

STAGING DISPLACEMENT: MAN RAY'S STILL LIFE COMPOSITION WITH CHESS SET, PLASTER CASTS, AND *OBSERVATORY TIME — THE LOVERS* IN CONTEXT

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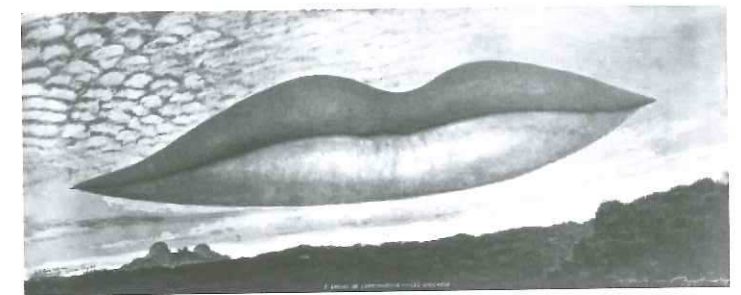
¹ Man Ray, "Preface from a Proposed Book: One Hundred Objects of My Affection," in William Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1961), pp. 48–49. In 1944, Man Ray assembled photographs of his objects and prepared texts for a publication he called *Objects of My Affection*. He prepared several maquettes for the book (one was shown in 1944 at the Aronowitsch gallery in Stockholm), although it was never published as he had envisioned. In 1970, an Italian version, *Oggetti d'affezione* (including 119 objects dating from 1917 to 1968), was published by Giulio Einaudi editore, Turin (with the assistance of Arturo Schwarz). A more comprehensive catalogue raisonné of Man Ray's objects was published by Philippe Sers in Paris in 1983, *Man Ray: Objets de mon affection*, listing 187 objects, with six texts and brief entries by Man Ray, a preface by Jean-Hubert Martin and essays by Brigitte Hermann and Rosalind Krauss.

A perpetual experimenter, Man Ray made pioneering contributions in the realms of photography, painting, object-making, and film production. In the preface to his album *One Hundred Objects of My Affection*, he wrote: "In whatever form it is finally presented: by a painting, by a photograph, by an arrangement of various objects, or by one object itself slightly modified, each object is designed to amuse, annoy, bewilder, mystify, inspire reflection but not to arouse admiration for any technical excellence usually sought in other works of art."¹ Man Ray's interdisciplinary approach reflected his view that "Perhaps the final goal desired by the artist is a confusion or merging of all the arts, as things merge in real life."²

Man Ray's photograph *Still Life Composition with Chess Set, Plaster Casts, and Observatory Time — The Lovers* (ca. 1934), on view in the current exhibition at the Shpilman Institute for Photography,³ embodies this integration of media, bringing together representations of Man Ray as painter, object-maker, and photographer. Taking this image as its point of departure, this study examines a series of highly-staged black and white photographs, created between 1934 and 1938, featuring the artist's studio, his sofa, and, predominantly, his painting *Observatory Time — The Lovers* (*À l'Heure de l'Observatoire — Les Amoureux*, 1932–34). Another focus of the essay is Man Ray's continued use of these same plaster casts in constellations that highlight his interest in blurring the borders between human and object. Moving between the realms of photography and object-making, Man Ray later assembled three-dimensional objects from the visual paraphernalia he accumulated. These thought-provoking objects, their afterlife as editioned replicas, and their relationship to photography are the concluding issues addressed here.

Whether or not Man Ray meant them to be seen as a series, the numerous photographic compositions featuring the artist's painting *Observatory Time — The Lovers* constitute variations on a theme.^[figs. 2–6] Central to Man Ray's artistic versatility was his flair for inventive staging. In this series, Man Ray configured and reconfigured a group of elements within a specific, replicated

[fig. 1]
Man Ray, *Observatory Time — The Lovers*, 1932–34
Color photograph
Replica: 1964
(Schwarz edition of 8 + 4)
The Vera and Arturo Schwarz
Collection of Dada and Surrealist Art
at the Israel Museum, Jerusalem



² Man Ray, quoted in Arturo Schwarz, *Man Ray: The Rigour of Imagination* (London: Thames and Hudson, and New York: Rizzoli International, 1977), p. 8.

