

LEISURE & ARTS

The Gallery: Zurich's Heart Belongs to Dada

By JAMIE JAMES

Zurich

The tasteful, neatly printed banner fluttering in front of the Zurich Kunsthaus reads, "Die Welt ist nur eine Filiale des Dadaismus": The world is only a branch office of dadaism. It is an appropriately businesslike metaphor for this staid, orderly city, which is better known as a center of world finance than of the avant-garde. Yet Zurich was the birthplace of dada, the most anarchic art movement in history, which swept away every conventional notion that art had to be beautiful and well-made — or even made, in the usual sense, at all.

Dada emerged from a smoky cafe here in 1916, the darkest year of World War I, as a protest against a world that seemed to have gone mad. Now, 78 years later, dada has returned to Zurich, and it has set up its headquarters at the city's premier cultural institution, one of the great art museums of Central Europe. Over the past 20 years, the Kunsthaus has quietly assembled a huge collection of dada objects, many of which are now being exhibited for the first time. This is the most comprehensive dada show ever mounted; its 419 objects range from masterworks by Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst and Kurt Schwitters to ephemera such as handbills and postcards.

Much to the surprise of museum officials, "Global Dada" (through Nov. 6) is a hit, though it requires a great deal of reading and offers very little in the way of pretty things to look at. Perhaps motivated by civic pride in their native art movement, the people of Zurich are coming to the museum in droves, and related lectures and theatrical events are attracting overflow crowds. The whole city, it seems, is talking dada: Even the local television and radio stations have devoted programs to recondite subjects such as the conceptual underpinnings of Schwitters's

collages and the continuing influence of dada.

For while the movement produced few visual motifs that could be imitated — its only style was nonstyle — it was arguably the most influential art movement of the 20th century. Surrealism, Fluxus, pop art and conceptual art all trace their intellectual lineage directly to dada. It favored ideas and attitudes over images, and relied on chance rather than design as its basic creative principle. It was also funny and erotic at a time when mainstream art had become deady dull. One of the most famous icons of dada is Duchamp's postcard of the Mona Lisa with a mustache and goatee penciled in, and the legend "L.H.O.O.Q." written underneath. These initials, when said aloud, create the bawdy French sentence, "Elle a chaud au cul": Roughly, she's hot to trot. While the original "L.H.O.O.Q." is not in the show, the image is invoked in other works by Duchamp and his imitators.

From the start, dada resisted being defined. In its myriad manifestoes (nearly all of which are included in the exhibition), it tended to describe itself with tongue-in-cheek pseudomysticism. One German exponent, Johannes Baader, formulated this neat evasion: "What Dada is, even the Dadaists do not know. Only the Overdada knows, and he's not telling anyone."

There are many explanations of how the movement got its absurd and perfectly apt name. The most widely accepted account is that at the Cabaret Voltaire, the free-form multimedia events organized (if that's the word) by Hugo Ball in Zurich from 1916, someone inserted a letter opener into a French-German dictionary at random. The blade touched *dada*, the French word for hobbyhorse, and the assembled group immediately endorsed it as their name.

As the exhibition's title implies, dada was a world-wide movement, and the Kunsthaus collection includes objects from such far-flung places as Tokyo; Santiago, Chile; and Ridge-

field, Connecticut. Some of the objects here flout the dadaist imperative and are actually beautiful, sophisticated works of art: Schwitters's elegant little collages are the equals of those by Picasso and Braque, and Man Ray's abstract photographs (he called them Rayographs) still have the arresting freshness they must have had when they were first shown 60 years ago. Yet it is the ephemera that are most intriguing, and perhaps most authentically dada. They include a postcard mailed in 1921 to the French poet Paul Eluard with, on its back, a tiny photomontage by Ernst, a charming ink doodle by Arp and a breezy message from Tristan Tzara.

Dada was, of course, never intended to be exhibited in museums. In an effort to illustrate the movement's multimedia origins, the Kunsthaus is presenting a series of dada music, dance and theater performances. The highlight was a re-creation of the first Cabaret Voltaire, staged by a French troupe called Compagnie Les Endimanches. It is impossible to say how close the event came to the original, but it was anarchic enough, with a Tzara stand-in shouting slogans from an absurdly tall podium, while a chanteuse tonelessly crooned baby talk and slapstick "Russians" clomped around in fur hats and fake beards.

A pilgrimage to the site of the original Cabaret Voltaire, a few blocks from the Kunsthaus, turned up an irony the dadaists surely would have loved. No. 1 Spiegelgasse, where the movement was born (or at least got its name), is now a deserted ruin. Some windows are broken, and wine bottles and cigarette butts litter its doorway — an anomalous disgrace in this neatest of cities. But the dada spirit still thrives, even outside the antiseptic zone of the art museum: Across the building's front someone has spray-painted "Dada ist die Weltseele": Dada is the soul of the world.

Mr. James, a New York-based arts critic, travels frequently to Europe.