

# The Margins of Dada, Dada at the Margins. Some Conclusions

## Dada as a supplement to constructivism

**I**n summation, several recurrent trends can be observed in the way Dada was apprehended in the Netherlands and Belgium. In many respects, clear parallels can be distinguished between the dissemination of Dada in both countries. It may be evident that the constructivist strata of the Dutch and Belgian avant-garde in particular were sympathetic and receptive to Dadaism. This may seem surprising on first sight, since Dada is usually associated with destruction and negation, whereas constructivism, as indicated by its name, is constructive. However, as Theo van Doesburg and his alter-ego I. K. Bonset stressed in describing the constructivism of De Stijl, constructivism wasn't only constructive—on the contrary, it was also rigorously destructive as far as the "old" was concerned. The "old" in all its disguises had to disappear before a "new art, science and culture"—the aims of De Stijl, according to the subtitle of the journal by that name—could emerge. It could even be argued that the geometrical constructivism of De Stijl was even more destructive than Dadaism, at least, Dada as it was congenially conceived in Zurich—an agency for "abstraction," a "new art," and a "new man."<sup>1</sup>

Dada in Zurich did not oppose all the "old," but mainly two periods: classical antiquity and the realist strand in Western art since the Renaissance. So-called primitive as well as medieval culture, ancient Eastern as well as European mysticism were, however, regarded as important orientations—part of a long countertradition.<sup>2</sup> "I appreciate an old work for its novelty," as Tristan Tzara put it.<sup>3</sup> When van Doesburg described the aesthetics of De Stijl as a (near) end point of a gradual development towards an ultimate art in "Klassiek, barok, modern" (classical, baroque, modern), the propositions of De Stijl were presented as completely unprecedented, or at least, as a final victory over a series of long-lasting misconceptions.<sup>4</sup>

There are other general corresponding points between Dada and constructivism. Whereas a tabula rasa was an essential prerequisite for the geometrical abstract art of De Stijl, Dada likewise focused on noth-

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ingness—an indifferent nothingness balancing all types of contrasts. This, in turn, corresponded with constructivist attempts to create new balances. Another major congeniality is concealed in the objective of both constructivism and Dadaism to transcend the boundary between art and life, between the artist and society, between the work of art and surrounding reality. These and other parallels between Dada and constructivism seem to correlate with the Dadaist-constructivist axis discerned by the art historian, John Elderfield.<sup>5</sup> The emergence of Dada in the Low Countries as a supplement to constructivism corresponds—albeit in reverse order—with the transition from Dada to constructivism in the Central European avant-garde as, for example, in the personal development of Marcel Janco, Kurt Schwitters, Raoul Hausmann, and Hans Richter.

The supplementary status of Dada in the sideline of constructivism, however, seemed to be more than the result of the apparent congeniality between the two. As a contrasting, complementary framework, Dada also served another objective. It functioned as a safety valve, as a possibility to vent certain emotions, certain affects, and certain urges that are by and large eliminated in constructivism—at least, in the Calvinist version of constructivism represented by De Stijl. This is most obvious in the Dada manifestos of Bonset, which seem to compensate the dry, mathematical imagery of the puritanical *Nieuwe Beelding*. Bonset not only opposed logic and reason; at the same time, the manifestos offered van Doesburg the opportunity to indulge in abuse, vulgarities, and obscenities for which there was no place in the *Nieuwe Beelding*. The same tendency can be observed as well in the oeuvre of Clément Pansaers. In Pansaers's work, his Dadaist indulgence in vulgarity countered the restrictions and inhibitions of his previous middle-class existence. In a way, the Dutch Dada campaign of 1923 offered each respective audiences at the carnivalesque soirées the same opportunity: a temporary lifting of the necessity to comply with customary morals and manners, decent behavior, and bourgeois normality.

**International Dadaism and  
Flemish nationalism**

In Belgium, or more specifically, in Flanders, the apprehension of Dada coincided not only by and large with a constructivist orientation, but also with a revision of and a distancing from Flemish nationalism. Pansaers may have been the only one who became a Dadaist after he dissociated himself first from a conservative Flamingantism and subsequently, from an inverse, pacifist Wallingantism during World War I, but Paul van Ostaijen's proximity to Dada also corresponded to a revision of his Flemish nationalism in an internationalist Communist direction.<sup>6</sup>

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*Het Overzicht* was originally a Flemish nationalist review, too.<sup>7</sup> This nationalism provoked van Doesburg's/Bonset's rejection of the journal as the "Pro-German, nationalist and Flamingant" review *Poverzicht* (Poor View), "dedicated to the interests of the pro-anti-syphilis-culture."<sup>8</sup> Gradually, this nationalism disappeared from the columns of *Het Overzicht*. In the end, the remaining editor, the initially Flamingant and Dutch-language author Fernand Berckelaers (better known as Michel Seuphor), transformed the review into a primarily French periodical with a particular interest in (ex-)Dadaists. An especially significant aspect of this transformation was the publication of a short political text by Schwitters, "Nationale Kunst," in which Schwitters emphatically objects to the possibility of a national art: a Flemish *gemeenschapskunst*, a Flemish national collective art, was precisely the initial objective of *Het Overzicht*.<sup>9</sup>

