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# Hans Richter: Universalism vis-à-vis Particularism

Milly Heyd

## *The Blue Man*

During the Dada period in Zurich, Hans Richter portrayed the *Blue Man* (fig. 1) – an image denoting an odd man out. The ecstatic yet cold quality of the blue color, the intensive expression of the eyes highlighted by white, and the man's position, stemming from the left lower part of the picture where the broad circular curve of the upper part of the body is cut off by the frame, all suggest a movement from place to place – and thus a man in flight. Who is the blue man and what does he signify?<sup>1</sup>

The present paper will address the question of Richter's Jewish identity problem as reflected in his art and writings and symbolized here by the blue man. It will be the third part of my work on the hidden Jew and Dada that investigates the question: "Why Jews and Dada?"<sup>2</sup>

Throughout his life Richter held fast to an essentialist view of identity, projecting himself to the world as a German. He managed to keep secret the fact that he was born a Jew, and even in post-World War II Manhattan

presented himself as a German. It was only after the unification of Berlin in 1989, thirteen years after Richter's death, that his birth certificate was found, stating that he was born (1888) to Jewish parents ("mosaiche Religion"): Moritz Richter and Ida Gabriele, née Rothschild. Moritz's Jewish name was Moses. He was well-to-do, engaged in real estate as well as in furniture making, and insisted that his son study architecture. Johannes Siegfried (Hans) Richter was born in Berlin as the first of six children.<sup>3</sup> Before getting his father's permission to study at the Academy of Art in Berlin, he had completed his training in carpentry. After filming *Metall* in Germany and Russia in 1931, Richter, whose film was rejected by the Nazis, described himself as being on the run. He left Russia "like a tramp" (echoing Charlie Chaplin) and arrived in Prague, but was not admitted to the hotel because of his appearance. He went from Prague to Vienna, to Aix-en-Provence, then to Paris and to Holland – like the wandering Jew. Later, when the artist was no longer in Germany, he wrote that

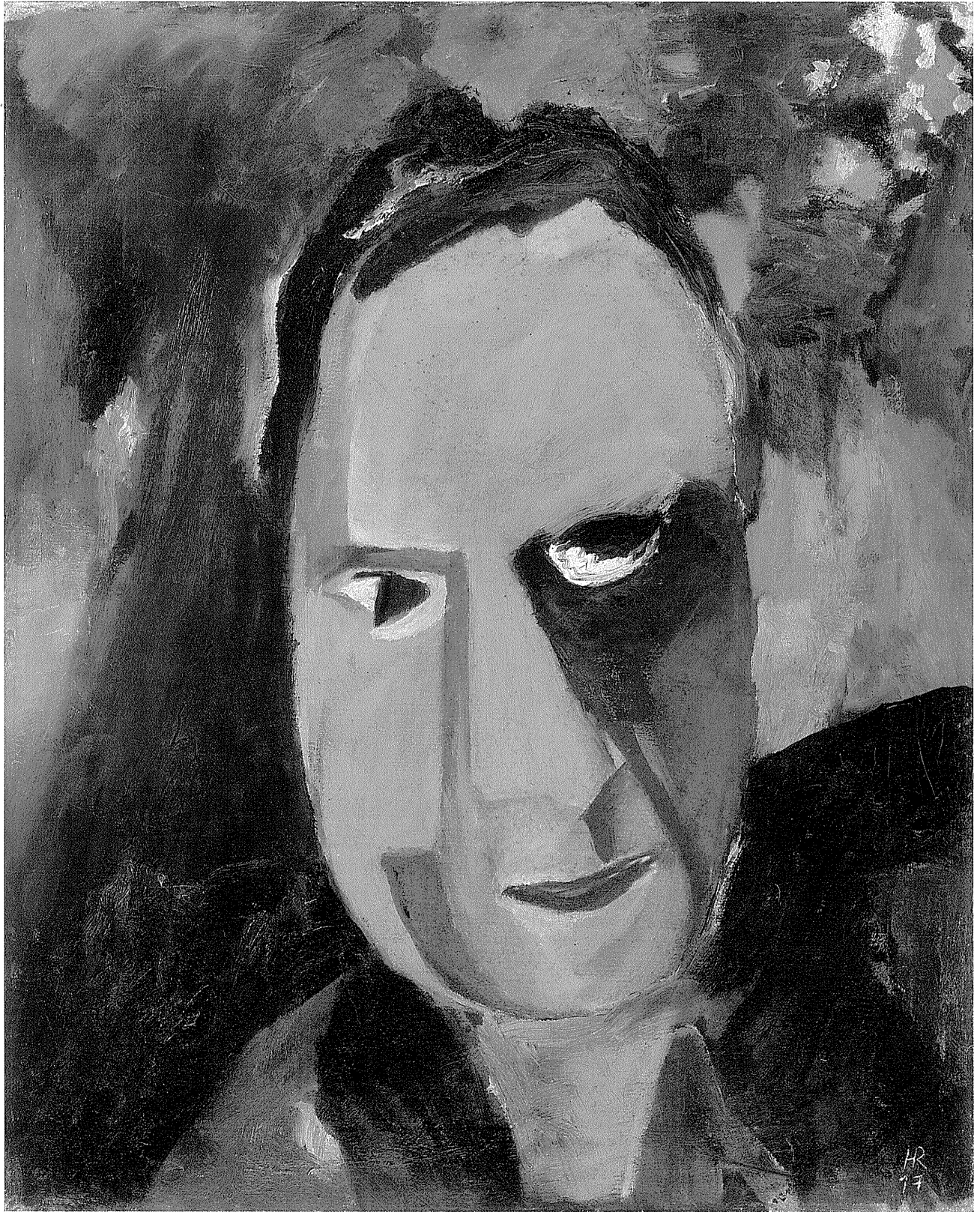
I would like to thank Eric de Bourbon for his help and his spirit of cooperation.

- 1 An earlier version of my analysis of the *Blue Man* was published in Milly Heyd, "Hidden Traces – Jewish Artists' Universal and Particular Identities," in *The Hidden Trace: Jewish Paths through Modernity* [catalogue, Felix-Nussbaum-Haus, Osnabrück] (Bramsche, 2009), 74–98.
- 2 See Milly Heyd, "Man Ray/Emmanuel Radnitsky: Who is Behind the Enigma of Isidor Ducasse?" in *Complex Identities: Jewish Consciousness and Modern Art*, eds. Matthew Baigell and Milly Heyd (New Brunswick, 2001), 115–42. See also idem, "Tristan Tzara/Shmuel Rosenstock: The Hidden/Overt Jewish Agenda," in *Jewish Dimensions in Modern Visual Culture: Antisemitism, Assimilation, Affirmation*, eds. Mathew Baigell, Milly

Heyd, and Rose-Carol Washton Long (Lebanon, NH, 2010), 193–220.

- 3 Marian von Hofacker, "Chronology," in *Hans Richter: Activism, Modernism and the Avant-Garde*, ed. Stephen C. Foster (Cambridge, MA, 1998), 240 and 274, n. 1. The author gives the names of the Richter's children chronologically: "Hans, Dora, Fritz, Vera, Albrecht, Richard." See also an earlier version in Marian von Hofacker, "Biographische Notizen über Hans Richter 1888–1976," in *Hans Richter 1888–1976: Dadaist, Filmpionier, Maler, Theoretiker* (Zurich, 1982), 51. See also Estera Milman, "Hans Richter in America: Traditional Avant-Garde Values/Shifting Sociopolitical Realities," in *Hans Richter: Activism, Modernism and the Avant-Garde*, 160–84. Note endnote 8 (p. 180) where Richter is quoted as saying: "My brother-in-law wasn't Jewish; I'm not Jewish." Yet, he also tells us that the same relative had to leave for Chile when the Nazis came to power.





