

*Surrealism and National Identity in Mexico
Changing Perceptions, 1940-1968*

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Recent studies have brought to light the importance of exhibition practice in the history of Surrealism, portraying it as one of the principal media for the deployment of the aesthetic and political agendas of those associated with the dissemination of Surrealist art and literature. However, little attention has been paid to how these events operated in the context of Surrealism's passage from Europe to the Americas, a crucial period in its history. Although the relationships between Surrealist doctrine and practice and Latin America have been a subject of growing interest in the last decades, the many Surrealist exhibitions staged there since the 1930s remain understudied.¹

The "International Surrealist Exhibition" organized in Mexico City in 1940 by Peruvian poet César Moro and Austrian-born artist Wolfgang Paalen was the most ambitious one ever to take place in the New World. Several reasons render it particularly emblematic. Mexico was one of Surrealism's prime locales of fascination, and the show came into being shortly after André Breton's 1938 sojourn there. The trip was to bring about important transformations in Surrealist thought, as Breton's visit was to influence his views about the movement's options for political engagement. The 1940 show also preceded the reclusion of most of the Surrealists at the Villa Air Bel, in Marseille, the stopping point in their journey to the Americas, only by a few months. A product of times of transition, this essay argues that many of the tensions and contradictions of these years can also be evinced in the exhibition itself.

So far, the show has been excluded from discussions of surrealist exhibition history, and is usually given summary mention in the few histories of Surrealism

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in the Americas that are available. This is particularly striking if we consider the importance that it had for the Surrealists themselves. Breton, for one, certainly considered it worthy of memory. In 1959, as a preface to the Surrealist exhibition celebrated in Paris that year, he drafted a list of the International Surrealist Exhibitions that had preceded it. In a fairly exceptional “historiographic” gesture, the poet created a chronology of exhibitions by assigning numbers to all of them. According to his account, the 1959 show celebrated in Paris was the eighth International Surrealist Exhibition in a list marked by interesting exclusions. Important shows such as those celebrated in Prague in 1935, Amsterdam in 1938, or Santiago de Chile in 1948, were left out of the sequence. And yet, the Mexican show appeared as the Fourth exhibition, a title by which it has since been remembered.²

In Mexican art history, too, the show is far from forgotten. Aside from the abundant bibliography produced about the encounter between Surrealism and Mexico since 1940, the exhibition occupies an important, and particularly problematic, position in its narratives. Why this field has responded profusely and passionately to the event is not difficult to explain. Like few other themes, debates about Surrealism and Mexico have long been entwined with the discussions of national identity that have shaped the construction of Mexican art history as a whole. Not until the 1990s, however, has the relationship between the discipline in Mexico and these broader cultural dynamics been looked upon critically.³

This interrelation is embodied clearly in the most ambitious response to Paalen and Moro’s exhibition ever produced. Written by art historian Ida Rodríguez Prampolini and published in 1969, *El Surrealismo y el Arte Fantástico de México* sets out to trace the impact of the 1940 exhibition and Surrealist thought and practice on the development of modern Mexican art.⁴ After reviewing the careers of every artist included in the show before and after the event, Rodríguez concludes vehemently that such impact was minimal. Much of what Breton and his circle viewed as surrealist in Mexican art, Rodríguez argues, was instead part of the country’s own “fantastic” tradition, which preceded the existence of Surrealism. Rodríguez’s argument hence transcends art historical questions to become a treatise on Mexican identity.

El Surrealismo is much maligned today, and has been dismissed by more recent critics as a product of cultural nationalism. At first glance, the book indeed appears to be little more than a chauvinist response to Surrealism’s claims vis-à-vis Mexico. Nevertheless, this essay will show that much more lies behind Rodríguez’s argument, not least for what it tells us about changing perceptions of national identity in the writing of art history in post-revolutionary Mexico. Although the moment at which Rodríguez wrote *El Surrealismo* has rarely been inscribed into its

discussion, its consideration is crucial to an analysis of the book. The paradigm of Mexico's "Fantastic art" emerged at a time when the relationship between Mexican art, politics and intellectuals was highly volatile. Rodríguez's invective must be set against the backdrop of the unstable relationships established between intellectuals and the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), the ruling party in Mexico's one-party state, surrounding the political crisis that befell it during the late 1960s.⁵ At a time when defining Mexico's identity came to be seen as a crucial part of very real political debates, intellectuals took strong positions on the subject. The product of a rarified intellectual atmosphere, however, these positions were hardly clear-cut or simple.

This bird's-eye view explanation still leaves much unanswered, however. Why did such an elaborate response to the surrealist exhibition of 1940 as Rodríguez's appear thirty years after the fact, reclaiming every single Mexican artist included in the show as members of Mexico's "fantastic" tradition? As we will see, this claim closely mirrored the arguments made by some of the most dogmatic writings on Mexican identity. Why, then, did Rodríguez select the surrealist exhibition as the critical anchor for her ambitious project? And just as importantly, how does *El Surrealismo* fit within Rodríguez's oeuvre, one which not only wasn't focused on isolating Mexican art from the global scene, but which was consistently focused on the dissemination of international art in Mexico as well as on enhancing the international prestige of Mexican art?⁶

An analysis of the discursive afterlife of the 1940 exhibition can offer answers to some of these questions. Just as importantly, it may shed light on unexpected aspects of its continued engagement with the politics of Mexican art long after Moro, Breton, or Paalen's time.

Staging the Fantastic

The exhibition opened at the Galería de Arte Mexicano on January 17, 1940, displaying over a hundred works by fifty-one artists from fifteen countries. Divided in sections devoted to international and Mexico-based artists, it featured the work of the majority of painters and poets directly involved with Surrealism, including its organizers as well as of those claimed as part of the movement by Breton. At their own request, Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo were featured prominently in the international section. Less internationally renowned painters based in Mexico such as the Guatemala-born Carlos Mérida or Agustín Lazo, on the other hand, were presented in the "Painters of Mexico" section, given the ambiguous status of "fellow travelers" of the movement.

The exhibition's opening night was a characteristically surrealist event.

