



**CRISIS  
AND THE  
ARTS**  
The  
History  
of  
Dada

**STEPHEN C. FOSTER**  
General Editor

CRISIS AND THE ARTS THE HISTORY OF DADA

VOLUME  
VII

# The Import of Nothing

How Dada came,  
saw, and vanished  
in the Low Countries  
(1915–1929)

Hubert F. van den Berg



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# INTRODUCTION

## I.

**T**his book presents a comprehensive history of Dada in the Low Countries—Belgium and the Netherlands. This history is not primarily a history of wild Dadaist exploits, but rather a history of the way Dada was received in Belgium and the Netherlands as a conceptual proposition—an avant-garde project from Switzerland, Germany, and France. The history of Dada in the Low Countries is a history of the margins of Dada and of Dada in the margins. In general, Dada was received by the Dutch and Belgian avant-garde with considerable reservation, not to say rejection. In the early 1920s, only a few artists and writers placed (some of) their work and activities in the programmatic framework previously developed in Zurich, Berlin, and Paris, striving for a “new art” and a new state of mind beyond the limitations of dominant bourgeois culture and society, while at the same time rigorously opposing and deconstructing this dominant culture.

Even those artists and writers who are commonly associated with Dada in Belgium and the Netherlands—notably Theo van Doesburg and Clément Pansaers—were obviously hesitant to join the Dadaist project unreservedly. Van Doesburg created “another face,” using the heteronym I. K. Bonset as a cover for his own Dadaist activities and writings. Pansaers insisted on his own brand of “Dadaiststyle I-give-a-damn-ism.”

To write a history of Dadaism and the Low Countries is anything but an easy mission. Although the history of Dadaism in the Netherlands and Belgium is punctuated with vivid anecdotes and curious events, the narration of this history is quite a complicated affair, partly due to the miscellaneous nature of the material available and partly due to the fragmentary character of the actual history of Dadaism in the Low Countries. The problem is not a lack of documentation—material is abundantly available—the difficulty is rather to trace some coherence in this material. Even though the artistic and literary avant-garde in Belgium and the Netherlands was a small world of “like knows like,” it is basically impossible to observe a red thread in the existing material. Hence, the history of Dadaism in the Low Countries cannot be narrated as one single continuing story, certainly not when everything that has

been labeled as Dadaist in the preceding decades has to be integrated in this story.

Anyone who tries to reconstruct the history of Dadaism in the Dutch and Belgian section of the wider Dada orbit is confronted with the problems of an archeologist who tries to remodel a jar from recovered shards. In the case of Dadaism in the Low Countries, not only have some potsherds disappeared over the course of time, but however much one turns the crock this way or that, the pieces will not fit together. This is self-evident, as some may concede, since “Dada in the Low Countries” never existed. As a rule, two Dada branches are made out: Dada Holland and Dada Belgium. Yet, even when the existence of these Dada sections as separate entities is assumed, the shards will not yield two jars.

This, too, is not unexpected, others may concede. Isn’t Dada a “school of paradox (and of paradoxology),” as Hugo Ball put it in his diary, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit* (The Flight out of Time)?<sup>1</sup> Isn’t Dada characterized by contradictions, incongruities, and illogicality, refusing “intelligibility” and “any logical association of concepts,” as van Doesburg suggested in his introduction to Dada, *Wat is DADA?* (What is DADA?)<sup>2</sup>

The consciously pursued opacity and deliberate ambiguities may indeed be essential aspects of Dadaism. However, there are other reasons for the incompatibility of many Dutch and Belgian Dada shards. Although they may have been stored in the same drawer for a long time, a closer investigation reveals that these fragments are of quite different origin and texture. The fact that the separate pieces don’t fit together, however much one tries, seems not so much a result of the specific nature of Dadaism, but rather the result of the way in which the fragments have been collected and filed by consecutive historians. Although the merits of the quite extensive historiography of Dadaism in the Low Countries, especially in the Netherlands, cannot be denied insofar as much has been rescued from oblivion, neither can there be doubt that the historiography of Dadaism in the Low Countries is impeded by this historiography itself.

## II.

The history of Dadaism in the Low Countries is largely a fragmented collection of only slightly related individual appropriations and incidental recuperations. These individual cases are presented in this book in a chronological order, that is to say, in the chronological order of their respective starts. Although the appropriation of Dada was a highly individual affair, one may distinguish two waves (if the word “wave” isn’t too big) in the history of this appropriation. Each wave comprised—simultaneously—several parallel apprehensions of Dadaism.

