



ROBERTO MATTA
GORDON ONSLOW FORD
A Vision Shared

“If we are not using poetry we are repeating ourselves”

– MATTA



PHOTO: FARIBA BOGZARAN

Roberto Matta and Gordon Onslow Ford, 1998

MATTA: EXPLORER OF HYPERSPACE AND HIS FRIENDSHIP WITH GORDON ONSLOW FORD

Roberto Matta was poetry incarnate, revealing invisible states of consciousness in images and words. His originality, liveliness, humor and agile mind danced fluidly, shape-shifting reality as he moved in and out of different languages to pull from the invisible while pushing the boundaries of the visible. When talking about his paintings, he became philosophical and poetic all at once, inviting his audience to grasp his vast and complex imagination.

Born on November 11, 1911, he trained as an architect at the Universidad Catolica in his native Chile. Moving to Paris in 1935, he worked as a draftsman with Le Corbusier on various projects including the visionary drawings of Ville Radieuse. He made casual drawings on the side without giving them any particular attention. In those early drawings he expressed the morphology of the earth moving into new dimensions: plants morphing into human bodies; inanimate objects morphing into earth; faces transforming into



Roberto Matta and Gordon Onslow Ford in Carnac, Brittany, France, 1938.

webs of interconnected circuits while organic forms seemed to travel in and out of time. He applied his architectural rendering skills to depict interior worlds, which he called the “Inscape.”

It was not until he met the painter Gordon Onslow Ford in 1937 that Matta began to relate his drawings to modern art. When Matta showed his drawings to Onslow Ford, he received an unexpected reaction: “These are the most exciting works I have seen in Paris.” Onslow Ford’s encouragement of Matta’s drawings enabled him to take his art seriously. In his own poetic and metaphoric language Matta remarked: “I was like a grape that knew it could make wine. Most grapes think that they are there to be eaten. I knew I had wine and that it had to come out, but I did not know how. It came because of the war and pain, too. I must say Gordon pushed me into making wine, and in that sense he freed himself through it.”¹

Matta and Onslow Ford’s friendship grew rapidly as they met regularly in

cafes and their studios conversing into the night. In 1938, during a rainy summer in the small fishing village of Trévigon in Brittany, they spent hours conversing about modern art, Ouspensky’s fourth dimension, Poincaré’s mathematical models and the curved space of non-Euclidean geometry. Ouspensky’s book *Tertium Organum*, and his discourse on expanding the visual perception and concept of reality by looking beyond the third dimension towards a “higher spatial dimension”—the fourth dimension, influenced and inspired them. The cultivation of these philosophical and metaphysical ideas impacted their work and evolved in their paintings for decades to come.

Through his friendship with and prompting from Salvador Dali, Matta showed his drawings to the founder of the Surrealist movement André Breton. His innovation and poetic rendering of life impressed Breton. “Matta put on his best suit and had his shoes shined to show Breton his drawings. After he left, Breton said the most impossible young man came with the most marvelous drawings.”² Matta joined the surrealists just in time to be part of the International Surrealist exhibition in 1938. He had already met Marcel Duchamp in 1936 and was fascinated with Duchamp’s scientific inquiry into art and the “indefinite space” he was aiming towards. Later Matta co-wrote an essay on Duchamp’s *Glass: An Analytical Reflection* and published it in *Société Anonyme* in 1944. A few months later Onslow Ford was also invited to the Surrealist circle after Breton visited his studio.

Matta and Onslow Ford were among the young Surrealists who brought a new vision to the group—a vision of going beyond the Freudian realm of personal dream symbolism to explore other inner dimensions. Matta referred to his exploration as “Psychological Morphology.” Later Onslow Ford called these dimensions the “Inner Worlds,” while their contemporary painter friend Wolfgang Paalen spoke of the Dynaton, which in Greek means “the possible.” They knew art was an essential vehicle for exploring the nature of reality. In their own unique way, they took surrealism to new plateaus of discovering the metaphysical aspects of the unconscious.

Upon Breton’s request, Matta defined Psychological Morphology. However, translating Matta’s ideas and philosophy from French into English is nearly impossible as he created new words, made puns and pushed the reader’s imagination into new ways of seeing. “Psychological morphology. . . the graphic result of the adaptation of internal energies to obstacles created in environment. . . The conception of a psychological time medium in which objects are transformed, leads one to compare to a Euclidean space in rotary and pulsatory transformation, in which the object at each risk of interpenetration can oscillate from a point volume to moment eternity from attraction-repulsion in past-future of light-dark of matter and movement. The fourth dimension would be the graphic expression of the risk undertaken during the entire duration of transformation.”³

Matta and Onslow Ford shared their ideas further with Breton when they spent the summer of 1939 at the Chateau de Chemillieu with the other members of the surrealist group including Yves Tanguy, Kay Sage, Jacqueline Lamba and Estéban Francés. Breton acknowledged this new development and commented on the new vision of these artists: “If, when they venture into the scientific realm, the precision of their language is somewhat unreliable, it cannot be denied that their common, fundamental aspiration is to move beyond the universe of three dimensions. . .The necessity of a suggestive representation of the four-dimensional universe asserts itself particularly in Matta and Onslow Ford.”⁴

