The Dada Text

In July 1916, as the Great War raged across Europe, Hugo Ball read aloud the first Dada manifesto at the Cabaret Voltaire (Ades, Cabaret 16). In typical Dada hyperbole, the manifesto made wild claims about the power of the word Dada and how it indicated a new tendency in art and literature. The manifesto, and the many that were written after it, identified and combated what the Dadaists saw as the bourgeois corruption that had caused the war and diluted art into something worthless. Through written manifestos, Dada poetry and collage, wild forms of theater and new ideas on visual art, Dada found a common voice among several different groups of artists from across Europe and in New York. Today, Dada is understood as an art movement, chronologically somewhere in between Futurism and Surrealism. Yet, Dada cannot be understood simply as a visual art movement, but instead as a literary movement. Rather than through painting or sculpture, Dada is best understood through the text, manifestos, poetry, and magazines produced by the Dadaists. Dada visual art by artists like Francis Picabia, Marcel Duchamp, or Hans Arp do not rely on traditional formal elements of art, but rather on the titles of the works. Dadaists have more in common with their contemporary, poet Guillaume Apollinaire, than with any painter, and they are more concerned with Symbolist poets Arthur Rimbaud and Comte de Lautréamont than with modern painters Édouard Manet and Paul Gauguin (Drucker 197).

Hugo Ball’s contribution, the formation of the Cabaret Voltaire, cannot be overestimated to the formulation of Dada. The Cabaret Voltaire event was essentially a stage play, with the Dadaists on stage reciting poetry (some original and some appropriated), performing wild dances, acting childish and telling jokes, and playing primitive music. There was some art
exhibited at the event, such as a few Picasso paintings and illustrations by the early Dada members (Ball 20). But the true innovation of the event was found entirely in the performance on stage, the mishmash of words and texts being thrown around the theater. The violent contortion of language represented the Dada ideal of abandoning the corrupt bourgeois society and burning it to the ground. As the backbone of civilization and communication, language had to be destroyed and reborn by the Dadaists. After the event Ball wrote, in what was one of the first accounts of the use of the name Dada, that the next step for the movement was to begin publishing magazines, exemplifying Dada’s literary core (Ball 20). Without this aspect of Dada, the movement could not exist. Perhaps even more integral to Dada was Tzara’s contribution to the Cabaret, a magazine he edited and published to go along with the performance, in which he initially outlines the anti aesthetic associated with Dada (Richter 33). Dada was too complex to be only represented by images. Its goals and its persona could only adequately be explained through text. The Cabaret Voltaire was the birth of Dada and the birth of the Dada language, the most important aspect of Dada.

While a large body of visual art was produced under the Dada label, much of its meaning was text driven. Without a title or other textual clue, the images of Francis Picabia, the readymades of Marcel Duchamp, and the collages of Hans Arp cannot be understood as they were meant to be by the artist. Picabia’s Portrait of a Young American Girl in the State of Nudity, 1915 (figure 1), an illustration of a spark plug, is rendered completely different by its title. Picabia is making a literary statement using irony in the title to make what is essentially a joke alluding to the new complexities of gender in the 20th century. Picabia’s clean and stern depiction of the spark plug lacks any artistic pretension and represents the ideal American girl, an embodiment of the new century and modernity (Hutton Turner 13). The spark plug is stripped
of all adornments, but is still powerful and erotically charged. For Picabia to make his statement, it was necessary for him to use text. On the spark plug, Picabia has also written the word “forever,” which indicates timelessness and power, or dramatic exaggeration and irony. This further emphasizes the important of the text to the meaning of the illustration. Duchamp similarly uses text with his readymade *Fountain*, 1917 (figure 2). He signed the readymade “R. Mutt,” using language to change and add to the meaning of the work. Without this false signing of the piece, *Fountain* would not have shocked its audience. Duchamp knew that with his name on the piece, critics would simply accept it as art from an artist (Gaiger 83). When the readymade was submitted into the Independent Artists’ exhibition in 1917 without Duchamp’s name, it was immediately voted by the directors to be removed from the show despite the exhibition’s promise to accept all art (Gaiger 85). Duchamp went on to publicize the event, turning it into a scandal. The scandal that followed, including editorials in various publications, is arguably more important to Dada than the actual piece. These publications, including “The Richard Mutt Case” published in Duchamp’s own magazine, *The Blind Man*, expressed the Dada disdain for art politics and hypocrisy explicitly and enabled a larger audience to understand the goals of Dada (Gaiger 86). For this piece to function as it was intended, Duchamp could not rely simply on the classic formal elements of art, nor could he use a formal medium such as paint on canvas. Rather, Duchamp worked with scandal and irony, a literary technique. Arp’s collage titled, *Arrangement According to the Laws of Chance (Collage with Squares)* from 1916-17 (figure 3), was created by allowing bits of paper to randomly fall onto a surface. Arp would then paste the bits of the paper wherever they fell. The purpose of this process is to completely annihilate the artist’s hand. To the Dadaists, individualism was a tired exercise and adhering to a type of painting was artificial to a level of immorality. Without the title, though, an audience would not
understand Arp’s point because the idea of chance would not be conveyed. The collage would read similarly to other completely abstract works of art, such as Mondrian’s grid compositions or Malevich’s squares. But unlike Mondrian, who believed his grid compositions represented utopian ideals, and Malevich, whose black and white compositions represented “pure art” and “the void,” respectively, Arp was not concerned with formal elements at all (Malevich 342, Mondrian 323). Instead, his secular collage’s meaning is completely found in the title of the work. The Dada aspect of the collage can only be clearly conveyed by a textual explanation.

