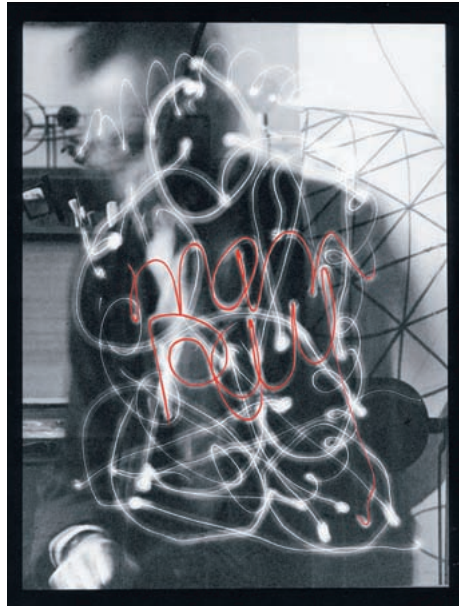


## AT PLAY WITH MAN RAY



The Surrealist artists were notoriously fond of activities and games that tap the subconscious. In the well-known Surrealist game *Cadavre exquis* (Exquisite corpse), one participant initiates a drawing and passes it to another to continue, who passes it to the next, and so on, until the work is deemed finished. Or consider the act of “automatic drawing,” pioneered by André Masson in the 1920s, in which the artist’s hand moves without conscious purpose across the page, creating in the process an image. The Surrealists regularly looked to the subconscious for inspiration; it was their radical *modus operandi*, an entryway to uncharted territories through which they often used ludic strategies as their means.

Man Ray was a central proponent of this playful approach to art and applied it throughout his many contributions to the Surrealist and the Dada movements. As he stated: “I have been accused of being a joker. But the most successful art to me involves humor.”

The artist cultivated an aura of mystery about his personal history and identity—an avant-garde form of the game hide-and-seek. Throughout his career, Man Ray refused to acknowledge his given name, Emmanuel Radnitzky, and made efforts to disassociate himself from his family background. Among the self-portraits he created, some are abstract (such as *Self-Portrait Assemblage* of 1916); while others are comically absurd (one 1943 image has his face bearded and mustachioed on one side, clean shaven on the other).

That mischievous obfuscation was characteristically expressed in a 1935 photographic self-portrait titled *Space Writing*, which

**LEFT: Man Ray, *Space Writing (Self-portrait)*, 1935 (cropped version of original); RIGHT: Man Ray, *Space Writing (Self-portrait)*, 1935 (cropped version of original; image reversed; signature highlighted in red).**

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contains a cipher—long undetected—of the artist’s signature. Indeed, Man Ray’s name hid in plain sight in this photograph for more than seventy years before my discovery of it in 2009.

In this image, the artist draws in the air with a penlight, creating looping designs and curlicues of light that frame his figure. Among those loops and scribbles are the cursive letters “n a m” on top and “y a r” beneath. When the photograph is reversed—or viewed in a mirror—his name becomes visible: “man ray.” The artist, from his seated position, drew the letters in the air while the camera facing him recorded them; in the print, they are hidden. In the uncropped version of this image, Man Ray is seen through a black

picture frame with his studio behind him. His shape is caught as a blur, but he has singled out his eyes with two dots of light—two focal points in the self-portrait.

Mirror writing is of course found in the notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci. In photography, we see it in the work of William Henry Fox Talbot, who in 1840 created an image of a poem hand-written by Lord Byron—which appears backward in Talbot’s contact print. Interesting on a mystical level, the “Essay About Letters” in the Kabbalistic Book of Zohar indicates that the Creator—having considered the Hebrew alphabet at length—constructed the world from end (*tav*) to start (*aleph*): “When God came to create the world, all the letters presented themselves before Him in reversed order.” Although Man Ray was by no means a scholar of the Kabbalah, the metaphor of creation from back to front seems apt for this Jewish artist whose work often depended on processes of inversion.

As curator and Man Ray scholar Merry Foresta points out, identity was a central theme in the artist’s work, often used as a conceptual and contextual point of departure. In *Space Writing* the identifying signature is crucial because of its very encryption. “I think it mattered to Man Ray to be known as a mysterious inventor, an alchemist,” Foresta says. While the signature was of course apparent to him, the photograph remained for many years an “abstract image” to others.

The discovery of this inscription is both a revelation and a resolution. Now, seven decades after he made his own game of hide-and-seek, we can finally look back at Man Ray and say:

“There you are!”<sup>6</sup>

—Ellen Carey