Katherine Dreier and the Société Anonyme

William Clark

“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 music. 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 Women’s 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 active in the WFTU.

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 organizing 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—under the WTUL agenda—brought greater security to workers’ lives and seen the formation 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 relations. 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 Stein’s 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 Bride...

Her first one-person show was in London in 1911 at the Doré Galleries, which later held the first Vorticist show in 1913, here:

“The American actress and feminist Elizabeth Robins introduced her into a circle of artists and literary men she met and engaged Edward Thrumbul. They returned to her family home in Brooklyn for their wedding. The marriage was annulled soon after it was learned that Thrumbul 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, 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 “magnates.” But aspects of patronage had decided with US involvement in World War I. This blurring and erasing of distinctions will be recognised by 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-modelled 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 Duchamp 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 Dreier’s painting, Duchamp reaches the top rung of the avant-garde ladder and becomes as Dreier would later call him “the modern-day Leonardo.”

The SIA (which continued until 1944 and also had a Mexican chapter) was 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 Jam., Glackens, Albert Gleizes, John Marin, Walter Pach, Man Ray, John Sloan and Joseph Stella. The managing director was Walter Arensburg. 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 1913—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 underlying the SIA’s dedication to democratic principles as part of a larger struggle, which seem the group consciously adopt a 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 it and join the group, regardless of style or subject-matter. This gave Duchamp an idea: what looked like an urinal signed
The Circle

Dreier seems among those that 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 had just happened by) was the centerpiece. Arensberg (a cryptology student who initially worked at the Association) became a pivotal centre for the next ten years. It organised an extensive series of exhibitions 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, Inc. which transvested 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 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 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 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 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 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 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 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.
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.

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 Frederick Kiesler, which would make any house or museum a worldwide museum of art by illuminating the grid of his writings." The artist himself admitted that "the notes [in the Green Box] help to under-

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, which contained most of his works.

Through the support of Katherine Dreier, 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.14

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 thermostes 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.15

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 congestion 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 these art world institutions that would normally be trusted to conserve them—dealers, galleries, museums—have come down to us in relatively fine condition, or even better?"16

Through the support of Katherine Dreier, Duchamp 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 under-

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 organizing 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 County 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 to 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 fatal negative answer in April, Dreier decided to sell the Haven. In April 1942, she moved to a new home, Laurel Manor, in Milford, Connecticut. She continued to add artwork to the Société Anonyme collection at Yale, through purchases and through gifts from artists and friends. In 1943, she attempted to reopen membership to the Société 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 Société 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 Société 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 begun when they were young.
The Société Anonyme began 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 found ed 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 Guggenheim collections.

notes
2. The Armory show has been recreated at http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MUSEUM/Armory/gallerytour.html
4. Duchamp’s ’Coffee Grinder’ (1911) was originally done as a decoration for his brother’s kitchen.
6. Ibid.
8. Charles Sheeler Interview, conducted by Martin Friedman for the Archives of American Art, 1959 http://artarchives.si.edu/oralhist/sheele59.html
9. Ibid.
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.
15. Ibid.
16. The Katherine S. Dreier Papers / Societe Anonyme Archive, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.