

# The Story behind the Research: Matta and the Open Cube

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Fig. 1  
Installation of *L'Honni aveuglant*  
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, 1992-2009, Madrid



Discovering the stories concealed within works of art is one of the principal tasks of a museum curator. When was the work made? Under what circumstances? What did people think about it at the time? What did the artist think about it? What happened to the work after it was finished? In addition to the information provided by the materials used in a work's creation, the marks left by the artist and the patina of time, research into other sources allows the curator, for example, to reconstruct the creative process and subsequent physical history of the work. Letters, texts by the artist, documents and contemporary photographs together create a map that offers the possibility of entering into a specific work of art in the most complete manner possible. On occasions these accounts lead on to a research project that casts a completely new light on the work in question. This has been the case with the new installation of the cycle by Matta entitled *L'Honni aveuglant (The dazzling Outcast)*, which was on display at the Museum between September and October 2011.

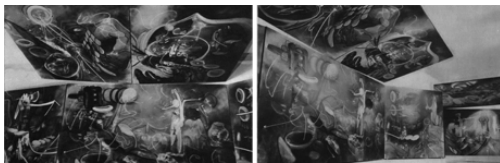


Fig. 2 and 3  
Installation of *L'Honni aveuglant*  
Iolas Gallery, June-July 1966, Paris



Fig. 4  
New installation of *L'Honni aveuglant*  
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2011, Madrid

[\[+ info\]](#)

## Photographs from 1966

According to Simone Frigerio who visited the first public presentation in 1966 of *L'Honni aveuglant*: "The latest exhibition by Matta at the Gallery Iolas [in Paris] has been designed to occupy a space through completely covering the ceiling, walls and floor with a group of paintings"<sup>1</sup>, while Geneviève Bonnefoi who also submerged himself in Matta's pictorial universe noted that "it is a space that one enters into as if into a steam bath that is as heavenly as it is infernal"<sup>2</sup>. Such accounts and the principal texts on this cycle<sup>3</sup> refer to the unique and striking installation of these works, now in the Museo Thyssen, shortly after they were created. Lack of visual documentation, however, had made it impossible to reconstruct that installation until now (fig. 1).

The discovery of an article with photographs of the installation of Matta's cycle at the Gallery Iolas in Paris in 1966<sup>4</sup> (figs. 2 and 3) has now made it possible, more than forty years later, to reconstruct the way in which Matta showed *L'Honni aveuglant* on its first presentation to the public (fig. 4). In addition to confirming what critics of the day had described and enabling us to present it in the way that Matta conceived of it, this discovery has opened up new directions for a more profound knowledge of the series and of the artist's concept of the "open cube".



Fig. 5  
Matta  
*Le cube ouvert*, 1949  
Private collection, Paris

### Towards the Open Cube

The concept of the “open cube” appeared in Matta’s work around 1947 as the result of an intensive process of investigation that drew on his origins as an architect, his links with Surrealism and his interest in the representation of a new concept of space related to non-Euclidean geometry<sup>5</sup>. From an early date Matta, who was known from the time of his arrival in Paris in 1933 for his “discovery of previously unexplored regions of space in the world of art”<sup>6</sup>, aimed to achieve a simultaneous expression of exterior and interior reality. The idea of the “open cube” arose precisely from his desire to create a new artistic concept that combined the multiple dimensions to which human beings are exposed. In addition, we need to remember the serious existential crisis that Matta suffered at this point, brought about by his knowledge of the terrible crimes committed during World War II. It manifested itself in a new intention: that of appealing directly to the viewer and of making him or her the true protagonist of the work.

Through canvases with floating structures that represent all-enveloping energies (fig. 5) Matta aimed to make the viewer aware of the enormous range of possible viewpoints that could be adopted in relation to any situation: he combined what is physical and external to us with the psychological and internal in order to offer the viewer a more profound knowledge of his or her surroundings. Matta expressed his increasingly urgent desire to reach out to the person viewing his work and to arouse that person’s dormant conscience through his painting.

