Gertrude Käsebier, Photographer: The New Woman in Black and White

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Abstract:

This essay makes a case for remembering and celebrating the advances in the art of photography and in social attitudes alike that were made by Gertrude Käsebier (1852-1934). Although she was forgotten by the time of her death, and her body of work is still underappreciated today, she was an innovative and important artist whose representations of women in particular were groundbreaking – never more so than in a self-portrait published in 1900 in Alfred Stieglitz's magazine, *Camera Notes*. There she created an image that looked ahead in both its technique and its unsparing self-representation to the art of modernist figures such as the painter Frida Kahlo, as well as the photographer Lee Miller. Käsebier's powers of intense observation, along with her readiness to empathize across the lines of race and class, may owe something to her lifelong struggles with hearing loss. As a turn-of-the-century woman photographer and, moreover, as one with a disability, Käsebier lived and worked in ways greatly ahead of her time.

Keywords: photography, New Women, portraiture, disability, lesbian, modernism.

When Gertrude Käsebier died in 1934 at the age of eighty-two, the New York art world, which she had inhabited from the 1890s onward, scarcely took note. In the eyes of those on the avant-garde scene, her death represented merely the passing of a woman who was, in all senses of the word, old. The photographic processes she favored, involving materials such as platinum paper, and the images she fashioned, which featured women in ankle-length dresses and men in high collars, had alike been consigned to the past. In the year of her death, the modernist community was abuzz instead with the stir created by an opera, *Four Saints in Three Acts*. With a libretto by the Jewish lesbian expatriate writer, Gertrude Stein; music by Virgil Thomson; choreography by the British ballet dancer Frederick Ashton, and sets and costumes by Florine Stettheimer, a New-York-based surrealist painter, *Four Saints in Three Acts* was designed from the start by its white collaborators to attract controversy and attention, not least because it used a singing and dancing cast in which all of the performers were Black.

Before its successful premiere in February 1934 (first in Hartford, Connecticut, then on Broadway), John Houseman, director of the production, engaged Lee Miller (1907-1977) as its official photographer. Thus, it was for Miller – the *Vogue* model who went to Paris in the late 1920s and became an experimental photographer, before returning to the U.S. in the early 1930s – that the cast members in *Four Saints in Three Acts* sat for their portraits. Though the notoriety surrounding Miller, who had posed for nude photos by Man Ray and also for nude self-portraits, seemed to predict that the photographs of the opera's Black cast might be sensationalized or exploitative, the reality was very different. The result instead was a suite of somber black-and-white images of dignified individuals, as Miller photographed the forty-four performers one by one, many of them in head shots that emphasized – as Carolyn Burke, Miller's biographer, puts it – "force of character": "Lee's portraits are empathetic. The participants are seen not as professionals preparing public selves but as friends engaged in an unusual venture" (Burke 2005, 138-39).

Where and how did this most daring of modern women learn to create such portraits? While it is impossible to prove that the direct source was Gertrude Käsebier, it is entirely possible to claim an influence – or, at least, the existence of a tradition of portraiture by women that went through Käsebier to reach down to Lee Miller. At the turn of the century, Käsebier exemplified and perfected the practice of treating groups of figures related by a common enterprise, such as the American male painters known as "The Eight," by exploring the character of each member in separate images. But the more precise antecedent for what Burke calls these "empathetic" portraits by a white woman that resisted the racial othering of Black actors was Käsebier's series of photographs of the Native Americans who had traveled East in the 1890s under the auspices of the entrepreneur William Cody. In *Buffalo Bill's Wild West Warriors*, Michelle Delaney writes about these men and their families, who were turned into "Show Indians," meaning both that they were paid performers in "Buffalo Bill's" show and that they were put on display, intended to embody an exotic spectacle for the entertainment of white audiences. Delaney explains how Käsebier invited them to her house, got to know them, brought them to her studio on Fifth Avenue in New York, and "treated the Sioux performers as friends" rather than as novelties (Delaney 2007, 16), while photographing them individually in ways that emphasized their unique personalities.

