TO LOVE THE MARIGOLD

The Politics of Imagination

BY SUSAN GRIFFIN

Photographs by Tina Modotti

from the book Tina Modotti: Photographs,
Courtesy of Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers.
See review, page 68.

IN PARIS RECENTLY I went to see a small exhibit of photographs taken by Tina Modotti. The show was in a small gallery suspended above the foyer of a large discount store known as FNAC, which sits on the commercial end of Rue de Rennes, a stone's throw from one of the few modern skyscrapers to invade the inner city of Paris (though at both ends of the city whole armies of steel and glass structures lay in wait).

Upstairs the harried mood of the Rue de Rennes rapidly peeled away. There was the startling beauty of the images Modotti made. And then the impact of her life story, described in a few terse paragraphs and illustrated by photographs she had taken, or which were taken of her — by friends, strangers, the press.

In one photograph, taken by Modotti, a line of Mexican men, mostly workers or peasants, stand staring at the camera. They have assembled at the headquarters of the Communist party in Mexico. One of them is holding a flag taken from the United States Army in that year (was it 1928?) by the first Sandinistas in Nicaragua. The moment is a victory and you can see this in the men's faces. But the camera's eye also catches a tender quality of innocence and hope, an expression one so seldom sees any longer even on the faces of any but the youngest children.

One might say that life is so difficult now, or that there has been so much violence in this century that innocence is no longer possible. But this explanation is too easy. The lives of the men in this photograph were undoubtedly very difficult and violence was palpably present — another series of newspaper photographs in this show depicts Tina Modotti as she is questioned by police just after her lover, a militant organizer, was assassinated. She was with him on the street when he was shot. He died in her arms.

Can the imagination help us navigate, individually and societally, our way through the current despair in the political atmosphere? Are there stories of past examples we can draw from for inspiration and guidance? Here, Susan Griffin attempts to enlarge the possibilities that may exist if we are open to considering imagination as a potential tool for change.

Susan Griffin is at work on a book about society, body and the experience of illness, a novel, and a volume of her collected poems.
—Ruth Kissane

Saturated with the beauty and sorrow of these images, my mood changes again as I descend the stairs. I join a line in front of the inner door of FNAC flanked by police who check the bags of everyone who enters. Throughout the summer a number of bombs have exploded in public places in Paris, one on the Metro near the Musee D'Orsay just days before I arrived. This random violence is as much a part of modern life as the busy and efficiently automated store I enter, glittering with metal and glass, offering endless racks of compact disks. Out on the street again the lone skyscraper of Montparnasse towers over me, reminding me again that this is a different age than the one Modotti recorded.

Outwardly the most obvious change is technological. Faster cars and airplanes, television, computers, email, faxes, medical miracles, buildings, even whole small cities rising as if overnight. Yet strangely, in this brave new world with its promise of every possible sensation and comfort, one feels diminished. The unapproachable immensity of the skyscraper in front of me, blotting out the immensity of the sky, appears now as an icon of an anonymous power, in whose shadow I feel powerless.

Among those who would seek or want social change, despair is endemic now. A lack of hope that is tied to many kinds of powerlessness. Repeating patterns of suffering. The burgeoning of philosophies of fear and hatred. Not to speak of the failure of dreams. Where once there were societies that served as models for a better future, ideologies, understandings, grand plans, utopias, now there are distrust, confusion, and dissatisfaction with any form of politics, a sense of powerlessness edging into nihilism.

Yet Modotti's beautiful images still speak in me, and I find it interesting that at this moment an interest in her work is revived: The eye of her camera was so fresh. Startlingly so. A bunch of roses, encountered, almost as if caressed, come alive as if never before in the frame of her camera. And it's the same with a typewriter or a crowd standing under umbrellas in the rain, her vision original, allowing one to see the familiar again in a fuller dimension. Even in her photographs of the Mexican Communist Party, one sees a layer of existence beneath theory; a desire for a better life and for justice that is radiantly evident among those she photographed. Perhaps it's precisely now, as old systems of meaning perish, that new meanings can be revealed.

