

# DADA INFLUENCE ON CONTEMPORARY ART. DADA'S JOURNEY FROM ROMANIA TO THE INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

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**Abstract:** *Dadaism is perhaps the most famous artistic movement that was initiated by Romanians. Originating in Moldova, Tristan Tzara brings his creative vision to all of Europe, a vision that would afterwards cross the Atlantic Ocean. The force of this artistic movement determined many of its representatives to believe, even for a brief period, that the deconstruction and rebuilding of the world we live in is possible. Dadaism still has an impact on a great number of artists, and it is most influential at the level of ideas and creative modes. Its vision is perpetuated in every artist that attempts to reinvent their style as well as in contemporary society when confronted with new and shocking artistic events.*

**Keywords:** Tristan Tzara, dadaism, contemporary art, international experience

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Anuarul Institutului de Istorie „George Barițiu” din Cluj-Napoca. Series Historica, LXI, 2022, Supliment, 1. *Identitate și diversitate în Europa. Istorie, societate, relații internaționale. Lucrările conferinței internaționale, Oradea, 22-27 martie 2022*, p. 671-679

## Why Dada?

My interest in the Dada phenomenon started in college, when I became acquainted with this movement and discovered it was a research area that suited me. The Dada movement with its rebellion, its direct way of anchoring itself to the social dimension, as a force for change and especially due to the ambition of those who believed in it, was a source of inspiration for me. When I truly understood the manifestos of this movement, not only its declamations, but also the artists' relationship with the world through the vision of the Dada writers, visual artists, architects and dancers, I discovered that Dada embodies another side of reality, a lifestyle where we can choose to live without socially imposed limits, without borders, free of what they deemed to be the absurd rules of the conservative, bourgeois morality. On the other hand, Dada stands for personal initiative, for the artistic creed of the one who works continuously with oneself and who seeks to give back, as well. I would say that this represents also my permanent stance in relation to the world, a balance that I try to create between my artistic vision and my true self. The fact that my artistic production is a mixed one, that of a visual artist, coordinator of cultural projects, and individual involved in social projects focused on culture, makes me feel close to the Dadaist vision, to which I consider myself largely indebted.

The Dada movement was born in Zurich following an announcement in the local newspaper of February 2, 1916. In the years preceding the First World War, Europe seemed to be suspended in a sort of illusory reality. Artistic events were no exception. The Dada phenomenon succeeded in bringing art on stage as a game, as a show that continues in one form or another into contemporary art. The show proposed by Dada promoters has had an overwhelming influence and this research explores both the events that started at Cabaret Voltaire and continued in various forms, as well as the ways in which these artists have influenced the visual arts, theatre and literature. My research focuses on how Dadaism manages to transcend the fixed boundaries of a single event, bringing on the stage a series of artistic conglomerates, consisting in a combination of theatre, poetry, painting, graphics and scenography.

As an avant-garde movement, Dada positioned itself as a reaction against eternal beauty, the laws of logic, against the artistic ideal of the bourgeoisie, attractive, aesthetically pleasing, against the purity of abstract concepts, against generalisations. Tristan Tzara himself was a fervent force against such beliefs that he deemed as outdated, obsolete, populist, and the one who proclaimed the "truth" in saying that "Everything we see is false."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Marc Dachy, *Dada. The Revolt of Art*, transl. from French by Irinel Antoniu, Bucharest, Univers, 2007, p. 144.

## Tzara's Journey from Romania to the Swiss Experience

Tristan Tzara fled to Zurich, where Marcel Iancu sang in bars and cafés, accompanied by his brother Jules (Iulian), to support himself. The Dada movement began to grow from one evening to another, from a successful party to another, through different, highly varied forms of expression. Performances, recitations, dance, songs were part of the development of each “Dada evening” and each performer would become a creator or simply a part of the creation as per one’s wish.

For the Dada movement, the sensory madness, the collage of ideas and emotions and everything it came to mean today in the artistic world resides in the incipient moment, in its first manifestation, namely those from Cabaret Voltaire. The importance of Voltaire Cabaret lies also in the diversity and richness of the performances that took place there, in the various, stylistically different events, as well as in the shows that were put on that stage, especially since it was a space conducive of experiments in which a variety of new artistic manifestations took place, truly unique and surprising.<sup>2</sup> The Dadaists cut the language into pieces, turned it into a mass of meaningless words, delivered it into fragments, divided it into components and explored it, researching from the ground, to the roots of the codes governing the use of language.

Hugo Ball has created a series of sound poems which he called *Klanggedichte*<sup>3</sup>, in order to change, to deconstruct a language that he considered devastated, tarnished by war. Thus, he showed up dressed in a cardboard suit, wearing a cylindrical shaman helmet with blue and white stripes on his head, and then he went on the stage to recite his poems composed of abstract words<sup>4</sup>, including the famous “Karawane”.

