

# umbrella

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## DADA REVISITED: the iowa conference

The first conference devoted solely to the study and discussion of Dada took place in Iowa from 30 March to 1 April 1978 at the University of Iowa. Sponsored by the University of Iowa School of Art and Art History, and by the Department of English and the Program in Comparative Literature, the conference was organized by Prof. Stephen Foster of Art History and Prof. Rudolf Kuenzli of Comparative Literature.

The need for a view of Dada seen in its own light as one of the major cultural phenomena of the 20th century has long been felt. Despite the tendency in the work of some art historians to treat Dada as a paragraph preceding the chapter on Surrealism, it has become clear by the 1970s that Dada was in its own right a uniquely important and influential art movement. The presence of scholars in literature, culture, psychology and human sciences at the Conference also clarified the contributions made by Dada to many fields other than art—ranging from political propaganda to typography to music. A much clearer understanding of contemporary culture emerges through the direct study of Dada than through the study of Dada via Surrealism. The Iowa conference was a valuable step toward the opening of the field of Dada studies, particularly in the interdisciplinary mode which is required by the explosive, interdisciplinary movement which was Dada.

### OPENING SESSION

The Conference opened on Thursday, 30 March, in a session chaired by Wallace Tomasini, Director of the School of Art and Art History. Tomasini, known for his work in Renaissance scholarship, drew insightful and amusing lines between the Renaissance of Italy and the Dada world. He then introduced Willard J. Boyd, President of the University of Iowa, who delivered the welcome. Prof. Boyd without question established a world record for brevity in a speech by the President of a major university, particularly a Big Ten school. In a graceful, eloquent sound-poem, he rendered thanks, praise to Dada, welcome and homage to the Dada spirit, all in a few lines, half of which he read backwards. The laughter and applause lasted as long as the speech. The opening paper of the Conference was issued by Michel Sanouillet, director of the Centre du XXe Siècle of the University of Nice, entitled "Dada: A Definition." Sanouillet defined Dada in terms of what it had been and how it acted, presenting in essence an overview of the French approach to Dada studies.



Following the opening session, the University hosted a reception at the President's House, at which time many of the conference participants had a first opportunity to meet one another and to interact. Along with the many distinguished presenters, the conference involved a substantial number of invited participants and "beisitzers" who contributed to the overall scholarship and development of the program.

Conference participants who did not present papers included New York critic Jill Johnson; Jean Brown, director of the Tyringham Institute and Archive Jean Brown of Massachusetts; Prof. Dominique Baudouin of the Department of French, University of British Columbia; Timothy Baum, distinguished collector and dealer in Dada materials; Prof. James Trissell of the Department of Art, Colorado College, Colorado Springs; Dr. Frank Seiberling, former Director of the School of Art and Art History, University of Iowa; and Dr. Kenneth S. Friedman, director of the Institute for Advanced Studies in Contemporary Art, San Diego.

## FRIDAY SESSIONS

The second session began Friday morning, chaired by Lionel Biron of the University of Michigan. Biron first introduced Mary Ann Caws of Hunter College and the Graduate Center, CUNY. Caws, past president of the Association for the Study of Dada and Surrealism, presented Dada as a mode of seeing the world in a paper entitled "Dada's Temper: Our Text." This was followed by *Dada and the Two Isms: Future and Surreal*, a multi-media performance and scholarly analysis of Dada in relation to Futurism and Surrealism by Elmer Peterson. Prof. Peterson, Director of Special Projects at Colorado College, is well known for his translations and studies of Dada texts, and for his book done with Prof. Sanouillet on Duchamp entitled *Salt Seller*. While it was obvious that the conference would be well attended from the audience on the first night, the conference was characterized by unusually high attendance at all sessions. Following a turn-away crowd at the first paper, all subsequent sessions and papers other than the Vautier performance on the last night were held in the largest available lecture hall, the history auditorium used on the first night.

On Friday afternoon, Manuel Grossman of Queens College Department of Communication introduced papers by the two conference organizers, Foster and Kuenzli. Foster presented Dada in the framework of an analysis of culture and "culturing" in "Dada Criticism, Anti-Criticism and A-Criticism." Prof. Keunzli discussed "The Semiotics of Dada Poetry." Kuenzli's speech was a delightful example of the blend of scholarship and pleasure that characterized the conference: he broke into resonant renditions of sound-poetry as he illustrated his text.

Arthur Cohen of Ex Libris, New York City, then spoke on "The Typographic Revolution: The Antecedents and Legacy of Dada Graphic Design." The well-informed, witty lecture was particularly valuable in its discussion of the little-known influence of Russian futurism on Dada design and related typographic phenomena. It was held at the University Art Museum as a preamble to the special showing of the Dada Artifacts Exhibition held directly following the presentation of the paper.