The first wave, in 1919-20, coincided more or less with the extension of Dadaism from Zurich and Berlin to Paris, New York, Cologne, and Hanover. This wave started off with the Belgian writer Pansaers joining Tristan Tzara from Brussels in December 1919, followed by the first presentation of Dada poetry, written by Kurt Schwitters, at a soirée in Amsterdam in February 1920. In May 1920, a "Dada head office in Holland" was established by the Dutch artist Paul Citroen and the German artist and photographer Erwin Blumenfeld. At the same time, some Dada conceptions were appropriated by the Flemish author Paul van Ostaijen and a few of his Flemish associates in the so-called *Bond zonder gezegeld papier* (Federation without Stamped Paper) after a visit to the *Erste Internationale Dada-Messe* (First International Dada Fair) in Berlin, in July 1920. Finally, in the following months, "I. K. Bonset—a heteronym of van Doesburg—made his first public appearance as van Doesburg's Dadaist mouthpiece in the columns of *De Stijl*. With the invention of this "other face," Bonset initiated an enduring involvement in Dada by van Doesburg and some other members of the *Stijl* circle. A second wave can be identified in the middle of the 1920s, when certain aspects of Dadaism, or perhaps even less distinctly, a certain reference to Dadaism, can be observed in Groningen in the work of Hendrik Werkman, the Flemish review *Het Overzicht* (The Overview), and the first Walloon anticipations of surrealism, *L'Oesophage* and *Marie*.

The assumption of a chronological order in the various beginnings of the individual Dada appropriations in the Low Countries should not conceal, though, that the history of Dadaism in this section of the Dada orbit is actually characterized by the simultaneity of these single appropriations. In fact, most separate apprehensions of Dada overlap chronologically to a considerable extent. This may give the impression of a rather arbitrary and chaotic arrangement of the following inventory. This chaotic arbitrariness corresponds, however, with the anything-but-structured history of Dada in the Low Countries as a set of rather incoherent episodes—history being understood here not just as a historiographic narrative, but also as a collection of real, though past events. Since the following account will concentrate on the appropriation and adaptation, as well as the critique and rejection of Dada as a programmatic framework, the main concentration will be on those representatives of the avant-garde in the Low Countries who substantially focused on Dada as a project. In reverse order: Schwitters, a German national who personified Merz—another Dada branch specific to Hanover—developed a new Dada conception in the course of a Dadaist tour through the Netherlands in 1923; van Doesburg and his alter-ego, Bonset, who combined Dadaism with the pursuit of a constructivist aesthetic; van Ostaijen, who rejected Dada as a viable framework for his own conceptions, notwithstanding his recuperation of several basic elements from Dadaist programmatic in his own

## xviii Introduction

emancipated cubism; and finally (and to start with) Pansaers, who was not just the first Belgian representative of the avant-garde joining Dada explicitly, but was, in fact, the first writer in the Low Countries who threw in his lot with Dada.

## Notes

1. Hugo Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*, ed. Bernhard Echte (Zurich: Limmat: 1992), 93.
2. Theo van Doesburg, *Wat is DADA?* (The Hague: De Stijl, 1923), 3.

## FOREWORD

**T**he publication of *The Import of Nothing: How Dada Came, Saw and Vanished in the Low Countries (1915-1929)* represents something of a departure from previous volumes in this series. This is due not only to the historical disposition of the author, Hubert van den Berg, but to the challenges he faced in writing about a Dada that was never officially constituted as a coherent community, as it was in Zurich, Berlin and other European cities, and whose embrace of the movement was partial at best.

In its initial phases, Dada was concerned to create a new history; that is, to critique and deflect the course of establishment culture in ways that would substantially (or at least discernibly) alter how culture worked. This was to be based on Dada's liberation of the process of culture from the constraints, on the individual and the collective, that "created culture" typically imposed. While Dada in the Low Countries was equally concerned with the deconstruction of dominant culture, it was also, based on the fact that Dada itself had acquired a history, concerned with the pragmatics of deconstruction. Dutch and Belgian "Dada" were selective in their appropriations of Dada and specific in their deployment of it. While adopting the general framework of Dada's critique, careful attention was paid to its instrumental value in the context of specific post-World War I social and political situations.

Mistrustful of Dada's "programs" (as distinct from its critical framework), and skeptical of what they perceived as Dada's reactionary addiction to "historical realism," Dada in the Low Countries, as van den Berg correctly notes, became more an historiographic than historical enterprise. Constituted largely of individual initiatives—cultural "moves" in the larger careers of persons such as Clement Pansaers, Paul van Ostaïjen, Theo van Doesburg and German fellow traveler Kurt Schwitters—Belgian and Dutch "Dada" utilized Dada as an interceptive device in the critique of dominant culture at the same time that it distanced itself from Dada's social agendas.

