



universität
wien

MASTERARBEIT / MASTER'S THESIS

Titel der Masterarbeit / Title of the Master's Thesis

**“Non-Conformity, Androgyny, and Camp: Gender Expression
through Artistic Experimentation in the Avant-Garde
Movements of the Interwar Period.”**

verfasst von / submitted by

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angestrebter akademischer Grad / in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts (MA)

Wien, 2023 / Vienna 2023

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt /
degree programme code as it appears on
the student record sheet:

UA 066 808

Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt /
degree programme as it appears on
the student record sheet:

Gender Studies

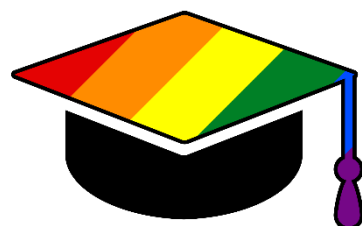
Betreut von / Supervisor:

Univ.-Prof. Dr. Sylvia Mieszkowski, MA

Gefördert von der Hochschüler*innenschaft an der Universität Wien und queer @ hochschulen.



queer @ hochschulen



Acknowledgments

Thank you to...

... the ÖH Universität Wien and queer@hochschulen for the generous support and for believing in the importance of my research for the queer community.

... my supervisor Univ.-Prof. Dr. Sylvia Mieszkowski, MA for your feedback, support, and encouragement.

... my family for believing in me and reassuring me that there is no need to rush (but also constantly mentioning that I could have started things earlier).

... to my friends – my (gender)queer bandits – for supporting me along the way.

... to my favourite lesbian and rebellious gender anarchist – Vera – for showing me what's really important, but also for the countless hours in the library, and for your support, motivation, and reassurance, which got me through it in the end.

Abstract (English)

This master's thesis investigates the gender non-conformity and modes of self-expression by five FLINTA* artists of the interwar avant-garde art movements Modernism, Dadaism, and Surrealism. The selected artists are the Modernists Romaine Brooks and Gluck, the Dadaist Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, and the Surrealists Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore. Through the interpretative method of close reading, I analyse the selected (self-)portraits, photomontages, performance descriptions, and literary text passages and connect the artworks to broader issues in gender studies and queer theory. I use the theoretical framework of Jack Halberstam's female masculinity to analyse Brook's and Gluck's portraiture. The Dadaist performance art by the Baroness is read as a form of (proto-) Camp performativity, in this my argument builds on aspects of Camp as described by Susan Sontag, Moe Meyer, Mark Booth, and Fabio Cleto. Lastly, I analyse Cahun and Moore through the lens of Levi Hord's non-binary lesbian specificity and connect their work on gender and masquerades to Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity. Ultimately, this research project highlights the diversity of gender non-conformity in avant-garde art and reconstructs a history of genderqueerness in the interwar period.

Abstract (Deutsch)

Diese Masterarbeit analysiert und interpretiert die ‚Gender Non-Conformity‘ und Methoden der queeren Selbstdarstellung von fünf kunstschaaffenden Personen der Zwischenkriegszeit. Die ausgewählten FLINTA* Personen stammen aus den Kunstströmungen Modernismus, Dadaismus und Surrealismus. Romaine Brooks, Gluck, Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, Claude Cahun und Marcel Moore werden genauer untersucht und es wird die interpretative Methode des ‚close readings‘ angewendet, um ausgewählte (Selbst-)Portraits, Fotocollagen, Beschreibungen performativer Kunst und literarischer Textpassagen zu analysieren. Diese Kunstwerke werden in Folge mit theoretischen Ansätzen der Gender Studies und Queer Theory verknüpft. Folgende Konzepte werden hierfür verwendet: Jack Halberstams Konzept von ‚Female Masculinity‘, Ansätze zu Camp Sensibilität von Susan Sontag, Moe Meyer, Mark Booth und Fabio Cleto. Weiters wird Levi Hords Begriff der ‚Non-Binary Lesbian Specificity‘ und Judith Butlers Performativität angewendet. Das Ziel dieser Arbeit ist es, die Sichtbarkeit von (gender-)queeren Personen der Zwischenkriegszeit zu erhöhen, deren unterschiedliche Zugänge zur ‚Gender Non-Conformity‘ und queerer Selbstdarstellung aufzuzeigen, sowie eine Rekonstruktion queerer Geschichte zu erzielen.

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Introduction¹

When looking at the parallel artistic avant-garde movements of Modernism, Dadaism, and Surrealism, it becomes evident that a certain discomfort with gender and expected gender roles is reoccurring in all three. While the slow move away from traditional heteronormative notions of gender and the rise of the 'new woman/garçonne' in the early twentieth century heralded an initial change in gender perception in European and US American metropolises, it was especially within art and literature of the interwar period that FLINTA* people² took strides towards a concrete shift in patriarchal understandings of gender and the traditional conception of 'women'. The interwar period, especially, was a time of social unrest, changing ideologies, and rising fascism which was also reflected in the revolutionary avant-garde art movements. Art and literature pushed against normative structures and limitations, criticised conservative values, and initiated cultural transformation. In the two decades between the wars, attitudes towards gender roles and non-heteronormative lifestyles first became more lenient before returning to conservative heteronormative values. Meanwhile, the avant-garde artists of the time consistently challenged conventionality and advocated for freedom of self-expression and -exploration in art and life.

In this master's thesis, I am juxtaposing the different artistic approaches to gender non-conformity by five artists from three co-occurring avant-garde art movements of the interwar period. I will be analysing work by the Modernist artists Romaine Brooks and Gluck, the Dadaist Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, and the Surrealists Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore. While Modernism already flourished in the second half of the nineteenth century, many avant-garde art movements developed alongside each other after the turn of the century. Dadaism and Surrealism evolved parallel to movements such as Expressionism, Cubism, Fauvism, and Futurism. It is necessary to view these movements as intersecting, since they influenced and shaped each other and because many of their respective artists did not produce art in complete isolation from other avant-garde groups. For instance, Claude Cahun, despite being a Surrealist, was highly interested in Dadaist art, knew several Dadaist artists

¹ This introduction incorporates and expands on text passages from my exposé that has been handed in to the SPL on the 28.03.2022.

² See the subsequent subsection for a definition of the acronym.

including Tristan Tzara, and subscribed to the Dadaist magazine *Journale Littéraire*.³ Most of these artistic movements were dominated by men, since being an artist, first and foremost, required financial freedom. To live off of their art, FLINTA* artists at the time had to be socially privileged or heavily supported by patrons within their community. This artist community was a widespread network that had its epicentre in Paris but also spread to other artistic capitals such as London, Berlin, and New York. I have chosen the selected artists from Modernism, Dadaism, and Surrealism because they share common connecting points within this queer FLINTA* network of the interwar period.

Despite their different approaches to art and aesthetics, the selected artists knew (of) each other, were supporters, readers, or admirers of the others' work and may have (indirectly) influenced or challenged their art production. All of them share a connection to interwar Paris, and the expatriate community surrounding Natalie Barney. Barney was an American expatriate, whose literary salon was often central to queer expatriate FLINTA* artists and writers. Her weekly salon was far from the only one, but it was frequented by the Sapphic community of early twentieth-century Paris.⁴ Additionally, the individual artists under analysis have more than this loose connection to Barney: Romaine Brooks was Barney's long-time partner and their relationship lasted over several decades. Gluck, while not part of Barney's innermost Sapphic circle, was acquainted with many people surrounding her. Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven was a good friend of Djuna Barnes and was published by Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap, who also were mutual friends of Natalie Barney.⁵ Lastly, Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore's address book contains Barney's details, and they were regular customers at Adrienne Monnier's and Sylvia Beach's bookshops, which were also frequented by the Sapphic salonière.⁶

Besides the interpersonal overlap, the artists under discussion also share thematic similarities. Modernism, Dadaism, and Surrealism at first seem rather distant from each other, not only in their general aesthetic but also in their ideologies, themes, and motifs. However, the selected FLINTA* artists, all depict gender non-conformity and the rejection and

³ Cf. Jenifer L. Shaw, *Reading Claude Cahun's Disavowals* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2016), 23-24.

⁴ For a more detailed account of Barney's central role in queer (Modernist) Paris see Shari Benstock's comprehensive guide to early twentieth-century Paris *Women of the Left Bank: Paris 1900-1940*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986).

⁵ Cf. *Ibid.*, 380.

⁶ Cf. Shaw, *Reading Disavowals*, 12-13.

subversion of cis-heteronormative ideologies in their art. By looking at the different forms of gender expression and the artistic rebellion against normative gender roles in the artworks of the five artists under analysis, I am showcasing, juxtaposing and analysing their different approaches to gender non-conformity. In this thesis, I am going to draw on the following contemporary concepts in queer theory: Jack Halberstam's notion of female masculinity, Judith Butler's theory on gender performativity, the phenomenon of Camp as discussed by Susan Sontag, Moe Meyer, and Fabio Cleto, Levi Hord's notion of non-binary lesbian specificity, and Monique Wittig's radical approach to lesbianism. These concepts will serve as a theory-foundation for my analysis and interpretation. Moreover, I will relate these theories to work by scholars active in the interwar period, such as the prominent sexologists Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, and Havelock Ellis or the psychoanalyst Joan Riviere.⁷ Using these contemporary queer theoretical approaches, I will analyse and interpret the selected artworks, literary texts, and performance descriptions. For my analysis, I will use the interpretive methodology of close reading, which I am going to discuss in more detail in the last subsection of the introduction. My theoretical foundation in queer theory as well as my selected methodology will be instrumental to answer the following research questions:

- How did the selected artists from the three parallel art movements of the interwar period (Modernism, Dadaism, and Surrealism) experiment with gender and self-expression through their art, writing, and performances?
- How can contemporary queer theories such as Jack Halberstam's understanding of female masculinity, Judith Butler's gender performativity, as well as theories surrounding Camp and non-binary lesbian specificity, aid us in understanding and reconstructing a history of radical gender non-conformity in art?

By analysing the different approaches to gender expression and artistic experimentation by Romaine Brooks, Gluck, Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, Claude Cahun, and Marcel Moore, I aim to highlight their – at the time – futuristic approaches to queerness. Art historical research projects and exhibitions on the avant-garde movements of the interwar period frequently overlook the ground-breaking work by queer FLINTA* artists. For instance, exhibitions on Dadaism at modern art institutions such as the renowned Centre Pompidou in

⁷ Joan Riviere's last name is inconsistently spelled as Riviere or Rivi re, since the article I am referring spells the name without an accent I will be doing the same in this thesis. See Joan Riviere, "Womanliness as a Masquerade," *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 9 (1929): 303-313.

Paris, mostly showcase male Dadaists and overlook the works of many FLINTA* Dadaists.⁸ Similarly, this inclination towards androcentrism can also be observed in scholarship on Modernism, Dadaism, and Surrealism.⁹ Through this project, I want to re-evaluate aspects of queer (art) history that are frequently overlooked by the heteronormative and androcentric art-historical scholarship on the interwar period. Using contemporary queer theory in relation to these artists' works enables us to view their lives and art as radical resistance to heteronormative bourgeoisie society and the cliché-driven male-dominated art world. My research project will be structured in three parts, one dedicated to each art movement and connected through their similarities and overlap. Before continuing to the individual chapters, I will address my reasons behind using certain terminology and pronouns concerning the artists, and I will provide a brief overview of prominent sexological theories that had an impact on queer FLINTA* people of the interwar period.

FLINTA*

In this master's thesis, I will be focusing on five FLINTA* artists in Modernism, Dadaism, and Surrealism and highlight their artistic experimentations with gender. FLINTA* is a useful acronym that originated in German-speaking queer activist circles, especially to create more inclusive safe spaces, and it has since been increasingly used in (German) academic contexts. It stands for *female, lesbian, intersex, non-binary, transgender, and agender*, as well as any additional variants in terminology which are signified through the *asterisk*. The acronym aims to encompass and describe marginalised identities that suffer under similar patriarchal confines. It focuses on gender identity regardless of sexuality, but can and should be used in combination with terms such as 'queer'. One of the pitfalls of FLINTA* as an acronym is its precise use: it is not a term that should be used in contexts that are mostly relevant to women (cis & trans*), rather it is imperative to uphold the specificity of every identity that it

⁸ I observed this tendency at the Centre Pompidou on a research trip in June of 2022, but the prevalence of male artists can also be seen at the museum's artist overview online. See "Dada: Artists and Personalities" Centre Pompidou, accessed April 27, 2023, <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/en/recherche/personnes?display=Grid&terms=Dada>

⁹ For instance, Anne Charles claims that there are "androcentric conventional currents running through the field of modernist studies." See: Anne Charles, "Review: A Broader View of Modernism," *NWSA Journal* 15, no. 3. (2003): 179-188. Moreover, Patricia Allmer discusses the "feminist interventions" in Dadaism and Surrealism to the "androcentric historicisations, exclusions, and historical appropriations, which present themselves as monolithic knowledge, repeatedly asserted in major exhibitions and publications." See Patricia Allmer, "Feminist Interventions: Revising the Canon," in *A Companion to Dada and Surrealism*, ed. by David Hopkins and Dana Arnold (Hoboken: Wiley, 2016), 366-381.

encompasses. Further, it is of utmost importance to refrain from bio-essentialist binary understandings of gender as this defeats the point of the acronym.¹⁰

While the acronym has not been used much in scholarly work, especially not scholarly work written in English, I believe it is an incredibly useful analytic category, particularly in the context of Modernism and the adjacent avant-garde movements of Dadaism and Surrealism. Despite being anachronistic and not available to the artists under analysis, using FLINTA* allows us to re-contextualise issues of gender identity more flexibly – a change that enables a more nuanced discussion of the gender identity of people such as Gluck or Claude Cahun. When talking about the artists in this thesis, their gender non-conformity is overtly displayed in their art; however, not all of the artists openly expressed their gender identities or sexualities. Moreover, the terminology used today differs drastically from the terms contemporaneous to the artists. Since this leaves us mostly relying on assumptions and suggestions regarding the artists' identities, we have to be very careful with the terminology we are using. Yet, simply referring to them as (queer) 'women' is inaccurate and reduces the specificity of their lived experiences. Therefore, the term FLINTA* as an analytic category offers a solution to this conundrum: by referring to the artists in this thesis as FLINTA* people we can uphold their specificity and signal that the people we are talking about are discriminated against through misogyny, sexism, transphobia, etc. The artists may fall anywhere under the umbrella of the acronym, which is exactly where the asterisk, signalling the expandability of the term, comes into place. Consequently, when referring to several artists at once, FLINTA* enables us to discuss their collective experience as people who were not cis-men and therefore may have had relatable experiences as they are suffering under the same limitations set by the patriarchal society. When considering the artists individually, we can elaborate on the specificities of their identities and introduce more nuance to the discussion. Lastly, FLINTA* also allows us to critically re-evaluate and perhaps exceed prominent sexological categorisation by scholars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the following section, I will briefly review different sexological approaches of the period and highlight why or how they were relevant to the artists under analysis.

¹⁰ For a more comprehensive discussion of the term, its historical conception, and its potential weaknesses see: Cordula Trunk, "Am Anfang ist das Wort: Die Geschichte des Begriffs FLINTA* zeigt dessen emanzipatorisches Potenzial, aber auch die damit verbundenen Probleme," *Nd Journalismus von Links*, October 7, 2022, <https://www.nd-aktuell.de/artikel/1167492.feminismus-am-anfang-ist-das-wort.html>.

Sexology and Female Inversion in the Interwar Period

Sexology and, more specifically, theories surrounding sexual inversion were especially prominent at the turn of the century and during the interwar period. “What characterized sexology’s mission as a field was its attempt to transfer authority for explaining sexual matters from the church and the legislative-judicial realm [...] to psychiatry and medical science,” explains Debra Modellmog.¹¹ However, the approaches of different sexological theories varied drastically, some were pathologizing and disapproving while others were a vindication for inverts. Modellmog points out that a wide variety of early twentieth-century intellectuals from America and Britain were not only fascinated by sexological theories but many were also acquainted with the scholars themselves.¹² While many scholars were working on sexological theories during the late nineteenth century and the turn of the century, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, and Havelock Ellis, despite their significantly different theoretical perspectives, were the most prominent sexologists for the circle of FLINTA* people discussed within this thesis. For instance, Ellis wrote a preface for Radclyffe Hall’s novel *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) and Hall also refers to the writings of Krafft-Ebing as well as Ulrichs. Thus, when Modellmog claims that “one way in which sexological discourse was spread – and also resisted – was through modernist writing,”¹³ she is highlighting that authors like Radclyffe Hall, who were in Romaine Brooks and Gluck’s circle of acquaintances, were not only aware of sexology but often also very well versed in the discourse. Claude Cahun, who will be discussed in the last chapter, even translated Havelock Ellis’s work into French and expanded aspects of Ulrichs’s theories.

To better understand the discourse surrounding homosexuality and transgender issues in the interwar period, I will give a very brief overview of the sexological theories by Ulrichs, Krafft-Ebing, and Ellis. Yet, it is important to keep in mind that these were not the only theories that may have influenced the artists under analysis; they were merely some of the most prominent sexologists and they were referenced by the artists themselves or acquaintances of them. The subsequent review of the sexological theories by these three scholars serves as context for the upcoming chapters, especially the chapter on Modernism. The aesthetic of Brooks’s, and

¹¹ Debra A. Modellmog, “Modernism and Sexology,” *Literature Compass* 11, no.4 (2014): 269.

¹² Cf. *Ibid.*, 270.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 271.

to a lesser extent Gluck's, portraits can be related to the theoretical ponderings of nineteenth- and twentieth-century sexologists. Their descriptions of the appearance of female invert/Urning/homosexuals are echoed and expanded on in the Modernist portraits under analysis; hence, a basic understanding of the different sexological theories of the time is advantageous. Although Claude Cahun was very well versed in sexology, especially Ellis's theories, these sexological theories are less important in my analysis of Cahun and Moore's collaborative work since the couple futuristically transgressed the binary understandings of gender or sexuality. Lastly, the Baroness's art did not refer to sexology, she mostly focused on a subversion of conventional gender norms and roles. While the contemporaneous sexology may not have directly influenced all of the artists under analysis, it had an impact on society in general and shaped the way homosexuality and gender non-conformity was (de-)stigmatised at the artists' time of production. Therefore, an overview of the three sexologists and their approaches can still be helpful in contextualising discussions of gender and sexuality in the interwar period.

Karl Heinrich Ulrichs is one of the earliest influential scholars in modern sexology. He is often considered to be the "first modern theorist of homosexuality."¹⁴ Ulrichs wrote a collection of essays under the title *Studies on the Riddle of Male-Male Love* (1864-1879), wherein he wrote about various sexual orientations and gender presentations and coined the term 'Urning' (Engl. 'Uranian') for male same-sex desires.¹⁵ Ina Linge explains, "[t]he female equivalent of the Uranian was the Urinde, although the term never really caught on. Nonetheless, Ulrichs's work made an impression on later generations of lesbian writers,"¹⁶ a phenomenon which can be seen not only in Radclyffe Hall's novel but also Claude Cahun's text *Uranian Games* (c. 1914). Ulrichs first published the collection of essays under a pseudonym but later published under his real name and outed himself in the process. Hubert Kennedy claims that "Ulrichs's intention in his writings was not merely explanatory, but also – and especially –

¹⁴ Hubert Kennedy, "Ulrichs, Karl Heinrich (1825-1895)," GLBTQ Archives, accessed April 10, 2023, http://www.glbqtarchive.com/ssh/ulrichs_kh_S.pdf.

¹⁵ Cf. Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, *Forschungen über das Räthsel der mann-männlichen Liebe: Vier Bände*, ed. by Hubert Kennedy (Berlin: Verlag rosa Winkel, 1994).

¹⁶ Ina Linge, "German and British Sexual Sciences Across Disciplines at the Fin de Siècle: 'Homosexuals', 'Inverts' and 'Uranians,'" in *The Edinburgh Companion to Fin de Siècle Literature, Culture and the Arts*, ed. by Josephine Guy (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 387.

emancipatory.”¹⁷ This shows that Ulrichs can be considered an early queer activist who adamantly defended homosexuals and fought for their rights and equality. His theory suggested that homosexuality was “inborn” rather than an “acquired vice,” explains Kennedy and points out that “Ulrichs was the first in a long and continuing line of researchers who believe that a proof of the ‘naturalness’ of homosexuality, that is, the discovery of a biological basis for it, will lead to equal legal and social treatment of hetero- and homosexuals.”¹⁸ Ulrichs’s writings were not only some of the earliest theories in sexology of the nineteenth century but also, unlike many theories by concurrent and later scholars of sexology, some of the most liberating and emancipatory for queer people of the time.

Krafft-Ebing’s work *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886) was initially intended as a medical reference work for legal contexts, but it became widely popular even outside of the courtroom.¹⁹ Krafft-Ebing clearly pathologized homosexuality, in a section called “*Homo-Sexual Feeling as an Abnormal Congenital Manifestation*,” he wrote

The essential feature of this strange manifestation of the sexual life is the want of sexual sensibility for the opposite sex, even to the extent of horror, while sexual inclination and impulse toward the same sex are present. At the same time, the genitals are normally developed, the sexual glands perform their functions properly, and the sexual type is completely differentiated.²⁰

He then extended this description into different degrees of inversion which he called “psycho-sexual hermaphroditism,” “homo-sexuality,” “effemination and viraginity,” and “androgyny and gynandry).²¹ Krafft-Ebing claims “[t]he female urning loves to wear her hair and have her clothing in the fashion of men; and it is her greatest pleasure, when opportunity offers, to appear in male attire.”²² Therefore, people such as Radclyffe Hall, Gluck, or Brooks and her sitters would have been grouped by Krafft-Ebing under the third category as female inverts/urnings since this description matched their appearance and lifestyle – they had a

¹⁷ Hubert Kennedy, “Karl Heinrich Ulrichs First Theorist of Homosexuality,” in *Science and Homosexualities*, ed. by Vernon A. Rosario (New York: Routledge, 1997), 26.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁹ Cf. Heike Bauer, “Scholars, Scientists and Sexual Inverts: Authority and Sexology in Nineteenth-Century Britain,” in *Repositioning Victorian Sciences: Shifting Centres in Nineteenth-Century Thinking*, ed. by David Clifford, Elisabeth Wadge, and Alex Warwick (London: Anthem Press, 2006), 198.

²⁰ Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, trans. Charles Gilbert Chaddock. (Philadelphia and London: The F.A. Davis Co., Publishers, 1892; Project Gutenberg, March 26, 2021), 222. https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/64931/pg64931-images.html#Page_222.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 223.

²² *Ibid.*, 280.

“masculine soul in the female bosom.”²³ Krafft-Ebing’s writing was consistently pathological, and he grouped homosexuals as mentally abnormal. Moreover, he also starkly criticised other scholars who did not do the same. For instance, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs was reprimanded by Krafft-Ebing who argued that “Ulrichs failed [...] to prove that this certainly congenital and paradoxical sexual feeling was physiological, and not pathological.”²⁴ Nevertheless, his theories were still considered valuable even for queer people of the period.

