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# 4.2/ The Last Stand of Revolutionary Art

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## /1 REVOLUTIONARIES TO THE END

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### /1.1 RIVERA THE HOST

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#### /1.1.1 ARRANGING THE MEETING

When Lev Trotsky, Diego Rivera, and André Breton were gathered at Coyoacán, Mexico, between May 20 and July 25, 1938, they engaged in discussions to reconsider the long-standing theme of the relationship between modern art and communist politics. All three were opposed to the ideological subordination of the arts to the policies of the Comintern and the cultural organizations of the Popular Front. The outcome of these discussions was a manifesto entitled “For an Independent Revolutionary Art,” jointly written by Breton and Trotsky, but signed by Breton and Rivera. It was first published, translated into English, in the U. S. journal *Partisan Review* of fall 1938,<sup>(218)</sup> and shortly afterwards in French and other languages in several journals of the Trotskyist movement. Trotsky had asked Breton to write a draft of the manifesto in order to attract artists to a newly-formed subgroup of his Fourth International, in the making since 1934: the ‘Federation of Independent Revolutionary Artists’ (FIARI). Upon receiving the draft, he amended it and added several passages of his own. Finally, both authors fused their contributions into the final text. Rivera had no part in this undertaking.

In 1929, the starting year of the Depression, Trotsky had been expatriated from the Soviet Union, and both Rivera and Breton had been expelled from the Communist parties of their countries. Still, none of the three had shed their communist convictions. It was by invoking Trotsky’s authority that Rivera and Breton had tried to reassert themselves against Party conformity for several years. Rivera had joined the Party at the end of 1922, resigned on April 26, 1925, had been readmitted in July 1926, and was expelled once more on September 10, 1929. Until then, he had belonged to its leadership. His final expulsion may have been related to a world-wide purge by the Third International. It did not impair his resolve to posture as a communist during his U. S. working tour two years later. In 1934, Rivera started a correspondence with Trotsky. In late 1936, he took charge of a cabled request from Trotsky’s secretary Anita Brenner to the Mexican section of the Fourth International to support Trotsky’s application for a Mexican immigration permit and personally intervened with President Lázaro Cárdenas to grant the request. Upon arrival, Trotsky took up residence at his home.

At the time the Manifesto was written, Trotsky recalled, he had not concerned himself with artistic questions since the publication in 1924 of his world-renowned *Literature and Revolution*. As for Rivera and Breton, they had operated in different environments of political culture, represented different artistic practices, and hence were not acquainted with one another. It is Trotsky under whose auspices the three of them came together, since he had figured prominently in the works and pronouncements of both artists several years before their meeting. At this point in time, Trotsky's stream of pronouncements seemed to promise a viable alternative to the Stalinist policies of the Soviet Union and the Communist parties worldwide under the tutelage of the Comintern. However, the encounter was unplanned and took place in a personalized social setting, including the protagonists' spouses, with estrangements and reconciliations among Trotsky and the other two. It brought together three high-strung, combative individuals in a beautiful ambient with no immediate political agenda, although all three were engaged in long-term networks of political endeavors.

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/1.1.2 **THE 'AUTHENTIC REVOLUTIONARY ARTIST'**

It was Rivera's initiative to bring about the meeting, since he was responsible for securing Trotsky's residency in Mexico and hosting him in his house, and later for hosting Breton when the writer, upon arrival for a lecture tour sponsored by the French government, found himself stranded without money because of botched arrangements on the part of the French embassy. His accomplishments as the leading muralist of successive Mexican governments, all of which styled themselves as revolutionary, and his provocations of two corporate sponsors in the United States whom he confronted with the communist tendency of his murals, had earned him a world-wide renown as a revolutionary artist, which he enhanced through a steady stream of programmatic writings. Surprisingly, then, Rivera had no part in the writing of the Manifesto, which Trotsky and Breton worked out among themselves. The vacuous ideal of a revolutionary artist they devised bears no resemblance to his works, self-descriptions, or pronouncements. Nevertheless, he postured as a front man for Trotsky when he signed the Manifesto in order to hide Trotsky's co-authorship.

Rivera's long-developed, flamboyant self-presentation as a revolutionary artist seems to have left no trace in the discussions at Coyoacán. Nor did the participants, on their long excursions into the surroundings, visit any of his murals. Apparently, the life and work of a *bona fide* revolutionary artist with their built-in conflicts was of no interest to Trotsky and Breton. In his published writings, Rivera had based his revolutionary self-characterization on his class-transcending professional status as a common worker, who in the initial Mexican state mural programs had toiled alongside construction crews for equal pay. The empathy with the proletariat he had thus acquired was at variance with his middle-class origins and profound education. During his aborted two-year tenure as

director of the Academia de San Carlos in Mexico City, he had devised an over-lengthy, over-ambitious teaching program which required students to spend one year as common workers and then take a panoply of courses in art history, literature, and science. This preparation was to enable them to produce a viable art of the proletariat.

Rivera's claim to be a revolutionary artist depended on his assumption that by providing the proletariat with its own image, art would help it acquire class-consciousness and thus inspire it to struggle for overcoming class division. Rather than devise new art forms to this end, revolutionary artists were to avail themselves of traditional art forms and turn them against their original class base. This program had its origins in the cultural policies of the self-styled revolutionary governments of Mexico, but Rivera attempted to develop it in a communist direction. Although the Mexican Communist Party strongly opposed those governments, he continued to receive their most prestigious official commissions, which he filled with communist images and symbols without incurring any objections. The ensuing inevitable conflicts continued to accompany Rivera's highly public work. They made him conceive his artistic and political activities as a ceaseless class struggle with its attendant showdowns or compromises. Always on his own, he saw himself, in his own words, as a "propagandist"<sup>(219)</sup> or a "guerilla fighter,"<sup>(220)</sup> rejecting any deference to his commissions.

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### /1.1.3 RIVERA'S CONTROVERSIAL CAREER

By placing dramatic scenes of barricade fighting and large-scale Soviet emblems on government buildings, Rivera sought to supersede the established ideology of the Mexican agrarian revolution with that of a world-wide class struggle uniting peasants and workers. In the last panel of his mural in the National Palace, a towering figure of Karl Marx appears pointing the way to an ideal governance. According to Rivera's self-serving account in his book *Portrait of America* of 1934, he set out to work in both the Soviet Union and the United States in order to enact his notions of revolutionary art in the two most advanced industrial states of the world. In the first, he was politically hailed but kept from working. In the second, he was applauded for his work but politically rejected. The outcomes of both geopolitical forays were equally problematical, as they touched upon the contradictions between Rivera's ideological convictions and the political preconditions of his muralism. The Marx panel he painted upon his return in 1934 in the Palacio Nacional was in fulfillment of a contract signed five years earlier. From then on, he had received no further commissions.

Rivera's work in the USA between 1931 and 1933 exacerbated the contradictions inherent in the political premises and objectives of his art. How could he uphold his self-definition as a revolutionary artist when the murals he was painting were sponsored by notorious leaders of U.S. monopoly capitalism, Edsel Ford in Detroit and John D. Rockefeller in New York? In the murals of the Detroit Institute of Art, painted in 1931,

his patron shielded Rivera in his quest to endow industrial workers with a pictorial exaltation. However, in the next mural he undertook at the Rockefeller Center in New York, he overextended himself in an accolade of Soviet politics, refused the patron's demand for at least replacing a Lenin portrait, was dismissed, and saw his work destroyed. In the end, Rivera was marginalized and radicalized to the point of painting—from July 15 until December 8, 1933—the mural panel series *Portrait of America* for the New Workers' School in New York City, run by a Communist splinter group, for free. The series depicted a blunt history of class struggle in the USA, leading into the current worldwide confrontation between communism and fascism.

It is in the *Portrait of America* panel series that Rivera's turn to Trotsky surfaces for the first time. In *Proletarian Unity*, the central panel for the head wall of the meeting hall, he adapted the Lenin segment of his aborted Rockefeller Center mural. He placed Lenin in the midst of Communist leaders, flanked by Stalin and Trotsky, as if these two could still cooperate. At the height of the Trotskyan schism, the panel projects a worldwide unity of communist parties and factions. Only a slight visual preponderance of Trotsky's over Stalin's portrait suggests Rivera's preference. Yet from a Stalinist perspective, Trotsky's mere appearance would have made the panel anathema. Stopping short of taking sides, Rivera's mural appears anachronistic or utopian. In the modified replica of the destroyed Rockefeller Center mural in the Palacio de Bellas Artes of Mexico City, which Rivera painted the following year, Trotsky makes his first appearance as Lenin's sole successor. Holding the banner of his projected Fourth International, he points the way to world revolution. A giant statue of fascism looms behind him, its head broken off, as if Trotsky had vanquished it himself.

