

The Lost Secret
Frida Kahlo and the Surrealist Imaginary

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The year 1938 saw both Frida Kahlo and André Breton enter new stages of their respective careers. Kahlo became established with a major show which ran from the first to the fifteenth of November at the Julien Levy Gallery on East 57th Street in New York, the gateway to America for European and Latin American Surrealists. In a letter to Gómez Arias from New York, Kahlo expressed her delight at the show and her public reception: “the gallery is boss and the paintings have been hung well. See *Vogue*: there are three reproductions in it, one in colour, I think is quite *drepa* [great]; something will also come out in *Life* this week.”¹ Half of the paintings sold and new ones were commissioned from eminent art world figures such as Anson Conger Goodyear, the president of MOMA, who requested a Kahlo self portrait, and Clare Boothe Luce, the managing editor of *Vanity Fair*, who commissioned a portrait of the actress Dorothy Hale for Hale’s mother, following Hale’s recent suicide.² Writing on the show in *Vogue* magazine, Bertram D. Wolfe, a friend of Kahlo and Diego Rivera, presented her art as “a sort of ‘naïve’ Surrealism, which she invented for herself,” noting it was free from “the Freudian symbols and philosophy that obsess the official Surrealist painters.”³ *Time* magazine confirmed the excitement round Kahlo’s show, announcing “The flutter of the week in Manhattan was caused by the first exhibition of paintings by famed muralist Diego Rivera’s German-Mexican wife, Frida Kahlo.”⁴ Here too, however, a naïve or infantile quality was read into her art: it was described by the critic as having “the daintiness of miniatures, the vivid reds and yellows of Mexican tradition and the playfully bloody fancy of an unsentimental child.”⁵ As Levy noted in his memoirs, Kahlo’s very presence in New York caused a sensation, helped by her lavish Mexican dress which was viewed

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as the height of exotica. When accompanying her round the streets near his gallery, Levy found she drew a crowd. On one walk from the gallery up Madison Avenue to 58th Street and then to Fifth Avenue, ending at the Central Hanover Bank, “we were surrounded by a flock of children who had followed us, despite the protests of the doorman. ‘Where is the circus?’ they were calling. ‘Fiesta’ would have been more accurate. Frida was dressed in full Mexican costume. She was beautiful and picturesque.”⁶

Kahlo owed a debt to Breton for her show, his discovery of her art in Mexico in April 1938 having led him to claim her for the surrealist movement, to encourage Levy to contact her, and then to pen an essay for the exhibition catalogue. But Kahlo was a discovery which cemented a new direction for the leader of the surrealist movement too, guiding the path his interests would take towards the indigenous and mythical during and after World War II. In his catalogue essay Breton claimed Kahlo stood “at that point of intersection between the political (philosophical) line and the artistic line, beyond which we hope that they may unite in a single revolutionary consciousness while still preserving intact the identities of the separate motivating forces that run through them.”⁷ He found the essence of the feminine in Kahlo: “there is no art more exclusively feminine, in the sense that, in order to be as seductive as possible it is only too willing to play alternately at being absolutely pure and absolutely pernicious. The art of Frida Kahlo is a ribbon around a bomb.”⁸ Soon after, in his lengthy analysis of Mexico entitled “Souvenir du Mexique,” published in *Minotaure*, a review published from 1933 to 1939 with the specific aim to restore art to its “universal scope,” Breton went further in his appreciation.⁹ He wrote that he had found in Mexico an “innate sense of poetry, of art, as they should be practiced by all, for all, and the lost secret for which we Europeans are desperately seeking.”¹⁰

For Breton, Kahlo’s *What the Water Gave Me* (1938, Fig. 1), was exemplary of her Surrealism.¹¹ In this work traditional and ancient iconography, mythology and symbolism, eroticism and botany, are all mapped out onto the legs of a female (Kahlo, as signified by her wounded right foot), who is submerged in bath water. In the composition, Kahlo maps out her life story by including details of earlier works and influences, notably her painting *My Grandparents, My Parents and I* (1936), allusions to fifteenth-century painter Hieronymus Bosch’s *The Garden of Delights* in her attention to flora and fauna, and a reference to her political position by documenting both the clash of the old and new in the dramatic detail of an American skyscraper burning in the crater of a volcano. A skeleton and a nude bather choked by a rope lend further macabre psychological drama to the work.¹² For the critic Wolfe, Kahlo’s “brand” of Surrealism appeared to fuse Surrealism and “a deep-rooted Mexican tradition.”¹³



Fig.1. Frida Kahlo, *What I Saw in the Water or What the Water Gave Me*, 1938, oil on canvas. Christies Images/ Photo © Christie's Images/ The Bridgeman Art Library/ DACS London

Breton found in this painting a quintessential surrealist modernism, the “lost secret” he had been searching for and all its feminine and hybrid power. Through such compelling images, Breton appears to have found in Kahlo a new “geography of modernism,” to borrow Andreas Huyssen’s term: the means to form a relationship between the once colonized (Kahlo) and the European (Breton) which was mutually enriching and inherently anti-bourgeois. As Huyssen explains in his conceptualization of geographies of modernism,

It was often the encounter of colonial artists and intellectuals with the modernist culture of the metropolis that supported the desire for liberation and independence. And it was the reciprocal though asymmetrical encounter of the European artist with the colonial world that fed into the turn against the traditions of proper bourgeois culture.¹⁴

Breton did not view Kahlo as an outsider nor did he exaggerate Kahlo's indigenous profile for its own sake. Rather, his stance was progressive— utopian too—in welcoming Kahlo to Surrealism as part of the movement's alternative global ambition which defied nationalism at a time when fascism's global project was to brutally reinforce it. Kahlo's "intertextuality," as she fused native Mexican and Surrealist styles, had immense poetic and political appeal.

An Exclusive Femininity

Prior to his Mexican sojourn, Breton personified the feminine and its exclusive, seductive, potential in the black eyed, blonde protagonist *Najda* (1928). This heroine's enigmatic and delicate disposition was so enticing that the poet described her in ethereal terms, writing that it was as if her feet did not touch the ground as she walked the streets of Paris.¹⁵ The 1938 international surrealist exhibition held in the Galerie Beaux-Arts in Paris, a few months before Breton sailed for Mexico, celebrated such feminine mystery and potential in staging a microcosmic surrealist universe of uncanny potential with a street of mannequins. They were selected and dressed to explicitly embody the "Eternal Feminine" according to writer Georges Hugnet.¹⁶ War did not halt Breton's obsession with the feminine—it fuelled it. In *Arcane 17* (1944) he lent the feminine a new historical gravitas in the guise of the fourteenth-century nymph figure, Melusine, writing that the "time has come to value the ideas of woman at the expense of those of men, whose bankruptcy is coming to pass fairly tumultuously today."¹⁷ Indeed he felt woman would lead society out of spiritual ruination, writing "she's the only one I can see who could redeem this savage epoch."¹⁸ For Breton, the feminine was aligned to love, poetry and art—hence Melusine's power to redeem and reform. A leaning towards Roman Catholic iconography persisted in this characterization, notably in allying the feminine with birth and death, sacrifice and redemption, virtue and vice, the sacred and the profane but also in the fact that Melusine, like the Virgin Mary, was part human, part divine. Breton and his circle perverted the ideal Mother/Virgin but still dialogued with it.¹⁹

