Limbswishing Dada in New York

Baroness Elsa's Gender Performance

Irene Gammel

> With me posing [is] art—aggressive—virile—extraordinary— invigorating—
> antestereotyped—no wonder blockheads by nature degeneration dislike it—
> feel peeved—it underscores unreceptiveness like jazz does.
> The Baroness to Peggy Guggenheim, 1927
> Felix Paul Greve [...] hat intellektuellen Ehrgeiz—Aber er will
> 'Originalitat'—von der ist *er strikter Antipod. Ich bin das*—was er nicht ist.
> So musste er mich hassen—lassen.
> The Baroness, "Seelisch-chemischebetrachtung"[1]

Celebrating her *posing as virile* and *aggressive* art in the first epigraph, the Data artist Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, nee Plotz (1874-1927) summed up her remarkable life and work just months before her mysterious death in Paris. Known as the Baroness amongst the international avant-garde in New York and Paris of the teens and twenties, the German-born performance artist, model, sculptor, and poet was a party to the general rejection of sexual Victorianism, launched with the 1913 International Exhibition of Modern Art, the so-called Armory Show, in Manhattan. Before coming to New York, the Baroness had undergone a picaresque apprenticeship amongst the Kunstgeiuerbler avant-garde in Munich and Berlin from around 1896 to 1911, before following her long-time spouse Felix Paul Greve (aka F.P. Grove) on a quixotic immigration adventure to Kentucky. After Grove's desertion, she made her way to New York and promptly married the impe-cunious (but sexually satisfying) Baron Leopold von Freytag-Loringhoven. Soon a tided war widow (the Baron was incarcerated by the French in 1914 and committed suicide in 1919), the Baroness claimed her new spiritual home amidst an energetic and international group of vanguard artists-- many of them exiles from Europe. From 1913 on, she threw herself with abandon into New York's experimental ferment, quickly becoming the movement's most radical and controversial exponent.[2]

Perhaps it is appropriate to begin by commenting on the irony of P.P. Grove and Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven's diverging trajectories. Just as the Baroness never tired of contrasting their antithetical artistic personalities, so their shifting cultural value follows opposite trends. In examining Canada's settler literature and Grove's vital importance for the Canadian canon of literature during the 19205 and 19303, Paul I. Hjartarson has noted the "steady decline of interest, both academic and public, in Grove's novels in the past two decades" ("Staking a Claim" 19; see also 28-29).[3] In contrast, as I have noted with respect to the Baroness, after decades-long obscurity, her cultural value has surged over these past years ("Transgressive Body Talk" 73-74), with recent citations of her work in the Neiu York Times and Time magazine (Kimmelman; Hughes) following the prestigious Whitney exhibition Making Mischief: Dada Invades Neu; York, in which her sculpture Portrait o/Marcel Duchamp photographed by Charles Sheeler was prominently featured on the cover of the exhibition catalogue.[4] An exhibition curated by Francis Naumann in New York City was dedicated exclusively to the Baroness's

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artwork (April 2002). In addition, there have been extensive scholarly discussions (Naumann, *New York Dada*; Sawelson-Gorse); her autobiography and letters have been published (Hjartarson and Spettigue, Baroness Elsa); and last but not least, her art work has made important forays into university curricula in Modernism and Art History courses.

In his pioneering *New York Dada, 1915-23*, the American art historian Francis M. Naumann has championed the Baroness amongst a motley international crowd of Americans and Europeans fleeing the war in Europe: Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia, John Covert, Jean and Yvonne Crotti, Charles Demuth, Marcel Duchamp, Katherine Dreier, Albert Gleizes and Juliette Roche, Mina Loy, Louise Norton Varese, Edgar Varese, Man Ray, Henri-Pierre Roche, Francis Picabia, Charles Sheeler, Morton Schamberg, Joseph Stella, the Stettheimer sisters, Clara Tice, and Beatrice Wood. They gathered in the salon of the American art collector and poet Walter Arensberg, as Buffet-Picabia recalls: "The Arensbergs showed a sympathetic curiosity, not entirely free from alarm, towards the most extreme ideas and towards works which outraged every accepted notion of art in general and of painting in particular" (260). Amongst this richly diverse group of artists the Baroness represented the most extreme and radical exponent.

Indeed, the Baroness's work belongs to the most aggressively icono-i clastic expressions of the era. During unsettling war times, she collaborated ' with the American sculptor Morton Schamberg to produce *God* (1917), a sculpture sacrilegiously made of plumbing fixtures and designed to dismantle the supreme signifier of the western sign system itself (figure 10). *God* was "so powerfully iconoclastic that it came to represent the single purest,] expression of Dada sensibilities in New York," writes Naumann, who attributed this work to the Baroness (*New York Dada* 126, 129, 172). Today a canonised work of art, God is a sister piece to Duchamp's *Fountain*, the infamous urinal proclaimed a sculpture at the 1917 Independents Exhibition in j New York, an art work in whose conception the Baroness probably also had a hand, as I have argued in detail elsewhere (Gammel, *Baroness Elsa*, chapter 8). The Baroness was also a poet with radical experimentations in sexual subject matter, as reflected in such poetic (or unpoetic) tides as "Orgasmic Toast," "Orgasm," "Subjoyride," and with irreverent references to "spin-sterlollypops," "celluloid tubes" ("A Dozen Cocktails Please") and to "koitus" ("Literary Five O'clock"), references that blasted to shreds the conventions of traditional love poetry. She was championed by the period's most avant-, garde literary journal, The Little *Review*, which launched her controversia and emotionally intensive poetry including "Mineself—Minesoul—and-Mine—Cast—Iron Lover," although a great deal of her controversial po has remained unpublished (see Gammel, "German Extravagance"). By 1921 she was so in/famous that she became the object of parody in CharleJ Brooks's *Hints to Pilgrims*.

