

Baroness Elsa and the Aesthetics of Empathy

A Mystery and a Speculation

Richard Cavell

On April 1st, 1921, the Socie'te'Anonyme of New York, which was the first American society devoted to the presentation of modern art, held a session on Dada which was immortalized in a drawing by Richard Boix (figure 5). In this draining we find a number o/key .figures within New York Dada, including Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp, all of whom are clearly identified by name. In the centre of the image, however, there is a .figure resting on a pillar identified only as "La Femme," and it is around this .figure that a mystery has grown up (figure 6). The New York Dada scholar Francis Naumann has suggested an identification with a sculpture by Archipenko (.figure 7), while admitting that "no specific sculpture by Archipenko—nor, Jor that matter, any other artist from this period—exhibits the unusual details that can be Jound in this illustrator's .flight of fancy" ("New York Dada" 14). Identifying the figure with Eve through the icon ojthe apple, Naumann notes contrariwise that from the "string attached to the woman's elbow (or is it a beaklike extension of her nose?) a cup dangles .freely in space, a detail that makes the sculpture look less like the depiction of a woman and more like an organ-grinder's monkey 'gone Dada'" (14). In the mystery of this figure Naumann sees the very reason why "people keep asking 'what is Dada?'"

In the decade from 1986, when Rudolf Kuenzli published *New York Dada*, to 1996, when Francis Naumann issued *Making Mischief: Dada Invades New York*, the figure of Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven has moved from the peripheries of New York Dada to occupy a central position, as the reproduction of her 1920 *Portrait of Marcel Duchamp* on the cover of Naumann's book tellingly indicates (figure i). The reasons for this shift are many: one has to do with the increasing recognition of the historical importance of women in Dada (as in the anthology of articles recently edited by Naomi Sawelson-Gorse). Closely connected to this avenue of approach is that of feminist theory, which, by critiquing the notion of Dada as an exclusively masculinist activity, has opened up a space for important figures such as Elsa to emerge from obscurity. Another avenue along which Elsa studies have developed is that of sexuality: Elsa's memoirs, published by Paul Hjartarson and Douglas Spettigue under the tide *Baroness Elsa*, remain among the most breathtakingly frank documents of this period, and we are now beginning to understand that sexuality was absolutely central to Elsa's art, be it her poetry, her prose or the artefacts she created. Finally, the growing interest in and research on Elsa's German partner, Felix Paul Greve, has been accompanied by the realisation that their work constitutes much more of an intellectual collaboration than was previously known to be the case.¹

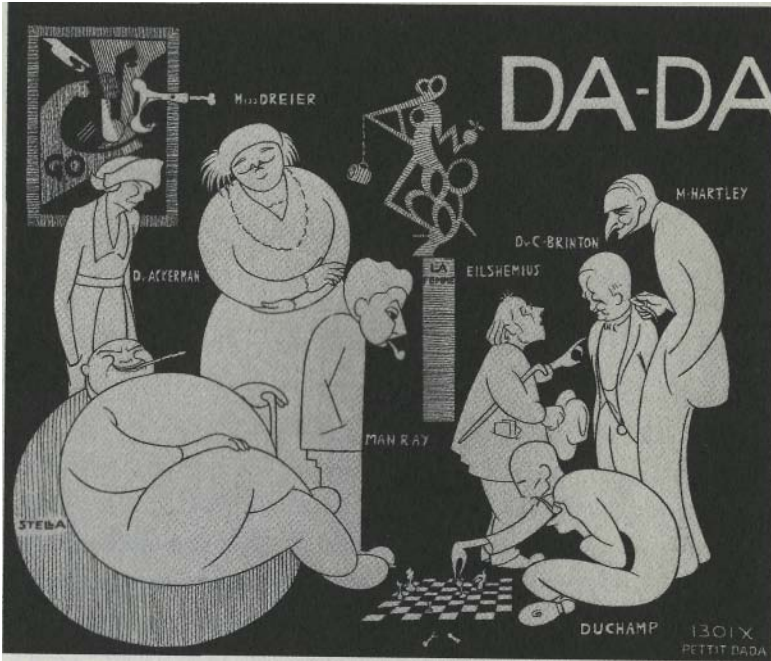


Figure 5: Richard Boix. *DA-DA (NEW YORK DADA GROUP)*. 1921. Brush, pen and ink. 11 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 14 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. (28.6 x 36.8 cm). Primary Inscription: Signed L.R. "Boix." The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Katherine S. Dreier Bequest.

