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DEVĚTSIL AND DADA

A POETICS OF PLAY IN THE INTERWAR
CZECH AVANT-GARDE

osvobozené divadlo
v praze
Théâtre libre à Prague
MEGHAN FORBES

In August 1923, two young Czech artists, Karel Teige and Jindřich Honzl, sent to friend and poet Jaroslav Seifert a romantic picture postcard they had doctored to create a more modern scene.¹ A pavilion in the background has been inscribed with the word “JAZZ,” and a rough sketch of an airplane flying overhead interrupts the tranquil setting. In the upper right corner, the word “DISK” and a drawing of it are penciled in.² Below,

I thank Barbora Bartunkova and Vlad Beronja, in particular, for reading and commenting on multiple versions of this text, as well as the members of the Global Modernism working group at New York University and my colleagues in the Leonard A. Lauder Research Center for Modern Art at the Met. Finally, thanks are due the anonymous peer reviewers and editors of *ARTMargins*.

A bibliographic note: Excerpts from Karel Teige's various texts that deal with Dada tend to reappear across several of his articles. For the sake of simplicity and clarity, I note a republication only when the titles of two articles or book chapters are the same. It should be noted, however, that in many cases paragraphs of text from one article might also appear in an article of another title. Conversely, two articles or chapters of the same title do not necessarily have the same exact text. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

- 1 There is no printed information on the back of the postcard to credit the manufacturer, artist, or date of the work. I am using “romantic” here following Alison Rowley's description of the commodity of picture postcards in fin-de-siècle Russia: “Russian romantic postcards were quite interchangeable with their European counterparts, and typically featured scenes of courting couples.” See her chapter “Bodies on Display: Romantic and Erotic Postcards in Fin-de-Siècle Russia,” in *Open Letters: Russian Popular Culture and the Picture Postcard 1880–1922* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 105–35.
- 2 This was a common symbol in Devětsil design—directly referencing the Devětsil magazine *Disk*, which first appeared in 1923—and was a popular motif in New Typography design generally.



Postcard from Karel Teige and Jindřich Honzl to Jaroslav Seifert, dated August 17, 1923. Postcard manufacture details unknown. Fond Jaroslav Seifert, Památník národního písemnictví (Museum of Czech Literature), Prague.

a woman in a white dress sitting languorously with a rose in her hand has been made up with a mustache, a pipe inserted between her lips. A man leans intently towards her, newly gifted an oversize bowtie. Sentimental lines of verse printed on the postcard suggest the pair are in the midst of a lover's quarrel, and our jocular interventionists have literally put something between them: an equation that reads " $Da^2 = \underline{dada}$."³

Teige, Honzl, and Seifert were all members of the leftist avant-garde group Devětsil, active in Prague and Brno in the 1920s. Born in 1900, Teige was an artist, writer, editor, and typographer who arguably became the group's leading figure. In the aftermath of World War I, the Devětsil group was formed in the newly constituted Czechoslovak Republic, announcing itself with a manifesto published in a weekly paper in December 1920. In the short statement, the co-signers (which include Teige and Seifert) proclaimed their rejection of the staid, bourgeois art of the academy in order "to fight for a new life" that brought art into direct confrontation with pressing social and political issues.⁴ In this vein, the Devětsil group ultimately forged Poetism, expressing an "art of life" ethos through poetry, performance, architecture, and visual

3 Postcard from Karel Teige and Jindřich Honzl to Jaroslav Seifert, August 17, 1923, Fond Jaroslav Seifert, Památník národního písemnictví, Prague.

4 Karel Teige et al., "U.S. Devětsil," in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, ed. Vlačin Štěpán, vol. 1 (Prague: Svoboda, Rudé právo, 1970), 81. Originally published in *Pražské pondělí* (December 6, 1920).

art that notably drew on Constructivism—and as I will argue here, Dada—and was a unique contribution to the interwar avant-gardes.⁵

As the postcard to Seifert suggests, Devětsil members were well aware of Dada. At the same time, that movement had a belated reception in the Czech milieu, and a fully locatable “Czech Dada” is difficult to pin down. Nonetheless, a Dada element within the Devětsil group is far more pervasive than the historical record would suggest. In the preamble to Michel Sanouillet’s massive tome, *Dada in Paris*, first published in 1965, the author states that, in terms of a Dada presence in Czechoslovakia, “there is no indigenous movement to report.”⁶ In 1998, *The Eastern Dada Orbit*, edited by Gerald Janacek, was perhaps the first comprehensive attempt in English to show the migrations of Dada eastward, but—consistent with Sanouillet’s framing—with an emphasis on Dada “as an import,” and Prague as a “prime transfer point for the Eastern Dada orbit.”⁷ In this volume, Jindřich Toman’s chapter on Czech Dada provides a preliminary chronology of discrete Dada moments, namely in Prague, and again with an emphasis on exchange in an international milieu.⁸

5 The solid scholarship in English and Czech on the Devětsil group and Poetism continues to grow. The most recent major contribution is the exhibition *Devětsil 1920–1931*. See Alena Pomajzlová, ed., *Devětsil 1920–1931* (Prague: Galerie hlavního města Prahy, 2019); published in conjunction with an exhibition of the same title, organized and presented at the Stone Bell House of the Prague City Gallery, December 11, 2019, to March 29, 2020.

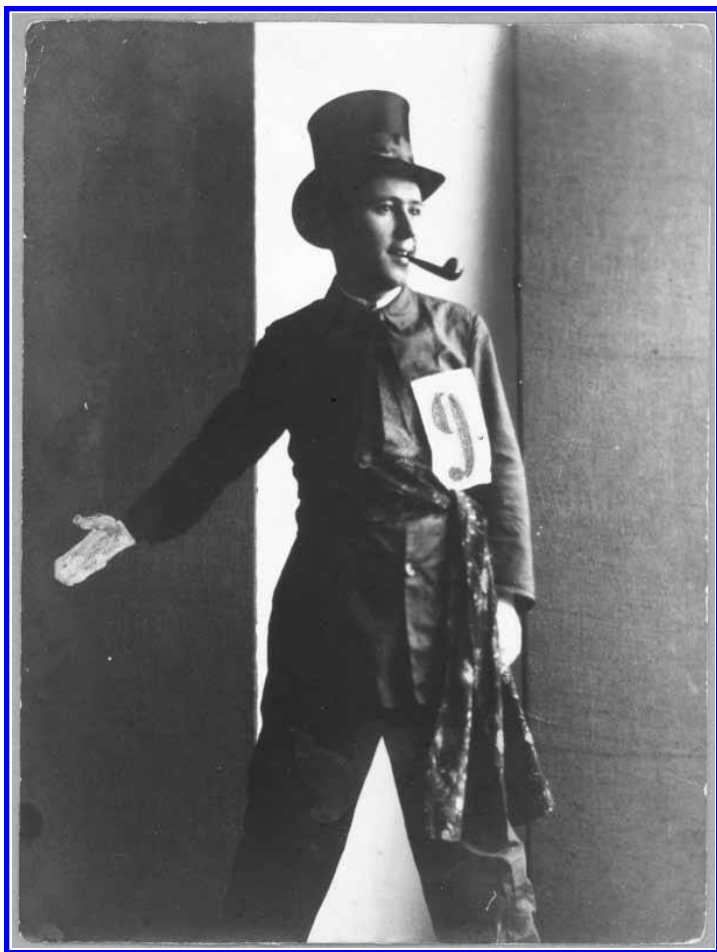
6 Michel Sanouillet, *Dada in Paris*, trans. Sharmila Ganguly (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 33.

