

*“To be plain: The amusement of redbellies
in the mills of empty skulls”*

- TRISTAN TZARA 1918



John Heartfield yuletide poster 1934

Dada claimed to be antiart and had a negative and destructive streak running through it. Concerned with only shock, protest, and nonsense, the Dadaist rebelled against the horrors of war, the decadence of society, blind faith in technology, and inadequate religion and morals in a continental upheaval. They rejected everything in the pursuit of complete freedom.

Poet Hugo Ball opened the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich making it possible for the young poets and artisans to gather there regularly. The Dada movement began spontaneously as a literary movement, guided by Tristan Tzara, a Hungarian poet. In July, 1917, Tzara began publishing the periodical *DADA*, where with others including Ball, Jean Arp and



Dada “The Bearded Heart” 1922

Richard Huelsenbeck, he explored sound, chance and nonsense poetry. He wrote many of the Dada manifestos and contributed to every major event and publications the Dadaists put out. Absurdity and chance placement summed up the design of the Dadaist publications. The anarchy of this movement is even evident in the fact that the Dadists didn’t even agree on the origin of the name Dada.

Kurt Schwitters of Hanover, Germany began an offshoot of Dada that was nonpolitical called *Merz*. He meant it as a one man art movement. His compositions were collages of found materials juxtaposing color against color, form against form, and texture against texture. He tried to combine the Dadaist elements of nonsense and chance with strong principles of design. Schwitters was rejected by the Dadaists, when he tried to join by defining himself as “an artist who nails his pictures together”, as too bourgeois. Schwitters

poetry began to explore the interaction of letters, syllables, words and sentences in poetry to play sense against nonsense.

In the early 1920’s, Schwitters made contact with Constructivist Ed Lissitzky and de Stijl artist Theo van Doesburg. He and van Doesburg would collaborate on book design with a focus on typography. Schwitters published twenty-four issues of *Merz* between 1923 and 1932. He ran a successful graphic design studio with major clients like Pelikan in the city of Hanover. When the German political system finally deteriorated in the 30’s, Schwitters fled first to Norway and then to the British Isle where he died in 1948.

Contradictory to Schwitters Constructivist tendencies, Berlin Dadaist John Heartfield held vigorously to revolutionary political ideas and pushed their artistic activities to raise public consciousness and to promote social change. As a protest against the German military, Helmut Hezfelde changed his name to John Heartfield. In 1919, Heartfield became one of the founding members of the Dada movement. Utilizing the method of photomontage, Heartfield created disjointed compositions which were potent propaganda weapons. Through book and magazine covers, political illustrations and cartoons, Heartfield attacked the Nazi party. His works maybe the most urgent messages in the history of photomontage. He created his compositions from glossy magazine prints and newspaper photos, and never took photos or retouched images.

Because photography at the time was still considered a poor man’s art, the working class immediately identified and comprehended Heartfield’s work. In 1933, Nazi storm troopers raided and occupied Heartfield’s studio. He fled to Prague, where not only did he continue his attacks of the Nazis with graphic propaganda, Heartfield actually sent postcard versions of his graphics to Nazi party leaders. When he learned he was on a secret Nazi enemy list, he fled

*“What I call the I-don’t-give-a-damn-
attitude of life is when everyone minds
his own business, at the same time as he
knows how to respect other individualities....”*

- TRISTAN TZARA 1918

*“The magic of a word - DADA - which
for journalists has opened the door to an
unforeseen world, has for us not the
slightest importance.”*

- TRISTAN TZARA 1918

to London in 1938. Before his death in 1968, Heartfield produced a series of photomontages protesting the war in Vietnam. As one of the most liberating movements, Dada still continues to inspire innovation and rebellion. Born in protest against war, Dada’s destructive and exhibitionist activities kept becoming more absurd and extreme, especially after the war ended. The nature of Dada itself led to controversy and disagreement among its members in 1921 and 1922, and eventually led to its self-destruction as a cohesive movement. Schwitters and Heartfield continued to progress their work, creating many of their finest compositions after the movement. Dada’s extremism and rejection of tradition led to its ability to further visual vocabularies started by the Cubists and further rid typographic design of its traditional preconceptions.



John Heartfield “Neue Jugend” 1917

CONSTRUCTIVISM

El Lissitzky
Alexander Rodchenko



EL LISSITZKY BEAT THE WHITES WITH THE RED WEDGE 1919

During the turbulent years of the first World War and the Russian revolution, Russian artists were split ideologically concerning the role that art was to play in the new communist state. The “leftist” artists that had been opposed to the old order of the Czarists supported the Bolsheviks with massive propaganda. By 1920, some artists led by Kandinsky, rejected a political role for art, believing the sole purpose of art to be the realization of the world through forms in space and time. In 1921, the Constructivists, led by Alexander Rodchenko, rejected “art for art’s sake” and devoted themselves to using their skills to serve the new communist society.