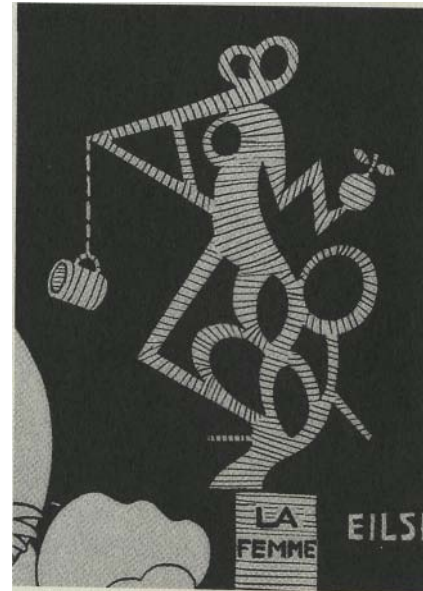


Figure 6: Richard Boix, detail.



Figure 7: Alexander Archipenko. *Seated Woman (Seated Geometric Figure)*. 1920. Plaster, painted Venetian red and burnt sienna. Signed: "Archipenko." 57 cm. Gift of the Goeritz family, London. Tel Aviv Museum of Art Collection, Israel. © Estate of Alexander Archipenko/SODRAC (Montreal), 2002.

We are far from having answered all the questions raised by the *fin-de-siecle* stories of self-fashioning told by Felix Paul Greve and Else Plotz; my own research into Greve has highlighted the homosexual panic that infiltrated his early writings, influenced his flight from Germany in 1909, and shaped his subsequent "Canadian" writings.² The present article complements that research in its focus on Elsa (as the Baroness was known)³ and her New York incarnation as the very embodiment of New York Dada, according to the current critical consensus. I agree with this assessment, and I do so with particular emphasis on this notion of *embodiment*: indeed, it can be said that the greatest work of art that Elsa produced in her New York period was herself (and this is another reason why she subsequently slipped into obscurity).

This paper contributes to one particular area of interest: the roots of Elsa's dadaism within a little known though profoundly influential aesthetic movement in late nineteenth-century Germany, a movement to which Elsa was directly connected.⁴ This context requires that I recuperate one of the most vilified characters in Elsa's memoirs: August Endell, an architect very

much in the *Jugendstil*⁵ vanguard of his time. While at the end of her life Elsa remembers Endell for his "snivelling lack of backbone—bawling babyconduct—weeping impotence" (Hjartarson and Spettigue 131), Endell nevertheless played a very important role in Elsa's early artistic life, and, indirectly, in her aesthetic formation. It was during her Munich years (circa the iggos-Elsa's memoirs contain few dates) that Else wrote to Endell, whom she had previously met socially, to ask him "how one may earn money in doing applied art.... I... really have no idea nor any art training. That is why I turn to you—because you seem to know so much about it" (Hjartarson and Spettigue 58). Endell accepted her proposal, and soon Else found herself working four to six hours a day on her art (Reiss 94). The rest of the story we can glean from Else's memoirs: how she and Endell marry, her discovery of his impotence, his encouragement of her affairs, and her entanglement, thus, with Greve. The complexities of this entanglement are brought out in an unforgettable passage of the memoirs, which detail Else's experiences in a sanatorium to which Endell had sent her "to be away from him and to have by-the-way, for his impotence my womb massaged-so that he should not look the only guilty one":

So here I was-installed in a sanatorium having my womb twiddled by a bourgeois very married doctor- who for businessake with the silent consent of his spouse-silently suffered himself to be the more or less openly expressed desire for many a waning young lady's hysterically erring sexcall-that was under his care. And the man [Greve]-who was to be the first potent mate I ever possessed-with whom I also remained together the longest time I ever was with one man-about 10 years-was in Berlin-keeping my husband [Endell] company-I dreaming about him-but-also about my husband-whom I did not desire to abandon-not even for this miracle of a youth-if it was only possible and he came up to expectation after my wombsqueeze excursion. But he did not-and the matter ended with hairpulling and slipperhurling from my part. (61)

Despite Else's scorn for Endell as a lover, it was through him that she was exposed to an art- critical milieu that was concerned with developing an empathic theory of artistic production; the theory was psychologistic, and embraced notions of sensory development and psychic dynamism.

