

The New York Times

**Review: 'From Bauhaus to Buenos Aires: Grete Stern and Horacio Coppola,'  
a Bicontinental Couple**

By Martha Schwendener

- May 28, 2015



"From Bauhaus to Buenos Aires: Grete Stern and Horacio Coppola," at the Museum of Modern Art, includes Stern's "Dream No. 43: Untitled" (1949). Credit...2015 Estate of Horacio Coppola, Collection Léticia and Stanislas Poniatowski

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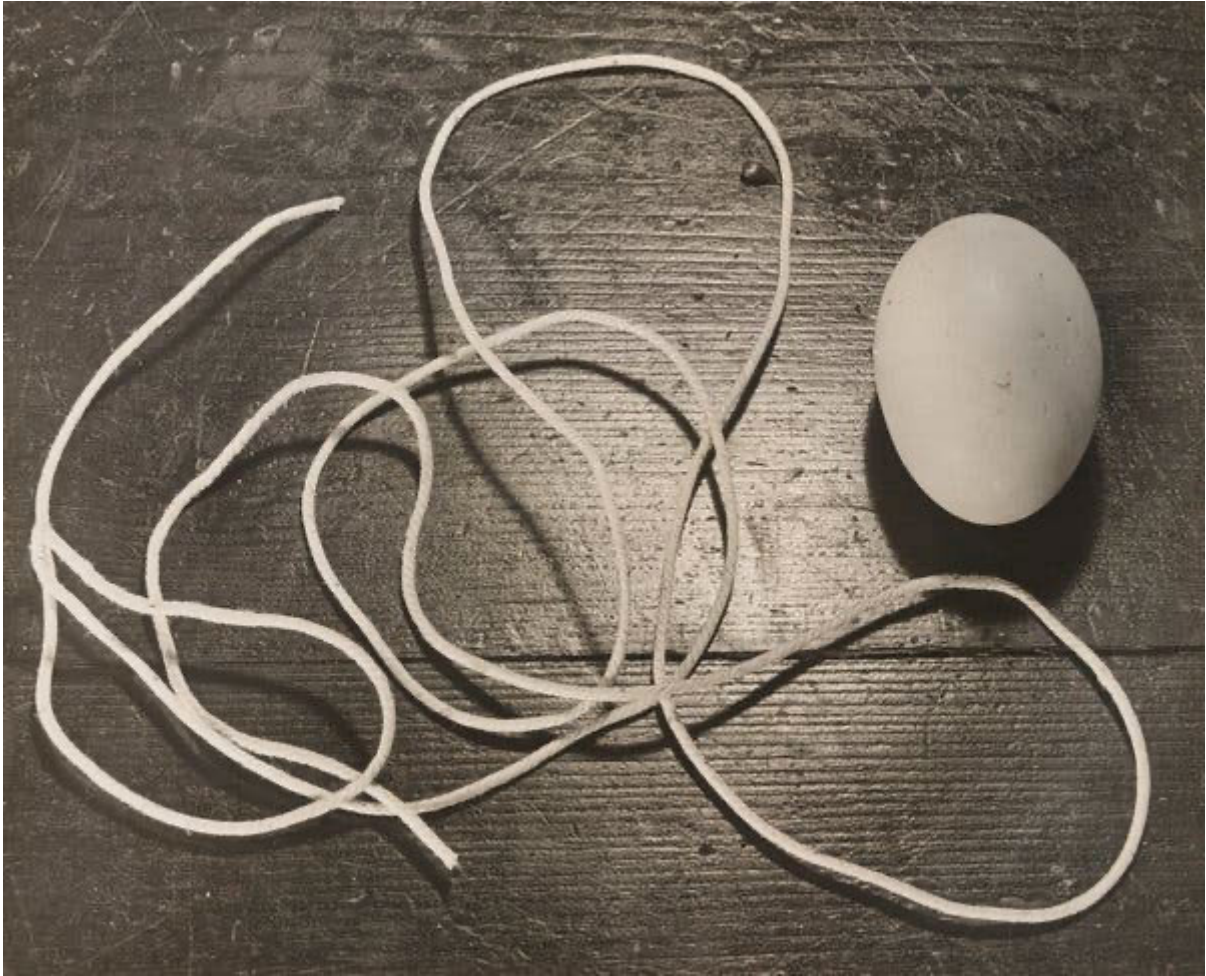
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Divided into alternating his-and-hers rooms and zigzagging across the Western Hemisphere, it's hard to tell at first if "From Bauhaus to Buenos Aires: Grete Stern and Horacio Coppola" at [the Museum of Modern Art](#) is about an artistic couple, 20th-century migration or European modernism and its diaspora. In many ways, it's about all of these. But despite more than 300 somber, high-contrast vintage black-and-white photographs, films and display cases of ephemera organized in neat rows, the exhibition is a bit of a hot mess.

