



## OSCAR TUSQUETS

Barcelona-born Oscar Tusquets Blanca, customarily introduces himself publicly “as an architect by training, a designer by adaptation, a painter by vocation and a writer through the desire to make friends”, in essence a consummate artist. He began his work as a designer of furniture and objects in 1972 when he joined Barcelona Design where he garnered a Spanish National Design Award. Since then he has been honoured with the Gold Medal for Merit in the Fine Arts; the Knight of the Order of the Arts and Letters and the Cross of Sant Jordi. Here the humble artist explains the balance of aesthetics and utility in design; his relationship with Salvador Dalí and his longing for the best of the past.

*“Vision is the art of seeing what is invisible to others” - Jonathan Swift*

Interviewed by [Eduardo Gión](#)  
Portrait by [Raul Hidalgo](#)

**One can say design is an extension of one's personality in terms of artistic traits. Although you explored different mediums, what drove you to become an architect?**

At 12-years-old, I attended a fine arts s-school and what I really enjoyed was drawing and being a painter. But my father told me I should do something more stable, economically speaking. And the closest thing to painting was to become an architect. I began architecture and it really hooked me, so for many years I didn't paint. This all meant that through Milan, you were meant to be linked with design, both in furniture and objects. From the moment I began, I started designing chairs and objects for indoor environments. My life has always been a lack of specialization. I am hopeless at specialization.

**Do you believe that architecture offers one artistic freedom?**

When I'm asked which attributes a person must have to be an architect I say “Health”.

It is a very hard job. It is like filming. It involves lots of money, so it is a tough battle. Everything else is too, but in reality it is an art. When you are able to create an auditorium like the one I did in Las Palmas (Spain), the Auditorio Alfredo Kraus, it is one thing it is create a tea pot that I actually like, but it is a different kind of emotion. A Tiffany tea pot may be a wonder, but it provokes a different kind of emotion rather like entering the Pantheon of Rome. Architecture consumes you.

**You were part of the counterculture era and La Gauche Divine in Barcelona. Your thoughts?**

La Gauche Divine was a joke, as was La Movida Madrileña. It was a unique moment. We were unconscious at the time, but now I am (conscious). María Vargas Llosa has written an introduction of my book because we have been friends since then. Mario Vargas Llosa, García Márquez and I used to hang around and have a few drinks together.

**So there was a literature explosion at that time in Barcelona as well?**

Everybody was there including architects and photographers such as Colita, Miserachs, and Maspons. The “La Mariona” restaurant included a table at the bottom where everyone was allowed to take a seat if they wanted to. There was a mix of artists. It was a thrilling moment. No one was aware of how much of a historical moment it was... From Colita's pictures it is possible to appreciate how that artistic movement was reflected. The characters I met there left a deep impression on my life forever. I think about the saying “the good old days” and I feel old. But I still listen to The Rolling Stones, Janis Joplin, The Beatles LP's and it is actually the best. It is not about nostalgia, it is about being the best. For example, Janis Joplin seemed to risk her life every time she was on stage and she really did. She passed away from the rigours of performing... Patti Smith is amazing. The book she has written “Just Kids”

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about her relationship with photographer Robert Mapplethorpe is a literary wonder because of the way she shows her love for Mapplethorpe. It's a stunning book written without rancour. If there is something that makes me proud, it would be the 60's, and the year that I was born. As for drugs and rock and roll, yes in my twenties I did like it. I enjoyed French songs too which involved good times like when my parents took me to France, where I attended an Edith Piaf concert.

**Later on, you met Salvador Dalí and a friendship was cultivated and you were also co-workers at one point. How would you describe your relationship with him? What was he like?**

In the beginning I was anti-Dalí, I was on the left, he was on the right.

I used to go to Cadaqués quite often. Dalí's birthday was on the eleventh and it was the same day as The National Uprising Day which was quite funny for him. He used to celebrate with massive parties at his place and everyone was welcome. If he found someone interesting on the street then they were invited to the party. That day he was accompanied by Amanda Lear.

Dalí was interested in my work. Back then I was 27-years-old and I made half a house in Cadaqués and I was shocked. Dalí told me: “Come to my place at 7 o'clock, I'm organizing a party with hippies, punks...” I went with Beatriz de Moura who was my wife at that time. Half an hour after being there my opinion of Dalí had changed. He was the most intelligent and funniest dude in the world! He loved being surrounded by young people and architecture, as well. He hated music. He used to say: “Architecture gets into the mind, music gets into the stomach, in the intestines. Low feelings” He was a born trouble maker. Then we met from time to time and I would say to myself: “I'm catching up with Dalí to have a good time”. We were good friends. He enjoyed talking

to me about Punks. He explained to me that he visited Punk bars in New York and chatted with the Punks there. In Paris he invited me several times in the afternoon for cocktails and after that he chose the people there he wanted to invite for dinner. If there was a minister at the cocktail he might not invite him! We were also together in New York. He set up a dinner every Sunday for poor people and artists. There were poor people from the street that Dalí felt anxious about. Andy Warhol was always at those dinners.

Moreover, at this time Dalí was finishing the building of the Cadaques Museum. Actually the Mae West room was a co-shared project between me and him.

