Photographic Masquerades: The Readymade Femininity of Greta Garbo and Marcel Duchamp

Always the vamp I am, always the woman of no heart.

– Greta Garbo [1]

Nowadays, this may be all very well – names change with the times – but Rrose was an awful name in 1920.

– Marcel Duchamp [2]

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Illustration 1: Greta Garbo as Mata Hari, 1931	Illustration 2: Marcel Duchamp as Rrose Sélavy, 1921
Let us compare two photographs…	

The first is of Greta Garbo as *Mata Hari*, one of several from a series of publicity stills of the movie star taken in 1931 by Clarence Sinclair Bull. In this particular image Garbo's hands are posed on the white fur of her collar, which, pressed suggestively against her cheeks, frames the mysterious beauty of her face; half hidden in shadow and with a notably seductive arch of her eyebrows, her eyes stare boldly out of the picture. A large ring on her left hand calls attention to her ambiguous marital status, allowing for the possibility that any viewer could *possess* her. It is important to remember

that Garbo, in the words of Roland Barthes, “belongs to that moment in cinema when capturing the human face still plunged audiences into the deepest ecstasy.” [3] The ecstatic beauty of Garbo’s face in this image is at once captured and produced by the medium of the photograph, which represents a space of simulation in which the reality of the movie star can be said to truly exist.

The second photograph, taken by the Surrealist photographer Man Ray, pictures the artist Marcel Duchamp posturing as his female alter ego Rrose Sélavy. This image, referred to as *Marcel Duchamp as Rrose Sélavy*, is visually quite similar in composition and pose to that of the Garbo photograph, except Duchamp uses the standard feminine props to photographically invert his gender. Interestingly enough, Duchamp tells us that his first idea “was to take a Jewish name,” but he considered the possibility of changing sex as “much simpler.” [4] Richly dressed in dark furs and a geometrically patterned hat, Rrose’s fingers arch in a feminine gesture as she holds the fur collar close to her exposed face. On her right hand is a simple wedding band that, in European fashion, mates her to her male counterpart Duchamp. Rrose is in this way created as a readymade woman that is constructed out of readymade elements, Duchamp’s body and Germaine Everling’s hands. Through the strategic implementation of readymade femininity, Rrose is brought to life in New York in 1920. Her reality is quite literally sustained within the frame of the photograph, which demonstrates, as we argue, the readymade nature of gender positions.

Duchamp’s use of femininity in this photographic sex-change is a direct extension of his famous artistic readymades, in which (often mass-produced) objects are chosen rather than created by an artist to be art. *Fountain* (1917), for example, is a urinal purchased from a lavatory supply store, one of a series of virtually identical objects within a commercial line of products, which could be easily replaced by another with

little to no difference in the object itself. The only feature that distinguishes this artwork from the other urinals in the series is the signature of *R. Mutt*, Duchamp's pseudonym for this piece. As Duchamp makes clear in his discussion with Pierre Cabanne, the readymade is based within object-relations: "It's difficult to choose an object, because, at the end of fifteen days, you begin to like it or to hate it. You have to approach something with an indifference, as if you had no aesthetic emotion. The choice of readymades is always based on visual indifference and at the same time, on the total absence of good or bad taste." [5] Prominently included in a list of Duchamp's readymades, Rrose exists as a photographic – a readymade medium par excellence – manifestation of the already existing language or signifiers of femininity. According to Judith Butler, "femininity is an ideal which everyone always and only 'imitates.' Thus, drag imitates the imitative structure of gender, revealing gender itself to be an imitation." [6] Duchamp's imitation of femininity in his pose as Rrose is in this way an imitation of the imitation of femininity as a cultural discourse of gender, a discourse that Garbo also participates in with her own imitation of the feminine.

