MAN RAY & SHERRIE LEVINE

A Dialogue Through Objects, Images & Ideas

JABLONKA MARUANI MERCIER GALLERY
C’est un réel bonheur de participer à la concrétisation de cette exposition à Knokke-le-Zoute. Ma première venue à Knokke remonte à la grande exposition de Max Ernst qui fut organisée au Casino. Parmi les convives le grand collectionneur, le Baron Bertie Urvater avait émis le souhait que Man Ray et Juliette soient présents pour l’événement. Hélas, Man Ray était à cette époque occupé par la préparation de sa première rétrospective présentée au Musée Boijmans Van Beuningen en Hollande puis au Musée National d’Art Moderne de Paris. Néanmoins son attachement à la culture belge était certain, notamment par le biais de sa première épouse, Adon (Donna) Lacroix qui était une poétesse issue de Belgique.

C’est donc avec beaucoup d’amitié que je souhaite un très bon accueil à cette exposition sur le sol belge.

En contemplant les œuvres, n’oublions pas que Man Ray était un homme de « 360° de liberté » !

I celebrate this exhibition in Knokke-le-Zoute with a great deal of pleasure. It brings back memories of the first time I’d been in Knokke, on the occasion of the Max Ernst exhibition held at the Casino. The Baron Bertie Urvater, a great collector and one of the honored guests suggested that Man Ray and Juliette should certainly be there. Unfortunately it was impossible as Man Ray was at that very time busy preparing his first retrospective in Holland, at the Musée Boijmans Van Beuningen, later to travel to the National Museum of Modern Art in Paris. However, his attachment to the Belgian culture was obvious, since his first wife Adon (Donna) Lacroix, was a Belgian poetess.

Therefore with great happiness I welcome this exhibition held in Belgium. While looking at the art works, we will remember that Man Ray was for 100% total liberty !

Marion Meyer
President of the International Man Ray Association
In 1918, Man Ray scandalized the art world when he created his first ready-made sculptures: an egg beater and an assemblage of metal light reflectors and clothes pins, which he presented as photographs entitled Man and Woman. In 2005 Sherrie Levine re-photographed Man Ray’s Man and Woman photos, called them her own art works, and re-scandalized the art world of a new millennium. At the beginning of the 20th century, as a vocabulary of abstraction was being developed, Man Ray produced a new order of images using the new medium of photography, and challenged the world to accept them as art.

“...isn’t it amazing that some painters still persist, a century after the invention of photography, in doing what a Kodak can do faster and better?”

Forty years later, when minimal abstract art dominated the art world, Sherrie Levine “began to use photography as a way of introducing representational imagery” back into art. Man Ray’s career was drawing to a close just as Levine’s career was beginning, but a lively dialogue between this Man (Ray) and Woman (Levine) exists through the sensibilities they share in their relationships with objects, images, and ideas.
SHARED FOUNDATIONS

Though separated by decades, both Man Ray and Sherrie Levine had a thorough early education in the latest mechanical and technological means of image-making.

Born in Philadelphia in 1890 and raised in Brooklyn, Man Ray mastered technical rendering, mechanical drawing and cyanotype blue-printing while at Boy’s High School in Brooklyn (1904 - 1908). His ability to render enabled him to make his ideas “real,” long before he had the means to produce them. His mechanical drawing skills gave him the power to draw plans for his ideas accurately enough to have them fabricat-ed by others.

While working in advertising and for McGraw Hill Book Compa-ny from 1912 through 1918 he learned cartographic drafting, photo-mechanical reproduction, air brush, and printing pro-cesses. He taught himself still photography and filmmaking.

With his embrace of the Dada machine aesthetic, Man Ray made the machine a subject of his art, and made machines central to his art-making processes.

LA FORTUNE

The dialogue between Man Ray and Sherrie Levine was sparked by chance or, literally, La Fortune, the 1938 oil painting by Man Ray that Levine “had seen a million times at the Whitney.” When she saw the painting again, by chance in Los Angeles in the traveling Perpetual Motif: the Art of Man Ray exhibition, and yet again in Philadelphia in 1989, she thought, “wouldn’t it be incredible to build this table?”

“This table” was a drastically narrowed, elongated carom bil-liards table ramping up at a precipitous diagonal from the foreground of Man Ray’s painting. It was supported by only one visible ornately-turned bulbous, yet spindly, wooden leg. Set against a grisaille seaside background with a sky full of brightly colored clouds, Man Ray pictured this deluxe billiards table as the intersection of “la fortune” – wealth, fortune, luck, and chance. Like his art, it was a creative game at which one played, but like chess, it was a game of skill, demanding deep rational thinking and complex spatial calculations, with suc-cess depending on creative solutions. Colored the same green baize as casino tables, it also suggested that even careful strategy was still subject to a stroke of luck or chance.