### The Open Cube as Total Work of Art

In the early 1960s and having depicted his “open cubes” on the surface of the canvas, Matta’s investigations extended beyond the canvas in order to create a three-dimensional structure consisting of a type of painting that totally enveloped the viewer. Each of the planes in his earlier works became an independent canvas that was then assembled as part of a cycle. The viewer thus ceased to be a merely external observer in order to submerge himself/herself into a new reality, becoming not just part of the work but its very epicentre. Matta’s intention with this new artistic concept was that instead of the viewer possessing the work, it should be the work that possessed the viewer: “Thus, trapped in an unbearable situation because of this painting, he also is obliged to carry out a poetic act of creation in order to make it his own: besieged by the real, he feels defeated and thus reflects”<sup>7</sup>.

With works such as *Être Atout* of 1960 (fig. 6) Matta laid the way for achieving his aim of creating a total work of art. Some years later, in 1965, the Kunstmuseum in Lucerne published the theoretical text



Fig. 6  
Matta  
*Être Atout* (polyptych), 1960  
Ramuntcho Matta Collection

Fig. 7  
Matta

- 1 *Où loge la folie A* (Where Madness Dwells A) [\[+ info\]](#)
  - 2 *Où loge la folie B* (Where Madness Dwells B) [\[+ info\]](#)
  - 3 *L'Honni aveuglant* (The dazzling outcast) [\[+ info\]](#)
  - 4 *Les Grandes expectatives* (Great Expectations) [\[+ info\]](#)
  - 5 *Le Où à marée haute* (The Where at Flood Tide) [\[+ info\]](#)
- Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid



of the artist on the “open cube” in conjunction with an exhibition of that name<sup>8</sup>. In “Cosa é la cosa mentale” Matta offered a summary of his project to create a cube that would show interior and exterior reality in an indissoluble fusion and would replace the physical space by a realm of the senses<sup>9</sup>. Despite the fact that he had already created other cubes that existed in real space, in the text he said that up to that point his open cubes had been “a spatial projection of my subconscious”. Nonetheless, the artist’s aim was to create a work that represented the fullest possible development of the individual, “a system of analogies, a poetic system” in his own words<sup>10</sup>.

### L’Honni aveuglant

The “open cube” that Matta designed in 1965 reflected all the different realms of human life. Earth, the cosmos, the future, the past, hostile and allied forces were to be represented on each of the cube’s six sides<sup>11</sup>. By completely enveloping themselves in it, viewers would feel themselves surrounded by everything that determined their existence, thus becoming fully developed individuals. The *L’Honni aveuglant* cycle in the Museo Thyssen represents the complete expression of that ideal. This is confirmed by Matta’s highly detailed description in which he lists each of the sides of the cube then provides the titles of the works now in the Museum’s Permanent Collection (fig. 7):

“[...] thus, for example, the bottom part of the cube would be an analogy of the earth (Where Madness dwells). [...] The wall of the top of the cube could be the morphology of the entire physical cosmos (the BACKGROUND) [...]. The canvas opposite you could be the morphology of the reencounter, the “GREAT EXPECTATIONS” of the future, of the unexpected, or of surprise. The canvas behind



Fig. 8  
Invitation to the exhibition  
*L'Honni aveuglant*, Iolas  
Gallery, June-July 1966, Paris

you could be memory, our history, our culture, "THE MEMORY SWITCH". The wall on the right, "THE WHERE AT FLOOD TIDE", could be the forces that are hostile to you, and the wall on the left, all the allied forces, "THE DAZZLING OUTCAST". As such, if you were in the perceptual centre of this space, you would simultaneously have an image of what could happen to you, of your allies and enemies, of the power of culture [...], and at the same time an awareness of the physical world in which you find yourselves"<sup>12</sup>.

The invitation to the exhibition held in 1966 at the Iolas Gallery where the cycle was exhibited (fig. 8) once again confirms the above-mentioned hypothesis as it presents the canvases in the manner of a cutout cube<sup>13</sup>. Each painting, reproduced on the invitation on a small scale, was located in its corresponding place in the cube. The five canvases in the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza made up four sides and represented the future, earth, friends and enemies. As Matta's text reproduced above indicates, there were two more, *The Background* (fig. 9) and *The Memory Switch* (fig. 10), which represented the past and the sky, respectively.

