(essay date 1980) In the following essay, Erickson draws upon the work of Tzara in a comparison of Dada and anarchy. The author suggests that the Dada manifesto is a direct descendent of nineteenth-century anarchy in its adherence to "propaganda by deed."

Since dada is a nonrelationship to all things and therefore capable of relating to all things, it opposes any ideology whatsoever ... (Huelsenbeck, pref. to Dada Almanach, tr. H. J. Kleinschmidt)

By the close of the nineteenth-century, classic collectivist anarchism had reached an impasse. Following its failure to incite the masses to action on a scale sufficient to jeopardize the power of the state, anarchism turned in desperation to terrorist acts of violence. The emergence of a powerfully centralized government, however, met this formidable threat and blunted its effect. The repression that followed led anarchism to turn increasingly from a collective endeavor to a personalist endeavor, inspired by Max Stirner and the American natiivist anarchists of the nineteenth century.

Owing to the separation of intellectual life from the power structure of modern society and the subsequent disaffiliation of the intellectual, anarchist ideology has continued to play a strong role in the twentieth century. "The bases of intellectual activity require spontaneity in a world of precision and order, individuality in a universe of collective responses, risk-taking in an organizational arrangement geared to 'line' and 'staff.'" The intellectual is, however, only a bedfellow of the anarchist through necessity. For, while seeking to define himself through opposition, and while putting individualist above collectivist response, he is prone to avoid risk-taking and spontaneity.

Dada, on the other hand, since its birth in Zurich during the period 1915-1919, has proved an authentic ancestor of anarchism through its exuberant advocacy of spontaneity and individuality. By its ready acceptance of risk-taking and violent activism that led to acts of public disorder, it placed itself on the deviant, neurotic fringe of the intellectual life of this century. To be sure, dada experienced little hesitancy in doing so for the simple reason that, like its anarchist forebears, it was fundamentally anti-intellectual in its unselconsciousness. For all anarchists the deed far outweighs the idea. That is precisely why the manifesto became the most important instrument of dada statement, for by its proclamatory nature the manifesto puts deed above idea. One can safely hold that the dada manifesto is less important for what it says than for what it does. It adheres closely to what turn-of-the-century anarchists called "propaganda by the deed."

Very generally, what the dadaist shares with the anarchist is that state of mind called apocalyptic, which excites even our sedate Webster's to describe as anticipating "an imminent cosmic cataclysm in which God destroys the ruling powers of evil and raises the righteous to life in a messianic kingdom." Of course, God as Messiah is replaced by Anarchism and Dada but the process varies not at all. These latter reason in kindred fashion that if we abolish traditional and conventional power structures, we will rediscover the natural life. The anarchist Peter Kropotkin argued in 1912, "No ruling authorities, then. No government of man by man; no crystallization and immobility, but a continual evolution such as we see in Nature." Anarchism sought to free man of institutional constraints and bring about the spontaneous and unimpinged, unleashing of his natural energies. In opposition to Marxist and liberalist doctrines, as well as the general course of Western technology, all of which have sought to master nature (Trotsky: "Through the machine, man in Socialist society will command nature in its entirety ..."), the anarchists envisaged a harmonious bond between man and nature (inner as well as outer).

Like the anarchists, the dadaists lacked a defined sense of future time as well as an evolving program of action--the first trait being a reason for, the latter trait a result of, anarchism's reaction against the historical materialism of Marxism and the theories of progress of liberalism and capitalism (The Essential Works of Anarchism, p. xxi). Instead of a diachronic view of chronological change and evolution, anarchism and dada sought the immediate realization of individual human potentiality.
The ties between anarchist thought and the origins of dada go beyond an imaginative analogue. Errico Malatesta, one of the foremost advocates of direct action and concerted violence, published his famous pamphlet on Anarchy in 1907 and Kropotkin brought out his book on Modern Science and Anarchism in 1912—both immediately preceding the gathering of the future dadaists in Zurich. Not that they necessarily read Malatesta's or Kropotkin's work, but during the early years of the century and the war between the ruling powers of Europe, in a city bursting its seams with refugees of all stripes, the ideas of anarchism saturated the air.