Perhaps aware of artist Donald Judd’s observation that “ac-tual space is intrinsically more powerful and specific than paint on a flat surface,” Levine transmuted the image from Man Ray’s small easel painting into a life-size object existing in the uncanny valley midway between traditional sculpture and everyday life. While Man Ray made his table too long, too narrow, and too tall, Levine did the opposite, making her 1990 edition of six La Fortune (After Man Ray: 1 - 6) tables identically too short, both in length and height. Just as the late Kirk Varnedoe had once described Jasper Johns’ encaus-tic paintings as “Duchampian gestures executed in the style of Cezanne,” Levine presented her whole edition of six ta-bles in 1999 at the San Francisco Museum of Art in a single straight row, as if executing the Minimalist serial gesture of Donald Judd’s Untitled (Six boxes) of 1974 but in a Surreal style. From this ambitious initial exercise Levine realized she had found in Man Ray a lively co-conspirator with whom to collaborate across the generations.
This potential for images or objects to be transmuted from one form to another led Man Ray, along with his closest artist collaborator, Marcel Duchamp, to introduce the objects and images associated with the game of chess as a new realm of subjects for art, equal to the figure, still-life, or landscape. Further, they considered game-playing to be a performative art form. Duchamp devoted a decade of his life (1923 - 1933) almost completely to this conceptual, performative expression, while throughout his career Man Ray produced dozens of advanced Modernist chess sets, each of which he regarded as a "whole unit, a work of art... a sculpture of many parts." and explicitly demanded that they be displayed on their boards or in the presentation cases he carefully composed and designed.

He made sets ranging in size from 5 to almost 27cm high and experimented with affordable editions in wood, plastics, and aluminum as well as deluxe designs executed in exotic woods, bronze, ivory, silver and gold. In every instance though, he succeeded in producing designs that were both pleasing to the eye and to the touch.
Still not yet fully understood and appreciated are the beautiful mechanical drawings Man Ray made of his designs. He regarded them as finished art works expressing his machine aesthetic. Many made during WW II, when good paper was scarce, have the relic-like look of Leonardo DaVinci’s sketchbook drawings of fantastic machines.

With the same intensity he devoted to composing a portrait, still-life, or Rayogram, Man Ray took dozens of photos of his chess sets arrayed on chess boards, just as his friend Constantin Brancusi photographed arrangements of his sculptures in his studio.

Man Ray’s numerous photos of people playing chess were intended to document their cerebral creative collaborations, just as photographs were later used as a form of documentation by the conceptual and performance artists of the late 1960s and the 1970s.

Like Man Ray, Levine felt “...it’s more useful to think of art-making as play rather than work. Fantasies of aggression and control have an interesting place there. I think that’s one of the reasons that I’ve been so attracted to games as subject matter.”
Man Ray
1946 Chess Piece Profiles, 1943-47
Vintage gelatin silver print of a drawing
23.8 x 30.2 cm
© Man Ray Trust

Man Ray
1946 Chess Set Design with Shaded Profiles,
1946-59
Black & red ink and pencil on paper
27.1 x 34.5 cm
MRT 21719.14 © Man Ray Trust

Man Ray
1943 – 47 Chess Piece Profiles,
1943-47
Vintage gelatin silver print of a drawing
25.8 x 20.2 cm
© Man Ray Trust

Man Ray
1926 Silver Chess Set on Board
with White Circular Tabletop, 1940-45
One of the five silver prints, three mounted
11.7 x 16.5 cm
© Man Ray Trust

Man Ray
1946 Wood Chess Set on Board and Table,
1947
One of the six silver prints, three mounted
5.7 x 10 cm
© Man Ray Trust

Man Ray
1946 Chess Piece Profiles, circa 1943-47
Red & black pencil on paper
A: 22.1 x 30.4 cm - B: 23.6 x 30.4 cm
MRT 21719.16 © Man Ray Trust

Man Ray
1933 Chess Set Design,
1933
26, rue Fauré, 6e
© Man Ray Trust

Man Ray
1926 Silver Chess Set on Board
with White Circular Tabletop, 1940-45
One of the five silver prints, three mounted
11.7 x 16.5 cm
© Man Ray Trust

Man Ray
1946 Chess Set Design with Shaded Profiles,
1946-59
Black & red ink and pencil on paper
27.1 x 34.5 cm
MRT 21719.14 © Man Ray Trust

Man Ray
1940 Chess Set Design
Red & black pencil on paper
A: 22.1 x 30.4 cm - B: 23.6 x 30.4 cm
MRT 21719.10 © Man Ray Trust

Man Ray
1940 Chess Piece Profiles, circa 1943-47
Red & black pencil on paper
A: 22.1 x 30.4 cm - B: 23.6 x 30.4 cm
MRT 21719.16 © Man Ray Trust

Man Ray
1933 Chess Set Design,
1933
26, rue Fauré, 6e
© Man Ray Trust
Man Ray also participated with a wider group of avant garde artists in the transmutation of ethnographic artifacts from Africa, the Americas and the Pacific cultures into the vocabulary of Modernist images and forms. He made many photos of these ethnographic artifacts for himself and collectors Paul Guillaume, Carl Kjersmeier and Nancy Cunard, among others. He posed them in isolation offset by shadows, but also in provocative visual counterpoint with European figure models, most famously his *Noir et Blanche*, 1926, in which his model Kiki echoed the form and posture of Brancusi’s 1910 sculpture *Sleeping Muse*.

