

Cutting Through Reality: The Power of Photomontage in Berlin Dada and Its Social Critique

Delft University of Technology
Department of Architecture

Carla Zurlino
6288669

AR2A011
Architectural History Thesis
(2024/25 Q3)

Tutor:
Everhard Korthals Altes

17.04.2025

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I Der Dada Nr. 2
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What this is about

Dada is anti-art. It was never meant to be beautiful, nor was it ever meant to conform. It was there to provoke, to disrupt, to challenge everything that had come before. For me, a German, this movement holds a particular weight- a moment in history where art ceased to be just art and became a weapon against the absurdity of a collapsing society. It has been more than 100 years since Dada reached its peak, yet it seems that it is forgotten what it did for modern art, particularly the innovation of photomontage. When I talk to fellow students about this thesis paper, I am often met with responses such as, “Wasn’t that just the crazy art?” But Dada was never just about chaos. It was born out of necessity, out of the ruins of World War I, as a response to a world that no longer made sense.

Dada did not appear out of thin air. It emerged, of all places, in neutral Switzerland, where exiled artists such as Hugo Ball, Tristan Tzara, and Richard Huelsenbeck found solace in the absurd. But it was in Berlin that the movement transformed into something far more radical. Raoul Hausmann, Hannah Höch, George Grosz, and John Heartfield saw an opportunity to take Dada beyond mere performance and poetry. They saw the power of image- the manipulation of reality through photomontage- to expose the political and social hypocrisy of their time. Heartfield’s work in the 1920s and 1930s, in particular, marks a turning point in visual culture, one that directly challenges the traditional perspectives established in the 15th century. With photomontage, he and his contemporaries created an entirely new form

of visual critique, merging fragments of reality into a grotesque yet powerful distortion of truth.

What fascinates me most is how Dada questioned not only the value of art, but also its very purpose in a society on the brink of collapse. After WWI, Germany was in turmoil- people were starving, political tensions were escalating, and the Weimar Republic was struggling to find stability. In such a world, art could no longer afford to be bourgeois, decorative, or detached from reality. Dada refused to be complicit. Instead, it mocked, criticised, and exposed. It was inevitable that a group of artists- or rather, anti-artists (monteurs)- would come together to ask the most urgent questions: What is art? Who decides its value? And does art even matter when society itself has lost its sense of purpose?

In this thesis, I will explore the rise and development of Dada, focusing particularly on photomontage as its most subversive and lasting contribution. By analysing key artworks, texts, and manifestos from that time, I will examine how this technique was not just a visual experiment, but a direct response to the socio-political chaos of post-war Germany. While many books on Dada were written in the 1960s and 1970s, more recent debates and documentaries have sought to place the movement in a contemporary context, helping us understand the mindset of those artists who turned to scissors and glue as their weapons of choice.

Through this research, I aim to uncover how photomontage became a crucial tool for political critique and subsequently why, a century later, its impact remains as relevant as ever. Although Dadaism is well documented in terms of primary sources and a resurgence in 70s literature, the more recent trend since the 2000s is a decline in book sales, as philosopher Wolfram Eilenberger said in an interview on the Swiss Radio Channel SRF. The known publications till now are extensive books, never truly focusing concisely on the topic at hand: This thesis is a holistic compiled writing uncovering the depth of the photomontage philosophy, technique, monteurs and the prevailing Zeitgeist. All of these were crucial for the photomontage to work in the political and social climate back then, which has not been published in a single paper until now.

How did the development of photomontage within the Berlin Dada movement serve as a tool for political and social critique in post-WWI Germany?

The 1910s

Rage in the Machine: Dada, Industry, and Anti-Bourgeois Art

The philosophical foundations of Dada

Dada emerged amid the brutality of World War I (1914–18)- a conflict that claimed the lives of eight million military soldiers and an estimated equal number of civilians. [1] This unprecedented loss of human life was a result of trench warfare and technological advances in weaponry, communications and transportation systems. Families were separated, most of society was starving and there was a high rate of displacement, voluntarily and involuntarily. It was technology that heightened the brutality of war itself. Chemical gas and long-range artillery drove conflicts, as well as tanks and airplanes. [1]

Hugo Ball, a German author and poet and one of Dada's primary founders, conceived Dada as a reaction to the failure of language, reason and art in the wake of war. He viewed the destruction of logical discourse as necessary, demonstrating this through his phonetic poetry, which mimicked the incoherence of a world that had descended into chaos. Ball believed that Dada should remain a rejection of ideology rather than an instrument for any political cause. He wrote in his first official Dada manifesto: *"For us, art is not an end in itself, but an opportunity for the true perception and criticism of the times we live in."* [2]

In contrast, Tristan Tzara, a Romanian avant-garde poet and performance artist, embraced Dada as an act of spontaneous destruction and renewal. For Tzara, Dada was not merely an escape from meaning, but an active celebration of absurdity. His writings and performances embodied the belief that rationality had failed, and the only valid response was pure creative anarchy. [7] While Ball saw Dada as an introspective critique, Tzara sought to turn it into a disruptive force, challenging societal structures with nonsensical acts. *"The beginnings of Dada,"* poet Tristan Tzara recalled, *"were not the beginnings of art, but of disgust."* [3]

The Political Schism: Berlin Dada and the Communist Turn

John Heartfield, the German visual artist, and George Grosz, the German artist, radicalised Berlin Dada, using photomontage and caricature to critique militarism, capitalism and the rising threat of fascism. [8] Unlike Tzara's emphasis on absurdity, their work had a direct political agenda. They argued that Dada should not merely reflect chaos, but actively dismantle oppressive structures. As Heartfield later said, *"Painting was no longer an adequate means of expression. We needed something that could shock people out of their complacency."* [4]

It was when George Grosz and John Heartfield met in 1915, just one year after the First World War had begun. This meeting had major consequences for Dada in Berlin. It would lead to the founding of the Malik Verlag, which published the Dada magazine, it would establish the left-wing Dada movement in Berlin and it would make both of them famous for their political works. During the war, they would start working together in Germany. Dada did not exist yet. But this collaboration was the birth of the photomontage. [5]

The ideological divergence within Dada was most apparent in Berlin, where Richard Huelsenbeck, the German writer, poet and psychoanalyst, and Raoul Hausmann, the Austrian artist, who became known for his experimental photographic collages and sound poetry, pushed the movement toward radical leftist politics. Huelsenbeck dismissed Tzara's focus on spontaneity, arguing that Dada should engage with the real material struggles of the time. In his article *"Der neue Mensch"*, published in 1917 in the magazine *Neue Jugend*, he wrote, *"The highest art will be that which in its conscious content presents the thousandfold problems of the day... the art which has been visibly shattered by the explosions of last week."* [6]* His vision aligned with revolutionary Marxism, seeing art as a tool to expose the contradictions of capitalism and war.



2 Potsdamerplatz 1915



3 Stettiner Bahnhof 1915



4 Inselbrücke 1916



5 Carriage and transport 1917



6 Umbau Friedrichstrasse Bahnhof 1918



7 "Dancing" bear 1921



8 Man skating around Berlin 1922



9 Kommissbrot car 1929

On November 11, 1918 World War I officially ended with Germany and the Allies signing an armistice. Berlin occupation in November 1918 by the Communists, The bourgeoisie saw them as Bolshevik monsters. [1]

1 Hobsbawm, E. J. (1995). *Age of extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991*. p. 23-26

2 Ball, H. (1916) *Dada Manifesto*.

3 Tzara, T. (1989), "Lecture on Dada," repr. and trans. in *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology*, ed. Robert Motherwell (Cambridge, MA.), p. 250.