Many of Dada's strategies were formulated as means to transactions; were transaction in character. Dada in the Low Countries can be understood, at least in part, as a rejection of Dada's specific strategies and, at the same time, as an acceptance of its concept of "transaction" that these strategies served. It is in this sense that van den Berg rightly describes the reception of Dada in the Low Countries as a "conceptual proposition."

xx **Foreword**

*The Import of Nothing...* stands as an important contribution to the Dada literature, both as the first sustained discussion of the Dada phenomena in the Low Countries to appear in many years, and as one of the best and most sophisticated articulations of Dada's reception and use, its historiographic complexion, and its vital, albeit deceptively invisible cultural descent into the twentieth century cultures of artistic and literary radicalism.

*Stephen C. Foster*  
General Editor



Figure 1.1  
Paul van Ostaïjen  
*Bezette Stad*  
Frontispiece (design by Oscar Jespers), 1921

# ZEPPELIN

Dagbladen

ZEPPELIN  
LONDEN

Good bye Piccadilly  
SQUARE  
farewell Leicester

BEATA INSULA

Figure 1.2  
Paul van Ostaijen  
"Zeppelin" 1921  
From his book, *Bezette Stad*

# BOEM

## PAUKESLAG

daar ligt alles

PLAT



voor rassen rassen cellen bassen koperen triangel  
trommels PAUKEN

rassen rennen razen rennen razen RENNEN

STOP!

drama in volle slag hoeren slangen werpen zich op eerlike  
mannen het gezin wankelt de fabriek wankelt  
de eer wankelt ligt er  
alle begrippen VALLEN

HALT!

Figure 1.3  
Paul van Ostaijen  
"Pats boem paukeslag" 1921  
From his book, *Bezette Stad*

De Ongekroond op zijn Theater  
voert hier lang open water



Figure 1.4  
Paul van Ostaijen  
"Grote Zirkus van de H. Geest" 1921  
From his book, *Bezette Stad*



Clément Pansaers  
 Clément Pansaers  
 Le 23 juillet 1920

Figure 2.1  
 Photograph of Clément Pansaers,  
 ca. 1920



Figure 2.2  
 Photograph of Clément Pansaers and  
 his wife, Marie Robbeets, ca. 1907



Figure 2.3  
 Guy Boscart (=Clément Pansaers)  
 Woodcut 1917  
 From the frontispiece of  
*Résurrection*, no. 2



Figure 2.4  
 Guy Boscart (=Clément Pansaers)  
 Woodcut 1917  
 From *Résurrection*, no. 2



Figure 2.5  
Guy Boscart (=Clément Pansaers)  
Woodcut 1917  
From *Résurrection*, no. 3



Figure 2.6  
Clément Pansaers  
Woodcut 1921  
From his book, *Bar Nicanor*



Figure 3.1  
Photograph of Paul Citroen 1920  
From Richard Huelsenbeck's *Dada-Almanach*

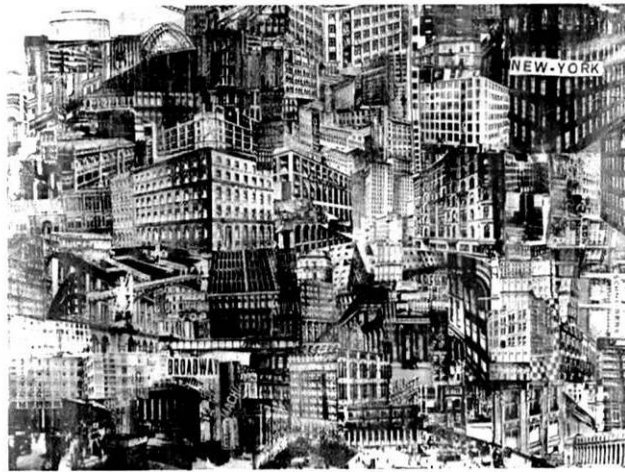
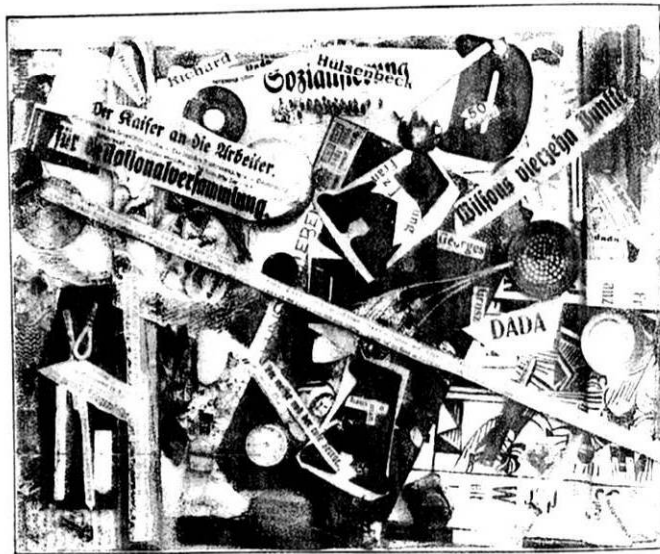


