

# Matta: when the invisible reveals itself

Ignacio Olavarria

Roberto Sebastián Antonio Matta Echaurren forged chains of words in order to feel free and captured reality with the aim of demolishing the walls of pictorial representation. Urged on by his rebellious and unconventional nature, Matta went beyond the limits of spatial representation on the two-dimensional plane.

Matta de-codified perceptible reality and presented it to the viewer in the form of his canvases. He offered himself as an interpreter to all those who wished to perceive through the gaze what could only be felt. In his voyage of interpretation he reached the limits of an interior world previously unexplored by pictorial language.

The work of this “southern realist”, as Matta defined himself, remains surprisingly relevant today. His theoretical conception of the future and of continual change is fully applicable to the world today in which nothing is fixed or stable.

Towards the end of his life Matta explained the reasons that led him to paint: “I paint in order not to forget the beating of my heart, the movement of the waves, the galaxies”<sup>1</sup>. This phrase contains the three key concepts in his work. His heart beats marked the rhythm of his progression towards the representation of his thoughts and emotions, while the movement of the waves reflected his meditations on material and energy, which are continuously transformed like the curves of the waves. This theory of energy is manifested in his pictorial output. Lastly, Matta referred to the galaxies as he was the painter of the telescope and the microscope, the painter of forces invisible to the eye, the painter of the human mind, the atom and the cosmos.

The new installation of works from the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza’s Permanent Collection consists of five large canvases that create an immense polyptych, offering a good example of the open cube system deployed by Matta. This system can be seen as the culmination of his quest for a spatial concept that evolved over the course of his career.

Matta’s concept of space took firm hold in the year 1928. At that period the young artist was studying architecture in Santiago de Chile while also attending drawing classes. He was taught by Hernán Gazmuri, a Cubist painter of whom Matta said: “He was the only person who taught me something relatively good about drawing”<sup>2</sup>. This early relationship brought Matta closer to the issue of representing multiple viewpoints of an object on the canvas. In addition, his training as an architect facilitated the subsequent development of his spatial theory as a whole.

Matta’s rebellious nature led him to leave Chile and move to Europe in order to study with Le Corbusier, however this episode does not seem to have allowed the young artist to progress as he might have wished:

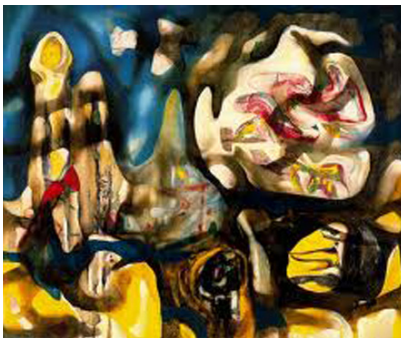


Fig. 1  
Matta  
*Psychological Morphology*, 1939  
Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía,  
Madrid

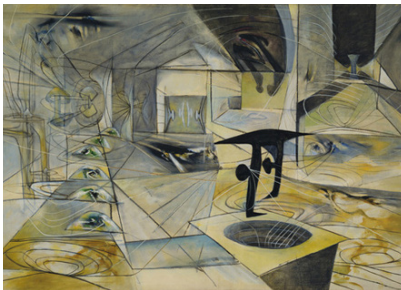


Fig. 2  
Matta  
*The Onyx of Electra*, 1944  
Museum of Modern Art, Nueva York

"In 1933 I arrived in Paris and sought out Le Corbusier who was at the height of his fame; I thought that it would be impossible to work for him but it was in fact easy as no one paid him anything. He wore huge glasses like magnifying glasses and treated me like a messenger boy. I think he was an unhappy man"<sup>3</sup>.

In the light of this situation, Matta's artistic preoccupations sought refuge in Surrealism and he produced his first oil paintings in the summer of 1938, working alongside Onslow Ford and Esteban Francés. In this series, entitled *Inscape*, he formulated the concept of "psychological morphologies". André Breton described these works as "absolute automatism, abstract Surrealism" while Matta considered them "The graph of transformations due to the absorption and emission of energy on the part of the object, from its initial appearance to its final form in the geodesic psychological medium"<sup>4</sup>.

In these "psychological morphologies" Onslow Ford and Matta were not representing reality in its external manifestation but rather its inner appearance: the forces that generate it, constantly modify it and complete it. The aim was to discover different states of consciousness and transform them into visual elements through forms and colours.

The following year, in the summer of 1939, Matta, working alongside a small group of friends, consolidated his "psychological morphologies" and began to use a technique that he would continue to deploy throughout his career. Starting with a canvas with a black ground he applied successive layers of watery paint, allowing the colours to mix together at random (see fig. 1).

Some time later, in one of his conversations with Eduardo Carrasco, Matta made the following statement on his pictorial activity at that period: "I do not paint, I see a cosmos in the patches of paint. I start from the patches [...] This is because my works are not painted... they are images"<sup>5</sup>. The idea of revealing the image already present in the patches of paint recalls the figures trapped in blocks of uncarved marble that Michelangelo wished to liberate and imbue with life.

