

André Breton, Surrealism and Mexico, 1938-1970. A Critical Overview.

Daniel Garza Usabiaga

Discussions about the relation between Surrealism and Mexico are numerous. Most of them, nevertheless, have been centered on a limited time span that starts with André Breton's visit to the country in 1938 and continues with the experience of several surrealists in exile during the Second World War.¹ There are also instances which examine specific cases such as Antonin Artaud's travel in 1936, the production of Wolfgang Paalen during his years in Mexico or Georges Bataille's conceptualizations on Pre-Columbian cultures.² Fewer attempts exist that try to evaluate the impact of Breton's visit and of the International Exhibition of Surrealism of 1940 in the local cultural context.³ What all these varied perspectives attest to is, in the end, the complex and many faceted set of relations that exist between Surrealism and Mexico.

This paper will revise the relation between André Breton, Surrealism and Mexico within a broader time span than is usually employed when discussing this theme (1930-1970). The reason for this is twofold. First, a reading of Breton's 1938 visit

¹ Most publications on the history of Surrealism when discussing Mexico and Surrealism are limited to this temporal frame. A publication that makes a more detailed analysis of this theme is Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995, pp. 250-287

² The most comprehensive publication which deals with Surrealism in Mexico from the reception of the first Manifesto to 1950, including Artaud's and Breton's visit as well as the activities of Breton and Paalen in the country, is Luis Mario Schneider's book *México y el surrealismo (1925-1950)*. Mexico City: Arte y Libros, 1978. See also for specific themes Keith Jordan. "Surrealist Visions of Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica and the Legacy of Colonialism. The Good, the (Revalued) Bad, and the Ugly". *Journal of Surrealism and the Americas* 2:1 (2008), pp. 25-63 and Amy Winter. *Wolfgang Paalen. Artist and Theorist of the Avant-Garde*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003.

³ The most comprehensive work which evaluates this point is Ida Rodríguez Prampolini's book *El surrealismo y el arte fantástico en México*, Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México / Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, 1969

to Mexico and of the International Exhibition of Surrealism of 1940 will be used to highlight a couple of points that have been omitted in previous accounts. One of these is how after his first trip to the Americas, Breton starts to conceptualize, more than ever, Surrealism's radical and fraternal internationalism, a position that would become further accentuated with the experience of exile during the War. The other is related to the increasing identification of Breton and Surrealism with a libertarian *ethos*, something that finds its first explicit expression with the Manifesto for an Independent and Revolutionary Art of 1938. By going beyond the time frame used in most analyses it will be possible to see how Breton's travel in 1938 continued to have an impact for the activities of the Surrealist group after 1945 as well as his constant interest in Mexican art. The revision of the International Exhibition of 1940 will serve to ponder the impact of Surrealism in the Mexican cultural context. This is the second intention of the paper. Such influence would be appreciated decades after the International Exhibition. *El surrealismo y el arte fantástico de México*, a book written by Mexican art historian Ida Rodríguez Prampolini, published in 1969, was the first to critically revise the exhibition of 1940 and its impact in the local cultural milieu. The thesis of her book gave the International Exhibition of 1940 an anti-nationalist value: Surrealist art was an alternative to the paradigm of the Mexican School and the Muralist movement. Moreover, Surrealism became a notable influence for a new generation of artists that by the end of the 1960s represented as well, an alternative to forms of non-figurative art which had been avidly sponsored and promoted by the art establishment during that decade.

André Breton in Mexico and the International Exhibition of Surrealism in 1940.

According to Breton, his trip to Mexico had its origins in his economic circumstances. Incapable of making a living as an independent writer, he sought a position teaching outside France through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Unable to grant him that position, the Ministry offered, by way of compensation, a trip to

Mexico City where he was to give a series of lectures at the National University on the state of poetry and painting in Europe.⁴ Undoubtedly, one of the strongest incentives for Breton's visit to Mexico was to make the acquaintance of Leon Trotsky, who had been granted political asylum by the Mexican government in 1937. Breton and the Surrealists had been strongly sympathetic to Trotsky since 1934, the year in which he was expelled from France. To condemn this act they wrote the pamphlet 'Planet Without a Visa' signed by Breton, Roger Caillois, Paul Éluard, Benjamin Péret and Yves Tanguy, amongst others.⁵ After the Parisian group's final break with the French Communist Party in 1935, Trotsky became an alternative for a new political position for Surrealism, one in which 'Marxists can walk hand in hand with anarchists'.⁶ As Michael Löwy has mentioned, the major outcome of Breton's visit to Mexico was the Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art ('one of the most important revolutionary documents of the twentieth century'). Written with Trotsky, it manifested the increasing anarchist sympathies of the French poet.⁷ As it is known, the French Communist AEAR (Association of Revolutionary Artists and Writers), through the figure of Louis Aragon, attempted to boycott Breton's activities in Mexico by sending letters to the Mexican LEAR (Liga de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarios) asking them to systematically sabotage his work.⁸

Signed by Breton and Diego Rivera the 'Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art' establishes an *anarchist* system, based on individual freedom, when dealing with matters of intellectual creativity.⁹ Although Trotsky did not sign the text, Breton recognized him as responsible for this 'demand for total independence in artistic matters'.¹⁰ This posture, in which 'imagination should be

⁴ André Breton, 'Visit with Leon Trotsky', In *Free Rein*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995, p. 36