**Fig. 1.** Hans Richter, *The Blue Man*, 1917, oil on canvas, 61 x 48.5 cm. Kunsthau Zürich, Gift of Frida Richter © 2011. © The Estate of Hans Richter represented by Art Acquest LLC

“during the Reichstag fire week, the last week of January 30, 1933, the Nazis cleaned out my apartment.”<sup>4</sup>

The blue man re-appears thirty years later in Richter’s film *Dreams that Money Can Buy* (1947), done in Manhattan, New York, where Richter found refuge from Nazism. The film will be analyzed here at some length, focusing on Richter’s identity struggle. It contains a number of episodes by Richter’s fellow artists Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp, Alexander Calder, Fernand Léger, and Max Ernst – each one projecting his own dream. Hans Richter chose Narcissus for his sequence, adapting the mythological legend to suit his biographical purpose. Here the actor Jack Bittner, called Joe, plays the part of Richter/Narcissus as he reverses the role of a psychoanalyst. While selling dreams, he becomes a modern surrealist-capitalist version of Asklepius who inspires dreams in his patients as part of their treatment. Moreover, in the Narcissus sequence, Joe himself begins to dream. Unlike the mythological Narcissus, who was unaware that the image in the water was of himself, Richter/Joe/Narcissus goes through a process of self-analysis in which he becomes self-aware. The dreamer gazes into a blue/green/turquoise flat circular disk. Subsequently, he picks up the disk and throws it up and down as if in a game of heads or tails. The casual game has a deeper meaning – the character is playing with his fate/life/self/universe. Thereafter, the blue/green/turquoise circle is gradually metamorphosed into a fragmented icon of a cool, water-like, enchanting and staring blue/green/turquoise eye that echoes the endless sea. It evokes oceanic feelings, representing interiority and the subconscious (fig. 2).

The circle is also associated with the next scene, where it serves as chips (discs used in lieu of money) in a card game played by four men, the dreamer included. The card game is one of concealment, chance, and fate, especially here where Tarot cards are used, symbolizing the hero’s journey and predicting the future of the dreamer/Hans Richter.

While playing cards, as in a trance or a séance, a broken tilted glass that is in motion spills water. It raises a spirit, the dreamer’s own. When the dreamer/Narcissus

looks downwards into the water hypnotized, he sees his reflection. In a dramatic moment of suspense, and out of the blue, the dreamer/Hans Richter turns blue (fig. 3).

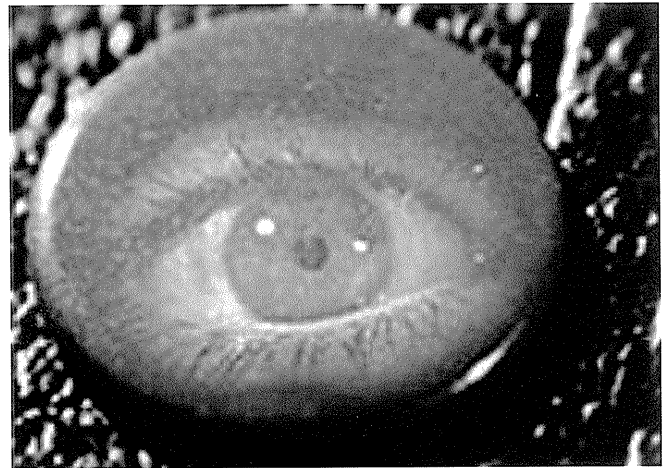


Fig. 2. Hans Richter, *Dreams that Money Can Buy*, 1947, film frame © The Estate of Hans Richter represented by Art Acquest LLC

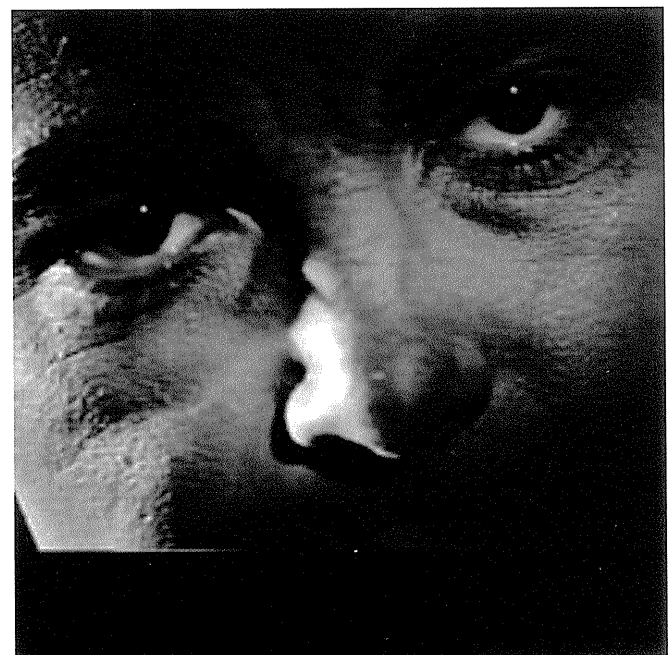


Fig. 3. Hans Richter, *Dreams that Money Can Buy: The Man that Suddenly Turned Blue*, 1947, film frame © The Estate of Hans Richter represented by Art Acquest LLC

Visually, it is a very charged moment. The dreamer looks upward gradually and his painful, expressive face is blue. He is watched from above, and is thus subjected, like a child, to a “superior” higher power. It is an uncanny moment of estrangement, one which Sigmund Freud

4 Hans Richter, *Hans Richter by Hans Richter*, ed. Cleve Gray (New York, 1972), 47.



called “*unheimlich*” – a term denoting that the familiar suddenly becomes strange, unfamiliar, odd. Concurrently, the dreamer/Hans Richter/the blue man goes through a process of introspection and of self-discovery. The blue color, therefore, serves as a means of indicating that a metamorphosis is taking place, and this magical transmutation is associated with a moment of self-awareness: one’s identity is formed in juxtaposition to others.<sup>5</sup> However, Richter/Narcissus does not tell the tale of self-love, but rather of hate, or being hated because he is different – blue. In postmodern terminology, through the process of becoming blue he becomes *the other* in the eyes of the card-playing group representing society.

The men playing cards gamble with the dreamer/Richter’s fate. When seeing the change of color that took hold of him, they first laugh and then refuse to continue the game with the man who has turned blue, saying: “Yes, but blue, who would want to sit at a table with a blue man, it’s either you or us, sorry sir but you’ll have to leave [...].” An existential question is raised by the blue man: “Blue, why is blue worse than green, violet, or white? Or white better than violet, green, or blue?”

Color here is coded; it carries social, political, racial, ethnic, and religious connotations. I wish to claim that through the hidden symbolic language of colors, Richter tells us that he is different from the others. One can argue that he felt blue/odd/depressed for a number of reasons: (a) he was an avant-garde artist; (b) he was defined by the Nazis as a “degenerate” artist and hence his work was exhibited in the Entartete Kunst exhibition in Munich, 1937; and (c) because he was hiding the fact that he was born to a Jewish family in Berlin.

Without mentioning any of this in the film, Richter seems to allude to all of these contributing factors. The card players’ reluctance to play his game symbolizes the events in Nazi Germany, where Jews were first mocked, their glass windows shattered (Kristallnacht), and then gradually but systematically driven out of their normal lives. Blue is not just a color, it is the color of “the other,” and being white is no better, according to Richter, than other races. Richter purposefully avoids using colors of the then rejected races (blacks and Jews, who were considered a race and had to wear a differentiating yellow star as

their distinctive badge) but hides behind artistic colors (violet, green, blue). Poetic freedom and displacement serve as devices of concealment. Blue becomes a marking sign, a mark of Cain. In the scene, blue is further associated with the coldness that crept over the dreamer as he calls for help to no avail: “Help me father,” but “there was no help. There was only fear, everything was cold.” The cold blue color is thus also associated here with Picasso’s Blue period, where melancholic blue figures, as in *La Vie* (1903), prevail. But first and foremost, the notion of the man who suddenly turns blue indicates Richter’s fear of being discovered, the dread that what is hidden will surface and shame him. In this respect it is equivalent to blushing, but rather than hot red, it is a cold blue blush.

My interpretation is reinforced by other parts of the dream in which fragments of the dreamer’s past are brought up. Beside the poetic allusions, Richter – functioning as the narrator/analyst – intertwines events of his past. Wishing to give minimal information about his background, let alone his Jewish origins, Richter/dreamer says: “I was born; not very much was said about it.” He relates that his family was normal, well-to-do, and so was he, thus emphasizing the disparity between his original existence and his metamorphosis into the blue man. As for the social-political realm, he remarks: “All of a sudden there was a big explosion. Who is responsible? Nobody knows. One day we are all going to face a great disaster.” He remembers his mother’s piano and the invasion of Holland on 10 May 1940. Apparently the dream was dreamt “One Day, in May,” the anniversary of his flight from Holland. Stylistically, the simple rhyme sounds as if he were telling a children’s story. However, it is a sad tale where “I lost my way, nothing behind me, nothing in front of me,” while trains are heard in the background. Towards the end of the dream he exclaims: “Forget about your politics or your religion,” as indeed he did not wish to be known as having been born Jewish.<sup>6</sup>

5 On the concept of identity from the post-modern position, see Zygmunt Bauman, *Identity: Conversations with Benedetto Vecchi* (Cambridge and Malden, MA, 2004).