Kahlo's portrayal of women also incorporated the heritage of the Church and an obsessive return to the figure of the Virgin Mary, though she fused this image with the heritage of the Aztlán. As with other Surrealists, such as Salvador Dalí and Joan Miró, Kahlo's childhood was shaped by Catholicism. Her mother, Matilde Calderón, was a devout Catholic and sent her to a Catholic school where catechism classes led Kahlo to become fascinated with the life of Saint Theresa of Avila.²⁰ Kahlo's representation of the female body, notably the body in pain, was grounded in a spiritualism which built on Catholic martyrdom and the iconography of the *retablo*: a small oil painting displaying a single saint, Christ, the Virgin Mary,

or a group of holy personages, portrayed as “a closing of a critical event and [a] continuing with life.”²¹ Kahlo owned more than two-thousand *retablos* and adapted the *retablo* tradition in her oeuvre to introduce the personal, domestic and emphatically feminine realm. The themes of the Mother figure, the goddess of myth and folktales, and the immaculate conception, which so fascinated Breton, all abound in Kahlo’s art, albeit with a peculiarly pre-Columbian and psycho-biographical edge.

In addition, Kahlo offered the Surrealists a feminine path which spoke to their geopolitical interests in the 1930s. The discovery of Kahlo fell between the surrealist map of the world published in *Variétés* in 1929, in which Mexico figures prominently, and Breton’s stated affinity with “people of color” in an interview in New York in 1945.²² Further, as the Mexican cultural renaissance overlapped with the promotion of regionalism in the United States, Kahlo’s powerful and stoic portrayal of her own pain and the redemptive power of the feminine offered a peculiarly surrealist modernism to North America. Kahlo stood on the border of Mexico and



Fig. 2. Frida Kahlo, *Self-Portrait on the Borderline between Mexico and the United States*, 1932, oil on metal. Private Collection/ Photo © Christie’s Images/ The Bridgeman Art Library/ DACS London

the United States, as she portrayed herself in *Self-Portrait on the Borderline of Mexico and the United States* of 1932 (Fig.2) and pitched pre-Columbian society against Fordist industrial advance. But in art historical terms she stood on the borderline of Mexico, New York and Paris, uniting all three cities in their avant-garde aspirations.

Kahlo's role in Breton's geopolitical vision of Surrealism and the manner in which her art brought together these supposedly sparring cities as the world stood on the brink of war reflects the exciting new status of Mexico in the eyes of the avant-garde. Soviet Russian film director Sergei Eisenstein had already made a pilgrimage to Mexico in 1930-31 to film its post-revolutionary spirit for his never completed film *Que Viva Mexico!*²³ Eisenstein intended the Sixth Story (or "Epilogue") of the film to "show modern, progressive Mexico with its art, industry and other forms of progress that result from the Revolution. This story will contain various scenes of natural beauty such as Michoacán, etc. It will show a liberated people and a highly modern civilization."²⁴ Eisenstein, a German Jew from Riga, fetishized the Mexican nation and confronted his own identity in the process of this film, but his glorification of Mexico was also part of a much wider modernist assault on high culture.²⁵ The feminine was central to Eisenstein's assault, just as it was to Breton's, as the woman question and civilization question were invariably intertwined in modernity. As Christine Buci-Glucksmann argued, "the metaphor of the feminine then rises up as an element in the break with a certain discredited rationality based upon the idea of a historical and symbolic continuum. It does this by designating a new heterogeneity, a new Otherness."²⁶

Transatlantic Politics

Otherness was seminal to Breton's transatlantic position. In the aftermath of the Wallstreet Crash of 1929, and with the establishment of the Federal Arts Project (1935-1943), American culture witnessed a rise in social realist art by painters Lucienne Bloch, Philip Guston, Thomas Hart Benton and Jackson Pollock. Though the Mexican Muralists José Orozco, David Siqueiros and Rivera painted mural cycles as part of the project, their work in the United States was largely devoid of the more radical revolutionary-nationalism of their Mexican paintings and murals. When it was explicitly political it bore the brunt of censorship as evidenced by the collapse of Rivera's mural commission for the Rockefeller Center in New York in May 1933. As *Time* magazine reported, due to his inclusion of the head of Vladimir Lenin in a fresco panel entitled *Man at the Crossroads*, "John D. Rockefeller Jr.'s son Nelson asked Rivera 'to substitute the face of some unknown man where Lenin's face appears.' Rivera had countered by offering to balance Lenin with a portrait of Abraham Lincoln. The Rockefellers exploded and fired Rivera."²⁷ *The New York*

Times reported on the outcry over this censorship too: “between 75 and 100 men and women sympathisers of the artist paraded in front of the Rockefeller building, shouting ‘Save Rivera’s art!’ and ‘We want Rivera!’ They carried banners on which similar sentiments were emblazoned.”²⁸ The controversy suggested the importance of Rivera and the Mexican muralists to the economic and cultural plan of the New Deal as long as they muted their Communism. Soon after, in an address at the Rand School in New York, Rivera publicly stated that “art should be propaganda,” and “art which is not propaganda is not art at all”—a position which summarized the essential tension between American art and the international avant-garde, whether from Mexico City or Paris.²⁹ The director of the Federal Art Project, Holger Cahill, wrote of the Project’s “spirit of frontier democracy” and its search for a new social role for artists drawing on the “fresh poetry of the soil.”³⁰ The Project promoted an American art which drew on the nation’s mythic past and long traditions of folk-culture and design, but which was suspicious of international modernism and art-for-art’s sake. Thomas Hart Benton reflected the dominant cultural mind-set in declaring that the United States was under threat from aesthetic colonialism:

The United States is invaded by aliens, thousands of whom constitute so many acute perils to the health of the body politic...these movements have been promoted by types not yet fitted for the first papers in aesthetic naturalization – the markers of true Ellis Island art.³¹

Given this mind-set, the surrealist movement’s role within the consolidation of the connection between Europe and the United States was invariably a gradual one. Surrealism’s profile benefitted with Alfred Barr’s “Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism” show at MOMA which ran from December 7 1936 to January 17 1937. It won considerable, if mixed, press and public attention. Surrealism still shocked and outraged aesthetic sensibilities, and threatened to win over its American audiences as indicated by Henry McBride’s declaration in one of the first reviews of the exhibition,

