

GENDERED AND CLASSED AESTHETICS: TRANSNATIONAL WOMEN'S ART AS SEEN IN MODOTTI, IZQUIERDO, AND BRENNER

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106



[Kodak advertisement. 1920]

Traversing borders and breaking boundaries, the art of the 1930s Americas rushed out, fomenting a revolution of culture and class to become a transnational renaissance. Between the Mexican Muralists and the North American New Deal workers, a government-sanctioned culture blossomed, asking for each individual's participation. The peoples of the Americas began racing toward or against indigenismo and industrialization, arguing about the role of the artist in politics and outside the mar-

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ketplace, and debating the role of the individual in the traditional world of folk arts and the global socioeconomic sphere. It was revolutionary, it was romantic. Yet what remains silenced is the role of women's art in this multivalent discussion, particularly that generated by working class and immigrant women artists, and the third space created by their radical gendered and classed aesthetics.

Women's participatory role in cultural production has been multilayered and abundant, yet it has historically been relegated to a static space in the otherwise progressive genre of art: woman as (sculpted) subject, woman as (pedestal-ed) object, woman as (inspiring) muse, woman as (romanticized) aesthetic. Within this, however, there are two components that intertwine to create a new thread: the woman's body as canvas *and* conveyer of politicized art, and the woman's gaze as genderized artist in a marketplace that consumed, re-produced, and transacted her image. When women artists appropriated their own image they became merchants in the global transaction of re-production. This re-production was not centered in the woman's body, as her 19th century biological determinisms would have her, and further it was not confined to societal demarcations of ideological and moral expectations as cultural carrier. Women's artistic re-production was instead positioned within the power designated in a woman's gaze upon her own image, re-cast into the public sphere, and thereby allowing for gendered political influences and social consequences. Women reconfigured the ways in which their gender had been historically characterized through a specifically aesthetic understanding.

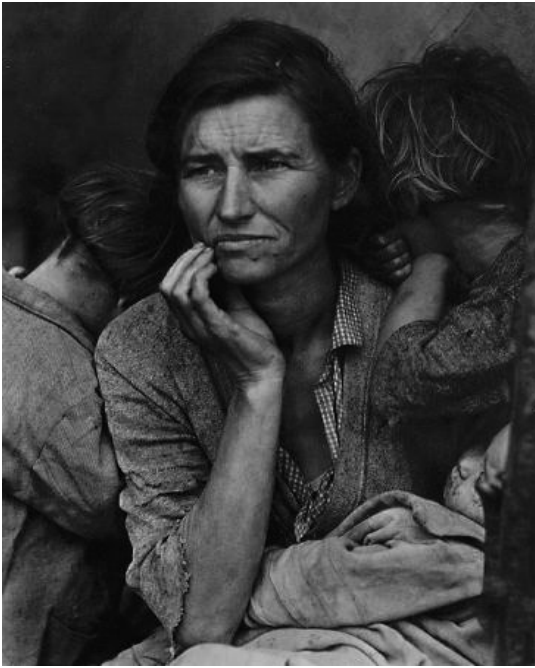
107



[Celia Bedford French. "Fish Women." 1930]

The marketplace of the 1930s was so conditioned by the political climate that women's art was now not defined and dismissed solely by the private inclinations of hobby and habit, but demanded to be understood publicly as a gendered, classed, ethnicized, and politicized discourse of the public and transnational world. These gendered and classed texts have yet to be fully explored for their political and social importance. Hoping to enter this discourse, I am defining "gendered aesthetic" and "classed aesthetic" as an artistic text that deals with gender or class from a specifically gender- or class-conscious creator; more often than not it is a woman artist of working-class or immigrant background who is coming from that intentionally defined space. The artists and their work are therefore generally attempting to negotiate such strictly socially defined terms as "gender" and "class" in the mutable and fluid way in which they are internalized individually.

108



[Dorothea Lange. "Migrant Mother." California, 1936].

