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## ..... The Baroness and Neurasthenic Art History

**Genius is nothing but an extravagant manifestation of the body.**

— Arthur Cravan, 1914

**Some people think the women are the cause of [artistic] modernism, whatever that is.**

— *New York Evening Sun*, 1917

I hear “New York” has gone mad about “Dada,” and that the most exotic and worthless review is being concocted by Man Ray and Duchamp. . . . What next! This is worse than The Baroness. By the way I like the way the discovery has suddenly been made that she has all along been, unconsciously, a Dadaist. I cannot figure out just what Dadaism is beyond an insane jumble of the four winds, the six senses, and plum pudding. But if the Baroness is to be a keystone for it,—then I think I can possibly know when it is coming and avoid it.

— Hart Crane, c. 1920

Paris has had *Dada* for five years, and we have had Else von Freytag-Loringhoven for quite two years. But great minds think alike and great natural truths force themselves into cognition at vastly separated spots. In Else von Freytag-Loringhoven Paris is mystically united [with] New York.

— John Rodker, 1920

**My mind is one rebellion. Permit me, oh permit me to rebel!**

— Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, c. 1925<sup>1</sup>

In a 1921 letter from Man Ray, New York artist, to Tristan Tzara, the Romanian poet who had spearheaded the spread of Dada to Paris, the “shit” of Dada being sent across the sea (“merdelamerdelamerdela . . .”) is illustrated by the naked body of German expatriate the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven (see fig. 1.1). Pubis shaved and arms cocked to flaunt her lean physique, the Baroness’s body itself forms the “A” of Man Ray’s “America!,” becoming—for Man Ray, for Tzara, and thus for European Dada—a sign of American Dada’s “merde” effect, a sign of the fact that “dada cannot live in New York,” because “All New York is dada, and will not tolerate a rival.” Man Ray thus sums up the paradox that is and was New York Dada—a retroactive label describing the work of a group of American and European artists practicing in New York in the years around World War I who often congregated in particular at the salon of Walter and Louise Arensberg, including, most famously, Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp, and Francis Picabia.<sup>2</sup>

Man Ray’s letter also indicates that, in spite of the tendency to telescope the history of New York Dada into this male triumvirate and their works (especially Duchamp’s readymades), there is a body, “traced by language and dissolved by ideas” as Michel Foucault would have it,<sup>3</sup> that both epitomized and, in its performative lived forms, radically disrupted the movement from inside and out. This body (and the subject that enlivens it)—the Baroness, a poet, autobiographer, artist, artist’s model, and self-performative cultural provocateur whom Berenice Abbott once evocatively

MER DELA MER DELA MER DELA MER DELA MER DELA MER DELA MER

de l'a



merique!

Cher Tzara - dada cannot live in New York.  
All New York is dada, and will not tolerate a  
rival, - will not notice dada. It is true  
that no efforts to make it public have been  
made, beyond the placing of your and our  
dadas in the bookshops, but there is no  
one here to work for it, and no money  
to be taken ~~in~~ for it, or donated to it. So  
dada in New York must remain a secret.

No additional sales have been made of  
the consignment you sent to "Société Anonyme".  
The "anonyme" itself does not sell anything.

1.1 Man Ray letter to Tristan Tzara, postmarked June 8, 1921, showing the Baroness (page 1 of 2 pages).  
Collection of the Bibliothèque Littéraire Jacques Doucet, Paris.

described as being “like Jesus Christ and Shakespeare all rolled into one”—motivates and disrupts as well this particular history of New York Dada.<sup>4</sup>

Man Ray was not the only contemporary who radicalized his representation of New York Dada (or the absence thereof) through the body of the Baroness. As Jane Heap (who, with partner Margaret Anderson, published the Baroness’s writings in their journal *The Little Review*) put it in 1922, the Baroness was “the first American dada,” adding, “she is the only one living anywhere who dresses dada, loves dada, lives dada.”<sup>5</sup> Georges Hugnet described her equally evocatively in his early 1930s account of the Baroness: “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.”<sup>6</sup> There was something unnerving, otherworldly, *irrational* about the Baroness, even in the context of the supposedly radical bohemian and avant-garde circles of the day. The Baroness lived, performed a kind of unhinged subjectivity that most of the other artists of her day only examined or illustrated in their work and that many, in spite of their aspirations to thwart bourgeois norms and define themselves as avant-garde, assiduously avoided.

We know the Baroness as a performative subject through several extant photographs of her (mostly by Man Ray), her own experimental autobiographical text and poems, and numerous anecdotal textual descriptions of her flamboyant self-display that exist in accounts of World War I-era [Greenwich Village](#). An exemplary instance of the latter is the reminiscence of Margaret Anderson, who wrote about the Baroness’s first visit to the offices of the *Little Review*:

She wore a red Scotch plaid suit with a kilt hanging just below the knees, a bolero jacket with sleeves to the elbows and arms covered with a quantity of ten-cent-store bracelets—silver, gilt, bronze, green and yellow. She wore high white spats with a band of decorative furniture braid around the top. Hanging from her bust were two tea-balls. . . . On her head was a black velvet tam o’ shanter with a feather and several spoons—long ice-cream-soda spoons. She had enormous earrings of tarnished silver and on her hands were many rings, on the little finger high peasant buttons filled with shot. Her hair was the colour of a bay horse.<sup>7</sup>

Clearly, for the Baroness, “the style [was] the woman.”<sup>8</sup> The Baroness used detritus she found on the street as well as items stolen from department stores to craft elaborate



costumes which she would then wear, complete with black lipstick, shaved head or brightly dyed hair, and other body adornments, to the legendary Greenwich Village balls or (notoriously, and surely far more noticeably) through the streets of New York. Even the daily newspapers carried stories of the Baroness's self-display, as in a 1915 *New York Times* story entitled "Refugee Baroness Poses as a Model," which described her as follows: "She is lithe in figure and as graceful as a leopard. Her hair is red and her eyes a turquoise blue. Her costumes are all her own, for she designs them and makes them. Perhaps some might call her bizarre in attire," and cites her melodramatic pronouncements: "I seek as best I may to give artistic expression, to show forth something of the thoughts within me. . . . Always was that soul hunger—always that raging protest within me against the conventional."<sup>9</sup> This incipient commercialization of the Baroness as an anecdotally rendered symbol of Greenwich Village bohemia aside, the Baroness was never fully or easily incorporated into the institutions of the period.<sup>10</sup>

A quintessential New Woman in her independence, though far more extreme in her demeanor and openly sexualized behavior, the Baroness (born Else Plötz) had run away from her middle-class German/Polish family when she was 18, fleeing what she called her stepmother's "bourgeois harness of respectability" to make her way as an actress, chorus girl, and artist in Berlin and then Munich; she looked for a rich lover to keep her "in style."<sup>11</sup> Numerous marriages and lovers later, a continent away from Europe, in New York City, the Baroness en-titled herself by marrying the German Baron von Freytag-Loringhoven (who shortly thereafter left to enlist in the German army and never returned).<sup>12</sup> She had settled in New York City in 1913 and lived there for 10 years, mingling with Greenwich Village bohemia and those artists now grouped under the rubric New York Dada.

