INSIDE THE VISIBLE

an elliptical traverse of 20th century art

in, of, and from the feminine

curated and edited by M. Catherine de Zegher

The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston
The Kanaal Art Foundation, Kortrijk, Flanders

The MIT Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England

(SA)
N8354
.T58
1996

This catalogue is published on the occasion of the exhibition *Inside the Visible,* subtitled *Begin the Beguine in Flanders* that was initiated at the Béguinage of Saint-Elizabeth, Kortrijk (Flanders, Belgium) and organized by the Kanaal Art Foundation from April 16, 1994 to May 28, 1995. The exhibition has been granted the honorary title of "Cultural Ambassador of Flanders" by the Flemish Government in 1994-95.

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Inside the Visible was further elaborated and organized by The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston. It was exhibited at the ICA from January 30 to May 12, 1996.

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Sophie Taeuber-Arp against Greatness

Yve-Alain Bois

Why is so little tribute paid, in standard accounts of twentieth-century art, to the maker of works as beautiful and intelligent as *Relief rectangulaire, Cercles découpés, Cônes surgissants*, with its cut-out background and menacingly protruding elements, or the painting entitled *Cercles mouvementés,* whose play on regularity and irregularity was so brilliantly analyzed long ago (in 1943) by Max Bill?

The ready-made answer—that Sophie Taeuber-Arp had to live her too-short life in the shadow of a much more famous husband, the sculptor Jean (or Hans) Arp, and was thus a typical victim of patriarchy—does not satisfy me. By all accounts Taeuber-Arp was "modest" in character, but she is also known to have been quite forthcoming: she was an excellent dancer, for example (to the point that she considered a professional career), and she played a stellar role in numerous dada performances. She conducted her career quite independently from Arp, was active in areas far removed from his concerns (puppet theater, textile and furniture design, architecture, pedagogy, editing), and it is obvious that in their collaborative work (from the duo-collages of 1918 to the duo-drawings of 1939) she never felt herself—nor, for that matter, was she ever felt—to be a lesser half of the pair. Furthermore, Arp was never tired of promoting her work, especially after her death, nor of underlining what he owed to it, not only in his writings but also in life: attentive visitors to Arp's studio in Meudon were invariably shown, almost as a reward, a good number of Taeuber-Arp's paintings and reliefs.[1] In short, it would be wrong, but for the tragic and absurd accident of her death by asphyxia at fifty-four, to posit her as a victim.

I would suggest instead that, if anything, her reputation has suffered from too much piety, in part enhanced by the tragic death. Leaving aside Bill's essay, the Taeuber-Arp literature divides for the most part into two categories: on the one hand, poignant memoirs by her friends (Georg Schmidt, Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia, Wassily Kandinsky, Emmy Ball-Hennings, Camille Bryen, among others), often written shortly after her death, and on the other hand, art historical studies at pains to reconcile the various threads of her extremely diverse production.[2] No value judgment seems ever to have been allowed: first mourning forbade it, then the sheer necessity to document her work transmuted into a general desire to present it as that of a "universal" artist, similarly able in any field and successful in all her endeavors.

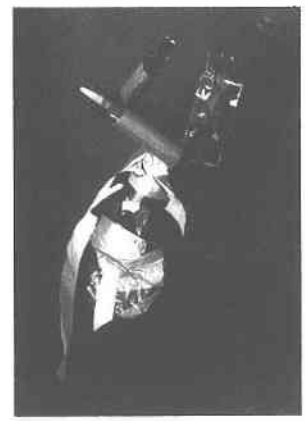
This was the wrong tactic: appraising all things identically is not much better in the end than ignoring them altogether; the lack of differentiation that results from unreserved applause, no matter how well intentioned, is not far from mere indifference. Arp sensed as much when he urged Hugo Weber, compiler of the succinct (and so far, only) catalogue of

Taeuber-Arp's oeuvre, to leave aside her forays into "applied arts." He felt that, given the formal similarity between her textiles and some of her paintings and reliefs, her art would be read as a simple extension of principles of design into the realm of "fine" art.[3] To be sure, one cannot but notice the emancipatory role that the textiles played in Taeuber-Arp's discovery of abstraction (enhanced, from 1916 on, by her teaching of this craft at the Kunstgewerbeschule in Zurich). She liked to challenge the hierarchy between "applied" and "fine" art: not only did she devote equal attention to both, seemingly as engaged in embroidering a pillowcase or a purse as in making a painting, but she also deliberately confused the issue (for example, in using almost identical compositions for her decorative frescoes in the Café Aubette in Strasbourg—her most ambitious collaborative enterprise, with Arp and Theo van Doesburg—and for a series of highly colored reliefs, realized at the same time, which she invariably called *Composition Aubette*). She was evidently an extremely talented craftsperson; yet, though she might have approved of it, there is a double danger in measuring all her activities with the same yardstick. A notion such as "decoration," imported into the domain of her independent work, becomes the great leveler, exonerating her mediocre paintings (there are quite a few) while diminishing the scope of her real inventions. There is little glory in designing an all-over motif for a tapestry, for example, but the same gesture is of major historical significance if it concerns a picture.

