

Shifting paradigms

Mexico in color: Ellen Auerbach's exile photography

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In 1955, Ellen Auerbach, a Weimarian advertising photographer of the Bauhaus circles, chose to document her trip to Mexico with her colleague Eliot Porter, using color photography for the first time in her career.

This article seeks to contextualize, for the first time, Auerbach's decision to use color in her work – and within the history of modernism in general. In a discourse where exile studies interweave closely with art theory, I intend to trace the paths of a modernism that might have been, but that was erased by history and migration, demonstrating how the use of color in a non-Western exile context became a starting point for rethinking the aims and epistemic possibilities of the photographic medium within and beyond the modernist perspective.

Keywords: Ellen Auerbach; Color Photography, Exile, Atmosphere.

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1. The archaeology of a missing historiography

Only in very recent times has art historiography, and, in particular, that linked to *October*¹, the historical journal of militant criticism, recognized the gravity of the historiographical silence maintained around women's photography in connection with the Bauhaus milieu, underlining how «the almost complete failure of art-historical, theoretical and museological reception after WWII ensured that their photographic projects would remain *terra incognita* all the way into the mid-1990s»².

To reconstruct the intellectual path of these *neue Frauen*³ implies considering complex epistemological axes that cross the emancipation movements emerging in Weimar in the early 1920s, taking in photography, one of the very few media accessible to women pursuing artistic careers⁴, the modernism of the Bauhaus⁵ the rise of a mass

¹ Of particular note are *October* 2020 issues 172 and 173.

² B. Buchloh, *Photography's Exiles: from Painting, Patriarchy, and Patria*, in "October", 173, 2020, p. 3.

³ On the concept of *neue Frau* during the Weimar Republic, see M. Meskimmon, S. West (ed. by) *Visions of the 'Neue Frau': Women and the Visual Arts in Weimar Germany*, Scholar Press, London 1995.

⁴ At the turn of the twentieth century, the academies of fine arts in Germany were still precluded to women. Photography, on the other hand, belonged to a different tradition. The profession of photographer was traditionally learned in private studios (Lotte Jacobi, for example, inherited the family studio) or institutes (such as the school for women *Lette Verein* and the *Lehr- und Versuchsanstalt für Photographie* in Germany). Either because they were women's academies or because of the technical nature of the medium and the recent foundation of the schools (allowing a more progressive ethos), the studios provided an opportunity for women's participation, and photography soon became a refuge for female students aspiring to a career in art or advertising.

On this point, see B. Buchloh, *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*, in H. Foster, R. Krauss, Y. Bois, B. Buchloh (ed. by), *Art since 1900. Modernism Antimodernism Postmodernism*, Thames&Hudson, London 2016, pp. 282-183, and J. Troeller, *A (Still) Marginal Modernity, or the Artist as Stenographer*, in "October", 172, 2020, pp. 4-5.

visual culture, and —finally—the experience of exile following the advent of National Socialism.

Indeed, as Ute Eskildsen⁶ has observed, many of the leading women photographers of the Weimar period (Ellen Auerbach, Gisèle Freund, Lotte Jacobi, Grete Stern, and Lucia Moholy, to name but a few) came from the Central European secular Jewish middle-class – wealthy, emancipated and enlightened – shaping a cultural climate in which «ethnicity, class, sexual orientation and gender overlapped and interacted in complex ways»⁷, almost always unacceptable to the National Socialist moral and aesthetic. Thus, whether it was a matter of being Jewish, socialist, anarchist or avant-garde, the condition of exile in the aftermath of 1933 seems to constitute a *formale Kategorie*⁸ in the interpretation of the post-Weimar output of these photographers, determining, in part, their prolonged lack of critical success.

On the other hand, looking at their exile production today from a trans-regional perspective allows us to retrace the steps of diasporic modernism, one that remained silent and peripheral to its post-war, North American and male-coded canons. It allows us to examine the departure from this mold, which came about in a context of «anachronistic isolation»⁹ and existential/cultural disorientation. On the subject of exile in non-Western contexts, a further level of analysis must be introduced: what are the symbolic and formal implications of these contextual hybridizations? What transformations occur in modernism, once implemented in archaic, unfamiliar contexts operating on different temporal axes?

Reflecting on these questions, of paramount importance in reconstructing a re-pluralized and delocalized history of the avant-garde and modernism, I will examine the

⁵ By the time the school opened in 1919, the constitution of the newly formed Weimar Republic had enshrined in its article 109 the total equality of rights and duties of men and women. Thus, between 1919 and 1932, there were 462 female students at the Bauhaus, one-third of the total number of students [E. Otto, P. Rössler (ed. by), *Bauhaus Women: a Global Perspective*, Herbert Press, London 2019, p. 6]. Photography became an official subject of study during the Dessau years – namely in 1929 – when a photography course was added to the advertising workshop.

