Hands that Talk, Eyes that Listen

By Lou Gemunden Spitta

Figure 1. Ellen Auerbach and Grete Stern, *Petrole Hahn*, 1931, Berlin.

Grete Stern's *Petrole Hahn* does more than establish a new way of seeing; it also creates new ways of thinking. The mannequin's head marks the center of the image spatially; it is also the site of the advertisement's explicit message: Pétrole Hahn oil leads to clean, bright, and elegantly wavy hair. Stern's composition of the image owes a great deal to two influential figures in her career, Walter Peterhans and Ellen Auerbach. Stern learned about the importance of technical precision and how to "see photographically"[1] from Peterhans; she later experimented with these techniques in collaboration with Auerbach, a fellow student of Peterhans' private class. Stern, Peterhans, and Auerbach met in Berlin in the late 1920s, after Stern had decided to leave her hometown of Wuppertal to pursue a career in photography. With the help of her brother, who worked in the film industry, Stern became Peterhans' only photography student for over a year,

[1] Translated by the author from Walter Peterhans' notion "ver fotográficamente."

until Auerbach's arrival in 1928.[2] Although numerous publications have credited Stern with *Petrole Hahn*, the image was originally a collaborative work between the two female photographers.[3]

The composition of the image, a single figure in front of a simple background, directs the viewer's eyes from the hair to the hair product. The photograph's exact focus on the hair, and on the bright and shiny bottle of hair oil, gives the viewer a central starting point to begin reading the image—namely the hair—and a second focal point—the hair product—so that viewer's eyes shift from one point to the next. In this way, the static photographic image gains movement and a linear narrative structure set in space. The move from hair to hair product causes the viewer to begin *thinking* about the efficacy of Pétrole Hahn; as she (or he) continues to look at the hair product and the hair it produces, thinking (potentially) leads to the decision to *purchase* Pétrole Hahn. The advertisement reveals not only the impact of Peterhans' notion of photographic vision on Stern. It also shows how Stern applied this principle and deployed it in her own way to create a legible, layered, and dialectical image. Stern's advertisement spawns a series of thoughts and questions in the mind of the consumer: I wish I had hair like that, should I buy Pétrole Hahn?

While one layer of *Petrole Hahn* promotes the hair product, Stern embeds the work with a second layer that uses a mannequin face to parody typical representations of women in other advertisements of the period. Though sexist and sexualized representations of women have continued to this day, Stern's critique must be contextualized because it relates to specific aspects of the advertising industry that have not remained the same. *Petrole Hahn* is a product of its time, and is an image dependent on the social and political environment that allowed for its creation—outside of its context, it could be totally misunderstood. The idea that photography is relative to and dependent on the context of its creation finds reiteration from Man Ray to W.J.T. Mitchell's influential *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*. In his 1935 essay "On Photographic Realism," Man Ray writes:

> That photograph, itself less substantial than the paper it is printed on, can evince a force, an authority, which, like certain words, goes well beyond the force and the authority of any material work. I understand that force as the immediate necessity for social contact, on which the photograph depends. As do words, it demands dissemination and attention from the masses without delay […] Nothing is sadder than an old photograph, nothing arouses so much pity as a soiled old print. They have tried to revive old films, admirable old films, films that had been made with great effort, and at great sacrifice; but it became clear that those films belong to a past beyond our grasp, a past impossible to bring forward into the present. And so we have to admit that a photograph, by its dependence on the social situation, is made for its own immediate age, and in the face of that obligation the photographer's personality takes second place.[4]

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[2] Luis Priamo, Grete Stern, años y obra to *Sueños: Grete Stern*, comp. Josep Vicent Monzó (Valencia: IVAM Centre Julio Gonzalez, 1995), 11.

[3] From this point onward, I will refer to the work as Stern's image so as to be concise, though it should never be forgotten that both photographers signed the image.

[4] Man Ray. "On Photographic Realism," in *Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913-1940*, ed. Christopher Phillips (New York, NY: Metropolitan Museum of Art/Aperture, 1989), 57-58.

Man Ray's declaration that photography is made for its own immediate age should not be understood as a deterrent against photographic studies like this thesis, that deal with sad "old" photographs. Instead, his observation that photography depends on the social situation in which it was produced must be read as both a warning and a challenge. Mitchell, citing the art historian T.J. Clark, notes that Clark believes we need "archaeology" to understand the modern era because the time of Benjamin, Picasso, Lenin, (and Stern) is so remote it cannot be comprehended without careful reconstruction.[5] Stern's *Petrole Hahn* therefore requires a similar sort of archaeology that takes into account photography's role in the emergence of new forms of advertisement, and the drastic changes that were occurring in Berlin during the Weimar Republic.