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## /1.2 **TROTSKY THE LEADER**

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### /1.2.1 **MODERN ART AND REVOLUTION**

Lev Trotsky's authority on matters of art was founded on his widely-translated book *Literature and Revolution* of 1924, a collection of essays that combined an ideological critique of the revolutionary claims of modern art, written in pre-revolutionary exile, with a political critique of the initial dominance of modern art in Soviet cultural policy. Both critiques concluded with unqualified repudiations. In several articles Trotsky had written for various Russian exile journals during his sojourn in Vienna between 1908 and 1914, reprinted in the book, he had criticized the oppositional or even revolutionary claims of modern art as middle-class ideological self-delusions. They formed part of his critique of intellectuals as the *Bohème*, a de-classed petty-bourgeois social group. To revolutionary movements in politics, Trotsky wrote, modern art contributes nothing. By giving voice to an unfocused social critique, it plays a stabilizing role of venting tensions within bourgeois culture, which will support it the more strongly the

more provocative it appears. Its ostensibly radical aversion to bourgeois society envisages no political alternative.

Trotsky made this political critique of pre-revolutionary modern art a foundational argument for a comprehensive theory of revolutionary art in the new Soviet state. According to this argument, modern artists can only participate in the revolutionary process without submitting to government or Party control. Yet, by the same token, their contributions remain just as insufficient as before. Modern art's lack of engagement with the revolutionary events of the time before the First World War, which coincided with its breakthrough in capitalist culture, was proof of its political irrelevancy. That the organizations of workers' parties should have ignored it betrayed its class limitation. Its claims for autonomy prevented it from being embraced by the working-class. Vladimir Tatlin's *Monument of the Third International* of 1919-1920 is the only work of Soviet art that Trotsky dealt with in his book. With little patience for the symbolic significance Tatlin had attached to his three-dimensional design, he took the purpose of the project as the steel shell for a Party office building at its word, doubting its technical feasibility and objecting to its dysfunctional shape.

By asking Breton to draft the Manifesto fourteen years after the appearance of *Literature and Revolution*, Trotsky abandoned his political repudiation of modern art and endorsed its pre-war revolutionary aspirations. Forgetting or forgiving its class-bound ideological self-indulgence he had denounced then, he was now ready to grant revolutionary significance to its mere freedom. The social preconditions and political objectives enabling art to fulfill a revolutionary mission, and its acceptance by the proletariat whose dictatorship is to determine the political culture for it to unfold, had been the two main issues of *Literature and Revolution*, spelled out by a member of the government in hopes of influencing official art policy through open debate. That the Manifesto does not even touch upon these issues was realistic by default, since Trotsky was in no position to set art policy for any party, let alone for any government. Throughout his political activities in exile, he never questioned the Bolshevik state, compromised, but not invalidated by Stalinist 'bureaucracy' in his view, and never envisaged any other political system.

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#### /1.2.2 **AUTHORITY AND INDEPENDENCE**

In *Literature and Revolution*, Trotsky had dwelt at length on the historic limitations of an art intended to promote the revolutionary interests of the proletariat, which the proletariat itself was incapable of producing, and which hence had to be fashioned from the extant art of the 'bourgeoisie.' Such an art could only be transitory, since the advent of socialism would do away with the proletariat as a class. At that time, the transition from revolution to socialism shaped the dialectical dynamics of Trotsky's thought on art. The political functions of an art responsible to the proletariat as he envisaged

it could not stop at the proletariat's idealization as a class but had to be aimed at an abolition of class society, as it was projected in the party-guided revolutionary change to socialism. The last chapter of *Literature and Revolution* projects a utopian council democracy stripped of state institutions, where a classless society will enjoy an art designed to match its needs and preferences. Art will blend into life according to 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century French utopian writers Condorcet and Saint-Simon. In the conversations at Coyoacán, Trotsky still held on to this ideal.

The foremost question Trotsky raised in *Literature and Revolution* was the extent to which the Bolshevik Party or the Soviet government should control artistic culture, both by prescribing themes or styles and by interdicting art at variance with their expectations. This question most directly affected modern art, compromised in his eyes. However, Trotsky vigorously rejected any such control. In concurrence with Education Commissar Anatoly Lunacharsky's liberal art policy, he left it to the artists' own professional competency to determine their work's revolutionary significance, which was under competitive debate at the time he published his book. In his judgment, the Party lacked such a competency. Issues of commission and audience he left out of consideration. Still, Trotsky made the exemption of the arts from political control conditional on "a categorical standard of being for or against the revolution."<sup>(221)</sup> "The Revolution," as he wrote in a quasi-mythical personification of the term, would suppress any art falling short of this requirement.<sup>(222)</sup> How such a prerequisite could be enforced without Party control, he did not say.

In the Manifesto, Trotsky spared himself any practical considerations about the production, purpose, and impact of revolutionary art. His sole concern was to grant artists a political license without political responsibility. Trotsky even revoked his earlier reservation, "except against the revolution," which Breton had inserted in his draft. A true artist was to be revolutionary per se. At this time, of course, Trotsky would have been at a loss to specify any extant revolutionary situation, or any extant revolutionary regime, to which such an artist would be able to adhere, let alone contribute. "In the face of the era of wars and revolutions which is drawing near, everyone will have to give an answer."<sup>(223)</sup> What kind of answer, and to what question? The only revolutionary perspective Trotsky could open to artists was desperate. Already two years earlier, he had envisaged such a perspective in his book *The Betrayed Revolution*, according to which, on the precedent of 1917, the ineluctable defeat of the Soviet Union in the imminent war would spawn another revolution. This scenario of doom failed to acknowledge the anti-fascist struggle to which leftist artists were committed.

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### / 1.2.3 **ANOTHER AVANT-GARDE**

In an article entitled "Art and Politics in Our Epoch," dated June 18, 1938,<sup>(224)</sup> which appeared in the August issue of *Partisan Review* preceding the issue carrying

the Manifesto, Trotsky charted the historic moment that led him to redefine the revolutionary significance of contemporary art, reversing his denial of any such significance in his articles from before the First World War. The reversal is based on his anticipation of an end to the cycle of systemic accommodations of modern art's challenge to bourgeois society that would follow from the world-historical crisis of the Great Depression. Since this crisis had made capitalism decline beyond recovery through democratic politics, he argued, bourgeois culture had become too weak for such an accommodation. Now Trotsky modelled the expected advance of his newly planned revolutionary movement on that of the artistic 'avant-garde.' He did not use the term, but predicted that the Fourth International, to be officially launched later in the year, would eventually win the lacking mass base on the precedent of "a progressive movement" in the arts, which, though insignificant initially, eventually prevailed.<sup>(225)</sup>

In the same article, Trotsky hailed Rivera as the foremost revolutionary artist of the time. "Do you wish to see with your own eyes the hidden springs of the social revolution? Look at the frescoes of Rivera. Do you wish to know what revolutionary art is like? Look at the frescoes of Rivera."<sup>(226)</sup> It was Rivera's adherence to the ideals of the October Revolution that earned him such an accolade. However, Trotsky also stressed Rivera's heritage of Mexican native culture, omitted his strained relationship with Mexican governments, and highlighted the rejections his work had incurred from both Soviet leaders and U.S. patrons. All this added up to near-perfect credentials for an independent artist of the Fourth International. Rivera would have been an apt interlocutor for Trotsky to frame the Manifesto, because in his long career as an artist and politician he had experienced, and written about most if not all the political issues addressed in *Literature and Revolution*. Yet he did not actively share in the writing of the Manifesto, which shows no trace of his widely publicized ideas. All he contributed was his signature.

Trotsky rather turned to Breton, whose political experience was limited to the ups and downs of his relationship with the French Communist Party, and who owed his radical postures to an uncompromising rejection of political realities and a fierce overdetermination of his personal convictions. Seventeen years Trotsky's junior, he had long looked up to him for ideological orientation. The Manifesto is not the outcome of the three-way discussions Trotsky, Rivera, and Breton may or may not have held at Coyoacán. Rather, it is a text Trotsky persuaded a reluctant Breton to draft in order to attract artists to the FIARI. And it was not intended to summarize any current political prospects of revolutionary art, only to reaffirm the artist's independence as a precondition. Trotsky's charge gave Breton the chance to have his notion of artistic independence, honed to absolute intransigence during years of struggle with, first, 'bourgeois' culture and, later, Communist party politics, validated as a political position. For him, submitting his draft for revisions and amendments to the only politician he trusted and admired was a small price to pay.



/1.3.1 **THE REVOLUTIONARY HABIT**

To the two political heavyweights with long-standing revolutionary credentials, André Breton had nothing to show except a shifting set of ideological beliefs pronounced to his small literary milieu in Paris. Why would Trotsky entrust him with writing a foundational manifesto for the artistic constituency of a world-wide political movement? And why would Rivera sign a text entirely remote from his own political agenda? For Breton, the reconciliation between making a political contribution to the revolutionary struggle and holding on to the unconditional freedom of art as a radical stand of opposition to society had been his paramount concern, even before he engaged himself with the Communist Party, and continued to determine his engagement and his final break. While Trotsky and Rivera could boast high political achievements as well as dramatic political setbacks that had netted them a world-wide celebrity as revolutionaries, Breton's reputation solely rested on his fierce defense of artistic independence from political control in the city of Paris through continuous literary altercations. But that was just what Trotsky needed for defining the main aspiration of the Manifesto.

