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Reviews

Women of Dada and Their Times

- Reviews section -

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This year is the centennial of the birth of Dada, an anti-bourgeois movement in literature and art with profound Left-wing associations, especially in relation to anti-colonialism. Cabaret Voltaire was a nightclub in Zurich, Switzerland where the movement was launched by the poets Emmy Hennings and other artists. This reflection by Penelope Rosemont is a contribution to both our Women's History feature and our ongoing centennial retrospective on World War I. â€” The Editors Against the Current

YES, THERE WERE Dada women!

One hundred years of Dada this year. Cabaret Voltaire lasted less than six months from its opening, February 1916 in Zurich, Switzerland. Who would have guessed that its obscure beginning would herald a world-rocking negativity that was at the same time an ardent demand for renewal?

The group, idea, movement that it created, Dada, itself didn't last very long but quickly mutated into surrealism and somehow made its radical presence known worldwide.

Zurich, at that time an island of peace, surrounded by ice, surrounded by war, attracted anarchists, revolutionaries, war resisters, bohemians who were fleeing the waves of patriotism and war fever rampant in Europe â€” it was even home for a time to Lenin. Albert Einstein lived there, taught there, was there in 1916. Bakunin had lived there earlier.

Emmy Hennings arrived with Hugo Ball in May 1915. They performed throughout Switzerland and then decided to establish a cabaret in Zurich named for Voltaire, to them "the anti-poet, the king of Jacanapes, the prince of the Superficial, anti-artist, preacher of the gate-keepers, the Papa Gigogne of newspaper editors..."

Plans were hatched with Marcel Slodky, Hans Arp and Max Oppenheimer. At Cabaret Voltaire's first evening Tristan Tzara and the Janco brothers showed up and joined them.

Emmy, herself a singer, was the star performer. Ball played piano. Other acts included a balalaika band and a Dutch banjo group, dancers who performed to the mandolin, passionate poets and pianist Artur Rubenstein who played Ravel, Saint-Saens and Debussy.

Art by Picasso, Slodky, Janco, Arp and others hung on the walls, amid dance created by Sophie Tauber Arp, and puppet skits by Hennings. They were soon joined by Huelsenbeck playing drums and reading his poems.

Plays, poems, dances, songs, Negro chants, puppet theater, all were encouraged, it was open to all comers. Ball wrote that it was "a race against the audience's expectations that called up all our powers of invention.... an indefinable intoxication."

According to painter Christian Schad, in the spring of 1916 Dada gave birth to itself from this atmosphere of "spontaneous incongruities, formulated anti-meaning, ebullient collisions of opinions." The name Dada itself was found by chance while searching for a title for their journal in a French dictionary.

When Dada or the cultural vanguard movements of this time are discussed, the women are most often completely left out. They might have been sensational performers as Emmy Hennings was, but nothing is left of their performances

â€” or it could just be the male-centered cultural sieve that strains women out. Some of my favorite women Dadas Hannah Hock, Hennings, Sophie Tauber Arp, Beatrice Wood and Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven participated and produced first class work, and yet....

Recovering Women Artists

Emmy Hennings was born in Flensburg on the coast of Germany, the daughter of a seaman. In 1906 she lost her child and was deserted by her husband; she took to the road, joining a traveling theater company. She had another child whom she left with her mother and continued as a vagabond performer appearing in road shows, light opera and nightclubs in Cologne, Budapest, Moscow and beyond.

A poet and writer, she wrote for *Pan* and *Die Aktion*, Left and anarchist journals. She and participated in the magazine *Revolution* which was founded by Hugo Ball and Hans Leybold. She was a star performer in Munich and met Hugo Ball while singing at Cafe Simplizissimus. Hugo Ball knew the gentle and elderly anarchist Gustav Landauer, active there, a fine writer especially notable for his theory of play.