Havelock Ellis published his multi-volume work *Studies in the Psychology of the Sex* over several decades. The second volume, which focuses on sexual inversion was published in 1900 and contained a chapter on “Sexual Inversion in Women.” He was writing at a time when the sexological discourse was already thriving. Pioneering the field of British sexology, Ina Linge points out that the second volume of Ellis’s theories is “one of the earliest sexological publications from Britain which dealt at length with the topic of sexual inversion or homosexuality.”²⁵ Ellis starts his chapter on female inversion with the claim that “[h]omosexuality is not less common in women than in men,”²⁶ a claim that was not insignificant since female homosexuality was generally overlooked by society and the legal system. His subsequent arguments on female inversion build upon a binary of feminine and masculine inverts. Further, he differentiates between levels of inversion beginning with “passionate friendships [...] with periods of intimate attachment to a friend of her own sex. No congenital inversion is usually involved” and then relationships of the “actively inverted woman,” who is “not repelled or disgusted by lover-like advances from persons of their own sex.”²⁷ Ellis describes the “actively inverted woman” as somebody with “a more or less distinct trace of masculinity.”²⁸ And whereas other sexologists nearly insisted on cross-dressing being a central element of female inversion, Ellis claims that “transvestism in either women or men by no means necessarily involves inversion” but “[t]here is [...] a very pronounced tendency among sexually inverted women to adopt male attire when practicable.”²⁹ Ellis’s work was far

²³ Ibid., 280.

²⁴ , 224.

²⁵ Linge, 388.

²⁶ Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex, Volume 2: Sexual Inversion*, 3rd ed. (1927; Project Gutenberg, March 5, 2022), Ch. IV, n.p., https://www.gutenberg.org/files/13611/13611-h/13611-h.htm#2_CHAPTER_IV.

²⁷ Ibid., Chapter IV, n.p.

²⁸ Ibid., Chapter IV, n.p.

²⁹ Ibid., Chapter IV, n.p.

less restrictive or pathologizing than that of his predecessors and some of his contemporaries and his work served more as a defence of inverts than a condemnation.

The sexological theories by Ulrichs, Krafft-Ebbing, Ellis, and their contemporaries were highly influential in conceptualising a modern understanding of sexuality. Laura Doan claims,

Sexology, as practiced by men such as the highly respected Ellis, seems out of date and out of touch to us now, but its cultural status after 1918— its distinctive modernity before its gradual displacement by Freudian psychoanalytic theory in about the 1940s and 1950s—was rather different.³⁰

At the time, sexology was incredibly influential in artistic and literary circles. It not only shaped the literature and art of (queer) people of the period, but it also directly affected the lives of these artists, writers, and by extension the wider public. For instance, the obscenity trial surrounding Hall's novel brought the topics of homosexuality and inversion into the public eye – which at first may have caused outrage and stigmatisation but ultimately lead to a change in the perception of queer people for the better. While sexology may have been the epitome of modernity then, these sexological theories are incredibly outdated now. Nevertheless, these sexologists may have even paved the way for gender studies and queer theory a century before these fields and disciplines have come into existence. From a contemporary gender studies perspective, it quickly becomes evident that Ulrichs's, Krafft-Ebing's, and Ellis's understandings of Uranism or inversion attempt to address female homosexuality, but they also incorporate aspects of transgender issues, like body and gender dysphoria, into their theories about sexuality. Matters of sex, gender, and sexuality are merged, confused for the same thing, or incoherently discussed even by the same author. While it may seem counterintuitive to refrain from disentangling these aspects in sexological theories it is vital to acknowledge this overlap to understand the experience of inverts and queer people of the time. We have to be wary of using contemporary terminology for people of the interwar period, yet that does not mean we cannot use modern terminology, categories, and identity descriptors in helping us understand or relate to their experiences. For instance, 'transgender' was not a concept available to people like Gluck or Radclyffe Hall and yet their lived experience can be related to a trans* experience. Their clear discomfort with their assigned gender finds expression in their art and writing. Without assuming that

³⁰ Laura Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism: The Origins of a Modern English Lesbian Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 130.

they were *definitely* trans* we can use the contemporary terminology as an umbrella which can include their experience with gender in their own way. Therefore, it is important to view contemporary terminology as a guide to understanding and not as a definitive answer. We must not disable or devalue the process of self-identification of queer people or take away people's agency and thereby reduce the specificity of their lives.

On Pronouns and the Different Terminology of Gender and Sexuality

The use of gender identity descriptors, sexuality labels, as well as pronouns varies significantly in scholarship on the five artists under analysis. I have already pointed out my reasons behind using the anachronistic acronym FLINTA* when referring to several artists at once. To minimise confusion surrounding my choices of terminology, I am now briefly going to explain my reasons behind using specific terms or pronouns for the artists. In addition to this brief overview, I will also go into more detail about my choices in the individual chapters.

In my discussion of the artists Romaine Brooks and Gluck as well as some of their FLINTA* sitters, I am using the terms invert and Sapphic; further, I am making use of our contemporary understanding of trans* to aid us in understanding or relating to some of these artist's or sitter's experiences. The term invert is relevant in this context since Brooks was well acquainted with Radclyffe Hall, whose novel can be seen as a fictionalised case study of female inversion. Sapphic, which functioned as a broader umbrella term for female same-sex relationships, is pertinent because Natalie Barney, the long-time partner of Brooks, fashioned her literary salon after Sappho's ideals.³¹ Thus, we can assume that the artists and sitters under discussion were at least familiar with these two terms. Lastly, the contemporary label trans* can be helpful in better understanding the genderqueerness of some of these FLINTA* people.³² I am using she/her pronouns for Brooks because her own use of pronouns and identity as a woman is not contested in her writing or art. I am using no pronouns for Gluck, as the artist rejected any gendered prefix or terminology that would indicate that Gluck was a woman.

³¹ Cf. Benstock, 53.

³² I am following Jack Halberstam's understanding of trans* and his use of the asterisk. Halberstam explains that "the asterisk modifies the meaning of transitivity by refusing to situate transition in relation to a destination, a final form, a specific shape, or an established configuration of desire and identity. The asterisk [...] makes trans* people the authors of their own categorizations." Jack Halberstam, *Trans* A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 4.

The Dadaist Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven identified as a woman and was mostly in relationships or infatuations with men; nevertheless, some rumours surrounding her bisexuality persist. Her gender non-conforming performance art was mostly subverting normative gender roles and criticised the strict regulation of women's bodies and fashion. I am thus discussing her as a pioneer in Dadaist performance art and as a feminist and I am using she/her pronouns when talking about her.

Lastly, in my chapter on Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, I am using terminology and concepts of modern gender studies and queer theory to discuss their lives and work. While Cahun and Moore were very well-versed in contemporaneous sexology, their highly futuristic approaches to gender in their own art and writing exceeded the boundaries set by sexologists of the period. Thus, I am using the contemporary approach of non-binary lesbian specificity to consider their lives and art and I am using they/them pronouns for each of the artists.

Methodology

The broader theoretical lens used to approach the selected artists and their work and writing is queer theory by Jack Halberstam, Judith Butler, Susan Sontag and other scholars of Camp theory, Levi Hord and Monique Wittig. To answer my research questions, I will analyse and contextualise the artists discussed in this project, establish connections to queer theoretical discourses, and do close readings of the selected visual artworks, literary texts, and performance descriptions.

The method of close reading, which is rooted in New Criticism, is particularly fitting as an approach to Modernists and adjacent avant-garde artists of the interwar period as close reading "was not only a product of the modernist period but a product of modernism."³³ Not only is close reading rooted in Modernism it also remains a prevalent methodology in literary and cultural studies. Clariza Ruiz De Castilla defines close reading as a method that "investigates the relationship between the internal workings of discourse in order to discover what makes a particular text function persuasively."³⁴ This interpretive methodology combines the detailed analysis and interpretation of a text (or image) with broader theoretical

³³ Max Saunders, "Modernist Close Reading," in *Modernism and Close Reading*, ed. by David James (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 19.

³⁴ Clariza Ruiz De Castilla, "Close Reading," in *The Sage Encyclopaedia of Communication Research Methods*, ed. by Mike Allen (Thousand Oaks, Ca: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2017), 136.

discourse. Close reading was initially used to interpret and analyse written text but has since been extended to visual works. In the interdisciplinary field of cultural studies, visual analysis has many different forms and foundations. I approach the visual analysis of my artworks in the same way as I am approaching the analysis of a written text. Therefore, I am not only close reading textual work but also visual artworks (painted portraits, photographs, and photomontages). Close reading is highly useful in establishing the interconnectedness of the artists' work and broader topics of identity politics and queer theoretical discussions. Within my thesis, I will highlight, analyse, and interpret the occurring gender non-conformity and rejection of cis-heteronormative societal expectations in the selected text passages, performance descriptions, and artworks. I am using queer culture as the focal lens of my interpretation, to correlate the queer culture of the interwar period with the post-modern and contemporary queer culture. I believe that an analysis of the (queer) cultural context of the production period in relation to the present moment, can highlight evolutionary aspects of the discourse surrounding gender non-conformity and queerness.

This master's thesis analyses and interprets the gender non-conformity and modes of self-expression by five FLINTA* artists of the interwar avant-garde art movements Modernism, Dadaism, and Surrealism. By close reading selected artworks, literary text passages, and performance descriptions and relating them to the contemporary queer theoretical frameworks of Halberstam's female masculinity, Butler's gender performativity, Sontag's Camp Sensibility, and Hord's non-binary lesbian specificity, I am reconstructing a queer history of radical gender non-conformity of the interwar period. Moreover, I highlight how genderqueerness in the interwar years, despite the rising fascism and prevalent misogyny, existed, prevailed, and, most importantly, thrived.

The body of my master's thesis is threefold, one chapter on each of the art movements. In my first chapter, I am looking at selected (self-) portraits by the Modernist artists Romaine Brooks and Gluck. Both artists depict alternative forms of female masculinity and gender non-conformity loosely following the tradition and aesthetic of dandyism. I use Jack Halberstam's notion of female masculinity as a theoretical framework for my arguments.

My second chapter focuses on the Dadaist (performance) art by Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven. Her outrageous fashion sense and radical performances can be linked to the

queer theories surrounding Camp Sensibility and Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity. Both Dadaism and Camp are centred on modes of self-expression and rejection of the normative. Therefore, I argue that the performance art by the Baroness can be seen as a version of (proto-) Camp performativity.

The last chapter focuses on the collaborative art by the Surrealists Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore. I will analyse selected self-portraits, text passages, and photomontages by the artists. Cahun and Moore futuristically rejected binary gender norms in their relationship and art. To approach their art and lives in a less restricting or binary sense, I use Levi Hord's notion of non-binary lesbian specificity. In their art, Cahun and More frequently use masks, masquerades, and mirrors to emphasise how gender is performative. Hence, I also use Butlerian gender performativity as a contemporary concept to analyse and conceptualise their work.

The upcoming three chapters are connected by the artists' shared dissatisfaction with normative gender roles and patriarchal restrictions set upon FLINTA* people of the early twentieth century. None of the artists under discussion wanted to abide by their families' or societies' expectations, therefore, they all devised artistic modes of expression that enabled them to transgress conventional (binary) gender standards. The different forms of gender non-conformity discussed in the upcoming chapters become increasingly more radical and futuristic towards the later chapters. We start with predominately binary forms of female masculinity, before shocking the general public with proto-Camp behaviours that question normative gender roles, and eventually reach non-binary gender expression and the inference that gender is a masquerade.

1. Female Masculinity and FLINTA* Dandyism in Romaine Brooks's *Left Bank Portraits* and the Self-Portraits by Gluck.

"You're neither unnatural, nor abominable, nor mad; you're as much a part of what people call nature as anyone else; only you're unexplained as yet – you've not got your niche in creation."³⁵

Radclyffe Hall's protagonist Stephen in the 1928 novel *The Well of Loneliness* represents the outcast invert, the genderqueer, the non-straight person of the early twentieth century. When Stephen's governess tells her she is "unexplained", and that her 'queerness' is not unnatural but merely unknown, this sentiment can also be extended to the lived realities of Hall and her contemporaries. Hall's novel is frequently considered one of the central pieces of queer Modernist literature, the publication and the subsequent obscenity trial being a crucial moment in litigating the period's attitudes to queerness. The social circle of FLINTA* writers and artists surrounding Hall can be traced through letters, semi-fictionalised accounts by authors of the time (for instance Djuna Barnes's *Ladies Almanack* (1928)), and, of course, through portraits and photographs. Moreover, the striking queerness of Hall's appearance is not unmatched by her contemporaries; rather, female masculinity and dandyism are arresting features reproduced repeatedly by other FLINTA* creatives of the interwar period. In this chapter, I am going to discuss the artistic representation of gender, androgyny, female masculinity, and dandyism in the portraiture of the interwar years. I will focus on the *Left Bank Portraits* (1920-1924) by Romaine Brooks and the (self-)portraits by Gluck. I will analyse the depictions of the Modernist FLINTA* dandy and Modernist androgyny by applying aspects of Jack Halberstam's concept of female masculinity.

FLINTA* Dandyism and Female Masculinity in Brooks's *Left Bank Portraits*

Romaine Brooks was an American expatriate artist, who spent most of her life in Paris and Capri. Brooks's childhood was rather traumatic, dominated by a mentally ill mother, a troubled younger brother, and an alcoholic father who abandoned the family. After her parents' death, she inherited a large amount of money, which gave her great financial and social freedom. Brooks is known to have had multiple relationships with other women, the longest one being a 50-year-long, tumultuous open relationship with the salonnière and

³⁵ Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness* (Ware: Wordsworth Classics, 2014), 138.

author Natalie Barney.³⁶ Barney and Brooks were well-connected in literary and artistic Paris, and Barney, especially, celebrated her Sapphic identity through weekly gatherings at her house in the Rue de Jacob. Barney's salon was a meeting point for queer FLINTA* people of the period and was the place where Brooks met many of her sitters.³⁷ Brooks's oeuvre consists mainly of portraits and later of graphite drawings. Her portraits, especially from 1914 onwards, depict strikingly stoic sitters and are powerful in their composition. Between 1920 and 1924, Brooks completed several portraits of the Sapphic FLINTA* community of Paris. Her sitters included but were not limited to Natalie Barney, Renata Borgatti, Una, Lady Troubridge, Gluck, and Elisabeth de Gramont. While this series does not have an official title, it is often referred to as '*The Left Bank Portraits*,' depicting the people connected to Barney and the artistic and literary circle of the Parisian *rive gauche*.³⁸ The decriminalisation of homosexuality under the Napoleonic Code of 1804, and thus the fairly relaxed regulations surrounding queerness led to a congregation of international queer expatriates in Paris.³⁹ The city thus became a hub of homosexual interwar intellectuals and avant-gardists. Brooks's portraits encapsulate and visualise this queer community. Joe Lucchesi observes that her "art provides a powerful art historical link between portraiture, the American expatriate experience, and the 'homosexual subject' in early twentieth-century art."⁴⁰ This link remains valuable to the LGBTQ+ community today, as visual evidence of queer history and the existence of a community even a century ago.

The sitters of Brooks's portraits all share an aloof expression, exhibit varying degrees of gender ambiguity, and flaunt their wealth and social status – a position of privilege that enabled their sexual and financial autonomy. While the people in Romaine Brooks's social circle were all aristocratic or financially well-off, their attitudes towards their own queerness and gender non-conformity showed varying degrees of (self-) acceptance. Natalie Barney, for

³⁶ For a more detailed account of Brooks life and her relationship with Barney see Diana Souhami, *Natalie and Romaine: The Love Life of Natalie Barney and Romaine Brooks* (London: Quercus, 2013).

³⁷ Cf. Whitney Chadwick, "Amazons and Heroes: Romaine Brooks and Her World" in *Amazons in the Drawing Room: The Art of Romaine Brooks*, ed. by Whitney Chadwick (Berkeley: Chameleon Books Inc, 2004), 29-30.

³⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*, 29.

³⁹ Cf. Michael Sibal, "Napoleonic Code," GLBTQ Archives, accessed April 22, 2022, http://www.glbtqarchive.com/ssh/napoleonic_code_S.pdf.

⁴⁰ Joe Lucchesi, "Introduction," in *Amazons in the Drawing Room: The Art of Romaine Brooks*, ed. by Whitney Chadwick (Berkeley: Chameleon Books Inc, 2004), 9.

instance, openly displayed her Sapphic ideology, called herself a lesbian,⁴¹ and idealised femininity. Conversely, Radclyffe Hall emphasised her at least partial self-identification with turn-of-the-century sexological theories about inverts through her semi-autobiographical novel *The Well of Loneliness* and thus emphasises masculinity in her own gender expression. Most of the sitters of Brooks's *Left Bank Portraits*, including her self-portrait, are visually more closely aligned with the masculinity associated with early twentieth-century inverts.

As discussed in the introduction, sexological theories at the turn of the century were widespread and different scholars had different approaches to pathologizing homosexuality. Ina Linge points out that the use of specific terminology overlapped significantly, but the "origin" of the individual terms "is far from uniform, and far from exclusively medical. Definitions of homosexuality, inversion or Uranism can range from an insistence on pathology [...] to the argument that same-sex desire is absolutely innate [...]." ⁴² Her insistence that sexology was not "exclusively medical," is crucial, since sexological discourse, despite being rooted in the sciences, also received a lot of non-scientific attention and was fervently discussed by intellectuals producing literature and art. Some sexological theories were intended to destigmatise inversion, and literary works like Hall's novel were the more accessible counterparts to those. However, the obscenity trial surrounding Hall's novel shows the reluctance of the general public to normalise and accept homosexuality. Brooks, Gluck and their sitters portray the visual characteristics often associated with female inversion and brought the aesthetic of inversion to the canvas. Their radical subversion of normative expectations of femininity and masculinity challenged and transformed conventions in Modernist portraiture.

A useful concept when discussing female inversion, early forms of lesbianism, and genderqueerness exhibited by FLINTA* people of the Modernist era is Jack Halberstam's notion of female masculinity. Halberstam argues that female masculinity is not an "imitation

⁴¹ The term lesbian was still relatively new in the early twentieth century and was barely used. While the word entered the English language in 1732 it was not really used until the latter half of the twentieth century, cf. OED online, s.v. "lesbian." Therefore, using 'lesbian' in its contemporary narrow definition of 'women loving woman' as a descriptor of sexuality for FLINTA* modernists can create problems as it erases the specificity of sexuality of these people and posthumously assigns them a sexual identity that may not be entirely accurate. However, in the case of Natalie Barney, "lesbian" is a self-assigned identity. She writes in her work *Éparpillements* (1910), "I am a lesbian, one need not hide it or boast of it, though being other than normal is a perilous advantage." Barney qt. in Diana Souhami, *No Modernism without Lesbians* (London: Head of Zeus, 2020), 213.

⁴² Linge, 388.

of maleness” but rather it “affords us a glimpse of how masculinity is constructed as masculinity.”⁴³ The lack of (scholarly) discussions of female masculinities, he points out, “has clearly ideological motivations and has sustained the complex social structures that wed masculinity to maleness and to power and domination.”⁴⁴ If masculinity is there to uphold the hegemonic patriarchal order, female masculinity disrupts this system and questions its legitimacy. Halberstam argues:

that the very existence of masculine women urges us to reconsider our most basic assumptions about the functions, forms, and representations of masculinity and forces us to ask why the bond between men and masculinity has remained relatively secure despite the continuous assaults made by feminists, gays, lesbians, and gender-queers on the naturalness of gender.⁴⁵

It becomes very clear that the inherent link between masculinity and power is firstly upheld by cis-heterosexual men and secondly by women who play into patriarchal structures of submission. People who challenge these patriarchal forms of power distribution frequently transgress traditional ideas of femininity and masculinity – through their appearance or actions – and thereby assert forms of female masculinity. While Halberstam points out that the many attempts to disrupt normative power dynamics through forms of female masculinity have not yet been successful in decoupling power from masculinity and thereby changing the way society views gender, it is important to recognise the rich history of gender non-conforming people who consistently fought for change.

The FLINTA* artist community of Modernist Paris and England present a striking conglomeration of women and gender non-conforming people who stimulated and celebrated female masculinity within their art and writing, as well as in their personal lives. Halberstam suggests that “[s]ometimes female masculinity [...] codifies a unique form of social rebellion,”⁴⁶ and the non-conformist lifestyle of these artist communities can be seen as a rebellious juxtaposition to the confines of traditional married life and inherently heterosexist social expectations. Enabled by their financial independence, these wealthy artists of the early twentieth century used their privileged social positions to subvert gender expectations and rebel against them. Many, though not all, used masculinity and cross-

⁴³ Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*. 20th Anniversary Edition (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 1.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

dressing as a strategy of self-empowerment. Halberstam also emphasises the importance of affluence when it comes to the subversion of gender in the early twentieth century, stating “[m]asculine identification with social impunity required money and social status.”⁴⁷ Without a financial safety net, their abilities to freely express their non-conforming gender identities and non-heteronormative love life would have differed dramatically. To an extent, their wealth bought them safety – a safety working-class FLINTA* people could not afford.

Brooks’s *Left Bank Portraits* are visibly queer-coded and proudly exhibit the gender non-conformity of the sitters. Their female masculinity signals their social, sexual, and financial independence, heralding a new era of visibly queer FLINTA* individuals. Susan Gubar argues that “cross-dressing can free the woman from being a sex object for men, even as it expresses the mutilation inextricably related to inversion when it is experienced as perversion.”⁴⁸ While the term ‘mutilation’ suggests a harsh lived reality, this added distance between general society and its outliers may have been a welcomed change in the Sapphic community surrounding Brooks. Some of these people decidedly opted against any association with men and their wealth enabled them to distance themselves from defamatory gossip outside of their own social circles. Thus, cross-dressing becomes more than a mere fashion choice in the Sapphic community of Paris; it was just as much a marker of identity as it was a political statement. The gender non-conforming style of Brooks and the expatriate artists and writers living in Modernist Paris, as well as Gluck and the British contemporaries, not only turned heads within artistic and literary circles but most likely also in the extended general public – and yet their social status enabled them to rise above it.

Laura Doan points out that cross-dressing had different legal or political repercussions in France and England. In Paris, it was illegal for a woman to wear trousers, which may have added a “transgressive thrill” to the practice. Meanwhile, cross-dressing was not legally regulated in England but still stigmatised and, therefore, had a certain “shock value” to the public.⁴⁹ The early twentieth century encapsulated a pivotal moment in women’s fashion with the look of the New Women – an increasingly more androgynous and streamlined style compared to the decadent early Victorian fashion. Doan points out that “[b]y the 1920s the

⁴⁷ Ibid., 87.

⁴⁸ Susan Gubar, “Blessings in Disguise: Cross-Dressing as Re-Dressing for Female Modernists,” *The Massachusetts Review* 22 no. 3 (1981): 486.

⁴⁹ Doan, 97-98.

