Several years ago, I went to a John Heartfield exhibition with a non–art historian friend. He walked around for about fifteen minutes and then said “I get this, it’s like punk.” This understanding of Dada as similar to a contemporary phenomenon made implicit sense to me; for Dada, as an art historical movement or entity, is often clearest in my mind in the guise of Neo-Dada. Even by the time of William Rubin’s famous 1968 exhibition on Dada and Surrealism at the Museum of Modern Art, the movement was being framed in terms of its “heritage.” In Rubin’s catalog, images of Dada works and those of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg appear side by side as if Dada existed first and foremost in a state of temporal and geographical collapse. The simultaneous appearance of Dada and Neo-Dada is telling, as both share a similar narrative logic in the discourse of art history. Dada is usually introduced as a precursor, an unruly child who matures into the properly codified movement of Surrealism. Likewise, the Neo-Dada manifestations of Johns and Rauschenberg are routinely referred to as an intermediary step between the fully articulated Abstract Expressionism and the similarly complete art of Pop. That both movements need to be so bracketed, positioned as either parenthetical or transitional, depending on the perspective, is cause for suspicion, given the teleology that such a narrative implies.

Even though Rubin argues that Surrealism also had a contemporary “heritage,” only a handful of Claes Oldenburg’s works are offered. More telling, however, is that no argument is made for Neo-Surrealism (not to mention Neo-Cubism or Neo-Constructivism). This is another way to flag the continued importance and influence of Dada; for in addition to the work of Johns and Rauschenberg, 1968 certainly felt the presence of figures such as Arman, Allan Kaprow, Yoko Ono, and Daniel Spoerri, and the importance of Fluxus cannot be underestimated. The ease of generating a 1960s list of Neo-Dada types is mirrored by the contemporary application of “Neo-Dada” to artists such as Francis Alÿs, Gabriel Orozco, and Rirkrit Tiravanija, to mention only a few. So what is it then, about Dada, that leaves it so available to perpetual reception, revision, and repetition?

One cause, or effect, of this eternal return is a seeming lack of coherence of Dada as a properly codified and historicized art movement. Rather, Dada is most
convincing as a set of strategies (which is why the list of artists attached to both it and Neo-Dada are so heterogeneous). And might this notion of an available set of strategies or production techniques (as opposed to a specific set of aesthetic problems) account for both Dada’s lack of cohesion as a movement and its perpetual returns? In the 1910s and the 1920s Dada’s most important strategies were the “invention” of the readymade; the use of collage, assemblage, and montage; and the deployment of chance. Each challenged the primacy of painting and its reliance on a visual discourse dominated by the problem of the picture plane. As Dada set out to escape and dismantle the language of painting its strategies were also seen, in part retroactively, to facilitate the blurring of art and life. And the merger, or eradication, of the difference between the two categories is what garners Dada’s reputation as anti-art, nihilistic, and antibourgeois. While the categories of art and life are hardly self-evident, if one accepts the dissolution of painting and, hence, bourgeois categories of art through art’s merger with life as one of Dada’s goals, then certainly Dada, and all of its returns, can be read as a series of profound failures. The art object (let alone the art world) remains virulently strong, seemingly impervious to repeated threats of destruction. However, I wonder if the emphasis of the inquiry were shifted away from art and the critique were instead leveled at life, what versions of “success” might arise? For instance, if Dada’s strategies are framed as a challenge to life as opposed to art, then one could consider seriously Pierre Bourdieu’s claim that

the games of artists and aesthetes and their struggles for the monopoly of artistic legitimacy are less innocent than they seem. At stake in every struggle over art there is also the imposition of an art of living, that is, the transmutation of an arbitrary way of living into the legitimate way of life which casts every other way of living into arbitrariness.¹

Certainly, Dada artists engaged in a struggle over the definition of art, but the strategies of montage, the readymade, and chance are not only mechanisms for making art objects, they are also abdications of traditional forms of artistic labor. Conceivably, Dada’s “anti-art” stance was not exclusively directed against the philosophical category of art; indeed, the continual challenges to art in many ways clarified and consolidated its very existence.² Rather, it was a profound rejection of the production of objects with traditional artistic skills, such that what is at issue is the problem of artistic labor.³ Hence, while Dada was not successful at destroying art, it confidently began the dismantling of the traditional life of the artist.

² Peter Bürger argues that the avant-garde attack on art “made art recognizable as an institution” such that despite Dada’s desire to destroy art, its activities actually serve to provide us with the best working definition of the category of art to date. See Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 57.
³ The very first line of William Rubin’s Dada catalog rhymes with this argument, stating that “the plastic arts played only an ancillary role in Dada . . . not worthy of delection in themselves” (*Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage* [New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1968], p. 11).
The ur-history of both the readymade and montage can be found in Picasso’s *Still Life with Chair Caning* (1907). His inclusion of a machine-made object into the picture plane is, among many other things, a renunciation of the time-honored artistic skill and labor of trompe l’oeil: Why should he paint an image of chair-canining when it has already been perfectly rendered by a machine? Picasso, as we know, felt the rappel d’ordre and returned to conventional definitions of artistic labor: a painter should paint, after all. But Marcel Duchamp’s investigation of the readymade definitively substituted the act of (artistic) production with consumption, purchasing his sculptures already made. As much as this act constituted an attack on the original and unique art object, it also displayed an enormous degree of ambivalence toward historical definitions of artistic skill and, by extension, the traditional labor of the artist. So too, the structure of montage can be seen as the editing and arranging of mechanically produced images made by someone else as opposed to the production of an image from the mind’s interior. To shop, to edit, to arrange, these were new forms of labor, ones not yet as familiar and administered as they are today. Even more challenging to traditional modes of artistic labor were those artists who used chance; be it the objet trouvé or automatic drawing, chance allowed the artist to relinquish control over the final work of art and, in doing so, diminished both the amount and effect of his or her labor.