⁵ 'Planet Without Visa'. In Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijalkowski (eds.) *Surrealism Against the Current. Tracts and Documents*. London: Pluto Press, 2001, pp. 104-106

⁶ 'Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art', In *Free Rein*, p. 33

⁷ Michael Löwy, 'The Libertarian Marxism of André Breton', In *Morning Star. Surrealism, Marxism, Anarchism, Situationism, Utopia*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009, p. 25

⁸ André Breton, 'Visit to Leon Trotsky', p. 39

⁹ 'Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art', p. 32

¹⁰ André Breton, 'Visit to Leon Trotsky', p. 45

free of all constraints and should under no pretext let itself be channeled toward prescribed goals',¹¹ became a sort of principle for Surrealism after 1938, particularly during the years of the war and after it, against the program of Socialist Realism and also, of the notion of 'committed art' as developed by those French intellectuals involved with Existentialism. As a direct outcome of the 1938 Manifesto, after his return to France in August, Breton played an important role in the organization of the FIARI (International Federation of Independent Revolutionary Art). The FIARI had its own newsletter, *Clé*, which was first published in January 1939. The editorial for this first issue of *Clé* was titled 'No Fatherland' and in it, as Gérard Durozoi has mentioned, was 'emphasized the scope of artistic internationalism, endowed with the same significance as workers' internationalism and the necessity of struggling against the decrees recently passed against foreigners residing in France, most specifically political immigrants'.¹² Anarchism, in this way, can be seen as an increasing interest for Breton during his trip to Mexico and his encounter with Trotsky. It appears even in 'Memory of Mexico', a text written after his return to France and that has been overtly criticized for the way in which it poeticizes Mexican reality.¹³ In this article, published in *Minotaure*, Breton describes a trip to Guadalajara with Rivera in which they met an old broker of antiquities 'whose faced resembled that of Elisée Reclus'.¹⁴ Reclus (1830-1905) was a French anarchist involved with the Paris Commune and also is recognized as the 'father' of social geography for his studies on geography as social space more than as science based on the notion of landscape.¹⁵ Libertarianism, in this way, can be seen as a haunting preoccupation for Breton during his Mexican trip, ready to be manifested even in small and quotidian details.

¹¹ 'Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art', p. 32

¹² Gérard Durozoi, *History of the Surrealist Movement*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002, p. 352

¹³ See, for example, Amy Winter. *Wolfgang Paalen. Artist and Theorist of the Avant-Garde*, pp. 71-84. Breton's "Souvenir du Mexique" was published in *Minotaure* 12-13 (1959)

¹⁴ André Breton, 'Memory of Mexico', In *Free Rein*, p. 25

¹⁵ For a larger discussion on the work of Elisée Reclus, see Kristin Ross, *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune*. London: Verso, 2008, pp. 75-99

The inclusion of Reclus in a text such as 'Memory of Mexico', should serve as evidence that the general idea that Breton poeticized Mexican reality has to be balanced with the political and social preoccupations he held at that time, which found expression in several comments that he elaborated about the situation of the country. 'Visit to Leon Trotsky' is another text that he wrote after his return to France. In it, he praised the expropriation of oil by the government of Lázaro Cárdenas and, perhaps was the first to denounce the the painter Gerardo Murillo's Nazism, better known as Dr. Atl.¹⁶ Even more important is the interview that Breton held with historian Heliodoro Valle. In this conversation Breton praised the internal and foreign policy of Cardenas' regime and also declared that Mexico was the Surrealist country *par excellence*. When specifying this qualification, Breton talked about the Mexican landscape, its vegetation, the various human groups residing in the country, and, more importantly, its highest aspirations such as ending the exploitation of man by man.¹⁷ Above all, he praised Cárdenas government for doing 'everything possible to ensure comrade Trotsky's safety'.¹⁸ Some critics have taken Breton's sympathy and optimistic comments towards Cárdenas's regime as if he had been duped by nationalistic propaganda. Nevertheless, for a French citizen who had experienced Trotsky's expulsion from his own country four years before, Mexico with its aid to the Spanish Republic during the Civil War, its open condemnation of Italy's invasion of Ethiopia in 1936 and to the Anschluss in March, 1938, could have represented a sort of progressive government within an international context dominated, exponentially, by the rise of Fascism.

¹⁶ André Breton, 'Visit to Leon Trotsky', pp. 42-43. This text was read on November 11, 1938 in an event organized by the Parti Ouvrier Internationalist to commemorate the anniversary of the October Revolution. In regards to Gerardo Murillo's often overlooked political position – which can be summed up as fascist, anti-communist and anti-semitic, see the analysis of his political writings in Arturo Casado Navarro, *Gerardo Murillo. El Dr. Atl*. Mexico City: UNAM, 1984. pp. 139-171

¹⁷ This interview is transcribed in Ida Rodríguez Prampolini's book *El surrealismo y e arte fantástico en México*, Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México / Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, 1969, pp. 53-54

