

For the third time Dada has taken up its quarters at the MoMA.

In 1936, the exhibition Fantastic art, Dada, Surrealism, then, 32 years later, Dada, Surrealism and their heritage had shown that the Museum considered the continuity between Dada and Surrealism self-evident.

This idea doesn't seem to work anymore.

Today Dada is on its own in the galleries of the MoMA.

This emancipation is not the only innovation in the present exhibition. Dada has come back to the cities where its historic events were set.

How should we understand this evolution? Is it an effect of our increased knowledge, the expression of a profound change in our historical models or, more prosaically, the echo of the relations between André Breton and Tristan Tzara?

In 1936 the MoMA emphasized the connections between Dada and Surrealism so much that they seemed almost the same. In so doing, the museum glossed over all the old quarrels, the dirty tricks, anonymous letters, and accusations which cropped up frequently during the last episodes of Dada in Paris.

André Breton had made this poisonous atmosphere still worse in the spring of 1921 when he decided to impose on the Dadaists what he would later call "an almost complete change of outlook".

The "change of outlook" in question aimed at having Dada engage in a positive way, to act in the "ethical" domain.

The first act in this new program took place in May 1921. A more than reluctant Dada was led to organize the "trial" of the writer Barrès, an ex-figure of the literary avant-garde, who late in life had turned to singing the praises of patriotism. The trial provoked the first schism in the Dadaist ranks. Francis Picabia announced his defection: "Now Dada has a court, lawyers, soon probably policemen..." (a remark that would prove to be prophetic).

Deaf to this warning, André Breton pursued his plan to give a "positive" meaning to Dada's activities. In January 1922, he was busy organizing a Congress "to determine guide lines and defend the Modern spirit". Again, when Tzara expressed his reticence, Breton answered with a press release in which he called Tzara an "imposter eager for fame."

The "Coeur à barbe" evening organized by Tristan Tzara in July 1923 marked the definitive rupture between the Dadaists who were faithful to Tzara and the group from the review *Littérature* that Breton had brought together.

Soupault, Eluard and Baron, decided to disrupt the evening. The uproar began when Pierre de Massot read a poem listing the names of modern artists who had died on the battlefield. When he arrived at that of Picasso (who was there in the theatre), André Breton became furious. He went up on the stage with his cane, breaking Massot's arm.

Michel Sannouillet tells the story of the ensuing events:

"From the stage Tzara motioned to the police gathered in the corridors (...) the policemen threw Breton, along with Desnos and Péret, out..."

For Breton, Tzara's appeal to the police would brand him for a long time with the "mark of Cain".

A new cause for discord between the two camps appeared in 1927 when Breton, Aragon, Eluard, Peret, and Unik joined the Communist Party. Tzara reacted by declaring in a Rumanian review: "The communist revolution is a bourgeois form of revolution".

Aware of these polemics, from 1924 to 29, no art historian, no exhibition curator could possibly have the idea of associating Dada with Surrealism.

The events that took place from 1929 on, cast new light on the history of the relations between Dada and Surrealism.

When Tzara learned about the repression that German political militants were undergoing, he realized that a common front opposing the different fascist movements that were gaining power in Europe was urgently needed. The Communist Party seemed to him to be the only force sufficiently organized to lead this fight.

So Tzara's conversion to the principle of "positivity", to the ethical action which the surrealism of 1922 had called for, had the immediate effect of bringing him closer to Breton.

It was André Breton who took the initiative for the reconciliation. He made it official in the Second Manifesto of Surrealism where he wrote that the estrangement with Tzara "was not based on anything quite serious as we may have been led to think."

From that moment on, Tzara contributed to the surrealist reviews. In the issue of December 1931 of LSASDLR, he published an "essay on the situation of poetry" which showed his revolutionary commitment. The same year, numerous meetings of the surrealist group took place at Tzara's home, in rue Junot.

In the context of this newfound confidence, it became a sign of bad taste to recall the tumultuous history of Dada in Paris. However, this is just what Ribemont Dessaigne did in 1931 by publishing in the NRF a History of Dada, in which he concluded by stigmatizing the surrealists who had confined Dada to the domain of art.

An indignant Tzara asked for and obtained the right to answer in the NRF. Ribemont acted against the movement of history. The stormy weather reigning between Dada and Surrealism was over. This warming of the climate called for a new weatherman: to this Georges Hugnet was to dedicate his efforts.

In 1932 Hugnet became the official historian for Dada. He gathered the recollections of the protagonists of the movement and delved unstintingly into Tzara's archives. His study "The Dada Spirit in Painting" was published in episodes in the Cahiers d'art.

