

Ever an Anarchist

Book Review of "Creative Composites: Modernism, Race, and the Stieglitz Circle" by Lauren Kroiz

Allan Antliff

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Creative Composites: Modernism, Race, and the Stieglitz Circle by *Lauren Kroiz*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012, pp. 267, 10 col. and 92 b. & w. illus., £34.95

Creative Composites revisits modern art in the circle of American photographer Alfred Stieglitz from the 1880s to the 1930s. Kroiz is interested in how a 'composite' conception of American nationhood figures in modernist theory and practice in Stieglitz's milieu. 'The term "composite"', she relates, 'refers to individuals, groups, or images pushed together but maintaining their difference, layered to reveal their sameness, or synthesized (frequently by sexual reproduction) into something new – significations that parallel popular period models of integrating ethnic and racial difference in the United States: cultural pluralism, assimilation and miscegenation.' (2) 'Aesthetic change' within the Stieglitz circle is, in turn, 'fomented' by evolving sociological formations of a 'composite' America (3). Focusing on Japanese-German art critic Sadakichi Hartmann, Mexican-born caricaturist Mariusde Zayas (*plate 1*), English-Sri Lankan historian Ananda Coomaraswamy and the American-born artists Georgia O'Keeffe and Arthur Dove, she examines the interplay between notions of modernism and 'composite' conceptions infusing 'photography, caricature, film, and collage' (8). Kroiz's treatment foregrounds important issues, not only for our understanding of the Stieglitz circle, but for the history of modernism in general.

Chapter one concerns 'straight' photography (prints from 'original' negatives not 'faked, doctored or retouched' in any way), a style championed by Sadakichi Hartmann as the modern counterpart to 'pictorialism' (frequently manipulated prints emulating painterly effects). Tracking the evolution of the 'straight' versus 'pictorial' debate surrounding the photographs of Gertrude Käsebier in Stieglitz's *Camera Notes* (1897–1903) and early issues of its successor, *Camera Work* (1903–17), Kroiz associates Hartmann's aesthetic with discourses celebrating a multi-ethnic conception of America as opposed to hegemonic assimilation into an Anglo-Saxon American norm (14). According to Kroiz, pictorialism as practised by Käsebier evidences assimilationist aspirations at odds with Hartmann's vision of 'artistic' photographers mobilizing the 'straight' aesthetic to celebrate a 'pluralistic nation' (38–9). She ends with a discussion of Stieglitz's iconic

exercise in straight photography, *The Steerage* (1907). This photograph of poor immigrant Americans crowding together in the steerage of a passenger ship returning to Europe is reinterpreted as a presentation of the ‘modern, pluralist, transnational citizen’ envisaged by cultural critic Randolph Bourne in the July 1916 issue of *Atlantic Magazine* (49). In sum, Kroiz argues, Hartmann and Stieglitz were set on renewing the American polity by ‘integrating difference’ (3).

Crucially, however, Kroiz neglects the politics of her protagonists. Stieglitz was a self-declared anarchist (‘at heart I have ever been an anarchist’) and Hartmann was deeply immersed in the anarchist movement during his New York years.¹ Among anarchists, modernist experimentation was associated with individualizing (heterogeneous and generative) anti-authoritarianism, and during the *Camera Work* period this idea was taken up and developed by a range of artists and critics in Stieglitz’s circle, including Francis Picabia, Hutchins Hapgood, John Weichsel, Max Weber, Man Ray, and Benjamin de Casseres.² When Kroiz aligns the intentions of Hartmann and Stieglitz with a nationalist-inflected ‘integration’ thesis, she suppresses an important – and complicating – aspect of their outlook. Certainly, after befriending Waldo Frank, Stieglitz found affinity with the conception of America espoused by Bourne and Frank in *SevenArts* magazine (November 1916–October 1917) and elsewhere. Kroiz cites Bourne’s article in which he speculated that a multi-ethnic ‘America’ founded on ‘the good life of personality lived in the environment of the Beloved Community’ was the touchstone of a ‘cosmopolitan’ identity at odds with subordination to ruling class Anglo-Saxon Americanism.³ But its relevance for a ‘straight’ versus ‘pictorial’ debate that unfolded many years prior is nebulous. Furthermore, once America entered the First World War in April 1917, Bourne’s ‘Beloved Community’ proved to be a chimera and the hard kernel of Stieglitz’s anarchism revealed itself.⁴ Tellingly, in a letter to Georgia O’Keeffe of 3 November 1917, Stieglitz wrote: ‘I was a really good American until I realized there was no America or American – I felt American for years for I believed Americans felt the universality of things and beings – I’m just nothing when the world is labeling individuals.’⁵

Kroiz derives her foundational concept of ‘composite’ modernism from a *Camera Work* article by de Casseres titled ‘The physiognomy of the New Yorker’ and published in 1910 (51). This throws the questionable dimensions of her discussion into sharp relief. De Casseres characterizes ‘the New York face’ as a hyper-capitalist ‘mixture of Frenzy and Barter, Power and Servility ... a composite creation, embodying the spirit of the Great Republic’.⁶ Neither de Casseres nor anyone else in the Stieglitz circle ever equated their world outlook with that of ‘the Tammany politician, the Wall-street broker, the hotel manager, the subway director’ and other hard-bargaining

