

FRIDA KAHLO & SURREALISM

How To Start a Transatlantic Revolution with Painting

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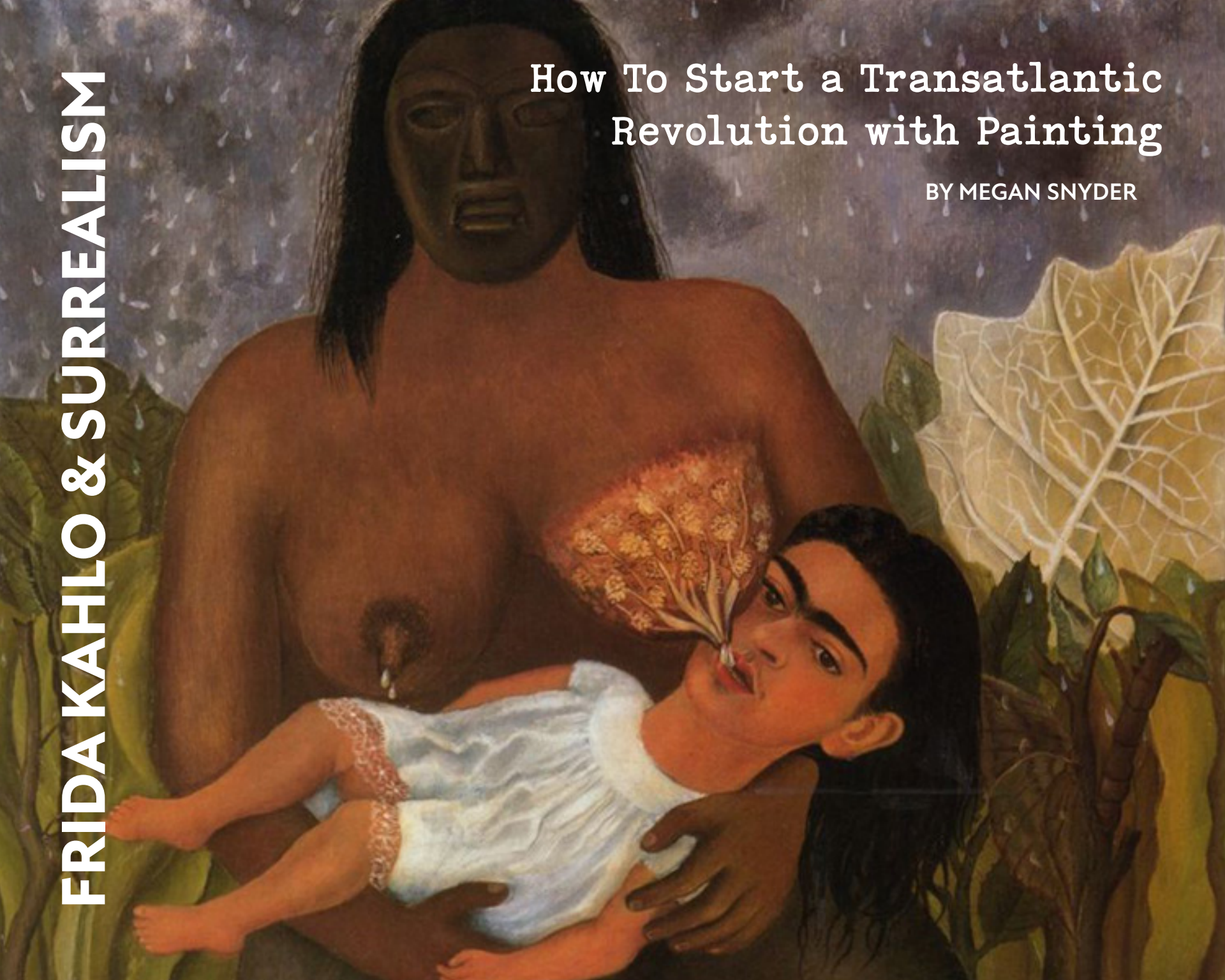
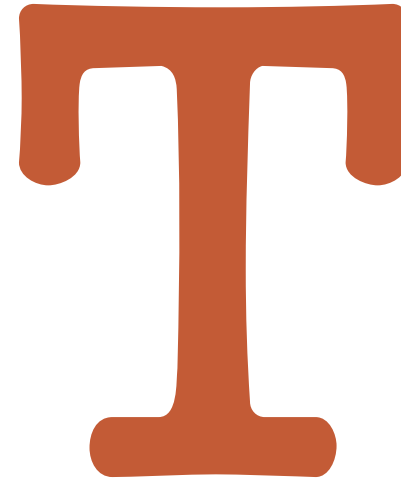