The artist Isabel Marín, dressed in a white robe and wearing a butterfly's head, descended to the exhibition floor at 11 p.m., as announced in the show's invitation. This performance was inspired by Wolfgang Paalen's *Toisón de Oro* of 1938, and was part of broader interactions between painting and performance in previous surrealist exhibitions. In Paalen's painting, a mystifying creature is constructed out of the combination of a suspended butterfly, a disembodied hand, neck and mouth, and a strange piece of furniture (Fig. 1). For the 1938 "International Exhibition of Surrealism," staged at the Palais des Beaux Arts in Paris, Paalen had produced a similar figure, a doll dressed up in a silk scarf whose head was covered with a bat-like contraption. Like the painting itself, Marín's performance also evoked similar apparitions in previous surrealist exhibitions, in particular Sheila Legge's during the



Fig. 1. Wolfgang Paalen, *Toisón de Oro*, 1938, Watercolor on paper; Colección Museo Franz Mayer

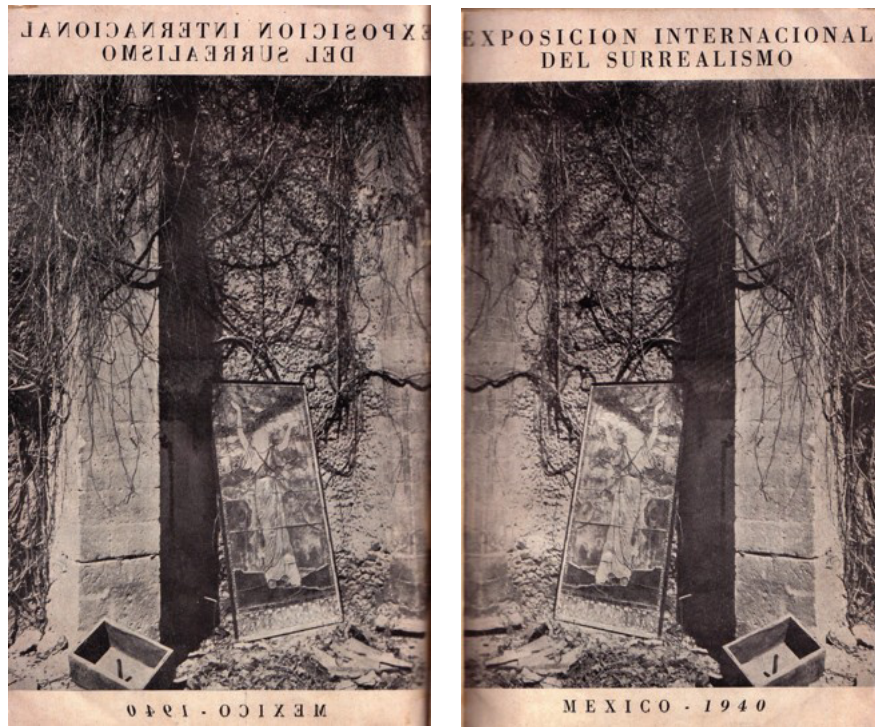


Fig. 2 Manuel Alvarez Bravo, *Sobre el Invierno*, 1938-39, as reproduced in the catalog cover for the “Exposición Internacional del Surrealismo” © 2010 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris

opening of the 1936 Surrealist show held in London. For that opening, Legge’s costume inspired the image found in Salvador Dalí’s *Untitled (Woman with a flower head)* of the following year.⁷

The show’s catalogue, with entries in English and Spanish, was a surrealist object in its own right.⁸ Manuel Alvarez Bravo’s photograph *Sobre el invierno*, of 1938-39 was featured as the catalogue’s cover (Fig. 2). The photograph shows vines overtaking the foundations of a building to be demolished at the Paseo de la Reforma, a major avenue in Mexico City. Included in the image is a nineteenth-century stained glass window that the photographer found nearby and placed against the wall. The shadow between a column and the wall merges with the foliage near the top edge of the frame to create the phantasmic image of a tree. The stained-glass window thus appears to hover around this eerie apparition.

As Amy Winter has shown, the image is one of confrontation between

architecture and nature, between old and new and, less obviously, between the specter of Mexico's rural past and the urban landscape of its modernity. The catalogue started with this photograph, but it ended with a confrontation at once literal and metaphorically charged: the mirror image of its own cover. Encountering its reversed form, the booklet itself thus embodied Breton's concept of "convulsive beauty," the dictum included in its very first page. According to the poet, this kind of beauty emerged out of the jarring opposition of contraries and was the defining characteristic that made Mexico one of the paradigmatic sites of Surrealism.

If the catalogue conveyed this through image and text, however, the exhibition sought to instantiate this national condition experientially. Paalen, who had arrived in Mexico in September 1939 after visiting southeastern Alaska and British Columbia, wanted to integrate what he defined as "Amerindian art" to the surrealist agenda.⁹ Paalen grouped together the various artistic traditions of these New World



Fig. 3. Installation photograph of the "Exposición Internacional del Surrealismo," Galería de Arte Mexicano, Mexico City, 1940; Image courtesy of Galería de Arte Mexicano

regions under that broad mantle, considering them primitive forms of expression. Paalen believed that unfettered by the constraints of the conscious modern mind, their forms could hence serve as fodder for surrealist experiments. At Paalen's

suggestion, pre-Columbian ceramics from Colima and masks from Guerrero and Guadalajara were selected from Rivera's collection for the 1940 exhibition. Alongside Paalen's own masks and sculptures from Oceania and New Guinea, these works were juxtaposed with canvases, photographs, collages, surrealist objects and drawings by the insane. The exhibition as a whole thus rendered spatial the surrealist vision of Mexico, and of the New World as a whole: ancient and modern temporalities coexisted with the real and the fantastic in a volatile site of fluid taxonomies.

