Spring 5-15-2016

David Alfaro Siqueiros’s Pivotal Endeavor: Realizing the “Manifiesto de New York” in the Siqueiros Experimental Workshop of 1936

Emily Schlemowitz
CUNY Hunter College

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!
Follow this and additional works at: http://academicworks.cuny.edu/hc_sas_etds

Part of the American Art and Architecture Commons, Art Practice Commons, and the Modern Art and Architecture Commons

Recommended Citation
Schlemowitz, Emily, "David Alfaro Siqueiros's Pivotal Endeavor: Realizing the “Manifiesto de New York” in the Siqueiros Experimental Workshop of 1936" (2016). CUNY Academic Works.
http://academicworks.cuny.edu/hc_sas_etds/68

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Hunter College at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Arts & Sciences Theses by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact AcademicWorks@cuny.edu.
David Alfaro Siqueiros’s Pivotal Endeavor: Realizing the “Manifiesto de New York” in the Siqueiros Experimental Workshop of 1936

By

Emily Schlemowitz

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Art History
Hunter College of the City of New York

2016

Thesis Sponsor:

May 11, 2016
Date

Lynda Klich
First Reader

May 11, 2016
Date

Harper Montgomery
Second Reader
Acknowledgments

I wish to thank my advisor Lynda Klich, who has consistently expanded my thinking about this project and about the study of art history in general. This thesis began as a paper for her research methods class, taken my first semester of graduate school, and I am glad to round out my study at Hunter College with her guidance. Although I moved midway through the thesis process, she did not give up, and at every stage has generously offered her time, thoughts, criticisms, and encouragement. My writing and research has benefited immeasurably from the opportunity to work with her; she deserves a special thank you.

I also want to thank my second reader Harper Montgomery. The discussions and bibliography for her course, Latin American Avant-Gardes and Neo-Avant-Gardes, helped me contextualize my topic and broadened my understanding of the region. I have greatly enjoyed studying alongside Amalia King, Leo Le, and Julie Torchia, as well as with my professors Nebahat Avcioğlu, Cynthia Hahn, Maria Antonella Pelizarri, Joachim Pissarro, and Max Weintraub. The department’s William Graf Memorial Scholarship kindly supported my research in Mexico City. I would like to acknowledge the assistance of Monica Montes at the Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros and Lois White at the Getty Research Institute. Thank you also to Karen Cordero Reiman for her wonderful hospitality and research leads.

It is impossible to adequately convey the gratitude I feel toward my parents Deb Howard and Jerry Schlemowitz. It is to them, and to Philip Warren, to whom this thesis is dedicated.
# Table of Contents

1. Acknowledgements........................................................................................................i

2. List of Illustrations...........................................................................................................iii

3. Introduction.....................................................................................................................1

4. Chapter 1: The Siqueiros Experimental Workshop in the Context of His Revolutionary Biography..................................................................................................................11

5. Chapter 2: Understanding Siqueiros’s “Manifiesto de New York” and the Workshop’s Expression of Modern Art........................................................................................................28

6. Chapter 3: The “Controlled Accident:” Siqueiros’s Experimental Paintings on Panel from 1936.........................................................................................................................49

7. Conclusion.........................................................................................................................69

8. Bibliography....................................................................................................................72

9. Illustrations.......................................................................................................................77
List of Illustrations

Figure 1. David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Collective Suicide*, 1936; nitrocellulose on wood with applied sections; 49 x 72 in. Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, gift of Dr. Gregory Zilboorg.

Figure 2. David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Cosmos and Disaster*, 1936; nitrocellulose, sand, wood, on copper mesh on wood; 23 x 30 in. Lent by the American Fund for the Tate Gallery 2002.

Figure 3. Mexican delegation to the American Artists’ Congress, New York, 1936. (Left to right) Rufino Tamayo, Olga Tamayo, David Alfaro Siqueiros, José Clemente Orozco, Roberto Berdecio, and Angélica Arenal. Collection of Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros.

Figure 4. David Alfaro Siqueiros, *The Elements*, ceiling detail of encaustic mural at the Escuela Nacional de Preparatoria, Mexico City, 1922–23.

Figure 5. David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Burial of a Martyred Worker*, unfinished detail of encaustic mural at the Escuela Nacional de Preparatoria, Mexico City, 1923–24.

Figure 6. David Alfaro Siqueiros, print of “popular trinity” in *El Machete*, ink on paper, April 1925.

Figure 7. David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Tropical America*, 1932; cement and paint; installed on an 18 x 80 ft. wall.

Figure 8. David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Tropical America* (restored, in situ), 1932; cement and paint; installed on an 18 x 80 ft. wall.

Figure 9. Artists in the Siqueiros Experimental Workshop convened for a meeting, 1936. David Alfaro Siqueiros leans against the wall in the center of the image, with the Workshop’s paintings of Earl Browder and Gerald Ford on either side of him.

Figure 10. Parade float for the Farmer-Labor Party on May Day 1936.

Figure 11. Parade float for the Farmer-Labor Party on May Day 1936.

Figure 12. The Siqueiros Experimental Workshop assembles the components for the Farmer-Labor Party May Day parade float outside of their headquarters, 1936.

Figure 13. Photo-enlargements of Earl Browder and James Ford, 1936.

Figure 14. *Earl Browder* and *James Ford* pictured at the Communist Party of New York’s 9th National Conventional, 1936.

Figure 15. David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Folding Screen: Experiments with the Controlled Accident*, 1936; nitrocellulose on wood. Collection of Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros.
Figure 16. David Alfaro Siqueiros, *The Birth of Fascism* (first version), 1936; nitrocellulose on wood; 39 x 30 in. Collection of Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros.

Figure 17. Russell T. Limbaugh, *Oopsie-Daisie*, printed in *New Masses* 18, no. 10 (March 3, 1936), 7.

Figure 18. Russell T. Limbaugh, *The Gang’s All Here*, printed in *New Masses* 18, no. 2 (January 7, 1936), 3.

Figure 19. David Alfaro Siqueiros, *No More! (Stop the War!)*, 1936; nitrocellulose on wood; 36 x 30 in. Collection of Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros.

Figure 20. David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Collective Suicide* (detail of central vortex), 1936.

Figure 21. David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Collective Suicide* (detail of left panel), 1936.

Figure 22. David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Collective Suicide* (detail of right panel with fallen icon), 1936.

Figure 23. David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Plastic Exercise*, 1933.
Introduction

When visiting the Museum of Modern Art in New York, one undoubtedly cannot help but stand in awe and become engrossed in *Collective Suicide* (1936, fig. 1) by David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896–1974). The painting, created by Siqueiros during his pivotal time in New York in the mid-1930s, often occupies the first room of the museum’s fifth-floor permanent collection galleries. The scale of the work, which spans almost six feet and nearly four-feet tall, draws in the viewer to explore further its forceful imagery, and the atmospheric space that simultaneously recedes and advances in swirls of black, blue, red, and ochre.

*Collective Suicide* is both an exercise in technical innovation and a landscape with a strong narrative component. It depicts a gruesome vision of Chichimec Indians, who instead of forfeiting to an army of invading Spanish conquistadors commit mass suicide by hurling themselves over cliffs on either side of the painting. Siqueiros used reduced, stenciled forms for the figures, adding to the sense of their collectivity, and placed them on top of an abstract ground from which he drew a fiery landscape of burning mountain peaks and a cavernous valley.¹ Applying a technique he developed in New York called the “controlled accident,” which sometimes involved him punching holes into the lids of commercial paint cans and allowing the paint to drip onto a panel while he walked around its perimeter, Siqueiros gave *Collective Suicide* a highly textured surface with layers of paint built up through his repeated movement.²

---

While the mixture of abstraction and graphic iconography in the painting has the power to transfix viewers, the context within which Siqueiros produced the work is equally fascinating and the subject of this thesis. Siqueiros painted *Collective Suicide*, and other panels like it, during the year he spent in New York developing the influential Siqueiros Experimental Workshop of 1936. From the beginning, Siqueiros intended the Workshop to function as a collective for artists who wanted to explore together new creative processes, like the “controlled accident,” and methods for making public art. Members referred to the Workshop as a “laboratory for traditional and modern techniques in art;” the term lab meant to convey the experimental nature of the artists’ working methods, while adding a sense of rigor to their exploration.3

What made the Workshop such a singular experience was that it provided a formal gathering space for collaborations to take place between some of the most catalytic figures in twentieth-century art, at a formative moment in their careers. Among the Workshop’s initial nucleus included the then up-and-coming, twenty-four-year-old Jackson Pollock, Pollock’s older brother Sande McCoy, George Cox, Louis Ferstadt, Axel Horn [previously Horr], Harold Lehman, and Clara Mahl [later Moore], along with artists from throughout Latin America, such as Luis Arenal, Roberto Berdecio, Jésus Bracho, Antonio Gutierrez, and Antonio Pujol.4 Participation in the Workshop proved especially critical for the U.S. artists, in particular Pollock, as they moved from regional figuration to abstraction during the 1930s. For Siqueiros, it provided him with the opportunity to refine his politico-artistic style and to synthesize his experimental ideas about art.

---

3 Siqueiros referred to the workshop as a “laboratory of traditional and modern techniques in art” in his “Manifiesto de New York,” David Alfaro Siqueiros papers, 1921–1931, bulk 1930–1936, Getty Research Institute (accession no. 960094), 1. Harold Lehman used the phrase in his article for *Art Front*, “For an Artists Union Workshop” (October 1937).
Although the aims and scope of influence of the Workshop are documented, examined principally by Laurance P. Hurlburt, Olivier Debroise, Jürgen Harten, and Irene Hener, references in the literature tend to recycle much of same information and quote from the established texts. In this thesis I unveil new documentation about the Workshop. Utilizing the David Alfaro Siqueiros papers, 1921–1991, bulk 1930–1936, at the Getty Research Institute (accession no. 960094), I illuminate heretofore-unacknowledged aspects the group’s rules and governance, political goals, and the theoretical framework for the collective Siqueiros put forth in his “Manifiesto de New York” from 1936. The Getty acquired the papers in 1996 from Roberto Berdecio, a painter from Bolivia who served as Siqueiros’s assistant and frequent collaborator throughout the 1930s. To date, scholars have used the collection to study Siqueiros’s time in Los Angeles in 1932, leaving the information about his later Workshop period relatively unexplored.

By mining the Getty papers, along with the other known primary sources, I shed light on the structure and intentions behind the Workshop by answering the questions: What does it mean to run a “laboratory” for artists in “traditional and modern techniques in art?” What were the artists’ collective methods and how did they influence the collaborators? And how does

---

8 “Manifiesto de New York,” GRI (accession no. 960094), 1.
Siqueiros’s conception of the Workshop, as outlined in his 1936 manifesto, fit within his oeuvre and artistic ideologies?

I draw particular attention to the significance of the “Manifiesto de New York.” This document has received scant attention within the literature, yet it elucidates Siqueiros’s reasoning for collective artistic production and his creative model for the artists’ experimentation, the two most celebrated aspects of his career. Siqueiros initiated the Workshop because he wanted it to solve what he considered the quandary of the modern artist, namely finding artistic techniques that uniquely reflected the contemporary era. As he stated, “we intend to find a technique of our time.” In the text, Siqueiros posits what those techniques could be for painting, sculpture, printmaking, and photography, and thus provides a blueprint for the artists’ investigation of materials and processes. Following the model established by Siqueiros in his manifesto, I insert the text throughout my discussion of the artists’ production to link his aesthetic theory with its applications.

In addition to the manifesto, the Getty papers contain valuable documents that speak to the day-to-day operation of the Workshop. Among the papers are two drafts of the “Rules and Assumptions Governing Siqueiros’s Experimental Workshop;” a description of the members and their roles within the collective; and a proposal for making the Workshop permanent. These texts especially add to the scholarship on the Workshop’s public projects, knowledge of which exists only through scant photographs and personal accounts, as they demonstrate that the group deliberately sought commissions from trade unions, the Communist Party of New York, the

---

9 For Siqueiros’s goals for the workshop see “Manifiesto de New York,” GRI (accession no. 960094), 1.
10 Ibid.
Farmer-Labor Party, and other “mass organizations” in the city.\textsuperscript{12} The group’s extensive list of tools and materials, provided in the plan for a sustained organization, emphasizes the seriousness with which the artists approached the collective and reinforces the central premise of the Workshop to serve as a lab for diverse practitioners and media.\textsuperscript{13}

The resources at the Getty augment the often-cited archives at Siqueiros’s foundation in Mexico City, Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros (SAPS). While the Getty’s collection speaks more to the artist’s plan for the Workshop and the manifestation of his ideas, his own materials at SAPS encompass personal items, including individual correspondence and photographs. The difference between the two collections can be attributed to the fact that before Siqueiros left for Spain, at the beginning of 1937, he gave many of his documents on art to Berdecio.\textsuperscript{14} It is unknown why Berdecio never returned them; nevertheless, the two archives are therefore inextricably intertwined. While my thesis will focus primarily on the Getty’s documentation, because of its comparative exclusion from the literature, I will also readily engage with the texts at SAPS, assessing that an analysis of both, done simultaneously, is necessary for understanding a more complete Workshop story.

Among the collection at SAPS is a letter describing Siqueiros’s role as a delegate to the first American Artists’ Congress in New York; letters to his then wife, Blanca Luz Brum, and to his friend, María Asúnsolo, outlining the technical achievements of the collective; a letter to Pollock, McCoy, and Lehman, providing his reason for leaving New York; a draft of a manifesto from 1934 that is often considered by Hurlburt and others as a precursor to the Workshop; and a draft of the New York manifesto.

\textsuperscript{12} “General Organization of Artists Union Workshop,” GRI (accession no. 960094), 4.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid, 1–4.
Many of these documents were incorporated into an anthology of Siqueiros’s writings compiled by Raquel Tibol in 1996.\textsuperscript{15} Notably absent from the compendium, however, is Siqueiros’s “Manifiesto de New York.”\textsuperscript{16} Its omission is likely because SAPS is missing the last page, which becomes apparent when comparing the document at SAPS to the one at the Getty. This final page, of a four-page manuscript, is vital because in it Siqueiros provides the structure of the collective and the privileges and obligations of its members. There are additional differences between the two documents as well: one is in Spanish and the other is in English. Siqueiros held onto his Spanish version and the English translation, kept by Berdecio, probably circulated among the U.S. members. Irene Herner has briefly quoted the draft of the New York manifesto at SAPS.\textsuperscript{17} The text, however, has never been published in its entirety, and, when mentioned, there is a distinct lack of linking its concepts to the Workshop’s artistic output, a need I address in this thesis.\textsuperscript{18}

When discussing the Workshop, scholars either concentrate on specific works of art by Siqueiros and other members of the collective, or they connect it to broader themes within Siqueiros’s art. Both methods have produced insightful readings into Siqueiros as an artist and as a prominent leftist figure. Laurance P. Hurlburt, recognized as the definitive source on Siqueiros

in New York wrote an article about the Workshop in 1976.\textsuperscript{19} He later dedicated a chapter to the topic in his book on the Mexican muralists in the U.S. and is largely responsible for the tendency to contextualize the Workshop within Siqueiros’s creative maturation.\textsuperscript{20} Looking forward and back to mural projects initiated by the artist, Hurlburt argued that the Workshop was integral to Siqueiros’s muralist development, even though he did not produce a mural in the city.