The attention paid to Pansaers and Dada in the Antwerpian review *Ça Ira!* corresponded with a similar internationalist shift, resulting in the rejection of former nationalist inclinations. This internationalist turn was, in the case of *Ça Ira!*, instigated by van Doesburg. On his way to encounter Dada for the first time in Paris in early 1920, van Doesburg had a stopover in Antwerp to promote the cause of De Stijl. As part of a dialogue with representatives of the local aesthetic avant-garde, van Doesburg also met the editors of *Ça Ira!* and persuaded them to drop their "insane Flamingantism," as one of them, Paul Neuhuys, later recollected.<sup>10</sup>

## The marginality of Dada in the Low Countries

### I.

The supplementary status of Dada on the sideline of Dutch and Belgian constructivism points at what is probably the most distinctive common feature of Dada in the Low Countries: its marginality. Dada—at least, Dada as a movement—obviously reached its limits in the Low Countries, both synchronically and diachronically.

The dissemination of Dada in Belgium and the Netherlands was more or less a footnote to historical Dadaism, although Dada didn't arrive as late as Richter's qualification of Dada in Holland as "Post-Dada"<sup>11</sup> may suggest. The arrival of Dada in the Low Countries was, on the contrary, anything but late. It coincided by and large with the final international breakthrough of Dada in 1919-20 (at least, of Dada as a project that had started in 1916 in Zurich and had been adopted in Berlin in 1918)—a project hitherto mostly confined to these two cities

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and, in more general terms, to the German-speaking regions of Central Europe, where it was dominated by artists and writers of German (speaking) expressionist origin.

This changed in 1919-1920, when the two Dada groupings then in existence—the Mouvement Dada in Zurich and Club Dada in Berlin—started to disintegrate. Some of the original Dadaists—like Janco and Richter in Zurich or George Grosz, John Heartfield, and Wieland Herzfelde—stepped down, some others had turned their back on Dada earlier, like Hugo Ball and Emmy Hennings in Zurich, and Franz Jung in Berlin. Several “Dada presidents,” though, remained dedicated to the Dadaist cause, most notably, Hans Arp, Christian Schad, and Walter Serner, as well as Tzara in Zurich and to some extent, the couple Hausmann and Johannes Baader in Berlin. Yet they did more than just keep the fire burning. The continuous and massive propaganda effort for Dada reached its peak more or less simultaneously with the dissolution of the first two Dada branches. The reviews *Dada*, *Der Zeltweg*, and *Der Dada*, a succession of well-reviewed soirées, the Erste Internationale Dada-Messe, and the publication of a *Dada-Almanach*, as well as several retrospectives by Richard Huelsenbeck, attracted other interested artists and writers, not only in Switzerland and Germany, but in many other countries as well. This resulted in a rapid increase of new Dada ramifications in the first years after World War I. New groups and individuals adopted the battle cry “Dada” and placed their work and ideas in the framework of Dada: Max Ernst and Johannes Baargeld in Cologne, Schwitters and Paul Steegemann in Hanover, André Breton, Louis Aragon, and their associates in Paris, Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray in New York, Lajos Kassák and other exiled Hungarians in Vienna. One may argue that Pansaers in Brussels, Paul Citroen, and Erwin Blumenfeld in Amsterdam, and van Doesburg in Leiden did the same.

As part of this international breakthrough of Dadaism, the arrival of Dada in the Low Countries was anything but delayed. However, this did not alter the fact that Dada gained some substance in a Dutch setting only in 1922-23, when Bonset and van Doesburg started producing *Mécano*, and Schwitters, Vilmos Huszár, and Theo and Pétro van Doesburg staged their campaign for Dada in the first months of 1923. This campaign was not only the apex of Dada in the Low Countries, but also the last major international manifestation of Dada. And whereas the tumultuous Soirée du coeur à barbe in Paris on July 6, 1923, ending in a fight between Dadaists and surrealists, can be regarded as the *non plus ultra* of historical Dadaism, the last “regular” soirée, explicitly announced as *Dada avond* (Dada evening), took place some months earlier in the small Frisian town of Drachten, in the far north of the Netherlands. It was there, on the ominous date of Friday, April 13, 1923, that Schwitters delivered what was not only his own last Dada performance in the wake of the Dada campaign staged a few months earlier, but the last historical

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Dada soirée as such. And whereas Dada as a movement had already disappeared for some time, French and German Dadaists—Arp, Ernst, Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, Francis Picabia, Schwitters, and Tzara—were united for a final Dada reprise in the Belgian review *Oesophage* in March 1925, long before the Dada renaissance after World War II would reunite the surviving Dadaists once again.

In short, Dadaist activity and references to Dadaism could still be discerned in the Low Countries after Dada had already disappeared as an international movement. Thus, a history of Dada in this section of the Dada orbit is primarily an account of the aftermath of historical Dadaism, of Dadaism in decline, and one could even argue, of the end of Dada.

## II.

The marginality of Dadaism in Belgium had yet another dimension. Dada in Belgium was not merely late: rather, the question seems to be whether any substantial Dada activity can be discerned at all. Although van Ostaijen studied Dada in Berlin and adopted some Dadaist conceptions and techniques, at no stage did he wholeheartedly present himself as a professing Dadaist, unlike Pansaers, the “sole representative of Dada in Belgium.” The point of reference and window on the world for Pansaers as a Dadaist was, however, Dada in Paris. Whereas Pansaers came in touch with Dada in Berlin in 1918–19 and could be regarded as a Belgian Dadaist in Belgium from December 1919 to early 1921, in the last year and a half of his life, he was a Parisian Dadaist, who from that time on, was as much (or rather, as little) a Belgian Dadaist as Ernst could be regarded a German Dadaist after his move to Paris some time earlier.

