Dalí and Duchamp in the face of the History of Western Art

By Pilar Parcerisas

The idea of the lecture is to analyze the position of Duchamp and Dalí in the 1950's as a confrontation with the Western History of Art. The point of departure is the text by Dalí dedicated to Duchamp The King and Queen Traversed by Swift Nudes published in Art News (New York, 4 April 1959), borrowing the title from a painting by Duchamp made in 1912.

In the late 1950s Marcel and Teeny Duchamp began to spend their summers in Cadaqués. They did so from 1958 until Duchamp’s death in 1968, further strengthening their friendship with Dalí. In the art world the euphoric embrace of European Informalism and American Abstract Expressionism was dwindling as new challenges emerged, Dada and Surrealism were taking their place in history. The exhaustion of painting called for founding a new era.

Painting had been transformed to a chessboard on which the future of art history was to be played out. A photograph of Dali and Duchamp playing on a transparent glass board illustrates the development towards an endgame in the history of twentieth century art. Taken from a low angle, the photograph shows them bottom up as through a glass floor playing on a chess board, reminiscent of the squared glass Dürer used as an aid to drawing perspective, and it is one of the unused shots from the film Autoportrait mou de Salvador Dalí (1966) by Robert Descharnes and Jean-Christophe Averty.

Let us recapitulate. Duchamp had initiated the 1940s by closing his own portable museum, the Boîte-en-valise (1935–41), to immerse himself in what was to be his final installation, Etant donnés (1946–66). He was gradually shutting down his already scanty artistic output and positioning himself even further, if possible, outside the competitive art world, continuing the legend that he had abandoned art for chess. In the late 1940s and early 1950s the much younger Dalí confronted Picasso, whom he depicted in terms of dynastic succession in the history of art in Portrait of Pablo Picasso in the Twenty-first Century (1947). In this picture the pedestal presents a double image of Velázquez combined with the head of
Picasso as a monstrous ram, crowned by the rocks of Dalí’s Cap de Creus: three stages of an art history in which Dalí puts himself forward as Picasso’s successor. He reaffirmed this posture in his lecture ‘Picasso and I’ (1951), perhaps his major public offensive against his compatriot 1.

Painting had entered a new phase of euphoria. Both Dalí and Duchamp abhorred the Informalism and Abstract Expressionism; they considered them ‘revivals’ or re-readings of the abstractions from the beginning of the 20th century, stemming from the bourgeois painting they had so fiercely opposed. In the case of Duchamp, he had fought them from an ironic Dadaist approach and, in the case of Dalí, via Surrealism and the creation of his paranoiac critical method. Painting was going through the last stage of exhaustion, after a long historical period in which even Abstract Expressionism would end up being replaced and expanded by performance and action.

The article in *Art News*, 1959

In April 1959, Dalí published an article on Duchamp in the magazine *Art News*, “The King and the Queen Traversed by Swift Nudes”, in which he wondered, indirectly questioning his friend, about the before and after of Modern painting. Dalí stated that painting was living through a crucial time which was going to give closure to a long period in art history and open a new phase with the relaunch of Modern painting. One year later he collaborated with Philippe Halsman in the making of the film *Chaos and Creation* (1960), where they mocked American abstract painting, especially that of Jackson Pollock. It showed a geometric structure from a Piet Mondrian canvas turning into a three-dimensional space displaying girls, motorbikes and pigs, engaging in a happening resulting in an abstract canvas full of paint drips. Once ready, Dalí tried to sell it to the New York MoMA. As he himself mentioned in the film, the movie was a homage to Marcel Duchamp.

“*The King and The Queen Traversed by Swift Nudes*”, also called “*nus en vitesse*” by Dalí in his manuscript (high speed nudes), alludes to the title of a painting made by Duchamp in May 1912, a few months after his famous *Nu descendant un escalier n.2*. It is a Cubist-futuristic work, showing the royal couple of chess traversed by some kind of corpuscles or discontinuous stains, which intercept the two pieces with a sort of electric discharge between them. Such an eroticism travels far beyond the speed that could be apprehended even by the
extra-fast photographic plates of the time. In Dali’s view, Duchamp’s painting *The King and the Queen Traversed by Swift Nudes*, acted like a notarised document – both their parents were notaries – of the new intra-atomic structure of the universe, propelled by the quantum energy of the particles that indicated the discontinuity of matter. There is also in this picture a new metaphysical dimension that anticipates the mystic realism of Dali’s later painting. Dali was always interested in the disintegration of matter and its corruption, as becomes evident in his work *Two pieces of Bread Expressing the Sentiment of Love*, dated 1940, and painted in Arcachon.