4 Huelsenbeck, R. (1991). *Memoirs of a dada drummer*. Univ of California Press. p. 112

5 John Heartfield and George Grosz, 'Der Kunstlump', p. 48 (also *Die Aktion*, 12 June 1920, p. 327)

6 Huelsenbeck, R. (1991). *Memoirs of a dada drummer*. Univ of California Press. p. 30

7 Ades, D. (2021). *Photomontage (Second) (World of Art)*. Thames & Hudson.

8 Siepmann, E. (1977). *Montage: John Heartfield. Elefanten Press Galerie, Berlin (West)*

9 Herzfelde, W. (June 1917). *Neue Jugend*. Malik-Verlag, p. 1

*all magazine publications by the Malik-Verlag:

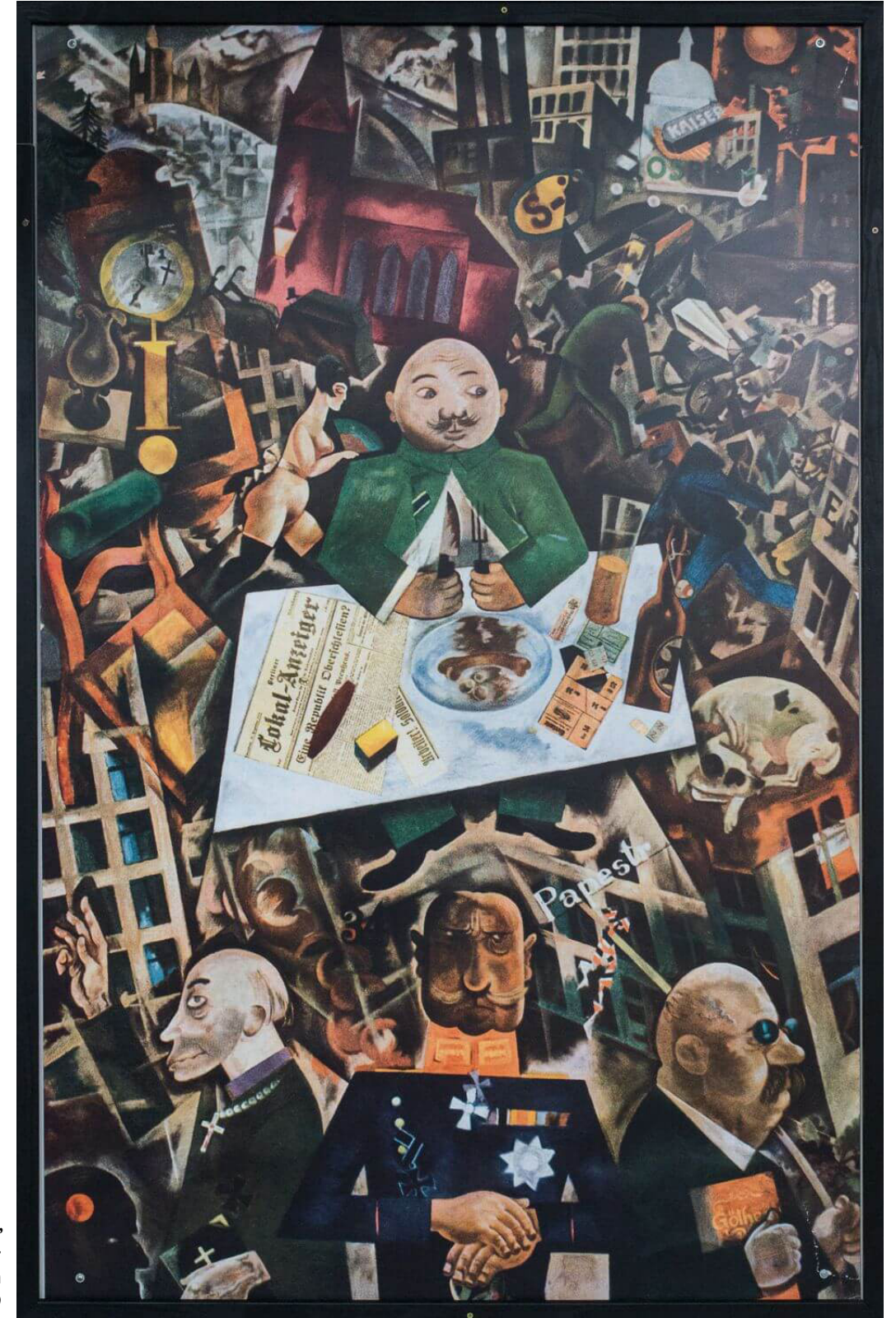
1. *Neue Jugend. Monatsschrift*, 1916 til 1917

2. *Jedermann sein eigener Fussball. Halbmonatsschrift*, February 1919

3. *Die Pleite, Halbmonatsschrift*, February 1919 til January 1920

4. *Der Gegner, politische Monatsschrift mit satirischem Teil Die Pleite*, 1919 til 1922

5. *Neue deutsche Blätter, Monatsschrift für Literatur und Kritik*. September 1933 til August 1935



10 George Grosz,
Deutschland -
ein Wintermärchen
1917 - 1919



11 Cabaret Voltaire
Hugo Ball
February 5, 1916

A Night at the Cabaret: Laughter, Language, and Revolt

Before Dada had a name, it had a stage. The Cabaret Voltaire, founded in neutral Zurich in 1916, was less an art venue than a sanctuary for the displaced and disillusioned- poets, deserters, and political exiles fleeing the First World War. Here, under dim lighting and behind cheap curtains, Hugo Ball, Tristan Tzara, Emmy Hennings, and Richard Huelsenbeck gave birth to a new kind of performance: one built on absurdity, sound, satire, and revolt.

This chapter explores Cabaret Voltaire as the crucible of the Dada movement- a space where language collapsed, performance became protest, and “non-sense” became resistance. It examines how these early happenings laid the philosophical groundwork for Dada’s later visual developments, including photomontage. Far from just performance art, the Cabaret was a declaration of war against war itself, wrapped in laughter, chaos, and intentional contradiction.

It was in the Cabaret Voltaire, the birthplace of the Dada movement, where Huelsenbeck joined them by declaring Dada in 1916:

We have decided to combine our diverse activities under the name Dada. We found Dada, we are Dada, and we have Dada. Dada was found in a dictionary, it means nothing. This is the meaning of nothing, where nothing means something. We want to change the world with nothing, we want to change poetry and painting with nothing and we want to end the war with nothing.

-Richard Huelsenbeck [1]

At the time, society seemed, or at least it seemed so to Ball, Tzara and Huelsenbeck, to have lost its ability to communicate meaningfully, especially in the wake of the destruction and trauma of the war. [3] As Ball performed gibberish in his Dada performance on the opening night of February 5, 1916 at the cabaret, he sought to express the idea that, in a world where logic and reason had failed, language itself had become meaningless. Dada, as Ball and Huelsenbeck described it, was an attempt to pronounce “nothing,” as society seemed to offer no solutions to the chaos and destruction caused by the war. [2]

Zurich, where the Dada movement was established, became a refuge for artists and intellectuals, fleeing the war and its aftermath. Switzerland, neutral during the war, provided a place for these displaced individuals to gather and share their frustrations. The socio-political situation of the time was dire: Europe was ravaged by war, people were starving, living in abject poverty, as described in the first chapter. In this context, Dada monteurs saw the bourgeoisie as the enemy, people who still bought art despite the crumbling social order [1]. This gap between the economic reality and the continued demand for art reinforced their disdain for the traditional art world. [3]

Dada, in their view, was not about solving society’s problems through conventional art forms like Expressionism. Instead, it was about rejecting these norms and offering “anti-art” as a means of social critique. Expressionism, which many artists had turned to, was seen as a failure to truly address the urgency of the situation. As Huelsenbeck wrote in 1918: “*The highest art will be that which in its conscious content presents the thousandfold problems of the day... Has Expressionism fulfilled our expectations? No! No! No!*” [4]. Dada, with its absurdity and deliberate destruction of artistic norms, became their way of confronting the reality of post-war Europe.

The Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich was the site of many of these radical performances. It was an avant-garde nightclub where artists and performers gathered to create spontaneous, chaotic and nonsensical performances. For the bourgeoisie, who still frequented the club’s more traditional forms of art, Dada performances were a shock. [2] The absurdity of their actions- expressed through noise, gibberish, and defiance of any artistic standard- was a grotesque attack on the established order. To the performers, however, it was not art in the traditional sense, but rather a complete rejection of the cultural norms that had led to war and destruction.

In the Dada movement, there was a sense that, in a world destroyed by war, art had lost its meaning and power to address real-world issues. Instead, Dada sought to create an art form that was chaotic, irreverent, and anti-establishment, offering no answers, but instead reflecting the absurdity of life itself.

