

ACTUAL-NO.1

AVANT-GARDE MEXICAN REVOLUTIONARY NATIONALISM: UNIVERSALIZATION OR COSMOPOLITANIZATION? DAVID ALFARO SIQUEIROS' "THREE CALLS..." AND MANUEL MAPLES ARCE'S ACTUAL NO. 1 (1921)

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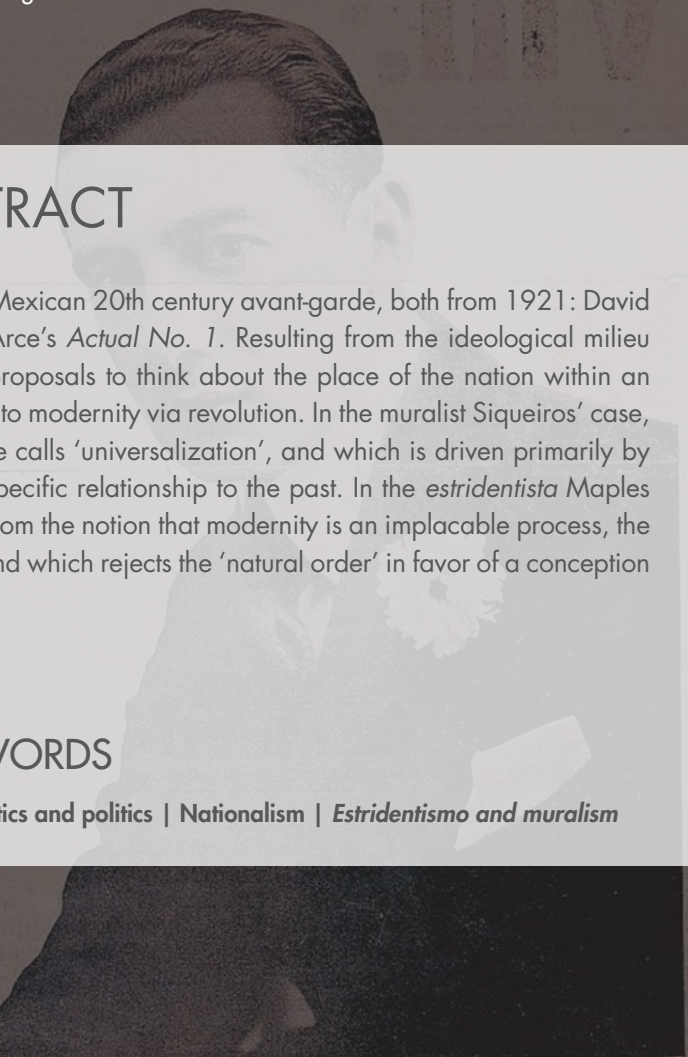
Illuminaciones Subversivas de Renée Dunan, F. T. Marinetti, Guillermo de Torre, Lasso de la Vega, Salvat-Papasseit, etc., y Algunas Cristalizaciones Marginales.

ABSTRACT

This essay compares two foundational manifestos of the Mexican 20th century avant-garde, both from 1921: David Alfaro Siqueiros' "Three calls..." and Manuel Maples Arce's *Actual No. 1*. Resulting from the ideological milieu of the Mexican Revolution, these texts contain distinct proposals to think about the place of the nation within an international context, after the successful entry of Mexico to modernity via revolution. In the muralist Siqueiros' case, to think the Mexican nation implies a process of what he calls 'universalization', and which is driven primarily by a classical understanding of the 'natural order' and a specific relationship to the past. In the *estridentista* Maples Arce's case, his call for a 'cosmopolitanization' derives from the notion that modernity is an implacable process, the access to which necessitates no relationship to the past and which rejects the 'natural order' in favor of a conception of the modern as urban.

KEYWORDS

20th century avant-garde | Mexican modernism | Aesthetics and politics | Nationalism | *Estridentismo and muralism*



Toda técnica de arte, está destinada a llenar una función espiritual en un momento determinado. Cuando los medios expresionistas son inhábiles o insuficientes para traducir nuestras emociones personales,—única y elemental finalidad estética,—es necesario, y esto contra toda la fuerza estacionaria y afirmaciones rastacuera de la crítica oficial, cortar la corriente y desnucar los "switchs". Una pechera reumática se ha carbonizado, pero no por esto he de abandonar el juego. ¿Quién sigue? Ahora el cubilete está en Cipriano Max-Jacob, y es sensacionalismo por lo que respecta a aquel periodista circunspecto, mientras se en el plano de superación, sin perder el equilibrio, intencionalmente equivocado, ignora, si aquello que tiene sobre los ojos es un cielo estrellado o una gota de agua al microscopio.

