A Hybrid Avant-Garde: Kati Horna's Balance between Artist Autonomy and Political Engagement

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A photograph taken by Mexican-Hungarian photographer Kati Horna (née Katalin Deutsch Blau, Kathe Polgare, 1912–2000) in the fall of 1937 features a girl with bright eyes and a kind smile who gazes into the distance (fig. 1). The girl has a ribbon tied in a bow at the top of her head to hold back her short, straight hair and wears a simple dark frock. Without context, the photograph is a moment of childlike delight and wonder. However, the image takes on additional meaning when we learn that Horna captured the photograph in Madrid during the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), a conflict between the fascist Nationalists and the democratic Second Spanish Republic. The Republic had recently suffered defeat in the northern Basque territory surrounding Bilbao, while its citizens in Madrid and Barcelona endured heavy air raids. Those who survived the raids were left without access to water, food, warm clothing, or shelter. Women, children, and the elderly flocked to refugee centers surrounding the city to seek help.

Against this backdrop of violence, disruption, and hunger, we can see that Horna adds a humanitarian rhetoric to the photograph by using an upward camera angle. Numerous photojournalists during the Civil War used a similar technique to depict standing soldiers in heroic terms. Expansive skies behind these figures create a sense of boundless possibility and optimism, while upward camera angles provide the subjects with towering authority and strength. When Horna applies this same rhetoric

Figure 1: Kati Horna, *untitled* (Girls of Madrid), 1937, photograph on cellulose nitrate, 6 x 6 cm. Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte, Centro Documental de la Memoria Histórica, Salamanca, Spain, #220 in the Kati Horna Archive. http://pares.mcu.es/ParesBusquedas20/catalogo/description/118215.

to a young girl, she becomes a heroine of endurance and hopefulness, as demonstrated by her faraway gaze and shining eyes. This photograph illustrates the humanitarian-feminist intentions that guided Horna's work during the last two years of the Spanish Civil War and provides evidence of her own artistic autonomy, even as she produced visual materials for the anarcho-syndicalist union, the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo/ Federación Anarquista Iberíca (CNT-FAI).

Before Francisco Franco's Nationalist forces attempted to overthrow the Second Spanish Republic on July 17, 1936, political organizations in the country suffered from factionalism. After the coup d'état, a myriad of political organizations rallied around right and left factions. On the left, the Popular Front consisted of Marxist communists, socialists, Republicans, and anarchists. While the anarchists viewed the Civil War as an opportunity for revolution, the other members of the Popular Front considered these endeavors detrimental to the war effort. During the war, the CNT-FAI collectivized agriculture and industry, established secular schools, and reorganized finance. These activities were driven by anarchist tenets of autonomy and belief in the ability of the community to organize itself. Upon her arrival in Spain from Paris in January 1937, Horna photographed the military and civilian efforts in the Aragón region and created propagandist materials for the CNT-FAI. In the first few months of her engagement with the conflict, her visual products matched the aims of the organization. Her pamphlet, *¿España? Un libro de imágenes sobre cuentos de miedo y calumnias fascistas* (Spain? A picture book of horror tales and fascist calumnies) can certainly be considered propaganda.[1] Over the course of the war,

[1] Michel Otayek, "Loss and Renewal: The Politics and Poetics of Kati Horna's Photo Stories," in *Told and Untold: The Photo Stories of Kati Horna in the Illustrated Press*, ed. Gabriela Rangel and trans. Christopher Leland Winks (New York: America's Society, 2016), 27–29. Otayek uses this brochure as evidence of Horna's agency in creating propagandistic materials. While his essay aptly recenters the

Horna's focus shifted. She became the graphic editor of the CNT journal *Umbral* in July 1937, where she displayed greater concern for broader social issues, such as humanitarianism and feminism.[2]

Despite the revolutionary aims of the anarchists, most groups considered women's rights a low priority. However, Mujeres Libres, founded by writer Lucía Sánchez Saornil, lawyer Mercedes Comaposada Guillén, and doctor Amparo Poch y Gascón advocated for the liberation of women from their "triple slavery." They believed that women were enslaved by their ignorance and by their dual status as both women and workers.[3] In addition to publishing a journal, *Mujeres Libres*, the group held meetings for women to gain education, job training, and build solidaristic community. Horna attended meetings, photographed members, and contributed to the associated journal. Her photographs and photomontages from the fall of 1937 to the end of the war in 1939 demonstrate her artistic experiments in feminist and humanitarian issues, but retain elements of the political matters that the CNT-FAI prioritized.[4] In this way, Horna was able to balance two concepts that at first appear mutually exclusive: artistic autonomy and political engagement. This was an accomplishment given the artistic debates occurring in avant-garde movements, which sought either the combination or separation of art and politics during the interwar years in Europe.