What, then, is the meaning of Dada, in which the Baroness gained such flashy prominence? According to the literary scholar Richard Sieburth, " Dada functioned as an infantile parody of the *logos*, a babbling *Urwort* aimed I echoing and cancelling the name of the Father and the authority of his Law" (46). Born in the midst of war, Dada was an anti-art, fed in New York by to influx of an international group of artists trying to escape the horror on in Europe. As a nonsense art, its goal was to reveal the corrupt won slashing all systems of order with abandon. Today, art historians and art historians see the Baroness as "the epitome of Dada anarchy, sexual freedom, and creativity," as the American

comparatist scholar Rudolf E. Kuenzli ("Baroness Elsa" 442) describes her. The feminist art historian Amelia Jones has placed her alongside Marcel Duchamp, arguing that "these artists' confusions of gender and over sexualizations of the artist/viewer relationship challenged post-Enlightenment subjectivity and aesthetics far more pointedly than did dadaist paintings and drawings" ("'Women' in Dada" 144).

In *Baroness Elsa: Gender, Dada, and Everyday Modernity*, the first book-length biography exploring the life and work of Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, I have traced the psychological roots of the Baroness's visceral Dada to her traumatic childhood and to the subsequent armouring of her body and self in a wild sexual odyssey through Berlin, Italy, and Munich. As I have argued, the trauma—which would coincide with the trauma of a whole generation during the World War I period—was inscribed on the Baroness's body (her non-feminine looks and militant aggressiveness, which included a boxing match with the poet William Carlos Williams and other altercations), and was articulated through her shocking art (her scatological humour, her acting out, her militant revenge on male misogyny in publicly performed gender acts). Her work was always uncompromisingly radical, routinely unleashing fierce controversy, even as the Baroness pioneered highly original art forms that effectively anticipated proto-punk, body art, and performance art (see also Gammel, "Mirror Looks").

Focusing in particular on her radical gender crossing in performances of erotically charged androgyny, I propose to trace the Baroness's performative trajectory from Europe, through New York and back to Europe. Her investment of herself, her living Dada, what she called "posing as art" in the earlier epigraph, must be seen as her most innovative contribution, one that makes her profoundly modern today, for her innovative art ultimately compelled the urbanite viewer to see city spaces and urban life in a new way. By shocking viewers, always taking them by surprise, by making sudden apparitions in quotidian spaces, her eroticized art created a profound affect in the viewer, making the viewer remember the event decades later. This art form grew out of her own personal history, as well as fermenting with the myriad of avant-garde movements and impulses in Europe and New York, impulses that she inscribed on her body. That her contemporaries felt deep discomfort with the Baroness had to do with what she described as the "aggressive" and "virile" quality of her art, as well as with her chosen format, eroticized performance art, which often filled her audience with a deeply i threatening mixture of desire and repulsion. Ultimately, performance was I the Baroness's most remarkable and most original contribution, but it also placed her at the outermost edge of the movement, representing its most avant-garde and most risky expressions.

As early as 1915, the Baroness began to parade the streets of New York in strange costumes. She adorned her body with *bizarre* and often utilitarian objects: vegetables, stamps, teaspoons, teaballs, electric taillight,[1] tomato cans, lead toys, wastepaper baskets as hats, parrot feathers as accessories, and so on. Her performances regularly included the parading of live animals: canaries worn in a small cage around her neck and dogs on long leashes. She even paraded a fake penis once. She shaved her head and lacquered it vermillion. She wore yellow make-up and painted her lips black. Picked up from the streets or purloined from Woolworth or Wanamakers, these items reflected America's consumer culture, utilitarian objects morphing into objects of strange beauty on the

Baroness's living body, a form of *dadamerique* that mirrored America's contemporary culture in strangely decontextualized form. Just as in her poem "Subjoyride," the speaker travels along modern-day advertisement signs and records "Philadelphia Cream Cheese" and "Bologna" as objects of poetic beauty, poetic ready-mades of sorts, so the material consumer items displayed on her body became objects of art that compelled the viewer to contemplate this work in a new way. The effect was part of Dada's *Lachkultur* (Korte 42), but it was also Dada's way of de-automatising the public by mirroring its culture in strangely skewed forms.

Briefly consider the biographical roots of this art, as registered in some of the memory pictures in her letters and autobiography. As early as 1896, Elsa Plotz had dressed up as a Renaissance Madonna for her lover Melchior (Mello) Lechter (1865-1937), one of the leading *Kunstgewerbkr* (arts and crafts movement) in Berlin, who injected art into life by creating artistic furniture, book covers, and stained glass artwork (Hjartarson and Spettigue 123-30). Likewise, the Baroness's first husband, August (Tse) Endell(1871-1925), was a *Kunstgewerler* in Munich and Berlin, “making decorations tions and furniture" (Hjartarson and Spettigue 72) and systematically crossing the boundaries of art and life, as discussed in detail by Richard Cavell in "Baroness Elsa and the Aesthetics of Empathy: A Mystery and a Speculation." The French scholar Thierry de Duve has effectively linked Duchamp's innovations, including the ready-made, to the *Kunstgewerbler* movement in Munich (41-63); for the Baroness, too, this movement was a profound influence. At the turn of the century, she witnessed the pagan cross-dressing that was an integral part of Munich's avant-garde circle, as they made an active effort to inject Eros into everyday life by celebrating androgynous models based on their reading of gynocritic treatises (Gammel, "No Woman Lover" 451-67). In addition to these early male gender-benders, the cross-dressing poet Else Lasker-Schiiler may have been an influence, as discussed by Klaus Martens in this volume.