Sherrie Levine once said that she liked to “…think of art-making as a game… [that] you can control in a way that you can’t control your daily life.” Starting with her *After Walker Evans: 1 -22* series of 1981 and other drawn and painted series of Modernist subjects, she embarked on the ambitious “art-making game”. Her goal was to introduce entirety of Modernist art and Modernist-adapted ethnographic imagery into the purview of Post-Modernist subject matter.

She continued in this vein with her *After Edward Curtis* series of 2005, her polished bronze casts of face and body masks (2007-2014), and her *African Masks After Walker Evans: 1 -22* series of 2014. While Man Ray most often pictured freestanding figural artifacts, Levine, in her ethnographic subjects, drawn from Walker Evans’ images, has focused on masks, either worn by their makers or in isolation.

Levine and Man Ray also each share a personal interest in costumes, disguises, masks and maskenfreiheit, the freedom conferred by wearing masks. They each collected and made masks and costumes and photographed themselves, models, and friends wearing them.

Sherrie Levine
*Lega Mask*, 2010
Cast bronze
33.7 x 20.3 x8.3 cm
Edition of 12

Sherrie Levine
*After Edward Curtis*, 2005
Giclee inkjet prints
5 x 48 x 33 cm
Edition of 12
Man Ray

Ady with Bangwe Queen Sculpture, 1934
Vintage gelatin silver print
28.8 x 20.9 cm
Unique work © Man Ray Trust

Man Ray

Simone Kahn, Ca 1927
Vintage gelatin silver print
8.2 x 5.9 cm
Unique work © Man Ray Trust
Sherrie Levine
African Masks After Walker Evans 1 - 24, 2014
Giclee inkjet prints (images varies vary)
24 x 46,3 x 33 cm
Edition of 12
FIGURATION & GRIDS
EROTIC SUBJECTS & SENSUOUS MATERIALS

In order to lend greater visual weight and impact to her series of relatively small-scale images (scaled to the size of their color plate reproductions in art books, or actual "found" postcards) such as After da Vinci (2013), Levine often presents them identically framed and arrayed in grids— usurping the format that the Minimalists had painstakingly emptied of all outside references and filling it back up with historical, representational images.

In the creation of her 1996 nine-part Cathedral series, based on Impressionist Claude Monet’s Rouen Cathedral façades dematerialized into daubs of color, and her 2007 After Cézanne, of his landscapes paintings built of blunt, chiseled prismatic brushstrokes, Levine generated the doubled effect of a grid-within-a-grid. With a digital pixel averaging algorithm, she broke down each grid square of Monet’s and Cezanne’s images to its one average color and digitally "stitched" it together with its surrounding squares.

Levine arrived at a figural image embedded almost imperceptibly in an abstract color grid pattern. She has described much of her work as the desire to “put a picture on top of a picture so that there are times when both pictures disappear and other times when they’re both manifest; that vibration is basically what the work’s about for me — that space in the middle where there’s no picture, rather an emptiness, an oblivion.”

Sherrie Levine
After da Vinci, 2013
Giclee inkjet prints
18 x 25.5 x 20.3 cm
Edition of 6

Sherrie Levine
Cathedral (9 parts), 1996
Iris print
9 x 86.4 x 71 cm
Edition of 10
Interestingly, these post-modern digital works of Levine’s bear a striking resemblance to one of Man Ray’s earliest known artworks, *Tapestry* of 1911.

This patchwork had figural origins too - as clothing scraps from the artist’s father’s tailor shop which Man Ray broke down into arbitrary abstract squares and literally “stitched” into an abstract grid pattern.

Man Ray regarded the chessboard grid as the “the original goal of all graphic art...a field for clear thinking, impromptu imagination, surprise, planning for the abstract” and the “basis of all painting...”

He intended his chess sets and chessboards to be separate works of art, even when they happened to be the same scale and could be photographed or played with in combination. Many of his chessboard grid inspired works, such as *Tapestry*, *Knights of the Square Table* (1961), and the Giant Chess Board Painting were made of non-traditional materials - cloth, silkscreened plastic, framed hard woods, plastic contact paper and/or painted plywood.
Levine, too, has “… always been attracted to grids. The Dadaists and Surrealists were very interested in games… for the same reasons I am. And they were also interested in the language around play. The chessboard was a classic icon for them… that was another thing that attracted me.”

