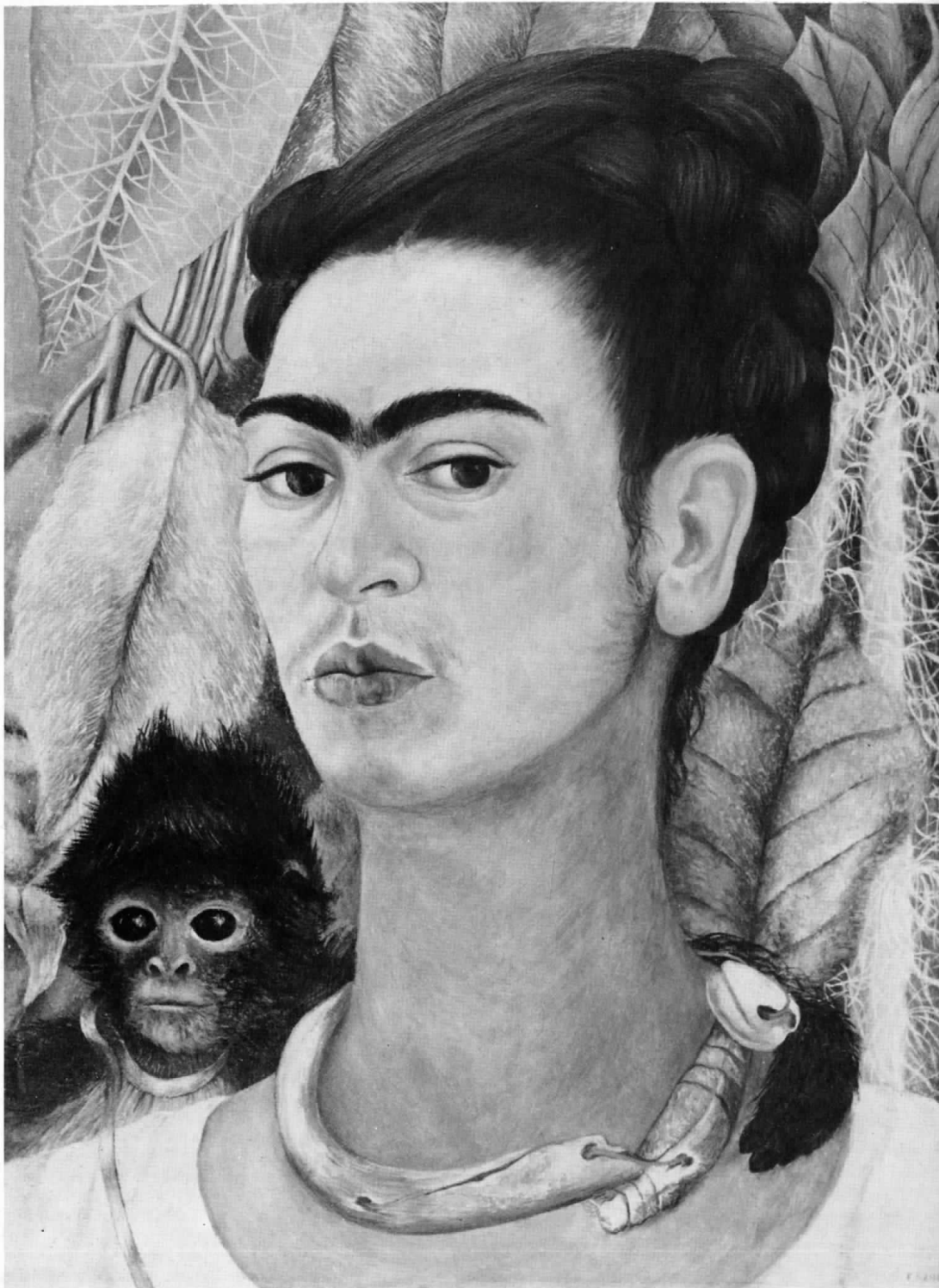
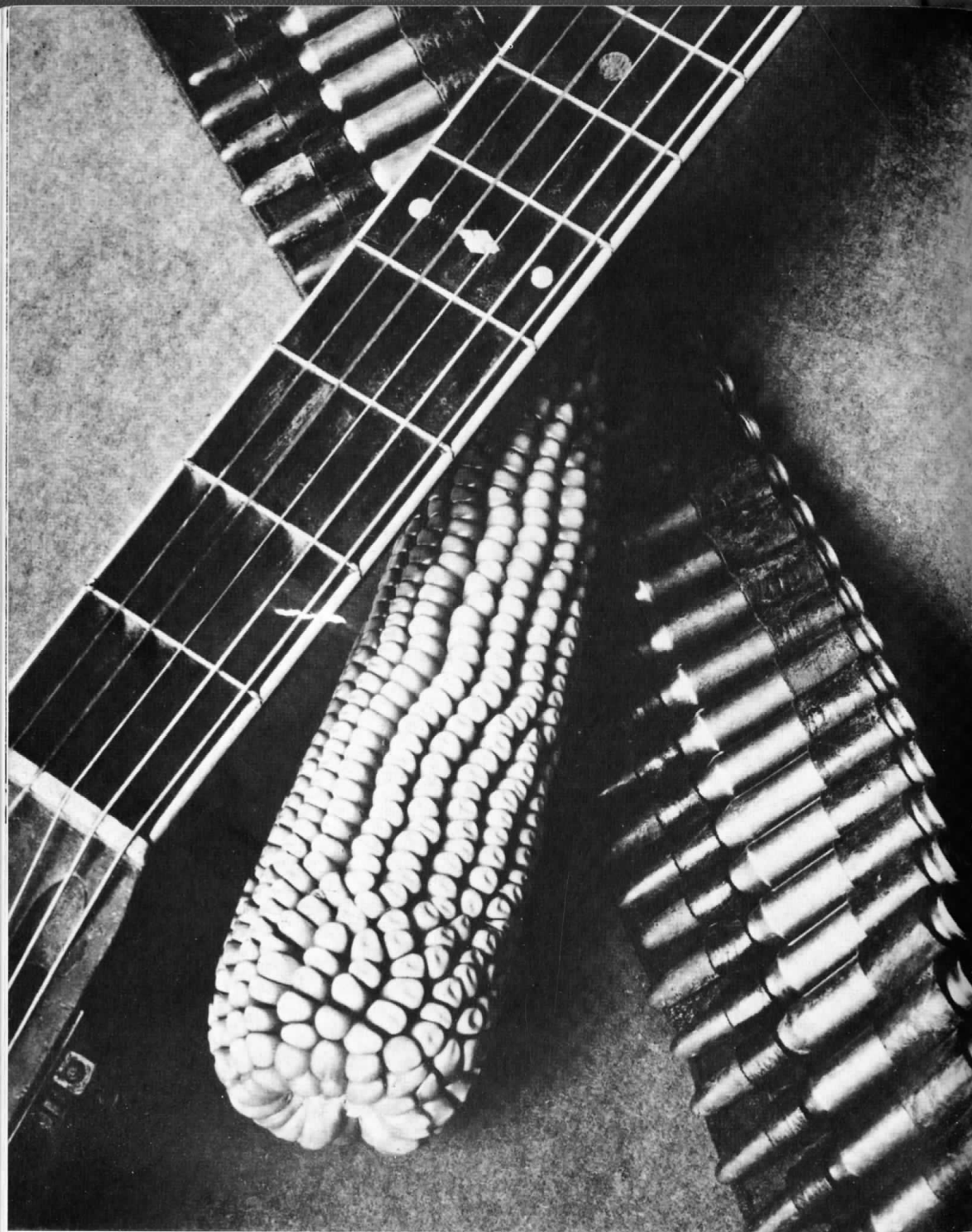




5. Frida Kahlo, **Self-portrait with a monkey** (Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York. Bequest of A. Conger Goodyear)



6. Frida Kahlo, **Self-portrait with cropped hair** (The Collection, Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Edgar Kaufmann Jr/Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris)



7. Tina Modotti, **Bandolier, guitar and corn-cob** (*Comitato Tina Modotti, Trieste/Carlos Vidali Carbajal, Mexico*)



8. Tina Modotti, **Pregnant woman carrying a child** (*Comitato Tina Modotti, Trieste/Carlos Vidali Carbajal, Mexico*)

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Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti*

* Co-written with Peter Wollen. Written as the catalogue text for the exhibition *Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti* held at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1983, which subsequently travelled to the Hausamwaldsee in Berlin, the Kunstverein in Hamburg, the Kustverein in Hannover, the Kulturhuset in Stockholm, the Grey Art Gallery in New York, and the Museo Nacional de Arte in Mexico City.

