

ART & DESIGN | ART REVIEW

A Plan to Spread Dada Worldwide, Revisited at MoMA

By JASON FARAGO JUNE 16, 2016

It's 1920. The Great War is over; revolution has come to Russia; a new German constitution has been adopted in Weimar. Tristan Tzara, the Romanian poet and gadfly who waited out the war in Switzerland, has moved to Paris. He is just 24, but he was at the core of Dada, the previous decade's most eruptive cultural phenomenon — and he is in the mood for publicity. He sends letters to people on both sides of the Atlantic seeking artistic contributions to a magnum opus for the anti-movement that turned the senselessness of world war into something convulsive.

Tzara receives more than four dozen replies. The artists all submit images and texts for “Dadaglobe,” an anthology he plans to distribute worldwide in a hefty edition of 10,000 copies. The publication, so he imagines, will be as disruptive as Dada was when it burst out of a cabaret in sleepy Zurich in 1916. “There needs to be throughout a whirling, dizzy, eternal, new atmosphere,” the poet insists. “It should look like a great display of new art in an open-air circus. Every page must explode.”

“Dadaglobe,” though, was never published. Francis Picabia, its main backer, broke with Tzara in 1921, and the materials were dispersed. The plans, the ambitions and the unrealized potential of that publication are the subject of

“Dadaglobe Reconstructed,” a rigorous yet sparky exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, which brings together the portraits, drawings and collages Tzara commissioned for “Dadaglobe,” plus a few paintings and sculptures by some of its leading adherents and sympathizers: Marcel Duchamp, Sophie Taeuber-Arp and Constantin Brancusi.

Enjoyable as the exhibition is — the photographs, correspondence and publishing ephemera will be catnip to Dada freaks and magazine geeks — its catalog may be the more important accomplishment. Assiduously edited by the independent curator Adrian Sudhalter, it features a full reconstruction of this magazine that never was, full of puns, poems and Duchamp’s chess notations, assembled with diligence and guesswork over 160 pages. It’s a substantial contribution to the history of interwar art, although you will need a mastery of French, German and Dada gibberish to read it. The show has been organized by Ms. Sudhalter and Samantha Friedman, a MoMA assistant curator, in collaboration with the Kunsthaus Zürich, where it appeared this spring. (“Dadaglobe Reconstructed” is the smaller of two collaborations between MoMA and Kunsthaus Zürich, which has one of the world’s richest Dada holdings. A major retrospective of Picabia opened this month in Zurich — to good reviews from Swiss critics — and opens at MoMA on Nov. 20.

In his solicitation letters, written on ritzy, pseudo-corporate Dada stationery, Tzara instructed his fellow artists to provide two or three reproductions of their work, to be presented alongside drawings, a book page with text and photographs of themselves, “which you can alter freely, although it should retain clarity.” The contributors, some of whom were only tangentially Dadaist, went wild with that last instruction. Theo van Doesburg pictured himself from behind, encircled his head with the high-Dada motto “I am against everything and everyone,” in French, and signed it with a pseudonym. Taeuber-Arp appears in a cloche hat and birdcage veil, half-obsured by one of her abstracted wooden busts. Picabia’s chosen portrait (a recent MoMA acquisition) is a study in hipster prodigality: a roughly sutured photocollage in which Picabia, a wealthy French-Cuban, tears his own face and captions himself as a nouveau-riche failure.

There are also a few documentary photos mixed into the show. At one

knees-up party, we see Tzara with Picabia and other fellow travelers wearing black tie, the word “Dada” scrawled across his forehead.

The focus on Tzara’s unrealized publication makes “Dadaglobe Reconstructed” quite a different show from MoMA’s 2006 Dada blowout, which divided the movement’s experiments and impostures by city: Zurich, Berlin, Cologne, Hannover, New York and Paris. This one treats Dada — specifically later Dada, from the end of the war to its evaporation in the early 1920s — as an international network, linked by the mail and photomechanical reproduction. That networked approach ends up sidelining some of Dada’s lone wolves, such as Kurt Schwitters, and revalorizing less famous figures center to Dada’s development. Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, designated Dada’s secretary on its letterhead, contributed spare drawings of circles, crosses and curves given mock-hieratic names like “Strange Suns” and “God on a Bicycle.” The underappreciated Swiss artist Jean Crotti wrote nonsense verse on a typewriter, then overlaid it with modern-day geometric forms. They find a visual parallel in an angular gouache by Crotti’s wife, Suzanne Duchamp, which imagines the unconscious as a factory.

As for Suzanne’s brother, living in New York, he did not create new works for the publication. Marcel Duchamp’s submission instead was a photo reproduction of “To Be Looked At (From the Other Side of the Glass) With One Eye, Close to, for Almost an Hour,” his small 1918 painting on glass, as well as a mechanistic portrait of his “Bride,” a recurrent figure before he abandoned painting. This show includes both the original works and their reproductions. In the case of the work on glass, it was photographed from its rear face, blacking out the text on the front-facing side and revealing a Brancusi sculpture that happened to be in the room at the same time. The unique artwork, for Duchamp and for Tzara as well, was only one node in an infinitely propagating chain of reproductions and revisions.

That’s what makes “Dadaglobe Reconstructed” especially relevant in our own moment of political disorder and media disruption. Tzara and the Dadaists cared less about artworks as discrete objects and more about how art could be transmitted across newly developed international networks. Circulation, not value, was the aim. Thinking like Tzara did about how art can circulate beyond

the museum — and mutate as it circulates — is no less important for today's artists, who can exploit a global communication network the Dadaists could only dream of.

“Dadaglobe Reconstructed” runs through Sept. 18 at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53rd Street, Manhattan; 212-708-9400; moma.org.

A version of this review appears in print on June 17, 2016, on Page C19 of the New York edition with the headline: A Plan to Spread Dada Worldwide.

© 2017 The New York Times Company