Katherine Dreier and the Société Anonyme

William Clark

Katherine Dreier

"[America] has developed along the material rather than the immaterial, the concrete rather than the divine."

(Katherine Dreier) [1]

"The art of the new painters takes the infinite universe as its ideal, and it is to the fourth dimension alone that we owe this new measure of perfection."

(Apollinaire)

"An artist expresses himself with his soul, with the soul the artwork must be assimilated."

(Marcel Duchamp)

Katherine Sophie Dreier (1877-1952) was born in Brooklyn, New York. Her father had amassed a modest fortune in an iron importing business. She had three sisters: Mary, Margaret and Dorothea, who between them combined an active commitment to social reform, progressive politics and modern art.

Right: The Armory Show

Mary Dreier was a US labor reformer active in leadership roles in the suffrage movement. Although independently wealthy, she won the trust of working women and became active in the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL). Mary walked the picket lines with strikers and was arrested and treated just as brutally by the police. The WTUL's establishment in 1903 drew together three important social currents flowing through early twentieth century America: the labor movement, the Womens' Movement, and the social reform movement of the Progressive Era. This coalition of wage-earning and middle-class women fought for the eight-hour day, decent wages, women's suffrage and protective workplace laws. She was a friend of Eleanor Roosevelt, who was also active in the WTUL.

Isadora Duncan

Margaret Dreier was also a labor leader and reformer and joined the WTUL becoming president of the New York branch and playing a major role in organising support for the strikes of 1909-11 against the garment industry. In 1929 President Herbert Hoover named her to the planning committee of the White House Conference on Child Health and Protection. In the 1930s she became an enthusiastic supporter of the New Deal which—influenced by the WTUL agenda—brought greater security to workers' lives and seen the instigation of the WPA which nurtured the post war generation of artists.

Dorothea was a painter working in a Post-Impressionist style.

There was a strong identification with German culture in the Dreier home, and the family often traveled back to Europe to visit relatives. Between 1907 and 1914, Katherine Dreier traveled abroad studying and buying art and participating in several group exhibitions in Frankfurt, Leipzig, Dresden, and Munich. In Paris she visited Gertrude Steins' salons seeing the Fauves and Picasso and reading (in the original German) Kandinsky's 'Concerning The Spiritual in Art' in 1912 just as it was published. This was to be a profound influence including its Theosophical dimension and condemnation of the art market. She also traveled to Holland, buying a van Gogh (before the Sonderbund show) which she eventually loaned to the Armory show. [2]

The young Marcel Duchamp

The Bride...

Her first one-person show was in London in 1911 at the Doré Galleries, which later held the first Vorticist show in 1915, here:

"The American actress and feminist Elizabeth Robins introduced her into a circle of artists and literati where she met and engaged Edward Thrumbull. They returned to her family home in Brooklyn for their wedding. The marriage was annulled soon after it was learned that Thrumbull already had a wife and children." [3]

In 1912, in New York she became treasurer of the German Home for Recreation of Women and Children and helped to found the Little Italy Neighborhood Association in Brooklyn. She was invited to exhibit her own work and her collection in the influential 1913 Armory Show. Contemporary criticism of her work reduced Dreier's status to a "decorator" locating her within the amateur field, producing in a less sophisticated medium—despite the decorative arts being an essential source of inspiration for many avant-garde painters and sculptors. [4]

The invisibility of Dreier and many other women who participated in the Armory Show—and in avant-garde circles in general—begins with criticism that dismissed women who made art works connected to the schools of Modernism as imitative, rather than capable of assimilating theories by canonical artists. The Armory Show was dependent on a number of women artists who participated in the growth of modern art in New York in the years around the 1913 exhibition, yet the critical reception of this, such as Frank Crowninshield's 'Armory Show' in Vogue, 1940, Mayer Shapiro's and Milton Brown's writing have conditioned perceptions of the period to see affluent women as mere collectors because they were the wives and daughters of the "magnates." But aspects of patronage had began to shift from the industrial capitalists—guided merely by a desire to amass more wealth—to a new class of 'cultural aesthetes' who were:

