'Don't forget that polemics always played a big part in Dada'

The signs of Dada and Surrealism's resurgence are manifold. Quirky, playful juxtapositions of incongruous elements fill many a contemporary gallery,2 A belief that an absurdist, irrational, anarchic spirit of Dadaist and Surrealist revolt can be conjured up as a potent form of resistance to the venal tendencies of administered culture, is one source for this infatuation. Meanwhile an all more predictable and professional reason lurks; some of this has the desiccated³ flavour of Ikea Dada and Surrealism - studied, polite, saleable drawing room madness for urbane sophisticates. Either way, historical Dada and Surrealism has found itself reassessed, revised and repackaged in numerous recent exhibitions (Undercover Surrealism at the Hayward Gallery, London being the most obvious), while the popularity of a litany of artists referencing, name checking and stealing from both movements is undeniable.

I'm not especially interested in the plurality of reasons for this rediscovered artistic fascination, more the manner in which artists and ideas, especially from Dada, have been institutionally and academically re-appraised. Specifically, how the anti-art impulse or the "desire for art to have an operation" (founding Dada poet and essayist Tristan Tzara's remark) has been managed or neutered. The contrasting aims of two recent projects to revise accepted ideas about the nature and legacy of New York Dada - Amelia Jones' book Irrational Modernism: A Neurasthenic History of New York Dada, and David Hopkins' publication and exhibition at Edinburgh's Fruitmarket Gallery Dada's Boys, are revealing in this respect. Both represent absorbing, subtly distinct reassessments of this era, offering cogent reasons for the period's ongoing influence within contemporary culture. The differing methodologies of the two projects are equally illuminating. Jones' combines exhaustive scholarly research with a 'hot', personal, subjective voice, which guiltlessly reveals its

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Amelia Jones

partisan connection with the subject – "sometimes reading about the Baroness [...] I feel attached to [her] by a hot, electrified wire of neurosis across the decades". Her intention in doing this is for the "lines between fact and fiction, between art history and storytelling, between biography and autobiography" to be blurred in such a way as to expose the interestedness of all history writing. This kind of passion and connection perhaps underpinned Hopkins' *Dada's Boys*, but his catalogue and exhibition was far cooler, more Duchampian in its suppression of subjectivity and its sublimation of heat.

Dada Woman

As noted, of the two, Jones' work is the lengthier, more evolved and scholarly,6 offering as it does a convincing revisionist, unashamedly feminist reappraisal of the neglected role of Dada provocateur Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven. Within the New York art world of European émigrés, sitting out the First World War in narcotic intoxication⁷ brought on by the psychological trauma of the war (hence her use of the early psychiatry term neurasthenia8a), the Baroness was, even by the standards of this most self-consciously arch-wild avant garde, excessive and eccentric. As Jones remarks, "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".9 The artist George Biddle's description of the Baroness gives a brief idea of how her revolt superficially manifested itself:

She stood before me quite naked – or nearly so. Over the nipples of her breasts were two tinned tomato cans, fastened with a green string around her back. Between the tomato cans hung a very small birdcage 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 Wanamakers. She removed her hat, which had been trimmed with carrots, beets, and other vegetables. Her hair was close cropped and dyed vermilion¹º.

As New York's premier kleptomaniac, part time poet, professional scavenger, unofficial performance artist, polemicist,11 sexual predator, lesbian icon and all round transgressor, this Teutonic force of nature cut a startlingly irregular shape within the modernist grid of New York City. Part of Jones' project is then to delineate how the Baroness' unbound, visceral embodiment of Dada ("She is the only one living anywhere who dresses dada, loves dada, lives dada."12) was a challenge to the avant garde men of the New York scene. As Jones highlights, the treatment she received at the hands of many male artists (the poet William Carlos Williams, whom she sexually intimidated, called her a "dirty old bitch") pointed to the gap between the rhetoric and reality - "She was thus a figure who pointed to the limitations of avant gardism." ¹³ Recounting an inability and resistance amongst some, though not all, of the Dada Boys¹⁴ to cope with the Baroness' sexual appetite and absence of "respectable avant garde behavior" 15, is then one counter-intuitive aspect of the book. As Jones recounts, the Baroness shamelessly "performed herself in dramatically unglued personifications [that] unhinged the European masculinity [of the New York Dada Boys club, revealing] men whose aesthetic radicality was often mitigated by their conservatism in the face

