

reviews



WASHINGTON, DC
Dada: Zurich, Berlin,
Hanover, Cologne,
New York, Paris
National Gallery of Art

Sex, politics, multi-media, installation, word, and performance art created by a network of war-resisting, gender-bending artists on two continents: no, not the latest biennial but the first-ever all-Dada exhibition. Organized by the National Gallery of Art and the Centre Pompidou, “Dada” drew crowds in Paris where it premiered last fall with an astonishing 1,500 objects gridded into 40 cubicles, opening onto a Paris panorama—seen through Duchamp’s *Large Glass*—that nearly trumped the chessboard of white walls and the huge volume of works it concealed.

But don’t fret if you missed “Dada” in France. A more accessible version on view in Washington through May 16, 2006 brings this influential avant-garde movement to life as a tale of six cities and a web of artists responding to the trauma of World War I. Exploding the conventional wisdom that Dadaists intended primarily to shock, the exhibition at the National Gallery re-frames Dada as a morally engaged response to shock, emerging amid the cultural anxieties evoked by machine culture, new

Left: George Grosz and John Heartfield, *The Middle-Class Philistine Heartfield Gone Wild (Electro-Mechanical Tatlin Sculpture)*, 1920 reconstruction of 1920 original.

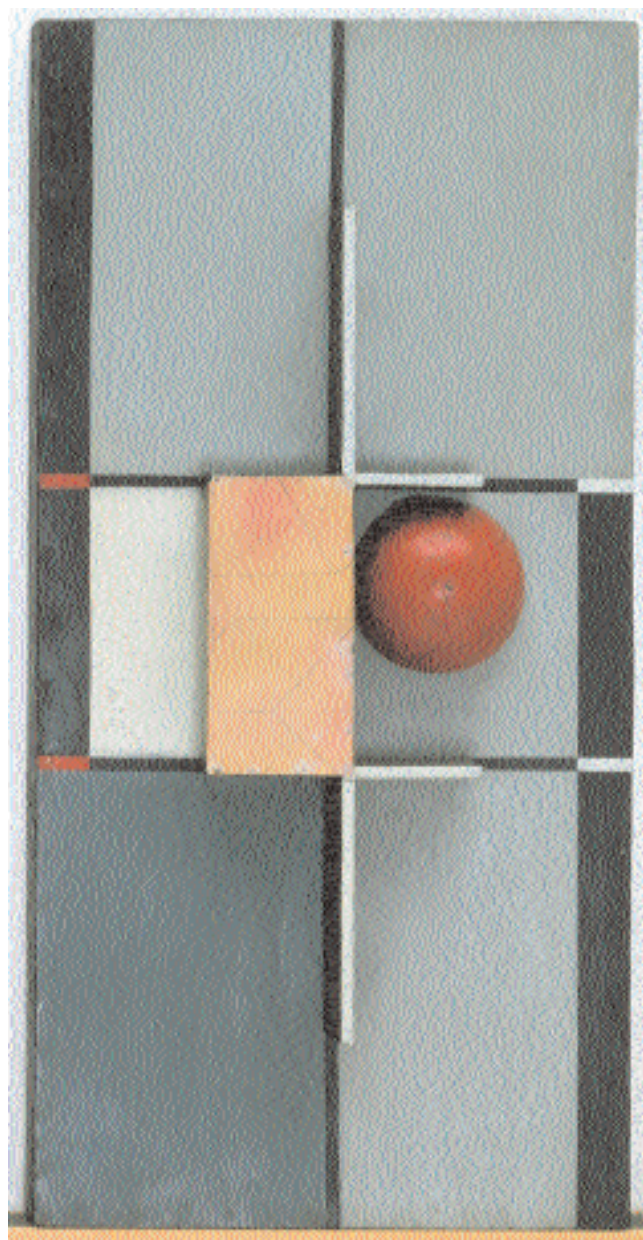
Tailor’s dummy, revolver, doorbell, knife, fork, embroidered insignia, and other objects, 220 x 45 x 45 cm.

Right: Kurt Schwitters, *Merz 1924, 1. Relief with Cross and Sphere*, 1924. Oil, metal ladle, board, wood, and plastic board, 69.1 x 34.4 x 9.3 cm.

war and media technologies, and changing gender roles.

Dada was art that refused to look away. For sculpture, it meant a double assault on the picture, rejecting social illusion (including the vaunted postwar “return to order” in France) and the illusion of the picture plane. While both versions of the exhibition

leave no doubt that Dada laid the foundation for the next century of art, the shock of Dada today is the continuing resonance of its concerns and approaches to art-making. Indeed, it is impossible to imagine modern and contemporary sculpture, from Rauschenberg to Cai Guo-Qiang, without Dada’s precedent.



LEFT: © ESTATE OF GEORGE GROSZ / LICENSED BY VAGA, NY. © 2005 JOHN HEARTFIELD / ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NY/NG BILD-KUNST, BONN. / RIGHT: MICHAEL HERLING. © 2005 KURT SCHWITTERS / ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NY/NG BILD-KUNST, BONN.

Sophie Taeuber, *Military Guards*, 1918. Turned and painted wood and metal joints, 40.5 x 18.5 cm.



