

Piet de Jonge

MAN RAY, OR THE ETERNAL THEME OF THE WINK \*

In 1922, Man Ray used the tick of a metronome to determine the regularity with which he allowed his brush to descend onto an 'automatic' painting. To the needle of the metronome he attached a photograph of the eye of his ex-girlfriend, Lee Miller; her moving eye was like a spectator watching the creation of an art work. When the metronome stopped, Man Ray smashed the whole thing with a hammer. It is apparent from the title, *Object To Be Destroyed*, that its destruction was part of the work. Yet Man Ray never intended the piece to disappear from the face of the earth.

An art historian would recognise three art works described in the above paragraph: a painting, an object and an action. A collection supervisor would spot a serious problem: the art work described is broken. Yet for Man Ray something else was happening and he continued to be captivated by the broken metronome. Destruction did not mean the end of the object, it afforded it new possibilities. In 1932, ten years after Man Ray's original destructive act, the magazine *This Quarter* published the following instructions for the readers: "Cut the eye out of a photograph of a loved-one you no longer see. Fix the eye to the needle of a metronome and adjust the weight so that it beats at the speed required. Leave it to tick for as long as you can bear. Then try to destroy the whole thing with a single, well-aimed hammer blow." From this the reader of the magazine's edition on the Surrealists could make his or her own 'Man Ray', a personal version of *Object To Be Destroyed*.

During the second half of the twentieth century many art works have been made which have the object's final destruction enclosed within them. The viewer doesn't destroy it, its destruction is, as it were, inherent in the object itself. The hammer blow is not prescribed by the artist but lies concealed within the object like a time bomb. Often this danger is even unintentionally built into the work, as the Foundation for the Conservation of Modern Art working group concluded. Over the last fifty years, artists have experimented with materials which had not previously been part of the normal sculptor's arsenal. The shelf life of plastics and other non-traditional sculpture materials is unpredictable; objects made from these materials threaten to slowly fall apart. Many of these artists never intended their work to vanish forever.

Up to the beginning of the twentieth century there were two categories of art works: objects that had been lost and objects that had survived. Thanks to Man Ray we now have a third category: the 'objects to be destroyed'. He introduced the notion of an art work with a short life span, the notion that an object could be made that had a deliberately short existence – only after it had been destroyed did Man Ray consider the work complete. With this he created the direct counterpart to art works that had been made to last for eternity.

Thus, while the artist was creating new possibilities, a plethora of new problems began to unfold – the artistic, conservation, legal and ethical problems which confronted the working group for the Conservation of Modern Art when they began to tackle the ten pilot objects.

In 1945, twenty-three years after the first, Man Ray made another version of *Object To Be Destroyed* for an exhibition at the Julien Levy Gallery in New York. Although he called this piece *Lost Object*, a printing error in the catalogue led to it being described as *Last Object*. Man Ray was so charmed by this accidental word play that he immediately adopted the new title. It is striking that Man Ray's view had changed in the intervening years: he now intended the object to continue to exist.

A few years later, in 1951, he moved to Paris where he exhibited the work once again. This time it was destroyed by young visitors who had clearly drawn the wrong conclusion from the object's description. Despite this, Man Ray was understanding about the action and remarked that in his youth he would probably have reacted in the same way. Hence, in 1958, he made the object as a multiple: one hundred metronomes with eyes were made under the title *Indestructible Object*. This greatly enhanced the object's chances of standing up to the passage of time.

In 1971, Man Ray once again addressed *Object To Be Destroyed* by taking another metronome. But this time, instead of attaching a normal photograph of an eye to the needle he stuck a ribbed plastic picture to it behind which the eye opened and closed with every beat of the metronome. This

instrument, which quite literally winks, and which he called *Perpetual Motif*, also figuratively winks at all the previous versions of the metronome.

1 The Floriade Foundation donated Gilardi's Zucche (1991) to the municipal council of Zoetermeer.

2 Jérôme Peignotin in the catalogue Gilardi, Ileana Sonnabend Gallery, Paris, January 1967. Gilardi wanted a high-grade material so that it could withstand fire and deformation. Concerning the paint and technique used, it is stated that Gilardi applied a solution of synthetic pigment with a vinyl-type synthetic resin onto the polyurethane in the same way as painting on a canvas. The glue is intended to form a strong joint and the glued pieces should appear seamless.

3 Contact with Brenda Keneghan was made at the symposium 'From Marble to Chocolate' at the Tate Gallery, London, September 1995. In February 1996 Keneghan carried out consolidation tests on polyurethane (see her introduction for seminar 9, on Plastics).

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