



The Société Anonyme

for America

Modernism

with contributions by

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The Société Anonyme

Modernism for America

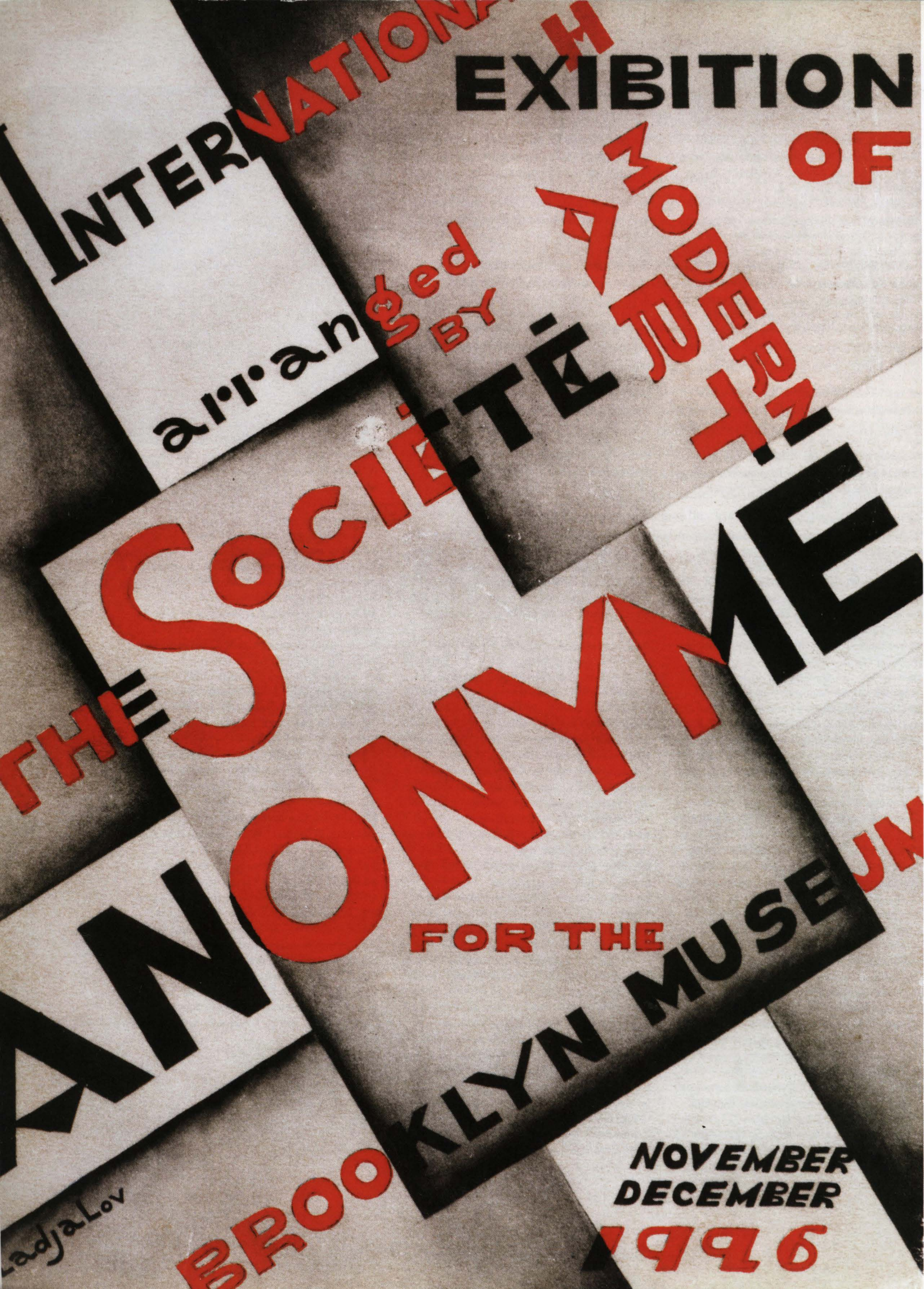
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INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITION OF

arranged **BY**

SOCIÉTÉ MODERNE

THE ANONYME

FOR THE

BROOKLYN MUSEUM

**NOVEMBER
DECEMBER**

1996

Ladja Lov

“One Big Painting” A New View of Modern Art at the Brooklyn Museum

Kristina Wilson

I always treat my exhibitions, as you may know, as one big painting, for in that way alone do the rooms look complete. People wonder why my exhibitions give such satisfaction and why even if they do not like the individual pictures, they always like the sensation of the room.

—Katherine Dreier, letter to Stuart Davis, September 29, 1926

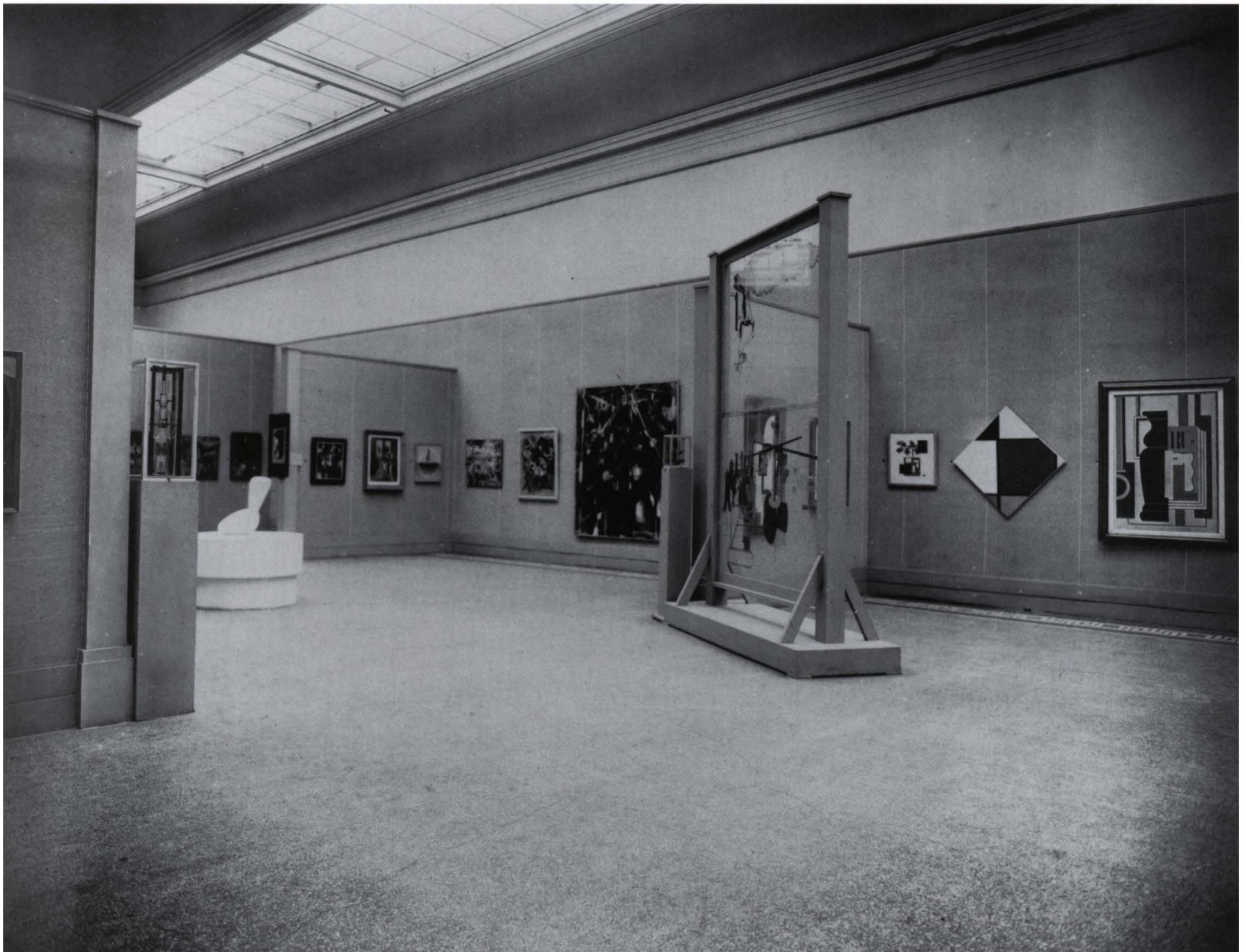
Among the many public programs that Katherine Dreier organized under the auspices of the Société Anonyme, none rivaled the scope and ambition of the *International Exhibition of Modern Art* held at the Brooklyn Museum from November 19, 1926, to January 1, 1927 (fig. 2). Dreier, determined to demonstrate the vitality of modern art and to rebuff those who claimed the movement was “dying out,” gathered together more than 300 contemporary works by 106 artists representing (as Dreier classified them) twenty-three countries.¹ Not only was the exhibition broad in its selection of artists, it also brought together works of extraordinary aesthetic diversity, ranging from the rigorous geometric abstractions of Constructivists such as El Lissitzky through the prismatic, spiritually infused figurative works of German Expressionists Franz Marc and Heinrich Campendonk to the Cubism of Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso. Dreier did not find the group assembled in Brooklyn discordant; rather, she 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. As she explained in a lecture at the Brooklyn Museum, delivered shortly after the exhibition closed, “To the Société Anonyme the term Modern Art represents a distinct point of view and holds within itself a definite meaning, which is — that it is an expression of the new cosmic forces coming to the fore, which in time will change our vision of life, as well as that of art, as radically as when Giotto broke with the Byzantine. Therefore, the Exhibition gathered together was not a haphazard affair — as many people seem to think.”²