Levine rivals Man Ray in the number of game-board-like grid paintings she has made of eccentric materials. Just as the early Christian icon painters painted on wooden panels, not canvas, Levine has always painted her chessboard icons on actual boards. She makes a pun of “game board” by conflating her subject, an actual game board, with the material “board” on which the image is painted. With odd formats and half squares, they are boards for un-playable games. Their identities hover between being “useless” art images and the useful objects they allude to in real-life. They are boards, and “not boards,” just as her plywood Knot Series are. Untitled (Lead Checks…) with the 8 x 8 grid of chess, and Untitled (Lead Cervon…), suggesting backgammon patterns, both 1985 series were painted with casein on lead plates. A pair of series, the Large Check: 1-6, and Large Check: 7-12, each of 1999, consist of 6 panels 13 ½ squares tall x 4 ½ squares painted with Duo Oil paint on solid oak panels in dazzling pairs of colors. Still others are executed on mahogany.

The eccentric proportions and half squares across their bottoms and right sides imply that they are cropped portions of limitless color grid fields of an unidentified, but infinite game. A Red and Grey Check series, 2000, are 12 square by 6 ½ square units in oil paint on aluminum. The cropping on these too suggest that they are not so much complete individual paintings but, that they represent the entire genre of all possible grid paintings.

It is significant that Levine, with her professed view of art-making as a game, entitled these works “Checks.” In chess, the process of “checking” one’s opponent is a climactic, critical point of the game, but is not necessarily the end of the game.

Man Ray loved chess as a subject because, as the game of war and love, it enabled him to contrast the rational and abstract with the erotic and representational. His Giant Chess Board Painting is another “picture on top of a picture.” Half buried by the central white grid squares is what appears to be a dancing female figure, naked from the waist down. However, if the work is rotated 90 degrees, with a white square at the bottom right, as chess players would view a chess board, the figure is no longer dancing but supine, her spread legs and naked pelvis occupying exactly the central squares most crucial to achieving a “conquest” when playing chess, adding a tantalizing distraction to any players trying to calmly plot their next moves. Levine strikingly expanded this contrast of the rational and abstract with the erotic and representational in her 1984 show, entitled 1917 at Nature Morte Gallery, in New York, when she generated considerable frisson by exhibiting her versions of Kazimir Malevich Suprematist abstractions juxtaposed with her copies of Egon Schiele’s masturbatory self-portraits.

Man Ray made the eroticism that is implicit in the naked dancing figure in the Giant Chess Board Painting explicit with his Mr. and Mrs. Woodman mannequins of 1947. The coupling wooden male and female figures trapped in a box accompany a bound folio of twenty-seven gelatin silver photographs of the duo in suggestive Kama Sutra poses. The 1970 re-presentation of the 1947 photos as an edition of a subject addressed earlier is yet another example of the Man Ray’s attitude “to create is divine; to reproduce is human.”
Mr. and Mrs. Woodman by Man Ray in Hollywood 1947
“MORE THAN ONE FACTOR, AT LEAST TWO…”

Man Ray and Sherrie Levine also have a shared sensibility in their use of objects in the creation of three-dimensional artworks. Almost a decade before the Surrealists, Man Ray adopted the strategies of the readymade and the found object, regarding everyday articles as a new source of “raw materials” from which to make new art.

Levine then adopted and modified this approach under her rubric of appropriation. As with chess, ethnographic images, and the pantheon of Modernism, objects from the outside world, originally made by others, could be re-cast into works of art by changing their context and presentation. The art-making process became a form of connoisseurship, transforming the artist from being a “maker” into a “chooser” - drawing the artist closer to the role of the curator or collector.

Man Ray posited that his “…attitude toward the object was different from Duchamp’s for whom retitling an object sufficed. I need more than one factor, [I need] at least two. Two factors that are not related in any way. The creative act for me rests in the coupling of these two different factors in order to produce something new, which might be called a plastic poem.” Levine acknowledges that though her “…art comes out of the Dada tradition…there’s no such thing as a neutral material that’s devoid of association.”

Her works, though “…very complicated…, can be read iconographically.”

And so, one might try to read an icon of Dada, Man Ray’s found object sculpture Cadeau (or Gift), originally designed in 1921 and editioned in 1970, along with Levine’s 2006 Cadeau. Duchamp asserted that designating a useful object a readymade or a found object made it useless. Man Ray “…made useless objects with useful titles,” and their uselessness then became one of their defining characteristics as art. Man Ray’s Cadeau is an ultimate expression of this “utility/futility” dynamic.

A flat iron and a handful of tacks are Man Ray’s two factors, “not related in any way,” though both are domestic objects and both are used to hold things down. The vertical line of tacks relates to the similar line of clothespins (also used to hold things) that appear in his the photo of the first found object sculptures, Woman, of 1918 that Levine re-presented in 2006.

With the application of the tacks, Man Ray turned the domestic female tool for smoothing things out into a menacing weapon with which to tear things up. Author Janine Mileaf points out that “the arched or cavelike shape, presumed weightiness, and projecting teeth echo the derogatory motif of the female sex as vagina dentata, a dark cavern with a harmful threshold.”

