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Andrei Codrescu: The Posthuman Dada Guide

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the streets of the Lower East Side to find the next “look.” And so they did, and so did dada go on, and still the homeless wait, with shopping carts full of treasure.

baroness elsa, von freytag-loringhoven (1874–1927): Celebrated in Berlin and Munich in her youth, the baroness bridges the fin de siècle decadence of Stefan George’s circle, German Expressionism, and New York Dada. She is also one of the few european artists who went beyond New York into America, in search of adventure and inspiration. Notorious for her affairs with both men and women, her prodigious sexual and artistic energy was legendary, but her complex personality and hard-to-defne art had to wait a long time for rediscovery. It finally came with a 1996 Whitney Museum of American Art exhibition, *Making Mischief: Dada Invades New York*. And the 2002 publication by MIT Press of Irene Gammel’s biography, *Baroness Elsa: Gender, Dada, and Everyday Modernity*. The Dada baroness was the genitor of street performance, fashion Dada, body art, and warholian networking. Her life is an anthology of daring and risk taking, from her start at age twenty as a model for Henry de Vry’s living pictures in Berlin at the Wintergarten, a much-admired form of art pornography, to being a chorus girl at Berlin’s Zentral Theater, a muse and lover to several artists and writers (including Djuna Barnes), a poet, a playwright, a novelist, an American immigrant in Sparta, Kentucky, a dadaist in New York, a free-speech

defendant, a jailbird, and the subject of numerous paintings, poems, and unending gossip. One of the odder chapters of Elsa's life was her residence in the Kentucky railroad town of Sparta, where she settled with her husband Felix Paul Greve, who had faked his suicide in Germany to run off to America with Elsa. In Sparta, bored out of her mind, the baroness sneaked off to Cincinnati by train to model nude at an art school. Greve emigrated to Canada in 1912, leaving his wife without resources in a strange country. He changed his name to Frederick Philip Grove and began a successful career as an English-language Canadian writer of popular novels about the settling of the wild American frontier. Elsa finally borrowed and earned enough money to make her escape to New York in 1913, where she connected quickly with the circle around Marcel Duchamp and met William Carlos Williams, who, like every poet or artist who knew her, was charmed and overwhelmed. In New York in 1919 she could sometimes be seen going to a party wearing a birdcage on her head and a self-designed costume that permitted risqué glimpses of her lithe, Amelia Earhart-type body. Like Mina Loy, she scoured the streets for discarded objects to use in her art. She mailed to Marcel Duchamp, from New York to Philadelphia, the famous toilet that became *The Fountain*, now on permanent display at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. She exhibited drawings, paintings, and sculpture, including a sculpture-portrait of Duchamp called *Limbswish*, made of a metal spring

and curtain tassel. Her poetry, published in *The Little Review*, was a constant source of scandal. *The Little Review*, edited by Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap, published the baroness's most outrageously dadaist, sexually charged work and would soon go on trial on obscenity charges for serializing James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Her poetry sparked one of the most heated debates about art in the 20th century, a forum titled "The Art of Madness" in 1919. This debate was the American avantgarde's most glorious moment, before the Pound-led faction charged off in another direction. The European dadaists moved with only a few skirmishes toward Surrealism, while the Americans made common ground with the more Futurist-oriented continental tendencies and pushed, in the tradition of Whitman and Emerson, for a native, widely ranging, freely breathing art. The baroness moved with equal ease between the different worlds, her body a statement *avant la lettre* of all the ideas the fired-up poets might come up with. Her extravagant costumes, poetry, art, and unabashed sexuality made her in a short time the most celebrated New York dadaist, but her high-mindedness and fondness for outrage ended up alienating many of the French expatriate artists and writers she frequented, and her constant need for money made even her most ardent fans uncomfortable. To everyone's embarrassment, she became a sort of bum, an eccentric street-person who reminded everyone how crazy Dada could *really* be, and a collection was

taken to get her enough passage money back to Germany. In Germany, her old friends from the Expressionist circles shunned her, but Djuna Barnes, to her credit, did not turn away her old friend. In 1928, her beauty and youth gone, her lavish imagination ignored, her genius art ideas discarded, she drank herself to death, and her obituary notice appeared in *transition*, the chief publication of the American modernists, where T. S. Eliot's *Wasteland* and Ezra Pound's poems appeared. Even in death, the Baroness Elsa connected with one of the vital modern movements that she'd helped birth by being close to William Carlos Williams, Margaret Anderson, Jane Heap, Hart Crane, and Berenice Abbott. On the other hand, no one was entirely comfortable with The New Woman, as the press dubbed her, as they did Mina Loy. Both Elsa's and Loy's art made the male-dominated avantgardes uneasy, and few writers, including Pound and Williams, came to the defense of *The Little Review*. The defense of *Ulysses* fell to the brave women poets and editors who went before the courts and the public with a fully articulate defense of freedom of expression. When Pound did finally speak up for James Joyce's novel, he did so under "the pseudonym of Emmy V. Sanders, hiding behind female skirts."³⁹

boxing: Arthur Cravan, French dadaist and amateur boxer, astonished his comrades when his challenge to the American Jack Johnson was accepted. Johnson was the

