

Morgan Drawdy

Modern Art and the Machine

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Welcome to Dada

“Dada art is anti Art,” the chant and key idea behind the Dada Art Movement that started in 1916 and continued through to 1924. The Dada movement falls around the start of the first world war which was from 1914-1918. When people reflect on this movement, their minds instantly travel to the outlandish ideas that the Dadaists presented and how they transformed the art scene. The Dada movement itself began at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich, Switzerland which was created by Hugo Ball, a German author. He is accredited as the founder of the Dada movement. Dada started as a way to mock the art scene, high society, and the concept of materialistic things. Many works of art made by New York Dada artists were produced in response to World War I, despite this war not taking place on American soil. By examining the works of the Baroness Elsa Von Freytag Loringhoven, Francis Picabia, and Marcel Duchamp with respect to gender. I will explore how the effects of the war influenced these artists’ works.

At the time of the war there were a lot of things changing. There was an expected spike in patriotism and nationalism, but aside from that there were a lot of impending societal changes. Before the war, the idea of gender roles were lawfully organized. The men would go to work and the women would stay at home, watch the kids, and take care of the man, but these ideas of gender started to change as the war broke out. The men either felt an extreme spark of patriotism or an extreme fear of war. The women were

thrown into working towards war efforts, some of them never having worked a day in their lives. In the paper *Equivocal Masculinity*, Amelia Jones states, “WWI paradoxically set in motion experiences that served to unmask the absence at the heart of these narratives or progress, undermining their truth value and leading to a culture of cynicism and irony.” (*Equivocal Masculinity*, 166). People did not know how to react to a war of this caliber, so it is expected that the overall feelings of the people would be this developed cynicism and irony that she talks about in her paper.

On January 2, 1916 the *New York Times* reported that there was a tremendous spike in the entertainment business, specifically in cinema. It was reported on January 2nd, 1916 that, “One out of every ten men, women, and children in this country visits a photoplay theatre weekly.” People were searching for a distraction from the tragedy that was happening overseas and what better way to do that than 90 minutes of mind-numbing entertainment. Towards the end of the war the tides shifted and on January 1st, 1918 the *New York Times* posted an article titled, “The New United States.” This article alludes to an increased sense of nationalism. They say, “War that wrings hearts and desolates homes brings into action lofty qualities of the human soul, fortitude, effort, sacrifice, honor, love of country, and it reveals to nations their own undreamed-of-strength and greatness; in the intense concentration of endeavor, their power is first made know,” (*New York Times*, 1918). If there was such a high level of nationalism and masculinity and triumph, why was everyone so scared? The simple answer is because this increased sense of masculinity was just an illusion to a lot of the people. It was easy to hide behind the popular opinion about the war than be openly against it. What people outwardly say and what they actually feel are often times completely different.

There was an artist named Baroness Elsa Von Freytag-Loringhoven, whose life rivaled a theatrical performance. She was, “the only one living anywhere who dresses dada, loves dada, lives dada,” (Equivocal Masculinity, 162). She lived all of her life in extreme poverty. George Biddle, a painter, visited her studio and said, “It was crowded and reeking with strange relics, which she had purloined over a period of years from the New York gutters. Old bits of ironware, automobile tires, gilded vegetables, a dozen starved dogs, celluloid paintings, ash cans, every conceivable horror, which to her tortured yet highly sensitized perception, became objects of formal beauty.” (artsy.net) Her life was filled with tragedy and irony, like that of a Shakespearean play. She was born in Germany where her mother died of ovarian cancer and she blamed her father for her death. She had various flings with men across Europe and at one point on her journey she helped her then husband fake his own death and start a new life in the Kentucky farmland. The Baroness’s connection to the war is as trivial as her life. Her husband at the time, Baron Leopold von Freytag-Loringhoven, heard news of the war breaking out and immediately left New York for Germany. He decided that he did not agree with war and ended his life, which the Baroness regarded as one of his best decisions. She herself decided to remain physically detached from the war, but this did not stop her from making artistic statements about it. Amelia Jones details one of her performances as, “A rangy German Baroness riding along with a French poilu’s trench helmet- perhaps the ultimate mixed metaphor of the Great War,” (Equivocal Masculinity, 162).