New Woman had evolved into the Modern Girl and the Masculine Woman. " The Modern Girl exhibits "boyishness rather than mannishness"⁵⁰ and the Masculine Woman "older in age than the Modern Girl, seemed ominously poised to disturb sexuality as well as gender."⁵¹ Doan further highlights that the Masculine Woman was not necessarily a lesbian and states that "[l]esbians seem generally to have followed the fashion trends during the 1920s and did not single out trousers as a sign of sexual identity."⁵² Nevertheless, trousers and other masculine fashion in the 1920s are a clear symbol of female masculinity, and while it is difficult and, at times, problematic to deduce sexuality from fashion and appearance alone, these can still function as an identifying codified feature in certain contexts. Accordingly, Halberstam points out:

Masculine women in the 1920s sought widely for political and social equality and for contexts in which their masculinity could flourish. They chose uniforms and homosocial environments, they chose occupations where they could drive cars and trucks and motorbikes, and they formed a formidable force of cross-identifying women who wore their gender and sexualities literally on their sleeves.⁵³

Romaine Brooks's *Left Bank Portraits* depict the female masculinity of interwar Modernism in its most prototypical form. The FLINTA* sitters exhibit remarkable gender ambiguity, wearing dark suit jackets and coats, white shirts, and short hair, making their gender identity almost impossible to decipher. The portraits create a striking imbalance of femininity and masculinity that aims to disrupt societal expectations. Whitney Chadwick argues that "Brooks inserts her figures into a long line of well-dressed men about town."⁵⁴ By aligning her sitters with the aesthetic of the male (Modernist) dandies and aesthetes, Brooks echoes the visual characteristics of a dandy dress code and thus emphasises her and her sitters' queerness. By the 1920s, the dandy aesthetic was already strongly associated with male homosexuality – Oscar Wilde being the quintessential queer Modernist dandy – and Tirza True Latimer suggests that "[i]n any or all cases, Brooks, like her male dandy predecessors, clearly deploys fashion [...] as a means of engaging critically with the social codes of rank and gender."⁵⁵ Thus, Brooks's depiction of her FLINTA* contemporaries in masculine clothing can be considered a

⁵⁰ Ibid., 102.

⁵¹ Ibid., 106.

⁵² Ibid., 107.

⁵³ Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 108.

⁵⁴ Chadwick, 33-34.

⁵⁵ Tirza True Latimer, *Women Together/Women Apart: Portraits of Lesbian Paris* (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 55.

visual act of rebellion against the heteronormative society of the 1920s and 30s. It was as much a formal act of emancipation as it was a form of self-expression.



Fig. 1 Romaine Brooks, "Una, Lady Troubridge," 1924. Oil on canvas, Smithsonian Art Museum.

While all of the sitters for Brooks's series encapsulate a certain dandyish quality, her portrait of the British translator Una, Lady Troubridge, the long-time partner of Radclyffe Hall, can be seen as the epitome of female dandyism. *Una, Lady Troubridge* (1924) (Fig. 1), is depicted with two dachshunds and is wearing a high-collared white dress shirt, a black coat, and pin-striped trousers. Her posture is stiff and her eyebrow crooked, she is sporting a modern short hairstyle and a monocle and is looking piercingly at the onlooker. The portrait is

predominately dark and cool-toned, with different shades of black, blue and brown; only Troubridge's orange lipstick is breaking the muted colour palette.

The portrait is frequently called a 'caricature of Una,' yet she deliberately chose this outfit for the session. Even Brooks herself seemed amused about the way Troubridge dressed for it as "she commented in a letter to Natalie Barney: 'Una is funny to paint, her getup is remarkable. She will live perhaps & cause future generations to smile.'"⁵⁶ However, as Laura Doan points out "[s]he arrived for the sitting not in a 'get up,' as Brooks put it, but in clothing that captures the very latest fashion trend."⁵⁷ Una Troubridge and Radclyffe Hall were known to be fashionable, and their modern but sometimes slightly unconventional style seemed to be central to their (gender) identities. Contrary to Brooks's portrait of Troubridge, other photographs of Troubridge and Hall show her in stylish flapper dresses with a boyish silhouette and more feminine attire, which underscores the importance of her intentional breaking of conventions by dressing like a dandy for the portrait with Brooks. Thus, her deliberately chosen style mirrors her queer lifestyle as a prominent figure in the Sapphic circles of Paris and England. Troubridge, and by extension Brooks, is using fashion as deliberate iconography that signals homosexuality; the monocle, especially, was an early symbol of lesbianism. While Doan points out that "there is no stable meaning" for such codes,⁵⁸ the monocle's significance in combination with a woman wearing a tuxedo is strongly queer-coded, especially in the context of the Parisian Sapphic community of the interwar years. One of the first lesbian bars in Paris was a nightclub called 'Le Monocle,' opened by Lulu de Montparnasse in the 1920s, and Florence Tamagne claims "[a]ll the women there dressed as men, in Tuxedos, and wore their hair in a bob."⁵⁹ Thus, the monocle's role as a clear sign of female homosexuality within the Sapphic community in Paris does not seem as 'unstable' as Doan suggests.

The female dandy embraces theatricality and underscores the performative nature of gender; however, the aesthetic of the dandy is not altogether a performance. Andrea Fontenot claims,

Troubridge cannot simply be read as cross-dressing; rather, her pose as female dandy creates a 'double drag quality' because each aspect of the male costume she

⁵⁶ Brooks to Barney quoted in Chadwick, 35.

⁵⁷ Doan, 117.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 109.

⁵⁹ Florence Tamagne, *A History of Homosexuality in Europe: Berlin, London, Paris, 1919-1939*, Vol. 1 (New York: Agora, 2004), 68.

appropriates – monocle, pinstripes, tailed coat, page-boy haircut – has the unusual distinction of feminizing the male wearer while masculinizing the female.⁶⁰

This doubling of the aesthetic subversion of masculinity and femininity, inevitably questions binary gender and normative dress codes. Drag as a type of performance art ultimately indicates a level of parodic intent, yet Troubridge's intentions behind her fashion choices were arguably not to create a parody of herself, but rather to emphasize her – and by extension her community's – queerness and non-normative gender identity. Classifying the (female) dandy as merely a form of drag limits the subversive and politically loaded potential of female cross-dressing in the interwar years. Correspondingly, Halberstam asserts:

On and off the stage, cross-dressing women in the early twentieth century [...] began a steady assault on the naturalness of male masculinity and began to display in public the signs and symbols of an eroticized and often (but not inevitably) politicised female masculinity. That some male impersonators carried over their cross-dressing practices into their everyday lives suggests that their relation to masculinity extended far beyond theatricality.⁶¹

Troubridge may have put on a tuxedo and monocle for the portrait to publicly signal her homosexuality, and her proximity to masculine women as well as her non-conforming lifestyle and identity emphasises the political statement made by Brooks's portrait. The female masculinity of Troubridge, Hall and their peers was arguably both a personal expression of identity and a 'politicised' rebellion against oppressive forms of patriarchal gender confines. Their presentation suggests that if women can be masculine, men can in turn also be feminine and thus the power structures of binary gender roles in the patriarchy are arbitrary, reversible and, ultimately, redundant.

⁶⁰ Andrea Fontenot, "The Dandy Diva," *Camera Obscura* 67 23, no. 1 (2008): 167.

⁶¹ Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 233.



Fig. 2 Romaine Brooks, "Self-Portrait," 1923. Oil on canvas, Smithsonian Art Museum.

Brooks's *Self-Portrait* (1923) (Fig. 2) depicts another iteration of the Modernist female dandy; this time Brooks is adapting her own masculine self-image into a publicised and subversively politicised version of herself. Brooks, once again, uses symbolism related to the dandy aesthetic in her self-portrait, yet it manifests differently than in the portrait of Lady Troubridge. Melanie Taylor suggests that "[t]he female dandy, like her male counterpart, is not a monolithic image, and Brooks's portraits reflect that historical and sartorial diversity."⁶²

⁶² Melanie Taylor, "Peter (A Young English Girl): Visualizing Transgender Masculinities," *Camera Obscura* 56 19, no. 2(2004): 11.

Her self-portrait, like the other pieces in the series, uses cool muted shades of grey, blue, and black. Brooks is wearing a dark coat, a top hat, and gloves; behind her are the indistinguishable shapes of a run-down village. Her eyes are shaded by her hat and yet glint penetratingly at the onlooker. This creates a fascinating dynamic of looking at and being looked at. In portraiture, there are the artist, the sitter, and the onlooker – while Brooks as the artist is looking at her sitters and thus produces an external image of them, in her self-portrait, she is commingling the external image and the self-image. By deliberately shading her eyes and parts of her face, Brooks obstructs the onlookers' view and thus looks at the viewer without being fully seen herself. She is playing with the power dynamics of the gaze. Usually, the onlooker is in a more powerful position than the subject, but this dynamic is reversed by Brooks: as the artist and the subject, she decides what the onlooker sees. “‘Ça, c'est moi,’ Brooks would declare to her guests, gesturing dramatically toward the 1923 self-portrait,”⁶³ writes Latimer. This reflects Brooks's superior attitude mirrored in her self-portrait. Her statement emphasises that the depicted version is how she views herself – masculine, mysterious, and distinguished. Ultimately, her declaration invites the onlookers to reconsider how they might view Brooks and how this relates or compares to her own perception. In a way, the factual sounding phrase mimics the implicit challenge of the painting and reaffirms her position as the one who sees but is not seen herself.

The self-portrait retains multi-layered elements of mystery, not only through her shaded face, but also through the background, and it implicitly challenges expectations and norms. We do not know where Brooks is standing or why the town in the background is in ruins. It may be a comment on the destruction of the First World War, an assertion of power and elitism by way of her expensive clothes in destitute surroundings, or an implicit suggestion that cis-heteronormative societal gender expectations are doomed to deteriorate. The mystery remains, but the stark juxtaposition of her clean-cut dandy appearance in the grim surroundings emphasises the deliberate composition of the image. It is as if Brooks challenges the onlooker to question notions of power, normativity, and perspective. Moreover, “Brooks's use of the dandy—a stock figure of her day— also has the potential to unsettle the very notions of sex and gender roles that at first glance it appears to reinstate,”⁶⁴ suggests

⁶³ Latimer, *Women Together*, 43. (Engl. That is me.)

⁶⁴ Taylor, 17.

Taylor. In other words, Brooks uses the elitist figure of the (heterosexual) male dandy to subvert what it initially stood for: male power. While Brooks does not make her intentions clear, the female masculinity of her dandified self encourages the onlooker to reconsider the connections between masculinity and power and question how this might lead to destruction. Thus, the portrait passes on important questions on societal issues that may have troubled Brooks and her generation or community without explicitly stating them and by retaining an element of mystery. Ultimately, Brooks's self-portrait does not exhibit a more masculine alter ego, nor is it a depiction of her in drag. Her privileged social position enabled her to break societal expectations and she flaunts her sexuality by posing as a female dandy. Glaring at the viewer, she challenges them to reconsider their preconceived notions of masculinity and femininity and "demonstrate[s] that masculinity is neither natural nor fixed."⁶⁵ Brooks shows the onlooker what she wants them to see and thereby opposes their expectations by subverting the traditional image of a 'women artist.'

Still reminiscent of the dandy as an icon and yet slightly less performative or provocative, the Portraits *Renata Borgatti au Piano* (1920) (Fig. 3) and *Peter, a Young English Girl* (1923-1924) (Fig. 4) depict female masculinity through a level of defiant gender ambiguity that destabilises the gender binary. Gubar claims that "cross-dressing becomes a way of ad-dressing and re-dressing the inequities of culturally-defined categories of masculinity and femininity."⁶⁶ Thus, in the early twentieth century and even today, opposing societal conventions in fashion becomes a politicised act and challenges preconceived notions of binary gender. Brooks's portraits can be seen as an artistic starting point for re-defining common understandings of what (queer) 'women' of the Modernist period looked like.

The portrait of the Italian pianist, Renata Borgatti, with whom Brooks had an affair during one of her stays in Capri,⁶⁷ underscores the aesthetic and highly stylised understandings of female inversion of Krafft-Ebing and Ellis. In *Renata Borgatti au Piano* (Fig. 3), the subject sits at a grand piano, sombrely playing a tune. The painting is rendered in muted shades of brown, taupe and black and has a gloomy almost melancholic atmosphere to it. Borgatti is depicted wearing a dark coat over a suit jacket and a white dress shirt. The sitter has a masculine

⁶⁵ Taylor, 2.

⁶⁶ Gubar, 479.

⁶⁷ Cf. Diana Souhami, *Natalie and Romaine: The Love Life of Natalie Barney and Romaine Brooks* (London: Quercus, 2013), 160.

cropped hairstyle and neither facial features nor posture give away their gender. Only 'Renata', Borgatti's traditionally female name, in the portrait's title, suggests that the pianist is a woman.



Fig. 3 Romaine Brooks, "Renata Borgatti au Piano," ca 1920. Oil on canvas, Smithsonian American Art Museum.

While we do not know how Borgatti identified – invert, lesbian, Sapphic, etc – her visual appearance in Brooks's painting echoes arguments from Havelock Ellis's theory on inversion. He suggests that "the commonest characteristic of the sexually inverted woman is a certain degree of masculinity or boyishness," and he continues that oftentimes inverted women wear masculine clothing. Ellis explains "[i]n such cases male garments are not usually regarded as desirable chiefly on account of practical convenience, nor even in order to make an impression on other women, but because the wearer feels more at home in them."⁶⁸ As Ellis suggests, masculinity or 'mannishness'/'boyishness' did not necessarily equate to homosexuality, but he argued that it can, in some ways, be seen as an additional aspect of queerness or as a means to counteract what we would now call gender dysphoria. Similarly,

⁶⁸ Ellis, Chapter IV, n.p.

Halberstam argues that “[t]he invert rejected the female body but did not always give up on femaleness; instead, she fashioned it into a masculinity she could live with.”⁶⁹ He highlights how female masculinity in Modernist inverts was embraced and could function as a way of subverting traditional understandings of binary gender roles. Halberstam suggests that the masculine women at the time were using their gender expression to “pioneer forms of masculinity that change[d] the meaning of modern gender and sexual identity.”⁷⁰ Thus Modernist inverts began to destabilise the traditional binary associations with masculinity and femininity in wider society. Their masculine gender presentation, and thereby the subversion of these gender roles, simultaneously seems to have had a positive effect on their personal relationship to their gender and the role society expected them to fit into.

The last portrait under analysis by Brooks depicts another striking example of female masculinity and, once again, subverts Modernist expectations of gender. The sitter in *Peter, a Young English Girl* (1923-1924) (Fig. 4) is the British artist Gluck. Brooks and Gluck painted portraits of each other, but the portrait by Gluck remained unfinished and the canvas was later reused; the only remains of the artwork are photographs.⁷¹ Diana Souhami, Gluck’s biographer, suggests that the encounter between the two artists was tense, and she quotes Gluck explaining:

Romaine wasted so much sitting time in making a row that at last I was only left an hour in which to do what I did – but my rage and tension gave me almost superhuman powers ... she insisted I should do one of my ‘little pictures’. I refused so she left me with the unfinished portrait.⁷²

While Gluck’s portrait of Brooks remained incomplete, Brooks’s portrait of Gluck is one of her masterpieces. Composed in a similarly muted palette to the other paintings of the *Left Bank Portraits*, Gluck is depicted wearing a dark coat and a suit jacket in shades of black and green. The unobtrusive background of the portrait is in tones of blue and grey. The sitter is looking away from the artist, showing off a strikingly androgynous profile with cropped hair, high cheekbones, and a sharp jawline. Once again, Brooks creates a stark juxtaposition between the portrait and its title: Gluck’s female masculinity is challenged by the almost patronising

⁶⁹ Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 109.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁷¹ Cf. Bridget Elliott, “Performing the Picture or Painting the Other: Romaine Brooks, Gluck and the Question of Decadence in 1923,” in *Women Artists and Modernism*, ed. by Katy Deepwell (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 70.

⁷² Gluck in Diana Souhami, *Gluck: Her Biography* (London: Quercus, 2013), 73.

appositive in the portrait's title *Peter, A Young English Girl*. While being dismissed as a 'young girl' may have aggravated Gluck personally, the cleverly chosen title reaffirms the portrait's overall gender ambiguity and fluidity as the masculine name 'Peter' stands in stark opposition to the gendered descriptor 'girl.' Thus, even the portrait's title destabilises and subverts gender norms.



Fig. 4 Romaine Brooks, "Peter, A Young English Girl," 1923-1924. Oil on canvas, Smithsonian Art Museum.

Androgyny in the early twentieth century had different implications than it does today, and even in contemporary contexts androgyny is not always seen the same way. Some scholars, including but not limited to Whitney Chadwick, Kira M. Campbell, and Joe Lucchesi,⁷³ use the term *androgyny* in their analyses and as a descriptor for Brooks's sitters and to a lesser extent Gluck's appearance; however, the term has a complicated history and might not imply what is initially expected – gender neutrality. Tracy Hargreaves argues that “from the late nineteenth to the twentieth century, androgyny has been produced as a shifting category, mobilised in different discourses – literary, sexological, psychoanalytic, sociological, feminist. The meaning of androgyny depends on its function in a given discourse.”⁷⁴ While, according to a standard dictionary definition, androgyny supposedly suggests “the quality or state of being neither specifically feminine or masculine,”⁷⁵ the visual appearance of an androgynous person is often more closely aligned with masculinity than femininity. If a woman appears more masculine, this female masculinity is equated with androgyny, whereas an androgynous looking man is often described as effeminate rather than androgynous. This discrepancy highlights the internalised implicit bias of our understanding of the gender binary. Full androgyny creates irritation, as the way we have been socialised requires us to categorise and differentiate into binary oppositions and since masculinity is associated with power, it is taken as the preferred default. Jack Halberstam also emphasises the role of binary oppositions in androgyny. He claims,

androgyny always returns this humanist vision of the balanced binary in which maleness and femaleness are in complete accord [...] to really explore the power of the visual images of female masculinity, we have to leave the androgyne behind and grapple with the implications of butch and transgender realness.⁷⁶

As Halberstam shows, androgyny is implying a harmonic balance of binary genders which is problematic because it partly disables the subversive potential of female masculinity. While butch and trans* are terms that are anachronistic in a Modernist setting they may allow us to

⁷³ Cf. Whitney Chadwick, “Amazons and Heroes: Romaine Brooks and Her World,” in *Amazons in the Drawing Room: The Art of Romaine Brooks*, ed. by Whitney Chadwick (Berkeley: Chameleon Books Inc., 2004), 10-39.; Kira M. Campbell, “Romaine Brooks and the Drawing of Self,” *Athron* 18 (2000): 71-75.; Joe Lucchesi, “Romaine Brooks’ Self-Portrait Photographs and the Performance of Lesbian Identity,” *Athron* 16 (1998): 49-55.

⁷⁴ Tracy Hargreaves, *Androgyny in Modern Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 3.

⁷⁵ Merriam-Webster Dictionary, s.v. “androgyny,” accessed May 1, 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/androgyny>.

⁷⁶ Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 215.

better relate to the experience of people such as Gluck or Brooks's other sitters. While Gluck's aesthetic may be butch, we cannot use butch as an identity category and retrospectively regard Gluck as a butch artist as it takes away the artist's agency and subjectivity. Regardless of anachronistic terminology, we can assert that the androgyny found in Brooks's and Gluck's portraits is more closely aligned with female masculinity than a neutral or 'balanced' gender ambiguity. Especially in the case of Renata Borgatti and Gluck (both in Brooks's portrait and Gluck's self-portraits), the onlooker may automatically assume the sitter to be male, and it is the portrait's title that prompts a reconsideration. This highlights that while Gluck and Borgatti may be considered androgynous looking, it is our biased alignment of androgyny with masculinity that provokes this association. Therefore, if we discuss these sitters and their aesthetic, it is more appropriate to talk about female masculinity as this highlights the politicised and subversive potential of their gender presentations – it does not merely reference the normative masculinity that androgyny frequently aims at but challenges the construct in its entirety.

Gender Rebellion through Female Masculinity in Gluck's Self-Portraits

The British artist Gluck was born twenty-one years after Romaine Brooks into the very wealthy Gluckstein family. Gluck shortened the family name and chose the name Peter as a way to be addressed by friends. The artist's active self-renaming and the rejection of feminine prefixes or descriptors indicate a certain discomfort with gendered language reminiscent of struggles described by members of the trans* community. Amy de la Haye and Martin Pel write:

It is also important to note here that when self-referencing, Gluck referred to 'herself' as a woman, with rare exceptions when the terms 'husband' and 'boy-ee' were used in relation to Nesta [Obermer]. However, scores of photographs in the Gluck archive have Gluck's hand-written details for return to be addressed to 'Gluck (no prefix).' [...] It was primarily intended to inform journalists of Gluck's preferred form of address, but in spite of this, they invariably used terms such as 'Miss Gluck.' Today, we might add to Gluck's demand, 'no pronoun.'⁷⁷

Following their suggestion, I have decided not to use any gendered pronouns when discussing Gluck and the artist's work. I also opted against using the gender-neutral pronouns 'they/them' as Gluck's insistence on 'no prefix' aligns more with also not using any pronouns at all. While this may result in slightly repetitive sounding language, it also highlights and

⁷⁷ Amy de la Haye and Martin Pel, "Introduction," in *Gluck: Art and Identity*, ed. by Amy de la Haye and Martin Pel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 13.

reflects the contemporary revolution of pronoun usage – many people today chose to go by multiple sets of pronouns, neo-pronouns, or, as I am doing here in the case of Gluck, no pronouns at all, and while this may be odd at first it is necessary to normalise and destigmatise gender-bending pronouns and simply following the rules a person sets out for themselves.⁷⁸ The act of naming – or re-naming – is a powerful one, argues Halberstam.⁷⁹ Thus, it is important to respect Gluck's self-identification, and even if terms such as trans*, gender-fluid, or butch may seem like accurate descriptors, we must refrain from using them definitively. They can be seen as contemporary identity categories that would potentially have appealed to Gluck and can help us in understanding Gluck's experience, but this is terminology and these were lifestyles unavailable to the artist. What we can deduce from the artist's gender presentation (short hair and masculine clothing), as well as Gluck's multiple same-sex relationships, is that Gluck clearly defied cis-heteronormative expectations of society in the interwar years.

Contrary to Brooks, Troubridge, or Hall, Gluck famously took to always wearing trousers and masculine clothing, and the artist's clear preference for menswear was continuously discussed in the press. In the article "Absent Dress and Dressed Appearance," Amy de la Haye features several newspaper clippings that discuss 'Miss Gluck's' unconventional style. These snippets highlight the blatant disrespect by the press to refrain from using prefixes and the endless fascination with the artist's clothing choices.⁸⁰ Not unlike the press and popular media today, these news clippings and their speculations surrounding a person's gender-bending style and potentially subversive fashion choices repeatedly emphasise cisnormative societies' desire to categorise people within the gender binary. What is often left behind are the opinions and arguments of the person under discussion.

In the case of Gluck, it does not further the discussion to question why and to what extent the artist's dress has subversive or political motivations or how Gluck truly identified. Nevertheless, we can conclude from actual statements by the artist that female clothing and linguistic descriptors such as 'miss' or 'women artist' seem to have triggered a form of gender

⁷⁸ Jack Halberstam discusses his stance on pronouns in his book *Trans* A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018) which can be illuminating to people who are new to gender non-conforming or unconventional pronoun usage.

⁷⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*, 1-22.