André Breton went to Mexico, as to a dreamland, to find there that magic 'point of intersection between the political and the artistic lines beyond which we hope that they may unite in a single revolutionary consciousness while still preserving intact the identities of the separate motivating forces that run through them'.¹ Fatal point, we may think as we survey its histories in this century: art corroded and destroyed by politics; politics smothered and sweetened by art. Yet the hope is necessary. Breton found it particularly in the paintings of Frida Kahlo, in Mexico, in 1938, work which blended reverie, cruelty and sexuality – the surrealist virtues, whose enchantment was heightened for Breton by the connection with Trotsky (then living in Frida Kahlo's 'Blue House', her self-portrait hanging on his study wall).²

Others found the point of intersection elsewhere. The critic of *30/30*,³ reviewing an exhibition of Tina Modotti's photographs in Mexico City, in 1929, described how she had found 'a clear and concrete solution' to the problem of joining art with propaganda in her emblematic photographs of sickle, corn-cob and bandolier, and other combinations with guitar or the numbers 27 and 123, referring to the articles in the Mexican Constitution concerning the ownership of land and the rights of labour. She had shown how 'we can make a social art without giving up pure art', how the production of a 'pure aesthetic emotion' through plastic form can be combined with 'revolutionary anecdotism'. Modotti took the formal lessons she had learned from Edward Weston and found a point of intersection with the revolutionary politics she had learned in Mexico.

Breton's hope, the dialectical unity of art and revolution, is one that has haunted the modern period. The fact that it is still no more than a hope for us today demonstrates that none of the solutions sought, by Breton or by others of different tendencies, succeeded with any degree of permanence. The initial *élan* at the moment of intersection has not

persisted or been generalised. We are left with a series of talismans, clustered most often at certain places and certain periods – Soviet art of the immediate post-revolutionary years, Berlin dadaism, French surrealism, the Mexico renaissance – to which we may turn back for encouragement and understanding. We need to know what has been achieved and how it was checked and deflected, to construct our own history in its own incompleteness. That is the purpose of this exhibition.

Why Mexico? An exhibition of work by Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti automatically invites questions about 'marginality' – the status, in terms of mainstream art history as presented in books and museum displays, assigned to Mexican art and to women's art and (in Modotti's case) to photography. The centres of art history are in Europe and the United States; Paris and New York are the last links in a chain which reaches back through Rome and Florence to the classical civilisations of antiquity. Breaks and diversions are to be smoothed over or bracketed off, the 'heterogeneous' to be admitted only as an influence. In this way the originality, scope and richness of Mexican art have been overlooked or underestimated.

THE MEXICAN RENAISSANCE

It is important to remember that Diego Rivera during his second stay in Paris (1911–20)⁴ was one of the best and most original of cubist painters. At the same time, in New York, the Mexican Marius de Zayas was central to the Stieglitz group, the first American avant-garde. He was a crucial contributor to 291 and was its main link with Paris.⁵ In the 1920s after Rivera's return to Mexico, the decade of the Mexican renaissance, there was an extraordinary surge of energy in the arts, which attracted foreign visitors and admirers – among them Edward Weston and with him, Tina Modotti, who stayed after his return to California. This was the decade too in which, while Alfred Barr Jr went to Moscow, René d'Harnoncourt went to Mexico City.⁶

Then, in the 1930s, the muralists were able to launch themselves 'up there', north of the border, with works and workshops which had an enormous effect, as one would expect of a movement which provided the example of a distinctive and energetic American version of modern art. Surely 'the crisis of the easel picture',⁷ which Clement Greenberg notes in 1948, had something to do with the impact of Mexican muralism? In particular, Siqueiros had a crucial and direct influence on Pollock, who studied with him. What is truly remarkable is the way in which Mexican art was shunted into the shadows after the New York art world had achieved its triumph.

It is worth comparing the art-historical fate of the Mexican renaissance

with that of Russian art of the 1920s. There are similarities between the two experiences. In both countries the example of cubism enabled artists independently to develop a specific culture of modern art. In both countries the overthrow of an *ancien régime* (tsarism, the *porfiriato*⁸) and the recasting of the society after political revolution and civil war gave the avant-garde a particular vision of its role, to produce the new art for the new society.

Through Rivera there were, in fact, close links between the Russian and Mexican avant-gardes. Rivera lived in the Russian art colony of La Ruche in Paris⁹ – he was the model for Ehrenburg's novel *Jurio Jurenito* – and was invited to the Soviet Union by Shterenberg after the October revolution. Later in the 1920s, on a long visit to the Soviet Union, Rivera took part in the debates on the relation between avant-garde art and revolutionary politics. Rivera's visit to Russia was matched by those of Mayakovsky and Eisenstein to Mexico.

Recent years have seen a great revival of interest in the Russian avant-garde and particularly in the ways in which art and politics converged and clashed. Many of the same issues and problems arose in Mexico at the same time – the relationship of the avant-garde artist with the mass audience, the role of collective work, the relationship between art and craft, the absorption of cubism into a complex national culture, the relationship between propagandist content and innovative formal concerns, and so on.

Yet while the Soviet artists' and theorists' search for answers to these problems has been recognised as of renewed importance for artists and theorists today, the Mexican experience has been only superficially introduced into the debate. The work of Kahlo and Modotti focuses particular questions about art and politics – feminist politics, in the contemporary sense, as well as classical revolutionary politics – in ways which are fruitful for those concerned by the same kind of questions now, since the resurgence of a conscious feminist art.

WOMEN, ART AND POLITICS

The second issue of marginality posed by this exhibition is that of women's art. At this point, the focus of attention shifts away from the actual historical context in Mexico that influenced Tina Modotti and Frida Kahlo and moves towards the debates which have developed around feminist aesthetics. It is here that the importance of the juxtaposition between the two artists comes into relief. An exhibition of either artist alone would have asserted her individual importance, her specific contribution to an artistic practice (painting or photography) and to women's cultural traditions. But the decision to bring the work of Frida

Kahlo and Tina Modotti together is based on something more than the fact that they have been unjustly neglected and that their art and their lives are of great intrinsic interest. The juxtaposition is designed to raise a series of ideas and arguments that are relevant to questions about women's art and feminist aesthetics.¹⁰

Thus the contrasts, as well as the parallels, suggested by the work of both artists provide a starting-point for the exhibition's line of interest to anyone concerned with art from a feminist perspective. Both were influenced by radical tendencies in contemporary Mexican politics and culture. They were both politically militant. Both found or developed their own aesthetic from under the shadow of a male artist of international repute. Both implicitly challenge 'high art', dominant traditions. It is here that their work has an immediate excitement and interest.

Feminism has always been deeply concerned with questions about representation, with the politics of images. This concern is with the way that 'woman' has been used in male representation, and (the necessary other side of the coin) with women's relegation to a marginal area of culture, specifically excluded from 'high art'. So work on women's art has proceeded on two fronts, both of which are relevant here. First comes a process of archaeological excavation, uncovering women artists overlooked and forgotten by male-dominated criticism. Secondly, there is the confrontation of the questions of value posed by the split between high art and applied arts and the examination of the rationale behind the unbridgeable gap that seems to divide them. In the present context this last point doubles with the discovery of popular traditions of Mexican art during this period (the background to Kahlo's work) and with an avant-garde desire to bring art into dialogue with the modern world and its technology (a contributing factor to Modotti's use of photography as political reportage).

Both Kahlo and Modotti worked in 'dialects' rather than the language of high art. Modotti learnt photography from Edward Weston, whose aesthetic was based on the desire to raise photography from a lesser art and give it the status of high art. Tina's own work shows a steady movement away from this principle. She returned rather to the documentary aspects of photography. The content changed as her work developed but she never lost or compromised her formal aesthetic position. Frida Kahlo's 'dialect' was drawn from folk art and naïve painting, both as part of a contemporary movement to the popular but also as a source of imagery and emotion that was very close to her own preoccupations. The contemporary political and cultural background is essential for an understanding of Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti's work. But it is the present interest in radical aesthetics, in the breakdown of high art, in the breakup of art under the impact of other media such as photography, that gives the Mexican background an immediate relevance.

The relationship between the lives and work of both women raises the question of how women come to be artists. The Mexican revolution provided a special context, a stimulus. This is the contribution of history. But in each case, an arbitrary element entered into their lives, changing its normal course and directing them towards unusual choices. This arbitrary element introduces the question of the woman's body, its place in representation and the woman artist's relation to the woman's body in representation. Kahlo had an accident as a teenager that left her permanently in pain and unable to have children. Her paintings are a visual record of the effect this had on her. Modotti was a great beauty; Edward Weston fell in love with her and used her as a model. It was her journey to Mexico with him that changed her life. When he went back to the United States, she stayed on, joining the Communist Party and becoming a photographer in her own right. The perspective offered by feminism is in terms of this emphasis on the body, on woman's body as a particular *problem* both as the vehicle for childbearing and as an object of beauty.¹¹ This perspective takes the arbitrary or chance element back into the political context of history.

Their relationship to the Mexican cultural background was necessarily rather different. Kahlo was an important Mexican artist, given added prominence by the fact that she was married to Diego Rivera, the leading mural artist. Modotti was a foreigner, drawn to Mexico by the events taking place there (as so many foreigners were), arriving as Weston's companion, and then utterly changed by what she found. But this point only highlights the series of contrasts and differences that provide the basis for the second level of argument at stake here. It is here that the juxtaposition between the two became crucial. Through their differences they can spark off a new line of thought or argument (like montage in the cinema, where bringing two images together can produce a third idea in the mind of the spectator).