Evidence does indeed exist of the dadaists' explicit interest in anarchism. The premier dada organizer, Hugo Ball, who was spoon-fed on the negativist ideas of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, completed a book on the anarchist revolutionary Michael Bakunin in the period 1916-1917. Furthermore, in his diary written during this period he discusses at length the language theory of the anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. While disclaiming anarchist tendencies ("Ich bin kein Anarchist," he wrote on June 15, 1915), he was incontrovertibly fascinated by them. So were other of the dadaists—Francis Picabia, for instance, who was a dadaist before the fact in Barcelona and New York and briefly joined the dadaists in Zurich in early 1919. Picabia was an avid reader of romans policiers, Nietzsche and the anarchist writings of Max Stirner. The latter's ideas regarding egoism were in vogue at the end of the nineteenth century and contributed to Nietzsche's theory of the Übermensch. These very ideas were a prelude, of course, to the cult of self of Barrès, Gide and others, as well as dada's aggrandizement of the individual.

Zurich dada, like all respectable non-movements, launched several manifestoes to declare its presence and non-alignments. Considering the etymology of the word "manifesto," as a document calculated to show its hand, the function of a dada manifesto is indeed curious. For it tries to show its hand without actually showing it. Traditionally the manifesto consisted of a public proclamation "for the purpose of making known past actions, and explaining the reasons or motives for actions announced as forthcoming" (Oxford English Dictionary). On the contrary, the dada manifesto denies all ties with the past as well as any reasons or motives for present or future action. It is in fact misnamed, for it is actually an anti-manifesto.

The young artists who grouped around the central figures of Hugo Ball, Emmy Hennings, Tristan Tzara, Richard Huelsenbeck, Hans (Jean) Arp and Marcel Janco in early 1916 and came soon after to be called "dadaists" announced themselves through a series of incendiary actions. As a messianic creed struggling to undergo the requisite act of self-purification, Zurich dada found its loudest voice in the manifesto. The most important of them was without doubt Tristan Tzara's "Manifeste Dada 1918" which we will consider closely. But first, we should look at two examples of the dada manifesto that preceded Tzara's masterpiece of the genre. One often cites Hugo Ball's Dada Manifesto of 1916 as the prototypic dada manifesto. It opens by discussing the origin of the word dada and proceeds to call dada "a world war without end, dada revolution without beginning." Without a doubt, the dada manifestoes that bewildered the public during its Zurich years were polemical documents, for they warned on that most cherished of all human attributes: reason—by violating the most basic of rational precepts: the principle of contradiction. These documents were disputationious, controversial and incendiary. And they were meant to be so. For along with the rite of self-purification they set to laying down the program of an anti-motion.

Ball's historic manifesto served to introduce the reading of his sound poetry at the First Dada Evening held at the Zunfthaus zur Waag on July 14, 1916—in anti-homage to France's Bastille Day. (The poetry had been performed earlier at the Cabaret Voltaire on June 23.) In his manifesto he broaches the danger of making dada into "an artistic tendency," before launching into his theory of poetic experimentation that also reflects well the agenda of the dada manifesto. Ball speaks of ridding words of the filth that clings to them "as if put there by stockbrokers' hands," a sentiment that rings with the spirit of Mallarmé. Valéry would later describe his symbolist mentor as inveighing against journalistic writing and the misuse of words as marketplace currency tending towards telegraphic simplicity, payable to the bearer on demand. For Mallarmé, "le contenu du poème devait être aussi différent de la pensée ordinaire que la parole ordinaire est différente de la parole versifiée." Consequently, word-combinations become conjurations, sonority replaces meaning. "Il faut choisir: ou bien réduire le langage à la seule fonction transitive d'un système de signaux: ou bien souffrir que certains spéculent sur ses propriétés sensibles, en développent les effets actuels, les combinaisons formelles et musicales,—jusqu'à étonner parfois, ou exercer quelque temps les esprits."
The expurgative, anti-utilitarian, shock-producing effect of the Ball-Mallarmé poetic formulation pervades the dada manifesto. And the latter, like Ball's poetry with its hieroglyphic aspect, reflects indeed that design of pure poetry of which Mallarmé and Valéry speak, in which the word becomes a thing in and of itself. The poetic image on its way to becoming, as Reverdy put it in his essay "L'Image," "une création pure de l'esprit," set down the example for the dada anti-manifesto.