In addition to the remarkable similarity in the respective poses of Garbo and Duchamp (or Rrose), the photographs also share a visual psychology that, as Moira Roth points out, is astonishing similar in terms of their "beauty and remoteness: staring out of their photographs, with their hands idly protecting them, they both project an image of utter aloofness. In both portraits there is an impenetrable impassivity." [7] It is the photograph as a major site of the production of femininity that we argue is the basic subject of both Garbo's and Duchamp's portraits and, more significantly, it is their apparent playing with the productive capacity of the photographic medium that allows them to perform a *masquerade*.

1.

In “Womanliness as a Masquerade,” the psychoanalyst Joan Riviere makes the point that womanliness can “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.” [8] Yet it is this possession of masculinity or masculine traits that made Garbo such an attractive public figure, not the least of which is due to her deep voice and the questions surrounding her sexual orientation. There is a dramatic contrast between Garbo’s photographic eroticism, a quintessential visual representation of the female film star, and her active challenge to the strict understanding and even performance of gender identity. Throughout her career Garbo highlighted the ease with which cultural conceptions of gender and sexuality can be manipulated. Through her masquerade of masculinity and her homosexual tendencies, Garbo lays claim to the masculine characteristics that at the time were outside the realm of most women’s experience – and in this way she appropriates a certain amount of power with her pose.

This power is evident in Garbo’s direct gaze in the *Mata Hari* photographs, since it is still rare today to see an eroticized feminine figure challenging the viewer with such a bold look. A comparison can be made between the gaze of the courtesan in Édouard Manet’s *Olympia* , confronting the viewer with the power of a woman as a sexual subject that looks back, and the gaze of Garbo. Manet’s painting is still discussed as controversial for the simple fact that cultural presentations of eroticism do not make room for the female gaze and, more specifically, women’s active acceptance and employment of their own sexuality. In her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey points out,

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and

displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*.[9]

While Garbo is set up as an erotic feminine figure to be looked at in the *Mata Hari* publicity still, she undermines the traditional presentation of women as passive by powerfully looking back at the viewer.

Whereas Bull's photograph of Garbo is specifically intended to produce a feminine consumer object (through photography and film) that is *womanly* , it is clear that Duchamp's Rrose is not attempting to *be* a woman but instead is trying to bring into dialogue the cultural signifiers of man and woman through Rrose. Although constructed and staged using similar readymade feminine props and poses as those employed in the image of Garbo, Rrose remains obviously not a woman – or at least can be seen as an intentionally fake woman. Yet Rrose is no longer strictly a man either, the photographic medium allowing Duchamp to perform both genders simultaneously. Poised in a feminine masquerade Duchamp can be seen taking on the cultural qualities that are considered "feminine" or "womanly." As Amelia Jones states: "It is because Duchamp and Man Ray constructed Rrose Sélavy through photographic conventions that draw directly from cultural codes constructing femininity in relation to commodification that the images can be said to subvert these inexorable effects of the advertisement's production of femininity." [10] Duchamp's masquerade as Rrose, similar to Garbo's photograph as *Mata Hari*, draws upon the methodology and processes of popular culture advertisements, specifically the manner in which femininity as a social category is constructed or assembled through the production of imagery.

This complex relationship between Duchamp the "man" and Rrose the "woman" performed by the "man" is made evident in the works title: *Marcel Duchamp as Rrose Sélavy*. Duchamp sets up

his name in a typographical pairing with Rrose, in a typical surrealist game where words are seen as *making love* with words, in this case "Marcel Duchamp" poetically making love to "Rrose Sélavy" and vice versa. Hence, for Duchamp, it is possible to unhinge his gender through a reinvention of his name and play with other matings of meaning. This multiplicity of meanings is most evident in the wordplay of Duchamp's chosen name *Rrose Sélavy* , which is an elaborate double pun in French: "eros c'est la vie," *eros that's life*, and/or "arroser la vie," *drink it up, celebrate life*.