The diversity of the Brooklyn exhibition may seem cacophonous to twenty-first-century viewers, who think of early-twentieth-century modernism as a series of discrete “isms.” Indeed, as Dreier’s somewhat defensive comments suggest, the show was unusual even in its day for its open embrace of varying modes of modernism. The *International Exhibition* was far more expansive than the focused shows of modern art put up in New York by Alfred Stieglitz in the 1910s at his 291 gallery, or by A. E. Gallatin at his Gallery of Living Art, which opened in 1927. Although it was conceived on the scale of the notorious Armory Show of 1913, it did not share that earlier event’s interest in categorizing and writing a history of modern art. Whereas Arthur B. Davies had organized the Armory Show around individual artists and common aesthetic approaches, Dreier’s installation of contemporary art (few items were more than ten years old) divided the work of individual artists and followed no discernible national or aesthetic groupings.³ When The Museum of Modern Art opened a few years after, in late 1929, it shared with the Société Anonyme an interest in representing the broad swath of practices that constituted modern art, but in its exhibition programs it tended to follow the historical, categorical approach of the Armory Show.

fig. 1
Constantin Alajálov and Katherine S. Dreier.
Cover of *Modern Art* (detail), 1926. Katherine S.
Dreier Papers/Société Anonyme Archive. Yale
Collection of American Literature, Beinecke
Rare Book and Manuscript Library

Although the Brooklyn show received a flurry of reviews during the weeks it was open, by July 1927 the critic Henry McBride was already remarking that in the end it had “attracted much less public attention than it deserved.”⁴ One can only speculate on the many reasons why it did not garner the enduring publicity that the Armory Show had received, or that The Museum of Modern Art was to attain in a few years. Undoubtedly as a consequence, it has been misunderstood by subsequent generations of scholars. I shall attempt here to reassess the contributions of the *International Exhibition* to the understanding of modern art in the United States by putting the show in dialogue with better-known displays of this radical art during the years before World War II. The Brooklyn show embodied both the collective nature of the Société Anonyme — a group of artists who, with fluctuating degrees of engagement, evaluated and promoted one another’s work — and the views of Dreier herself. As such, it offered a vibrant, occasionally quirky view of modern art. The voice of the Brooklyn show, when folded into the discourse generated by the Armory Show, Stieglitz, Gallatin, and MOMA, significantly enhances our understanding of the reception and interpretation of modernism in this country.

fig. 2
International Exhibition of Modern Art, organized by Katherine S. Dreier and the Société Anonyme, Brooklyn Museum, November 1926–January 1927. Installation view. Katherine S. Dreier Papers/Société Anonyme Archive. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library



ANTECEDENTS TO THE BROOKLYN SHOW

In the years preceding the Société Anonyme exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum, displays of modern art tended to gravitate toward one of two poles. On the one hand, exhibitions were sometimes held in small galleries, where, despite limited space, the works tended to be hung in a single row with room between them.⁵ The best-known American example of this type of institution was Stieglitz's commercial gallery 291, in operation from 1905 to 1917: in the small rooms he rented on the top floor of 291 Fifth Avenue, he covered the walls in a light gray burlap-type material and usually hung works in an evenly spaced single row (fig. 3).⁶ The minimal decoration was intended to help focus visitors' attention on the art but also created a particular, intimate atmosphere, larger than the works themselves, to which visitors submitted when they entered.

Larger exhibitions of modern art, on the other hand — including the Armory Show and the Society of Independent Artists' exhibition in 1917 — were sometimes installed in spaces recalling the grand galleries of such Beaux Arts institutions as New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.⁷ In many Beaux Arts museums before World War I, galleries of paintings were hung following a centuries-old salon-style formula: canvases were stacked on the wall, rather than hung in a single row, and were arranged by size and shape to create large, roughly symmetrical patterns. Exhibitions of modern art such as the Armory Show, held in a large, vaulted space, followed this practice, clustering the new canvases in ways that resonated with the display of older, more established works (fig. 4).

In the years before the *International Exhibition* in Brooklyn, the Société Anonyme made use of both of these exhibition practices. The installations at its first exhibition space, at 19 East 47th Street, fell squarely within the first display trope (see fig. 5 in Gross's introductory essay in the present volume). Dreier often described this gallery as an "experimental" museum, implying that within its walls, established precedents for the display and reception of art would be set aside in pursuit of new paradigms.⁸ The two rented rooms were decidedly domestic in scale: a floor plan labels the larger room 21'7" by 15'2" and the smaller room 14'7" by 15'6". Each had an 8'10" ceiling, a fireplace, and windows.⁹ Despite the small space, the works on display seem not to have been clustered tightly. Judging from exhibition checklists that include only sixteen to twenty works, it is likely that Dreier and Marcel Duchamp, head of the exhibitions committee, preferred to show fewer works with more wall space for each.¹⁰ The space, like that at 291, encouraged viewers to examine the art closely.

In addition to its air of unhurried contemplation, the gallery on East 47th Street embodied the first, Stieglitz-type display of modern art in its decoration: Duchamp covered the walls with a bluish-white oilcloth, its light tint reminiscent of the muted tones at 291, which he believed created a "neutral" background for the art.¹¹ For the Société's inaugural exhibition, in 1920, he outfitted the picture frames with lace paper. These quirky elements turned the gallery itself into an artwork: the art no longer was located simply in the canvases hung on the walls but rather comprised the entire atmosphere of the room. These decorating choices also instigated a quintessential Dada challenge to art-viewing precedent: the oilcloth walls created an almost industrial backdrop for the art, and the lace transformed the picture frames from props conferring (masculine) importance and establishment into ephemeral (feminine) accessories.

By the spring of 1921 the finances of the Société Anonyme were precarious, and Dreier was temporarily forced to close the East 47th Street gallery. In search of alternative venues, she contacted several museums, hoping to find institutions that would broaden the audience of the Société Anonyme and also confer on it an impi-



fig. 3
Alfred Stieglitz's 291, c. 1906. Installation view. Alfred Stieglitz/Georgia O'Keeffe Archive. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library



fig. 4
Armory Show, 1913. Installation view. Image courtesy of the Walt Kuhn, Kuhn family papers and Armory Show records, 1882–1966, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

matur of legitimacy. In shifting from a small space to larger museums, the radical art of the Société Anonyme also left behind the self-conscious, intense artistic atmosphere of the first display type and was reconfigured according to the traditions of the second, salon-style display type.