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discourse on Horna's political intentions, it overlooks the relevant discussions on art and politics that were occurring in the artistic avant-garde movements during the interwar years in Europe. Otayek observes that Kati's waning revolutionary fervor is expressed in her collages and photomontages created with José Horna, which attest to the pending defeat of the revolution. However, I argue that Horna shifted her focus from the aims of the CNT-FAI to her own personal humanitarian and feminist interests in these same photomontages and collages.

[2] Miriam Basilio, "The Art of Kati Horna," *Latin American Literature and Arts* 51 (1995): 71. Basilio was the first to notice Horna's burgeoning interest in feminism during the Spanish Civil War.

[3] María Aránzazu Díaz-R. Labajo, "Miradas para la guerra de España: los usos de las fotografías de Kati Horna en la propaganda del Gobierno republicano, de la CNT-FAI y en las revistas ilustradas Weekly Illustrated, Umbral, y Mujeres Libres (1937-1939)," in *Liberales, cultivadas y activas: redes culturales, lazos de la amistad* (2017): 503.

[4] Kati's Civil War oeuvre contains 972 negatives and 20 known photomontages, several of them created in collaboration with José. There are 270 negatives stored at the Kati Horna Photo Archive at the Centro Documental de la Memoria Histórica (CDMH) in Salamanca, Spain. A recent discovery by Almudena Rubio Pérez uncovered an additional 522 photographs within "Las Cajas de Ámsterdam," a shipment containing important CNT documents and image archives that were smuggled out of Spain shortly before the fall of the Republic. It is likely that there are more photomontages by Horna that scholars have not yet found or identified. I recently conducted research on the newspaper *Tierra y Libertad* at the CMDH and found two previously unidentified photomontages signed by José using Kati's photographs. Kati Horna, *Archivo fotográfico de Kati Horna*, Centro Documental de la Memoria Histórica, Salamanca, Spain; Almudena Rubio Pérez, "'Las Cajas de Ámsterdam': Kati Horna y los Anarquistas de la CNT-FAI," *Historia Social* 96 (2020): 22.

In his book *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974), Peter Bürger explains that the historical or revolutionary avant-gardes of the early twentieth century rejected the "separation of art from the praxis of life," which had dominated the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[5] Instead, he observes that the avant-gardes sought to "organize a new life praxis from a basis in art."[6] This shift required the participating artists to establish novel guidelines for using art to change their realities. On the one hand, Russian Constructivists adhered to an "art for the proletarian," which utilized abstraction to reflect modern industry. They contended that individual artistic autonomy should be subservient to the needs of the proletarian class. On the other hand, Surrealism championed freedom, chance encounters, the subconscious mind, irrationality, and the marvelous. The leader of the movement, André Breton, sought to combine dream and reality, which he termed "surreality."[7] He considered aligning Surrealism with the French Communist Party (PCF) but avoided a formal commitment because he believed in the primacy of artistic freedom over service to an official political party.

Although Horna experimented with both Constructivist and Surrealist formal artistic methods, she did not ascribe to their "all or nothing" mentalities regarding the combination of art and politics.[8] Instead, I posit that she committed to the belief that artistic autonomy and politically engaged art can coexist without the one consuming the other. This was the position argued by Lajos Kassák, the founder of Hungarian Activism, whose teachings had an early influence on Horna. Hungarian Activism combined leftist ideologies with artistic avant-garde disciplines, primarily Constructivism and Expressionism.[9] Horna, who encountered the group during her adolescence in Budapest, described Kassák as a "man who opened her mind to new ideas."[10] In response to these influences, Horna created a hybrid philosophy that

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[5] Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 49.

[6] Ibid.

[7] André Breton, "Manifesto of Surrealism" (1924), in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 14.

[8] Even in exile in Mexico after the Spanish Civil War, Horna was associated with the Surrealists, but she did not accept the title herself.

[9] Hungarian Activism was a movement within the larger Hungarian avant-garde.

