

# Dada and Music: Tackling Musical Conventions

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The Dada movement is known for its subversive, rebellious and anticonventional attitudes, manifesting itself mainly within the domain of art and literature. Dadaism, as an artistic movement, was active during a relative short period of a couple of years before and after 1920. After 1924 no more Dadaist activities were developed. However, since the Dadaists not only concerned themselves with artistic issues – as did earlier movements like Cubism or Expressionism – but with social and political issues as well, the Dada spirit survived its original period due to its anticonventional and nonconformist mentality and its sense of nonsense and absurdism. It continued to work in different art practices in Europe and America, like a smouldering fire or as a root system, a rhizome.

In the 1950s and 1960s Dadaist tendencies were revived by composer John Cage and the Fluxus movement in New York. Cage was influenced by Marcel Duchamp in particular, while most Fluxus members were strongly influenced by both John Cage and Dadaism. Lesser known is that certain Dadaists, although having a limited musical background, targeted the musical conventions of that time. In this paper I want to research how the musical concerns of these Dadaists can be understood within their overall, anticonventional attitudes. I will then take into account how their musical expressions were received at the time and whether their approaches influenced artists, musicians and composers of later periods.

## I



I. The Meierei tavern in Zurich, 1935, where Cabaret Voltaire was staged.



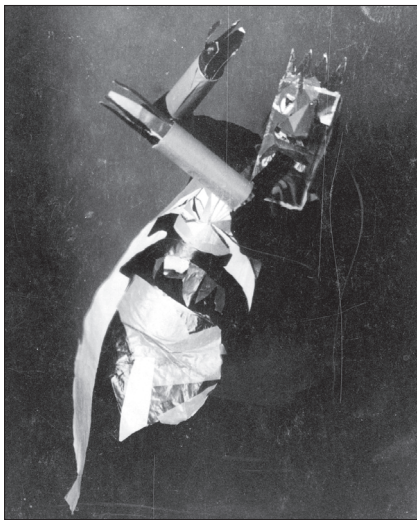
II. Hugo Ball and Emmy Hennings, Zurich, 1916.

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Initially *Cabaret Voltaire*, established in the back room of the Zurich *Meierei tavern* during the first half of 1916, had been planned to be a stage for artistic entertainment. It was founded by Hugo Ball.

The *Cabaret Voltaire* was a daily cabaret with musical and literary presentations by artists that would be present as guests, without any artistic predilection.<sup>1</sup> Modern-classical music, modern dance in free expression and modern Expressionist or Futurist poems were performed. Modern paintings and prints were shown on the walls.<sup>2</sup> Against the backdrop of the Great War, the performances soon became increasingly grim and irrational. The Cabaret Voltaire artists believed civilization was rapidly deteriorating. For their grim and irrational, but also absurdist and playful expressions, the word ‘dada’ was found as a common denominator.<sup>3</sup> The *Cabaret Voltaire* performers – consisting next to Hugo Ball of: Emmy Hennings, Tristan Tzara, Marcel Janco, Hans Arp, Sophie Taeuber, Richard Huelsenbeck – rebelled against trusted standards and conventions, because they found these had lost their meaning and value in the circumstances of the war. Both in society and in the arts. They rebelled against the supposed rationality and logic of the authorities that had started the war, and of the people that supported them. They rebelled by presenting new forms of literary recitation that was inspired by the Italian Futurists – such as the simultaneous poem, in which various performers recite different texts at the same time so that no one in the audience could make out a single sentence. Also, they performed bruitist plays or sketches, that were accompanied by a variety of noises. Such as: rattles, whistles, sirens, propellers, typewriters, drums, clapping and stomping. One of the bruitist performers, Richard Huelsenbeck, was banging a big drum frequently. Furthermore, they recited sound poems consisting of non-existing, meaningless, abstract ‘words’, as if using a fictional language.<sup>4</sup> Through the use of self-made masks and costumes, they reached a higher level of irrationality.<sup>5</sup> All these methods were later adopted by the Berlin and Paris Dadaists.

In their visual works of art, the Cabaret Voltaire artists Hans Arp and Marcel Janco used abstraction, collage and unconventional materials. Such as: pieces of cloth, cardboard, rope and plaster. Berlin Dadaists Raoul Hausmann, Hannah Höch, George Grosz and John Heartfield, made collages with photos and newspaper clippings (photomontages), as well as assemblages of heterogeneous objects. These were methods of eliminating the sensitive, the personal and the signature from their



III. Sophie Taeuber dancing in a Cubist costume, Zurich, 1916.

work. In a similar manner and for much the same reasons, Max Ernst composed his visual works in Cologne, using printing clichés and cut out book illustrations. By these methods the Dadaists rebelled against the dominance of ‘high’ over ‘low’ art: ‘*Everyone Can Dada*’<sup>6</sup> they yelled on a text poster in their famous *Erste Internationale Dada-Messe (First International Dada Fair)* of 1920 in Berlin. Another one of their slogans was; ‘*Dilettantes Revolt Against Art!*’<sup>7</sup>. They criticised the inviolability of ‘high art’ and rebelled against the idea of the supposed artist-genius. The dada attitude was iconoclastic, in the sense that the Dadaists were fighting traditional or conventional artistic methods and ideas by destroying them. Apart from using non-artistic, impersonal, found materials such as newspaper clippings, photos and found objects, they also applied chance, as a method to avoid predictability. And, of course; irony, cynicism and humour became natural ingredients for the Dadaists. The here described methods and approaches became part of the strategies that define Dadaism.

