

Paul Strand, *Woman of Avarado* [Susana Ortiz Cobos, habitante del pueblo de Avarado, Veracruz, que formó parte del elenco de la película *Redes*], 1933. Plata sobre gelatina | Impresión: Sergio Puntel bajo la supervisión de Richard Benson, 2010

english texts

EL MURMULLO DE LOS ROSTROS

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PAUL

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**STRAND**

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EN MÉXICO

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# PAUL STRAND

## EN MÉXICO

New Yorker by birth, descendant of a family with Eastern European roots, resident in half a dozen countries on three different continents, inhabitant of a French village at the time his eyes were closed forever, Paul Strand Amstein (1890-1976) made of his remarkable talent for photography the best passport to become a citizen of a world without borders.

The images Strand created over six decades record their contributions to the development of photography as a propositional and transcendent art. They are also enduring expressions of how the resources of that discipline - which extended to the fields of cinema and book editing- served him to discover and celebrate his sense of belonging in a universe composed of subtle and infinite correlations. The fickle appearance of everyday objects, vegetal forms, the breath of desert landscapes, the lives of ordinary people, were topics that attracted the eyes of Paul Strand, characterized by his austerity and compositional rigor, and his desire to access the substantial.

Linked in the beginning to the avant - garde movement that claimed for photography a direct vision of reality without mystification, Strand led his work to the assessment of

landscape as manifestation of primal forces, and of portrait as a link with social memory. His first stay in Mexico, between 1932 and 1934, was crucial, for it would define the political sense of his craft as a documentary filmmaker and photographer, through which he promoted an anti-fascist and anti-racist agenda, in favor of the dignity of the subaltern classes.

The exhibition's aim is to recover the itineraries followed by Strand on the two occasions when he passed through Mexico -the second of which occurred in 1966-, documenting both the historical context in which these trips were made and the relationships that they set in motion. The double sense of these travels has ultimately been assumed: Paul Strand's trips to Mexico but also those of our country in the work and memory of the American photographer.

Thanks to Fundación Televisa's acquisition of a considerable group of works executed by Strand at his Mexican sojourns, it has been possible to reencounter this fundamental author for the history of photography, and a portraitist who, putting aside folklores colorfulness, was sensible to the rumor that transforms countenances into biographical traces, micro histories, testimonies of the egalitarian treatment deserved by all people.

## ENCUENTROS EN TAOS

### PAUL STRAND EN MÉXICO

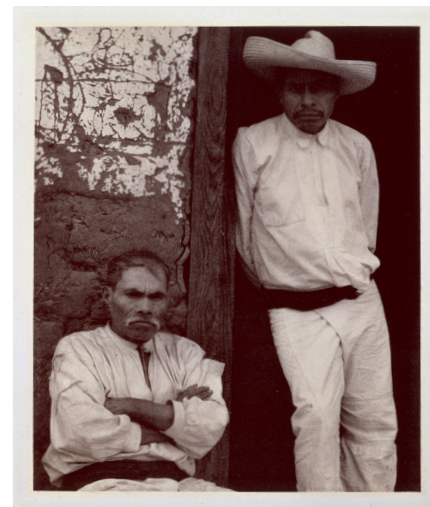
The destinies of American photographer Paul Strand and Mexican composer and conductor Carlos Chávez were mingled in the town of Taos, New Mexico, probably since the summer of 1931. In addition to being bastion of ancient Indian communities, it also housed an artistic community that traced its origins to the late nineteenth century.

It is known that in that year Chávez spent a few days visiting sites that, in ancient times, had been part of the territory of New Spain and more recently that of Mexico. Strand once again enjoyed a stay in an environment that he had known since 1926 on the initiative of his wife, Rebecca Salsbury, and where he had lived several times with painter Georgia O'Keeffe and her husband photographer Alfred Stieglitz, the great forerunner of modern American photography, who was his mentor for many years.

Strand and Chávez both were part of the roster of illustrious visitors who brought fame to Taos as an artistic refuge: Leopold Stokowski, Carl Jung, Martha Graham, D. H. Lawrence, Ansel Adams. Both, therefore, had dealings with Mabel Dodge and Tony Luján a couple that became indispensable in the artists' social gatherings.

Chávez's invitation to Strand to travel to Mexico came to the photographer in a moment of personal redefinition: the relationship with Stieglitz had cooled down creating some resentments; the relationship with his wife was heading to a break; his request for support to the Guggenheim Foundation had been

rejected; and, not least important, his ideas about photography were not the same after his eyes had been seduced by the landscapes and architecture of southwestern United States.