The largest Société Anonyme exhibition held in these years — in fact, its largest until the Brooklyn show — consisted of fifty-nine works by thirty-two artists and took place in Massachusetts, at the Worcester Art Museum in November and December 1921. Although one critic called this “the most radical show ever held in the land of the Pilgrims,” photographs of the exhibition reveal an intriguing tension between the radical art and a fairly conservative installation (figs. 5, 6).¹² The works were hung predominantly in a single row — a feature atypical of salon-style arrangements but one that had, in fact, been the standard practice at the Worcester Museum since its opening, in 1898.¹³ In its presentation the Société Anonyme show did not look remarkably different from exhibitions of Barbizon landscape painting or Renaissance art held at the museum. The gallery itself contained several traditional architectural elements: a neoclassical molding framed the top of the space, while a dado rail anchored the lower section of the wall and created a barrier below which the art could not be hung. The paintings were placed very close together and were arranged symmetrically, with the largest works at the walls’ centers and corners. Whereas in the New York gallery visitors had been encouraged to consider the artworks in depth, in an intimate, enveloping environment, at the Worcester show visitors were presented with a dense

fig. 5

Société Anonyme exhibition, Worcester Art Museum, November–December 1921. Installation view. Katherine S. Dreier Papers/Société Anonyme Archive. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library



arrangement and were invited (as the gallery couches indicate) to view the art from a distance at which its larger hanging pattern would be evident. At the Worcester Museum, then, modern art was presented as readily fitting into the established structures of the art-historical canon.

THE INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITION OF MODERN ART

The *International Exhibition of Modern Art* reveals much about the aspirations and beliefs of Dreier and her cohort. Evaluated according to the terms of such earlier displays as the East 47th Street space and the Worcester Art Museum, the installation can be analyzed as Dreier's attempt to forge a union between the contemplative yet rebellious atmosphere of a small gallery and the establishment grandeur of a major museum. Further, the selection of works for the 1926 exhibition can be understood as the consequence of the unique collaborative character of the Société Anonyme as an organization. Finally, the specific features of the installation — both its unifying single-row hang in the main gallery and the domestic-scale rooms holding smaller works — should be seen as a product of Dreier's philosophical approach to modern art. In each of these respects — its relationship to installation practices, its diverse aesthetics, and the driving force of Dreier's ideas — the Brooklyn show made important contributions to the concurrent discourse of modern art, setting precedents for some better-known collections of art and providing essential counterpoints to others.

fig. 6

Société Anonyme exhibition, Worcester Art Museum, November–December 1921. Installation view. Katherine S. Dreier Papers/Société Anonyme Archive. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library



The Installation

Dreier's arrangement of artworks in the Brooklyn exhibition represented a surprising convergence of the Société Anonyme's first installation — the small, intensive modern-art space at East 47th Street — and the salon-style arrangement exemplified at the Worcester Art Museum. The physical space that the show occupied at the Brooklyn Museum (see fig. 2) shared many features with the Beaux Arts architecture of the Worcester museum: the hall was monumental in scale, with tall ceilings and vast overhead lights that cast a bright, even glow across the entire show.¹⁴ A neoclassical cornice crowned the space, and a second narrow molding ran along the wall at approximately two-thirds of the wall height. This second molding formed an edge for a muted wall covering that was installed as a backdrop for the works of art; it created a kind of intermediate ceiling height, keyed to human scale, that kept the grand space from overwhelming visitors.¹⁵ The large room was subdivided by a series of partitions that, while not extending the full height to the ceiling, configured the room in a conventional enfilade (fig. 7). The enfilade — a progression of rooms opening one onto another, the doorways following a single axis — was a typical motif of the Beaux Arts museum, copied from earlier European museums, such as the Louvre, that had previously been palaces.¹⁶

While the architectural frame of the *International Exhibition* had an unmistakably grand, public scale, elements of the installation recalled more intimate displays of modern art. The paintings were hung in a single row, with more space between them than at Worcester. While some bays were anchored by a large, central canvas (such as Johannes Molzahn's *Family Portrait II* in fig. 8), others seem to have had no clear focal work, appearing as a simple array (as in the sequence of Béla Kádár and Campendonk canvases in fig. 9). Most important, perhaps, was the absence of a dado rail, which allowed Dreier to hang the paintings at any height she wished. Whereas Joseph Stella's large *Battle Lights, Coney Island, Mardi Gras* (1913–14), anchored along the dado rail, had towered over visitors to the Worcester show (see fig. 5), in the *International Exhibition* his equally large *Brooklyn Bridge* (1918–20) was hung low to the ground (see fig. 2). It still loomed large, but it was placed so that viewers could examine many parts of the canvas closely, its cluster of vanishing points, at about eye level, palpably pulling one into its vortex of light and color. By hanging large works closer to the ground and allowing more space between them, Dreier created a series of intimate viewing zones. Her exhibition, then, had the scale and legitimizing architectural frame of an established public salon — it was, as she called it, “monumental” — while simultaneously importing the contemplative, immersing mode of aesthetic experience fostered at her smaller gallery.¹⁷

It is worth noting that Dreier's successful negotiation of these two distinct modes of displaying art — intimate versus public, detailed scrutiny versus grand effects, modernist rebellion versus establishment masters — was perhaps the first of its kind in the United States. Although her innovation has been overlooked, it must have been an inspiration for the young Alfred H. Barr, Jr., who attended the *International Exhibition* as a professor at Wellesley College and would become, in 1929, the founding director of The Museum of Modern Art.¹⁸ Barr's museum lacked the funds to build its flagship modernist home until 1939, and during its first decade it occupied a series of fairly conservative spaces; rather than minimize the antimodern elements of these early architectural frames, Barr carefully balanced them against a spaced-out, single-row hang (fig. 10) recalling Dreier's arrangements for the Société Anonyme.¹⁹ This hybrid exhibition style was promptly forgotten when MOMA opened its new building, but it contributed significantly to the museum's success by presenting often unfamiliar art within a familiar structure of visual cues.



fig. 7
International Exhibition of Modern Art, organized by Katherine S. Dreier and the Société Anonyme, Brooklyn Museum, November 1926–January 1927. Installation view. Katherine S. Dreier Papers/Société Anonyme Archive. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library



fig. 8
International Exhibition of Modern Art, organized by Katherine S. Dreier and the Société Anonyme, Brooklyn Museum, November 1926–January 1927. Installation view. Katherine S. Dreier Papers/Société Anonyme Archive. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library



fig. 9
International Exhibition of Modern Art, organized by Katherine S. Dreier and the Société Anonyme, Brooklyn Museum, November 1926–January 1927. Installation view. Katherine S. Dreier Papers/Société Anonyme Archive. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library

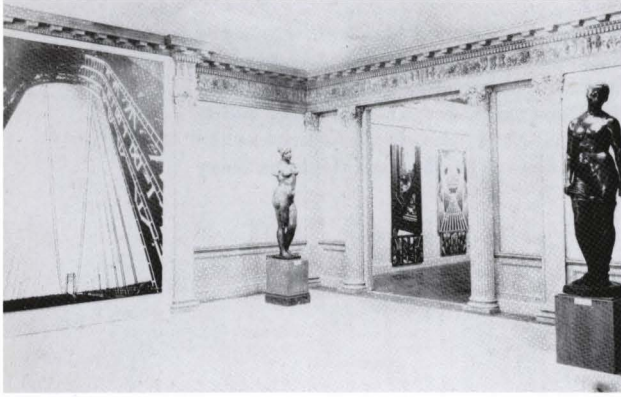


fig. 10
The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53rd Street,
1932. Installation view. The Museum of Modern
Art Archives

The Diverse Voices of the Société Anonyme

In addition to its innovative hanging strategy, the *International Exhibition* offered a selection of modernist art of unprecedented diversity. Although Dreier installed the exhibition, and was thus responsible for the way the public experienced the art, she was eager to explain that the selection of works was the consequence of conversations she had shared with a wide range of European artists over the course of a lengthy scouting trip during the spring and summer of 1926. In the foreword to the exhibition catalogue, she thanked, among others, Duchamp, who had accompanied her in Paris and Italy; Fernand Léger, who had shown her the work of his best students in Paris; and Kurt Schwitters, who had introduced her to the community of abstract artists in Hannover. She emphasized that all of these figures were artists and asserted that the resulting selection of works was infused with the high standards of creativity and expressiveness that only artists could fully judge in one another. The exhibition, she explained, was “not the work of one person, but really represents the modern group of Europe, for my long experience and personal friendship with many of these artists made it possible for me to turn to them in all friendliness and ask their aid, which they gave with a generosity which only artists extend to each other, when the aim is art and not personal advancement.”²⁰