In spite of their on-again, off-again difficulties with this dynamic personality, Margaret Anderson and her feminist literary colleagues Jane Heap and Djuna Barnes, as well as the young photographer Berenice Abbott, were extremely helpful and friendly to the Baroness, giving her emotional support, publishing her work (Anderson and Heap in the *Little Review*; Barnes was responsible for urging the Baroness to write her autobiographical narrative), and, at various points, giving financial assistance.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, the Baroness's erstwhile friend and ongoing object of desire, the poet William Carlos Williams, published a violently misogynistic account of his encounter with this epochal figure in the journal *Contact* in 1921. Williams's response exemplifies, in an extreme way, the tendency among the male avant-gardists to view the voraciously heterosexual Baroness with trepidation. Thus Williams describes her

as “a Bohemian” but also as a pathetic, desperate lover spewing “bloodygreen sensations” in a continuous “flux” of letters; he claims that she has an ancient body (re-marking on “her broken teeth, her syphilis” and calling her an “old lady,” though she was only in her mid forties) and a deep stench (“a reek stood out purple from her body”) that differentiate her from the “clean muslin souls of Yankeedom.” He describes her apartment in similar terms as “the most unspeakably filthy tenement in the city. Romantically, mystically dirty, of grimy walls, dark, gaslit halls and narrow stairs, it smelt of black waterclosets, one to a floor, with low gasflame always burning and torn newspapers trodden in the wet. Waves of stench thickened on each landing as one moved up . . . I saw them [her dogs] at it on her dirty bed.”<sup>14</sup>

Williams’s scatological characterization of the Baroness as a stinking flow seems intimately connected to Man Ray’s labeling of his missive with the punning “merdelamerdelamerde . . .”. Clearly, while the Baroness was a potent and active agent in New York’s cultural avant-garde (even personally terrifying and threatening to many associated with it, while her experimental poems and prose pieces provoked heated discussions),<sup>15</sup> she also functioned as a site of violent projections. She was thus a figure who pointed to the limits of avant-gardism as such.

Not only did the Baroness’s lived Dada perform this function; in her own published poems and prose pieces criticizing the life and work of Williams and Duchamp she made it clear what she thought their limitations were, for example characterizing Williams in her acerbic review of his *Kora in Hell* as “yoked by neurasthenia / poisoned by ‘loved ones’ [i.e., his bourgeois family in suburban New Jersey] / pestered by sex,” and noting, “W. C. attacks art—*when has time*.” From the Baroness’s point of view, Duchamp and Williams exemplified the tendency among male avant-gardists to make radical art in their free time, while living more or less bourgeois lives, driven by neurasthenic fears of the modern challenges to their coherence as male subjects.<sup>16</sup>

Elsewhere, in another text on the Baroness (with whom he seemed to be obsessed, in spite of himself), the married poet histrionically noted that she “tried to destroy me. That made no difference to me because she couldn’t, but the form it took was familiar. ‘Come with me and I will make a man of you.’ Yea, yea. . . . She was like Cortez coming to Montezuma and she wanted to do the same stupid thing he did. Destroy.”<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, then, Williams’s ruminations on the Baroness seem aimed at reestablishing his virile masculinity. In the *Contact* essay, he performs this through the transparently autobiographical figure of the essay’s potent, even godlike protagonist, “Evan Dionysius Evans,” who has definitively rejected the Baroness’s threatening charms and who makes her a symbol of a struggle between European encroach-

ments—via Dada—and American culture. Toward the end of his diatribe, Williams plaintively poses the question, “what in God’s name *does* Europe want of America . . . [?]”<sup>18</sup> What, indeed, does the highly sexed Baroness—a sign of ethnic, national, class, and sexual otherness (an androgynous German woman with an overtly voracious sexual appetite, dressed in urban detritus like a mentally ill “bag lady”)—*want* of the hounded avant-garde poet?

The Baroness, then, can be viewed (as she clearly was by many of the male members of the avant-garde) as embodying the cacophonous clash of races, sexes, sexualities, and classes of people that constituted the population of New York City in the World War I era and that accompanied the massive cultural shifts to which Dada responded and which it helped to promote. The Baroness, as constructed and reconstructed through accounts such as Man Ray’s, Williams’s, and Anderson’s, becomes not only a sign of New York Dada but a figure of the threat posed by these shifts to the normative—Euro-American, white, heterosexual, male—subjects of the modernist avant-garde, in spite of the vast variations among these subjects in their adherence to the codes of normative masculinity. Perhaps because of these variations, Williams’s misogynistic reaction contrasts sharply with the far more cool rejection of the Baroness by Duchamp, whose masculinity (at least in the context of World War I-era New York) was already ambiguous.

As David Joselit put it to me, Duchamp’s relationship to masculinity in his New York Dada period parallels the “Warren Beatty effect in *Shampoo*”—the less macho man adopting feminine attributes in order to seduce women.<sup>19</sup> Joselit’s formulation encourages me to emphasize here that, while stressing the “feminine” as that which compromises normative masculinity, I do not mean to imply that masculinity is fixed. Masculinity manifests itself in multiple, and mutable, ways, some of which (like Beatty’s character) are not at all typically “macho.” In this book, I stress feminization as a trope of a certain kind of compromised masculinity in order to stress the way in which gender categories were being shored up during this period—not incidentally, the period of their first acute erosion; and the way in which the polymorphous “gender fucking” of the Baroness (and of parallel characters such as Arthur Cravan) completely subverts such reiterations of traditional notions of gender.<sup>20</sup>

The Baroness, then, became a sign of the ruptures in the social (and gender) fabric during this highly charged period—of the uncontainable, violent, feminizing, debased and debasing effects of modernity, and in particular of industrial urbanism and its most violent extrusions, the trenches and advanced weaponry of the World War I battlefields, between roughly 1913 and 1923. These are precisely the years of



the Baroness's life in New York, but also the general period associated with the avant-gardism of New York Dada.

In this way, the Baroness—in Williams's charming words, a “dirty old bitch” with a deep stench and “bloodygreen sensations” flowing threateningly forth across the boundaries of respectable avant-garde behavior—figures what I am calling in this book *irrational modernism*. In her inimitably fluid and destabilizing way—queer in her disruption of both the gender and homo/heterosexual axes of sexual identity—she will thread her way through this book, just as she insinuated herself into the circles of artists and writers now associated with New York's World War I-era artistic avant-gardes (including New York Dada as well as the writers from Barnes to Ezra Pound and James Joyce connected to the *Little Review* and other experimental little magazines from the period). In so doing, she will serve to disrupt this art historical study of New York Dada, reenacting the very irrational effects that she so dramatically stood for at the time, performing the seedy and seamy underside of modernism that discourses of high art and architecture have labored to contain through their dominant models of rational practice.

Such an insertion of the Baroness will also allow me to insist upon the acknowledgment of the aspects of sexism and misogyny within this period's avant-gardes (and, in particular, New York Dada)—their lingering sexual conservatism (as is made clear by Williams's responses to her)—and upon a recognition in art history of the crucial importance of the contributions of avant-garde women in stimulating, promoting, and producing the ideas and aesthetic innovations associated with Dada. As Naomi Sawelson-Gorse puts it in her crucial revisionist anthology *Women in Dada*: “The paradoxical irony of Dada is slippage. This movement of absolute rebellion was also one of repression [and in it] . . . misogyny prevailed in a consistent way.”<sup>21</sup> While feminist scholars in literary studies have been laboring for many years to recuperate and revalue the work of individual women writers in the avant-garde literary movements (including, relevant to this study, writers from this period such as Mina Loy, Djuna Barnes, and, through the work of Irene Gammel, the Baroness herself as a writer), art history has been very slow to accommodate such a feminist impulse. In general, as the cultural historian Marisa Januzzi has noted, while studies of individual women writers and artists linked to Dada have emerged in recent years, “Dada as a movement has largely escaped such [feminist] reconsiderations, perhaps because of its limited, trap-laden usefulness for feminist practitioners.”<sup>22</sup>

Navigating around these traps, with a little help from the Baroness (well-versed in stepping between the cracks on the sidewalks of New York, as well as in negotiat-

ing the black holes of avant-gardism for its women practitioners), and following the lead of Sawelson-Gorse's *Women in Dada* as well as Gammel's groundbreaking feminist biography of the Baroness, I hope to sketch here a picture of New York Dada that suggests not only its limitations in response to social and gender shifts, but also its debt to radical feminist figures such as the Baroness. In so doing, I believe I will provide a new, different view of New York Dada that is more, not less, important and interesting for its acknowledgment of the group's contradictions—contradictions that, indeed, make it more relevant to the conflicted situation of late modernity (or postmodernity) in the early twenty-first century.