¹⁸ André Breton, 'Visit to Leon Trotsky', p. 43

Another text written by Breton in 1938 was dedicated to the painter Frida Kahlo. This text is important in order to understand a new conception of internationalism within Breton's ideas. Years before his visit to Mexico, he began speculating on the existence of 'great movements of sensibility', to use a phrase he employed in his text 'Before the Curtain'. In 1936, for example, in his article 'Crisis of the Object', he pondered 'the parallel development, during the nineteenth century, of scientific ideas on the one hand and poetic and artistic ideas on the other'.¹⁹ According to Breton, in around 1830, there is a coincidence between the heyday of the Romantic Movement which culminated with the work of Arthur Rimbaud and Lautréamont (around 1870) and the 'discovery of non-Euclidean geometry, an event which shook to its very foundations the edifice constructed by Descartes and Kant and opened up rationalism, so to speak'.²⁰ According to this speculation there are movements which achieve a total disruption of sensibility that can affect and transform the domain of knowledge, pertaining to science, art or poetry. In another text written in 1936, Breton stated that these 'great movements of sensibility' are not limited to the domain of knowledge but can also be manifested in the political and social realm. In 'Non-national Boundaries of Surrealism', he highlighted the coincidence between the new course for poetry set by Lautréamont and Rimbaud around 1870 and the 'great preliminary attempt at proletarian revolution that ensued' from the Franco-German War, namely the Paris Commune.²¹ Nevertheless, in this text of 1936, Breton was still focused on seeing these 'great movements of sensibility' as part of a 'European consciousness'.²² By 1938, Breton's text on the work of Kahlo indicates a change in his approach. Through the work of this artist, Breton witnessed, 'at the other end of the earth, a spontaneous outpouring of our own questioning spirit'.²³ The 'great movements of sensibility', in this way, are seen as international in their scope and not only limited to a 'European consciousness'. Kahlo is an example

¹⁹ André Breton 'Crisis of the Object'. In *Surrealism and Painting*. Boston: MFA Publications, 2002, p. 275

²⁰ André Breton, 'Crisis of the Object', p. 275

²¹ André Breton, 'Nonnational Boundaries of Surrealism'. In *Free Rein*, pp. 10-11

²² André Breton, 'Nonnational Boundaries of Surrealism', p. 17

²³ André Breton, 'Frida Kahlo de Rivera'. In *Surrealism and Painting*, p. 144

of an artist who has arrived at an art in connection to 'pure surreality, despite the fact that it had been conceived without any prior knowledge whatsoever of the ideas motivating the activities' of the Surrealists.²⁴ The International Exhibition of Surrealism of 1940, which amassed artists from Mexico and abroad, has to be seen in this light, as evidence of a 'great movement of sensibility' that is indifferent to national boundaries.

The International Exhibition of Surrealism took place at the Galería de Arte Mexicano and it opened in January, 1940. It was organized by the Peruvian poet César Moro and Wolfgang Paalen who had settled in Mexico City the previous year with Alice Rahon and Eva Sulzer. The show featured works by members of the Parisian group of Surrealists such as Victor Brauner, Max Ernst, Esteban Frances, Man Ray, Yves Tanguy, Gordon Onslow-Ford and Joan Miró. It also featured the work of artists that had at some point participated in Breton's collective, such as Salvador Dalí, Alberto Giacometti and André Masson. Amongst the Mexican artists that were featured were Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, Manuel Álvarez Bravo, Agustín Lazo, Carlos Mérida and Guillermo Meza. The exhibition presented Amerindian art: ceramics from the cultures of Western Mexico and objects from the Northwest Coast. These objects were the property of Rivera and Paalen, respectively. For the night of the opening a performative event was announced: 'apparition of the great sphinx of the night'. Isabel Marín appeared wearing a butterfly mask reminiscent of Paalen's painting of 1937 *La toison dor*. With this performative act, the 1940 International Exhibition continued a tradition of such events that began in the London Exhibition of 1936 with Sheila Legge dressed as Dalí's *La femme a tete des fleurs* and in the 1938 Exhibition at the Parisian Galerie Beaux-Arts where Hélène Vanel presented a piece inspired in Jean-Marie Charcot's work on hysteria.²⁵

²⁴ André Breton, 'Frida Kahlo de Rivera', p. 144

²⁵ See Lewis Kachur. *Displaying the Marvelous. Marcel Duchamp, Salvador Dalí, and Surrealist Exhibition Installations*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001, pp. 86-88

If the 1940 exhibition gave continuity to the shows of 1936 and 1938 with such a performative feature, it was unable to do so in regards to the inclusion of Surrealist objects and the use of overarching environmental display solutions. Compared to the exhibition at the Galerie Beaux-Arts, the display at the Galería de Arte Mexicano was traditional, centered mainly on painting. In the catalogue of the exhibition Paalen explained that the lack of sculpture and Surrealist objects was due to the difficulties in their transportation within the international context of the epoch. In order to remedy this situation, he assembled a Surrealist object *ex professo* for the show. This was *El genio del espacio*, a pistol made out of bones through which the relation between weapons and death was made explicit. The inclusion of Amerindian art echoed the 1936 Surrealist Exhibition of Objects at Galerie Charles Ratton in Paris where Surrealist objects were displayed *a la par* of Non-Western Art, mathematical and natural objects and Marcel Duchamp's *readymades* in a sort of 'fraternisation of the natural, the 'primitive' and the surrealist, along with now-historical examples of the critical and experimental legacy of modern art'.²⁶ Often overlooked in accounts of the show at the Galería de Arte Mexicano, the ceramics from Western Mexico and the objects of the Northwest Coast were almost completely unknown in Mexico in 1940. The International Exhibition of Surrealism was, in fact, the first time in which such objects were displayed for an audience in Mexico and began a process of increasing interest in such material culture that ended in the mid-1940s with two major exhibitions: *Indigenous Art from North America* at the National Museum of Anthropology in 1945 and *Pre-Columbian Art from Western Mexico* at the Palace of Fine Arts in 1946. Breton was fascinated, just like Paalen, with the material culture of the Northwest Coast and, during his visit to Mexico, became interested in the ceramics from Western Mexico which tend to represent human figures performing quotidian tasks. Rivera, who held the largest collection of such figurines, introduced him to this kind of art and it is highly probable that during