of actual gender or social excess." ¹⁶ The picture that emerges of New York Dada in the book is then one where the established secure identities of many leading Dadaists somewhat disintegrate. Characters such as Duchamp, Picabia, Man Ray and the poet William Carlos Williams, patently damaged by the psychological impact of the First World War, are revealed to be more complex, flawed 'avant gardists' than the popular mythology. There's certainly a sense of them being respectable bourgeois men playing at being transgressors. The Baroness' curt remark about William Carlos, "he only attacks art - when he has the time", and her complaints about the manner in which Duchamp "prostitutes himself" are astute in this context. No doubt Jones' exhaustive recounting of this 'gap' between the talk and the action, and the numerous revelations of misogyny, will resonant for some contemporary women artists similarly surrounded by professional 'bad boys'.

The other more pointed aspect is a critique of art historical institutions and their similar inability and resistance to locating the Baroness within the canon of Dada. Along with Arthur Craven - another figure who until recently was critically marginalised – the Baroness has largely been historically invisible because of an inability to successfully classify her. While her gender was the primary reason for this 'oversight', an important dimension of her neglect, like Craven's, was her relative 'failure' to produce autonomous art objects. ¹⁷ As noted she "lived avant gardism", embodying and personifying Dada 'revolt' through her actions and on her body. Her eccentric street attire of scavenged junk, stolen trinkets and vermilion scalp, was as potent a 'popular' act of cultural and social insurrection as the pantomime of a Dada ball.

Within art movements exclusively concerned with the production of autonomous objects it's common to find figures who spark aesthetic insurrections, but who themselves fail to realize the potential of their iconic rupturing of practice, ultimately becoming mere footnotes in history. Indeed, David Hopkins in his otherwise excellent 'A Very Short Introduction to Dada and Surrealism', frames his mention of the Baroness precisely within these terms (she gets a paragraph and one further brief mention). In his book Hopkins describes her, instructively, as a Dada mascot, whose artworks (classified and understood solely as objects) were relatively minor. Marginalisation of these iconoclasts or mascots, who could be credited with embodying a spirit or operating as a 'muse' is common within more conventional, aesthetic, 'formal' movements is perhaps 'acceptable'. However within the context of Dada, a movement rhetorically concerned with anti-art, where testing the ontological securities of cultural, social, sexual categories and borders was everything, it's a substantial historical flaw. In this movement all actions, ephemeral or permanent, official or unofficial, art or non-art are as essential as historical 'matter'. The Baroness, like Arthur Craven, may have been an insubstantial or minor contribution to Dada objects, but as instigators of a revolution of the mind and body, they were as effective as many. Such an historical and institutional sleight of hand which demotes this kind of 'influence' to the margins, by virtue of the difficulties of picturing it within the gallery or museum (a challenge which should perhaps be faced rather than conveniently ignored), is as problematic with Dada as it has been with the

repackaging and managing of conceptualism - another rupture that sought to give art and

Jones' book is then a timely focus on a figure who in her actions offers a much needed corrective to the lop-sided representation of the history of Dada. All too often Dada and Surrealism returns as a skeletal disembodiment: something the recent Undercover Surrealism show was guilty of in its rather too desiccated presentation of Bataille and his followers. An inability to bring back to life the more vulgar, excessive, irrational, anti-aesthetic moments in Dada is then firstly a misrepresentation of history. After all, the importance of figures like Craven and the Baroness on the Dada 'scene' was well documented at the time. As Hans Richter noted, "Craven was greatly admired, because he succeeded in tearing Bourgeois existence apart at the seams. He carried out to the letter all the deeds of anarchy he promised in his writings."18 Jones' reprinting of a hilarious extract from the Baroness' diary, detailing her inability to hold in a fart while attempting to seduce a young man and the frosty response her flatulence receives, strangely says as much about the 'air' of rebellion in New York Dada as any readymade.

