

When the Cabaret Voltaire opened as “Künstlerkneipe Voltaire” on February 5, 1916, its initial program – advertised on a poster designed by Marcel Słodki – first announced “music recitals and recitations.” Music was indeed central to the Dada impulses that unfolded during the Soirées, first at Cabaret Voltaire, then at the movement’s various venues in Zurich, and later transcending both national and European borders. Yet, neither in Dada Zurich’s historiography nor in the common conceptions of the movement, music is as prominently featured or contextualized in its full complexity. The “Interlude” program in the Vaulted Cellar unfolds in two acts from February to April 2025 and thematizes Dada’s legacy in relation to music and sound, while also creating space for contemporary practices and discourses. The title “Interlude” refers to the traditional structure of musical compositions and to what happens during the interval between parts of a larger composition. At Cabaret Voltaire, “Interlude” activates the Vaulted Cellar between the usual exhibition program, inviting the audience to a different kind of immersive and reflective experience.

Dada is often associated with loud disturbing sounds as well as chaos and randomness. Yet, the program sheets and chronicles of various protagonists reveal that the Dada Soirées in Zurich brought together many opposing artistic directions of the time: experiments with noise shared the stage with pieces rooted in the Western harmonic musical tradition, played by protagonists such as Hans Heusser and Suzanne Perrottet. At Cabaret Voltaire and the later Zurich venues, one could hear romantic pieces by Saint-Saëns and Rachmaninov, as well as folk music in German, French, Danish and Russian, brought by the movement’s international protagonists, most of whom were fleeing the First World War. The two founders of Cabaret Voltaire were professionally active as cabaret musicians. During the Dada Soirées, Emmy Hennings sang folk songs and Hugo Ball played ragtime music on the piano. However, against a backdrop of disillusionment stemming from the crises of the war, Dada also developed new artistic languages that often drew on anti-traditional principles and used rhythm and sound as artistic materials.

Some of these innovations were shaped by the appropriation of non-European idioms; what was problematically labeled as “primitive” was embraced as a liberating alternative to communicate more directly with the public and disrupt the established norms of traditional Western art and the values of bourgeois society. With access to examples of African poetry, Zurich’s Dada artists incorporated “Chants N_” and the bruitist works of Richard Huelsenbeck into their Soirées programs, without critically reflecting on this appropriation. On the other hand, a crucial part of the experimental sound research of Dada artists also unfolded in questioning language as a tool of propaganda, in a context where

nationalism established itself exponentially, which resonates with today’s political reality.

One of Dada’s artistic strategies was to understand words no longer as signifiers but as sound and use them as rhythms and intonations. A few years before the opening of Cabaret Voltaire, the futurist Luigi Russolo published the manifesto *L’Arte dei Rumori* (The Art of Noises), in opposition to academism and tradition, while seeking a direct and dynamic impact on the audience. Yet, within Futurism, the reproduction and declamation of machine and war sounds is to be understood as a proto-fascist celebration of modernity. In contrast, Dada artists used language itself to question nationalist propaganda, critiquing the violence of the modern age and war. This is particularly evident in the development of the new forms of sound poetry and simultaneous poetry, used mainly by Hugo Ball and Tristan Tzara, in which the noise of nonsensical words stands for an opposition to normative rationality. In these sonic tactics, the body was the instrument and place of declamation, and thus, a form of opposition against structures of power and rules.

The development of experimental music in the 20th and 21st centuries owes a certain legacy to Dada. The movement’s anti-bourgeois ethos resonates with various movements, such as Fluxus, or the punk and noise music genres, all of which embrace sound as a site of opposition. Figures such as Merzbow – the stage name of the pioneering Japanese noise artist of the 1980s and 1990s Masami Akita – or the industrial band Cabaret Voltaire demonstrate these historical links, with Akita directly referencing Dada artist Kurt Schwitters’ Merzbau. The processes of aleatoric creation exemplified by Tzara’s “cut-up” technique, or collage and assemblage, find a particular echo in sampling cultures, in the pioneering experimental compositions of John Cage, or in musique concrète and its sound collages. The use of urban soundscapes, field recordings and various environmental sounds in today’s electronic music resonates with Ball’s sound poetry. The centrality of the body and performance in this form of poetry is also central to contemporary sound art practices that blur the lines between music, poetry and the visual arts. The rejection of norms and the search for raw sounds in the various directions of noise music align with the transgressive ethos of Dada.