But "glory" and "major" are words that do not quite fit when dealing with Sophie Taeuber-Arp's achievement, and this may be what is lying at the core of most writers' embarrassment about it. What if she had found glory and "majorness" repulsive? What if she had seen heroism, in its phallocratic bravado, as that which her art should try to undercut? (After all, it was under the antimilitarist spell of dada that she emerged as an artist during World War I.) Kandinsky, though himself more prone to unleash vociferous canvases, gently compared the general tone of Taeuber-Arp's work to a whisper, adding (perhaps thinking of his own production) that a murmuring voice is often more persuasive than a loud one.[4] What if she had tried to make effectively "minor" art?

I used a similar phrase in a discussion of Ad Reinhardt's painting, both to underline what distinguishes his aesthetic from that of the abstract expressionist artists with whom he is usually associated and to account for the lack of interest of a critic like Clement Greenberg in his work. I added that the term "minor" was inappropriate, but that the impossibility of finding an antonym for "major" devoid of deprecating connotations demonstrates the hold that the aesthetic of heroism has on our culture. This is as valid with regard to Taeuber-Arp's work as it was with Reinhardt's. If I am drawn to such a comparison, however, it is because in discussing Reinhardt's work I offered this quote from Greenberg's archrival G. L. K. Morris: "It was interesting to hear Arp mention this a few months ago: 'I don't want to be great—there are too many forces throughout the world today that are *great*.' This was not spoken in modesty; it merely represents a new relation between the artist and his work." Although Arp's statement was directed at his own endeavor, I think it is not unlikely that he had his recently deceased wife in mind. (Morris's article dates from June 1948; Taeuber-Arp died in January 1943.)[5]

Morris's "this was not spoken in modesty" is important here, for the acknowledged "modesty" of Sophie Taeuber-Arp blinded her friends and admirers to the originality of her best work (just as it provided them with an explanation of what they saw as her lack of desire to differentiate her art from her craft activities). In certain ways, nothing is more difficult than attempting to be "minor," nothing more ambitious, for nothing involves a greater risk of being misunderstood. Reinhardt certainly knew this, and it is not by chance that he shared with her an interest in what I would call the noncompositional (which is different in tone from the anticompositional: it is quieter).[6]



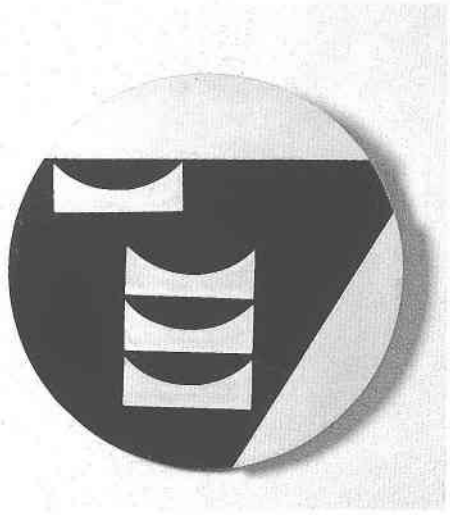
Left: Ascona, ca. 1925.

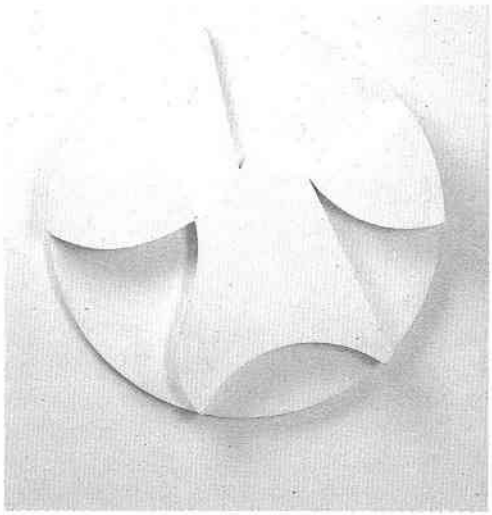
Right: Sophie Taeuber-Arp dancing in a costume designed by Hans Arp at the opening party of "Galerie Dada" in Zürich (March 23, 1916).