"...the readers and followers of Neitzsche, Bergson, Whitman, Veblen, and often Blavatsky. They represented a professed desire to keep the art market autonomous from the markets for other goods where "it is not for the maker to set the goal for art, but for the buyer." [5]

They believed financial support for artists should be unconditional. An examination of many of these early 'women collectors' at the Armory Show (and later) reveals their own occupations as painters, sculptors and writers, recognised by their peers and the general public as professionals. Most accounts of these early twentieth century 'collectors' neglect a community and reciprocity between art patronage and production, especially in the case of women artists/collectors/organisers. Yet this neglected ground is where modern art is often first accepted or appreciated or *contested*. This blurring and erasing of distinctions will be recognised by artists as a fore-runner of artist-run initiatives and akin to Pierre Bourdieu's assessment of avant-garde art, as ostensibly anti-commercial art: 'art produced for producers'.

The Fountain

In 1914 Dreier formed the Cooperative Mural Workshops, a combination art school and workshop modeled in part after the Arts and Crafts movement and the Omega Workshops of Roger Fry. The organisation, which operated until 1917, also included the dancer Isadora Duncan. In her painting Dreier began working toward non-representational portraiture, and in 1916 she was invited to help found the *Society of Independent Artists* (SIA) which brought her into an influential circle of European and American avant-garde artists, most notably working with Marcel Duchamp as friend, partner and patron.

"While her interest in modern art is often understood in relation to her correspondence with Duchamp, her early abstractions are undoubtedly influenced by her interest in Kandinsky's theories... Dreier's most commonly reproduced work is her portrait of Duchamp, in the collection of MOMA. A slightly earlier portrait of Duchamp, called Study in Triangles, recalls Kandinsky's first chapter in On the Spiritual in Art, "The Movement of the Triangle." Following Kandinsky's logic and Dreir's painting, Duchamp reaches the top rung of the avant-garde ladder and becomes as Dreier would later call him "the modern-day Leonardo." [6]

The SIA (which continued until 1944 and also had a Mexican chapter) were a group of American and European artists who aimed to support regular exhibitions of contemporary art. It is thought it was based on the French *Société des Artistes Indépendants*, founded in 1884 (which had rejected Duchamp's 'Nude Descending a Staircase') and which acted as a kind of institutionalized Salon des Refusés. The other founders with Dreier included Marcel Duchamp, William J. Glackens, Albert Gleizes, John Marin, Walter Pach, Man Ray, John Sloan and Joseph Stella. The managing director was Walter Arensberg. Much the same group had been responsible for the Armory Show in 1913, which they quickly aimed to surpass.

'The Big Show' held at the Grand Central Palace in New York in 1917—then the largest exhibition in American history (2500 works by 1200 artists; the Armory Show had 1200 works)—coincided with US involvement in World War I. This underlined the SIA's 'dedication to democratic principles as part of a larger struggle,' which seen the group conciously adopt a no-jury policy, with the works (which extended to film screenings, lectures, poetry readings and concerts) hung alphabetically. Duchamp was originally the director of the installation of the show. For $6 artists were offered an opportunity to exhibit and join the group, regardless of style or subject-matter. This gave Duchamp an idea. What looked like a urinal signed

'R. Mutt', arrived through a delivery service with its six bucks. The central anti-academy philosophy of accepting all works was easily mocked and some members took it upon themselves to remove the work from the exhibition two days before the opening. Duchamp made an even bigger show of resigning from the SIA. It is slightly ridiculous that this incident has over-shadowed the rest of the show, but it certainly divided opinion—some of Dreier's correspondence on the matter still exists such as this one to SIA president, William Glackens:

"I want to express my profound admiration in the way you handled so important a matter as you did at the last meeting when it was [decided]...that we invite Marcel Duchamp to lecture...on his "Readymades" and have Richard Mutt bring the discarded object and explain the theory of art and why it had a legitimate place in an Art Exhibit... I felt that if you had realized that the object was sent in good faith that the whole matter would have been handled differently. It is because of the confusion of ideas that the situation took on such an important aspect... [you] will force Richard Mutt to show whether he was sincere or did it out of bravado."