Breton had long been the leader of an artists' and writers' movement, which in its breakup of conventional art forms and its aggressive social critique had gone farther than any other in capitalist states during the two decades between World Wars I and II. Over and beyond their work, the surrealists were prone to prove their revolutionary aspirations by disruptive interventions in the public sphere. They manifested their provocative cultural critique in group pronouncements on political issues of the day rather than in the art work of their members. The further step they took, however, starting in 1925 and culminating in 1930, of politicizing themselves by adhering to the Communist Party failed on the issue of artistic self-determination. It was this issue that drove the factionalist struggles within the surrealist group, pitting individual members against one another, struggles which Breton vainly tried to decide by personal authority and which led to defections or exclusions. When Louis Aragon submitted to Party discipline for the sake of political activism, he stopped being a surrealist.

At the start of the Depression, Breton's ties to the Communist Party reached their breaking point. Although he had already been ousted as a member in 1929, in his Second Surrealist Manifesto of 1930 he still professed allegiance to Communism in the event of a future war. Otherwise, the surrealists would pursue their revolutionary goals "by their own particular means."<sup>(227)</sup> In the Second Manifesto Breton quotes the tart remark of Party leader Michel Marty: "If you are a Marxist, you don't need to be a surrealist."<sup>(228)</sup> This made the surrealist version of revolutionary art appear redundant. Indeed, during the following decade surrealist art began to flourish on the upper

middle-class art market, first in France, and then abroad, with no trace of a revolutionary message. Even the class-transcending cultural policy of the Popular Front, to which the Communist Party had rallied in 1935, could not mitigate the break, because surrealist art was the opposite of popular. Thus, the political split became extreme. During the general strike of 1936 the Party urged moderation, while the Surrealists called for a violent takeover of power by armed workers' militias.

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### /1.3.2 CLASS LIMITATION OF INDEPENDENCE

Breton's conflicts and eventual break with the Communist Party resulted from his refusal to cede his radical ideas about art and literature to the service of Party propaganda. Not only was he unwilling to abandon the axiomatic antagonism between traditional and modern art for the sake of transmitting a political agenda, but he did not accept any agenda for the arts at all. In his efforts to engage with the culture of a mass party designed for working-class appeal, Breton saw himself required to forego his upper middle-class educational privilege. Already in his pamphlet *Legitimate Defense* of 1926, one year after signing up as a Party member, he publicly rejected the request from the editor of the Party daily *L'Humanité*, Henri Barbusse, to write instructive articles for its readers. His two-fold activities as dealer and critic in the upper-middle-class culture of modern art and as a political intellectual and writer on behalf of or at variance with a working-class party made for a self-contradictory, two-track career that dealt with two antagonistic constituencies. For him, 'independent,' the current term for modern art, meant to be beholden to neither one of them.

Although the French Communist Party's organizational discipline, ideological subservience to the Comintern and adherence to the Popular Front precipitated Breton's eventual break-off, it is doubtful that he would have been able to pursue his revolutionary ambitions within any political organization, since they were derived from the axiomatic claims of modern art for absolute autonomy. The short-lived literary opposition group called 'Contre-Attaque,' which he helped found together with Georges Bataille in October 1935, defined itself as a "fighting union of revolutionary intellectuals" ("union de lutte des intellectuels révolutionnaires.") Without a working-class constituency or audience, it nonetheless called for an "intractable dictatorship of the people in arms,"<sup>(229)</sup> expected to violently overthrow the government. In May 1936, more than a month before the first Popular Front government was formed, Breton and several other surrealists walked out on 'Contre-Attaque,' precipitating its demise. It was the last of several organizational schemes Breton had been pursuing in literary politics. On June 16, 1936, the 'International Surrealist Exhibition' he had been organizing opened in London to great acclaim.

Breton's pamphlet *Neither Your War nor Your Peace*, published immediately after his return from Mexico, confirms his refusal to commit modern art to any political

agenda for the sake of its revolutionary purity any longer. Concurrent with his unsuccessful efforts to recruit artists and writers for the FIARI, it amounted to an unaverring retreat from politics. Breton's idiosyncrasy of political conscience contrasted with the world-embracing outreach he worked for on behalf of the growing surrealist literary and artistic network, starting with the London show of 1936 and culminating in the Paris show of January 1938, both labeled 'International.' Breton wrote up the latter as if surrealism had become an expanding world-wide movement. The coincidence of political failure and artistic success, of political breakup and artistic alliance-building, is an unexpected confirmation of the political independence which the Manifesto of Coyoacán demands for the arts. It inaugurated the surge of surrealist culture as a focus of world-wide adherence that Breton, giving up on his political aspirations, tirelessly worked for during and after the Second World War.

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### /1.3.3 **BRETON'S TROTSKYISM**

Breton's formal break with the Communist Party dates from a meeting the Surrealist group held on March 11, 1929, to clarify its position vis-à-vis Trotsky's recent expulsion from the Soviet Union. In the Second Manifesto, where Breton renders an account of the break, Trotsky concludes with a list of names that "circumscribe a century of truly heart-wrenching philosophy and literature: Hegel, Feuerbach, Marx, Lautréamont, Rimbaud, Jarry, Freud, Chaplin, Trotsky."<sup>(230)</sup> Less than two years later, on December 1, 1931, Louis Aragon and Georges Sadoul, on the eve of the Second International Conference of Revolutionary Writers at Kharkov, signed a self-critical declaration where they reneged on both the 'Freudianism' and the 'Trotskyism' of the surrealists, presumably taking exception to Breton's efforts at a convergence of psychoanalysis and Marxism. Indeed, in April 1934, several surrealists followed Breton in signing his pamphlet *The Planet without a Visa*, written to protest the French government's denial of an entry visa to the exiled Trotsky. The defiant statement of a Left outside the Party ended with Trotsky's prediction that "socialism will mean a leap from the reign of necessity to the reign of freedom."<sup>(231)</sup>

Applying Trotsky's notion of a permanent revolution to the violent clash between Right and Left in France on February 6, 1934, Breton felt that an upset of capitalism's social order was ineluctable and imminent. However, with his charge of a "scandalous complicity of the Second and Third Internationals," directed at the two leftist parties about to join in the Popular Front, he dismissed all extant forces of the Left. Since 1935, Breton's sympathies for Trotsky's exile politics enabled him to maintain the long-standing revolutionary self-designation of modern art at its most radical, and its most hypothetical. Like Trotsky, he held on to the communist label, rejecting the oppressive constraints that Bolshevik cultural policy had adopted after the April Decree of 1932. Finally, in February 1937, Breton hailed the coincidence in time of the

International Surrealist Exhibition of 1936 in London with widespread factory occupations in France—opposed by the Communist Party—as a common sign of incipient revolution. He echoed Trotsky’s dictum “the French revolution has begun”<sup>(232)</sup> precisely in the year the Popular Front government staged the Paris Expo as a celebration of peace.

At this point in time, Trotsky was opening to Breton a political perspective of world-historical scope. It rested on his expectation that at the height of the Depression, the capitalist social order would no longer be able to muster the economic strength required to tolerate its culture of dissent, just as it could no longer gather the political will to abide by its democratic form of government. Such expectations had no bearing on Breton’s busy initiatives and activities in artistic culture, although he would at times say otherwise. The principal attraction Trotsky’s views and writings held for him was the convergence of revolutionary aspirations and unrestricted freedom, germane to the ideology of surrealism, as a precondition of communist art policy. To find himself entrusted with writing such an art policy for a world-wide revolutionary movement, however tenuous if not utopian, must have appeared as the ultimate vindication to Breton. It did not matter that Trotsky had lifted all the social and political conditions he had once specified in *Literature and Revolution*. When Breton suggested he re-issue the book in French translation, Trotsky declared it out of date.

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## / 2      **THE MANIFESTO**

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### / 2.1      **STRUCTURED DIGEST OF QUOTATIONS FROM THE TEXT**

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#### / 2.1.1      **THE HISTORIC MOMENT**

[Acute Decline of Culture:] “We can say without exaggeration that never has civilization been menaced so seriously as today. [...] today we see world civilization, united in its historic destiny, reeling under the blows of reactionary forces [...] We are by no means thinking only of the world war that draws near. Even in times of ‘peace’ the position of art and sciences has become absolutely intolerable.”

