

The background of the book cover is an abstract composition of horizontal bands. The top half is a dark, textured green. Below this is a thin, bright white band. The bottom half is a vibrant, textured red. The overall texture is grainy, suggesting a canvas or paper surface.

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DADA AND SURREALISM

A Very Short Introduction

OXFORD

Introduction

Question: How many Surrealists does it take to change a lightbulb?

Answer: A fish.

Everybody knows something about Dada and Surrealism. Dada, born in 1916 and over by the early 1920s, was an international artistic phenomenon, which sought to overturn traditional bourgeois notions of art. It was often defiantly anti-art. More than anything, its participants, figures such as Marcel Duchamp, Francis Picabia, Tristan Tzara, Hans Arp, Kurt Schwitters, and Raoul Hausmann, counterposed their love of paradox and effrontery to the insanities of a world-gone-mad, as the First World War raged in Europe.

Surrealism, Dada's artistic heir, was officially born in 1924 and had virtually become a global phenomenon by the time of its demise in the later 1940s. Committed to the view that human nature is fundamentally irrational, Surrealist artists such as Max Ernst, Salvador Dalí, Joan Miró, and André Masson conducted an often turbulent love affair with psychoanalysis, aiming to plumb the mysteries of the human mind.

For many people Dada and Surrealism represent not so much movements in 20th-century art history as 'modern art' incarnate. Dada is seen as iconoclastic and confrontational; Surrealism as similarly

anti-bourgeois in spirit but more deeply immersed in the bizarre. But why Dada-and-Surrealism? Why are they yoked together? They constitute two movements but are regularly conflated. Art historians have traditionally found it convenient to generalize about Dada ‘paving the way’ for Surrealism, although that was only really the case in one of Dada’s locations, namely Paris. This book will certainly rehearse that story again, but it will also present these movements as distinctly different, so that they can be played off against each another. Dada, for instance, often revelled in the chaos and the fragmentation of modern life, whilst Surrealism had more of a restorative mission, attempting to create a new mythology and put modern man and woman back in touch with the forces of the unconscious. Such differences touch on important distinctions which I have aimed to make as vivid as possible.

More than any other art movements of the last century Dada and Surrealism now permeate our culture at large. Surrealism especially has entered our everyday language; we talk of ‘surreal humour’ or a ‘surreal plot’ to a film. This very continuity means that it is difficult to place them at one remove from us in ‘history’. Critical and historical accounts of both movements have admittedly become more and more elaborate. Dada, which might be thought to be anti-academic, is now widely studied in universities. Similarly monographs on notorious Surrealist artists such as Dalí and René Magritte are ubiquitous. But very often the sheer plethora of information is dazzling, and we lose critical distance.

Conscious of this problem, I have structured this book around key thematic issues. Chapter 1 charts the historical development of Dada and Surrealism, and deals with the assumptions involved in approaching them together. Chapter 2 looks in detail at the way both movements disseminated their ideas, particularly in terms of public events and publications. In the process, it shows how they established a dialogue between art and life. Chapter 3 looks closely at aesthetic questions, focusing on poetry, collage, and photomontage, painting, photography, object-making and film. Issues of anti-art and the positioning of each movement within modernist aesthetic debates are centrally important here. The last two chapters highlight recent research, by both myself and

Chapter 1

Dada and Surrealism: a historical overview

The early 20th century was a period of tumultuous change. The First World War and the Russian Revolution profoundly altered people's understanding of their worlds. The discoveries of Freud and Einstein, and the technological innovations of the Machine Age, radically transformed human awareness. In cultural terms, the novels of Joyce or the poetry of T. S. Eliot – the former's *Ulysses* and the latter's *The Waste Land* were both published in 1922 – registered distinctively new 'modernist' modes of feeling and perception characterized by a marked sense of discontinuity. Hence the theorist Marshall Berman sees a simultaneous sense of exhilaration and impending catastrophe, reflective of the fractured conditions of life at the time, as defining modernist sensibility.