There is a specific tone and rhetoric that all the Dadaist writers adhere to. Whether it is the manifestos of Tzara, the poems of Picabia, a play by Andre Breton, or an essay by Rrose Selavy, Duchamp’s female alter ego, Dada writing is consistent with its use of surreal juxtapositions, violent hyperbole, puns and other wordplay, themes of social destruction and disruption, echoes of primitivism, and atonality. Unlike the visual aspect of Dada, there is a consistent style found in Dada texts. Published in December 1918 in Dada 3, Tzara’s “Dada Manifesto” proclaimed that, “Dada means nothing” (Tzara 40). Just as Dadaists claim to make anti-art, Tzara’s manifesto is an anti-manifesto, full of contradictions and written with a lack of rules for artists to follow. It reads less like instructions on painting and more like a call to arms to bring down established laws of morality and logic. Here, Tzara is clearly influenced by the long poems of Rimbaud and Lautréamont, with their often violent and surreal attacks on bourgeois values (Ades, Littérature 162). Rimbaud’s A Season in Hell chronicles the narrator’s journey through hell in which he learns that his suspicions of the everyday world are true and that everyday motions are meaningless, while Lautréamont’s Les Chants des Maldoror’s titular protagonist does his best to violently disrupt every aspect of civilized society. These themes of suspicion of bourgeois values and the intense negative reaction to them are prevalent in the Dada
manifestos. The Dadaists and later, the Surrealists, many of whom fall under both categories, hailed Rimbaud and Lautréamont, as well as the poet Charles Baudelaire, as their forefathers (Lykiard 21). Tzara reacts to previous visual art movements, particularly Futurism and Cubism, with negativity and suspicion. He claims that art in general feeds into the bourgeois mouth and therefore must be abandoned completely for the movement to achieve its goals.

Today, Dada is understood as the early 20th century anti-art movement that rejected western art canon and built its own violent and puzzling oeuvre. The core of Dada is in the written word, though. What the Dadaists were reacting to, like the war, the bourgeois corruption, and static culture, could not properly be addressed with just visuals. These complex issues required an equally complex reaction and this could only be achieved through a combination of a variety of text and image. While Tzara himself argued that Dada was not literary, Dada text and literature are completely necessary to convey the sense of anti-art (Caws 18). Although anti-art strives to reject all convention and aesthetic value, that rejection is a convention and an aesthetic decision. An audience cannot discern anti-art merely by viewing it. There must also exist a text or label that indicates the anti-art intention of the artist. This text can come in the form of a Cabaret Voltaire event, a title of a piece or other text found within a piece, or one of the Dada manifests, poems, or essays. It was necessary for Dada to establish itself as a specific art movement because it did have specific, complex, and often subjective and vague goals. Despite the necessity of text for Dada, the movement could not simply have been a literary movement. Text alone could not have had the same intensity as the text paired with the visual, the performance, and the behavior. An iconic image, such as Duchamp’s *Fountain*, has more impact on an audience than any of Tzara’s labyrinthine manifests simply because it is easier and quicker to experience. This spontaneity and shock is a key quality for Dada. The movement
would not be nearly as significant and as liberating to the artists of the 20th century if it had merely been a collection of poems and essays. But without those texts, Dada could not have existed at all.
Works Cited


Figure 1. Francis Picabia, *Portrait of a Young American Girl in the State of Nudity*, 1915, ink on paper.
Figure 2. Alfred Stieglitz, studio photograph of Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain*, 1917,
Figure 3. Hans Arp, *Arrangement According to the Laws of Chance (Collage with Squares)*, 1916-17, torn and pasted papers, ink, and bronze paint, 49 x 35 cm.