

## **History vs. Histories (part 1: Contested Terrains)**

What is the role played by marketing in the insertion of artists, groups, or movements in art history? Where and when does business intersect with art history, and how does one affect the other? How can the promotion of a certain art history be part of a government's agenda? What is the role played by collectors in the elaboration of a given art history? This panel studies the relationship between contemporary art and the economic processes in the art world that influence art history in one way or another.

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Thank you very much, and I will like to thank SITAC and Pablo Helguera for inviting me here. I apologize for not speaking in Spanish, and I will try to speak slowly enough to enable the translation to occur because much of this is going to be improvised.

I'm going to be talking about Salvador Dalí and I should immediately lay some cards on the table. I have just spent the last three years organizing, and finally overseeing, a very large exhibition of Salvador Dalí at the Palazzo Grassi in Venice. This is actually the only exhibition to mark Dalí's Centenary year organized outside Spain. At least eleven other exhibitions of Dalí's work were organized inside Spain. Clearly to lay claim on Dalí as a Catalán or Spanish treasure of the National Culture. My exhibition was by contrast an attempt to look again, not just at the famous and admired Dalí of the Surrealist years but at late Dalí, which is actually a very peculiar and interesting problem.

I hoped also to be able to show you a small video that I made of the exhibition, but as the person who was supposed to help me didn't have time to do it, I can only show you a very small, and as you will see, dangerously chosen snippet.

The Dalí case is a peculiarly interesting one. I can think of few if any other mayor twentieth-century artists whose popularity combines with such virulent dislike on the part of both critics and historians. The extreme disdain with which Dalí has been regarded by critics, curators and historians of Modern Art has, in fact, multiple sources, which are ethical, political, and I think less esthetic.

But the strength of this opposition to Dalí, makes one wonder whether there really hasn't been something to hide on the part of the critics. One just wonders if Dalí is every critic's guilty secret, an adolescent passion to be recanted and eradicated on reaching maturity.

He is also a very easy target. He was, in many respects, monstrous; he was spectacular and a great showman. But what I want to do is to suggest that there are important ways in which we should look behind the spectacle, and in order to make what I have to say link with the themes of this talk, perhaps I'd like to indicate now, where I think, what I have to say may be irrelevant.

One is that I believe this critical opprobrium which has clouded Dalí's reputation for the last forty years has actually obscured a number of ways in which Dalí was actually the first to do something, the first to invent something, the first really to explore the possibilities of things, I mean such as the photography within Surrealism, the found object, the artist's video and so on. That I could expand on, but I think that is one consequence.

I also think that the critical revaluation of Dalí, the attempt to dismantle the critical prejudices that have so far dogged his reputation have actually shown up a real poverty within Art History. There is no doubt that the most interesting work that has been done now on Dalí -late Dalí included- is by literary theorists, by cultural theorists, even by scientists. So I'm suggesting that there is something that we need to think about, to look at.

But before I try to articulate my more positive view of Dalí—and I have to say that I have always been a little ambiguous about Dalí—I want to trace briefly the stages by which Dalí's bad reputation accumulated.



I'm going to begin, and this is actually quite brave, because I'm putting my head in the lion's mouth here—that is *your* mouth—I'm going to begin with a video that shows Dalí at his very worst, from the perspective of the Surrealists. Could we have the video?

There you have Dalí, "The Hollywood Darling."

Firstly, Dalí's rejection by the Surrealists in 1939—now I'm mapping very briefly the stages by which this bad reputation has built up. Dalí had finally put himself completely beyond the pale, by siding with the Fascist victor in the Spanish Civil War. I think it's not clear, but Dalí would have done anything in order to return to his Catalan home of Port Ligat. But the contrasting example of Picasso, who refused to enter Spain during Franco's lifetime, was a permanent reminder of Dalí's political fallibility. The surrealist leader André Breton also deplored the cynical means by which Dalí has imposed himself on the public and gave him the enduring anagrammatic nickname "Avida Dollars". The Surrealist's rejection had a long time effect on Dalí's critical fortunes because he lost the support of the only anti-modernist grouping—that is the Surrealists—while simultaneously alienating all the Modernists. There is virtually no serious critique of his work for the next forty years that is from 1940 up until 1980, the date of the Pompidou retrospective, which really began the critical re-evaluation.