⁸⁰ Cf. Amy de la Haye, "Absent Dress and Dressed Appearance," in *Gluck: Art and Identity*, ed. by Amy de la Haye and Martin Pel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 164-185.

dysphoria for Gluck – gender dysphoria is defined as “the distress arising from conflicts between a person’s gender identity or expression and their assigned gender/sex.”⁸¹ What seems to have, in turn, provided a sense of gender euphoria was Gluck’s newfound sense of style. Gender euphoria has not yet received much scholarly discussion, yet in a recent study by Will J Beischel, Stéphanie E. M. Gauvin, and Sari M. van Anders the participants of their survey “described gender euphoria as a joyful feeling of rightness and experienced it in relation to their bodies, minds, and social lives.”⁸² Arguably, while the terminology might be more recent, feelings of gender dysphoria or euphoria are not a new phenomenon as can be seen in the (queer) FLINTA* artist of Modernism and adjacent avantgarde movements. For instance, in a 1918 letter to the artist’s brother, Gluck writes “I am flourishing in the new garb. Intensely exciting. Everybody likes it. [...] I hope you will like it because I intend to wear that sort of thing always,”⁸³ which highlights how the artist’s dress has significantly contributed to Gluck’s contentment. In 1925 Gluck explains “I’ve experienced the freedom of men’s attire and now it would be impossible for me to live in skirts.”⁸⁴ Therefore for Gluck, gender euphoria is clearly linked to masculine clothing and by extension, a version of female masculinity enabled by attire. Rather than questioning or labelling Gluck’s gender identity, we can analyse the way the artist chose to present it to the public – through Gluck’s paintings.

Gluck is known for having a broad range of painting subjects and styles – the artist produced various portraits, landscapes, florals, as well as social scenes, and refused to specialise in anything or join a particular school of art.⁸⁵ Within my analysis, I am going to focus on the three self-portraits: *Self Portrait, with Cigarette* (1925), *Medallion* (1937), and *Gluck* (1942).

⁸¹ Will J. Beischel, Stéphanie E. M. Gauvin, and Sari M. van Anders, “‘A Little Shiny Gender Breakthrough’: Community Understandings of Gender Euphoria,” *International Journal of Transgender Health* (2021): 274.

⁸² Beischel, Gauvin, and Anders, 281.

⁸³ Gluck qt. in de la Haye, *Absent Dress*, 169-170.

⁸⁴ Gluck qt. *Ibid.*, 184.

⁸⁵ Cf. Gill Clarke, “Gluck: A Life in Art” in *Gluck: Art and Identity*, ed. by Amy de la Haye and Martin Pel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 38.



Fig. 5 Gluck, "Self Portrait, with Cigarette," 1925. Oil on canvas, whereabouts unknown.

Gluck's earliest self-portrait was completed in 1925, *Self Portrait, with Cigarette* (Fig. 5) depicts the thirty-year-old artist in a shirt and tie, wearing a beret, and casually smoking a cigarette. The portrait's background is dark and Gluck's face, turned in a half profile, is partly shaded, yet looking quizzingly at the onlooker. Since the original painting was stolen, only black and white reproductions of it can be found, and the original colouring is lost.⁸⁶ One of these reproductions was featured in the 1973 exhibition 'Gluck,' and is printed in the exhibition catalogue. The artist's outfit, as well as the facial features, display an astonishing depiction of masculinity. This portrait, when compared to Gluck's other self-portraits or those of Brooks, is visually unambiguous when it comes to the representation of gender. It seems

⁸⁶ Cf. Simon Martin, "The Individual Artist: Gluck and Modern British Art," in *Gluck: Art and Identity*, ed. by Amy de la Haye and Martin Pel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 97.

to be the portrait of a young man; only the title indicates that this is a self-portrait of Gluck. The iconography of the cigarette is especially powerful, as it aids Gluck in passing as a man. Smoking had long been associated with men, masculinity, and by extension power. Thus, it is not surprising that many FLINTA* people of the early twentieth century, especially those in same-sex relationships, are frequently depicted smoking. Penny Tinkler argues that the link between smoking and men or masculinity started to unravel around the turn of the century and in the interwar years,

[smoking] was a sign of gender rebellion and it signaled a break from traditional forms of femininity. More specifically, smoking represented a rejection of the passive, subordinate, and domesticated 'angel in the house' and the embrace of an identity characterized by qualities such as intellectuality, an active sexuality, and physical prowess, previously assigned exclusively to men.⁸⁷

This symbolic form of "gender rebellion" in combination with Gluck's masculine clothing style, and rejection of verbal cues, pronouns, or titles suggesting femininity certainly creates the effect Tinkler suggests. Gluck rejects the femininity society would expect from the artist and creates a carefully curated version of female masculinity, thereby confirming Halberstam's claim that "[m]asculinity [...] is what we make it."⁸⁸ Gluck's self-made masculinity already differentiates itself from the dandyish female masculinity of Brooks and her social circle.

While Gluck occasionally borrows symbolism and apparel associated with the tradition of the dandy, it is unknown whether – and unlikely that – the artist would appreciate being aligned with the 'lesbian dandies' of Modernist Paris. Gluck considered them "very boring" and Gluck "scorned the 'lesbian haute-monde,'" suggests Diana Souhami.⁸⁹ It may have been due to their age gap, or their differing social scenes, but despite both being Modernist artists known for cross-dressing and having same-sex relationships, Brooks and Gluck dealt very differently with matters of gender and sexuality. This stark difference can also be seen when comparing Brooks's portrait *Peter, A Young English Girl* (1923-1924) to Gluck's *Self Portrait, with Cigarette* (1925). Both depict Gluck at roughly the same age and yet Brooks's portrait visibly ages Gluck as she aligns the sitter more closely with the nineteenth-century tradition of the dandy. Gluck's self-portrait, on the other hand, does not pay tribute to dandyism but rather

⁸⁷ Penny Tinkler, "Sapphic Smokers and English Modernities" in *Sapphic Modernities: Sexuality, Women and National Culture*, ed. by Laura Doan and Jane Garrity (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 79.

⁸⁸ Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 144.

⁸⁹ Souhami, *Gluck*, 72.

echoes the aesthetic of a newsboy. Gluck visually aligns the portrait more closely with the working class, whereas Brooks's portrait is signalling a privileged wealthy position. Gluck was definitely not working class, yet visually referencing a lower social class may have been the artist's attempt to relate the personal experience of stigmatisation and repression due to Gluck's non-cis-heteronormative lifestyle to the systematic repression of the British working class.



Fig. 6 Gluck, "Gluck," 1942. Oil on canvas, National Portrait Gallery.

Gluck's second self-portrait under analysis, *Gluck* (1942) (Fig. 6), depicts the artist at 47 years old, which is roughly the same age as Brooks was in her self-portrait. It is a close-up of Gluck's face, in vivid colours on an off-white background. The artist's hair is short, the head is slightly tilted, and the gaze austere and with a certain brazenness to it – Martin Pel goes as far as calling it “haughtily imperious.”⁹⁰ Similar to Brooks's self-portrait, Gluck's artwork contains an implicit challenge to the onlooker, demanding we reconsider preconceived notions of gender roles and the structuralised and internalised power dynamics these beliefs created. In Gluck's biography, Diana Souhami explains that during the second world war, the artist struggled to obtain financial autonomy, as all of Gluck's money was managed by trustees. The Gluckstein family's paternalism aggravated the artist gravely, which may have led Gluck to increasingly present “as a man, a person of power, authority and strength. To The Family [sic] this was a masquerade.”⁹¹ The 1942 self-portrait can thus be seen as a visual assertion of power and independence from the artist's family. That Gluck's family continued to believe the artist's decade-long commitment to masculine dress and a sexually independent lifestyle was a “masquerade” must have been incredibly frustrating. Therefore, the 1942 self-portrait may have been a way of re-asserting Gluck's masculine identity. Gluck's transgressive style on and off the canvas implicitly criticised the limiting and misogynistic rules surrounding gender in the interwar years – had Gluck been born a boy, the artist would have never had any issues regarding financial autonomy and would not have been questioned as much by family or the press. Interestingly, Gluck used the word “husband” as a self-descriptor in relation to Nesta Obermer, whom Gluck referred to as “wife.” Gluck writes “Darling Heart, we are not an ‘affair’ are we – We [sic] are husband and wife.”⁹² Despite Nesta already having a husband, their relationship was all-consuming and toxic. Nesta, however, “showed no intention of committing to [Gluck] alone.”⁹³ Their dedication to each other remained asymmetrical – for Gluck, it was marriage, for Nesta, it was a meaningful affair.

⁹⁰ Martin Pel, “Souvenirs of Gluck,” in *Gluck: Art and Identity*, ed. by Amy de la Haye and Martin Pel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 64.

⁹¹ Souhami, *Gluck*, 230.

⁹² Gluck qt. in Diana Souhami, “You/We,” in *Gluck: Art and Identity*, ed. by Amy de la Haye and Martin Pel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 50.

⁹³ Souhami, *You/We*, 57.



Fig. 7 Gluck, "Medallion," [You/We], 1936. Oil on canvas, Private Collection. Obelisk Art History Project.

Arguably, Gluck's most celebrated painting is the double portrait of Gluck and Nesta. *Medallion* (1937) (Fig. 7), often also referred to as *You/We*, is the artist's visual representation of their relationship and symbolically epitomises their 'marriage.' It shows Gluck and Nesta's profiles up close: Gluck, in the foreground, with cropped brown hair and a resolute gaze into the distance, and Nesta behind the artist, her blond hair almost halo-like, framing the two people. She is looking upwards to the top left corner of the painting, her gaze softer and more hopeful than Gluck's. The background is a subtle colour gradient from off-white to dark grey, and the two sitters wear shirts with collars, suggesting more masculine dress. Nesta's face is lit up, while Gluck remains slightly more shaded, which ultimately puts the focal point on the artist's partner. Thereby, the onlooker mimics Gluck's point of view not only as the painter but also as the partner looking appreciatingly at their loved one.

The portrait conjoins the two people at their heads, which signals their unity or oneness. *Medallion's* unofficial title – *You/We* – echoes this visual synthesis of souls and emphasises Gluck's intended message of commitment to Nesta. After finishing the painting Gluck wrote to Nesta "Now it is out [...] And to the rest of the Universe I call 'Beware! Beware!' We are not to be trifled with."⁹⁴ Thus, for Gluck, the painting was clearly more than a portrait: it was a statement of love and their united futures. Gluck's declaration of love for Nesta was, in turn, also a confirmatory statement of homosexuality. Gluck's female masculinity always provoked speculations about the artist's sexuality – these assumptions by the public caused Gluck's family to worry, and Gluck to crave the possibility of being open about the relationship with Nesta all the more.⁹⁵ Souhami reminds her readers that, while female homosexuality was not illegal in Britain at the time, "the Establishment – judiciary, government and the press – insisted they should be neither visible nor heard."⁹⁶ Opposing the widespread homophobia and discrimination, Gluck uses the symbolism of female masculinity – masculine dress and gender-ambiguous facial features – as well as the literal fusing of their heads as a means to emphasise the (homosexual) union of bodies and minds in the *You/We* portrait. Arguably, the painting and Gluck's subsequent celebration of it as the artist's and Nesta's wedding picture was as much of a public statement of female homosexuality as was possible in the mid-1930s. Only 4 years after Gluck's death, the double portrait was used as the cover art of the 1982 Virago Press edition of Radclyffe Hall's 1928 novel *The Well of Loneliness*, which not only increased the painting's degree of fame but also its direct association with lesbianism. While Gluck may not have been friends with Hall, Troubridge, Brooks and their extended circle, this conjoining of queer literature and art – and thus the inevitable and irrevocable association of queerness with the painting – would most likely have pleased the artist.

Both Brooks and Gluck were non-conforming in art and lifestyles. They rejected cis-heteronormative gender roles and expectations and, in doing so, subverted the standards of gender and sexuality in Modernist society. In their personal lives, the artists loved women and were part of queer FLINTA* Modernist communities. On the canvas, they echoed their lifestyle and signalled it outwardly for generations to come. Using their privileged social status and the ability to openly express their female masculinity to their advantage, the art by Brooks

⁹⁴ Gluck qt. in Souhami, Gluck, 152, original emphasis.

⁹⁵ Cf Souhami, *You/We*, 52.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 52.

and Gluck initiates a widespread change in FLINTA* self-expression in Modernist portraiture. Moreover, when Halberstam claims “female masculinity is a specific gender with its own cultural history rather than simply a derivative of male masculinity,”⁹⁷ we can take Brooks and Gluck as examples of this cultural history. While considering female masculinity as a gender altogether may be taking it a little far, it is certainly valuable to consider female masculinity and its various expressions in Modernism as an important historical factor in shaping masculine-presenting queer and trans* identities of the decades to come. Gluck’s and Brooks’s subversive use of masculine clothing and its representation through fine art enables us to see a historical evolution of female masculinities. Gluck’s sincerity when it comes to showcasing the artist’s masculinity juxtaposes Brooks’s more playful and theatrical references to the masculine dandy tradition. Brooks’s dandies pay homage to an even older historical tradition linked to homosexuality and queerness. In this chapter, I showed how female masculinity and dandyism in Brooks’s and Gluck’s paintings reconstruct a history of gender non-conforming and masculine presenting people. The artists depict how they viewed themselves and their community from their queer perspectives rather than strictly following the descriptions made by sexologists of the period. The visual tradition of Brooks’s dandies and Gluck’s masculine self-presentation is still frequently referenced in the queer community up until today and contemporary butch or trans* masc people follow in the footsteps of these Modernist pioneers. Still following the lasting echoes of dandyism, but moving on from the earnestness of Modernist portraiture, in the next chapter we leave the European continent and look at the Dadaist artist and German expatriate Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven in the urban mayhem of interwar New York. She is directly challenging the normative gender roles of the interwar society and is boisterous, outrageous, and Camp in her approach to gender non-conformity.

⁹⁷ Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 77.

2. (Proto-)Camp Performativity and Futurist Gender Play in Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven's Dadaist Performance Art.⁹⁸

"Freedom: DADA DADA DADA, a roaring of tense colors, and interlacing of opposites and of all contradictions, grotesques, inconsistencies: LIFE." ⁹⁹

Dadaism was a brief avant-garde movement of the 1910s and 20s that started in Zurich with the *Cabaret Voltaire* collective, but quickly spread to all major art hubs of the interwar period. New York Dada, albeit not formally called Dada until 1921, centred around Man Ray, Francis Picabia, Marcel Duchamp, and Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven. It was radical and disruptive of normative early twentieth-century culture and art production. In its most basic form, Dada can be seen as an anti-movement: anti-art, anti-bourgeoisie, anti-capitalism, anti-normative, etcetera. Daniela Padularosa claims "Dada combined contradictions: it was an artistic movement but also 'anti-art'; it was political and apolitical, international and polyglot, as well as ancestral and adamic,"¹⁰⁰ thereby echoing the introductory quote by Tristan Tzara from his 1918 Dada Manifesto. In this light, it can be argued that Dada is both and Dada is neither, Dada is here but it is not. It is the inconsistencies and contradictions within the movement that enable the wide-ranging array of visual art, ready-mades, collages, and performance art. Amelia Jones claims New York Dada "challenged bourgeois morality in the most aggressive way through the opening of art to the erotic exchange of interpretation, in particular via the *sexualization* or *eroticization* of the subjects and objects of art."¹⁰¹ For instance, the figure of the dandy – a style or iconography originally linked to elitism and bourgeoisie morality – was initially re-fashioned and re-claimed by Modernist artists people such as Romaine Brooks as seen in my previous chapter. This iconography was also picked up by Dadaist artists such as Marcel Duchamp who eroticised the figure of the dandy and turned

⁹⁸ Aspects of this chapter are a re-worked and extended version of a previous essay of mine called "Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven's Dadaist Gender Play as a Form of Proto-Camp Sensibility," which was written for the WS2020 Seminar "240075-1 Call Me Mother! Konfigurationen von Drag, Gender und Marginalität in Camp Diskursen."

⁹⁹ Tristan Tzara, "Dada Manifesto (1918)," 391.org, accessed May 4, 2023, <https://391.org/manifestos/1918-dada-manifesto-tristan-tzara/>. For a digitised version of the original publication in French see Tzara, Tristan. "Manifeste Dada 1918" DADA 3, 1918. Kunsthau Zürich, Library, DADA III:33:3, (Zürich: ProLitteris, 2016), <https://digital.kunsthau.ch/dadaismus/en/dada-on-paper#!artwork/dada-3-tristan-tzara>.

¹⁰⁰ Daniela Padularosa, "Anti-Art? Dada and Anarchy" in *Anarchism and the Avant-Garde: Radical Arts and Politics in Perspective*, ed. by Carolin Kosuch (Leiden: Brill Rodolpi, 2019), 100.

¹⁰¹ Amelia Jones. "Eros, That's Life or the Baroness' Penis." in *Making Mischief: Dada Invades New York* ed. by Francis M. Naumann and Beth Venn (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996), 239, original emphasis.

it into a parody. The Dadaists question normativity as well as narrow-minded, prudish early twentieth-century society by radically subverting pre-existing concepts and relying on the shock value of their pieces or performances. Baroness Elsa was notorious for erotically charged and exuberant displays of Dada: she played with patriarchal norms and gender and criticised society wherever possible. Within this chapter, I am going to focus on Baroness Elsa's gender play, her criticism of gender roles, and her radical and subversive performative approach to life and normativity. I will argue that the queer concept of Camp, which was introduced in the latter half of the twentieth century, can be used to analyse the Baroness's art, performances, and aesthetics; that her creative output can be seen as a form of (proto-) Camp performativity.

Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven's arrival in New York in the early 1910s triggered a significant increase in Dadaist art production. The German-born Baroness, who re-invented herself as a Dadaist figurehead upon her arrival in the city, quickly became the central Dadaist in New York. She completely outdid her contemporaries with her wildly extravagant fashion choices, radical poetry, and provocative performance pieces. Her reputation was shocking and varied: some praised her for her artistic choices, while others tried to avoid her at all costs. Robert Reiss claims she "became a sort of mascot of [the New York Dadaists'] cultural program, described by her contemporaries as the 'mother of Dada.'"¹⁰² Mascot and mother have very different implications, yet both fit the Baroness: mascot suggests her being a symbolic and recognisable figurehead among the Dadaists, whereas mother implies her having a significant role in creating and nurturing New York Dadaism. Both terms emphasise her centrality in the movement. The Baroness likely was the first or the 'mother' of New York Dada, since Dadaism as a descriptor for the artistic output produced there only emerged in the early 1920s, after several years of Baroness Elsa's contributions to the movement. Jay Bochner explains,

Historically most of Dada in New York is subsumed into a category called 'proto-Dada,' but when the goofy word finally shows its face here, in the 1921 magazine *New York Dada*, it is to declare, in Tristan Tzara's pronouncement, that God and my toothbrush

¹⁰² Robert, Reiss. "'My Baroness': Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven," in *New York Dada* ed. by Rudolf E. Kuenzli (New York: Willis Locker & Owens, 1986), 81.

are Dada, and New Yorkers can be Dada too, if they are not already; which is to say that proto-Dada could be Dada.¹⁰³

Thus, the performance art, self-aggrandizement, poetry, and lifestyle choices of the Baroness throughout the 1910s and early 1920s should be seen as instances of Dada.

Regardless of her title, the Baroness's life was not glamorous in the typical sense of the word. After the death of her third husband, through whom she had acquired the title, her previously somewhat affluent life turned into what Lauren Ross describes as "squalor." Moreover, Ross points out that Baroness Elsa was "sometimes homeless" and "frequently shoplifting."¹⁰⁴ This description is echoed by the American writer William Carlos Williams, who once described the Baroness's apartment as a "slum room where she lived with her two small dogs," and he recounts that the day he had met her, she had just been released from jail because she was "under arrest for stealing an umbrella."¹⁰⁵ The Baroness was not only frequently arrested for shoplifting but also for public indecency.¹⁰⁶ At a time when women first started to wear dresses that showed their ankles, Baroness Elsa was prancing around town fully nude or in extravagant clothing alternatives. Rudolf E. Kuenzli, quoting from Margaret Anderson's autobiography, writes the Baroness was

[p]arading half-naked in her spare costumes with her many dogs through the streets of Greenwich Village and helping herself in stores to whatever she needed for her art led to her arrest so many times that she learned to leap 'from patrol wagons with such agility that policemen let her go in admiration.'¹⁰⁷

This alternative lifestyle characterised by social and artistic rebellion has shaped the Baroness's legacy, and Kuenzli argues "[t]o her friends and acquaintances she was the epitome of Dada anarchy, sexual freedom, and creativity."¹⁰⁸ While the Baroness had a substantial number of admirers and critics during her lifetime, her art, poetry, and performances were forgotten fairly quickly by the general public, and exhibitions of her work are still scarce. Dadaism tends to be remembered for its male artists. Ruth Hemus points out,

¹⁰³ Jay Bochner. "dAdAmAgS" in *Making Mischief: Dada Invades New York* ed. by Francis M. Naumann and Beth Venn (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996), 215, original emphasis.

¹⁰⁴ Lauren Ross. "Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven (1874-1927)" in *Making Mischief: Dada Invades New York* ed. by Francis M. Naumann and Beth Venn (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996), 184.

¹⁰⁵ William Carlos Williams, *Autobiography* (New York : New Directions Publishing Corp., 1967), 168, 164.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Ross, 184.

¹⁰⁷ Rudolf E. Kuenzli. "Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven and New York Dada." in *Women in Dada* ed. by Naomi Sawelson-Gorse (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1998), 445.

Margaret Anderson, *My Thirty Years War: An Autobiography* (New York: Covici, Friede, 1930), 179, qt. in Kuenzli.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 442.

“[w]omen do not fare well in most Dada histories. Often, where their names appear they are accompanied by nothing than a few scant details.”¹⁰⁹ This androcentric focus exists even though female Dadaists such as the Baroness were often at the forefront of artistic revolution.

The Baroness’s art was heavily reliant on spontaneous acts, performativity, and thus a certain ‘non-repeatability.’ This, in turn, makes her work less easily remembered, as we are dependent on written or spoken accounts of her artistic legacy. Some of these accounts can be found in her contemporaries’ memoirs and literary work. For instance, Margaret Anderson writes about the Baroness in her memoir *My Thirty Years War* (1930), and William Carlos Williams does so in his *Autobiography* (1967). She appears in John Unterecker’s biography of Hart Crane *Voyager: A Life of Hart Crane* (1969) and is frequently featured in Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap’s literary magazine *The Little Review*, which is where most of the Baroness’s published poetry can be found. The editors of the magazine were some of the Baroness’s biggest supporters, and their insistence on publishing her work furthered the Baroness’s career as a poet and solidified her standing within the New York avant-garde community. Her writing was provocative, just like her performances and fashion choices. Tanya Clement argues that within Dada “the act of art is intricately tied with the artist’s ability to provoke a response from fellow Dadaists and the bourgeois culture.”¹¹⁰ Not only did the publication of her poetry prompt heated discussions that were also printed within the literary magazine, but her appearance, performances, and fierce independence widely triggered her male contemporaries and she was often considered to be, as Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick calls it, “a notorious presence.”¹¹¹ Moreover, Kuenzli suggests that

[t]he Baroness intimidated these male avant-garde writers and artists through her uninhibited life praxis, which challenged their accommodating, secure bourgeois lifestyles. In the Baroness’s eyes, these men were all cowards who, while producing unconventional works, still insisted on a conventional lifestyle and traditional gender roles.¹¹²

She rejected traditional family life, ignored the intrinsic societal dress code for women, revolutionised female performance art, and ignored her reputation within the (male) artist

¹⁰⁹ Ruth Hemus, *Dada’s Women* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 3.

