



Otto Steinert

Monika, 1950

gelatin silver print 23.5 x 16.3 cm

It is a yearning for a place

Andrew Berardini

A place with a boyish woman, hair-sheared over a soft face with sharp eyes. Short pants and sensible shoes, that sweater almost prim, but she wears it all with striking poise. A new New Woman returned from the shadows with all the lost abstractions. Her delicate frame shoulders an indomitable spirit, a rejection of convention. In her pose, a manifesto.

A place to experiment with life, politics, art, photography into abstraction. A place of long arguments over coffee then booze until dawn, mouths ashen with endless cigarettes. Intellectual rigor makes for physical hunger, and the arguments end with fierce and lonely fucking on cheap mattresses shifting on the worn floorboards. It is a fourth-floor walk-up to a cold-water flat, the rubble of a world war still being cleared, bodies still being counted. It is the memory of those hardships, of lost freedoms regained, the belief in what can be possible and the shame of what has passed, of the hard poverty of a broken nation not yet mended. The renewal of lost avant-gardes, of the way that a lens can tangle light in a photograph, to unfix it, to capture the energy of its making, the fracture of time normally only fixed in that instance.

While the rest were chasing decisive moments and fashion spreads, here there was no singular moment but moments overlaid. The long shutter of a shifting present, a material experimentation begun by Man Ray and Moholy-Nagy, dropped and temporarily forgotten in the horrors of dictatorship and air raids. A doctor, Otto Steinert, trying to find a picture, a voice, a way to heal the traumatic snap in black-and-gray shadows, in the silvery white of a silver print that makes everything look precious and ghostly.

Monika, Otto, this picture they made together. Here's a place they could be artists, make something new.

I dreamed of this place in my teenage bedroom, hemmed in by eggshell walls pinned with snapshots of punk priestesses, existentialist novelists, feminist intellectuals, snatches of poems and song lyrics scrawled with pencil on the doorpost, taped-up pages torn from art history textbooks of cubist wonders and blue Marilyns. I read about places like this one in biographies and histories, terse novels and ecstatic poetry—of gangs of artists in scenes quivering with life, of places of inclusion for weirdos and refugees, queer souls and brown bodies, for women, for identities whose names I did not then know but recognized in the wild, brave flapping of their freedom like bright flags caught in a ferocious wind.

From that teenage bedroom, I dreamed of women like Monika, of female power and desire marked by confidence, vision, and audacity. Of an artist's studio, a work hanging just so, and a student, a lover, a friend sitting still long enough for a picture to take shape, for a memory to coalesce with light, for a moment, a person, a dream of what art and life could be, burned into paper.