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MMAS 255

October 20, 2009

Post-Modernism in America: Dada's Revenge

As an art movement, Dada was a major contributor to the postmodern revolution in graphic

design. Dada was one of the first movements to really explore the expressive potential of typography,

allowing type to become something much more then it previously was. Dada typography was a stark

contrast to traditional rules in design that viewed type as a slave to written word. This new and

liberating technique would pave the way for more experiments in type later in history. However, in

1919 three years after the dada movement emerged on the scene, others were hard at work setting in

place design principles that flew in the face of dadist beliefs. The Bauhaus school of design and the

constructivism movement in Russia would soon be distilled along with swiss design principles into a

utopian system of grids, sans serif type and neutrality known as the International Typographical Style.

This new modernist approach to design soon swept across the globe putting into place strict rules that

placed importance on clean, legible design. Modern design continued to roll on into the 1960s

revolutionizing the way designers viewed the purpose of graphic design itself. Yet, in America in the

early '60s a new take on art, called "Conceptual Image" started to gain ground as a legitimate art form.

Too many Conceptual art seemed to be an exciting new movement, but in reality it was Dada poking its

strange head up once more. The relationship between The Conceptual image and other post-modern

movements in art and graphic design are easy to see. Much of the same philosophy and principles of

Dada can be found in the work of post-modern designers. While modernist design principles required

years of study and practice to perfect, both dada and postmodern design was much more accessible to a

larger range of "would be" designers. It would seem that even today the spirit of Kurt Schwitters is

alive and well in Post-Modern design.

The birthplace of the Dada movement was in Zurich, Switzerland as World War I was coming to a close. After witnessing the horrors and carnage of "the war to end all wars" the Dadaist rejected all traditional beliefs and rules embracing a life of chaos and absurdity. They argued that the present day society with its many rules, moral codes, and blind faith in technology was the main cause of WWI and despite all its laws failed to stop such a tragedy from taking place. Many subscribers to the Dadaist movement took a staunch anti-war stance and as a result a large amount of Dadaist work was political around the time of the war. The origin of the name Dada is still up for debate as even Dadaist never fully agreed on where the name "Dada" came from further illustrating the chaos of the movement. One account maintains that a group of artists in Zurch in 1916, wanting a name for their movement, chose it randomly by stabbing a French Dictonary with a paper knife and used the word that point landed on. Others dismiss these origin theories and say that the name is merely nonsensical with no inherit meaning. Whatever the case may be, the creation of the dadaist movement sent shock waves through Europe as it challenged both artistic and political philosophies of the time (Elger 5-7).

Perhaps the most pivotal figures in the birth of the Dada movement were Hugo Ball and Emmy Hennings. They owned the Cabaret Voltarie in Zurich which arguably witnessed the birth of the Dada movement within its walls. They opened the Cabaret as a place for young poets, painters and musicians to meet and socialize, so it was the perfect place to launch their war on modern society. As Marcel Janco one of the co-founders of the movement recalls "We had lost confidence in our culture. Everything had to be demolished. We would begin again after the "tabula rasa" (Sheppard 45). At the Cabaret Voltaire we began by shocking common sense, public opinion, education, institutions, museums, good taste, in short, the whole prevailing order." Janco along with friend Tristan Tzara (another leading figure in the Dada movement) joined forces with Hugo Ball, Jean Arp, and Richard Huelsenbeck to explore various new techniques in sound poetry, nonsense poetry, and chance poetry. These bizarre performances shocked and dismayed regular audiences as people found no value or

meaning in these absurd displays (Elger 12-13). This did not phase Hugo and the other Dadaist however as shocking the audience was exactly what they wanted. In addition to nonsense poetry, Tzara started a periodical simply titled DADA early in 1917 that he used to help spout the Dadaist mantra. Tzara went on a relentless campaign to spread the Dada message and bombarded many artists and writers with letters. As a result Tzara soon emerged as the leader of the Dadaist movement as Hugo's involvement in the movement slowly came to an end and he perused other interests (Elger 15).