²⁶ Steven Harries, "Beware of Domestic Objects: Vocation and Equivocation in 1936". *Art History* 24 (2002), pp. 726-727

Breton's trip to Michoacán with Trotsky he acquired a couple of these statuettes that he took back to France as part of his personal collection.²⁷

The International Exhibition of Surrealism of 1940 was presented at a particular moment within the development of modern art in Mexico. As it is known, during the regime of Lázaro Cárdenas the Muralist movement and the Mexican School of Painting acquired a new momentum. Figurative representation, explicit social commentary, anti-imperialist and anti-clerical comments were the order of the day in Mexican art. From this perspective, Surrealist art could only be bourgeois art, art for art's sake. There also seems to have been a huge lack of knowledge about the development of Surrealism. Most of the reviews of the exhibition draw on an idea of Surrealism taken from the First Manifesto of 1924, therefore there was a generalized lack of awareness of the difficult fusion between art and politics that the Surrealists attempted to perform during the 1930s and some of the activities that derived from this, such as the Surrealist object. Another factor that can not be underestimated is the conservative culture of the Mexican bourgeoisie, a characteristic that was at odds with the more radical postures of Surrealism. Proof of this can be found in a paragraph that was censored by the owners of the Galería de Arte Mexicano in the text written by Moro for the catalogue. In this paragraph Moro announces the end of Christian civilization brought about by Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis.²⁸ If the sum of all these factors can account for the bad reception that the 1940 International Exhibition of Surrealism had within Mexico, this does not imply that it did not have a positive impact. As Ida Rodríguez Prampolini comments, the Surrealist Exhibition had an anti-nationalistic impact: it was a rupture with the immediate tradition in the sense

²⁷ I have discussed these issues concerning Northwest Coast art and the ceramics of Western Mexico at length in the paper 'Anthropology in the Magazines *Dyn* and *El hijo pródigo*. A Comparative Analysis (of Surrealist Inspiration)'. Paper presented at the Conference *Vivísimo Muerto*. June 2010, The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

²⁸ In a workshop organized in March 2009 by the Getty Research Institute (in which Dawn Ades, María Clara Bernal, Rita Eder, Graciela Speranza, Yolanda Westphalen and myself participated) there was found within the César Moro Papers a copy of the catalogue of the 1940 exhibition with a handwritten note by Moro. This note was a transcription of a paragraph that according to Moro was 'censored and suppressed' by the Director of the Galería de Arte Mexicano. The note is signed by Moro. Yolanda Westphalen was the one who found this note.

that for the first time since the Revolution of 1910, Mexican art that was independent of a specific ideology or national identity became linked with European art, establishing a direct relation and allowing its influence.²⁹ Nevertheless, as Rodríguez Prampolini also mentions, the true impact of Surrealism in 1940 was only able to be assessed decades later with the work of a new generation of artists.³⁰

Surrealism in Mexico after 1940

With the advent of the Second World War, a group of Surrealists was established in Mexico. Some of them – Benjamin Péret, Gordon Onslow-Ford, Esteban Frances – lived in the country temporarily. Others found in Mexico a permanent place of residence: Remedios Varo, Leonora Carrington, Alice Rahon and Wolfgang Paalen. Their influence within Mexican art and culture is considerable. Although the work of Varo and Carrington did not change drastically in Mexico, their style of painting influenced a new generation of artists. Paalen, along with his friend Miguel Covarrubias, was an avid promoter of Amerindian art during the 1940s. Also, between 1942 and 1945, he edited the journal *Dyn* in which he put forward a dissident understanding of Surrealism. Paalen attempted to create a new art based in the complementarity of new discoveries in the realm of physics with the plastic solutions of Amerindian art, whilst departing, at the same time, from Breton's tendency to poeticize the realms of science and Non-Western cultures. The formula aimed to reconcile the realms of art and science. Although most critics locate the impact of Paalen's ideas in the formation of Abstract Expressionism in the United States, it is also possible to see his influence within the Mexican context, particularly in the work of Gunther Gerzso. Paalen admired the work of Gerzso and wrote the text for the catalogue of his first solo exhibition

²⁹ Ida Rodríguez Prampolini, *El surrealismo y el arte fantástico de México*. p. 66

³⁰ It is even possible to postulate that several artists related to the Mexican School of painting were influenced by Surrealism after 1940 like Diego Rivera, José Chávez Morado or Raúl Anguiano. In some of their works after the 1940 the inanimate mixes with the animate (Rivera) or there are juxtapositions of incongruous elements (Chávez Morado). Nevertheless, a detailed study of the impact of Surrealism on these painters, after 1940, still needs to be done.