This aspect of Pansaers’s Dadaism was a recurrent feature in the dispersion of Dada in, or rather, from the Low Countries. Most Dutch and Belgian adoptions of Dadaist principles or involvement in Dadaist activity took place in or originated from third countries: Switzerland, Germany, and France. This holds true for Pansaers, van Doesburg, van Ostaijen, Citroen, and Blumenfeld, as well as—self-evidently—for Schwitters. Even most Dutch and Belgian Dada involvement was situated outside the Low Countries. Those Dutch and Belgian artists who reflected Dada seriously and substantially did so to a large extent not in the Low Countries, but abroad. This could lead to the assumption that Dada never really caught on in Holland or Belgium. The Dada interests of Pansaers, van Ostaijen, and van Doesburg seem primarily a result of their presence in Paris and Berlin, which were then the cultural capitals of Central and Western Europe, and in the avant-garde bulwark of the Bauhaus in Weimar. Although direct contacts with Dadaists in Berlin and Paris may have furthered the Dada involvement

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of van Doesburg, van Ostaïen, and Pansaers, there can be no doubt that Dada was generally at least nominally known among avant-garde artists in the Low Countries from 1919–20 onwards. Still, Dada did not gain broad support. The Dadaist prairie fire obviously came to a halt in the Low Countries. Dada was apparently far from being attractive enough to be adopted on a wider scale.

**III.**

In this context, it is remarkable that none of the writers, artists, and musicians who were actually involved in Dada in one way or another presented themselves unconditionally and unrestrictedly as Dadaists. Even Belgium's sole Dadaist, Pansaers, stressed that he was only a Dadaist by analogy and had become a Dadaist independently of the Mouvement Dada. Van Doesburg, doubtless the most important figure in the Dutch dissemination of Dada, never presented himself openly as Dadaist, although he didn't hide his sympathy for Dada. Instead, he created another personality whose identity was consciously shrouded in mystery for his Dadaist ventures. Although Schwitters figured as the authentic Dadaist in the publicity accompanying the Dada campaign of 1923, he presented himself emphatically as a non- or even anti-Dadaist, and not just as part of a Dadaist pun. It seems that the only Dadaists who appear as Dadaists without reservation are Pétro/Nelly van Doesburg and the two directors of the Dada-Centrale in Holland, Citroen and Blumenfeld. However, although Pétro van Doesburg did sign a faked letter to Bonset in September 1922 as "Nelly-da-da,"<sup>12</sup> she didn't publicly (dis-)qualify herself or her piano recitals as Dadaist. It was actually Schwitters who named her as a Dadaist, with the obvious aim of increasing the confusion about the stand of the "Dadaist resident orchestra" toward Dadaism. Press reports show that Pétro van Doesburg's contribution on the piano was regarded as the only serious part of the Dutch Dada soirées in early 1923, providing at least some value for the high entrance fee.<sup>13</sup> Schwitters's allegation that she was in fact the only participating Dadaist seems not least to be a response to the assumed seriousness of her part in the evenings. Nelly van Doesburg didn't speak out—at least, not in 1922–23. The case of Citroen and Blumenfeld is more or less comparable, since they were presented as official representatives of Dadaism in Holland only in the Berlin *Dada-Almanach* and probably not without substantial participation by Huelsenbeck.

#### IV.

The diminishing willingness among those artists and writers in the Low Countries with apparent Dada affiliations to present themselves unreservedly as Dadaists coincided with the absence of expressly Dadaist groups: Dada never constituted an organizational framework in Belgium or the Netherlands. In the course of the 1919–20 international breakthrough of Dadaism in several places, new Dadaist branches made their appearance in Geneva, in Cologne, in New York, and, notably, in Paris. In the Low Countries, though, Dada remained, by and large, an individual affair. This was even emphasized by van Doesburg/Bonset, by Citroen and Blumenfeld, and by Pansaers through their respective and (as far as Holland was concerned, competing) stress on their singularity as sole representatives of Dada in Holland and Belgium. One may argue, however, that the role of Dada as an organizational framework was assumed by other, pre-existing formal and informal communities: for example, in the Netherlands, by the *Stijl* circle, in Antwerp, by the *Bond zonder gezegeld papier*, and a little later, by the emerging surrealist group in Brussels, or—more generally—by the network of like-minded constructivists in the Low Countries. However, this did not alter the fact that Dada in the Low Countries didn't possess the social dimension that characterized Dada in Zurich, Berlin, Paris, or—on a smaller scale—in Cologne or New York.

#### V.

This absence of a Dada group in the Low Countries had profound repercussions for the praxis of Dadaism. As a consequence, Dada remained primarily a succession of incidents. Only in the case of van Doesburg and Bonset can one discern a substantial continuity, be it only for four years or so. Secondly, Dada was not an end in itself. As a rule, Dada served other purposes: the advance of a constructivist aesthetics, the self-establishment of an autonomous surrealist group, or simply the denunciation of rivals and opponents.