Figure 3.2  
Paul Citroen  
*Metropolis*, ca. 1923



3.3 Hans Citroen  
*Wilson's vierzehn Punkte* 1920  
From the catalogue of the First International Dada Fair in Berlin



3.4 Erwin Blumenfeld *Don Juan heiratet*, ca. 1922



3.5 Paul Citroen *Self Portrait*, ca. 1920



Figure 3.6  
Erwin Blumenfeld  
Submission for Tristan Tzara's *Dadaglobe*  
1920-21  
Bibliothèque littéraire Jacques Doucet  
(Paris), estate of Tristan Tzara



Figure 4.1  
Photograph of Paul van Ostaïjen in  
Berlin 1918



Figure 4.2  
Paul van Ostaijen  
"Bull" for Paul Joostens 1920



Figure 4.3  
Floris Jaspers  
Portrait of Paul van Ostaijen 1918  
From Paul van Ostaijen's *Het Sienjaal*

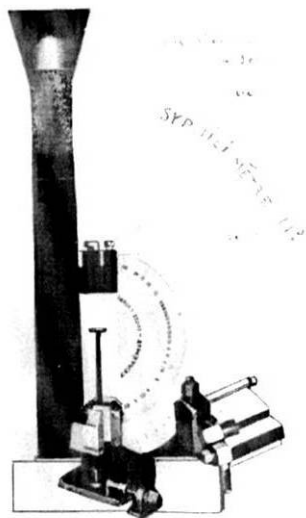


Figure 4.4  
Paul Joostens  
*Syphilimètre H<sup>3</sup>* 1925

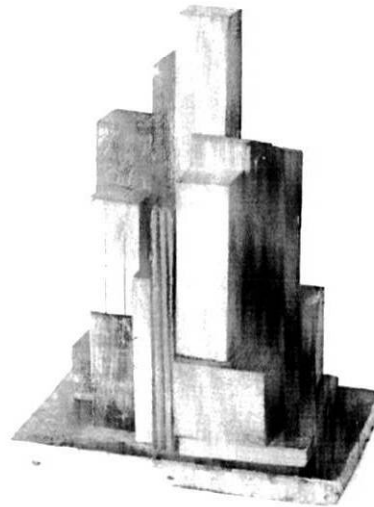


Figure 4.5  
Paul Joostens  
*Konstruktie* 1922



Figure 4.6  
Paul Joostens  
*La Maléfique* 1946



Figure 4.7  
Paul Joostens  
Drawing 1922  
From his book, *Salopes*



Figure 5.1  
Photograph of Theo van Doesburg and his dog, *Dada* 1926



Figure 5.2  
Photograph of Nelly van Doesburg  
during the Dada campaign 1923  
From *Het Leven*, January 27



Figure 5.3  
Photograph of Nelly van Doesburg posing as I. K. Bonset 1927  
From *De Stijl*, no. 79-84



Figure 5.4  
Portrait of I. K. Bonset (1899) 1923  
From *Merz*, no. 4

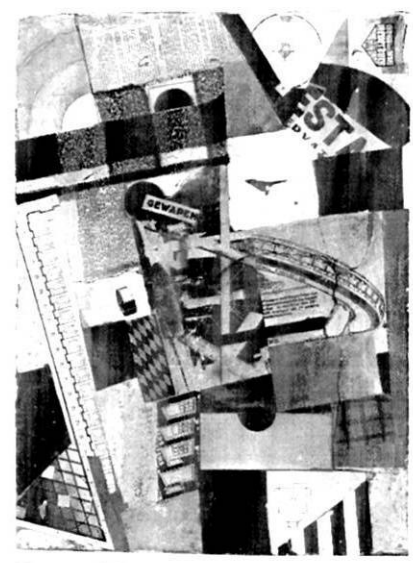


Figure 5.5 I. K. Bonset  
*La matière dénaturalisée*.  
*Destruction 2'* 1923  
From *Mécano*, no. 4-5

# DE STIJL

MAANDBLAD VOOR NIEUWE KUNST, WETENSCHAP EN KULTUUR. REDACTIE: THEO VAN DOESBURG. ABONNEMENT BINNENLAND F 6.-, BUITENLAND F 7.50 PER JAARGANG. ADRES VAN REDACTIE EN ADMINISTR. HAARLEM STRAAT 73A LEIDEN (HOLLAND).