at the Galería de Arte Mexicano in 1950. Between 1942 and 1944, Gerzso developed a style of painting based on biomorphic abstraction; his work *El descuartizado* (1944) printed in the fourth issue of the Surrealist Journal VVV is an example of this. Around 1944, his style changed toward a sort of figurative painting that was highly oneiric; his work *Los días de la calle Gabino Barreda* (1944), a collective portrait of some of the Surrealists in exile, is a case that illustrates this shift in his production. Finally, around 1946, Gerzso arrived at a particular style based on architectonic abstraction, profoundly influenced by Pre-Hispanic cultures. This solution, which was highly influenced by Paalen's ideas regarding a modern actualization of Amerindian Art, would be a constant for the rest of his life. Although Gerzso defined himself during his lifetime as a Surrealist, the institutional discourse of Mexican modernism situated him as an antecedent of the abstract geometric art of the 1970s.³¹ Cases such as the one of Gerzso serve as evidence that in Mexico there existed a sort of non-figurative art influenced by Surrealism although the institutional discourse of Mexican modernism did not acknowledge this fact.

The institutional discourse of Mexican modernism is used in reference to *art as an institution*, to use a term developed by Peter Bürger, which refers to the fact that there is 'a historically specific institutionalization of aesthetic praxis in every era'.³² In the case of Mexico, after the Revolution the institutional discourse was centered on the Muralist movement and the Mexican School of Painting. This situation, however, began to change during the 1950s, and by the end of the 1960s a new institutional discourse on Mexican art emerged. Figurative art and social content gave way to abstract art concerned with studying the specificity of the medium or issues of perception and not with expressing social or political

³¹ It only recently that the Surrealist influence on the production of Gerzso has been studied and explored seriously in studies by Rita Eder, Cuauhtémoc Medina and Diana C. Du Pont. See the catalogue of the exhibition *El riesgo de lo abstracto: El modernismo mexicano y el arte de Gunther Gerzso*. Santa Barbara: Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 2003 and Rita Eder, *Gunther Gerzso: El esplendor de la muralla*. Mexico City: Ediciones ERA, 1994.

³² Jochen Schulte-Sasse. 'Foreword: Theory of Modernism versus Theory of the Avant-Garde'. In Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. xxxvii

commentaries. The Mexican artist who emblematically represents this shift is Rufino Tamayo. Described at once as Mexican and universal, the work of Tamayo fitted the intentions of the post-war Mexican governments to represent the nation as cosmopolitan, endowed with certain internationalism. During the 1960s, the State promoted the work of Tamayo, and non-figurative art in general, like never before. A case in point to illustrate this is the only individual exhibition presented within the series of shows organized for the inauguration of the Museum of Modern Art in 1964.³³ The Museum of Modern Art also, from the date of its opening up to 1970, organized at least three biennales and other forms of contests in which the awarded works featured non-figurative solutions.³⁴ The better known of these was the *Salón de Artistas Jóvenes* of 1965, particularly for its polemics.³⁵ Also known as *Salón ESSO*, this event was sponsored by the Organization of American States (OAS) and an affiliated company of Standard Oil. Besides the Mexican case, the OAS organized the same contest in seventeen other Latin American countries. Some critics have identified the series of *Salones ESSO* as a strategy to promote abstract art in the region as an 'ideological weapon' during the period of the Cold War.³⁶ Besides these cases at the Museum of Modern Art, another instance in which it is possible to see how the State promoted non-figurative art during the 60s can be found in the integral design solution used during the 1968 Olympic Games; in particular with its use of Op art for the graphic design and of monumental abstract sculpture as public art in order to decorate the urban fabric. By 1976, the institutional discourse of modernism had arrived to a stylistically coherent proposal to encompass different

³³ Even the architecture of the Museum of Modern Art, designed by Pedro Ramírez Vázquez, emblemizes this shift. Its dimensions were devised in order to exhibit easel painting, leaving no room -literally- for instances of Muralist practice. *Ramírez Vázquez en la arquitectura*, Mexico City: Editorial Diana, 1989, p. 98

³⁴ These are: The Second National Biennale of Sculpture of 1964, the *Salón de Artistas Jóvenes* of 1965 and the Third National Biennale of Sculpture of 1967.

³⁵ The recognition of the work of Fernando García Ponce was heavily contested. The night of the opening of the exhibition this confrontation gave way to insults and a public row. See Raquel Tibol. *Confrontaciones*. Mexico City: Ediciones Sámará, 1992, pp. 19-28

³⁶ See, for example, Shifra Goldman. *Contemporary Mexican Painting in a Time of Change*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1977, pp. 29-35. At the time of this exhibition, several artists and critics had a similar impression within the country: See, for example, the newspaper article written by Antonio Rodríguez, "Actitud tendenciosa y fraudulenta del jurado en un concurso de la OEA", *El Día*, 4 de febrero de 1965.

solutions of abstract art, namely Mexican Geometrism. Mexican Geometrism was showcased in an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art that amassed numerous artists who employed geometric designs in their work, regardless of their original intentions.³⁷ Such was the case of Gerzso, who always expressed his affinities with Surrealism.