Thirdly, the Dadaist praxis in the Low Countries assumed a specific form (or perhaps a quite unspecific form, at least in comparison with Dada in bulwarks like Zurich, Berlin, or Paris). In Zurich, Berlin, or Paris, Dada appeared not least as a "group event"<sup>14</sup> with a strong social dimension. Dada was renowned for its wild manifestations. The history of the Dadaist project is not a history of debuts and book launches, but rather a history of events, or to be more precise, of social events. This social dimension was obvious in the *Cabaret Voltaire*, in tumultuous exhibitions and soirées, in public provocations and interventions—on the whole, collective activities.

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In many cases, written expressions of Dadaism are only the recordings of a (mixed) literary and artistic praxis trying to overcome the limitations of a blank sheet of paper and the reduction of artistic activity to canvas and plaster. Manifestos were proclaimed first and only afterwards were they printed. Dadaist poetry was intended for declamation. Dadaist "inventions," such as sound poetry, simultaneous poetry, simultaneous concertos, noise poetry, etc., were directed primarily at the ear, not at the eye. Rather, the publication of the poetry *post festem* was intended to document its previous declamation. The Dutch and Belgian contribution to Dada, however, was by and large a written one. The main form of expression of Dada in the Low Countries (insofar as one may speak of Dada there at all) was a literary one. The two main Dadaists in the Low Countries, Pansaers and Bonset, manifested themselves as Dadaists only on paper (and in an occasional woodcut, drawing, or collage). The only exception was the Dada campaign of 1923, when the related publications assumed their "traditional" Dadaist role: the last double issue of *Mécano* and the first two issues of *Merz* documented the tour in all its aspects, after the tour was over.

## VI.

It is important to emphasize that Dada reached its limits in the Low Countries. The advance of Dada was obviously not as successful as it was in Paris, for example, where the arrival of Dada as a project was more or less simultaneous with the arrival of Picabia and Tzara, some time in late 1919 or early 1920. This failure to succeed was particularly conspicuous, as several Dutch artists had been involved in the emergence of Dada in Zurich. The first entry in *Chronique Zurichoise*, Tzara's chronological account of Dada in Zurich, refers to an exhibition by Arp and the Dutch couple, Otto and Adya van Rees-Dutilh, in the local Gallery Tanner in November 1915. This exhibition was regarded by Tzara as the first manifestation of the Mouvement Dada in *statu nascendi*.<sup>15</sup> The names of the van Rees couple remained associated with Dada for a longer period, despite their early departure from Zurich in the spring of 1916. Their work was exhibited in the Cabaret Voltaire. The anthology of the same name contained a collage by Otto van Rees, representing Holland in the international ensemble.<sup>16</sup> The First Dada Exhibition of January/February 1917 in the Gallery Han Coray in Zurich also showed works by Otto and Adya van Rees, praised by Tzara in a tour through the exhibition as expressions of "inner harmony" and "mathematical purity."<sup>17</sup> This participation resulted in the unsolicited mention of "R. van Rees" and "Madame van Rees" as co-signatories of Huelsenbeck's *Dadaistisches Manifest* in April 1918.<sup>18</sup>

Another Dutchman who played a crucial role in the genesis of Dada

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in Zurich was Jan Ephraïm, the publican of Holländische Meierei (Dutch Dairy), the establishment that served as the temporary seat of the Cabaret Voltaire in early 1916 (fig. 8.1). Ephraïm allowed Ball and Hennings to open their cabaret on his premises and even applied to the local police authorities for permission to start the Cabaret Voltaire.<sup>19</sup> Marietta di Monaco also mentioned Ephraïm in her reminiscences as a source for exotic songs and music presented in the cabaret as *Chants nègres*.<sup>20</sup>

Along with the van Rees couple and Ephraïm, other Dutch nationals were occasionally noticed in Zurich: Ball recollected a visiting group of young Dutch men taking over the Cabaret Voltaire with music and dance.<sup>21</sup> Jacoba van Heemskerck, a Dutch expressionist painter, had her work shown in the Galerie Dada as a participant in a Sturm exhibition.<sup>22</sup> Neither Ephraïm nor the Dutch youngsters likely had any relation at all to the Dutch avant-garde. Van Heemskerck may not even have known what the real purport of the Galerie Dada was—her work was only shown because Herwardt Walden's Sturm enterprise acted as her agent. The van Rees couple remained abroad and obviously didn't see the necessity of promoting Dada back home. In this regard, it isn't surprising that Dada wasn't recognized in the Low Countries for several years, despite the Dutch involvement in the birth of the Dada movement in Zurich.

## The untimely arrival of Dada in the Low Countries

### I.

The reception of Dada in the Low Countries was not only impaired because the van Rees couple remained abroad and didn't return home as Dada disciples. World War I was a major reason for the delayed arrival of Dada. The events of the war overshadowed the aesthetic ventures of a small group of émigrés in a Zurich nightclub. The war also hindered cross-border communication to a considerable extent. The fact that Dada emerged in remote Zurich and not in Berlin or Paris (which, although not exactly next door, were nevertheless focal points of artistic and literary life in the Low Countries, unlike Zurich) was certainly not beneficial to the dissemination of Dada in Belgium and the Netherlands. The first contacts between Tzara on the one hand and Pansaers and van Doesburg on the other, although established from Zurich, did not occur until after the end of the war, in late 1919. However, Dada mainly reached the Low Countries from Berlin and Paris. In part, it even happened the other way around: representatives

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of the avant-garde from the Low Countries became aware of the import of Dada during stays in Berlin and Paris—at least, this was the case with Pansaers, van Doesburg, and van Ostaijen.

