

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 on the one end 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.

However, given the ephemerality of sound and the fact that the Dadaists themselves made little mention of their musical pieces in their writings and chronicles, it is difficult to find concrete information on this aspect of Dada. As a result, it has been largely excluded from the main historical narrative of the movement. Nevertheless, 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 crucial 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 discourses and practices around sound, giving them space as an echo of Dada’s legacy.

«Interlude»

Act 2, Hold The Sound – BaseCamp Library
11.03.2025–27.04.2025

The first act (07.02.25–08.03.25) presented WURM, an experimental space for everything that sounds adventurous, exploratory, noisy, improvised, speculative, and charmingly weird founded in 2011 in Basel. For “Interlude”, WURM transformed the Vaulted Cellar into a stage for a month, presenting experimental and new sounds by Elie, Gaspard Emma Hers, and Violeta García. The second act of “Interlude” (11.03.25–27.04.25) is composed around the BaseCamp Library, featuring “Hold The Sound”, an installation that invites the audience to read, listen, reflect and discuss.

The desire to capture the ephemeral nature of sound through verbal and visual expression is the starting point of “Hold The Sound”. BaseCamp is an initiative of the Locarno Film Festival – a permanent laboratory and art residency dedicated to expanding the multidisciplinary dialogue on contemporary cinema. The Library is a new project from BaseCamp with the endeavor to build a living and evolving archive. It is born out of the need for more vibrant social spaces that foster community. With a modular display system, the BaseCamp Library can adapt to many places and enable the sharing of tools and ideas, free from production-driven constraints. “Hold The Sound” is a curated selection of over 150 art books that hold sound, each in their own way. From critical theories around listening practices to scores, the ephemeral phenomenon of sound is translated, archived and reflected upon through a medial transfer, in the form of publications. These works encourage deeper engagement with listening and attention, presenting a variety of voices that offer thought-provoking ideas, introductions and new ways of accessing auditory phenomena.

As curators of “Hold The Sound – BaseCamp Library” Justine Stella Knuchel and Jan Steinbach observe, today’s sonic environments are increasingly shaped by algorithms, leading to isolating effects that are already evident. In this context, they believe there is a need for exploring different ways of engaging with sound, questioning our habits, and reclaiming listening as an active practice. The title of the project is a reference to sound artist Tony Conrad, who shouted “Hold the sound!” decades ago, as he passed his microphone to an audience – an invitation to engage deeply with the auditory experience, to hold and acknowledge it fully.

The display of the library was conceived by designer Gabriel Hafner, using only discarded or recycled materials. It offers an environment where the public is invited to sit and inhabit the space in an extended temporality. For the first time since its inception, the BaseCamp Library is presented at Cabaret Voltaire accompanied by a soundscape, developed in collaboration with Beatrice Dinoia and composed of three sound works. These pieces by C3, Furtherset and Surani were originally performed live in the library space as it was displayed in Milano, at Fabbrica del

Vapore. All three works, whether original creations or re-adapted sound performances, aim to reconsider listening as a practice that embraces a multiplicity of dimensions and blurs boundaries between natural and technological, voluntary and involuntary, real and imagined sounds – each equally capable of expanding the limits of perception. The recordings are played in “Interlude: Act 2, Hold The Sound – BaseCamp Library” to accompany the reading and reflecting of the public.

The sound work *Here, now listen* by Milano-based collective C3 (Luca Cingolani, Marco Verna, Roberto Paravia) was created in the context of a workshop, where participants were invited to paint with unusual tools on a large shared paper sheet. Different microphones captured the microscopic and macroscopic signals of their movements to reveal the hidden spontaneous melodies of this collective action.

The Infinite Hour by Venice-based sound artist Furtherset is a reimagination of an original short track as an extended, almost orchestral piece, built around a circular structure of differences and repetitions, to offer an immersive experience to the listeners.

corpi d’acqua / ඉතුරු ඇඟ / bodies of water by Surani, an artist active between Sri Lanka and Rome, is a sonic immersion into water sounds, connecting the currents that tie all islands and lands, from Sri Lanka to the Mediterranean. The work seeks memory, movement and transformation – a way to feel sound as a fluid, as something that envelops and reshapes, but also that intrinsically bears memory within it.

Published in inauguration of the BaseCamp Library in 2024, the pocketbook *Hold The Sound* is available for purchase at the bookshop CVBOOKS at the entrance. It collects thoughts on sound selected by 30 artists and researchers, and brings together a multitude of voices offering insights into listening experiences and fascinated by the idea of giving form to something as elusive as a sound.

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, march “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

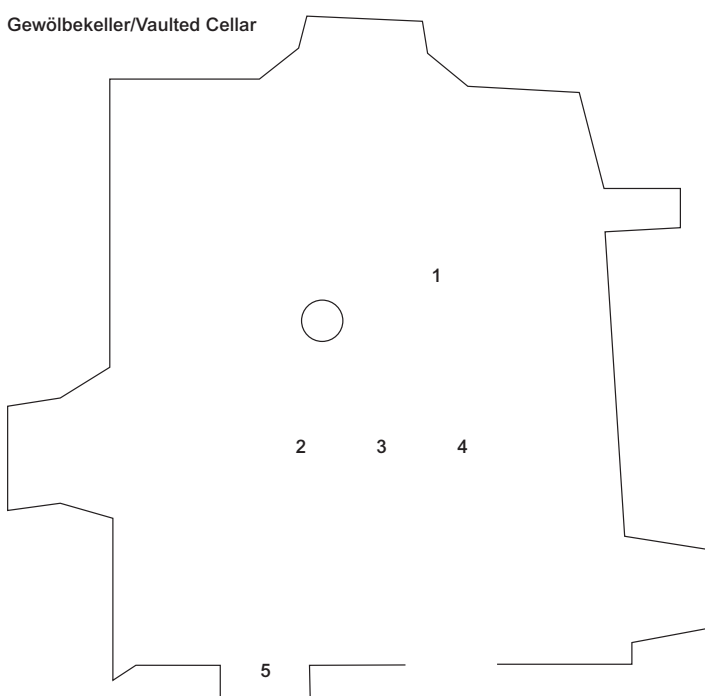
The program sheet of the Dada Soirée “Soirée Hans Heusser” challenges the usual idea of these events as radical, anti-bourgeois provocations. The program sheet contains traditionally oriented compositions that are rooted in the style of the 19th century in their tonality and titles. Such works were an 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 Schöler, as well as to the stage composition “Der gelbe Klang” by Wassily Kandinsky, which represents the draft of an abstract synthesis of the arts.

The simultaneous poem was published in the magazine “Cabaret Voltaire”, which was issued once. The present 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.

Gewölbekeller/Vaulted Cellar



Exhibits in the Vaulted Cellar:

- 1
Hold The Sound – BaseCamp Library
Design by Gabriel Hafner, 2024–2025
- 2
Furtherset
Sound piece
The Infinite Hour [Extended Version],
2024
41min07sec
- 3
Surani
Sound piece
corpi d’acqua / ඉතුරු ඝූෂා / bodies of water, 2024
01h07min
- 4
C3
Sound piece
Here, now listen, 2024
58m28sec
- 5
Dada showcase with changing exhibits from the collection of the Kunsthaus Zürich and the collection of Cabaret Voltaire.