6 All the quotations are from the film *Dreams that Money Can Buy*, presently under discussion.

Hans Richter also critiques the Narcissus sequence in writing:

The last sequence of *Dreams* I shot was [...] completely my own [...] at this time I had a very disturbing experience, which is much too private to explain. It boiled down to the self-realization that I was not the self-hero I thought I was [...] this experience was so strong that I decided to make a film about it. In the film a man in his forties suddenly realizes he isn't the man he thought he was [...] he is blue. He's a bird of a different color [...]. Narcissus is a man who looks at his own image, but in this new version, not only *at* his own image but *into* it and into the world which is mirrored in him.<sup>7</sup>

Apparently, Richter sees in the man who turned blue his alter-ego, his double, and through him raises questions of identity. In the present article, I wish to ask what the meaning of the double in Richter's art is and base my interpretation on the tension between Richter's universal identity and his hidden, particularistic Jewish origins. Identity is symbolized here in the beautiful, poetical, estranged, excluded, and fearful cold image of the blue man, or the man who suddenly turns blue. Narcissus/Richter/blue man is associated with a bird – and so with flight, metamorphosis, and spirituality.

Unlike the mythological Narcissus, who is unaware that he is looking at himself, Richter/Narcissus/blue man asserts that he is self-aware. Paradoxically, it is as if he were saying: "I am not what I am." Hence, he presents himself as lacking definite identity. However, while describing the fire and smoke that broke out as the filming of the sequence of Narcissus progressed, Richter presents an essentialist attitude to identity differing from his self-image of suddenly becoming blue, or "a bird of a different color," when he says that he was worried "because this was still war, and I was a German, not even an American citizen yet."<sup>8</sup> The sub-text of the dream becomes here Richter's citizenship, or as we shall see later, the question: "Who am I?" is related to ethnicity, one's origins, and where one belongs. As a matter of fact, his self-definition as a German is somewhat perplexing, because having been

born a Jew in Germany, he would not have been seen as such in the country of his birth, especially not during World War II, the time during which *Dreams that Money Could Buy* was conceived in America.

But before we deal with Richter's family of birth, let us turn to another context in Richter's work in post-World War II America in which the blue man appears. Richter, in a story-telling mode, raises the question of the significance of the blue man through a group of participants who converse about the meaning of the image:

We were sitting in a restaurant: a Negro writer, my Jewish distributor, and a non-Jewish critic. Somebody asked: 'What does that man who suddenly turns blue mean [...]'? The Negro writer said: 'That's obvious. That is the Negro question. The blue man feels self-conscious, he is isolated among his friends; even the objects and surroundings are unfriendly.' 'No' said the Jewish distributor, 'when I was in Nazi Germany in 1934, as a Jew I felt exactly that way—isolated and looked at by all these people in the street, self-conscious, embarrassed and alone.' 'Yes,' said the non-Jewish critic, 'but I think what Richter wanted to show is the relative isolation of the individual in our highly collective society.' I answered truthfully [that] what I really wanted to show was the relative isolation of the modern artist—spiritual isolation [...]. 'But I can only say [...] that all three of you are right, and that it is obvious that I have touched with this blue man upon something which we all have in common [...] differentiated by our individual experience.'<sup>9</sup>

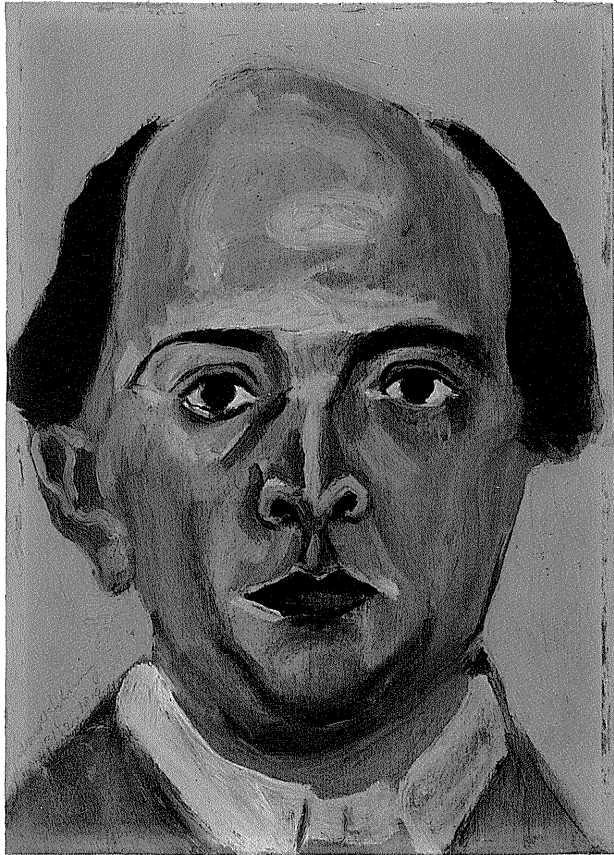
Here the blue man can represent anyone or any group of people at odds with their surrounding. In a Rashomon-like way, four individuals provide us with four different points of view regarding the question: who does the blue man represent? while giving each person a particularistic, typological essentialist definition ("Jew," "Negro," "non-

7 Ibid., 53.

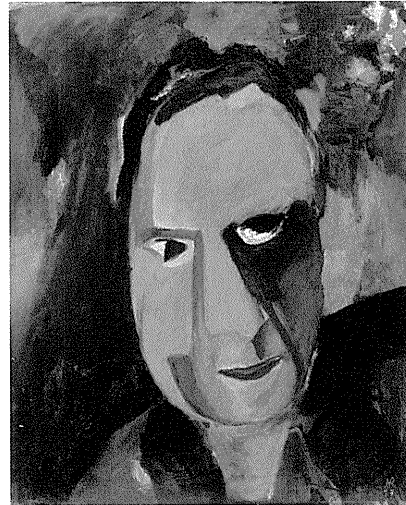
8 Ibid.

9 Mekas Jonas, "Hans Richter on the Nature of Film Poetry," *Film Culture* 3 (1957): 7.





**Fig. 4.** Arnold Schönberg, *Blue Self-portrait*, 1910, oil on three-ply panel, 31.1 x 22.9 cm. © Belmont Music Publishers, L.A., USA / © VBK, Vienna 2011



**Fig. 1.** Hans Richter, *The Blue Man*, 1917, oil on canvas, 61 x 48.5 cm. Kunsthaus Zürich, Gift of Frida Richter © 2011. © The Estate of Hans Richter represented by Art Acquest LLC

Jew,” and “modern artist”). Richter identifies with the non-particularistic position of the artist, yet accepts the particularistic points of view. There are four answers, and from a methodological perspective it is important to note that there is no priority of one over the others. The dilemma of how to understand the works discussed here is resolved through the particularistic as well as the universal options. It also symbolizes Richter’s own position, having lived throughout his mature life suppressing and hiding the fact that he was born a Jew.

### **The Blue Man: Hans Richter and Arnold Schönberg**

Richter’s blue man did not emerge in a void. Artistic precedents to Richter’s blue man can be found in Arnold Schönberg’s paintings (fig. 4). The Viennese composer and painter, who painted a *Self-portrait* (1910) in a bluish

tint – which was exhibited in the first Blaue Reiter exhibition in Munich – also did a *Blue Self-portrait* (1910) positioned on the background of a complementary orange. Similarly, in Richter’s early *Blue Man* (fig. 1) (1917) there are remnants of fading orange in the background. Richter talks about his getting acquainted with the Blaue Reiter in 1913 and acknowledges the impact the movement had on him. The choice of blue for the title of the artistic group signifies the aspiration to transcend the mundane and strive towards the spiritual. Hence, Franz Marc depicted blue horses, and Kandinsky’s blue rider appeared on the cover of *Der Blaue Reiter* almanac (1912). Schönberg, however, was the one who chose blue for a number of his self-portraits, and later Richter turned it into a leitmotiv. Although Richter mentions Kandinsky and Franz Marc in his writing, he ignores Schönberg. Art historians and critics alike pay no heed to him in Richter’s context, perhaps because Schönberg was primarily conceived of



**Fig. 5.** Hans Richter, *Visionary Self-portrait*, 1917, oil on canvas, 55 x 38 cm. © The Estate of Hans Richter represented by Art Acquest LLC. © Collection Centre Pompidou, Dist. RMN / Philippe Migeat

as a composer. I find Schönberg's impact on Richter to be compelling, not just in the context of the blue man, but also in Richter's visionary self-portraits that echo the Viennese artist's *Visions*.

