

JAYNE H BAUM

Contemporary Photography and Fine Art

ELLEN CAREY
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art

MAN IN THE MIRROR

INTERVIEW by Krystian von Speidel

Special thanks to Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Artists Rights Society (ARS), and the Man Ray Trust for permissions to reproduce "Space Writing."

Man Ray serves a legendary role in the 20th-century avant-garde. One of his most revealing artworks has been upended by a recent discovery: a Man Ray *Space Writing* finding, found by lens-based artist Ellen Carey.

Created during an experimental photo session, only two prints of Man Ray's *Space Writing* still exist. Bowdoin College Museum of Art has a cropped image, and an uncropped example resides in a private Italian collection. After a search through 12,000 negatives and 5,000 contact prints, the Pompidou Centre in Paris was unable to locate any more. Since discovering Man Ray's hidden signature in *Space Writing* (Self-Portrait 1935), photographer Ellen Carey has fostered acknowledgement for her discovery, introducing fresh insight into Man Ray's brilliance and suggesting linkage to Abstract Expressionism. Carey is an artist whose work appears in the permanent collections of museums ranging from Kansas City's Nelson-Atkins and Hartford's Wadsworth Atheneum to the Whitney Museum of American Art. An associate professor of photography at Hartford Art School at the University of Hartford, Carey has made Connecticut's capital her base of operations since the 1990s. She recently sat down with VENU's Krystian von Speidel at her studio in the historic Underwood Typewriter building to discuss her discovery and how it remained hidden for more than 70 years.

KvS: Merry Foresta, Director of the Smithsonian Photography Initiative, mentioned the work *Space Writing* to you during a studio visit in 2009. Was it your first time seeing the work?

EC: I have a collection of Man Ray books and had seen the show, *L' amour fou* at the Pompidou in 1985. He was also my influence when I was an undergraduate and graduate student. Being a photographer who has used the penlight intermittently for 30 years and who has studied photography vis-a-vis the self-portrait, I knew this Man Ray piece. I had seen the image many times, but Merry pointed out the affinities between my drawings and this particular image. I have always considered penlights drawing with light. Of course, when I saw the image, light bulbs went off. I remember telling Merry, 'I bet if I turned this to a mirror we would see his name, Man Ray.' It was a quantum leap, when you discover something this exciting. I saw the words as clear as day. The letters M and R just jumped out. I could see it right away.

KvS: Explain drawing with a penlight and how *Space Writing* was created.

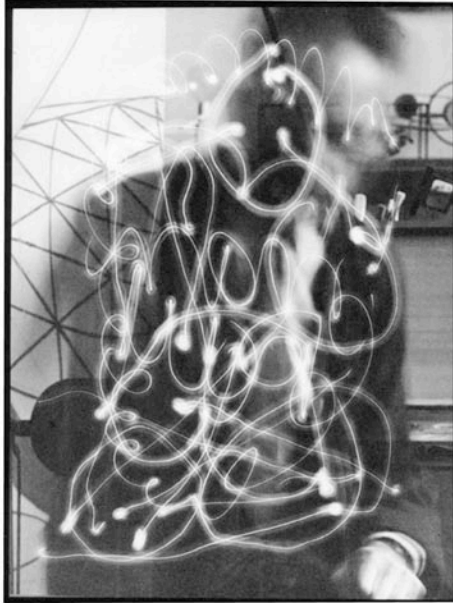
EC: In the studio, take a penlight and open up the aperture all the way. I've subsequently realized that between the wars there was a fashion for penlights. There's a famous Picasso example. These are called space writings or light drawings. Anybody can do it. I imitated the drawing and recreated Man Ray's work and discovered the shutter would have been opened for two to three minutes to create *Space Writing*.

KvS: The original is 3x2 inches. Did you see a larger version?

