

Man Ray

Man Ray (born Emmanuel Radnitzky) studied mechanical drawing in high school. A few years ago art historian Anne McCauley pointed out that Man Ray's early photographs acknowledge this training; in mechanical drawing the trick is to render shadows cast by complex curves. Consider the strong shadows that describe the two astonishing early Man Ray photographs, "Man" and "Woman," both from 1918. In these photographs, the sunlight---Man Ray must have photographed on the roof of his studio---describes the objects in piercing, high relief. You can see some formative drawing exercises embedded in Man Ray's great innovation of the 1920's, the photogram---or as he claimed, the *Rayogram*. Photograms are camera-less pictures made as objects cast shadows on photographic paper. In his photograms Man Ray mixed solid objects with translucent ones, metal plates with pieces of hardware, guns, and film strips, spirals of paper and springs, light bulbs and glassware. These are photography located somewhere on the border of mechanical drawing and sculpture.

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In December 1973 I visited the Man Ray retrospective in New York. The weather was gloomy and cold and my woolen clothes barely kept me warm. I remember the photograms and a large array of Man Ray's society portraits of the surrealists. I was carrying my sister's 35mm Minolta camera and I finished off a roll of 36 photographs documenting Man Ray's sculptures. At that point I thought of myself more as a sculptor than as a photographer. One work that drew my attention in the show was Man Ray's "Obstruction," a large branching sculpture of 32 wooden coat hangers suspended from the ceiling. A year later, in what would be my final sculpture project, I begin working with metal coat hangers. It only occurred to me only later that I cribbed from Man Ray in that last sculpture just before I became a photographer.

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A few years ago Quentin Bejac guided me through the Centre Georges Pompidou Museum's photography collection in Paris. Bejac mentioned that the photography collection starts with Man Ray. One of the prime innovators in photography and *the* surrealist photographer par

excellence, Man Ray is at the origin point in the Pompidou's history of photography.

When Man Ray arrived in Paris in 1921, he became friends with a photographer living nearby. This photographer, Eugene Atget, used an old camera and was nearing the end of his life. Man Ray's young assistant, Bernice Abbott, also befriended Atget. She photographed him and after his death she brought all Atget's negatives and prints and brought the archive to New York. In 1968 she sold the whole mass of material to the Museum of Modern Art and in 1980's the museum mounted four comprehensive exhibitions of Atget's work.

Man Ray in Paris, Atget in New York, together they create dual and competing lineages comprising photography as art at the Pompidou and at MoMA. For me in the 1980s, living in New York in the shadow of MoMA, the rhetoric around Atget's work functioned as a stifling godlike avatar. Atget, in MoMA's historical narrative, is the be all and end all of photography. And Man Ray? Against the encyclopedic and hardworking Atget, Man Ray seems to be positioned in New York's telling as the clown, the society photographer, the playboy, the *experimenter*. The great irony, of course, is that Man Ray discovered Atget and in some indirect way originated New York's insistent narrative of the primacy of "straight," "street" photography that has always annoyed me.

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The photographs that provided me with a way out of this problem with Atget are Man Ray's great 1930's photographs of the mathematical models. After Max Ernst alerted Man Ray to the plaster models of mathematical equations at the Institut Henri Poincaré in Paris, Man Ray photographed the plasters, and titled them "Mathematical Objects." The photographs use strong directional lighting that starkly illuminates the multiple planes and surfaces of each model. When Man Ray went to Hollywood in the 1940's, he derived a suite of paintings from the photographs, that he titled "Shakespearean Equations." I recall that only the Shakespearean paintings were exhibited in the 1973 New York retrospective.

Ten years later, in the early 1980's, at a gallery in midtown Manhattan, I was astonished to see the "Mathematical Objects" for the first time. I'd begun photographing aluminum foil and draped fabric in my small

studio on Grand Street and I thought of these still life arrangements as models for complex, spatial manifolds. In my imagination, Man Ray's photographs covered similar territory and I considered this encounter with his work to be profoundly serendipitous.

The "Mathematical Objects," recalled Brassai's photographs, his "Involuntary Sculptures" which I was already knew. Photographs of sculptural constructs---the detritus shaped by random forces in Brassai or the complex mathematical equations materialized in hardened, inscribed plaster forms in Man Ray--- presented the solution to the problem that the rhetoric around Atget posed for me. Man Ray's "Mathematical Objects," prompted me to take seriously the "graph" in *photograph*. Most people understand "graph" to mean "writing," in "writing with light." After the "Mathematical Objects" I now took "graph" to mean a dimensional diagram of information. The graphs of the sensitometric characteristics of film, or the economic distribution of wealth in the five boroughs of New York City, these too properly re-photographed could be considered photo-graphs. In this light, Man Ray's 1920 photograph, "Dust Breeding," his "capture" of months of dust gathered on Marcel Duchamp's horizontal "Large Glass," graphs the acculimation of time. I was elated by this discovery.

The photograph as a physical graph challenged the argument about the importance of Atget and of street derived photography. My abstract studio photographs were not analogies or stand-ins for the world and neither were the Man Ray's "Mathematical Objects." Both diagramed forces and vectors, topographical and mathematical realities that were no less valid than the other way of working in the street. In bequeathing me his "Mathematical Objects," Man Ray undid his inadvertent championing of Atget. The score, in 1983, was now even.