Those Surrealists are out to capture New York; and if you do not watch out, if you do not quickly arrange some system of defense, they will do so. The shattering bombardments now emanating from the Museum of Modern Art are not the first attack upon this fair city. On the contrary there have been so many and apparently harmless onsets in the recent years that the guileless citizens got used to them, and last Tuesday evening, when the opening explosions of the private view occurred, the fashionable multitude allowed

them to detonate unconcernedly, just as though nothing were happening.”³²

Lewis Mumford warned his readers more kindly stating, “It would be absurd to dismiss Surrealism as crazy. Maybe it is our civilization that is crazy. Has it not used all the powers of the rational intellect ... to universalize meaningless War and turn whole states into fascist madhouses?”³³ Come February 1, 1937 the *Art Digest* critic Sibilla Skidelsky decided to dismiss the show as a “huge absurdity,” claiming the artists were only on exhibit in New York because their own countries were no longer interested in their art.³⁴

By the end of the decade aspects of Surrealism were also infiltrating popular culture in advertising, shop window displays and cinema. Dalí led this osmosis with his much publicised presence in New York, his two window displays at the Bonwit Teller stores *Jour (Narcisse)* and *Nuit (Sommeil)*, and his *Dream of Venus* installation at the 1939 World Fair. Though dismissed from the Paris group, Dalí was the popular face of Surrealism in America as war broke out in Europe, and apart from Kahlo, he was never upstaged. However if Surrealism took root in the United States, and notably in the city of New York, it was only through a process of gradual cultural assimilation. Levy and Barr ensured the revolutionary and political ambitions of Surrealism were underplayed (if not censored out altogether through the selective presentation of Surrealism, minus manifestoes or Breton’s usual authorial role in exhibitions). This became especially evident in Barr’s 1936 MOMA exhibition, where, as Dickran Tashjian argues, an attempt to interweave Surrealism within a general history of art ensured that “Surrealism fell victim to the cultural imperialism of the Modern.”³⁵

Kahlo’s dramatic impact on the American press and public was indicative of this fear of and fascination with the foreign. Her inclusion in the MOMA’s landmark “Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art” exhibition in 1940 and in “Exhibition by 31 Women,” which ran from 5 January to 6 February 1943 at Peggy Guggenheim’s Art of this Century Gallery, indicated she her status as a modern artist to be taken seriously. That said, a tone of suspicion persisted amongst some critics. While Edward Alden Jewell of the New York Times wrote a positive review of the Guggenheim show, McBride attacked the movement with added chauvinistic force, writing,

Surrealism is about 70 percent hysterics, 20 percent literature, 5 percent good painting, and 5 percent is just saying ‘boo’ to the innocent public... Considering the statistics the doctors hand out, and considering the percentages above ... it is obvious the women ought to excel at Surrealism.³⁶

Ruling over a Bewitched New York

Prior to these exhibitions, Kahlo's fame spread slowly as the third wife of Rivera, having married him in the city hall in Coyoacán on 21 August 1929. The union was viewed in Mexico as the marriage of the local and the international and had been documented with interest by the American press; her parents viewed the marriage of the gargantuan forty-two year old artist and their petite twenty-two year old daughter as the marriage "between an elephant and a dove."³⁷ Under a photograph of the couple, a journalist in *La Prensa* wrote: "Last Wednesday in the nearby village of Coyoacán, the controversial painter Diego Rivera was married to Miss Frieda [sic] Kahlo, one of his students. The bride was dressed, as can be seen, in simple street garb, and the painter Rivera as an American, without a vest."³⁸ Described as a modest affair, the ceremony indicated the couple's Communist values and identification with the worker, while their attire fused the modern with the traditional and indigenous. It was the first time Kahlo had dressed in a *rebozo* —a woven shawl which was worn by all social classes and distinguished only by the material (wool, cotton, silk) it was made from. She borrowed the item from a maid, performing her new Tehuana-inspired identity in the full knowledge that it flattered her husband's politics and desires, a man who romanticized Amazon women who "rule over bewitched men."³⁹

Kahlo's self-fashioning as a newly married woman complemented Rivera's elevation of the peasant and worker in his public murals. In his Ministry of Education murals, the people of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec literally outshine other characters. As one of the founders of the Futurist-like group, the *Estridentistas*, the writer Manuel Maples Arce, observed: "On the second floor, in grey monochromes, there are intellectual symbols. In the corridor of the third floor, in warmer tones... the spiritual life of the people is on show."⁴⁰ The muralist's peculiar celebration of the feminine, evidenced in the womb-like compositions in the Ministry of Education murals, distanced it from the machismo and formal concerns of the *Estridentistas* and brought him nearer to the Surrealists. Rivera stood at the crossroads of myth and modernism, embracing pre-Columbian iconography and identity, on the one hand, and avant-garde technique and language, on the other. His influence on the young artist Kahlo lay in this appreciation of the pre-Columbian and openness to internationalism; it also lay in his introduction of her to the European and American art world and entrenchment of her political beliefs (Fig. 3).

Claudia Schaefer insists that Kahlo's personal transition from modern Mexican woman to modern artist wearing traditional garb mirrors Mexico itself, specifically its "phase of self-examination and self-definition after the Revolution."⁴¹ When Kahlo entered the United States with Rivera and through San Francisco,



Fig.3. Photo of Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera (raising his fist in a communist salute) during Mexican Labor's anti-fascist demonstration in Mexico City, Nov. 23 1936. Photo © AP/ Press Association Images

Detroit and New York and wearing Tehuana dress, she performed her Mexican identity alongside her gendered one. Rebecca Block and Lynda Hoffman-Jeep also view Kahlo's self-fashioning as embodying "the two main goals of post revolutionary Mexican leaders: she exalts contemporary manifestations of Mexico's pre-Hispanic past (the Aztec jewelry and her achievement of a "native look" with her simple coiffure) and simultaneously directs attention to the rich diversity in Mexican culture (the different types of *rebozo*, her dress, pose, and props)."⁴² In the painting *Self-Portrait on the Borderline between Mexico and the United States* (1932), Kahlo stands as no woman artist ever had before her, positing herself as a "postcolonial subject," defying any dictated place.⁴³

In this reading, Block and Hoffman-Jeep draw on Frederic Jameson's interpretation of Third-World literature in which he claims the Third World is defined by the experience of colonialism and imperialism and its cultural production

by nationalism.⁴⁴ However, in adopting Jameson's view of the Third World text for Kahlo's art, Block and Hoffman-Jeep insist on a binary opposition between First and Third Worlds, which pitches Kahlo's art against her North American neighbor (and European comrades) and reinforces a divide which ignores the global modernism of Kahlo and her surrealist fusion of the poetic and political. Kahlo's representations of the allegorical female body do not employ the traditionally gendered imagery of colonization but subvert them to overthrow the binary-driven hierarchies of art and the colonizer-colonized. Certainly, Kahlo unveiled Mexico to an American society she viewed as keen to destroy its nature and traditions in the name of capitalist progress, but her relationship with North America and Europe was more nuanced than Jameson's frame allows. She produced art in and for exhibitions in North America and Europe, and if her art spoke to a personal Latin American identity it did so with a collective pertinence which was not peculiar to the Third World (as in Jameson's frame), but to the international agenda and politics of the avant-garde.