“Interlude” bridges the gap between this history and contemporary sound practices, giving them space as an echo to Dada’s legacy.

“Interlude”

Act 1, WURM – Elie and Gaspard Emma Hers
07.02.2025–08.03.2025

The first act of “Interlude” presents WURM, an experimental space for everything that sounds adventurous, exploratory, noisy, improvised, speculative, and charmingly weird. Founded 2011 in Basel, it evolved into a buzzy hub for workshops, performances and collaborative projects. For “Interlude” WURM occupies the Cabaret Voltaire for a month, presenting experimental and new sounds.

The Vaulted Cellar is transformed into a stage, activated by performative actions and new sounds. The program includes various sound performances, taking place during two Soirées on February 7 and March 1, 2025. In between these events, the space is inhabited with recordings of the performances. In the center of the room hangs a unique lamp, usually present in the original WURM space, now displaced as part of the scenography to invite new happenings. The focus shifts from the visual to the auditory, as an invitation to experience the space differently.

The program of “Interlude, Act 1: WURM” is organized in collaboration with Mercury Tracer, an event series based in Basel and launched at WURM that serves as a platform for ultra-contemporary artists from the fields of ambient, experimental music and experimental club music. Curated by Flavia Senn and Mattia Comuzzi, Mercury Tracer showcases the diversity and innovation of a new generation of musicians and puts local and international, forward-thinking voices at the center to break traditional boundaries and give room to innovative forms of expression. For the Soirée of February 7, 2025, Elie and Gaspard Emma Hers have been invited to perform their works in the Vaulted Cellar. The recordings of these performances create the soundscape for the first act of “Interlude”.

Elie is a DJ and sound artist based in Neuchâtel, Switzerland. In performances close to harsh noise, she explores the sonorities of unexpected materials, such as syringe garbage cans, and aggressive sounds created by DIY granulators as well as EDM samples. In her practice, the body is at the center, exploring its limits and its breath, as a creative and subversive energy. Here, noise simultaneously amplifies bodily movements and saturated sounds to an extreme, presented without any pretense of savoir-faire. As she moves through space, she also plays with the resonance of sound through feedback, creating a triptych between body, machine and space. The artist appropriates the violence of sound to convey it in her own terms, creating a kind of dystopian sonic high that amplifies the over-stimulation of the brain as a commentary on contemporary violent realities for bodies and the power structures they must conform to. Confronted with dark tones and disrupted frequencies, the audience’s hearing and orientation are challenged as part of a cathartic procession.

Gaspard Emma Hers – also known as DJ Würm – is a multidisciplinary artist from Brussels, Belgium. Their music delves in liminal spaces between fiction and personal archive; they propose a journey into a landscape that echoes the sound of distant raves and develops into an introspective ambient noise piece. There is no narrative line to follow, but some images can be grasped in order to find a pathway into endless echoes, loops and vibrations. The artist assembles different sonorities like a floating collage, fragmented by deep bass and strident sounds. It is an invitation to call upon one’s own mythology, references and soundscapes, to let personal emotions create connections with the multiple and diverse layers of sound. The fantasy world that unfolds inhabits the medieval architecture of the Vaulted Cellar, whispering legends into the audience’s ears and blurring the temporalities of the past and future. Music is present as a distinct material with a liberating bodily effect, inviting sensitive dance and emotional release.

