

LOCAL ANTHROPOGENIES – PHYLOGENESIS

A PHOTOGRAPHIC HISTORY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

8. MAN RAY (U.S.A., 1890-1976), MOHOLY-NAGY (Hungary, 1895-1946)

Reflexivity

The 1920's, just after the First World War, were very intense from a photographic point of view. They have shown us, with Sander, the combinatory of roles and crafts parallel to the Bauhaus technical and gestural Combinatory, and with Stieglitz, Weston, and Strand, the radicalization of "straight photography". It is also the time when American Man Ray, inverting the voyage of Frenchman Marcel Duchamp to New York, settles in Paris where he elaborates a photography that is not only conscious or episodically reflexive like those we have just mentioned, but constantly reflexive. Moholy-Nagy will also develop a Bauhaus reflexive photography in the same era.

This whim of reflexivity is probably only intelligible if we take into consideration the formidable shock of classic representation that occurs from 1900 to 1927 in the field of sciences. For three decades, all notions of causality, substantiality, representativeness, communication through the daily language, conscience, and sub-conscience – the bases of the Western world for twenty-five centuries – were either ruined or radically displaced. Most of the time, this was done in a manner that the public could not understand, in a way that would have spun many heads. At the end of this chapter, we shall conduct a short inventory of this moral, logic, and representational seism for those who are not familiar with it.

8A. « Delicious » reflexivity : Man Ray

In the area that interest us, that of the creation of images, Marcel Duchamp testifies the perturbation in the strongest way. Man Ray's – who rubbed shoulders with Duchamp – photographic work is immediately inscribed in the logico-semiotic diversions cultivated by the master. One example is well-known: (1) Man Ray photographs dust that has settled for weeks on Duchamp's famous *Grand Verre*; (2) Duchamp baptizes the photograph *Elevage de poussière*; (3) Man Ray re-baptizes it *Vue prise en aéroplane* – a very appropriate title when

the photograph is reproduced in its entirety, not partially, as is too often the case (AP, 241). The ensemble is dated 1920.

In 1924, Man Ray follows the same path, but as a lone rider. He prints on a woman's back – the woman poses in a resolutely Ingresque position (*AP, 246) – two affronted “F”, hence killing several birds with one stone: (1) *summarising* the human being as he is called and writing “femme” with its initial letter “F”; (2) *naming* her twice, even absolutely by writing two “F”, once from left to right, once from right to left, both facing each other; (3) *figuring* her sexual organs by the confrontation of the thus-created lips; (4) *making her bifrontal*, by symbolically placing on her back what she would perceptively be from the front; (5) *totalizing* in a libidinal manner her sex (symbolised) and the beginning of the gluteal crack (archaic direct stimulus); (6) *making her appear* as a cello, even *making* a cello out of her – an instrument that is played close to the body, since the “FF” configure the sound holes of the instrument; (7) *titling* “Violon d’Ingres” a violin made with an Ingres figure, which de-metaphorises the expression and pleasantly situating woman as a pass-time; (8) *evoking* Ingres’ pictorial subject, resumed by the odalisque of the “F” thereby traced, etc.



Man Ray, AP, 246

However, Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp do not limit themselves to leaps and logico-perceptive field effects. Both are visual artists and cultivate perceptive-motor field effects in accordance or in tension with the former. Duchamp, who introduced to Stieglitz's "291" such pure visual artists as Picasso and Braque, is not content with taking an urinal to confer it with the status of art piece, but exercises a 90° rotation on it, making it a Cyclades goddess and a Bernini fountain. He titles the piece *Fountain* (where the emission of rinsing water wins over the evacuation of urine). His *Porte-bouteille* looks like a totem. Decidedly, his first drawings expose a potential stumbling that we will find in ready-made *Trébuchet* and its variations, which is indeed his artistic subject. In fact, the leap and the logic curvature on the one hand and the leap and the artistic curvature on the other comfort each other mutually within the realm of a general "quantum" party, where the "particle" and the "field" compatibilise. (Quantum theory dates from 1905. In the 1920's, Dirac's quantum Mechanics will pursue the identification of the particle and the field in physics)

Man Ray's photographic subject also combines logico-semiotic field effects like those of the *Violon d'Ingres*, with perceptive-motor field effects that stems from – seeing the same photograph – a crossing of evanescence and weighty consistency, or still, vanishing sliding and franc cutouts. His first collection, dated 1922, is intelligently titled *The Delicious Fields*.

