I, Jaime L.M. Thompson, hereby submit this work as part of the requirements for the degree of:

Master of Arts

in:

Art History

It is entitled:

"A Wild Apparition Liberated from constraint":

The Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven's New York Dada Street Performances and Costume Art of 1913-1923

This work and its defense approved by:

Chair: Dr. Theresa Leininger-Miller
Dr. Joan Seeman Robinson
Dr. Kimberly Paice
“A Wild Apparition Liberated from Constraint”:

The Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven's
New York Dada Street Performances and Costume Art of 1913-1923

A thesis submitted to
the Art History Faculty
of the College of Design, Architecture, Art, and Planning
University of Cincinnati
In candidacy for the degree of
Master of Arts in Art History

Jaime L.M. Thompson
May 2006

Thesis Chair: Dr. Theresa Leininger-Miller
Abstract

After eighty years of obscurity the German Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven (1874-1927) has reemerged as a valuable subject of study. The Baroness was an artist and a writer whose media included poetry, collage, sculpture, performance and costume art. In chapter one I firmly establish the Baroness’s position as a Dada artist through examining her shared connections with the emergence of European Dada. In final chapters I will examine the most under-examined aspect of the Baroness’s various mediums—her performance and costume art. In the second chapter I will explore the Baroness’s work utilizing performative and feminist theories in relation to Marcel Duchamp’s female alter ego Rrose Sélavy. Finally, I will discuss the theme of “The Other” as a social and cultural commentator within the Baroness’s performance art. A study of the Baroness’s Dada performance art during her ten years in America can broaden our understanding of New York Dada.
Acknowledgements

Two years ago I ran across the name of Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven for the first time when I was in search of a subject for a seminar class paper. At the time, I was enamored with the Dada movement in New York but frustrated with my attempts to find a female artist who truly practiced a viable form of Dada art. The women I researched all seemed to fall short of my expectations because they were either too closely linked to a male artist, often as a mistress or a girlfriend to have a distinct production, or their work lacked the radical message of the male Dadaists. Then I found the Baroness, a woman previously marginalized by scholars as an eccentric bohemian and not well acknowledged for her artistic merit. I cannot take the credit for her reevaluation and subsequent reemergence into the artistic canon. Writers and historians Irene Gammel, Francis Naumann, and Amelia Jones were the ones who reintroduced the Baroness to the art world. Each of their publications has been useful in the completion of my own research on the work of the Baroness. I am especially grateful to Francis Naumann. He has taken time to communicate with me via email and answer my questions. The digital photographs of the recreation of the Baroness’s candy-striped costume (figure 16) were especially useful. This replica costume, carefully recreated by Pascale Outtara, allowed me to see the Baroness’s striped costume in full color, a great joy, as all the photographs of the Baroness are in black and white.

I am also grateful to the Jean Tatgenhorst family who, through the School of Art in the College of Design, Art, Architecture, and Planning at the University of Cincinnati, provided me with a travel grant to help with my research. Without their funds I would not have been able to use several archives and personally see some of the Baroness’s surviving works. The archivists and librarians of the Museum of Modern Art, the Smithsonian Archives of American Art, and the Golda Meir Library of the University of Milwaukee-Wisconsin were not only helpful but also very accommodating. Stacy Beggi, Allyson Wolfe, and Mara Lynch at the Museum of Modern Art gave me a unique opportunity to privately view the Baroness’s Dada Portrait of Bereneice
Abbott (1918), now in storage because of its continued deterioration. This research trip not only helped me gain access to valuable research materials but reminded me why I am perusing a career in Art History.

I want to extend my gratitude to all the faculty and staff at the College of Design, Art, Architecture, and Planning at the University of Cincinnati who have shaped my life in the last two years. The library staff members Jane Carlin, Elizabeth Meyer, Linda Heinemen, Dorian Love, and Nanda Araujo have each contributed to making my life easier by ordering texts for me, helping me make better use of the library and its systems, and warmly greeting me each time I entered the library. I also must thank the Art History faculty with whom I have worked so closely. Drs. Jonathan Reiss, Diane Mankin, and Mikiko Hirayama have each shaped my academic life with their enriching classes and thoughtful advice.

I am also indebted to my thesis committee members. First, I want to thank the one person who has given me the most advice, encouragement, and help—Dr. Theresa Leininger-Miller. As my thesis chair and the Director of Graduate Studies she has helped me to look at writing as something much more than just relaying my research, and for that I am grateful. No matter how heavy her work load was, Dr. Leininger-Miller found the time to edit my chapters, often numerous times. Her enthusiasm and emotional support helped sustain my momentum on this project. I am also grateful for Dr. Joan Robinson, my neighbor and editorial advisor. I have shown up on her doorstep with sections of my thesis for revision, and each time she has happily helped me polish each chapter. Her skills in writing and her sense of humor have made the process of writing my thesis so much easier. Dr. Kimberly Paice’s interest and enthusiasm for my subject area and research have also been greatly appreciated.

Finally, I would like to thank all of my family members. First, I must thank my younger brother Jason, my first friend, who has grown into a mature and intelligent man. Although he doesn’t know it, our occasional conversations remind me how much I want to make him proud. My grandparents, Rodger and Wendy, have also played an active role in my development both
as an artist and art historian and for this I am grateful. I must also thank my father J.T. for his inquires about the Baroness and New York bohemian life. His deep interest in my subject has been matched only by his concern for my future. I am also eternally grateful to my mother Lynne, who has not only supported me but also accompanied me to New York on my research trip. She sat for long hours, with a patience only a mother could have, waiting for me to finish reading through rolls of microfilm and stacks of papers. It was both of my parents’ words of advice and encouragement, combined with my knowledge of their parental pride, that have kept me from giving up. Most importantly I must thank my partner Will who has somehow managed to not only love me but live with me, as well as my stacks of books and papers that always seem to find their way into his space. He has been a constant source of encouragement and compassion, and I thank him whole heartedly.
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Introduction

Like an empress from another planet, her head ornamented with sardine tins, indifferent to the legitimate curiosity of passers-by, the Baroness promenaded down the avenues like a wild apparition liberated from all constraint.¹

—George Hugnet, 1932

With me posing as art—aggressive—virile extraordinary—invigorating—anti-stereotyped—no wonder blockheads by nature degeneration dislike it—feel peeved—it underscores unreceptiveness [sic] like jazz does. But there are a number of bright heads that have grasped fact to their utmost pleasure—advantage—admiration of me.²

—The Baroness Elsa Von Freytag-Loringhoven August 1927

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Greenwich Village served as a home to artists, poets, and political radicals. However, even these supposedly unconventional figures often stared in shock at one of New York’s German immigrants. The only warning one might receive of her impending arrival was the yap of the parade of dogs that occasionally preceded her. Then, around the corner she would appear like some strange mechanized figure pieced together with the debris of the industrialized city. Her appearances sometimes featured a shaved and painted head, shaved eyebrows, yellow face powder, stamps as beauty marks, celluloid curtain rings worn as bracelets, a coal shuttle used for a hat, tea balls hanging from the bust of her dress, or a set of working taillights attached to her bustle.³ Through her costume this woman, the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven (1874-1927), turned her body into an art that reflected the society and culture of the American urban life.⁴

The Baroness’s life in the United States of America began in 1910, after she left Germany for New York to meet her husband, Felix P. Greve (1879-1948), who had departed

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⁴ Née Else [sic] Hildegard Plötz. From this point I will refer to Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven as “the Baroness,” as is the custom with scholars of this artist. Using the term “Baroness” is anachronistic but the continuity created by using one name for this artist outweighs this fault.
before her. Despite many other problems he was prompted to leave because of his editors, the public’s reaction to his writing, and his constant state of debt.\textsuperscript{5} To escape his situation, Greve faked his suicide with the assistance of his wife, who then followed him to the United States about a year later. The pair had hoped to begin a new life in the Midwest, far from the economic and legal problems they had created for themselves in Europe. This union did not last long because Greve quickly abandoned the Baroness on their farm in Kentucky, penniless and alone. He departed to Canada to avoid the problems that had arisen in his marriage and to start his life over one last time. In 1913, the Baroness made her way to New York. It was during this year that she transformed herself from Else Hildegard Plötz into the Dada Baroness. She achieved this change partially through another short-lived marriage, to a German Baron, and a new and overwhelming interest in turning every element of her life into art.

During 1913-1923, while the Baroness was in New York she created poetry, assemblages, collages, performance, and costume art with a Dada sensibility. Her work created during these ten years blurred the distinction between life and art. She was heralded by Margaret Anderson (1886-1973) as “perhaps the only figure of our generation who deserves the epithet extraordinary.”\textsuperscript{6} She was even named “the first American dada” by Anderson’s partner Jane Heap (1887-1964), in their journal The Little Review. However, she was never fully accepted or celebrated by the artists of the New York Dada circle.\textsuperscript{7} Still, her work and social life brought her into contact and collaboration with artists such as Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), Man Ray (1890-1976), Morton Schamberg (1881-1919), and George Biddle (1885-1973). She also formed close connections with literary figures such as William Carlos Williams (1883-1963), Djuna Barnes (1892-1982), Jane Heap, and Margaret Anderson. Her writer friends not only helped her find publishers for her poems but also gave her monetary gifts to help continue her various

\textsuperscript{5} Gammel, Baroness Elsa, 144.
\textsuperscript{6} Margaret Anderson, My Thirty Years War (New York, NY: Horizon, 1969), 181-82.
\textsuperscript{7} Jane Heap, “Dada,” The Little Review 8, no. 2 (Spring 1922), 46.
artistic endeavors. Nevertheless, the majority of the Baroness’s art works was never shown in any galleries and never acquired by any museums during her lifetime—with only one exception. Her *Portrait of Marcel Duchamp* (ca. 1920) was displayed in the offices of *The Little Review*.⁸ Despite the fact that her visual art was not accepted into the traditional artistic canon, descriptions of her performances found their way into the literature of her writer friends and those who had experienced her performances.

After decades of obscurity, the Baroness has again become a topic of interest for New York Dada and feminist scholars since Francis Naumann’s exhibition and catalogue, *Making Mischief: Dada Invades New York* (1996).⁹ This exhibition, held at the Whitney Museum of American Art, brought to the public her art work within the context of Dada. It was around this time that scholars were prompted to form a more complete understanding of this forgotten artist by piecing together the fragments of her life from her unfinished autobiography and multiple collections of personal writings.

Three of the main scholars of the Baroness are Irene Gammel, Francis Naumann, and Amelia Jones. Each writer has contributed to the examination of the Baroness’s work but each falls short in certain areas. The first biography on the Baroness was not successfully completed until 2002. Irene Gammel’s *Baroness Elsa: Gender, Dada and Everyday Modernity, a Culture Biography* (2002)¹⁰ employs Freudian theory to analyze both the life and art of the Baroness. As one might guess from the title, this book does not critically analyze the Baroness’s visual images. Instead, the focus of this work is the Baroness’s sexual exploits and sound-based poetry.

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⁸ Unlike the Baroness’ art, which had limited circulation, her poetry was often featured in the *Little Review* beginning in 1918.
Francis Naumann is a respected writer on New York Dada, and it was his inclusion of the Baroness in *New York Dada, 1915-23* (1994)\(^{11}\) that helped historians become better aware of this overlooked artist. However, his text is limited. Naumann generally treats the Baroness as a personality and neglects an examination of her performance work, focusing instead on her collages and assemblage works. Furthermore, he located the section on the Baroness in a chapter entitled “Others,” thus separating her from the major Dada artists because of her German nationality.

