realism as Figuration

Marx, Engels and Lenin. It has developed its own revolutionary schools, newspapers, and magazines; it has its worker-correspondents, its own literature and art. In the past two decades there have developed writers, artists and critics who have approached the American scene from the viewpoint of the revolutionary workers.

To give this movement in arts and letters greater scope and force, to bring it closer to the daily struggle of the workers, the John Reed Club was formed in the fall of 1929. In the past two and a half years, the influence of this organization has spread to many cities. Today there are thirteen John Reed Clubs throughout the country. These organizations are open to writers and artists, whatever their social origin, who subscribe to the fundamental program adopted by the international conference of revolutionary writers and artists which met at Kharkov, in November, 1930. The program contains points upon which all honest intellectuals, regardless of their background may unite in the common struggle against capitalism. They are:

1. Fight against imperialist war, defend the Soviet Union against capitalist aggression;
2. Fight against fascism, whether open or concealed, like social-fascism;
3. Fight for the development and strengthening of the revolutionary labor movement;
4. Fight against white chauvinism (against all forms of Negro discrimination or persecution) and against the persecution of the foreign-born;
5. Fight against the influence of middle-class ideas in the work of revolutionary writers and artists;
6. Fight against the imprisonment of revolutionary writers and artists, as well as other class-war prisoners throughout the world.

On the basis of this minimum program, we call upon all honest intellectuals, all honest writers and artists, to abandon decisively the treacherous illusion that art can exist for art's sake, or that the artist can remain remote from the historic conflicts in which all men must take sides. We call upon them to break with bourgeois ideas which seek to conceal the violence and fraud, the corruption and decay of capitalist society. We call upon them to align themselves with the working class in its struggle against capitalist oppression and exploitation, against unemployment and terror, against fascism and war. We urge them to join with the literary and artistic movement of the working class in forging a new art that shall be a weapon in the battle for a new and superior world.

Diego Rivera (1886–1957) ‘The Revolutionary Spirit in Modern Art’

After working in the Parisian avant-garde during the second decade of the century, Rivera returned to his native Mexico to participate in, indeed to help formulate, the country's mural art programme. The idea of such an art was conceived as a counter to the tradition of easel art, and was stimulated by debates on the social role of art following the Russian Revolution. A committed Communist, Rivera none the less became critical of Stalinism and its policy in the arts, and for most of the 1930s was allied with Trotsky (see IVD9). The present essay was written while Rivera was engaged on commissions in the United States. Originally
ART is a social creation. It manifests a division in accordance with the division of classes. There is a bourgeois art, there is a revolutionary art, there is a peasant art, there is not, properly speaking, a proletarian art. The proletariat produces art in its struggle but no class can produce a class art until it has reached the highest point of its development. The bourgeoisie reached its zenith in the French Revolution and thereafter created art expressive of itself. When the proletariat in its turn really begins to produce its art, it will be after the proletarian dictatorship has fulfilled its mission of liquidating all class differences and producing a classless society. The art of the future, therefore, will not be proletarian but Communist. During the course of its development, however, and even after it has come into power, the proletariat must, of course, use the best technical devices of bourgeois art, just as it uses bourgeois technical equipment in the form of cannon, machine guns, and steam turbines.

... The man who is truly a thinker, or the painter who is truly an artist, cannot, at any given historical moment, take any but a position in accordance with the revolutionary development of his own time. The social struggle is the richest, the most intense and the most plastic subject which an artist can choose. Therefore, one who is born to be an artist can certainly not be insensible to such developments. When I say born to be an artist, I refer to the constitution or make-up of his eyes, of his nervous system, of his sensibility, and of his brains. The artist is a direct product of life. He is an apparatus born to be the receptor, the condenser, the transmitter and the reflector of the aspirations, desires, and hopes of his age. At times, the artist serves to condense and transmit the desires of millions of proletarians; at times, he serves as the condenser and transmitter only for small strata of the intellectuals or small layers of the bourgeoisie. We can establish it as a basic fact that the importance of an artist can be measured directly by the size of the multitudes whose aspirations and whose life he serves to condense and translate.