An exhibition of modern art curated by a modern artist — or a group of modern artists — was not without precedent in the United States: not only had the progressive painters Arthur B. Davies and Walt Kuhn jointly decided which works to include in the Armory Show thirteen years earlier, but Stieglitz himself had first developed his reputation as a practitioner of an avant-garde art form, photography. Dreier consulted far more artists, however, than had been involved in either of these two venues. The result of her far-reaching contacts and open mind was an exhibition that gathered, as described by one critic, a daunting, if energizing, array of modern art:

Despite our earnest efforts, the constructivists, the suprematists, the exponents of the *Intérieurs Mécaniques* and *Intérieurs Métaphysiques* — even the clarificationists of Holland, — began after a time to blend into a huge kaleidoscope, shifting from one colorful and entrancing pattern to another, until finally sensations of form and color became blurred. There is perhaps no way to remedy this condition save repeated visits to the Museum.²¹

Among the works exemplifying the exhibition’s diversity were paintings by Ragnhild Keyser, Suzanne Phocas, Carl Buchheister, and Finnur Jónsson. Keyser, a Norwegian artist studying with Léger, had shown several works in Paris during the spring and summer of 1926, when Dreier was in the city scouting new art. Through Léger, Dreier had invited Keyser to participate in the upcoming show. Her paintings in the *International Exhibition*, such as *Composition I* (1926; fig. 11), reflect the tutelage of the Purists and testify to Dreier’s esteem for Léger. Working with a group of objects that included a ladder-back chair, a vase, and a plaster torso, Keyser simplifies the forms into a flattened geometric pattern; all that remains of the chair are a few abbreviated slats, hovering at right angles to the back stile, and the red seat cushion. The torso has been transformed into a pair of interlocking semicircles. Although the predominant palette of grays, black, and white is more muted than Léger’s, Keyser manages to convey some of the monumentality of her teacher’s work through boldly overlapping shapes, and through such subtle passages as the shaded right edge of the vase in the painting’s lower right.

Dreier also discovered in Paris the work of Phocas, who had made a reputation by painting apparently primitivist works such as *Child with Dog* (1925–26; fig. 12).

Phocas's style was in fact a product of careful cultivation (the rows of curls on the girl's head, and her semicircular eyebrows, in particular owe a debt to Léger).²² But Dreier celebrated such elements as the girl's awkward pose and the dog's weirdly triangular fur, believing that Phocas had achieved an honest vision that, while different from Léger's and Keyser's, was equally important. In the exhibition catalogue she asserted that Phocas "was so absolutely unspoiled in her sincerity [that] the naive purity of her work is part of her own personality."²³

Dreier also used her contacts to learn of new artists in Germany. Schwitters introduced her to the radically nonobjective work of a group of abstract artists based in Hannover, including Buchheister. When Dreier met him and decided to include his work in the Brooklyn show, Buchheister was actively involved with an international coterie of Constructivist artists, including fellow Brooklyn exhibitors Lissitzky and László Moholy-Nagy. Such works as *White with Black Wedge* (1931; fig. 13) resemble those Buchheister contributed in 1926. The abstract arrangement of shapes has no pictorial depth, yet the sharp point of the black wedge assumes an animated, dramatic quality, as if it were propelled into the world of the canvas by an unseen force to the right. As it enters the painting, the black meets the resistance of a field of white sand, which both adds texture to the work and acts as an imported, three-dimensional reference to the real world of construction and labor. Buchheister's radical principles come through in his artist's statement for the Brooklyn catalogue: "Do you know a method how to shake abstract pictures out of one's sleeve? It cannot be done — therefore, one has to work like a Philistine — consecutively — constantly work."²⁴

Dreier's well-established affinity for the expressionistic, spiritualist vein in modern art found a new outlet in the work of the Icelandic artist Jónsson. She discovered him at Der Sturm, her favorite gallery in Berlin and a highly respected institution of modern art. Jónsson was represented in the *International Exhibition by Woman at the Card Table* (c. 1918–25; fig. 14), a Cubist-influenced work of highly saturated colors. The mechanomorphic female figure, seated at a table that seems to fall out of her pictorial world into a separate three-dimensional space, is surrounded by a fractured array of infused colors (sweeping in pinks and blues through the lower left of the canvas, fanning out in blues and browns before her Brancusi-like face) and luminescent, biomorphic clouds of blue, gray, and, behind her head, pink fading to deep red.

The polyphony of the Société Anonyme's approach to modern art can also be seen in the extravagant "special catalog," *Modern Art*, that accompanied the *International Exhibition*. In Dreier's mind the catalogue was an essential complement to the exhibition; while the show was necessarily temporary, *Modern Art* would provide a permanent record of the event.²⁵ This 124-page book was designed by Constantin Alajálov, a Russian émigré artist living in New York, in close consultation with Dreier, who believed the book should embrace modernism in an unusual, aggressive graphic design. Alajálov's design accomplished precisely that: throughout, the text is framed with bold black rectangles; a simplified yet legible map introduces each country, key cities and boundaries marked by dramatic lines of longitude and latitude; and the text itself shifts shape over the course of the book, expanding and retracting like construction blocks in an elaborate edifice (figs. 15, 16). In its bold design, *Modern Art* contributed yet another modernist voice to the art in the *International Exhibition* and can be compared with such contemporary ventures in book production as the two influential catalogues produced by the *Little Review* magazine, *International Theatre Exposition* (1926) and *Machine-Age Exposition* (1927).²⁶

Modern Art also exemplified the multiple voices of the Société Anonyme in its content. Dreier organized the catalogue geographically, grouping artists by their coun-



fig. 11
Ragnhild Keyser. *Composition 1*. 1926. Oil on canvas,
51 x 25⁵/₈ in. (129.5 x 65.1 cm)



fig. 12
Suzanne Phocas. *Child with Dog*. 1925–26. Oil on unprepared canvas, 29⁷/₈ x 39³/₈ in. (75.9 x 100 cm)