The Dada roots of much that is taken for innovation in recent sculpture and performance art are evident in the small army of half-mechanized mannequins, puppets, and sexually ambiguous figures that populates the exhibition. Another surprise is the impact of sculpture by women artists who are more often identified with other media, such as Sophie Taeuber, better known for tapestry weaving, Hannah Höch, known for photomontages of New Women, and the Baroness Elsa von Freitag-Loringhoven, perhaps best known for dressing up and performing a version of her own outrageous self on the streets of Greenwich Village.

If Taeuber's subtle, subversive marionettes, carved "Dada heads," and symmetrical turned wooden bowls were a revelation in their white Paris cube, they truly come into their own against the brilliant mustard walls of the Zurich room at the National Gallery. Sculptural objects such as *Untitled (Chalice)* (1916) and *Untitled (Amphora)* (1917), created with her husband, Hans Arp, take an unprecedented step toward modern abstraction. Before Mondrian, the couple also produced tapestries and a group of "duo-collages" that may be the first rigorous grids. These collaborations, as well as some of Arp's individual works, reflect the influence of Taeuber's expertise as a professor of textile and decorative arts. Her interests in primitivism and performance, shared with other Zurich-based Dada pioneers, are evident in her Northwest Indian or Oceanic-influenced Dada heads, photographs of her Café Voltaire costumes and masks evoking Hopi kachina dolls, and in her cartoon-y yet severe marionettes with symmetrical bodies and abstract painted faces, such as *Dr. Komplex*, *Freud Analyticus*, and

the fairy *Urbido*, positioned to perform in a puppet theater with visibility from all sides.

Hannah Höch also drew on decorative and "domestic" arts to more explicitly confront new ambiguities of female identity. Her rarely seen, strangely sexualized dolls, with enlarged nipples sewn on the outside of their clothes, are positioned within a re-creation of the 1920 Berlin Dada Fair, where a reconstituted version of John Heartfield's and Rudolph Schlichter's pig-headed, uniformed *Prussian Angel* hovers above. The exhibition makes clear that neither women nor men held a patent on modern gender confusion—and that Duchamp and Man Ray were not the only Dada artists interested in how machines affect the body. The partially mechanized figures created by so many of the Dadaists seem to reflect the trauma of the "new man," as survivor and/or witness to the devastation of 10 million killed and 20 million wounded.

The postwar "crisis of memory" comes into play in Kurt Schwitters's sensational *Merzbau* (1919–37), the sculptural highlight of the exhibition and certainly the largest three-dimensional work. Arguably the first site-specific installation, it was created gradually within Schwitters's

home and never open to the public. In an astonishing feat of artistic "channeling," a portion of the *Merzbau* has been evoked in the NGA's Hannover gallery by sculptor Tomas Rivas, who began by making a full-scale cardboard mock-up based on photographs. The cathedral-like memorial—complete with relics, many collected without consent from Schwitters's friends—invites meditation on architecture in the context of Dadaist interest in the past, and on the relationship of architecture to memory.

The architecture of the exhibition itself as an art form invites attention—self-consciously in the Pompidou's effort to reflect and reveal Dada in its chessboard construction, and more subtly at the National Gallery. It is clear that the ambition of the Paris design was to offer a Dada experience: visitors were invited to pursue different avenues at will or at random through the grid of 40 white cubicles bordered by a "great gallery of writing" and a parallel "corridor of sounds." Some of the cubes were devoted to single or paired artists, others to signature Dada themes such as luck and chance, and others to Dada events. The approach aimed to be simultaneously "chronological, thematic, monographic, or geographical...a kind of braid permitting (visi-

tors) to make links between the various "cells." But in offering so many potential threads to follow through its maze, "Dada" at the Pompidou risked being conceptual at a cost, its effort to contain the huge volume of objects and texts within a Dada construct seeming to conceal as much as it revealed.

According to NGA curator Leah Dickerman, Dada began with a dynamic web of networks, contacts, and communication—as did the exhibition itself, which she conceived in 2001. Her thesis, that Dada represents a profoundly historical and moral response to World War I, sets up inevitable comparisons between the shell-shock of that era and current post-9/11 global anxieties. From an entrance film looping black and white footage of horses in gas masks facing brutal modern weapons to the placement of more than 400 works in multimedia galleries themed (and color coded) according to the six major centers where Dada flourished, the exhibition design at the NGA presents both Dada's context and its unmistakable contemporary resonance. "The Dadaist notion that art might be assembled from the stuff of modern life is so foundational for the next century that we have to struggle to recognize its historical novelty," said Dickerman. But this exhibition makes it impossible to overlook Dada's impact, from Hans Arp's wood reliefs to Richard Tuttle's early work at the Whitney this winter, from Man Ray's 1920 work *Obstruction* (63 coat hangers) to Dan Steinhilber's *Untitled, 2002* (1,062 hangers) recently acquired by the Hirshhorn.

André Breton, near the end of his life, said "Fundamentally, since Dada, we have done nothing new." This brilliant, long overdue re-evaluation of international Dada proves Breton's point—or at least, sets the terms for any continuing debate.

—Cathryn Keller