

## MATTA AND GORDON ONSLOW FORD: AN INVISIBLE DIALOGUE

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The first time I met Roberto Matta (Matta) was in September of 1993, in Munich, at the opening exhibition of his longtime friend, Gordon Onslow Ford (Gordon). Gordon had wanted us to meet, as Matta was his most important surrealist artist friend, and from the moment we were introduced, we were conversing about art, metaphysics, and science. Gordon and I had met a few years earlier, had become engaged in regular dialogue, and collaborated on a publication.<sup>1</sup> As a scientist exploring cutting-edge research in *Lucid Dreaming*<sup>2</sup> and having published on the transcendent experiences in this phenomenon,<sup>3</sup> I recognized both of their quests in arts and consciousness. I was in my early thirties, passionately immersed in dialogue about the frontier in the new science of consciousness with two surrealist artists who had just turned 80.

It was endearing to witness Matta and Gordon's profound friendship of sixty years, how their time in France had shaped them as artist/philosophers. They strongly sustained their connection and vision throughout their lives. They had first met in 1937, soon after Gordon moved to Paris. Matta was an architect working with Le Corbusier and Gordon was an accomplished landscape painter. Their meeting was serendipitous as their landladies knew each other and arranged a lunch for the two to meet. After lunch, Matta showed Gordon some of his casual drawings and Gordon remarked that they were the most marvelous drawings he had seen in Paris. Apparently, Matta was in disbelief of Gordon's reaction but to prove it, Gordon commissioned one drawing every month from Matta. As a result, he collected many of Matta's significant early drawings, including *Star Travel*, 1939.

Their dialogue and friendship led them to travel in the summer of 1938 to Trévignon, Brittany, the birthplace of their favorite surrealist painter, Yves Tanguy. It was a pivotal moment for both artists, who were in their mid-twenties. As Gordon expressed in a letter to his mother while they were in Brittany:

"Matta and I are going from strength to height... and in spite of the fact that he has lately been in bed with a bad ear, we have



Gordon Onslow FORD  
*3 Trees Move Along*, 1938  
 Huile sur toile - Oil on Canvas  
 68 x 91,8 cm - 26 ¾ x 36 ½ in.  
 Coll. Lucid Art Foundation, Inverness, CA, États-Unis



Gordon Onslow FORD  
*Street Scene Paris*, 1938  
 Huile sur toile - Oil on Canvas  
 65,1 x 91,4 cm - 25 ⅞ x 36 in.  
 Coll. Lucid Art Foundation, Inverness, CA, États-Unis

both been working on exciting discoveries, and each picture is better than the last. We are studying psychology, biology and morphology and are hoping to be able to appreciate better our subconscious and as we used to say “all that cannot be taught.” I am sure that the path to realization lies not in what you learn from others but in what you find out for yourself.”<sup>4</sup>

It was in Trévignon that Matta and Gordon experienced significant shifts in the direction of their art. With Gordon’s encouragement, Matta transformed from an architect into a surrealist painter and developed his idea of Psychological Morphology, and Gordon transformed from a landscape painter into one exploring a new territory of spontaneous abstract forms. Matta once told me, “Gordon had to give up his trees to become a surrealist!”

To understand the shift they experienced in Brittany, the influence of Russian philosopher Piotr Demianovitch Ouspenski, who received considerable public attention in the 1930s in England and throughout Europe, cannot be overemphasized.<sup>5</sup> On rainy days, Gordon and Matta immersed themselves in Ouspensky’s magnum opus, *Tertium Organum*,<sup>6</sup> to which Gordon may have been exposed by his aunt.<sup>7</sup>

Ouspensky's book introduced Gordon and Matta to a completely new perspective, allowing them to connect their art with the concept of the fourth dimension, sparking new discoveries in their artwork and practice. Ouspensky pondered a crucial question: "what do the dimensions of space represent in reality and why are there three of them?" His answer offered an expansive vision of the self: "We bear within ourselves the conditions of our space, and therefore within ourselves we shall find the conditions which will permit us to establish correlations between space and higher space."<sup>8</sup>