1 Huelsenbeck, R. (1916). "Erklaerung", extracted from: Dada Zurich: Texte, Manifeste, Dokumente, hgr. v. Karl Riha and Waltrauf Wende-Hohenberger, Philipp Reclam Stuttgart, 1992, p. 29
Note: This is translated from German. Find the original version in the appendix

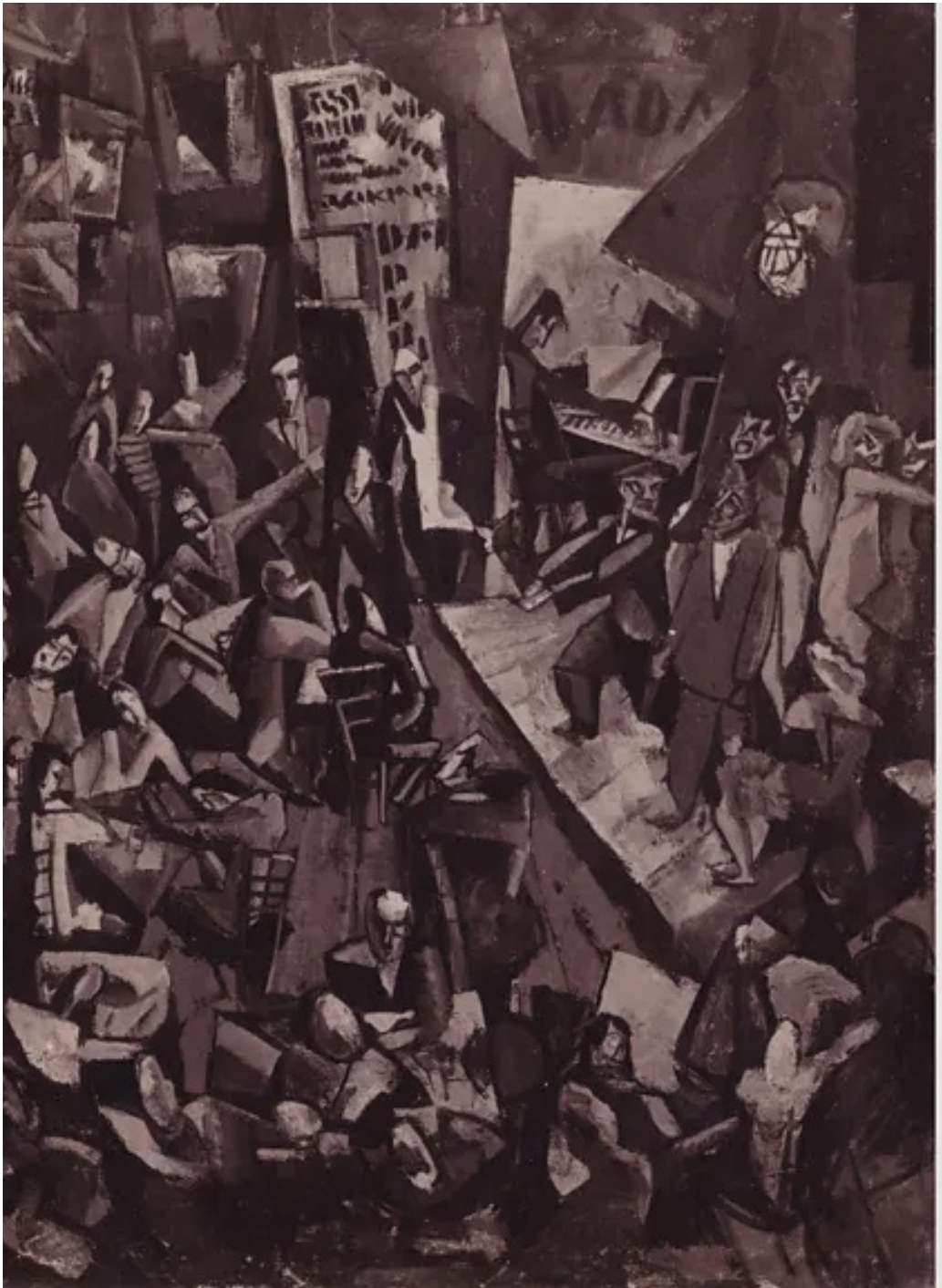
2 Ball, H. (1996). Flight out of time: A Dada Diary. Univ of California Press.

3 Ades, D. (2021). Photomontage (Second) (World of Art). Thames & Hudson.

4 Huelsenbeck, R. (1918). Dadaistisches Manifest, from the estate of Hannah Hoech (Berlinische Galerie)

5 Richter, H. (1978). Dada: Art and anti-art. https://doubleoperative.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/richter-hans_zurich-dada.pdf

12 Painting of Cabaret Voltaire that night of Ball's performance
Marcel Janco
1916



Manifesto Machines: Dada, Der Dada, and the Print Revolution

While Dada erupted on stages, its longest-lasting legacy may lie in print. From Zurich’s Cabaret Voltaire publication to Berlin’s Der Dada, Die Pleite, and Jedermann sein eigener Fussball, the movement’s magazines functioned as both manifestos and visual playgrounds. They were not just platforms- they were part of the performance, designed to confront readers, destabilize meaning, and visually assault the bourgeois eye.

This chapter delves into the role of Dada’s print culture in spreading the movement’s ideology. It examines how the use of typography, collage, and layout became political tools in themselves, rejecting coherence and hierarchy in favor of disorder and fragmentation. These publications were not just reflections of Dada’s chaos- they were the chaos, disseminated through the postal system like aesthetic time bombs. Special attention is paid to the emergence of photomontage in these pages, where image and text collided with radical purpose.

The term “Dada” is said to have originated as a nonsensical word, chosen arbitrarily by the movement’s founders, Huelsenbeck and Ball, as described previously in the manifestos abstract. In French, “Dada” means “rocking horse,” and in German, it is a childish expression, emphasising the movement’s rejection of logic and conventional thought. The term itself encapsulated Dada’s spirit of absurdity and rebellion against established norms, despite the declaration that it was chosen out of a dictionary. [1] The Dadaist wanted to spread the word and they mainly did so in the form of magazine publications, often including their typography and photomontage on the cover and within. (see figure, right side)

The Malik Verlag was a key publisher for Dada, particularly known for publishing the Magazine of (at some point former-) Dada members, mainly Hausmann, Grosz and Heartfield, in various forms until 1933. [5] This magazine became a vital platform for Dada’s political and artistic critiques, often showcasing the work of John Heartfield, who got the title of the Monteur and Typograph. Meanwhile, Der Dada

Magazine by Raoul Hausmann featured a similar anti-bourgeois sentiment: “Dadaism demands: the international revolutionary union of all creative and intellectual men and women on the basis of radical Communism” [3]

Although Huelsenbeck was originally part of the Ball and Tzara group, he started turning against their thinking when he went back to Berlin in 1917. Huelsenbeck critiqued Tzara’s abstract approach, stating it failed to address real-world issues: “I find in the Dadaism of Tzara and his friends, who made abstract art the cornerstone of their new wisdom, no new idea deserving of very strenuous propaganda. They failed to advance along the abstract road, which ultimately leads from the painted surface to the reality of the post office form” [3] Alongside Hausmann, he issued a manifesto calling for revolutionary change, echoing the Communist occupation of Berlin at the time, reflecting their manifestos back to the political climate. By publishing this manifesto he discloses a public statement that Dada shall not be known as one. [3]

In fact, Hausmann and Huelsenbeck were not the only ones to publish a magazine. In the same year as Hausmann- 1917, Tzara released his own, titled “Dada: recueil littéraire et artistique [Dada: Literary and Artistic Review]” from July 1917 until September 1921. [4] It was a cutting-edge publication that was originally published in Zürich (1-4/5) and then in Paris (6-8). Tristan Tzara edited the publication himself, and unlike the others, without a publishing team. In his most notable Dada manifesto he states that “dada means nothing” in issue 3 (1918) [4]. This statement alone shows the conflict between demanding (Hausmann) and nothingness (Tzara).

