**DADA QUEEN IN THE BAD BOYS’ CLUB: BARONESS ELSA VON FREYTAG-LORINGHOVEN**

In the neglected sculpture garden of the De Pisis Museum in Ferrara, Italy stands Man Ray’s “Monument to the Unknown Painter,” a slender steel shaft mounted on a pedestal. Encoded in this sculpture, we may read Man Ray’s challenge to the militarism of his era, his tribute to the many artists who died in the First World War, or his homage to artists of all times who have died unrecognized. Yet the equating of painters with soldiers also bespeaks the masculine exclusivity of Man Ray and his circle. Although Dadaism and its offshoots sought to outrage bourgeois morality and to disrupt prevailing conceptual schemes, many of the (male) artists connected to this avant-garde movement remained peculiarly blind to the sexist conventions of their times, viewing women primarily as muses, models, and sexual objects.

As Paul B. Franklin writes in *Women in Dada*, a collection of essays devoted to women’s contribution to Dada published by MIT Press, “ the history of Dada tells the tale of male artists and writers grappling with the moral bankruptcy of modern civilization in the aftermath of World War I. In this gendered narrative, men’s experiences — whether in the trenches or in the art studio — have taken precedence over those of women. If and when women gained entry into this exclusive Boys’ Club, they did so as artistic muses rather than as active participants.”

Despite its reputation as a bad boys’ club, Dada in New York and Paris was largely promoted, performed, financed, and documented by women such as Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap, the editors of the influential *Little Review,* who were among the first to publish Dada poetry and art work; Katherine Dreir, Boston socialite and painter, patron of Duchamp; and Peggy Guggenheim who provided money to numerous artists connected to the movement. Among the many female artists in Europe and America inspired by the confrontational spirit of Dada were Clara Tice, Beatrice Wood, Suzanne Duchamp, Berenice Abbot and Baroness Elsa Von Freytag-Loringhoven. In their careers as patrons and artists, most of these women struggled to have their efforts taken seriously by the public.

Among these Dada women, one emblematic figure stands out in stark detail in a photograph from 1915: shaved head, aviator’s helmet topped by a jaunty feather, boldly striped bathing suit clinging to an athletic form, eyes shut, bust out, arms thrown back poised as if for the high-dive. This grotesque woman warrior, whose costume is intended as a protest against the First World War, is Baroness Elsa Von Freytag - Loringhoven. Poet, painter, sculptor, and above all, performance artist, the Baroness flits ( and at times streaks naked) through the memoirs, correspondence, and iconography of many artists and writers of the period: Man Ray, Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Hart Crane, Marcel Duchamp, Berenice Abbot, Djuna Barnes. Dismissed for decades as a lunatic, she has now been recognized as America’s first Dada artist ( in the estimation of Jane Heap), queen of international Dada, and the great aunt of punk and of performance art.

Von Freytag- Loringhoven’s inclusion in the ranks as a serious artist depends less on her recent identification as the true creator of “god,” (a phallic sculpture of plumbing pipes previously canonized under the name of Morton Schamberg), than on the importance now assigned to her “art to wear” or “corporeal art.” The bizarre costumes which were the hallmark of her notoriety in Greenwich Village are viewed today as an early form of performance art, enlivened by astringent wit and inscribed with feminist and anti- capitalist ideology. Tall, slim, and austere, with a haughty bearing and a dancer’s grace, the baroness strutted the New York streets and popped in at public events with her head shaved and shellacked in red, canceled postage stamps pasted on her cheek, brassieres assembled from tin cans,

hats made of coal scuttles or waste bins trimmed with fresh vegetables, lighted candles, or spoons.

In the first volume of her autobiography, *My Thirty Years War*, Margaret Anderson describes the costume worn by the Baroness at their first meeting:

“She wore a red Scotch plaid suit with a kilt hanging just below the knees,

a bolero jacket with sleeves to the elbows and arms covered with a quantity

of ten-cent-store bracelets — silver, gilt, bronze, green and yellow. She wore

high white spats with a band of decorative furniture braid around the top.