Art historian Amelia Jones recently published *Irrational Modernism: A Neurasthenic History of New York Dada* (2004)\(^{12}\) in which she reinterprets New York Dada through the life of the Baroness in each chapter. Jones discusses the varying influences on the work of the Baroness and other artists during World War I. This unconventional text climaxes with the Jones appropriating the Baroness’s own voice. She, however, fails to fully explain how these influences actually impacted the Baroness’s diverse body of work, including her performance art. In Jones’s article “Women’ in Dada: Elsa, Rrose, and Charlie” (1998)\(^{13}\) she confronts the reasons why art historians have resisted the most extreme examples of avant-garde art that includes the Baroness’s performance art. Jones claims that historians are discomforted by sexuality and performances which has resulted in the neglect of artists and art subjects.

A review of these major texts on the Baroness reveals the most neglected aspect of the Baroness’s wide body of work, that of her performance and costume art. Partially, the exclusion of her performance art is the result of the inability to replicate it in exhibitions effectively. The Baroness’s performances were unlike modern performance in which the artist’s act is often recorded in some manner, by film, photographs, writing, or even just a title. Her performances were not titled and rarely recorded by photographs and film. It is also uncertain whether she

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repeated her performances or if they were singular occurrences. Yet another problem is the fact that much of the information on the Baroness’s performances comes from literary texts and, as such, does not include the dates for their appearance.

There are few visual objects that represent the Baroness’s costume art from the ten years she spent on the east coast of the United States. Some of the rare examples that show the Baroness actually in the state of performing are from the remaining stills of a ruined film by Duchamp and Man Ray, “The Baroness Shaves her Pubic Hair” (1921).\textsuperscript{14} The film was destroyed in processing and the few extent images were used by Man Ray to illustrate a letter to Tristan Tzara. The two surviving costume objects are: \textit{Earring—Object} (ca. 1917-1919) (figure 1) and \textit{Limbswish} (ca. 1920) which were assemblages that would have been worn as accessories during her performances.\textsuperscript{15} A few photographs of her costumes are extant, three from the Associated Press and five by Man Ray. Images of the Baroness in costumed attire were also published in the single issue journal, \textit{New York Dada} (1921). For each of the photographs the performances were short and apparently intended only for the camera and photographer. Despite the few examples of pictorial record, there are multiple detailed accounts of the Baroness’ performances and costumes in the writings of her contemporaries, such as Margaret C. Anderson’s \textit{My Thirty Years’ War: An Autobiography} (1930)\textsuperscript{16} and Williams’s \textit{The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams} (1951).\textsuperscript{17} The performance and costume art of the Baroness, especially those which were represented in the photographs, film stills, and literary sources, present scholars with a rich resource for study that, until now, has not been analyzed in depth.

\textsuperscript{14} The remaining stills are pasted to a letter which was sent to Tristan Tzara and was postmarked 8 June 1921. It is in the collection of the Bibliothèque littéraire, Jacques Doucet, Paris.
\textsuperscript{15} The Baroness gave \textit{Limbswish} and \textit{Earring—Object} to the pianist Allen Tanner (1898-1987) and his lover, the artist, Pavel Tchelitchew (1898-1956). She provided Tanner and Tchelitchew with the estimated creation dates for each. Both works are now in the collection of Mark Kelman, New York. I will not discuss \textit{Earring Object} within the scope of this paper because I am approaching her work thematically and this costume accessory does not fit properly within either of the themes I discuss. \textit{Limbswish} is discussed in the second chapter.
An obstacle for the Baroness, like other “personalities” of Greenwich Village, was that her work was criticized as bizarre antics instead of a form of Dada performance art, which at that time would have been more closely related to theater. This problem is not unique to her work because Dada street performances and theater as a whole have been neglected by scholars for similar reasons. Her performance art, or more accurately her living as art, is linked to her previous history as an actress in Berlin’s theater and her previous avant-garde German connections. She applied the Richard Wagner’s (1813-1883) concept of “gesamtkunstwerk” (total work of art) to her very life, transforming her body and even her existence into art. These factors, along with the inspiration for her bizarre attire revealed in her personal letters and literary descriptions, reveal an artist’s intent for her work to be much more than antics and instead, serious artistic performances.

My first chapter will lay claim to the Baroness as a Dada artist, a feat that has not been accomplished fully by other historians. In previous texts the term “Dada artist” is simply applied to her work without a thorough examination of how she could have been performing in a Dada manner years before Dada emerged in Zurich’s Cabaret Voltaire. I will cite details from her German background, such as her connections to fin-de-siècle German theater, the Berlin avant-garde, and the German Arts and Crafts movement, to explain how they led to her emergence as an independent Dada artist in New York City.

After establishing a place for the Baroness within the artistic canon I will thematically explore the most radical of her art forms, her performances. In the next two chapters, I will use under-analyzed photographic and literary works as sources of the Baroness’s performance work. In the second chapter I will compare Marcel Duchamp’s masquerade as a woman, Rrose Sélavy, in respect to the Baroness’s feminist performances. When compared in this manner it will become clear how the Baroness’s performance art is unique in the realm of New York Dada

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18 In fact, the Baroness’s first found object-sculpture, *Enduring Ornament* (1913) is often claimed as Dada and so were her performances, which seem to have first appeared in photographic form in 1915, a full year before the 1916 start of Dada.
because it deals specifically with a feminist reaction to the industrial era at the turn of the twentieth century. In the final chapter, I will explore how the Baroness used her role as a outsider of German identity to critique American society and culture from 1913 until 1923. By reclaiming a place for the Baroness in the Dada canon and analyzing her performance art more thoroughly than previously attempted, I will present richer contexts for her career, and the New York Dada movement.
Chapter 1
Cut from the Same Cloth: The Baroness Elsa’s Shared Influences with Dada

Paris has had Dada for five years, and we have Else [sic] von Freytag-Loringhoven for quite two years. But great minds think alike and great natural truths force themselves into cognition at vastly separate spots. In Else von Freytag-Loringhoven Paris is mystically united to New York....It is possible that Else von Freytag-Loringhoven is the first Dadaist in New York and that the Little Review has discovered her.19

—John Rodker, 1920

The Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, seemingly forgotten for decades after her death, has not been acknowledged with certainty within the artistic canon by any author. During her own life she was proclaimed as a “Dada” artist by the press with statements like the opening quote. Even though she has been included in texts such as Robert Motherwell’s Dada anthology20 and Francis Naumann’s New York Dada 1915-23, 21 her role as an artist seems to hover around the Dada movement without ever being firmly fixed within it.

Defining the Dada movement is troublesome and, in fact, some scholars, such as Dickran Tashjian, have argued that it was not a movement at all but rather a chaotic phenomenon that transversed art forms, styles, and national boundaries.22 Dada originated in the Cabaret Voltaire in Switzerland in 1916, during World War I, but it quickly extended to urban centers in France, Germany, and the United States. Dada artists, no matter what their nationalities, shared an urge to disrupt bourgeois society through various forms of revolt and mediums that included collage, assemblage art, and theater work.

Dada was a boy’s club; few women were accepted as “insiders” unless they were either lovers or wives of male artists. The Baroness was neither. The New York variant of Dada did include more female members such as Mina Loy (1882-1966), Florine Stettheimer (1871-1944), Beatrice Wood (1893-1998), and Katherine S. Dreier (1877-1952). These women, including the

Baroness, attended Louise (1879-1953) and Walter (1878-19054) Arensberg’s gatherings. The Arensberg’s home was the famous gathering place for the New York avant-grade and Dada artists. Many of these women were either Dada patrons, supporters, or were artists whose works did not share Dada’s revolutionary intentions.

The Baroness’s art is cut from the same cloth as Dada, sharing its volatile revolt against societal norms, but with one distinct difference: it employed a feminist lens to critique and rebel against modern life and society. Without a thorough understanding of the Baroness’s artistic influences and personal background her performances do not seem to hold the same revolutionary zeal as that of the Dadaists and, instead, they seem to be the work of an isolated mad woman. I will build my case for this German artist to be finally placed within the ranks of the Dada movement through a discussion of her influences and contacts during her early life in Germany, and in subsequent chapters, through her art work.

The Baroness’s turbulent life has been problematic for many researchers. Although many of her poems and artworks, as well as some images of her, survive, there is little documentation of her life before her arrival in New York in 1913. And although she related her early history, in letters to the writer Djuna Barnes, she was not completely factual with personal information.23 Some researchers, such as Irene Gammel, have made use of Barnes’ notes as well as the published writings of Felix Philip Greve, the Baroness’s second husband, to help reconstruct her past.24 Greve seems to have drawn on his wife’s early history in his novels, *Fanny Essler* (1905) and *Maurermeister Ihles Haus* (1907). Yet these two books lack credibility because Greve altered many of the facts surrounding the Baroness’s life to create more cohesive storylines and to subtly disguise the identities of the main characters. These books were also colored with the author’s prejudices and personal relationship with the Baroness. The major

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23 The Baroness had ulterior motives for her friendship with Barnes. She hoped that their collaborative efforts on her autobiography would help her gain a visa into France after she had returned to Germany from New York. Djuna Barnes was living in France at the time of this correspondence and could do little for the Baroness besides give her a place of residence once she was in France and monetary help.

24 Gammel used his published books and private letters as sources for her *Baroness Elsa*. 
issue in using Barnes’s and Greve’s texts as sources for the Baroness’s youth, therefore, is that each of these works is infused with the tensions between them and the Baroness’s vendetta against the men who had hurt her.

Two historians, Irene Gammel and Klaus Martens, have more recently attempted to unravel the Baroness’s complicated life in Europe. They have done so through exhaustive research, multiple essays, and Gammel’s biography of the Baroness. The knowledge that can be gleaned from these sources provides the cornerstone to understanding the early influences on the Baroness and how she came to create a radical modern art form that can be defined as Dada even without her direct contact with the movement.

In “Two Glimpses of the Baroness,” Martens lists the following influences on the Baroness. He states that her more radical, seemingly Dada, work was most likely affected by the commotion surrounding the 1913 New York Armory Show (International Exhibition of Modern Art) and her friendship with Marcel Duchamp. I will correct this by documenting the early influences the Baroness shared with Dada. Martens then correctly stated that the Baroness had no way of being directly influenced by the early rumblings of Dada from June 1910 to 1913 when she lived in rural Sparta, Kentucky, and Cincinnati, Ohio. He asserts that it is also impossible that she had contact with any of the early Expressionists or the Futurists who helped influence the subsequent Dada movement. Martens deduced that it was, therefore, the Baroness’s short career as an actress from ca. 1895 to 1897 that gave her the main inspiration for her Dada-like artworks and later performances in New York. Although acting would have been a major influence for the Baroness’s work, Martens neglects to explain how her connection to German theater could link to the Dada movement which also shared this inspiration. He also fails to note the other stimuli in her early life that were shared by Dada artists.

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25 This essay is from The Politics of Cultural Mediation: Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven and Felix Greve, Paul Hjartarson and Tracy Kulba, eds. (Edmonton: University Alberta Press, 2003). It is possible that the Baroness could have been inspired by periodicals or even some of the literature produced by these movements.

26 Klaus Martens, “Two Glimpses of the Baroness,” The Politics of Cultural Mediation, 42. Though Dada is not credited as emerging until 1916 its artists had already began to express their disgust with society in the early 1910s.
On July 12, 1874, Else Hildegard Plötz, the future Baroness, was born to Adolf Plötz, a bourgeois master mason, and Ida-Marie Kleist, a fragile low-ranking noble woman, in the town of Swinemünde in Pomeranian Germany. Gammel has proclaimed the Baroness’s father as the person who most affected her later development into an artist.\(^27\) She also claimed that the Baroness’s later aggressive behavior was an imitation of her father’s own overt hostility towards his family.\(^28\) Contrary to Gammel, I see the Baroness’s mother instead as the greater influence in her life, because her mother systematically developed her own escape from a controlled domesticity into a world of fantasy and artistic freedom.

