

*“Alias Man Ray: The Art of Reinvention”
The Jewish Museum, November 15, 2009 - March 14, 2010*

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“What’s in a name?” Shakespeare mused. For Emmanuel Radnitzky, apparently quite a bit. He shortened this birth name to Man Ray and, with this brilliant, punchier moniker, became a photographer supreme as an expatriate in 1920s roaring Paris. Undeniably, this also de-ethnicized his persona, a practice that a number of artists deployed. “Emmanuel Radnitzky” was kept under wraps until a 1977 monograph, published the year after he died.

The Jewish Museum considers him as part of a series of exhibitions that examine the identities of Jewish artists.¹ In the case of Ray this is a complex theme involving an erasure of his Russian Jewish immigrant past in favor of an international cosmopolitanism. The exhibition’s thesis posits the artist’s “conflicted identity,” “a sense of otherness deeply connected to the problem of assimilation—in the artist’s words skirting both ‘notoriety’ and ‘oblivion’”²

The tightly hung show of over 200 works including photography, painting, sculpture, drawing and film provides a retrospective overview of this polymath of modernism. In this age of widespread video art, his non-narrative films, for example, *Le retour à la raison* (1923), might raise his profile as an early multi-media artist. Two running screens were laudably included within the hanging, a hint but perhaps not enough to convey the filmic artist.

Our current, post-Cindy Sherman sense of malleable identity is introduced at the outset of the exhibit, with a chronological span in three different media enacting various Man Ray personae, as well as contrasting portraits of him by Stieglitz and Picasso. Ray’s cast bronze sculpture *Auto Portrait* (1933), a bust enframed in a wooden box, anticipates the boxed casts of Jasper Johns. Flashback documentation of his

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student work on paper, handsome mechanical drawings and designs is positioned across from his hand-on-hip Bar Mitzvah portrait. The formative years include examples of his radical magazine covers for *Mother Earth* (1914) and foreshadow collaborations with his first wife, poet Adon Lacroix. Inspired by love, he became a book artist in 1914-15, designing layouts for her poems, as well as writing poetry himself. One of the most significant revelations of the show is this unfamiliar material featuring their publications that united word and image. Thus “Alias Man Ray: The Art of Reinvention” is front-loaded with documentation (the opposite of the Museum’s earlier Eva Hesse survey).

If Man Ray’s early Cézannism is much less astute or convincing than Arshile Gorky’s, his take on Cubism is a great improvement.³ *Promenade*, *Symphony Orchestra*, and *The Rope Dancer* are high points of American Cubism, at the same moment as Max Weber’s apogee and at a time when some of the Parisian Cubists were in the trenches of World War I.

Curator Mason Klein interestingly notes *Promenade*’s “dressmaker pattern” shapes, which give its opaque planes some curious, less angular contours, as well as matching bumps and hollows. Klein sees this as “a more explicit self-identification.”⁴ The abstracted figure unfolds laterally, like a cut-paper doll. Similarly shaped are the colorful, irregular cutouts of *The Rope Dancer*. Here the show scores several points by reminding us of father Radnitzky’s tailor shop: we notice the colored threads sewn into the *Revolving Door* collages, or the mannequin of *Interior*, or *Still Life + Room* (1918) seemingly more tailor shop than de Chirico. Documentation of the Radnitzkys’ shop would be welcome, but apparently was not preserved (an absence that Klein might see as telling). Ray does nonetheless secrete personal historical detail into the more generic language of modernist form. I am reminded of Picasso’s analogous inclusion of Catalan musical instruments in his Cubist paintings.⁵

Central to the exhibition’s theme is the tiny yet monumental *Man Ray 1914*, where the name is stacked as two cliff-like ridges, topped by the sky blue year. Painted on the cover of a sketchbook, its initial and primary purpose may have been identification. Nonetheless, it is more radical than the play of word and image in Cubism proper; this is entirely and uniquely word **as** image, foreshadowing much later developments in 1960s art. Name as identity, true, but not so much in “assimilation” as boldly stated, carved like Mt. Rushmore into the cliffs as a word portrait.

Equally fascinating is a lost relief assemblage of two years later, *Self-Portrait*, 1916, documented by a small black and white photo. Here readymade materials are used pictorially: two bells and a push button can suggest facial or bodily features. The

push button that elicits the viewer's touch is a frustration for the spectator, as no bell would ring. The true *Portrait* aspect is entirely indexical: a print of the artist's painted left hand, pressed onto the surface. Like *Man Ray 1914* it seems to state, Man was here. The history of artist's hand prints in the twentieth century is rather amazing, and includes Picasso, Pollock and Johns.