If there was a link from Gertrude Käsebier to Lee Miller – from the old and largely forgotten turn-of-the-century American pictorialist to this young modernist – it also extended through another area, in terms of avant-garde visual effects. Working alongside the photographer Man Ray, Lee Miller had rediscovered in 1929 the nineteenth-century technique of solarization – that is, the exposure of film to light during the development process – which turned the black areas of an image white and the white areas black, creating a sense of strangeness and stylization. Had Miller ever seen Käsebier's remarkable self-portrait, first published as *Portrait of the Photographer* in the April 1900 issue of *Camera Notes*? In it, Käsebier manipulated the black-and-white image to strip away details from all but her head and hands, leaving what was likely a dark background white

and reducing her clothing to an empty outline (Fig. 1). It was an image that had less in common with the realist modes of the early twentieth century than with the latter-day surrealist experiments of Miller and her contemporaries. Truly, when it came to matters ranging from racial politics to aesthetics, Gertrude Käsebier proved herself to be the newest of New Women.

But that was the problem. The very term "New Woman," which described someone at the end of the nineteenth century who was self-consciously progressive and unconventional in her social philosophy, gender politics, artistic ambitions, and way of life had fallen out of fashion. So, too, by the time of Gertrude Käsebier's death in 1934, the women who had been slapped with that label, as well as those who had proudly used it themselves, were dismissed as anachronisms – as quaint and even embarrassing figures, for having been too earnest, militant, woman-centered, and feminist. Käsebier was part of a circle of turn-of-the-century American women photographers who believed in careers in the arts for women, and who worked together to advance the interests of those pursuing them. For Käsebier, there was no ambiguity surrounding this issue; it was, so to speak, a matter of black and white.

Writers of turn-of-the-century advice manuals had urged middle-class women to earn their livings by taking up cameras and opening studios of their own, much as Käsebier did. Mrs. M. L. Rayne, for instance, began one section of her 1893 book, *What Can a Woman Do: Or, Her Position in the Business and Literary World*, by helpfully informing readers that

> There are nearly twelve hundred lady photographers in the United States. The requisites for this business are patience to continue steadily in one line, improving one formula, a preliminary education in the science of photography, a knowledge of the chemicals used, and a few hundred dollars . . . The business pays at the rate of one hundred to three hundred per cent on the cost of the material used. (Rayne 1893, 126-27)

Women such as Käsebier, however, who hoped not merely to make money, but to be taken seriously as artists, faced greater challenges. In his study of Käsebier's contemporary and acquaintance, Zaida Ben-Yusuf – a British emigrée of North African heritage who opened a portrait photographer's studio on Fifth Avenue, about ten blocks from Käsebier's – Frank H. Goodyear III sums up the difficulty of dealing with male colleagues: "While willing to accept women in the field, many believed that they lagged behind men in terms of quality of work, that they were unsuited to positions of leadership, and that their careers inevitably stagnated before being abandoned"; thus, what men frequently offered women such as Ben-Yusuf and Käsebier was a shifting and unstable base of support, or what Goodyear calls a mix of "simultaneous encouragement and scorn" (Goodyear 2008, 34-35).

In search of more reliable assistance, women looked to one another. Gertrude Käsebier was part of a network of female photographers – New Women socializing with and inspiring other New Women – that was based in New York City, but extended south through Philadelphia and down to Washington, DC. As Barbara Michaels reports in *Getrude Käsebier: The Photographer and Her Photographs*, many contemporaries – from Eva Watson Schütze, to Alice Austin, to Sarah

Sears – revered Käsebier's work and considered her a role model. She was already in her mid-forties at the turn of the century when, with her three children grown and able to look after themselves, and with the burden of a husband who shared none of her artistic passions, she set herself up as a professional in her own studio. Meanwhile, accustomed to working alongside other women at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, where she had studied painting in the early 1890s, and happy to be in their company, Käsebier generously mentored younger female aspirants. Rose Clark, for instance, "said she owed Käsebier 'any success she had with a camera'" (Michaels 1992, 64).