Yet the most profoundly affective influence, I propose, takes us back even further to the Baroness's Prussian home in Pomeranian Swinemiinde on the Baltic sea (today the Polish bordertown of Swinoujscie). For the Baroness remembers vividly the events coinciding with her mother Ida-Maria Plotz's diagnosis of cancer in the early 18905: her mother rebelled against her tyrant-husband, as described in Greve's *Maurermrister Ihles Haus* (1907). What Greve does not tell us is that she also began transforming useful fabrics into useless objects, "spoiling elegant materials with cheap trash [for] she was tired of doing 'fine handiwork.'" The Baroness later dramatized this memory picture in a letter to her most loyal friend during the Berlin years, the American writer Djuna Barnes. Of her mother she writes:

> [S]he was speculating about—maybe—putting [the golden fried squares] with "such and such a stitch"—some velvet of special tint— or silver braid—or lace—on it—to make [a] "handkerchief holder" [whose] "usefulness" had ceased to interest her. ("Djuna Sweet—If you would know")

As the Baroness describes it, Ida-Marie Plotz "felt revolutionary." Her "flashing smile—illuminating face—her giggle and untouchable aloofness" establish a likeness with "'Marcel' [Duchamp]," as the Baroness asserts, the comparison marking her mother as an artistic inspiration for the daughter

("Djuna Sweet—if you would know"). Just as her mother suddenly refused to create functional decorations for her bourgeois home, so her daughter now actively marshalled her mother's memory. In New York, she used innocuous domestic objects including tea-balls and icecream soda spoons for her anti-bourgeois art, purposefully stripping them of their domestic usefulness to proclaim her Dada message. Yet where Ida-Marie Plotz's scandalous rebellion had been confined to the privacy of home and sanatorium, dismissed, silenced, and ridiculed as madness, the Baroness took her strangely beautiful attires to the public street as deliberate acts of art. Her acts were born out of memory's deep affect, and her performance, in turn, would create strong emotional responses in her viewers. But if Ida-Marie Plotz's rebellion was ultimately constrained by patriarchal and bourgeois norms, the Baroness aggressively struck out at the very institutions that wished to impose those constraints.[5]

Indeed, the fiercely anti-bourgeois panache at the heart of Dada, as she tells us in her memoirs, was born in her passionate rejection of the "bourgeois harness" of her parental home, imposed by her father and new step-mother (Hjartarson and Spettigue 42). Her Dada has a Mephistophelian edge, as the young Elsa Plotz grew up with an intimate familiarity of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's work through Ida-Marie Plotz's interest in the Romantics. Mephistopheles—or Mefu, Mefi as the Baroness calls him in her poems "Mefk Maru Mustir Daas" and in "Clock"—is the anti-thesis to "The Lord" in Goethe's philosophical drama Faust (1790-1833) and is key to understanding her entry into Dada.[6] As a demonic tempter, Goethe's figure of chaos, evil, and destruction is a roguish mischief maker, who uses theatrics, artifice, costuming, play, but also bodily and material pleasures to dismantle static systems of order. In Goethe's view, and the Baroness's appropriation of it, such chaos is only seemingly destructive, for the rogue as anarchic spirit of negation and antithesis (*der Geist, der stets uerneint* [Goethe, *Faust* 82]) ultimately produces spark, energy, movement, drive, joy, and life (*Leben*). Here, in this focus on life and kinetic movement, then, lies a second important entry point into her distinctive form of Dada.

Indeed, most remarkable about the Baroness's art is the kinetic and erotic charge inherent in her body images, which tell a story fundamentally different from the male machine paintings and sculptures exhibited by Francis Picabia and Marius de Zayas in the Modern Gallery, works that marked the advent of modernity in New York, as documented in Naumann's *How, When, and Why Modern Art Came to New York: Marius de Zayas.* Picabia's spark plug, provocatively titled *Jeunejille ame'ricaine dans 1'e'tat de nudire'*, in particular, appears to encapsulate the catalyst spark of the Dada period, while Duchamp's *Large Glass* and *Bicycle Wheel* ready-mades likewise celebrated the perpetual motion of the new machine age with a focus on technological images (Naumann, *New York Dada* 61 and 38-39, 40). Typical, too, of the image of New York Dada are the sleek machine paintings and mechanical abstractions by Morton Schamberg (Naumann 126-29).