The irony of Ball condemning in this first manifesto the attempt to make dada into an artistic tendency, while revealing extreme concern with artistic tendency, appears less ironical if we recall the opening passages of his Kandinsky essay delivered April 7, 1917 in the Galerie Dada. In the latter Ball described the upheaval of the modern world by a succession of profound changes in religion, science and morality which resulted in man losing "the principle of logic, of centrality, unity, and reason." Being stripped by science of the illusion of godliness man became ordinary matter, until mass culture replaced the individual by the machine and introduced Angst into the human condition. In this description of the individual in modern technological society, Ball echoes the thinking of Bakunin, who, in rejecting reason and rational processes that turn man into abstractions, emphasizes the forces of despair, instinct and passion that set the individual apart and spur him to action to right wrongs done him. The first action for the artist is reaction, against systems, through a turning inward, as Ball describes, to become an ascetic of his own spirituality.

This essay, which sounds a refrain not only to Mallarmé's description of the modern age but the anarchist view of all society, much more modern industrial society, suggests that when Ball argues against "artistic tendency" he emphasizes not artistic but tendency. Art, a different and newer art, an art purged of tradition, will come to be created. In short, an a-historical (tendency-less) art expressive of the individual artist's spirituality. "Art," as Bakunin says, "is as it were the return of abstraction to [individual] life" ("God and the State," p. 147). During the same evening that Ball read his manifesto, Tzara delivered his "Manifeste de Monsieur Antipyrine." Using what will become a familiar device in dada manifestoes, Tzara peremptorily reels off a list of what dada stands for as well as what it stands against. Dada is "notre intensité," "la vie sans pantoufles ni parallèles"; it is neither "folie, ni sagesse, ni ironie"; it is "contre et pour l'unité et décidément contre le futur. ..." Dada "reste dans le cadre européen des faiblesses, c'est tout de même de la merde, mais nous voulons dorénavant chier en couleurs diverses pour orner le jardin zoologique de l'art de tous les drapeaux des consulats." The dadaists are not free--in conduct and art "nous ne sommes pas libres et crions liberté" in order to discover the "essence centrale." Aside from parallels, house slippers, and the future, dada denounces humanity, the auto, war and serious art.

One senses several anarcho-dadaist reactions and predilections in the dada lists: in general the castigation of tradition and social-political processes that have banded together to dehumanize man through technology, sentiment and organized violence. The language of the dada manifesto reveals also an unhistorical, synchronic time sense "(décidément contre le futur)" that embodies a reaction against theories of historical evolution. Dada valorizes instead an activity whose intensity and variety are brought out by illogic and inconsequence. It valorizes the ceaseless pursuit of freedom.

On July 23, 1918, in the Zur Meise Zürich, Tzara read his "Manifeste Dada 1918" which would be published in Dada 3. It reaches perhaps the high-water mark of dada polemicism. As Michel Sanouillet notes, this underestimated manifesto represents the great gospel of dada, "qui contient en germe l'entièrè évolution future du dada et du surréalisme." Tzara opens by laying down the agenda of a dada manifesto: "signer, crier, jurer, arranger la prose sous une forme d'évidence absolue, irréfutable, prouver son nonplusultra et soutenir que la nouveauté ressemble à la vie comme la dernière apparition d'une cocotte prouve l'essentiel de Dieu." For all its naiveté, the love of novelty is a "signe sans cause, passager, positif." But even the need of novelty is obsolete, a device "pour crucifier l'ennui." Tzara explains that he writes a manifesto but wants nothing, yet says certain things. In principle he is against manifestoes, just as he is against principles. He writes "pour montrer qu'on peut faire les actions opposées ensemble, dans une seule fraîche respiration."