⁶ U. Eskildsen, *A Chance to Participate: A Transitional Time for Women Photographers*, in M. Meskimmon, S. West (ed. by), *Visions of the 'Neue Frau': Women and the Visual Arts in Weimar Germany*, cit., pp. 62-76.

⁷ N. Roemer, *Photographers, Jews, and the Fashioning of Women in the Weimar Republic*, in L. Greenspoon (ed. by) *Fashioning Jews, Clothing, Culture and Commerce*, Purdue University Press, West Lafayette 2013, p. 99.

⁸ I borrow this term from literary exile studies: see W. Pfeiler, *German Literature in Exile*, University of Nebraska Studies, Lincoln 1957, p. 5.

⁹ B. Buchloh, *Photography's Exiles: from Painting, Patriarchy, and Patria*, cit. p. 5.

decision taken by Ellen Auerbach – pupil of Walter Peterhans and co-founder with Grete Stern of the Berlin advertising studio *ringl+pit*¹⁰ (1930-1933) – to use color for the first time in her photographs dedicated to Mexican art and folklore¹¹, taken with her colleague Eliot Porter in 1955.

2. Displacement practices

There is no grammar of exile, except for the state of loneliness, uprooting, and distrust in the concept of homeland and nation-state to which every exile inevitably brings an individual aesthetic and stylistic response.

For Ellen Auerbach (née Rosenberg), exile in 1933 meant leaving Berlin and the studio she had opened a few years earlier with her friend and lover Grete Stern, to head for Palestine¹² with her partner and future husband, Walter Auerbach, who was on the Nazi blacklist for his leftist views. Here, far removed from the growing consumer culture and moral freedom of the Weimar Republic, Auerbach seems to abandon the prerogatives of the *neues Sehen* and the teachings of Peterhans (who had guided her training in the Bauhaus milieu and her work as an advertising photographer in *ringl+pit*), as well as the photography of «product fetishism, the object isolated in a beam of desire»¹³ that characterized her early works.

Exile, in terms of its material consequences, which will be briefly outlined here, therefore produces a theoretical effect, a decentralization of the modernist canon, opening up to exogenous, spurious, sometimes commercial, and always anarchically isolated, movements: «I had to separate myself from some of Peterhan's teachings, since vivaciousness and spontaneity sometimes took the place of technical perfection. It

¹⁰ For a recent bibliography on *ringl+pit*, see E. Otto, *ringl+pit and the Queer Art of Failure*, in “October”, 173, 2020, pp. 37-64 and S. Bender, *ringl+pit: (un)figuring the New Woman*, in “Open Library of Humanities”, 8, 2022, nn.

¹¹ Two volumes of photos would be produced from the photos taken during the trip. They were only published many years after the photographs were taken: E. Auerbach, E. Porter, *Mexican Churches*, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque 1987; E. Auerbach, E. Porter, *Mexican Celebrations*, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque 1990.

¹² Auerbach's migration is reconstructed in M. Valdivieso, *Von Berlin nach Amerika: Die Fotografinnen Grete Stern und Ellen Auerbach im Exil*, in I. Hansen-Schaberg, W. Thöner, A. Feustel (ed. by), *Entfernt: Frauen des Bauhauses während der NS-Zeit, Verfolgung und Exil*, Edition Text + Kritik, Munich 2012, p. 217.

¹³ R. Krauss, *Jump over the Bauhaus*, in V. Deren Coke (ed. by), *Avant-Garde Photography in Germany 1919-1939*, Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, New York 1982, p. 104.

was, therefore, not the country but, rather, the circumstances that changed my photographic methods and conceptions»¹⁴.

The photographs Auerbach produced as early as the years of her flight to what would become Israel are, in fact, dictated by new circumstances of economic and aesthetic survival that would go on to characterize her photography of exile in a broader sense.

Until then, she had been accustomed to working almost exclusively in the studio, using fixed motifs that she could control to a high degree of precision¹⁵. But now, in Palestine, the twenty-seven-year-old photographer, who worked as a reporter for the *Women's International Zionist Organization (WIZO)*¹⁶ and the *Jewish National Fund (KKL)* before opening a studio dedicated to children's photography with her partner and friend Lisette Grschebina (1934-36), found herself having to experiment with instant photography and landscape photography, slowly acquiring a new and personal style that would culminate in her Mexican photographs.



Ellen Auerbach, *Weg nach Jerusalem*, 1934

¹⁴ S. Baumann, *The Essence of Things. an Interview with Ellen Auerbach*, in E. Auerbach, J. Ammann, U. Eskildsen, R. Schubert, S. Baumann (ed. by), *Ellen Auerbach. Berlin. Tel Aviv. London. New York*, Akademie der Künste, Berlin 1998, p. 12.