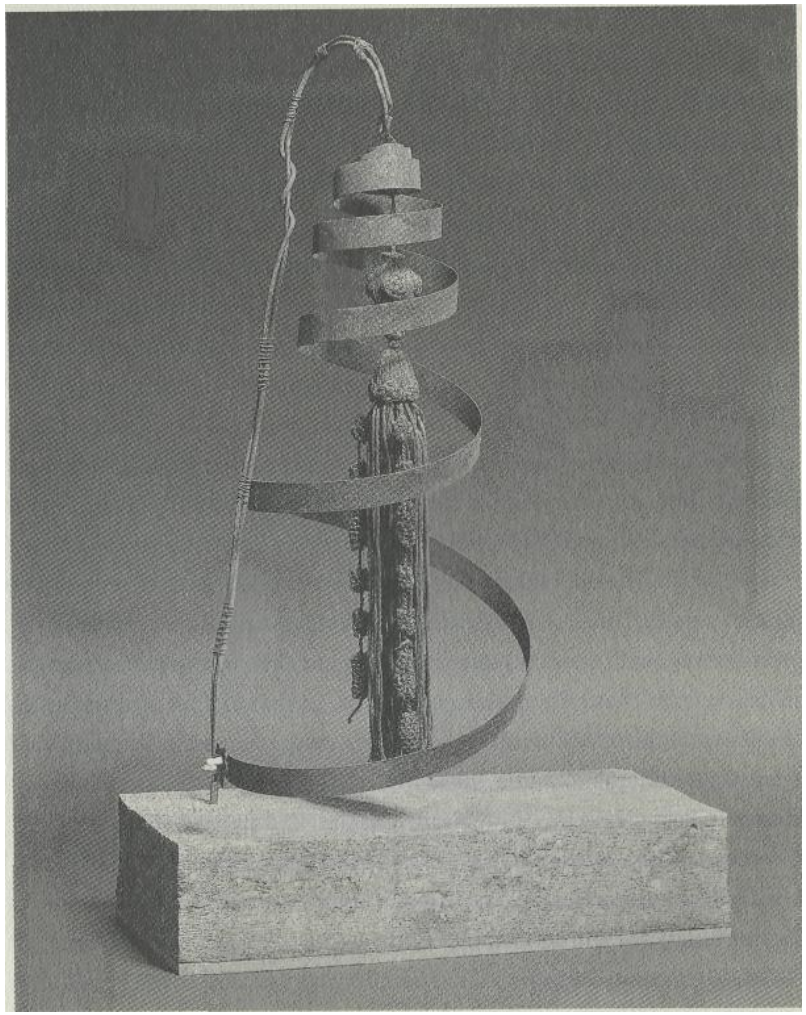
Most recently, feminist art historians have taken these male representations as a comparative springboard for a gender approach that points to the distinctive differences in the works of female dadaists. The American art historian Amelia Jones has theorized the Baroness's streetwalking as a revolutionary new art form within New York Dada ("Practising Space"; see

discussion below) and has highlighted the gender effects of her art ("Eros, That's Life"; "'Women' in Dada"). In Naomi Sawelson-Gorse's edited volume *Women in Dada: Essays on Sex, Gender, and Identity*, the Baroness is featured prominently, with several essays arguing that her work is distinctively different from that of her male colleagues. Barbara Zabel, for instance, discusses the Baroness's work as a "recovery of the human in the machine-age portraiture" (36). Likewise, in the *Women's Art Journal*, the cultural historian Eliza Jane Reilly notes the "formal and iconographic contradictions between [Freytag-Loringhoven's] highly personal and sensual art, which incorporated human and animal forms, organic materials, and her own body, [on the one hand] and the deliberately machine-centred, anti-humanistic, and masculinist stance of much of the art classified as Dada [on the other]" (26-27).

In contrast to the steely immortality of the male machine gadgets, the Baroness's gilded vegetables are no longer extant, their demise a testimony to the precariously ephemeral nature of performance art. Modern performance theorists like Peggy Phelan remind us that this art form makes a dramatic impact precisely because it does not survive (146-53 *passim*). The Baroness's art consisted in parading her body as a living art museum in a contemporary quotidian urban space. As she perambulated along inner city streets, her art objects—including the long earrings, the hanging belt ornaments, the metal springs and tassels—-were vibrating in movement, scripting kinetic energy onto her body. A few important items of the Baroness's performative gear have survived and are held today in private collections and museums, as *Oggetto* (*Object*) in the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice, a belt with ornaments loosely attached and swinging with the movement of the Baroness's body (reproduced in Schwarz 121). These surviving objects, then, provide a rare glimpse at an extraordinary art form.

The spirit of the Baroness's art is, perhaps, best epitomized in *Limbsurish* (figure 1), held in Mark Kelman's collection in New York, along with *Enduring Ornament, an iron ring; Earring-Object,* an earring; and *Cathedral,* a wood splinter (reproduced in Gammel, *Baroness Elsa,* chapters 6, 7 and 8). While our access to the Baroness's performative costumes is often mediated through textual testimonials and personal impressions provided by her contemporaries, these rare objects allow us some uniquely unmediated glimpses into the Baroness's body art and sculptures. These objects, therefore, are invaluable in recapturing the Baroness's art today. *Limbsurish* was worn attached to her belt and consisted of a long curtain tassel surrounded by a metal spiral, the tassel and the metal's swirling shape thematizing and accentuating kinetic movement. The tide is an erotically charged pun on limbs *wish* and limb *swish,* the latter evoking the sound of the object's swishing movement as the Baroness paraded her body in full gear. The Limbsiuish body ornament is large, about eighteen inches high, and worn on her belt; it makes the mannish Baroness a dominatrix of sorts. The reader familiar with her autobiography may easily imagine her handling of the object, intimidating her reluctant artist-lovers including Duchamp, Williams, and the "Cast Iron Lover."[7].

Figure 1: Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven. *Limbswich*. C. 1920. Metal spring, curtain tassel. 21 11/16 in. Mark Kelman



Collection, New York.

