

Dreaming Out Loud

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BY PETER FRANK

Man Ray Trust "A Practical Dreamer: The Photographs of Man Ray" -- at least the third major retrospective locally accorded modernism's main Man in this decade -- proffers a body of work that was avant-garde, even controversial, in its day and is still good-looking and interesting, however softened by the patina of time.

The Getty's Ray array numbers more than a hundred items, arranged chronologically and grouped according to locales -- New York, Paris, Los Angeles (but not Paris the second time around, thus lopping off the artist's last quarter-century) -- and, remarkably, all belonging to the museum. Indeed, this is the single most awe-inspiring thing about "A Practical Dreamer": not that one person is responsible for so varied a march of pictures, but that one institution owns them all -- and some 200 others besides.

Next time the Getty does a Ray show, however, it would be well advised to assemble a smaller selection, one that documents not the Man's history, but the themes, forms and/or methods that recur consistently in his oeuvre. The most engaging passages in "A Practical Dreamer" are those that trace a certain continuity, by accident or by design. A suite of "Rayographs" commissioned by the Paris electric company CPDE, for instance, shows how deftly Ray could apply the technique he discovered (but did not invent) -- creating multi-image silhouettes by exposing photographic paper with objects resting on it -- to a given theme.

Similarly, a cluster of portrait photographs, also from the Paris years, lets us see how Ray flattered the egos of his sitters, all the while satisfying his own. He regarded such dignitaries as Sinclair Lewis, Joan Miró, Tristan Tzara and the Marquise Casati (an eccentric art patron) as colleagues and as friends. His portrayals of them were spirited collaborations in which both their lives and the props of his studio served as grace notes to their own responses to his camera.

Like the spritz of champagne opened long ago, the éclat of Ray's much-vaunted radicality has mostly (but not entirely) evaporated. What remains impressive in the photographs is Ray's dogged and largely successful avoidance of conventionality. A career-spanning selection of prints, paintings, assemblages and, yes, photos at Robert Berman's Bergamot space actually points more avidly than the Getty exhibition at Ray's bad-boyishness, assuring us that his later

years were as puckish as his earlier ones. The selection is a mere shadow of the retrospective Berman and Track 16 mounted three years ago, but it touches all the bases and tidily complements the Getty survey.

If the Man born Emmanuel Radnitsky was the voice of diffident yet elegant Dadaism and Surrealism in various places at various times, the man born Eliezer Lissitzky in the same year (1890) was the voice of passionate yet coherent Constructivism in various other places and at many of the same times. As an American, Ray was able to buck the political tempests of his era; as a Russian, Lissitzky responded fervently to them and, ultimately, became one of their myriad victims. Before his untimely death -- back in the USSR, in midWorld War II -- Lissitzky had studied, worked, proselytized and made connections over much of Europe, in particular in Germany, where he studied architectural engineering in his youth, and where he found his closest non-Russian artistic compeers among the mad rationalists of the Bauhaus and the rational madmen of Dada.

Like Ray, Lissitzky gravitated to where the innovation was and was adept at seizing the means of invention and running with them -- often to visionary ends. He was able, for instance, to evolve the tumult of Russian Futurism into a distinctive style that he applied with particular verve to illustrating books. As such, he was a key figure in the renaissance of Yiddish publishing during the first years of the Soviet Union. Lissitzky even created geometrized stylizations of Hebrew, as well as Cyrillic and Latin, letters. Out of those publishing projects, he devised Constructivist typographies and methods of non-objective storytelling which, to this day, beg to move from storyboard (or chapbook) to animation screen.

"Monuments of the Future: Designs by El Lissitzky" looks at all the aspects of Lissitzky's work with functional objects, from his earliest poetry pamphlets to his attempts to inject a little Constructivist vim into the Stalin-ridden monumental realism. The show has his "Proun" structures and plans for the *Room for Constructivist Art*; his series of lithographs based on the Futurist opera *Victory Over the Sun*; drawings for the still-radical "Cloud-iron" concept he proposed for a Moscow office building; and vintage photo documentation of the elaborate and dynamic displays for trade and technical fairs he created in the late 1920s and '30s. It's all here but the painting and sculpture.

Pretty amazing what a tubercular little guy from Smolensk can accomplish in 51 brief years. Amazing, again, that the Getty owns it all. This particular collection reposes in the Getty's Research Institute, entirely separate from the museum, and is normally available to scholars; through the better part of February, it's available for everyone's perusal. It hangs in the Institute's exhibition gallery, installed in a handsome, multilinear manner that pays homage to Lissitzky and his Constructivist comrades by turning the small, L-shaped space (pun unintended) into a bustling but easily negotiated biographical arc.

With her love of puns and her forceful exploitation of typography as a visual phenomenon, contemporary artist Kay Rosen inherits much of both the Man Ray and the El Lissitzky spirit. In one of the most ambitious works in her two-venue exhibition, the wall-spanning *No Noose Is Good Noose*, she pays oblique homage to the latter modernist's milieu. With its nervously active stick figures, emphatic semicircular arrows and expansive, stagelike presence, the multilayered black-and-white confabulation of painted plexiglass and masonite obliquely but knowingly conjures one of the monuments of Russian Constructivism, the stage set Alexandra Exter designed in the early '20s for director Vsevolod Meyerhold. Rosen even references those heady days of the Revolution in the work's texts.

Indeed, Rosen references a lot of things in the texts of her works -- and, by and large, her works are little more than texts. Sounds heady and . . . boring? Not in the least. And while you don't *have* to speak English to get a visual kick out of her mega-colorful paintings, usually rendered with housepaint on panel or wall, the payload really is in the language. Rosen's wordplay is intricate, elaborate, relentless, endlessly surprising, and would be daunting if it weren't so damned hilarious. Trained in linguistics, Rosen sees -- and hears -- words, singly and in grammatic sequence, as unstable but lyrical constellations of sound and meaning. Syllables mirror each other into phrases ("ASS ASS IN IN THE THE ATER" -- i.e., John Wilkes Booth); repeated words link with other words and change direction completely ("MURmur --/edEd:/ MIKE's/ mike's/ DEAD"); single words break up into unexpectedly revealing components, some of which are visual rather than -- or as well as -- verbal ("CROTCH ET Y", "TRIC KK NEES"), ad infinitum.

As impressive as Rosen's hyperlexia is, it's driven home by her physically overwhelming but optically lucid graphic style, an approach not dissimilar to Barbara Kruger's, but less involved with the tensions between image and language, and more involved with the image *of* language. The tension exists between in-your-face style and in-your-head content -- or, rather, in-your-mouth content, considering how much Rosen's wordplay depends on homonyms, skewed interior rhyming and other speech games.

It's not surprising that much of Rosen's work over the years has appeared in book format, and the vitrine at MOCA containing various of her publications jumps with the same caged energy that bristles through the Lissitzky book displays. Most of Rosen's other early work is at Otis, including performance documentation done in and around architectural structures in Gary, Indiana (where the Texas-born artist lives), and Chicago, documentation that combines subtle, witty photographs with obsessive and beautiful movement notations. But words are Rosen's main medium, and -- writ wee or large ("JUMBO MUMBO," as the huge centerpiece of the Otis show declares) -- they're what fill both locales. Ray and El would be proud.