¹⁵ See I. Graeve Ingelmann, *Ellen Auerbach, Das dritte Auge. Leben und Werk*, Schirmer/Mosel, Akademie der Künste, München, Berlin 2006, p. 50.

¹⁶ For a recent and accurate reconstruction of the movement, see A. Summers, *Lost in translation? WIZO and international feminism c. 1920-1940*, in "Journal of Modern Jewish Studies", ahead of print, 2021, pp. 1-25.

Auerbach's flight does not end, in fact, with her arrival in the "promised land". In 1936, as conflict with the Arab population escalated¹⁷, the Auerbachs decided to move to London, to which Stern had also fled. Despite frequenting the major circles of emigrés overseas¹⁸, the couple failed to obtain the work visa required to remain in the country and, in 1937, left once again for New York.

Auerbach's American life, haunted by economic and existential insecurities and a deep sense of uprooting, failed once again to allow her to fully pursue the career she had imagined as a girl, namely to become an artist working in the photographic medium. At the same time, a departure from the codes of European artistic photography and hybridization with commercial genres contributed to the development of a free and very personal style. At a time when a photographer could not make a living solely from his or her own artistic output¹⁹, Auerbach was forced to accept a variety of very different work, all far removed from her aesthetic preferences and anyway unsuccessful, being in disaccord with the dictates of American commercial photography. She made reproductions for the Rosenwald Foundation (1939-42), took psychiatric photographs for the Menninger Foundation (1946-49), commissioned portraits for friends and magazines, record sleeves for Columbia Masterworks, took children's portrait pictures, and briefly taught photography at the Junior College of Arts and Crafts in Trenton (1954). In the meantime, her photographic style developed, unpublished and invisible, on the periphery of all this experience, finding its ideal dimension in *travel* (a theme to which most of her private shots are dedicated).

3. Travel and exile

¹⁷ In her diaries, Auerbach always expressed a strong feeling of discomfort regarding the attitude towards Arabs by some groups among the Jewish population. She writes: «es war die Zeit der großen Deutschjuden-Einwanderung. Diese "Yekkes" waren sehr unternehmend und schauten auf die alten frommen östliche Juden und die kleinen Yemeniten herab. Sie waren auch sehr Arabfeindlich. Ein Plakat sagte, ein jüdisches Mädchen, das sich mit einem Arab abgab, sei ein Schandfleck der jüdischen Rasse. Ich hatte wohl eine vorgefasste Idee, dass Juden sehr anpassungsfähig und international interessierte seien und gut kochten. Nichts von alledem konnte ich entdecken. Ich fühlte mich unbehaglich, hauptsächlich bei dem Gedanken, dass ich in diesen Land mein Leben verbringen müsste. E. Auerbach, *Autobiographische Erinnerungen*» (cit. in I. Graeve Ingelmann, *Ellen Auerbach, Das dritte Auge*, cit., p. 53).

¹⁸ Including Bertolt Brecht, whom Auerbach photographed in 1936.

¹⁹ See P. Galassi, *Two Faces*, in Id. (ed. by) *American Photography, 1890-1965*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York 1995, p 18.

Critics have only recently begun to analyze the complex intersection between travel and exile²⁰. They have explored the irreducible distance between exile and the traveler, insofar as «what makes exile the pernicious thing it is not really the state of being away, as much as the impossibility of ever *not* being away [...] hence it is the permanence of the exile condition, the permanence of unredeemable absence, that distinguishes it from travel»²¹. Auerbach, who had briefly returned to Karlsruhe in 1953 to be with her survivor parents only to leave hastily for New York, as she was unable to feel at home in Germany, seems – on the contrary – to deprive exile of its apparently intrinsic dimension of nostalgia for a lost homeland.

Her gaze on the places she visits is not the *present but not participating*²², and typically *male*²³ gaze of the traveler and the exile, who construct their journey against the concept of a distant or lost homeland but is instead – as Ingelmann notes – animated by an uprooting that becomes a universalistic tension and the re-enchantment of the world.

After migrating, photography became for her a “window” through which she sought to explore reality. These explorations did not claim to be universally valid, nor did they attempt to document or denounce social and societal conditions. Aided by her factual and detailed style, she gave expression and validity to her subjective view of reality. At the heart of her wide-ranging thematic work, which emerged after emigration, lies the conviction that there is a more universal meaning inherent to material phenomena. [...] the artist wanted to prove to herself, through her work, that her world is not an illusion, a fiction, or an imagination, but a real world²⁴.

²⁰ J.F. Evelein (ed. by), *Exiles Traveling. Exploring Displacement, Crossing Boundaries in German Exile Arts and Writings 1933-1945*, Rodopi, Amsterdam New York 2009.

²¹ Ivi, p. 25.