4e JAARGANG No. 11. NOVEMBER 1921.

## LETTERKLANKBEELDEN (1921)

IV (in dissonanten)

U<sup>l</sup> J- m<sup>l</sup> n<sup>l</sup>  
 U J- m<sup>l</sup> n<sup>l</sup>  
 V- F- K<sup>l</sup> Q<sup>l</sup>  
 F<sup>l</sup> V- Q<sup>l</sup> K<sup>l</sup>  
 X<sup>l</sup> Q<sup>l</sup> V<sup>l</sup> W<sup>l</sup>  
 X<sup>l</sup> Q<sup>l</sup> W V  
 U<sup>l</sup> J- m- n-

g<sup>l</sup>  
 A- O- P<sup>l</sup> B<sup>l</sup>  
 A- O- P<sup>l</sup> B<sup>l</sup>  
 D- T- O<sup>l</sup> E-  
 d t o e

O<sup>l</sup> E<sup>l</sup>  
 B<sup>l</sup> D<sup>l</sup>  
 Z<sup>l</sup> C S B P D  
 j

Aantekening: te lezen van links naar rechts. Voor de teekens zie men *Stijl* no. 7.

Figure 5.6  
I. K. Bonset  
"X-beelden" 1921  
From *De Stijl*, no. 11

## DE TROM

Rrrrr om (zeer snel)  
 Rrrrr om  
 Rrrrr - om  
 DE trom  
 De drom  
 De trom  
 Rrrr - om  
**BOM**

Bij den dom  
 Met den trom  
 Bij den zwarten dom  
 Met den hollen trom  
Rrrr - om

Marcheerent!  
 Geweren!  
 DE zwarte soldaten!  
 De schuine geweren!  
 Rrr-om  
BOM.

Figure 5.7  
I. K. Bonset  
"De trom" 1921  
From *De Stijl*, no 11

X-Beelden.

DOOR I. K. BONSET.

hé hé hé  
 hebt gij 't lichaamtik ervaren  
 hebt gij 't lichaamtik ervaren  
 hebt gij 't li CHAAM tik er VA ren

O<sup>n</sup>

— ruimte en  
 — tijd  
 verleden heden toekomst  
 het achterterengonds  
 het doorekäär van 't riet en de verschijning  
 kleine verfrommelde almanak  
 die men onderseboven leest

MIJN KLOK STAAT STIL

omgekauwd sigarettende op 't  
 WITTE SERVET

ZIG - ZAG

vochtig bruin  
 ontbinding  
 GEEST  
 348

VRACHT AU TO MO BIEL

DWARS

inliend onvruchtbaar middelpunt

caricatuur der zwaarts  
 uomo electrico

rose en grauw en diep wijnrood

de scherven van de koemos vind ik in m'n thee

Aanteekening: O<sup>n</sup>: te lezen nul<sup>o</sup>; — ruimte en — tijd: te lezen min ruimte en min tijd.

Figure 5.8  
 I. K. Bonset  
 "Letterklankbeelden" 1921  
 From *De Stijl*, no. 11

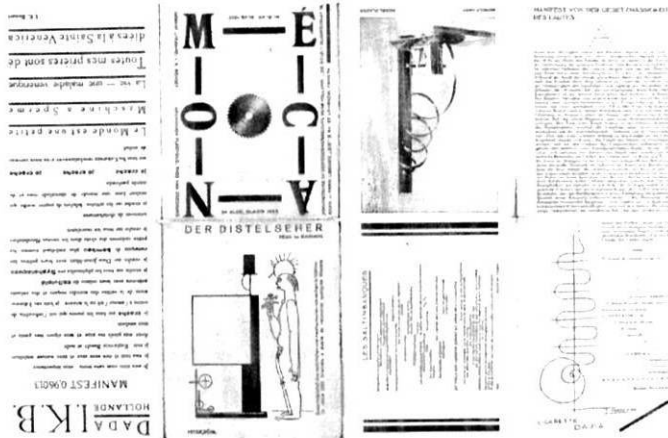


Figure 5.9a  
*Mécano*, no. 2  
 1922



Figure 5.9b



Figure 5.10  
 I. K. Bonset  
 Manifeste 69. Submission for  
 Tristan Tzara's *Dadaglobe*  
 1921  
 Bibliothèque littéraire Jacques  
 Doucet (Paris), estate of  
 Tristan Tzara