Hanging from her bust were two tea-balls from which the nickel had worn away.

On her head was a black velvet tam o’ shanter with a feather and several spoons

— long ice-cream soda spoons...”

Sculptor George Biddle remembers her thus:

“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 bird-cage 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 vermillion.”

Von Freytag- Loringhovencreated these startling costumes from junk picked up in the street, or odds and ends pocketed at the dime store, for which she was frequently arrested, spending weeks at a time in the Tombs, the New York jail. Yet, Anderson claims, the Baroness eventually learned to jump “ from patrol wagons with such agility that policemen let her go in admiration.” The source of materials and the serendipitous way they came into her hands were part of the total experience of her aesthetic. Sometimes she would stand on the sidewalk, waiting for a truck to run over and squash a tin can or a bottle cap before retrieving it, for only then was it ready to be employed in one of her creations. To express her rage and grief over the end of her friendship with William Carlos Williams, she stole a funeral crepe from an undertaker’s establishment, draped it on her naked body, and in a gesture of defiant, desexualized mourning, shaved her head like a novice preparing to retire to the convent.

Critics today see the Baroness’s eye-popping assemblages and body art as saturated

with messages of protest against the forces which she believed were destroying creativity in the American mind: sexual hypocrisy, mass consumerism, and enslavement to technology.

“Cars and bicycles have tail lights. Why not I?” she quipped when asked to explain the battery- operated tail light tacked to the bustle of her dress. Her tail - light bustle offered cultural critique at a time when women in bloomers were pedaling the streets and the inhabitants of urban areas were becoming anonymous vehicles in the stream of traffic. As Irene Gammel, author of the first, comprehensive biography of Von Freytag-Loringhoven, *Baroness Elsa*, writes: “ the Baroness’s dada was an important cultural response to modern urban mass production.” Von Freytag-Loringhoven’s sculpture “god” openly expresses her rejection of technology with its underlying statement: Americans worship plumbing above all else. Writing to Peggy Guggenheim, she suggested that God ought to take lessons in production efficiency from Henry Ford. Impressed with the advertising slogans designed to publicize the new consumer products of the twenties, Elsa created a new genre of poetry, “ready-made poems,” pieced together from scraps of advertising language. Some of these poems are loaded with sexual suggestion, clearly evincing Elsa’s understanding of the subliminal appeal at work in advertising, while voicing a protest against America’s sell-out to consumerism.

....Nothing so pepsodent --- soothing

Pussywillow --- kept clean

with Philadelphia Cream Cheese.

They satisfy the man of

Largest Mustard Underwear --

No dosing

Just rub it on

Very scarce photographic documentation of her whimsical costumes has survived. This is surprising, given that she had several friends among Dada-inspired artists and photographers

(including Berenice Abbot, Morton Schamberg, and Man Ray) - and modeled for them in many of their own projects. Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp, with whom she often collaborated as a model, featured her in their scandalous film — “Baroness Elsa Shaving Her Pubic Hair” --- which was botched during the developing process and thus lost to history. They rarely photographed her art- to- wear costumes, and it would seem that few of her artist friends considered them worthy of recording.

For years a cult figure in the New York underground, Baroness Elsa was discovered by the public in 1996 during the Whitney Exhibition “ Making Mischief: Dada Invades New York” where four of her artworks were displayed, including a bead portrait of Berenice Abbot.

Scholars of gender studies have hence had a field day with her phallic images and cross- dressing, and even “cross-cross dressing” --- for, according to her biographer, Irene Gammel, some costumes were inspired by the Berlin drag queen style. Her challenges to propriety are seen today as a statement of extreme feminism. Or as the Baroness herself summed it up “ I was sexually modern.”