Mexico: a Land with the "power of conciliating life and death"

Mexico was an established haven for international writers and artists during the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940). It also won considerable attention on French shores by the time Breton secured work as cultural ambassador to visit Mexico in 1938.⁴⁵ A 1929 exhibition entitled "The Ancient Arts of America," at the Pavillon de Marsan, organised by Georges-Henri Rivière and Alfred Malraux, brought many aspects of its culture to public attention, while Antonin Artaud's accounts of his 1936 visit to Mexico, including his experience of peyote with the Tarahumara people, seized the imaginations of his surrealist circle. In February 1936 Artaud gave a series of lectures on Surrealism and theater at the University of Mexico, also writing for the *Nacional Revolucionario*, and meeting with the painter María Izquierdo (1906-55) at the Café Paris in Mexico City. His 1936 essay on Izquierdo claimed she was a modern reincarnation of the "Indian soul," and her gouaches "indigenous people trembling naked among the ruins."⁴⁶ Artaud saw Surrealism as sharing this native spirit: "Surrealism, Cubism, Picasso, Chirico, Balthus ... are nothing else than the old animist spirit of the Mexican totems and the high magical poetry and metaphysic of the Popol Vuh, of the Rabinal-Achi, or Ollantay, of the Pyramids of Chichén Itzá, or the Mayan Hieroglyphs, etc ..."⁴⁷

Breton's stance on Mexico and Kahlo may have indulged in a mysticism which echoed Artaud's prose, but he tailored it to a specific political, collective agenda. When he and Jacqueline Lamba found on their arrival in Mexico City that no accommodation (or fees for Breton's cultural talks) had actually been arranged by the French Embassy for them, they were gratefully "adopted" by Rivera and

Kahlo, who invited them to stay as their guest.⁴⁸ While part of Kahlo's circle, Breton took a major step for Surrealism, one which marked the end of his dispute with the Communist Party's stance on art in offering an alternative to it: he helped Trotsky and Rivera draft the manifesto "For an Independent Revolutionary Art" which launched the *Fédération internationale de l'art révolutionnaire indépendant* (FIARI), declaring that the task of the epoch was to participate actively in the preparation of the revolution.⁴⁹ The manifesto called for an international revolution, in opposition to Stalin's state policy of Socialist Realism and "socialism in one country," but also in opposition to the burgeoning threat of Fascism, recently displayed in the 1937 World Fair where the Soviet and German pavilions dominated the architectural scheme. The FIARI manifesto not only brought these three men together in a common political stance, it also united them with the Left in the United States. *Partisan Review* published the tract in the fall of 1938 that included a public declaration by Dwight Macdonald indicating he was prepared to form an American section of FIARI.⁵⁰

In "Souvenir du Mexique" Breton described Mexico as "Red land, virgin land, all soaked with the most generous blood, land where man's life is priceless, yet ready as the agave (always its best expression) to consume itself in a flowering of desire and danger!"⁵¹ He claimed Aztec culture was the foundation of modern Mexican cultural revolution, while "the power of conciliating life and death" was "the main attraction that lures us to Mexico."⁵² Breton explained he arrived in Mexico with a favorable disposition thanks to the strong impression one of the first books he read as a child, Gabriel Ferry's *Costal, the Indian Zapotec: A Tale of Mexico during the War of Independence* (1852).⁵³ Zapotec's love of independence inspired Breton's adventurer's turn of phrase and conflation of the revolutionary spirit of France with that of Latin America, as well as his fascination with Kahlo's Tehuana dress (the typical dress of the Isthmus Zapotec women) and beauty, which could but have reminded him of the long silky hair, small feet and Creole spirit of the female protagonist in the story, Gertrudis.⁵⁴ His selection of illustrations for "Souvenir du Mexique" paid homage to the many characteristics of the Mexicans: black and white reproductions of Rivera's 1938 paintings *Casabuatl (Guerrero-Taxco)* and *The Couple*, José Guadalupe Posada's carton strip *Zapata*, and photographs by Manuel Alvarez Bravo. Alvarez Bravo's black and white photographs of *The Dreamer* (1931) and *After the Strike (Tehuantepec)* (1934), are particularly telling as far as Breton's post-revolutionary view of Mexico and its surrealist potential are concerned. In one a young boy dreams, in the other which opens the essay, a young man lies dead in a pool of his own blood, the victim of those who feared his revolutionary spirit.

By the time this essay was published Breton had become increasingly political in many public ways. In 1933 he was one of the leaders of the PCF-led

Revolutionary Writers and Artist Association; in 1934 he protested against the threat to expel Trotsky from France where Trotsky had been recently exiled; in a lecture delivered in Prague in 1935 on “The Political Position of Surrealism” he referred to Trotsky several times and cited his revolutionary aim to “win every man’s right not only to bread but to poetry;” in 1936 he denounced the Moscow trials.⁵⁵ In July 1938, when he arrived in Mexico and recognized Frida Kahlo as “delicately situated at that point of intersection between the political (philosophical) line and the artistic line,” Breton used her art to reinforce Surrealism’s call for “a single revolutionary consciousness.”⁵⁶

Paris and the “cocoo lunatic sons of bitches of the surrealists”

Breton returned the hospitality when Kahlo visited Paris at his invitation in February 1939 to participate in the “Mexique” show at the Renou et Colle Gallery. She stayed with the Bretons and then Kurt and Arlette Seligmann.⁵⁷ Though she “won over the Parisian world of art more completely than more famous painters had after years of struggle,” it proved to be a troubled visit.⁵⁸ In a letter from Paris to her lover the photographer Nickolas Muray, Kahlo described Duchamp as a “marvelous painter” and the “only one who has his feet on the earth, among all this bunch of cocoo lunatic sons of bitches of the surrealists.”⁵⁹ She was critical of Breton largely due to his curatorial ineptitude—he failed to clear her art with customs in good time—and the fact that he included in her show such popular objects as *retablos*, toys, sugar skulls, and ceramics which he had collected in Mexican flea markets. Kahlo disparaged “all this junk.”⁶⁰ But her joy over the positive reception of her art by Miró, Picasso, Tanguy, Paalen and other Surrealists, indicates that she did not have a deep rooted dislike of the movement or its ambitions and was adamant to be taken as seriously as its male protagonists. She also viewed it as a major honor to have her vivid self-portrait with parrots and floral frame, painted on aluminum and glass, *Self-Portrait “The Frame”* (1937-8), purchased by the Louvre.⁶¹ Indeed, while Kahlo may have quipped in her letter to Muray that Breton and his circle were too intellectual, the influence of this immersion in the surrealist circle stayed with her. A year later, in January 1940, she also happily exhibited in the “Exposicion Internacional del Surrealismo,” at Ines Amor’s Galeria de Arte Mexicano in Mexico City.⁶² Organized by Breton, Wolfgang Paalen and the Peruvian artist César Moro the international show included Kahlo and Rivera and eight other Mexican artists, as well as the photographer Manuel Alvarez Bravo and pre-Columbian objects from Rivera’s collection.⁶³