In a section of the manifesto headed "Dada ne signifie rien," Tzara describes how bourgeois mentality seeks to decipher the meaning of everything, in this instance, dada, etymologically, historically, psychologically, whereas dada exists without meaning. The argument against the reductionist tendencies of the bourgeois mind recalls Bakunin's cautious words in regard to the usefulness of scientific (and positivistic) theory. "Science cannot go outside of the sphere of abstractions ... [it] is the perpetual immolation of life, fugitive, temporary, but
real, on the altar of eternal abstractions." "In this respect, it is infinitely inferior to art" which "recalls to our minds the living, real individualities which appear and disappear under our eyes" ("God and the State," pp. 146-147).

Dada is an unconstruable work of art, Tzara insists, and "Une oeuvre d'art n'est jamais belle, par décret, objectivement, pour tous. La critique est donc inutile, elle n'existe que subjectivement. ..." Since no common psychic basis exists in the human condition, the bourgeois mentality seeks explanation futilely. "Comment veulent-ils ordonner le chaos qui constitue cette infinie informe variation: l'homme?" Consequently, "tout le monde fait son art à sa façon. ..." The question of individuality is ever raised by the dadaists as it is by the anarchists.

As Tzara states, dada was born of a need for independence and a distrust of unity. In contrast to previous artistic movements that sold out to the bourgeoisie for material gain--Tzara includes cubism and futurism--"le peintre nouveau crée un monde ... sans argument. L'artiste nouveau proteste: il ne peint plus / reproduction symbolique et illusioniste / mais crée directement en pierre, bois, fer, étain, des rocs des organismes locomotives pouvant être tournés de tous les côtés par le vent limpide de la sensation momentanée." The new art willingly becomes a monstrousity, in refusing to be saccharine.

Tzara would create an absolute, non-materialist, non-dogmatic, non-systematic, non-sentimental art. Here we enter upon Tzara's notion of artistic process.

Un tableau est l'art de faire se rencontrer deux lignes géométriquement constatées parallèles, sur une toile, devant nos yeux, dans une réalité qui transpose sur un monde à d'autres conditions et possibilités. Ce monde n'est pas spécifié ni défini dans l'oeuvre, appartient dans ses innombrables variations au spectateur. Pour son créateur, elle est sans cause et sans théorie.Ordre = désordre, moi = non-moi, affirmation = négation: rayonnements suprêmes d'un art absolu. Absolu en pureté de chaos cosmique et ordonné, éternel dans la globule seconde sans durée sans respiration sans lumière san contrôle.(p. 55)

This passage raises some interesting points. One is that art creates a super, messianic reality that transcends rational limitations and physical conditions. This new world or messianic reality which remains unspecified and undefined partakes of the nature of man himself as he is seen by Tzara, composed of an "infinie informe variation," such that qualities that cancel each other out in the rational world co-exist in the new world. Tzara again echoes the thought of Bakunin who insistently condemned church and state that rule through a process of abstraction and act perniciously on "the infinite and shapeless variation" of individual life.