The transparency of the paint layers brings to mind Marcel Duchamp, a key figure in Matta's career and one who would exercise a major influence on him from 1942 onwards. While Duchamp terminated his particular quest for transparency with *The Large Glass*, Matta began his in 1943 with his "large transparents".

In *The Large Glass* Duchamp established a series of symbolic relationships referring to the arousal of desire. The innate transparency of the glass used for this work allowed him to create an interplay in which the sexual impulses and instincts arising between the bachelors and the bride are revealed in such a way that nothing and no one can conceal them.



Fig. 3  
Marcel Duchamp  
*The Large Glass*, 1915-1923  
The Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia



Fig. 4  
Matta  
*Evolution d'une cible*, 1956  
Private collection, Berlin

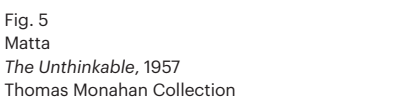


Fig. 5  
Matta  
*The Unthinkable*, 1957  
Thomas Monahan Collection

The additional difficulty facing Matta twenty years later was that of converting the canvas into a transparent support so that the entire interior universe should be revealed without anyone being able to conceal it (see fig. 2).

This mission was entrusted to “le vitreur”, who, in Matta’s words:

“Is a curious character who turns everything into glass and into transparency. At that period I referred to characters whom I termed ‘large transparents’, I wanted everything to be transparent so that one could see through and so that nothing could be concealed.”<sup>6</sup>.

In addition, there are certain similarities between Duchamp’s *The Large Glass* and the “cube” on which Matta was already working at that point. Both oblige the spectator to become part of the work; in the case of the former this is achieved through the spectator’s gaze that passes through the work and in the way he or she is reflected in it, thus becoming part of it. In the latter, the spectator is drawn into the work and becomes immersed in it. In both cases the viewer becomes part of what is represented. In *The Large Glass* it is the spectator that transmits the energy that moves the machine of desire. In Matta’s cubes the viewer is transported to the true real world that he or she cannot perceive through sight.

Duchamp’s influence was crucial for Matta’s formulation of the concept of the reciprocal interaction between the viewer and the work and by the late 1940s he had established the theoretical basis of the “cube”. Over the coming years he would put his theory to the test in his canvases, which became an experimental laboratory that would take concrete shape in the 1960s (see figs. 4 and 5).

From 1946 Matta’s social and political commitment became more pronounced and was expressed in his work as a result of his return to Europe that year when he saw at first hand the horrors resulting from World War II. Over the course of the next two decades the subject matter of Matta’s work reflected his ideas on the historical events of his time. Concentration camps, injustice, Salvador Allende’s Socialist Chile, the Vietnam War and Pinochet’s coup d’état are among the themes to be found in his compositions.

Matta’s social and political commitment did not, however, prevent him from completing “the cube”, one of his most original and characteristic projects that he had been working on over the previous years. Between 1960 and 1966 he produced large format works with the aim of creating a closed cube that would replace the individual paintings and would allow for the participation of the viewer in the work through his or her immersion in it. Technical difficulties regarding its installation prevented him from fully terminating this ambitious project and he was ultimately obliged to leave the cube open to reveal its six interior sides.

In this unique configuration of multi-dimensional space that involves time and movement in addition to the traditional dimensions, Matta was able to represent a complete interior world that expressed his own thoughts and emotions as well as relationships between subject and object. This type of connection would expand the relationship between his paintings and the viewer with the aim that the viewer not only saw the work but also felt himself/herself to be seen by it and to be part of it.

His works involve both planetary space and microscopic space, in which objects and people are fundamentally represented from within and not through their exterior appearance. For Matta, visual perception was not sufficient to reveal the essence of reality in its most authentic form. Limited perception codifies its exterior appearance without discovering its genesis, its formation and its relationship with what surrounds it, in a continuous and ongoing process of evolution. Matta's aim was to reveal the intrinsic essence of each of the elements that makes up perceptible reality.

This intention extended to the world of the sensations, emotions, states of mind and ideas that each of the motifs in his work convey, whether the subject is nature, people, inanimate objects or historical events.

In the last years of his life Matta's unconventional approach led him to move into the field of digital creation. He considered that computers opened up a new direction for artistic experimentation and one that allowed for the ongoing incorporation of distortions of colour, movement, interaction and spatial representation. In the year 2000 Matta stated: "The task of the *computer* is that of an accelerator of form. Its drawings are the future of the original"<sup>7</sup>.

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#### Notes

- 1 Matta: "Un estallido interior". In *Revista común presencia entrevistas*: <http://comunpresenciaentrevistas.blogspot.com/2006/11/roberto-matta-entrevista-en-roma.html>
- 2 Carrasco, Eduardo: *Matta. Conversaciones*. Santiago de Chile, Interamericana, 1987, p. 75.
- 3 Matta: "Un estallido interior", op. cit.
- 4 *Matta* [exhib. cat.]. Barcelona, Fundación Caixa Catalunya-Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 1999, p. 31.
- 5 See Carrasco 1987, op.cit. p. 145
- 6 Carrasco 1987, p. 204.
- 7 Matta-Ferrari, Germana: *Matta. El año de los tres 000*. Lugano, Sistan Edition, 2000.