Technical performances then take all their sense at the service of this option. As soon as he arrives in Paris in 1920, Man Ray rediscovers and appropriates himself the *photogram*, which he re-baptizes *Rayogram*. This direct application in the camera obscura of the object on the sensitive paper without camera allows triggering the most puzzling artistic and logico-semiotic "leap-fields" by displacing the object several times and photographing it successively. One fine day of 1929, Lee Miller – his assistant – accidentally switches the dark room back on, hence conducting a solarisation, an effect that is well-known to advertising technicians, and that allowed – correlatively – to decompress the inside of the form and to reinforce its contours (this is almost the entirety of Man Ray's photographic subject). Other "delicious" "field" triggering tricks joined the latter: the negative impression, the oblique impressions obtained by the deviations of the enlarger, the impressions in relief through the application of a slide over the slightly displaced negative. In any event, the results were "astral", a cross between artistic and logic.

We could classify Man Ray's photographs in two lots. The former would include those whose movement goes from fluidity and imponderability to the cutout and the weight, as is the case with *The Autumn*, in the *Four Seasons* collection of 1929 (PA**, 83), where we see (Eluard's?) penis and the mouth (Kiki de Montparnasse?) softly rise to the surface, to finally create the bluntest accent at their contact in the generalized fluidity. The second lot would include photographs whose movement goes – to the opposite – from the cut-out and the consistency to the evanescence and imponderability, such as the *Portrait of a tearful Woman* (AP, 245 and front cover), where the volume, which was very full at the beginning, blurs with tears and a camera shake to end.

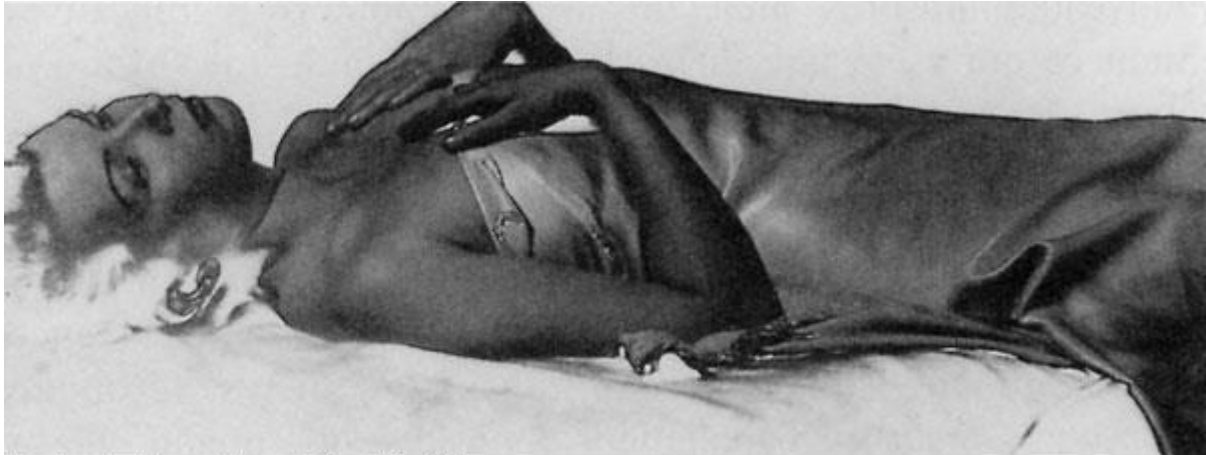


Man Ray, *Quatre saisons*, PA, 83

In any case, Man Ray works on the artistic agonizing struggle of representation. To maximize the latter, it was necessary that the most arbitrary and further away “delights” should be applied to the closer and most carnal realities, in particular the orifices of the body, whose libidinal, semiotic and logic importance Freud had demonstrated since 1900. *The Neck*, dated 1929 (AP, 243), taken at a low angle shot, is a penis as explicit as the above-mentioned *Autumn*.