[10] Lisa Pelizzon, *Kati Horna: Constelaciones de sentido* (Barcelona: San Soleil, 2015), 20. Kassák believed that art reflected its artist. If the artist was socialist, then the art itself would inevitably also be socialist. The artist could produce revolutionary work, but her autonomy should not be subordinated to directly serve a social class or political ideology. Kassák's ambivalent view on artistic independence is reflected in his own brief experiences as an official poster censor for the Hungarian Soviet Republic. He quickly left his position for the same reason that he did not fully commit to Constructivism: he believed that artistic autonomy should not be consumed by one's dedication to social and political organizations. Esther Levinger, "The Theory of Hungarian Constructivism," *The Art Bulletin* 69, no. 3 (1987): 457; Éva Forgács

balanced artist autonomy and political engagement by integrating Constructivist and Surrealist formal elements with Kassák's theory.[11] Although her photographs, photomontages, and collages contain anarchist intonations—certainly enough to be published in CNT-FAI's newspapers and journals—Horna's own humanitarian-feminist voice can still be heard and recognized.

The remainder of this essay addresses the intersection of art and politics in Horna's artwork from the Civil War, which included avant-garde vestiges of Constructivism and Surrealism. This work was created in collaboration with her husband, Spanish graphic artist José Horna (1912–1963), who she met while working at

Figure 2: László Moholy-Nagy, *Die Eigenbrötler II* (The Mavericks II), 1927, photomontage (gelatin silver prints and ink), 22.4 x 15.7 cm. Gift of Herbert R. and Paula Molner in honor of Douglas Druick, 2011.333.1. The Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois / Art Resource, NY © 2024 Estate of László Moholy-Nagy / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

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and Tyrus Miller, "The Avant-Garde in Budapest and in Exile in Vienna," *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, eds. Peter Brooker, Sascha Bru, Andrew Thacker and Christian Weikop, vol. 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1137; Oliver Botar, "Lajos Kassák, Hungarian 'Activism', and Political Power," *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 36, no. 1–2 (2002): 400.

[11] Alicia Sánchez- Mejorada, Emma Cecilia Garicía Krinsky, Sergio Flores, and Lisa Pelizzon have emphasized Horna's avant-garde productions, notably works that reflect Surrealist influences, as well as her documentary photography as a photojournalist. By referencing Horna's "libertarian beliefs" and role within the CNT-FAI only in passing, they relegate these connections to a minor role. The 2016 edited volume *Told and Untold* recentered Horna's commitments to radical left-wing politics but allows them to overshadow her artistic contributions: *Told and Untold: The Photo Stories of Kati Horna in the Illustrated Press*, ed. Gabriela Rangel and trans. Christopher Leland Winks (New York: America's Society, 2016). While Almudena Rubio Pérez's recent findings in "Las Cajas de Àmsterdam" are invaluable, they too focus solely on Horna's political engagements.

Umbral.[12] Kati Horna left Budapest in 1930 to study politics at the Hochschule für Politik in Berlin.[13] She then lived in Paris from the fall of 1933 to March 1937, when she left for Spain. The text of the essay mirrors Horna's travels, by moving from an example of her integration of Constructivist formal elements to an example of her application of Surrealist elements, both created during the Spanish Civil War. Subsequently, it details Horna's use of humanitarian and feminist iconography and her effort to balance her artistic autonomy with art created in service to the CNT-FAI.

Horna adopted formal elements from Constructivism but avoided committing to their goal of "art for the proletariat." While in Berlin, she encountered László Moholy-Nagy's photographic theory of "New Vision" and his belief in the narrative potential of photomontage, as described in his influential publication, *Malerei, Photographie, Film*.[14] Photomontage is a method of cutting, pasting, and manipulating photographic fragments into a whole, accomplished either in the darkroom or by physically altering the hard copies of the photographs themselves.[15] A comparison between *Die Eigenbrötler II* (fig. 2) by Moholy-Nagy and *L'enfance* by Kati and José illustrates similar spatial relationships between the two photomontages.[16] These formal similarities demonstrate Moholy-Nagy's influence on Horna, particularly in the use of blank space and triangular relationships between elements. These triangular relationships are used to bring attention to victimized and exploited figures, who are isolated from their

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[12] While it is important to note Kati and José's collaborations on *L'enfance*, *sin titulo*, and *¡Campesinos! La FAI está con vosotros*, the primary aim of this essay is to demonstrate Kati's avant-garde experimentations in materials created for the CNT-FAI.

[13] Maria Antonella Pelizzari, "The 'Social Fantastic' in Kati Horna's Paris (1933-1937)" in *Told and Untold*, 44.

