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Jennifer R. Gross, ed.

The Société Anonyme: Modernism for America

New Haven: [Yale University Press](#) in association with [Yale University Art Gallery](#), 2006. 252 pp.; 302 color ill.; 62 b/w ill. Cloth \$65.00 (0300109210)

Exhibition schedule: Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, April 23–August 20, 2006; Phillips Collection, Washington, DC, October 14, 2006–January 21, 2007; Dallas Museum of Art, June 10–September 16, 2007; Frist Center for the Visual Arts, Nashville, October 26, 2007–February 3, 2008; Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, 2010



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In an interview conducted by curator Jennifer Gross with the contemporary abstract painter Robert Mangold in August of 2004, the artist openly acknowledged his relative unfamiliarity with the Société Anonyme, the progressive, independent art organization that Katherine Dreier (1877–1952) and Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) founded in 1920. Under the aegis of the Société, Duchamp and Dreier assembled a remarkable collection of modern art, donating the bulk of the holdings to the Yale University Art Gallery in 1941 (<http://artgallery.yale.edu/socanon>). As a student at Yale during the mid-fifties and early-sixties, Mangold recalled that he had “seen individual works” at the art gallery, and although he “might have known vaguely what the collection was . . . I don’t think we’d ever seen it as such.” He summed up the situation by concluding, “I was sold on the art but I didn’t know how it had gotten there” (157).

What is perhaps most unusual is the extent to which this story is not unusual. Indeed, the history of the Société Anonyme and its extraordinary art collection is not as well-known as it could be. While the documentary literature is surprisingly comprehensive, it is notably under-theorized. Thus, despite the extensive publication of primary source materials, the Société Anonyme’s historical status has often reflected that of its self-appointed title, thereby designating a culturally distinguished presence that has somehow remained curiously anonymous.

The *Société Anonyme: Modernism for America* represents an important contribution to addressing this situation. As acknowledged by Gross, the Seymour H. Knox, Jr., Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Yale University Art Gallery, who served as both the organizing curator of the exhibition and editor of the catalogue, “It is the ambition of this exhibition and its accompanying publication to clarify the place of the Société Anonyme in the development of modernism in America and to increase the visibility of the Société Anonyme Collection and its archives for future use by artists and scholars” (xiii). In addition, Gross notes that “it is also an endeavor of the project to make familiar the art of many artists whose works are not otherwise represented in American collections” (1). This text and exhibition notably succeed in reaffirming the unique position of this celebrated, yet somehow “anonymous,” collection of international modern artists.

In her introductory and concluding essays, Gross presents portraits of Duchamp and Dreier as the guiding spirits behind “America’s first ‘experimental museum’ for contemporary art” (1). As founding directors whose dedicated sense of commitment to the Société Anonyme endured over the course of three decades, Duchamp and Dreier emerge as the angels of the project. If Duchamp was an instigator, diplomat, and transformative visionary, Dreier provided the underlying structures—the joists beneath the floor—that supported the foundation. Yet Dreier was also an artist and an explorer in her own right, particularly in the areas of German and Eastern European art. Moreover, if Dreier was a spiritually-oriented idealist who characterized the members of the Société Anonyme

as “missionaries” of a new “consciousness” (10), Duchamp was an acute realist who expressed profound disenchantment with the “fakes and crooks” who dominated the “art game” (8). Together, they collaborated in presenting an alternative, independent vision of international modernism distinct from that offered by such prominent contemporary figures as Alfred Stieglitz, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., A. E. Gallatin, and Walter Arensberg, even as the membership of the Société included individuals who were closely associated with these powerful figures. Gross’s two essays thus serve as bookends that anchor the catalogue securely in intimate, archivally based historical narratives of the Société Anonyme, its collection-building activities, and its position in the New York art world. All of these activities are in turn illuminated by Gross’s sensitive biographical accounts of Dreier and her unique friendships with Duchamp, Kurt Schwitters, and Wassily Kandinsky.

Complementing Gross’s essays are the contributions of two of her colleagues at the Yale University Art Gallery, Susan Greenberg and Elise Kenney. Greenberg examines the educational mission of the Société Anonyme, particularly the ways in which its progressive vision of modern art, integrally shaped by the pragmatist philosophy of John Dewey, informed Dreier’s public commitment to social reform. She also helpfully reconstructs the Société Anonyme’s multidisciplinary programming, which encompassed not just the visual arts but also literature, psychology, music, and modern dance. Kenney draws on the extensive archival holdings of Yale’s Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library to present an institutional history of the university’s 1941 acquisition of the Société Anonyme collection. Notably, the museum’s holdings were later supplemented following Dreier’s death in 1952, largely through the agency of Duchamp, who served as a joint trustee of the collection and an executor of Dreier’s estate.

