



David Hopkins

# DADA AND SURREALISM

A Very Short Introduction

OXFORD

## Dada and Surrealism: A Very Short Introduction

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David Hopkins

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To Benjamin

# Introduction

*Question: How many Surrealists does it take to change a lightbulb?*

*Answer: A fish.*

Everybody knows something about Dada and Surrealism. Dada, born in 1916 and over by the early 1920s, was an international artistic phenomenon, which sought to overturn traditional bourgeois notions of art. It was often defiantly anti-art. More than anything, its participants, figures such as Marcel Duchamp, Francis Picabia, Tristan Tzara, Hans Arp, Kurt Schwitters, and Raoul Hausmann, counterposed their love of paradox and effrontery to the insanities of a world-gone-mad, as the First World War raged in Europe.

Surrealism, Dada's artistic heir, was officially born in 1924 and had virtually become a global phenomenon by the time of its demise in the later 1940s. Committed to the view that human nature is fundamentally irrational, Surrealist artists such as Max Ernst, Salvador Dalí, Joan Miró, and André Masson conducted an often turbulent love affair with psychoanalysis, aiming to plumb the mysteries of the human mind.

For many people Dada and Surrealism represent not so much movements in 20th-century art history as 'modern art' incarnate. Dada is seen as iconoclastic and confrontational; Surrealism as similarly

anti-bourgeois in spirit but more deeply immersed in the bizarre. But why Dada-and-Surrealism? Why are they yoked together? They constitute two movements but are regularly conflated. Art historians have traditionally found it convenient to generalize about Dada 'paving the way' for Surrealism, although that was only really the case in one of Dada's locations, namely Paris. This book will certainly rehearse that story again, but it will also present these movements as distinctly different, so that they can be played off against each another. Dada, for instance, often revelled in the chaos and the fragmentation of modern life, whilst Surrealism had more of a restorative mission, attempting to create a new mythology and put modern man and woman back in touch with the forces of the unconscious. Such differences touch on important distinctions which I have aimed to make as vivid as possible.

More than any other art movements of the last century Dada and Surrealism now permeate our culture at large. Surrealism especially has entered our everyday language; we talk of 'surreal humour' or a 'surreal plot' to a film. This very continuity means that it is difficult to place them at one remove from us in 'history'. Critical and historical accounts of both movements have admittedly become more and more elaborate. Dada, which might be thought to be anti-academic, is now widely studied in universities. Similarly monographs on notorious Surrealist artists such as Dalí and René Magritte are ubiquitous. But very often the sheer plethora of information is dazzling, and we lose critical distance.

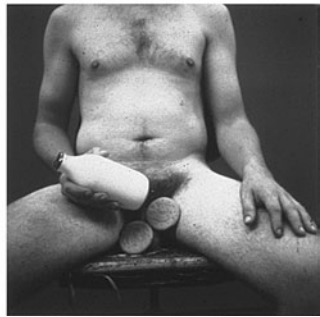
Conscious of this problem, I have structured this book around key thematic issues. Chapter 1 charts the historical development of Dada and Surrealism, and deals with the assumptions involved in approaching them together. Chapter 2 looks in detail at the way both movements disseminated their ideas, particularly in terms of public events and publications. In the process, it shows how they established a dialogue between art and life. Chapter 3 looks closely at aesthetic questions, focusing on poetry, collage, and photomontage, painting, photography, object-making, and film. Issues of anti-art and the positioning of each movement within modernist aesthetic debates are centrally important here. The last two chapters highlight recent research, by both myself and

others, in line with current historical perspectives on the movements. I examine Dada and Surrealist attitudes to a range of key topics from irrationalism to sexuality, before focusing closely on their politics. The book concludes with some reflections on the afterlife of the two movements, particularly in relation to recent art.

My main concern has been to ask the questions of Dada and Surrealism that correspond to our current cultural preoccupations. For instance identity – whether racial or sexual – is a central concern for many of us, and Surrealist artists, such as the French photographer Claude Cahun or the Cuban painter Wifredo Lam, were pioneers in addressing it. But to appreciate the force of their concerns it is necessary to recreate the contexts to which they were responding. Similarly, given Surrealism's current popularity in culture at large (for example, the ubiquity of Dalí's works on posters) it is safe to assume that the 'darker', unconscious aspects of our psychic lives, which were celebrated by both Dada and Surrealism, are now widely thought to be 'positive' things. However, in cultures where Fascism was once powerful many would question the virtues of surrendering to the irrational, while modernist critics have argued that, however anti-bourgeois they might have considered themselves, the Dadaists and Surrealists simply helped to extend the range of experience which bourgeois culture could assimilate into its system of values. In our 'postmodern' culture we all too readily aestheticize our darker motivations and impulses. This book looks at the historical roots for such attitudes and clarifies why, and in what contexts, they were once 'radical'. In doing so, questions about our own motivations might inevitably arise.