For his research, Hurlburt especially relied on the perspective of the U.S. participants. He uncovered an important early article by Axel Horn about the Workshop’s experimental techniques and their inspiration for Pollock.\textsuperscript{21} He interviewed and accessed the personal archive of Harold Lehman, who has since been interviewed by the Archives of American Art, a transcript used throughout this thesis. Although Hurlburt acknowledged that Berdecio had a collection of documents from the era, he favored the two letters at SAPS from Siqueiros to Asúnsolo, in which Siqueiros expounds on the discovery of the “controlled accident.”\textsuperscript{22} Additionally, Hurlburt’s own correspondence with the artist’s wife, Angelíca Arenal, whose suggestion that Siqueiros intended for his 1936 paintings on panel to serve as studies for mural-sized compositions, supported his thesis.\textsuperscript{23}

Since Hurlburt’s study, a number of scholars have situated the Workshop along the continuum of Siqueiros’s development during the 1920s and 1930s. Olivier Debroise and Mari Carmen Ramírez in Portrait of a Decade: David Alfaro Siqueiros, 1930–1940, considered the Workshop as an extension of Siqueiros’s ongoing political commitment. According to Debroise,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{20} Laurance P. Hurlburt, \textit{The Mexican Muralists in the United States} (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989).
\item \textsuperscript{21} Axel Horn, “The Hollow and the Bump,” \textit{Carleton Miscellany} 7, no. 3 (summer 1966): 85–86.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Hurlburt 1989, 295. For Siqueiros’s letters to Asúnsolo, see Tibol 1996, 129–39.
\item \textsuperscript{23} \textit{Ibid}, 287.
\end{itemize}
the 1936 paintings reflected what he termed Siqueiros’s concern for the “immediate present.” A description that aptly captures the leftist subject matter of Siqueiros’s art, and the artist’s desire for the Workshop to play an integral artistic role in New York’s political milieu. James Wechsler has located the Workshop as another revolutionary effort by the artist in a sequence of radical activity. As Wechsler described, as early as 1922, Siqueiros had engaged other artists in the formation of collectives mobilized against the influences of capitalism and bourgeois individualism.

The Workshop is generally acknowledged as a turning point for Siqueiros responsible for his international ascension and his increasingly positive reception by North American institutions. Anna Indych-López has traced the shift in his treatment by U.S. museums to the Workshop. To do so, she compares Siqueiros’s representation in two exhibitions that bookend the 1930s: “Mexican Art” at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1931 and “Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art” at MoMA in 1940. At the beginning of the decade, Siqueiros received limited attention in the Met’s exhibition, but by the end, he shared the spotlight at MoMA with his peers, Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco. Instrumental to this change, as Indych-López suggests, is MoMA’s acquisition of key works from Siqueiros’s New York period and the artist’s collaboration with Pollock.

The relationship between the collective’s two most known alumni, Siqueiros and Pollock, was the subject of a 1995 exhibition in Düsseldorf. “Siqueiros/Pollock, Pollock/Siqueiros,”

---

24 Olivier Debroise, Mari Carmen Ramírez, and James D. Oles, David Alfaro Siqueiros: Portrait of a Decade, 1930–1940 (Mexico City: Instituto de Bellas Artes, 1997), 58.
curated by Jürgen Harten with the assistance of Herner, juxtaposed works of art prior to, during, and post 1936 to scrutinize the effect Siqueiros had on Pollock and Pollock on Siqueiros. Harten made the case that their relationship had not only artistic merit, but also reflected a vibrant cross-cultural exchange between the U.S. and Mexico, at a time when Mexican art and revolutionary zeal deeply influenced North American art. Harten used many of the same sources identified by Hurlburt; however, he noted that limited attention had been paid thus far to Siqueiros’s own considerations of his Workshop experience expressed in his writings, a deficit he leaves for future investigation.27

As the curator of the Siqueiros portion of the Düsseldorf exhibition, Herner contributed enormously to the success of the publication as a visual record. A catalogue raisonné of Siqueiros’s art has yet to be published, and the book provides a comprehensive, graphic accounting of his works from the mid-1930s.28 Herner also has done the most work among contemporary scholars to address Harten’s challenge that Siqueiros’s personal sentiments about the Workshop remain elusive, by integrating more of the artist’s voice into her discussion.29

In her recent article, “Siqueiros and Surrealism?,” which informed a chapter in the exhibition catalogue Siqueiros: Landscape Painter, Herner looked closely at Collective Suicide, and another experimental painting, Cosmos and Disaster (1936, fig. 2), to consider the question of why MoMA and the Tate Modern have exhibited Siqueiros’s art next to Dada and Surrealist works.30 The answer, she concluded, lies in the ways in which Siqueiros assimilated into his

28 Ibid, 59. According to the International Foundation of Research (IFAR), a Siqueiros catalogue raisonné for Siqueiros has yet to be published and is not in process.
visual language the idea of artistic action arising from the subconscious, a concept that resonated with Surrealist automatism and free association.\textsuperscript{31} Weaving together references Siqueiros made to the “controlled accident” and the Workshop’s experimental process, Herner also touched upon the history of the Workshop and Siqueiros’s biography. To strengthen her narrative, she referenced documents at the Getty. Curiously, she only quoted from texts written in 1932 and 1934,\textsuperscript{32} letting the essential “Manifiesto de New York” remain unacknowledged.

In this thesis, I rely on the establishment, by the aforementioned scholars, of the Workshop’s importance for Siqueiros’s development as an artist and for his worldwide recognition. I build upon this understanding to concentrate on documentation that has yet to be reconciled within the scholarship on the Workshop, integrating those texts from the Getty’s David Alfaro Siqueiros papers with other familiar documents from 1936 to impart new knowledge about Siqueiros’s instrumental, experimental endeavor.

Chapter 1 looks at influential precursors to the Workshop through the lens of Siqueiros’s speech at the 1936 American Artists’ Congress to establish the foundation upon which he built the collective and to gauge his intent more fully. It also introduces the formation of the Workshop, and Siqueiros and the artists’ integration into New York’s leftist environment. Chapter 2 conducts a thorough reading of the Workshop’s principles provided in Siqueiros’s “Manifiesto de New York,” and examines the ways in which his articulated tenets were realized in the group’s public projects. Lastly, chapter 3 explores the meaning of the “controlled accident,” while analyzing the individual works of art created by Siqueiros during his Workshop year and their connection to his rich documentation.

---

\textsuperscript{31} Herner 2009, 113.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid, see fn. 19, 27, and 62.
Chapter 1: The Siqueiros Experimental Workshop
in the Context of His Revolutionary Biography

“Recently a few artists working with myself have begun to establish an art workshop in New
York.”33 With this simple, personal statement, Siqueiros opened his “Manifiesto de New York,”
the foundational document of one of his seminal endeavors, the Siqueiros Experimental
Workshop. Siqueiros must have written the manifesto around March of 1936. He arrived in the
city on February 14th of that year and by all accounts, within two weeks, had already signed a
lease on a studio space at 5 West 14th Street and had attracted a core group of artists to his
collective.34 Siqueiros’s integration into New York’s political and cultural scene took place
swiftly, aided by his prior connections to U.S. and Latin American artists in the city, and his
introduction to prominent leftist leaders at the first American Artists’ Congress. To understand
Siqueiros’s intent behind the Workshop more fully, this chapter examines significant milestones
that led up to its creation, as well as the groundwork Siqueiros laid during the initial weeks of his
arrival.

Siqueiros traveled to New York with several of the Workshop’s founding members to
attend the American Artists’ Congress.35 Held at the city’s Town Hall and New School for Social
Research, the congress was billed as an event on par with the 1913 Armory Show for its cultural

33 “Manifiesto de New York,” GRI (accession no. 960094), 1.
34 Siqueiros recorded February 14 as the date of his “return to the United States” in an
unpublished note located at the GRI (accession no. 960094). For a timeline of when the
Siqueiros Experimental Workshop was up and running, see oral history interview with Harold
Lehman, 1997 Mar. 28, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
35 For context and background on the American Artists’ Congress see William B. Scott and Peter
M. Rutkoff, New York Modern: The Arts and the City (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins Press,
1999), and Matthew Baigell and Julia Williams, eds., Artists Against the War and Fascism:
Papers of the First American Artists’ Congress (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press,
1986).
importance. In 1936, motivated by what the organizers characterized as “plainly a world catastrophe,” artists gathered at the congress to form a united bulwark against the effects of the Great Depression at home and the threat of war and fascism on the horizon. Siqueiros was one of the three hundred and sixty delegates and twelve hundred attendees present for the three-day conference. Joining him, as part of a special delegation from Mexico, were artists Luis Arenal, Roberto Berdecio, José Clemente Orozco, Rufino Tamayo, and Antonio Pujol; of this group, Arenal, Berdecio, and Pujol would participate in the development of the Workshop. Recalling a portrait of the Mexican representatives at the apartment of journalist Alma Reed, Workshop artist Harold Lehman remembers Siqueiros serving as the leader of the delegation (1936, fig. 3). In the picture, Siqueiros appears in the middle of the group between Olga Tamayo and Orozco with his arms crossed, looking directly at the camera—the epitome of a resolute artist engaged in a serious expedition.

On February 16th, only two days after Siqueiros landed in the city, he addressed the congress in a closed-door session at the New School for Social Research. Elected to speak on behalf of Mexico’s Asamblea Nacional de Productores de Artes Plásticas, Siqueiros gave a speech with a twofold purpose: to ratify the Asamblea’s agreement with the congress’s organizing principles and to assert Mexico’s legacy as a progenitor of revolutionary art. The latter was equally crucial for Siqueiros’s international standing. As the last of the tres grandes to

36 Stuart Davis compared the congress to the Armory Show in “The Artists’ Congress,” New Masses 18 (February 18, 1936): 20.
37 Lewis Mumford, “Opening Address,” in Baigell and Williams 1986, 64.
38 Attendance statistics from Scott and Rutkoff 1999, 197.
40 The full text of Siqueiros’s speech is reprinted in Baigell and Williams 1986, 208–12.
41 For details on Siqueiros’s election by the Asamblea Nacional de Productores de Artes Plásticas, which took place a couple of months prior to his trip to New York, see Philip Stein, Siqueiros: His Life and Work (New York: International Publishers, 1994), 96.
come to the city, Siqueiros took the opportune moment of the congress to announce his presence, and, for those who were unfamiliar with it, to establish his role within the formation of Mexico’s muralist movement.

Although his speech, ambitiously titled “The Mexican Experience in Art,” has received limited attention within the literature, it is a dynamic example of Siqueiros’s oratory skills.42 With the speech, he set the stage for one of his most productive periods; a discussion of the address also reveals key precursors to the Workshop and provides insight into his politico-artistic perspective. In the address, Siqueiros historicizes the muralists’ story and thereby asserts his position as one of its primary protagonists. He refers to himself throughout the speech in the third person, as though he was not reading a subjective account but rather statements of fact.

Siqueiros commenced his narrative, like many chroniclers today, with the Revolution of 1910, although the first murals were painted only after the fighting had ended. 43 “Modern Mexican painting of revolutionary tendency arose at the same time as the Mexican Revolution and followed its contingencies,” he declared. “Thus the first unrest in art corresponded to the beginnings of social and political unrest.”44 Amid the tumult of the Revolution, as Siqueiros reviewed, new artistic concerns emerged: artists looked toward Mexico’s indigenous heritage for inspiration and found themselves drawn to vernacular motifs and populist subject matter. This turn toward a national aesthetic corresponded with an upsurge in political content in art. “We began to discover that Mexico had a great archaeological tradition and also a rich folklore,” Siqueiros described. “José Clemente Orozco and [Francisco] Goitia produced works of art,

42 Hurlburt 1989, 221, epitomizes the treatment of Siqueiros’s participation in the American Artists’ Congress, by making a quick reference to Siqueiros’s role as delegate in his discussion of why Siqueiros came to New York and moving on to discuss the Workshop.
44 Siqueiros in Baigell and Williams 1986, 208.
which were important for the development of our Art. Orozco’s anti-clerical drawings and Goitia’s revolutionary scenes illuminated contemporary life.”

The idea of art originating from a place of revolution held power for Siqueiros. Writing in a note from 1936, he stated that he came to New York to pursue his “lifelong battle for the Functional Revolutionary Art.” Combining the terms “functional” and “revolutionary” meant, for him, art that had the potential to reach, and consequently radicalize, the masses. To achieve this goal, Siqueiros continually looked for new ways to integrate art into the public realm; to make art that connected with the proletariat; and to align his own practice with that of the worker. His speech to the congress offered a timeline of his and his compatriots’ engagement with these issues, from inception to present day.

Coming of age during the Revolution profoundly affected many of the muralists. Siqueiros attributed it with compelling him to travel outside the country, with his subsequent encounter with Diego Rivera in Paris, and with his and Rivera’s collaboration on the foundational manifesto for Mexican modernism: “Three Appeals for the Current Guidance of a New Generation of American Painters and Sculptors,” which Siqueiros published when he was only twenty-five. As he recalled before the assembly,

At the same time [in 1919] Siqueiros was sent to Europe…. This caused the contact between the restlessness of Mexican youth with a certain degree of mature technique…which was represented by Rivera. It made it possible to publish our manifesto *Vida American [sic]—American Life—which appeared in Barcelona in 1921. Here for the first time Rivera and Siqueiros tried to express the theory of the muralist movement, which developed a little later.

The “Three Appeals” captured the spirit of the Revolution and the optimism felt by young Mexican artists at its conclusion.

46 Siqueiros in an untitled document, GRI (accession no. 960094).
47 Siqueiros in Baigell and Williams 1986, 209.
Reflecting Siqueiros and Rivera’s time abroad, the manifesto sought to proclaim Mexico’s artistic identity while connecting it with international trends in art. Utopian in its expansive language, the visionary text called for an investigation of new artistic forms drawn concurrently from daily life and Mexico’s *mestizo* culture. “Let us return to the constructive foundations and great sincerity of antiquity,” the artists exclaimed. “LET US LIVE OUR MARVELOUS DYNAMIC AGE!” Historian Mari Carmen Ramírez has characterized these seemingly disparate forces as the movement’s “paradoxical aim: the simultaneous longing for a universal art rooted in vernacular subject matter.” The manifesto’s amalgamation of constructive art and political instability, combined with an emphasis on the country’s pre-Hispanic artistic legacy and the modern structures and technology springing up around them, formed the basis of Siqueiros’s artistic philosophy.

Throughout his address to the congress, Siqueiros employed the words “restlessness” and “unrest” to describe the climate in which mural art came to the fore. These expressions can be traced back to the “Three Appeals,” where he used as an example for his peers a group of emerging practitioners in Spain, who were, according to him, “attuned to the restlessness of these days.” By paralleling the 1921 text, Siqueiros added gravitas to his speech and affirmed his status as a founder of muralism.

