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# Play and the Avant-Garde: Aren't We All a Little Dada?



PHILLIP PRAGER

Dada, an art movement that became well known in the late 1910s and early 1920s, challenged traditional notions of art and aesthetics. Dada artists, for example, tossed colored scraps of paper into the air to compose chance-based collages, performed sound poems devoid of semantic value, and modeled a headpiece fashioned of sardine cans. To most art historians, Dada remains a culturally contingent expression of World War I trauma, nihilism, political disillusionment, and an aggressive attack on the moral bankruptcy of Western culture. The author suggests that this negative interpretation originates from art history's methodological blindness to the importance of play, not only to creative and artistic endeavors, but to human identity itself. Dada is characterized by an effervescent love of improvisation, curiosity, novelty and an unselfconscious exploration of the phenomenal world; it emphatically professed to be "anti-art" and "a state-of-mind." When considered from the perspective of play research and positive psychology, Dada emerges as an early and visionary milestone in understanding play as a fundamental expression of humanity almost a century before academia would take adult play seriously. **Key words:** Albert Ellis; avant-garde; cognitive-behavioral therapy; creativity; Dada; Marcel Duchamp; modernism; play; positive psychology; Richard Hülsenbeck

**T**HE AMERICAN MODERNIST ARTIST Man Ray, who spent much of his career in Paris, entitled his 1927 creation—a bubble-blowing clay pipe—*Ce qui manque à nous tous* (or *What We All Lack*). It pokes fun at Friedrich Engels, Karl Marx's coauthor, who had declared, "What these gentlemen all lack is dialectic."<sup>1</sup> What we really lack, Man Ray implies, is neither historical consciousness nor the formulaic methodology of dialectical reasoning, but humor and creative imagination.

The colorful, dynamic Man Ray embodied precisely these qualities, as did his wayfarer French artist Marcel Duchamp. In the opening epigram of Man Ray's autobiography entitled *Self-Portrait*, Duchamp pretends to be writing an encyclopedic entry and defines the elusive subject as "masculine, noun, synonymous with: pleasure in play, enjoyment."<sup>2</sup>

Man Ray and Duchamp were pioneers of Dada, the exuberant artistic movement that burst into prominence in the 1910s and 1920s, first in Zurich, at a night club called the Cabaret Voltaire, and then spread to Paris, Berlin, and New York. Dada revolutionized art by pioneering new techniques and media ranging from collages, montages, and assemblages to poster poems and bruitist concerts; Dadaists used found objects, newspaper clippings, cutouts, bits of string and textiles, dust, nails, all sorts of seemingly random or castaway objects, and they delighted in employing chance in composing their works. Duchamp exhibited a signed urinal as *Fountain*; German poet Hugo Ball performed sound poems devoid of semantic value, such as *Gadji beri bimba*; and Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, like Ball a member of the German avant garde, modelled a headpiece fashioned of sardine cans.<sup>3</sup>

To art historians, Dada is the enfant terrible of their discipline, an anarchic movement typically dubbed in art historical introductions as nihilistic, or called an iconoclastic attack on bourgeois aesthetics, or considered a pathological reenactment of the trauma of World War I. William Rubin, for example, who organized the 1968 Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) exhibition on Dada calls it “aesthetic nihilism,”<sup>4</sup> an “intellectually oriented nihilism towards art”<sup>5</sup> that tries to debase pleasure itself.

In my 2012 article “Making an Art of Creativity: The Cognitive Science of Duchamp and Dada,”<sup>6</sup> I attacked this traditional nihilistic portrayal by arguing that art history continues to be dominated by outdated notions of creativity. Classical, romantic, and psychoanalytic notions pervade the discourse on creativity even in the twenty-first century and ignore the scientific research that has been conducted in the last forty years. Cognitive scientists typically define creativity as a combinatorial process in which ideas or objects from seemingly incongruous domains merge to produce surprising new meanings<sup>7</sup>—a process literally externalized and visualized in the collage or assemblage. In *The Chinese Nightingale*, for example, German Dada artist Max Ernst combines paper clippings to create a wonderfully imaginative creature with a lyric and poetic quality—before one realizes that the body consists of a bomb; it merges with the delicate fan, scarf, and arms into a very disturbing evocation of World War I. In *Forest and Dove*, Ernst combines objects even more incongruous: fishbones and paint. He placed the bones beneath the canvas, then scraped paint across it to reveal the bone shapes below and conjured up a mysterious and richly evocative landscape.

In this article, I suggest that Dada did not just mark a watershed in the understanding of creativity but that it constitutes a precursor to identifying the

importance of play as fundamental expression of humanity. Dada's negative reception by art historians is an example, par excellence, of Western society's play deprivation; worse still, because art historians have pathologized Dada artists as neurasthenic, nihilistic, or traumatized by World War I, they have deprived Dada of a message of real and concrete importance to the understanding and improvement of the human condition.