But does this enigmatic work issue a threat of violence to women or a warning to men of the danger of women? Man Ray had relationships with many strong, independent-minded women, among them Adon Lacroix, Kiki of Montparnasse, Meret Oppenheim, and Lee Miller. If viewed through the rearview mirror of a millennial feminist sensibility one might wonder if Man Ray, as if an idiot savant, may have prophetically crafted an icon that even offers an alternate reading of feminist rebellion, resistance, and rejection of men.

Levine’s Cadeau has two factors as well - the retriever and the flat iron. However, the two factors actually become three:  the iron, the retriever, and the bird offered by the retriever. How do the elements relate? Does the dog represent an artist? Are both seekers, “choosers?” Each has chosen an object from daily life, retrieved it, rendered it "useless" and offered it for approval.

The artwork becomes the gift/cadeau. The iron stands blank, mute, and immovable. Its mirror-like surface reflects the artist’s gift with no hint of appreciation, suggesting a tableau of desire for acceptance met with rejection, not unlike the initial responses both Man Ray and Sherrie Levine experienced when they offered their radical new art forms as gifts to the art world.
Another work that evidences Levine’s ties to the Dada tra-
dition is her 1996 cast aluminum and rubber edition of a
tricycle. It is entitled Hobbyhorse, an English translation for
the French word “Dada” that was chosen at random from a
dictionary to be the art movement’s name.33

Dada replaced the natural with the mechanical as art, just
as the tricycle supplanted the hobbyhorse in the realm of
play and as the motor car replaced the horse in the realm
of work. Though tricycles—offer children their first real free-
dom of movement, Levine’s mechanical Hobbyhorses, with
their elegant brushed aluminum finishes, often exhibited
on a series of small plinths, generate ghostly hall-of-mir-
ror reflections of each other yet assume an air of arrested
movement.34

Levine’s The Three Muses and The Three Furies, each in-
spired by objects found at Santa Fe antiques markets,36
were presented in 2006, at the same time as her
Cadeau. A study in contrasts, The Three Muses are dense, concentrat-
ed masses: stolid and static, while The Three Furies, explode
with energy, manically animate and expressionistically gro-
tesque. A play between subject and form, each work presents
exactly the same subject three times but without repeat-
ing exactly the same form. Though each group suggests a
father-mother-child family, origins contradict appearances
since both the Muses and the Furies were groups of sister
figures.

With her interest in the implication of expansion in any re-
peated form, Levine may have chosen The Three Muses as
a subject, because in subsequent re-writings of mythology
they multiply to eventually become as many as nine
muses.

With her concern in representation and re-representation,
The Three Furies may have been attractive because their
initial mythological role was to police the mis-representa-
tion of facts, stories, and the natural order of things.37

Initially, the Furies did not have well-defined visual appear-
ances, which would explain the metamorphic look of these
objects Levine has fashioned.

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Sherrie Levine
Hobbyhorse, 1996
Cast aluminum, rubber
69 x 89 x 48 cm
Edition of 12

Sherrie Levine
The Three Muses, 2006
Cast bronze (3 parts)
A 23.5 x 31.7 x 12.7 cm
B 36.2 x 20.3 x 24.1 cm
C 30.5 x 39.5 x 21.7 cm
Edition of 12

Sherrie Levine
The Three Furies, 2006
Cast bronze
A 13 x 23.5 x 12 cm
B 12 x 17.5 x 10.8 cm
C 10.4 x 17.8 x 8.2 cm
Edition of 12
**ENLARGED, ELONGATED AND RELATED**

In their commercial art work, both Man Ray and Sherrie Levine became familiar with the practice of systematically compressing or stretching an image on its horizontal or vertical axis to fit it into a layout or exaggerate it for effect. They both later used this effectively in their art.

Man Ray did so in his 1947 Eccentric Chessboard, composed of a grid of rectangles, not squares; as did Levine with her 1999 Large Check series of vertically stretched and cropped game board paintings mentioned above.

In the realm of objects, Man Ray exploited this “stretch/compress” technique to great advantage in his enlarged, elegant silver chess piece Bishop, Le Fou, of 1970, which is based on the 1962 chess set design discussed earlier, and Proverb, which was originally conceived of in 1944 then produced as an edition in 1973.

Proverb has a rigid, silent pendulum blade frozen in an obelisk form that is a horizontally compressed version of the metronome in the artist’s 1922 Object to be Destroyed. Proverb also echoes the pyramid form of the King piece of Man Ray’s 1920 and 1926 chess sets. In the fashioning of his “plastic poems,” puns and acrobatic wordplay were often crucial additional “factors.”