Could I have the first slide, please?

(1)

This is just a postcard from England; it doesn't look as if it has much relevance on Dalí. It is a recent front page of *The Guardian* newspaper, a left-wing newspaper, which ran a questionnaire to all the important people of the art world, asking them what had been the most important work of art in the twentieth century, the most influential; and the three prime contenders were reproduced on the front page of this paper. There was obviously Duchamp's fountain. Duchamp is actually regarded as the figure who has fully commanded the respect and the interest of contemporary artists for the last twenty or thirty years. Dalí, by contrast, is probably nowhere. But I would like as a kind of sub theme to this talk to suggest that Dalí and Duchamp have more in common than might appear, and that there is something of the Dada anarchist in Dalí just as there was in Duchamp.

(2)

Of course, Dalí was fortunate in establishing himself as a kind of brand, almost before he had begun his reputation as an artist with this extraordinary painting called *The Persistence of Memory*.

(3)

This is the later painting called *The Disintegration of the Persistence of Memory*, from the 1950's, and one of the questions I want to ask really is whether this is a copy of *The Persistence of Memory* making some side gestures towards Dalí's apparent interest in science, or whether it is a work that genuinely should command interest.

## (4)

The only exception from this critical void that really surrounds Dalí from 1940 to 1980 was the curator James Thrall Soby, and he wrote in the 1941 catalogue to Dalí's one and single exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, 1941, he wrote what seems to me a very prescient critique, is tacked on at the end of his article. It says:

There is a problem related solely to Dalí's emergence as a public figure, which deserves some comment. Is he an isolated phenomenon projected into fame by an unusual technique, a weird imagination and a flair for publicity? Or does he reflect, in exaggerated form, the psychology of his epoch? Is he pure eccentric or part prophet? Although parallels between an artist and his time are frequently of dubious validity when drawn by a contemporary, there are few in Dalí's case, which at least carry the weight of plausible conjecture.

To begin with, even the most determined Narcissus cannot isolate his own image, and the pool into which Dalí has stared so fixedly carries reflections of his surroundings that no flurry of pebbles can dispel. His former identification with Surrealism, which to many once signified a childish retreat from reality, may now conceivably be re-read as a passionate espousal of a counter-reality to which all France, all civilized Europe had been clinging for assurance.

## (5) (6) (7)

This is *Impressions of Africa*. It's no always easy to see these double images. The double image, I want to say, no longer appears so personal a device in a world where statesmen as well as painters have portrayed objectives with such cunning that they have become "without the slightest physical or anatomical change, the representation of another entirely different object, the second representation being equally devoid of any deformation or abnormality betraying arrangement." Soby goes on:

In view of the frightful havoc, which machines have lately wrought on earth, one may properly enquire whether Dalí's loathing of them has been merely egocentric and exhibitionistic. To narrow the question, one may ask which type of architecture more accurately diagnosed the hidden psychosis of the years just before the war: *machines à habiter*, with their flat white roofing and broad areas of glass or the small, dark, womb-like houses, which Dalí proposed to build as retreats from a mechanical civilization and which, as air raid shelters, recently covered the landscape of England.

So that was a rare exception in those years, to the general dislike and indifference.



(8)

Secondly, in the English-speaking world, which was largely Dalí's audience during this period, his 1942 autobiography *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí* was widely misunderstood. Above all by George Orwell who took his outrageous claims entirely at face value: "Dalí," he wrote, "is as antisocial as a flea." Lacking in insight into the psychoanalytical sources of Dalí's approach, all failed to recognize that Dalí was constructing a persona and his own personal myth, perfectly consciously.