The mannequin face in *Petrole Hahn* acts as a single signifier with a plethora of meanings, most of which the 1930's viewer would have easily picked up on, but almost all of which are lost on the contemporary viewer. As the advertisement becomes a "soiled old print," it loses part of its message as a result of changes that occurred in the development of the mannequin. In Sara Schneider's essay, "Body Design, Variable Realisms: The Case of Female Fashion Mannequins," she cites the mid-eighteenth century dressmaker's form as the most significant precursor to the realistic, contemporary mannequin.[6] At the 1894 Paris Exposition German manufacturers introduced 200-pound wax figures with meticulously inserted real human hair, equally authentic eyebrows and eyelashes, and teeth supplied by designers who conducted business with dentists.[7] The mannequin's purpose subsequently shifted from the "pure functionality" of the dressmaker's form, used solely as a measurement for clothes, to newly created mannequins described at the time as "realistic and grotesque."[8] Thus, when the 1930's viewer examines a mannequin, that mannequin is always positioned as a development in relation to the mannequins that came before it.

While the contemporary viewer cannot distinguish between minute historical changes in the construction of the mannequin, the 1930's viewer would have considered Stern's mannequin slightly antiquated. As Maud Lavin notes in *Clean New World*, the *Petrole Hahn* mannequin is not a "high-fashion type." Lavin cites the abstract, sleek, "Art Nouveau-derided heads" displayed in the pages of *Die Dame* as counterexamples to Stern's mannequin. When Stern selects her mannequin for *Petrole Hahn* in 1931, her choice contrasts with ultramodern mannequins such as the one used in *Predilection for White—and Which Make-Up?*

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[5] W. J. T Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: Chicago, 2005), 1.

[6] Sara K. Schneider, "Body Design, Variable Realisms: The Case of Female Fashion Mannequins," *Design Issues* 13, no. 3 (Fall 1997): 5, accessed March 10, 2013, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1511936.

[7] Ibid., 6.

[8] Ibid.

Figure 2. *Predilection for White—and Which Make-Up?* 1931, Berlin.

Stern's use of the mannequin was by no means a unique inclusion among 1930's advertisement, but her decision to select an older mannequin was, according to Lavin, particularly ". . . out of place in advertising…."[9] In the 1931 Elizabeth Arden makeup advertisement, *Predilection for*

[9] Maud Lavin, *Clean New World* (Cambridge: MIT, 2001), 59.

White, the composers use a mannequin's face that looks eerily human.[10] If not for the awkwardly positioned hand attempting to grasp onto a mirror, the plastic mannequin might easily be mistaken for a heavily made-up woman. Stern's *Petrole Hahn,* however, replaces a real woman's head with a mannequin's head to parody the mannequin equals woman formulation: the contrast between the irregularly small mannequin head and the regular size human hand immediately signals that the work creates a clear distinction between human and non-human representations of women. In *Predilection*, this distinction is purposefully avoided; with makeup and cosmetics at her disposal, the ordinary woman can transform herself into an ideal. While retouching has become an integral part of advertisements today, Stern and Auerbach were among the first artists to draw attention to the inherent dangers behind the construction of a female image. Indeed, as Maud Lavin notes, Stern and Auerbach's insistence on avoiding darkroom trickery probably cost them a considerable amount of work and lowered the price they could ask for their work.[11]

Later developments in the construction and usage of the mannequin in fashion and advertising defend the validity of Stern's critique and demonstrate how the situation has (dangerously) developed since 1931. In looking at the development of the mannequin in the decades after *Petrole Hahn*, we introduce an anachronistic reading of the image only available to the informed contemporary reader. This reading is based on Sara Schneider's assertion that our "…ideas of what appears most real to us vary with the times, the technology available, and our recollection of realisms."[12] Only a decade after Stern's image, firms such as Mary Brosnan's were using specific people to sculpt mannequins. Brosnan's sculptor, Kay Sullivan, copied the likeness of "debutante or college girls" and then took ". . . liberties with her clay [to] come up with something which might be any debutante, college girl, or suburban matron."[13] Brosnan's firm thus uses a (attractive and rare)[14] human body to create a mannequin that is at once real and *exceeds* the real. Stern uses a mannequin at a time when such techniques did not exist; the changes she witnessed in the development of the mannequin, however, might have allowed her to predict the (troubling) trend towards an illusion of realism based on an unattainable ideal. Schneider asserts that "Petites [were] universally several inches taller than the women who they were designed to show clothes for…."[15] As Helen Burggraf recalls in her 1985 article "New York Fashion Designers Trim Frills From Shows," thinner and taller mannequins were created because ". . . clothes simply look better on taller figures.'"[16] When Sullivan takes "liberties" with her clay, she transforms the human form into an unattainable plastic shape.