With the German army advancing on Paris, Gala and Dali left and travelled to Arcachon, near Bordeaux, where they stayed for four months before finally managing to make their way to the United States. Also taking refuge in Arcachon were Marcel Duchamp, Leonor Fini and other friends such as Coco Chanel2.

According to Dali, the work was inspired by a chess game between Gala and Duchamp, during which a pawn fell to the floor. The canvas provided a counter-point to Duchamp’s painting: two decomposing pieces of bread are intercepted by a chess piece, a pawn on an empty, arid beach with crumbs scattered around them, and a little beyond these a chess pawn. In the distance on the horizon are a stretch of sea and the schematic figures of a couple. According to Robert Descharnes,3 the pawn is associated with the presence of Marcel Duchamp in Arcachon. Descharnes reports Dali as saying that ‘Gala and he played chess every day after lunch, while I was painting these crusts of bread. I was trying to get a very smooth surface, on top of which were some rough crumbs of bread. Things often fell on the floor, such as the pawns, for example. One day, instead of putting them back in the box, one of the pawns was left among my still-life models. So then, they had to look for other pawns in order to continue the game, because I was using it and I didn’t want them to take it away from me.’ The presence of the pawn turns the picture into a proxy chessboard, introducing a vital tension into the *nature morte*. Are the pieces of bread perhaps the king and queen of the board? Or Gala and Dali with an intruder, Duchamp, who arouses his jealousy, as had happened on Duchamp’s first trip to Dali’s house in 1933, when he was accompanied by Mary Reynolds?4

Duchamp and Dali shared a great admiration for Leonardo da Vinci and not only because all three had notaries for fathers. The fascination with machines and the advances in medicine of the late 19th century had led to a rediscovery of Leonardo’s utopian and mechanistic spirit. What is particularly worth noting is the great influence that Leonardo’s anatomical drawings of the female body and organs had on the mechanistic iconography of *The Bride Stripped Bare* or that the grotto in *The Virgin of the Rocks* had on the
configuration of *Étant donnés* and the black silhouette on the door of Breton’s Gradiva gallery. Dalí admired Leonardo’s paranoiac capacity, his ability to develop a battle scene on the basis of marks on the wall, dream interrupted by an imperfect reality, and to encourage his pupils to do so. But what really fascinated Duchamp and Dalí about Leonardo was painting as a mental machine. Freud’s interpretation of Leonardo’s dream about a vulture was fundamental here, in shedding light on the enigma of the Mona Lisa’s smile. In this Oedipal reading the Mona Lisa becomes an androgynous mother goddess, at once castrating and devouring the man (the son) in her erotic acts. It was Marcel Duchamp who put forward the paradigm version of the Freudian interpretation with his rectified ready-made, giving the Mona Lisa a beard and moustache (1919), making her masculine and uniting in a single image mother and son, male and female. Duchamp also added the inscription L.H.O.O.Q.: read aloud, the letters can be heard as ‘Elle a chaud au cul’ (She has a hot arse). When Dalí was studying Millet’s *Angelus*, he picked out Leonardo’s *Mona Lisa* as a painting that expressed the same thing as the Angelus, the same Oedipus complex, the same phagocytic machine of love and death that moved Lautréamont’s sewing-machine and umbrella on the operating table. At the end of the book he chose to reproduce Marcel Duchamp’s rectified ready-made.

For Dalí, the moustache that Duchamp painted on la Gioconda (L.H.O.O.Q.) provided a full stop to the art of the 20th century. Moreover, it acted as an epitaph to painting, after which “nothing creative has occurred in art history”. Dalí used to laugh at the abstractions of the 1950s and mocked Pollock’s painting by throwing a lobster covered in paint against a canvas to make it slide and drip and make stains on its surface, painting it randomly. Dalí was very critical of this type of painting: “After Modern painting, a group of braves has hurriedly plunged into the edge of the most absolute nothingness, as a necessary condition for a pre-mystic spiritual state. Tapié called it an ‘art autre’ (Art of Another Kind): Kline, Tàpies, Millares, De Kooning, Mathieu”.