## DEFINITIONS

This book is by no means meant to be a comprehensive study of New York Dada, nor an apology for the use of this term, which I use merely as a shorthand to talk about an artistic phenomenon that was only retroactively, from the early 1920s, labeled as such by the popular press and, self-servingly, by the European Dada movement (Tzara's exchange with Man Ray is typical of the attempt to reinterpret the group in relation to European Dada movements, in which Tzara was a key player).<sup>23</sup> As noted, the book focuses primarily on the visual art practice associated with the group of artists working in the context of the Arensberg salon and, to some extent, Alfred Stieglitz's 291 Gallery and the related, eponymous publication (spearheaded by Paul Haviland, Agnes de Meyer, and Marius de Zayas),<sup>24</sup> as well as other related journals and institutions (such as the journals *The Blind Man* and *New York Dada*, and the organizations Society of Independent Artists, founded in 1916, and Société Anonyme, cofounded by Duchamp, Man Ray, and Katherine Dreier in 1920). The book often focuses even more narrowly on the work of the best-known representatives of the visual arts component of the New York Dada movement, the triumvirate Man Ray, Duchamp, and Picabia, counterposing their practice to the less codifiable self-display, literary self-constructions, and urban promenades of the Baroness.

While the interconnections among the various institutional and discursive sites of the European and New York avant-gardes should not be forgotten, many important and useful sources have already exhaustively traced them, and this book will not repeat such efforts.<sup>25</sup> It will, however, attempt to broaden and deepen the historical texture in which the New York Dada group's works are suspended and in relation to which they can be understood. To that end, the book will make reference to other

cultural figures linked at various times to the core New York Dada group (Jean Crotti, Katherine Dreier, Arthur Cravan, and others) and to related cultural expressions, including the visual artwork associated with purism and other contemporaneous movements (by artists such as Joseph Stella, Morton Schamberg, and others), films addressing modernity (such as Charlie Chaplin's brilliant 1936 spoof of industrial rationalism, *Modern Times*), and the literary avant-gardes that intermingled with the New York Dada artists (including Williams, the writers and editors associated with the *Little Review* and other little magazines, etc.), as well as to memoirs, novels, and poems from the period addressing the topics of war and urban modernity in general and World War I-era New York in particular.

I have attempted to steep myself in the culture of the period in order to get at least a slightly less fragmented sense of the texture of life during this period in New York, and to imagine more fully the spatial meanderings of the Baroness's body among the avant-garde salons and the streets of New York. The figure of the Baroness, who interferes in this narrative as an aggressive, peripatetic interloper whose fantastic sartorial displays and sexualized comportment ruffled the composure of the male avant-gardists at the time, also emerges now and again as the author of fantastic experimental poems and innovative objects made from found urban detritus—and thus not only as a performative irritant to the male avant-gardes, but as an important contributor to avant-garde culture in her own right. Through this focus, I hope to continue the rescue of the Baroness begun in earnest by Robert Reiss, Paul Hjartarson and Douglas O. Spettigue, Francis M. Naumann, and, in the recent biography, Irene Gammel—a rescue from the limiting framework of the partial anecdotes in Greenwich Village memoirs and contemporaneous newspaper accounts defining the Baroness as an object of voyeuristic fascination or derision during her life and after her untimely death in 1927.<sup>26</sup> But it will also be noted that the Baroness was not unique in her flamboyant self-performance (there were, for example, the numerous costume balls, drag balls, the political movement to free women's bodies through dramatic innovations in dress during the period, and the shared interest in constructing elaborate bodily adornments by avant-garde, "New Woman" colleagues such as Mina Loy).

In sum, I am interested here not simply in inserting the Baroness into the artistic canon of New York Dada—this, at any rate, has already been effectively done by scholars such as Naumann and Sawelson-Gorse.<sup>27</sup> I am interested, rather, in challenging the very rationalism of art history itself (its tendency to reduce complexity to simple genealogies of radicalism founded by male artists) by using the Baroness's disruptive, irrational example as a way of looking at the canonical works from a different, res-

olutely feminist point of view. In so doing I hope to begin to question the very notion of avant-gardism that has come out of the histories and theories surrounding this canon and, by extension, the very ways in which art histories of this movement and the avant-gardes in general have been written. By insisting on attending to the *lived* avant-gardism of the Baroness, I want to revise our current understanding of New York Dada as a group of visual objects and images whose meaning and political significance has remained more or less static over time and, thus, to interrogate our understanding of avant-gardism and even of art history and modernism themselves.

### **RATIONAL MODERNISM, RATIONAL POSTMODERNISM, AND THE READYMADES**

There are two basic modes of art history that have been brought to bear on New York Dada: the numerous texts historicizing the doings, publications, and artworks of the artists associated with the movement (such as the work of Dickran Tashjian and Naumann);<sup>28</sup> and the texts, often oriented toward the study of postmodernism, that use the movement as a grounding for their theories of avant-gardism or radical critique (the work of cultural theorist Peter Bürger, art critics and historians Benjamin Buchloh and Hal Foster, and many others) and which position New York Dada, and particularly Duchamp's readymades, as key origins for the institutional critique associated with the historical avant-gardes and later with progressive postmodernism.<sup>29</sup> It is this second understanding of New York Dada in which I want to intervene by over-identifying, as it were, with the Baroness, who (along with all the other women involved in the historical avant-gardes) is routinely left out of such larger pictures.

William Carlos Williams's anxiety-driven account of the Baroness makes clear that *flux*—in its tendency to overflow the bounds of rationalism—was highly threatening to modern masculinity, even, apparently, in its avant-garde guises. This threat had to be managed, psychically and discursively (as Williams's text indicates) as well as in material terms, through rationalizing social institutions that, as Michel Foucault's work persuasively and extensively argues, function to channel and regulate psychic anxieties. For example, as the brilliant feminist German cultural theorist Klaus Theweleit has argued, World War I (with its attendant schools, discourses, machines, and social institutions) functioned to reestablish the myth of virile masculinity in the face of the threat of unleashed feminine flows posed by industrialism and shifting gender roles.<sup>30</sup>

Strong links, if not a complete congruence, exist between industrial rationalization and the particular impulse toward rationalization among some of the most

influential modernist (or, in Bürger's terms, "historical") avant-gardes in their heroic period from just before World War I to around 1930.<sup>31</sup> Thus, even as the dominant industrial models of this period of the second industrial age—Taylorism and Fordism—focused obsessively on *controlling* the dangerous flows of labor and capital loosed by the new machine-age economies, avant-garde theorists such as Adolf Loos and Le Corbusier argued for a highly rationalized method of artistic or architectural production that would *contain* the irrational (ugly, dangerous, debased, kitsch, ornamental) flux of an explosively burgeoning mass culture.<sup>32</sup> Ironically, this tendency toward rationalism within the avant-garde itself has been reiterated by some of the major theorists of the historical avant-garde who, following Bürger's example, have reduced the complexity of these movements to the singular radical impulse of Duchamp's ready-mades.

As Terry Smith has noted in his useful analysis of Taylorism and Fordism, in these industrial systems (which, indeed, function on both psychic and material levels) labor is minutely divided and instrumentalized according to assembly line production of machine parts; the "precision of timing, or coordinated human/machine action" dominates factory production, and "all other relationships become subordinate to maintaining the Flow." Although the flow is maintained and even encouraged (as the necessary surplus that motors capitalism), the threat of its overflow—of the loss of control—is acute and must at all costs be avoided. The Taylorist/Fordist system is thus aimed primarily at manipulating and surveying labor and, particularly in Fordism (which involved the construction of gargantuan factories to implement the assembly line mode of production), at *shaping space* such that no excess flow can escape the system of production and consumption that benefits the factory owners.<sup>33</sup> All energy is focused toward the channeling of human labor into the most efficient, machinic production of parts and, ultimately, of machines that can be sold for a reasonable price but at a great profit. Taylorism and Fordism also function to rationalize *bodies*, which are virtually made into machines through repetitive labor. So much is made brilliantly clear in John Heartfield's critique of rationalization, his 1927 collage *Rationalization Marches / A Spectre Goes around Europe*, which constructs a figure out of fragments from machines and factories, striding (as a symbol of the march of socialized industry) across an urban, **industrial landscape** (see fig. 1.3).<sup>34</sup>