It is within this cultural and artistic context of the 1960s that the first systematic account of Surrealism and Mexico, including the International Exhibition of 1940, appears: Ida Rodríguez Prampolini's book *El surrealismo y el arte fantástico en México*, published in 1969. In this book, the author makes a severe and harsh critique of Bretonian Surrealism; a posture that was not uncommon after the Second World War as it can be noted in comments by Jean-Paul Sartre (who is quoted by Rodríguez Prampolini), Henri Lefebvre or Guy Debord, to mention a few.³⁸ Rodríguez Prampolini's criticisms are centered in the intellectual character of Surrealism, its 'sophisticated fantasy'. According to her perspective, Surrealism's use of black humor, the unconscious and even sadism were not a threat to the actual state of things; Surrealism only transformed these themes into works of art, poems or paintings.³⁹ It is important to mention that several comments by Rodríguez Prampolini seem to misunderstand completely the Surrealist enterprise, such as when she mentions that Surrealism attempted to abolish the domain of reason or when she states that the Surrealists sought to express the incredible, the bizarre, the extravagant or the hallucinating.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the strategy of qualifying Surrealism as an over-intellectualized enterprise served the author to differentiate those artists affiliated with Breton

³⁷ Fernando Gamboa, at that time Director of the Museum of Modern Art, declared that Mexican Geometrism was the most important art movement since Muralism. Foreword to the catalogue of the exhibition *El geometrismo mexicano. Una tendencia actual*. Mexico City: Museo de Arte Moderno, 1976.

³⁸ See for example: Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Surrealism'. In *Modern Times: Selected Non-Fiction*. London: Penguin Classics, 2000, pp. 187-198. Henri Lefebvre. *Critique of Everyday Life*. London: Verso, 1992, pp. 111-117. Guy Debord. 'Contribution to the Debate 'Is Surrealism Dead or Alive?'' In *Guy Debord and the Situationist International. Text and Documents*. Edited by Tom McDonough. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002. pp. 67-68

³⁹ Ida Rodríguez Prampolini, *El surrealismo y el arte fantástico en México*, p. 96.

⁴⁰ Ida Rodríguez Prampolini, *El surrealismo y el arte fantástico en México*, pp. 10, 23

from the Mexican contingent that participated in the 1940 International Exhibition. For Rodríguez Prampolini, what the Surrealists accomplished through intellectual method, the Mexican artists accomplished through a kind of innate character and location or context. She postulated within the group of Mexican artists a sort of 'primitive' mentality tailored after the ideas of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl. As such, the works produced by Mexican artists around 1940 are not Surrealist but 'fantastic', the 'product of the development of a nation with a tendency towards the irrational'⁴¹:

'In the Mexican fantastic realism, the unreal or absurd connotations are not as explicit as in Surrealist art, which consciously searches for them. Behind Surrealism there is a lie that pretends to be true, behind the Mexican production there is truth, the painting is a mirror that gathers the image of a *sui generis* vital reality'.⁴²

This tactic of differentiation between the Surrealist and Mexican artists who participated in the 1940 International Exhibition served the author to clarify how, around 1940, the ideas of Breton were not followed in the country and, as such, the Mexican artists could not be counted as Surrealist but as something else. However, her strategy is troubling and highly problematic in its recourse to pure exoticism.⁴³ Moreover, she completely missed the point behind Breton's internationalism as expressed in his article on Kahlo: the idea of 'great movements of sensibility' which, regardless of national boundaries, led artists from different geographies to arrive at an art of 'pure surreality, despite the fact that it had been conceived without any prior knowledge whatsoever of' Surrealism. Curiously enough, and even if she tried to mark a difference between Surrealists and Mexican artists, when Rodríguez Prampolini discusses some of

⁴¹ Ida Rodríguez Prampolini, *El surrealismo y el arte fantástico en México*, p. 111

⁴² Ida Rodríguez Prampolini, *El surrealismo y el arte fantástico en México*, p. 96.

⁴³ This strategy seems to imply a kind of self-determination in which the imposition of the category of Surrealists on Mexican artists, around 1940, is rejected. Moreover, the discourse on the fantastic – during this time – is situated in line with the Latin American literary *boom* which attempted to create a regional identity in opposition to Europe and the United States through recourse to certain themes such as magical realism.

the works of national artists she seems to be talking about Surrealism. This can be evaluated, for instance, in her discussion of Juan O’Gorman:

‘With his travels into the world of the unconscious that are tempered by consciousness, with his invocation of myth, symbol, allegory and madness, the production of O’Gorman resumes, better than any other what the Mexican fantastic is and its huge differences with French Surrealism.’⁴⁴

As mentioned earlier, even the differentiation outlined by Rodríguez Prampolini between the Surrealists and Mexican artists that participated in the 1940 International Exhibition, did not eclipse the positive evaluation that she granted to such an event. This is particularly with regard to its anti-nationalistic character. The International Exhibition of 1940 allowed contact between European and Mexican art and produced an influence upon local artists. From that point in time, a group of young artists began ‘to pursue their own paths, escaping forever from the dictatorship of the ‘Mexican style’, opening in this way new avenues of expression that were less local and more international’.⁴⁵ According to Rodríguez Prampolini, the real impact of the International Exhibition of 1940 was at play in this generation of young artists who followed Surrealism and who began to gain notoriety in the 1960s. From her perspective, this new generation – in contrast to the artists involved in the exhibition of 1940 – had gotten rid off of the mentality that produced ‘fantastic’ art; their production consciously employed Surrealist strategies.⁴⁶ Among the artists of this new generation, one could mention Xavier Esqueda, Gelsen Gas, José García Ocejo, Alan Glass, Pedro Friedeberg and Alberto Gironella.⁴⁷ Breton was quite fond of the work of several of these artists.