Looking at the work of Tina Modotti and Frida Kahlo side by side, with this hindsight, one is struck immediately by the contrasts between them. While both produced work that is recognisably that of a woman (Modotti sometimes less so than Kahlo), the stance taken up by each as an *artist* is very different. On the one hand Frida Kahlo's work concentrates primarily on the personal, the world of the interior, while Modotti's looks outward, to the exterior world. She photographed the street, women and children in the streets, men at public political meetings. In total contrast, Kahlo's subject is herself. She painted her private world of emotional relationships, she found images for her personal experience of pain and her tortured relationship with her body, her obsession with her own image. The types of work they produced, therefore, stand in apparent opposition to each other, suggesting two different roads for feminist art: a concern with social problems on the

one hand, and private ones on the other. Two points can be introduced here to break down this apparent polarity. First of all, the feminist slogan 'the personal is political' recasts Kahlo's private world in a new light. Secondly, Modotti's work as a photographer can only be understood in the context of her private life and position as a woman. The intention here, then, is to switch over, or rather to blur the distinctions set up by the polarity between them and to bring out the ways in which Kahlo's work is political and Modotti's is personal.

Looking at Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti's work in relation to their lives and experience as women it is clear that conscious decisions about artistic stance are only to a limited extent the result of conscious, controllable choice. Two other forces are of utmost importance: that of historical heritage and that of individual accident. The relation between these two can be described as that between the necessary and the contingent. The differences between a working-class Italian immigrant to California and a Mexican bourgeois intellectual are of great importance. These social-historical conditions contribute to the artist's stance, to Kahlo's desire to explore herself and her colonised cultural roots through her art, and to Modotti's desire to change the conditions of exploitation and oppression she saw around her, then to devote herself to the international working-class movement. These differences are clear and visible in the two women's places of birth and death.

REVOLUTION AND RENAISSANCE

The Mexican renaissance was the progeny of the Mexican revolution, an event – or rather a historic phase – which is not easy to characterise or describe in simple terms.¹² The overthrow of the *ancien régime* of Porfirio Díaz unleashed uncontrollable forces and counter-forces for nearly a decade of civil war, *putsch* and counter-*putsch*, peasant rising and landlord repression, convention, charter and constitution-writing. It was a period of mingled cruelty, surprise and hope in which great masses travelled through Mexico on military campaigns and many millions died, others surviving to march in triumph through the capital, wreak merciless vengeance on the defeated or thank their luck or their cunning.

There are five things, at least, worth emphasising about the Mexican revolution. First, it was a genuine revolution. It swept aside the attempts of political leaders to limit or control its effects. Peasants and workers played a leading role in breaking careers, changing *régimes* and, eventually, recasting the entire political order, inspired by schemes for their own betterment and the destruction of old enemies. In the end, after

many checks and long delays, Mexico emerged with the power of the old ruling class broken. Its three pillars – landlords, army, church – were shattered and the institutions of debt peonage and the old *hacienda* system were destroyed. What took their place, however, was not workers' and peasants' power, not socialism, but a new type of state, answering many workers' and peasants' demands but nurturing an indigenous capitalism at the same time, under the harmonising protection of a civilian and lay bureaucracy.

Second, during the period of the revolution, organised labour fought on the opposite side to the most militant peasant forces. The House of the World Worker, the centre of the anarcho-syndicalist trade-union movement, enlisted with Carranza and Obregon, and battalions of workers fought against the armies of Villa and Zapata, who in different ways represented the aspirations of the peasantry. This meant that the labour unions were integrated rapidly into the new post-revolutionary structure of power after Obregon became president in 1920, long before land reforms of any scope were carried out. It was a division which made possible the deceleration of revolutionary impetus until both workers and then peasants could be integrated into the new state system.

Third, the Mexican revolution occurred before the Russian revolution. The armies which fought their way across the country had many a *corrido* to sing and demands formulated in many a *plan*, but they had no revolutionary theory of a Marxist, or even socialist type. Nor of course did they have the Russian revolution before them as a model; there was no Communist Party in Mexico till after the end of the revolution. The Constitution of 1917 was a compromise document, whose famous articles 27 and 123 offered in reality less than they seemed to promise. They produced radical liberalism rather than a step towards socialism, and democratic rights dependent on a state power which was destined to sediment into self-perpetuating one-party rule, though much less murderous and pervasive than that which came to prevail in the Soviet Union.

Fourth, the revolution made possible the release of a great surge of national feeling, the culture of *mexicanidad*. This aspect aligns it with the wave of third-world revolutions which have characterised the middle of the twentieth century: in Turkey, Argentina or Egypt, for instance. The wish to be rid of the *porfiriato* represented in part a wish to assert national independence, in the face principally, of course, of the United States which only sixty or seventy years before had seized and annexed the whole northern half of the country and had continually intervened in Mexican politics, both by military incursions and through diplomatic and economic pressure. In this sense, the Mexican revolution was a national revolution, disfigured and enfeebled by internal divisions and

civil war. Certainly this is how the revolution is officially presented, with varying degrees of vigour.

Fifth, the revolution coincided with a cultural revival, not so much political as philosophical. In reaction against the positivism which had become an official part of Porfirian ideology, the succeeding generation, that of the *Ateneo* of 1909,¹³ embraced a militant, not to say Promethean idealism. The tradition of classical humanism and idealist metaphysics was harnessed to a mystical vitalism and voluntarism, which grew to epic proportions with the revolution. Vasconcelos, the Minister of Education in the early 1920s who launched the programme of mural painting and cultural renewal from which the Mexican renaissance developed, was a leader of the *Ateneo* and the promulgator of a visionary teleology of the cosmic man, in which Mexican nationalism was blended with elements of Saint-Simon and Bergson, in an exalted amalgam of art, will and the destiny of *la raza*.

It was Vasconcelos who summoned Rivera and Siqueiros back from Europe to play their part in the cultural programme he had planned. (Rivera had been in Europe throughout the revolution; Siqueiros had fought on Obregon's side in the Red Battalions of workers.) Modelling himself on the example of Lunacharsky in the Soviet Union, Vasconcelos launched a mass literacy campaign, a reform of the education system and state patronage for the arts, which were to display the new national culture on a monumental scale. It was Vasconcelos's good fortune to find in Diego Rivera, especially, an artist who could match his own grandiose ambitions with the appropriate energy.

More than any of the other artists involved, many of them of great talent and ability, Rivera set his stamp on the Mexican renaissance (to the exasperation of his rival, Orozco). He set about creating an art which would be modern, monumental and American, worthy of the revolution and with the ideological and political aim of impelling it further forward. Unlike his fellows in Russia, Rivera determined to stay with figurative art and to reject abstraction. As far as content was concerned, Rivera revived the lost genre of history painting, on an unprecedentedly vast scale – the scale of the revolution and eventually the history of Mexico from its first beginnings, through every period up to the present, combined in one massive composition. Formally, he fused a mural style derived mainly from the early Italian renaissance (Giotto especially) with elements of cubism, of Gauguin and Cézanne, of the caricature tradition and of Mexican pre-Columbian and popular art.

While Rivera dominated Mexican painting of the 1920s, it is important to realise that there were many others who flourished at the same time, with widely varying styles and types of subject matter. None the less it was the concept of a monumental civic art, displaying in public places the history of Mexico, in a modern but distinctively national style,

drawing on Indian and popular forms, which came to represent the core of the Mexican renaissance. Rivera's aim was to reverse the current of art history so that instead of the exotic or the primitive feeding into European art, the reverse would happen: the lessons of European art he had brought back with him would feed into the native Mexican tradition.

These strands formed the background of both Frida Kahlo's painting and Tina Modotti's photography (in Modotti's case in tension with the influence of her teacher, Edward Weston). The contrast between their work – its smallness of scale, both in subject matter and actual physical size – and the monumentalism of the muralists is immediately striking. Yet this 'smallness' is deceptive. It springs in part from the traditional constraints of women's art, which the Mexican revolution had done nothing to loosen. Yet within these constraints they were able to produce work quite as innovative and explosive in its implications as the mammoth productions of their *confrères*.

THE INTERIOR AND THE EXTERIOR

The slogan 'the personal is political' dates back to the days when the Women's Movement was organised around consciousness-raising. The phrase is emphatic and assertive. But in announcing what now *is*, it contains within it the residual ashes, the memory, of what previously *was not*. This argument has been forcefully restated in *Beyond the Fragments*:

Before the women's movement, socialist politics like all other sorts of politics, seemed something separate from everyday life, something unconnected with looking after children, worrying about the meals and the housework, finding ways of enjoying yourself with your friends and so on. It was something professional for men among men, for the shop steward or the party activist. The activities of the women's movement have begun to change that as far as women are concerned. But it's meant a different way of organising which does not restrict political activity to the 'professional'.¹⁴

The phrase 'the personal is political' rejects the traditional exclusion and repression of the personal in male-dominated politics. And it also asserts the *political* nature of women's private individualised oppression. The main achievement of consciousness-raising lay in providing a structure for women to discover that their problems were no longer 'problems', no longer anybody's 'fault', but were political issues. Out of this immediate experience feminism revalued the private and the

personal, challenging the division of the sexes into separate spheres.