[Totalitarian Equation:] “In the contemporary world we must recognize the ever more widespread destruction of those conditions under which intellectual creation is possible. The regime of Hitler [...] has reduced those who still consent to take up pen or brush to the status of domestic servants of the regime [...]. If reports may be believed, it is the same in the Soviet Union, where Thermidorian reaction is now reaching its climax.”

[Compromised Democracy:] “It goes without saying that we do not identify ourselves with the currently fashionable catchword: ‘Neither fascism nor communism!’, a shibboleth which suits the temperament of the philistine, conservative and frightened, clinging to the tattered remnants of the ‘democratic’ past.”

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/ 2.1.2 **SUBJECTIVE REVOLUTION**

[True Art is revolutionary:] "True art, which is not content to play variations on ready-made models but rather insists on expressing the inner needs of man and of mankind in its time—true art is unable not to be revolutionary, not to aspire to a complete and radical reconstruction of society. This it must do, were it only to deliver intellectual creation from the chains which bind it. We recognize that only the social revolution can sweep clean the path for a new culture."

[Against the Popular Front:] "The totalitarian regime of the USSR, working through the so-called cultural organizations it controls in other countries, has spread over the entire world a deep twilight hostile to every sort of spiritual value. [It is promoted by persons] disguised as intellectuals and artists [...]. The official art of Stalinism, with a blatancy unexampled in history, mirrors their efforts to put a good face on their mercenary profession."

[The Psychoanalytic Subject:] "The communist revolution [...] realizes that the role of the artist in a decadent capitalist society is determined by the conflict between the individual and various social forms which are hostile to him. This fact alone, insofar as he is conscious of it, makes the artist a natural ally of revolution. The process of sublimation, which here comes into play and which psychoanalysis has analyzed, tries to restore the broken equilibrium between the integral 'ego' and the outside elements it rejects."

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/ 2.1.3 **A NEW ORGANIZATION**

[Socialism in Politics, Anarchism in Art:] "If, for the better development of the forces of material production, the revolution must build a socialist regime with centralized control, to develop intellectual creation an anarchist regime of individual liberty should from the first be established. No authority, no dictation, not the least trace of orders from above! Only [then] will it be possible for [...] artists to carry out their tasks [...]."

[Freedom of Support:] "Every progressive tendency in art is destroyed by fascism as 'degenerate.' Every free creation is called 'fascist' by the Stalinists. Independent revolutionary art must now gather its forces for the struggle against reactionary persecution. Such a union of forces is the aim of the International Federation of Independent Revolutionary Art which we believe it is now necessary to form."

[Rallying Cry:] "Our aims: The independence of art—for the revolution. The revolution—for the complete liberation of art!"

/ 2.2.1    **AGAINST ALL POLITICAL SYSTEMS**

The Manifesto starts on the assumption of a severe historic crisis that puts the work of artists everywhere in jeopardy. However, it does not relate the two historic emergencies of the decade—the economic and social impact of the Great Depression and the approaching Second World War—to one another but conjures up an unspecified political emergency without antagonists. While previous pronouncements on revolutionary art had explicitly or implicitly challenged an adversarial political or social order to be overturned, the Manifesto purports to engage the entire world. As current revolutionary movements in China and Spain were ending in defeat, it falls back on the apodictic correlation between revolutionary art and revolutionary politics on the advance. Its global extension rests on a rejection of all three political systems currently confronting one another. While in the case of communism and ‘fascism,’ the charge of oppressing artists’ independence comes as no surprise, in the case of democracy it appears unjustified. The principled communist opposition to capitalism, to which all three authors still adhered, overrides the systemic differences.

The Manifesto’s sense of historic emergency is derived from the totalitarian equation Trotsky had drawn two years earlier in *The Betrayed Revolution*. It symmetrically denounces the Hitler State and the ‘Thermidorian’ Soviet Union. The Stalinist dictatorship has invalidated their antagonism as embodiments of the clash between capitalist enslavement and communist liberation. Democracy, which can boast freedom of the arts, is excluded from the comparison of political systems, but its underlying capitalist economy is mired in a crisis the authors estimate to be terminal. Under dismal market conditions, artists also lose their independence. Economic hardship has a similar effect as totalitarian subjugation. Such an even-handed rejection of totalitarianism and democracy rests on Trotsky’s conviction that communism can be restored to freedom on its own terms. Clinging to the same ideal after his own break with the Communist Party, Breton kept advocating revolution against the Third Republic, which he opposed even more bitterly after the Party had joined the Popular Front coalition.

Trotsky and Breton realized that artists’ economic hardships caused by the Depression compelled them to adapt their work to the ideological requirements that came with party or state support. Judging it as a “period of the death agony of capitalism, democratic as well as fascist,” they no longer acknowledged democratic politics as a safeguard of artists’ freedom. Their condemnation of totalitarian art was not limited to the repressive art policies of the Soviet and German regimes, but also targeted their efforts to furnish themselves with an art of propaganda by financial support and

administrative supervision. In this political economy, only hack artists could thrive. If independence was germane to the profession, their work was no art at all. The contemptuous denunciation of the “tattered remnants of the ‘democratic’ past,” issued by a writer on a government-sponsored lecture tour and a politician under the protection of a democratic government, was specious. It recalls the Comintern’s unsuccessful attempts to topple democratic governments in the name of world revolution during the first four years after World War I.

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/ 2.2.2 **A COMMUNIST DEMOCRACY**

The wholesale repudiation of all three political systems presupposed the assumption that communism’s legitimacy could be recaptured if communism was restored to independence of its current dictatorial debasement. In *The Betrayed Revolution*, Trotsky had taken pains to elaborate on his distinction between the extant capitalist and a hypothetical Soviet democracy. On the strength of this hypothesis, the Manifesto soared above the quandaries that entangled current groups or agencies promoting revolutionary art, quandaries which had mired Rivera’s monumental accomplishments and from which Breton had never been able to extricate himself. It relapsed onto an abstract, even vacuous, idea of revolution as a mere conviction of individuals. Detached from all previous or current definitions of revolutionary art pervading leftist artistic cultures everywhere, the Manifesto’s reassertion of the term was meant to sanction an art without political direction, without political purpose, and without political goal. The “independence” on which it enjoined artists to insist was based on a refusal of contemporary politics.

On December 5, 1936, the Soviet regime had adopted a new constitution, of which article 125 guaranteed three fundamental freedoms: of speech, of the press, and of public meetings. Inscriptions featuring its key provisions were scattered through the Soviet pavilion of the 1937 Paris Expo. The art show in the Soviet pavilion of the New York World Fair was billed as a testimony to Soviet democracy. Trotsky surely had this propaganda in mind when he desisted from investing the term democracy with any value. After all, the new Soviet constitution had ominously qualified its guarantees of freedom with the proviso “in conformity with the interests of the workers and with the view of affirming the socialist system.”<sup>(233)</sup> Trotsky struck the analogous proviso “except against the Revolution” from Breton’s draft. Unlike the Soviet constitution, the Manifesto does address the institutional regulation of politics. Its categorical insistence on independence—rather than freedom—leaves open what artists might contribute to any specific political agenda, be it spontaneously or under obligation. It takes communism for granted pure and simple.

While the Manifesto limits its summary rejection of Communism as practiced in the USSR to the totalitarian equation with German ‘fascism,’ it focuses on “the

so-called cultural organizations [the USSR] controls in other countries." This specification targets the Popular Front cultures of France and Spain, surely on account of Breton's perpetual conflicts with them. Rejecting communist manipulation enhances the Manifesto's pitch to disaffected artists on the Left to join the FIARI as an alternative organization, this one without discipline, but also without political backing, funding, and strategy to fight for a cause. The sole impetus for artists to join is personal conviction rather than professional opportunity. The underlying exclusion of any remunerated work, no doubt because of the FIARI's lack of funds, recalls Breton's principled rejection of writing for pay. It disregards the professional needs of visual artists, with which Breton, a freelance art dealer, must have been familiar. The French Communist Party, on the other hand, fought for the rights of artists, whose works at the art shows in the Maison de la Culture were for sale.

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### / 2.2.3 ANARCHISM AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

Politically, the Manifesto does not call for a complete freedom of Communism, but only for the coexistence of "a socialist regime with centralized control" and "an anarchist regime of individual liberty" that exempts the arts from social and political incorporation by totalitarian regimes. It expects artists "to carry out their tasks" which no one is to set for them. With the rehabilitation of anarchism, the long-rejected alternative to Communism in the Marxist tradition, the Manifesto falls back on the posture of social dissent adopted by modern artists before the First World War. It revokes the contrary move from anarchism to communism which many of these artists had made after the First World War, once communist parties were in place. In the Spanish Republic, Josep Renau, the Director of Fine Arts, was a prominent representative of this transition, which had eventually propelled him to the post of Undersecretary of Fine Arts (see Chapter 3.1/3.1.3). During the losing Civil War, his government had suppressed anarchist organizations pursuing policies of what Trotsky termed permanent revolution.