Such internalizations of politicized spaces are especially poignant for the transnational women artists working in the 1930s. Deborah Barker in *Aesthetics and Gender in American Literature* writes,

The same evolutionary theories of aesthetics that were used to marginalize the woman artist and to question the merit of her original productions were inextricably linked to representations of the "uneducated masses" (whether lower-class European immigrants

or recently migrated southern blacks) as a hindrance to cultural evolution. According to these theories, the woman artist was perceived as lacking the creative genius to produce original works of art, while the immigrant masses were perceived as lacking the aesthetic judgment to recognize and appreciate “true” art. Therefore, if the woman artist attempted to promote her own work, she contributed to the devolution of artistic standards, creating an unrefined mass audience for her inferior work. (15)

Society’s linking of women and the “uneducated masses” in the realm of cultural production creates a new way to thread together class, ethnicity, and gender, and to see what the social, political, and personal responses such a collision brings about.

There are many ways that we can read this transformation externally, in the ways that the public responded to women’s first gallery shows, or the ways in which certain images of certain women were appropriated and held in the dominant culture. We can also see this internally, as represented by the women’s art itself. I have chosen three women in particular, Tina Modotti, Maria Izquierdo and Anita Brenner, to represent this often silenced, complex phenomenon as they claim a pivotal grasp on the tensions, fluidities, and dialogues of an otherwise un-imitated artistic and cultural awakening. All three women negotiated international borders, all participated in politics to varying degrees, and all were read as women before they were read as artists. What connects them is their involvement in politicized arts and their varying degrees of a gender-conscious transnationalism; what separates them is the medium through which they recast the gaze of their sociocultural contexts and whether or not this is consciously represented in their work as a gendered and/or classed aesthetic.

109



[Edward Weston. “Portrait of Tina Modotti.” Mexico, 1920s].

Tina Modotti did not choose the Angel in the House or the New Woman as possible spaces to exist; such binaries would be mundane for such a woman. This bold dismissal of public negotiations of womanhood did not confer revolutionary status on Modotti, instead she became defined by her personal and sexual relationships: Frida Kahlo's friend; Edward Weston's lover; Antonio Mella's conspirator. Her now infamous involvement in Mexican politics, the Muralists' school of art, and a stint as a glamorous Hollywood actress, has led audiences to read Modotti in exactly the way women have been interpreted for years: as an object for romanticized gaze. Yet Modotti began a discussion of her own in the photographs she took and the subjects whose stories she told: a narrative of Mexico at once as politicized and aestheticized as the great revolution would have them. Her work, arguably (even to her I would guess), is gendered and classed, but the more interesting question this raises is about the consequences this multi-textured art may hold for the larger discourses. What does politicized art look like? How do we know when classed art has disassembled old frameworks? And what tools do we need to interpret ethnicized and gendered art? Modotti explains this all to us, just as defiantly as Izquierdo does not.

110



[Modotti. "Workers Parade." Mexico City, 1926]

For Tina Modotti, using the camera was a way to harness her body, a way to harness her gaze, onto a blank page that could speak for her otherwise shy yet sexualized persona. In order to be heard, to be seen, she first felt the need to legitimize camera work, and then, even more defensively, documentary/social realist camera work, to the gen-

eral public. Photography was not a fine art, barely read as an art, and with cheap, mass produced Kodaks, this “democratic” vehicle was soon enough available to make every individual their own personal photographer. This “mass” art form, then, was the chosen medium of realists, of proletariats, of revolutionaries and romantics.

In the 1929 edition of *Mexican Folkways* Modotti joins an argument already in progress: is photography an art, is it a fine art, and is it more or less “real” than painting? She writes, in defense of her craft,

La fotografia, por el hecho mismo de que solo puede ser producida en el presente y basándose en lo que existe objetivamente frente a la cámara, se impone como el medio más satisfactorio de registrar la vida objetiva en todas sus manifestaciones; de allí su valor documental, y a esto se añade sensibilidad y comprensión de asunto, y, sobre todo, una clara orientación del lugar que debe tomar en el campo del desenvolvimiento histórico, creo que el resultado es algo digno de ocupar un puesto en la producción social, a la cual todos debemos contribuir. (198)

