# 1924 *OTROS*

# SURREALISMOS

Canonical Surrealism, associated with André Breton, one of France's most remarkable writers, officially began in Paris with the publication of the *First Surrealist Manifesto* in 1924. The text outlined the essential points of one of the theoretical, visual and literary movements with the greatest and most long-lasting critical success, points also disseminated through magazines associated with the group, such as *Minotaur*. Dream and desire, automatic thought and found objects, clairvoyance and alchemy, new relationships with nature and a vision of the city as the most esteemed Surrealist object configure a fascinating universe also regarded with curiosity and longing by many creators located far from Paris, either physically or metaphysically. A universe which was also, however, strictly governed by Breton, who included and excluded different participants

from the movement at will, such as the notable case of Dalí's expulsion.

There are, however, other Surrealists, like those who traced the alternative geographies of *Le Monde au temps des surréalistes*, published in 1929 in the magazine *Variétés* by the Belgian Surrealist group, one of the first to challenge Breton's proposals. That map, which reassesses the concept of "centre" and "peripheries", seems an excellent way to approach places distant from the centre (Paris) due to their remoteness, either physical or resulting from historical circumstances. What happened in places where Breton was only present through isolated artists who acted as a transmitter for what was taking place in Paris or where echoes only arrived via magazines and occasional news? Was it possible or desirable to respect Breton's strict rules regarding who was to be included or excluded from the group? And above all, how should Surrealisms - by now in the plural - be defined one hundred years after the *First Manifesto*?

In this sense, Spain provides an excellent case study to approximate those other Surrealists. The country had very significant focus points,

such as the Students' Residence in Madrid, the *Logicophobist Exhibition* held in Catalonia in 1936, and Tenerife, with a role in the movement that in fact predates Breton's trip to the Canary Islands in 1935. Numerous canonical assumptions were reassessed in Spain and new readings proposed, as was also the case in Latin America. Like others geographically remote from Paris, those Spanish artists have only very occasionally been defined as "Surrealists" because they were never located in the sphere of Breton's influence.

This same dissidence is to be found in the women close to the group, who offer us the chance to reread Surrealism from those "other Surrealisms" and their complex map of relationships. These women, who received the torch from Gala Dalí, our initial guide in this exhibition, will be lighting the way in each of its sections.

Marcel Jean's half-open doors, half-dream setting, half-infinite possibilities for new readings, welcome us in.

Estrella de Diego
Curator

# I. | Surrealisms far from Breton

Breton's presence was not equal in the different places where Surrealism emerged. In some, his presence and hence his influence was more direct, while in others it was diluted or reinterpreted due to circumstances. In Cadaqués with Gala Salvador Dalí - that "third person" which the couple constructed and whom they made the creator of their joint artistic project - the distancing was intentional due to disagreements and rivalries.

For the Belgian Surrealists, distancing themselves from Breton was a decision made by the group in order to maintain its independence. They did not agree with Bretonian automatism and rather than the *objet trouvé* - the found object, the result of chance - they prioritised the *objet bouleversant*, which required devising and constructing.

The case of Argentina has points of connection with the peripheral nature of the avant-garde in Spain. Breton was present in Buenos Aires through magazines such as *Minotaur* and in this sense the

library of the artist Raquel Forner – consulted by the city's avant-garde creators – played an essential role in disseminating the movement.

## II.| Surrealisms close to Breton

Breton's presence, including his physical one, was, however, very notable in other places geographically distant from Paris. In 1938 he travelled to Mexico where his limitations with regard to diversity became evident. Breton would define it as the only naturally "Surrealist" country due to its folk culture, which was in vogue at that time among the social elite to which his hosts, Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, belonged. He also wrote a text for the documentary photographer Manuel Álvarez Bravo who, together with Kahlo, would become one of the artists affiliated with the Surrealist group due to the direct decision of Breton. That passion for the "exotic" reappears in his interest in Hector Hyppolite (a self-taught painter associated with voodoo) during his trip to Martinique while fleeing from occupied France to the United States.

In May 1935 Breton and his wife Jacqueline Lamba arrived in Tenerife in the company of the group's poet Benjamin Péret. Their mission was clear: the organisation of a *Surrealist Exhibition* of an international nature at the Ateneo de

Santa Cruz. They had been invited by the influential Canarian group associated with the magazine *Gaceta de Arte* which, under the editorship of Eduardo Westerdahl, was an essential publication for disseminating avant-garde artistic proposals in Spain, not only ones associated with Surrealism. In addition to the fact that for Breton, Tenerife must have seemed an ideal place due to its commitment to the avant-garde, the "exoticising" character which he perceived in the island as well as its only partly tamed natural word fuelled his colonialist aspirations.

With Breton far away or near at hand, multiple Surrealisms existed.

## III. | Products and spaces of the dream

One of the themes in which Surrealism was most interested was the dream and the mechanisms of its presentation, which were closely linked to automatism - allowing our thoughts to roam, unhindered by consciousness or logic, when we are awake. The dream space is the place where extraordinary and involuntary encounters take place, formidable associations sustained by their own unexpected logic.

“Exquisite corpses”, one of the most popular Surrealist games, reflects this passion for the unexpected: without knowing what the previous person has written or drawn, participants continue the game through their successive contributions. These are the result of chance, the same one that governs “*objets trouvés*”, and another example of casual alliances.

Remains of dreams reappear in the ghostly landscapes of the Surrealists, which are essentially figurative. The illusion of space is meticulously reproduced in them but it is not

a space that we can enter, as we would that of Velázquez's *Las Meninas*. It only appears to exist, like the spaces we dream about. Fragments of bodies, severed hands and other elements located outside of any established logic complete this repertoire of the products of dreams.