### **Ce qui manque à nous tous**

Why would we lack such nonsense in our lives, as Man Ray suggests? Because improvising—that is, exploring ideas, objects, materials, and people without considering sense, purpose, or function—is one of the key features of play. Play, in turn, is not the evolutionary recipe for only the success of our mammalian class and human species but also for the origin of creative innovation—the recipe for our social cohesion, our mental facility, and our physical health. As the psychiatrist Kay Redfield Jamison explains, “Play sets and becomes the physical arena for exploring new objects and for combining physical activities with sensory experiences in ways that might otherwise remain untried. Play increases the scope of the animal's experience and the range of its skills, generates a greater sense of control, and allows the animal to test its competence.”<sup>8</sup>

Much Dada art is about as meaningful as bubble-blowing beluga whales. These mammals delight in producing bubbles of all kinds—strings of small bubbles, single bubbles, large bubbles, even donut-shaped bubbles. They kick and bite them; they divide them into smaller bubbles; they swim to the surface and watch the bubbles rise before sucking them up.<sup>9</sup> The whales seem to do so simply because they find it pleasurable. But while such play serves no immediate purpose, it aids in cognitive and behavioral flexibility—and it may very well have inspired the ingenious (and highly imaginative) hunting technique of humpback whales, which disorient their prey with bubbles.<sup>10</sup>

Dada certainly did not create objects of contemplative beauty or aim at the perfection of artistic technique or craft. It subverted the traditional notion of authorship with its use of found objects and aleatoric practices. I suggest, however, that this negative portrayal of Dada stems from the obsession of art historians with finding meaning in a work of art and their pervasive disinterest in and ingrained snobbery of art as a form of play. As Brian Sutton Smith, author of *The Ambiguity of Play*, observes, “Only the pretending children, who are a

relatively coherent cultural group, have been studied empirically as players. . . . Few of these other cultural groups are studied as players, though they are, of course, studied endlessly as actors, musicians, dancers, artists, and novelists, which may perhaps be the same thing, but the idea is not usually consciously entertained.”<sup>11</sup>

In the case of Dada, an understanding of play seems even more fundamentally important than in the interpretation of other artistic movements or cultural expressions. Dada expressed play in its raw state. Some philosophers of aesthetics, beginning in the eighteenth century with Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schiller and continuing today with scholars such as Roger Scruton, have certainly identified play as intrinsic to the value of art.<sup>12</sup> For Kant, the disinterested, contemplative pleasure we derive from beauty allows us to engage in “free play,”<sup>13</sup> stimulating our emotions and imagination, and he even captures the autotelic character of play by describing beauty as “purposiveness without a purpose.”<sup>14</sup> Friedrich Schiller writes, “Man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and he is only fully a human being when he plays.”<sup>15</sup> Yet he, too, relates play quite narrowly to aesthetics and beauty: “The object of the play-drive, represented in a general schema, may therefore be called living-form: a concept serving to designate all the aesthetic qualities of phenomena and, in a word, what in the widest sense of the term we call beauty.”<sup>16</sup>

Play is a behavioral phenotype and cognitive style that certainly fuels our production and appreciation of beauty and other forms of aesthetic experiences, but it lies at the very core of our biological identity and inspires far more varied cultural expressions. Dada strove not to employ the play-drive to create beautiful objects but to highlight the play-drive itself; it abstracted creativity into its most unpolished, unadulterated, and effervescent ingredient and wrenched it from the domain of art to highlight its importance to any domain of human endeavor, be it artistic, scientific or quotidian.

In his *Enhancing Creativity*, Raymond Nickerson, for example, points to “the importance of playing with combinations of pictorial parts in the generation of creative visual patterns” and argues that not just art, but much scientific hypothesizing can be viewed as a form of “intellectual playfulness—finding pleasure in playing with ideas. . . . There is a great deal of whimsy and play, for example, in much of the thinking that scientists do—a considerable amount of toying with ideas and fantasizing—imagining oneself, for example, riding on a photon at the head of a beam of light.”<sup>17</sup>

Play may or may not result in a valuable scientific invention or stimulat-

ing piece of art. Had Albert Einstein's photon fantasy proved inconsequential, it would have remained a mere amusing example of imaginative play. A basic characteristic of play is that it *appears* purposeless. It must necessarily appear so, because transformative ideas—whether in the arts or the sciences—are unpredictable, unscriptable, the result of chance encounters. They rely on bringing domains into dialogue that would remain incongruous and disparate if it were not for the sheer pleasure that we derive from novelty and improvisation.