On Friday night, the exhibition was officially opened to record-breaking attendance. The museum was packed with the largest crowd it had ever received for an opening. The exhibition, begun as a modest series of examples, became a major exhibition of Dada artifacts rarely seen. Drawing on 12 collections, both public and private, the show was beautifully installed and accompanied by a catalog which will surely become a standard reference work in the field of Dada scholarship. (Available for \$5.00 plus \$.50 postage from the University of Iowa Museum of Art, Riverside Drive, Iowa City, IA 52242). Stephen Foster, co-chairman of the Conference, initially suggested the exhibition and acted as its guest curator for the Museum. The catalog includes his essay, "Dada: Back to the Drawing Board," the incredible chronology compiled by British scholar, Richard Sheppard, and a lucid discussion of the Dada centers by Rudolf Kuenzli. The catalog entries were written by Sue Behrends, Gail Jones, Jackie MacMurray and Mary Wickstrom. Behrends and Jones served as research assistants to the Museum, taking responsibility for the exhibition, also

working closely with Prof. Foster in the planning and execution of the conference itself.

The opening featured an exuberant performance of Kurt Schwitters' *Ursonata* by Dary John Mizelle, director of the Electronic Studio, School of Music, Oberlin College. Using only his voice, he stunned the audience with a rich rendition of the famous Schwitters work rarely heard live. Two Iowa composers, Steven Schick and Peter Tod Lewis, also presented Dadaistic contemporary works, *Psappha of Iannis Xenakis* and *Samarkandko*.

## SATURDAY SESSIONS

The sessions opened with J.C. Middleton's introduction of Richard Sheppard of the University of East Anglia's School of European Studies. Sheppard's paper on "Dada and Mysticism: Influences and Affinities" offered a view of the religious aspects of Dada and the Dadaists usually ignored in favor of the better-known tendencies to political activism and aggressive public gesture. Drawing heavily on middle-European mysticism and its traditions, Sheppard also discussed the influence of Zen and of Oriental thought. Dr. Hans J. Kleinschmidt, New York psychiatrist, discussed "Berlin Dada" in a fascinating narrative-historical account drawing on personal experience and anecdote to present the non-political or contra-political sides of some of the Dadaists more usually seen as political activists.

In the afternoon, Prof. Michel Benamou, of the Center for Twentieth Century Studies, University of Wisconsin, introduced the three final papers. First, Dickran Tashjian, author of *Skyscraper Primitives*, spoke on "New York Dada and Primitivism." Prof. Tashjian of the Program in Comparative Culture, University of California, Irvine, highlighted the interaction between the primitive thinking brought into Western art by anthropology and the modes of work brought into existence by the New York Dadists. Thomas Elsasser of the University of East Anglia, Visiting Professor at University of Iowa in film, then screened several Dada films and delivered a paper on "Dada Film: The Technique of Liberation, the Liberation of Technique." Prof. Benamou's final introduction was that of Ben Vautier, Fluxus artist from France, where he is now director of La Difference, the experimental gallery of the Centre du XXe Siècle at University of Nice.

Following Elsasser's dry, scholarly discourse, Vautier came

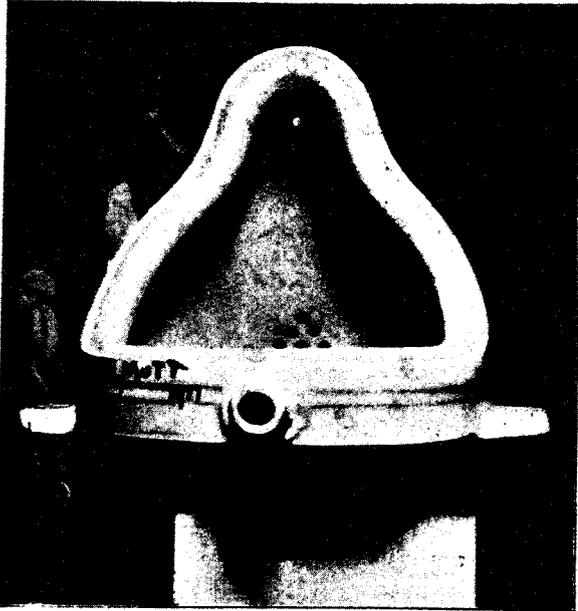
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Fountain by R. Mutt

Photograph by Alfred Stieglitz



THE FOUNTAIN REFUSED BY THE INDEPENDENTS

on like Three Stooges in one person. Possessed of an extraordinary memory for dates and facts, Vautier filled several boards with charts and graphs while projecting slides of Fluxus pieces, "Ben-Mots", and ideas throughout his talk. One of the younger artists whose work Duchamp admired, Vautier spoke specifically on "The Duchamp Heritage," discussing in particular the work of his Fluxus colleagues such as Paik, Beuys, Higgins, Brecht, Maciunas and Filliou. Benamou—who had obviously taken great relish and delight in introducing Vautier—took equally great delight in terminating the lecture suddenly as Vautier returned from a clambering run over the chairs of the lecture hall, to remind the audience of Vautier's Fluxus concert that evening.

