

H-France Review Vol. 10 (December 2010), No. 221

Michel Sanouillet, *Dada in Paris*, revised and expanded by Anne Sanouillet, translated by Sharmila Ganguly, The MIT Press: Cambridge Massachusetts, London, 2009, xii + 705 pp. Appendixes, notes, bibliography, and index. \$39.95 (cl). ISBN 978-0-262-01303-1.

Review by Elza Adamowicz, Queen Mary University of London.

In 1965 the public viva of Michel Sanouillet's doctoral thesis *Dada à Paris* at the Sorbonne was threatened with disruption by members of the radical Lettriste group, whose leader Isidore Isou protested against the appropriation of Dada by the academic establishment, arguing that the Lettristes were the true heirs of Dada. Yet Sanouillet was attempting to resist the fossilization of Dada as a historical movement, hence his declared aim to reconcile "dry laboratory studies" with Dada's "enthusiasm, exuberance, spontaneity, insolent laughter, and human touch" (p. 2). *Dada à Paris* was first published in French in 1965, and revised and expanded by Anne Sanouillet in 1983 and 2005.[1] It is the 2005 revised edition which is now available in a long-awaited English translation by Sharmila Ganguly. A leading scholar of Dada, editor of the first French academic journal on the subject, *Cahiers Dada et Surréalisme* (1965-7), and co-founder and first president of the Association for the Study of Dada and Surrealism (1972), Sanouillet has made a major contribution to the establishment of Dada as a distinctive movement. His *Dada à Paris*, the first major scholarly work on Dada, remains today an essential reference for scholars in the field.

Born in 1916 in pacifist Zurich at the heart of a war-torn Europe, the Dada movement emerged in violent reaction to World War I, and was the revolt of a generation of displaced disaffected artists, poets and intellectuals. What was Dada? Anarchist, nihilistic, primitivist, it was primarily a cry—of revolt, despair, vitality—encapsulated in a woodcut by German artist Otto Dix entitled *Der Schrei* (1917), and echoed in a text by Tristan Tzara which simply repeats the word "howl" [*hurle*] 275 times (1920). Assaulted by the mass destruction of the 1914-18 war, its wounded bodies and psyches, its violence—not only at the front (the massacres of trench warfare) but also on the home-front (the psychiatric treatment of shell-shocked soldiers), the dadaists resorted to the absurd in the face of the absurdity of the war. As Breton later recalled about this period: "We simply responded in kind to a world that scandalised us". Resisting the "return to order" of post-war reconstruction programmes designed to suppress the traumas of war, the Dadaists privileged art forms based on the chaotic and the spontaneous, exposing the disintegration of rational discourses by mimicking the irrational utterances of the insane or the babble of the child.

Critical literature has traditionally considered Paris Dada as a transitional phase, an unruly nursery for future surrealists, "a psychic slash-and-burn ploy—for its more successful cousin Surrealism" (Gordon). French surrealist critics in particular refer to the period 1920-22 as "the Dada interlude" (Bonnet) or the "Dada digression" (Béhar) in the development of surrealism, seen as rationalising and codifying Dada's unruly principles. It is arguable that after 1924 Dada was indeed partially eclipsed by surrealism, and exhibitions such as Alfred H Barr's *Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism* (New York: Museum of Modern Art 1936) presented Dada as a prelude to surrealism. After World War II, however, there was a reevaluation of Dada, especially in the United States, where Robert Motherwell's *Dada Poets and Painters* (1952) influenced American artists and poets, and several exhibitions (such as Duchamp's *Dada 1916-1923* at the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York in 1953, or *The World of Dada* in the Rhode Island Museum of Art 1961) were instrumental in the positioning of

Dada not as prelude or prologue, but as a distinct avant-garde movement. The last ten years, in particular, have seen a large number of exhibitions^[2], facsimile reprints of Dada texts and journals, anthologies, conferences and scholarly works.^[3] Sanouillet's work has remained a reference throughout, leading for instance Laurent Le Bon, curator of the 2005 *Dada* exhibition at the Centre Beaubourg in Paris, to declare that he was seeking to "attempt to approach the spirit of Michel Sanouillet's vast unrivalled chronicle, *Dada in Paris*" (2005: 515). In these recent reevaluations a twenty-first century of installations, performance art, indeterminacy and parody remains fully conscious of the relevance of the Dada movement (rather than Dadaism).

In this context Sanouillet's impressive work has lost none of its relevance for current research. Combining meticulous scholarship and a lively narrative, he adopts a descriptive rather than an analytical approach, offering a detailed chronological account of both collective and individual Dada activities in Paris, and of the synergies, debates and quarrels among the members of the group between 1919 and 1923. The work benefited from first-hand information from several of the key actors of the Paris Dada group, including André Breton, Francis Picabia, Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes and Tristan Tzara. It includes an extensive bibliography and an appendix of previously unpublished correspondence (220 letters) between the main actors Breton, Picabia and Tzara, as well as other unpublished texts. Together, this corpus constitutes a key document when exploring the shifting public collective and private individual relations within the group.

