

Habiba Salem

1003241119

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Raoul Hausmann and Berlin Dada

This essay will analyze Raoul Hausmann's artworks and how they are Dada. In order to understand his artworks, it is important to mention Dada's history and the effects of the First World War, specifically on Berlin in 1920. It is essential to include other artists' works, such as George Grosz, John Heartfield, and Max Ernst, who are crucial figures in explaining Hausmann's ideas and his influence on shaping Berlin Dada. Furthermore, the essay will also explain Hausmann's artworks in connection with Tristan Tzara's Dada manifesto, written in 1918, to understand how they were Dada of their time, specifically Berlin Dada. Overall, it will clarify the role and impact of machinery and militarization on the art scene that resulted from the war in Germany. Finally, it will explain how Dada's influence continues today in political arts.

In 1916, many artists fled to Zurich, Switzerland, for safety during the First World War. Among the artists were Hugo Ball and his wife, Emmy Hennings. Together, they established a bar called Cabaret Voltaire, where they and artists such as Richard Huelsenbeck, Tristan Tzara, and Hans Arp formed the first Dada group and conducted performances to express their hatred for war.¹ Tzara did not only hate war but firmly believed that modern society and ideals were to blame for the war. In his manifesto, he expressed his views against anything and everything that brings war, such as language, art, religion, and morality.² It is his views that fundamentally

¹ David Hopkins, *Dada and Surrealism: A Very Short Introduction*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 4, 7.

² Tristan Tzara, "Dada Manifesto 1918," http://writing.upenn.edu/library/Tzara_Dada-Manifesto_1918.pdf.

shaped Dada and helped attract international artists. After the war, the artists moved back to their home countries, including Huelsenbeck, who introduced Dada to Berlin.³

Unlike other Dada groups, Berlin Dada was profoundly driven by the war's impacts on the city. The central themes of their work are machines and the human mind and the social, political, and psychological issues that the war caused.⁴ Berlin Dada was anti-war and anti-art. Following Dada's ideas against art, Berlin Dadaists sought ways to express their disgust against the German government and depict life after the war without using traditional art. The artists used photomontage as their medium to represent newness and to demonstrate their rejection of abstract painting as a medium-specific and subjectivist project.⁵ Photomontage, which consists of cutting found materials or imagery and re-shaping them in a way that changes the original meaning, was founded and used by Club Dada. George Grosz and John Heartfield also used it to exchange collage postcards and care packages with patriotic messages to evade the military censors during the war.⁶ During the First War, people glorified soldiers, and wars and fights were glorified in ways that they began to create soldier portraits that presented the glorification of war. Photomontages were made against this glorification and illustrated that the glorification helped ruin Germany.⁷

However, photomontage was used extensively by Hausmann to present his ideas. He used photomontage to provoke an experience of visual and linguistic ambiguity and to engage his

³ Hopkins, *Dada*, 11.

⁴ Hopkins, *Dada*, 11, 103.

⁵ Matthew Biro, "Raoul Hausmann's Revolutionary Media: Dada Performance, Photomontage, and the cyborg," *Art History* 30, no.1 (2007): 35, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/227660056_Raoul_Hausmann's_revolutionary_media_Dada_performance_photomontage_and_the_cyborg.

⁶ Biro, "Raoul," 32.

⁷ Biro, "Raoul," 33.

audience by encouraging them to associate with them freely. His artworks represent mechanized war and technology's effects on the human mind and body through photomontages, poetry, and performances. He produces his photomontages through the chance method and emphasis on a single letter.⁸ Hausmann's writings also provide a closer insight into his ideas and artworks, specifically *Dada in Europe for Der Dada 3*. He explained, "DADA is against the life of the mind; DADA is the total absence of what is called mind. What is the point of a mind in a world that just goes on mechanically? ... Free yourself from all restraint, forget your card games and the familiar warmth of your family... you will learn to see these things for what they are: problems caused by the system, which needs a particular technical knowledge... Become a Dada and you will start to share our delight in the attack and in the unconquerable power of irony."⁹ He believed that humans were driven by emotional tendencies, thus, causing the war. Therefore, he encouraged using technology and science to make rational decisions. This idea is evident in his works such as *ABCD*, *Tatlin at Home*, and *Self Portrait of the Dadasoph*. The essay will further discuss these artworks.