When Dada finally arrived in the Low Countries, it was at a rather untimely moment. On an aesthetic level, Dada, as a foreign import, could be regarded as the proposition for a package deal: a synthesizing cross section of features previously developed in the pre-war avant-garde—in German expressionism, Italian futurism, and French cubism. As such, Dada arrived a few years too late. When the pre-war avant-garde was apprehended in the Low Countries during the war, many artists started to combine elements of the pre-war “isms” themselves. This made the synthesis offered by Dada not only redundant, but also rather unattractive, since it implied that the artists involved had to resign themselves to an already elaborate program and to the sometimes whimsical command of Tzara, director of the Dada movement, or its German secretary, Huelsenbeck, to whom they had to apply for authorization.<sup>23</sup> To some extent, this may explain why Pansaers applied for a Dada “membership” in an attempt to overcome his isolated position in Brussels, whereas van Ostaijen didn’t consider becoming a “member” of the Dada movement, not even during his Berlin exile. Van Ostaijen had no cause to complain about a lack of interest from the Flemish cultural community, or at least from his Flemish avant-garde associates. From a distance, he could still hold sway over the Antwerpian avant-garde as “Pope Paul from Halensee,” so he had no need to sacrifice his sovereignty by seeking membership in the Dada movement ruled by Huelsenbeck in Berlin and Tzara in Zurich and Paris.

Dada came at the wrong moment, not only as an aesthetic cross section through the avant-garde, but also as a distinct set of programmatic considerations. Dada came too late, insofar as the Dadaist program constituted a passage from the pre-war to the post-war avant-garde: from futurism, cubism, and expressionism to constructivism and surrealism. When Dada finally arrived in the Low Countries, a local development in a constructivist direction had already set in. Although Dada was not without success in the constructivist spectrum of the Dutch and Flemish avant-garde, Dada was not adopted as a project in its own right, a framework of its own. At the same time, for the majority of the local avant-garde, Dada came far too early, as the avant-garde was still adopting expressionist techniques in a diluted form. Dada met its synchronic limitations in its inability to compete with the new constructivist tendency as well as in its inability to rival the epigone appreciation of expressionism in the Low Countries.

## II.

Curiously enough, these limitations were reaffirmed by those Dutch and Belgian avant-garde writers and artists who nevertheless adopted Dada or elements from or kindred to Dada (albeit on a limited scale) as part of their own aesthetic ventures. The emphatic claim by Pansaers, van Doesburg/Bonset, Citroen, and Blumenfeld that they and only they were the legitimate representatives of the Dada movement in Holland and Belgium may have discouraged the adoption of Dada by others. It is symptomatic that on the one hand, van Doesburg/Bonset presented Hendrik Werkman's *The Next Call* to Tzara as a new Dadaist sensation from the Netherlands, and on the other hand, attacked Werkman for his apparent failure to meet Dadaist standards, conveying the implicit message, "Mind your own business, you amateur."

The way Dada as a project was propagated in Holland and Belgium did not exactly increase its appeal. When *Ça Ira!* provided Pansaers the opportunity to present his case and that of Dada to a wider Belgian audience, he did not really present an invitation to participate in Dada. On the contrary, Pansaers took credit for—the single-handed assassination and death of Dada. When Schwitters and van Doesburg launched their Dada campaign, it was presented as an attempt to uncover the dormant Dadaism in the visitors of the soirées as well as in the Dutch press. Again, they claimed that Dada had to be defeated and had to vanish—not a very attractive perspective for prospective Dadaists. As far as van Ostaijen was concerned, although he drew heavily on Dadaism for his emancipated cubism, at no stage did he ever present Dada as a viable framework.

### The strategic character of Dada

The rather detached or even dismissive public stand by those involved in Dada may in part be regarded as a typical Dadaist riddle in accordance with Tzara's slogan, "*Les vrais Dadas sont contre DADA*" (The true Dadas are against DADA). Another aspect of the emergence of Dada in the Low Countries may have contributed to this reticence as well. In the Low Countries, Dada, both as a denomination and as a framework, possessed a profoundly strategic character. Not only did Dada allow van Doesburg, through Bonset, to engage in mud-slinging at his opponents and rivals without any restriction whatsoever, it also allowed Pansaers to overcome his isolation by suggesting that he was now part of a larger movement. Likewise, it allowed the editors of *La Revue du Feu* and Citroen as the ambitious director of the Dada-Centrale in Holland to underline their own importance—in the case of *La Revue du Feu*, with an opposite result. As demonstrated by a dis-

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missive critique in the respectable art review *De Kunst*, Dada was not so much an honorary title, but rather a disqualification and a stigma.