The Baroness recognized that the stifling of her mother’s artistic pursuits by her father led to her eccentric and escapist behaviors. As her father took to nightly drinking and even abusive behavior, her mother’s desire for an escape through reading evolved into lively performances of books for her two daughters. Thus we can see how these enactments of literature might stimulate the Baroness’s future interest in performance. Gammel also claims that Ida-Marie Kleist’s love of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe may well have manifested itself in the Baroness’s later work. For example, she believes the character Mephistopheles from Goethe’s *Faust* was part of the Baroness’s performance work in terms of her demonic temper, mischievousness, use of theatrics and costumes, and a desire to dismantle authoritarian systems.\(^29\)

In 1888 Ida-Marie began a true rebellion, not only against her husband, but also against social norms. Adolf had left their home for six weeks for health reasons. In his absence, his wife ceased her passive escapism and began a visual assault. She bought both of her daughters

\(^{27}\) This statement is based on Irene Gammel’s book *Baroness Elsa*. Gammel cites the influence of the Baroness’s father in two main ways—their shared distaste for religion and aggressive behaviors. I agree with Gammel that Aldolf Plötz’s dislike of dogma appears in the Baroness’ New York art work such as *God* (c. 1918) (figure 15), in which a plumbing trap is supposed to represent the patriarchal deity. But the German anti-Catholic sentiment, discussed by Gammel, was not just her father’s personal crusade but also that of such famous personalities as that of Otto von Bismarck (Gammel, 31). It seems even seems possible that the bent phallic shape of *God* suggests an attack towards male authoritarian figures, such as her father, and not disgust with religion.


fashionable cosmopolitan clothing and cut their hair short. She also redecorated their house to satisfy her own tastes, mixing styles and bright colors, not caring what others would think.

Ida-Marie had harnessed a woman’s means of rebellion by altering the domestic realm, the only space over which she had control. She had turned her two daughters into symbols of the “New Woman,” a feminist concept of the time that her husband would have opposed. The look her daughters sported was of an androgynous New Woman, although they did not yet understand the concepts of independence these women desired at such young ages. Their mother’s demand for freedom within the domestic realm would come to be an example, for the Baroness at least, of the New Woman’s desire for independence from male authoritarian figures. Her rebellion included successfully forcing her husband to pay for a year of the Baroness’s education at the Königlich-Preussische Kunstschule in Berlin, a school that taught both art education and the applied visual arts. Ida-Marie’s home environment became a new means with which to explore her own artistic freedom. This seems to have been Ida-Marie’s attempt to not only free herself from the controlling hand of her husband, but also to instill in her daughters a sense of independence which she had been denied.

However, Ida-Marie’s actions escalated from the eccentric to suicidal in 1891. She was committed to a sanitarium and shortly thereafter died on February 26, 1893. The Baroness apparently did not view her mother’s actions as insane, but rather the only sane reaction such a woman could have in the “dull-witted diplomatically cautious world of men.”30 The sanitarium had become a place of freedom for Ida-Marie who, for the first time since her marriage, was able to create the artwork her husband had earlier proclaimed frivolous. There she began to combine bits of clothing and rubbish to create fiber assemblages that seem eerily similar to the costumes created from street debris that her daughter would later make in New York.31 She instilled in her daughter an early form of protest against patriarchal authority that would later evolve into a

30 Gammel, Baroness Elsa, 41. This information can also be found in Paul Hjartson and Douglas O. Spettigue, Baroness Elsa: The Autobiography of Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven (Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1992), 203.
31 Gammel, Baroness Elsa, 42. Although there is not existing visual proof of Ida-Marie’s bizarre creations, her daughter did discuss them in her letters to Djuna Barnes.
form of feminism. Ida-Marie cannot be cited as one of the Baroness’s links with Dada, but she can be credited as contributing to her daughter’s unique feminist take on a radical form of Dada art that propelled its protest from the private realm into the streets. It was her mother indeed, who taught the Baroness how to rebel against authority figures using art.

After a confrontation with her father, when he attempted to strangle her, Elsa Plötz left her home for Berlin. Free from her father’s constraints on her personal freedoms she began to explore her sexuality. This freedom to express her sexuality is tied to the pursuits of the New Women and important in the development of the Baroness and her feminist performances. This new found control over her sexual destiny is expressed by her 1894, debut as a performer in Henry de Bry’s *tableau vivant* at the Wintergarden Vaudeville Theater. The Baroness was required to pose “artistically” in a padded nude-colored body stocking. This somewhat risqué form of modeling undoubtedly instilled in her a new confidence that would later be exhibited by parading nearly nude as part of her later performances, and fully nude as an artists’ model.

From October 1894 to August 1895 the Baroness attended the Berlin Acting School. When she began to perform she was said to have outfitted herself in outrageous attire to distract from the fact that she would frequently forget her lines. Gammel and Martens disagree on the Baroness’s occupation after graduation from acting school. Gammel suggests that she was unable to find work as an actress so, it is said that she became a sexually promiscuous chorus girl in Berlin’s Central Theater. This theory is in keeping with Gammel’s depiction of the Baroness as a sexual adventurer. However, after a great deal of research from a tip in the novel *Fanny Essler* (1905), Martens found that Elsa had actually worked with a theatre trope in Cottbus, Germany and was listed in a 1897 advertisement in a local paper as being “Formerly of

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33 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
36 Gammel, *Baroness Elsa*, 66-67. Gammel bases this information from page 46 in Hjartarson and Spettigue’s *Baroness Elsa* and Greve’s *Fanny Essler*. 
Berlin’s Central Theater.” This then suggests that the Baroness had developed her acting skills previously at the Central Theater and would not have been just a chorus girl there.

The Central Theater often parodied performances of more serious plays and operas during the time the Baroness had worked there, 1895-1897. Such folk theater was typically a vulgar and humorous form of entertainment. It was considered a distinctly German reaction to the more cultured plays that were often Italian or French. In a manner, the folk plays served to define a national identity that subverted and satirized other cultures. Actors mocked the pretensions of high culture or the pretentiousness of foreign cultures, similar to the way the Baroness would later mock Americans and their perceived high culture, despite the fact she herself would later cling to her identity as an aristocrat. This mockery of the bourgeois, it must be noted, is shared with Dada.

The Baroness’s work as an actress in Berlin is a direct link to her later performance work in New York, which also thrived on satire. These skills learned as an actress and in acting school led to the Baroness’s creation of an early kind of performance art in New York relying on costuming as a form of parody, as well as improvisational speeches and the recitation of her own poems. This link that Martens creates for the Baroness to German satirical theater also provides another connection to the Baroness’s version of Dada work, because it documents her understanding of the “theater of subversion,” yet another feature characteristic of the Dada.

The Baroness’ performance art in New York is also connected to European movements such as Futurism and Dada, because they too developed a form of street performance from

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39 Martens, “Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven: Theatrical Beginnings.” The dates given by Martens do not correlate with Gammel’s dates. One of the problems with the Baroness’s early life is that many of the sources list her as being younger. Since Martens has found evidence of the Baroness’s 1897 exploits with the Cottbus trope, I believe his dates are correct.
40 Martin Esslin, Foreword, Lessing, Brecht, Dürrenmatt, and Others: Essays on German Theater, Margaret Herzfeld-Sander, ed. (New York, NY: Continuum, 1985), xi.
previous experiences in theater. Futurism, one of the influences on Dada, was represented by actors, who took to the streets with their faces painted, wearing top hats, and velvet jackets, sporting radishes or spoons in their button holes. Futurism, one of the influences on Dada, was represented by actors, who took to the streets with their faces painted, wearing top hats, and velvet jackets, sporting radishes or spoons in their button holes. 42 Dada performance in Berlin, where the Baroness had lived, featured costumes worn in the streets. For example George Grosz (1893-1959), who was associated with Dada, wore a skeletal death costume through the streets of Berlin in 1918 at the same time that the Baroness was wearing her artistic clothing in the streets of New York. What she was doing was not as radical in comparison to that which was happening in European Dada, but America Dada did not include this unique form of social protest expressed in street performance.

The Baroness’s participation in German theater is not her only connection to Dada. After being released from the hospital for syphilis treatments in 1896, which certainly interrupted her acting career, the Baroness stumbled upon the German poet Stefan George’s (1868-1933) avant-garde group. 43 This particular circle was mostly male, homosexual, anti-bourgeois, anti-Teutonical, spiritual, and heavily influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche’s Also Sprach Zarathustra (1891). 44 The Baroness naturally shared the group’s desire to overthrow patriarchal authorities. Her unconventional sexuality, tales of her escapades, and her androgynous appearance titillated the male members of the group, who also experimented with androgynous images and clothing. 45 But their feelings of lust were halted by her behaviors as a New Woman. She confronted the group with her aggressive demands for equal treatment and her annoyance with there adherence to bourgeois norms. 46 Nevertheless, she became a student as well as a model, a muse, and an artistic collaborator with some of them, especially Melchior Lechter (1818-1888). In 1896 she began a short-lived relationship with Lechter, a German Arts

42 Goldberg, Performance, 22.
43 It should be noted that the Baroness claimed her syphilis was the result of his father’s extramarital affairs and had been given to her mother before the Baroness’s birth and therefore was not directly contracted by the Baroness. For more on this topic consult Gammel, Baroness Elsa, 68-70.
44 Gammel, Baroness Elsa, 74.
45 Ibid.
46 The Baroness was a promiscuous person, but she most likely exaggerated her sexual exploits. Gammel, Baroness Elsa, 74-6.
and Crafts artist and designer, who initiated her interest in German contemporary art. Lechter’s theories concerning aesthetics for even prosaic objects such as books or furniture certainly sparked the Baroness’s later interest in turning her own life into art through her artistic costumes and performances. Such anti-bourgeois and nihilistic tendencies of the group can be related to the later development of Dada.

She abandoned the group and left Berlin for Italy in 1898, where she remained, until 1900, for two years. There the Baroness rented a studio and began taking modeling lessons. It is from her trip to Italy that we find the first documentation of her use of clothing as art which would later evolve into her street performance attire. One of the Baroness’s lovers on this trip, Oscar A.H. Schmitz (1873-1931), said she wore a man’s Panama hat and masculine-cut boots. To off set the male clothing, she wore large rings, rosary style necklaces of semiprecious stones, and even two large tiger stone earrings shaped like “old Greek oil containers.”

The Baroness’s costume at this point seems derived from her mother’s creations, as well as her emerging New Woman beliefs, and the decorative concepts of the German Aesthetic movement. However, her costume as described by Schmitz lacks the more explicit social critiques found in her New York performances that link them more directly to Dada.

In 1900, the Baroness arrived in Munich from Italy, a flourishing city complete with a new vivid youth culture developed around the idea of “theatricality.” She quickly became acquainted with a group of avant-garde artists referred to as the “Kosmiker spectrum,” who were dedicated to a life centered on Eros, dancing, and self-indulgence. This group inspired her later work because of its celebration of sexuality and emotions, and its disgust with traditional patriarchal society. Members of the group were often known to transform themselves into

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47 Quoted from Irene Gammel, Baroness Elsa, 91 but this information was originally from Oscar A.H. Schmitz’s “Klasin Wieland,” 101-102.
48 Gammel, Baroness Elsa, 99.
49 Gammel, Baroness Elsa, 102.
50 Their distaste for patriarchal society would have been a continuation of the lessons she learned from her mother about rebelling against male authority.
“hermaphrodites” at dances through costume and behavior.51 Within this German aesthetic movement costume and finery became important as a means to define oneself, as much as the actual production of objects.52 Unfortunately, there are no extant examples of their work but such concepts and collaboration must have affected the Baroness who later used costume to not only define herself but to convey her own critique of society and culture.

