

## “A Hard, Merciless Light: The Worker-Photography Movement, 1926–1939”

MUSEO NACIONAL CENTRO DE ARTE REINA SOFÍA, MADRID

Devin Fore

**AT FIRST GLANCE**, it is not entirely obvious what the term *worker-photography* means. The phrase pivots on an enigmatic vinculum that, while insisting on a connection between the two words, fails to clarify the nature of this bond. Yet the question that is skirted by this slapdash conjuncture is essential to understanding both the technical parameters and the political ambitions of an interwar documentary impulse that came into being “for the purpose of giving visibility to the emerging popular classes in the era of mass democracy,” as curator Jorge Ribalta observes. Was worker-photography an authentic grassroots movement that emerged spontaneously from the ranks of the working class in response to an impulse toward self-determination? Or was it instead defined thematically, as a revolutionary iconography of the proletariat? In other words, was the working class the author or the object of worker-photography?

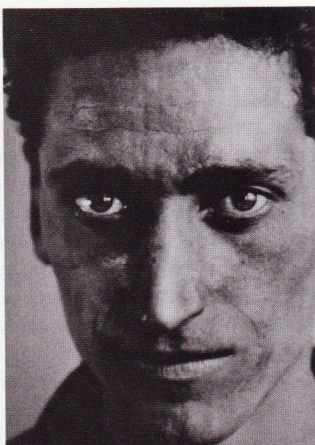
Eschewing any simplistic answer, the show at the Reina Sofia maps, with tremendous subtlety and breadth, the complex triangulation of popular organizations, artistic avant-gardes, and party directives that determined the emergence and course of the worker-photography project. The exhibition’s narrative is organized around three critical caesuras: 1926, when the two major organs of the movement, *The Worker-Photographer* and *Soviet Photo*, were founded; 1929, the year that worker-photography began growing beyond this initial German-Soviet dialogue to become an international initiative with cadres in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Austria, Britain, the Netherlands, and the Americas; and 1935, when Popular Front strategy shifted the movement’s focus away from the

rhetoric of class struggle to the creation of a united front against fascism.

Initially, the amateur worker-photography groups in Germany and the Soviet Union shared a program close to that of the Proletkult movement: to cultivate a participatory proletarian consciousness outside the political agendas of the Communist Party. Central to this project was a system of alternative media networks such as the one established by Willi Münzenberg, whose weekly *Arbeiter-Illustrierte Zeitung* (Workers’ Illustrated News) was, at its peak, the second-most-read periodical in Germany. One of the remarkable feats of the show is that it reconstructs and exhibits, alongside framed prints, the material media—magazines, book covers, posters, almanacs, postcards, etc.—through which these images were disseminated. Together with the six documentary films shown in the exhibition, this multimedia coverage creates a vivid impression of the movement’s ambitions to organize a counterhegemonic “life matrix” (*Lebenszusammenhang*) for the delegitimized experience of the proletarian subject, whose existence otherwise appeared fragmentary and incoherent in comparison with the dominant narrative of bourgeois “lifestyle.”

Turning their cameras toward overlooked logics of the commonplace, worker-photographers expanded the theater of proletarian struggle beyond the economic analytics of the party into the sites of everyday existence, defining the working class at the level of habitus and lived ideology. Morris Engel chronicled life in Harlem, and Henri Cartier-Bresson documented the modest vacations of French workers, but nowhere was this impulse to exceed the party’s economism better exemplified than in the immensely successful and widely imitated 1931 photo-essay “24 Hours in the Life of a Moscow Worker Family,” by Maks Al’pert, Arkadii Shaikhet, and Semen Tules. In addition to recording the valorized labor of the wage-earning members of a “typical” Moscow family, the Filippovs, the series also depicted the family outside the workplace engaged in educational and leisure activities, in domestic work, consumption, and sport. As the Filippov documentation and its spin-offs discovered—nearly forty years ahead of mainstream Marxism—the biopolitical contexts of *byt*, or “everyday life,” may fall outside the categories of classical political economy, but they are critical for the maintenance of living labor power and thus of the forces of production in general.

From left: Image from the photo-essay "24 Hours in the Life of a Moscow Worker Family" by Maks Al'pert, Arkadii Shaikhet, and Semen Tules, first published in *Arbeiter-Illustrierte Zeitung* 38 (1931). Cover of *Arbeiter-Illustrierte Zeitung* 17 (1931). Photograph by Tina Modotti. Morris Engel, *Child Crying*, ca. 1935, black-and-white photograph, 9½ x 7½". From the series "Harlem Document," 1936–39. Kata Kálmán, *Ernö Weisz, 23-Year-Old Factory Worker*, 1932, black-and-white photograph, 15½ x 11¾".



The course of the exhibition bears witness to the movement's gradual drift away from its spontaneous—and visually astonishing—amateur origins toward a more familiar set of aesthetic idioms. While the tightly cropped physiognomic gallery of the Hungarian Kata Kálmán, for example, engages the conventions of portraiture, it also resists this tradition's visual rhetoric of the expressive personality, sustaining a precarious tension between scientific objectivity and monumental individualism. Eventually, however, there is no doubt that aesthetics has overtaken the initial impulse of worker-photography. Tellingly, the final rooms of the show move to France and Spain, two countries that, unlike Germany, never had a robust grassroots worker-photography movement. This break is registered in the wall text separating the second and third sections of the show, which reads in Spanish, "*Políticas documentales en la era del Frente Popular*," but which is rendered in the adjacent English as "Documentary *Poetics* in the Period of the Popular Front." Far too meaningful to be ignored as a mere translation error, the displacement of *politics* by *poetics* here marks the concerted effort in the mid-1930s to represent the working class using a stable and identifiable set of visual tropes. The same wall text announces that the final rooms stage "the production of an epic iconography of the proletariat."

Marx, for one, didn't write about the *proletariat*. Determined to avoid the kind of specious hypostatizing encouraged by this word—the notion of the proletariat as a quasi-biological species, the identification of this revolutionary subject with the body of the male factory laborer, etc.—Marx chose to speak instead of the *working class*, a nonessentializing, labile subject position that is defined dynamically vis-à-vis the forces of production and the activities of social reproduction. As Étienne Balibar has pointed out, Marx's terminological distinction signals the impossibility of representing the proletariat *as such*. An iconography of the proletariat may be an expedient visual myth for galvanizing revolutionary politics, but it doesn't reflect the diversity of working-class experiences, which, as the Reina Sofía exhibit makes so palpably clear, encompass a range of contexts, both within the workplace and beyond. □

"A Hard, Merciless Light: The Worker-Photography Movement, 1926–1939" will be on view through August 22.

DEVIN FORE IS AN ASSISTANT PROFESSOR IN THE PRINCETON UNIVERSITY DEPARTMENT OF GERMAN.