²² Ivi, p. 28.

²³ Ivi, p. 29.

²⁴ My translation of: «Seit ihrer Emigration wird die Fotografie für sie zu einem “Fenster” durch das sie die Wirklichkeit zu erkunden versuchte. Diese Erkundungen erhoben keinen Anspruch auf Allgemeingültigkeit, wollten weder gesellschaftliche noch soziale Zustände dokumentieren oder anklagen. Mit Hilfe eines sachlichen und detailgenauen Stils verlieh die Fotografien ihrer subjektiven Vision der Wirklichkeit Ausdruck und zugleich Gültigkeit. Im Zentrum ihres nach der Emigration entstandenen, tematisch breit gefächerten Werks steht die Überzeugung, daß den materiellen Erscheinungsformen eine, universellere Bedeutung innewohnt.[...] Die Künstlerin wollte sich kraft ihres Werkes beweisen, dass ihre Welt keine Illusion, keine Fiktion oder Eibildung ist, sonder eine wirkliche Welt» (I. Graeve Ingelmann, *Ellen Auerbach, Das dritte Auge. Leben und Werk*, cit., pp. 85-86).



Ellen Auerbach, *Griechenland*, 1953

Photography, in Auerbach, thus becomes an instrument with which to she could root her exile identity, made of instants and not of places, personal visions, and revelations: «Auerbach’s vision. is unobtrusive, sometimes seemingly absent, in order to capture a mood more accurately»²⁵.

The surrealist sensibility of her Weimar photography – pursued more explicitly, and more successfully, by Ringl (Grete Stern) in Argentina²⁶ – unfolds, more melancholic and less mannered, in the photographs Auerbach took far from home (in Chile, Argentina, Greece, or on the nearer Great Spruce Head Island). These are surrealist in the Sontagian sense of the term: «in the very creation of a duplicate world, of a reality in the second degree, narrower but more dramatic than the one perceived by natural vision»²⁷.

4. “But there’s nothing to see”²⁸

²⁵ J. Ammann, *Ellen Auerbach’s Third Eye*, in E. Auerbach, J. Ammann, U. Eskildsen, R. Schubert, S. Baumann (ed. by) *Ellen Auerbach*. Berlin. Tel Aviv. London. New York, cit., p. 93.

²⁶ See N. Brizuela, *Grete Stern, Horacio Coppola and the Question of Modern Photography in Argentina*, in “Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies”, 24, 1015, pp. 243-265.

²⁷ S. Sontag, *On Photography*, RosettaBooks, New York 2005, p. 40.

²⁸ «Auerbach recalls one of her trips with Eliot Porter in 1955 or 1956 when she felt drawn to a statue in a church, covered with a drape, and asked him to photograph it. ‘But there’s nothing to see’, he retorted. Interestingly, the photograph he reluctantly took conveys a very important aspect of Mexico and helps to explain why Breton felt at home there – though “surrealism” does not seem to me precisely the correct term for describing Mexico’s special way of linking the visible and invisible».

C. Naggar, *La fascinación del otro/ The Fascination for the Other*, in C. Naggar, F. Richtin (ed. by) *Mexico Through Foreign Eyes: 1950-1990/1990 Visto por ojos extranjeros*, Norton&Co, New York, London 1993, p. 48.

Auerbach's trip to Mexico in 1955, with her friend and partner of the time, Eliot Porter, marks a watershed in this artistic path. Alternatively, to use a Benjaminian term, Auerbach's Mexican photography seems to form a constellation with her German production:

It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural²⁹.

Despite being geographically and historically inscribed in the «second discovery of America»³⁰, which saw the American photographers of her generation and the one immediately preceding it, including Paul Strand, Edward Steichen, Edward Weston, and Helen Levitt, head for Mexico, Auerbach's Central American photography, still lacking in-depth studies³¹, is substantially different both in look and style from that of her colleagues.

As Monica Bravo noted in an important recent study, North American photographers were traveling to Mexico at a time when a profound renegotiation of transatlantic relations was taking place: their ultimate goal was to aesthetically define a “greater America,” which would integrate European modernism into a different, transnational, and modern history of the American continent:

²⁹ W. Benjamin, *On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress*, in Id., *The Arcades Project*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, London 1999, p. 463.

³⁰ P. Roussin, *Photographing the Second Discovery of America*, in C. Naggar, F. Richtin (ed. by), *Mexico Through Foreign Eyes: 1950-1990/1990 Visto por ojos extranjeros*, cit., p. 97.

