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Author

Czacki, Catherine

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The Baroness is All Hands

by Catherine Czacki

A needle driven into a tabletop.

A pen nib driven into a lemon rind.

A nail file driven into a box.

A safety pin driven into a piece of cardboard.

A nail driven into the wall, right above the floor.¹

The Baroness is all hands...

Methods of arranging matter and objects inherit the past of manipulating material things – the items might be stolen, found, and /or given. They are objects often tagged ‘unambitious’, yet persist in their material presence. Expounding upon themes both historical and narrative, aiming toward non-hierarchical language, hoping to reveal the fissures of historical discipline. This is the poetics of historical influence, the lineage one inherits, known or unknown, when they address matter with hands, and words with thought. The Baroness comes through, she always comes through, with her hands – hands touching the things, hands attached to her body. A body to which we no longer have access.

This female influence exists behind the closed doors of modernism, generally ignored or, misattributed; she is the antiquated, debased, dialectical opposition to the finish-fetish commodity. She is the basement, the plumbing.

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¹ Witold Gombrowicz, *Cosmos*, trans. Danuta Borchartd (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 79.



Closed doors / back rooms. Misattribution, historical blindness. Hers is not the shiny finished ready-made of male peers, but, rather, it is the antiquated, the trifle, the trash, the bauble, the 'eternal ornament.'

(It would really fuck with the ready-made to find a woman had invented it – at least had more of a hand in it – a hand obscured by the crushing weight of time... A shop-girl-type no less.)

The Baroness is all hands. It was said to me that she "probably never paid for a thing in her life" (Norman Bryson). I am inclined to believe this is true. She found her way through— situation by situation— by taking and arranging objects with her hands as she saw fit and as she pleased. Her impulse was pure impulse. I have a different orientation; I might be all hands, but I'm less body. Her body was constantly following her hands, making moves and being both host and absorber of things. I'm there after the party is over, dealing with the objects. She was the party with the objects as they were encountered.

Even her story is hard to pin, like her body. A question of attribution always arises: did she make the thing? Did she have the idea? Was she the inspiration? Or, was it he who orchestrated it all? It's probably more complicated than a 1-to-1 ratio of thought to thing, one person to another. There are many folds. Her influence / his influence. Her narrative leaps, just as she did, and captures moments at the core of issuing the truth. Was it really; is it really? By saying "you are doing it wrong" (Joanna Russ) – the authority, the brilliant polemicist, will always win. If you are wrong, then, by measure of reason they are right. The right is the one who can win the argument, the last to laugh, the last one standing – *on the right side of God, whichever God is currently being worshipped, be it abstract energy or money*. But she, she might win in other ways. She keeps being reborn. There are many insistent hers. Many misbehaving hers. Many hers who cackle on infinity, and keep playing with

the things they aren't supposed to touch. A complicated dialectic fight for supremacy sometimes ending in dominance of one side over the other.

In writing these very words, I reveal my disinterest in winning, my lack of polemical skill, my disinterest in the game being one of dominance. I only want the calmly walking through words, the porousness of them, the touch of them. I only want things to be simple and fair. I want ideas to be shapes that are thrown from one mind to another, molded, then thrown back to the initiating mind (Sarah Dziedzic).

She maybe died by foul play, just in the same way she maybe invented the ready-made. She also maybe killed herself, and was just a hoarder collecting junk. All options might be right, if you disagree with the singular truth.

There are trinkets and baubles, trash and waste – and there is high art. The line between the two polarities has been forever altered by the avant-garde. You can be a witch and a genius, a pauper and a baroness. Some remain relegated to the lower strata forever, some are elevated for a small period of time, or eternally (whatever eternally means to the human consciousness).

She is walking trash. She reminds everyone of what is in the gutter, but with a performative panache. She is not the street urchin begging for alms – she wears her garbage proudly, with dignity, with insistence. She keeps revealing the material that others would rather see disappear, or never see at all. She deals (like the witch) with the material in a way that is not acceptable – she wears it, she ossifies in it.

After the glory is over, after she dies of gas inhalation – what is left is the objects, the trash on pedestals in museums. She might have won, she might be laughing lastly at the deadness of her objects in the high castle of art.

In glass cases. Her "God" is behind glass and on a pedestal now, finally she is credited – but only partially. His name still must be there to authorize her arrangement. The objects are so strange behind glass. They were never meant to be behind glass. So what if they are stolen? Most were stolen in the first place.

