

# MAN RAY: UNCONCERNED BUT NOT INDIFFERENT

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“Yes” was Marcel Duchamp’s reply at every point scored in the tennis match he and Man Ray played the first time they met in 1915; they played without racquets, nets or a ball and neither one spoke the other’s language. It was in the countryside of New Jersey at an artist colony where Man lived with his French speaking Belgian wife Adon Lacroix.

Ray and Duchamp informed each other’s intellectual and artistic development profoundly from then on. Both were born in the late nineteenth century before telephones, electricity, automobiles, the military-industrial-entertainment complex and the digital age that we take for granted today. They lived at the time of the two most terrible wars in human history; the impact on all of human culture of the First and the Second World Wars must not be underestimated. Both Ray and Duchamp were creatively concerned with originality and the experimental and both were accomplished draftsmen, in the industrial and the aesthetic sense. They were the only New York Dadaists, co-founders with Katharine Drier of the first Museum of Modern Art in New York called the Société Anonyme, and in 1917 they both participated in the first exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists, which rejected R. Mutt’s submission, *Fountain*.

Duchamp and Ray were the first Conceptualists per se, each choosing to walk their own fine line, but always asking the primary question, what is art? Their resolved independence is more fascinating since both were published regularly in Dada and Surrealist printed matter and magazines like *391*, *La Révolution Surréaliste*, *Minotaure* and *VVV*; but neither one ever signed a manifesto. Both Ray and Duchamp were closely allied to important modernist groups in America from 1915 to 1921. Among them, the brilliant photographer and exponent of modern art, Alfred Steiglitz producer of *Camera Work* and the 291 gallery. Also the Walter and Louise Arensberg salons mixed in their lives with anarchists at the Ferrer Center and socialist oriented American realists, The Eight and the Ashcan School who included Robert Henri, George Bellows and John Sloan. The politically volatile and complex economic and cultural landscape of America, which was in the process of changing from an agrarian to an industrial economy, and in particular New York, where the first sky scrapers were being built, also contained Alexander Calder, Marsden Hartley, Morton Shamburger, Charles Sheeler, Joseph Stella, Edgard Varèse, Wallace Stevens, Isadora Duncan and Thomas Wilfred, inventor of the *Lumia* a series of startlingly beautiful box sculptures combining colored moving lights and music.



*Man Ray, Indestructible Object, 1923*

Womens rights was a public issue in the media; suffragettes, flappers and many brave women led the field organizing protests and peaceful demonstrations for human rights, including women’s right to vote. An outstanding figure was Mary Harris Jones, called by all, Mother Jones [<http://www.kentlaw.edu/ilhs/majones.htm>]. She became nationally known in 1912 when she led a march of children through the streets of West Virginia to protest the horrendous conditions of child labor, for which she was arrested. Released from prison by the governor of the state, Mother Jones was 83 years old and had been working tirelessly for decades to aid and change the terrible persecution and unimaginable abuse of miners and their families and of workers throughout the world. The working conditions prior to unions and protective legislation, lay in stark contrast to the luxury and comforts of the new industrialist and capitalist bourgeoisie in America and Europe, and these facts must be realized in order to grasp the complexities of artistic and literary cultures as they evolved through individuals like Ray, Duchamp and the Surrealists in France and America.

Alias Man Ray: The Art of Reinvention at The Jewish Museum provides a tremendous opportunity to experience a representative sample of the variety of Man Ray’s oeuvre from all periods of his productive career. Rather than to demonstrate the curator’s thesis that Ray did not develop a coherent style, this retrospective provides an excellent vision of his remarkable talents applied in a variety of media and techniques. Too few of Ray’s twenty-five late Shakespearean Equivalents paintings have ever been exhibited together and here we are given only one... *Full article online*