³¹ To my knowledge, the only comprehensive critical source to piece together this experience is I. Graeve Ingelmann, *Ellen Auerbach, Das dritte Auge. Leben und Werk*, cit., pp. 87-95. It is also worth mentioning that Marion Beckers has been the only scholar to highlight this gap, briefly noting the complex short-circuit that these images achieve in Auerbach's production in her harsh review of the exhibition *Ellen Auerbach- Berlin Tel Aviv London New York* (Akademie der Künste, Berlin, 17.5-7.7 1998). Beckers writes: «Aber allein die Photographien der fast ein halbes Jahr währenden Reise im Winter 1955/56 durch Mexiko, gemeinsam mit dem amerikanischen Photographen Eliot Porter, den ca. 3000 Kirchen Interieurs-Aufnahmen, hätten eine gesonderte Berücksichtigung verdient. Viele dieser Aufnahmen, in denen sie sich mit den kultur- und religions geschichtlichen Eigenarten der Mexikaner in ihrer Gottes- und Heiligenverehrung auseinandersetzt, nehmen Kompositorisches der frühen Figurenportraits wieder auf» (M. Beckers, *Ausstellungrezensionen*, in “Frauen Kunst Wissenschaft”, 26, 1998, p. 89).

Through their photographs, they sought to express widely held beliefs about Mexico, which, importantly, also had parallels in the United States. These themes included the idea of a nation being both young and prehistoric, the tension between tradition and industrialization, the recovery of Indigenous and folk cultures, and the adaptation of European vanguards to meet regional needs [...] The foundations for Greater American identity formation in the interwar period were shared ideals that distinguished the so-called New World from the Old-ideals based in place, indigenous people, and relationship with the avant-garde and tradition³².

Auerbach's and Porter's photos from their trip depart markedly from this approach, seeming rather to function as *dialectical images*, offering a singularly Weimarian look at the Mexican reality.

There is a certain amount of Third-Worldism and Western Romanticism in the spirit of these photographs: the "decisive moment" is sought among churches, markets, and villages, in the places of archaic rural existence. The life of the cities, their poverty, and the rapid modernization taking place on the Mexican territory are practically neglected. Photography is conceived here as a form of resistance:

Mexico is being industrialized at a rapid pace, its highways extended and improved, the people presented with the mixed blessing of modern living. Most prefer store-brought things to their own handicrafts. More and more the hand-carved images with their homemade clothes are replaced by stereotyped plaster saints. Old floors are being ripped out and loud-patterned machine-made tiles put in their place. This change is more rapid in the north. In less prosperous, less accessible villages the changes come more slowly. There the Indians have worshipped the saints in semipagan rites for a long time. They clothe and decorate them for fiestas, but even the local priest often may know little of their history and significance³³.

And yet, this attempt to "save" what was surviving the arrival of modernity takes on a particular inflection in the work of a former advertising photographer who had once been the ambassador³⁴ of rising and proud modernity in Europe.

³² M. Bravo, *Greater American Camera, Making Modernism in Mexico*, Yale University Press, New Heaven 2021, p. 4-5.

³³ E. Auerbach, *Preface*, in Id., E. Porter, *Mexican Churches*, cit., p. 8.

³⁴ See S. Bender, *ringl+pit: (un)figuring the New Woman*, cit.

Aside from a small number of architectural shots, almost all the photographs collected in *Mexican Churches* focus on the religious sculptures – wooden, polychrome, and, especially to the eyes of a European Jew, undoubtedly *unheimlich* – animating the interiors of churches. A preference for interior photography, attention to detail, the silent dialogue between objects, the effects of light on different surfaces, and the materiality of things are some of the elements of her early work that return, for the first time explicitly, in the *Mexican Churches* cycle.

Pit's German gaze seems to rediscover in the subject of Mexican sacred subject a facet of photography that had always interested her: the fetishistic exchange the medium can achieve between the animate and the inanimate. This element could already be seen in her early “surrealist” advertisements, such as *Pétrole Hahn* (1931) or *Hat and Gloves* (1930), where the human figure was replaced by a realistic and uncanny mannequin dominated by the tactility of the goods that surrounded it:

the sense of touch seems to overwhelm the featured products' design; the tactile qualities of the crocheted cotton cap, the net veil, the soft suede gloves, the stiff burlap mat, and the luxurious wool rug, are the real subject of this picture. More than a little distracting though is the New Woman as mannequin. The decidedly round face with large, heavily lined eyes looking down, rather than into the camera, is as unexpected as the wisps of very short inflexible hair that protrude from the tight cap over her left eyebrow. Unconventional and hyper-real, this production should have won over at least the more adventurous clients³⁵.

It is this exchange between the animate and the inanimate, which, in that same period, Benjamin interpreted as intrinsic to the fashion of the time («in fetishism, sex does away with the boundaries separating the organic world from the inorganic. Clothing and jewelry are its allies [...] These regions are traversed by paths that accompany sex. These landscapes are traversed by paths that lead sexuality into the world of the inorganic. Fashion itself is only another medium enticing it still more deeply into the universe of matter»³⁶) that we find in Auerbach's sacred photography, in the polychrome statues that closely resemble her Weimar mannequins, endowed with an expressiveness and a materiality – in the fabrics and jewels with which they are adorned

³⁵ J. Keller, K. Ware, *Women photographers in Europe 1919-1939*, in “History of Photography”, 18, 1994, pp. 220-221.