His objective account omits nothing of the internal struggles punctuating the history of Dada in Paris.

Nevertheless Breton said that he admired Georges Hugnet's essay. He invited him to join the Surrealist group in a Pigalle café. Hugnet immediately became a member. Until 1939 he participated regularly in the group's activities, exhibitions and publications.

The article in the Cahiers d'Art was the basis for the one that Hugnet gave the MoMA in 1936 for the Fantastic Art catalogue. His History of Dada was written in the light of the events of 1932. Surrealism had just put itself "at the service of the revolution", and Tristan Tzara had joined the ranks of the surrealists as well as those of the communist party. In the chapter he devoted to Zurich Dada, Hugnet recalled that already in 1919 Hans Richter had "established as a principle that the artist must take an active part in politics".

The part of the essay about Dada in Berlin recalls in what circumstances in Berlin Dada "spontaneously put itself at the service of the proletariat."

For Hugnet, everywhere, from Cologne to Hanover, Dada asked the questions to which Surrealism found the answers.

In the history written by Jean Hugnet, the flowing and smooth quality of the passage from Dada to Surrealism is seen as the key note. His narrative shows how Dada came to Paris to die, confident of its rebirth in the form of Surrealism.

The third, and last, episode in the history of Dada in the Cahiers d'art concluded with an intriguing "to be continued".

The political question that, in 1929, had been at the centre of Tzara's reconciliation with Surrealism was, in 1933, at the origin of a new rupture. Tzara was wary of the project for Minotaure, a review whose ostentatious luxury seemed to him to be in contradiction with the movement's political commitment.

"poetry is considered as an aim in itself. This is just what I'm always going to oppose as hard as I can, because of poetry's revolutionary nature." (Cahiers du sud)

Again in 1935 the tension increased still more when Breton denounced the Stalinist bigotry and authoritarianism of the Communist Party and finally broke with it. In response, Tzara published an article in which he preached the artist's unconditional commitment to communism. ("L'homme approximatif")

Again, current events contributed to the rewriting of history.

In an article, Breton had Surrealism begin in 1919 and forgot in doing so... the episode of Dada.

When, in 1934, Hugnet published a Short Poetic Anthology of Surrealism Tzara reacted violently to the publication. In a letter he sent to the Cahiers du sud he mentioned "a short anthology" of which he wrote, "One cannot affirm enough that the idiotic insufficiency of the preface is of a kind that makes the best intentioned doubt of the good faith of the person who put it together".

Another work about Surrealism would soon outrage Tzara. A Short Survey of Surrealism, published in London by Gascoyne in 1935, finished with this quotation from Nadja recalling the sad Coeur à Barbe evening: "M. Tristan Tzara would doubtless prefer that no one knew how the evening of the Coeur à barbe in Paris he 'turned us in', Eluard and me, to the police."

In 1935, the Tzara-Breton break was an accomplished fact. Tzara became an active, disciplined and zealous militant in the Communist Party. Breton went over to the Trotskyite camp. With Leon Trotsky In 1937, he cosigned the Manifesto "for an independent revolutionary art".

The text condemned "the totalitarian regime in the USSR (...) HOSTILE TO THE EMERGENCE OF ANY KIND OF SPIRITUAL VALUES".

Fantastic Art Dada Surrealism

At the beginning of the thirties, studies about either Surrealism or Dadaism were rather rare. In this bibliographical desert, Jean Hugnet's article, published in the Cahiers d'art, stood out particularly strongly. To its other merits can be added the double approval, both of the Dadaists and the Surrealists, from which it benefited.

When the New York MoMA started to organize its exhibition Fantastic Art Dada Surrealism, Hugnet's article affirming the continuity from Dada to Surrealism was in agreement with Alfred Barr's views and his desire to establish the genealogy of modern art. In 1936, the MoMA summed up the two axes of modern creation. Cubism and Abstract Art constituted the formalist trend; Fantastic Art Dada Surrealism emphasized what Barr called the "persistent interest which human beings have in the fantastic, the irrational, the spontaneous, the marvelous, the enigmatic and the dreamlike."

If the Surrealism of the thirties does seem to belong to the posterity of fantastic art, the anchoring of Dada to this same tradition amounts to a theoretic feat.

Before the show was to begin, Tzara, who no longer believed in either Breton's friendship or in Hugnet's objectivity, sent a recommended letter to Alfred Barr Jr. (on October 6, 1936):

"I have heard that (...) that the very meaning of your exhibition will be shifted and turn around Surrealism. Furthermore, something else that I did not know (...) is that it seems that the catalogue is to be prefaced by Breton. These two absolutely new elements change my ideas about your exhibition completely. A preface by Breton would not give me an adequate guarantee of the necessary objectivity in the presentation of Dadaist works."

