Cassandra in the City

Mira Schor


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 Neuroasthenic 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 Intentional 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/I 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, according 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 flung 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 combatting 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" (135). 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 Irene Gammel, whose excellent book Barones: Elsa: Gender, Dada, and Everyday Modernity, A Cultural Biography (MIT Press, 2002) is a useful companion to Intentional Modernism, providing additional, detailed biographical material that Jones's more metahistorical work cannot accommodate.

Contemporaries of the Baroness, includ-
Living in dire poverty despite her impec-
rious title, she was an artist's model, made
sculpture from found objects, and trans-
formed 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 photog-
rapher Berenice Abbott.

In a few photographs by Man Ray and
others, she defies known tropes of female
representation: less alluringly feminine than
Broze Sélavy, she is not young, her poses are
awkward, her costumes strange, yet there is a
confrontational, comic, still-hopeful expres-
sion 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 prac-
tice, here specifically as a sign for the neuros-
thenic, cathetized art history she proposes.
Confessing to panic disorder, near the end of
Immaterial Modernism Jones engages in a kind
of reverse, mediumistic ventriloquism, in
which the dead Baroness speaks through the
living, irrational art historian: in a per-
formative 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
clash of the city hard on my bones the
hollow gestures of M-F-MR turning
money from antipathy using sad bodies
girls fresh failing coatracks spiders ass
me arms raised crotch shaved flaxing
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 phalus gifts upon this too cold
grinding on. Menstruation—(mensick-
ness!). I cannot live for I am proud and
heed splendid—Manahatta mangles
dream fleshthoughts artwarmed empti-
ness (216).

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 bril-
liant 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
examinations 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—

Like the Baroness, Jones has always
spoken from the courageous place of the
"inconvenient" woman, beginning with her
meticulous analysis of Duchamp's active par-
ticipation in the creation of his own myth, a
myth of silence to insure his presence. Here
Jones insists on her identificatory cathexis
to the Baroness who, though at least as trans-
gressive and avant-garde as Duchamp, if not
more so, was silenced because she spoke too
loud. In Postmodernism and the Ex-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 fig-
ures in her field while proposing alternative
methods for writing art history.

After the Baroness died in Paris in 1937,
Djuna Barnes wrote of the death mask she
had taken of her friend, "Looking at [the
Baroness] I thought of death in reverse" (quoted 34). Jones proposes a Benjaminian inter-
pretation 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 a-
esthetic forms in order to make sense of the
past" (237). Jones attempts and largely suc-
ceds in articulating a desublimated, lived
model of history.

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

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