

IV. Analysis of Art Work and Situation in Historical Context

Like Duchamp, Jean (Hans) Arp was an international artist whose work is representative of Dada ideas. Arp was born in Strasbourg of French parents while it was German territory, which explains his dual names of Jean and Hans. Arp studied in both France and Germany, traveled and exhibited all over Europe, and moved to Zurich during World War I. Arp not only studied painting but also poetry, and in Paris in 1904 he discovered modern painting, which he then pursued at the Weimar School of Art and the Académie Julian in Paris. Arp also wrote a great deal of poetry throughout his life. Like Vassily Kandinsky, Arp believed in the spiritual potential of art and contributed to the *Blaue Reiter Almanach* edited by Kandinsky and Franz Marc. Through his contact with Kandinsky, he began to explore the expressive potential of abstraction, and when he moved to Paris in 1914, his contact with Picasso prompted his combination of collage with the cerebral aspects of art. (35-8 DS) During his time in Switzerland, the landscape seems to have made a lasting impression on him, and when he turned to abstraction, it was based on nature and organic shapes.

While in Zurich, Arp became one of the founding members of Dada with Tzara, Marcel Janco, and Richard Huelsenbeck at the Cabaret Voltaire in February 1916. In this same year, Arp was looking to simplify art by using geometric forms and stripping away the emotion of German Expressionism in search of an order higher than that imposed by man. At this time Arp was exploring the metaphysical reality of objects and of life itself. Within this reality he sought some common denominator belonging to both the lowest and the highest forms of animals and plants. He used commercial papers as Picasso and Braque did in their collages, but less to use contemporary materials as to be relieved of any decisions of color and tone and therefore have less of a “hand” in the creation.

The most revolutionary of Arp’s collages were those such as his *Collage Arranged According to the Laws of Chance* which he worked on from 1916–17. In this form of creation he felt that: “These pictures are Realities in themselves, without meaning or cerebral intention. We... allowed the elementary and spontaneous to react in full freedom. Since the disposition of planes, and the proportions and colors of these planes seemed to depend purely on chance, I declared that these works, like nature, were ordered according to the laws of chance, chance being for me merely a limited part of an unfathomable *raison d’être*, of an order inaccessible in its totality...” (226 HMA) In these works the pieces of paper were glued where they were allowed to fall. According to Hans Richter, the origin of this technique is one instance where Arp became frustrated with a collage he was working on through traditional methods, and subsequently tore the work up and threw it on the ground. The result, a freer and more suggestive random arrangement was of much more interest to the artist and finally freed him from the judgments of his own creation while solving one of the problems with which he had been struggling. The rectilinearity of the shapes guaranteed a somewhat regular design, but chance had introduced an imbalance that seemed to Arp to restore to his work a special mysterious vitality he wanted to preserve.

As Matthew Gale states in *Dada and Surrealism* “If Dada was to be considered as ‘anti-art,’ then this was one of the purest and most provocative of such gestures, even if the results were also of great formal and aesthetic value. By letting chance intervene so directly, the artist’s role was startlingly reduced in a way that commented upon the state of the world in which fate had overtaken the determination of human plans. The rationalism of Western society had been shown to be worthless, and Arp became interested in alternatives in Eastern philosophy.” (63 DS) Richter put forth another view of the role of chance in Dada works: “For us chance was the ‘unconscious mind’ that Freud had discovered in 1900.... Adoption of chance had another purpose, a secret one. This was to restore to the work of art its primeval magic power and to find a way back to the immediacy it had lost through contact with... classicism.” (1023 AA) While Picasso saw the power and force of African art, Dada artists saw the power and force of the randomness of the universe.