³ The original painting, *À l'Heure de l'Observatoire — Les Amoureux*, now in a private European collection, sold in 1979 for \$750,000 at Sotheby Parke Bernet in New York, establishing a record price for Man Ray's work and for all Surrealist art. The work sold as part of a successful auction of the William N. Copley collection. According to Sotheby's expert Andrew Strauss, the unprecedented price can also be explained by the popularity of this image; it attracted bids from Estée Lauder and Mick Jagger, who both lost out to a private collector at auction.

⁴ In the 1960s Man Ray collaborated with the Galerie Europe and replicated *Chess Set* in silver, polished and gilded bronze editions, with an enamel and metal inlay chess board mounted in wood with storage drawers for chess pieces, presented on a wooden stand.

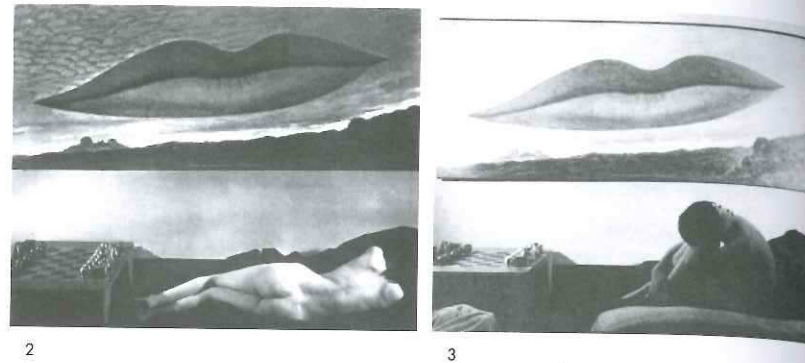
setting; his studio became an ideal locale for experimentation with varying arrangements within a frame, evocative lighting and cast shadows.

The first "given" on this "stage" is Man Ray's iconic painting portraying the lips of Lee Miller — the artist's model, lover, studio apprentice and collaborator — hovering in a cloudy sky above the Luxembourg Gardens and breast-like domes of the Paris Observatory.³ These lips appear repeatedly in Man Ray's oeuvre, and in 1964, he created an edition of color photographic enlargements of his painting.^[fig. 1] Although *Observatory Time* represents an idyllic dream realm or fantasy of blissful union, the photographs in which the painting was reproduced were created several years after Man Ray and Lee Miller had parted, thereby becoming perhaps an image of paradise lost. The second "given" in this series of photographic compositions is Man Ray's *Chess Set* (*Jeu d'Échec*), first made in 1920 from found objects, such as a violin scroll to represent the knight, and produced in 1920–26 in silver-plated and oxidized silver-plated brass geometrical forms.⁴ The chess table serves as another stage, and most probably alludes to Man Ray's rich creative exchange with Marcel Duchamp, which centered around exhibitions and publications, as well as chess matches and their shared support of chess foundations.

In perhaps the most striking composition in the series, the sofa hosts two plaster casts: one of a Praxitelean⁵ torso of the Classical goddess Venus; and — adjacent — a cast of the head of a statue known as the Arles Venus. These plasters, acquired at an artists' supply shop, served as recurrent props in many of Man Ray's photographs and were also utilized in three-dimensional object-constructions, as discussed later in this essay. In other compositions within this series, in lieu of plaster casts, Man Ray stages a live nude reclining on the couch with her back to the viewer and a chessboard at her feet.⁶^[fig. 2] On the back of a print in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, Man Ray pointed out a possible multivalent interpretation of the female body, noting that "The breasts/shoulder-blades pun only became apparent when the image was