*Tertium Organum* challenged and inspired the young artists, offering them a new direction in art: the possibility of engaging with enigmatic realms of consciousness, and with epistemic uncertainty,<sup>9</sup> or the notion that in not knowing, there is a knowing. Ouspensky referred to the "habit of the positivistic method of searching always for the visible," enticing readers with the idea that "beyond this visibility there is a whole 'invisible world'—a world of to us new and incomprehensible forces and relations. The *knowledge* of the existence of this invisible world: this is the first key to it."<sup>10</sup> Ouspensky declared that to understand the noumenal world we must search for the hidden meaning in everything.

Undoubtedly, Matta and Gordon listened deeply to this passage in the text: "Science does not sense it and does not recognize it... Now we have *a form of knowledge* which senses this difference perfectly, knows and understands it. I am speaking of art. The musician, the painter, the sculptor well understand that it is possible to walk differently—and even impossible not to walk differently."<sup>11</sup> In this radical statement, Ouspensky acknowledged art as epistemology—a way of knowing. He further instructed that the artist "must be a clairvoyant: he must see that which others do not see."<sup>12</sup> These passages guided both artists for the rest of their lives.

Matta and Gordon also read Pierre Mabille's *La Conscience Lumineuse* (1938). Finding Mabille's theory aligned with their thinking, when they returned to Paris—eager to start an art movement based on their discoveries—they approached Mabille in hopes he would provide the intellectual and narrative voice to communicate their "new subject in art."<sup>13</sup> "I feel we are on the edge of great discoveries, and I am very excited."<sup>13</sup> Gordon wrote to his Aunt Gullie upon his return from Trévignon. Mabille, loyal to Breton, dissuaded them from starting a new movement, encouraging them instead to join the Surrealists.<sup>14</sup>

After that initial meeting with Matta in Munich in 1993, I visited him in Paris the following month to interview him about his philosophy of art, and we met several more times over the years to engage in dialogue. I met Surrealism by meeting Matta. His passion about his discoveries was electric, and he communicated in several languages, regardless of whether you understood them. His concept of Psychological Morphology was not only in his painting but also animated his body, language and voice. He came alive when riding in that surreal landscape of consciousness between waking, dreaming and the transcendent. One of the highlights of meeting Matta was walking with him through his retrospective at La Pedrera in Barcelona. He shared his thoughts of sixty years of creations and philosophy with the disbelief that he actually produced that many pieces! He was being inspired by his own paintings which he had not seen for many years.

Matta visited Gordon in Inverness, California in 1997, during which time he came to our studios and shared stories and walks in the woods. My last visit with Matta was in 1999 at his home in Paris.<sup>15</sup> I interviewed him about his recollections of meeting Gordon and the early days in Paris as surrealists. He made a surprising remark about himself and Gordon in relation to the art world: "We were the misunderstanding of the century!"<sup>16</sup>

As time passes, I understand that their visionary work was not seen, and its significant contributions to the philosophy of art practice, and the exploration of consciousness, was often ignored. Their interest in art and science kept their work relevant, and their vision of discovering depths of consciousness through visual art is timeless.

At the time I met Gordon and Matta, I was researching transpersonal experiences in lucid dreaming and their parallel with paintings, focusing on exploring inner realities. I interviewed four painters and a Buddhist monk, Ajahn Amaro, each in different places, posing diverse questions. Through phenomenological research, I extracted the themes which arose out of their answers, and based on those themes, created an "Invisible Dialogue" among these five individuals. Matta and Gordon were the surrealist painters in the study and the other two were the American painters Lee Mullican and John Anderson.<sup>17</sup> For this essay, I returned to the interviews from thirty years ago to create a new rendition of the *Invisible Dialogue*, between Matta and Gordon.