This kind of enquiry, which does not necessarily place Dada and Surrealism on a pedestal but seeks to establish why they are still such vital forces in our culture, seems particularly pressing given that contemporary art is very much in thrall to these movements. This can be made apparent by glancing at a work by Sarah Lucas, one of the most visible British artists of the 1990s.

Lucas's work reveals a continuation of the desire to shock that was once the stock-in-trade of Dada. At the same time, she uses substitutions or



**1. Sarah Lucas, *Get Off Your Horse and Drink Your Milk*, set of photographs, 1994**

displacements of bodily imagery that were once the currency of Surrealism. Her work implicitly relies on the achievements of Dadaists and Surrealists such as Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, and René Magritte. But does Lucas's work simply confirm that Dada-style shock has become institutionalized? Or does it build on this tradition in a culturally significant way?

These, it seems to me, are the kind of questions that a contemporary engagement with the implications of Dada and Surrealism might throw up. By the end of this book, we should be well placed to answer them. The central task of the coming chapters, however, is to establish the key historical and thematic contours of Dada and Surrealism.

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# Chapter 1

## Dada and Surrealism: a historical overview

The early 20th century was a period of tumultuous change. The First World War and the Russian Revolution profoundly altered people's understanding of their worlds. The discoveries of Freud and Einstein, and the technological innovations of the Machine Age, radically transformed human awareness. In cultural terms, the novels of Joyce or the poetry of T. S. Eliot – the former's *Ulysses* and the latter's *The Waste Land* were both published in 1922 – registered distinctively new 'modernist' modes of feeling and perception characterized by a marked sense of discontinuity. Hence the theorist Marshall Berman sees a simultaneous sense of exhilaration and impending catastrophe, reflective of the fractured conditions of life at the time, as defining modernist sensibility.

Early 20th-century art movements powerfully reflect this new mind-set. Daringly innovatory in technical terms, movements such as Cubism and Futurism, both of which were at their height around 1910–13, moved beyond the calm surface of traditional painting to probe the structure of consciousness itself. Arguably, though, it is to Dada and Surrealism that we should look for the most compelling explorations of the modern psyche, not least because both movements placed considerable emphasis on mental investigation. Dada partially saw itself as re-enacting the psychic upheaval caused by the First World War, while the irrationalism celebrated by

Surrealism could be seen as a thoroughgoing acceptance of the forces at work beneath the veneer of civilization. This chapter summarizes the overlapping histories of both movements, but, first of all, what attitude links them to the other art movements of the early 20th century?

## The 'avant-garde'

More than anything else, Dada and Surrealism were 'avant-garde' movements. The term 'avant-garde', which was first employed by the French utopian socialist Henri de Saint-Simon in the 1820s, initially had military connotations, but came to signify the advanced socio-political as well as aesthetic position to which the modern artist should aspire. Broadly speaking, art in the 19th century was synonymous with bourgeois individualism. Owned by the bourgeoisie or shown in bourgeois institutions, it was a means by which members of that class could temporarily escape the material constraints and contradictions of everyday existence. This state of affairs was challenged in the 1850s by the Realism of the French painter Gustave Courbet, which, by fusing a socialist agenda with a matching aesthetic credo, arguably represents the first self-consciously avant-garde tendency in art. By the early 20th century, several key art movements – such as Futurism in Italy, Constructivism in Russia or De Stijl in Holland, as well as Dada and Surrealism – were pledged to contesting any separation between art and the contingent experience of the modern world. Their reasons for doing so were inflected in different ways by politics – the Constructivists, for instance, were responding directly to the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia – but they tended to share the belief that modern art needed to forge a new relationship with its audience, producing uncompromising new forms to parallel shifts in social experience. For the cultural theorist Peter Bürger, writing in the 1970s, the mission of the early 20th-century European avant-garde thus consisted in undermining the idea of art's 'autonomy' ('art for art's sake') in favour of a new merging of art into what he calls the 'praxis of life'.