Breton had failed to translate his revolutionary aspirations into politics and had never pursued them in his literary work. At the end of the day, he was reduced to shrink them into a notion of artists' moral integrity, into the independence of their "inner world." This led him to insert the psychoanalytic liberation of the subject, the fundamental surrealist tenet, into the Manifesto. Trotsky relented in letting him define the revolutionary task as restoring "the broken equilibrium between the integral 'ego' and the outside elements." A "process of sublimation" substitutes for a political practice affecting reality, as if the revolutionary mindset was to be cured from an autistic disconnection. Ideological awareness was to inform no more than the artistic imagination. No activity, only "chance" and "psychoanalysis" are conjured up to bolster the artists' visceral independence as an existential self-assertion. It was a tour de force to postulate that those two concepts both enabled and obliged artists not to take position



vis-à-vis the political conflicts of the day, but to stay ready for a hypothetical future when they would find an opportunity to act.

It comes as no surprise that the call on “revolutionary artists” to assemble under the umbrella of Trotsky’s projected Fourth International says nothing about how a revolutionary movement might advance. The Manifesto merely offers the FIARI as a haven where they can work with no requirements, an alternative to the current political environment of pressure for service. The bleak preamble about the universal threat to civilization which engulfs the arts makes the emancipation of the subject appear as a mere retreat. What follows lacks any aggressive edge against the forces of oppression, a *sine qua non* of any revolutionary movement. It merely guarantees would-be revolutionary artists the undiluted purity of their convictions, whatever they might be. The final rallying cry, which proclaims “independence” as a precondition of a struggle for “liberation,” sounds like a vicious circle. That seasoned political practitioners such as Trotsky and Rivera should have subscribed to a such a platform amounts to an unaverring resignation. Against their and Breton’s intentions, the last stand of revolutionary art was a concession of failure.

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## / 2.3 **COLLABORATIVE WRITING**

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### / 2.3.1 **BRETON’S TEXTS**

Several witnesses and commentators have traced the working process in which Breton and Trotsky jointly collaborated on the Manifesto, most extensively van Heijenoort, Roche and Dugrand. The latter reports that not until the final days of his stay did Breton write a long-hand draft of the entire Manifesto in green ink, which he subsequently discussed with Trotsky during several working sessions. Trotsky had long asked a reluctant Breton to write the Manifesto. Breton promised to comply but procrastinated so long that Trotsky finally expressed his impatience to him. Only then did Breton come up with a short initial version, which he submitted to Trotsky as a basis for further discussions, during which Breton must have taken notes for the elaboration of his complete text. This second long-hand version is twice as long as the first draft. Van Heijenoort seems to have typed a copy for Trotsky to cut out those parts on which both authors were in accord and paste them together with passages from a typewritten Russian text of his own. This bilingual collage was then retyped in French. Both composite texts are lost.

Breton started his first draft with a lengthy, rather academic exposition about the relationship between historic determinacy and subjective independence of art and thought according to his understanding of Marxist theory. He foregrounded the surrealist ideas of chance and autonomous creation to assert a non-fatalistic capacity of art to work for change. Breton generalized Marx’ dictum that writers should not write

for pay to cover the arts in general as a precondition for the uninhibited unfolding of artists' creativity, which should never be determined by any task. He drew only one red line to unbridled freedom: "All license, except against the Revolution," a line adapted from Trotsky's *Literature and Revolution*. This short initial draft sounded rather defensive. Not a word about what the arts might contribute to the capitalized but unspecified "Revolution," much less about where, when, and how a revolution might be expected to occur. All Breton seemed to care for at this point was the axiomatic insistence on the freedom of modern art, the stumbling block in his approach to Communism.

The second, expanded draft starts with a lengthy paragraph which expands on the starting paragraph of the first. It is followed by a newly-written survey of the current world-historical situation endangering the integrity of art and the "personality" of the artist. The threat emanates from both the 'fascist' Hitler State and the Stalinist Soviet Union, paired under Trotsky's totalitarian equation. Breton extends the totalitarian threat to "the crumbling capitalist society" in a world-wide conflict between social injustice and human dignity. It imperils the individual conscience, the "ideal of the ego," which psychoanalysis works to restore. An "emancipation of man" takes the place of a collective revolution. To achieve this goal, the artist is the "predisposed ally." In order to situate the arts in a future free from historic adversity, Breton evokes Marx' doctrine of a time lead of the arts over the "general development" of society's material base. It endows authentic artists with "the gift of prefiguration," which enables them to impress the urgency of "a new order" on their contemporaries. In this projection, prophecy stands in for revolution.

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### / 2.3.2 THE BLEND

The textual comparisons show that Trotsky circumscribed what he perceived as the catastrophic geopolitical preconditions for a revolutionary mission of art at the historic moment when he put the Manifesto into its final shape. He replaced the pertinent passages in Breton's second draft by more elaborate and more specific, yet still hypothetical projections. All artistic tenets of the Manifesto, approximately four fifths of the text, are taken word for word from the draft. They are hyperbolic restatements of modern art's revolutionary claims Breton had upheld through the decade, now stripped of any discernible communist partisanship. Trotsky's ideological amendments could not make up for this vacuity. In order to have the last word on the Manifesto's political purpose, Trotsky had to abandon the historical critique of modern art he had advanced fourteen years earlier in his *Literature and Revolution*. He also had to disregard the admiration for Rivera's murals expressed in his concurrent article, whose arguments found no echo in the Manifesto. Breton's and Rivera's ideas about art simply did not jibe.

No matter how emphatically stated, the absolute self-determination of an art with the claim to a world-revolutionary mission was detached from the substantive

artistic speculations Breton had entertained for years. Breton fell back on them to flesh out the political void of Trotsky's world-historical imagination. This may have been the reason for his reluctance and procrastination in coming forward with the draft. At the end of the day, the Manifesto does not call on "revolutionary" artists to join in the common pursuit of an ever so vague political goal, but only to "loudly proclaim" their "right to exist." This was the purpose of countless manifestos modern artists had issued since the beginning of the century. For Trotsky to subscribe to it served the purpose of luring modern artists to his minuscule movement. That he should have deleted Breton's assiduous proviso "except against the revolution" goes to show how far he was ready to go in granting artists an "anarchist" sphere of self-sufficient ideology. The price to pay for such a license was the disconnection between artistic independence and operative politics. The Manifesto envisages no art policy.

Of the three participants in the encounter at Coyoacán, Breton could surely raise the faintest claims to any political viability of his long-developed notions about revolutionary art. Now Trotsky provided him with an opportunity to finally overcome the persistent rift between surrealist art and any political movement on the Left. Never before had he ceded the last word to a politician. For Trotsky, on the other hand, to forego the functional correlations between art and politics he had explored in *Literature and Revolution* and to delegate the internal definition of revolutionary art to an unaffiliated writer, may have meant acknowledging the "independence" of art from politics that he wanted the Manifesto to proclaim, as long as he could have the final say about the political parameters. Thus, if it was Trotsky who put the finishing touches on the Manifesto, the substance of Breton's second draft was in line with his earlier pronouncements. It took only tactical concessions on the part of both authors to reach agreement on the final text. They were easy to make because no real political purpose were at stake, only the ideological reassurance of wavering artists on the Left.

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### / 2.3.3 TROTSKY'S EDITORIAL WORK

Trotsky must have been disappointed when Breton handed him his second, expanded draft. In claiming for the arts a sanctuary of political unaccountability in exchange for a categorical allegiance to "the revolution," whatever it might be, Breton exempted artists from responsible engagement with any political movement, including the Fourth International. Since Trotsky's cut-and-paste version of the typed transcriptions of Breton's second draft and his own additions is no longer extant, it remains uncertain whether all passages in the final text that do not occur in the second draft are Trotsky's insertions, or whether some are the result of further discussions. In any event, these passages set the Manifesto's political course, as vague as it may be. The introductory passages referring to Marx, to the political world situation, and to the relationship between art and revolutionary politics have been stricken from

the second draft. The new preamble merely conjures up an “absolutely intolerable” threat to culture, after the precedent of the destruction of Roman civilization at the hands of barbarian invaders.

Still, another passage insists that totalitarian complicity in the threat does not entail a symmetrical rejection of both communism and ‘fascism.’ Since for Trotsky communism is not represented by the current Soviet regime, it remains a valid political premise for any revolution. Implacably opposed to capitalist democracy, Trotsky shies away from labelling communist freedom democratic. This is why he added the words “democratic as well as fascist” to Breton’s “death agony of capitalism,” to make sure Breton’s summary polemics against totalitarian oppression could not be construed as an espousal of democracy, which he found irretrievably compromised by the heightened social injustice perpetrated by the self-defense of capitalism in decline. At this point, Trotsky inserted an entire paragraph that reasserts a “revolutionary state’s” authority to take defensive measures against an “aggressive bourgeois reaction,” arts and sciences included. How could such a reservation jibe with the “anarchist regime of individual liberty?” It was one thing to exempt the arts from political direction, but quite another to grant artists free expression.