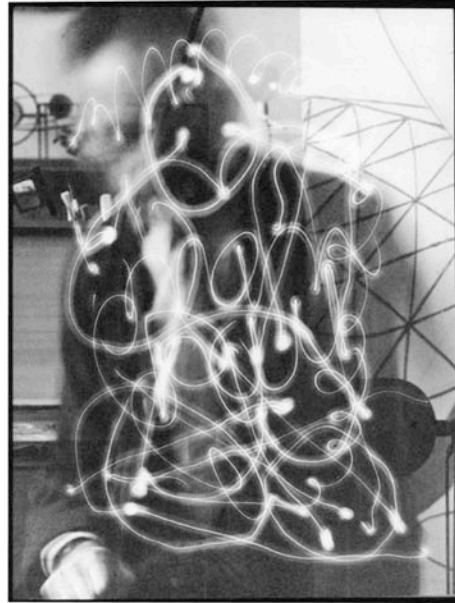
EC: I saw the image in Merry Foresta's *Perpetual Motif: The Art of Man Ray* for the Smithsonian. The work is included in many books, often blown-up to 8x10. From the Venice Biennale catalog, the image is uncropped. When I saw the original at the Jewish

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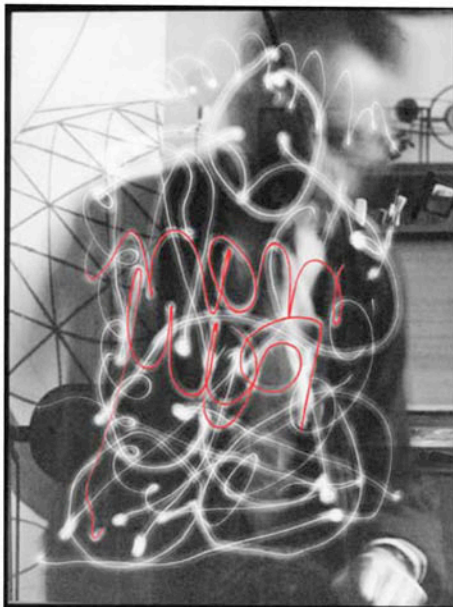


Original Image

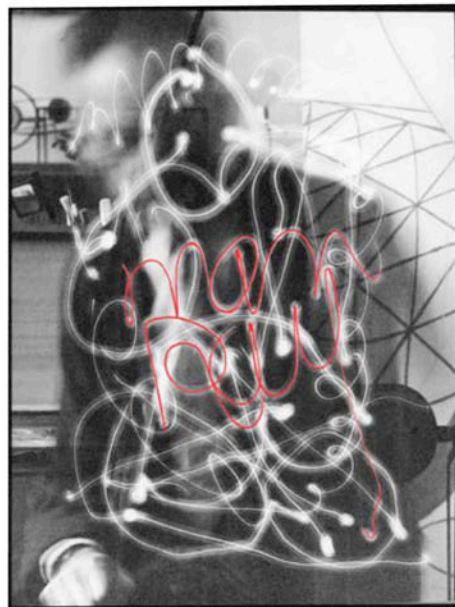


Original Image Reversed

Man Ray, *Space Writing* (Self-Portrait) 1935. Gelatin silver print on paper (cropped version of original) 3 3/16 in. x 2 5/16 in. (8.1cm. x 5.87 cm.).
Collection of Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine, Museum Purchase, Lloyd O. and Marjorie Strong Coulter Fund.



Signature discovery



Signature discovery reversed

Man Ray, *Space Writing* (Self-Portrait) 1935. Gelatin silver print on paper (cropped version of original) 3 3/16 in. x 2 5/16 in. (8.1cm. x 5.87 cm.).
Collection of Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine, Museum Purchase, Lloyd O. and Marjorie Strong Coulter Fund.
Signature highlighted in red. Signature discovery 2009 Ellen Carey.

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Museum in *Alias Man Ray: The Art of Reinvention* [which cites Carey's discovery], I was surprised; it's quite tiny. The lines are diminutive and not thick and wide as in the reproduced images I'd seen before. So there is delicacy and transparency countered with looping bright spots.

KvS: What influence has *Space Writing* had on other artists?

