

Anti-Doodles: a Dada-ist Game for Long Pandemic Afternoons

By Ray Briggs and Anna Zusman | 1 October 2020



As 20th Century Europe erupted into the chaos of the Great War, Dadaists responded with art forms that reflected the fragmentation and the unintelligibility of the world around them. 'Some people,' wrote Tristan Tzara in his 1918 *Dada Manifesto*, 'think they can explain rationally, by thought, what they think. But that is extremely relative' (Tzara).

Now, as the world grapples with the threats of pandemic, totalitarianism, and environmental destruction, Anna and I (Ray) are prepared to set aside traditional, orderly methods. Hugo Ball's 1916 *Dada Manifesto* proclaims saying *dada* as the way to 'get rid of everything that smacks of journalism, worms, everything nice and right, blinkered, moralistic, europeanised, enervated' (Ball). While I'm skeptical about this sweeping conclusion (a few sentences earlier, Ball has touted saying *dada* as the way to 'achieve eternal bliss' and 'become famous'), 2020 feels like the perfect time to say *dada* in our 21st Century voices.

I found it impossible to write literally about the COVID-19 pandemic. When I tried, I felt tired, tiresome, and didactic. Anna said that it was hard for her too; she was looking for a distraction rather than a reminder. So together, we sought a way to be random, playful, and chaotic. At first, I wrote poems to accompany a few of Anna's surreal drawings, which she'd created on a tablet by overlaying ordinary figure drawings with bizarre details (the head of a hog or a giraffe in place of a human head, a hole in the chest with a bird's face peeking out, a magnificent flower sprouting from a crotch). But this wasn't a true collaboration (too much of Anna, not enough of me), and it didn't feel truly alive.

Finally, Anna discovered a scheme that worked for both of us. First, each of us emailed the other one a list of three words. The lists had to be generated independently – no peeking allowed! Once we'd pooled our six words, I would use them in a poem, and Anna would incorporate them into a drawing – again, with no peeking! When our creations were complete, we shared them with each other and exchanged comments.

Although we'd initially framed this approach as a playful escape from reality, we noticed our drawings and poems returning to themes of confinement, catastrophe, and disruption. All of Anna's scenes were set in closed rooms, and three showed threats: floodwaters, flames, or mysterious intruding tentacles. My poems depicted characters frustrated by their confinement or overwhelmed by a threatening and difficult-to-predict external world.

We picked up on a few thematic resonances that were specific to individual poems.

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Anna: 'One of my drawings shows characters from Alice in Wonderland. I think there is the sense of surprise in Alice in Wonderland. You never quite know what's happening, which chimes with the current situation.'

Ray: 'The poem that accompanies that drawing is all about the contrast between a cramped, constrained reality, and sweeping, ambitious daydreams. I love how that contrast between dreams and reality shows up independently in Anna's picture, where the "real" backdrop of a burning city is offset by a picture of an idyllic castle hung on the wall.'

Anna: *Titmouse* was the easiest one to come up with for me. For the first time in my life, I heard that word, and I was like 'wow this is a weird word.' Initially, I was just trying to put all the words into a coherent picture, but eventually, I realised it was about the creative process – that part when you're all alone and trying to create something, and you're not sure if anybody's listening.

Ray: Yeah, I was really captivated by the language too – especially when you told me, 'A titmouse is neither a tit nor a mouse.' That sentence stuck in my head, and I designed the whole poem around its rhythm.

Anna: I love the fact that it is never revealed what a titmouse is.

Ray: Speaking of mysteries, where is the axis in that picture?

Anna: The pole is an axis around which the mouse dances. I was like 'I don't want to draw any math-like things.'

**

In the end, my poems and Anna's drawings reflected reality in their formal elements, not just in their themes. Our separate but parallel method of creation is a lot like social isolation: two people in their own separate bubbles, still working with the materials at hand to create a shared artistic universe. Just as we've adapted to teaching and socialising over Zoom, we adapted to writing and drawing around the constraint of our randomly chosen words.

We tried not just to make the best of this constraint, but to use it to make our project better. I believe that in the best cases, formal rules can actually serve as an aid to the creative process: while the rational, conscious mind sits in the corner gnawing on the ropes of constraint, the creative, unconscious mind is free to play unimpeded. Maybe that's why both of us added more structure: I decided that each poem would be a sonnet, and Anna built 3D models to design the layout of the last three poems.

Anna writes, 'I had a teacher who said that "uncontrolled creativity leads to idiosyncratic wackery." With us it was controlled creativity and even though it was idiosyncratic, I hope it goes beyond wackery.'