Linked intimately to this logic—not surprisingly, since Le Corbusier was an open supporter of Fordism—this modernist architect, painter, and theorist explored what he calls the "new world of space" of modernity precisely through an insistence that architecture, sculpture, and painting are "bound to the necessity of controlling



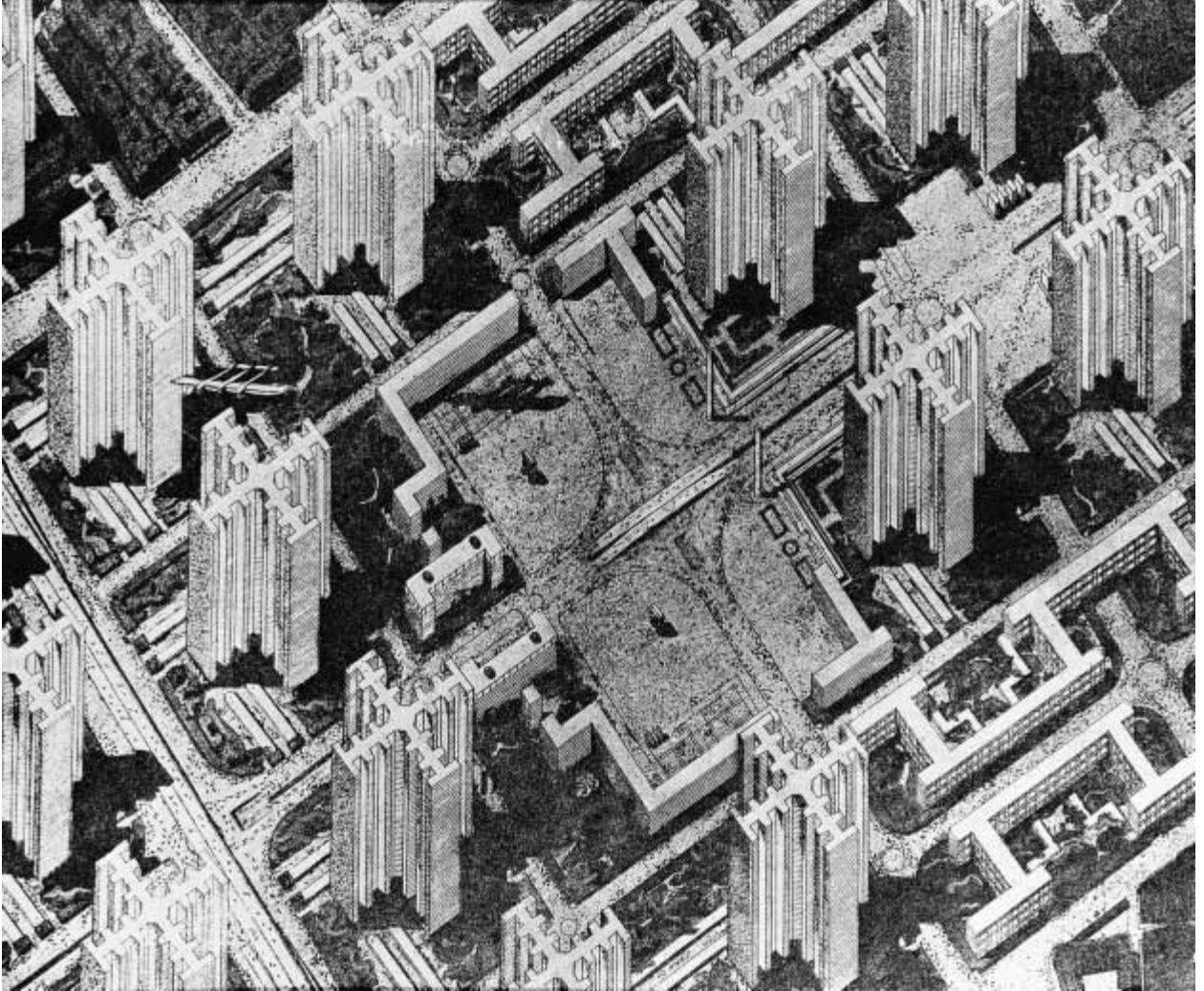
1.3 John Heartfield, *Rationalization Marches / A Spectre Goes around Europe*, c. 1927, collage; a manipulated version of this was published in *Der Knippel*, no. 2 (February 1927). Akademie der Künste, Berlin; © 2002 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

space.” A fully successful work, he argues, opens up the “boundless depth” of this new space, accomplishing “*the miracle of ineffable space*.”<sup>35</sup> Ironically, Le Corbusier’s claims for this transcendent quality of the new modern arts are articulated as a defense against the convulsing “birth pains of the machine age,” but not against machines (nor, clearly, against rationalization) per se. His core argument is that, in art and architecture, the work must “show an incessant desire to take possession of space”; and, finally, that all elements in the best work (exemplified, of course, by his own) “can be brought into proportion: dimensions, light, distances, colors, outlines, the mass of plastic constructions.”<sup>36</sup> Everything, then, in this “new world of space” can be brought under the *control* of the social engineer—apparently (given the aims of Fordism) this might be factory owner, architect, or artist. Le Corbusier’s compulsion to rationalize bore fruit in buildings and sketches such as his rigorously, even oppressively, geometric drawing of the ideal modern city from his 1925 essay “*The Street*” (see fig. 1.4).<sup>37</sup>

It is worth stressing that, while modernity can be usefully characterized by its dominant strains of rationalism—from the controlling discourses of theorists such as Le Corbusier and Loos (who infamously declared ornament to be a “crime”)<sup>38</sup> to its everyday corollaries in the Taylorized and Fordized bodies of industry and beyond—it was also continually disrupted by the very irrationality it labored to contain. As Charlie Chaplin’s magnificent spoof of Taylorist/Fordist industrialism in his 1936 film *Modern Times* makes clear (in particular the scene with the feeding machine, which goes out of whack and begins to beat Chaplin with its mechanical arm; see fig. 1.5), such rationalism, when taken to an extreme, inevitably extrudes its own grotesque irrationalities.<sup>39</sup>

In a sense, the conception of the avant-garde that continues to dominate (at least) Anglophone conceptions of radical practice—one that, loosely, assumes (as I will do here) “avant-gardism” to define those practices that in some way function to critique or effectively point to the contradictions within the structures of urban, capitalist, industrial modernity or postmodernity—specifically negotiates this rational/irrational divide.<sup>40</sup> Unfortunately, as we will see, such conceptions often close down the irrational side of modernity in order to make modernist sense of it, even as, at the end of Chaplin’s film, the narrative reaches closure by siphoning the hilarious, uncontrollable body language and behavior of Chaplin’s character into the straitjacket of a heterosexual marriage portrayed in the most banal fashion in its bourgeois aspirations (as Chaplin and his beloved Gamin make a “home” for themselves in a shack on the outskirts of the city).

As the case of Le Corbusier makes explicit, the aesthetic manages such “irrational impulses” just as efficiently as Ford’s factory system, or, ultimately, Chaplin’s



**1.4** Le Corbusier, drawing of the ideal city, from "The Street," 1925. From Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret, *Oeuvre complète de 1910–1929* (Zurich: Les Éditions d'architecture Erlenbach, 1948).





1.5 Charlie Chaplin, *Modern Times*, 1936; still of broken feeding machine molesting Chaplin.

film. Both systems—industrial, artistic—aim at containing flux (though, admittedly, often from opposite ends, with the artist “making sense” of it creatively, while the factory owner wants to rationalize it out of existence). The entire concept of art as a mode of channeling desires and impulses that are inappropriate to “civilization”—the basis of Sigmund Freud’s theory of sublimation—makes this much clear.<sup>41</sup> Fredric Jameson, following Freud’s model (which will be examined at greater length in chapters 3 and 4), confirms this rationalizing tendency in his claim that the aesthetic itself is “conceived as a kind of safety valve for irrational impulses.”<sup>42</sup>

While these managing systems inevitably produce their own excess and inefficiency, such excess is continually controlled and/or disavowed—not only by dominant modes of modernist practice (such as Le Corbusier’s rationalized model) but also by discourses of art history, which labor to make sense of the past by erasing or containing its confusing irrationalities. One could argue, as some already have,<sup>43</sup> that the discipline of art history and its corollary art criticism have functioned largely to manage away the irrational confusion of the past through rigid models of historical and aesthetic analysis that ultimately come down to individual genius (simplistic origins) and isolated aesthetic values and meanings (the artwork divorced from any of the messy vicissitudes attached to its production, dissemination, and interpretation).