Both artists' visions share a nervous, dramatic, colorful, and ecstatic artistic language where the dematerialized painted image is mingled with spiritualism. It is noteworthy that one of Richter's paintings, *Visionary Self-portrait* (fig. 5), a multicolored, manic, dematerialized image in which an ecstatic quest is bursting forth from its confining frame, so different from the depressed blue man, was displayed in the Nazi exhibition *Entartete Kunst*. Rather than freedom of expression or a colorful search for artistic meaning and one's place in the world, for the Nazis the intensively charged image symbolized decadence.

I dealt with the composer/painter's self-portraits in the first issue of *Ars Judaica*, where my focus was on how Schönberg's struggle between his Christian and Jewish

identities is reflected in his art.<sup>10</sup> In Richter's case, he stuck to his German identity. Both Schönberg and Richter opted for the blue man to signify their positions as artists who give birth to their own selves, as spiritual beings but also as the odd ones out. Both were born to Jewish parents, and both grappled with their identities. Schönberg, who was born in 1874, converted to Protestantism in 1889. In spite of that, while attempting to stay in an Austrian summer resort in 1921 with his family and students he discovered that he would not be admitted, as the place was closed to Jews. Later, in 1923, Schönberg declared his Jewishness in a confrontation with Kandinsky. But his formal re-entry into the Jewish community took place only in 1933 in Paris, in a ceremony at which Marc Chagall served as a witness.<sup>11</sup> Later that year Schönberg, who had to leave Europe with the rise of Nazism, found refuge in the United States, eventually settling in Los Angeles.<sup>12</sup>

### Hans Richter's Autobiography: My Mother, My Father

In his autobiographical book *Hans Richter by Hans Richter* written in 1971 in New York, the artist introduces a photograph of his young, slender, smiling mother surrounded by her three small children (fig. 6). Her features are delicate and pleasant. She holds Richter's baby sister on her lap, while the two other siblings are standing apart. The three-and-a-half-year-old Hans shares his mother's facial features, but his expression is solemn and he holds a wooden horse close to himself as compensation for not being held by his mother. In terms of gender, while the female (mother) holds a child, Richter the male carries a horse. Curiously enough, the wooden hobby horse, one of the meanings of the word "Dada," will later become his artistic vocation.

The book also includes a chalk drawing of his mother's head in profile entitled *My Mother* (1908) (fig. 7), with

10 Milly Heyd, "Arnold Schoenberg's Self-portraits between 'Iconism' and 'Anti-Iconism': The Jewish-Christian Struggle," *AJ* 1 (2005): 133–46.

11 *Ibid.*: 136.

12 Hans Heinz Stuckenschmidt, *Schoenberg: His Life, World and Work*, translated from the German by Humphrey Searle (New York, 1977), 369.

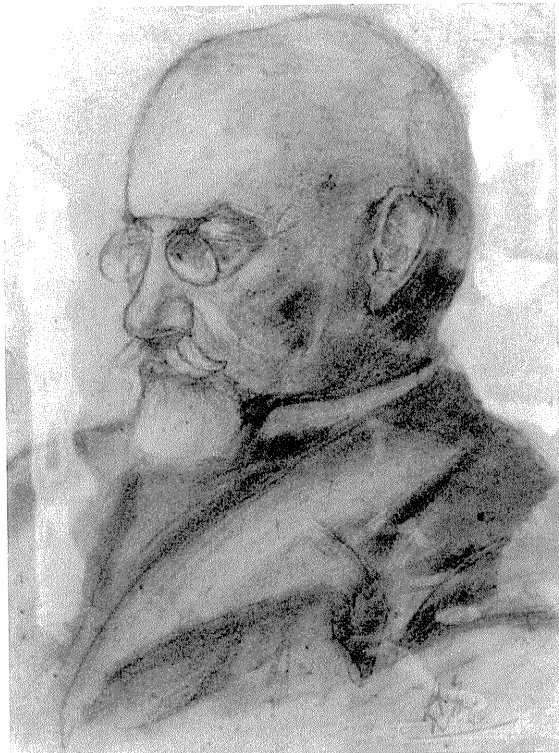




**Fig. 6.** Hans Richter, Artist's mother and sisters, 1890, photo © The Estate of Hans Richter represented by Art Acquest LLC



**Fig. 7.** Hans Richter, *My Mother*, 1908, chalk © The Estate of Hans Richter represented by Art Acquest LLC



**Fig. 8.** Hans Richter, *My Father*, 1906, pencil and chalk © The Estate of Hans Richter represented by Art Acquest LLC



**Fig. 9.** Hans Richter, *My Father*, 1914, ink and pencil © The Estate of Hans Richter represented by Art Acquest LLC

downcast eyes in a traditional naturalistic and reserved pose that conveys her respectability as she matured. His book also features two drawings of his father, an early naturalistic one, *My Father* (1906) (fig. 8), in profile, bespectacled, sporting a small beard, and avoiding eye contact, and a later one of 1914 dramatically wearing a hat in a modernist style (fig. 9). Whereas the early portrait is “particularistic” in nature (the father looks like Freud), the later one is universalistic and dynamic, bearing no resemblance to the father’s features. It is, hence, significant that in the autobiography, the parents’ names are conspicuously absent and nothing is said about their background. Information provided in the book is, on the one hand, documentary, but on the other, devoid of basic data. In this respect Richter is similar to Man Ray, who in his autobiography, *Self Portrait*, avoids mentioning his family’s Jewish background.<sup>13</sup>

### Hans Richter and Leonardo: *L’Uomo Universale* (Universal Man)

Hans Richter opted for universality rather than Jewish particularity and as such was one of the founding members of the Dada movement in Zurich. His ink drawing of the *Universal Man* (1917) (fig. 10) shows in the center a man who looms disproportionately large vis-à-vis nature. Man, dominating the universe, raises one of his arms upwards like a conductor, while with his second hand pointing downwards he, like a puppeteer, manipulates the strings of two masked marionettes that represent grotesque humanity. Duality is inherent here: the dual position of the hands and the two masks, as well as Man’s double head. We are well versed with Leonardo da Vinci’s universal man, the all-encompassing Renaissance man whose knowledge is total as a man of letters, a philosopher, a theologian, and a scientist as well as an artist. Leonardo depicted the ideal proportions of the universal man in various positions simultaneously, in a circle or a square, multiplying his legs accordingly. But the ideal head, the unifying factor, he depicts as one. Richter deviates from Leonardo; in his drawing Man has a double head echoing

Janus, the double-headed, double-faced god. In accordance with his Dadaistic mock-heroic ironic manner, universal man is playing his part in a performance, conducting and puppeteering at the same time.



Fig. 10. Hans Richter, *The Universal Man*, 1917, ink © The Estate of Hans Richter represented by Art Acquest LLC

### Hans Richter, Tristan Tzara, Man Ray

Richter’s dual identity can be seen in the context of the artworks and writings of Man Ray and Tristan Tzara, who shared a similar need to hide their origins. They left their home countries in order to establish their identities as artists: Man Ray/Emmanuel Radnitsky, whose family emigrated from Kiev to New York, left for Paris; Tristan Tzara, who was born in Romania, went to Zurich, Holland, and then to Paris; and Hans Richter left Germany for Zurich, Paris, Russia, and eventually New York. Richter being a common German name, he – unlike the other two – did not have to change it.