Consequently, treating the performances, actions and opinions of an historical figure as culturally significant as the 'left-behind' artifacts is important. Jones' book is then in its concentration on the Baroness, a principled commitment to not siding with one of the winners of art history. She makes this explicit in an edited version of her text, reprinted in the recent 'Dada Seminars' publication:

There's a tendency in art history to privilege the cultural victors and those artists whose reputation has already been solidified or whose work in one way or another serves the purposes of the discourse that comprise the discipline and its institutional support structures.19

The obvious example of the victor in the story of New York Dada is Duchamp. Despite being a self confessed 'fan' of Duchamp, Jones' book unavoidably questions, both implicitly and explicitly the mythology and centrality of Duchamp and co. in the official story of Dada. As such, it is a timely and welcome puncturing of the sacred cult of Marcel - especially as an unquestioning acceptance of Duchamp's 'genius' and 'radicalism' has become rather too entrenched and academic.²⁰ There is something patently absurd in the institutional and critical lionizing of Duchamp as the arch-strategist who debunked institutional authorial power - as Jones calls it, the "oxymoronic codification [of] the Duchampian 'tradition'." Increasingly in Jones' narrative the picture of Duchamp that emerges, while suitably intriguing, does highlight how it's perhaps more useful to think of him as representing what Hans Richter called a "sublime compromise" as opposed to 'successful' subversion. While not believing that the Baroness represents some romantic outsider example of 'liberation' (she died in abject poverty, alone and forgotten), such a reading does muddy the waters regarding Duchamp's centrality in the story of Dada and by extension art history. Perhaps as T.J. Clark remarked, "Duchamp is the figure of what our century has allowed in the way of radical critique."22 The emphasis on 'allowed' is obviously significant.

Irrational Modernism, is then, a timely reassessment of this entrenched approach to Dada and attending ideas about the nature of the avantgarde. As Jones' writes:

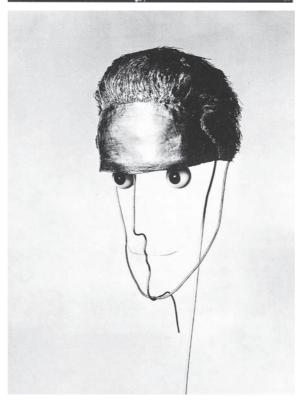
In art history we are far too attached to a simplistic notion of the avant garde as a group of heroic (almost always white male) individuals fighting unequivocally against the evils of capitalism and the dumbed down values of its mass bourgeois culture.

The book does an excellent job of revealing how historical denial of inconvenient figures like the Baroness in the history of Dada has resulted in this streamlined mono-history. Contrary to such a methodology, Jones' argument

for a model that is equally critical, but that functions by returning the skull to life – giving it flesh - through the very identificatory processes that art history has long labored to suppress in order to sustain its illusion of objectivity. 23









succeeds in bringing history into close proximity as well as challenging the (fictional) coherence of much art historical writing on the period. Just as she highlights how the Baroness represented an irrational, bodily subjectivity that polluted stable categories, so Jones similarly offers an infestation of the 'neutral' position of the professional art historian. Dispensing with the fiction of objectivity she aims

to promote a kind of neurasthenic art history - one that acknowledges rather than suppresses the confusing projections and identifications through which we art historians give meaning to works of art, movements, and the artists who make and sustain them both.²⁴

Dada's Boys

Curated by art historian David Hopkins, Dada's Boys was an intelligent and timely exhibition which, as with Jones' book, aimed to take as its original focus the fecund world of New York Dada. However, while Jones' subject was the protofeminist provocateur the Baroness, Hopkins' exhibition and book was concerned with evoking "Dada's [...] paternalistic role for a lineage of predominantly male artists concerned with developing themes of male identity."

Hopkins' shift of attention towards the reverberations of Dada's interrogation of masculinity appeared to be an astute curatorial means of avoiding the difficulties of trying to represent and re-animate the stereotypical mythic notion of Dada. Those expecting to be assaulted by a Dada riot would have been disappointed; Dada's Boys functioned as a soberly constructed, formally balanced exhibition and an accessible, engaging catalogue and text. However, the extent to which the air of sobriety in the Fruitmarket Gallery was maintained was a point of contention.

