

Unit 4 Sample Essay

The Dada movement arose in the early 20th century as a reaction to the widespread carnage and destruction that resulted from World War I. A large and diverse group of European artists led principally by Tristan Tzara—working in media as varied as performance, dance, photography, painting and all manner of visual arts—considered it absurd that such vocal nationalist pride (supposedly a rational concept) could bring about events like trench and chemical warfare, not to mention the deaths of tens of millions of people. Believing that if a rational world can create such destruction, then the rules that govern a rational world no longer apply, the Dadaists sought to express this belief through works of art that opposed the norms of bourgeois culture and illuminated the idiocies of society. For these reasons, the work of the Dada movement is often referred to as “anti-art.”

Dada is a seminal avant-garde movement in the history of modern art, namely because it sought to deconstruct the aesthetic experience of popular art. Although the Dada artists were heavily influenced by the concerns and philosophies of preceding modern movements like Cubism, Expressionism, Constructivism, and Futurism, the appearance of many Dada works of art seem to lack precedent. Perhaps the most famous example of this is Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain*, in which he took an everyday urinal, inverted it, and signed the object “R. Mutt.” This work, considered to be the first readymade, was so unconventional and odd that it encapsulated the idea of a work of art that lacked definition and defied categorization. Furthermore, the sheer lack of production in the work was Duchamp’s humorous and ironic take on what constituted art itself.

Hans Arp was another artist key to the Dada movement. Rather than using elements of humor and irony, Arp relied on the element of chance to create his work. He famously created a series of collages based on chance, where he would stand above a sheet of paper, dropping squares of contrasting colored paper on the larger sheet’s surface, and then gluing the squares wherever they fell onto the page. Arp believed the end result would provoke a visceral reaction, like fortune telling from I-Ching coins. Arp’s chance collages have come to represent Dada’s aim to be “anti-art.”

During Dada’s relatively short lifespan, the movement’s uncanny sense of satire, irony, and experimentation proved quite influential and in turn spread to a number of cities throughout Europe. As it spread, several artist collaborations took place, including but not limited to Tristan Tzara and Andre Bréton, and Hans Arp and Max Ernst. The Dadaists’ ideas regarding the deconstruction of artistic form and convention were eventually adopted by those artists who would found Surrealism in the 1920s, such as Bréton and Ernst. Interestingly enough, long before New York City would become a hub for avant-garde artists, Marcel Duchamp traveled to New York and helped introduce the radical notion of “anti-art” to an American public who had experienced very little European modern art, if any at all. Duchamp’s presence and work in New York would prove to have a lasting impact. In the decades to follow, particularly in the 1940s and

50s, a great number of American artists would cite Duchamp as a great influence on their work. This is especially apparent in the work of Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and other artists who would come to form the mid-century Neo-Dada movement.