

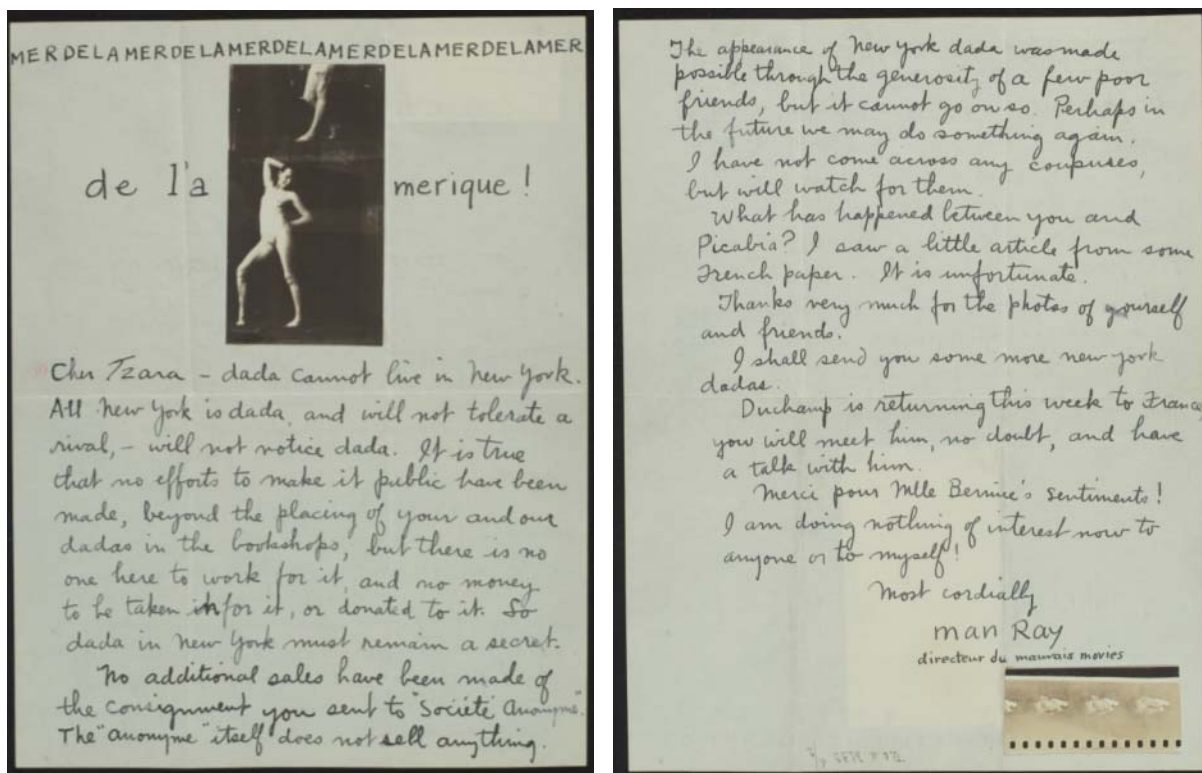
## A SCHOLAR'S NIGHTMARE:

### A Mistake in the Literature that Cannot be Erased

In the late 1970s, as I began to compile information for the declared subject of my doctoral dissertation on “New York Dada,” I visited the famed Bibliothèque Littéraire Jacques Doucet, Paris, which, among other vast holdings, contained the archives of Tristan Tzara and Francis Picabia. I was most anxious to review this material, for I knew it would be very important to my study, but I had also been forewarned that the library presented certain obstacles that made access to the material difficult. In order to make photocopies and publish any piece of correspondence in their collection, you needed to secure permission from both the heirs of the sender, as well as those of the recipient. I didn't think this would be too difficult for me, for on previous trips to Paris I had befriended Alexina Duchamp (the widow of Marcel Duchamp), Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia (the first wife of Francis Picabia), Juliet Man Ray (the widow of Man Ray), and Christophe Tzara (the son of Tristan Tzara). Equipped with letters of introduction from these individuals, I made an appointment to visit the library. Shortly after arriving, I was greeted by its director, François Chapon, an elderly gentleman (at least to me at the time), who was most cordial, but apparently spoke not a word of English (I would later learn that he spoke English fairly well, but preferred to communicate in French, for which I was grateful, since it required me to use the language, practice I desperately needed).