Duchamp uses the photograph as what he terms an *inframince* or infrathin medium. [11] Through this quality of the photograph, he both is and is not *Rrose Sélavy*, is and is not a woman. This inter-distinction is reflected in the use of the term "and/or" to negotiate the relation between Duchamp and Rrose, connecting them through the "and" while at the same time separating them through the "or." Jones even suggests that this *and/or* is a mating device in which Duchamp and Rrose "are related by way of an *inframince* asymmetry (incongruence) carried through all of Duchamp's productions: Duchamp and/or Rrose Sélavy, bride and/or bachelors, man and/or woman, viewer and/or viewed." [12] The photograph functions as a means of visually positing such *inframince* visual relationships through the materialization of the image as a simulation or representation. "In the photographic process it's not a question of considering the world as an object, of acting as if it was already there as an object, but of making it become an object, in other words, of making it become other," Jean Baudrillard states. [13] In this way, Duchamp's relationship with Rrose Sélavy is an infra-thin coupling of sexual identity that is accomplished strictly within the representational space demarcated by the photograph.

Duchamp's use of the advertising industry's strategies of producing femininity can be seen as a parody of gender

differentiation. But, as Jones asks:

What are the specific codes of femininity the Rrose Sélavy images parody? Here it is worth turning to studies in the history of photography that have linked nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century representations of women to the massive expanse of consumer culture and concomitant developments in photographic technology and the mass media. Since its origins around 1840, photography has developed a special relationship to both the commodity and femininity. [14]

We can readily see this relationship in the *Mata Hari* photograph in which Garbo is presented as a commodity object of the film industry, embodying the fantasy of femininity that Hollywood sells. In images of Garbo, the relationship between commodity and femininity is made explicit: she is the object of desire who seduces spectators who seek to consume her image. Garbo the fetishized movie star exists only as a product of this system of signification. Similarly, Rrose is "also highly seductive, having been photographed with portrait conventions used in advertisements and celebrity photos of the time, conventions used for eroticizing the female image to sell commodities or the female herself as a commodity." [15] As an extreme example of this same system of cultural signification, Rrose exists as a representation defined through the readymade modes of femininity she exhibits, yet without the relation to any "real" womanly presence. In other words, Rrose represents all of the signifiers used in the photographic commodification of femininity without a bodily or "real" referent.

In *Belle Haleine* (1921) Duchamp uses the star power of his alter-ego to sell perfume under the readymade label *Belle Haleine* (Lovely Breath), *Eau de Voilette*, which bears the authorizing signature of RS: *Rrose Sélavy*. But like the signifiers that constitute the feminine, this perfume bottle is only the surface appearance of what is actually an empty shell. This work consists of a readymade Rigaud perfume bottle

originally labeled *Eau de Violette* (Violet water), which Duchamp slightly alters to say *Eau de Voilette* (Veil Water) and uses the reversed R of the Rigaud label to create the initials of Rrose Sélavy. Rrose, like many other celebrity figures, is pictured – a photograph of her, again taken by Man Ray, graces the custom cut label affixed onto the crystal surface – as the embodiment of feminine beauty on a perfume bottle, a commodity object advertised as a key element in the cultural production of the feminine. Duchamp's *Belle Haleine* can in this way be seen as a parody of the conception of purchasing a readymade product the sole purpose of which is the production of womanliness.

As a cultural readymade, Butler reminds us, "femininity is an ideal which everyone always and only 'imitates,'" and Duchamp's imitation of the feminine or womanly through Rrose, his act of transvestitism, reveals the imitative structure of gender itself as a product. [16] Photography is also based upon imitation and therefore reinforces the imitative qualities of Duchamp's act. "Surrealism lies at the heart of the photographic enterprise," Susan Sontag notes, "in the very creation of a duplicate world, of a reality in the second degree, narrower but more dramatic than the one perceived by natural vision." [17] What is the duplicate gendered role that Duchamp is creating? The answer appears to lie in the masquerade of representation: the interchangeable signs of gender, the poses and its props, that constitute the erotic play of femininity that Duchamp and Garbo engage in.

2.