As a painter, architect, photographer and graphic artist, El Lissitzky may best represent the Constructivist ideal. Lissitzky’s style, which he called PROUNS (an acronym for “projects for the establishment of new art”), introduced the usage of three-dimensional illusions receded behind and pushed forward the picture plane. He called it an

“The fulfillment of our perception of the world under the aspects of space and time; that is the only goal of our plastic creation.”

- GABO AND PEVSNER 1920

“For us, space and time are born today. Space and time: the only forms where life is built, the only forms, therefore, where art should be erected.”

- GABO AND PEVSNER 1920

“interchange between painting and architecture” and applied this style to applied design. His transformed supremist design elements into a political symbolism that any semi-literate peasant can understand.

The 1917 Russian Revolution, as Lissitzky saw it, was a new beginning for mankind. Along with social engineering, Communism, according to Lissitzky, would create a new order. The constructor’s role was to forge a unity between art and technology through a new world of objects meant to provide mankind with a richer environment. The idealism of Lissitzky moved his emphasis away from the personal aesthetic toward an emphasis on graphic design in order to enrich community life.

By 1921, postwar Germany had become the stomping grounds for many of the artist involved in de Stijl, Bauhaus, Dada and Constructivism, leading to an exchange of both Eastern and Western ideas of the time. Lissitzky traveled to Berlin, where he developed his typographical ideas through experimentation with photomontage, print making, graphic design, and painting. He collaborated with other artists and furthered the message of Constructivism to Western Europe.

As a graphic designer, Lissitzky began utilizing graph paper to impose a modular structure and mathematical order to his designs. He rebelled against metal typesetting, an often used construction and paste-up to achieve his designs. He correctly predicted the abandonment of the Gutenberg system for the photomechanical process that would replace it. Negative space, a rigid structure, asymmetry and halftones defined Lissitzky’s work.

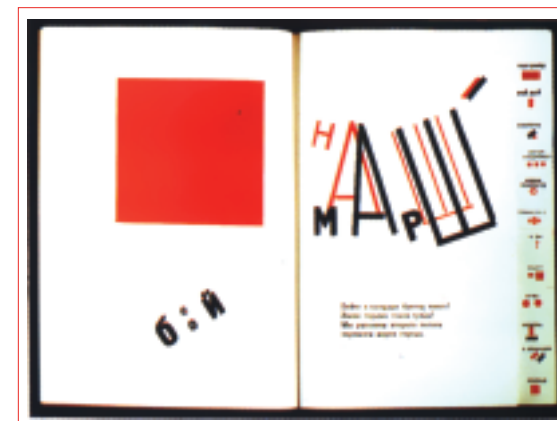
Lissitzky used large, bold sans serif numbers as compositional elements to express his attitude that numbers and letters are more than just a verbal sign. He began experimenting with photomontage as a solution for communication messages.

During the 1920’s, the Soviet government officially encouraged the new Russian art and even sought to publicize it internationally. When he returned to Russia in 1925, he dedicated the majority of his time to large exhibition projects for the Soviet government. He died shortly after the Nazi invasion of Russia in December of 1941.

An ardent Communist, Alexander Rodchenko brought an innovative spirit to Constructivism, and experimented with typography, montage and photography. His early paintings were examples of analytical precision and the definition of forms led by his interest in descriptive geometry. By 1921, Rodchenko’s social views led him to feel his art should express the views of society at large instead of his own views. He abandoned painting for visual communications, and began collaborating with writer Vladimir Mayakovsky. Rodchenko’s designs consisted of a geometric construction, using large areas of pure color and bold, sans serif typefaces that would be used throughout the Soviet Union.

Rodchenko began the design magazine, *Novyi lef*, (“Left Front of the Arts), in 1923 for all the fields of creative arts. The magazine exemplified the strong, static horizontal and vertical forms that defined Rodchenko’s work. He often juxtaposed the soft forms and edges of photomontage against bold, blocky type. He consciously tried to innovate a new illustration technique for the twentieth century through photomontage.

Although tolerant of advanced art in the early years after the 1917 Revolution, by 1922, the government turned hostile. The Soviets accused the same artists that had supported the Bolsheviks in 1917 of “capitalist cosmopolitanism.”



EL LISSITZKY PAGES FROM THE VOICE 1923

“Art is called upon to accompany man everywhere his tireless life takes place and acts...So that the flame of life does not go out in man.”

- GABO AND PEVSNER 1920

Constructivism remained influential in Russian design even though most of the artisans who did not leave the country drifted into poverty or worse, vanished into the Gulag. The innovations of Constructivism were continued and further developed in the West through the 1920’s and beyond.



GEORGY AND VLADAMIR STENBURG FILM POSTER UNDATED