

III. Cultural and Historical Context

As the art world in Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century was in constant flux, so was the political scene. The development of nation-states, which was thought would lead to peace, instead fostered nationalism and imperialism and led to more competition. Germany was building its empire and formed alliances with Austria-Hungary and Italy (the Triple Alliance), while France, Britain, and Russia united (The Triple Entente) to defend their interests.

To explain these alliances and the political atmosphere in Europe in the 1910s, Matthew Gale states: “These alliances were formed in the mistaken belief that any war would be geographically contained and short-lived. In retrospect, the “Agadir Crisis” of 1911 can be seen as the first slip towards the wider conflict. The Germans objected to the French annexation of Spanish Morocco and send a gunship to protect the one German citizen in Agadir. An arms race followed British support for the French. Under cover of these distractions the Italians invaded Libya – then still nominally part of the Ottoman Empire – accompanied by a diversionary attack on Turkey itself in the following year (1912). The Balkan nations saw their opportunity to free fellow nationals ruled by Turkey. Greece, Montenegro, Serbia and Bulgaria united and, with unparalleled carnage, swept to within hailing distance of Constantinople itself. When these allies fell out, and Bulgaria attempted to claim more territory in 1913, Serbia and Greece united with Romania in a brief, punitive campaign.” (DS 30)

Artists such as Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, the founder of the Futurist movement, were enthusiastic about the prospects of war and found ways to be part of the action. Others, such as Pablo Picasso, openly criticized the inhumanity of war through his art by using newspaper clippings on events such as the Balkan war in collages.

The event that finally involved Europe in war was the June 1914 assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, while he was in Sarajevo on a good-will mission. In July 1914, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia, and immediately, Russia, Germany, France, and Britain were drawn into war, while Italy remained neutral. The “Great War” would last until 1918 and involve almost all of Europe. In 1915 Italy betrayed the Triple Alliance by entering the war on the side of the Allies. Artists who had worked together on projects for years suddenly found themselves face to face in the trenches, and the call to patriotism for a country whose morals the artists had been opposing rapidly turned to disillusionment and disgust at the waste of human lives. (DS 30-2)

Until this time, no war had ever caused large-scale destruction for such a long period of time. Millions were killed, wounded, or missing. In the five month battle of Verdun in 1916, 500,000 troops lost their lives. On one day in 1916, the British lost 60,000 men in the battle of the Somme. Gardner’s *Art through the Ages* describes the result of progress and the new technology of guns in this way: “The mud, filth, and blood of the trenches, the pounding and shattering of incessant shell fire, and the terrible deaths and mutilations were a devastating psychological, as well as physical, experience for a generation brought

up with the doctrine of progress and a belief in the fundamental values of civilization.” (1022 AA) The only possible response was a non-response such as Dada.

As André Breton explained, Dada was a state of mind. If reason and logic were responsible for the devastation and destruction of “The Great War,” the only route to salvation was through political anarchy, the irrational, and the intuitive. Again, according to Gardner’s *Art through the Ages*, this cynicism though proved to be positive in its destruction. “Although the artists’ cynicism and pessimism inspired Dada, what developed was phenomenally influential and powerful. By attacking convention and logic, the Dada artists unlocked new avenues for creative invention, thereby fostering a more serious examination of the basic premises of art than had prior movements. Dada was, in its subversiveness, extraordinarily avant-garde and tremendously liberating. In addition, although horror and disgust about the war initially prompted Dada, an undercurrent of humor and whimsy – sometimes sardonic or irreverent – runs through much of the art.” (1023 AA)

Dada was officially born at the Cabaret Voltaire, a café in Zurich, in 1916 and officially died in Paris in 1922. Tristan Tzara’s *Seven Dada Manifestoes* declared Dada an anti-art, against everything, even itself. As for the name “Dada,” in the *Manifestoes*, Tzara claims the word does not mean anything, but enumerates others’ attempts to find a definition for the word. Richard Huelsenbeck on the other hand, claims the group opened the dictionary to a page one day and found the word. In either case it is sufficiently nonsensical to describe the movement.

Dada artists wrote plays and poems solely with sounds (sound poems, cacophonous symphonies), created objects to be destroyed, and invented “readymades” – works of art chosen for their odd aesthetics, and when taken out of context and named a work of art, became one. This was evidently a comment on the Dada view of current and past artistic trends. Nonsense, chance, and automatism were all integral to Dada creation. The central concept of Dada was a protest against a world that would allow the mass destruction of World War I, where millions of lives were lost and new technology created weapons and airplanes capable of destruction never before imaginable. Dada was a reaction against this horror. These artists felt that if industry and progress lead to mass destruction, they would rather not have either. Because of these beliefs, Dada must be nihilistic – it must deny everything, including itself. Dada writers wrote poems such as Louis Aragon’s “Suicide,” written in 1920 and included in his work *Le Mouvement perpétuel*.

“Suicide”

A b c d e f
 g h i j k l
 m n o p q r
 s t u v w
 x y z

To Dada artists and writers, the alphabet – letters and words they created – were suicide. They were unable express the horrors of war with the tools of language. Thus, sound

poems and cacophonous symphonies were born. Hugo Ball believed that journalism and politics had irredeemably debased the meaning of words and that this was symptomatic of the wider decay of Western civilization. As a solution, he proposed the deconstruction of language by reducing words to sounds, as in the following excerpt from one of his sound poems:

gadji beri bimba
 glandridi lauli lonni cadori
 gadjama bim beri glassala
 glandridi glassala tuffm i zimbrabim
 blassa galassasa tuffm i zimbarbim...
 (53 DS)

Dada was a highly international movement which sprang up in Zurich, NY, Berlin, Cologne, Paris, and Hanover, and many of the artists were as international as the movement itself. Marcel Duchamp, a French artist living in New York, personified Dada as much in his work as in the fact that he was not officially part of the Dada group in Europe. Duchamp worked in NY from 1915-23, where he spent a great deal of time with Man Ray, an American artist. The two artists had been creating Dada-type art before Tzara and the others declared their art Dada in Zurich.

One of the best examples in understanding the premise (or the non-premise) behind Dada is Duchamp's *LHOOQ*, from 1919. In this work, he takes an image of the *Mona Lisa*, paints a mustache on it, and writes these five letters below it. When pronounced in French, the sounds of the letters translate to: "elle a chaud au cul" ("she has a hot rear end"). This was tantamount to speaking badly about someone's mother. The *Mona Lisa* was a sacred work of art representing the Renaissance, illusionistic painting, and the manner in which western artists had painted for over 400 years. With this one act, Duchamp was invalidating all previous art, which had been based on Renaissance principles.

Another contribution Duchamp made to Dada is the invention of the "readymade" – an industrial mass-produced object whose function is altered and context changed from a material object to a thing of the mind either through its placement with other objects, or through naming it a work of art. An example of a readymade is Duchamp's famous urinal, placed upside down and sideways, and titled *Fountain*. By changing its position and naming it something other than itself, it becomes a work of art, and is no longer a urinal. He also signed it R. Mutt, a play on the Mott Porcelain Factory and the comic strip Mutt and Jeff. Duchamp's work in particular shows the Dada interest in word games and cerebral art.¹

¹ This work was submitted to the first exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists in New York, based on the Parisian Société des Artistes Indépendants – "no jury, no prizes." If an artist submitted his or her \$3 membership dues, he or she could hang 2 works. The works were hung alphabetically beginning with the letter R. This work was rejected though, so Duchamp resigned, because he felt it was contrary to the principles on which the Society was founded.