The typical theory of nineteenth-century bourgeois aesthetic criticism, namely 'art for art's sake,' is an indirect affirmation of the fact which I have just stressed. According to this theory, the best art is the so-called pure art, art for art's sake, or, in other words, an indirect affirmation of the fact which I have just stressed. The typical theory of nineteenth-century bourgeois aesthetic criticism is one which

...
control of art, it is necessary that the proletariat carry on the struggle on two fronts. On
one front is a struggle against the production of bourgeois art, – and when I say struggle
mean struggle in every sense – and on the other is a struggle to develop the ability of
the proletariat to produce its own art. It is necessary for the proletariat to learn to make
use of beauty in order to live better. It ought to develop its sensibilities, and learn to
enjoy and make use of the works of art which the bourgeoisie, because of special
advantages of training, has produced. Nor should the proletariat wait for some painter
of good will or good intentions to come to them from the bourgeoisie; it is time that the
proletariat develop artists from their own midst. By the collaboration of the artists who
have come out of the proletariat and those who sympathize and are in alliance with the
proletariat, there should be created an art which is definitely and in every way superior
to the art which is produced by the artists of the bourgeoisie.

Such a task is the program of the Soviet Union today. [...] [...] [Russian avant-garde artists] carried on a truly heroic struggle to make that art accessible to the Russian masses. They worked under conditions of famine, the strain of
revolution and counter revolution, and all the material and economic difficulties
imaginable, yet they failed completely in their attempts to persuade the masses to
accept Cubism, or Futurism, or Constructivism as the art of the proletariat. Extended
discussions of the whole problem arose in Russia. Those discussions and the confusion
resulting from the rejection of modern art gave an opportunity to the bad painters to
take advantage of the situation. The academic painters, the worst painters who had
survived from the old regime in Russia, soon provided competition on a grand scale.
Pictures inspired by the new tendencies of the most advanced European schools were
exhibited side by side with the works of the worst academic schools of Russia.
Unfortunately, those that won the applause of the public were not the new painters
and the new European schools but the old and bad academic painters. Strangely
even enough, it seems to me, it was not the modernistic painters but the masses of the
Russian people who were correct in the controversy. Their vote showed not that they
considered the academic painters as the painters of the proletariat, but that the art of
the proletariat must not be a hermetic art, an art inaccessible except to those who have
developed and undergone an elaborate esthetic preparation. The art of the proletariat
has to be an art that is warm and clear and strong. It was not that the proletariat of
Russia was telling these artists: ‘You are too modern for us.’ What it said was: ‘You are
not modern enough to be artists of the proletarian revolution.’ The revolution and its
theory, dialectical materialism, have no use for art of the ivory tower variety. They have
need of an art which is as full of content as the proletarian revolution itself, as clear and
forthright as the theory of the proletarian revolution.

In Russia there exists the art of the people, namely peasant art. It is an art rooted in
the soil. In its colors, its materials, and its force it is perfectly adapted to the environ-
ment out of which it is born. It represents the production of art with the simplest
resources and in the least costly form. For these reasons it will be of great utility to the
proletariat in developing its own art. The better Russian painters working directly after
the Revolution should have recognized this and then built upon it, for the proletariat,
so closely akin to the peasant in many ways, would have been able to understand this
art. Instead of this the academic artists, intrinsically reactionary, were able to get
control of the situation. Reaction in art is not merely a matter of theme. A painter
who conserves and uses the worst technique of bourgeois art is a reactionary artist, even
I want to use my art as a weapon: I want to think, in all that I can speak, in all that I can write, and in all that I can paint, be nothing else. I want to be a propagandist of Communism and I want to be its propagandist. Every single artist has been a propagandist. I want to be a propagandist and I want to be nothing else.

Every single artist has been a propagandist. If he does not want to be a propagandist because he cannot carry on any longer with an artistic inspiration, it does not mean that he does not want to be one.