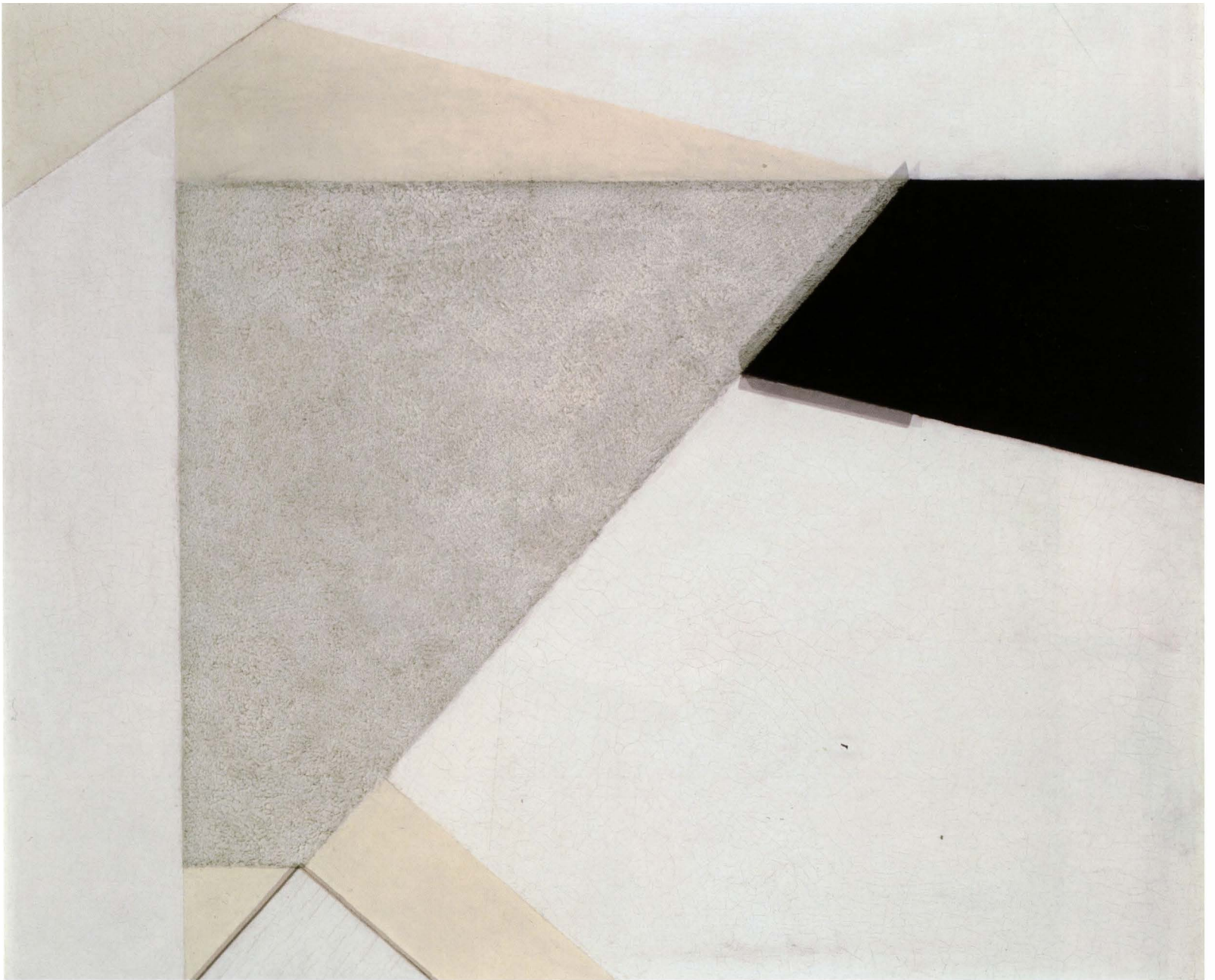


fig. 13
Carl Buchheister. *White with Black Wedge*. 1931. Oil,
enamel, sand, and wood on panel, 25 x 30¹/₈ x 1³/₈ in.
(63.5 x 76.5 x 3.5 cm)



fig. 14
Finnur Jónsson. *Woman at the Card Table*. c. 1918–25.
Oil and gold paint on burlap, 25³/₄ x 20⁵/₁₆ in.
(64.1 x 51.6 cm)

try of residence. This system differed from the exhibition installation — in which works were arranged without regard to nationality — and resulted in a narrative comprising protagonists with distinct national identities. These protagonists were further individualized in the actual pages of the catalogue, where each was represented visually by both a portrait photograph and a reproduction of his or her art (see fig. 15). Dreier wrote brief summaries of the biography and philosophy of many of the artists but left several to speak for themselves. In addition to Buchheister's statement, for example, she included the words of the U.S. artist Paul Gaultois, who exemplified a certain America-first, boosterish rebellion common among his compatriots: "I am self-taught. I was born in the Middle West, much to my delight. I may mention I have very little desire to go to Europe, as America seems to possess much more than I can really know."²⁷ An excerpt from a 1920 manifesto by Antoine Pevsner and Naum Gabo demonstrated a concern with the abstract, and perhaps fourth-dimensional, potential of sculpture: "We deny the static as the only measure of rhythm. We insist there is a new element in the pictorial arts. We insist that kinetics is a new element in art. It is the foundation of the outward reality of our time."²⁸ The effect of multiple, overlapping personalities and artistic agendas was enhanced by the selected reprinting of artists' signatures (see fig. 16). The barely legible scrawls of Fritz Stuckenberg, John Covert, and Paul Klee, among others, ensured that readers appreciated the broad scope of the modern art movement.

Katherine Dreier's Vision

While the aesthetic and philosophical points of view represented in the Brooklyn show were unprecedented in their variety, Dreier repeatedly argued that the collection possessed a unifying theme. For her, the defining feature of modern art — present in all of the works in the show — was its ability to offer a profound interpretation of the relationship between the individual and the larger contemporary world. In an era of modern machinery, modern communication, and modern transportation, people were at once more readily in contact with one another and more readily alienated from the patterns of life that had defined society for centuries. This crisis of the individual was tinged with larger questions about the existence of spiritual forces that might offer an enlivening presence in daily life.²⁹ Dreier could be maddeningly oblique as she tried to "explain" the meaning of modern art to the public, but in her writings relating to the Brooklyn show she continually connected the unifying power of art to the unifying power of spiritual belief. In an article for the *Brooklyn Museum Quarterly* published before the exhibition opened, she explained that modern art might look different from other artworks in the museum because it concerned itself with issues that had no preexisting visual vocabulary:

Art is never unconscious, for it is the highest expression of the most developed and conscious soul — the seer. *It must*, therefore, be prophetic. The form art chooses to express itself in, depends upon the century in which it makes its appearance....

Therefore, the form which Modern Art has chosen in which to express itself had to be a new form. For to use a parable that Christ used, one cannot put new wine into old skins, for the wine in expanding will burst the skins. Art had reached its completion in the forms of the past, therefore, the artist with a prophetic vision had to seek new forms in which to express the psychic emotions of his day.³⁰

Dreier pursued these allusions in her impassioned introduction to *Modern Art*. Celebrating the dedication of so many artists to the exhibition, she declared that "only cosmic forces can bring forth such a response." She then made her goal explicit: "Our work is to preserve the energy of art and direct it to future fruition. To encourage artists



fig. 15
Katherine S. Dreier. *Modern Art*, 1926. Designed by Constantin Alajálov. Page 68

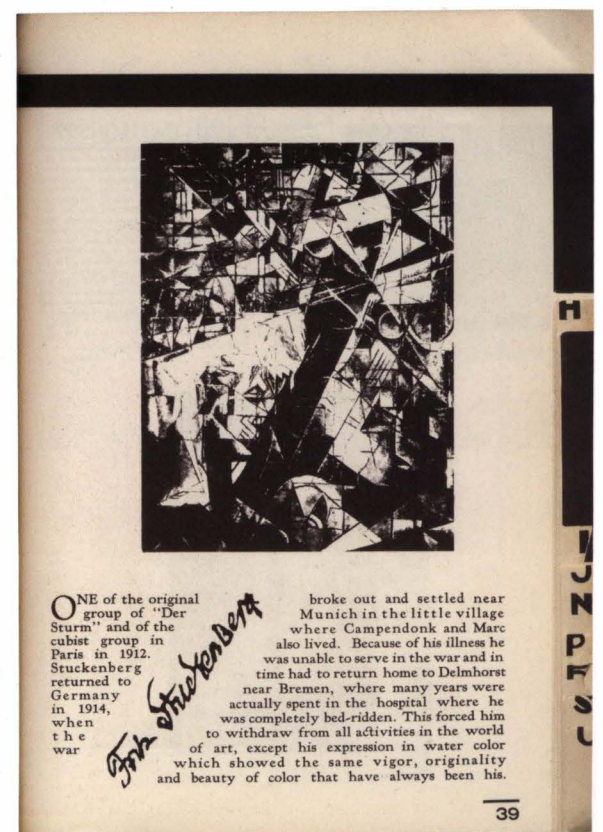


fig. 16
Katherine S. Dreier. *Modern Art*, 1926. Designed by Constantin Alajálov. Page 39

to be true to themselves and the vision that is God given.” Finally, although the voices in the show were many and varied, Dreier proposed that her vision of modern art “is bigger than any one nationality and carries the follower into a large cosmic movement which unites him in thought and feeling with groups throughout the world.”³¹

Dreier’s single-row hanging at the Brooklyn Museum reflected her ideas about the universal nature of modern art in two ways. First, in her effort to demonstrate the “large cosmic movement which unites” artists from all countries, she hung the paintings uniformly throughout the galleries, with no regard to nationality or even to groupings of an artist’s own works. This arrangement contrasted markedly with the emphatic internationalism of the *Modern Art* catalogue (and with Dreier’s own tendency to underscore, in her publicity statements, the large number of nations represented).³² The hang promoted the sense that these diverse works were equal in importance, and brought to the foreground surprisingly resonant similarities in composition and palette. Speaking to a Brooklyn civic club in the museum galleries, Dreier reminded her audience that the countries represented in the exhibition “were shut off from each other’s influence during the period of the terrible world war. Bearing this in mind, it is all the more amazing to see how united the underlying thought is and how united we fundamentally are.” Explaining her installation design, she continued, “I have purposely, therefore, interchanged the nations in hanging to bring out this idea of the close unity that binds us.”³³