In these years after the end of the Cold War, a time of the failure of old paradigms and systems of thought, perhaps hope lies less in the direction of grand theories than in the capacity to see, to look past old theories that may obscure understanding and even promise. To assume what the Buddhists call beginner's mind. And to see what exists freshly and without prejudice clears the path for seeing what might exist in the future, or what is possible.

EVEN IN THE GRIMMEST of circumstances, a shift in perspective can create startling change. I am thinking of a story I heard a few years ago from my friend Odette, a writer and a survivor of the holocaust. Along with many others who crowd the bed of a large truck, she tells me, Robert Desnos is being taken away from the barracks of the concentration camp where he has been held prisoner. Leaving the barracks, the mood is somber; everyone knows the truck is headed for the gas chambers. And when the truck arrives no one can speak at all; even the guards fall silent. But this silence is soon interrupted by an energetic man, who jumps into the line and grabs one of the condemned. Improbable as it is, Odette explains, Desnos reads the man's palm. *Oh*, he says, *I see you have a very long lifeline. And you are going to have three children.* He is exuberant. And his excitement is contagious. First one man, then another, offers up his hand, and the prediction is for longevity, more children, abundant joy.

As Desnos reads more palms, not only does the mood of the prisoners change but that of the guards too. How can one explain it? Perhaps the element of surprise has planted a shadow of doubt in their minds. If they told themselves these deaths were inevitable, this no longer seems so inarguable. They are in any case so disoriented by this sudden change of mood among those they are about to kill that they are unable to go through with the executions. So all the men, along with Desnos, are packed back onto the truck and taken back to the barracks. Desnos has saved his own life and the lives of others by using his imagination.

BECAUSE I AM SEIZED by the same despair as my contemporaries, for several days this story poses a question in my mind. Can the imagination save us? Robert Desnos, a surrealist poet, was famous for his belief in the imagination. He believed it could transform society. And what a wild leap this was, to imagine a long life at the mouth of the gas chambers! In his mind he simply stepped outside the world as it was created by the SS.

In the interest of realism, this story must be accompanied by another. Desnos did not survive the camps. He died of typhus a few days after the liberation. His death was one among millions, men, women and children who died despite countless creative acts of survival and the deepest longings to live.

In considering what is possible for the future one must be careful not to slide into denial. Imagination can so easily be trapped by the wish to escape painful facts and unbearable conclusions. The New Age idea that one can wish oneself out of any circumstance, disease, or bad fortune is not only sadly disrespectful toward suffering, it is also, in the end, dangerous if escape replaces awareness.

But there are other dangers. What is called "realism" can lead to a kind of paralysis of action and a state of mind that has relinquished desire altogether. Especially now, when the political terrain seems so unnavigable, the impulse is toward cynicism. For months before the World Conference of Women met in Beijing, an informal debate circulated among women in the United States. Alongside the serious question of whether or not one should boycott China because of its many violations of human rights, another question was continually posed. Why should we meet at all? What good will it do? The fear was that few of the agreements reached there would be implemented by governments.

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What is required now is balance. In the paucity of clear promise, one must somehow walk a tightrope, stepping lightly on a thin line drawn between cynicism and escape, planting the feet with awareness but preserving all the while enough playfulness to meet fear. For those who went to the conference in Beijing, though, something momentous occurred, not the immediate shifting of governmental bodies, but a rising of spirits, despite the odds, in the creation of a different arena, defined in different ways by women from all over the world, another possible world began, if even temporarily, to exist and this has nurtured desire and imagination.

