

Dada Futures: Introduction

Jennifer Buckley and Joyce C. Tsai

In 1918, Tristan Tzara notoriously declared that “Dada means nothing.” Not only does Dada itself mean nothing; Dada negates meaning altogether. But negation does not go far enough, and so Dada destroys. Art, philosophy, morality, the family – all structures bolstering the bourgeoisie are to be swept away in Dada’s “great negative work of destruction” (Tzara 41). The past, having been well-battered by futurism earlier in the decade, is targeted for “abolition.” But so, too, is the future. Unlike the vanguardists before and after who have cast themselves as prophets of the new (machine-age art, economic/social system, *Mensch*, cyborg, etc.), Tzara presents Dada as a negative impulse so deep and so forceful that it would annihilate not only the values and structures of modern culture, but also Dada *itself*. Tzara’s Dada is for “the moment” and of its moment, as averse to any future (including its own) as it is to the past. That moment could be as brief as an instant, as Jed Rasula emphasizes in his contribution to this special issue, which celebrates a much longer period: the forty-year history of the International Dada Archive. Two years after Tzara published “Manifeste Dada 1918,” Walter Conrad Arensberg quipped that “the life expectancy of real Dada works should be just 6 hours” (191).

Of course, Tzara and Arensberg were not the only Dadas to comment on its disposition toward futurity. According to Marcel Janco, Dada “lasts, and will last as long as the spirit of negation contains the ferments of the future.”¹ Janco, Theo van Doesburg, and Kurt Schwitters are among those that Stephen C. Foster designated as the “constructive Dadaists,” contrasting their efforts to imagine a “new order” – however necessarily inchoate – with the thoroughgoing negativity of Johannes Baader (36).² Even those who did comment on the possibility that their efforts would endure tended to emphasize Dada’s anarchic “spirit,” rather than artworks and actions. For Rasula, the sheer volume and range of products

¹ Qtd. by Sanouillet in *Dada Spectrum* 24. Also in that volume, Mary Ann Caws writes of the “Dada spirit,” which she saw as operative in 1978. Another edited collection, published the following year, that stresses Dada’s enduring “spirit” is Richard Sheppard’s *Dada: Studies of a Movement*.

² Foster adds that for George Grosz, Otto Dix, Hannah Höch, John Heartfield, and Raoul Hausmann, their “negativism is specific but [their] . . . implicit positivism is extremely vague” (44).

(*Erzeugnisse*) or productions that Dada issues forth undermines the multiple curatorial and theoretical impulses to create “a normalizing perspective on its materials”: Dada will always slip from our grasp, a trickster slipping hermeneutic knots.

That spirit was ungovernable from the get-go: consider the bewildering range of Dada’s sometimes contradictory political and aesthetic commitments, even in its initial coalescence in Zurich in 1916.³ Yet as scholars have stressed, the groups’ members – notably including Tzara – profusely documented their artworks and actions, and even their deliberate misrepresentations enabled a future of some sort. Stealing tactics (and much else, as Tzara admitted) from the futurists, Dadas published not just to circulate their output, but also to propagate rumor and scandal, and to launch threats of action yet to come. Timothy Benson’s contribution to this issue addresses the extraordinary range of strategies Dada commandeered from the battlefield, from the new transmission technologies to mass media. Dada’s deployments cleaved the links between text and meaning, disrupted the rhythms and logic of discourse, and secured new terrains of imagination. As Kurt Beals further argues here, Dada also absorbed the technologies of cryptography and telegraphy into its poetics. Originating in the war and migrating to economic markets, both technologies required meaningful messages to be encoded as meaningless ciphers, and then decoded into usable information.⁴ Dadas mimicked the look and logic of cryptography so effectively that at some times their poems read as coded threat; at others, their writings appeared as spiritual incantations whose meaning can only be deciphered by initiates.

Dada published its often carefully designed ephemera on cheap, acidic stock – explicitly refuting contemporary values of art and its market. At a time when few museums would contemplate collecting these objects, Foster and Rudolf E. Kuenzli mounted their groundbreaking show *Dada Artifacts* at the University of Iowa in 1978, accompanied by the symposium *Dada in Art and Literature*. The next year they established the International Dada Archive, and commenced building the core of a major collection that now houses some 60,000 works including periodicals, books, and other media. Kathryn M. Floyd reflects here upon the impact of that exhibition and others, which have transformed interpretive and curatorial trajectories by including ephemera, periodicals, and performance as integral aspects of Dada’s poetics and politics.

³ For an account emphasizing Dada’s multiple, often conflicting origins, impulses, and activities, see James M. Harding’s *The Ghosts of the Avant-garde(s)*, especially pp. 1-58.