A lot of her anti-war artwork was portrayed in the sense of performance, but her more sculptural works, specifically one titled, “God” epitomized her Dada style, and out of the box thinking. God consists of a cast iron drain trap set on it’s end that is mounted on a

miter box. She frequently is known to elevate common objects to art and often brings to question the value of art. The baroness often depicts sexual innuendos in her works and comments on a things or people that she thinks have wronged her and this piece is no exception. The piece, "God" loosely resembles the male typical genetalia. This is perhaps a critique on the male dominated society that she works and lives in and a comment of what she see's around her. A lot of her pieces were miscredited to male colleagues of hers. This piece in particular was accredited to Morton Schamberg, a photographer that she often worked with. People were more willing to accept her avant-garde pieces as made by males than by the true artist. There has always been a divide between men and women artists for as long as time, but this shows that this change was happening, but it was not societally accepted yet. The changing roles of the women in society due to the war made her able to create these works and possibly made society more willing to understand the ready-made art form that she invented.

Despite her outrageous public performances and her collaborations with several big artists of the time, she had very little public exposure. There was absolutely no mention of her in the New York Times outside of the mention of her husband, the Baron. Her work only started to be collected in the early 2000's, because that is around the time where female artists started to become extremely popular and considered collectable. She was often overshadowed by her male colleagues such as Marcel Duchamp, who is credited with coining the term "ready-made" when it was in fact the Baroness who started this unique style of art, and Francis Picabia with whom often got a lot of media coverage for gallery events that she also attended.

Francis Picabia grew up in a very luxurious lifestyle because both his mother and father were from wealthy families. He was a French citizen although he was the son of a Spanish man so eventually during the war he was called to serve with the rest of the young men in France. Through some connections, he became the chauffeur to a general that was stationed in Bordeaux. He annoyed the general so much that he was transferred to another duty that involved retrieving sugar from Cuba. He took the path to Cuba by stopping in New York where he met up with Marcel Duchamp. He then decided that he fancied New York so much that he was going to stay there instead of going back to his duties of war. It was a very fortunate coincidence for him that while he was in New York he became ill and was given a medical discharge for the rest of the war. It is speculated that he remained sick because of the lifestyle that he had adopted. His wife Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia quotes, “an inconceivable orgy of sexuality, jazz, and alcohol,” (artsy.net) were just a few of the things that he participated in. Picabia submitted himself to another type of bodily harm then what he would have faced in the war. Instead, he replaced it with a drug dependency and alcoholism. This is the same concept of the spike in New Yorkers going to the movies looking for an escape.

Picabia has a very unique style of portrait that takes the form of mechanical art pieces that have very deep meanings or plays on words. His piece, “An American Women in the Nude,” has two very distinct, contrasting interpretations, but they both seem to be centered around the same girl, Agnes Ernst Meyer. She was a friend of Picabia’s, one that he admired. The story goes that this painting is a portrait of her how Picabia saw her. The first interpretation is this. The lines in the painting are clean and sleek which gives this illusion to elegance and class. The spark plug references her love of cars and the act of