⁴⁴ Ida Rodríguez Prampolini, *El surrealismo y el arte fantástico en México*, p. 86

⁴⁵ Ida Rodríguez Prampolini, *El surrealismo y el arte fantástico en México*, p. 75

⁴⁶ Ida Rodríguez Prampolini, *El surrealismo y el arte fantástico en México*, p. 111

⁴⁷ One year before Rodríguez Prampolini’s book was published, the National Institute of Fine Arts organized the exhibition *Solar*, an event that was part of the cultural activities organized to accompany the Olympic Games of 1968. This exhibition was a national art contest. The notoriety of the artists influenced by Surrealism can be evaluated through this event: José García Ocejo, Xavier Esqueda and Pedro Friedeberg were amongst the awarded artists. This is the kind of

He organized an exhibition for Glass, born in Montreal in 1932, at the Galerie du Terrain Vague in 1958.⁴⁸ Breton corresponded with Friedeberg and in one letter he described his work as 'participating in the Surrealist intention, being one of its most notable expressions'.⁴⁹ Gironella was invited by Breton to participate in the last International Exhibition organized during his lifetime, *L'Ecart Absolu* of 1963. What is particularly interesting in Ida Rodríguez Prampolini's evaluation of Surrealism in Mexico around 1969, is the way in which she seems to pose the attraction that a young generation of Mexican artists felt towards Surrealism as a sort of third-way within the local cultural and artistic context. At the end of the 1960s, an art inspired by Surrealism served as an alternative not only to the Mexican School style, but also to the new wave of non-figurative art avidly promoted and sponsored by the art establishment during that decade.

Breton and Mexico after 1940.

As mentioned earlier, the internationalism and the libertarian sympathies of Breton only increased after 1938 with the advent of the war in Europe and his own experience of exile in the United States. His identification with anarchism can be appreciated, for example, in his embrace of the figure of Charles Fourier who seems to displace, after the war and for obvious reasons, the figure of Sade in his discourse. Fourier was a utopian socialist that can be seen as antecedent to anarchism. The title of the International exhibition of 1963, *L'Ecart Absolu* ('*Absolute Divergence*') is in fact a concept borrowed from Fourier. In the 1950s Breton wrote a text in which he made explicit the affinities between Surrealism

influence that Surrealism had in the Mexican cultural context around 1968. In contrast to the student and worker's movement in Paris, which had a sort of Surrealist undertone, the protests in Mexico City lacked this kind of inspiration. The activities of the students in Mexico, which culminated in the catastrophic massacre at Tlatelolco in the month of October, had to do with appropriation of public space and of the official design of the Olympic Games in order to change and alter its meanings. Such activities were closer to Situationism's political tactic of *détournement* than with any Surrealist inspired-activity.

⁴⁸ "Alan Glass". In *La era de la discrepancia. Arte y cultura visual en México 1968-1997*, edited by Olivier Debrouse and Cuauthémoc Medina. Mexico City: UNAM/ Turner, 2007. p. 109

⁴⁹ Letter of André Breton to Pedro Friedeberg, transcribed in Ida Rodríguez Prampolini, *El surrealismo y el arte fantástico en México*, p. 107

and anarchism: 'Tower of Light'. In it, he stated 'It is in the black mirror of anarchism that surrealism, long before it achieved self-definition, first recognized its own reflection'.⁵⁰ Breton held the conviction, since 1925 according to him, that social revolution could only promote a libertarian world, which was one and the same as a surrealist world.⁵¹ Regarding internationalism, Breton still regarded in 1950 that its key lay in a state 'of mind that has manifested itself sporadically in every age and in every country'.⁵² Such 'great movements of sensibility' do not find form, exclusively, in art or plastic solutions. More importantly, they represent a common and new awareness of life. This condition is what allows 'a free association of individuals united by the spontaneous rejection of all the social and moral constraints of our time'.⁵³ This is what lies at the core of Surrealism's internationalism, an internationalism that attempts to be fraternal, more than a unification of style in art. The internationalism of Breton was radical and fell, even, into utopian speculation. In an interview of 1948, he declared that national boundaries would soon disappear, giving way to the forthcoming constitution of a United States of the world.⁵⁴ Two years later, he declared that he was preparing with Benjamin Péret a work on 'universal history', 'the need for which is becoming increasingly pressing as a counter to national histories'.⁵⁵

As mentioned before, after 1940 Breton became interested in and promoted the work of several young Mexican artists with affinities to Surrealism, particularly in the late 1950s and up to his death. At the beginning of the 1950s however, Breton also became involved with two Mexican artists in very different ways. These cases deserve further probing. The first is Rufino Tamayo. Breton wrote a text for the catalogue of an exhibition that Tamayo had in Paris in 1950. As is well-known, Breton held a strong position against art's subordination to a specific

⁵⁰ André Breton, 'Tower of Light', In *Free Rein*, p. 265

⁵¹ André Breton, 'Tower of Light', p. 266

⁵² André Breton interviewed by José M. Valverde (1950). In *Conversations: The Autobiography of Surrealism*. New York: Marlowe & Company, 1993. p. 238