³⁶ W. Benjamin, *Fashion*, in Id., *The Arcades Project*, cit., pp. 69-70.

– that look singularly *human*. The attention to detail and the tactility of matter and light in the Mexican folk sculptures seem to bring back the discourse on fetishism (which was interpreted in German commercial photography according to the modern and secular categories provided by Marx³⁷ and Freud³⁸) to its historical and religious function³⁹.

In the stylistic continuity between the two series, there emerges a subtle and ironic critique of modernity's alienated relationship with objects⁴⁰, and, at the same time, confidence in the medium's ability to present different and anti-modern ways of existence, to convey a redemption and a re-enchantment of the world: «The church offered solitude and communication [...] The Saints are regarded not as distant, transcendental beings but as intimate friends to whom the devout relate on a regular basis»⁴¹. It was again Benjamin who wrote, in *One Way Street*:

In a dream, I saw barren terrain. It was the marketplace at Weimar. Excavations were in progress. I, too, scraped about in the sand. Then the tip of a church steeple came to light. Delighted, I thought to myself: a Mexican shrine from the time of pre-animism, from the Anaquivitzli⁴².

It is this need to unearth a sacredness submerged by the “market culture” of Weimar and Western culture in a broader sense (to which Benjamin suggestively poses Mexican religiosity as an antithesis⁴³) that we find again in Auerbach's photography, in which the fetish seems to regain – through the practice of photography – a long-forgotten *animistic* function, albeit a bearer of different existential baggage.

³⁷ K. Marx, *Capital Volume I*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, Section 4, see <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch01.htm#S4>.

³⁸ S. Freud, *Fetishism* (1927), in Id. *Miscellaneous Papers, 1888-1938*, Hogarth and Institute of Psycho-Analysis, London 1959, pp. 198-204.

³⁹ See C. de Brosses, *Du culte des dieux fétiches, ou parallèle de l'ancienne religion de l'Égypte avec la religion actuelle de Nifrite* (1760), Farnborough, Paris, 1972.

⁴⁰ H. Böhme, *Fetishism and Culture. A Different Theory of Modernity*, De Gruyter, Berlin 2014, p. 7.

⁴¹ I. Graeve Ingelmann, *Ellen Auerbach, Das dritte Auge. Leben und Werk*, cit., pp. 88-89.

⁴² W. Benjamin, *One Way Street*, in Id. *Selected Writings Vol. I, 1913-1926*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, London 2002, p. 455.

⁴³ According to Kraniauskas, Benjamin's interest in ancient Mexican culture was mainly associated with the imperialism and colonialism to which it was subjected. That is, his dream image repeats the theme of colonization of the sacred and its primeval source by capitalism and presents the same analogy with Christianity's colonialism of religious imaginaries. See J. Kraniauskas, *Beware Mexican ruins! 'One-Way Street' and the Colonial Unconscious*, in A. Benjamin, P. Osborne (ed. by), *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, Routledge, London 1994, pp. 139-154.



Ringl+Pit, Hut und Handschuhe, 1930

Ellen Auerbach, Eliot Porter, The Virgin in wall niche, church of Sanra Helena in Sanra Cruz Xoxocotlán, Oaxaca, 1955ca

5.Colors

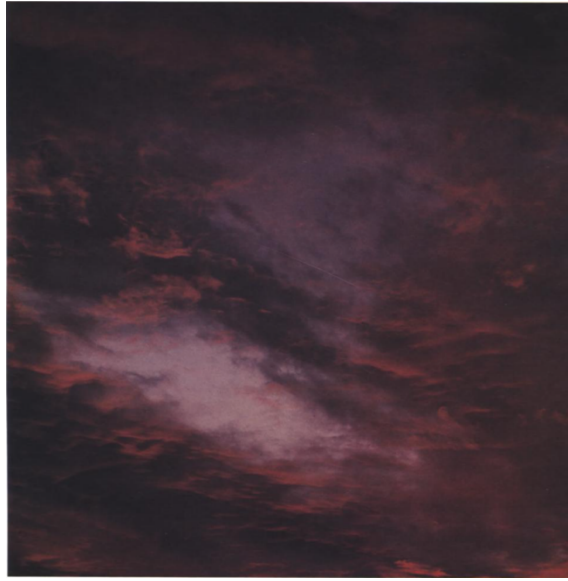
In this subversive use of modernist aesthetics, a decisive role is played by the use, for the first and only time in her career, of color photography.