[14] Translated, the title reads *Painting, Photography, Film.* Moholy-Nagy and Horna's shared connection to Kassák most likely facilitated her introduction to his work and artistic praxis. Moholy-Nagy frequently collaborated with Kassák on the Hungarian Activist journal *MA*. I emphasize Horna's connections to Kassák and Moholy-Nagy over her relationship with Marxist philosopher Karl Korsh (1886–1961). The latter relationship was facilitated by her first husband, Marxist intellectual Paul Partos (1911–1964). Korsh and Partos's influence on Horna's political development were certainly important in her young life. However, I believe that this was a moment of radicalism in Horna's otherwise nuanced approach. While Partos remained committed to the radical aims of the CNT-FAI, as the Republican army began to fall, Horna's zeal diminished.

[15] The term refers to both the German words, "montieren" meaning "to assemble" and "Monteur" signifying "engineer." The term was linked to the Constructivist designation of the "artist engineer," who employed industrial technology to make herself and her art useful to anti-capitalist and anti-bourgeois society. Horna's preference for the designation "art worker" or "photography worker" probably stemmed from similar proletarian connotations. Eleanor Hight, *Moholy-Nagy: Photography and Film in Weimar Germany* (Wellesley, MA: Wellesley College Museum, 1985), 106; Lisa Pelizzon, "El conflicto en el cruce de fronteras: Kati Horna y la Guerra Civil Española," *DeSignis* (2018): 76.

[16] An image of *L'enfance* (Childhood) can be found at: https://latarteyfoto.wordpress.com/2017/04/21/kati-y-jose-horna-lenfance-1939/.

surrounding environments in both photomontages. However, while *Die Eigenbrötler* condemns class hierarchies and the exploitation of the proletariat, *L'enfance* denounces fascist attacks on civilians.[17]

Moholy-Nagy's *Die Eigenbrötler* features a white background that flattens the plane, to which he gives dimension through three groupings of figures. On the right side of the photomontage, a building rises dramatically above its surroundings. Groups of people gaze out from behind barred windows. Animals surround the fortified building. A fish with a gaping mouth invades the bottom left corner of the photomontage, while a cat and a dog approach the structure. Three intertwined, running figures are simultaneously separate from and part of the scene. Each of these groups form one point of a triangle. One corner begins at the gaping mouth of the fish. From there, following the upward diagonal trajectory of the fish across the image, the second point is the top window of the building. The third point consists of the small figures running through the neutral space. Eleanor Hight concludes that the figures safe behind the barred windows represent the bourgeoisie, the running children exposed to the elements represent the proletariat, and the roaming animals represent danger.[18] Moholy-Nagy advocated for art in service to the proletariat and commonly used photomontage to critique class distinctions. It follows that his use of blank space and triangular relationships demonstrates the exposure of the proletariat to the ills of capitalism. The central figures, who are frozen in mid-stride without a clear direction, are utterly vulnerable. Their constant state of motion mirrors the rapid demands of industrialization on the worker. There is no defense for them from the dangers of worker exploitation, which is symbolized by the roaming animals.

Kati and José's *L'enfance*, created in Paris shortly after the fall of the Republic, can be interpreted as an anti-fascist experiment in Constructivist formal methods.[19] It features a neutral, white background punctuated by elements that also form a triangle: a photograph of a young boy against an abstract representation of a decaying tree; a

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[17] Although *Die Eigenbrötler II* was never published, it uses strategies that Moholy-Nagy implemented throughout his work: the exploitation of blank space and creation of structure through diagonal axes. While Horna most likely never saw it, *Die Eigenbrötler* is an example of Moholy-Nagy's formal constructions and integrates his social concerns for the proletarian. Horna most likely saw a similar photomontage in one of the many advertising posters and book jackets that Moholy-Nagy produced after leaving the Bauhaus in 1928. While there is no evidence that Horna formally studied with Moholy-Nagy, most scholars agree that the two crossed paths while in Berlin, and found an affinity due to their shared language, background, and interest in Hungarian Activism.

[18] Hight, *Moholy-Nagy*, 110.

[19] José, like Kati, was likely well-versed in the stylistic and ideological principles of Russian Constructivism which he encountered through Soviet photomontages by El Lissitzky and Alexander Rodchenko featured in the journal *USSR in Construction* (1931–1941). The journal circulated in Spain after it was translated into Spanish in the 1930s.

pile of rubble; and the ruins of a building, barely left standing after the devastating air raids on Barcelona in March 1938. The building looms over the figure of the young boy, threatening him with its presence. The rubble around its base forms one point and the chimney at the top of the building forms another point on the triangle. The young boy, who constitutes the third and most striking point, is almost completely exposed, his only shelter a weak tree with bare branches. He is not grounded by other structures in the photomontage, but rather floats amidst the wreckage. As in *Die Eigenbrötler*, the triangular relationships of the photomontage highlight the victimized figure as detached from his surroundings.

