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| Freytag-Loringhoven, Baroness Elsa von (1874-1927) |
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| Born Else Hildegard Plötz in the Baltic seaport town of Swinmünde in 1874, the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven was an avant-garde poet, performer, visual artist, model and autobiographer associated with the retrospectively named New York Dada movement. Arrested in Pittsburg for wearing men’s clothes and publicly smoking in 1910, the Baroness became an increasingly notorious figure in New York city as the First World War took hold in Europe. Head shaved and lacquered in high vermillion, her often naked body decorated with the tin cans, ice cream spoons, and gilded vegetables that she collected from the city’s gutters or stole from its department stores, the Baroness both embodied and challenged the limits of established avant-garde gestures through a radical lived-Dada practice performed on and through her body. Well-suited to *The Little Review’s* tagline ‘Making no Compromise with the Public Taste’, the Baroness was, as editor Jane Heap put it, ‘the only one living anywhere who dresses Dada, loves Dada, is Dada. |
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Well-suited to *The Little Review’s* tagline ‘Making no Compromise with the Public Taste’, the Baroness was, as editor Jane Heap put it, ‘the only one living anywhere who dresses Dada, loves Dada, is Dada.’ (46) Such pioneering combinations of the performative energies of Dada with the formal innovations of collage, found object assemblage and the Readymade were not limited to the Baroness’s corporeal expressions, but carefully worked out in her iconoclastic sculptural assemblages, mixed media canvases, and sexually explicit and stylistically challenging poetry.  Fig: Baroness  George Grantham Bain. Baroness v. Freytag-Loringhoven. Photograph. George Grantham Bain Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.  <http://digital.lib.umd.edu/images/digital/collections/trn/splash_image.jpg>  Highly provocative, the Baroness’s poetry combined pseudo-religious exclamations and eroticised imagery within the jarring rhythms, broken lines and violently atonal structures of her aurally and visually striking compositions. Committed to an examination of female sexual pleasure, a poem such as ‘A Dozen Cocktails - Please’ (c.1923-1927) explores a sexualised modern landscape littered with ‘dandy / celluloid tubes - all sizes’ (condoms) and the ‘coy flappertoy’ (vibrators) as it celebrates the mature and relatively emancipated modern woman’s entitlement to indulge her ‘lusting palette.’ Blurring the visual, the verbal and the acoustic, the ‘longdrawnoutness’ of ‘German / Sound’ (‘I Hate Hate’ c.1923-26) permeates much of her poetry written in English from this period, and directly informs the experimental non-verbal poetic rhythms and patterns that mark her contribution to Dada sound poetry.  Published in little magazines including *The Little Review*, *transition*, and *Broom*, such poems created quite a controversy amongst readers and modernist commentators alike. As public debates over the obscenity and the meaning or value of modern art in America raged, Baroness Elsa’s poetry was frequently invoked as representative of the ‘insane’ and ‘obscene’ inclinations of the European avant-garde in opposition to more established modernist aesthetics and sensibilities. While Harriet Monroe, editor of *Poetry*, named the Baroness directly in her complaint over *The Little Review’s* avant-garde proclivities, the publication of ‘The Cast-Iron Lover’ in the September 1919 issue sparked a passionate debate on the question of art and madness with the Baroness and Dada at its centre. Tensions between Elsa and her modernist contemporaries were further enflamed by her published criticisms of their work, notably her long experimental prose poem-review of William Carlos Williams’ *Kora in Hell* entitled ‘Thee I Call Hamlet of the Wedding-Ring’.    Financially destitute after her third husband the Baron Leopold von Freytag-Loringhoven (1885-1919) returned to Germany with the outbreak of the First World War, the Baroness supported herself as an artist’s model. Employed by the Art Student’s League, the Ferrer School and the New York School of Art, Elsa came into contact with many artists including George Biddle (1885-1973), Louis Bouché (1896-1969) and Sarah McPherson (1894-1978), who introduced her to Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) and the avant-garde circles gathered at Walter and Louise Arensberg’s West Sixty-seventh street apartment. In addition to her modelling, the Baroness collaborated with Man Ray and Duchamp, and made a marked contribution to New York Dada with her multimedia canvases and junk assemblages constructed from the twisted wire, cogs and feathers that she collected from the streets of New York city. As the New York groupings disbanded after the war, the Baroness eventually made her way to Berlin where she endured extreme poverty, loneliness and depression. It was during this period that she composed an autobiographical account of her early life through a series of letters to Djuna Barnes (1892-1982), who transcribed this material in the hope of using it to promote a collection of the Baroness’s poetry. The project never came to fruition in either woman’s lifetime and the Baroness died in tragically absurd circumstances in December 1927 when the gas was left on in her small Parisian apartment. Discovered buried within the Djuna Barnes papers archived at the University of Maryland, the Baroness’s poems, letters and autobiographic manuscripts have now been catalogued separately.  Fig: Freytag\_Duchamp.jpg  Portrait of Marcel Duchamp. ca. 1920-1922 Mixed media assemblage. No longer extant. Photograph by Charles Sheeler. Francis M. Naumann Collection, New York.  Source: <http://www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~jconte/Images/Freytag_Duchamp.jpg> |
| Further reading:  (Gammel, Baroness Elsa: Gender, Dada, and Everyday Modernity A Cultural Biography)  (Gammel and Zelazo, Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, Body Sweats: The Uncensored Writings of Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven)  (Hjartarson and Spettigue)  (Heap)  (Jones)  (Sawelson-Gorse)  (University of Maryland Libraries ) |