In 1900 the Baroness met her next great influence, August Endell (1871-1925), who was an architect and leader of the Jugendstil movement, also known as the German Art Nouveau movement. Endell was so impressed by the Baroness’s sketches that he began to teach her the applied arts—specifically book design—in sessions that would last from four to six hours a day.53 Endell, who soon became her husband, underscored the importance of art in everyday life, and warned her that the public often arrogantly criticized artists who broke with tradition.54 Perhaps Endell’s biggest impact on her was his interest in fashion and costume. Together they created “designs that framed the body in unconventional ways making iconoclastic artistic statements.”55

The Baroness’s links to Jugendstil and German Arts and Crafts (Kunstgewerber) theories through Endell are significant. Both of these movements, as they took place in Germany, focused on gesamtkunstwerk. Artists of these groups sought to harmonize buildings, furniture, clothing, jewelry and textiles. Her teacher and husband stressed the importance of the total work of art as displayed by their mutual interest in fashion, home design, and book design. The concepts of Kustgewerber are also cited by the prominent Duchamp scholar, Thierry de Duve, as

51 This adaptation of the androgynous persona, however, would not have been a new influence on the Baroness since she had already been dressing herself in such a manner.
54 Cavell, “Baroness Elsa and Aesthetics of Empathy,” 31. In his article “DieZukunft” (1897-1898) he expressed his theory that artists/architects who go against the traditional ways will be frowned upon but this should not stop the artistic experimentation. As the Baroness’s teacher and husband it is likely he would have shared these theories with her.
55 Gammel, Baroness Elsa, 115.
being important to Duchamp’s development of American Dada. Although the Baroness was not in direct contact with the Expressionists or Futurists, as cited by Martens, she was connected to the very movement that propelled Duchamp towards Dada. This connection with the German avant-garde demonstrates that she shared common influences with Dada without necessarily the direct influence of Dada artists themselves.

Yet another connection to Dada was the couple’s acquaintance with Benjamin Franklin Wedekind (1864-1918), a handsome and controversial actor and playwright who often attended soirées at their home. Wedekind’s theater performance works and plays subversively attacked authority figures, bourgeois society, and even the beliefs of the liberal middle class. His style of “black theater,” which used farcical dark humor, was an inspiration to later Expressionist artists. His Lulu plays seem the most related to the Baroness’s later work. These two plays Erdgeist (1895) and Die Büchse der Pandora (1904) contain the character LuLu who is used to question the construction of gender and societal constraints. However she is not a noble character, instead Wedekind treats her as an animal within a circus like atmosphere. This character has been read both as a New Woman or a femme fatale. These works created controversy upon publication both for their formal elements as well as the use of overtly taboo sexual scenes. The Endell couple shared Wedekind’s interest in societal changes but because of their connections to Jungendstil’s they most likely desired change through more serious means then the subversion and mockery found in Wedekind’s plays.

However, it is certainly likely that Wedekind’s plays influenced the Baroness’s later performance work. Although he performed in the theater rather than in the streets, his content was similar to the Baroness’s work with its inflammatory qualities. It is probable that Wedekind’s urinating and even masturbating on stage as a protest to the German obscenity laws, influenced the Baroness’s later radical street performances.

57 Gammel, Baroness Elsa, 116.
Wedekind is closely related to Dada, and his sexually and politically charged work has been cited as influencing Hugo Ball (1886-1927), one of the German founders of Zurich Dada. Ball, however, did not come to know of Wedekind until ten years after Wedekind had met the Baroness and Endell.\(^5^9\) Inspired by Wedekind, Ball later proclaimed

> In an age like ours when people are assaulted daily by the most monstrous things without being able to keep account of their impression, in such an age aesthetic production becomes a prescribed course. But all living art will be irrational, primitive, and complex: it will speak a secret language that will leave behind documents not of edification but of paradox.\(^6^0\)

By the turn of the twentieth century, art as a whole was facing truly radical change. The world was at the brink of war and was characterized by the new industrialism, a new middle class, and new political movements. Dada formed during this time of turbulence as a critical reaction to these radical changes.\(^6^1\) One should note however, that the term “Dada” in relation to New York artistic activity is a retroactive label. New York avant-garde artistic activity was not actually called “Dada” until the early 1920s by the New York press. The press not only declared current work “Dada” but also works previously created by artists they considered to be part of this movement, which included the Baroness.\(^6^2\) New York Dada scholars today such as Francis Naumann, have also dated the beginning of the movement as early as 1915, again before the term would have been used. The meaning of Dada itself has also been progressively expanded. By the 1940s it had come to be perceived as a movement that sought to break down boundaries and social practices to expose its cultural failures in hope of positive change—instead of being considered a destructive and nihilistic group. Like the Dada movement itself, the Baroness’s reputation has undergone a transformation. Instead of being perceived as a lone “madwoman”, the Baroness has been reclaimed as a creative artist who was ahead of her time. Her inclusion within this movement also provides a new rich field of study, as it posits a uniquely feminist

\(^{5^9}\) Gammel, Baroness Elsa, 116.
\(^{6^2}\) Jones, Irrational Modernism, 277.
perspective, rare in the mostly male Dada canon. In the following chapter I will explore two representations of women within Dada, through the performances of the Baroness and Duchamp’s female persona, Rrose Sélavy, to further emphasize the importance of the Baroness’s Dada contribution.
Chapter 2
Confusing Gender: Masquerade in the Works of the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven and Marcel Duchamp

One is not born but rather becomes a woman.
—Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1948)

In the early twentieth century, rigid Victorian gender spheres were beginning to be dismantled. Both men and women began to deconstruct such gender roles through the manipulation of clothing and hairstyle, and by assuming identities, such as the dandy, the New Woman, and the cross-dresser. Gender as linked to identity quickly became an important topic in both psychology and art. The Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven was hardly an exception to this trend. After her arrival in New York in 1913 she extended her interest in costume and theater into an early form of performance art. Her performances, like her artwork and poetry, were broad in their critique but generally focused on the ideas of bourgeois womanhood and American society as understood by a German immigrant. In this chapter I will focus on the Baroness’s commentary on women’s roles and how her performances related to Marcel Duchamp’s female persona, Rrose Sélavy. To explore how these two Dada artists used their performed self-portraits to comment on the shifting concepts of gender identity prevalent at the turn of the century, I will employ the theories of passing, masquerade, and performativity.

Before examining the Baroness’s performances I must make a short digression into the tangled path that led the Baroness from Germany to New York. As noted in the last chapter, the Baroness had married the architect and artist, August Endell, but this marriage was to be short-lived. In 1903 the Baroness began divorce negotiations with her husband after she had an affair with his friend, the poet, Felix Paul Greve (1879-1948). She then married Greve in 1907. Two years later Greve faked his own suicide as an attempt to avoid impending financial and legal troubles. He then journeyed to the United States to reconstruct his life. A year later the Baroness arrived in New York and quickly joined him on his farm in Sparta, Kentucky.

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63 The dandy was not a new concept because it had been around since the mid 19th century.
there was not pleasant for the Baroness, as she barely spoke English and did not take to the isolation of the farm. In the fall of 1911 Greve abandoned his wife and moved to Canada to begin his life over once more, under the new name of Frederick Philip Grove. There is little documentation of the two years in which the Baroness passed through Cincinnati to eventually make her way to New York. Djuna Barnes did write that the Baroness went to Cincinnati to pose for artists.\textsuperscript{64} Besides finding a job as a model the Baroness must have been drawn to the city because of its large German American population, German Theater, and vaudeville halls. By 1913 the Baroness had found her way to New York City via Cincinnati and made her first home in Harlem.\textsuperscript{65} That same year she married her third husband, the Baron Leopold Karl Freiherr von Freytag-Loringhoven (1885-1919), without a legal divorce from Greve.

Although she was indeed a Baroness through this marriage, she didn’t follow the typical moral or social standards prescribed for her new rank. She posed for artists, she stole, and she begged to support her art which included collages, sculptural assemblages, poetry, and an early form of performance art.\textsuperscript{66} Her performances consisted of the recitation of her poetry, handmade and assembled costumes created from urban debris, and parading through the streets of Manhattan like a flâneur. The Baroness, however, was never at the center of the lively Dada circle in New York because of her unpredictable personality, frank truthfulness, and volatile temperament. Her form of Dada artwork, unlike that of the male Dadaists, featured a distinctly feminist response to the rigidity of Victorian gender roles still prevalent in American culture. Through her aggressive sexual tendencies and her distinctly androgynous appearance she, like other New Women, used clothing and behavior to blur the once rigid definitions of gender roles.\textsuperscript{67} Through poetry and letters she expressed her frustration with male avant-garde

\textsuperscript{64} Gammel, Baroness Elsa, 152. The original source is Djuna Barnes “Elsa—Notes,” 24 April 1993.
\textsuperscript{65} The Baroness would have been drawn to Cincinnati because of its German population. She had not yet mastered the English language and would have felt isolated by this. Although there is no documentation of her performing in the German theaters in Cincinnati, it is likely she saw them as a potential source for a job.
artists, specifically Duchamp, who championed non-normative behavior through art but did not also challenge the concept of separate gender roles.\footnote{Rudolf E. Kuenzli, “Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven and New York Dada,” Women in Dada, 458.}

Duchamp largely explored gender roles in works such as \textit{L.H.O.O.Q.} (1919) (figure 2), but his work seems to emphasize the continuation of the Victorian gender spheres. By 1921, Duchamp created his famous alter ego, Rrose Sélavy, who like the Baroness, illuminated the performativity of the female gender. Sélavy should not be misunderstood as an inactive creation; rather, Duchamp created her with a distinct personality. He designated her president of a fictitious company, as a copyright agent for his projects, and as a creator of readymades. Originally, Duchamp had planned on creating a new self-identity through changing his religion, but upon finding no satisfactory Jewish names for his concept he altered his gender temporarily through masquerade. He chose the name “Rose,” which was common in the 1920s, and later added the extra “r” to create the now famous pun “Eros c'est la vie.” Duchamp’s new persona may have been influenced by many factors including the familiar urban dandy, the new masculine-looking attire adapted by women, the cross-dressing antics of Charlie Chaplin in the film \textit{Woman} (1915), and likely, even the Baroness’s concurrent performances. Although we can not be certain of her influence on Duchamp, they both had studios in the same Lincoln Arcade building and they were acquaintances, but the nature of their relationship is unknown.\footnote{The Baroness, in one of her letters to Jane Heap, states that Duchamp visited her often in private and “in the middle of night.” She portrayed him as a close friend who, she claimed, appreciated “my seriousness—my honesty—my trouble.” Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven to Jane Heap, “Dear Heap-you would please me a heap,” personal correspondence, ca. 1918-1923, Little Review (Chicago, IL), Records, 1914-1964, UWM Manuscript Collection 1, University Manuscripts Collection, Golda Meir Library, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, UW, 5.}

One of the main reasons little has been said about the Baroness’s performances, while much has been written about Rrose Sélavy, is because there is little visual documentation of her
actions or specific titles for the works. Instead they were generally singular occurrences. The Baroness did not name her performances, record the number of times she performed, and usually did not have anyone record them. Duchamp, by contrast, performed as Rrose Sélavy specifically for the camera of Man Ray.

One of the rare photographs of the Baroness is from 1915 (figure 3) and features her in her Lincoln Arcade apartment and studio. She perches precariously on what appears to be an ottoman, clutching a transparent self-made chiffon gown in an attempt to cover her breasts. Her eyes stare at the viewer with a look of discomfort from beneath a decorative headband that encircles her fashionably bobbed hair. Her feet are posed awkwardly in strapped ballet shoes with the left foot flat on the stool and the right foot in a vertical ballet-like position with her weight resting on her toes. The studio that surrounds her is cluttered with many objects including sections of cloth, a suitcase, a cloth-covered table, a chair and an ottoman, a bird cage, and a decorative ceramic dish. Some of these objects that are scattered about the room were used as accoutrements of the Baroness’s costume and performance art.