7 Gerald Janacek, “Dada in Central and Eastern Europe,” in *Crisis in the Arts: The History of Dada*, ed. Stephen Foster, vol. 4, *The Eastern Dada Orbit: Russia, Georgia, Ukraine, Central Europe and Japan*, ed. Gerald Janacek (New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1998), 1, 2.

In German, the volume *Dada global* had appeared four years prior. For a short section on Prague, see Ludmila Vachtova, “Prag,” in *Dada global*, eds. Hans Bolliger, Judith Hossli, Guido Magnaguagno, Raimund Meyer, and Juri Steiner (Zurich: Linmat Verlag, 1994), 103–7. Vachtova similarly posits a history of Czech Dada as “import . . . a history without women and in the conditional” (103).

More recently, in English, we have Tom Sandqvist’s *Dada East*, but this focuses largely on Romanian influence, as its subtitle suggests. See Tom Sandqvist, *Dada East: The Romanians of Cabaret Voltaire* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006). Additionally, a 2018 exhibition titled simply *Russian Dada*, curated by Margarita Tupitsyn at the Reina Sofia in Madrid, makes a claim for another eastern Dada constellation. Margarita Tupitsyn, ed., *Russian Dada: 1914–1924* (Madrid: Museo nacional centro de arte Reina Sofia and Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018); published in conjunction with an exhibition of the same title, organized and presented at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arts Reina Sofia, Madrid, June 6–October 22, 2018. In German, Tomáš Glanc has also documented the contemporary Russian reception of Dada: Tomáš Glanc, “*Sie faulen bereits, und der Brand ist entfacht*”: *Die russische Rezeption von DADA* (Zürich: Edition Schulblade, 2016).

8 Jindřich Toman, “Now You See It, Now You Don’t: Dada in Czechoslovakia, with Notes on High and Low,” in *Eastern Dada Orbit*, 11. See also Jindřich Toman, “Dada Well Constructed: Karel Teige’s Early Rationalism,” *Umění/Art* 43, no. 1–2 (1995): 29–33.



Karel Teige. Undated.
Photographer unknown.
Fond Artuš Černík, *Památník
národního písemnictví*
(Museum of Czech
Literature), Prague.

The current essay is an attempt to more fully assert a strain of Dada within Devětsil. It positions such manifestations as not merely a reflection of Dada tendencies occurring elsewhere, but a useful category for thinking about some of Devětsil's own artistic production and theoretical formulations related to Poetism. Wary of inscribing a vocabulary that does not wholly fit, in the service of an expansionist mode of canon building that does not accommodate local contexts on their own terms, I am not arguing here for a Czech Dada as such. Rather, I aim to show how Devětsil members, and especially Teige, incorporated Dada principles into Poetism, using these principles for their own purposes. In so doing, I hope also to sound a call for a more serious consideration of the Czech context within contemporary historiographies and exhibition practices that might attempt to responsibly account for the full range of Dada trends and locales.

Dada is understood as a multi-sited phenomenon, and the transmutations of Dada actors and ideas through Prague from Germany, Hungary, and Yugoslavia—which have been more or less adequately documented⁹—offer a foundation on which to persuasively argue for inclusion of the city in a transnational Dada history. This article moves beyond the notion of Prague as “transfer point,” to focus specifically on what a Czech, Devětsil riff on Dada looked like. The various examples cited below—including Teige’s theoretical reflections on Dada, as well as photographs of performances of Devětsil plays and adaptations of French Dadaist productions—further indicate that the interwar Czech avant-garde was inherently networked, one node in a larger European interwar exchange.

In sum, this essay asks: what did Devětsil want out of Dada? The group’s engagement with Dada is pictured in a variety of images published across Devětsil books and magazines. While Teige was not singular among his colleagues in taking an interest in Dada, he is exceptional in his dual role as editor and prolific contributor to Devětsil publications. Here, a special emphasis is placed on two magazines—*Pásmo* (1924–26), published in Brno, and *ReD* (1927–31), in Prague—and the two-volume collection of Teige’s writings, *On Humor, Clowns and Dadaists*, from 1928 and 1930.¹⁰ A close reading of his essays and photomontages, graphic design, and editorial decisions provides a salient point of depar-

9 See, for instance, Jindřich Chalupecký, *O dada, surrealismu a českém umění* (Prague: Jazzová sekce, 1980); Ludvík Kundera, *Dada* (Prague: Jazzová sekce, 1983); Rea Michalová, “Poetism and Dada,” in *Karel Teige: Captain of the Avant-Garde* (Prague: Kant, 2018), 177–84; Holger Siegel, *In unseren Seelen flattern schwarze Fahnen: Serbische Avantgarde 1918–1939* (Leipzig: Reclam-Verlag, 1992); František Šmejkal, “Kurt Schwitters and Prague,” trans. Marta Filipová, *Art in Translation* 3, no. 1 (2011): 54–55; Irena Subotić, “Zenit a jeho okruh v letech 1921–1926,” *Umění* 25 (1987): 30–42; Toman, “Dada in Czechoslovakia” and “Dada Well Constructed”; and Vachtova, “Prag.”

For primary accounts from Dada visitors to Prague, see Raoul Hausmann, *Courier Dada* (Paris: Le terrain vague, 1958); Richard Huelsenbeck, “En avant Dada: A History of Dadaism,” in *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology*, ed. Robert Motherwell, trans. Ralph Manheim, 2nd ed. (New York: George Wittenborn, 1967), 21–46, originally published as *En avant Dada: die Geschichte des Dadaismus* (Hanover: Paul Steegemann Verlag, 1920); and Karel Teige, “O dadaistech,” in *O humoru, clownech a dadaistech: Svět, který voní* (Prague: Odeon, 1930), 123–56, with an earlier version in *Tvorba* 2, no. 6 (June 1927): 168–86.

10 The first volume of *On Humor, Clowns, and Dadaists* (*O humoru, clownech a dadaistech*) was published with the subtitle *The World Which Laughs* (*Svět, který se směje*), and the second *The World Which Smells Nice* (*Svět, který voní*). Though Šmejkal makes the claim that the latter was “the first book on the history of Dadaism in Europe” (58), Teige certainly was occupied with these questions already in the preceding volume, from 1928, and the majority of the text in both volumes had appeared previously as essays in various publications. As Toman notes, the 1924 essay in *Sršatec* from which the two volumes take their name was already “the first extensive and serious account of Dada in Czech.” Toman, “Dada in Czechoslovakia,” 20.

ture for articulating how Dada manifested itself within the Czech avant-garde. This article also introduces Devětsil's Dada engagement within the context of its better-understood affinities with Constructivism. Through a consideration of theoretical texts and artistic production that had a platform in Czech avant-garde print, this article makes explicit Devětsil's intersections with a more global Dada construct.