At the congress, he continued to reference the Revolution as he discussed the muralists’ earliest attempts to realize the tenets of the “Three Appeals” in their art. For him, the mural program at the Escuela Nacional de Preparatoria (ENP), that engaged Siqueiros, Rivera, and

---

50 Siqueiros in Baigell and Williams 1986, 209.
Orozco at the beginning of the 1920s, achieved mixed results. The artists experienced challenges transitioning from easel painting to walls and those technical difficulties obscured their desire to produce socially significant art. As Siqueiros characterized, “the moment we began our actual work, having come to mural painting as easel painters we were primarily absorbed in new technical problems. We neglected the real problem of content and created murals of neutral or socially irrelevant character.”

While Siqueiros’s mural at the ENP remained unfinished, failing to unite the walls and ceiling into a cohesive painting composed of allegorical scenes, his ambition to create an allover composition that filled a bi-level staircase foreshadowed elements of his works in the 1930s and onward (1922–24, figs. 4 and 5). In this inherently active space, it is evident that he wanted to engage the viewer in movement and create an immersive, painted environment that would activate a decidedly quotidian setting (a stairwell in a school). Throughout the 1920s and 1930s Siqueiros pursued this aim. Movement became integral to the Workshop’s experimentation as well, where the artists practiced encircling panels on the floor as they dripped paint onto wood supports. It was also relevant for the large-scale parade floats made by the collective, which could be seen at political rallies passing through crowds with kaleidoscopic effect. Siqueiros was perennially interested in integrating art into the everyday, what he would have termed the “functional,” and it influenced his choice of materials, the context for his art, and the kind of work he created throughout his career.

Following the ENP, the second effort by the muralists to produce substantive, public material proved more successful. A group of ENP artists formed the Union of Technical Workers, Painters, and Sculptors, an artist organization that announced its objectives in a

manifesto penned by Siqueiros, as secretary general, and signed by Rivera, Orozco, and five other members. The manifesto appealed to the public and specifically the “popular trinity”—soldiers, farmers, and workers—for solidarity in the fight against what they perceived as the current bourgeois forces within Mexico’s culture. Instead of producing art individually in the studio, seen as conformist, the artists embraced a collective model. As the manifesto described, “Our basic aesthetic goal must be to socialize these individual artistic expressions. We condemn as aristocratic easel painting…and extol…monumental art as being of real use to the general public.” Like in the “Three Appeals,” the artists conveyed a desire to return to the country’s artistic roots because “being a popular expression, it is collective.”

The Union’s manifesto appeared as a broadside pasted throughout the streets of Mexico City and in the pages of the group’s graphic newspaper *El Machete*, which became the primary organ of the collective from 1923 through 1925. The paper’s accessible, visual format allowed the artists to communicate directly with the proletariat and its delivery and subject matter increasingly provoked the Mexican government. As Siqueiros described, “[when] we began to reach the masses through our drawings and prints the government became antagonistic to us.”

One of the prints executed by Siqueiros for *El Machete* embodied the Union’s radical orientation (1925, fig. 6). In the two-toned, black-and-white illustration, three icons—a soldier, farmer, and worker—are depicted clasping hands under the headline, “These three are victims; these three are brothers.” The image and corresponding text was meant to reinforce, in a challenging way,

---

the idea of unification between artists and the “trinity” expressed throughout the Union’s founding text.

Siqueiros portrayed the Union to the congress in idealized terms. As he recounted, “As soon as we had acquired our technique we became more conscious of the social possibilities of our work [and]…some of us were little by little transformed from merely passive spectators of the revolution into active participants.”\(^{55}\) Siqueiros was part of this budding leftist group in Mexico. By the time the Communist Party absorbed *El Machete* as its official newspaper in 1925, he had grown into a passionate union organizer and dynamic party member.

This period of the artist’s biography has elicited conflicting opinions. Siqueiros’s story is often told as a series of stops and starts with periods of great artistic energy followed by equally fiery lulls, in which he gave up painting in favor of activism. The on-off narrative, however, effectively separates his declaration that he was a creator of “Functional Revolutionary Art,” into the suggestion that he operated either as an artist or a revolutionary.\(^{56}\) Siqueiros’s closest allies even disagreed about the nature of his political and artistic engagement, and whether the two forces were separate or one outweighed the other. As Olivier Debroise quoted to underline this “tension,” Siqueiros’s wife, Blanca Luz Brum, in 1932, insisted on the dividing the two facets: “Siqueiros is a painter and a revolutionary. Let us be quite clear, without the compound term. Both elements are clear and ardently defined, *whatever he may protest.*”\(^{57}\) An alternative point of view also circulated, however, which confirmed his own perspective that the dual aspects, art and revolution, could not be separated. The Argentine artist Antonio Berni, a frequent collaborator of Siqueiros, described him as “the most consistent in his revolutionary position; it

\(^{55}\) *Ibid.*

\(^{56}\) Siqueiros in an untitled document, GRI (accession no. 960094).

\(^{57}\) Quoted in Debroise, Ramírez, and Oles 1997, 29.
was he who carried the muralist tendency of Mexican revolutionary painting to its final conclusions.”

Siqueiros, as Berni recognized, was actually remarkably stable in his ideas about muralism and the connection between art and politics in his work. One cannot look at Siqueiros without considering the dual nature and constancy of his self-identification as a leftist artist. As his speech to the congress demonstrates, ideas and terms identified in his earliest endeavors filter throughout his practice, and it is clear that he always thought of himself, as he professed in the foundational documents for the Workshop, as a revolutionary artist searching for ways to make revolutionary art.

Siqueiros closed his address by bringing the story of Mexican art up to date. He highlighted the new determinations of the recently founded League of Revolutionary Writers and Artists (Liga de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarios or LEAR), which he considered to be continuing the ideas formulated by the muralists in the 1920s. “A new movement has grown out of all the past experiences,” Siqueiros described, “The League has adopted the idea that revolutionary art is inseparable from forms of art which can reach the greatest number of people.” LEAR had sent Arenal, Orozco, and Pujol as delegates to the congress. Although Orozco had spoken about the group’s goals directly before Siqueiros took the stage, Siqueiros’s choice to end with LEAR helped him link the new direction in Mexican art with the muralists’ influence, and by extension, his own trajectory.

Attuned to the congress’s philosophy of harmony in the face of war and fascism, Siqueiros’s concluding sentence, that actually culminated all of the speeches given by the

---

59 Siqueiros in an untitled document, GRI (accession no. 960094).
60 Siqueiros in Baigell and Williams 1986, 211.
delegates, summarized the opinion embraced by the attendees. As he stated on behalf of the Mexican delegation, “Differences of esthetic opinion do not prevent us from uniting solidly on…the defense of culture against the menaces, Fascism and war.” This declaration was emblematic of the Popular Front era ushered in the year prior. In the summer of 1935, with the threat of fascism imminent, the Communist Party softened its opposition to other leftist organizations, and the Comintern’s general secretary, Georgi Dimitrov, called for a “Popular Front against Fascism,” emboldening party members to cooperate with likeminded groups. The Popular Front galvanized inclusive language and created the conditions for coalitions like the congress to flourish. It also encouraged the development of artist organizations, like the Workshop, which did not have a specific party affiliation but whose members were deeply connected to progressive politics.

Defiant in its political goals but vague about its artistic identity, the congress hoped to attract myriad practitioners and intellectuals. As Matthew Baigell and Julia Williams characterized, “its political interests were well defined, but its artistic personality was purposefully undeveloped.” A product of a yearlong effort led by artist Stuart Davis, the congress arose out of conversations among an initial group of fifty-two artists who were joined in the idea that the “irrepressible impulse of Art may upset the whole Fascist program.” Membership to the congress was not, as Davis described, a “mere spontaneous explosion.” It grew by word of mouth and an official call for delegates published in the radical newspaper Art Front. As the newspaper printed, “It is a call to all artists of standing who are aware of the

61 Ibid, 212.
62 The connection between the Popular Front and the American Artists’ Congress is discussed in detail in Baigell and Williams 1986.
63 Baigell and Williams 1986, 15.
64 Lewis Mumford, “Opening Address,” in Ibid, 64.
critical situation which confronts the artists of the United States and who have the desire to do something in the defense of their own interests.”

Those who answered the call, according to Davis, spanned theoretical orientations and included “leading American artists, academicians and modernists, purists and realists.”

Siqueiros, as one of the speakers, found himself amid an illustrious crowd that included photographer Margaret Bourke-White, painters Aaron Douglas and Rockwell Kent, architect Lewis Mumford, and historians Meyer Shapiro and Max Weber, among many others. In January, only a couple of weeks before the congress opened, the Asamblea had elected Siqueiros, Berdecio, and Tamayo to represent the organization. The invitation of the Mexican artists meant to show international accord with the U.S. initiative. “I feel the congress has accomplished its purpose,” Davis reflected at the end of the three days. “It has brought together artists from out-of-town, and the artists from Mexico, Cuba, and Peru, to show their solidarity.”

In a letter from the artists to LEAR and the Asamblea, the Mexican delegates reported encountering a supportive environment in New York. The group wrote enthusiastically about the flow of exchange they hoped would continue between the two countries now that they had forged an alliance. As the artists stated:

> We have been able to appreciate the great sympathy and representation that exists for Mexican painting in the United States…. This interest must be harnessed, intensifying the relationships between artist organizations of both countries…. We propose that the following points be enacted: the exchange of graphic, antifascist, antiwar, and anti-imperialist newspapers, and the periodic travel of members from Mexican and U.S. organizations, whose history of ability and efficiency deem them deserving of being representatives.

---

66 Ibid.
67 Stuart Davis in Baigell and Williams 1986, 91.
69 Letter from Luis Arenal, Roberto Berdecio, David Alfaro Siqueiros, José Clemente Orozco, Rufino Tamayo, and Antonio Pujol, D. A. S. papers, Acervo INBA—Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros. [Hemos podido apreciar la gran simpatía y respeto que existe por la pintura Mexicana]
On an individual level, in many ways, the Workshop exemplified a microcosm of the dialogue between U.S. and Latin American artists espoused by the delegation. It is perhaps not surprising that three out of the six of the delegates—Arenal, Berdecio, and Pujol—were among the Workshop’s founding members.

Gathering artists together from different backgrounds was central to Siqueiros’s ongoing collective project, which reached new levels of maturity in the Workshop. The first suggestion of his notion to create a collective in New York appeared in a speech he gave at the opening celebration of his solo exhibition at the Delphic Studios. In the 1934 speech, addressed to “painters, sculptors, printmakers, cartoonists, photographers, and architects,” Siqueiros charted a plan to organize “workshop-schools,” in which practitioners with diverse interests would “work collectively, coordinating our respective capacities and individual experiences within the technical arts…learning and teaching new techniques to our disciples-partners.” Although the “workshop-schools” did not come to fruition in 1934, the concept for establishing a space for artists to share and relay expertise, which was fundamental to the Workshop, found its first expression here.

Siqueiros formed the Workshop in 1936 as a hub for professional artists to collaborate on public works and to experiment together with new materials and methods of approach to making

---

70 David Alfaro Siqueiros, “Hacia la Transformación de las Artes Plásticas” [Toward a Transformation of the Plastic Arts] in Tibol 1996, 125. [Vamos a trabajar colectivamente, coordinando nuestras respectivas capacidades y experiencias individuales, dentro de la disciplina del eipo técnico…neusto aprendizaje de la nueva técnica y la enseñanza de la misma a nuestros discípulos-colaboradores.]
art. One of the cornerstones of the group was its desire to act as a resource for leftist artists and organizations in the city. As Siqueiros wrote in his "Manifiesto de New York," "We are not going to interfere with the work and plans carried on by existent art organizations, but shall offer to them…the results of our experiences as a consultative workshop." The idea of the Workshop as a source of ingenuity and information was in part a response to Siqueiros and the other delegates’ congress experience. The spirit of revolution that infused the New York political scene closely mirrored Siqueiros’s own convictions, and he wanted the Workshop to actively participate in the progressive movements of the moment.

The Workshop’s location, in a loft near Union Square, also made it accessible to leftist artists and strategically placed it amid the political activity of the day. Aptly named for its union heritage, at the time, the Square was home to numerous partisan organizations. As James Wechsler has valuably mapped, the offices of the leftist newspaper New Masses were situated on one of its corners as well as the John Reed Club School of Art, an art school with a social-realist bent. Additionally, the surrounding area was populated with radical institutions: in the early 1930s, the National Workers (Communist) Party moved its headquarters from 26–30 Union Square to 50 East 13th Street, and the New School for Social Research, where the congress took place, was only a short distance away on West 12th Street. According to Lehman, Siqueiros also shopped for the Workshop’s materials at “David Mayer [on the Square]…the store for supplies, not nitrocellular [sic] paint but everything else like mechanical equipment.”

Lehman ended up being an important ally of Siqueiros in the creation of the Workshop. He helped him sign a lease on the Workshop’s 14th Street studio, translated key documents

---

71 “Manifiesto de New York,” GRI (accession no. 960094), 1.
72 Wechsler 2009, 155.
73 See oral history interview with Harold Lehman, 1997 March 28, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
written by Siqueiros for distribution, and helped recruit members to the collective. Many of the Workshop’s original participants, like Lehman, knew of or belonged to Siqueiros’s first collective action in the U.S., called the Bloc of Mural Painters, a team of muralists he assembled in Los Angeles in 1932 to paint several works there.\(^{74}\) Thus, the collective’s formative artists were familiar with and understood Siqueiros’s desire to establish a more permanent site for experimentation and cooperation between artists of a variety of media and perspectives.

Lehman, for instance, recalled how upon Siqueiros’s arrival in New York the two artists quickly reestablished their connection. Reuniting at the apartment of the artist Naomi Robinson, a mutual friend, he remembered, “It was there that Siqueiros talked to me about wanting to establish a Workshop in New York. Because I had this experience with him in L.A… I said, ‘I like the idea.’ But this time it was to explore new materials, not frescos.”\(^{75}\) Of the artists who helped formulate the Workshop Arenal and McCoy were similarly active in the Bloc. Although Pollock had moved to New York by the early 1930s, he perhaps also assisted Siqueiros on at least one of his Los Angeles murals, as curators Catharine Baetjer, Lisa Mintz Messinger, and Nan Rosenthal have posited.\(^{76}\)

The six-month period Siqueiros spent working on the West Coast is frequently cited as an important antecedent to his Workshop year. Not only did he make connections to artists who played significant roles within the New York collective, but also he expanded his repertoire of tools and techniques, advancements that proved fundamental to the Workshop’s experimentation.

\(^{74}\) For a discussion of the three murals, see Shifra M. Goldman, “Siqueiros and Three Early Murals in Los Angeles,” \textit{Art Journal} 33, no. 4 (summer 1974): 321–27. One of the murals, \textit{Tropical America}, was recently restored and reopened to the public in 2012 (see fig. 8).

