

Cassandra in the City

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Amelia Jones. *Irrational Modernism: A Neurasthenic History of New York*

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What if, in entering *Fountain* in the 1917 Society of Independents exhibition in New York City under the name R. Mutt, Marcel Duchamp was not, as he stated in “The Richard Mutt Case,” just “choosing” an “ordinary article of life,” but, in fact, curating the work of another artist entirely? In a 1917 letter to his sister Suzanne, he wrote that “one of my women friends, using a masculine pseudonym, Richard Mutt, submitted a porcelain urinal [to the Society of Independents show] as a sculpture” (42). What if instead of the wink-wink-nudge-nudge, know-what-I-mean anonymity accorded Duchamp’s gesture, the work in fact masked another kind of anonymity, the one famously defined by Virginia Woolf as “Anonymous Was a Woman”?

The established narratives of the avant-garde are, paradoxically, among the most fetishized of all canonical histories. Thus, even though I had thought of myself as someone who did not have the most personal investment in Duchamp’s originality, I found myself shocked, shocked, at the suggestion, in Amelia Jones’s revisionist examination of New York Dada, *Irrational Modernism: A Neurasthenic History of New York Dada*, that Duchamp might not have been, even as we have been trained to conceptualize it, the “author” of *Fountain*, and that R. Mutt might well be the *nom de plume* (or, given her personality, the *nom de guerre*) of the Baroness Elsa von Freytag Loringhoven, a German artist’s model, poet, and assemblage and performance artist, who was a close friend of Duchamp and other stars of the New York Dada movement and a highly controversial figure in her own right, but who has fallen into the shadows of art history.

Jones has chosen the liminal figure of the Baroness as her Virgil in this ambitiously complex and compelling book, which is the latest expression of her overarching art-historical project, composed of her “engendered” evaluation of Duchamp’s oeuvre and the production of his central place in the

history of the twentieth-century avant-garde; her broader desire to intervene into the gendered mechanisms and value hierarchies of art-historical methodology, in order to propose an embodied, "intersubjective," and performative art-historical practice; and her interest in desublimatory practices in twentieth-century performance art, particularly of the feminist art movement and beyond. Thus *Irrational Modernism* is the third part of an impressive trilogy on this tripartite area of study, joining *Postmodernism and the En-Gendering of Marcel Duchamp* (1994) and *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (1999).

The art-historical establishment is exquisitely tuned to the most minor incursions, even when they take the form of carefully reasoned bodies of thought that acknowledge their imbrication in the Establishment: Jones admits that her work "has involved . . . struggling, and not always successfully, against my own internalization of the Ideological State Apparatus that is the discipline of Art History" (238). Indeed it could be argued that Jones, who describes herself as a "long-time, somewhat obsessive fan of the life work of Marcel Duchamp," (echoing the Baroness, who at one point had "rhapsodized, 'Marcel, Marcel, I love you like hell, Marcel!,' then rubbed her body down with a clipping of Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*") (101), maintains the balance of power of the state apparatus by her continued focus on Duchamp, for even this book is not quite as much about the Baroness as one might wish, given the interest and complexity of her life and work. On the other hand, questioning the metamasculinity of Duchamp as founding father of postmodernism or suggesting a female usurper threatens the "State," and Jones's deliberately "overidentificatory" relation to the Baroness unmasks the personal investments that underlie all art-historical practice.

The impact of World War I on avant-garde movements such as Dada is usually examined through experiences of artists who were in it. In her chapter "War/Equivocal Masculinities," Jones examines the impact of the war on "noncombatant masculinity" and is truly compassionate in her understanding of Duchamp's and Francis Picabia's decision to avoid combat and the call to patriotism, militarism, and murderous aggression in a largely senseless war. At a time when "in Paris, able-bodied young men who were not in uniform were, accord-

ing to myth at least, routinely harassed by young women handing them white feathers" (61), Duchamp came to New York to avoid conscription; Picabia was drafted but finagled his way out of combat. While Jacques Villon fought in the trenches and Raymond Duchamp-Villon served in a noncombatant medical unit and perished, Duchamp wrote of the "attitude of 'combat-ing invasion with folded arms'" (101).

But in "Dysfunctional Machines/Dysfunctional Subjects," Jones is critical of the artists' recuperation of phallic power through their embrace of cold, hard, "machinic" projections of industrialized commodities. Posited as fathers of modernism and postmodernism, they are also praised for their experimental approach to gender, while Elsa's work, composed of the contingent urban detritus that was her favored subject and material, has fallen from art history.