Nonetheless, despite the fact that even the invitation referred to six sides of the cube, photographs of the installation show that the cube was ultimately not closed in and that it consisted of four sides that opened to allow the spectator inside. It was probably the physical impossibility of translating Matta's ideal into real space that resulted in this modification. On the other hand, it may have been intentional. This was what Bonnefoi believed, who entitled her article "From Cube to Space" and stated that "the installation [...] *L'Honni aveuglant* does not produce the impression of a cube [...] but rather of an open space that can be infinitely extended"<sup>14</sup>.

### Matta as the Dazzling Outcast

*L'Honni aveuglant* was thus a key work in Matta's career. Firstly, as the artist's own writings reveal, it constituted a milestone in his lengthy process of research into space and dimensions, both physical and psychological. Not only did he translate his concept of the "open cube" into real space, with the limitations that this implied, but with this cycle he expressed his highest aspirations as an artist. In the cycle of works now in the Museo Thyssen, Matta offered a compendium of everything that he wished to convey to his contemporaries in his attempt to raise them to a higher level of knowledge of reality. In addition, the work can be seen as a statement about himself and his role as an artist in society.

Matta considered himself to be a "dazzling outcast" and thus identified with the title of his work. *L'Honni aveuglant* also involves a reflection on his role as an artist in society, the function of whom was



Fig. 9  
Matta  
*Le Fond*, 1966  
Private collection

Fig. 10  
Matta  
*Interrupteur de la mémoire*, 1966  
Castellani Art Museum of Niagara University  
Collection. Donated by Dr and Mrs Armand  
J. Castellani, 1986



to disturb people's consciences. This was an uncomfortable role for his friends and associates who, in Matta's opinion, both rejected and admired him. *L'Honni aveuglant* is Matta's most personal cycle in which he reflects on reality and dream, the physical and the mental, the world and its relationship with the artist. Matta appeals to us in his desire to liberate our thinking and free it of prejudices and moral and aesthetic limitations. He "seemingly makes life more difficult as he wishes to disturb; but he does so in order to make it clearer and more lucid. More beautiful"<sup>15</sup>.

## Notes

- 1 Frigerio, Simone: "Matta. "Le Honni Aveuglant". In *Aujourd'hui, Art et Architecture*, no. 54, September 1966, p. 99.
- 2 Bonnefoi, Geneviève: "Matta du cube à l'espace". In *XXe siècle*, n°. 27, 1966, p. 137.
- 3 See Alarcó, Paloma: *Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza. Pintura Moderna*. Madrid, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2009, pp. 452-453, ill. and Álvarez Lopera, José: *Maestros Modernos del Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza*. Madrid, Fundación Colección Thyssen-Bornemisza, 1992. n. 665, pp. 552, 604, ill.
- 4 See Bonnefoi 1966 op.cit.
- 5 On Matta and theories of modern physics, see Sawin, Martica: "Matta en Nueva York: Una luz que iluminó el panorama artístico americano". In *Matta, 1911-2011* [exhib. cat., Valencia, IVAM – Bilbao, Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao]. Madrid, Sociedad Estatal de Acción Cultural, 2011, pp. 41-43 y Henderson, Linda D.: *The fourth dimension and non-Euclidean geometry in art*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1983, p. 348.
- 6 Marcel Duchamp in the catalogue of the collection of the Société Anonyme, 1945. Cited in Sawin p. 42.
- 7 Matta: "El proscrito que deslumbra (1965)". In *Matta* [exhib. cat., Madrid, Palacio de Cristal]. Madrid, Ministerio de Cultura, 1983, p. 41.
- 8 *Matta (le cube ouvert)* was on display at the Kunstmuseum de Lucerna from 8 August to 26 September 1965.
- 9 Matta: "Cosa é la cosa mentale". In *Matta* [exhib. cat.]. Lucerna, Kunstmuseum Luzern, 1965, unpaginated.
- 10 Matta 1965, unpaginated.
- 11 Matta 1965, unpaginated.
- 12 Text by Matta reproduced in "Cronologie et documents". In *Matta* [exhib. cat.]. Paris, Centre Pompidou, 1985, pp. 292-293.
- 13 Paris 1985, p. 293.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid.