

Value Inversion in the Work of

Tina Modotti

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Out of all the creators associated with early post-revolution Mexican art, photographer Tina Modotti is one that inspires curiosity. Despite her heritage as an Italian-born American, to this day, she is considered the quintessential Mexican photographer, her nationality and ethnicity having effectively transgressed any expectation suggesting Mexican ancestry to be a requirement for a recipient of said legacy. It is furthermore fascinating to consider that despite the reverence her work garnered for its intriguing aesthetic qualities, she did not consider herself an “artist” in the strict sense of the term¹. Influenced by her teacher and most famous partner, photographer Edward Weston, Modotti favoured straightforward photography techniques that emphasized clean, geometric forms, and formal properties, embracing the modernist slogan “Form follows function”, whilst simultaneously avoiding pictorial methods². However, unlike Weston, who’s work would emphasize the physical nature of thoughtfully staged objects and individuals as the predominant subject matter upon which to ponder, Modotti, concerned above all else with expressing the plight of her subjects and environments in all their honest complexity, embraced documentary photography, and used Modern techniques associated with composition rendering to enhance the context of the content presented, rather than overshadow it³. Embracing the limitations of the camera’s functions, she made what can arguably be considered art out of subject matters that were not considered “artistic” by Weston or the dominant Western art scene

¹ Modotti, Tina. "On Photography." In *Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti*, 28. London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1982.

² Mulvey, Laura, and Peter Wollen. "Roots and Movements II: Tina Modotti." In *Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti*, 21-24. London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1982.

³ Modotti, 28

of Modern times⁴. As a result, possibly unconsciously, her work effectively embodies an artistic strategy referred to by Professor of Art History Andrea Giunta as “value inversion”⁵, a tool with which the discussion of Modotti’s contributions towards recording, defining, and embracing the Post Revolutionary Mexican identity cannot be had without mention of.

In the article “Strategies of Modernity in Latin America”, value inversion is described by Giunta as “decontextualizing and resemanticizing operation” to replace a naturalized ideology⁶. Joaquin Torres-Garcia’s 1943 piece “Inverted Map of South America for the School of the South” is presented as an example; by displaying a map of South America upside down from the manner in it is typically rendered in the West and Latin America, Torres-Garcia embraces the south as the new “north”, replacing the ideology that favours Western countries as the centers of progress⁷. Modotti’s work, though through a methodology can be discerned as more subtle, also asks the viewer to break from naturalized notions associated with Western ideologies. Using the aforementioned Modern photographic techniques popular in the Western artistic trends of the early 20th century, subject matter to do with local politics, life, and environment are framed and presented in compositional styles that denote their importance to a degree that compels the viewer to consider their opinion and ideas about Mexico beyond mere shapes and objects, and instead as ideas, philosophies, and achievements. Between the years of 1923-1930 that Modotti initially spent in Mexico, this style of representation was one answer to the question of Mexican

⁴ Mulvey, Laura, and Peter Wollen. "Roots and Movements II: Tina Modotti."

⁵ Giunta, Andrea. "Strategies of Modernity in Latin America." In *Mosquera: Beyond the Fantastic*, 1-10. MIT Press, 1996.

⁶ Giunta, Andrea. "Strategies of Modernity in Latin America."

⁷ Giunta, Andrea. "Strategies of Modernity in Latin America."

identity, the recently-ended revolution having incited nation-wide feelings of patriotism in simultaneity with feelings of confusion regarding what it meant to be Mexican after centuries of colonial rule⁸. Similar to a number of her local artistic contemporaries including Diego Riviera⁹, she viewed socialism as the answer to a positive future in Mexico, and became heavily involved with the thriving communist party, photographing for *El Machete*, a popular left-wing periodical of the time¹⁰. Unlike Riviera however, her work nearly entirely avoided any obvious evidence of her own narrative staging, as she instead elected to photograph Mexico as it was from her point of view through the lens of the camera and the legacy of Weston's Modernist techniques. With this set of strategies, she was able to present a broader range of subject matters with which to describe the political and social situation in Mexico, among them the legacy of the Revolution, and the lifestyle of the people.

One of Modotti's most well-known pieces is the 1926 photograph "Worker's March". The image is taken above a crowd of walking men in sombreros, and the modernist formal elements of the composition are immediately noticeable to the viewer; from enough of a distance, the image appears almost abstract, like a pattern of organic forms manifested from

⁸ Mulvey, Laura, and Peter Wollen. "Revolution and Renaissance." In *Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti*, 11-12. London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1982.

⁹ Manjarrez, Maricela González Cruz. "Tina Modotti and Muralism: Notes on a Common Language." *Third Text* 28, no. 3 (May 04, 2014): 271-81. Accessed December 14, 2017. doi:10.1080/09528822.2014.913348.

¹⁰ Casanovas, Marti. "Revolutionary Anecdotes." In *Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti*, 32-33.

heavy contrasts between oval shapes and irregular polygons placed in various areas between. However, the intended political and social message still overrides any initial focus the viewer might have had about the physical aspects of the piece. Each of the men photographed in the piece are all a very similar distance away from the camera, and are subject to the sun reflecting off their similar sombrero hats almost all in the same way. They also all walk in the same direction, and all of their faces are covered by their hats and the surrounding shadows. There is a dominating sense of consistency, and orderliness present within the scene, and the viewer is unable to consider the men as individual people, but instead, as all supporting elements of something greater. The presented metaphor of working men in sombreros as orderly, Modernist shapes, ultimately serves to place the utmost emphasis on their collective identity as noble Mexican workers thriving under unity and solidarity¹¹. Modotti's intentions to celebrate the Mexican worker subtly suggests her political affiliations, and also encourages the viewers to consider the landscape of modern Mexican life as one worth stopping to appreciate, looking beyond the surface of what admirable aspects lie behind such everyday occurrences.

Contrasting the aforementioned photograph, Modotti's 1929 piece "Untitled [woman with Pot on Head]" urges the viewer to focus deeply on the individual instead of the collective. The straightforward portrait pulls the viewer into the image with the intense contrast between the woman's figure caught in midday shadow and the pale sky behind her. Unlike the busts and figures of women photographed in the work of Weston, the camera position is below rather than

¹¹Mulvey, Laura, and Peter Wollen. "The Interior and Exterior." In *Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti*, 13-17. London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1982.

above the subject's head height, and the face gazes directly at the viewer¹², with an inquisitive, and curious expression. The viewer is compelled to look into her face and eyes, and interpret her as a person with a life, as opposed to a structure staged to merely describe what can be done with light and shadow, or to serve any purpose of titillation. The Modernist formal element is present in the form of balanced variation in the silhouette shape of the woman against the sky, possibly subtly suggesting she be regarded the way someone might value a great work of art, in all her dignity, strength, power, and beauty.

In the 1926 piece "Hands of the Puppeteer", Modotti uses the differences between negative and positive areas to create a piece that tells a story without the need to stage or dress the subject in a studio. The piece appeals to Modernist aesthetics through heavy contrasts and repetition of clean geometric triangular forms, while also using said shapes to describe the puppeteer's arms at work, curling together the strings of his puppet. The comparison suggests reverence of the action of creation, in the case of the puppeteer, the creation of entertainment. Also a common symbol in pro-communist art of the time, Modotti's emphasis on his worn, strong hands¹³, suggest reverence of the man's work, and her intense regard and compassion for working individuals. As mentioned previously, what might be mundane, Modotti intends to present as beautiful.

¹²Mulvey, Laura, and Peter Wollen. "The Discourse of the Body." In *Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti*, 25-27. London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1982.

¹³Manjarrez, Maricela González Cruz. "Tina Modotti and Muralism: Notes on a Common Language." *Third Text* 28, no. 3 (May 04, 2014): 271-81. Accessed December 14, 2017. doi:10.1080/09528822.2014.913348.

In conclusion, Modotti's unique work helped to form a profound, and popularly accepted notion of Mexican identity through the embrace of Mexican life as it was at the time of her initial residence. Regarding her subjects with an empathetic and affectionate eye, she used a popular Western language of Modern photographic techniques to highlight and present the rich and fascinating culture of Mexicans that was already present, without the need of pictorial manipulation, or staging in a studio. Her love of the country is easy to see, and her loss of drive to continue her photography practice in the same way after being exiled from the country in 1930 is easy to believe. Through she initially spent only 7 years in the country (10 altogether including her return in 1939 before her death in 1942)¹⁴, her remarkable career suggests that the sufficient level of empathy, involvement, and understanding of Mexican life might override any requirement of blood ancestry, or specific visual language, to have one's cultural contributions cherished and valued in the country.

¹⁴ Max, Perchick. "A Tempestous Life of Art, Passion, Love and Death." *PSA Journal* 62, no. 3 (March 1996): 30-34. Accessed December 15, 2017. doi:9603206059.

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Tina Modotti, "Worker's March", 1926



Tina Modotti, Untitled [woman with Pot on Head], 1929



Tina Modotti, "Hands of the Puppeteer", 1926