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10 *Predilection for White—and Which Make-Up?*, 1931, New York Public Library, New York, in *Clean New World: Culture, Politics, and Graphic Design*, by Maud Lavin (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2001), 58.
11 Ibid., 63.
12 Sara K. Schneider, "Body Design, Variable Realisms: The Case of Female Fashion Mannequins," *Design Issues* 13, no. 3 (Fall 1997): 5, accessed March 10, 2013, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1511936.
13 Ibid., 10.
14 I am not suggesting that debutante or college girls are inherently attractive, but rather that the use of certain types of models—generally young, white, curvaceous but thin girls—constructs a notion of beauty that infiltrates society through the advertisement images that form part of mass culture, and that ultimately determine our entire conception of beauty.
15 Sara K. Schneider, "Body Design," 11.
16 Ibid.

Sara Schneider examines another moment in the development of the mannequin that further illuminates the problems behind the woman equals mannequin formulation. In the 1950s, people—and women in particular—were often stylized to look like mannequins; the mannequins that were deemed realistic were those that looked like models who themselves happened to look like mannequins.[17] When Christian Dior introduced his ultra-feminine full-skirted New Look, Schneider cites the mannequin historian Marsha Bentley Hale, who writes: "Live models appeared to emulate mannequins rather than in reverse. With 'wasp' waists and emphasized busts [and padded hips], they took on mechanical poses similar to plastic dolls with rounded shoulders."[18] Only twenty years after Stern created *Petrole Hahn* the conflation between woman and mannequin was already complete. In the 1970s and 1980s, the mannequin and the model occasionally co-inhabited the storefront display; live models posed alongside their mannequin dolls with, Schneider notes, the ". . . explicit intention of confusing the viewer and making him or her wonder which of the two was the model, and which was the mannequin."[19]

The conflation between model and mannequin becomes dangerous when develops into a cultural norm. Since mannequins are created using a mold in a factory, a single, homogenous size is reproduced until it is ubiquitous. When storefront designers wished to display larger sized clothes, they ". . . stuffed wadded tissue paper into the bust and hips . . ." to add mass to the mannequin's frame.[20] Thus, the normative size became a thin one and all other sizes were mere modifications.[21] Given that men dominated the fashion and advertising industry, the creation of a normative size should be viewed as sexist; indeed, when the Greneker Company employee Martha Landau asked the new head of design to manufacture a half-size mannequin, he responded: "Inside every fat woman is a thin woman trying to get out."[22] In the unnamed head of design's distasteful comment, a purely aesthetic norm is enforced; the ideal woman becomes the standard of beauty, and so, the aesthetic construction of the mannequin has serious ethical ramifications.

Stern's message in *Petrole Hahn* gains considerable force when viewed from the present moment, where the advertising industry's methods have become more deceptive, scientific, and effective. In Betty Friedan's 1963 *The Feminine Mystique*, she cites Ernst Dichter, the Austrian-American psychologist and marketing expert who has become known for applying Freudian concepts to consumer behavior. Dichter articulates an argument that originated around the same time as Stern's 1930's work: "Since buying is only the climax of a complicated relationship, based to a large extent on the woman's yearning to know how to be a more attractive woman, a better housewife, a superior mother, etc., use this motivation in all your promotion and advertising."[23] Dichter's work comes after Stern's *Petrole Hahn*, but Stern would certainly have been familiar with the basic notion of seducing the consumer; indeed, even though Dichter and others made advertising a psychological science by creating focus groups, the agencies Stern worked for would have already been seeking to attract the consumer through seductive images.

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[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid., 16.
[20] Ibid., 11.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ellen Lupton, *Mechanical Brides: Women and Machines from Home to Office*, ed. Maud Lavin and Nancy Aekre (New York, NY: Princeton Architectural Press, 1993), 48.

As a consumer of her own, Stern would inevitably have come across advertisements that sought to attract the viewer. Dichter's comment, though it arrives decades after *Petrole Hahn*, shows how quickly the advertisement industry evolved (or devolved) from its humble beginnings in the 1920s into a dominant cultural force that sought (and seeks) to control and manipulate consumers.

During the late 1920s, advertising made women its primary market of address; as Ellen Lupton notes in *Mechanical Brides: Women and Machines from Home to Office*, women were responsible for ". . . buying, using, cleaning and maintaining consumer goods." [24] Photography's potential to convince the (predominantly female) consumer did not go unnoticed. Herbert Moldering, looking back at photography's development in "Urbanism and Technological Utopianism: Thoughts on the photography of Neue Sachlichkeit and the Bauhaus," writes that the ". . . invention of photography had coincided with a period of a fully developed commodity production…. Photography, itself a commodity, steadily increased the range of commercial economy by bringing into circulation reproductions of objects that were not otherwise available."[25] Moldering's comment connects cultural change with aesthetic and structural developments occurring simultaneously in photography. Stern's commercial work took part in the rapidly changing advertising industry; in fact, the early development and experimentation within the industry made her work possible.