The Baroness insisted on reinserting the body with all its effluences in the face of pretensions to transcendence epitomized by America's obsession with sterile plumbing. "America's comfort:—sanitation—outside machinery—has made American forget own machinery—body!" (quoted on 130). The possibility of her being the author of *Fountain* is buttressed by her work *God*, a plumbing joint as twisted phallus, plumbing "that fails to channel flow properly" (133). But, although "The sexual, machinic forms of Man Ray, Picabia, and Duchamp's New York Dada pictures and objects . . . have easily been recuperated into the capitalist logic of the museum . . . the Baroness's irrational, lived Dada, however, still resists any easy or formulaic positioning within the institutions of high art" (119, 122). Duchamp was always already privileged to redefine the model of male genius while fully inhabiting it. Structurally, there was no place for the Baroness to be recuperated to: she could not retreat to any established model of femininity.

This book is part of an effort to restore the Baroness to the central place she held in New York Dada: Jones acknowledges her debt to scholars such as Irene Gammel, whose excellent book *Baroness Elsa: Gender, Dada, and Everyday Modernity, A Cultural Biography* (MIT Press, 2002) is a useful companion to *Irrational Modernism*, providing additional, detailed biographical material that Jones's more metahistorical work cannot accommodate.

Contemporaries of the Baroness, includ-

ing William Carlos Williams, Hart Crane, Duchamp, and Ezra Pound, often demonized her as a sexually aggressive, smelly, old European harpy, but in their writings they acknowledged the influence of the uncompromising radicality of her practice. Margaret Anderson, the coeditor of *The Little Review*, wrote simply, "She is the only one living anywhere who dresses dada, loves dada, lives dada" (quoted on 5).

The Baroness was known for her outrageous entrances. For example, applying for the job of artist's model at the studio of the artist George Biddle,

With a royal gesture she swept apart the folds of a scarlet raincoat. She stood before me quite naked—or nearly so. Over the nipples of her breasts were two tin tomato cans, fastened with a green string around her back. Between the tomato cans hung a very small bird-cage and within a crestfallen canary. One arm was covered from wrist to shoulder with celluloid curtain rings, which she later admitted to have pilfered from a furniture display in Wanamaker's. She removed her hat, which had been . . . trimmed with gilded carrots, beets and other vegetables. Her hair was close cropped and dyed vermilion (quoted on 190).

By the time the Baroness appeared on the nascent avant-garde scene of New York Dada, she had already been a central figure of earlier European avant-garde communities. Born in Swinemünde in 1874, by 1903, after a debauched start as a model and chorus girl in Berlin, she had married the architect August Endell and begun an affair with the writer Felix Paul Greve, who wrote a veiled biography of Elsa, *Fanny Essler*, a 1905 *succès de scandale*. The early intersection of her aggressive heterosexuality with her involvement in the nascent "queer culture" in Germany, including marriage to two men who were probably homosexual, informed her understanding of Duchamp's ambivalent sexual affect.

In 1910 Greve brought Elsa to the United States, where he abandoned her. She lived in New York from 1913 to 1923; the final touches of her persona were fixed by her brief marriage in 1913 to the Baron Louis von Freytag-Loringhoven, giving her the aristocratic title that became her flamboyant moniker, "The Baroness."

Living in dire poverty despite her impressive title, she was an artist's model, made sculpture from found objects, and transformed her person into a living artwork through extravagantly imaginative costume and dramatic interventions into the social fabric of the city and the center of a largely male avant-garde. At the same time she engaged the friendship and professional support of important avant-garde women, including the editors of *The Little Review*, as well as the writer Djuna Barnes and photographer Berenice Abbott.

In a few photographs by Man Ray and others, she defies known tropes of female representation: less alluringly feminine than Rose Sélavy, she is not young, her poses are awkward, her costumes strange, yet there is a confrontational, comic, still-hopeful expression on her face, very different than Claude Cahun's self-images or Cindy Sherman's.