While we can easily laugh with Chaplin at the limitations and contradictions of industrial rationalism (and certainly in the new era of global postindustrialism, as we grapple with more insidious and profound rationalizing forces, the shortcomings of Taylorism and Fordism seem more than obvious), it is apparently more difficult to confront the rationalizing impulses of the ways we think—in this case, of the logic of historical avant-gardism, its theories, and art history in general. In art history and beyond, we are far too attached to a simplistic notion of the avant-garde as a group of heroic (almost always white male) individuals fighting unequivocally against the evils of capitalism and the dumbed-down values of its mass bourgeois culture.

To acknowledge the complexities and contradictions of the attitudes and social interactions of the members of the historical avant-garde would be to undermine the belief in their simple heroics and to call into question the very framework through which their works have been canonized. It would be to challenge on the deepest levels our conception of what it meant not only to make and interpret culture during the World War I period but what it means to make and interpret culture (from works of art to historical texts) today. It would be to throw out the time-honored masculinist conception of art history as a patrilineal succession of male geniuses heroically battling the forces of industrial capitalism.<sup>44</sup> It would be to open the door to a fuller,

though inevitably less cohesive, understanding of the history of modernity and artistic modernism.

A particular example of the tendency to heroize male avant-gardists, as I have already begun to suggest, is the case of Duchamp and his readymades, which, largely because of the huge influence of Bürger's argument in his 1974 *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, have come to define for many the most radical impulse of the historical avant-gardes. Ironically, given Bürger's own insistence that all aesthetic theories must be understood to be highly contingent on the "period of their origin," and that the tools of historical avant-gardism wielded to critique institutions of art can no longer simply be applied to the same effect,<sup>45</sup> Bürger's definition of the historical avant-garde, extended by art historians and art critics from the 1970s to the present, has become absolutely central to dominant Anglophone understandings of avant-gardism.

In particular, Bürger's privileging of Duchamp's readymades as critiques of "art as an institution," via their undermining of the fundamental modernist idea of art as produced in a historical and political vacuum by the hand of a genius, has come to inform dominant conceptions of radical practice. The success of Bürger's argument carries with it an inherent contradiction. Bürger's model dominates discourses of contemporary art and particularly the notion of radical practice to such an extent that artists are heroized for, precisely, their supposed critique of art institutions (including the institutional category of the artist). The art museum thus celebrates (and markets) the artist as a genius *because* he critiques the institution: a situation epitomized by the mass marketing of Andy Warhol via the 2001–2002 retrospective of the artist as a countercultural genius, in a hagiographic exhibition that was (for its Los Angeles appearance) sponsored by Merrill-Lynch and taxpayer dollars from the city of Los Angeles.<sup>46</sup> As I have already explored at length in my book *Postmodernism and the En-Gendering of Marcel Duchamp*—although this phenomenon continues full force—Bürger's claim that "when Duchamp signs mass-produced objects . . . and sends them to art exhibits, he negates the category of individual production" is thus itself completely negated by the art- (turned mass-) marketing of artists such as Duchamp and, more recently, Warhol as geniuses of radical practice.<sup>47</sup>

Particularly in U.S.-based discussions of postmodernism, New York Dada, and specifically the readymades of Marcel Duchamp, have been situated as epitomizing the cultural critique of the radical historical avant-garde, and thus as origins for a radical postmodern practice in the visual arts. This model provided a historical explanation and grounding for the effusion of practices critical of high modernism in the 1960s and, more specifically, for the emergence of the postmodern appropriation art

that burst out of the confines of conceptualism in the late 1970s. Duchamp's readymades, then, have typically become an offhand reference in discussions of art practices as diverse as minimalism and feminist appropriation art—a point of origin for any work perceived as being motivated by an impulse to intervene in the capitalist structures of the art market through a recontextualization of mass-media or industrially produced images and objects. The rationalizing logic of the market, these arguments suggest, was thus to be overturned by the simple gesture of recontextualizing mass production as art. While acknowledging how useful they have been for theorizing postmodernism, I am insisting that these arguments themselves have had a rationalizing force in that they have telescoped the chaos of a dynamic cultural movement into a simple, understandable, unilaterally critical aesthetic gesture: and one originated by a single (white male) author.

In my earlier study on Duchamp I pointed to Hal Foster's influential model of the avant-garde, which synthesizes such arguments and epitomizes many of the features of this type of theory of avant-gardism and postmodernism. Foster has elaborated his argument in numerous places, including his 1986 essay "The Crux of Minimalism," where he produces a heroic lineage of artistic radicality from the readymades straight to 1960s minimalism.<sup>48</sup> For Foster, who draws explicitly on the idea of avant-gardism developed by Bürger, the model of artistic radicality for the minimalist artists originates with Duchamp's readymade and its ontological critique of the conditions of art making, display, marketing, and interpretation. For Foster the critique of the institutions of art initiated by the readymades originates a trajectory of "repressed modernism" diametrically opposed to the Manet-to-Picasso-to-Pollock lineage established by Clement Greenberg in his 1950s writings. Foster sees Duchamp's readymades (and implicitly Duchamp as their originator) as ultimately generating a radical *postmodern* practice that "was able to break up the order of late modernism."<sup>49</sup> (By "late modernism" he is gesturing to the fixities of Greenberg's formalist model.)

This dominant model of avant-gardism is predicated on the erasure of the subjectivity of the artist—the messy and potentially compromising aspects of her or his sexuality and other biographical vicissitudes—from the artistic encounter. (I want to stress that this erasure is a fantasy, one that inevitably fails as biographical and bodily details about the artist inevitably haunt every discussion of the work.) As Foster puts it, minimalism in particular functioned as a "critique of subjectivity . . . as the grounds . . . for the production . . . of art."<sup>50</sup> As Foster's formulation reveals, the "repressed modernism" he posits is, in one sense, highly conservative: it is explicitly

Cartesian in its emphasis on a desubjectified, conceptual (versus interested, embodied), *rational*, readymade-inspired, and inevitably masculine set of practices.

In another sense, however, the suppression of subjectivity was aligned with radical theoretical ideas, in particular post-1960 poststructuralist notions of “the death of the author” (per Roland Barthes’s famous 1970 essay).<sup>51</sup> The idea of the death of the author (the demise of the humanist notion of the centered, fully knowing subject who is the origin of his productions) was posed, and often functioned, as a radical corrective to mythified modernist notions of artistic genius as determining the meaning of the text or work of art. However, not only does this “corrective” have the potential to contradict itself (as I have noted, Foster epitomizes the tendency to reauthorize “geniuses” such as Duchamp), but it has also, as Anna Chave has pointed out, served within art discourse to facilitate an ultimately conservative, exclusionary model of what art is admitted into the canon and what is excluded.<sup>52</sup>

The feminist art movement, gaining momentum just as minimalism and other conceptually oriented movements were beginning to dominate the U.S. art scene, thus strategically refused such desubjectifying and potentially rationalizing approaches, insisting on reinjecting the “personal” into models for making and viewing art (motivated by the slogan “the personal is political”). As Chave points out, none of the work of women artists exploring minimal forms in the 1960s, such as Judy Chicago, Mary Corse, Lynda Benglis, Eva Hesse, Hannah Wilke, Simone Forti, Yvonne Rainer, and beyond, are included in the canonic “Duchampian” strand of avant-gardism, even though they were intimately involved in the lives of and innovations attributed to the male minimalists.<sup>53</sup> Thus, the ostensible erasure of subjectivity within art criticism and art history has been largely disingenuous. Foster is stuck with an oxymoronic codification of what he calls a “Duchampian ‘tradition’”:<sup>54</sup> Duchamp—via the readymades—becomes the heroic origin for a postmodernism that critiques origins (and that leaves out women, queers, irrational aspects of subjectivity and practice, etc.).

