

**Critique
d'art**

Critique d'art

Actualité internationale de la littérature critique sur l'art
contemporain

27 | Printemps 2006
CRITIQUE D'ART 27

Dada 2005

Jean-Claude Marcadé

Translator: Charles Penwarden



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/1213>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.1213

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

Publisher

Groupeement d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 April 2006

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

Electronic reference

Jean-Claude Marcadé, « Dada 2005 », *Critique d'art* [Online], 27 | Printemps 2006, Online since 13 February 2012, connection on 22 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/1213> ; DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.1213

This text was automatically generated on 22 April 2019.

Archives de la critique d'art

Dada 2005

Jean-Claude Marcadé

Translation : Charles Penwarden

REFERENCES

- Bize, Hervé. *Dada*, Paris: Cercle d'art, 2005, (Découvrons l'art)
- Dachy, Marc. *Archives Dada: chronique*, Paris: Hazan, 2005
- Dachy, Marc. *Dada: la révolte de l'art*, Paris: Gallimard, 2005, (Découvertes; Arts)
- Durozoi, Gérard. *Dada et les arts rebelles*, Paris: Hazan, 2005, (Guide des arts)
- Lemoine, Serge. *Dada*, Paris: Hazan, 2005
- Lista, Giovanni. *Dada: libertin & libertaire*, Paris: L'Insolite, 2005
- Pansaers, Clément. *L'Apologie de la paresse*, Paris: Allia, 2005
- Pansaers, Clément. *Bar Nicanor*, Paris: Allia, 2005
- Pansaers, Clément. *Le Pan-pan au cul du nu nègre*, Paris: Allia, 2005
- Almanach Dada*, Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2005, (L'Ecart absolu)
- Dada*, Paris: Ed. du Centre Pompidou, 2005

- 1 Is Dada one modern moment among others, part of the alternation of the old and the modern (new) that has been Europe's artistic rhythm since the early 15th century, or is it part of the historic avant-garde of the 20th century (or, roughly, its first quarter)? It's a serious question, because the organisers of the big *Dada* exhibition at the Musée National d'Art Moderne aimed to show that Dada was the biggest, if not the *only genuine* avant-garde of the last century; and also, because an author like Gérard Durozoi can state that, "The 20th century was the century of modernity and the avant-gardes—to the extent that people readily confuse the former with all the latter" (p. 8). And yet, what happened within the modernity that emerged between 1900 and 1925 is so particular in relation to all the other *modernities* that punctuated the life of the arts before it (since the advent of the modern era), and after it, throughout the 20th century, that I think it is legitimate, for clarity's sake, to refer to it in terms of the avant-garde, without an s. It is therefore pointless to contrast, as Durozoi does, a "harmonious" avant-garde (Cubo-Futurism, all

forms of abstraction, Constructivism) with Dada, as the greatest subverter of values and practices. In fact, between 1913 and 1915, all the future ingredients of Dadaism could be found throughout Europe (and above all in Paris, Milan, Moscow and Saint Petersburg)—the use of assemblage, automatism, collage, active bodies, waste material, derision, the distortion of use and meaning, the poetics of the ephemeral, staged exhibitions, glossolalia, manifesto-poems, readymades, scandals, tracts, tampered-with typography, face-painting and paint on all everyday objects, “happenings,” iconoclastic nihilism: you name it. One would have no trouble finding subversive features in Cubism and Futurism that would prove that Dada was not born by immaculate conception in 1916.

- 2 It is significant that the MNAM show allots very little room to “pre-Dadaism” and tends to drum home the point that “before Dada” the main ancestors were in the US: Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray. For Serge Lemoine, “before Dada” is Duchamp. As for Marc Dachy, the most exhaustive and insightful Dada specialist, whose monumental *Archives Dada: chronique* is an indispensable volume, he allows considerable space to “post-Dada” (p. 377-451) but nothing to “pre-Dada”.
- 3 And yet, one of the key, defining characteristics of Dada, the oscillation between destruction and construction (“destruction through construction”, says Pansaers) is very much present in the European avant-garde before 1916. In 1921 Roman Jakobson declared that in Dada poetry and painting there was “nothing new compared to Russian and Italian Futurism” (Dachy, *Archives Dada: chronique*, p. 158), a point on which Tristan Tzara clearly disagreed, claiming to have “nothing in common with the Futurists and the Cubists” (*Ibidem*, p. 270). In his *Dada: libertin & libertaire*, Giovanni Lista, the chronicler of Italian Futurism, devotes a whole chapter to “before Dada”. He gives convincing details of a pre-Dadaism that was present in Parisian, Italian and German artistic circles (the Incohérents, Futurism, Parisian Cubo-Futurism, Expressionist primitivism, etc.). Unfortunately, here too the Russian School pre-1916 is totally absent, even though the polymorphous experiments of the Cubo-Futurists and the extravagances of the “Futuro-Slavs” also heralded the antics and radicalism of Dada.
- 4 The *Dada* catalogue, which features a post-Dadaist poet who somehow managed to escape the attention of Marc Dachy, the businessman François-Henri (p. 55), contains no general essays or summings-up but, as in a phone book (and even in its texture), offers an alphabetical list of names in Indian file (though there are no files or Indians). This encyclopaedic, guidebook way of presenting Dada is not unpleasant from an aesthetic point of view, but it is totally ineffective and even harmful from an epistemic one. Even the Devil would get lost here. This is all typical of the “literarisation” of the visual arts (their reduction to narrative), for which Dada and Surrealism are no doubt partly responsible. That said, *La Révolution surréaliste*, the exhibition put on by Werner Spies in 2002 did manage to avoid that pitfall by showing only the *being of art*.¹ The dominant sociological, psychologising, storytelling trend has a whiff of Taine about it.
- 5 So, what is Dada? Pansaers claims that “Dada wanted to be the watchword of a certain spirit” (Dachy, *Archives Dada: chronique*, p. 316). Dada was a “movement” said Tzara, laconically (*Ibidem*, p. 270). Clearly, what distinguishes Dada from all the other currents of the 20th century is its existential aspect. Dada was primarily something you lived. The works were an extra.
- 6 If Dada opposed Cubism and Futurism, that is because these had a “purely aesthetic character” (*Ibidem*, p. 362). Dada aimed to be anti-art, which meant that it was against any

kind of aesthetic. Dachy is very on message in this respect when, discussing the first International Dada Fair, he observes, “One cannot but note that Ernst did not have the acerbic quality of Grosz’s drawings and that *the prettiness of his work led him straight to Surrealism* [italics mine]” (Dachy, *Dada : la révolte de l’art*, p. 58). There you have it, then: Dada, tough; Surrealism, soft.

- 7 There is something adolescent about Dada. But adolescence is short-lived. And old adolescents always end up “playing the game”. They get written about and shown and discussed in books, theses, exhibitions and symposia. But more than this post-pubescent revolt, there is in Dada an anarchist power that had never manifested itself with such vigour in the arts before. Anarchy of behaviour, anarchy of speech.
 - 8 From all the Dada-related events of 2005, the provisional conclusion is that the movement was not an “episode” in the historic avant-garde: it was, along with Soviet Constructivism, a vital link in that radical modernity that sought to renew all human activity, within a dynamics that would never be finished, always projecting its conquest into the future.
-

NOTES

1. For more details, see review #226 in CRITIQUE D’ART #20, autumn 2002, p. 114.