If Käsebier was the leader of an informal group, that group was itself a subset of a larger network loosely organized around another one of her friends, Frances Benjamin Johnston (1864-1952). Though eight years younger, Johnston had discovered camera work as a calling a few years earlier than had Käsebier. In *The Positive Image: Women Photographers in Turn of the Century America*, C. Jane Gover describes the important, though unofficial, association of likeminded professionals who gathered around Johnston:

> Many of the women involved were friends who shared artistic interests, class backgrounds, and other objective sociological characteristics. These women, through photography, tested the bonds of domesticity, found a sense of sisterhood, and sought to establish their own creative identities. In their way, they were at odds with the prevailing middle-class social expectations for women and this as much as their interest in photography defines them as a unique cultural group. (Gover 1988, 55)

Several members of this circle were at odds with expectations in another way, too, for they were primarily lovers of women, whether as intimate friends or as romantic partners. None used the word "lesbian" – or even the term more common in this period, "Sapphist" – to name themselves, but a number moved across what Adrienne Rich later would call a "lesbian continuum" (Rich 1983, 156). Some even established what were known at the time as "Boston marriages," living and working in committed relationships with other women, with whom they might or might not have been sexually involved. This was particularly true of Frances Benjamin Johnston.

Like Gertrude Käsebier, Johnston was a celebrated photographer whose success was enhanced by assignments from magazines. She was, as her Bettina Berch puts it, always quick to "peddle" a "photo feature" to an editor (Berch 2000, 77). Among these was a series for the *Ladies' Home Journal* that she edited from 1901 to 1902 of "seven photo essays . . . that showcased the talents of eight of the 'foremost' women photographers" of the day, among whom she included Käsebier (Malone 2018, 180). But Johnston also welcomed exciting commissions from individuals, such as one from Booker T. Washington in 1902, who engaged her to photograph the African American students at the Tuskegee Institute, with the resulting images used by Washington in his own journalism (Berch 2000, 65). Unconventional subjects appealed to her, for she was herself unconventional.

In 1909, Johnston entered into an eight-year-long intimate partnership with another woman photographer, Mattie Edwards Hewitt, who was newly divorced from a husband, and who had

been writing love letters to her (Berch 2000, 82-84). Four years earlier, though, in the summer of 1905, Florence Johnston had traveled around Italy, France, and England with Gertude Käsebier at the latter's invitation. Johnston's biographer, Bettina Berch, is at pains to clarify this episode, suggesting that Käsebier's motivation was mere professional ambition, rather than emotional or erotic attraction. Käsebier wanted to meet with (and to photograph) socially prominent people abroad, and "Johnston was known for her boldness when it came to getting access" (Berch 2000, 77). Another possibility, of course, was that Käsebier needed a female traveling companion by her side for the sake of maintaining social propriety, in Europe and also in New York, where Käsebier's German-born husband Eduard still had the power to exercise some sway over her actions, as well as her reputation. Käsebier may have been a New Woman, but she was one who had been born in 1852. Observing the Victorian prohibition against unchaperoned travel for ladies of the middle classes would have been second nature to her. Even so, it seems no great stretch to imagine that, in choosing to go abroad with Johnston, Käsebier recognized that she would be happiest in the company of what we might now call a woman-identified woman. During this same period, Käsebier was spending most of her working days alongside other women, such as Harriet Hibbard and Alice Boughton, who were her studio assistants at various times. She liked women, just as she liked looking at them, especially through a lens.