In the same text, Dalí gave an account of a meaningful anecdote of his stay in Arcachon: “During the war, and amidst German bombing, Duchamp and I were circulating between Arcachon and Bordeaux filling up his famous suitcase. I remember mentioning the possibility of leaving famous people’s excrements to posterity, and Duchamp insisted on the need to keep a record of the temperatures. Historically, it was a failure. The L.H.O.O.Q. of history”. Indeed, eroticism in Duchamp was intrinsically linked to a record of the temperature. In this context, L.H.O.O.Q. alluded not only to the Gioconda, interpreted by Freud in
Leonardo da Vinci. A Memory of his Childhood as the result of an incestuous relationship, but also to art history. Duchamp’s assisted ready-made was a true epitaph of Modern painting, the last measurement of its temperature: according to Dali’s eroticism, a metaphorical and scatological way to say that art history was a matter of the “ass”. With the Gioconda L.H.O.O.Q, Duchamp blurted out a sort of “up your ass” at art history. It was a subversive, Dadaist, irreverent and practical way to put an end to a specific way of understanding art.

The funny thing is that, in his manuscript for the article in the Art News, Dalí never managed to write the formula L.H.O.O.Q. quite right. It is a well known fact that his original manuscripts often had spelling mistakes. This was because he wrote as he pronounced; however, on occasions the mistakes reveal the peculiar functioning of his subconscious mind: LA CAHO O O c, LA CHAU O Oc, LA CAAU A Oc de l’histoire, DU CHAU O Oc. What appears here repeatedly is the graphic unit ‘Chao’ (which could be interpreted as “caos”), linked to the title of his film Chaos and Creation, as well as the letter ‘c’ on its own, in allusion to the word “culo” (“ass” in Spanish).

Marcel Duchamp: L’échec c’est moi.

Confronted by the general interest for the ‘revival’ in painting, Duchamp’s speech opted for thinking of himself as a failure: “L’échec c’est moi”, he would say. Also, he talked about retirement or simply doing nothing. In fact, in 1959 he decided to conclude his assemblage Étant donnés (1946-1966) and, regarding art, he turned himself inwards to the extreme, by devoting himself to chess or acting with the same ‘passiveness’ in his own life, as a strategy for an anti-theatrical art.

The article on Marcel Duchamp that Dalí published in Arts News,7 ‘The King and the Queen Traversed by Swift Nudes’, testifies to the esteem and admiration he felt for Duchamp. It is as if the whole of Duchamp’s work is to be explained in terms of the discontinuity of matter expressed in the painting and the drawings of this theme, depicting the chess-board king and the queen in the act of making love, traversed by high-speed particles.

Dali felt that Duchamp, in spite of giving up painting and confining himself to playing chess, was still king on the chess-board, and the chess-board, seen as a table of death
and a machine of love, enabled him to perceive the discontinuity of matter in the amorous act. Many of Duchamp’s paintings have the word ‘king’ or ‘queen’ in the title. For the title alone of *The King and the Queen Traversed by Swift Nudes* Dalí declares that he considers Duchamp to be one of the most important painters and poets of our time, because he deploys the whole ‘genetic programme of movement discovered by Leibniz on the basis of certain passages in Malebranche. Genetic velocity traverses the king and queen!’ Indeed, in this representation of the discontinuity of matter that Dalí saw as so important, there is a scientific anticipation of the structures of the DNA, an area in which he also claimed to be a pioneer.

Another of the 13 arguments exposed in Dalí’s manuscript stated that Duchamp’s individual Dadaist anarchism had turned him into an aristocrat, the reason he refused to take part in the “contemporary art quarrel”.

According to Dalí, with Braque and Miró, art had become archaeology and folklore, like in *Dog Barking at the Moon*, by Miró. Dalí and Duchamp set themselves far from those “barkers” of painting. They were two aristocrats who admired the scientific, mathematic and artistic mechanisms developed in the French court prior to the French Revolution.