This points not only at the other face of the strategic character of Dada, but also at another probable reason for the fact that so few Dutch and Belgian artists and writers of avant-garde provenance were eager to associate themselves openly with Dada. Dada was not only a self-denomination or a battle cry; it was also a recurring stigma in contemporary criticism, in which the first dismissive reports on Dada in Berlin and Paris anticipated the actual arrival of Dada in Holland and Belgium. To present oneself as a Dadaist implied that one had adopted for oneself the distinct profile of a clowning fanatic, of an irrelevant freak—not quite the best option for positioning oneself in the artistic field. Whether one was actually inspired by Dada or just applying techniques comparable with those of the Dadaists (in particular, when superficial similarities with Dada existed), one had to dissociate oneself from Dada under penalty of (self-)marginalization. So even if Werkman's *The Next Call* was actually a Dadaist joke (in fact, it wasn't), he could only contend the opposite. Published in the fall of 1923, with the Dada campaign by Schwitters and van Doesburg still fresh in the public memory, Werkman risked having *The Next Call* immediately brushed aside as another trifling Dada imitation incited by the tour. In other words, Werkman *had* to emphasize that his review was “not a repetition of the Dadaist joke.” Even if Dada still led a secret afterlife in Werkman's own “Abracadabraism” (which may have been the case), he could only proclaim that Dada was dead. As is evident, this precipitated the eventual death of Dada as a self-denomination and a conceptual framework—at least, as an explicit and public one.

## Der Sturm, Kurt Schwitters, and Dada in the Low Countries

The marginality of Dada in the Low Countries draws attention to the fact that, for its contemporaries, Dada didn't possess its current status as one of the major events in the recent history of Western art. Not only did the commentators of the Dutch Dada campaign regard Dada as nonsensical clowning and derailed radicalism, but in the discussions of the avant-garde, Dada seemed to be repeatedly regarded as a disqualification and a stigma. Furthermore, in the late 1910s and early 1920s, Dada was overshadowed to a considerable extent by other contemporary developments. On a political level, World War I, the subsequent revolutions in Russia, Germany, and Hungary, social unrest in most other European countries, a reshuffling of the map of Europe, the fall of several monarchies, and the disintegration of the Austrian and Russian empires with all their implications, drew the attention away

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from the ventures of a handful of artists addressing cosmic chaos. But it was not only politics, war, and socio-economic unrest that overshadowed Dada. In the artistic field, Dada was overshadowed in particular by the Sturm enterprise of Walden.<sup>24</sup>

Der Sturm was not only an important point of reference for the Zurich Dadaists, but also for many Dutch and Belgian artists with avant-garde inclinations. In 1912, Der Sturm presented Italian futurist exhibitions in Brussels, The Hague, and Amsterdam, as well as a Vassily Kandinsky retrospective in Rotterdam and Utrecht. The same exhibitions had been shown previously in Germany and had had a significant impact on Ball, among others. In 1913, Walden invited a group of Dutch artists—including van Heemskerck, Piet Mondrian, Otto and Adya van Rees, and Erich Wichman—to participate in the *Erste deutsche Herbstsalon* (First German Autumn Salon). In 1916, the second Sturm exhibition followed in The Hague, later shown in April 1917 in the Galerie Dada in Zurich, as well. Works from the Sturm gallery were later shown by *La Revue du Feu* and *D'Orkaan*, as well as by De Branding and *Het Overzicht*.

Dada was not marked by specific stylistic innovations of its own, as Haftmann has pointed out. By and large, the artifacts created in the setting of the Dada movement drew on the innovations developed previously in cubism, futurism, and expressionism. Before Dada was noticed in the Low Countries, the same combination of styles and techniques had already been represented in the Netherlands by Der Sturm, both as a review and as a gallery, with local agents like Citroen. As van Doesburg noted in *Het Getij*, in his "Revue der Avant-garde" in 1921, *Der Sturm* "contributed most to the triumph over Expressionism. Indeed, all modern artists, irrespective of their nationality, were allowed to speak. Here appeared also the manifestos of the Cubists (Delaunay, Léger etc.) and of the Futurists, the protests against the attacks on the great leader of Expressionism, Kandinsky. In *Der Sturm*, Herwardt Walden launched the important verses of the poet August Stramm, cut down at the front."<sup>25</sup>

As a result of this comprehensive coverage of the European avant-garde in *Der Sturm*, Dada, if it was perceived at all in the first instance, was certainly neither perceived nor perceptible as something special. On the one hand, the predominance of Der Sturm in the Low Countries as a platform of the international avant-garde may have edged Dada out of sight. On the other hand, this same predominance of Der Sturm probably contributed to the rising star of Schwitters in the Netherlands, since he was probably the most significant Dadaist in the Sturm stable. One of the main arguments against Schwitters's admission to Club Dada in Berlin had been his association with Der Sturm at a moment when the Berlin Dadaists were engaged in a fierce campaign against Walden and his review. Nonetheless, Schwitters also benefited from the relationship. The first presentation of his Merz poetry was at a soirée

intended to draw attention to an exhibition of submissions from the Sturm gallery. His participation in the Dada tour coincided with a Branding exhibition also held in association with Der Sturm.