\(^{75}\) Oral history interview with Harold Lehman, 1997 March 28, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

As Hurlburt explained, “The Experimental Workshop was a continuation of Siqueiros’s technical investigation of the ’30s, which had the aim of creating a viable 20th-century revolutionary art form.” 77 Both Hurlburt and Shifra M. Goldman have rightly situated 1932 as the moment when Siqueiros, confronted with the technological resources of the U.S., began to realize the potential of industrial materials for making art. 78

Siqueiros executed three murals in the city, the second of which, Tropical America (1932, figs. 7 and 8), was the most technically ambitious and employed approximately nineteen artists on the Bloc team. Occupying the second-story of a building on Olvera Street, a busy artery at the heart of the city, the sixteen-by-eighty-foot wall presented unique challenges. It was on this surface, and the other two, that Siqueiros developed an innovative technique for painting murals outdoors. After consulting with architects Richard Nuetra and Sumner Spaulding, Siqueiros experimented with waterproof white cement as a medium that could withstand the elements and accept pigment. The cement’s fast drying time required that he accelerate his application of fresco color. Siqueiros discovered that an industrial airbrush allowed him to cover large areas rapidly. Applying a base coat, he then went over the mural scene using metal or celluloid stencils to give outlines to the airbrush’s “smoky effects.” 79 Stencils and airbrushes loomed large in the Workshop’s experimental process as a means of painting both small-scale panels and monumental parade floats and posters.

Siqueiros’s time in Los Angeles also proved a significant step in the development of his art-by-collaboration model, namely it demonstrated for him that a team of artists could work together on one work of art. Members of the Bloc, however, acted more like assistants than

---

77 Hurlburt 1976, 237.
78 Goldman 1974, 321.
79 Ibid, 323.
creative partners. As Goldman acknowledges, “The idea of a “team,” or artists’ collective, was an important part of Siqueiros’s ideology, however the [Los Angeles] murals bear the vigorous stamp of his own artistic personality.”80 Along those lines, Arthur Millier, a member of the Bloc, remembers discovering Siqueiros in the middle of the night finishing *Tropical America* by himself. “At 1:00 a.m. in a dead Olvera Street I found Siqueiros sweating in an undershirt in the cold air, sitting on a scaffold, painting for dear life the peon bound to a double cross.”81

By contrast, the Workshop presents a more refined and comprehensive collective paradigm. What makes it exceptional is the existence of Siqueiros’s manifesto, in which he articulates a specifically communal agenda that incorporates elements of his previous shared undertakings, like the Union and the Bloc, yet emphasizes a more democratic model. As Siqueiros introduced the Workshop members, “We are artists with various and varied ideologies who want to work together on the esthetic and technical problems of the plastic arts…to discover new roads for modern expression.”82 This statement coupled with the manifesto’s concluding enticement: “We wish to state that the Experimental Workshop is already established….We invite you all to come down and work with us in the developing what we have started.” provided an open invitation for an array of artists to join and influence the collective.83

The Workshop is at once an extension of Siqueiros’s prior revolutionary creative endeavors, and a departure from them. Although the Workshop had its roots in Siqueiros’s previous collective experiences, it was the first time he dedicated a studio for group innovation and engagement. Siqueiros likely came to New York with the intention to develop the Workshop. He had announced his unrequited designs in 1934, during a speech he gave to the

80 Ibid, 327.
81 Interview with Arthur Millier by Shifra M. Goldman, July 1973, quoted in *ibid*, 324.
82 “Manifiesto de New York,” GRI (accession no. 960094), 1.
83 Ibid, 4.
Delphic Studios in Los Angeles, and he knew that many of his comrades from L.A. were already in the city. As a prelude to the Workshop, the congress allowed him to situate himself as one of the tres grandes of Mexican muralism before an acclaimed and captive audience. The tenor of his speech captured his desire to link the Mexican muralists, and by extension himself, with the Revolution of 1910 and the artistic movement which originated from that moment of social tumult. In his speech, he articulates the case for political engagement serving as a wellspring for artistic action, a concept that was essential for the Workshop’s creative output.
Chapter 2: Understanding Siqueiros’s “Manifiesto de New York” and the Workshop’s Expression of Modern Art

Siqueiros’s form of modernism as foremost public, collective, and experimental reached its zenith in the Workshop. He articulated these three concerns in his “Manifiesto de New York,” the document he wrote at the beginning of the collective to guide its structure and methodology. Although the Workshop is often regarded as innovative, it is rarely understood as Siqueiros’s expression of these three combined tenets, an omission that can be attributed to the fact that the 1936 text has yet to be fully incorporated into the literature. This chapter draws from the manifesto and other key papers found at the Getty to provide a more complete comprehension of the foundations upon which the artists built the collective, its plan and organization, and the group’s construction and intention behind its public works. The chapter also relies on the personal accounts of Harold Lehman and Axel Horn to augment the Workshop story and to illustrate the experiences of its members.

Siqueiros established the Workshop in spring 1936 as a collective for artists who wanted to explore together new creative processes and methods for making public art. As he described in the manifesto, “We are artists with various and varied ideologies who want to work together on the esthetic and technical problems of the plastic arts... to discover new roads for modern

---

84 For a discussion of Siqueiros’s innovation in the workshop, see Hurlburt 1989, 229. Hurlburt was the first scholar to describe at length Siqueiros’s use of unconventional materials and processes toward, what Hurlburt describes, as his “independent approach to Marxist art.” As outlined in the Introduction, the manifesto has been left out of key anthologies of Siqueiros’s writings, including the definitive source Palabras de Siqueiros (Tibol 1996), and important bibliographies, such as the one compiled in Debroise, Ramírez, and Oles 1997.
expression.” By “we,” a pronoun he employs throughout the document, Siqueiros meant the small, international body that composed the Workshop’s initial nucleus.

In addition to Siqueiros, there was the U.S. contingent of Jackson Pollock, Sande McCoy, George Cox, Louis Ferstadt, Axel Horn, Harold Lehman, and Clara Mahl, as well as the Latin American group of Luis Arenal, Roberto Berdecio, Jesús Bracho, Antonio Gutierrez, and Antonio Pujol. At its height, the Workshop was reported to have at least fifteen members who moved in and out, depending on their schedules. Several of the artists, including Pollock, were members of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and would go to their WPA post during the day and then convene at the Workshop at night. As Lehman recalled, “They came when they were not working on the project [WPA], either after hours or on weekends or when there was a lull in their own work.”

One of the few photographs from the Workshop era shows Siqueiros seated on the floor engaged in a discussion with a group of artists around him (1936, fig. 9). On the wall behind the group is a collection of paintings, a marker of the artists’ productivity and an indication that the collective was already underway. Siqueiros wears his characteristic overalls and on his lap is a collection of papers. Looking at the photograph, one can easily imagine the artists debating official business or perhaps considering the fine points of the Workshop’s organization. Only a couple of month’s prior, Siqueiros had expressed those tenets in his manifesto, the document that served as a map for the artists’ investigation.

85 “Manifiesto de New York,” GRI (accession no. 960094), 1.
86 Oral history interview with Harold Lehman, 1997 Mar. 28, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. In the same interview, conducted by Stephen Polcari, Lehman remembered that the workshop had close to fifteen artists.
87 We can roughly estimate the date of the photograph based on the two portraits of the CPUSA presidential candidates Earl Browder and James Ford that hang on the wall. The workshop
In the left-hand margin of the manifesto’s first page, Siqueiros numbered the paragraphs one through six. Each paragraph introduced a new principle of the Workshop’s methodology, including the group’s intention to comprehend the technical characteristics of art; to study the relationship between classical and modern methods; to identify public art forms; and to learn and explore together in a collaborative, nonhierarchical environment. Topping the list was the collective’s intention to experiment. Experimentation was fundamental to all of the Workshop’s endeavors: it influenced the artists’ choice of materials and practices as well as their cooperative working dynamic. As Siqueiros introduced, “This workshop intends to be experimental in purpose…. We intend to experiment with new theories of composition in the plastic arts…[and] we intend to experiment with modern methods of working collectively.”88 The word experiment and related terms—science, technical, and chemical—permeate the manifesto and entered into the Workshop’s lexicon as evidenced by the artists’ frequent description of the space as a “laboratory.”89

Siqueiros initiated this creative lab, as he explained in the third paragraph, because he wanted it to solve what he considered the quandary of the modern artist, namely finding artistic methods that were specific to the present moment. He proposed that the artists achieve this goal by simultaneously experimenting with traditional and modern techniques in art, in hope that through a comparative study the artists would arrive at new visual forms. “Through a profound analysis of the relation of traditional techniques to their time,” Siqueiros opined, “we intend to find the technique of our time;—for we consider also that so-called modern techniques are in

88 “Manifiesto de New York,” GRI (accession no. 960094), 1.
89 Siqueiros referred to the workshop as a “laboratory of traditional and modern techniques in art” in the manifesto and Harold Lehman used the term “laboratory” in his article for Art Front (see Lehman 1937).
reality archaic and consequently anachronistic.”⁹⁰ Throughout the “Manifiesto de New York,” Siqueiros examined what those established and contemporary processes could be for painting, sculpture, printmaking, and photography, and thereby provided a plan for the Workshop’s exploration.

Siqueiros’s ultimate objective was for the artists to define a new genre of public art that was equally accessible to the proletariat and fit the criteria outlined in the manifesto. As he described, “Our problem is not only one of a physical and technical nature, but also to find forms of the widest possible public scope. In short, art for the people not art for the elite.”⁹¹ For him, creating art for the masses was a distinctly modern task befitting his model of a politically engaged and technically up-to-date artist. This artist that Siqueiros envisioned was also absorbed in public, collective modes of art making. As he continued, “For we maintain that even the most advanced art workers…remain tied to cramped and passé methods ill-suited to their purposes.”⁹² Thus, according to Siqueiros, not only did his peers utilize obsolete materials and techniques, but also they engaged in antiquated ways of working.⁹³

Artists who coalesced at the Workshop desired to produce art collectively. All of the members were meant to be, according to Siqueiros, either “professionals in the plastic arts, or persons who because of their specific technical knowledge can contribute to its growth.” Among

---

⁹⁰ “Manifiesto de New York,” GRI (accession no. 960094), 1.
⁹¹ Ibid.
⁹² Ibid.
⁹³ It is likely that Siqueiros was referring here to both European and Mexican artists. In his 1934 manifesto, “Hacia la Transformación de las Artes Plásticas” [Toward a Transformation of the Plastic Arts], he expressed a similar sentiment. As he stated, “We will work collectively, coordinating our respective capacities and individual experiences within the discipline of the plastic arts to end the egocentricity of modern European art and the false collectivism of official Mexican modern art” [Vamos a trabajar colectivamente, coordinando nuestras respectivas capacidades y experiencias individuales, dentro de la disciplina del equipo técnico. Así pondremos fin al egocentrismo del arte moderno europeo y al falso colectivismo del arte moderno oficial mexicano], printed in Tibol 1996, 125.
these professionals, Siqueiros hoped to recruit, “painters, sculptors, engravers, photographers, cinematographers, chemists, [and] architects.”94 The unusual addition of chemists to the collective mix reflected his increasing interest in incorporating chemical processes into his works. In the Workshop, the group experimented with the reaction of paints to solvents and the physical properties of different kinds of media. Part of what made the Workshop so groundbreaking was Siqueiros’s interdisciplinary approach to thinking about the structure of the collective and the varied materials and processes it would utilize.

By providing a space for collaborations to take place between “art workers” with a wide range of experiences and training, Siqueiros challenged the notion of the studio as a retreat for solitary work. In fact, he adamantly distanced the Workshop from the notion of a traditional art school or atelier, where the artist is removed from his public and where assistants work in service to a Master. As he stated, “We firmly believe that even the most advanced and modern schools of art are in reality academic—in the best cases purely scholastic, and consequently sterile…. The Siqueiros Experimental Workshop is not an elementary school of art.”95

The concept of artists working together at a cooperative site has its origins in the Union’s manifesto, where Siqueiros initially articulated alternatives to studio practices while criticizing the work of the lone artist as art of the “ultra-intellectual clique.” 1922 is also when Siqueiros first espoused art for the masses, writing that “expressions of monumental art” were significant because of their “real use to the general public.”96 His idiom “real use” raised the question of what kinds of art will be most meaningful to the everyday viewer. To which Siqueiros always

94 Ibid.
95 Ibid.
96 David Alfaro Siqueiros, Manifesto del sindicato de obreros técnicos, pintores, y escultores de México, published in El Machete (Mexico City) 2, no. 7 (June 15–30, 1924); translated into English in Ramírez and Olea 2004, 461.
answered, “monumental, heroic, public art.” It became apparent in the Workshop that his idea of public art applied to the studio as well—the Workshop is another example of Siqueiros’s insistence on making art as accessible to the masses as possible through the communal production of it.

Instead of calling the Workshop a studio, the artists referred to it as either a lab or shortened the term to shop. Members of the shop were free to work on individual projects provided that they gave part of their time to the group’s collective efforts. Within the shop, as Siqueiros specified, the artists were organized into sub groups based on expertise and interest, with each division having a “technical director” to act as a “practical guide” for its exploration. He intended the artists to gain new knowledge from each other: “We are going to learn and teach in the process of production for production,” Siqueiros expressed. “Theory and practice are conceived as one.” This system, according to him, would allow for experimentation. As he expounded, “In this way, we shall experiment with traditional fresco, traditional encaustic, [and] traditional tempera… and at the same time with modern fresco in cement, modern encaustic with the use of electricity, [and] modern tempera with silicate.”

Siqueiros dedicated a significant portion of the manifesto to defining, as he did above, what he meant by “traditional” and “modern” in relation to artistic techniques and materials. As he described, at the core of the Workshop’s philosophy was for the artists to put the “traditional face to face with the modern.” To this end, he methodically listed for each discipline—painting, sculpture, printmaking, and photography—what he viewed as its contemporary

---

97 70 Obras Recientes de David Alfaro Siqueiros, essay by Angelica Arenal (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, 1947).
99 Ibid.
100 Ibid.
manifestation alongside its historic counterpart; for example, “traditional” encaustic, which was often made by heating beeswax with a branding iron, was juxtaposed with encaustic that employed present-day electric tools, such as a heat gun, for warmth. The emphasis for contemporary techniques throughout the document is on introducing methods that are reproducible—including stenciling, silk screening, and photo copying—and materials that are industrial and mechanical characteristics of art that he deemed the height of modern.\textsuperscript{101}

Siqueiros’s positioning of modern processes next to classical ones, such as for painting and sculpture, which he classified as “uni-exemplar,” ultimately intended to serve his ambition for the Workshop to create art for the proletariat. As he summarized,

In accordance with our expressed belief in art for the widest possible public consumption, we intend, before the uni-exemplar methods of artistic production and traditional methods of reproduction, to place the modern multi-reproductive approach, experimenting with the most modern mechanical techniques.\textsuperscript{102}

In painting, he wanted the artists to explore “products of modern chemistry,” for instance, “the modern mediums of silicate” and nitrocellulose—a commercial lacquer typically used on automobiles—next to traditional mediums such as “oil, tempera, [and] water color.”\textsuperscript{103} It was through the application of these industrial paints that Siqueiros thought the Workshop could come closer to the masses. As James Oles has observed, “Because these new materials were used and manufactured by the working class, artworks made by them, he believed, would be inherently physically proletariat.”\textsuperscript{104}

While in painting the source and composition of the media was a way for the artists to relate to the people, in sculpture, Siqueiros wanted the Workshop to identify three-dimensional

\textsuperscript{101} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{104} Oles 2011, 25.
forms that could mobilize the masses through direct encounters in the public sphere. Instead of creating structures that embodied the cardinal conventions of a statue—stationary, monochromatic, and often stripped of any political connotations as they were destined for privileged placement within a museum or private collection—Siqueiros desired for the Workshop to create dynamic, colorful objects that functioned predominantly for public consumption. “Before the single-toned sculpture of the ‘pure’ elite approach,” he wrote, “we intend to develop the most modern mechanical polychrome sculpture, using the most modern means available…to create sculpture of the most multi-reproductive and transportable nature.”

