1930a

The introduction of mass consumer and fashion magazines in twenties and thirties Weimar Germany generates new frameworks for the production and distribution of photographic imagery and helps foster the emergence of a group of important women photographers.

It is no accident that an astonishingly large number of women were among the key photographers of European and American photographic culture in the twenties and thirties. The famous question posed by Linda Nochlin in an essay in 1972 entitled "Why have there been no great women artists?" would have to be reversed for this period with the question being "Why were there so many great women photographers in the twenties and thirties?" In introducing the work of some of these photographers, and in order to explain this phenomenon, numerous and contradictory factors have to be considered. Generally speaking, one could argue that photography provided access to a technical and scientific apparatus of image production that displaced, once and for all, the exclusionist patriarchal rule that had declared exceptional manual skill, if not virtuosity, to be the single valid criterion of art. Photography—the techno-scientific reorganization of images—was causally intertwined with a general reformulation of the concepts of male sublimation that lay at the root of artistic identity. This is evident, for example, in the paradigm shift occurring in the work of Florence Henri (1893–1982) after she had taken courses with ▲ László Moholy-Nagy at the Bauhaus in Dessau in 1927 (as well as with Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee).

Recognizing that photography had become the central instrument of image production within the industrialization of everyday life, Henri adopted the principles and practices of Moholy-Nagy's "New Vision" photography. Returning to Paris in 1928, she wrote to her friend Lou Scheper:

> *Paris makes an incredibly old fashioned impression after the Bauhaus. I am no longer under its spell.... I am photographing.... I am fed up with painting and getting nowhere, and I have got an incredible number of ideas for photography.*

The tensions and tendencies embodied in the photography of Weimar women became apparent in a comparison of self-portraits by two of the most important protagonists of photography in the twenties. Germaine Krull's (1897–1985) *Self-Portrait with Ikarette* from 1925 [1] constructs the photographer's image within a complex amalgam of tropes of modernity: firstly, the fragmentation of the body and the metonymic foregrounding of the indexical hands that self-reflexively perform the act of photographic recording; secondly, the superimposition, if not the substitution, of the camera for the photographer's physiognomy, causes the photographer's eye and the optical device (the camera's viewfinder) to collapse in a mechanomorphic symbiosis. And lastly, the tropes of the emancipated "New Woman," in which the display of the technical apparatus is matched by an equally ostentatious display of the cigarette—offers yet another universal emblem of independence.

By contrast, Lotte Jacobi's (1896–1990) *Self-Portrait* of c. 1930 [2] emerges not only from a dramatic painterly chiaroscuro, but also from a far more traditional concept of the portrait and the photograph. The probing introspection with which Jacobi faces the camera seems to be driven by both *desires* for and *doubts* about the very feasibility of portraiture and the credibility of that genre, in which the representation of the subject had been anchored for centuries. In Jacobi's portrait the protagonist is not yet the camera itself, but is, rather, an artistic subject, albeit a struggling and desperate one. And yet, Jacobi's attempt to maintain a hierarchical relation between the subject and a (presumably subservient) technological apparatus is uncannily contested by the camera's glistening eye with its typographic inscription emerging from the dark of the studio space, and even more so by the ostentatiously lit remote-control cable that links machine and maker like an umbilical cord.

The "New Woman" as photographer

More concrete explanations for the increased numbers of women photographers can be found in the historical transformations of professional and educational institutions. Until the turn of the century, the traditional route to photographic education had been to work as an apprentice in the studio of a professional photographer (as did Jacobi, for example, who learned the profession in the workshop of her father and grandfather). Yet two institutions in Wilhelminian Germany offered photographic education within the curriculum when most of the traditional beaux-arts academies still barred female students. The first was the Institute for Photographic Education of the Lette Verein (founded in 1890 for the professional education of female photographers, it had begun with thirteen students and had 337 by 1919). The second major institution was the Teaching Institute for Photography (*Lehr- und*

▲ 1923

1 • Germaine Krull, *Self-Portrait with Ikarette*, 1925
Silver-gelatin print, 20 x 15.1 (7⅞ x 6)

2 • Lotte Jacobi, *Self-Portrait*, Berlin, c. 1930
Silver print, 32.1 x 25.1 (12⅝ x 9⅞)

