

## Unit 3: Photography

### Man Ray

#### *Untitled (Self-Portrait with Camera)*



**Man Ray**, (American, 1890–1976)

*Untitled (Self-Portrait with Camera)*, 1930, printed c. 1935

Solarized gelatin silver print, 4  $\frac{3}{4}$  × 3  $\frac{1}{2}$  in. (12.1 × 8.9 cm)

Photography Acquisitions Committee Fund, Horace W.

Goldsmith Fund, and Judith and Jack Stern Gift, 2004-16

## Getting Started

- What impression do the subject's facial expression and pose make? How about his clothing?
  - Describe the composition and use of space in this self-portrait. How do they affect our perception of the subject? (*Lack of details and vague setting focus our attention on the subject and his actions, especially his face, oriented toward the camera, and his hand, adjusting the lens.*)
  - Describe the use of value and tone (lights, darks, and grays) in this photograph. Is it realistic or somehow exaggerated? How does it affect the way you perceive the subject?
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## Looking Closely

In this black-and-white, solarized photograph, Man Ray shows himself at work, dressed in a button-down shirt and tie. He appears in profile, his body cropped mid-torso, his gaze cast downward and focused on his camera as he adjusts the lens. The composition is divided in half lengthwise: Ray's head and torso almost completely fill the right half of the image, while the camera and Ray's hand appear at left. The photographer appears in a space otherwise devoid of details, the camera itself seeming to dematerialize and blend into the background. The image is rendered in values ranging from the palest grays to deep charcoals but lacks pure white or true black. Man Ray's hair, skin, and camera have a mysterious glow. His face, torso, and hand are outlined by a thin, dark, soft contour, creating almost the inverse of a glow or halo effect.

## About the Work

Man Ray shaped his elusive identity in the many self-portraits he made. He once described himself as an artist who "so deforms the subject as almost to hide the identity of the original, and creates a new form." By experimenting with techniques such as **cropping**, multiple exposure, and the camera-less rayograph, Man Ray demonstrated how mutable the representation of any person, object, or artistic medium can be. Here, he uses solarization, which involves exposing the film to bright light during the development process (normally done in a pitch-black "dark" room) to reverse some of the highlights and shadows.

In many of his other self-portraits, Man Ray assumes various roles, creating alter-egos and embracing a stereotypical artist persona in a beret, scarf, and cloak. Here, however, Man Ray distances himself from the image of the bohemian artist. Instead, he projects an earnestness and seriousness, with his business-like apparel and demeanor, suggesting the confidence with which he approached his art. Indeed, Man Ray had achieved considerable professional success in Paris by 1930.

To create this self-portrait, Man Ray photographed his reflection in a mirror—the camera in the image is the very one used to take the photograph.

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## About the Artist

Born Emmanuel Radnitzky to Russian-Jewish immigrant parents and raised in Brooklyn, Man Ray rejected his birth name. In 1921, at the age of thirty-one, he moved from the United States to Paris, where he remained for twenty years. He became the most prominent American expatriate in the avant-garde art scene, carefully cultivating a distinctive artistic persona as the odd man out. He was welcomed by the Dadaists upon arrival and later embraced by the Surrealists. Although never fully aligned with either group, he became the only American artist to become a major figure in both. Man Ray was famous in his day for his more traditional (and more financially lucrative) portrait and fashion photography, but he is best remembered for his experimental photography. It was through his commercial photography that he rediscovered the nineteenth-century process of creating photograms—a camera-less method of creating images directly from objects placed on photosensitive paper and exposed to light—which would be the fertile ground for his experimentation and his signature art form. Though he did not invent the photogram, as he would later claim, he did pioneer a personal and ingenious variant of it, which he dubbed the rayograph. Beginning in the late 1920s, Man Ray also experimented with photographic techniques such as solarization and multiple exposures. In the 1930s, he shifted his focus from photography to painting.

## Sources

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## Further Discussion

- What might have motivated Man Ray to use solarization instead of a traditional photographic development process? What quality/mood/tone does solarization lend to his self-portrait?
- Long after color photography was developed in the later nineteenth century, artists continued to experiment with black-and-white photography. What is gained and lost in restricting the colors of an image to black, white, and gray?
- Man Ray projected various identities in his self-portraits. As a class, discuss the notion of personas and alter egos. Where else have your students encountered invented personas and alter egos. (For example, Picasso/the harlequin; Stephen Colbert; Lady Gaga; David Bowie/Ziggy Stardust; comic book superheroes; Beyonce/Sasha Fierce; Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde, etc.) Why do you think the concept of alternate selves appeals to some people, including many artists? If you were to create an alter ego or alternate persona, what would it be? What would it reveal about your identity?

**Ilse Bing**

***New York—Me and the Elevated***



**Ilse Bing** (American, b. Germany, 1899–1998)

***New York—Me and the Elevated***, 1936

Gelatin silver print, 7  $\frac{3}{8}$  × 11  $\frac{1}{8}$  in. (18.7 × 28.3 cm)

Purchase: Mr. and Mrs. George Jaffin Fund, 2000-7

The Jewish photographer Ilse Bing took this photograph while visiting New York City in 1936. With her signature use of oblique angles, she frames the Manhattan skyline within the diagonal lines of the elevated subway across the East River in Queens. The eye races toward the midtown buildings, the Chrysler building rising in the center, and the lower rooftops of the Queens residences visible below. The **point of view** is from the subway platform, where Bing and her camera are reflected in a round mirror. By placing herself within the frame, Bing draws our attention to the relationship of the photographer to the city. She is an outsider—later to become a U.S. citizen—who has placed herself within the city’s framework.

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## Sources

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## Discussion: Ideas and Questions

- Compare Man Ray’s and Bing’s self-portraits. How are they similar? How are they different? (*Students might consider the scale of the figures relative to the overall composition, placement of the figures within the image, connection to the artists’ profession, inclusion of the image of the camera itself, use of background space, etc.*)
- Man Ray presents himself in an empty gray space, whereas Bing inserts herself into the architecture and infrastructure of New York City. How do these different uses of background shed light on the artists’ personalities and artistic practices?
- How does each of these artists experiment with the photographic medium? Consider such things as processing techniques, compositional strategies, cropping, point of view and perspective, lighting, use of reflections, scale/proportions, and contrast.