Each Dada invention—montage, the readymade, and chance—profoundly questioned the role, stability, nature, and necessity of the artist’s labor. Given that Dada took place in a handful of urban centers, each weathering the change of the increasingly solidified and expansive industrial revolution, perhaps these labor-saving and labor-altering modes of production all speak to a desire to negotiate the effects of the machinic on everyday life. Much has been made of the Dadaist’s love of machines, their profligate self-imaging as machines; their ambivalence toward artistic labor, however, has been less articulated. I’d like to propose that the Dada obsession with the machinic is bound up with a dual desire to make work that effaces the traces of human labor as well as to be free from the “toil” of traditional artistic labor. The artist-as-machine makes a particular kind of object in a particular kind of way, one that dialectically taxes and enervates the body as well as liberating the body (and mind?) from outmoded forms of artistic skill. Consequently, when Dada and Surrealist artists finally turn to the benchmark of artistic labor—the rendering of the figure—they do so in the guise of the exquisite corpse: an assembly-line production, structured by chance, in which no one artist is burdened with the “whole job.”

I’ve argued elsewhere that Duchamp’s readymades can be seen in part as a reaction to the Taylorist demand for efficiency. Perhaps this argument can be extended more generally to note that certain challenges to artistic labor might

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have emerged in Dada in response to the general cultural demands that labor—both productive and consumptive—reshape itself to conform to the then emergent logics of Taylorism and Fordism. Certainly, the responses to these demands varied greatly: In America Duchamp embraced the contradictions of consumer culture to avoid the hard labor of production. Whereas in Paris, Tristan Tzara famously declared that Dada makes no sense, refusing the centuries-long work of producing artistic meaning and cultural legibility. In both cases, as well as in many others, the artists have transformed the terms of artistic production (for which Walter Benjamin would later congratulate the Dadaists in his 1934 polemic “The Author as Producer”) to be simultaneously a part of their time and, as such, to better offer it an immanent critique. In other words, Dada’s strategies of production not only try to render “art” obsolescent, but also are designed to demolish (or at least challenge) the capitalist-bound terms of labor that go a long way to circumscribe the category of “life.”

Who performs the labor of art and what that means is a thread that runs through much post-1960s art. And whenever one finds a reference to a Dada heritage or Neo-Dada manifestation, and specifically when one encounters the legacy of Duchamp, there is usually some kind of play with artistic labor at hand in the work. Think of Sol LeWitt’s assistants producing his wall drawings, or Kaprow’s Fluids, a 1967 event in which volunteers built a wall of ice to the artist’s specifications only to watch it melt, or Gilbert and George’s invitations to come and drink with them in pubs. Although we are far from montage, the readymade, and chance, we remain in a realm articulated by a pretty ambivalent relationship to something called artistic labor. This is one of the ways in which Dada’s strategies are perpetually transforming, such that the legacy of the readymade can find itself equally in Michael Asher’s site interventions and Jeff Koons’s sculptures.

This is all to say that one reason for Dada’s perpetual return is due to the constant need to articulate the ever changing problems of capitalism and the role of the laborer within it. Dada offers a set of strategies to articulate both a problem and a potential solution. Historically, the solution was to radically reconfigure the modes of artistic production in a fashion that relinquished the artist from certain forms of labor. More recently the strategy seems to be a homeopathic first strike, in which the artist embodies the most “advanced” logic of capital’s version of the laborer. This has (at least) two distinct iterations, each with different political, economic, and ideological valences. The first is the migrant artist who moves according to where the labor is (e.g., artists who find their largest support in specific countries and not others). The second is the model of the nomadic artist in which the artist’s global mobility embodies the privilege of the newly described “creative class” (e.g., contemporary multinational biennials).6

Needless to say, the “original” Dada rebellion against work is probably why Dada and its repetitions are narrated as adolescent, interstitial sidebars to art

history’s master narrative. Yet I’m hard pressed to read the refusal of work-for-profit as adolescent or rebellious per se. Instead, Dada’s strategies of work avoidance or Neo-Dada’s ironic work mimicry constitute a set of management techniques (I suppose the pun is intended) for how to live, as an artist, in a critical way, amid the endless permutations, twists and turns, and baffling contradictions of capitalism, in a way that has some kind of provisional legitimacy. This legitimacy, or way of living (that in Bourdieu’s phrase often understands its own arbitrariness), often comes about through a challenge to previously articulated versions of labor and skill. Rather than denigrating Dada’s perpetual returns, we might instead read such reinventions as infinite calibrations and necessary critical adjustments designed to counter the steady strength of the status quo. After all, it’s worth remembering in this age of corporate pop music that lots of punk was made by people who didn’t know how to play their instruments.