Dadaists insisted that they were not engaged in the production of art, but “anti-art.” Their work was not to be contemplated for its aesthetic qualities or displayed on a wall or exhibited and sold. Richard Hülsenbeck, one of Dada's founding fathers at the Cabaret Voltaire, rhetorically asked “But what was Dada? ‘Dada,’ came the answer, ‘ne signifie rien’ [Dada means nothing—ed.]”<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, composer John Cage, a pioneer of the so-called neo-Dadaism of post-World War II America, speaks of his art as “purposeless play.”<sup>19</sup> The self-confessed purposelessness of the original Dadaists scandalized the art world, and the notion of “anti-art” fuelled the nihilistic and politically aggressive portrayal of Dada. From a psychological perspective, however, the formula is tautological. In the end, it simply affirms the autotelic nature of play. Even ethologist Marc Bekoff defines play as “virtually all activities (performed in nondeprived settings) that appear to be functionless,”<sup>20</sup> and Stuart Brown, director of the National Institute for Play, similarly describes play as “an absorbing, apparently purposeless activity that provides enjoyment and a suspension of self-consciousness and sense of time.”<sup>21</sup>

### **Neurasthenic Play**

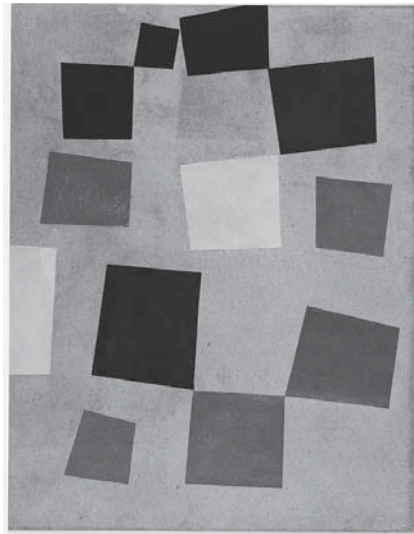
As we saw Kay Jamison explain, play serves to explore and understand the world in a process of sensory and material improvisation. Motivated by the same urge to play that inspired bubble-blowing beluga whales, Alsatian artist Jean Arp would toss colored scraps of paper into the air and glue them onto paper where they fell. He loved the idea of chance, of serendipity, as part of the creative process. Fellow Dadaist Hülsenbeck comments on Arp's “playfulness and a certain childlike joy. . . his constant experimentation. He was always willing to give a new idea a chance, in art and in life.”<sup>22</sup> For art historians, on the other hand, playfulness and serendipity were the very antithesis of any positive emotion or creative activity. T. J. Demos, for example, discusses Arp's collages as exhibiting

“a profound doubt toward his own self as a creative subject: ‘cerebral intention’ would be abolished from his work,”<sup>23</sup> thus leading to “the denial of the singularity of artistic identity.”<sup>24</sup>

Baroness Elsa von Freytag Loringhoven started as a vaudeville performer in Berlin, but became one of the figureheads of Dada in New York. One contemporary described her as “decked out with impossible objects suspended from chains, swishing long trains, like an empress from another planet, her head ornamented with sardine tins, indifferent to the legitimate curiosity of passers-by, the baroness [sic] promenaded down the avenues like a wild apparition, liberated from all constraint.”<sup>25</sup>

In her book *Irrational Modernism*, Amelia Jones describes the baroness’s art as enactments of severe mental illness. She writes that Freytag Loringhoven suffered from a “neurasthenic desublimation of the terrifying, destabilizing social forces of the World War I period.”<sup>26</sup> Her diagnosis is particularly surprising, because Jones explicitly tries to revise the “lingering rationalism of theories and histories of the historical avant-garde and in general within art history,”<sup>27</sup> yet to label Freitag Loringhoven “neurasthenic” and “irrational” is as rationalizing as the paradigms Jones tries to avoid. She perpetuates the myth that creativity is based on negative emotions (neurasthenia) and goal-states (sublimation) and assumes that irrational behavior necessarily signifies a pathological state of mind. Jamison offers a much simpler explanation in her evocative description of how creativity and play correlate with positive emotions and an exuberant disposition: “If, as it has been claimed, enthusiasm finds the opportunities and energy makes the most of them, a mood of mind that yokes the two is formidable indeed. Exuberant people take in the world and act upon it differently than those who are less lively and less energetically engaged. They hold their ideas with passion and delight, and they act upon them with dispatch. Their love of life and of adventure is palpable. Exuberance is a peculiarly pleasurable state, and in that pleasure is power.”<sup>28</sup>

Much of the nihilistic or pathological interpretation of Dada stems from the notion that art serves an expressive function, a tradition with origins in the nineteenth century, when painting’s imitative and representational purpose was cast into an existential crisis by the invention of photography. In his “What is Art?” Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy wrote, “To evoke in oneself a feeling one has once experienced and having evoked it in oneself then by means of movements, lines, colors, sounds, or forms expressed in words, so to transmit that feeling that others may experience the same feeling—this is the activity of art.”<sup>29</sup>



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Figure 1. Jean Arp, *Square Arranged According to the Laws of Chance*, 1917. Cut-and pasted papers, ink, and bronze paint. © 2013. Digital Image, The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence.



