

## Dual Identity: Man Ray/ Emmanuel Radnitsky

This lecture was initially meant to be given by Prof. Milly Heyd. For personal reasons she couldn't come and present this lecture. I've been asked to replace her. She has done an extensive research on the issue of Man Ray's hidden Jewish identity, and this lecture largely follows in her footsteps. [[**2. Man Ray, Self Port**]] Man Ray, seen here through the focus of his camera, was perceived in the context of modernism as adhering to universal values. Such a reading was in line with the self-image he wanted to project to the world. In his wish to construct his early start as an artist ("I made my first man on paper when I was three," he writes in his *Self Portrait*) he linked himself, to the long genealogy of the artist as a genius, setting himself apart from his personal family. The present lecture takes a postmodern perspective, emphasizing the struggle of identities that took place between the artist's public universal persona (Man Ray) and his hidden particularistic world (that of Emmanuel Radnitsky). Man Ray chose the name "Man" to proclaim his universality, thus replacing his birth name "Emmanuel," a Hebrew name meaning "God is with us." Apparently God was to play no role in Man Ray's life and art. The artist rejected his ethnic, religious and particularistic identity re-creating himself as a "Man of the world."

Man Ray's fragmented self, as I shall argue, is mirrored in many of his major as well as minor works. And yet, it is the tension between the universal and the particular that nourished much of his creativity. According to Ronald Penrose, "No one has ever managed to elicit from him the history of his family which he affirms is long forgotten and better so, since it could only be a cause of embarrassment." In a catalogue entry to an exhibition held at the *Librarie Six* in Paris in 1921 there is a mock-heroic fantasy of his biography: "it is no longer known where Man Ray was born. After a career of a coal merchant, millionaire several times over and chairman of a chewing-gum trust, he has decided to accept the invitation of the Dadaists to show his latest canvas in Paris." Man Ray's hidden identity is by no means a unique phenomenon. It was shared by other Dadaists, two of whom, Tristan Tzara and Hans Richter, will be examined in a lecture which will be given tomorrow at the Dostoevsky Library.

There is a common denominator among the Dadaists and Surrealists of using fantasy and masquerade to recreate their identities. [[**3. Rose Sélavy**]] Duchamp chose the persona of Rose Sélavy. Man Ray and Duchamp were part and parcel of Dada's rebellion against essentialist definitions of identity. But for Man Ray constructed identity was a response to external as

well as internal threat. It has been pointed out that “Man Ray made a concerted effort to keep his original name secret”

Man Ray’s autobiography, *Self-Portrait*, hides more than it reveals, and hence draws attention to that which is lacking. The author omits basic biographical data. As a matter of fact, no single member of his family of birth is named by him. Furthermore, he does not care to describe his home milieu, ignoring his socio-ethnic and religious background. It was only after the artist’s death that Neil Baldwin, the artist’s biographer, made up for the missing parts and traced the artist’s family history, yet with no attempt to connect the artist’s background to his art. Emmanuel Radnitsky was born in 1890 in Philadelphia. Both his parents immigrated to the United States. His mother was Manya Louria, from a village near Minsk. His father’s name was Melech, a common Jewish name, which stands for “king”. The family moved from Philadelphia, where Emmanuel was born, to Brooklyn, New York, where the father worked as a tailor, both in a factory and at home, a fate which was shared by his mother. In fact, the whole family was involved in this sweatshop experience which included long hours, low wages, and exploitation. The children also helped out, and Emmanuel, the eldest, was in charge of making long-distance deliveries by a trolley car. **[[[4. Gropper]]** We can see the more traditional depiction of the tailoring enterprise as

done by William Gropper whose family immigrated from the Ukraine.

[[**5. Enigma**]] The Enigma of Isidore Ducasse 1920), an assemblage made and photographed by Man Ray, pays tribute to Comte de Lautréamont's (alias Isidore Ducasse) definition of beauty in *Les Chants de Maldoror*: "Beautiful as the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table." This aphorism was adopted by the Surrealists to define the essence of the encounter in the surrealist poetic image and collage, the chance meeting of distant realities. Man Ray's assemblage is a mystifying, sinister creation consisting of coarse fabric (in the early version, an army blanket), enveloping a vaguely anthropomorphic form and tied with a rope. Due to the disparity between the title of the work and the assemblage itself, Man Ray who perceived himself as being "mysterious," engages the spectator's gaze in a sophisticated game of hide-and-seek. The artist is playing here a dual role. By adopting Lautréamont's definition of beauty, he does offer us a clue to what he had called his "opaque" world. On the one hand, the image is indeed opaque, but the title helps us decipher what lies behind the scene/blanket. It is not by chance that out of all the images in Lautreamont's work, Man Ray chose one which involves a mystification of the sewing machine. It can be contextualized in reference to the world the artist was escaping

