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Fundació "la Caixa"

"la Caixa" Foundation brings together in Lleida 84 photos previously unpublished in Spain from one of the last survivors of 20<sup>th</sup> century *avant-garde* movements

## ***Ellen Auerbach. The intuitive look***

Berlin, Tel Aviv, London and New York. Four milestones in the career of Ellen Auerbach (Karlsruhe, Germany, 1906). At nearly 100, the photographer is one of the last survivors of 20<sup>th</sup> century *avant-garde* movements. Her oeuvre, never shown retrospectively in Spain, is presented in Lleida with the title *Ellen Auerbach, The intuitive look*. The showing, organised and produced by "la Caixa" Foundation, is a collection of 84 black and white photographs (with a few colour exceptions) which invite viewers to delve into the immense career of Ellen Auerbach; starting in 1929, when she decided to make a break with her past to work as a photographer in Berlin, to the 1960's. This chronological journey is marked by the four cities where she did her work. Closing out the exhibition is a fifth section devoted to her travels in the 1946 – 1959 period: Majorca, Mexico, Argentina, Greece, etc. The showing is the result of a research effort that brought unpublished works to light, with the invaluable aid of the artist herself. These photos belong to Ellen Auerbach, and are deposited as a legacy in Berlin's Akademie der Künste.

*Ellen Auerbach. The intuitive look*, organised by Mercedes Valdivieso, can be visited at the Lleida's "la Caixa" Foundation Centre Social i Cultural (Blondel, 3), from 14 February to 20 April, 2003.

The work of Ellen Auerbach is present in major international collections such as New York's Metropolitan Museum, the Yokohama Museum of Art and the Berlinische Akademie. Her pictures have also been shown in countless exhibitions in Germany, the United States, Canada, Mexico, etc. Nevertheless, her photography has never been shown in Spain, except for the photos that formed part of the 1995, *Female Photographers in the Weimar Republic (1919-1933)* exhibition, held in the "la Caixa" Foundation's Sala Catalunya. The retrospective showing *Ellen Auerbach. The intuitive look* now offers a global view of this prolific artist's work for the first time in Spain.

The exhibition's chronological course is broken down into five ambits: her Berlin beginnings (1929-1933), the later flight to Palestine (1933-1935) the break taken in London (1935-1936), the definitive leap to New York (1937-1959) and the many trips that she took between 1952 and 1965. Except for the photos taken between 1955 and 1956 in Mexico with photographer Eliot Porter, plus a number of experimental pictures, all of the photographs exhibited are black and white.

### **Berlin beginnings**

1929 is a landmark year in Auerbach's biography. Determined to make a living as a photographer, the small-town youth decided to take her chances in Berlin. The city not only gave her a taste of new freedoms that the Weimar Republic bestowed upon women (access to universities and freedom of choice in professions), but also helped her break away from the bourgeoisie conventions that tied her down as a woman and a Jew. She became a student of Walter Peterhans, forerunner of Germany's "new photography". Though brief (Peterhans had to relocate to Dessau to teach in the Bauhaus), this education was decisive in her photography career. Grete Stern, also a student, acquired photographic equipment from Peterhans, and with a simple "Fancy sharing the studio with me?" invited Auerbach to become her partner and friend.

Their childhood nicknames of Grete (*Ringl*) and Ellen (*Pit*) gave way to the name *Ringl+pit*, for a studio specialised in advertising photography. In 1933, the photograph entitled *Komol*, taken to advertise a hair lotion of the same name, took first place in the Deuxième Exposition Internationale de la Photographie et du Cinéma in Brussels. But the incipient careers of Auerbach and Stern were soon stymied by Adolph Hitler's rise to power as chancellor in 1933. The two women, of Jewish origin and with left-wing ties, found themselves obliged to leave Germany permanently.

The exhibition features several innovative pictures from the *ringl+pit* period, the fruits of the two partners' teamwork. Along with the award-winning *Komol*, photos such as *Pétrole Hahn* (1931), a parodial take on the image of the 'new woman' portrayed in advertising, *The corset* (1929), *Columbus' egg* (1930) and *Head and gloves* (1930), among others. If Grete Stern was more interested in experimental photography and the formal placement of her subjects, Ellen Auerbach had more of a bent for portraying femininity and criticising the female stereotype shown in advertising and cinema. She was behind the groundbreaking concepts and the humorous, self-parodying nuances that give such a special feel to many of the *ringl+pit* photographs.

### **Flight from Berlin**

Ellen Auerbach arrived in Palestine in December, 1933, without the slightest idea as to what her personal and professional future would hold. She soon found work for the Jewish National Fund (KKL) and the Women's International Zionist Organization (WIZO), but commissions aimed at promoting a Jewish state in Palestine were far from the photographer's interests. The Arab revolts of 1935 caused the Ishon studio, the child photography operation founded by Ellen and Walter Auerbach shortly beforehand, to falter. As a result, they decided to leave the country. Palestine made for a radical split from the work done in Berlin. If the *ringl+pit* pictures could for the most part be considered studio work, focused on representations of identities, with their emigration, such criteria took on a secondary importance. The photographer became an "open window" to the reality of the outside world. This is what she sought to capture on film in her travels through various countries and cities.

Like many German exiles, for Auerbach London was merely the last stopping place from which to abandon Europe *en route* to the United States. In the British capital, Ellen Auerbach met the likes of Bertolt Brecht, also an exile, whom she had the opportunity to photograph (two of the pictures are exhibited in Lleida). In 1937, she married Walter Auerbach, who had long been her companion, as a prerequisite for emigration to the US. In New York, she earned a living by continuing her work as a child photographer. She and her husband entered the so-called New York School circles (the exhibition also features a photograph of an as-yet-unknown Willem de Kooning with wife Elaine).

In the mid-1940's, Ellen Auerbach and her husband separated. Until the 1960's, her life was marked by an uprooted sort of restlessness. The photographer took several trips with fellow photographer Eliot Porter to Mexico, Argentina, Colombia, Greece,

Majorca, etc., all of which are documented in this exhibition. Toward 1965, she was forced to permanently abandon photography, taking work as a child therapist for subsistence.

Along with the photographs of landscapes and nature scenes, the exhibition holds a collection of interior, architecture and street life pictures. There are also personal studies and portraits. The photographs taken by Ellen Auerbach are not “constructed” (except for those taken for advertising purposes in the 1930’s). They are images that the artist “encounters” in her environment, managing to catch them at just the right time to make them visible. Her work and attitude toward life make up a whole: “I belong to the people who seek something. (...) I’ve noticed that I’m seeking something and I’ve also noticed that it’s hidden (...). It’s nothing specific. And when I find it somewhere, I’m happy.”

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From 14 February to 20 April, 2003

**“la Caixa” Foundation Centre Social i Cultural**

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### **Hours:**

Monday to Saturday, from 10 am to 1 pm and 5 pm to 8 pm

Sundays and holidays, from 11 am to 2 pm

**Free admission**