The preamble offers an overview of Dada manifestations worldwide. Here Dada is considered in its diversity, forming "the many panels of a polyptych" (p.4), an international phenomenon united by a shared revolt against the absurdity of war, the decadence of bourgeois society and the sclerosis of traditional art. If Dada was a chameleon, as the Dadaist Tzara once declared, it changed its colours under the impact of the cities it besieged. While Zurich was invaded by the carnival masks of a grotesque *Totentanz*, New York Dada was both a ludic embrace and a critique of the machine and commodity culture. Berlin Dada, for its part, was a much more violently political animal which exploited the weapon of photomontage in the satire of Weimar Republic society, while Cologne's Dadaists used black humour and caricature to expose the post-war political situation. The militancy of the German Dadaists contrasts with the more ludic ambience promoted by the Paris Dadaists. While revolutionary and anarchistic, they disdained concrete action and, unlike the surrealists, did not intervene in political activities or ideological debates (such as the disputes in 1920 which split French socialists and led to the creation of the French Communist Party).

Sanouillet turns next to the French reception of Dada, not in a spirit of chauvinism (as he was accused by Lettriste Maurice Lemaître), but in order to explore an important period in the history of French intellectual thought. The first section (chapters one through five) deals with the early period 1916-1920 and focuses on the relations between the young Paris writers André Breton, Louis Aragon and Philippe Soupault, and the more radical Zurich Dadaists, a cosmopolitan group which included the Romanian Tristan Tzara, the Germans Hugo Ball and Richard Huelsenbeck, the Alsatian Hans Arp and later the Franco-Cuban Francis Picabia. Their Zurich journal *Dada*, with its innovative typography, experimental texts and violent (anti-)manifestoes, contrasts with the Paris journal *Littérature*, ironically titled but only tentatively avant-garde, still arguably in thrall to post-symbolist poetics. Collaboration between the two groups included a French issue of *Dada* (nos 4-5, 1919), where poems and texts by Tzara and Picabia appear alongside texts by French poets Aragon, Breton, Soupault, Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes among others. Drawing attention to simplified clichéd ideas linked to Dada, and in particular to *a posteriori* accounts of the movement, Sanouillet is careful to distinguish between the movement's "authentic" and "imaginary" (pre)history (p.5).

The main section (chapters 6-22) provides a detailed chronological account of Paris Dada between the arrival from Zurich of Picabia and Tzara in late 1919 and the breakup of the group in 1922. Sanouillet identifies three stages in Dada's Paris activities, corresponding to the three "Dada Seasons" in 1920, 1921 and 1922: from collaborative (Zurich and Paris groups united as a *bund* in their battle against the establishment) to conflicted (the Picabia-Breton and Tzara-Breton disputes) and, finally, schismatic. The first Dada matinée in the French capital (23 January 1920), organised by the *Littérature* group, included poems by Aragon, Breton and Tzara, the presentation of paintings by Picabia, music by the Groupe des Six; and a speech by rightwing parliamentarian Léon Daudet declaimed by Tzara to the accompaniment of clanging bells.

This was the first in a series of Dada events, provocative public performances quickly dominated by Tzara and Picabia's nihilistic energy, a "Dada Festival", exhibitions of paintings by Picabia and Ribemont-Dessaignes, and roudy meetings at Picabia's flat, then at the Certà café. The following year, the "Great Dada Season" included an exhibition of Max Ernst's collages, a "Salon Dada" and the mock trial (reminiscent of the councils held during the French Revolution) of the writer Maurice Barrès, libertarian turned ultra-nationalist, organised by Aragon and Breton. Following the trial Picabia distanced himself from Breton's over-solemn version of Dada and its undertones of bureaucracy, declaring: "Now Dada has a court, lawyers, and before long, probably policemen." Early in 1922 Breton planned to hold an International Congress to Determine the Aims and Defense of the Modern Spirit (or Congress of Paris), which was to bring together a deliberately eclectic group of avant-garde writers and artists to debate the state and future direction of the "modern spirit" in art and literature. The enterprise gave rise to further disputes between Tzara and Breton and, as a consequence, the latter broke with Tzara's more radical version of Dada. At that point, "Dada-according-to-Breton... took on the new name of surrealism" (p. 33).