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Figure 2. *Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven* (1874-1927). Undated photograph. George Grantham Bain Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

That may be the function of art, but not necessarily of play. Duchamp produced a very small body of work, and critics commonly believe he abandoned art—or at least painting—for a life of playing chess after he completed *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (more often called *The Large Glass*), on which he worked from 1915 to 1923. Rubin observes that “Marcel Duchamp is the only painter to have impressed the world of art as much by what he did not do as by what he did,” and he adds that “the sense of crisis which pervaded art between the wars lent great prestige to Duchamp’s nihilism.”<sup>30</sup> Those, like Rubin, who interpret Duchamp through the lens of the romantic and expressive theory of art see his inactivity as itself expressive. His ennui, they think, captures the sense of moral vacuum pervading Western culture in the aftermath of World War I. “If the first command of an artist is to be true to that within himself which he must express,” Rubin writes, “then Duchamp’s abandonment of painting was the ineluctable consequence of his particular genius.”<sup>31</sup>

In my interpretation of Duchamp,<sup>32</sup> I suggest he articulates with visionary insight the very principles of creative cognition. His creative genius lies in the fact that all the art he produced was truly transformative. Each of his works fundamentally challenges form, content, exhibition, or perception—the rules and conventions that define the mental category of “art”—rather than generating countless exemplars of one new technique or style as some other artist might, whose entire oeuvre consists of perhaps one truly transformative idea that sustains his or her entire career.

Duchamp’s motivation was not personal, philosophical, or political but something much more mundane. “It was always the idea of ‘amusement’ which causes me to do things,” Duchamp recounts.<sup>33</sup> Art was not a matter of expression for him at all. It belonged in the domain of play: “You simply follow a line that amuses you more than another, without thinking very much about the validity of what you’re doing. It’s later when you ask yourself if you’re right or wrong, and if you should change.”<sup>34</sup> Pierre Cabanne conducted a series of interviews with Duchamp, published as *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp* (1971). In the book’s brief ninety-two pages, Duchamp uses the words “amusing” or “amusement” an astonishing forty-one times. “Do the letters ‘L.H.O.O.Q.’ have a significance other than pure humor?” Cabanne asks. “No. . . . Reading the letters is very amusing,” Duchamp responds.<sup>35</sup> He began trading with art, he says, because “it was an amusing experience.”<sup>36</sup> He employs aleatoric operations because “it’s amusing to can chance,”<sup>37</sup> and he “only see[s] happy films when possible . . . I love good, amusing movies.”<sup>38</sup> Asked about the optical machines he began making in 1924,



Duchamp replies, "I made a little thing that turned, that visually gave a corkscrew effect, and this attracted me; it was amusing."<sup>39</sup> Did the three-dimensional rubber breast on the Maeght Gallery catalogue have any particular meaning, Cabanne inquires? "No, it was just another idea," Duchamp replies.<sup>40</sup> He had seen "falsies" for sale, rubber padding for cleavage enhancement, and he noticed that "the manufacturers hadn't bothered with the details. So I worked on making little breasts, with pink tips."<sup>41</sup> Why did he hang a geometry book out of a window to expose it to the elements and called it the unhappy readymade? "It amused me to bring the idea of happy and unhappy into found objects, and then the rain, the wind, the pages flying, it was an amusing idea . . ."<sup>42</sup>

### **Dada as a State of Mind**

Duchamp's motivation was unequivocally linked to positive emotions—in radical contrast to the classical, romantic, and psychoanalytic traditions that have typically associated creative insight with madness, mental turmoil, suffering, and sublimated desires. Certainly the humorous character of Duchamp's work has also been appreciated, especially his love of word play. Many who rightly regard Duchamp's *Fountain* as a prank or practical joke question the standard interpretation that it represents intellectual nihilism.

Yet to call it a "joke," even appreciatively as Roger Scruton does,<sup>43</sup> is to denigrate the meaning of Dada. Its followers were unambiguous in declaring that Dada was not a style, not an artistic movement, not a political protest, but a mode of being. "Duchamp functioned as a living myth, the personification of Dada's refusal to distinguish between 'art' and 'life,'" Rubin observes.<sup>44</sup> There is little mystery about this conflation of art and life; it was neither a philosophical nor ideological performance, but a reminder of our biological nature, our capacity for play. Duchamp could not stand boredom, and he was extraordinarily curious. "I always asked myself 'why' a lot," he said, "and from that questioning came doubt, doubt of everything."<sup>45</sup> This curiosity was coupled with a passionate love of novelty, "I dream of rarity. . . . I had a mania for change. One does something for six months, a year, and one goes on to something else."<sup>46</sup>