By 1942 Kahlo’s *Diary* reveals an increasing shift towards surrealist technique, as her art moved towards the psychoanalytic and displayed the influences of Dalí,

Max Ernst and Pablo Picasso. Image and word play became increasingly evident in her diary and an associative patterning not unlike that in surrealist poems and automatic drawings. Drawings revealed the influence of other surrealist artists and surrealist interests on her imagery: notably *Fantasy* (1944) with its suspended foot, mountain morphing into breasts, and Dalí-like eye with a clock for an iris; *Moses* (1945), based on her reading of Freud; and *Karma II* (1946), where Kahlo's style is strikingly similar to André Masson's automatism, as limbs and landscape interlink.⁶⁴

Of course by the mid 1940s many Surrealists had emigrated to Mexico and Kahlo would have been met them and been exposed to new surrealist debates and ideas in Wolfgang Paalen's review *DYN*, a breakaway surrealist journal launched in 1942 that produced six issues until its end in 1944. *DYN* reflected an internationalist and Trotskyite political perspective and a strong leaning towards pre-Columbian art in the essays (published in English, French and Spanish) and artworks reproduced in its pages. Paalen and his wife, the poet and artist Alice Rahon, settled in Mexico in 1939, Benjamin Péret and Remedios Varo sailed there via Casablanca in the winter of 1941, Gordon Onslow Ford and Jacqueline Johnson arrived in the summer of 1941, spending some time with Matta who was vacationing in Taxco with his wife, Robert Motherwell and Bernard Reis' daughter, and in the spring of 1942 Leonora Carrington arrived with her new Mexican husband, Renato Leduc. A new rhythmic, often automatist approach to form and space and very vibrant palette was increasingly evident in the art of Matta, Onslow Ford, Wolfgang and Alice Paalen as the Mexican landscape and art scene influenced their styles.

In the first edition of *DYN* (April-May 1942) Alice Paalen wrote of Mexico City's nearby volcano in a poem "A l'Ixtaccihuatl," describing it in mythic terms as if it were a sleeping goddess.⁶⁵ In a 1943 essay by Wolfgang Paalen on "The Birth of Fire: A mythological hypothesis suggested by the appearance of a new volcano" he addressed the eruption of a volcano in the town of Paricutin and the representation of the volcano in Mexican codices.⁶⁶ It is not surprising that volcanic landscapes became a notable element in the compositions of those Surrealists who traversed Mexico at this time, nor that the eruption of this new volcano in Paricutin was an event which "entered into the mythology of the Surrealists in Mexico and became part of the litany of the marvellous in its expanded New World version," as Martica Sawin has noted.⁶⁷ Of course the volcano was central to many of Kahlo's images too, reminding us that this was an era when iconography and ideas were spilling from one city and circle into another through the avant-garde. Kahlo depicted an American skyscraper being devoured by a volcano in *Self-Portrait on the Borderline of Mexico and the United States* (1932) and in 1943 her *Flower of Life* depicted male and female sexual parts coming together and exploding in volcanic sparks and hues, as

conception itself is portrayed as an alchemical force.

The Feminine Point of Intersection

Octavio Paz, the first Mexican author to write a surrealist composition and to befriend the Surrealists in Paris in 1937, reminds us how the art of Mexico raised the curiosity of outsiders prior to the modern day—it “aroused the amazement of Dürer before it astonished Baudelaire.”⁶⁸ Mexico played a significant role in expanding the art of the Western world, Paz noting how it offered a new appreciation of “objects ranging from a black mask to a Polynesian fetish The radical ‘Otherness’ of Mesoamerican civilization is thus transformed into its opposite: thanks to modern aesthetics, these works, which seem so distant, are also our contemporaries.”⁶⁹ But Mexico became emphatically feminine in her radicality for the Surrealists. Kahlo’s approach to the Mexican landscape, her fusion of myth and psychobiography, resulted in images of Mexico not only as a feminine force but as emphatically maternal one, which cemented this surrealist perspective. Her iconography often expressed her grief over her own inability to carry a baby, Diego’s child, full term, and thus a sense of maternal grief hitherto undocumented by any Surrealist.

Conception was explored in such 1930s surrealist works as Breton and Paul Eluard’s text *Immaculate Conception* (1930) and Eileen Agar’s oil painting *Autobiography of an Embryo* (1933-34) which delved into “womb magic.”⁷⁰ But the explicitly grieving and failed maternal body, often depicted by Kahlo in gruesome gynaecological pain, presented a new iconography to the surrealist movement. Kahlo’s obsession with the maternal body spoke to the life cycle which Breton deemed intrinsic to the Mexican imaginary and which he repeatedly returned to in his own surrealist imaginary. Drawing on the female icons of her day—the virgin-mother and protector of the helpless known as the *Guadalupeana*, the weeping *La Llorona*, the harlot known as *la Malinche* or as the more profane *la Chingada* (‘the screwed one’), Kahlo’s art always returned to powerful and sacrificial types.⁷¹ In her painting *My Birth* (1932), produced in Detroit soon after her first miscarriage and her mother’s death, three generations—Kahlo’s mother, Kahlo, and Kahlo’s still-born child – are brought together through two matriarchal signifiers, the Aztec birthing figure of the *Tlazolteotl* and the *Mater Dolorosa*. Though the roll-top wooden bed and embroidered pillow cases are homely, the gynaecological vantage point and the lack of inscription on the retablo, disturb the viewer. As in *Henry Ford Hospital* (1932), the bed is more coffin than comfort: it is a place where heavy female limbs sit in their own blood, their faces either covered or weeping, and emphasizing woman’s role in the cycle of life rather than her power to control it. In both paintings, Kahlo draws on medical textbooks, provided by Rivera, whose mother was an obstetrician.⁷²

Kahlo was at pains to document her grief over the loss of her child.