The emphasis on a sculpture’s capacity to be moved and easily replicated meant that the political message of the Workshop’s sculptures could be seen by a wide variety of people from the vantage of their daily lives. As is demonstrated in the sculptures the Workshop produced, described later in this chapter, these mobile objects served as the vehicles for the Workshop to communicate political ideals with the masses on behalf of the Communist Party and trade unions.

The correlation of the audience to a work of art was also integral to the collective’s application of photography and printmaking. Coinciding with the artists’ “traditional” employment of “pencil sketches” for preliminary drawings, Siqueiros intended for the collective to utilize photography as a means for understanding the public’s spatial relationship to a work, a practice that has origins in his relationship with Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein. As

106 Siqueiros tested his theory of employing photography in lieu of preparatory sketches in his outdoor murals in Los Angeles in 1932. Hurlburt was the first to attribute Siqueiros’s interest in photography to his conversations with the filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein in Mexico in 1931 (see Hurlburt 1989, 207). The relationship between Siqueiros and Eisenstein is the subject of the chapter “The Vertical Screen,” by Olivier Debroise, in Ramirez and Olea 2004, 239–45. In the
Siqueiros explained, “We shall experiment with the use of photography…to check the process and progress of the work, [and] to analyze the architectural dynamism of the wall to be painted in relation to the spectator.”

Similarly, in printmaking, Siqueiros emphasized the use of color and its “psychological” effects on the viewer as part of the Workshop’s “modern” interests. In conjunction with the established methods of “wood-engraving, metal-engraving, etching, [and] lithography,” Siqueiros wanted to use the photomechanical process of photogravure as well as color printing techniques such as “color lithography and all the most modern processes of mechanical color reproduction.”

Siqueiros’s concern for connecting with the people through a work’s materiality and functionality continued in his choice of tools. In the manifesto, he reimagined, and even expanded, the kinds of devices that could be called artistic. For tools, he summarized, the collective would, “while working with the hand-brush, cold chisel, mallet, and other traditional tools…experiment simultaneously, with all the modern tools which can be employed by artists such as [the] air gun, pneumatic drill, [and] blowtorch.” For him, it was not only the media that imbued a work of art with a tangible sense of the proletarian, as Oles suggested, but also the implement by which the artists used to construct it.

Having outlined the goals of the Workshop and the kinds of materials and processes with which the group would experiment, Siqueiros closed the manifesto with a section dedicated to the contract between the collective and its individual artists. The bulleted list, titled “Privileges and Duties of Members,” provides insight into some of Siqueiros’s aspirations for the group,

chapter, Debroise stipulates that Eisenstein’s break with linear cinematographic composition profoundly influenced Siqueiros’s multi-angular construction and dynamic sense of space.

108 Ibid.
109 Ibid, 3.
including the formation of a lecture and publication program, the production of exhibitions, and the cultivation of earned revenue. In return for the fifteen dollar monthly membership fee, artists would be able to “use for [their] own production the premises, tools, machines, and materials which are the property of the WORKSHOP;” as well as receive free admission to lectures put on by the collective, complimentary copies of publications, and the right to partake in any of the exhibitions and publicity sponsored by the collective.\textsuperscript{110}

Membership, as Siqueiros addressed earlier in the text, required active engagement in the collective’s creative, intellectual, and fiscal life. The artists’ participation in the workshop, however, took on new resolve in Siqueiros’s closing remarks. Not only was the facility of the practitioners to learn from and contribute to the group’s artistic advancements a benefit and mandate of being a member, but also it was what Siqueiros called a “moral” obligation, by which he likely meant that, faced with the political upheaval of the time, it was ever more urgent for artists to engage in the investigations taking place in the Workshop, and to act as both teacher and student in their collaborations to produce revolutionary art. As he continued,

Members may observe and follow in theory and practice all experiments and technical realizations of the WORKSHOP…. It shall be the moral duty of the members to contribute to the general experimentation of the workshop their particular knowledge and experience for it is only in that interchange of experience and knowledge that a full and complete result can be achieved by the WORKSHOP. This is one of the fundamental points of our methodology.\textsuperscript{111}

The exchange between artists cultivated within the Workshop, Siqueiros repeated, was for the purpose of establishing new forms of modern, and thereby civic, art. As he stated in his last point, “In accordance with the program…previously expressed, members shall be expected to

\begin{footnotes}
\item[110] Ibid, 4.
\item[111] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
give their greater interest to working in the direction of true modern art, which is essentially public art.”

As the manifesto makes clear, Siqueiros’s inventiveness in the Workshop was directed toward defining a new modern program that was above all public, collective, and experimental. When discussing the Workshop, scholars frequently ascribe the word “innovative” to Siqueiros’s New York project. Hurlburt, the first scholar to write in-depth about the artist’s progress in the group stated that Siqueiros’s imaginative use of materials and processes in the Workshop demonstrated his “independent approach to Marxist art.” For Hurlburt, what was lacking in the literature at the time was a discussion of what he called the “serious rationale” for Siqueiros’s experimentation. According to him, Siqueiros’s motivation lay in the artist’s belief, as Hurlburt quoted from Siqueiros’s letter to Blanca Luz Brum in 1936, that the “fundamental problem of revolutionary art is a technical problem, a problem of mechanization, a physical problem in sum, tied to a problem of dialectical methodology.”

Although Hurlburt was correct in establishing Siqueiros as a vanguard among his peers, his study of the Workshop is especially missing a discussion of the collective nature of the group. This omission is likely because he did not incorporate the manifesto and other papers in Berdecio’s collection within his writing. By not fully addressing the collective aspects of the Workshop, as evidenced by his emphasis on Siqueiros’s relationship to socialist realism and technical aspects of the Workshop’s experimentation, Hurlburt fails to articulate a complete

---

112 Ibid.
113 First quoted in Hurlburt 1989, 229. Siqueiros’s letter is dated June 9, 1936. […] que el problema fundamental del arte revolucionario es un problema técnico, un problema mecanización, un problema físico en suma, ligado a un problema de metodología dialéctica,] printed in Tibol 1996, 141.
114 Ibid, 223.
understanding of Siqueiros’s modernist drive and what made him so innovative and thus iconoclastic.

Knowledge of what Siqueiros meant by technical problems and dialectical methods is expanded by his 1936 manifesto. The manifesto reveals that Siqueiros intended to address “physical” or technical concerns through dialectical solutions, by bringing together artists with diverse backgrounds to work at the collective, and by putting, in terms of media and techniques, “the traditional face to face with the modern.”115 While Hurlburt’s interpretations paved the way for further investigation of Siqueiros’s experimentation, the addition of Siqueiros’s seminal text, made here, knits together his other frequently cited statements into a cohesive articulation of his goals using his own words and philosophy. Additionally, the “Manifiesto de New York,” written at the outset of the collective, offers a theoretical grounding to the works of art executed by and in the group, a connection that has yet to be made within the literature.

The art produced by the Workshop can be divided into three categories: individual works created for experimentation, discussed in chapter 3; panels painted by Siqueiros and sold as revenue for the Workshop; and temporary public works made collectively for specific political events and as forms of political action.116 The public works, which are the subject of the

116 This thesis forgoes a discussion of Siqueiros’s revenue-generating paintings. While the paintings speak to Siqueiros’s connections in New York, specifically his relationship to wealthy patrons, for example, George Gershwin, who purchased several works during the workshop year, they do not reveal the same technical innovations that his other paintings on panel, like Collective Suicide, do; for the most part, they are apolitical portraits. As Hurlburt has characterized, “[Siqueiros’s] privately commissioned easel paintings...had great practical importance in securing necessary funds for the workshop’s operation, even though they were hardly significant in the context of his pursuit of a revolutionary technical and political mural form” (Hurlburt 1989, 230). For this reason, I chose to focus on the paintings that related most to the technical advancements advocated by Siqueiros in his “Manifiesto de New York” and other crucial texts from the era to carefully illuminate the connections between his art and theoretical orientation.
remaining part of this chapter, fall into the groupings of parade floats, posters, backdrops, stage designs, and monumental portraits. Although they are no longer extant, documentary photographs and films of the Workshop’s public projects do exist, along with accounts of what the works were looked like and the effect they had on audiences from artists and other contemporary sources.\textsuperscript{117}

The first project, a parade float created for the 1936 May Day parade, encapsulated the kind of “art for the people” espoused by Siqueiros in the manifesto.\textsuperscript{118} Emblazoned on the front and the back with “Communist Party New York District” and on either side with “For a Farmer-Labor Party,” the float, as the insignias suggest, was commissioned by the FL and CPNY to signify the unity of the North American people against fascist forces in the U.S. The work’s sculptural iconography, large-scale forms affixed to a flatbed truck, depicted clashing symbols of power: the political influence of Wall Street versus the economic and social interests of the people as represented by the FL and CPNY (1936, figs. 10 and 11). Lying face up on the truck was a figure crowned by a swastika and holding in its outstretched arms a donkey and an elephant. Entrapped in the clutches of this fascist icon, the representations of the Democratic and Republican parties were meant to symbolize the link between the U.S. government and fascism. In the back of the float, a gigantic hammer, upon which the artists painted the recognizable hammer and sickle, moved by a pendulum. When lowered, the hammer crashed into a Wall

\textsuperscript{117} Recently, a photograph of the Workshop’s float \textit{Daily Worker} was uncovered at the Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, NYU Bobst Library. The same float also appears briefly in a film that was shown at the Grey Art Gallery, New York University, in the exhibition “The Left Front: Radical Art in the ‘Red Decade,’ 1919–1940 (January 13–April 4, 2015). The film “May Day Parade, New York, May 1, 1937,” was produced by John Albok, and is available at the Moving Image Collection, The Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University Beta Tape #1 “Color Tape”—hour #2.

\textsuperscript{118} “Manifiesto de New York,” GRI (accession no. 960094), 1.
Street tickertape machine, which emitted streams of red tape over the supine idol, representing the potential dominance of communism, and by extension the people, over fascist power.\footnote{For my explanation of the float’s iconography I have relied on the two photographs of the float as well as Hurlburt’s description (see Hurlburt 1989, 226).}

A photograph of the papier-mâché hammer taken the day the artists assembled the components for the float shows its dramatic form against the backdrop of a New York tenement (1936, fig. 12). Architecturally proportioned, the hammer was presumably too large to fit through the building’s front door and was lowered like a piano from the window. On the roof and fire escape of the surrounding building, people have emerged from their apartments to look closer at the activity going on around and below them. Pollock stands on the fire escape’s steps, staring out from underneath the wide brim of his cowboy hat and supporting the base of the hammer’s arm. Such was the scene captured by an anonymous photographer, perhaps Siqueiros, as the group prepared for its May Day debut and aroused the curiosity of its neighbors.\footnote{This photograph was found among Siqueiros’s papers at the Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros.}

There is an overall sense of theatricality in the photograph: the hammer appears like a prop in a radical play, in which both bystander and artist are cast as actors with their stage an alley in 1930s New York. This overtly public project seems to embody exactly what Siqueiros meant in the “Three Appeals” when he declared, “let us love…the contemporary aspects of our daily lives.”\footnote{Siqueiros translated in Ramírez and Olea 2004, 459.} For Siqueiros, the ideal work was intended for an everyday viewer created by a public artist. Pollock, a young artist and collective member working on the street under the gazes of the masses, represented this ideal. In this scenario, making the work encompasses the public element of art made visible to a proletariat audience.

The images of the float photographed alongside the vessel or from street level looking up seemingly utilize photography in the way that Siqueiros had advocated. The photographs provide
a means for understanding the spectator’s physical experience of the work. One can imagine how impressive the seesawing brightly colored hammer must have appeared as it moved along the parade route from Washington Square Park to Union Square, triumphantly soaring over the parade goers. Its presence even made the pages of the leftist magazine *New Masses*. Observed by editor Michael Gold, “On another float a worker with a great symbolic hammer labeled ‘Famer-Labor Party’ was smashing all the Wall Street tickers in the world.”122

Siqueiros, reflecting upon the Workshop’s May Day creation in correspondence with Hurlburt, described the work as an “essay of polychromed sculpture in motion” synthesizing many of the criteria for “modern” sculpture expressed in the manifesto.123 As Lehman corroborated in a 1937 article for *Art Front*,

This project crystallized practically all the outstanding ideas about which the shop had been organized. It was in the first place Art for the People, executed collectively; and into it went the dynamic idea, new painting media, mechanical construction and mechanical movement, polychrome sculpture, and the use of new tools.124

The public function of the float, seen as it progressed through the crowd of May Day revelers, its kinetic apparatus, and the media with which the artists constructed it, all supported the dictums outlined by Siqueiros in his 1936 plan. As he had expressed, he intended for the group to create sculptures that were principally portable, mechanical, and colorful. Furthermore, instead of precious materials, to make the work the artists employed inexpensive readily obtainable supplies—chicken wire, newsprint, and spray paint—visualizing the message of the FL and CPNY quickly and reproducibly.

According to the “Materials Available for the Workshop—on Loan,” a list found among Berdecio’s documents at the Getty, the collective had a range of tools at its disposal, enabling it

---

123 Hurlburt 1989, 226.
to erect this kind of temporary, monumental structure. Included in the catalogue was a “compressor, air gun, air brush…projector, Cutawl, assorted carpenter tools, drill press, rip saw…one lithographer press with printing equipment and assorted stones, one band saw, [and] complete silk screen process equipment and furniture.”125 The seriousness with which the artists approached their work and the intention for the Workshop to serve as a hub for varied creative activity are evident from this extensive list. Although such logistical details, such as the devices the artists had on hand, are often omitted from the literature, they illuminate how the artists intended to operate as a collective, and as an active Workshop, instead of merely sharing a studio space.

Of primary concern for the Workshop was how the group would generate revenue, while actively participating in the goings on of unions and other leftist organizations in New York. Additional texts identified at the Getty indicate that the artists sought to unify these two endeavors, by receiving paid commissions from trade unions and the Communist Party, as they did for the creation of the May Day float. These key documents illuminate some of the nuts-and-bolts of the group’s plan to function as a self-governing and self-sustaining organization.

Workshop members, per the papers, were divided into three different committees called “producer groups,” which were then subdivided into smaller units responsible for different aspects of the collective’s governance as well as its artistic and community engagements. The administration committee was composed of the publicity, “contact,” and Workshop divisions and maintained the shop’s inventory of supplies as well as acted as the public face of the Workshop. The production committee was the umbrella term for the group’s artistic efforts, producing “the actual work of the shop.” Under this group, there was the “a. mural unit, b. poster unit, c.

125 “General Organization of Artists Union Workshop,” GRI (accession no. 960094), 1.
sculpture unit, d. experimental, e. graphic multi-reproductive unit, f. photographers, [and] g. mechanical unit (chemists etc., carpenters, mechanics, and mechanical draughtsman).” Lastly, the education team was in charge of the “a. lectures, b. monographs, c. groups to learn different public art processes during production, [and] d. political discussion groups to aid public art.”

