

A Forgotten 20th-Century Photographer Who Folded Her Work into the Fabric of Life

An exhibition at the Americas Society spotlights Kati Horna, who believed that the circulation of images, rather than the standalone photograph, could bring about social change.

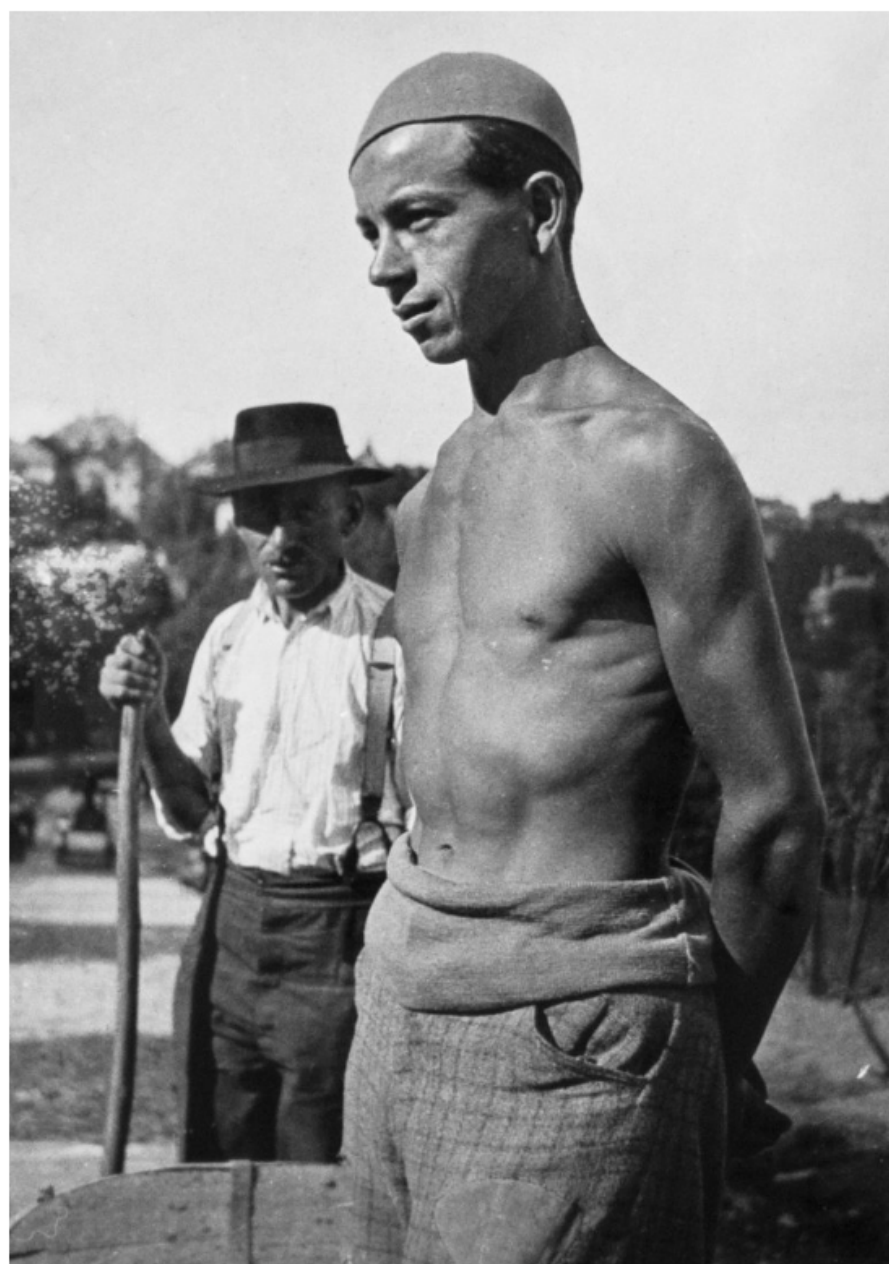
[Told and Untold: The Photo Stories of Kati Horna in the Illustrated Press](#)

continues at the Americas Society through December 17.