Duchamp’s interest in science, already present in his first ‘presumably’ Cubist works such as *Nu descendant un escalier* or *The King and the Queen Traversed by Swift Nudes*, was of great importance to Dalí, as it pointed towards an utmost modern discovery: the discontinuity of matter. The ‘swift nudes’ are corpuscles loaded with physical quanta that travel the infinite (or divine) space thanks to their quantic energy. In Dalí’s view, Duchamp’s ‘swift nudes’ taught a lesson to all the kilometres of pseudo-decorative painting produced by Modernity.

However, Dalí still intended to relaunch modern painting by a plan he considered “secret”, based on *pompiers* painting. Another option was rebuilding painting on the foundations of Duchamp’s Gioconda with moustache. Indeed, Duchamp opted for taking art to the territory of the game of life and so devoted himself to move the king and queen around the chess board, surrounded always by the ‘swift nude’ invisible particles.
Duchamp in "The Apotheosis of the Dollar"

Dalí's position opens a new door for Modern painting and we can see his secret proposal in *The Apotheosis of the Dollar*, 1965, where Dalí paints Duchamp dressed as the "Sun King".

In this strange and complex picture of very large dimensions there are traces of a great many influences and presences: Praxiteles, Velázquez, Vermeer, Duchamp, Watteau, Fortuny and Meissonier, presided over by the Baroque curves of the dollar symbol — of whose curves Dalí considered Velázquez to be the precursor because Velázquez’s brush-strokes consist of two vertical lines and one curved line: in other words, dollar signs. The painting perhaps takes its inspiration from the idea suggested by Breton’s anagram on Dalí’s name, *Avida dollars*, and at the same time served to deny that he was greedy for money: gold has an alchemical significance, and its apotheosis is incarnated in the work of art. Art is the only thing capable of turning the dollar into art (as this painting demonstrates) and not the other way round.

The title is long, but helps us understand the keys to the work: *Salvador Dalí in the Act of Painting Gala in the Apotheosis of the Dollar, in Which One May Also Perceive to the Left Marcel Duchamp Disguised as Louis XIV, Behind a Curtain in the Style of Vermeer, Which is But the Invisible Though Monumental Face of the Hermes of Praxiteles*. Dalí represented himself as a Baroque painter, glorified, in the style of Velázquez, with Gala as the model for his Madonna and, beside her, the face of Dante’s Beatrice, in which we can see a kneeling Don Quixote. Dalí felt he had succeeded, that his painting and his ideas had earned him money and would earn him even more: ‘As regards my fame, my bank balance and the influence of my art and my ideas, I was one of the masters of the world.’ But that was not enough; he needed a new painting that would transform gold, or rather, the dollar into art — representing his artistic Parnassus: his ‘kings’ of art, his ‘divinities’, who had succeeded in making art a form of alchemy. And he put all of this into a picture that is at the same time a clear homage to his artistic divinities, who include Dalí and Gala, but especially Duchamp and Meissonier as representing two options that he saw as capable of refashioning painting. On the left there is Duchamp, shown dressed as Louis XIV, the *Roi Soleil*, capped with Watteau’s lute-player (Watteau was another artist who ranked among his paranoiac obsessions) and with his heart opening on two doors from Velázquez’s *Las Meninas*, in a clear
allusion to Duchamp’s research into perspective. Nor can we overlook the fact that behind the multiple profiles of the Praxiteles Hermes in the form of a curtain by Vermeer, with a Vermeer self-portrait from the rear in the corner of Hermes’ lips, there are resonances of Duchamp’s self-portraits in profile and of a highly enigmatic pre-Cubist painting by Duchamp, Yvonne et Madeleine déchiquetées (1911), in which the transported profiles and shadows of the faces of Duchamp’s two sisters make a virtual precursor of the paranoiac-critical method. What is more, in Dali’s Apotheosis the shadow of Hermes’ nose contains another figure, that of Goethe, and if we heighten our paranoiac vision we can see Duchamp’s right eye transform into a possible portrait of Wagner from the back, wearing a beret. On the right, the soldiers of Napoleon’s cavalry, painted after the manner of Meissonier, trail off in an endless line (also the S-shape of the dollar sign); the soldiers on the left may well be from the battle of Tetuan, and are reminiscent of Fortuny, while the Solomonic columns in the centre are somewhere between Baroque and Op Art, their shower of golden rain forming the symbol of the dollar transformed into gold.

