

Photography and the Making of 'African Art'

Review of:

Wendy A. Grossman, *Man Ray, African Art and the Modernist Lens*. With contributions by Ian Walker, Yaëlle Biro, Paol Mørk, Rainer Stamm and Tomás Winter. Washington DC: International Arts and Artists, 2009. Distributed by the University of Minnesota Press, 200 pages colour/ black and white illus. ISBN 978-0-8166-7017-8 | paperback | \$39.95

The confluence of an interest in African art and photography, and the name of Man Ray, is not a particular surprise these days, the last twenty or so years has seen a plethora of publications of all sorts on these topics in history, art history, anthropology and cultural and post-colonial studies. Yet this book brings to the centre of this debate, practices which have tended to be marginalized, namely the role of photography in both structuring and reflecting Modernist and, later, Surrealist sensibilities in relation to African Art. In taking Man Ray, in both USA and Paris, as central focus, it also challenges his construction as an artist and photographer, by bringing into the analytical frame material often overlooked within in the assessment of his corpus and influence. Instead these narratives are subjected to an 'ethnographic' analysis which concerns itself with the flow of images around networks, their transformation, the sites of their apprehension, whether in galleries, museums or magazines from *Vogue* to *Cahiers d'art*. In many ways the histories that intersect around this body of work are well-known, histories of modernism, popular and intellectual manifestations of *negritude* and *l'art nègre*, constructions of race in early twentieth century USA, the cultural rupture of World War 1, the relationship between colonialism, anthropology and the avant garde. If their synoptic handling here is sometimes less than fluid, what is revealing however is the way that photography worked through so many channels, blurring boundaries, destabilizing assumptions, creating sites of friction.

At the heart of this narrative are, of course, Western constructs of Africa itself, and its discursive categories of race, gender, and sexuality as nodes of the primitive. The chapters draw complex webs of aesthetics, colonial networks, art markets, dealers, collectors and writers which enable us to understand how the photographs functioned. If some of this does indeed go over familiar ground, what marks out this volume is the quality of its research and its detailed account of those flows and networks through which images were made to have meaning. These are interwoven with dense cultural contexts which mark the transformative and translatory power of the photograph as African objects were rendered into Western aesthetic categories through the use of light, shadow, framing and camera angle, drawing African objects into specific modes of consumption. A most striking example is Man Ray's extraordinary series for the Danish collector and writer Carl Kjersmeier where not only is there a striking use of light on the African carvings themselves, but the use of

the shadows of those objects produces a dark ethereal doubling effect which is far from the 'objective' document of the object.

Kjersmeier is one of a rich cast of characters in this book with whom Man Ray worked or was connected, there is a massive roll-call of names familiar – Alfred Stieglitz, Walker Evans, Michel Leiris, and many less familiar. Although the somewhat irritating absence of an index makes tracing these characters more difficult, all are explored in detail. Indeed we get a sense in the end that it is not really Man Ray who is the centre of the book, he becomes almost a convenient peg on to which to hang a multitude of ideas and connections that gave his and other photographs meaning. The chapters are interspersed with very informative 'sidebar' pieces by a number of contributors, on, for instance, the photographic avant garde in Prague or on Kjersmeier. The chapters themselves address the relationship between the shifting reception of African Art and concepts of race and racial politics in the USA especially in the contexts of the Harlem Renaissance, the fluid concepts of document and art, the Dada movement and Surrealism, and the impact on popular culture, especially the Colonial Chic typified by Man Ray's famous photograph of British socialite and writer Nancy Cunard bedecked in African bracelet up to her elbows. There is also a useful timeline and, in an attempt to reclaim another, indigenous narrative for the objects there is an excellent concordance of the African pieces actually photographed by Man Ray and the other key photographers discussed, notably Walker Evan and Charles Sheeler. However, this attempt, although packed with rich information is somewhat disingenuous in that all the pieces remain in Western collections and are represented through museum norms. The only substantial essay not by Grossman is an elegant piece by Ian Walker on the tense and complex relations between Man Ray, Surrealism and ethnographer Michel Leiris, whose Mission Dakar-Djibouti resulted in the acquisition of some 3500 Dogon objects for Paris. In a volume so focused on the ways in which meanings were made across a range of cultural productions – Walker's projection of the analysis into the recent debate around the aesthetic appropriation of African objects in the new Musée du Quai Branly suggest the ways in which the arguments that informed and entangled Man Ray's responses to African objects are far from dead. It is also a useful essay in that it explores a very specifically French conceptualization of anthropological and ethnographic practice, thus providing a useful corrective to the volume overall which tends to conflate and homogenize colonialisms and the discipline of anthropology.

One of the strengths of this book is the way it steers the reader away from the canonical images which have marked commentaries on this period of aesthetic practices. For instance Grossman demonstrates that Man Ray's famous *Noire et Blanc* was not particularly widely disseminated at the time of making, and that its subsequent iconic status is more a function of certain analytical fashion in art history and post-colonial analysis than an historically grounded account of the consumption of the image itself. For this is Grossman's central analytical position, that uses ideas of visual economy, network and materiality to establish a different critical model for modernist primitivism and its twentieth century transformations. Consequently a material approach becomes central to the analysis. Negatives, multiple prints, magazine spreads, copy prints, books, and posters, and exhibition spaces are made

to matter and are given interpretative and analytical weight. This convergence of material forms, she argues, enriches the cultural context through which we might understand both the consumption of African Art and photography.

This approach is greatly enhanced by the superb production values of the volume. It is generously illustrated, and beautifully so, printed on a thick low-gloss paper. Photographs are shown as material objects, sometimes with crop marks, in whole magazine spreads, in multiple forms (indeed Man Ray himself experimented with negative prints in further translation of the formal qualities of the subject matter), in albums and so forth. We can actually see what Grossman is talking about. While there is extensive analysis of the photographs themselves throughout, this is ultimately only a means to an end, the analysis of the social and cultural work that the photographs were expected to undertake.

This is a book to be mined for a wide range of ideas and information. It is not necessarily a comfortable read, it demands a lot of the reader, for it suffers from too greater a density, almost an overload of information which can at times obscure the theoretical and analytical thrust. But this extraordinary richness will none the less ensure the volume's longevity as a key work in the field. The research is exemplary, the analytical approaches genuinely revealing and the production superb. It makes one see a well-known narrative in art history anew.

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