Reclining Nude in a satin Sheet, made around 1930 (**AP, 244), summarizes well this strip tease and reflexivity through its imagery and through each word of the title. *Reclining*: here, many elements are disposed, lying, devitalized like the object in the Rayogram. *Nude*: it is always the sexual body that is intended, for the former above-mentioned reasons. *In* : the nude is never quite frank nor visible nor tangible; it is only a glimpse, here in the ambivalent translucency of the right nipple, which is diverted and differed touch sensitively, visually, imaginatively, whilst the bottom of the body disappears under the refusing, strict horizontal line of the fabric. *Satin*: is the material per essence of this photograph, which is skin by its smoothness, and refusal of the skin by the shining coldness. *Sheet*: indeed, there are thin sheets everywhere, the sheet of the skin cladding a nude that is itself a sheet, and sheet of the photo,

fluids and cutout as surface and chartering of the surface. There are never consumed penetrations of the containing and contained, but juxtapositions (let us go back to the *Autumn* again). Even the tears are not true effusions. In 1930's *Glass Tears* (AP, 247), the latter are glass drops placed on the skin of the face and besides the eyes.



Man Ray, *Reclining nude in a satin Sheet, AP, n°244*

That every representation and capture should encompass a machinery, and should thereby be indirect, as noted by the era's physicists (the Relations of incertitude date from 1927) ; that we should not be capable of simultaneously see and kiss Albertine's cheek like Proust notes and attempts to overcome at the same moment by the overlapping of his syntax; Man Ray gives this to see, literally, through the decompositions of the photographic process, of which he shows and exploits the densities and imponderables, the evanescence and the definite. Logic and erotic have rarely been so "deliciously" intricate.