Born Elsa Plotz in the Prussian military town of Swinemunde, Elsa manifested a rebellious spirit from the very start. Life at home with her despotic father was sheer hell. After going mad, Elsa’s mother expressed her own rebellion by sewing together “strange creations” of fine fabrics and trash---inspiring Elsa’s future experiments with cast- offs. When her widowed father remarried, Elsa became estranged from her family, and escaped to Berlin after her father attempted to strangle her during a knockdown fight. A kind- hearted aunt took her in, but finding the girl too unruly to manage, promptly turned her out again . To support herself, Elsa found work in the music hall, as a performer of “Living Pictures, ” --tableaux of scantily dressed models illustrating mythological scenes, which were all the rage in entertainment in Berlin, and which required the nearly naked performers to stand motionless for an extended period of time. This sexually -charged self- display doubtless influenced her later performance art. It also taught her the basic modeling skills which would be the sole source of her livelihood abroad.

From music hall performer to artists’ model was an easy leap for this young woman whose androgynous looks and superb physique appealed to some of Berlin’s most influential artists, linked to the circle of Stefan George, including Melchior Lechter, Ernst Hardt, Oscar and Richard Schmitz. Oscar wrote that she first passed from “hand to hand” as “ the darling of the guild, “ and then became mistress and muse of Melchior Lechter, leading figure in the applied arts movement in Germany. Elsa aspired to being more than just a mistress or model. She wanted to become an artist herself, and her marriage to August Endell in 1901 reinforced those aspirations. Endell, Jugenstil architect, had designed the daring facade of the Hof Atelier Elvira, the photography studio of lesbian suffragists Sophia Goudstikker and Anita Augspurg, which served as a meeting place for gays and lesbians ( destroyed by the Nazis in 1937). Through Endell, Elsa continued to be part of a community of avant-garde artists and intellectuals, while, with his encouragement, experimenting with varied media and techniques. Despite their solid artistic partnership, the Endell’s marriage was fraught with sexual troubles. Elsa found herself wondering if her husband“ was possessed at all even of so much as a penis....” and begged Endell to provide her with a lover. Yet his sexual ambiguity intrigued her: “Exactly that made me curious--” she wrote to Djuna Barnes, “ how he would behave. I was eager, ready for any perversity.”

In 1902, Elsa seduced the young writer Felix Paul Greve who later confessed that he owed his conversion to heterosexuality to their encounter. Greve took the Endells to Italy, where Elsa registered as “Frau Greve” in the hotel guest books and Endell took a room by himself. Her husband was devastated by her desertion. “You not only abandon me,” he wrote, “you also steal my friend.” Greve’s Italian journey had been financed by a generous acquaintance, who, upon learning that Greve had eloped with Elsa, pressed charges for illegal appropriation of funds, and managed to have Greve thrown in prison for two years. To help her lover pass the time, Elsa wrote him letters recounting her erotic exploits in the music hall, where among other things, she had contracted syphilis ( of which she was later thoroughly cured). Greve used this material as the basis for his novel *Fanny Eysler*, written while in prison. Upon release, he staged his own suicide and resurfaced in Kentucky, where Elsa joined him. In their rural hideaway, the affair soured and Greve abandoned Elsa without funds and knowing no English.

Fleeing to Cincinnati, Elsa was temporarily welcomed by a group of African-Americans who offered her food and lodging, but was soon arrested for vagrancy after trying to bathe in a public fountain. In 1915, she found her way to New York and her luck briefly improved. She married Leopold Baron von Freytag Loringhoven and thus acquired her title. On the way to the ceremony, she found an iron ring on the street. This was to become her “found sculpture” — entitled “Enduring Ornament” --- but this serendipitous discovery did not prove auspicious for their marriage. Anxious to defend his country in the First World War, the Baron returned to Germany, — after cleaning out Elsa’s purse-- was captured, and later committed suicide. Penniless again, she found work in a cigarette factory but came to blows with a co-worker, losing two teeth and also her job. She took up modeling, her old profession from Berlin, and enjoyed a modest success modeling for the New York School of Art. Moving to poorer and poorer digs, she and her dozen dogs settled into a tenement on 14th street where she produced her art- to wear. George Biddle visited her in her unheated loft “crowded and reeking with strange relics which she had purloined over a period of years from the New York gutters.... it had.... quite as much authenticity as, for instance, Brancusi’s studio in Paris, or that of Picabia...”