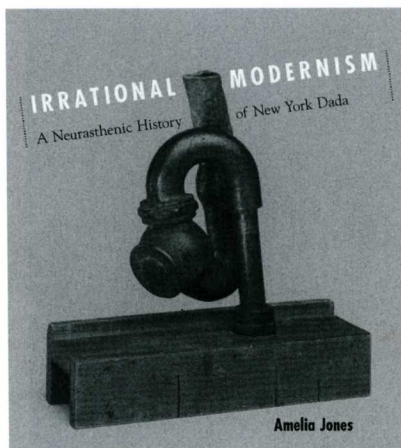
Like the Baroness's friends, Jones too sees her as emblematic of avant-garde practice, here specifically as a sign for the neurasthenic, cathected art history she proposes. Confessing to panic disorder, near the end of *Irrational Modernism* Jones engages in a kind of reverse, mediumistic ventriloquism, in which the dead Baroness speaks through the living, irrational art historian: in a performative example of the "intersubjective" art-historical practice Jones calls for, she enacts her identificatory relation to her subject and her Virgil by imagining a walk through the night of New York in 1919, in the shoes and the voice of the flâneuse-of-the-New-York-night Baroness.

I am flexed with revolt—the war the crush of the city hard on my bones the hollow gestures of M-F-MR turning money from antipathy using sad bodies girls fresh flailing coatracks spiders asses me arms raised crotch shaved flaunting sex. The smell of sex deleted from their machine abstractions (girls born without mothers—gears refusing to catch—hot liquid exchanges frozen glassy hard) while I explode flesh feathers forcing huge phallus gifts upon this too cold grinding on. Menstruation—(mensickness!). I cannot live for I am proud and heed splendor—Manahatta mangles dream fleshthoughts artwarmed emptiness (226).

This is a risky experiment, therefore all the more interesting in its departure from the

(supposedly) objective voice considered appropriate for art-historical writing. Such a venture would be courageous for any author of expository text because it enters into the zone of fiction, drama, and poetry. Finally it is courageous because the Baroness was a brilliant modernist writer in her own right, a very tough act to follow.

Jones's imagining of the Baroness's voice focuses on her abject yet triumphant sexual emanations and the almost foolhardy courage she displayed in a hostile world. The Baroness herself resisted an abject self-image: "I am unfit for victim . . . victim is mean—



obscure—I must flash radiance for my nature is lovely" (219). She expressed sheer joy in language including the *readymade* language of advertising, for example in a series of poems collectively called *Subjoyride*: "Ready-to-wear-American Soul poetry. (The right kind) / [. . .] Lux Kamel hands off the better bologna's beauty—get this straight— / [. . .]—Nothing so pepsodent—soothing— / pussy-willow—kept clean / with Philadelphia Cream / Cheese. / They satisfy the man of largest mustard underwear—no dosing— / Just rub it on—" (144–45).

Of Duchamp, the Baroness wrote that he "is kept—fed—lulled—petted. . . . I can only join *real* life not *spectre* performance—I lived life with my passions—myself—since men were not men—but prostitutes. . . . I have my full power—I am Amazone. . . . my swing will naturally go to desperation and 'crime' instead [of] to: prostitution" (142). She loved him, but was compelled to call him out as a complicit prostitute in bourgeois society, while understanding her own marginalization within that society.

Like the Baroness, Jones has always spoken from the courageous place of the "inconvenient" woman, beginning with her meticulous analysis of Duchamp's active participation in the creation of his own myth, a myth of silence to insure his presence. Here Jones insists on her identificatory cathection to the Baroness who, though at least as transgressive and avant-garde as Duchamp, if not more so, was silenced because she spoke too loud. In *Postmodernism* and the *En-Gendering* of Marcel Duchamp and projects like *Sexual Politics*, a controversial curatorial focus on another inconvenient woman—Judy Chicago—Jones has displayed, within traditionally exegetic text as well as the experimental writing she engages in here, the mixture of courage and foolhardiness characteristic of the Baroness, fairly addressing and attacking powerful figures in her field while proposing alternative methods for writing art history.

After the Baroness died in Paris in 1927, Djuna Barnes wrote of the death mask she had taken of her friend, "Looking at [the Baroness] one thought of death in reverse" (quoted 234). Jones proposes a Benjaminian interpretation of this figure, something like Benjamin's Angel of History: "The death mask of the Baroness, then, is presented here to evoke a life mask for us now" (238). She says that for Theodor Adorno, "Benjamin bemoaned the kind of history that involved the extraction of 'inmost soul' from the 'alienated, reified, dead world' of frozen aesthetic forms in order to make sense of the past" (237). Jones attempts and largely succeeds in articulating a desublimated, lived model of history.

This book is important at this moment in history: the recuperation of failed masculinity, combined with the silencing of nonconformist women in an America caught up in militarism, xenophobia, and profligacy, is a story that resonates strongly in the United States today.

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