driving which is a pastime that she fondly shared with Picabia himself. The portrait also captures her essence of being, that of being a “dynamic, attractive woman whose marriage to a prominent banker made her financially independent,” (The Rise of Surrealism ,68). Picabia portrays that she is, “the spark that ignited the new energies within the Stieglitz group,” (The Rise of Surrealism ,68) in 1915. The second interpretation goes a little bit along more with Picabia’s typical style. There is a visual poem that was published 3 months prior to this painting coming out that is said to unveil more context. It was called “Mental Reactions” by de Zayas and text by Meyer. It recorded Agnes’s reactions to an attractive man at a gathering and can be summarized in one word, flirt. This is said to illuminate one of her traits that most annoyed Picabia. He decided to portray her as a spark plug as if to suggest that she is an erotic tease. She is depicted as a spark plug to spark men’s passions and the name, “An American Girl in a State of Nudity” represents how much he desired to see her in such a compromising position. The way that he dehumanizes her by simplifying her down to mechanical parts, whose mere essence is to suggest only sex, not only is insulting to the woman that is modeled after, but also to all women who enjoy this piece. This idea of overt masculinity came about as men struggled to find their place in the world where women were threatening to become their equal. This was only able to happen because of society rapidly changing in response to World War One.

One of Picabia’s lifelong friends, Marcel Duchamp, is usually referred to as the God of Dada. He is famous for having this nonchalant attitude about him in every aspect of his being, and is seemingly untouched by any worries in the world that may be imminent to him. When considering Duchamp’s connection to the war it is very apparent that he was trying to avoid it. Most of his family fought in the war. His brother, Jacques Villon, fought in the

trenches in France, his other brother Raymond Duchamp-Villon, also an artist, joined a medical unit and lost his life while serving and his sister, Suzanne, and two sister in laws worked in the nursing corps. He was called to serve and was released due to being diagnosed with a minor heart murmur. He had the option to join a non-combat unit, but instead he ran away from the war and Europe all together. It was probably best that he left Europe because if he had stayed he would have been socially exiled. When he went to New York, he took a job as the secretary to a captain at the French war mission and he declared that he was finally being useful to his country. Although he ran away from the war, he still felt this need to contribute to it any way that he was comfortable with from a distance.

Consider Duchamp's piece, "Why not Sneeze Rose Selavy?" This piece consists of a small bird cage, fitted inside with four wooden bars, containing a thermometer, a cuttlefish bone and one hundred and fifty-two marble cubes. On the underside of the cage is the title and date of the piece. The name Rose Selavy was in fact Duchamp's female alter ego. He used this name a number of times. He used this signature when he posed as a woman in full makeup and clothing for the photographer Man Ray to which he signed the picture Rose Selavy. In 1963 Duchamp referenced this title and explained, "You don't sneeze at will; you usually sneeze in spite of your will. So the answer to the question, "Why not sneeze?" is simply that you can not sneeze at will!" (Tate.org). This alludes to the state of erotic arousal. The different aspects of the piece come together to represent a sexual invitation, while the bird cage represents confinement, and the marble stones represent coldness towards these advances. As Siegal has suggested: "The implied answer to the question is that R[r]ose prefers the state of permanent anticipation that is not sneezing to the release of tension the small explosion would bring: because eros is desire, delay is the only state in which it

survives undiminished,” (Seigel, p.171). The fact that he dressed up as a woman to be photographed by Man Ray shows this sense of changing masculinity brought on by the societal changes implementing by the war. In comparison to Picabia, he decided to embrace the more feminine emotional aspects to represent sex. By creating this character, Rose Selva, he is embracing this side of himself. The fact that these pictures of him and this piece is very popular shows an adjusting public opinion on cross-dressing and exploring sexuality.

The art scene seemed more intrigued by the men exploring their sexuality and masculinity in response to the war than they were with the women's roles changing to be more inclusive and understanding in the working world. There is a stark contrast between how the Baroness's work was seen and how Marcel Duchamp's was accepted. She was considered an outcast in even the most outcasted art scene. This suggests that even with all of the changes in gender roles at the time there was still an extreme bias towards female artists at the time. This is backed up by the fact that women were creating new places in society and men were hesitant with accepting that. This took the form of combatant masculinity and female alter egos. This time period and art period changed the course of history and created a pinpoint of change throughout history to be referenced as a moment of drastic change in gender roles and in art.

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