Thus, the definitive version of the Manifesto curbs the demand, inherent in Breton’s second draft, that artists’ freedom must remain inviolate. It does grant them the professional autonomy of choosing themes or styles, but in locating revolutionary significance in their personal convictions, their “inner world,” it still subjects them to an attenuated dose of totalitarian mind control. This is the unbridgeable double standard that follows from the coexistence of a socialist regime for economic and social development and an anarchist regime for the artistic practice. The repressive measure the Manifesto allows, the self-defense of a hypothetical “revolutionary state” against a hypothetical “reaction,” would be an inadmissible encroachment by the first regime upon the second. The concluding paragraph of Breton’s second draft included the exclamation “all liberty in art, except against the proletarian revolution,” printed in capital letters, and adapted from Trotsky’s *Literature and Revolution*.<sup>(234)</sup> It was disingenuous for Trotsky to delete the words “except against the proletarian revolution”<sup>(235)</sup> for the definitive text.

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/ 3      **HISTORICAL CRITIQUE**

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/ 3.1      **AN ARTISTS’ GROUP IN A NO-MAN’S LAND**

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/ 3.1.1      **AGAINST THE POPULAR FRONT**

The two totalitarian regimes the Manifesto singles out as foremost threats to artists’ freedom lay beyond the reach of its combative edge. Even the authors’

hyperbole does not envisage standing up against their oppressive policies. Rather, the Manifesto is directed against the Comintern's support and control of the self-styled 'revolutionary' artists' movements in democratic states. In denouncing these movements as "Stalinist organizations," the authors rate the Communist Party's influence on artistic culture—personified in Louis Aragon's direction of the Maison de la Culture in Paris—as nefarious, and participation as a sacrifice of conscience. What artists should do in a rivalling group such as the projected FIARI remains unsaid. However, making the Popular Front into a venue of Stalinist dominance overestimates the pro-Soviet propaganda aims and underestimates the democratic coalition politics of its endeavors, which netted it so much non-communist support. It also underrates their contributions to an anti-fascist political culture, however unsuccessful this culture would turn out to be.

Regardless of its political and artistic quandaries, the Popular Front had put forth the single consolidated political challenge on the part of artists against fascism mounted during the decade, culminating in its short-lived ascendancy to government in France and Spain. To offer the projected Fourth International as an alternative for artists to pursue would have required at least the outlines of a program. On the one hand, there was a coalition of state and party agencies with public or private cultural associations in several countries, well-financed, publicized through congresses and journals, and animated by passionate debates. This coalition had been capable of attracting thousands of intellectuals and artists to activist engagement. It was backed by two large parties which, even after their fall from power, still had a mass base to address. On the other hand, there was a tentative alliance of minuscule communist splinter groups, not yet in existence, fleetingly adhered to by a handful of dissident artists and intellectuals enmeshed in factional disputes and prone to loss of heart. To them, Trotsky's promise of an organization without political expediency and political control offered no more than a refuge.

The Manifesto's one-sided charge of communist party dominance ignores the democratic pluralism of Popular Front culture, which was rooted in the Comintern's shift from an antagonistic revolutionary strategy to a cooperative parliamentary one for the communist parties of France and Spain. The ensuing vigorous debate environment could not be labeled as oppressive. Yet the authors were incapable of acknowledging democratic freedom for the arts, since they took democracy for just as tainted as 'fascism' and communism. For them, not only was democracy inextricably linked to capitalism, the primary target of revolution, but its diplomatic cooperation with the Soviet Union had also failed to stop the momentum of 'fascist' military encroachment. It is the fundamental contradiction of Breton's and Trotsky's reasoning that they were de facto calling for democratic freedom of the arts without espousing democracy. Hence their insistence on the independence of political conscience had no political grounds

to stand on. Their Manifesto reads as an involuntary recognition of the tentative alignment between modern art and democracy now under way.

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### / 3.1.2 FROM ANARCHISM TO SOLITUDE

Breton had never experienced any oppression of the arts. The political culture of democratic France ignored the avalanche of his 'revolutionary' pronouncements, of which the Manifesto was to be the last. On the contrary, the growing success surrealist art enjoyed in France and abroad since 1936 was never endangered by censorship, because this art was devoid of politics, at least in appearance. For Breton, to enjoin artists to shed a nonexistent subjugation amounts to a reversal of the social aggression the surrealists had cultivated from the start. To rally them for solitary independence, unconcerned with economic support or public resonance, was disingenuous. The artist "must understand that his place is elsewhere," says the Manifesto, but it does not say where that is to be. It offers artists no more aesthetic or political perspectives than did Trotsky's scarce pronouncements on the culture of the Fourth International. On the contrary, the absence of any precepts was just its principle, the point of its appeal to form a coalition of politically disenfranchised or disillusioned artists thrown back onto fashioning a cause of their own.

An "anarchist regime" for the arts alone is not simply a conceptual oxymoron. To separate such a regime from a "socialist" one, which is to regulate economics and society, means setting up a sanctuary of political unaccountability. It is a reversal of the subordination of anarchism to socialism which had long been either pursued or contested in recurrent struggles to unify communist movements. The Manifesto regresses to the anarchist origins of modern art on the Left at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a posture revived by the Dada groups at the end of World War I and its aftermath. At that time, Breton's participation in the French offspring of the Zurich Dada center had triggered the politicization that eventually brought him to communism, but without acquiescence to communist discipline. The anarchist bifurcation of the Manifesto has its topical origins in the Spanish Civil War. Here, anarchists had unsuccessfully attempted to pursue what Trotsky called a "permanent revolution" (see Chapter 2.2 / 2.3.3).

For a long time, anarchism had informed collective protest movements in society or politics. The Manifesto, however, presents it as an exemption from collective responsibility, a haven for unbridled subjectivity. In Breton's view, the predicament of subjectivity in the uncertain times for which he drafted the Manifesto required psychoanalysis for ideological self-stabilization. From a public stance, manifest in the message of a work of art, revolutionary identity is introverted into an unconscious sentiment that authenticates the revolutionary sense of any heartfelt art. This is Breton's justification for the absence of revolutionary themes in the works that surrealist artists

were producing. Their revolutionary convictions need not be apparent in their art. To remedy this contradiction, the Manifesto offers psychoanalysis as the king's path to an art of freedom. Psychoanalysis is a mental stabilization practice of the middle-class and pertains to individuals detached from any organized collective. Such a prescription of soul-searching as the ultimate test of the individual's freedom compensates for the political opacity of the historic situation.

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/ 3.1.3 **POLITICAL NO-MAN'S LAND**

Trotsky's belief that Communism could be redeemed through political freedom was tantamount to having it restored to democratic principles. But he was unable to conceive of any political venue for a hypothetical Soviet democracy, which he wished to categorically distinguish from the extant capitalist one. And it was only the latter that hitherto had guaranteed freedom of the arts. In vain did Trotsky insist in an unpublished letter to a handful of surrealist artists in Britain: "Blind is whoever does not comprehend that fighting for anti-fascist democracy means fighting for imperialist opposition. [...] No need to tell you, dear comrades, that it is the revolutionary path in which we hope to engage you."<sup>(236)</sup> What Trotsky would have needed to tell them was where such a "path" could lead. Just now, communism and democracy, eventual allies of expediency in the Second World War, were forced to adopt ever-more deliberate postures in an anti-fascist struggle, while the Fourth International was sitting on the fence. A simultaneous challenge to both sides was inconceivable. The authors of the Manifesto were attempting to politicize artistic freedom in a political no-man's land.

In effect, the Manifesto's call for a revolutionary art, unilaterally defined by artists' convictions, beholden to no audience, and exempt not only from any political control, but also from any political mission, would only have allowed a democratic answer. It foreshadowed the post-war re-definition of artistic freedom as a categorical antithesis to totalitarianism right and left. In disavowing democracy while insisting on democratic liberties, the authors deluded themselves about the social conditions required for any ideology of political freedom to take root. Breton's subsequent efforts at implementing the Manifesto through a mailing list, assembling a handful of artists and writers as part of the Fourth International, lacked any social field of operations. The authors paid no attention to the incipient anti-fascist alignment of modern art with political democracy that had been going on during the last three years before the outbreak of World War II in the artistic cultures of the Popular Front in France and of the United States (see Chapter 4.3 / 1.3.2), both under the impact of modern art's oppression at the hands of the German dictatorship, the nemesis of democracy.