A LIVING POETRY: POETISM IN RELATION TO CONSTRUCTIVISM AND DADA

Tristan Tzara moved to Paris from Zurich—the birthplace of Dada—in 1920, and Teige made his first trip to the French capital in the summer of 1922. While it is uncertain whether the two crossed paths, it is certainly Tzara, or the “shy *baladin* of Romanian origin,”¹¹ whom Teige associates most explicitly with Dada across his writings. First published in 1927 and reproduced in *The World Which Smells Nice* in 1930, the essay “On Dadaists” introduces many figures central to the Dada movement, but Teige asserts in no uncertain terms that Tzara was the “real initiator and main culprit of Dada.”¹² In this essay, Teige offers his own definition of Dada that underscores a Dadaist embrace of a “living poetry” (*živoucí poesie*) and makes explicit the connection between a Dada and Poetist view of the world: “The specific lesson of Dada, *the lesson of a living poetry*, emancipated from the refuse of academic prejudice, as Tzara himself speaks of it, played its role even at home [in Czechoslovakia], around 1922, with the inception of Poetism.”¹³ In the first manifesto dedicated to Devětsil's “art of life”-ism from 1924, Teige describes Poetism similarly: “the *art of living* (*uměním žítí*) in the most beautiful sense of the word, a modern Epicureanism.”¹⁴

11 Teige, “Dadaismus,” *Tvorba* 1, no. 8 (February 1, 1926): 143.

12 Teige, “O dadaistech,” 124.

In this text, Teige also references from the French milieu Francis Picabia, Louis Aragon, and Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, among others—even including Philippe Soupault and André Breton, who made a rather tumultuous departure from Dada to form Surrealism (and would both visit Prague). But he also extends his summary of the key figures to include those he associates with German Dada, such as Walter Mehring, Hans Arp, Richard Huelsenbeck, Johannes Baader, John Heartfield, Raoul Hausmann, and Kurt Schwitters, many of whom made visits and hosted performances in Prague. He also notes a group of “Hungarian emigrants, members of the group *Ma*, who caroused in Prague for some Dadaist evenings in communist circles after the fall of the republic” (153).

13 *Ibid.*, 123. Emphasis is the author's.

14 Karel Teige, “Poetism,” in *Karel Teige/1900–1951: L'Enfant Terrible of the Czech Modernist Avant-Garde*, ed. Eric Dluhosch and Rostislav Švácha, trans. Alexandra Büchler (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 71; originally published as Karel Teige, “Poetismus,” *Host* 3, no. 9–10 (July 1924). Emphasis is my own.

Teige also foregrounds, both in this Poetist manifesto and elsewhere, a strong association between Constructivism and new beauty.

It might seem unlikely that Poetism, emphatically insisted upon as “*an art of living and enjoying*,”¹⁵ would also be introduced in Marxist terms: “*Poetism is the crown of life; Constructivism is its base.*”¹⁶ From the very first manifesto, an unlikely synthesis of socialist rhetoric with an embrace of individualist pleasures is present. This dualism led Devětsil to find philosophical and artistic points of interest in both Constructivism to the East and Dada to the West. Peter Zusi notes that “For most of the decade [of the 1920s] Teige conceived Constructivism as only one ‘pole’ of avant-garde culture, coexisting with a complementary principle he termed Poetism.”¹⁷ I propose here that Teige’s unique vision for Poetism in the 1920s is conceived rather in a triangulation, with Dada as a third point.

The seemingly incompatible juxtaposition of Constructivism and Dada in Poetism was itself consistent with a Dada ethos. In his 1918 Dada manifesto, Tzara writes, “Dada Dada Dada, a roaring of tense colors, and interlacing opposites and of all contradictions, grotesques, inconsistencies: LIFE.”¹⁸ Teige picks up on this productive notion of difference in Dada: “Dadaists live only in their temperament of opposition, they are foreign to the modern, Constructivist spirit.”¹⁹ And his project likewise embraced contradiction for its generative capacity, setting forth a series of “contrasts”—“nature–civilization, sentiment–intellect, fantasy–rationality, freedom–constraint, construction–poetry, public–intimacy”—that apparently “do not interrupt, but rather intensify, the value of their particular elements.”²⁰ It is a set of binaries that accommodates Dada and Constructivism in the project of Poetism.

Within this context of contradiction, it is important to acknowledge, as previous scholars have pointed out, that Teige does not offer a consistently positive reading of Dada across the 1920s, nor a single version of

15 Ibid., 66. Emphasis is the author’s.

16 Ibid., 67. Emphasis is the author’s, and the translation is modified.

17 Peter Zusi, “The Style of the Present: Karel Teige on Constructivism and Poetism,” *Representations* 88, no. 1 (Fall 2004): 103.

18 Tristan Tzara, “Dada Manifesto 1918,” in *The Dada Painters and Poets*, 82; originally published as “Manifeste Dada 1918,” *Dada* 3 (December 1918).

19 Teige, “Dada,” in *Svět, který voní*, 76; originally published in *Host* 6, no. 2 (1926).

20 Teige, “Naše základna a naše cesta. Několik principiálních poznámek. Konstruktivismus a poetismus,” *Pásmo* 1, no. 3 (1924): 2.

it.²¹ Devětsil's interpretation of a Dada sense of humor, writes Toman, was a "somewhat generalized and domesticated form of Dada."²² In Teige's interpretation, Dada performed a poetics of play, and like Dada, Poetism could address the need to find joy in everyday life or even in the face of trauma. Teige sees in Dada a reimagining of the place of art in a drastically altered society, when "in the age of the [First] World War, we were compelled to question the sense, utility, and general benefit of art in a world which sheds blood to redeem its tomorrow."²³ The utility of Dada for Teige could be understood as finding humor even in dark times, for it is our "great fortune," he writes, to be able to laugh, even "amidst day-to-day bitter disappointments."²⁴ His interpretation of Dada could be understood as a vulgarized (mis)reading of Dada with an emphasis on catharsis and rehabilitation in the postwar period—what he called a "liberating nonsense (*osvobozující nesmyslnost*)"²⁵—which is at times contradictory with his simultaneous reading of it as a form of nihilism. It is a version of Dada aligned conveniently with early iterations of Poetism. But it was also, as Toman notes, "more than embellishing Constructivism with humor."²⁶ Acknowledging the cathartic aspects of a comedy tenuously constructed on the rubble of World War I, Teige wrote in the original Poetism manifesto of 1924, anticipating the subtitle of the first in his future two-volume tome *On Humor, Clowns, and Dadaists*, that if the -ism "was born in an atmosphere of cheerful fellowship, *in a world which laughs*, [then] who cares if it laughs itself to tears?"²⁷ Dada had appeal precisely because it intervened directly into the harshness of real life through nonsense and absurd humor.

In the 1920s, Teige and Devětsil were emphatically youthful without looking away from the world's tragedies: "Long live the victorious months and liberating nonsense: the meaning of youth is dizziness

21 As Chaloupecký writes, in light of Teige's fluid perception of Dada, "To describe Teige's opinion of Dada is rather difficult" (10). Illustrative of this is Vachtova's claim that his reception of Dada goes "in all directions: Dada was confused, funny, important, tragic" (105).

22 Toman, "Dada in Czechoslovakia," 21.

23 Teige, "Dada," 80.

24 Teige, "O humoru, clownech a dadaistech," in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, ed. Vlačín Štěpán, vol. 1 (Prague: Svoboda, 1970), 571; originally published in *Sršatec* 4, nos. 38, 39, 40 (July–August 1924): 3–4, 1–2, 2–4; also republished in *Pásmo* 2, no. 1 (October 1925): 6–10. Due to the multiple iterations, I quote from the anthologized version of this text. When referencing the article specifically, I use quotation marks, and when discussing the collected volumes of the same title, I employ italics.