In Zurich, not only is the birthplace of Dada located at the Cabaret Voltaire, but also one of the most significant Dada collections in the world can be found at the Kunsthaus Zurich. The Zurich Dadaists expressed themselves in both intense live moments and in the creation of lasting art or ephemera, such as texts and invitation cards. Alongside the Dada cabinet at the Kunsthaus Zurich, the Dada showcase at the Cabaret Voltaire is another important space where these works are presented, allowing the unique features of the venue to be highlighted. The institution occupies a space between being a place of remembrance for Dada and a project space for contemporary art and gastronomy. This dual function allows for the intersection of time-specific and timeless questions. The Dada showcase and the rotating exhibition, both located in the same room – the Vaulted Cellar – are distinct formats. However, they enter into a dynamic relationship. In the juxtaposition of historical documents and contemporary contributions, two key aspects emerge. First, the continuity of Dadaist ideas and techniques is revealed. Second, a space opens up to reflect on the approaches required to gain new perspectives. The exhibits change every three months, each time focusing on a different theme.

About the current selection:

The idea that Dada artists used noise instead of harmonious sounds has become established in the collective memory. While this aspect of Dada is an important legacy that has inspired many musical styles, the sonic diversity of the movement is often overlooked. The selected exhibits offer insight into the musical world of Zurich Dada. As early as 1920, Richard Huelsenbeck distinguished between two currents within Dada: “music” and “bruitism”. While he understood “music” as rhythmically structured sound design – often with percussion instruments – he described “bruitism” as a chaotic, noisy world of sound, characterized by sound poetry and simultaneous poetry. Bruitism in particular shaped the common perception around Dada. However, the exhibits show that the Dadaists did not simply oppose the musical tradition, but dealt with it in a complex way. At the same time, the Dada protagonists often made use of orientalist and racializing elements, such as the appropriation of African rhythms or the use of sound poems based on languages reduced to supposed “original sounds,” thus reproducing exoticizing and colonial clichés. These elements can also be recognized in the exhibits on display.

1) Arnold Schönberg, *Opus 11, No. 2*, 1909. Collection Cabaret Voltaire

As a musician, the still relatively unknown dancer Suzanne Perrottet performed at at least three of the eight Dada Soirées that took place in Zurich. She described herself as the person who introduced atonal music to the Dada movement. Atonal music is characterized by the absence of a central tone around which melody, scale, chords and harmonies are built in tradi-

tional Western music. Arnold Schönberg was one of the most important composers to develop atonal music at the beginning of the 20th century, particularly with concepts such as dissonance, unpredictable harmonic movements and the twelve-tone technique, which prevents the dominance of one tone over the others. At the opening of the Galerie Dada in 1917, Perrottet played six pieces by Schönberg. These notes provide an insight into the atonal composition *Opus 11, No. 2*, which was performed that evening.

2) Hans Heusser, Marsch “Salve, Lugano”, composed after 1919. Collection Cabaret Voltaire

The Swiss composer Hans Heusser has long been overlooked in the historiography of Dada, although he was one of the most active pianists at the Soirées. Hans Heusser’s involvement with Dada was limited to the Zurich Dada years 1916-1919. From 1924, he lived in St. Gallen as city music director and is still known today mainly for his “Russian Rhapsody”, pieces for wind band orchestra and marches. An important turning point in Heusser’s Dada period probably took place at the last Zurich Dada Soirée on April 9, 1919, which is regarded as the high point of Zurich Dada. Walter Serner performed his text “Letzte Lockerung” there, which led to an uproar in the audience. As a result, Heusser was unable to perform the piano quartet he had planned for the end. Heusser’s later compositions, such as the present march “Salve, Lugano”, which is part of a nationalist and military tradition, stand in stark contrast to the Dadaists’ bruitistic performances, which are to be understood as critical reactions to the war.

3) Hugo Ball, sound poem “Karawane”, performed in 1916, published in 1920 the the Dada Almanach. Collection Cabaret Voltaire

According to the Dadaists, the rational creation of meaning through language and logic had led to the First World War. Hugo Ball, who grew up in a strict Catholic family and went to war as a volunteer, positioned himself against the principle of rational meaning-making during the Dada years in Zurich. He strove to bring the magical and the unreasonable back into consciousness. Ball was a pioneer of the sound poem, in which language is only used as sound material and therefore has no linguistic meaning. He performed his sound poem “Karawane” in a cardboard costume, whereby, according to his own account, he adopted an ancient cadence of priestly laments. The sound poem is very similar to music due to the absence of words describing the content. Since, according to the Dadaists, music eluded any clear meaning, these poems broke with the rational, linguistic formation of meaning. The Dada Almanach, in which “Karawane” appeared as one of Ball’s central works, was published in 1920 as a document of the Dada movement.