European boxing champion and made his living staging exhibition matches. He was in flight from the United States where he was wanted on the Mann Act charge of transporting a minor across state lines for sexual purposes. The underage young woman he had been consorting with was but one of a string of girls seduced by Johnson, who had a reputation for prowess. Jack Johnson, who was Black, thought that racism was at work and was not going to return to America until he was assured of an impartial jury. In the meantime, he wandered bored from France to Spain and countries in-between, knocking down one challenger after another. Arthur Cravan, born Fabian Lloyd, was the nephew of Oscar Wilde and the publisher in 1913 of an avantgarde magazine, *Maintenant*, written entirely by himself, and the author also of an infamous fake interview with André Gide, who was, ostensibly, “dazzled by my height, my shoulders, my looks, my wit.” In 1914, Cravan received the adulation of the avantgarde when he published a vitriolic attack on the painters exhibiting in the Salon des Independants: “M. Delaunay . . . has the face of an inflamed pig . . . Unfortunately for him, he married a Russian . . . I don’t say I wouldn’t fuck Madame Delaunay just once . . .” and so on, followed by attacks on Marie Laurencin and others. The pugnacious Cravan fled the war in France to Switzerland, living on money he made by selling a fake Picasso. When he ran out of cash, his mother agreed to pay his passage to New York. On the way,

waiting for a ship in Barcelona, he challenged Jack Johnson to a fight. He managed seven rounds before Johnson knocked him out, but his legend among artists *was* a knockout. According to Breton, he told Leon Trotsky, who was on the same ship to New York, that he preferred “crushing the jaws of a Yankee gentleman in a noble sport to letting his ribs be crushed by a German.”⁴⁰ Jack Johnson returned to the U.S. to face the music and served a sentence in Leavenworth Prison. In New York, Cravan continued to make trouble, getting arrested for taking off his clothes at a lecture, preceding by a few decades a similar act by Allen Ginsberg at Columbia University in 1967. (Years later, Ginsberg told me that he was still known by a lot of people as “the poet who takes his clothes off at poetry readings.” He laughed and said, “I did that *once*. I’m sixty years old now! What kind of fool would I be to take off my clothes in public!”) Cravan’s reputation for wildness was not diminished when he married the great beauty Mina Loy, whose looks and poetry had already conquered New York. Cravan and Loy vagabonded through Mexico and South America where he made a living boxing and writing for newspapers. His myth grew even more after his unfortunate disappearance aboard a boat he had built to take him and Mina from Mexico to Buenos Aires. William Carlos Williams, in love with Mina Loy, described the scene with a great deal of pathos. He has Cravan leaving in his boat and the pregnant Loy left on the shore.

Some people speculated that Cravan didn't drown, as was likely, but that he assumed another identity (a favorite Dada game) and became the mysterious B. Traven, author of *The Treasure of Sierra Madre*. The disconsolate Loy went back to New York, where she lost her appetite for the risky games of love and art. About Cravan she wrote: "His life was unreal, or surreal, in that he never *was* the things he became. For instance, he became *champion de Boxe amateur de la France*."⁴¹ Cravan's life and art were a Dada continuum, whereby he made boxing the second most important recognized sport for the dadas, the first being chess. The dadas and the surrealists excelled at *new* games, the best known of which is *le cadavre exquis* (the exquisite corpse), a collaborative means of writing a poem or drawing a picture in such a way that no one will know what anyone else contributed until the very end when the sheet is unfolded and the collective mind of the collaborators becomes visible. Like most stories of the dadas, Cravan's life holds as many tales, fables, myths, and mysterious connections as the story of any one life can, particularly when the protagonist of that life set out to lead an oversized, extraordinary one. Cravan's life and art are indeed masterful, and the Guide advises, "Don't try this at home," but then, neither did Cravan. What he did make was a *cadavre exquis*, an exquisite corpse, that X-ray of the collective mind, the X-ray, certainly, of an age.

