

## THE CIGAR BOX REVOLUTION

*Complex works of art speak not through individuals, but ensembles.*

~ Paul Rosenfeld

## FROM GAZOOK TO THE MASSES

The alternative presses formed in the 1960s have a direct lineage to the small arts, socialist and anarchist presses that began in America during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In 1915, in an arts colony located in Ridgefield, New Jersey, artist/photographer Man Ray created the first 'American Dada periodical' – a small 4-page hand-drawn comic/arts proto-zine he called the *Ridgefield Gazook*. The *Gazook* was meant to be an irreverent joke, a poke in the eye, or perhaps a love-note, aimed at the established avant-garde of the time: (Gertrude Stein and PicASSo among those singled out). Man Ray wrote each of the four one-page parodies himself and signed them with various pseudonyms. There was only one issue of the *Ridgefield Gazook*, #0.<sup>1</sup>

Man Ray had also been a frequent visitor to the small 291 gallery, run by photographer Alfred Stieglitz, which was without question, the single most

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<sup>1</sup> Man Ray, "The Ridgefield Gazook", Ridgefield, N.J., 31, March, 1915. *Published unnecessarily whenever the spirits move us. Subscription free to whomever we please or displease. Contributions received in liquid form only. This issue limited to local contributors.* -- Editor, Man Ray.

important porthole and introduction to modern art in America. From 1903 to 1917, Stieglitz published *Camera Work*, an unsurpassed, quality letterpress magazine devoted to photography and fine art. *Camera Work* and the 291 were at first showrooms to support and display the fine gravures and art of the Photo-Secession and further the public acceptance of photography as fine art. Within a few years, with the help of Edward Steichen, the works of Rodin, Matisse, Picasso, Brancusi, Cézanne, O’Keeffe, Dove and Marin would be exhibited at 291, and the pages of *Camera Work* opened to include experimental painting, sculpture, anarchist writing, and criticism.

Man Ray befriended Marcel Duchamp when the elder statesman of the Paris avant-garde arrived in New York in the summer of 1915, following the sensation of his *Nude Descending a Staircase* exhibited at the New York Armory show in 1913. Over 300,000 visitors would view this show, including President Theodore Roosevelt who declared, “That’s Not Art!”

Man Ray and Duchamp would collaborate on several projects together and formed a loosely-knit group of artists which would coalesce and become known as *New York Dada* beginning in 1915, several years before the word dada would find currency. “Dada attacked anything conventional and sacrosanct—government, literature, art. It was according to Duchamp, “a sort of nihilism... a way to get out of a state of mind – to avoid being influenced by one’s immediate

environment or by the past, to get away from clichés – to get free.”<sup>2</sup>

The wealthy art collectors Walter and Louise Arensberg would lend major financial and spiritual support to this group which included; Marcel Duchamp, Francis Picabia, Man Ray, Max Weber, Charles Sheeler, Bertrice Wood, and Marius de Zayas. The Arensberg’s art-filled apartment was a swirling, open all-hours salon, art studio and gallery: an urban refuge and laboratory for contemporary artists. “Over the course of five years, from 1915 through 1921- they created a literary and artistic salon that could be ranked with in importance with the circle that had formed around Gertrude Stein and her brothers in Paris a few years earlier.”<sup>3</sup> After dinner or theater, the Arensberg’s opened their apartment to friends and artists where they would play music, chess games, and partake in intense discussions that would last until morning. Duchamp would stay fulltime at the apartment during the summer months when the Arensberg’s vacationed.

The Arensberg support extended as well to modern experimental poets: Alfred Kreyborg, William Carlos Williams, Mina Loy, Pitts Sanborn, Wallace Stevens, Carl Van Vechten, Maxwell Bodenheim and numerous others. “Arensberg co-founded and agreed to supply the financial backing for a new poetry magazine to

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<sup>2</sup> Calvin Tomkins, *The World of Marcel Duchamp*, (Time, Inc., 1966) p.66

<sup>3</sup> *New York Dada*, p.27

be called *Others*.”<sup>4</sup> The poets associated with the journal became known as the *Other Group*. Arensberg was himself a serious poet and writer, his publication of *The Cryptography of Dante* caused a scandal in 1921, with its sexually symbolic Freudian interpretation and suggestion that hell, purgatory and paradise represented various aspects of Dante’s mother’s reproductive organs.

The Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, was a marvelous, unpredictable, poet, independent artist, crazed feminist and the physical embodiment of dadaist spirit. She worked odd jobs, having lost her husband and fortune in 1914, and fell happily into the circle of New York avant-gardists, becoming both muse and willing nude model. The Baroness was 39, statuesque and thin, turning her lithe body into a living artwork as she created her own wild street-fashion from discarded objects: pots, pans, fish netting, cut vegetables and stuffed birds were displayed in her hair and hats. She fashioned tomato soup-cans as a brassiere, wore metal wastebaskets as skirts, and once tied a blinking red light to the back of her bustle, becoming a walking human traffic light. Her love affair with Marcel Duchamp and Wallace Srevens was a source of local legend. She constructed concrete poems out of found words and an attraction to their sound. Her meaningless portrait-poem homage to Duchamp: “Love- Chemical Relationship” was published in *The Little Review*, an important literary magazine that also serialized Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Freytag-Loringhoven made collage assemblages of her art friends out of found objects, and is credited with discovering in 1917, that

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<sup>4</sup> Francis M. Nauman, *New York Dada 1915-23* (Harry N. Abrams, NY, 1994) p. 29

plumber's trap and icon of dada titled *God*, (now in the Philadelphia Museum of Art.) Freytag-Loringhoven's position has been long overlooked and is now the subject of several more in-depth studies and a novelization.

Irene Gammel, the biographer of the Baroness, astutely observed that, "*God* is a sister piece to Duchamp's sensually gleaming urinal *Fountain* (1917).. the scandalous *pièce de resistance* of the 1917 exhibition of the American Society of Independent Artists...."<sup>5</sup> Gammel asserts that since the Baroness was involved with the conception of *God* (a piece focusing on body wastes) in the spring of the 1917, "there emerges the question of whether the rabble-rousing Baroness may have had a hand in the mysterious *Fountain*. If this is the case, then this *pièce de resistance* must surely be seen as one of the most profoundly collaborative works in the annals of New York dada."<sup>6</sup> Gammel presents an array of circumstantial evidence including the pseudonym signature R. Mutt on the *Fountain*, (Mutt was also the nickname of the Baroness), that point to an unacknowledged collaboration between the Baroness and Duchamp. The jury is still out on this episode, but a new evaluation of the readymade and its possible feminist foundation will have many repercussions through the twentieth century. The Baroness returned to Europe in poverty in the 1920s and committed suicide, a sad and destitute ending for a rough diamond just now beginning to shine.

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<sup>5</sup> Irene Gammel, *Barones Elsa: Gender Dada and Everyday Modernity* (MIT Press, 2002) p. 222

<sup>6</sup> *Barones Elsa: Gender Dada and Everyday Modernity*, p.224