8B. Systemic reflexivity: Moholy-Nagy

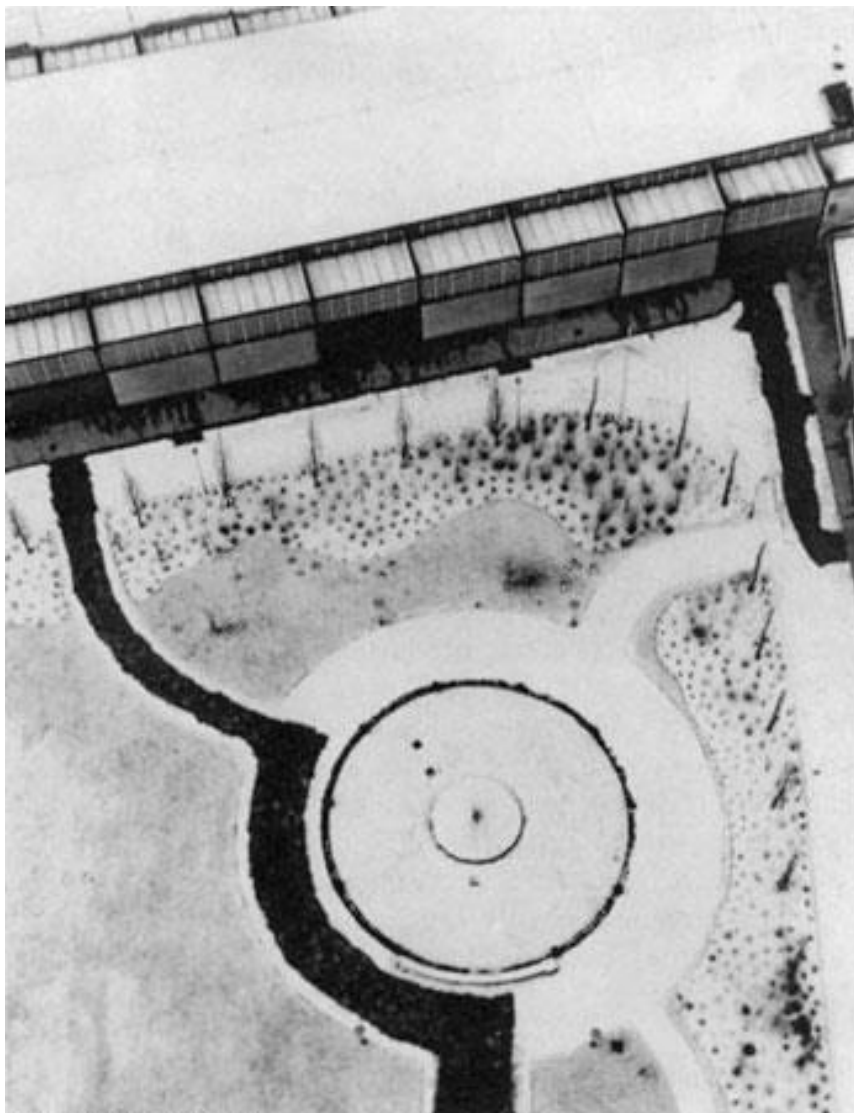
As he is only five years younger and reflexive, Moholy-Nagy must be joined to Man Ray. He defined himself as "Lichtner", i.e. "Lightner" or "Lighter". Just like Man Ray, born Emmanuel Rudnitski, had taken the pseudonym of "Man Ray", author of "rayograms".

From 1923 to 1928, Moholy-Nagy was a prestigious professor for this Bauhaus we already referred to in the chapter on Sander, and impassioned with social combinatory. However, he applies the Bauhausian Combinatory to the photographic process that he decomposes and recomposes with a vertigo of the digitalizing permutation that seemingly was Hungarian (nomad?), if we think about what were, thirty years later, Vasarely's "unités plastiques", Nicolas Schöffer's mobile sculptures, and Yona Friedman's mobile architecture. This made a good match with the ready-made à la Duchamp. Rather than aiming at creating something new, which is often an illusory novelty, let us take or re-combine significantly what

was previously done, particularly by the industry. Hence, Moholy-Nagy tried his hand at photomontages, in the manner of Schwitters's collages.

Thus, when he really started photographing, it is not surprising that this great combinator should have seen the entire universe as a network, a net, whose essence was light, which never shows its permutational fecundity so well as when it is caught in a metallic frame, ropes, bars, shadows of bars that were especially shot from the top of a ship's mast, so that the weight of substance can be dissipated to the profit of a sole reticular structure (PF, 118, 126, 131). We could only choose an aerial view (****AP, 236) to illustrate this "aerialist" (PF, 118-135), contemporary of the high angle and low angle shots of filmmaker Eisenstein and photographer Rodchenko (LP, 94; AP, 228, 229).

If there were still marked memories of the WORLD 2 – of its forms with integral parts and backgrounds – with the former photographers, the delicious reflexivity of Man Ray and the systemic reflexivity of Moholy-Nagy have definitely tipped us towards the grasp-construction by the functioning elements of WORLD 3.



Moholy-Nagy, AP, 236

8C. Note on the representational and logical revolution of the “belle époque” and the roaring twenties to serve as a backdrop for man ray and moholy-nagy in particular.