Within the texts, the artists also developed fourteen ways for the group to raise revenue. Like the Workshop’s catalogue of materials, the list endorses Siqueiros’s selection of process made in the manifesto and gives primacy to methods that are reproducible and public. Among the suggestions were “multi-reproductive work in: a. lithography, b. posters, c. illustrations for leftists”; “stencils on cloth of trade union, political and other emblems”; and a “rental library of paintings, prints and reproductions relative to trade unions and mass organizations.”

From these ideas, it is clear that the collective sought to engage unions and leftist organizations in its production. The concept of a rental library confirms the artists’ intention to make the shop accessible to outside groups. In a note at the end of the document, the artists stipulate that they had already reached out to unions by distributing a survey to ascertain the kind of work they needed. The collective determined that its public activities would be dictated in part by the necessities of its clients and that the work performed by the Workshop was to be relevant to the goals of external organizations. As the text concluded, “[From] these questionnaires we will have a prospectus of the work that will be available for the shop…. We have succeeded in most cases also in getting orders for immediate work. This favorable response is clear proof of the need for an art Workshop.”

Members of the collective produced the temporary public works—for parades,

---

126 Ibid, 3.
127 Ibid.
128 Ibid.
demonstrations, and unions—during brief but intense moments of action. As Lehman recalled, “The workshop operated in spurts. Short bursts of activity…would be followed by periods of relative quiet…. At such times people would drift off and only the central core would remain.”

During one of these moments of high activity, a month after the artists’ May Day presentation, the CPUSA asked the Workshop to make two large-scale portraits of the presidential candidates, Earl Browder and James Ford (1936, fig. 13).

The monumental likenesses were destined for the party’s 9th National Convention as representations of the presidential and vice-presidential candidates on the party’s ticket. In the paintings, the picture plane is closely cropped around the heads of the men, with both figures depicted gazing intently at the audience in a manner that conveyed the gravity befitting their task of winning the election and defeating fascism. The finished works are visible in an archival photograph found among the Communist Party of the United States Photographs Collection at New York University’s Tamiment Library (1936, fig. 14). Taken from the convention floor, the image captures the portraits with the sign “Vote Communist” hanging above a sea of delegates. Browder, evidently pleased with the overall effect, wrote to Siqueiros soon after the event, exclaiming, “no small part of the success of the meeting was due to the work which you contributed and this was visible by the way in which your paintings were greeted by those present.”

The portraits encompassed an array of the Workshop’s experimental techniques, including the application of commercial lacquer through an air gun and the aid of mechanical

---

130 This photograph was first identified by Wechsler 2009, 162.
tools—a projector and camera—to complete the work. Some scholars consider these paintings to be the “most technically innovative” of the Workshop’s temporary public works. As Hurlburt declared,

These portraits combined the most basic of the workshop’s technical aims: the use of reproducible mechanical and/or industrial elements—the photograph, spray gun, and nitrocellulose paint—all for the purpose of synthesizing a public art form of modern technological means and overt contemporary political content.\textsuperscript{132}

To this list, as Hurlburt also pointed out, it is important to add that Lehman and Siqueiros made the works collectively, with the aid of photographer Peter Juley, who had assisted Siqueiros on previous projects.\textsuperscript{133}

According to Lehman, the creation of the paintings was a two-part process, involving preliminary sketches from which the final design was drawn.\textsuperscript{134} The preparatory paintings for the works can be seen on the wall behind Siqueiros in the image of him seated on the Workshop floor (see fig. 9). Siqueiros and Lehman painted these “original paintings” from pictures of the candidates. Rendered on Masonite panels using an airbrush and nitrocellulose, these portraits are much smaller in scale yet contain a similar level of fine detail. Upon completion of the initial works, Juley photographed the panels and then the artists projected sections onto fifteen-foot screens to produce the enlargements that hung at the convention. To heighten the photorealism of the portraits, Siqueiros and Lehman layered nitrocellulose pigment in the areas around the candidates’ features, especially in Ford’s hair, creating a dramatic chiaroscuro, which one can imagine was clearly visible to the convention attendees.

\textsuperscript{132} Hurlburt 1989, 229.
\textsuperscript{133} Harold Lehman letter to Hurlburt, dated September 7, 1974, cited in Hurlburt 1989, 228.
\textsuperscript{134} Lehman described the process of creating the portraits to Hurlburt in a letter dated September 7, 1974 (see Hurlburt 1989, 228).
Throughout 1936 the Workshop continued to receive commissions from the CPUSA. The group made at least four more parade floats after the 1936 May Day celebration.\textsuperscript{135} The next float followed a similar rubric to the first. Mounted on a sailboat intended to sail up Coney Island, past the pedestrians along the boardwalk, it was made for the American League Against War and Fascism for an “anti-Hearst Day” on July 4th.\textsuperscript{136} The float depicted William Randolph Hearst, the newspaper tycoon who appeared often in the leftist press as a symbol of fascism, seated back to back with Hitler. The figures’ heads revolved around a central axis, creating a double portrait meant to illustrate what the artists considered to be Hearst and Hitler’s interchangeable politics. On the side of the boat, the artists had scattered paint-soaked red handprints intended to represent the death of the masses at the forces of fascism. Once more, this float’s kinetic mechanism, use of industrial materials, and political content fulfilled the mandates for public, usable sculpture expressed by Siqueiros in his manifesto.

When considering the Workshop’s public works, it is impossible not to be reminded of that Siqueiros’s stated reason for coming to New York was to pursue “Functional Revolutionary Art.”\textsuperscript{137} Although little is known about the other three floats, the Workshop artists clearly developed a style for executing radical, public parade floats, which included accessible iconography with several moving parts placed on easily accessible vehicles. What is verifiable is that the three floats were other commissions for the League Against War and Fascism: one was executed for an antiwar protest in August 1936, another for a rally for Republic Spain in January 1937, and finally the last one, known as the “Daily Worker” float, for the 1937 May Day

\textsuperscript{135} Hurlburt 1989, 226–27.
\textsuperscript{136} This description of the float relies on the analysis of Hurlburt 1989, 226–27.
\textsuperscript{137} Siqueiros in an untitled document, David Alfaro Siqueiros papers, GRI (accession no. 960094).
The Workshop brought together artists whom Siqueiros had known from previous projects as well as new practitioners committed to the ideas expressed by Siqueiros in his manifesto. Siqueiros’s concept of modern art as created collectively through experimentation with new materials and techniques—both historic and current—and a steadfast dedication to making art public were the guiding principles of his “Manifiesto de New York,” and by extension, the civic works he and the Workshop produced in 1936. These artistic tenets—public, experimental, and collective—have heretofore to be fully articulated in the literature. This chapter addresses those omissions by conducting a close reading of Siqueiros’s seminal manifesto and by drawing connections between the document and the public works created by the Workshop.

My knowledge about the four floats comes from Hurlburt 1989, 226–27. A photograph of the 1937 May Day parade float was found at The Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University (photos 223, box 81, folder 16109 Siqueiros) and exhibited at the Grey Art Gallery, New York University, in the exhibition “The Left Front: Radical Art in the ‘Red Decade,’ 1919–1940,” (January 13–April 4, 2015). Since Siqueiros had already left New York to fight in the Spanish Civil War at this point, I do not to discuss this work at length here.
Throughout Siqueiros’s career, he subscribed to his own philosophy of agency and action, linking his art to the leftist politics of the day and connecting his iconography to proletarian ideals. Whether his art took the form of plastering the streets of Mexico City with broadsheets of *El Machete* as it did in the 1920s; using burlap, a common farming material, as the “canvas” for powerful portraits of peasants in the early 1930s; or painting a mural on the side of a building in Los Angeles in 1932 for the masses to see, his works were not merely personal expressions, but were visual rallying calls to the public. As Hurlburt characterized, “Siqueiros’s ultimate goal was to produce political art that would radicalize the viewer.”139 In the Workshop, Siqueiros applied his dynamism to perfecting his revolutionary tools. With space to work and a cohort of creative comrades around him, he refined the kinds of materials he utilized, his collective methods, and the radical, contemporary subject matter of his art.

Siqueiros’s innovations are especially apparent the Workshop paintings from 1936. Like with all of his creative production, Siqueiros was not satisfied with traditional painting materials or formats—his 1936 paintings are not classic oil-on-canvas works. Rather, in the Workshop, he set out to complicate what he considered the “traditional” aspects of painting by beginning his works on the floor, using scrap materials, and applying a repertoire of unconventional techniques and devices to paint them. Many of the works began collectively created by the artists working together to paint abstract grounds to which Siqueiros later added narrative elements. Although in the “Manifiesto de New York” he had originally focused on the production of murals, the lack of

---

139 Hurlburt 1989, 229.
mural commissions in the city prompted his use of panels. Today, the shop is most identified with approximately fifteen of his paintings, which are mostly painted on panel.\textsuperscript{140}

This familiarity among later audiences with Siqueiros’s 1936 paintings over other Workshop production is in part due to the ephemeral nature of the collective’s public projects—none of which are extant—and moreover, to the acquisition of significant works by institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art, as well as the effect the paintings had on Siqueiros’s subsequent output and the work of members of the collective, specifically Pollock. While many scholars have discussed Siqueiros’s paintings in the contexts of his influence on Pollock and the role they played within his creative growth, especially in relation to his mural for the stairwell of the Electricians’ Syndicate in Mexico City, \textit{Portrait of the Bourgeoisie}, in 1939–40, this chapter situates the works within his “Manifiesto de New York” and other important texts from the era to develop further understanding of Siqueiros’s experimental premise, especially his formative principle of the “controlled accident,” which sparked his 1936 body of paintings, and the revolutionary themes that run throughout his visual production in the Workshop.\textsuperscript{141}

When Siqueiros wrote in the manifesto that the collective was “going to learn and teach in the process of production for production,” differentiating what happened in the group from the “verbal methods of even the most advanced and modern (so-called) schools of art,” he articulated a way of working that relied on the messy and fertile interactions between the diverse

\textsuperscript{140} For an understanding of the breadth of Siqueiros’s production in the workshop, see Harten 1995.

practitioners who coalesced at the Workshop.\textsuperscript{142} In this statement, Siqueiros also espoused a practice that preferred action to formal study. By all accounts, it was his seemingly boundless energy and verve that invigorated an animated setting in the Workshop, in which he and the other artists thrived. As Axel Horn recalled, “Spurred on by Siqueiros, whose torrential flow of ideas and new projects stimulated us all to a high pitch of activity, everything became material for investigation.”\textsuperscript{143} Within the collective’s unorthodox environment, Siqueiros was able to identify the “controlled accident” as well as the media with which he would work.

Throughout the New York manifesto, Siqueiros expressed a fascination with the technical aspects of painting. He wrote in the document that the artists, while experimenting, would consider the composition of paint that gives the medium its structure, the emotional effects of various colors, and the relationship of the viewer to the picture plane or a mural’s architecture. As he described,

We shall strive for a more realistic comprehension of the scientific elements, which are inherent to the plastic arts; such as—the physics and chemistry of plastic materials, the psychology of plastic elements, the geometry of plastics, and the relation of the science of optics to the plastic arts.\textsuperscript{144}

Siqueiros’s desire to understand the “science” of “plastics” may explain why he wanted to count chemists and architects among the Workshop’s members. In the manifesto, he stated that he intended for the group to bring to bear a wide range of specialties on painting—and the disciplines of photography, printmaking, and sculpture—to know the medium more fully, and, from exchanges of knowledge, be able to innovate. As he professed, “We are artists with various

\textsuperscript{142} “Manifiesto de New York,” GRI (accession no. 960094), 1.
\textsuperscript{144} “Manifiesto de New York,” GRI (accession no. 960094), 1.
and varied ideologies who want to work together…to discover new roads for modern expression.”

Siqueiros’s technical concerns also likely informed his choice of nitrocellulose, a readily available commercial paint that he reportedly purchased in bulk from New York’s Valentine & Co. Mentioned in the manifesto in a list of “modern mediums…which can be utilized for art purposes,” nitrocellulose achieved near mythic status for the artist—he even named it in large, bold letters, handwritten across the top of the typed text: “NITRO-CELLULOSE.” Also known as Duco and pyroxylin, nitrocellulose is a quick-drying lacquer that can be sprayed through an airbrush, dripped from paint cans, or added to with rocks and sand. It has the flexible or “plastic” properties Siqueiros desired in a paint medium and the artists experimented with it ubiquitously. As Horn recollected, “Lacquer opened up enormous possibilities [for us] in the application of color…. We used it in thin glazes and built it up into thick gobs.”

In the Workshop, Siqueiros discovered that when he poured solvent over several layers of nitrocellulose, the paint became even more malleable and created eddies of color that he could then manipulate with a brush or a stick. This chemical reaction of the paint to the solvent Siqueiros called the “controlled accident.” As he described in a letter to his friend María Asúnsolo when he realized the process’s potential,

Already in this experimental workshop in New York, we have discovered something most wonderful…using the accident in painting, that is, using a special method of absorption of two or more colors on the surface produced snails and conches of forms and sizes most unimaginable with the most fantastic details possible. The discovery we made almost playing, but this “little game” would not have occurred to us if our theory

---

145 Ibid, 1–2.
146 Ibid, 2.
147 Axel Horn 1966, 85–86.
did not include the initial investigation of all technical concerns, and if our theory was not based on the principle that without modern technique you cannot have modern art.148

From the letter, it is evident that the word “accident” had dual applications. It not only characterized the physical effect of the nitrocellulose and thinner, but also how the artists recognized the technique—by “almost playing” or by nearly accident—which Siqueiros attributed to his model, outlined in the manifesto, as a total belief in experimentation and the modern practices he distinguished in the 1936 document.

One can see the fruits of the collective’s investigations with the “controlled accident” in a pocket-sized wooden painted screen Siqueiros kept in his possession until his death in 1974 (1936, fig. 15). Comprising fourteen equally sized wood panels connected by hinges, Folding Screen: Experiments with the Controlled Accident, was one of the first works he completed using his influential experimental painting method and nitrocellulose. Folding in and out, the panels extend horizontally, creating undulations of richly colored red, black, and yellow paint. When closed, the screen could have easily fit into the artist’s palm—perhaps he carried it around in 1936 like a calling card to attract members to the Workshop. Over the course of his life, it may have served as a readily accessible emblem of his experimental process, as well as his growth as an artist during his time in New York.