The Baroness's consistent focus on erotically charged movement is also found in her kinetically charged poetic experimentations. The visual poems "Perpetual Motion" and "Matter, Level, Perspective," for instance, compel the viewer's eye to move up the stairs, using treadmills and spirals, always climbing and circling without allowing the eye to come to a final resting point. "Read from down up," the Baroness instructs her viewer/ reader in "Matter, Level, Perspective," but even as the viewer's eye arrives in the uppermost section, the gaze is immediately propelled further in spirals of movement. Similarly, "Appalling Heart" creates a kinetically vibrant city space by featuring verbally *swishing limbs:*

City stir—wind on eardrum—
dancewind: herbstained—
flowerstained—silken—rustling—
tripping—swishing—frolicking—
courtesing—careening—brushing—
flowing—lying down—bending—
teasing—kissing: treearms—grass—
limbs—lips.
City stir on eardrum—.
In night lonely peers—:
moon—riding!
pale—with beauty aghast—
too exalted to share! (47)

The long catalogue of action-charged participles "tripping—swishing" creates the city as a space of "perpetual motion." The

reader careens with the speaker in a whirlwind ride through the moonlit metropolis, in which the city's body is rendered strangely skewed ("with beauty aghast"), like a cubist painting, with limbs grafted in entirely new ways, creating hybrid bodies and compelling new ways of seeing the city and the body.

In an essay entitled "Practicing Space: World War I-Era New York and the Baroness as Spectacular Flaneuse," Amelia Jones has applied Walter Benjamin's theory of flanerie and Michel de Certeau's urban theory to discuss the Baroness as "a quintessential New Woman/flaneuse" whose performative body scripted non-normative codings during the teens and twenties and who "perfected a rhetoric of walking, moving throughout the city to produce an alternative 'space of enunciation'" (6). In the second part of her essay, Jones proceeds to impersonate the Baroness, re-enacting her Dada ravings against male machine art:

> I ask you why I am mad—ruthlessly lonely by inner rendering of outer circumstance—within commonplace life mesh— while they cavort scrupulously making machine sex dolls. (8)

Jones's brilliant ventriloquising of the Baroness revives early twentieth-century gender dissidence in the metropolis with a striking immediacy for the twenty-first century reader. For those interested in gender issues, the Baroness's flashing memory bits often create a drive toward recreating and resurrecting this artist.

Indeed, much of the Baroness's modernity today has to do with her stunning gender acts that are bound to dazzle postmodern viewers and readers schooled in Butlerian theories. These gender theories stipulate that the material body repeats and reproduces socio-cultural constructs, and that daily performed gender acts can be used to trouble, disrupt, and parody the categories of body, gender, sexuality, and identity (Butler). The premise behind this theory is that political and social power no longer resides primarily in traditional centres of power such as the state apparatus or political parties but works at the microcosmic level of social relations. Consequently, political work and social change, in particular in the realm of gender relations, rely on microcosmic parodic performance and subversive repetition of conventional gender roles. Since it is believed that a parodic repetition will effectively change society from the microcosm up, the theatrical emerges as a political category, and costuming becomes an enactment of gender identities. It is within this context that the Baroness's gender acts achieve their ultra-modernity for the twenty-first century viewer and reader.

A key to the Baroness's performative trajectory into the postmodern era, then, is her radical androgyny, which publicly disrupts the binaries of conventional gender codes. The Baroness had begun modelling in her twenties, posing in 1896 for her lover, Melchior Lechter. During the teens and twenties, the Baroness still supported herself and her art through modelling, yet she had also begun to use her profession as a creative anchor for inscribing her diaristic personality experiments, critically commenting on the use painters had made of her body. The American painter George Biddle remembers such a performance in his memoirs. In 1917, when she was in her early forties, the Baroness presented herself as a model in his Philadelphia studio. Biddle recalls in his memoirs:

> Having asked me [Biddle], in her harsh, highpitched German stridency, whether I required a model, I told her that I should like to see her in the nude. 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 about her back. Between the tomato cans hung a very small birdcage and

> within it a crestfallen canary. One arm was covered from wrist to shoulder with celluloid curtain rings, which later she admitted to have pilfered from a furniture display in Wanamaker's. She removed her hat, which had been tastefully but inconspicuously trimmed with gilded carrots, beets and other vegetables. Her hair was close cropped and dyed vermilion. (137)

In this self-display as model, the Baroness's body draws attention to the sexual signifiers: the breasts with the tomato cans as bra satirize the fetishizing of these sexual signifiers in visual representations. But perhaps most importantly, feminist art historians have shown that generations of male painters have represented themselves in self-portraits with their nude female models, enacting the hierarchical boundary male/female, active/ passive in the model/artist representation. The Baroness's autobiographical self-display dismantles this traditional binary: when she throws opens her scarlet raincoat, the male painter Biddle is forced to reconfigure his model as an artist. Biddle's account is emblematic of the way in which the Baroness flashes through the memoirs and autobiographies of modernists, as well as appearing in photography and painting, as in the painting by Theresa Bernstein, which shows the nude Baroness with a thick shadow surrounding her body, as if she had wrapped herself in an Achilles-like armour of sorts (figure 2).[8]