Let us consider in more detail the significant similarities between the photograph as an imitative form and the notion of the readymade. This overlap is particularly apparent when considering the representation or masquerade of femininity as a cultural readymade, which significantly uses eroticism to hide sexuality both in terms of the physical body and the power dynamics that accompany gender constructions. Eroticism,

according to Duchamp, becomes a tool to reveal “things that are constantly hidden – and aren’t necessarily erotic.” [18] In this way, Rrose’s erotic traits are largely the result of the photographic medium that quite literally hides the reality of what is pictured, turning all that it captures into a readymade image. This, stated simply, is the power of the photograph that reveals the masquerade hidden within life, showing us not what we see but rather what we want to see.

As Garbo and Duchamp demonstrate in different ways, *femininity* is a culturally transmitted and easily purchased readymade language, one that can be used by anyone who wants to participate in the production and/or reproduction of its qualities. This aping of the masquerade of femininity by Duchamp illustrates the construction of the feminine self that Susan Bordo describes as a manifestation of social control of women: “With the advent of movies and television, the rules for femininity have come to be culturally transmitted more and more through *standardized visual images*. As a result, femininity itself has come to be largely a matter of constructing[…] the appropriate surface presentation of the self.” [19] Bordo’s observations can readily be seen in the ready-made or *standardized visual images* that constitutes Duchamp’s work and also the whole of the industrial world; the ready-made is tangible in all aspects of modern life, including the objects of femininity that are used to create a surface illusion of what it is to be a woman. Rrose bears the photographic *surface presentation* of a woman because she, paradoxically, visually reproduces all the signifiers of femininity without having to physically embody them as a reality. In the hyperreality of the photographic image – which generates real models without origin or reality [20] – there is a level of perfection that cannot be achieved outside its simulated frame. It is therefore no coincidence that photography is the primary means through which femininity as a readymade cultural object is produced and communicated.

The use of readymade femininity is most evident in the popular culture use of film or publicity stills, which function as fetishistic objects that stand in for the hyperreal movie star. In photographic film stills produced by the film industry, John Ellis states:

The star is tantalizingly close and similar, yet at the same time remote and dissimilar. Further, the star is a legitimate object for the desires of the viewer in so far as the star is like the viewer, and an impossible object for the desire of the viewer in so far as the star is extraordinary, unlike the viewer. There is a complicated game of desires that plays around the figure of the star: every feature in it is counteracted by another feature. The male and female star can be desired by either sex, yet that desire has access to its object only on condition that its object is presented as *absent*. Desire is both permitted and encouraged, yet knows it cannot achieve any tangible form of satisfaction, except the satisfaction of looking.[14]

The desire exhibited by Garbo and Duchamp is permitted and encouraged through the mode of still image presentation, the tangible photographic object achieving a hyperreal eroticism that is not possible outside the illusionism of this frame. There is a complicated game of desire being played out within the photograph of Greta Garbo as *Mata Hari*, a tantalizing closeness resulting from her tightly cropped face that makes her a legitimate object for the desires of spectators. The Hollywood publicity still is not simply a means of promoting and selling films, it is also an active site within modern culture for the production of feminine desire based upon the spectator's ability to experience this erotic encounter as an act of (visual) consumption, with women being the primary object of this envisioning desire.

Using the conventions of the publicity photograph readily seen in the Garbo image, Duchamp disappears as a subject in order to recreate himself as an object: the photographic Rrose. The

photographs of Garbo and Rrose use the seductive gaze of womanliness to create masks that are adorned with readymade signifiers of femininity such as the furs and rings that accentuate their overtly feminine postures. Such *classic props*, as Barthes refers to those objects that "constantly make the unveiled body more remote," function as a powerful means of making "the living body return to the category of luxurious objects which surround men with a magical décor."[22] This effect in fact is a key purpose of the publicity still, which is a fetishistic object that distinctly separates the erotic representation from any physically reality. Garbo, considered from this perspective, is a model produced through the processes of photographic image creation that is created without an original "Garbo" – Greta Gustafson being simply the feminine prototype from which Garbo the international icon was formulated. Stated differently, Garbo the movie star is a hyperreal construction that exists through the reproducibility of photographic technology, which makes her become or disappear into the object of the photograph.[23] But, whereas Garbo is transformed into an object through the photograph, Duchamp uses the photograph to make the object of Rrose around which there is literally no reality: Rrose is purely hyperreal (infrathin).