The apparently frightened middle-aged subject of this photograph looks nothing like the “caustic, vitriolic, daring, pushy, confrontational, shameless, shocking, and aggressive” woman that her biographer, Irene Gammel, has described. Here the Baroness is temporarily passing as a Victorian woman. Although she is not “passing” in the traditional sense of the word which is associated with race (blacks trying to be accepted as whites) she does seem to be referencing the appearance of a class of women even if only temporarily. She achieves this passing by adapting a stereotypical gendered pose and clothing of a Victorian woman. These combine to illustrate what the Freudian psychoanalyst Joan Riviere has termed as “the masquerade.”

According to Riviere’s essay, “Womanliness as a Masquerade” (1929), femininity is actually a disguise that is affected in order to hide any signs of masculinity as an attempt to avoid social

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70 Irene Gammel, Baroness Elsa, 168.
71 Gammel, Baroness Elsa, 171.
punishments or to introduce anxiety in men and colleagues.\textsuperscript{73} She also states that elements used in this feminine disguise, such as clothing and jewelry, are compensation for the lack of the phallus. The key feature of Riviere’s theory is that she does not acknowledge the duality of Victorian gender roles and instead feels that there really is no true female gender role.\textsuperscript{74} These features of the masquerade are also related to Judith Butler’s theory of “performative gender.” In Butler’s essay, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitutions: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory” (1990), she defines gender performativity as

\begin{quote}
    an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a \textit{stylized repetition of acts}. Furthermore, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence must be understood as a mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.\textsuperscript{75}
\end{quote}

The feminine enactments of the Riviere’s masquerade then constitute the gendered performative action as described by Butler, with a slight difference: Butler doesn’t acknowledge either gender, male or female, and instead views them both as masquerades.

Indeed, the Baroness does represent the concept of “femininity as a masquerade” through such overtly female attire as the tiara-like headband and the chiffon dress. Even her pose, which was an attempt to hide the female features of her body, her breasts, and her groin, is a performance for the camera.\textsuperscript{76} The Baroness was not a woman ashamed of nudity or her own female form; she was a nude model for artists’. One could also argue that her own muscular androgynous form, which is more obvious in other photographs, and short hairstyle underscored a degree of masculinity that she was attempting to conceal with such feminine adornments. In this photograph the Baroness drew attention to traditionally feminine features through body language, clothing, and accessories and was thus presenting a performative enactment of femininity.

\textsuperscript{73} First published in the \textit{International Journal of Psychoanalysis} in 1929. This is one of Riviere’s best known and most important pieces of analytical writing.  
\textsuperscript{74} Joan Riviere “Womanliness as a Masquerade,” Anna Tripp, ed. \textit{Gender} (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2000), 133.  
\textsuperscript{76} This gesture is assuredly a pose because the Baroness was not uncomfortable with nudity or half dress. In fact she was known to parade through the streets wearing only a Mexican blanket (Gammel, \textit{Baroness Elsa}, 198).
Although Duchamp did not perform like the Baroness, he did use a temporary passing when he posed as a bourgeoise female, Rrose Sélavy. He enacted the feminine through makeup and clothing (figures 4 and 5). In two of the photographs from the 1920-1921 series, Sélavy longingly stares at the viewer through a soft focus lens. These photographs mimic conventional constructions of alluring femininity. Duchamp’s rouged lips neither smile nor frown. Instead, he seems to be attempting to seduce the viewer with his feminine guise. His faux blond ringlets are barely noticeable beneath the black hat with its jolting geometric patterned band. The hands of the artist Francis Picabia’s girlfriend, Germaine Everling, adorned in jewelry, delicately hold the fox fur collar of his coat closed to hide his Adam’s apple.

These photographs of Duchamp also personify Riviere’s theory of the female masquerade as disguising the masculine or possession of the phallus. Here Duchamp utilizes makeup, clothing, jewelry, and even Everling’s hands to transform himself into a readymade woman. Unlike the Baroness’s performance as a frightened delicate woman, Duchamp presents himself as an American woman whom he described as “the most intelligent woman in the world today—the only one that always knows what she wants, and therefore always gets it...” Indeed, Duchamp as Sélavy seems to possess a direct and seductive gaze, the physical beauty, and the psychological distance of a femme fatale. The image shares many qualities with publicity photographs of movie actress femme fatale such as the three-quarters view, soft focus, and feminine clothing. Within these photos Duchamp is clearly exploiting the artificial constructions of gendered identity just as the Baroness did. But unlike her, he is not subverting Victorian gender roles in a didactic manner but rather he seems to be enacting the female masquerade as a parody of the female sex from the masculine vantage point.

78 As cited in Francis Naumann, New York Dada, 1915-1923, 36.
The Baroness’s performances did not rely only on the subversion of the stereotyped feminine look but on also women’s roles in society. The Victorian understanding of separate gendered spheres was predominated in American culture with women largely confined to domestic activities. The industrial revolution of the 19th century had altered female gender roles by emphasizing women as the primary consumers for the family. This was so common that stores and advertisers quickly took note of the expanding numbers of female shoppers and geared advertising towards them. The Baroness used this expanded gender role to further critique American women.

The artist George Biddle provides a description of his meeting with the Baroness in 1917 in his memoir, *American Artists Story* (1939):

I met her in my Philadelphia studio...in the spring of 1917, a few weeks before I enlisted in the Officers’ Training Camp. Having asked me in her harsh, high-pitched German stridency whether I required a model, I told her I should like to see her in the nude. With the 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 breast 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 it 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 vermillion.

This description of the Baroness is typical of her performances in which she exploited both “masculine” and “feminine” features such as the shaved head and tin can bra, thus showing the fluidity of gender. Much like the feminist New Woman, although more risqué, she expressed her sexual independence and defiance of gender norms by exposing her nearly nude form. The tomato can bra can be read as a commentary on the woman’s consumer role. With this element of her costume she parodied the newly invented brassiere, a distinctly female article of clothing, with tin cans that can be associated with the domestic activity of both shopping and preparing

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meals. The shower curtain rings and vegetable-trimmed hat also refer to the domestic responsibilities of the American woman. Finally, the caged bird worn as a pendant may likely be a reference to the entrapment of the female within the domestic sphere.

Duchamp as Sélaïv also referenced the theme of the female as consumer through the assisted readymade Belle Haleine, eau de Violette of 1921 (figure 6). In her essay, “Rose Sélaïv Goes Shopping” (2005), Helen Moelsworth points out that Duchamp’s selection of the readymades associated with Sélaïv suggests the feminized activity of shopping rather than the artistic act of creation. Like the Baroness, Duchamp as Sélaïv selected an object not as just an acquisition but with a perceived good taste. Here the artist has chosen a Rigaud brand perfume bottle and attached a collaged label to it. On the label (figure 7) is a photograph of Duchamp in the guise of Sélaïv wearing a black hat trimmed with black feathers. Through the attachment of this femme fatale image of Sélaïv to a perfume bottle, she becomes linked to both a consumable product and the seduction of advertising.

The title of this work, Belle Haleine, or “Beautiful Helen,” may be a reference to Helen of Troy. This would imply that Sélaïv is offering the consumer both classic beauty and her own glamour as represented in the oval photograph. The second part of the name, “Eau de Violette,” is a pun perhaps referring to “little veil” thus relating to the idea of veiling masculinity through the feminine masquerade. Duchamp seems to be utilizing this readymade to show his understanding of the enactment of gender through the use of such products as perfume but he also seems to be expressing the continuation of female masquerade. By centrally emphasizing the perfume bottle he promoted the continuation of gender performativity by other women.

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82 Gammel, Baroness Elsa, 201. The first bra emerged in 1913 in New York and was made of two handkerchiefs and some pink ribbon. It was supposedly conceived of by Mary Phelps Jacob, latter Caresse Crosby.
84 Jennifer Blessing, Rose is a Rose is a Rose: Gender Performance in Photography (New York, NY: Abrams, 1997), 19.
86 Blessing, Rose is a Rose is a Rose 19.
Through the appropriation of the female masquerade, both Duchamp and the Baroness question the nature of the artist versus the subject. In the Baroness’s performance for Biddle she intended to convey two messages: she would be a good model for him, but she was an artist as well. Thus she challenged her role as an object of the male artist by reasserting through her costume that she was too a visual artist—the product of her own creativity. And in Belle Haleine, Duchamp also is both the creator of this assisted readymade and the subject dressed as Sélavy.

The Baroness was not only performing as a parody of the conservative Victorian woman; she also pointed out the masquerade of the masculine. In 1983, the Lacanian analyst E. Lemoine-Luccioni expanded Riviere’s theory of the female masquerade. He insisted that the female was not the only one who was compensating for the lack of the phallus. He stated: “if the penis was the phallus, men would have not needs of feathers or ties or medals... Display, just like the masquerade, thus betrays a flaw: no one has the phallus”87

The Baroness accentuated her own androgynous figure with masculine clothing and very short hair and in doing so performed the male masquerade. An example of an image of the Baroness with a masculine haircut is Man Ray’s photograph of her published in the single issue magazine New York Dada (figure 8). Her friend, the photographer Bernice Abbott, stated “[s]he invented and introduced trousers with pictures and ornaments painted on them. This was an absolute outrage...”88 Although women had begun to wear split skirts around this time, a woman with shaved hair wearing men’s trousers would still have been viewed as revolutionary. But even as the Baroness acquired this male garb as a temporary act of passing; she still used it to stress her own status as an artist by painting directly onto the pants, allowing herself not only to wear her art but to become it.

87 La Robe: Essai Psychanalytique Sur Le Vetement (1983), 34, as quoted in Stephen Heath “Joan Riviere and the Masquerade,” Gender, 149.
88 Gammel, Baroness Elsa, 396.
Pants, however, were not the only male attribute the Baroness made use of in her performances. Perhaps one of her most disruptive performances involved shocking older women with a plaster cast of a penis. Djuna Barnes wrote, “She made a great plaster cast of a penis once, & showed it to all the ‘old maids’ she came in contact with.”

Without a digression into Freudian castration theory, the possession of this object allowed the Baroness a traditionally masculine sexual authority while also suggesting symbolically her ability to pleasure herself without a man.

The Baroness also used a sculptural assemblage worn as an accessory to her costume. Limbswish (ca. 1920) (figure 9) is a gold furniture tassel encased by a spiraling clock spring. The tassel and spring were attached to a section of wire that would be tucked under a belt. The wooden block Limbswish is now attached to was later added on as a means to display the work. Originally, the object would have been displayed swinging back and forth below the Baroness’s waist. The name “Limbswish” (figure 10) seems to be a pun expressing a desire for the distinctly masculine “limb.”

Here the Baroness seems to be expressing the fluidity of gender not only through clothing and body language, but also through the appropriation of the phallus. With Limbswish and the portable plaster cast of a penis she actually turns the phallus into a feminine accessory in the manner of a pendant or clutch purse. Riviere associated female accessories with a desire to replace the phallus, so it seems appropriate that the Baroness would have enacted this. Through her portrayal of aspects of both the male and female gender, the Baroness’s actions seem more closely related to Judith Butler’s theory than Riviere’s. Butler, like Riviere, believed

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89 Djuna Barnes “Elsa—Notes” (1933) as cited in Gammel’s Baroness Elsa, 195.
90 I have not found a literary source or photograph of the Baroness using this accessory in a specific performance but it can be assumed that she enjoyed this piece because it is one of the few she took with her to Germany when she departed the United States in 1923.
there is not a female gender role but she also insists there is not a male gender role either—rather, that gender is nonexistent.  