Indeed, she rarely tired of doing so, even when she was, quite literally, tired. Thanks to a cache of revealing, unpublished notes (now housed in the University of Delaware Library's Special Collections Department) that were written by her granddaughter, Mina Turner – many of them transcriptions of stories that Käsebier told about herself – the record survives of what happened at the end of one such exhausting day of work. With the assistance of Harriet Hibbard, Käsebier had just finished photographing a family of Chinese shopkeepers, with whom she had struck up a friendly acquaintance during her many excursions to New York's Chinatown, where she went often to eat and to watch theatrical performances. She had invited the family to visit her in her studio, and they had done so as a group, resulting in a lengthy photo session. As William Innes Homer documented in his catalogue of a 1979 exhibition of Käsebier's images, she favored long sittings with a carefully posed subject as the core of her method of portraiture. She treated sitters "much as a painter would, often working two or three hours" with each one, "until she found the most appropriate pose and the best possible light" (Homer 1979, 17). On this particular occasion, the group portraiture project left both Käsebier and her assistant drained. As Turner records, once Käsebier and Hibbard were alone again, the latter changed into a kimono-style dressing gown and sprawled in a chair to rest. But if Käsebier, too, was weary, she nonetheless had an unflagging passion for framing and capturing striking effects – particularly when they involved the representation of women – and an eye that, so to speak, never slept. According to Turner's account, Käsebier abruptly barked an order at her assistant, calling out the name "Hibbard" and telling her not to move, and then began photographing her in this pose. As soon as she had finished, she headed straight to the darkroom to develop the resulting image (Turner, Gertrude Käsebier Papers).

Several things about this story – for which Käsebier herself would have been the source, communicating it to Mina Turner after the fact – are worth noting. One is the rather blunt and autocratic persona that comes through. Käsebier was a commanding presence. She was briskly modern, rather than genteel or in any way "Victorian" in her manner, and she put the urgency of capturing a photographic moment above any polite social forms. Another is the way in which Käsebier chose to address her assistant, using her surname only. The model for this version of employer-employee relationship, at the turn of the century, was not a domestic one, of a mistress calling out to a servant (who would have been "Harriet" to the lady of the house); nor was it that of a lady milliner or other tradeswoman, whose subordinate would have been known as "Miss Hibbard." It was instead a masculine model, of men giving orders to other men, addressing their fellows as they had learned to do at school, by surname alone. When it came to her camera work, Käsebier undertook it with the same seriousness and intensity as her male peers. She dealt with women whom she trusted and liked as a man would have done with his associates, expecting them to be physically tough and selflessly dedicated to the perfection of the end result, just as she was.

In her single-minded pursuit of an image, she resembled nothing so much as her intrepid contemporaries in journalism, the so-called "girl reporters," who both emulated and competed with men, and who did so while wearing the less restrictive, more comfortable clothing styles – known as "rational dress" – that Käsebier also favored. Although she appreciated and preserved in her photographs the graceful beauty of the fashionable women around her who were corseted, ornamentally hatted or veiled, and swathed in layers of flowing white muslin, she preferred something more practical for daily life – a variation on the "walking suit" (a long dark jacket and skirt, worn with a cotton blouse) that constituted the costume of middle-class women outfitted for business in an urban world. The purpose of such clothing was functionality and mobility, while affording women an air of respectability that helped them to move through public spaces.

Käsebier's own attitudes toward class-based and gender-based codes of respectability were – especially given her mid-Victorian birth and her marriage to an unimaginative, bourgeois German man – surprisingly close to those of the most daring suffragists and other feminist reformers twenty years her junior. Her disdain for many social prohibitions came through in small and large matters alike, particularly when notions of what was or wasn't a suitable object for the camera's lens were at stake. Her granddaughter, Mina Turner, drawing upon family lore, has provided an amusing example of the differences in opinion that divided Käsebier from her more rigidly conventional husband, Eduard. One day, Käsebier chose to photograph her young grandchild, Mina Turner's brother, while he was sitting on his toilet-training chair. To this, Eduard reacted loudly and violently, insisting that it was an outrage to take an image of his grandson in such a pose. His objections, however, carried little weight with Käsebier (Turner, Gertrude Käsebier Papers).