Lisa Pelizzon observes that, although this element is at first difficult to see, the boy is sitting on a cloud.[20] The grey lines that curve around the child and balloon outward are faint, but undeniable. Pelizzon argues that this subtle yet important element implies that he has perished during the air raid and now holds a Christ-like status as a martyr.[21] However, I interpret the child not as a martyr, but as a singular representation of all the victims of the Civil War. *L'enfance* is a denunciation of the attacks on the Spanish civilian population during the Civil War, a conflict that dissolved the borders of war and civilian zones. Interestingly, the victims in both *L'enfance* and *Die Eigenbrötler* float within the blank space of the photomontages, completely unprotected, to demonstrate the vulnerability of the groups. Horna's experiments in photomontage demonstrate her application of Constructivist formal elements that bring attention to victimized groups through isolation. However, she replaces Moholy-Nagy's proletarian concerns with her own pacifist interests. To create her hybrid avant-garde, Horna meticulously curated her use of formal elements and ideological tenets to create a heterogeneous artistic practice that extended beyond the traditional borders of a singular avant-garde movement.

Horna also experimented with Surrealist collage, which replaces the harsh edges and brutal chopping of Constructivist photomontage with a blend of reality and dream into a cohesive yet chimeric scene. The German Surrealist Max Ernst, who is credited with the invention of collage, described it as "the exploitation of the fortuitous encounter of two distant realities on an unfamiliar plane (to paraphrase and generalize Lautréamont's celebrated phrase: 'Beautiful, like the chance meeting of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table).'"[22] Although unified, his method of

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[20] Pelizzon, *Kati Horna*, 237.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Max Ernst, "Beyond Painting," in *Surrealists on Art*, ed. Lucy Lippard (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1970), 126. Ernst found the combination of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table illustrative of the recontextualization of collage. The dissecting table robs the umbrella and sewing machine of their purpose and identity. Then, Ernst explains, the umbrella and sewing machine "make love," or become something entirely new, heterogenous but unified. Louis Aragon credited Ernst with

Figure 3: Max Ernst, *Tranquility*, in *La femme 100 têtes* (The Hundred-Headless Woman): Chapter VI, plate 100, 1929, collage. Photo by Jacques Faujour, Musée National d'Art Moderne/Centre Georges Pompidou/Paris/France, © 2024 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris. Digital Image © CNAC/MNAM, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY.

collage retains an element of dissonance. Ernst found that this combination was the ideal vehicle to project the uncanny, a word used by Sigmund Freud to describe the unsettling feeling of familiar objects within unfamiliar contexts. Horna exchanges Ernst's concentration on Freudian traumas and absolute artistic autonomy for socially and politically engaged wartime traumas.

Ernst's first collage-novel, *La femme 100 têtes*, demonstrates his application of the uncanny. One collage from the book features a man comfortably reclining in an armchair that is adrift on a churning sea (fig. 3). His calm demeanor is strikingly out of place in the dangerous scene. A torrent of water engulfs a lighthouse and an enormous wave crashes against it in the background. In the foreground, a woman's arm reaches out from the waves as if she is swimming against the current. While her presence might have come as a welcome source of help, she appears inhuman and alien. She does not reach out toward the man but reaches past him to continue out to sea. Ernst's collage is an uncanny combination of familiar (the armchair and the man reclining in it) and strange (the mysterious arm and dangerous crashing waves). Kati and José collaborated in applying

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the invention of collage in "The Challenge to Painting," in *The Surrealists Look at Art: Eluard, Aragon, Soupault, Breton, Tzara*, ed. Pontus Hulten, trans. Michael Palmer and Norma Cole (Venice, CA: Lapis Press, 1990), 64.

Ernst's approach to collage in *sin titulo* (1938).[23] It features a father embracing his young child in a field. However, glimpses of the dangers of the Civil War punctuate the image. The father's right leg has been amputated, so he leans on two crutches for support. The landscape is filled with flowers, but the sky above is dotted with airplanes, a reminder of the imminent raids. The contrasting elements within the environment create an uncanny scene that juxtaposes the beauty of life with the dangers of war. It is a humanitarian call to the preservation of life.