Paul Strand. Men of Santa Ana, Lake Pátzcuaro [Hombres de Santa Ana, lago de Pátzcuaro] Michoacán, 1933  
Colección y Archivo de Fundación Televisa

Urged for a change, at the end of 1932 Strand arrived in Mexico, the unknown country where he planned to reroute his life and photography. Chávez offered him jobs at the Departamento de Bellas Artes -a section of the Secretaría de Educación Pública- that the musician directed between 1933 and 1934, but above all, he gave him the opportunity to reflect on the social meaning of images.

# ODISEA POR TIERRA

## PAUL STRAND EN MÉXICO

According to official records, Paul Strand first entered Mexico on November 26th 1932, through Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas. The long and tiring journey that took him from New Mexico to central Mexico was made on a Ford model A. He did not speak Spanish and of the country that he was facing he only knew what he had read in some books - the stories of D. H. Lawrence -, for example, and heard in conversations with friends and acquaintances that had already visited the post-revolutionary country. Carlos Chávez was his primary contact for solving problems that involved both his transfer and the establishment of his new residence. Through the composer he met Carolina Amor and her family, with whom, after staying in a hotel, he found lodging in a home located on the street Abraham González in Mexico City.

During his first stay in Mexico, which lasted from November 1932 to early January 1935, Strand had no other jobs than those found by the initiative of Carlos Chávez at the Secretaría de Educación Pública and the Departamento de Bellas Artes. He was appointed professor of drawing, performed cultural promotion and research activities - a report on the situation of craft production in Michoacán-, and finally he was assigned a project, to use cinema as an educational and transforming tool for social consciousness, which is why he took over the Comisión de Fotografía y Cinematografía and undertook the making of the film *Redes*.

The images displayed in the following galleries - including the 20 that were selected to make up



Paul Strand. Church gateway [Portal de iglesia], Hidalgo, 1933  
Colección y Archivo de Fundación Televisa

the portfolio of photoengravings *Photographs of Mexico*, were first edited in 1940, documenting the gradual approach of Strand to a country where the old and the new were mixed, the gourds and gas stations. Perhaps the greatest merit of this approach, based mainly in making portraits of people in rural communities, is the way he set aside the paraphernalia by which a picturesque Mexico was built, during the 20's and 30's, intended to win over the gaze of tourists and serve as illustration of officialist rhetoric. There are no masks or fireworks or flowery trajineras in Strand's Mexican photography: only the evocative power of human presence and material works that speak for it, letting time accumulate and settle.

Comission of Photography and Cinema

# EL CINE Y LA SEP

## PAUL STRAND EN MÉXICO

Cinematography as a teaching tool was included in the project presented by José Vasconcelos on October 1920 for the creation of the Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP). Three years earlier, the Ministerio de Educación, precedent of this unit, had integrated into the curriculum of Escuela Nacional de Música y Arte Teatral a school subject entitled Preparation and Cinematographic Practice, of which cameraman Manuel de la Bandera was responsible.

Created in July 1921, the SEP soon installed a movie theater at its headquarters and purchased a lot of fixed and portable projectors to organize educational screenings in various schools, syndicate centers and public squares across the country. Photographer and filmmaker Luis Márquez Romy, appointed head of the Photo cinematic Workshops of the Secretaría, had among his responsibilities the production, acquisition, and copying of educational films.

Vasconcelos' impulse of educational film in the 30's resulted in the acquisition of the Hidalgo Theater for film screenings, support for private productions with strong nationalistic interests like *Nezahualcoyotl* (1935) by Manuel Sánchez Valtierra- and the making of documentaries by the Ministry. Those short films covered a wide range of interests: agriculture, industry, health, medicine, biology, zoology, festivals and traditions of the native populations, geographic

and tourism issues, recordings of health campaigns, and campaigns against alcoholism and illiteracy, as well as the edition of the newscast *Revista Filmica* de la SEP.

In 1933 Paul Strand took charge of the Comisión de Fotografía y Cinematografía del Departamento de Bellas Artes after presenting a proposal that extolled film as the best tool for creating social awareness. As head of that Commission he undertook the making of *Redes*, a movie called to be an example of the political and cultural use of moving images.

In late 1934 SEP already had a large catalog of films for the "artistic and educational outreach through cinema". Its new director, Agustín Velázquez Chávez ordered a "series of educational films", consisting of 48 documentaries that would support the academic programs of the ministry and a "series of films consisting in a repertoire" of 76 films selected from the world 's most relevant filmography for its subject "on the various phenomena that affect the life of man, in relationships with peers and in regards to building a new society and an advanced social order". This ideology prevailed for the rest of the decade, not so the ministry's momentum to produce its own films.