¹¹⁰ Tanya Clement, “The Baroness in Little Magazine History” *Jacket2* (blog), May 5, 2011. <https://jacket2.org/article/baroness-little-magazine-history> (Accessed 27.09.22)

¹¹¹ Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick. “Reconsidering the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven and Kay Boyle: Feminist Aesthetics and Modernism” *Feminist Formations*, vol. 28. 2, 2016: 52.

¹¹² Rudolf E. Kuenzli, 458.

community. So much so that “the Baroness effected a kind of living collage that erased the boundaries between life and art,” as James Harding argues.¹¹³ Her life was her art; she lived and breathed Dada. This “erasure of boundaries,” enabled her to fully immerse herself in her work, but also challenged her to reach new extremes. However, Harding also points out that “[t]he characterization Dada followed the Baroness’s activities rather than inspiring them.”¹¹⁴ She did not want to be Dada; she happened to be Dada without really trying. Her predilection for self-fashioning on all occasions and the naturalness of the Baroness’s Dadaist lifestyle emphasise that deliberately trying to be Dada frequently misses the point. Her lifestyle embraced aspects of Tristan Tzara’s manifesto (quoted at the beginning of this chapter), despite not actively trying to do so. The Baroness disregarded limitations and embraced contradictions – she was the contradiction. She was the personification of Dada which was all and nothing at the same time. This is also pointed out by Amelia Jones, who highlights the inconsistencies and contradictory Dadaist life of Baroness Elsa:

Performing herself across boundaries — as penniless woman-for-sale, New Woman-artist, mannish lover-of-Duchamp, outlandishly androgynous streetwalker, a proud feminist dependent on male support — she became increasingly unbounded and ultimately ‘disappeared,’ a victim of, in her words, ‘my true honest love nature — and my unfitness to deal with the world — *unprotected*.’¹¹⁵

After her artistic peak in the late 1910s, she also vanished from many accounts of Dadaist art production and art historical reviews of the movement, often remaining a mere footnote. She also ‘disappeared’ from the art scene in the mid-1920s, defeated by her poverty, and died, allegedly by suicide, in 1927 at the age of 53 in Berlin.

Connecting two movements: Dada meets Camp

Before analysing the Baroness’s art and performances in more detail, it is necessary to briefly discuss Dadaism and its connection to Camp, as this is at the core of my subsequent argument and analysis. The two apparently unrelated movements of Dadaism and Camp have several aspects in common despite happening at two entirely different moments in the twentieth century. We can use the incidental nature of both Dada and Camp as their initial connecting

¹¹³ James Harding. “Nude Descending Bleeker Street Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven and Performing Gender in New York Dada” in *Cutting Performances* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 40.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹¹⁵ Amelia Jones. “‘Women’ In Dada: Elsa, Rose, and Charlie” in *Women in Dada* ed. by Naomi Sawelson-Gorse (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1998), 156. Jones includes quotations from the Baroness’s Autobiography in *Baroness Elsa*, ed. by Paul Hjartarson and Douglas Spettigue (Ottawa: Oberon, 1992), 56, original emphasis.

point. Wanting to be Dada misses the point of Dadaism and so does wanting to be Camp. Further, both movements are centred on modes of self-expression and rejection of the normative; much like Dadaism, Camp can be seen as an anti-movement. Even though Camp is often made out to be apolitical, through its popular renditions by way of Susan Sontag's "Notes on Camp" (1964) and the subsequent popularisation of Camp in the discourse surrounding Sontag's 'Notes', it is vital to view Camp as a political and critical cultural movement. Camp is, first and foremost, a critique or parody of normative cultural expression as well as societal expectations, which is exactly where another parallel to Dadaism can be found.

Camp, as a unified phenomenon and cultural movement, soared to popularity in the late 1960s – nearly 50 years after Dadaism. It was more widely popularised through Christopher Isherwood's novel *The World in the Evening* (1954) and especially through Susan Sontag's essay "Notes on Camp" (1964).¹¹⁶ Their writings introduced a more general audience to the term Camp and thereby almost commercialised its meaning; nevertheless, it is essential to underscore that Camp is above all a queer phenomenon. Definitions vary significantly, and the commercialisation of Camp is often frowned upon by queer scholars and other members of the queer community. The variation in definitions can already be seen in the different approaches Isherwood and Sontag use when attempting to verbalise the essence of Camp. Isherwood defines it through a conversation between his protagonist and another character. In the dialogue Isherwood writes, Camp is "expressing what's basically serious to you in terms of fun and artifice and elegance;" ¹¹⁷ the dialogue makes it clear that Camp exists within a larger queer context. While this brief definition does not necessarily verbalise said queerness, it is implicitly encoded in Isherwood's work.

Sontag approaches defining Camp from an entirely different angle: she comes up with a series of convoluted categories or criteria of Camp 'Sensibility'. Her 58 notes are partially contradictory and less than helpful for grasping the concept. This criticism is also echoed by Marc Booth, who states "[t]he attempt to make sense of 'Notes on Camp', to find its unifying

¹¹⁶ Christopher Isherwood, *The World in the Evening* (New York: Random House, 1954).

Susan Sontag "Notes on Camp" In *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, ed. by Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), 53-65.

¹¹⁷ Isherwood, 106.

principle, is hindered by its style, and, more particularly, by Sontag's little epigrams."¹¹⁸ Despite being unable to produce a uniform definition of Camp, some of her notes can aid us in roughly outlining her approach to Camp. For instance, in her eighth note, Sontag claims "Camp is a vision of the world in terms of style – but a particular kind of style. It is the love of the exaggerated, the 'off', of things being-what-they-are-not."¹¹⁹ This partial definition is then further complicated by the following 50 notes, yet it can give us a rough idea of how Sontag's notes are structured or worded. Regardless of its chaotic character, Sontag's essay has almost reached a cult-like status and "Notes on Camp" had a significant impact on the understanding of Camp in its entirety.

The biggest criticism regarding Sontag's "Notes" is her failure in highlighting the clear connection between Camp and homosexual/queer subcultures and contexts. Sontag writes "[w]hile it's not true that Camp taste is homosexual taste, there is no doubt a peculiar affinity and overlap."¹²⁰ While she acknowledges the link between Camp and queerness, she repeatedly emphasises that "even though homosexuals have been its vanguard, Camp taste is much more than homosexual taste" before finally concluding that "one feels that if homosexuals hadn't more or less invented Camp, someone else would [sic]."¹²¹ Her refusal to directly credit queer communities in the creation and development of Campness can be seen as queer erasure and, a step further, as queer appropriation. Understandably, queer scholars especially openly criticise Sontag's notes: D.A. Miller calls her arguments a "phobic de-homosexualization of Camp,"¹²² Sue-Ellen Case writes Sontag's attempted definition is "an avant-garde assimilation of camp,"¹²³ and Moe Meyer claims Sontag "[downplayed] homosexual connotations [...], sanitized [Camp], and made [it] safe for public consumption."¹²⁴ In light of these criticisms, scholars have turned to differentiating between Camp and 'pop camp' or 'camp-lite'. Carl Schottmiller explains "[p]op camp became a way for mainstream audiences (largely heterosexual) to take on qualities of Camp (irony, love of style and artifice)

¹¹⁸ Mark Booth, "Campe-Toi! On the Origins and Definitions of Camp" In *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, ed. by Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), 67.

¹¹⁹ Sontag, 56.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 64.

¹²¹ Ibid., 64.

¹²² D.A. Miller "Sontag's Urbanity," *October* 49 (1989): 93.

¹²³ Sue-Ellen Case, "Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic," in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, ed. by Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), 189.

¹²⁴ Moe Meyer, "Introduction: Reclaiming the Discourse of Camp," in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed. by Moe Meyer (New York: Routledge, 1994), 6.

while potentially ignoring how Camp historically operated in homosexual subcultures.”¹²⁵ Thus, in order to discuss Camp and not accidentally discuss pop camp, it is vital to acknowledge Camp’s inherent queerness and marginality. Meyer emphasises,

[t]he first move in uncovering and revealing the queer is the removal of the objectivist bias from interpretations of Camp. Sontag and her imitators are quick to define Camp as an attribute of objects. Even when Camp is applied as a description to the actions of persons, that person is described as a camp. This objectivist bias that reduces people to thinglike status is used to label Camp as extreme aestheticization and therefore apolitical. The arguments that defuse Camp, that deny it power as a cultural critique, are based, then, on a denial of agency.¹²⁶

It is crucial to recognise that Camp is about self-presentation and performativity, it is a mode of expression that opposes normative patterns in society and the art world. Defining Camp and its broad versatility still needs to encompass the fact that Camp, at its core, is queer, political, and critical. A definition of Camp “should be stable enough to be of benefit to the reader, yet flexible enough to account for the many actions and objects that have come to be described by the term,” explains Meyer and poses the following broad definition: “Camp refers to strategies and tactics of queer parody.”¹²⁷ While this may serve as an initial definition that may satisfy the need for a theoretical basis of the concept it still does not quite indicate the essence of Camp that frequently incorporates kitsch, trash, theatricality, self-parody, or self-presentation. While these aspects are not essential to Camp, they are recurring themes within it. In a way, Camp often creates a parody out of societal conventions by overdoing them; Camp is a hyperbole and goes against the grain of normativity – much like Dadaist artistic strategies and especially the performances of the Baroness. Camp has such a broad diversity of expressions; Sontag’s pop camp examples are not entirely wrong. Not even her attempted definition is completely faulty; it is merely not enough. Therefore, by critically expanding Sontag’s Notes, we can still utilise aspects of her essay for an analysis of Camp instances. It is however essential to look beyond what she proposes and always retrace Camp to its queer roots. Linking this concept back to the Baroness highlights the inherent Campness in all of her actions. Her performances can be seen as exaggerated, wildly subversive, and outrageously Camp. Baroness Elsa encapsulates the queer spirit of New York Dada through

¹²⁵ Schottmiller, Carl. “‘Excuse My Beauty!’: Camp Referencing and Memory Activation on RuPaul’s Drag Race,” in *Sontag and the Camp Aesthetic: Advancing New Perspectives*, edited by Bruce E. Drushel and Brian M. Peters (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017), 113n6.

¹²⁶ Meyer, 11.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 8.

her Camp lifestyle. Her nonconformity to gender expectations and traditional family values were the epitome of modernity during her time.

Baroness Elsa and (Proto-)Camp Performativity

Baroness Elsa did not produce Dadaist art, she lived it. Everything about her life was Dada; she wore outrageous costumes as her everyday attire, lived and performed her social criticism, wrote poems as weird as her costumes, and thereby shocked bourgeoisie society and the art world. Reiss even describes her as being “the embodiment of Dada to the marrow of her bones”¹²⁸ and Kuenzli states “[s]he dared to make art and life one, without any compromises.”¹²⁹ This commitment to her craft emphasises her unironic approach to Dada, especially through extremely innovative and modern performances. While many of her Dadaist contemporaries created art that was object- or collage-based, the Baroness’s main focus was her performance art, as this encompassed her daily life. Through her subversive Dada acts she rebelled against norms, politicised, eroticised, and performed gender in a way that was unprecedented in early twentieth-century New York City. Amelia Jones states, the

erotic politicization [of gender and the gendered body was] enacted most powerfully through dramatic self-performances, [it] worked in explosive antagonism to the veiled bourgeois moralism, utopian formalism, and romantic sentimentalism that [...] had reigned previously in the European art world.¹³⁰

As implied by Jones, the Baroness’s radical approach to the body, gender, sex, and eroticism consistently challenged her conservative contemporaries, who were already shocked by the New Woman’s shorter skirts, more masculine haircuts, and emancipated autonomy.

In her radical performance art, the Baroness disrupted traditional binary gender roles and presented a more fluid understanding of gender that was performative rather than inherent. This creates a link to Judith Butler’s theory on gender performativity, which albeit being a postmodern concept is still applicable in a Dadaist context. Butler claims:

¹²⁸ Reiss, 98.

¹²⁹ Kuenzli, 457.

¹³⁰ Jones, “‘Women’ in Dada,” 143.

Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure, but if this continuous act is mistaken for a natural or linguistic given, power is relinquished to expand the cultural field bodily through subversive performances of various kinds.¹³¹

Baroness Elsa “put on” gender as she pleased, transgressing boundaries and subverting normativity. When Butler suggests that “*gender* is not a noun [...] gender is always a doing”¹³² we can relate it to Baroness Elsa’s performances: not only is she performing her gender on a daily basis, but she is also appropriating and ridiculing masculinity and femininity in her performances. One of Baroness Elsa’s most outrageous performances was her creation and public exhibition of a plaster-cast penis. Her editor, biographer, friend, and lover Djuna Barnes referred to this performance in a draft, where she writes: “She made a plaster cast of a penis once, & [sic] showed it to all the ‘old maids’ she came in contact with.”¹³³ It is unclear whether the Baroness simply showed around the plaster-penis or wore it – perhaps even in the nude. Due to the Baroness’s tendency for exhibitionism, we can assume that the latter option is not entirely unthinkable. Her performative nudity was a radical opposition to the prudish and conservative bourgeois society. By posing with a plaster-penis, regardless of being nude or not, she reasserted herself as a man-woman: emancipated and independent from any male influence. Amelia Jones suggests that this plaster-penis “signaled the Baroness’s adoption of phallic attributes (as New Woman)”¹³⁴ which ultimately indicates her modernity. The Baroness, however, was more than merely a modern or ‘New Woman.’ Her lifestyle exceeds the limitations of modernity by overstepping the boundaries of what was considered to still be womanly. With her plaster-penis, she radically appropriated the ultimate symbol of masculinity: the penis. She emphasised how masculinity is constructed around a bio-essentialist ideology even though gender is ultimately performative since genitals do not equate to gender or masculinity/femininity. By wearing a fake penis, she is commenting on the wearability of gendered bodies and gender identity and the Baroness shows that the gendered self is produced by outside forces which can also be replicated or ridiculed in

¹³¹ Judith Butler “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.” *Theatre Journal* 40 no. 4, (1988): 531.

¹³² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 33.

¹³³ Cf. Djuna Barnes, “Notes, 1933 and undated,” 1.1.3, Box: 1, Folder: 3.0; Reel: 1, Frame: Reel 1, Frame 75. *Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven Papers*, 0009-LIT. University of Maryland, Special Collections and University Archives, College Park, Maryland. Digital Collection, accessed May 4, 2023. <https://hdl.handle.net/1903.1/6260>.

¹³⁴ Amelia Jones, “‘Women’ In Dada: Elsa, Rose, and Charlie” in *Women in Dada* ed. by Naomi Sawelson-Gorse (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1998), 157.

performative acts. In that sense, she is also emphasising how the body can be a site of subversion and resistance.

The Baroness's plaster-penis performance is also a feminist statement and a call for emancipation which is directed at other "old maids." In wearing a penis, the Baroness is criticising patriarchal structures and power dynamics. The penis as a symbol of power is directly connected to patriarchal structures; thus, in her performance, she is reclaiming agency and is symbolically rejecting the normative notions of male dominance. She is challenging the status quo and calls for the emancipation of women and society since the patriarchal power dynamics continuously perpetuate inequality and oppression. Moreover, by proudly flaunting her penis, she seems to suggest that men are redundant, as she can have her own penis, and, therefore, a life without men can be a life worth living. After three husbands and several unrequited infatuations with other men – the most significant ones being her Dada contemporary Marcel Duchamp and the poet and writer William Carlos Williams – this attitude may seem bitter and disappointed but could also indicate a queer awakening. Irene Gammel suggests that the Baroness had moments of "flirting with the lesbian identity without committing herself"¹³⁵ which indicates at a certain queerness of Baroness Elsa and does not make this entirely implausible. Djuna Barnes's record of the plaster-penis is from 1933, but it does not state when the performance itself took place, thus we are unable to pinpoint whether this may have been a direct response to male rejection or not. Nevertheless, the Baroness was known for having radical reactions to rejection by the men with whom she fell in love.

One of these creative outbursts spurred on by male rejection is recorded by Margaret Anderson in her autobiography *My Thirty Years War*. After being rejected by Williams, the Baroness shaved her head and put on a dramatic show of mourning. Anderson writes:

At last when she could struggle no more she had to think of something else to do. So she shaved her head. Next she lacquered it a high vermilion. Then she stole the crêpe from the door of a house of mourning and made a dress of it. She came to see us. First she exhibited the head at all angles, amazing against our black walls. Then she jerked off the crepe with one movement. It's better when I'm nude, she said.¹³⁶

¹³⁵ Irene Gammel, *Baroness Elsa: Gender, Dada, and Everyday Modernity: A Cultural Biography* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2003), 68.

¹³⁶ Anderson, 211.

Not only does this episode highlight the Baroness's frenzies of creativity and performance, but it also emphasises the theatricality of her actions. She expresses her heartbreak through the stolen mourning shawl, but at the same time ridicules the practice of mourning by reappropriating and repurposing the crêpe. She thereby ridicules her own feelings and by extension the feelings for yet another man that does not value her love. Her shaved head is signifying a rebirth of the self, just like the act of undressing. By exhibiting her nakedness, she highlights the vulnerability, but also the sexuality of the body. And when she finally declares "[s]having one's head is like having a new love experience;" ¹³⁷ she rids herself of previous lovers, just as she has shed her hair. This performance in front of her close friends Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap, who published her poetry in their literary magazine and supported her art and lifestyle, shows the absurdity and the radical nature of some of her performances. It also emphasises how "the Baroness made a work of art out of her own body and profile," as Francesca Chiappini states.¹³⁸ Her body was her canvas; she did not shy away from changing it by shaving her hair or painting her limbs. She lived the ethos of the body as an extension of the mind, and in her case, it was an extension of her creative mind and Dadaist output.

The Baroness used everyday objects found on the streets of New York City and creatively repurposed and appropriated them in her art, thereby radically subverting what was considered wearable fashion. In doing so, she commented on societal expectations or normative behaviours in ways that were entirely unexpected by her peers and created inherently critical and political art. Dadaists frequently incorporated mundane objects into artworks to accentuate the low threshold of what can be considered 'art'. Robert Reiss even claims that the Baroness "was a pioneer in the fashioning of found objects" ¹³⁹ and thereby influenced other artists and our perception of object-based Dadaism. The Baroness was a collector: she picked up trash objects from the street and morphed them into something useful in her art.¹⁴⁰ This urban and utilitarian approach to making art out of objects and giving them new meaning can also be seen in her infamous tomato can-bra. After the invention of

¹³⁷ Ibid., 211.

¹³⁸ Francesca Chiappini. "Spelling Errors as a Cry of Protest. the Idiosyncratic Language of the Baroness Elsa Von Freytag-Loringhoven." *Altre Modernità* 17, 2017: 202.

¹³⁹ Reiss, 82.

¹⁴⁰ Cf. Gammel, 185-186.

the bra in the early 1910s, the Baroness fashioned herself a bra out of tomato cans. The artist George Biddle reports on it in his memoir:

She stood before me quite naked—or nearly so. Over the nipples of her breasts were two tin tomato cans, fastened with a green string about her back. Between the tomato cans hung a very small bird-cage and within it a crestfallen canary. One arm was covered from wrist to shoulder with celluloid curtain rings, which later she admitted to have pilfered from a furniture display in Wanamaker's. She removed her hat, which had been tastefully but inconspicuously trimmed with gilded carrots, beets and other vegetables. Her hair was close cropped and dyed vermillion.¹⁴¹

The bra as a modern piece of clothing can be seen as liberating to all women, who had previously worn corsets or other restrictive clothing, yet at the same time, it can also be regarded as further capitalist exploitation of women through the fashion apparatus. The Baroness's ironic use of tomato cans as bra cups alludes to the discomfort of the new invention. Tomato cans are not practical in supporting heavy breasts, nor are they comfortable. In using this mundane item as a way to cover up nipples, the part of the breast that is frequently seen as the most obscene, she emphasises the absurdity of bras in general. The birdcage between the two cans references the restrictive nature of bras but also their historic predecessors: corsets. The dejected bird can be seen as a symbol alluding to women being trapped in socially constructed gender roles as well as uncomfortable and impractical clothing. Thus, her critique of the bra is well aligned with her personal fondness for nudity but is also a commentary on the restrictive nature of clothing designed for women, which ultimately controls female bodies and inhibits their freedom of movement – the fact that bras could also be liberating to women with heavy breasts seems to be pushed aside entirely. The Baroness politicised what was supposed and expected to be private: the nude body, the penis, and the bra (and by extension breasts); she was radical and unconventional. She made herself the art exhibit, her body became the display and she “had turned herself into a sexually charged art object.”¹⁴² Biddle's description of the complete outfit – celluloid rings, vegetable hat and brightly coloured hair – allows for a vivid visualisation of the Baroness's bizarre fashion choices. Her performance and her outfit foreshadow aspects of the Camp movement of the late 1980s by several decades.

¹⁴¹ George Biddle, *An American Artists Story* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1939), 137.

¹⁴² Gammel, 2.

Baroness Elsa's aesthetic and radical performances can be considered proto-Camp since she is radically subverting normative gender roles and behaviours and critically opposes societal expectations decades before Camp could be considered a coherent cultural movement. As previously discussed, Camp is difficult to define and can be split into Camp and 'pop camp,' the latter being the less radical, less queer, and apolitical version of the movement. Susan Sontag, who popularised the term Camp in the 1960s and is frequently criticised for her apolitical approach to the movement, suggests that Camp is a "mode of aestheticism" that sees the world "not in terms of beauty but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization"¹⁴³ and she continues by explaining that "[m]any examples of Camp are things which, from a 'serious' point of view, are either bad art or kitsch."¹⁴⁴ The Baroness's Dadaist performance art and her outfits which incorporated found objects, fall under this definition of Camp. Moreover, Marc Booth asserts that "Camp self-parody presents the self as being wilfully irresponsible and immature, the artificial nature of the self-presentation making it a sort of off-stage theatricality, the shameless insincerity of which may be provocative, but also forestalls criticism by its ambivalence."¹⁴⁵ Combining what is usually considered as "bad art" and "irresponsible" behaviour has radical and subversive potential, which is picked up by the Baroness in her performances. She constantly invited people to look at her much like Booth's claim suggests: "camp people [...] prefer to be seen."¹⁴⁶ Using the prefix *proto-* enables us to indicate the temporal gap between the Baroness's period of artistic production and Camp as the unified cultural phenomenon of the later 1960s, and emphasises that her form of Camp was not as thoroughly connected to the queer community and Ballroom or drag culture as it is today.¹⁴⁷ It is not a type of proto- 'pop camp,' because the Baroness was decisively political, critical, and queer in her approaches to challenging normativity, and her actions and style are not any less Camp than those that followed in the decades after her. Thus, the prefix *proto-* is only necessary if we want to temporally differentiate her early Camp performances from

¹⁴³ Sontag, 54.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 55.