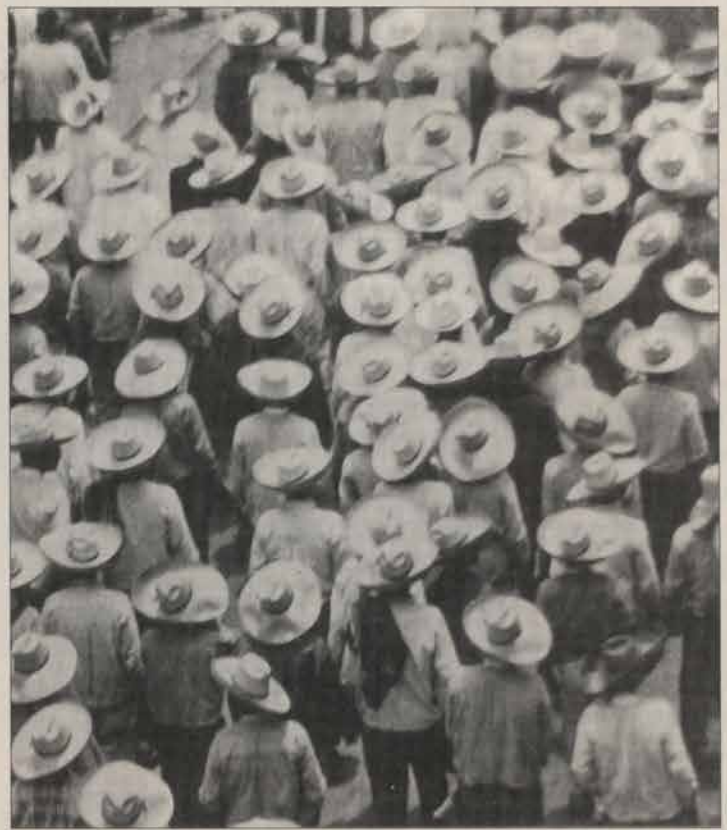
One might say that human societies have two boundaries. One boundary is drawn by the requirements of the natural world and the other by the collective imagination. The dominant philosophies of Western societies have pitted imagination against nature. The effects of this dualism upon nature are devastatingly clear. But the effects on the human imagination are also terrible. Dividing the mind from the body, sensuality, experience creates small and tortured thought from which frenetic, soulless and destructive societies have been born.

In the harsh world of the concentration camp, whose regime was designed to crush the spirit, how was it possible for Desnos to keep the larger possibilities of life alive in his mind? I find the thread of an answer in the lines of one his poems,

Having said having done
what please me
I go right I go left
and I love the marigold.

AS A POET DESNOS continually returned his attention to experience and to his own desire. Parting company with the leader of the surrealist movement, Andre Breton, when Breton began to require an allegiance to Marxist theory as part of the aesthetics of surrealism, Desnos trusted his own desire and the resonance of this desire with life more than any ideology.

It is ironic that a society that has dreamt of mastering nature would create a feeling of such terrible powerlessness for the great majority. Though for at least the last two hundred years, technology itself has been the source of a hope for freedom and equality — new machines that would free us all from labor, chemicals that will conquer disease, methods of agriculture that would feed everyone — and now the latest hope, that computer networking will somehow magically create a more democratic public arena. But what I see now, standing in this brave new world, is that this technological mandate has become more deterministic in our minds than any law of nature. In this light, progress assumes a demonic aspect, like an engine that cannot be stopped but must bear down on whoever or whatever is in its path.



Taking a poll recently among my friends, I asked them that if they were to pretend that any social change would be possible, what change would they like to see occur in their own cities or neighborhoods. Almost everyone I asked would like have a city free of cars. Their noise. The pollution they cause. The traffic. The danger. The use of valuable public space. But, as if history were implacably turned in the direction of technological dependency, everyone assumes such a change would be impossible. Yet if machines can be imagined and created, their absence can be imagined and created too.

One of the most powerful sources of inspiration for the French Revolution was desire, the simple hunger for bread. This lead to a demand for bread that required a leap of the imagination kindred to the leap Desnos took when he envisioned long lives among the condemned. In a highly hierarchical society, to perceive hunger as a social circumstance subject to change is a creative act. To see clearly is not only an act of scrutiny. The most obvious fact can be obscured by an unexamined assumption or an old way of seeing. And to free oneself from those old ways requires imagination.