In 1917, Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap had just moved the *Little Review* from Chicago to New York and had set up their editorial office in West 16th Street. The Baroness, always in search of like-minded artists, came, decked out in one of her costumes, to inspect the office of the *Little Review*. Enquiring about a submission she had made, though not giving her name, Elsa was impressed when Heap whipped the poem out of a drawer. “How you know I write it?” asked the Baroness. “I am not totally without imagination,” said Heap, adding that the poem had been accepted for publication. Thus began a long collaboration with the *Little Review*.

The Baroness’s poems appeared in the issue featuring the first excerpts of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, creating even more of a stir among readers than did Joyce himself, for one poem made references to oral sex ( “I got lusting palate” ). Incensed subscribers demanded the Baroness be dropped from future issues. Heap replied that they did indeed intend to drop the Baroness “right into the history of American poetry.” The *Little Review* published more poems by the Baroness than by any other poet, but her work never won recognition outside a small circle of admirers including Hemingway and Djuna Barnes.

The Baroness’s poetry is of interest today not only as a forerunner of “language poetry,” with its attempts to shatter traditional schemes of grammar, form, and meaning, or for

the insight it shows into America’s consumer culture. It also deserves to be read for its high humor and plastic approach to language. Von Freytag- Loringhoven used four main disruptive strategies in her poetry: volcanic emotional intensity conveyed through the use of abrupt units and bold punctuation, mixed diction of archaic words and slang, collage techniques, and sound poetry. In the latter category, she created poems with sounds expressing rage or grief, but with few words. When spoken aloud, these poems have enormous power. Her poetry was both visual, with its experiments in typography and punctuation — and dramatic, revealing its full impact only through performance. Some of her experiments were even too radical for the editors of the *Little Review*, who did not dare publish her “subjoyride” series, constructed from advertising slogans, in which her loony wit and biting critique of American culture are most evident. The Baroness also wrote poetry in German, using traditional rhyme schemes and stanza forms, echoing the high language of Heine and Goethe.

One harsh critic of her poetry, Ezra Pound, eventually changed his mind about her work. Pound at first disapproved of Anderson and Heap’s enthusiasm for the Baroness’ poetry, and insisted that “ no idiots” --referring to the Baroness-- should be published in future issues of their magazine, during his collaboration with the *Little Review* as “European editor ” (from 1917 to roughly 1924). He also wrote parodies of her poetry which were published under a pseudonym in the *Little Review*. Yet years later, while interned in St. Elizabeth’s asylum for the criminally insane, he began to view the Baroness more sympathetically. In the *Rock Drill Cantos* (1955) he wrote:

..... Else Kassandra, “the Baroness”

von Freitag etc. sd/ several true things

in the old days/

driven nuts

Well, of course, there was a certain strain

on the gal in them days in Manhattan

the principle of non-acquiescence

laid a burden

Drinklage where art thou

with, or without, your *von*

Here Pound seems to be identifying with Elsa, who like himself in his later years, was destined to play the role of unheeded prophet, considered by all as merely a crank.

He laments Elsa’s untenable situation — her burden, her strain: the lack of patronage and support starved her into isolation and poverty, and finally drove her mad. The last two lines of the stanza reveal Pound’s fondness for the “old gal” while imitating her own style.

Indeed Von Freytag- Loringhoven’s influence on Ezra Pound may have run deeper than he might have cared to acknowledge. Elsewhere in the *Cantos*, he resorts to linguistic and stylistic strategies which echo the Baroness’s own experiments, which he had previously parodied in the *Little Review*. Writing to Margaret Anderson in 1954, he regretted that the Baroness’ poetry had been omitted from the *Penguin Book of Modern American Verse* and scolds Anderson for not taking the Penguin editor to task for this oversight.

