Assembling Art: The Machine and the American Avant-Garde
by Barbara Beth Zabel

Watch by Gerald Murphy, 1925, oil on canvas, Dallas Museum of Art // Cover image of the presented book

Gerald Murphy (1888–1964)
A prominent figure and multi-talented artist of the Lost Generation of Avant-Garde Americans in Paris in the 1920s, Gerald Murphy was known for painting everyday objects in flat, un-modulated colours. He later said that he was “nourished on Leger’s Picasso’s, Braque’s and Gris’ abstractions.”

Inspired by the cubists and Russian constructivists, Murphy created paintings in which patterns of line, color, and form dominate the depiction of familiar objects. His background in mechanical and architectural drawing lent itself to this tendency toward abstraction.

He worked painstakingly, producing only a handful of finished works in the decade of the 1920s.
1 The Avant-Garde Automaton

Philosophers tell us that we are metaphorical beings who make the world in our image, the image of the human body. According to such an “embodied” philosophy, we begin with our bodily experience and then create ever more elaborate metaphors to make sense of who we are and to construct our realities. Bodily metaphors are fundamental to our comprehension of the world. This is the argument, much simplified, that George Lakoff and Mark Johnson make in their book *Philosophy in the Flesh*. Taking their lead from cognitive science, the authors call into question many assumptions of the Western philosophical tradition. They argue, for instance, that “reason is not, in any way, a transcendent feature of the universe or of disembodied mind. Instead, it is shaped crucially by the peculiarities of our human bodies, by the remarkable details of the neural structures of our brains, and by the specifics of our everyday functioning in the world”.

The body thus provides key metaphors for intellection; for instance, we talk of “grasping an idea” and of “wrestling with a concept.” Even internal organs are called into service; we want to get to the “heart of the matter,” or we cannot “stomach” something. The nature of these metaphors is, of course, conditioned by the course of history; as the world changes, so, too, do our metaphors.

The advent of the machine and machine culture brought about a major shift in metaphoric paradigms. As the machine assumed an increasingly important role in our lives, it became a potential rival to the body as a source of metaphors. Indeed, in literature and the arts, the machine was a key cultural icon that threatened to usurp the place of the body as a fundamental trope of the new century. Metaphors for people and human activities were increasingly drawn from the realm of mechanical components – gears, sprockets, and crankshafts; thought processes were characterized as “wheels going around,” and eccentrics were said to have a “screw loose”. Quite remarkably, however, the machine did not usurp the body. Rather than being displaced by the machine, the body became conflated [to fuse, to merge] with it. The body remained a powerful metaphor, though now coupled with the machine. And this coupling reconceptualized our place in the world.

Both artists and writers were quick to exploit the metaphoric possibilities of machine-age culture; body-as-machine metaphors proliferated. Many works by Man Ray, Stuart Davis, Arthur Dove,
and Alexander Calder, among other American modernists, suggest that machines and bodies are functional analogues of each other. Although this was an idea first introduced into New York Dada by Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia, the Americans’ fixation on – and metaphoric construction of – the human figure as a kind of anonymous automaton illuminates much that is distinctive about American culture and its problematic relation to the machine. An editorial statement in 291 written by Paul Haviland, a wealthy French writer and photographer who was an important backer and contributor to Stieglitz’s 291 and who was living in New York at the time, encapsulates this body-as-machine metaphor:

“We are living in the age of the machine. Man made the machine in his own image. She has limbs which act; lungs which breathe; a heart which beats; a nervous system through which runs electricity”.

Through such machine-age metaphors artists and writers found ways to conceptualize a rapidly changing America, which had undergone a quite radical shift from an agrarian to an industrial economy and had by this time become the major industrial leader in the world.

In the discussion that follows, I use “automaton” not in its original narrow sense to mean a mechanism that is self-moving or powered (derived from the Greek for a self-acting or robotic figure that appears to imitate the motions of men or animals). Instead, I use the term in a broader sense to mean an image of the human body as robotic or machinelike. Rather than actual automata or robots, my focus is on images that conflate body and machine—that is, images of anthropomorphic machines or mechanomorphic human beings. Scholars of European art of this period occasionally adopt the term “cyborg” to characterize such images; however, the derivation of this term-cyb(ernetic) + org(anism)-denotes control more by electronic than mechanical devices. Automaton seems preferable for a discussion of the machine age.’

2 Stripped to the Core
Man Ray’s X-ray(ted) Automata

(...) The late discovery of the Röntgen rays, so inconceivable and so strange in its origins, ought to convince us how very small is the field of our usual observations. To see through opaque substances! to look inside a closed box! to see the bones of an arm, a leg, a body, through flesh and clothing! Such a discovery is, to say the least, quite contrary to everything we have been used to consider certainty. This is indeed a most eloquent example in favor of the axiom: it is unscientific to assert that realities are stopped by the limit of our knowledge and observation.

