The Largest Surrealist Object in the World

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Dalí and Duchamp

Since the death of Salvador Dalí, and very much since the centenary of his birth, uncountable innumerable research papers, as well as exhibitions, showcased his written and pictorial work¹. In addition, others have acknowledged his artistic actions or have studied his relation to other artists, be they contemporary or not. But there was an obvious need for an exhibition that would explain the relationship between Dalí and Duchamp, two artists who form part of what we think of as "modernity"². Modernity called into question almost all the elements that had defined art up to the first years of the twentieth century.

Duchamp and the Dadaists smashed traditional ideas about the identity of art and the artist into pieces, and from that moment on everything that an artist produced was to be regarded as a work of art. Accepted reality lost its privileged place as a thematic axis of painting, and artworks were free to adopt as their subject abstract ideas and objects that until then had been excluded from consideration. Feelings, ideas, fantasies and dreams were the new concepts, the new forms of inspiration. And Dalí and the Surrealists made good use of them, erasing the borders between sleep and waking, between the conscious and the unconscious, to free themselves from the supposed tyranny of the real.

If, on this level, the conceptual connection between Dalí and Duchamp is evident, the geographical factor was also to favour the relationship between the two artists. France was to provide some of their points of encounter: Paris, thanks to the Surrealist group, and Arcachon, where they both took refuge at the start of World War Two. However, Catalonia also played an important role, and especially Cadaqués, where Dalí had his one and only fixed place of



residence. Cadaqués was also the place where Duchamp chose to spend so many summers. There, beside the Mediterranean Sea, they both engaged in making art and, at the same time, engaged with one another as friends and accomplices.

What I will try to show with this contribution, however, is that this relationship was in fact to transcend the death of Marcel Duchamp and that this transcendence would be made evident, to a great extent, in the Dalí Theatre-Museum in Figueres, the last great work of the Catalan artist. The museum, as we shall see immediately, has direct links to the *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme* in 1938, one of the last exhibitions in which Duchamp and Dalí coincided as members of the Surrealist group. At the same time, let me remind you that, in the Figueres museum, Dalí wanted to display not only his own work but also works by other artists, either by exhibiting them in their own right or by incorporating them into the installations he designed for the museum. And Duchamp, of course, was one of those other artists.

From the very first, Dalí used to say that his museum was a readymade. If Duchamp had transformed ordinary objects into works of art, by the simple fact of having selected them, Dalí adopted a similar approach in choosing the old municipal theatre of Figueres in which to exhibit his work³. As Dalí saw it, this theatre—destroyed by fire at the end of the Spanish Civil War—had been transformed into a Surrealistic stage set, an enormous readymade⁴. And for that reason, he felt that even if it did not contain a single work of art, it would be evident to everyone that the whole thing was a work by Salvador Dalí.

This resounding statement made by the painter was difficult to understand, for the general public, especially considering the state of the municipal theatre (ill. 1) at that time.





The fire and the passing of time had turned the building into a ruin and nobody could visualize or imagine it as a future museum. Nobody, but Dalí.

There is no doubt that Duchamp was very much in Dalí's mind when he was conceiving his museum. Here I must ask you to accompany me on a quick virtual visit to the Dalí Theatre-Museum. By exercising a little imagination, and by borrowing the helmet of the diver⁵ at the entrance to the museum (ill. 2-3),





we will go in search of the submerged trail of Duchamp, whose presence is hidden in some quite unsuspected places in the building.



The Dalí Theatre-Museum

The gestation of the Dalí Theatre-Museum, like its subsequent execution, was long and difficult, under the tireless leadership of the artist. Dalí directed a team of people capable of giving material form to his ideas, however odd they might be.

It all began in 1961⁶, when the town of Figueres paid tribute to its favourite son by presenting him with its highest distinction—the fig leaf—and putting on in his honour, among other acts, a bullfight in honour of Dalí a surrealist bullfight. For the surrealist happening Dalí invited the artists Niki de Saint Phalle and Jean Tinguely to make an enormous bull of plaster covered in gold-coloured plates, thanks to the suggestion of Marcel Duchamp. The bull disintegrated, breathing fire through its horns, with rockets and flares coming out of its body, followed by a spurt or red liquid symbolising the blood of the animal and finally by a white dove. That very day, Dalí unveiled a plaque on the house where he had been born, in carrer de Monturiol, and the painter announced, in the midst of the ruins of the old theatre, that he would build his future museum there⁷. Among others, Duchamp was one of the friends who accompanied him on that very important day (ill. 4).