It dangerously resembles Ball’s original performance at the cabaret, although Tzara most likely wrote this to cause more absurdity, almost meant as another shock of attack, on Dada itself this time. It goes back to the unknown of the etymology of the word Dada itself. What does it really mean?

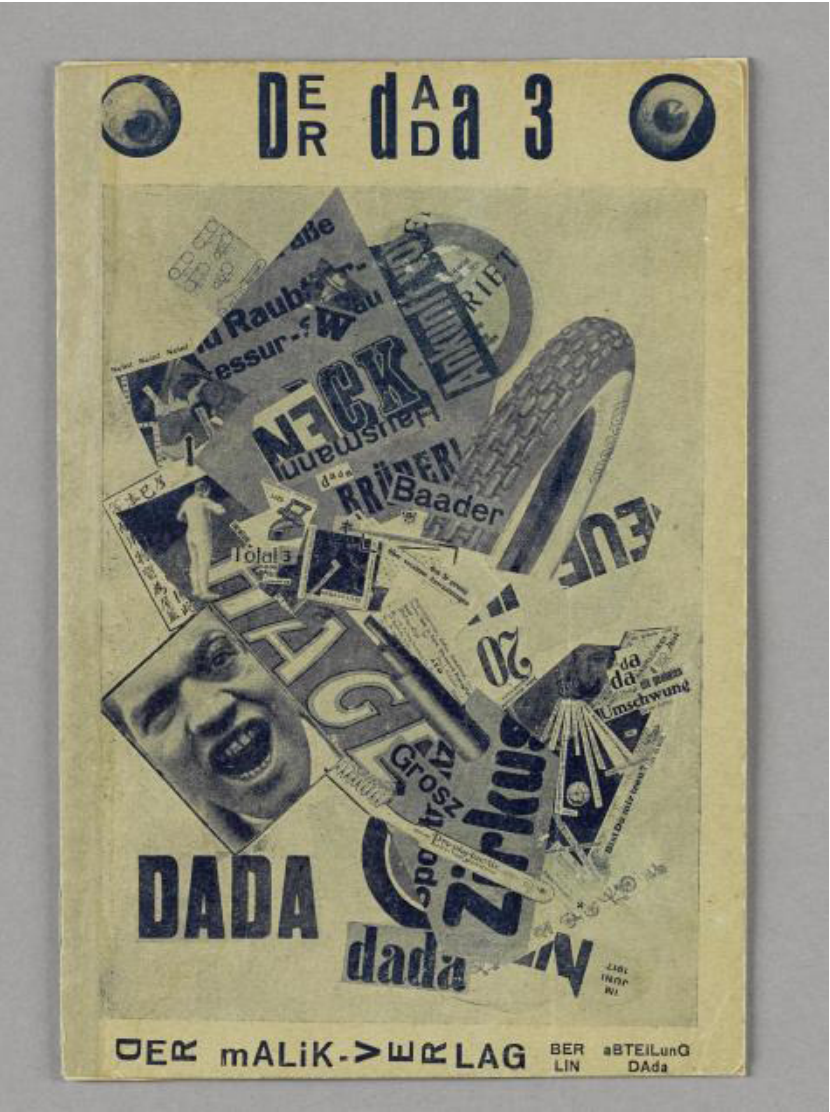
1 Kiefer, K. H., & Riedel, M. (1998). Dada, konkrete Poesie, Multimedia: Bausteine zu einer transgressiven Literaturdidaktik. Peter Lang GmbH, Internationaler Verlag Der Wissenschaften.

2 Ades, D. (1974). Dada and Surrealism. Thames and Hudson, p. 26

3 Huelsenbeck, R. (1920). En Avant Dada: A History of Dadaism. Translated complete from German by Ralph Manheim. first published as En Avant Dada: Eine Geschichte des Dadaismus, Hannover, Leipzig, Wien, Zurich. Paul Steegemann Verlag

4 Tzara, T. (1918). Dada 3 - décembre 1918: recueil littéraire et artistique. Accessed through [https://monoskop.org/Dada_\(journal\)](https://monoskop.org/Dada_(journal))

5 Siepmann, E. (1977). Montage: John Heartfield. Elefant Press Galerie, Berlin (West)



13 Der Dada No. 3
John Heartfield
April 1920

Cut with purpose: The Visual Logic of Dada Photomontage

The Technique of Photomontage and Its Revolutionary Implications

No single medium embodied the spirit of Dada as fully as photomontage. Violent, irreverent, and defiantly anti-aesthetic, it became the perfect form for a world in fragments. Developed most notably in postwar Berlin by artists like Raoul Hausmann, John Heartfield, and Hannah Höch, photomontage took the visual language of mass media- advertisements, headlines, state propaganda- and turned it against itself.

This chapter traces the emergence of photomontage as a Dadaist form of political and social critique. It examines how montage allowed artists to directly engage with contemporary issues: war, class, gender, and media manipulation while bypassing traditional artistic techniques and hierarchies. The method's feminist potential also comes into focus through the work of Höch, who used the medium not only to critique patriarchal structures but to reimagine identity altogether. [1] More than a visual strategy, photomontage was a way to reclaim representation in a world spinning out of control.

Photomontages have been in existence since the beginning of commercial photography which could be marked as the late 19th century, as this was the medium needed to be transformed. [1] First, though, there was the collage, in preliminary strokes. It is important to note that collages use different types of media to bring objects from different times and backgrounds together, whereas the montage blends photographs together in a rather seamless way. Some earlier examples may blur the lines, but this is the principal difference between collage and photomontage. It is believed that "Still life BACH", created by cubist Georges Braque in 1912, was the first collage, a technique quickly explored by Pablo Picasso, though it did not stop there. This way of arranging different pieces of art inspired futurists, such as Giacomo Balla and Umberto Boccioni as well. [1] There was already political turmoil, but World War I had not yet begun. Only once there was a separation

between home and the front, photomontage gained a new dimension in communicating, especially for Grosz and Heartfield. [2]

Looking back now, the assembled image space is the adequate response to the apparent atomisation of the context of life and the world experienced in war and in other ways in everyday city life. The legend that surrounds Grosz and Heartfield's development of photomontage as a separate artistic process indicates a further development: The photomontage was created because social contradictions could be expressed in correspondence between the front and home. Had it been expressed in conventional verbal form, communication would most certainly have fallen victim to censorship. [2]

It could be seen as a transition from a bourgeois to a proletarian class standpoint. The political development of Grosz and Heartfield was of major importance in the 1920s, after they, together with Huelsenbeck, buried Dada in Berlin in 1920.

One of the most lasting contributions of Berlin Dada was the development of photomontage. Photomontage involved cutting and assembling images from newspapers, magazines and advertisements to create jarring and often satirical compositions. This technique was not merely an artistic experiment, but a method of subversion. It deconstructed the media's authority and exposed the contradictions of the Weimar Republic and capitalism. The Berlin Dadaist almost became obsessed with collecting and keeping all printed media, as Hannah Hoch reflected [2].

Heartfield's later photomontages, such as Adolf the Superman: Swallows Gold and Spouts Junk, were direct attacks on fascism, using manipulated imagery to reveal the corruption and hypocrisy of political leaders. Grosz, similarly, used photomontage to depict the grotesque nature of bourgeois society, blending caricature and collage to portray

a world dominated by greed and violence. Huelsenbeck praised photomontage as "the most immediate form of revolutionary propaganda," noting that it was uniquely suited to an age saturated with mass media. [3]

Contradictory Raoul Hausmann and Hannah Hoch also claimed that they discovered the photomontage in 1918 whilst they were on vacation. Hausmann later said in 1932:

"Not without reason the purely phonetic poem was discovered which was optically supported by a novel Typography. Photomontage, also propagated by the Dadaists, served the same purpose: renewal and strengthening of the physiological in typography. It was already recognised then that the increasing need of the age for the image thus the doubling of a text through optical illustration was not to be solved through simple juxtaposition, but rather only through an optical construction referring back to linguistic-conceptual foundations." [4]

The contradictory between the members of Dada and being unable to agree on who discovered this technique will be analysed in three selected photomontages later on.