13 Man Ray, *Self Portrait* (Boston, 1963).





**Fig. 11.** Hans Richter, *Tristan Tzara*, 1928, ink and charcoal  
© The Estate of Hans Richter represented by Art Acquest LLC

Tristan Tzara/Shmuel Rosenstock, the author of the Dada manifestoes, had to confront anti-Semitic remarks such as “this little Rumanian Jew,” despite his name-change and chosen cosmopolitan identity. I have argued elsewhere that outside of the universal aspect of his Dada manifesto, he wrote like a biblical prophet.<sup>14</sup> Man Ray photographed himself while playing with various identities: as a bespectacled, bearded intellectual or an oriental fakir. But his most beloved persona was that of a Frenchman wearing a beret, the identity he craved most. I have written previously about Man Ray’s repressed Jewish-American sweatshop experience with which he played a hide-and-seek game that can be seen in the assorted sewing machines hidden under blankets in his various *Enigmas*, as well as the hot irons signifying danger, red or studded with nails as in *Cadeau*, meant to tear rather than smooth.<sup>15</sup>

In a playful Dada photograph that Man Ray took in Paris, Richter is securely grounded on the right while Tzara is elevated in the air. Richter, for his part, did doodle-like humorous portrayals of Tzara and Man Ray, highlighting Tzara’s dandy-like appearance and his effeminate mouth and monocle, focusing on his eyes and unique sight (fig. 11). His ink drawing of Man Ray (fig. 12), emphasizing the photographer’s curly hair, glasses, and sulky, drooping expression, suits his verbal description of the artist whom he had gotten to know in the 1920s:

Man Ray is a sorcerer; he has pulled more rabbits out of his beret than anyone before him [...] yet his art was never really anti-art, rather it was anti-pretensions—and so he is himself. Whenever I see him, I get the same quite reserved but enthusiastic welcome. That is the level on which our long friendship of forty years established itself.<sup>16</sup>

There is a common denominator among the Dadaists and surrealists who turned to fabricated new identities as artists. Duchamp chose the persona of “Rose Sélavy,” claiming that he wished he were born a Jew, which sounds



**Fig. 12.** Hans Richter, *Man Ray*, 1932, ink  
© The Estate of Hans Richter represented by Art Acquest LLC

14 Heyd, “Tristan Tzara/Shmuel Rosenstock” (n. 2 above).

15 Heyd, “Man Ray/Emmanuel Radnitsky” (n. 2 above).

16 *Hans Richter by Hans Richter*, 57.

paradoxical in our context.<sup>17</sup> Tristan Tzara (Shmuel Rosenstock), Man Ray (Emmanuel Radnitsky), and Duchamp rebelled against essentialist definitions of identity. Yet, there is a difference between Duchamp, on the one hand, and Man Ray and Tzara, on the other, regarding their chosen identities and name-changes. Obviously, Duchamp kept his original name and did not hide his “original” identity. He adopted a feminine sexual alter-ego as a provocative rebellion against the notion of *paterfamilias* – a role he did not wish to play, as attested to by his *The Bride Laid Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*.<sup>18</sup> By contrast, for Man Ray and Tristan Tzara their constructed identities and pseudonyms were not solely a matter of poetic license but also a response to the external threat they felt as Jews. A pseudonym, as in Duchamp’s case, is the use of another name for oneself for certain purposes, rather than the denial of one’s original name; a name change, like in the case of Tzara and Man Ray, is a complete rejection of one’s name of birth for all purposes. The fact is that while Duchamp did not hide his Franco-Christian family origins, Man Ray, Tzara, and others concealed their Jewish ancestry by changing their names. Tristan Tzara, who was insulted by André Gide because the latter referred derogatorily to his Jewishness, did not succeed in hiding. Man Ray was constantly clowning, and Hans Richter, the universal man, managed to live throughout his life in his chosen identity, keeping secret the fact that he was born a Jew even in post-World War II Manhattan. Richter being a German name, he did not have to change it, and his appearance, stature, accent, and manners were also of help. Hence, artists who wished to hide their Jewish origins became part of the movement advocating masquerading, so that it can be said that Dada was a suitable artistic language for artists such as Tzara, Man Ray, and Richter, as well as others who recreated themselves and chose alternative identities as artists.

17 On Duchamp wishing to be born Jewish, see Bradely Bailey, “Rose of Washington Square: Marcel Duchamp, Fanny Brice, and the Jewish Origins of Rose Sélavy,” *Source 27*, no. 1 (Fall 2007): 14–21.

18 I have previously elaborated on Duchamp’s “against *paterfamilias*”; see Milly Heyd, “The Imago of the Artists’ Father: Duchamp vis-à-vis

### Hans Richter: *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*

Richter is well known as the historian of Dada in his book *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*.<sup>19</sup> In spite of his own Jewish complex, he did not refrain from writing about other people who were Jewish within the group, or hinting at those whose dual identity he could perceive. He thus enables us to examine his attitude, both in his writing and in his art, towards these people, some of whom were in the periphery of Dada in Zurich. His discussions, and at times visual portrayals, include both the participants whose identity was hidden and those whose Jewish identity was obvious.

The author Walter Serner exemplifies the first group. He was born in 1886 as Walter Seligman to prosperous assimilated Jewish parents from Karlsbad; the father owned a local newspaper. His name-change, as in many other cases, was a means of hiding his Jewish origins. Hans Richter wrote about Serner and drew his portrait in Zurich. Richter talks about Dr Walter Serner as “a rootless figure who took root in anything that was extraordinary [...] a tall, elegant Austrian who wore a monocle.” He was perceived as a nihilist, a cynic, and an anarchist. Furthermore, “his bearing, the impeccable precision of his language, his remarkable intelligence [...] made him a sort of aristocrat.” While comparing Serner to Tzara from a moral point of view, Richter claims that Serner “was a moralist (‘Dehumanization is not the same as spiritualization’), in contrast to the practical Tzara, who saw and used the world unhindered by moral scruples.”<sup>20</sup>

The appreciative description pays tribute to Serner’s appearance as well as to his intelligence. Without saying that Serner was originally Jewish, Richter hints at that fact by using the terminology of the “rootless figure” that alludes to the wandering Jew. As for Serner’s visual depiction, Richter is ambivalent. In *Dr Walter Serner*, an oil painting done in 1917, Serner faces the viewers frontally, dressed

Cézanne,” *Source 27*, nos. 2/3 (Winter/Spring 2008): 40–48.

19 Hans Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*, translated from the German by David Britt (London 1965). First published as *Dada, Kunst und Antikunst: der Beitrag Dadas zur Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Cologne, 1964).

20 *Ibid.*, 36.





Fig. 13. Hans Richter, *Dr Walter Serner*, 1917, oil on canvas  
© The Estate of Hans Richter represented by Art Acquest LLC

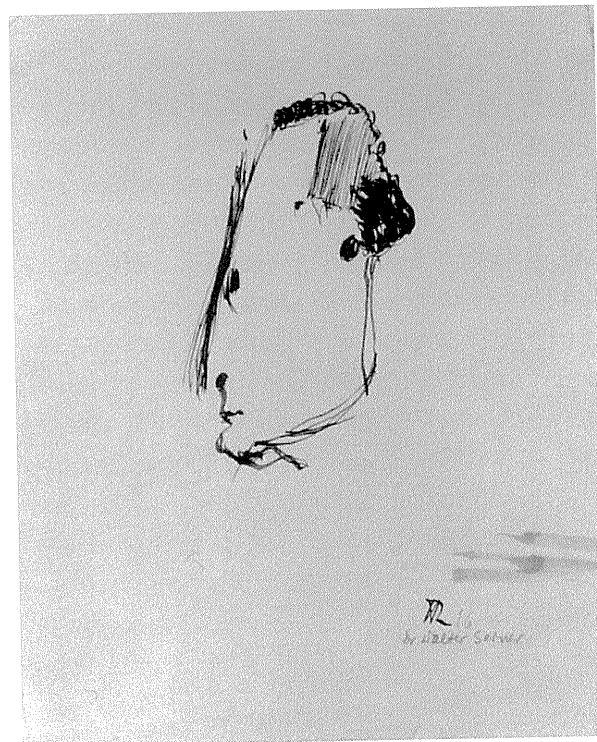


Fig. 14. Hans Richter, *Dr Walter Serner*, 1916, ink © The Estate of Hans Richter represented by Art Acquest LLC

formally, his handsome intelligent features creating a dialogue with the spectator (fig. 13). On the other hand, in the earlier image of 1916 Richter drew a caricature of Serner in profile, an image that can exemplify Sander Gilman's analysis of the stereotypical Jewish physique,<sup>21</sup> suggesting that Seligman is the topic of the painting rather than Serner (fig. 14). In other words, the two portrayals direct the viewer to Seligman-Serner's dual identity.