25 *Ibid.*, 580.

26 Toman, "Dada Well Constructed," 32.

27 Teige, "Poetism," 68. Emphasis is the author's, and the translation is modified.

From the article "I. excentrický karneval umělců v Brně" ("First Eccentric Carnival of Artists in Brno") *Salon* 3, no. 10 (1925). Photographs by Vladimír Lehký, Moravian Museum in Brno.

and laughter."²⁸ The First Eccentric Carnival of Artists, which took place in Brno in February 1925, was a real manifestation of this impulse.²⁹ Though not exclusively billed as a Devětsil event, it was announced in *Pásmo*, and the group members appear to have been the life of the party. Photographs published in the Brno-based magazine *Salon* capture the festivities, as young people gather in a variety of clownish poses, donning painted faces or papier-mâché masks, in front of a backdrop with a stylized rendering of the Eiffel Tower and a large female nude.³⁰ In one image, a woman dressed in flouncy, belted pants and a long-sleeved blouse, with heeled pumps, turns away from the camera to reveal a number 9 (*devět* in Czech, referencing Devětsil) on her back, but keeps her smiling face visible. The woman is captioned only as "Adorable 'Devětsil girl'" (*Devětsiláčka*) but is actually Jaroslava Václavková, partner of another Brno Devětsil member Bedřich Václavěk, an editor of *Pásmo*. Both photographs on this page—the



28 Teige, "Dada," 83.

29 In the same period, in 1925 and 1926, a series of raucous, carnivalesque "eccentric eight o'clocks" were also hosted in Brno and associated with the local Devětsil chapter. For a brief description, along with documentation of the eight o'clocks as well as the First Eccentric Carnival of Artists, see Petr Ingerle, "Brno Devětsil: A Local Chapter in the History of the International Avant-Garde," in *Brno Devětsil and Multimedia Overlaps of the Artistic Avant-Garde*, ed. Lucie Česálková and Petr Ingerle, trans. Miloš Bartoň and Alan Windsor (Brno: Moravian Gallery, 2014), 75–79, as well as plates 23–30.

30 ak, "I. excentrický karneval umělců v Brně," *Salon* 3, no. 10 (1925): n.p.

other of which is captioned “Devětsil group”—and the accompanying text highlight the active presence of Devětsil in the festivities. In the *Pásmo* advertisement, the event is notably billed as including the “artistic collaboration of constructivist artists,”³¹ emphasizing not the Dadaist tomfoolery on display in photographs and made explicit in later recollections of this evening,³² but a more utilitarian side to the undertaking.

Teige similarly underscored the affinity of Constructivism with playful aspects more associated with Dada, and put forth the idea that the workers of the circus and the factory were united: “A living poetry (*životní poesie*) has grown from a constructivist base and in accord with it: clowns and fantasts are the brothers of laborers and engineers.”³³ A will toward play and farce thus does not preclude more rationalist tendencies, and it is this—the fruit born of a Dada seed planted in Constructivist soil—that sets Poetism apart from other European avant-garde-isms of its time. Teige states, “Constructivism and Poetism must give their thanks to the negative and destructive function of Dada.”³⁴ Constructive qualities alongside the contradictory—sometimes playful, at other times nihilistic—aspects of Dada found their way into Teige’s Poetism in a dialectical (yet intentionally unstable) synthesis. Alongside a Constructivist approach, Poetism is—as Teige wrote—also an unapologetic “wish to embrace all the fruits of poetry, liberated from a literature we throw into the scrap heap: [it is] a poetry of Sunday afternoons, picnics, lit-up cafés, intoxicating cocktails, lively boulevards, spa promenades, but also the poetry of quiet, of night, calm, and peace.”³⁵ And it is the Poetist “picture poem” in which these diverse aspects of daily life could come together and be animated on the page.

31 *Pásmo* 1, no. 5–6 (1924–25): 10.

32 For a summary of contemporary recollections, see Ingerle, “Brno Devětsil,” 77. These also aided in reconstructing the participants in the photographs.

33 Karel Teige, “Estetika filmu a kinografie,” in *Film* (Prague: Nakladatelství Václav Petr, 1925), 45; previously published in *Host* 3, no. 6–7 (April 1924). An English version is available as “The Aesthetics of Film and Cinégraphie,” in *Cinema All the Time: An Anthology of Czech Film Theory and Criticism, 1908–1939*, ed. Jaroslav Anděl and Petr Szczepanik, trans. Kevin B. Johnson (Prague: National Film Archive, 2008). Emphasis and translation are my own.

It is also worth noting that the language here distinctly reflects that of the first Poetism manifesto, though this article was published a few months prior (in the same magazine).

34 Teige, “Dada,” 88.

35 Teige, “Poetism,” 71.

DADA HUMOR AND POETIST PLAY ON THE PAGE AND ON THE STAGE

The “picture poem” (*obrazová báseň*) was the visual manifestation of Poetism, executed typically in the form of a photomontage that incorporates text, a form explicitly linked to the process of mechanical reproduction, privileging prints over “superfluous originals,” which according to Teige ought to be tossed out once they have been reproduced.³⁶ The picture poem was introduced programmatically in Teige’s short essay “Painting and Poetry,” in the first issue of the Devětsil magazine *Disk*, from 1923.³⁷ Karel Srp associates the advent of the Czech picture poem with both the Berlin Dadaists and Soviet Constructivists, specifically linking its output to the collages of Raoul Hausmann and Hannah Höch (both of whom visited Prague), as well as to the book and magazine design of El Lissitzky and Aleksandr Rodchenko.³⁸ But in Teige’s own description, it is Schwitters’s “Merzbild” collages that seem to have the closest affinities with some of the central tenets of Poetism and the picture poem: “Merzkunst wants to create reality as a work of art. . . . It is the transposition of banality to the sphere of poetry. [. . . It is a poetry] that no one ever wrote, but that we find nonetheless in a book, the newspapers, on a poster.”³⁹ In the same essay, Teige also draws comparisons between Dada and Constructivist montage, while rightly making a distinction between their approaches toward the medium with regard to their organizing principles. He writes that

36 Karel Teige, “Painting and Poetry,” in *Between Worlds: A Sourcebook of Central European Avant-Gardes, 1910–1930*, ed. Timothy O. Benson and Éva Forgács, trans. Michael Henry Heim (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 368; originally published as “Malířství a poesie,” *Disk* 1 (1923). The translation is modified.

37 For more on the picture poem, see, for instance, Irina Denischenko, “Photopoetry: Czech Poetism and the Photographic Image,” in *Beyond Given Knowledge: Investigation, Quest and Exploration in Modernism and the Avant-Gardes*, ed. Harri Veivo, Jean-Pierre Montier, Françoise Nicol, David Ayers, Benedikt Hjartarson, and Sascha Bru (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 95–113; Zdeněk Primus, “Obrazová báseň: entuziastický produkt poetismu,” in *Karel Teige, 1900–1951*, ed. Karel Srp (Prague: Galerie hlavního města Prahy), 49–62; published in conjunction with an exhibition of the same title, organized and presented at the Stone Bell House of the Prague City Gallery, February 15–May 1, 1994; Karel Srp, “Optical Words (Picture Poems and Poetism),” in *Czech Photographic Avant-Garde, 1918–1948*, ed. Vladimír Birgus (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 56–72; and Jindřich Toman, *Photo/Montage in Print* (Prague: Kant, 2008), 83–94.