This concept of polar gender roles as nonexistent is further expressed by the film created by the Baroness, Duchamp, and Man Ray, entitled “The Baroness Shaves her Pubic Hair” (1921). The actual methods for the creation of this film and the roles of each artist are uncertain. Who manned the two cameras, as well as, who played the role of the “barber” are topics that are currently being debated. Unfortunately, because of the experimental processing technique the negatives were ruined except for a few stills which were later used by Man Ray in a letter to Tristan Tzara (figure 11). The two remaining stills from the film show the Baroness with a shaved head and groin. The top still has been cut in half exhibiting only the lower half of the Baroness whose legs seem paused in the state of running. The other still, which has been preserved in its entirety, shows the Baroness in an angular pose. The Baroness’s nude form is vivid white as she positions herself against a dark shadowy void that comprises the background. She stands with her right hand seemingly displaying the grandeur of her shaved head. While the left hand is placed on her hip perhaps denoting her newly sheared pubic area. Her legs are splayed open with the right leg bent at the knee—further exhibiting this region.

Although we do not know whether the Baroness struck her own poses or was instructed on this matter, the confidence exuded by this stance and the flagrant display of her body seem to be the product of only one artist—the Baroness. The Baroness was both an artist’s model who prided herself on her unique form of posing and a creative performance artist who used her

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91 Butler, 162.
92 In Gammel’s Baroness Elsa on page 290, Gammel claims that the two cameras were run by a mechanic and Duchamp. In René Steinke’s Holy Skirts: A Novel (New York, NY: William Morrow, 2005) page 177-282 she creates a fictive version of the facts she researched concerning this film. She cites Duchamp as the “barber” and Man Ray as the camera man; but once more I must point out this is a historical based fiction. George Baker’s “Keep Smiling” in The Dada Seminars states that Man Ray assisted Duchamp on the film. He also claims Man Ray was the “barber.”
93 Man Ray, Letter to Tristan Tzara, postmarked 8 June 1921. This letter is of great importance to the New York Dada movement. The letter proclaims that Dada cannot survive in New York because the city is already Dada. The Baroness’s legs are used to represent the letter “A” in the opening heading that may be read as a scatological pun on mer (the sea or mother), merde (shit), and Amerique. It is odd that Man Ray has used the Baroness, a well known German immigrant, to symbolize America.
body as an art form and, thus, it is likely that she created this pose without either Man Ray or Duchamp’s instruction. Gammel has pointed out that this pose expresses not only the Baroness’s “New Woman sexuality” but also “her critique of America.” Although I agree that the Baroness’s stance seems to subvert the conservative morality of some Americans, it does not seem to be a critique of America as a whole. In “Keep Smiling” (2005) George Baker notes an alternative reading in which this exposing pose of the Baroness can be read in relation to Freudian castration theory. The “barber” then has removed the phallus from her. But even in the absence of the phallus the Baroness’s shaved head and powerful stance does not relate to the castrated female. I conclude that this pose instead acknowledges the futility of polar genders.

This fluidity between artist and subject as well as gender was recognized by contemporary artists: they reflected these transformations in portraits of Duchamp and the Baroness. Biddle’s *The Baroness Elsa Von Freytag-Loringhoven* (1921) (figure 11) represents her head six times, with varying facial expressions which Irene Gammel has labeled “serious, morose, judgmental, reflective, inquisitive, and glum.” Emotion is not the only factor that seems to vary; so, too, does the perceived gender of these faces. The second in the top row is an aged feminine face with bobbed hair and defined lips. The two heads at the right of the top row seem more masculine in appearance with their hair shaved quite short. This image seems to portray not only the emotional qualities of the Baroness but also her ability to use gender as masquerade. The linear focus of this lithograph and the sharp angles of the faces give them a mask-like appearance. The hair and full lips of one head represent the attributes of the female masquerade, and the absence of these features represents the male. The fluidity of these gender changes suggests that the Baroness seemed not to have a specific gender—which would be in keeping with Butler’s theory that gender is nonexistent, or that all gender is a masquerade.

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97 Biddle also seems to have represented the Baroness as a six-headed hydra, the mythical beast who attacked and devoured men. He most likely linked the hydra to the sexually aggressive behavior and volatile emotions that once
Like the Baroness, Duchamp was also represented as both masculine and feminine by his peers. The *Portrait of Marcel Duchamp* (1923) (figure 12) by Florine Stettheimer, a close friend of Duchamp, represents how others within his New York circle might have viewed the importance of his female alter ego. Duchamp is depicted not as one person, as one would expect with a portrait; rather, he is shown opposite of his feminine alter ego. The predominant colors of this painting—blue and pink—are colors which may be associated with the male and female masquerade. Duchamp sits in a chair that bears his name and initials, as well as French and American flags, and wears typically masculine attire including a smoking jacket and trousers, which are both neutral in color. His eyes are downcast, perhaps staring in boredom, while one hand adjusts a small crank that is attached to a stool. The stool, connected to a spring, supports the pink-clad Sélavy. She sits coyly exposing her white lace-trimmed stockings. She is identified by her name on the seat as well as perhaps a visual pun on her name expressed through the rose color of her dress. Sélavy has extended her arm as though in discussion with Duchamp, who appears to ignore her. This positioning of Duchamp as controller of the mechanism that moves Sélavy seems to be promoting the bourgeois gender roles that the Baroness opposed.

Although these are only two illustrations of Duchamp and the Baroness’s performances, they represent some of the ways in which other artists responded to their performative actions. These gendered enactments were seen as such vital parts of each artist’s work that they warranted depiction. Despite the fact that Biddle and Stettheimer seem to understand the importance of gender roles within the Baroness’s and Duchamp’s art, one cannot help but question the true intent of the Baroness and Duchamp in relation to their gendered artistic activities. Unfortunately this question must go unanswered because neither artist verbally expressed their thoughts on the importance of gender in their work.

resulted in the Baroness’s infamous fist fight with the writer William Carlos Williams. Irene Gammel has also noted this connection in *Baroness Elsa*, 285.
As mentioned in the introduction, the first three decades of the twentieth century were an era when gender identity was being explored. Virginia Woolf commented on this phenomenon in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), stating that “No age can ever have been as stridently sex-conscious as our own.”\(^98\) Like Woolf these artists seem to recognize this quality of their times and most likely understood their performances as parodies of gender. But it is unlikely that they would have applied the term passing to their own behavior, as I have. However, the term has been redefined in a post-structuralist sense to encompass multiple forms of passing and could be applicable to their works at least temporarily.\(^99\) Pamela L. Caughie has defined passing in relation to performative enactments as a term that “brings out the historical emergence of this concept in actual social practices (not just linguistic or philosophical theories) within a specific historical context.”\(^100\)

With no artist’s statements about these performative works one cannot help but question the real intentions of the Baroness and Duchamp regarding their masquerades as a form of passing. The Baroness was aware of her performance art as a form of living art. Her background in theater and her contact with German avant-garde artistic movements had planted the idea in her that such items as clothes could be art, but so too could a person’s entire life. A close reading of her dictated biography to Djuna Barnes reveals that she also had a basic understanding of Freud which would have spurred her interest in gender and sexuality.\(^101\) As a feminist she critiqued not only the female enactments, but as a German immigrant she was able to relate this to the distinctly American perception of the female gender. Duchamp, a Frenchman, was also a foreigner in New York and he, like other male Dadaists, was interested in representing the American woman. But his “Sélavy” was never an artist: instead, she was a copyright agent and a careful shopper who was appointed to choose his readymades. Though both artists used passing through a masquerade of the Victorian female gender role, the

\(^{100}\) Caughie, 401.  
\(^{101}\) Eliza Jan Reilly, “Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven,” 27.
Baroness seems to have parodied the female and thus to have made a feminist statement about gender roles, whereas Duchamp’s temporary passing as a woman seems less a feminist statement than an enactment of stereotypes.
Chapter 3
Looking at the United States with German Eyes

All America is nothing but impudent inflated rampantly guideless burgers—trades people—in
defiance of law of nobility—all America is founded on that greed hence I – alone – do not belong
here—as I say:- I can not fight a whole continent. 102

I look in the mirror and see a neglected disspirited [sic] left over old woman! And – the insane
thing about it is it is not true! But it is true- in America-! 103

–The Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven
ca. 1818-1923

The writer Djuna Barnes described the national heritage of the Baroness Elsa von
Freytag-Loringhoven while she was in her late thirties as having “The high arched nose that
smelled everything, the deep set piercing green eyes, the mouth grimly sensuous ... and the body
strong, wiry, durable and irreparably German.” 104 In fact, many contemporary writers and even
modern historians have looked at the Baroness’s German nationality as one of her defining
characteristics but they have overlooked how this related to her identity as an outsider in the
United States in relation to her performance work.

A person who is an outsider is able to critique a group with a degree of separation that
allows him or her to see things that would go unnoticed by others. This concept of the artist as a
foreign critic was not unique in the New York Dada circle. The French transatlantic Dada artist
Francis Picabia (1879-1953) also used his status as an outsider to evaluate American society. 105
In his print, Portrait d’une jeune fille americaine dans l’etat de nudité (1915) (figure 13), he
suggests that American women are mechanical. The American woman at this time was
associated, by the French at least, with an athletic stamina, much like a machine, but devoid of
beauty. Picabia’s sparkplug, a machine built to combust, lies motionless without a spark.
However, American women were not the only subject that transatlantic artists associated with
U.S. culture. Art historian Wanda Corn has proposed that the Duchamp’s Fountain (1917)

102 “Dear Heap-it would please me a heap,” 6.
103 “Jane Heap understand one thing,” 1.
104 Irene Gammel, Baroness Elsa, 17.
105 I use the term “transatlantic” in the manner that Wanda Corn did in The Great American Thing: Modern Art and
National Identity, 1913-1935 (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999). She used it in conjunction with
artists who crossed the Atlantic to live in a country but not to expatriate.
(figure 14) was intended as a didactic tool for the American public to appreciate its own unique artistic endeavors of plumbing, bridges, and skyscrapers. Morton Schamberg (1881-1918), in collaboration with the Baroness created a sculptural assemblage glorifying the American achievement in plumbing sarcastically titled God (1918) (figure 15).106 Joseph Stella (1877-1946), the Italian-born Futurist and a close associate of the New York Dada circle, also created art that evaluated the country as he adapted to it. His images of the city emphasized technology and industry representing the country as a whole.107

The Baroness saw America through the eyes of a foreigner. To her New York was a place of industry and technology, even as it still clung to Victorian morals and the cultures of Old Europe. As a German living in the U.S. in the early 20th century, her experiences and her feelings towards American society and culture differed significantly from that of the other transatlantic artists. She did not perceive the country as a haven from the crumbling old cultures of Europe as other New York Dada transatlantic artists did. Instead, she considered American society as a pale imitation of her own German culture. With her performances, the Baroness was, in Irene Gammel’s words, “assaulting America from behind the mask of an already dismantled aristocracy.”108 The Baroness’s German identity and romanticizing of her homeland must be addressed in order to gain a fuller understanding of her performances and their relation to both the Dada movement and American society of the time.

There is no doubt that the Great War had a profound effect on all artists, especially on those in the New York Dada group who had traveled so far to escape its horrors. The Baroness was different from the male artists in that she had left her home country before the war had started in order to be with her second husband, Felix Paul Greve. For her there wasn’t the threat

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106 The attribution of God has been in debate during the last decade. Originally, the work was attributed to Schamberg but scholars are now questioning the role of each artist in the creation of this sculpture.
107 Stella depicted the Brooklyn Bridge, city streets, street lights, and skyscrapers as symbols of the modernity of the United States in his best known work, the series The Voice of the City of New York Interpreted (1920-22). In A Battle of Lights, Coney Island, Mardi Gras (1913-14) he again represents the modern aspects of the city through vivid lights, intense colors, and a sense of movement created by the abstract composition.
of conscription or warfronts; instead, she suffered from a different fear. Prior to America’s entry into the World War I, German immigrants had already represented a perceived threat on American soil. The Baroness has been described as evoking this reactionary fear. Irene Gammel, in her biography of the Baroness, wrote about her:

The grotesqueness of Freytag-Loringhoven’s self-images, as well as the intensity of her style, appropriately reflected the trauma created by the Great War, a trauma that for many artists could be countered only by retraumatizing assaults on post-Victorian belief systems, middle-class stability, and bourgeois family values.109

And indeed the Baroness’s performances, costumes, and German accent haunted a frightened public.110 Historians like Gammel and Amelia Jones have both interpreted her art and performances as being in large part a reaction to the war.111 After close examination, I find however that none of her performances seem to carry this kind of political message or agenda. On the contrary, her performances are either a critique of American society or they express her otherness as a German.