- 1 Ades, D. (1974). *Dada and Surrealism*. Thames and Hudson
- 2 Siepmann, E. (1977). *Montage: John Heartfield*. Elefant Press Galerie, Berlin (West)
- 3 Huelsenbeck, R. (1920). *En Avant Dada: A History of Dadaism*. Translated complete from German by Ralph Manheim. first published as *En Avant Dada: Eine Geschichte des Dadaismus*, Hannover, Leipzig, Wien, Zurich. Paul Steegemann Verlag
- 4 Benson, T. O. (1987). *Raoul Hausmann and Berlin Dada*. Published by UMI research press. Digitized by the Internet Archive in 2019 with funding from Kahle/Austin Foundation, p. 93
Originally published in: *Illus. in Hans Richter: Dadaismo e Astazione (1909-1923)* (ex. cat., Milan: Galleria Schwarz, 1965), no. 16.



14 Still life BACH, George Braque, 1912



15 Dynamic of a cyclist, Umberto Boccioni, 1913



16 Nature morte au compotier - Pablo Picasso

The 1920s

Art on Trial:The 1920 Dada Fair as Political Spectacle

In the sweltering Berlin summer of 1920, visitors entered a gallery only to be met with military dummies, aggressive slogans, and a complete rejection of anything resembling traditional art. This was the First International Dada Fair, a visual assault that turned exhibition space into battlefield, manifesto into wallpaper, and the artist into an agitator. Organized by John Heartfield, George Grosz, and Raoul Hausmann, the fair was not simply an art show; it was a direct provocation to the state, the public, and the very institution of art itself.

This chapter explores the political and visual strategies of the Dada Fair, focusing especially on how photomontage left the page and entered physical space as immersive, confrontational propaganda. The fair blurred the line between satire and insurrection, making it a crucial moment in the evolution of Dada’s message. It also marked a turning point: Dada was no longer confined to backroom performances or printed manifestos, it had entered the public eye, daring the world to respond.

The pinnacle of Dada’s first political engagement was the First International Dada Fair, held in an art salon in Lützowstraße in Berlin in June 1920, organised by Heartfield, Grosz and Raoul Hausmann. The deep running split within Dada can be seen in the attendance list: Hugo Ball and Tzara did not participate in the fair as their philosophy had not been aligned with the other three Dadaists since the war ended. This exhibition was meant to be a direct challenge to the existing art world, with works that mocked capitalism, militarism, and nationalist ideology. Among the most controversial pieces was The Prussian Archangel, a mannequin dressed in a German officer’s uniform with a pig’s head, symbolising the corrupt and oppressive nature of the military establishment. [1] Heartfield, Grosz and Huelsenbeck saw the fair as an opportunity to fuse artistic experimentation with political agitation. Across the three rooms a giant banner reads: “Dada fights alongside the international proletariat!” Never mind that the proletariat takes little note of these fighting methods. Only the “Red Flag” magazine publishes a review by Gertrud Alexander, a German-Soviet communist, politician, publicist, editor and cultural critic translator. [1] Still, the organiser’s work directly addressed the

failures of the Weimar Republic and the lingering militarism of post-war Germany. The exhibition attracted both acclaim and outrage, with authorities considering it an affront to national dignity. It solidified Berlin Dada’s commitment to revolutionary activism, but also marked the beginning of the end for the movement. [2] It might have become clear that the simple contradiction of anti-art monteours hosting an art exhibition, was absurd in itself. Instead of Dada expanding further, it did the opposite: it imploded. It is the year of the Dada retrospective, in which all the latent contradictions that have characterised this phase break down. The artists who condemn art held an art fair; the slogan of which is the condemnation of the art trade, itself becomes the subject of sales negotiations: the nonsense as a program, which was thought of as a protest against the functionalisation of life, collides with the claim to political effect. [2] For Grosz, Heartfield and at times also Hausmann, international solidarity was an indispensable part of the Dada-Fair, even though the communist movement did not honour them as trusted combatants. They were judged to be bourgeois and decadent because of their nihilism, and the Dadaists themselves revolted against the communists’ dogmatic, punctilious concept of art.[1]

Both Grosz and Heartfield had already left the Dada positions behind at this stage. Heartfield worked for Piscator’s proletarian theatre in 1920, which offered him the opportunity to speak to the addressee that Dada had sought in vain: the working class. In other words, Dada cannot be talked about as a whole construct, but it really needs to be looked at from member to member.

1 Bergius, H. (n.d.) Erste Internationale DADA-Messe (1920). Rekonstruktion der Messe und des Kataloges. Auszug aus der Publikation “DADA Triumphs!”. Retrieved from <https://www.burg-halle.de/~bergius/>

2 Siepmann, E. (1977). Montage: John Heartfield. Elefanten Press Galerie, Berlin (West)



17 International Dada Fair
July 1 to August 25
1920

Pasted Politics:When Montage Became a Weapon

The Death of Dada and the Survival of Photomontage

This artistic shift was not just about technique; it marked a political realignment. Photomontage became a weapon, a tool of class struggle. Grosz and Heartfield moved beyond the disillusioned irony of Dada and embraced Marxist critique. Their rejection of Dada in Berlin was not the death of radical art, but its evolution. [2] Dada did not die because of the rejection of the wealth public or the political climate. It was the members themselves, who set an end to the unavoidable contradictions within the turmoil. In many ways, the so-called “death” of Dada was the birth of something even more dangerous: a direct challenge to power through imagery. Rather than an end, photomontage became a catalyst, an insurgent language that blurred the line between art and revolution. [1]

Despite its radical energy, Dada could not sustain itself indefinitely. By the early 1920s, internal divisions and external pressures led to its dissolution;

Ball, disillusioned with the movement’s politicisation, withdrew into mysticism.

Tzara moved toward Surrealism, where his ideas of creative spontaneity found new ground.

Huelsenbeck continued his revolutionary activities, but eventually distanced himself from Dada’s more chaotic elements.

Heartfield and Grosz, however, remained committed to using art as a weapon.

The final blow came when many of Dada’s Berlin members abandoned the movement, recognising that its shock tactics had become predictable. Grosz officially declared, “Dada is dead.” [3]. The movement’s members had, in essence, killed it themselves. However, its techniques (especially photomontage) would live on, influencing political propaganda and radical art throughout the 20th century. [1]

The Evolution of Photomontage in the 1920s and Its Role in World War II

Following the dissolution of Dada, the photomontage technique, pioneered by Berlin Dadaists, evolved into an even sharper political weapon. Heartfield, in particular, used photomontage throughout the 1920s and 1930s to critique the rise of Nazism. His works, published in AIZ (Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung), became some of the most powerful pieces of anti-fascist propaganda of the era. Unlike the earlier shock tactics of Zurich Dada performances, which relied on absurdity and unpredictability, photomontage had a direct, unmistakable political message. [2]

During World War II, photomontage was used by both fascist and anti-fascist forces. The Nazis understood the power of visual propaganda, manipulating imagery to reinforce their ideology. However, anti-fascist artists like Heartfield countered these efforts with equally powerful photomontages, exposing the horrors of the Nazi regime. The effectiveness of these works lay in their ability to subvert familiar imagery: taking the visual language of propaganda and turning it against itself. [2]

1 Ades, D. (2021). *Photomontage (Second) (World of Art)*. Thames & Hudson.

2 Siepmann, E. (1977). *Montage: John Heartfield*. Elefant Press Galerie, Berlin (West)

3 Benson, T. O. (1987). *Raoul Hausmann and Berlin Dada*. Published by UMI research press. Digitized by the Internet Archive in 2019 with funding from Kahle/Austin Foundation, p. 46
Originally published in: *Illus. in Hans Richter: Dadaismo e Astazione (1909-1923) (ex. cat., Milan: Galleria Schwarz, 1965), no. 16.*