While Hugo and Tzara were main figures in the literary branch of Dada, the French painter Marcel Duchamp was its chief ambassador to the world of the visual arts. Duchamp embraced the philosophy of absolute freedom that Dada pronounced and utilized to to make his most controversial work. Among his more famous and perhaps infamous works were his bicycle wheel mounted on a wooden stool and his urinal piece entitled "Fountian" which he submitted to an avante-garde show as a joke to test and tease his avante-garde peers. Duchamp being a dadaist was no stranger to public outrage as his work often times pushed the idea of what "art" really is to limits no one had conceived before. Perhaps his most outrageous piece was a reproduction of the Mona Lisa in which he painted a mustache and a goatee. The public saw it as an attack on the Mona Lisa, however it was instead Duchamp's clever mockery on tradition and a public who in his eyes had lost its way (Meggs 257-258.)

Despite the contributions of Duchamp, Tzara, Ball, and the many other Dada artists of the time, there is perhaps one man who postmodern design is more indebted to than any other. As he once stated many years ago "My name is Kurt Schwitters... I am an artist and I nail my pictures together." Yes indeed his name was Kurt Schwitters and he (in this authors humble opinion) was the greatest of all the Dada artists or rather should I say the greatest of all the Merz artists. While most other Dada artists of the time were heavily invested in political and idealogical battles, Kurt played by his own game. Originally Schwitters had applied to join the Berlin branch of the Dada movement in 1918. However the Dadaist headed by Richard Huelsenbeck rejected Scwhitters application saying he was too "petit bourgeois " and mocked him for being the "Caspar David Friedrich of the Dadaist Revolution".

Schwitters replied to Huelsenbeck's remarks with an absurdist short story *Franz Mullers Drahtfrühling, Ersters Kapitel: Ursachen und Beginn der grossen glorreichen Revolution in Revon* published in Der Sturm. In which an innocent by standard started a revolution merely by being there. With it clear to Schwitters that the Dadaist wanted nothing to do with him and really he with them, he set out to create his own work without worrying what anyone else thought. Schwitters created his own one man art movement he called "Merz" which came from a torn off piece of paper that originally stated "Kommerz"which translated means commerce. His work within merz consisted of collage's composed of various materials which he would find laying about his house and town, he used everything from newspapers to garbage in his work. In addition to his collage work Scwhitters also composed and performed nonsensical poetry. According to him poetry was the "interaction of elements: letters, syllables, words, and sentences." (Elger 112 – 117)

As time went on the dominate political wing of the Dada movement began to slowly fade away, but Schwitters continued his work and became a successful graphic designer while also publishing 24 issues of his own periodical titled "Merz" (compare that to the mere 9 that Tzara and the other Dadaist published). It is his work as a graphic designer and typographer that make Schwitters especially important to the much later postmodern design movement. As a graphic artist Scwhitters was employed by many businesses and even the city of Hanover as a typography consultant. He also collaborated with Theo Van Doesburg a dutch artist to design a book in which the typographic forms were depicted as characters. Scwhitters experimental typography broke traditional rules but at the same time maintained a sense of design and structure (Pegrum 54.) As a result his experiments were precursors to the kind of experimentation that would take place in the 1970s in postmodern design.

John Heartfield is the last important figure in the Dada movement whose work had the greatest influence on postmodern design. His work contrasted Scwhitters in that it was almost entirely political. However for that same reason he was extremely important to the later postmodern designers who were looking to spread there own political messages through their design. Heartfield's main style utilized

