

Dada

John GAYER

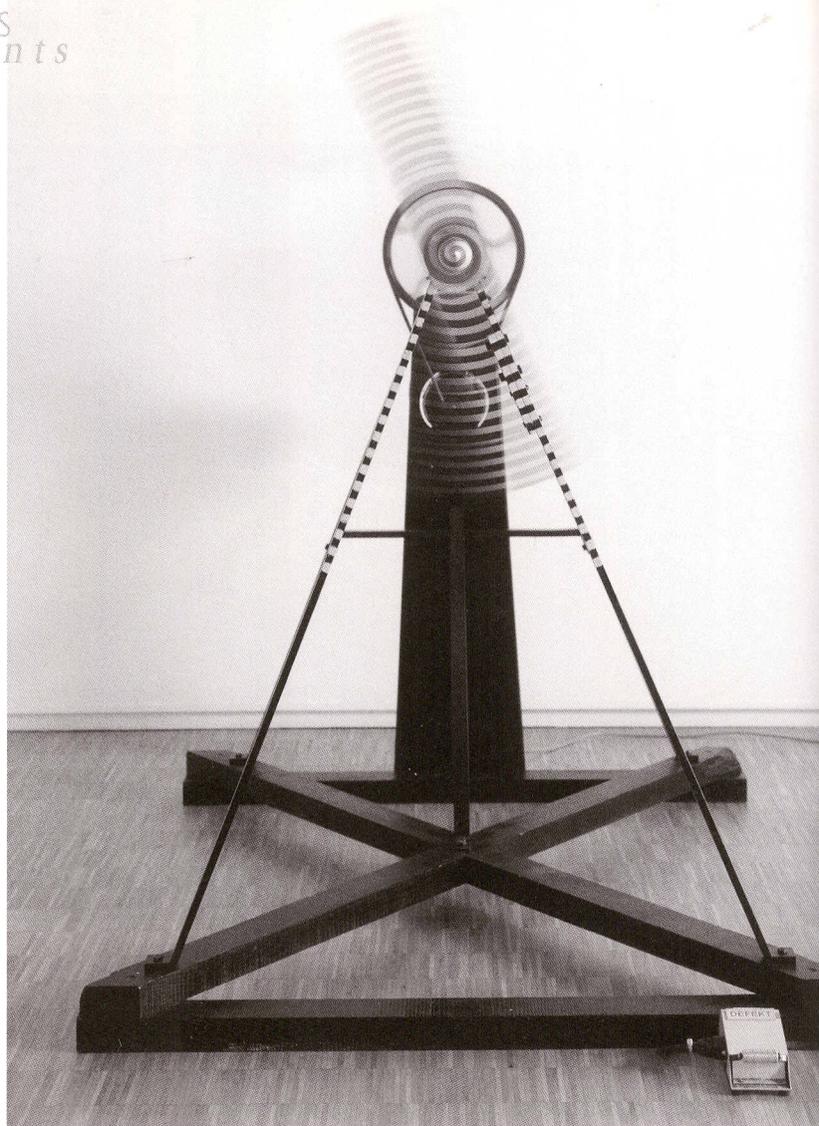
In her 1968 essay on the Museum of Modern Art's *Dada and Surrealism* exhibition, Lucy Lippard lamented the fact that no in-depth survey devoted exclusively to Dada had ever taken place in the United States. Now, after a period of time lasting nearly four decades, that day finally arrived. Organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington, and the Centre Pompidou, Paris, in collaboration with the Museum of Modern Art in New York, DADA (February 19–May 14, 2006) proved to be one of the highlights of the capital's spring exhibition season. Subdivided according to the cities of Zurich, Berlin, Cologne, Hanover, New York and Paris, the six centres in which Dada took place, the subject matter of the exhibition ranged from the primitive masks of Marcel Janco to Marcel Duchamp's optic machines and from Hannah Hoehc's image of politicians in bathing suits to aural abstractions by Kurt Schwitters. In addition to work by the movement's major figures, the exhibition included several artists whose work has rarely been seen. Surprisingly, the material representatives of this almost century old movement often appeared younger than what one would expect. Not only did particular selections bear a distinctive contemporary air, but also the visual and intellectual impact made by the sculptural works could not be overlooked.