In the archives of Marcel Duchamp, there is a *Red Herring*. The archivist is so excited by Elsa, that she wants to follow a path of free-association. With me as audience, she recalls the possibility of a clipping featuring the elusive Elsa. Large format boxes are pulled out of climate-controlled rooms. Many things emit the odor of the 1910s and 1920s, yet she isn't there. She escapes again, she is missing from the official history. Careers are made on the idea of singular genius, as is the case for Duchamp. Only he is allowed to own the readymade.² She is the back room of the readymade – her archaic objects, her trash objects. They are too referential of the past, of the vaudeville soul, or the things we wish to forget when we frame things on pedestals. She is too dirty, too poor, and too broken. Which is why it becomes even more comical that she acquires the "Baroness" title. She insists on her own importance, she laughs at what others think of her. Titles are given to people who fight wars, who marry or who are born in the right place at the right time. My own father was titled, though the money isn't there; he lost it by measure of his *otherness*. He lost it on both ends, because it was too much for one name in the first place, and because he couldn't prove descent from the right side. It was a title of marriage and a title of military worth, given to the foreigner so they would feel included, so they would fight the wars for those who live in castles. Djuna Barnes speaks of this in *Nightwood*; the Baron is empty, he hides behind the title, "passes" for something he is not. We think these things don't matter anymore, but they keep mattering. We are matter, and we like to make matter out of others. We set up boundaries, socially and physically, then become angry when others pass the boundaries we have set. We must have someone at the base to touch the things we like to hold once they have transcended their baseness and become reified, and we must position ourselves higher in relation to the others and the things.

² R.Mutt is still haunting, still debated – letters exist giving her credit – but no one wants to deflate the mystique of the originator – the genius.



The title in itself is an empty cipher. It only means that you can convince people of importance. They might think importance follows you like a perfume. *We can capture this air of importance in a title, it bottles it.* This is the act of naming, it gives notice – renders real, makes the thing what it is.

In the name of throwing shapes as an alternative discipline to authoritative polemical banter, I reference my influences, I see their complexity and their attempts, not as a means of supporting or refuting – but in order to throw shapes back at them to mold and continue throwing, or for others to catch and mold and throw down the line. Their desire to revisit, and write about a history that is largely foreclosed upon, a revelation of what continually seeps back in, the past that constitutes and frames the current. Silvia Federici explains the material manipulations that women engaged, how they were not supposed to touch things in the way they did, becoming labeled witches for their radical distaste for the hierarchy, their refusal to be owned.³ Witold Gombrowicz takes up this description of the material oddities constructed by a maid in his book *Cosmos*, a she who becomes labeled a witch.

A poor woman dealing with the objects of everyday in unusual ways, ways that cause discomfort to the family of the retired banker who runs the boarding house she cleans, these bizarre configurations are discovered in her cottage while she is not there. The witch frightens the patriarch. She might have birth control, she might not “produce” bodies to be used for capitalist means.⁴ Irene Gammel tracks the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, tracks her various modes of being and surviving – Elsa gets to places, escapes places. She does what she wants.⁵ She does not bear children. To dress like a man and shave one’s head

³ Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004).

⁴ Federici argues that witch hunts established the basis for capitalism, by subjecting women’s bodies to male power, destroying the knowledge they had prior of birth control and other forms of female specific medical treatment. Their bodies were needed to ‘produce’ labor, they were child-making machines.

⁵ Irene Gammel, *Baroness Elsa: Gender, Dada, and Everyday Modernity: A Cultural Biography* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).

is no longer an avant-garde move really, Elsa and Claude Cahoun won this battle. Though battles still persist on other grounds, culture still regards women's bodies as the surfaces on which to display things, the place to mount the desire of reproduction – yet reproductive rights are seldom palatable. We are desired, hunted, and haunted. Politics, property rights, health, equal pay. The cult of youth is most visible in the image of woman; hags and witches result if you don't keep up appearances, keep perpetual youth. Wearing less has also become accepted; when Elsa wore her tin cans she was arrested, but now Gaga can make money on this scheme. Moves forward and reversals; the escape of desire and the hunt or haunt continues.

Djuna never made it to her funeral: she got drunk with the other ladies and they all missed it.⁶ I could shave my head and play the drums again, but I've lost that desire. I'm too tired and quiet now. I want my rest. I could never afford more than one space at a time, I couldn't keep up with the percussive element. It required time, space with no leaking noise, and less than three jobs worked six days per week. That was my only ever desire, to "perform," to be a drummer. It felt safe behind all those surfaces, I could speak in aggressive hits and not in words. But, all those jobs stole the time. Hers was a cigarette factory, mine was a pornographic video store. It seemed easier to continue art, to continue to make things with trash in small scales, subtle arrangements. Sly gestures of contempt for the money I can't seem to make or keep. The art world hates a broke complainer. You must just consume the same gold leaf covered food objects as the rich, and thank them for giving you this luxury. But then you go home and cry while you shit gold, as you know it can't pay your health insurance or college debt, that you just are shitting something that has no nutritional value, and now can't even be recycled and sold.