In this case, possibly finding this object more expensive than he’d like, the artist commented that “choosers can’t be beggars,” reversing the standard maxim, identifying the artist as a “chooser,” and creating his own new Proverb in the process.
Permanent Attraction, first created in 1948, is pictured, titled and signed in this rare photograph along with Man Ray’s Alphabet for Adults, 1948, and To Be Continued Unnoticed, the catalog for his 1948 exhibition at the Copley Galleries in Hollywood. The Permanent Attraction, editioned in 1971, features vastly enlarged and elongated chess pawns and Queen, and at first suggests a simple, trophy-like tribute to the artist’s life-long love of chess.

However, as a combination of the abstract grid and the figurative/erotic, the pieces may also suggest female breasts and an enlarged male member, or every chess player’s dream, the chess achievement of pawn promotion, the gender and role transformation of a lowly pawn into an all-powerful Queen if the pawn successfully penetrates the hindmost rank of the opponent’s domain on the chessboard. One could consider Levine’s entire œuvre as a meta-gesture of “pawn promotion” is that she pushes her ideas to their extreme endpoint in order to re-gender the works of dead male artists into those of a living female artist, Levine, herself.

SIMPLE, SWEEPING GESTURES

Man Ray and Sherrie Levine have each produced other works by adeptly employing the “choosing” and manipulation strategies of the Readymade and the found object.

Arturo Schwarz cites Sculpture by Itself II as one Man Ray’s “first interpreted Found objects” ...where we find Man Ray’s creative method at its most economical: a slight modification of a mundane object is sufficient to transmute it into a poetical creation.” Man Ray anticipated his future photos of African sculptures by displaying this abandoned wooden assembly template as a totemic abstract figural form. He executed a precise mechanical drawing of it on the wall of his studio, in white lines on a dark wall, like the commercial blueprint he made of his early chess set drawing.

He also laid the original wooden piece down flat onto a piece of illustration board, along with drafting curves and hand tools, and used it as a stencil to spray paint around with a commercial art airbrush - creating a drawing with “...a photographic quality...” - presaging his future development of the Rayogram photo technique. Hence, he made this “useless” object assume three roles, that of: a sculpture; a model; and a drawing tool.
Levine has also produced work that Schwarz might term an ‘interpreted Found object’ as he described Man Ray’s Sculpture By Itself II, above. Levine once explained that “the pictures I make are really ghosts of ghosts; their relationship to the original images is...three or four times removed.”

Among these ghosts are related series of 2-D works Levine has made since 1985, among them: her Large Gold Knots; her Lead Knots; and her Large Pink Knots. These works may indeed be ghosts of paintings. All are typical sizes of paintings and are simply framed as if they were paintings. However, like Man Ray’s works, they function as visual puns and present a number of paradoxes or contradictions.

Instead of being traditional stretched canvases covered with painted images, patterns, or gestures they are a non-traditional material for art – plywood panels. Though uncommon as art material, this plywood made from fir trees is the most common utility grade building material in the United States. It is as common to building and everyday-life as canvas is to painting. In fact, in her Large Pink Knot Series, Levine adopts the uncut 244 x 122 cm, or 96 x 48 inch size panels that are the standard “sheet size” used in all construction in the United States. Proportion-wise, it is the everyday-life building equivalent to the “golden section” in design and painting composition. In its unaltered 96 x 48 inch size sheet, it indeed becomes a found object or Readymade. In building houses, plywood is used for “framing” and for “closing in” – cladding a building structure, but in Levine’s case, it is the plywood itself that is framed and closed in, instead. Framing the plywood prevents it from being built into anything useful, hence further defining it with the “utile/futile” characteristic of the Readymade.

This plywood is produced by peeling thin, consistent veneer layers off of a length of a tree trunk with a machine. Wherever there were branches, knots appear. These are cut out of the veneers and infilled with a generic abstract pointy-ended ovoid shape of the same veneer. Levine allows this natural chance operation process to pre-determine the layout of these shapes which she then clads with the alchemical elements – either gold or lead metallic paint, or she replaces the organic wood with the inorganic - acrylic plastic paint. Instead of painting an elaborate image or abstract design on the panel, Levine again allows chance to pre-determine the vivid, endlessly varied wood grain patterns as her compositions. Just as Man Ray’s contemporary, the Belgium Surrealist Magritte created a painting that declared “Ceci n’est pas une pipe,” Levine presents a ghost that is “knot” a painting and both is fir and is not fur.
Man Ray’s Square Dumbbells or Haltères is another work predicated upon contradictory wordplay, and manipulation of a found object to arrive at the “utility/futility” dynamic discussed above in regard to Cadeau.

The artist seized upon the contradiction inherent in the word “dumbbell”: dumb, meaning mute, or silent; and bell, a hollow metal form that creates a musical note when shaken. When originally conceived of in 1944, the artist found a pair of wooden dumbbells, which typically had a round ball form at each end of their handles. A clear pattern of saw cut marks on the 1944 solid ebony originals indicate that the artist had the ball-forms cut off so they could not reproduce (a sound), then nested them into individual form-fit pockets inside a velvet-lined wooden box so they “wooden/wouldn’t” ring.