¹ ‘At heart I have ever been an anarchist. All truth seekers are that, whether they know it or not’, Alfred Stieglitz to Waldo Frank, 6 July 1936, cited in Allan Antliff, ‘Stieglitz parmi les anarchistes’, in Jay Bochner and Jean-Pierre Montier, eds, *Carrefour Alfred Stieglitz: Colloque de Cerisy*, Paris, 2012, 50; on Hartmann’s anarchism see Paul Avrich, *The Modern School Movement: Anarchism and Education in the United States*, Princeton, NJ, 1980, 126–7.

² Allan Antliff, *Anarchy and Art: From the Paris Commune to the Fall of the Berlin Wall*, Vancouver, 2007, 49–70 (Picabia); Allan Antliff, *Anarchist Modernism: Art, Politics and the First American Avant-Garde*, Chicago, IL, 2001, 30–6, 41–3 (Hapgood); 53–7 (Weichsel); 108–17 (Weber); 81–4 (Man Ray); 106–8, 120 (de Casseres) and Antliff, ‘Stieglitz parmi les anarchistes’, 48–9 (de Casseres).

³ Randolph Bourne, ‘Trans-National America’, reprinted in Olaf Hansen, ed., *Randolph Bourne: The Radical Will: Selected Writings, 1911–1918*, Berkeley, CA, 1977, 249 (Anglo-Saxon ruling class); 262 (international citizenship); 264 (Beloved Community). For more on Bourne’s outlook, see Antliff, *Anarchist Modernism*, 167–71.

⁴ On war-time repression of the anarchist movement, see Antliff, *Anarchist Modernism*, chapters 8 and 9.

⁵ Alfred Stieglitz to Georgia O’Keeffe, 3 November 1917, cited in Katherine Hoffman, *Alfred Stieglitz: A Legacy of Light*, New Haven, 2011, 93.

⁶ Benjamin de Casseres, ‘The physiognomy of the New Yorker’, *Camera Work*, 29 January 1910, 35.

‘public men’ embodying de Casseres’ ‘composite’.⁷ Yet Kroiz seizes on de Casseres’ term, decontextualizes it, and maps it onto the Camera Work milieu to give her treatment historical cachet. In chapter two she concludes that, with the arrival of Marius de Zayas and other foreigners after 1907, ‘The Stieglitz circle became a “composite creation” – de Casseres’ evocative description of the New Yorker’s particular physiognomy – as its modernism shaped that creation.’ (51) Subsequently, ‘composite modernism’ becomes very slippery as it morphs from designating the diverse ethnic make-up of the Stieglitz circle to demarcating de Zayas’ synthesis of various artistic values – “primitive” and modern, abstract and representational, material and symbolic’ – in caricature (76). The latter discussion sets the stage for Kroiz to suggest that de Zayas’ promotion of modernist ‘primitivism’ – exemplified in the exhibition of work by Pablo Picasso alongside African statuary at 291 – was a celebration of contemporaneous ‘racial hybridity’ in America (83). De Zayas’ racism, which surely should figure in an argument that he promoted modernism to showcase ‘the potential for constructive miscegenation of black and white’, is sidelined (84).⁸

In chapter three Kroiz discusses Ananda Coomaraswamy’s support for Stieglitz’s photography and his influence on the photographer. Briefly, Kroiz demonstrates Coomaraswamy’s conception of a ‘living art’ in the West, which he initially associated with post-impressionist painting (and the work of American modernist John Mowbray-Clarke), was extended to photography and film during the 1920s (110).⁹ Kroiz makes a compelling case that Coomaraswamy’s enthusiasm for Stieglitz’s photographs and his push to acquire Stieglitz’s work for the Boston Museum of Fine Arts was rooted in this understanding. However, her discussion might have benefited from a closer examination of Coomaraswamy’s notion of the spiritual in art and the related concept of ‘idealistic individualism’ so integral to his anarchist societal ideal.¹⁰ Instead, Kroiz presents Coomaraswamy’s aesthetic as an adjunct to a ‘composite’ reprise of de Zayas’ views on the part of Stieglitz, and pits both against ‘the prevalent American nativist idea that shared culture would be achieved through nostalgia or ethnic homogeneity’ (100, 126). An otherwise stimulating discussion runs out of steam, and further understanding as to how Stieglitz’s photography (Spiritual America as castrated stallion, for example) aligned with his anarchism remains unanswered.

Stieglitz’s relationship to his own ethnicity is a second issue worthy of exploration. During the 1930s, Frank associated Stieglitz with a ‘universal’ impulse in Judaism toward liberty

⁷ De Casseres, ‘The physiognomy of the New Yorker’, 35.