In spite of Dali's express desire, and frustration at the delays, the museum was to take more than a decade to become a reality: it was opened at last on September 28, 1974. But during this long parenthesis, Dalí was never tired of declaring that he wanted his museum to be alive, changing, almost a continuous happening. In fact, the artist kept faith with this concept, because, for as long as he was present, the museum underwent many changes from the day it first opened to the public.

One of the spaces that Dalí renewed immediately was the old pit. If at first it consisted only of parterres with incipient vegetation, very soon —on November 6, 1974, to be precise—a crane lifted a car from the square at the side of the museum into the interior (ill. 5-6).





Moreover, it was not just any old car: it was the Cadillac that Dalí and Gala had used in the United States, during their uninterrupted stay there, from 1940 to 1948.

The Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme



This Cadillac very clearly evokes Dalí's last contribution to a show, as a full member of the Surrealist group. That show, as we noted before, was the *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme* held at the Galerie des Beaux-Arts in Paris in 1938. The first piece in the exhibition was a work by Dalí, the *Rainy Taxi* (ill. 7-8)



That surprised the visitors just like this latest version⁸, which welcomes people as they enter the Dalí Theatre-Museum in Figueres (ill. 9-10-11).







As we can see, Duchamp and Dalí played a very important role in the 1938 Surrealist show. André Breton and Paul Éluard were the "organisateurs" and Marcel Duchamp was the "générateur arbitre", assisted by Claude le Gentil. Max Ernst and Dalí were the special advisers. Man Ray was in charge of the lighting and Wolfgang Paalen of everything to do with sources. In addition to *Rainy Taxi*, Dalí presented six paintings, several objects and a number of drawings. Duchamp, for his part, exhibited several early works and was responsible for the decoration of the ceiling of the central room. As Man Ray recalled, the Galerie des Beaux-Arts was one of the most elegant galleries in Paris. Duchamp, who was in charge of the decoration,



had the red wallpaper and the period furniture removed, and he covered the light that came from the ceiling with hundreds of empty coal sacks⁹ (ill.12).



In association with the exhibition, the Galerie des Beaux Arts published the *Dictionnaire abrégé du Surréalisme¹⁰* compiled by Paul Éluard and André Breton, with some of the definitions made by Salvador Dalí. The entry concerning the painter describes him as a poet and theorist of surrealism since 1929¹¹. Duchamp is reviewed as a painter and writer, both of pre-surrealism and surrealism¹².

Duchamp and Dalí were also involved in the installation entitled *Les plus belles rues de Paris*. This took the form of a surrealistic street scene with mannequins transformed by the artists



represented in the exhibition. Duchamp dressed his mannequin in a hat and jacket (ill. 13).



Dalí's mannequin was covered with spoons and wore a balaclava—designed by Elsa Schiaparelli—and a bird's head as a hat (ill. 14).



The Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme and the Dalí Theater-Museum

As is clearly apparent, the 1938 Surrealist exhibition had a great effect on the Catalan painter, who went on to employ, on a number of occasions, several of the resources that had been used



in the Paris show¹³. The Theatre-Museum is a good example of this. Here, when we enter the corridor on the third floor, we are in Rue Trajan, which is painted black (ill. 15).



If we walk along to the right and look through the last window, we find a large installation, the ceiling of which is covered with sacks painted black (ill. 16)



which immediately remind us of those in the 1938 exhibition (ill. 17).





As we already said, in the patio at the entrance of the *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme* we were to find first the *Rainy Taxi*. Once inside, and led in with a claustrophobic atmosphere created by the bags hanging from the ceiling, we were to find the first room. Besides the works of the artists participating in the middle of the

room there is a bed with a small pond, surrounded by vegetation (ill. 18).



Let us return to Figueres, and specifically to the Mae West room of the Dalí Theatre-Museum. This space is a recreation in three dimensions of Dalí's 1934 work *Mae West's Face which May be Used as a Surrealist Apartment*, in the Art Institute of Chicago¹⁴. In this space, we find the installation *Paradise*, in the manner, as it were, of Duchamp's *Étant donnés* (ill. 19).





Paradise is, in fact, a space situated behind the wall that helps to configure the face of the actress; seen through two strategically located orifices (ill. 20).



