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Matta: Psychological Morphology

and the Formative Time with

Gordon Onslow Ford

Fariba Bogzaran, Ph.D

Department of Arts and Consciousness,
John F. Kennedy University
Co-founder, President Lucid Art Foundation

"I was a grape who knew it could make wine"

Matta, 1993

In autumn of 1938, Matta was asked by André Breton to articulate his concept of *Psychological Morphology* in writing. At the age of 27, trained as an architect, Matta bridged his architectural perspective; applying the archetypal structure of the "unconscious ecology"¹ through the enunciation of a visual poetic synthesis. His artist statement is a reflection of the endless possibilities of the morphology of the dimensions of the mind. With this statement, he made an original indelible footprint as a new member of the surrealist group.

Matta's description of *Psychological Morphology*, difficult to translate (or even understand), was faithful to the surrealist ethos. The theory of *Psychological Morphology* grew out of Matta's integrative and complex overlap of spatial architectural morphology. He combined this with psychic automatism, which "...is dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason."² Although his concepts embodied the definition of surrealism, Matta's *Psychological Morphology* was indicative of a transformation of time, space and thoughts. It is a transformation of persona into an unexpected field of invisible enigma. "La réalité est la suite des convulsions explosives qui se modelent dans un milieu pulsatoire et rotatif soumis à des rythmes. L'œil agent de la mémoire est un moyen de simplifier."³

Psychological Morphology is a poetic synthesis of the visual architecture of consciousness oscillating from the known to the hyperspace dimensions of the mind. These are challenging ideas to express in words and are reduced when described in a linear language. Matta struggled to communicate his vision in words, especially when his audience relied solely upon reason to understand his theory. To appreciate Matta's genius, one has to enter "Matta Consciousness." Matta did not employ multiple languages with the intention to entertain. He did so to express the inexpressible. Nor was his intention to offend or shock when he behaved out of the ordinary. Furthermore, his art was not intended for décor. Matta's work was to trace the traceless and his challenge was to visually capture this morphological movement in stillness.

A Psychological Morphologist

Although Matta was friends with known members of the Surrealist group, his unique friendship with the British painter Gordon Onslow Ford was formative. Onslow Ford came from a family of artists and had the keen eye of a collector. With the help of Breton, Onslow Ford acquired important surrealist and cubist paintings. Onslow Ford first met Matta in 1937 and saw his "casual" drawings. He told Matta that his drawings were the most exciting work he had seen in Paris. Onslow Ford not only encouraged Matta to paint by giving him artist's materials, he also became his patron making it easier for Matta to live an artist's life. Most importantly, Onslow Ford exposed Matta to metaphysical ideas that opened him to new ways of seeing. In my last conversation with Matta he acknowledged that, "Gordon was the metaphysical one."⁴ During the summer of 1938, Matta and Onslow Ford visited Brittany together spending time in the village of Trévignon. As Onslow Ford recalled, Matta declared himself as a Psychological Morphologist to the pension owner. Both Matta and Onslow Ford considered Tanguy their master and the pilgrimage to Brittany was a in homage to him. They were fascinated with Tanguy's intuitive knowing that moved beyond time. Tanguy blended or obscured the defined classic surrealist horizon of time and created forms that implied weightlessness, timelessness, and suspension.

That summer, Matta and Onslow Ford, still in transition from their previous careers, took an inner vision quest to find their unique way into the art world. They painted, dialogued and studied Ouspensky's *Tertium Organum* and the concept of the Fourth Dimension. Their synergetic meeting coupled with the study of Ouspensky's "Hyperspace Philosophy"⁵ transformed their ways of seeing. Both were fascinated with science and influenced by *mathematical objects* that they saw at the old Trocadéro. These implied perceptual changes, yet they had the philosophical grounding of Ouspensky's writing, as in "...deciding to understand the noumenal world we must search for the hidden meaning in everything. At the present we are too heavily enchained by the habit of the positivistic method of searching always for the *visible* cause and the *visible* effect."⁶ Coming from a scientific background, it was a revelation to read that "science does not sense it and does not recognize it. . . we have a *form of knowledge* which senses this difference perfectly, knows and understand

it. I am speaking of art." ⁷ Ouspensky summarized his point by capitalizing it in one sentence: "THE PHENOMENON IS THE IMAGE OF THE NOUMENON."⁸ This concept was a springboard for Matta and Onslow Ford. It influenced their work for the remainder of their lives and careers.

It was challenging for Matta and Onslow Ford to incorporate these hyperspace philosophies into their creative processes and artistic practices. This period in their lives -with the lively exchange of ideas and experimentations- was pivotal for both artists. Matta created a vocabulary of form in his fluid and flexible drawings yet he needed Onslow Ford's receptive metaphysical tendencies to move beyond the structure of the expected in familiar forms. He also admired Onslow Ford's discipline. At this time, Onslow Ford's competent artistic expressions as a landscape and seascape painter had yet to be integrated with his metaphysical interests. He was still bound to realism and the images of perceived reality. Onslow Ford learned about the freedom of automatism from Matta. Matta often said amusingly, "Gordon had to give up his trees to be a Surrealist." Combining the theory of the Fourth Dimension, experimenting with automatism in visual and poetic form, and exploring the unconscious beyond narrative and symbolic imagery, shaped the artistic quest of both artists. In his own poetic way, Matta recalled this important time with Onslow Ford:

" . . . I knew that I was in love with something that had to happen in me. . . I knew I had something. It is like a grape. I was a grape who knew it could make wine. Most of the grapes think that they are there to be eaten like that. I knew that I had wine and that it had to come out, but I did not know how. . . I found myself alone, and I wasn't interested in décor. I must say that Gordon pushed me into making wine, and in that sense he freed himself through it. . ."⁹

While many surrealists were pre-occupied with the symbolic and the lyrical imagery of dreams, Matta and Onslow Ford transcended symbolic representation by extending themselves into new territory; the dynamic and ever changing (morphing) dimensions and unexplored depths of the mind. The imagery of their discoveries is also observed within inner phenomena of deep meditation, hypnagogic states, and *hyperspace lucidity*.¹⁰

Matta wrote *Psychological Morphology* following the summer in Brittany with Onslow Ford. His statement is an integral

expression evolved from his knowledge of architecture, science, Jules Henri Poincaré's mathematical theories, fourth-dimension theory, and, perhaps, having a sympathetic ear such as Onslow Ford's for his ideas. As Gordon wrote, "I was the responsive audience that Matta needed so that he could make discoveries through spontaneous talk."¹¹ Words were too slow for Matta to express his entire theory. Matta declared, "if we do not use poetry we are really repeating things."¹² How could he explain a complex idea in words when he firmly believed it was impossible? "...(T)here is something that we don't know—we shoot it and get it. That is the role of art—to express before the words."¹³ He mixed any of the four or five languages he knew to communicate what is inexpressible. "Poetry must provoke the scientific mind."

With one eye, Matta could see into the far distance of the various dimensions of the inner worlds and with the other, he was immersed in the wonder of waking life and its possibilities. With embodiment of poetic delight, he integrated the two perspectives. In his creative process, Matta first allowed automatism to make its full display (unconscious) and then he would engage by articulating what emerged (consciousness). "All things are changing in all dimensions," he claimed, "in one moment the concept takes form and then it passes to words. I like to conceive in a very genetic way."¹⁴

Perhaps Matta's Psychological Morphology became more understood when technology eventually caught up with his concept. The film by Ramuntcho Matta (neXT, 1999)¹⁵ captured the essence of his father's work at the end of his life. It depicted Matta "seeing" the morphing of his paintings into new dimensions. The animation of his paintings communicated this concept more clearly. Now, with current technology our perception is accustomed to seeing objects move at breathtaking speed in space and morphing into new shapes and forms. Matta communicated this idea in 1938 when technology was in its infancy. Can we still understand Matta's *Psychological Morphology* today? If we awaken to various dimensions of the mind with its unique ecology, and immerse ourselves in epistemic poetry, then Matta's theory can be understood perfectly.

Notes:

- 1 Ferrari, G. (1987). *Matta: Entretiens Morphologiques: Notebook No. 1, 1936-1944*. London: Sistan.
- 2 Breton, A. (1924). *Manifeste du Surréalisme*. First published in French in Paris. The English version, Tr. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969, p.26.
- 3 "Reality is a sequence of explosive convulsions self-organized as pulsating space in rotation under the beat of rhythm. The eye as the agent of memory is a means to simplify." Translated by Daniel Deslauriers. Artists statement in Ferrari, G. (1987). *Matta: Entretiens Morphologiques: Notebook No. 1, 1936-1944*. London: Sistan. p. 70.
- 4 Personal communication, 1999, Paris, France.
- 5 Referring to writers such as Hinton, Bragdon and Ouspensky, art historian Linda Henderson coined the term *Hyperspace Philosophy* for the popular philosophy in nineteenth century that concerned with the fourth dimension. In Henderson, L.D. (1983). *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- 6 Ouspensky, P. O. (1937). *Tertium Organum: the Third Canon of Thought A Key to the Enigmas of the World*. London: Kegan Paul. p. 160.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid., p. 161.
- 9 Personal Communication, 1993, Paris, France, in Bogzaran, F., (1996). In *Images of the Lucid Mind: Phenomenological Experiences in Lucid Dreaming and Modern Painting*. Michigan: UMI.
- 10 *Hypnagogic State* occurs at the onset of sleep. *Lucid dreaming* is being awake in dreaming. *Hyperspace Lucidity* is a term coined by the author to address the multidimensional aspect of lucid mind after extensive interviews and research with the artists and lucid dreamers. In Bogzaran, F. *Images of the Lucid Mind* (1996).
- 11 Ferrari, G. (1987). *Matta: Entretiens Morphologiques: Notebook No. 1, 1936-1944*. London: Sistan. P.23.
- 12 Personal Communication, 1993, Meeting with Gordon Onslow Ford and Matta. Munich, Germany
- 13 Personal Communication, 1993, Paris, France. In *Images of the Lucid Mind: Phenomenological Experiences in Lucid Dreaming and Modern Painting*. Michigan: UMI.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 The film "neXt", 1999, by Ramuntcho Matta, Sometimes Studio. It was showed at Matta's retrospective in Fundació Caixa Catalunya. La Pedrera, Barcelona, Spain & Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía.



Homage to Gordon, 1956

Óleo sobre tela / *oil on canvas*

203,2 x 156,4 cm

Colección / *Collection*

Lucid Art Foundation, California, Estados Unidos