38 Srp, “Optical Words,” 60.

In *Russian Dada*, Tupitsyn likewise underscores this connection, writing that “the signifying capacity and high potential of photomontage for political art was recognized equally by the Dadaists, who deemed it ‘a medium of Dada art,’ and by Russian artists” (85).

39 Teige, “O dadaistech,” 143.

“Dadaist photomontages are more a new character than a new form of book illustration, as are the photomontages of Constructivists and Poetists. Dadaist photomontages are most often without composition, pêle-mêle; the photomontages of Constructivists and Poetists are subject to the strict and scientific order of construction (*stavba*).”⁴⁰ While Teige aligns Devětsil with the rationalized side of photomontage, and Esther Levinger has emphasized the Constructivist, grid-like elements of the form,⁴¹ a close reading of picture poems reveals that Teige is also interested in moments that exploit the cut-up montage elements toward humor, chance, and play. In his magazines—in particular *ReD*, which he edited alone—Teige extends this notion to the page layout, creating a synthetic publication able to capture the fluid movement between Constructivist and Dada elements through the use of image and text, advertisement and graphic design.

ReD is emblematic of the visual theory of the picture poem put into practice, and it is also a site in which a liberal interpretation of Dada is showcased. An April 1928 issue dedicated to the Liberated Theater—the Devětsil-affiliated theater company, typically associated with the actors Jiří Voskovec and Jan Werich, at which Honzl was a director—is notably synergistic with Dada principles of play in its cover image and photographs from theater performances. In fact, Teige had singled out the “Dadaist humor” of Voskovec and Werich’s *Vest pocket revue* and *Smoking revue*.⁴² The theater group perhaps came closest in the Czech context to embodying what Teige described as a “liberating stupidity of clownerie (*osvobozující hloupost klaunství*).”⁴³ The cover of the April 1928 issue of *ReD* features a picture poem by the photographer Jaroslav Rössler, which doubles as an illustration for the Prague production of the play *Methusalem* by Yvan Goll. In the montage, a dancer in a simple leotard perches in a slender wine glass on tip-toe, while a showgirl with

40 Ibid., 151.

41 See Esther Levinger, “Czech Avant-Garde Art: Poetry for the Five Senses,” *The Art Bulletin* 81, no. 3 (September 1999): 513–32.

42 Teige, “o dadaistech,” 154.

A periodical that also bears the title *Vest pocket revue*, edited by Staša (Stanislava) Jílovská (a rare instance of a Devětsil-affiliated publication with a female editor), signals Dada affinities in its look and content and is advertised in the issue of *ReD* dedicated to the Liberated Theater. The third issue, from December 15, 1929, includes a Czech translation of Tzara’s poem “Chanson Dada,” accompanied by a photographic portrait of the author with monocle, and is followed directly with a brief text by Teige, titled simply “Tristan Tzara.” See *Vest pocket revue* no. 3 (December 15, 1929).

43 Teige, “O humoru, clownech a dadaistech,” 583.



Cover of *RED* 1, no. 7 (April 1928). Photomontage by Jaroslav Rössler. Private collection.

a feathered headdress skips across a vinyl record on a phonograph machine. Another showgirl dances among the electric signboards of music halls and movie palaces. The montage, with its unapologetic embrace of fun and ostensibly bourgeois pleasures, set within the frame of a compartmentalized, functionalist cover design, embodies the contradictions of Poetism, which displays an astute handling of, and willful departure from, the principles of Constructivism, inclining toward a Dada sense of play and the “art of living.”

Rössler’s photomontage collapses temporality and space in a way

that aspires toward a cinematic reading,⁴⁴ gesturing at a life beyond the page and beckoning the viewer to follow into the interiors of the music hall (or magazine). Teige situated the music hall, circus, jazz, sport, and dance (which he also tended to conflate with each other, and with Dada generally) as sites where modern poetry and art synthesize. In *On Humor, Clowns, and Dadaists*, he writes of the connection between Devětsil's work and the atmosphere of the music hall: "The art of the music hall is close to the integral poetry of Poetism."⁴⁵ Rössler's picture poem, published in *ReD* the same year, well illustrates this sentiment.

A compendium of photographs inside the April 1928 issue of *ReD*—which was assembled by Honzl—also features theater and dance performances documenting innovative Czech costume and stage design, and shows how the Liberated Theater engaged a pan-European literary scene in its programming. Several international Dada productions are featured.⁴⁶ For instance, one photograph captures a scene from the Liberated Theater's production of the French Dadaist Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes's *The Mute Canary*, with set design by Antonín Heythum.⁴⁷ In the image, a man stands perched on a scaffolding, the name of the playwright schematically rendered in block letters at his right and a large umbrella to his left (also bearing text, illegible in the reproduction). As advertised on the cover, there are also images from Goll's *Methusalem*, with photo documentation attributed to Rössler, as well as sketches of clownish costume designs by Otakar Mrkvička.⁴⁸ Though never realized, the initial costume designs for the play's German version, intended to be premiered in Königsberg in 1922, were by George Grosz.⁴⁹ Marking another example of the collapsed

44 I am thinking with Aleksandar Bošković here, who likewise draws on Tomar's conception of "photopoetry" in relation to the picture poem, and Pavle Levi's coinage of "cinema by other means" to delineate the avant-garde photomontage's function (specifically within the book form) as a "cinematic *dispositive*." See "Revolution, Reproduction, Representation: Iurii Rozhkov's Photomontages to Maiakovskii's Poem 'To the Workers of Kursk,'" in *Slavic Review* 76, no. 2 (Summer 2017): 395–427.

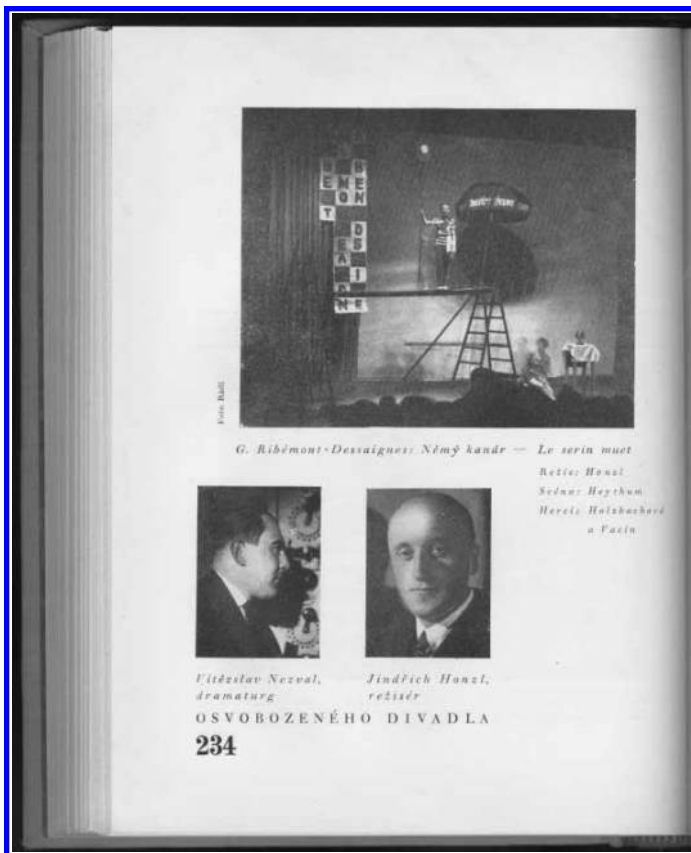
45 Teige, "S clowny a komedianty," in *O humor, clownech a dadaistech: Svět, který se směje* (Prague: Odeon, 1928), 66.