Two photographs of the Baroness from 1915 illuminate my argument. Both of these images show her dressed in a handmade costume while posing for the camera in her Greenwich Village apartment. In the first image (figure 16), she stands in a rigid pose with her back arched and her arms outstretched behind her in the manner of an automobile hood ornament (such as the Rolls-Royce Wraith, which had not yet invented). Her face is upturned and aloof, she is posed with an air of superiority. In another photograph (figure 17), she lunges forward dramatically on her left leg and swings her arms out in arabesque, the left in front, and the right behind. These rigid poses complement the linear patterning of her bizarre and revealing costume. The two-piece costume clings tightly to her muscular form. Her feminine attributes

109 Gammel, Baroness Elsa, 9.
110 Ibid.
111 Irene Gammel addresses her work as a reaction to the war within the eighth chapter titled “A Citizen of Terror in Wartime,” in Baroness Elsa: Gender Dada and Everyday Modernity, a Cultural Biography. Amelia Jones addresses the Baroness’s war connections in the second chapter, “War/ Equivocal Masculinities,” in Irrational Modernism: A Neurasthenic History of New York Dada.
have been highlighted on this costume with deliberately placed tassels and beading on her breasts. On her head is a strange cap with a large black feather protruding from it horizontally.

In his 2003 exhibition, Francis Naumann displayed a mannequin attired in a red and white costume based on these photographs (figure 18). In this reproduction it is easier to see how the tight bodice was fastened, closed on the front with only three buttons that leave triangles of the torso exposed. A brooch which seems to feature a lion, two strategically placed circles of beading over the nipples, and the horizontal stripes draw the viewer’s eye to the model’s cleavage, which would have been read by the American public at this time as risqué. The striped pattern of the bodice continues on the pants with what appears to be wide ribbon detail. These ribbons extend past the end of the pants and dangle around her calves. To the ends of the ribbons the Baroness added small bells that would have added sound to her one-woman parade through the streets. Three-quarters length pants like these that cling so tightly to her legs would have been seen as a sign of sexuality and rebellion, especially with their embellishment of beaded tassels down the curves of thighs. Her geometric patterned ballet-like shoes, also worn in the photograph and discussed in the last chapter, complete her eccentric costume. The two-piece midriff costume seems more like the outfit of a jester or a scantily clad acrobat rather than a baroness.

Over her cropped hair the Baroness wears what Gammel thinks is a “French aviator” cap with a feather and what Francis Naumann has called a “coal shuttle.” Gammel reads this hat as a pro-French statement and relates it to an interview with Louis Bouché in which he discussed his first meeting with the Baroness in a subway station. He described her as “wearing a French Poilou’s [sic] blue trench helmet,” and later in his recollection he also mentions that she “adored anything French, she a German, and Germany and France in mortal combat.”

This comment is not in the typed manuscript of the interview. However, within that manuscript

113 Ibid. This is taken from Louis Bouché, “Autobiography” (Louis Bouché Papers, American Art Archives), roll 688, frames 700-702.
of the interview Bouché does state that she “had an accent that you could cut with a knife.”

Amelia Jones has suggested that the German Baroness’s costume of a French helmet represents the “ultimate mixed metaphor of the Great War.”

Although the Baroness did have affection for the French culture and for particular Frenchmen like Marcel Duchamp, this does not necessarily correlate with a political agenda concerning the war. She was the early war bride of a German, the Baron Karl Freiherr von Freytag-Loringhoven (1885-1919). Because of this, a politically pro-French statement in her work would have been unusual since her husband saw the French as the enemy. The Baron Freytag-Loringhoven abandoned his wife when he entered the war in 1914. He departed for Germany aboard a steamer that was intercepted by the French and became a prisoner of war before ever having the chance to return to Germany. In 1919 he committed suicide in a prisoner of war camp. The Baroness’s love for her husband is yet another reason why this work should not be interpreted as a pro-French statement. Her devotion to the Baron is not mere speculation; the Baroness lost two teeth when she came to blows with a fellow New York City cigarette factory worker who had slandered him. Her affection for her German husbands, all three of them, may also be represented by the three rings she is wearing on the ring finger of her left in the 1915 photographs (figure 19), which has gone unnoticed by other scholars. Gammel also points out that the Baroness’s “aviator hat” corresponds with the 1915 bombing of Britain by German zeppelins. This suggests that the Baroness identified with her fellow countrymen. However, if the headdress is not an aviator hat but rather a construction of the Baroness’s own creativity complete with the large black feather, or perhaps even Naumann’s “coal shuttle,” there must be another explanation.

114 Louis Bouché interview with William E. Woolfenden, typed manuscript of interview, 1963 March 13, Interview, New York, NY, American Art Archives, 2.
115 Amelia Jones, Irrational Modernism, 35.
116 Gammel, Baroness Elsa, 162-164.
117 Gammel, Baroness Elsa, 164.
118 Ibid.
119 Gammel, Baroness Elsa, 166.
120 Ibid.
I propose an alternative to Gammel’s political reading of this costume and performance. The photographs seem to embody the combination of both the Old and New Worlds found in American culture and hence may be a commentary on America’s own cultural borrowing. The red and white pant stripes might reference the red and white stripes of the American flag, a country that had not yet entered the war. The pearl earrings, gold brooch, feather, and vivid patterns may be a parody of the American appropriation of Old European cultural elements. The flashiness of the costume combined with the dramatic pose of the Baroness seems more closely related to her early work in the German theater and relates to her understanding of satire. The costume itself looks like something a court jester might wear. It also breaks away from the conservative dress and typical gender roles of American women. It is possible, then, that this costume may be read as a satire of American culture, its rapid industrial growth, and its desire to cling to conservative Victorian morality.

This example is not a singular occurrence of the Baroness’s ability to critique American culture as an outsider. Bouché described another of the Baroness’s undated costume and performances saying, “And then she wore a bustle and on the bustle at the base of her spine she had a taillight and at night she’d turn on the taillight and she explained, with her fabulous accent, that after all, bicycles and automobiles had taillights and she didn’t want to collide with anybody so she just felt that she had to have a taillight.” 121

Gammel has interpreted this performance as a feminist statement.122 In a feminist reading the taillights could show the Baroness as the vanguard of the art scene, leaving the male artists (and indeed, everyone else) to stare at her taillights as she blazes past them. The contraption also highlights her behind, a sexualized area of the body. This would be in stark contrast to the Victorian morals as connected to the bustle. However, I feel that the bustle, a prominent feature of women’s Victorian clothing, when combined with working bicycle

121 Louis Bouché interview with William E. Woolfenden, 2.
122 Gammel, Baroness Elsa, 188-189.
taillights, can more accurately be read as a comment on American industry. It is probable that the Baroness employed the French Dada concept of the American woman as machine, as Picabia did, by incorporating machinery into her costume. The Baroness also highlights the American desire to cling to Victorian gender roles via the bustle, already outdated in German standards of fashion.

Finally, the taillights could be associated with Henry Ford (1863-1947) and the assembly line production. The Baroness was fully aware of the impact of Ford in America. In a humorous letter to Peggy Guggenheim she wrote:

> All know —[God] is tinkerer—limitless of resources.  
> But why so much tinkering?  
> He better fordize [sic]—learn from America—start expert machineshop [sic]—Ford can supply experience—funds—is rumored for as yet he is clumsily subtle—densely—intelligent—inefficiently—immense—(Lord not Ford---of course).[...]  
> [God] better hotfoot towards progress—modernize—use his own omnipotence intelligently—smart or we'll all expire in tangle.  
> Well Lord knows—(Does he?)

Within the disjointed writing of the Baroness I believe we find her true feelings about America. Rather than idealizing assembly line production in her letter and costume, she is applying her characteristically caustic wit. She points out how Americans have elevated the machine and industry to the level of a deity. One may read Schamberg’s and the Baroness’s collaborative assemblage sculpture, *God* (figure 14) in the same manner as a glorification of American industry. The “machine shop,” so focused on efficiency, would seem to be in stark contrast to the Germany the Baroness romanticized as a place of culture.

The Baroness also expressed her otherness as a member of the European aristocracy. Man Ray’s (1890-1976) photograph, *Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven* (1920) (figure 20), presents the Baroness enacting her “aristocratic” rank. Here she stands carefully posed in a contrapposto stance with her left arm outstretched and resting on a nearby chest of drawers. The feather fan she holds falls on her right shoulder as she stares off to the side, not deigning to look at the

123 From a letter to Peggy Guggenheim, 9 August 1927, in Gammel’s *Baron Elsa*, 229.
camera. Behind the Baroness sits a small dog, who, although blurred, may be her beloved “Pinkey.” Instead of a baroness, however, she looks more like a working-class girl in her cheap ready-made imitation of high class finery, trying to “play lady.” The outfit is an attempt at depicting herself as part of high society through the use of a broad-brimmed hat, delicate collar lace, embroidery, and gossamer material. These same articles were used by working-class women for the same means. It seems in this image that Man Ray has captured the Baroness’s desire to reclaim the romantic concepts of German nobility through her eccentric costuming and posing.

I have emphasized the Baroness’s social distance as a German in American society and avoided simplifying her as a wartime radical to demonstrate that the Baroness was not an outsider because of her political stance, but rather because Americans rejected and feared most things related to Germany in the first half of the 20th century. In An Ethic for Enemies (1995), Donald W. Shriver, Jr. states that the anti-German reaction in America did not start during World War I but instead encompassed the first fifty years of the twentieth century. Shriver explained that feelings of ambivalence towards Germans began as tides of immigrants flooded into America. Between 1880 and 1920 more than 5.5 million Germans left their homeland for a new life in America. Americans insisted that these new immigrants quickly assimilate or face varying forms of alienation. Shriver points out that Germans were fiercely proud of their culture, specifically in areas of art, philosophy, theology, and science. Their pride in the cultural products of their homeland actually allowed them to integrate many aspects of their culture into their American lives. Before the war, many Americans also reacted to Germans with suspicion because of their perceived connections to aristocracy. This was certainly the case with the Baroness who so flaunted her status as German aristocracy. The association with the von

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125 Estad, 64.
127 Shriver, 75.
128 Ibid.
Freytag-Loringhoven name also connected the Baroness to her father-in-law, Hugo Freiherr von Freytag-Loringhoven (1855-1924), a Prussian General of Infantry during WWI who was often mentioned as an enemy general in American newspapers.129

Americans’ feelings of discomfort with the rising tide of proud Germans unwilling to give up their old ways, and the new threat of war, resulted in a reaction against Germans that included propaganda, harassment, anti-immigration campaigns, and even death in severe cases.130 The European war that began in August 1914 resulted in an economic recession in the United States. This recession only furthered anti-German sentiments and resulted in the avoidance of anything German or German-sounding. For instance during wartime, hamburgers were renamed “liberty” sandwiches.131 Germans and anything German-related were so despised that dachshund were “openly kicked in the street.”132 Many Germans were falsely arrested for espionage and for pro-German agitation, and others became the victims of lynch mobs.133 In fact the Baroness was arrested in 1917 or 1918, while she was in Connecticut, and jailed for three weeks on the suspicion that she was a German spy.134 Despite the reactionary behavior of the majority of the American public, many women, such as Jane Adams, rebelled against the war and formed anti-war leagues.