Photography, precisely because it can only be produced in the present and because it is based on what exists objectively before the camera, takes its place as the most satisfactory medium for registering objective life in all its aspects, and from this comes its documental value. If to this is added sensibility and understanding and, above all, a clear orientation as to the place it should have in the field of historical development, I believe that the result is something worthy of a place in social production, to which we should all contribute. (198)

111

Modotti aligns photography’s usefulness with its political consequences as much as she creates a correlation between the aesthetic “documentary value” and a corresponding “historical development.” The implications for this are numerous; namely, Modotti raises social realist art to a high art valuation and in so doing requires audiences to reconfigure the woman artist, the consequences of her gaze, and its objective and subjective resultant work.

Judith Davidov in *Women’s Camera Work: Self/Body/Other in American Visual Culture* writes that

[a]lthough women worked in all photographic genres, their subjects were often (unlike their male counterparts who often favored allegorical representations of female nudes) friends and family members; rarely did women hire models. To examine their work—a trove of visual documentation of everyday life that makes a strong case for female agency in the making of (photographic) histories—is to understand the way in which personal and social experiences in this period led women to make visual choices contingent on contexts and relationships. (8-9)

The idea that Modotti is consciously engaged in a *historia grafica* (pictorial history) through the medium of the camera connects simultaneously with her use of indigenous female subjects in a particularly politicized way. This creates not only an innovative gendered approach to the understanding of women as object/subject but also a new way in which to understand the historical process that appropriates such images. In other words, women’s cultural work creates not only a new frame-

work by which to understand women and art, but their visual work also creates *a new language* by which to translate their internal negotiations of external social phenomenon. What this means for certain women in particular—ethnic, working-class, immigrant, or all of these—adds still another layer of communication, and yet another language we are struggling to learn.

112



[Modotti. "Woman with Olla." 1926]

Modotti shot "Woman with Olla" in 1926. Technically, it is perfect: the round, wet olla paralleled with the woman's angular, bent arm, a slight quarter profile being the only visible resonance of her identity, her obscured individuality in a distinctly communal practice. Aesthetically, though, this portrait begs more questions about gender, ethnicity, and labor than gives answers about shape, form, and light.

Woman's body, as re-appropriated for the re-production of gendered images by women, stands as revolutionary alone. Yet to this is added another layer of otherness and language: the indigenous female body, represented by women of color and nation. The indigenous female body, argues Tace Hedrick in *Mestizo Modernism: Race, Nation, and Identity in Latin American Culture*, represents a location where

citizenship and nationhood collide with notions of culture and gender. Women, as “producers of racialized bodies” (3) and vehicles of cultural epistemologies, become the symbols of modernizing and hybridizing nations.



113

[Modotti. “Woman with Flag.” 1926]

In the post-revolutionary Mexico of Vasconcelo, the mixed “race” individual, Hedrick notes, would come to serve for many as a symbol of racial and therefore national unity (4). Modotti was an active participant in such symbologies, and as a multi-national, multi-lingual artist, her vision includes images that often capture multi-textual layers. Here, Modotti re-writes the nationalistic body as gendered and also aesthetic. Modotti’s technical aesthetics seem apparent; her fame was almost immediate and her draw magnetic. Yet what makes her so appealing, in part, is what I would consider her cultured aesthetics; Modotti enters the new language of classed, ethnicized, and gendered national art necessarily created by the *indigenismo* element of her gaze through speaking directly to the labor, art, and life ways of the people she photographs. Her images expand the ways in which we speak about and to a transnational discourse of constructing the woman’s body as a canvas for politicized ontologies as much as for a domestic vehicle for a classed, gendered, and ethnic nationalism.

Anita Brenner enters the aesthetic dialogue as an intelligista; viewing indigenismo through an anthropological gaze, yet also as a multi-cultural woman. Though culturally born to Russian Jewish immigrants, Brenner was born and raised in Aguascalientes, Mexico, then *San Antonio, Texas* and then New York City as an adult. This highly transnational sense of cultural belonging informed her work personally and academically for the rest of her life; she received a Ph.D. in Anthropology from Columbia University in 1934, under the direction of Franz Boas, and later was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship (1930-1932) for the study of Aztec art in Europe and Mexico. Illustrating her complex relationship to nationalism, Brenner was honored for a lifetime of writing about Mexico and was granted the Aztec Eagle—the highest award given by the Mexican government to foreigners, but which she promptly refused on the grounds that she was Mexican by birth.

114 *Idols Behind Altars: Modern Mexican Art and Its Cultural Roots* was published in 1929, and contains over 350 pages of written text and 72 photographic plates—taken by Tina Modotti and Edward Weston. One of the main purposes and ultimate functions of *Idols* was the de-romanticizing of indigenous culture; it argued, through the utilization of visual and written texts, that Native art is far from “vanishing” and is not solely designed as tourist relics, but instead is a highly cultural form of resistance to both North and Latin American imperialist and nationalist appropriation (Rashkin 41). Elissa Rashkin persuasively argues in “*Idols Behind Altars: Art, Authorship, and Authority in the Mexican Cultural Renaissance*” that Brenner’s text highlights issues of cultural authority and nationalistic tensions of the 1930s and speaks directly and specifically through visual texts.

What I hope to accomplish by situating Modotti’s social documentation work with Brenner’s anthropology (and next also with Izquierdo’s surrealism) is how the role of a consciously designed form of visual text produced in this era creates a necessarily gendered, classed, and ethnicized aesthetic. All three women purposely set forth to create, or at the very least enter into, an historical dialogue that had just as purposefully excluded them for centuries. How and why they then created a new language to establish their own version of transnational aesthetics becomes the center of this circle. Brenner writes,

Mexico resolves itself harmoniously and powerfully, as a great symphony or a great mural painting, consistent with itself, not as a nation in progress, but as a picture, with certain dominant themes, certain endlessly repeated forms and values in constantly different relationships, and always in the present, like the Aztec history-scrolls that were also calendars and books of creed. (Brenner 15)

This excerpt calls to mind Modotti’s insistence on photography’s role in history, as well as her understanding of the role of visual texts as markers of the new Mexican nationalism. That the country itself becomes as a visual text requires “readers” to see the importance of the visual and its re-appropriation by classed and gendered artists. Nationalism, then, is not written on the backs of all women, on the sorrowful faces of

indigenous peoples, or on the necessarily reductive poverty of working women, but is instead depicted by transnational women as a re-appropriated and powerful gaze back onto history itself.



115

[Photographer unknown. Portrait: Maria Izquierdo. 1920]

Then enters Maria Izquierdo. A surrealist painter, Izquierdo rarely enters into a crowded room, let alone is seen as starting a rowdy discussion. Her personal life is kept far from the forefront, but I believe that her arranged marriage at the age of 14, her three children, and the reason she abruptly left her husband all before she was 25 are important to understanding her sense of gender and power (EHF). Izquierdo's work is rarely ever called political, while Modotti's never leaves such a categorization and Brenner's appears to avoid the issue, though this is untrue for all of them. Juxtaposing these women brings about many questions; namely, in what ways does the transnational aesthetic market and simultaneous sociopolitical sphere become re-written by such women's texts, and how does this cause audiences to radically resituate their understanding of gender, class, ethnicity, and politics in such a highly charged historical era?



[Izquierdo. "Autorretrato." 1946]

Octavio Paz once wrote that the day someone “writes the real history of Mexico, the name of Maria Izquierdo will be a small but powerful center of magnetic radiation” (Mexconnect.com). Although she began as a student of Rufino Tamayo and Diego Rivera, Izquierdo soon disconnected herself with the Muralists. She instead aligned herself with the avant-garde group called the Contemporaneos, who believed that the Muralists had become too entrenched with the nationalists (and thereby Western capitalists) who used a conception of male dominance and power as a structural framework for defining national identity. That Izquierdo aligned herself with such a staunchly anti-imperialist and anti-patriarchal worldview *and* art collective *speaks* to her work significantly. Although often relegated to the traditionalista and “folk” realm, her work instead is highly politicized, and though this is almost never mentioned, highly gendered. Yet the Contemporaneos did in fact recognize such elements in her art and heralded Izquierdo’s work as an “opposition to the Muralists [and] as a representative of cultural nationalism ‘beyond’ politics and closer to the ‘purity’ of indigenous culture” (Greely). In this specific way, Izquierdo’s work becomes a way to read Mexican nationalism as a struggle between the modernizing forces of indus-