Dreier also wrote to Duchamp asking him to reverse his resignation from the SIA over the refusal to exhibit Mr Mutt's Fountain:

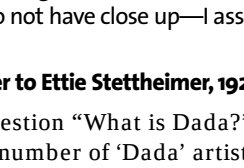
"When I voted "No," I voted on the question of originality—I did not see anything pertaining to originality in it; that does not mean that if my attention had been drawn to what was original by those who could see it, that I could not also have seen it."

One of the SIA, George Bellows, supposedly became very angered (this was 100 years ago) and turned on Walter Arensberg saying: "Someone must have sent it as a joke. It is signed R. Mutt; sounds fishy to me... It is gross, offensive!...There is such a thing as decency. Do you mean that if an artist put horse manure on a canvas and sent it to the exhibition, we would have to accept it?" Arensberg responded with "I am afraid we would." But most of these accounts are from Beatrice Wood's—who shared a studio with Duchamp—unreliable memoir 'I Shock Myself.' Some believe that the love triangle that developed among Wood, Duchamp and French Diplomat Henri-Pierre Roché formed the basis of Roché's novel, *Jules and Jim*, which was later made into the celebrated film by François Truffaut. [7]

'Fountain' was not seen by the public, but the joke was kept running in the 'open submission' magazine *The Blindman* which Duchamp and Roché printed (and Wood fronted till her father got upset) to accompany The Big Show. It began as a joke and was extended in the subsequent issue into a system of assault, following the attitude characteristic of Picabia's earlier '391' magazine. Like their European counterparts, first-generation modernists in the United States depended on the word—in manifestoes, catalog essays, and "little magazines"—to advocate and advance their art.

Duchamp's idea of 'ready-mades' had come from his surprise in New York at seeing objects such as a snow shovel (which he had no idea existed), and imagining them as ready-made sculptures just like the arrival of ready-made clothes or cigarettes on the market. This had resonated with his interest in Raymond Roussel's theatrical works which he described as "the absolute height of unusualness," and Alfred Jarry's 'Pataphysics.' It also reminded him of the 'gadgets' he kept about his studio (and which his sister threw out) such as the bicycle wheel (possibly a pun on 'Roussel'), which he enjoyed looking at like flames in the fireplace "to help his ideas come out". He would notice the spokes blurr and a curious three dimension 'optical flicker' effect which remained with one eye shut, this reminded him of his obscure readings on Euclidian geometry and the French mathematician Jules Henri Poincaré.

The Circle



Dreier seems among those who initially opposed the inclusion of Fountain, but she later came to appreciate Duchamp's intentions. They struck up a friendship that lasted Dreier's lifetime, and he introduced her to the circle of progressive artists and poets which had formed around Walter Arensberg's house and given rise to the SIA.
The Arensberg's West 67th Street apartment contained works by Duchamp, Picasso, Braque, Gris, Miro and 19 Brancusi sculptures. Duchamp's 'Nude Descending a Staircase' (which the Arensbergs' bought from the Armory Show on the last day when they just happened by) was the centerpiece. Arensberg (a cryptology fanatic who shared mental and word games of all sorts with Duchamp) became a pivotal centre because of his extraordinary mind and instinctive comprehension of all that was stirring. The apartment contained the Avant-Garde in New York. Duchamp actually moved in to a small room and bath upstairs somewhere in the building, living in the Arensberg place most of the time.