Leah Dickerman argues that Dada must be disconnected from its traditional characterization as an "attitude" towards life. She believes that the emphasis on Dada as a mode of being "has worked to deflect further definition of the logic of the movement's formal procedures and the particular social semiotics

of its objects.”<sup>47</sup> Yet to focus on the latter would do an even greater injustice to Dada. Its formal procedures and social semiotics ought not be interpreted as aiming at goal-states in and of themselves but as an expression of an autotelic mode of being: “The ‘autotelic self’ is one that easily translates potential threats into enjoyable challenges, and therefore maintains its inner harmony. A person who is never bored, seldom anxious, involved with what goes on, and in flow most of the time may be said to have an autotelic self. . . . For most people, goals are shaped directly by biological needs and social conventions, and therefore their origin is outside the self.”<sup>48</sup>

Duchamp’s biography is a quintessential example of an autotelic self. Robert Motherwell reminisces that “he could not have been more pleasant, more open, more generous”<sup>49</sup> and that “one learns from his conversations of an extraordinary artistic adventure, filled with direction, discipline, and disdain for art as a trade and for the repetition of what has already been done.”<sup>50</sup>

Stuart Brown, author of *Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul*, writes that “play is a state of mind, rather than an activity.”<sup>51</sup> This was the quintessence of Dada that Duchamp embodied and that Richard Hülsenbeck so passionately articulates in the *Collective Dada Manifesto*.

Dada is a state of mind that can be revealed in any conversation whatever, so that you are compelled to say: this man is a DADAIST—that man is not; the Dada Club consequently has members all over the world, in Honolulu as well as New Orleans and Meseritz. Under certain circumstances to be a Dadaist may mean to be more a businessman, more a political partisan than an artist—to be an artist only by accident—to be a Dadaist means to let oneself be thrown by things, to oppose all sedimentation; to sit in a chair for a single moment is to risk one’s life.”<sup>52</sup>

Duchamp’s extraordinary and adventurous biography, fuelled by his lifelong curiosity, neophilia, and playfulness, illustrates how positive affect is not merely a transient experience but inspires future courses of action. Barbara Fredrickson, who developed the “broaden-and-build theory,” explains: “Positive emotions broaden an individual’s momentary thought-action repertoire: joy sparks the urge to play, interest sparks the urge to explore, contentment sparks the urge to savor and integrate, and love sparks a recurring cycle of each of these urges within safe, close relationships.”<sup>53</sup> Moreover, positive emotions increase

one's thought-action repertoire, which becomes self-reinforcing. Frederickson and Joiner found evidence to suggest that positive affect and broad-minded coping predicted each other both reciprocally and prospectively, which led them to suggest that "positive emotions initiate upward spirals toward enhanced emotional well-being."<sup>54</sup>

These upward spirals define the course of an autotelic existence, and the intrinsic meaning such positive emotions bestow on life is evident in Duchamp's serene contentment. "I consider myself very happy. I've never had a serious illness or melancholy or neurasthenia," he writes. "Also, I haven't known the strain of producing, painting not having been an outlet for me, or having a pressing need to express myself."<sup>55</sup> This was no easy feat to achieve when one considers his nomadic, transcontinental life-style spanning two world wars and the financial strain he often endured when he was young. Duchamp did not enjoy public speaking, yet he approached it with humor: "It was a game for me to see what I could do, to keep from being ridiculous."<sup>56</sup>

Fredrickson points out that positive emotions allow us to accrue a wide range of intellectual, physical, and social resources to deal effectively with stressful and adverse situations,<sup>57</sup> while negative emotions limit our thought-action repertoire to flight-or-fight. Tragedies strike everyone, yet, as psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi points out, "It is how people respond to stress that determines whether they will profit from misfortune or be miserable."<sup>58</sup>

In the aftermath of World War I—bloodbath of sixteen million killed, twenty million wounded, millions of them civilians—despondency, numbness, and trauma became widespread. In the following description of the *Zeitgeist* from which Dada emerged, Hülsenbeck's inward flight into escapist fantasies is palpable. So is the way Dada very consciously regarded itself as an antidote to the dysphoria and rumination that held Europe in its grip.

In 1917 the Germans were beginning to give a great deal of thought to their souls. This was only a natural defence on the part of a society that had been harassed, milked dry, and driven to the breaking point . . . . It was only natural that the Germans should have lost their enthusiasm for reality, to which before the war they had sung hymns of praise, through the mouths of innumerable academic thickheads, and which had now cost them over a million dead, while the blockade was strangling their children and grandchildren . . . . [The expressionists] pulled people gently by the sleeve and led them into the half-light of

the Gothic cathedrals, where the street noises die down to a distant murmur and, in accordance with the old principle that all cats are gray at night, men without exception are fine fellows . . . [Expressionism] aimed at inwardness, abstraction, renunciation of all objectivity. . . . On the basis of . . . the psychological insight that a turning-away from objective reality implied the whole complex of weariness and cowardice that is so welcome to putrescent bourgeoisie, we immediately launched a sharp attack on expressionism in Germany, under the watchword of “action,” acquired through our fight for the principles of bruitism, simultaneity and the new medium.<sup>59</sup>

Hülsenbeck’s description of Germans as having “lost their enthusiasm for reality,” retreating into the “half-light of the Gothic cathedrals,” and succumbing to the lure of expressionism’s inwardness and abstraction is an evocation of pathological rumination—an obsessive and typically vacuous quest for meaning and insight, together with an anhedonic renunciation of the concrete, the pleasing, and the playful.<sup>60</sup> The “turning-away from objective reality” and widespread “weariness and cowardice” that Hülsenbeck observes capture the narrow thought-action repertoire of fight-or-flight that Fredrickson associates with negative emotions.