Second, Dreier’s hang encouraged viewers to engage each individual work as a complex, philosophically resonant statement in its own right. By leaving space between the artworks — allowing each to be contemplated separately — and by ignoring some of the rules of symmetrical hanging, she prevented the art from being subsumed into a larger decorative scheme. Dreier was aware that the flatness of abstract art made it seem merely ornamental to some viewers, and her installation seems to have been calculated to avoid any of the superficial undertones lurking in a salon-style hang. She explained the distinction between decoration and abstraction in several lectures and articles written around the time of the Brooklyn show, for example in describing the Constructivist murals of Willi Baumeister:

To many Abstract Modern Art is simply decorative art. But this is not the case. A decoration must always be flat to be good. A painting must always have depth to be good. This new Division of Color Space breaks up the wall and introduces a vibration which has hitherto not been taken into consideration.³⁴

In avoiding the decorative patterns of salon-style arrangements, Dreier refused to let abstract canvases become swaths of decorative wall covering and insisted on the separateness of each work — insisted on its ability to convey both “depth” and “vibration.”

In addition to the formal galleries, Dreier also had at her disposal four smaller spaces partitioned off at the corners of one of the large galleries (fig. 17). Writing to Duchamp in July 1926, she described these as “four quaint small rooms...[which] will make a charming intimate background for certain pictures and water colors.”³⁵ By September, Dreier’s installation plans for the rooms had become more complex: no longer content to use spaces suggesting domestic intimacy merely in their scale, she had decided to outfit them with furniture in order to demonstrate “how Modern Art looks in the home.” Explicitly attempting to make the displays realistic for the audience she hoped to attract, she chose conservative, period-styled objects: “The more I think of making a selection of furniture which Abram & Straus will have for sale, the more pleased I am with the thought, especially as Abram & Straus is the big store where the big middle class Brooklynites buy.”³⁶



fig. 17
International Exhibition of Modern Art, organized
by Katherine S. Dreier and the Société Anonyme,
Brooklyn Museum, November 1926–January 1927.
Installation view. Katherine S. Dreier Papers/Société
Anonyme Archive. Yale Collection of American Lit-
erature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library



fig. 18
Louis Michel Eilshemius. *The Pool*. c. 1920. Oil on
printed sheet of music paper, laid down on laminated
chipboard, 10^{11/16} x 13^{5/8} in. (27.1 x 34.6 cm)

Dreier's motivation for displaying modern art in models of the home was in part a consequence of her belief in art's "psychic" value. To her mind the public could best learn from this work — created by artists who had perceived a "cosmic force ... [which] clarifies his vision and sweeps him upwards to greater heights" — through sustained, intimate daily encounters.³⁷ As she explained in a lecture of 1930, the home was the ideal site for such interactions because "the HOME is a woven part of ourselves." Quoting Oswald Spengler, a favorite writer, she stated, "Of all the expressions of race — the purest is the house. ... The prime form of the house is everywhere a product of feeling and of growth."³⁸ It was thus in the home, where cultural identity was so firmly rooted, that the philosophical investigations of modern art would have the greatest impact.

And what art did Dreier deem appropriate for the homes of "middle class Brooklynites"? Among the works hung in these model rooms were an assortment of impressionistic landscapes by American artist (and Société Anonyme favorite) Louis Eilshemius, possibly including *The Pool* (c. 1920; fig. 18).³⁹ While the small size, loose brushwork, and subject matter of this work make it an unsurprising choice to hang in a dining room, other selections for these domestic spaces indicate that Dreier believed in the public's capacity to embrace more extreme art. In the parlor she hung Jacques Villon's etched version of Édouard Manet's famous *Olympia* — a work with an unsettling confrontational glare, despite its figurative realism (fig. 19). In the library she collected at least five of Schwitters's Merz collages, perhaps including *Merz 1003 (Peacock's Tail)* (1924; fig. 20), in which a thin strip of black wood seems to be anchored by a yellow rectangle, forming the vortex of a spiraling array of muted red, gray, black, and white shapes. Additionally outfitted with abstractions by Jean Arp, Baumeister, and David Kakabadzé, the model rooms themselves became works of art within the larger exhibition, spaces meant to open the eyes and, Dreier hoped, the "souls" of Brooklynites.⁴⁰

The year after Dreier's *International Exhibition* opened in Brooklyn, her fellow collector of modern art A. E. Gallatin opened his own permanent space, the Gallery of Living Art, on the campus of New York University. While Gallatin and Dreier shared an interest in exhibiting international avant-garde art and educating the public

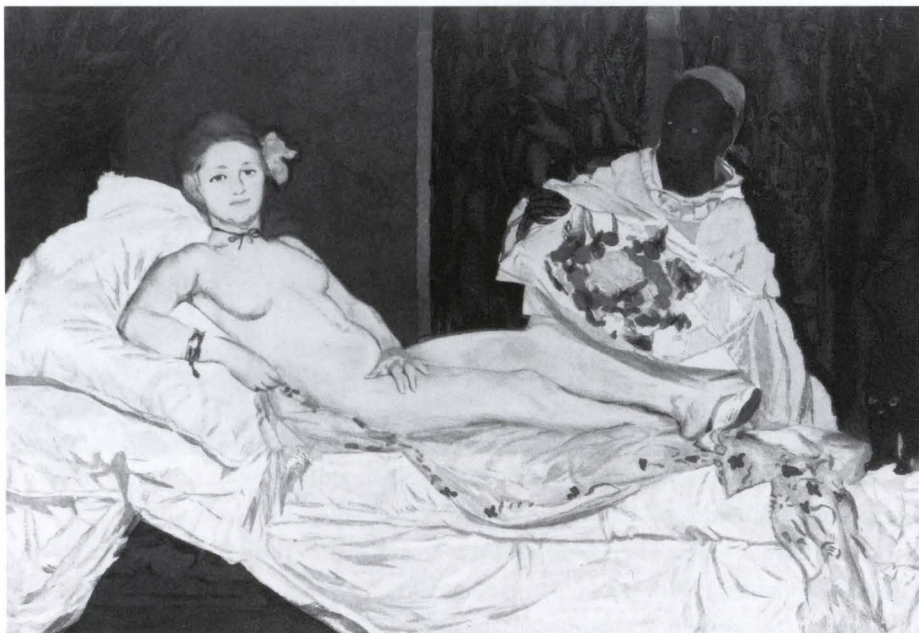


fig. 19
Jacques Villon. After "Olympia" by Manet. 1926.
Color etching, 20⁵/₁₆ x 26¹/₄ in. (51.5 x 66.5 cm)