Rivera's *Mandrake* of 1939 and Kahlo's *Las dos Fridas* of the same year occupied prominent positions in the exhibition layout (Fig. 3).¹⁰ Rivera's and Kahlo's works were produced specifically for the show and engaged surrealist tropes. Kahlo's *Las Dos Fridas*, for instance, translated the Bretonian notion of communicating vessels—the dialectical points of resolution between dream and waking, imagination and reality—as the bloody conduit that linked the two images of her unfolded self. Rivera, for his part, presented the title of his painting as a nonsensical succession of words for the exhibition. Yet despite these points of communion, most observers perceived Rivera and Kahlo's contrast with the rest of works in the show.¹¹

Although neither of the artists genuinely embraced Surrealism, it was particularly important to harness Frida and Diego for Breton's agenda in Mexico.¹² During Breton's stay in Mexico, Rivera had publicly defended the French poet from attacks he faced from several quarters. Theirs was however a reciprocal exchange. During the late 1930s, Rivera had been the subject of considerable criticism in Mexico, particularly from communist circles.¹³ Several gestures by the artist were perceived negatively. Prominent among these were Rivera's acceptance of commissions from U.S. patrons Ford and Rockefeller. Rivera's criticism of the policies of president Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-40), whose administration drew discursive prestige from its alignment with the early reforms of the Revolution, had also been deemed a contradiction of his earlier "revolutionary" stance. Because the number of his commissions was waning by 1940, Rivera took Breton's presence in Mexico as an opportunity to regain political and artistic purchase.¹⁴

During Breton's visit to Mexico, Rivera had facilitated his encounter with Leon Trotsky, who was in exile at Frida Kahlo's home at the time. As a result of the meeting, Breton and Trotsky drafted the manifesto titled *Towards an Independent Revolutionary Art*.¹⁵ However since Trotsky was forbidden from engaging openly in politics while in Mexico, Breton and Rivera signed the document. In the text, Breton and Trotsky set themselves apart from the rhetoric of Stalinist Communism. The separation was significant, since a considerable number of Mexican artists, notably the veteran muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros, espoused such rhetoric. Because revolutionary art did not have to submit to political agendas, Breton and Trotsky

claimed, political revolution could be channeled through the creative individuality of artists. Although Rivera distanced himself from Trotsky shortly after the manifesto was released, he remained close with Breton at the time of the exhibition.¹⁶

In a sense, then, the “International Exhibition” of 1940 was an attempt to marshal a narrow image of Mexican art and culture to serve this artistic and political agenda. To be sure, Mexico’s status as a paradigmatic locus of Surrealism had never been merely an aesthetic condition. Breton made this clear in his 1939 “Mexique” exhibition, and in his “Souvenir du Mexique” article, published in the same year in the journal *Minotaure*.¹⁷ A prototype for Moro and Paalen’s show—Paalen actually saw it—“Mexique” opened in Paris and presented Alvarez Bravo’s photographs and Kahlo’s paintings alongside folk art and pre-Columbian artifacts that Breton had brought back from his 1938 trip. In the show, the personas of the photographer and the painter were presented as mediums for Mexico’s revolutionary essence, one that sprang forth from the country’s timeless past and pervaded its popular culture. Through their highly personal vision of the world, the show argued, Alvarez Bravo and Kahlo translated this essence into revolutionary, yet ideologically independent, bodies of work.¹⁸

Breton thus aligned his idealized vision of political revolution with an essentialist construction of the Mexican national spirit. Trotsky, however, who had a strong influence on the poet at the time, saw Mexico in a somewhat less romantic light. In Trotsky’s view, the cultural and artistic expressions hailed by Breton were only symptoms of an imminent political revolution with a material basis. The 1940 surrealist exhibition in Mexico City was thus staged at the meeting point of these interpretive models of time, history and politics. While Breton glorified the static, timeless, and immanent revolutionary ethos of Mexico, Trotsky envisioned the country as a dynamic site of social and political transformation. In the show, Moro and Paalen instantiated Mexico’s timeless essence by collapsing together ancient and modern objects, but they also anticipated revolutionary times to come. Rivera and Kahlo were situated problematically alongside the members of the surrealist movement, but the position that they gave to the Mexican “fellow travelers” was less ambiguous in this respect. Echoing their separation from the “international” artists in the exhibition space, reproductions of their works were included in the final page of the catalogue. These images provided an open end to the image of surrealist Mexico embodied by the booklet. While isolated from the rest, these artists were also presented as pioneers of the exhibition’s spreading gospel.

Moro opposed Rivera’s inclusion in the show, deeming him an opportunist. Moro’s views about culture and politics paralleled those of Breton and Trotsky, but his involvement with Surrealism in the New World was more profound.¹⁹ The

Peruvian poet's advancement of Surrealism in the New World actually predated the 1940 show. In fact, the exhibition in Mexico City was not the first surrealist show he had been involved with in the Americas. In 1935 Moro had participated, alongside fellow Peruvian poet Emilio Westphalen and four Chilean artists, in a surrealist exhibition in his native city of Lima. Fresh with his experiences of direct contact with the Surrealists' inner circle—Moro had lived in Paris between 1927 and 1934—the show was a modest attempt to introduce the ideas of the movement to the local scene. The event has since been remembered by some as the first surrealist exhibition ever organized in Latin America.²⁰

After he relocated to Mexico in 1938, Moro continued his promotion of Surrealism. Moro published the only two articles about Surrealism that appeared in Mexico City before the “International Exhibition” opened. The second of the texts is particularly interesting, setting the stage for the show. Titled “La realidad a vista perdida,” it appeared on November 15, 1939 in the journal *Letras de México*.²¹ Highly poetic in its language, the essay was also openly political. It described the malaise of the Spanish Civil War and of Latin American politics, suggesting that only a momentous event could bring renewal to an otherwise ill-fated world.²²

The notable introduction to the exhibition catalogue, written in November 1939, presents the show as just this event. A summary of Surrealism's mythology from its origins in Lautréamont and Sade to its practice by Breton and fellow poet Benjamin Péret, Moro's aggressive text is among the most important documents in the history of New World Surrealism. As in the show, different Mexican temporalities overlap in the text. Moro posits that Surrealism could reconstitute the interrupted time of the pre-Columbian world that lived on, despite the colonial interlude, in places like Mexico and Peru. If static, however, this latent time was generative at the same time; Moro conceptualized it as a reservoir out of which future political events were to unfold. For Moro, the show would “begin anew the brilliant pre-Columbian night. The purest Night of the New Continent, in which the grandiose forces of dream clash with the formidable jaws of the civilization in Mexico and the civilization in Peru.” These countries, Moro wrote, “despite the invasion of Spanish barbarians and the sequels [of these invasions] that persist,” still preserved “thousands of luminary points that must enlist very soon in the line of fire of international surrealism.”²³ Unlocking the revolutionary forces contained in this continental essence, the “International Exhibition” would have nothing less than cataclysmic consequences.