FIGURE 1. *The Emperor Napoleon in His Study at the Tuileries.* Neoclassical Oil painting by Jacques-Louis David in 1812.



here is a neoclassical oil painting that suspends on the wall at the National Gallery of Art In Washington DC, called *The Emperor Napoleon in His Study at the Tuileries* (Fig 1.) that was painted by Jacques-Louis David in 1812. The painting showcases a portrait of Napoleon Bonaparte as the French Emperor. Embedded symbols—like the honeybees, fleur-de-lis, book written by Plutarch,

classic French military uniform, map scrolls, and dripping wax candles— in the composition communicates political power. In *Propaganda and the Legitimation of Power in Napoleonic France*, historian Allen Forrest explains that art equipped Napoleon with influential pathways of public relations. Therefore, Napoleon hired the most prominent portraitists and history painters of the 18th and 19th centuries “to present his image and thus legitimate his power.” This is notable because just as how Napoleon used art as propaganda to politically influence the art and literary communities of France, André Breton —the founder of Surrealism—used art and literature to spread political ideologies via Surrealism. This paper will examine the politics and psychology associated with Surrealism, why Frida Kahlo’s painting—*My Nurse and I* or *Me Suckling* (fig 2.) created in 1937 —was chosen by Breton to début at the Surrealist art show called ‘Mexique’(fig.3) in 1939; and how the formal qualities of the painting connects to Surrealism. More specifically, how Breton used Kahlo’s painting as a form of political propaganda to expand Surrealism, and as a device to ‘claim’ Kahlo as a Surrealist.



FIGURE 2. *My Nurse and I or Me Suckling.* Oil painting created by Frida Kahlo in 1937

