DADA OBJECTS
Chapter 5

The Object of Dada

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I am taking the term “object” in two senses: as the thing itself and as the goal of the whole thing, the total object in a double sense, in forms both literal and metaphorical. I see this shiftability as the clue to its surprising density and longlivedness. Let me start with a remark quoted by John Ashbery from a conversation with John Cage: “What”, I asked Cage, “is the advantage of not knowing what you are doing?” “It cheers up the knowing,” he explained (Cage 1989: 22).

I’ll be getting back to the unknowing and to this passage. Now, I delight in not knowing exactly what Dada is or was doing, but even more greatly in the thought of applying both senses of the word “object” to whatever it was doing. Now the divergence between the two senses of the word: the object/thing and the goal, leaves a space for the energizing ambivalence of what Dada means, at least for me. As in Pierre Reverdy’s aesthetic theory of the two elements which meet from different realms and clap together in their difference, the two senses of much Dada objectness strikes me as just right.

In his “Disdainful Confession” of 1923, Breton lauds the unpinnabledownness of things: “Until further notice, anything that can delay the categorization of beings or ideas – that can, in a word, maintain ambiguity – has my full approval” (Breton 2003: 159). And in his piece on Entr’acte – that film so clearly based on betweenness, on the “entre” in all its many senses – in the special number of October devoted to Dada George Baker (2003: 160) calls for a category of that which falls between categories.