trialism and transglobal capitalism versus the modernist tendencies to appropriate indigenous populations for their very anti-modern and romanticized ontology. The ways in which Izquierdo utilizes the representations of the female body, the indigenous traditions, and the political climate of her time, show how entrenched her consciousness was in establishing a discourse of women as national creators, not just national representations or bodily producers of other children of -isms.

In 1930, Izquierdo became the first Mexican woman to have a solo monographic exhibit in the United States (Sullivan). Yet not much was ever heard from her again in the upper Americas. Possibly it could be that no one was sure what to do with her art. In 1947, the painting “Dream” could have been seen as radically feminist; is this work a feminist statement? Does using the term “feminist” imply an act of politicizing that “gendered aesthetics” does not? Is this “gendered” and “classed” art? What gaze the dissected bodies, the woman holding her own decapitated head, and the repetition of crosses would lead viewers to see this painting with?

117



[Izquierdo. “Mujeres y Columnas.” 1936]

If there is, as Octavio Paz suggested, a “true” history of Mexico hidden in Izquierdo’s work, what is it telling us? Certainly, with a painting such as her 1936 “Mujeres y Columnas,” we are seeing women not as sculpted, pedestal-ed, or romanticized in the

ways that viewers had come to expect them; not posed and projecting, representative of higher moral virtues and valuations; or, suffering, down-trodden, with babes in arms at the mercy of the cruel world—yet these women are a model of oppression (if that is indeed what they are) for a reason vastly separate from the martyrdom of Representation. They are naked to the world, tied to columns that become the patriarchy they have resisted, and under the gaze of the evanescent moon, created by the gaze of Izquierdo. The woman's body is here canvas *and* conveyer of a larger discourse about the gendering and politicizing of the indigenous body as well as the aesthetics of a woman's classed conceptionality.

My primary intention with exploring what it means to have a gender and class aesthetic is to establish the ways in which women, as artist-subject and as artist's-gaze, have utilized the political sphere of the 1930s Americas in order to re-appropriate an artistic calling that is solely theirs. This calling was certainly controlled by the public-market patriarchy as it was in the nineteenth century, but the artistic renaissance that was brought about in part through the women's sphere of art, was more defined by the new political and indigenous forces of the post-industrial era. As Anita Brenner wrote in her historical account of the Mexican Revolution, *The Wind that Swept Mexico* (1943), "We are not safe in the United States, now and henceforth, without taking Mexico into account; nor is Mexico safe disregarding us" (3). Our necessary interdependence is not simply geographic, Brenner argues; our borders are living histories that tell the story of Mexico's "crucial position in hemispheric politics and culture" which in turn shapes how the United States understands its own self, a trans-action these artists have witnessed. This specifically transnational exchange of artistic texts and goods allowed for nation-hood to be written anew *within* the individualized Voices of gendered, classed, and ethnicized women rather than written *on* their indigenous bodies and historicized images.

The works of Tina Modotti, Maria Izquierdo, and Anita Brenner exemplify the ways in which politically conscious women re-cast the historical representations of women and create a vivid, radical, responsive discourse that challenges why and how previous historically motivated images have dominated conceptions of gender and class. Their revolution is a visual one; it is at once stripping the indigenous woman's body of romanticized poverty and nationalistic pride, and covering her with the aestheticized and real image of a selfhood designed by an autonomous rendering of gender and class. Their art, then, becomes a Voice for a battalion of other voices that both dissuades the public of its historical biases and pseudo-scientific rationales and, further, persuades the masses towards the legitimacy of their gaze and the cultural resistance that is loudly encoded in their art.



[GuerillaGirls.com]

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