedrich Glauser, the renowned 20th-century Swiss crime writer.

→ odeon.ch

Terrasse

Directly opposite the Café Odeon is the Café de la Terrasse, these days often simply known as the Terrasse. This was also a popular venue where Dadaists exchanged views with like-minded people.

→ cafe-terrasse.ch

Zunft Haus zur Waag

This guild house was where the first Dada Soirée was held in July 1916, and where Hugo Ball proclaimed: "How does one achieve eternal bliss? By saying dada. How does one become famous? By saying dada. With a noble gesture and delicate propriety. Until one goes crazy. Until one loses consciousness." This quote is still regularly recited at the Cabaret Voltaire. These days, the Zunft Haus zur Waag is particularly renowned for its "Zürcher Geschnetzelte", a traditional dish comprising fried strips of veal served in a creamy sauce.

→ zunft-haus-zur-waag.ch

ZunftHaus zur Meisen

The seventh Dada Soirée was also held in a guild house. The ZunftHaus zur Meisen is a magnificent rococo building situated directly on the River Limmat. These days, thanks to its beautiful banqueting halls, it is a popular venue for weddings and other special events.

→ zunfthaus-zur-meisen.ch

Kaufleuten

The Kaufleuten hosted the eighth Dada Soirée in 1919. It was a legendary evening, apparently attended by 1,000 guests. At the same time, it was the last official event held by the Dadaists in Zurich. Still today, artists from a wide variety of genres convene here. Moreover, the building is a whole work of art in itself, housing an experimental kitchen, club and concert hall.

→ kaufleuten.ch

Appendix

“Who’s Who” of Dada

Generally speaking, the founding members of Dada Zurich are considered to be:

Hugo Ball, a former theater director from Munich, was the initiator of the Cabaret Voltaire and thus automatically, so to speak, the father of the Dadaists. However, he left the movement just a few months later, as he felt that Dadaism was developing in the wrong direction. His initial euphoria for the new, noisy art movement gave way to incomprehension for the – as he described it – increasing nonsense of his Dada colleagues.

Emmy Hennings came to Zurich from Germany with Hugo Ball. She sang chansons and wrote her own poems and books. She left Zurich with Ball to live in Ticino, where the couple fostered a close friendship with Hermann Hesse.

Marcel Janco came to Zurich from Romania to study architecture at the Swiss Federal College of Technology (ETH). He soon became acquainted with Hugo Ball and Emmy Hennings, and co-founded Dada with them. He exhibited his pictures at the Cabaret Voltaire and together with Tristan Tzara and Richard Huelsenbeck performed simultaneous poems in German, French and English, the best known of which is “L’amiral cherche und maison à louer”.

Tristan Tzara, whose real name was Samuel Rosenstock, came to Zurich from Romania, just like Marcel Janco. He quickly became one of the most important advocates and promoters of Dadaism. He wrote for Dada journals and made the movement known in France, Berlin and New York by means of shrewd promotional campaigns.

Richard Huelsenbeck wrote the famous Dada Manifest, which was signed in 1918 by the majority of the movement's protagonists and which spoke out explicitly against Expressionism. As the Dada chronicler, he founded a Dada faction in Berlin together with George Grosz, Raoul Hausmann and others.

Hans (Jean) Arp studied at the Kunstschule in Weimar, Germany, before settling in Weggis, Switzerland, with his father. He was friends with Wassily Kandinsky and very close to the "Der Blaue Reiter" group. While carrying out an assignment for Tristan Tzara, he got to know Hugo Ball, Emmy Hennings, Marcel Janco and Richard Huelsenbeck and founded the Dada movement with them.

Sophie Taeuber-Arp found her way to the Cabaret Voltaire through Hans Arp. After attending Rudolf von Laban's School of Dance and spending several summers living in an artist colony on the Monte Verità in Ascona, she taught textile art at the Zurich Kunstgewerbeschule. She performed cubist dances at the Cabaret Voltaire. In her search for new art forms and materials, she created the first constructive and concrete works of art, and is regarded as the precursor of this genre. Nowadays, her portrait features on the 50 Swiss franc banknote.

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