Figure 6.1  
 Photograph of Theo and Nelly van Doesburg among participants of the  
 International  
 Congress of Constructivists and Dada in Weimar. 1922



SANKT ZIG K wird aus dem Ei springen  
 ENZACK  
 ladet Sie ein zu einer  
 Zeitschrift  
 Conférence  
**DADA À PARIS**  
 par **TRISTAN TARRA**  
**HANs ARP** liest seine Wolkenpumpe vor  
 Am Klavier **PETRo v. DoESBURG**  
 Kompositionen von Vittorio Rieti  
 9 Uhr abends  
 Montag d 25 September 1922  
 Hotel Fürstenhot Weimar  
 Weh weh unser armer Kasper ist tot  
 wer wird die Kaffeemühle drehen

NACHTBEINE haben keinen Zutritt  
**MÉCANO**  
 Gebrauchs-  
 anweisung  
 Kunstschrift.  
 III




**EINLADUNG FÜR ZWEI PERSONEN**

Figure 6.2  
 Theo van Doesburg  
 Invitation for the Mécano soirée in Weimar 1922

HOLLAND: DADA IN HOLLAND. WO: GEZICHT. DONSET. GEZICHT. AN ANNA SLOOTER.  
 PICABIA. ZEICHNUNG. HANSA IN HOLLAND. ZEICHNUNG. WEISSLADENKUNDE FOTO

**MERZ**  
 1  
 HOLLAND  
 DADA

**MERZLITERATUR**  
 VON K. SCHWITTERS  
 ANNA BLUME | VERLAG  
 DIE KATHEDRALE | STEEGMANN  
 BLEI-E II | VERLAG HEINRICH  
 STURMBILDERBUCH 4 | VERLAG  
 DIE BLUME ANNA | DER  
 AUGUSTE BOLTE | STURM

**MERZ 2** IM APRIL 1923  
 Abonnement in Deutschland viertel-  
 jährlich 1,25 M., mit Warenauftrag  
 im Frühjahr 1923. Mehr-Ausstellungen im Kunstsalon  
 Emil Richter, Dresden; Sommerabend, des Haag; Gebouw  
 voor Troostende Kunst, Amsterdam. Wichtige Ausstellungen  
 im Sturm, Berlin.

HOLLAND  
 DE STIJL  
 MECANO  
 REG. TH. VAN DOESBURG

JANUAR 1923  
 HERAUSGEBER: KURT SCHWITTERS  
 HANNOVER · WALDHUSENSTRASSE 5<sup>a</sup>

Figure 6.3  
 Kurt Schwitters  
 Cover 1923  
 From Merz, no. 1



Figure 6.4  
 Kurt Schwitters  
 Merz collage with Dutch and Czech  
 material 1923  
 From *Het Vaderland*, February 3 Fig

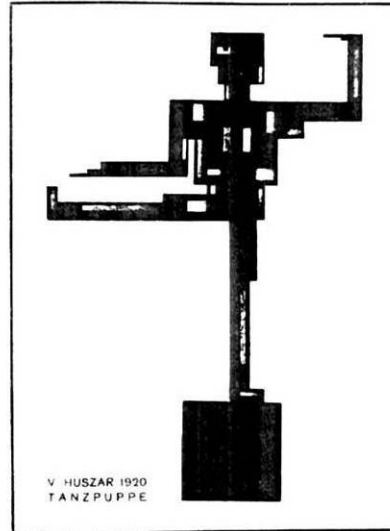


Figure 6.5a  
 Vilmos Huszár  
 Mechanical Dancing Figure 1923  
 From *Merz*, no. 1

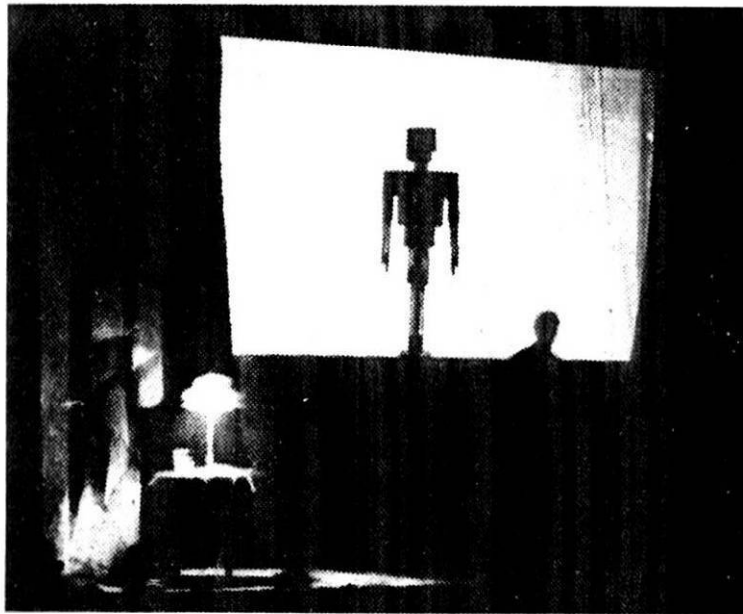


Figure 6.5b



Figure 6.6  
 Theo van Doesburg and Kurt Schwitters  
 Program of the Dutch Dada tour 1923



