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Lauren Kroiz, *Creative Composites: Modernism, Race, and the Stieglitz Circle*

Mathilde Arrivé



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REFERENCES

Lauren Kroiz, *Creative Composites: Modernism, Race, and the Stieglitz Circle*, Berkeley, University of California Press, Washington, D.C., The Phillips Collection, 2012, 271 pages, 39 euros. ISBN-10: 0520272498

- 1 Lauren Kroiz, Assistant Professor in the History of Art department at the University of California Berkeley, offers a fresh look at the formative moments of early American modernism, by situating its emergence and development within a racially tense context (1890-1946) dominated by issues of nationality, immigration, ethnicity and identity. Building on a vast array of writings and artworks, Lauren Kroiz indeed argues that period debates about pluralism, assimilation, integration, miscegenation, nativism, and even eugenics, informed the formulation of new aesthetics in the New York avant-garde and provided different models or counter-models for art-making. Lauren Kroiz stresses the rapid and profound changes that occurred in the art world over the first four decades of the 20th century. While focusing primarily on Alfred Stieglitz, the author analyzes the ever-shifting contours of his New York circle and casts light on marginal figures—"diasporic outsiders"—in particular the Japanese German art critic Sadakichi Hartmann, the Mexican-born artist Marius De Zayas, the English Sri Lankan curator Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, whose contributions to U.S. modernism have long been understudied.

Book summary

- 2 The book is organized chronologically around four key figures and moments in the construction of U.S. modernism, which correspond to four major exhibition spaces (*The Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession*, 291, *Intimate Gallery*, *An American Place*).
- 3 In Chapter 1, entitled “Defining Straight Photography: Artistic Pluralism or Assimilation to Painting’s ‘Foreign Tongue’”, Lauren Kroiz shows how Sadakichi Hartmann, in his early plea for “straight” photography, encouraged photographers to assert their own visual idiom rather than to imitate painting, its methods and effects. Indeed, as an alternative to the “assimilative” aesthetic of Gertrude Käsebier and her sentimental, *fin de siècle* pictorialism, Hartmann advocated a “pluralist” aesthetic that would enable photography to promote its distinctive identity and language as a new medium and art. Lauren Kroiz explains how Stieglitz navigated between these two stances before finally embracing Hartmann’s “straight” vision, which, ultimately, led to the dissolution of the Photo-Secession in the mid-1910s.
- 4 In Chapter 2, “‘The Caricaturist’s Way’: Abstraction and Constructive Miscegenation”, Lauren Kroiz analyzes Marius De Zayas’ writings and composite caricatures and the way he envisioned creativity as a sexualized process of “interbreeding” (51), at a time when Stieglitz introduced non-photographic artworks in his 291 gallery exhibits, especially abstract modern art from Europe. As Lauren Kroiz explains, De Zayas championed the combination of media as well as the mixture of races, considering hybridization and “constructive miscegenation” (56) as a model for both national identity and national art.
- 5 In Chapter 3, “The Promise of Cinema: Harnessing Spirit, Nation, and Art”, Lauren Kroiz explores Alfred Stieglitz’s deviation from De Zayas’ artistic and racial “melting pot” between the wars and, under the influence of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, turned toward symbolic, serial forms (epitomized by his *Equivalents*) with alleged universal and spiritual meaning, capable to appeal to a wide audience. Lauren Kroiz explains how the new medium of film fueled Stieglitz’s utopia of transcendence, transparency and unmediated experience, which she calls “transcultural spirituality” (100). In this chapter, Lauren Kroiz also analyzes Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler’s *Manhatta* and, more generally, addresses the vexed relation of the New York avant-garde to standardization, mass production, and consumerism.
- 6 The last chapter of the book, “The Sense of Things: Collage, Illustration, and Regional American Culture”, focuses on Stieglitz’s “last circle”, which, as Lauren Kroiz notes, was significantly more homogeneous than his earlier cosmopolitan group. The author focuses on the ways in which Arthur Dove and Georgia O’Keeffe reactivated and appropriated regional imagery from the South and the Southwest respectively, drawing on African American, Hispanic and Native American heritage and material cultures to devise new genres of American abstraction. Lauren Kroiz situates this process of cultural appropriation within a two-fold context—the revival of regional folk arts and the emergence of new anthropological theories that spatialized culture and established regional objects as significant components of the national culture.