## II

Music played an important role in the *Cabaret Voltaire* soirees. Founder Hugo Ball and some professional, classically trained pianists, played music by modern-classical composers such as Reger, Liszt,



IV. Opening of the First International Dada Fair, ca. 30 June, 1920.

with shrill dissonances, culminating in a boisterous climax. At right angles to the piano he had placed a harmonium. While his left hand played the piano friskily, he pressed in, with his right forearm, as many keys of the harmonium at once, as possible – all the while operating the pedals of the harmonium energetically, with his right foot. Heusser juxtaposed heterogeneous styles, with a preference for jazz and a major role for chance. He combined pseudo church music with experimental sounds. That heterogeneity, the use of different styles side by side, but also the combination of high culture (serious music) and low culture (marching music, popular music, folk songs), was indicative of a critical and anti-artistic approach that became characteristic of Dada in Zurich.<sup>10</sup>

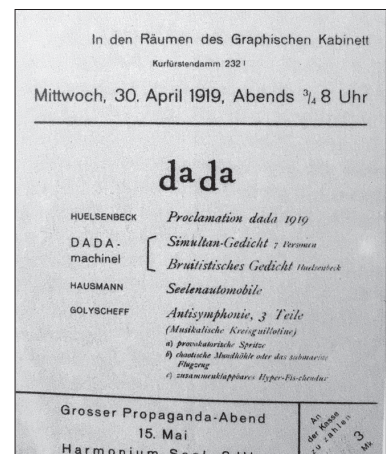
The protagonists of Berlin Dada adopted Futurist-Dadaist methods such as simultaneous poetry and bruitism, and introduced *noise* as a representation of the vivid and chaotic modern life. They loved contemporary jazz music. George Grosz wrote poems that he called ‘Sincopations’, to which he danced on stage. But, unlike the Zurich Dadaists, the Dadaists of Berlin didn’t give music a prominent place in their manifestations.<sup>11</sup> However, in composer and visual artist Jefim Golyscheff, they saw a true Dadaist. He showed assemblages of heterogeneous, banal objects in their first Dada-exhibition in 1919, much to their acclaim. Golyscheff was invited to perform some of his musical compositions at a couple of Dada soirees. For a specific soiree in 1919 he had composed a piece called *Keuch Maneuver* (*Gasp Maneuver*), in which self-made instruments and kitchen utensils had been used. On an earlier soiree Golyscheff had performed his composition *Anti-Symphonie*.<sup>12</sup> At his sign, a girl in a white dress sat down at the grand piano, while Golyscheff announced his *Anti-Symphonie* with the voice of an electronic puppet. Many years later, Raoul Hausmann commented on Golyscheff’s piece as follows:

*Ay Ay, Mr Johann Sebastian Bach, your well-tempered disorder is crashing with the dodecaistic Antisymphonie! Over and out with the fancy sounding plait of that oh so sublimely grounded tradition! Dada also triumphs in tones! Gentlemen, are your rusted-up ears ringing? Allow the musical circular saw to deal with them! Rinse the remains of your voice with Golyscheff out of your chaotic mouthcave!*<sup>13</sup>

This performance was, much like Heusser’s drum performance in Zurich, true musical iconoclasm – although it wasn’t devised and performed by the core Dadaists. On the first Paris Dada soiree, music by Satie and Les Six<sup>14</sup> was played on pi-

Debussy, Scriabin, Rachmaninoff and Saint-Saëns.<sup>8</sup> Modern and innovative music that used atonality and dissonance, but not per se *iconoclastic* music – since basic elements like the structure of a composition remained preserved. After five months, *Cabaret Voltaire* had stopped, but other Dada soirees were still being organised. Incidentally and mostly for a small audience. One of those soirees was dedicated to the pianist-composer Hans Heusser, who had played piano in earlier Dada events.<sup>9</sup>

For this particular soiree, Heusser had planned a totally iconoclastic performance. His compositions for piano, harmonium and voice, avoided traditional harmonies. The music he performed was strongly rhythmic, referring to so-called ‘primitive’ cultures,



V. Program for the Berlin Dada Soiree of 30 April, 1919.

ano.<sup>15</sup> It was modern and experimental music but I would not name it *iconoclastic* music, because many conventional musical elements were kept intact. However, on two of the next major Dada manifestations some outrageous musical compositions, made by Dadaists themselves, were impassively performed by a professional pianist.<sup>16</sup> Apparently, some of the core Dadaists felt an urge to compose music as well. The writer and painter Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes had composed his musical pieces by using a self-made, pocket size, sort of roulette device. This way he let chance determine the positions and order of the musical notes – and possibly also of elements like meter and rhythm. The result was a dissonant melodic and harmonic pattern, that became increasingly complex by the use of chance, repetition and the adding of different layers. He also parodied established musical notation by incorporating illogical, contradictory instructions to certain sections of the score. Visual artist and writer Francis Picabia also composed occasional musical pieces for such Dada soirees. Announced as ‘sodomist music’, one piece consisted of a series of repetitions of three notes varying in speed and duration, all performed by the same professional pianist. In this way, traditional musical conventions were torn down. Like in Dada visual arts, the cult of the artist-genius was attacked in Dadaist music too. No musical training was needed and neither was virtuosity sought in the performances. Everyone could make music. The music of both Ribemont-Dessaignes and Picabia broke with all expectations and conventions, and with the supposedly good taste of the upper classes. The class of authorities and politicians.<sup>17</sup>