On one level, the switch of interpretation towards Dada's picturing of a poetics of masculinity, and its echoes in contemporary practice, was a judicious act of Dada revisionism that corrected an evident lag between curatorial and institutional analysis and artistic practice. As was borne out by the show, numerous artists in the last thirty years have acknowledged a debt to Dada's examination of the exploded "hole at the center of masculinity."²⁵ While some critics have picked up on the continuing influence of Dada, few have offered as comprehensive an overview as Dada's Boys. Uncovering this hidden tradition, Hopkins' aim then was to counter the standard readings of key artists such as Jeff Koons, Martin Kippenberger and Paul McCarthy.

Alongside this desire to correct an art historical blind spot, Dada's Boys, as the catalogue revealed, was also driven by a sense of underlying frustration on Hopkins' part with a perceived absence of a broader critical examination of heterosexual male identity. However Hopkins, unlike Jones, was more typically 'masculine' in not acknowledging his personal investment and motivation for this project. A perhaps well grounded fear that it would jeopardise his credentials as a 'professional' art historian prompted his relative invisibility in the text. This resistance to 'voicing' his involvement was slightly amusing considering the topic.

In his catalogue essay Hopkins remarked that "the literature on heterosexual masculinity is formidably large, but frustratingly repetitive."26 Part of his argument was that the arena of male subjectivity has been somewhat colonized by psychological, queer and feminist theory. For Hopkins, the need for a contemporary reassessment of Dada and its historical reverberations resides in precisely how it offers a corrective to the absence in theoretical texts of heterosexual masculinity; of any substantive discussion of how masculinity is lived and experienced on a daily basis. Discussing the dominant theories of masculinity, he noted a lack of understanding of "patterns of friendship, the dynamics of group identification and loyalty, structures of humour and self reflexivity",2 which has resulted in the standard assessment being somewhat superficial (though he is slightly vague about who he means in this context). Consequently for Hopkins, the tendency towards deconstructing and dissecting the heterosexual male through feminist and queer lenses has reduced him to a state of self-abnegation. As a result there has been a notable failure to grapple with the complexities of heterosexual masculinity, especially those darker more uncomfortable areas of what Homi Bhabha called masculinity's "prosthetic reality". There was then, within this art historical illumination of a largely ignored facet of Dada, also a programmatic attempt to inject some self-confidence to the beleaguered male.

Top: Portrait by Man Ray of Duchamp transformed through shaving cream. Middle: Jean Crotti "Portrait of Marcel Duchamp" 1915 photograph of work now lost. Bottom: Photograph by Man Ray: 'Marcel Duchamp as Rrose Sélavy'.

The Sublime Compromise

Because he is so frightfully cold. You see all his heat flows into his art.2

On entering the Fruitmarket space, Duchamp, the fount of Hopkins' theses, was represented by familiar images as 'Rrose Sélavy', and a more surprising photograph by Man Ray of Duchamp covered in shaving foam. Nearby, Picabia's schematic parodies of mechanized femininity sat vitrine-entombed next to his heretical bodily spurt of 'La Sainte Vierge'. For Hopkins, both artists bonded through their contempt for the dominant male stereotypes of the time (the stereotypes who were being slaughtered in the trenches, while they drank cocktails in Manhattan), as well a more anxious sense of their own passive, feminized self. Experiencing gender vertigo, they embraced a fluid sense of self and used an adolescent form of humour to bullishly protect themselves. The aim for Hopkins the curator was to illuminate how their complex, paradoxical grasp of the 'troubled' self has been mirrored in more recent work.

The selection of international artists following in Duchamp's and Picabia's tracks, in this Scottish context, represented something of a welcome coup, but was still slightly hampered by precisely the kind of fondness for the 'victors' that Jones had remarked upon.²⁹ The presence of Matthew Barney was perhaps the most obvious example of this tendency. Canonised on the international art circuit, with Cremaster globally colonising every space the Guggenheim can muscle in on, his appearance was unnecessary. It also offered a reminder of how the kind of programmatic surrealism favoured by Breton (for that is surely what Barney's work really retails as) emptied the anti-art out of Dada.