The Fantastic Strikes Back

Seen in this light, the numerous and impassioned responses to the exhibition

are easily explained. While Moro's prophecy in the text has been interpreted as a testimony to his idealistic faith in Surrealism, it was also a provocation aimed at Mexico's intellectual establishment. Most reviewers writing immediately after the exhibition were eager to trivialize it. Those in the social section of the Mexico City daily *Excélsior*, for instance, remarked that the opening night had been attended by the most select elite of the city and that, its Surrealism notwithstanding, it had been disappointingly normal. Most critics were skeptical about the quality of the surrealist works on display, describing them as anecdotal or humorous but only rarely as provocative. Others like the Mexico City-based Spanish critic Ramón Gaya deemed the show formulaic and anachronistic, a banal reflection of avant-garde art practice.²⁴

Significantly, however, reviewers like Luis Basurto, the art critic for *Excélsior*, were highly critical of the placement of Mexican artists in the exhibition. For Basurto, Kahlo's paintings in the show were too enriched with her "spiritual naïveté" to be Surrealist, while Rivera was "surely one of the least surrealist painters in the exhibition." Although both painters used "indecorous tricks" to make their works *look* surrealist, their distance from the movement, which Basurto left curiously unexplained, was nonetheless obvious.²⁵ There was, arguably, *one* surrealist painting made by a Mexican artist in the entire show, Agustín Lazo's *El Interlocutor*, of 1937. Sadly, though, in Basurto's opinion the work was among the artist's worst.²⁶

If perhaps simple, Basurto's objection to the show exemplifies a pervasive trope in the art criticism of his time. Critiques similar in nationalist tone to Basurto's appeared in many places in the weeks and months after it. This wide range of passionate responses indicates that the show's agenda proved somewhat unsettling to Mexican critics in 1940. More significantly, however, the "International Exhibition" has continued to be influential long after this. Opinions about the show vary drastically in the historical literature. Many dismiss the event while others credit it with having transformed twentieth-century Mexican art altogether by bringing about a momentous rupture away from art's dependence on nationalism. For instance, art historian Luis Mario Schneider makes this argument in his 1978 survey of the relationship between Mexico and Surrealism. In Schneider's words, the show's "essential snobbishness [...] covered with its skin of banality and elegance a new tacit and latent [artistic] tendency in Mexico." "It is starting with this exhibition," he argues, "that a Mexican art, distant from the nationalist cause, from the didactic and revolutionary themes, and from the subordination of Mexican history to stereotypes, begins to reveal itself."²⁷

Schneider is only one of the critics to make a distinction between nationalist "currents" and opposing "counter-currents" in Mexican art after 1940. Such a distinction is questionable on many accounts, however, and has withstood criticism.

The exhibition titled “Ruptura 1952-65,” shown at Mexico City’s Museo Carrillo Gil in 1988, for example, brought together the work of many artists working outside the nationalist paradigm under the broad “rupture” category, but not without problematizing the concept. In an essay presented in conjunction with the exhibition, Jorge Manrique argued that the 1940 Surrealist exhibition was only one of many significant events that led to a change of sensibilities in Mexican art around the middle of the twentieth century. Over the course of the entire century, Manrique claimed, a diversity of positions, not just “official” and “latent” ones, had defined modern Mexican art.²⁸

It is nevertheless significant that in a milieu where the question of art’s relationship to national identity has never ceased to be relevant, the 1940 “International Surrealist Exhibition” continues to be remembered as a fundamental transformation in twentieth-century Mexican art and culture. Indeed, in determining the exhibition’s critical afterlife, the peculiar context of cultural politics in Mexico has played a fundamental role. The three decades after the 1940 Surrealist show saw the most heated debates about the role of visual culture in post-revolutionary Mexican society, with particularly active debates in the field of art history. Such authors as Deborah Cohn have described cultural production in Mexico at large during this period in terms of dichotomy between a “cosmopolitan” camp that sought to position Mexican culture in the broader Latin American and global spectrum, and a “nationalist” one that worked to advance its isolation from them. Throughout, Cohn claims, the former camp of artists and intellectuals generally stood in opposition to the state’s official languages, while the latter had an easier time aligning itself with them.²⁹

However Cohn’s description is hardly one we can take at face value today. Revisionist histories of early twentieth-century Mexican art have shown that the work of such artists as Rivera and Siqueiros, for instance, long considered part of the “nationalist” camp, always aspired to position Mexico within the global art field. Indeed Rivera and Siqueiros completed several international commissions and advanced this agenda throughout their careers.³⁰ Likewise, members of the “cosmopolitan” camp like Octavio Paz or Rufino Tamayo had close ties to Mexico’s official cultural apparatus. Paz was actually employed by the state as ambassador to India between 1962 and 1968, and Tamayo completed a number of official commissions while being canonized as a national artist in Mexico starting in the early 1950s. Like several other “cosmopolitans,” then, Paz and Tamayo positioned themselves as globally marketable figures at least in part through the Mexican state’s direct patronage.³¹

The surrealist exhibition’s afterlife has taken interesting directions in this

complex discursive field. One direction, as discussed at the beginning of this essay, is particularly telling of the intersections between the construction of national identity and the practice of art history. Indeed what Basurto left unexplained in 1940—the fundamental artistic distinction between surrealist and Mexican artists—was to find sophisticated articulation only three decades later, in Rodríguez Prampolini's *El Surrealismo y el arte Fantástico de México*. Forceful and authoritative, the book reconstructs the history of Surrealism from its Parisian beginnings to its international expansion. The book's core however is a reappraisal of the 1940 show in Mexico. Discussing the exhibition, Rodríguez explains that

What led [her] to write this book was just this problem. What happened at the time when Mexicans opened their eyes to an artistic expression based on fantasy, dream, and another reality? Did interpretations of these questions appear, as they did in other countries such as Belgium, the Netherlands, the United States, Chile or Cuba? Did it fall, on the contrary, into a void without echo, without being understood? [...] Was Surrealism capable of changing the course of Mexican art over time [...]?³²

Rodríguez's review of the careers of the Mexican painters included in the surrealist exhibition of 1940 then begins. Like Basurto the author first clears the ground on Frida and Diego. She argues, rightly, that Kahlo's artistic sources were to be found in Mexican popular culture and not in Surrealism, and that furthermore, when Diego painted surrealist canvases, his otherwise unquestionable talent seemed somehow to leave him entirely.³³ For Rodríguez the 1940 exhibition, although ultimately beneficial to Mexican art, had been unsuccessful for a simple reason. Having attempted to impose a foreign, alien category onto Mexican artists, its organizers failed to realize that the country already possessed a "fantastic" tradition of its own long before Surrealism ever arrived in Mexico.