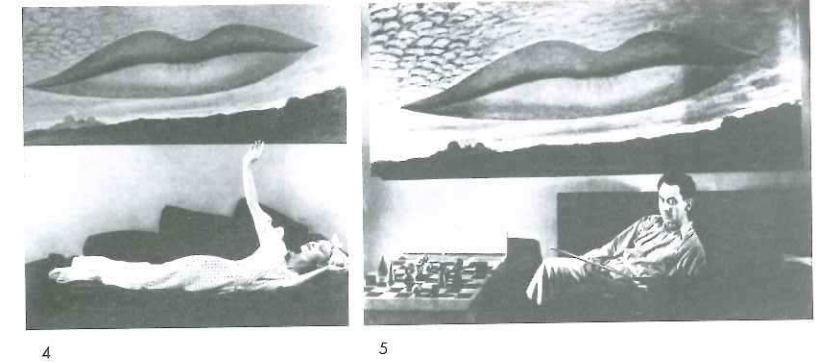
[fig. 2]
Man Ray, *Observatory Time – The Lovers*, 1934–38
Centre national d'art et de culture
Georges Pompidou, Paris

[fig. 3]
Man Ray, *Observatory Time – The Lovers*, 1934–36
Museum of Modern Art, New York



[fig. 4]
Man Ray, *Observatory Time – The Lovers*, 1934–36
Photograph for *Harper's Bazaar*, November 1936

[fig. 5]
Man Ray, *Observatory Time – The Lovers*, 1934



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Praxiteles of Athens was a renowned Attic sculptor of the 4th century BC.

6
The same image exists also with the model's head cropped out of the composition.

7
Man Ray quoted in *Man Ray: Photographs*, introduction by Jean-Hubert Martin, with three texts by Man Ray (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982), p. 87, note to plate 85.

8
André Breton, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 1, p. 322, quoted in Jack Spector, "The Surrealist Woman and the Colonial Other," in: *Surrealist Art and Writing 1919/39: The Gold of Time* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 162. And see Adina Kamien-Kazhdan, "Desire: Muse and Abused," in *Surrealism and Beyond in the Israel Museum*, exh. cat. (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 2007), pp. 213–215.

developed: a perfect Surrealist coincidence.⁷ In a related composition, shot from a greater distance, a nude sits in a fetal position, and the contours of the bed and pillows mimic the landscape of the painting.^[fig. 3] In yet another version, recalling Man Ray's fashion photographs, an elegantly bedecked reclining model reaches up toward the equally idealized world represented in the painting.^[fig. 4] In a fifth variation, Man Ray, the self-reflective artist, sits on the sofa intensely scrutinizing the viewer.^[fig. 5] In this version, the chess pieces have been moved, possibly with a staff Man Ray holds in his hand. As opposed to the live or cast females, who, as objects of male desire and sources of creative inspiration, do not engage with the game, Man Ray is an active participant or agent of desire. A similar position is expressed in the first Surrealist Manifesto: "What matters is that we be masters of ourselves, the masters of women and of love too."⁸ In what appears to be a final variation, the already familiar divan and chess table are left bare^[fig. 6] – perhaps inviting viewers to occupy the artist/analyst's couch in their imagination, and project their own game of alternate realities and desires.

This potentially limitless series recalls a film strip, and exposes the viewer to the artist's deliberate creative process and power of invention. Man Ray thus draws attention to himself as the creator of the work, a constructor of images composed of visual paraphernalia he regularly accumulated. In a related, but slightly earlier image, Lee Miller portrays Man Ray sleeping beneath the same torso of Venus (hanging on the wall) – the photographic lamp directed on the now passive photographer.^[fig. 7]

Man Ray's choice of the term *Still Life* in his title injects photography with a pictorial expression, and signifies the production of carefully orchestrated imagery. The artist uses similarity and difference as organizing principles to create a sequence of images. Each component acquires new meaning through its re-contextualization. The painting *Observatory Time – The Lovers* is inserted as a prop in the photograph, like the couch, while the casts – objects alien to the home setting – are later removed from this familiar context and placed in new situations,

9
See Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny'" (1919), *Collected Papers*, Vol. IV (London: Hogarth Press, 1956), pp. 369–407. Freud's seminal explanation of the "uncanny" as the tension between what is familiar or unfamiliar, between the ordinary and the extraordinary has impelled art critics such as Rosalind E. Krauss and others to comment on the uncanny effect of surrealist photography, research that suggests that the surrealists were eminently aware of Freudian ideas, which they self-consciously used to develop their art. See Rosalind E. Krauss, *Amour Fou: Photography and Surrealism* (Washington and New York: Corcoran Gallery of Art and Abbeville Press, 1985).