These political arguments also influenced feminist aesthetics, and are relevant to any attempt to transform an experience of oppression into a theory of oppression. The principal question is this: what relationship should a new, feminist aesthetic have to the culture of oppression and marginality which has traditionally moulded women's artistic work? This marginality brings particular repercussions in its wake, when it is attached to an ideological concept of femininity and the 'feminine sphere'. Here a metonymic chain of meanings and resonances come into play, fettering women's cultural possibilities. The chain is a series of loose, associative links: woman, stability, the home, private emotion, family, domestic labour and decorative arts. But these links can only acquire meaning in opposition to another chain: man, mobility, work, transcendence, politics, productive labour and art. Thus an opposition develops between the interior and the exterior, the private female and public male as though the feminine sphere was there primarily to give meaning and significance to its opposite.¹⁵

Walter Benjamin comments on the institutionalisation of the public/private distinction around the home:

Under Louis-Philippe the private citizen was born. . . . For the private citizen, for the first time the living-space became distinguished from the place of work. The former constituted itself as the interior. The office was its complement. The private citizen who in the office took reality into account, required of the interior that it should support him in his illusions. The necessity was all the more pressing since he had no intention of adding social preoccupations to his business ones. In the creation of his private environment he suppressed them both. From this sprang the phantasmagorias of the interior.¹⁶

Benjamin omits to mention that these phantasmagorias could only exist under the management of a wife. The home, on the scale envisaged here by the private citizen, only materialises as an effect of marriage.

It can be argued that, as women had been 'relegated', so had their creativity. Woman decorated her sphere with applied arts; the personal, private and domestic are the raw material of her self-expression. There is a danger here that a creativity produced by a social condition (the interior/exterior split) should then be theorised as *specific* to women and naturally expressive of 'femininity' as such. There is an important difference between 'femininity as such' and exploring a sphere which is not only assigned to women in a social division of labour, but is neglected and despised by men. In this sense the domestic, and the private lives it generates, are like uncolonised territory or virgin soil,

untouched by the masculine. There are several positions that feminist aesthetics can adopt in response to this quandary. Women artists can embrace the domestic and personal, accepting their sphere and using it as a source of imagery and experience, simultaneously paying tribute to the historic relegation of women. But this position can, and should, lead very quickly to analysis of the female condition rather than a celebration of it.

Frida Kahlo's paintings emerge directly out of her life – her physical suffering and her emotional suffering. Living and working within the confines of her childhood home, she took herself as the main subject matter of art and painted her own image and her immediate relationships. Her art forms a material manifestation of her interior experiences, dreams and fantasies. It also seems to act as a 'decoration' of her life and relationships in a similar manner to the way she decorated herself and her house with the colours and objects of Mexican folk art. She painted her friends' portraits and gave her self-portraits (such as the one she painted for Trotsky) to friends.

This private, personalised world that gave rise to her art seems encapsulated by the fact that she often actually painted from her bed, the most private part of the private world of the home. Kahlo continually gives the impression of consciously highlighting the interface of women's art and domestic space, as though in her life (and in her dress) she was drawing attention to the impossibility of separating the two. However, her art also acts as an ironic, bitter comment on women's experience. The feminine sphere is stripped of reassurance. The haven of male fantasy is replaced by the experience of pain, including the pain associated with her physical inability to live out a feminine role in motherhood. This pain is shown not only in *Childbirth* (1932) and *Henry Ford Hospital* (1932) but also in the theme of a 'mask' inherent in her self-portraits. The masks fall away, revealing the wounds inflicted by physical illness and accident (her damaged spine, her fractured leg) merging with the wounds inflicted by Rivera, the pain caused by his infidelities, as, for instance, in *Unos Cuantos Piquetitos* (A Few Small Snips) (1935), where a man is shown inflicting the wounds on a woman's body.

In her *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair* (1940), painted after Rivera left her in 1939, she makes yet another leap from the interior pain caused by her love for Diego to the wound left on the female body by castration. Here, surely, is a direct reference to Freud. Kahlo's painting seems to move through a process of stripping away layers, that of the actual skin over a wound, that of the mask of beauty over the reality of pain, then moving, like an infinite regress, out of the physical into the interior world of fantasy and the unconscious. Perhaps the most important aspect of this stripping away is its implicit rejection of any separation

between the real and the psychoanalytic, an assertion of the reality of forces and fantasies that are of all the greater significance because they cannot be seen. Her use of metaphor and iconography is the means that enables her to give concrete form, in art, to interior experience. In this sense she takes the 'interior', offered as the feminine sphere, the male retreat from public life, and reveals the other 'interior' behind it, that of female suffering, vulnerability and self-doubt. Frida Kahlo provides an extremely rare voice for this sphere which, almost by definition, lacks an adequate means of expression or a language.

Tina Modotti gradually transformed herself from an object of beauty, used in the art of others, into a professional photographer. As Weston's model, assistant and, finally, artistic apprentice, her concept of photography was initially dominated by his aestheticism. Gradually her work shows her searching for her own direction, and gaining confidence as her political commitment changed her way of looking at the world. Her photographs do not lose their sense of form; but her priorities change.

During the period when she was deeply absorbed in Mexican political life, Tina's photographs reveal two rather different strands. These different approaches seem to reflect and comment on both the social and political division between the sexes and Tina's own position as a woman photographer. Politics was primarily the sphere of men. In her photographs of Mexican political life, Tina used her background of formal aestheticism to produce an ordered and abstract rhetoric of revolutionary imagery. Her 'slogan' photographs reflect this aspect of her work, but her photographs of workers and political meetings show the same approach. The use of formal patterns gives a sense of detachment from the people photographed and a commitment to the political ideas expressed. She must very often have been the only woman at the meetings she photographed. On the other hand, a different approach produces another strand of work in her photographs of women and children. The images of hunger, the oppression of being a child and childbearing speak for themselves. The images are posed and composed but the gaze of the subjects themselves strikes directly into the camera and out of the print.

Tina's photographs are predominantly of people in public, exterior space. In her own life, she was continually on the move: an immigrant in one country, adopting the politics and culture of another, then, as an exile, travelling through Europe as a Communist Party militant. She did not decorate the places she lived in. Manuel Alvarez Bravo recalled, 'The walls of her studio were white and clean. Later she started to write some of Lenin's and Marx's phrases on them.'¹⁷

The fact that Kahlo and Modotti's choices were not developed within a consciousness of women's art diffuses a polemic or antagonism

between them. Furthermore the choices they made, consciously or unconsciously, were clearly linked to their own conditions of existence, class, sex, history, even chance, showing up the contingent aspects of artists' work that can so easily disappear under a cloud of genius. Particularly, what they wanted to do and what was possible for them to do, their desires and limitations, were defined by the fact that they were women, however different the kinds of work they produced may have been.

ROOTS AND MOVEMENTS I: FRIDA KAHLO

Frida Kahlo was born and died in the same house in Coyoacan, on the outskirts of Mexico City. The house is now the Frida Kahlo Museum. It is depicted in one of the paintings Frida Kahlo made of her family tree. The infant Frida stands naked in the courtyard, holding the blood-red ribbon which connects her to her grandparents. On her mother's side the ribbon leads up into the volcanic mountains of Mexico, on her father's across the sea to an invisible Europe. The motif of the ribbon is repeated in the twisting form of the umbilical cord which joins Frida's foetus to her mother, superimposed on her bridal gown. Below the foetus, another twisting form, that of a sperm, is penetrating an ovum, which at the same time is being pollinated by a blood-red cactus flower. The imagery is typical of her work; not only is she placed in her family house but rooted in a landscape and, more generally, in the process of nature, participating in a compound animal, vegetable and mineral life.

In another painting, *Roots* (1943), Frida Kahlo paints herself stretched out on the *pedregal*, the volcanic rock of Mexico, leaning on one elbow, her hair loose, her long dress cut away to reveal an intricate web of branches growing in a large green leaf and connected by root tendrils with the earth below. Artery, umbilical cord, root, tendril: in Frida Kahlo's paintings these symbolic connections merge into a single image as the life force is carried precariously between soil, stem and body along convoluted and precarious veins. In the *Self-Portrait as a Tehuana* (1943) the lace of her head-dress merges into the fronds of plants in the background through a tracery of tendrils.¹⁸ In *The Two Fridas* (1939) the vein which connects to a locket of her loved one, held in one hand by the 'Indian' Frida, is being severed with scissors by the hand of her counterpart, the 'European' Frida, so that the blood drips down onto her white dress.