Figure 6.7  
 Theo van Doesburg and Kurt Schwitters  
 Poster for a Dada matinée in The Hague 1923



Op 't tooneel zat een heer en sprak  
wartaal....

Figure 6.8  
Caricature of Kurt Schwitters reciting  
"Revolution in Revon" 1923  
From *Het Leven*, January 27



Figure 6.9  
Photograph at the  
"headquarters" of  
the Dutch Dada  
campaign, the  
house of Theo van  
Doesburg's second  
wife, Lena Milius, in  
The Hague.  
Pictured: Theo and  
Nelly van  
Doesburg, Kurt and  
Helma Schwitters,  
Bart and Ina de  
Ligt. 1923



Figure 6.9b



Figure 7.1  
Thijs Rinsema  
Collage, ca. 1923-30

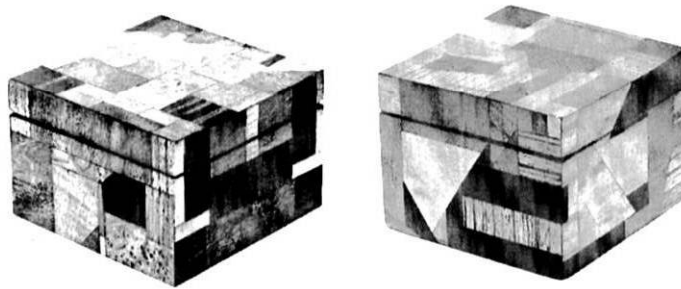


Figure 7.2  
Thijs Rinsema  
and Kurt  
Schwitters  
Collage Boxes,  
ca. 1923-30

Een  
**DaDa** avond  
door *K. Schwitters*  
Vrijdag 13 April  
8 uur 's avonds  
Entree f 1.00

de Phoenix  
DRACHTEN

Figure 7.3  
Kurt Schwitters  
Invitation for a Dada soirée in Drachten 1923

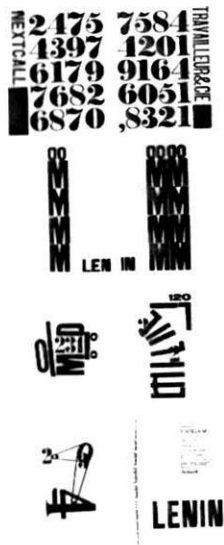


Figure 7.4  
Hendrik Werkman  
Typographic arrangement 1924  
From *The Next Call*, no. 4

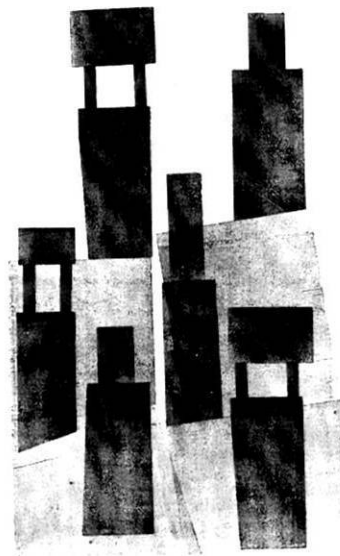
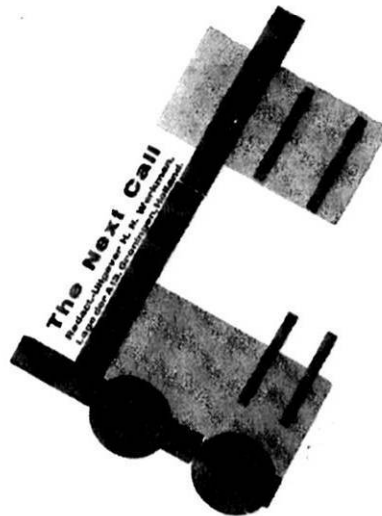
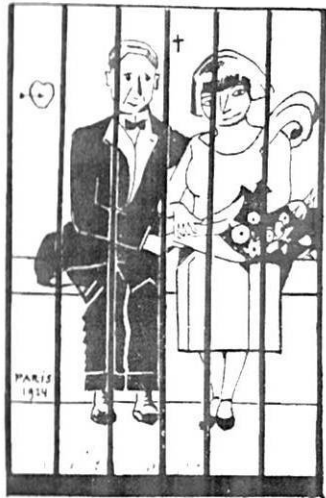