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The ambivalence of the uncanny also participates in the principle of the absurd and black humor. For an analysis of the uncanny in the Surrealist context see Celia Rabinovitch, *Surrealism and the Sacred: Power, Eros, and the Occult in Modern Art* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, and Harper Collins Icon Editions, 2002), pp. 22–23.

seen in novel, at times disturbing, contexts. Through the well-known Surrealist tactic of *dépaysement*, or displacement, these indeterminate images are taken out of their context (or literally removed from their "native land") and newly juxtaposed in ways that disorient, surprise, and refresh our vision.

Man Ray animates fragmented inert objects, imbuing them with added meaning and mystery through their juxtaposition. Inspired by classical statuary like the Metaphysical/Surrealist painter Giorgio de Chirico, Man Ray adorns the classical head of Venus with a head-band and necklace, and paints eyebrows and lipstick onto the cast, blurring the distinction between cast and human body. The semi-animated yet essentially expressionless head is set at a bizarre angle to the torso relief, creating an effect of decapitation. Man Ray recycled the plaster casts of Venus' torso and head in many photographs, juxtaposing these fragments with geometrical objects, lobsters, lamps and mirrors, human hands and heads, nude female bodies, an embracing couple. Brought together with a live nude in an intimate erotic position,^[fig. 8] the cast torso undergoes metamorphosis, and is deceptively humanized. Through an artful use of light and shadow the plaster surface is softened into flesh, as the breast of the upper figure fills the concave abdominal curve of the more inviting, idealized cast torso. A reverse effect is achieved in other works, where the female body is objectified, transformed into a hybrid human-classical torso whose arms are eliminated through the manipulation of the negative or the image projected onto the photographic paper.^[fig. 9] The interchangeability of human beings and casts embodied in Man Ray's *Still Life Composition* series and related works simultaneously enchants and alarms the viewer. The unnaturally life-like quality of the casts and the sensation of doubling between body and cast evoke Freud's concept of the "uncanny" (*Das "unheimliche"*).⁹ The ambivalence of the uncanny grows from a perceptual confusion between what is animate and inanimate, particularly provoked by dolls, mannequins, and also plaster casts brought to life as unsettling "doubles" of the human body.¹⁰

[fig. 6]
Man Ray, *Observatory Time – The Lovers*, 1935–38

[fig. 7]
Lee Miller, *Man Ray Asleep*, ca. 1930
Centre national d'art et de culture
Georges Pompidou, Paris

[fig. 8]
Man Ray, *Untitled* (bust of
Nusch Éluard naked bent over
a plaster bust lying), ca. 1936



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11
Kirsten A. Hoving, "Man Ray's Disarming Venuses," *History of Photography*, 29, 2 (Summer 2005), p. 123.

