

Richard Huelsenbeck, “Dadaist Manifesto” (1918)

Abstract

The author and physician Richard Huelsenbeck (1892-1974) went to Switzerland as a conscientious objector during the First World War. In Zurich, he was involved in the Cabaret Voltaire and in 1916 became one of the co-founders of the Dada movement, which rebelled against the contemporary art scene, which it perceived as conventional and bourgeois. After his return to Germany, Huelsenbeck went to Berlin, where he wrote this “Dadaist Manifesto” in 1918, which was signed by most artists who considered themselves part of this movement. Criticizing Expressionism, Huelsenbeck goes on to distinguish the Dada movement from it and define its characteristics in the various art forms.

Source

Dadaist Manifesto

Art, in its production and direction, depends on the time in which it lives, and artists are creatures of their epoch. The highest art will be one in which the thousandfold issues of the day are revealed in its consciousness, an art which allows itself to be noticeably shattered by last week’s explosions, which is forever trying to collect itself after the shock of recent days. The best and most challenging artists will be those who every hour snatch the tatters of their bodies out of the turbulent whirl of life, who, with bleeding hands and hearts, hold fast to the intelligence of their time.

Has Expressionism fulfilled our expectations of such an art, which should be a measure of our most vital concerns?

No! No! No!

Have the Expressionists fulfilled our expectations of an art that burns the essence of life into our flesh?

No! No! No!

Under the pretext of turning inward, the Expressionists in literature and painting have banded together into a generation which even now is longingly expecting its historical validation and is campaigning for honorable bourgeois recognition. On the pretext of cultivating souls, they have, in their opposition to naturalism, found their way back to the abstract, emotional gestures which presuppose a comfortable life free from content or motivation. The stages are full of kings, poets, and all sorts of Faustian types; the theory of a melioristic world-philosophy, whose child-like, psychologically naive manner remains significant for a full critical understanding of Expressionism, haunts idle heads. A hatred of the press, hatred of advertising, hatred of sensations bespeaks people for whom an armchair is more important than the noise of the street, and who even make being swindled by every small-time profiteer into a virtue. That sentimental resistance to the times, which are neither better nor worse, neither more reactionary nor more revolutionary than any other times, that feeble opposition, which sidles up to prayers and incense when it does not prefer to make paper cannons out of Attic iambs—these are traits of a youth who never knew how to be young. Expressionism, discovered abroad and—true to style—transformed in Germany into a fat idler with hope of a good pension, has nothing in common with the efforts of active men. The signers of this manifesto have, under the battle cry

DADA!!!!

assembled together to put forward a new art, from which they expect the realization of new ideals. What then is DADAISM?

The word Dada symbolizes the most primitive relation to the surrounding reality; with Dadaism a new reality comes into its own. Life appears as a simultaneous whirl of noises, colors, and spiritual rhythms, which Dada takes unflinchingly into its art, with all the spectacular screams and fevers of its feisty pragmatic attitude and with all its brutal reality. This is the sharp dividing line separating Dadaism from all artistic directions up until now and particularly from FUTURISM, which not long ago certain weak minds took to be a new version of impressionist realization. By tearing to pieces all the platitudes of ethics, culture, and inwardness, which are merely cloaks for weak muscles, Dadaism has for the first time ceased to take an aesthetic position toward life.

the BRUITIST poem

represents a streetcar as it is, the essence of the streetcar with the pensioner Schulze yawning and the brakes screeching.

the SIMULTANEIST poem

teaches a sense of all things in mad, chaotic pursuit of one another; while Herr Schulze is reading, the Balkan Express crosses the bridge at Nish, a pig squeals in Butcher Nuttke's cellar.

the STATIC poem

makes words into individuals. [...] The word Dada instantly signals the internationalism of the movement, which is bound to no frontiers, religions, or professions. Dada is the international expression of the times, the great rebellion of artistic movements, the artistic reflex of all these offensives, peace congresses, riots in the vegetable market, suppers at the Esplanade, etc., etc. Dada champions the use of the

new materials in painting.

Dada is a CLUB, founded in Berlin, which you can join without commitments. In this club every man is chairman and every man can have his say in artistic matters. Dada is not a pretext for the ambition of a few literary men (as our enemies would have you believe), Dada is a state of mind that can be revealed in any conversation whatever, so that you are compelled to say: this man is a DADAIST—that man is not; the Club Dada consequently has members all over the world, in Honolulu as well as New Orleans and Meseritz. Under certain circumstances, to be a Dadaist may mean to be more a businessman, more a political partisan than an artist—to be an artist only by accident—to be a Dadaist means to let oneself be moved by things, to oppose all sedimentation; to sit in a chair for a single moment is to risk one's life (Mr. Wengs pulled his revolver out of his pants pocket). One feels torn, one says yes to a life that seeks to progress by saying no. Affirmation—negation: powerful hocus-pocus of existence fires the nerve of the true Dadaist—whether he is reclining, hunting, cycling—half Pantagruel, half St. Francis, laughing and laughing. Down with the aesthetic-ethical attitudes! Down with the bloodless abstraction of expressionism! Down with the world-bettering theories of empty-headed literati. Up with Dadaism in word and image, with all the Dada things that happen in the world! To be against this manifesto is to be a Dadaist!

Tristan Tzara. Franz Jung. George Grosz. Marcel Janco. Richard Huelsenbeck. Gerhard Preiß. Raoul Hausmann. Walter Mehring.

O. Lüthy. Frédéric Glauser. Hugo Ball. Pierre Albert-Birot. Maria d'Arezzo. Gino Cantarelli. Prampolini. R. van Rees. Madame van Rees. Hans Arp. G. Thäuber. Andrée Morosini. François Mombello-Pasquati.

Source: Rose-Carol Washton Long, ed., *German Expressionism, Documents from the End of the Wilhelmine Empire to the Rise of National Socialism*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1993, pp. 267–69.

Source of original German text: Richard Huelsenbeck, "Dadaistisches Manifest" (1918), *Dada Almanach*, ed. Richard Huelsenbeck. Berlin: Erich Reiss, 1920, pp. 36–41.

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