

ART IN EUROPE

# Zurich goes gaga for Dada

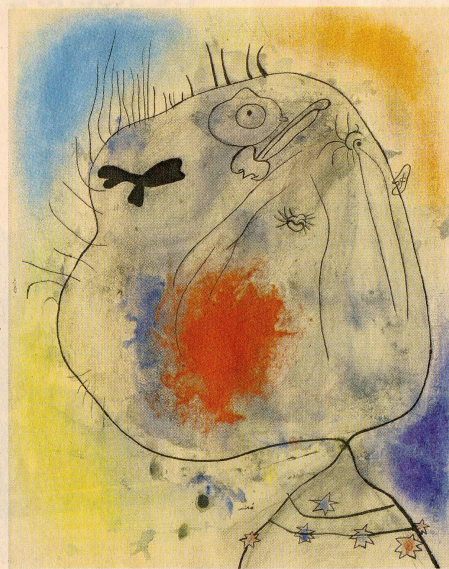
*The Swiss city celebrates 100 years of history's most aggressive anti-art movement – one that still shocks today.*  
By Jackie Wullschlager

Switzerland is a birdcage, surrounded by roaring lions," Hugo Ball wrote from Zurich in 1916. Today, Europe's lions – the migrant crisis, fears of terrorism and financial instability, the threat of Brexit – still do not touch Switzerland, and the vista from Zurich's glassy lake lined with fairy tale bourgeois houses remains unreal.

Artist-provocateur Christian Jankowski underlines that artifice by erecting here a floating timber summer palace, complete with swimming pool and giant LED screen, the delightfully named "Pavilion of Reflections". This is the centrepiece of the nomadic European biennial Manifesta, opened last week and entitled *What People Do For Money: Some Joint Ventures*, which Jankowski choreographs as a series of encounters between 30 artists and "non-art professionals" in Zurich. The Pavilion displays documentary footage of their meetings; the resulting art – objects, installations, performances – is spread across town.

In "Dog Salon Bobby", Guillaume Bijl reconstructs Zurich's "dog salon" Hundsalon Dolly in the Griener Contemporary gallery. Salon owner Jacqueline Meier ("After all, there are people in the art world who also have dogs") works in the gallery once a week. In "Intra- and Extraoral", Torbjørn Rødland shows surreal photographs of damaged bridges, broken crowns and a film of an extraction in a dentist's office. Mike Bouchet has turned a day's sewage produced in the city – 80 tonnes – into a sludge sculpture "The Zurich Load". And Matyáš Chochola presents a Thai boxer's training sessions as performances, plus installations of old exercise equipment, in "Ultra Violet Ritual".

The gap between life and art? The artist as professional entrepreneur, or politically controversial *Gastarbeiter*



(guest worker)? Amid current European tensions, and against a historical show *Sites under Construction*, featuring images of work, from August Sander's labourers to Andreas Gursky's panorama of a Siemens factory, Jankowski sends up the absurdities of conceptualism and the marketplace. He also pays homage to the moment when Dada, history's most aggressive anti-art movement, began in Zurich in 1916.

Complementing Manifesta, century exhibitions across the city celebrate Dada's laconic playfulness, strategies of appropriation and destruction-as-creation, skill in twisting anti-art into art. Dada still resonates as the first self-conscious art movement – reactive, conceptual, rejecting a high culture contaminated by a world war caused by

capitalism and colonialism. "While in the distance the thunder of artillery rolled, we sang, pasted and wrote for our lives," recalled Hans Arp.

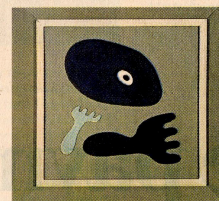
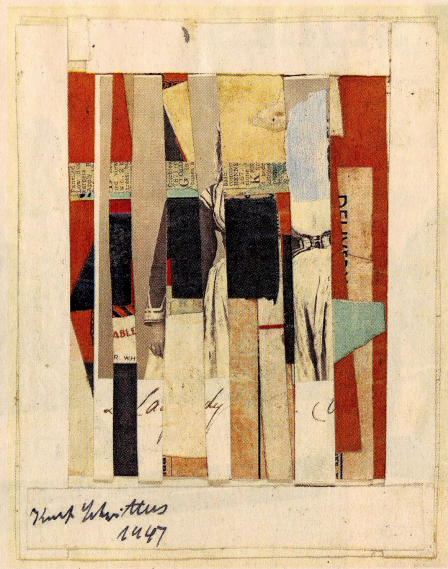
Hauser & Wirth's exhibition *Schwitters Miró Arp* traces how the German artists took fragments of language and imagery, scraps of words and forms, cardboard, fabric, bits of wood, and abstracted them into the nonsense configurations of Dada – cousin and forerunner of Surrealism's strange transformations, developed in 1920s Paris when Miró set out to "assassinate painting".