One has to distinguish, of course, between two modes of being minor: the involuntary (Gleizes and Metzinger were minor cubists in this sense) and what I would label, for want of a better word, the programmatic. The first is common (often simply a failed attempt at greatness): not everyone can be Picasso. The second is much rarer (and particularly difficult to realize for the simple reason that, if the affirmation of the "program" itself becomes too forceful, it tips into "majorness"). It is to such a programmatic "minorness" that I attach Taeuber-Arp's best inventions. Her lesser works often fall into the involuntary minor category: it is impossible for me to see what Hugo Weber called her "Pompeii" series (1926) or her "constructive abstractions" (1927–28), for example, as anything but unsuccessful efforts to tame down abstraction with a dash of art deco figurative stylization; and many of her abstract paintings, particularly in the early thirties, perfectly illustrate the type of academic European postcubism that Frank Stella later attacked under the label of "relational art."[7]

Although I am far from pretending that the following choice is enough to summarize Taeuber-Arp's artistic accomplishment, I would like to concentrate on several key moments of her production that epitomize for me her unique position in the development of twentieth-century art.

1. The duo-collages of 1918. Realized in collaboration with Arp, these regular grids are to be counted among the earliest noncompositional works ever, preceding by several months Mondrian's series of modular paintings dating from 1918–19 and going further than the Dutch artist in the search for impersonality that was prevalent at the time: commenting later on these collages, Arp pointed to their introduction of a certain degree of chance in the color distribution, and the mechanical (nonautographic) procedure of cutting colored paper with scissors. Yet a certain lack of purposefulness in this demotion of authorial choice, noticeable in the arbitrary subdivision of certain modular units or the sudden use of a differently textured paper for others, prevents the duo-collages from being on a par with other works such as Delaunay's famous *Disk* of 1913–14, Malevich's *Black Square* of 1915, Duchamp's "unassisted" readymades (the 1914 *Bottlerack,* for example), or Rodchenko's *Monochrome Triptych* and modular sculptures of 1921. One could say that these last works were deliberately anticompositional: the duo-collages did not carry such a high-voltage message.[8] They resemble the first noncompositional works ever, Balla's various *compenetrazioni iridescenti* of 1912, in that they were conceived as private experiments. (According to Arp, Taeuber-Arp at first did not wish to exhibit them.)





Left: *Composition dans un cercle blanc (Composition in a White Circle)*, 1936. Relief, painted wood. 49 cm. diameter x 4 cm.

Right: *Relief circulaire en trois coupes (Circular Relief in Three Layers)*, 1936. Painted wood. 60 cm. diameter x 6 cm.

Courtesy Stiftung Hans Arp und Sophie Taeuber-Arp e.V., Rolandseck, Germany. Photo: Fotostudio Wolfgang Morell.

2. The Aubette low reliefs of 1927–28. Although their motif is similar to that of the Aubette frescoes, its stark modularity is far more conspicuous once transposed into the independent realm of easel painting (relief). However, it takes some effort to perceive them as modular. They consist of brightly painted rectangles of thin cardboard glued on a white support. Except for a white margin surrounding the overall pattern, the "ground" itself is entirely regulated by the module and thus loses its character as ground. But it only loses this character here and there, inconsistently: a white unit interrupting a field of colored ones is not perceived as ground, nor is a similar hole made by two contiguous white units, but what about a continuous white field consisting of nine such units, or thirty-six? Its effect depends entirely on the distribution of the neighboring areas. Some areas display a strictly binary opposition of "negative" and "positive" units (as in a chessboard), but in general conglomerates are markedly unequal so as to destroy any perceptive certainty. One of Taeuber-Arp's most cherished strategies is obviously that of the greatest diversity within utter regularity.

3. The "multispace" paintings of 1932–39. These are among Taeuber-Arp's most intriguing works: they use the syntax of the "relational works" of the same period while undermining it. The canvas is divided into four, six, or twelve equal areas, usually square, each being treated as a potentially independent composition. The ground of each zone is of a different color, but its composition acknowledges that of its contiguous zones—something like an abstract *cadavre exquis*.

4. The semi-irregular compositions with circles, or dots, of 1934 (the most celebrated, and rightly so, being *Cercles mouvementés*, mentioned above), followed by the more systematic high reliefs of 1936. Strict modularity is abolished, but it is always looming at the horizon. Or rather, one could say that regularity is affectionately teased but playfully frustrated. Various possible groupings constantly cancel one another: these works must be a nightmare for Gestalt psychologists. The best reliefs are those in which half circles are cut out from the periphery of the wooden ground, allowing the wall behind to enter the space of the work.