It starts with photographs of Buenos Aires by the Argentine artist and filmmaker Horacio Coppola (1906-2012) and then turns to advertising work and portraits made in Germany by Grete Stern (1904-99), a photographer who became Coppola's wife. But wait: Doesn't the show's title suggest a trajectory moving from the Bauhaus to Buenos Aires?

What becomes clear — as much as possible, since the information is buried deep in a handful of wall labels and mostly in the catalog — is that these were fellow travelers and photographers, rarely collaborators. Stern was clearly more of a visual arts innovator, but Coppola provided the connections and the place to land during the turbulent '30s and '40s. The catalog provides enough evidence to draw your own conclusions: Stern is featured in an essay and reproductions up front; Coppola, in a separate essay at the back of the book.

Stern was born in 1904 in Elberfeld, Germany, and studied drawing and graphic design in Stuttgart before moving in 1927 to Berlin, which was undergoing a photographic revolution. Under the advice of her brother, Stern took private photography lessons with [Walter Peterhans](#), who later became the director of photography at the Bauhaus. Her most significant output in Germany was with Ringl & Pit, the advertising agency she founded with Ellen Auerbach in 1930. The Ringl & Pit work here combines art and advertising in the best Bauhaus tradition: innovative typography and layouts and photographs of products that look like modernist still lifes. After the rise of the Nazis, however, Stern and Auerbach were forced to sell their business, three years after its opening.



Coppola's "Still Life With Egg and Twine" (1932). Credit...2015 Estate of Horacio Coppola, The Museum of Modern Art, Thomas Walther Collection

In Buenos Aires, Coppola started taking photographs around 1927 and going for long walks (starting in 1929) with none other than Jorge Luis Borges, later Argentina's best-known writer, who included two of Coppola's photographs in a 1930 book. Much of Coppola's work in this show consists of cityscapes and street views, either of Buenos Aires or European cities, which resemble at different moments the work of Eugène Atget or American modernists like Walker Evans or Paul Strand.

Coppola went to Europe for the first time in 1930; in 1932, he returned and studied at the Bauhaus in Berlin — and met Stern. His photographs changed. He became more technically proficient and started incorporating oblique angles and aerial views, like the Russian Constructivists or Laszlo Moholy-Nagy. His Bauhaus studies depicting eggs, feathers or twine are interesting, if not revolutionary.

In 1935, the couple married and moved to Buenos Aires, where they entered (or for Coppola, re-entered) a world of artists and intelligentsia. Stern made portraits

of their friends and acquaintances, including Borges and the poet Pablo Neruda, when he visited town in 1945. Very little information about Stern's sitters is included in the exhibition, which is disappointing since some of them were involved in the international anti-Fascist movement or early versions of feminism, like the playwright Amparo Alvarado and the abstract painter Manuel Ángeles Ortiz, whom Stern photographed in 1943 after his internment in a concentration camp during the Spanish Civil War.

She also photographed members of *Madí* (from the first two letters of the words "materialismo dialéctico"), who were committed to abstraction as an antidote to the propaganda disseminated by Juan Perón. One of Ms. Stern's best-known works, on view here, is the "Photomontage for *Madí*, Ramos Mejia, Argentina" (1946-47), which she made for the second issue of their journal. For the images, she used the "M" from a neon sign advertising Movado watches and superimposed "*Madí*" over the obelisk designed by Alberto Prebisch to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Buenos Aires. The obelisk symbolized, for her milieu, abstract geometry.

Stern and Coppola divorced in 1943, and the exhibition ends with work from the late '40s and early '50s. One of the best rooms in the show features "Dreams (Sueños)," the surrealist photomontages that Stern published in a women's magazine from 1948 to 1951 to illustrate a column on psychoanalysis. Campy, vivid and weird, the montaged images often featured the couple's daughter, Silvia Coppola, and demonstrated the popular fascination with psychoanalysis in Argentina during that period, but also the fears surrounding repression by the Perón dictatorship. Others are vaguely feminist, like "Dream No. 1: Electrical Appliances for the Home" (1949), in which a woman serves as the base of a lamp, with a man's hand reaching around to switch her on — or off.

The catalog contends that Grete Stern and Horacio Coppola created a stunning body of work, but the show argues, in many ways, for two discrete bodies of work. What might have been accomplished instead of trying to insert two lesser known figures into the canon is to highlight what's really interesting about their lives and careers: that they — and particularly Stern — were migratory and interdisciplinary, harbingers of the kinds of artistic practice we see today in which commerce, parenthood and politics can no longer be elided, and so they become part of the work. The museum could have showcased their work along with that of their friends and compatriots, from Bauhaus to Buenos Aires, from the literary world to the poets, writers, activists and psychoanalysts with whom they interacted and not just as mute players in this narrative. Now that would have been an extraordinary show.

A version of this article appears in print on **May 29, 2015**, Section C, Page 26 of the New York edition with the headline: A Bicontinental 1930s Couple Ahead of Their Time. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)