"Un automóvil en movimiento, es más bello que la Victoria de Samocracia". A esta eclatante afirmación del vanguardista italiano Marinetti, exaltada por Lucini, Buzzi, Cavacchioli, etc., juxtapongo mi apasionamiento desivo por las máquinas de escribir, y mi amor efusivísimo por la literatura de los avisos económicos. Cuanta mayor, y más honda emoción he logrado vivir en un recorte de periódico arbitrario y sugerente, que en todos esos organilleros pseudo-líricos y bombones melódicos, para recitales de changarro gratis a las señoritas, declamatoriamente inferidos ante el auditorio disyuntivo de niñas fox-troteantes y espermódicas y burgueses temerosos por sus concubinas y sus cajas de caudales, como valientemente afirma mi hermano espiritual Guillermo de Torre, en su manifiesto yoista leído en la primera explosión ultráica de Parisiana, y esto, sin perforar todas esas poematizaciones (sic) entusiastamente aplaudidas en charlotadas literarias, en que sólo se justifica el reflejo cartonario de algunos literaturipedos "specimen".

Es necesario exaltar en todos los tonos estridentes de nuestro diapason propagandista, la belleza actualista de las máquinas, de los puentes gímnicos recién extendidos sobre las vertientes por músculos de acero, el humo de las fábricas, las emociones cubistas de los grandes trasatlánticos con humeantes chimeneas de rojo y negro, anclados horoscópicamente—Rulz Hidobro— junto a los muelles efervescentes y congestionados, el régimen industrialista de las grandes ciudades, volatantes las bluzas azules de los obreros explosivos

lio Verhaeren, tan sinceramente amada por Nicolás Beauduin, y tan ampliamente dignificada y comprendida por todos los artistas de vanguardia. Al fin, los tranvías, han sido redimidos del dicitario de prosaicos, en que prestigiosamente los había valorizado la burguesía ventruda con hijas casaderas por tantos años de retardarismo sucesivo e intransigencia melancólica de archivos cronológicos.

Chopin a la silla eléctrica! He aquí una afirmación higienista y detorsoria. Ya los futuristas anti-seleográficos, pidieron en letras de molde el asesinato del claro de luna, y los ultraístas españoles, transcriben, por voz de Rafael Cansinos Assens, la liquidación de las hojas secas, recién agitada en periódicos y hojas subversivas. Como ellos, es de urgencia telegráfica emplear un método radicalista y eficiente. Chopin a la silla eléctrica! (M. M. A. trade mark) es una preparación maravillosa; en veinte y cuatro horas extermina todos los gérmenes de la literatura putrefacta y su uso es agradabilísimo y benéfico. Agítese bien antes de usarse. Insisto. Perpetuemos nuestro crimen en el melancolismo trasnochado de los "Nocturnos", y proclamemos, sincéricamente, la aristocracia de la gasolina. El humo azul de los tubos de escape, que huele a modernidad y a dinamismo, tiene, equivalentemente, el mismo valor emocional que las venas adorables de nuestras correlativas y exquisitas actualistas.

ANGUARDIA ESTRIDENTISTA

INTRODUCTION

This essay will draw a comparison between two fundamental manifestos for the Mexican *avant-garde* of the first half of the 20th century, and which appeared within months of each other: “Tres llamamientos de orientación actual a los pintores y escultores de la nueva generación Americana” (May 1921) (“Three Calls of Current Orientation for Paintings and Sculptors of the New American Generation”) by muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896-1974), and *Actual No. 1* (December 1921) by poet Manuel Maples Arce (1898-1981). The former, published in Barcelona as part of the single-number magazine *Vida-Americana* which Siqueiros helped edit, was one of the most influential starting points for the artistic movement which not too long after would be known as Mexican muralism. However, the extent of its repercussions in the country’s cultural milieu was not limited to visual arts, and it seems to have also been an important referent for Maples Arce (Rashkin, 2014: 67), whose manifesto contains comparable ideas and an *avant-garde* approach that cannot be reduced to literature alone. *Actual No. 1* is the founding document of *estridentismo*, often called Mexico’s first vanguard movement and the subject of a scattered historiography that pales in comparison to that which has been produced around muralism.

The contemporaneity of the two manifestos signals the birth of *avant-gardism* in Mexico, a historical conjunction that in the year 1921 comes to include the end of the mass armed mobilizations of the Revolution as well as the consolidation of the government of undefeated general Álvaro Obregón, who promoted the implementation of a nationalist cultural program throughout the entire country by Secretary of Education José Vasconcelos (December 1921-July 1924). An anti-positivist, Revolutionary intellectual, Vasconcelos established a

series of long-lasting connections between the newly formed State and its artistic agents, of which many that were affiliated with his ideals came to occupy important government positions¹. Along with the promotion of schools and libraries, the arts were to homogenize the country.² The growth of the muralist movement is owed, in large part, to Obregón’s and Vasconcelos’ national project, which started commissioning them ever since 1922. In this sense, all of the arts became enmeshed in the process of identity-construction as a result of the Revolution, and were thus employed by the state to consolidate its power. Nevertheless, politically-inclined artists of the period were uniquely positioned in what they saw as a historical crossroads, and they used the opportunity to attempt to modulate the power of the state to their own interests and positions³.