Photography became a central part of the advertising industry during the period between the two world wars.[26] Advertising agencies, journals and newspapers wanted photographic images to accompany their text.[27] Stern's work promoting Pétrole Hahn was a direct result of the companies' desire to produce a brand image; advertisement became a necessary expense that insured a company would be known, and that it would continue to be successful. With improvements in the quality of printing presses, papers, and inks, photographs acquired greater brilliance and clarity.[28] According to Naomi Rosenblum, photographic advertisements replaced graphic images in part because photography had an ". . . element of surprise and the power to carry conviction."[29] If prior to this period photography had been an art, had been used as a record keeper, or had been a private hobby, in the 1920s and 1930s photography rapidly became an economically viable profession. Throughout the interwar period, machine-made objects were regarded with a sense of pleasure and awe.[30]

The interest in the new, the modern, and the scientific, had a profound impact on the subject matter of photography. The camera, as a machine object that mechanically reproduces, became a beautiful object. Romantic photographs of factories, automobiles, airplanes, and new machinery were in high demand. In the same essay where he famously proclaimed, "the illiteracy of the future will be ignorance of photography,"[31] László Moholy-Nagy wrote: "The appeal of

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[24] Ellen Lupton, *Mechanical Brides: Women and Machines from Home to Office*, 7.
[25] David Mellor, ed., *Germany The New Photography 1927-33* (United Kingdom: Arts Counclin of Great Britain, 1978), 87.
[26] Naomi Rosenblum, *A History of Women Photographers*, 115.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid.,139.
[30] Ibid.,139.
[31] László Moholy-Nagy. "Photography in Advertising," in *Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913-1940*, ed. Christopher Phillips (New York, NY: Metropolitan Museum of Art/Aperture, 1989), 91.

what is new and still unused is one of the most effective factors in *advertising*; therefore it is appropriate, even from the most superficial point of view, to include *photography* in advertising."[32] Moholy-Nagy defines the relationship between photography and advertising in terms of what is "new," and what is "effective." In doing so, he is quick to recognize that certain aspects of photography make it a perfect medium for advertising, and that the connection between photography and advertising would only strengthen with time.

The representation of women in German advertisement was problematic for numerous reasons. While the German advertising trade journal *Gebrauchgraphik* estimated that women bought over 85 percent of all commodities in 1932, women were represented as idealized, machine-made commodities in the same images that sought to attract (and indeed necessitated) the female consumer.[33] In Maud Lavin's *Cut With the Kitchen Knife: The Weimar Photomontages of Hannah Höch,* she notes that the transition of young women to modern roles was an uneven process.[34] German mass culture's representation of the newly modern woman thus became a series of unfixed, contradictory images. Mass culture's conflicting representations of the New Woman was in large part a response to vast political changes occurring in the Weimar Republic. With the decline of birth rates after the War, women not only gained the right to vote in 1918, but they also fought their way into the workplace.[35] These younger, independent, and economically vital women were called New Women.[36] New Women were more likely to be working for a wage, to have had an illegal abortion, to have moved or be living in a city, and to be married.[37]

Stern's critique in *Petrole Hahn* gains considerable force precisely because it inserts itself into a cultural debate that occurs within mass culture; her image (at least initially) does not constrict itself within the museum-space of "high" art. According to Lavin, mass culture became ". . . a site for the expression of anxieties, desires, fears, and hopes about women's rapidly transforming identities."[38] Conservatives met these changes with harsh opposition, because they feared women outside the home and in the workplace. Lavin cites Atina Grossman, who notes that the New Woman was "a much abused and conflated image of the flapper, young stenotypist, and working mother."[39] Women gained the right to vote in 1918, but politically they remained subordinate to men; first, because the Reich's criminal code of 1871 criminalized abortion and the publicizing of contraception and, second, because the civil code of 1900 granted husbands the right to make all decisions in married life, including those regarding a wife's work.[40]

While women dominated consumption they appeared in advertisements either as mannequins, as highly romanticized drawings, or, through heavily retouched photographs; today an anti-capitalist advertisement seems a contradiction in terms, but during the 1920s and 1930s advertisement was in its earliest stages and still allowed for experimentation. *Petrole Hahn* is an

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[32] Ibid., 87.
[33] Maud Lavin, *Clean New World*, 50.
[34] Maud Lavin, *Cut With the Kitchen Knife: The Weimar Photomontages of Hannah Höch* (New Haven: Yale, 1993), 1.
[35] Maud Lavin, *Clean New World*, 51.
[36] Ibid.,
[37] M. Teitelbaum, ed., *Montage and Modern Life, 1919-1942* (Cambridge: MIT, 1992), 55.
[38] Maud Lavin, *Cut With the Kitchen Knife*, 2.
[39] Ibid., 4.
[40] Ibid.