After finding a seat at one of the tables in the library, he brought me the first of many volumes containing the correspondence of Tristan Tzara and Francis Picabia, each letter or clipping mounted to separate pages in large, oversized albums. This was thrilling material for me to see, since Tzara and Picabia corresponded with artists in New York, but no single document shocked me more than one written by Man Ray to Tristan Tzara that began with a continuous string of hand-written block letters “MERDELAMERDELAMERDE,” punning on the words “MERDE” [SHIT] and “LA MER” [THE SEA], that also contained a collaged photograph of a nude woman, her legs miming the shape of a capital letter “A” to spell the words “de l'amerique!” [from America]. I had never seen this letter before, and assumed

that I was the first scholar in modern history to see it since Tzara had received it. I asked Mr. Chapon if I could take a photograph of the letter. At first, he objected, because he said that the image of a man with his penis tucked between his legs was too vulgar for publication, but when I explained that this was a woman—and not just any woman, but the eccentric Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, who was the subject of film made by Man Ray and Duchamp of her shaving her pubic hair (and this was likely an outtake from that film)—he granted permission. So with my trusted 35mm single-lens reflex camera, I took pictures of both the recto and verso of this important letter and had the photographs developed as soon as I returned to New York.



Letter from Man Ray to Tristan Tzara, n.d., Bibliothèque Littéraire Jacques Doucet, Paris (TZR.C.3192 2/2)

I revealed the existence of this letter for the first time in 1979, in a symposium held in honor of Milton W. Brown, my professor at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, in a talk entitled “The New York Dada Movement: Better Late Than Never” (which, coincidentally, was the last of many lectures presented in the symposium). The proceedings were published in *ARTS Magazine* a few months later, where a detail of the letter appeared for the first time in print. It is captioned “1921” and, in an accompanying footnote, I state that the letter is undated, “but must have been written in June of 1921, for [Man] Ray mentions

“Duchamp is returning this week to France... and Duchamp departed for Europe on the *France* in June of 1921.”<sup>1</sup>

Over the years, I continued to gather information on the subject of New York Dada, and made repeated trips to Paris to visit the Doucet Library. On one especially memorable occasion, I learned that Monsieur Chapon was about to retire as director of the library. Since he had been of such help to me, I purchased a Mont Blanc fountain pen and presented it to him as a departing gift. In what was perhaps a gesture of gratitude, he said that he had read my article on New York Dada (which I had previously sent him), and that he might be able to help me more precisely date the letter from Man Ray to Tzara. He asked if I had checked the postmark on the envelope in which it was sent, whereupon I can still remember asking “What envelope?” It was then that he told me that the envelopes in which most of the letters were sent were saved, but preserved in a different file. This was news to me, but as soon as he helped me match up a number assigned to the letter (TZR.C. 3193 2/2) with its corresponding envelope, I discovered that it was postmarked June 8, 1921. This was a great reassurance for me, as it reinforced my earlier published estimate that the letter had been written in June of 1921.



Envelope of letter sent by Man Ray to Tristan Tzara, postmarked June 8, 1921, BLJD (TZR.C.3193 2/2)

Shortly after my essay on New York Dada appeared in *ARTS Magazine*, I switched the topic of my dissertation to Man Ray's early years in New York (before he left for Paris in 1921), because the topic seemed more manageable. Nevertheless, I continued to gather material on New York Dada, as I had hoped to write a book on the subject. As soon as my dissertation was completed in 1988, I submitted a copy of my *ARTS Magazine* article on New York Dada with a proposal to write a book on the subject to the publishing company of Harry N. Abrams in New York, at that time considered the best publisher of art books in America. To my surprise and great pleasure, they responded in the affirmative, feeling that such a book would fill a necessary gap in the history of 20<sup>th</sup>-century art. They assigned me an in-house editor, a woman who had been a staff editor at Abrams for many years.<sup>2</sup> We got along very well and, when I submitted my entire manuscript to her to be edited, I was delighted to discover that she had made only a few, comparatively minor changes, most confined to spelling, grammar, and syntax.