Every night following the Armory Show there had been an influx of prominent French artists. Among the other members of the group were Man Ray, Picabia, William Carlos Williams, Mardsden Hartley, Mina Loy, Edgar Varase, Charles Demuth, Isadora Duncan and Charles Sheeler, who casts a more disparaging eye on the influx of draft-dodging Frenchmen on the make:

"CS: Yes. Well, they had a purpose in being there, I think, of course. Maybe that wouldn't include Duchamp but the majority of the others it was the hope of good picking, that is I mean to say pick up sponsors, you know....we would be in a gathering...and there was one fellow you'd see looking up and down if there were some people there that—women that represented means of some kind and so forth, looking up and down deciding whether the fur coat represented anything more substantial that might be picking, you know, sort of as taking inventory...A lot of that went on in those days. It made me sick.

MF: You're disillusioning me. That's good. What about Katherine Dreier? Didn't she get involved in this too?

CS: Well, she was madly in pursuit personally of...

MF: Duchamp?

CS: Marcel." [8]

Sheeler also recounts one evening Isadora Duncan dropped by:

"...and, as she was leaving—Walter wasn't prepared for it—she threw her arms violently around his neck and her considerable avoirdupois and he wasn't prepared—she flattened him to the ground, they fell on the floor and when he got up two front teeth were missing. He was going around for several days this way with a handkerchief up to his face 'til he got repairs. But there were silly little things like that haven't anything to do with—of importance." [9]

The Société Anonyme

"From a distance these things, these Movements take on a charm that they do not have close up—I assure you."

(Marcel Duchamp, Letter to Ettie Stettheimer, 1921)

In response to the question "What is Dada?", posed by the press a number of 'Dada' artists gathered at Katherine Dreier's on East 47th Street, to try a bit of hype. Duchamp was the spokesman:

"Dada is nothing...For instance the Dadaists say that everything is nothing; nothing is good, nothing is interesting, nothing is important. It is a general movement in Paris, relating rather to literature than to painting" And later in the interview, "Painting has already begun to tear down the past—why not literature?. But then I am in favor of Dada very much myself". Even as he was making this declaration, however, Duchamp was distancing himself from the Paris Dada scene that prompted the Evening Journal article. When his sister Suzanne... suggested Duchamp send something for the Dada Salon Tzara was organizing at the Galerie Montaigne, Duchamp responded that "exposer," sounded too much like "épouser", and when Tzara himself repeated the request, Duchamp sent a telegram that contained the three words "PODE BAL—DUCHAMP" with its pun on "peau de balle" or "balls to you." Thus, when the exhibition was mounted, the spaces reserved for Duchamp's works were occupied by empty frames. So much for Duchamp's participation in Paris Dada." [10]

Around this time, in 1920, Dreier, Duchamp, and Man Ray met in Dreier's apartment (the Arensberg's had escaped to the West Coast) to found a centre for the study and promotion of of the international avant-garde. Dreier wanted to call it "The Modern Ark," perhaps symbolising her shipping an unrivalled collection of European Modernism over the Atlantic, but Man Ray suggested a typically tedious Dada word game: the French term for "incorporated," so the name would read "Société Anonyme, Inc." which translates into "Incorporated, Inc." Dreier added the subtitle "Museum of Modern Art: 1920." Ray's involvement was largely inconsequential.

If anything the name emphasised Dreier's commitment to treating artists and art movements with impartiality. Her—typically modest—concern was with "art, not personalities." It is thought she modelled the association on the broad-ranging events and contemporary art exhibitions sponsored by Herwarth Walden's Sturm-Galerie in Berlin.

As with much of the avant garde they had to create their own means of showing their work, the Société Anonyme, was used as an exhibition vehicle for the next ten years. It organised an extensive series of exhibitions, lectures, symposia, publications and established a reference library and acquisitions programme: all for the support of modern artists and the education of the general public.

Throughout the twenties Anonyme was New York's first museum of modern art, presenting an

T'um

international array of cubists, constructivists, expressionists, futurists, Bauhaus artists, and dadaists. It hosted the first American one-person shows of Kandinsky, Klee, Campendonk, and Leger. Société Anonyme promoted some of the most progressive artistic experimentation to be done in the US country at the time.