During those three years, the revolutionary ideal had declined everywhere in Europe. In the Soviet Union, the revolution had been declared accomplished at the end of the First Five-Year Plan. In Italy and Germany, it had been perverted into the

militarization of society. In democratic France, it had been reduced to a line of argument for social reform in the discourse of parliamentary politics. In all four states, artists or artists' groups that styled themselves as revolutionary had accommodated themselves to this political decline, either by subscribing to the totalitarian perversion of the term revolution or by exchanging their revolutionary for anti-fascist postures. The term had lost its original connotation of a forcible upset in politics as much as in the arts. In the contest between the two fundamental ideologies of revolutionary art and art for the people, the former had lost out against the latter. The Manifesto, however, does not waste a word on the people whom artists address and who would have to carry out their revolutionary aspirations. In the final analysis, it advocates a political *art pour l'art*.

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### / 3.2 **SELF-CONTRADICTION AND SELF-DELUSION**

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#### / 3.2.1 **DELUSIONS OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE**

Trotsky, Rivera, and Breton were probably the most prominent, and certainly the most activist public intellectuals of their time who tried to come to terms with the political confrontation of the arts, that is, the politicization of the arts to a point where they became enmeshed in the shifting confrontations of political systems racing to clash in the Second World War. With their ample records of involvement in art politics and their prolific writings about many of the attendant issues at various points in their careers, one might have expected from their joint deliberations an informed, if partisan, assessment of this historic trajectory, which would have substantiated their ideal of a meaningful involvement of artists in the politics of their time. But did they really expect art to contribute to "a complete and radical reconstruction of society," to be accomplished in the coming war they took for granted? Or did they merely indulge in an extreme of the self-overestimation which had been commonplace throughout the cultural discourse of the decade? Extreme to the point of paradox, because it was based on the refusal of any involvement in current politics?

When the three celebrities from the public sphere of culture met at Coyoacán for the first time, they tried to compaginate their views on art and politics. The two artists, to whom Trotsky had long provided an alternative to the constraining doctrines of the Communist Party, now reciprocated by providing him with an ideological platform for an artists' group as an contribution to his movement. It was a passing convergence of three individuals whose careers were built on a maximal publicization of their views, overestimating the political impact of the public sphere with its speeches, interviews, declarations, and protests. And yet, over the course of the decade, the reliability of the public sphere as a medium and an index of political processes had steadily diminished. The Manifesto only existed in the form of three journal articles in English, French, and



Spanish with little circulation—and perhaps in a few typed sheets Breton sent to prospective members—and had no political impact whatsoever. Beside Breton, the author, there was no person to proclaim it, no gathering to discuss it, no group to adopt it anywhere. Its declarative pathos sounds like a call in the desert.

Breton and Trotsky must have realized that a self-confinement of the arts in an untouchable realm of independence was bound to shut them out of the historical process with its give-and-take of politics and ideology. Hence their promise that only in the future “will it be possible for scholars and artists to carry out their tasks, which will be more far-reaching than ever before in history.” It is because of its focus on a hypothetical artists’ constituency of the future that the Manifesto does not refer to any historical conditions or events of the present time, when such conditions or events affected the arts as never before. Silent about class conflict, it gives no answer to the question of who is to engage in a revolutionary struggle against whom. Unlike most other art manifestos of the Left, it appears non-partisan. Indeed, the roundabout challenge to all three political systems of the day would have made it impossible for any prospective adherent to be a partisan of any political position such as they had been thus far articulated. Trotsky did not expect the restoration of a libertarian Communism against the totalitarian power of the Soviet state from any revolutionary action, only from the imminent war.

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### / 3.2.2 **CONCEALED LEADERSHIP**

Breton’s obsequious deference to Trotsky, different from Rivera’s self-assured, contentious adherence, made Trotsky into a counter-figure to Hitler and Stalin, the supreme patrons of totalitarian and oppressors of free art. Never before had Breton relinquished the verbal lead of his political initiatives. Now he adjusted his texts to fit into Trotsky’s ideological frame. Aboard the ship that took him back to France, Breton wrote Trotsky a letter expressing this deference—he called it “Cordelia complex”—in hypertrophic terms the recipient found embarrassing.<sup>(237)</sup> He included a professional portrait photograph of himself, inscribed with a dedication that expresses some of the ambivalence between freedom and leadership inherent in his own position. A few months later, in another letter discussing Trotsky’s break with Rivera which had occurred in the meantime, Breton conceded him a deciding authority on all political matters where—as opposed to artistic questions—no agreement could be reached.<sup>(238)</sup> In the restricted realm of the ideologically overcharged Paris art scene, he was used to claiming such an authority for himself.

So much did Trotsky value Breton’s commitment that he described the Fourth International as a political endeavor by analogy to avant-garde movements in the arts. Just like these movements, he asserted, it was starting out as a small minority but would eventually gain the strength to prevail. He never raised the question of popular

backing. That Trotsky should have left it to Breton and Rivera to sign the Manifesto, despite his oversight and co-authorship and despite Rivera's non-participation, may have been meant to make it appear not as a politician's call but as the profession of two creative artists on their own account. Yet those two artists had no professional concerns in common, only their adherence to Trotsky's ideas. Trotsky may have expected their international prominence would invest their signatures with the power of a rallying call, but at this point in time, neither one represented ideologically like-minded movements any longer. At home, both were confronted with communist hostility or internal disarray. They brought no followers to the FIARI.

The deceptive signatures cannot conceal that the Manifesto, rather than giving voice to the shared aspirations of an extant community of artists or writers, as the two Surrealist Manifestos of 1925 and 1930, also written by Breton, had done, is actually an ideological blueprint for the political orientation of a future artists' association that did not yet exist. If the Manifesto advances political demands at all, it does so only in the negative. Its point is the absence of any political prescription. It reads like an indiscriminate invitation to freedom-loving artists of whatever revolutionary stripe. In fact, it addresses communist sympathizers, loath to submit to communist discipline, without mentioning communism. At an impasse in their efforts to compaginate their own artistic and political activities, the two artistic celebrities who put their names under the Manifesto were signing on to what they must have taken for a radically new beginning. Breton, who had been able to imbue it with many of his key ideas, was to work for its dissemination to the end. Rivera, whose ideas it ignored, jumped ship within a year.

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### / 3.2.3 **CIRCULAR REASONING**

The fundamental contradiction of the Manifesto consists in the assumption that art must be independent and revolutionary at the same time. Yet a revolution cannot presuppose freedom, the objective of its struggle. The October Revolution did not strive for freedom, but for social justice, to be attained under the dictatorship of the proletariat and to be enforced by terror. According to Trotsky's *Literature and Revolution*, revolutionary art cannot promote the revolutionary process. Its revolutionary agency can only be developed in tandem with the social and political revolution in process. The "complete independence" the Manifesto calls for would detach it from its base. Indeed, the Manifesto does not presuppose any such base. It is hard to imagine how an artist—or any individual for that matter—could "subjectively assimilate" the political conditions that require or favor a revolution, if such conditions don't exist. And if they did exist, "subjectively assimilate" would mean internalizing the revolutionary strategy, meant to be "served" by artists to the point of unconditional self-identification.

To expect art to aim for “a complete and radical reconstruction of society,” as the Manifesto would have it, little more than a year before the outbreak of World War II—which all three participants took for granted—presupposed a disregard for historical reality in favor of an elusive avant-garde ideal. The Manifesto remains silent about the specifics of the current historical scenario, but we know from other sources that Trotsky envisaged an uprising of Soviet workers against the Stalinist regime in the event of a German attack. Not unlike Lenin, but less confident, he conceived of an imminent world war and a concomitant revolution as converging trajectories. How artists could position themselves vis-à-vis this quasi-apocalyptic future, what, if anything, they could contribute to its revolutionary outcome, the Manifesto does not say. Could they work for its advent? Or could they at least give a clear-sighted testimony of its progress? Whatever the answer, the Manifesto grants them no activist role.

The Manifesto’s tacit definition of artistic freedom by default, as a mere absence of control, had long been a commonplace demand in the apologetics of modern art. But it does not touch upon the opposition between traditional and modern art on which this demand was originally predicated. A traditional and a modern artist joined to sign it in the name of free political expression. The term “political indifference” denotes detachment from any organizational ties that might impede the artist’s independent judgment. Artists are to be empowered to participate in a generic revolution on their own. At which point they might join the mass movement any revolution requires, remains unsaid. The authors were at a loss to envisage any mass movement. In his missive to the FIARI of December 22, 1938, addressed to Breton and printed in the journals *Bulletin of the Opposition*, *Clarté* and *Partisan Review*, Trotsky conceded: “FIARI is not an aesthetic or political school and cannot become one. But FIARI can oxidize the atmosphere in which artists breathe and create.”<sup>(239)</sup> The “atmosphere” pervading the free arts nine months before the war was ideologically obfuscated beyond therapy.