This installation has an almost oneiric ambience that reminds us of the room at the 1938 exhibition: a bed on which lies an ear, surrounded by plants and animals, a small pond and a washbasin.





The whole is illuminated in a special way, so that reality and fantasy are fused (ill. 21).

We leave behind the Mae West room and go up the stairs that lead us, again, to the third floor of the museum, at the entrance to Rue Trajan. There we find what Dalí called the "room of timeless masterpieces". As we have said, Dalí wanted his Theatre-Museum to display works by other artists, and this is one of the rooms he chose for precisely that purpose. There are some of Dalí's paintings here, but also an El Greco, a Meissonier, a Bouguereau, an Urgell, a Fortuny and also, among these masters who were so important for Dalí, a piece by Duchamp¹⁵. That piece is the *Boîte-en-valise*, which Duchamp gave to Dalí and Gala in 1958, and which is prominently displayed in a vitrine¹⁶ (ill. 22).





Very close to it is the drawing "Preliminary study of Gala for the picture One Hundred Thousand Virtual Virgins Reflected by an Indeterminate Number of Mirrors by Cybernetics 'Étant donnés'" of 1974, the title of which is clearly a tribute to Duchamp and the two artists' shared interest in optical illusions (ill. 23)



We will end our *visit* by returning once more to rue Trajan. This time, however, we will turn to the left, where another window invites us to look out to the exterior, but here our view is not complete now. A silhouette delimits the surface of the glass (ill. 24).



This silhouette will call to mind works by Dalí from 1936, such as *Couple with Their Heads Full of Clouds*¹⁷ or *Man with His Head Full of Clouds*¹⁸, but it could also—and why not?—be yet another reference to Duchamp.



Galerie Gradiva

In 1937, a notary in Versailles called Louis Bomsel entrusted André Breton with the running of an art gallery in Paris, located at number 31, rue de Seine. Marcel Duchamp took charge of the design of the premises, which they named Gradiva, in tribute to Wilhelm Jensen and Sigmund Freud. As well as works of art, Gradiva would also exhibit books and sculptures of primitive art. Unfortunately, despite the considerable energy that Breton put into it, the gallery was not a great success.

When Dalí heard of the gallery project, he was eager to get involved. Thus, in a letter to Breton on March 27, 1937, he explained his ideas for the gallery:

"My idea is to call the shop a Café, written in the same way as on café windows (if it is considered that it could be Café Gradiva, Café in capital letters and Gradiva in small letters) [...] the outside of the shop should correspond exactly to that of a butcher's, with gruesome fake marble and gilded horse's heads, from which would hang long switches of hair (longer than usual) as in the hairdressers"¹⁹ (ill. 25).



SEEFELD (TIROL) lies chur Breton, ge vous si la corte postale, son titre "La melancolie estatique des chiens gateusse comme une vertigisseusse desante en estry " ERGHOF MODERNES H Je pense a la boatique - ge pense que l'ikee de canaflage it try borre at poursai atre optique porticlement, trut en acceptor l'idee suivante la quelle portripe essi des comuflage of confusion vistematique de representations esta dord as

He also told Breton his intention to write to Duchamp to explain him his thoughts:

"At the same time I have written to Duchamp because I believe that my project *fits in* with its conception of camouflage and may perhaps serve, I can find no better ideas in any other direction than the Duchamp project, which seems to me the most lyrical and the best suited to the circumstances"²⁰.

We do not have the letter that Dalí sent to Duchamp, but Dalí kept Duchamp's response, in which he explains his ideas for the future gallery (ill. 26). The letter includes Duchamp's design for the front door (ill. 27).



(fin Arif on commencement Mai) 11 me Larray I it on pourse part ete ariver_ Clero gala J'arais autos perse and pour Bren regne no 2 lettres; celle pour Barcelone est portie Samedi (3th.) - idees see la Enchante partortes no idees see la toutrique. Malheurenement Breton a affaire à Raymond Dumcom (Son proprietaire) et toute idee extérieure l'entrée du cabinet particultes le metry à l'interdeur, la ou il aura un horeau siparé de la contigue) à faire la forme d'an de la boutique est sournise à son individu Tron rets. - De borte que Breton est dégenté et je crains him qu'on Ce qui de aillans n'empicherait pas he puisse organister are devouture l'artice de la boutigere en comp de ni chain hi poisson (ou plutot canon pas assey chair si poisson) De plus toutes les idées content cher le beul danger dans l'idie de cancouflage est de ressantler aux dancings et Bounsel ne vent pas dépenser de Montpornasse. mais cela purt Ete crité. exageriment .-En tout cas à mentat ou fera Entout cas vien ne tera fini plus de travail quand vous serg ni prit quand very arrivery et rentre the mary rong entre

One can read "*faire une forme découpé d'un individu*" (to make a silhouetted form of an individual) that will in due course become the silhouette of a couple, allowing a glimpse of the interior through the transparent area of the glass door.

