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ART REVIEW

A little skewering music, please

The eight-year global outburst known as Dada gets a landmark show in New York. MoMA's installation is another matter.

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NEW YORK -- Do you think you know what Dada art is? I thought so too. We were both wrong.

Or at least, not as broadly informed as we might have been. But we do have a good excuse: Until now, there hasn't been a major American museum exhibition of Dada.

That's a surprise. Since the landmark retrospective of anarchic French artist Marcel Duchamp at the old Pasadena Art Museum in 1963, the Dada iconoclasm that his urinal-sculpture and Mona-Lisa-mustache drawing exemplify has moved inexorably into the institutional mainstream.

Once Dada was routinely hinged to the fantastic imagery of 1920s Surrealist art. There it functioned as a modest if important harbinger. But today Dada stands on its own, widely recognized as a distinctive rupture in the cultural fabric.

A large, thorough and — best of all — deeply engrossing exhibition has finally taken up the challenge of surveying Dada art between its eruption in Zurich in 1916 and its demise in Paris in 1924. "Dada" is a version of a show organized last year in Paris and that had its debut in February at Washington's National Gallery of Art. Now it is on view here, at the Museum of Modern Art (the final stop on its tour), through Sept. 11. Expect "Dada" to be the most important Modern art survey this year.

Dada is an art of lacerating wit. At its best, the lacerations are what matter.

That makes sense, because Dada emerged in response to World War I — the most vicious, brutal and reckless brawl in the history of humankind. Born of trauma, Dada meant to rip a gash in consciousness.

Dada performs sometimes puckish, sometimes wrenching ridicule of aesthetic standards and social norms. Beginning in the 1950s, its historical example inspired a growing cadre of American artists. The time was ripe.

World War II was something like a grand finale for the awful overture of the Great War. Postwar America, emerging into unprecedented international power and prosperity, could finally claim that it possessed meaningful artistic conventions to overturn. The Dada spirit suddenly mattered. And as the convulsive postwar decades unfolded, it only came to matter more.

Artists, as usual, came to this conclusion about Dada's importance long before art museums did. (And why not? Museums secure conventions; they don't ridicule them.) For artists today, Duchamp has edged out Picasso and Matisse as the most admired among the European triumvirate who, early in the 20th century, transformed Modernism.

Beyond nationalism

Dada was the first truly international art, ancestor to today's globalism. The show is wisely organized by city — Zurich, Berlin, Hannover, Cologne, New York and Paris. (Barcelona, a minor player, is omitted.) Consider Dadaists a self-selected community of individuals, identified by art-affinity rather than nation.

Zurich, neutral Switzerland's commercial center, was a refuge from the war — and from fierce German nationalism. Hugo Ball and Richard Huelsenbeck, exiled German poets, plucked an obscure French word meaning "hobbyhorse" from a French-German lexicon to name their anarchic activity. Its infantile sound — *da-da, da-da* — is as telling as any dictionary meaning.

Ball wrote that "there are people of independent minds — beyond war and nationalism — who live for different ideals."

Dada had two parents: nausea at the insanity of modern warfare and excitement about modern technologies. Together they shaped three artistic responses that recur throughout the show: pure abstraction, a specific type of figuration and literary twists.

Abstraction, whether geometric or organic, divorced art from any discernible link to the visible world. Talk about rejecting convention!

Hans (Jean) Arp made exquisite collages from torn paper composed by chance. He'd drop the bits of paper onto a sheet, then glue them down wherever they landed (or so he claimed).

Sophie Taeuber, the only Swiss citizen in the Zurich Dada group (and later Arp's wife), made the most radical work. She executed brilliant geometric pictures in needlepoint. They transform a decorative object of idle feminine pastime into the equivalent of an artistic manifesto, rooted in domesticity but separate from it.

This is abstract art wielded as blunt political tool. Arp and Taeuber demand retreat from familiar understanding and entrance into the unknown. If a viewer is not willing to go, the artists' work is just scraps of wastepaper and stumbling embroidery.

Taeuber was also a genius with figurative art. Her fantastic, sci-fi marionettes recast an 18th century play about royalty as a combat between Freud and Jung, wrestling for the king's inner life. In fact, throughout the show the quintessential Dada figure turns out to be the marionette — or the tailor's dummy, puppet, doll and mannequin — which is to say, a lifeless, brainless, sightless being, ripe for manipulation.

Somewhere between the abstract and the figurative is the third Dada strand. Language — the written word — is inherently abstract yet figurative. Printed text, artful penmanship and handmade typography turn up everywhere, in paintings and collages, on posters and magazine covers, even on sculptures.