photomontage in a harsh and visually striking manner and also introduced innovations in the perpetration of mechanical art for offset printing. Heartfield's work was for a large point in time directly centered on ridiculing the Nazi party as it rose to power and eventually took over Germany. His work bares a strong resemblance to the Pop Art and Conceptual Image movements that spawned in the early 1960s (Pegrum 67.) Combining images and public figures of the present day into artwork that served as commentary on recent events was similar to Pop Art, which followed later in the '60s. With Heartfield he was critiquingWorld War II and the Nazi regime, with Pop Art the designers were critiquing American consumerism and pop culture. While one was clearly more serious then the other they both shared a common theme of design and approach. Similarities between the work of dadaist like Heartfield and postmodern designers are easy to find. Looking at Heartfield's "Adolf the Superman" poster **(Fig 1.1)** and Roman Cieslewicz's "Mona Tse-Toung" **(Fig 1.2)** side by side the influences become obvious. With Heartfield's piece he was critiquing a powerful political figure utilizing the power of photography, placing different images together to create a commentary on the subject. Cieslewicz's work is taking note from Heartfield and combining photographs in an image to critique a powerful political figure. Another example of Dada's influence on postmodern design is Kurt Schwitter's "The Proposal" **(Fig 1.3)** and Richard Hamilton's "Just What Is It that Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?" **(Fig 1.4)** Schwitters is believed by many to be the father of collage work and thus has just as large an influence on many postmodernists as Heartfield. When looking at these two works the ideology and technique presented in Schwitter's work is mirrored nicely by Hamilton's. While Hamilton's work seems more recent and clean, both capture the same essence. They both exist as commentary's on the culture and lifestyles of the people that lived in their time. Not only do they share a philosophical bond but they both achieve a similar visual look that is unique all its own. Looking at Scwhitters work along side postmodern designers it is almost impossible to say that many postmodernists were not indebted to the much earlier dadaist.

Upon looking at the Dada movement and the many different artists and designers that formed it, it is easy to see how it was a product of the culture and times in which it existed. As state previously the Dada movement formed during the end of the WWI as a protest against the horrors of war. However it was not just the Dadaist who were reeling from the first World War, empires and dynasties fell, many countries fell into depression or poverty and still others were still in shock over the whole ordeal. Some found comfort and reassurance within friends, family, or religion while others saw the war as a call for more regulation and laws. This is where the Dadaist come in, they like everyone else in the world were attempting to deal with the many questions and sorrows that the war brought. The culture that existed around the time of Dada's formation was one of confusion and anxiety. So in response to these feelings of doubt the Dadaist came in and decided that rather then trying to rationalize the existence of a world, which let WWI happen, they would instead decide the world was completely illogical and had no intrinsic purpose or meaning. All Dada did was take up all the confusion and chaos that permeated through the air during that time and utilized it to fuel an art movement. One that while trying to answer the call for answers, itself could provide no answers because it believed that there were no answers to begin with. This thought process is intrinsically linked to postmodern thought, as it is this philosophy that has allowed post-modernists to branch out and become so independent and free from traditional rules, just as the dadaist did before them.

As time marched on the Dada movement faded away into the recesses of everyones memory. Soon more modern design principles took the place of any remnants of the Dada movement in design. Dada beliefs laid mostly dormant for nearly 50 years as more modern ideas continued to flourish. It would take yet another World War to set the stage for Dada's triumphant return under a new guise. World War II lasted from 1939 with the German invasion of Poland to 1951 with the surrender of Japan. As the 2$^{nd}$ World War came to a close the world responded in a much different way than the Dadaist had to WWI. Rather than throwing rules and laws to the wayside society embraced these ideas. As a result new institutions were formed to help enforce more laws and help regulate the world. WWII

birthed such organizations as the U.N. and NATO, both a sign of order and law. The Japanese government was almost completely changed and a new constitution was drafted enforcing new laws on their country. As the culture around them sought to bring order to the world, so too did designers. The majority of graphic designers after WWII felt a moral obligation to help bring order to the world with design that was rigid, clean, orderly, and legible. Out of this desire was birthed the International Typographical Style, a design movement which also ironically started in Switzerland but for completely different reasons. This style of graphic design was the culmination of modernist beliefs up until that point in history. Design principles from the Bauhaus, Constructivism, and Futurism were combined into a "perfect" system of grids and sans serif type. This new style of design soon sky rocketed in popularity around the world as it met the demand for order that so many designers had after WWII (Mchale 32-36.)