Kandinsky

The Museum

The International Exhibition of Modern Art at the Brooklyn Museum in 1926 (the title was lifted from the 1913 Armory Show) rivalled the SIA's Big Show of 1917 in its scope and diversity. It is arguably one of the most successful, well-curated and highly attended exhibitions in America in the 20th century. It also made deliberate attempts to affect people in a more lasting manner.

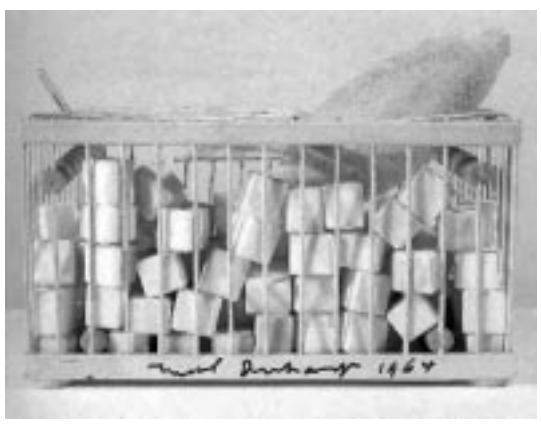
"Dreier had four galleries in the exhibition made up to resemble rooms in a house to illustrate how modern art could and should readily integrate into an everyday domestic environment, and there was also a prototype of a "television room," designed in conjunction with Frederick Kiesler, which would make any house or museum a worldwide museum of art by illuminating different slides of masterpieces with the 'turn of a knob. Concurrent with the exhibition the Societe sponsored eighteen lectures, fourteen of which were delivered by Dreier herself." [11]

It was in fact more or less single-handedly organised by Dreier—an astonishing effort demonstrating her work for the Société to date. The extensive Catalogue (given free to participating artists) was dedicated to Kandinsky's 60th Birthday and abstract art seemed to dominate at the exhibition. The Brooklyn exhibition featured 308 works by 106 artists from 23 countries and attracted over 52,000 visitors in seven weeks. It travelled to Manhattan, Buffalo and Toronto and was the first introduction in the US of Surrealism. It also offerred a larger sampling of Soviet and German (and simply non-French) modernism that had been included in the Armory Show (which had included out of the German school only one Kandinsky, one Kirchner, and two Lehmbruck sculptures, and out of the Russians only Archipenko). [12]

It was also the first time Duchamp's 'La mariée mise à nu par ses cèlibataires', or 'The Large Glass' (1915-23), was exhibited. It seems to have been largely ignored, only picking up attention when it was exhibited in the New York Museum Of Modern Art after the war.

Dreier was Duchamp's main supporter, commissioning, owning and enabling many new works, including the Large Glass itself. Dreier had an intimate relationship to most of his output, many of which make oblique references to her: 'T'um' was a mural commissioned for above her bookcase based on the shadows cast by his other works in her house. 'Why not Sneeze Rrose Sélavy' was commissioned by Dreier for her sister, Dorothea—who didn't want it, probably repulsed by its more Benny Hill (arroser, c'est la vie) aspects.

Why not Sneeze Rrose Sélavy



The major work of Duchamp's career was broken in transit to Dreier's home in Connecticut. Dreier conveyed the news six years later, where, over lunch, in France.

"Bearing a certain amount of responsibility for the damaged to the Large Glass, Dreier paid for everything connected to its repair, including materials and contracted labor. She assured Duchamp of a room in her house, offered him thermoses of coffee, breakfasts on a tray in the mornings, and a carpenter on hand to assist in the reconstruction. She even covered his passage to America." [13]

It is a misconception that the Large Glass had merely cracked in the patterns one sees today, it was reduced to a pile of unattached fragments which a newspaper described as "a 4 by 5-foot three hundred pound conglomeration of bits of colored glass."