This is why vision is a collective activity. The act of perception is not simply an intellectual accomplishment, it is also a psychological choice. What one is willing to see is dependent on what others see. The emotional ability to perceive, know, or eventually imagine is affected by the social atmosphere. Conversely, since what is known by the social body is woven into the social fabric of perception, to introduce a perception that has before been excluded from vision, can rend and reweave that fabric.

One of the most creative moments in the French Revolution occurred on October 5, 1789, when six

thousand women marched to Versailles to see the King. Early that morning, the market women, who had learned that there was no bread in Paris, organized the protest. A delegation of women entered the National Assembly. They demanded that the price of bread be fixed. And Reine-Louise Audu, Queen of the Markets, asked the King to sanction the Declaration of Rights.

To do this the Queen of the Markets had to imagine herself as having the right to make a demand on the King of France. And six thousand other women had to imagine that with her. One might argue that the revolution lay as much in the act of making demands as in what was demanded.

IMAGINATION IS AS NECESSARY to a social order as any legal agreement. That in America we imagine ourselves to be a democracy is crucial; even when democracy is failing. One might say that this is the problem. We imagine ourselves to be a democracy and yet we are not. When most major newspapers and television stations are owned by a few corporate conglomerates, when one must either be a millionaire or be funded by the contributions of millionaires to run for office, how can this be a government of the people, by the people, and for the people?

The answer is that such a moment does not require less but rather more imagination. For to imagine is not simply to see what does not yet exist or what one wants to exist. It is also a profound act of creativity to see what is. To see, for instance, that the freedom of public discourse is being circumscribed by corporate power requires an imaginative leap. One must begin to redefine civil liberties in the light of new technologies and consider the effect of these technologies on democratic process.

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At the same time, the act of seeing changes those who see. This is perhaps most clear with self-perception. By my perceptions of who I am or what I feel, not only do I re-create my idea of who I am but I also change myself. Perception is not simply a reflection of reality but a powerful element of reality. What is perceived has a powerful effect on those who see. Anyone who meditates has had this experience. Observing the activities of the mind changes the mind until, bit by bit, observation creates great changes in the soul. And the effect is the same when the act of perception is collective. A change in public perception will change the public. This is why acts of imagination are so important. When together women began to perceive the way prejudice against us affected our lives, a powerful social movement was born.

Like artistic and literary movements, social movements are driven by imagination. I am not speaking here only of the songs and poems and paintings that have always been part of movements for political and social change, but of the movements themselves, their political ideas and forms of protest. Every important social movement reconfigures the world in the imagination. What was obscure comes forward, lies are revealed, memory shaken, new delineations drawn over the old maps: it is from this new way of seeing the present that hope for the future emerges.

One often and with good reason fears that solitary and unique voices will be silenced by mass tyranny. Yet this is not the only danger. In a society that is atomized and alienated, the imagination is in danger

of the limitations of the ego, of being restricted to a canvas that is too small. Social movements can free the mind and enlarge the imagination. And what is also true is that, wittingly or unwittingly, one is always part of a social body. In the awareness of this participation one can experience a largesse, a widening of consciousness, a communion that brings consciousness beyond the smaller boundaries of self. As Desnos wrote: *No longer to be oneself, but to be each one.*

How is it that a great mass of people thinks? It is perhaps something like the way a wave passes through water or through molecular space. By a kind of chain reaction the way is laid for a certain pattern of thought, for certain ideas. Slowly, through countless signs, verbal and nonverbal, the unthinkable becomes thinkable. Until someone puts it into words.

It is so often the experience I have when I write that what I write, if my ear is in tune and I am working well with my craft, is always a bit beyond me, beyond my emotional ability and willingness to see. The words have to hit the air, they have to be heard, even by myself, to realize meaning. Only then can I sit in the light of them, the way that in meditation I sit and see what I am thinking. But what is astonishing in this process is that it is most often these very words which seem to precede the edge of conscious thought that readers respond to by saying, "That's just what I was thinking, but I had not yet found a way to say it."