Not only did this new modern design movement begin in the same country as Dada, but one of its chief founders and designers lived and worked in Zurich; the very city Hugo Ball and the other Dadaist jump-started their movement. This designer was Josef Muller-Brockmann who soon emerged as the leading theorist and practitioner of the modernist movement in the 1950s. To Brockmann neutrality was extremely important and his design was impersonal and objective. This is why he utilized the grid in all of his work throughout his career. The grid symbolized everything that graphic design should be and what modern design in essence was. Brockmann described using the grid as "the will to systematize, to clarify the will to penetrate to the essentials, to concentrate the will to cultivate objectivity instead of subjectivity the will to rationalize the creative and technical production processes the will to integrate elements of color, form and material the will to achieve architectural dominion over surface and space the will to adopt a positive, forward-thinking attitude the recognition of the importance of education and the effect of work devised in a constructive and creative spirit" (Sheppard 86-87.) This in essence is what modern design or International typographic style is. This modern ideology that was expressed by Brockmann and his grid system was adapted almost overnight. Before

long this swiss style had taken its place at the throne of graphic design, daring anyone to oppose its perfection.

Throughout the 1950s this modernist approach to design became the industry standard for design, revolutionizing corporate logo and identity design. The style became even more wide spread with the introduction of the modern swiss font Helevetica. Developed by Max Miedinger and Eduard Hoffmann of the Haas type foundry in Münchenstein, Switzerland, Helevetica soon became the staple of modernist design (Meggs 361.) Its clean and sleek design embodied the modern ideals of neutrality and legibility. As a result Helevetica was used almost constantly in the work of modernist, some using Helevetica exclusively. Everywhere someone would look from the 1960s onward there would be Helevetica staring back at them. It was adopted by corporations and government offices furthering its widespread use around the world. To young graphic designers just starting school in the late 60s and 70s the overwhelming use of Helevetica became stifling. Helevetica and the modernist approach to design had been used so extensively that it had become mundane and boring. Helevetica once fresh and exciting was driven to look cliché thanks to its widespread over use. As a result these new graphic artists felt a need to break away from what they viewed as the oppressive and heavy handed ways of the modernists. To them the modern way of thinking was symbolized by Helevetica, which restricted their freedoms and ability to express themselves in a creative fashion (Sheppard 101-104.)

Even while modern design was in full swing there were artists in America experimenting and drifting away from the uniformity of modernism. One big influence on postmodern design was Push Pin Studios, founded in 1958 by Milton Glaser and Seymour Chwast. Push Pin challenged the status quo in graphic design throughout the 60s. While the majority of graphic artists in the 1960s subscribed to the modernist mantra, Push Pin was much more experimental. With more outlandish and styled illustrations they contrasted the rigid and monotone photography used in most modern design. Their treatment of typographic forms and the typography they used was free flowing and abstract which flew in the face of fonts such as Helevetica. Along with Push Pin studios there emerged other artists who

were ideologically opposed to the modernist movement. Artists such as Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein began the Pop Art movement in America in the 1960s. The Pop Art movement blurred the lines between art, commerce and popular culture. The movement celebrated and critiqued the consumerist culture that had become dominate in post-WWII America. Taking forms of pop culture such as comics, soup cans, and images of public figures and turning them into art; challenged the modern idea of aesthetics. While Pop Art was not the single contributing factor to the later postmodern design movement it did have a powerful impact on the culture of the 1960s. Pop Art challenged what was culturally acceptable as art and took large step away from Modernism. In fact many at the time saw the rise of Pop Art as the final death nail in Modernisms coffin (Weikop 8-9.) As the 60s turned into the 70s the graphic artists who were influenced by designers such as Warhol and Glaser, were poised to overthrow modernism within the world of graphic design.