With the armed and ideological conflicts of the Revolution still but a few years in the past, the artistic environment in the Mexico of 1921 was deeply connected with the diverse and often divergent philosophical and political currents that both preceded and arose during the Revolution itself. Vasconcelos and the intellectuals that followed the currents developed by the *Ateneo de la Juventud Mexicana* ever since 1909 were enmeshed with those who borne enthusiasm for Zapatista collectivism, the Marxism of the Russian Revolution, and the heterogeneous mixture that was often the result of the sheer multiplicity of this convergence. In the re-evaluation of the Mexican identity that was implied in the process of revolution, artists from all fields rose forward to offer practical answers regarding the way forward. They offer competing versions of the nation, by which I mean not only a teleological, ethnographic projection of a certain State but also the place it occupies as an image among others that suffer from the same tensions: nationalism as a cultural politic relates directly to an international positioning.

1. See, for example, Evodio Escalante, “Los proto-contemporáneos en La Falange (1922-1923)”, in *América: Cahiers du CRICCAL* 21, 1998.
2. For more detail on Vasconcelos’s educative project see Javier Ocampo López, “José Vasconcelos y la educación mexicana”, *Revista historia de la educación latinoamericana*, 7(6), pp. 137-157; Federico Lazarín Miranda, “José Vasconcelos: Apóstol de la educación”, *Tiempo* [http://www.uam.mx/difusion/casadeltiempo/25_iv_nov_2009/casa_del_tiempo_elV_num25_11_14.pdf accessed 1 October 2015].
3. The clearest example of this is perhaps Diego Rivera’s explosion as Mexico’s premier artist; as a communist and eventually a Trotskyist, his murals embody the political aesthetic of a Mexican modernism shaped by Marxist philosophy of history. Siqueiros’ (Stalinist) communism played an important role in his artistic activity, and Maples Arce’s own Bolshevistic tendencies were key in the configuration of *estridentismo* as political movement in the urban environment of Xalapa, under the employment of the socialist governor of Veracruz, Heriberto Jara.

The call from both manifestos to 'universalize' and 'cosmopolitanize' registers these tensions, as will be seen below, as a historical and philosophical endeavor that must be addressed by a double movement best conceptualized as a dialectic between the national and the international. Nevertheless, this relatively simple methodological concern for these artists is further complicated by the constant intrusion of a level smaller to the national, the locality with which, most obviously in *Actual No. 1*, whatever kind of political discourse must come to grips with. The meanings of those concepts were not so clear-cut, which is why even if I am writing about competing nationalisms I must also emphasize that they are often complementary as well.

The connections between the muralists, politics, and their construction of a Mexican nationalism has already been widely studied by art historians. In contrast, the *estridentista avant-garde* has been mostly limited to scholarship in the discipline of literary studies, with several recent contributions from art historians. The latest, most comprehensive study belongs to Elissa J. Rashkin, whose book *La Aventura Estridentista* (2009) presents the current founded by Maples Arce in *Actual No. 1* as more than just an artistic 'style' or 'school', developing a cultural history of it as an aesthetic movement that comprises literature, visual arts, and political activity in equal measure. The book follows a relatively recent line of academic studies that results from a situation best described by Tatiana Flores in her article "Strategic Modernists: Women Artists in Post-Revolutionary Mexico" (2009):

The extraordinary developments of this decade are attributed to a narrow group of male artists, in particular los tres grandes: [Rivera, Orozco, Siqueiros]. [...] The artistic visual languages that arose tend to be grouped under the generalizing rubric of "Mexican School," giving the false impression of a premeditated uniformity [...]. Only when one takes as a point of departure a broader vision of *avant-garde* art in Mexico do artists typically regarded as minor gain greater recognition. (Flores, 2008: 12)

Flores' broader vision allows her to better draw the heterogeneity of the 1920s in Mexican art, which included important women artists that participated directly in *estridentismo* such as Tina Modotti and Lola Cueto, or who were closely associated with the muralists, like Frida Kahlo. The dominance of Kahlo's figure as the quintessential Mexican woman artist nonetheless reflects

the same historiographical operations that led to the privileging of "the big three" as the embodiment of a national(ist) culture over the versions offered by other artists and writers, whether in Vasconcelos' *ateneísta* line (such as the Contemporáneos group), the militant communists of *El Machete* magazine, or the *estridentistas* themselves. Flores' idea of a "premeditated uniformity" that applies to the producers of visual culture in the 1920s permeates many, if not most, studies of *estridentismo* beyond Rashkin's. In these works, as well as in older literature such as Luis Mario Schneider's fundamental anthologies of *estridentista* texts, there is a tendency towards treating *estridentismo* as a uniformity, which risks homogenization and erasure of internal fractures. Thus, the straining that *estridentismo* undergoes from its appearance in 1921 till the separation of its members in 1928, resolved by Lynda Kilch in "Estridentópolis: Achieving a Post-Revolutionary Utopia in Jalapa" (2010) by dividing its production into two phases (1922-1925, 1925-1927), could be conceptualized instead as an oft-contradictory series of continuities.