Duchamp had already given up art to devote himself to chess, Dali felt that his decision was Socratic in its ethic and dressed him as Louis XIV so that he could continue to reign supreme, both in art and on the chess-board, which was, of course, a space of representation: Dürer’s squared glass. In depicting him as the Sun King, Dali was glorifying with an alchemical action Duchamp’s enduring sense of failure and enabling him to go beyond the already decadent naturalistic currents of retinal painting to become the first truly modern artist. This is what prompted Dali to say that Duchamp could claim, like Louis XIV, that ‘l’échec c’est moi’, and proclaiming this aristocratically was the only way to survive the general collapse of modern painting. Behind the monarchy of the Roi Soleil and his successors, there is also the splendour of the culture and the ideals of the 17th and 18th centuries, from which both Duchamp as Dali drew so extensively, and which the bourgeois revolution inexorably eradicated.

Confronted by the relentless advance of abstraction, Dali became increasingly interested in the pompier painters of the 19th century and their pure, decadent narrative techniques (painters such as Bouguerau, Detaille, Moureau or Meissonier — hence his homage to Meissonier in the Hotel Meurice in 1967), almost as a form of rebellion against the majority of artists — Kline, Tàpies, Millares, de Kooning and Mathieu among them — who
sought to refound painting on the basis of abstraction, hurling themselves into the most absolute void in a pre-mystical state.\textsuperscript{12}

Dalí felt he could refound painting, but with Duchamp, as if they were the only ones capable of creating a new artistic dynasty, each with his different means and methods — Duchamp with the epitaph of painting that was the bearded \textit{Mona Lisa} and Dalí with his ‘secret, imperialist’ plan on the basis of \textit{pompière} painting.\textsuperscript{13} In \textit{The Apotheosis of the Dollar} Dalí looks backwards, glorifying Classicism, the Baroque, the \textit{pompière} painters and Duchamp, in an attempt to go back to an intra-uterine art history. So it is that years later he was to ask, rhetorically, ‘what is new?’ and answer ‘Velázquez’.\textsuperscript{14}

\textbf{A new concept of Beauty: The Venus and Madonnas of the XX Century.}

Dali comes to Classicism to find a new kind of representation of beauty aside from the complicity of the female with Nature. Duchamp did the same with the Queen on the chess board and with the mechanical concept of the feminine and having a new look at Art History using la Gioconda as a Dada action.

In 1953 Víctor Obsatz took a photograph of the head of Marcel Duchamp, in which he is seen en face and in profile at the same time, so that the ear in the profile is overlaid on the nose of the frontal image. This double portrait in a single image, was the origin of the plaster sculpture \textit{Otorhinological Head of Venus} that Dalí made in 1964.

Dalí often showed an interest in the ear and its spiral morphology, for example in the collage \textit{The Phenomenon of Ecstasy} (1933), in which the ear is the organ chosen to illustrate this manifestation, and in the \textit{Sistine Madonna} or \textit{Madone à l’oreille} (1958), where he emphasizes its uterine character. Karin von Maur has noted that the position of the second face, and the fact that the ear is superposed on the middle of the face, recalls the legend of birth from the ear, as in Rabelais’ \textit{Gargantua and Pantagruel}, for example, and that ‘the muscle of hearing, composed of the helix and the antihelix, shows a morphological analogy with the double helix of the DNA molecule and thus with the genetic basis of life’.\textsuperscript{15} Dalí had done several earlier drawings of an ‘otorhinological’ Venus, in which the ear in profile is indeed attached to the nose. In the plaster busts, Dalí went further, putting a nose where the ear would have been, so that the head in profile is perfectly integrated into the frontal view, creating a double image in three dimensions that has nothing to do with Cubism. Dalí seems
to propose an interchangeability and an expanding of the senses as a new concept of beauty, without moving away from Classicism, something that Duchamp had also formulated when he transported Classical perspective into new dimensions.

