

Laura Gonzalez is a researcher and image theorist at the Autonomous University in Mexico City (UNAM). I visited her during my third visit to Mexico City to discuss the implications of re-looking at Rivera's 1933 Mural, especially, the relevance of technology in *Man at the Crossroads*.

Questions for Laura Gonzalez, UNAM (Autonomous University of Mexico City), Tuesday March 27th, 2007

1. What are the implications of reinterpreting Rivera's Rockefeller mural today? Is it important and relevant and why do you think so?
2. Who might represent some of the figures if they were to be replaced today with contemporary people?
3. How do you see the work of contemporary artists using technology and media in comparison with Rivera, who was using limited technology and an ancient technique to express his political, artistic and philosophical vision?
4. Rivera's assistant Lucienne Bloch, the photographer was instrumental in preserving the memory of the Rockefeller mural. What is the relevance and importance today of the photograph and the photographer in an increasingly saturated world of images, to preserve and save the hidden, the censored and the unseen subject?
5. Rivera's mural, *Man at the Crossroads*, portrays man in the possession of a technology and science, looking with hope and high vision to a new and better future. How do you see the relevance and importance of his message today in a moment when we are also at a crossroads in relation to advances in technology such as the Internet, genetic engineering?
6. Rivera's Rockefeller mural maybe influenced by the work of Eisenstein who he knew at the time. It could have some constructivist and Masonic influence. Can you discuss these influences and others as you see them in relation to the work of Rivera?
7. Can you discuss the differences between Rivera's original conception painted in New York and the reconstruction in Bellas Artes?
8. How do you see the censorship of Rivera's mural as a provocation compared to contemporary artists?

9. A younger generation of artists today maybe less politically active and generally more passive. How do you see the work of Rivera to encourage a more thoughtful and activated approach to art?
10. Rivera's Rockefeller mural and many of his works appear jam packed with constructed and narrative histories, that, in order to understand you must look for hours at the mural. Do you think an added element of time, and the moving image will help his work?
11. Time and space are a vital consideration for the viewer to better understand the contents of the mural. Can you talk about Rivera's construction of time and space as a mechanism to control the viewer?
12. Why was the image of Lenin able to completely efface the rest of the images and symbols of the mural? Can you tell me about this?

Laura Gonzalez Responds (Edited)

The context in which Rivera painted this mural, both at the Rockefeller Center and at Bellas Artes afterwards, to mark the differences between his time and our time, I think it's a very different context, I think maybe it's the difference between the thinking of the modern era, and the post-modern era, thinking that was very positive towards technology, before the atomic bomb, and before the crash of the USSR. Maybe he was very positive in his thinking of the outreach of the left and Marxist government of the Soviet Union before it actually became authoritarian and totalitarian. So I think, the mural is important in our understanding of the positive ways in which Rivera was viewing both technology and Marxist thought.

Yes I think it's the center of the mural, his view on technology, because he had a positive view of technology, technology as an instrument of a man, not a women, a man and I would say that in this mural, there is an interesting dialectic between the symbols, like masses and women and technology, have like almost these feminine passive quality and man and his instruments and theory and war are like more of an active masculine quality. So to me its interesting to think that today we have a more critical view of technology as something that can have like an active positive consequence on the lives of everyone. But it can also have a very destructive, how can I say. It can dominate humanity in a bad sense not only in a positive sense. So I think we, at this time, our view would not be so positive as Rivera in the 30s.

The figure of Lenin and Trotsky in the mural was no fun for Rockefeller. Rivera might have sold him the idea that he was going to paint a mural of the positive consequences of technology and the control of nature. That's within the ideology that Rockefeller would support but not necessarily the social politics of the left as were applied at that time in the Soviet Union.

At the start of the 30s the politics of the US government were social, I mean more social than they are today. So there was something on which to ground a mural like this one. But evidently it was no fun to put the characters of Lenin and Trotsky because it's as if you were supporting their social politics in the Soviet Union. Trotsky at that time came to Mexico and was a personal friend of Rivera.