46 One example of a Dada collaboration with the Liberated Theater that does not figure in this issue of *ReD* is Schwitters's "Evenings of Grottesque." Teige writes of these performances that Schwitters is "an excellent orator (his evening performances, arranged by the Liberated Theater in 1926, are still remembered well)." Teige, "O dadaistech," 146.

47 The play premiered at the Theater Na Slupi on March 17, 1926, which would become the playhouse of the breakaway Dada theater group.

48 *Methusalem* premiered on March 10, 1927, at the Umělecká beseda.

49 See Richard West, "Georg Grosz: Figure for Yvan Goll's *Methusalem*," *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 55, no. 4 (April 1968): 91–94.



Interior of *ReD* 1, no. 7
(April 1928): 234.
Upper photograph by Otto
Rádl. Private collection.

opposition between Dada and Constructivism, Grosz stamped his drawings for this Dadaist play—created with compass and ruler—with the insignia “Grosz, Constructor.”⁵⁰ Likewise, in the last two issues of the Czech periodical *Tam Tam*, a music and theater publication with clear Dada affinities, a sort-of press release for the Liberated Theater describes the company both as a “cheerful cult” (*veselý kult*) and a Constructivist group, in its concerted employment of “good new technology,”⁵¹ thus highlighting both its Dadaist and Constructivist aspects.

An earlier photomontage collaboration of Mrkvička and Teige in a 1926 issue of *Pásmo* visualizes this interplay.⁵² The montage mixes

50 Ibid., 93.

51 “Osvozené divadlo!” *Tam Tam* no. 5 (December 1925): 29.

52 Upon seeing this work in *Pásmo*, Hannes Meyer would write to editor Artuš Černík asking to reproduce in a special issue of *Das Werk* a specific selection of photographs included therein—one of a “more constructive” stage design and the other the “circus image”—essentially deconstructing the montage. For more on this exchange, see Meghan Forbes, “To Reach over the Border”: An International Conversation between the Bauhaus and Devětsil,” *Umění* 64, no. 3–4 (December 2016): 291–303.

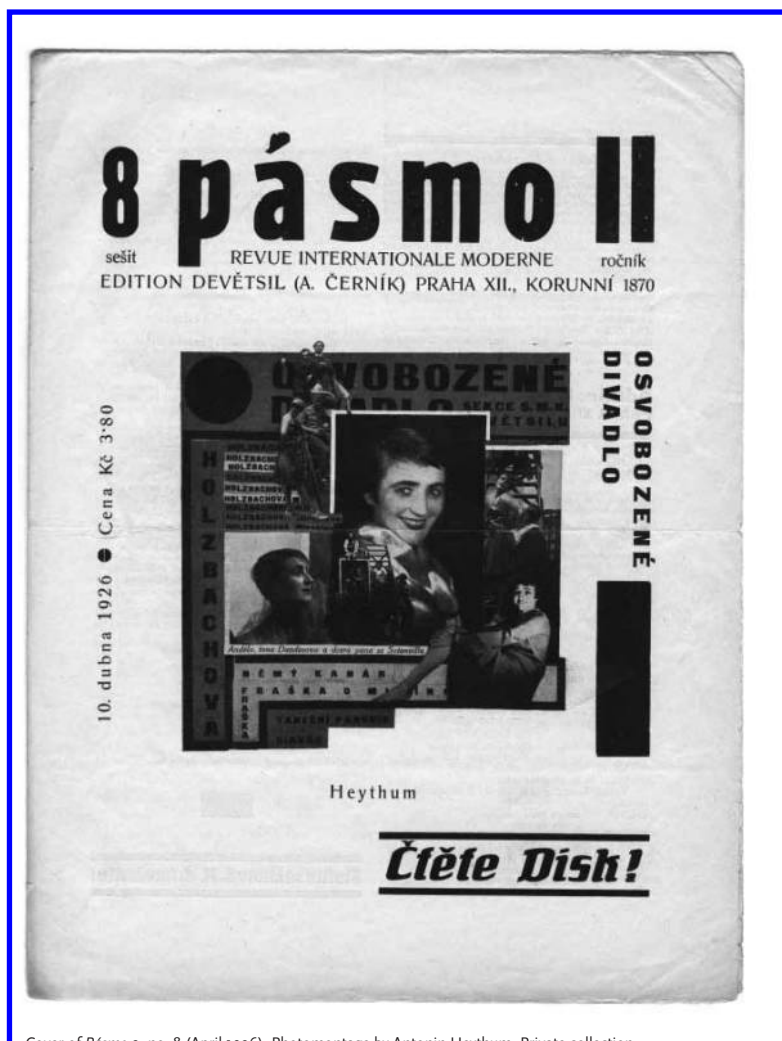


Interior spread of *Pásmo* 2, no. 8 (April 1926): 88–89. Photomontage on page 89 by Karel Teige and Otakar Mrkvička. Private collection.

images of clownish humor with examples of Constructivist stage designs and New Typography graphic principles. Contrasts between black-and-white geometric blocks produce the initials “OD” in the upper left corner (to stand in for *Osvobozené divadlo*), and the photograph from *The Mute Canary* that would be printed as a stand-alone image in *ReD* a couple years later here appears in the lower left third of the print. Toward the middle right of the image is another stage set bearing a banner that reads “CIRKUS,” its centrality emphasizing the privileged place of the circus within the *Devětsil* project.⁵³ In another montage on the cover of the issue, which spotlights the dancer Míra Holzbachová,⁵⁴ the

53 The photograph documents a staging of the production *George Dandin, or the Confused Husband* (billed in Czech as *Molière’s Comedy: Circus Dandin*), which premiered at Na Slupi on February 8, 1926. It was directed not by Honzl, but by Jiří Frejka.

54 Holzbachová performed with the Liberated Theater and was one of the few female *Devětsil* members. She also appears to be standing beside Václavková in one of the previously mentioned photographs from the Brno carnival in *Salon*. She is pictured frequently in *Devětsil* magazines, along with several other dancers, including Milča Mayerová, both of whom had previously studied with Rudolf von Laban in Hamburg. As Matthew Witkovsky notes, von Laban had maintained connections with the Dadaists at the Cabaret Voltaire during World War I, when he managed a dance studio in Zurich. Bibliographic details are referenced here



Cover of *8 pásmo*, no. 8 (April 1926). Photomontage by Antonín Heythum. Private collection.

title of *The Mute Canary* appears in bold letters alongside the words *fraška* (farce), *taneční parodie* (dance parody), and, predictably, *circus*.⁵⁵

In “On Humor, Clowns, and Dadaists,” Teige asserts that “modern theater . . . could learn a lot from traditional circus,”⁵⁶ equating the circus and Dada in clear terms: “The humor and character of our age is

from “Míra Holzbachová,” in *Český taneční slovník: Tanec, balet, pantomime* (Prague: Divadelní ústav, 2001), 100–1. For more on Mayerová and her relationship to Devětsil, see Matthew Witkovsky, “Staging Language: Milča Mayerová and the Czech Book *Alphabet*,” *The Art Bulletin* 86, no. 1 (March 2004): 114–35.