More controversially, Käsebier exercised her right to determine what constituted a fit subject when, around 1901, the middle-aged Society architect Stanford White brought to her studio his teenaged lover, Evelyn Nesbit, who had been making her living as an artist's model and a chorus

girl. This was hardly the sort of visitor that a lady was expected to receive. To Käsebier, however, a commission was a commission and not an occasion to get on her moral high horse. The image of Nesbit that she produced was as beautiful as it was non-judgmental. In it, Nesbit, with eyes half-closed and leaning forward toward the camera *en deshabillée* – seemingly uncorseted and wearing an off-the-shoulder white dress that emphasized her unbound breasts – is no mere pin-up. Käsebier's composition draws the spectator's eye to the foreground, which is dominated by the hand on which Nesbit must lean in order to achieve this seductive posture. There is nothing idealized or eroticized about that hand. The wrist is rather thick; the fingers seem short and are splayed, in order to bear all the weight; and the muscular tension of the forearm is evident, as Nesbit holds the pose. For the viewer, the effect is of being treated simultaneously to an attractive fantasy and of being taken behind the scenes, to see the effort on which the illusion depends. This sort of modern – almost postmodern – self-consciousness and contradiction was something that Käsebier explored repeatedly, especially in her photographs of women, many of whose arms and hands strain uncomfortably as the subjects prop themselves up to place their bodies at an attractive angle. Not long after Käsebier created this photograph of *Miss N.*, as she titled it, the Irish poet William Butler Yeats would publish, in the December 1902 issue of the *Monthly Review*, "Adam's Curse" – a poem in which a female speaker explains that "'To be born woman is to know – / Although they do not talk of it at school – / That we must labour to be beautiful'" (Yeats 2000, 2097). Käsebier had already revealed as much to her male and female audiences alike, purely through visual means.

It was, in part, this extraordinary capacity to capture the appealing public image that sitters wished to project and, at the same time, to suggest the effort, whether physical or mental, that it took to maintain an illusion of surface perfection and coherence of personality, that underpinned Käsebier's success in portraiture. Certainly, her unjudgmental empathy with her subjects – the quality that Carolyn Burke would also locate decades later in Lee Miller's photographs of the African American cast of *Four Saints in Three Acts* – accounts for how and why Käsebier was able to create one of her most important series of images: her photographs of Gertude Simmons Bonnin (1876-1938), the daughter of a Sioux mother and of a white father, who wrote under the Native American name of Zitkála-Šá.

When she accepted Käsebier's invitation to visit her New York studio and to pose, the twenty-two-year-old Zitkála-Šá had every reason to be wary of an older white woman with a camera, however "New" Käsebier might have been in her social attitudes. From the time when, as a little girl, she was taken away by missionaries from her mother and from the Yankton reservation in South Dakota, to be stripped of her supposedly "savage" ways at a school in Indiana, Zitkála-Šá was aware of being the object of the white gaze. In a series of autobiographical accounts that she began publishing around 1900, she wrote openly about the pain and resentment she felt at being the victim of that unsympathetic and controlling gaze – about how, when she was a child, white children and adults alike subjected her to their intrusive, disapproving stares (or, as she put it, "riveted

their glassy blue eyes" on her), which "embarrassed me, and kept me constantly on the verge of tears" (Zitkála-Šá 2003, 87). Using journalism as her form of protest, and magazines such as the *Atlantic Monthly* as her vehicle, she made clear that this hostile scrutiny had continued, with racist misrepresentation added to it, even after she became a college student, a musician, and a debating champion. On one occasion, while participating in an intercollegiate oratory contest, she found

> There, before that vast ocean of eyes, some college rowdies threw out a large white flag, with a drawing of a most forlorn Indian girl on it. Under this they had printed in bold black letters words that ridiculed the college which was represented by a 'squaw.' Such worse than barbarian rudeness embittered me. (Zitkála-Šá 2003, 102-03).

How, then, did Gertrude Käsebier earn her trust – so much so, that Zitkála-Šá posed for the camera not only in the sort of diaphanous aesthetic costume that a white female musician was expected to wear, but in Sioux dress? Surely Käsebier's openness and guilelessness helped – that is, her readiness to make friends with almost everyone she met and to be interested in them as individuals, across the lines of race and of class, whether it was a family of shopkeepers in Chinatown or a displaced young Native American violinist, torn between career opportunities in the East and personal loyalties in the West. But there is another possibility, too: that Zitkála-Šá responded to the not-completely-hidden sense of vulnerability present in a woman who had spent her entire life dealing with a disability.

It is easy to forget the existence of that invisible disability, which was the permanent effect of Käsebier having contracted scarlet fever as a child. Mina Turner highlights it, however, in her unpublished account of her grandmother, where she describes the deafness in one ear that began for Käsebier at the age of three, but that progressed to affect her hearing in general as she aged. According to Turner, Käsebier's way of deflecting sympathy for her advancing deafness was to make a joke of it and to say she was grateful for a condition that allowed her to be unaware of and to ignore so many unimportant things that were being said around her (Turner, Käsebier Papers). Yet it was an obstacle in life nonetheless. Having spent years under the unfriendly scrutiny of white racists, Zitkála-Šá had become hypersensitive to the motives of those who wished to stare at her. She would most certainly have recognized the difference, however, between being treated as a spectacle by those who were out to ridicule or patronize her – something that was intolerable – and being looked at closely and appreciatively by someone for whom sight was, by necessity, her primary means of connection with the outside world.

Here perhaps was one explanation for the trust that a number of Käsebier's photographic subjects, men and women alike, placed in her during the lengthy sessions through which they patiently sat – especially in cases where those subjects differed from her in race and/or in class. To careful observers, Käsebier's partial deafness would have been evident through her way of turning or cocking her head and would have helped, so to speak, to level the playing field

between themselves and a privileged white woman, who could afford her own studio (albeit one bankrolled at first with her husband's money). Her condition would have excused the intensity of the gaze that she fixed upon them, especially within a social order where women in general were to be looked at, but were never supposed to look back.

As is often true, however, of those for whom daily life is more of a struggle, Käsebier turned her least charitable, least flattering regard upon herself and, in visual terms, cut herself no slack. An extreme example of this phenomenon, of course, was the case of Frida Kahlo, disabled by spinal injuries sustained in an accident, who in the late 1920s began her career in painting, just as Käsebier's career in photography was ending, with a long sequence of searing self-portraits. Käsebier, in contrast, seems rarely to have been the subject of her own work and rarely to have placed images of herself before the public, which makes even more interesting the heavily manipulated self-portrait that she executed around 1899 and published in the April 1900 issue of *Camera Notes*, the journal of the Camera Club of New York, edited by Alfred Stieglitz (Käsebier 1900, 246). Although Käsebier often used pictorialist techniques to aestheticize her female sitters, including strategic placement of the billowing, gauzy white fabrics of turn-of-the-century garments, she denied herself that softening effect, offering nothing but the barest black pencil outline of a clothed body. As Barbara Michaels describes this image,

> Käsebier's self-portrait . . . montaged clear photographs of her own face and hands to a sketchily drawn Chinese-style gown, emphatically demonstrating her philosophy that, in a portrait, the face and hands should be given priority . . . [The] combination of media would have recalled Käsebier's switch from painted portraiture to photography, while suggesting her continued willingness to keep a brush at hand to alter or enhance photographs. (Michaels 1992, 66)

I would like to end with some additional thoughts on how to read this very modern, almost abstract self-portrait (Fig. 1). First, we should note that the angle of her head is tilted slightly backwards, as though to emphasize deliberately her least beautiful or conventionally feminine feature – her prominent jaw. She had, in fact, artificially distorted the original size and shape of her lower face in real life. As Mina Turner notes, in 1872, when Käsebier was twenty-years-old, she decided to have all her teeth removed, because she wished never again to have to put herself in the hands of a dentist (Turner, Käsebier Papers). Nineteenth-century dentures, of course, were hardly the undetectable, perfectly fitted objects they are today. The cross-cultural garments that Käsebier wears in her self-portrait – what is obviously a Western high-collared blouse, combined with a loose and unrevealing coat of Asian design – both desexualize and de-familiarize this image of a woman. What Käsebier offers here makes an anti-fashion statement, denying spectators the pleasure of looking at a woman's clothes. The image also resists turn-of-the-century Orientalism, through its erasure of all details of the seemingly Chinese-style garment, which thus cannot be treated by Western viewers as an exotic spectacle. The coat exists merely as a suggestion, almost as an architectural structure, to support the unglamorized head. Its use also

makes impossible any guess as to whether Käsebier is or is not wearing a corset, which in 1900 was the mandatory signifier of respectability.

What is perhaps most radical, however, about this self-portrait is its visual questioning of *being* as a verifiable state and of the boundaries between existence and non-existence. As Mina Turner reports, Käsebier confided in her granddaughter that she had been subject all her life to uncanny perceptions and experiences, some of which fell into the realm of the paranormal (Turner, Käsebier Papers). Käsebier's self-portrait, in which she appears to be of an impermanent and indeterminate shape, evokes late-Victorian spirit photography, as it was called – manipulated images, some of them by and of women, that were produced to document psychic phenomena and to serve as evidence of ghosts moving among us in the modern landscape. Here, Käsebier is her own ghost. It is impossible, moreover, to know whether we are seeing her dematerialize or materialize, fading from sight or coming into view. Either way, Kasebier is suspended between two states.

But this is also a photograph that self-consciously reminds the audience of photography itself as a form of creation and erasure, of life and death – one that encourages its audience to think about the implications of witnessing a human image as it gradually appears and rises from the fluid bath, during the development process, or as it is expunged by the creator's hand. It seems fitting, therefore, to place this self-portrait alongside some of Käsebier's more famous depictions of the theme of maternity. In photographic images such as *The Adoration* (1897), mothers proudly hold up to the camera's lens the dynamically moving forms of the children they have borne, doing so with the pride and assurance of artists, "as beautiful objects and as evidence of their own creativity" (Stetz 2013, 46). But in this self-portrait, as in Frida Kahlo's notoriously daring 1932 modernist work, *My Birth*, in which the painter depicts her own adult head emerging from the womb, Käsebier is giving birth to herself. At the same time, with her bodily parts both coming into focus and disappearing before our eyes, in this literal and figurative vision of dissolution and development, Käsebier confronts her own mortality and corporeal impermanence – as well as the impermanence of her art form, despite its seeming fixity.

Perhaps Käsebier really was psychic, for in highlighting transience and ephemerality, her self-portrait proved prescient. Despite her great success at the turn of the century, Käsebier lived long enough to see herself and her innovative work cast aside. Once considered a New Woman, she was unjustly relegated to the category of the old guard and wrongly viewed as the antithesis of modernism, instead of as a precursor of it. Such a change in status was, of course, by no means unique for women artists of the early twentieth century. As Eve M. Kahn has described in "Portrait of an Artist," Lillian Baynes Griffin, a gifted contemporary, met a similar fate and sank into obscurity even deeper than Käsebier's, becoming "one of New York City's forgotten photographers" (Kahn 2018, 33). In the case of Gertrude Käsebier, however, such erasure is particularly unfair and unwarranted. More than merely a precursor of modernist figures such as Frida Kahlo and Lee Miller, she was an exemplar of success for all women artists who wished to forge a professional

career and a distinguished reputation while demonstrating fearless devotion to the principle of experimentalism, boldness of personal vision, and determination to cross the borders of race and class. She deserves not only to be remembered, but celebrated.

Figure 1.
Portrait of the Photographer, manipulated self-portrait by Gertrude Käsebier, circa 1899.

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