Hülsenbeck’s “sharp attack” on expressionism in Germany, under the watchword of “action” is a passionate pledge to put into practice the lessons of twentieth-century positive psychology: “When positive emotions are in short supply . . . they lose their degrees of behavioral freedom and become painfully predictable,” Fredrickson points out.<sup>61</sup> Dada’s bruitism, its simultaneity, its love of paradox and spontaneity, and its passionate embrace of the novel, the wonderful, and the amusing, all—as exemplified by Hülsenbeck—constitute a therapeutic endeavor rather than a sociopolitical or philosophical protest.

Moreover, Dada certainly did not erupt *ex nihilo* during the second decade of the twentieth century. If novelty, curiosity, wonder, and exploration are play’s driving force, then there was perhaps no period more exciting than the early twentieth century, a veritable playground brimming with the unusual and the unknown. In his portrayal of the *fin-de-siècle*, Tom Gunning argues that new technologies and a series of universal expositions bewitched the masses into a state of wonder, marvel, and astonishment, drawing them into a “paradoxical celebration in these festivals of the novel in the guise of the eternal, and of the technological in the form of magic.” At these expositions “newness and amaze-

ment became a mode of reception for technology.”<sup>62</sup> The urban environment, with its bewildering array of new technologies, offered a range of mystifying new sensory experiences with unexplored artistic potential embedded within an ambiguous cultural and political context that invited exploration and experimentation. This decade was most certainly no period for an aesthetics of passive contemplation but, instead, a time for active engagement. It was the perfect ferment for Dada, which passionately delighted in the new. “Novelty,” writes Tristan Tzara, the Romanian-French poet and performance artist who helped found Dada, “is the cross of sympathy, demonstrates a naïve *je m’enfoutisme*, it is a transitory, positive sign without a cause . . . art on the basis of the supreme simplicity: novelty, we are human and true for the sake of amusement, impulsive, vibrant to crucify boredom.”<sup>63</sup>

### **Dada and Shame**

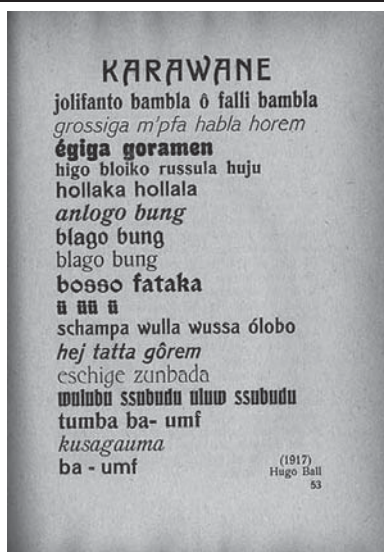
One tremendous obstacle hinders us humans from engaging in play. We may distinguish ourselves biologically as neotenous—as retaining juvenile characteristics into our adulthood along with a lifelong capacity for play that we do not even share with chimpanzees. Yet we have imposed a cultural barrier between playful youth and earnest adulthood that has become so engrained we perceive it as biological. Consequently, “the biggest roadblock to play for adults is the worry that they will look silly, undignified, or dumb,” Brown observes.<sup>64</sup> It is precisely this mental block that Dada tried to dislodge. Yet, perversely, the same worry has obstructed the true intentions of play.

When Albert Ellis initiated the paradigm shift within psychotherapy from psychoanalysis to cognitive-behavioral therapy, he emphasized “shame-attacking exercises” in the belief that shame constitutes one of the most poisonous emotions to a flourishing life. “In the 1960s, when REBT [rational emotive behavior therapy] was still very young, I realized that shame is the essence of much—no, not all!—human disturbance,” Ellis writes in a passionate style evocative of Dada manifestos.<sup>65</sup> One of the central foundations of REBT was a shame-attacking exercise “designed to let you keep judging your ‘bad’ or ‘stupid’ act while removing your *self-damning*.”<sup>66</sup> Ellis continues: “To benefit from it, you deliberately pick something you *consider* shameful and that you would ordinarily totally avoid doing or about which you would put yourself down severely if you were to do it. For example, you wear some outlandish clothes to a formal affair, or



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Figure 3. Hugo Ball reciting the sounds poem *Karawane* at the Cabaret Voltaire, Zurich, 1916. Anonymous photograph.