Richter had his own way of pointing to hidden Jews in the group while circumventing the word "Jew." When describing Tzara's "incredible intellectual mobility" as compensation for his shortness, Richter addresses him as "the Rumanian poet Tristan Tzara." But he also alludes to a biblical image, visualizing Tzara as "a David who knew how to hit every Goliath in exactly the right spot." Moreover, as in Serner's case, Richter hints that Tzara,

whose "crafty grin was full of humor," was "always on the move, chatting away in German, French or Rumanian,"<sup>22</sup> thus suggesting that he is yet another wandering Jew. Richter quotes Hugo Ball's euphemism when the latter described Tzara's and the Janco brothers' first appearance in Zurich: "there appeared an oriental-looking deputation of four little men with portfolios and pictures under their arms, bowing politely many times."<sup>23</sup> The use of the term "oriental" was a means of circumventing the use of the word "Jew." Richter's heads likewise project a duality. Richter explained that he was fascinated by the "kind of double image" that creates the polarities of black and white in a "positive-negative opposition."<sup>24</sup> I wish to argue that the stylistic gestalt-like technique is also an artistic means for conveying the dual nature of the portrayed, thus suggesting a hidden identity. *Dada Head (Ludwig Rubinger)*, done in

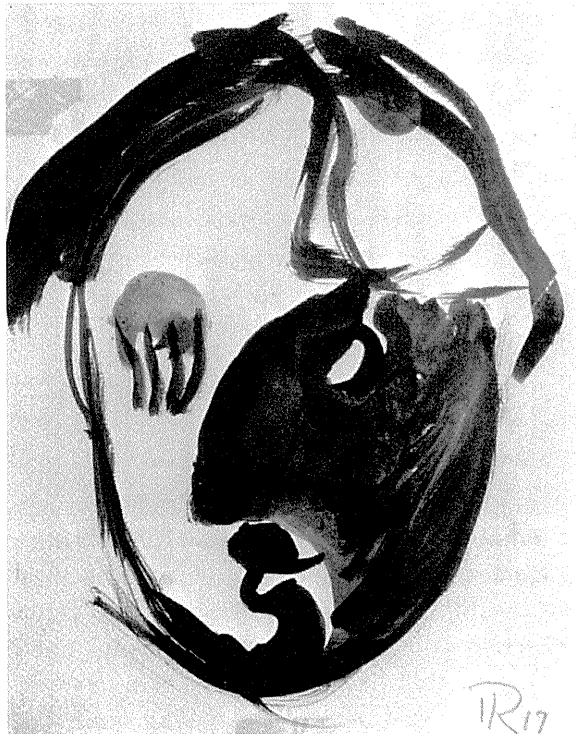
21 Sander L. Gilman, "The Jew's Body: Thought on Jewish Physical Difference," in *Too Jewish? Challenging Traditional Identities* [catalogue, Jewish Museum] (New York, 1996), 60–73.

22 Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*, 18–19.

23 Ibid., 16. See also Albert Boime, "Dada's Dark Secrets," in *Jewish*

*Dimensions in Modern Visual Culture* (n. 2 above), 93: "Ball's allusion to an 'oriental-looking deputation' unmistakably zeroes in the ethnicity of Tzara, the brothers Janco, and their friend. 'Oriental-looking' was coded for Jewish."

24 *Hans Richter by Hans Richter*, 62, 67–68.

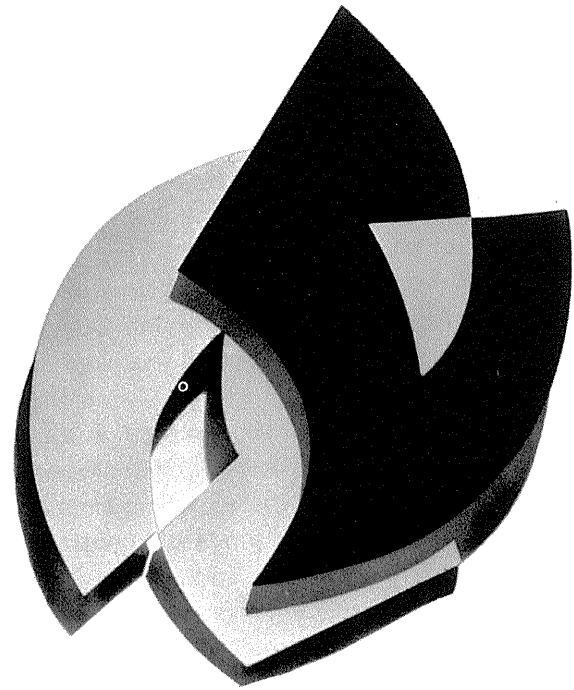


**Fig. 15.** Hans Richter, *Dada Head (Ludwig Rubinger)*, 1917, ink  
© The Estate of Hans Richter represented by Art Acquest LLC

1917, is a case in point (fig. 15). Here, Richter drew an ink portrait of the German-Jewish poet-editor, whose Jewish family moved from Galicia to Berlin and who published under the pseudonym Ernst Ludwig Beck Grom. In an embryonic head, Richter “gives birth” to simultaneous competitive features. A sense of duality is formed with a moon-like, Pierrot-Lunaire dreamy white side of the face on the left, its melancholic eye looking downwards, while on the right side, in contrast, a dark shadowy profile with a hooked-like nose and intensive-looking open eye evokes a sensation of dynamism and inquiry. It reveals the tension between the universal (Pierrot) and particularistic Jewish dimensions. This portrait served as a point of departure for his constructivist portrait *Cohesion #7*, made of painted wood, and done as late as 1968 in New York, long after the death of Rubinger, who had died in 1920 (fig. 16). At this stage the block-wood shapes lost their descriptive dimension, and geometric universal

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 67.



**Fig. 16.** Hans Richter, *Cohesion #7*, 1968, painted wood © The Estate of Hans Richter represented by Art Acquest LLC

constructivist form took over. Still, the dramatic tension between the white and black remains, the black being in the forefront on top of the white. Richter himself directs us to see the visual connections between the two images. Both appear on the same page in his book *Hans Richter by Hans Richter*.<sup>25</sup> It is in light of the above that we should re-look at the various heads done by Richter, which resemble a Rorschach test, playing a hide-and-seek game with the painted protagonist.

While writing the history of Dada, Richter also refers directly to Jewish people who were on the margins of Dada in Zurich. He talks about the Talmud scholar, Erich Unger, whom he describes verbally using visual imagery. Unger was seen as “intelligent [with a] sheep like face,” someone who “never stopped twirling the hair on his temples, an atavism, according to him, which went back to the *peyes* [sidelocks in Yiddish] of orthodox Jews.”<sup>26</sup> We see here that Richter did not refrain from using Yiddish words, whose meanings he understood.

We also learn from Richter about Dr Oscar Goldberg, a Pentateuch numerologist deemed “a demonic figure”

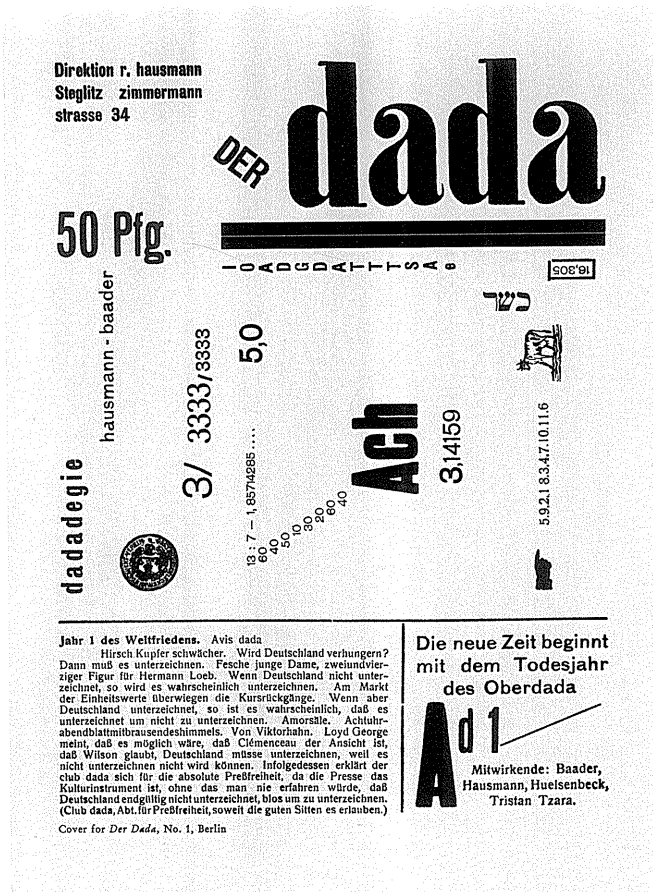


Fig. 17. Cover for *Der dada*, no. 1, 1919, Berlin, designed by Raoul Hausmann

who “examined the secret meaning of the Pentateuch. As every Hebrew letter has a numerical value [...] the numerical combinations formed by the words of the Pentateuch would yield a secret message.” Richter admits that he found this “fascinating” but was not competent to judge.<sup>27</sup> In other instances, Richter reacted to the world using modes of speech that show knowledge of particularistic Jewish vernacular. Hence, for instance, his reaction to New York City upon his first arrival was “the city terrified me—Sodom and Gomorrah [...] and certainly there were more than the proverbial five good people that would have changed the fortune of Sodom and Gomorrah in the Bible.”<sup>28</sup> It is quite common, both in Yiddish and Hebrew, to compare evil to Sodom and Gomorrah.