Another point Tzara makes is that this unspecified and undefined world "appartient dans ses inombrables variations au spectateur" (my italics), which presupposes art as subjective and individual--from the standpoint not only of the creator but of the spectator. Art belongs to all who come in touch with it in the sense that each human encounter or experience with an art object creates a new statement: art constitutes then the infinite theoretical total of all its possible variations as seen by human beings in all their possible (subjective) variations. Of course, in this sense, objective "meaning" in a work of art does not exist, for, as creator-spectator, no two individuals will draw upon the same resources. In this case, aesthetics like rationality is nonsense, for no absolute knowledge or proof concerning beauty or artistic process is possible. As for literature, it is "Ouvre de créateurs, sortie d'une vraie nécessité de l'auteur, et pour lui-même. Connaissance d'un suprême égoïsme, où les lois s'étiolent. Chaque page doit exploder ..." To what end? To prepare "le grand spectacle du désastre, l'incendie, la décomposition" that will replace sentimentality and "rétablir la roue féconde d'un cirque universel dans les puissances réelles et la fantaisie de chaque individu."

This apocalyptic vision of the emergence of a supreme, lawless egoism precedes a strong expression of Tzara's disgust for psychoanalysis, dialectic, logic, and science--all systems of fallacious organization and explanation. Tzara then arrives at his description of the "ideal" kingdom--his je m'enfouisme life in which "chacun garde ses proprires conditions, en sachant toutefois respecter les autres individualités, sinon se défendre. ..." In short, Tzara steps right out of the classic egalitarian, anarchical tradition of Bakunin, Malatesta, Kropotkin and Sorel, but, most particularly, of Max Stirner who, in his essay on Der Einzige und sein Eigentum (1845), proposed a union of egoists to free all individuals from the abstractions of liberal ideology.

Not only does Tzara pick up the notion of je m'enfouisme with which he opened his manifesto but harks back to simplicity, notably expanding the word with the adjective "active" in the section entitled "La spontanéité" dadaïste." In a world without reason, in which all activity is vain, art is the means of self-purification or, as Tzara tells us, the means to "nous tirer proprement, en chrysantèmes lavés. ..." "Il nous faut des œuvres," he
continues, "fortes droites précises et à jamais incomprises," in order to keep them uncontaminated by logic which stifles and kills independence.

"Ce qu'il y a de divin en nous," Tzara insists, "est l'éveil de l'action anti-humaine"--which can be glossed as "anti-humanistic" action such as that manifested by Sartre in attacking so-called humanists who see everything in terms of function alone, or by a modern artist such as Robbe-Grillet who argues for a chaosiste literature that shuns the false humanism of past ages. Far from being a call for action against the human being, "anti-humanistic action" signifies a call to preserve the integrity of the individual human being through abstract art and action such as the dadaists cultivated in order to strip away myth and custom. Tzara attacks morality, for "la morale atrophie comme tout fléau fabricat de l'intelligence." His outspoken bias against authority reads like the anarchist pamphlets of the last half of the previous century: "Le contrôle de la morale et de la logique nous ont infligé l'impassibilité devant les agents de police--cause de l'esclavage, rats putrides dont les bourgeois en ont plein le ventre, et qui ont infecté les seuls corridors de verre clairs et propres qui restèrent ouverts aux artistes" (p. 56).

Tzara concludes that "il y a un grand travail destructif, négatif à accomplir" against morality and its "deux boules de suif qui ont poussé comme des éléphants"--charity and pity. He leaves us with his idea of the true character of dada:

... dada; connaissance de tous les moyens rejétés jusqu' à présent par le sexe pudique du compromis commode et de la politesse: dada; abolition de la logique, danse des impuissants de la création: dada; de toute hiérarchie et équation sociale installée pour les valeurs par nos valets: DADA; chaque objet, tous les objets, les sentiments et les obscurités, les apparitions et le choc précis des lignes parallèles, sont des moyens pour le combat: DADA; abolition de la mémoire: DADA; abolition de l'archéologie: DADA; abolition des prophètes: DADA; abolition du futur: DADA; croyance absolue indiscutable dans chaque dieu produit immédiat de la spontanéité: DADA ...

"(p. 56)

Following sound anarchist example, dada opposes order, logic, control, and even time; it valorizes unconventional means, conflict, spontaneity.