The Bürgerian model of the historical avant-garde has come to dominate Anglophone discussions about twentieth-century art to such a degree that ideas such as the Duchamp to minimalism or pop axis have become completely naturalized. There are times when it seems as if Duchamp, Warhol, and other privileged white male artists such as Robert Morris and Richard Serra worked in an intense historical vacuum untouched by femininity, women artists, and even (in the case of Warhol) his own blatantly self-performed queer subjectivity. Fundamentally, any aspect of the work connecting back to the *irrational* flows of modernity and its subjects—to

the messy, uncontainable aspects of the artist's subjectivity and, inevitably, of the viewer's/interpreter's (the artist's embarrassing nonmasculine gender, nonwhite racial identity, sexual excesses and/or irregularities, or any digression from the critique of capitalism proclaimed to be inherent to avant-gardism)—must be suppressed within this model. In this regard at least, such arguments do not differ in their ultimate ideological assumptions and effects from the rigorous controls of modernity and modernism in their most rationalizing moments.

### **IRRATIONAL MODERNISM: AN ALTERNATIVE AVANT-GARDE?**

To return to the provocative case of William Carlos Williams: the “Bohemian” Baroness not only threatened his sense of masculinity directly through her brazen attempts at seduction, but she destroyed the “ineffable” personal space (as Le Corbusier might say) that enabled Williams to retain his sense of self-containment and equanimity (as a family man but also as an avant-garde poet). In its full citation, Williams described the Baroness's olfactory effect as follows: “close up, a reek stood out purple from her body, separating her forever from the clean muslin souls of Yankeedom. It was that peculiar, pungent smell of dirt and sweat, strong of the armpit.”<sup>55</sup> Here Williams explicitly counterposes the clean, unstained and freshly laundered shirts (and sheets?) of rational, healthy, wholesome, mainstream American culture (as he fantasizes it) to the Baroness's old-world stench: she is disruptive and terrifying in terms of gender (a proactively heterosexual female artist with voracious sexual appetites, yet one who was queer in her excessiveness and bonding with lesbian friends), ethnicity (as a German, endowed with the very name of one of the best-known German generals during the World War I period, her father-in-law), as well as class (smelly, wandering the streets, and often overtly performing her abject poverty, notoriously refusing the personal refinements of the mostly bourgeois or upper-class members of the avant-garde). Her smell, more even than the sight of her strong, androgynous body, threatens the integrity of Williams's carefully maintained, new-world masculinity.<sup>56</sup>

With the help of this marvelous, pungent figure—“La Baronne,” as Williams calls her—this book will, I hope, offer a convincing counternarrative of how we might understand (both historically and theoretically) the practice of the avant-garde during this particular moment and at this particular place of cultural practice (New York from around 1913 to 1923). Drawing on and, as it were, reperforming the disorderly figure of the Baroness throughout this text, I hope to provide a model for

understanding (or, more to the point, performing, enacting, and/or allowing for the resurfacing of) *irrational modernism*—a model that provides a new way of thinking about the so-called historical avant-garde, but also (by implication) revises our current conception of radical artistic practice.

This irrational modernism should not be confused with the fetishizing appropriative attitude toward so-called primitive cultures (usually from sub-Saharan Africa) on the part of the European cubist and Dada movements.<sup>57</sup> Rather, as the above discussion makes clear, I am interested in the irrationality that *escapes* the appropriative logic that itself attempts to rationalize whatever confusing, invigorating, “exotic,” or complex otherness is perceived to be attached to such cultures. The artist who fetishizes a “primitive” culture does so in order simultaneously to borrow from its supposedly freeing cultural difference and to suppress the terrifying effects of such difference;<sup>58</sup> the Baroness, conversely, provides an opening into ethnic, sexual, and class otherness (albeit of a still European variety), pointing to the limits of the rationalizing strategies of a male-dominated avant-garde whose whiteness yearns to be ethnicity-free in its global dominance. It must be admitted up front, however, and even stressed, that the Baroness’s own anti-Semitism, evident in her autobiography and letters, compromises any easy conception of her as a figure who destabilizes all aspects of oppressive othering.<sup>59</sup>

It is also important to emphasize this author’s particular investment in the Baroness’s irrationality. The Baroness will be interpretively performed here through the eyes/mind/heart of a fellow neurasthenic: someone who acknowledges her own stench and confusion of boundaries in the researching and writing of this art history—but also someone clinically diagnosed with what I understand and experience as the twenty-first-century version of neurasthenia: panic disorder. Through such an interpretive performance, the Baroness as she appears here will reassert the confusing and unfixable vicissitudes of a particular performative artistic practice while pointing to the confusing and unfixable vicissitudes of the interpretive desire that reenacts her in a new historical narrative. In this way, I hope not only to come up with new ways of looking at New York Dada and historical avant-gardism (ones that result not from changing or challenging the “facts,” but rather from viewing them—and representing them—from a different angle), but also to argue for a revision of the very models through which we (historians or otherwise) continue to understand the past. Most importantly, the revised model I offer here embraces rather than shuns or suppresses the irrationality that oozes across the boundaries of any neatly formulated account of

these artists—of any account that would reduce their lived practice to the making (or, in the case of the readymades, appropriation) of objects and pictures.

Of course, I must admit that, in writing a book that will “take place,” as it were, between two (containing) covers, one cannot be entirely irrational. This book, then, will sustain the tension between rationality and irrationality, interrupting the seemingly “objective” passages of art historical argument with intermittent bursts of neurasthenic irrationality (admissions of my own overidentification, etc.). By the end, my identification with the Baroness will be so dramatic that the lines between “fact” and “fiction,” between art history and storytelling, between biography and autobiography, will be definitively blurred. The story will be embarrassingly personal—just like the Baroness herself—resubjectifying the dry, putatively “objective” narratives that comprise “proper” histories of art and culture. This is not posed simply as a “subjective” art history, then, but as one that attempts to expose the interestedness of all history writing—to expose the way in which all historical narrative takes shape through an intertwining among subjects.

A distinction needs to be made, then, between different degrees of rationality and irrationality. As a long-time, somewhat obsessive fan of the life work of Marcel Duchamp, I have no interest, for example, in dismissing the importance of the readymades or in labeling them as “rationalizing” in some simplistic way (although they have been put to rationalizing—desubjectifying—ends by Bürger’s followers).<sup>60</sup> While the Baroness will be reenacted here as a figure of dramatically useful irrationality, I will, in fact, suggest that the readymades and Duchamp’s machinic sexual diagrams (such as the epochal 1915–1923 *Large Glass*)<sup>61</sup> labor in their own way to negotiate the “mad rationality” of industrial capitalism such that, in effect, they verge on exposing, though they never fully embrace, irrationality.<sup>62</sup> When viewed in this way, these works become nicely freed from the onerous duty of acting as inspirational and even instrumental “origins” for postmodern appropriation art. They become elusive, and we are reminded that we can never, indeed, fully understand what or how they mean.

What I want to stress is that the readymades, when understood solely as critiques of the institutions of art, offer only one way of looking at both the potentialities of radical practice and the larger significance of the activities of the New York Dada movement (as well as of postmodernism, but that’s a topic for another book). And that this one way has become somewhat of a dead end, functioning (as it does) to exclude the messy, subjective, and disorderly practices identified in some way with irrationality,



often (as Williams's comments so usefully make clear) by proximity to the creative bodies of women, queers, colored, and/or otherwise "grotesque" subjects.<sup>63</sup>

As Mikhail Bakhtin argued in his important study of Rabelais, the grotesque subject destroys "dogma" and "authoritarianism"; Rabelaisian, carnivalesque images "are opposed to all that is finished and polished, to all pomposity, to every ready-made solution in the sphere of thought and world outlook."<sup>64</sup> "Grotesque," countercultural figures such as the Baroness thus extrude from (and deny the containing power of) the very kind of rationalism promoted by Le Corbusier (his system being, if nothing else, a "pompos" and "ready-made solution" proposed to control spatial relations). As Peter Stallybrass and Allon White put it in their wonderful study *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, in which they expand on Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque as disruption, the grotesque subject is the necessary "other" to bourgeois concepts of high culture (which I am linking to bourgeois rationalism): "The high/low opposition in each of our four symbolic domains—psychic forms, the human body, geographical space and the social order—is a fundamental basis to mechanisms of ordering and sense-making in European cultures. . . . Cultures 'think themselves' in the most immediate and affective ways through the combined symbolisms of these four hierarchies."<sup>65</sup> This book, in these terms, will strategically focus on the "low" part of these hierarchies (via the Baroness—the abjected, "grotesque" subject excluded from accounts of the avant-garde) in order to trace a revised history of a particular moment in art history.