After six drawings, with six words each, it felt like we'd reached a suitable endpoint for this project (although Anna will be continuing in the same vein with randomly generated Pictionary words). When I proposed the title *Doodles*, Anna responded:

'*Doodles* means *mindless sketching or writing*. What we did, or at least the way I approached it, was almost the opposite: taking something nonsensical and making sense out of it. That requires quite a bit of mindfulness and peculiar awareness of uncommon connections. I found my process very therapeutic because it reflected the current situation, which is unpredictable and doesn't quite make sense. The only way to live with it is to make my own kind of sense.'

So, these are *Anti-Doodles*.

References

Ball, Hugo. 'Dada Manifesto.' 1916. *Wired*, 11 July 2016, online.

Tzara, Tristan. 'Dada Manifesto.' 1918. *Dada Painters and Poets*, 2nd ed., translated and edited by Robert Motherwell, Belknap, 1989, pp. 78–9, online.

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Words:

1. Elegant
2. Contrarian
3. Decay
4. Duck
5. Radishes
6. Pearl

Ingrate

They feed me on quince paste and duck à l'orange,
on salads of endive and radish and pear
on mille-feuilles and sherry and cherry pavlova.

They dress me in cufflinks and elegant gowns,
in cummerbund splendor. They coil my grey hair.
They drape me in satin and pearls and chiffon.

I hate their decor and their fine, scented soap
I'll splatter their monogrammed curtains with slop,
unravel them, bury them, let them decay;

I'll pestle their pastry, prosciutto, pâté,
parboil them down to a pasty purée,
commingle them into contrarian soup,

then let myself loose in the meadow to gloat
as nude as a daisy, as free as a goat.



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Words:

1. Stunted
2. Overflowing
3. Blobfish
4. Samovar
5. Shocking
6. Nose

Spontaneous Generation

Behold my magic kitchenette!
It's fructuous, salty, fecund, wet:
a mug that grows live eels; a glass
writhing with cichlids, perch, and wrasse;
a chubby-belly china dish
that breeds blue-blubber jellyfish.
This ichthy ichor overflows,
so shocking to the eye and nose
its fragrance overwhelms the sea,
outweirds it in abundance.
The blobfish boil over, far
beyond the bounds of samovar
and saucer! Stuffed with stunted sculpin,
the building bulges... brims... bursts open!



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Words:

1. Bookish
2. Escapist
3. Flamingo
4. Tiddlywinks
5. Glisten
6. Cat

Phantasms

I'm a mousy mister, a bookish bloke.
My apple is crab; my cherry is choke.
My income is fixed; my budget is broke.
My dreams are fantastic, escapist, baroque:

tiddlywink towers that squop to the sky,
jacks in tall stacks, twenty knucklebones high,
checkers that leap, model airplanes that fly,
chess pieces polished with midnight-blue dye –

a game-player's paradise! Pinball! Pachinko!
Graphics that glisten and pop! Lights a-blink-o
as bright as the feathers of fifty flamingos!
Sounds that go BLAST-O and BLAM-O and BINGO!

... I beg your pardon. I long for that.
I cook my supper. I pet my cat.