The empathic aesthetic grew up as part of a late nineteenth-century debate in Germany whose context was a post-1850s disenchantment with the notion of idealism; as such, it was concurrent with some of the most revolutionary movements of the late nineteenth century, movements that would subsequently be identified with the origins of Modernism. Drawing on the attention that Schopenhauer had given to the physiology of the perceptual act (Mallgrave 9), this debate increasingly turned to the question of content, as opposed to idealist and universalist notions of form, and to the subjectivity that encountered it. "Empathy" (*Einfiühlung*, literally 'in-feeling') was the term coined in the early 1870s by Robert Vischer to describe that relationship.

Robert Vischer drew on the work of his father, Friedrich Theodor Vischer (one of the originators of this intellectual debate), who had argued that the 'artistic spirit' could animate form in such a way as to imply both the interrelationship of viewer and object, and the interrelationship of sensory apprehension in perceiving that object, through a form of "emotional transference" (Mallgrave 19). Robert Vischer further developed the notion of empathy (as he writes in *On the Optical Sense of Form*) as a specific attack on the strictures of idealist aesthetics (Mallgrave 21). Drawing on a proto-Freudian text by Karl Albert Schemer, Vischer writes: "Here it was shown how the body, in responding to certain stimuli in dreams, objectifies itself in spatial forms. Thus it unconsciously

projects its own bodily form...into the form of the object. From this I derived the notion that I call 'empathy'" (Mallgrave 24). This dreamlike projection of the self characterized our everyday experiences as well, argued Vischer: "an objective but accidentally experienced phenomenon always provokes a related idea of the self in sensory or motor form" (Mallgrave 25). Thus, as Vischer's editors interpolate, "[t]he phenomena that we encounter in the world...become analogies for one's own bodily structure; in viewing a specific object, [as Vischer writes], 'I wrap myself within its contours as in a garment'" (25). As the editors further note, "Although the notion of empathy in English can suggest a simple projection of emotions or the emotional response we may feel toward an object, it denotes for Vischer a more radical and thoroughgoing transference of our personal ego, one in which our whole personality (consciously or unconsciously) merges with the object" (25). This emphasis on the physiological underpinnings of aesthetic response (as opposed to formalist or idealistic ones) is the key to understanding the aesthetics of empathy, and provides powerful linkages to Elsa's work including the insistence upon the bodily and the sensual, the relationship between the sensual and the spatial, and the notion of projection, or extension, that issues in an empathic set of sensory relationships.

Vischer's notion of empathy remained attractive to aesthetic theorists such as Theodor Lipps, who sought to develop a psychologistic theory of empathic intermediation.⁶ Lipps was particularly concerned with empathy in terms of architectural space and ornament, providing "[elaborate dramatic accounts of the emotive character of the perception of lines" (Podro 107 n. 9). It was this aspect of Lipps's work that influenced August Endell, who wrote two articles in this

connection (1897-98): one on the possibilities within the 'new' architecture; the other on decorative art. As a resident of and practitioner in Munich, Endell was particularly well placed in terms of the Jugendstil; as Stephen Escritt remarks, "In the 1890s and 1900s, pluralism was fostered in Munich, where there was a relatively liberal attitude towards the arts. It is in this context of local liberalism and confident authoritarian nationalism that *Jugendstil* flourished in the city" (117). The style was named after the journal with which it was most closely associated—*Jugend*—whose motto was *Kunst und Leben*: art and life (Escritt 119).

In his article on architecture, Endell espouses a sensuous, tactile aesthetic: "Seht das Einzelne, Linie für Linie, Fläche für Fläche, geht den Formen mit dem Auge nach, tastet sie ab, erlebt sie, genießt sie, erst dann werdet ihr begreifen was sie uns sein können" (143).⁷ Such an aesthetic should lead one to bold new insights: "Lasst euch ruhig anmassend und arrogant schelten, wenn ihr alte Berühmtheiten tadelt. Ihr sollt tadeln, sollt hassen, denn nur so lernt ihr lieben, lernt ihr mit ganzer Seele fühlen" (143).⁸ The essay on decorative art is concerned with kinetic aspects of art and perception: "Während wir also beim Durchlaufen von krummen Linien immer ein Neues aufzufassen haben, bietet die Gerade fortwährend dasselbe Bild. Es wird somit die Wahrnehmung der Geraden sich rascher vollziehen, und zwar um so rascher, je länger die Gerade sich dehnt. Denn jeder neue Moment giebt ja nur der Art nach schon Bekanntes. Es wird aber ganz allgemal das Bekanntere auch rascher aufgefasst und macht auch rascher anderem Platz; somit wird sich die Schnelligkeit im Auffassen der Geraden fortwährend steigern" (119).⁹ Endell saw *Jugendstil* as embodying this new aesthetic based on tactile qualities and free forms, and sought to embody these qualities in his own

architectural and decorative work, particularly the Elvira photographic studio (1897-98; figures 8 and 9). Elsa's genius was to translate these elements into a personal, performative aesthetic.