Sin titulo was published in *Tierra y Libertad* on July 23, 1938, as the Nationalist army neared victory. A few months earlier, the Republican government had attempted to sue Franco for peace, but he rejected their offer. The image appears under the title, "Nosotros no reiremos"—"we will not laugh." The accompanying text asserts that it would be better to die fighting the advancing fascist army than to live under their control and calls for continued defense of anarchist liberties. In this context, the collage takes on a dark intonation. In *Tierra y Libertad*, the collage is not a scene of happiness disrupted by war, but rather a goodbye between a father and his child before he leaves to defend this family from the approaching airplanes in the distance. Although Horna created graphic materials for the CNT, it is unlikely that she took the same sacrificial stance as that expressed by the article accompanying the collage. After defeat and exile, many of her anarchist peers remained committed to the cause in secret. However, Horna did not maintain her politic after she left Spain.[24] Her anarchist fervor declined throughout the war and left her disenchanted. *Sin titulo*'s call for the preservation of life, when published in *Tierra y Libertad*, became an insidious signal to die fighting for anarchist freedoms. This provides an example of the politicization that Horna consistently navigated during the Spanish Civil War. Although she intended to create art that could change the social and political landscape of Spain (and by extension, Europe), she did not want to create art that solely served the goals of the CNT. In line with Kassák's philosophy, Horna believed that her autonomy could exist simultaneously with art in service to revolution.

Horna's oeuvre is consistently described as empathetic and rooted in human connection.[25] Among scenes of battle and the ruins of air raids, Horna's Civil War body

[23] An image of *sin titulo* (untitled) can be viewed at: https://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/collection/artwork/sin-titulo-untitled-468.

[24] Although Kati and José strayed from their radical organizational affiliations after the Civil War, Kati remained committed to promoting gender equality for the remainder of her life.

[25] Carmen Agustín-Lacruz and Luis Blanco-Domingo, "La memoria en encuadres. Fotógrafas extranjeras en Aragón durante la Guerra Civil Española (1936–1939)," *Documentación de las Ciencias de la información* 44, no. 1 (2021): 66; Pelizzon, *Kati Horna*, 62–63, 66; Alicia Sánchez-Mejorada, "Kati Horna y su manera cotidiana de captar la realidad," *Addenda* 10 (2004): 5.

Figure 4: Kati Horna, journal layout for "La maternidad bajo el signo de la revolución," ("Motherhood Under the Sign of Revolution"), *Umbral* no. 12, October 1937. Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte, Centro Documental de la Memoria Histórica, Salamanca, Spain, https://hemerotecadigital.bne.es/hd/es/viewer?id=4e766593-eff2-4c30-9697-702582d32ceb.

of work contains photographs of quiet and everyday moments.[26] A barefoot soldier writes a letter in a field at the Aragón front. A woman gazes down at her breastfeeding infant. Women gather to do laundry at a fountain in Barcelona. An elderly *campesina*, or peasant, gazes out across the countryside. Within these seemingly ordinary moments, scholars remark on Horna's intentional portrayal of humanity found in each of the subjects included in the photograph: she approached those in front of her lens with benevolence and compassion.

The photo series *La maternidad bajo el signo de la revolución* (fig. 4) published in the journal *Umbral* in October 1937, demonstrates Horna's humanitarian and feminist focus on women and children in a two-page spread surrounding an article by

[26] While there have been exhibitions of the photographs from "Las Cajas de Ámsterdam" and two articles published between 2020 and 2022 by Rubio Pérez, the full archive has yet to been made public. Therefore, this essay draws from the Kati Horna Archive at the CDMH and integrates Rubio Pérez's findings on the "Las Cajas de Ámsterdam" archive for support.

Lucía Sánchez Saornil. In August, Horna and Saornil toured the Casa de Maternidad in Vélez-Rubio, a refuge for pregnant women, mothers, and their children. While they walked around the facilities, they interviewed the director of the center, Doctor Carreras, and photographed scenes of young children and their mothers.[27] The spread also features photographs from the refugee center at Alcázar de Cervantes, which they toured the following month. Horna's photographs display mothers breastfeeding their newborn infants, children eating in a dining room, and women socializing in small groups. Horna arranges them in a method reminiscent of photomontage, in which the placement of each image contributes to an overarching narrative.[28] The images curve across the page, beginning with a photograph of a group of babies lying in bed. Then, the photographs illustrate mothers feeding themselves and their children. They are safe, cared for, and in the case of an infant with an exclamatory expression, enjoying a moment of happiness. The two photographs on the opposite side of the layout conclude the narrative with images of the older children at the refugee centers. One features a young boy; Saornil ends her article with his story, which recounts his separation from his father on the road to the center.