Figure 7.5  
Hendrik Werkman  
"Chimney" image, ca. 1923



Figure 7.6  
Hendrik Werkman  
Title page 1925  
From *The Next Call*, no. 8





DESSIN DE PAUL JOOSTENS  
LE BEAU PETIT SOUVENIR QUE ÇA FAIT

Figure 7.7  
Paul Joostens  
Illustration for Michel Seuphor's  
"Mariage filmé" showing Seuphor and  
his wife, Mado Millot, their wedding  
1925  
From *Het Overzicht*, no. 22-24

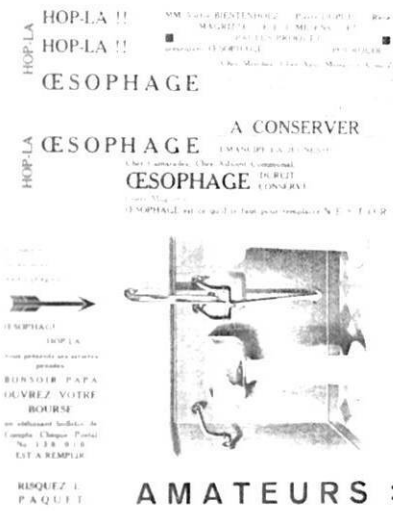


Figure 7.9  
René Magritte and E. L. T. Mesens  
"Hop-la!!" 1925  
From *L'Oesophage*, no. 1



Figure 7.8  
René Magritte and E. L. T. Mesens  
"Les 5 commandements" 1925  
From *L'Oesophage*, no. 1

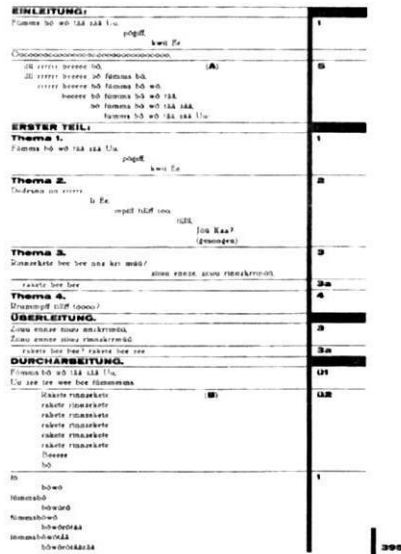


Figure 7.10  
Kurt Schwitters  
Ursonate (typographic design by Jan  
Tschichold) 1927  
From *internationale revue i10*, vol. 1



Figure 8.1  
 Postcard of the Holländische Meierei,  
 Zurich, sent by Hans Arp and Ludwig  
 Neitzel to Tristan Tzara 1925

## LA MORT DU PAPE AU PAYS DU PATINAGE

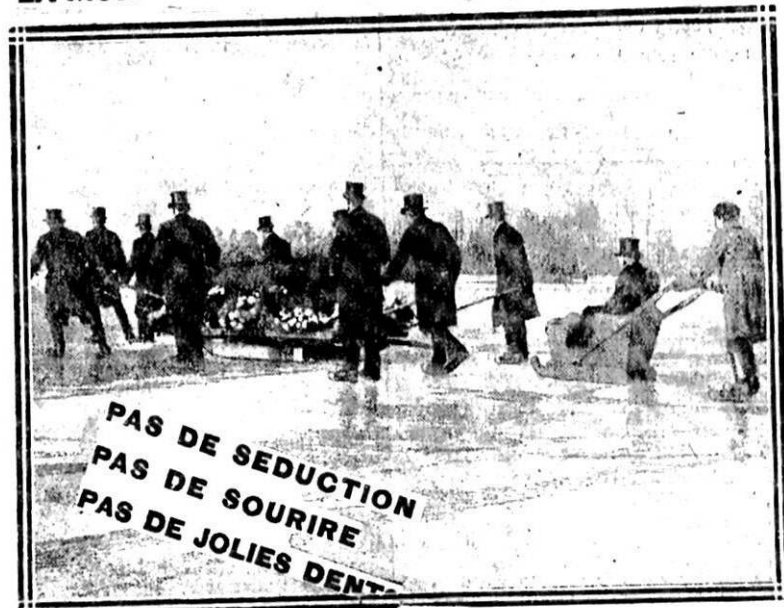


Figure 8.2  
 Théodore Fraenkel  
 La mort du Pape au pays du patinage 1920-22