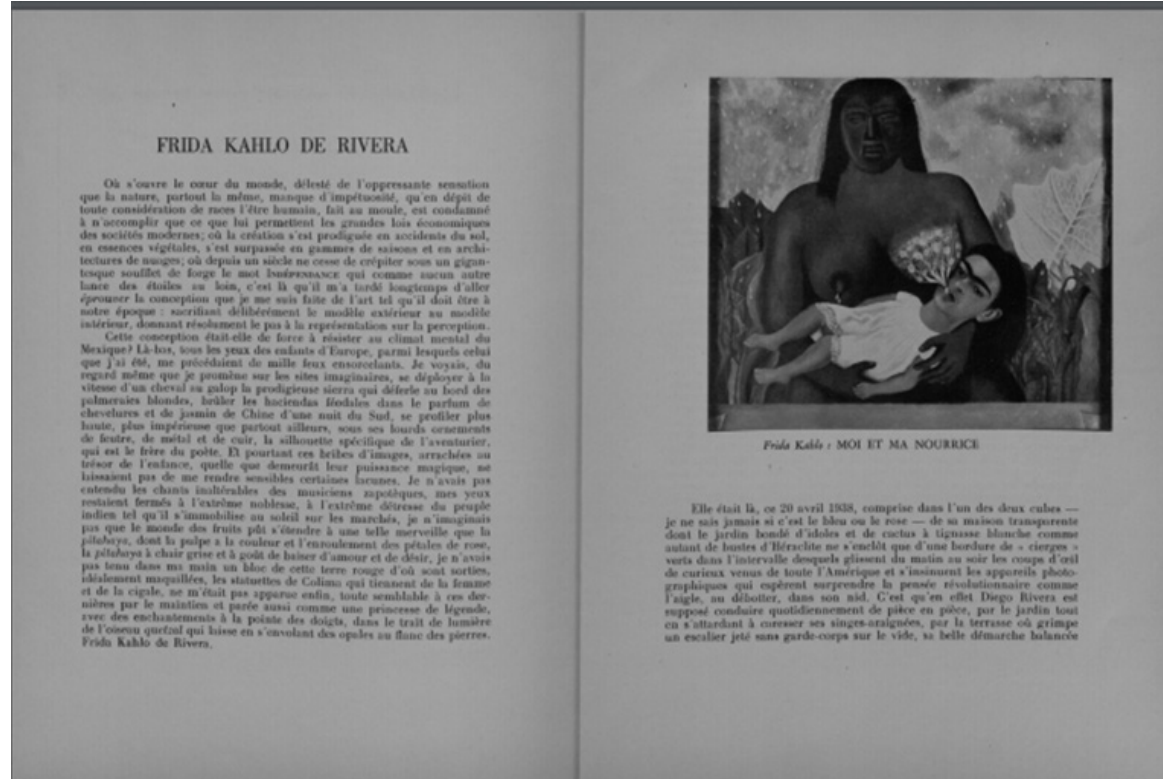
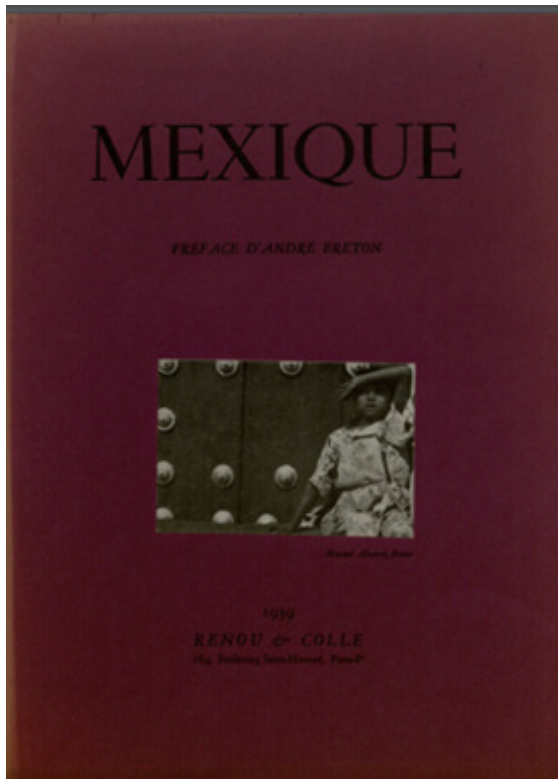


FIGURE 3. 'Mexique.' The Front page cover of the catalogue, and an entry on Frida Kahlo featuring *My Nurse and I* or *Me Suckling* created in 1939

“SURREALISM [...] ASSERTS OUR COMPLETE NONCONFORMISM CLEARLY ENOUGH SO THAT THERE CAN BE NO QUESTION OF TRANSLATING IT, AT THE TRIAL OF THE REAL WORLD, AS EVIDENCE FOR THE DEFENSE [...] SURREALISM IS THE ‘INVISIBLE RAY’ WHICH WILL ONE DAY ENABLE US TO WIN OUT OVER OUR OPPONENTS.” - ANDRÉ BRENTON

What is Surrealism?