Of course behind Man Ray's shift from Cubism to Dada is his meeting with Marcel Duchamp in Ridgefield in 1915, an epochal moment of New Jersey modernism. Duchamp and Ray together become the main force of New York Dada, after which Marcel paved Man's entrée to the Parisian avant-garde in 1921. There he would be the only American amongst the incipient surrealist group, and the first to exhibit in their new gallery. Man collaborates with Marcel in the cross-dressing *Rose Sélavy* portraits (1921), one of the most transgressive gestures of Dada and one that still gives off sparks. One notes Man Ray's adaptation of his own name as a forerunner to Marcel's play of pseudonymity; perhaps it was a prompt for Duchamp's initial idea to fabricate a Jewish identity.⁶ This persists on a level that parallels the gender alteration: the fact that *Sélavy* also puns on "Ce Levy," Levy being a common Jewish name. The Marcel/Rose friendship became a kind of "sel à vie," as he put it, but not without the cost of overshadowing Man's reputation to this day.⁷

Joining the stream of artists to France did seem to distance Man Ray from his ethnic roots, though the "School of Paris" had numerous Jewish members. He wrote to his patron Ferdinand Howald that he was fast becoming Parisian, even while trading on the French fascination for things American.⁸ Emigration also involved a linguistic dislocation. His Adamic first name suggested to his new friends the word *main*, the artistic limb. The main/Man pun seemingly delighted the artist, and is given play in the show through the positive/ negative pair of photos of a *Hand* (1922). Less attention has been given to Ray/*raie* as in ray of light, essential for the artist or photographer. Alternately the French word could also name the crack of Kiki's *derriere*, in the famous *Le Violon d'Ingres* (1924).

There is an excellent selection of cameraless rayographs, including an astonishing all black square, *Black Rayograph* (1930). It would seem to contradict his rejection of abstraction, but it is inscribed to Desnos as "pleine des choses qui absorbent la lumière," (full of things which absorb light) thus not abstract, only dark. In the chic magazine *Vanity Fair*, in November 1922, Man Ray published his "new method" of rayographs. Interestingly this, too, constitutes a triumph of renaming, in this case of photograms, cameraless exposures that were practiced from the origins of photography. The photograms pioneered by Christian Schad in Zurich Dada circles around 1919 came to be likewise baptized Schadographs by Tzara in 1936. Man Ray was thus not the first, but the first to (re)**name**. Self-renaming of the

photogram technique is thus itself wrapped up in identity. He was successful in this rebranding: rayograph would become a generic term.

At the same time as these experiments, he made largely non-surrealist celebrity portraits, from all the arts, including Breton, Cocteau, Hemingway, Joyce, and Stein. Some of these graced the walls of the renowned Shakespeare and Co. bookstore on the Left Bank. The bookstore and many of these protagonists of the arts of 1920s Paris also figured in Woody Allen's May 2011 movie, *Midnight In Paris*, as does a Man Ray character. Appropriately, since Man Ray participated in the forging of a celebrity culture for writers and artists, he not incidentally achieved notoriety himself. Warhol's celebrity portraits are later parallels; Man Ray was to become one of his subjects.

Thus imbricated within these notables are four self-portraits, shifting identities between camera Man, (*Self-Portrait with Camera*, 1930), drummer, and dandified *Self-Portrait as a Fashion Photographer* (1936). *La mode* is a mode he heavily pursued in the Paris years, seemingly related to—as the class opposite of—the workmanlike tailor shop.⁹ Alas, his apposite fashion photographs were not represented in this show.

Throughout the “Alias Man Ray: The Art of Reinvention” exhibition efforts are made to give equal attention to drawing, object making (mostly in later editions) and painting, the last a less acclaimed enterprise, though one the artist put stock in. Man Ray can be seen as part of a wave of ironic “bad painting,” together with that of de Chirico and Picabia, whose later works have been revived in this respect. Here Barbara Novak's postulate comes to mind: the painterly is generally not congenial for the American artist.¹⁰ Indeed, Man is best when there is limited evidence of hand, either very smooth surfaces (as in the *Revolving Doors*), the commercial tool airbrush, or the rayographs. In this, too, he is forerunner to fellow Pennsylvanian Warhol.

The rise of the Third Reich and the Holocaust parallels a change in mood in Ray's works during the late 1930s and beyond. Driven into exile, he did not return to New York, but like Dali looked to Hollywood. Despite his previous camera work, Ray could not carve a niche in the film industry. From the Hollywood period, we have the targeted *Self-Portrait in cross-hairs* (c. 1947), which perhaps on one level are the cross-hairs of anti-Semites. At the same time, the *Self-Portrait with Half Beard* (1948, catalogue Fig. 29, but not exhibited) bespeaks acceptance of a more dualistic post-war identity: is it Franco-American, or Jewish-American, or both?