Born out of opposition to World War I and disillusionment with the state of day-to-day life, Dada's fragmented images and sounds commented on the chaos, violence and hypocrisy of current events. Abandoning classical notions of beauty and order, Raoul Hausmann's *Mechanical Head* (c. 1920)

provides a shocking vision of man's dehumanisation and Duchamp's readymades prove that art no longer requires craftsmanship, but it may also be found. Then suddenly, within this sphere of rebellion, the viewer encounters the stillness of Sophie Taeuber's sombre, symmetrical forms and two boxes by Kurt Schwitters that result from his collaboration with a Hanover craftsman.

Hovering between functional objects and independent sculpture, Taeuber's sophisticated abstract volumes appear less accessible than her stunning marionettes, but remain visually exciting despite their stasis. Made of turned wood and paint, their forms initially suggest spindles, oversize doorknobs or the hilt of a sword. Closer inspection reveals three portraits of Hans Arp as well as an amphora, covered bowl, poudrier and chalice. Schwitters' boxes, on the other hand, carry inlaid wood patterns adapted from his collages. The skill with which the tones of the wood mimic the look of the paper fragments found in his "Merz" pictures draws the eye into the rich surfaces. Both artists also repeat favourite motifs. In Schwitters' case *Untitled (Inlaid Box Anna)* (c. 1921) returns to one that began with the love poem *An Anna Blume*.

In contrast to Taeuber and Schwitters, functional objects receive a radically different treatment by Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray. Unfortunately, Duchamp's readymades, unlike most of the sculptural works in the exhibition, come with such an imposing reputation that seeing anything new in them presents a challenge. Another factor affecting their presentation is the coincidence that *Bicycle Wheel*, *Hat Rack*, *Trébuchet (Trap)* and *In Advance of the Broken Arm* all exist as second, third or fourth versions of lost originals. *Bicycle Wheel* dates from 1951, the other three from 1964. Similarly, Man Ray's wonderful *Obstruction* (1961), made of over five dozen coat hangers, lives on as a replica of the 1920 original and his aluminium *Lampshade* (1954)

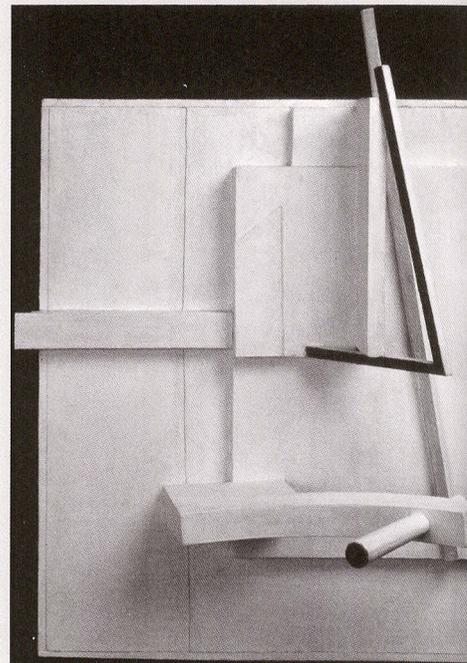


replicates an aluminium replica of the original 1919-20 unfurled paper object. Unfortunately, undermining the impact of the latter two pieces is their placement up above viewers' heads. What appears to be an economical means of ensuring the works' security, also suggests oddball Calder mobiles. Though the quiet intensity and casual beauty of these pieces avoids being compromised, *Obstruction* fails to fulfil its intended confrontational quality: a sad fate for an artwork which the artist believed could be expanded to the point of preventing viewers from seeing paintings on the gallery's walls.

