

Re: Q: use of the term anti-art (2 answers)

H-ArtHist

Robert Belton <bbelton@ouc.bc.ca>
wrote:

Saul Ostrow asks for the earliest use of the term anti-art. Regarding Dada, Merriam-Webster online gives 1937, but it does not explain. Oxford online gives David Gascoyne's Short Survey of Surrealism in 1935, but the allusions are actually to anti-painter (linked to Picabia), anti-literature (linked to Tzara), etc. There are also references to Wyndham Lewis in 1942, anonymous (The Listener) in 1959, Sitwell in 1932, and even G. B. Shaw in 1896, with different meanings of course.

As for Dadaists "emphasiz[ing] that they are making a new art," this is technically correct, but it needs to be framed carefully with a mixture of contempt on the one hand and valorization of a very specific sort on the other. For example, Tzara said, "Art is not the most precious manifestation of life...," "The beginnings of Dada were not the beginnings of an art, but of a disgust," and so on

(<http://www.english.upenn.edu/~jenglish/English104/tzara.html>).

The third Dada manifesto says, "Art is a pretention"

(<http://users.ev1.net/~darkfox/manifesto3.htm>).

But it is also clear that an alternative conception of art is a path to a new way of living: "Dada knows the correct measure that should be given to art: with subtle, perfidious methods, Dada introduces it into daily life"

(<http://www.english.upenn.edu/~jenglish/English104/tzara.html>).

I, too, would be very interested to know exactly when "anti-art" was explicitly used in the Dada context. Hans Richter's Dada: Art and Anti-Art of 1965 seems to associate it with everything they did from the start, but the term itself does not appear in the early documents.

Sincerely,

Robert Belton, PhD
Dean, Faculty of Arts
Okanagan University College
3333 College Way
Kelowna, B.C.
V1V 1V7

(250) 762-5445, local 7319

Kenneth Allan <ken.allan@UTORONTO.CA>

wrote:

(x-post: caah)

"Anti-art," one of the more slippery terms of later twentieth-century art criticism, is rarely if ever found in Dadaist documents, where it should be most expected. It was retrospectively applied to Dada by subsequent commentators. A less thrilling but more accurate term might be "anti-conventional-practice." Dadaists stress negativity, but don't seem to use the actual term "anti-art." Tristan Tzara, in 'Zurich Chronicle' [1918] writes of "anti-philosophy" and calls Francis Picabia an "anti-painter." Kurt Schwitters criticizes Richard Huelsenbeck for being against art in 1920. Huelsenbeck in 'En Avant Dada' [1920] says "The Dadaist considers it necessary to come out against art,..." But these are all rhetorical exceptions to their pro-art stance. Ribemont-Dessaignes in 'History of Dada' [1931] writes of the magazine 'Littérature' as being "the equivalent of 'Anti-littérature.'" Harriet and Sidney Janis [1945] write of Duchamp as "anti-artisan and anti-artist." Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia describes Duchamp's work as being "anti-aesthetic" in 1949. In 1951, Robert Motherwell writes of Duchamp's 'Fountain' as being "anti-art" in the introduction to his 'The Dada Painters and Poets'. [xxiii] Motherwell's is the first use of the term "anti-art" that I'm aware of, although there are no doubt earlier ones. Hans Richter's use of the term for the title of his book, 'Dada: Art and Anti-art,' doesn't come about until 1964.

Ken Allan

Reference:

Q: Re: Q: use of the term anti-art (2 answers). In: ArtHist.net, Nov 28, 2002 (accessed Apr 30, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/25352>>.