12
Ibid., p. 131.

13
See Arturo Schwarz, *Man Ray: The Rigour of Imagination*, p. 171, plate 289.

Surrealism also demonstrates a complex relationship to classical antiquity. Kirsten Hoving notes that "ironically, it was largely through photography – a medium that depends on mimesis and measure – that Surrealists like Man Ray deconstructed the values of classicism."¹¹ The ideal female torso appealed to Surrealists because of its potential for metaphor and metamorphosis and multivalent nature. Fragmented statues also evoked World War I battlefields and its victims' prosthetic devices. Although this last association is particularly appropriate for the disturbing, mutilated doll-objects created and photographed by Hans Bellmer,^{pp. 129, 131} rather than Man Ray's works, in the latter's photographs "Venus is uprooted from her conventional cultural associations and cast adrift in a void where she is not myth, not ancient, not ideal, not whole, not symmetrical, not upright."¹² Man Ray employed the plaster casts of Venus' torso and head in numerous photographic compositions. He later created two assemblages using these objects: *Venus Restored* (*Vénus restaurée/Torse habillé*) (1936),^[fig. 10] and *Venus* (1937).¹³ Both assemblages involved encasing the plaster casts of Venus, in either net or rope, blending the idea of restoration with the containment of bondage fantasies. Man Ray's "restoration" of the plaster half-cast of Venus' torso entails lacing up the torso with a rope – an unusual kind of corset. Instead of completing the figure physically with the missing limbs or head, Man Ray brings to it a metaphorical wholeness. The corset then functions as a kind of net to capture

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Rosalind E. Krauss, "Objects of My Affection" (1983), in: Man Ray, *Objects of My Affection* (New York: Zabriskie Gallery, 1985), n.p.

15
"An original is a creation motivated by desire. Any reproduction of an original is motivated by necessity... It is marvelous that we are the only species that creates gratuitous forms. To create is divine, to reproduce is human." Man Ray, "Originals Graphic Multiples" (ca. 1968), in Man Ray: *Objets de mon affection* (Paris: Philippe Sers, 1983), p. 158.

16
Letter from Man Ray to Arturo Schwarz, Paris, January 12, 1971 (The Arturo Schwarz Library of Dada and Surrealist Documents, Periodicals, Books, Manuscripts, and Letters in the Israel Museum, Jerusalem, cited heretofore as "Schwarz Library, IMJ").

17
Letter from Man Ray to Arturo Schwarz, Paris, December 9, 1970 (Schwarz Library, IMJ).

18
Letter from Arturo Schwarz to Man Ray, Milan, December 16, 1970 (Fonds Man Ray, Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Centre Pompidou, Paris).

19
Arturo Schwarz in an interview with the author, June 14, 2011.

20
Letter from Man Ray to Arturo Schwarz, Paris, January 12, 1971 (Schwarz Library, IMJ).

the viewer's erotic imagination, heightening an awareness of Venus' sexuality.

Both objects were eventually lost, a fate shared by many of Man Ray's objects. However, photography rescued many of them from oblivion, since they were often destroyed or disassembled after being photographed for publication in books or periodicals. These photographs capture ephemeral objects, sometimes never fully produced. They provide an important source for the replication of lost works, calling into question or redefining what might be considered the "original." Rosalind Krauss evaluated this multivalent relationship between object and photograph, noting that Man Ray's work process "acknowledges a certain usurpation of the object by its photographic record," as the photograph becomes a trace of something absent, "a copy... that exists without an original."¹⁴

Between 1959 and 1974, Man Ray reissued many early and later works as unique replicas, editioned replicas, and multiples. Unique replicas were usually motivated by a need for exhibition copies, whereas editioned replicas and multiples produced by galleries were commercial ventures that benefited both Man Ray and his dealers. Man Ray blurred traditional boundaries by presenting his works both as exhibition pieces in museums and galleries and as originals, replicas, and multiples offered for sale. Perhaps in response to Man Ray's flexible flow between the mediums of painting, photography ("artistic" and commercial), and object-making, both artist and dealers adopted a more relaxed attitude towards the editioning of replicas. His lifelong experience with photography, in which each print is by definition a multiple of its template negative, made Man Ray feel at ease with the editioning of his works in other media. This activity reflected Man Ray's position that "to create is divine, to reproduce is human."¹⁵