Early 20th-century art movements powerfully reflect this new mind-set. Daringly innovatory in technical terms, movements such as Cubism and Futurism, both of which were at their height around 1910–13, moved beyond the calm surface of traditional painting to probe the structure of consciousness itself. Arguably, though, it is to Dada and Surrealism that we should look for the most compelling explorations of the modern psyche, not least because both movements placed considerable emphasis on mental investigation. Dada partially saw itself as re-enacting the psychic upheaval caused by the First World War, while the irrationalism celebrated by

Surrealism could be seen as a thoroughgoing acceptance of the forces at work beneath the veneer of civilization. This chapter summarizes the overlapping histories of both movements, but, first of all, what attitude links them to the other art movements of the early 20th century?

The 'avant-garde'

More than anything else, Dada and Surrealism were 'avant-garde' movements. The term 'avant-garde', which was first employed by the French utopian socialist Henri de Saint-Simon in the 1820s, initially had military connotations, but came to signify the advanced socio-political as well as aesthetic position to which the modern artist should aspire. Broadly speaking, art in the 19th century was synonymous with bourgeois individualism. Owned by the bourgeoisie or shown in bourgeois institutions, it was a means by which members of that class could temporarily escape the material constraints and contradictions of everyday existence. This state of affairs was challenged in the 1850s by the Realism of the French painter Gustave Courbet, which, by fusing a socialist agenda with a matching aesthetic credo, arguably represents the first self-consciously avant-garde tendency in art. By the early 20th century, several key art movements – such as Futurism in Italy, Constructivism in Russia or De Stijl in Holland, as well as Dada and Surrealism – were pledged to contesting any separation between art and the contingent experience of the modern world. Their reasons for doing so were inflected in different ways by politics – the Constructivists, for instance, were responding directly to the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia – but they tended to share the belief that modern art needed to forge a new relationship with its audience, producing uncompromising new forms to parallel shifts in social experience. For the cultural theorist Peter Bürger, writing in the 1970s, the mission of the early 20th-century European avant-garde thus consisted in undermining the idea of art's 'autonomy' ('art for art's sake') in favour of a new merging of art into what he calls the 'praxis of life'.

Dada and Surrealism thus shared the defining avant-garde conviction that social and political radicalism should be bound up with artistic innovation. The artist's task was to move beyond aesthetic pleasure and to affect people's lives; to make them see and experience things differently. The Surrealist goal, for instance, was nothing less than the French poet Arthur Rimbaud's call to 'change life'.

As already noted, the modern art of the early 20th century – the pictorial fragmentation of Picasso and Braque's Cubism, for instance – represented a startling break with traditional artistic conventions. The standard art-historical way of understanding this break is to see it as representing the legacy of late 19th-century French artists such as Gauguin, Seurat, Van Gogh and Cézanne, alongside a general shift of sensibility that had been effected by European Symbolism in the 1880s and 1890s. In the paintings of Cézanne and Gauguin, for instance, space was flattened out and colour distorted in a radical departure from naturalism. Such conditions paved the way for the abandonment of Renaissance pictorial conventions, such as linear perspective, in Picasso's watershed painting of 1907, the proto-Cubist *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)*. At the same time German Expressionism and French Fauvism experimented further with expressive, non-naturalistic uses of colour.

Dada and Surrealism were certainly beholden to Cubism and Expressionism, alongside Futurism, for their new pictorial languages. Cubist collage, for instance, led directly to the Dadaists' development of 'photomontage'. But the Dadaists and Surrealists would have been deeply uncomfortable with the idea, implicit in much of Cubism, that formal innovation alone provides a rationale for art. Much as the art of Cubism aimed to shock or disorientate its viewers into rethinking their relations with reality, it was ultimately 'autonomous' art; art about art. For Dada and Surrealism the stakes were considerably higher than this. Like certain other 20th-century art movements such as Futurism, which reflected the speeded-up,

multi-sensory world in which people in the first decade of the 20th century were living, Dada and Surrealism were committed to probing experience itself.