First, his *Tatlin at Home* presents Vladimir Tatlin, a Russian artist who used art for social purposes.¹⁰ He shows Tatlin's brain replaced by machinery to indicate that even though technology has taken over, he is still capable of making his own technological thoughts.¹¹ This piece encourages people to disregard their human minds and emotions and start thinking rationally with their calculated thoughts.

⁸ Biro, "Raoul," 37.

⁹ Dawn Ades, *The Dada Reader: A Critical Anthology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 93.

¹⁰ Dietmar Elger, *Dadaism*, (Los Angeles: Taschen, 2004), 34.

¹¹ Elger, *Dadaism*, 38.

Second, *Self Portrait of the Dadasoph* was presented at the First Dada International Fair and represented Hausmann's thoughts about the new human, a half-human and half mechanized figure.¹² In this piece, he presents an interference of both humans and machines with a dual identity that runs on rational and mechanized thoughts.

Lastly, his final self-portrait piece titled *ABCD* best represents his attitude toward the human-technological interface and presents the social and political issues in Berlin.¹³ The artwork shows Hausmann clinching onto the letters ABCD with numerous images such as tickets and a gynecological diagram.¹⁴ It also demonstrates his thoughts about visual culture and the German language.¹⁵ Hausmann believed that "medium was empowering and suggesting that how one saw could potentially affect and transform what one saw and make audience recognize their contributions to their aesthetic experiences and to take a more reflexive and critical attitude to both life and politics."¹⁶ He wanted to inspire and evoke a sense of experience in people with his visual poetry. He believed that people could not express themselves as words lost their value, so he created several poster poems that could quickly deliver the message visually when words failed.¹⁷ This artwork can relate to Tzara's manifesto, in which Tzara explains how language is useless, irrational and the cause of the war.¹⁸

However, Hausmann also expressed fears and anxieties about science and technology for their misuse to aid the war.¹⁹ His "Spirit of the Time" best expresses this concern. The artwork

¹² Biro, "Raoul," 28, 30.

¹³ Biro, "Raoul," 33.

¹⁴ "ABCD, 1920s," *TheMet*, 2019. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/265584>.

¹⁵ Biro, "Raoul," 37.

¹⁶ Biro, "Raoul," 35.

¹⁷ Biro, "Raoul," 37.

¹⁸ Tzara, "Manifesto", 1.

¹⁹ Biro, "Raoul," 31.

presents an expressionless wooden dummy doll assembled with everyday objects such as a ruler, watch, and camera attached to it.²⁰ Hausmann wanted to reflect the society and how the war had made them dull and unexpressive, completely reliant on machines that gave facts and information. He believed this had made people unable to use their brains to generate new ideas of value. He wanted to warn people against depending on machines that would prevent them from making their rational thoughts and turn them into machines with no value. This piece relates to Dada because it is a simple assemblage without the use of traditional human representation through abstract paintings.

Other artists tried to express their thoughts through photomontages or drawings, such as John Heartfield and George Grosz, who had anglicized their names in protest against the German regime.²¹ Unlike Hausmann, both artists focused on exposing the German leaders they blamed for causing the war and corrupting the country. For example, Grosz produced several personal and political artworks and displayed the political leaders as corrupt leaders who did not care for their people's well-being. During the war, he was called to serve in the army but was dismissed twice due to mental health issues.²² Being forced into recruitment had psychological effects and held great significance on him as an artist, encouraging him to join Heartfield in a campaign to protest against German wartime propaganda.²³ In mid-1917, Grosz described himself as a 'machine whose pressure gauge has gone to pieces.' to demonstrate his struggles.²⁴ In *Fit for Service*, he illustrated the recruitment process, in which a well-fed doctor examines a skeleton, pronounces it fit for service, and ignores the health issues it could have—representing the

²⁰ Elger, *Dadaism*,

²¹ Peter Pachnicke and Klaus Honnef, *John Heartfield*, 19.

²² Hopkins, *Dada*, 116.

²³ Biro, "Raoul," 32.