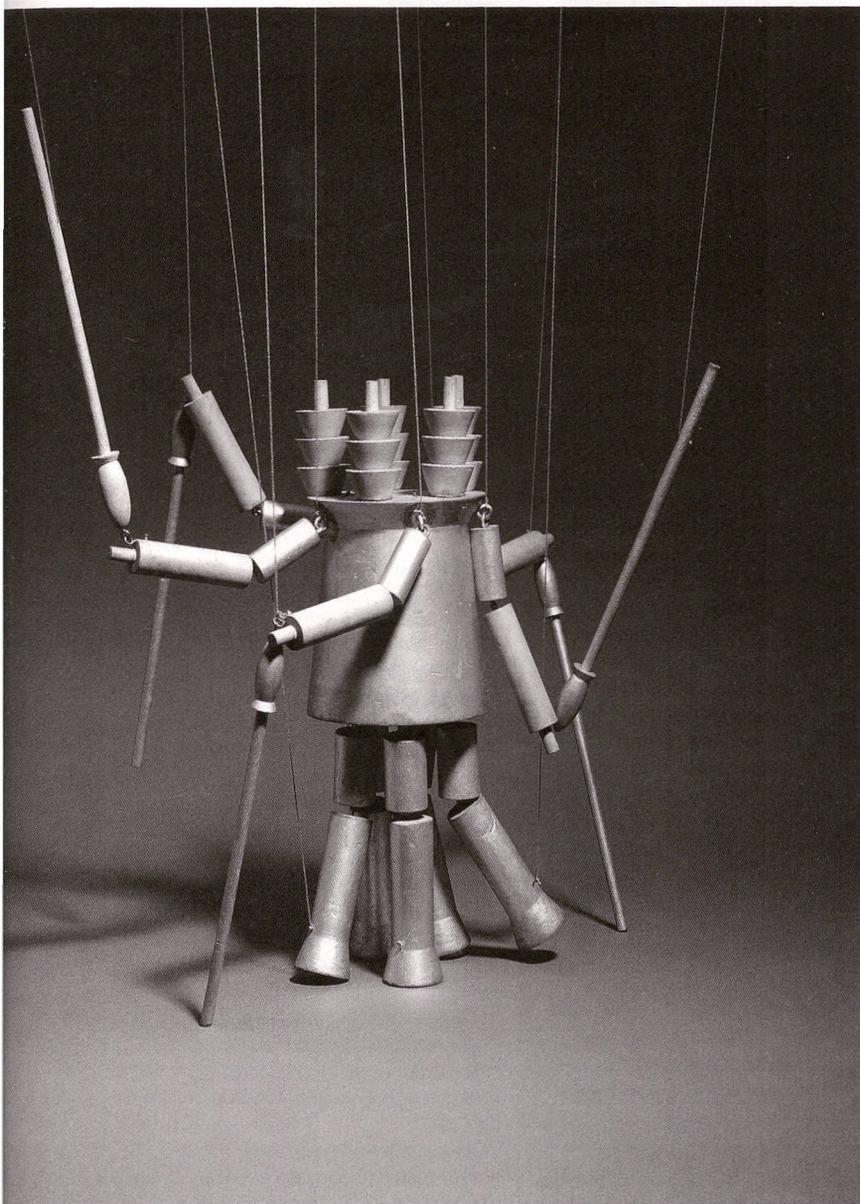
Examination of the sculptures revealed that replicas and reconstructions can be found throughout the show. Both the 1988 reconstruction of the original 1920 version of George Grosz and John Heartfield's *The Middle-Class Philistine Heartfield Gone Wild (Electro Mechanical Tatlin Sculpture)* and the 2004 remaking of John Heartfield and Rudolf Schlichter's *Prussian Archangel*, also originally from 1920, account for their unusually pristine condition. In a much more theatrical vein, a large photograph of

Schwitters' *Merzbau* resides within a recasting of his famous three-dimensional collage. Harboured in an alcove, it contrasts with the avant-garde character of most Dada works. The unadorned surfaces and neutral tones of this contrived manifestation point back in time by conveying a decidedly Gothic impression.

The presence of such renewals and enhancements creates a



← **Marcel DUCHAMP**, *Rotative plaques verre* (Optique de précision) (Rotary Glass Plates [Precision Optics]), 1979 (second replica, based on the 1920 original). Motorized optical device: painted plexiglass plates on metal axle, motor and metal and wood stand. 170 x 125 x 100 cm. Centre Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne, Paris, Acquisition, 1979. CNCA/MNAM Dist. Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY. © 2005 Marcel Duchamp / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris/Succession Marcel Duchamp.



← **Kurt SCHWITTERS**, *1. weisses Relief* (1st White Relief), 1924/1927. Painted wood and glass relief. 66.5 x 48.7 x 28.7 cm; in plexi box: 91.4 x 76.2 x 32.4 cm. Sprengel Museum Hanover. Kurt Schwitters Archiv im Sprengel Museum Hanover. © 2005 Kurt Schwitters / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

↑ **Sophie TAEUBER**, *Die Wachen* (Military Guards), 1918. Turned, painted wood and metal joints. 40.5 x 18.5 cm; diameter: 13 cm. Kunstgewerbesammlung im Museum Bellerive, Museum für Gestaltung Zürich. Photo: Marlen Perez.