cafés: Refuges from cramped quarters, nosy landladies, and dreadful toilets. Also, the

European living rooms where strangers are (mostly) welcome. Birthplaces of conspiracies, publications, and bohemian artistic-political ideas. There is a vast literature of cafés: Paris in 1900 had two thousand cafés, one thousand of which had been frequented for at least one absinthe by Baudelaire; among the cafés of the early 20th century, Aux Deux Magots inspired an entire raft of books, one of which is eight hundred pages thick and contains the brief biographies of all its waiters; one of its tables was sold at auction in 1987 for a great deal of money because of the asses that sat at it and the ideas that the discomfort of those asses caused to the brains to whom they belonged. Paris cafés, thousands of them, were in permanent contact with thousands upon thousands of cafés in all the cities of Europe, and it was possible, throughout all of the 20th century, for a brooding person starting in Paris to travel between cafés in major capitals via a *pneumatique*, and arrive the same day in Moscow, still holding his half-full Pernod glass from Paris. The first Dada café in Paris was Certâ in the passage de l'Opéra, with its yellow curtains and unmatched cane chairs, made famous by Aragon's book *Le Paysan de Paris*. Breton, Tzara, and Aragon adopted it because they were sick of Montparnasse and Montmartre, the bohemian standards of café life. "Certâ was the first of the Dada and Surrealist cafés, those legendary venues, those homes-away-from-home where, every evening, the chosen ones would assemble." Louis Aragon found the voice of the cashier so alluring that he called just to hear her say,

“None of the Dadas are here, monsieur.”⁴²

It is now said that with the banning of cigarettes and the increasing costs of overhead, French cafés are disappearing to make room for cheaper American chains. The mushrooming of Starbucks in the U.S. has not so far produced many intellectuals because American houses are too big. Will they reduce ideas in Paris or, *au contraire*, stimulate philosophy through sheer hatred of their loci?

In a small country like Romania where geniuses are precocious and still living at home, cheap cafés are where minds are formed, and Capşa, the most expensive café for a century, is where reputations were both born and killed. On the subject of cafés, our only contribution is the banal explanation that the cheaper the café, the greater its creative atmosphere, and the more expensive, the greater its irrelevance. This Guide contains references to only a few cafés, the most important of which for our purposes is Café de la Terrasse, Zurich, Switzerland, 1915–1917, where Tristan Tzara, daddy of Dada, plays chess eternally with Vladimir Ilych Lenin, daddy of Communism. Lenin is a Russian exile biding his time until he can lead a revolution that will set the 20th century on a course that could have resulted in the extinction of the human race. Tristan Tzara, a Romanian exile, is in neutral Switzerland to avoid being killed in the First World War raging everywhere else in Europe. Tristan Tzara is not biding his time; he is having fun

inventing an art revolution right here and now in Zurich, the Dada revolution, a movement that will radically alter the 20th century to continue into the 21st, surviving both communism and the possible extinction of the human race. At this moment, however, as the antisarist Lenin opens with his usual E-4 King's pawn, nothing is known of the future. Lenin is a writer of obscure commentaries on the work of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, living in abject poverty with his wife Nadya at 11 Spiegelgasse, a few doors away from the noisy bohemian nuisance of Cabaret Voltaire down the block at 1 Spiegelgasse. He meets regularly with his fellow exiles, Karl Radek, a Polish revolutionary, and Gregory Zinoviev, his best friend, and often passes the night arguing tactics with a variety of contemptible Swiss socialists and political exiles with half-baked ideas. He spends his days in the well-run libraries of Zurich, writing up essays on dialectical materialism, instructions to comrades in Russia and Europe, editorials filled with rage at the socialists of Western Europe's dying democracies, and, occasionally, a half-pleading, half-philosophical missive to his mistress and comrade, Inessa, who lives only a hour or two away in Clarens, Switzerland, but has not come to see him even once in the entire year. The Swiss annoy him with their orderly habits, their maddening routines, but he admires their precision, punctuality, scrupulousness, and is grateful for their so-called neutrality, which is sheer cowardice. In fact, everything that is not