## Fictitious Dadaism in the Low Countries

Schwitters was the only foreign Dadaist who came to Holland to promote the Dadaist cause. There were other Dadaists, though, who came to the Netherlands in the early and mid-1920s—Jung, Blumenfeld, and Hannah Höch—but not for Dada's sake. Jung came to the Netherlands in May 1921 to avoid prison for his involvement in the hijacking of a fishing vessel that brought him to Russia as a delegate of the council-communist *Kommunistische Arbeiter-Partei Deutschlands* (KAPD, Communist Worker's Party of Germany). Jung was arrested by Dutch military police in front of the house of Henriëtte Roland Holst, kept in jail for some months, and then extradited to Russia.<sup>26</sup> Höch was invited to the Netherlands by Schwitters during a holiday stay in the house of Lajos D'Ebneth.<sup>27</sup> There she met Til Brugman. They subsequently lived together in Brugmann's house in The Hague from 1926 to 1929. Although Höch had been presented by Schwitters and van Doesburg as an exemplary Dadaist in early 1923,<sup>28</sup> by 1929, when her first individual exhibition in the Netherlands was staged in The Hague, Rotterdam, and Amsterdam, she was no longer regarded as a Dadaist. The reviews regarded her work as quite idiosyncratic, but no longer resorted to the classification of Dada.<sup>29</sup>

Although Blumenfeld contributed to Dada in the Netherlands on a very modest scale, he moved there just after he married the Dutch Lena Citroen—in order to start a new life after the end of his military service, and not primarily to launch a campaign for Dada. As already mentioned, Schwitters was the only Dadaist from abroad who apparently saw some good in staging Dada in the Low Countries. Despite his repeated invitations to participate, other Dadaists did not see the value of his efforts.

In late 1920, after Pansaers had already gone to the trouble of booking a theater in Brussels, the Parisian Dadaists rescinded their promise to perform and remained in the *Bar Certâ*. When van Doesburg tried again in late 1922, the Dadaists refused again, because, as Schwitters later indicated, they weren't interested.<sup>30</sup> Nelly van Doesburg suggested that this refusal may have been due to the fact that the impresario engaged by van Doesburg didn't want to pay honoraria.<sup>31</sup> Whatever their reason for not turning up, they obviously did not consider it important to stage Dada in the Low Countries, although the Low Countries enjoyed considerable popularity for the projection of Dadaist mystifications.

In addition to the Dada-Centrale in Holland, German Dadaist litera-

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ture produced at least three other fictitious Dada representatives from the Low Countries: Dada-Oz, Adriaan Michiel van den Broecke, and Jan van Mehan. Dada-Oz was the Dadaist *nom de guerre* of Otto Schmalhausen, who had been a close friend of Grosz since art school, as well as his brother-in-law, due to Grosz's marriage to Eva Peter in 1920. Schmalhausen, a German national, was born in Antwerp in 1890, but raised in Germany. In an obvious act of Dadaist self-mystification, the catalogue of the *Erste Internationale Dada-Messe* in Berlin introduced Schmalhausen as a Belgian Dadaist. The catalogue complained about the fact that Dada-Oz was still "honored quite insufficiently in Germany," although he had been "one of the earliest Dadaists who already constructed 'dada-works' as part of his advertisement agency in Antwerp before the war, when nobody thought of Dada."<sup>32</sup> Works shown by Schmalhausen also bore clear reference to the Low Countries. One contribution was entitled "Antwerp," another, "Dream of the Mothers at the Zuiderzee." For the cover of Huelsenbeck's *Dada-Almanach*, Dada-Oz created an altered death mask of Ludwig van Beethoven, who also had Dutch ancestors. A certain Adriaan Michiel van den Broecke (the Younger) made his posthumous appearance in the Leipzig satirical journal *Der Drachen* in 1920 as the subject of a "dada-ballistically expressive simultaneous impression necrology" by Rolf A. Sievers. The spelling of the Dutch name of van den Broecke suggested that the apparently deceased figure was of Flemish descent.<sup>33</sup> Jan van Mehan was the pseudonym of Hans Havemann,<sup>34</sup> a friend of Schwitters who wrote a "tragedy in elemental sounds" as a practical joke, published in 1920 by the avant-garde Hanover publisher, Paul Steegemann. Not only did the pseudonym suggest a Dutch background, the preface was dated "The Hague, May 1920" and the booklet was presented in the review *Der Marstall* (also published by Steegemann) as an example of "New Dutch Art."<sup>35</sup> The French Dadaist Théodore Fraenkel took a photo of a funeral procession on ice in Calvinist Holland as the basis for an anti-papist collage ridiculing the death of Pope Benedict XV (fig. 8.2).<sup>36</sup>

Despite the popularity of the Low Countries as the backdrop for fictitious Dada extensions (and perhaps as a result of that dubious honor), Dada in Belgium and the Netherlands remained primarily a local affair and distinguished itself in this respect from the international character of the Dada branches in Zurich and Paris. This Dadaist reticence may be taken as another indication of the marginality of Dada in the Low Countries and may confirm J.A. Dautzenberg's opinion in regard to the Dada campaign of 1923 that Dada was only a "footnote in art history (because it is nothing else)."<sup>37</sup> However, as Anthony Grafton has established, footnotes can be quite important, especially German footnotes.<sup>38</sup> This certainly holds true for that little German footnote called Dada.