Irrational, grotesque subjects are those whose expressions and desires are uncontainable not only in the logic of mainstream European cultures but also within the restrained and restraining logic of avant-gardism epitomized by the reactions of Williams but also as embedded in the exclusionary patrilineage established over the last forty years in relation to Duchamp. If the readymade became the model for minimalism, conceptualism, and postmodern appropriation art, with their apparent evacuation of artistic subjectivity, the Baroness's disorderly urban flânerie (as well as her radically experimental poetry, self-costuming, and kleptomaniacal approach to commodity capitalism) might be the very lens through which to understand another important strand of late capitalist culture relating to feminism, body art, and other less rational—and rationalizing—modes of contemporary art practice.<sup>66</sup> In fact, I would insist that the Baroness's current renewed visibility in New York cultural discourse (see for example the recent fashion spread in the *New York Times Magazine's* "Fashions of the Times" supplement, with a model posing in outlandish costumes and la-

beled as “channeling Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven”)<sup>67</sup> testifies, precisely, to this confluence of attitudes.

To my mind, then, the irrationality the Baroness unleashes is far closer to the complexities of contemporary culture than the reified view of the readymade that has developed out of Bürger’s theory (so close, in fact, that it can, unfortunately, be marketed and thus completely defused of its destabilizing effects by the *New York Times Magazine*). Nonetheless, with some attempt to restore the truly *gross* and excessive aspects of her life and work, as here, the Baroness might help us understand how the messy, personal, and subjective have—in waves, beginning at least with the rise of identity politics in art world discourse in the late 1960s—begun to reemerge with increasing force to challenge the repressive boundaries of this restrictive patrilineal model of art practice and art history.

The alternative view of New York Dada, and of historical avant-gardism in general, which the Baroness allows me to trace here makes much more sense in relation to the profoundly multiethnic, sexually and racially diverse art world (and panglobal visual culture) of the twenty-first century, a world that demands some acknowledgment of the contingent relations among diversely identified subjects. I propose an *immersive* historical understanding (which thus exposes the contingency of its own production, the embeddedness of its narratives in the historian’s own historical fabric) that parallels what I will argue to be this irrational, immersive trajectory of avant-gardism or radical practice embodied by and through the promenades of the Baroness in the streets of World War I-era New York. For it is through a neurasthenic, flâneurial *immersion* in the spaces of urban industrialism that the Baroness ultimately most profoundly challenges the rationalisms still embedded in most variants and narratives of historical avant-gardism.

## NEURASTHENIC ART HISTORY

There are at least two histories (which themselves splinter ad infinitum) at issue in this book, which moves from a more obvious level of history—more or less conventionally art historical—to an increasingly disintegrated narrative that overtly intertwines past and present. By the end of the book, it will be clear that the “obvious” history—like the less obvious one—has as much to do with the person telling it as with the “facts,” however those might be construed. On this level, then, this book is about *doing* art history as well as about this particular art history of a movement and

its works. I offer this account as an overtly neurasthenic art history—disorderly, irrational, and ultimately highly self-invested.<sup>68</sup>

Let me emphasize my conviction that any history we reconstruct of this period, and indeed our whole conception of radicality or avant-gardism, are deeply informed by our own experience: in my case (I was born in 1961) by the reenergized social activism of the 1960s and 1970s and the reinvigoration of critical theory with the rise of poststructuralism during and after that period. We can never view the World War I period as those who lived it did; those gestures of radicalism I privilege here must be understood in the light of my own experience of this later period of activism and cultural theory and my own thus-inflected ideas of culture and what constitutes political intervention.

In particular, as I have noted, my affinity with the time, place, and activities of the New York Dada group is personal as well as intellectual. As a sufferer of panic disorder, my *descriptions* of their neurasthenic responses are thus also openly admitted to be *projections*, empathetic attempts to inhabit, and also to identify with, their anxious, sometimes downright disorderly and antisocial behavior and creative expressions.<sup>69</sup> Anxiety is my mode of being. Sometimes, reading about Francis Picabia or the Baroness, two nervous (and nerve-wracking) characters who will figure heavily here, I feel attached to them by a hot, electrified wire of neurosis across the decades. Writing in early twenty-first-century Los Angeles (an environment said by theorists such as Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson to be the quintessential site for the stresses and shocks of postmodernity or, indeed, of posturbanism),<sup>70</sup> I hold within myself, I behold outside of myself (the two collapse in people with neurasthenic/panic dispositions), the various effects of postmodernity, of late/global capitalism. It is with this metaphor of wired (electrical) connectivity that I wish to enliven this study of a group of artists whose work negotiated—rather than definitively overturned, subverted, or resolved—the conflicts of industrial urban modernity.

I am interested, then, in neurasthenia not as a medical discourse of managing (rationalizing) excessive or socially unacceptable behaviors and thoughts, but in neurasthenia as a complex network of bodily/psychic symptoms that rupture the subject's smooth functioning, propelling her into a heightened state of irrationality. To be a neurasthenic, suffering generalized anxiety and fear which can become incapacitating as they escalate into hysteria or panic, is to experience every stimulus of one's surroundings acutely as an attack on one's emotional and corporeal integrity; under such an attack, the neurasthenic is suspended in a state of terror and dissociation as the fight-or-flight system begins randomly to misfire.<sup>71</sup> In theories of neurasthenia

from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the corporealized neurotic symptoms of the neurasthenic were seen as responses to the noise and crowds of urban modernity (as late nineteenth-century psychologist George Beard's work laboriously argued), to the horrors of trench warfare in World War I (per the writings of Sigmund Freud, Sándor Ferenczi, W. H. R. Rivers, E. E. Southard, and others), and even, as we will see in the case of Francis Picabia, to a self-imposed state of nervous exhaustion caused by excess socializing and drug and alcohol abuse (excesses that can themselves be viewed as attempts to process the shocks of industrial urban modernity).<sup>72</sup>

Neurasthenia has also been intimately connected to Dada by its practitioners. As Brigid Doherty points out in her rich study of German Dada, George Grosz's 1917 poem "Kaffeehaus," written shortly after his release from a military mental hospital where he had been committed to cure his shattered nerves after a brief stint in the army, includes the lines: "I am a machine whose pressure gauge has gone to pieces! / And all the cylinders run in a circle — / See: *we are all neurasthenics!*"<sup>73</sup> And Duchamp wrote in his notes, "See Nietzsche's eternal Return, neurasthenic / form of a / repetition in succession to infinity," linking neurasthenia to the repetitions of machine-age labor and logic.<sup>74</sup> Picabia was clinically diagnosed as a neurasthenic. But, Picabia and the Baroness aside, the New York Dada crowd was in general far less likely to expose any such weaknesses than the violently expressive Germans. To admit to experiencing neurasthenia (rather than disavowing it, attempting to sublimate it, or slinking away to Switzerland to heal it—all understandable, but perhaps less productive, responses to its horrors) is to embrace one's lack of cohesion, and the impossibility of knowing others (whether historically or in the present).