This aside, Hopkins' interest in Dada's neglected examination of the "poetics of masculinity" seemed to result in a certain partitioning or removal of an integral aspect of the ethos of the Dada Boys. In concentrating on illuminating the poetics he neglected the antiart polemics, as well as shying away from the more confrontational and ambiguous aspects of heterosexual male identity. In the catalogue essay Hopkins referred to the Boys as an "unruly group of male artists who have little truck with the conformism of Mammy's boys", 30 and who delve into the murkier areas of male subjectivity. Unfortunately the signs of this weren't always there, instead there was a sense of bringing the Dada Boys into proportion. This was odd, as Dada, and many of the artists following in the bastardised parental lineage, often deliberately failed or were strategically incompetent in 'properly' sublimating irrational desires into art and culture. Letting irrational desires out, letting the work slip and slide and operate in flux was a recurring aspect of Dada and its followers. Nowhere is this clearer than in the base, excessive work Paul McCarthy has produced for the last thirty years. In this context McCarthy could have delivered a more excessive performance the "hole at the centre of masculinity", but the chosen exhibition work ('Cultural Soup') was an atypical, minor piece, far more in the intellectually respectable mould of Mike Kelley and his sociological uncovering of power.

This absence of precisely the kind of evidence of the irrational, unclassifiable, and visceral body embodied by the Baroness was significant. As it was, there was a nagging sense of aesthetic propriety, somewhat out of keeping with the subject and the catalogue's claims (as noted, on the whole the signs of aesthetic transgression, of snubbing decorum, were mild). I'm not arguing here for a raucous, tokenistic, cacophony of 'noise', the now conventional, superficial, formal signs of white cube rebranding, rather evidence of a



more substantive rethinking of the cognitive and aesthetic base of artistic communication. While Keith Farqhuar's installation and painting did at least reference the Dada tendency to tartly bite the hand that feeds, the exhibition as a whole was largely devoid of this kind of questioning of the aesthetics of gallery spectatorship, and the unraveling of the category 'artist' that was central to Dada.

There was a real opportunity to reveal this with the inclusion of Jeff Koons. Koons is admittedly one of the 'victors' in recent art history, but I'm inclined to argue the grounds for his 'victory' are erroneous. Unfortunately the choice of one of Koons' basketballs squarely and safely placed him in the "oxymoronic Duchampian tradition" of producing readymade sculptures that are institutionally lauded as exposing institutions' power to confer value. Contrary to this, it could be argued that Koons' more substantial, 'troubling' challenge to the authority of art institutions lay not with the Duchamp influenced, respectable ready-mades,³¹ but the overtly sexualized sculptures, performances and photographs he lovingly produced (partly with Cicolina - a reincarnated Baroness?) and exhibited in the late 1980s and early '90s.

Koons is perhaps one artist who, at least then, walked in the tracks of his Dada precursors albeit in a perverse tangential, pseudo evangelical manner. The work he produced between 1988-1992 definitively infected the sphere of art with illegitimate 'responses' (affection for trash, seduction), tested its ontological boundaries, and troubled the foundations of gallery spectatorship. This assault on the dominant aesthetics of art consumption went alongside, as Hopkins rightly discusses, an overlooked complex, ambiguous grasp of the intersections of class, sexuality and gender that deserves greater critical attention. However these were not distinct aspects of his practice; form and content were intimately linked.

Increasingly, however, the reading of Koons, as with the Dadaists, has focused on the formal category status of his objects (trinkets from the world of low-end consumerism). I'd argue that what was really subversive about his work was not the tired 'trafficking' of exotic objects into art (a standard ruse to liven up the 'academy' with some 'rough'), but his transportation of cognitive forms of attention from outside art (his love for these objects being the most pronounced subversion of critical distance). In this way he questioned the ontological securities of art consumption and spectatorship just as the Dadaists had some 70 years before. One of Jones' remarks regarding the Baroness and Duchamp seems applicable in this context:

I argue that these artists' confusion of gender and overt sexualisations of the artist/viewer relationship challenged post-Enlightenment subjectivity and aesthetics far more pointedly than did Dadaist paintings and drawings, which only partially addressed the divisions that privileged art as separate from life.32