The final session of the Conference was convened at the Corroboree Gallery, the experimental gallery of the University of Iowa, by Prof. Hans Breder, Director of the Gallery and member of the art faculty. The session itself, billed simply as "Performance", was a Fluxconcert organized by Vautier and several Iowa artists. The concert presented the classic range of Fluxus work, including pieces by Filliou, Paik, Friedman, Brecht, Watts, Knowles, Ono, Shiomi, Vautier himself and many of the other Fluxus colleagues. The audience responded with a variety of reactions, ranging from stunned amusement to limp indignation. Most had a marvelous time, and the conference closed to resounding laughter and applause. It was an appropriate way to end a series of investigations organized around Dada, but spanning the centuries from the German mystics of the Middle Ages to the sometimes mystifying French artist of the mid-20th century.

The Conference was well planned and well executed. The

## THE BLIND MAN

### The Richard Mutt Case

They say any artist paying six dollars may exhibit.

Mr. Richard Mutt sent in a fountain. Without discussion this article disappeared and never was exhibited.

What were the grounds for refusing Mr. Mutt's fountain:—

1. Some contended it was immoral, vulgar.
2. Others, it was plagiarism, a plain piece of plumbing.

Now Mr. Mutt's fountain is not immoral, that is absurd, no more than a bath tub is immoral. It is a picture that you see every day in plumbers' show windows.

Whether Mr. Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view—created a new thought for that object.

As for plumbing, that is absurd. The only works of art America has given are her plumbing and her bridges.

### "Buddha of the Bathroom"

I suppose monkeys hated to lose their tail. Necessary, useful and an ornament, monkey imagination could not stretch to a tailless existence (and frankly, do you see the biological beauty of our loss of them?), yet now that we are used to it, we get on pretty well without them. But evolution is not pleasing to the monkey race; "there is a death in every change" and we monkeys do not love death as we should. We are like those philosophers whom Dante placed in his Inferno with their heads set the wrong way on their shoulders. We walk forward looking backward, each with more of his predecessors' personality than his own. Our eyes are not ours.

The ideas that our ancestors have joined together let no man put asunder! In *La Dissociation des Idees*, Remy de Gourmont, quietly analytic, shows how sacred is the marriage of ideas. At least one charm-

ing thing about our human institution is that although a man marry he can never be *only* a husband. Besides being a money-making device and the *one* man that *one* woman can sleep with in legal purity without sin he may even be as well some other woman's very personification of her abstract idea. Sin, while to his employees he is nothing but their "Boss," to his children only their "Father," and to himself certainly something more complex.

But with objects and ideas it is different. Recently we have had a chance to observe their meticulous monogomy.

When the jurors of *The Society of Independent Artists* fairly rushed to remove the bit of sculpture called the *Fountain* sent in by Richard Mutt, because the object was irrevocably associated in their atavistic minds with a certain natural function of a secretive sort. Yet in any "innocent" eye

participants and papers were selected carefully for interest and balance, a fact brought home by attendance far surpassing original expectations. Along with those participants invited by the University itself, some 300 individuals came from Iowa and other states and nations to participate in the discourse and study of Dada. The methodologies and approaches to scholarship ran the range from narrative history and personal remembrance to semiotic analysis. Many of the speakers were attempting to redefine the issues involved in Dada and the understanding of Dada, and in that sense, the conference proceedings—to be published next Winter by Coda Press—will offer exciting new perspectives in Dada scholarship. Both French and German approaches to Dada scholarship were represented well. Neither French, German nor American contributions to Dada were neglected.

Throughout the entirety of the Conference, a sense of joy and humor were evident. The Iowa Dada Conference succeeded admirably in expanding our view of Dada—that complex, dichotomous movement which excelled in polarities and contrasts. So many references were made, in fact, to "The Poles of Dada" in relation to one or another series of topics, that a subtheme emerged to the Conference in the form of a running symposium on Polish jokes. By the last day, Benamou spoke of "Poles" between broad winks, as did Tashjian in his paper. In reverie, one was able to conceive of the "Poles of Dada" clustered in a broad field, banners waving—red banners of Dada socialism, prayer flags of Dada mysticism, multicolored ribbons and flags of the many-hued Dada. How delightfully apt that this vision of poles, flagpoles in an international Dada Plaza, should take place near the long geometrical rows of Iowa corn starting to ripen in the spring breeze.

—Ken Friedman