²⁴ Hopkins, *Dada*, 116.

dehumanization and militarization of people.²⁵ Another piece, titled *Five O'clock*, shows the elites drinking and enjoying themselves while the commoners are malnourished and have to go to work. Grosz exposed how the government used commoners for money and entertainment instead of improving the city's conditions and helping its people.²⁶

Unlike Grosz, Heartfield did not shy away from directly humiliating and insulting the government through his artwork in collaboration with Rudolf Schlichter at the First Dada International Fair, in which they presented a pig dressed in army clothes hanging from the ceiling.²⁷ During the rise of Nazism, he created a series of photomontages such as *Adolf the Superman*, which presents an image of Adolf Hitler with his body exposed through an X-Ray, revealing him as swallowing money and his heart made of a swastika.²⁸ Although this photomontage was created in 1932, it still reflected the Dadaist ideals using Dada techniques. Heartfield aimed to expose the hypocrisy, greed, and abuse of power of the Nazis.²⁹

Another artist whose work reflects the effects of war on Germany is Max Ernst. Although he was based in Hanover, one particular work titled *Murdering Airplanes* fit the Berlin Dada ideals of representing war trauma. Ernst was one of the people recruited to serve in the war, and he created *Murdering Airplanes* to help the viewer visualize the war scene and his hardships on

²⁵ Jeff Michael Ocwieja, "Art as Political Struggle: George Grosz and the Experience of the Great War," *Grand Valley Journal of History* 3, no. 2 (2014): 12.
<http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvjh/vol3/iss2/2>.

²⁶ "George Grosz. Dawn (Früh Um 5 Uhr!) From In The Shadows (Im Schatten). (1920/21, Published 1921)," *Museum of Modern Art*, 2011.
https://www.moma.org/s/ge/collection_ge/object/object_objid-115081.html.

²⁷ William S. Rubin, "Dada, Surrealism, and their heritage," *Museum of Modern Art* (1968): 46. www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1884.

²⁸ Peter Pachnicke, and Klaus Honnef, "John Heartfield: Photomontages," *Museum of Modern Art* (1993): 2. <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/393>.

²⁹ Pachnicke, Honnef, "John Heartfield", 2.

the battleground. His artwork illustrates a large attacking airplane with arms flying over a field with soldiers carrying an injured soldier.³⁰ He represents the dehumanization of wartime violence and the use of machines to destroy humanity.³¹ This artwork further demonstrates Hausmann's fears of people misusing science and technology to harm others and transform machines into an extension of humans.

All of the mentioned artworks share common values that consist of hatred against corrupt people and the effects of the war on humanity. They also focus on visual expression rather than using words or traditional art techniques and instead use photomontages, assemblages, or drawings.

Lastly, although Dada ended long ago, its influence still precedes today. An example is Ai Weiwei's artworks that challenged China's politics and traditional arts by smashing ancient potteries or altering them.³² He lived in New York and was influenced by Dada and especially the works of Marcel Duchamp.³³ He aimed to create artworks that have a social impact beyond the artistic discipline and to encourage a new change in Chinese Arts.³⁴ Additionally, there is Black Dada, named by Adam Pendleton, who created a book made of collage that included the

³⁰ Robert Hemmings, "Modernity's Object: The Airplane, Masculinity, and the Empire," *Criticism* 57, no. 2 (2015): 294. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13110/criticism.57.2.0283>. 294.

³¹ Robert L. Herbert, "The Arrival of the Machine: Modernist Art in Europe 1910-25," *Social Research* 64, no.3 (1997): 1299. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40971211>.

³² Daniel Aloi, "Ai weiwei: Smashing China's Traditions in Art and Architecture," *World Literature Today* 81, no. 4 (2007): 42, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40159468>.

³³ Aloi, "Ai weiwei," 42.

³⁴ Melissa Chiu, "On Ai Weiwei," *Social Research* 83, no.1 (2016): 175-177. <https://search-proquest-com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/docview/1809020274/fulltext/E4AE66800F84F34PQ/1?accountid=14771>.

writings of significant Black Arts Movements leaders such as LeRoi Jones.³⁵ Black Dada aimed to shed light on social issues the Black community had been through, such as the violence of racism in the 1960s.³⁶

Overall, Dada's influence continues today as people use its techniques and explore new materials and ways to create art without solely relying on traditional painting techniques. Dada also influenced the way people approach political arts. Many of the techniques today, such as photomontages and collages, would have never surfaced if it were not for Dada. As Raoul Vaneigem said, "the beginning of dada was the rediscovery of lived experience and its possible delights — its end was the reversal of all perspectives, the invention of a new universe."³⁷

³⁵ Terence Trouillot, "What is 'Black Dada'? Artist Adam Pendleton Lays Out His Disruptive Theory in a New Book," *Art World*, 2017.

³⁶ Terence Trouillot, "What is Black Dada".

³⁷ Hopkins, *Dada*, 155.

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