Man Ray freezes Duchamp’s Nude Descending a Staircase by photographing it in black and white while Levine brings the work back to life again by the simple gesture of assembling a grid of color postcard reproductions of the Duchamp piece, each with minute differences of color and focus.

The repeated images flicker across the wall suggesting film frames animating the subtle shifts in motion that Duchamp captured in his painting and creating a rich chromatic chord of what the artist refers to as “the almost same.”
Sherrie Levine
After Duchamp: Nude Descending a Staircase, 2012
Original color postcards
Each: 50.8 x 40.8 cm
Overall: 152.5 x 244 cm
In the 1920 found object work Obstruction Man Ray turns repetition into a chain reaction.

Originally made eleven years before Alexander Calder’s first documented Mobiles, the work is formed by the repetitive action of linking one coat hanger to another, but it expands rather than simply repeats, implying a potential progression to infinity. Obstruction is fixed at points, yet constantly shifting in its relationships, one part to another. Originally intended to be hung in a doorway, it is an airborne kinetic counterpoint to Marcel Duchamp’s Trebuchet, (a name derived from the French chess term for trap) also a coat rack obstruction, but one immovably mounted to the floor.

Each of these works exerts a strong sense of Dada absurdity, since hanging up a guest’s coat is a gesture of hospitality contradicted by the imagined coat either being hung in the doorway, preventing the visitor’s entrance, in Man Ray’s case; or flat in the middle of a messy studio floor, in Duchamp’s case. Made during a period when Man Ray was actively playing chess, Obstruction can also suggest a chart of the trajectories of a chess game slaloming from side to side toward an eventual endgame checkmate.

It is a repetition, it is a series, yet not at all a grid.
The fetishistic nature of much of Man Ray’s art is widely acknowledged and Levine readily concedes that her work too “…has always been very self-consciously about fetishism.”

Her first New York gallery event, held in 1976, was not an exhibition but a sale of what she acknowledged as “the ultimate fetish object,” shoes. Levine has covered fetishes almost literally from head to toe, finally producing a life-size cast bronze edition Fedora, in 2011. Man Ray had photographed women’s hats as soft and suggestive as a woman’s sex while Levine hardened her man’s hat into a shiny helmet but left the traditional deep cleft in its crown.

Levine’s Fedora is similar to her description of her 1991 Fountain (After Marcel Duchamp) cast bronze urinal “…an object that has a function so closely identified with men, but the form is so feminine….” Like a magician performing hat tricks, Levine uses the work to offer a light, bright counterpoint to the iconic dark, matte black bowler hats in the works of Magritte and to the signature grey felt hat always worn by artist/shaman Joseph Beuys (a man wearing a Beuys/boy’s hat!).

Though Sigmund Freud is said to have stated that “sometimes a cigar is just a cigar,” Levine’s Fedora, transposed from soft warm felt to cold hard bronze, is not just a hat, even though slavishly accurate in its details. In fact, the ultimate sleight-of-hand illusion Levine performs is convincing us to believe the hat is a fedora when the perfectly rolled up edge of its brim defines it as a homburg;” the style of hat that Freud himself was most often often pictured wearing.”

Sherrie Levine
 Fedora, 2011
 Cast bronze
 12.7 x 29.2 x 25.4 cm
 Edition of 12
Sherrie Levine

Green Skull, 2012
Crystal glass
14 x 18 x 11 cm
Edition of 12

Sherrie Levine

Phrenology Cranium, 2006
Plated bronze
25.4 x 15.2 x 17.8 cm
Edition of 12
In 1993 Levine presented her work, Newborn, frosted glass casts of Constantin Brancusi’s sculpture of the same name depicting a highly abstracted baby’s head. Brancusi produced his first version in marble, in 1915 followed by a bronze re-interpretation in 1920. Brancusi’s Newborn was the same size and shape as the large ostrich egg that Man Ray kept in his studio and repeatedly photographed. In a cradle to grave counterpart to her Newborn, Levine has more recently offered Jawbone, Phrenology Cranium, a series of frosted cast glass Skulls and series of animal skulls and skeletons.

Levine has professed her love of grids as universal systems of geometric; She has stated that her work is a “commingling of the anthropomorphic and the geometric” - so, her skulls and skeletons express a countering fascination with universal systems of anthropomorphic structuring.

With concern for both the cerebral and the sensory, Levine may have chosen these subjects because the head is both the center of our higher abstract reasoning and the center of our direct sensory experiences - sight, smell, taste, hearing and touch.

The skull is the head devoid of life and emptied of its sensory processing faculties, however. It can be read as the symbolic transition point from life and time as we know it, to an unknown and possibly unknowable eternity - a limitless grid of human and non-human experience, where the boundaries between the living and the dead are blurred. The skull is a reminder of mortality, a symbol of the passage from one world to another.

