

The Whole Man Ray at Cultural Center

By JOHN RUSSELL

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In the cultural history of the last 60 years Man Ray is not so much invisible as intangible. He is everywhere, and yet nowhere. He does everything, and yet most people would find it difficult to say who he is, or what he did, or when he did it. That is partly his own fault, since no one is more adept at covering his tracks, changing his disguise and generally throwing an admirer off the scent. But it is also the fault of the museum world, which has never been able to come to terms with Man Ray or known whether to regard him as painter, photographer or inventor.

As of this morning, all that is changed. At the New York Cultural Center, through March 2, something like the complete spectrum of Man Ray's activity since before World War I is on view. Some objects were too fragile to travel, a great many photographs await a show of their own and a strict choice was made among the paintings. But even so, there are several hundred items in the catalogue: paintings, watercolors, drawings, photographs, objects, collages, books, stage designs. The whole man is there as never before in one place.

At this point I must interpolate a line or two on the absurdity of a world in which the New York Cultural Center, which has mounted this show with exemplary dedication, should be threatened with closure. It has had from its very beginning a checkered career. But since Mario Amaya took over the directorship in 1972, it has had as lively and inventive an exhibition program as any museum in the world.

Of show after show we have had to say—whether we liked it or not—"No one else would have done this." The older, staid, more self-important museums will go their majestic way despite whatever temporary difficulties may beset them. But the



"Red Iron," one of the exhibits of works by Man Ray at the New York Cultural Center, 2 Columbus Circle.

Cultural Center has consistently done what they will never do and do not even want to do, and New York without it would be a diminished city.

Back to Man Ray, meanwhile. Man Ray before 1914 was one of the small minority of American artists who knew what was going on in Europe and aspired to be a part of it. We knew this, more or less, but we did not know it as it is spelled out at the Cultural Center, where painting after painting has, however awkwardly, an international touch. Once or twice he brilliantly brought

it off: in the untitled watercolor that relates to the worldwide preoccupation with the dance, for instance, and above all in that classic of its day, the Modern Museum's "Rope Dancer."

During World War I, Man Ray was sensitive enough to the climate of the times to shift toward dada; more precisely, to react to the presence in New York of Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia, and to impress himself upon Duchamp in particular as a kindred spirit. Man Ray was by nature witty, irreverent and much given to riddles

and puns. He could make art out of nothing in ways that turned out to be absolutely up to the minute when the European art world as it existed before 1914 was either discredited or in total dereliction.

I doubt, for instance, if any American artist has ever been made welcome in Paris as Man Ray was made welcome when he showed at the Librairie Six in December, 1921. The little catalogue was prefaced by Louis Aragon, Duchamp, Paul Eluard, Max Ernst and Tristan Tzara. There was no stronger team in Paris then (or later) and they were just delighted to have Man Ray around.

But Man Ray has never liked to be typed once and for all, and over the last half-century he has kept several careers in being at once. He has a place of his own as a maker of disquieting objects. We think, for example, of the everyday domestic flatiron as something that brings smoothness and order to life. Not at all, says Man Ray; what if that same domestic iron had spikes on it and tore all our clean shirts to pieces?

Some of the images he produced in this way have had an afterlife he did not foresee. The famous metronome that goes tick-tock with a beautiful eye on the end of its stalk was lately adopted, for instance, as an election poster in West Germany (by the winning side, moreover). As a portrait photographer, Man Ray has had no equal in this century, and as a poetical tease, an all-purpose allusionist and a commentator on the day's preoccupations he will never lose his place in history.

The Cultural Center show has been organized by one of his oldest friends, Roland Penrose, in collaboration with Mr. Amaya, and I can't imagine its being done better. Justice has been done, and can be seen to have been done, to one of the most remarkable Americans of his generation.