from, but in which he apparently left some clues for the spectator. Our assumption is that *The Enigma of Isidore Ducasse* is a condensation of two layers of the artist's identity: Emmanuel Radnitsky and Man Ray. A universal reading of the uncanny image shows that the blanket resembles a womblike sac with an outline of an embryonic Man (or Man Ray). It encompasses a sadistic "love scene" between the pointed "male" rod of the umbrella, which falls prey to the "teeth" of the sewing machine on the dissecting table, a typical surrealist "vagina dentata." Birth is here a cruel process involving dissection. The entire cycle of existence is telescoped here: the birth (or unveiling) of Man entails his death.

A particularistic reading of the assemblage takes us back to the artist's childhood, where home was also a working place in which were made clothes for the garment industry. Lautréamont used his unique definition of beauty to describe a young boy. The assemblage evokes Man Ray's memories of himself as a young Emmanuel participating in the sweatshop experience. A mixed memory, it is part and parcel of the Jewish-American immigrant experience in a working class environment. But it is also one in which he was introduced to inspiring fabrics and shapes as well as to sewing machines and flatirons which became an integral part of his work as an artist. **[[6. Tapestry]]** *Tapestry* (1911) is an early example showing the

creative impact the Radnitsky household had on his art. It consists of a patchwork of fabric scraps, in a variety of colors and shapes, the center of which can be read as an abstract shape of a human figure representing “Man”. The artist is drawing here an analogy between the figure and the materials it is made of.

[[7. Enigma]] In *The Enigma of Isidore Ducasse* Man Ray mystifies his home experience. The army blanket denotes a cover-up, a metonym for his sense of shame. The pre-Teutonic root for the word shame, means to hide, to cover oneself, which is the natural expression of shame. In Hebrew, the term for shame, busha, is of the same etymology as the word for one’s private parts (mevushim), and the same root was used also in Genesis in the context of Adam and Eve’s sense of exposure after the fall. Thus hiding is intrinsic to, and inseparable from, the concept of shame. Note the onomatopoeia in the hushing sound that is common to the term both in Hebrew and in European languages (busha; shame). By covering the sewing machine with a blanket, yet informing the viewer that the sewing machine is there, Man Ray both covers and uncovers his socio-economic Jewish background. Hence, *The Enigma of Isidore Ducasse* is actually the Enigma of Emmanuel Radnitsky covered by Man Ray’s need to hide his “original” identity.

The assemblage, a farewell to his background, was conceived in terms of baggage, both physical and metaphorical. Wrapped up and tied with a rope, it was ready to be carried. It was done in America prior to the artist's departure for Paris on 22 July 1921. As Man Ray wrote to Tristan Tzara in an intentionally self-contradictory manner: "Dada cannot live in New York. All New York is dada and will not tolerate a rival – will not notice dada." Our claim is that he needed to get away, to separate himself from New York, in order to be noticed. Paris symbolized freedom and the ability to extend his artistic identity; --- just as for Duchamp, from the opposite direction, New York had earlier played a parallel role.

[[**8. Lingerie, Cadeau**]] Cadeau , the first work Man Ray made in Paris, echoes the world he has left behind. It is a glaringly hostile offering from an emigrant son; the nail-studded flatiron could tear rather than smooth out a piece of cloth or garment. Its aggressive presence expresses his attitude to clothing, but his art reveals how agonizing this "tearing" of (or tearing himself away from) the past proved to be. Apparently, variations of *The Enigma of Isidore Ducasse* and *Cadeau* became leitmotifs in Man Ray's art. Let's see, for instance (on the left), the Rayograph from 1931, where a nail-less flat iron is dematerialized, gaining a poetic quality through

the black, white and grey shades. **[[9. Cadeau, Red]]** The 1966 red-hot iron conveys a sense of danger.

**[[10. Sewing machine and umbrella]]** Similarly, Man Ray was to re-use the sewing machine and umbrella. In a 1933 image he stripped the two objects from their cover and placed them side by side. Since this bare state no longer conveyed an enigma – a term added by Man Ray to the original Lautréamont quote – it was omitted from the caption. In a related work, *Enquête* (Inquiry) done in the same year – a photcollage containing elements of these images – the uncovered sewing machine and umbrella are lying on an actual dissecting table, and it seems as if the artist dissects/deconstructs himself on it. The dissecting table appears to have been taken from doctors' manuals. Its matter-of-factness only enhances the vulnerability of the objects. Exposure amounts to an act of demystification—that which was hidden becomes revealed. **[[11. Enigma II]]** And yet, two years later Man Ray put a bundle of objects in a paper bag tying it with a rope and titled it *Enigma II*, suggesting that the sewing machine is there and also alerting the spectator to the possibility that he might be on the move again. One may speculate whether the news from Germany, following Hitler's 1933 rise to power, lies behind the suggestion of a possible need to leave.