The use of chance became an essential creative method for Dadaist artists. Marcel Duchamp<sup>18</sup> used chance to establish certain goals or new standards. From a one meter height, he dropped three pieces of thread, each of one meter length, which he then fixed on canvas in the forms they had attained by chance (*Three Standard Stoppages*, 1913–1914). He considered these forms as a new standard to work with, and moreover, by doing so he questioned the infallibility of common standards.<sup>19</sup> Other standards appeared to be possible! At around the same time he developed his musical experiments. During the Christmas holidays of 1913, while staying at his parents’ home in Blainville, near Rouen in Normandy, Duchamp invited his two youngest sisters to participate in his composing method. He had written down musical notes on pieces of paper which he put in a hat. Subsequently, he picked them out at random to write them down on music paper. He repeated this procedure twice, to obtain three parts, to then be sung by his sisters and himself. He named the piece: *Erratum Musical*.<sup>20</sup>

For another piece, originated about the same period, entitled *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors Even. Erratum Musical*, Duchamp devised a more complex composing method. He numbered all keys of a piano 1 to 85, from left to right. Likewise, he numbered a set of 85 small balls. Other instruments he used, were a couple of small trolleys and a big funnel. The procedure Duchamp applied was as follows: he filled the funnel with all of the numbered balls, then led the trolleys at varying speeds under the funnel, collecting the dropping balls at random. He then took the balls out, one by one, and recorded their numbers on music paper. This procedure could be repeated infinitely, with the same set of balls falling in entirely different sequences in the trolleys. The result was a randomly composed piece of music, that was preferably to be played on a mechanical piano or organ – thus avoiding a virtuoso musician giving an individual interpretation of the piece. Such a conceptual, and really iconoclastic method of composing – that was based on chance, combined with a mechanical performance – could hardly express any kind of emotion as traditional compositions were believed to aim for. Moreover, since every note could only be used once per sequence or ‘period’ as he called it, Duchamp’s compositions lacked traditional and recognized standards, such as chords or harmonies, or the repetition of patterns. The music implied a rather demanding and unconventional listening attitude.<sup>21</sup>

### III

Not much can be found about the reception of the musical performances by Dadaists in Zurich, Berlin and Paris by audiences and critics. A review of the Hans Heusser soiree in Zurich, by a critic

of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (June 2, 1917), simply accepted the lack of traditional harmonies and the abundance of strong rhythms as a part of Dadaist theories. But the critic did mention he would rather have liked some more uniformity and melody in the work. In Heusser's oriental dances the critic recognized the rhythmic and 'erotic' sound figures of 'primitive' people. But the critic couldn't appreciate the mingling of 'archaic tendencies' or church music with 'extreme futuristic' sounds. All in all, he couldn't see these 'insane' expressions as either 'music' or 'art'.<sup>22</sup>

In Berlin, the insults of the Dadaists towards the audience, on the soiree that had Golyscheff's *Anti-Symphony* on the program, were appreciated by the audience as farcical, according to another critic. In contrast to some other Dada manifestations, the audience was not at all shocked and did not feel an urge to protest.<sup>23</sup>

In Paris however, Ribemont-Dessaignes' music had an utterly disturbing effect on the audience. The subsequent uproar consisted of shouts, cries and whistles that united in a discordant harmony with the music. When at the end of the soiree a well-known professional singer performed a late-romantic song, that was misleadingly announced as a 'manifest', she was booed off the stage. Everything the Dadaists came up with at that point in the programme, was thereafter ridiculed and dismissed by the audience.<sup>24</sup>

A rebellious audience was not reserved to Dada manifestations. Many performances of avant-garde pieces at that time, that broke with traditional concepts of music or art, were met with an uproar by a shocked audience. Think of what happened at the premiere of Stravinsky's ballet *Le Sacre du printemps* (*Rite of Spring*) in 1913 in Paris. But innovative composers like Stravinsky were unambiguous about their new works, while the calculated musical provocations by the Dadaists were often just part of their overall strategies.

If common Dadaist features included an opposition to accepted, traditional or conventional, values in arts and society – in order to shake up expectations and to attack rusted-up, bourgeois mindsets, to question the distinction between 'high' and 'low' art and to attack the cult of the artist-genius and of academically trained artists – this naturally also applied to Dadaist music.

The Dadaist methods, which we have been able to distinguish so far, were: the use of non-traditional artistic materials for addressing unconventional topics and themes, the use of chance with a subversive, provocative attitude and a certain playfulness, and a good sense of anarchic humour and absurdism. These were all applied with the intention of disturbing set expectations and opinions of audiences. All these methods apply to Dadaist music: juxtaposing classical music with popular music, working with non-musical objects as instruments, using chance, and discomforting the audience expectations with anticonventional musical performances.

#### IV

In the slipstream of the Dada movements in Berlin and Paris a few composers appeared who – at least at one point – addressed conventional expectations. Although they were all influenced by Dadaism, they were not members of original Dada groups. Such composers were: Erwin Schulhoff and Stefan Wolpe in Germany, and Erik Satie, Edgard Varèse and George Antheil in Paris. What connects their approaches to dadaism is a significant degree of nonconformism, an *iconoclastic* attitude towards supposed good taste and accepted ideas and forms – and a good sense of humour. These composers shared an interest in popular and jazz music, and introduced distinctive rhythmic patterns – using percussion in a way that reminds of Hans Heusser's rhythmic performance at 'his' Dada soiree in Zurich, or of Huelsenbeck's big drum at the *Cabaret Voltaire*.