Dalí, some forty years later, also drew a silhouette on a glass (ill. 28).



In this occasion it is one of the windows of the Rue Trajan. He may well have done so in memory of his friend.



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As we can see in the Dalí Theatre-Museum there is more than an explicit homage to Marcel Duchamp: we can also perceive his presence. And, if the visit to the Dalí Theatre-Museum may be described as an experience, Dalí intended that the visitors should be something more than mere spectators.

Duchamp was one of the first artists to define the viewer as playing an essential part in the formation of cultural meanings and having agency in the reception of the artistic phenomenon. As he said: "the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualification and thus adds his contribution to the creative act. This becomes even more obvious when posterity gives a final verdict and sometimes rehabilitates forgotten artists".²¹ As we return to Dalí and his museum, is not this, what he too intended to practice? The conceptual Dalí, then, is very much in tune here with Duchamp's thesis.

Finally, allow me to recall that Dalí also declared that the museum in Figueres was to be "the museum of all my friends".²² The Catalan artist wanted to make it a point of encounter for contemporary artists, in a space that he hoped would become the spiritual centre of Europe. When Dalí was making this declaration, Marcel Duchamp would have been just a few miles away, in Cadaqués, where he spent what was to be the last summer of his life.

An attentive tour of the rooms of the museum will make it clear to us that, at least with regard to Duchamp, Dalí kept his promise. And this is borne out by these words of Antoni Pitxot, an artist, a friend and collaborator of Dalí's and director of the Dalí Theatre-Museum until 2014: "Dalí never forgot his great relationships: Marcel Duchamp, Luis Buñuel, Federico García



Lorca. All the important figures he knew in 20th Century Art, without whom it would have been a very sad period. Today the Dalí Theatre-Museum is a wonderful thing because everyone gets something out of it, learns something, and is inspired by it. It is a source of inspiration in many ways. There is a lot of contemporary art that feeds off the ideas that Dalí highlighted in his Museum. It is a source of inspiration".²³



Notes

¹ The celebration of the centenary of the artist's birth was in 2004, curated by Montse Aguer, current director of the Dalí Museums. That year gathered a considerable number of exhibitions, symposia and publications updating the uncountable sides of the artist's work.

² To be fair, in 2003 *l'Association pour l'étude de Marcel Duchamp*, published a splendid monographic work on the relation between both (*Marcel Duchamp & Salvador Dalí*, Association pour l'Étude de Marcel Duchamp, Paris, 2003). Also to be considered are the papers of Lewis Kachur, relative to the installations displayed at the surrealist exhibitions (Lewis Kachur, *Displaying the marvelous : Marcel Duchamp, Salvador Dalí*, and surrealist exhibition installations, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2001), of Francisco Javier San Martín (Francisco Javier San Martín, *Dalí-Duchamp : una fraternidad oculta*, Alianza, Madrid, 2004) as well as the remarkable papers of Pilar Parcerisas (Pilar Parcerisas, *Duchamp en España : las claves ocultas de sus estancias en Cadaqués*, Siruela, Madrid, 2009; Pilar Parcerisas, *Marcel Duchamp. Don't forget: una partida de ajedrez con Man Ray y Salvador Dalí*, Museo Arqueológico de Murcia, Murcia, 2013)

³ Josep Carles Clemente, "El Museo Teatro Dalí explicado por el propio Dalí", *La Actualidad Española*, Madrid, October 10, 1974.

⁴ Jacques Michel, "Salvador Dalí et son musée", Le Monde, Paris, October 3, 1974.

⁵ On the balcony at the front of the Dalí Theatre-Museum is a mannequin dressed up as a diver. This, by no means, is accidental, since it is a memento of the conference held by the painter wearing a diver suit. These series of lectures ran concurrently with the International Surrealist Exhibition held at the New Burlington Galleries, London in 1936. According to the programme, Dalí was to speak on one of the following subjects: "Paranoia", "The Pre-Raphaelites", "Harpo Marx" or "Phantoms". Dalí gives the lecture in a diving suit to demonstrate that this work reaches down into the subconscious. The event nearly has a tragic end when Dalí almost suffocates inside the suit.