However, as Gannit Ankori observes, in the stylized nature of the tears in many of Kahlo's work we see the artist focusing on her artistic productivity in the face of reproductive failure, often rejecting the uncontrolled wailing of the woman who weeps for lost children known as *La Llorona*.⁷³ Tears are not just expressions of sorrow and pain, but also of rebirth. Indeed, as tears are depicted more often on the faces of the Virgin Mary, Saints and Martyrs, than on the faces of sinners who are damned to Hell, tears are far from signs of weakness—they are an attribute and sign of strength.⁷⁴ Other paintings show Kahlo lamenting her childless state through replacement figures but her strength still dominates the composition, as evidenced in *Self-Portrait on the Bed or Me and My Doll* of 1937; with her pets as child-substitutes in *Self Portrait with Small Monkey* of 1945; or with her lover as her longed for child in *The Love Embrace of the Universe, the Earth (Mexico), Me, Diego and Mr Xólotl* of 1949.

The last image goes beyond her personal desire for a child, however, pointing to the healing power of the feminine for the artist and society. Diego may be a child substitute (with an all seeing eye, aligning the child with wisdom) but, in posing him Christ-like in the lap of the female, as in the Pièta, and then positioning both herself and her lover in the embrace of a greater mother figure, the earth goddess Cihuacoatl, the artist is armoured by the power of the feminine. Buttressed between the day and night, the sun and the moon, as well as local flora and the dog figure Xólotl (who guards the underworld with the god Quetzalcóatl), here a cosmic mother meets a cosmic faith in the healing and creative power of love. We see the revolutionary power of both those concerns indicated in the mirroring of the Universe-Mexico-Kahlo and Kahlo's fiery red dress with its volcanic detail at her heart. Kahlo's obsessive return to the maternal body and what she once termed her art's "message of pain" had an individual and collective force.⁷⁵ This painting is part of Kahlo's monumental "collective-individual" art, as Rivera called it in the *Boletín del Seminario de Cultura Mexicana* in 1943.⁷⁶

A mother's tears, blood, and breast milk are often viewed by the western psyche as base yet Kahlo's oeuvre revels in the power of the abject. Julia Kristeva explains that even the nourishing breast is associated with the base as it is associated with "infantile regression." Milk and tears are viewed as "the metaphors of non-speech, of a 'semiotics' that linguistic communication does not count for."⁷⁷ It is associated with the Mother, her attributes, and the need to repress them. In contrast, in the Aztec culture to which Kahlo looked, these abject traits are celebrated.⁷⁸ Kahlo's iconoclasm and Otherness was political in gender and national terms. As Anita Brenner, the Mexican-born writer and friend to Kahlo, recognized in her influential book *Idols Behind Altars: Modern Mexican Art and its Cultural Roots* (1929), a

fusion of culture, politics and Otherness was at the forefront of left-wing politics.⁷⁹ In sum, Kahlo's peers in Mexico recognized that peculiar power of the feminine, long admired by Breton, as both personal and political too.

The Lost Secret

In his autobiography Diego Rivera proudly proclaimed that Kahlo's art "had no precedent in the history of art—paintings which exalted the feminine qualities of endurance to truth, reality, cruelty, and suffering."⁸⁰ Kahlo's paintings depicting trauma, birth, death and heartache shattered traditional aesthetic experience in a manner which mimicked the violent shattering of her own actual mind and body. Her art, with its religious and iconoclastic layers of meaning and its voice for the Other, forced the viewer into a self-conscious position. In so doing her art was allied with the surrealist ambition to seize and affect the individual in the name of collective revolt. Kahlo's art went further though: it synthesized pre-Columbian and European values and developed a radical new hybridity at a crucial moment in Surrealism's history. She exploited art's power to challenge and transgress social mores, brought High and Low or fine and decorative arts together, and reconsidered traditional techniques as she strove to develop new ones.

The Surrealists' internationalist project and avant-garde principles also defied notions of center and periphery. Their anti-institutionalism, anti-patriotism and anti-clerical stance was part and parcel of a vision of an avant-garde devoted to transcending national boundaries and eliminating the barriers between art and life. Kahlo brought a new formal and political urge to Surrealism at a time when it needed to expand out of Europe. Breton's discovery of her art in 1938 facilitated her quest for international recognition and his admiration for her never contradicted her expressed desire for her work "to be a contribution to the struggle of the people for peace and liberty."⁸¹ In turn, the discovery of Frida Kahlo made real Breton's quest for the "lost secret" of the non-Western world as Surrealism stood on the brink of the threat of a new World War and modern art of an American take-over.

1 Frida Kahlo, letter to Gómez Arias (November 1938), repr. in Raquel Tibol, *Frida Kahlo, An Open Life*, trans. Elinor Randall (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), 69.

2 Andrea Kettenman, *Frida Kahlo 1907-1954, Pain and Passion* (Cologne: Taschen 2000), 46.

3 Bertram D. Wolfe, "Rise of another Rivera," *Vogue* (November 1, 1938): 64.

4 "Art: Bomb Beribboned," *Time* (November 14, 1938): 29.

5 "Art: Bomb Beribboned," 29.