[[**12. Obstruction**]] A further example of Man Ray's grappling with his past is the mobile *Obstruction*, originally done in 1920 and redone by the artist in 1947 and later in 1964. Arturo Schwarz describes the artist's work progress on this "graceful aerial sculpture" made of coat hangers. Man Ray added coat hangers to each end of the mobile until, reaching a total 117, they obstructed the whole space of his studio. The blockage had a definitive symbolic significance for the artist, who commented: "It would have been amusing to keep the game going and obstruct the whole universe." The lightness of the mobile is offset by the association of a family tree—but one in which the branches (or hangers) are getting in each other's way (that is, obstructing one another). In effect, he effected an execution of his ancestors by "hanging" them by their own working tools. Thus, by applying black humor to everyday common objects, Man Ray strove to cast off the burden of his past, ironically continuing to cull his images from the very world he left behind.

[[**13. Needle and thread**]] Apparently, Man Ray was unable to rid himself of that background, as can be seen by a variety of the smallest objects used in the tailoring industry, such as pins, needles, threads, that populate his art. Thus, his *Needle and Thread* (1937), an illustration for Eluard's collection of poems "Les Mains Libres," is a sophisticated drawing in

which the thread suggestively delineates a feminine human shape. **[[14. mother and thread]]** The woman's figure and hairdo echo the silhouette of the artist's mother. **[[15. Family photo with father]]** An early photograph from 1895 shows Man Ray's father seated on a wicker armchair holding the artist's little sister, Dora, while the mother's slender figure is shown with her hand on little Emmanuel. The photographer Man Ray did not hesitate to manipulate photographic documentation according to the specific biographical information he wished to convey. This is revealed through a comparison of the early photograph with the same image cropped without the father in Man Ray's constructed autobiography. He leaves himself as a little boy with his slim mother, omitting his father from the scene. The mother and son appear together beyond the confines of a specific location. In a truly Dadaist fashion, Man Ray left a fragment of the father's hand to provoke the spectator but he also created a verbal-visual pun between Man and "main" (hand, in French). Moreover, by leaving the father's disembodied hand in the cropped version, the artist cunningly draws our attention to what has been left out. In other words, omission becomes a means of highlighting the self-referentiality of the artist's hand.

**[[16. Thread needle]]** In the drawing, the artist-son is piercing the image of the mother with a needle. She has

become The Great non-aging Mother, a cosmic slender figure: the world at large is seen through her silhouette. By penetrating the image with a needle, Man Ray attempts to exorcise the magical power she holds over him through the tools of her own *métier*, which ironically also has become his in some of his works.

[[**17. Fold up**]] In a later ready-made, *Man Ray Close-up (fold up) III* (1963), which consists of an open and flattened sewing kit with a pack of needles, the kit itself resembles a human head, as if the artist were thinking: “my head is full of needles” or “if you get a close-up view of my head, it will reveal the needles.”

From needles and threads, Man Ray eventually upgraded himself to become a photographer of *haut-couture*. [[**18. Coco and mother**]] His 1935 photograph of the trim Coco Chanel in a little black dress, a hat and a string of pearls, a cigarette in her mouth, representing the “New Woman,” is a case in point. It might be noted that her slenderness echoes that of his mother. It is intriguing that when Man Ray talks about his entry into the Parisian world of high fashion he describes himself mockingly: “with my bundle in a black cloth under my arm, I felt like a delivery boy,” echoing his childhood chores.

The highly ambivalent relation to the past is further explored in Man Ray's film *Emak Bakia* ("Leave me alone" in Basque), produced in 1926. In the film, the artist presents the "metamorphosis" of stiff white collars by ripping them apart and shooting their dancelike passage through revolving and deforming mirrors. [[I don't have a good photo of this scene]] Following this exhilarating pirouette to freedom, however, the sequence is rewound, so that at the end the torn collars become whole again. A pin dance is there too. It is as if Man Ray were telling himself, and us, that the past is like a never-ending recurring experience from which one cannot completely sever oneself.

[[**19. Man Ray self portraits**]] Man Ray photographed himself many times in the 1920's in various personae, playing with his own identity: a far eastern exotic fakir, an intellectual with a beard and spectacles, but far and foremost, a Parisian with a black beret, an identity he craved for most. In his art he resembles a magician, mystifying through photography and rayograms the photographic process, while undermining its realistic function. This process is self-referential as Man Ray attributes to his profession the ability to create for him his own chosen world and identity.