⁶ Most precisely, August 12, 1961. The day started in Vilasacra, "the capital of the world" according to the writer Carles Fages de Climent, with a parade presided by Dalí. He made his entrance into the bullring with his Cadillac, accompanied by the two giant fancy-dress costumes he had presented at the Beistegui Ball in Venice. The ring was decorated with forks that supported moustaches and some windmills. Curro Girón, Paco Camino and Fermín Murillo were the bullfighters. A helicopter was supposed to throw the bull into the Bay of Roses as an offering to Neptune, but the company changed its mind at the last moment. (*El País de Dalí*, Consorci del Museu de l'Empordà, Figueres, 2004, p. 408) ⁷ Op. cit. *El País de Dalí*, p. 408

⁸ Dalí presented a new Rainy Taxi at the *Dada, Surrealism and their heritage* exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in New York on March 27, 1968. Another piece related to this artwork is the motorcar driven by Cristopher Columbus, a part of the Dream of Venus pavilion of 1939.

⁹ They should be empty on the recommendation of the Insurance company. Man Ray, *Autoportrait*, Robert Laffont, Paris, 1964, p. 214-215.

¹⁰ Dictionnaire abrégé du surréalisme, Galerie Beaux-Arts, Paris, 1938.

¹¹ The precise definition is: Dalí, Salvador (born 1904) "Prince of the Catalan intelligence, tremendously rich". Painter, poet and surrealist theorist since 1929" (*La femme visible, Babaouo, La conquête de l'Irrationnel*, etc.)" (André Breton, Paul Éluard, *Diccionario del surrealismo*, Renglón, Buenos Aires, 1987, p. 27)

¹²The preface written by Breton says: Duchamp, Marcel (born 1887). Pre-surrealist and surrealist painter and writer. Who, at the end of the complete historical development of dandyism, consented in assuming the figure of the "benevolent technician", as once said Gabrielle Buffet. Our friend Marcel Duchamp is for sure the most intelligent man and – for many – the most annoying of the first part of the Twentieth century. (Op. cit. *Diccionario del surrealismo*, p. 31)

¹³ Another occasion on which Dalí used this means was in the design for a fancy-dress ball, *A Surrealist Night in an Enchanted Forest*, to be held 2 September 1941, in the Del Monte Lodge in aid of New York's Museum of Modern Art, which organised a fund to assist artist-refugees from Europe. The guests were required to dress as "dreams" or forest creatures. The ballroom was transformed into a cave. From the ceiling hang five thousand sacks, intended to force the guests to stoop. Scenes from this dinner can be seen here: <u>https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vg6i4E0Woak</u> (consulted February 20, 2018).



¹⁴ <u>http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/65819?search_no=1&index=8</u> (consulted February 19, 2018)

¹⁵ To know which other works are from the collection of Fundació Gala – Salvador, please consult: <u>https://www.salvador-dali.org/en/artwork/the-collection/</u> (consulted February 20, 2018).

¹⁶Duchamp dedicates a copy to Gala and Dalí: "Pour Gala et Salvador Dalí […] de Cadaques. Marcel Duchamp 1958".

¹⁷ <u>https://www.salvador-dali.org/en/artwork/catalogue-raisonne/obra/443/couple-with-their-heads-full-of-clouds?text=clouds</u> (consulted February 19, 2018)

¹⁸ <u>https://www.salvador-dali.org/en/artwork/catalogue-raisonne/obra/439/man-with-his-head-full-of-clouds</u>?text=clouds (consulted February 19, 2018)

¹⁹ Letter from Salvador Dalí to André Breton, March 27th, 1937. Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí, Figueres

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Marcel Duchamp, "The Creative Act" [1957], in M. Sanouillet and E. Peterson (eds.), *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, Da Capo Press, New York, 1973, p. 140.

²² "Dalí reafirma la creación del museo DALI", Ampurdan, Figueres, 10/07/1968.

²³ <u>https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=07M3t6VWA8E</u> extract of the documentary "Dalí – Pitxot. Al legoria de la memòria", Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí, 2014 (consulted February 19, 2018)

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