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Figure 4. Hugo Ball, *Karawane*, 1917. Sound poem. From *Dada Almanach* (Berlin 1920), edited by Richard Hülsenbeck, 53.

yell out the time in a supermarket, or tell a stranger that you just got out of a mental hospital . . . while doing this 'shameful' act, work on your thoughts and emotions so that you do *not* feel very embarrassed or humiliated."<sup>67</sup>

The similarities to Dada are striking. Ellis's shame-attacking exercises reads like the diary entries of a Dada artist. Dressing up in a cubist costume and reciting sound poems devoid of semantic value, as Hugo Ball did at the Cabaret Voltaire in 1916, would certainly have made an effective shame-attacking exercise in cognitive-behavioral therapy.

His legs were in a cylinder of shiny blue cardboard, which went up to his hips. It made him look like an obelisk. Over it he wore a huge coat with a collar cut out of cardboard, scarlet inside and gold outside. It was fastened at the neck so that he could make winglike movements. And to top it all off, he also wore a high, blue-and-white-striped witch doctor's hat. Once he'd finished dressing himself, he realized that he couldn't actually walk in the costume, so he had to be carried onto the stage. There he recited his sound poem 'Karawane [Elephant Caravan]'.<sup>68</sup>

Albert Ellis was ranked the second most important psychiatric therapist of all times in a 1982 random sample of eight hundred members of the American Psychological Association—ahead of Sigmund Freud and behind Carl Rogers.<sup>69</sup> In 1991 he was voted the single most important psychotherapist in a similar Canadian survey.<sup>70</sup> I find it one of the more engaging facts in the history of psychotherapy that this giant of psychiatry was, for six years (from 1947 to 1953), a student of Richard Hülsenbeck, author of the *Collective Dada Manifesto*.<sup>71</sup>

Hülsenbeck was not only one of the founding fathers of Dada and a prolific writer and chronicler of the movement, he was a medical student invalidated out of World War I before he emigrated to Switzerland in 1916 and fell in with the Cabaret Voltaire. Hülsenbeck had a second career as a ship's doctor; and after moving to New York in 1936, he embarked on a successful psychiatric career under the name of Dr. Charles R. Hulbeck. Between 1945 and 1970, he published a variety of articles in scientific journals in which he reviewed psychoanalysis and modern art and explored the nature of creativity and anxiety.<sup>72</sup> Yet despite Dada's legacy to psychotherapy, Hülsenbeck writes at the end of his career, "I never succeeded in making clear to anyone the true meaning of Dada. . . . I was constantly thwarted by the American Medical Association and colleagues. . . . I

wanted to go back to some kind of chaos, not a chaos that kills, but a chaos that is the first step to creativity.”<sup>73</sup>

Hopefully, this reassessment through twenty-first-century psychology and play research will finally reveal the visionary insights into the human condition that Dada’s bubble blowers proclaimed with such exuberance and conviction almost a century ago and finally blast through the patina of mystery and entropy under which art history has encrusted it.

## NOTES

1. Engels made this statement in a letter to Conrad Schmidt in 1890. *Marx and Engels Correspondence* (1968). Available online: [http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1890/letters/90\\_10\\_27.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1890/letters/90_10_27.htm). His statement had shortly before been mocked by the surrealists on the cover of their magazine *La Révolution surréaliste*. See Arturo Schwarz, *Man Ray: The Rigour of Imagination* (1977), 209.
2. Man Ray, *Self-Portrait* (1963; repr., 1998).
3. Amelia Jones, *Irrational Modernism: A Neurasthenic History of New York Dada* (2004), 154.
4. William Rubin, *Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage* (1968), 53.
5. *Ibid.*, 185.
6. Phillip Prager, “Making an Art of Creativity: The Cognitive Science of Duchamp and Dada,” *Creativity Research Journal* 24 (2012): 266–77.
7. See, for example, Margaret Boden, *The Creative Mind: Myths and Mechanisms* (1990; repr., 2004), 130; Thomas Ward, Steven Smith, and Ronald Finke, “Creative Cognition,” in *Handbook of Creativity*, ed. Robert Sternberg (1999), 202.
8. Kay Redfield Jamison, *Exuberance: The Passion for Life* (2004), 59.
9. Fabienne Delfour and Stéphane Aulagnier, “Bubbleblow in Beluga Whales (*Delphinapterus leucas*): A Play Activity?” *Behavioural Processes* 40 (1997): 184.
10. *Ibid.*, 183.
11. Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play* (1997), 129.
12. See “The Value of Art” in Roger Scruton, *Beauty* (2009), 127–28.
13. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement* (1790; repr., 2007), 38.
14. *Ibid.*, 47.
15. Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man, in a Series of Letters* (1967), 107.
16. *Ibid.*, 105.
17. Raymond Nickerson, “Enhancing Creativity,” in *Handbook of Creativity*, ed. Robert Sternberg (1999), 410.
18. Richard Hülsenbeck, “En Avant Dada: A History of Dadaism. 1920,” in *The Dada*