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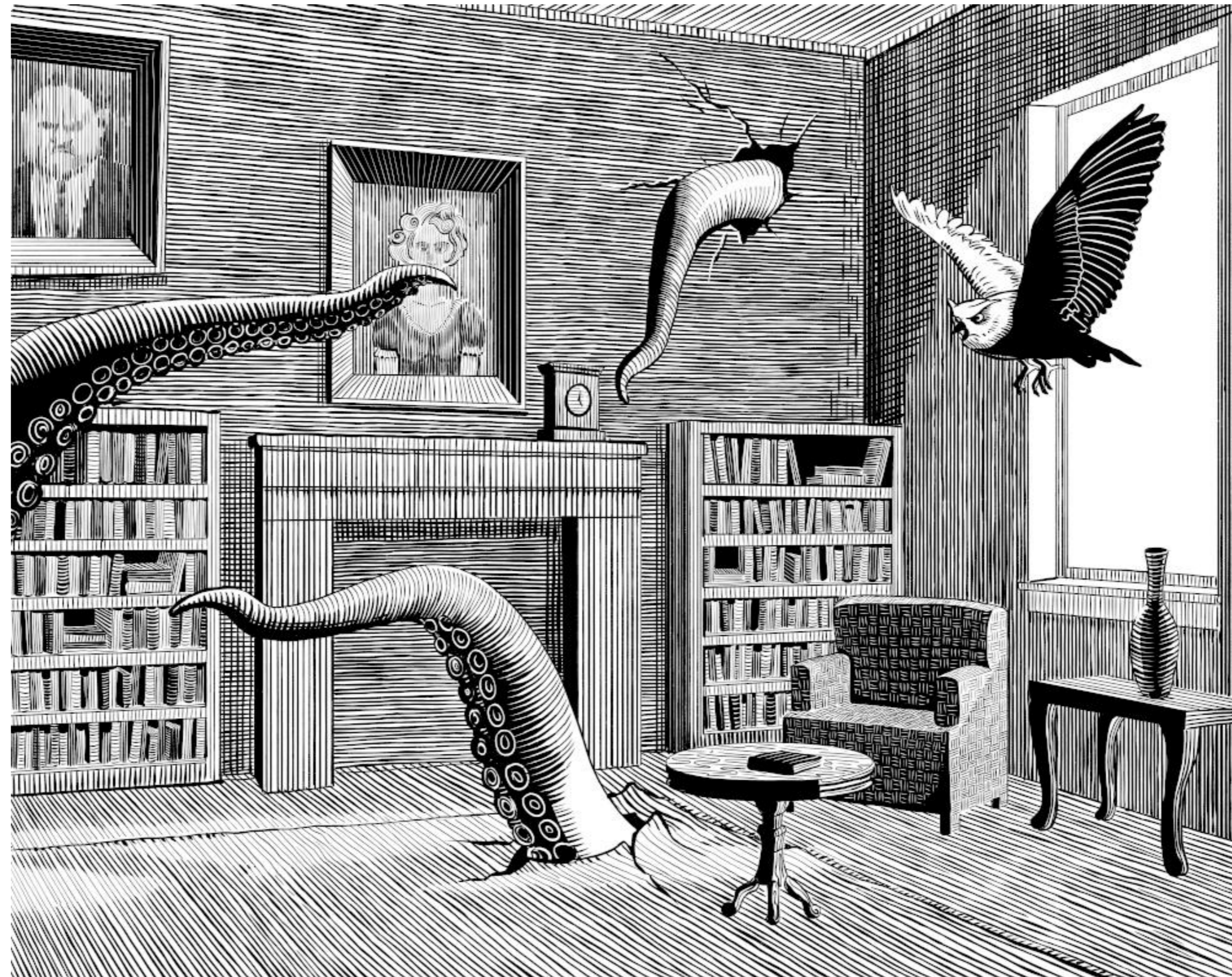
1. Tentacles
2. Burst
3. Study (as in a room, not the verb)
4. Mysterious
5. Wings
6. Explosive

Injustice

The Thing in my study that whispers and sings,
that giggles and snivels, that tickles and stings,
a tangle of tentacles, ankles and wings,
is burbling with ardor.
It stirs with a whirr from its Chippendale chair,
to comb its mysterious, copious hair,
then bursts through the doorway and thumps down the stair
to enter the parlor.

The world, it proclaims, is corrupt and unfair:
its knees are unshod and its eyeballs are bare;
it hasn't a barber.

Its rage is explosive: your humanoid kings
with little regard for the feelings of Things
have emptied the larder!



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Words:

1. Titmouse
2. Tit
3. Mouse
4. Formica
5. Honeycomb
6. Axis

Ornithology

A titmouse, she said, is neither a tit nor a mouse.
A titmouse, she said, is never a flavor of cheese.
It couldn't, she said, demolish the roof of your house.
It isn't, she said, a honeycomb studded with bees.

What is it, I asked: a bug or a bat or a snake?
A movie, I asked? A colour? A flavor of praxis?
And was it, I asked, a-prowl when I wasn't awake?
And could it, I asked, untether the Earth from its axis?

She would not reply. She sat at the edge of her chair,
and gave me The Eye, as hard as formica or chrome.
What is it, and why? And when will I meet it and where?
Unheeded, my cry. The gloaming of nobody home.

Alarming, unknown, it lurks like a loon or a lark
Unknowing, alone, I wait for its steps in the dark.



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Words:

1. Orchid
2. Escape
3. Vulture
4. Pancakes
5. Hackles
6. Impossible

Breakfast

I came here for pancakes and raspberry jam,
black pudding with bran flakes, granola on spam,
but my ill-fated plan takes a tumble... and BAM!
A outcroppy landscape rears up. Here I am

surrounded by grackles of nibby-sharp shape.
I puff up my hackles. I fluff up my nape.
A thundercloud crackles. Weird vortices gape.
I rattle my shackles and plot my escape...

but daylight turns midnight. The grackles turn vulture,
alight on the tip of a crackling sepulcher,
critique my cuisine with their cackling culture:

No orange juice, orchids, or grape nuts! They toss the bowl
into a wasteland that's gaping, uncrossable.
These condors turn conqueror. Escape is impossible.



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