The screen’s heavy impasto resulted from a shared gesture performed by several artists in the Workshop. The first “controlled accident” test works, it seems, commenced as collective acts, in which the artists together dripped and splattered nitrocellulose from paint cans to build vivid fields of colorful streaks. Sometimes this method involved the artists puncturing holes into

---

148 Letter to María Asúnsolo, dated April 6, 1936, printed in Tibol 1996, 130. [Pero el resultado ha sido magnífico…uso de lo accidental en la pintura, esto es, del uso de un método especial absorción de dos o más colores superpuestos que al infiltrarse uno en el otro producen las fantasias y formas más mágicas que pueda imaginarse la mente humana.]
the lids of the paint cans, placing panels onto the floor, and swinging the cans over them. As Lehman remembered:

We selected all of the colors, and we got core cans, of all colors, including the primers…the first thing we did is punctured holes, we didn’t open them up, we punctured holes in the lid…and then we started dribbling the paint onto big 8 x 12 feet plywood panels on the floor. First we had put a ground coat on, and that was done just by painting it on…Because we wanted to see how it behaved when we poured thinner on it…the thinner would dissolve the paint, and as it dissolved the paint would create completely new structures, forms, in the paint itself that would take on shapes that were recognizable.149

Lehman’s account emphasizes the immediacy of the artists’ actions, as they applied the color directly from the can to the panel using their bodies and limbs in the absence of a brush or other instrument. The accumulation of paint that appears like splatters of color on the screen’s surface suggests that the work was likely cut out from the large-scale panels arranged on the floor, with Siqueiros adding the hardware afterward to make the work fold. Lehman’s description of the proportions of the panels reinforces Siqueiros’s desire, expressed in the manifesto, for the artists to “experiment with collapsible, transportable murals;” perhaps the screen was intended to serve as a maquette for such a portable mural or, again, an object that Siqueiros could show to potential clients and possible workshop members as evidence of the collective’s innovative style.150

Because the artists labored at the same time on a series of panels, the layers of paint cannot be attributed to a specific individuals and thereby remain rooted in the collective process. As Lehman continued, “one person would pour a color, another person would pour a color, then a third would come along with the thinner.”151 Lehman’s account of the artist’s choreographed

---

149 See oral history interview with Harold Lehman, 1997 March 28, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
151 Ibid.
movements suggests a modernized assembly line. The artists’ repeated action, where every participant has a specific role, captures a workmanlike routine that embodies what Siqueiros meant by “learning in the process of production for production.”

In subsequent paintings, Siqueiros picked out forms generated by the “controlled accident” and developed them into recognizable, revolutionary images. The first of these works, *The Birth of Fascism*, a small painting on panel measuring approximately two by two-and-a-half feet illustrates Lenin’s metaphor, “The Soviet Union as an immovable rock resists all tempests” (1936, fig. 16). In the swirling, atmospheric ground of the rolling sea, created by the combination of the nitrocellulose and solvent, Siqueiros painted a woman lying on a raft and giving birth to the ultimate demean: a three-headed creature joining the portraits of Hitler, Mussolini, and the newspaper tycoon William Randolph Hearst. Adrift in the tumultuous water of “capitalism,” on one side the raft, the Statue of Liberty appears to be drowning—“a symbol of the bankruptcy of our public liberties”—and on the other side, an open book floats face down, representing “the religions, or the morals, and philosophies of the bourgeoisie, in total shipwreck.” At the top left, on a distant rock, an unfinished geometric structure, faintly evocative of Tatlin’s Monument to the Third International (1920), signifies the “white and gleaming…letterless, numberless” Soviet Union.

Siqueiros’s iconography typifies the symbols of fascism and freedom then prevalent in New York’s leftist press. Throughout the pages of the *New Masses*, for instance, individuals perceived as villains to progressive ideals are often pictured overtaking the Statue of Liberty. In

---

152 Ibid, 1.
153 Quoted in Hurlburt 1989, 224.
155 Ibid.
one such image, Hearst and his compatriots are depicted using the American flag to toss Lady Liberty into the air, causing her to lose her tablet, the symbol for law (1936, fig. 17). The callousness of the act is made apparent in the image’s flippant caption, which reads “oopsie-daisie.” In another cartoon, members of the Liberty League, a political organization comprised primarily of business elite who opposed the New Deal, push the statue from her pedestal into the river, with their arms raised in ghoulish salute (1936, fig. 18). The newspaper employed the statue, as a symbol of American idealism in ruins, or what editors from the New Masses called “a Frankenstein of its ideal liberty,” like Siqueiros’s own Frankenstein figure in *The Birth of Fascism*.

The imagery in *The Birth of Fascism*, along with *No More! (Stop the War!)*, another work he finished around the same time, epitomizes Siqueiros’s recent exposure to the principles of the American Artists’ Congress, which came out of the Popular Front’s call for communist organizations to work with compatible groups (1936, fig. 19). As Olivier Debroise characterized, “the first two [paintings from the Workshop] in particular…appear as almost literal visual transposition of the anti-Fascist discourse of the Popular Front.” Siqueiros’s use of vetted symbols supports his claim in the manifesto to “offer…solidarity” to “existent art organizations,” a typical Popular Front sentiment, which he could achieve by contributing the expertise of the Workshop and by allying his iconography to anti-Fascist causes. Indeed, it fits that Siqueiros

---

156 The statue holds a tabula ansata (a tablet evoking the law) upon which the date of the American Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776, is inscribed.
157 Debroise, Ramirez, and Oles 1997, 54.
entered both works into an exhibition sponsored by the congress, which took place soon after the
convention.\footnote{Debroise, Ramírez, and Oles 1997, 54. The exhibition was held at the New School for Social
Research in April 1935 and titled “Against the War and Fascism: An International Exhibition of
Cartoons, Drawings, and Prints.”}

In No More! (Stop the War!), Siqueiros utilized more of his novel painting tools to
visualize a similar revolutionary narrative about the uprising of the Popular Front masses against
imperialist forces. Siqueiros’s references are overt: two-thirds of the painting on panel is filled
with a multitude of tiny, stenciled figures, marching upwards in rows of airbrushed helmets and
bayonets directed at a horizon with fascist and capitalist icons. As Siqueiros explained, they
represent “an immense throng of millions and millions of people setting off in the same direction
from all parts of the Earth. Their demeanor is violent and resolute, for they intend to stop the war
that has already begun.”\footnote{David Alfaro Siqueiros letter to María Asúnsolo, dated April 9, 1936, published in Tibol
1997, 134. Debrouse first quoted this letter in relation in Debrouse, Ramírez, and Oles 1997, 56.}
The upper trio of figures includes a small monster wearing a gas
mask meant to symbolize war. Above, a head with several hands jutting out from it clasps a
swastika representing the capitalist nations joined to fascism. At left appears a visual
amalgamation of World War I, with Paris’s Eiffel Tower illuminated by a menacing beam of
light from a spotlight on the painting’s right. “One can see,” Siqueiros wrote, “on the horizon,
veiled, like a thing of memory not present reality, a synthesized scene from the European war of
1914–1918. As a symbol I used the Eiffel Tower in Paris, among exploding shells.”\footnote{Ibid, 135.}

Debroise characterized the painting’s details of Paris as a simultaneous allusion to the
dashing of Siqueiros’s youthful optimism and a rendition of the avant-garde’s still idealized
city. “At the same time it is a reference,” Debrouse described, “[to] one of the last bastions
of freedom in Europe, offering sanctuary to refugees of fascism, becoming a seat of
the Comintern and giving rise to the Popular Front.”

Thus, in No More! (Stop the War!), Siqueiros combined both personal and global symbols, depicted through his own technically innovative visual language, in a rebuke to the fascist drumbeat to war. Hurlburt has described Siqueiros’s independent approach to Communist topics as his own unique “dialectical realism.” As Hurlburt summarized, “Siqueiros claimed the artist’s right to interpret independently while presenting Communist subject matter, as well as exercising complete freedom in technical areas.”

According to Hurlburt, Siqueiros’s “dialectical realism” is distinct from the socialist realism that dominated Soviet art during the Stalinist era. Socialist realism sought to glorify the experiences of the proletariat and industrial worker. While Siqueiros’s art is populated by these figures, drawing from real people and known events, for Hurlburt, his emphasis on technical experimentation provided a new model. Siqueiros’s style of revolutionary art he identified in the “Manifiesto de New York” as a “technical problem...a physical problem in sum, tied to a problem of dialectical methodology.” Hurlburt distinguished Siqueiros’s style as “active” or “dialectical” realism. This description is certainly apt; however, as discussed in chapter 2, the term “dialectical” also encompasses the way in which Siqueiros wanted the Workshop to fuse practitioners from both the arts and sciences and how he intended to put classical and new methods “face to face.” This chapter thus reveals that the descriptor also applies to the very process, and verbal conjunction, of the “controlled accident.”

Within this painting system, sets of opposites coexist, including collective and individual,

\[\text{162} \text{ Debroise, Ramírez, and Oles 1997, 56–57.}\]
\[\text{163} \text{ Hurlburt 1989, 229.}\]
\[\text{164} \text{Ibid.}\]
\[\text{165} \text{Quoted in Hurlburt 1989, 223.}\]
\[\text{166} \text{Hurlburt 1989, 229.}\]
\[\text{167} \text{“Manifiesto de New York,” GRI (accession no. 960094), 2.}\]
abstraction and representation. During the “controlled accident,” Siqueiros engaged with collectivity and abstraction first, working with other Workshop artists to apply the nitrocellulose and solvent in drips and splatters, and individuality and representation second, going into the painting later on his own to pull out figurative subject matter. He alluded to precisely that order of methods in the manifesto, when he continually used the word “before” to describe modern techniques preceding traditional ones, as in “before the traditional mediums most in use by artists today, such as oil, tempera, water color, etc. we shall place the modern mediums of silicate, nitro-cellulose and all the products of modern chemistry which can be utilized for art purposes.”

If dialectical methodology coupled with technical breakthroughs was one of the primary goals Siqueiros had for the Workshop, then Collective Suicide, often considered the crowning achievement from this period, embodies his aspirations (see fig. 1). The painting, a vast and foreboding landscape, is a searching image that engages in both abstraction and figuration. Ripples of color, varied and multilayered, emanate from the center of the painting’s vertiginous space around which Siqueiros has placed stenciled figures and behind which stands a mountain range engulfed in flames (fig. 20). Made in the later months of the Workshop, likely over the summer, Collective Suicide is one of three paintings commissioned by a prominent New York psychoanalyst, Dr. Gregory Zilboorg, who promptly donated the work to the Museum of Modern Art.

Much scholarly attention has been paid to identifying the scenes depicted flanking the central valley, which Siqueiros airbrushed onto raised tableaus. Shaped using a cutawl, a tool reported among the Workshop’s inventory discussed in chapter 2, the two applied reliefs define

168 Ibid.
the contours of the molten middle as well as the opening of the earth below. Scholars often locate the iconography in *Collective Suicide* in a moment from Mexico’s history: an indigenous tribe’s resistance to the Spanish conquest. On the left, Chichimec Indians leap to their deaths, stab themselves with spears, and pierce each other with arrows to avoid subjugation by the conquistadors invading on horseback from the right. Death of the native civilization is also embodied in the fallen idol that separates the Chichimecs from their persecutors (figs. 21 and 22). Siqueiros rendered the figures using stencils, his preferred method for creating repetitive silhouettes to heighten the suggestion of the masses.

When later asked to describe the painting’s imagery in a questionnaire from the Museum of Modern Art, Siqueiros spoke about the work in general terms, stating the painting was a response to a “deep sense of antiwar and antifascism.” Debroise takes a similarly modern perspective and sees *Collective Suicide* as an indication of Siqueiros’s despair at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, in July of 1936, right around the time he began painting the work. It is likely that Siqueiros intended for the painting to encompass, in a dialectical way, both historic symbolism and contemporary resonance to leave its interpretation open-ended, more universal, and thereby more identifiable for current audiences.

In many ways, *Collective Suicide* is Siqueiros’s decisive expression of the Workshop’s varied tools and methods espoused in the manifesto. To paint the work, he utilized the “controlled accident” formula of nitrocellulose and solvent, an airbrush, stencils, and the cutawl. The effects of the “controlled accident” can best be seen in the vortex of paint at the center of the work, where the movement of the artists working together translates into a spiraling

---

169 For an interpretation of the iconography in *Collective Suicide* see especially Hurlburt 1976, 242, and Oles 2011, 26–27.
170 October 1970 questionnaire in *Collective Suicide* object file, the Museum of Modern Art, Debroise, Ramírez, and Oles 1997, 58.
concentration of color. In the mountains above, one can see the delineation in the process, when Siqueiros went in to pick out images a process materialized in the structures of the mountains where he drew a red line to give the range its peaks. By adding the two panels on the bottom, Siqueiros continued the transposition from accident to image. The painting moves from an abstraction oriented to a bird’s eye view to an upright, horizontal painting; in the secondary step, Collective Suicide became a landscape with revolutionary content.

Siqueiros described finally being able to conquer the allure of abstraction to further his polemical intent in another letter to Asúnsolo, dated to April 6, 1936. As he wrote,

Now I well see my technical road as a revolutionary painter is in using a technique and a dialectic suited to its ideological and aesthetic end. If you could see how well I am able to think plastically on political problems! Before it was almost impossible for me. The emotional and sensual part of art dominated me entirely. A pleasant texture of beautiful abstract form made me forget the initial proposition of my political thought and for this reason I did not succeed. Now I have the energy to sacrifice those things in my paintings that are not in concordance with my mental objective.172

When Siqueiros recorded these thoughts, he could have been reflecting on his most recent mural project Plastic Exercise (1933, fig. 23), a work in which he grappled with similar visual concerns, but that lacks a radical narrative. Nevertheless, the 1933 mural, painted in a private residence on the outskirts of Buenos Aires belonging to a patron supportive of Siqueiros’s formal experiments, is an important antecedent for understanding his progression in the Workshop, and the lineage of the abstract beginnings of his paintings from 1936.