This approach would be more in line with Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado, who in "Vanguardia y campo literario: La Revolución Mexicana como apertura estética" (2007) proposes a cultural hegemony yet to be constructed in the 1920s, a panorama from which the aesthetics and politics of the various strands of nationalism are consistently contested. 'Nation' is still here an empty signifier, and the Mexican Revolution as a historical process represents an *opening*, which is to say the realization by political and artistic agents of the existence of myriad possibilities of granting the nation with a particular content of words, images, identities, political positions, and so on.

The two documents that I have selected for comparison represent well the scrambling of distinct positions described by the historiographical revision above – which is to say the non-hegemonic situation of cultural discourse in 1920s Mexico – as well as they represent their points of crossing. The two visions and interpretations of nationalism that followed from these foundational manifestos show, ever from 1921, the many similarities and differences that translate into comparable, yet quite distinct, aesthetic and political positions directly related to the Mexican Revolution and its place in modernity. I will proceed chronologically by analyzing Siqueiros' "Tres llamamientos..." first, and I will focus especially on key terms that seem to articulate each manifesto into a discursive apparatus. Some of



Fig. 01- *Vida-Americana* #1. Houston, International Center for the Arts of the Americas, 1921. Digitalized archive version.



Fig. 02- Manuel Maples Arce, *Actual No. 1: Hoja de vanguardia*. Mexico, Museo Nacional de Arte, 1921.

“TRES LLAMAMIENTOS...”

these terms overlap from one manifesto to the other, the comparison of which will provide the concluding remarks of this essay. While these two manifestos have been previously compared (Flores, 2004: 215-219), the approach taken here focuses on the main discursive elements (such as nature and its association with modernization) related to the issue of the tension between the national and the international, defined in each text as a need to “universalize” (according to Siqueiros) or to “cosmopolitanize” (according to Maples Arce).

Siqueiros’ manifesto was published originally, as referred above, in *Vida-Americana*, a journal that he helped edit and which appeared in Barcelona, Spain, in May of 1921. Despite its organization in Europe, it presented itself as a vanguard publication of North, Center, and South America, and its editorial aim was to reach not a wide audience but one primarily made

up of “businessmen, intellectuals, and industrialists” (de la Rosa, 2015: 24). Written and illustrated by a “new generation”, the articles in the journal were dedicated to contemporary American issues and cultural items such as the development of oil extraction in Mexico, education in the United States, or the music from Brazil, asserting its geographical interests in a manner that reinforces the striking claim at the top of the cover: “WE SHALL NOT MAKE HISPANO-AMERICANIST LITERATURE”. Like the hyphen between the words *Vida* and *Americana*, the magazine develops a modernist link that refuses the separation of art from life, in the process establishing new and unexpected connections that might at first not seem relevant to an artist, an industrialist, an intellectual, and so on. Instead, the hyphenation serves as a connection that subverts expectations in a way that introduces said subject positions to each other as equivalent, ideally provoking new relations

between, for example, a writer and the oil industry, relations that do not assume an inherent separation that would conventionally dictate that the writer's practice has nothing to do with industry. It is worth emphasizing that by the end of the First World War oil becomes the most important natural resource for its value in many different industrial enterprises, meaning that these artists were possibly quite conscious of the renewed relationship towards nature and the mechanical. The *avant-garde* at large is based on the overturning and the questioning of these relationships, and *Vida-Americana* hints consequently at the geographical dislocation of its production and its presentation; the prices given are in dollars, pesetas, and francs (US, Spanish, and French currencies respectively), bringing to bear the displacement of its very demand and offer, at least in places that at the time attracted many 'americanist' intellectuals and artists. [Fig.01]

In the case of "3 llamamientos...", the renewed relationship towards nature and the mechanical implies a synthesis, the result of a dialectical process: Siqueiros exclaims that "as an indelible principle in the cementation of our art, LET US REINTEGRATE to painting and sculpture their DISAPPEARED VALUES, also adding to them NEW VALUES!! Like the classics, let us realize our work within the inviolable laws of aesthetic equilibrium!"⁴ (Siqueiros, 1921: 2) Siqueiros, however, was no regular classicist, and immediately follows this statement by exclaiming "LET US LIVE OUR MARVELOUS DYNAMIC EPOCH! Let us love the modern mechanics that puts us in contact with unexpected plastic emotions; the actual aspects of our daily life, the life of our cities in construction." The manifesto's concern with "outside" and "exotic" influences, which do not respond to the "vigor of our great racial faculties"⁵ suggests that the classicality referred to here is one that is contextually subjected to a particular *land and people*, which the text later reinforces by calling for a re-appreciation of pre-Columbine cultures, upon which a new aesthetic was to be founded. The past of "disappeared values" means, therefore, 'native values', and the language of *reintegration* and *addition* indicates historically grounding something once more into the flow of history.