These images demonstrate Horna's commitment to feminist efforts that extended her humanitarian concerns beyond the official platforms of the political organizations she allied with. Republican propaganda and symbolism during the Civil War emphasized the role of young boys, who could grow up to be soldiers and fight for their cause, over girls. Therefore, photographs of girls were rarely published as they did not support these war aims. This dearth of representation was intricately tied to images of women published during the war, first taking the form of the proud *miliciana*, or militiawoman, at the front lines, then quickly replaced with the image of the "combative mother."[29] Following the moderate Republicans, women were barred from enlisting and called to serve in the rear guard.[30] The combative mother supplied the government with male children who would grow up to join the ranks of the soldiers. The mother and her children became symbols of hope for the future against fascism.

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[27] Doctor Carreras' full name and biographical details remain unidentified. The article only refers to him as "doctor Carreras" and there is a great deal of research yet to be done on this refugee center. Even María Aránzazu Díaz-R. Labajo refers to him simply as "doctor Carreras" in "Miradas para la guerra de España," 497.

[28] This is a method which she used throughout her career. Moholy-Nagy described the narrative potential of photomontage (and by extension, photo series) in *Malerei, Photographie, Film*.

[29] Mary Nash, *Defying Male Civilization: Women in the Spanish Civil War* (Denver, CO: Arden Press, 1995), 57.

[30] Basilio observes that the image of the militia became synonymous with anarchist opposition to unification. See Miriam Margarita Basilio, "'First, Win the War!' Kati Horna, Gendered Images and Political Discord During the Spanish Civil War", in *Told and Untold*, 60.

However, in the journal, Horna includes photographs of both young girls and boys.[31] In doing so, Horna removes women from their status as producers, deindustrializes them, and rehumanizes them. Her feminist interpretation was an unpopular choice, seen as secondary to the war effort by other groups within the Popular Front.[32]

Horna's images of motherhood and children, although subversive, were nuanced enough to be considered appropriate, as evidenced by their existence in an anarchist publication. The symbolism of the mother adheres to the Republican appropriation of women as producers of soldiers and is therefore directly antifascist. However, Horna's removal of mothers from the status of producer situates them as individuals, revealing her affinity with the anarcho-feminist group Mujeres Libres, which emphasized the individuality of women. Horna's photographs also accompany a similar article, titled "Maternidad," meaning "motherhood," which appeared in the associated journal *Mujeres Libres* in January 1938. In the article, Horna's photograph of the breastfeeding mother was used in accordance with the organization's effort to encourage new mothers to breastfeed their children. Mujeres Libres sought to educate women and encourage their *capacitación*, best translated in English as "consciousness-raising and empowerment."[33] However, they understood that motherhood was a reality for most women, so engaged a campaign to create *madres conscientes*, or self-conscious mothers.[34] Mujeres Libres' concern with the mothers themselves rather than the soldiers that they produce presents a stark contrast to the image of the combative mother, nurturing her son for his eventual service as a soldier. Horna's attendance at group meetings, her photographs of educational and refugee centers for women and children, and her collaboration with its founding members suggest that Horna found a kinship with the anarcho-feminist group. Her humanitarian photographs contain a perspective that did not seamlessly align with the male-dominated version of anarcho-syndicalist aims. However, this diversion is subtle and nuanced enough that it had the potential to escape direct criticism, allowing her to seemingly remain faithful to CNT initiatives, while challenging established gender roles within Spanish society.

Even before the war, revolutionary leftist magazines associated women's bodies with fertility, freedom, and production. Mendelson identifies that anarchist artists repurposed the female form along these ideological lines to connect their role as

[31] Pelizzon, *Kati Horna*, 143–145.
[32] Basilio, "First, Win the War!," *Told and Untold*, 60.
[33] Martha A. Ackelsberg, *Women of Spain: Anarchism and the Struggle for the Emancipation of Women* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2005), 147.
[34] Ibid., 162.

