

Paula Birnbaum and Anna Novakov, eds., *Essays on Women's Artistic and Cultural Contributions 1919–1939: Expanded Social Roles for the New Woman following the First World War*. Lewiston, New York, The Edward Mellen Press, 2009, 264 pp., 29 black-and-white illus., \$119.95 USD hardback

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The fourteen essays that comprise *Essays on Women's Artistic and Cultural Contributions 1919–1939* grew out of papers presented at a themed conference that explored the concept of “working girls” and cultural production in the interwar years.¹ It follows that the authors move beyond a discussion of so-called high art to embrace discussions of “art, design, craft, architecture, and popular culture in different parts of the world” (p. 2). The content is both expected, in that it provides a reassessment of studies of the individual artists, and refreshing, in that it includes material from diverse geographic areas that range from New Zealand to Canada's West Coast. It does, however, read like and look like conference proceedings and therefore the contributions do not demonstrate the extensive research one might expect from a book of collected essays.

The papers illuminate “cultural production” during a time characterized by “great social opportunity, but also economic depression and conservative backlash” (p. 1). The format of the conference and the subsequent book provides a reader with a conscientiously developed context for each case study, which is placed within five themed sections: “Reconfiguring Girlhood,” “Modernity and Visual Culture,” “Re-Imagining Gender and Race,” “Craftswomen and National Identity,” and “Women and Public Spaces.” Its mandate is somewhat reminiscent of Bridget Elliott and Jo-Ann Wallace's co-written *Women Artists and Writers: Modernist (im)positionings* (1994) in that it focuses on the same time-period, a period that does call out for further analysis, particularly with regard to gender. Granted Elliott and Wallace restricted their study to Europe while Birnbaum and Novakov aim for diversity, but, nonetheless, *Modernist (im)positionings* has much to offer any study of cultural production in the interwar years; it is missing from the bibliography.

Celia S. Stahr's essay about Mexican artist Frida Kahlo is compelling in its analysis of the artist's frequently discussed 1932 painting *Self-Portrait on the Border Line Between Mexico and the United States* when, as Stahr suggests, it is “viewed against some of the images and tropes of 1930s America that informed the debate over what constitutes an authentic American art” (p. 138). It is difficult, however, to understand why the author failed to cite Martha Lindaurer's exemplary study *Devouring Frida: The Art History and Popular Celebrity of Frida Kahlo* (1999), which remains one of the most scholarly investigations of the artist and her work. Stahr makes speculative but captivating links between Kahlo and Georgia O'Keeffe, derived from the publication that accompanied the exhibition that originated at the McMichael

Canadian Art Collection, *Carr, O'Keeffe, Kahlo: Places of Their Own* (2001–02), and from Raquel Tibol's edited and selected letters by Kahlo. The result is an exciting conference paper (and published proceeding), but a sparsely researched discussion.

Essays on Claude Cahun, women architects in Germany, and West Coast craft, on the other hand, all reflect the kind of meticulous research done by scholars who have elaborated upon their primary areas of study. Similarly, Charlotte Macdonald's essay acquaints one with material about cultural performance and bodies, specifically about “marching girls,” who were considered by contemporaries and continue “to be interpreted, as both progressive and reactionary, aesthetically admirable and execrable, emancipator[s] and restrictive, modern and anti-modern” (p. 25). The essay on Elizabeth Ginno's pictures (etchings and sketches) of “people under Hitler's thumb” (p. 196) for a California audience advances discussions of costume and its relationship to identity and meaning, while Paula Birnbaum's essay on the Société des Femmes Artistes Modernes (FAM), a women's art collective founded in Paris in 1913, provides an alternate look at a modernity that was “invested in representing motherhood and other themes of female embodiment” (p. 93). As such, like many essays in this book, Birnbaum's study challenges a monolithic, unified modernity and opens up the possibility of other dialogues and narratives. Specifically, Birnbaum proposes that the works produced by FAM artists “suggest a deep ambivalence expressed by a variety of female artists working in Paris in this period regarding the discourse on maternity, nationalism and citizenship” (p. 93).

Like Birnbaum, in her chapter about the work of German artist Hannah Höch, Melissa Johnson challenges a canonical delineation of modernism and offers avenues for further research and discussion. Known mainly for her photomontages, Höch's art production during the Weimar era encompassed a range of media “that has only been brought to light in the last decade or so—her needlework, textiles and other design work” (p. 69). Johnson elaborates upon this in her perceptive analysis of Höch's photomontage *The Gymnastics Teacher* (ca. 1925), in which the viewer sees both the New Woman and her antithesis, the German housewife. Johnson uses *The Gymnastic Teacher* as a signpost to reveal how Höch “responded to and participated in the gendered discourse around modern women” (p. 71), and in doing so, Johnson disturbs the traditional scholarly boundaries between modern and non-modern, between art and craft, and between traditional and “new.”