Negative feelings and prejudice toward German immigrants can also be cited as part of the reason the Baroness lived a life of poverty; she was unable to find a job. The prevalent negative sentiment prevented her from teaching the German language, which was a career she desperately wanted to pursue.135 By retaining her love of Germany, its language, aristocracy, and culture the Baroness might have been seen as linked to the enemy, even though she did not share its politics.

129 Gammel, Baroness Elsa, 162.
132 Ibid.
133 Ibid.
134 Gammel, Baroness Elsa, 213. I have not been able to find the precise date that the Baroness was arrested.
135 Von Freytag-Loringhoven to Jane Heap, “Jane Heap understand one thing.” 3.
The relation of the Baroness to Germany and its culture can also provide deeper insight into the New York Dada movement. Michael R. Taylor, in the recently published exhibition catalogue, *Dada: Zurich, Berlin, Hanover, Cologne, New York, Paris* (2005), explores the importance of German identity and the impact that the war had on New York Dada. He claims that even though the movement is most commonly linked to French culture through Picabia and Duchamp, many of its practitioners and patrons had a German heritage, including Morton Schamberg, the Stettheimer sisters, Walter Arensberg, and Katherine Drier.\(^{136}\) German identity connects New York Dada more to the German secessionist model that was centered around symbols and cryptology, instead of the French avant-garde groups which focused on optical abstractions.\(^{137}\) Taylor compares the New York Dada’s effort to resist the dominant culture’s patriotism and prejudice towards the German people to the German Dada artists’ similar resistance to their own government and its anti-British propaganda.\(^{138}\) But he also feels that the war permeated every aspect of the group. The war did dramatically affect most members of the New York Dada group who created artwork as a result of this, but as I have explained, the Baroness was really an exception. Although the wartime reaction towards German people certainly resulted in fewer jobs for them and perhaps the poverty of the Baroness, I do not think there is convincing evidence that her works in any specific way represented the political aspects of the war.

The Baroness’s assaults on American culture in the public realm of the streets may well have been read as an aggressive act of war. But these actions were part of the Dada ideology in which artists sought to awaken the public through shock and discomfort to the problems of culture and society. The Baroness embodied old Europe, dressed as an eccentric street beggar baroness and speaking in a thick German accent. Her personality, and her loud, imperial,

\(^{136}\) Taylor, 277-78.

\(^{137}\) Taylor, 278. Even Duchamp has been tied to German models of art because of his trips to Germany and Switzerland in 1912. He was intrigued by Swiss and German artists who were more interested in intellectual art and concepts rather than the retinal art favored in Paris (Taylor, 278).

\(^{138}\) Ibid.
intense, and confrontational demeanor, also would have been stereotyped as typically German.\footnote{Gammel, \textit{Baroness Elsa}, 172.} Her work, though often misunderstood, transmitted the spark of the German avant-garde which is so closely tied to the birth of Dada in the Cabaret Voltaire. The Baroness did not convey German style of Dada with its preoccupation with war; instead, she is uniquely separate from the Great War. The Baroness identified with the pre-World War I Germany, but instead of reacting to the war she addressed what she perceived as the failings of the American public and society.

The Baroness expressed her particular disgust with Joseph Stella and the America he idealized in one of her letters to Jane Heap:

\begin{quote}
The Americanism of Stella—the industry for vain results—\textit{the industry of vanity—}in Stella: conceit and money—a well known name brings comfort and Braggadoccio [sic]—he is vigorous businessman—by a queer twist (the twist of Democracy) brought out of his true track: poultry dealer—\textit{instrument maker}\footnote{Von Freytag-Loringhoven to Jane Heap, “Dear Heap—you would please me a heap,” \textit{pg}. 3.}
\end{quote}

In this disjointed segment of a letter the Baroness describes her dislike of businessmen and industry. This same sentiment is echoed in the opening quotes of this chapter because it contrasted with her romantic notions of nobility. In the same letter to Heap she goes on to explain that she cannot truly live in the United States because it is a “Spectre [sic] Performance.”\footnote{Von Freytag-Loringhoven to Jane Heap, “Dear Heap—you would please me a heap,” \textit{pg}. 3.} Here she is communicating that, to her, America’s culture is a mere conglomeration of European culture and American industry. To the Baroness this does not constitute a true “culture” but rather a façade of culture. The stress of living within a country that rejected her resulted in desperate pleas to her friends for funds to aid her escape. In another letter to Jane Heap, the Baroness stated, “I have no chance here none at all- I hate this country- I am nauseated to see the monstrous faces—send me to Paris.”\footnote{Baroness Elsa Von Freytag-Loringhoven to Jane Heap, “Since you made that appointment with me” personal correspondence on Hotel Hudson stationary, c.1918-1923, \textit{Little Review} (Chicago, IL). Records, 1914-1964. UWM Manuscript Collection 1, University Manuscripts Collection, Golda Meir Library, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.UW, \textit{pg}. 2.}
The Baroness is not like the other Dada artists who saw America as a refuge from war; she only came here to stay with a lover. Her constant state of poverty prevented any departure from the country. America was not completely a safe haven far from the horrors of war for the Baroness. She was an outsider who, through costume and performance, performed her otherness as a German immigrant, refusing to assimilate.
Conclusion

In the closing of the last chapter, I communicated the Baroness’s great desire to escape from her destitute life in America by departing to the Paris. The City of Light was a natural choice of destinations for her; many others from the New York artistic community had already moved there, including Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp, Berenice Abbott, Margaret Anderson, and Gabrielle Picabia.\(^\text{143}\) However, instead of Paris she ended up on a steamer ship to Germany on April 18, 1923, with only the necessary luggage and her small dog Pinkey.\(^\text{144}\)

After stepping off the ship, the Baroness would have been stunned, since Germany had changed greatly in the ten years of her absence. In January 1923, the Weimar Republic had failed to stop France and Belgium from invading Ruhr, which resulted in a massive economic and national crisis. After settling in Berlin, rather than Paris because of her poverty and lack of a visa, the Baroness suffered economic hardships far worse then she had in America, and was able to make only a meager living by selling newspapers.\(^\text{145}\) Her father’s disinheritance of her and subsequent death, combined with her realization that the Germany she knew was dead, led her now to attack her homeland with more anger than she had mustered towards America. In a letter to Berenice Abbott the Baroness expressed this new hatred of her home country. She exclaimed, “‘Germany’! Fi! I can not have much German blood in me—do I strike you as German?” Irene Gammel has pointed out that the Baroness then, in a complete turnaround, declared her identity as an American artist.\(^\text{146}\)

\(^{143}\) Gammel, Baroness Elsa, 302.
\(^{144}\) Gammel, Baroness Elsa, 311-312.
\(^{145}\) Gammel, Baroness Elsa, 321.
\(^{146}\) Ibid.
Despite her depression and economic hardship, the Baroness resumed her performance art in Germany briefly but not to the same degree she had in New York.\textsuperscript{147} By 1926 she had finally received her visa and arrived in Paris. There she reconnected with friends she had made in the United States and even opened a modeling school to teach the art of posing. The school, however, was short-lived and closed the same year it opened because it violated the restrictions on her travel visa. On December 14, 1927, two months after her modeling school was closed, the Baroness and her dog Pinkey died of gas asphyxiations in her apartment. It is not known whether the act was neglect or suicide, but a suicide letter was never found, and the Baroness does not seem like the kind of woman who would have taken her own life quietly.

Eight decades after the Baroness’s death, her poetry, assemblage sculpture, collage work, and costumes have only begun to be recognized. She has now been included prominently as a New York Dada artist in the recently published exhibition catalogue titled \textit{Dada: Zurich, Berlin, Hanover, Cologne, New York, Paris} (2005). But this new attention to her career from authors such as Naumann, Gammel, and Jones has neglected two areas of study in relation to her work: her connection to the formation of Dada and the performance aspect of her art work, the subject of this thesis.

The first chapter revealed how the Baroness’s work could have emerged as Dada in New York without contact with Dada artists. Her connections to Jugendstil, German Arts and Crafts (Kunstgewerber), German theater, Benjamin Franklin Wedekind, and even her mother’s private rebellion helped her develop goals similar to those of the Dada movement without gaining inspiration from its primary members. Her performance tactics, though unusual in the United States, were quite similar to those of the Dada artists of Berlin and Zurich. There artists

\textsuperscript{147} The one recorded performance of the Baroness while in Germany took place within the French consulate offices, when on the occasion of her fiftieth birthday she asked, once more, for a visa. To the amusement of the officials she was wearing a cake with fifty lit candles on her head. The performance was documented in a letter she wrote to Djuna Barnes and also Janet Flanner, \textit{Paris was Yesterday 1925-1939}, (New York: Viking Press, 1972), 39.
understood the radically disruptive effect of taking their performed art into the streets. The Baroness employed performance and costume in a Dadaist manner in an attempt to disrupt societal boundaries of class and nationality, as well as gender.

In the second chapter I explored the Baroness’s feminist critique within her performance art. Through comparing this work to Marcel Duchamp’s masquerade as Rrose Sélavy, I emphasized the major difference between their two forms of Dada. Duchamp, like other Dada artists, showed an interest in women and their new roles within modern society. His portrayal of the female is a mockery while the Baroness’s seems to be a didactic critique. The Baroness desired to reform the predetermined gender roles of her generation.

Lastly, in chapter three, I examined the role of the Baroness’s German identity by defining her role as an outsider critic. During the first half of the twentieth century, Germans faced prejudice in the United States. This psychological separation created a feeling of “otherness” for German immigrants like the Baroness. She used this separation in combination with her pride in her German identity as a means to critique what she perceived as shortcomings in American society and culture. It was her romanticizing of her homeland that led her to ridicule American industry and cultural borrowings through her costumes and performances. She wanted to show the American public its faults through her performed parodies.

These performances, which seem so contemporary to present-day readers, were far ahead of their time, and, as such, were not fully understood. Despite the Baroness’s obscurity for decades after her death it appears that her influence somehow survived. Irene Gammel has linked the Baroness’s performance work to the 1922 play, Antigone, directed by Jean Cocteau (1891-1963). Gammel feels that Cocteau, who worked with Man Ray on the production of this play, might have used the Baroness as an inspiration for the main character, Antigone, played by

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148 Gammel, Baroness Elsa, 300.
Genicia Athanasiou.\textsuperscript{149} Besides the lead character being a rebel against authorities, the actress playing this part was asked to shave her head and completely pluck her eyebrows, physical characteristics the Baroness used in her own performance.

The Baroness’s work also seems similar to that of the younger Claude Cahun (1894-1954). When she first arrived in France the Baroness stayed in a hotel only minutes from the residence of Cahun, a radical performance artist and photographer.\textsuperscript{150} Cahun would have at least heard of the Baroness through her friends Jane Heap and Georgette Leblanc.\textsuperscript{151} Although any connection between these artists would be speculation, it is striking that both used strange and grotesque means to critique societal gender roles. The issues that the Baroness explored in her work—dealing with gender roles, social roles, and economic classes—became incredibly important and respected concerns in other artists’ work after her death.

The Baroness’s oeuvre should not be viewed as a failure because of its temporary anonymity. Rather, her oeuvre contributed to a time when artists were exploring and reacting against the traditional understandings of social structures. Her work and the possible influences it had on other avant-garde artists in New York, especially other Dada artists, anticipated later contemporary movements. The Baroness, like Dada artists, broke completely from the object as art and used her own body as a means to express her critique of society and culture. Her performances signaled the later Happenings, Performance, and Body Art of the second half of the century. The feminist statements of her performances reflect the work of the feminist artists of the seventies. By returning the Baroness to the Dada canon and examining her performance art one gains a fuller understanding of Dada, especially the New York variant, and its links to contemporary movements.

\textsuperscript{149} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{150} Gammel, \textit{Baroness Elsa}, 366.
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