Surrealism is an avant-garde art movement that focused primarily on the literary arts but then expanded to the visual arts. One of Breton's main goals for Surrealism was to expand communism via art and literature as a device to ignite an insurgency. Art historian Robert Short notes, the curiosity of the Surrealist political discourse was influenced by extremely impassioned writing: "to associate its intellectual, artistic, and moral preoccupation with the aims and methods of international communism." Fundamentally, Communism promotes the ideal that 'all' consumer goods are publically owned. Furthermore, that each person participates and is compensated according to his or her skills in a society for their labor. Because communism majorly influenced the ideologies of Surrealism, it influenced both the visual compositions of paintings and the fictional narratives of literature. Breton honed in on the loyalty that artists pledged towards Surrealism, and used it to ignite a political agenda. For example, at the end of *The Surrealist Manifesto*, Breton penned "Surrealism [...] asserts our complete nonconformism clearly enough so that there can be no question of translating it, at the trial of the real world, as evidence for the defense [...] Surrealism is the 'invisible ray' which will one day enable us to win out over our opponents." The expression "nonconformism"—when compared to the rest of the words—seizes the attention of the reader because it is italicized. Additionally, the suggestion of the word proposes the desire not to follow the standards of society. When Breton wrote *The Surrealist Manifesto* in 1924, the bank systems and major corporations had created a volatile and unequal economic system in Europe. Many people and movements—including Breton and the Surrealist—had blamed capitalism (the dominate political power and force in Europe) for these predicaments. Therefore, Breton had looked to communist polices as an instrument to create economic equality. 'Nonconformist' combined with the phrase "win out over our opponents," advocates for a revolution. However, in order to advance the mission of Surrealism, Breton would have to travel internationally to forge "transatlantic" connections with other artistic communities.

While Surrealism continually disseminated international avant-garde communities, the Surrealist focused not only on communism but also on an 'anti-colonist' approach to policymaking. More importantly, it is this anti-colonist system in politics that Surrealists hoped to change on an international level. Art historians Susanna Baackmann and David Craven claims that anti-colonialism was a political philosophy that connected the different groups of Surrealism "on both sides of the Atlantic." Yet, Breton's goal for Surrealism in Latin



FIGURE 4. Collective Invention. Surrealist Oil painting created in 1934 by René Magritte

America—and more superficially Mexico—was to blaze a cultural and political revolution with art and literature to expand communism. Art historian Ilona Katzew who specializes in Latin American art argues “Breton’s Surrealism sought to liberate the unconscious and to give it material form in art and literature; he believed that Surrealism was a truly ‘revolutionary art form’” However, for Surrealism to illuminate a path of revolt for Latin-American populations and in Mexico, Breton had to fabricate a path for others on a global scale. Accordingly, Breton—whose objective was to expand the art-political platform—went undercover as a French representative to Mexico with the sanctioned mission of endorsing French culture overseas. When Breton traveled to Mexico, he