Currently, American artistic work is out of synchrony with the history of the world, it is out of time, and modernity represents an opening of the possibility to correct the course of American history: the "orientation of actuality" of the manifesto's title brings to bear a philosophy of progress that is inevitable as long as there is the will to ground it in contingency. According to Natalia de la Rosa, Siqueiros emphasized in a drawing also found in *Vida-Americana* "the idea of a universal rhythm due to the fact that mathematical rules reveal such a harmony" (de la Rosa, 2015: 33-34), which not only references the image on the cover but also drives the point of a rationalist nature that develops a cadence in the flow of time. Modernity becomes a natural occurrence, and access to it a matter of knowing what those rhythms are, the form that its flow takes.

Siqueiros's jab against Futurism ("which naively tries to crush the previous invulnerable process") describes history as indestructible, limiting the idealism of unbridled Romantic creativity with a materialist sense of its surpassing of the capabilities of an individual or a group. In the double movement of reintegration and addition, however, another possibility is drawn: manipulation and its further collective realization in *construction*. History is the "GREAT FLOW" (Siqueiros, 1921: 2) of which the artist and his/her society can participate, but only inasmuch there is a will to *synchronize* with it by manipulating and constructing the body politic that corresponds to it at a certain point in time. There is a dialectic of stillness and dynamism at the heart of this conception of history, the resolution of which Siqueiros suggests leads to Nature (in its classical, lawful aspect), conceived also as a body in need of manipulation: "the puerile theories that we have embraced frenetically in the past few years in America, the sick branches of "IMPRESSIONISM", a tree pruned by PAUL CÉZANNE, the restorer of the essential" (Siqueiros, 1921:2). By means of the "synthetic energy" with which the pre-Columbine cultures came to develop a knowledge of nature, the modern subject can also come to construct an epistemology that reaches to the core of the rationality of the natural, in the same way that Cézanne, by correcting the course of history, reveals the truth that has been obfuscated by the attempt to *imitate* instead

4. The version referred to here is the digital copy of the original document provided by the International Center for the Arts of the Americas at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. It was downloaded on January 15, 2017.

5. Race theory was a key factor of the Mexican (and by extension, Latin American) identity according to the *ateneísta* intellectuals, of which the most vocal and prominent member to argue for it was José Vasconcelos. Racial categories permeate his work, and with it, the nationalist discourse that emerged from the 1920s. Vasconcelos' later attraction for fascism is not as surprising as it might initially seem considering the entire cosmology of the Mexican nation was built upon racial theories and racial science.

of *know*. Siqueiros uses this synthesis of natural and modern in metaphors across the entire manifesto, railing against the mimetical principle in art, coming to develop a conception of art as yet another system of knowledge designed to reach the truth. In other words, art becomes as important as science in the cause of progress. One of those metaphors reads: "Let us amass and solidly plant our own commotion before nature with a strict adherence to the truth." Understood as a rejection of imitation (of "exotic" influences from Europe, of nature...), to be true is to be *natural*.

The rationality of nature and the quest for truth as matter of knowledge crucially coincides with the appeal to belong to the here and now – grounding oneself into the flow of history is only possible through the synthesis effected in *construction* (reintegration and addition). There is, however, a *false* way in which that grounding takes place, and Siqueiros here rejects the undercurrents of a nationalist art based on "*reconstruction*": "INDIANISM", "PRIMITIVISM", "AMERICANISM" [...], so in vogue among us and which are leading us to STYLIZINGS of ephemeral life." (Siqueiros, 1921:2) These reconstructions do not last because they are but imitations of the past; they do not reintegrate, nor do they add, and quickly become reduced to an archeological

exercise whose truth is in doubt because they belong not to the here and now but to an immediate past attempting to senselessly imagine the distant one. They are not natural but artificial, they do not provide knowledge, only a series of pleasures: "Let us discard the theories based on the relativity of "NATIONAL ART", LET US UNIVERSALIZE! Our natural racial and local physiognomy will appear in our work inevitably either way." A national art based on reconstruction is here conceptualized as a useless relativism that is also the result of a failure to understand the rhythm of universal history, which is why Siqueiros' call to be universal is articulated also by the knowledge of the truth of/in nature.

