



## ART BEAT

VISUAL

### Two Exhibits Gaze Upon Man Ray's Afterimage

Posted by [Zoë Pollock](#) and [Molly Finnegan](#), December 16, 2009

Art history knows him as Man Ray, the witty surrealist artist who helped legitimize photography as a medium of high art. But two new concurrent exhibits are changing his historical afterimage, so to speak.

['Alias Man Ray: The Art of Reinvention,'](#) an exhibit at the Jewish Museum in New York, filters the artist's work through the context of his immigrant, assimilated past -- the ways he tried to escape it, and the ways in which it is inherently and deeply embedded in his work.

Ray was born Emmanuel (or Manny) Radnitzky in Philadelphia in 1890. His parents were Russian Jewish immigrants who shortened their last name to Ray in 1912. When Ray was a child, his father worked in a garment factory during the day and as a tailor by night. Images and objects from that childhood found their way into Ray's art: He employed hangers, mannequins and irons in pieces like *Cadeau* (or "Gift"), [an iron with tacks glued to its inner spine](#), and in many other ready-mades, photographs and paintings. *Cadeaux* is one of many examples on exhibit at the [Jewish Museum](#), as is "Tapestry," a quilt on canvas composed of suiting remnants.

Traces of Ray's biography materialize not only through his choice of media, but also through his methods. After he mastered the photogram process, Ray renamed it for himself. The so-called "Rayograph" aptly "resembled a process of penetrating to the core of an object, when in fact all you really saw were the contours of the surface of an object," curator Mason Klein told Art Beat.

"There was no penetration to this mysterious core. And in a way that became a metaphor for the way he was in the world."

Living as an artist in New Jersey and New York, Ray never fully felt accepted in America. Instead, he found fame and camaraderie in the Surrealist and Dada scenes of Paris. The iconoclastic Dada movement was marked by a rejection of normative values and a playful focus on irony and rebellion. Its international ranks, which included the likes of the Romanian poet and artist Tristan Tzara and French artist Marcel Duchamp, embraced Ray.

"In Dada there was no systematic or programmatic manifesto," explained Klein, "so [Ray] could really feel accepted and yet remain apart from a group. Dada allowed him the freedom to transcend the strictures of restricted definitions and fixed identity."

For the generation reared in the wake of World War I, Dada was a disavowal of the culture that was responsible for the violence and destruction of modern warfare. Another current exhibit, '[Man Ray, African Art and the Modernist Lens](#),' at the [Phillips Collection](#) in Washington, D.C., explores a kind of cultural warfare -- the rejection of the staid Western canon through the integration of other cultures. Among works by other modernist photographers like James L. Allen, Cecil Beaton, Walker Evans, and Alfred Stieglitz, the exhibit puts together the images Ray took of Carl Kjerfve's collection of African art with the original figures he actually photographed.

For Ray, who had attended school in Spanish Harlem before arriving in Paris, the history of marginalization and racism in America would not have gone unnoticed. According to Grossman, the very act of photography would have been a manifestation of his outsider status -- the photographer always on the outside looking in. African art provided both a challenge to the societal status quo, as well as a formal, aesthetic challenge.

"He wasn't interested in the object per se, but rather the modernist interpretation -- the interplay between light and shadow," said Wendy Grossman, curator of the Phillips exhibit. In one image, the placement of an ivory pendant and a black whistle looks like the two are squared off, resembling a chess match, a popular pastime among the Surrealist set. "It's about the interplay of these two objects," said Grossman, "which in his mind become conceptual pawns to create other ways of looking at these things."

In a section about the Harlem Renaissance, the exhibit plays with "how [photography was] a black and white medium," says Grossman, and how questions of race and identity were explored in the different responses of black and white photographers to African art during that period.

Ray's *Noire et Blanche* (or "Black and White") first appeared in Paris Vogue in 1926, and would later become a central image to the Surrealist movement. The image contrasts the alabaster white face of Kiki de Montparnasse (a fixture of the Paris art scene and one-time lover of Ray), with a black African mask, a provocative pairing that addresses issues of exoticism and different concepts of beauty. (Ray also printed a negative version of the photograph, with the model's face made dark and the mask light.)

The final room of the Phillips exhibit focuses on African art and fashion in photography. Several images of white models in African hats and jewelry offer much to mine about white appropriation of African cultures (in one image, for instance, the model wears the hat stylishly, but incorrectly). Though Ray's use of African objects in his fashion photography was a largely commercial venture, it's possible to imagine his appropriation as a comment on "fashioning" new identities -- whether the vehicle is a mask, clothes, a new name or a new country.

"It's been a difficult measure to try to find a narrative; to try to find a way to weave together his multiplicity; to weave together his contradictions; to weave together his myriad panoply of styles," says Klein. These two exhibits seek to untangle the man from his life's work, which was to create art with the same vigor as he was recreating himself.