anti-capitalist advertisement that Stern and Auerbach successfully sold to Pétrole Hahn, the shampoo and beauty product company. The advertisement can be considered anti-capitalist because, while selling a product, it simultaneously criticizes the objectification and representation of women in other advertisements. As such, *Petrole Hahn* doesn't attack the actual product, but the system of representation—and psychological manipulation—used to market that product. Founded in 1885 by Genevan pharmacist Charles Hahn, Pétrole Hahn was first bought by Proctor and Gamble in 1985, and then bought again by the French company Eugene Perma in 1998, which recorded sales of 110 million dollars in 2011.[41] At the time when Stern and Auerbach received the commission to produce the advertisement, however, Pétrole Hahn was only just beginning to produce and propagate a brand image.[42] The mannequin's shiny hair in *Petrole Hahn* was meant to demonstrate the effectiveness of the oil product being sold.

Comparing *Petrole Hahn* with Stern's other commercial images highlights how she repeatedly returned to her social critique in a number of works. The *Komol* advertisement uses a similar system of layering to comment on how other agencies of the period constructed a false female identity through their advertisements.

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[41] Dominique Charton, "Hahn Oil: 100% Made in Reims," *Les Echos* (France), August 2, 2012, accessed February 6, 2013.

[42] While Eugene Perma has a small collection of Pétrole Hahn advertisements in the company museum, my efforts to track down Stern's image through the company that commissioned it were unsuccessful.

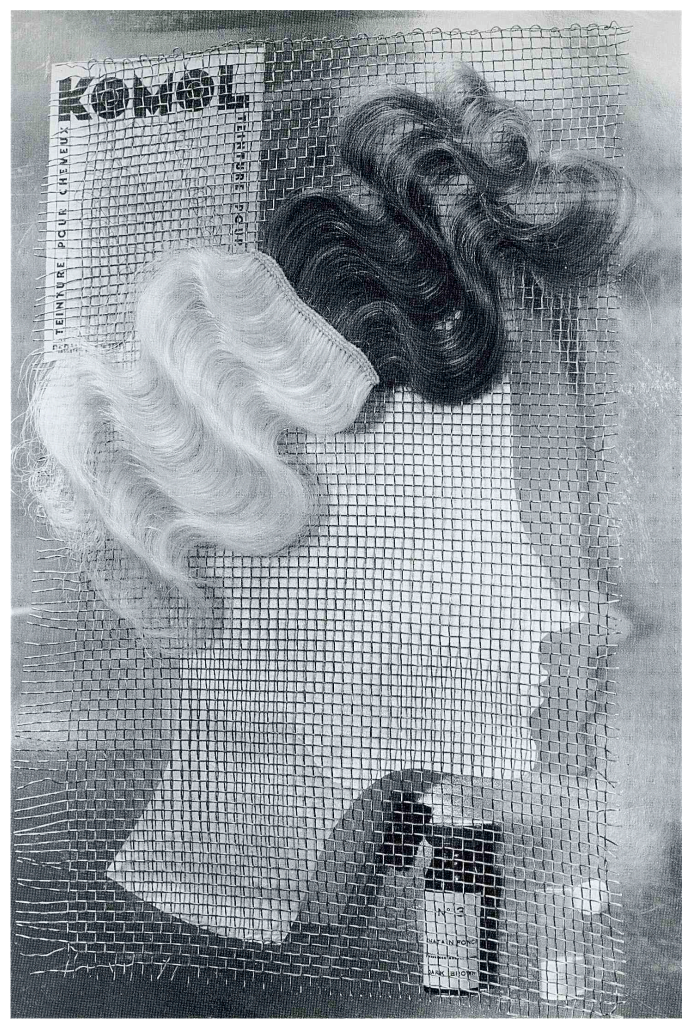

Figure 3. Grete Stern and Ellen Auerbach, *Komol,* 1932, Berlin.

Once again, Stern's composition remains simple and economical. In lieu of a mannequin or a model, Stern simply attaches hair onto a screen, places a cardboard silhouette behind it, and uses specific lighting to add another portrait of the head. The contrast between the metal screen and the soft and wavy hair works well to promote the efficacy of Komol hair lotion; simultaneously, the juxtaposition between the cardboard silhouette and the silhouette's shadow signals a divide between various representations of women—*this* woman, with the help of Komol, transforms into the beautiful, shadowy idea of what a women should be.