**The Mae West Room is more of a sculptural installation, where it transcends to being more of a illusion than a painting. How did you come up with the idea?**

I was really conceptual at that time and I told Salvador I saw his painting regarding Mae West. I suggested to him to create a room inspired by her. He agreed. He painted that on a “Paris Match” magazine cover. I was amazed. I told him to create a space that represented the painting but from another point of view. Dalí replied: “Perfect. I can dispose of the theatre annex at “La Peixateria” as a location that is where it will take place, set a scene in that place. It's going to be boss!” I sketched in water-colours and took it to him proudly. He did not even look at it, he said: “Tusquets, I fully trust you. Carry on.”

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A reproduction of it was done for Paris and the Pompidou as well. I did a retrospective of all Dalí's work in Paris. What he really wanted was for the public to walk around the room, sit on the lips, rest on the nose, etc. We published books together. One day, he phoned me and told me that he was about to give me the best he had ever written for my publishing house. He gave me a book he had written in 1940. It was awesome book. He gave me the legal rights, to the book which is about his childhood. We worked on one of the best editions. When he passed away I reproduced his furniture my way.

**What do you think he would think about your reproductions?**  
He would be glad about them I always put myself in his shoes as he would

do it to reproduce his madness. The latest thing I have created has been a dissected lamb table. He would like it. It was an idea that popped into my mind from a collage by Dalí where there is a woman in a stable full of sheep and one of them looks like a bedside table. I thought it could be a dissected lamb. I remembered I was at a taxidermy shop with Dalí in Paris, where he bought lions that drove (his wife) Gala crazy when she received the bills. I came to them with the idea. They were amazed and they made 20 identical lamb bedside tables and a cabinet maker made the drawers. We were delighted. Later on I went to design chairs in a Dalí-esque style, reinterpreted from his paintings. They were taken from a blog of Dalí paintings where he draws furniture, armchairs and lamps.

**Why is the Lip Sofa so iconic?**

It has been the most reproduced item and its origin is the Mae West painting. One of those is in the Victoria & Albert Museum in London. But the ones we did recently is much more beautiful; At that time he was overexcited about the American Dream and he wanted an ultra-realist result.

**Did you do the graphic design for the first times books?**

I sometimes take a look at them and wonder how the hell did we do it. We weren't graphic designers at all. There weren't computers yet they were really good. Including the book 'In Perspective'; the 'Groucho Y Yo' book, (1971) and the one we did for Lumen. Then we invented 'La Sonrisa Vertical' whose name was proposed by film director Luis García Berlanga. We came up with the idea of a little girl with a "significant" big smile taken from an antique print book and then turned the smile into a vertical position. I think about it and I don't think we could do that now. We didn't give a shit. It was an idea of Berlanga's and mine. Almudena Grandes' first book came from 'La Sonrisa'. But they stopped producing them because the manuscripts were not high enough quality. And we quit. Berlanga was another fantastic character, a good friend.



**When you design what do you prioritize upon: utility or beauty?**

I have already answered that query. I think this is a wrong question because a tea pot is not sculpture. It is beautiful, even photogenic. You do not burn yourself, it does not leak; so in its use is beauty. A beautiful tea pot cannot burn you, just as a beautiful chair cannot be uncomfortable. You love it when you use it. You see how it works; how comfortable and useful it is. Beauty is not linked to only how photogenic something is but is linked its utility. If its use becomes unbearable you end up hating it.

**The remodelling of the Palau de la Música Catalana (music hall) was also led by you. How challenging was the project?**

Yes it involved 30 years of work. Working on a good building has to be slow. It is beautiful, this is how it should be done. It was a really challenging proposal and we hardly pushed for it but they were courageous enough to propose it to us. We studied the project and the building quite well. It's a building visited by 50,000 people per year, so it excites me. I enjoy everything.

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**Another iconic artwork is your Gaulino Chair, inspired by Gaudí.**  
The Gaulino Chair is one of my favorites. As for its name and design, I called it that because when I finished it, it reminded me both of Gaudí and Carlos Molino, an Italian architect, designer and photographer from Turin

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who shot erotic Polaroids. That is the story behind the “Gaulino” name. Nowadays, due to the existence of Ikea, the design world has changed irreversibly. It is impossible to compete with the prices they have so everything is lost. Therefore, artists like me only have the chance to create museum items such as Dalí's lamb. Then I had the idea of doing a limited edition of 20 Gaulino chairs in which I drew bottoms in the sitting part. They have been dyed and have white whippings drawn on them and have been exhibited in London.

**Your objects and design are shown worldwide. How does that feel?**

Yes, there are objects of mine at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York; the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris and the Victoria & Albert Museum in London. I also have a wooden table exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum in New York which I'm extremely proud of.

**In your paintings we see so many influences such as Fassbinder, Pop Art. Did people ever influence you in other ways?**

My greatest influences are Antonio López García and Edward Hopper. It is better having more than one influence to avoid going wrong. As for Dalí, his influence is more about his personality than him as an artist. At the moment, I am having an exhibition of my painting in London. It is a Pop blast!