⁸ Wendy Grossman offers a more nuanced analysis of de Zayas’ understanding of modernism. Picasso and other modernists subsumed the cultural and historical specifics of African masks and statuary within a discourse equating the absence of representational conventions as codified in European art with unbridled expressivity, which they sought to emulate. African artists were deemed ‘barbaric’, ‘childlike’, ‘primitive’, tropes that mirrored societal prejudices, and Europe’s modernists were said to tap into similarly elemental depths, albeit without becoming ‘savages’ themselves. These racist paradigms were shared by de Zayas, who recognized African art’s influence at the same time as he asserted the ‘civilized’ modernists’ racial superiority over the ‘savage’ African. Referencing de Zayas’ commentary on the 1914 exhibition of African art at 291 (‘Statuary in wood by African savages: The root of modern art’) and his subsequent publication, *African Negro Art: Its Influence on Modern Art* (1916), she observes: ‘While lauding “Negro Art” for its “influence on our comprehension of form... and [for] opening our eyes to a new world of plastic sensations,” he simultaneously characterized the makers of these objects as savages whose art was derived from what he perceived to be a primitive, undeveloped mentality. Torn between the revolutionary impact the inventive African objects were having on Western aesthetic vision on the one hand and his deeply ingrained racial prejudices on the other, de Zayas’ words reflect the kind of unease towards things African that entwined the culture of Modernism’, Wendy Grossman, *Man Ray, African Art, and the Modernist Lens*, Washington, DC, 2009, 30.

⁹ On Coomaraswamy, post-impressionism and Mowbray-Clarke, see Antliff, *Anarchist Modernism*, 137–9.

¹⁰ Antliff, *Anarchist Modernism*, 123–40.

which escaped the 'captivity of the Jewish nation' to find personification, initially, as 'Christian Grace'.¹¹ In the contemporary world, 'business and State' 'threatened human liberty' while socialism defended freedom and expanded its scope to encompass economics and governance.¹² Stieglitz, wrote Frank, opposed 'the bourgeois-capitalist world' dominating America because he was attuned to spiritual currents 'older than the Republic' that placed 'the value of life (what we call vaguely beauty and truth)' at the forefront of existence.¹³ In other words, Stieglitz's allegiances lay with the cause of humanity and socialism,¹⁴ a conception at odds with Kroiz's ethnocentric suggestion that Frank and other 'avant-gardists . . . celebrated him [Stieglitz], his Truth, and his photographic practice as specifically Jewish', despite Stieglitz's 'reluctance to take on the mantle they bestowed' (106).

Kroiz's final chapter argues that during the 1920s and 1930s Stieglitz circle artists sought out 'regional diversity' in a bid to develop 'a distinctly American composite culture' (184–5). Linking the work of O'Keeffe (who collects, sketches and paints Zuni and Hopi kachina dolls, shells, and animal skulls) and Dove (who creates assemblages utilizing items such as snails, shoes, twigs, razor blades, buttons, and denim shirtsleeves) to this shared ambition, she concludes previous 'historians' of Stieglitz circle artists have misinterpreted the group's 'obsession with matter, material, and skulls' as 'an elegiac inward turn, away from contemporary events and from attacks by proponents of American scene painting' (186).¹⁵ This is disingenuous, as the work of the Stieglitz circle has been discussed in socially engaged contexts by a host of art historians, many of whom are cited by Kroiz.¹⁶ However, it does accord with the book's general tenor, which is to say that Creative Composites may offer many insights, yet Kroiz is overly ambitious when she claims to have effectively revised our understanding of early American modernism.

¹¹ Waldo Frank, 'The New World in Stieglitz', in Waldo Frank, Lewis Mumford, Dorothy Norman, Paul Rosenfeld, and Harold Rugg, eds,

¹² Frank, 'The New World in Stieglitz', 213.

¹³ Frank, 'The New World in Stieglitz', 221

¹⁴ Frank, 'The New World in Stieglitz', 223. Stieglitz's intense commitment to the publication is discussed in Richard Whelan, *Alfred Stieglitz: A Biography*, Boston, MA, 1995, 551–3. The book was in part a collective response to art critic Thomas Craven's harsh (and anti-Semitic) accusation, in *Modern Art: The Men, the Movements, The Meaning* (1934), that Stieglitz's promotion of 'French' modernism in the US had eviscerated American art. See Sarah Greenough, 'Alfred Stieglitz, facilitator, financier, and father presents seven Americans', in Sarah Greenough et al., *Modern Art and America: Alfred Stieglitz and his New York Galleries*, Washington, DC, 2000, 324–5.

¹⁵ Kroiz generalizes from Greenough's characterization of the Stieglitz circle.

¹⁶ See, for example, Jackson Rushing, *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde*, Austin, TX, 1995; Celeste Conner, *Democratic Visions: Art and Theory of the Stieglitz Circle, 1924–1934*, Berkeley, CA, 2001; Wanda Corn, *The Great American Thing: American Art and National Identity, 1915–1935*, Berkeley, CA, 1999; and Donna Cassidy, *Marsden Hartley: Race, Religion, and Nation*, Hanover, NH, 2005.

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