Many artists and writers found her company exhilarating. Duchamp proclaimed “The Baroness is not a futurist. She is the future.” Biddle insisted “The Baroness has validity” and judged her to be “a shrewd and salty critic.” Hart Crane, both attracted and repelled by this androgynous woman, ridiculed her at parties by mimicking her speech and mannerisms. Yet, he cheered the explosive spirit of her poetry and admired her courage in speaking out against American conformity. Too few of her contemporaries took her work seriously. Although Duchamp and Man Ray praised it, they did nothing to help her gain recognition or support.

In an essay on the Baroness in *Women in Dada,* R. Kuenzli suggests one reason for this lack of solidarity from her male colleagues. “The subject position of a female artist or writer within these avant-garde groups became a crucial question: was she to accept and imitate male fantasies about women and their roles, or was she to respond to and critique these male libidinal constructions and thus situate herself at the margins of these movements?” Indeed, the Baroness refused to imitate anyone’s fantasies or to conform to any roles of social or sexual behavior, and thus was relegated to the margins of the artists’ community in New York. Even her staunchest supporters, Anderson and Heap, found her too much at times.

The Baroness’s marginalization was intensified by the fact that American men were terrified of her. Their fears must have baffled and disappointed Elsa, who had met with such success in Germany. Wallace Stevens, who once complimented her on a costume, for years avoided the streets where she was known to prowl. Hart Crane reportedly hid in doorways to escape from her. George Biddle quaked in his shoes when she tried to kiss him. “ Enveloping me slowly, as a snake would its prey, she glued her wet lips on mine,” he wrote. She had two great loves among the artists and writers of New York: Marcel Duchamp and William Carlos Williams. Duchamp deflected her sexual advances with Gallic aplomb. Their friendship deteriorated not from his lack of sexual reciprocation, but because she felt he had surrendered to bourgeois values. She leveled similar accusations at William Carlos Williams who at first encouraged her attentions only to repudiate her cruelly.

The Baroness’s keen pursuit and Williams’ hasty retreat were chronicled in the *Little* *Review* which published her “Thee I Call Thee Hamlet of the Wedding Ring” an eleven page criticism of Williams’ *Kore in Hell* in 1921. Purporting to be a review, the essay is a scathing expose of Williams, branded as a typical “American male” who preferred dull suburban comforts to the artist’s itinerant life and who practiced a ruthless double standard: feigning monogamy while thriving on promiscuous affairs to feed his art. Their relationship had begun after he had admired one of her sculptures, a chicken liver modeled in wax, displayed in Anderson and Heap’s apartment. At the end of one of the Baroness’s many stints in jail, Anderson and Heap sent Williams off to the Women’s House of Detention to pick up Elsa on the day of her release. Williams, a husky and handsome womanizer, took her to breakfast and spent the morning listening to her mesmerizing talk. Williams did not hide his attraction to the worldly and exotic Baroness, nine years his senior, and at the end of their encounter, issued a declaration of love. Elsa then demanded a kiss, but Williams found the strong odor of her body and the pressure of her teeth against his lips rather unsettling. In the following weeks, he encouraged her with an invitation to his home, love letters, and a gift of ripe peaches, but panicked when she interpreted these gestures as signals of his sexual interest in her. Her attempts at seduction became an implacable and predatory quest --- “I will get this man,” she announced to Heap — to which he responded with vulgar insults. Enraged, she threatened to publish the two love letters he had sent her and assaulted him near his home after luring him outside on false pretenses. Exasperated by this harassment Williams boned up on his boxing technique, and at their final meeting flattened her in the street. But after her death in Paris he would write, “The Baroness to me was a great field of cultured bounty in spite of her psychosis... She was right. I found myself drinking pure water from her spirit.”