¹⁴⁵ Booth, 69.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 72.

¹⁴⁷ Queer Ballroom culture has its origins in the latter half of the 19th century in New York and has been a continuous subculture of the city and the LGBTQ+ community ever since, cf. Tim Lawrence, "'Listen, and You Will Hear All the Houses that Walked Before': A History of Drag Balls, Houses, and the Culture of Voguing," in *Voguing and the House Ballroom Scene of New York City 1989–92*, ed. by Stuart Baker. New York: Soul Jazz Books, 2011. (New York: Soul Jazz Books, 2011), 3.

the ones that were born out of the queer Ballroom communities, but not when talking about her aesthetic choices or culturally critical performance pieces.

George Biddle's description of Baroness Elsa's outfit featuring the tomato-can bra encapsulates her Campness and shows how the phenomenon is appropriate in the context of her Dadaist performance art. The Baroness's style was eccentric, over the top, and kitsch. When Sontag argues that Camp envisions "things being-what-they-are-not"¹⁴⁸ this can be linked to this specific performance of the Baroness. By using celluloid curtain rings as bracelets, she repurposed found objects and gave them a new life. The Baroness saw the use-value of things beyond the consensus of what should serve which purpose, thereby criticising the inherent worth society assigns to different objects. Similarly, Irene Gammel suggests that "[s]he took the 'found object' as her raw material, systematically stripping it of its conventional semantic, utilitarian, and pragmatic meaning. By reclaiming it in a radically new context—as performance art—she effectively decolonized it from its commodity status."¹⁴⁹ This process of "stripping" and "decolonizing" a found object can be seen in her repurposing of the curtain rings. Due to their similar shape, the curtain rings can be used the same way as bracelets, yet they are made from cheap material as opposed to jewellery made from precious metal. By overlooking the aesthetic principles that construct normative ideas of beauty and style, she is repurposing the mundane objects in her outfit for practical reasons and because they were readily available to her. Moreover, Baroness Elsa juxtaposes the 'ugly' look of the celluloid rings used as bracelets with the gilded vegetables that adorned her hat. Not only has she repurposed vegetables into decorations and fashion accessories, but she has also coloured them golden to modify the presumed value of the vegetables. Biddle's description does not tell us whether these vegetables were real or perhaps gilded miniature versions, though the latter seems less likely since she even admitted to having stolen the comparatively cheap celluloid rings. Gilded vegetables but plastic bracelets – the Baroness disregarded what was typically considered beautiful, aesthetically pleasing, or valuable. She went to extremes and aggressively challenged the boundaries of normativity and the consensus of objects serving a limited number of purposes.

¹⁴⁸ Sontag, 56.

¹⁴⁹ Gammel, 186.

The Baroness created forms of aesthetic anarchy to underscore her critique of dominant cultural norms and her rebellion against oppressive structures of the patriarchal society. Margaret Anderson recounts several of the Baroness's outfits in her memoir and writes "[t]ired of conventional dressing, she began creating costumes which resulted in her arrest whenever she appeared upon the streets."¹⁵⁰ Anderson's statement once more underscores the stark difference between the Baroness's clothing style and that of the general public. One of the most famous outfit descriptions of the Baroness is so grotesque and unconventional it may even be difficult to visualise:

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 from which the nickel had worn away. 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 color of a bay horse.¹⁵¹

This outfit defeats any kind of categorisation and epitomizes the Baroness's (fashion) anarchy. It ridicules the traditional dress of Scotland and at the same time makes kitchen wear out of kitchenware. The outfit can be seen as anti-nationalist which emphasises the underlying cultural critique and subversion that is so essential to Dadaism and Camp. Nationalism was especially prominent in the interwar period, and the anarchic tendencies of Dadaism opposed the oppressive hierarchies and normativity that nationalism reinforced in society. Padularosa claims that Dadaism "transformed the political concept of anarchy into aesthetic and linguistic practices while stressing its spiritual and moral importance,"¹⁵² which is also prominent in the Baroness's art and life. The Baroness was neither Scottish like the outfit might suggest, nor American like the country she chose to live in, yet she was also not typically German. By appropriating parts of national garments in her outfit, it is as if she wanted to express that nationality is not of much value to her and that she simply liked the aesthetics of a kilt or tam o'shanter. This is complicated further since wearing Scottish national dress was banned for nearly four decades under the Dress Act 1746 to enforce English cultural rule in the Highlands. Thus, if the Baroness chose to wear a kilt simply for the aesthetic it is arguably

¹⁵⁰ Anderson, 179.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 178.

¹⁵² Padularosa, 99.

ignorant and insensitive. Perhaps though, her reasoning was more subversive, and she wanted to comment on and criticise (historical) clothing restrictions. This, however, is left to speculation since there are no clear comments by the Baroness regarding her intentions. Fabio Cleto writes “[a]s both a style of performance and a perception, the camp act was a statement of identity, and of cultural positioning.”¹⁵³ Baroness Elsa visually positioned herself above national or political alignments, she appropriated what she saw fit, and created a persona that was so distinctive nobody could mistake her for anybody else. Ultimately, her self-perception and her place in the broader cultural sphere find expression in her fashion choices. Amelia Jones argues that “[t]he Baroness is a figure whose boundary-breaking performances rearticulated gendered and national identity to an extent far beyond that to which most of the male avant-gardists, their anti-bourgeois proclamations aside, were ever willing to go.”¹⁵⁴ Her revolutionary, feminist, and anarchic tendencies, set her apart from most people she encountered and intimidated the majority of them. Even among the most radical Dadaists, she seemed to go to more extremes.

Besides the vivid descriptions of the Baroness’s outfits by Biddle and Anderson, the series of photographs by International News Photography from 1915, capture the essence of Dada and Camp in her work and showcase Baroness Elsa’s unique style and constant cultural criticism. Despite the limitations of black and white photography, these images allow us to properly visualise her creative and captivating style and Irene Gammel claims that these images are “the earliest portraits of the Baroness in New York.”¹⁵⁵ In this series of photographs, it is as if she is introducing herself to the city and its art scene, claiming her space amongst the artists of the avant-garde. The Baroness is surrounded by the chaos of her studio and yet remains the focal point of the images. The two images are alluding to two different yet related cultural spheres: while her makeshift gown and shoes (Fig. 8) are reminiscent of ballet performances and thus a commentary on broader cultural institutions that indicate a ‘high culture’, her skin-tight acrobat-inspired costume (Fig. 9 & Fig. 10) alludes to the circus and the androgyny of circus performers.

¹⁵³ Fabio Cleto, “Origins II: Queer,” in *Camp: Notes on Fashion*, ed. by Andrew Bolton (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 1/34.

¹⁵⁴ Amelia Jones, “Irrational Modernism: A Neurasthenic History of New York Dada” (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2004), 36.

¹⁵⁵ Gammel, 169.



*Fig. 8 International News Photography (INP), Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, 1915.
Photograph. © 2001 Bettman/Corbis/Magma. Gammel, 170.*

In the Baroness's ballet-inspired portrait (Fig. 8), she is criticising the inherently classist cultural institution of ballet by juxtaposing her own Camp performance with the Campness of the classical dance productions. Ballet is inherently elitist since ballet has long been entertainment for the wealthy and aristocratic. The portrait is parodying ballet as an institution: not only is it the Baroness who is performing – a woman with a title who would usually be the one observing a performance, but she is also posing as if she was caught doing something embarrassing. Hunched over, one foot pointed as if in a pointe shoe, her see-through 'gown' clutched to her chest, and her facial expression rather shocked, she is placed on top of an improvised pedestal presenting herself to the camera – her audience. The image has a near ridiculous character to it: not only is she parodying a ballet pose, but she is also exaggerating the act of self-presenting and is relishing in her self-created spotlight. Her performance is more Camp than Dada, especially since ballet itself has a strong Camp flair to

it. Both Isherwood and Sontag connect Camp to ballet: Isherwood states “[h]igh Camp is the whole emotional basis of the ballet”¹⁵⁶ and Sontag suggests “opera and ballet are experienced as such rich treasures of Camp.”¹⁵⁷ While the two authors certainly do not have a monopoly on deciding what is or is not Camp, their claims regarding this do not need much persuasion. Ballet is a dramatized form of storytelling without words; the story is told through dance moves, gestures and facial expressions and the dancers wear near nonsensical outfits, shoes, and sometimes headdresses. At the beginning of the twentieth century, ballet had a new peak in popularity due to Serge Diaghilev’s new company the *Ballets Russes*. While there are no apparent historical connections between the Baroness and the Ballets Russes, we can assume that she was at least aware of it, as the company had such a monumental impact on society and the art world.¹⁵⁸ Diaghilev’s ballet is no exception to the general Campness of the art form and Philip Core even argues that “the designs of the Ballet [...] are the templates of much modern camp taste.”¹⁵⁹ Hence, perhaps even the Baroness was inspired by the Ballets Russes’ Camp aesthetic. By turning herself into a ballet dancer, the Baroness is using Camp as the vehicle of her inherent criticism. She seems to question who is enjoying what is perceived as ‘high culture’ and why ballet has such a high standing in art and entertainment. Her own radical art has frequently been criticised as bad or too extreme. One of her critics, Charles Henry, even draws a parallel to the Ballets Russes in a review of her art in 1920. He states, “Her idea was admirable, but the form which she used expressing it was too Russian ballet.”¹⁶⁰ While Henry’s review does not refer to the 1915 image of the Baroness posing as the parody of a ballerina, it underscores the Campness of her art in general and in relation to the Campness of ballet.

¹⁵⁶ Isherwood, 106.

¹⁵⁷ Sontag, 61.

¹⁵⁸ For a more detailed account of the Ballets Russes’ wider cultural impact see Davinia Caddy, *The Ballets Russes and Beyond: Music and Dance in Belle-Époque Paris*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

¹⁵⁹ Philip Core, “From *Camp: The Lies that Tell the Truths*,” In *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, ed. by Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), 83.

¹⁶⁰ Charles Henry, “Discussion: ‘What About the Independent Exhibition Now Being Held on the Waldorf Astoria Roof?’” *The Little Review* 6, no. 11 (1920): 37, <https://modjourn.org/issue/bdr516535/#>.



*Fig. 10 International News Photography (INP),
Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, 1915.
Photograph. © 2001 Bettman/Corbis/Magma.
Gammel, 6.*



*Fig. 9 International News Photography (INP),
Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, 1915.
Photograph. © 2001 Bettman/Corbis/Magma.
Gammel, 8.*

Leaving the ballet behind and moving on to the circus, the other two images of the International News Photography series (Fig. 9 & Fig. 10) depict the Baroness in an androgynous acrobat's outfit that defies gender roles and categorisation and follows the (literary) tradition of androgynous circus performers. Her outfit, an aviator-esque hat with a feather as well as a geometric skin-tight acrobat's costume, is incorporating both elements of masculinity and femininity. The masculinity of the trousers and hat is weakened by the feminine fit of her slightly ruffled top. The shoes are the same as in the last photograph; instead of make-shift ballet flats, they are now repurposed as the shoes of an acrobat or gymnast. She is once more posing theatrically as if she was caught during a performance or right after landing an acrobatic trick. The seriousness of her performance fails not only because of the cluttered surroundings of the Baroness's studio space, but also because it is so exaggerated and self-assured, yet does not depict any actual acrobatic trick or talent. This can, once again, be related to Camp since Sontag argues, "the essential element [of Camp] is seriousness, a seriousness that fails."¹⁶¹ Her Campness encapsulates the artifice and spectacle that is also associated with circus performances. In a way, the Baroness is part acrobat but also part clown, utilising aspects of the circus to perform her ultimate trick: gender confusion. The Baroness consistently had an interest in androgyny and genderfluidity. Many of her later performances played with and subverted gender and the gendered body, as can be seen in the previously discussed plaster-penis performance. Additionally, Irene Gammel points out that already in her younger years "Elsa's gender fluidity was emerging as a trademark. With her slim waist, the virtual absence of breasts, and her short hair, she was the quintessential androgyne [...], combining female and male elements."¹⁶² Thus, we can see genderqueerness as a perpetual theme in the Baroness's art and performances. In the 1915 portraits, her interest in androgyny manifested itself through her genderqueer Camp acrobat. The gender ambiguity of circus performers or acrobats with their 'masculine' muscular bodies but graceful 'feminine' movements, has long been a point of fascination in literary and artistic representation.¹⁶³ The Baroness used this pre-existing discourse in her portraits, thereby indirectly challenging normative assumptions on masculinity and femininity and creating a persona that attempts to encapsulate a gender-neutral acrobat. A literary counterpart to the

¹⁶¹ Sontag, 59.

¹⁶² Gammel, 68.

¹⁶³ Cf. Naomi Ritter, "Art and Androgyny: The Aerialist," *Studies in 20th Century Literature* 13, no. 2 (1989), 173.

Baroness's androgynous acrobat in Djuna Barnes's character 'Frau Mann' in her novel *Nightwood* (1936). Barnes, who cultivated an artistic and interpersonal relationship with the Baroness, used her as an inspiration for several characters in the book. Barnes's character 'Frau Mann,' also referred to as 'The Dutchess of Broadback,' is a mysterious German aerialist who is part of a group of circus performers. Barnes may have been inspired by the Baroness and her acrobat portraits when creating the character. She describes her as follows:

She seemed to have a skin that was the pattern of her costume: a bodice of lozenges, red and yellow, low in the back and ruffled over and under the arms[...] – one somehow felt they ran through her as the design runs through hard holiday candies [...] The stuff of the tights was no longer a covering, it was herself; the span of the tightly stitched crotch was so much her own flesh that she was as unsexed as a doll.¹⁶⁴

Barnes's passage illustrates how Frau Mann's body has become one with her costume and props – she is the perfect androgyne. Not only is her name, *Frau Mann*, a linguistic amalgamation of the sexes, but the body has also become indistinguishable and "unsexed." The lasting echoes of the Baroness's 1915 portraits can be seen in Barnes's description of Frau Mann, and Baroness Elsa's androgyny is perfected in Barnes's character.

The Baroness's performances became more radical, outrageous, obscene, and Camp over time. While her portraits of 1915 are fairly tame yet loaded with political messaging and gender subversive potential, her later performances and descriptions or depictions of her outfits became increasingly uncompromising. By the early 1920s, she had transformed herself into the Dadaist moving art display as described by Biddle and Anderson. The Baroness's approach to life and her art was very much aligned with Cleto's description of Camp: "a form of heroism without deeds, a silent protest transforming the brutal imperium of nature into the beauty of artifice; it turned social exclusion into self-designed, privileged exclusiveness, and the humiliation of normality into the grandeur of self-invention."¹⁶⁵ Similarly, the Baroness created an environment where her actions and performances were the norms and the adjacent society – which she criticised through her art – were the outliers. She was aggressively progressive in criticising binary gender roles, advocating for feminist issues and emancipation, and radical in developing new approaches within art, performance, and poetry. Her anarchic approach to life and rules expanded the possibilities of Dadaism and envisioned

¹⁶⁴ Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), 12.

¹⁶⁵ Cleto, 1/36.

a future where normative gender roles and patriarchal power dynamics are less restrictive. Analysing her performance art as a form of proto-Camp performativity, not only underscores how her art and queer potential foreshadowed aspects of queer theory by several decades, but also reinforces the queer potential of her gender non-conforming art and reconstructs parts of the queer history of FLINTA* Dadaism. For the final chapter of my thesis, we are moving back across the Atlantic to interwar Paris, a place the Baroness also periodically called her home. I am going to discuss the Surrealist artists Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, who were also revolutionaries amidst their artistic cohort and interwar society and who challenged binary gender in art and life, futuristically transgressed their contemporaries, and underscored the general performativity of gender.

3. Through the Mask and in the Mirror: Visualisation of Non-Binary Lesbian Specificity in the Works of Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore

“Masculine? Feminine? But it depends on the situation. Neuter is the only gender that always suits me.”¹⁶⁶

One of the most extraordinary couples and artistic collaborators of the avant-garde movements of the interwar period were Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore. Radical in their political beliefs and Surrealist artistic output, the two defied art rules, heteronormativity, and fascism. The artists were a lot more private with their lives and art than the Dadaist Baroness, but not any less radical in subverting normativity and criticising hegemonic structures in society. Both were born in the 1890s in Nantes, met in 1909, the year that also marks the beginning of their artistic collaboration, and after the marriage of Cahun’s father and Moore’s mother, the two became stepsiblings in 1917. Tirza True Latimer claims “entwining the two ‘daughters’ in a familial relationship that undoubtedly facilitated their artistic collaborations and provided a degree of social cover for their intimacy.”¹⁶⁷ Even though their homosexual relationship was not illegal due to France’s Napoleonic Code, it was certainly something that was scrutinized by the wider public. Thus, having a pseudo-familial connection as a cover most likely reduced unwanted questions or homophobic assaults. Nevertheless, it can also be seen as a dangerous premise for queer erasure in historical accounts: their romantic relationship may not only be overshadowed by their collaborative relationship but also their familial ties. The couple lived together until their deaths, in the 1920s they settled in Paris, but they had to leave the city due to the war in 1937 when they moved to the island of Jersey. Despite Cahun’s Jewish heritage and the couple’s lesbian relationship, both Cahun and Moore undertook a two-person anti-Nazi-propaganda campaign during the German occupation of Jersey, which eventually resulted in the imprisonment and death sentence of the couple. They were saved by the liberation of the island in 1945, but Cahun, whose health had deteriorated

¹⁶⁶ Claude Cahun. *Disavowals: Or, Cancelled Confessions*, trans. Susan de Muth (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2008.), 151.

¹⁶⁷ Tirza True Latimer, “Claude Cahun's Mirror in the Lens.” *The Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide* 18, no. 1, (2011): 19-22, [2]. *Gale Academic OneFile*. Accessed May 4, 2023. <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A247741202/AONE?u=anon~eb62cb0b&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=c028ed13>. This online version does not include the original page numbers; therefore, I included the pdf’s page numbers in square brackets.

severely ever since their time in prison, died in 1954. Moore later committed suicide in 1972 to escape her arthritic pain and ill health.¹⁶⁸

Despite Cahun's astonishing oeuvre of writing, theatre performances, collages, and photography, much of the artist's work was forgotten about and not discussed until François Leperlier rediscovered Cahun's work in the 1990s, nearly 40 years after Cahun's death.¹⁶⁹ In recent years, scholarship on the couple and exhibitions of their work have surged and their names have become better-known again. Nevertheless, the neglect of Cahun's and Moore's work, in the decades before Leperlier's rediscovery highlights the existing heterosexist bias in art historical scholarship. Regardless of Cahun and Moore's involvement in Surrealist art circles and the avant-garde art scene of Paris, their work remained undervalued during their lifetime and only posthumously received increased critical attention. Arguably, the male-dominated Surrealist movement overshadowed the couple's groundbreaking work and their subversion of heteronormativity and gender norms, especially within Surrealist photography. Since the late 1990s, scholars have picked up on the couples' work and have highlighted their pioneering art and extraordinary lives, specifically in the context of queer theory and gender studies. Following this scholarly tradition in this chapter, I will discuss Cahun and Moore within the context of non-binary lesbian specificity using aspects of Monique Wittig's revolutionary essay "The Straight Mind" (1980) and building upon Levi Hord's notion of non-binary lesbian specificity. Further, I will use these theories in combination with Butler's theory of performativity when analysing Cahun and Moore's collaborative work.

Queer Alternatives: Choosing Names, Changing Pronoun, and Non-Binary Lesbian Specificity

Both 'Claude Cahun' and 'Marcel Moore' are chosen names – deliberately androgynous or genderbending and not connected to their previous family names or identities. Latimer argues that "[r]enaming, unnam[ing], and refusing to be named or labeled afforded Cahun and Moore a symbolic means to unravel the familial and cultural nets that enmeshed them."¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁸ For a detailed biographical account of Cahun and Moore's lives see Jennifer Shaw's *Exist Otherwise: The Life and Works of Claude Cahun* (London: Reaktion Books, 2017).

¹⁶⁹ In 1992, Leperlier wrote the first biography about Cahun in French, further he collected, edited, and republished much of Cahun's writing. See François Leperlier, *Claude Cahun: L'Écart et la Métamorphose: Essai*. (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1992).

¹⁷⁰ Tirza True Latimer. "Entre Nous: Between Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore." *GLQ a Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12, no. 2 (2009): 201.

The process of renaming oneself can be empowering, especially for trans* and gender non-conforming people who never felt like they fit their birth name. Latimer's argument highlights the empowering possibility to redefine the self, outside of familial or cultural expectations. This can also be linked to Halberstam, who states "[n]ames establish character, lead into events, and create expectations."¹⁷¹ Defying such expectations was something Cahun and Moore did regularly. Cahun especially took on an array of different personas and names – the artist published under several names among which were Claude Courlis (a reference to a bird with a hooked beak) and Daniel Douglas (an homage to Lord Alfred Douglas the lover of Oscar Wilde) before settling on Claude Cahun in the later 1910s.¹⁷² Since Cahun and Moore consistently used their chosen names in the interwar period, I have chosen to only refer to them under these names.

Moreover, the issue of pronouns is also relevant in the context of the couple. Similar to Gluck, from the first chapter, the pronouns used in publications about Cahun and Moore differ drastically, and attitudes towards the different use vary. It is always difficult discussing (gender-) queer people posthumously in a way that pleases everyone. Some scholars argue that Cahun and Moore, or other people living non-normative lives, should only be discussed within the limitations of their time. For instance, Gen Doy argues "I feel that there are dangers in basing a whole methodology on postmodernist feminist approaches."¹⁷³ Similarly, Danielle Knafo suggests, "[w]hile I believe that Cahun's art easily lends itself to interpretations based on theories that were refined only a little more than a decade ago, I think it is risky to apply such a retrospective analysis to Cahun without considering the personal, social, and cultural climate in which she lived."¹⁷⁴ However, I think that our contemporary understanding of gender and sexuality can be especially enlightening in exploring the non-normative lives of Cahun and Moore and aid us in understanding their gender non-conformity. I still agree with Knafo that the circumstances of their lives in the interwar period need not be ignored when using contemporary queer theory to analyse the couple; nevertheless, I think that contemporary queer theory is especially productive in an analysis of Cahun and Moore's work.

¹⁷¹ Halberstam, *trans**, 2.

¹⁷² Cf. Shaw, *Exist Otherwise*. 29-30.

¹⁷³ Gen Doy, *Claude Cahun: A Sensual Politics of Photography*. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007.), 37.

¹⁷⁴ Danielle Knafo, "Claude Cahun: The Third Sex," *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 2, no. 1 (2001): 56.