While Warhol and Glaser were not exactly Dadaist in their beliefs or design, they laid the groundwork for later artists and designers to come in and truly resurrect Dada in America. Perhaps one of the biggest postmodern designers to play a role in the complete resurrection of Dadaist techniques is David Carson. A postmodern designer working mostly in a grunge style, much of of Carson's work is seemingly mirror images of some of the early Dadaist's work. While Carson never attended a traditional art or design school to learn his craft, it is hard to not believe that somewhere at sometime in his early career he is was not exposed to the work of Dadaist such as Il'ia Zdanevich, Tristian Tzara, or Kurt Scwhitters. The typographical styles that these Dada artists utilized are strikingly similar to some of Carsons work. The complete disregard for traditional rules surrounding the use of typography are apparent in both Carson's work and the Dadaist's. They are not afraid to beat up their type, warping it, cutting it, tearing it is all acceptable. This is dramatically different from modern designers who try at all costs to protect their type and make it completely clear and legible. An example of the parallels between Carson's work and the Dadaist's is Il'ia Zdanevich's poster design for Tristan Tzara's Dadaist announcement **(Fig 2.1)** and David Carson's cover for his book "The End of Print" **(Fig 2.2)**. In these

two pieces you can see the similarities between the two in how they treat type. It is much more free flowing and organic with no grid system or rules holding it in. Rather the typography is spread across the page in a disorderly and unruly manner making it more difficult for the viewer to read what it says. It is possible to understand the message both are trying to convey, but it takes much more work than a modern design. Just as the modernist were and are upset at Carson for upsetting their system or rules so too were the modern designers of the 1920's upset at the Dadaist's. While you could argue that Carson's work is even more outrageous than the Dadaist; if you take into context the time at which the Dadaist first introduced their experiments. It is easy to see how they could be just as outlandish as Carson's designs were when he introduced them. Even some works such as Kurt Scwhitters's *"Dada Soiree"* **(Fig 2.3)** is just as experimental and revolutionary as the work that Carson does in the present day with typography. Along with Carson there are many present day designers whose work has hints of Dada influence within them. Stephan Sagmeister's work while not entirely Dada seems to have Dada tendencies. His work is often humorous and  absurd making viewers feel somewhat uneasy. Such work as his "Fresh Dialogue" **(Fig 2.4)** and "Hurry!" **(Fig 2.5)**  posters carry on the absurdest spirit of Dada into the present day world.

      In his book Meggs describes the emergence of postmodernism into design as "breaking the international style so prevalent since the Bauhaus. Postmodernism sent shock waves through the design establishment as it challenged the order of clarity of modern design."(Meggs 466.) It is this cultural and philosophical impact that postmodernism had on design that is what intrinsically links it to dadaism. While postmodern designers are a large and diverse group with their own unique styles and opinions, they all share one common foundation. This foundation was laid in place back in the 1920s during the Dada movement as individuals rose up and decided to challenge the status quo and traditional design principles. While Dada may have not had the long term or global impact that postmodernism seems to enjoy; it can be argued that postmodernism is just an extension or evolution of what the Dadaist started. Both had similar goals in trying to free themselves from the constrictions of more modern design. They

also take as their basic starting point the rejection of and disregard for philosophy, aesthetics, ethics, established order, and the Absolute. Dada was a movement that believed that their was no absolute truth except for the fact that there is no absolute truth. The same can be said for the postmodern movement, as it is continually built on the premise that there is no real right or wrong and that the definition of such is at the artists or designers own digression. Perhaps one of the most ironic quotes by a postmodernist is that of Jean-François Lyotard one of the founding theorists of postmodernism in the real of social science. Lyotard attempts to describe the postmodern movement by asking "is postmodernity the pastime of an old man who scrounges in the garbage-heap of finality looking for leftovers, who brandishes unconsciousnesses, lapses, limits, confines, goulags, parataxes, non-senses, or paradoxes, and who turns this into the glory of his novelty, into his promise of change?" (Mchale 34.) Reading this quote one can only think of our old friend Kurt Scwhitters. It is incredibly funny and ironic that a postmodern thinker would attempt to come up with some grand metaphor for postmodernism; all the while merely describing the great dada odd ball Kurt Scwhitters. Scwhitters technique of taking garbage and old unused items and turning them into art was perhaps before his time. If Schwitters were alive today he would be opening exhibitions in New York city and being applauded as a genius and revolutionary. Rather he is stuck back in time as a member of an obscure movement (of which he wasn't "actually" a member) in Europe, while postmodern artists and designers of today reap the benefits from the foundations that he and other Dadaist laid in place.