⁵³ André Breton, 'Tower of Light', p. 265

⁵⁴ André Breton interviewed by Claudine Chonez, (1948). In *Conversations: The Autobiography of Surrealism*, p. 226

⁵⁵ André Breton interviewed by José Valverde, p. 241

political program, as exemplified by Socialist Realism. After the war, this posture became exacerbated and expanded to include the notion of 'committed' art as formulated within the intellectual circle of Existentialism – his confrontation with Albert Camus on the figure of Lautréamont is paradigmatic of this position.⁵⁶ In his text on Tamayo, Breton seems to relate the Muralist movement with a form of administered art, as an art subordinated to social action and nationalism.⁵⁷ Under this perspective, he sees the work of Tamayo as a kind of alternative, and he reaffirms the notion of his work as representing at once something intrinsically national and also universal:

The whole drive behind Tamayo's work is provided by two vital necessities. First, the need to reopen the lines of communication which painting, as a universal language, should be providing between the continents, allowing for the discordance between the various vocabularies by restoring to a position of honor the *technical* research which remains the sole basis for unification. Secondly, to extract the essence of eternal Mexico from the adventitious elements in its appearance and the episodic aspects of its struggles, and to pour these into the crucible of the human soul.⁵⁸

Although in these lines, it is possible to appreciate Breton's constant interest in a dimension of a fraternal internationalism, he reproduced the institutional discourse on art that began to gain *momentum* during the 1950s within Mexico; perhaps influenced by the ideas of Octavio Paz and other writers associated with the group known as *Contemporaneos*. In this institutional discourse, as it has been mentioned, Tamayo played a key role as a major exponent of non-figurative art in opposition to the style of the Mexican school.

⁵⁶ See André Breton, 'Yellow Sugar'. In *Free Rein*, pp. 244-246

⁵⁷ André Breton, 'Rufino Tamayo', In *Surrealism and Painting*, p. 230

⁵⁸ André Breton, 'Rufino Tamayo', p. 233

The second figure from the Mexican art world with whom Breton became involved during the early 1950s was David Alfaro Siqueiros. This episode is important as it represented a sort of final retaliation towards the muralist who four months after the opening of the International Exhibition of 1940, attempted to kill Trotsky. The event is also important in that it represents a collaborative activity between the Surrealist Movement and the Anarchist Federation, amongst other libertarian organizations from France and Spain. Since the late 1940s, the government of Miguel Alemán, through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, began to organize a diplomatic exhibition of Mexican art that encompassed Pre-Columbian objects and modern works of art: *Exposición de arte antiguo y moderno de México*. The person in charge of curating the show was Fernando Gamboa, a long-standing militant Stalinist and close friend of Siqueiros. Between 1951 and 1953, the exhibition toured through three European cities: Stockholm, Paris and London.⁵⁹ In 1952 it was presented at the Museum of Modern Art in Paris. Breton visited the exhibition and described it as 'admirable'. However, he could not admit the presence of Siqueiros as part of the show. In May 23 1952, the Surrealist movement and the Anarchist Federation published an article in the anarchist journal *Le Libertaire* denouncing Siqueiros and condemning his presence in the show. The article was titled '*A l'assassin!*' ('Murderer!'). In the article, there is a detailed description of the assault against the home of Trotsky that Siqueiros perpetuated on May 24 1940, and a fragment of a declaration he gave to the Mexican newspaper *Excelsior* in 1947 regarding this event: 'I never have and never will deny the responsibility which I hold in this affair (...), while affirming that I acted independently. I must state that I consider my participation to be one of the greatest honors of my life'.⁶⁰ The article in *Le Libertaire* denounces Siquieros as a member of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD); that is, as a member of the secret police in charge of executing the orders of the Soviets, including political repression and extermination, during

⁵⁹ For more detailed information on this exhibition and the work of Fernando Gamboa see Carlos Molina, 'Fernando Gamboa y su particular visión de México'. *Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas*, 87, Fall 2005, pp. 117-143

⁶⁰ 'Murderer!'. In *Surrealism Against the Current. Tracts and Declarations*. p. 157

the Stalin era. The text finishes by denouncing his participation as 'inadmissible in every respect', prompting a need for the rise of 'the most vehement protest'.⁶¹

As this case evidences, Breton's relation to Mexico was not limited to the years between 1938 and 1940 but continued after the war. Although he never ceased to be interested in the art and culture from the country, such relation always included political concerns. Some of these concerns, explored in this essay, were related to Surrealism's notion of internationalism and an interest towards libertarianism which found its first explicit evidence in the Manifesto of 1938, which was written with Trotsky. Also the relation between Surrealism and Mexico was not one-sided. As it was explored, the 1940 International Exhibition represented a break with the nationalist discourse prevalent in art during those years. Moreover, Surrealism influenced a generation of artists who, during the 1960s, gained notoriety and represented an alternative to the model of the Mexican School of Painting and to the institutionalization of non-figurative art throughout the decade.

⁶¹ 'Murderer!'. in *Surrealism Against the Current. Tracts and Declarations*. p. 157. For another account of this incident see Francisco Reyes Palma, "Exilios y Descentramientos". In Esther Acevedo (Ed.) *Hacia otra historia del arte en Mexico. La fabricación del arte nacional a debate (1920-1950)* Mexico City: CONACULTA/CURARE, 2002. pp. 251-272.