Returning to the issue of pronouns with this in mind: much of the literature on Cahun and Moore uses she/her pronouns for them and a lesser extent uses gender the neutral pronouns they/them. I have decided to use they/them pronouns for Cahun and Moore within this chapter, some of the scholars I will quote use she/her pronouns for them. I will not change or highlight this difference in every citation, and I will only change this through square brackets where it can easily be done without convoluting the quotation. When looking at the introductory quote by Cahun, it becomes clear that Cahun had a very fluid relationship with gender, and the statement “Neuter is the only gender that always suits me”¹⁷⁵ suggests an alignment with what we now call non-binary gender identity. Cahun continues the statement above by saying “[i]f it existed in our language no one would be able to see my thought’s vacillations,”¹⁷⁶ suggesting the limits of language but also the complexity of genderqueer identities. Nearly one hundred years later, language has changed, and pronoun usage has diversified significantly. People now are using multiple sets of pronouns, neopronouns, no pronouns, or the gender-neutral singular they. Given Cahun’s lack of language at the time but very clear gender non-conformity, using they/them pronouns seems like a fitting alternative to binary gendered pronouns. By virtue of their close relationship and continuous discourse of sameness and unity in their collaborative work, I am also extending the use of they/them pronouns to Moore. Jordan Reznick, one of the few scholars using they/them pronouns for the pair, argues:

[...] ‘they’ does not suggest an oversimple relationship between trans now and then but instead fruitfully entangles past and present perversions of normative gender. In other words, it is not an invocation of sameness but a mapping of shared conduits for gender’s troublesome fluidity. [...] ‘They’ thus accounts for both gender and the deliberate slippage of identity between Cahun and Moore while extending that slip to the trans temporal lapse through which their time touches our own.¹⁷⁷

Reznick shows how ‘they’ not only liberates the narrow-minded assertions that pronouns have on gender but also further highlights how using gender-neutral pronouns for Cahun and Moore underscores the groundbreaking and futuristic elements of Cahun and Moore’s art and writing as well as their unique bond to one another.

¹⁷⁵ Cahun, *Disavowals*, 151.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 151-152.

¹⁷⁷ Jordan Reznick, “Through the Guillotine Mirror: Claude Cahun’s Theory of Trans against the Void” *Art Journal* 81, no. 3 (2022), 54.

Attitudes and terminologies regarding non-cis-heteronormative gender and sexuality have changed drastically in the past 100+ years; thus, words and labels that are available now will always be anachronistic in the context of queer people of the interwar period. Nevertheless, contemporary labels can be especially useful in describing the lives and interpersonal relationships to a present-day audience as it creates relatability and highlights the historical existence of genderqueer and non-heteronormative relationships or people in previous centuries or decades. When discussing Cahun and Moore in terms of non-binary lesbianism, I am not trying to argue that they definitely were non-binary lesbians. In fact, it is likely that they would not have identified with those terms; however, I am using this theoretical framework for us to further understand aspects of their non-normative lives. Similarly, Latimer argues,

I hesitate to use the word lesbian to describe their ménage because I doubt that either Cahun or Moore would have accepted this or any other such label. [...] Nevertheless, *lesbian* is a placeholder for the nonnormative relational alternatives imagined by Cahun and Moore and other women in their Paris environment.¹⁷⁸

In viewing gender and sexuality labels as fluid and on a spectrum, discussions do not necessarily end up being limited or intransigent. Cahun's, and to a lesser extent Moore's, gender presentation was non-normative, their art inherently commented on gender stereotypes and was set to radically subvert gender clichés and normative aesthetics.

Moreover, the couple lived together for several decades, thereby defying heteronormative relationship structures, and they were financially independent from men which underscored their autonomy. When Cahun and Moore lived in Paris in the 1920s, they frequented queer locations such as Sylvia Beach's and Adrienne Monnier's bookshops and attended literary and artistic salons that undoubtedly served as great networking opportunities in the queer and FLINTA* avant-garde scene of Paris.¹⁷⁹ When Latimer claims "[t]he couple's address book from the interwar period reads like a register of vanguard Paris and situates them at the hub, not the margins, of the capital's cultural life,"¹⁸⁰ she is underscoring the involvement of the two in the vibrant community of the time. They not only walked the same streets as Romaine Brooks, Gluck, and the Baroness they might have attended the same parties or frequented

¹⁷⁸ Latimer, *Entre Nous*, 199-200, original emphasis.

¹⁷⁹ Cf. Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "The Equivocal 'I': Claude Cahun as Lesbian Subject" in *Inverted Odysseys: Claude Cahun, Maya Deren, and Cindy Sherman*, ed. by Shelley Rice (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1999) 115-116.

¹⁸⁰ Latimer, *Entre Nous*, 204.

the same bookshops. As my previous chapters have shown, non-normative lifestyles, relationship forms, and gender presentation were not quite so unusual in this Parisian circle of friends and acquaintances. This universal rejection of (hetero-)normativity among their contemporaries may have influenced and encouraged the couple further in their individual gender expression on and off camera. While boyishness and the rejection of traditional femininity were something that many women of the early twentieth century practised, more radical subversions of femininity and masculinity can be found within the queer avant-garde scene of the period. Jennifer Shaw suggests, that especially

[t]he photographs of Cahun from the 1920s suggest that her rejection of traditional femininity went beyond that pursued by the fashionable New Woman of Paris. Indeed, many of the images of Cahun show her not only stripped of feminine arb, but also with her head shaved – an extreme version of the close-cropped hair of the New Woman. Sometimes, Cahun’s aim seems not to have been to affect boyishness, but to strip herself of gender characteristics altogether in pursuit of some core of self.¹⁸¹

Cahun’s experimentation with gender, femininity, and androgyny in their early photography highlights their unconventional approach to gender this, paired with the sentiments from the introductory quote, can be connected to contemporary theoretical approaches to non-binary gender identity and expression.

Non-binary lesbian specificity can serve as a theoretical lens that allows us to attempt to make sense of their non-normative lives. Levi Hord argues, “the pairing of *non-binary* and *lesbian*, has the potential to liberate structures of desire as a whole, giving way to a model in which sexuality without gender is more redemptive than contentious.”¹⁸² Especially in the context of Cahun and Moore’s life, non-binary lesbian specificity may be a way of discussing their relationship towards each other and their gender in a delicate and nuanced way. Hord’s argument builds on Monique Wittig’s infamous and radical claim that: “Lesbians are not women.”¹⁸³ In her article “The Straight Mind” (1980), Wittig argues that ‘man’ and ‘woman’ only work in binary systems of heteronormativity. She claims that language forces us to abide by heteronormative systems of power and thus concludes “[i]f we, as lesbians and gay men, continue to speak of ourselves and to conceive of ourselves as women and as men, we are

¹⁸¹ Jennifer Shaw, “Narcissus and the Magic Mirror” in *Don't Kiss Me: The Art of Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore*, ed. by Louise Downie. (New York: aperture, Jersey Heritage Trust: 2006), 40.

¹⁸² Levi Hord, “Specificity without identity: Articulating post-gender sexuality through the ‘non-binary lesbian’” *Sexualities* 0, no 0 (2020): 3, original emphasis.

¹⁸³ Monique Wittig, “The Straight Mind” *Feminist Issues* 1, no. 1 (1980): 110.

instrumental in maintaining heterosexuality.”¹⁸⁴ Her claim that “lesbians are not women” then suggests that lesbians are simply lesbians and that this is already enough of a descriptor for desire, relationship model, and also gender identity. Therefore, Wittig’s approach to lesbianism is not necessarily a genderless one but one that goes beyond the binary genders that construct compulsory heterosexuality. Looking at Cahun and Moore’s decade-long partnership and their constant rejection of normativity, Wittig’s definition of lesbian already seems less restricting than a more standardised definition of lesbianism where lesbians are women loving women.

Levi Hord’s recent revaluation of Wittig’s theory, links it to contemporary understandings of gender and sexuality and can be even more enlightening when looking at the complex and surprisingly futuristic lives of Cahun and Moore. Hord’s central argument is that “Wittig’s lesbian is a non-binary figure who preserves the specificity of lesbianism outside of its overwrought exclusions.”¹⁸⁵ They suggest that the pairing of non-binary and lesbian breaks narrowminded and essentialist conceptions of lesbianism and binary gender. Hord explains they “work with the notion of *lesbian specificity* as an alternative to *lesbian identity*, suggesting that there is a specificity to lesbian experience that can be lived but which resists being solidified.”¹⁸⁶ This aspect is especially important in the context of the two artists, some of their lived experiences, despite being a century ago, may still be relevant or relatable to contemporary contexts, and yet it is not necessary to pinpoint them exactly. In a way, using specificity rather than identity emphasises the malleability of queer lives and thereby highlights the need for flexibility in terminology or definitions. Lesbianism is often thought to be built on an exclusionary basis – non-men who are attracted to non-men. However, Hord rightfully points out that a definition that is based on a set of exclusions rather than a set of self-identifiers can be counterproductive as it limits the potential of a term.¹⁸⁷ They continue by arguing that non-binary as an identity is shaped differently, they see it as “a subject position with a connected ideology about gender” and state that it “is more a framing ideology than it is an identity. It has no prescriptive content, no prescriptive behaviors or aesthetics.”¹⁸⁸ Non-binary breaks out of binary understandings of gender and relationships

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 108.

¹⁸⁵ Hord, 15.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 6, original emphasis.

¹⁸⁷ Cf. Ibid., 9-10.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 10-11.

and thus exceeds limitations or possibilities, in a way non-binary can be whatever an individual wants it to be: no gender, neither or both binary genders, gender fluidity – there is a wide spectrum of non-normative expressions. Thus, Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore's non-normative gender experimentation can also be aligned with contemporary understandings of non-binary identities. Seeing Cahun and Moore not only as a lesbian couple but also as non-binary individuals allows us to reimagine their non-normative bond and identities in a more nuanced way. Hord suggests that "[p]airing *lesbian* with *non-binary* [...] lets lesbian specificity flourish,"¹⁸⁹ which is exactly what we can see with Cahun and Moore. Forcing the two into identity categories that are too narrow, too specific, or too limiting is counterproductive. Discussing them as *women* feels inaccurate and like an act of erasure of their radical gender non-conformity. Similarly, *lesbian*, in its most common understanding of the term, also does not work as a label since it still centres on womanhood. Thus, Hord's notion of non-binary lesbian specificity, which encompasses Wittig's understanding of *lesbian* and creates a re-articulation of non-normative love, relationships, and identity enables us to discuss Cahun and Moore's extraordinary lives in a way that is liberating rather than restricting.

Cahun and Moore's Artistic Collaboration

Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore met in their early teens and their personal relationship and artistic collaboration quickly thrived and developed into a lifelong partnership. Both artists had a very broad spectrum of artistic output, while Cahun focused more on theatrical performance, literary writing and photography, Moore established themselves early on as a graphic artist, illustrator, and even fashion designer.¹⁹⁰ Cahun's role in their artistic collaborations was the more public one since they were the one in front of the camera or audience, and Moore's role can be considered as being more behind-the-scenes. Moore often made illustrations to accompany Cahun's writing or made collages out of their joint photographic efforts. Despite the recent rise in (scholarly) interest in Cahun's oeuvre, scholars vary in emphasising or acknowledging Cahun and Moore's collaborative process, for instance, Corinne Andersen mentions Moore briefly but fails to point out the potential collaboration

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 17, original emphasis.

¹⁹⁰ Cf. Louise Downie, "Sans Nom: Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore," *Jersey Heritage Trust Heritage Magazine* (2005) 8.

on the portraits.¹⁹¹ Tirza True Latimer, contrarily, discusses Moore's role in the couples' photographic practice and points out that "[h]ardly anyone would deny that these images result from some sort of collaboration since Cahun could not possibly have realized most of them without assistance."¹⁹² And she asserts that even Cahun themselves talked about the photographs as a collective effort they described them "as 'our photography' or 'our amateur efforts' in letters to friends, [Cahun's] use of the first-person plural possessive acknowledges Moore's involvement."¹⁹³ Moreover, Latimer notes that both of their names can be found on the rolls of film "indicating Moore's involvement, start to finish."¹⁹⁴ This shows that the artists themselves considered their work as a joint undertaking. Thus, it is crucial to include both artists' perspectives, lives, and works in scholarly discussions or non-academic contexts such as museums and exhibitions.

Nevertheless, Moore is frequently erased from their collective photographic efforts. Even though they usually were not the sitter in the portraits, their presence can still be noticed otherwise. Latimer argues "Moore's characteristic reluctance to step into the limelight has, by default, also focused critical attention on Cahun."¹⁹⁵ Many of the photographs featuring Cahun in elaborate costumes or poses would have been impossible to take without assistance, thus Moore's involvement was critical in the photographic process. Moreover, in several of the images Moore's figure behind the camera is casting a shadow onto the scene and their shadowy presence is emphasising their collaborative process. One of these images featuring Moore's shadow is *Untitled (Cahun on quilt with mask)* (Fig. 11) from 1928. Not only is the shadow indicating that this is, in fact, not a self-portrait, but the carefully arranged body of Cahun in front of the symmetric pattern of the fabric also suggests that the visible shadow in the bottom right corner was not accidental. Latimer suggests that the location of the shadow is exactly "where we are conditioned to look for the artist's signature"¹⁹⁶ which can be seen as an intentional and playful nod towards their collaborative process. Cahun and Moore's photography always appears strategically planned and the positions of motifs and

¹⁹¹ Corinne Andersen, "Que me veux-tu?/ What do you want of me?: Claude Cahun's Autoportraits and the Process of Gender Identification," *Women in French Studies* 13 (2005): 37-50.

¹⁹² Latimer, *Mirror in the Lense*, [1].

¹⁹³ Latimer, *Entre Nous*, 199.

¹⁹⁴ Latimer, *Women Together*, 71.

¹⁹⁵ Latimer, *Entre Nous*, 199.

¹⁹⁶ Latimer, *Mirror in the Lense*, [2].

bodies seem very intentionally placed. Since this is not the only image of Cahun where Moore's shadow intrudes into the scene, it is even more likely that this is a recurring artistic choice rather than a mistake that happened on multiple occasions.



Fig. 11 Claude Cahun, "Untitled. (Cahun on quilt with mask)," 1929. Photograph. Jersey Heritage Trust. Shaw, Reading Disavowals, 73.

When Moore's shadow is visible it creates underscores the involvement of another person albeit image titles such as "self-portrait" which tend to indicate otherwise. The photographer is a seen and yet unseen presence that indirectly comments on the prying and sometimes even voyeuristic aspects of photography. Doy argues that "[t]he shadow of the photographer always reminds us that there is an observer, an/other, involved with the making of the

photograph, or a viewer who will look at the image once it is made. Cahun's photographs are almost always for an observer, and we know who that usually was."¹⁹⁷ This double layer of the photographer observing the subject but also the viewer observing the photograph and thereby potentially intruding on personal or private moments is complicated even further when considering Cahun and Moore's romantic relationship. Since many of the photographs were never shown or published during their lifetime, we cannot automatically assume they were meant for the public's prying eyes. Jennifer Shaw points out that the majority of images produced by the couple in the interwar years "are known to us as negatives or small prints. In these cases, it is unclear whether Cahun and Moore meant these images as works of art for public consumption."¹⁹⁸ Therefore, nuanced discussions of these photographs are necessary because they themselves never commented on the images or prepared/selected them for an exhibition or discussion.

Cahun and Moore did however also publish aspects of their work, most notably the experimental book *Aveux non avenues* (Engl. *Disavowals or Cancelled Confessions*). The book was published in 1930 after Cahun and Moore had been working on it for a decade; moreover, Jennifer Shaw argues its small edition and avant-garde publishing house made it out to be "an art book and a collector's item."¹⁹⁹ While *Disavowals* can broadly be categorised as autobiographical writing, it is impossible to fully encompass the essence of the book in a single genre or specific type of book. Fragmented and rebellious, *Disavowals* creates a collage of memories, fictionalised accounts of events, dreams, and philosophical explorations. It is a book that is loosely inspired by confessional writing without actually revealing things and Shaw claims that "Cahun's book is never merely about unraveling and negation. It is, rather, about reimagining the self in a process without closure, on a journey undertaken not only by Cahun, but also by [the] readers."²⁰⁰

Like other written texts by Cahun, Moore's artwork or collages supplement their writing. In *Disavowals* several photomontages accompany the prose, they enhance but also complicate the written text, as there sometimes is no clear thematic overlap between image and text.

¹⁹⁷ Gen Doy, "Another Side of the Picture: Looking Differently at Claude Cahun," in *Don't Kiss Me: The Art of Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore* ed. by Louise Downie. (New York: Aperture Foundation, 2006), 74.

¹⁹⁸ Shaw, *Narcissus*, 33.

¹⁹⁹ Shaw, *Reading Disavowals*, 16.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

Andrea Oberhuber suggests that the combination of poetic and photographic work crates a “double orientation” of the intertwined meanings.²⁰¹ The text-image relations of *Disavowals* are more kaleidoscopic than straightforward yet looking at one without the other inevitably misconstrues the meaning of the book. While only the frontispiece includes Moore’s signature, we can assume that they were involved in the making of all photomontages that can be found in *Disavowals*. Still, the involvement of Moore in the making of *Disavowals* is an ongoing discussion among scholars, and while there will be no definite answer to settle this debate Shaw points out that “[i]t is certain, however, that Moore was Cahun’s constant intellectual interlocutor and that [...] in *Disavowals* Cahun writes about a collaborator in love and art whose reference is Moore.”²⁰² This reference towards Moore is a theme within the book that comes up on several occasions, and when it does, it is frequently connected to allusions to unity or descriptions of same-ness.

Within lesbian literature, the trope of unity, sameness, or even the Doppelgänger is a common symbol emphasising homosexual desire. Within *Disavowals* but also throughout other work by Cahun this mirroring trope of the self and the other is frequently reproduced. In a section of *Disavowals* called ‘Singular Plural,’ they write, “Us. Nothing can separate us,” which is not only alluding to unity and sameness within love but also plays with the idea of multiple selves and singular plurals.²⁰³ In an effort to distance themselves from classic artist and muse dyads, Cahun continues by stating “[m]y lover will no longer be the subject of my drama, he will be my collaborator,”²⁰⁴ thereby underscoring the involvement of Moore in their artistic processes and emphasising their collaborative relationship. In the quote a masculine pronoun is used, this does not necessarily indicate the gender of Cahun’s collaborator, but rather highlights the common issue of using a generic masculine pronoun in language. It also shows one of the difficulties of translating *Disavowals* from the original, because on the contrary to English, French is a grammatically gendered language that does not have a gender-neutral pronoun. However, the use of “he” might also be deliberate as it can be seen as directly referencing the masculinity of Moore’s chosen name – Marcel. The

²⁰¹ Andrea Oberhuber. “Claude Cahun, Marcel Moore, Lise Deharme and the Surrealist Book” *History of Photography* 31 no. 1 (2007): 41. See Oberhuber’s article for a more detailed analysis of the text-image relations in Cahun and Moore’s collaborative work.

²⁰² Jennifer Shaw, *Exist Otherwise*, 110.

²⁰³ Cahun, *Disavowals*, 102.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 103.

Couples' complex artistic and personal relationship and, in a sense, reciprocal subjectivity is solidified further when Cahun writes "I am one, you are the other. Or the opposite. Our desires meet. It's hard enough just to disentangle them."²⁰⁵ They suggest a convergence of selves, connecting Cahun and Moore's love, life, and art on such an intrinsic level it is difficult to argue for anything but collaboration between the two artists. Therefore, when Shaw writes "Collaboration in the relationship, collaboration in art — the one informs, even becomes. [sic] the other,"²⁰⁶ she is not exaggerating their closeness but merely reproduces what Cahun already indicates in *Disavowals*. Since the couples' work has an overarching theme of mirroring and masking the self and the other, as well as subverting gender expectations and heteronormativity I will be analysing these aspects of their close collaborative work in the upcoming artworks under discussion.



Fig. 12 Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore "Plate X", 1930.
 Photomontage, introducing Chapter 9 "I.O.U."
 Cahun, *Disavowals: Or, Cancelled Confession*, 183.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 103.

²⁰⁶ Shaw, *Reading Disavowals*, 168.

Plate X, the 10th photomontage in *Disavowals* (Fig. 12) is, like most of their work, a collaborative effort of Cahun and Moore. It is the opening image of the book's final chapter. The photomontage includes cut-out heads of Claude, illustrations, as well as phrases that are strategically placed and encompass the central themes of the book and the following chapter. Subjectivity, identity, anti-normativity – all are overarching topics that Cahun discusses in the text, and Jennifer Shaw suggests that this final photomontage “is not only Cahun's proposal for reimagining [their] own subjectivity, but also an attempt by Moore and Cahun to explicitly depict their alternatives to conventional mores and contemporary assumptions about the relationships between creativity and desire.”²⁰⁷ The top half of the plate is dominated by imagery of the nuclear family. Next to a banner with the words “la sainte famille” (Engl. the sacred/holy family) is the depiction of the traditional family triad: father, mother, and child. The father is grasping the child by the hair with one hand and holds a lightning bolt in the other, which is referencing the patriarchal power dynamics in a heteronormative family structure. The mother is trapped between the man and the child suggesting women's complicated role of familial care worker as the mother and wife. Lastly, the child is anxiously grasping a bird resembling a Courlis (like the name Cahun had previously used as a pseudonym) as if it was a stuffed animal. The child itself is ambiguously gendered – perhaps Cahun and Moore wanted to avoid displaying clear sex characteristics that would result in binary gender assumptions since they viewed their gender in a less binary sense. The displayed family dynamic is influenced deeply by patriarchal power dynamics and the banner with the words “la sainte famille” is creating clear religious overtones. These overtones are also carried into the final chapter of the book and are present throughout the preceding text; Cahun is continuously criticising conservative religious values and the rampant pronatalism of interwar France. Shaw points out that “Parisian culture between the wars was rife with pronatalist propaganda encouraging women to marry and procreate.”²⁰⁸ The photomontage by Cahun and Moore calls this propaganda into question and presents us with a distorted image of the ‘sacred’ family. By conjoining the bodies and thereby creating a grotesque visualisation of familial bonds, they are underscoring the culturally and religiously constructed normative family. The father and child seem to be growing out of the mother's torso, a

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 200.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 58.

painfully altered depiction of pregnancy. This uncanny bodily connection emphasises the unnaturalness of the nuclear family as a concept and questions familial bonds as a whole. While the mother is central to the family the power remains with the patriarch, he grasps the child and nearly has the mother in a headlock – it visualises the imbalance of power within the nuclear family. This disparity is frequently upheld by religious conservative values and patriarchal societal codes. Shaw calls it a “sinister image of the family: psychologically distant, yet bound painfully together.”²⁰⁹ In a way, Shaw is pointing out that the family is viewed as a unit despite its individual family members. This is also indicating the legal implications of family life and how wives were dependent on their husbands in almost every aspect of life. The non-normative lifestyle of Cahun and Moore and their lifelong partnership stands in stark contrast to this depicted image of grim heteronormative family life.