In 1914 she spent time in prison charged with forging passports for those wishing to escape the war. She identified with the pacifists, not like some of the avant-guardists who supported the war. John Elerfield, editor of *Flight Out of Time* by Hugo Ball, claims she was implicated in a murder. She and Ball left for Zurich in 1915 to escape the madness.

According to Huelsenbeck, Hennings sang “Hugo Ball’s aggressive songs with an anger we had to give her credit her for although we scarcely thought her capable of it,” referring to the passionate voice of the frail Emmy. The Zurich Chronicle called her the “star of the cabaret” and described her as “exuberant as a flowering shrub, she presents a bold front and performs with a body that has only been slightly ravaged by grief.”

In her poem “Prison,” read at the first Dada event, she voiced her hatred of war and the prison system, her continuing despair: “There outside lies the world, there roars life, there men may go where they will, once we belonged to them, and now we are forgotten, sucked into oblivion, at night we dream of miracle on narrow beds, by day we go around like frightened animals, we peep out sadly through the iron grating, and have nothing more to lose....”

Cultural, Scientific & Social Revolution

Dada represented a beginning in a revolution of culture and consciousness, while Einstein brought the revolution in science. In November 1915 Albert Einstein triumphantly revised Newton’s universe with the General Theory of Relativity. “The general theory of relativity was not merely the interpretation of some experimental data or the discovery of a more accurate set of laws. It was a whole new way of regarding reality,” said his biographer Walter Isaacson.

In 1917 Hennings and Ball had broken with Dada and left Zurich. The Russian Revolution was in full swing. The Isaacson biography mentions the German Revolution of 1918 that began with a revolt of the sailors, became a general strike and then a popular uprising. On November 9, Einstein noted “Class cancelled because of Revolution.”

Protestors occupied the Reichstag and the Kaiser resigned. Students took over the university and jailed the deans

and the rector. Einstein and two friends, physicist Max Born and psychologist Max Werthheimer, asked the students to release the prisoners. But the students didn't have the power to do so, so Einstein and friends went to find the new German president who did then sign the release order. That day Einstein also addressed a group on the dangers of tyranny, both Right and Left.

Emmy published an autobiographical novel *Gefangnis* (1918) which described her prison confinement, her talks with other prisoners and the feeling prison provoked in her of being trapped always "whether in prison trapped by bars, or outside the walls trapped by society. Ball, who had written an entire book on Bakunin, now claimed anarchists were innocents (perhaps he did not always feel this way).

Emmy subsequently turned to Catholic mysticism. Most of her work, including two novels which may have a religious turn and further information on her life, is available only in German.

Einstein's work was not known to the broad world until 1919 when it was confirmed by the Eddington observations (on the deflection of light by gravity "ed.) The New York Times then published a huge six-part headline "Lights All Askew in the Heavens, Men of Science More or Less Agog over Results of Eclipse Observations, Einstein's Theory Triumphs, Stars Not Where They Seemed or Were Calculated to Be. But Nobody Need Worry....."

Kandinsky too passed through Zurich. He was a friend and a major influence on Hugo Ball, in touch with Tzara, and his work was included in the first Dada journal (1916). It is notable that Kandinsky's Moscow exhibition of 1920 shows a change in his work "forms floating in space, perfect circles, geometric designs, the spectrum of color, bent forms and waves, cosmological considerations. He seems to have been translating Einstein's theory of relativity into exhilarating paintings.

In a time of high hopes and many defeats a short-lived Munich Soviet was established in 1919 and the gentle Gustav Landauer became minister of education. Soon all were massacred by the military Freikorps. [1]

Thinking about Dada today, it is astonishing that such a small, obscure group should have become such an influence. It was the laboratory for new ideas and unrestrained, uninhibited, playful activity and their works still find joyful resonance in our hearts. Groupings like this still exist.

One finds them around small magazines; they are poets, artists, socialists, anarchists and environmentalists. They are determined to create new ideas, new worlds and most of all, a new future.

[Against the Current](#)

[1] On the Munich Soviet and massacre, see [here](#)