Versuchsanstalt für Photographie), founded in Munich in 1900, which admitted women as of 1905; Krull, for example, studied with the American Pictorialist Frank Eugene Smith, who taught at the Munich Institute from 1907 to 1913. Nevertheless, it was not until 1921 that women could become full members of the German Professional Guild of Photographers. By the mid-twenties, photography was introduced in most German arts and crafts schools as a new medium within the curriculum of the applied arts. It had become more and more evident that the rapidly expanding need for advertisement and graphic design would benefit immensely from an increase in technical and artistic competence in photography. Thus, as of 1925 the Munich Institute for example, replaced its Pictorialist faculty and appointed younger photographers who were familiar with the aesthetics of "New Objectivity." Other private institutions, such as the Reimann Schule appointed the young "New Vision" photographer Lucia Moholy to its faculty, where she remained from 1930 to 1933. The Bauhaus made its first faculty appointment in photography only under the directorship of Hannes Meyer, who nominated Walter Peterhans in 1929 to direct the new photographic curriculum that was aligned with the courses for advertising and design. Until 1933, when the Bauhaus was closed by the Nazi government, eleven women had successfully completed the photography class, among them several who went on to find considerable professional recognition, such as Ellen Auerbach (born 1906), Grete Stern (1904–99), Elsa Franke (1910–1981) and Irena Blühova (born 1904) (not to mention those who—like Henri—had studied with Moholy-Nagy).

But of equal, if not greater importance, were the newly arising professional opportunities offered to women. Statistics from 1925 record that 11.5 million women were professionals (35.8 percent of the total working population), making up the majority of low-level workers at the conveyor belts of industrial mass production, of white-collar workers in offices, and of sales personnel in department stores and retail industries. The social role model of the "New Woman" not only provided access to forms of emancipated experience. It also constructed women as producers and consumers and as objects within the overall process of the industrialization of new desires. Photographic mass culture generated and responded to these new behavioral forms and needs.

The new culture of illustrated magazines first emerged in Berlin (there were 200 registered magazines devoted to women, fashion, and domestic culture alone), ranging from Ullstein's conservative middle-class *BIZ*, the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* (circulation 1.7 million copies), to a counterpublication for the working class, Willi Münzenberg's *AIZ*, the *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung*, sometimes reaching a print run of 350,000. Their equivalents in

▲ 1925b, 1929

▲ 1920

4 • Gisèle Freund, *Demonstration in Frankfurt*, 1932

the thirties worked through its most profound contradictions. These ranged from the iterative production and distribution of images of the star, the new public persona whose function it was to compensate for the loss of subjective experience in the masses, to the contemplation of the precarious status—if not the final demise—of the representation of the bourgeois subject. The photograph's essential duality as both an exact indexical record and an artificial simulacrum (its most extreme form being the montage of photographs) lent itself to both the ideology of a physiognomically anchored identity and to the conception of subjectivity as pure construction.

At one extreme we find Erna Lendvai-Dircksen (1883–1962). Admitted as one of the first women members of the German Guild of Photographers in 1924, she ran one of the most successful portrait studios in Berlin. Lendvai-Dircksen claimed that a subject's identity was grounded in ethnicity and race, homeland and religion, and that therefore the portrait could best map that identity by tracing the physiognomy of the sitter as accurately as only photography would allow. In her lecture in 1933, "On German Photography," she polemicized against the "internationalist dissolution of the photograph by New Objectivity" and promised that her project would "save the German and the Germanic people's faces" and would follow the "inner obligation to participate in the restoration of the decaying German physiognomy." Not surprisingly, Lendvai-Dircksen not only became an ardent fascist herself in 1933, but her work would soon be published and distributed by the Nazi rulers as the photographic corroboration of their racist ideologies.

We find the dialectical opposite in portrait photographs by Freund and Jacobi, Annelise Kretschmer (1903–87), and in Helmar Lerski's (1871–1956) project *Köpfe des Alltags* (Everyday Heads), published in 1931. In 1932 Freund had still been attempting to construct the image of the new proletarian and collective subject in her photographs of mass demonstrations [**4**] and Jacobi had produced portraits of the Communist candidate Ernst Thälmann for the cover of *AIZ* in a desperate attempt to prevent the Nazi Party from coming to power in the fatal elections of 1933. In these images—as in the photographs by ▲ Aleksandr Rodchenko and the Soviet avant-garde photographers working at that time—the subject is anonymous, and ostentatiously presented as constructed by class, social relations, and professional identities. In some of the most radical work of the time, the subject is constituted in the process of labor itself, as in the extraordinary series of images of street workers, taken by Ella Bergmann-Michel between 1928 and 1932 from a bird's-eye view, in which the ground of labor (the grid of cubic basalt blocks making up a street) and the laboring figure itself are fused in an inseparable unity.