Behind the family is a row of anatomical drawings of different embryonic stages inside Russian nesting dolls. The words “Otez Dieu, Il reste Dieu” (Engl. “Remove God, He remains God” or “Remove God, God remains”) are written next to them. Not only does this refer to the religious themes of the last chapter and Cahun’s take on the biblical creation myth, but it also ultimately questions nature and God by connecting them to games and illusions, common themes in Surrealist artworks. The style of the drawings in the upper half of the montage is reminiscent of images in scholastic literature, yet their distortion is mocking educational drawings and thereby criticising the heteronormative understandings of pregnancy, family life and partnerships. The little banner featuring the words “la sainte famille” is between the distorted image of normative family life and the largest Russian nesting doll containing a set of twins on the left. Perhaps Cahun and Moore, who were stepsiblings and lived under the pretence of sisterhood rather than coupledness for much of their life, are suggesting that the sacred family is the bond between siblings rather than the constructed bond between the heteronormative family. The nuclear family and reproduction are both aspects of normative life that were unavailable to Cahun and Moore in their lesbian relationship, yet their inherent critique through the deformation of bodies emphasises that this is also not worth striving for. Pregnancy, especially, takes a toll on bodies and the resulting parenthood, specifically, the normative conceptions of motherhood, restricts an individual’s subjectivity and fundamentally changes one’s identity. In a way, the photomontage questions this as a

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 204.

necessity for a fulfilled life and emphasises the theatricality of the heteronormative family. It seems to suggest that the contentment found in the nuclear family is an act or a performance to overshadow the disparate conditions that it creates for men and women. Cahun and Moore thus point out that familial roles are masquerades performed for the consensus of normativity.

The performativity of gender (roles), identities, and patriarchal expectations is continued in the lower half of the image, where identity and masquerade are the main motifs. On the right are snippets from Cahun and Moore's weightlifting photographs, a subversive series alluding to the theatricality of weightlifters and inherently criticising the hypermasculinity of sports as an exaggeration and masquerade (see Fig. 13 and the subsequent analysis). In *Plate X* the images of Cahun as a weightlifter, serve the purpose of emphasising the performativity of gender and culturally constructed ideals of masculinity. More of these identities, multiple selves, or faces are displayed on the bottom left of the montage. A phallic tower of heads is framed by the words: "Sous ce masque un autre masque. Je n'en finirai pas de soulever tous ces visages" (Engl. "Behind this mask another mask. I will never finish lifting off all of these faces."). The variety of faces and masquerades of the same person alludes to shapeshifting and the changeability of identity through appearance. Cahun is a weightlifter, dandy, bohemian, pilot, or jester – every face is a different mask or identity that can be put on and taken off. Cahun's gender-ambiguous face is a blank slate for different roles, one that confounds normative understandings of gender, masculinity, or femininity. Especially the statement "I will never finish lifting off all of these faces" emphasises the performativity of identity and, by extension, gender. Cahun and Moore are suggesting that subjectivity of any kind is connected to a performance that is put on and that an identity or self without elements of performative behaviour or presentation is unachievable. If it is impossible to lift off the last face because the self inherently is a masquerade, the artists also suggest that authenticity is always a performance, and in that the essentialist notion of the self is denied. The artists imply, that there is no inherent 'essence' of the self because the self is constructed within our societal structures and limitations. Binary gender expectations are central to societal limitations that influence the performance of the self and the gender-ambiguous photography and photomontage work by Cahun and Moore calls this into question. The 'faces' of Cahun are sometimes masculine and other times feminine, it is a performance and

a masquerade that subverts the essentialist understandings of gender. This is exactly what Butler's theory of gender performativity asserts, she claims that "gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*."²¹⁰ Thus, the gendered self is always a performance, masculinity and femininity are societal patterns that are constantly reproduced. By subverting the normative patterns of ritualistic gender performance, possibilities of gender transformation can be reached. In this photomontage and their wider oeuvre, Cahun and Moore are playing with the concept of (gender) identity as a masquerade and performance long before Butler wrote about it. In their art, they are destabilizing societal gender expectations by emphasising how everything is merely an act or a mask that can be "lifted off" once there is time for the next face and identity.



Fig. 13 Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, "I am in training don't kiss me," 1927.
Photograph. Obelisk Art History Project.

²¹⁰ Butler, *Performative Acts*, 519, original emphasis.

The full-size image of Cahun as a weightlifter shows how Cahun and Moore's art repeatedly centres on discussions of performative gender expressions and criticises normative masculinity and femininity. The weightlifting series from 1927 consists of several pictures in which Cahun is posing in a theatrical costume with a prop dumbbell. The weights feature name pairs on each side: "Totor et Popol" on the left and "Castor et Pollux" on the right. Totor and Popol are comic book heroes, from a comic strip series by Hergé – characters featured in works such as these tend to build on stylised and hyperbolic reproductions of masculinity or femininity. These characters are juxtaposed with the mythological twin half-brothers Castor and Pollux, the Dioscuri, the pair are the embodiment of mythological warriors and athletes which is emphasising an idealised version of masculinity mocked by Cahun in the photograph.

The underlying theme of the image is established very quickly: the critique of dominant forms of masculinity and femininity. Cahun's makeup exaggerates their features in a grotesque and clown-like fashion, their hair is reminiscent of Oscar Wilde's famous dandy style, and their outfit refers to but also mocks weightlifters of the 1920s. Overall, the photograph is emphasising the performativity of gender, as Cahun is underscoring the theatricality of gendered mannerisms, appearances, as well as gendered activities. Their playful subversion of societal expectations of masculinity and femininity creates a comical set of contradictions within the image. The pose of the coquettishly crossed legs is contradicting the typical poses of bodybuilders or weightlifter. Cahun's pouty lips and effeminate makeup stand in direct opposition to the words featured on their shirt: "I am in training don't kiss me." Additionally, these words evoke the question of 'training for what?' – the dumbbell is suggesting a workout and yet the passive pose is indicating that this is merely a farce. Perhaps Cahun is suggesting that in order for us to fit into normative assumptions of gender, we are constantly training to be part of binary gender performances. They seem to imply that indoctrinated binary assumptions about gender can only be unravelled through realising that gender is performative. In the image, Cahun's performance manages to pair hyperfemininity and hypermasculinity in paradoxical ways, prompting the viewers to question these hyperbolic forms of binary gender expressions. The onlooker is encouraged to question why femininity is considered as soft and why masculinity is associated with strength, and by extensions, why these associations always stand in binary oppositions. Thus, when Corinne Andersen claims

that “[i]n the weightlifter photographs, Cahun plays a woman who plays at being a man,”²¹¹ it is an argument that limits the subversive potential of the series by insisting on binary genders. It is not about a woman pretending, rather it is to show that gender as well as gender roles or expectations are performative acts. By exaggerating masculinity and femininity in the same picture Cahun is highlighting the masquerade of gendered acts and emphasises that anyone can be masculine or feminine regardless of their gender.

Gender as a performance is a central element of Cahun and Moore’s work. The Butlerian notion of gender performativity is a concept of postmodernism, decades after their period of production; yet, contemporaneous to their work was a precursor of Butler’s theory published in 1929 by the psychoanalyst Joan Riviere. In her paper “Womanliness as a Masquerade,” Riviere suggests that womanliness “could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it” before concluding that womanliness and its masquerade cannot be separated as “whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing.”²¹² Riviere assumes masculinity to be an inherent quality that either exists or does not, but suggests womanliness is a masquerade that is always artificially put on. In other words, to be recognised as a ‘woman,’ womanliness has to be performed, yet Riviere does not expect a ‘man’ to perform manliness. Her incongruent argument underscores an androcentric worldview, and whether intentionally or not as she seems to suggest without this masquerade women simply do not exist. This can either be read as futuristically agender or as a sexist act of erasure. Despite her asymmetrical argument, Riviere’s text was revolutionary in partially recognising gender as a performative act and her metaphor of putting on a mask to convey womanliness is artistically carried out in Cahun and Moore’s work. In many of their photographs, Cahun’s strikingly androgynous face creates a sense of gender illegibility, of which the artists cleverly take advantage. They futuristically transgress binary gender expressions and play with masculinity and femininity from a non-binary perspective. The couple’s unorthodox lifestyle and art could easily be scrutinized by the broader public. With the rising fascist ideologies of the interwar period, Cahun and Moore certainly faced prejudice and discrimination for their lesbianism, gender non-conformity, Jewish heritage, and radical antifascist politics. “The notion of the mask as

²¹¹ Andersen, 44.

²¹² Joan Riviere, “Womanliness as a Masquerade” *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 9 (1929): 306.

disguise is also important in terms of sexual identity, at a time when, despite legal ‘toleration’ of homosexuality in private, public identities were often subject to self-censorship to avoid antagonisms or even violence,” argues Gen Doy.²¹³ Thus to hide their true identities, Cahun and Moore sometimes had to put on masks of femininity or sisterhood. This potentially alienating experience of concealing the self as an act of self-preservation may have also spiked their interest in the symbolism of masks and masquerades within their art.

The common motif of disguising the self appears not only in Cahun and Moore’s photography and photomontages but also in Cahun’s written work. They repeatedly discuss masks and the process of masking, one of the most illuminating passages is from Cahun’s semi-autobiographical text “Bedroom Carnival” (1926), a kaleidoscopic text about their (childhood) experiences. Cahun writes:

The seduction of the mask imposes itself on petty romantic souls, but pairing the mask plays into the hands of those who, for moral or material reasons, have an interest in never acting in a way that will reveal their faces. Masks are made of different kinds of materials: cardboard, velvet, flesh, the Word [sic]. The carnal mask and the verbal mask are worn in all seasons. [...] You apply your mask too heavily, and it bites your skin. [...] You realize with horror that the flesh and its cover have become inseparable. Quick, a little saliva; you reglue the bandage to the wound. [...]

I had spent my solitary hours disguising my soul. The masks had become so perfect that when the time came for them to walk across the plaza of my conscience, they didn’t recognize each other. I adopted the most off-putting opinions one by one, those that displeased me the most had the best chance of success. But the make-up that I employed seemed indelible. I scrubbed so hard to wash it off myself that I took off my skin. And my soul, like a flayed face, no longer had a human form.²¹⁴

This passage in particular can be read as further evidence for Cahun’s trans* experience. “Bedroom Carnival” recounts experiences of putting on different identities and escaping reality and the self through masquerade. Cahun starts by philosophising about masks and masquerades in general, pointing out the different strategies and materials of masks that can be used in the process of concealing the self. When they state the “carnal” and the “verbal” masks are “worn in all seasons,” they are alluding to a trans* experience that not only incorporates physical masking but also needs a verbal change to abide by societal gender expectations. Pitch, tone, and choice of vocabulary can be part of gendered assumptions; to

²¹³ Doy, *Sensual Politics*, 47.

²¹⁴ Cahun in Shaw, *Exist Otherwise*, 284-285.

overcome or tolerate living in a binary gendered world they may have to be adjusted to avoid further scrutiny. Most of the text is written from Cahun's perspective as they are recounting their personal experiences and memories. However, in certain passages, Cahun is skilfully using the second person to enmesh the reader in the experience of masking; this makes the discomfort of wearing the wrong mask more palpable to the reader. They aim to involve the reader as much as possible on an emotive level by heavily relying on pathos to transport the emotional variables of the text. The passage is brimming with discomfort in one's own skin and the painful experience of gender dysphoria: the mask worn to fit into societal standards needs to be "scrubbed off," masks can produce "wounds" that need to be swathed, and the soul ends up being "flayed" of its humanity. Yet, Cahun disguises this experience under the pretence of carnival, circus, and clownery.

The passage about the arduous masking process and losing the self in the process of trying to fit into societal expectations highlights the challenges of being trans, especially being trans* and existing outside of the gender binary. The text can be read as masking the self to fit into the socially assigned binary gender but also as trying to be something entirely different. Both experiences are painful for the subject and emphasise the discomfort societal binary gender roles may bring to individuals. Recognising this underlying discomfort with gender and societal expectations of cis-heteronormative lives, Jordan Reznick connects Cahun's experience to another Butlerian theory. They claim,

Gender is not a frivolous nothing of puzzles and play but a means of survival which forever alters the self. The always-already quality of the mask that both wounds and bandages anticipates Judith Butler's theorization of transgender precarity: one is born into a gendered world not of one's choosing, by which one must gain recognition to survive.²¹⁵

Butler defines precarity as "that politically induced condition of maximized vulnerability and exposure for populations exposed to arbitrary state violence and to other forms of aggression that are not enacted by states and against which states do not offer adequate protection."²¹⁶ Thus, connecting Cahun and Moore's fascination with masks and masquerades to Butler's theory of transgender precarity is particularly useful in underscoring the urgency of disguising

²¹⁵ Jordan Reznick, "Dismembered Muses and Mirrors that Bite: A Trans Perspective on Gender Variance in Surrealist Art," in *The Routledge Companion to Surrealism*, edited by Kirsten Strom (New York: Routledge, 2022), 374.

²¹⁶ Judith Butler, "Performativity, Precarity and Sexual Politics" *AIBR. Revista de Antropología Iberoamericana* 4, no. 3. (2009): ii.

the self behind masks to live a life worth living without constant discrimination and harassment. The reality of constantly of masking one's identity from the public can be traumatising and emotionally scarring, Cahun and Moore find ways to cope with this reality by processing it artistically. While the visual work of the artists prompts viewers to question the meaning of masks and masquerades, they also conceal Cahun and Moore's intentions behind the imagery more drastically, leaving more room for interpretation and speculation. Contrarily, Cahun's written texts, at first, seem more vulnerable, raw, and personal but after close inspection, it becomes noticeable that Cahun's narrative voice is highly unreliable. It is a narrator that skilfully blurs the boundaries of reality and fiction; a narrator that lures in the reader under false pretences of confessional writing only to leave them behind with speculation and uncertainty. Cahun confesses nothing, they may allude to personal experiences, but they could also be part of yet another masquerade.



*Fig. 14 Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, "Untitled. Self-Portrait (reflected in mirror)," 1928.
"Untitled. Marcel Moore looking into mirror," 1928. Photographs. WikiArt.*

Mirrors, mirror effects, and the mirrored self are also reoccurring motifs in Cahun and Moore's photographic work. This mirroring trope not only emphasises the intimate bond between the two artists but also highlights how the reflection of the self is never a true depiction of identity or reality. The reflected self in the romantic partner, can not only be found in Cahun's texts as previously discussed, but it is also very prominent in the mirrored self-portraits of Cahun and Moore. In a sense, they are each other's alter egos, a doubling and reimagining of the self in the most intimate partner. The famous portrait diptych (Fig. 14) of Cahun and Moore posing in a similar manner and looking into the same mirror creates the effect of them mirroring each other. The images have one significant difference and that is the focal point or gaze of the subjects. While Cahun is looking at the camera, which results in their mirror image looking away, Moore is looking into the mirror, which results in their mirror image looking at the camera. The subject is looking at the reflection but also at the photographer and by extension the viewer, who in turn, is looking at the subject. It is an intricate dynamic of looking and being looked at, one that is even further complicated by Cahun and Moore's intimate relationship in which they viewed each other as 'the other self.' Considering their entangled intimate and artistic collaboration, Latimer suggests "[v]iewed as pendants, these photographs picture the subject and object (of representation, of desire) as interchangeable, albeit not identical, entities."²¹⁷ Regardless of which photograph was taken first, one mimicked or *mirrored* the other, and yet no identical mirror image can be achieved. The photographs thus also suggest that a slight change in perspective changes the image, which on a meta-level highlights the inconsistent nature of mirrors, perspective, and reflection.

Cahun and Moore are the same and the other, similar to how a mirror image is the same but also not. One's reflection in the mirror is not the same image others have of oneself. In other words, when we look into a mirror the face looking back at us, is not the face everyone else sees. It is a laterally reversed image of the self, and yet it is the only reflection that is familiar to us. The only way we can see ourselves not flipped and in real-time is through a true mirror or non-reversing mirror – once two mirrors are joined together seamlessly at a 90-degree angle they create an unreversed mirror image.²¹⁸ A photograph reflects the subject without

²¹⁷ Latimer, *Women Together*, 94.

²¹⁸ For a more in-depth discussion of the phenomenon of the true mirror see Caroline McHugh, "The Art of Being Yourself," filmed December 2012, TEDx Talks, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=veEQQ-N9xWU&t=234s>.

mirroring it at a specific moment in time, a mirror reflects the subject in real time but reversed. Thus, a photograph of a reflection in the mirror creates a fascinating multi-layered depiction of the self that blurs reality and reflection and thereby hides the true self. This is also pointed out by Andersen, who states “[i]ronically, it is the reflection, the image twice removed from ‘reality,’ that the viewer wants to read as the ‘true’ Cahun.”²¹⁹ She highlights the constructed character of the image, one that insinuates a ‘truthful’ depiction of the self but also plays with the ability to hide in plain sight. Similar to Cahun’s unreliable narrator in their written work, these images are an unreliable portrayal of reality. It is a different form of masking the self, one that does not fully conceal but still distorts reality into something it is not.

The more we try to discover Cahun and Moore’s identities through their artistic output, the more difficult it becomes. They cleverly deflect from who they are and only show who or what they want us to see: a kaleidoscopic set of identities outside of binary gender roles, heteronormativity, and assumptions about art and artists of the interwar period. Their art and lives transcend the expectations of the early twentieth century and the couple lived in a sense of queer futurity. Cahun and Moore’s queerness is so palpable it creates reassurance as well as hopefulness for liveable queer realities. Moreover, Reznick argues that their “works compose a valuable archive of the experience of nonbinary transgender subjectivity before transsexual medicine standardized the ‘trapped in the wrong body’ narratives that would come to dominate descriptions of transgender subjectivity beginning in the postwar period.”²²⁰ By approaching Cahun and Moore through the theoretical lens of non-binary lesbian specificity, it enables us to think of them and their art in a non-restrictive sense. Their same-sex relationship is not held captive in limiting understandings of lesbianism and their gender-nonconforming lives are put outside of the restraints of binary gender. While femininity and womanliness have served a purpose in the couples’ lives, it is nothing more than a masquerade that can be put on when needed. This can be seen as a situational and advantageous approach to gender and gender roles as useable masks in the gendered masquerade or carnival we call life. Revisiting the motifs of masks, masquerades, and mirrors throughout their oeuvre highlights the fascination of the artists with the ability to reflect and

²¹⁹ Andersen, 40.

²²⁰ Reznick, *Dismembered Muses*, 374.

deflect. They are reflecting the aspects of their identity they want the viewers to see and yet they confound us with an array of mixed messaging and deflections. The inability to grasp the notion of the self in their work or understand Cahun and Moore's identities may mirror their difficulty in navigating a gendered world so alien to their non-binary lesbian specificity.

Coda

“If I spoke to you about art, understand that I was speaking about life.”²²¹

Self-Portraiture is a deeply personal art form that provides an insight into the artist’s perception of the self and allows the onlooker to better understand how they want to be seen. The artists discussed in this thesis, chose to defy normative gender assumptions in their life and art. Their artworks were the principal mode of self-expression and their assertion of gender non-conformity. The quote above illustrates how art was all-encompassing for Claude Cahun which can also be extended to their partner Marcel Moore, Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven and her Dadaist lifestyle, as well as Romaine Brooks and Gluck. The artists did not only perform their gender non-conformity in their art, rather their art was the place where they could creatively depict their lifestyles, identities, and non-normative appearances.

Within my thesis, I have shown how the five FLINTA* artists under analysis approached gender non-conformity and used their art as a vehicle for self-expression. While the artists approached non-normative gender expression differently, they all challenged cis-heteronormative gender roles and hegemonic masculinity. By close reading the gender non-conforming (self-)portraits, photomontages, performance descriptions, and literary text passages by the selected artists, I analysed and interpreted their modes of self-expression and connected them to broader issues in gender studies and queer theory. I used the following approaches as a theoretical basis for my arguments: Halberstam’s female masculinity, Butler’s gender performativity, theoretical approaches to Camp by Sontag, Meyer, Booth, and Cleto, as well as Hord’s non-binary lesbian specificity. Ultimately, this research project has shown the diversity of gender non-conformity in Modernist, Dadaist, and Surrealist art during the interwar period. This reconstructed history of genderqueerness in the lives and art of FLINTA* people is incredibly valuable since it underscores that gender non-conformity prevailed and flourished during the interwar years, regardless of the political and social challenges of the period.

Juxtaposing the selected artists from three different avant-garde art movements – Modernism, Dadaism, and Surrealism – acknowledges represents the diverse and multifaceted gender non-conforming art of the interwar period. The selected artists were not

²²¹ Claude Cahun, *Disavowals*, 66.

randomly chosen, rather they were all part of the same literary and artistic FLINTA* network surrounding Natalie Barney. They inspired and supported each other, challenged each other's creativity, and mutually encouraged bold artistic choices that advanced their respective art movements and society in general. The innovative and experimental character of avant-garde art encouraged the exploration of the self and individual self-expression, which manifested itself, especially in their depiction of gender non-conformity. The selected artists used a variety of different approaches to visualising genderqueerness, some upheld binary gender more than others, but they all subverted normative values.

The Modernists Romaine Brooks and Gluck depicted themselves and their sitters along a spectrum of female masculinity. By aligning their FLINTA* sitters with masculinity, Brooks and Gluck not only asserted their autonomy and freedom, but they also challenged patriarchal power dynamics. Besides the subtle political implications and challenges of their portraits, they, first and foremost, approached gender non-conformity on a deeply personal level: they depicted themselves how they want others to view them while still retaining an element of mystery. Furthermore, in following the aesthetic tradition of the dandy, the artists utilised preconceived symbols of homosexuality and gender non-conformity to their advantage thereby signalling the queerness of the sitter to the knowing onlooker.

Baroness Elsa approached gender non-conformity from an entirely different angle: she directly challenged hegemonic forms of masculinity and used her performance art as a vehicle for social criticism. Her performances and outfits were shocking and outrageous to bourgeois society and she was notorious for her bold art in New York and the broader Dadaist and avant-garde scene. In her performances and outfits, she repurposed found objects and she used things beyond their intended purpose and her art was incredibly Camp. She mocked what was considered traditional or culturally valuable and radically performed gender how she saw fit. This total (gender) anarchy was not only Dada but also Camp; in this, she foreshadowed aspects of the Camp movement of the latter half of the twentieth century and created a form of proto-Camp performativity.

Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore futuristically approached gender from a transgressive non-binary perspective in their life and art. Going beyond, normative expectations of gender roles along the axis of binary gender, I analysed their approach through the lens of non-binary lesbian specificity as discussed by Levi Hord. In breaking stereotypes and cis-

heteronormativity, the artists starkly criticised societal conventions and moved beyond set limitations. Moreover, Cahun and Moore's collaborative art emphasised the performativity of gender through the reoccurring motifs of masks, masquerades, and mirrors. They question the essentialist notion of the authentic self and assert that life and identity are always part of a (gendered) performance. Using mirrors and masks emphasise this masquerade of life and in this, they only show what they want the onlookers to see.

All of the artists show the complexities of gender and gender non-conformity through their art and depict a plethora of queerness. Their art is visual evidence that gender non-conformity prevailed during the uncertain times of the interwar period. Reconstructing a (visual) history of genderqueerness is paramount in underscoring the existence of queer people throughout society at any given moment in time. The queer community has always been scrutinized by the wider society and will continue to be discriminated against if queerness is not normalised. Thus, queer visibility and queer representation in the past, present, and future are necessary to achieve liveable conditions for the LGBTQ+ community. It is necessary in academic and non-academic contexts to address the androcentric and cis-heteronormative bias in history, and critically question whose stories are being told and which histories are being left out. This research project is reframing and retelling the stories of five FLINTA* avant-garde artists of the interwar period, yet the network of queer FLINTA* artists, writers, and intellectuals of the early twentieth century is vast, and many stories, artworks, and connections remain untold and unexplored.

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