Astutely, the editors did not group the essays that related to other than Western cultural practices into one section but have dispersed them throughout the various sections, and thus Laura W. Allen's essay on Japanese women artists appears in the section on “Modernity and Visual Culture,” while Tusa Shea's essay on Aboriginal textile motifs appears in the section on “Craftswomen and National Identity.” Both contributions provide the reader with

information about less-discussed areas of artistic practice. Allen introduces readers to art production by Japanese women working early in the twentieth century by drawing attention to one artist, a “pioneering Western-style painter, Yoshida Fujio (1888–1987).” Adroitly, however, she does not simply provide a biography but rather uses Yoshida as an entrée to issues around art education for women, women in the workplace, and women’s rights movements as they related to Yoshida and her contemporaries. Allen suggests that the women painters featured in her narrative “in the 1920s used collective action, foreign travel, and media representation to voice the opinion that their work mattered” (p. 115).

Tusa Shea’s excellent essay briefly but meticulously examines textiles produced in British Columbia that incorporated and appropriated Aboriginal motifs. She looks at the “interwar period where there was a history of contact between Aboriginal and non-Native women that largely took place within the domestic sphere and centered around the production of handicrafts” (p. 170). Shea’s research undoubtedly is grounded in but expands out from her outstanding contributions to the exhibition and catalogue *“A Woman’s Place”: Art and the Role of Women in the Cultural Formation of Victoria, B.C., 1850s–1920s* (Maltwood Art Museum and Gallery, University of Victoria, 2004–05), and thus adds to the literature about the complicated transcultural exchanges between settlers and Aboriginal artists and craftspeople. Her handling of Mary Louise Pratt’s depiction of “contact zones” as an opening for discussions of transculturation and her dismantling of the notion of “authenticity” provide an exciting framework for analyzing the collecting of Aboriginal women’s handicrafts and the production of both non-Native and Aboriginal art. Shea writes that “[i]n spite of racial and class-based barriers, evidence demonstrates that these women exchanged ideas and techniques” (p. 181). Thus, according to Shea, discussions about appropriation and tradition need to be complicated and expanded rather than accepted as simplified codes of colonialism. In Shea’s work the Aboriginal craftswomen are cultural producers rather than passive subjects and thus the “discourse of disappearance” must be challenged and rewritten.

In a somewhat similar vein, Stephanie Ellis investigates the absence of the female itinerant worker who “represents a particularly charged figure at the margins of Hobo Culture” (p. 228). As Ellis states, the term Hobo itself derives from a “male-gendered etymology,” specifically the shortened version of “hoe-boys” (p. 229). She goes on to discuss three categories of Hobo Girls: the “placeless woman,” the “rebel girl,” and the “sister of the road.” Ellis also tracks the “slide of the term Tramp—from male transience to female promiscuity” (p. 233), and thereby explores sexual agency, transgressiveness, sexual politics, and the perceived threat to domesticity. Tirza True Latimer’s paper on the Swiss-based POOL group, responsible for producing the silent film *Borderline* (1930) and the publication *Close Up*, also explores themes of sexuality and

introduces issues of diversity. Like Ellis’s contribution, this will be of great interest to scholars in the field of cultural studies.

With Despina Stratigakos’s essay the reader moves into the realm of architecture, and here the quintessential modernist movement associated with Weimar Germany is opened up to highlight women architects, who during the interwar period made up “less than 5 percent of total enrolments” in architectural schools (p. 206). Despite the small number, women architects were active during the period, and Stratigakos provides an insightful discussion of their contributions as well as their frustrations, most provocatively through her analysis of Johanna Böhm’s novel *The House of Single Women* (1932), whose protagonist “is a butch woman architect who constructs and leads a residence for unmarried women” (p. 211). Anna Novakov’s essay about photographer Ivan Tomljenovic engages with experiences of “an outsider in a foreign land”—Tomljenovic was a Yugoslav artist working in Weimar Germany. It has been paired with Stratigakos’s essay not so much because both are set in the Weimar, but because both interrogate the spaces in which women lived and worked. In addition, both authors engage with women who inhabited the modernist world even though they remained on the margins. So too did Malvina Hoffman, although as Susan Martis acknowledges, the sculptor, after WWI, was “inspired less by modern artistic movements and more by historic styles” (p. 153). It is her innovative *L’Offrande* (1919) and her less aesthetically radical *The Sacrifice* (1926) that motivate Martis’s discussion of this little-known American artist who studied with Rodin and revelled in the performances of the Ballets Russes. Photographs of both sculptures are included in the text and although the quality of all the images is poor, these, like other art works discussed in the book, have rarely been reproduced.

Flavia Marcello’s brief preface suggests that the collection of papers in their diversity enables the reader “to review and evaluate” the material, whether it be objects, acts, or organizations, “for what they can reveal about women and their lives” (p. i). It is in the relationships between lived spaces and cultural production, between resistance and accommodation, that the book has most to offer, and, while some essays are under-researched, some obviously works-in-progress, many too brief, together they offer a reader thoughtful analyses of “international feminist art practices and popular culture” (p. 3) that hopefully will lead to further studies.

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Notes

- 1 “Working Girls: Women’s Cultural Production during the Interwar Period” was organized by the co-editors of the volume at the University of San Francisco and Saint Mary’s College of California in 2007.