According to Maud Lavin, during the depression German advertising promoted a vision of a technological utopia.[43] Advertisements propagated the notion that the consumption of new, massed produced commodities would improve the lifestyle of the consumer. While today this representation of commodities feels familiar, it originated during the early stages of photographic advertisement. In Germany, in the United States, and in other European powers the machine and its products were represented as reassuring instruments of security and control.[44] The vision promoted by German advertising was so idealized that an advertisement page rarely included a

[43] Maud Lavin, *Clean New World* (Cambridge: MIT, 2001), 50.
[44] Ibid.

photograph that was not heavily retouched, and almost no advertisements were composed with only a single stand-alone photograph.[45] Advertisements of the period began to photographically idealize the female body by using retouched images that moved the human body into an inhuman domain. Many of these images are difficult to read from the present moment in part because advertisements today are so different, but also because looking back these older advertisements appear comical—although they were never intended to illicit laughter.

Figure 4. *The Woman as Mother*, 1929, Berlin.

Petrole Hahn's anti-capitalist and social critique becomes most visible when the advertisement is compared to *The Woman as Mother,* another advertisement of the period.[46]

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[45] Ibid.

[46] Stern's images cannot be compared to "typical" advertisements of the period, because advertising produced such a diversity of images. Having looked at hundreds of advertisements from the period, it seems that most can be divided into one of three categories: modern images

While the 1929 Pixavon shampoo advertisement sells a similar product to Pétrole Hahn, the presentation of *The Woman as Mother* immediately draws out the subtle argument underlying *Petrole Hahn's* composition. The message of *The Woman as Mother* is, by today's standards, almost comical; in 1929, however, the juxtaposition between the product, the retouched photograph, and the drawn image was meant to show how an ordinary mother—with the help of Pixavon shampoo—could transform into an ideal, or perfect mother. According to Maud Lavin, the product in *The Woman as Mother* becomes the "author of the woman's accession to an ideal."[47] Hair product advertisements today use a similar structure—ordinary woman plus shampoo equals beautiful model—but the basic formula is not as blatant. While much of the difference between 1920s and 1930s advertisement and contemporary advertisement has much to do with the difference between photography and film, one major feature that stands out in advertisements like *The Woman as Mother* is that they celebrate their ability to transform a woman into an ideal. [48] Contemporary advertisements still work in almost the exact same way, only today they try and hide the structure of that transformation a little more.

Although advertisements such as *The Woman as Mother* seem almost tame by today's standards, the (mis)representation of women in photographic advertisements was only the latest development in a troubling trend. Photography allowed for new forms of representation, but in many ways, the medium only expanded upon previous forms of advertisement that utilized stylized and sexualized drawings of women. In Germany in particular, block printing and hand drawn images remained a dominant style of advertisement even alongside photographs. The collection of *Gebrauchsgraphik* at the Cooper Union Library contains a similar amount of photographic advertisements and printed or typographical ones between 1920 and 1930.

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that were produced by avant-garde artists, hegemonic images such as *The Woman as Mother* that dominated advertising, and older typographic images produced by a printer, such as block-printing.

[47] Maud Lavin, *Clean New World*, 54.

[48] *Predilection for White—and Which Make-Up?*, in *Clean New World: Culture, Politics, and Graphic Design*, by Maud Lavin, 58.

Figure 5. *Leokrem, ca. 1930.*

In the 1930s *Leokrem* advertisement for self-tanning lotion, the image of a women lying on the ground indicates that the idealization of women was propagated by numerous forms of representation: women as a mother figure, as a sexualized object of desire, and, in this case, as a non-human, plastic commodity. With the help of *Leokrem* tanning lotion, women can transform themselves into irresistible objects of male desire. The *Leokrem* advertisement demonstrates that darkroom manipulation finds its origin in graphic representations of women. While *Leokrem* is only one work that propagates a single, sexualized representation of women, the placement of the young woman at the center of the image—much like the central placement of a product in an advertisement—instantly begins to produce the conflation between woman and commodity, woman as object.

Stern's *Petrole Hahn* is an advertisement that attempts to produce an alternative representation of women, and to construct a new type of identity. If in *Leokrem* and *The Woman as Mother* we have two different mis-representations of a women, in *Petrole Hahn* the woman

has been displaced entirely by a mannequin. Typical images such as the Pixavon advertisement sought to attract the female consumer by falsely empowering her through a representation that aligned or equated her with the commodity.[49] In opposition to this structure of representation, Stern and Auerbach remove the women entirely from their ad, thereby creating a humorous contrast between the mannequin and the product. The mannequin face not only stands in for the idealized female, but it also acts as a critique of advertisements such as *The Woman as Mother* where the photograph has been heavily retouched to look perfect.