It would be wrong to think of Frida Kahlo as cloistered or secluded, despite the injuries which physically inhibited her movements, and her intense attachment to her native home and land. In some ways it would

be easily possible to exaggerate the 'rootedness' of Frida Kahlo. She travelled extensively in the United States, firstly with Rivera, then on her own account when she was recognised as a painter in her own right, and also for medical reasons. She visited Europe after André Breton returned to Paris full of enthusiasm for her work. Nor did she live continuously in the Blue House even while she was in Mexico. It was there that Trotsky lived and the Dewey Commission prepared its report on Stalin's trials and purges of the late 1930s.

None the less, Frida Kahlo developed her own sense of 'rootedness' and 'Mexican-ness' to an extreme degree. She wore Mexican dress and Mexican jewellery, transforming herself, so to speak, into a Mexican artefact. She was noted especially for her use of Tehuana costume – the long dresses of the women of Tehuantepec in southern Mexico who enjoyed a mythic reputation for their personal and economic independence. For a while, when she visited New York and Paris for her exhibitions, Frida Kahlo's style was even taken up in high-fashion circles, featured in *Vogue* and adapted as a 'look' by Schiaparelli.¹⁹ In a way, this suggests how much artifice there was in her 'rootedness', the extent to which her presentation of self *como Tehuana* was inextricably bound up with masquerade and a taste both for the archaic and the ornamental.

The same structure of feeling and sense of style comes out in her choice of art-historical models and pictorial schemes. At first sight, Frida Kahlo's paintings could be taken for those of a 'naïve'. There is an element of this appreciation in Breton's celebration of Frida Kahlo as a spontaneous surrealist. It is true, too, that she never had any formal tuition as a painter and was largely self-taught – she began painting as something to do while bed-ridden after the road accident which incapacitated her in 1925. Her first paintings could perhaps be properly called 'naïve'. But after her entry into the milieu of the muralist renaissance and her marriage to Diego Rivera, it is clear that she could hardly have remained naïve about the kind of artistic choices that she made, even if they were suited to a reliance on intensity and vigour of conception rather than technical skill or painterly touch.

The Mexican renaissance saw a revival of interest in certain specific forms of popular and traditional art: *pulqueria* painting, *retablos* and *ex-votos*, traditional portraiture and popular prints, as well as a more general interest in folk art.²⁰ This aesthetic 'going to the people' served the aims both of popular nationalism and political radicalism, on the one hand, and of the modernist attack on academicism and the institution of 'fine arts' on the other. Popular forms were celebrated and praised by most of the leading Mexican artists of the time – Rivera, Orozco, even Weston – but nobody took them to heart as much as Frida Kahlo, who not only reproduced their conventions but found ways of

assimilating their typical subject matter in her own personal preoccupations and 'symptoms'.

Ex-voto paintings were particularly important to her. Dozens of them which she collected are still on display in the Kahlo house today. They were paintings made on sheets of tin to be nailed up in church as thanks-offering after a miraculous recovery from accident or disaster.²¹ They are usually in three parts. At the top is the figure of the saint, the saviour or the virgin whose aid was invoked and who effected the miracle. In the middle is a graphic and often gory depiction of the disaster or affliction. At the base is a written inscription expressing gratitude and recounting the details of the incident. Frida Kahlo uses this form particularly directly in the painting titled *Marxism Can Cure the Sick* (n.d.), in which Marx is shown in the place of the holy figure and Frida Kahlo herself is being cured, throwing away her crutches. Other works, like *Henry Ford Hospital* (1932), show the catastrophe in savage detail, without offering any hope of recovery or amelioration.

It is worth stressing that *ex-voto* painting was already long in decline when rediscovered during the 1920s. The paintings emulated by Frida Kahlo had their heyday in the mid-nineteenth century. *Pulqueria* painting (murals on the walls of *pulque* shops, where the cheapest form of alcohol was sold) and popular print-making still existed during the 1920s, though they were to become extinct very soon afterwards, except for conscious revival by artists – Frida Kahlo herself painted a *pulqueria* with a team of students in the 1940s, when it was already a clearly archaising project. The discovery of popular forms was essentially a discovery of what was already in danger of being lost, their adoption by artists a conscious revival and prolongation beyond their normal historical span. Later *ex-votos* showed an influence of 'chromos' and comic strips which is absent from Frida Kahlo's 'historicist' use of the type.

In fact, the 'historicist' aspect of modernism comes out with great clarity in Mexico. In the first place, 'ancient' history was chronologically much closer and also in many ways culturally closer. The archaism of the Paris avant-garde took painters either back beyond antiquity – to Ancient Egypt or, as with Picasso, pre-Latin Spain – or else out to the colonies, to forms of art which were brought back to the metropolis as the cultural plunder of imperialism. In Mexico the situation was very different. Aztec culture was only centuries rather than millennia in the past. By the time that the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan was taken and razed by the Spanish, Michelangelo had already completed the Sistine Chapel, and Raphael and Leonardo were both dead. Pre-Columbian is much more nearly co-extensive with pre-Raphaelite than with Egyptian or Mycenaean. The city of Tenochtitlan was founded in the thirteenth century and fell in the early *cinquecento* – the Aztec era was simultaneous with the Italian renaissance, and the sack of Tenochtitlan by Cortes took

place in the same decade as the sack of Rome by his overlord, Charles V.

Thus the murals of Giotto, Piero and Mantegna which Rivera and Siqueiros studied and sketched were directly contemporary with the Aztec civilisation to which they turned back in the 1920s. Moreover, the actual language of the Aztecs (Nahuatl) was still being spoken and the Indian substructures of Mexican culture ('idols behind altars' in Anita Brenner's phrase)²² was still clearly visible. Finally the Indian peoples had at last re-entered the mainstream of Mexican history during the Revolution. Zapata's demands for land reform were posed and understood as demands for a return to pre-Conquest forms of village organisation. A political history was being discovered and revived as well as an artistic one. Just as in the English Revolution appeals were made to the Saxon past before the Conquest and feudal rule identified with the Norman yoke, so in the Mexican revolution, appeals to the pre-Conquest Indian past still had a political value. It is for this reason, among others, that it was possible for political and artistic avant-gardes to overlap in Mexico in a way that they never could in Europe.

Hence the artistic avant-garde, once the crucial decision had been taken to retreat from any move into abstraction, was able to use popular forms not as a means of facilitating communication but as a means of constructing a mythic past whose effectiveness could be felt in the present. Thereby it brought itself into line with the revolutionary impetus towards reconstructing the mythic past of the nation. Though Frida Kahlo was not herself a 'history painter' like Rivera, she also worked from the point where 'avant-garde modernism', 'popular historicism' and 'mythic nationalism' met, in her own favourite genre – self-portraiture. Popular forms made it possible for her to develop a form of self-portraiture which transcended the limits of the purely iconic and allowed her to use narrative and allegory. In this way she created a mode of emblematic autobiography steeped in *mexicanidad*.

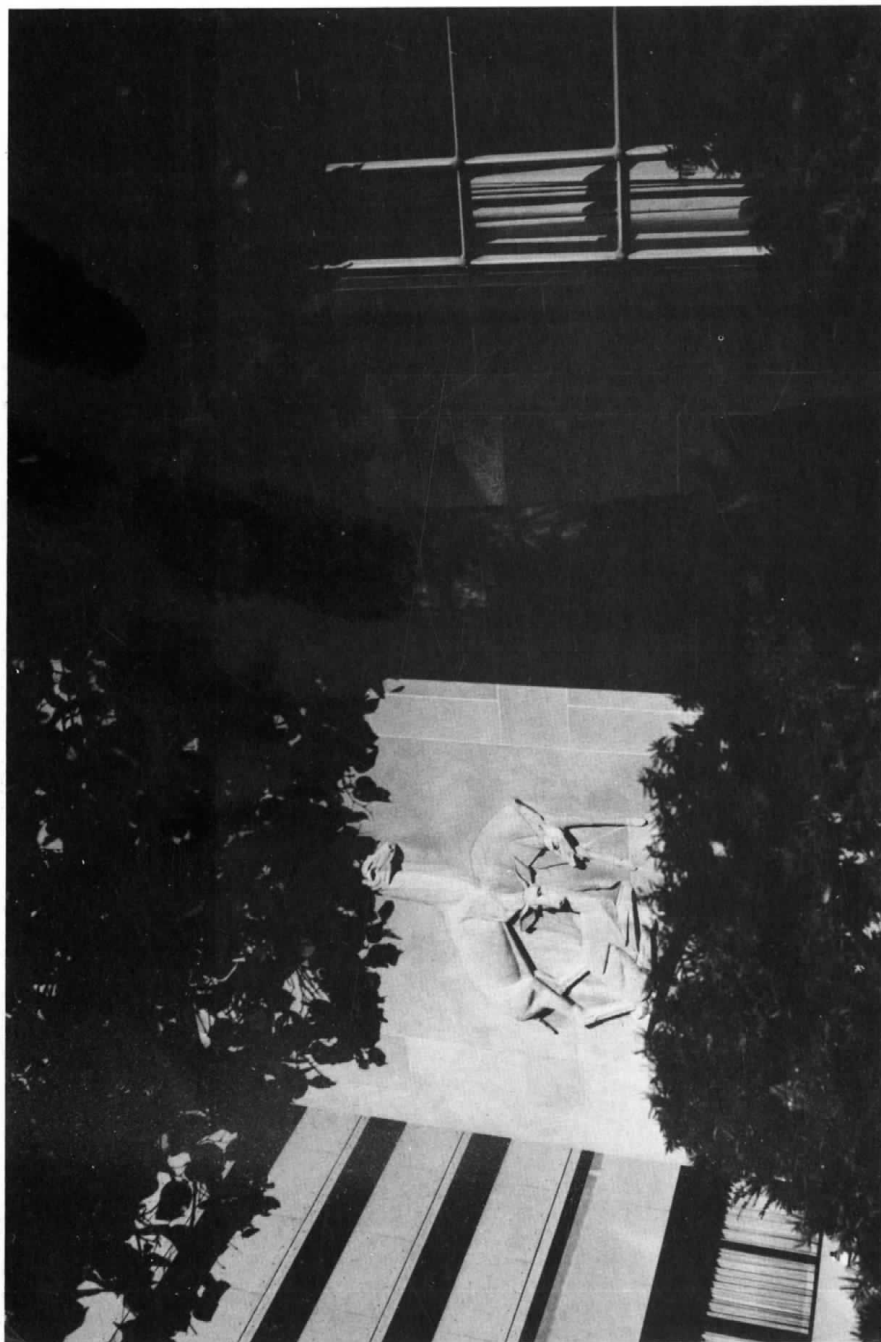
Frida Kahlo's roots in Mexico allowed her to participate in the avant-garde precisely because the Mexican revolution was not just the destruction of an old Porfirian, feudal, colonial past, but at the same time the creation of a new one, rooted in the suppressed pre-Columbian culture and the rejected popular traditions. In her painting *My Nurse and I* (1937) the Indian form of the nurse, reminiscent of an Aztec goddess, is fused with the colonial Catholic motif of the madonna and child. She uses the popular non-academic form in which the child is depicted out of proportion in relation to the mother with enlarged, and adult head – a self-portrait in fact. Thereby she both allegorises her own life and represents a mythic Mexican history in formal as well as figurative terms. In the background drops, like the drops of milk from the breasts, are falling like rain or manna: thus the world of nature is