18 Raoul Hausmann. Was ist Dada?, 1919
Typography.
(Der Dada 2 [Berlin: December 1919])



19 John Heartfield, Benütze Foto als Waffe! (Use Photo as a Weapon!), 1929

Analysis

Who's Afraid of Hannah Höch? Gender, Dada, and Domestic Subversion

The Role of Equal Rights in Hannah Höch's Work

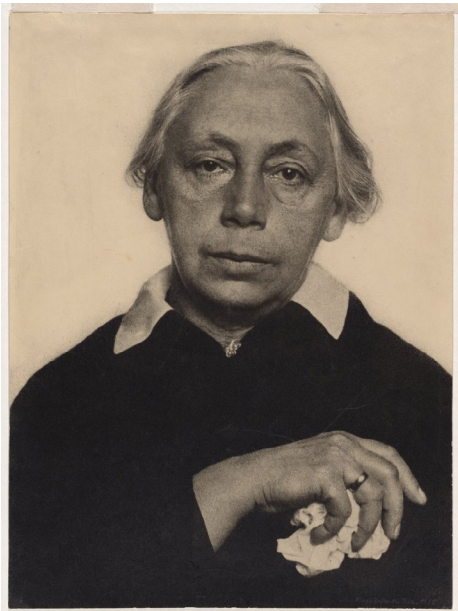
It seems nearly impossible to understand this photomontage by looking at it only once or twice. It might not be possible to understand every single detail and yet this is what Höch's montage is about. She later said: "We [the Dadaists] regarded ourselves as engineers, we maintained that we were building things, we said we put our works together like fitters." [1]. Hannah Höch's photomontage presents a compelling critique of gender roles and the illusion of equal rights within the Dada movement, whilst still depicting the political situation in Weimar at the time post World War I. As a German Expressionist, Höch was deeply influenced by the work of Käthe Kollwitz, who often depicted themes of social justice and the struggles of women. Höch herself was frustrated with the way women were treated, particularly within the Dadaist circle, where male members claimed to support gender equality, but failed to take real action.[2]

The composition is divided into distinct quadrants, each carrying symbolic weight:

At the center of the composition is Niddy Impekoven, a renowned German dancer of the Golden Twenties, whose dynamic pose conveys movement and vitality. However, her head has been replaced by Kollwitz's, emphasising the intersection of artistic legacy and feminist critique. The montage suggests that while women were celebrated for their cultural contributions, their identities were often overshadowed by broader political and artistic narratives. [3]

Höch subtly inserts her own signature into the piece—a small cutout of her head placed beneath a map indicating the countries where women had secured voting rights by 1919. [2] This strategic placement underscores the disparity between political advancements and the actual reality of women, especially within artistic and intellectual spheres.

Upper Right Quadrant: Labeled "Die anti-dadaistische Bewegung" (The Anti-Dadaist Movement), this section critiques political figures opposed to Dadaist ideals. General von Hindenburg's head is humorously placed on an exotic dancer's body, while German Minister of Defense Gustav Noske converses with another general, both balancing yet another general on their heads. This absurd layering suggests a hierarchy-



20 Porträt Käthe Kollwitz, 1925-29



21 Niddy Impekoven und ihre Tänze, 1930



22 Close up: women rights map of europe, 1919

dada is not an art movement

anti dadaist



join dada

dadaist

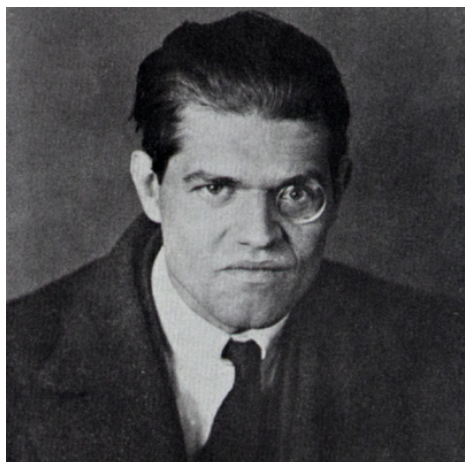
23 Hannah Höch Cut with the Kitchen Knife Dada Through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch in Germany, 1919



24 Wilhelm II. im Jahr 1902



25 Hannah Höch, detail of Kaiser Wilhelm II, Cut with the Kitchen Knife Dada Through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch in Germany, collage, mixed media, 1919–1920 (Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin)



26 Raoul Hausmann in 1915

cal structure of power that remains indifferent to progressive change. Kaiser Wilhelm appears with an exaggeratedly large head, his moustache morphing into two wrestlers locked in combat, symbolising the struggle for dominance. [3]

Lower Right Quadrant: In stark contrast, this section represents the world of the Dadaists, labeled “Dadaisten.” Here, Höch aligns herself with the movement while also subtly critiquing its male-centric narratives. She includes a map and the figures of fellow Dadaists, such as Raoul Hausmann, her former partner, who overshadowed her legacy for years. The montage also features George Grosz and Wieland Herzfelde, the brother of John Heartfield. Notably, Niddy Impekoven reappears in this quadrant, this time depicted as bathing John Heartfield in a bathtub. This surreal juxtaposition challenges traditional gender roles and underscores the performative nature of power within both artistic and social frameworks. [1]

Upper Left Quadrant: This section prominently features influential political and intellectual figures of the time, all of whom are men. The presence of Lenin, Johannes Baader, and Karl Radek, who was deeply involved in Communist movements between Russia and Germany, suggests a critique of male-dominated revolutionary politics. Karl Marx is also depicted, alongside modern art critic and writer Theodor Däubler, whose head is infantilised by being placed on a baby’s body. This visual choice mocks the self-importance of these figures and highlights how political power structures often undermine progressive social change and emphasises Höch’s skepticism towards male intellectual dominance. [2] Additionally, the presence of Einstein, who is depicted as saying, “He, he, young man, Dada is not an art trend”, reinforces the movement’s ideological depth beyond fleeting artistic fashion. This statement serves as a declaration that Dada was more than a passing phenomenon; it was a profound cultural and political statement.

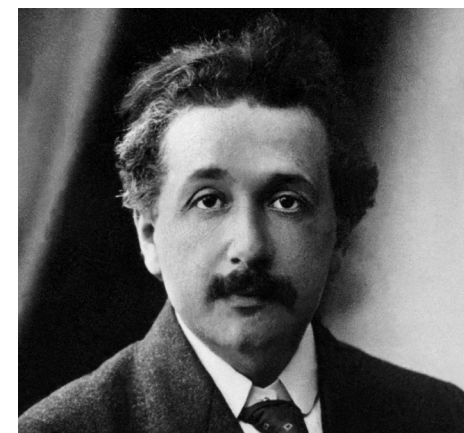
Lower Left Quadrant: This area features scenes of mass gatherings, including Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, leaders of the German Communist Party who were imprisoned, tortured and assassinated in January 1919. Liebknecht is shown saying, “Join Dada,” linking revolutionary political



27 Paul von Hindenburg around 1915



28 Hannah Höch, detail of the dadaists, Cut with the Kitchen Knife Dada Through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch in Germany, collage, mixed media, 1919–1920 (Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin)



29 Albert Einstein around 1905

struggles with the radical artistic movement. The montage illustrates how Dada operated across Europe, with various centers engaging in distinct yet interconnected forms of artistic expression, particularly photomontage, which was central to Berlin Dadaists. [1] [3]

1 Gray, E. B. (2016). Hannah Höch: Dada to Anti-Dada. Courtauld Essay 1.

2 Ades, D. (2021). *Photomontage (Second) (World of Art)*. Thames & Hudson.

3 Höch, H., Boswell, P. W., Makela, M. M., Lanchner, C., & Makhholm, K. (1996). *The photomontages of Hannah Höch*.



30 Rosa Luxemburg und Karl Liebknecht

Critique the Critic: Dada's Mouthpiece Bites Back

Theme of Photomontage

Criticizing those, who still use traditional artistic values. The art critic plays the role of being the one to say what to do.

Artist

Raoul Hausmann 1886–1971

Alternative Title

Der Kunstkritiker

Medium

Lithograph and printed paper on paper

Dimensions

support: 318 x 254 mm

Both Raoul Hausmann and Hannah Höch claimed that they developed the medium of photomontage in 1918 [1]. Hausmann did this photomontage in 1919, a year after their first experiments and in the same year as Höch's photomontage, analysed above.