This dialogue never took place (in the visible realm), but it is their words, extracted from my interviews with them and rendered as a surreal collage, reflecting their philosophical views on their art practices.



Roberto Matta peignant dans l'atelier de Gordon Onslow Ford sur le bateau S.S. Vallejo, Sausalito, CA, États-Unis, 1956 — Roberto Matta painting in Gordon Onslow Ford's studio on the S.S. Vallejo boat, Sausalito, CA, USA, 1956

Malitte et Roberto Matta (devant), Gordon Onslow Ford et Jacqueline Johnson (à l'arrière) sur le bateau S.S. Vallejo, Sausalito, CA, États-Unis, 1956 — Malitte and Roberto Matta (in front), Gordon Onslow Ford and Jacqueline Johnson (in back) on the S.S. Vallejo boat, Sausalito, CA, USA, 1956

Gordon Onslow Ford peignant dans son atelier sur le bateau S.S. Vallejo, Sausalito, CA, États-Unis, 1956 — Gordon Onslow Ford painting in his studio on the S.S. Vallejo boat, Sausalito, CA, USA, 1956

## INTERVIEW WITH MATTA, PARIS, 1993 AND GORDON ONSLOW FORD (GOF), INVERNESS, CA, 1993

GOF: A painter has to live the reality of his paintings. Those are only words. For a painter, an inner-world is made up of spiritual content and a technique to express it. The painter has to embody both aspects. You have to get into the spirit of the world in which you are painting.

Matta: If we are not using poetry, we are really repeating things. I like to conceive in a very genetic way.

GOF: Once you have seen into the mystery a little bit and found a way to express it, then you are on your way. It is very hard to talk about.

Matta: When the brain works before words, it is like waves, like an embryo before the words—there is something that we don't know—we should shoot it and get it. That is the role of the art—to express before the words.

GOF: Creation is a result of experience and contemplation. It is only after much painting and contemplation that the way opens to the inner-worlds. “The painter who wants to paint bamboo has to become bamboo”—this also applies to the inner-worlds. The painter of the inner-worlds *is* the inner-world.

Matta: I want to surprise myself. It has to be a surprise, or I would be bored—something that comes from inside of me. It is hard to put into words. The mystery is everywhere—I might catch something.

GOF: When you pay full attention to what is happening, something surprising turns up, which is a confirmation about the creative power of the Mind. My paintings are dealing with all these experiences, which we don't have the equipment to remember fully unless we do something about it like sing or dance or paint, and then the experience is revived or recreated.

Matta: That is quite something [pointing to his painting on the wall]. God knows what it is. But for 80 years it has led me like a horse, led me to some kind of virtual landscape, a landscape of something which has no name.

GOF: Hopefully, an inner-world painting will awaken something in someone who is sympathetic, awaken something that they haven't thought of or seen before; it is a revelation, and the revelation is passed on.

Matta: We are not grasping things, you see, and this kind of grasping needs a language, which is psychological morphology.

GOF: In the inner-worlds, every object is one with the space around it. It doesn't end with its own boundary. It has energy which goes beyond it. There is only one creative force in the universe, and the painter has to become a part of it.

Matta: I am not just a painter, I am the white in the egg. I am a mystic. I am divine. I believe in religion that goes beyond words. I am a mis-tick!<sup>18</sup>

GOF: It has to do with the spiritual dimension of the painter. Painting an inner-world implies the growth of consciousness, where the painting helps the growth of consciousness and the growth of consciousness helps the painting.

Matta: It is the mystery inside us.

GOF: It comes from the mysterious place that I have called the Great Spaces of the Mind, shared by all. The Void is something. The Void is not a negation, it is the root of all that exists. It is too fast for our senses to catch, and it has possibilities beyond belief.

Matta: They [referring to scientists] don't know what it is all about. What they tell you is very insufficient.