⁴ For a somewhat different approach to the terms of this issue’s title, see Kurt Beals, “Dada Futures: Inflation, Speculation, and Uncertainty in *Der Dada 1.*” (When the editors began planning the *Dada Futures* exhibition and symposium in 2017, we were unaware of Beals’s prior use of the title.)

In 2018, the Dada Archive's curator, Timothy Shipe, worked with us and English faculty member Stephen Voyce to curate *Dada Futures: Circulations, Replicants, Surrogates, Participants*. This exhibition at the University of Iowa Stanley Museum of Art highlighted the collection's history, as well as the ways that Dada impels new practices, deploys new tactics, and releases fierce, gleeful, undignified forms of aesthetic and political revolt into a world perpetually in need of its destructive creativity. The exhibition celebrated the University's collection of Dada artifacts while also arguing that Dada could never be contained – not at the moments of its various inception, not in 1978, and not now. *Dada Futures* emphasized works that demonstrate how Dada has lived in Fluxus, in underground zines, in mail art, and in performances that reject respectability politics of any and all kinds.

Further, Dada continues to live. Dada is not contained in the single moment but is always happening and becoming, as Dalia Judovitz argues in this issue. Judovitz explores the temporality that Marcel Duchamp unlocks through the readymade, which refuses the singular presence of the work of art through replication, mirroring, and copying. Dada is at once negative and constructive; out of step with time, becoming, lurching into the future. For Roger Rothman, these seemingly contradictory features are what makes Dada the seed of the critical enterprise of the Situationist International and also the affirmative impulse of Fluxus.

Set against the tautology of *l'art pour l'art* and Art in general, Dada in all its incarnations welcomes instrumentalization and demands to be deployed as cultural contagion, irritant, and weapon. Of Dada's many postwar manifestations, among the most urgent and necessary is "Black Dada Nihilismus," a poem first published by LeRoi Jones (later known as Amiri Baraka) in 1963 and issued as a sound recording with the New York Art Quartet in 1964.⁵ Baraka's piece takes up Dada's takedown of Enlightenment epistemologies, even as his formulation of "Black Dada" points at prewar European and American Dadas' racist primitivism. Black Dada seeks to destroy the culture built upon Black death; if even Sartre cannot be saved, then no white vanguards – up to and including Dada itself – can or should be spared.⁶ Black Dada's temporality is, if anything, more vexed than

⁵ As a part of the *Dada Futures* symposium in 2018, Bill Friend delivered a talk on an avant-garde group, Black Mask, Up Against the Wall Motherfuckers, that took their name from Baraka's work. "Black Mask, Up Against the Wall Motherfuckers, and the Avant Garde in the 1960s."

⁶ Drawing on Fred Moten's reading of "Black Dada Nihilismus" and his critique of the avant-garde, John Gillespie has recently written, "White Dada is only radical in a world, to a world, and for a world that perpetuates and corroborates with the gratuitous violence of that Black derelict object. Therefore, the significance of Dada in its conjunction with blackness (Black Dada) forces us to be both critical of white Dada's 'radical' intrusion on the art world and

white Dada's, as all available concepts of futurity are anchored in post-Enlightenment ideas of "progress" that require the continued oppression of Black people.⁷

Notably, Black Dada itself has had a future, and not only in Baraka's additional publications and performances of the poem.⁸ The first two terms of his title provide the foundation for the multimedia project of the American conceptual artist Adam Pendleton, who delivered the April 2018 Inaugural Intermedia Research Initiative Lecture in conjunction with the exhibition and symposium. Pendleton's *Black Dada: what can black dada do for me do for me black dada, a reader* (2017) first took form as a spiral-bound stack of photocopies – a compendium of texts related to his thinking and practice.⁹ One of those texts is Baraka's poem, drawn from the 1964 edition of his collection *The Dead Lecturer*; in the *Reader*, Pendleton pointedly places it between an English translation of Hugo Ball's 1916 "Dada Manifesto" and Stokely Carmichael's "The Pitfalls of Liberalism" (*Black Dada* 51-73). Pendleton's Black Dada knows Baraka's, as well as Ball's and Tzara's Dadas: his own manifesto repurposes several lines from Ball's manifesto and Tzara's "Manifeste de M. Antipyrine" (1920), all of which (along with much else) he reframes with the statement "white dada remains within the frame of european weakness (333-45)." Black Dada also knows W. E. B. DuBois, June Jordan, Adrian Piper, Gertrude Stein, Sun Ra, Lorraine O'Grady, and Sol LeWitt, photographs of whose *Incomplete Open Cubes* series form the basis of Pendleton's abstract, black-and-white paintings and prints. Given Black Dada's digestion of art and literary history – "we ate them," the manifesto concludes – it is somewhat surprising to read its definition: "Black Dada is a way to talk about the future while talking about the past; it is our present moment." Open to the "imminent historical

then to be conscientious of the fact that Black inclusion in the world of art under the regime of modernity is a priori Dada. . . . The list of incomprehensible violence that Baraka encourages presents itself to the world as nothing other than an unprogrammable program of anti-ethics, anti-art, and anti-worldness." See also Moten, especially Chapter 1.