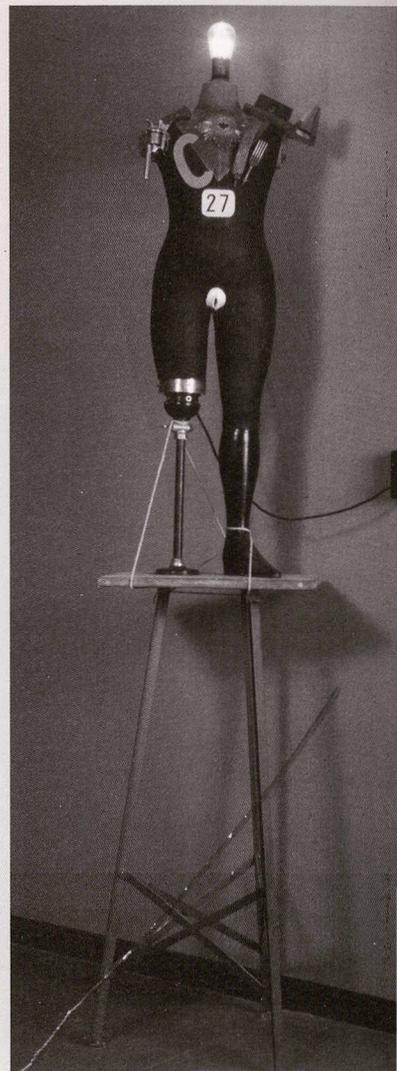
variety of effects. While many artists over time have produced multiple versions of key pieces, the presence of original works, artist built replicas, artist sanctioned replicas, and professional reconstructions as seen here forces the viewer to consider the authenticity of the art work, the inherent merit of these various forms and the perspectives from which these different kinds of objects should or should not be viewed. For the average museum goer the initial sense of excitement created by the startling phenomenon that is Dada would

be deflated as he or she experiences some disappointment with the idea of viewing replacements. It forces one to consider the overarching purpose of the exhibition, the nature of the movement being surveyed, the possible modes of presentation as well as one's personal definition with regard to what can be accepted as art.

In the long run such wrinkles make DADA that much more interesting. The vigour of these works and the fact that they still present challenges to the viewer speaks of the importance and originality of these artists' achievements. One unwritten subtext to the exhibition is that, in light of the current situation in Iraq, the moral outrage expressed at the destructive effects of war still rings true. Most importantly, though, in every gallery the viewer sees evidence of the movement's tremendous impact on later art. Duchamp's *Rotary Demisphere* (Precision Optics) (1924) points to Kinetic Art and the Op-Art works of painters such as Bridget Riley. Taeuber's containers suggest Tony Cragg's vessel sculptures and the stacked cones of her marionette Dr Komplex re-emerge in General Idea's skiing *Venetian Blind* costume at Lake Louise, Alberta in 1977. The spirit of Man Ray's coat hangers also live on in Dan Steinhilber's *Untitled* (2002), a dense floor to ceiling column assembled from paper-clad wire hangers now in the collection of the Smithsonian's Hirschhorn Museum just across the National Mall. In summation, this outstanding reevaluation of Dada's contribution to the historical avant-garde produced many more revelations than would have been expected. ←

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John GAYER has contributed exhibition reviews to art journals in Canada, the United States and Finland. He is currently based in Washington, D.C.



George GROSZ and John HEARTFIELD, *Des wildgewordene Spiesser Heartfield* (Elektro-mechan. Tatlin-Plastik) (The Middle-Class Philistine Heartfield Gone Wild [Elektro-Mechanical Tatlin Sculpture]), 1988 (reconstruction of 1920 original). Tailor's dummy, revolver, doorbell, knife, fork, letter "C" and number "27" signs, plaster dentures, embroidered insignia of the Black Eagle Order on horse blanket, Osram light bulb, Iron Cross, stand, and other objects. Overall, including base: 220 x 45 x 45 cm; base: 90 x 45 x 45 cm; object: 130 x 45 x 45 cm. Berlinische Galerie – Landesmuseum für Moderne Kunst, Fotografie und Architektur Art © Estate of George Grosz/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. © 2005 John Heartfield / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.