

Fotofeis



Figure 1 Seydou Keita Portrait from a series taken in Bamako, Mali

Two photographs shown at the International Festival of Photography in Scotland, *Fotofeis*, and separated by only twenty years, seem to open upon two different worlds. In the first by Tina Modotti, a thin unshod girl in a ragged dress stands before a wood and tin shanty, looking directly and intently into the lens. She cooperates with Modotti in making the picture but there is something cautious and even fearful in her pose, her hands nervously clutched over her chest. In the second, an advertisement for Kodak, wholesome youth is gathered around the cold hearth of the modern American home, their cheerful gestures of consumption fixed forever by the photographer in the foreground. The first picture is part of a fine exhibition of Modotti's pictures at Inverleith House, Edinburgh, the second comes from *American Photography 1890-1965*, shown at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, a

display of modernist photographs from MOMA, New York. The two exhibitions are linked by far more than Edward Weston, for in some of the prints made by Modotti in the twenties there can be seen the promise of an alternative modern cult of the object linked to radical causes. Here humble items, glasses or cloth, step out into the light and offer themselves to the viewer not as consumer fetishes but as transparent objects of knowledge. This vision is perhaps best exemplified by Modotti's 1929 picture of the typewriter of Julio Antonio Mella, where the forms of that modern icon of precision and inspiration have produced a fragment of a text by Trotsky, translated into Spanish. Of course the dream was soon ruined: Mella, a Cuban revolutionary, was murdered in the year the picture was taken by the agents of Machado, and the modernist depiction of objects soon became subject to a bloated and apparently carefree consumerism. Modotti's images responded, becoming rougher in definition but sharper in impact, and more directly attached to the revolutionary cause.

Her suspicious girl seems to stand at the threshold of a door leading onto much of the work in *Fotofeis* which takes migration as one of its themes. Frank Darius has made portraits of asylum-seekers in Berlin awaiting the decision of the authorities on their fate. In this often long period of limbo they are not permitted to work and must simply bide their time. And they wait also in Darius's straightforward pictures, shot in groups or alone in front of plain studio backdrops. These refugees too often look directly at the camera; their poses, their cheap American-style sports clothes, and sometimes their scars, tell much of their tales. The captions, aside from identifying their subjects and giving the length of time they have spent waiting, list their countries of origin, these names speaking of famine, civil war and Western-sponsored terror: Ethiopia, Yugoslavia, Angola, the Lebanon, the list is long.

Yet curiously the faces and poses in the extraordinary portraits of Seydou Keita have the same tenuous and haunting quality. Keita ran a portrait business in Bamako, Mali's capital, catering to a new class of civil servants and urban traders. His sitters had often adopted Western styles of dress, or at least aspired to, for Keita kept a stock of suits and consumer items for those who could not bring their own. It is the naivety, not of the photographer, but of the sitters before the camera which gives these works their disquieting air, reminding us of Benjamin's enthusiasm for early daguerrotypes, taken long before mass-media saturation, and before people had got used to posing for the camera, when in his words, 'the human countenance had a silence about it in which the gaze rested'. And these

looks, direct and unsmiling, act against the clothes and props, the dandyish suits and white gloves, the bicycles and pith helmets, revealing them as a sad and shameful livery. These people, like the girl in the Modotti picture, and different though their immediate circumstances were, seem exiles even at home.

Such similarities are not merely a matter of an accidental conjunction of photographic styles but have their basis in larger processes of the movement of money and arms, goods and people. Exhibitions in *Fotofeis* sometimes speak of this: looking at *American Photography* and then at some of the more abject contemporary shows, raises the question of how a nation evolves, to put it in imagistic terms, from the idealism of Paul Strand to the wallowing in disgust of Joel-Peter Witkin. Clues may be found in the American show, where Weegee's demonic New York children devour with their eyes the body of a gambler murdered in the street, or in one of the captions to Allan Sekula's *Fish Story* which cites a U.S. military man: 'I've got a photo of myself, 19 years old, grinning, my arms spread wide, holding a head in each hand ... I cut off heads for the U.S. government'. Sekula's impressive exhibition, the result of a long project about harbours and ships in which colour photographs and panels of text are equally weighed, seeks to give both a feeling for and an analysis of the global processes of trade and what they mean for the lives of people everywhere. The concealment of commodities in containers becomes the sign for many another concealment, and for the resistance of capital to overall representation. What Sekula's impressive work shows, as does (perhaps unwittingly) parts of *Fotofeis*, is that by combining a variety of strategies and points of view, capital can be held up to the light. Those not content to live with or even celebrate the existence of abject conditions may choose to look at their causes. The documentary aspect of photography is crucial to this examination. Modotti, writing of 'good photography', claimed straightforwardly that it 'accepts all the limitations inherent in photographic technique and takes advantages of the possibilities and characteristics the medium offers'. There is another type of work, though, which 'gives the impression that [it] is almost ashamed of making photographs ... superimposing effects and falsifications that can only please those of perverted taste'. Naturally there is also some of this in *Fotofeis*, looking mannered and irrelevant, concerned only with itself and its immediate milieu. Meanwhile Modotti's pictures which, like others in the festival, reflect upon the rapacity of a single system which unites them and is ever more clearly revealed, leap over the years between their making and our viewing with ease.

Fotofeis takes place in venues throughout Scotland through October and November. Exhibitions mentioned: *Tina Modotti * Her Life and Photography*, Inverleith House, Royal Botanic Gardens, Edinburgh, until 19 November; *American Photography 1890-1965*, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, until 26 November; Frank Darius, *'Fremdes Zuhause': Portraits of Asylum Seekers in Germany*, Street Level, Glasgow, until 11 November; Seydou Keita and Malick Sidibé, *Photographs from Mali*, Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh until 21 October; *Joel-Peter Witkin*, Stills Gallery, Edinburgh, until 18 November. Allan Sekula, *Fish Story*, Tramway, Glasgow, until 12 November. A catalogue is published by Fotofeis with essays by Allen Frame, Pavel Büchler and Val Williams.



Figure 2: Tina Modotti, Untitled, 1927