What then was Paris Dada? Did it die in 1922 when Breton ended his collaboration with Tzara? Did it continue with Tzara? And what was the precise relation between Dada and surrealism? Sanouillet is fully aware of the complexity of these issues when he outlines fluctuating definitions and genealogies. In an earlier edition he argued that surrealism was simply one of the manifestations of the vast nebulous subversive movement which, for want of a better name [*faute de mieux*] was called Dada; surrealism, thus, "was the French form of Dada" (1993: 432). This statement disappears in the present edition, however, where Sanouillet argues that Dada and surrealism were two distinct movements among the many manifestations of the international avant-garde during and after World War I (p. 308). Sanouillet uses the image of the trunk (the avant-garde) with separate branches (Dada and surrealism), and his position is thus close to that of Breton and Soupault who claimed that surrealism was neither a consequence nor a rationalisation of Dada, but that Dada and surrealism co-existed and alternated in the early 1920s.

Yet elsewhere Sanouillet considers (Tzara's) Dada as a foreign branch grafted onto a native trunk (Breton's *Littérature* group), encouraging the growth of the native plant, but finally wasting away before being rejected (p. 302). In the process, he writes, the Paris version of Dada was to be "normalized, purified, narrowed down, diluted, and sterilized through surrealism" (p. 312). This suggests a purely French Dada, enriched admittedly by foreign input; and it explains why Paris Dada tends to be considered by Sanouillet less as an international movement than a French movement around Aragon, Breton and Soupault; and less as an artistic movement than as a literary one (p.303), while foreign artists active in Paris Dada in the early 1920s --Max Ernst, Man Ray, Hans Arp--are considered in terms of "imports".

While Sanouillet underlines the importance of Dada in the genesis of surrealism, he nevertheless claims that Paris Dada "never resulted in the birth of a specific art form (such as New York readymades or Berlin photomontages), nor even in original concepts applied to

artistic problems” (p. 303). Yet two seminal events for the early elaboration of surrealism, which took place at the very heart of Paris Dada activities, gave rise to the two essential modes of surrealist poetic and pictorial production, automatism and collage. The earlier event, the composition of the first automatic text, *Les Champs magnétiques* by Breton and Soupault in 1919, is given a full development (chapter five). However, the important implications of the second event, Max Ernst’s 1921 collage exhibition in Paris, “La mise sous whisky marin”—which has been evoked by one critic as “surrealism’s primary scene” (Krauss) — are not developed. The exhibition is considered in detail as a Dada event (pp. 181-3): the press releases (where Ernst is designated as the “Einstein of painting”); the private view (where distinguished visitors were greeted with insults and “kangaroo” bellows, while Soupault and Tzara played hide-and-seek among the guests); the composition and absurd titles of Ernst’s collages. No mention is made of Breton’s catalogue essay, however, although this was a seminal work in the early elaboration of surrealism since it outlined an embryonic aesthetics of the image as the bringing together of incompatible elements, an aesthetics undisputably central to Breton’s 1924 *Manifesto of Surrealism*.

Sanouillet’s (quite undada) title to the 1965 conclusion, *Conclusion et bilan*, has been replaced by a more tentative “Conclusion?”, eschewing the definitive, opening instead onto the idea that Dada remains a complex and contradictory entity. As Max Ernst declared in an interview in 1958: “Dada was a bomb. Can you imagine anyone, almost half a century after the explosion of a bomb, trying to retrieve its pieces and paste them together in order to display them?” With *Dada in Paris* Sanouillet has taken up this challenge and pasted together a complex narrative of Dada activities in Paris without seeking to defuse the bomb.

NOTES

[1] Michel Sanouillet, *Dada à Paris* (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1965; reprint Université de Nice: Centre du XXe siècle, 1980; revised and expanded by Anne Sanouillet (Paris: Flammarion, 1993 and Paris: CNRS Editions, 2005).

[2] The major Dada exhibitions of 2005-6 (Centre Pompidou in Paris; National Gallery of Art in Washington; Museum of Modern Art in New York), was accompanied by extensive catalogues: Laurent Lebon, ed., *Dada* (Paris: Editions du Centre Pompidou, 2005); and Leah Dickerman, ed., *Dada: Zurich, Berlin, Hamburg, Cologne, New York, Paris* (Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art; New York: D.A.P., 2006).

[3] Publications include: Dawn Ades, ed., *The Dada Reader. A Critical Anthology* (London: Tate Publishing, 2006); Hanne Bergius, *Montage und Metamechanik. Dada Berlin: Artistik von Polaritäten* (Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag, 2000); Leah Dickerman and Matthew S. Witkowsky, eds., *The Dada Seminars* (New York : D.A.P., Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2005); Henri Béhar and Catherine Dufour, eds., *Dada Circuit Total* (Lausanne: L’Age d’Homme, 2005); Ruth Hemus, *Dada’s Women* (Yale University Press, 2009); David Hopkins, *Dada’s Boys. Masculinity after Duchamp* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2007); Dafydd Jones, ed., *Dada Culture. Critical Texts on the Avant-Garde* ((Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2006); Rudolf Kuenzli, *Dada. Themes and Movements* (London: Phaidon, 2006).

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ISSN 1553-9172