Erwin Schulhoff was politically engaged, like the Berlin Dadaists, and an advocate of revolution in the arts. He displayed a distinct sense of absurdity in at least three pieces from 1919. *In Futurum* is a silent piece, consisting entirely of rests, which anticipates John Cage's *4'33"*. It has the following performance instruction: 'the whole piece with free expression and feeling, always, until the end'. The sheet music for Schulhoff's *Sonata Erotica für Solo-Muttertrompete* (*Sonata Erotica for Solo-*

*Mother Trumpet*), bears the notation that this ‘sonata’ had to be a piece ‘in which a soprano spends several minutes faking a carefully notated orgasm’. *Symphonia Germanica* was composed as a satirical charge against the German nationalism and militarism of those days. In it, the German anthem was cited in a highly ironic manner. A voice is wailing and growling chaotically ‘Deutschland, Deutschland über alles...’, accompanied by divergent miscellaneous noises.<sup>25</sup>

Stefan Wolpe integrated elements of jazz and popular music into his compositions, alongside Dadaist characteristics like: sudden surprises, extreme contrasts, the use of chance and the simultaneity of unrelated elements. These particular features kept his interest all of his professional life. An early example of his particularly, Dadaist vision on music was a performance in which he had eight gramophone players at his disposal, of which he could regulate the speed. This way he would play a Beethoven symphony very slowly or very quickly, and combine that with funeral marches or popular tunes like waltzes.<sup>26</sup>

Both Varèse and Antheil applied, influenced by jazz music, strong, percussive rhythms in their music, and incorporated unconventional instruments like sirens and all kinds of exotic percussion instruments. Antheil even used electric bells and airplane propellers for his piece *Ballet Mécanique* (1924).

Erik Satie used pronounced rhythms in his works as well, towards the end of his life. For example, in his last composition, which was for the *Relâche* ballet (1924). The choreographic piece included the absurdist *Entr’acte* intermission film, for which Satie cooperated with Francis Picabia, who devised both the ballet and the film. Several of Satie’s compositions had, apart from their anticonventional form, absurdist titles like *Three Pieces in the Form of a Pear*, or *Tapestry in Forged Iron*, the latter belonging to a series he called *Furniture Music*. These titles are reminiscent of the alienating, non-referential and playful titles that Duchamp gave to many of his works.

Distinguishable Dadaist tendencies hardly resurfaced within the arts again, until the 1950s. With the exception of composer John Cage. Cage came in contact with the works and ideas of Marcel Duchamp at an early stage of his formal education.<sup>27</sup> As a result, he started experiments with non-musical instruments in the 1930s, things like metal plates and household objects were ‘played’ in a rhythmical way. Switching appliances on and off, and making percussive patterns with divergent materials. Other such early experiments by Cage included the development of the ‘prepared piano’. Things like nuts and bolts, screws and rubber erasers were inserted in between the strings of the piano, to acquire strange, unconventional sounds when the instrument was played. Like Duchamp, John Cage used chance as a compositional method. In 1951 a copy of the *I Ching*, or the *Book of Changes* was presented to him. He started to write music by consulting the coincidental ‘answers’ the book gave him to specific questions he posed, related to the score – such as pitch, duration, intervals.<sup>28</sup> He kept applying this chance-method in all his professional life. Using chance and non-musical instruments in a playful manner, disregarding any strict distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ art, but also by integrating art and life, Cage manifested a distinct Dadaist stance – except that his methods were aimed at creating new music, while perhaps for Duchamp and Dadaism in general, breaking down conventional values was the main goal – as it was for Fluxus.<sup>29</sup>

## V

Dadaist features and methods were widely adopted in the later, international Fluxus movement (USA, Germany, Japan, Netherlands) in the beginning of the 1960s. To label the movement, the term: ‘Neo-Dada’ was used. Fluxus included artists, poets, composers, designers and people from outside the artistic field. Their view on art, and on the art world as well as on society, was in many ways like that of the Dadaists. Fluxus members distanced themselves from the commercial art world and considered finished works unimportant. They attached great value to the creative processes. Fluxus operated outside of conventional, so called ‘mummified’ art institutions. Like John Cage, from whom they drew much of their inspiration, they took the position that any boundaries between art and

everyday life should be broken down as much as possible. Like Dada did, Fluxus attacked artistic conventions: Fluxus works and events had to be simple and were allowed to be entertaining.<sup>30</sup>



VI. Piano Activities performed during Fluxus Internationale Festspiele Neuester Musik. Hörsaal des Städtischen Museums Wiesbaden, Germany 1962.

Fluxus participants applied the method of presenting everyday objects and performing banal acts as art. This was considered ‘anti-art’ and ‘anti-music’. In 1962, in Wiesbaden, Germany, a great *International Fluxus Festival for Newest Music* (‘Fluxfest’) was held.<sup>31</sup> Besides performances by several Fluxus members, music by John Cage was performed, next to music by modern composers like Stockhausen and Ligeti. To give some idea of what these, then ‘newest,’ Fluxus musical performances would have sounded and looked like, I will describe some specific performances.