Tzara's proclamation ends with the sentence: "Liberté: DADA DADA DADA, hurlement des couleurs crispées, entrelacement des contraires et de toutes les contradictions, des grotesques, des conséquences: LA VIE."

The resemblance between dada ideas and classic anarchist ideas runs deep. Both believe fundamentally in the greater importance of "natural" man as opposed to political man. In a way Rousseau indicated, society develops power relations that present an obstacle to the cultivation and emergence of natural man. The anarchists and the dadaists go beyond Rousseau's beliefs in man's natural goodness, however: "For whether man is 'good' or 'brutish' is less important to the anarchists than what men do to preserve their inner core" (Horowitz, p. 17).

With the recovery of fundamentals, the liquidation of impediments and superfluities goes hand in hand for the dadaists as for the anarchists.

Horowitz's description of the anarchist prescription for action stands equally for that of the dadaists:

The goal, however ill-defined, is all-important. And the means used in its attainment (the overthrow of the state and of the class system) are moral in virtue of these aims. Therefore, the means used are conditioned only by the question of efficiency of realizing the ends. No ethic is attached to them. Clearly, the anarchist is not a pragmatist. He does not accept the idea that there is a mean-ends continuum. The purpose of violence determines its good or its evil character--and not the fact of violence as such.(p. 21)

The fundamental similarity between dada and anarchism lies in the fact that for them both all problems derive from the power structures ruling through abstracting ideologies (church, government, the State and all its representatives, social or artistic), while for the socialist and communist they derive from class. The socialist, in accepting the statist basis of capitalist society, while attempting only to subvert it in order to redistribute its power through the replacement of its procedures of rule, becomes, in the anarchist view, corrupted--just as Marcuse saw the student opposition groups of the sixties being effectively silenced through cooptation by the state and radicalism being defused through its transformation into "radical-chic." In just such a fashion, giving as examples the sell-out of cubism and futurism, Tzara signals in his manifesto the omnipresent danger of reification.

Along with the fervent advocacy of natural, spontaneous and individual values, dada shared with the anarchists the militant, revolutionary commitment we observe in Bakunin, Malatesta and Kropotkin. Both anarchism and dada touted an impractical activism, however, Given the complexity of modern industrial society, dada belief,
like the anarchist belief in the abolition of authority, realized itself as "nothing but a posture, an attitude of mind, and a style of life" (Horowitz, p. 26). As effortfully as dada tried to realize its messianic kingdom, as stridently influential as it became on modern literature and art, in the mind of society it has always belonged, like anarchism, to the deviant, criminal fringe. And like anarchism it could have cared less.

To conclude, everywhere in dada activity one observes anarchistic values—in the rejection of convention and the return to fundamental and natural form of Arp’s collages, in the experiments with automatism and sound poetry, and in the use of drums and masks, as well as in the spontaneity of stage improvisations in the Cabaret Voltaire and flagrant anti-social acts committed in the cafés and streets of Zurich. The impact of anarchist values reveals itself in all these activities through which the dadaists sought purity and personal redemption. But nowhere does the anarchist prescription for direct action linked with moral purpose reveal itself more fully than in the dada manifesto.¹⁵

Notes
9. Paul Valéry, "Je disais quelquefois à Stéphane Mallarmé" (1931) in "Variété," Ouvres de Paul Valéry, op. cit., pp. 650-51. To my knowledge, no one has cast Mallarmé in the role of anarchist but in regard to language he opposes strongly all reductive systems—to the extent of rejecting, as Valéry observes, the theory of semiotics long before Saussure proposed it. In fact, structuralist-semiotic theory, whose faith in progress and abstraction marks it as an outgrowth of liberal and Marxist reductive ideologies, is implicitly castigated by Mallarmé and dada.
10. Reprinted in Ball, Die Flucht aus der Zeit.
15. This work was made possible by support from the Graduate Research Fund at the University of Kansas.