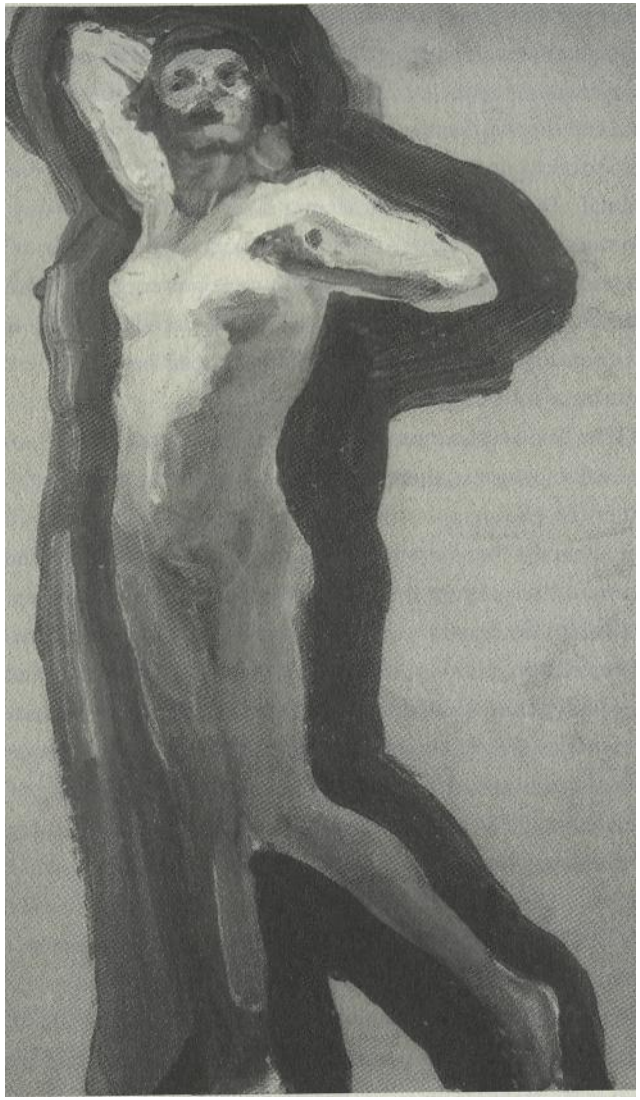


Figure 2: Theresa Bernstein. *Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven*.

1916-17. Oil. 12 x 9 in. Francis M. Naumann Collection, New York.

The Baroness routinely shocked her viewers with her desexed body, her radical androgyny, as when she modelled for a film project in which the American photographer Man Ray and Duchamp collaborated in 1921. One still from the film has survived in Man Ray's 1921 letter to dadaist Tristan Tzara in Paris the startling pose highlighting the Baroness's radical gender fluidity: with the masculine, shaved head, slim boyish body in angular positioning, she displays herself as America's androgyny, her legs posing in shape of the letter A. With this self-representation, the model presents us with a physical diary picture, highlighting her aggressive rejection of feminine shame, and her simultaneous ability to avoid the voyeuristic male gaze: the pose baffles and shocks the viewer in a Dada gesture, but does ultimately not serve titillating ends. The Baroness is in charge, not the photographers behind the camera. In 1921, the Baroness was prominently featured in the only *New* York Dada issue which was edited by Man Ray and featured contributions by Duchamp and the Romanian dadaist Tristan Tzara. Alongside her Dada poem, "Yours with Devotion," the Baroness was featured in profile—her head shaved, her breast nude—and in frontal view with feathery head-gear and heavily bejewelled hand—the performative gear and artistic armour with which she confronted bourgeois conventions and masculinist misogyny (reproduced in Naumann, *New York Dada 206*).

Given that the Baroness had been parading her shocking androgyny since at least 1915, one wonders whether Duchamp's famous pose as *Rrose Selavy*) (1921), photographed by Man Ray, as well as his later partial shaving of his head, might not have inspired by the Baroness's cross-dressing and radical hair removal. As her extensive correspondence with *The Little Review* editors documents, Duchamp was her friend from 1915 and figured in several of the Baroness's art works including the sculpture *Portrait of Marcel Duchamp* (figure 1). Jones argues that Duchamp's pose as *Rrose* is central to New York's "performative Dada," the injection of eros into everyday life ("'Women' in Dada"); Naumann has compared it with Charlie Chaplin's cross-dressing in the movie A Woman (1915) ("Marcel Duchamp" 20-40); and Krauss has read *Selavy* as *Levy* with Duchamp cross-dressing into Jewish identity (42-46). *Rrose Selavy* is decidedly feminine, with Duchamp turning himself into art object, making new the conventional "rose" of poetry by autoerotically wrapping himself in feathers, big hair and soft clothing. *Rrose Se'lavy* was the perfect male complement to the female Baroness who, disrobed and desexed, wrapped herself in her virile armour of shock performance.

In February 1921, Anderson and Heap strategically deployed the Baroness's photograph and writing in their activist fight against US obscenity legislation, using her as a literal figure-head in their legal battle against America'sobscenity laws (Gammel, "German Extravagance"). Finding themselves in court for having serialized Joyce's sexually explicit *Ulysses* in *The Little Review*, they defended women's right to view and control sexual subject matter by displaying alongside their programmatic defence of *Ulysses*, "Art and the Law," not James Joyce's portrait, but the Baroness's, the Village's militant performance artist. The

photograph of the Baroness, looking severe and austere with a few feminine necklaces, is vertically extended with her signature at the bottom, arranged in columns like a poem, and extended with a hand-drawn crown on top. The crown signals the Baroness's titled status, but is also a visual signifier for the bars of the jail that literally threaten to silence the women claiming their sexual rights, as Heap writes in her 1922 "Dada" article: "And then 'bars' for Dada, 'bars' for Else von Freytag—two sets of bars for the same thing!" (46). Just as Joyce's Ulysses was effectively silenced in the United States by 1922, so the Baroness found herself silenced. In New York, she literally lived at the borderline of American society, routinely stealing from department stores in order to support her art and life. "That is now—why I want to go away too—I am fed up with myself—my loneliness and memories—I must live—and not become a nervous freak. Here nobody wants me—I am respectfully—or—horrifiedly—avoided." So she wrote in a letter to Jane Heap, who helped organise her trip back to Germany.