A group of Fluxus members, lined up behind a table, made gestures and sounds by tapping, jumping, clapping and knocking. In another performance blocks of wood, a duck whistle, a small pair of scissors, a violin and a double bass – that was ‘prepared’ with clothespins and glue clamps and played with all kinds of materials – were used. During their ‘Four Directional Song of Doubt for Five Voices’, five performers each repeated their own word of a sentence. In the piece ‘Piano Activities,’ a prepared, grand piano was ‘played’ by the present

Fluxus performers with a hammer, a saw, a large brick and various household objects, until it was completely demolished.<sup>32</sup>

Cage’s prepared piano, was taken to the extreme by Fluxus member Nam June Paik. He not only manipulated every possible part of a piano with all kinds of objects and materials, he also connected them to electrical devices – such as light bulbs and hair dryers. The keys that were still playable, activated those devices when hit. The audience was invited to come on stage and play the piano. Apart from Fluxus’ ambition to seriously investigate new creative processes, this approach can also be interpreted as an attack on conventional musical practice, wherein the audience is turned into the performer and the work of art is democratically defined by both the artist and the public.<sup>33</sup>

On the last day of this *Fluxfest* in Wiesbaden, music by Pierre Schaeffer was performed. Although Schaeffer had no connection with Fluxus himself, his method of working resembles the Dadaist practices of collaging and assembling. Through his work for a French broadcasting station, he was able to combine his expertise as an engineer with his passion for sound. He experimented with the electronic equipment of the radio studio to create a wide variety of sounds, and combined these with recorded music from gramophone records. He rerecorded fragments of records, either playing them backwards, or delaying them, accelerate, repeat them, or have them played in loops. Later on, he started using self-recorded, ambient sounds. One would hear pieces of piano music mixed with fragments of conversations, or the sounds of steam trains and spinning lids – whether or not manipulated by electronic devices. At a later stage, Schaeffer was able to use a new studio that had a tape recorder. The magnetic tape recorder was a revolutionary innovation in sound recording at that time – a godsend for Schaeffer to expand his experiments with much more ease and many new possibilities.

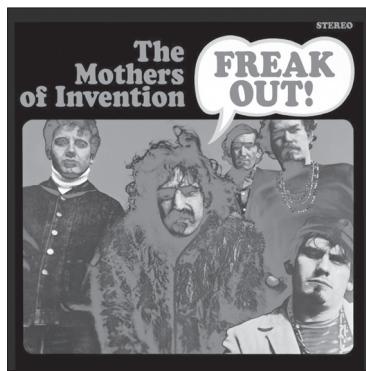
Schaeffer coined the term *musique concrète* (concrete music) for his sound collages. His music is often remarkably rhythmical and harmonical. Like Cage, Schaeffer sought out the limits of what

musical expression could be and explored uncharted territory with pure technical means. His way of working changed the traditional process of musical composition. A classical composition begins with the abstraction of traditional musical notation, which then results in audible music. But concrete music starts with the opposite: with concrete and specific sounds that lead to a composition through an extensive process. With his concrete music, Schaeffer had a great influence on composers and musicians of different directions.<sup>34</sup>

## VI

Dadaist strategies also were employed by certain rock musicians and rock bands. I will here, briefly consider Frank Zappa, The Residents, Einstürzende Neubauten, Cabaret Voltaire and Throbbing Gristle.

The musical collages or concrete music that Pierre Schaeffer had developed were among the methods that the American rock artist Frank Zappa used. Already on his first albums in the second



VII. Front cover of the first album by The Mothers Of Invention (1966).

half of the 1960s. In his teens Zappa had been a passionate listener of blues, rhythm and blues (R&B) and rock 'n' roll music; but he had also discovered the rhythmical, percussive music of Edgard Varèse. With this self-taught musical background, Zappa learned to combine an avant-garde interest in experimentation with poppy tunes and an ironic sense of humour. The music he did with his band *The Mothers of Invention* consisted of a mix of R&B and percussive avant-garde pieces, with bland vocal parts. He often applied distorted vocals and instrumentation, as well as musical collage. In his lyrics he manifested a very critical and ironical stance on American society. He matched his seriousness with a sharp irony and broadened rock with avant-garde experiments, often in the range of one song. This way he contrasted and mixed, 'high' and 'low' art.<sup>35</sup>

The Californian band The Residents used an extensive set of anticonventional strategies to attack the commercial music business, achieving a high level of both irony and absurdism. On their first albums, in the mid-1970's, they tackled as untrained musicians, divergent popular songs by contemporary acts like Nancy Sinatra, The Beatles, The Rolling Stones and Iron Butterfly. In later years, they did heavily edited versions of songs by Elvis Presley, James Brown and Michael Jackson, deconstructing them and rendering them bare – generally impenetrable for listeners that are familiar with the original popular tunes. This ironical and 'anti-musical' attitude, is reminiscent of the musical approaches by Dadaists. Subsequently, the status of rock musicians – especially that of rock stars – was fundamentally attacked by The Residents. The Residents consequently concealed their identities by wearing masks on stage and never revealing their real names or personal data. Their masks, that have the shape of an eyeball with a top hat on, have ironically become iconic. This anti-rockstar and anti-pop attitude, can be considered as equivalent of the Dadaist anti-genius attitude and their critique on consumerism.