Marcel Iancu’s masks would play an important role in the dances performed at Cabaret Voltaire, due to their broken rhythms that were completely anarchic. The masks were created from pieces of cardboard, paint, glue and sackcloth, all crumpled and torn, with ragged edges and unevenly applied paint. In Romania, the presence of the Dada movement is noticeable in the journalism of those times, especially in terms of some poetic productions or ones specific to visual arts. Due to the journals of that period we have the first signs of a revolutionary, incisive cultural demonstration. Practically, the newspapers that have published the first works of those who would later take part in the movements in Switzerland and France, various illustrations, pictopoetry, avant-garde lyrics, manifesto texts.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Mario Micheli, *The Avant-garde Art of the 20th Century*, Bucharest, Meridiane, 1968, p. 142.

<sup>3</sup> Marc Dachy, *Achives Dada, Chronique*, Paris, Hazan, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Aurélie Verdier, *l'ABCdaire de Dada*, Paris, Flammarion, 2013, p. 90.

<sup>5</sup> Petre Răileanu, *Dada face to face followed by Tristan Tzara, Portrait sketch*, Bucharest, Tracus Arte, 2016, pp. 25–35.

Ilarie Voronca worked for different avant-garde publications, attempting to give editorial directions. In October 1924, in cooperation with Victor Brauner, he released the only edition of *75 HP*. The magazine was created to be a manifesto magazine, against traditionalists, with the clear intention to cause a scandal.

On the purely Dadaist side of journalism, there are the DADA publications, which in a single or in several issues, were released first in Switzerland and then all over the world, spreading like their authors, themselves traveling artists. One of those who left a distinct mark in the Romanian journalism was, ironically, Marcel Iancu, nicknamed Janco, who in 1922 brought to Romania his artistic experience gained during his presence at the Voltaire Cabaret and the overall experience with the Dada movement. He participated in Dada exhibitions, went through several ephemeral artistic trends and, once he returned to the country, he laid the foundations of *Contimporanului*, a long-lived magazine. He organized fine arts exhibitions in Bucharest and managed to gather as participants personalities such as Hans Arp, Hans Richter, Arthur Segal or Constantin Brâncuși.

## From the Paris Adventure to the Death of the Dada Movement

After the end of the First World War, the Dadaists in Zurich dispersed and the representatives of this group started to perform in new cultural venues, taking the Dada influence to various European cities where they arrived, as its genuine missionaries. Tristan Tzara arrived in Paris, in Germany – Richard Hülsenbeck in Berlin, and Jean (Hans) Arp in Köln. Tristan Tzara’s “1918 Dada Manifesto” is the one that made Dadaists immortal.<sup>6</sup> The manifesto gained worldwide recognition, as it became the true creative act of the Dada movement, making Tzara an international star. This manifesto is what persuaded Picabia to come to meet him in Switzerland and Breton to call him to Paris.

In 1922, a unique Conference on Dada was held in Jena, during which Tristan Tzara proclaimed the death of the Dada movement and resumed his plea against modernism. Basically, Tzara announced the dissipation of the movement, probably out of the organizer’s pride, although before that several members of the group had already migrated towards other artistic trends and cities. Some of the artists landed in Berlin where the first Dada party took place in 1918, in the Secession Hall. It was then that Huelsenbeck published the first Dada manifesto in that city. A Dada Club was founded and the *Der Dada* magazine

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<sup>6</sup> Tristan Tzara, *Seven Dada Manifestos and Lampisteries with a series of drawings* by Francis Picabia, *Approximate Man*, transl. from French, foreword and footnotes by Ion Pop, Iași, Polirom, 2016, pp. 29, 38.

was published, in which political preoccupations were quite conspicuous, with Huelsenbeck as coordinator.

In June 1920, the First Dada International Fair was organized, an important event. Photomontages and collages, Grosz's works and one of Baader's installations were on display for the first time. The exhibition featured works by Otto Dix, photomontages and collages by Hausmann, Grosz and Heartfield. There were also works by Max Ernst and complex installations that also had instructions for contemplation, such as Baader's. German artists led the Dada experience towards game, puzzle, scenography, collage, turning the interaction with the audience into a moment in their show.