Stern's *Petrole Hahn* can be considered radical in relation to hegemonic advertisements such as *The Woman as Mother*; but it is also radical when compared with two types of images produced by the avant-garde—those that employed artistic training towards advertisement images, and those that functioned as autonomous works of art, which were influenced by mass culture but did not circulate (directly)[50] inside of that culture. When Stern and Auerbach's *Petrole Hahn* is put on the walls of a museum or gallery, its origin as a commercial image contrasts with its admittance into the realm of "high" art. What type of image is *Petrole Hahn*, an advertisement or a work of art? The reception history of *Petrole Hahn* reveals that Stern and Auerbach thought about this question, were confronted by the opinions of other influential photographers on the subject, and received art prizes and artistic recognition for their advertising work. Although today it seems difficult to comprehend, the advertisements produced by *ringl + pit* gained the attention of the most prestigious magazines and journals at the time, such as *Gebrauchsgraphik*[51] from Berlin and *Cahiers d'Art* from Paris.[52] Their advertisement, *Petrole Hahn*, also won first prize at the *Deuxième Exposition Internationale de la Photographie et du Cinema* in Brussels.[53] Stern and Auerbach were not alone in receiving artistic recognition for advertising work. In the early 20th century, German advertisement, graphic design, and montage, received recognition from frequent exhibitions in Berlin, such as the 1925 *Advertising Fair* (*Reichsreklamemess*e), the 1929 *International Advertising Congress* (*Reklameschau*), or the 1929 *Film and Photo* (*Film und Foto*, Fifo) exhibition in Stuttgart.[54] These exhibitions, along with several publications, promoted creative advertising and indicate that the line between art and advertisement was elastic. As a dialectical and layered image, *Petrole Hahn* engages with both its original source—mass culture—and with the art world that, by reviewing and canonizing the image, transforms the work's status as a product of popular culture.[55]

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[49] Maud Lavin, *Clean New World*, 57.

[50] All images circulate inside mass culture, but some works of art, when they are placed within the museum, remain slightly outside of popular culture.

[51] With Maud Lavin's help, who found the date and issue of the one article on Stern, I was able to find and digitize the section on Stern. The Cooper Union Library in New York City contains a massive collection of *Gebrauchsgraphik*; in the February 1931 edition they have the original article published on Stern as well as a short selection of her images, some of which I have never encountered elsewhere; it is reproduced in its entirety in the Appendix.

[52] Josep Vicent Monzó, comp., *Sueños: Grete*, 9.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Jeremy Aynsely, *Graphic Design in Germany 1890-1945* (Los Angeles: University of California, 2000), 119.

[55] This argument structure comes from my reading of Perry Meisel's *The Myth of Popular Culture.*

After receiving artistic recognition for advertisement work, Stern never made any comments in relation to the issue of art and advertising; she did, however, respond to the question of photography as art. Barely two months after arriving in Argentina in 1935, Stern and her husband Horacio Coppola presented their work at the request of Victoria Ocampo, who headed *Sur* publishers.[56] Jorge Romero Brest, reporting for the magazine *Sur,* called the exhibition the first earnest display of "photographic art" in Argentina. As part of their exhibition, Stern printed out a presentation of motives, employing her skills in graphic art. The document is worth quoting in its entirety, not only because it was the first document on modern photography published in Argentina, but also because it was one of Stern's only public statements on photography:[57]

> The photographic image is the result of two actions: preparation of the shot and, secondly, the photographic process. The first action is conditioned and conducted by the photographer's free subjective activity based on precise acquaintance with the photographic process. In that first part, the photographer carries out a selection of photogenic values of the object. This selection is not mechanical. It expresses the photographer's intuition of the object as well as his understanding, his knowledge thereof. He chooses the tilt most suitable to the object, its spatial order. He determines the rate of chiaroscuros, the sharp parts, the parts that are not to come out sharp, the plastic and morphological values defining the object and the matter thereof. This subjective and free preparatory action ends at the moment of exposure. Photographic technique is an optical-chemical process whereby an image of an object is obtained with full detail and a range of shades that includes halftones. Obliterating this process, or modifying it by means of subsequent manipulation, amounts to depriving photographic technique of its specific properties. The fact that this optical-chemical process is independent from the photographer's free, subjective activity does not mean that photography as a medium for human expression is less suitable than other techniques of manual process. In a strict sense, the technical process in photography only 'verifies' the photographer's subjective representation as he faces the object. Is photography an art? As a matter of fact, photography has omitted to raise this issue: it has created a place of its own in today's life, it has a social function. The images of things and beings which photography enables us to produce, amount to a fundamentally new possibility for knowledge and expression, given its specific ability to provide detail of and to 'insist' on the reality of those beings and things.[58]

Leading art critics in Buenos Aires initially commented on the exhibition, such as Julio Rinaldini in *El Mundo* and Romero Brest in *Sur*—after which it fell into oblivion.[59] Addressing the anti-climatic impact of Stern and Coppola on the Argentina art scene, Luis Priamo (sadly) remarks that it was a suitable destiny consistent with a conservative environment where theoretical thinking was ignored.[60] Stern and Coppola sidestepped the question of photography as art, but, in

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[56] Luis Priamo, *Grete Stern: Obra Fotográfica en la Argentina*, 13.
[57] Ibid., 16.
[58] Ibid., 14.
[59] Ibid., 16.
[60] Ibid.