These are among the exceptions to the weakening drift of the later works; other stronger works include the notably large canvas, *Image à deux faces* (1959) on the naughty lesbian theme of “les deux amis.” It is not well-painted, but the image of the two kissing profiles has a graphic simplicity. In an inspired hanging, it is skied, as if

in anticipation of a James Rosenquist billboard-sized painting. And at the very end, two drawings of circular and triangular shapes, *Shadows* (1971), strike a surprisingly contemporary note.

In the last rooms, one becomes aware that the identity thesis, already stretched, is also competing with a commitment to a career overview. One wonders if abandoning the retrospective format could have made for a stronger case.

What's in a name, when it comes to branding a show? **Alias** is intriguingly masked, and announces its identity theme. It is defined as "an assumed name," from the Latin *alius*, "at another time, otherwise." Yet this levels the gesture, since there are markedly variant types of assumed names. Man Ray is a partial one, an extraction entirely contained within Emmanuel Radnitzky: *Man* a middle syllable, *Ray* the beginning and end. The first and last names share the same sole vowel, and number of letters, melding into an implicitly singular unit, which can be uttered in one breath. They are also nouns, referring elsewhere, and thus puns. A totally alternate pseudonym, like Juan Gris, or Arshile Gorky, is a purer alias. Man Ray's should be compared to his contemporary, the writer Samy Rosenstock, who analogously adopted S. Samyro (before arriving at the more renowned fuller alias Tristan Tzara). Tzara was an early colleague and crucial supporter; his photographic portrait is one of Man Ray's most imaginative. Given Tzara's émigré and Jewish background, this seems highly relevant for contextualization, indeed modern artistic pseudonymity itself should have been explored in the catalogue. The practice continued, and Larry Rivers has pointed to its commonality: from Trotsky to most jazz musicians and Hollywood stars.¹¹ Rivers knew, as he was born as, and known through his teenage years, as Yitzhok Loiza Grossberg. The de-ethnicizing editing of Phillip Goldstein to Guston, and the alteration of Marcus Rothkowitz to Mark Rothko, also come to mind.

The seemingly covert "alias" was even more complexly determined and contextualized in the case of Man Ray. He took his new name circa 1912—around 21, the age of majority, not solo but in concert with his younger brother Sam (foreshadowing, perhaps, the conspiratorial play of aliases with Duchamp). The real shocker, however, is buried in Footnote 40 of the catalogue: the Radnitzkys gave the name "Michael" to their eldest son on his birth certificate.¹² Perhaps like many immigrants wanting their offspring to adapt in the new world, Ray's parents launched the de-ethnicization process that "Alias Man Ray: The Art of Reinvention" emphasizes as defining their son's life and work.

1 Mason Klein, Curator at The Jewish Museum, organized the exhibition. The accompanying 256-page catalogue with 246 illustrations, co-published by Yale University Press and The Jewish Museum,

includes essays by Klein, Merry A. Foresta, and George Baker, with an illustrated timeline by Lauren Schell Dickens. The citations that follow are to this catalogue.

2 “You see, I try to walk the tightrope of accomplishment between notoriety and oblivion,” Man Ray, “Ruth, Roses, and Revolvers,” *View* (Dec. 1944), quoted in Klein, catalogue p. 94. See also p. 6.

3 One could compare works by both in Gail Stavitsky and Katherine Rothkopf, *Cézanne and American Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). See also Michael R. Taylor, ed. *Arshile Gorky: A Retrospective* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2009), 23-26.

4 “Alias Man Ray: The Art of Reinvention” exhibition catalogue, 43.

5 Picasso’s works from around 1912-15. See Lewis Kachur “Picasso, Popular Music, and Collage Cubism (1911-12),” *The Burlington Magazine* Vol. 135, (April 1993), 252-60.

6 “Alias Man Ray: The Art of Reinvention” exhibition catalogue, 47.

7 Man Ray inscribed his first published rayograph *Rose sel à vie* (1922) (catalogue Fig. 34, p. 183.) “Le sel de la vie” might loosely be translated as “spice of life.”

8 Letter from Man Ray to Ferdinand Howald, August, 18, 1921, The Ohio State University Libraries.

9 The class issue is interestingly engaged in George Baker’s catalogue essay, “Man Ray’s Culture Industry,” 129-60.

10 Barbara Novak, *American Painting of the Nineteenth Century; Realism, Idealism, and the American Experience* (New York: Praeger, 1979).

11 Larry Rivers, with Arnold Weinstein, *What Did I Do? The Unauthorized Autobiography* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 44. Rivers also points to such pseudonyms being understood, if not spoken of. And who would have taken “Man Ray” as a “real” name?

12 “Alias Man Ray: The Art of Reinvention” exhibition catalogue, 214.