1. Victor Burgin, *As in a fairy tale*, from *Hotel Latone*

2. Victor Burgin, *In the hotel*, from *Hotel Latone*





The game was easy,
posing,
no real threat to the trapper.

The language I speak "within myself"
is not of my time;
it is prey, by nature,
to ideological suspicion.

13. Geoffrey Miles, from the series *The Trapper's Fear of the Text*

given its role as nourishing mother. Autobiography is encompassed by history and history by nature.

ROOTS AND MOVEMENTS II: TINA MODOTTI

Tina Modotti's relationship to Mexican culture was quite different from Frida Kahlo's though she took part in the same artistic movement. Tina Modotti's life was (almost) nomadic – born in Italy, emigrated with her family to the United States, moved from San Francisco to Los Angeles and then from California to Mexico, expelled from Mexico on a ship bound for Rotterdam, political asylum in Berlin, flight to Moscow where her work for the Comintern sent her first to Paris, then to Spain and finally flight again to France, after the defeat of the Republic by Franco and the Fascist forces in the Civil War, and a final exile, back in Mexico, where she died in 1942, only forty-five years old. The ten years or so which she spent in Mexico (first visit in 1922, a second more or less settled stay from 1923 to 1930, the final exile from April 1939 until her death) was the longest period spent in a single country during her adult life. It is also the period when almost all her work as a photographer was done.

While she was still in Los Angeles, Tina Modotti was part of a group interested in Mexico and Mexican art. Her first husband, the artist and poet Roubaix de l'Arbrie Richey, died in Mexico during a visit in 1922. Tina Modotti went to Mexico City to join him but he died of smallpox before she arrived. He had already made friends among Mexican artists and Tina Modotti too found herself increasingly drawn towards Mexico. In the autumn of the same year, after her return to the United States, an exhibition of Mexican folk art was sent to Los Angeles, and her determination to return grew. The next year she left again for Mexico, this time with Edward Weston, the photographer. Robo Richey had already urged Weston to come to Mexico, just before he died, and join him in what he called 'an artists' paradise'.

Weston's ideas about photography were essentially decided before he left for Mexico. In the first place, he was in reaction against 'pictorialist' photography, with its lack of focus, its atmospheric effects and its imitation of etching and painting. He wanted a photography which was clean and sharply outlined. Weston revered the modernist slogan 'Form follows function' and he wanted photographic forms which followed the function of the camera in its capacity to record with detail and accuracy. But besides distrusting pictorialism, Weston also rejected documentary realism and avant-garde photography – Man Ray or Moholy-Nagy. Documentary was not art and avant-gardism was another way of seeking effect and using camera trickery rather than straightforward

ward photography. Weston's particular contribution was to find a different path: photographing ordinary objects or locations in the real world, clearly and straightforwardly, in order to bring out the formal values normally overlooked; to see with a trained and artistically sensitive eye the abstract formal compositions and textures of light and shade which could be elicited from ordinary reality and capture them precisely and without interference or mediation on his photographic plate. It was this aesthetic legacy which Tina Modotti, as his pupil, apprentice and eventually colleague, was to inherit.

In retrospect we can see close analogies between Weston's ideals for photography and those of Renger-Patsch and the 'New Objectivity' photographers in Germany or post-cubist purism and *l'esprit nouveau* in Paris. But Weston himself was very conscious of his own Americanism, of the need to break with European models of art. In fact, this was the driving force behind his modernism. The connection between Americanism, photography and avant-garde art had already been made in New York by Stieglitz, who took a similar line. At the same time he felt stifled by the philistinism he felt in Los Angeles, where both avant-gardism and the claims of photography to art were still worse than suspect. He was naturally impressed by what he found in Mexico City, where cubist artists, such as Rivera, had rejected the Parisian aspects of cubism without abandoning avant-gardism – and at the same time been given massive public commissions. Even better – Rivera and the other muralists accepted photography as an equal art form.

Weston, however, could not accept revolutionary politics. He retained his North American individualism and distrust of socialism. Tina Modotti, whose Italian immigrant family was already socialist, identified rapidly with the political aspects of the Mexican revolution as well as the artistic. She joined the Communist Party and was active in political campaigns – in support of Sandino, for instance, and in opposition to Mussolini. It was during this period in fact that she met Frida Kahlo, through the Communist Party (Frida Kahlo was then in the youth movement) and, according to Kahlo's biographer, Hayden Herrera,²³ introduced her to Diego Rivera, also of course a party member at that time. At any event, for Tina Modotti Mexico provoked both a rapid politicisation and a rapid development as a photographer in the manner of Weston. These two dimensions of her life and work, however, were in tension and part of the fascination of Modotti's photography lies in her efforts to overcome this tension.

During his time in Mexico Weston's preferred choices of subject for his photography were female nudes, Mexican folk toys and artefacts, clouds, plant and architectural forms, domestic objects (such as the toilet bowl he likened to the Victory of Samothrace). He also did many portrait heads, though he had a strong dislike for the idea of commercial

portraiture (his main source of livelihood for much of the time). Weston also undertook some commissions – to photograph *pulqueria* paintings for the magazine *Mexican Folkways* and, jointly with Tina Modotti, to provide the illustrations for *Idols Behind Altars*. His human subjects, then, were limited mainly to socially neutral objects, though with a definite bias towards the 'classically' rather than ornamentally folkloric (where, as he saw it, 'form followed function').

Tina Modotti's style of photography is clearly indebted to Weston. Like him she used a large-view camera or a Graflex, slightly more portable but still necessitating a tripod. Her compositions were consciously geometrical, or 'elemental' as Weston might have put it. She did not crop photographs and she went for the same clean sharp-focus look as Weston. She used the same printing technique (like Weston, she frequently made palladium prints). Some of her photographs are on the verge of abstraction, as are many of Weston's – one of bamboo constructed simply around the parallel verticals of the stems or one of the rims of glasses (though this photograph is a double exposure, something Weston would never have allowed himself. Indeed, he half-remonstrated with Tina at one point in his *Daybooks* because she made a print negative).²⁴

However, Tina Modotti soon showed a much greater range of subject matter in her photographs than is to be found in Weston's work. To begin with, she took her camera out into the street and photographed people there. There are series of photographs of women in Tehuantepec, of scenes of mothers with infant children, of the poor (especially children) in Mexico City, of peasants on demonstrations or reading the Communist Party paper *El Machete*. These photographs retain the same formal preoccupations as Weston's despite their very different subjects. The hats of peasants on a demonstration echo the same circular forms as the glasses on a table. The formal composition of a photograph of a pregnant woman holding a naked infant on her hip is arranged with great geometrical clarity and without showing the faces of either mother or child. The geometrical character of her compositions is shown at its clearest in four photographs originally published in *Forma* in 1927²⁵ and described there as illustrations for a book of *estridentista* poetry by German List Arzubide.²⁶ These are of telephone wires, a gas tank, a construction worker among girders and the corner of a staircase. All are composed with an emphasis on the geometrical outlines and tracings of their subjects. Except for the staircase, however, they are all scenes of modern industry. This is in accord with the tenets of *estridentismo* which of all Mexican art movements was closest to European constructivism and futurism in its emphasis on the urban, the modern and the industrial as well as the revolutionary. But it is quite unlike Weston's response to Mexico. Just before his journey south Weston had been photographing

industrial scenes but in Mexico he returned to domestic subjects. Modotti also photographed workers loading bananas and carrying timber with the same formal concerns.

