Mae West print (1934-35).
Assembling the apartment.
(Ramón Gómez de la Serna, Dalí)
Mae West Apartment.

RE-VISITING MAE WEST'S FACE

Gordana Kostich-Lefebvre
Dali’s famous gouache on printed paper from 1934, 1 Face Of Mae West Which May Be Used As A Surrealist Apartment, was realised forty years later as an “apartment” in Dali’s Theatre-Museo, in his native Figueras. Constructed under Dalí’s direction by the Catalan architect-designer Oscar Tusquets, the Figueras piece consists of furnishings for a rather stretched, semi-enclosed space which needs to be viewed through an extraordinary observation point, a key(hole) to the face on the ground. Unfortunately, this spatial portrait and its decoder (vue éclairée) have never been presented as a two-part installation. This myopia needs to be corrected first.

If visitors were “ordinary” passers-by—that is, not already familiar with the “portrait,” and not looking for it—the face would be concealed from them, and revealed only though a very particular “point of view.” A viewer could certainly recognize the famous lip-shaped, red sofa, 2 the most sensual of all sofas, and could even sit on it, but would not be able to immediately put it together with the rest of the facial features, which are separate objects apparently scattered around. The floor is slightly inclined. What would fit into the portrait as “blond bangs” is a suspiciously ragged carpet, which indeed draws attention as something out of its proper place, wherever that place could possibly be. A visitor’s passage or hallway divides the “room” from a rectangular pedestal of table height, set across from, and at the orthogonal axis to the face on the ground. Unfortunately, this spatial portrait and its decoder (vue éclairée) have never been presented as a two-part installation. This myopia needs to be corrected first.

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This work evokes a long and rich tradition of composed, encrypted and transformational representations. Thematically, it is close to aberrated portraits, “hidden” (subsumed) objects, and patchwork/puzzle compositions. Spatially, it is akin to two-part perspectival “experiments” of a Brunelleschian type; “scenographies”; architectural figurations in plan, landscape and/or garden assemblages; and even large-scale land designs visible only from the air. At first, references could be established with any of the above, but on closer inspection, nothing completely fits. Dalí’s piece seems truly independent from all of the above. So what is this aslant assemblage/performances with a diva?

Surprisingly, nothing in Mae West Face installation or its operation is aberrated. 4 Through the dimension of the “hidden face” invokes a composite portraiture of a kind that made Giovanni Arcimboldo and his humanoid creations 5 influential far beyond refined Mannerism and an inspiration to twentieth century avant-garde artists. Breton, for example, considered Arcimboldo

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1. The same year that the Surrealists as a group denounced Dalí.
2. In 1936, a little more than a year after the gouache portrait, Dalí made the first Mae West lips sofa, a wooden frame upholstered in dark and light “shocking pink,” now much less known than the red lips sofa. He represented it in his 1937 chalk and gouache Birth of Paranoiac Furnishing.
3. Which might be called a “diminishing” lens, as opposed to a magnifying one.
4. What Dalí aberrated this time was a traditional depth perception, as well as horizontal and vertical space expectations. By playing with our visual limitations, Dalí teased and thwarted our spatial aptitude. He only extended the parameters within which we normally operate. There is a certain definite space within which we discern images and figures presented on the vertical surfaces. By considerably moving these limits Dalí hid his creation. The face is a spatial composition: a horizontally designed, gigantic three-dimensional sculpture, which could have been a part of a landscape or garden design were it in the open.
5. Mostly compositions of various species of the same class, they were also exercises in the art of classification, a real obsession of the mid-sixteenth century. Considerable attention has been paid to the (glamourised) musical chromatic notation that Arcimboldo supposedly used to correlate his paintings to music. See Tonino Tornitore, “Music for Eyes” in The Arcimboldo Effect: Transformations of the Face from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century, eds. Simonetta Rasponi and Carla Tansi (Milan: Bompiani, 1987), 345–358. Leonardo’s interest in chromatic music—as well as his organic sculpture/shield of the head of Medusa which, although short-lived, was rather famous—should be seen in the same light.

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Note

Unless otherwise noted, images are from The Arcimboldo Effect: Transformations of the Face from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century.

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Ljudskoga lica i zvezdanog neba nikada se covek nagledao ne bi.
(One never beholds enough of human face and starry heaven.)

—Ivo Andrić, "Lica, predelli" ("Faces, landscapes")
6. The series of French postcards (well) known as "tete compose" which were in circulation around 1900 showed heads composed of female nudes.


8. Dali introduced the image in Le surrealisme au service de la revolution (Vol. xii no. 3, Paris 1931) as a process of superimposition. He produced a painting based on this image around the same time (1934-35) that he created Mae West's Face. They are shown as the Archimboldo Effect (286, 289), accompanying Caecilien's text "Armarum venator," but unless the illustrations are meant to form a parallel visual essay in its own right they are completely out of place as they are "out of text." Interestingly, although Dali's work has illustrated this book more than anyone else's (besides Archimboldo), and although his little text "Honour to be Object!" has been reprinted in it, Dali's composed heads receive only non-verbal attention.

9. "Faces and/or heads in the landscape" is too vast a subject, even if confined just to Surrealism.

10. Around forty versions of Muses inquietantes.


12. Hidden faces. Author's foreword, xvi.

13. Intended as a homage to Rothko, Dali created this painting in 1976 as a homage to Rothko, Dali created this painting in 1976 as a homage to Rothko, Dali created this painting in 1976 as a homage to Rothko, Dali created this painting in 1976 as a homage to Rothko, Dali created this painting in 1976 as a homage to Rothko, Dali created this painting in 1976 as a homage to Rothko.