EC: I am putting forth that this image is a precursor to Abstract Expressionism, specifically to Jackson Pollock. This has been substantiated by Francis O'Connor, the Pollock scholar. Photographer Herbert Matter was best friends with Pollock. This image appears to have influenced Pollock through Matter. I hope to show that Matter knew *Space Writing* and made Pollock aware of it. Photography has had affinities to painting since its invention, so I think it revisits the discourse through this image.

KvS: The title suggests that Man Ray was in fact writing something. How would you respond that your discovery points out the potentially obvious?

EC: If it was obvious, why didn't anyone discover it before? It's been hidden for more than 70 years. I think people are excited and confounded and perplexed, and there may be a tinge of professional jealousy. This is a beloved member of the avant-garde, so it is amazing that it remained hidden. Surrealists loved to play games, and this is the gamesmanship of the dream and the unconscious. Curator after curator has been astounded by this discovery, indicating the divide between art-maker and art-historian. This fantastic self-portraiture introduces text, one of the first to incorporate the two. The history of photography is loaded with self-portraits, revealing the artist. It's a tremendously rich image.

KvS: In hiding the text in *Space Writing*, was Man Ray teasing his audience with something known only to him?

EC: As he declared, 'I have no problems, I only have solutions.' Man Ray delighted in messages and the mystique of his own name. He was a complex genius who had a keen eye for symmetry and asymmetry.

KvS: How does your discovery influence understanding of Man Ray?

EC: I hope it will encourage scholars to do more research. 2010 was a year of great artistic discoveries, including daVinci's fingerprint and Henry Adams' discovery of an alleged Jackson Pollock signature. I'd love a show around *Space Writing* and its influence on Pollock, modern and contemporary art. The concept of hidden signatures

deserves more comment. *Space Writing's* significance in the world of self-portraiture is substantial, a sophisticated image. Camouflage and hidden meaning in artwork has been under-researched in contemporary art.

KvS: Unknown for years, what does your discovery say about the clinical manner in which historians approach art?

EC: It's a combination of being prescient and curious about artistic intents and methods. One unemphasized facet is how materials have meaning. How materials are used for the artistic imagination separates great artists from good artists. It might behoove historians to include those creating photography in their research. We need a better dialogue between people who create and those who study and certainly vice-versa. A mutual openness will lead to more discoveries and collegiality among artists and academics.

KvS: Will any mysteries be revealed posthumously in your own work?

EC: I've been thinking about it. I'd love to do a portrait series of people based on names. It's wonderful and certainly something that's percolating. I feel a very strong signal from Man Ray. The hidden signature is so interesting, a picture truly worth a thousand words. In this case, we have boundless new information about an artist for all time. □



Ellen Carey in the Polaroid 20 X 24 Studio, NYC, Photo by Doug Levere.