5. The tondo reliefs of 1937–38, sometimes polychrome (like *Envol*) but far more engaging when they are white on white (like *Relief circulaire en trois coupes*). As in the multispace canvases, the issue is once again that of contiguity and continuity: the two notions are antithetical, but Taeuber-Arp plays at undoing the opposition. The reliefs comprise several layers (often four), each the irregular cut-out portion of a disk. Their superimposition locks into

an elegant puzzle of illusionistic transparency, yet the possibility of an independent rotation of each layer is always implied. These works are highly compositional, but composition itself is given as transient.

6. The colored pencil drawings of curved lines dating from 1939–42.[9] The lines are agitated yet deprived of any sign of autographic expression: mechanical, textureless, evenly traced, each of a different color. Wormlike when seen individually (but that is almost impossible to achieve), these lines form spaghetti meshes so intricate that one quickly renounces the effort to entangle them. They can often be found in two different thicknesses in a single drawing, the thinner lines inducing an illusion of depth that gets undone when one begins to group the curves by color. Superimposition is the rule, and also near-parallel doubling. Almost never fulfilling a function of contour, close to being doodles yet carefully penciled in, Taeuber-Arp's lines harbor a sense of purposelessness while remaining sheer trajectories. Despite the industrial draftsmanship, these drawings are perhaps the first truly automatic ones in our century: unlike their surrealist antecedents, they never appeal to an unconscious reservoir of images in order to signify. Pure transit and pure transitivity.

Many other things could be singled out in Taeuber-Arp's voluminous oeuvre: I have no doubt that my selection will seem arbitrary to some, especially since, partly for reasons of space, it brackets out her work in fields other than painting and relief. I do not wish to dismiss the rest of her activity, though I admit to finding it less innovative. As a matter of principle, it seems to me that the major works of an artist have to be understood first, especially if they invent a way of forcefully being "minor."

Notes:

1. Ellsworth Kelly told me how relieved he was that Arp was touched by his enthusiasm upon discovering of Taeuber-Arp's work at Meudon around 1950. Embarrassed by his own preference yet finding it difficult to hide, he was encouraged by Arp to express his admiration freely.
2. The first (and still most complete) monograph, beautifully designed by Max Bill, was edited by Georg Schmidt (*Sophie Taeuber-Arp* [Basel: Holbein Verlag, 1948]). It contains numerous memoirs by Taeuber-Arp's friends and the catalogue of her work by Hugo Weber. The only full-length study, as far as I know, is Margit Staber's *Taeuber-Arp* (Lausanne: Editions Rencontre, 1970). The most complete exhibition catalogue was jointly published by the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris and the Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts, Lausanne, in 1990. Rather than providing a general overview, the texts included in this catalogue consist of monographic studies of specific areas of Taeuber-Arp's production and activities (her "vertical-horizontal compositions," dance, puppet theater, the Aubette and her other interior "designs," pedagogy, textiles, the publication of the journal *Plastique*, and line drawings). Rather than synthetic, the approach is kaleidoscopic, but the effect is similar: the importance of her reliefs, for example, is utterly obliterated.
3. Information provided by Staber, *Taeuber-Arp*, 81.
4. Kandinsky, as quoted in Schmidt, *Sophie Taeuber-Arp*, 88.
5. On this episode and on the issue raised here, see Yve-Alain Bois, "The Limit of Almost," in *Ad Reinhardt* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1991), 25.
6. Frank Stella's 1959 black paintings represent a case of anticomposition (rather than of noncomposition): the program was so assertive that the "minor" mode was transmuted into a "major" one. This might explain why this artist returned to a highly compositional manner shortly thereafter.
7. See Frank Stella as quoted in Bruce Glaser, "Questions to Stella and Judd" (1966), reprinted in Gregory Battcock, *Minimal Art* (New York: Dutton, 1968), 149.
8. Delaunay's case is enigmatic, to say the least: although he was aware of the radicalism of his *Disk* (calling it his *coup de poing*), it represents a unicum in his oeuvre and can possibly be regarded as a fluke. As for the duo-collages, see Christian Besson, "Les *Compositions verticales-horizontales* de Sophie Taeuber," in Schmidt, *Sophie Taeuber-Arp*, 35–41.
9. On the line drawings, see Agnieszka Lulinska, "Sous le signe de la ligne," in Schmidt, *Sophie Taeuber-Arp*, 113–19.