- Painters and Poets: An Anthology*, ed. Robert Motherwell (1951; repr., 1988), 33.
19. John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (1961; repr., 1973), 46.
  20. Mark Bekoff, "Social Behavior," *Bioscience* 34 (1984): 228.
  21. Stuart Brown, *Play: How it Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul* (2009), 60.
  22. Richard Hülsenbeck, *Memoirs of a Dada Drummer* (1969; repr., 1991), 99.
  23. T. J. Demos, "Zurich Dada: The Aesthetics of Exile," in *The Dada Seminars*, ed. by Leah Dickerman and Matthew Witkovsky (2005), 21.
  24. *Ibid.*, 22.
  25. Quoted in Jones, *Irrational Modernism*, 154.
  26. *Ibid.*, 32.
  27. *Ibid.*, 33.
  28. Jamison, *Exerberance*, 6.
  29. Leo Tolstoy, *What is Art?* (1897; repr., 1996), 51.
  30. William Rubin, "Reflexions on Marcel Duchamp," in *Marcel Duchamp in Perspective*, ed. by Joseph Masheck (2002), 41.
  31. *Ibid.*, 42.
  32. Prager, "Making an Art of Creativity," 269–76.
  33. Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp* (1971), 47.
  34. *Ibid.*, 22–23.
  35. *Ibid.*, 63.
  36. *Ibid.*, 73.
  37. *Ibid.*, 47.
  38. *Ibid.*, 104.
  39. *Ibid.*, 72.
  40. *Ibid.*, 87.
  41. *Ibid.*
  42. *Ibid.*, 61.
  43. Scruton, *Beauty*, 99.
  44. Rubin, "Reflexions on Marcel Duchamp" 41.
  45. Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, 18.
  46. *Ibid.*, 37.
  47. Leah Dickerman and Matthew Witkovsky, eds., *The Dada Seminars* (2005), 2.
  48. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (1990; repr., 2008), 209.
  49. Robert Motherwell, introduction to *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, by Pierre Cabanne (1971), 9.
  50. *Ibid.*, 11.
  51. Brown, *Play*, 60.
  52. Richard Hülsenbeck, "Collective Dada Manifesto (1920)" reprinted in *The Dada Painters and Poets*, ed. by Robert Motherwell (1951; repr., 1988), 246.
  53. Barbara Fredrickson, "The Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* 359 (2004): 1367.

54. Barbara Fredrickson and Thomas Joiner, "Positive Emotions Trigger Upward Spirals toward Emotional Well-Being," *Psychological Science* 13 (2002): 172.
55. Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, 15.
56. *Ibid.*, 89.
57. Fredrickson, "Broaden-and-Build Theory," 1367.
58. Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*, 7.
59. Hülsebeck, "En Avant Dada," 39–40.
60. See, for example: Sonja Lyubomirsky and Susan Nolen-Hoeksema, "Self-Perpetuating Properties of Dysphoric Rumination," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 65 (1993): 339–49.
61. Fredrickson, "Broaden-and-Build Theory," 1375.
62. Tom Gunning, "Re-Newing Old Technologies: Astonishment, Second Nature, and the Uncanny in Technology from the Previous Turn of the Century," in *Rethinking Media Change*, ed. by David Thorburn and Henry Jenkins (2003), 40.
63. Tristan Tzara, "Dada Manifesto. 1918," in *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology*, ed. by Robert Motherwell (1951; repr., 1988), 76.
64. Brown, *Play*, 211.
65. Albert Ellis, *A Guide to Rational Living* (1961; repr., 1997), 231.
66. *Ibid.*
67. *Ibid.*
68. Hugo Ball, *Flight Out of Time: A Dada Diary* (1974; repr., 1996), 70.
69. Darrell Smith, "Trends in Counseling and Psychotherapy," *American Psychologist* 37 (1982): 802–9.
70. Ronald Warner, "A Survey of Theoretical Orientations of Canadian Clinical Psychologists," *Canadian Psychology* 32 (1991): 525–28.
71. Joseph Yankura and Windy Dryden, *Albert Ellis* (1994), 11.
72. Articles written by Richard Hülsebeck published under the name of Charles Hulbeck include: "The Creative Personality," *American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 5 (1945): 49–58; "Psychoanalytic Thoughts on Creativity," *American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 13 (1953): 84–86; "Completeness-Incompleteness: The Human Situation," *American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 16 (1956): 54–62; "Psychoanalytic Notes on Modern Art," *American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 20 (1960): 164–73; "Self-alienation and Self-confirmation in Modern Art," *American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 21 (1961): 173–82; "Three Creative Phases in Psychoanalysis: the Encounter, the Dialogue and the Process of Articulation," *American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 23 (1963): 157–63; "The Existential Mood in American Psychiatry," *American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 24 (1964): 82–88; "The Irrational and the Nature of Basic Anxiety," *American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 30 (1970): 3–12.
73. Richard Hülsebeck, *Memoirs of a Dada Drummer* (1969; repr., 1991), 188.