

Arp was born in the Alsatian city of Strassburg in 1887. Situated at the foot of the Vosges Mountains and the Black Forest, this beautiful mediaeval city has for centuries been subject to a curious interplay of French and Alemannic elements. This is clearly reflected in both language and political development. Arp belonged to the harried and menaced generation that had been forced to bear the miseries that resulted from the neurosis for power and technical ingenuity being divorced from imagination. There were a few — the young Arp among them — who boldly stood up against everything that was spiritually bankrupt and hypocritical. They kidded and parodied the complexity of daily existence and, with fanatical energy, endeavored — with success — to stimulate both a new and more elementary mode of living and creative expression through art. They renounced the false educational clichés that asserted universal progress. Culture was to be found among the primitives, among the “barbarous” in the eyes of an over-organized and mechanical civilization. They were convinced that those elementary forces that are the fruit of “thought sprung from fantasy,” as Vico formulated it in the 18th century, could liberate mankind and art from the sterility of mere virtuosity, from, among so much else, the excrescence of man’s intellectual and materialistic desire to be the all-important nucleus of the uni-

verse. The time had come for the constructive forces of the imagination to take up arms against the rule of common sense. Vico’s struggle with the world of Descartes was continued with increasing vehemence.

What else were the first Dadaists up against, if it was not the festering rational world, its spurious moral standards and its bloated beauty cult founded on outworn classical recipes? “*We must destroy in order that the lousy materialists may in the ruins recognize what is essential. . . . Dada wanted to destroy the rationalist swindle for man, and to incorporate him again humbly in nature. Dada wanted to change the perceptible world of man today into a pious, senseless world without reason.*”¹

Behind the seemingly nihilistic and destructive Dada actions lay a firm belief in those concealed properties without which there can be no organic beauty, no human grace. It was high time indeed that Hugo Ball’s *vox humana* made itself heard to remonstrate against the stifling process of mechanization. From 1916–18 an inspired medley of painters, poets, dancers and *diseuses* gathered in Zurich to form the almost legendary *Cabaret Voltaire*,² anxiously seeking for the “*buried face of the time, its personality and origin, the cause of its affliction and its resuscitation.*”³ Somewhere in his

1. From Arp's diary, *Transition*, 1932.

2. Arp, Tristan Tzara, Richard Hülsenbeck, Hugo Ball, Emmy Hennings and Marcel Janco.

3. Written by Hugo Ball, who had come to