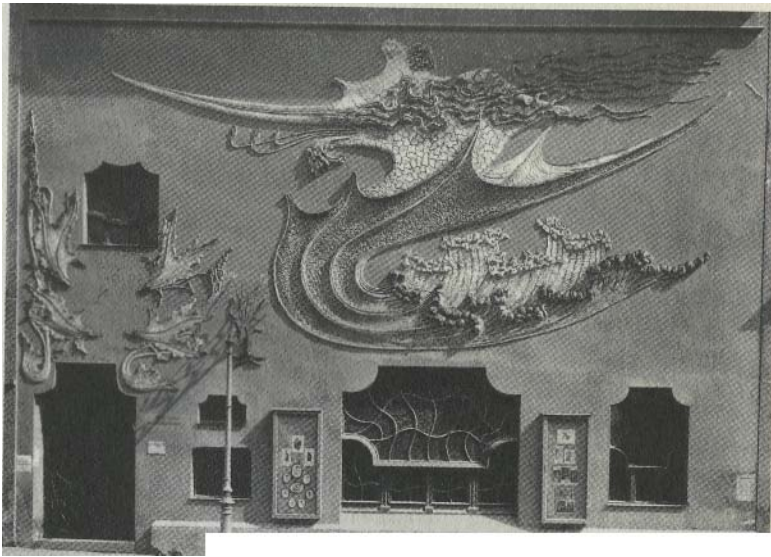


Figure 8: August Endell. Exterior facade (Elvira Photographic Studio, Munich). 1897-98. Bildarchiv Foto Marburg, Germany.

This performative aesthetic was given its theoretical underpinnings in the work of another empathic theorist, Conrad Fiedler, who sought to develop empathic theory in the direction of the sensuous, arguing that the optical, for example, was not (only) an abstract sense. Fiedler is less known in his own right than as virtually the co-author of Adolf von Hildebrand's much better known work, *the Problem of Form*, which was based on

the distinction between visual perception, that pertaining to the eye at rest taking in a distant view, and kinesthetic perception, that pertaining to the near view and the eye in motion. The implication of this theory was the rejection of three-dimensional representations of space in favour of kinesthetic, processual space.

Heinrich Wölfflin, one of the major figures within the history of art theory, took the empathic notion further, arguing, like Endell, that "it is in the applied arts that the signs of formal change first become manifest" (Mallgrave 47). For his own version of empathic theory, Wölfflin drew on the work of August Schmarsow, who suggested that the prime quality of architecture was not form but space (that is, not space as a container but space as something actively constructed through an interplay of sensory perception), and on Schmarsow's intellectual mentor, Carl Stumpf, and especially on his notion that "'the human body, rather than just vision, stands at the center of our spatial experience'" (quoted by Mallgrave 61). He thus refused to valorize vision in terms of the fixed point of view, a notion that was of crucial importance to the anti-retinalist art of Duchamp and other New York dadaists—including the Baroness herself.



Figure 9: August Endell. Interior stairwell (Elvira Photographic Studio, Munich). 1897-98. Bildarchiv Foto Marburg, Germany.

One of Elsa's first workings out of the notion of empathy is found in a text that is arguably attributable to her as a collaboration, namely Greve's *Fanny Esskr* (1905). As the initials of the title itself suggests, this was a co-production of Felix and Elsa, a notion confirmed by Elsa in the comment published in her memoir that "He [Greve] had written *two novels*. They were each dictated by me as far as material was concerned-it was my life and persons out of my life-he did the executive part of the business-giving the thing a conventional shape and dress" (65). While Elsa comments that she "disliked the 'style' already *then*" (65-66) which Greve imposed on her material, there is in *Fanny Essler* a suggestion of the procedure through which Elsa would translate aesthetic theory into a form of psycho-sexual empathy,¹⁰ a process that, as Gammel argues, would receive a further twist in the memoirs, where Elsa re-appropriates her life-story as originally appropriated by Greve. It was in *Fanny Essler*, however, that Elsa took her first major step towards the concept of empathic embodiment which characterized her New York persona. It is crucial, for this reason, to understand *Fanny Essler* as a collaboration. What I am suggesting is that the "autobiographical dialogue" ("No Woman Lover" 453), which Irene Gammel sees taking place between *Fanny Essler* and the memoir, is already present within *Fanny Essler* as an empathic dialogue in which the aesthetic becomes empathically sexualized through the details Else dictated from her autobiographical exploits.