(qtd. in Henderson, Duchamp in Context 6)

(...) This idea of exposing the inner mechanics of the body is more explicitly stated in other rayographs (...). Instead of the living bones of an X-ray, however, Man Ray peels off skin, muscle, and flesh to reveal mechanical simulations of human anatomy-nuts and bolts and adjustable rods. Such intrusion of the mechanical into the realm of the biological suggests a perspective on the role of the machine in modern life not unlike Duchamp’s. Once again we sense in this body! machine nexus the potential for changing existence for the better (after all, the human body might gain strength and durability if it had a mechanical substructure) as well as for the worse (implicitly stated is fear of machine control).
(...) Yet all of these artists participated in the great excitement of the discovery of a new perceptual apparatus. X-rays were seen at the time as unleashing a new and mysterious force of nature. This new force allowed avant-garde artists to speculate on a radically changed world. With their shadowy images, Man Ray’s rayographs in particular elicit a sense of mystery akin to the enigmatic powers evoked by X-rays themselves. Like the technology of X-ray emission, the process of creating rayographs was also mysterious – in some measure determined by chance and therefore revealing secrets for the artist analogous to the secrets unveiled by X-rays. Such experimentation also cuts to the heart of larger issues of the day, including the catastrophic loss of life in world war as well as the ways in which new perceptions of the body, gender, and cultural identity interact with scientific knowledge.

**Man Ray** [From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia]

Man Ray, born Emmanuel Radnitzky (August 27, 1890 – November 18, 1976), was an American artist who spent most of his career in Paris, France. Perhaps best described simply as a modernist, he was a significant contributor to both the Dada and Surrealist movements, although his ties to each were informal. Best known in the art world for his avant-garde photography, Man Ray produced major works in a variety of media and considered himself a painter above all. He was also a renowned fashion and portrait photographer. He is noted for his photograms, which he renamed rayographs after himself. (…)

In 1999, ARTnews magazine named him one of the 25 most influential artists of the 20th century, citing his groundbreaking photography as well as "his explorations of film, painting, sculpture, collage, assemblage, and prototypes of what would eventually be called performance art and conceptual art" and saying "Man Ray offered artists in all media an example of a creative intelligence that, in its 'pursuit of pleasure and liberty,'—Man Ray's stated guiding principles—"unlocked every door it came to and walked freely where it would."
5 The constructed Self
Machine Age Portraiture

The genre of portraiture is, as Richard Brilliant noted, especially sensitive to changes in the perceived nature of the individual in Western society. It is not surprising, therefore, that in an era of machine domination, mechanical symbolism intruded more aggressively into the realm of self-representation than into any other genre. Many of the portraits of the American avant-garde have little, if any, recognizable relationship to their subjects. No longer based on mimesis, these new portraits, usually called ‘object portraits,’ feature words, images, shapes, and sometimes even found objects selected and juxtaposed so as to signify distinctive attributes of each individual. The process of decoding such portraits, which have no or very little mimetic resemblance to their subjects, is quite different from making sense of conventional portraiture. Even if nothing is known about the subject of a traditional portrait, the viewer can learn from the painted likeness; for instance, character can be read in the face, social status inferred from the clothing, and so on. But since “object portraits” do not give us a legible face – or clothing or setting or even an identifiable human being – their decoding is a more difficult task. Object portraits depend more on the knowledge the viewer brings to the portrait. Consequently, this kind of portraiture may seem less accessible, even hermetic. At the same time, once the requisite knowledge is acquired, such portraits can achieve a kind of intimacy. So, while they seem to be effacing personality, they depend on and encode innermost knowledge of the subject’s identity. Furthermore, in that such portraits are more constructed objects than semblances of their subjects, they can also attest to the effect of mechanization on the artist’s consciousness. These machine-age portraits raise key questions about the role of the machine in creating ideas of personal identity during and just after World War I. On the surface, these works represent the dehumanization – even the erasure – of self, in Linda Nochlin’s words, “the loss of the tradition of the self in an age of mechanical reproduction”. But one could argue that the presence of the mechanical reflects a new mode of rendering identity and individuality in the modern world. In other words, rather than presenting technology as obscuring or threatening the traditional nature of portraiture, these works may invoke technology to reassert those values in an oblique way. (...)

Portrait by Gerald Murphy, 1928-29, Oil in canvas
(...) These multiple readings of Man Ray’s work thus represent a number of ways in which the machine can be seen as representing power: it is, on the one hand, an enabling device (enabling creativity by setting the beat and serving as a muse), while, on the other, it is a controlling mechanism (asserting power over the creative process, over life itself). While Man Ray has created a portrait that embodies both self and other, male and female, machine and body, he does not try to resolve them into a new unity. By presenting polarities as polarities Man Ray generates an uneasiness, indeed, a disruption of expectations. The result is an utterly unsettled construction of modern subjectivity. Here, rather than using art as an attempt to establish a definitive self-identity in the perplexing age of machine ascendancy, the artist uses the genre of portraiture to point to this era’s crisis in individual and cultural identity.(...)

The possibilities of self-representation were vastly complicated and enriched by the advent of the machine. With its mix of conflicting impulses, portraiture in the machine age worked through a crisis in identity. While many avant-garde portraits seem to resolve the crisis by denying, or at least diminishing, differences between male and female, machine and human, civilized and primitive, others—perhaps the more powerful portraits—acknowledge and exploit these very differences. Furthermore, while many portraits seem to erase gender by doing away with clearly recognizable human features, these portraits are nevertheless saturated with gender codes. Similarly, while some portraits try to ameliorate the technological by embracing the primitive, such a strategy ultimately absorbs the primitive into a Western patriarchal and colonialist narrative.

A decoding of such portraiture thus reveals the avant-garde’s attempt to forge a new identity through an appropriation of the other. In some cases, this appropriation constitutes a challenge to the existing order; in others, a reinforcement of traditional gender positions and Western notions of primitivism. The construction of modern identity reveals itself as a complex mix of ambiguities and contradictions determined by an avant-garde in search of human meaning in the increasingly inhuman world of the machine.