Yet when the Baroness returned to Germany in 1923, her journey funded by donations made by Williams, Heap, and others, she found even more horrendous conditions in post-war Germany. Her father had disinherited her; her widow's pension was denied; and she was an aging woman during a time when a generation of younger women, most notably Marlene Dietrich, were conquering the stage with sexually charged androgyny that appealed to a mainstream viewership. Still, even while destitute and often suicidally desperate, the Baroness continued to perform herself aggressively. Denied an exit visa for Paris and caught in Germany, she presented herself to the French Consulate in Berlin. Presumably on her birthday on July 12,1924, she flashed the French Consul in full performative gear, a memorable act she detailed in her letter to Barnes:

> I went to the consulate with a large—sugarcoated birthday cake upon my head with 50 flaming candles lit—I felt just so *spunky and afluent* [sic]—! In my ears I wore sugar plumes or matchboxes—I forgot wich [sic]. Also I had put on several stamps as beauty spots on my emerald painted cheeks and my eyelashes were made of guilded [sic] porcupine quills—rustling coquettishly—at the consul—with several ropes of dried figs [dangling] around my neck to give him a suck once and again—to entrance him. I should have liked to wear gaudy colored rubber boots up to my hips with a ballet skirt of genuine goldpaper white lacepaper covering it [in the margin: to match the cake] but I couldn't afford that! I guess—that my inconsistency in my costume is to blame for my failure to please the officials? (Hjartarson and Spettigue 216-17)[9]

The iconographic tale of this Dada performance is as personal as it is political. In this staged German/French confrontation, the fifty flaming candles on her head flash into tension-filled political relations and diplomatic stalemate, mate, after Germany's suspension of reparation payments and France's subsequent retaliatory invasion of the Ruhr territory in the spring 1923, political events that were, in part, the cause for the Baroness's inability to leave Germany. Her performance is a peace offering of sorts, a seductive display of decidedly oral delights of cake and sugary figs—with the desired gaudy coloured rubber boots and ballet skirt poking fun at the officers' high booted military outfits, as well as ridiculing bureaucratic seriousness. Even though the consul still refused to issue a visa, the daring episode was commemorated by her contemporaries (Flanner 39).[10]

At the same time, there was an important (self-)destructive

side to the Baroness and this side was explored, perhaps not entirely fairly, in a 1932 short story by Mary Butts, "The Master's Last Dancing," published only recently, in 1998 in *The New Yorker*. The red-headed British modernist writer and free-spirit Mary Butts used the Baroness's personality as raw material to comment on the decadence of the Montparnasse era: "There was a woman come lately to Paris, from somewhere in Central Europe by way of New York, who made her living by giving us something to talk about," writes Butts (III). In this barely veiled portrait of the Baroness, the Empress, as she is called in the story, dies her hair green, paints on her head a phallic sign and on her knees a skull, and wears a dustbin and hearthbrush for jewels. The satirical portrait is none too flattering, however, for the last dance functions, as Butts's biographer Nathalie Blondel has written, as Butts's farewell to her own wild life of decadence in Paris (Blondel 226-27, 327)-In this story, the Dada Baroness retrospectively comes to encapsulate the pathology of the age, personifying the trauma that was the result of the war. As Butts writes, "we were the war lot. We had a secret" (no). This *roman a clef* made the Baroness its focus, as it critically engaged the wild parties organized by Ford during the twenties in Paris. Butts's party ends in a wildly grotesque and clearly fictionalized scene, in which the Baroness literally dances on Djuna Barnes's face, leaving a pool of blood, Butts thus exorcising her decadently destructive life by using the Baroness as a medium.

As for the Baroness's important legacy, she had launched an art form whose trajectory would span to the postmodern era, her "anti-stereotyped" posing anticipating, amongst others, the grotesque poses of the American performance artist Cindy Sherman. During the teens and twenties, the Baroness was far ahead of her time in paving the way for other 1920s and 19308 gender performers as seen with Anita Berber in Berlin and Claude Cahun in Paris. Indeed, in 1923, Anita Berber (1899-1928) continued the Baroness's trajectory, performing with monocle and cylinder in Berlin's Wintergarten and bars, with breasts nude, the nipples painted red, "like two drops of blood," the mouth "a bloody wound" (Lania 162). With her partner Sebastian Droste, Berber performed radical androgyny, enacting a state beyond conventional gender boundaries in in/famous nude performances. Droste was "more and less than a man, more and less than a woman— different," during a time when "nude dance was the fashion in 1922" (Lania 152). The titles of their performances—House of Madness (Haus der Irren), Cocaine (Kokain), Byzantinian whipping dance (ByzantinischerPeitschentanz), the latter evocative of the Baroness's *Limbsunsh* title—highlight the grotesque-ness that coincided with the post-war atmosphere in Germany (Lania 156-57). The abandonment and self-destructiveness was an expression of the times of unemployment, post-war despair, and escape.

Meanwhile in France, the French photographer, surrealist poet, and performer Lucy Schwob, aka Claude Cahun (1894-1954), gave herself an androgynous identity that, like the Baroness's, was reflected in a stunning mutability of gender identities recorded in her photographs. It is intriguing to speculate how well the Baroness and Cahun knew each other. When in 1926, the Baroness arrived in Paris, she settled in the Hotel Danemark on rue Vavin, just a short walk from 70 rue Notre-Dame-des-Champs, where Claude Cahun lived from 1922 on. Moreover, Cahun and the Baroness shared some friends: Heap, Anderson and Georgette Leblanc. During the twenties and thirties, Cahun took photographs of herself in male costumes with her hair shaved off or dyed outrageous colours. She photographed herself

as socially constructed sex doll, powerfully drawing attention to the gender imprisonment in daily life (Krauss 30-36). Cahun powerfully parodied the codes of gender conventions in a way that continued the Baroness's performative trajectory into the 19308 and 19408, when Cahun, a Jew and lesbian, was incarcerated by the Nazis in 1944, and much of her work destroyed as decadent and perverted art.[11]

