

# 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 demoted 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."