Luckily for Barr and the MoMA, Georges Hugnet waited until the exhibition in New York was over before publishing the third chapter of his History of Surrealism in the Cahiers d'art. (in February 1937)

His account of Dada in Paris depicts Dada's agony. He repeatedly shows scores being settled and base tactical maneuverings. André Breton has the part of the saviour of Dada, the person who allows it to solve its contradictions.

As could be expected, the evening of the Coeur à barbe concluded the chapter about Dada in Paris. Following Gascoyne, Hugnet made the denunciation to the police the last Dada act. "Some others called in the police to reestablish the peace." "That's what Dada had come down to."

Tzara became furious at reading this last chapter of the History of Dada. He expressed his anger. He described the article as "particularly tendentious", call Hugnet as a "pen pusher", a "bureaucratic moralist" .

In 1937, no one could name an impartial and consensual historian capable of writing a preface for an exhibition like the one at the MoMA associating Dada with Surrealism.

But in 1937, no one could have had the idea of associating Dada and Surrealism.

After World War II, such an idea seemed to be possible again. In 1951, Robert Motherwell, who presented himself as "a young artist among the Parisian Surrealists", published his Dadaist anthology. Initially he aimed at publishing all of Hugnet's Cahiers d'art articles, of which the MoMA catalogue had only contained a short version. That Motherwell found Hugnet's essays relevant to current-day issues was a telling symptom of the growing warmth in the relationship between Dada and Surrealism.

In 1956, Hugnet and Tristan Tzara became reconciled. Again, Hugnet delved into the poet's archives in order to write a new study about Dada. L'aventure Dada appeared the following year,. In the preface to the work that he dedicated to Hugnet, Tzara wrote that "[Dada's] end was only relative. Its prolongations in surrealism and beyond (...) bear witness to its validity and historic necessity..."

The principle of continuity between Dada and Surrealism became the established view with Sannouillet's seminal work of 1965 on Dada in Paris.

"Surrealism is neither the 'reform' of Dada, nor a movement parallel to Dada. It is simply one of its multiple incarnations, doubtlessly the most brilliant, and the one to have the most spectacular future." Sannouillet concluded: "Surrealism was the shape Dada took in France".

For the author of Dada in Paris, nothing illustrates this metamorphosis of Parisian Dadaism into Surrealism as well as Les Chants magnétiques written in 1919 by André Breton and Philippe Soupault

Les Chants magnétiques, written by two convinced Dadaists, was called by Breton: the "first surrealist work".

Dada Surrealism and their heritage

With the 1968 exhibition *Dada Surrealism and their heritage*, the MoMA reaffirmed the continuity between Dada and Surrealism. His curator, William Rubin, noted that "Many of the essentials of surrealism – the experimentation with automatism, accident, biomorphism and found objects within the framework of an overriding commitment to social revolution – had been present in Dada to some degree."

His conclusion was faithful to what had been learned from the exhibition of 1936: "...these young poets (the surrealists) dialectically transformed moribund Dada into the new movement."

In the exhibition *Fantastic Art, Dada*, the very alive surrealism of the time was pulling Dada in its wake. Thirty years later, it was Dada's turn to be the dynamic element in the exhibition, fittingly, in view of the importance of Dada for the artists of that time.

The contemporary "heritage" from Dada and Surrealism derived principally from Dadaism, especially from Schwitters's *Merzbau* which, for W. Rubin, reconciled art and life and thus shared the concerns of Oldenburg, Eva Hesse and Robert Morris. Schwitters foreshadowed Rauschenberg and Spoerri, and the spectacles at the Cabaret Voltaire, performance art.

Dada by itself

Thirty years after William Rubin's exhibition, Dada is on its own at the MoMA.

In Paris as in Washington or New York nobody would have the idea of assimilating it with Surrealism any more. While the manuscript of *Les Chants Magnétiques*, which shows how one movement "dissolved" into the other, was shown in Paris, it has disappeared from the American versions of the exhibition.

As different as they are, the museographical agendas adopted at the Pompidou and at the National Gallery of Art both give a meaning to Dada's newly found autonomy.

The Pompidou's exhibition proposed different ways of entering the exhibition and invited visitors to wander in different directions, following an erratic path, freed from chronology. Emancipated from time and space, uchronic as well as utopic, Dada showed its contemporary relevance and acquired a literally mythic status. A mythical status resumed in Catherine Millet's definition of Dada as "The avant-garde that was mother to all the avant-gardes".