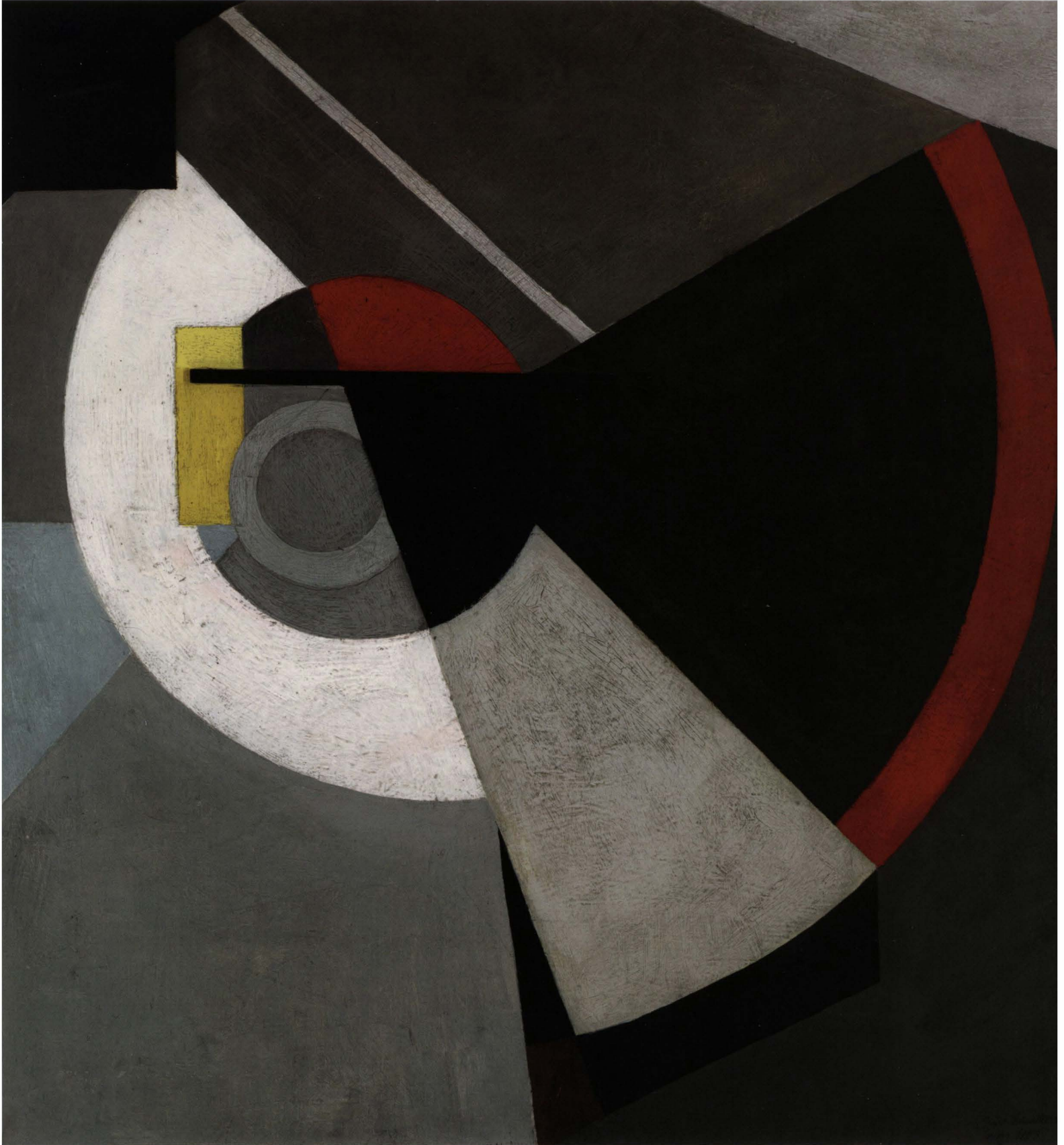


fig. 20
Kurt Schwitters. *Merz 1003 (Peacock's Tail)*. 1924.
Oil and wood on composition board, 28⁷/₈ x 27¹³/₁₆ in.
(72.7 x 70.6 cm)

about it — and preceded The Museum of Modern Art in doing so — their opinions about the significance of modern art were at times diametrically opposed. Both showed the works of Picasso, Braque, Piet Mondrian, Juan Gris, and Arp (among many others), but where Dreier emphasized the philosophical essence that she saw residing in this work, Gallatin consistently highlighted its pictorial innovations. He had been introduced to modern art through the formalist criticism of Clive Bell, and as he built his collection in the late 1920s and early 1930s, he increasingly sought works that embodied formalist sophistication through abstraction.⁴¹ In stark contrast to the ardent passion of Dreier's writings associated with the *International Exhibition*, Gallatin's first elaborate exhibition catalogue, published in 1933, featured a cerebral essay by the young James Johnson Sweeney. Entitled simply "Painting," Sweeney's essay discussed modern art solely in terms of the progressive elimination of pictorial illusionism and the pursuit of flatness and abstraction.⁴²

Just as Gallatin and Dreier approached modern art from different intellectual viewpoints, they also approached the business of hanging differently. For Dreier, the kaleidoscopic mix of works in the Brooklyn show was a conscious strategy to celebrate the diversity of modern art; she would maintain this diversity throughout the remaining years of the Société Anonyme's existence. As Gallatin's collection grew, by contrast, he narrowed his focus to abstract artists, and his hanging style reflected his categorizing impulse: rather than mixing works up, he arranged them according to their mode of abstraction (referring in the 1933 catalogue, for example, to Cubist "groups" organized around Picasso and Braque, and to the Surrealist "group" of Arp and Joan Miró).⁴³ And whereas Dreier used the single-row hang to draw out a fundamental unity in her collection, Gallatin hung his collection in a salon-influenced mode, stacking works and clustering them symmetrically to create groups of related formal elements, distinct from other groups. Ultimately, Dreier's and Gallatin's work as collectors and exhibitors of modern art reveal a dynamic, multifaceted discourse about the meaning of modern art in the years between the world wars.

THE LEGACY OF THE BROOKLYN SHOW

With its vibrant, wide-ranging collection of art, its passionate advocate in the person of Katherine Dreier, and its practical lifestyle displays, the Société Anonyme's *International Exhibition* might be expected to be better known in the American annals of modern art. Although historians must be wary of inferring simple causal relationships, hindsight does offer us a few possible avenues to explore in quest of the Brooklyn show's quick relative disappearance. The most prominent reason can be located in the birth, in 1929, of The Museum of Modern Art. With its hardy financial base and ever-growing team of opinionated scholars, MOMA quickly came to dominate the American modern art scene in the interwar years. Barr and his assistants made use of the discourse that had concerned collectors and artists in the years before MOMA opened: from Dreier, arguably, Barr adopted the pairing of the single-row hang with more conservative, architectural frames, while he shared with Gallatin the impulse to categorize modern art and establish its historical sequence. Stieglitz's intensive artist's space, Dreier's universalizing embrace, and Gallatin's studiousness were all lost in the wake of the new modern museum.

MOMA also offered the public a few things that Dreier in particular could not. First, the museum's major supporters — the Rockefeller family — possessed celebrity as well as wealth, and lent to the institution an incomparable aura of establishment and glamour. Second, with its elite board of trustees and Ivy League-trained director, MOMA promised in its founding documents to provide trustworthy guidance through the confusing waters of modern art. Critics eagerly embraced this proposal, celebrating

the “disinterested committee” and “qualified judges” who would ensure that the museum did not “flood its galleries with the banal and meretricious.”⁴⁴ Their comments indicate a lurking desire to find order in the apparent chaos of new styles and isms — a desire that Dreier did not share. Although she was specific about the qualities she embraced in modern art, she believed that many different kinds of modernism achieved it. In the end she had an inspiringly optimistic view of the public, believing that if individuals were exposed to a sufficiently wide variety of art, they would find works that resonated for them on the “cosmic” level. Perhaps, ultimately, the American public was not entirely ready to take on the challenge of Katherine Dreier and her fellow artists, and to hear the polyphonous voices gathered in the Société Anonyme.

Notes

Epigraph: Box 10, Folder 281, Katherine S. Dreier Papers/Société Anonyme Archive, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

1 Katherine S. Dreier, Foreword to *Modern Art* (New York: Société Anonyme, 1926), p. 1.

2 Dreier, “Lecture on Modern Art with Lantern Slides,” January 28, 1927. Box 46, Folder 1369, Katherine S. Dreier Papers.

3 See Bruce Altshuler, *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition: New Art in the 20th Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 63.

4 Henry McBride, “Modern Art,” *Dial* 83 (July 1927): 86.

5 For trends in France see Martha Ward, “Impressionist Installations and Private Exhibitions,” *Art Bulletin* 73 (December 1991): 599–622.

6 See Sarah Greenough, ed., *Modern Art and America: Alfred Stieglitz and His New York Galleries* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, and Boston: Bulfinch, 2000), and Kristina Wilson, “The Intimate Gallery and the *Equivalents*: Spirituality in the 1920s Work of Stieglitz,” *Art Bulletin* 85 (December 2003): 752–55.

7 See Francis M. Naumann, “The Big Show: The First Exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists, Part I,” *Artforum* 17, no. 2 (February 1979): 34–53.