Figure 5: Josep Renau, *la primavera* (the spring), c. 1933–5, photomontage. Valencia, Spain. Published in *Estudios*, January 1935.

producers with agricultural cultivation.[35] Spanish graphic artist Josep Renau, who held significant artistic and political influence in Spain during the Civil War, openly embraced the title of propagandist. His work covered the interior and exterior of the Spanish Pavilion with large-scale photomurals at the Paris International World's Fair in 1937. In an earlier collage, he utilizes the image of a female body to represent agricultural productivity in his collage, *la primavera*, published in the January 1935 issue of *Estudios* (fig. 5).[36] In the background, a youthful, nude female body emerges from the fields. Her figure, suggestive of fertility, looms over a campesino who pushes a plow through the land behind a white horse. The fertility of women, at first connected to agricultural production, informed the conception of the combative mother during the war, who supplied the Republican army with soldiers.

Horna replaced the youthful nude with images of elderly women, which her contemporaries avoided. This choice challenged the model of the combative mother by employing the image of an elderly *campesina* to represent production, freedom, and endurance. For example, in a photomontage created in collaboration with José and published in *Tierra y Libertad* on June 18, 1938, Kati's photograph of a *campesina* stands proudly in the foreground (fig. 6). Her hands rest on her hips, and she gazes outwards triumphantly. Her upright and steady posture is symbolic of women's ability to continue producing even after her ability to bear children has passed. She appears no less capable of agricultural labor than a younger woman. In the background, two horses pull a plow while a man guides them. The words, "¡campesinos! La FAI está con

[35] Jordana Mendelson, *Documenting Spain: Artists, Exhibition Culture, and the Modern Nation, 1929–1939* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 151–152.

[36] Although Renau was a communist, until the later stages of the Civil War, the communists allied with the anarchists. His work appeared in the anarchist magazines *Orto* in 1932 and several times in *Estudios* between 1933 and 1935. Ibid., 148.

Figure 6: Kati Horna, *untitled* (Peasant in a vineyard on the road from Madrid to Alcalá de Henares), 1937, photograph on cellulose nitrate, 6 x 6 cm. Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte, Centro Documental de la Memoria Histórica, Salamanca, Spain, #93 in the Kati Horna Archive. https://pares.mcu.es/ParesBusquedas20/catalogo/description/118345.

vosotros" (farmers! The FAI is with you) frame the photomontage. This photomontage, like Renau's *la primavera*, consists of a *campesino* in a field but replaces the faceless, young, nude female torso with a robust, hopeful, elderly *campesina*. Her age and vitality represent past and future fortitude of the *campesinos* and resilience towards authoritarian control. While Horna uses the same method and symbolism as Renau, she furthers feminist discourse by incorporating an individual elderly woman who resists commodification and objectification into the photomontage. This was a novel intervention, as concerns regarding ageism or the removal of women's societal value past their childbearing years fell beyond the scope of Mujeres Libres. For example, in Catalonia, anarchist programs to introduce women into the skilled workforce admitted women between the ages of sixteen and thirty-five. Women older than thirty-five who applied were instead encouraged to volunteer with various women's organizations.[37]

Horna occupied an elite position as one of the few foreign female photographers of the Spanish Civil War. Carmen Agustín-Lacruz and Luis Blanco-Domingo count four other women photographers of the conflict.[38] Like her contemporaries, Horna's profession as a photojournalist and her presence at the front lines challenged spaces traditionally reserved for men. Moreover, Horna's practice was exceptional in her efforts to balance artist autonomy and art in service to revolution. Horna's humanitarian and feminist efforts retained her autonomous voice within the

[37] Nash, *Defying Male Civilization*, 132. José can be considered an exceptional supporter of feminist aims; it was uncommon for a man to support the efforts of Mujeres Libres, let alone initiatives that fell outside of their scope.

[38] Agustín-Lacruz and Blanco-Domingo, "La memoria en encuadres," 62. Agustín-Lacruz and Blanco-Domingo list Gerda Taro (1910–1937), Agnes Hodgson (1906–1984), Vera Elkan (1908–2008), and Margaret Michaelis (1902–1985) as the other four female foreign photographers of the Spanish Civil War.

materials she created for the CNT-FAI. In so doing, she created a hybrid avant-garde that presented a solution to the dominant interwar debate on how to combine art and politics without the one consuming the other.[39] This discourse, like photojournalism and war photography, was predominantly controlled by men. Horna's creative voice nevertheless resonated in these spaces, through her consistent application of compassion for her subjects and her balance between artistic autonomy and political engagement.

[39] Gail Day, "Art, Love and Social Emancipation: on the Concept 'Avant-Garde' and the Interwar Avant-Gardes," in *Art of the Avant-Gardes*, eds. Steve Edwards and Paul Wood (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 333.

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