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The Lamps

Shelly Silver

2015, DCP, color & black/white, 4 min., English. **Producer** Shelly Silver. **Production company** House Productions (New York, USA). **Written and directed by** Shelly Silver. **Director of photography** Shelly Silver. **Production design** Shelly Silver. **Sound** Shelly Silver. **Music** "Die Schnitzelbank". **Sound design** Shelly Silver. **Editor** Shelly Silver.

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"All who want me would like to eat me up. But I am too expansive and am open to all sides, desire this here and that there."

The Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven

"The Baroness is not a futurist. She is the future."

Marcel Duchamp

"The Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, née Plötz, was an unsung member of the New York Dada Movement. She was a poet, artist, vaudeville performer, runaway, rabble-rouser, cross-dresser, and all around public provocateur. She actively did not fit into her historical moment, and like most misfits, suffered for it. As with many women artists throughout history, her cultural legacy has been obscured and in some instances appropriated into the oeuvres of better-known male peers. Some researchers believe that the Baroness was the artist behind "Fountain," the ready-made urinal attributed to Duchamp. *The Lamps* details her trip to the Naples Archeological Museum in the early 1900s where she breaks into "Il Gabinetto Segreto," a secret room filled with erotic objects from Pompeii."

Shelly Silver

The Lamps is a short video by artist and filmmaker Shelly Silver, inspired by the life of Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, the notorious “Baroness” of bohemian Munich and New York Dada. During her extraordinary personal and artistic career, the Baroness (born Elsa Hildegard Plötz in 1874) carried out important work as a poet, painter, collage-artist, cross-dresser, vaudeville performer, shoplifter, social critic, and all around public provocateur. Until recently, however, her legacy has been marginalized by art history, and many of her works misattributed to male peers. For instance, recent scholarship has demonstrated that she gave Duchamp the ready-made urinal that he then exhibited as Fountain.

In *The Lamps*, Silver commemorates an early-life incident reported by the Baroness in her unfinished autobiography. While traveling in Italy in the summer of 1889, Elsa and her companion, Richard Schmitz, visited the Archeological Museum in Naples (the same place, incidentally, that Ingrid Bergman would explore some fifty years later in Rossellini’s *Viaggio in Italia*). Brushing aside a stunned museum guard, Elsa forced her way into “Il Gabinetto Segreto,” a room containing a famous collection of erotica from antiquity that in the nineteenth century was strictly forbidden to female visitors. According to Schmitz, “inside she inspected the collection of phalluses...as if they were antique lamps.”

Silver recounts this provocative story of feminine subversion with playful exuberance. *The Lamps* unfolds in a Freudian series of associative elements that include cropped images of an antique statue, a chorus of surprisingly expressive bullfrogs, and an early Edison phonograph recording of a formerly popular German drinking song called “*Schnitzelbank*.” *The Lamps* is rife with light-hearted sexual innuendos and more serious reflections on the experience of women within patriarchal Western culture. Silver makes use of narrative intertitles that move fluidly between first and third person points-of-view to convey the slippage between self and other in a complicated process of feminine subject formation. The lyrics of “*Schnitzelbank*” further introduce an inventory of symbolic objects that would make a psychoanalyst leap from his couch. Its leading bass solo repeatedly sings out the question, “Ist das nicht eine —” (Is that not a —), and a chorus replies, “Ja, das ist eine —” (Yes, that is a —). Then follows a litany of nouns, starting with “*Schnitzelbank*” (cutting table), “goldener Ring” (golden ring), “schönes Ding” (beautiful thing), “gute Wurst” (good sausage), “große Eier” (big eggs), “Lichtputzschere” (candle snuffer), “*Juden-Meier*” (Meier the Jew), etc.

Beyond their obvious sexual connotations, the suggestive imageries fall into relationship with Germany’s historical identity – a fitting evocation, given the Baroness’s Prussian origins. Through Silver’s insistent juxtaposition of the Greek statue with the jar of frogs, *The Lamps* concisely evokes a national imaginary torn between its aspirational classicism and a darker folk tradition, giving rise to the proverbial conflict between beauty and the beast. As preserved by nineteenth-century historians like the Brothers Grimm, Germanic fairy tales served an important function in the construction of Germany as a modern nation-state. At the same time, these stories captured the attention of Marxist intellectuals interested in the subversive (even revolutionary) undertones of popular culture. The critical philosopher Siegfried Kracauer perceived a secret kinship between the fairy tale and cinema as a modern media. In “The Mass Ornament”, he argued against

the prevalent conception of fairy tales as narratives of individual wish-fulfillment, preferring to interpret them as social allegories that express the hope of oppressed classes for “the miraculous advent of justice.”

There are many points of comparison between the fairy tale and Silver’s little video. Its condensed length (4 minutes and 18 seconds) engages the viewer as a fable or anecdote would, holding out a compact bud of meaning that blossoms over time in one’s memory. *The Lamps* inhabits the cyclical temporality of the fairy tale, the once-upon-a-time of history as recurring present. Encapsulated by the spinning photographic record, this cyclicity spins us around and around in the conundrum of the woman caught up in a patriarchal language game – “the phalluses (his words)” – defined by her lack in relation to the symbolic phallus. Defying the processes of social petrification, the heroine of *The Lamps* plays hide-and-seek with language and masquerades gleefully in an anarchic dance with conventions. In her willingness to grapple with the dark side of fantasy, Silver gives us a contemporary feminist fairy tale that throws fixed identities into confusion.

Cassandra Guan, NYC 2016

Shelly Silver, born in 1957, is a New York based artist working with the still and moving image. Her work explores contested territories between public and private, narrative and documentary, and – increasingly in recent years – the watcher and the watched. She received a BA and BFA from Cornell University and subsequently attended the Whitney Museum of American Art Independent Study Program. Her work has been exhibited, screened, and broadcast worldwide. A retrospective of her work was presented at Cinéma du Réel, Pompidou Center (2015), Arsenal Cinema, as well as at Dok Leipzig, Germany (2014). Silver is Associate Professor and Chair of the Visual Arts Program, Columbia University.

Films

1984: *Are We All Here?* (50 min.). 1987: *Meet the People* (17 min.). 1989: *Things I Forget to Tell Myself* (2 min.), *getting in* (3 min.). 1990: *We* (4 min.). 1991: *The Houses That Are Left* (51 min.). 1994: *Former East/Former West* (62 min.), *April 2nd* (10 min.). 1996: *37 Stories About Leaving Home* (52 min.). 1999: *small lies, Big Truth* (19 min.). 2001: *I.* (3 min.). 2003: *suicide* (7 min.). 2004: *What I’m Looking For* (15 min.). 2008: *in complete world* (53 min.). 2009: *5 lessons & 9 questions about Chinatown* (10 min.). 2013: *TOUCH* (68 min.), *frog spider hand horse house* (Forum Expanded, 47 min.). 2015: *The Lamps*.