Footnotes

- Recounted in Richter's book (Dada: Art and Anti-Art, Thames and Hudson, 1978, p.7) when he visits Tristan Tzara – it's Tzara's parting shot.
- 2 Too numerous to mention, but especially hot in Scotland wander into anyone of the Glasgow's contemporary galleries right now and you're likely to find outsized mundane objects, heads with chair legs
- 3 I am indebted to Graham Ramsay for informing me of the writer Robert Garnet's liberal use of this word in relation to some members of the art community.
- Jones, A, Irrational Modernism: A Neurasthenic History of New York Dada (MIT Press 2004) p. 28.
- Ibid. p. 25
- I think this is mainly due to the differing nature of the two publications, as opposed to any failing on Hopkins part. His book and exhibition is obviously aimed at a pseudo-populist gallery clientele, while Jones' book is squarely aimed at the university.
- Iones' book features a fantastic photography of Duchamp, not looking his 'normal' composed self, but resolutely 'bombed', slumped in a bathroom overtaken by booze and chemicals
- Neurasthenia described a collection of psychological and physical symptoms including chronic fatigue. Initially associated with the stresses of urbanization on the intellectual class, it was an increasingly common War diagnosis
- 9 Jones, A, Irrational Modernism, p. 5
- 11 Her polemics could often be anti-Semitic, something Jones doesn't dodge.
- 12 John Rodker's remark in the Little Review quoted in Naumann, F. M. New York Dada 1915-23 (Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Jan 1998), p. 168.
- 13 Jones, A, Irrational Modernism, p.
- 14 The Baroness' relationship with Duchamp is especially intriguing. Jones teasingly hints at the Baroness possible authorship of Duchamp's urinal.
- 15 Jones, A, Irrational Modernism, pg.10
- 16 Jones, A, The Dada Seminars, (volume of 12 essays published by The National Gallery of Art, Washington)
- 17 This is not to say she didn't, just that few of them have survived or become 'official' Dada art.
- 18 Richter, H, Dada, Art and Anti-Art, p. 85.
- 19 The October group infatuation with all things Duchampian is rather worryingly revealed in The Duchamp Effect edited by Martha Buskirk and Mignon Nixon (MIT 1996). Reading it I was reminded of the exasperated tone of Terry Atkinson in his 1980's Open University television program, where he took one of the early pot-shots at the Duchampian myth – "too sophisticated a bourgeois mind not to sense the grip which modern art's ideologies had on him, instead of finding an alternative he extended the limits of what he was seemingly trying to get away from - so for all its assumed intellectual rigour and order Étant donnés is for me the ultimate act of incoherence. Duchamp's last bourgeois, hollow smile...and his reputation rolls on endlessly...
- 20 Jones, A, The Dada Seminars
- $21\ Jones, A, {\it Irrational\ Modernism}, pg. 22$
- 22 Clark, T. I., 'All the things I said about Duchamp: A response to Benjamin Buchloh', in The Duchamp Effect edited by Martha Buskirk and Mignon Nixon (MIT
- 23 Jones, A, Irrational Modernism, p. 239
- 24 Ibid. p. 172
- 25 Ibid. p. 44
- 26 Hopkins, D, Dada's Boys (Fruitmarket 2006), p. 16
- 27 Ibid., p. 18
- 28 The Baroness on Duchamp. She goes on, "For that reasons, although he loves me, he would never even touch the hem of my red oilskin slicker. Something of his dynamic warmth - electrically - would be dissipated by the contact." Quoted in Jones, A, Irrational Modernism,
- 29 Paul McCarthy, John Bock, Keith Farquhar, Sarah Lucas, Jeff Koons, Roderick Buchanan, Knut Asdam, Martin Hirst, Angus Fairhurst, Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp, Lee Miller, Douglas Gordon and Matthew Barney.
- 30 Hopkins, D, Dada's Boys, p. 15
- 31 There is a well documented snob value in professing an admiration for Duchamp - after all.
- 32 Jones, A, Eros, That's Life, or the Baroness' Penis in making Mischief: Dada invades New York (Whitney Museum of American Art 1996) pp. 23

Baroness Elsa Freytag Loringhoven