The strategies of both Zappa and The Residents are similar of Dadaist strategies, in the way they question musical conventions and commercialism. Both use appropriation and transformation of existing pop songs, similar to the Dadaist cut-and-paste strategy with magazine clippings and photographs. Moreover, like the Berlin Dadaists in particular, Zappa and The Residents showed a similar critique towards conservative values and right-wing politics.<sup>36</sup>

Like The Residents, the Berlin rock band Einstürzende Neubauten started off as a group of untrained musicians. The Neubauten scoured scrap heaps in search of material that can be used for percussion or texture sounds. Their musical approach starts with almost nothing, aiming to make 'music' without conventional instruments. Shopping carts, trash cans, iron sheets, oil drums and all

sorts of other metallic stuff that was found on scrap heaps and construction sites were supplemented with power tools, like drills and chainsaws. Punk rock's *do-it-yourself* mentality was pre-eminently true for this band in its first phase (from 1980 onwards). But rather unlike punk – which 'first wave' as a movement was already over at the time Einstürzende Neubauten started – they did not apply a fast '1-2-3-4!' time with a basic, three-chord progression. Neither other familiar rock elements, such as choruses and bridges, are found in the music of the Einstürzende Neubauten. Routine had to be avoided, logic was sabotaged, all self-evident approaches were disrupted. All totally like Dada. Apart from rock music, Dada and Futurism were actual sources of inspiration for the Einstürzende Neubauten. They payed tribute to Dada with their: 'Let's Do It a Dada', that was released in in 2007, when their music had evolved into more conventionally structured songs.<sup>37</sup>

Two bands from the industrial Northern England were Cabaret Voltaire and Throbbing Gristle. These were unschooled musicians too, that used electronics as the basis for their musical experiments. Reminiscent of Fluxus, they considered themselves as non-musicians that rebelled against conventional and commercial rock music. Both groups were inspired by the Dada movement – it's not without meaning that one of these named itself after the infamous Zurich Dada stage. Both groups also applied the literary *cut-up* technique, popularized by the American beat-writer William Burroughs. Burroughs was, in turn, indebted to Dadaist Tristan Tzara with his recipe for a Dadaist poem: cut a text into pieces, shuffle these and then re-arrange them in random order.<sup>38</sup> While Cabaret Voltaire was mainly about experimentation with sounds and rhythms, Throbbing Gristle was out for *anti-music*.

On an attic, Cabaret Voltaire created its own musical universe using a tape recorder, an analogue synthesizer and a self-built oscillator, into which they fed the sounds of voices, a clarinet, a drum machine and an electric guitar. Everything they put in, came out strongly distorted. They cut and pasted divergent fragments – whilst improvising and by using chance – into compositions, that were reminiscent of concrete music and the cut-up method. An example of their first, experimental phase is: 'The Dada Man', a recording that was composed of synthesizer sounds, ambient sound recordings, and ascending and descending rhythms from an edited drum machine – avoiding a fixed rhythm – and that varied in pitch and volume. Sometimes they drove around in a van from which their tape loops were blaring. They roamed pubs with their tape recorder. At other times they performed in music halls under the guise of a normal 'rock band', whereby the audiences felt fooled and once exposed to a hellish load of anti-pop noise, they started revolting. Very reminiscent of the fuss at the early Dada events. Their anti-conventional musical strategy not only attacked traditional song structures, but also the audience's ears, which were used to more harmonical scores. Over the years, their music became more structured, with the application of regular rhythms and repeated musical patterns that were mostly built around two consecutive tones. Music that was still filled with electronics and wherein choruses and bridges were still absent.<sup>39</sup>

Throbbing Gristle (TG) used very similar methods: feeding sounds of instruments and voices into various electronic machines, thus achieving a wide, multi-layered range of distortions and effects. *Noise* and 'industrial' rhythms were the result (TG's music was the first to be labelled 'industrial'). Recording their playful improvisations directly, without structuring them into common song structures, TG wanted to avoid to sound like a regular rock band. They had no drummer, were unlearned as musicians, and addressed unconventional, taboo-breaking themes in the lyrics, that were driven by a fascination for 'evil'. Often, the lyrics were improvised; on stage and in the studio. The rise of punk rock was of no importance to the band. The singer Genesis P-Orridge thought punk was too



VIII. The Residents,  
Autographed Photo, 1978.

traditional, and even too musical. He didn't appreciate the punk rock motto: 'Here's three chords... now start a band'. In contrast, he said: start a band with no chords, do whatever you want. Throbbing Gristle was *anti-music*. Nevertheless, their albums sound exciting. The soundscapes are varied and layered, machine-like rhythms create an industrial atmosphere, guitar and bass are played with a lot of echo and distortion. Their music was very loud and had changing frequencies that were meant to have a physical effect on the audience, which sometimes resulted in nausea or even epileptic attacks. Although the music did become more structured and accessible later on in their work, the ominous sounds, in combination with P-Orridge's melancholy voice, make TG's music indebted to Dada.<sup>40</sup>

## VII

Dadaist attitudes, thoughts, strategies, methods and work were continued in later periods and practices. I will now look into how these compare to the original Dada movements.