It was certainly a choice conditioned, at least partly, by her collaboration with Eliot Porter, one of the first photographers to use Kodachrome⁴⁴ and color in general, outside the sphere of commercial photography. At a time when color photography was still associated with the consumerist imagery of American mass culture and ostracized in the artistic sphere (in 1949, Bruce Downes still considered Weston's color photographs critically "uncommentable"⁴⁵), Porter's naturalistic photography explored not only the emotional but also the *abstract* possibilities of the medium⁴⁶.

⁴⁴ Kodak commercialized Kodachrome film in 1935, keeping it on the market until 2009. As Natalie Boulouch explains, this represented a paradigm shift, abandoning the additive color synthesis of Autochrome for much simpler "chromogenic development" processes for the photographer, effectively opening the market up to amateur color photography. N. Boulouch, *Le Ciel est Bleu. Une histoire de la photographie couleur*, Éditions Textuel, Paris 2011, pp. 95-96. On the Kodachrome technique see also M. Frizot, *Une étrangeté naturelle. L'hypothèse de la couleur*, in Id., *Nouvelle Histoire de la photographie*, Bordas, Paris 1994, pp. 418-423.

⁴⁵ B. Downes, *Let's Talk Photography*, in "Popular Photography", 1949, p. 24.

⁴⁶ Cf. K. Rosenberg, *Eliot Porter*, in "The New York Times", 25 July 2013.



Eliot Porter, Clouds at sunset. Tesuque, New Mexico. Summer 1960

«Meditations on pure color»⁴⁷, Porter's photographs shared with Auerbach's aesthetics an obsessive attention to the details of the image, which contributed – in his poetics – to a very personal form of pantheistic mysticism («the images selected are mostly details of nature which emphasize how nature's apparent disorder can be reduced to aesthetically stimulating fragments [...] Only in fragments of the whole is nature's order apparent»)⁴⁸. The use of color in the Mexican project therefore represents for both of them a decentralization of their previous research: while it is true that the colors of Porter's photographs were retouched in a studio⁴⁹ to obtain specific compositional effects, here, the heterodox choice of color photography is subservient to a concern that is both realistic and transcendent: to capture the atmosphere of the new context:

Our only goal was to get pictures which show the saints and their surroundings as they are revered by the Mexican people. Therefore, we decided to use only the existing illumination, however dim and unsuitable it seemed from a photographic viewpoint. I saw more and

⁴⁷ W.J. Neaf, *Afterword*, in E. Porter, *Intimate Landscapes*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 1979, p. 134.

⁴⁸ J. Gleik, E. Porter, *Nature's Chaos*, Hachette, New York 2001, p. 10.

⁴⁹ «Porter manipulated his prints in the color lab to bring out the qualities he wanted to emphasize. He made a point, however, of never adding colors not found in his transparencies» (P. Martineau, *Eliot Porter: In the Realm of Nature*, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles 2012, p. 20).

more how important it was not to use additional light. The candles or colored glass were imperative in creating the atmosphere we wanted to retain. [...] Often the exposure meter showed no reaction at all, and we literally worked in the dark. But, because photo film can accumulate light through time, some of the resulting pictures show more than met the eye⁵⁰.

Here, the use of color, an undisputed taboo in German modernist photography, aims to intensify that *unheimlich* exchange between animate and inanimate⁵¹ already observed in Auerbach's works from the Weimar years. Auerbach, far removed from Western photography and its dictates, freely adopts a "second-rate" technique, choosing to appropriate the uncanny imagery associated with color photography precisely to explore how «the dichotomies drawn by the Western world between body and soul, mask and reality, art and life, do not apply to Mexico» from the technical point of view»⁵².

Among the few who observed this gap was an exceptional witness of the two artists' photographs: Octavio Paz, called upon to review *Mexican Churches* in 1987 (the book would be published only 30 years after the trip, when color photography was fully accepted as an artistic practice, and American interest in non-Western cultures had undoubtedly increased) writes:

This is a composition in which the animation of colors and the richness of tones dramatically contrast with the poverty of the materials – paper, glass, plaster, cement, stains of moisture – tools with which time makes and destroys appearances. The paper garland, a sumptuous rag, seems to be a crown for a destitute king, Christ. It is remarkable how the eye of the artist isolates this humble reality and transforms it into living art. It has been years since that garland was thrown into the garbage can and the wall, if it still stands, has been painted over several times. But the image in Mr. Porter's photograph lives. Photography redeems.⁵³

⁵⁰ E. Auerbach, *Preface*, in E. Auerbach, E. Porter, *Mexican Churches*, cit., p. 7.