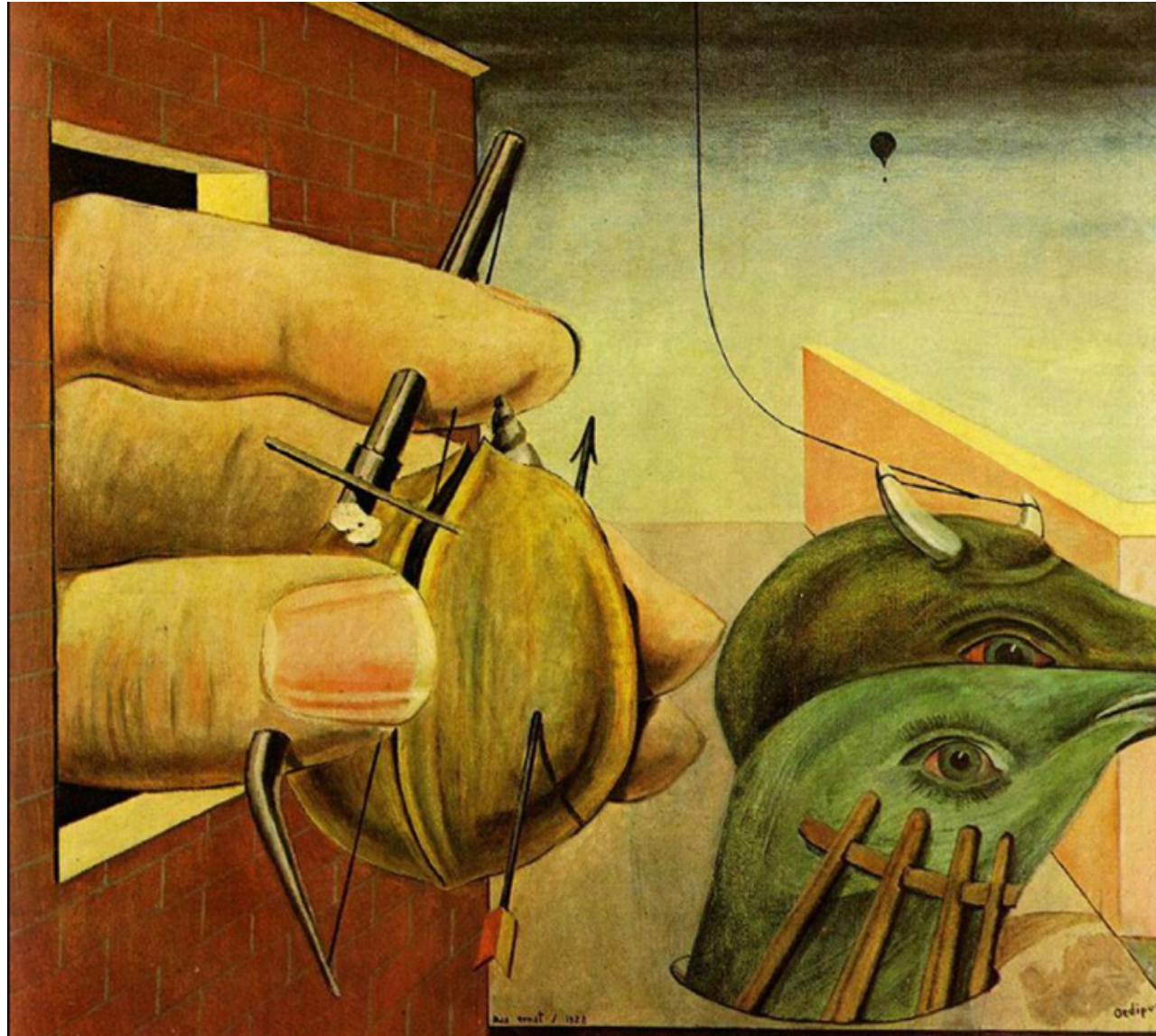
masqueraded himself as a French Diplomat, which illustrates the secret agenda of expanding the Surrealist movement

Diego Rivera introduced Kahlo to Breton while he was in Mexico in 1938. Consequentially, Breton automatically categorized Kahlo as a Surrealist, but Kahlo—in her own words—rejected any connections to the movement. In *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo*, the author Hayden Herrera claims “FRIDAS RESPONSE [sic] to being welcomed into the Surrealist pantheon by its founding spirit was a show of innocent dismay. ‘I never knew I was a Surrealist,’ she had said, ‘till Andre Breton came to Mexico and told me I was.’” Kahlo denied Breton’s testimonial that she was a Surrealist. Kahlo’s denial motivated a

passionate desire in Breton to use Kahlo's paintings as a device to spread communism via Surrealism because her paintings 'did' illustrate the identical formal characteristics of Surrealism. Thus, Breton had invited Kahlo to Paris to display her paintings in an art show as a ruse to promote politics. Herrera continues to say, "The show was called 'Mexique,' and if it was not exactly a one-woman exhibition [...] Frida was the main feature." In the manifesto *Surrealism and Painting*, Breton writes, "The need of fixing visual images, whether these images exist before their fixation or not, stands out from all time and has led to the creation of a veritable language." The word veritable is defined as 'true' or 'absolute'. Breton knew the influential and transformational power of vision; that the influence of visual images—or in this case painting—communicates a dialogue between the masses because information is transmitted with the gaze of the spectators. Thus, painting was a critical tool in growing the politics of Surrealism, that Breton used paintings as a form of political propaganda.