As soon as 1910-1913, Russell and Whitehead's *Principia Mathematica* broadcast an axiomatic vision of mathematic, where the notion of truth (*adaequatio rei et intellectus*) gives way to that of consistency of systems. A little before, Henri Poincaré had familiarized an audience of non-specialists with non-Euclidean geometries and with Mach's pragmatism. In the latter, the physical theory gives itself as a coherent notional organism, irreducible to naïve experience. Wittgenstein, whose *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* is dated 1921, will alert the Anglo-Saxon universities on the circularity of evidences stemming from the structures of everyday and formalized languages. Gödel's works on the limitations of formalisms are issued from 1930, but testify well of prior effervescences.

In physics, as soon as 1900, researchers measure that radioactivity shakes some aspects of classic mechanics. In 1905, the restrained Relativity subsumes Galilee's group of transformations specific to Newtonian Mechanic under Lorenz' group of transformation, typical of the electromagnetic Theory, and consequently envisages a universe devoid of privileged references of illusionary (Bergsonian) psychological simultaneity. Quantum Theory, also dated 1905, introduces the notion of discontinuous and granular causality, shaking two centuries of differential equations and the entire western causality (*natura non facit saltus*). In 1915, generalized Relativity relates our universe and its gravitation to a non-Euclidean geometry, that of Riemann. In 1924's undulatory Mechanic, the same quantity of energy is manifested as a wave or corpuscle according to the conditions of observation. And 1927's Relations of incertitude state that the determinations of the localization and the speed of a particle are in inverted exactitude relation.

In 1897, Edouard Buchner discovers zymase. To explain fermentation, enzymes no longer require the vital strength of an integral cell demanded by Pasteur, a contemporary of Nadar. The living itself starts appearing as the result of the functioning elements of WORLD 3. Emil Fischer's 1902 Nobel Prize gives the wanted publicity to the “key-lock” enzymatic functioning.

In human sciences, Freud's *Traumdeutung*'s is again dated 1900 and aims toward a sort of incredibly changing mental chemistry. From 1912, the Gestalttheorie no longer describes the animal and human perception as additionable data, but as perceptive-motor fields with non-continuous resultants between them: it is through leaps (*quantum dare* we say) that the brain switches from one form to another. In 1912, Saussure's students draft a *Cours de linguistique générale* where the language is proposed as a system of coherent differences, whose relationship to reality is second, like in Poincaré's physic theory. Before 1930, Hjelmslev, who worked closely with the Copenhagen physic institute where the principle of complementarity was conceived, will rush in the view of a language that is more or less axiomatizable.

In the arts world, McCay's *Little Nemo* first appears in 1905. This divine comedy of comics, to which the Slumberland responds – almost more radically – to Freud's *Traumdeutung*, and whose metamorphosis forecast D'Arcy Thompson's 1917 *On Growth and Form*. The different Picassian cubisms bloom at the same time as the two Theories of relativity. In Music, Schönberg's atonal period starts in 1908, and his serial period begins in 1918. The *Manifeste du surréalisme* is dated 1924, year of the undulatory Mechanic.

None of this was easy to hear. Even Bergson, whose “concrete length” at times compenetrated at consonant with some aspects of the era does not seem to have understood the Einsteinian demand of a physical (operating) definition and not only intuitive of simultaneity, since he could not take advantage of the Quantum Theory. To reach a happy medium, let us add the First World War to these pacific diversions. The war demonstrated the vanity recorded by Dada, of obvious ethics that had become as suspect as the obvious representations and demonstrations.

T.M.D./ADAGP (collection Lucien Treillard).

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A photographic history of photography

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List of abbreviations of common references :

AP: The Art of Photography, Yale University Press.

LP: Szarkowski, Looking at Photographs, Museum of Modern Art.

PF: Kozloff, Photography and Fascination, Addison.

The acronyms (), (**), (***) refer to the first, second, and third illustration of the chapters, respectively. Thus, the reference (***) AP, 417) must be interpreted as: “This refers to the third illustration of the chapter, and you will find a better reproduction, or a different one, with the necessary technical specifications, in The Art of Photography listed under number 417”.*