[[**20. Décollage**]] Changing his name to Man Ray did not change his fate. In the wake of the Nazi occupation of Paris

he bore the fate of Emmanuel Radnitsky and fled back to the United-States, settling in Los Angeles. He was to return to Paris only in 1951. In a later work from the war period, *Décollage*, created in 1944 in America, Man Ray invites the viewer to play an active role in a game of decoding. The suggestive title intimates that the elements juxtaposed in the collage lay bare hidden components of Man Ray's life in the past, present and future. There is a striking visual analogy between the advertisement of striped shirts and the photograph of fondling zebras. The Zebra family "dressed" in their stripes, alludes to the family of shirtmakers – yet another allusion to the artists' background. A physical closeness between the members of the Zebra family even hints at the artist's sense of nostalgia towards that past, for all his eagerness to wipe out its traces. The words "snow Ivory," associated with soap, also suggest the artist's awareness that one cannot indeed wash away one's past. A significant confessional statement reads: "my beard my bread." **[[21. With marker]]** It is divided into two parts: a handwritten line reading "my beard my" and the printed word "BREAD" collaged below it, both appearing crosswise to the horizontal lines of the "letter" —a device that underscores the code-like character of the artist's message. The statement is of particular interest in terms of the artist's identity and his preoccupation with his beard as a means of

concealment/exposure. **[[22. Self portrait half beard]]** In his photographed self-portraits in the guise of different personae, Man Ray performs masquerades, in which the presence and absence of a beard plays a major role. The revealing phrase may, therefore, be read as his comment on his individual and artistic identity—or rather, on the tension between the two aspects of his personality, a pronouncement along the line of “I earn my bread by means of camouflaging (or playing tricks with) my beard.”

**[[23. Decollage with markers]]** Block letters “SH-H-H-H” adorn the lower part of the collage, insinuating that something should be hushed. At the side, “MISSING WITNESS” is printed, keeping the suspense with regard to both his identity and the nature of the evidence. **[[24. with markers]]** The handwritten section begins with the phrase “making the best,” and six lines from the top ends with the words “been sewing in.” The bottom line reads, most tellingly, “the true aspect cannot be hidden for long in...” The witness, it is implied, will appear at the end and tell his story.

**[[25. Rue Férou]]** In view of the persistently ironic and ambivalent stance that Man Ray expressed in his art toward his family background, one is struck by the solemn tone of his oil painting *Rue Férou*, created in 1952. For the austere scene takes place on the street where Man Ray established his Paris

studio after returning from the United-States. The painting is devoid of the artist's irony. What, then, could have brought this conversion? One cannot but consider the date of the painting's execution—less than a decade after the end of World War II and the Holocaust. However, Man Ray himself would most probably have denied such a direct link. His studied emotional aloofness can be seen in his autobiography when he refers at some length to the events that followed France's involvement in the war and his own flight from Paris. He never mentions the circumstances that led to his taking refuge in America. Man Ray ignores the fact that he had to be on the run because of his Jewishness. Likewise he remains silent and doesn't share in his reaction to the Holocaust.

The poignant pitch of the image shows that the artist's protective wall of detachment did not hold. The painting is pervaded by a sense of forlorn mystery. It depicts a shadowlike, dwarfish man with a cap, seen from behind as he wearily pulls a cart down a narrow empty street. Stylistically, Man Ray drew his inspiration from René Magritte. However, his wagon-pulling figure carries a baggage which takes us back to *The Enigma of Isidore Ducasse*, yet unlike it, the tone is no longer witty. In the painting the bundle is not de-contextualized. For Man Ray it is a post World War II and Holocaust image. It stands in a direct contrast to his emotional aloofness found also in his writings on

the events. The little figure seen from his back represents the artist carrying the burden of a larger fate, perhaps echoing the photographs of carts pushed by victims which were published after the Holocaust. The painting also alludes to the time when, being the eldest child, Emmanuel worked as a delivery boy dispatching clothes made at home by a trolley car. Seen in this context, the lonely figure in the picture comes to impersonate a Jewish peddler destined to roam forever from place to place—a modern variation of the Wandering Jew as an image of rootlessness. In *Rue Férou*, Man Ray, the sophisticated Man of the world, nevertheless pushes his own enigma in the cart and acknowledges his preoccupation with both his family history and his ethnic descent.

It is certainly challenging to read this vast subtext to the oeuvre of Man Ray—the brilliant vanguard artist-provocateur – as a record of his struggle to come to terms with his particularistic disguised socio-ethnic identity. Throughout his work, by means of his unique blend of irony, puns, ready-mades and uncanny images, he distanced himself from the past. However, he also leads us to uncover the true aspect of the missing witness. Moreover, in *Rue Férou* he momentarily comes to terms and identifies with Emmanuel Radnitsky