Crane, Pound, and Williams reflect a general male attitude toward the Baroness --- her purity, validity, and genius are grudgingly recognized beneath her apparent madness — not viewed as a pose, but as an extreme form of “non - acquiescence-- ” which however was a threat to American culture, to the self-assuredness of American men, as well as a source of danger to the Baroness’ own mental health. Modernist writer Mary Butts, who evoked the Baroness in a satyric commemoration of the Montparnasse era published posthumously in the *New Yorker* in 1998, insightfully suggests another aspect — the Baroness’s madness manifested the pathology of her times, the destructiveness of World War I . Butts almost sees her as a sort of Septimus, the war- crazed veteran in Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway.*

By 1922, Elsa had come to despise America where her life had become an “unskilled, fierce battle” against poverty. “ I alone do not belong here. ... I cannot fight a whole continent,” she wrote to Jane Heap. Heap collected funds from friends to send her back to Germany, but Elsa couldn’t have chosen a worse time to return to war-ravaged Berlin. When her application for a war widow’s pension was turned down, she was forced to sell newspapers on the street. Desperate for money, she unsuccessfully tried extortion and blackmail of former lovers. Berlin, scene of her adolescent sexual adventures was now a deathtrap. “I am at the mercy of street riffraff,” she wrote in fall 1923. “I have no heating, bed, furniture, clothing, and winter is coming.” Pianist Allen Tanner, protégé of Margaret Anderson, encountering her by chance in Berlin, gave her money, and in exchange she gave him four of her sculptures. Thanks to his small gesture of generosity, these sculptures survived and were brought to the US.

The return to Germany was a shock to Elsa in many ways. The high culture

of Heine and Goethe had vanished, and the language she had prized had deteriorated.

Distressed by the hollowness of the new German society, where she was as much an outsider as ever, she began to miss the frankness and directness of the American culture she had left behind. “German is obtuse!” she wrote, “ I hate — almost loathe their language... German....wears flabbing coattails and performs overpolite bourgeois movements, compliments, bows, silly meaningless --- masking true clumsiness! ....the American is at least no pretender of some culture that is long since down at the heels.” While in Germany, she began to translate her German poems into American slang.

Concerned for the Baroness’s plight, Djuna Barnes, then in Paris, began corresponding with Elsa and offered to collaborate with her on a biography of Elsa’s life. Barnes also assumed the role as agent, attempting to interest editors in Elsa’s poetry. To Barnes, the Baroness was “a citizen of terror, a contemporary without a country,” and a woman “strange with beauty.” Still stuck in Berlin, denied a visa for France, Elsa struggled with deep depression, fearing she might go mad. In 1925 she was interned in a shelter for homeless women where she exacerbated her caretakers by violating house rules. Clinical records of this institution state that she was not “mentally insane in the full sense of the word.” Judged merely abnormal, she was released a few months later.

With Barnes’ help, in 1926, Elsa escaped to Paris where Jane Heap and other old friends were now living. Faced once again with the problem of supporting herself, Elsa planned to open a modeling studio for artists, and Peggy Guggenheim promised to provide financial backing. But this project was doomed from the outset, as Elsa’s visa did not permit her to work. One evening in December 1927, the gas in her apartment was left on, asphyxiating the Baroness and her beloved dog Pinky. It remains uncertain whether her death was accidental or intentional, as no suicide note was left. Barnes took charge, commissioning a death masque and arranging for her burial in a pauper’s grave in Père Lachaise, but Elsa’s name is not listed in the records there. Friends in New York learned of her death through the obituary appearing in Janet Flanner’s *Letter from Paris* in the *New Yorker.* Her death mask, as regal as a Roman senator’s, appeared in the magazine *transition,* in a photograph by Marc Vaux.*.*

Barnes never made headway with Elsa’s biography, but may have used some of the material in creating the character of Robin Vote in her novel *Nightwood*. Other acquaintances continued to purloin details of Elsa’s life. Greve, resuscitated as the Canadian writer Frederick Paul Grove, wrote a successful novel based on her abused childhood. In 1979, three years before her death in 1982, Barnes instructed her estate to publish the Baroness’ poetry, yet nothing has come of her behest. Perhaps we should not be surprised that it has taken so long for the Baroness to achieve recognition, given the prejudices of her era. She was German, female, and outrageous. Elsa’s life, with the gaudy colors and strident tones of a Lady Ubu, illustrates the neglect women in the avant-garde endured in making art.