Kati Horna, "Historia de un vampiro: sucedió en Coyoacán en 1962" (Story of a Vampire: It Happened in Coyoacán in 1962, 1962), gelatin silver print, 10 x 13 1/4 in, private collection, Mexico City (© 2005 Ana María Norah Horna y Fernández)

My first reaction upon seeing [Told and Untold: The Photo Stories of Kati Horna in the Illustrated Press](#) was: “How is it possible that I have never heard of this person?” The surprise was engendered by the realization that the work in this retrospective exhibition — which was curated by Michel Otayek and Christina De León at the Americas Society — holds its own next to that of all the canonized photographers from the same period with whom I am so familiar.



Kati Horna, "Untitled (Shirtless Man and Peasant, Hungary)" (1933), gelatin silver print, 4 3/4 x 6 3/4 in, private collection, Mexico City (© 2005 Ana María Norah Horna y Fernández)

Born in 1912, [Kati Horna](#) was a photographer, a Hungarian Jew, and an émigré. After seeing the show, I immediately wrote to my mother — also a Hungarian Jew, born in 1923 — to ask if she had heard of Horna. The answer was no. That Horna was unknown to both of us may be in part because she spent her productive adult life in Mexico. It may also be because she eschewed stardom, identifying herself as an art worker rather than an artist. It may also be because she was a woman. László Moholy-Nagy, born in 1895, was an émigré too, but he landed in Chicago and was associated with the Bauhaus School, making him a much

more familiar figure, even if he and Horna shared a home country and a visionary imagination. One might summarize Moholy-Nagy's overall project as a proposal for the reimagining of spatial relations in order to construct a more enlightened future; Horna's project focused on circulation — the power of context and the exploration of distribution networks as a way to create and disseminate meaning. For Horna, the circulation of images, rather than the standalone photograph, was the principal arena of investigation and action, motivated by the belief that she could bring about positive social change.

Horna's early life experience was a series of exiles requiring her to adapt repeatedly to different cultural environments. Although the first few photographs in the exhibition are single images taken in Hungary, Horna moved to Berlin as a young woman, gravitating toward a group of intellectuals and writers who were drawn to the Marxist theoretician Karl Korsch. Horna had spent time in Hungary hanging out in radical and leftist circles, and her association with Korsch was, in many respects, part of a continuum. Her young husband, Paul Partos, had also been part of the same political circle. Horna's brief formal training in photography had taken place in Hungary with József Pécsi, who taught design and typography as well. Horna came from a relatively wealthy family, and she made choices that were far from conventional for young women at the time, including the determination to make her own living.



"Eine lustige Ostergeschichte: Das Franco-Ei" (A Funny Easter Story: Franco, the Egg), photographs by Kati Horna and Wolfgang Bürger, *Die Volks-Illustrierte* (March 31, 1937), private collection, New York

Wisely, Horna chose to leave Berlin after the Reichstag fire in 1933, moving on to Paris, where she began to support herself as a photographer. One early example of her published work at the time is a parody — one could liken it to a cartoon — consisting of a series of eggs acting out a political drama; the eggs having been adorned with Hitler’s mustache. This work, “Hitler-Ei” (1936), and several others that use quotidian objects as their putative subject matter were done in collaboration with Wolfgang Bürger. Both the commitment to collaboration and the use of serial imagery as a narrative strategy — which evolved into the photographic essay, popularized in America by *LIFE* magazine — would go on to become hallmarks of Horna’s future endeavors.

About the egg pictures, Otayek explains in the catalogue:

As can be seen in the copy on display here, rather than Hitler, in *Die Volk-Illustrierte* the story’s comical tyrant is dubbed “Das Franco-Ei,” a reference to Francisco Franco, leader of the right-wing military insurrection that sparked the Spanish Civil War in July 1936. This subtle editorial gesture reflects a growing conviction by many on the Left that the fight against Franco in Spain represented the last hope to halt the advance of fascism across Europe.



Kati Horna, “Militiamen in the outskirts of Banastás Aragon” (1937), gelatin silver print mounted on paper 10 ¾ x 14 in (page), private collection, Mexico City (© 2005 Ana María Norah Horna y Fernández)

Not surprisingly, Horna and Partos were drawn to the anti-fascist struggle in Spain. In 1937, they moved to Barcelona to work on behalf of the Republicans, at the Foreign Propaganda Office of the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo. Their assignment was to refute the negative press asserting that the anarchists were imposing a reign of terror on the populations they governed or controlled. Horna was put at the head of the office’s photographic agency. Over the course of the war, however, Horna’s focus shifted from the refutation of stories told by the mainstream press to the undeniable

suffering caused by war. Otayek sees her work from this period not as straight documentary but “as a political intervention; as radical story telling.” After two years in the service of revolutionary change, she became disillusioned and picked up and moved once more, this time to Mexico.