⁶ Irene Gammel, *Baroness Elsa: Gender, Dada, and Everyday Modernity: A Cultural Biography* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).

It's been digested and divested. Shit is not "equivalent," it is base – and that's why Elsa liked to reference it.⁷

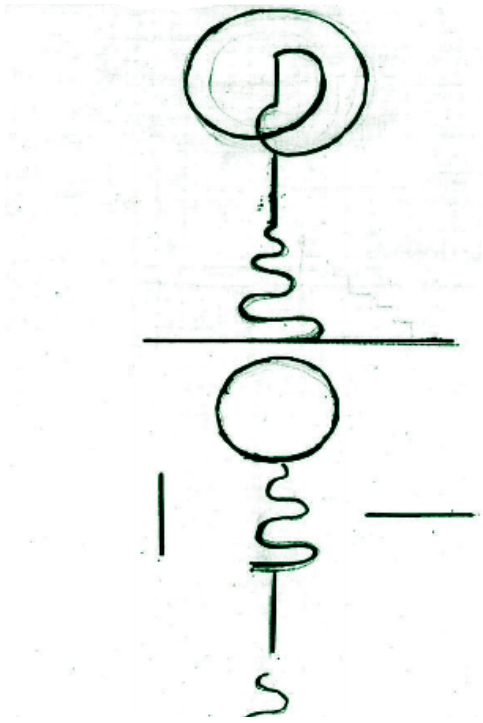
She found it funny. We try to hide it all the time, but, really, what we are denying and trying to hide is our material self, the reality of the frailty of our bodies and the incapability of our consciousness to last once the body has given in. And *she*, never tired of being a performer, of pushing the buttons of the men around her, of pushing people to see her – to notice her aging body, her proclivity for wearing and doing things considered inappropriate to normative behavior.

My body is all around me; I cannot escape it. I don't really wish to escape it – but it disagrees with me, it fights me, within or without it – the system prefers to pretend transcendence, to pretend that escape is possible.

The gestures of poverty and simplicity are hard to own with conviction if you can't bank it with historical hierarchy. Gestures by some that are seen as trash and trifles, are alternately gestures when deployed by others seen as moves positioned as anti-bourgeois, poetic, anti-hierarchical, post-colonial statements.

Ruining the mystery, giving it away, being pedantic. Only the master big M polemicist may use words, all others are being silly and childish, having play-time with the signs and symbols – 'it's not really serious'. *Is it ever.* Language is a system to tell stories, to engage metaphor, to have recursivity and hand memories and thoughts that are subjective to others – possibly inciting new thoughts in other minds or existing

⁷ See Georges Bataille's *The Accursed Share vol. I*, on base materialism and the societal configurations of gold and shit. See also George Baker *The Artwork Caught by the Tail: Francis Picabia and Dada in Paris*, on Dada's usage of objects and signs of 'general equivalence,' a term that Baker gleans from Jean-Joseph Goux's *Symbolic Economies: After Marx and Freud*.



more simply as a form to be pleurably absorbed. To use language is to use yet another tool in the human game of cultural production.

Her sexual, material body was in tune with the objects, there to be taken and used with occasional attempts at ownership. She was constantly being possessed and thrown away, accused of being low on the order of things. Her single weapon was her distaste for convention, *her ability to laugh at the idea of anyone "actually" possessing her. Like the objects she found appealing, the leftovers – the street trash, the stolen – she thwarted possession. In the spirit of Virginia Woolf – lacking ambition, being non-productive, unable to produce, unreasoning, unfocused.*⁸ These are the tactics that reveal – the problems of reason, the problems of progress, the problems of hierarchy.

† Catherine Czacki is an artist and PhD student in the Art History, Theory and Criticism program – with a Concentration in Art Practice, at the University of California, San Diego. Most recently Catherine was included in Sculpture Center's annual 'In Practice' exhibition, titled 'Under Foundations.'

⁸ Douglas Mao describes the anti-imperialistic/anti-productive stance of Virginia Woolf in "Solid Objects: Modernism and the Test of Production."

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Catherine Czacki, "page 333 of Baroness Elsa by Irene Gammel, containing Earring–Object," 1917-1919
Image courtesy of Catherine Czacki

Photograph pg. 65

Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven and Morton Schamberg, "God," 1917
Image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Photograph pg. 69

Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, "Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven Papers. Special Collections and University Archives, University of Maryland Libraries," 1913-1927
Image courtesy of the University of Maryland

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Address:

Haunt Journal of Art
Department of Art
Claire Trevor School of the Arts
University of California, Irvine
3229 Art Culture and Technology
Irvine, CA 92697-2775

Email:

hauntjournal@uci.edu

Website:

www.hauntjournal.org

http://escholarship.org/uc/uciart_hauntjournal

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