FIGURE 5. *Oedipus Rex.*

Oil painting created in 1922 by Max Ernst





**FIGURE 6. Les
Demoiselles d'Avignon.**
Oil painting created 1908
by Pablo Picasso.

My Nurse and I or Me Suckling

The painting that Breton decided to premier at Mexique was the portrait *My Nurse and I or Me Suckling* because it demonstrates the key characteristics of Surrealism. While Breton was guided by the political ideologies of Communism and anti-colonist perspectives, he was also influenced by the psychoanalytical theories of Sigmund Freud. Clinical Psychiatrist Aaron H. Esman notes, “The Surrealists’ romance with Freud and psychoanalysis began with the litterateur Andre Breton.” Breton’s captivation with Freud empowered an artistic revolution that was constructed around the ‘unconscious.’ For this reason, Breton had appropriated the psychoanalytical foundations—like automatic writing and dream interpretation—from the psychologist Freud for the theoretical underpinnings of Surrealism. In the Surrealist Manifesto Breton writes, “I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a surreality.” Surrealist artists applied Breton’s philosophy of ‘contradictory’ imagery in their classic compositions to pledge their devotion to Surrealism. In order to access the unconscious and expose the reality of truth, the Surrealist combined unconventional juxtapositions in their compositions as seen in *Collective Invention* (fig.4) painted in 1934 by Rene Magritte and *Oedipus Rex* (fig.5) created in 1922 by Max Ernst. Both paintings by key European Surrealists contain compositions with extreme visual contrasts. For example, *Collective Invention* contains an anamorphic creature that is half-fish and half-human that the ocean swept up on the beach. Conversely, *Oedipus Rex* encompasses an extreme contrast in scale, as there are human hands the size of apartment windows. Most strikingly, there are oppositions and contradictions that Kahlo illustrated in the painting *My Nurse and I or Me Suckling* —such as the past versus the future that indicates a political revolution —that provoked Breton, to classify Frida Kahlo as a surrealist. Now, the visual display of Kahlo’s self-portrait at that show ‘Mexique’ communicates that Kahlo is a Surrealist because the imagery in *My Nurse and I or Me Suckling* becomes a site of truth.

Kahlo alludes to the juxtaposition of past versus future in *My Nurse and I or Me Suckling* because there is an infant —with the portrait of Kahlo painted as the head—breastfeeding from a woman wearing a brown wooden mask. The mask is geometric in form, has hollowed out dark eyes, and thick nose and lips that are spherical in shape. In a way, the mask encompasses all of the same characteristics of the primitive during that time period. Major artist and movements during the beginning of the twentieth century were obsessive about Primitivism and often incorporated primitive imagery in their art. Additionally, the primitive style mask



FIGURE 7. *Sleeping Muse*. Sculpture created in 1910 by Constantin Brancusi.



FIGURE 8. Man Ray's series of photographs titled *Noire et blanche* (1926).



uncannily reflects the masks that are highlighted in many Surrealist, Dada, and Cubist compositions that were created in Paris. For instance, Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* (fig 6) painted in 1908; Constantin Brancusi's *Sleeping Muse* (fig 7) sculpted in 1910; Man Ray's series of photographs entitled *Noire et blanche* (fig 8) in 1926; and there are even photographs of Breton's wife (fig 9) surrounded by African/primitive styled masks in their apartment. Conversely, the word primitive is continually associated with the past. For example, the description of primitivism is defined as a preliterate and prehistoric culture that practices elementary communal and commercial customs. As noted in the above paragraph, Breton based the foundations of Surrealism on the literatures of



FIGURE 9. Simone Breton in André Breton's apartment surrounded by masks. (1929)

Freud, in which Freud often associated the state of dreams with the primitive. The book *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* by Freud notes "dream-work is not only formal; it is also of greater import. It not only translates our thoughts into a primitive form of expression, but it reawakens the peculiarities of our primitive psychic life, the ancient dominance of the ego, the earliest impulses of our sexual life, even our old intellectual property." Ironically, this quote is listed in the *Archaic Remnants and Infantilism* chapter of the book. Thus, there is a portrait of Kahlo's head combined with an infant's body satirically and metaphorically communicating that an "infant" is being held in the arms of 'primitivism'.