When in 1916 the word 'dada' was found among the artists of *Cabaret Voltaire*, it was against the background of the Great War, that had already led to millions of military and civilian victims. While these Zurich Dadaists were perhaps mostly thinking of exploring new directions in art practice – noting that immigrants in Switzerland were forbidden to show their political convictions at that time<sup>41</sup> – the Berlin Dadaists were more politically engaged. They were opposed against the ruling class, that, as they saw, oppressed the working class. In the field of the arts, they addressed acclaimed, new artistic trends like Expressionism and Cubism, as well as the concept of 'art for art's sake'. Dada tackled 'high art' snobbery, the illusion of the so-called artist-genius and the commercial art world, as well as social and cultural conservatism in general – which they saw as responsible for the disastrous course of the war and the social circumstances thereafter. They showed an anti-art, anti-war and anti-bourgeoisie stance that was expressed in their work, including their music. Their works and words were, to a great extent, reactions to the historical contexts of their times. But not exclusively: Marcel Duchamp, for instance, would not have his creative thinking and subject matter be influenced or directed by socio-historical circumstances.

When Dada resurfaced in the 1950s, the historical context had changed completely. Society and technology had evolved, and a second World War had disrupted societies once again. When artists and musicians recurred to Dadaist methods, it was for the artistic approaches and methods in themselves. These practices in the fifties generally did not show a great commitment to address social circumstances. John Cage experimented and rebelled against conventional musical values, using non-musical principles as methods and non-artistic objects as tools and instruments, as well as the unconventionality and unpredictability of chance for his compositions. The same goes for Fluxus. No matter how 'Neo-Dada' this movement was – stressing the playful, nonsensical, non-artistic and banal of their performances and products – it did not involve much socio-political engagement.

The 'alternative' rock bands discussed here above, used different Dadaist approaches in their own way and time. Like the original Dadaists, they were critical of the establishment and generally orientated towards the political left. Sometimes they addressed specific social issues in their lyrics. But it was Frank Zappa in particular, who expressed a strong social critique by satirizing divergent and specific social issues. He addressed conservative American values and institutions, like the American school system, the consumerist culture in the United States, but also the smug doings of the hippie and freak subcultures of his times. Beyond the musical context, Zappa even waged legal battles over unjust power politics of conservative institutions.

The works and events of the original Dadaists, including their manifestos and other texts, were generally not taken seriously in their time. Most of their audiences and critics considered their work initially to be merely nonsense and cheeky rubbish. The public took Dadaist provocations either for granted, or responded with laughter. But more and more, as time progressed, the audiences responded with riot and protest to the Dadaist provocations. The Dada movement needed the public

participation to achieve their goals: to address social ills and misconceptions in art and society. Dadaist music was part of that strategy.

Thanks to the early Dada-historiographies by, above all, Dadaists Richard Huelsenbeck (1920)<sup>42</sup> and Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes (1931)<sup>43</sup>, as well as those by Georges Hugnet (1932-1934)<sup>44</sup>, Dada was never forgotten as a movement. New York's Museum of Modern Art dedicated an overview of Dada in its 1936 exhibition *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*, which was accompanied by an extensive illustrated catalogue.<sup>45</sup> The public learned hereby mainly of Dada's achievements in the field of visual art. In that particular manner Dada returned in public awareness. However, it was not until the 1950's, that Dada's rebellious, anti-establishment stance was picked up again by, among others, the French Situationist International movement,<sup>46</sup> and by Fluxus, only a few years later. Dada had finally returned as an influential, anticonventional phenomenon, albeit mainly within the cultural field. In the visual arts it influenced most of the post-World War II tendencies in modern and contemporary art, such as Pop Art, Conceptual Art, Happenings and Art Performances, Nouveau Réalisme, Arte Povera, Zero and Postmodernism. Artists such as Jean Tinguely, Daniel Spoerri, Arman, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol and Jeff Koons are much indebted to Dadaism and to Marcel Duchamp in particular.

The music of the rock bands I discussed in this paper, had a relatively small cult-following in underground circuits. Very much like Dada originally had functioned. It took a while before its musical value and its anticonventional expressiveness was recognised and appreciated by a wider audience. The music industry followed soon after that. Rebellious and innovative expressions and approaches in art, are often neglected. After losing their initial shock effects, it takes a while for them to become accepted and valued.

Dada's subversive, anarchic and humorous anti-conventionality is remembered to this day. But is its subversive power still recognised in the arts of the present? In today's technologically advanced times, in which the entertainment industry plays a dominant role and social media ensure the rapid spread of creative ideas, it seems increasingly difficult to distinguish oneself effectively. However, as history has showed, newly accepted cultural conventions are often met with new subversive cultural tendencies.

*Overveen, The Netherlands*

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Hugo Ball, from diary (*Die Flucht aus der Zeit*) entry Feb. 2, 1916, also press release for the opening of Cabaret Voltaire. Original announcement: 'Cabaret Voltaire. Unter diesem Namen hat sich eine Gesellschaft junger Künstler und Literaten etabliert, deren Ziel es ist, einen Mittelpunkt für die Künstlerische Unterhaltung zu schaffen. Das Prinzip des Kabarets soll sein, daß bei den täglichen Zusammenkünften musikalische und rezitatorische Vorträge der als Gäste verkehrenden Künstler stattfinden, und es ergeht an die junge Künstlerschaft Zürichs die Einladung, sich ohne Rücksicht auf eine besondere Richtung mit Vorschlägen und Beiträgen einzufinden'.

<sup>2</sup> At the opening night of Cabaret Voltaire on Feb.5, 1916, on the walls were works by Arp, Otto Baumberger, Giacometti, Edwin Keller, Leo Leuppi, Konrad Meili, Eli Nadelmann, Oppenheimer, Picasso, van Rees, Schlegel, Segal, Slodki, Henry Wabel. *Dada in Zürich*, p.85. In June, 1916, works by Arp, Paolo Buzzi, Francesco Canguillo, Corrado Govoni, Janco, Kissling, August Macke, Marinetti, Modigliani (portraits of Arp), Eli Nadelmann, Oppenheimer, Picasso, van Rees, Slodki, Segal and Wabel were exhibited. *Dada in Zürich*, p.87.