This view of Dadaism seen as bearing the flame of humanity's revolt and intransigence is the product of putting together the testimonies of former Dadaists who refused Surrealism, and the viewpoints of politically committed Surrealists who were hostile to Dada because of what they saw as its political irresponsibility.

In the first group, Ribemont Dessaigne and Francis Picabia bequeathed to the French tradition an image of Dada as a gesture of pure revolt.

Nowadays this extremely radical Dadaism is taught to new generations in the writings of Crail Marcus, who dresses Dada up in strass and vinyl. Marcus sees the *Evenings* at the Cabaret Voltaire as looking forward to the Sex Pistols in concert. Beyond the anecdote, this historical short-cut relates the punk *No FUTURE* to the Dadaist « abolition of the future ». It highlights the ontological originality of Dadaism, opposed to all forms of teleology and therefore different from forward-looking avant-gardes.

In contrast with the utopian vision presented in Paris, the exhibition in Washington reveals a Dada that has its feet on the ground. It opens with a room in which a documentary about World War I is shown. The exhibition resituates Dada in the cities where its events took place and in its chronology.

The exhibitions in Paris and Washington illustrate two historical narratives that dialogue with and mirror each other. While in Paris, Surrealism appears as having brought a politically irresponsible Dada to reason, in Washington, Surrealism could be accused of having dissolved Dada's political conscience in esoteric mists.

In the preface to the American catalogue, we read that, unlike Dada, Surrealism "was much more closely tied to the culture of poetry and the book, a rarefied social world, and more focused on the individual unconscious detached from the larger social one. Nor does the issue of public – of politics, mass communication, and audience relationships – come to center stage in Surrealism as they do in Dada."

This indifference of Surrealism to the social and political issues of its day is confirmed in another essay in the catalogue: "The difference is that where Dada coalesced on public stages, the surrealists sealed their pact in private rooms. From allies to initiates..."

The structure of an exhibition and its underlying museographic agendas bear witness to the epistemology used as a frame of reference by its conceivers.

What was the underline aims of Barr's assimilation of dada and surrealism in his 1936 's exhibition ?

One possible answer is brought by the catalogue that MoMA published to celebrate its fifth anniversary. Alfred Barr explained one of the reason which led him to connect Dada more closely with surrealism a year later.

« dada and Surréalism, to the extrem advance guardist, these movments seemed, as indeed they are, reactionary »

"Reactionnary", from the formalist point of view, is the surrealism of 1930, dominated by Dali who preache the return to the technique of academic painters.

"Reactionnary", ideologically, is dada, by refusing to believe in the future, and so, put itself in opposition to the usual forward momentum of avants-gardes.

A second possible answer to this connexion lies in Barr's fascination for diagramms.

These schema that Barr drew up to show the dynamics of the evolution of twentieth century art movements expressed a highly idealist vision, a synthesis of the Kantian process of autopurification in art and of Hegel's idea of the dynamics of history.

Elsewhere, Barr gave this vision the shape of a "torpedo" speeding towards the future. A torpedo which has so much energy and speed that it pulls dada and Surrealism along with it.

In contrast to barr's diagrams, The checkerboard layout in Paris, inducing a non-hierarchic and non-linear way of visiting the Dada exhibition, constitutes a radical alternative to the "mainstream" model identified with the pattern of formalist modernism.

Its theoretic model could be that of the "rhizome" formulated by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.

"Let us resume the principal characteristics of a rhizome: in contrast to trees and their roots, rhizomes connect any one point with any other point(...) . It is not made of units but of dimensions or, rather, of moving directions. It has neither beginning nor end but always a middle, by which it grows and reaches outward." (Milles Plateaux, Editions de Minuit, 1980)

The museographical option chosen in Washington, which aims to present Dada according to a confirmed historicist a priori, leads to a similar questioning of the "idealized" "disembodied" nature of modern art whose evolution had been mapped by the "family tree" drawn up by Alfred Barr. Challenging the idealism inherent to this modern art invented by the MoMA, recent American historiography has promoted a "base materialism" which has proved to be an effective and formidable theoretic tool.

Emphasizing that "Dada ... can be understood (...) as a refusal of both transcendence and sublimation", Leah Dickerman explicitly refers to this anti-idealist historiography.

This new history of art has substituted the dialectics of idealism and materialism for the pair "progressive and reactionary" that used to prevail in considering modernism, thus creating a yawning gap, almost a Grand Canyon, between a Dadaism of "comrades" and a Surrealism of "initiates".

Just as, because of modern astronomy, we no longer view the firmament as containing the heavenly bodies depicted on the ceiling at Grand Central Station, speculations on the "end of history", new materialist art history, interrogations about the idea of Progress, have finally led to the explosion of Alfred Barr's torpedo.