The remaining essays, by scholars Ruth Bohan, David Joselit, Dickran Tashjian, and Kristina Wilson, address the Société Anonyme’s particular philosophical and aesthetic engagements. Building on the historical issues explored by Gross, Greenberg, and Kenney, Wilson’s essay focuses on the Société Anonyme’s massive exhibition of modern art at the Brooklyn Museum in 1926–27, a show that featured over three-hundred works by artists from more than twenty-three countries. Adopting a conceptual model that was distinctively different from the schema that Barr would later implement at the Museum of Modern Art, Dreier envisioned the exhibition as a unified work of art—or as she put it in 1926, as “one big painting” (75)—with the microcosm of the canvas serving as a metaphor for the macrocosm of the show. Emphasizing themes of correspondence and unity, Dreier “believed the works shared a common philosophical agenda: to reveal, through color and form, larger questions about the metaphysical state of humankind in the modern world” (75). Wilson’s essay, which is well illustrated with period installation photographs, aptly reconstructs the ways in which Dreier’s universalizing, metaphysical artistic vision was implemented concretely in her display strategies, as intimate, domesticated spaces were embedded within the expansive, formal scope of the salon.

Like Wilson, Bohan also situates her discussion of the Société Anonyme at the intersection of avant-garde modernist aesthetics and the artists’ overarching spiritual visions. In particular, she focuses on the ways in which the relationship between Dreier and Joseph Stella was “triangulated” by their mutual friendship with Duchamp, and in turn how their personal relations were expressed symbolically in Dreier’s and Stella’s portraits of the artist. The Société Anonyme’s collection includes two of Stella’s most prominent paintings, *Brooklyn Bridge* (1918–20) and *Battle of Lights, Coney Island, Mardi Gras* (1913–14). As Bohan demonstrates, the leisure and industrial subjects of urban modernity inspired in Stella a kind of religious response, as they served as secular sources of revelation that provided the bases for abstracted technological fantasies. In his essay, Tashjian extends the leitmotifs of divinity and mysticism, skillfully reconstructing the ways in which Dreier’s Theosophically oriented beliefs intersected with her interest in Russian/Soviet avant-garde art. He demonstrates extensively how, when engaging these materials, Dreier repeatedly avoided issues of political ideology and nationalism, as she adopted instead a universalizing tone of utopian humanism that led her to characterize the power of this revolutionary art as “a big cosmic force” (45).

In a lecture delivered at the New School of Social Research on February 23, 1931, Dreier asserted “that art should nurture ‘the spirit as well as the body’” (72). While Wilson, Bohan, and Tashjian explore Dreier’s beliefs in the spirit, Joselit’s essay emphasizes Duchamp’s multifaceted engagements with embodiment. In so doing, Joselit offers a complex and intriguing meditation on the mutually reflective, and often categorically transgressive, relations between corporeality and desire, markets and frames. Thus if Dreier approached an exhibition as “one big painting,” Duchamp, as Joselit insightfully argues, “saw the artist as a readymade, to be moved through the market like a chess piece on its grid” (33). Drawing on the resonant associations of the term “Société,” which signifies incorporation, Joselit traces the intermingling of the personal and institutional networks that underpinned Duchamp’s “double incorporation of the self” in both the New York art world and in the use of his own image in works such as *Wanted: \$2000 Reward* (1923); *Belle Haleine, Eau de Voilette* (1921); and *Monte Carlo Bond* (1924). As Joselit observes, “In these works incorporation connotes both the literal inclusion or representation of a body within a work (which is itself a microcosm of a market) and the constitution of a new legal subject—the corporation—that may function autonomously in the world of business” (35). This resonant duality—and collapse of duality—between the Société Anonyme’s composite corporation of individuals and Duchamp’s artistic self-appropriations yields a multivalent, symbolic body that is situated at once in subjective and institutional domains, even as this composite construction mirrors and inverts familiar categorical frameworks. As a final example of interwovenness and reversal, Joselit shows how, by seeking to “break even” in the art market rather than turn a profit, Duchamp’s commercial activities were

converted into an alternative mode of currency that represented “a form of giving rather than spending” (37).

Viewed as a whole, *The Société Anonyme: Modernism for America* presents a rich and varied account of an important cultural institution whose historical and conceptual dimensions have, until now, been too little known. In bringing these materials so vividly to light, the catalogue lifts the shadows surrounding Duchamp and Dreier’s “Anonymous Corporation,” as it reveals the Société Anonyme to be a Société Extraordinaire.

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