We find, however, a third model of Weimar portrait photography in the extraordinary portraits that Krull and Freund produced in the late twenties in Germany and when exiled in France in the thirties, and in particular in the work of Jacobi, one of the greatest portraitists of the twentieth century, during her years in Berlin and New York. These images are defined by an innate sense of the subject's fragility, its historically determined transitional status. Their almost exhaustive account of the intellectuals and artists of the interwar period (such as Krull's portrait of Walter Benjamin in 1926) reminds us of Nadar's astonishing pantheon of portraits of the Republican intellectuals and artists in France after 1848. These images seem to hold on to the last moment of European subjectivity

▲ 1935

before the concept of the subject and its social reality were annihilated by the joint onslaughts of fascist politics and engulfment by the image technologies of mass culture.

The subject in exile

As evident in her numerous portraits of actors of the period, for example *Lotte Lenya Weill* [5], Jacobi already seems to have recognized that the modern specular subject of the "star" would be constituted at the very intersection of fashion design, makeup, lighting techniques, and iterative distribution, in outright opposition to the traditional conception of unique subjectivity, that assumed "naturally" available markers of distinction (by class privilege) and the inevitable emanation of individual psychic presence. Photographs now appeared to be uniquely qualified to record images of that new type of constructed subjectivity. But Jacobi and Freund—like their great Viennese colleague Lisette Model— would also record subjectivity as suspended, in transition between Weimar culture and exile.

Freund had been a member of the Communist Student Organization at the University of Frankfurt, where she had been working on her doctoral dissertation under the tutelage of Karl Mannheim, Norbert Elias, and Theodor Adorno. Forced to emigrate to Paris in 1933, she saved her manuscript and subsequently completed it at the Sorbonne in Paris in 1936, where it was published in 1937 as the first social history of photography under the title *La Photographie en France au XIXème Siècle.*

Jacobi emigrated to New York in 1935. While stark chiaroscuro had been a hallmark of her portraits throughout the twenties, signifying dramatic specular modernity with its attributes of theatricality, fashion, and film (such as the portrait of the actor *Francis Lederer* or *Russian Dancer* in 1929), it acquired a distinctly melancholic dimension after her arrival in the United States. Jacobi's portraits recorded the danger of the historical moment and the tragic experiences of her sitters (the portraits of Erich Reiss, Karen Horney, and Max Reinhardt, for example) who found themselves not only biographically and professionally suspended in the geopolitical chasm of exile, but equally, as did Jacobi herself, in the historical shift from the radical bourgeois public sphere of Weimar culture to that of the culture industry of the United States.

While Jacobi's melancholic chiaroscuro attempted to rescue the subject's contemplative dimension, Freund's decision to employ color photography from 1938 onward (the portraits of James Joyce and of French interwar intellectual and artistic "celebrities," for example) situated the portrait within an altogether different set of relations, signaling the inevitable shift toward the spectacularization of subjectivity. Freund's color photographs seem involuntarily intertwined with the imminent influx of American technicolor movies and with the full-color advertisements of the *Saturday Evening Post* or *Life* magazine whose chromatic "naturalism" would simulate immediacy, presence and life, promising unlimited access to the universe of dead objects that consumer culture was soon to foist on its postwar subjects.

▲ 1959d

5 • Lotte Jacobi, *Portrait of Lotte Lenya Weill*, c. 1928
Silver print, 27.6 x 35.6 (10⅞ x 14)

It is particularly important to trace the development of the Weimar photographers after their emigration either to France (as was the case with Freund and Krull), to the United States (as was the case with Jacobi, Auerbach, and many others), or to Argentina (as in the case of Grete Stern). Bereft not only of their language and culture, but also of the progressive social and political contexts from within which they had emerged (for instance, the context of the Weimar avant-garde—such as the Bauhaus—the emergence of an emancipatory feminist consciousness evident in the radical enactment of the rights of the "New Woman," and the horizon of an actually existing socialist politics), they now found themselves confronted with totally different definitions of the social functions of photography. On the one hand was an outright and intensified commercialism in the rapidly accelerating consumer culture of the United States where "photography as a weapon" was more thoroughly discredited and censored than one might be able to recollect at this point. On the other hand was a general cultural backlash and a return to the patriarchal supremacy of painting as the centrally governing practice of visual culture (as in Abstract Expressionism), against which photography, shunted from its position at the radical forefront of Weimar culture, could now be relegated to its earlier role as the minor "sister art."

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