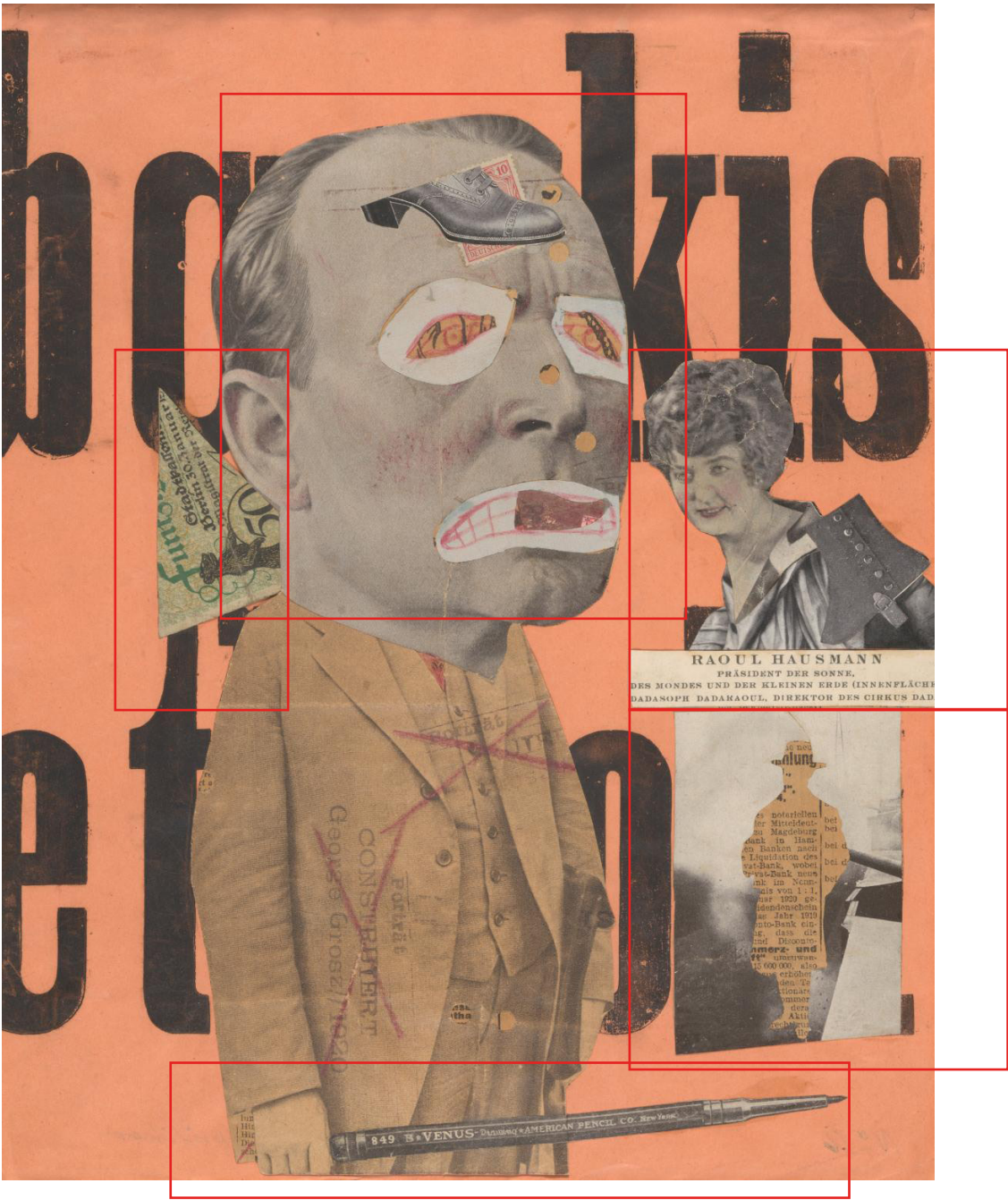
The central figure is a cut-out of a man who is supposed to be George Grosz, as indicated by the stamp on the tuxedo, although this was never confirmed. [2] The head is comically large, which suggests an overblown sense of self-importance. He has a grotesque and exaggerated face with drawn eyes and mouth, which appears to be consuming or spouting words from a piece of text towards a woman cut-out. It is not known who she is, but Hausmann had a reputation of being a womaniser and having an affair with Hannah Höch whilst being married. [2] Underneath there is an almost museum-like name tag of himself as well as a negative of a figure cut out. It puts Hausmann into his own piece of art without being the main figure.

His wide-open mouth and intense gaze convey a sense of absurdity, reinforcing Dadaist themes of irrationality and critique of traditional authority.

The main figure is being choked by a 50 DM German bank note which touches upon the bourgeoisie, whilst also holding an oversized expensive looking pencil.

The background is a neon orange with scrap letters of Hausmanns poems, not making any coherent sense.

The Art Critic serves as a scathing commentary on the elitism and corruption of the art world, mocking critics who uphold outdated artistic values, while failing to recognise the need for change. [2]



31 The art critic, Raoul Hausmann, 1919

Conclusion

The study of Dada, and particularly its pioneering use of photomontage, reveals a movement that was more than just a radical rejection of traditional art. It was a necessary response to the chaos and uncertainty of post-WWI Germany. Figures like Heartfield, Grosz, Höch, and Hausmann did not simply create art; they weaponized images, challenging both political systems and the very nature of representation itself. By cutting and reassembling fragments of mass media, they exposed the absurdity of propaganda, the failures of the ruling elite, and the fractured reality of a war-torn society.

The short few years were filled with juxtapositions, contradictions, disagreements and countless products produced but they all had one thing in common: the absurdity of a starving society and that inner urge of expressing their deepest feeling that society is failing. They were the generations of figures (I almost refuse to say artists) that had to say and do something in the realm of visual art. It is almost ironic that the fragmented society got represented in fragments of newspapers, postcards, letters, any mass produced printed media, rearranged and put together seamlessly in a new context.

This thesis has argued that photomontage was not merely an aesthetic innovation but a turning point in how visual culture could be used to engage with politics and social critique. While existing literature has often placed Dada within a broader avant-gar-

de tradition, I have emphasized its unique role in shaping modern political art. The Berlin Dadaists did not just break artistic conventions; they pioneered a form of visual resistance that remains relevant today. Although Dada and its legacy faded since the turn of the century, it should never be forgotten or neglected in the wake of political tension and the response of art. That art is almost a mirror of the fragmentation of society and its beliefs. Of course it is well known in art critic circles but the broader society is more and more unaware of their doings, just as I was before doing this research. I never comprehended the extent to social critique that they conducted and how deep their beliefs ran. It is not mere a “glueing together of scraps”. If this would have been their only ambition, they would have never gotten attention in any way. The grotesque is what made people turn and think, even if it was in disgust. It provoked a reaction which was so deeply needed in the paralysed state of Germany after World War I.

In reassessing the historical and cultural impact of photomontage, this research sheds new light on how early 20th-century artists laid the foundation for contemporary visual activism. Their radical approach to image-making has echoed through generations, influencing everything from anti-fascist propaganda to modern digital collage and montage. The significance of their work is not confined to the past as it continues to challenge, provoke, and inspire.



32
The guilty one remains unknown
George Grosz
1919

Annotated bibliography

[1] Ades, D. (1974). Dada and Surrealism. *Thames and Hudson*, pp. 2-28

Dawn Ades spent most of her career as a lecturer and then professor in Art History and Theory (1971-1989) at the University of Essex. Following that, she spent her last career years as the head of the department of Art History and Theory, even giving a lecture series titled “Surrealism and the avant-garde in Europe and the Americas” at the University of Oxford in the academic year of 2009/2010. Therefore, she uses her Masters degree in art history and her till then acquired knowledge to describe Dadaism in its beginning and ending stages, set in the times of WWI and the transition into surrealism.

[2] Schneede, U.M. (1979). Die zwanziger Jahre: Manifeste u. Dokumente dt. Künstler. *DuMont Buchverlag*

Uwe M. Schneede (born 1939) studied Art History, Literary studies and classical archaeology, additionally completing a research year at the Rijksbureau voor kunsthistorische Documentatie in Den Haag. From 1973 onwards, he functioned as the director of the Art Club in Hamburg until he became a professor of modern art history at the Art History Institute of the University of Munich. During his role as a director in Hamburg, he witnessed the erecting of Oswald Mathias Ungers “Galerie der Gegenwart” in 1997. His years of studying, teaching and leading resulted in the complete collection of art in the 1920's in Germany, with the manifestos and political events partaking at the same time.