## Notes

1. See Tzara, *Oeuvres complètes*, 1: 357-58; Richard Huelsenbeck, "Presseausendung", in Schrott, *Dada 15/25*, 61.
2. See Schrott, *Dada 15/25*, 105-34.
3. Tzara, *Seven Dada Manifestos*, 7.
4. See Theo van Doesburg, "Klassiek, barok, modern," in Theo van Doesburg, *De nieuwe beweging in de schilderkunst (en andere opstellen)* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff/Landshoff, 1983), 111-26.
5. See John Elderfield, "On the Dada-Constructivist Axis," *Dada/Surrealism* 13 (1984): 5-16; Marc Dachy, *Dada & les dadaïsmes. Rapport sur l'anéantissement de l'ancienne beauté* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 263-95.
6. See Reynebeau, *Dichter in Berlijn*, 129-30.
7. See Fernant Berckelaers and Geert Pynenburg, "Manifest-  
Inleiding," *Het Overzicht*, no. 1 (1921): 1-2; Fernant Berckelaers, "Het  
Vlaams-Nationalisme," *Het Overzicht*, no. 5-6 (1921): 41-43.
8. See Cornelis Nelly Mesens [Theo van Doesburg], ". . . waar de maes  
K en Scheldwoorden vloeien . . .," *Mécano*, no. 4-5 (1923): [7].
9. See Jozef Peeters, "Gemeenschapskunst," *Het Overzicht*, no. 9-10  
(1921): 79-80.
10. Paul Neuhuys, "La Revue 'Ça Ira!'," *Ça Ira! Collection complète  
1920-1923* (Brussels: Jacques Antoine, 1973), [IV]. In regard to van  
Doesburg's conscious internationalism, van Doesburg's emphasis on  
the particular internationalist character of "the family Dada" (cf. Theo  
van Doesburg, "Rondblik," *De Stijl* 4, no. 2 (1921): 29) and van  
Doesburg's recurring critique of avant-garde nationalism (be it in  
Flanders or among English vorticists like Ezra Pound) makes obsolete  
any serious discussion of the suggestion by Egbert Krispyn that Bonset  
showed a clear "affinity with the spirit of fascism" and a "fascistoid  
frame of mind" (for this allegation; cf. Egbert Krispyn, "Literature and  
*De Stijl*," in *Nijhoff, Van Ostaijen, "De Stijl,"* 63).
11. Richter, *DADA - Kunst und Antikunst*, 202.
12. See van Straaten, *Theo van Doesburg*, 110.
13. See e.g. "Dada-Avond," *Leidsche Courant*, (February 15, 1923);  
"Dada-Avond" *Leidsch Dagblad*, (February 15, 1923).
14. Ferdinand Drijkoningen, Jan Fontijn, and Hans Würzner,  
"Dada," in *Historische Avantgarde*, ed. Ferdinand Drijkoningen and Jan  
Fontijn, 159.
15. Tzara, "Chronique Zurichoise," 10.
16. See *Cabaret Voltaire*, 24 and 32.
17. Citation in Schrott, *Dada 15/25*, 80.
18. See *Dada-Almanach*, 41.
19. See Raimund Meyer, "Dada ist gross, Dada ist schön. Zur  
Geschichte von 'Dada Zürich'," in *Dada in Zürich*, ed. Hans Bolliger,

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Guido Magnaguagno, and Raimund Meyer (Zurich: Arche, 1985), 67-68.

20. See Schrott, *Dada* 15/25, 35.

21. Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*, 91.

22. See Meyer, "Dada ist gross," 55, 89 and 245-46, 260.

23. See Schwitters's problems with Huelsenbeck in Berlin. Cf. also Tzara, "Eye-cover."

24. See Geurt Imanse, "Van *Sturm* tot *Branding*," in *Berlijn-Amsterdam 1920-1940. Wisselwerkingen*, ed. Kathinka Dietrich, Paul Blom, and Flip Bool (Amsterdam: Querido, 1982), 251-64.

25. Theo van Doesburg, "Revue der Avant-Garde. Deutschland," *Het Getij* 9, no. 3 (1921): 197.

26. See Hubert van den Berg, "'Dichter en muiterkapitein'. Het gedwongen oponthoud van Franz Jung in Nederland," *Het Oog in 't Zeil* 7, no. 5-6 (1990): 41-48.

27. On Höch and the Netherlands; cf. *Hannah Höch. Eine Lebenscollage* II, 1: 257-82.

28. Cf. van Doesburg, "Dadaïsme," *Het Vaderland*, February 23, 1923. The text is accompanied by "Drie Dadaïstische Teekeningen," three Dadaist drawings by Schwitters, Höch, and Picabia. Höch's drawing, entitled *Der Kümmelspalter* (The Niggler) is also contained in the "Holland Dada"-issue of *Merz*.

29. See *Hannah Höch. Eine Lebenscollage* II, 2: 365-80.

30. See Kurt Schwitters, "[Theo van Doesburg]," *De Stijl*, dernier numéro, (1932): 55.

31. See Den Boef and van Faassen, "Vriendschap tussen concurrenten?," 45.

32. *Erste Internationale Dada-Messe*, 3.

33. Rolf A. Sievers, "Adriaan Michiel van den Broecke (der Jüngere)†," in Hans Reimann, *DADA im Leipziger 'Drachen'*, ed. Karl Riha (Siegen: Universität-Gesamthochschule Siegen, 1988), 18.

34. See Paul Raabe, *Die Autoren und Bücher des literarischen Expressionismus. Ein bibliographisches Handbuch* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1992), 203-04.

35. See Jan van Mehan, "Neue holländische Kunst," *Der Marstall*, no. 1-2 (1920): 38.

36. See Théodore Fraenkel, "La mort du Pape au pays du patinage," in Meyer et al., *Dada global*, 330.

37. J.A. Dautzenberg, "Voetnoot in de kunstgeschiedenis," *De Volkskrant*, January 26, 1996.

38. See Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote. A Curious History* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997)