At that point, I was under the impression that the text would not be subjected to any additional editing. Unfortunately, I was wrong. I had asked to be given an opportunity to review galleys—which I thought was customary—but when I inquired, they told me that changes made at such a late phase in the process would be costly and slow everything down, but I was assured that nothing would be changed. That having been said and accepted, I anxiously awaited the appearance of the finished book. When I received the first copy, I was naturally pleased to see that the result of five years of intense work finally materialized, but when I began reading, I discovered to my horror that changes were made to the text without consulting me. Most were minor, but the most egregious was the publication of an incorrect date for the letter I had discovered in the Doucet Library written by Man Ray and sent to Tristan Tzara. It was presented in the proper chronological sequence within my text—that is to say, where I discussed the exchange between artists in New York and Paris during the early summer of 1921—but the caption below the image read “postmarked June 8, 1922.” Where did they get that, I wondered? By 1922, Man Ray was already living in Paris, and why would he be writing to Tzara about Dada activities in New York? Adding to that mistake, when the endnote referring to this letter is consulted at the back of the book, someone changed the date again, this time writing “undated, but postmarked June 8, 1920.”<sup>3</sup>

As anyone can imagine, I was furious, for these mistakes appeared under my name and I had always prided myself on accuracy in all aspects of my scholarly writings. When I called my editor and asked for an explanation, she said that the mistake in

the caption was not hers, but rather caused by a layout editor who had incorrectly transcribed the year from a label attached to the verso of a photographic print I provided (which was hard to believe, since that label had been typed). The 1920 date given in the footnote, however, she admitted to having made herself based on information she found in a biography of Man Ray that had appeared a few years earlier, Neil Baldwin's *Man Ray: American Artist*. I immediately rushed to consult my copy of this book, only to discover that the date of this letter is there given as unknown, though the author correctly surmised that it was written a few months after the publication of the magazine *New York Dada*, which appeared in April 1921 (in notes at the back of the book, however, he incorrectly states that the letter is in the collection of the Société Anonyme Archives, Beinecke Library, Yale University).<sup>4</sup> Since Baldwin does not provide a specific date, but then goes on to discuss the formation of the Société Anonyme in 1920, my editor mistakenly assumed that he dated the letter to that same year and, for reasons that I cannot fathom, imagined that his date was more accurate than mine.

At that point, there was nothing I could do about the mistake that had been made. I asked the publisher to issue an errata slip, but they refused. I would have to live with it, hoping that whenever someone caught it, I would be able to explain that it was just a regrettable mistake made by the publishers. The only problem is that I would not always be available to provide the explanation and, worse yet, someone might simply assume that the information was correct and use it without question. The latter is unfortunately what has occurred over the years. Most recently, when my book was consulted by a reputable scholar, the information was accepted as fact, which is a reasonable assumption, as most of the other information provided in the book is—to the best of my knowledge—accurate.<sup>5</sup> Once a mistake is planted into the literature—even when corrected in subsequent publications (as in revised editions of the original book)—it is impossible to eradicate, as nothing can prevent future scholars from consulting the original publication and, if the source is considered otherwise trustworthy, presume that the information they are reading is correct.

Francis M. Naumann

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<sup>1</sup> Francis M. Naumann, "The New York Dada Movement: Better Late Than Never," *ARTS Magazine*, vol. 54, no. 6 (February 19080), note 35; the photograph is reproduced on 148. Unbeknownst to me, I would later discover that the letter had already been reproduced some years earlier in a small book published by the Pompidou in

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conjunction with their show “Paris-New York” (see *Paris-New York: Échanges littéraires au vingtième siècle*, Bibliothèque Publique d’Information, Centre National d’Art et de Culture Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1977, pp. 34-35). This publication catalogues all three of the letters Man Ray wrote to Tzara, but mentions specifically that this particular letter to Tzara was undated (cat. 26, p. 33).

<sup>2</sup> I have intentionally withheld the name of my editor, for I would not want her to be remembered for the innocent mistake she made to my text described in the present account. Besides, in the final phases of editorial process, she was diagnosed with a terminal illness to which she eventually succumbed.

<sup>3</sup> Francis M. Naumann, *New York Dada 1915-23* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), note 48, p. 241; the letter is reproduced on p. 208.

<sup>4</sup> Neil Baldwin, *Man Ray: American Artist* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1988), p. 390, referring to information provided on pp. 73-74.

<sup>5</sup> Samantha Friedman, “Dada Lives in New York,” in Adrian Sudhalter, *Dadaglobe Reconstructed*, Kunsthaus, Zurich 2016, p. 17, note 3. Curiously, the same letter is correctly dated in the illustrated checklist to the catalogue compiled by Sudhalter (p. 120).