In close collaboration with Man Ray, the Galleria Schwarz in Milan produced editioned replicas of ten of Man Ray's objects in 1963–64 and in 1971. Corresponding from Paris, Man Ray commented on the relationship between replica and original: "I shall try to help you to realize replicas of the objects you wish to produce. In any case, these cannot be exactly like the originals, but we can preserve the spirit as in previous replicas."¹⁶ In a letter to Arturo Schwarz, Man Ray directed the dealer-scholar-poet how to prepare the editioned replicas of *Venus Restored*.^[fig. 11] "A cast of the Venus de Medici torso – could be in painted plastic to look like marble."¹⁷ Schwarz responded: "The example I have is a cast made of plaster, of course. If you would like it to look like marble, why not use marble? I could have it sculptured in Carrara by a professional craftsman."¹⁸ Allowing for flexibility in terms of materials, Man Ray replied: "A cast of Venus de Medici bought at Lorenzi's, rue Racine, I think they can make it in synthetic stone, but you can get it in Italy I suppose. Or white plastic."¹⁹ Finally, three-dimensional plaster casts (as opposed to the original half-plaster relief) were acquired at an artists' supply shop for the *Venus Restored* edition, and Man Ray himself tied the rope to create the assemblages. This case demonstrates Man Ray's flexible approach to the recreation of his ideas, as long they "preserve the spirit" of the original work.²⁰

[fig. 9]
Man Ray, *Nude*, ca. 1930
Centre national d'art et de culture
Georges Pompidou, Paris

[fig. 10]
Man Ray, *Venus Restored*,
1936
J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

[fig. 11]
Man Ray, *Venus Restored*,
1936 (original lost), plaster
cast and rope, replica: 1971
(Schwarz edition of 10)
The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, gift of
Mary and Jose Mugarab, New York, to
American Friends of the Israel Museum



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10



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21
Man Ray, unpublished notes,
Hollywood Album, Getty
Research Institute, Special
Collections.

22
For a study of May Ray's
Jewish identity and questions
of assimilation see Milly
Heyd, "Man Ray/Emmanuel
Radnitsky: Who is Behind
the Enigma of Isidore
Ducasse?" in: Matthew
Baigall and Milly Heyd (eds.),
*Complex Identities: Jewish
Consciousness and Modern
Art* (New Brunswick: Rutgers
University Press, 2001); and
Mason Klein (ed.), *Alias Man
Ray: The Art of Reinvention*
(New York: The Jewish
Museum, and New Haven
and London: Yale University
Press, 2009).

DR. ADINA KAMIEN-KAZHDAN
IS CURATOR OF MODERN
ART AT THE ISRAEL MUSEUM,
JERUSALEM. HER EXHIBITION
"SURREALISM AND BEYOND"
IN THE ISRAEL MUSEUM OPENED
IN 2007. KAMIEN-KAZHDAN
COMPLETED HER PHD AT THE
CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF
SURREALISM AND ITS LEGACIES,
UNIVERSITY OF ESSEX,
COLCHESTER, ENGLAND.

In his own words: "It is permitted to repeat oneself as much as possible. Nothing is more legitimate and more satisfactory. So long as you do not repeat others. Work until you have developed one single manner that is you, and no one else"; and also: "...only originality has the right to repeat itself. Only the artist who has created his own idiom can take pleasure in its repetition."²¹

Man Ray's background as an immigrant (and son of immigrants) propelled him to focus his art on issues of self and identity. He was concerned with the construction of an artistic persona through a series of subtle and encrypted self-references throughout his career.²² I contend that through his photography, replication of objects, and publication of books, Man Ray strove to make his "destructible" work more "permanent" or "indestructible" (as invoked in a number of titles to his works). The idea of staging, reinvention, or recreation was integral to his character. Replication reflected Man Ray's desire to leave an enduring and far-reaching legacy rather than be categorized within a particular movement or period in art history. His flexibility vis-à-vis the replication and dissemination of his work reflects an undermining of art-world hierarchies characteristically Dadaist in spirit. While this approach promotes the status of the photographic artwork (and photography in itself as a subversive medium), this same attitude towards replication underlines the multiple character of photography. Man Ray's endorsement of replication anticipated the multiple's rapidly growing artistic status in the 1960s. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that Man Ray – a pioneer of avant-garde photography, who paved the way for the inclusion of this medium within art historical discourse – craved recognition within the traditional *métier* of painting and in the "sculptural" activity of object making.