Levine’s 2008 bronze cast of a two-headed calf, entitled False God pointedly asks when is something unique? When is it a copy? When is it a reproduction? When is it one of a series? Where is the original? Since Levine has divided her time between New York and New Mexico for the past several years, the emergence of animal skulls, especially those of cattle, allude to such skull images as subjects in New Mexico by 20th century American Modernist Georgia O’Keeffe.

This would represent the first time Levine has made work inspired by the imagery by another woman artist.
In terms of the body and body parts as imagery Man Ray and Sherrie Levine are a study in contrasts. Man Ray focused the majority of his attention on the bodies of live, often nude, female artists’ models while Levine has chosen as her models the bodies of artwork by deceased male artists.

Paradoxically, it was one of the saddest events of Man Ray’s life, the break-up with his paramour Lee Miller, that inspired two of his most well-known works, each based on a sensory organ: Object to be Destroyed, 1933, the metronome with a cropped photo of Miller’s eye affixed to it; and A l’heure de l’observatoire - Les Amoureux, Observatory Time – The Lovers, 1932 – 1934. The artist depicted Miller’s lips enlarged to monumental scale to suggest the bodies of supine lovers pressed together, silhouetted floating in an eternal twilight above the skyline of the Luxembourg Gardens, near the studio they shared, with the twin domes of the Paris Observatory, distant on the horizon. The image has both an arresting, immediate impact and an expansive, meditative timelessness.

It is both one of the most Surreal and one of the most enduringly romantic images of the 20th century. The number of times and ways in which this image has been reproduced is a tribute to its endless appeal. Aside from the original oil painting, which resides in a private collection, perhaps the grandest version of this image is the large-scale, limited edition color lithograph the artist produced in 1970.

THE PLEASURES OF REPETITION & REPRODUCTION

The many references to early unique Man Ray works later issued in new versions, multiples or editions touches upon the concerns about originals, repetitions, reproductions, editions, and series which he shares with Sherrie Levine. Regarding art making, Levine has stated that “...desire comes first... for me, art’s basically about pleasure” and went on to describe his art works as “objets de mon affection.” These pleasures and affections are discovered and revisited throughout a career via repetition of images and themes, often with changes of scale or medium.

In his book objets de mon affection Man Ray included a section entitled “Originals Graphics Multiples” which read:

An original is a creation motivated by a desire. Any reproduction of an original is motivated by necessity. The original is the result of an automatic mental process, the reproduction, of a mechanical process. In other words: Inspiration then information; Each validates the other. All other considerations are beyond the scope of these statements. It is marvelous that we are the only species that creates gratuitous forms. To create is divine, to reproduce Is human.”

Man Ray began re-producing his earlier works of the 1920s and 30s during WWII in the 1940s when he feared all his life work, left behind in Paris might have been destroyed. In the mid-1980s Levine began to produce generic versions of modernist abstract styles that she had theoretically abandoned in the 1970s... One dilemma that each artist faced was that when museums and collectors would finally come to understand and value of their work, earlier work would always be in greatest demand. Late in his life buyers seeking “vintage” copies of certain images, rather than more recent prints, led Man Ray to respond “Vintage? I am not a wine.”

Man Ray felt all of his work had equal value as ideas. He felt past and present existed as one. He entitled a 1966 retrospective catalog essay "I Have Never Painted a Recent Picture.” and explained "as far as I am concerned, everything happened simultaneously – like scenery seen from a fast train.”

In his Hollywood Album of 1940 - 1948 Man Ray wrote "it is permitted to repeat oneself as much as possible...nothing is more legitimate and more satisfactory,” and Levine has explained that to her, “repetition is implicit in the notion of the readymade. I think that one of the reasons I’m drawn to this tradition...” “I like repetition, because it implies an endless succession of substitutes and missed encounters... and helps] maximize the historical references and the metaphorical possibilities.” There’s a compulsion to repeat. In other words, the game is never won.”

TRICKS & TRUTHS

The work of Sherrie Levine and Man Ray both evidence a tenacious commitment to the pursuit of radical experimentation with or without wide appreciation or support. Man Ray once lamented that “the world really hates new ideas; [but] it loves tricks. And under the guise of tricks it is possible sometimes to put over new and valid ideas... the tricks of today are the truths of tomorrow.”

Many shared experiences and concerns influenced and inspired the work of Man Ray and Sherrie Levine: a thorough grounding in the most advanced visual technology of their eras; commercial art experience; work with a wide variety of media, including experimental materials; an interest in games and play as creative strategies; introduction of new realms of subject matter; a fascination with masks and fetishes; pioneering use of the found object and the readymade; willingness to transpose and repeat images across time and media; and employment of simple, profound gestures to re-define art-making.

Each re-examination of their work leads us to a new appreciation of their contributions and to eagerly anticipate what further developments they may inspire in generations to come.

Larry List
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