Interestingly, the Jewish presence within Dada was so common that on the cover of the first issue of *Der dada*, issued in Berlin and designed by Raoul Hausmann (fig. 17),

a hand pointing upwards draws one’s attention to the word כשר (Kosher) written in Hebrew, while a reversed goat miniature stands next to it. Humor notwithstanding, kosher could signify here – to those who could understand – that the publication was legitimate and could be used, just as a goat is allowed to be eaten according to the Jewish dietary laws. The image was reproduced in Richter’s *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*.

### Hans Richter: *Ghosts before Breakfast*

Another variation of questioning identity appears in Richter’s film *Ghosts before Breakfast* (Berlin, 1927–28), done a year after Man Ray’s *Emak Bakia* (“Leave me alone,” in Basque), produced in 1926, whose subtext also dealt with the artist’s identity. I have shown elsewhere that *Emak Bakia* was another artwork in which Man Ray was engaged with the hidden Jewish sweatshop experience that had engulfed his childhood.<sup>29</sup> The film presents the “metamorphosis” of stiff white collars by showing them being ripped apart and displaying their dance-like passage through revolving and deforming mirrors. Following this exhilarating pirouette to freedom, however, the sequence is rewound, so that at the end the torn collars become whole again. A pin dance is shown as well. It is as if Man Ray were telling himself, and us, that the past is like a never-ending, recurring experience from which one cannot completely sever oneself.

Such a double-edged creative strategy was also used by Hans Richter in *Ghosts before Breakfast*, designed and directed by Richter to the music of Paul Hindemith. Unlike *Emak Bakia*, filmed by Man Ray, who was a photographer, this film was not photographed by the artist himself but by Reiner Kuntze. Here, objects (bowler hats, coffee cups, etc.) rebel against their daily routine. In a magic-like manner, four floating bowler hats fly away from their original position on human heads as if they were balloons (fig. 18). The film consists of the splitting and duplicating of human bodies as well as

27 Ibid., 145.

28 Ibid., 48.

29 Heyd, “Man Ray/Emmanuel Radnitsky” (n. 2 above).



objects such as a dummy, which falls apart. The director plays with the participants' appearances, showing them with and without a beard, viewed in positive as well as negative in the film. However, like Cinderella, when the clock strikes twelve, all objects return to their original, practical state. Beyond the humorous enchantment, there is here, more importantly, a rebellion against the bourgeois values, represented by the floating hats as well as the duplication of the heads, mask-like faces with beards, or without – all question one's identity. For the film conveys the message that it is the hat that makes the man.<sup>30</sup> The man with the bowler hat is everybody and nobody. When floating, the spectator is provoked to ask: "To whom do these hats belong? And on whose heads do they eventually settle down? Whose identity is represented? Why do the participants, like the hats, resemble one another?" Eventually the hats find their place on the heads of four persons who look alike around the breakfast table.

In a biographical film interview Richter noted that *Ghosts before Breakfast* was filmed at his sister's house near Berlin. Those present were all wearing bowler hats "for one reason or another," one of the reasons being was that they did not want to be recognized as artists. Apparently, he was aware at the time that there was a hidden dimension present behind the hats.

Hans Richter, like Man Ray, played the film forwards and backwards, deconstructing and reconstructing his world. Whereas Man Ray had come from a Jewish working class sweatshop environment, Richter's was Jewish bourgeois. Both wished to undo their background; Man Ray rips off stiff collars and Richter breaks objects and lets the bowler hats fly away. However, the images are rewound and become whole again, reverting back to the beginning, and so suggesting that there is no way out. Both artists viewed objects in an anthropomorphic way and Richter even said explicitly that "objects are also people." He explained in symbolic language the seriousness with which he regarded inanimate objects:

30 See also the poignant analysis of Marion von Hofacker, "Richter's Films and the Role of the Radical Artist, 1927–1941," in *Hans Richter: Activism, Modernism and the Avant-Garde*, ed. Stephen C. Foster (Cambridge, MA, 1998), 122–160.



Fig. 18. Hans Richter, *Ghosts before Breakfast*, 1927–28, film strip © The Estate of Hans Richter represented by Art Acquest LLC

Even objects are God's children. My love of objects [...] is a confirmation that humans are also objects, objects of historical, political, celestial happenings or simply objects of their own stupidity. Let them come together. People and objects in a space of

friendly and mutual respect. Maybe the teaching “Love your neighbors as yourself”—the neighbor you cannot stand—will then approach reality, will lead to a general tendency towards an attention to the life of ordinary things, to the unexpected respect for the co-beings of the human sphere. Because, if you would become aware of *Everything* around, constantly and without prejudice, you might then even include your neighbor.<sup>31</sup>

The film was confiscated by the Nazis, and the way in which Richter understood the reason for this kind of censorship was that “if objects could rebel so could people.”

### Hans Richter and Marcel Janco

Although Richter and Janco each went his own way, a correspondence between the two artists exists, mainly in French (1966 to 1974).<sup>32</sup> The letters show that there was a close relationship between them, though it was not devoid of tension. Richter kept copies of the letters he sent to Janco and preserved those he had received from him as well. The correspondence deals with Dadaist issues, with a Dada album Janco wished to publish but for which, due to foreign currency restrictions in Israel at the time, he could not afford the copyright permissions. Although he inquired persistently about this matter, no offer of financial help was made. We also read about the events leading to Richter’s participation in a Dada exhibition held at the Tel-Aviv Museum under its director, Dr Chaim Gamzu.

One of the letters written by Janco to Richter from Ein Hod, an artists’ community in northern Israel where Janco had established himself as an artist, is a Dadaist artwork (fig. 19) (ca. 1960s). We can learn from their writings about the nuanced approaches of the two artists to the Dada movement. For Richter, as the subtitle of his book *Art and Anti-Art* indicates, there was a dialectical function to the movement. It was both art and its negation, and he saw the component “anti” as central.

For Janco, as the letter indicates, Dada was never anti-art. Having studied architecture prior to his becoming a Dadaist, and then returning to Romania in the 1920s in the post-Zurich period, where he worked as an architect, Janco was not among the *enfants terribles* in the group. He did not change his name, and many of his images of the period were more architectonic than Dadaist. It is, therefore, noteworthy that the letter to Richter is written in a Dadaist mode, with script on all sides of the page and illustrated by three Dada doodles (fig. 19). A visual pun is created between parts of the text and the images: “Ce n’est pas vrai que Dada a tué l’art” (It is not true that Dada killed art), and it is illustrated by childlike shapes. In one case we see a sharp-toothed animal, and below it a shape whose horizontal part consists of a gun, as if these “naïve” images have teeth that can bite and kill. Aggression here is mitigated, however, by the candid style. This is typically Dada in the sense that Janco says one thing, “did not kill,” but illustrates the image with biting, aggressive features (teeth) and a gun. And yet, it all seems to be in a happy-go-lucky manner. Another premeditated contradiction is in the following line: “n’a pas été anti-art mais nous n’avons jamais écrit l’art avec un grand ‘a’” ([he] was not anti-art but we never wrote art with a capital “A”). Vis-à-vis this claim, Janco inscribes the form DADA on the same page. Not only is the letter “a” capitalized but all four letters of the movement are.

A comparison between Janco’s art done in Israel and the content of the letters demonstrates his dual artistic and national identities. On the one hand, as an Israeli artist Janco identified with the fate of the land and its history. His painting of the *Wounded Soldier* (1948), is well known; done during the War of Independence, it thus denotes his turn away from Dada’s pacifism. On the other hand, as the letters indicate, Janco was continuously engaged in Dadaist matters and apparently saw himself as a Dadaist. Richter remained universal.

Janco tried to gain Richter’s response and sympathy during difficult and crucial political periods in Israel. On 5 September 1967, Janco wrote that he could not correspond with Richter for six weeks because of the war, and: “C’est toujours plus bête de lutter et de vaincre où mourir, que de gagner la paix par la diplomatie” (It is

31 *Hans Richter by Hans Richter*, 145.

32 © The Estate of Hans Richter represented by Art Acquest LLC.