Figure 10: Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven (with Morton Livingston Schamberg). *God*. 1917. Philadelphia Museum of Art. The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection.

The artworks that Elsa produced during her New York period demonstrate another form of her empathic aesthetic. Her 1917 work *God* (figure 10) at once "brilliantly [turns] the tables on the woman-as-machine trope," in the words of Amelia Jones, while offering a sexualized and scatological reading of EndelPs musings on the relation of line to curve in decorative art ("Eros"). Her *Portrait of Marcel Duchamp* (1920) (figure 1) explores another dimension of empathic theory, taking the traditional portrait and making it into something tactile,¹¹

exploring thereby the sculptural space of anti-retinalist art—art that declared its independence from the fixed point of view.

The most important aspect of this aesthetic dialogue in Elsa's work, however, had to do with the notion of embodiment. This notion constituted an awareness that the mechanical era celebrated in the work of such artists as Francis Picabia and Fernand Leger was giving way to an increasingly organic notion of form; indeed, Elsa's description in *Baroness Elsa* (Hjartarson and Spettigue) of her lovemaking with Felix clearly indicates her sense of how the mechanical could become sexualized, and vice versa, a notion given classic expression in Duchamp's *Bride Stripped Bare By her Bachelors, Even*. It is this notion of sensual empathy that constitutes, in my view, the uniqueness of Elsa's art. In effect, she sought to embody her art, making herself into an artifact not so much in the Wildean sense that she might have imbibed from Felix's Oscar Wilde, but in a much more performative sense—the body as process rather than as product. Hence the descriptions of her Greenwich Village appearances, which were almost Happenings in their own right: "she shellacked her shaven skull, colored it vermilion, wore an inverted coal scuttle for a cap, and applied to her body as decorative elements mechanistic implements such as metal teaballs" (Reiss 86); "She wore also at times a black dress with a bustle on which rested an electric battery tail light... Still another time on the street she had a wooden bird cage around her neck housing a live *canary*. The hem of her skirt was decorated with horse blanket pins, and she had five dogs on five leashes" (Louis Bouche quoted in Reiss 87); "She wore high white spats with a band of decorative furniture braid around the top. Hanging from her bust were two tea-balls.... On her head was a black velvet tarn o'shanter with a feather and several spoons" (quoted by Kuenzli, "Baroness

Elsa" 442). Through such gestures, as well as through the performativity of her nude modelling (an active, rather than a passive, modelling; a modelling that took place inside and outside the art studio), Elsa represented her notion of the interface between the mechanical and the organic, the abstract and the sensual, the fixed point of view and multiple viewpoints. As she put it in her essay "The Modest Woman," "'America's comfort:—sanitation—outside machinery—has made American forget own machinery—body!'" (quoted by Kuenzli, "Baroness Elsa" 451), suggesting that body and machine are not oppositional but empathically interrelated.

Elsa's empathic aesthetics thus led her to a more interrelational notion of the mechanical and the sensual than that held to by her dadaist peers. These aesthetics also provide an enhanced context for comments which have recurred in the descriptions of Elsa's art: that "her whole life was Dada" (Reiss 86); that Elsa "dresses Dada, loves Dada, lives Dada," that she was "riding the line between woman and object" (Jones, "Eros" 244-45); that for the Baroness "life praxis and art were one" (Kuenzli, "Baroness Elsa" 450). Empathic theory thus allows us to understand more fully how, as Paul Hjartarson and Douglas Spettigue have put it, "Elsa was moving toward Dada before Dada was recognized" ("Introduction" 28).

It is through this notion of empathic embodiment that Elsa lays claim to her centrality within New York Dada, and it is this observation that brings me to my concluding speculation. Could it be that the identity of the artwork labelled "La Femme" in the drawing by Boix has remained a mystery for so long because it labels not an object at all, but, quite literally, a woman? In fact, I think it does, and I think that woman is

Baroness Elsa herself, whose ordinary role in Dada is proclaimed by the apple she so boldly flaunts. Boix's drawing represents Elsa in one of her most famous poses (figure 11), captured thus by Man Ray in a still from the now-lost film, "Baroness Elsa Shaves her Pubic Hair." The drawing also represents one of Elsa's most famous forms of empathic objecthood, that of the metal teaballs hanging from her breasts. It is here, in this drawing, that Elsa finally escapes the strictures critics who claim to know what "the depiction of a woman" (Naumann, "New York Dada" 14) should look like, and asserts her empathic identification with Dada itself, which proclaims her its central, if unnameable, figure.