Ultimately, the Baroness had pioneered a new art with her virile "posing" as art. She had turned herself into an art object, producing flamboyant and provocative self-images that were controversial but also highly inspirational. "She is the only one living anywhere who dresses Dada, loves Dada, lives Dada," Jane Heap wrote in what was an impassioned defence of Dada from attacks launched from within the modernist camp (Harriet Monroe), who feared that Dada was going too far in assaulting traditional conventions of art and mores. Anderson and Heap judged her genius to be on par with that of James Joyce: they championed both as radical experimenters, publishing the Baroness's poetry and poetic prose alongside *Ulysses* from 1918 to 1921, while the poet Ezra Pound immortalized her by name in his *Cantos* for her "principle of non-acquiescence" (Canto 95: 646). The Baroness's performative spirit and radicalism are, perhaps, best encapsulated in Heap's proclamation in her editorial note "Full of Weapons," which appeared in the Picabia number in 1922, printed in capital letters that were reminiscent of the Baroness's loud upper case letters in the "Cast Iron Lover": "*The Little Review,"* Heap shouted at her readers, "is an ADVANCIN G
POINT TOWARD WHICH THE 'ADVANCE GUARD' IS ALWAYS ADCANCING" (33). The Baroness lived and embodied that slogan. An uncompromising, androgynous Amazonian warrior, her sleek body armour a virile and aggressive tool, she was marching and fighting at the front line of the avant-garde. Like no other, she was ardently committed to her art— and ultimately willing to sacrifice herself for it.

Endnotes

1. "Felix Paul Greve [...] is intellectually ambitious—he craves 'originality,' but is originality's strict antipode. I am that—which he is not. And that is why he hated me—and left me" ("Spiritual-Chemical Reflection"). My translation from the original German.

2. These events have been documented in a number of sources including Paul I. Hjartarson, "Of Greve, Grove, and Other Strangers" 269-84; "The Self, Its Discourse, and the Other" 115-29; Paul I. Hjartarson and Douglas Spettigue in the introduction to Baroness E!sa 9-35; Gammel, "Breaking the Bonds of Discretion" 149-66.

3. This important point should not, however, denigrate or gloss over the impressive number of recent scholarly studies, including special sessions as well as published revisionist and cultural approaches (feminist, gender, comparative, auto/biographical, and translation theory) that bring P.P. Grove into the modern-day scholarly discussion, as well as into the university classroom. In Sexualizing Power, introduction 1-12) I make a case for revisionist reading approaches to Grove, as a way making this author accessible and relevant today. Grove has not achieved the enduring academic and public status of a Hemingway, but compared with Canadian contemporaries like Morley Callaghan, he has held his own.

4. My thanks to Francis M. Naumann for making available a photograph.

5. It is important to note that F.P. Grove drew at least in part on the same memory pictures of *Ida-Marie Plotz* when he created his temporarily resisting Canadian mother figures in *Settlers of the Marsh* (1925) and in *Our*

Daily Bread (1928), figures that leave the reader with a haunting sense of quixotic female rebellion. Many of the Baroness's letters about Ida-Marie Plotz lend further credence to E.D. Blodgett's earlier argument that Grove's fictional characters always lash out but are eventual constrained by patriarchal systems; their rebellion and disruption "never leads to the advent of a new order, but is at best frustrated comedy" (Blodgett, Configure, 54); see also my *Sexualizing Power*, in particular chapter 12, "The Father's Seduction and the Daughter's Rebellion" 207-32.

6. In a circa 1924 letter to Barnes ("Dearest Djuna [...] It is marvellous how you love me"), she connects "Mefk" and "Maru" of her poem "Clock" with "Mephistopheles," as she writes: "I should have 'mephy' printed rather than 'mephy' and 'Mephistopheles'; Mefistofeles—with F too—in regard to 'mefk maru mustirdass' with which it pretends to be connected." She continues: "[m]efy—mefisto—mefistopheles—as he is variously called—that ph in German in derived from the Greek—I believe—it is not uncommon already to change it into 'f'."

7. My thanks to Mark Kelman for providing me with a photograph and ektachrome of *Limbsurish* and for the rare opportunity of seeing this inspirational object in New York City, along with *Enduring Ornament*, *Earring-Object*, and *Cathedral*. I am also grateful to Mark Kelman for making available detailed and hard-to-access information on the provenance of *Limbsuiish*. My thanks to Francis M. Naumann for first drawing my attention to these art objects.

8. My thanks to Francis M. Naumann for sending me a photograph.

9. Although corroborating evidence is missing, the number of candles—fifty—
suggests that the Baroness's performance act took place on July 12,1924, her 50th birthday.

10. Interestingly, the British author Ford Madox Ford attributes to the Baroness a similar performance in the British Consulate in Paris, possibly in 1927. "I found telephone bell ringing and a furious friend at the British Embassy at the end of it. He wanted to know what the hell I meant by sending them a Prussian lady simply dressed in a brassiere of milktins connected by dog chains and wearing on her head a plum-cake!" (334).

11. It is important to note that, even though ahead of her time in breaking many bourgeois conventions, the Baroness remained caught in the anti-Semitism that was rampant during the teen s and twenties even among avant-gardists. The Baroness's comments on Karl Wolfskehl's "oriental" sexuality, for instance, reveal anti-Semitic stereotyping (Hjartarson and Spettigue 138).