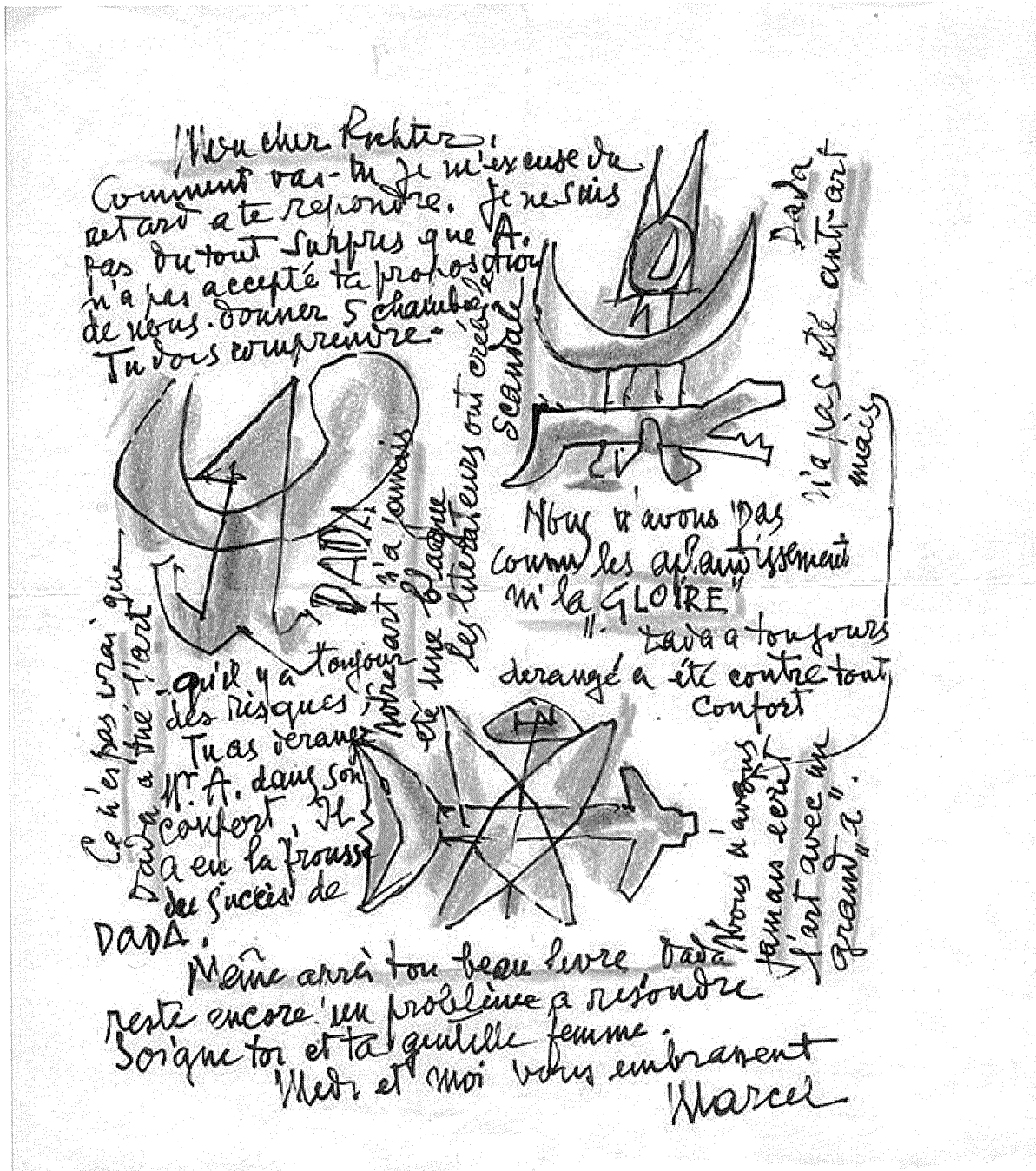


Fig. 19. Dada letter from Marcel Janco to Hans Richter, ca. 1960s © The Estate of Hans Richter represented by Art Acquest LLC

always more stupid to fight and win or die than to achieve peace through diplomacy). On 12 August 1970, during the War of Attrition, Janco wrote: “La situation est précaire et le moral diminue. Ce n’est pas difficile à comprendre le désespoir de notre peuple!” (The situation is precarious and morale is low. It is not hard to understand the despair of our people!). The use of “notre peuple” (our people)

could have been a means of suggesting that Janco and Richter are of the same people, indicating commonality.

But the most moving and significant letter was written by Janco to Richter on 7 February 1974, following the Yom Kippur War: “Je suis démonté depuis la guerre du ‘Yom Kippur.’ Cette guerre, la vie chère, le sang des soldats, les prisonniers, les crimes terroristes [...]. Tout cela nous



démoralise en attendant la paix depuis 25 ans” (I feel frustrated since the Yom Kippur war. The war, the high cost of living, the blood of women soldiers, the prisoners, the terrorist crimes [...]. All this is demoralizing, for we have been waiting for peace for 25 years.) Moreover, Janco admits that due to these circumstances, his artistic work was impaired.

When reading the correspondence we ought to pay attention not just to what has been said but also to that which has not. Richter remains silent, never responding to Janco’s remarks about the situation in Israel. As a matter of fact, in all his letters he preferred to ignore the Israeli perspective altogether. Janco did not give in and kept inviting his friend and colleague to come and visit, enjoy the weather, and lecture about Dada and his work – all to no avail. In one such invitation, dated 4 March 1972, Janco touches Richter’s soft spot: “Je suis surpris que vous, qui êtes toujours en voyage, avez peur d’Israël!!” (I am surprised that you, who are always traveling, are scared of Israel!!). Indeed there was in Richter fear of a confrontation with the Jewish state, which might have meant confronting his relatives in Israel and his early hidden Jewish background. Janco seems to be aware of this without saying anything expressly about it, but at times he did try to evoke Richter’s response to this issue, as when he began one of his letters with the word “Shalom.” As expected, there was no reciprocity from Richter, who preferred to ignore the challenge. As for the album which Janco wished to publish first in Hebrew and only then in English, Richter opposed this, stating that the album was to be published in English.

One of Hans Richter’s brothers made his home in Eretz Israel in 1924. In my interview with his son Dan, he confirmed that Hans had not wished to come to, nor visit his family in Israel, which he called “the land of your fathers,” obviously punning on the concept of the “Land of our Fathers,” while reversing its meaning.<sup>33</sup> In

his writings Richter, who in 1941 immigrated to New York, wished to create the impression that he had to flee Europe because the Nazis saw him as a “degenerate artist,” and not also because he was born a Jew. Hence his obituary in the *New York Times* (16 February 1968) states: “An outspoken opponent of Nazism, Richter was forced to flee Germany and immigrate to the United States.” Since even in America he remained faithful to the identity of the German-artist émigré, he is discussed as such in Cynthia Jaffe MacCabe’s *The Golden Door: Artist-Immigrants of America*.<sup>34</sup> A major source shedding light on Richter’s Jewish background is Marian von Hofacker, who first in 1982 and later in “Chronology” (1988) published information on Hans Richter’s Jewish roots.<sup>35</sup> Matthew Baigell, in his illuminating book *Jewish Art in America* (2007), includes Hans Richter among the Jewish artists who left Europe because of the war.

In the later part of his life Richter turned more and more from Constructivism to rhythmically analyzed geometrical abstraction. The blue man was no longer present in his art, which now consisted of elegant, sophisticated compositions carrying a universal artistic message. An analysis of this style is beyond the scope of the present article, but my claim is that his universal artistic position corresponds to his inner universalism.<sup>36</sup>

In light of Hans Richter’s universalism and suppression of his particularistic Jewish origins I would like to conclude this article with Richter’s own words that express his inner cravings for finding his true *self*. In view of his inner quest, these gain an enhanced and ironic touch:

Going back to what was *once* the theme, the urgent problem, one finds out about oneself—or better, *The Self*—what is behind one’s conscious personality. Going back does not mean not going forward—one is always going forward [when] going back to the roots, the origins, the *Mutter (Faust)*.<sup>37</sup>

33 Telephone interview with Dan Richter, 2 Oct. 2008.

34 Cynthia Jaffe McCabe, *The Golden Door: Artist-Immigrants of America, 1876–1976* [catalogue, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution] (Washington, 1976).

35 See n. 3 above.

36 For a different interpretation, see Malcolm Turvey, “Dada between Heaven and Hell: Abstraction and Universal Language in the *Rhythm Films of Hans Richter*,” *October* 105 (Summer 2003): 13–36.

37 *Hans Richter by Hans Richter*, 74.