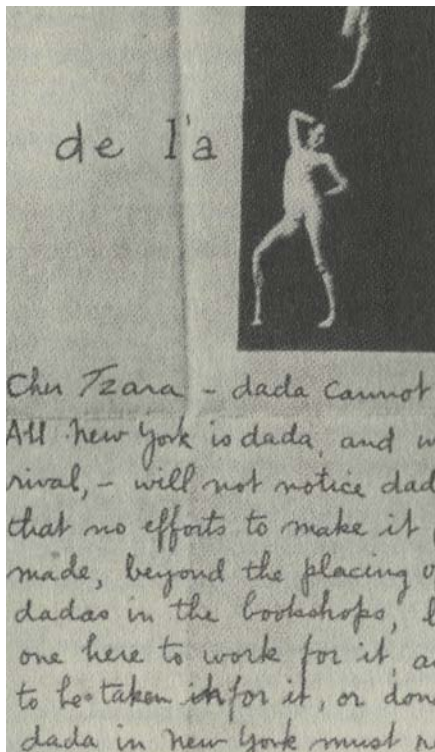


Figure 11: Man Ray. Letter to Tristan Tzara, postmarked 8 June 1921. Bibliotheque Litteraire Jacques Doucet, Paris. © Estate of Man Ray/SODRAC (Montreal), 2003

Endnote

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1. Chief among those researchers working in this area are Irene Gammel, whose cultural biography of Elsa was recently published by MIT Press (2002), and Klaus Martens, whose research into the early years of FPG has opened up highly productive terrain.
2. Richard Cavell, "Felix Paul Greve, the Eulenberg Scandal, and Frederick Philip Grove," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 62 (1997): 12-45.
3. The two spellings (Else/Elsa) of Freytag-Loringhoven's first name reflect the different periods of her life. In her early years in Germany, she circulated as Else; in New York, she assumed the anglicized version, Elsa.
4. Some dates: Elsa arrives in North America in 1909, meeting up with Felix, who had left earlier that year. In 1913, the two having split up, Elsa finds herself in New York and marries that year the Baron von Freytag-Loringhoven. In that same year, Marcel Duchamp, with whom Elsa was to be closely associated, begins producing his ready mades. New York Dada, however, is normally situated in the period from 1915-1924, although Hans Arp does not invent the term Dada until 1916, and he does so in Zurich, with the New York group adopting the term only circa 1921. Elsa's first New York publication was issued in 1918, and her artworks date from 1917-1920. See Hjartarson and Spettigue, *Baroness Elsa*, and Kuenzli, *New York Dada*.
5. This is the German equivalent of Art Nouveau, characterized by flowing, organic lines deriving from Nature.
6. One of the publication venues through which Lipps disseminated his theories was *Die Zukunft*, and it is indicative of the close interconnections within German artistic and critical circles of this time that this same journal was the central instigator of the Eulenberg scandal that I have argued was one of the precipitating causes of Felix Paul Greve's sudden departure from Germany.
7. "See the detail, line by line, surface by surface, follow the forms with your eyes, feel them all over, experience them, enjoy them, only then will you comprehend what they mean." Passages from the German are translated with the assistance of Ilona Iatzi.

8. "Let them scold you as presumptuous and arrogant when you disapprove of old celebrities. You should disapprove, should detest, for you only learn to love, to feel with all your soul by doing so."
9. "While we constantly take in something new as our eyes pass over the curved line, the straight line continuously offers the same picture. The perception of the straight line will consequently happen faster [;] this is faster, the longer the straight line extends. Every new moment only shows something already familiar in a similar way. But the familiar, in general, is also perceived faster, and it too makes quicker space for something else, therefore the speed of perception of the straight line continuously increases."
10. Anna Freud uses the phrase "*irallinen Sicheinsjühlens*" (complete empathy) to represent the culmination of a sexual fantasy she describes in a paper on "The Relation of Beating Phantasies to a Daydream." See the discussion in Darian Leader, *Freud's Footnotes* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000) 172, note 2.
11. Gammel remarks that "Elsa's writing takes pleasure in words...experiencing them in their physical materiality" ("No Woman Lover" 455)