GOF: You know, we all are dealing with mysteries. So really, the interest is not to explain it away—it is to express it and enjoy it. We really don't know anything.

Matta: They are the Void, the Unknown.

## NOTES

- 1 - Gordon Onslow Ford, *Insights* (Emeryville: Lapis Press, 1991).
- 2 - *Lucid Dreaming* is an awareness in sleep. I worked with a team of researcher at Stanford Sleep Laboratory exploring the science and phenomenology of this state of consciousness. Some of the visual experiences in this phenomenon are akin to the paintings of Matta and Gordon Onslow Ford.
- 3 - Bogzaran, F., *Experiencing the Divine in Lucid Dream State* ((Michigan: UMI., 1990).
- 4 - Letter from Gordon to his mother, Maud E. Woollerton, from Maison de la Douane, Trévignon, August 27, 1938. Gordon Onslow Ford Archive, Lucid Art Foundation, Inverness, California.
- 5 - Ouspensky was both a mathematician and esoteric philosopher. Matta and Gordon also had backgrounds in science and responded to the interdisciplinary approach Ouspensky prescribed.
- 6 - Ouspensky, P.D., *Tertium Organum* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench Trubner & Co, 1937).
- 7 - A 1938 letter from Gordon to his aunt, known as “Old Cat”, discusses Ouspensky’s text. Gordon Onslow Ford Archive, Lucid Art Foundation, Inverness, California.
- 8 - Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum*, 79.
- 9 - *Epistemic Uncertainty* is a mathematical term which I defined philosophically. See Bogzaran, F., and Deslaurier, D., *Integral Dreaming* (New York: SUNY Press, 2012), 204–06.
- 10 - Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum*, 166.
- 11 - *Ibid.*, 160.
- 12 - *Ibid.*, 162.
- 13 - Letter from Onslow Ford to Gladys Woollerton, from 76, rue de Rennes, Paris, November 14, 1938. Gordon Onslow Ford Archive, Lucid Art Foundation, Inverness, CA.
- 14 - “Art and Exploration of Consciousness” in Bogzaran, F. (Editor), *Gordon Onslow Ford: A Man on a Green Island*, (Inverness: Lucid Art Foundation, 2019).
- 15 - Every time I met Matta, he mentioned his grief about how badly he was treated in New York after the death of Arshile Gorky. Blamed for Gorky’s suicide, Matta felt the real cause was the jealousy of certain New York artists who did not want him around and plotted the scheme to have him return to Europe after WWII. This trauma stayed with him all his life. In Martica Sawin’s book, *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School* (1997), the influence of European surrealists on Abstract Expressionist in New York is well researched, including how often it was downplayed.
- 16 - For more developed discussion see, “Art and Exploration of Consciousness” in Bogzaran, F. (Editor), *Gordon Onslow Ford: A Man on a Green Island*, (Inverness: Lucid Art Foundation, 2019).
- 17 - Bogzaran, F., *Images of the Lucid Art: A Phenomenological Study of Lucid Dreaming and Modern Painting*. (Michigan: UMI., 1996).
- 18 - Matta often played with words. When he used the word Mystic, he started to play with the word and said “mys---tic.” It can also sound like “mis-tic” or “mis-take” or “mis-tick.”





Roberto Matta dans l'atelier de Gordon Onslow Ford, Inverness, CA, États-Unis, 1997 — Roberto Matta in Gordon Onslow Ford's studio, Inverness, CA, USA, 1997  
Photo : Fariba Bogzaran



Roberto MATTA

*Red Hat, Green Hat* [Chapeau rouge, chapeau vert], 1956

Extrait d'un carnet de dessins de Roberto Matta.

Matta est représenté avec le chapeau rouge et Gordon Onslow Ford avec le chapeau vert.

Coll. Lucid Art Foundation, Inverness, CA, États-Unis

In Trerigum they painted for the first time