"A photograph from 1936, taken in Katherine Dreier's Connecticut home...Wearing a pullover rather than his usually natty clothes, a five-o'clock-shadowed Duchamp stands wearily next to the Large Glass (1915-23) which he had just spent weeks reconstructing. This image...begs an interesting question. How is it that the unconventional and often fragile works of an artist who publicly eschewed those art world institutions that would normally be trusted to conserve them—dealers, galleries, museums-have come down to us in relatively fine condition, or indeed, at all?" [14]

Through the support of Katherine Dreier would seem to be the answer. The effort on the Large Glass seems to have nearly burnt him out, even the long-suffering Dreier complained to one of her friends about the his monomania at this time: "Duchamp is a dear, but his concentration on just one subject wears me out, leaves me limp."

Duchamp also used this time to restore all his other works in Dreier's collection. The Large Glass' near destruction and the draining process of undertaking its repair galvanized his resolve to enter into the large-scale reiteration and reproduction of his works in multiples. He first published the Green Box (Paris, 1934). "Only then... did he restore the image between two new plates of glass, now to be read through the foundational grid of his writings." The artist himself admitted that "the notes [in the Green Box] help to understand what it [the Large Glass] could have been." [15]

The Haven

The eventual opening in 1929 of the New York Museum of Modern Art reduced Dreier's hopes of the Société becoming a permanent museum. The Société made an urgent appeal to the Carnegie Corporation for assistance, but was refused and its headquarters in New York closed. From this point on, it continued only through Dreier's personal efforts in organising events, a lecture series, writing and further accumulating the Société's collection. In 1939, as war broke out Dreier began a plan to open 'The Country Museum' (also known as the Haven), at her house in West Redding, Connecticut—this merged the Société's and her own private collection.

She approached Yale University about funding and maintaining the Haven but, because of the high costs of renovating and maintaining it, Yale offered a compromise to take over the Société's collection if it were moved to the Yale Art Gallery. Reluctantly Dreier agreed, and began sending the collection in October 1941 shortly before the US entered another war with Germany.

"In 1942, Dreier was still adamant about her desire to open the Country Museum and to use her private collection as its basis. She continued her attempts to convince Yale to fund her project, but when Yale gave a final negative answer in April, Dreier decided to sell the Haven. In April 1946, she moved to a new home, Laurel Manor, in Milford, Connecticut. She continued to add artwork to the Societe Anonyme collection at Yale, through purchases and through gifts from artists and friends. In 1947, she attempted to reopen membership to the Societe Anonyme and printed a brochure, but Yale blocked distribution of the brochure because of the ambiguous connection between Yale and the membership campaign. In 1948, Dreier and Duchamp decided to limit the activities of the Societe to working on a catalog of the collection and to acquiring artwork." [16]

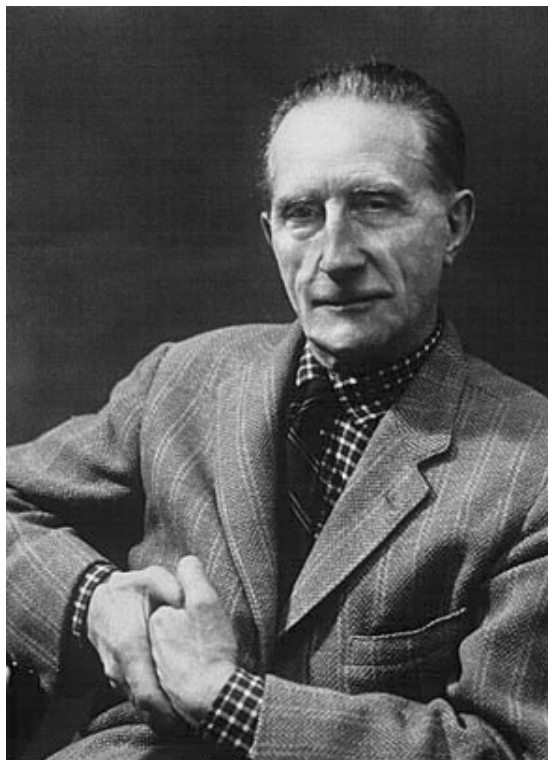
On the thirtieth anniversary of the Société's Anonyme's first exhibition, 30 April 1950, Dreier and Duchamp hosted a dinner at the New Haven Lawn Club, where they formally dissolved the Societe Anonyme. In June, a catalog of the Société's collection at Yale, *Collection of the Société Anonyme: Museum of Modern Art 1920*, was published. Dreier died on 29 March 1952.