Francis Picabia's dizzying 1920 "Self-Portrait" consists of his own signature written in elegant script and blotted ink. Beneath it he signed the drawing by printing his name. Through duplication and mimicry, the unified self promptly disappears into an energy-sucking black hole.

Dada's sensibility stands at the busy intersection of mass media and mass warfare. Industrial production is at its heart.

World War I was history's first fully mechanized combat — fought not just on land and sea, but under the ocean (in submarines) and in the air (with rockets and planes). With chlorine and mustard gas, the catastrophe claims a dubious distinction: the first deployment of weapons of mass destruction.

And it coincided with new commercial sound and image technologies, such as the proliferation of photolithography, magazines, radio and film. They broadcast the war while also providing distractions from it.

More than 9 million soldiers died. Almost as many people succumbed to famine, local civil wars and related disasters. At its end in 1918 an influenza pandemic, partly fueled by the resulting unsanitary conditions, claimed tens of millions more lives.

The brutality stunned participants and observers, artists not least among them. Sliced-and-diced photographic collages and cinematic montages were a brilliant formal innovation rendered by Hans Richter in Zurich; Hannah Höch, Raoul Hausmann, John Heartfield and George Grosz in Berlin; and Max Ernst in Cologne. They cut up pictures of bodies, like the war cut up flesh.

The best are painful to see, as if psychic wounds — or even flat-out craziness. Grosz's 1919 "A Victim of Society (Remember Uncle August, the Unhappy Inventor)" is built on a half-finished, amateur portrait of strongman Friedrich Ebert, the first president of the hapless Weimar Republic. Grosz turned the found portrait into a satirical freak, through deftly added collage.

Machine parts replace the nose. Buttons attach to the crackled cranium. A straight razor is at his throat, and a Goodyear tire inner tube props up his goggle-eyed head. We are all the nieces and nephews of loony Uncle August, with his grotesque modern dementia.

Kurt Schwitters is the great poet of commercial mass-production. A one-man Dada outpost in bourgeois Hannover, Schwitters made collage into an all-encompassing environment (not unlike the war). Bus tickets, string, newspaper ads, lace, soap packages — Schwitters' decaying art is fragile yet hopeful, an elegant confidence and determination asserted amid the rubble. The show's large selection creates unexpected refuge amid mostly raucous galleries.

New York-centric display

"Dada" is a big show — more than 400 works by 45 artists. National Gallery curator Leah Dickerman has chosen well. The catalog is also a gem. (Expect it to become a standard text.) If there's a problem it's in the installation, overseen at MoMA by curator Anne Umland. The air is let out of the tires, deflating Dada's effect.

In Washington the show told the story of Dada. The installation began in Zurich, went quickly to Berlin and the smaller outposts of Hannover and Cologne. Then came New York, at first a neutral sanctuary like Zurich but far from the battlefields; and finally Paris, the European art capital where artists reconverged after the war. There, Dada partly petered out and partly succumbed to the new dreams and nightmares of Surrealist art.

In New York, by disappointing contrast, the show begins with New York Dada, then goes to Paris. Berlin, with side trips to Hannover and Cologne, is next, and things finish up in Zurich. A wall text at the entry says two doors lead into the exhibition, one at each end, because Dada happened nearly simultaneously in New York and Zurich; and the word "entrance" is indeed inscribed over two doorways. One is clearly the front door, though, and the other is the back door.

This installation tells MoMA's story, not Dada's. The artistic conversation between Paris and New York, and how one passed prominence to the other, has always been the museum's principal story line.

An impressive tableau of famous Duchamp "ready-mades" opens the show. (Imagine finding Taeuber's marionettes there instead!) There's the bicycle wheel upended on a stool, the spider-like hat rack, the metal rack for drying washed wine bottles, the snow shovel waiting for its user to fall and break an arm and the coat rack made useless on the floor.

"Fountain" — Duchamp's store-bought, white porcelain urinal, laying on its back like some industrially manufactured odalisque — awaits viewers on the opening display's other side. An authorized 1964 copy of the long-lost original, hypocritically rejected for inclusion in a supposedly jury-free 1917

exhibition of avant-garde art, it brought Dada to New York on a wave of scandalous publicity.

The narcissism of MoMA's installation would be funny if it weren't for the larger social context. America is now in its own war in Iraq, with at least 52,000 corpses and counting. From a Dada perspective, our new millennium's most powerful drawings are the ones showing nonexistent mobile weapon labs that then Secretary of State Colin L. Powell exhibited at the United Nations.

Dada's traumatic genesis in the savage trenches that split Europe apart gets blunted and obscured. Famously, Duchamp claimed that Dada was just a life-passage from making art to playing chess. That strategic board game is about bloodless war. MoMA's crass installation celebrates its anemic spirit.

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