Critical analysis

- 7 Combining contextual insights with close analyses of texts and artworks, Lauren Kroiz offers an archeology of modernist discourses by rehistoricizing the dynamics of their construction and their constant dialogue with the wider social world. With its contextual and interdisciplinary approach, its emphasis on the local, the minor, and the heterogeneous, and its focus on issues of class and race, *Creative Composite* is typical of U.S. “New Art History”. Lauren Kroiz indeed reaches outside art history, drawing on literary studies (Tony Morrison, Michael North), immigration history, and cultural history. Yet, political and institutional aspects are not central to her study. *Creative Composite* also builds on a rich pool of primary sources, since the author unearthed a great wealth of archival material from the Smithsonian Institution, the Getty Institute, Princeton University, the University of California, among others.
- 8 Although the theoretical framework of the book is not made explicit, Lauren Kroiz, however, clearly distances herself from Visual Studies, as her goal is to tackle the issue of race outside notions of “the gaze” (154, 170, 186). The emphasis is therefore laid on tracing how racialized terms and ideas percolated in the art world, rather than on exploring the power dynamics underlying the period’s “racialized iconography”¹. Lauren Kroiz analyses convincingly the parallels between race and aesthetics at the time, but the homology between media and nations sounds slightly contrived at times, while such insistence on race and ethnicity may lead to (re-) fetishizing them, which does not quite correspond to the ethos of the “post-racial” age the author mentions in her conclusion (192).
- 9 *Creative Composites* offers a revisionist alternative to earlier accounts of U.S. modernism. Lauren Kroiz rejects the idea that modernism was a “foreign importation” and a “derivative” phenomenon (186), arguing in favor of its Americanness instead. She also seeks to counter the view that U.S. modernism was strictly form-oriented, a-political, isolated from the political and social sphere (5, 15). But, above all, Lauren Kroiz departs from formalist criticism and questions the Greenbergian model and myth of “medium specificity”. For her goal is indeed to bring back to the fore the foundational diversity and heterogeneity of early U.S. modernism, which have been ironed out by Clement Greenberg’s grand narrative of “medium purity”.
- 10 As a response to Greenberg’s modernist teleology and “hierarchical segregation of media” (3), Lauren Kroiz focuses on hybrid and mixed forms (collages, assemblages) and explores intericonic, intertextual and intermedial connections. The book is richly illustrated with some hundred pictures, which form a dynamic network of visual echoes. Actually, the logic of composite assemblage may also apply, to some extent, to the book itself and characterize its sophisticated choral structure, which makes it a demanding but rewarding read altogether².
- 11 Refusing any totalizing, ontologizing reading of U.S. modernism, Lauren Kroiz focuses on specific, localized narratives, marginal voices, singular encounters, non-canonical texts and minor genres (illustrations, caricatures). Lauren Kroiz also stresses its cosmopolitan ingredients, its transatlantic dimension as well as its regional extensions, and thus offers a valuable remapping of U.S. modernism, while paving the way for a truly *transnational* perspective on modernism³. In *Creative Composites*, U.S. modernism appears less as a static theoretical abstraction than as a complex, non-linear historical

process, fluid to the point that the conceptual boundaries between “modernity”, “modernism”, “modern art” are not always clear in the book.

- 12 In spite of the difficulty of writing about Alfred Stieglitz—given the sheer bulk of scholarship on him—Lauren Kroiz manages to shed new light on the man, whom she portrays favorably, far from his reputation as a domineering, self-centered elitist. The author tends to downplay the numerous frictions and divisions within “the Stieglitz circle” and to present it as a diverse, inclusive, collaborative and constantly evolving constellation of artists, critics, curators and intellectuals with competing claims. Yet, the book does not fully dispel the impression that figures like Hartmann, De Zayas and Coomaraswamy were only mere passing satellites in Stieglitz’s grand solo modernist project. Indeed, Stieglitz’s status and role as the father, architect and leader of U.S. modernism is never challenged. And, in spite of the book’s focus on diversity, heterogeneity and the margins, the reader may sometimes get the impression that Stieglitz was early U.S. Modernism—a term that the author tests but nonetheless naturalizes—and that the art world over the period was restricted to the somewhat narrow, albeit shifting, perimeters of his club.
- 13 By questioning the Greenbergian mystique of “medium purity”, *Creative Composite* revisits U.S. modernism in the light of today’s taste for mixed media, and accommodates its legacy to new media theories. The book is original, intellectually creative and scientifically very sound, and offers new ways of envisioning and understanding modernism in the “post-medium” age (192).

NOTES

1. This is probably why the author does not touch upon orientalism or primitivism much, and leaves aside parts of the period’s “racialized iconography”, especially considering other *Camera Work* contributors like Baron De Meyer (“Study of Gitana”, *Camera Work* XXIV, 1908; “From the Shores of the Bosphorus”, *Camera Work* XL, 1912; “Aida”, *Camera Work* XL, 1912) or Fred Holland Day (“An Ethiopian Chief”, 1896, printed in 1905), for example.
2. The twelve-page index is an extremely useful tool to navigate within the book.
3. *Creative Composites* adopts a national perspective (the creation of an American art).

AUTHORS

MATHILDE ARRIVÉ

Université Paul Valéry - Montpellier III