⁷ Regarding Black Dada temporality, Moten influentially frames Baraka's piece as a "tragedy" about "the absence, the irrecoverability of an originary and constitutive event; the impossibility of a return to an African, the impossibility of an arrival at an American, home. 'BLACK DADA NIHILISMUS' is a response to political homelessness and this is the sense in which it is tragic" (94).

⁸ Baraka performed "Black Dada Nihilismus" with the New York Art Quartet at the Bell Atlantic Jazz Festival in New York City, 13 June 1999.

⁹ At the *Dada Futures* symposium, Thomas O. Haakenson delivered a paper about Pendleton's project; see his article, "1968, Then and Now: Black Lives, Black Bodies." An illuminating essay on Pendleton's project that emphasizes the artist's "archival tendencies" and includes commentary on the early, self-published editions of *The Black Dada Reader* is Adrienne Edwards's "Blackness in Abstraction." See also Edwards's introductory contribution to the published *Reader*, "The Struggle for Happiness, or What is American about Black Dada."

possibility” of large-scale “transformation,” Pendleton concludes his volume by declaring in Joycean cadences, “Yes yes to afro-conceptualism, yes yes to the practice of abstraction, yes to history, all of it, yes to freedom, all of it, yes, to flight, yes to flying in the future, heart was going like mad, I say yes (337-49).” Citational to the end, as well as fully engaged with Afro-pessimist thought, Pendleton’s *Black Dada* nevertheless opens up the possibility of a transformed future.

We are completing the introduction to this symposium-related special issue in June 2020. In some ways, the global state of emergency under which we all now live feels very different from the conditions under which we, the issue’s contributors, and other colleagues and community members gathered in February 2018. Certainly, Rasula’s emphasis on Dada as a “contagion” now registers brutally, as we endure a pandemic that recalls the devastating sweep of the H1N1 (“Spanish flu”) virus across the world in 1918-19. As it did a century ago, an economic crisis threatens to topple the social and political order, even as speculators make a killing on equities unmoored from reality. Now, as then, Dada says good riddance. Now, as then, white supremacy kills Black people: although we write 101 years after the Red Summer of 1919, that timespan does not feel like a remove. Now, as then, the grotesque abuse of state violence is being revealed through the use of new network technologies. Now, as then, Dada may appeal to a new generation of people treated by the establishment as cannon fodder for unjust wars, as sacrificial lambs to the altar of capital, or as expendable collateral damage acceptable to the state in times of civil conflict. In such times, Dada’s ostensible nihilism seems fully comprehensible, if not reasonable. And it is in this spirit – a twenty-first century Dada spirit – that we offer this introduction, and this issue’s contributions to the study of Dada. The essays gathered offer different facets of Dada’s languages and (anti-)logics, unraveling Dada’s multiple temporalities. Like all histories, these should be read in the blazing light of now.

This issue is dedicated to the memory of Stephen C. Foster (d. 2018). Without the scholarship and foundational collecting of Foster and Kuenzli, as well as Estera Milman’s stewardship of the University of Iowa’s collections encompassing “Neo-Dada” and other postwar vanguards, the exhibition, symposium, and issue would not have been possible. We are deeply grateful to Timothy Shipe for his editorial leadership, curatorial acumen, and collegial support.

General Editor’s Note

This issue, based on papers originally presented at the *Dada Futures* symposium held at the University of Iowa in 2018, is the fifth since *Dada/Surrealism*’s rebirth as an online open-access journal. I would like to extend my sincerest gratitude to my guest co-editors, Jennifer Buckley and Joyce C. Tsai, for their leadership in organizing the symposium and their invaluable collaboration on this issue. Our thanks are due to the UI Office of the Vice President for Research and Economic

Development for awarding a major conference grant to support the symposium. Additional funding came from the Obermann Center for the Humanities, the Intermedia Research Initiative, and the University of Iowa Stanley Museum of Art, which offered its space and its staff expertise for the concurrent exhibition. We thank the anonymous readers who provided peer reviewing for this issue. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to the many colleagues at the University of Iowa Libraries who have supported us in these endeavors, including but not limited to Mark Anderson, Pete Balestrieri, and Marie Culpepper.

Timothy Shipe

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