It was partly because she dared not move the fragile Large Glass monolith, that she had considered converting her home into a Museum. Troubled by the matter even at the end of her life, she confessed to Duchamp that she might not leave enough money to guarantee its upkeep and safety. After her death Duchamp acted as her executor and entered it into the Arensberg Collection in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, which contained most of his works.

Duchamp had helped to amass the collection of the Société Anonyme, and with Dreier gone, he tried to provide for its long-term survival, anxious about the rapid deterioration of works. There was no money for conservation, so Duchamp approached Mary Dreier who contributed $1,500 per year until she died. Eventually, under Duchamp's supervision, the Large Glass would be cemented to the floor of the Philadelphia Museum of Art amidst the Walter and Louise Arensberg Collection where it had all began when they were young.

Mary Dreier

The Société Anonyme begun in 1920; Albert Gallatin's Gallery of Living Art at New York University did not emerge until 1927, most dominant of all the Museum of Modern Art was founded in 1929; and then the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1930. The Museum of Non-Objective Art—later to be better known as the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum—was founded in New York in 1937. The Société Anonyme's art collection eventually became the basis of the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggemheim collections.



Marcel Duchamp

notes

1. Ruth L. Bohan, The Société Anonyme' s Brooklyn Exhibition, UMI Research Press, Ann Arbor 1982, p.12). Quoted from http://www.brickhaus.com/amoore/magazine/p2contents.html
2. The Armoury show has been recreated at http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MUSEUM/Armory/gallerytour.html
3. http://etrc.lib.umn.edu/travbio.htm
4. Duchamp's 'Coffee Grinder' (1911) was originally done as a decoration for his brother's kitchen.
5. http://www.people.virginia.edu/~sls8y/gender.html
6. *Ibid.*
7. http://www.craftsreport.com/april97/wood.html
8. Charles Sheeler Interview, conducted by Martin Friedman for the Archives of American Art, 1959 http://artarchives.si.edu/oralhist/sheele59.htm)
9. *Ibid.*
10. Marforie Perloff, Avant-Garde Tradition and the Individual talent. http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/perloff/dada.html
11. New Thoughts on an Old Series, John D. Angeline, http://www.brickhaus.com/amoore/magazine/Davis.html
12. Stuart Davis (a leading US modernist) underwent something of a conversion with the Brooklyn show stating that "the exhibition itself was an inspiration to me and has given me a fresh impulse." Fascinated by El Lissitzky's work, Davis was supplied by Dreier (who had kept up a strong appreciation for Russian modernism since 1922 when she visited the Erste Russiche Kunstausstellung in Berlin) with knowledge which would inform his seminal 'Egg Beater' series. She simultaneously supplied Lissitzky with sports magazines which reflected American culture. Such closeness between US and Soviet modernism has since been downplayed because of the Cold War. See Angeline above. The over-emphasis on Parisian Modernism which critics such as Harold Rosenberg note in much American art stems from critics reflecting its predominance and over-emphasis in Peggy Guggenheim's collection.
13. Marcel Duchamp as Conservator, Mark B. Pohlad, http://www.toutfait.com/issues/issue_3/Articles/pohlad/pohlad.html
14. Ibid. I would recommend the Duchamp magazine http://www.toutfait.com this regularly over-turns conventional wisdom on Duchamp.
15. *Ibid.*
16. The Katherine S. Dreier Papers / Societe Anonyme Archive, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.