Within this new logic, for the Surrealists women came to occupy the role of a medium, of the unconscious in its purest state; a seemingly privileged position but one that ultimately functioned as a mere vehicle for their exclusion. In order to return these women to their rightful place in history, this first section starts with Remedios Varo, who confessed that she was never interested in Breton's inventions about "the feminine" but rather in automatism. Varo was the first in a succession of women close to the Surrealist group who would open up the path of seeing towards the dream.

## IV.| Nightmares and desire

In the *First Surrealist Manifesto* of 1924 Breton describes a man who, cut in half by a window, continues walking. It is a disturbing image that summarises certain notions associated with the unconscious and with dreams in which time and space are disrupted and acquire a different logic that dismantles our habitual system of relationships.

This is how the unconscious speaks to us, in its own language of surprising concatenations and parallel times. It contains within it that desire which manifests itself in unexpected images, often turning dreams into premonitory nightmares of wars or of impossible love for random objects: dolls, mannequins, hybrid gender forms, androgyny, etc. Bodies which transform themselves and dissolve through desire and nightmare; they split in half like the man in the *First Surrealist Manifesto* or flirt with other mental states and even with death.

These strategies for the liberation of desire relate to Breton's own concept of *amour fou*, an

extravagant love that springs from the irrational and can focus on any object, whatever the imagination longs for. This idea is in turn closely linked to the invention of the stereotype of "the feminine" from the standpoint of the Surrealists' masculine conception. Despite everything, it is a codified desire and one full of prohibitions and some women artists close to the group rebelled against it. Among them was Toyen, our guide in this section of the exhibition; camouflaging her identity behind an ambiguous nickname and cultivating a fluid gender attitude, she appears to have called for the need to tear up the label of *amour fou* in order to open up desire to what desire itself dictates.

## V. | Among mediums: chimeras, doubles and other extraordinary encounters

Associated with the label of desire and the unconscious and with the role that Breton assigned to women as a vehicle for the manifestation of that unconscious, it is worth remembering the connections between some women Surrealist artists and worlds that might be termed magical, clairvoyant, telepathic, etc. This is the case with Gala, a well-known card reader, or Remedios Varo and Leonora Carrington, our guides in this section, who shared a passion for clairvoyance, with the latter often the subject of the former's dreams.

These connections with the invisible world would come to be considered standard in the Surrealist group. In this sense we should bear in mind the well-known image described in the book *The Songs of Maldoror* of 1869, written by the Count de Lautréamont (the pseudonym of Isidore Ducasse), whom the Surrealists considered a precursor of the movement: "As beautiful as the chance meeting

of an umbrella with a sewing machine on an operating table." Identities change and are exchanged through this concept of extraordinary encounters; the self fractures and is duplicated; the body fragments then reconstitutes itself, just as in dreams. The familiar becomes strange in the sense in which Freud referred to "the uncanny" *(Das Unheimliche)*. Escaping the rational leads to the immediate discovery that everyday things never cease to surprise: metamorphosis reigns over the world.

## VI. | Stones, trees and other creatures

“The philosopher’s stone is simply that which will enable man’s imagination to take stunning revenge for everything.” With these words, Breton defined one of the Surrealists’ favorite themes: the search for the philosopher’s stone, that mythical substance which expressed the age-old desire to turn the most humble materials into gold and, metaphorically, to achieve higher knowledge. One of Breton’s particularly memorable allusions to the stone (and through it, to his relationship with nature) appears at the end of the beautiful text *The starry Castle*, inspired by his trip to Tenerife in May 1935: “On the side of the abyss, built in philosopher’s stone, the starry castle opens.”

At the same time, stones become an allegory of the quest for a kind of inner illumination. In order to achieve it, nature acts as a vehicle for the transformation process favoured by alchemy, that mystical discipline so admired in the Surrealist world. During the time she

was closest to the movement Maruja Mallo, our guide in this section, shared a concept of nature in which stones symbolise infinite possibilities.

## VII. | Invisible, modern, nocturnal cities

Maruja Mallo also introduces us to another of the subjects that most fascinated the Surrealists: cities, which find their antithesis in forests - stony, metamorphosed, idyllic, almost devoid of branches, etc., - two sides of the same coin and referred to by Breton in the *First Manifesto*: "Automobiles are parked before the door, concealed by the shade of trees." Once again, the castle of the Surrealists takes us to Paradise lost.

Within these cities we encounter the modern world of local festivals enjoyed by the group's members. Sometimes these cities are terrifying nocturnal ones, seemingly from an Edgar Allan Poe story; in other cases they are places of chaotic lights and darkness which recall the setting described by Breton in his novel *Nadja*, the great love story set in a city (in this case Paris) and in a narrative space that reveals an unusual facet of Surrealism: the city transformed into the Surrealist object par excellence.

## VIII. | Cosmos and alchemy

For the Surrealists, nature is the intact world that preceded our arrival and which summons and invokes the magic associated with origins. In turn, alchemy and the quest for the philosopher's stone represent the desire to reach a higher state of consciousness. To achieve this and thus to encourage this transformation implied by the alchemical process, the Surrealists made use of nature as a medium.

The process of transformation reveals itself in simple gestures, with stones, sea urchins, shells, branches, etc., but it also does so through the nature of the universe that inhabits ancestral caves: from Alice Rahon's cosmic transmutation to the figures leaning over the edge of the earth in Ángeles Santos, the two artists who share the role of guides in this section; from Salvador Dalí and Gala's clouds to Joan Miró's constellations; from Rufino Tamayo and Jean Peyrissac's planets to the unfathomable transformations outside the limits of convention in the work of Roberto Matta.

The intangible world also makes an appearance in Miró's painting *A Dog barking at the Moon*: a way, perhaps, to demand answers from the cosmos itself. Welcome to the spiritual dimension of the world.