6 Julien Levy, *Memoir of an Art Gallery* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1977), 16.

- 7 André Breton, "Frida Kahlo de Rivera" (1938), *Surrealism and Painting*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (Boston: MFA Publications, 2002), 144.
- 8 Breton, "Frida Kahlo de Rivera," 144.
- 9 *Minotaure*, No. 1 (February 1933): opening declaration, np.
- 10 André Breton, "Souvenir du Mexique," *Minotaure*, No. 12-13 (May 1939): 37.
- 11 André Breton, "Des Tendances les plus récentes de la peinture Surréaliste," *Minotaure*, No. 12-13 (May 1939): 16-17.
- 12 Wolfe, "Rise," 131.
- 13 Wolfe, "Rise," 131.
- 14 Andreas Huyssen, "Geographies of modernism in a globalizing world" in *Geographies of Modernism: Literatures, cultures, spaces*, eds. Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker (London: Routledge, 2005), 6.
- 15 André Breton, *Nadja* (1928), trans. Richard Howard (London: Penguin Books, 1999), 64.
- 16 Georges Hugnet, *Pleins et déliés, souvenirs et témoignages 1926-1972*, (La Chapelle-sur-Loire: Guy Authier, 1972), 329. For a lengthy analysis of the 1938 international surrealist exhibition and its feminine, uncanny qualities, see Alyce Mahon, *Surrealism and the Politics of Eros 1938-1968* (London and New York: Thames & Hudson, 2005).
- 17 André Breton, *Arcanum 17* (1944), trans. Zack Rogow (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1994), 61.
- 18 Breton, *Arcanum 17*, 63.
- 19 Katharine Conley presents a reading of this obsession with the Virgin Mary as muse and subversive figure in her study *Automatic Woman: The Representation of Woman in Surrealism* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1996).
- 20 Kahlo identified with Teresa as one of her names was Carmen (Teresa was from Order of the Discalced Carmelites). Also, as the members of Teresa's order originally walked barefoot, and stoically put up with the injuries that were incurred from this act, Kahlo—who suffered polio and a resultant damaged right leg afterwards—felt a further bond with the saint. See Salomon Grimberg "Frida Kahlo's Memory: the Piercing of the Heart by the Arrow of Divine Love," *Women's Art Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Fall 1990-Winter 1991): 5.
- 21 María A. Castro-Sethness, "Frida Kahlo's Spiritual World: The Influence of Mexican Retablo and Ex-voto Paintings on her Art," *Women's Art Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Autumn 2004-Winter 2005): 21. Retablos are also referred to as imagined *pintadas* (painted images), *santos sobre hoja de lata* (saints painted on tin), or *laminas* (plates).
- 22 René Bélance, "An Interview with André Breton," (1945) in *What is Surrealism?* ed. Franklin Rosemont (New York: Pathfinder Books, 1978), 256.
- 23 Eisenstein was fascinated by the art of Posada, which had come to his attention in Moscow in the 1920s, and had developed an interest in visiting Mexico on reading Anita Brenner's *Idols behind the Altars: Modern Mexican Art and its Cultural Roots* (New York: Payson & Clarke Ltd, 1929).
- 24 Harry Geduld and Ronald Gottesman, *Sergei Eisenstein and Upton Sinclair: The Making and unmaking of Que Viva Mexico* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 150.
- 25 See Masha Salazkina, *In Excess: Sergei Eisenstein's Mexico* (Chicago and London: University Chicago Press, 2009), 177.
- 26 Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *Baroque Reason: The Aesthetics of Modernity* (London: Sage Books, 1994), 49. Salazkina draws on Buci-Glucksmann's Baroque aesthetic to frame her overall analysis of Eisenstein and his exploration of the male in (feminine) disguise.
- 27 "Art: Rockefellers v. Rivera," *Time*, (May 22, 1933): 25.

- 28 “Rockefellers ban Lenin in RCA Mural and Dismiss Rivera,” *New York Times*, May 10, 1933, in *Readings in Latin American Modern Art*, ed. Patrick Frank (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 36-37.
- 29 Frank, 42.
- 30 Holger Cahill, *New Horizons in American Art* (New York: MOMA, 1936; reprint 1968), 11.
- 31 Thomas Hart Benton, quoted in Barbara Rose, *Readings in American Art since 1900: A Critical History* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967), 27 and 54.
- 32 Henry McBride, “Farewell to Art’s Greatness: Modern Museum’s Surrealism says Goodbye to All That – A Sensational Show,” *The New York Sun*, December 12, 1936, 21.
- 33 Lewis Mumford, “Surrealism and Civilization,” *New Yorker*, (December 19, 1936): 79.
- 34 Sibilla Skidelsky, “The Sham of it,” *Art Digest*, (February 1, 1937): 13.
- 35 Dickran Tashjian, *A Boatload of Madmen: Surrealism and the American Avant-Garde 1920-1950* (London and New York: Thames & Hudson, 1995), 42.
- 36 Edward Alden Jewell, “31 Women Artists show their Work,” *New York Times*, January 6, 1943; Henry McBride, “Women Surrealists,” *The New York Sun*, January 18, 1943, quoted in *Peggy Guggenheim and Frederick Kiesler: The Story of Art of this Century*, eds. Susan Davidson and Philip Rylands (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2004), 292.
- 37 Bambi, “Frida Es una Mitád,” *Excelsior*, Mexico City, June 13, 1954, 6, quoted in translation in Hayden Herrera, “Beauty to his Beast: Frida Kahlo & Diego Rivera,” in *Significant Others: Creativity and Intimate Partnership*, eds. Whitney Chadwick and Isabelle de Courtrivon (London and New York: Thames & Hudson, 1996), 119.
- 38 *La Prensa*, August 23, 1929, cited in Raquel Tibol, *Frida Kahlo: An Open Life* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), 61.
- 39 Rebecca Block and Lynda Hoffman-Jeep, “Fashioning National Identity: Frida Kahlo in ‘Gringolandia,’” *Women’s Art Journal*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Autumn 1998-Winter 1999): 10.
- 40 Manuel Maples Arce, cited in Laurence Schmeckebier, *Modern Mexican Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1939), 20.
- 41 Claudia Schaefer, *Textured Lives: Women, Art and Representation in Modern Mexico* (Tucson and London: University of Arizona, 1992), 3.
- 42 Block and Hoffman-Jeep, 10.
- 43 Block and Hoffman-Jeep, 10.
- 44 See Frederic Jameson, “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism” in *Social Text*, No. 15 (Autumn 1986): 69. Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen also argue for Kahlo’s extreme “Mexican-ness” in the catalogue essay for *Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti* (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1982).
- 45 This was thanks to the efforts of Alexis Léger, the foreign service officer in charge of cultural affairs. Breton chose Mexico over Czechoslovakia as his first destination as it offered him the opportunity to meet Léon Trotsky who was exiled there, and whom he had not met during Trotsky’s time in Paris. For their part, both Diego Rivera and Kahlo were also excited to meet and support Trotsky: Rivera had joined the Mexican section of the Trotskyite International Communist League in September 1936, had helped Anita Brenner in ensuring Trotsky’s asylum in Mexico, and was one of the welcoming party to greet Léon and Natalia Trotsky when they arrived in Tampico harbour, Mexico, on January 9, 1937. Trotsky and his wife stayed for a while in Kahlo’s childhood home, the Casa Azul, and she enjoyed a brief affair with Trotsky as documented in a self-portrait of 1937 in which she presents herself in the guise of *femme fatale* with red lips, nails and blouse, holding a bouquet of flowers and a

note bearing the words 'For Léon Trotsky with all love I dedicate this painting on the 7th of November 1937. Frida Kahlo in San Angel, Mexico.' It was this painting that Breton noticed and admired in Trotsky's office when he visited Mexico, writing of it as exemplary of "all the gifts of seduction." See Breton, "Frida Kahlo de Rivera," 143.

46 Antonin Artaud, "La Pintura de María Izquierdo," *Revista de revistas*, Mexico City, Aug 23, 1936, repr. in *Oeuvres Complètes*, tome VIII (Paris: Gallimard 1971): 301-2. Izquierdo was comparable to Kahlo in her focus on female subject-matter often in religious compositions (such as *Our Lady of the Sorrows Altar*, 1943), the still-life, and self-portrait (e.g. wearing a white *rebozo* in her *Self Portrait* of 1943), and in enjoying an international success in New York and Paris, though her works lacked the visceral dimension of Kahlo's Surrealism, leaning instead towards a Magritte-like distortion of scale and De Chirico-like use of architecture.