Years later, Siqueiros would give a more solid theoretical form to this approach in the concept of a "dialectical-subversive" game which simultaneously embraces and contradicts an original model. (Mandel, 2009: 15) Still, in "Tres llamamientos..." the idea of a synthesis that results in the construction of a new world would permeate throughout the muralist movement in its early stages as it practiced a kind of nationalism that did not give primacy to ethnographic description (or reconstruction, in Siqueiros' words) and which directly related to the social upheaval (that "commotion before nature") of the Mexican Revolution.

ACTUAL NO. 1

Manuel Maples Arce's *Actual No. 1* is the founding document of *estridentismo* – announcing itself as a "Vanguard Sheet" and a "Comprimido estridentista", it was published in December of 1921. However, unlike most *avant-garde* manifestos, which appeared usually in journals, *Actual* was plastered all over the walls of Mexico City's center. The target audience, unlike Siqueiros' text, was pretty much undefined, since anyone taking a walk through the center would be able to look at it, regardless of whether they could follow the dense vanguardist prose or not. "We had no public", Maples Arce later said, "it was necessary to improvise one." (quoted in Flores, 2014: 53)

The large, advertisement-like typography as well as the proportionally significant photograph of the dandyish author were probably meant to call attention

and provoke curiosity to passers-by. They would be greeted with a word-game in which the Spanish word for success absurdly, wrongly corresponds with statements, a pictorial and textual element that I believe represents well the whole discourse of the manifesto, as will be argued further down. Regardless, Maples Arce starts out by declaring that in the name of the "actualist vanguard" Mexico he declares himself as 'presentist', as belonging squarely in the here and now. With a vertiginous prose that uses commas as stopgap measures of flow control, *Estridentismo* is *on time*, its rhythm that of modernity. The images that the author uses to make this point are distinctly geometrical, almost architectural ("the eclatant vertex of my in-substitutable presentist category, equilaterally convinced and eminently revolutionary, while the whole world is out of axis, contemplates itself spherically stunned with

twisted hands...“⁶) (Maples Arce, 1921), providing an understanding of the course of time as coinciding with the rotation of the earth. Everyone who is “out of axis” feels a sort of vertigo, of perceptual displacement: the now is an emotional, contradictory rush for which the manifesto is a *timely* cure. After all, “*comprimido*”, as the sheet is also titled, has two meanings in Spanish: to compress something as well as a pill, usually one of a medical nature. [Fig.01]

This humorous, modernist play on geometrical words and concepts entails an approach that relativizes perspectives and often reverses them: “the truth never happens nor does it occur outside of ourselves.” (Maples Arce, 1921) Truth comes to be the result of an emotional current that develops in an “integralist equivalence”, by which the manifesto perhaps means a radically individual and yet also radically democratic form of knowledge, one that does not respond to the rationalization of nature but to its other, Romantic aspect as an undefinable state of being. Even if this seems completely contrary to Siqueiros’ view of nature, it parts from the same philosophical position, in the sense that *estridentismo* at this point rejects imitation in favor of creation, understanding the quest for truth as one that takes place in “reality thought, and not in reality apparent.” Maples Arce continues: “in this instant we assist to the spectacle of ourselves. Everything must be overcoming and equivalence [...], we should not imitate Nature, but study its laws, and in the bottom behave like her.” (Maples Arce, 1921) Modernity puts up a mirror because it presents the possibility of creation as opposed to the horizon of imitation – in an oblique Hegelian manner, to be modern here means to acquire consciousness of the self, a consciousness that entails the knowledge of nature not to imitate but to *integrate* it to “reality thought”. In a way comparable to Siqueiros’ call for a naturalization, *Actual* half-rationalizes and half-expresses its way through an idiosyncratic materialism in which the contradictory interplay between the ideal and the material subverts the classicist understanding of nature and finds *matter* in it instead of ideas. Nature might have laws, but if truth is irreducibly individual then what nature has to offer is not a *model* for the correction of the course of history but an intensely emotional connection

the result of which would be behaving as *if we were nature herself*.