“Bombed! Shelled! Besieged for two years – but Life goes on!,” photographs by Kati Horna, *The Weekly Illustrated* (December 3, 1938), private collection, New York

Once in Mexico, Horna’s overt engagement with national politics diminished and was replaced by an engagement with feminism and her personal experience. In an example of her commercial work from the early 1960s, two covers for the magazine *Mujeres: Expresion Femenina* appear together in a wall case. What’s striking about them — and what distinguishes them from American magazine covers of the same period— is the depth of subjectivity that comes across from the women depicted. Horna has managed to photograph these women and still allow them to maintain their personal power. They do not appear in any way as mere objects for male consumption, or consumption generally.



Kati Horna, “Portrait of Veronica Loyoby,” *Mujeres* 34, (March 20, 1960), private collection, Mexico City, and “Portrait of Beatriz Sheridan,” *Mujeres* 79 (February 10, 1962), private collection, Mexico City (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)



Installation view, *Told and Untold: The Photo Stories of Kati Horna in the Illustrated Press at the Americas Society* (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

This case, and the overall arrangement of vitrines and wall-mounted frames in the show, are careful to emphasize the importance of publications as the vehicle for the circulation of Horna's images. They also show us how her images were recirculated or recycled at times, and given new uses and altered meanings. While some photographs appear singularly in frames on the wall, for the most part we see them as they appeared in print in magazines and newspapers, or we see the image both as it appeared in a layout and framed by itself. Seeing the image as singular as well as embedded in the photographic essay demonstrates in an instant how easily meaning is altered by context.

One of Horna's most striking photographic essays was shot in a supposedly progressive mental institution, La Castañeda asylum, and published by *Nosotros* in 1944. Horna seems to have instinctively understood what Michel Foucault would go on to say in *Madness and Civilization*, published in 1961: we can learn more about ourselves by looking in the margins than we can by looking in the center. This prescription was strengthened when Horna chose, coincidentally in 1961, to recirculate the image of one the patients photographed for this spread by submitting it to a group exhibition. She titled it "El Iluminado," which translates as "illuminated," "enlightened," or "visionary." By reframing this marginalized man as a visionary, she emphasizes that those we discard or shun reflect back to us a truth about ourselves that we choose not to see.



Kati Horna, "Untitled" (from the series *La Castañeda*, 1944), gelatin silver print, 8 7/8 x 6 5/8 in, private collection, Mexico City (© 2005 Ana María Norah Horna y Fernández)

Among Horna's more personal essays is *Ode to Necrophilia*, published in 1962 and featuring artist Leonora Carrington. Much of Horna's work was made in collaboration with close friends and sprang from the deep sense of community she developed in Mexico. Perhaps, in the end, a form of serial and poetic narrative was even more powerful for her than the means by which her images circulated. This essay imagines the sexualized female body as abandoned and her bed inhabited by a ghost; it was made after Horna's second husband, José Horna, with whom she spent her adult life in Mexico, had a near fatal heart attack. Necrophilia is defined as sexual intercourse with or attraction to corpses, but here Horna presents it as the recognition of a love and desire so strong that being without it is unimaginable. It's the experience of lying next to someone's warm body for a lifetime and then suddenly being faced with the prospect that a moment will come, perhaps quite soon, when that beloved body will go cold.



Kati Horna, from the series *Ode to Necrophilia* (1962), gelatin silver print, 7 1/2 x 8 in, private collection, Mexico City (© 2005 Ana María Norah Horna y Fernández)

The shift from overt political work to more personal material could be thought of as an abandonment of the public sphere, but perhaps it is in part a recognition that comes with age — that political transformation also depends on individuals being able to transform themselves. While some progress can indeed be legislated from the top down, change also happens from the bottom up.

To the end, Horna viewed herself as an art worker. She never saw herself as precious. Her work succeeded as part of the fabric of social and political life, and as a consequence, she became invisible to us. The gatekeepers of fine art photography established norms (think John Szarkowski, director of photography at the Museum of Modern Art from 1962 to 1991) and a historical canon (think Beaumont Newhall in *The History of Photography: From 1839 to the Present*) that excluded most women and would not endure unruly photographers such as Horna, who placed the collective above individual artistic merit. It required a new generation of curators to bring this work back into circulation.