so doing, they failed to realize that the discussion over the issue of photography as art had never taken place in Buenos Aires.[61] Stern's rejection of the issue, while anachronistic in terms of Argentine photography, relates more directly to her work in Berlin, and to *Petrole Hahn*'s artistic recognition. Stern's language at the end of her presentation of motives indicates that her understanding of photography has little to do with a yes or no answer to the question of photography as art. Instead, Stern defines photography as a subjective representation, and as a medium for human expression that must be utilized with consideration to its respective merits and potential. Stern's stance in opposition to photographic manipulation, employed by *The Woman as Mother* advertisement, demonstrates that she, like most photographers at the Bauhaus, regarded dark room manipulation as a photographic sin, at the same time that montage was (somewhat paradoxically) celebrated.

The contrast in *Petrole Hahn* between the mannequin face and human hand forces the viewer to compare the image in relation to advertisements of the period that employed avant-garde techniques and often used montage to combine multiple objects or images. The face looks like it has been pasted onto the image, both because it is slightly small in proportion to the hand, and because of its awkward tilt. Stern deliberately avoids using montage in her advertisement work to distinguish her style from that of her avant-garde contemporaries. Stern's *Petrole Hahn* contains a message shared by many avant-garde artists of her time, but her expression of that message is unique. Hannah Höch, the avant-garde artist known for her ties to the Berlin Dada group, created vivid and destabilizing photomontages that, according to Lavin, both "…criticized and reproduced the media's representation of women in her day."[62] The short-lived Berlin Dada movement that began during World War I consisted of a "loosely federated" group of artists that displayed a shared interest in pacifism and anarchic Expressionism.[63]

[61] Ibid.
[62] Maud Lavin, *Cut With the Kitchen Knife: The Weimar Photomontages of Hannah Höch* (New Haven: Yale, 1993), 5.
[63] Ibid., 14.

Figure 6. Hannah Höch, *Das schöne Mädchen*. 1919-1920

Höch's montage represents one expression of Berlin Dada, in which she equates parts of the female body with technological objects; Lavin calls the work "a portrait of a modern woman defined by signs of femininity, technology, media, and advertising."[64] Hoch cut images from the print media and pasted them into her photomontage. Unlike Stern, Höch's photomontages used jagged and imprecise cuts to draw attention to the collision and recombination of opposing images.[65] Höch was employed by the modern periodical Ullstein Verlag where the avant-garde photographer served as a handicraft designer from 1916-26. Like Stern's work for *Idilio*, Höch took the job to earn a living; unlike Stern, Höch never had the opportunity to embed a social critique within her commercial work; instead, Höch cut out images from the periodical and put them into her (completely separate) Dadaist[66] photomontages.[67]

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[64] Ibid., 43.
[65] Ibid., 6.
[66] Lavin considers Höch a peripheral member of Berlin Dada, and notes that Höch was a much more key member in the European avant-garde network called International Constructivism, that

Höch's *Mädchen* serves as a counterpoint to *Petrole Hahn* in that both images share a comparable message, but each image executes that message in a different style and in relation to a separate context. Höch pulls her images from popular magazines and creates works of art; Stern reverses this relationship between art and mass culture by embedding her images inside the same sorts of publications Höch is inspired by. Stern's *Petrole Hahn* isn't influenced by cultural production: it *is* cultural production. Stern doesn't propose an alternative representation of the New Woman precisely because she has no space to do so; her images work from within a system of representation with rules and restrictions. Instead, Stern's images offer allegorical interpretations.[68] Her creation of the image is not an example of (high) art inserting itself into (low) mass culture; the work is itself continuous with both art and advertising and thereby destroys the falsely constructed boundary between art and mass culture. Indeed, if Stern had openly presented her own portrayal of the relationship between woman and commodity, her work would not have been bought, would not have been published, and would subsequently have had almost no viewership. Stern's ability to maneuver inside an experimental but nonetheless restrictive space distinguishes her work from that of her contemporaries and most photography after her. Stern's images perform dialectical work that unleashes them from the context of their creation; the layered narrative is a device that transforms the disposable and ignorable image into a dynamic work that occupies space and time. She slows down the viewer, directs the viewer's eyes from one point to the next, and thereby turns sight into thought. This is Stern's achievement. With her eyes she listens, with her hands she creates dialectical images that talk.

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formed after Dada broke apart. Nonetheless, many of her photomontages can accurately be grouped together with other Dadaist photomontages because of shared devices, a similar structure, and a comparable aesthetic.

[67] Maud Lavin, *Cut With the Kitchen Knife*, 59.

[68] I take the notion of allegorical interpretations from Lavin's description of Hannah Höch's work in *Cut With the Kitchen Knife*, because both artist's share a desire to create readable, narrative-based photomontages.