In fragile early works, Arp's more formal vocabulary of cut-out cardboard structures in muted colours already contrasts with Schwitters' tattered mixed-media "Merz" works – an attempt to remove the commercial from

"Kommerz" – and his remnants with narrative hinterlands, such as "Edelweiss" (1919), including the flower.

Arp goes on to a sculptural biomorphic vocabulary – "Leaf Nose" (1926), "Head; Scottish Lips" (1927) – shared with Miró's weightless canvases ("Floating Forms", "Ballet Dancer", centred on a giant disembodied eye). Schwitters remains the urban romantic of tram ticket, newspaper and cigarette-packet collage – an aesthetic reprised in turn in Miró's jumbled stencilled birds, stockinged leg, letters, black clouds, in the 1930s "Metamorphosis" series. Concluding highlights are the late abstracted sculptures, where each artist forges everyday materials and images into emblems of classical modernist purity: Arp's plaster "Dream Amphora", Miró's tilting stoneware and iron flower "Figurine (Project for a Monument)", Schwitters' "Arabesque" (1943-45).

The determined joy of Schwitters' last works, made when he was ill and penniless – trying to sell his collages for £1 each – in exile in England, is always affecting. "My father saw the great beauty of weariness, tiredness, ruin which surrounded him everywhere after the war," writes Ernst Schwitters in the catalogue to Galerie Gmurzynska's *Kurt Schwitters: MERZ*. This fresh biographical presentation showcases unseen archives and photographs



Clockwise from top left: Joan Miró's 'Untitled' (1937), Kurt Schwitters' 'Untitled (ABLE)' (1947), Hans Arp's 'Teller, Gabeln und Nabel' (1923)  
Judy and Michael Steinhilber Collection; VG Bild Kunst/Pro, Merz; Stiftung Arp e.V., Berlin; Rolandswarth

alongside works ranging from a charcoal drawing, "The Lonely One" (1918), reminiscent of Kirchner, through "Merz" collages evocative of the congested city, to late near-landscapes including "The Spring Door", where space opens up in sweeping lines and dancing rhythms. A chief feature is the installation, designed by the late Zaha Hadid to recall collisions in Schwitters' Hanover home, between the curves, angles, columns and ceiling cutaways of Merzbau, the life-long work-in-progress plaster and wood grotto, which the artist called his "Cathedral of Erotic Misery".

So Schwitters remained expressive in spite of himself. His Dada opposite is Francis Picabia, who aped every expressive mode to smash the possibility of sincerity or belief. If Schwitters' collage aesthetic had enormous formal impact on postwar art, Picabia's parody, plagiarism, hybridity and kitsch remain key influences now, as witnessed in *Our heads are round so our thoughts can change direction*, Zurich Kunsthaus's exhaustive, scholarly retrospective of this promiscuous shape-shifter.

No artist had a more divided response to modern art's twin fathers, Duchamp and Picasso. The mechanistic/cubist compositions – "Sad Figure", "Dances at the Spring", "Udnie" – that launched Picabia's career announce an ambivalence between painting and the conceptual, which increasingly played out as smart tricks of derivation, often driven, I think, by boredom. Cloying portraits of Spanish women in mantillas are evoked in Ingresque academic draughtsmanship. "Transparencies" are multiple Renaissance-style figures depicted in bewildering superimposed lines. Ripolin "Monster" paintings outdo Picasso in over-figurative surfaces – multiple eyes, mouths, dots, confetti, streamers.

Then comes something else: compositions with soft-core porn sources – the Aryan bathers "Five Women", a naked seductress taunting a proud, doleful "Wandering Jew" – made on the Côte d'Azur during Nazi occupation. They are so bad, and so uncomfortably close to Third Reich propaganda paintings, they were excluded from French post-war retrospectives and have never been shown in America, where this exhibition travels, to MoMA, in the autumn.

Parody, madness, or collaboration? Picabia's "The Adoration of the Calf" – hands groping fanatically at an idiot animal head based on Erwin Blumenfeld's 1937 surrealist photograph "The Dictator" – suggest the first. But Picabia was an anti-Semite, arrested though released as a collaborator. He refused fixed positions, thought art meaningless. Was he both fellow-traveller and moralist? "I've stopped trusting anything save chance and nonsense," he wrote in 1939. Seventy years later, Dada still wrongfoots and shocks.

*'Manifesta 11' to September 18;  
'Schwitters Miró Arp' to September 18;  
'Kurt Schwitters: MERZ' to September 30;  
'Francis Picabia' to September 25, then  
MoMA, New York, November 20-March 19*