55 The words are cut from promotional posters with the printed titles of performances at the Liberated Theater. The latter two words here are derived from an evening dedicated to Holzbachová’s choreography, held on March 11, 1926, at Na Slupi.

56 Teige, “O humoru, clownech a dadaistech,” 584.

Dada. The spirit of Dada is the spirit of the circus clown. *Dada presents to us the spectacular circus.*⁵⁷ In the same year as this essay was first published, texts related to Tzara's earlier Zurich and Paris performances appeared in print as *Seven Dada Manifestos* (which Teige references in his 1926 essay "Dadaismus"). The collection opens with the now famous "Mr. Antipyrine," first recited in 1916, in which Tzara proclaimed: "We are circus directors whistling amid the winds of carnivals convents bawdy houses theatres realities sentiments restaurants HoHiHoHo Bang."⁵⁸ The circus, for Devětsil and Dada, stood in for a certain type of humor appropriate to addressing the terrible absurdity of World War I; in Teige's interpretation, it both can be a subversive form of humor related to the nihilist qualities of Dada and can reflect a desire for catharsis and laughter even in the aftermath of devastation.

There are ample examples to illustrate what this element of clowning around looked like among Devětsil actors and dancers, beyond what the limited space here allows. But it was perhaps Charlie Chaplin, much beloved across the avant-gardes, who represented for Teige the most perfect embodiment of the Poetist "art of living" in his use of the comedic attributes of the clown and circus to engage serious social issues. Teige, who proclaimed that "the art of the clown is synthetic,"⁵⁹ had compared the circus clown—an "expert in all forms of life"⁶⁰—to the poet, "the greatest of whom is Chaplin."⁶¹ It is little surprise then that Chaplin appears frequently across Devětsil publications. By late 1922, Teige began to reproduce Cubist renderings of Chaplin by Fernand Léger from Goll's book *Chaplinade*.⁶² The cover of a 1925 issue of *Pásmo* is graced with a full-body photographic portrait of Chaplin, caught mid-laugh, and sporting his familiar accessories—bowler cap, big shoes, and cane. The same page includes a notice announcing that Chaplin, along with Douglas Fairbanks and Harold C. Lloyd, has been offered honorary Brno Devětsil membership.⁶³

57 Ibid., 582. Emphasis is the author's.

58 Tristan Tzara, "Manifesto of Mr. Antipyrine," in *The Dada Painters and Poets*, 75; originally published as "manifeste de monsieur antipyrine," in *Sept manifestes Dada* (Paris: Editions Jean Budry, n.d.). Subsequent scholarship and a 2005 reprint date the original publication to 1924.

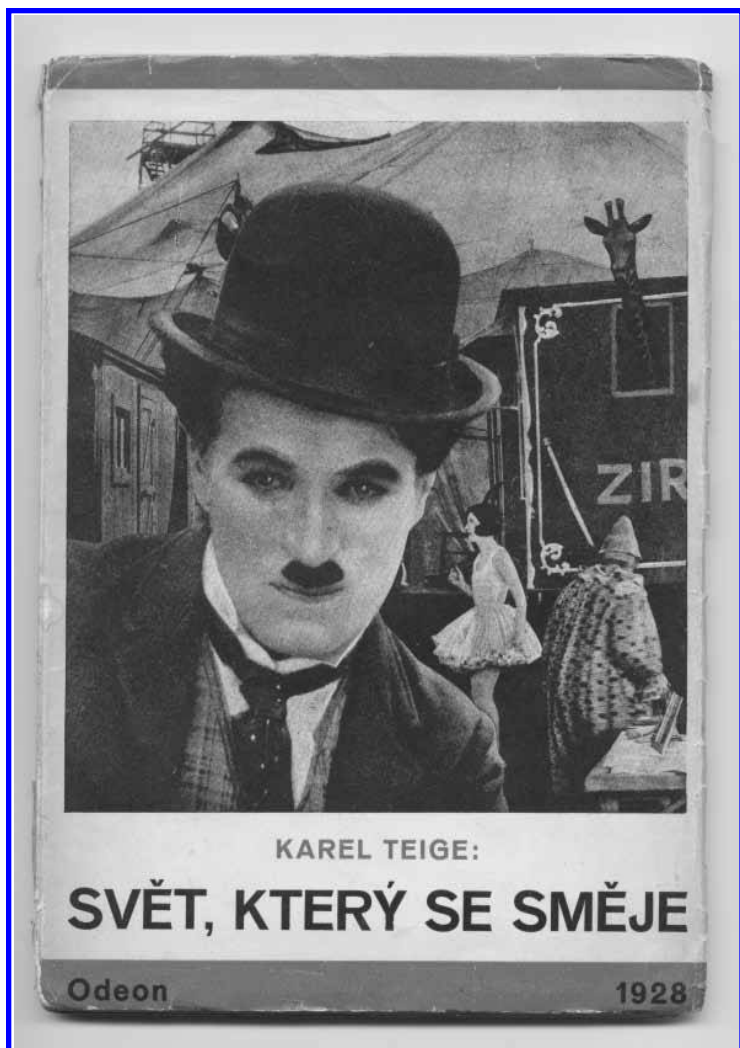
59 Teige, "S clowny a komedianty," 57.

60 Ibid.

61 Teige, "Estetika filmu a kinografie," 47.

62 Teige did meet Léger in Paris in 1922, and they subsequently corresponded about permission to reproduce Léger's "Charlot." Letter from Fernand Léger to Karel Teige, November 25, 1922, Fond Karel Teige, Památník národního písemnictví, Prague.

63 See *Pásmo* 1, no. 13–14 (1925): 1.



Cover of Karel Teige, *O humoru, clownech a dadaistech: Svět, který se směje* (On Humor, Clowns and Dadaists: A World which Laughs). Prague: Odeon, 1928. Private collection.

Perhaps most notably, promotional imagery from Chaplin's film *The Circus* largely comprises the cover of the volume *A World Which Laughs*. Teige described the book cover generally "as the poster for a book,"⁶⁴ and certainly, the strategic inclusion of this imagery on the cover of a book proclaimed in the title to be about humor, clowns, and Dadaists is an illustration of this point. In the photomontage,

64 Karel Teige, "Modern Typography," in *Karel Teige/1900–1951: L'Enfant Terrible*, Dluhosch and Švácha, eds., trans. Alexandra Büchler, 104; originally published as "Moderní Typo," *Typografia* 34, nos. 7–9 (1927).

Chaplin's head in his signature bowler cap looks out at the reader from the left corner, filling most of the frame. Behind him are the requisite circus accoutrements: a clown (Henry Bergman), a dancer in tutu (Merna Kennedy), and a giraffe poking its long neck out of a caboose window. The depicted scene never actually occurs in the film (in which I found no giraffe cameos) but collapses the most important protagonists into one frame, a montage that narrates the film's storyline in a single image: showing simultaneously Chaplin as the tramp, his clown foil, and the love interest at the circus where he is employed. The layers perform somewhat like the combined elements in the Rössler montage, conveying also a cinematic quality. It is a notable illustration of how Teige envisions the picture poem to work, in which "A poem is read like a modern picture. A modern picture is read like a poem."⁶⁵

The examples above reflect variations on a theme, in which photographs capturing the stage (and film) are either combined in photomontages or presented side by side, in Devětsil books and magazines, to display a uniquely Czech version of Dada that also appropriates international influences to project a cathartic, clownish humor.