Despite all these philosophical beliefs that tie these two movements together, perhaps the thing that bonds them more than any other is how open their genre of art, design, and philosophy is and was. Both dada and postmodern design have within them a large array of different visual styles and artists who believe perhaps slightly different things but are still bound by their belief in freedom and skepticism. If there was but one quote, one person to describe both the dada movement and the postmodern movement simultaneously, it would be one excerpt from Tristan Tzara's Dada manifesto. In this short excerpt he describes the true essence of what dada is. In doing so he is basically describing

the postmodern thought of the present day. If you replace the word dada with postmodernism then you can clearly see the dotted lines which connect the two movements. The argument can even be made that rather than living in a "postmodern" world; we are merely living in the modern era with Dada-like cycles that go on and off over periods of time. While postmodernism is fairly popular today, will it always remain so? Or will it suffer the same fate as Dada did, only to be resurrected some 70 years later under a new name; all the while modernism sits quietly in the back pulling all the strings.

"Every product of disgust capable of becoming a negation of the family is Dada; a protest with the fists of its whole being engaged in destructive action: Dada; knowledge of all the means rejected up until now by the shamefaced sex of comfortable compromise and good manners: Dada; abolition of logic, which is the dance of those impotent to create: Dada; of every social hierarchy and equation set up for the sake of values by our valets: Dada; every object, all objects, sentiments, obscurities, apparitions and the precise clash of parallel lines are weapons for the fight: Dada; abolition of memory: Dada; abolition of archeology: Dada; abolition of prophets: Dada; abolition of the future: Dada; absolute and unquestionable faith in every god that is the immediate product of spontaneity: Dada; elegant and unprejudiced leap from a harmony to the other sphere; trajectory of a word tossed like a screeching phonograph record; to respect all individuals in their folly of the moment: whether it be serious, fearful, timid, ardent, vigorous, determined, enthusiastic; to divest one's church of every useless cumbersome accessory; to spit out disagreeable or amorous ideas like a luminous waterfall, or coddle them - with the extreme satisfaction that it doesn't matter in the least - with the same intensity in the thicket of one's soul - pure of insects for blood well-born, and gilded with bodies of archangels. Freedom: Dada Dada Dada, a roaring of tense colors, and interlacing of opposites and of all contradictions, grotesques, inconsistencies"

- Tristian Tzara The Dada Manifesto (Elger 205.)

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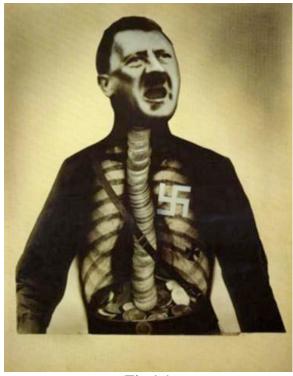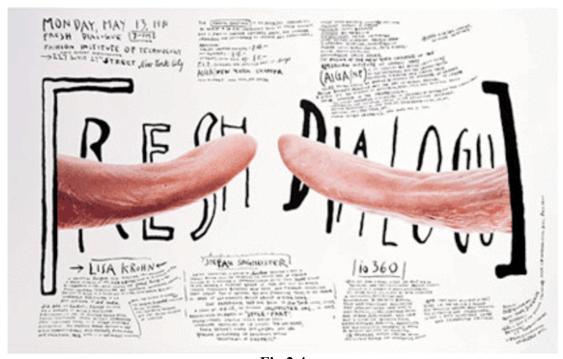Premier*. EBSCO. Web. 10 Dec. 2009.

Appendix



**Fig 1.1**



**Fig 1.2**

**Fig 1.3**



**Fig 1.4**

**Fig 2.1**



**Fig 2.2**

**Fig 2.3**



**Fig 2.4**

**Fig 2.5**