I chose to highlight the particular case of an artist who had a major influence on my development, due to his personality that I consider to be in line with all the great contemporary artists. An anxious thinker and a lonely person, Arp was born between two worlds which shaped his path as an artist. Half French and half German, the artist called himself "Jean" when he spoke French and "Hans" when he spoke German, a sign of a way of thinking oriented towards multiculturalism. He would make random collages, out of pieces of falling paper that was subsequently glued in the place where it fell. He created collages with pieces of wood, laminated materials and tapestries, reliefs from painted wooden boards joined with screws, engraved wooden boards and ready-made ink drawings on paper, many of which in cooperation with Sophie Taeuber – his life partner. However, the field in which he attained full recognition is sculpture. Known for his work made of various materials, Jean Arp won the Grand Prize of the Venice Biennale for Sculpture in 1956.

In 1920, Andre Breton gave up Dada for surrealism.<sup>7</sup> The subsequent movements that draw from the Dada experience are the Lettrism, the Happening, the (avant-garde) Performance, the Action Painting and the Situationism (Situationist International). The twentieth century would not have been the same without Dada, given that its evolution would have taken, undoubtedly, a different turn. Jean Tinguely, the French artist Arman, Niki de Saint-Phalle, César Baldaccini, Ben Vautier are just some of the artists who have taken over, knowingly or not, a part of the Dada's legacy. Other personalities who discovered their total or partial affinity with elements of the Dada movement are Dorothea Tanning, the Fantastic Realists of Vienna, possible descendants of Dadaism, Cindy Sherman, Gilbert and George, Dan Graham or Allen Jones. A series of Dada elements were borrowed also by the Romanian culture, given that many artists display in their works elements reminiscent of the lesson offered by the protagonists at the Cabaret Voltaire.

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<sup>7</sup> Marc Dachy, *Dada. The Revolt of Art*, transl. from French by Irinel Antoniu, Bucharest, Univers, 2007, p. 84.

2016 was the year of the Dada centenary, an event that was celebrated worldwide. Among our events we mention the exhibition made by Erwin Kessler at ARCUB-TZARA.DADA.ETC<sup>8</sup>, a very well done Dada retrospective, displaying works presented for the first time to the local public, Gigi Căciuleanu's show "L'Om Dada"<sup>9</sup> or "The heroic-erotic and musical poem Fuchsiada" by Urmuz, a theatrical installation signed by Helmut Stürmer, assisted by director Silviu Purcărete at the German State Theater in Timișoara. Those were dedicated events from all artistic fields, theatre, visual arts, choreography, music, as DADA allows this fabulous mix of arts.

## Personal Work

Furthermore, I would like to present now my personal work by starting with the first signs of my interest in the Dada movement. Practically, through Dada I discovered that one can become a voice with a great impact on others and, gradually, I managed not only to build a form of visual expression, but I too was influenced by the thinking and actions of those who lived more than 100 years ago. My first work was called «Why experiment?». It is a work made using the mixed media technique on wooden frames support. The work was a space of self-expression, a personal way to reveal to the world my thoughts, aspirations and anxieties. This work aimed to be a clarification of the way I positioned myself with regards to outer world and, at the same time, as the most sincere manner of interacting through my art with a viewer of whom I knew nothing, with an abstract audience. A series of works came next, among which "Panorama of orange 15" stood out, an artwork made with watercolours, relief paste and bitumen on a pre-treated cardboard. This work consists in a separation of pictorial areas, paths made with orange paint. This piece was also influenced by the work of Hans Richter, a multivalent visionary artist who had left a deep impression on me not only through his works in the fine arts field, but also due to his cinematic talent. Stemming from the same experimental area is another one of my artworks, "Where and why do daisies grow?". This artwork is meant to be an exercise in materiality, in using the canvas support pre-prepared intentionally so as to be more textured, within short a stylistic and chromatic exercise.

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<sup>8</sup> Arcub. TZARA.DADA.ETC, source: <https://arcub.ro/eveniment/tzara-dada-etc/>, accessed at 15:35, 07.08.2020

<sup>9</sup> Andrei Crăciun, Lari Giorgescu, „L'Om DADA /the Dada Person/ should be seen by all theatre professionals in Romania“, fnt.ro, source: <https://fnt.ro/2016/lari-giorgescu-%E2%80%9E%E2%80%99om-dada-ar-trebuie-s%C4%83-fie-v%C4%83zut-de-to%C8%9Bi-oamenii-de-teatru-din-romania%E2%80%9C/>, accessed at 11:47, on 20.04.2020.

The same period has enabled me to better link my avid interest in the study of literature and the discovery of theatre with the serigraphic experiments and with the experiences carried out in the graphic techniques workshop where I had discovered the basics of engraving. One of the artworks encompassing my trials, my quests from that period is a canvas on which I played with my own image creating a series of self-portraits, some painted, others imprinted using the linographic technique or with the help of a stencil. The grid repeated in several works reminds me of Francis Picabia's 391 magazine, which in one of the issues presented the molecular construction, a drawing arranged on a chessboard on which various symbolic elements can be found. The idea of overlapping axes, the play between full and empty, the symbols thrown on a world contained within a chessboard, the small random elements combining to create a story are all part of an interpretation matrix that Picabia chose to carry into a technical universe, whereas I preferred to take it into a journey starting from childhood up to the current experiences, by overlapping it every time over a different universe.