SOMETHING OUT OF NOTHING

In closing, I return to my initial question: what did Devětsil want from Dada? Simply put, the answer might be: nothing. Indeed, at the opening of *The World Which Smells Nice*, the book that largely concludes his writings on Dada, Teige described Dada as "Nothing. A glorious and banal nothing."⁶⁶ Across his writings in the 1920s, Teige addresses nihilism as symptomatic of a reimagining of the role of art in a drastically altered postwar society. What Teige called "Dadaist negation, Dadaist pessimism and nihilism, Dadaist anaestheticism and anti-artism" did not amount to an empty void; it was "*not only* a deep and elemental sadness of disintegration and the emptiness of everything, a hopelessness in the futility of everything."⁶⁷ It is also, in its willingness to address these darker themes, adjacent to what is "beautiful, amiable, and happy, like love and poetry," and what is more, a "humorous élan against stagnant and anemic aestheticism and literariness."⁶⁸ The banal-

65 Teige, "Painting and Poetry," 368. The translation is modified.

66 Teige, "Od romantismu k dadaismu," in *Svět, který voní*, II.

67 Teige, "Dada," 87. Emphasis is my own.

68 Ibid.

ity of the everyday and modern ennui are charged here with agency in that, from nothing, art and poetry might come to life.

Thus, when Teige concludes toward the end of “On Dadaists” that a specifically Czech Dada in the realm of poetry and art amounted to “all together nothing,”⁶⁹ this can be interpreted simultaneously as a claim *for* and *against* the existence of a Czech-sited Dada. As Tzara famously stated in his 1918 Dada Manifesto, “Dada means nothing.”⁷⁰ A similar conclusion is reached by Hausmann, but with a twist; in the second issue of his magazine *Der Dada* from 1919, the question “What is dada?” runs lengthwise across a page, and, following a string of suggestions—Art? Fire insurance? Organized religion?—the real answer is insinuated: “Or is it nothing at all, i.e. everything?”⁷¹ Thus, a claim for “nothing,” in the context of Dada, takes on a positive value: nothing becomes precisely something, a subversion of presupposed values. Zusi interprets Teige’s assertion of “aesthetic negation” as “socially affirmative. Or, translated into Teige’s emerging Constructivist terms, art under capitalism had lost its functional efficacy.”⁷² What Teige found compelling in both Constructivism and Dada was an insistence on an art that could take the form of life itself. In Poetism’s debt to the former, this was figured in the embrace of the “new,” of rationality and a vision of social progress that imagined the new person and even a new world. Even in his essay “Dada,” first published in 1926 and already a retrospective account of the movement, Teige looks to the Soviet Union as the promise of a new way forward: “a new beauty, a new poetry of a new life.”⁷³

To that end, a slogan coined by the Kiev-born Soviet writer and journalist Ilya Ehrenburg—“New art quits being art”—was very popular with Devětsil, for whom the negative functions here to argue for an art that cedes being described as such because it is pervasive and indistinguishable from everyday life. Ehrenburg’s catch phrase was thus aptly emblazoned in bold, black letters in Devětsil’s anthology *Život* (*Life*, 1922). It has been suggested that the anthology was displayed open to

69 Teige, “O dadaistech,” 153.

70 Tristan Tzara, “Dada Manifesto 1918,” 77.

This is likewise printed as the opening epigraph in Roman Jakobson’s famous Dada article, written in Prague. See Roman Jakobson, “Dada,” in *Language and Literature*, ed. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1987), 34–40; originally published as “Dada,” *Vestník teatru* 82 (February 8, 1921): 3–4.

71 “Was ist dada?” *Der Dada* no. 2 (December 1919): 7.

72 Zusi, “Style of the Present,” 108.

73 Teige, “Dada,” 90.

these pages at the Bazaar of Modern Art in Prague in 1923.⁷⁴ The slogan was subsequently hung as a banner when the exhibition moved in a smaller form to Brno (as The Exhibition of New Art) in early 1924.⁷⁵ This echoes a slogan that graced the *Erste Internationale Dada Messe* (1920) in Berlin, at which a photograph captures Grosz and John Heartfield holding a sign that reads: “Art is dead. Long live Tatlin’s new machine art.”⁷⁶ In another anthology, *Revoluční sborník Devětsil* (*Revolutionary Anthology of Devětsil*, 1922), Teige again quotes Ehrenburg’s proclamation that new art is no longer art, and follows with the assertion that “*in a new world art has a new function.*”⁷⁷ Teige proposes a productive value of repudiation in art that is arguably inflected with Tzara as well as with Ehrenburg, Hausmann, and Tatlin.

When Teige scrawled the equation “ $Da^2 = \text{dada}$ ” on a postcard to Seifert in 1923, he was perhaps drawing out the “yes” hidden twice in the word “Dada,” since *da* means “yes” in several Slavic languages (including Russian, but not Czech).⁷⁸ In the context of Tzara’s “Dada means nothing” (or, we could transcribe it, $Da^2 = o$), Teige’s concession that the catalog of Dada moments in the Czech context amounts to “all together nothing” in fact squares up to precisely something ($Da^2 = o = \text{Dada}$). Better than nothing, the work of Devětsil in the 1920s stakes a claim for the Czech interwar avant-garde—on its own terms—on the global Dada map.

74 See Helena Maňasová Hradská, “Avantgarda ve výkladní skříní. Výstava nového umění (1924) v Brně pohledem dobového tisku,” in *Brno v minulosti a dnes: příspěvky k dějinám a výstavbě Brna* (Brno: Statutární město Brno, Archiv města Brna, 2012), 345.

75 See Petr Ingerle, “Brno a literární a umělecká avantgarda dvacátých let 20. století,” in *Devětsil 1920–1931*, 70. For more on these exhibitions see, for instance, Hana Rousová, “Devětsil—Bazar moderního umění,” in *První republika 1918–1938*, ed. Anna Pravdová and Lada Hubatová-Vacková (Prague: Národní galerie Praha, 2018), 55; published in conjunction with a long-term exhibition of the same title, organized and presented at the Trade Fair Palace of the National Gallery, Prague, from October 24, 2018; Karel Šrp, “Karel Teige in the Twenties: The Moment of Sweet Ejaculation,” in *Karel Teige/1900–1951: L’Enfant Terrible*, trans. Karolína Vočadlo, 25–27; and Šrp, “Poetry in the Midst of the World: The Avant-Garde as Projectile,” in *Central European Avant-Gardes: Exchange and Transformation, 1910–1930*, ed. Timothy O. Benson, trans. Andrée Collier Záleská (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 114–18.

76 In *Dada Almanach*, n.p. (between pages 40 and 41).

Vladimir Tatlin’s model for the construction of a monument to the Third International was never built, but it became a popular symbol across the interwar avant-gardes. A sketch of it is reproduced, for instance, in *Život*, alongside a photograph of the Eiffel Tower—the latter upheld as a more successful construction, as it was in fact executed.

77 Karel Teige, “Umění dnes a zítra,” *Revoluční sborník Devětsil* (1922): 199.

78 Teige explicitly noted this himself, also using the notation of an equation: “[the word ‘Dada’] in Russian = yes, yes.” “Od romantismu k dadaismu,” 8.