If anything, the primary point of this introduction, and this book as a whole, is that none of its major subjects—art, bodies, subjectivities—are superstructural to social or economic causes. All are, rather, modes of being and experiencing the world around us; they cause as much as they are caused by the roar of police helicopters outside my window that functions for me as an aural sign of urban (post)modernity (my husband hardly registers the noises that, to me, are shattering). The Baroness knew that much. She wore modernity and its violent effects in and as her body. This history, then, is my history in more ways than one. I write about this specific group of artists both because this earlier moment in my view speaks so directly about some of the origins of our present difficulties, and specifically because their writings, visual artworks, and other remaining ephemera—especially the urban wanderings of the Baroness—activate just the kind of irrational modernism that I feel speaks most urgently and relevantly to the present moment.

## SUMMARY OF CHAPTERS

All historians of New York Dada face the problem of dealing with a seemingly insurmountable mountain of archival and secondary materials, all of which convey a smothering mass (and sometimes mess) of fascinating anecdotes. Particularly in the case of the Baroness, what we know about her is cobbled together from fragmented and usually hyperbolic descriptions of her various corporeal performances, as well as (more recently) from her poems and rediscovered autobiography, which itself is a fragment (its narrative stops before she arrives in New York).<sup>75</sup> How do we construct a legitimate or convincing history when we only have a pile of disconnected anecdotes (anecdote being, as Djuna Barnes put it, “the skeleton of life”)?<sup>76</sup> How do we construct the history of a movement from what essentially amounts to gossip, including chatty and often facetious stories from the art as well as popular press venues of the period not only about the Baroness but about her (in)famous colleagues Man Ray, Duchamp, and Picabia; self-constructed narratives later published about the doings of the group (autobiographies and memoirs); little magazines relating to their gatherings and productions; their visual artworks; other archival letters and sources?

As Irit Rogoff has suggested, gossip—in its immediacy and connection to “subjectivity, voyeuristic pleasure and the communicative circularity of story-telling” (precisely all the qualities erased by the rationalizing kinds of art history I am hoping to counter here)—offers a juicy and “gender-specific variant” on Foucault’s notion of the disruptive potential of historical genealogy, which he articulated in his 1971 essay “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” as follows:

The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated Self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration. Genealogy . . . is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history’s destruction of the body. . . .

If interpretation were the slow exposure of the meaning hidden in an origin, then only metaphysics could interpret the development of humanity. But if interpretation is the violent or surreptitious appropriation of a system of rules, which in itself has no essential meaning, in order to impose a direction, to bend it to a new will, to force its participation in a new game, and to subject it to secondary rules, then the development of

humanity is a series of interpretations. The role of genealogy is to record its history.<sup>77</sup>

Anecdote, like gossip, is a particular kind of language that inscribes the bodies studied here. The task of this genealogy (as Foucault puts it) is to “expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history’s destruction of the body.” Once again, the Baroness—who is gossiped about and produces her own gossip-filled account of herself, but who also enacted “history’s destruction of the body” (as Williams’s comments made so clear)—provides an exemplary model for recapturing a particular genealogy of New York Dada.

So much, I hope, is already clear. Briefly, this genealogical tracing will pursue the following particular logic: the chapter after this one, entitled simply “War / Equivocal Masculinities,” will retrace the particular links between World War I and the New York Dada group. While the group’s more or less retroactive incorporation into the Dada cannon automatically links their anarchic practice to the highly politicized practice of the European Dadaists (such as Grosz) working in the shadow of the Great War, the group, perhaps in part because of their strategically chosen distance from the battlefields, has not been discussed at any length in relation to that profoundly shattering context.<sup>78</sup> This chapter will begin to redress that gap, but also to complicate the relationship between the male artists of the group and conventional conceptions of masculine subjectivity at the time—conceptions that were, naturally, linked to the heroic figure of the soldier-male. First and foremost, the chapter will argue that their escape from the war at the very least must be seen as complicating their relationship to the notion of “avant-gardism” (since “avant-garde” is a term of heroic proportions drawn, in the nineteenth century, from military parlance, serving to position the artist as a cultural soldier marching at the forefront of his society).

The following chapter, “Dysfunctional Machines / Dysfunctional Subjects,” takes a topic well known in New York Dada studies and begins to dissect it through a series of case studies, specific works drawn from the New York Dada canon and here rethought in relation to the irrational side of modernism noted above. The feminized and broken machines constructed by the Dadaists (almost exclusively, it must be noted, by the men) seem to be prototypes of Chaplin’s broken feeding machine in *Modern Times*: they leak, misfire, and otherwise waste crucial “virile” energies through their dysfunctional forms. While not as overtly or as passionately and disruptively as the Baroness, these machine images and objects thus (perhaps inadvertently) allow some seepage; the machinic forms which should function to regulate and channel the

flows of capital instead leak. This chapter itself begins to focus more extensively on the Baroness, in particular pointing to her writings on machine-age rationalism and to her objects fabricated from urban detritus. The Baroness's found plumbing sculpture (the twisted plumbing pipe mounted on a miter and labeled *God* in 1917), with its trembling, broken, mouthlike orifice, provides one example of an ironic dispersal of the regulatory boundaries claimed both by modernity (industrial capitalism) and by its artistic axis, modernism.

In the fourth chapter, "The City / Wandering, Neurasthenic Subjects," I increasingly overtly identify with—and project onto—the Baroness as a radical urban wanderer performing a fragmented narrative that itself is flâneurial (art history is thus revealed not only as neurasthenic but as a mode of historical wandering). By the end of this chapter, there will be no distance at all between my panicked relationship to postmodernity and the Baroness's neurasthenic desublimation of the terrifying, destabilizing social forces of the World War I period. Casting light on the particular fabric of New York City—its byways, physical and psychic structures (as recaptured through my own contemporary wanderings, historical photographs and textual accounts, as well as films documenting the streets of New York from this period)—the chapter will nonetheless also cast such a retroactive "knowledge" of the spaces of urban modernity into question. How much can we ever know about what it was like to wander the streets of World War I-era New York? I inhabit the Baroness, as much as this can be possible, in order to find out.

The book ends with a melancholic conclusion. In Walter Benjamin's study of nineteenth-century Paris and its arcades, wherein he accumulates and examines fragment upon fragment of the detritus (objects, city structures, anecdotes) that comprised life at that time, it becomes increasingly clear how impossible it will be ever fully to recapture the simultaneously glittering and dislocating effects of the era in a fully embodied way. And yet Benjamin valiantly kept trying to recuperate something believable of this past—such that he ends up giving us an equally glittering, fascinating genealogical tale of dreamworlds and subjects reeling from the shocks of modernity, a flâneurial, broken narrative exploring the fragmentary texture of, but not fully defining, the fabric of past lives and the spaces of their materialized wanderings. Honoring Benjamin's strategic failure fully to recapture the past, I end by relinquishing any claims to having provided another "true" history of New York Dada.

At the same time, I will hope to have revitalized some questions about New York Dada and its various complex contexts, so that this book will be a valuable contribution to the study of this moment in the history of artistic modernism. I offer a new

story, and one that I hope will be perceived as being as glittering as those that came before—but perhaps also, as Benjamin imagines possible for his own study, may be seen as dispelling some of the mystifying lure of the capitalist (and late capitalist) dreamworld. In this case, I am most interested in pointing to the lingering rationalism of theories and histories of the historical avant-garde and in general within art history, a discipline whose practitioners often continue to grasp at certainties (and origins) and thus fail to resist the lure of oversimplifying the historical understanding of the avant-garde. If the goal of Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk* is to awaken the dreaming collective with a “box on the ears,” then the goal of this book is to dispel the easy answers that are too often called upon to explain this particular moment of our collective past.<sup>79</sup>

Returning once again to Foucault, I would say that the Baroness, with her body understood as an “inscribed surface of events,” becomes a natural object of my interpretive desire but also the subject I hope to inhabit through art historical, interpretive identification; she is the lingering trace of the historical disruptions that made the World War I period so traumatic. I follow her, as she wanders, in order to understand more fully the conflicted history inscribed there. In following her lead, I will fully impose this new direction on the history of New York Dada in order to recover some of its irrationality. As Foucault tells us, genealogy, after all, “is history in the form of a concerted carnival.”<sup>80</sup>