war is cowardice. To exist without conflict is something Lenin cannot comprehend. The cosmos is a raging battle of opposing principles, a field of carnage forever recycled by a series of temporary victories that advance the struggle of consciousness, leaving behind the weak. In the library, he requests materials that are brought to him in silence by efficient and unobtrusive librarians. Libraries are the single stable fact of his exile, an axis that runs through his life, beginning in the hushed decorum of the British Museum Library where he wrote at desk 06, the same one used by Karl Marx to write *Das Kapital*. At desk 06 Lenin was known as Jacob Richter, a German national. In Zurich, he frequents La Terrasse to play chess after a hard day's work, but it isn't for pleasure only. The café teems with agents and counteragents, spies, and his own people, who, for safety reasons, he does not acknowledge but with whom he manages, nonetheless, to communicate. Lenin cannot imagine a world without honest libraries or without noisy cafés. Lenin cannot imagine the Soviet Union. Playing chess with the very public and well-known mischief-causing Romanian poet makes Lenin feel safe. All eyes are on Tzara; nobody pays much attention to the Russian revolutionary whose shiny pate can be seen reflected in the ostentatious monocle of Monsieur Tzara. "To masquerade as a conspirator, or at any rate to speak French with a Romanian accent and wear a monocle, is at least as wicked as to be one; in fact, rather more wicked, since it gives a dishonest

impression of perfidy, and moreover, makes the over-crowding of the cafes gratuitous, being the result neither of genuine intrigue nor bona fide treachery—was it not, after all, La Rochefoucauld in his *Maximes* who had it that in Zurich in Spring in wartime a gentleman is hard put to find a vacant seat for the spurious spies peeping at police spies spying on spies eying counterspies . . .”⁴³

chess: Chess is inhumane. It also mirrors civilization; that is to say, it mirrors our perceptions of time. It also combines gambling, which is a kind of hostile attention to fate, with calculation. It fosters the illusion of learning and improvement aided by a comfy deity called Excellence. The Masters of chess are a transcendent class that gives hope to every player. The Masters embody a Knowledge that, unlike the mystery gods, can be accessed physically by going to tournaments, or any time by turning on the computer. It is possible that chess, at its inception two-plus millennia ago in either China or India, began as an oracular board used for divination, a paleo-Ouija. The early pieces could have been the most delicate bones of a just-eaten beast, or those of a captured enemy. Ritual drunkenness by the oracle-keeper, or of the spectators, may have led to a bit of gambling, and to consequently incorporating dice into the setup. Rules will have come about both in order to keep the house advantage, and to pay at least formal obeisance to king and country, hoping that by

such homage the game would remain sacred, therefore untaxable. The Golden Horde was crazy about chess: the Mongols, like most nomads, loved this portable game and played it for centuries. At times, it mirrored military tactics. The Arab caliphates at the height of their power worshipped chess. The Mongol and Arab games were played fast, each player making as many moves as he could at the opening of the game, indifferent to the opponent. If one of the players failed to move as fast as the other, that was too bad. There was no rule about taking turns. Waiting politely for the opponent to make a move was unheard of in early chess, when the game was a joyful rush to victory in the initial moves. Protracted war was boring to warriors: there was no joy in waiting out the enemy, plotting methodically, designing tactics. Early war, like early chess, was about the rush, about thinking on your feet, about heading to death in one exultant sprint with your vigorous young comrades. J. C. Hallman, who wrote the *The Chess Artist*,⁴⁴ quotes Vincenz Grimm, a Hungarian chess-player who visited Syria in 1865: “For the first time that I played with an Arab and invited him to commence the game, he made with incredible rapidity 10 or 12 moves one after the other without in the least troubling himself about my play. When I asked in astonishment, ‘When does my turn come?’ he rejoined in just as much astonishment, ‘Why are you not moving?’” In Europe, chess changed and became slower and more stately;

it incorporated notions of chivalry and fair play, and the pieces themselves mirrored the medieval courts. The King acquired a cross, to represent the Crusading King. Tactical thought, silence, and deliberation entered the game as played at Europe's medieval courts. During the Renaissance, chess got sexier, like everything else. Played by flirting young courtiers, it became charged with carrying sexual innuendo across the board: surrendering became voluptuous. Eventually, slow chess began to bore the Europeans, whose societies started to change and speed up. The revolutions that began in the 18th century had their effect on chess, but it took the 20th century and America to truly speed up the game.

Tzara and Lenin play fast now, several games in a row, at a speed the La Terrasse riffraff isn't quite accustomed to. Four hundred years of deliberate moves have seen only incremental changes in timing, but this appears to no longer be the case, and it confuses the kibbitzers. Chess, like society, is starting to move at the speed of machines, keeping time to the shouts of futurists and dadaists, cars, and airplanes. The advent of one-minute chess played with a digital clock late in the 20th century could already be glimpsed in the rapid moves of the two players. One-minute chess, simultaneous games, and blindfolded chess have already been played, but the future is full of them, like ticking bombs. Chess

(continued)