<sup>3</sup> The first mentioning of the word 'dada' was in Ball's diary, entry April 18, 1916.

- <sup>4</sup> See Ball's introduction of May 15, 1916 to the *Cabaret Voltaire* magazine, p.5, for a short impression of Cabaret Voltaire's stage history; for details, p.32. See also Hentea, pp.63-78, for a more extensive history; Ingram, pp. 4-9.
- <sup>5</sup> In his diary entry of May 24, 1916, Ball discusses the irrational effects while dancing, caused by Marcel Janco's masks and the self-made costumes.
- <sup>6</sup> 'Dada kann Jeder'
- <sup>7</sup> 'Dilettanten erhebt Euch gegen die Kunst!'
- <sup>8</sup> *Dada in Zürich*, pp.85-87.
- <sup>9</sup> The 'Soirée Hans Heusser', the 6th Dada Soiree in Zurich, was held on May 25, 1917. *Dada in Zürich*, p.90.
- <sup>10</sup> Ingram, pp.7-8.
- <sup>11</sup> Alvarez, pp.68-75; Füllner, pp.15-27.
- <sup>12</sup> Ingram, pp.11-12; Bergius, p.338; p.220.
- <sup>13</sup> Hausmann, p.119.
- <sup>14</sup> The Six: a group of six composers with Satie initially as their patron: Georges Auric, Louis Durey, Arthur Honegger, Darius Milhaud, Francis Poulenc, Germaine Tailleferre.
- <sup>15</sup> Sanouillet, p.123.
- <sup>16</sup> The pianist was Marguerite Buffet, cousin of Picabia's wife Gabrielle Buffet.
- <sup>17</sup> Ingram, pp.16-19.
- <sup>18</sup> Marcel Duchamp had a Dadaist spirit, already before Dada. Nevertheless, he did not participate in any Dada movement, simply because he did not want to belong to any movement. See, a.o.: Tomkins, p.234; Cabanne, p.31.
- <sup>19</sup> Molderings, chapters 2-3 and passim.
- <sup>20</sup> Stévanca, p.2 and passim; James, pp.107-109.
- <sup>21</sup> Stévanca, p.3 and passim; James, pp.107-109 and passim.
- <sup>22</sup> *Dada in Zürich*, p.60.
- <sup>23</sup> Bergius, pp.338-339.
- <sup>24</sup> Ingram, p.18; Sanouillet, pp.40-45. The singer was Hania Routchine; the composer Henri Duparc.
- <sup>25</sup> Ingram, pp.12-13; *Wikipedia* (En.) entry for Erwin Schulhoff.
- <sup>26</sup> Ingram, pp.13-14.
- <sup>27</sup> Cage encountered the work of Marcel Duchamp already in the late 1920s, see, a.o., *Wikipedia* (En.) entry John Cage.
- <sup>28</sup> Steve Marshall, John Cage's I Ching chance operations, <https://www.biroco.com/yijing/cage.html> 27-12-2021
- <sup>29</sup> Greenbaum, section 'The Seeds for a Normative Dada' (unpaged); *Wikipedia* (En.) entry John Cage.
- <sup>30</sup> Greenbaum, section 'Normative Dada's Legacy: Fluxus & Early Minimalism'; Sadowska, passim; *Fluxus!*, pp.8-11 and passim.
- <sup>31</sup> For the program, see *Fluxus!*, p.146.
- <sup>32</sup> Performance fragments in film registration 'Fluxus Festival (Wiesbaden 1962)' on YouTube.
- <sup>33</sup> Sadowska, section '1.5 Nam June Paik, interactive art'.
- <sup>34</sup> *Wikipedia* (En.) entries on Pierre Schaeffer and Musique Concrète; for Schaeffer's theories and methods, see (a.o.) Dack.
- <sup>35</sup> A recommendation would be Zappa's autobiography, *Zappa/Occhiogrosso*.
- <sup>36</sup> Reynolds, pp.247-251 (a.o.).
- <sup>37</sup> Reynolds, pp.483-487 (a.o.).
- <sup>38</sup> It was, in fact, Burroughs' close friend, the artist and writer Brion Gysin, who first (re)discovered the cut-up technique in the 1950's. Through Burroughs, though, it became popularized. Tristan Tzara published his 'How to Make a Dadaist Poem' as part 8 of his Dada manifesto *On Feeble Love and Bitter Love* (1920).
- <sup>39</sup> Reynolds, pp.150-158 (a.o.).
- <sup>40</sup> Reynolds, pp.224-240 (a.o.).
- <sup>41</sup> Hentea, pp.72-73.
- <sup>42</sup> Huelsenbeck, *Dada Almanach; En Avant Dada; Dada siegt!*
- <sup>43</sup> Ribemont-Dessaignes in Motherwell.
- <sup>44</sup> Hugnet in Motherwell.
- <sup>45</sup> *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*, (ed. A.H. Barr Jr.) exh.cat. Museum of Modern Art, NY, 1936.
- <sup>46</sup> a.o. *Wikipedia* entry Situationist International; Guy Debord, *La Société du spectacle*. Paris (Gallimard), 1967.

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