Actual echoes the *Vida-Americana* manifesto in stating a need to “Fixate aesthetic delimitations. To make art, with our own and congenial elements fertilized in their own environment” (Maples Arce, 1921). Art-making is a contextual situation, and to be actual is to be of one’s own time and place, meaning also philosophically conceiving of the fact of newness and the possibility of participating in it via the act of creation. In this relationship to time, ‘nature’ comes to be one’s own time and place: “to make pure poetry, suppressing every strange and de-naturalized element.” (Maples Arce, 1921) In other words, ‘nature’ also comes to stand for an ‘actualist’ historicism. For the *estridentismo* of this first manifesto, the condition of modernity is not one to which one can or cannot access; while to Siqueiros it seems like a natural development with which the artist can align him/herself, to *estridentismo* the occurrence of modernity transcends the will of any and all subjects⁷. “The people from the provinces iron in their wallets the tickets of the reminiscent tram” (Maples Arce, 1921) – while there is an ostensibly traditional opposition between city and country, this image explodes it by suggesting that the people from outside the city always carry it with them, and that their memory already works like a tram: it is not a matter of joining or reaching modernity because it is already there, regardless of where anyone is from. By declaring the “psychological unity of the century” (Maples Arce, 1921), *estridentismo* extends modernity as a global event in which the sole frontier of art is a “marginalist emotion”, which is to say an attachment to “conventional chapters of national art”. Against such limits of self-imposed isolation, the fixation of delimitations of a new art is given in a “plane of overcoming and equivalence”, which means that for *estridentismo*, therefore, there is no need to look at the past for any kind of reintegration because the past runs the danger of being tyrannical. To the overcoming of tradition follows the equivalence of new creations, if only due to their integral belonging to the here and now: the present is radically democratic where the past tends towards domination. *Actual* firmly reiterates that it rejects retrospection as much

6. The version referred to here is the digital copy of the original document provided by the International Center for the Arts of the Americas at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. It was downloaded on December 24, 2016.

7. This reflects Tatiana Flores’ point that Maples Arce sought to level entirely the hierarchical models of Latin American modernist productions, against the narratives, even of the time, that sought to validate them through the recognition of European *avant-gardists*, establishing center-periphery relations. (Flores, 2014: 50-53)

as it rejects futurism, and it calls for sheer “actualism”.

The manifesto ends by wishing success to young Mexican poets. At this point the first lines of the manifesto become relevant: the Spanish word for success corresponds, letter by letter, to a statement that put together represent a revolutionary composition. E is associated to “Death to Father Hidalgo!” (one of the Mexican imaginary’s founding figures); X to “Death to St. Lazarus St”.; I to “Raphael” (a continuation of the previous line, reading St. Lazarus St. Raphael); T to “Corner” and a bold straight line; O to “Placement of ads forbidden” and another bold straight line. This correspondence could be read as an articulation of success that implies, first of all, the rejection of national monuments; second, the rejection of religious culture; third, a sense of the geometrical mapping of a city (their modern urbanism defined by their rational, square traces); finally, an everyday urban negativity related ironically to the law (*Actual* was, also, an advert). These elements contribute to an understanding of success that is primarily a playful negation of the past

that burdens the present as much as an immersion into the most modern space of all, the city. It brings together everything the manifesto stands for in a humorous manner that strips ‘success’ of its conventional definition as positive reinforcement of a social system. Instead, it develops the *estridentista* idea of overcoming and equivalence, of becoming equal in the logic of a modernity that in the avatar of the Mexican Revolution had, in any case, already overcome everything else. That very opening that the Revolution offered represented the possibility of a radically democratic present, not in an institutional sense but in one that gives primacy to each individual’s adaptation to the electrified currents of actuality that are best lived in the logic of the city. Thus, when Maples Arce exclaims “Let us cosmopolitanize!” (Maples Arce, 1921) it is not just a rejection of nationalism in favor of a world-wide view – it is also related to the root of the word as primarily a matter of *citizenship* extending globally, or in other words, the world understood as a city. Therein lies the modernity of the times, the rhythms of which are urban.

CONCLUSION

These manifestos could be said to represent two avenues of thought regarding the artistic *avant-garde* that would become important for the process of definition of the national imaginary in 1920s post-Revolutionary Mexico. Siqueiros’ “Three calls...” has a more conventional form, as part of a journal publication aimed at an elite audience. Its nodal points are those of truth, modernity and nature, around which is articulated a specific understanding of history that grants subjects the agency to access an idealist ‘great current’ of progress. Nature is a classical, rational grounds from which such an agency springs forth, in terms of an art that does not limit itself to imitation but expands to understanding, to generating knowledge about nature, the ultimate aim of which would be the (idealist) truth. Modernity is nature in the present, and so to know the natural would mean to know the self – the objective becomes the development of a process of self-discovery, which not only resonates with Kant or Hegel but with the opening of possibilities that the Mexican Revolution had enacted upon the nation, its definition now up for the taking.

Maples Arce’s *Actual* is more experimental, being basically a leaflet and a city-wall poster aimed at no one in particular. It is, arguably, for the Mexican youth and the intelligentsia, but the conditions of its presentation are akin to a public performance in which anyone could possibly participate. This quality of un-definition makes *Actual* fulfill its democratic aspirations as a radical encounter between the individual and the collective, which could be analogically understood as the encounter between the aesthetic and the political. Its nodal points are the same as the Siqueiros manifesto, except they articulate here a differing kind of discourse, in which subjects’ agency does not stem from the rationality of (natural) history but from an irreducible individuality. In other words, it is a Romantic view that does not presuppose the division between the human and the natural, but that sees said division as a negative result of the subject’s refusal to *live* modernity fully by letting itself be ruled by the past. By rejecting this rule, time, like the Revolution, opens up and becomes prismatic – if the possible presents

are endless, and before the intensity of the new all subjects are equal, then there cannot be a singular truth.