47 Antonin Artaud, "Draft of a Letter to the Director of the Alliance Française" in *Selected Writings*, ed. Susan Sontag (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 348-349.

48 Mark Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind: The Life of André Breton* (London: Bloomsbury 1995), 454.

49 As Trotsky was forbidden by the Cárdenas government to write on politics he was not an official signatory of the F.I.A.R.I. manifesto. For an in-depth analysis of Trotsky's impact on Surrealism at this moment see Robin Adèle Greeley "For an Independent Revolutionary Art: Breton, Trotsky and Cárdenas's Mexico," in *Surrealism, Politics and Culture*, eds. Raymond Spiteri and Donald LaCoss (Aldershot: Ashgate 2003), 204-225.

50 See Dwight Macdonald "This Quarter," and André Breton and Diego Rivera, "Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art," in *Partisan Review* (Fall 1938): 7 and 49-53, respectively.

51 Breton, "Souvenir du Mexique," 31.

52 Breton, "Souvenir du Mexique," 32.

53 Breton, "Souvenir du Mexique," 40.

54 Doña Gertrudis' long heavy dark hair has major amorous and religious significance – she makes a pledge with the Virgin Mary to sacrifice her hair for the divine protection of her loved cavalier Don Rafael. See Gabriel Ferry's *Costal, the Indian Zapotec: A Tale of Mexico during the War of Independence Costal, the Indian* (1852, English edition, London: James Blackwood, 1857), 69.

55 André Breton, "Position Politique du Surréalisme," (Paris: Éditions Sagittaire, 1935), 50.

56 Breton, "Frida Kahlo de Rivera," 144.

57 Kahlo was not happy at having to share a room with the Breton's daughter Aube, then three years old. She also claimed the poor accommodation had led to the kidney infection which led to her hospitalization in March. See Polizzotti, 471-2. Kahlo would host the Seligmans in turn when they came to Mexico for an exhibition of Kurt Seligmann's art at Ines Amor's gallery in 1943. See Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1995), 275.

58 Diego Rivera, with Gladys March, *My Art, My Life: An Autobiography* (New York: Dover Publications, 1991), 138.

59 Frida Kahlo, letter to Nickolas Muray (16 February 1939), Nickolas Muray Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C..

60 Kahlo, letter to Nickolas Muray (16 February 1939).

61 Herrera, *Frida Kahlo: the Paintings*, 122, footnote 100. It was the first twentieth century Mexican painting the Louvre purchased.

62 Breton may have been given credit but as he was in military service at time he "can have had little to do with it," as Sawin reminds us, though Breton may have had a say as Paalen chose the paintings in Europe in 1939 before leaving for Mexico, as Onslow Ford stated in interview with Sawin. See

Sawin, 433, footnote 3.

63 It is worth noting that the show did not include any North American artists (as international surrealist shows would after the war).

64 *Moses* was commissioned by the business man José Domingo Lavin and based on Kahlo's reading of Freud's essay *Moses and Monotheism* (1939). Her title for the work may indicate her knowledge of Otto Rank's *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero* (1909) though her composition draws on both the retablo tradition and Aztec symbolism.

65 Alice Paalen, "À l'Ixtaccihuatl," *DYN*, No. 1 (April-May 1942): 44-45.

66 Wolfgang Paalen, "The Birth of Fire: A mythological hypothesis suggested by the appearance of a new volcano," *DYN*, No. 4-5 (December 1943): 71.

67 Sawin, 287.

68 Octavio Paz, "The Art of Mexico: Material and Meaning" (1977), in *Essays on Mexican Art*, trans. Helen Lane (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993), 38.

69 Paz, "The Art of Mexico," 36.

70 Agar coined the term "womb-magic" to denote an "artistic and imaginative life," an alternative to male rationality and its civilising mission. See Eileen Agar "Religion and the Artistic Imagination," *The Island*, i/4, December 1931, 102.

71 See Roger Barta on Mexican national character and this matriarchal mythology in *The Cage of melancholy: Identity and Metamorphosis* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 147.

72 Salomón Grimberg, *Frida Kahlo* (Dallas: The Meadow Museum, Southern Methodist University, 1989), 14.

73 Gannit Ankori, "Frida Kahlo: the Fabric of her Art," in Dexter and Barson, 38. In a letter of 1926 Kahlo called herself '*Virgen Lacrimorum*' (Virgin of the Tears), evoking this mother who weeps for her child's pain and hopes for spiritual rebirth. See Frida Kahlo, letter to Alejandro Arias (August 21 1926), published in Erica Billeter, *The Blue House: The World of Frida Kahlo* (Seattle: University of Washington, 1993), 185. Also, while the Virgin Mary was spared the pain of childbirth and is never portrayed in the act of birth, the weeping Virgin is of paramount importance in Western art and Kahlo may have been referring to that iconography as opposed to *La Llorona*. Since Medieval times, the shed tear represents repentance, sorrow, self-knowledge, and the purification not just of one's own soul but the souls of other men. See Moshe Barasch, "The Crying Face," *Artibus et Historiae*, Vol. 8, No.15 (1987): 21-36.

74 Barasch, 36.

75 Kahlo's full statement of 1953 (cited in Tibol, 1993, 67) reads: "I've done my paintings well, not quickly but patiently, and they have a message of pain in them, but I think they'll interest at least a few people. They're not revolutionary, so why do I keep on believing they're combative?"

76 Diego Rivera, "Frida Kahlo and Mexican Art," *Bulletin of the Mexican Cultural Seminary*, No. 2, Ministry of Public Education, Mexico City (October 1943): 89-101, reproduced in *Écrits sur l'Art*, ed. and trans. Catherine Ballesterio (Neuchatel: Editions Ides et Calendes, 1996), 276.

77 Julia Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 174. Marina Warner has also considered the abject nature of the Mater Dolorosa, writing, "the tears she sheds are charged with the magic or her precious, incorruptible, undying body and have power to give life and make whole." See Marina Warner, *Alone of all her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Vintage, 1976), 221.

78 See Dina Comisarenco Mirkin's fascinating essay, "Images of Childbirth in Modern Mexican Art," *Women's Art Journal*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Spring-Summer 1999): 18-24.

79 Brenner's career began in the 1920s with her writings about the muralist renaissance and with her involvement in the avant-garde group in Mexico City of which José Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros and Tina Modotti were members. Later she was a critic for *The New York Times* and *The Nation* and founded and ran the magazine *Mexico/This Month*. See Susannah Joel Glusker, *Anita Brenner: A Mind of her Own* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998) and *Anita Brenner: Vision of an Age*, ed. Carlos Monsiváis (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 2007).

80 Rivera, *My Art, My Life*, 123-4.

81 Frida Kahlo, letter to Antonio Rodríguez (1952), quoted in Herrera, *Frida, A Biography of Frida Kahlo*, 263.