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### / 3.3 **TOO LATE**

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#### / 3.3.1 **FIARI’S FAILURE**

Immediately upon his return from Mexico in early September 1938, Breton embarked on a membership drive for the FIARI in France and England which met with minimal success.<sup>(240)</sup> The only modern artist of renown he was able to enlist was André Masson. A group of surrealist artists and writers in England even actively opposed him on ideological grounds.<sup>(241)</sup> Only in the United States did the Manifesto have any impact,<sup>(242)</sup> thanks to a group of Trotskyist writers and academics who published it, and other texts by Trotsky, in their journal *Partisan Review*. However, they did not print the Manifesto as a leaflet for general distribution, as Breton had hoped, and did not form a

chapter of the FIARI.<sup>(243)</sup> Already on September 17, 1938, Breton wrote to this group that the FIARI had gathered “about fifty adherents in France.” “From now on we can have full confidence in the results of our common enterprise,” he concluded,<sup>(244)</sup> but this initial response soon fizzled. Lack of funds for printing hampered the publicity required. In Mexico, only two painters signed on.<sup>(245)</sup>

Already aboard the ship on his return from Mexico, on August 9, 1938, Breton wrote to Trotsky of his fears that the Manifesto would come too late to influence the French intellectual scene, compared to the years between 1926-1931, when “many writers and artists” looked to Trotsky for guidance.<sup>(246)</sup> He was losing the political self-assurance which in the past had never failed to fire up his penchant for ideological prescriptions. In the letter from aboard ship, he implored Trotsky to provide him with written instructions on how he should proceed “in the domain where you can hold me qualified.”<sup>(247)</sup> This request was at variance with the independence claimed for artists in the Manifesto he had signed. On June 2, 1939, Breton had to report that, because of Rivera’s defection and of internal squabbles amongst the editors of *Clave* and *C/é*, enrolments in the FIARI were too “platonic” or “distrustful” to help it advance. Contributions to the journal were not forthcoming, printing funds were lacking, and it did not sell. He did not rate it as a viable publication. All told, he could do no more.<sup>(248)</sup>

There are two reasons why the Manifesto failed to take hold. One was its Trotskyist challenge to the Communist Party, which, in sync with the Comintern, was all out to squash the Trotskyist opposition. The other was that the Manifesto gave no clue as to what revolutionary artists were expected to do, what kind of art they should make, and, above all, for what political goal they should work. Whoever took Trotsky’s world-historical predictions literally would have had to forego any revolutionary activity, immobilized by the inexorable anticipation of a world war needed to create the cataclysmic conditions for a revolution to break out. Trotsky’s expectation of a Soviet defeat flew in the face of the commonplace belief in the USSR as a bulwark against a German attack. The ‘independence’ that the Manifesto claimed for artists precluded entrusting them with any task, either to promote or to prevent such an event. It meant that artists, deprived of any political orientation, were stuck in a holding pattern of immobilized self-defense.

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### / 3.3.2 RIVERA’S DEFECTION

Rivera’s break with Trotsky and the leadership of the FIARI in January 1939 over his objections to Trotsky’s organizational decisions was a decisive blow to the impact of the Manifesto. It incensed him so much that he charged Trotsky with ‘Stalinist’ methods. His attitude was the opposite of the near-submissive deference to Trotsky which drove Breton’s tireless activism after his return to Paris. On January 11,

1939, Trotsky declared that he no longer felt any “moral solidarity” with Rivera’s “anarchist politics.”<sup>(249)</sup> With this judgment, he drew a sharp line between anarchism in the arts, which the Manifesto demanded, and in politics, which it excluded. For Rivera’s undivided self-understanding as an artist and politician, such a split could never work. Within six months, the break deprived the fledgling FIARI of its most famous artist, who might have helped it advance as a figurehead, if not as a leader. Although the Manifesto lacked any reference to Rivera’s thought, Trotsky, in his article of August 1938, had banked on Rivera’s world-wide prestige as a revolutionary artist. Now the anarchism he had conceded to artists in the Manifesto came back to haunt him.

Rivera’s defection deeply affected Breton, whose unwavering admiration for Trotsky kept him going in his promotion of the FIARI. He studiously avoided taking sides. Working to organize a show of Frida Kahlo’s work in Paris, he had to uphold relations with Rivera. However, in his attendant writeup of Mexican culture, he characterized him not as a revolutionary artist, but as a tragic figure. Almost nine months after his return, Breton addressed Rivera’s art in the last issue of his journal *Minotaure*, which appeared on May 12, 1939, three weeks before he wrote to Trotsky that his promotion of FIARI had come to nothing. The issue carried Fritz Bach’s group photograph of the three participants of the meeting at Coyoacán, but no account of the meeting itself, and not a word about the Manifesto. Breton placed Rivera into an illustrated travel report entitled “Memories of Mexico.” With nostalgic admiration, he recalled Rivera’s grand mural cycles of the past. For several years, he wrote, Rivera had received no more commissions and retreated on painting expressive landscapes, as if the adverse conditions evoked in the Manifesto had prevented him from making the revolutionary art it called for.

Rivera’s front cover picture for Breton’s Mexico insert in the last *Minotaure* issue shows the dead Minotaur, wrapped in what appear to be the swathes of a mummy, with splashes of blood splurging from his throat. He is surrounded by the skulls and bones of his sacrificial victims and by the brick walls of the labyrinth. The yellow rope that has guided his killer Theseus back to the exit unwinds along the corridors. On the back cover, Theseus with his knife and Ariadne with the spool of the yellow rope are standing at the entrance, which takes the form of toothed jaws snapping shut around them. Unlike what the myth says, Theseus has failed to rescue the boys and girls who had been offered to the Minotaur. Their remains are scattered throughout pockets of the labyrinth. Whatever Rivera intended to convey with his pictorial alterations of the myth, the image does not carry the upbeat sentiment, however hollow, which the Manifesto seeks to convey about the success of a future revolution. It rather seems to confirm Breton’s downcast description of him as a revolutionary artist at a loss, invalidating Rivera’s proxy signature on Trotsky’s behalf.

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### / 3.3.3 MASSON VERSUS PICASSO

No doubt it was Breton who assigned the outer covers of the last *Minotaure* issue, published on May 12, 1939 to André Masson, the only important artist member of the FIARI. By contrast to his melancholic pages about Rivera, his article “André Masson’s Prestige” concludes with the confident acclamation: “In his person we plainly reconcile the authentic artist and the authentic revolutionary.”<sup>(250)</sup> And yet, Masson’s cover pictures were even gloomier than Rivera’s inside. On the front, the eyeless skull of the Minotaur, one horn broken off, contains the circular brick walls of the labyrinth. Where the mouth should be, a bloody victim on an altar seems to be devoured by the beast. On the back, the labyrinth, a solid tower with no entrance, accessible only to the imagination. Breton may have aimed at a reconciliation of sorts when he brought the loyal adherent of and the apostate from the FIARI together on both sets of covers. Yet it is hard to say which one conveys a sadder message: Rivera’s fortress of failed rescue or Masson’s internalization of mortal conflict. In their different ways, both seem to confirm the Manifesto’s involuntary despondency.

Sometime in late 1938 or early 1939, Pablo Picasso filled a sheet of FIARI stationery with lines of unreadable letters. He must have obtained it from Breton, perhaps with the request of writing a statement in support of the projected group. Instead, he drew a pattern of obscure signs which only looks like a text. Less than two years after having painted *Guernica*, he was no longer in the mood for politics. In his “Political Position of Surrealism,” written in June 1935 to draw the line against the Communist Party, Breton had reprinted an interview from the same year where he recalled Picasso’s explanation of the peculiar shape in which he drew the hammer and sickle emblem (see Chapter 2.2/2.2.2). “If the handles of the tools were made into one, so that a single hand could seize it.”<sup>(251)</sup> He took it to denote the subjective integrity of conviction. Perhaps Breton knew about Picasso’s tentative pictorial deviations from his two Popular Front commissions—the July 4 inauguration curtain and the *Guernica* mural—and expected him to subscribe to the Manifesto’s call for independence. Yet Picasso, an adherent of the Popular Front, which had never dared to encroach upon his freedom, used the letterhead to illustrate his view that FIARI made no sense.

During the nine months or so when Breton tried and failed to get the FIARI going, the Spanish Civil war was lost, and the German annexation of Czechoslovakia was enacted as a prelude to World War II. Under these circumstances, no tentative launch of one more ‘revolutionary’ artists group could work on the desperate hope that just this coming war would give a communist revolution another chance. The Manifesto’s abstinence from world-political partisanship was bound to leave any artist at a loss about what to aim for in this end phase of the political confrontation of the arts. Masson’s pictures of introspective self-torment (see Chapter 4.3 / 3.3.3) were

representative of this end phase in the unintended sense of suffering from politically irrelevant independence. Given the scarce distribution of the Manifesto, it may be unrealistic to blame the ideological vacuity of its contents for its lack of resonance. Only in retrospect has it acquired its historic relevance. The three international protagonists of revolutionary art had ended up in a blind alley. Their meeting at Coyoacán turned out to be their last stand.