# REDES

## PAUL STRAND EN MÉXICO

In a film context already dominated by Hollywood idolatries, in the period when Mexican cinema made efforts to organize itself as an industry and shortly after Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein had been prevented from completing his “filmic symphony” *¡Que viva Mexico!* Paul Strand took responsibility as head of the Comisión de Fotografía y Cinematografía of the Departamento de Bellas Artes.

In August 1933, Narciso Bassols and Carlos Chávez had in their hands the project that Strand and Agustín Velázquez Chávez recommended to the Mexican State to fulfill its “cultural function” through cinema, recognized as the “most effective means to reach the masses that want to be educated”. For this, they proposed the production of short films that avoided “the documentary exhibition of the picturesque” and helped the viewers understand their reality.

Budgetary, technical, and human restrictions limited the educational cinema program to a single film: *Redes*, whose shooting took place between late 1933 and fall of 1934. The film, initially called *Pescados*, proposed a realistic narration of the struggle for life and justice of a fishing community who discovers the strength of union. For its filming a town on the banks of the river Papaloapan (Alvarado, Veracruz) was chosen, at the same time scenario where the story was developed, and place of residence of many of its elected protagonists.

Strand gathered a team made by Agustín Velázquez Chávez (co - author of the argument), Fred Zinnemann (Director), Emilio Gómez Muriel (assistant director), Henwar Rodakiewicz (author of the film adaptation and technical script), Guenther von Fritsch and Barbara Messler (editing), Silvestre Revueltas (composer of the musical score), and Ned Scott (Stillman). Of the film’s photography, supposed to be “organically related to the topic and action” of the film, Strand himself was in charge; he was also involved in the drafting of the argument and the development of successive versions of the script.

Ensnared by bureaucratic processes that delayed the delivery of resources and concluded without the participation of Strand, *Redes* joined the history of Mexican cinema as a difficult piece to classify, reluctant to generic definitions, contradictory in its mix of subversive agitation and State sponsorship. Due to its unusual theme, the exhibition was delayed more than expected; distributor Javier Liceaga offered the premiere at Cine Alameda, “but nonetheless, categorically accepted by its artistic quality and deep emotiveness, they refused to show it due to the socialist character contained in the work; hostile character or at least unconnected to the bourgeois public”. Finally *Redes* premiered at the Cinema Principal accepted after some very unfavorable conditions for the producer: the Secretaría de Educación Pública.

# NED SCOTT

## STILLMAN DE LA PELÍCULA REDES

Edward Norman Scott, Jr., was born in Paris in 1907 and died in La Cañada, California, in 1964. Due to the outbreak of World War I, he was sent by his parents to Switzerland, initiating a path that would finally lead him to New York City. In the early 30’s he joined the Camera Club of that City, a group that gave him the chance to make his first photographic expedition to Taos, New Mexico, and meet Paul Strand.



Ned Scott (1907-1964). Foto fija de la película *Redes* [antes *Pescados*] dirigida por Fred Zinnemann y Emilio Gómez Muriel y fotografiada por Paul Strand, Alvarado, Veracruz, 1933-1934  
Colección y Archivo de Fundación Televisa

Without signing any contract or assenting to any compensation for his work, Scott agreed to travel to Mexico in 1934 to join the filming team of the movie *Redes*. With this production staged in Alvarado, Veracruz, he began his career as a stillman -the photographer in charge of documenting the filming process and making stills of film scenes later used in the promotion of films-. On his return from Mexico, he joined the Hollywood industry, where he also

served as a portraitist of celebrities. Films like *Stagecoach* (John Ford, 1939), *The Long Voyage Home* (John Ford, 1940), *Sahara* (Zoltan Korda, 1943), *A Thousand and One Nights* (Alfred E. Green, 1945) and *The Lady from Shanghai* (Orson Welles, 1947) were promoted through Ned Scott’s stills.

The photographic work that Ned Scott made during the filming of *Redes* allows us to appreciate the conditions under which the shooting of a film characterized by its realistic vocation and the austerity of its material resources was carried out. These images reveal the plot, worthy of another film, that involved the complicated production of the movie in which Strand implemented for the first time, his ideas of cinema as creator of social consciousness. Like all great stillmen, Scott contributed to the purposes of a collective work leaving traces of his personal creativity.



Ned Scott (1907-1964). Foto fija de la película *Redes* [antes *Pescados*] dirigida por Fred Zinnemann y Emilio Gómez Muriel y fotografiada por Paul Strand, Alvarado, Veracruz, 1933-1934  
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# FRONTIER FILMS

## PAUL STRAND EN MÉXICO

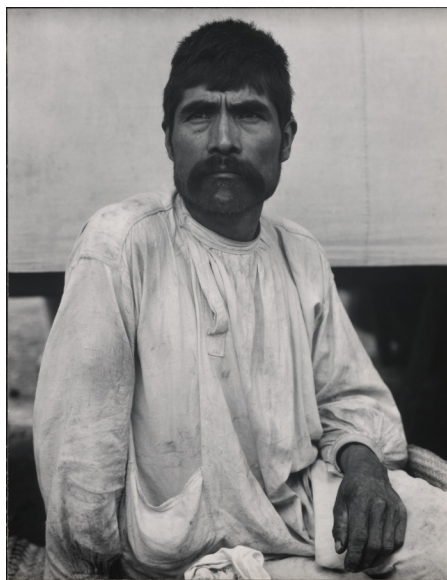
Paul Strand returned to the United States in early 1935 after he lost control over *Redes*, in whose final edition he did not participate. Annoyed by the decisions that sidelined him from the film, the photographer was forced to submit to Ignacio García Téllez, successor of Narciso Bassols as Secretary of Public Education, an extensive statement, dated February 7, 1935, in which he defended his contributions and gave details of the rough process of making the project.

Strand saw the final version of *Redes* in New York in late 1936. When the film had its commercial debut the following year, in the same City, it was already part of the catalog of Frontier Films, the production and distribution cooperative of documentaries with progressive political hints, initially called Nykino, of which Strand was an active participant.

After his experience on the set of *Redes*, Strand deepened his relationship with moving images and his search for a politically engaged art; trend that explains the trip, eventually failed, he made to the Soviet Union in 1935 with the intention of working with Sergei Eisenstein. In the second half of the 30's and early 40's Strand's iconographic production was destined mainly to the big screen. Movies like *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936), *Heart of Spain* (1937) or *Native Land* (1942), *It's Up to You* (1943) and *Tomorrow We Fly* (1944) illustrate his stance as a documentarian with regards

to the threats of that period: poverty, fascism, racism, World War II.

For these same stances, when in the 50's the McCarthyism encouraged the anticommunist phobias of the US government, Strand saw the need to migrate to other places in search of better conditions for his work, a move that would involve his return to still photography and portraiture consolidated in its first trip in Mexico.



Paul Strand. Man [Hombre], Tenancingo de Degollado, Estado de México, 1933  
Colección y Archivo de Fundación Televisa

# FANTASMAS SIN SOSIEGO

## PAUL STRAND EN MÉXICO

While his photographic and film cameras recorded some of the faces and realities of post - revolutionary Mexico, Paul Strand radicalized his political thought and redefined the purposes of his artistic work. His claims for the transformation of the established order, that definitively drove him away from notions of art as a solipsistic work, were clearly expressed in the documentary films he made in the 30's and 40's of the twentieth century.

When Strand decided to exile himself to Europe accompanied by his third wife, Hazel Kingsbury, his bet for the social sense of images was accomplished through the genre that allowed him to be closer to Mexicans - portraiture-, and through the use of a print medium that went beyond portfolios, enhanced the narrative of still photography and was, somehow, film on paper: the photobook.

In the photobooks *La France de Profil* (1952) and, especially, in *Un Paese: Portrait of an Italian Village* (1955), the first one made in collaboration with the French writer Claude Roy and the second co - authored with Cesare Zavattini, theorist and screenwriter who was the precursor of Italian neorealist cinema, Paul Strand allowed his portraits, both representations of specific individuals and expressions of belonging to a community, populate with words, tastes, smells and sounds. He would do the same years later in Scotland, Egypt, and Ghana.

The faces of people in the street had entered Strand's work in 1916, when he made a series of portraits in New York provided with a periscope device that prevented the models from knowing that they were being photographed. Though still anonymous, people portrayed in Mexico were recognized in their individuality. In the Italian town of Luzzara, theme and setting of *Un Paese*, Strand complied fully with the lessons he had learned from photographer David Octavius Hill - "highlight the strength of the people, not their weaknesses"- and from the poet Edgar Lee Masters, author of *Spoon River Anthology* (1915), restless ghosts colloquium, whose reading perhaps incubated the idea of looking at a small village for the protagonists of a social album; to hear, with the help of photography, the story of local sorrows and joys that could be recognized with other names and other languages by most human beings.