By describing certain dialectical processes both manifestos reserve a special place for synthesis. For Siqueiros, synthesis belongs to the acquisition of knowledge and the furthering of the truth, which is to say it is a methodical concern, but for Maples Arce it is more of an existential stance. *Estridentismo* aims to be a synthesis of all vanguards, “not because of a false desire of conciliation – syncretism – but because of a rigorous aesthetic conviction of spiritual urgency.” (Maples Arce, 1921) He continues:

It is not a matter of gathering prismatic media, basically anti-seismic, to make them ferment, wrongly, in glasses of fraternal label, but tendencies insiteally organic, of easy reciprocal adaptation, which resolving all of the equations of the present technical problem, so sinuous and complicated, will illuminate our marvelous desire of totalizing inner emotions and sensorial suggestions in a multanimous and polyhedral form.⁸

Therefore, synthesis is not a strictly methodical parameter but is transposed more closely into what the manifesto calls overcoming and equalization, in which ‘totalization’ is used in the cubist sense of accessing a multiplicity of perspectives simultaneously instead of just one. By describing “the present problem” (whatever the reader wants to interpret that is) as a *technical* one, Maples Arce takes a position similar to Siqueiros’ in the sense that a materialist approach to modernity (underlying in the association between the language of the synthetic and the manipulation of forms, even if the authors might have not been aware of the entire philosophical methodology or history behind it) would provide a bold answer to the question of ‘what is to be done’. Still, it is significant that the concept both authors would refer to when thinking about synthesis is syncretism; as said above, for Siqueiros it was a positive conjunction of the past, present, and future, but to Maples Arce here it is merely a “false desire of conciliation”. The concept was – and is – a commonplace first approach to the

Latin American identity, and *estridentismo*’s rejection of it represents a combative evaluation of the synthetic, or in other words, an understanding of syncretism as a pacification and consequent ‘flattening’ of distinct elements. The “multanimous and polyhedral form” of *estridentismo*’s synthesis is not only a reference to cubism (and thus the ‘un-flattening’ of distinct elements) but a stance that is both aesthetic and political when its principles are related to the development of a nation’s imaginary⁹.

Finally, a brief comparison of the sites of their production are also significant in terms of discourse. Siqueiros, writing from Barcelona, is positioned as an international artist in dialogue with different nations (in the case of “3 calls...”, American nations). The circuits with which *Vida-Americana* was connected were recently – though well-established – *avant-garde* networks of artists, writers, and art patrons (de la Rosa, 2015: 24). Even if a second number was never published, Siqueiros intended to move publishing houses and base the magazine in Paris, arguably the most important site of circulation of vanguardist ideas and theories at the time. In contrast, Maples Arce, writing in Mexico City, did not have any access to *avant-garde* networks, and thus depended entirely on the performative aspect of plastering the manifesto across the city center. This could be related to their respective calls of universalization and cosmopolitanization; the universal proceeds from a modern metanarrative of progress in which Siqueiros claims Mexico plays a part, while the cosmopolitan implies no particular metahistorical line. In the former, the relationship between particular and general is hierarchical: the particular (nation) is subdued by the general (a Euro-centric philosophy of history). In the latter, the same relationship is vague, inasmuch the particularity of the city metonymically turns into the generality of the world as it is. In this way, universalization focuses the past upon the present and projects into the future, while cosmopolitanization focuses solely on the present and is not tied to a specific philosophy of history, at least in this case. Where Siqueiros could be said to establish a dialogue between the national and the international, Maples Arce could be said

8. “Insiteally” is also a made-up word in Spanish, “insíticamente”, which would approximately mean specifically of a certain site, or place. It is the same with “multanimous”, which in Spanish is “multánime”, which would approximately mean of multiple spirits.

9. This would mean, for example, looking at Native Americans *as they are*, as modern subjects possibly untied from the overruling of their agency by the concept of syncretism. One of the consequences of this, for example, is that while Siqueiros, along with most other intellectuals at the time, would base many of their arguments regarding the nation on race theory, Maples Arce would reject it as meaningless ever from *Actual 1*.

to do the same in terms of the local and the global (as the world of the city and the city of the world).

I hope to have shown in this essay that the comparison between the discourses of these two kinds of *avant-garde*, which would lead to the definition of Mexican nationalism in the following decades, is not only desirable but also highly fruitful. It allows to include

Mexican *avant-garde* practitioners in discussions and proposals on modernity which were happening around the globe after the First World War. It also allows to have a wider understanding of diverse propositions that were part of nationhood and citizenship, and which have been diminished throughout the decades and the strengthening of the Mexican (post) revolutionary state and its cultural project.

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