⁵¹ Roland Barthes too underlined, in a negative sense, this irrational trade between life and death that seemed intrinsic to the practice of color photography: «I always feel (unimportant what actually occurs) that... color is a coating applied later on to the original truth of the black-and-white photograph. For me, color is an artifice, a cosmetic (like the kind used to paint corpses)» (R. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, Hill and Wang, New York 1981, p. 81).

⁵² C. Naggar, *La fascinación del otro/ The Fascination for the Other*, cit., p. 48.

⁵³ O. Paz, *Here People Talk to God*, in "New York Times", 20 December 1987.

At a time when color photography was still being used almost exclusively for advertising, and occasionally by exiles for essentially political purposes⁵⁴, Auerbach's 'chromatic' deviation from modernism seems to constitute a sort of third way, dictated by the transregional nature of her perspective, in which her "neue Sehen", gazing upon Central American religious art – transformed into something stylistically and technically anarchic by exile – meets the need to present different ways of conceptualizing reality. The graphic and linear style of German and American modernism is replaced here by an idea of diffuse photography, a creator of atmospheres.

Auerbach was fully aware of the importance of this cycle in her output: a point of arrival and a theoretically relevant conclusion (reconciled with the past and aesthetically free) to her difficult and complex existential and artistic journey. After this cycle, Auerbach would abandon photography almost entirely⁵⁵: «I gave my little contribution to the world»⁵⁶.

6. Atmospheres

The goal of refocusing perception through color photography, presenting the Mexican project as a different way of approaching reality, is evident in Auerbach and Porter's decision to set up an installation for the first exhibition of the Mexican cycle, *Madonnas and Marketplaces*, held in 1957 at the Limelight Gallery in the Village⁵⁷. Here, the artists rejected gallery owner and curator Helen Gee's plan to exhibit the paintings in an aseptic modernist white cube, asking her to drape the walls with linen sheets in four different colors: «The gallery was transformed. The linen absorbed the glare of the lights, and the prints looked gem-like against them. They created an environment in keeping with the work – it was no longer a gallery, but a sanctuary»⁵⁸. Auerbach and Porter's color photography here reveals its radically anti-modernist spirit: these are not

⁵⁴ See H. Yoon, *Practice in Color. Gisèle Freund in Paris*, in "October", 173, 2020, pp. 7-36.

⁵⁵ «There were also, as Graeve Ingelmann observes, practical reasons for this choice. The lack of artistic recognition of her work, the absence of a stable income, and her total incompatibility with the American advertising aesthetic, are some of the reasons for completely rethinking her career. She went on to teach children with learning disabilities at the Educational Institute for Learning and Research in New York, where she would continue to work until her death» (I. Graeve Ingelmann, *Ellen Auerbach, Das dritte Auge. Leben und Werk*, cit., pp. 93-94).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

⁵⁷ On the gallery's pioneering role in the history of American photography, see L. Corbus Bezner, *Helen Gee in the Limelight*, in "History of Photography", 20, 1996, pp. 78-81.

⁵⁸ H. Glee, *Limelight: a Greenwich Village Photography Gallery and Coffeehouse in the Fifties: a Memoir*, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque 1997, p. 208.

images meant for a viewer perceived as a «disembodied Eye»⁵⁹; rather, they invite more complex, emotional, haptic, atmospheric forms of visuality that would not be fully conceptualized until many years later. Here:

Before being perceived as properties of objects, colors are perceived in their interaction with the color of contiguous objects and even with the air between our eye and the perception, so that «they no longer condense into superficial colors, but spread around objects and become atmospheric colors», they are «like an exit of the thing outside itself»⁶⁰, an ecstasy that it would be no exaggeration to call coexistence or communion⁶¹.

Setting the stage for a complex legacy – erased by exile and history – Auerbach's Mexican photography seems to pave the way for new paradigms, describing an eccentric, dialectical, colorful, mystical, and non-European modernism that the canon must begin to take into account⁶².

⁵⁹ B. O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube. The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, The Lapis Press, Santa Monica, San Francisco 1986, p. 10.

⁶⁰ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Fenomenologia della percezione* (1945), Bompiani, Milano 2004, pp. 353-417.

⁶¹ «Prima che come proprietà degli oggetti, i colori sono percepiti nell'interazione col colore degli oggetti contigui e perfino con l'aria che si interpone tra il nostro occhio e il percepito, tanto che 'non si condensano più in colori superficiali, ma si diffondono intorno agli oggetti e divengono colori atmosferici', sono 'come un'uscita della cosa fuori di sé', un'estasi che non sarebbe esagerato definire coesistenza o comunione» (T. Griffero, *Atmosferologia, Estetica degli spazi emozionali*, Mimesis Edizioni, Milano 2017, p. 46).

⁶² I would like to thank Valentina Bartalesi and Elena Gipponi for their careful and kind reading, the advice and the suggestions with which they accompanied the writing of this article.