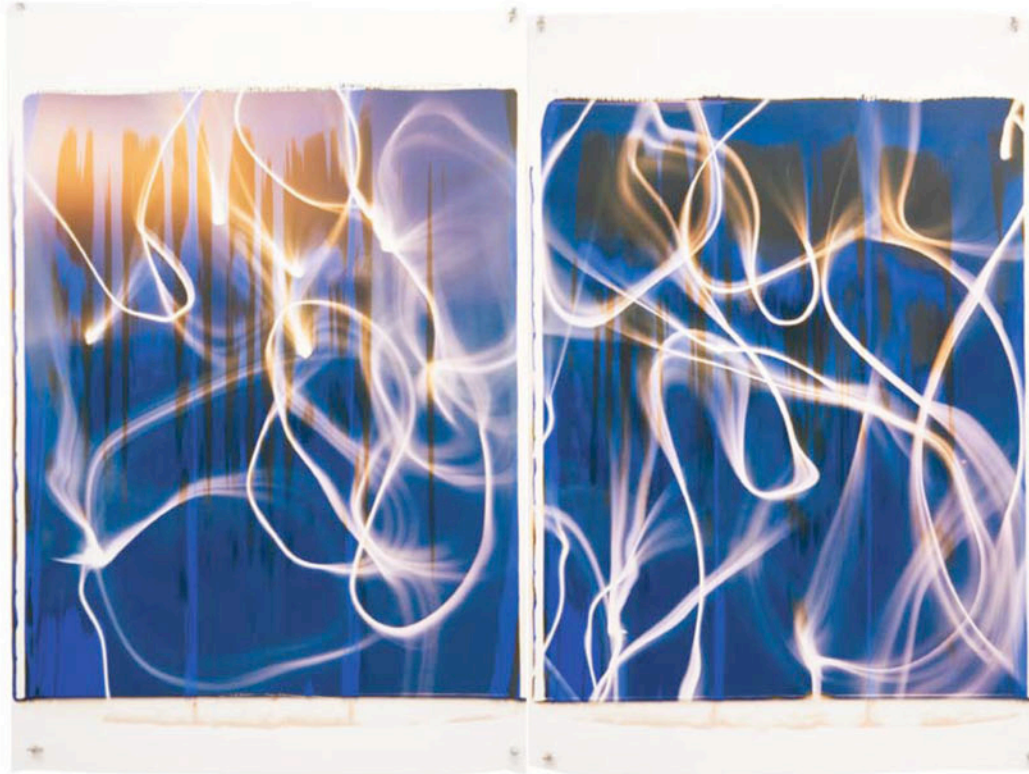
Ellen Carey (b.1952, US), an internationally recognized lens-based photographic artist, teaches at the Hartford Art School and creates artwork that has been the subject of forty-six, one-person exhibitions. Carey earned her BFA from the Kansas City Art Institute and MFA from SUNY Buffalo. Carey's concepts and practices are described by her work series, *Photography Degree Zero* and *Struck by Light*. These twin subjects investigate minimalism and abstraction alongside photographic process using the vintage photogram method and the large format Polaroid 20 X 24 camera.

Her work is in the permanent collections of over twenty museums such as The Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Museum at the Chicago Art Institute, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, New Britain Museum of American Art, The Smithsonian, and the Yale University Art Gallery. Her work is also featured in several private collections, including The LeWitt Foundation, the Grover Photography Collection, and the Linda and Walter Wick Collection. Ellen Carey (www.ellenecarey.com) is represented by Jayne H. Baum (NY, NY) and Nina Freudenheim Fine Art (Buffalo, NY). Her work is also featured at the Polaroid Studio (www.20x24studio.com) and the Aperture Foundation (www.aperture.org).

A book highlight is "*The Edge of Vision: The Rise of Abstraction in Photography*" (Aperture Foundation); exhibition and tour (2009-12) by Lyle Rexer. Rexer, an independent curator and critic, states: "Ellen Carey is among this country's most committed experimental photographers."

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Ellen Carey, "Polaroid Penlights", 2007, Polaroid 20 X 24, Color Positive Prints, 34"H x 44"W (diptych), courtesy of the artist and Jayne H. Baum Gallery (New York, NY).

Photography and Lens-Based Art: Introduction

by Ellen Carey

Abstraction in photography and lens-based art presents a contradiction in terms, minimalism a further oxymoron. Well developed in the 20th century in other areas — Abstract Expressionism, Minimal and Conceptual Art — it is still emerging at the close of the first decade of the 21st century.

It is here, in the early stages of modern and contemporary art that has roots in photography, that my work has a context. It is important to note these practices are largely based in America and fully aware of this legacy, their tenets are incorporated into my art practice. The American invention of Polaroid 20 X 24 camera/film compliments these breakthroughs in visual thinking with my discovery of the *Pull* in 1996, producing an abstract/minimal image that is simultaneously photographic/process; it fits under my umbrella concept *Photography Degree Zero*. Another legacy develops and contin-

ues, the photogram, a technique from the dawn of photography (1834) discovered by British inventor William Henry Fox Talbot (1800-1877); it parallels my artistic practice and concept calling it—*Struck by Light*.