This commitment to lived experience meant that Dada and Surrealism were ambivalent about the idea of art as something sanctified or set apart from life. This is a fundamental point, and it is why it is inappropriate to treat Dada and Surrealism as identifiable stylistic 'isms' in art history. In actual fact there was comparatively little stylistic homogeneity among the artists involved, and literature was as important to them as visual art. It would be more accurate to describe these movements as ideas-driven, constituting attitudes to life, rather than schools of painting or sculpture. Any form, from a text to a 'ready-made' object to a photograph, might be used to give Dada or Surrealist ideas embodiment. In Dada a basic distrust for the narrowness of art frequently translated into open antagonism towards its values and institutions. At this point, therefore, we should put generalities aside and examine the overall historical outlines of Dada. A discussion of Surrealism will arise out of this.

Dada's origins: Zurich and New York

The 'myth of origins' of Dada centres on one man, the poet and theorist Hugo Ball, and the cabaret bar, called the Cabaret Voltaire, which he opened in the Spiegelgasse in Zurich in February 1916.

The cabaret was initially modelled on prototypes in cities in which the itinerant Ball had previously lived, namely Munich and Berlin. Like the cabarets there, it offered a heterogeneous programme of events ranging from the singing of street ballads to the recital of poems in the dominant Expressionist mode. Ball's early associates at the cabaret, all of whom were expatriates like himself, included Ball's girlfriend the cabaret performer Emmy Hennings, the Romanians Tristan Tzara and Marcel Janco, a poet and artist

construction, 'Dada-and-Surrealism' might even be seen as erected on the basis of, say, Barr's above-mentioned exhibition at MoMA, New York of 1936, or the publication of the French scholar Michel Sanouillet's important study *Dada à Paris* of 1965 in which he argued that Surrealism was the form that Dada took in Paris. Alternatively, the formulation could be seen as based on the attractions of an international figure such as Max Ernst, who moved from Cologne to Paris in 1922, providing possibly the clearest bridge between German Dada and French Surrealism.

There are, however, very good reasons for looking at the movements side by side, not least because their concerns can often be contrasted in a peculiarly telling manner. Both movements prioritized the poetic principle and downplayed the concept of art, endorsing the avant-garde wish to merge art and life. Both presented themselves as 'international' in ethos, and, in its later stages, Surrealism was virtually global. Both were fundamentally irrationalist in orientation.

Beyond this, subtle and significant differences existed between them. Dada was largely anarchic in spirit. The people who held it together, however tenuously – namely Ball, Huelsenbeck, Tzara and Picabia – were highly ambivalent about what they were doing, just as Dada was defined by them as simultaneously affirmative and destructive. By contrast, Surrealism, impelled by the organizational proclivities of André Breton, was much more of a 'movement' in the sense that the word implies direction. The Dadaists were largely unconcerned about making traditionally saleable art objects, while Surrealist artists such as Dalí and Magritte specialized in that most traditional and saleable of techniques, oil painting. Admittedly Breton criticized the commercial preoccupations of certain artists, but Surrealism might easily be termed 'reactionary' if we were to judge it by the standards of Dadaist anti-commercialism and technical innovation. The Dadaists were ambivalent about the values of intellect, seeing excessive rationalism as part of man's downfall, but the Surrealists, in their theoretical writings at least,

paradoxically employed highly intellectual means to investigate unconscious phenomena.

These, of course, are generalizations, and detailed comparisons will emerge from the focused case studies and discussions in the chapters that follow. My approach throughout, as I asserted in the introduction, will be to examine how Dada and Surrealism concurred or diverged around a set of key themes. I have avoided mapping them onto one another as far as possible, but I have nevertheless seen them as inhabiting a common cultural moment bracketed by two world wars. One thing that should be evident from the above historical summaries is how much emphasis they placed on attracting attention to themselves as avant-garde formations. I have mentioned manifestos, the changes of direction signalled by articles in journals, the importance of staged events, and so on. This emphasis on dissemination is highly characteristic of these movements. It therefore provides the thematic foundation for the next chapter.