

## MAN RAY: Unconcerned but Not Indifferent

### ***Alias Man Ray: The Art of Reinvention***

The Jewish Museum <http://www.thejewishmuseum.org>

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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, net 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 Ray lived with his French-speaking Belgian wife Adon Lacroix.

Man 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, 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, and the impact on all of human culture made by the First and the Second World Wars must be contemplated. Both Man 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 among a handful of Dadaists in New York, co-founders with Katharine Dreier 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 Man Ray were 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 such as *391*, *La Révolution Surréaliste*, *Minotaure* and *VVV*; but neither one ever signed a manifesto. Both Man Ray and Duchamp were closely allied with two key American modernist groups of the period 1915 to 1921: the circle surrounding Alfred Stieglitz, the brilliant photographer and exponent of modern art, publisher of *Camera Work* and director of the 291 Gallery; and the salon of Walter and Louise Arensberg, who hosted soireés for avant-garde artists at their home on West 67th Street. 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 skyscrapers were being built, also contained Alexander Calder, Marsden Hartley, Morton Schamberg, 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.

A woman’s right to vote was a public issue in the 1910s, widely discussed in the printed media and at social gathering. Suffragettes, flappers and newly liberated women organized protests and demonstrations for human rights in general. 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 to help advance workers causes throughout the world. Working conditions prior to the establishment of unions and protective legislation, lay in stark contrast to the luxury and comforts of the new industrialist and capitalist bourgeoisie in America and Europe. These facts must be taken into consideration in order to grasp the complexities of artistic and literary cultures as they evolved through individuals like Man 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 Man 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 Man Ray's twenty-five late *Shakespearean Equivalents* paintings have ever been exhibited together and here we are given only one. His later paintings like the two shown, *La rue Férou* and *Night Sun – Abandoned Playground*, are sublime and tantalizingly reminiscent of Magritte and early de Chirico. These and a good selection of his paintings from before 1917 show what an excellent and committed painter he was throughout his life. Man Ray in his time was known by the majority for his phenomenally varied and highly achieved photographic work, both commercial and aesthetic, which is represented here by important examples, but which would require several additional galleries to do it justice.

The installation is wonderful because the work is. It is well lighted and arranged chronologically. In particular, the carousel presentation for the *Revolving Doors*, of 1916-17 is very fine, with the rainbow hued prints shown flanked on the adjacent wall by originals, and Man Ray's remade versions of the original collages. A number of key "object" sculptures and Schwartz editions are present, but to savor them, their anecdotal history is necessary. *Cadeau* is a metal iron with a row of tacks glued down the middle, it was assembled by Man in the company of Erik Satie, only hours before being exhibited in Man Ray's first show in Paris (months after his arrival in 1921), at the Librairie Six bookstore. As the title states, it was made as a gift, to Satie, with whom he became instant friends when they met.

The curator, Mason Klein, is to be congratulated, but also challenged on the central premise of his catalog essay and his interpretation of Man Ray's life and work. Klein tries to demonstrate that Man Ray, according to a biographer Baldwin and in the words of a critic named Leider, "never quite found himself." This is entirely moot, but when Klein sets up his argument with such assertions as, "...In light of the virtual absence of 'Jewish' artists, at least in avant-garde Western European art," he is blatantly incorrect. The fact that such creative geniuses as Jean Cocteau (an early friend and champion of Ray), Tristan Tzara (born Samy Rosenstock), Marc Chagall, Max Jacob and Gertrude Stein were all allied and then living in Paris, can hardly be ignored. Klein imposes an interpretation and sets up arguments as foregone conclusions such as, "...How can one doubt that his [Man Ray] unceasing sense of alienation has its roots in his immigrant, Jewish upbringing..." and "...That the artist's agenda of identity suppression has

been largely overlooked is understandable, given how few people today even know that the artist was Jewish, or that he was once called Emmanuel (Manny) Radnitzky." This psychological approach, which is popular among some art historians today, fails to explain the evolution of their subject, Man Ray in this case, beyond and apart from the average social, religious and economic conventions of people who are not creatives. It is a fact, which Klein does not state, that in early 1912, Man Ray's entire family decided together to change their name legally from Radnitzky to Ray. Emmanuel was already called Manny, so the transition to Man Ray, for a person as intensely involved with modernist ideas, literature, art and photography, and who chose the path of art over the practical career of architecture, makes perfect sense.

The catalog is an elegant publication with essays and a timeline well worth reading. In particular, *Man Ray's Culture Industry*, by George Baker spotlights the fascinating career of Man Ray as a highly paid advertising and fashion photographer. His career in advertising, fashion and as a portraitist deserve considerable note when studying Man Ray's life and character. In that context, to know that Man Ray spent summers with Picasso in his villa on the Côte d'Azur, and that he liked to buy fancy cars, adds a new facet to his brilliance.

In retrospect one can look over the long lives and varied works that Man Ray and Duchamp evolved, individually and together, perceiving some interesting and fundamental differences between them. While both were unashamedly and notoriously adventurous in their pursuit of the feminine sex, Duchamp as an artist was more cerebral and ascetic, in counterpoint to the fertile, talkative and productive voluptuary that in many respects characterizes Man Ray. Two friends of Man Ray offer the following insights on his character and intensions, which seem more representative, and are unlike the repressed and guilty persona suggested in this critical approach of this show:

*...He had a way of making everything new and, if not important, certainly worth considering, worth pondering. It was this rather rare quality of his which fascinated me. It is a quality, of course, which reveals itself in his work. Of an extremely fertile mind, his imagination is always at work, always creating new relationships of a surprising kind...*  
Henry Miller

*...his prolificness, his lack of concern for rules, and the universality of his gifts place Man Ray outside any school. It's impossible to confine him within limits by labeling him with the characteristics of any one style. Perhaps his former patron Gertrude Stein defined him best when she wrote: "Man Ray is Man Ray is Man Ray is Man Ray..."*  
L. Fritz Gruber

Today there can be no doubt that Man Ray is one of the most influential and accomplished creative geniuses in Western history. He was a stellar individualist, and through his life and work Man Ray resonates intrepid, elegant and humorous disquietude in our deepest pleasure zones.