Between 1938-39, Matta created a series of paintings entitled Psychological Morphology. These paintings show the first step into the “internal energies” where an inner life was organically evolving. In his paintings from the 1940’s, he transformed the image of matter into energy and, with great speed, vortex into hyper-space. Using automatism, he painted freely by applying paint directly to the canvas and then spreading the paint with cloth, brush or palette knife. The surface of the canvas became blurred, unrecognizable, and non-dimensional. After contemplating what appeared under his hands, he rapidly created new images articulated from the unknown. “I want to



PHOTO: ELISABETH ROUSELIN

Left to right: Roberto Matta, André Breton, Aube Breton, Gordon Onslow Ford, and Estéban Francés at Chemillieu, France, 1939.

surprise myself or I would be bored. Something has to come from inside of me. It is hard to put into words. The mystery is everywhere, and I might catch something.”⁵

With war declared in Europe, Matta left Paris for New York in late 1939. Onslow Ford returned to England where he painted *Cycloptomania* (page 6), constructed of curved multi-horizon worlds with a morphing female image taking an egg-shaped eye from the center of the inner circle, making visible the invisible reality. In 1940, Onslow Ford was soon able to leave England to join his friends Matta and Yves Tanguy in New York.

While in New York, Matta and Onslow Ford met many young American artists, particularly at the influential lectures and exhibitions Onslow Ford gave on surrealism at the invitation of the New School for Social Research. Soon after, the two friends parted. Onslow Ford moved to Mexico in 1941 and Matta stayed in New York until 1947. Matta’s genius and magnetic personality attracted many creative people. He had regular visits with artists such as William Baziotes, Jackson Pollock, and David Hare and became close friends with Robert Motherwell. These artists gathered regularly at Matta’s studio in New York to experiment with automatism.



Matta painting in Sausalito, California, 1956 on the Ferryboat *Vallejo*, owned by Gordon Onslow Ford.

During the 1940's and 1950's disturbed personages appeared in Matta’s drawings and paintings. The elongated and, at times, chillingly torturous “humanoids” were caught in a vortex between worlds—perhaps showing the anxiety of war and the human beings trapped in the middle. In 1937, he saw Picasso’s *Guernica*. The reflection of agony and horror of war in *Guernica* also shocked and disturbed his audience at the

time. Some of Matta’s humanoids were reflecting similar emotions but caught in a different space-time. During the same period, personages appeared in Onslow Ford’s paintings particularly during his stay in Mexico from 1941 to 1947. In his paintings, these personages seemed more at peace and often appeared in the form of a female and a male searching for ways to unite which can be seen in *Personnages Communicating in Depth*, 1944 (page 8). As Matta’s “humanoids” elicited an emotional response, Onslow Ford’s personages remained metaphysical.

In 1956, Matta visited California and reunited with his friend by staying in Mill Valley with Onslow Ford and his wife Jacqueline Johnson. During his stay, Matta made several drawings and paintings in one of Onslow Ford’s studios which was located at the historic ferryboat *Vallejo* in Sausalito. Onslow Ford shared the ferryboat with the painter

Jean Varda. At the time, Onslow Ford was in the midst of his exploration of the inner worlds through the primordial elements of “line, circle, dot.” Matta’s last visit to the San Francisco Bay Area was in 1998 where he visited Onslow Ford’s home and studio in Inverness. He made an automatic painting by pouring different colors and water onto paper, then using a long brush and his walking stick he articulated a world appearing under his hands.

From the 1960’s through the 1990’s Matta’s paintings danced into hyperspace, delved into cosmic landscapes and brought attention to both the earth and the inner worlds as a dynamic and vibrant place of pregnant potential. In his recent brilliant “Carborundum” prints his personages dramatically changed and transformed into more tranquil beings. In particular *L’oeuf de Verbe Voir*, 1995 (page 34) shows beings seeing through the eye of the fish—an archetype of regeneration and creation. In *Le Source de Calm*, 2002 (page 38), there is a sympathetic atmosphere and a congregation of beings interconnected in an affectionate manner symbolic of the realities of the inner worlds.

Through automatism, Matta expressed on his canvases his deep relations with the universe. Some of the paintings shown in this exhibit reflect this quality: *Morphology of Oneness*, 1996 (front cover), *Etoilages des Forces*, 1995 (page 31) and *Selfinity*, 1995 (page 32). In these images Matta brings into perspective the importance of nature and earth as a microcosm of the larger universe. “I can say that matter is marvelous. It is what once used to be ‘divine nature.’ Nature does everything, plants, stars, human brains, horse brains, serpents. It does everything and transforms all into pure energy, sometimes at incredible speed and it ‘organimates’ itself in organisms still unknown to us. To enter matter is like entering an ocean.”⁶

Over the years, Matta kept close contact with astrophysicists. The recent scientific discovery of “antimatter,” which indicated a major portion of the universe was invisible, excited him as it confirmed his sixty-year quest of catching what cannot be seen by the naked eye. Referring to scientists, Matta commented: “they don’t have any visual language. It has to come from the artist. That is the role of art. . . they really need an artist to show images which are not anthropomorphic images of the Greek gods, animals, and birds, but some constellation of matter which tends to become life.”⁷

The last time I visited Matta in Paris, he had just turned 90 and was ecstatic about his new discoveries. He showed me several drawings, which were his renderings for the creation of a new world. Never repeating himself, Matta was transparent, letting the life force flow through him in the marvel of creation. His art awakens, amuses and inspires the viewer to look within and beyond the perceived reality. Collectively, Matta’s paintings and poetry will be the agent of change and inspiration for the constant invocation of the new dimensions of consciousness.

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