Although the tradition had precedents in the pre-hispanic and colonial periods, in Rodríguez's view the first modern representative of the "fantastic" was the painter Julio Ruelas (1870-1907). For Rodríguez, Ruelas' artistic sensibility was most clearly exemplified by paintings such as *La Domadora* of 1897. The painting presents a woman in the nude, whip in hand, in the act of taming a hog circling around her with a monkey clinging to its back. This bizarre scene of sexual innuendo is structured around a narrative of ambiguous temporality (Fig. 4). In its irrational iconography it anticipates the kind of imagery that Surrealism would come to appreciate in Mexican art. But for Rodríguez it is entirely independent, historically



Fig. 4. Julio Ruelas, *La Domadora*, 1897, Oil on cardboard; Colección Andres Blaisten

and aesthetically, from Surrealism's own origins or discourses.³⁴

According to the text, later artists of this “fantastic” tradition like Roberto Montenegro and Julio Castellanos created similar effects in their work by making references to magic and alchemy. Castellanos came deceptively close to Surrealism in paintings such as the 1947 *Self Portrait*. In the work, the image of the artist's face is placed at the center of the composition in what could well be a painting within the painting, a mirror hovering over the table underneath it, or a window opening up onto another dimension. For Rodríguez however the work is not surrealist, as it embodies a particularly mystical—and Mexican—representation of vision.

Yet the most fantastic of all Mexican artists was not a painter, but the printmaker José Guadalupe Posada. Breton had claimed Posada as a Surrealist *avant la lettre* as soon as he was introduced to his work; he had displayed his etchings as uniquely surrealist works in the 1939 “Mexique” exhibition. Just as adamantly however the late nineteenth-century artist had been made into a national symbol by earlier official discourses in Mexico, dating from the beginning of the twentieth

century.³⁵ Fundamental in this construction of Posada was the 1943 exhibition of his work organized by Mexican art historian Fernando Gamboa at the Art Institute of Chicago. In the catalogue for that exhibition, sponsored by Mexico's Secretary of Public Education, Gamboa had established Posada's work as "the most direct expression of the Mexican people's soul and sentiment."³⁶

The discourse on Posada featured in exhibitions and texts produced by state intellectuals remained unchanged for decades. Writing in 1964 about Posada's work in the context of the mammoth traveling exhibition "Master Works of Mexican Art from pre-Columbian Times to the Present," for instance, Gamboa addressed Posada's ambiguous relationship to Surrealism: "Posada's art, which is a satire and a chronicle of a society in a state of crisis," Gamboa wrote, "reaches, at its most sensitive moments, the contradictory and explosive domain of the 'black humor,' as André Breton has pointed out." "Posada," Gamboa claimed, "has observed the world without emotional, aesthetic or ideological prejudices. Instead of limiting himself to reflections on this world, he transformed it into a carnival, where daily life does not differ from the marvelous."³⁷

In *El Surrealismo*, Rodríguez discusses Posada's work in terms that are practically lifted from Gamboa's text. Posada was not a Surrealist, Rodríguez claims; he had instead captured the true essence of the "fantastic" experience of daily life in Mexico like no one else.³⁸ Particularly in his images of *calaveras*, or skulls, which alluded to the celebration of the Day of the Dead in Mexico, Rodríguez argues, Posada managed to unite fantastic and real, life and death, in a manner so authentic, pure and Mexican that it made surrealist attempts to do the same seem formulaic and contrived in comparison. "What Breton asked for in his Second Manifesto [...] *to always maintain exposed a point where life and death, real and imaginary, past and future [...] stop being perceived as opposites,*" Rodríguez sentences, "had already been accomplished in Posada with an authenticity and virginal purity never surpassed by the artists who, years later, knew and followed surrealist themes."³⁹

Broader Paradigms

Naturally, Rodríguez's argument can now be easily dismissed. Beyond its discussion of Mexican art, the book seems to present a totalizing and reductive image of Mexican culture. Rodríguez's construct—which she continued to advance without changes until the 1990s—has proven influential on discussions of Mexican art. For instance, in the 1976 monograph on Julio Ruelas, still the only one about the artist, the painter retains the position that Rodríguez assigned to him as the first representative of Mexico's fantastic art.⁴⁰ In the first monograph about Wolfgang Paalen, published in 1984 by Leonor Morales—one of Rodríguez's students—the

painter's "introduction" of Surrealism in Mexico is duly preceded by the country's own "fantastic" tradition, one of which Ruelas, Montenegro and Posada are prominent members.⁴¹

Of broader transnational origins than Rodríguez's book, the paradigm of the fantastic has also found its way to museological narratives in the wider field of Latin American art. The most notable example is the controversial "Art of the Fantastic" exhibition held at the Indianapolis Museum of Art in 1987. As Mari Carmen Ramírez has argued, the exhibition "best exemplifie[d] the tendency toward reductionism and homogenization that underlies [...] representations of Latin American identity." In the show, cultural identity was problematically discussed "in terms of a primal, ahistorical, and instinctual essence that was presumed to convey the particularities of the Latin American character by allowing itself to be expressed through art."⁴²

Like its ramifications, the origins of the "fantastic art" paradigm are not hard to track down. The Museum of Modern Art had used the term to title its 1936 exhibition, "Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism," a precedent Rodríguez was familiar with.⁴³ Rodríguez, however, probably used the term with more specifically Latin America precedents in mind. As Lourdes Andrade has argued, a clear connection exists between Rodríguez's formulation of the "fantastic" and Alejo Carpentier's concept of the "marvelous real," introduced in the prologue to his 1949 novel *El Reino de este Mundo*.⁴⁴ In the novel, Carpentier argued that reality in the New World was so infused with fantastic and magical overtones that its inhabitants could hardly be impressed by what Surrealism or other European trends could offer them.⁴⁵ Carpentier hence claimed that "the marvelous" was inherent in the Latin American spirit before Surrealism discovered it, in much the same way that Rodríguez asserted that the "fantastic" was the defining characteristic of the Mexican character before Paalen, Breton and Moro's 1940 exhibition claimed it as a surrealist trait. Both accounts share the same basic structure: in them, a "native" voice counters the exoticizing views about cultural identity espoused by "foreigners" with an argument even more ahistorical in character than their own.

Less obvious connections also exist between Rodríguez's ideas and concepts of "Mexicanness" formulated during the first half of the twentieth century. In particular, Rodríguez draws upon the writings of the American journalist Anita Brenner. In her 1929 book *Idols Behind Altars* Brenner posited that, despite the westernization of Mexico during the colonial period, the pantheistic mindset of the pre-hispanic period persisted in the modern Mexican mind.⁴⁶ Rodríguez incorporates this concept from Brenner into her narrative, claiming that art in Mexico is produced "organically," without intellectual pretensions. European Surrealists needed highly

rational self-analysis to produce art, Rodríguez asserts, but when Mexicans tried to emulate them they betrayed themselves, “exposing the kind of primitive mentality in which the supernatural [...] is natural.”⁴⁷ In making such a claim, Rodríguez also borrows directly from Octavio Paz’s 1950 book, *El Laberinto de la Soledad*. In one of his most influential and controversial works, Paz suggests that a short list of attributes— among them a strong intuition and an incorrigible penchant for poetic reverie—defined modern Mexicans.⁴⁸ Echoing Paz’s codification of a set of traits of *Mexicanidad*, Rodríguez claims that the singularity of Mexican art is a result of these cultural particularities.

Conclusion

Seen in this broad historiographic context, it becomes clear that Rodríguez’s invective belongs to a long lineage of essays on *Mexicanidad*. Nevertheless, the immediate context in which *El Surrealismo* was written also informed the work decisively. The massacre of hundreds of student protesters authored by state forces at The Plaza of the Three Cultures Mexico City on October 2, 1968, was only a culmination of the political tensions that marked the end of the decade. On one level Rodríguez’s is merely an art-historical discussion of the delicate subject of Mexican identity, one that was front and center in the agenda of many other disciplines during this period. In Mexican art, moreover, the late ‘60s were a time of profound questioning and debate. For a generation of artists who came of age at mid-century, self-definition was a pressing matter in the face of the increasing internationalization of Mexican art and during a time of crisis for the state-sponsored cultural apparatus. Events such as the “Confrontación 66” exhibition, held in April of that year in Mexico City, rendered clear the divide, generational as much as political in nature, between “old” and “new” guards in Mexico.⁴⁹

To characterize *El Surrealismo* as merely a nationalist pronouncement on the history of Mexican art misses the complexity of this relationship. To jump to conclusions about the political implications of the book’s tone, moreover, threatens to further trivialize its context. Today the 1968 student riots can hardly be defined within the parameters of a romantic narrative that has been constructed around them during the last four decades, one which pits the simplistically defined motivations of a repressive state against what is construed as a unified and progressive student movement. Just as this set of political conflicts in Mexico cannot be described in any easy way, cultural debates of the time cannot be understood as a simple confrontation between cosmopolitanism and nationalism.

Rodríguez’s own biography embodies these nuances and contradictions. Although she authored a book aligned in more than one way with the languages used

by the Mexican state to discuss and construct national culture, Rodríguez was herself directly involved with a developing student movement that stood in direct opposition to the state's authoritarian practices, not least cultural ones. The students who took part in the protests, which Rodríguez supported through 1968, were primarily based in Mexico City's National Autonomous University (UNAM), where her research was focused at the time, and which served as their main center of operation.

In a broader sense, the ways in which identity politics related to political claims in late 1960s Mexico cannot be parsed out easily, yet sources of the period can help us understand this interaction. For instance, in a symposium celebrated in April 1968 in Mexico City and dedicated to the problem of defining national culture, philosopher Leopoldo Zea exemplified the dilemmas of the time when he asserted that the search for such a culture was a pursuit at once imperative and doomed to failure. Speaking about those seeking to define *Mexicanidad* and searching for the paradigmatic—and perhaps unsurprisingly enough, male-gendered—*Mexicano*, he asked rhetorically:

What Mexican are you talking about? (...) The Mexican from the highlands? The Mexican from the coast? The one from the north of from the south? The peasant? The petit-bourgeois? (...) Which Mexican? Juan? Pedro? Luis? ⁵⁰

Zea, who as Director of Cultural Relations during the administration of Adolfo López Mateos (1958-1963) had been among the organizers of the ever-assertive art exhibitions of Fernando Gamboa, was only one of many intellectuals haunted by these questions during the '60s. Seen in this context, Rodríguez's response to the claims made by Breton and his circle vis-à-vis Mexico and its artists appears less of a bizarre anomaly, which is how it has been characterized by her detractors.⁵¹

During the late '60s, many intellectuals, notably Octavio Paz, broke away from the official discourses that sought to forge a cohesive and reductive sense of *Mexicanidad*, reversing their earlier alignment with them. Paz resigned from his post as ambassador to India in protest of the 1968 massacre, and in 1970 he published *Posdata*, a revision of *El Laberinto de la Soledad*. In it he formulated a scathing critique of the mechanisms whereby Mexico's ruling party attempted to construct and enforce a narrowly defined image of national culture in dictatorial fashion.

⁵² The poet's hands were hardly clean, however, and he could not step away easily from the constraints of an essentialist language that he had played no small part in constructing.

For the younger Rodríguez, situating herself as an intellectual in this

climate presented no less complex a challenge. While in *El Surrealismo* Rodríguez became strongly invested in just this essentialist language, this hardly meant that she supported the regime that described national identity in the same terms as those she adopted to discuss Mexican art.⁵³ Her best-known work today, *El Surrealismo* is in fact both preceded and succeeded by other works where Rodríguez called this language into question.⁵⁴ Her conflicted position circa 1969, which exposes the dissonance between political attitudes and discursive alignments that marked the decade in Mexico in the widest sense, was nevertheless a generalized condition.

Stirring these questions, the “International Exhibition of Surrealist Art” thus continued to confront the Mexican intellectual establishment long after its closing. In its reincarnation as part of an extensive art-historical discussion, it remained suspended at the interstices between Mexican art and politics, bringing to light the inconsistencies and contradictions of artistic and national taxonomies. Talk of revolution was as much in the air in 1968 as it had been in 1940, but the post-humanist moment required a different kind of revolution than the one Breton’s Surrealism could ever have offered. Interestingly enough, art history might have been the only “communicating vessel” between the two very different historical situations. That this was the case, however, sheds light on the complex strategies of remembering and forgetting whereby nationalities are constructed, and whereby art and its history will likely continue to play crucial roles.

1 See Lewis Kachur, *Displaying the Marvelous: Marcel Duchamp, Salvador Dalí, and Surrealist exhibition installations* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001). For a discussion of the 1938 Surrealist exhibition in Paris in particular, see Elena Filipovic, “Surrealism in 1938: The Exhibition at War,” in Raymond Spiteri and Donald LaCoss, eds., *Surrealism, Politics and Culture* (Aldershot, Hants, Burlington: Ashgate, 2003), 179-203.

2 Gilles Rioux, “À propos des expositions internationales du Surréalisme. Un document de 1947 et quelques considérations,” *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 120 (April 1978):163-171.

See Esther Acevedo, ed., *Hacia otra historia del arte en México. La fabricación del arte nacional a debate (1920-1950)*, Vol. 3 (Mexico City: Conaculta, Arte e imagen, 2001-2004).

4 Ida Rodríguez Prampolini. *El Surrealismo y el arte fantástico de México* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1969).

5 Rodríguez first advanced the idea of the “fantastic” art of Mexico in an article of 1967: Ida Rodríguez-Prampolini, “Surrealismo y arte fantástico en México,” *Revista de la Universidad de México*, 21 (12) (Aug.-Sept. 1967).

6 For an analysis of this *oeuvre*, see Jennifer Josten, “A Breach in the Cactus Curtain: Ida Rodríguez Prampolini and the Diffusion of International Contemporary Art in Mexico, 1959-1968” (paper presented at *Transnational Latin American Art*, a conference at the University of Texas at Austin, Austin, November 7, 2009).

7 Luis Mario Schneider, *México y el Surrealismo (1925-1950)* (Mexico City: Arte y Libros, 1978), 171.

8 The inclusion of texts in two languages is explained by the fact that the show was intended to travel to Peggy Guggenheim's gallery in New York later in 1940. Although this never happened, it does evince its international aspirations as well as the direct relationship its organizers had with artists in that city. Amy Winter, *Wolfgang Paalen, Artist and Theorist of the Avant-garde* (Westport and London: Praeger, 2003), 95.

9 Leonor Morales, *Wolfgang Paalen: Introdutor del Surrealismo en México* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1984), 8.

10 Dawn Ades, "Rivera and Surrealism in Mexico, 1938-1940," in *Diego Rivera: Art and Revolution*, exhibition catalogue (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, Landucci Editores, 1999), 318.

11 This contrast was paralleled in the presentation of these works in the catalogue for the exhibition. In it, Kahlo's *Las Dos Fridas* was confronted with Max Ernst's *Zoomorph Couple*, of 1933, a painting with which it shared only a very general compositional layout. Rivera's *Mandrake*, on the other hand, appeared alongside Yves Tanguy's *The other Paths* of 1939. Tanguy's painting depicted a mindscape populated by biomorphic personages against which Rivera's image offered a compelling counterpoint. See *Exposición Internacional del Surrealismo*, exhibition catalogue (Mexico City: Galería de Arte Mexicano, 1940), n.p.

12 Ades, "Rivera and Surrealism in Mexico," 313.

13 The controversy in which he incurred during this decade is perhaps best exemplified by two texts, one, "Rivera's Counterrevolutionary Way," written against Rivera by David Alfaro Siqueiros in 1934, and its response, "Contra los Stalinistas," which Rivera published in 1936 in Buenos Aires, but which was available in Mexico since 1935. Both are reproduced in Raquel Tibol, *Documentación sobre el arte Mexicano* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1974), 53-82.

14 Robin Adèle Greeley, "For an Independent Revolutionary Art: Breton, Trotsky and Cárdenas's Mexico," in *Surrealism, Politics and Culture*, note 72.

15 For an English version of the manifesto, see André Breton and Diego Rivera, trans. Dwight McDonald, "Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art," *Partisan Review* (Fall 1938): 49-53.

16 Greeley, 223.

17 André Breton, "Souvenir du Mexique." *Minotaure* 12-13 (1939): 31.

18 Greeley, 217.

19 André Coyné, "No en vano nacido, César Moro..." in *El Surrealismo entre viejo y Nuevo Mundo*, exhibition catalogue (Madrid: Quinto Centenario, 1989), 121.

Pedro Favaron, *Caminando sobre el abismo: Vida y poesía en César Moro* (Lima: Antares Artes y Letras, 2003), 64. About Moro and Surrealism, see also Emilio Westphalen, "Digresión sobre Surrealismo y sobre César Moro entre los surrealistas," in Joseph Alonso, Daniel Lefort and José Rodríguez Garrido, eds., *Avatares del Surrealismo en el Perú y América Latina* (Lima: Institut Français d'Etudes Andines, Pontificia Universidad Católica, 1992), 203-217.

21 Schneider, *México y el Surrealismo*, 170. The first, "The trajectory of dream," was a review of a collection of documents about dreams published by Breton in Paris in 1938. See *Letras de México*, 3 (II) 10 (Oct. 15, 1939): 5. For a discussion of the journal's involvement with Surrealism in Mexico, see María de Lourdes Franco, *Letras de México. Gaceta Literaria y Artística (1937-1947)* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1981), 19-55.

22 César Moro, "La realidad a vista perdida," *Letras de México*, 3 (II) 11 (Nov. 15, 1939): 8.

23 César Moro, *Exposición Internacional del Surrealismo*, exhibition catalogue (Mexico City: Galería de Arte Mexicano, 1940), n.p.

24 Schneider, *México y el Surrealismo*, 182.

25 Luis Basurto Jr., "La Gran Exposición Surrealista Internacional. I. Los Pintores Mexicanos."

Excelsior, January 20, 1940.

26 Luis Basurto Jr., "La Gran Exposición Surrealista Internacional. II. Los Pintores Mexicanos." *Excelsior*, January 23, 1940.

27 Schneider, *México y el Surrealismo*, 170.

28 Jorge Manrique, "Rompimiento y Rompimientos en el Arte Mexicano," in *Ruptura, 1952-1965: Catálogo de la Exposición, Museo de Arte Alvar y Carmen T. de Carrillo Gil, Museo Biblioteca Pape*, exhibition catalogue (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1988), 37.

29 Deborah Cohn, "La construcción de la identidad cultural en México: Nacionalismo, Cosmopolitismo e infraestructura intelectual, 1945-1968," in Kristine Van den Berghe and Maarten van Delden, eds., *El Laberinto de la Solidaridad. Cultura y Política en México (1910-2000)* (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, Presses Universitaires de Namur, 2002), 89-103.

30 On Rivera's U.S. commissions, see Robert Linsley, "Utopia will not be televised: Rivera at Rockefeller Center," *Oxford Art Journal* 17 (2) (1994): 48-62; Linda Bank Downs, *Diego Rivera: The Detroit Industry Murals* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999); Anthony W. Lee, *Painting on the Left: Diego Rivera, Radical Politics, and San Francisco's Public Murals* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999). For an account of Siqueiros' later career and global aspirations, see Leonard Folgarait, *So far from Heaven: David Alfaro Siqueiros' The March of Humanity and Mexican Revolutionary Politics* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

31 On Tamayo, see Diana C. Du Pont and Mary K. Coffey, eds., *Tamayo: A Modern Icon Reinterpreted*, exhibition catalogue (Santa Barbara: Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 2007).

32 Rodríguez, *El Surrealismo*, 56.

33 Rodríguez, *El Surrealismo*, 60-63.

34 Rodríguez, *El Surrealismo*, 45-46.

35 See Jas Reuter, "Posada and the popular traditions," trans. Marigold Best, in Dirk W. Raat and William H. Beezley, eds., *Twentieth-century Mexico* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 84-97.

36 Fernando Gamboa, *Posada, Printmaker to the Mexican People*, exhibition catalogue (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1944), 15.

37 Fernando Gamboa, "Modern Art," in *Master Works of Mexican Art from pre-Columbian Times to the Present*, exhibition catalogue (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1963), 233-234.

38 Rodríguez, *El Surrealismo*, 46-47.

39 Rodríguez, *El Surrealismo*, 47. The emphasis is the author's.

Teresa del Conde, *Julio Ruelas* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1976), 40.

41 See Leonor Morales, *Wolfgang Paalen: Introdutor del Surrealismo en México* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1984), 11-18.

42 Mari Carmen Ramírez, "Beyond 'The fantastic': Framing identity in U.S. exhibition of Latin American art," *Art Journal* 51 (4) (Winter 1992): 63. Subsequently, the essay gave birth to one of the most important anthologies of Latin American art criticism: see Gerardo Mosquera, *Beyond the Fantastic. Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America* (London: The Institute of International Visual Arts and Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996). Although positioned passionately against the paradigm, the volume offers little in the way of its historical deconstruction.

43 Alfred Barr, *Fantastic Art, Dada Surrealism*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936).

44 Lourdes Andrade, "De amores y desamores: Relaciones de México con el surrealismo," in *El Surrealismo entre Viejo y Nuevo Mundo*, exhibition catalogue (Madrid: Quinto Centenario, 1989), 109.

- 45 Alejo Carpentier, *El Reino de Este Mundo* (Mexico City: Edición y Distribución Ibero Americana de Publicaciones, 1949).
- 46 Anita Brenner, *Idols Behind Altars* (New York: Harcourt & Brace, 1929).
- 47 Rodríguez, *El Surrealismo*, 96.
- 48 Octavio Paz, *El Laberinto de la Soledad* (Mexico City: Cuadernos Americanos, 1950).
- 49 Olivier Debrose, "Veinte son muchos años [*Confrontación 86*]," *La Jornada*, July 25, 1986. See, also, Juan García Ponce, "Confrontación 66," in *Ruptura, 1953-1965*, 111-120.
- 50 Leopoldo Zea, "Introducción," in Leopoldo Zea, et al, *Características de la cultura nacional* (Mexico City: UNAM, Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales, 1969), 8.
- 51 Lourdes Andrade, *Para la desorientación general. Trece ensayos sobre el Surrealismo* (Mexico City: Editorial Aldus, 1996), 31-37. See also José Pierre's invective against the paradigm of "fantastic art," one more destructive than it is illuminating. José Pierre, "Algunas reflexiones deshilvanadas sobre el encuentro de México y del surrealismo," in *El Surrealismo entre Viejo y Nuevo Mundo*, exhibition catalogue (Madrid: Quinto Centenario, 1989), 110-117.
- 52 The book was based on lectures delivered in October 1969 at the University of Texas at Austin. See Octavio Paz, *Posdata* (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1970).
- 53 For a general analysis of these realignments, see Juan F. Marsal, "Les Intellectuels Mexicains, Le Parti Révolutionnaire Institutionnel et le Massacre de Tlatelolco," in *Intellectuels et état au Mexique au XXe siècle* (Paris: Éditions du C.N.R.S., 1979), 91-104.
- 54 Starting in 1959, Rodríguez published an international art column in *Arquitectura México*, the country's premier publication on architecture, and other publications such as *Novedades*. Among the early examples see "Reaparición del Arte Alemán," *Arquitectura México* 66 (June 1959); "Problemas del arte abstracto," *Novedades* 622 (February 12, 1961); "El arte de la basura o los pepenadores del arte," *Novedades* 637 (May 28, 1961). Anything but a nationalist tone pervades some of Rodríguez's publications after 1969: see for instance Ida Rodríguez Prampolini. *Pedro Friedeberg* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1973); Ida Rodríguez Prampolini, *Herbert Bayer, Un Concepto Total* (Mexico City: UNAM, Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, 1975).