4) Hans Heusser, program sheet “Soirée Hans Heusser”, Zurich, 1917, facsimile. Collection

Kunsthaus Zürich

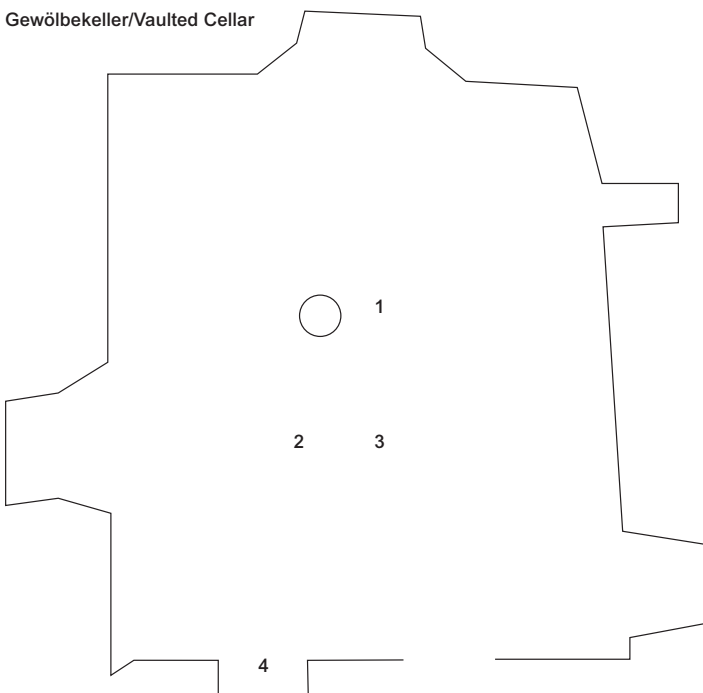
The program sheet of the Dada Soirée “Soirée Hans Heusser” challenges the usual idea of these events as radical, anti-bourgeois provocations. The program sheet contains traditionally oriented compositions that are rooted in the style of the 19th century in their tonality and titles. Such works were an integral part of the Dada Soirées. Heusser’s artistic position can be placed in relation to the avant-garde with regard to his program: he refers to the German poet and representative of avant-garde modernism, Else Lasker Schüler, as well as to the stage composition “Der gelbe Klang” by Wassily Kandinsky, which represents the draft of an abstract synthesis of the arts.

transcription shows the simultaneous poem as a score for the voices, approximating the conventions of musical notation.

5) Tristan Tzara, Richard Huelsenbeck, Marcel Janco, *L’amiral cherche une maison à louer*, 1916 first performed and published in the Cabaret Voltaire magazine, facsimile. Collection Cabaret Voltaire

The simultaneous poem “L’amiral cherche une maison à louer”, first performed by Tristan Tzara, Richard Huelsenbeck and Marcel Janco at the Cabaret Voltaire in March 1916, consists of various texts recited simultaneously by different voices. Fictitious words are mixed with German, French and English as well as whistles and other noises. This mixture makes it impossible to understand the content of the words or to define a single author for the work. As with the sound poems, the language loses its meaning and becomes pure sound. The simultaneous poem was published in the magazine “Cabaret Voltaire”, which was issued once. The present

Gewölbekeller/Vaulted Cellar



Exhibits in the Vaulted Cellar:

- 1 Stage light element WURM
Design by Fabian Peña
- 2 Elie
Recording of a sound performance
Loop
- 3 Gaspard Emma Hers
Recording of a sound performance
Loop
- 4 Dada showcase with changing
exhibits from the collection of the
Kunsthaus Zürich and the collection
of Cabaret Voltaire.

Erdgeschoss/Ground Floor