My art works contain aspects that are conceptually linked and informed through visual characteristics, such as the shadow and silhouette image seen in the object as a negative, referencing this rich history. Formal issues of size and scale, in tandem with palette, create visual impact. The content-laden aspects of my work are weighed in — their echo is

embedded and realized in my choices of method and material — acknowledging that these contain symbols and signs, creating and adding to my art's meaning. Themes such as mourning, love and loss are seen in muted, monochrome tones, often expressed as site-specific minimal, monumental gridded tableaux. Black, white and grey have aesthetic as well as conceptual value, underscored in the content behind my pictures, giving them a context. This reductive palette can highlight line and shape, the ubiquitous codes of the circle (the camera's lens) and square (the camera's body) are

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JOYFUL FEELINGS OF CREATIVITY REFLECT A DISCIPLINE WHERE I AM DIGGING DEEPER INTO COLOR'S MOTHER LODGE, REVISITING TERMS, SUCH AS *COLOR PROCESSING*, IN NEW AND EXPERIMENTAL WAYS. COLOR IS SUBJECT AND OBJECT, MATERIAL WITH MEANING, PROCESS WITHIN THE ART.

also used. Stark and subtle, these three are colors, serving as a reference to *drawing with light*, a historical phrase that points to the medium's origins in the 19th century.

Parallel to this is my work that emphasizes color — that it has purpose and exists for a reason. Joyful feelings of creativity reflect a discipline where I am digging deeper into color's mother lode, revisiting terms, such as *color processing*, in new and experimental ways. Color is subject *and* object, material *with* meaning, process *within* the art. Again, this gives my work context in the relatively young field of color photography, itself just over a century old. Art and photography, like music, are universal languages as is color.

The end results are innovative and challenging artworks known for their rich synoptic clarity with well-thought out conceptual underpinnings that expand the content in the realm of art and photography by introducing new forms, such as the parabola, seen as a conical loop in my *Pulls* or the variation of color shadows in my photograms like *Push Pins*. Feeling and form are juxtaposed, seen in unprecedented, unpredictable ways expressed through methods and techniques, mastered and further developed, within an

array of unusual and striking combinations, using new nomenclature.

My tools of choice for creative expression include the 20th century large format Polaroid 20 X 24 camera, one of five in the world. It has been used by myself for close to three decades and has become synonymous with contemporary art. An antiquated cameraless process, from the dawn of photography in the 19th century, known as the photogram, is my other tool. Like paint tubes, I use light, in all its forms, as a common denominator throughout my work. This interdisciplinary approach reflects my creative endeavors and artistic interests in a medium well known and highly regarded for its technical advances, over two centuries, enriching the visual arts and broadening the parameters of our picture culture, all made with Polaroid film/camera or cameraless/enlarger in my photogram projects in tandem with my experiments, inventions, and applications within a variety of processes/methods/techniques. A new interest of mine is the biology of seeing and this brings my work into the 21st century. Here a third tool, digital imaging technologies, has begun to be used, especially appreciated is the medium's ability to introduce scale, a much-

needed formal issue in my work. Its ability to expand an existing palette's range, through contrast and saturation, is leading to new possibilities; its capacity to reverse and/or manipulate an image presents even richer ones.

As a metaphor for the field and myself as the art maker, I begin in the 19th century with black and white, using the photogram, and enter the 20th century through color and Polaroid, reaching the 21st century through the use of digitalization. Experiments include one or more of these, which are needed to create one huge, ink-jet print. A new interest, the biology of seeing, is a perfect match for monumental, digital images. Size and scale are introduced as photograms, revisualized as six gigantic, unique images titled *Dings & Shadows* or *Blinks R/G/B/Y/M/C*; the unifying concept doubles as the formula for photographic color theory. This idea has tremendous flexibility and could transfer into other forms and disciplines, such as painting, sculpture, printmaking, glass, film or a site-specific, time-based installation. The development of projects that move freely amongst other contemporary art practices reflects my artistic education and background, while exploring and embracing my cultural and creative interests. □

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Ellen Carey, "Polaroid Penlights Pulls", 2007, Polaroid 20 X 24 Color Positive Prints, 60-80" H x 66" W (triptych),
courtesy of the artist and Jayne H. Baum Gallery (New York, NY).