8 Dreier, letter to William Henry Fox, director of the Brooklyn Museum, July 19, 1926. Box 6, Folder 152, Katherine S. Dreier Papers.

9 Gallery blueprint. Box 90, Folder 2322, Katherine S. Dreier Papers.

10 See exhibition paraphernalia in Box 87, Katherine S. Dreier Papers, as well as Robert L. Herbert, Introduction to *The Société Anonyme and the Dreier Bequest at Yale University: A Catalogue Raisonné*, ed. Robert L. Herbert, Eleanor S. Apter, and Elise K. Kenney (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 5.

11 Duchamp described the wall covering in a letter of 1922: “The overall thing looks very good especially since these walls made of pale blue green almost white oilcloth — neutral.” Duchamp, letter to Jacques and Gaby Villon, December 25, c. 1922, in *Affect/Marcel: The Selected Correspondence of Marcel Duchamp*, ed. Francis M. Naumann and Hector Obalk, trans. Jill Taylor (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000), p. 127. In his Introduction to *Société Anonyme*, Herbert mentions that Man Ray “arranged the blue lighting” for this first exhibition (p. 4). Man Ray, in his autobiography, says that he installed “blue daylight bulbs” in the gallery, which would

have created the effect of clear daylight, not blue light. Man Ray, *Self Portrait* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1963), p. 79. McBride described a “pale bluish white oilcloth,” supporting Duchamp’s description of the wall covering. Henry McBride, “News and Views on Art, Including the Clearing House for Works of the Cubists,” *New York Sun and Herald*, May 16, 1920. It is unlikely, then, that the light bulbs created a blue light; more probably the oilcloth had a slight blue tint. My thanks to Jennifer Gross and Kristin Henry for directing me to these references.

12 Quotation from unidentified clipping, c. 1921. Box 89, Folder 2311, Katherine S. Dreier Papers.

13 Installation photographs of the first exhibitions held at the Worcester Art Museum depict a single-row hang. See photographs in the Worcester Art Museum Archives.

14 Fox wrote to Dreier that the exhibition “will be arranged in one of the top-lighted galleries, with the over-flow, if any, in a side-lighted gallery.” February 25, 1926. Box 6, Folder 152, Katherine S. Dreier Papers.

15 Although the extent to which the galleries were custom-fitted for the Société Anonyme show remains unknown, Dreier did brag to Walter Arensberg that “the Brooklyn Museum is doing its part in a most royal manner and is giving me all the space I need, besides doing over the rooms for this Exhibition.” Dreier, letter to Arensberg, July 28, 1926. Box 2, Folder 56, Katherine S. Dreier Papers.

16 See Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach, “The Universal Survey Museum,” *Art History* 3 (December 1980): 448–69.

17 Dreier, letter to Fox, January 31, 1927. Box 6, Folder 154, Katherine S. Dreier Papers.

18 See Sybil Gordon Kantor, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr., and the Intellectual Origins of the Museum of Modern Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), p. 112.

19 On the Fifth Avenue space see Terence Riley, *The International Style: Exhibition 15 and The Museum of Modern Art* (New York: Columbia Books on Architecture, 1992). The Museum of Modern Art rented its first gallery space in the Heckscher Building, a Fifth Avenue skyscraper. The Société Anonyme had rented space in the same building in 1924 (see Tashjian’s essay in the present volume), which Alfred Barr, then a graduate student at Harvard, may have known. On the Rockefeller brownstone, see Russell Lynes, *Good Old Modern: An Intimate Portrait of The Museum of Modern Art* (New York: Atheneum, 1973), p. 96; William Rice Pearsall, “Changing a Residence into an Art Museum,” *Archi-*

- tectural Record* 71 (May 1932): 349; and Kristina Wilson, "Exhibiting Modern Times: American Modernism, Popular Culture, and the Art Exhibit, 1925–1935," Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 2001, chapter 3.
- 20** Dreier, *Modern Art*, p. 4; Ruth L. Bohan, *The Société Anonyme's Brooklyn Exhibition: Katherine Dreier and Modernism in America* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982), pp. 45–49.
- 21** "Société Anonyme's Exciting Show," *American Art News*, November 27, 1926, rpt. in *Brooklyn Museum Quarterly*, January 1927, p. 20. Box 88, Folder 2272, Katherine S. Dreier Papers.
- 22** Suzanne Phocas was married to the Cubist Jean Metzinger. See Herbert Apter, and Kenney, *Société Anonyme*, p. 526.
- 23** Dreier, *Modern Art*, p. 25.
- 24** Carl Buchheister, *ibid.*, p. 41.
- 25** Bohan discusses the development and content of *Modern Art* in detail in chapter 6 of *The Société Anonyme's Brooklyn Exhibition*.
- 26** Frederick Kiesler and Jane Heap, *International Theatre Exposition* (New York: Little Review, 1926), and Heap et al., *Machine-Age Exposition* (New York: Little Review, 1927).
- 27** Paul Gaultois, in Dreier, *Modern Art*, p. 112.
- 28** Antoine Pevsner and Naum Gabo, *ibid.*, p. 74.
- 29** Many of Dreier's avant-garde compatriots, notably Wassily Kandinsky, were interested in spiritualism and mysticism in the decades before World War II. See, e.g., Louise Welch, *Orage with Gurdjieff in America* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), and Wilson, "The Intimate Gallery and the *Equivalents*."
- 30** Dreier, "Regarding Modern Art," *Brooklyn Museum Quarterly* 13 (October 1926): 117–18.
- 31** Dreier, *Modern Art*, pp. 5, 1.
- 32** Bohan, *The Société Anonyme's Brooklyn Exhibition*, p. 51. *Modern Art* identified twenty-three nations that had nurtured and produced modern artists. Some of the attributions are puzzling, however: the Japanese-American artist Yasuo Kuniyoshi, for example, is listed as being from Japan, when all his artistic training, and his career, were undertaken in the United States.
- 33** Dreier, "Lecture to the Brooklyn Civitas Club," 1926. Box 46, Folder 1368, Katherine S. Dreier Papers.
- 34** Variations on this statement appear in the exhibition catalogue for the traveling version of the *International Exhibition* at the Albright Art Gallery, Buffalo (*International Exhibition of Modern Art Assembled by the Société Anonyme* [Buffalo: Buffalo Academy of Fine Arts and the Albright Art Gallery, 1927], p. 9), and in the article "Explaining Modern Art," *American Art Student*, March 1927. See Box 87, Folder 2255, and Box 42, Folder 1234, Katherine S. Dreier Papers.
- 35** Dreier, letter to Duchamp, July 20, 1926. Box 12, Folder 317, Katherine S. Dreier Papers.
- 36** Dreier, letter to Paul Woodward, September 14, 1926. Box 6, Folder 153, Katherine S. Dreier Papers.
- 37** Dreier, *Modern Art*, p. 1.
- 38** Dreier, "The Home and Its Changes," lecture delivered on October 28, 1930. Box 46, Folder 1364, Katherine S. Dreier Papers.
- 39** Louis Eilshemius's *Spirit of the Pool* is included in a section of the catalogue entitled "List of Pictures Hung but Not Catalogued." The specific works on view, then, are sometimes difficult to confirm.
- 40** Dreier, "Lecture to Members of the School Art League," delivered at the Brooklyn Museum, November 20, 1926. Box 46, Folder 1367, Katherine S. Dreier Papers.
- 41** See Gail Stavitsky, "A.E. Gallatin's Gallery and Museum of Living Art (1927–1943)," *American Art* 7 (Spring 1993): 48, 50.
- 42** See *ibid.*, p. 54, and James Johnson Sweeney, "Painting," in *Gallery of Living Art: A.E. Gallatin Collection* (New York: Gallery of Living Art, 1933), n.p.
- 43** A.E. Gallatin, "The Plan of the Gallery of Living Art," in *Gallery of Living Art*, n.p.
- 44** Forbes Watson, "To Our New Museum," *The Arts* 16 (September 1929): 46; A. Philip McMahon, "A New Museum of Modern Art," *Parnassus* 1 (October 1929): 31; James W. Lane, "The Moderns in America," *Commonweal*, January 1, 1930, p. 254.