My entire creative endeavour resides under the umbrella of the Dada views accepted more as a psychological trademark rather than strictly as a fine art production. Nevertheless, it is there where I experience, not infrequently, the specific Dada anger and manifesto, by transposing into my artworks my states of mind and moods through which I express, completely or partially, my momentary feelings, where I send messages, I gather pieces of information from the external environment. Then, I combine all these and throw them into the space outside my work, shaped in such a way as to convey my messages. When I am involved in one of my projects, I often realize that, conscious or not, I apply the Dada-specific ways of positioning myself in relation to the outside world. In such moments, I discover that even chaos can become a working tool when one looks at the world as a whole, without trying to change it (which would imply a new set of rules), without observing the rules one does not need, or with which one cannot or doesn't want to comply.

Moreover, it is worth bringing into discussion another side of my artistic endeavour that includes shows, cultural projects, social events in which I took part, sometimes as coordinator, creator of art projects, and other times as visual artist or designer, photographer or any other function that an artist can undertake, following the example of the Dada practitioners. For the Art Galleries Weekend 2016, we started a project based on the writings of Urmuz, called Fuchsiada. The project, entitled «FUCHS(ilis)-ISM, SOCIO-CHROMATIC EXPERIMENT FOR MUSIC AND MOVEMENT» properly drawn by Pálnie (Funnel) and Stamate on the overture of Ismail and Turnavitu's salwar pants near Gayk's Cârligați (Hooktown), had the decorations and costumes coordinated by Anca Maria Ciofirlă and Sofia Ovejan. The show was designed as a living organism developing over 13 episodes, a show that was self-constructed with



the help of the audience who acted as creator and as spectator, simultaneously. We built the costumes and scenery for this play. Many of the proposed elements combined color, different materials, collage.

Only in 2018 did we manage to fully perform this undertaking, by means of an independent project, supported by AFCN – National Cultural Heritage Administration. Thus, resuming the previous experience, *Fuchsiada*, the new show which continued the pilot event from 2016, benefited from a strong team, the director of the show being, once more, Anca Maria Colțeanu.<sup>10</sup> The next performance, intended as a sequel to *Fuchsiada* was “*Krinollette – The simple joy of destruction / Pure joy of the decay*”, an improvisational show staged exclusively during the White Night of Art Galleries event.<sup>11</sup>

I have made several series of visual art works in various techniques, at different times of my life. Each stage of development brought along a new relationship with Dadaism. Many of the works did not even go through the sketch stage, they were clear references to moments in my life that marked me. Like the Dadaists, I tried to turn the inner revolt into something else, in my case, into a free artistic discourse.

## Conclusions

One can speak of an era of rebellious personalities and a time of accumulation. The Dada movement produced in its destructive manner what we nowadays collect, the rules of artistic creation are different, art in general interacts differently with the public, the twentieth century witnessing major changes in any intellectual field.

The Dada experience is the one that has led us to a freedom of action, enabling us to rethink the processes and techniques in all arts, while it confronted people with an exercise of freedom. The show proposed by the Dada representatives has become our own show now, seeing that the artist has to work with oneself. My conclusions regarding my Dada experiences have developed on several levels. For one thing, I went through an artistic experience in which I tested techniques and forms of expression specific to the avant-garde trend. Furthermore, I went through a social experience, because Dada is, at its core, a social movement, one in which the public is part of the artistic creation, a creation which transcends the cultural barriers. Therefore, I had a complete Dada experience by exploring

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<sup>10</sup> Anca Maria Ciofirlă, *Fuchsiada*, 2016, source: <https://galeriemontage.com/spectacole/fuchsiada>, last accessed at 13.03.2022, 12.14.

<sup>11</sup> Idem, *Krinollette – The simple joy of destruction / Pure joy of the decay*, 2018, source: <https://galeriemontage.com/proiecte-culturale/krinollette/>, accessed on 14.03.2022, at 18:20.



a complete show, through the relationship I developed with the materials, the techniques and the audience.

After all, Dada is also about courage and commitment and I believe that these two characteristics are necessary for the creation of any sustainable and coherent product in today's art, be it visual or performative. The Dada show is actually a way to live our life, to bring in it elements specific to the arts and integrate them, playing the desired part on the stage represented by our personal life.