[3] Siepmann, E. (1977). Montage: John Heartfield. *Elefanten Press Galerie, Berlin (West)*

Siepmann created this book magazin about John Heartfield and his works, set in a complete overview of the socio-political setting of the time. It includes most texts from the manifestos, as well as written letters and interviews. It is Siepmann's only published book but it is the most complete collection of John Heartfield. It was a limited edition but collectors say it is a must when research the art movement in between WWI and WW2.

[4] Ades, D. (2021). *Photomontage (Second) (World of Art)*. *Thames & Hudson*.

Ades released the latest version of Photomontage in 2021, which makes it the most complete and recent book on the market at the moment. Her education and career got previously described which is a testament to her that she spent most of her life, trying to understand and research the topic in more depth every time. Not many new works have been discovered but certainly the historic understanding has developed.

[5] Huelsenbeck, R. (1964) Dada. Eine literarische Dokumentation. *Published Richard Huelsenbeck, Reinbek near Hamburg*

Richard Huelsenbeck was part of the Dada movement as one of the first members. He came to Zurich in 1919 the night when Hugo Ball performed at the cabaret Voltaire. He stayed part of the group and later on wrote several pieces about Dadaism and psychology.

[6] Riha, K. (1977) Dada Berlin. Texte, Manifeste, Aktionen. *In collaboration with Hanne Bergius published Karl Riha, Stuttgart*

This book is known as a Reclam book, which is a very famous book series in Germany. It is usually rather small and concise, recognizable by its yellow color but it contains all important information for that certain topic. In this case, it is a collection of all written texts, manifestos and actions that have been published in that time. It does not go too into depth but rather presents a sober understanding of Dada Berlin.

[8] Richard Huelsenbeck, „Dadaistisches Manifest“ (1918), Dada Almanach, herausgegeben von Richard Huelsenbeck. Berlin: Erich Reiss, 1920, S. 35-41

This document is the original Dada manifesto which has been signed by the following members: Tristan Tzara. Franz Jung. George Grosz. Marcel Janco. Richard Huelsenbeck. Gerhard Preiß. Raoul Hausmann. Walter Mehring. O. Lüthy. Frédéric Glauser. Hugo Ball. Pierre Albert Birot. Maria d'Arezzo. Gino Cantarelli. Prampolini. R. van Rees. Madame van Rees. Hans Arp. G. Thäuber. Andrée Morosini. François Mombello-Pasquati. It includes some of the biggest names associated with Dada in

Zurich. Together, they all agreed at this moment in time (1918) that this is what dada is about underlining the most important reasons of why this is the club to join and the mediums that come with it.

[7] Sternstunde Kunst - Das Prinzip dada (n.d.) Play SRF. Available at: <https://www.srf.ch/play/tv/sternstunde-kunst/video/das-prinzip-dada-?urn=urn%3Asrf%3Avideo%3A9ad993db-5c78-420a-89cd-52a5b023d3be> (Accessed: 08 December 2024).

The Sternstunde Kunst is a Swiss radio and tv program publishing movies about several different art movements. It is a neutral reportage showing the creation and development of the Dada movement. It makes use of art works, video footage and commentaries. In this way they explore a wide range on the principle of dada by making it understandable for the average viewer/listener. films as non-academic

The following three are more movies made about Dada, originally published on German national tv. I am aware that these are not academic sources but it helped me a lot to understand the atmosphere of the time, as it includes footage in a way that a book never could.

[8] <https://www.srf.ch/play/tv/sternstunde-kunst/video/john-heartfield---kunst-als-waffe?urn=urn:srf:video:eaf65e36-83d0-4680-aced-c49e339c0399>

[9] <https://archive.org/details/germany-dada>

[10] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G2RIUd-9Gui4>

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3 Landesarchiv Berlin. (1915) Stettiner Bahnhof <https://landesarchiv-berlin.de/fotosammlung>
4 Landesarchiv Berlin. (1916) Inselbrücke <https://landesarchiv-berlin.de/fotosammlung>
5 Landesarchiv Berlin. (1917) Carriage and transport <https://landesarchiv-berlin.de/fotosammlung>
6 Landesarchiv Berlin. (1918) Umbau Friedrichstrasse Bahnhof <https://landesarchiv-berlin.de/fotosammlung>
7 Landesarchiv Berlin. (1921) „Dancing“ bear <https://landesarchiv-berlin.de/fotosammlung>
8 Landesarchiv Berlin. (1922) Man skating around Berlin <https://landesarchiv-berlin.de/fotosammlung>
9 Landesarchiv Berlin. (1929) Kommissbrot car <https://landesarchiv-berlin.de/fotosammlung>
10 Estate of George Grosz, Princeton, N.J. / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2024
Foto: (Vergleichsabbildung, George Grosz, Deutschland, ein Wintermärchen, 1919–1920 (1918), Autotypie, 29,6 x 18,5 cm, Reproduktion des gleichnamigen Gemäldes / Akademie der Künste, Berlin, Kunstsammlung, Inventar-Nr.: KS-Grosz 370) <https://www.kuma.art/de/exponat/deutschland-ein-wintermaerchen>
11 Hugo Ball, Verse ohne Worte im kubistischen Kostüm, Zürich, 1916. 71,5 x 40 cm. Unknown photographer. Publicity postcard to promote the programme of the Cabaret Voltaire. https://monoskop.org/Hugo_Ball
12 Marcel Janco (1916) painting of a night in the Cabaret Voltaire Note: now survives only in a

reproduction on a postcard <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20160719-cabaret-voltaire-a-night-out-at-historys-wildest-nightclub>
13 John Heartfield. (1919) Der Dada Nr. 3 <https://sdr.lib.uiowa.edu/dada/derdada/>
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16 Pablo Picasso (1914-15) Nature morte au compotier (Still Life with Compote and Glass), oil on canvas, 63.5 x 78.7 cm (25 x 31 in), Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio.
17 First International Dada-Fair (1920) View into the second room, From left to right: Hausmann, Höch, Baader, Herzfelde, Margarete Herzfelde, Schmalhausen, Grosz, Heartfield <https://www.burg-halle.de/~bergius/First-International%20Dada-1920.pdf>
18 Raoul Hausmann (1919) Was ist Dada? 2025 Raoul Hausmann / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/11514>
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20 Hugo Erfurth (1925 – 1929) Porträt Käthe Kollwitz (Abzug 1935) <https://sammlung.staedelmuseum.de/de/werk/portraet-kaethe-kollwitz>
21 Hans Frentz (1930) Niddy Impekoven und ihre Tänze, Freiburg, Urban-Verlag 1930. <https://www.deutsches-tanzarchiv.de/archiv/nachlaesse-sammlungen/i/niddy-impekoven>

22 Hannah Höch (1919–1920) Close up of: Cut with the Kitchen Knife Dada Through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch in Germany, collage, mixed media, (Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin) <https://smarthistory.org/hannah-hoch-cut-kitchen-knife-dada-weimar-beer-belly-germany/>
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26 Raoul Hausmann (1915) Photographer unknown. https://arthive.com/de/artists/1659~Raoul_Hausmann
27 Paul von Hindenburg (around 1915) Fotoporträt von Nicola Perscheid https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_von_Hindenburg
28 Hannah Höch (1919–1920) Cut with the Kitchen Knife Dada Through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch in Germany, collage, mixed media, (Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin) <https://smarthistory.org/hannah-hoch-cut-kitchen-knife-dada-weimar-beer-belly-germany/>
29 Albert Einstein im Jahr 1905. Ausser einigen Fac-

kollegen kannte ihn zu dieser Zeit noch kaum jemand. (Image:Keystone) <https://www.nzz.ch/wissenschaft/einstein-die-sonnenfinsternis-von-1919-machte-ihn-beruehmt-ld.1484048>
30 Rosa Luxemburg und Karl Liebknecht (n.d.) <https://www.wsws.org/de/special/pages/luxemburg-liebknecht.html>
31 Raoul Hausmann (1919-1920) The art critic, ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2025 <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/hausmann-the-art-critic-t01918>
32 George Grosz (1919) The guilty one remains unknown, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Stanley M. Freehling <https://www.artic.edu/artworks/110664/the-guilty-one-remains-unknown>

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