The paradox of the movie star is that, in the case of Garbo, the spectator's experience of eroticism is based on a pretense of the possibility of a *real* encounter with the object of the image, namely Greta Gustafson. Duchamp forgoes this possibility, instead basing Rrose's eroticism in the readymade cultural signifiers that are used to produce femininity as a hyperreal state. Rrose is in this way not a photographic representation of feminine eroticism but rather exists as an object of the erotic female stripped bare of any pretense or mask of *real* or authentic subjectivity.

Georges Bataille points out that it is through objects that we first flirt with sexuality, the photographic object being a

key example. He observes:

We thus achieve awareness only by condemning and by refusing to recognize our sexual life. Eroticism is not the only thing to be brushed aside: we have no direct awareness of anything within us that cannot be reduced to the simplicity of things, of solid objects. In the first instance we are clearly conscious only of things, and anything less sharply defined than a physical object is not clearly perceived at first. It is only later that analogy provides us with concepts not possessing the simplicity of a solid object.[24]

Duchamp is masking the illusion of his gender identity with another mask, one constructed through the significations of femininity with which he as Rrose adorns himself. This dual identity, being both the male Duchamp and the female Rrose, is made possible by the hyperreal space of the photograph, which allows him to escape the physical genital reality of maleness or femaleness and to propose an infra-thin gender position based on the realities of the masquerade.

3.

In *Marcel Duchamp as Rrose Sélavy* , the figure of Rrose is a play of feminine parts that collectively contribute to the creation of a gender and identity while at the same time making us aware of this constructed nature. For example, the fragmented signifiers of the "real" woman's hands, the fur collar, the hat, the wig, the made-up face of Duchamp all function as parts in an elaborate cultural masquerade. These fragmented effects, however, are visually resolved in the medium of photography, through which the real and/or masquerade is brought into dialogue. Duchamp's pictorial cross-dressing as Rrose, however, embodies the fragmented process of gender signification as a means of parodying the production of sexual and gender identity. This embracing of the fragmentation of femininity as a cultural product or commodity allows for multiple meanings and, as evidenced in his photograph, opens up possible perspectives that cannot

exist in gender roles as they are culturally constituted.

Unlike Garbo's penetrating gaze, which visually seduces us into her image, Duchamp's look is drowsily seductive and suspiciously evasive. Rather than an overt sexuality that invites the possibility of an erotic encounter, Duchamp presents a mysterious sexuality that, although playing with the signifiers of femininity, calls our attention to the fact that he is a man masquerading as a woman. In fact, this masquerade is made even more clear by the signature in the lower right corner of the photograph that reads *lovingly Rrose Sélavy, alias Marcel Duchamp*. Here Duchamp presents the full complexity of this pictorial representation: Duchamp is named as the alias of Rrose and/or Rrose is the alias of Duchamp. More generally, masculinity is presented as a masquerade of femininity and/or femininity is a masquerade of masculinity. Femaleness, according to Bordo, is an artificial constitution the rules of which are learned "directly through bodily discourse: through images that tell us what clothes, body shape, facial expression, movements, and behavior are required."[25] Garbo, although born a woman, was not born *feminine* and, just like Rrose, has to pose in order to achieve this feminine state. What Duchamp makes obvious with the readymade feminine character of Rrose is that *bodily discourse* is regulated through a complex network of already existing cultural conceptions of gender and sexual identity, with femininity in particular being powerfully enacted through consumerist enterprises – the film industry representing a key example – that sell the image of the feminine.

