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Dada Africa Dialogue with the Other 05.08.–07.11.2016

Press conference: 03.08.2016, 11 am, opening: 04.08.2016, 7 pm



Hannah Höch
Untitled (From an Ethnographic Museum), 1929
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Dada is 100. Marking this centenary, “Dada Africa: Dialogue with the Other” is the first exhibition to explore Dada’s encounter with non-European art and cultures. For Dada artists, this was not just a springboard to explore new aesthetic departures; it also nurtured their hopes of social renewal. In five sections, the show illustrates this dialogue between works by Dada and artefacts from Africa, Asia, America and Oceania. The exhibition and catalogue were produced in partnership with Museum Rietberg in Zurich.

This joint centenary project was inspired by Dada’s first-ever exhibition, held at Han Coray’s gallery in Zurich in 1917. The title was “Dada. Cubistes. Art Nègre”, and on show together were both avant-garde and African art.

After the First World War, the very foundations of Western civilisation seemed to be in doubt, and there were calls for radical change in art. Expressionists and Cubists had already been keen to draw on formal elements in non-European art to develop a new visual idiom. For Dadaists the art of foreign cultures had the additional appeal of conveying a cogent alternative to their own outdated society. As they delved deeper, they uncovered artistic tools that would lend themselves to social and political protest. The Dada paintings and masks of Marcel Janco, for example, were influenced by artefacts from Cameroon. Sophie Taeuber-Arp, for her part, was struck by the expressive power of indigenous works from North America and Southern Africa. Tristan Tzara took literary cues for his “Poèmes nègres” from African and Australian texts, while Hugo Ball borrowed input from Oceania for his richly creative use of materials.



Provocations and aesthetic transgressions

The Dadaists launched their assault on conventional views of art with cross-genre performances consisting of music, text and dance. The pseudo-African sound poems, the rhythmic drumming and the masked dances – spontaneous, vibrant and primal – were intended to shock the audience and to overcome the divide between the show and its audience. At the same time, the “primitive” flavour tested the minds and bodies of the performers to their limits. The exhibition retraces these enactments with the aid of historical photographs, documents and acoustic specimens.

Hannah Höch’s collages from her series “From an Ethnographic Museum” are another distillation point in this exhibition. In works with a grotesque feel, the Dada artist combines depictions of non-Western artefacts with others of “white” physicality. Now these collages are displayed alongside the original objects from Africa, Asia and Oceania, still in the Museum Rietberg collection, from which Höch borrowed her motifs – just one example of the unusually fruitful collaboration between two institutions with very different profiles.

The exhibition describes a historical situation. Wherever use is made of racist and colonialist terms such as “primitive”, “negro” or “nègre”, they are taken from historical quotations and have been placed in inverted commas. In the early 20th century, these concepts were applied to societies in Africa and also Oceania, which were regarded as primeval.

Artists (selected): Approx. 100 works (collage, assemblage, masks, sculptures, documentary material, photographic reproductions, sound installations) by unnamed artists from Africa, Oceania and Asia, the Master of Buafle, as well as Hans Arp, George Grosz, John Heartfield, Raoul Hausmann, Erich Heckel, Hannah Höch, Richard Huelsenbeck, Marcel Janco, Man Ray, Hans Richter, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Tristan Tzara.

Catalogue

The richly illustrated 244-page catalogue casts light from the perspectives of ethnology, history and art history on connections between works of Dada and art, music and literature from Africa, Asia, America and Oceania. Published by Scheidegger & Spiess / edited by Ralf Burmeister, Michaela Oberhofer and Esther Tisa Francini / languages: German (English from June 2016) / price: € 34.80 (museum edition), € 38.00 (bookshop edition) / ISBN: 978-3940208-42-2 (museum edition), 978-3-85881-507-1 (German bookshop edition), 798-3-85881-779-2 (English bookshop edition).

National and international loans

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Exhibition architecture and colouration: david saik studio

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