Ian Gibson, Dalí's biographer, has continued the Orwell line in his book which, I think, is unfortunately called, *The Shameful Life of Salvador Dalí*; if your autobiographer can't do better for you, I don't know who can.

Thirdly, after the war Dalí stepped up his attacks on Modern Art, in such tracts as *Dalí on Modern Art: the Cuckolds of Antiquated Modern Art*. In 1959 he was invited by *Art News* to comment on Marcel Duchamp. Interestingly, Dalí was presented by *Art News* as a famous critic, as well as a painter; and I think that's how he was regarded at the time. Dalí praises Duchamp's silence, his abandonment of painting. "Duchamp's moral example is worthy of Socrates but functions more Jesuitically without suicide. Duchamp is saved from the imminent collective failure of Modern painting. Duchamp did not believe it necessary to pursue Modern painting to its final consequences. Only Dalí had a secret plan; in any case I cannot be accused of practicing Modern painting." So he tries to make common cause with Duchamp, which is actually very curious.

(9)

Georges Bataille recognized the valiant character of Dalí's painting. "This conflation of incompatible models, photography, Vermeer, Velázquez... veils and reveals Dalí's pictorial procedures." And the tendency to take Dalí's painting as, in some way, photographic, has actually been one of the greatest misunderstandings of his work.

(10)

This is a painting of 1929, called *The First Days of Spring*. It's a painting, which includes bits of collage, bits of stencil, in other words it mixes so-called "high" and "low". Dalí was always absorbing and mixing the popular and high-art painting:

I want to pick up something that Hans Haacke said this morning: any object has to be seen in its own place. What has become very clear to me in this exhibition is that Dalí's paintings need to be seen physically; they do not reproduce well; they appear as if they reproduce well, but they do not. They are actually extraordinarily unique. His painting technique is quite strange, under a magnifying glass. He uses a lot of tiny, tiny drops, all sorts of things that are very peculiar and need more research.

(11)(12)

This is *The Premonition of the Civil War*. I have to mention one very controversial critique of this by Robert Hughes, last year for the centennial. He says:

Every inch of it, from the sinister greenish clouds and electric-blue sky to the gnarled bone and putrescent flesh of the monster, is exquisitely painted. This—not Picasso’s *Guernica*—is modern art’s strongest testimony on the civil war, and on art in general. Not even the failures of Dalí’s later work can blur that fact.

A problematic statement in some ways, but there is no doubt that Hughes is changing his view about even the latest Surrealist Dalí.

(13-20)

I just wanted to end by looking at late Dalí’s paintings. Now we watch Dalí through the lens of Warhol, I might say Dalí after Warhol. This is Dalí, the old hippie, embracing Warhol. Although there is a lot of mileage between Warhol and Dalí, they are similar and dissimilar. Warhol undoubtedly admired Dalí, he admired him because, he said, “he’s so big.”

This is called *The Antimatter Ear*. It was painted in 1958; and Duchamp, in one of the last collective Surrealist exhibitions, included it. It created a great scandal. Duchamp asked for the picture, and when the surrealists complained, he said, “they can just piss off; if they want to organize exhibitions, they can do it themselves.”

Why did he put this painting in this show? Partly because of the optical effects; it’s a different painting. Seeing it very closely it looks abstract, from three meters back you can see Raphael’s *Madonna*, and then from 10 meters back you can see an enormous ear. The ear of the Pope.

Here we have a kind of ambiguity, an uncertainty on Dalí’s part, about his own attitude to religion, to the sacred. It doesn’t matter for the public to know whether I’m joking or whether I’m serious. Just as it doesn’t matter to myself to know whether I’m joking, whether I’m serious. It is something that I think places Dalí in a very interesting relation to contemporary art.

Thank you.