Gender and sexuality are projected onto subjects and objects alike, functioning as symbols and signs that subvert and conceal the complex and convoluted reality of identity as a lived state. Identity becomes a floating category, a game to be played by social subjects. As Riviere states in response to her use of "womanliness" as a category: "The reader may now ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between

genuine womanliness and the ‘masquerade’. My suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference; whether radical or superficial: they are the same thing.”[26] Duchamp draws upon this indifference between genuine womanliness and the “masquerade,” that Riviere highlights, in the (photographic) creation of Rrose, who, at her most basic level, exists as an active questioning of the strictly binary view of gender in modern culture. Both Garbo and Rrose exist through a play with the culturally constructed and disseminated nature of gender, which in both cases supersedes any physical or bodily reality.

On this point, therefore, we can recognize a key distinction between the two photographs. In Garbo as *Mata Hari* – as well as in most if not all publicity stills – the expression of gender functions through an assumed reality that is projected onto the image, with viewers assuming the persona of “Garbo” to be the same as the person named Greta Gustafson; it is the possibility of this fantasy becoming a reality that is at the heart of these erotic images. The same is not true for Rrose, who exhibits readymade gender signifiers not as a prelude to the real but instead to accentuate the unreality of performed gender roles. In *Marcel Duchamp as Rrose Sélavy*, Duchamp pictures a coming together of the polar categories of male and female in order to produce an ambiguous and dialogic eroticism only possible in the object of the photograph.

[1] Greta Garbo, quoted in Alexander Walker, *Garbo: A Portrait* (New York: Macmillan, 1980), 11.

[2] Marcel Duchamp to Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp* , trans. Ron Padgett (Cambridge: Da Capo Press. 1987), 64.

[3] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* , trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 56.

[4] Duchamp to Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, 64.

[5] Duchamp to Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, 21.

[6] Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 145.

[7]Moira Roth, "Marcel Duchamp in America: A Self-readymade," in *Difference / Indifference: Musings on Postmodernism, Marcel Duchamp and John Cage* (Amsterdam: G+B Arts International, 1998), 20.

[8] Joan Riviere, "Womanliness as a Masquerade," in *Formations of Fantasy*, ed. Victor Burgin, James Donald and Cora Kaplan (New York: Methuen, 1986), 39.

[3] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Film Theory and Criticism*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 837.

[10] Amelia Jones, *Postmodernism and the En-gendering of Marcel Duchamp* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994: 168.

[11] Duchamp never directly defines the term "infrathin." Instead, he presents examples of how it functions. As he writes in one of his notes: "infrathin separation – better/ than screen, because it indicates/ interval (taken in one sense) and/ screen (taken in another sense) – separation has the 2 senses male and female." Marcel Duchamp,*Marcel Duchamp, Notes* , ed. and trans. Paul Matisse (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1980), np.

[12] Jones, *Postmodernism and the En-gendering of Marcel Duchamp,* 95.

[13] Jean Baudrillard, "The Art of Disappearance," in *Jean Baudrillard: Art and Artefact,* ed. Nicholas Zurbrugg (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 30.

[14] Jones,*Postmodernism and the En-gendering of Marcel Duchamp,* 164.

[15] Jones, *Postmodernism and the En-gendering of Marcel Duchamp,* 147.

[16] Butler, The *Psychic Life of Power,* 145.

[17] Susan Sontag,*On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1977), 52.

[18] Duchamp to Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp,* 88.

[19] Susan Bordo, “From Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body,” in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism,* ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York: Norton, 2001), 2366.

[20] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), 2. There is a comparison to be made between Baudrillard’s concept of the hyperreal and Duchamp’s idea of the infrathin, both of which define a form of simulation as model.

[21] John Ellis, *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video* (London: Routledge, 1992), 98. [22] Barthes, *Mythologies*, 85.

[23] Baudrillard, “The Art of Disappearance,” 30.

[24] Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality,* trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights, 1986), 161-162.

[25] Bordo, “From Unbearable Weight,” 2366.

[26] Riviere, “Womanliness as a Masquerade,” 39.