The most remarkable geometrical compositions which Modotti used were in her series of photographs which used as elements objects emblematic of the Mexican revolution; bandolier, corn-cob, sickle, guitar. In this series the subject matter is clearly not found *in situ* but the product of deliberate *mise en scène*. The choice is determined not for its denotation but for its connotation – there is a move towards conceptual as well as formal abstractions. The connotations involved are those not only of *mexicanidad* but also of revolution – the sickle (especially as a composed element) and the bandolier. Weston also, albeit with a slightly uneasy conscience, took to arranging his subject matter to bring out its formal qualities, but Modotti not only did this but also selected subject matter to reflect her political commitment.

After Tina Modotti was expelled from Mexico, on the grounds that she conspired to assassinate the President, she continued her photography in Germany (where it had already been published) but was discouraged by finding that photographers there used the Leica rather than the heavy camera she was used to. Her decision to abandon photography seems connected with her inability to change her whole style of work as a photographer, as the move from Graflex to Leica would have demanded, rather than simply assigning photography a lower priority in favour of direct political work. Workers' photography movements in Germany had developed around news magazines in an attempt to match the use of photography in the Establishment news media. The preconceptions of this style of photography were completely different from those implicit in Tina Modotti's work, which had been much closer in many respects to 'New Objectivity' photography.

In Mexico, Tina Modotti had worked with Workers International Relief, the world-wide organisation founded and directed by Willi Münzenberg. WIR not only ran mass-circulation photo-journals and magazines but produced films, both in Germany and the Soviet Union (the Dudow/Brecht *Kuhle Wampe*, for instance), and published books.²⁷ It was an enormously complex and far-reaching organisation which acted both as a propaganda machine and a patron of the arts. It was also financially independent, which gave Münzenberg the possibility of pursuing a more flexible policy than would have been possible if he had had to rely directly on either the German or the Soviet Communist Party for his operations.

Münzenberg's talents as an entrepreneur were suited to an age of mechanical reproduction. Within the mass media photography is just an element, juxtaposed with print, part of a layout, without the singularity which is the mark of the aesthetic object. Tina Modotti's

background had trained her to see a photograph as an art object, to be looked at in its own right, with its own intrinsic value, rather than as one component of a wider mosaic. While in Germany her photographs were taken up and published in illustrated magazines; in Mexico they were shown in exhibitions, mounted and hanging on a wall, like paintings. This was not simply a question of art in opposition to journalism, but of quite different ways of contextualising and looking at photographs. In a famous essay Walter Benjamin supplied the theoretical arguments underpinning the priority which Münzenberg gave to the mass media, arguing in favour of the 'journalisation', but it is clear from his essay that he is really concerned with the latter and 'politicisation' is a supplement: 'In some cases today's films can also promote revolutionary criticism of social conditions, even of the distribution of property. However, our present study is no more specifically concerned with this than is the film production of Western Europe.'²⁸

Faced with the pressure to 'journalise' her art Tina Modotti gave it up altogether. She belonged, in a sense, to a previous epoch, in which photography was an artisanal product, closer, despite the modernity of its technology, to folk art or popular urban art than to the mass media. The photographer had a small studio or workshop, received personal commissions, held public exhibitions, and so on. The photographs took a long time to conceive and even to make as a result of the detailed attention paid to the making of each print. Benjamin assumed that, in a secular society, this kind of activity would most naturally be justified in terms of 'art for art's sake' or 'pure' art. Certainly Weston's example does support this assumption. But Tina Modotti showed how this kind of photography could itself be politicised, without necessarily being 'journalised'. Moreover, her work had a crucial influence on other artists: Manuel Alvarez Bravo, the leading Mexican photographer of the next generation, and Sergei Eisenstein, whose interest in Mexico was awakened by reading *Idols Behind Altars*. In fact, Modotti's 'emblematic' political photographs and her photographs of life in Mexico are analogous in a number of ways to Eisenstein's own practice – in terms of *typage*, the mode of composition and even the concept of 'intellectual montage'.

THE DISCOURSE OF THE BODY

The art of both Kahlo and Modotti had a basis in their bodies: through injury, pain and disability in Frida Kahlo's case, through an accident of beauty in Tina Modotti's. Frida Kahlo sought an iconic vocabulary which could both express and mask the reality of the body. Tina Modotti, whose career began as a film-actress and a model, redirected the look which had focused on her outwards when she herself became a

photographer. Kahlo's art became predominantly one of self-portraiture; Modotti's one of depiction of others – predominantly women, but seen with an eye quite different from the one that had looked at her.

Frida Kahlo had about thirty operations in the years between her accident in 1925 and her death in 1954. In the accident her spine was fractured, her pelvis shattered and her foot broken. For long periods she was bed-ridden, in pain and incapacitated. She was unable to have the child she desired and suffered miscarriages and medical abortions. In some respects her painting was a form of therapy, a way of coping with pain, warding off despair and regaining control over the image of her crushed and broken body. Painting brought pleasure, hope and power over herself. It made possible both a triumphant reassertion of narcissism and a symbolisation of her pain and suffering. She painted originally for herself and it was not really till Breton recognised the value and fascination of her work for others that she conceived the possibility of holding exhibitions and marketing the paintings.

The vocabulary which Frida Kahlo found and used was primarily that of traditional Mexican Catholic art, especially depictions of martyrdom and of the Passion. There is an explicit use of the imagery of the Passion: the wounds of the scourging and the crucifixion, the knotted cord, the ring of thorns, the simultaneous shining of sun and moon during the tenebrae. The style and iconography are those of popular baroque, in which intensity of expression is given precedence over beauty or dignity, and like most popular forms there is an archaic, almost medieval aspect to the representation, a love of minute detail, a disparity between foreground figure and background setting, a disregard for proportion and perspective. The graphic is systematically favoured rather than the perceptually realistic.

In particular, Kahlo uses the device of the 'emblem'. In *Henry Ford Hospital* her body on the bed is surrounded by a set of emblematic objects, like those surrounding the crucified Christ in an allegory of redemption. Emblems and attributes are graphic signs which carry a conventional meaning, often in reference to a narrative subtext (attributes) or a common set of beliefs (emblems). At times, Frida Kahlo used complex allegorical schemes, as in *Moses* (1945) with an idiosyncratic personal iconography. Through the resources of emblems, she was able to transcribe her physical pain and suffering into a form of graphic language, which could be read by the spectator. The appeal is not to an imaginary identification with herself as subject of pain but as a symbolic reading of herself as vehicle for suffering as in *The Little Deer* (1946).²⁹ Hence the common reaction of horror rather than pity, itself associated more with 'low' than 'high' art.

Another mode of representing the body which she used was to draw detailed imagery from anatomical textbooks. Before her accident she

had intended to study medicine and her injuries gave her a further reason for studying anatomy. Anatomical organs are often used as emblems – the bleeding heart of Catholic tradition, or the pelvis in *Henry Ford Hospital*. The accuracy of anatomical depiction contrasts with other stylistic aspects of her painting, drawn from an epoch and a milieu without precise anatomical knowledge. The effect produced is not only one of physical fragmentation and dislocation but also a kind of anachronism.

Beauty is another form of accident, one that is prized rather than feared. Yet it is one which can bring with it its own burdens. After her expulsion from Mexico, the ship on which Tina Modotti was deported docked in New Orleans and she was detained for eight days in the Immigration Station there. She wrote to Weston:

the newspapers have followed me, and at time preceded me, with wolf-like greediness – here in the U.S. everything is seen from the 'beauty' angle – a daily here spoke of my trip and referred to me as 'a woman of striking beauty' – other reporters to whom I refused an interview tried to convince me by saying they would just speak of 'how pretty I was' – to which I answered that I could not possibly see what 'prettiness' had to do with the revolutionary movement nor with the expulsion of Communists – evidently women here are measured by a motion picture standard.³⁰

It is ironic, in a way, that this letter should have gone to Weston who did more than anyone else to promote and perpetuate the legend of Tina Modotti's beauty, both through his daybooks and through the photographs for which she was model, culminating with the famous series of her lying nude on the *azotea* in 1924. Tina Modotti also acted as a model for Diego Rivera when he was painting murals in the Agricultural College at Chapingo in 1926. Earlier she had been an actress – playing the fiery Latin vamp in early Hollywood Westerns. When Tina Modotti herself became a photographer she photographed primarily women, but the contrast with Weston's approach could not be greater.