Its interesting because its not a technological war, they are wearing masks but it this kind of war where there is man fighting against man. There are some airplanes but it's not like the technological war that we could have today with high technology and long distance ammunition. So it's also the mass against the mass and the funny thing of this mural is that the masses of workers and the masses of soldiers are basically the same. They're the instruments of someone else in the mural. They are active in the sense that they will be fighting for things but they are not fighting for their own things. Its like they are carried away by someone else. They are the instruments of someone who is planning or devising the politics. So it's a view of the mass, a very passive view of the mass. The man who's in charge of technology is an abstract man and in the mural is associated with a high-class person, not with a worker, because he's blond and has. In a color coded society like Mexico, or maybe like the United States too, its not like the common worker its like a, another kind of, maybe middle class, high middle class, person, who has the technology in his hands. There's this ambiguity because the figure has these gloves that the worker use, but it's not like the masses that owe technology their power. It's a very class oriented view of technology.

Maybe we could compare this mural to the one in the National Palace. In the plastic sense this montage of different elements but there is not a dynamic view of the figures that are mounted together like in the murals of Siqueiros. Siqueiros had a cinematic quality of the reading of the mural. You can almost think of Siqueiros murals as films and he did use film and he did use photography as a tool in the construction. And not only

the syntactic construction of the mural but also the ideological construction of the mural. In this particular mural of Rivera, technology is the theme, is the subject of the mural, but its not encoded in the syntax of the mural, which is very, I would say classical. It's not dynamic in that time sense dimension as the murals of Siquieros.

Maybe we can explain it metaphorically or by analogy. The way in which Rivera constructs his murals is like a photograph, like an instant that's suspended in time, and in the mural of Rivera you can see different instances that's suspended in time, but those instances are not connected in the reading of the mural, while in the murals of Siqueiros you would not think of a still photograph, but a movie camera, that is moving in time and space and is also directing your reading of the mural. So Siquieros would be filmmaking and Rivera would be photography, still photography. That would be like the analogy if you would try to compare the syntax of the mural with a technology image like photography or film.

I would compare the kind of view of technology and how it's represented socially with metropolis of Fritz Lang. Its like you have the different elements, the social elements, you have like the owner of the factory, you have the workers, the workers have no identity. They are just instruments of the owner of the factory. And then there's this abstract man in the center of the mural. In Metropolis it's the heart that's the center of the whole argument, which will unite the workers and the owner and the good use of technology and the bad use of technology and be like the element that would make the equilibrium. And here its like the figure of the worker, at the center of the mural, that's like the heart of the mural, and the element that's the point of equilibrium, of everything, of both the structural, formal elements of the mural, and the ideological elements of the mural. It's in the middle and here you have the rich classes and then you have the poor classes and here you have the war then you have the masses. Its like a dialectic thinking but it's a very flat, a very evident way of balancing things out in the mural.

How we read the mural today? We wouldn't be so dialectic. That dialectic doesn't support today. Things are more complex and more difficult. You were speaking of the ethical uses of technology in the genetic engineering. It's more complex than good and bad and positive and negative. Lets take technology as a subject of art. I think that this point it would be very difficult for an artist to represent his views on a piece of art, his views of technology, because its so complex. Here in Rivera's mural you see technology

but now we are using high technology, electronic technology, micro technology. It's so complex. It's such a complex affair. In Rivera's time you could use technology as a tool, but if you are an artist today you are wondering if you are the subject in technology as an object or if, you as a person, living in the 21st century, are not part of a technologies object also, because we use so many technological interfaces at this time, even with our bodies. There is this German Philosopher Pedro Zloterdyk who is thinking, he is proposing that at this time, we cannot think of subject, object relationship with technology. We are also objects of technology ourselves and technology is becoming a subject. I mean with these artificial intelligence interfaces technology is also a subject and it's more of an inter-subjective relationship that we have with technology, than subject object oriented relationship. So its really very complex when you are thinking of cells, I mean in the Siqueiros mural you have this man and his hands he has like this representation of a cell that's dividing. But now we have these cells that are thinking by themselves through technological manipulation so, I think that the degree of relationship of man and technology in the 21st century is very intense, much more than it was at Rivera's time. So it would be difficult to represent it as an object.