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So many women of my generation speak of experiencing an emotional and intellectual shift before the advent of the woman's movement. The movement appeared to be almost spontaneous, like the generation of a fire from countless separate cinders lighting up all at once. But the bed of the fire was laid. Yet in every way the rush of observations and insights which occurred as part of the women's movement was dependent on the temper of the times. It was a time of social change and of creative thought about social justice. The movement for Civil Rights had a powerful presence in the national imagination. In the late sixties the Black Power movement had also, by a forceful turn of imagination, transformed exclusion into a form of strength.

Even the right to imagine had to be won. Added to the many effects of political and economic discrimination one must add the loss of this birthright. It is as if the capacity to speak of dreams, that territory of mind described by Desnos as "the extraordinary city of midnight; of half-waking, half-memory" had been captured and were under siege. To win back this city one must speak forbidden truths, challenge authority, put the occupying armies on trial. Could this be why revolutions and movements for liberation so often spark such great artistic movements at their inception?

Released from habitual ways of ordering the world, the life of the imagination can take circuitous and surprising turns. To enter the city of midnight is to engage what the philosopher Ernst Bloch calls the Not-Yet-Conscious, ideas and desires that are nascent, yet not quite born. Such ideas are not finite. Like a rain forest or any ecosystem, the process of creation is endless. And so too is the process of change. An idea that may be original, vibrant, or revolutionary at one time can become stultifying in another period. Over the last two decades the social movement called variously women's liberation or feminism or the equal rights movement has begun changing shape, even reversing an older direction. Stepping away from the clear divisions of separatism, which for a period allowed women to imagine worlds in which we were not oppressed, another transformative act of the imagination is being made

manifest now. Ideas, books, organizations, plans of action proliferate, connecting the injustices that women suffer to other forms of injustice and to a plethora of psychological, economic and ecological problems that beset the modern world of both men and women today.

What arises is the understanding that one cannot approach women's issues in isolation. Carmen Vasquez, for instance, writes movingly about the connection between warfare and violence toward women. Describing her father's return from the Korean War, she tells us how he was changed: he became a man easily angered who would strike out brutally against his wife and children. Now, one can no longer speak of "women's issues" apart from all other kinds of suffering.

My friend Odette, who is a holocaust survivor, tells another story about Robert Desnos. A few years after she heard the story of the decisive palmreading in front of the gas chambers, she saw a film by the surrealist Man Ray in which Desnos appears. The film consists of several images, connected only by loose association. After one sequence depicting a beautiful starfish, Desnos opens his hands for several minutes the camera studies his open palms. Then black ink floods from them.

So much is in this story. A nearly prophetic image. The association of a human hand with a starfish, that blessed link between the human imagination and the imagination of nature (because of course the human mind is part of nature). The ink, like blood, the blood of a wound, the expression of pain, or the blood of sustenance, of connection. Flowing outward. The ink is still with us. We have the poems Desnos wrote. And this story we repeat.

IS THE STORY OF DESNOS' spectacular success at the mouth of the gas chambers of Buchenwald true? I cannot know for certain. But the story itself keeps the knowledge of something alive in me, my belief in a saving grace. Years ago I dreamt that a ferocious man was chasing me through my house with the intent to kill me. He pursued me through the house and finally cornered me. I was terrified. But somehow I had a pair of scissors and paper, and I cut an intricately lacy pair of wings which I fixed to my body. With these wings, I flew up to the ceiling where he could not reach me.

What remains with me from Modotti's images is not just the portraits of dreams that failed but those of dreams that are still alive and of aspiration itself, that learning of the soul that never ceases.

No one can stop us from imagining another kind of future, one which departs from the terrible cataclysm of violent conflict, of hateful divisions, poverty and suffering. Let us begin to imagine the worlds we would like to inhabit, the long lives we will share, and the many futures in our hands. ❦