Weston became famous as a photographer of the female nude. He claimed that it was the formal quality of the shape of the female body which interested him and that any erotic motive (and there certainly was one, because he had affairs with the great majority of his models) was suspended in the photographic work. His particular form of voyeurism, of taking woman as an object of gaze, was justified in the terms of pure aesthetic form. About the comments of others on the erotic quality of his work he wrote: 'Others must get from them what they bring to them: evidently they do!'³¹ implying also that an erotic

interpretation might follow from the 'sexual suppression' he himself did not suffer from. The fact remains, however, that his nude photographs of Tina Modotti are often taken from above, looking down on her as she lies passively, sunbathing or asleep, on the ground, in a conventional pose.

Tina Modotti's photographs were not of 'beauties' but of peasant and proletarian women, marked by the conditions of their life. Often they are mothers with small children, their bodies framed to emphasise not their own form but that of their interaction with the children. That is to say, they are represented in the process of activity and work, rather than isolated in a pose for the camera. The camera position is often below head height (it is only men who are photographed from above, partly to bring out the circular shape of their hat-brims). In her photographs of women especially the careful organisation of the composition is not allowed to override the directness of the look.

For Frida Kahlo beauty was inextricably bound up with masquerade. In her self-portraits, whatever the degree of pain implied, by tears or even wounds, her face remains severe and expressionless with an unflinching gaze. At the same time the mask-like face is surrounded by luxuriant growths, accoutrements, ornaments and familiars – a monkey, a doll, a hairless dog. The ornament borders on fetishism, as does all masquerade, but the imaginary look is that of self-regard, therefore a feminine, non-male and narcissistic look. There is neither coyness nor cruelty, none of the nuance necessary to the male eroticisation of the female look. The masquerade serves the purpose of displacement from a traumatic childhood of the subject herself, ever-remembered, ever-repeated.

Throughout Kahlo's work there is a particular fetishisation of nature, an imagery of fecundity and luxuriant generation which is clearly a defence against her knowledge of her own barrenness, one of the products of her childhood accident. Veins, fronds and vines often merge in the body itself. There are three modes of self-portraiture: the body damaged, the body masked and ornamented, the body twined and enmeshed with plants. In some paintings even the rays of the sun are incorporated in the web. Fruit in still lifes become part of the body, flesh-like, or like skulls with vacant eyes. It is as though compensation for her barrenness, and a defence against trauma, are condensed in pullulating images of cosmic and natural vitality sometimes counterposed with images of barrenness itself, of lava rock and broken ligneous forms.

In a sense, nature is being turned into a complex of signs. Similarly the body itself becomes a bearer of signs, some legible, some esoteric. Masquerade becomes a mode of inscription, by which the trauma of injury and its effects are written negatively in metaphor. It is as if the intensity of the trauma brings with it a need to transfer the body from

the register of image to that of pictography. Thus faces are read as masks, and ornaments as emblems and attributes. This discourse of the body is itself inscribed with a kind of codex of nature and cosmos, in which sun and moon, plant and animal, are pictograms. At the same time this pictographic effect de-eroticises the imagery.

Hayden Herrera, writing about Frida Kahlo, writes of 'her nearly beautiful face in the mirror'.³² The aptness of 'nearly' carries with it a covert recognition of the overt ruin seen in *The Broken Column* against which beauty has been constructed as a defence. It is the artifice, the masquerade, which produces the uneasy feeling of slight mismatch between ostensible features and ostensible subject.

Tina Modotti, on the other hand, suffered from the inscription of beauty on her body by others. It is somehow appropriate that while Frida Kahlo is remembered for her jewellery and her extravagant costumes, Tina Modotti is remembered as one of the first women in Mexico to wear jeans.

It is the discourse of the body, together with its political and psychoanalytic implications, which provides a continuity for us with Mexico between the wars. The history of art, as Viktor Shklovsky observed, proceeds by knight's moves, through the oblique and unexpected rather than the linear and predictable. If the art of Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti has appeared to be detached from the mainstream, this by no means entails any loss of value. In many ways their work may be more relevant than the central traditions of modernism, at a time when, in the light of feminism, the history of art is being revalued and remade.

Notes

1. André Breton, 'Frida Kahlo de Rivera', in *Surrealism and Painting* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).
2. Trotsky arrived in Mexico on 9 January 1937. He was met at the port of Tampico by Frida Kahlo, and stayed with her in the 'Blue House' until May 1939.
3. 'Las Fotos de Tina Modotti, El Anecdótico Revolucionario', 30/30, 10 (1929).
4. See Florence Arquin, *Diego Rivera: The Shaping of an Artist, 1889–1921* (Oklahoma: Oklahoma University Press, 1971). Rivera was born in 1886.
5. See Dickran Tashjian, *Skyscraper Primitives* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1975), and Catherine Turrill, 'Marius de Zayas', in *Avant-garde Painting and Sculpture in America 1910–25*, catalogue, Delaware Art Museum, 1975.
6. Alfred Barr Jr became the first Director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York in the year following his visit to Moscow in 1927–8. René d'Harnoncourt was his successor in this position.
7. 'The Crisis of the Easel Picture' (1948), in Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961).

8. Porfirio Díaz was the last pre-revolutionary President of Mexico, whose régime extended from 1876 to 1911.
9. See Marevna [Vorobëv], *Life in Two Worlds* (New York: Abelard-Schulman, 1962) and *Life with the Painters of La Ruche* (London: Constable, 1972).
10. See, for instance, the periodical *Heresies*, New York, from 1977, which still provides the principal forum for debate on women's art and feminist aesthetics.
11. See the periodical *m/f*, London, from 1978, for a continuing debate on 'the discourse of the body'.
12. For a recent political analysis of the Mexican revolution, see Donald C. Hodges and Ross Gandy, *Mexico 1910-1976: Reform or Revolution?* (London: Zed Press, 1979).
13. 'El Ateneo de la Juventud' (The Athenaeum of Youth) was an intellectual society founded in 1909 with the purpose of reforming Mexican culture. See Carlos Monsivais, 'Notas sobre la Cultura Mexicana en el Siglo XX' in *Historia General de Mexico*, vol. 4 (Mexico, 1976).
14. Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal and Hilary Wainright, *Beyond the Fragments* (London: Merlin Press, 1981). For another approach, see Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, 'The Personal is Not Political Enough', *Marxist Perspectives*, 8 (Winter 1979-80).
15. In *Old Mistresses* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock argue that this secondary organisation of masculine/feminine antinomy into social and cultural spheres dates from the Victorian period, and comment, 'for women artists have not acted outside cultural history, as many commentators seem to believe, but rather they have been impelled to act within it from a place other than that occupied by men'.
16. Walter Benjamin, 'Louis-Philippe or the Interior', *Charles Baudelaire: Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (London: New Left Books, 1973).
17. Manuel Alvarez Bravo, quoted in Mildred Constantine, *Tina Modotti: A Fragile Life* (New York and London: Paddington Press, 1975).
18. See Hayden Herrera, 'Self-Portrait of Frida Kahlo as a Tehuana', in *Heresies*, 4 (1978-9).
19. See Bertram D. Wolfe, 'Rise of another Rivera', *Vogue* (1 November 1938).
20. See Jean Charlot, *An Artist and his Art*, vol. 2 (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1972).
21. See Gloria Kay Giffords, *Mexican Folk Retablos* (Tucson: Arizona University Press, 1974).
22. Anita Brenner, *Idols Behind Altars* (New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1976). This book contained photographs by Modotti and Weston.
23. Hayden Herrera, *Frida Kahlo* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982).
24. *The Daybooks of Edward Weston*, vol. 1 (Millerton, New York: Aperture, 1961).
25. See the magazine *Forma*, ed. Gabriel Fernandez Ledesma, 10 (Mexico, 1927).
26. See Carleton Beals, *Mexican Maze* (Philadelphia: J. P. Lippincott, 1931).
27. For this period see *Photography/Politics: One* (London: Commedia, 1979) and John Willett, *The New Society: Art and Politics in the Weimar Period 1917-33* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978).
28. Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', *Illuminations* (London: Fontana, 1970).
29. The metaphor of the 'stricken deer' has a tradition in Mexican poetry. See, for instance, 'Verses Expressing the Feelings of a Lover' by Sor Juana Inez de La Cruz (Juana de Asbaje 1651-95):

*If thou seest the wounded stag
that hastens down the mountain-side,
seeking, stricken, in icy stream
ease for its hurt,
and thirsting plunges in the crystal waters,
not in ease, in pain it mirrors me.*

Translated by Samuel Beckett in Octavio Paz (ed.), *Anthology of Mexican Poetry* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1959). On the theory of the emblem, and Sor Juana's practice of it, see Robert J. Clements, *Picta Poesis* (Rome, 1960).

30. Letter from Tina Modotti to Edward Weston, quoted in Constantine, *Tina Modotti: A Fragile Life*, p. 175.
31. *The Daybooks of Edward Weston*, vol. 2, p. 32.
32. Herrera, in *Frida Kahlo*, 1982.

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Visual and Other Pleasures

Laura Mulvey

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