Plaza, state of Puebla [Plaza, estado de Puebla], Puebla, 1933  
Colección y Archivo de Fundación Televisa

# BARCAS EN REPOSO

## PAUL STRAND EN MÉXICO

In 1966 Paul Strand made his second trip to Mexico. The stay was short, apart from work commitments and according to the rhythms of a photographer who already was seventy-six years old. The States of Guanajuato and Yucatán joined the Mexican itinerary begun three decades ago. His gaze, however, was no longer able to seek the nearness required by portraits and left but distant testimonies of a rural country whose profile had been modified due to urban and industrial expansion. The image of some boats resting, evident proof of his compositional talent was one of the memories that the veteran traveler brought from his passing through the Yucatán Peninsula.

Strand had the chance to relive old times as he passed through Mexico City. He visited Galería de Arte Mexicano (GAM), founded by the initiative of her hostess and friend, Carolina Amor, after the departure of Carlos Chávez from the Departamento de Bellas Artes in 1934, leading to the shutdown of the Sala de Arte, enclosure that held the photographer among its invited artists. Under the direction of Inés Amor, Carolina's sister, GAM had acquired prestige as promoter of the best expressions of national art. Strand saw in this gallery an exhibition of recent works by Manuel Álvarez Bravo, many of them the result of his experimentation with color. Strand's enthusiasm with his friend's work whom he had met in 1932 and with whom he had shared walls in 1956 at MoMA, resulted in recommendations of acquisition attended shortly after by Rene d'Harnoncourt and John

Szarkowsky, respectively director and head of the photography department of that Museum.

The reunion with Mexico motivated Strand to carry out, in 1967, the second edition of *Photographs of Mexico* -now under the title *The Mexican Portfolio* - for which he requested muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros a presentation text. Álvarez Bravo was the recipient of other friendly gestures of the photographer and editor of *Un Paese*. Not least of them, a note published in the journal *Aperture*, in 1968, in which Strand, after mentioning the retrospective exhibition of the Mexican artist presented between June and August of that year, at Museo del Palacio de Bellas Artes within the framework of the XIX Olympics, he described him as "the greatest Mexican photographer and one of the most important photographers of his time. "

# JARDINES INTERIORES

## PAUL STRAND EN MÉXICO

Long-lived and reserved artists, Paul Strand and Manuel Álvarez Bravo did not abandon photography even faced with the obvious decline of their physical capabilities. Limited in their mobility to short walks, sheltered for health reasons in their home environments -the first in Orgeval, France, and the second in Coyoacán, south of Mexico City, they made of the vegetation of their gardens and of other expressions of life that could be seen from doorways and windows of their dwellings, the subject of their final reflections on photography as a way to rediscover the beauty of the basics; that light which builds and reinvents with the passage of moments, hours, seasons, and eras, and refers, from the minuscule scale, to the order of the stellar rotations and translations.

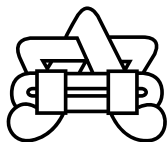
It was not during the final stretch of their lives that the photographers Strand and Álvarez Bravo began the decipherment and celebration of vegetal forms. The wonders of nature were recognized by both of them all along their photographic careers. However, exhibitions such as *Variaciones* - presented by Álvarez Bravo at the Centro de la Imagen on 1997-, and *The Garden and On My Doorstep* portfolios -the last Paul Strand's publishing projects- were signs of meditation and serenity that were no strangers to the wisdom the photographers had acquired over the years nor to the consciousness they had of the near end of their days. Men soon to deliver their gaze to the kingdom of darkness -Strand died in 1976 and Álvarez Bravo in 2002, both told us from

the depths of their interior gardens that there is no need to go far, not beyond from where a tree grows green again or a branch shakes its shadow, to understand that the universe is a myriad of gifts and miracles.

The video work that is the epilogue of *El murmullo de los rostros* assumes that Strand and Álvarez Bravo were also found in a homeland without borders or flags where images are the substitution of floral buds and the gnashing of fallen leaves.



Paul Strand. Boy [Niño], Hidalgo, 1933  
Colección y Archivo de Fundación Televisa



Paul Strand. Fiesta, Huejotzingo, Puebla, 1966  
Colección y Archivo de Fundación Televisa

# Museo Amparo

EL MURMULLO DE LOS ROSTROS

## PAUL STRAND

EN MÉXICO

14.05.16 - 20.08.16

Exposición organizada por Fundación Televisa



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