The infant stylized as Kahlo herself that is held in the arms of the woman wearing a primitive style mask represents the future while contrasting the past—but more specifically a revolution or a change. Infants and babies signify new beginnings. For example, when a woman gives birth to a baby, that baby is embarking on a novel journey of life—or a new future and changing the discourse of the future. Now, Kahlo is also revealing an imperative foundation of Surrealism—the importance of a new future and change generated by a revolution. The narrative of *My Nurse and I* or *Me Suckling* illustrates that in order to ignite a new rebellion, people need to unlock the past—or their unconscious dreams— and it is with the power of unconscious—or the primitive—that change will ensue. The necessity for a revolution is apparent in many of the statements that Breton wrote in his manifestos. For example, feminist literary critic Ranjana Khanna, argues, “The Surrealist manifestoes had to belong to aesthetic and political realms that would bring about changes in life, and changes in conceptions of selfhood – massive ontological shifts that would forever transform the relationships to the past, to the present, to hope, to the future.” Therefore, it is the transformation of change that represents a new future.

As a spectator zooms in to the interaction of Kahlo and the maternal women wearing a mask— Kahlo is suckling and breastfeeding from the woman’s left breast. However, the breast is painted to look like a tree—with the branches of the tree acting as yellow and orange contour lines to form the shape of breast. This relationship emphasizes the act of nurturing. However, what is critically important about this association is the symbolism of the tree. The tree in this painting signifies prosperity, transformation, and growth. In the context with Surrealism, this reflects the concept of ‘historic materialism’ that Breton notes in the *Second Manifesto of Surrealism*. Extraordinarily, historic materialism

reflects a socialist theory that influenced the communist platform created by Karl Marx. Frederick Engle, who initially discussed the theory of historic materialism in the book *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific* states:

The materialist conception of history starts from the position that the production of the means to support human life and, next to production, the exchanged of things produced, is the basis of all social structure; that in every society that has appeared in history, the manner in which wealth is distributed and society divided into classes or orders, is dependent upon what is produced, how it is produces, and how the products are exchanged.

The critical words listed in this statement are ‘support human life’, ‘historic’, and ‘production’. Now, the spectator at the show *Mexique* visually perceives in *My Nurse and I* or *Me Suckling* a maternal-like woman “supporting a human life” by holding, nurturing and breastfeeding an infant. The production of the milk that happens when breast feeding take place signifies “the production of means.” The production of means support a new future or revolution—in other words the infant stylized as Kahlo.



1938: Let the Revolution Begin

In the fall of 1938, Breton with the collaboration of Diego Rivera and Leon Trotsky (fig.10) wrote in *Towards a Free Revolutionary Art* “The aim of this appeal is to find a common ground on which may be reunited all revolutionary writers and artists, the better to serve the revolution by their art and to defend the liberty of that art itself against the usurpers of the revolution.” Therefore, Breton profoundly understood how volatile the political and cultural climate was in Europe during that time, in that Breton was eager in any way to initiate a revolution, and this is why Breton claimed Kahlo as a surrealist. In that Kahlo’s painting communicated the primitive, juxtapositions, and political revolution, which the Surrealist always strive for in their art and literature. Profoundly, many scholars have labeled Kahlo as a rebel who paved a path for female artists. However, even though Kahlo denied her existence as a Surrealist, her painting did inspire revolutionary thoughts—so much that Breton used her art as political propaganda to inspire his own agenda. In January of 1939, Kahlo voyaged to Paris, and two months later Breton revealed Kahlo’s painting *My Nurse and I* or *Me Suckling at the spectacle ‘Mexique’* on March 10th. Ironically, War World II started when Germany attacked Poland, six months later in September of 1939. Ultimately, this transatlantic encounter between Breton and Kahlo illuminated Breton’s desire to proliferate a revolution using art and literature by diffusing Surrealism as a political-art movement.

FIGURE 10. André Breton with Diego Rivera and Leon Trotsky in Mexico City (1938).