There is another allusion to Duchamp in the enigmatic title of an unfinished 1974 drawing: ‘Preliminary study of Gala for the picture Cent mille vierGes virtuals réflexes par un Nombre de miroirs réels à determiner par ‘etant donnés’ cibernètiques’. This is a drawing in pencil, ink, wash and sanguine that shows a reclining female nude from the rear, in which the fleshy parts of the body are clearly signalled. Like Velázquez’s Venus in the mirror, the erotic female position is seen from behind. It is relevant here that Dali painted several female portraits from the rear, with an erotic theme (Girl at the Window, 1915; The Angelus of Gala, 1935; Young Goddess Leaning out of the Window, 1960), in which he seems to be hinting at the sodomy to which he made explicit reference in ‘The tragic myth of the Angelus of Millet’.

There are allusions here to Apollinaire’s hundred thousand virgins, to the Virgin in Duchamp’s The Bride Stripped Bare and to the female nude in the mechanism of Duchamp’s Étant donnés. The project seems to point towards a transformation of the Classical concept of Venus, running from Velázquez to Duchamp and to Dalí. It would seem that the desired mirror effect was to produce an explosion of Venus, a fragmentation that would result in the discontinuity of matter and a number of possible ‘cybernetic Venuses’ or ‘Étant donnés cibernètiques’ that come close to The King and the Queen Traversed by Swift Nudes.

It could be said that both Dalí and Duchamp closed the door on a humanist Modernity, which began with the Renaissance and died, inevitably, in the passage from Modernity to post-Modernity - despite their wish to relaunch it. With his paranoiac critical method, Dalí renewed classical painting; Duchamp, in turn, spat on the classical model of naturalist beauty with his anti-theatrical approach. The art to be bequeathed to posterity was to be assessed by its erotic quality, gauged as a temperature, with Leonardo’s Mona Lisa having the highest erotic temperature in the history of art and the masculinisation of the subject alluding to Freud’s incestuous interpretation of the picture in his Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood (1910).

While the paranoiac critical method could be considered a ‘bachelor machine’ of art, being as it is a tropological mechanism of language capable of creating double images, in the manner of Raymond Roussel, the device of Étant donnés could be regarded as more than
“the last nude”, as Lyotard would call it. It might well be the last work executed according to all the deviations of classical perspective that aims at delegating the creative act to the viewer: “L’échec c’est moi” (“I am the failure”). To which we could add: “C’est le regardeur qui fait l’oeuvre” (“It is the viewer who makes the work).

For all their aesthetic differences, Dalí and Duchamp were both convinced of the need for an artistic machinism that would be capable of giving rise to a new system of representation radically opposed to the movements in art generated by the bourgeois revolution, notably Impressionism and the other -isms it spawned. Dalí and Duchamp confronted the history of painting in a long and costly game of chess, opening new lines of development without moving from the board – a mathematical, geometric space, a machine of love and death, presided over by Gala and the Bride.

In his endgame, Dalí sought to break out of Breton’s old Surrealism and his own idea of putrefaction through the latest scientific theories of the disintegration of matter and Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle, which contributed so much to the quantum physics that he saw in the swift corpuscles of the painting *The King and Queen Traversed by Swift Nudes*, circulating on the board with the movements of the figures that Duchamp executed after he gave up painting. Duchamp, for his part, exchanged the art object for an action: the movement of chess pieces; and in another artistic gesture, in *Etant donnés* (1946–66), transferred artistic responsibility to the spectator.17
Notes


2 R. Descharnes, quotation from the comment of this work into the catalogue 400 Obres de Salvador Dalí, Barcelona: Fundació La Caixa, 1983, pp.147-148

3 Idem.

4 Pilar Parcerisas, Duchamp en España, Madrid, 2009, pp. 32-33

5 S. Dalí, El mito trágico del ‘Angelus’ de Millet, Tusquets Editor, 1977


7 ‘The King and the Queen traversed by swift nudes’, New York: Art News, April 4th 1959

8 Idem.


10 Dalí a Perpignan. Quotation from the comment of the illustration núm. 88, Perpinyà: Bibliographie section I, Catalogue. Perpignan: Palau dels Reis de Mallorca, August-September 1982

11 ‘The King and the Queen traversed by swift nudes’, op.cit.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Le Sauvage [Paris], n.34, octubre 1976, p.96

15 Ibid.