Plastic Exercise occupies a semi-cylindrical vaulted cellar of the Don Torcuato home of Natalio Botana, an editor for the Buenos Aires newspaper Crítica. Siqueiros described the work in an explanatory pamphlet as “an interior monumental pictorial work.”173

---

environment than solely a mural on the wall, all told, the painting spans 2,200 square feet and fills the walls, ceiling, and floor of the underground architecture. Siqueiros began the mural pamphlet, like in the “Manifiesto de New York,” by introducing the materials and collective processes used to realize the work, including the substitution of “archaic” tools and procedures with “modern” ones. Plastic Exercise was one of the first times Siqueiros employed nitrocellulose and worked on the floor.174

To create the painting, he and his interdisciplinary group of Argentine and Uruguayan painters, filmmakers, and architects thought about the activation of the space by the body. Their objective was to enliven an active viewing experience, what Siqueiros referred to as a “dynamic spectator,” who upon entering the space followed a circuitous course designed by the “executing team.” As Siqueiros wrote, “Instead of a logical route, the dynamic spectator’s path through the work was our constructive circulation.”175 The idea of “circulation” echoes the encircling of the Workshop artists around the panels on the floor. In the Workshop paintings, Siqueiros replaced the idea of the “dynamic spectator” with the “dynamic artist,” whose movement was integral to the development of the works. As Irene Herner has characterized, “To begin the first stage of the creative process, Siqueiros and the [Workshop] members put the entire body and mind into action…their first step of painting became a ritualistic, unpredictable, and liberating dance.”176

The allover arrangement of Plastic Exercise is the product of Siqueiros using photographs as the original “sketches” for the mural. Like the stenciled figures in Collective

174 When Siqueiros began using nitrocellulose is a debated point. Although Siqueiros stated that he first used nitrocellulose in 1931 for propaganda graffiti, the work of Anny Aviram, a paintings conservator at the Museum of Modern Art, traces the date to 1935 for his paintings on panel. See Amy Aviram et al., “David A. Siqueiros’ Modification of Oil- and Cellulose Nitrate-based Paint,” Journal of the American Institute for Conservation 52, no. 4 (2013): 278–89.
175 Ibid.
176 Herner 2009, 114.
Suicide, female forms in the mural appear as abstracted shapes. Siqueiros began the process by taking pictures of live models posed on top of plate glass mounted off the floor. Photographing them from different angels and positions, the artist-team then projected those images directly onto the walls and floor. This process resulted in a fishbowl-like composition that Siqueiros called the “plastic box”—a phrase describing the architectural harmony between space, composition, and viewer—similar to the unity between the artists, support, and architecture in the Workshop.\textsuperscript{177}

Although innovative in its spatial construction, the choice of the female nudes in Plastic Exercise was more stylistic than subject driven. As the letter from Siqueiros to Asúnsolo confirms, he was aware of the mural’s deficiencies as a radical work of art. Hurlburt has noted that, “While acknowledging that Plastic Exercise was not ‘ideologically revolutionary work,’ [Siqueiros] considered it the ‘initial contribution of revolutionary form,’ the ‘embryonic realization’ of an art form that would combine not only revolutionary content but also revolutionary form.”\textsuperscript{178} Hurlburt, however, does not continue to link the possibilities recognized by Siqueiros in his 1933 project to his development in the Workshop. The Workshop documents elucidate that what Siqueiros identified as problematic in Plastic Exercise, notably its private venue, dispassionate content, and deficient connection between the work’s abstraction and representation to revolutionary conclusions, he addressed in 1936. As Herner confirmed in her description of Collective Suicide as an “almost abstract composition” that “gives an almost

\textsuperscript{178} Hurlburt 1989, 219.
representational testimony,” she acknowledged the dialogic relationship between those two revolutionary forces fostered by Siqueiros in his 1936 paintings on panel.¹⁷⁹

It is notable that Collective Suicide was nearly immediately recognized for its innovations. Not only was the work acquired and gifted to a U.S. institution the same year it was made, but in December 1936, the Museum of Modern Art included the painting in its sweeping exhibition “Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism.” The exhibition catalogue lists Collective Suicide under the section titled “related artists,” suggesting that it was deemed related, at least tangentially, to the main organizing art historical categories.¹⁸⁰ Siqueiros’s inclusion in this landmark show, which comprised over seven hundred works of art and traveled to six venues throughout the U.S., shows his perceived affinity of his work to European art movements. Siqueiros had referenced Dada in his foundational document the “Three Appeals,” calling it the “absolutely new REAPPRAISAL of ‘classical voices,’” a theme that resonates with the tenets of his 1936 manifesto.¹⁸¹ In Dada, Siqueiros would have found practice, like the accident, that turned classical traditions off kilter. His works engages, if subconsciously, with Dadaist tropes, particularly the emphasis on materials derived from commercial or functional sources, “readymade” for artistic production.

The relationship between Siqueiros and Surrealism was even stronger. The words that defined Siqueiros’s methods—accident, automatic, and experimental—were tantamount to surrealist art making. As Herner noted, “Siqueiros integrated into his visual process the concept that artistic action arose from moments that erupted out of the unconscious, termed ‘free

¹⁷⁹ Herner 2009, 122.
association, ‘automatism,’ and ‘critical paranoia’ by psychoanalysis and Surrealism.” It is no coincidence that Dr. Zilboorg, a renowned psychoanalyst who met Siqueiros in Taxco in 1935, was drawn to his work and served as one of his principle patrons during these years. Siqueiros affirmed his interest in what he called the “psychology of plastics” in his “Manifiesto de New York” as he wrote: “We desire that the Experimental Workshop shall arrive at the most profound study of the psychology of plastic elements concerning scientific knowledge of the psychological value of color, form, texture, correlation.” By “psychological value,” Siqueiros meant the influence of these formal concerns on the viewer’s emotional reception of a work of art.

To Herner’s list of processes shared by Surrealists and Siqueiros, one must add that they both engaged with the creation of cosmic, visionary landscapes. Landscapes were a popular subject matter at the height of the Surrealist movement in the 1920s. Instead of portraying vistas of natural scenery, however, Surrealist landscapes reflect the uncanny, sometimes mysterious imagery of dreams, myth, and fantasy. Siqueiros’s landscapes, as seen in Collective Suicide, also play in these realms, combining historic and contemporary points of reference to radical ends in seas of automatically applied paint.

In the paintings Siqueiros produced in the summer of 1936, after Collective Suicide, he continued his revolutionary themes, often replacing the masses of stenciled forms with solitary figures. In Cosmos and Disaster, another work acquired by Dr. Zilboorg and not discovered until the 1990s in a private collection, a diminutive red-stenciled fallen figure lies among a vast wreckage (see fig. 2). All but devoid of humanity, the cataclysmic landscape of a blackened sky lit up by the burning embers of a city below, reads like an ominous continuation of the narrative in Collective Suicide. Less is known about Cosmos and Disaster, likely because Siqueiros

---

182 Herner 2009, 113.
painted it just before leaving New York for Spain to volunteer for the International Brigade against Franco’s army. The painting was the conclusion of Siqueiros’s Workshop experiments with nitrocellulose, stencils, and collage.

As with other paintings from this formative year, *Cosmos and Disaster* began with Siqueiros and other Workshop artists pouring, dripping, and launching nitrocellulose at the panel laid on the floor. The much-discussed accidents that occurred when solvent was superimposed over the nitrocellulose are apparent especially in the middle ground of *Cosmos and Disaster*, where the reaction of the two materials has produced clouded pools of black and ochre. Enhancing the appearance of the “holes” created by the thinner, Siqueiros sprayed the ochre paint through a frisket—a plastic sheet used in airbrushing that allows the artist to control the flow of paint. Using the tool is a precise procedure that requires a steady hand: the frisket is placed over the entire panel and then Siqueiros would have cut into it to remove the parts he wanted to airbrush. The frisket, like Siqueiros’s airbrushing of stenciled figures, was another way for him to render images from the painting’s abstract ground. At this juncture, he also incorporated small pieces of rock and sand, roughening the texture of the paint to heighten a sense of the ruination of the landscape. He then affixed shards of broken wood and nails to the panel, which seen from a distance look like partially demolished buildings and planes diving into the rubble.  

More abstract than *Collective Suicide*, *Cosmos and Disaster* has also been associated with Siqueiros’s portentous vision and anguish at the Spanish Civil War. This reading of the work rings true, given the proximity of its completion to his departure. As Debroise has described, “Filled with a disordered accumulation of broken beams and tangled wires, *Cosmos*

---

184 See Debroise, Ramírez, and Oles 1997, 179, for another detailed description of *Cosmos and Disaster*.  

66
and Disaster summarizes the apocalyptic images of war in the mid-1930s.” Like Collective Suicide, Cosmos and Disaster has also been displayed among Surrealist works. In 2009, the Tate Modern exhibited it in the gallery “Surrealism and Beyond,” in a section titled “Poetry and Dream,” another recognition that Siqueiros’s landscapes from this period traffic in the cosmos or mental domain. In 2016, however, it went on display in the Tate’s gallery “Citizens and States,” illuminating the bridge in his paintings between abstraction and representation, envisioned and actual events.

Siqueiros concluded the opening paragraphs of his “Manifiesto de New York” with a statement that speaks to the aims of the Workshop, specifically the advancements it hoped to make in the technical aspects of painting and its aim to reconcile classical traditions within a modern practice:

For we consider that contemporary producers of plastic art (on the whole) have not only not advanced in the proper cumulative understanding of the scientific elements of which the plastic arts consist, but also that they have lost nearly all of the corresponding experiences of the past.  

The phrase “cumulative understanding” is especially vital in the Workshop, as it articulates how wide ranging the collective intended to be with regard to the disciplines it explored, the types of practitioners who were part of their group efforts, and the resonance of the works they produced. How the participants functioned as a collective is especially apparent in their descriptions and the creative results of the “controlled accident.” The allusion to the past might at first seem to have meaning only in technical terms. Closely examining Siqueiros’s paintings has proven, however, that it also referenced historic content as well. As this chapter has explored, Siqueiros’s Workshop paintings consolidate or merge technical advances, collective and

185 Ibid, 179.  
186 “Manifiesto de New York,” GRI (accession no. 960094), 1.
individual processes, and contemporary and past subject matter all in order to meld revolutionary methods with radical themes.
Conclusion

If David Alfaro Siqueiros came to New York on February 14, 1936, as he avowed in a note found in Berdecio’s papers at the Getty, to continue his “lifelong” objective to create a “Functional Revolutionary Art,” then the Siqueiros Experimental Workshop proved a pivotal step in that journey. Only Siqueiros, a master wordsmith and prolific writer, could coin a phrase that so neatly described his purpose. Although his reference to the “Functional Revolutionary Art” appears to be part of a draft—a quick entry among numerous documents at the Getty—it nevertheless captures his views on art as primarily a catalyst for social change, illuminating how critically entwined art and politics were in his practice.

In sync with the political climate of the time, as demonstrated by the Workshop’s public works and Siqueiros’s radical iconography, the Workshop gave its artists the chance to participate artistically in the politics of the New Deal period, while experimenting with innovative methods for creative production. For approximately one year, Siqueiros engaged local and international artists in a collective investigation of classical and modern techniques, desiring that they would find new modes for artistic expression. Together, these artists implemented the ideas espoused by Siqueiros in his seminal text from the era, the “Manifiesto de New York.”

This study asserts the importance of the manifesto, a document Siqueiros wrote at the beginning of the Workshop, to direct the artists’ experimentation with materials and processes, their structure and methodology, and their relationship to outside political and artistic organizations in the city. In the manifesto, Siqueiros articulates a philosophy that espouses public, collective methods of art making, a dialogic exploration of traditional and new

---

187 Siqueiros in an untitled document from 1936 found at GRI (accession no. 960094).
techniques, and an interdisciplinary program that incorporates practitioners from diverse backgrounds and encompasses the disciplines of painting, sculpture, printmaking, and photography. Above all, the workshop was meant to be experimental, a “laboratory for traditional and modern techniques in art.”

Although the “Manifiesto de New York” charts the course of the Workshop’s experimentation, the document has remained, until now, largely overlooked in the literature. By quoting extensively from the manifesto, along with other texts and epistolary writings from the period, this thesis establishes the document within the canon. Siqueiros’s artistic practice, which was marked by lifelong efforts to have his art reflect the ideals formulated in his writings, found one of its most fully realized successes in the Workshop.

Inspired by Siqueiros’s Collective Suicide, this study originated from an interest in the work’s unusual spirals of paint, a hallmark of Siqueiros's 1936 invention the “controlled accident,” and its depiction of somber, metaphorical subject matter. Wanting to know more about the milieu in which Siqueiros created the painting, yet finding that much of the scholarship repeated well-known facts and often referred to the same primary sources, I identified that an accounting of the papers in Berdecio’s collection at the Getty was needed to understand further Siqueiros’s impetus for the Workshop and works, like Collective Suicide, which he made within the group.

While my focus was primarily 1936 as a crucial moment for Siqueiros, the documentation at the Getty is copious and varied, with a concentration of papers from Siqueiros’s foremost years between 1921 and 1937. Many of the documents, as the finding aid suggests, are drafts of manifestos elucidating the assimilation of art and philosophy in his

---

188 “Manifiesto de New York,” GRI (accession no. 960094), 1.
collectives, in his theory of Mexican muralism, and in his painting. Future scholarship on Siqueiros could address the compendium of the David Alfaro Siqueiros papers, adding further understanding to the relationships between Siqueiros’s ideology and his art.

Bibliography

Archival Sources:


Secondary Sources:


______. *So Far From Heaven: David Alfaro Siqueiros’ The March of Humanity on Earth and Toward the Cosmos*. Ph.d. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1980.


_______. “Lectures to Artists.” [S.l.: s.n.]: ca. 1962.

_______. Siqueiros por la via de una pintura neorrealista o realisa social moderna en Mexico [Siqueiros through the road of neo-realism or modern social realistic painting in Mexico] (text in Spanish and in English). Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, 1951.


Figure 1. David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Collective Suicide*, 1936; nitrocellulose on wood with applied sections; 49 x 72 in. Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, gift of Dr. Gregory Zilboorg.
Figure 2. David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Cosmos and Disaster*, 1936; nitrocellulose, sand, wood, on copper mesh on wood; 23 x 30 in. Lent by the American Fund for the Tate Gallery 2002.
Figure 3. Mexican delegation to the American Artists’ Congress, New York, 1936. (Left to right) Rufino Tamayo, Olga Tamayo, David Alfaro Siqueiros, José Clemente Orozco, Roberto Berdecio, and Angélica Arenal. Collection of Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros.
Figure 4.
David Alfaro Siqueiros, The Elements, ceiling detail of encaustic mural at the Escuela Nacional de Preparatoria, Mexico City, 1922–23.
Figure 5. David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Burial of a Martyred Worker*, unfinished detail of encaustic mural at the Escuela Nacional de Preparatoria, Mexico City, 1923–24.
Figure 6. David Alfaro Siqueiros, print of “popular trinity” in *El Machete*, ink on paper, April 1925.
Figure 7. David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Tropical America*, 1932; cement and paint; installed on an 18 x 80 ft. wall.
Figure 8. David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Tropical America* (restored, in situ), 1932; cement and paint; installed on an 18 x 80 ft. wall.
Figure 9. Artists in the Siqueiros Experimental Workshop convened for a meeting, 1936. David Alfaro Siqueiros leans against the wall in the center of the image, with the Workshop’s paintings of Earl Browder and Gerald Ford on either side of him.
Figure 10. Parade float for the Farmer-Labor Party on May Day 1936.
Figure 11. Parade float for the Farmer-Labor Party on May Day 1936.
Figure 12. The Siqueiros Experimental Workshop assembles the components for the Farmer-Labor Party May Day parade float outside of their headquarters, 1936.
Figure 13. Photo-enlargements of Earl Browder and James Ford, 1936.
Figure 14. Earl Browder and James Ford pictured at the Communist Party of New York’s 9th National Conventional, 1936.
Figure 15. David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Folding Screen: Experiments with the Controlled Accident*, 1936; nitrocellulose on wood. Collection of Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros.
Figure 16. David Alfaro Siqueiros, *The Birth of Fascism* (first version), 1936; nitrocellulose on wood; 39 x 30 in. Collection of Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros.
Figure 17. Russell T. Limbaugh, *Oopsie-Daisie*, printed in *New Masses* 18, no. 10 (March 3, 1936), 7.
Figure 18. Russell T. Limbaugh, *The Gang’s All Here*, printed in *New Masses* 18, no. 2 (January 7, 1936), 3.
Figure 19. David Alfaro Siqueiros, *No More! (Stop the War!)*, 1936; nitrocellulose on wood; 36 x 30 in. Collection of Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros.
Figure 20. David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Collective Suicide* (detail of central vortex), 1936.
Figure 21. David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Collective Suicide* (detail of left panel), 1936.
Figure 22. David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Collective Suicide* (detail of right panel with fallen icon), 1936.
Figure 23. David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Plastic Exercise*, 1933.