14. Philosophically, the Mae West installation seems to be firmly within a Lacanian system, to be one of the masters and a precursor to the world of the imaginary and the marvellous. Surrealists were referring to the tetes composees long before the first monograph on Arcimboldo appeared in 1954. An anthropomorphic landscape by another Mannerist, Matthias Merian (1533-1650), is curiously comparable to Dali's "ethnic" paysage polyvalently titled The Paranoiac Figure, an African village-scape within a giant female face whose "birth" as The Paranoiac Visage Dali originally presented in 1931. Both fall into the category of human faces concealed in the landscape. Then the fact that, in order to access the picture of Mae West's face, it is necessary to raise a viewpoint twice—first of all by stepping onto the camel pedestal to discover the plane of depiction, and secondly "entering" the picture itself through the diminishing lens—places the installation on the level of "larger scale arts," although very far (below) from, for example, the ancient, mysterious Peruvian ground figures visible from thousands of feet above the ground; far even from the visions of bodies embedded in architectural plans ... but the principle is the same.

The theme of the convulsive face has its place within a general Surrealist exploration of illusionary and spatial visages, and this subject was regularly explored, starting with De Chirico, but also by Ernst, Magritte, Delvaux, Duchamp and Man Ray. However Dali's work, more than anyone else's, abounds with symbolic and illusionary heads and faces. They are anthropomorphised and personalised spaces, often with mythological and cosmological dimensions. Dali divines rather than creates "hidden faces." His ability to initially perceive them, together with a deep persuasion that a face offers an entry to a set of conditions "behind" itself and, reciprocally, that the phenomena could be facialis (for example, in Dream [1931]; Anthropomorphic Echo [1937]; Sleep [1937]; Old Age, Adolescence, Infancy [1940]; and Melancholy [1942]) are the prerequisites for Dali's "facialisation." In this light it is quite natural that Dali titled his novel Hidden Faces, a novel "dealing with the development and the conflicts of great human passions ... the story of the war, and more particularly of the poignant post-war period."12

Other apoposte examples of Dali's metamorphic "facial" works are The Image Disappears (1938), a variation on Vermeer's interior metamorphosed into a "hidden" face, The Apparition of a War Scene on the Face of Lieutenant Deschanel (cover of Paris Match, 1954); the famous skull sculpted with bodies of four women, photographed by Phillippe Halsman (1954) and then retouched by Dali; Paranoiac-critical Conversion which was a Transformation of Antiques Magazine Cover into the Apparition of a Face (1974); Gala Contemplating the Mediterranean Sea which at Twenty Metres Becomes the Portrait of Abraham Lincoln (1976); and endless anamorphosed visages, including self-portraits on an empty-looking skin such as the one in Enigma of Desire.
and not only because the "object" is a face of the desirable American "cultural" icon from the thirties. It is a very clean uncanny, and the paradigm of a cleverly deconstructed object. It embodies many of elements figuring in Lacan's theory: camouflage and mimicry; the mirror; objet a = agama; luring; the gaze and the eye; the cathartic speculum; and sublimation. Dali's familiarity with Lacan's writings has often been emphasised and Lacan's "influence" on Dali is deduced from their acquaintance and the role of the paranoiac within Dali's system. Definitely, Lacan knew Dali's work. Taking into account their common interests in Freud, in the phenomenon of vision and the laws of optics and in painting, it is not surprising that there should have been an exchange between their respective systems. Mae West's Face requires a sharpening of the (scopic) vision, relying as it does between the large scale and the "readable," just across the threshold of the normally perceptible, merely but wittily hidden in front of "our noses." It is easy and convenient (perfectly suited) to interpret it in Lacan's terms where Dali's visions are already incorporated.

With regard to representational aspects, there is a considerable conceptual difference between facialised landscapes, heads sitting on the open ground and "faced" interiors. The facial landscapes as painted by Giorgione and Dürer are an extension of the recognition of "playful figurativeness of nature." Less well-known Arcimboldan "face-scape" woodcuts underline the interplay between the "natural," or the existing condition on one hand, and the real or possible manmade intervention on the other, rather than being illustrations of some portraiture both created and discovered "by chance." Volumetric "heads on the ground," such as Ork of Bomarzano, Pirro Ligorio's anthropomorphic catharsis of the Entrance to Hell motif, like Le Corbusier's "facial five points" reveal a great tension with the ethingion from which they seem—painfully, and unsuccessfully—to attempt to gain independence. That is the case of anti-Antheus. A "faced" interior, in comparison, is completely unnatural, exclusively artificial. To phrase it better, it is utterly independent from nature's whim and under the full control of its creator. Paradoxically, to facialise an interior means to externalise it. An ephemeral facial epidermis envelops furnishings inside the dwelling, where a nose could become a hearth, the eyes landscape depictions framed on the wall and the lips a rosy love seat. Does this still resonate with a more traditional building/body analogy, where the breath is the vital force and the hearth coincides with the classical breathing heart or soul? Windows are the eyes and the entrance is the mouth? The analogy is still possible although across the threshold, just behind the traditional mouth/entrance where the whole face-interior occurs, making room for the inner face. In the case of Mae West's Face, this transgression hinges on the fullness and startle of the pink-lipped love seat.

The access into an interior face—as opposed to the access to the interior through the face—interiorising, and the face-interior are strung together beyond Lacan.